

# Visiting the Debatable Land

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# THE DEBATABLE LAND

Visit the Anglo-Scottish borderlands





The missing English flag





Liddesdale - the heart of the Debatable Land





The March Bank or Scots' Dike





Looking at England from Scotland on the road between Jedburgh and Otterburn



The Anglo-Scottish border has been present in its current form, or thereabouts, since the 11<sup>th</sup> century, which makes it one of Europe's oldest steady land borders. Indeed, Hadrian's Wall, built by the Romans in AD 122 to mark the border between Roman Britain and Caledonia, stands not far south from the modern border.

At the start of my project, I analysed views of the borderlands by gathering railway posters of the area from the 1910s-1950s. One that particularly stood out to me was an advertisement to visit Carlisle, an English city 20 miles from the border, labelling it "The Gateway to Scotland". It showed an English knight on his white horse draped in red, creating a physical St George's cross. He was positioned before a fortified gateway, beyond which were mountains assumed to be Scotland. This Carlisle is very exaggerated, as there are no such gates or even explicit signs of English identity. Similarly, the Scotland beyond Carlisle has no wild mountains, but a firth across which people have commuted for school and work for centuries. Such posters created an impression of an ancient border with grand structures to marvel at, physically dividing two starkly different countries. The reality, however, is more a distinct area, with elements of English- and Scottish-ness, as well as its own unique history and culture.

The region is for the most part remote with only a few towns along the 96 miles/150km long border. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, before the treaties of union, acts of parliament in both kingdoms said that in the debatable land, "all Englishmen and Scottishmen are... free to rob, burn, spoil, slay, murder

and destroy." The lawlessness was carried out by clans known as "reivers" who relied on the lack of control over the region to carry out crime. This history is still celebrated by the local people, with folk songs about the reivers remaining popular. They give the area a history stemming from neither country but rather in spite of both.

The photos I took are mostly from "The Debatable Land", the area of the border that remained wild and not truly claimed by England or Scotland for the longest, indeed even after the union of 1707. My poster takes inspiration from those old railway posters to advertise visiting The Debatable Land to find out how the border really is. It is easy to forget which country you are in when spending time in this area, as signs are small and the extreme weather leads to flags blown away, shown in the first picture. Picture two is of Liddesdale, another part of the Debatable Land which is particularly remote. The third picture shows a forested area of the border, the trees having grown out of a ditch dug in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to mark the border and shaping the landscape since. Finally, the fourth picture shows a view of England from Scotland. The remote, open landscape shows the lack of a physical border in many areas, in contrast to the third photo.

The landscape is shaped by the border in these subtle ways, nodding to its history as an independent, lawless region, rather than by the grand border structures imagined in railway posters of the last century. I hope to have shown that the Borders are very much an entity to themselves: they are foreign to English and Scottish outsiders alike.