

Haltwhistle History Group Newsletter

All your history group news, reports, upcoming events and information FREE in your inbox after every meeting.

Edition 9, 10th April 2024

Edited by Steve Gibbon

Our website: <https://history.haltwhistle.org/>
Our Wiki(pedia) <https://haltwhistle.org/history/>

Hello everyone, here is the ninth newsletter of the History Group with a reminder that I am very much dependent on two sources to make this work:

1. My notes taken at a meeting and any other information people can supply, particularly from those people who may have contributed to a discussion or presentation.
2. You, the reader. If you have anything you would like to see in this newsletter, please provide me with information.

I can't do all of this on my own, so all contributions welcome please.

Please note that the group meetings have moved to the second Wednesday of the month. We meet in the Community room of the Hospital which at the moment is provided for free, is on the ground floor and accessible. It is an excellent venue with a small kitchen for tea and coffee preparation. We meet at 1030 for a prompt start. We finish by 12 noon.

I can be contacted via email at steve@stevegibbon.co.uk or by phone on 01434 344 383.

Also feel free to mail this on to anyone else who might be interested or print a copy for them. If you did not receive this directly from myself then I do not have your email address. If you want to ensure you are on the circulation, please contact me by email and ask to be put on it. Equally if you do not want to be on the circulation let me know and I will remove you from it. Thank you.

In this newsletter:

1. Digital News
2. Summary of meeting held at Haltwhistle Memorial Hospital – 10th April 2024 – Magna Fort and Milecastle 46
3. Wanted – your Memories and Anecdotes.
4. Date of Next Meeting
5. Library

Digital News

Steve is happy to receive any stories, anecdotes or recollections you may have of Haltwhistle and the surrounding area so that he can record it in the Wikipedia for posterity. You can find the wiki at <https://haltwhistle.org/history/> (i.e. via the Haltwhistle Partnership website) with some initial information but it can hold any amount of information whether text, images, video or audio.

Summary of Meeting held at Haltwhistle Memorial Hospital – 10th April 2024 – Magna Fort and Milecastle 46

Our guest speaker this month was Sophie Westlake, Community Outreach and Education for of Vindolanda. Sophie very kindly provided me with her notes for the meeting, so we have a detailed transcript of the information she so excellently presented.

Local History Society: Magna Fort and Milecastle 46

Info: The Magna Project is a 5-year National Lottery Heritage Fund project from 2023 – 2027 which will support the archaeological excavations of Magna Fort and the wider frontier landscape, facilitate enhanced activity and engagement programmes in a new purpose-built facility at the adjacent Roman Army Museum. Tremendous opportunities for volunteering and engagement and five new jobs will also be created. The project focuses on both climate change and celebrating the diversity of the ancient people of Hadrian's Wall, bringing the fort of Magna alive once more. The new buildings will enable the Roman Army Museum to run many more activities and events, positively promoting the area and providing a real boost the local economy.

The Vindolanda Trust has just celebrated it's 54th birthday, marking 54 years of research excavations on Hadrian's Wall. This allows us to bring to life ancient cultures and help us get a better understanding of what society was like within this landscape over 2,000 years ago. As part of this research, the Vindolanda Trust has just begun the second year of archaeological excavations at the site of Magna Fort. This sits next to the Roman Army Museum and has never before been the focus of sustained archaeological excavation. Today I am here to talk about the fascinating history of Magna Fort, from AD 85 to the modern day, what we have been able to understand about those who were stationed on this frontier landscape, and why now there is a need for archaeological excavations on this site.

Introduction

To understand the wider frontier landscape around the site of Magna Fort, we are able to look back to approximately AD 85 when the site of Magna is first occupied by the Roman Army.

- Magna Fort was part of the cog in the framework of the Trajanic frontier within the Stanegate system, being built and operational between AD 85- AD 122, before becoming part of the Hadrian's Wall frontier defences when the building of the Wall began in AD 122.

- The site of Magna sits high on the Whin Sill ridge, near the Walltown quarry and Nine Nicks of Thirlwall, in quite an exposed position. But with this, comes amazing views to the north, south and west. Giving plenty of advance warning of incoming storms or unwelcome visitors, meaning this was a great strategic position for the Roman Army. There is no certain way to know that this fort was called Magna, as there are no written records of the name – however, Rivet and Smith in 1979, have identified that Magna means ‘stone, or rock’ and so given the location, this seems highly appropriate.
- The site also guards the road junction between two major Roman roads, the Maiden Way and the Stanegate. The Maiden way was the Pennine route running south from Magna through to Kirkby Thore in Cumbria. The closest fort from Magna down the Maiden Way was Epiacum or Whitby Castle which was probably built around the same time as Magna, or perhaps a little later, when Hadrian’s Wall was constructed to control access to the silver and lead mines in the surrounding area. The Stanegate road runs east-west from Corbridge to Carlisle. The Stanegate was one of the busiest roads in the north with an evermoving cargo of post, soldiers and supplies for the forts that ran along it and then the Wall which included Vindolanda and Magna. The extramural settlement or town outside the fort must have done a roaring trade in overnight accommodation and meals from travellers from both well populated routes. This settlement outside of Magna Fort was likely to have been larger than we would usually find at a normal fort.

Looking to the actual Fort itself, we are able to use information from comparable sites, such as Vindolanda, getting a better understanding of the lifespan of this fort.

- We think the first wooden fort was probably constructed at the same time as that at Vindolanda around AD 85 and by AD 100 a much larger timber fort appears. When the Wall construction began roughly AD 122, Magna’s ideal location could have been used by the legionary staff officers and their clerks meaning the auxiliary soldiers living there would have been turned out and would have had to sleep in their leather tents. The stone fort at Magna was not built until the AD 130’s and was placed in the western area of the larger previous fort.
- However, there are a few curiosities with Magna fort, that we are hoping to go some way to investigating during the next four years of excavations. Firstly, the stone fort of Magna being built in AD 130’s, after the construction of Hadrian’s Wall, but on the site of the pre-Hadrianic timber fort. This has raised many questions about why, then, is there a curious diversion to the Vallum up north? This is not to avoid an existing fort, as far as we are aware. Another curiosity is the praetorium, which is situated, according to antiquarian reports, in the SW corner of the fort, rather than being placed in the middle. Is this evidence of a larger fort?

Whilst we have very little in the way of evidence about the structure and layout of Magna Fort, we do have evidence of those who were stationed at Magna.

- The army along the Wall was made up of two main components: the legions and the auxiliaries. The legions were the most highly paid and had the highest proportion of skilled craftsmen, engineers and other specialists. The skilled legionnaires built the Wall (all of them Roman citizens although not all were from Italy) but left the task of garrisoning and protecting it to the auxiliaries. The auxiliary troops were specialists, highly skilled in battle and although they did not have the status or as much pay as the legionaries, they made up the bulk of the Roman fighting forces. Of the auxiliaries the most valuable, and highly paid, were the cavalry regiments, which provided the fast response forces. The auxiliary infantry, however, were the main staple of army life along the Wall, providing the solid defence in battle and the slower but ruthless work. Any occupants of the land pre-Roman would have likely found themselves liable to being enrolled in this auxiliary fighting force – although stationed along the lines of the German frontier in case they remained loyal to their local communities.
- Amongst the specialist battalions at Magna were a unique unit in Roman Britain, Syrian archers, stationed there in the 2nd Century. Another unit was made up from Dalmatian mountain soldiers from the areas now defined by the nations of Croatia and Serbia. We know this, as despite its lack of excavation mentioned previously, Magna has yielded many stone inscriptions – more than any other Wall fort. Building inscriptions and altars record the presence at one time or another of: First Cohort of Syrian Archers, Second Cohort of Dalmatians (infantry), First Cohort of Batavians (probably part-mounted), and legionaries from the Second Augusta and the Twentieth Valeria Victrix, these were probably involved with the Wall building, rather than garrison of the fort.
- The soldiers at this fort would have been kept busy not only with the maintenance of the buildings and walls of the fort on such an exposed setting but also would have been charged with looking after the conditions and security of the roads in the surrounding area and making sure they were passable and safe. Small detachments would have often been at outposts in strategic places and as such apart from the harshest winter months it would have been rare to find the Magna battalion in anything near its entirety at its fort. This would not have been unusual as we see from the strength report writing tablet from early Vindolanda in c AD 90, it was common for soldiers to be moving around away from their base for any number of reasons.
- If we are working on the assumption that Magna was occupied from AD 85 to the mid-fourth century, and the average garrison being 400 soldiers strong, we can ascertain that 5,000 soldiers were stationed there during the Roman occupation. With the civilian settlement outside the fort walls, we are working to a number of around 10,000 people living at Magna during this time.

After the collapse of the Roman Empire in Britain, the site went into ruin and the following years were marked with contestation for land, power, and resources. However, there was antiquarian interest in the site of Magna.

- From the 16th century onwards a trickle of interested historians and academics began visiting the area. This number dramatically increased when

the 'wastes', as this part of the world was known due to its lawlessness, became more hospitable to travellers with the demise of the Border Reivers. As the Border Reiver control diminished in the early 17th century after the Union of the Crowns in 1603, the Carrick family began to farm the land from the late 17th century. They were not hugely impressed by the archaeology that was spoiling their farm land and were quite forceful about removing it so their plough could run smoothly. However, unlike many farmers in the region, when the antiquarians came around, the Carricks realised the profit they could make by selling on the antiquities they found. In this way they have preserved at least some of the finds from this fort.

- The road – today known as the B6318 - built in 1751-58 left many antiquarians appalled at the sanctioned destruction of so many Roman sites and artefacts. Stones, statues and inscriptions were torn up and used in the construction or thrown away. This road provided new trade opportunities for the farmers of the area and easier access to their land. Agricultural improvements hence followed and in the later 18th century we see an increase in reports of people acquiring antiquities from the site.
- This generosity to the curious passers-by was pushed to its limits when in the 1830's John Carrick was making a further attempt to improve the fort field in the south west corner. He came upon some remarkably well-preserved masonry that still had painted wall plaster attached. The building as described by antiquarian and county historian John Hodgson 'had a large hypocaust and several rooms floored with bath cement, laid of large flat stones, and supported by pillars'. When the walls of one of these rooms was exposed, 'they were so beautifully painted they glowed like stain glass in the sun'. The next year the altar of the prefect of the Hamian Archers was found. No proper report of these findings was ever made and all that survives is a sketch and an outline plan. In 1837 Mr Carrick completely removed the remains of this bathhouse. Described diplomatically by Hodgson as 'self-defence' from the curious and interested travellers who trespassed on his fields to see it and in doing so trampled his crop.

It would be another 159 years until there was any archaeological intervention at Magna.

- In the autumn of 1996, the Vindolanda Trust consolidated the by now very battered remains of this angle turret first uncovered by Clayton's excavations on the north and eastern ramparts. There are no contemporary accounts or records of what was uncovered, and this is the only visible remains of that work.
- In 1999, archaeological surveys produced a geophysical survey of the fort and extramural settlement at Carvoran. The survey was successful in that it clearly showed that despite the lack of visible evidence on the ground to a large extent it was possible to infer the area was covered by the later Roman remains.
- The 2002 excavations by Andrew Birley located both the eastern and southern walls of the fort, as well as the South Gate, but failed to find any

trace of the western wall. The surviving remains were minimal, proving that the damage from stone robbing, modern road building and agricultural land clearance was even more severe than anticipated. The absence of a western wall beneath the current field wall must cast some suspicion on the Clayton NW angle turret, which had been 'displayed' for the benefit of the 1886 Wall Pilgrims. However, Wall Pilgrims gather every 10 years to walk the Wall and discuss its history, this tradition continues to this day.

This now takes us to 2023, when, after years of observed changes in the climate and ground conditions at Magna fort, the Vindolanda Trust secured funding to begin a sustained research project into the buried archaeology of Magna and this central section of Hadrian's Wall.

- We began the excavation's not on Magna Fort, but in the northwestern corner of the field at Milecastle 46.
- This area was the starting point for Year 1 of our 5-year National Lottery Heritage Fund Project, where we spent 12 weeks excavating the site of Milecastle 46. The excavations enabled us to understand the role of this Milecastle on the landscape, and its relationship to Magna Fort, sitting a few hundred metres behind it. What remains of the milecastle's outer walls were able to be located in 2023, though in some places only the trenches the stones had been robbed from remained. Despite this, the remains enabled us to prove our milecastle is of the long-axis type and was constructed with 3.2m wide broad walls. This means it was one of the earlier sections of the wall defences to be built and forms a trio with milecastles 47 and 48 defending the Tipalt Burn and River Irthing. Aside from the outer walls themselves very little structural evidence for buildings was found, with the main spaces in and outside the milecastle being cobbled areas. This included the road leading to and running through the milecastle, which had a total of four phases built one on top of the other. The original Hadrianic road was replaced during the Antonine period, with further resurfacing in the Severan period and finally a Medieval trackway overlying everything. Finds from this season, including a rare dual balance, tell us that this milecastle was used at some point during the Roman occupation, as a customs point.
- Being so close to the site of Magna Fort, which would have been built prior to Hadrian's Wall and Milecastle 46, it is unlikely that soldiers would have been stationed up here for long periods of time. It is more likely that they would have come up for their 'shifts' at the milecastle, before returning to Magna Fort. The lack of ovens is one clue for this.
- We excavated a wide area of cobbles, both inside and outside the Milecastle. This would have acted almost as a 'car park', for wagons to load and unload goods to be checked at this custom's point. The Romans would have been trading glass, silver, and spices for Caledonian gold, pearls, and amethyst. Trading goods was a method of keeping an uneasy peace between those living north and south of Hadrian's Wall.
- While the internal space of the milecastle proved to be lacking in buildings, it did have one substantial feature close to the East wall – a clay-lined well.

Wells are always an exciting discovery because of the high potential for waterlogged or anaerobic preservation within but they're not typically found within milecastles making this discovery even more interesting. The well had been intentionally backfilled once it was no longer in use and had been packed with a great deal of heavy stone rubble, including facing stones which probably came from the milecastle walls. This packing had allowed the lower deposits to remain waterlogged and semi-anaerobic, preserving organic material such as timber, leather and rope. This is very exciting, as we hope that this means there is more anaerobic conditions elsewhere in the site.

- There was an opportunity for excavation outside the milecastle and a series of very large irregular pits to the east of the milecastle wall were discovered. The similarities between them suggest that they were all probably for the same purpose and may all have been in use at the same time. Current interpretations are that they were most likely for industrial activities, such as quarrying or processing raw materials however there were very few clues as to their exact use found during the excavation. We are currently working with our partners at Teesside University to do extensive environmental soil sampling, which we hope will help us understand what these pits were used for. It was great to be able to extend our excavation to beyond the walls of the milecastle, as this is not typical practice for other excavations of milecastles. This is helping us understand the wider frontier landscape and layers of occupation on this site.
- It was however in the last few weeks of the excavation in September 2023, that the greatest surprise was uncovered. Outside the milecastle walls was the discovery of a stone lined cist grave. The grave was nestled in the corner between the east wall of the milecastle and Hadrian's Wall and contained the remains of a single individual who appears to have been wrapped in a shroud before burial. These details suggest the person was buried here deliberately and with care while the milecastle walls were still standing, most likely in the late Roman period. We are still in the research phase and are hoping to learn more about this person in the near future.

1st April 2024 was the start of our second season of excavations, where we are continuing to excavate and understand the frontier landscape between Hadrian's Wall and Magna Fort. This year will focus on the road network along the Wall and to the Fort, as well as the Vallum.

- The Vallum is the ditch and mound system that runs to the south of Hadrian's Wall and was built contemporaneously. The distance of the vallum to the Wall varies, it was preferred to run close to Wall but where the terrain didn't allow (such as when the Wall runs along the crags of the Whin Sill) it moved as much as 700 metres to the south. During construction Magna caused problems for the builders especially when considering the route of the vallum. The fort was only a couple of hundred yards from the line of the Wall and so normal procedure would have been to have the line of the vallum run below and incorporate the fort into the frontier zone. However, this would have caused problems for the two major roads that run past it. It was decided to run

to the north between the fort and the Wall but presumably a large causeway would have allowed access. You can see the route it would have taken around the fort on aerial images and marked on OS Maps but around 1940's quarry waste was used to fill in the vallum in this area so it can no longer be seen. This diversion is still a conundrum to today's archaeologists, its is such an extraordinary diversion to the north and there doesn't appear to be a reason for it. It has been suggested they wanted to avoid a bog in the area, but a bog could have been easily drained with minimal work. It must be determined that the Vallum was diverted so much because something in its path had to be avoided. What this was has possibly been revealed by boring or core samples from these different areas. It looks like there may once have been an ancient lake here which is this was the water source of the settlement would have been supremely important. We hope that current archaeological investigation will go some way to confirm or deny this theory.

- The overall aim of this project is to research the impact of climate change on our cultural heritage and develop a legacy for future management of this incredibly precious ancient Roman resource. In the last two decades the land to the north of the fort, which was historically covered by a marsh, has been rapidly drying out, damaging the covering of peat and organic soils that have formed above the ancient Roman landscape. Ancient and precious organic Roman layers are now being exposed and ultimately put at risk. The fort of Magna, unlike nearby Vindolanda, has never been subjected to a sustained research excavation but recent geoarchaeological survey work has proved beyond doubt that Magna has some of, if not the richest, environmental deposits thus far identified from the World Heritage Site.
- The excavations are also crucial for highlighting the impact climate change is having on the delicate ecosystems that protect the most fragile artefacts, long-term monitoring of the ground conditions has already started.

Roman Army Museum

- The Vindolanda Trust is an independent charity, all that we do is funded by our visitors. The Vindolanda excavations have revealed so much to us and Magna has the potential to be just as rich in preservation.
- Thus, the modern site of Magna has gone from a place where its Roman remains were pillaged and sold or thrown away to a place where its history is celebrated - though it is yet to bring forth most of its archaeological secrets!

Thank you, Sophie, for a very interesting talk.

You can find out more at the Roman Army Museum website:

Roman Army Museum Website	https://romanarmymuseum.com
Magna Fort	https://romanarmymuseum.com/magnafort/
Accessible Trench Talks	https://romanarmymuseum.com/event/accessible-trench-talks/
Dig diary (updated regularly)	https://romanarmymuseum.com/magnafort/magna-dig-diary-2024/

Correspondence from Lucy Vasey 03.04.24

Hi Jan

Thank you for getting back to me and apologies I have taken a while to reply.

My dad is researching his father's war history. He has a report from The Journal 30th April 1915 which details my grandfather and a number of soldiers from the Haltwhistle company of Fusiliers who were all injured and then went on to be recuperated at Dilston Hall. We assume that they were all injured in the same attack so if anyone in your history group knew anything about this then this would suggest what happened to my grandfather.

My father has a photocopy of the article which mentions all the soldiers involved by name and would be very happy to come to your group one time if that would be ok, in case anyone would be interested and perhaps have any information.

Look forward to hearing from you.

If anyone can cast any light on this, could you please forward responses to Jan Millward janmillward@btinternet.com Many thanks.

Wanted – your Memories and Anecdotes.

What are your memories of the 40's, 50's, 60's and 70's or even more recently. What anecdotes and stories can you tell? One of our objectives is to capture this information before it is 'lost'. If you have anything you can share and any images to go with it please don't hesitate to forward it to me when I can then incorporate it into future newsletters as well as our Wikipedia of information about Haltwhistle and its surrounding parishes.

Thanks, Steve Gibbon steve@stevegibbon.co.uk 01434 344 383

Date of Next Meeting: Wednesday 8^h May 2024. 10:30 in the Community Room of Haltwhistle Hospital. Steve Gibbon will be providing some historic memory boxes of objects and images to stimulate memories and discussion.

Ideas for Future Talks

We now have a full programme for this year – details on the website soon – and some ideas for next, but nothing yet set in concrete for 2025. Do you have any ideas for a future meeting talk? If so, could you let a member of the committee know so we can keep a full programme developed, many thanks.

Library

You can also find this information on the website at <https://history.haltwhistle.org/>

A reminder from Jan that some people may have borrowed books from the library and may not have signed for them or returned them. If you have a book from the library, could you please just let Jan know that you have it and whether you will be hanging on to it or returning it. Thank you. Jan can be contacted at janmillward@btinternet.com

A small reference library of books, maps and pamphlets has already been built up. For now, it will be available at each meeting or via Jan Millward. A sign in/out book will be used to record who has what so books can be kept track of. The list of available publications is provided below.

<u>Title</u>	<u>Author</u>
265 Years of a Dissenting Congregation in Haltwhistle	Roberta Wood
A Haltwhistle Christmas	Tony Storey
A Walk Along the Wall	Hunter Davies
Altwesel at the First Millenium 1000 AD	Tony Storey
Bishop Ridley and the Reiving Ridleys	Tony Storey
Carnival News 2002	
Castle Hill Methodist Church Centenary Brochure	
Church of the Holy Cross, Haltwhistle	
Featherstone Castle	John Cornforth
Haltwhistle 8th Walking Festival	Haltwhistle Partnership
Haltwhistle and South Tynedale (1973)	Tony Storey
Haltwhistle and South Tynedale (Pamphlet)	Tony Storey
Haltwhistle and the Great War	Northern Cultural Projects
Haltwhistle Methodist Church Centenary Brochure	
Haltwhistle Methodist Circuit Souvenir Programme	
Haltwhistle Station	Tony Storey
Haltwhistle, Haydon Bridge and South Tynedale	Frank Graham
History of Gilsland	
Holy Cross Church (Pamphlet)	
In Nancy's Memory	Matthew Parker
Legends of Haltwhistle and the South Tyne	Richard and Susan Sim
Letter from Haltwhistle	Brian Lee
Medieval Castles, Towers, Peles and Bastles of Northumberland	T H Rowland
My History of Featherstone Castle	John Clark
Northumberland Folk Tales	Rosalind Kervan
The Church at Hautwysel	Tony Storey
The Reivers, The Story of the Border Reivers	Alistair Moffat
Towers and Bastles	P F Ryder
Tynedale Songster	Frank Graham
War on the Banks of the Tyne	Haltwhistle Partnership

Deadline for contributions

Contributions to the newsletter are welcome – even short stories or anecdotes. You may also provide an image with your contribution for inclusion in the newsletter and email it to me. Please make sure the image is your own or you have copyright permission for it.

To avoid spam, please seek the permission of your email friends before forwarding this newsletter. If you do not wish to receive this newsletter, please email me at steve@stevegibbon.co.uk and I will remove your details from the subscriber list. Please do NOT paste this newsletter, or any part thereof, on Facebook, Twitter or any other social network, blog or website or in any village newsletter or other publication. If you believe an item could be of interest to your local community by being included, for example, on a community Facebook page, please contact me. I will happily provide a suitable copy, thereby indicating my permission to use the item in a wider setting. Thank you.