

THE ROMANS IN CUMBRIA

An Overview

Eric Apperley May 2020

Vol I of the initial publications of VCH Cumberland (1901) included two sections about human history – ‘Early Man’ (all pre-historic) and ‘Pre-Norman Remains’. The latter focused entirely on the Anglo-Saxon and Viking eras, but remained silent on the Romans. In fact, Cumbria has a very rich Roman heritage. The Roman occupation of the county spanned in excess of 300 years and over the past 120 years, more and more evidence has come to light. A growing interest in archaeology (helped in more recent decades by TV programmes ¹) has contributed to a proliferation of excavations.^{2,3} New technology is also providing information about Roman Cumbria, with Lidar surveys revealing features on the ground which are not visible to the naked eye.⁴

A full account of all this activity would require a book in its own right although there are many publications on specific aspects. This overview therefore only attempts an outline of the period and lists the most significant features (not necessarily exclusively).

Outline of early Roman activity in Britain:

Every schoolchild used to know that Julius Caesar invaded Britain in 55BC. But both this and his subsequent visit in 54BC only involved the south-east corner of the island. Trade links were developed and treaties established with the local tribal chiefs (kings). It was nearly a century later in AD 43 that the Roman Army, in the time of Emperor Claudius really arrived and meant to stay, with fortifications and towns built on a much wider scale. In AD 60 there was a rebellion in the east, under Boudicca, Queen of the Iceni (what became East Anglia), which led to the sacking and destruction of the Roman towns of Colchester, London and St Albans. The aftermath and recovery from this resulted in the expansion of Roman activity further north to deal with other threatening rebels. In AD 70, Petrius Cerialis was appointed Governor of Britannia with a brief to sort out the rebels in the north. (He was back in Rome to another post by AD 74.) This expansion led to the construction of many timber forts - that at Carlisle is thought to date from 72AD, and the forts of the Stanegate Frontier, which preceded Hadrian's Wall date between then and c.85AD and presumably at least the start of the road network for which the Romans were famous. The network roads was probably in place by AD 90. It is

not known when the development of the forts into masonry entities commenced - possibly associated with the building of Hadrian's Wall starting in AD 122.

It is worth noting that considerable controversy continues to surround the Wall, particularly as to why it was built. As originally planned, it involved a wall across the isthmus between Solway and Tyne, with forts set back from the line, and with the western half built of turf, not stone. Quite soon afterwards, a decision was taken (possibly by the Emperor) to move forts up to the line of the Wall, and to build a second line a little to the south, a complex of mounds and ditches we now call the Vallum, the purpose of which remains unknown. At the same time, the original plan of the stone wall was modified to make it narrower. The best recent book on the subject is David J Breeze, *Hadrian's Wall: A study in archaeological exploration and interpretation* (Archaeopress, 2019).⁵ Continuing archaeological discoveries show that forts and towers but without a wall, carried on down the Cumbrian coast as far as Ravenglass which was a significant port for the Romans. Unfortunately for Cumbrians, the most striking remains are in the Northumbrian portion of the wall (for example, Housesteads, Vindolanda, Chesters).

End of the Roman occupation:

Following major attacks by Picts and Scots (from Ireland), forts and wall were rebuilt in AD 389.; In the 4th century, army reorganisation led to the abandonment of inland forts, although the Wall continued to be manned and was supported by the new mobile field army. This period also saw rebellion by some parts of the Roman army in Britain and struggles for control in Rome.

In AD 409 the Roman field army was withdrawn from Britain for use on the continent and nearer Rome. Some of the Wall fort garrisons may have remained in situ (Birdoswald for example), 'going native', and becoming local war bands – but an end to currency and imported ceramics makes this period very difficult for the archaeologist.

Roman place-names in Cumbria

It is a remarkable fact that of the more than two dozen significant sites in Cumbria (not counting mile-castles, towers, turrets and the like) we only know for certain the names of less than a handful. Now lost inscriptions tell us that Carvoran was called *Magnis*, and Old Penrith was *Voreda*, while a badly damaged inscription probably confirms that Carlisle was *Luguvalium*. For the rest we are dependent upon guess-work (albeit informed guess-work) based upon lists of places such as Ptolemy's *Geography*, the *Antonine Itinerary*, the

Notitia Dignitatum, the *Ravenna Cosmography*, the *Peutinger Table* and more recently the list of wall forts on the Staffordshire Moorlands plan. This is why often old accounts give different Roman names to places than the name currently given them. Thus the oldest map of Roman Britain, that of Abraham Ortelius (1590) locates *Arbeia* (which we now assume to be South Shields) in Central Cumbria. The best source for the names of places in Roman Britain is still A.L.F. Rivet & Colin Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain* (Batsford, (1981)

Key Timeline

AD 43	Romans arrive in Britain
AD 60s	Revolts in East Anglia (Boudicca)
AD 70	Romans move north to quell other fractious tribes (<u>Brigantes</u> , <u>Carvetii</u>)
AD 71-74	Wooden forts established in Cumberland, later replaced with stone
AD 122	Hadrian has The Wall built from Wallsend to Bowness; later extended by the addition of small forts down the Solway coast as far as <u>Ravenglass</u> .
AD 138 (turf;)	Emperor Antonius advanced into Scotland and built the Antonine Wall Hadrian's Wall effectively abandoned
AD 158	Romans retreat from Scotland, dismantling all structures; Hadrian's Wall reinstated
AD 180-211	Serious war in North Britain
AD 211-275	Peaceful and much rebuilding
AD 275-367	Little evidence specific to Britain
Post AD 367	Attacks by Picts and scots (from Ireland)
AD 389	Forts and wall rebuilt
AD 409	Roman field army withdrawn from Britain

Early accounts:

Since the time of Bede, writing in the 8th century, writers have been aware of the Wall. William Camden (1551-1623) ⁶and William Stukeley (1687-1765) ⁷ were the earliest antiquaries to write detailed accounts of Roman sites in Cumbria, where they appeared to have found quite a lot of original stonework still showing above ground. ^{8,9} In early times it was usually known as the Picts' Wall: and until the 19th century it was usually associated with the Emperor

Severus rather than Hadrian. It is only in the last 150 years or so that it has generally been called 'Hadrian's Wall'.

Official Records

- a) The Records of History on (or under) the ground are contained in The National Heritage List for England, or 'The List', which originated in 1882, when the first powers of protection were established. These developed into what we know today as statutory 'Listing' just after the Second World War. Drawing together all scheduled monuments, listed buildings, registered landscapes and battlefields, and protected wrecks, The List now holds over 400,000 entries. Historic England continuously updates The List, which is curated for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) by Cumbria's County Council Libraries & Archive Department. In Cumbria there are 8,978 entries, of which 216 relate to the Roman period. There are over 30 forts listed. ^{10,11}
- b) Many of the discoveries are reported in the *Transactions* of CWAAS (Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society) which can be found online at [Cumbria Past](#). In addition, many of these will appear in township pages of this database (on right-hand side).

FORTS ON HADRIAN'S WALL

1. BIRDOSWALD; V;

1.HE Link;

2. EH Research Link



2. CASTLESTEADS; No V ;

1.HE Link;

2.CWAAS Link; *Biggins, J.A. and Taylor, D. J. A., The Roman Fort at Castlesteads, Cumbria: a Geophysical Survey of the Vicus', 2007*

3. STANWIX; No V;

1. HE Link;

2. CWAAS Link; A bit of wall is all that is visible; *Dacre. J. A., 'An Excavation On*

The Roman Fort At Stanwix, Carlisle', (Contributions by Caruana I. D., Dickinson B. M., Padley T. G. and Taylor J.;

3. Other Link; *Bathhouse discovered at Edenside Cricket ground after floods in 2015 (BBC News Item)*

4. BURGH-BY-SANDS; No V

1. HE Link;

2. CWAAS Link; Church stands upon site - probably built with much of the masonry from the fort. *Collingwood R.G., 'Explorations at the Roman fort of Burgh-by- Sands', (1922)*

5. DRUMBURGH; No V;

1. HE Link

2. CWAAS Link; *Bellhouse, R.L., 'Hadrian's Wall: the forts at Drumburgh' (1989)*

6. BOWNESS-ON-SOLWAY; No V;

1. HE Link;

2. CWAAS Link; *Potter, T.W., 'Excavations at Bowness-on-Solway; 1973;*

3. CWAAS Link; *Bellhouse, R.L., 'Roman Sites on the Cumberland Coast: Hadrian's Wall. The fort at Bowness on-Solway, a reappraisal', 1988*

FORTS CONTINUING DOWN THE COAST (No wall)

7. BECKFOOT; No V;

1. HE Link

2. CWAAS Link; *Robinson, J., 'The Roman Camp near Beckfoot (Mowbray) Cumberland', (1880).*

3. CWAAS Link; *Collingwood R.G., 'The Roman, Fort at Beckfoot' (1935)*

8. MARYPORT; No V;

1. HE Link

2. CWAAS Extra – Not online;; XXII; *Jarrett M.G., 'Maryport, Cumbria: A Roman Fort and its Garrison' (1976).;*

3. Other Link: Current Archaeology magazine article

4. Other Link; Senhouse Museum

10. MORESBY; No V; (Parton);

1. HE Link

2. CWAAS Link *Birley E., 'The Roman Fort at Moresby' (1947)*

11. RAVENGLASS; V;

1. HE Link [fort];

2.HE Link [bathhouse];

3. CWAAS Link; Collingwood, R.G., 'Roman Ravenglass' (1927)



FORTS AT KEY ROAD JUNCTIONS

12. AMBLESIDE; V;

1 .HE Link

2. CWAAS Link; Collingwood, R. G., 'Explorations in the Roman Fort at Ambleside (fourth year, 1920) and at other sites on the Tenth iter.' (1921)



13. KIRKBY THORE; No V;

1.HE Link

2. CWAAS Link Gibbons, P. 'Excavations and Observations at Kirkby Thore' (1989); Contributions by Bartlett A., Hird L., McCarthy M., Rackham J., van der Veen M. and Wild F.

3. Other link; Tynedale U3A

4.Other link; Ancient monuments website

14. WHITLEY CASTLE by Alston; No V; Northumberland

1. Pastscape Link

Track to Kirkby Thore - protecting the extensive lead mining area around Alston

15. BROUGHAM; No V;

1.HE Link;

2. CWAAS Link Collingwood R. G., 'A note on Brocavum' (1922)

3. CWAAS Link Birley, E., 'Materials for the History of Roman Brougham' (1932)

OTHER FORTS protecting main routes

17 TROUTBECK; No V;

1. HE Link;
2. No CWAAS Link

18 OLD PENRITH; No V;

1. HE Link;
2. CWAAS Link; Haverfield, F., '*Voreda, the Roman fort at Plumpton Wall*' (1912)
3. CWAAS Link; Birley, E., '*Old Penrith and its Problems*' (1947)

19 PARKHOUSE,(Wreay); No V;

1. HE Link;
2. No CWAAS Link

20 LOW BORROWBRIDGE; No V;

1. HE Link;
2. CWAAS Link; Birley, E., '*The Roman Fort at Low Borrow Bridge*' (1947)

21 HARDKNOTT; V;

1. HE Link;
2. CWAAS Link Collingwood, R. G., '*Hardknot Castle*' (1927)



22 BROUGH; No V;

1. HE Link
2. CWAAS Link Birley, E. '*The Roman Fort At Brough-Under-Stainmore*' (1954)

23 OLD CARLISLE, No V;

1. HE Link;
2. CWAAS Link Collingwood, R. G., '*Old Carlisle*, (1927)
3. CWAAS Link Birley, E., '*The Roman Fort and Settlement at Old Carlisle*' (1951).
4. CWAAS Link Bellhouse, R.L., '*Excavations At Old Carlisle*' (1956)

24 BLENNERHASSETT, No V;

1. HE Link;
- 2 CWAAS Link Evans, J. and Scull, C., '*Fieldwork on The Roman Fort Site At Blennerhasset*' (1990) (Contribution On The Samian By Millett, M

25 CAERMOTE; No V;

1. HE Link:
2. CWAAS Link Bellhouse, R.L., '*The Roman Forts near Caermote*' (1959)

26 PAPCASTLE, No V;

1. HE Link
2. CWAAS Link Collingwood R. G., '*Report of the Excavations at Papcastle*', (1912).
3. CWAAS Link Birley, E., '*Roman Papcastle*' (1961.)
4. CWAAS Link Charlesworth, D., '*Excavations at Papcastle, 1961-2*'
5. Other Link; Major excavations 2010-2014 after flood of 2009;¹²
Apperley, E.C., '*Roman Papcastle*', (2016)

27 CASTLERIGG, No V;

1. Other Link, BBC news item (2008)

28 KIRKBRIDE, No V;

1. HE Link End of Stanegate;
2. CWAAS Link Birley, E. and Bellhouse, R. L., '*The Roman site at Kirkbride*' (1963);
3. CWAAS Link Bellhouse R. L. and Richardson G. G. S., '*The Roman site at Kirkbride*' (1975)

29 WATERCROOK, No V;

1. HE Link;
2. CWAAS Link North, O.H. and Hildyard E.J.W., '*Excavations at the Roman Fort of Watercrook*' (1944)

30 BEWCASTLE; No V;

1. HE Link;
2. CWAAS Link Outlier fort, Collingwood, R. G., '*The Roman Fort at Bewcastle*' (1922)

31 NETHERBY, No V;

1. Pastscape Link;
2. CWAAS Link Birley, E., '*The Roman Fort At Netherby*' (1952)

32 BOOTHBY, No V;

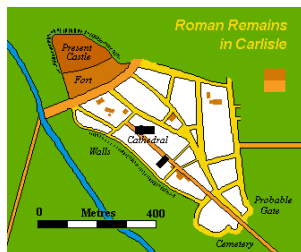
1. HE Link;
2. CWAAS Link Simpson F. G. and Richmond I. A. , 'Report Of The Cumberland Excavation Committee For 1933', Excavations on Hadrian's Wall.

33 NETHER DENTON, No V;

1. HE Link;
2. CWAAS Link; Simpson F.G,' *Excavations On the Line of the Roman Wall in Cumberland During the Years 1909-12.*' (Contributions By Haverfield, F. , Craster H.H.E.,Newbold P.)

34 CARLISLE, No V; No specific listing

Little of the Roman fort/town can be identified.



ROMAN ROADS

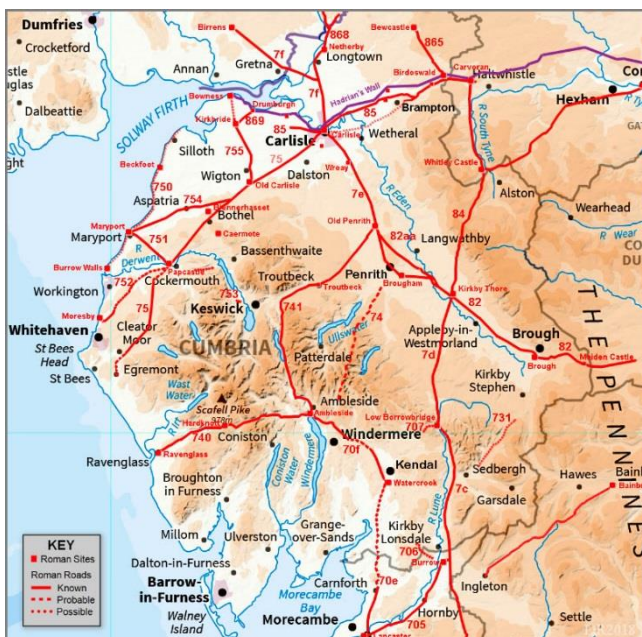
The Romans arrived in Cumbria in the 1st century AD in order to subdue the Brigantes and establish a northern frontier to protect their province of Britannia. This was a military zone, and any civilising influence was purely secondary, so as a result there is not the wealth of buildings such as villas that are found in the south of the country. The Romans built military roads for rapid movement of troops in times of trouble, for the movement of supplies to the garrisons of the regular forts and to protect such movements and also the movement of produce such as minerals (lead, copper) which were one reason for being here in the first place. Only later did these roads also become trading routes, and civil settlements grew alongside the forts to supply their needs. Only occasionally were existing tracks adopted and improved – they went in the wrong direction and were physically inadequate. Roman roads were surveyed, engineered and constructed to a hierarchy of exacting standards: the main roads which are the typical survivors (and many still in use today), local roads with little in the way of

engineering or surfacing, and private roads to a villa or mine.¹³



An area north of Penrith has been identified as possibly the [one surviving example of local roads](#) in Cumbria – where new agricultural land was opened up through “centuriation”.

A review of Roman Roads was carried out over 3 years (2015-2017) and made extensive use of Lidar to check the known and reveal some previously unknown roads. The work was triggered by a promise to the late Hugh Toller to complete what he had started in the county. He was a pioneer in using Lidar to detect Roman roads and he is sadly missed.¹⁴



Although there are still some big gaps in our knowledge of Cumbria's Roman roads ¹⁵ every excavation for a new building, for utility services, etc. is quite likely to show further proof of the existence of a Roman road. The last few years have seen great strides towards completing the picture.

The map ¹⁶above shows Roman roads in the county. It includes those with Margary road numbers (the numbering system devised by Ivan Margary)¹⁷, with modifications to accommodate new roads and new information on old ones. These changes are "unofficial".

It is unclear how much wheeled traffic used these roads but a popular legend that has been around since at least 1937 ¹⁸ traces the origin of the 1435 mm (4 ft 8½ in) standard railway gauge, to the evidence of rutted roads marked by chariot wheels dating from the Roman Empire. It is curious that the Roman pace or *passus* was 4.855 ft or 1435 mm; a thousand such was one Roman mile.

ROMAN TOWNS

When a permanent fort was established, a civilian establishment (a vicus) very quickly grew adjacent providing services and supplies for the fort and its troops. In some cases, these vici grew to a large size and are justified in being regarded as towns, though there is no strict definition of this status. In Cumbria, Carlisle (which became the administrative capital of the region), Old Carlisle, Papcastle¹⁹, Maryport and Kirby Thore all seem to be large enough and there will be others.

OTHER FEATURES OF ROMAN ORIGIN

- (a) Turrets etc on Wall; V; This database link: A set of photographs is found in Appendix 4 of the article on Leisure and Tourism in this database.

There are also

- (b) 1 Maiden Way; V,
2 High Street V ; 1. HE Link ; 2. HE Link 3. CWAAS Link Collingwood. R. G., *'Two Roman Mountain-Roads*, I. High Street., 2. Maiden Way (1937)
3. Maiden Castle, No V; 1. HE Link; 2. CWAAS Link Collingwood R. G..
'Maiden Castle In Stainmore' (1926)

4. Crosby Garret Helmet; In private hands;



1. [British museum Link](#); 2. [Wikipedia Link](#); 3. [CWAAS Link](#)

5. Carlisle City; Recent excavations See book by M. McCarthy for a very thorough account of its Roman background

Sources and References

In addition to the specific references below, the following publications provide much more detail and background,

P. Salway, *Roman Britain*, Oxford(1981)

J. Collingwood Bruce, *Handbook to the Roman Wall*, (1863) many reprints, 13th Edition 1978, latest Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne, 2006.

G.De La Bedoyere, *Hadrian's Wall*, Stroud, (1998)

P. Southern, *Roman Britain*, Stroud, 2011

W.D. Shannon, *Murus ille famosus (that famous wall): Depictions and Descriptions of Hadrian's Wall before Camden* (Cumberland & Westmorland Antiquarian & Archaeological Society, Tract Series, XXII, 2007)

References:

¹ <https://www.archaeology.co.uk/articles/features/time-team-the-rise-and-fall-of-a-television-phenomenon.htm>

² There are at least five organisations in Cumbria offering archaeological services whilst many more from out-county also are contracted from time to time. It is compulsory to have an archaeological report for an application for Planning Permission if it involves a site of interest.

³ In March 2020, a search for excavations showed 688 covering the period 1874 to 2018, but not all were for the Roman Period.

⁴ Lidar <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/lasers-reveal-lost-roman-roads>

⁵ David J Breeze, *Hadrian's Wall: A study in archaeological exploration and interpretation* (Archaeopress, 2019)

⁶ W. Camden, "*Britannia*, 1586-1594; this is a county-by-county description of Great Britain and Ireland. It is a work of chorography: a study that relates landscape, geography, antiquarianism, and history. Rather than write a history, Camden wanted to describe in detail the Great Britain of the present, and to show how the traces of the past could be discerned in the existing landscape. By this method, he produced the first coherent picture of Roman Britain. Originally in Latin but in English in 1610. Online at - https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/text/contents_page.jsp?t_id=Camden or

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=gri.ark:/13960/t9f52pj9k&view=1up&seq=7>
(original)

- ⁷ W. Stukeley, *Itinerarium Curiosum: or, an Account of the Antiquities, and Remarkable Curiosities in Nature or Art, Observed in Travels Through Great Britain, 1776*

Online at https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_HphaAAAAYAAJ/page/n4/mode/2up

And Stukeley: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Stukeley

- ⁸ Removal of stonework: It is known that much of the masonry at Papcastle was used in the building of Cockermouth Castle around 1100 whilst the substantial buildings in the vicus at Maryport were used in the building of the new town there. It is also most likely that many farmers used this 'free' supply of stonework to build their farmhouses and field walls.

- ⁹ See book by W D Shannon above

- ¹⁰ <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/about-the-list/>

- ¹¹ <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/results/?searchType=NHLE+Simple&search=Cumbria>

- ¹³ M.C. Bishop, *The Secret History of the Roman Roads of Britain*, 2014. Excellent introduction and even answers the question how long would it take to build a road.

- ¹⁴ <http://www.romanroads.org/gazetteer/cumbria/M753.htm>

- ¹⁵ <http://www.romanroads.org/gazetteer/cumbria/cumbriapages.html>

- ¹⁶ Map from <http://www.romanroads.org/gazetteer/cumbria/cumbriapages.html>.... David Ratledge

- ¹⁷ I.D. Margary, *Roman Roads in Britain*, 1973. Always the starting point even though it is now long out of date. The "Margary" road numbers are from this book.

- ¹⁸ "Standard Railway Gauge". Townsville Bulletin. 5 October 1937. p. 12. Retrieved by wikipedia 3 June 2011 – via *National Library of Australia*.

- ¹⁹ Papcastle (Derventio). Whilst the fort had long since disappeared, the massive flood in 2009 led to the discovery that the vicus spread substantially to the south of the river. A major excavation series in 2010, 2012-2014 followed. Whilst official reports can be found on Discover Derventio: (<http://www.discoverderventio.co.uk/>) , the related booklet by Eric Apperley gives a useful account.