

THE BIG STORY



Cavalry formed a key part of the Roman defence of northern Britain in the AD 70s, according to recent archaeological investigations

Hadrian's Wall had an older, bigger, northern brother

Research is revealing more about a formidable network of forts that the Romans built across modern-day Scotland as early as the AD 70s. **David Keys** reports

HADRIAN'S WALL had an older sibling – a vast late first-century AD defence system stretching 120 miles across Scotland. Archaeologists, who have been investigating the system over the past decade, have so far surveyed 14 forts and numerous

fortlets. These all formed part of a defensive network that was built in the AD 70s – some five decades before Hadrian's Wall, and a full 70 years before the Antonine Wall.

The archaeologists believe that the system consisted of a series of around 20 forts, at least half a

dozen fortlets and up to 30 watchtowers, rather than being a continuous wall or ditch. It probably ran from Montrose or Stonehaven (south of Aberdeen) on the North Sea coast to the Firth of Clyde.

Over the past five years, the

researchers – led by Dr Birgitta Hoffmann and Dr David Woolliscroft, both of the University of Liverpool – have conducted geophysical surveys of seven of the system's largest forts. Now they are hunting for missing fortlets and towers. They've so far discovered

potential aerial photographic (crop mark) evidence for five previously unknown towers, one of which they've successfully excavated and found evidence on the ground for.

The geophysical investigation of the forts has revealed that they were almost certainly manned by more troops than was previously thought. The surveys – using magnetometry and electrical resistivity meters to 'x-ray' the ground – show unusually large numbers of barrack blocks within each fort. And it appears that many of the troop formations may have been cavalry units – as a number of the blocks boasted built-in stables.

The research is also suggesting that, for a substantial part of its length, the frontier was made up of a double system of fortifications, providing the legionaries with defence in depth.

So why did the Romans feel compelled to build such a sophisticated look-out, communications and defensive system so far north – and why in the AD 70s?

The Roman legions invaded what is now Scotland probably in around 69 or 70 AD – and went on to conquer the whole of southern Scotland over the next decade.

The new defensive line was, it seems, their attempt to tighten their grip on these newly acquired territories. Not only would it have deterred invasions by hostile northern Caledonian tribes, it would also have protected friendly lowland tribes from cattle-raiders.

That the Romans enjoyed amicable relations with the local

ANGLO-SCOTTISH WARS

Researchers seek to solve the mysteries of Bannockburn

THE SITE OF ONE of Britain's most famous battles – the epic showdown between English and Scottish armies at Bannockburn in 1314 – may at long last be about to reveal its secrets.

Researchers from the University of Glasgow's Centre for Battlefield Archaeology, the University of Stirling and a Glasgow-based archaeological excavation unit have just launched the most detailed study of the battlefield area ever carried out. They hope that their investigations will solve some of the great mysteries of the battle – where precisely it was fought, how it unfolded and the number of combatants in the English and Scottish armies.

At present there are up to six suggested locations for the battle, spread over four square miles. Accounts of the chronology of the clash – written 40 years or more after the event – are vague to say the least. Estimates of the number

of combatants vary between 18,000 and 50,000.

A full-scale metal detection survey, covering several square miles, is already under way – and dozens of small excavations are due to follow over the next few months. A detailed examination of the sub-soil across a wide area has also been launched in a bid to reconstruct what the vegetation was like there at the time of the battle.

Over the centuries only four artefacts potentially associated with the battle of Bannockburn

have been found. Three of them – two horse pendants, bearing coats of arms, and a possible arrowhead – now reside in private collections. The fourth, an axe found in the 19th century, has since been lost.

Due to the often waterlogged soil, and centuries of ploughing, it's unlikely that many iron arrowheads will have survived – but bronze, copper and silver artefacts may have done. In fact, the dampness of the soil may have helped preserve some wood and leather objects.

It's also conceivable that the study may reveal the graves of the thousands killed at Bannockburn. However, it's unlikely that they will ever be excavated. **11**



A 1330 illumination shows Robert Bruce defeating the English at Bannockburn

lowland population appears to have been confirmed by the discovery of large native civilian settlements nestled around the forts. These were probably made up of local merchants and craftsmen as well as, quite possibly, the girlfriends of the

troops. The houses in the civilian settlements are mostly of typical native design. Finds within them have included everything from pottery and industrial waste to garment fittings and Roman-style ladies' jewellery.

Despite fostering warm relations with many local natives,

tensions between the northern Caledonian tribes and the Roman occupiers persisted, eventually erupting into a major conflict. In AD 83 or 84, the two sides appear to have clashed on the battlefield (although conclusive evidence is

The frontier was probably designed to deter invasions by hostile northern Caledonian tribes

lacking), with up to 30,000 men on each side. The Roman politician and historian Tacitus named the battle 'Mons Graupius', but its precise location is still a mystery.

It is from this very battle that the Caledonian leader Calgacus's iconic, but almost certainly fictitious anti-imperialist rallying

cry derives: "To robbery, slaughter, plunder they give the lying name of empire. They create a wilderness and call it peace."

As the investigations continue, it's conceivable that new information could finally lead to the discovery of the site of the battle of Mons Graupius. So far, archaeologists have ruled out four potential sites in central Scotland – and are now planning to investigate alternative locations further north.

The late first-century Roman defence zone currently being investigated was abandoned by the Romans in around AD 87 just three or four years after their supposed victory at Mons Graupius. **11**

