

# Hadrian's Wall

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*in our Time*

Edited by  
David J. Breeze



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Line drawings by Mark B. Richards

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Front cover. Mucklebank turret. Photograph Elizabeth M. Greene.

Although the photograph of Mucklebank turret was chosen because of its artistic merit, it reflects a historical moment in the study of Hadrian's Wall because it was excavated by John Pattison Gibson in 1892, the year that saw the death of John Collingwood Bruce the great interpreter of the frontier and the start of modern 'scientific' excavations on the Wall.

Back cover. The Wall at Walltown snaking round the rocky outcrops. Line drawing by Mark Richards.

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*To the memory of a fallen tree in Sycamore Gap*

Hadrian's Wall is a World Heritage Site

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## A Note on Terminology

Hadrian's Wall has, over several centuries, acquired a language of its own. The very name of the Wall has changed over time. It appears to have been called the Picts' Wall in the medieval period. When scholars thought that the Wall had been built on the order of the Emperor Septimius Severus, it became known as Severus' Wall. In 1840, it was demonstrated that the Wall was actually built in the time of the Emperor Hadrian and so it became known as Hadrian's Wall. At the same time, it was often called The Roman Wall, and this phrase is still used in some circumstances, such as the title of the *Handbook to the Roman Wall*, the linear descendant of John Collingwood Bruce's *The Roman Wall*, first published in 1851, with its successor now in its 14th edition.

Behind the Wall, almost for its full length, is a great earthwork consisting of a ditch with mounds set back on each side, known as the Vallum since the time of the Venerable Bede who so named it in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, completed in 731. Its principal feature is the central ditch, so it should really be known as the Fossa, but it is too late to change the name now.

The Wall itself was called the *vallum*. This word appears on the Ilam Pan (see pages 52-3). Along the top of the vessel are the words RIGOREVALI AELI DRACONIS followed by the names of four forts in the western sector of the Wall. Unfortunately, the phrase lacks punctuation, so we have to guess at that. It has been suggested VALI and AELI go together and demonstrate that the name of the frontier was the *Vallum Aelii*, the Wall of Aelius, Aelius being Hadrian's family name. However, RIGORE is a technical surveying term and an alternative view is that Draco, the man who owned and probably commissioned the vessel, was a surveyor and if so he would almost certainly have been a legionary and therefore had two names, Aelius Draco.

'Wall' refers not just to the stone wall which we see today, but its predecessor in the western 31 Roman miles (50 km) of the frontier which was originally built of turf. Its replacement in stone started in the reign of Hadrian and continued for some time.

The military structures along Wall have their own names: forts, milecastles and turrets. 'Fort' is a modern word; the Romans would probably have called a fort on the Wall, a *castellum* or *castra*, the derivations of our place names Caerleon, Lancaster, and of course Chester/Chesters, so it is not surprising that many forts along the Wall have Chesters in their name, including Halton Chesters and Great Chesters.

A milecastle was given its name by John Horsley in 1732 because these small forts, that is, 'castles', occurred at every mile. The word 'turret' was introduced into Wall terminology from the Latin word for a tower, *turris*.

Unfortunately, the complications do not end there. Along the Cumbrian coast, south-westwards from Bowness-on-Solway, are 'milecastles' and 'turrets' but here they are called milefortlets (fortlet = a small fort) and towers.

A confusion could easily arise between the names of the roads along the Wall. The Roman road is called the Military Way, while the Military Road is the name used for that constructed in the years after the Jacobite Uprising of 1745-6.

All dates are AD/CE unless otherwise specified.

## Foreword

Rory Stewart

You are about to read essays by eighty farmers, walkers, photographers and archaeologists. One tenderly compares his teenage excavation of a guard's urinal to the uncovering of Tutankhamun's tomb. A second remembers a stumbling archaeological knight, losing his own vallum. A man, dedicated to preserving the grass sward of the Trail, precedes a woman who wants her children to be encouraged to clamber on the stones. Another evokes youthful disappointment.

Such essays blend what we half observe and half create. Memories are filtered through the feel of rain in toeless boots, the sound of curlews in May, and the scent of wild garlic. A Dutch scholar sympathises with a Batavian unit's request for beer; a Romanian scholar with the efforts of Dacian masons. Heaters, gloves and sleet are remembered; so is a mother-in-law walking. For me, formed by my time in military barracks in Iraq, I register the violence of the Wall and am drawn to Marta Alberti's lyricism: 'how striking, perhaps awe inspiring, perhaps dangerous, and obscene, must the curtain wall and all its apparatus have looked to those, whose ancestors had seen it in all its natural, unobstructed beauty.'

The great David Breeze, with Mark Richards the *genius* of this book, and perhaps the central figure in our contemporary understanding of the Wall, might be wary of my imperial analogies: would emphasize the Wall's limitations as a military barrier; might wish to dissolve the ethnic distinctions implied by units called after Dacians or Tigris boatman, and emphasise instead more local, less stridently distinct, identities within the *vicus*. But here, in these essays walkers, visitors, and pilgrims – inspired by the destruction of a tree much younger than the Wall – are released to imagine contradictory possibilities: set free from the epistemological anxieties of scholarship.

If I had been allowed a section in the book, for example, I would have written about the fort that once stood on the low mound, rising out of the wet, reed-fringed, sheep pasture at Bewcastle. A place near which my friend Steve keeps his British Blue cows, and Trevor Telford, his sheep: a place which has a problem with mobile signals, a primary school under threat, subsidies for forestry, and a 19th century joke about the absence of Armstrongs in the graveyard ('they were all hung as thieves in Carlisle').

Bewcastle fort was a poorly chosen spot, hard to supply, and hard to defend: with limited sightlines to the north; and the ridges to the south prevented direct signalling to reinforcements on the Wall. Little wonder that it was stormed and burned. The walls were constructed in a polyhedron, seen almost nowhere else in the Empire. The technical term for the unit shows it was double the strength of those in most other forts. Why did the Romans build and double garrison such an eccentric place?

The answer, I believe, lies in two words on an itinerary copied in a Byzantine world, and preserved in the Vatican, which tell us that the Romans called the fort, 'the shrine of Cocidius'. They built on the holy hill of an old Celtic God. A bent metal plaque depicting Cocidius has survived (he looks like a beetle complete with antennae); so too, has the inscription of a very grand visitor from Rome, who made the difficult journey to dedicate an altar there. The fort seems to have been located, not because of its strategic advantages, but despite its disadvantages, as a *temenos* or sacred enclosure, to keep the shrine of Cocidius and its divine power within the military frontier: as a way of colonizing a sanctuary, and controlling local worshippers: a tribute to fear of the sacred.

Perhaps some memory of this was even preserved, when an Anglian obelisk of assured craftsmanship and mysterious Christian meaning was driven like a stake into the heart of the site, three hundred years after the storeroom was burned. But these are not archaeological certainties. Perhaps the anomaly of the fort was simply some bureaucratic mishap, or a construction project authorized by a corrupt Imperial freedman. And the fort later merely a convenient quarry for the Anglian monastery.

Each of these eighty entries reminds us how difficult it is to interpret the twenty million stones, laid along the Wall. Al McCluskey, a former soldier, suggests the builders may have been too exhausted to invest much meaning in the blocks, which they passed from sweating hand to hand. Alex Croom reminds us how quickly sections were undermined by water and tumbled inwards. Jim Crow shows stones being relaid only a few decades after the first construction. Robert Witcher shows us 18th century engineers reusing the Wall as road foundation. Barbara Birley depicts Charlie Anderson moving the stones again with a digger in 1959.

Cut and moved, shoved and abandoned, cleared and repositioned by so many people over one and a half millennia, the stones might seem to shed all connection to human individuals: their tumbling, simply part of the more elusive geological history sketched by Ian Jackson. The rock's function as a wall becomes only a few moments in its hundreds of million years of existence: its emergence from the earth heart in lava, or



its formation in a stream bed; its encounter with the feet of dinosauromorphs, and ancestral crocodiles; its absorption of the concentrated carbon of the Triassic, and its long sojourn beneath the ice sheet.

But the attention which these writers have paid to the smallest engineering decisions of the Romans – to the precise turf they selected, their surveying lines, their bridges, and their sinuous dance with crag tops – revivifies the stones. And with them the roundabouts, reconstructions, quarries, tombstones, sponsored trails, visitor arches, pictures, maps, and virtual imagery spawned by the Wall. Through these essays and Pilgrimages, those who died and those who still work in the shadow of the Wall find a joyful, ingenious, scholarly, ironic, ever-evolving memorial: reanimating the mute and resistant masonry.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rebecca Vincent". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Rebecca" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Vincent".



## Introduction

The cutting down of the tree in Sycamore Gap, made famous by the film *Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves* starring Kevin Costner and Morgan Freeman, on the night of 27/28 September 2023 was a shock. The loss of this iconic tree on Hadrian's Wall reverberated across Britain and beyond. Social media, the air waves and newspapers all covered the story. Suggestions for the future of the remains of the tree, whether in the ground or now removed from the site, have poured into the National Trust, the owners of the ground, and Northumberland National Park, guardians of the wider area.

In this book, Jim Crow, who excavated the Wall hereabouts, tells the story of Sycamore Gap and its tree. The contributors to this book describe other iconic views of Hadrian's Wall popular to visitors and authors alike over the last 200 years. We hope that this will provide some comfort to those grieving for the lost tree, for history teaches us that new iconic views of Hadrian's Wall will come to the fore. With that in mind, I invited colleagues and friends who have excavated on the Wall, written about it, worked on it, taken groups there or simply visited the Wall, to offer their favourite view of Hadrian's Wall and why it is special to them. The net has been cast widely, with contributors from America and Canada and several continental countries as well as the UK. When it comes to the contents, we have not restricted ourselves to the structural remains, nor to only the Roman remains, nor to only the Wall itself. The discovery of two massive stone heads by Frank Giecco and his team excavating the newly found building in Carlisle is a reminder that individual objects can become icons in their own right. So can paintings, drawings, photographic records of excavations, and even the excavators themselves. All are represented here.

The idea for this book emerged in the days following the cutting down of the tree. Jim Crow wrote to the *Times* about the history of the tree. Carly Hilts, editor of the popular archaeological magazine *Current Archaeology*, was considering how to deal with the issue when I wrote to offer a short article on the event looking at earlier iconic views of the frontier. In discussion with Mark Richards, this quickly grew into the realisation that many colleagues had a favourite view of the Wall. On 9 October, I approached Archaeopress with a proposition for a book of these favourite views, and this was accepted. So, on 10 October I issued an email inviting about 40 colleagues to write about 200 words, supported by an illustration, about their favourite place on Hadrian's Wall; twenty-four hours later I had over 30 acceptances! What was particularly impressive was that only one view was chosen by more than one contributor. The contributors' various responses are a resounding indication of the appreciation, indeed love, that archaeologists have for Hadrian's Wall. It is hard not to conclude that it is the whole of the frontier that has their affection and not just one part of it.

In a way, that is reflected in the status of Hadrian's Wall as a World Heritage Site, which incidentally includes several places not actually on the line of the Wall including South Shields, Bewcastle, the forts, fortlets and towers on the Cumbrian Coast and Ravenglass with its amazing bathhouse. Inscribed in 1987, it was one of the earliest properties in the UK to become a World Heritage Site, an acknowledgement of its importance as an archaeological site, not just in this country but on a world-wide scale. As part of the process of nominating a property as a World Heritage Site, the support of the local community has to be demonstrated. It can fairly be said that the views of several elements of the Wall community are clearly expressed in this book.

What this book does not do is to offer a coherent view of the building and history of Hadrian's Wall. Nevertheless, through reading and linking the individual contributions the story of the Wall is told as well as something of the history of its exploration, a fascinating subject in its own right. Shining through are the memories of the Wall offered by 80 archaeologists and colleagues who have known and explored Hadrian's Wall over the last 70 years. They have helped broaden our understanding of this magnificent ancient monument, but fear not there is still much more to be learnt about Rome's most celebrated surviving structure in Britain.

The title for this evocation was suggested by Mark Richards and for that, and for his superb line drawings, I am most grateful. I also owe thanks to the many colleagues and institutions who kindly provided the other illustrations for this book: they are listed in the acknowledgements.



# Individual Contributions

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*Samples*



## The Landscape Tells Stories

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### *Harry van Enckevort*

The Roman army planned its borders in a variety of landscapes: mountain ridges, deserts and rivers. In Britain the alignment of Hadrian's Wall west of Housesteads took advantage of the strategic opportunities offered by the Whin Sill.

On the other side of the North Sea, the Rhine provided a suitable barrier to protect the Empire. On the strategically located 'mountains' near Nijmegen, the Roman army built the first legionary camp in 19 BC. From this glacial outwash plain, 40-60 m above sea level, the Roman legionaries had a good view of the Batavian settlements on the river plain. Centuries later, Hendrik Marsman (1936, translated by Paul Vincent) wrote of this landscape: 'Thinking of Holland / I see wide-flowing rivers / slowly traversing / infinite plains...'. Almost 120 years after the founding of Nijmegen, Batavian soldiers were sent from their homeland to the far north of Britannia to guard Hadrian's Wall. The rugged landscape bore little resemblance to the Rhine delta, although the weather must have been similar if W.H. Auden (1937) in his poem *Roman Wall Blues* is to be believed: 'Over the heather the wet wind blows, I've lice in my tunic and a cold in my nose. The rain comes pattering out of the sky...'. The Batavian soldiers stationed on the British frontier will have gained many new impressions there but they also clung to old traditions as evidenced by the letter found in Vindolanda from Masclus of the Eighth Cohort of Batavians asking his commander to send beer. After years of service, some Batavian veterans returned to the Rhine delta and Nijmegen with wives, children and souvenirs. As an archaeologist in Nijmegen, I am curious about the connected Roman frontiers in the Dutch river area and northern England. During my pilgrimages to Hadrian's Wall, I was struck by the stories of the soldiers who lived near the Wall and the landscape in which they worked. Over a pint in the evening, they became more and more exciting.



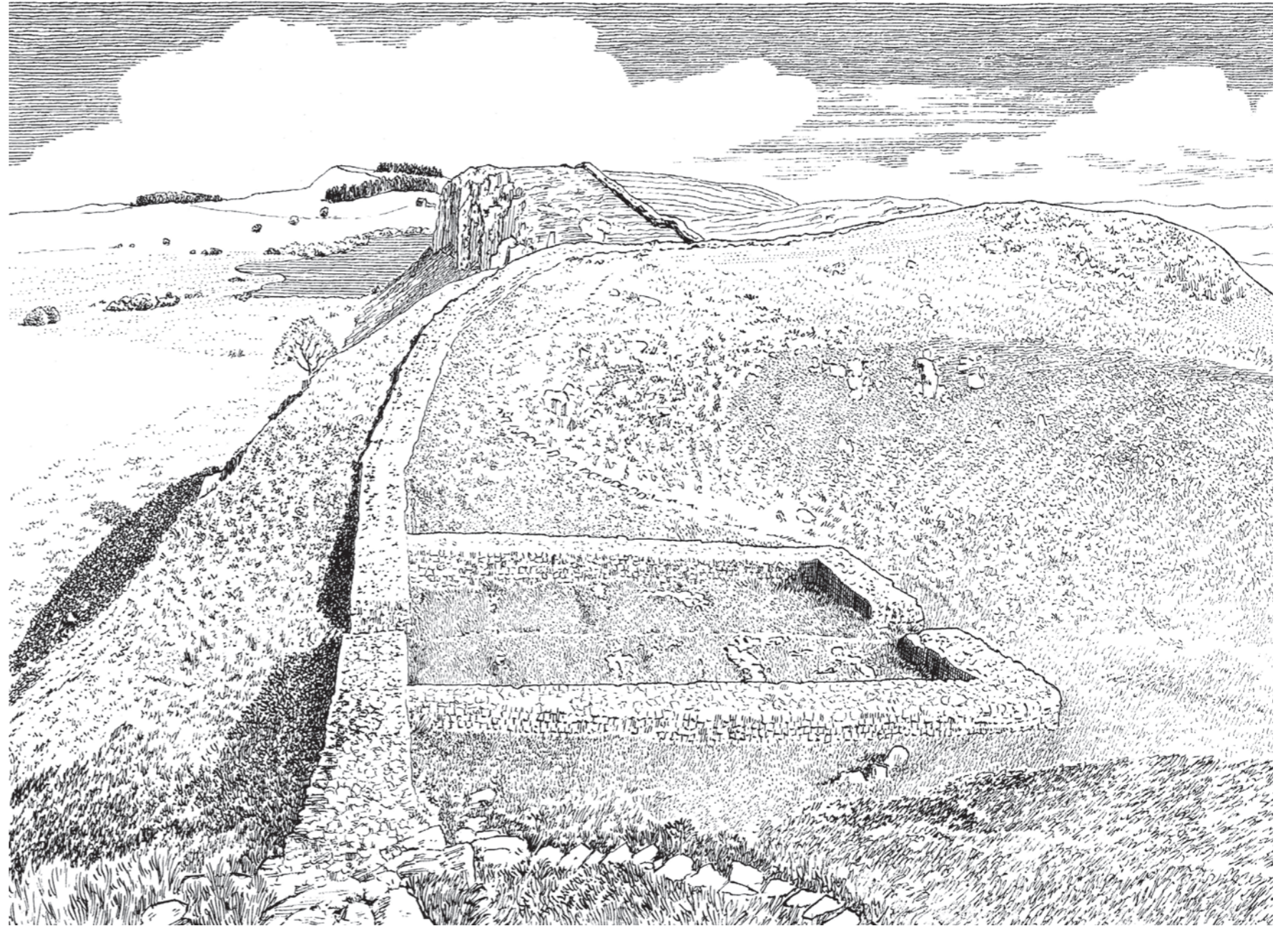
## Milecastle 39 (Castle Nick) and Crag Lough

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*Avril Sinclair*

Approach this view of the Northumbrian landscape from Steel Rigg carpark and it is breathtaking. There are three complementary aspects: the geology, the lough and the Wall. The primary feature is the natural underlying geology that has created the dramatic edge of the doleritic Whin Sill, dipping north to south, and is seen striding off into the distance. This provides a natural defensive location for Hadrian's Wall, following the edge of the Whin Sill. The Wall is particularly well preserved and spectacular from this viewpoint. Gazing down below there is an excellent view of the well-preserved milecastle 39 (Castle Nick). Its internal walls inspire thoughts on what it would have looked like when complete and in use.

In the distance, resting almost against the base of the Sill is the natural freshwater lake of Crag Lough. Apparently, the origins of this date back to early post-glacial times when this area was inundated by melt-water lakes. The landscape along the edge of the Whin Sill is challenging, with steep sections requiring steps to be cut into the crag to aid the walker. The gaps in the crags have resulted from the erosive power of post-glacial meltwater streams, probably exploiting weaknesses such as faults, creating the low points in the Sill. The geology of this part of the Wall has therefore led to the formation of two signal features, the Whin Sill as a useful line for the Wall, and two dips, one to hold a milecastle and the other a tree.



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John Wilkes, Professor Emeritus, London University  
Alan Wilkins, specialist in Roman artillery  
Pete Wilson, Rarey Archaeology, Weaverthorpe, Malton, Yorkshire  
Rob Witcher, Associate Professor, Durham University

The cutting down of the tree in Sycamore Gap on Hadrian's Wall in September 2023 caused widespread shock in Britain and beyond, and for many was felt as a personal loss. Since its appearance in the film *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* in 1991, the tree has become the iconic view of Hadrian's Wall. In a positive response to this sad event, David Breeze, author of several books on Hadrian's Wall, invited 80 friends and colleagues to nominate their favourite view of the Wall. The views are presented in a visual celebration with photographs and specially commissioned line drawings, each accompanied by personal reflections. The wide-ranging contributions are testimony to the affection many hold for this evocative Roman frontier.

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