

I. The Auxiliary Fort: Housesteads

Before we take a close look at one of the best known examples of Roman fortification work in Britain, Housesteads auxiliary fort on Hadrian's Wall in Northumberland, let's sort out some definitions.

First, camps. These were constructed for temporary occupation, housed the troops in tents, and were always built, day by day, when the legionaries were on the march advancing into new territory so that they would have a protected base for the night. Another type of camp, the practice camp, was very small and constructed as a training exercise only, usually close to a permanent fortification.

The second group of fortified sites was for permanent occupancy, or at least semi-permanency, even if short term. These forts ranged in size from fortlets, fortified garrison outposts, fortified gateways and so on, to the full legionary fortress built largely in stone and covering about 50 acres.

In Roman Britain, Hadrian's Wall provides an unusually complete range of fortified sites. Any serious student of the Wall soon learns to distinguish between the forts, the milecastles and the turrets, and then at least to begin on distinguishing the various designs of each of these fortifications. Unfortunately, there isn't a legionary fortress associated with the Wall, the nearest being the one at York (two other well-known ones were at Chesters and Caerleon). The largest of the sites either on or closely associated with the Wall is Corbridge (Corstopitum), 3 km to the south, a town and military supply depot for northeastern Britain built on the site of a second century stone

fort, and perhaps covering 30 acres at its greatest extent.

Housesteads (Vercovicium or Borcovicus -- the name is disputed) auxiliary fort covers about 5 acres and was constructed a bit later than the Wall itself, which runs east and westward from the ends of the fort's north wall. It was occupied for a long while by an auxiliary cohort (of the larger size, or "milliary") of about 800-1,000 Tungrian (Belgian) infantrymen. Beyond the northern gateway of the fort the ground falls steeply, while the entire site has little level ground, as it slopes back from the crest of the escarpment towards the south. On the southern side of Housesteads Fort was a vicus or civil settlement. Only half a dozen of the town's buildings are now visible (though more have been excavated and covered again), but the archaeologists assure us that the settlement was an extensive one, with many large timber and stone houses crowded together, with gable-ends to the narrow streets, several temples and shrines (one of them a Mithraeum), cemeteries, and terraced fields or gardens lower down the steep south-facing slope.

The main gateway to the fort is the east gate, to your right if you are the typical visitor walking up the long hill through the townsite towards the south gate. In Roman times a roadway ran out through the main gateway to continue the Military Way, a line of communication connecting the whole of the military zone lying just south of the Wall. There was also a north-south track giving access to the tribal lands across the Wall, close beside the small stream, the Knag Burn, on whose bank the still unexcavated bathhouse for the

fort was built. A gateway was constructed here as a checkpoint for traffic through the Wall in the most convenient ground for some distance on either side of the fort, the small valley of the Knag Burn.

Inside the fort, the layout and style of the buildings are typical of most auxiliary forts. The Roman soldier who marched (or sauntered?) back to his barracks in Housesteads from an afternoon visit to the baths would have climbed up the slope with the sun in his eyes and given the day's password to the guards posted in one of the guardrooms on either side of the double eastern gateway. If he didn't turn at once to right or left, to his small shared room in one of the barracks XIII to XVIII, or perhaps return to duty in a stable or workshop (XV and XVI), he would walk straight up the via praetoria towards the principia, the headquarters of the fort. He could look through its colonnaded front court, and the long assembly hall behind it, directly into the central one of the five rooms at the back of the principia, the cohort's shrine and strongroom.

If our imaginary infantryman was headed for his barracks at the western end of the camp (I-VI), he would turn left in front of the principia on the broad street, the via principalis, and head westward past the side of the fort commander's house, the praetorium, just inside the south gate. Behind the principia lay the hospital. North of the hospital was an open space, perhaps with several wagons taking turns to unload grain or other supplies at one of the two granaries next to the principia on its northern side.

The west end of the fort provided four more barracks and perhaps two additional workshops: armourers, tent makers, farriers, smiths, carpenters, stonemasons were all needed. Any Roman soldier, whether legionary or auxiliary, was almost certain to learn a skilled trade and use it daily, at least in peacetime, though he was also expected to put in long hours at weapons drill, guard duty, practice-camp construction, customs control work and so on.

"Time off" must have been part of our soldier's life too. He needed time to make his own meals, usually with the standard rations of grain and cheap wine as the staples, but perhaps supplemented officially or of his own accord with locally-caught or raised meat and game. Perhaps he grew some vegetables in the fields terraced below the fort, or visited the shops, inns and brothels which must typically have flourished in the civilian settlements, the vici, near each of the permanent forts. He might have a wife and family in the town, and so have some domestic life as well as the rather crowded but comradely life in the long rows of barrack rooms.

It isn't easy to visit a fort such as Housesteads and imagine how it was sixteen hundred years ago. No matter how many tourists are crowding round, it's hard to see them as Roman soldiers. The buildings all have just two or three feet of stony wall (and some lack even that height) to show where the rooms were. But more and more knowledge is being gained by increasingly careful and thorough archaeological work, lending colour to the black and white ground plans for those of us who work to develop enough imagination to picture the past successfully.