

Course Topics (not necessarily covered in this order)

Overview

Description (and Photos)

It's More Than *Just* a Wall

History

Purpose

Selected Special Topics

What was the purpose of Hadrian's Wall?

Quick Answer (for any wall): Keep Something In or Keep Something Out

Real "Answer" (more detailed and specific to Hadrian's Wall): It's uncertain

Some Theories:

Military Fortification (stop large attacking force)

Border/Immigration Control (possibly collect taxes and/or fees, Trojan Horse)

Customs Inspection (possibly collect taxes and/or fees)

Impress/Intimidate the 'Natives'

All of the above (at one time or another in the wall's active ~280-year lifespan)

Timeline: Roman Britain and Hadrian's Wall

Roman Period – Key Dated Events

55-54 BCE Julius Caesar Expedition (Withdrew)

43 CE Emperor Claudius Directed (and "Led") Invasion – "Permanent" Occupation -- Elephants

60-61 Queen Boudicca's revolt

83 Battle of Mons Graupius in Caledonia/Scotland (Slowed Northern Expansion)

~85 First Fort at Vindolanda Site (Near What *Later* Became the Wall)

~122 Hadrian in Britain – "Decision" to build wall

~142 Start of Antonine Wall (Emperor Antoninus Pius -- Probably Never Personally in Britain).

~163 Rebuilding of Sections of Hadrian's Wall (Date of Abandonment of Antonine Wall??)

- ~early 200s Large scale repairs and modifications (Emperor Severus – Led Campaigns versus Picts)
- 306 Raids by Picts (From North of the Wall – They Reached London)
- ~410 Roman Withdrawal, End of Occupation and Governance of Britain

Things That Are Difficult to Pin to a Specific Date – Roman Period

Western Turf Wall Converted to Stone (most *turrets* there were always built of stone)

Demolition of Most Wall Turrets (Perhaps in Phases?)

Intentional “Permanent” Closure of Some “Lanes” in Some Fort and Milecastle Gates

Some Forts May Have Been Added and Abandoned (Both On-wall and Support Forts)

Changes in Roman Army Organization/Tactics

Legions vs Auxiliaries (Infantry vs Cavalry) – Auxiliary example: Cohort IX -
Tungrians

Mobile Legions vs Border Guards (recruited locally)

Possible Tradition of Roman Army Service Over Multiple Family Generations

After End of Roman Occupation of Britain

- 600s CE Wall/Fort Stones Begin to be Used Re-used in Construction (Church for Jarrow Abby)
- 1600s John Speed Publishes British Maps Showing “Picts Wall”.
- 1700s Wall Material Used to Build Roads
- 1800s Historian William Hutton (age 78!) walks wall, *both* ways (1801), writes book
Antiquarian John Clayton Dedicates Himself to Wall Preservation – Land Purchases.
- 1987 Named UNESCO World Heritage Site
- 2003 Hadrian’s Wall Path opened for hiking (and biking??)

Selected Quotations from Vindolanda Tablets -- ~100 CE (~5 years pre-Hadrian’s Wall)

Message Fragment (names of sender and received unknown – found early-1970s, interpreted ~1973):

... I have sent (?) you ... pairs of socks from Sattua, two pairs of sandals and two pairs of underpants, two pairs of sandals [these are probably two *additional* pairs of sandals, from a different person -- additional text may be missing here; original message may have listed additional items from additional people]... Greet [several names follow, which are only partially legible, uncertain how many names were originally in this list]...ndes, Elpis, Iu..., ...enus ..., Tetricus and all your messmates with whom I pray that you live in the greatest good fortune.

Message (Severa to Lepidina):

Front (“inside”):

*m*¹ Claudia Severa to her Lepidina greetings. On 11 September, sister, for the day of the celebration of my birthday, I give you a warm invitation to make sure that you come to us, to make the day more enjoyable for me by your arrival, if you are present (?). Give my greetings to your Cerialis. My Aelius and my little son send him (?) their greetings. *m*² I shall expect you, sister. Farewell, sister, my dearest soul, as I hope to prosper, and hail.

Back (“outside”):

*m*¹ “To Sulpicia Lepidina, wife of Cerialis, from Severa”

Message (Severa to Lepidina, *alternative translation* of Front side):

“Claudia Severa to her Lepidina, greetings. On September 11, sister, for my birthday celebration, I ask you sincerely to make sure you come to (join) us, to make the day more fun for me by your arrival...Say hello to your Cerialis. My Aelius and little boy say hello. *I await you, sister. Be well, sister, my dearest soul, so I may be well too. Hail.*” [Portion in italics is in second handwriting.]

References/Sources

Books/Booklets:

Birley, Andrew; *The Vindolanda Guidebook*; Vindolanda Trust; 2023.

Birley, Robin; *Vindolanda: A Roman Frontier Fort on Hadrian's Wall*; Amberley (Stroud, Gloucestershire); 2009.

Bowman, Alan; *Life and Letters on the Roman Frontier: Vindolanda and its People*; The British Museum Press (London); 2003. This book covers the Vindolanda (handwritten) tablets translated into English and released/published up to approximately 2003. The book has been revised and updated several times, probably, in part, due to additional tablets being discovered and/or interpreted during ongoing excavations. The 2003 copyright date is for the edition CCF used to prepare for this course. This might be the most recent edition. It's possible a website (see below) has, in effect, “replaced” this book.

Breeze, David J and Brian Dobson; *Hadrian's Wall* (4th Edition); Penguin Books (London); 2000,

de la Bedoyere; *Hadrian's Wall: History and Guide*; Tempus (Stroud, Gloucestershire); 1998.

Moffat, Alistar; *The Wall: Rome's Greatest Frontier*; Birlinn (Edinburgh); 2008.

Web Sites:

Note: Entering “Hadrian Wall” (or something similar to those words) on any internet Search Engine should return at least a few dozen web sites. CCF has not looked at all of them, so he can’t say the ones listed below are the best. However, the links that follow *do* seem to lead to sites that are among the largest and/or most extensive. The first three listed web sites contain photos.

Hadrian's Wall (Wikipedia), (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hadrian's_Wall) : accessed 21 Sept 2025)

Hadrian's Wall (English Heritage), (<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/hadrians-wall>) : assessed 21 Sept 2025)

A Travel Postcard from Hadrian's Wall: Why Visit and What to See, (<https://www.petersommer.com/blog/uk-travel/postcard-from-hadrians-wall>) : accessed 21 Sept 2025). This web site is a 2018 blog entry by Paul Breson, who was the primary guide during our 2024 tour.

The History of the Roman Wall: Which Crosses the Island of Britain, from the German Ocean to the Irish Sea, describing its antient state, and its appearance in the year 1801, (https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/48/The_history_of_the_Roman_wall%2C_which_crosses_the_island_of_Britain%2C_from_the_German_Ocean_to_the_Irish_Sea._Describing_its_antient_state%2C_and_its_appearance_in_the_year_1801_%28IA_historyofromanwa00hutt%29.pdf) : accessed 21 Sept 2015). This is primarily listed here as a historic curiosity. It is a downloadable pdf of an out-of-print book (now in the public domain) that was a factor in the wall being becoming known to the public (outside of Northern England) and (eventually) preserved. The author, William Hutton, walked the entire length of the ruins of the wall (in both directions) in 1801, at age 78! The original edition of the book was published in 1802, by John Nichols and Son (London). The book, and this web site, are also notable for having both a title and a url, respectively, that are among the longest CCF has ever encountered. Hutton refers to the wall as the “Servian Wall,” referring to a Roman emperor (in office about a century *after* Hadrian) who, in the early-1800s, was widely (incorrectly) believed to have ordered the construction of the wall. The word “antient” in the title is not a typo; it is a now-obsolete spelling of the word “ancient.”

Roman Inscriptions of Britian: Vindolanda Tablets, (<https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org>) : accessed 21 Sept 2025). This web site *seems* to provide transcriptions (in both Latin and English) of all of the Vindolanda tablets whose contents have been released up until around 2019. CCF suspects a large number of the finds are small fragments of documents (containing perhaps only one or two words) that would not be useful if published or released.

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