

SESSION 6 – SPITTAL: FROM SPA TO SEASIDE RESORT

SALMON FISHING PHOTOS x 5

SALMON SHIELS PHOTOS x

1. Finchy Shiel with Fording Box
2. North Bells Shiel with Fish House
3. Watham Shiel, Horncliffe modern construction
4. Needle Eye Shiel, Ord - ruined shiel
5. Sanstell Shiel
6. Sandstell Shiel - interior

THE EARLY DAYS OF SPITTAL

Thomas Johnstone's 1817 History of Berwick gives this description:

“Spittal is a populous village, inhabited mainly by families of fishermen, situated at the mouth of the river Tweed, about a mile east from Tweedmouth, to which parish it belongs. Its name probably derives from the establishment of some religious house or hospital, at or near the place.”

That religious house, or “hospitium”, was a leper hospital dedicated to St Bartholomew. It was founded sometime before 1234.

The first fishermen's settlement grew up close to the estuary of the Tweed, in the Sandstell Road area. The word “Sand-stell” means the “fishery on the sands” and is one of the earliest recorded fisheries, along with Hallowstell – the “fishery of the Holy Man (St Cuthbert”, which is first mentioned in 1122.

Spittal stood on the route of a path along the coast, which was the main road between Holy Island and Berwick for many centuries.

In medieval times, the lands in the manors of Tweedmouth and Spittal were held in socage from the Bishop of Durham by families such as the Manners, the Greys and the Herons. Socage was a form of tenure involving providing fixed services for the lord.

In 1657, the Corporation of Berwick purchased the manors of Tweedmouth and Spittal from the Earl of Suffolk for the sum of £570.

Part of Spittal was held by the Radcliffe family, the earls of Derwentwater, until the estates of the Jacobite-supporting 3rd Earl were confiscated by the Crown after his execution in 1716 and granted to the Royal Hospital at Greenwich.

Tweedmouth and Spittal were formally absorbed into the borough of Berwick under the Corporation Act of 1835. However, until the Counties (Detached Parts) Act of 1844, Spittal and Tweedmouth remained part of the County Palatine of Durham because of their historical association with the prince bishops.

THE SPA WELL

The discovery of the so-called healthful properties of the natural spring at Spittal Banks was the beginning of the development of Spittal as a resort.

PHOTO OF THE SPA WELL

Johnstone's History of Berwick 1817:

“In the neighbourhood of the Village is a strong Mineral Spring, which according to Dr Fuller, contains fixed air, iron and a small proportion of sulphuric acid. People resort to Spittal from various parts of the country, for the benefits of this Spring; and it is said that many labouring under bilious and scorbutic complaints have experienced its healing virtues. Others are induced to repair thither for the convenience of sea bathing, although the accommodation which the Village can furnish, and the attractions it can offer, when compared with places of more fashionable resort, are few.”

Dr John Fuller's 1799 “History of Berwick”, described Spittal as: “but ill suited to the great number of people who resort to it in summer for the mineral water as well as for sea bathing.”

Despite this, John Goode's “Directory” of 1806 remarked that the Spa “collects many respectable families from the country”.

EARLY VICTORIAN DEVELOPMENT OF SPITTAL

At the beginning of the 19th century, Spittal consisted of little more than a few fishermen's cottages, set in two streets, one very wide and one narrow.

In the 1820s, the village began to develop as a curious mixture of fishing village, industrial centre and seaside resort, as can be seen in an engraving of 1829 by John Dixon Evans.

ILLUSTRATION OF SPITTAL BEACH WITH RAILWAY AND BATHING MACHINES

The illustration shows the horse-drawn Berwick Pier Railway, built in 1811 to carry stone from the quarry at Hud's Head for the construction of the pier and still being used to transport coals from the Scremerston Colliery to the Carr Rock staithes until the 1850s. Note the bathing machine on the beach.

A plan of 1831 shows only two large houses, both built in the 1820s to provide accommodation for summer visitors. Roxburgh House had nine rooms with an “extensive and uninterrupted view of the German Ocean” and Seafield House was described as being: “well adapted for parties wishing to keep lodgers during the bathing season”.

1837 saw the beginning of development of what was known as the “New Town”, at the southern end of Main Street

PLAN OF SPITTAL IN 1837

VICTORIAN AND EDWARDIAN HOLIDAY RESORT

Summer visitors came to Spittal in increasing numbers from the 1830s, attracted by the beach and the opportunities for sea bathing.

There were complaints in 1836 about the “admixture” of ladies and gentlemen bathing together so, the following year, notices were posted to inform the public that the central part of the beach was now reserved for ladies, with gentlemen allowed to bathe at either end. Two years later, the beach was divided in half with stakes and a screen, with gentlemen confined to the south end and ladies to the north.

An account in July of 1837 described the village as “nearly full Departures have not yet occurred and as the coaches, which now drive into the village, are every day crowded, the quantity of respectable persons accommodated is immense.”

Excursions from Berwick to Spittal became popular when Mr Wilson began operating his steam-ferry service across the river in 1838.

The opening of the railway line from Newcastle to Tweedmouth in 1847 and the branch line to Kelso in 1851 brought an influx of summer visitors from Tyneside and the Borders.

Frederick Sheldon’s “History of Berwick-upon-Tweed”, published in 1849, gives a colourful description of Spittal at the height of the summer season when: “Stout farmers and comfortable looking housewives come down from the hills of the Lammermuirs or the plains of the Cheviots; and cautious Scots from Kelso and Teviotdale, having weighed well in their own minds the expenditure of every penny, journey to Spittal for a week or so, to be fleeced in their lodgings, etc.”

Well might the “cautious Scots” count their money as the return excursion fare from Kelso was two shillings (about £6 in today’s money).

Sheldon continues: “According to the most approved fashion at bathing places, a few Border noblemen and “gents” occasionally come there. There is but one bathing machine, and the ladies either undress on the sand, or proceed in their bathing dresses, at early dawn, to the sea, and thence to their houses. The active, the aged, the youth, the child, and man, bathe in the refreshing floods of the old Ocean. Some rush recklessly in, as though it were a disagreeable process the sooner over the better; others timidly, and by degrees, approach the water, and so undergo their ablutions. Crowds of idlers parade the beach, and at every corner groups of sailors, etc. lie all their length in the sun and, with their hats over their eyes luxuriate in a slumberous quiet.”

In 1863 six new bathing machines were provided on the beach and within a few years it had been noted that the number of bathers had increased substantially. Some men complained that the ladies' area of the beach had expanded gradually year-by-year with the moving of the dividing stakes, gaining about 50 yards by 1873.

Sometimes, the bathers themselves proved to be an attraction. One visitor remarked: "A lady swimmer was the admiration of all onlookers; she sported about just as a mermaid may be supposed to do."

From time to time there were less savoury onlookers prompting a complaint in 1848 that: "the practice of looking over the sea-banks, immediately over the place where the ladies are bathing seems to be on the increase."

The following year, the village bellman was instructed to issue warnings against trespassing on the ladies' section of the beach.

Spittal became a popular destination for Sunday School trips and workers' outings from the Border towns. One Sunday School party from Coldstream amounted to 770 adults and children, and an outing of Selkirk millworkers totalled some 900. Some organisations began to hold annual camps in the village.

Whole families with their servants took up residence, renting a property in Spittal for the summer season.

PHOTOS OF THE SPA WELL AREA

In the 1870s, the area close to the Spa Well was developed to create the grassy square we can see today. Several of the houses near the Spa Well were built by the sculptor William Wilson, including Spa Villa and numbers 178-180 Main Street, which are decorated with elaborate carvings. Several of these new villas were intended as boarding houses. Spa Villa Lodging House, for instance, contained Six apartments owned by different enterprising women catering for visitors in the high season.

PHOTO OF SPA VILLA

By 1879 there were fourteen public houses in Spittal to cater for the locals and for those visitors who may prefer an alternative to the waters of the Spa Well.

"What could be more appetising and refreshing after a morning bathe than a cup of water from this famous mineral spring? Although some prefer as a restorative stimulant twenty drops from another well-known fountain, the 'Golden Fleece.'"

Berwick Journal May 17th 1878

The railways allowed some working people the opportunity to enjoy a day out, an overnight stay was the preserve of the wealthier classes until the passing of the Bank Holidays Act in 1871. This created four paid holidays each year on Boxing Day, Easter Monday, Whit Monday and the first Monday in August, in addition to Christmas Day and Good Friday.

THE END OF THE 19th CENTURY

By the end of the Victorian period, Spittal had grown into a substantial seaside resort with over 40 houses offering rooms for visitors, in addition to the few large boarding houses like Roxburgh House and the Commercial Inn, and the salt-water bathing establishment established by A. C. Burn.

PLAN SHOWING SPITTAL IN 1920

Roxburgh House, Commercial Inn & Burns' Sea Water Baths

In the late 1890s, the Boston family built a row of 15 houses in St Helen's Terrace and on the eve of the First World War, eight of these houses were offering rooms for summer visitors.

PHOTO OF ST HELEN'S TERRACE

For many, Spittal offered a break from the bustle of an increasingly busy world.

In September 1878, a correspondent to the Kelso Mail wrote:

“Many and varied are the attractions of Spittal to the fair sex, the delightful walks along the cliffs; the quiet opportunities for novel reading or flirtation in some of the sheltered nooks at the rocks; the warm sunlight and the gentle sea breeze, which embrown and beautify their complexions. The sterner sex also can enjoy life there to the full. All business cares are cast aside. They can sit for hours together on the sandy beach, and smoke, talk of the past with old companions, toss pebbles into the air, and please themselves in a hundred ways without the slightest mental or physical exertion. Quiet pleasures are the truest and best, for their memories are sweet. So to holiday-seekers I heartily recommend Spittal, where many of these are to be found. Bathing coaches, donkeys, fashionable walks where well-dressed crowds parade to the tow-rowing of some military band, are unknown, and may they never displace the time-honoured recreations and customs of the Northumbrian watering-place.”

PHOTO OF SALMON NETTING AT SPITTAL BEACH

The salmon netting was always of interest to visitors. Other diversions were on offer too, such as a 3-hour trip by steam-ship to the Farnes, Holy Island or St Abbs and Pierrot Shows were becoming a regular feature of summer entertainment in Spittal.

PHOTO OF PIERROTS AT SPITTAL

However, as the 19th century came to an end, it seemed to others that Spittal was standing still while other seaside resorts were investing in their future. Scarborough was spending £30,000 on pleasure gardens and Rhyl was investing the huge sum of £200,000 on improvements.

One regular summer visitor, Baillie Laidlaw of Jedburgh, wrote to the Berwick Journal: “It would surely not cost too much to provide a few nice seats along the beach above the high-water mark. It would cost very little to make a nice promenade along the sides of the turf facing the beach, ashes and gravel being plentiful and just at hand.”

This and other proposals prompted the Town Council to hold a meeting of the Spittal Improvement Committee to discuss possible improvements. The result was an ambitious plan to construct a concrete promenade, 1,200 yards long and 12 feet wide.

The promenade was completed in 1899 and became a popular attraction.

SPITTAL IN THE 20th CENTURY

A local guide book of 1909 described Spittal as: “the rising health resort of the Borders. One of its most attractive features is the long stretch of firm and beautiful sand, almost a mile in length. Excellent bathing may be enjoyed, and boating and fishing are pleasurable pastimes here in calm weather. Another great attraction to many is to watch the salmon fishermen at work. The quietude of the place is also attractive to many. Away from the busy streets of the city, the darker side of life can be forgotten in the music of the sea. This is one of the great advantages Spittal has over the larger and more fashionable watering places, with their thousands of visitors. Nowhere in England can a more bracing climate be found. The pedestrian has an open country to explore, while those who do not care for walking can find, nearly anywhere here, a quiet nook or cranny in which to pass the hours away, with a book perhaps, or, better still, watching the things on land and sea, that even find a halo of beauty in this little seaside resort.”

That guide book expressed the view that: “The probability of Spittal becoming better known is beyond doubt, and her position among the north country watering places is assured”.

The expectation was not to be fulfilled in the long term.

However, some further developments did take place after the First World War when Forte Brothers opened their Venetian Pavilion on the Promenade in 1922.

PHOTO OF SPITTAL PROMENADE

PHOTO OF VENETIAN PAVILION 1

PHOTO OF VENETIAN PAVILION 2

However, it wasn't until 1938, after years of pressure by trades unions, that the Paid Holidays Act established an entitlement to six days annual paid holidays. Even then, the right was restricted to workers whose minimum rates of pay were set by trade boards until after the Second World War.

By the 1950s, most workers were entitled to two weeks annual holiday and the heyday of the British seaside holiday resort began with the establishment of holiday camps and caravan parks.

Spittal's seascapes were among the attractions that brought the artist L.S.Lowry to stay in Berwick on several occasions between the 1930s and the 1970s.

PHOTO OF LOWRY PANEL ON SPITTAL PROMENADE

After the Second World War, the site at the Carr Rock that had been used as an RAF air-sea rescue base was turned into a holiday caravan park by James Scott and the Corporation erected chalets on the sea-front, each equipped to accommodate two adults and one child.

Spittal promenade acquired many of the attractions expected of a seaside resort, with putting green, sailing pond, donkey, rides, swings and slides – and Bingo! There was even a miniature railway for a short time in the 1960s.

The popularity of the British seaside holiday declined rapidly with the advent of cheap air flights and package holidays in sunnier climates abroad, and Spittal's attractions fell out of favour.

SPITTAL TODAY

The simple pleasures have continued to be Spittal's main assets into the 21st century, so we'll finish with a description of Spittal that I consider to be as relevant today as it was when it was written for that local guide book in 1909:

“We leave the visitor to prove Spittal for himself, or herself, feeling sure that all we have said of it will be corroborated by its patrons, and that, although it does not boast of mammoth hotels or a crowded life, still its allurements will bring the visitor back to its pleasures, and that he will acknowledge with gratitude its subtle powers of building up the brain and nerve of the tired worker, so that he may face the days of toil with a cheerful and happy spirit.”

FINAL PHOTO OF SPITTAL BEACH