

HADRIAN'S WALL: MUSEUM AND MONUMENT



Housesteads

Key Statistics

The Wall stretched for 74 miles and was 15 feet high and 10 feet wide.

Building commenced around AD 122-125.

It was (and remains) a magnificent feat of engineering comprising 18 million specially prepared blocks of stone, most of which was sourced locally.

A fort was built at seven mile intervals. There were 17 major forts of which Housesteads is a famous example. Such forts held about 400 people.

Castles were built at 1 mile intervals, but not always in a logical place relative to the local terrain. Clearly, there was rigid adherence to the design.

It is estimated that 10,000 soldiers were assigned to constructing the Wall with each Century allocated a specific portion to construct.

The Wall was constructed by the 2nd, 6th and 20th legions aided by auxiliaries. It acted as an imposing frontier for about 300 years.

The Wall is now a World Heritage Site.



Legionaries on their way to Corbridge

Why Was It Built?

By AD 122 the Romans had accumulated a huge garrison in Britain inside a border running between what is now Newcastle-on-Tyne and Carlisle.

The Emperor Hadrian came to power in AD117 at age 41. He visited Britain in AD122 as part of a policy of touring the empire, connecting with the army and raising morale. Contrary to past Roman practice, Hadrian took the decision to consolidate and not extend the empire.

A decision was made to consolidate along that line the drivers for which may have been:

- Establishment of a physical and symbolic barrier.
- Control of the northern part of Britain.
- Establishment of a customs post.
- A military barrier.
- To keep the military busy (by shifting several million tonnes of stone) and avoid rebellion.

The Museum of Antiquities at Newcastle–on-Tyne holds many stone tablets with the inscriptions of the Romans who built the Wall including one confirming that it was Hadrian who ordered the construction.

Who Built the Wall?

The Roman military was multi-skilled and it is believed they (not slaves) built the Wall.

The military stonemasons were highly skilled and used tools which were virtually identical to those used in modern times. Each mason worked on a stone for about 20 minutes before it was ready to fit on the wall.

Techniques for Lifting and Quarrying Stones

Like today's stonemasons, the Romans lifted stones by using lewis holes. A lewis has a pair of half rounded legs which grip the sides of a secure hole in the stone. When the lifting ring is raised an angled pull on each leg creates a secure grip.

Clues have been left at Fallowfield Quarry where the Romans quarried away an entire hillside.



Roman Banquet

The Wall as a Museum

Excavation started in earnest during Victorian times. Nevertheless, only 1pct of the Wall has been excavated.

The site at Vindolanda is, arguably, the jewel in the crown. The site is just south of the Wall and was occupied by the military between the 1st and 4th centuries AD. The fort there played an integral role in the construction of the Wall.

Vindolanda benefits from Anaerobic soil conditions which provide perfect, oxygen-less preservation conditions under a layer of clay. The finds at Vindolanda have led to unique political and social insights into the Roman occupation. Thousands of leather artefacts have survived and wooden items such as boxwood combs (for cleansing the hair of nits and lice). However, it is the famous Vindolanda tablets which are now ranked as one of Britain's top treasures.

The Vindolanda Tablets

These are very thin (1mm thick) wooden tablets, about the size of a modern postcard. The address was placed on the outside with the message inside. About 900 such tablets have been discovered to date with more found. The writing was an unusual, lower case Latin script which is difficult to read and translate. The correspondence covers routine social matters such as invitation to birthday celebrations and incredibly detailed military records. The letters were probably written by scribes. Roman pen nibs have also been found and reconstructed.

Upon exposure to the air the writing on the tablets fades. However, a process entailing soaking in alcohol and ether then viewing under infra red light reveals the script.

From the tablets we learn that the Romans:

- brought writing to the British Isles;
- enjoyed a high level of literacy (including some women);
- did not always maintain the roads in good condition;
- allowed women to accompany the military on the Wall; and
- appear to have despised the local British calling them Brituncili or “wretched little Brits”.



Corbridge

Life on The Wall

Excavation has revealed that, whilst relative to the Mediterranean, a posting to the Wall would have been considered a hardship posting, nevertheless the soldiers enjoyed warm bath houses and in some cases under floor heating.

The populace was a cosmopolitan mix comprising soldiers from Syria, North Africa, Hungary, Bulgaria, France, Spain and Germany.

Outside the military forts civilian settlements known as vicus grew up. These provided accommodation for soldiers' partners and slaves. There were also workshops, shops, and butchers to support the military community.

End of The Wall

After the Roman withdrawal in AD411 the Wall fell into disuse and was subsequently used as a quarry for local building work, e.g. Lanacost Priory. From Bank's Turret west there is no evidence of the Wall left.