

Thursday, September 3, 1987

This morning we decide to visit the fort at Chesters first, then work our way back west along the Wall, Carrawburgh, Housesteads, Vindolanda, Carvoran ... suddenly we realize that we have too little time. Three days are not enough to get down to terms of real intimacy with Hadrian's Wall. Indeed, I'm only too aware that the Claytons, Collingwood Bruces, Simpsons, Richmonds, Birleys and many others, no doubt, have spent their lifetimes on the job. (We're told, incidentally, by the ancient writers that Hadrian, a multifaceted and various man, was equally difficult to get to know.) I shall have to content myself with looking at just the "big" sites.

Chesters Fort is on the North Tyne River, at Chollerford; this is the site of the second Roman Wall bridge (the other crossed the Irthing River). Here too, only the eastern bridge abutment remains, although when the water is low, as today, the west bank of the river still has some of the bridge stone visible in place. We wonder whether the stony riverbed downstream is actually showing us the waterworn rubble from the bridge and conclude from an aerial photograph in the guidebook that it is, for there are no stones visible upstream from the site. We can't catch even a glimpse of the two piers said to be still in place in the riverbed itself, however.

The best parts of Chesters are the baths on the riverbank, the headquarters building, the commandant's house, a barracks block and a little museum stuffed with finds from the last one hundred and fifty years of excavation. We walk first through

the barracks. Two rows of rooms face each other across a street with a stone drain running down the centre. The bases of several columns suggest that there were small roofed porticoes down at least part of the rows -- must have been rather noisy, we think, with stone paving everywhere and this a cavalry fort. Clatter, clatter of horses' hooves everywhere!

But nowadays there are cows not horses. Around the perimeter of the fort, along either side of the gravel path leading across the field from the museum and parking lot, and around the baths -- around every excavated item, in fact, are sturdy fences to keep out the cows who are all about, cropping the thick wet grass.

The headquarters building (principia) is in the centre of the fort. The main streets from the north, west and east gates meet at one end of it. There are three sections: a courtyard with a portico on three sides, an assembly hall (the basilica) and behind the wall, a range of rooms (here five of them) of which the regimental shrine and standards once occupied the central one. To one side of the shrine there is a strong room where the pay was kept. It had a heavy oak door which we are told disintegrated as it was exposed to the air during excavation. In the basilica is the tribunal at the west end, a raised platform from which the officers could address their troops, who supposedly could all cram themselves at once into the hall and courtyard (there were approximately 500 of them).

East of the principia is the praetorium, the commanding officer's house, which is a courtyard house with its

own small bath-suite. At least the commandant would not have to bathe with the common or garden cavalrymen!

The baths at Chesters are deservedly famous. Here we can get a real sense of camp life, because there are still walls high enough to make the various rooms feel like roofless rooms and not just spaces marked out by stones at ground level. Our guidebook mentions traces of plaster. We search diligently, at first seeing nothing. Suddenly there it is, traces of coloured stuccoish stuff, all over the place. We take what seem like dozens of photographs (sadly, everyone of them is later lost in a puzzling series of events which ultimately points an accusing finger at the Canadian developer).

We find all the details mentioned in the guidebooks: the 'voussoirs' or wedge-shaped stones from the barrel-vaulted ceilings that are made from tufa, a volcanic stone quite light in weight, the furnace, the worn stones in the doorways where so many soldiers tramped through, the sewer from the latrines washed clean with the overflow water from the frigidarium or cold bath room just nearby. It's all so puzzling, so challenging, and so rewarding! We walk excitedly back and forth from room to room, arguing and gesticulating. A family with three children appears. The kids seem to find us more interesting than the stones, with our knapsacks, eccentric enthusiasm and obsession with photographing the oddest nooks and crannies: "Take this drain after you've got a good one of the hypocaust in the laconicum...". One of them disappears briefly -- he's crawled into the stoke hole behind the space where the boiler must have been -- mother and father show slight signs of panic, and they all leave before the clamour to "go down by the river" leads to wet feet or worse.

* Hunter Davies, A Walk Along the Wall, Quartet Books, 1976.

Sudden exhaustion sets in, so we meander back via the south gate of the fort, to the west gate. "Here the iron collars which formerly held the door pivots can be seen." We do see them. "A water channel leads into the north guard chamber, and beyond it is an oven." We find the water channel and the oven, which is a jolly round bit, stones slightly blackened, jammed up against the fort's outer wall.

The museum next. But an hour of looking at the hundreds (thousands?) of items found at Chesters over the years finishes us entirely, and lunch is needed to revive us. Hunter Davies' comment (p. 74)* on the "headless goddess standing on a headless and legless cow, which doesn't exactly make you want to rush off and look at it" makes us laugh, but we agree with his next words, "in fact, it's surprisingly impressive". She's probably a figure of Juno, in fact, found here at Chesters.

Failing to find a baker's shop in either Chollerford or Humshaugh (and how do you pronounce that?) we drive down into Hexham. At a shop which proclaims cheerfully that it is the "Home of the Northumbrian Tart" we buy a couple of them, not without a few ribald comments.

We are tired of things Roman, we decide. We shall visit Hexham Abbey and be mediaeval for a bit. The first thing we see inside the Abbey is an enormous Roman tombstone of a cavalryman called Flavinus, whose horse is trampling a barbarian foeman. Not at all Christian, or mediaeval either. In very short order, we are discovered by a friendly flower-arranging lady as tourists interested in the Roman stones of Hexham. There are lots, all carted from the ruined Wall when the earliest church was built here. In the crypt we find an inscription which mentions Septimius Severus, only half out of the ceiling. Running our fingers over the letters in the dim light gives a sudden sense of the slow passage of eighteen hundred years as nothing else has so far.

In the Abbey guidebook we read about the two hundred Hexham schoolboys barricaded in their grammar school and burned alive by marauding Scots in 1296. This border country wasn't peaceful in Hadrian's day, or a thousand years later. Now there's some top secret military establishment up in the hills which sends out planes of advanced design, bludgeoning the tourists' and locals' ears, as a reminder of modern warfare.

After the change of pace in Hexham Abbey for an hour or two, we return to the Wall, driving back through Chollerford to Carrawburgh (apparently pronounced Carabruff). Here there's only a parking lot beside the road, with a sign pointing out over a field full of sheep, tussocky grass and humps and bumps. This is Brocolitia, as the Romans called it, a fort which hasn't been excavated at all, it appears. The guidebooks call it "disappointing", but we enjoy it. We find three excellent mushrooms (we shall add them to tomorrow's breakfast) and an enormous stone which must be Roman (though none of the books admit to the knowledge of it) since it has the clear traces still

of an attractively casual pair of crossed legs!

Outside the fort, a little down the slope, is a Mithraeum, or temple-shrine for worshippers of the deity associated with the near-eastern Ahura-Mazda and the powers of light and dark. The tiny temple still has the benches at the sides, three altars at the front and the smashed remains of the torchbearers found in every Mithraeum, Cautes and Cautopates. The damage was done in the 4th century A.D. presumably by Christians. The originals are in the Newcastle Museum: the ones at Carrawburgh are replicas.

The last fort of call for the day is Housesteads. It's perhaps the best known and deservedly so. It really should have a whole despatch to itself, but we don't do it justice. The weather is clear and bitterly cold, and the long climb up the hillside in the slanting thin sunlight and tumultuous wind should have warmed the blood, but not enough! We rush round, looking at barracks and latrines, a hospital (needs lots of imagination) and finally squat in the shelter of a guard room by the north gate, looking out over the bleak border country towards Scotland with chattering teeth. We promise ourselves another visit to Housesteads another year, and retreat back to the car, half a mile away and the last one left in the parking lot.

We are much warmed and cheered by a visit to a tiny inn, high in the hills above Haltwhistle, very close to the stretch of the Wall which runs along the Craggs. This is fairly desolate moorland, and our inn gives us a grand meal from a moorland deer in a venison pie of excellent tastiness. What a way to end a day -- tired, windburned, and still talking things Roman over our wineglasses and coffee! Tomorrow comes Vindolanda, a high point of the trip, we hope.