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Appreciating Northumberland and seeking the best adjective to describe its scenic beauties*.

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Fig. 128.1 Silhouette Hedgehog
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A wonderful short trip to Northumberland yielded five great pleasures, headed by a night-sighting of a live hedgehog. Something that I personally have not witnessed for very many decades. Reassuringly, the hedgehog looked exactly as I expected it to look. It did not like our probing torch-light, so we kept the sighting brief. But it was enough to show me that my childhood memories were entirely accurate. A hedgehog is a hedgehog is a hedgehog. So it should be. But good to have personal confirmation. All admirers of the elusive, charming, and now habitat-threatened animal should join the British Hedgehog Protection Society (<https://www.britishhedgehogs.org.uk>)!

The second great pleasure in Northumberland was to breathe clean, fresh air. As a Londoner, I enjoy living on a small hill, because the hill-top air is at least fresher than the fumes of the low-lying Thames basin. Yet a few lung-fulls

of air in Northumberland made me realise that I'd been relatively kidding myself. Everywhere in London is polluted. Come on, politicians: get to grips with this issue. We know that clean air is needed for health, both mental and physical – especially of growing children. Come on, voters, pressurise the politicians to take action. And let's send all those who oppose the clean-up (and their children) to breathe some real air in Northumberland, in order to experience the difference and to learn that there's a better way.

Thirdly, then, the coast-line of Northumberland is something special. We spent some time in seeking the perfect adjective to describe its qualities. It's visually very attractive. Yet 'pretty' does not do justice to its grandeur. Nor, on the other hand, is the over-used adjective 'awesome' really right. Even though there is much to strike awe into viewers, much of the coast-line is too low and secretive to provide the sort of shock and awe associated with huge mountains and towering cliffs. Certainly, the Northumberland coast is striking. But many things are that. Eventually, I settled for 'grandly beautiful' or perhaps 'beautifully grand'. Some combination of 'stunning'; 'wild'; 'magnificent' would do as well. The kittiwakes nesting on the basalt rocks provided a squawking chorus of approval. And the castles, some ruined, added majesty and grand views.

By the way, when walking out on one low headland, we bumped unexpectedly into two old friends from Battersea – so other Londoners have already got the message. The lengthy coastal walk is rightly popular; and we plan to come back another time to talk some more.

Fourthly, the small market and seaside towns in Northumberland are attractive and joyous places. They are not immune to today's common urban pressures. There are some closed shops and some struggling pubs. There are also some trafficked streets in the centres which could be pedestrianised with benefit. Yet their scale makes them highly attractive places to live and to visit. And the prevailing mellow sandstone stonework adds a distinctive visual charm.

Alnwick is one leading example. It has obvious and important places to see – like the imposing Castle, with an impressive art display and beautiful grounds. It has a collective ensemble of town-centre buildings, including the central market place, the Town Hall, a couple of medieval town gates, and a slightly over-sized nineteenth-century Assembly Rooms, all of which deserve a pottering visit. And there are unexpected venues. Like the nineteenth-century railway station converted into the gorgeous Barter Books emporium, which serves a great breakfast and, more importantly, has a truly astonishing array of fiction and non-fiction on its groaning shelves – enough to fill a huge Victorian engine shed, which gives an idea of its scale. And there are little secrets to spot across town: the fountains, known in Northumbrian dialect as ‘pants’ (a usage dating back at least to 1661 but whose origin remains unexplained); the town seats, all devised in different designs; and, round a quiet corner, brandishing a sword manfully, a 14-foot high bronze statue to Henry Percy, better known as Harry Hotspur (c.1364-1403). This tribute, unveiled in 2010, salutes the fighting spirit of the celebrated hero – and also the links between Alnwick and the Percy family, who continue to reside in Alnwick Castle.

So what was the fifth Northumbrian thing of note? The huge skies – which can, of course, be seen elsewhere – and, especially, their utter darkness at night. Unfortunately, during our short visit, the weather was continually cloudy and overcast. Our plan to visit Kielder Park was put on hold for another time. Nonetheless, Northumberland remains known for the peerless quality of its dark skies – and those at Kielder are internationally renowned (see <https://www.visitkielder.com>). Its dark skies zone covers almost 580 square miles; and in 2013 was awarded Gold Tier Dark Sky Park status by the International Dark-Sky Association (<https://www.darksky.org>). That accolade ranks Northumberland with only a few competitors, world-wide. It deserves applause from all who seek to combat the disorientating effects (on humans and wildlife alike) of excess light pollution.

Kielder should become the destination of choice for all the millions of Brits who have never really experienced the deep wonder of a truly dark sky. Humans first used the stars to learn to navigate and to count the passing of time. Let everyone enjoy that seminal experience, which is genuinely awe-inspiring. So it follows too: let's control technology; curb light pollution; and protect life properly in all its forms.

In the meantime, visit Northumberland for real wildlife; grandly beautiful coast; fresh air; intriguing towns; and huge dark skies, where starlight quietly puts Planet Earth into its cosmic context.

(This BLOG is dedicated to the great hospitality and unshakeable good cheer of our Northumberland hosts.*