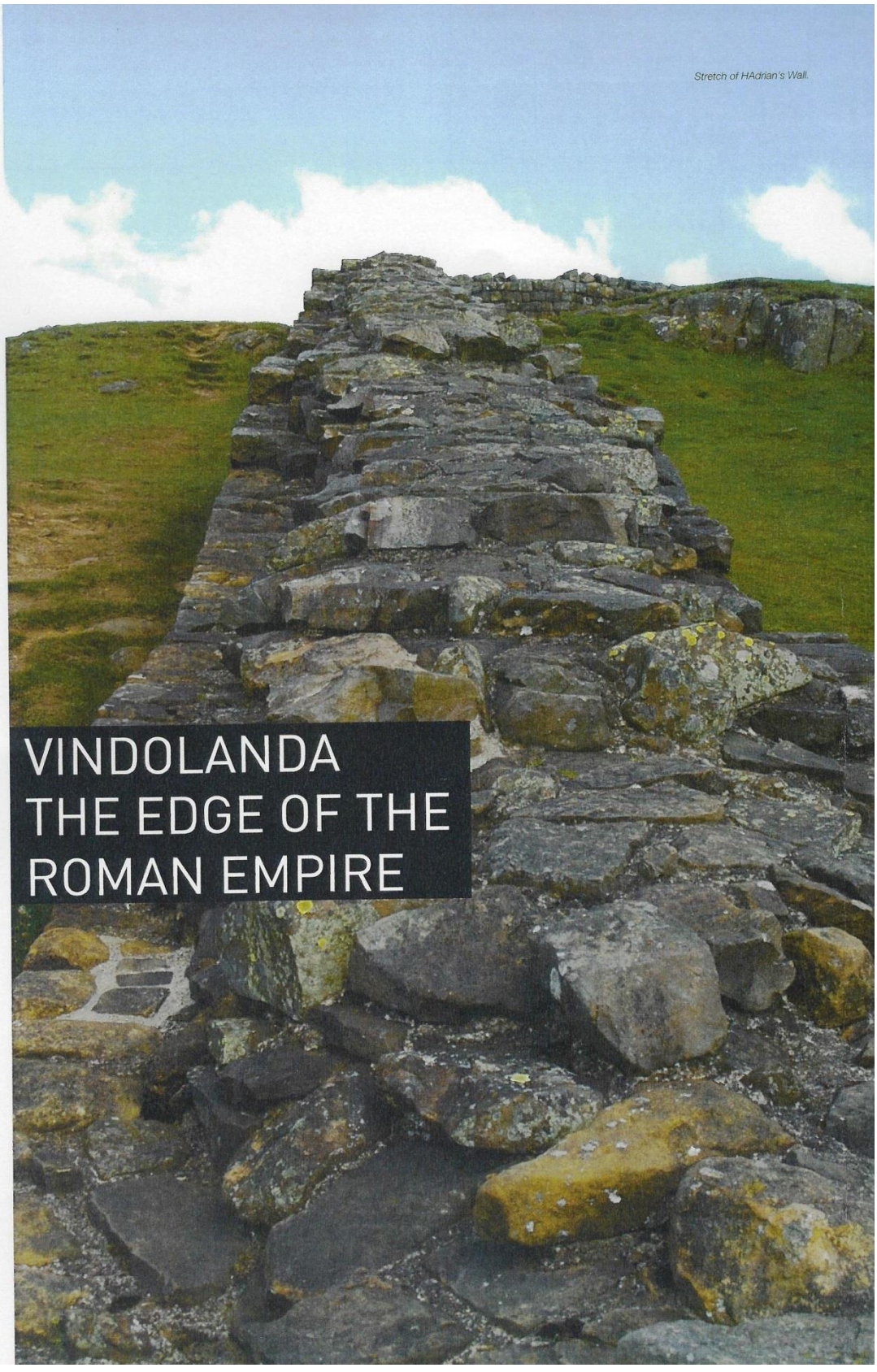
foreign correspondent



Stretch of HAdrian's Wall.

VINDOLANDA THE EDGE OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

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On Saturday 13 March 2010, two days before the Ides of March, a special event was held in northern England to launch British Tourism Week. Five hundred individual beacons were lit across Hadrian's Wall, which stretches from Cumbria on the west coast of England to Northumbria on the east. This was the first time the wall had been illuminated from end to end since the Roman Army left in the early 5th century.

Construction of the wall was begun in 122 CE and it marked the border between civilisation – that is, the Roman world – and the barbarians to the north. It took eight years to build, and when it was completed it was 135 kilometres long, 4.15 metres high and three metres thick. The countryside across which the wall snakes is moorland with steep cliffs and valleys. On completion it marked the northern edge of the Roman Empire.

Britain's Roman heritage in this part of the world is mostly military. Prior to the construction of Hadrian's Wall a frontier zone called a limes (pronounced leem-ays) had been established along the military road of the Stanegate, which ran from Carlisle to Corbridge with wooden forts built at intervals of approximately 25 kilometres. However the frontier was permeable, designed more to control the movements of the tribes within the border zone than to wage war on them, and to regulate such commerce from fortified settlements as there might be between Roman Britain and its barbarian neighbours.

Of these settlements, Vindolanda survives today as one of Britain's most important excavated Roman sites. It was established around 85 CE and over the next 300 years it was extended, beginning with a huge military bathhouse constructed in 100 CE to meet the needs of the thousand-strong Cohort of Batavians. You can walk through the remains of the changing rooms, the hot and cold rooms and the hot and cold baths. The interpretive panels for the bathhouse and all the other excavations are in four languages: English, French and German – and Latin.

Several turf and timber forts succeeded one another at Vindolanda until a stone fort was built. There was a hospital and army and civilian housing, including a substantial private residence for the Commander in Chief, which has also been extensively excavated. The remains of a later Christian church were found in what had been the courtyard of this house.

The Romans called the place 'Vindolanda', possibly turning into Latin the existing native name, thought to mean 'white lawns'. The fort guarded the central section of the vital east-west supply route; Vindolanda's nearest forts were Housesteads and Chesters. A copy of a wooden Roman fort has been erected on the site, and adds to the ambience of the area.

Sporadic excavations had been made on the site of Vindolanda since the nineteenth century, and enough had been found there to convince Classical scholar Eric (later Professor) Birley to buy the land and continue excavations. A nineteenth-century house, Chesterholme, was also on the site and this now houses the museum. Birley later sold the land, but in 1970 both house and site became the property of the newly formed but, at the time, impoverished Vindolanda Trust, established by Eric Birley's son, Dr Robin Birley, who was the director of the site from 1967 to 2007 and is currently the Vindolanda Trust Director of Research.

The Roman fallen plaque.

Roman milestone still in situ.

The site has now been extensively excavated and stretches over a couple of kilometres. The volunteers who work alongside the archaeologists pay £70 for the privilege of working on the site for two weeks. We visited in early May. It was cold but dry, but the climate can often catch you out with a sudden heavy downpour of rain.

The significance of the site is that it provides a picture of Roman life – both military and civilian – during the occupation of Britain from 85 CE to the beginning of the 5th century. The record haul of Roman footwear in one day from this site was 70 boots, shoes and sandals, according to Robin Birley. Other finds include the remains of a temple altar, gold jewellery, coins, an almost complete set of porcelain bowls imported from France, and the small bronze figure of a cavalry horse mounted on a pole that has become the symbol of Vindolanda. Many of the domestic items can be seen in the museum on the site, while the nearby Roman Army museum displays much of the military hardware and tools that were found.

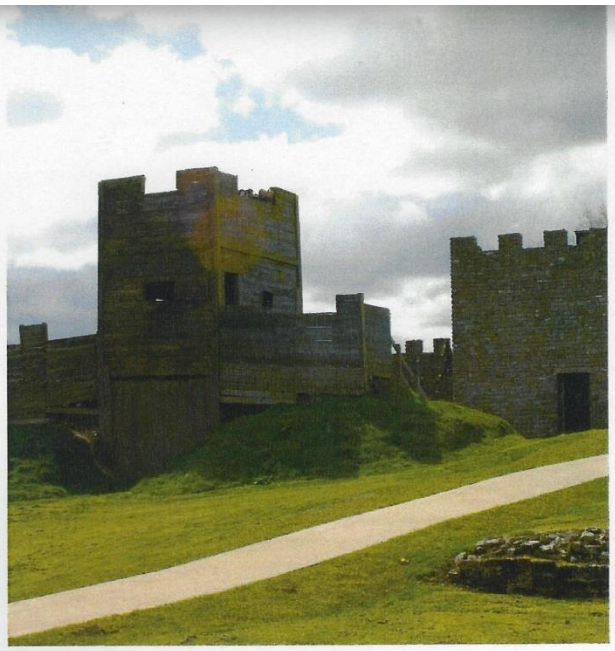
The archaeological record of this site, however, was reinforced by one of the most remarkable discoveries ever made on a Roman site in Britain. The museum shows an excellent film in which Robin Birley describes in detail how he and his team, which included his wife Patricia, made their major discovery in 1973. Work began in earnest on the site between 1970–1972. During the laying of a new drain in 1972 the foundation posts of a small wooden fort were found under the remains of later stone forts. Excavation stopped for the winter, then began again in spring 1973.

Wooden forts generally only lasted for eight years, and as each new fort was built the ever-efficient Roman army spread a clean layer of turf or clay to begin the foundations of the next one. Often these turf layers were as much as 80 centimetres thick, and had the effect of creating a seal for anything which had been left in the rooms beneath, preserving it in an anaerobic condition. Successive rooms of the excavated fort yielded hair, rope, superbly preserved iron and bronze objects still with their original sheen, as well as a mass of leather goods and wooden tools, all of which gave a remarkable snapshot of life in early Roman Britain.

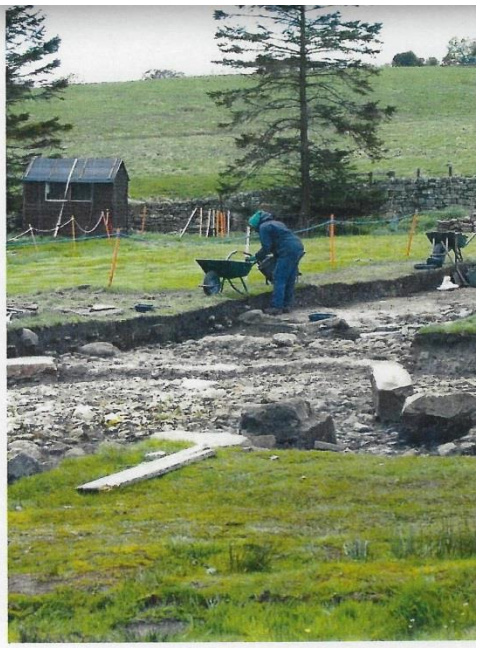
All the objects were quickly sealed in polythene bags to preserve them from oxygen damage, and transferred to the museum's temporary laboratory. A few small pieces of detritus resembling thin oily shavings of wood were picked up by one of the excavators. On pulling them apart, he was astounded to see ink hieroglyphics on either side. A further search revealed a few more fragments. Until this date only two or three examples of written text dating from the Roman period had been found in Britain, though examples from the drier climates of the Middle East were not so rare. Here were letters, lists and orders which gave a fascinating insight into the lives of ordinary Romans, both military and civilian, on the farthest frontier of the Roman Empire. There were wax tablets similar to those which had been found on other sites in Britain but the remainder—over 80 per cent – were the much more unusual leaf tablets, thin sheets of softwood specially prepared to take ink writing.

At that time the Vindolanda Trust was in its infancy, and as late as 1974 was operating out of a mobile classroom donated by the local Gateshead council. The early tablets were conserved by the British Museum and the formula for conservation was given to the staff at Vindolanda.

Infra-red photographs of 20 of the tablets are on display in the museum, as well as nine originals. The remaining tablets are in the British Museum. They are about the size of a postcard: the writer, who was confined to a maximum of about 18 lines of text, would then fold the thin wooden leaf in half and write the address on the back.



Fort reconstruction.



Archaeological excavations under way.
Photos: Cindy Davies.

They were delivered by the highly efficient Roman postal service. Unfortunately for eager twenty-first century eyes, they contain the day and month but not the year, as that involved the name of the Emperor and used up valuable space. To date over 400 tablets have been discovered at the Vindolanda site and translated. This is not an easy task. Often the writers were scribes – some more literate than others – and neither punctuation nor spaces between words were used in the Latin of that period. They also used colloquialisms and army slang, and in one case the letter was folded before the ink was dry – a couple of the words will remain forever indecipherable.

So what did they say to each other, these people of 2000 years ago? There were orders for food for the Saturnalia, the end of year feast, duty rosters, quartermaster's accounts, requests for leave. One of the first translations was of a letter sent to a soldier regarding clothes he had ordered:

'I have sent(?) you ... pairs of socks from Sattua, two pairs of sandals and two pairs of underpants...'

The 'brothers' letter is one of the longest and concerns their complicated financial matters. It begins:

Octavius to his brother Candidus, greetings. The hundred pounds of sinew from Marinus, I will settle up ... I have bought about 5,000 modii of ears of grain, on account of which I need cash.

In another letter Chrauttius chides his friend Veldeius, the Governor's groom, for not replying to his previous correspondence. A birthday party invitation from Claudia Severa, wife of the commander of the nearby fort, to Sulpicia Lepidina, wife of the commander of the IX Batavorum Cohort, was written in an elegant hand (probably by her scribe), with a postscript by the lady herself in a different hand: 'Farewell, sister, my dearest soul, as I hope to prosper and hail.' This and the other letters between the women are the earliest known examples of writing in Latin by a woman.

Letters about the daily lives of the soldiers and civilians on the frontier often reinforce the archaeological record. Whereas only a single cabbage stalk had been found at the dig site, the tablets show that the diet was varied and orders had been issued for beans, beet, lentils and pepper, salt and mustard.

The newly refurbished museum at Vindolanda does justice to this important site and is a pleasure to walk around. Many more artefacts of a military nature can be seen at the nearby military museum. Robin Birley estimated in 1970 that work on the site would be finished within 30 years. The discovery in 1993 in one day of 200 writing tablets makes current estimates at between 100 and 150 years. His son, Dr Andrew Birley, succeeded his father as Director of Excavations in 2007, and his wife Patricia is currently the Director of the Vindolanda Trust.

I am sure that our descendants will still be in awe when they visit the museum in MMCLXI.

Vale

Dr Robin Birley's book, *Vindolanda's Treasures*, which can be purchased at the museum, was a valuable resource in writing this article. My thanks for additional information from the staff at the Vindolanda Museum. The tablets which have been translated can be viewed on line at vindolanda.csad.ox.ac.uk More information is available at the British Museum site: www.britishmuseum.org