

Monday, August 31, 1987

Flight into Prestwick arrives 8 a.m. into brilliant still sunshine. No crowds - quite a change after Pearson International on a Sunday evening! Off at once to Carlisle, more or less at the Wall's western end, though we soon realise it's three times easier to start at Newcastle (actually Wall-send), as that's what all the guide-books do, and work east to west.

Evidence of Roman Carlisle is minimal. All that's visible is an item doubtfully labelled a "shrine", since it's neither a well nor a grave, at least. Alas, it now rather resembles a bit of the city drains, dug up in the garden of Tullie House. This fine 17th century mansion contains Carlisle Museum, sharing the known site of a Roman fort with the Cathedral next door. It's a shock to realise that what this casual Canadian viewer assumes is a rather depressingly conventional red brick 19th century imitation Gothic church is actually the real thing, six, seven or more hundred years old, red Cumbrian stones, some of them appropriated from the Roman works a millennium earlier still. Sir Walter Scott was married here in the 1820's, we're told.

Inside Tullie House (no entry fee) is a magnificent collection of Roman finds from excavations all along the western half of Hadrian's Wall (go to Newcastle for comparable material from the eastern half, as well as to the superb museums at sites like Carvoran, Vindolanda, Housesteads, Chesters or Corbridge.) Among the altars and the hundreds of everyday objects - tools, sandals, pottery, jewellery - are a tombstone inscribed in Greek

and several figurines of the three Mother Goddesses. We shall see more of these seated ladies, carrying jugs or loaves or baskets of fruits, all along the Wall sites. There are many of these barely Romanized local deities: Mars Cocidius, Mars Thincsus, Antenociticus, Taranis, Caelestis Brigantia, Vitiris, among others. I learn about "chapes" (the metal caps which protect the tips of leather scabbards) and "terret rings" (part of a chariot-horse's harness through which the reins run freely over the saddle-girth.)

Wednesday, September 2, 1987

A second visit to Tullie House and things domestic occupied Tuesday. Now we set off to find the first real traces of the Wall. The first visible turret, the smallest of the observation posts along the line of the barrier, is an exciting moment for us. Each turret is numbered - from the eastern end, of course! - and this one, Banks East, is called 52a. It is carefully aligned with the Wall, as almost all were, but just up the hill to the east is Pike Hill Tower, an observation tower built before the Wall and lying athwart its line. We take lots of slides (later we shall become much more blasé and choosy!)

We encamp at Gilsland, that is, we secure our beds in a solidly comfortable Victorian farmhouse for the next two nights. My word, what breakfasts! Our hosts run a B. and B. with the same enthusiastic hospitality with which long lost friends might be welcomed. From here we set out to walk westwards (thankfully, with the guidebooks this time) along the best part of the western third of

the Wall. Here it was originally built of turf, though altered plans meant that even before Hadrian's reign ended in 138 A.D., the turf was being replaced by stone. We recall that we noticed Banks East turret was not bonded into the Wall itself. It had been built of stone from the start, so that change from turf to stone for the Wall meant butting it up against the turret.

In Gilsland we locate our first milecastle, Poltross Burn, behind the railway station. Milecastles were small fortifications originally protecting gateways through the Wall. Each had accommodation for a single small unit, the contubernium or "messtent" of eight soldiers. Poltross Burn could house, unusually, two contubernia, to judge from the two barrack blocks whose lower walls are visible on either side. I'm amazed at the steep pitch of this little encampment, down the rushing burn's west bank (Cumbrian - the east bank is Northumberland!) I wonder how the soldiers posted here liked the precipitous slope, no doubt unevenly paved or cobbled, between the north and south gateways. Surely the floors of their barracks didn't slope as well, did they? They most certainly do now, and I have to make some effort to convince myself those Romans were actually living and sleeping on level floors.

There's a marvellous couple of miles to follow Poltross Burn. First, past two turrets, 48a and 48b, down to one of the only two river crossings the Wall made, at Willowford Bridge over the R. Irthing. All our guidebooks duly instruct our inspection of the bridge abutment - very blocky and complicated because the riverbed had shifted westward and a second abutment had been made after the first crept back from the water. They also tell us we must now detour two or three miles back through Gilsland, as the Irthing can't be crossed here. Not deterred, we inspect the shallow

rocky river, take off our boots and wade across, keeping guidebooks, cameras and knapsack well above the no more than knee-deep water. A small brown waterbird, the dipper, keeps us company, flying from stone to stone, sometimes even under the water. A stiff (very stiff!) climb up a huge bank brings us to Harrow's Scar milecastle. No trace of bridge abutment this side, below Harrow's Scar, as the Irthing bends and the flow has scoured the bank back. It wasn't so steep, it seems, for the Romans.

From Harrow's Scar milecastle, a bit more damaged than Poltross Burn because some mediaeval farmer saw fit to construct his farmstead inside it, we tramp along towards Birdoswald Fort. We pass one or two centurial stones, facing blocks inscribed with a backward C and a man's name in the possessive case. These recorded whose century (a detachment of 80 or so soldiers) built a particular section of the Wall. We locate >TERENTI in the southern face of the Wall. Nearby is a phallus, carved as a good luck symbol into another facing block.

Birdoswald is the first full-sized fort we've seen. It is on a splendid escarpment looking out to the south over the Irthing gorge. Forts were here designed to house, as a rule, 500 or sometimes more auxiliaries, the non-citizen recruits who served as support troops to the legionaries and whose duties were to man the Wall the legionaries had helped them to construct. Not all the forts hereabouts lie on the line of the Wall itself. Several, such as Corbridge (Corstopitum) or Chesterholm (Vindolanda) lie further back, on the Stanegate, the road which was originally constructed as the northern east-west artery to control the local Britons, the Brigantes of Cumbria among them. Right now, much of Birdoswald is still either under grass or farm buildings, but the central area is being excavated, showing

granaries with the usual heavily paved floors raised on stone blocks for air-circulation and buttresses reinforcing the side walls, to take the pressure of the stored tons of grain. The eastern gateway of the fort is well preserved. By the time we've travelled along the sites to the east, we'll recognize the typical gateway layout at a glance: small guard rooms at the side, threshold with a raised central block to keep out unauthorised low-axled vehicles, small holes in the long stone blocks to carry the round pin-hinge of the

long-lost heavy doors.

As we walk back to Gilsland we wonder if we've seen the Popping Stone in the Irthing (where Scott "popped the question" to his future bride, apparently!) this afternoon. If so, there wasn't anything to distinguish it from a thousand others. Tomorrow we plan to drive ahead, to Chesters, Housesteads, Chesterholm, and visit all the sites in the great central third, best preserved of all, of Hadrian's Wall.