

The Real Bernicians or How to Create a Country

Step 1: Land

To create a country first you must acquire land: defined territory that is not governed or claimed by any other recognised nation. (Unless you have the means to take land by force.)



On 31st January 2020, in a world much like ours, the United Kingdom left the European Union, Scotland left the United Kingdom, and an area of land that had long been forgotten gained a quiet prominence. Throughout history, the site – north of England and south of Scotland – had been controlled by the Romans, the Angles, the Norsemen and more. It had been England, Scotland and Border Country; it had names that had long been forgotten. For decades it lay uncontested and disregarded. That was until the day two unions split causing an aperture on the map to suddenly belong to no one.



Four friends sat in a pub in Newcastle's Ouseburn Valley lamenting the state of the world and the opportunities open to them. Rebecca Bromfield from Ashington was a barmaid with a first-class degree in History of Art. Abena Nkrumah from Fenham was a youth worker who'd studied Human Geography and still lived with her parents. Sarah McGregor, originally from Glasgow, was a permanent temp who hadn't found a use for her Politics degree. Sanjeev Anand, a fine artist from South Shields, worked in telesales – trying to sell printer toner cartridges to people who didn't want to talk to him. They sat on the broken springs and worn upholstery of armchairs that had surely been opulent once. The air was sickly sweet and sour like overripe fruit and body odour. Friends since university, they had each graduated clutching a roll of parchment and a handful of dreams. Over the years these items had been consigned to drawers that were rarely opened.

Abena stroked her phone screen, gliding around a map of Great Britain. She settled on something. 'What's that?'

Her three friends huddled around as she enlarged the map on the small screen. 'What's north of Northumberland?'

'Scotland.'

'And south of that?'

'England.'

'Then what is this?' Abena zoomed in on an area between the two, no longer united, countries.

Later that evening, four friends stood in the middle of a field in darkness. 'Do it here!' Sanjeev said. Rebecca turned the torchlight from her phone to brighten the spot he was pointing towards. Abena held their makeshift flagpole – made from a broken broomstick threaded through the arms of a white t-shirt that said, *Your Time is Now!* Together they plunged the jagged end of the stick into the ground and declared themselves founders of a new nation. The wooden stick stood upright as the t-shirt quivered in the cold, salty wind.

Step 2: Population

Establish a permanent populace. Helpfully, there is no minimum or maximum requirement with regard to population size. (If there is a pre-existing indigenous community on the land, proceed with caution.)



People of Scottish heritage living around the world considered applying for Scottish citizenship and 'going home'. Some fantasised about returning to the landscape of their foremothers and fathers, reconnecting with a homeland that they knew only from stories, analogue photographs and vaguely recalled childhood holidays.



While the world was preoccupied with larger geopolitical shifts, no one of note paid any mind to what was happening north of Northumberland, where history was also being made. Four friends woke in a silver Ford Fiesta, in the middle of a field in a country they had recently created.

'What should we call it?' Sarah asked, leaning out of the car window to peer at the fields that stretched towards a foggy horizon. She could taste the sea in the air, although it wasn't visible.

'The Latin word for this area was Bernicia,' Abena said. 'It means victory.'

'The Republic of Bernicia,' Sanjeev said, with gravitas.

Rebecca smiled and nodded in approval.

Over a breakfast of stale bread rolls and cans of cider – found in the boot of Sarah's car – the friends agreed on a plan. They would create a country so conclusively that by the time the world realised what had happened, it would be impossible to shake their claim of sovereignty. To achieve this, they needed a population. Rebecca nominated her grandad, Rob. He'd been a miner all his working life, was practical, and had taken up watercolour painting in his retirement. She felt he was a good all-rounder. No one objected. Sarah did pause, wondering whether it was wise to start the country with an ageing population, but she risked sounding callous if she brought it up, so she kept quiet. Instead she nominated her political theory lecturer from university, who was just a few years older than them. Sarah knew that the young academic lived from pay cheque to pay cheque and worked year to year on part-time, fixed-term contracts with little security. Sarah was sure that she would jump at the chance to build a new life for herself in their fledgling country. Sanjeev chose his green-fingered work colleague, who had maintained a prize-winning allotment for the last three years. Abena's choice used up her first two nominations: she asked for her cousin, who was a bricklayer, and his wife, a nurse, to join them. Their utility and relevance to the project were obvious, and no one objected. Rebecca's next vote was for her on-again-off-again partner who, like Sanjeev, was a fine art graduate, but, unlike Sanjeev, was extremely high maintenance. Both Abena and Sarah jumped in and vetoed the nomination, causing Rebecca to sulk. And thus, the process continued. Some nominations required debate, but there wasn't too much tension and all in all they felt they were making good progress.

The friends set up camp and assembled tents around a central fire pit, where they met each evening to keep counsel. As the others came, each new arrival pitched a tent in the space that had been left for them around the natural hearth that burned each night. The new populace began to work the land, cultivating the soil and planting crops. (NB The Morrison's in Berwick was only a ten-minute drive away for any essentials they needed while they waited for their crops to grow.) As the skin on their fingers toughened to the new way of life, their hopes and hearts thawed and began to sprout anew.

It was Grandad Rob who spotted them first. While out on a walk he came across a single row of terraced houses in a clearing beyond a thicket of trees. They appeared to be abandoned, but through a window he saw a family of four were living in the last house in the row. They wore simple, sack-cloth garments and each had an abundance of light brown hair, startling green eyes, and a faint coat of downy blonde hair covering their arms, hands, cheeks and necks. Grandad Rob quickly returned to the camp to tell the others. It was agreed that they should make contact with the family, who they named the First Bernicians. If all went well, the new Bernicians would relocate from their tents to the empty houses and integrate the First Bernicians into their new community.

Step 3: Government

Decide on a system of governance and establish a leadership authority that is recognised by the people of the land.



There was talk of a referendum in the UK to decide, as a nation, whether to recognise Scottish independence. There were cross-party battles, inter-party squabbles. There was talk of an early election. There was talk of voting fatigue. There was a lot of talk.



The First Bernicians always moved as a group or in pairs. They appeared to be a timid clan and hid whenever the new Bernicians tried to approach them. As an offer of friendship, the new Bernicians left a hamper on the steps of the First Family's home filled with chocolates (from Morrison's), foraged apples and blackberries, a cinnamon loaf (brought by a recent arrival), a box of wine (as it seemed unlikely that the family would have a corkscrew), and a roll of drawing paper and a tray of watercolour paints (Sanjeev's idea). Encouraged by the lack of aggression shown by the family, the new Bernicians moved into the empty houses.

Meetings previously held around the fire pit moved to the middle house in the terraced row, where the four founding members now lived. It was suggested that John Locke's writings on the natural right to life, liberty and property might guide the new population when thinking about models of government.

'Should *property* be a focus?' Sarah asked, unconvinced.

Abena announced that democracy was of course the answer, and several voices rose and fell as agreement and discord mingled until no one was sure what had been decided.

'What about a theocracy?' Sanjeev called out. The room fell silent – he had their attention. Abena smiled, encouraging him to go on. She always felt that Sanjeev was too timid and needed to have more confidence in his ideas.

'It's when you choose a God to guide you.' He said. Abena's face fell; Sanjeev should sit down and be quiet. 'I've done a series of paintings inspired by Gaia, the primordial earth mother.' Sanjeev explained. 'We could start a theocracy with a focus on Mother Earth and let her guide us.'

Grandad Rob, who'd been ignoring much of the 'discussion', sat up as the lad, Sanjeev, was speaking. As a man who had been born by the sea and spent his working life underground, he had inbuilt respect for the power of the earth. Several people thought Sanjeev's idea was ridiculous and told him so. But like Grandad Rob, others seemed to like it. Which is how the Republic of Bernicia came to be governed as a new theocracy, looking to the earth and her immortal intelligence for guidance as its ruling power.

The meeting closed and the Bernicians made their way out of the middle house to return to their respective homes in the terrace. When they opened the front door to

leave, they were met by an odd assemblage: on the doorstep before them was a pile of what looked like rubbish, topped with shredded paper and covered in a rainbow of powders. Nobody could agree if the torn drawing paper and crumbled watercolour paints was an act of aggression or a work of art. When Sanjeev saw it, he said it was definitely a work of art, but Rebecca wasn't so sure – perhaps it was some kind of threat. Some way in the distance, in the shadow of the trees, the First Bernicians stood watching.

Step 5: Constitution

Write a constitution. This document should define and specify the laws that make up your country. It should set out the structure of the state, the main governing institutions, and the principles that underpin their relationship to each other and to citizens.



Scotland's draft Independence Bill became its interim constitution. News stories about constitutions abounded, and debates began concerning Britain's own. Unlike most countries in the world, Britain had no single legal document that set out the fundamental laws and outlined how the state worked. Instead, it had an accumulation of statutes, conventions, judicial decisions and treaties which were collectively referred to as the British Constitution.



The responsibility of forming a government and writing a constitution was led by five Bernicians: Grandad Rob, who had worked his whole life inside Mother Earth, and could read her warning signs and messages; a friend of Sarah's, who had graduated in Earth Sciences; Sanjeev's friend with the prize-winning allotment in South Shields; Sanjeev himself, whose idea it had been to form a theocracy; and Sarah's political theory lecturer, who felt a system of governance that involved adopting processes which 'mirror the organic rhythm of the elements', was frankly ludicrous. She had agreed to be included in the leadership team in the hopes she could be a moderating influence. The preamble to the constitution that they settled on read:

***We, the people of the Republic of Bernicia,
Honour Mother Earth and all that she gives us.
We take our place as custodians of this land and
Acknowledge the interdependence of all life;
Recognise the inequalities of our past;
Respect those who came before us; and
Believe that Bernicia belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.
We therefore adopt this Constitution as our supreme law so as to –
Establish a society based on ecological values, social justice and fundamental rights
(human and environmental);
Lay the foundations for a balanced and sustainable system of production and utilisation
of resources;
Improve the quality of life of all citizens and release the potential of each person; in
order to
Build a united and equitable Bernicia able to take its place as a sovereign state in the
family of nations.
May Mother Earth protect us all.***

Step 1.5 (an addendum to Step 1: Land): Borders & Boundaries

An important step which was inferred but not explicit in Step 1 is the need for defined boundaries. Any established country must create and secure its territorial borders to keep in those who belong and keep out those who do not.



At the edge of Scotland, where once a border was implied, a line of high metal fences was built and a military patrol stood guard.



The Republic of Bernicia built and fortified its own boundaries (brick walls topped with broken glass). Led by Abena's cousin who was a bricklayer, the Bernicians worked for months to complete the borders, shielding themselves from Scotland and England. While they worked, the First Bernicians watched from afar in bemusement.

Soon after the completion of the border walls, the First Bernicians started to appear with injuries. They would return to their house at the end of the terraced row, their sack-cloth garments torn and bloodied, with cuts on their faces, arms and legs. Abena and Rebecca were tasked to follow them to find out who or what was attacking them. They tracked the First Family to the southern border wall, where they watched them support each other to climb over the boundary and, in the process, get nipped and stabbed by the broken glass that laced the top of the walls.

'Why don't they just use the gate at the west side?' someone asked when the Abena and Rebecca reported what they'd seen.

'Maybe we need us to show them.'

'What? Are they stupid?'

'I don't get it. If there's something there that they want so much, how come they keep coming back here?'

'You're right, no one's forcing them to be here.'

'If they want to be on that side – why don't they stay over there?'

No one thought to say, *we've divided a land that was once their home*. No one noticed that the First Bernicians were trying to live in two countries, no longer belonging to either.

Step 6: Culture

Collectively recognised cultural practices, habits and norms are the fabric of any highly regarded country. Establish a set of diverse and lively cultural activities which incorporate manifestations of creative and intellectual achievement.



A Festival of Independence was planned in Scotland, while in England the announcement of a Brexit Festival divided public opinion.



For the Bernicians, the following cultural features were (eventually) unanimously agreed upon (except when they weren't):

National dress: Kente Cloth Kilts

Sarah and Abena both wanted the Bernician national dress to incorporate the fabric traditions of their ancestors. Therefore, a brightly coloured kente cloth kilt was agreed upon, to incorporate the weaving practices of the Scots and the Akans.

Food and National Dish: Bernician Chicken Tikka Masala

The original dish is said to have originated in Glasgow, or in England, or on the Indian subcontinent. It was unanimously agreed that the famed chicken dish would be the national meal due to its pluralistic and diverse origin story, which made it as Bernician as the newest Bernician. It was updated by incorporating wild garlic, mushrooms, and hogweed foraged locally.

National Emblem: The Bernician Terrier (formerly the Bedlington Terrier)

Rebecca suggested the fluffy dog because its speed and dexterity mirrored the swiftness of mind and movement that characterised the Bernician spirit.

Resources & Economy: trees, wildlife, the sea, fertile ground with burgeoning crops, coastal views, eight terraced houses. It was discussed that these could be used to establish a micro-economy and that trade and tourism with neighbouring countries might become a possibility at some stage. But for the present, they had all they needed.

Flag: Undecided

Sanjeev and Grandad Rob had been tasked to collaborate on the design of the Bernician flag. However, blending Sanjeev's bold colours and abstract shapes with Grandad Rob's muted, cloudy aesthetic proved a greater challenge than anyone had anticipated. Months passed and no flag appeared.

Drink: Someone suggested they create a national cocktail. Ingredients discussed included Newcastle Brown Ale; WKD Blue; Irn Bru; cider; red wine and green tea. Grandad Rob got up to leave at this point; he'd had enough. Then, in a moment of inspiration which could only have come from Mother Earth, Sanjeev suggested birch sap. They had all witnessed the First Bernicians tapping the birch trees for the clear liquid that ran through them, and wasn't that the perfect national beverage for a country governed by Mother Earth?

Step 7: International Recognition

For any new country to be formally recognised, it needs other nations to acknowledge its existence. This requires diplomatic ties with other countries, and it is advisable to seek recognition from the United Nations. Ideally, this should be done by achieving a seat on the UN Security Council. However, failing that, and as a minimum requirement, your country should be recognised by at least one UN member state.



The UK officially denied Scotland's claim to independence and there were threats that it would, at some point, look to demolish any permanent borders that had been constructed. However, the EU released a statement formally recognising Scotland's sovereignty and announced that EU member states would meet to discuss the possibility of Scotland re-entering the European Union.



The single row of terraced houses in Bernicia had slowly been repaired and updated. The crops were growing, and life settled into its own rhythm. Sarah started to talk about the need to form diplomatic ties. The Scottish effort gave them hope of what could be achieved if they formed powerful alliances. One afternoon, they met in the middle house to discuss next steps. Someone said they should approach Scotland as a potential ally. But what if Scotland tried to claim Bernicia as its own?, someone else fretted. Rebecca felt the Republic of Ireland should be the first point of contact, as of all the neighbouring countries it was the least likely to make a claim on Bernicia. Others reasoned that they should reach out to England quickly and not sit waiting to be discovered. It was inevitable that the English would find them soon, especially if they were making challenges to the Scottish border. Over homemade flapjacks and mugs of birch sap, they debated the merits of each approach – that was until a thunderous roar in the distance interrupted their discussion. The Bernicians moved to the front windows to see what had caused the noise. Past the fields, the border wall they had spent months constructing tumbled like a pile of toy bricks as a tank charged through it. Propellers sounded in the distance, and a helicopter came into view. They had been discovered. Panic rippled through the group. The Bernicians ran through the house, pushing each other, crawling over those who had fallen, scrabbling to get to the back door. Was it the English, the Scots or some other power? As they rushed out of the terrace, they were met by a wall of bodies: four hairy people stood in a row. The First Bernicians were obstructing their path.

'Are they attacking us as well?'

'Maybe they're trying to... save us.'

'Or asking us to stay... and fight.'

'With those things?'

The First Bernicians stood, each holding a weapon (a rifle, a BB gun, a spade and a mallet). On the ground in front of them were assorted paraphernalia. The tanks could be heard crushing everything that stood in their way; the clamour grew louder as they neared. Hesitantly, someone bent down to pick up a spatula. Another person took the rope. Someone else pulled the Bernician flagpole out of the earth, discarded the t-shirt (which had greyed in the weather), and held the jagged stick like a spear. Together, they joined the First Bernicians, extending the human wall that the first people had created. The ground trembled as the tanks approached.

'Mother Earth, protect us all!' they shouted, as they ran into the fray.