

St Abb's Head

NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE



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Scotland's
National Nature
Reserves

'Saints and Seabirds'

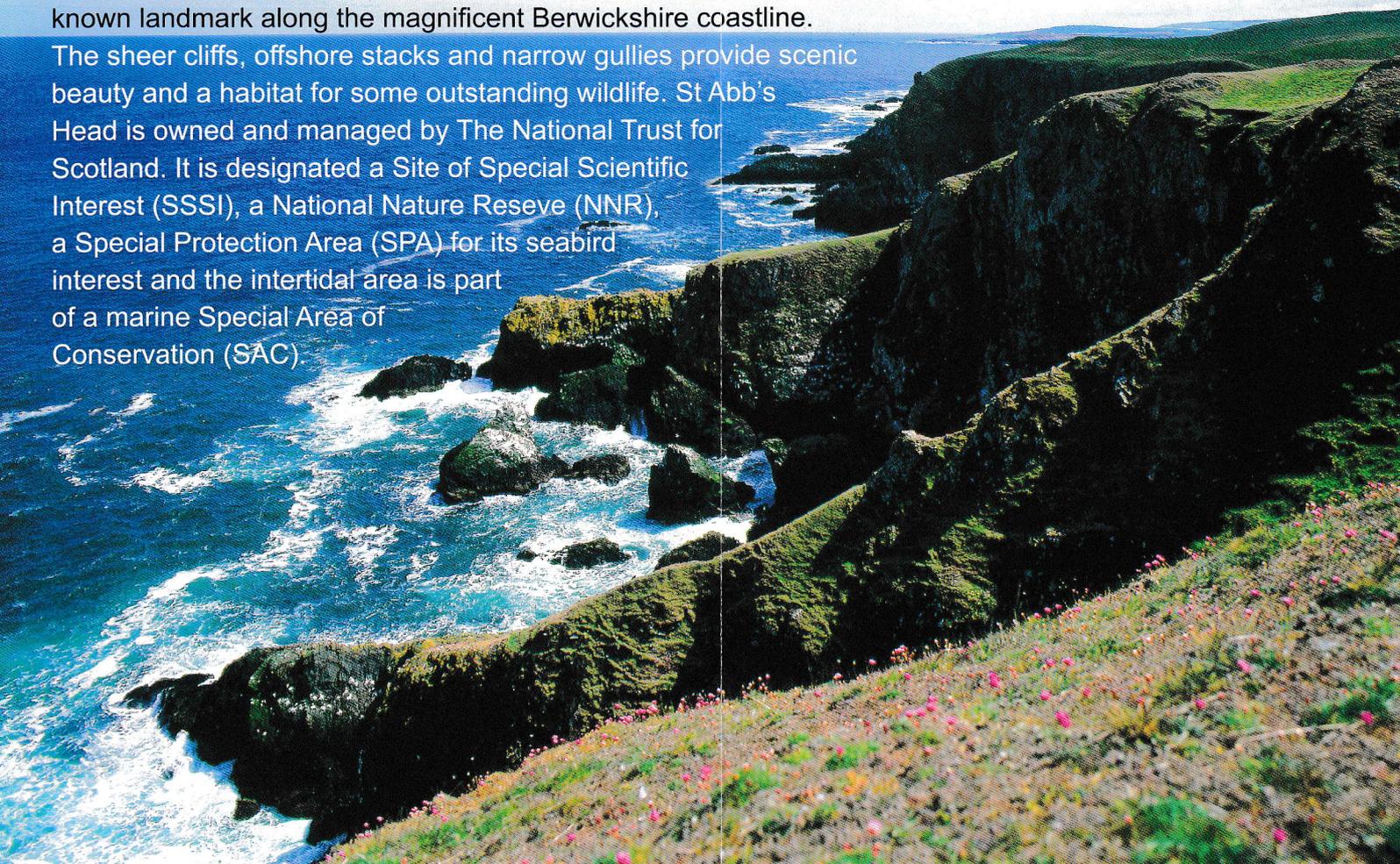


St Abb's Head

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Formed by active volcanoes, St Abb's Head is the best known landmark along the magnificent Berwickshire coastline.

The sheer cliffs, offshore stacks and narrow gullies provide scenic beauty and a habitat for some outstanding wildlife. St Abb's Head is owned and managed by The National Trust for Scotland. It is designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), a National Nature Reserve (NNR), a Special Protection Area (SPA) for its seabird interest and the intertidal area is part of a marine Special Area of Conservation (SAC).





Stories in stone

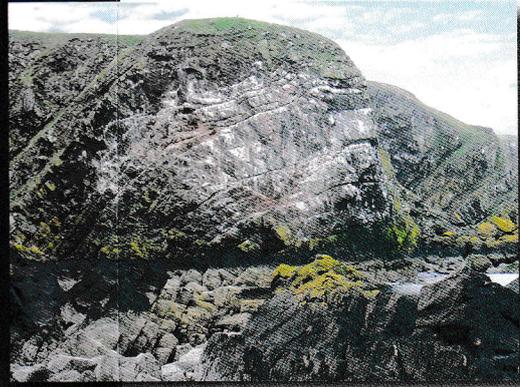
Pettico Wick lies on the St Abb's Head fault – a line of weakness between two very different types of rock.

To the west are sedimentary rocks. They were deposited underwater as layers of mud at a time when a wide ocean called the Iapetus separated Scotland and England. As the American continent, with Scotland attached, gradually moved towards the European continent around 450 million years ago, sea floor sediments in between were pushed up into mountains and squeezed into folds. For millions of years these mountains have been worn down to give the rounded hills we know today as the Southern Uplands, with the folded rocks beautifully displayed along the Berwickshire coast.

To the east of Pettico Wick are unstructured pink and purple lavas that erupted from volcanoes around 400 million years ago. The lava is more resistant to wind and

water erosion than the surrounding rocks.

In time, as erosion continues at a faster rate on either side, St Abb's Head is likely to become the Isle of St Abbs.



Cliffs along St Abb's coastline

Traces of our past



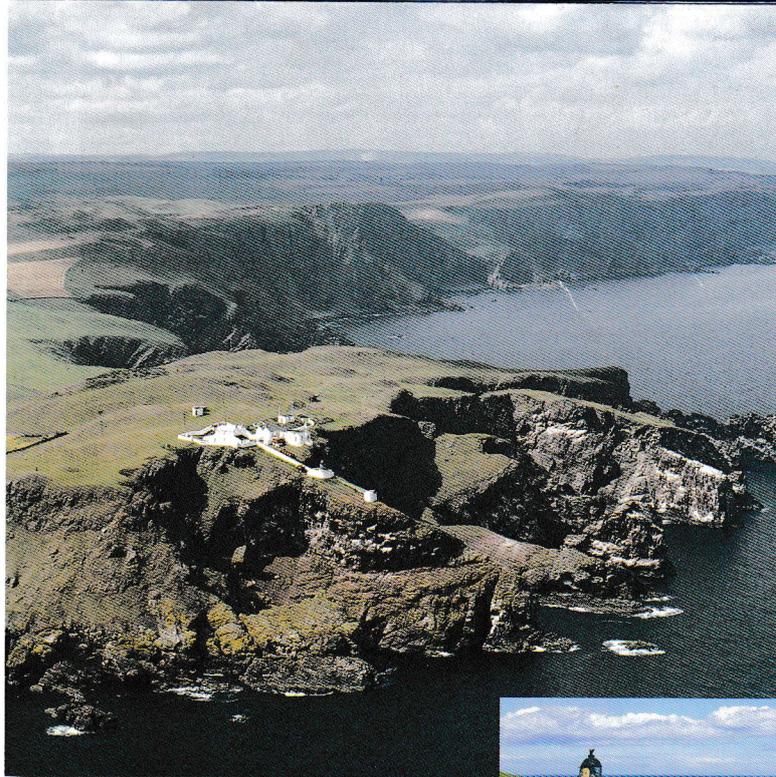
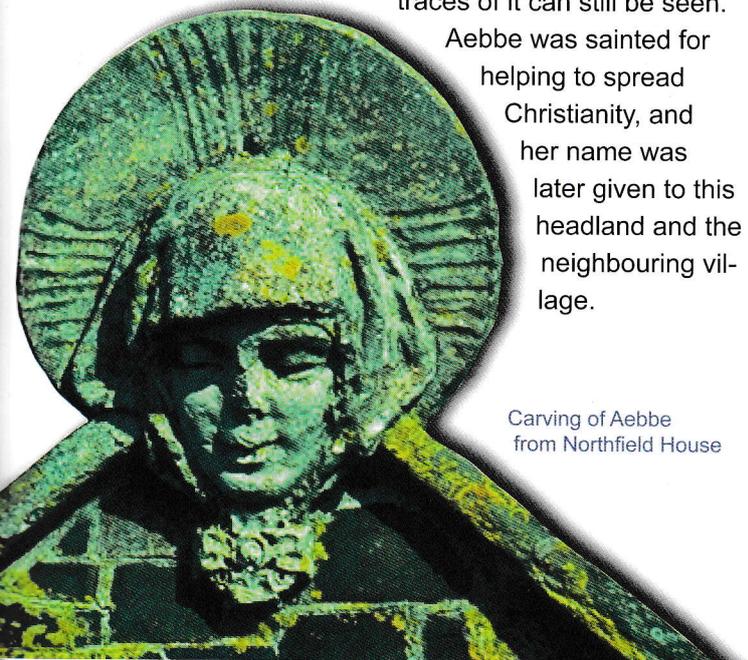
St Abbs village

Aebbe, daughter of Aethelfrith, the first King of Northumbria (at that time all the land from the Humber to the Forth) was abbess of a monastery on Kirk Hill from 643 to her death around 680.

Cuthbert, the patron saint of Northumbria, was a visitor to the monastery, spending contemplative nights immersed in the sea. After Aebbe's death, the monastery was accidentally burned down and never replaced. Very slight traces of it can still be seen.

Aebbe was sainted for helping to spread Christianity, and her name was later given to this headland and the neighbouring village.

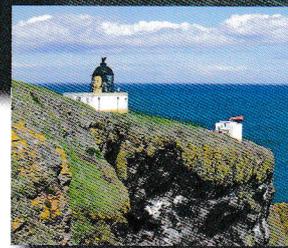
Carving of Aebbe from Northfield House

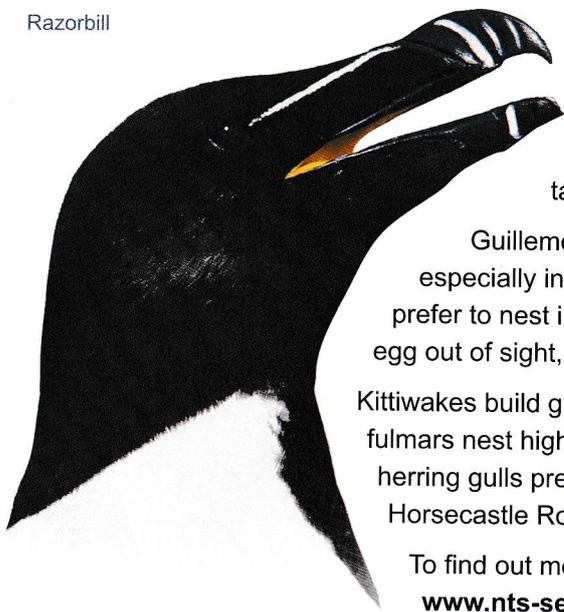


The St Abb's Head lighthouse

The St Abb's Head lighthouse, which originally used coal and oil, was built in 1862 and converted to electric operation in 1966. Up until automation in 1994, the lighthouse was manned by three full-time keepers who grew fresh food in a sheltered walled garden.

Today the land is managed to conserve the rich variety of wildlife and provide the opportunity for visitors to enjoy and learn about this special place.





Seabird city

Sheer cliffs, deep gullies and offshore stacks mark the battleground between land and sea. Thousands of seabirds nest here, safe from animals that might take their eggs or chicks.

Guillemots crowd tightly together on the broad ledges and sides of offshore stacks, especially in the area north of the lighthouse. Razorbills occur in similar places, though they prefer to nest in single pairs or small groups. Puffins use crevices in the cliff face to lay a single egg out of sight, but the scarcity of suitable sites limits their numbers to around a dozen pairs.

Kittiwakes build grass and mud nests on sheer cliff faces either side of the lighthouse while fulmars nest higher up on grassy ledges or in round crevices such as at Hopes Heugh. Shags and herring gulls prefer the low, flat rocks for nesting and roosting especially near Black Gable and Horsecastle Rocks.

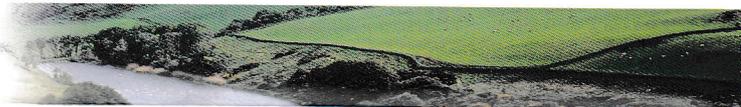
To find out more about seabirds at St Abb's Head and the NTS's monitoring work visit www.nts-seabirds.org.uk

Mind your manners

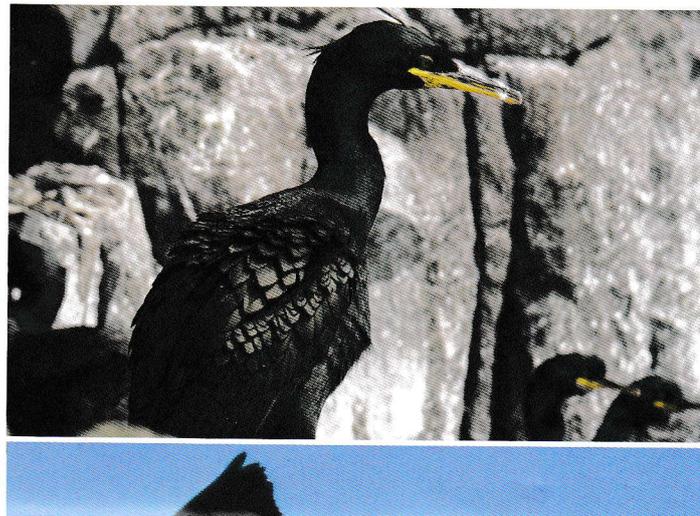
into the relationship between human disturbance and seabird success was carried out in 2003. Results showed that breeding of both guillemots and kittiwakes was significantly reduced by the presence of people because the nesting birds experienced stress, causing raised heart rates. This resulted in an additional energetic cost to the birds that could lead to chick mortality.

visitors can keep yourself safe and help the nesting seabirds by keeping back. Wear warm, windproof clothing and sturdy footwear with a good tread.

Walkers at Mire Loch



From the top: shag, gannet in flight, kittiwake on nest, guillemot





Life on the edge

The cliffs have a simple but colourful vegetation that tolerates severe exposure and salt spray as well as dry summer conditions. These plants, such as sea campion and scurvy grass, tend to have thick, fleshy leaves that help to reduce water loss in this harsh environment.



Purple milk-vetch

The rocky grassland has a rich variety of wild grasses and flowers, forming a colourful display in summer and providing a home for many different creatures. Rock-rose, wild thyme and purple milk-vetch are widespread and small copper and common blue butterflies fly on sunny days. Streaky-brown meadow pipits and flocks of twittering linnets forage for plant seeds while black and grey, white-rumped wheatears hunt for invertebrates on the slopes, especially at Kirk Hill, sometimes nesting in empty rabbit burrows there.

The deep valley that cuts across the headland from Pettico Wick to Horsecastle Bay provides a different range of habitats for wildlife. Plants, birds and animals living here benefit from the sheltered conditions.

Eels, perch and sticklebacks live in the freshwater Mire Loch that is also a breeding site for frogs and toads.

