

Hadrian's wall and Antonine's wall - two remnants of the past



A photograph of a section of Hadrian's Wall¹

It is widely known that Roman roads were superbly made (at least in comparison to the roads made in this day and age) so that they can survive the journeys of Roman troops and carriages. This in turn allowed them to last much longer due to their planned durability and because of their architects and builders we now have relics of the past that remain in a sufficiently good condition for us to analyse and learn about the past through them. But the roads were not the only stone structure left behind by the Roman Empire and, at least in Britain, there are finer examples of the Roman influence on the Isles than roads - namely "The Walls".

One of the finest examples of how Roman Britain was would be Hadrian's Wall - a physical evidence of the Roman's presence on the British Isles. In this day and age Hadrian's Wall remains not only a memory of the past, of the conquest and rebellions as well as the enormous might of the Roman Empire, but also an attraction for tourists and history enthusiasts. As an artefact of the past Hadrian's Wall is listed as UNESCO World Heritage Site making it known worldwide as much as it is known locally. A quick search can bring multiple results in many different languages, further highlighting its

¹ Quisnovus, *A Section Of Hadrian's Wall*, [photograph], 2010, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Section_of_Hadrian%27s_Wall_1.jpg>[accessed 16 April 2023].

importance and impact it has on those wishing to learn more about the history of the Roman Empire.

The wall dates back to nearly the beginning of the era and last year 'celebrated' being 1900 years old - just like Roman roads, the quality of the structure allowed it to weather the forces of nature over long periods of time. Made of stone and secured in place with roman mortar Hadrian's Wall remains standing as intended presenting Roman's might for all to see, as was their intention (during the age of Roman Conquest building stone structures in the contested areas was a sign of might and power, intended to scare the locals in submission, as well as allowing for easier control of the area).

Hadrian's Wall, even though an artefact of the past in its own right, has a special meaning for the history and the debate over How Roman Britain really was - due to its nature and the preconceived usage Hadrian's Wall influenced the area surrounding it giving rise to garrisons, watch towers and other defensive structures standing watch over the 'definitive border' of the Roman Empire. Distributed over equal distances, watch structures allowed Romans to look after their contested territory with ease, it further provided shelter for the Roman Legions stationed in Britannia. An archeological dig in 1906 that went on for 9, previously unplanned years uncovered many Roman artefacts in the Roman site of Corbridge. This shows how Romans settled near to the Wall and made the surrounding area, as well as Britannia (south of Hadrian's Wall) their home. Various artefacts were found in the 56 acres area,² among them statues and various other objects, some of which can be easily assumed were used on a daily basis by the Romans.

The origin of the wall takes us back to the age of Roman conquests of Britain, the ones that failed and the one undertaken by Emperor Hadrian, whom the wall is named after. In the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D. multiple rulers of the Roman Empire attempted to conquer Britain to extend the reach and might of Rome. Hadrian was the first to build a wall to separate Britannica from the lands out of Roman's reach, over the period of 6 years Hadrian completed initial stages of his plan (the wall was later on further extended). Continuing the plan to spread the Roman reach, Hadrian's successor Antonius Pius, akin to his predecessor, built a wall, further up North, separating Britannica from Scotland - thus the now known Antonine Wall was built and contrary to the 73 miles (80 roman miles) Hadrian Wall, Antonine's Wall was only 37 miles long, between the River Forth and River Clyde. The Antonine wall was later on 'abandoned in favour of Hadrian's Wall, which continued in use nearly until the end of Roman rule in Britain (410).'³ This further proves how important, valuable and cemented in the culture the first Wall was for Romans.

To further understand the meaning behind the Wall an understanding of its namesake emperor is a necessity. Emperor Hadrian born 24th of January 76 CE and died on the 10th of July, 138, was one of the Five Good Emperors.⁴ He succeeded where others

²English Heritage, *Extraordinary Explorations At Corbridge*, N.A. <<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/corbridge-roman-town-hadrians-wall/history-and-stories/extraordinary-explorations-at-corbridge/>> [accessed 11 April 2023].

³ David J Breeze, *Hadrian's Wall*, 2022, <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hadrians-Wall>>[accessed 11 April 2023].

⁴ G.W. Bowersock, *Hadrian*, 2023, <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hadrian>>[accessed 11 April 2023].

failed and managed to consolidate the enormous Roman Empire and its might. Hadrian earned his position by climbing the Roman ranks quite conventionally, albeit one could argue that his familial connection later had impact on his ability to do so, as upon his father's death he was left in the care of his Trajan, who later on was named the successor to Emperor Nerva. Hadrian it seems did not spend many years in Rome itself, he preferred to travel and made it his quest to travel from the east to west of the empire, including to Britain, where he decided and initiated the building process of the Wall named after him. The wall itself could further be understood and Hadrian's passion for art and structures, as the Wall was not the only structure he ordered to be erected. Among other constructions we can list the temple of Olympian Zeus, which most likely influenced his spiritual side and made him give himself more to the Greek system of beliefs. It is said that Hadrian was capable of climbing a mountain, just to watch a Sunrise.⁵ With the way Hadrian approached various projects, it was no surprise that the idea of building a great wall dividing an Isle, almost like a Great Wall of China, was born in his mind.

Stretching between Wallsend (River Tyne) to Bowness-on-Solway Hadrian's 73 miles long Wall nearly connects the west and east of Britain. According to sources, the distance between each Roman structure was equal.

*At every 1/3 Roman mile there was a tower, and at every mile a fortlet (milefortlet, or milecastle) containing a gate through the wall, presumably surmounted by a tower, and one or two barrack-blocks. Before this scheme was completed, forts were built on the wall line at roughly 7-mile intervals and an earthwork, known as the vallum, dug behind the wall and the forts. Probably at this stage the stone wall was narrowed from 10 Roman feet wide to about 8 feet. The fortlets, towers, and forts continued for at least 26 miles (42 km) beyond Bowness southward down the Cumbrian coast.*⁶

This kind of structuring and distancing allowed Romans to easily defend their border if needed, it, as mentioned before, provided safety for them as well as made a loud statement to the locals, demanding their attention and respect, clearly saying that no amount of revolt will force Romans to retreat. This of course was unsuccessful in a long run, but allowed Romans to leave a valuable sign of their presence for those that came after them.

As mentioned before, Hadrian's Wall was not the only one to leave an impact on Britain. Up north from the Hadrian's Wall lived the tribes of Caledones, which the Romans failed to conquer and called, quite unsurprisingly, the barbarians (Keltoi). Whatever the reasons behind this decision may be, in 142 AD, during the reign of the Emperor Antoninus Pius and by his order, the soldiers of the empire advanced north of Hadrian's Wall, and about a year after that decision a new wall was built, a little bit different in structure and it's might. 'Sixteen forts—built in two stages—are known along the wall, and fortlets lay between many of these. All were connected by a road, the Military Way. An aerial survey has revealed 20 camps used by the soldiers who built the wall.'⁷ Albeit the second wall was eventually deemed as worth abandoning around 160 AD and the soldiers were ordered to

⁵ G.W Bowersock, *Hadrian*.

⁶ David J Breeze, *Hadrian's Wall*

⁷ David J Breeze, *Antonine Wall*, 2023, <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Antonine-Wall>>[accessed 11 April 2023].

return to their “Hadranic” stations. Whilst talking about the Antonine Wall another relics of the past come to mind and may possibly be of more importance as they allow us to learn about the past from the information embedded in the stone by the Legionaries of the II,, VI and XX, who were responsible for the construction of the second wall. It is their meticulous records on “distance slabs” allows us to not only learn the exact measurements, distances in-between, but also included friezes describing and detailing the Roman’s campaign against the barbarians they so heatedly despised - the Caledones up north from the Walls.

The very fact that there is close to 40 years difference between the moment when the works started on Hadrian Wall to the moment when Antonine Wall was abandoned and the soldiers returned to their previous post, makes it very vivid as to how truly Roman Britain was. The occupation of territories, however short it would be, tends to irrevocably change the course of history, affect tradition, culture and the very future of the area itself. Various towns in the United Kingdom that we can currently visit are yet another example of just that, London, Leicester, Leamington Spa. All of these contain roman structures in their vicinity, quite often in the form of some public bath houses, but also the shape and form buildings take in the centre of these towns and cities. All of them are located south of either Antonine or Hadrian’s Walls and show us how Roman traditions and influences prospered, secured by the might of at least one wall.

The greatest impact the Walls had would be on the areas immediately surrounding them, more so in the case of Hadrian’s Wall, especially when we take into account how well preserved it currently is and how much of it remains. One such example would be a Maryport in Cumbria, where in the beginning of the 20th century archaeological excavations took place resulting in many important relics being discovered. Most of them were connected to the garrison life of Romans soldiers and allow us to form an idea of what sort of life style they had, how their everyday life looked. The presence of board games among the archaeological finds proves that the soldiers had sufficient amount of free time, sufficient amount of people and a peaceful enough mindset to play them. This gives us an idea of how the Roman invasion looked like as we do not truly know whether Britons continued to rebel against their Roman oppressors past Hadrian’s intervention and the wall’s construction, just as they did prior to that c.60 AD when Queen Boudicca led a revolt against the empire after the passing of her husband, who in his effort and willingness to protect their family (he had no male heir, just daughters), left them his wealth whilst giving a portion to the Emperor Nero. This of course did not secure the safety for his family, but it shows that 60 years prior to the construction to the wall and nearly a century before the soldiers returned from the Antonine Wall to Hadrian Wall the Roman roots were already deep within the Britons Soil, growing deep and breaking the ground apart, slowly preparing it for further steps of the invasion. This of course is but one example of the might of Briton’s spirit as it is said that Boudicca’s forces decimated the 9th Legion, killing around 70000 people. This may very well has later on pushed Emperor Hadrian to build a wall, give people a physical symbol of where the Empire stands and where it ends, preventing any uncertainty, at least in his mind. By building a wall he has also contained the area, ensuring that the stationing soldiers

are appropriately spread out to be able to manage any risk thrown at them and potentially prevent what happened to the 9th Legion from happening to the rest of his forces.

What we do know is what we are left with. Either due to the methods and structures utilised when building Antonine Wall or due to ferocity of the Caledones, there is not much left of the Wall in this day and age, people tend to favour the much better preserved Hadrian's Wall to use as their compass of the past. When it comes to the Hadrian's Wall it was ravaged by time, forces of nature and its neighbours eagerness to build their own houses. For this reason, at a much later date, parts of the wall were disassembled to either procure the stones or to create roads, allowing for a free and convenient travel. This caused the wall to degenerate over time, potentially losing some crucial information that could give us even more insight to How Roman Britain really was. Yet even after that, much of the initial wall remains, to this day and age loudly and proudly marking the "definitive border of the Roman Empire " as Hadrian intended.

When we navigate through the period of the Roman influence on Britain we may come across many different examples, from bath houses, fountains, pieces of architecture, records of Roman place-names or even inscriptions confirming not only the connection to the Empire or cooperation, but outright ownership of the area.

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