

**Anonymous Poem** from Belgravia magazine, 1876.

Not one o'er which the heart could say  
    'These Romans were of kindred clay.'  
Yes one! I found a broken tile —  
    Among the rest 'twas little worth;  
It could not tell the name or style  
    Of any god in heaven or earth;  
It did not in the least bring home  
    The might or majesty of Rome.  
But on its unpretending face,  
    Of greater price than virgin gold,  
Some childish hand had striven to trace  
    The semblance of a warrior bold.  
Ye guardian powers! Shield them well  
    When all the shudd'ring banks of the Tyne  
Give back the Caledonian yell,  
    And 'gainst the calm-eyed Roman line  
Wave behind wave, tumultuous roar  
    The torrents of Barbarian War.



'The semblance of a warrior bold'.  
Engraved stone at Chesters Museum  
© EH and the Trustees of the  
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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.

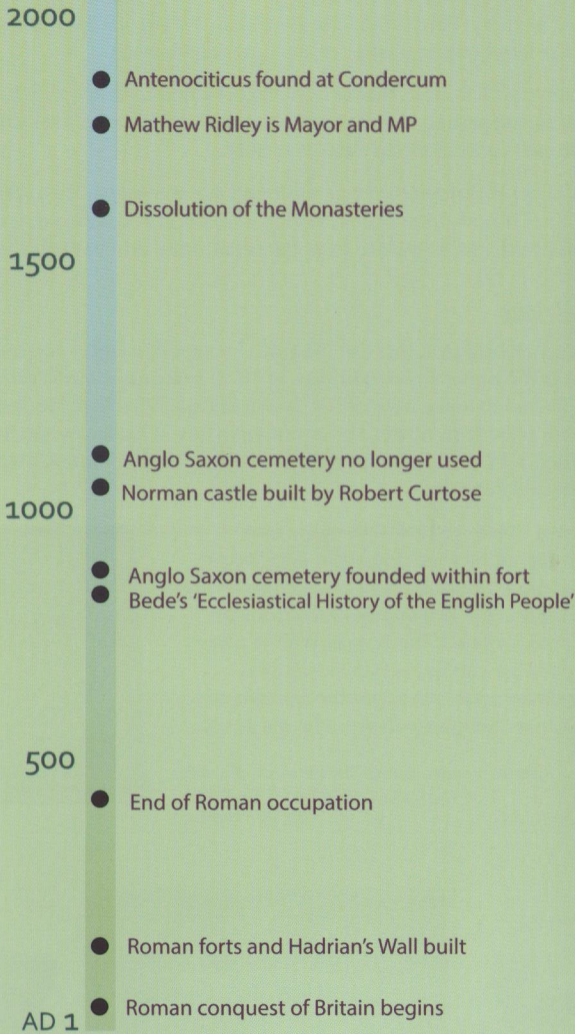
To view and download other leaflets in the series and an accompanying booklet, or to find out more about

**Tales of the Frontier** please visit

**[www.talesofthefrontier.org](http://www.talesofthefrontier.org)**

This work was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council with support from Tyne & Wear Archives and Museums and Durham University.

**Timeline**



**Links:**

Hadrian's Wall Country: [www.visithadrianswall.co.uk](http://www.visithadrianswall.co.uk)  
Hadrian's Wall Path: [www.nationaltrail.co.uk/hadrians-wall-path](http://www.nationaltrail.co.uk/hadrians-wall-path)  
Hadrian's Wall on Tyneside: [www.hadrianswalltyneside.org.uk](http://www.hadrianswalltyneside.org.uk)  
Great North Museum: [greatnorthmuseum.org.uk](http://greatnorthmuseum.org.uk)  
Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums: [www.twmuseums.org/home](http://www.twmuseums.org/home)  
St Nicholas Cathedral: [stnicholascathedral.co.uk](http://stnicholascathedral.co.uk)  
Castle Keep: [www.newcastlecastle.co.uk](http://www.newcastlecastle.co.uk)  
Benwell Roman Temple: [www.english-heritage.org.uk/daysout/properties/benwell-roman-temple-hadrians-wall/](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/daysout/properties/benwell-roman-temple-hadrians-wall/)  
Benwell Roman Fort: [english-heritage.org.uk/daysout/properties/benwell-vallum-crossing/](http://english-heritage.org.uk/daysout/properties/benwell-vallum-crossing/)  
Cover image: The Keep and the City Walls, Newcastle. © TOTF Archive.

# Tales of the Frontier

People, places, past and present  
around **NEWCASTLE**



## No. 8 Guarding the Tyne: Crossing Places

The modern city of Newcastle hides a wealth of ancient history, but look closely and you can still catch a glimpse of the people who first built this northern fortress above the River Tyne.

The fort of Pons Aelius lies beneath the Norman Castle, and the Roman bridge has had many successors (now the Swing Bridge). Yet the city streets still reflect the Roman plan: follow the line of the Wall along Westgate Road to the suburb of Benwell and between the rows of terraced houses discover a temple to a local god...

**Come and explore the clues to the ancient world  
beneath the city streets**





## CONDERCUM

The Roman cavalry fort of Condercum now lies under modern-day Benwell, a suburb of Newcastle upon Tyne. Today, little can be seen of the fort but the A186 follows the course of the Wall, along Westgate Road into the city. The remains of a small temple are preserved (see below) and the original causeway over the vallum can also be seen.



Benwell temple. ©TOTF Archive.

By 1789 the area north of the road had been cleared of stones and by the end of the 18th century all surface masonry was gone. In 1851, Roman scholar Rev. J. Collingwood Bruce observed that the site could be passed without being noticed.

## Antenociticus

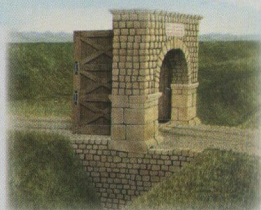
A sandstone head was discovered in 1862 at a temple near the fort, in what is now Broomridge Avenue, Benwell. Parts of the lower leg and forearm were also found, indicating that a life-sized statue once stood here. Inscriptions on three altar stones suggest that this is Antenociticus, a native British deity. He wears a torc around his neck and his hair curls forward resembling two horns. It is thought Antenociticus was worshipped as a source of inspiration and intercession in military matters. You can now visit him at the Great North Museum in Newcastle.



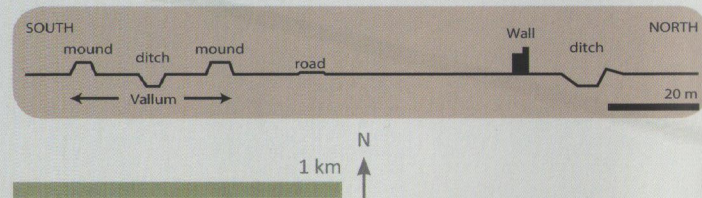
Antenociticus.  
© Tyne & Wear  
Archives & Museums

## The Vallum Crossing

To the south of the fort is a causeway across the Vallum - the large earthwork that ran to the south of Hadrian's Wall. It is thought that the Vallum formed the southern boundary of the Military zone which would have been out of bounds to civilians. The central ditch was 6 m wide and 3 m deep, and was flanked by two mounds, 6 m wide and 2 m high, set back 9 m from the ditch.



© English Heritage. Benwell Vallum crossing, drawn by Frank Gardiner.



## PONS AELIUS

The small Roman fort of Pons Aelius was set on high ground above an established crossing point of the River Tyne, on a major north-south route. The name Pons Aelius combines the Roman word for bridge (pons) with the family name (Aelius) of the Emperor Hadrian.

Archaeological finds at the fort have been dated to the 3rd century onwards, suggesting that Pons Aelius was an addition to the frontier up to 100 years after Hadrian's Wall was built.

The Cohors I Cornoviorum was stationed at Pons Aelius. They were raised from the Cornovii tribe from Cheshire and Shropshire, and were the only native British unit known to have been stationed on the Wall.

## The Bridge

The Roman bridge across the Tyne was located at roughly the same place as the present Swing Bridge. In 1872, a Georgian stone bridge was demolished to make way for the 'Swing Bridge'. When the foundations of a pier of were removed, the antiquarian Rev. J. Collingwood Bruce recorded timbers from what were thought to be the Roman, medieval and Georgian bridges.

Pieces of these timbers were made into souvenirs such as walking sticks and caskets, an elaborate bookcase, and book covers used for Bruce's own copies of the book he authored, entitled 'The Roman Wall'. A piece of the timber can be seen in St Nicholas Cathedral. It is now thought the remains of the 'Roman' bridge are likely to be medieval.



Book cover for Bruce's 'The Roman Wall' made from timber recovered from the bridge.  
© TOTF Archive.



Artistic impression of Pons Aelius by  
HB Richardson, 1840.



"To Oceanus  
the Sixth Victorious  
Legion Loyal and  
Faithful  
(made this)."

Two well-preserved altars recovered from the mud of the river are thought to have once stood on the central pier of the bridge. Dedicated to Oceanus and Neptune, they can be seen in the Great North Museum.



"To Neptune  
the Sixth  
Victorious Legion  
Loyal and Faithful  
(made this)."

## Saxon Cemeteries and the 'New' Castle

From the late 7th century, the site of the Roman fort was used as a Saxon cemetery, perhaps because this enclosed space had symbolic significance, being linked with Rome. Later, the presence of paved areas and drains suggest the area may have become an important gathering place.

Building remains (including re-used Roman stones) within the area of the fort appear to indicate the presence of a small church built in around 1000, within the existing cemetery. This was later enclosed by the ramparts of the Norman castle.

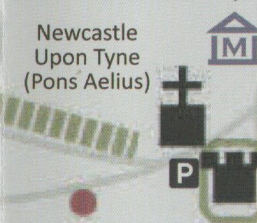
12th century references to Newcastle identify the site of the Norman 'New Castle' with an earlier placename, 'Munecaceastre', modernised to Monkchester. This suggests that a monastic settlement may have been present but the archaeological evidence is less clear.

A timber castle was first built in 1080 by Robert Curthose, the eldest son of William the Conqueror. Around a hundred years later the castle was rebuilt in stone by Henry II's architect, 'Maurice the Engineer', at a cost of £1,144 - over £600,000 at today's prices. The Black Gate tower was added in the mid 13th century.



"Newcastle Castle, 1814" by L.  
Connell published in Border  
Antiquities by Walter Scott, 1814.

The cemetery was reduced in size but continued in use until around 1168 when it was destroyed by the construction of the Keep. However, no evidence for settlement prior to 1080, either monastic or otherwise, has been found either on this site or within the modern city.



Gateshead



Detail from monument to Matthew Ridley.  
© TOTF Archive.

## Matthew Ridley: Mayor, MP. & Senator?

Newcastle upon Tyne was one of the most important towns of England in the 18th century with an origin myth that drew upon the Roman Wall. During the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, Mayor and MP Matthew Ridley inspired the city to stand firm against the Scottish onslaught. He died in 1778 and his burial monument in St Nicholas Cathedral portrays him dressed in a toga in the guise of a Roman senator. The inscription recalls Ridley's role during the uprising, and the choice of Roman imagery may be a reference to the role of the Roman Wall in providing defence against an early invasion from the north.