Hadrian's Wall and its Trees

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Front cover: A sycamore at Carvoran (Magna).
Back cover: An alder grove near milecastle 24 by Mark B. Richards.

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To the memory of a fallen tree in Sycamore Gap

For Chester, Avery and Keira Breeze

May they continue to grow as strong as the successors of the Sycamore Gap Tree

Hadrian's Wall is a World Heritage Site

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A Note on Terminology

Hadrian's Wall has, over several centuries, acquired a language of its own. The very name of the Wall has changed over time. It appears to have been called the Picts' Wall in the medieval period. When scholars thought that the Wall had been built on the order of the Emperor Septimius Severus, it became known as Severus' Wall. In 1840, it was demonstrated that the Wall was actually built in the time of the Emperor Hadrian and so it became known as Hadrian's Wall. At the same time, it was often called The Roman Wall, and this phrase is still used in some circumstances, such as the title of the *Handbook to the Roman Wall*, the linear descendant of John Collingwood Bruce's *The Roman Wall*, first published in 1851, with its successor now in its 14th edition.

Behind the Wall, almost for its full length, is a great earthwork consisting of a ditch with mounds set back on each side, known as the Vallum since the time of the Venerable Bede who so named it in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, completed in 731. Its principal feature is the central ditch, so it should really be known as the Fossa, but it is too late to change the name now.

The Wall itself was called the *vallum*. This word appears on the Ilam Pan (facing page). Along the top of the vessel are the words RIGOREVALI AELI DRACONIS followed by the names of four forts in the western sector of the Wall. Unfortunately, the phrase lacks punctuation, so we have to guess at that. It has been suggested VALI and AELI go together and demonstrate that the name of the frontier was the *Vallum Aelium*, the Wall of Aelius, Aelius being Hadrian's family name. However, RIGORE is a technical surveying term and an alternative view is that Draco, the man who owned and probably commissioned the vessel, was a surveyor and if so he would almost certainly have been a legionary and therefore had two names, Aelius Draco.

'Wall' refers not just to the stone wall which we see today, but its predecessor in the western 31 Roman miles (50 km) of the frontier which was originally built of turf. Its replacement in stone started in the reign of Hadrian and continued for some time.

The military structures along Wall have their own names: forts, milecastles and turrets. 'Fort' is a modern word; the Romans would probably have called a fort on the Wall, a *castellum* or *castra*, the derivations of our place names Caerleon, Lancaster, and of course Chester/Chesters, so it is not surprising that many forts along the Wall have Chesters in their name, including Halton Chesters and Great Chesters.

A milecastle was given its name by John Horsley in 1732 because these small forts, that is, 'castles', occurred at every mile. The word 'turret' was introduced into Wall terminology from the Latin word for a tower, *turris*.

Unfortunately, the complications do not end there. Along the Cumbrian coast, south-westwards from Bowness-on-Solway, are 'milecastles' and 'turrets' but here they are called milefortlets (fortlet = a small fort) and towers.

A confusion could easily arise between the names of the roads along the Wall. The Roman road is called the Military Way, while the Military Road is the name used for that constructed in the years after the Jacobite Uprising of 1745-6.

All dates are AD/CE unless otherwise specified.

Preface

The cutting down of the tree in Sycamore Gap on the night of 27 to 28 September 2023 led archaeologists and colleagues on Hadrian's Wall to produce *Hadrian's Wall in our Time*, a compilation of their favourite places and objects on the frontier. Through that book we sought to give comfort to those who were mourning for the loss of their favourite tree by reminding readers that there have been iconic views of Hadrian's Wall before the tree in Sycamore Gap became famous, and that there will be other iconic views in the future.

Amongst the contributions for *Hadrian's Wall in our Time* there were, unsurprisingly, many about trees. This book, *Hadrian's Wall and its Trees,* follows naturally from the realisation that there are a lot of trees along Hadrian's Wall! There are, of course, many trees still standing along its line and thereby marking its course, but to these we can add the archaeological evidence for their predecessors and also paintings and drawings of trees created over the last 200 years. Trees also acquired an afterlife when their wood was refashioned to make objects used by the Romans. These ranged from needles to buildings, as well as elements of Hadrian's Wall itself. Many such items are discussed here by the archaeologists of Hadrian's Wall and those who help conserve it. Indeed, the conservation of wooden artefacts and of today's trees is a significant part of this book, as well as the history of woodlands in the Wall corridor.

David J. Breeze
Edinburgh

Foreword

Trees hold a unique place in the human psyche: they are landmarks, way markers, first signs of home on a long walk, or welcome places of respite. Often, they can be all of these.

For almost everyone, no matter how urban our existence, or how detached we feel from nature, trees will have played some part in our lives. Take a moment and think of one that comes to mind for you.

When I was young trees were things to climb, landmarks at which to meet, places to 'prog' fruit or gather chestnuts for upcoming conker competitions.

My abiding thought of trees, however, is of their constancy, of the knowledge that for veteran trees they were here before us and will (or should) be here when our human lifespan ends. Trees span more than several human lifetimes and because of this they carry the experience and accumulated knowledge of having lived through times we only read about in history books.

For this reason, I consider trees to be almost mythical. When I grew up in rural Ireland, pubs, churches, graveyards, rivers, lakes, GAA pitches, water standpipes and **trees** were the things which defined our places, we navigated by them.

A song I learned from the singing of my mother about our local townland, includes the line...

'And when I reach the chestnut tree my eyes with tears to fill, for I feel no pain, I'm home again in lovely Brackaville'.

My mother told us that the chestnut tree was used by priests to say mass in penal times. It was therefore a holy place. It was also a place of mystery, and my friend once told me his neighbour had seen a man with a hoofed feet and horns by the tree on a dark night. Perhaps the chestnut tree had a foot (or hoof) in both camps. The chestnut tree is now sadly gone, a natural death, so it can no longer testify to the past, but such references will exist in songs, in stories, in poems and in prose up and down the length and breadth of every country in the world which has trees, and their absence is most likely noted in those places where they have been removed or where the climate or soils simply can't sustain them.

When on 28 September 2023 we woke up to find that the famous tree at Sycamore Gap on Hadrian's Wall had been deliberately felled, the public display of feeling and emotion, whilst perhaps overwhelming, was not surprising, such is the connection with trees deep inside human beings. Sycamore Gap was and remains special to so many people, it holds so many memories of great days out with loved ones or of occasions to mark some of life's special or challenging times. Times that make us feel human, as only nature can. Sycamore Gap at that time was perhaps simply the lightning conductor for how much we value trees (or should value them). There have been other celebrated trees in the past, and there will be many more in the future, I hope, and from that thought I take great comfort – people do care.

On the morning after the felling of the tree, when I and others were being interviewed by the world's media, the one overwhelming feeling that I had was not one of anger that the tree had been lost, or anger towards those who had perpetrated such a horrible negative act. My feeling was immediately one of a desire to see a thousand, or thousands, of positive actions for nature, for heritage, for people and for places to fill the gap left by this one negative act. I consider this book to be such to be one such positive act and the trees profiled in the pages which follow are to be celebrated, to be cherished and to be loved by us all for their natural beauty, for the unique habitats they represent as part of natures rich tapestry, but above all for their constancy and the perspective they provide for us on role as humans on this planet.

Tony Gates

Chief Executive of Northumberland National Park Authority

Introduction

David J. Breeze and Mark Richards

Our aim in this compilation is to highlight the trees along Hadrian's Wall and its vicinity, one of which, until recently, stood in Sycamore Gap. Today, many trees still mark the line of the Wall, either singly or in a row. For long stretches a line of trees lies beside the Wall ditch as this was a ready source of water for trees, and in the spring white hawthorn blossom announces the location of the earthwork.

Many of the trees along the Wall are native to Britain. These include alder, ash, blackthorn, hawthorn, hazel, oak and pine, all of which are present on Hadrian's Wall. Rudyard Kipling recognised the antiquity of such trees, citing oak (below at Heavenfields), ash and thorn in the poem *Tree Song* in his collection of historical stories in *Puck of Pook's Hill*, in which he also used the leaves of those trees as a magical device to erase the memory of Dan and Una's talks with Puck. By way of contrast, the sycamore tree is a later introduction to Britain, possibly from France in about 1500.

The Romans did not inherit a landscape of dense forests, even though they frequently wrote about cutting their way through forests and crossing marshes. Agriculture had started in northern Britain 4000 years before the arrival of the Roman army. By about 500 BC the farmers of northern Britain had reduced the tree cover to about what it is today. The Roman army would have marched through a countryside not too dissimilar from today's landscape. Certainly there would have been no towns and cities, but there would have been hamlets and even villages, as well as farms and fields, all connected by tracks.

In Roman times, the predecessors of our modern trees provided a valuable resource for the soldiers of the Roman army, their dependants and the local people. Wood was used in a variety of ways in the construction of Hadrian's Wall, and not just for elements of the linear barrier itself but also of the forts, fortlets and towers along its line. It was also a component of roads, and even the thresholds of the gates of the fort at Carlisle were of wood. At milecastle 52 (Bankshead) on the Turf Wall, excavators in the 1930s revealed fragments of wood, stated to be oak, still adhering to the iron strapping of the south gate. Part of a building inscription carved into a wooden tablet has even been found, at milecastle 50 (High House) on the Turf Wall.

Wood (and coal) was burnt in fires to keep people warm and for cooking. Items used every day, such as buckets and toilet seats, were of wood. Furniture and boxes large and small were of wood. A visit to the museum at Vindolanda demonstrates the wide range of wooden objects used by the soldiers in the adjacent fort. Here the anaerobic conditions have led to the preservation of many wooden objects, which otherwise usually survive only in dry conditions such as deserts. As a result of the passage of time, and of the soil conditions, very many wooden objects have disappeared, including items of jewellery. Nevertheless, it is possible to offer some suggestions about what we have lost.

Hadrian's Wall does not now possess all the range of organic items that were in use by its inhabitants, but evidence by analogy from other Roman sites can expand or explain our material remains. For example, in this book Jacqui Huntley discusses the possibility of the existence of a pizza oven at Vindolanda. Pizzas are usually made of a special wheat called durum. No durum wheat has been found on Hadrian's Wall, but the fort at Bearsden on the Antonine Wall yielded traces surviving in a pottery vessel. Chaff would have been useful for starting fires for cooking, and a document found in Egypt records the delivery of a sack of chaff for fuel to the Roman fort at Dionysias (*Papyrus Fayum* 21).

The items found on Hadrian's Wall can also be used to help us understand life in other parts of the Roman empire. The prime example is the Vindolanda writing tablets. Until the discovery of the tablets 50 years ago archaeologists and ancient historians were cautious about using Roman military documents from the eastern provinces of the empire, such as Egypt and Syria, to illustrate life on the northern frontiers of the empire, owing to the more advanced civilisation and longevity of writing in these provinces. Now the tables are turned. Although many of the Vindolanda and the Carlisle writing tablets are similar to those found in the eastern provinces of the empire, and, of course, *vice versa*, they do contain some unique types of documents missing from collections elsewhere. The British documents, therefore, not only illuminate life on the north-western frontier, but their broad similarity with the eastern material allows that to be used with confidence to shed light on the activities of the Roman army across all the frontiers which it protected.

Indeed, several of the contributions point to the interlinked nature of the people living beside Hadrian's Wall with other provinces of the empire through trade and also the movement of both soldiers and civilians. Hence, there are contributions in this book from archaeologists across the North Sea, from the province of Lower Germany, whose history was intimately related to that of eastern Britain.

The contributions to this book are arranged in sections that reflect the history, life and usage of the trees of the Wall, as well as the measures taken to ensure their protection. It would be somewhat repetitive to produce a report on each single tree or group of trees along the Wall, no matter how magnificent they are. Some mark a fort, such as the single one standing on the plateau on which Benwell fort sits. There is a gnarled oak at Vindolanda (opposite). A tree at the corner of the fort at Carvoran tells the traveller heading eastwards from Birdoswald that they have reached the central crags sector of the Wall (pages 6–7). So many trees have a story to tell, and we hope that through the stories offered here we can encourage the readers of this book to look a little differently at the landscape as they explore Hadrian's Wall.

This is not a history of Hadrian's Wall: that can be found in the books listed in the bibliography at the end. Readers of this book will find that some of the contributors

differ in the interpretations they offer, particularly about the issue of whether there was a wall-walk or parapet along the top of the linear barrier. This is just one of the many questions about Hadrian's Wall which we find difficult to answer because the evidence has not survived through the centuries since its abandonment; the frequent use of the word 'perhaps' in many contributions emphasises this. Nevertheless, these uncertainties produce healthy debate about many aspects of this famous Roman frontier, and a thirst to learn more. Useful information can be derived from the smallest trench revealing details relating to the construction of the Wall to the major investigations at the fort and civil settlement at Vindolanda, which have shed so much light on life on the northern frontier in Britain and, by analogy, military life elsewhere in the Roman empire.

This book offers an eclectic collection of papers by archaeologists working on Hadrian's Wall. It is essentially a book to be dipped into rather than read at one go. Readers will observe that there is some repetition or overlap between a number of contributions, but these are simply a reminder of the interlocking nature of our evidence.

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