

The Appleby Archaeology Group welcomed Alastair Robertson, a well known local historian from Alston, to their final meeting of the 2012/13 winter season. The subject of Alastair's talk was the ongoing investigation at, and development of, Whitley Castle Roman Fort a few miles from Alston itself. Alastair explained that he had first discovered the fort many years ago, by the simple expedient of knocking on the door of Castle Nook farm, on whose land the fort is located, to ask permission to have a look. From that simple beginning, he went on to write the first modern handbook to the fort and helped the landowner to set in motion the process which recently resulted in the granting of Lottery Funding to develop the site as a historic and cultural centre.

The fort is believed to have been called Epiacum, since the Roman geographer Ptolemy mentioned it as one of the 9 towns or *civitas* belonging to the Brigantes – the principal indigenous tribe of this part of Britain during the time of the Roman occupation. The name Epiacum is derived from the Roman goddess Epona, the protector of horses. Although the origin of the association with the fort is unclear, it is known that the fort maintained a contingent of cavalry.

The fort probably has a very early foundation date, pottery having been found in association with an altar found nearby has been dated to 100AD. This could place the Roman presence in the area prior to the construction of Hadrian's Wall in 122AD. A coin found under the pedestal of the altar dates to 150AD and is currently in the Newcastle Museum of Antiquities. So why is the fort located where it is? The answer is lead metal and silver, both of which are extracted from lead ore. The Alston area is famed for its lead mining history and also for the high percentage of silver in the ore. It is not fanciful to suppose that as soon as the Romans discovered that there was lead in the area, they wanted to mine and control it.

The fort lies on the Maiden Way, the Roman road over the high Pennines which connects the fort at Kirkby Thore with Garrigill and onward to the Hadrianic fort at Carvoran, on the wall. The road was still in use as a routeway as recently as the 19<sup>th</sup> century and continues in places as a path even today. A recent excavation on the Maiden Way, by the volunteers of the Altogether Archaeology Project, seems to indicate that the section of the road between Whitley Castle and Kirkby Thore is of light construction, so it may be that most of the lead mined in the area was shipped out northwards, possibly because security might be more assured in that part of the military zone. The Project has recently carried out a survey of the route of the southern end of the road near Kirkby Thore and results are forthcoming.

Another Roman road which has been recorded is that between Whitley Castle and Corbridge. The distance between the two forts gives rise to speculation that there might be a fort somewhere between the two in Allendale and in fact a possible site at Old Town has been identified using laser imaging.

Alastair continued by describing the topography of Whitley Castle. It is built on top of a slight natural hillock with long defensive views on three sides. The form of the hill made it impossible for the usual playing card shape to be constructed with the result that the plan view resembles a diamond, an extremely rare occurrence almost unknown in the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, the Romans had done their best to stick with the layout of the buildings as they would have been within the usual rectangular shape. There is some suggestion that the hillock may have been an existing Brigantian site, which suited the Roman requirements rather well. Certainly there are many Iron Age and Bronze age farms in the South Tyne Valley, attesting to the long history of settlement. This settlement

continued around the fort during the period of Roman rule and local farms must have supplied it with food, willingly or otherwise. Other people, providing services of various kinds, would have been drawn in to the area and the result was a large civilian settlement, or vicus, just outside the military compound.

One of the defining features of the site are the seven clearly defined earth ramparts, an unusually high number - most Roman forts had just two or three. It is not known if this is because it actually needed heavy defences, or because the early builders were fond of digging ditches and building ramparts. These ramparts still survive to a considerable height. The fort was apparently abandoned in the late third century, that being the date of the most recent pottery found on the site. This date may correspond with abandonment of the outpost forts north of the Wall at Bewcastle, Birrens and Netherby.

Alastair remarked that the fort has been described many times by antiquaries, including William Camden, the author of 'Britannica', one of the first serious British geographic studies, who was a friend of Reginald Bainbridge, a teacher from Appleby. However, there have been very few excavations. The fort bathhouse was investigated in 1810 but the only work carried out using modern techniques was that by Durham University in 1957, the results of which are now being reviewed. An extensive survey was carried out by English Heritage a few years ago as part of the Miner – Farmer Project and those interested can find the full report of the findings on the English Heritage website. There are currently no plans to excavate on this scheduled ancient monument, although the Altogether Archaeology Project, in association with the owners of the site, have carried out organised molehill surveys over the last two years. Amongst the finds have been glass beads, Roman nails, a loom weight and a particularly fine bronze dolphin, thought to be the decorative end of a strigil, an instrument used for scraping the skin during bathing.

Alastair concluded his talk by recommending his audience to discover Whitley Castle, together with its equally interesting environs, for themselves. He was warmly thanked for his fascinating insight into the history of this little known historic site.

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