

## **Hadrian's Wall : 'Vallum Aelium'**

Hadrian's Wall is the most important Roman structure in Britain. It was begun in AD 122, during the rule of Hadrian, the Roman emperor. Work was largely completed by AD 128, within six years. There were two defensive Roman fortifications built across Britain: Hadrian's Wall and the less elaborate Antonine Wall, across central Scotland.

Hadrian's Wall was the most heavily fortified border in the Empire. Besides being used for military defence its gates were probably used as customs border posts. Large sections of the wall still exist, especially in the mid-section. For much of its length the wall can be followed on foot by Hadrian's Wall Path. It was made a Unesco World Heritage Site in 1987.

The Wall was 80 Roman miles (73 statute miles or 120 km) long. Its width and height depended on the construction materials which were available nearby. East of the River Irthing, near Gilsland, the wall was made from squared stone and measured 3 metres (9.7 ft) wide and five to six metres (16–20 ft) high. West of the river the wall was made from turf and measured 6 metres (20 ft) wide and 3.5 metres (11.5 ft) high. This doesn't include the wall's ditches, berms and forts. The central section measured eight Roman feet wide (7.8 ft or 2.4 m) on a 10-foot (3.0 m) base. Some parts of this section of the wall survive to a height of 10 feet (3.0 m). The Wall stretched west from Segedunum (Wallsend) to the Solway Firth, ending near Bowness-on-Solway. Hadrian's Wall lies entirely within England.

The initial plan called for a ditch and wall with 80 small gated milecastle fortlets, one placed every Roman mile, holding a few dozen troops each, and pairs of evenly spaced intermediate turrets used for observation and signalling. Very few milecastles are actually located at exact Roman mile divisions; they can be up to 200 yards east or west because of landscape features or to improve signalling to the Stanegate forts to the south. Local limestone was used in the construction, except for the section to the west of Irthing where turf was used instead, since there were no useful outcrops nearby. Milecastles in this area were also built from timber and earth rather than stone, but turrets were always made from stone. The milecastles and turrets were of three different designs, depending on which legion built them: the Second, Sixth and Twentieth Legions were involved in the work. Construction was divided into lengths of about 5 miles (8 km). One group of each legion would excavate the foundations and build the milecastles and turrets and then other cohorts - not the citizen legionnaires - would follow with the wall construction.

Later, forts, such as the one at Birdoswald, were built along the Wall. After most of the forts had been added, the vallum (wide ditch and ramparts) was built on the southern side. The wall was thus part of a defensive system which, from north to south, included a row of forts 5-10 miles (16 km) north of the wall (used for scouting and intelligence), a glacis (gentle slope) and deep ditch, a berm (earth bank) with rows of pits and entanglements, the curtain wall, a military road and the vallum.

The wall was garrisoned by auxiliary (non-legionary) units of the army (non-citizens). Their numbers fluctuated throughout the occupation but may have been around 9,000 strong, including infantry and cavalry. The new forts could hold garrisons of 500 men, while cavalry units of 1,000 troops were stationed at either end. The total number of soldiers manning the early wall was probably greater than 10,000. Some of them came from distant parts of the Roman Empire such as Dacia (now Romania), Syria, and Belgica (Low Countries). They probably included the earliest African people in Britain. There were civilian villages (vicus) near garrisons. Some of the soldiers may have 'married' and integrated into the local community throughout the years.

In the late 4th century, barbarian invasions, economic decline, and military coups loosened the Empire's hold on Britain. By 410, the Roman administration and its legions were gone. The Wall eventually fell into ruins and it was a convenient source of recycled dressed stone for many local buildings until historical interest in the Wall developed in Victorian times and later. ATB 2011