

TO THE WILDS OF THE NORTH

To mark 50 years of the Lotus-Cortina, photographer Martyn Goddard takes one in search of deserted roads and dramatic scenery in Northumberland – close to the home of the racer who made its name



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THE PAGES COVERING Northumberland in my battered 1996 Philips road atlas lacked the scribbled notes that denote good photo locations elsewhere. The reason? After 30 years of automotive photography, this furthest-north region of England has been off my creative radar. I hatched a plan to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Lotus-Cortina and Ford's heritage collection provided one for our adventure – just like the one that was raced by the likes of Sir John Whitmore and Jim Clark. I had the great fortune to watch them as a teenager at Silverstone, or from my uncle's office window above the Crystal Palace circuit.

Early morning, as I head out of North London with wife Beverly, the A1 road sign just says 'The North', and henceforth our chosen route along this historic British trunk road does not deviate for the thick end of 300 miles: the distance to the Marches of Northumberland. It's a fitting way to stretch this sports saloon, designed in an era when there were fewer than 100 miles of motorway in the whole of the UK!

Torrential rain and spray batter the little Ford (and little it is, by the standards of today's bloated family cars), but the single-speed wipers cope with the conditions and the revolutionary 1960s 'aeroflow' ventilation system makes for reasonable visibility.

The grind is over by dusk when we finally arrive at Heddon-on-the-Wall (yes, that wall), close to Newcastle-upon-Tyne, to stay at Close

House hotel and golf club (where Lee Westwood plays). The Cortina's vinyl seats have proven admirably comfortable on the journey, its 14-inch wood-rimmed steering wheel easy on the hands, the Smith's gauges (a full set apart from a clock) easy on the eyes.

Unloading luggage from the cavernous boot, I'm reminded of when I met Ford Thunderbird designer Frank Hershey at the Pebble Beach Concours and his reminiscence of obtaining Henry Ford II's blessing to build it because of its ability to carry two sets of clubs in the trunk! Dinner is exceptional, though we overlook the Château la Fleur Pétrus Pomerol 2003 at £190 in favour of the house Syrah to accompany pork loin and black pudding.

The morning news reports that a month's rain has fallen in a day, yet the Cortina starts without choke and soon we're heading along the arrow-straight B6348 military road towards Housesteads Roman Fort on Hadrian's Wall.

Built in AD122 to secure this outpost of the Roman Empire and stretching 80 miles from Newcastle to Carlisle, the wall took six years to build using a million cubic meters of stone – much of which still stands. Entry to the Fort is via a steep shale path to a strategic viewpoint. Legionnaires from the Mediterranean endured this blustery location; even Syrian archers did a tour of duty here. One of their favourite buildings might have been the grain store, whose hypocaust heating can still be seen. Unlike so many Roman ruins in the UK, much survives and from the north gate you can see the stone wall snaking over the crags.

Next we head to Rothbury via the A6079 and B6342, and uncover Northumberland's secret. This is England's least populous county, with a mere 62 people per square kilometre (in

London it's 5206!) and wonderful roads with long straights courtesy of the Romans and switchback dips thanks to the topography. The Cortina comes to life, and the drive makes for serious use of the wrist-flick gearbox.

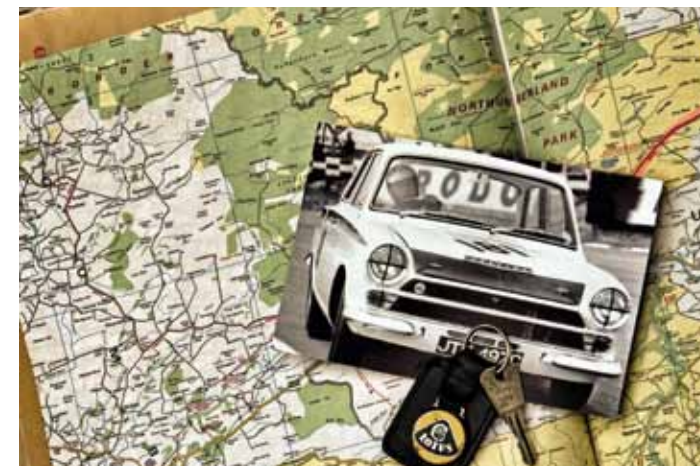
At Wallington House there is a beautiful humpback bridge across the swollen River Wansbeck, but the road to Craggside House is closed by flooding. Plan B is a lunch of Northumberland cheeses at the Congregational Art Gallery, before diverting to Eshott Hall. The hotel is warm and the friendly staff show us to the Italian Room (our aptly named quarters for a night in the former Roman stronghold). And they just love the Lotus-Cortina.

Another early start for the drive north to meet Mike and Beth Mills, our National Park guides, up College Valley in the Cheviot Hills, where only ten cars are permitted per day. Road trips have a habit of turning up the unexpected. Mike is the owner of one of the first ever sport saloons, a 1930 Riley Alpine 6/14. This 1600cc lightweight fabric-bodied four-door was equipped with twin camshafts and a crossflow hemi cylinder head when Ford had barely ceased production of the Model T!

The clouds roll in as we climb the narrow road to the valley, stopping at the Allied Airmen Memorial adjacent to Cuddystone Hall. Erected in 1995, the 50th Anniversary of VE day, it marks the location and model of aircraft whose crews had succumbed to atrocious weather over the Cheviots. It's a struggle to see through the mist but we can just make out hills with such great names as Sinkside and Blackhaggs.

From Wooler we drive north and cross the Scottish border, car and driver revelling in the sinuous traffic-free roads to the market town

Right
That mapbook, a certain 50th anniversary and childhood memories of the Lotus-Cortina in action prompted a memorable trip to England's northernmost corner; the A1's OK Diner en route to more salubrious surroundings; swollen River Wansbeck traversed by beautiful bridge.





‘The Cortina comes to life, and the drive makes for serious use of the wrist-flick gearbox’



Above
Inside the Jim Clark
Rooms at Duns, just over
the border in Scotland;
outside the Eshott Hall
hotel, for an overnight stop.

of Duns, home to The Jim Clark Room. This tiny, free-to-enter museum is dedicated to the 1963/65 double F1 champion and 1964 British Touring Car champion – when he drove a Lotus-Cortina. The room is like a giant trophy cabinet chronicling the sporting life of the Berwickshire farmer, whom some would say became Britain’s greatest racing driver. One period photograph shows the maestro hustling the Cortina at Brands Hatch in 1964. We see period films of Clark delicately threading his F1 Lotus around Oulton Park, then drive back across the English border on a route his less popular ancestors might have taken.

Northumberland in the 15th century was known as a lawless territory with groups of raiders causing the English crown to take similar measures to the Romans, resulting in the area’s many castles. Eshott Hall Hotel wasn’t fortified but it was built in 1660, and that night we feast on Guinea fowl, sweet potato and baby vegetables with parsnip puree courtesy of chef Chris Wood.

Our final day’s tour begins with Cragside House, postponed by the floods. This impressive Arts and Crafts house, built by the lawyer-turned-engineer William George Armstrong in 1863, is packed with innovations that might be commonplace today but were revolutionary at the time. Armstrong’s company harnessed the power of water for projects such as the lifting gear of Tower Bridge. At his home water powered a passenger lift;

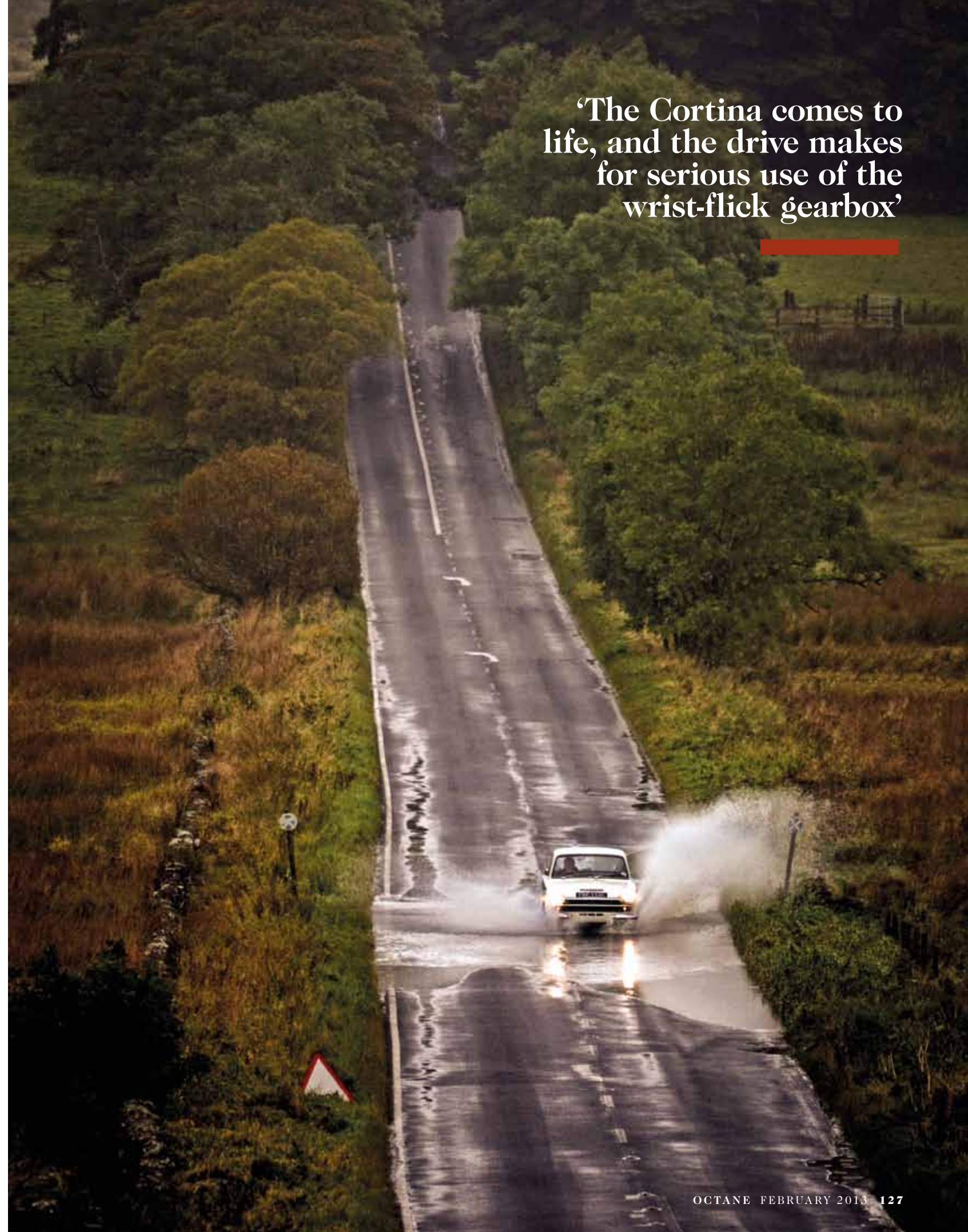
in 1881 he was using electric lighting powered by hydroelectric energy from his own power station; and by 1885 he was on the telephone.

Cragside also sports a six-mile drive through the estate that would have made a great rally stage for our Cortina but for its 15mph speed limit. Instead we make do with the B6341 east to the coast.

The steep hill out of Rothbury requires second gear and highlights a lack of low-down torque (it peaks with 107ft lb at 4500rpm) from the twin-cam but, once out on the moorland road, the car is in its element. The combination of Lotus-tuned suspension and Yokohama tyres copes with the sweeping, gravel-covered bends, there is hardly any body roll and just the right amount of oversteer. We blast along the straights with roller-coaster dips and never bottom out, and I can use the full 110bhp all the time secure in those period seats.

There’s an invitation to tea at Howick Hall, ancestral home of the Grey family, where Charles 2nd Earl Grey had a Chinese mandarin blend a tea to offset the lime taste of the spring water. He became Prime Minister in 1830 but failed to register the blend so the family hasn’t benefitted from it. The gardens and tearooms ooze 18th-century grandeur.

It’s mid-afternoon before we reach the Northumberland coastal route but the light is interesting and the road deserted. We can see Bamburgh Castle on a rock outcrop as we head north but it is not until passing through the



1965 FORD

LOTUS-CORTINA

ENGINE 1558cc four-cylinder, DOHC, twin Weber 40 DCOE 31 carburetors
POWER 110bhp @ 6000rpm
TORQUE 107lb ft @ 4500rpm
TRANSMISSION Four-speed manual, rear-wheel drive
STEERING Recirculating ball
SUSPENSION Front: MacPherson struts, coil springs, anti-roll bar. Rear: live axle, lower A-brackets, coil springs, telescopic dampers
BRAKES Front discs, rear drums
WEIGHT 876kg
PERFORMANCE Top speed 106mph 0-60mph 10.5sec

village and out onto the sand dunes that we gain the quintessential vista of beach and medieval castle. Norman in origin, the castle was the first to fall to artillery fire during a nine-month siege in the Wars of the Roses.

The afternoon shadows are lengthening as we approach the causeway to Holy Island. Checking the tide tables, we have just two hours to cross and savour the Lindisfarne Priory and Castle – there are red signs warning of dire consequences if you attempt the crossing in the red tide time zone!

Working our way around the monastic ruins and then a bracing walk around the small harbour – where local fishermen have recycled old boats into huts by turning them upside-down – takes longer than planned so we head straight back across the bay towards our last night in Berwick-upon-Tweed.

The Northumbrian House is located within the town walls and, like much of the town, is Georgian. Berwick changed hands between Scotland and England in the medieval times

but it was Elizabeth I that equipped it with defensive walls and the town's architecture has a Scandinavian feel. Our host Ian Kille gives us a route that in as much of the town as possible before sunset. The bridges over the Tweed include George Stephenson's Royal Boarder Bridge, which dominates. It was built in 1847 and its 28 arches carry the East Coast Mainline trains.

But you can forget about trains. This is serious driving country, as proven by 950 hugely rewarding miles in the Lotus-Cortina. Northumberland has dramatic topography, a wealth of historic sites, great hotels and friendly people. That old atlas is now full of notes on those pages – and we will return. *Cont.*

THANKS TO Tourist Information, www.visitnorthumberland.com; Close House Hotel, www.closehouse.co.uk; Eshott Hall Hotel, www.eshothall.co.uk; Howick Hall, www.howickhallgardens.org; Northumbrian House B&B, www.7ravensdowne.co.uk.

