

## Vindolanda – “Frontiers in Transition”

Members of Appleby Archaeology Group and several interested visitors were treated to a lively, informative and very comprehensive talk by Marta Alberti, Senior Archaeologist with the Vindolanda Trust, on Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> November. The group had last heard a talk about excavations and the work at Vindolanda in 2007 – on Thursday Marta brought them right up to date with events and research at the Roman fort since that date – and it proved to be a fascinating account of the work at Vindolanda. During the evening members learnt of the many discoveries which have been made relating to the structure of the fort and objects in it during the last nine years. Dr Alberti began her talk by outlining how Vindolanda came to be where it is and explained why it's in a good location. There are plenty of natural resources close by which no doubt played a big role in choosing the site – it has water, limestone, clay, sandstone, lead and iron all within striking distance- in fact all that was needed to create the camp and to maintain both itself and the nearby civilian population. There was some discussion about its proximity to the already existing Stanegate, an ancient route which may date to the Iron Age, and the usefulness of this as a supply route for a camp at the edge of the Roman Empire. Vindolanda was founded in 85AD by Belgian auxiliary soldiers and was inhabited in various forms and layouts until well after 410AD. On average there was a change of garrison every 20 years and the Trust's current research – “Frontiers in Transition” – is seeking to discover how each garrison used and perceived the landscape and the area in which the fort was situated. Dr Alberti showed some photographs which had been taken using the latest, most sophisticated type of drone – the clarity of the images was stunning and revealed a complex arrangement of buildings, yards and passageways which could be variously dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. Astonishingly these images have made possible the identification of 8 forts at the site at lower ground levels than what is visible at ground level today.

2<sup>nd</sup> century buildings showed a very large latrine site – a 20-seater – clearly a visit to the toilet was both a public and a communal affair, a complex drainage system, mortared courtyards and workshop areas for metalworking. Looking at the level of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century fort layout posed an intriguing question. Romans are well-known for constructing straight roads and buildings with straight walls and right-angle corners, yet several buildings dating to the level of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century appear to have rounded walls. They appear to be very un-Roman round houses. Precious few objects have been found in the remains of these buildings and their shape and location prompted the suggestion that they may have been occupied by locals – perhaps working for the garrison? Perhaps offered some protection or payment from the garrison in return for labour? The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century levels of construction revealed a large barracks floor, a smaller cavalry barracks with very fine stone work, elaborate drainage systems and well-prepared surfaces. In these levels one surprising fact seemed to be emerging – there was apparently very little difference between life within the fort and the civilian life outside the walls. One of the strongest arguments was the evidence for the presence of women. Numerous spindle whorls both inside and outside the fort have been regarded as a very strong indication of a considerable female presence. Roman soldiers would simply not have engaged in this type of activity – spinning was the preserve of women and considered an important female accomplishment. Of course women were not actually supposed to be within the fort of Vindolanda at all – but throughout history armies have had their female camp followers and the existence of brothels nearby is not hard to imagine. Marta ended by showing some pictures of impressive recent finds – 421 leather shoes (male and female), skulls of animals, a very dainty spoon for make-up or medicine, wooden tablets, a sword handle, a pine barrel stave stamped with the name of the maker “Albinnor” and a good luck charm with phallic symbol. Vindolanda site is a “live excavation” between April and September when volunteers are welcome to join – many Appleby Archaeology Group members could be heard expressing a keenness to participate after Marta's excellent talk.

