

Appleby Archaeology November 2007

Andrew Birley of the Vindolanda Trust had the undivided attention of the Appleby Archaeology Group as he made the Roman garrisons' time at Vindolanda come alive. Andrew is the third generation of his family to be excavating at Vindolanda. His talk was titled *Size Does Matter*

The site of Vindolanda is likely to have been chosen by the Romans because of its strategic position as it lies half way between Corbridge and Carlisle on Stanegate, the Roman frontier and supply route, which was established around 80AD. The location would have provided many of the resources needed for building and living there. There were wooded valleys and mineral resources such as sandstone, limestone and clay, with iron, lead and coal mines close by.

There have been at least nine forts on the site spanning a period from 85 to 410AD. The early forts were earth works with turf and timber ramparts and had to be replaced every five to ten years as did any civilian buildings outside the fort. The Roman army laid down a clean cover of clay and turf over demolished structures before rebuilding. This created anaerobic conditions in some areas, and the lack of oxygen has resulted in the survival of some structures and many discarded items such as the famous writing tablets. These early forts lie to the south and west of the later stone forts and several metres below the present ground surface. From the 140s onwards a series of stone forts were built and it is the remains of these that are visible today.

The forts expanded, contracted and were modified to meet the needs of the of the Roman army. Roman soldiers, in the same way as happens with modern armies, did tours of duty and when they left a fort it was destroyed and rebuilt by the next garrison to be posted there. Several instances were described.

The first fort was replaced by a much bigger construction around 95-100AD after the withdrawal of Roman troops from Scotland made it more necessary to defend the Stanegate frontier. The fort was at its largest between 105-130AD and it was during this time that Hadrian's wall was built. Vindolanda would have been a base for the wall but it being a mile away was perhaps considered too far and soon additional forts were built on the wall itself. Later in the second century, when the Antonine Wall was built, Hadrian's wall seems to have been mothballed and Stanegate again became important. At this time large defensive ditches were built. Later buildings subsequently collapsed into these ditches. Two hundred and fifty circular huts were built on the fort platform

between 200-212AD. These would have housed up to two thousand people and may have been built to house soldiers and their followers during the Emperor Severus's campaigns into Scotland. One theory is that they were built by soldiers from North Africa, who came with their families, to augment the army in Britain and wanted to live as they did at home.

The only human remains that have been found so far come from this period. Tests indicate that they were of a man who came from Allendale and that he had met a cruel death suggesting that troublesome natives were dealt with severely.

Forts in the later third and fourth century were built over the round houses and modified as needs dictated.

The civilian areas extended south and west beyond the forts and occupied a far greater area. They would have made a big demand on local resources. The remains of large wooden buildings of the pre Hadrian forts have been excavated, and the use of so much wood must have had an impact on the local people. Later civilian buildings were built of stone. The settlement, or vicus, thrived in the 3rd century but had disappeared early in the 4th possibly because the army was reorganised into smaller garrisons and everybody lived within the fort. No pottery or coins later than 280AD have been found in the vicus but later coins and pottery have been found within the fort. Recent geophysical studies indicate that there are civilian and industrial buildings to the north of Stanegate

The writing tablets, of which there are more than 1000, provide great insight into the daily lives of the people. There are examples of everyday correspondence, for example an invitation to a birthday party with the earliest example, in the western world, of a woman's handwriting, as well, lists of army stores, duty rotas and even writing exercises that have been corrected. Two rare finds were a mass of hair which was originally part of a centurion's helmet and a sealed box wood box containing seeds of opium. The anaerobic conditions have ensured the preservation of leather items such shoes, textiles, most spun from native wool, and basketwork. Many other artefacts have been recovered including beautiful painted glass, lead loom weights, items of jewellery and weapons.

The letters and inscriptions give some idea of the relationship between the garrisons and the local Britons. At the start of the occupation it seems the locals were despised but as time went on they

may have been treated with some respect as is suggested by the inscription on the base of a statue translated as "The troops from Gaul dedicate this statue to the goddess Gallia, with the full support of the British-born troops". It may be significant that the letters of the last phrase of the inscription were very small.

Andrews final slide of a small statue to the god Priapus god of fertility and possibly farming illustrated the title of his talk, He concluded his presentation by outlining the future plans for work at Vindolanda and inviting those present to visit the site and volunteer to assist in excavations. It is estimated that it will take one hundred and fifty years to investigate the site fully! .

The e committee hope to arrange a summer visit to the site which they hope will be well supported

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