

This Borders town should teach the rest of Britain about community spirit

Newly hip Selkirk is flourishing as others falter, alive with independent businesses and feeling positive about the future

[Robin McKelvie](#), TRAVEL WRITER 25 January 2024 • 8:30pm



The Borders town of Selkirk is experiencing a rebirth CREDIT: Getty

The Great British High Street is supposed to be in its death throes, drowned under the weight of out-of-town supermarket monoliths. But no one has told Selkirk. This Scottish Borders bolthole is burgeoning as others falter, its main square alive with community-driven businesses, independent stores and even a traditional shoemaker – more artisan than Aldi.

The signs approaching Selkirk are not good. The glorious Borders hills are rudely interrupted by a brace of hulking hypermarkets at Galashiels. They guard the roundabout leading to Selkirk, but I keep my loyalty cards in my pocket, drawn on by a historic town swimming in tales of Willam Wallace’s proclamation as Guardian of Scotland and Sir Walter Scott, who once served as the “Sheriff of Selkirkshire”.



The Haining is an 18th-century country house and estate CREDIT: Robin McKelvie

The 1980s heralded tough times for the Scottish Borders as Thatcherite economics had little sympathy for the collapsing textiles industry. As the famous mills in the home of Tweed closed, towns depopulated and slid off the tourist map. Again no one seems to have read Selkirk the script.

Sarah Macdonald of local tourist initiative **Scotland Starts Here**, explains: “Far from dying, Selkirk is on the up and really came together to stand against all the privations of the Covid lockdowns. Selkirk has always had a fiercely independent and strong community spirit and that has come to the fore.”



'Selkirk is on the up and really came together to stand against all the privations of the Covid lockdowns' says Sarah MacDonald CREDIT: Robin McKelvie

I search for that spirit in the grounds of **The Haining**, an 18th-century country house and estate that helps form a protective green belt around Selkirk. Andrew Nimmo-Smith was obviously impressed by Selkirk's community as he bequeathed them the house and 160-acre estate in 2009. Ex-leader of Reform UK Scotland Michelle Ballantyne is leading its rebirth: "We want to restore it as a resource for the community and an events space that funnels money back in."

Before I delve into lifeblood Market Square, I make two pilgrimages in the grounds. One to the tree bedecked in colourful rags, marking the tragically numerous local suicides, tragedies that hint at the struggles this corner of Scotland still faces. Around the loch lies **Scott's Bench**, a memorial to the deeply creative frontman of seminal Selkirk band Frightened Rabbit, Scott Hutchison. Despite his own battles against depression, the bench quotes his aim to make positive "tiny changes to earth". That could be Selkirk's civic motto.



The Five Turrets is a contemporary self-catering escape inside an imposing Scottish Baronial mansion CREDIT: Robin McKelvie

Another positive motto ("Town. Trade. Tradition") greets me in the **General Store** on Market Square. The "store" moniker is deceptive. No watered-down, overpriced Tesco substitute, this remarkable operation puts community first.

CEO Sue Briggs greets me in overalls. "We sell recycled goods and gifts and use the proceeds to subsidise repairs for the community. We try to fix anything. We employ locals too and have just started up a community library where you can cheaply rent everything from hoovers to hedge trimmers."

I only make it a few metres before Ewa Przemyska, a more recent arrival into Selkirk's community, sweeps me into **Tibbie's. Selkirk Distillers** already had a shop in the square, but they've just opened this zeitgeist-embracing gin bar. I tuck into a platter of charcuterie, which goes surprisingly well with its Bannock Gin, named after the delicious, traditional Selkirk Bannock fruit cake that infuses the gin and is still baked next door at Camerons.

In Selkirk tradition and the present constantly and seamlessly intertwine. I pop into newbie [Three Hills Coffee](#) just for a sublime brew, but they're intent on signing me up for a full barista course that "gives the local people the skills to make great coffee at home".

The past lives just a few doors away. Literally. [Colin Turnbull](#) is an old world souther, Scots for shoemaker. Selkirk was once known as the "Souters' Town" and he keeps this glorious tradition alive. "We can fix any shoe, and people send them here from as far afield as Australia," he says. It is to Clarks what Willy Wonka is to Cadbury.



Sue Briggs is the CEO of the [general store](#) in Market Square CREDIT: Robin McKelvie

It's hard to make it clear of Market Square without being coaxed into an independent bookstore or cheery café. I'm waylaid again by [The Burnside Gallery](#). The Scottish-Spanish couple who own it are not content to run an excellent wee art gallery: they also stage workshops and events and support a web of local artists and schools.

I end the day with another warm welcome in a town that is rapidly starting to feel like Camberwick Green with Wi-Fi and better coffee. It's from Gethin Chamberlain, an ex-foreign correspondent who has forged [The Five Turrets](#), a contemporary self-catering escape inside an imposing Scottish Baronial mansion.

Gethin also runs [Go Wild Scotland](#), and the following morning we are up at dawn to search for red squirrels, eking through the dense remnants of the old Ettrick Forest that once swathed southern Scotland. "The wildlife here is every bit as impressive as the Highlands. We get numerous pine martens too, plus a number of deer species and otters," he enthuses. "The birds of prey are thriving again thanks to the South of Scotland Golden Eagle Project you can visit on the Philiphaugh Estate."

I spend my last night in serious style up the Ettrick Water at [Aikwood Tower](#). Selkirk's rich history encroaches again as a powerful Borders reiver once defied both the might of both Scotland and England from this 500-year-old fortress. Now, there's

a table tennis table, roaring fire and an Aga-blessed kitchen, where owner Vicki Steel has left me a hamper alive with local goodies. More Selkirk Bannock anyone? Vicki suggests I ramble up to the postcard-pretty village of **Ettrickbridge**, where her husband Rory saved **the Cross Keys Inn** from closure last year and has already scooped an award. Otters and deer accompany me along the sun-dappled river; I half expect to be painted into a watercolour.

Rory greets me with a pint of local Tempest ale and Borders-landed haddock ‘n’ chips. “I couldn’t let the pub stay closed as it means so much to the community,” he explains. That word again – community. You don’t hear that in many British high streets these days. I’m glad no one bothered to tell Selkirk it is meant to be lumbering under the weight of supermarket hegemony.