

WALL WALK IV
There and Back Again
by John Conyard

As ever the end of September saw clear skies, sunny days, and me in a dog tent on Hadrian's Wall.

On arriving in the dark, it started to become apparent that Winshields campsite was teeming with small plastic tents. I found our normal spot and speedily set up camp. As the stars came out and the temperature dropped I almost felt sorry for the modern campers in their thin modern plastic tents. Canvas, even in small amounts, seems warmer. And a fire always cheers things up. The firelight always looks ethereal playing on the tall trees where we camp. But the firelight illuminated serried ranks of mosquitoes and midges as they formed up on the underside of my canvas. I spent some time burning them down one by one with a candle, only to find hundreds of them in ranks hidden in the grass. But I've had worse nights sleep.

The following morning the sun rose to show me the massed tent lines of the Army and Air Cadet Corps camped around me. We watched each other with puzzlement as I broke down my camp.

Before 9.00am I met up with Stephen A., plus Sharon, Mark, Lawrence, Corin and Eric. There were many different reasons for doing the walk. Stephen wanted to test himself and his kit. For Sharon it was a complete change of landscape. For me it was a chance to walk in beautiful countryside that I would normally only ever get to see in a book. We were going to walk through a Roman landscape full of fantastic Roman remains.

We headed up on to Winshields and travelled west. As the Wall fell away the terrain became easier. At Cawfields a quarry had literally eaten away a stretch of Wall. My highlight was Great Chesters, the Roman fort of Aesica. This was a small fort hard to reach today, with a civilian settlement and bath house outside the walls. There had been limited excavation, and now there are concerns over the damage caused by farm animals. As at Housesteads, here the barrack blocks had been turned into chalet-style accommodation in the later Roman period. The site is famous for an enamel brooch found in the south gate in 1894.

The gate now holds an altar, mysteriously covered in coins. The underground strong room of the principia is just visible through the long grass. A farm overlies the north-east corner of the fort, but the walls elsewhere are clearly visible. A 5-mile long aqueduct served the garrison, and what may be high status tombs lie close by in a cemetery. The last garrison was a 500 strong cavalry unit, and horses still occupied the site.

Heading south past various traces of marching camps, we headed for Haltwhistle Burn. We even stopped at the pub for a drink, but the small fortlet was a disappointment.

After this we wanted to follow the Roman road, the Stanegate. But public rights of way just didn't allow it. We had to follow the B6318, the old military road, before heading south out of the military zone. We made our way back to the Stanegate and Vindolanda. Lawrence was suffering as we walked down to the fort. But a short rest picked him up and he raced the rest of the journey. We headed north on a long climb back to the Wall, passing the civilian settlement at Milking Gap. This was abandoned since it fell within the military zone between the Wall and the vallum.

Meeting up with the Wall we headed west past Crag Lough where Stephen and Mark did some slinging. We were steadily climbing and expending energy, but conversation made you forget the pain. Past Steel Rigg we climbed to the highest stretch of Wall. By now things were beginning to hurt. My knees were seizing up, while muscles and ankles were giving out. If last year the walk was too short, this year it was a little too long. At first Eric was enjoying himself in the countryside. By the end of the walk the poor little dog had had enough.

We hobbled into the farmyard back at the campsite, and collapsed back into the modern world. This was certainly the hardest Wall walk we have ever done. But for me it was clearly the best. Great Chesters and Milking Gap were special places to visit, and the company made them more special still.