

GOD PRESERVE US FROM THE ROMAN WALL THEME PARK

CHRISTOPHER GOULDING
argues that Northumberland is best
left the way it is.

NORTHUMBERLAND is described by a Tourist Board advertising campaign as "England's best kept secret". Indeed, this is not far from the truth. The wild open spaces of our beautiful border county are largely unspoilt and have mercifully escaped development for tourism on any large scale. So why should anyone wish to change this? The evidence is, it would seem, that someone does.

Traditionally, the comfortable trickle of visitors to Northumberland's historic towns and picturesque villages has always been catered for by the small businessman. Souvenir shops and boarding houses are an integral part of the local economy in such places as Alnwick and Bamburgh, and publicans enjoy the welcome seasonal boost in trade each summer. The hills and valleys of the more remote areas remain the preserve of those with some degree of commitment to the outdoor life. The terrain is naturally suited to traditional pursuits such as fishing and shooting which provide a valuable source of income for land-owners.

All of this fits quite comfortably into the landscape and is no great intrusion on any of the local communities. In parts of Northumberland it is still possible to spend a day fishing without seeing another soul from dawn to dusk — your solitude only at risk, perhaps, from a sudden ear-splitting swoop by an RAF jet fighter on a low flying exercise.

Unfortunately, these idyllic unspoiled days would seem to be numbered. Few stories in the local news have depressed me more than a small article which announced that the development of a "Roman Wall Theme Park" was being considered for a site near Corstopitum Roman Fort on the outskirts of Corbridge. Earmarked as the ideal location by a European firm of consultants, the idea was to attract more than half a million tourists a year and cash in on the fame of Hadrian's Wall. Local council officials admitted that such a proposal would have meant developing a green belt site next to an ancient monument, and doubts were expressed as to whether a small town such as Corbridge could have coped with such an influx of visitors.

Fortunately, the idea seems to have been shelved due to lack of available investment capital. But this rather extreme example of commerce invading the countryside illustrates the spreading north of an already large and growing force in our society — the leisure industry. If, then, Northumberland has been "discovered", surely those of us who love the place must fear for its survival as we know it.

There are, of course, good reasons why many people do want the region's tourism potential to be developed. Tourism's contribution to the economy is widely recognised. It creates thousands of jobs and plays a crucial part in the nation's balance of payments by earning foreign currency. It can also create spin-off effects beneficial to local people such as improved public

transport and revitalisation of run-down areas. But to even consider inflicting such a huge development onto Corbridge (a town already somewhat developed as part of Tyneside's stockbroker belt) is so potentially disastrous that one inevitably fears for the future of the county as a whole.

Former Environment Secretary Nicholas Ridley, when speaking on the subject of green belt development, said that the English countryside is already one of the most heavily man-made habitats in Europe. "To make it into a green museum," he said "would be to belie its whole history." This may be true for some parts of Mr Ridley's adopted southern back yard, but certainly not for the few naturally beautiful and unspoiled wildernesses which we have left and which are anything but green museums.

Exploitation for tourism has already made other areas of outstanding natural beauty such as parts of the Lake District into little more than theme parks where nature has been tamed and

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anaesthetised for public consumption. Old roadways and paths are upgraded and "improved" to give carloads of sightseers access to designated views. Once the birthright of local inhabitants or a marvel to be stumbled upon by visiting walkers, such places can now be "taken in" in a few minutes (and usually are) without so much as leaving the car and feeling the wind on one's face.

The indigenous wildlife inevitably suffers. Its natural habitat disturbed and changed for ever by being dotted with picnic sites and heritage centres, it is driven out. Room is left only for a few examples of each species in the so-called wildlife sanctuary created for them to be looked at and photographed in a sad parody of their true state of existence.

Perhaps the only hope of defence against this invasion lies in the weather? The highly unpredictable changes in conditions to which Northumberland is prone tend to drive away the faint-hearted. Although the popular ideal of cloudless sunny skies is not infrequent, many would say that the county is at its magnificent best just after a howling storm — and they are not the stuff of glossy travel brochures. Aye, the stalwarts of our salvation may yet prove to be our two greatest generals — General July and General August!

England's best kept secret? Surely that unexploited secrecy is part of the very essence of Northumberland's priceless charm. Soon there will be no secret places left in England. The few remaining unspoiled wildernesses which we still have must be guarded and protected like the precious jewels they are. For once defiled, they will never ever be the same again. ●