

# THE ROMAN WALL

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IN northern England, spanning the counties of Cumberland and Northumberland from sea to sea, stands the vast structure that is locally known as "The Wall". At sundry times and in divers places it has been called also "The Wall of Severus," "The Cumberland Wall", "The Wall of the Picts", or "The Wall of Northumberland". By the modern historian and archaeologist it is invariably denominated "The Wall of Hadrian" or "The Roman Wall".

The Wall is noticed, perhaps for the first time in English literature, by Defoe, who in his *Robinson Crusoe* (1719-20) has this to say for it:

After we passed this mighty nothing, called a wall (*i.e.*, the Great Wall of China), something like the Picts' wall, so famous in Northumberland, built by the Romans, we began to find the country thinly inhabited.

But the antiquaries had had their eye on the ancient fortification long before the days of Defoe. We find a short chapter entitled *Murus Picticus* in Camden's *Britannia* (edition of 1587), a work that ran through seven or eight editions in the course of two centuries. The later editions contain the fruits of the researches of some anonymous investigator who surveyed the whole length of the Wall in 1708. Twenty years later the structure came under the more critical eye of Alexander Gordon, the "Sandy Gordon" of Scott's *Antiquary*, who has much to say of it in his *Journal*. Horsley's *Britannia Romana*, published in 1732, contains engravings to elucidate an excellent text in which the Wall cuts a conspicuous figure.

An unusual degree of enterprise is shown by William Hutton of Birmingham, who in 1801, at the advanced age of 78, traversed the length of the barrier on foot and composed the first monograph to deal with the subject. He takes a pardonable pride in his achievement, writing in his Preface: "Perhaps I am the first man that ever travelled the whole length of the Wall, and probably the last man that will ever attempt it". He, of course, erred. The Wall had been traversed before his day, and in recent times "walking the Wall" has become something of a popular pastime.

Rapid increase of scientific knowledge in the last half of the nineteenth century brought a vast amount of light to bear

on the Wall, the history of whose construction had hitherto been imperfectly understood. The first edition of Dr. Collingwood Bruce's *Hand-book* appeared in 1863, and the successive editions of the work, eight in number—the last dated 1925—continue to incorporate the increasing masses of knowledge. In the present century the "antiquary" has changed his name to "archaeologist," and the science of systematic excavation has materially assisted in solving many—though by no means all—of the problems attending this ancient structure.

Every year the Wall is visited by thousands of tourists and "trippers". They prefer its eastern course; for here a modern highway runs parallel with the fortification, and one may view it for miles from the seat of a char-a-banc or private motor car. The adventurous seek also the prospect afforded by a voyage by aeroplane above it. But those for whom the dead past is by no means dead must needs, after the fashion of Aeneas at Cumae and Carthage, *singula lustrare* and scan its details from close range. They must walk by and on the Wall; they must prod among its stones; they must imagine themselves as of the great throng who so laboriously wrought it.

The best approach to the Wall is undoubtedly near its western extremity. One boards a train at Carlisle and in a few hours reaches the romantic town of Gilsland—the land of gills, or narrow valleys, as the word is explained by Scott. This was the ancestral home of bluff Sir Thomas de Vaux of *The Talisman*, and near the railway station is Mumps Ha' where the Tib Mumps of *Guy Manner- ing* used to reside. Not far off lies the Maiden Way that Dandie Dinmont and Brown used to their advantage. The Gilsland Spa, a sulphur spring, was perhaps the village called Banna by the Romans, a people who seldom overlooked the value of medicinal waters.

Hard by the railway station is found the Poltross Burn, which forms the boundary between Cumberland and Northumberland. The Wall may without difficulty be traced from the Burn through the town of Gilsland and thence westerly through Cumberland. A stroll of less than an hour will bring one to Birdoswald, the Amboglanna of the Romans, a site on which they chose to erect the strongest fortification that served to protect northern Britain. But first one must surmount a trifling obstacle. The passage-way to the fortified post leads through one of the many fine steadings that one encounters in this part of Cumberland, with house and outbuildings forming a rectangle with central court, much like a mediaeval castle. A sixpence is paid to the provident house-

wife, who presently sends us out through a little postern gate into the meadow where the ruins lie.

The fort, which formed one of the Wall's chief defences for eastern Cumberland, has been twice excavated—first in 1852, more recently in 1928 and 1929. It lies on a little plateau which is guarded on the south by steep cliffs at the bottom of which flows the Irthing, a stream of goodly width. On the north is the Wall itself, and beyond it is a deep chasm which drains an adjoining bog. The western side boasts no natural defences, and here the Romans erected some outworks to guard the approach to the fort.

Massive walls, five feet in diameter, inclose an area of five and a half acres. This is laid out in much the same way as was the orthodox Roman camp, temporary or permanent. One may pry into the old guardrooms and the quartermasters' stores, and see the ruts in the passages of the gateways worn by the endless coming of carts bringing supplies; for these frontier posts were always provisioned to withstand a year's siege. Horse-shoes and mule-shoes have been brought to light by the excavators, likewise broken pottery and arms, cooking utensils, rings and other ornaments, coins and inscriptions. From one of these last, we learn that the fort was first held by a garrison of Dacians from Roumania. In the most flourishing times of Empire it was the policy of the Romans to employ foreigners, rather than native sons, for the purpose of frontier defence.

Outside the walls, a village, in the course of time, must have grown up. The later Emperors placed no obstacle in the way of a soldier's marrying while he was still engaged on active service. So the homes of the legionaries soon spread over the adjacent countryside; and when their long period of military service was at an end, they exchanged the sword for the ploughshare and became peaceful farmers. Indeed there is good reason to believe that many of the peasants of these northern counties are the descendants of these old defenders of Rome's frontier.

At intervals of a Roman mile eastward and westward from Amboglanna one discovers the "mile-castles"—small but stoutly built structures built against the southern face of the Wall, housing small garrisons which might at least sound the general alarm in case of an attack from the north. There are other appurtenances which, together with a general survey of the structure, may now be observed.

The Wall, as we ascertain from inscriptions, was built by the soldiers of the Second, Sixth, and Twentieth legions. It is almost exactly 73 English miles in length, beginning on the lower reaches

of the Tyne and extending to Bowness-on Solway, at either extremity running out beyond the present sea-level. The builders made nothing of high elevations, and were wont, indeed, to choose lofty and precipitous places for its construction. At no point does the Wall survive in its entirety; its original height has been estimated at 18 to 20 feet. It was constructed out of a solid core of concrete—a material without the aid of which the Roman constructor appears to have been singularly helpless—which is faced with small partially dressed stones that average 9 by 11 inches. The thickness of the Wall varies from  $7\frac{1}{2}$  to  $9\frac{1}{2}$  feet, and the curious variation in the breadth of the foundation seems to indicate a partial change of plan while the work was in process of building. A deep ditch was dug directly to the north of the fortification.

To the south of the Wall proper and running parallel with it are seen extensive earthworks, in some places three dykes, in others two, with intervening ditches. These structures are sometimes close to the Wall, sometimes relatively remote, in one instance half a mile distant. For what purpose were they intended? The question has long puzzled scholars, and is still to be regarded as more or less *sub judice*. Much of the work was undoubtedly earlier than the Wall itself. But why, on the completion of the stone fortification, were the ditches and ramparts obliterated? Could they have served the purpose of secondary defences if the Wall should be stormed? Were they intended as a protection for the garrison in case of an insurrection in the rear? These are some of the questions that have been raised but not as yet answered with surety. The space between the earthworks and the Wall is threaded by a military road which sufficed for the purveyance of supplies to the forts, and for the rapid movement of troops from one point to another.

The type of fort known as mile-castle which we have observed in the neighbourhood of Amboglanna is conspicuous at intervals of a Roman mile throughout the entire length. These fortlets average 60 by 70 feet in interior dimensions, and are provided with doorways opening to both north and south. Each mile is divided into three equal lengths by the presence of two turrets, about 13 feet square internally, which were employed as signal-stations. The great fortified camps, of which the Birdoswald example is typical, were constructed five or six miles apart.

Such, in brief, was the gigantic chain of defence with which Rome encompassed the marches of northern Britain.

The great Wall came into being in this wise. In or about the Year of Grace 117, an extraordinary thing happened in Britain:

an entire legion disappeared from the army of occupation. This was the illustrious Ninth, recruited in sunny Spain, which had been sent, in the time of the Emperor Trajan, to do service under the heavy skies of the north country. Such a disaster as the destruction of a large military force was by no means unparalleled in the annals of Rome. A hundred years before this time, the ill-starred Varus and his army had perished in the Teutoburger Wald; and still half a century earlier, the plutocrat Crassus had lost his legions and his life in the sands of the Syrian desert. These catastrophes to Roman arms are lamented alike in the chronicles of the historian and the verses of the poet. But no record whatsoever survives of this tragic disappearance of a complete military unit from the army-rolls of Britain. How is this silence to be explained? Quite manifestly, the matter was hushed up. None but the private soldiery and a handful of subalterns had fallen. Why then noise abroad the disgrace of Rome?

Stationed at York as recently as 107 A. D., the Ninth Legion, we may conjecture, had been dispatched on some unknown errand into the glens of Caledonia, there to perish at the hands of the dour Picts, mutely testifying in its downfall that the military discipline and science of Rome sometimes proved no match for the fierce and unrestrained energy of the charging barbarian.

Five years later there arrives on British soil that tireless wayfarer, the Emperor Hadrian, the forerunner of that magnificent era which Gibbon saw fit to describe as the most happy in the entire course of human experience. The discerning eye of Hadrian saw that it was caution, not enterprise, that was needful on the northern frontier.

Sussex, Surrey, Kent, and Essex had fallen to Roman arms in the days of Claudius. Subsequent expansion had been so rapid that, by the year 80, Agricola, the father-in-law of the historian Tacitus, was able to launch towards the north a powerful attack which carried the eagles into Scotland itself, and the year 84 found him locked in desperate conflict with 30,000 Caledonians amidst the Grampian Mountains. Here, we are informed by the annalists of Rome, a glorious victory was won by Roman arms. But soon afterwards, for some reason unmentioned, we see the legions in full retreat, their commander recalled, and the work of conquest, such as it was, wholly undone. Historians have met with no success in their attempts to recover the Caledonian side of the story.

The imperial policy of Hadrian favoured interior cultivation rather than increased expansion. Trained in the Greek schools

of political thought, he was not slow to perceive the folly of extending the boundaries of empire without first assimilating the elements of barbarism existing within. He sought, then, a definite boundary of the territory that lay within the sphere of Rome's political interests, utilizing, wherever it was possible, such barriers as nature herself had provided. In Britain, Agricola himself had, in the year 81, constructed a line of forts, connected by a wall of turf, running from the Firth of Forth to the Firth of Clyde. This was a sound military policy, as the distance here is less than forty miles, but in the eye of the statesman Hadrian it did not serve. Between this line and the Tyne lay scattered and barbarous tribes who must be held in check at the cost of much labour and expense. Why not leave these without the pale of civilization?

Accordingly, Hadrian reached a decision to abandon southern Caledonia to the forces of barbarism, and fall back on the Solway-Tyne boundary. Here there already existed several forts scattered across the country; Agricola had built them, together with a section of roadway extending between Carlisle and Corbridge. This was the site chosen for the construction of the great Wall which was to serve *inter alia* as the northern limit of Rome's civil authority.

The death of Hadrian in 138 was followed by a revival of the traditional policy of expansion. The political philosophy of this learned Emperor was a thought too subtle for the normal Roman governor, who understood the principle of conquest, but distrusted the counsels of moderation. So the year 141 finds Roman troops again in the north country, and 143 sees the reconstruction of the old wall of Agricola. Large numbers of troops were withdrawn from their garrison duties on the Wall of Hadrian to man the new fortification, but apparently both walls were kept going, as the folk who resided between them were not yet to be trusted.

The later history of this northern boundary of the Empire is one of extreme interest, and it demonstrates the essential soundness of Hadrian's policy. In 155 there occurred a general rising of those inhabiting the Lowlands and the North of England, which resulted in the temporary loss of the northern wall and perhaps a part of the southern; but the region was again, in 158, reduced to peace by the governor Julius Verus.

The year 180 is momentous in the history of Rome, marking as it does the commencement of the era when it became imperative that the Empire should begin to stand on the defensive against the foes without. Gothic hordes appear on the Danube, and threaten to overrun the Balkans. Britain is infected by the strange spirit of unrest that breaks out in central Europe, and a general

insurrection in Northumberland, Cumberland, and as far north as the country beyond the Tweed results in the capture of the forts of both walls and the destruction of much of the walls themselves. The frontier becomes a scene of confusion wherein those who dwell on both sides of it seek to blot it out. This disturbance makes itself felt as far south as York; and the Picts, perhaps the only barbarous people of the ancient world that felt a positive hatred for Roman institutions, threaten to become masters of the whole island. They capture and permanently retain the wall of Agricola.

But Rome was not yet at the end of her resources, and her arms presently recovered something of their former strength in Britain. In the course of time the province was visited by an Emperor whose biography proclaims him as one who had no patience with half-measures. This was the redoubtable African, Septimius Severus, the builder of Leptis Magna on the African coast, the destroyer of Byzantium, the general who relentlessly crushed the opposition of rivals. He first set himself the task of rebuilding the Wall of Hadrian, and he accomplished his undertaking with such thoroughness that the repaired structure acquired, as we have seen, the suggestive name "Wall of Severus", while Hadrian's part in the affair was largely forgotten. This was only a beginning, and may well have been intended by the Emperor as a means for securing the rear while he plunged with his army into the wilds of Caledonia. His ultimate aim was the subjugation of the entire country.

With feverish energy Septimius marched beyond Perth and Stirling, even beyond Aberdeen. The ruins of his temporary camps may still be traced as far as Raedykes on the 57th parallel of latitude. But Caledonia stern and wild at length broke the heart of even this man of iron. He sickened, retired to York, and died, urging his followers, with his latest breath, to leave Scotland to her own devices.

The third century was one of horror and death throughout the Roman world, characterized as it was by frequent incursions of the barbarians, pestilence, famine, and the savage strife of a succession of brutal ruffians who struggled each to secure and hold the reins of power. But Britain happily found herself in a condition of "splendid isolation" such as has been her supposed lot in more recent years. The Wall proved to be a veritable rampart against the marauders of the north, and all went well till, in 287, a new foe, one destined ultimately to sway the destinies of Britain, appeared on the southeastern coast. This was the Saxon. But at about the same time, strangely enough, chance brought it about that

the Belgian adventurer Carausius should put the island in the way of becoming something like a sea-power, partially independent of Rome. The Saxon menace however persisted, and presently the Britons were under the necessity of constructing a series of defences, not unlike those erected long afterwards against the threatened invasion of Napoleon, from the Wash to Southampton.

Towards the middle of the fourth century the troubles of Britain, no longer actively supported by a sadly-embarrassed Rome, began to come thick and fast. The Scots of Ireland attacked the western coast, while the Picts began again to press upon the northern frontier. In 367 a tremendous thrust of these peoples swept over England, and raiding parties reached even Kent. This invasion did permanent damage to the country; Britain was again recovered by Roman arms, but industrially she was ruined. Nor was it long before the barbarians on the continent drove a permanent wedge between Italy and the Channel. The eagles of Rome began to depart from the island about 407, though the process of withdrawal may not have been completed before 440.

Such in brief is the history of the Wall, which is in large measure the history of Roman Britain herself. It would be a matter of extraordinary interest to know at what date the fortification was finally abandoned; but the mediaeval mists are difficult to penetrate. The smaller forts on the Wall fell into disuse about 330, and some historians think that the rising of 367 left it merely as it is to-day, an historical ruin. But the strong permanent camps on the Wall would surely have held out long after the abandonment of the barrier itself. Romano-British civilization died hard, resisting Caledonian and Saxon to the end, and the question of supremacy was not finally decided till the great battles of Dyrham and Winwaed late in the sixth century.

A discussion of the real purpose of the Wall may appear very much in the nature of an anti-climax; but it is manifest, none the less, that there is a radical difference between its structure and that of, let us say, the Great Wall of China. Unless a fortification be of such a height as to defy the attempts of men to scale it equipped with ladders, it is altogether necessary that its top be broad enough to accommodate a numerous force of defenders. The great width of the Chinese Wall may well be contrasted with the narrowness of the Roman. The latter possesses great strength, relatively, by virtue of its concrete core; but a wall which batters uniformly and possesses a breadth of no more than eight feet at the base must be hardly more than three or four feet in width on top, eighteen or twenty feet from the ground. A twofold line of defenders would



here be sadly embarrassed to operate in unison, and the dodging of missiles thrown from beneath would be out of the question. We are therefore irresistibly drawn to the conclusion that our Wall was not intended to withstand massed attacks by an enemy. It was, as a recent writer puts it, "an elevated sentry-walk" from which a constant watch might be kept upon the countryside. Since the Picts seldom attacked in great force, it may well be that the most common function exercised by the Wall was the discouragement of the foray by the northerners. A Caledonian must have contemplated with little satisfaction the possible capture of a herd of cattle if he should have to demolish a section of a twenty-foot wall—to say nothing of encountering the garrison—to bring it home; and, in the case of portable objects, as it has been well observed, "escaping raiders are always handicapped by the fact that they are tired, having to do a double journey, whereas the defenders are fresh. The looter has to carry his loot; the defender carries only his arms. On top of this, put a wall in front of the raider, and his position becomes extremely difficult."