

Verses from **The Roman Wall** by Thomas Doubleday, 1822

Where yonder reaching hill slopes boldly down,
Far stretching eastward, with a long decline,
Stand where the cottages the summit crown,
And mark it cut with many a crossing line
Of lane and hedgerow; on the right the Tyne
Spreads himself, glittering, in the morning ray;
There many a midnight fire is seen to shine,
And may a dusky vessel plough her way,
Where once Rome's burnish'd prows and Denmark's Sea-Kings lay.

Here plant thy foot, where many a foot hath trod,
Whose scarce-known home was o'er the southern wave,
And sit thee down; on no ignoble sod,
Green from the ashes of the great and brave;
Here stretch'd that chain which nations could enslave,
The least injurious token of their thrall,
Which, if it help'd to humble, help'd to save;
This shapeless mound thou know'st not what to call,
Was a world's wonder once — This is the Roman Wall.



River North Tyne and bridge abutment at Chesters.
© TOTF Archive.

This leaflet is one of a series covering the length of Hadrian's Wall. They were inspired by the **Tales of the Frontier** project undertaken by Durham University. We hope they encourage you to visit new locations and to explore the Wall and its influence on people and places through history.

To view and download other leaflets in the series and an accompanying booklet, or to find out more about **Tales of the Frontier** please visit www.talesofthefrontier.org

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Timeline

- 2000
 - 'Little Man' set up on village green
 - 'Little Man' found at Waters Meet
 - Robert Forster writes his imaginary tour
 - Robert Scott walks to church without crutches
 - Silver platter found by Isabel Cutter
- 1500
 - Dissolution of the Monasteries by Henry VIII
 - Pele Tower built at Corbridge using Roman stones
- 1000
 - Norman Conquest
 - Bede's 'Ecclesiastical History of the English People'
 - Roman stone re-used to build churches at Hexham and Corbridge
- 500
 - End of Roman occupation
 - Hadrian's Wall built
 - Coria founded
 - Roman conquest of Britain begins
- AD 1

Links:

Hadrian's Wall Country: www.visithadrianswall.co.uk
Hadrian's Wall Path: www.nationaltrail.co.uk/hadrians-wall-path
Hexham Abbey: www.hexhamabbey.org.uk/heritage/
Corbridge Roman Town: english-heritage.org.uk/corbridge

Cover image: Tooled stones at Corbridge. © TOTF Archive

Tales of the Frontier

People, places, past and present
around HEXHAM & CORBRIDGE



No. 7 The Tyne Valley: Old Stones and New Faith

Just to the south of Hadrian's Wall, in the valley of the River Tyne, the towns of Hexham and Corbridge once lay at the heart of frontier country. The Roman fort and settlement at Corbridge provided a ready source of masonry for medieval builders - dressed and carved blocks were found in abundance. The stones shaped the appearance of early churches, creating a very Roman-looking landscape long after the Empire. More Roman stones are found north of the Tyne: a mysterious figure on a village green, and an odd assortment of carvings in a church of miracles...

Come and explore the Roman stones, meet the characters and read their stories in the Tyne Valley



CORIA

This most northerly town in the Roman Empire lay at the junction of Stanegate (east-west) and Dere Street (north-south), and on a crossing of the River Tyne.



© English Heritage. Granaries at Coria.

The town was known by various names – eg Corstopitum and Coriosopitum, but in the Vindolanda writing tablets it is called Coria. The first fort was built in the AD 70s or 80s. When Hadrian's Wall was built it became a fortified grain distribution point, and a civilian settlement grew.

Robert Forster, who directed excavations at Corbridge from 1907 to 1914, wrote an imaginary 'Second Century Tour' of the Wall:

"There are some two and a quarter million cubic feet of masonry in sight, and a quarter of a million square brown facing-stones...The northern view of the Wall is grimmer and more impressive: except for its regularity, one might imagine it to be a long line of sandstone cliffs,—a rock-bound coast, ready to combat any sea of northern rebellion that may try to encroach upon the fertile soil of a Roman province."

The tombstone of Flavinus



Flavinus by Mike Quinn / CC-BY-SA-2.0.

The stone was discovered in the foundations of the cloister at Hexham Abbey in 1881. It probably came from the army cemetery near Corbridge where the Petrian Cavalry from Gaul was based.

"To the spirits of the departed and to Flavinus, a trooper of the Petrian Wing, standard-bearer in the turma of Candidus, twenty five years old with seven years service, here [he] lies"

Flavinus had a single Roman name, rather than a Gaulish one (like 'Asterix'), or three names like a Roman citizen. The torque around his neck suggests he may have been important among his own people. He is shown wearing parade armour, including a plumed helmet, and carries a long spatha, the cavalryman's sword. His horse has an elaborate harness with bronze discs. These details would have been painted in vivid colours when the memorial was first made. Flavinus rides triumphantly over the wild, naked, barbarian, booting his cowering enemy in the rear!

The 'Little Man' of Acomb

Found in 1970 at Waters Meet, where the North and South Tyne Rivers converge, this carved sandstone figure is something of a mystery. Believed to be of Romano-British origin, the stone represents a rare, previously unrecorded style. The figure, possibly 'Hercules', carries a club in right hand. The carving was kept in Acomb House for 30 years, then spent 5 years in a barn. It now stands just off the bridleway at the edge of the village.



Acomb carving.
© Stan Beckensall.



© Trustees of the British Museum.

Treasure in the Tyne

This Roman silver platter was found by nine-year old Isabel Cutter whilst she gathered sticks on the north side of the River Tyne just below the bridge at Corbridge in February 1735. It is now in the British Museum.

A 'Roman' medieval landscape

"This was a recognizably Roman landscape with a comparable range of monuments—including stone bridges, temples, and the large mausoleum at Corbridge—to those of Italy and southern Gaul. St Wilfrid, bishop of Hexham, will have seen such structures during his visits to the continent and clearly drew upon these Roman ruins when he arranged for the construction of his new monastery at Hexham in the 670s."

from 'Hadrian's Wall. A Life' by Richard Hingley, 2012

St John Lee Church

The church, founded in the 10th century, is dedicated to St John of Beverley who became Bishop of Hexham in AD 685. It may have been built on the site of a private chapel referred to by the historian, Bede, as John's place of the retreat. St John was known as a worker of miracles, and one strange story suggests that his power may still be effective.

In 1888 WW Tomlinson recorded the tale of a remarkable marriage, celebrated in 1765. Bridegroom Robert Scott, was a Northumbrian piper who had used crutches for 26 of his 90 years. His bride, Jean Middlemas, was only 25. On his wedding day, Scott threw away his crutches and walked from the village of Wall to the church!

The Oakwood Stone, found nearby in the 1970s is an example of the 'cup and ring' marked stones found across northern Britain, and is likely to have covered a prehistoric burial. It now sits between the font and a Roman altar, perhaps uniting the spirits of prehistoric, Roman, and Saxon sculptors.

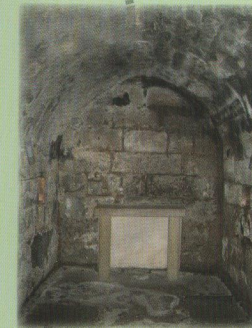


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Hexham Abbey

Queen Etheldreda granted lands at Hexham to Wilfrid, Bishop of York in around AD 674. The Saxon crypt and apse of his Benedictine abbey still remain.

Wilfrid learnt about Christianity during stays in Gaul and Rome. Returning to Northumbria he was keen to build stone churches like those he had seen. A supply of stone lay just 3 miles away at Corbridge. Almost every stone in the crypt is Roman. Some have lewis holes, slots used by Roman engineers to hoist the blocks into place. Others have diamond patterns, designed to hold plaster. Several have decorative patterns (see cover), perhaps from a fine house that kept its roof until Wilfrid's builders recycled it.



The crypt by Mike Quinn / CC-BY-SA-2.0.

The crypt below Hexham Abbey

Wilfrid perhaps brought back from Rome some memento of his favourite saint. To house his relic, he created an underground chamber directly below the high altar of the church. He may have been influenced by the catacombs at Rome; passages run north and south of the central shrine and its antechamber. One seems to have admitted pilgrims; the other was for monks.

The relics have long since vanished, and the plaster and paintings have gone from the walls. But something remains of the magic created in the very earliest days of English Christianity.



Roman stones at St Andrew's © TOTF Archive

St Andrews, Corbridge

Wilfrid sent his monks to build a second church at Corbridge. Remains of this building can be seen in the Roman archway at the base of the tower, but it has been radically altered, often to deal with various marauders through the centuries.

Nearby is a fortified pele tower built in around 1300 from more Roman stones to provide a refuge from Border Reivers. It was once used as a fortified vicarage.

