

ENGLISH HERITAGE  
EDUCATION

KS2–KS3

## TEACHERS' RESOURCE PACK

### Birdoswald Roman Fort

This resource pack has been designed to help teachers plan a visit to Birdoswald Roman Fort, which offers fascinating insight into life in a Roman fort and the building of Hadrian's Wall.

Use this pack in the classroom to help students get the most out of their learning about Roman Britain.

#### INCLUDED:

- Historical Information
- Glossary
- Sources
- Site Plan

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Don't forget to download our **Hazard Information Sheets** to help with planning.

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Step into England's story

## HISTORICAL INFORMATION

DISCOVER THE STORY  
OF BIRDOSWALD

Below is a short history of Birdoswald Roman Fort. Use this information to learn how the site has changed over time. You will find definitions of the key words in the Glossary.

### THE ROMANS CONQUER BRITAIN

By the 1st century BC, the Roman Army had conquered many countries to create a great **Roman Empire**. They made use of each nation's natural resources and introduced architecture and culture that reflected the city of Rome. In AD 43, Emperor **Claudius** (r.AD 41–54) had successfully invaded Britain. The Romans gradually conquered the country, building towns and forts where soldiers were based to keep control of their occupied **territory**. The Army reached Inverness in AD 84, where the governor Agricola defeated the **Caledonians** at the **Battle of Mons Graupius**. The conquest of Britain was nearly complete.

The Romans built a network of roads and forts to control their new territory. In AD 87, there was a crisis elsewhere in the empire and troops were withdrawn from Britain and sent away to fight. The Caledonian tribes continued to rebel against Roman rule. By AD 100, all the Roman troops had left Scotland and the **Roman frontier** had fallen back to the **Tyne–Solway line**. The garrisons along this line were stationed at forts, including Carlisle, Corbridge and Vindolanda. Each fort was linked by a military road called the **Stanegate**.



A 2nd-century Roman auxiliary troop soldier. These auxiliaries were garrisoned at forts along Hadrian's Wall.

## HADRIAN'S WALL

Emperor **Hadrian** (AD 117–38) decided to secure the land that the Romans held against raiders behind a strong frontier. He ordered a wall to be built to the north of the Stanegate road.

The Wall was begun in AD 122. Some parts were built in stone but in other places (including Birdoswald) the **Turf Wall** was built. At every **Roman mile** along the wall, a **milecastle** or small fortlet was built (in stone or turf and timber). These were defended gateways through the Wall. There were two **turrets** in between each milecastle. From these turrets, soldiers could keep watch over the long Wall. A ditch was dug on the north side of the Wall as an additional barrier to raiding, unauthorised entry or an invasion. Then, a large ditch (6m deep and 3m wide) was also dug to the south of the Wall – the **Vallum**. **Garrison** forts were built along the Wall. The Vallum could only be crossed at the gates at the forts.

Birdoswald (called 'Banna' by the Romans) is a garrison fort built to guard the bridge crossing over the river Irthing. The fort was built over a small marshy bog surrounded by thick woodland. It was originally built in timber and later replaced in stone.

Hadrian's successor **Antoninus Pius** (r.138–61) moved the Army forward to a new Wall to the north. This left Hadrian's Wall largely empty but archaeological evidence suggests that people were still living at Birdoswald during this time. The garrisons returned in AD 163.



Hadrian's Wall stretches for 73 miles and took six years to build.



Emperor Hadrian ordered the building of Hadrian's Wall.



A reconstruction illustration of Willowford Bridge, showing the Turf Wall on the left and the stone wall in the distance on the right.

## THE FORTS ON THE WALL

Sixteen forts were built along Hadrian's Wall, where troops were based to guard the frontier. Every fort was built to the same basic design: they were rectangular in shape with rounded corners, like a playing card. The design was adjusted to suit the size of the garrison stationed at a particular fort. The outside of a fort had a high defensive wall with towers along it, supported from behind by earth banks. A defensive ditch ran around the fort perimeter. There was an entrance on each side, guarded by a gatehouse to allow troops to move in and out quickly and easily.



Roman forts were built to the same basic 'playing card' design.

## CIVILIANS AT BIRDOSWALD

### Geophysical surveys and excavations

revealed settlements and buildings around the walls of Birdoswald fort. Most of the buildings were small houses with a space in the front for selling wares or a trade. One larger building may have been a 'mansio'.

In the 2nd century, the people living in the settlements were the soldiers' families, slaves and servants. Low-ranking **auxiliary soldiers** could not be legally married but often had 'unofficial' families. Evidence shows that women and children lived near the fort at this time: the tombstones of two children have been found from the fort's cemetery. The cremated remains of a woman, and children's shoes, have been found in the ditches at the fort.

Soldiers were paid in cash for their service, so had money to spend. This would have attracted civilian traders who were keen to supply the Army with pottery, hides, food and timber. Craftspeople such as blacksmiths, cobblers, weavers and metalworkers would also have been needed near the fort.



Craftspeople sold their wares to the garrison. This decorative brooch, made from copper alloy and enamel, was discovered at Birdoswald Roman Fort.

## BIRDOSWALD IN THE 3RD CENTURY

Under Emperor **Septimius Severus** (r.193–211), Hadrian's Wall was hugely improved and Birdoswald fort was updated to host a new **auxiliary unit**. **Granaries** were built and the **barrack blocks** rebuilt. A tower in the north wall of the fort was converted into a **bakehouse** and the main east and west gates were either repaired or rebuilt.

The new garrison, which would stay at Birdoswald throughout the 3rd century (and into the late 4th century), was the 'cohors I Aelia Dacorum milliaria', an **infantry regiment** of 1,000 soldiers. Roman soldiers were drawn from all over the empire to fight in the name of Rome. This garrison came from Dacia (modern Romania).

During the 3rd century, the northern frontier of Britain was largely peaceful, and the garrison stayed at the fort. The '**vicus**' – the **civilian** settlement around the fort – expanded. This was where the soldiers' families, traders and craftspeople lived.



Reconstruction illustration showing the two granaries at Birdoswald Roman Fort, built to store grain and other dried foods.

## LIFE AT THE FORT

Soldiers at the fort paid for their own food and equipment from their wages. This left them with spending money for entertainment such as drinking and gambling. Gaming was a popular pastime – three dice have been found at the fort. Stones were scored with grids for board games using pottery counters.



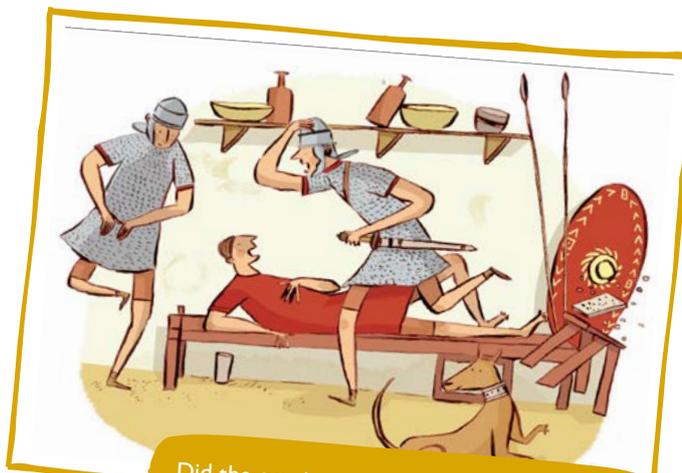
Two dice made from bone and carved with numbers on each face, found at Birdoswald Roman Fort.

Temples to different gods have been found along the wall. The people in the area were a mixture of Roman citizens, soldiers from other countries in the empire and **native Britons**. The differences in temples reflect these different cultures, from eastern religions to traditional Roman gods and native **deities**. This mixture of religious practices would have also existed at Birdoswald.

## SAXON DISTRACTION?

Towards the end of the 3rd century, Saxon raiding ships began to appear in the North Sea. It is possible that soldiers from the Hadrian's Wall garrisons were transported to new frontiers to defend against the Saxon invaders.

The **commander's residence** at the fort was rebuilt around the beginning of the 4th century after it had 'fallen into ruin', which suggests the fort had been abandoned around this time. The headquarters and fort baths were also repaired.



Did the garrison leave Birdoswald Roman Fort to defend Britain against the Saxons raiders?

## DEATH, BURIAL AND CREMATIONS

On the high ground to the west of the fort is Birdoswald's cemetery. In 2009, a ditched enclosure was excavated near the cemetery. It contained remains of **cremations**, which was how the Roman military disposed of the dead.

For cremations, a **pyre** was built to suspend the body over a pit, into which the remains could fall. In the enclosure was a mixture of pits, dug from the earth and containing burnt human bone. Some of the pits were lined with stone, with human remains in fabric or leather bags, wooden boxes or pots. There were two large rectangular pits and one stone-lined pit was surrounded by two ditches. These variations suggest people of high and low status.

In an earlier excavation, a small drinking pot from Gaul (modern day France, Belgium and Germany) was discovered. The drinking cup may have been for the deceased to take to the **afterlife**. Carved animal bone was also found, for decorating the pyre.



One of the cremation urns containing human cremation remains discovered at Birdoswald in 2009.

## END OF ROMAN BRITAIN

By the end of the 4th century, troops were withdrawn from Britain as the Roman Empire began to collapse. Evidence from this time is difficult to find, because Roman coins and pottery (which help **archaeologists** to know the date of buildings) stop appearing, as the Roman systems of production had begun to break down. By AD 410, **Roman administration** had ended in Britain.

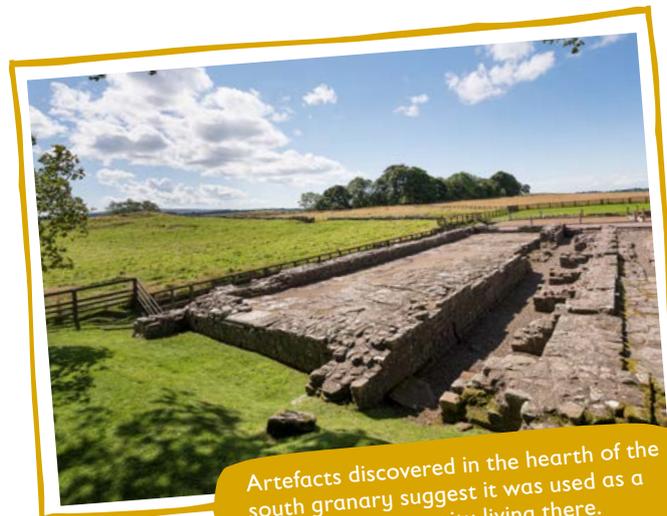
Many soldiers did not go back to Rome after the fall of the empire, and stayed in the forts along Hadrian's Wall during the 5th century. By this time, the soldiers serving on the wall had been born and raised in the local area, rather than brought in from other countries around the empire. Britain was their home. For the past 90 years, it had been the law for a soldier's son to follow him into the Army. The soldiers and their families were settled at the forts.

It was practical for the garrison and civilians to continue living in the fort, because it was well defended. There is evidence for what life was like there – the adapted south granary had **hearths** and high-status objects were discovered dropped near them.

This suggests it was used as a **hall**, as was common in post-Roman Britain. Halls had a 'high end' close to the fire where important people sat to keep warm. Later, more large timber buildings were built. These buildings suggest that the garrison evolved into a self-sufficient community that no longer depended on the Roman Empire. The community at Birdoswald fort probably relied on supplies from the local area in exchange for providing protection.



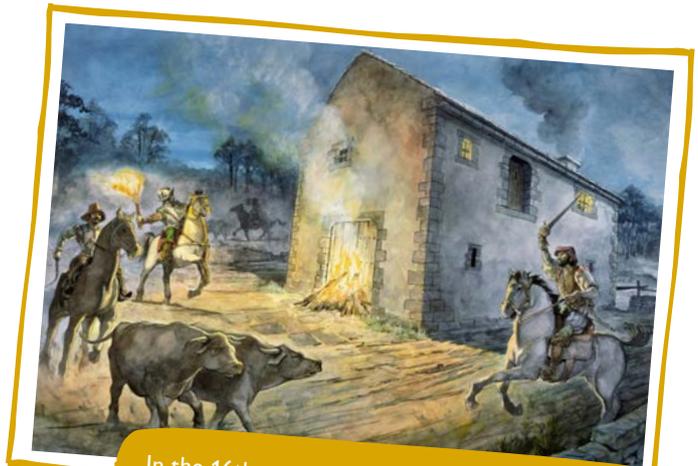
After the fall of the Roman Empire in Britain, many soldiers stayed with their families rather than go back to Rome. Britain was their home.



Artefacts discovered in the hearth of the south granary suggest it was used as a hall by the community living there.

## BIRDOSWALD OVER TIME

After the Romans, the first evidence about the fort shows it passing between different owners as part of the **Barony of Gilsland** in the 13th century. Then the evidence stops for a century. The area was raided by the Scots during this time. **Robert the Bruce** burned Gilsland in 1311 and it was raided again in 1333 and 1345. Other owners are mentioned during the 15th and 16th centuries. In the 16th century, the farms at Birdoswald were tenanted by the Tweedle clan and suffered raids during the time of the **Border Reivers**.



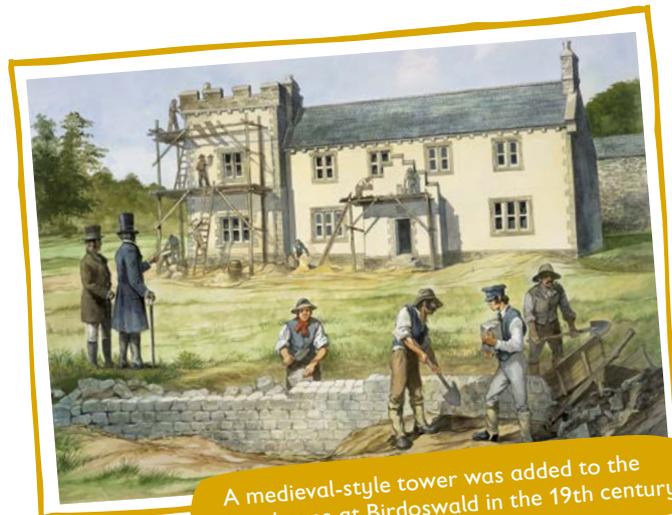
In the 16th century, the farm at Birdoswald Roman Fort was raided by the infamous Border Reivers.

## DISCOVERING BIRDOSWALD

Public interest in Birdoswald grew in the 18th and 19th centuries. In 1745, just before the new farmhouse was built, the Hadrian's Wall scholar John Horsley visited. In 1830, the owner Thomas Crawhall began excavations and was visited by John Hodgson in 1833, who was writing the book 'History of Northumberland'.

In the Victorian era, the famous author Sir Walter Scott often visited the Gilsland area. Henry Norman, who owned Birdoswald at this time, may have been inspired by Scott's romantic literature as he added mock ruins and a medieval-style tower and Gothic porch to the buildings at Birdoswald.

Birdoswald was excavated again in the 1850s and 1920s. In the 1930s, the estate was sold to Lord Henley, who placed the walls and gates of the fort into state guardianship. In 1984, the estate was bought by Cumbria County Council. English Heritage carried out excavations in 1987 and eventually took over its management in 2004.



A medieval-style tower was added to the farmhouse at Birdoswald in the 19th century.

## GLOSSARY

TRICKY TERMS AND  
WHAT THEY MEAN

Below is a list of words you might come across while exploring Birdoswald Roman Fort. Use this Glossary to find out what they mean.

**afterlife** – life after death

**Antoninus Pius** – the 15th emperor of the Roman Empire (r.138–61 AD). Antoninus ordered the building of the Antonine Wall after the Army pushed further into Caledonian territory roughly 100 miles north of Hadrian's Wall. It was abandoned eight years later.

**archaeologist** – a person who excavates (careful digging) places and then studies artefacts and remains to work out what they can tell us about the time they are from

**auxiliary/auxiliary unit** – soldiers who support a country's regular Army. The Romans used auxiliaries who were not citizens of Rome to protect and expand their empire. They became citizens of Rome once they finished 25 years' service in the Army.

**bakehouse** – a small building with stone or brick ovens where bread was baked

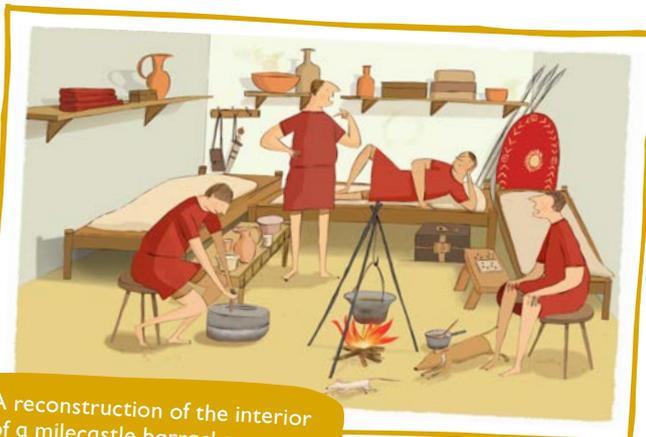
**Barony of Gilsland** – the land (estate) and title belonging to the Baron (nobleman) of Gilsland. Gilsland is a small village near Hadrian's Wall.



A Roman coin showing the head of Antoninus Pius.

**barrack blocks** – a group of buildings used to house soldiers

**Battle of Mons Graupius** – the battle in AD 83 in Caledonia (modern-day Scotland) between the invading Roman Army and the native Caledonians. The Roman Army's victory marked its domination of the whole of Britain.



A reconstruction of the interior of a milecastle barracks.

**Border Reivers** – lawless people who raided others' property along the Anglo-Scottish border, taking cattle and supplies, from the late 13th century to the beginning of the 17th century

**Caledonians** – one of the Celtic tribes who lived in (what is now known as) Scotland during the Iron Age and the Roman occupation of Britain; the Caledonians were enemies of the Roman Empire



A deity statue discovered at Birdoswald Roman Fort.

**civilian** – a person not in the armed services or the police force

**Claudius** – the fourth emperor of the Roman Empire. He built many new roads, aqueducts and canals across the empire. He was the first emperor to successfully conquer Britain.

**commander's residence** – the house inside the fort where the commander of the garrison lived. Each Roman Army unit was led by a commander.

**cremation** – burning a person's dead body to ashes, usually after a funeral service

**deities (deity)** – gods or goddesses (a god or goddess) in a religion that worships more than one god or goddess

**excavation** – careful digging of a place where historical artefacts may be buried

**garrison** – a group of troops living in a fort or town to defend it

**geophysical surveys** – physical sensing techniques used to create images or maps of archaeological sites underground

**granary (granaries)** – a building where grain and other dried foods are stored. Grain is used to make bread, which was an important part of the Roman diet. It was important to keep the grain dry under cover.

**Hadrian** – the 14th emperor of the Roman Empire. He ordered the building of Hadrian's Wall, which marked the northern limit of Roman-occupied Britain.

**hall** – a building or large room used for meetings or banquets

**hearth** – the floor of a fireplace

**infantry regiment** – a group of soldiers who fight on foot (not on horseback)

**mansio** – a place in a Roman town where people could stay, like a small hotel

**milecastle** – small forts that were built along Hadrian's Wall at every (Roman) mile. They were all built to the same design, with a watchtower, and two long buildings to house soldiers. Native Britons could only cross the Wall through a milecastle, which allowed the Romans to tax goods passing through and control movement across the frontier.



Harrows Scar Milecastle (milecastle 49) overlooking Willowford Bridge, near Birdoswald.

**native Britons** – the Celtic tribes living in Britain before the Romans invaded

**pyre** – a pile of material (usually wood) used as a platform for burning a dead body

**Robert the Bruce** – king of the Scots from 1306 until his death in 1329

**Roman administration** – the government of the Roman Empire

**Roman Empire** – the countries that were ruled by the Roman emperor

**Roman frontier** – the border that marked the end of Roman territory (land occupied by the Romans)

**Roman mile** – 1.6km

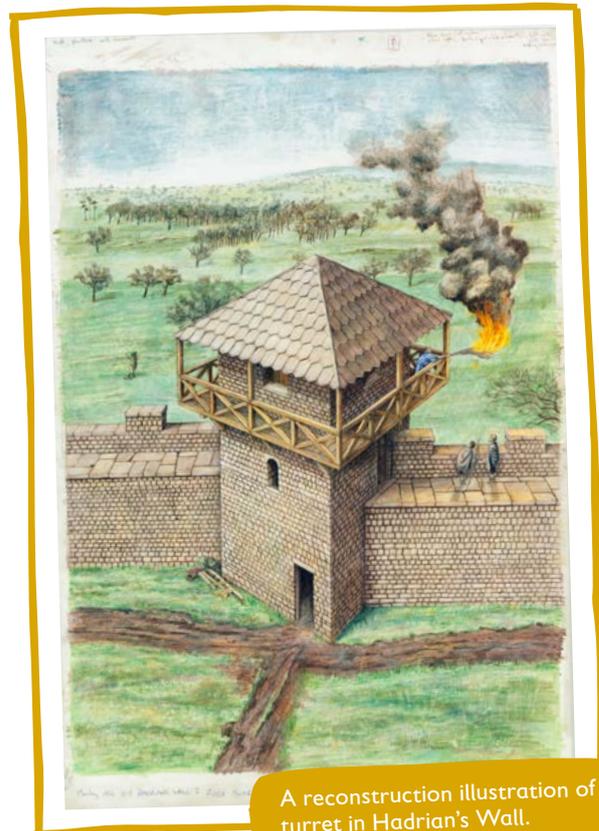
**Septimius Severus** – the 21st emperor of the Roman Empire. Severus visited Britain in 208 and ordered Hadrian's Wall to be strengthened. From 208 to 211, he invaded Caledonia (Scotland) and reclaimed territory up to the Antonine Wall. After his death, the Roman Army fell back to Hadrian's Wall and would never invade Caledonia again.

**Stanegate** – the Roman stone road, built before Hadrian's Wall, which linked two major forts at Corbridge and Carlisle

**territory** – an area of land ruled by a leader (e.g. a monarch or an emperor/empress) or a government

**Turf Wall** – part of Hadrian's Wall that was built from grass-covered earth and timber

**turrets** – small towers along Hadrian's Wall, probably used as lookout posts and for signalling messages (each turret could see the next one along the Wall) for quick communications along the long frontier line



A reconstruction illustration of a turret in Hadrian's Wall.

**Tyne-Solway line** – the Roman military border (before Hadrian's Wall) that ran from the river Tyne to the Solway Firth. It was an early frontier line of Roman occupation in northern Britain.

**Vallum** – a broad, flat-bottomed ditch that ran parallel to the south of Hadrian's Wall. It created a protected 'military zone' in front of the Wall, as attackers could not cross it.

**vicus** – the settlement outside a Roman fort where civilians lived



A reconstruction illustration of Hadrian's Wall and the Vallum earthworks to the right.

# SOURCES

PEER INTO THE PAST

A historical source is something that tells us about life in the past such as a document, a picture or an object. It may be a primary source, from the time, or a secondary source, created later. Experts at English Heritage have chosen these sources to help you learn about the history of Birdoswald Roman Fort.

## SOURCE 1

‘It was a fearful sight looking at the thousands of Britons spread on the distant hills. They seemed to tower high above us. On the flat plain between them and us their war chariots jostled noisily for space. We were greatly outnumbered...

The battle began suddenly, and at first both sides fought at long range. The Britons, with their long swords and small shields, brushed aside our missiles with great skill and retaliated with dense volleys of spears. Agricola then ordered us forward. The long swords of the Britons were not suited to hand to hand fighting. Our swords are short and sharp and we stabbed at faces and struck hard with the bosses of our shields and began to push up the hill. Other battalions of our army followed and slaughtered anyone near. We moved with such speed that we sometimes left the enemy behind, slightly wounded or even unharmed.

Thousands of Britons stood on the hilltops watching the battle below. They laughed at our small numbers and slowly began to descend, surrounding our army. But Agricola expected this and ordered four squadrons of cavalry that he had kept back for emergencies, to charge at them furiously. They scattered and we began a glorious pursuit... The Britons were felled in huge numbers but showed great courage even in defeat.’

This source is an adapted extract from a secondary account of the Battle of Mons Graupius in AD 83 by Cornelius Tacitus, a senator and a historian of the Roman Empire. Tacitus was the son-in-law of Emperor Agricola, who led the battle.



## SOURCE 2

### ROMAN STYLUSES

Two styluses discovered at Birdoswald Roman Fort and now at Tullie House Museum. The stylus on the left has an eraser on the far right, used to smooth the wax to make the writing disappear.



## SOURCE 3

### TOMBSTONE

This is the tombstone of G Cossurtius Saturninus of Legion VI Victrix, discovered at Birdoswald Roman Fort. He was born in Hippo Regia, North Africa. Hadrian's Wall was built by the three legions of Roman Britain (II Augusta, VI Victrix and XX Valeria Victrix). The legions were the citizen soldiers of Rome. Legions included many specialists, such as surveyors, architects and builders.



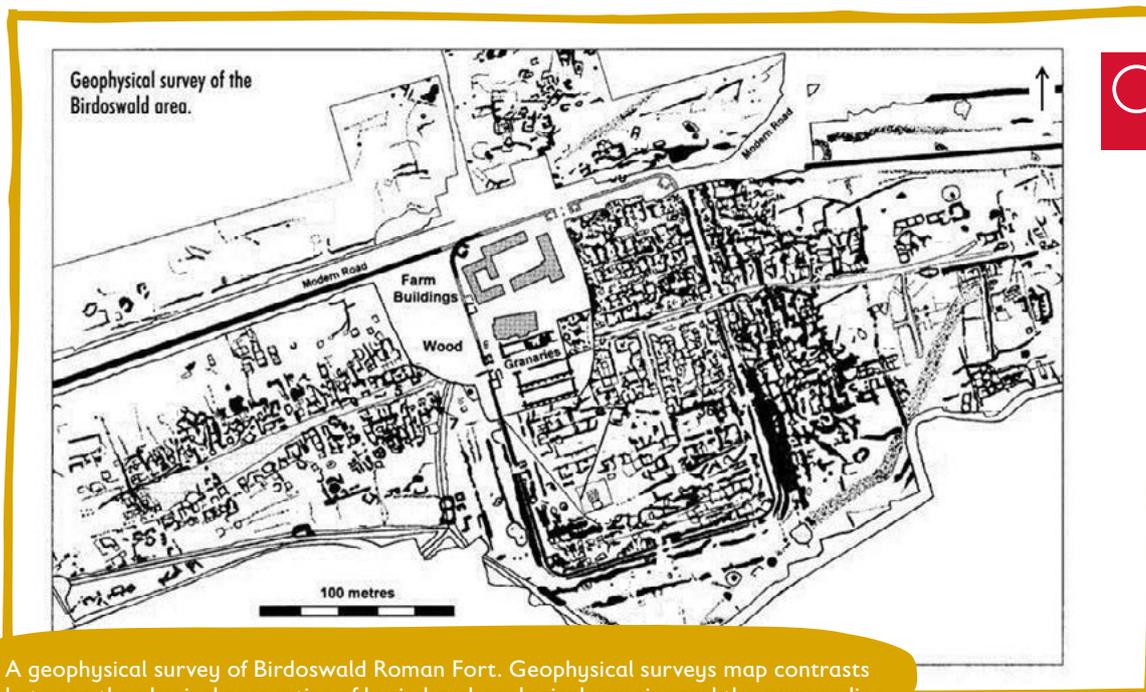
A Roman craftsman carving a tombstone.

## SOURCE 4



Aerial view of Birdoswald fort.

## SOURCE 5



A geophysical survey of Birdoswald Roman Fort. Geophysical surveys map contrasts between the physical properties of buried archaeological remains and the surrounding soil, allowing us to 'see beneath the soil' without needing to excavate the ground.

## CREMATION URN

In 2009, the cremation cemetery at Birdoswald Roman Fort was excavated by archaeologists. They discovered cremation urns buried in the ground. The Romans cremated their dead, and the human remains were placed in urns (pots) and some were buried in stone cists (burial chambers), while others were placed directly into the ground. Sometimes objects were placed inside the urns that were connected with the person who had died.

Five of these urns were cleaned using damp cotton swabs, sometimes using a magnifying glass. Many fragments had to be carefully pieced together by archaeological conservators to re-create the whole pot. Conservators use a special glue which does not disintegrate over a long period of time.

Most of the urns are black-burnished ware. This is a type of pottery that was made in Dorset and transported to Hadrian's Wall. We can tell this by the colour and the decorative latticework (cross-hatching) marks on the urns' surface.

Some of the urns contain human bone which helps archaeologists identify who the remains belonged to. This urn contained the remains of a young adult, between 30 to 40 years old. Experts think she was female, because there is a fragment of a pelvic bone which is broader and more curved than a male's pelvic bone. Another urn buried right next to it contained the remains of a child.

In the bottom of one urn objects other than bone were found. Conservators used x-ray technology (CT scanning) to examine the objects because these objects are too fragile to extract them. The objects included chain-mail links made from iron and a ring, a pendant and wire made from copper alloy. It's possible that these objects are part of a horse-harness or are items of jewellery.

These urns are now on display at Birdoswald Roman Fort.

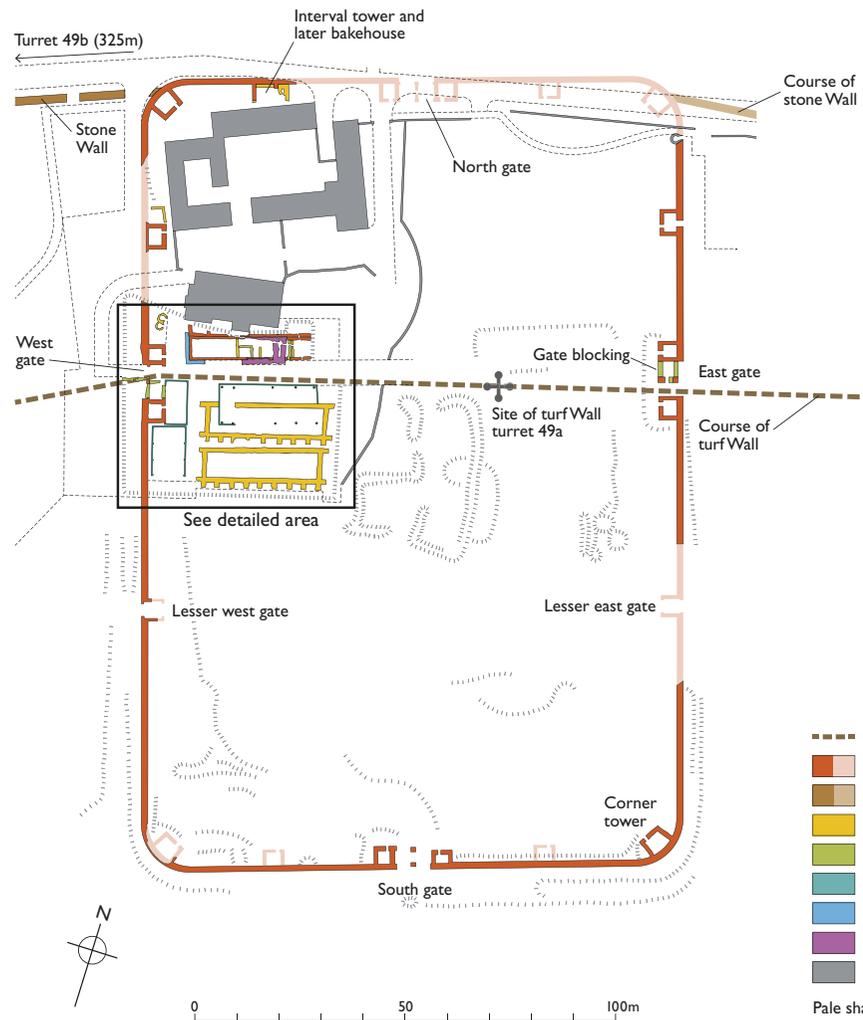
Find out more about the 2009 excavation and the recent conservation work on the urns on the Historic England webpage: [[historicengland.org.uk/research/support-and-collaboration/research-and-english-heritage-trust/birdoswald-cemetery-excavation](https://historicengland.org.uk/research/support-and-collaboration/research-and-english-heritage-trust/birdoswald-cemetery-excavation)]



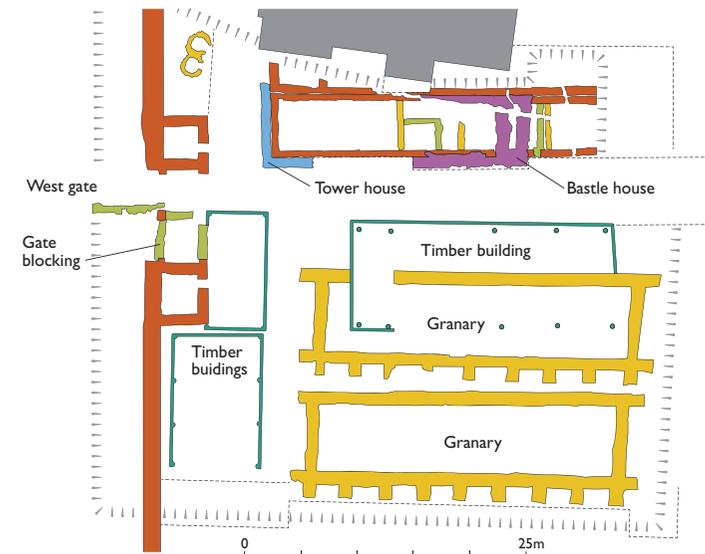
# SITE PLAN

## BIRDOSWALD ROMAN FORT AND TURRET 49b

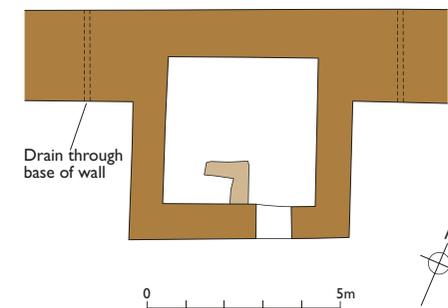
### PLAN



### DETAILED AREA



### TURRET 49b



- c. AD 122 turf Wall
  - c. AD 130–38 stone fort
  - c. AD 138 stone Wall
  - c. AD 198–208 granaries
  - c. AD 250–310 blocking of gates
  - c. AD 520 timber buildings
  - c. 1400 tower house
  - c. 1650 bastle house
  - post-1650 standing buildings
- Pale shades indicate missing elements

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