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Scotland and Northern England (S26A-4)

Newcastle and the Roman Frontier

Although this was primarily a Scotland trip, Newcastle upon Tyne, England was on my list of places to visit because of nearby Roman frontier sites like Hadrian's Wall.

London was founded by the Romans, and over several visits to the city I was surprised by how much of Roman London survives in and under the modern city. On train day trips out of London to Bath, Colchester and St. Albans, I learned a lot more about Roman Britain.

I was already aware of Hadrian's Wall across northern England, which marked the northwest boundary of the Roman Empire for many years, and then learned about the Antonine Wall across Scotland that the Romans used during a few temporary pushes into Scotland. There are a number of surviving Hadrian's Wall-related sites in the Newcastle area. Because the Antonine Wall was mostly constructed with dirt and timbers, much less of it survives today, but there are a few related sites in Bearsden, Scotland, near Glasgow. Both are part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site – Frontiers of the Roman Empire.

I passed through Newcastle in 2003 while taking a train from London to Edinburgh, and I also became a bit familiar with the look of the city because *Vera*, a favorite British police TV drama, was filmed on location there. But I hadn't been to Newcastle before. Because Newcastle was only about 2 ½ hours by train from Glasgow, I added a four-night stay to this trip's itinerary.

Without a car, I hoped to find a small group tour to visit Hadrian's Wall sites outside of Newcastle. But although there were plenty of city walk, pub visit and *Vera* filming locations tours to choose from, my usual site for booking tours didn't have any. I did find a private group tour provider, though – a bit pricy since I didn't have a group to split the cost with, but my guide had studied Roman Britain in college and was able to provide a great education with our sightseeing.

I got to Newcastle early in the afternoon, and my hotel let me check in early, so I was able to start my Newcastle sightseeing right away. I set off for Newcastle Castle.

Newcastle Castle's Castle Keep was built starting in the 1170s, replacing a wooden castle built by the son of William the Conqueror in 1080. The Black Gate was added around 1250. Additional protections were added later, including stone walls that had enclosed the town that had developed around the castle. But as the castle later became unnecessary, it fell into ruins. Today, the restored Black Gate and Castle Keep along with a bit of castle wall are all that remain.



Newcastle Castle's Black Gate. The Black Gate includes the entrance, ticketing and the Castle Garth Museum that features information about the castle and artifacts found at the site.



Castle artifacts dating back to the 1600s and 1700s on display in the Castle Garth Museum



The Castle Keep, as seen from the Newcastle train station. The keep has been nicely restored for exploring, with information about its various rooms, an exhibit of archaeological finds at the site, and rooftop access that offered nice views of central Newcastle.



The keep's well room. Castles needed working wells inside the castle walls to provide water when the castle was under siege (Scotland's Dumbarton Rock fell to the Vikings in 870AD because after a four-month siege, they ran out of water). This well was 99 feet deep, and still has water at the bottom.



Climb the keep's 99 stairs to see the view from the top, including the River Tyne and the city's famous bridges that routinely appeared in *Vera*

Central Newcastle is about ten miles upstream from the mouth of the Tyne. But given the width and depth of the river, this was the first spot where the Romans were able to build a bridge across the Tyne, which they did in the second century. They built Pons Aelius, a Roman fort, at Hadrian's wall at the site of the bridge to help protect the bridge.



Newcastle Castle was built on top of the fort, and none of the fort is visible today, although outlines of its walls are marked with cobblestones in the plaza at Newcastle Castle Keep.



Roman Pons Aelius archaeological finds are displayed in a Castle Keep exhibit.



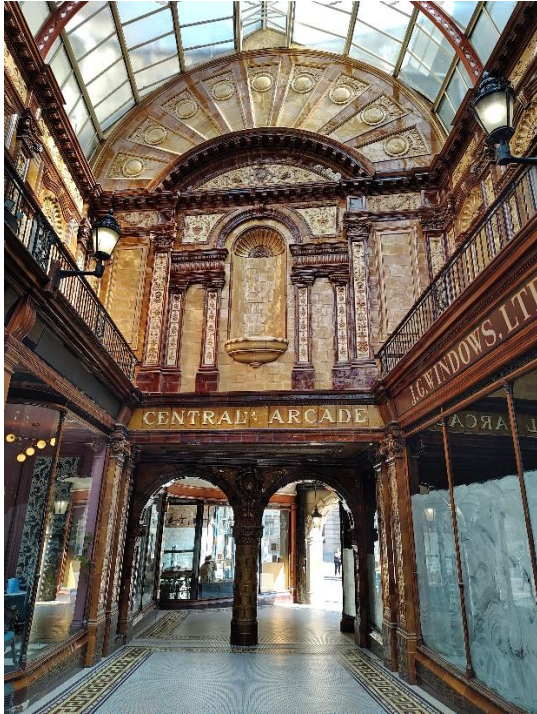
Newcastle eventually outgrew the castle and its walls. Newcastle's town wall was built starting in about 1265, and did not include the castle. These fortifications eventually eliminated the need for the castle for defensive purposes. The historic center of today's Newcastle was generally surrounded by these city walls, and is now known as Grainger Town, named for a Richard Grainger who redeveloped parts of it in the 1800s. Only portions of the old city walls survive today. I took a walk along part of the wall and then through the historic center.



Blackfriars Medieval Friary, once part of a larger complex, dates back to the 13th century.



Earl Grey Square. Grey's Monument dominates Earl Grey Square. And, yes, this is Charles Grey, 2nd Earl Grey and one-time British prime minister, of Earl Grey tea fame. According to the family, the tea was blended with bergamot to offset the taste of mineral lime in the water at their home at Howick Hall. At least according to a sign at the monument, as there is some dispute over the tea's origins.



Central Arcade is a beautiful old-style shopping arcade, an early type of shopping mall. But while central Grainger Town seemed to have plenty of businesses, storefronts in the arcade were mostly empty.



Grainger Market – closer in design and content to Seattle’s Pike Place Market – fared somewhat better as it is home to about 100 businesses, but most of the shopping action I saw seemed to be taking place elsewhere.



Cathedral Church of St. Nicholas as seen from the Castle Keep



Also known as Newcastle Cathedral, the church was founded in 1091, although the current building dates back to the 1300s. Scottish Protestant reformer John Knox once served as its minister. Its spire was used to guide sailors navigating the River Tyne.

Quayside is an areas along the banks of the River Tyne. It was historically an industrial area with busy commercial docks, but after World War II, the area became run down and crime-ridden. Redevelopment since then has brought in restaurants, nightlife, housing and

government offices, and it is now considered one of Newcastle's draws. I headed down to explore Quayside a bit and cross the Gateshead Millennium Bridge to Gateshead, the town across the river from Newcastle.



Quayside



Quayside. The Swing Bridge is one of two bridges near water level where pedestrians can cross between Newcastle and Gateshead. It is located at the site of the Old Tyne Bridges of 1270 and 1781, and it is believed to be the site of the original Roman Pons Aelius bridge. A key feature of the bridge is that it can rotate, allowing ships to move upstream.



Quayside. Tyne Bridge, and beyond that is Gateshead's The Glasshouse International Centre for Music.



View from Gateshead across the river towards Quayside

Newcastle isn't generally regarded as a tourist destination. In the city center, the castle, Grainger Town and Quayside were pretty much it as far as city sightseeing goes. These could all be seen in an easy day.

An excellent addition to the itinerary, though, involved heading a bit north to the campus of Newcastle University and its Great North Museum: Hancock, and spending a half-day there. In many ways, it was a general-purpose museum with traditional exhibits of Egyptian, Greek and Roman artifacts and the like, but it also had excellent exhibits on Hadrian's Wall and early cultures in what is now the U.K.



Roman kitchen and other everyday items found at sites along Hadrian's Wall



The color was projected on these carved stone altars. Because traces of paint can routinely be found, it is believed that Roman altars, grave markers, temples, mile markers and such were often initially brightly painted, only for the color to fade over the centuries.



New Stone Age artifacts found in the region around Newcastle date back about 5000 years.



Anglo-Saxon artifacts

Of course, my primary reason for visiting Newcastle was to see Hadrian's Wall. My tour was to start at Pons Aelius at Newcastle Castle and then head to some out-of-town sites. But because I saw Pons Aelius on my own, we skipped going back there, using the time saved for a longer visit at our final stop.

Roman Emperor Hadrian ordered the construction of a defensive fortification across the northwest boundary of the Roman Empire in today's England. Started in 122AD, the resulting wall ran for 73 miles from the Tyne River in the east to Solway Firth in the west. The wall stood about 12 feet high and was about 8-10 feet thick. It was fronted on the north by a deep V-shaped ditch. A deep ditch called the vallum was built along the south side of the wall, although there is some evidence that the vallum (or at least parts of it) predates the wall. A Roman military road followed the back of the wall.

It took about six years to build the wall. About 60% of it was constructed with stone, with the rest originally being a turf wall, although the turf wall was eventually replaced with a stone wall. In some places, the foundation was wider than the actual walls built on them, presumably to save construction resources.

Along its route, a number of forts and milecastles were built, the former manned by about 600 men and the latter operated by between 12 and 20 men. Civilian villages often developed near the forts. Although soldiers generally had 25-year contracts with the Roman army and could not marry, they often had significant others and children in these villages. The villages were also populated by merchants serving the fort. There appeared to be little trade across the wall, however, given the great reduction of Roman artifacts found to the north.



A segment of Hadrian's Wall at the village of Heddon-on-the-Wall.

Most surviving segments of the wall, as you can see at Heddon-on-the-Wall, have been stabilized. The unmowed grass to the left grows in a swale that once was the deep V-shaped

ditch mentioned above. After the Romans left, many stones from the wall were taken and used elsewhere. Here in Heddon-on-the-Wall village, St. Andrew's Church was built in about 650AD, with much of its construction material coming from the wall.



Hadrian's Wall climb Steel Rig in Northumberland National Park



Hadrian's Wall in Northumberland National Park

Roman Vindolanda Fort and Museum preserves the ruins of Vindolanda, a Roman fort near Hadrian's Wall that actually predates the wall. The site features extensive ruins, an ongoing archaeological dig and a museum that displays artifacts found at the site.



Roman bathhouse in the foreground, the village to the right, and the walled fort across the grassy strip that runs from left to right across the picture. The quarry where much of the rock came from is to the right on top of the hill in the distance.



A village house. Houses generally were narrow but deep, because their street frontage was a factor in their taxes. Archaeology digs in village houses found evidence of spinning or weaving or certain kinds of shops.



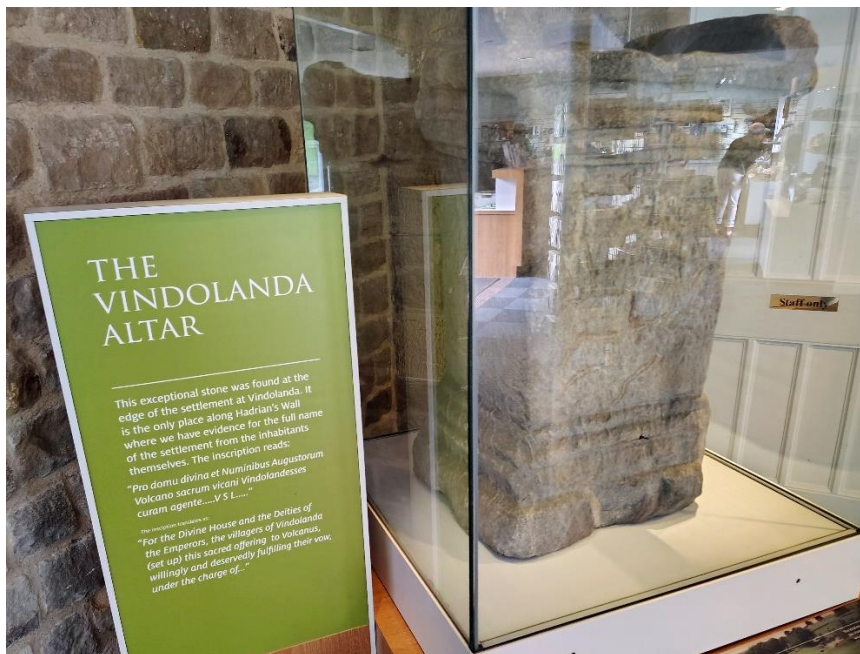
The road enters the fort



Heated air could be circulated under floors to help heat the buildings. When you see the ruins, imagine the amount of labor it took to cut and haul all these rocks from the hilltop quarry to the Vindolanda site, and then build all the walls and structures here.



Volunteers join seasonal archaeological digs at Vindolanda and continue to unearth new finds. There is much to see at Vindolanda, but there is still a lot at the site that remains unexcavated.



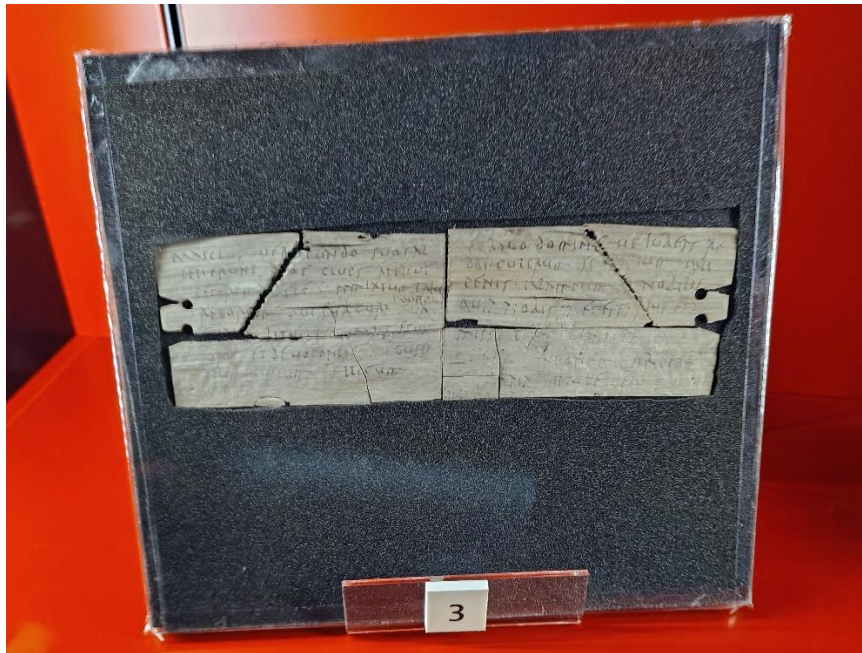
The inscription on this altar on display in the museum provides the name of the site that its inhabitants used. Because of this find, Vindolanda is the only site along Hadrian's Wall where we know its actual name.



Soldiers were paid twice a year. This was found at a headquarters building where they believe the soldiers were paid. The dips in the top of the stone? From centuries of soldiers laying their arms on it as they held them out to collect their pay.



Because of low oxygen levels in the soil around the site, soft goods like wood, cloth and leather were more likely to survive over the centuries. Numerous leather shoes and other items have been unearthed at Vindolanda archaeological digs.



The low oxygen also helped preserve these – thin pieces of wood that inhabitants wrote letters and messages on. Everything from work-related information to a birthday party invitation. At the time of their discovery, writings at Vindolanda were the oldest handwritten messages discovered in the U.K., although some earlier examples have since been found in London.

After Hadrian's death in 138AD, Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius tried to expand the frontier further north, essentially abandoning Hadrian's Wall as he pushed into present-day Scotland. There he ordered the construction of a wall that covered the 40-mile stretch of land between the Firth of Forth to the east and the Firth of Clyde to the west. This was an earthen and timber wall known as the Antonine Wall, built in about 142. But Antoninus was unable to conquer the area's tribes. His successor Marcus Aurelius withdrew from the Antonine Wall back to Hadrian's Wall in 164. Forty years later, Emperor Septimius Severus made another attempt to extend the frontier northward and briefly reoccupied the Antonine Wall, but this effort failed, and Rome once again withdrew to Hadrian's Wall.

I couldn't find much information about visiting Antonine Wall sites, but there were some sites within a reasonable walk from the Bearsden train station. I made Bearsden the destination of one of my planned train day trips out of Glasgow.



There wasn't much to see at the site of the Bearsden Roman Fort. After it was partially excavated, it was reburied to protect it over time until more advanced archaeological techniques are available – actually a common practice in archaeology.



Communal bathing was an important part of Roman culture. Bathhouses were built near the forts, including this bathhouse near the Bearsden fort. Although the street here follows the route of the old Roman road, no traces of the Antonine Wall itself survive at this location.

The decline of the Roman Empire in the late 300s led to the end of Roman rule of Britain by about 410, leaving the walls, forts and milecastles to be used by local leaders or fall to ruin.

For my last full day in Newcastle, I checked out some of the towns along the River Tyne east of Newcastle, starting with the appropriately named Wallsend. Wallsend marks the eastern end of Hadrian's Wall. Segedunum Roman Fort, Baths and Museum there protects the site of the fort at the end of the wall and has a nice museum featuring artifacts found at the site.



After excavation, much of the site has been reburied, although outlines of the fort's buildings are marked. This is the view of the site from the top of the museum.

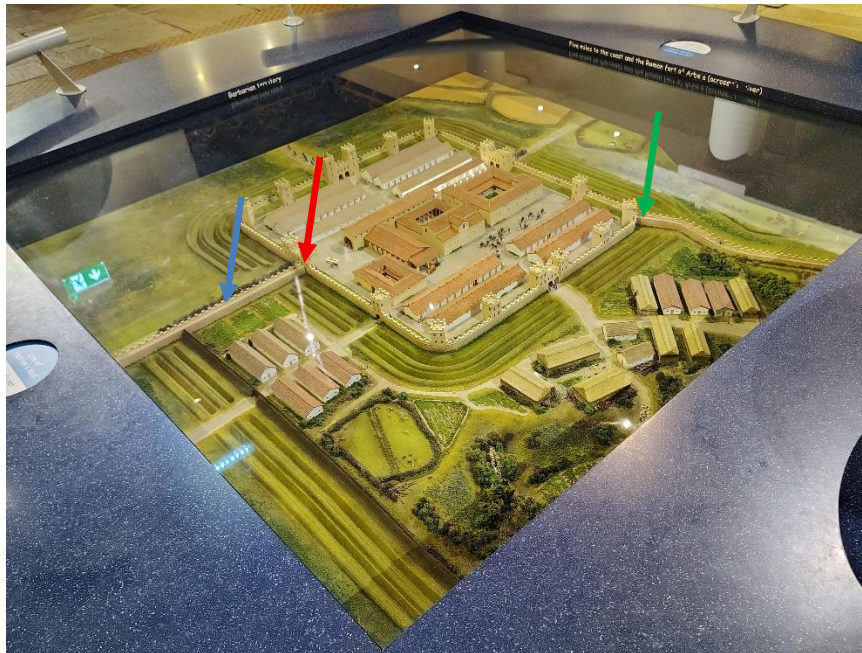
- The red arrow marks where Hadrian's Wall connected to the fort.
- The blue arrow marks where Hadrian's Wall continued towards the west.
- The green arrow marks where the branch wall connected to the fort and then headed downhill towards the River Tyne.
- The yellow arrow marks a reconstruction of a Roman bathhouse, although it was closed at the time of my visit.



Little survives of the branch wall due to centuries of riverfront development and redevelopment.



Outlines of the fort buildings and information markers give visitors some sense of the fort, although it helped that I saw Vindolanda the day before. The forts along the wall had similar layouts.



What the archaeological evidence suggests that the fort at Segedunum looked like



A pair of Roman fort latrine toilet seats on display in the museum. Just as baths were communal, so were toilets. Modesty was not a part of a Roman soldier's life on the frontier.



Non-citizens could gain Roman citizenship through 25 years of military service. When a soldier was granted citizenship, he received one of these, a *diploma* made of brass inscribed with information about his being granted citizenship that served as evidence of that citizenship.



Gameboards and game pieces found at the site.

With visits to Segedunum, Pons Aelius, Heddon-on-the-Wall, Northumberland National Park, Vindolanda and Bearsden sites, museums at Segedunum, Newcastle Castle and Vindolanda sites, the Great North Museum: Hancock in Newcastle and the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow, I got a very nice introduction to the U.K.'s Roman frontier sites on this trip.

After finishing up in Wallsend, I continued east to North Shields where I walked from the Metro station to the Tyne riverfront at Fish Quay. Fish Quay serves local fishermen with docks for their boats and markets to sell their catches.



The docks at Fish Quay. *Vera* fans will recognize the area around Fish Quay from the opening episode of the series, as this is where the ashes of Vera's father were spread.



Restaurants and pubs line Fish Quay. Although it draws a fair number of visitors, it's nothing like the crowds at San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf.



There's plenty of fresh seafood available at Fish Quay, with a sizable helping of fish & chips a popular choice.



The sculpture *Fiddlers Green* serves as a memorial to those fishermen lost at sea.

From here, I walked along the England Coast Path to the village of Tynemouth as it followed the bank of the River Tyne to where it meets the North Sea.



Where the Tyne meets the sea. On the left is North Pier that leads out to a lighthouse.



The ruins of the Tynemouth Priory and Castle. Originally established in the 7th century, Vikings destroyed it in 875. It was reestablished in the 11th century. Three medieval kings were buried here, including Malcolm III, King of Scotland, although his body was later reburied at Dunfermline Abbey in Scotland.



Tynemouth Beach and the Tynemouth North Sea waterfront, from the priory grounds



Looking along the North Sea coast north towards the village of Whitley Bay

This wrapped up my Newcastle area sightseeing. From here, I walked to Tynemouth's Metro station and returned to Newcastle.