

Vindolanda Roman Fort 2013

2013 marks the 1800th year since the last fort was built by the Fourth Cohort of Gauls at the site of Roman Vindolanda, also known as Chesterholm. It is also the fifth year I travelled to this fort for a two-week session as one of the hundreds of volunteer excavators each season. With at least nine forts, both wooden and stone, spanning over three hundred years, the initial settlements of Vindolanda predate Hadrian's Wall (built in AD 122). Visitors to the site are often struck by the physical extent of the fort and its civilian town, the *vicus*. Although Vindolanda lies a few miles to the south of the Wall, it remained an extremely important military centre in the post-Hadrianic era, housing auxiliary (i.e. generally non-citizen) units of infantry and cavalry and guarding the old frontier, the east-west Stanegate Road.

It is best known for the discovery of thin wooden writing tablets in the 1970s (more are being discovered at the site to this day), preserved in anaerobic conditions alongside leather shoes and otherwise perishable materials, which document military, civilian and mercantile life at the fort, including the famous party invitation sent to the wife of the Commanding Officer around AD 100, which preserves the earliest certain example of Latin in a woman's handwriting for the farewell. The tablets may have rocketed the site to fame (in 2003 they were voted by the British public as the top treasure in the country), but because of its size and the multiple layering of the successive forts, only limited areas of the excavation require the slow, careful searching, by hand, of the dark anaerobic soil for those precious materials. The tablets may be a rare find, but that does not make it any less exciting: by the end of my fortnight, concluding the twentieth week of the season, the volunteers that year had recovered over 1100 small finds and an astounding number of pottery sherds, nails and other ephemera, all in the first couple of metres down. My own companions accounted for about 10% of the total small finds, ranging from pottery stamps to an Anglo-Saxon throwing knife, throwing (appropriately) light on life at Vindolanda after Roman occupation.

The Birley family who oversee the excavations at Vindolanda procured funding for a five-year project in the south-east quadrant of the main fort, and it was this which was well under way by the time I arrived. This area of the site has never been uncovered and already shows much promise. I will not detail what has been discovered so far, for that is covered by the blog, including images and videos, to be found at <http://vindolanda.blogspot.co.uk/> (I can be seen in the foreground at 4:32 on the Week 20 video blog!). However, I will briefly tell of what my digging compatriots and I found.



Fig. 1

The Antonine building, probably a dwelling. Its paved floor had been created from the square stones of the hypocaust pillars from a Hadrianic bathhouse. A door-frame, postholes and a cobbled surface are also preserved.

We were attempting to trace a beautiful Antonine (AD 138-161) building and its associated tightly-packed cobbled surface, probably a courtyard (see Fig. 1). It had been partly cut-through, maybe by a robber trench of later folk looking for building materials. Many scraped knuckles and aching trowel-wrists later, it became apparent the building subsided into a ditch into which an industrial oven had been set (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2

The area in which I was digging, after the two-week period. The Antonine building is out of frame to the left. The wall-like structure in the middle is the oven, evidenced by a great amount of burning closer to the camera. The red line indicates a possible roundhouse (see below and Fig.3)



After the ditch and oven, we found the cobbled surface again, but only briefly, for it ran out. Though we were initially despondent, continued trowelling back revealed clear colours in the soil which started to map out footprints of curved walls. If these continue, then it is likely that these are buildings known as roundhouses, built by the local Britons (called by the tablet-writing Romans as *Brittunculi*, 'little Britons') when the Romans abandoned the fort in that area and built a new one a little further up the hill during the Severan period (193-211). The industrious locals used the stone and existing ramparts to build their characteristic dwellings, and it was particularly exciting to see the remnants of these coming through, even if they were sometimes difficult to see and indeed petered out in my section (Fig. 3). That indicated in Fig. 2 was a large and clear dark smudge, suggesting perhaps that it had burned down.



Fig. 3

The specific area on which I worked during the second week. The oven can just be seen right at the top, going left-right. The red lines indicate approximately the curved wall of a potential roundhouse, which continued on the other side of, and presumably underneath, the later wall to the right. Though it is difficult to see here, the only feature that alerted us to this building is the change in soil colour and the single paving slab through which one red line cuts.

Roman Britain is a far cry from Egyptology, but being local to the area, I am familiar with the forts along Hadrian's Wall. For one who was going to university to study Ancient History at undergraduate level, it seemed too good an opportunity to miss being part of the excavation team of a fort I had visited many times as a school pupil. Information about becoming a volunteer yourself can be found at <http://www.vindolanda.com/excavate.htm>. I have still not achieved my personal goal of finding a coin, which were dropped in no small numbers in drains, on floors and in cobbled roads, or deposited as hoards. Though this year was my best yet for small finds – a key, a ring, a piece of lead (likely to have been coated in bronze originally) and a penannular brooch (without its pin) – coins still elude me. This of course means that I must return!

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