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SPOTLIGHT ON MUSEUMS TULLIE HOUSE MUSEUM, CARLISLE

Tullie House Museum was once home to the Dean of Carlisle, Thomas Tullie, and dates from 1689. It is a fine Jacobean House of local red stone just a short walk away from the Cathedral in one direction and from the imposing fortress in the other.

It is no coincidence that the early families of the area were named Ransome, Robson and Armstrong. Carlisle squares up to the edge of what is known as the 'Debatable Lands', an area of shifting borders and allegiances between England and Scotland with a tendency for lawlessness and blood feuds. The Emperor Hadrian had a defensive wall built and manned across the country here in Roman times. In later times, the times of the Reivers or cattle raiders, tall Pele Towers were built as strategic look-outs and bolt-holes. Even the towns in the area are distinguished by narrow lanes leading into wide squares into which livestock and populace could retreat during border raids. Marcher lords or marchionesses were given special powers by the king to keep the peace on the borders. In the East of the country the Marcher lords were Percys based at Alnwick (now the film location of Harry Potter films), while in the West the lords were Nevilles (Cecily and Anne both married kings), Cliffords (Lady Anne was an important heiress in the north) and Greystokes (Lord John also known as Tarzan). Bonnie Prince Charlie took Carlisle in 1745, lost it shortly afterwards and made his final flight to exile via The Western Isles.

Steeped as its history is in conflict and bloodshed, a visitor today to Carlisle will find the town peaceable and welcoming, its people warm and friendly, and the air suffused with scent of just-baked biscuits from the local biscuit factory. Follow the smell of freshly roasting coffee and you will find the best coffee shop in the North in Bank Street. The shop is also a museum owned by a local historian who will give you more than the time of day if you ask him what he knows of Carlisle. And don't leave without trying the toasted banana bread.

Carlisle was also an important centre for textile production in the 18th century, famous for checked and striped cottons. One of the mills was the largest in cotton factory in Britain employing over 1,000 workers. However, the failure of supply of raw cotton caused by the American Civil War brought bankruptcy and destitution for many.

One of the 34 magnificent quilts in the Tullie House collection is made from locally produced fabrics. The collection spans the years 1700-1950 and includes cord, wholecloth, strippy, framed, mosaic, block and log cabin quilts. An attractive illustrated brochure. 'Stitches in Time - The Tullie House Quilt Collection' is available for purchase from the museum for £4.95.

The museum is home to 64 samplers. The earliest is a signed red alphabet sampler of 1698 by Deborah Robinson (the D of the alphabet is marked in blue) which has unfortunately been cut down. Many of the samplers are by girls from local schools and it would seem that there was here a design convention for geometric trees and plants - branches and stems all lead from the main stem at abrupt angles. Red houses are favoured - again recalling local red sandstone. Only a few of the samplers display the Scottish convention of Frisian or Saxon alphabets with paired initials - I had expected more.

The samplers and quilts can be viewed by groups who have made a prior appointment. It is important to remember that staff are few and while every effort is made to allow access, envigilation means taking someone away from important work for the best part of an afternoon or morning. Viewing is free, but it is thoughtful and kind to leave a donation.

A number of costume exhibits are on open display. The museum has excellent facilities and is a very pleasant place to spend time

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