

## The Heir of Gilsland, a poem, in five cantos.

By Robert Carlyle, 1817. (Extracts from Cantos I & V)

In Beuth's domain in ancient day,  
When Saxon Edward held the sway,  
Ere Norman William rul'd the land,  
Or Harold bled on Hastings' strand,  
One of the train I always made  
To hunt the boar and draw the blade;  
Then went the spiced goblet round  
While minstrels woke their harps' blithe sound,  
Or of their Saxon sires of eld,  
Of dames in Wizard's thraldom held,  
Or facts achiev'd by Runic hand  
In mountainous Northumberland.

Imagine not this simple strain,  
The fiction of the minstrel's brain;  
Long as Bewcastle's column stands,  
And frowns o'er intervening lands,  
Or Boothby peeps athwart the scene,  
Skirted with fields of brighter green,  
Or Lanercost's grey ruins rise  
Pleasing to antiquaries' eyes,  
Amidst Saint Mary's silent vale,  
Still shall the wild and mournful tale  
Of stern De Vaux and hapless Beuth  
Be handed down from age to youth.



East face of Bewcastle Cross from 19th century engraving by Lyson.

This leaflet is one of a series covering the length of Hadrian's Wall. They were inspired by the **Tales of the Frontier** project undertaken by Durham University. We hope they encourage you to visit new locations and to explore the Wall and its influence on people and places through history.

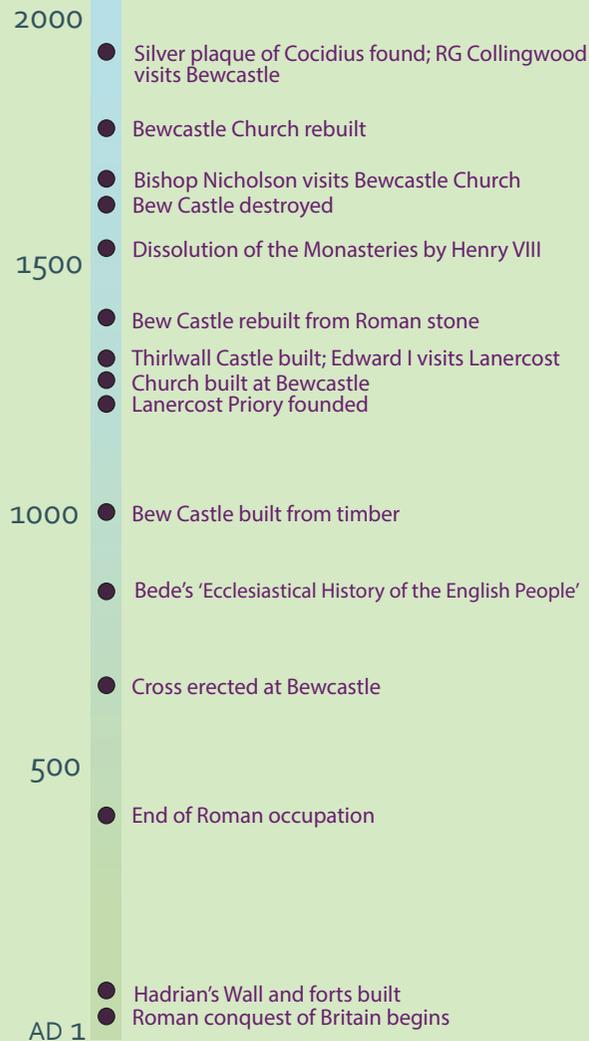
To view and download other leaflets in the series and an accompanying booklet, or to find out more about

**Tales of the Frontier** please visit

[www.talesofthefrontier.org](http://www.talesofthefrontier.org)

This work was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council with support from Tyne & Wear Archives and Museums and Durham University.

## Timeline



### Links:

Hadrian's Wall Country: [www.visithadrianswall.co.uk](http://www.visithadrianswall.co.uk)

Hadrian's Wall Path: [www.nationaltrail.co.uk/hadrians-wall-path](http://www.nationaltrail.co.uk/hadrians-wall-path)

Tullie House Museum: [www.tulliehouse.co.uk](http://www.tulliehouse.co.uk)

Bewcastle: [www.bewcastle.com](http://www.bewcastle.com)

Birdoswald Roman Fort: [english-heritage.org.uk/birdoswald](http://english-heritage.org.uk/birdoswald)

Lanercost Priory: [english-heritage.org.uk/lanercostpriory](http://english-heritage.org.uk/lanercostpriory)

Cover image: Bewcastle Castle. © TOTF Archive.

# Tales of the Frontier

People, places, past and present  
LANERCOST, BIRDOSWALD & BEWCASTLE



## No. 4 The Irthing Valley: A King, a Cross, and a Magical Dwarf

The River Irthing meanders through a land rich in history and folklore. For the Romans it was strategically vital - a river crossing and road junction guarded by special forces: a unit of archers from Syria. Meanwhile, to the north, a shrine to 'The Red One' was built.

New ideas then took hold and the old gods were forgotten. An intricately carved cross was erected and churches built. But this was a wild and lawless land. Protection was needed from northern raiders, be it a sturdy castle or the charms of a magical dwarf.

**Come and explore the people, places, and stories of the Irthing Valley**



## FANUM COCIDIUS

The fort had an unusual hexagonal plan, occupying a small plateau. Only the embankments and ditches can still be seen. A church and churchyard occupy the southern part of the site; the castle lies over the north-east corner. The fort was connected to Birdswald by the Roman road known as the Maiden Way.

Of the nine stone altars recovered at Bewcastle, six are dedicated to the local war god Cocidius, 'The Red One', suggesting that this was the 'Fanum Cocidi' or 'Shrine of Cocidius' mentioned in the 7th century Ravenna Cosmography (a compilation of all known towns in the Roman Empire). Two silver plaques dedicated to Cocidius were found in an underground strong-room. They are now at Tullie House Museum in Carlisle. Archaeologist Eric Birley surmises that the fort was planted on a pre-existing shrine and the god was adopted by the Roman army.

## Lanercost Priory

*"... rising from among majestic elms, are seen the venerable ruins of Lanercost Abbey, backed by the woods that slope down from the baronial castle of Naworth to the clear murmuring streams of the Irthing".*

William Ford, 1839

The Priory Church of St Mary Magdalene occupies the original nave of Lanercost Priory, an Augustinian monastery founded in 1169. It was built just below the course of Hadrian's Wall and an inscribed stone, set upside down in the stonework, betrays the origin of the masonry. Antiquarian Rev J Collingwood Bruce observed in the 19th century:



*"The whole structure has been formed from stones taken from the Roman Wall. In addition to some altars preserved in the crypt, several centurial and carved stones are seen in the walls of the adjacent buildings".*

The Priory was favoured by Edward I and his large retinue, who almost bankrupted the community. During one stay Edward and his men took 200 stags and hinds while hunting!

He was a ruthless king and on one occasion he sentenced Thomas de Brus and other Scottish captives to be dragged at the tails of horses from Lanercost to Carlisle before hanging and beheading.

*"In this locality, the traveller is apt to lose his reckoning, in consequence of the number of cottages and villages which are denominated 'Wall'".*

Rev J Collingwood Bruce, 1895



Silver plaque of Cocidius. ©Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery Trust, Carlisle.

## Bew Castle

A timber castle was built in 1092, and rebuilt using stones from the Roman fort in the mid 14th century. It was destroyed by Oliver Cromwell in 1641, but antiquary William Camden visited in time to see:

*"... a Castle of the Kings, which, standing in a wild and solitary country, hath beene defended onely by a ward of souldiers. But this in publicke Records is written Beuth-castle, so that the name may seeme to have come from that Buetho, about King Henrie the First his daies, after a sort ruled all in this tract."*

## Bewcastle Church and Cross

The earliest recorded church dates from 1277, though only the east end remains, built from the remains of the Roman fort. It was always a very modest building. A bishop visiting in 1703 noted:

*"The Font wants a pedestal and looks like a Swine's Trough".*

By contrast, the remarkable 7th century cross shaft hints that this was once a much more significant religious site. There may have been an early monastic cell present within the old fort. The four sides of the shaft are intricately decorated with reliefs depicting figures, animals, chequers, vine scrolls, interlace knots, runic inscriptions, and a sundial.



Sketch by WG Collingwood, 1899.

*"The Bewcastle Cross was certainly not erected among uninhabited ruins...the community in whose midst it was set up may have been a Roman-British community, living within the Roman walls continuously ever since the Roman evacuation..."*

Read at the site in 1934 by RG Collingwood

The church was rebuilt in 1792. Past rectors included successful border reivers! Legend has it that only the *women* of the parish were buried in Bewcastle – all the men were hanged in Carlisle...

## The people of Bewcastle

*"In October, 1792, I accompanied a friend to visit the Runic pillar in Bewcastle church-yard. This visit gave me an opportunity of judging of the manners of the inhabitants. The sequestered possessors of this wild district are extremely hospitable to strangers, and possess none of that ferocity of manners attributed to them by many tourists. We were cheerfully entertained with such fare as the place afforded; and we left the village of Bewcastle, its ruined castle, its remarkable monument, with its primitive curate and hospitable inhabitants, with sentiments of regard and esteem."*

From the journal of an unnamed friend of the poet Robert Carlyle.

## MAGNA

The Roman fort at Magna (Carvoran) pre-dates Hadrian's Wall and was built to guard the junction of the Maiden Way and Stanegate, the supply route linking Coria (Corbridge) with Luguvalium (Carlisle). Only the north-west corner angle remains visible.



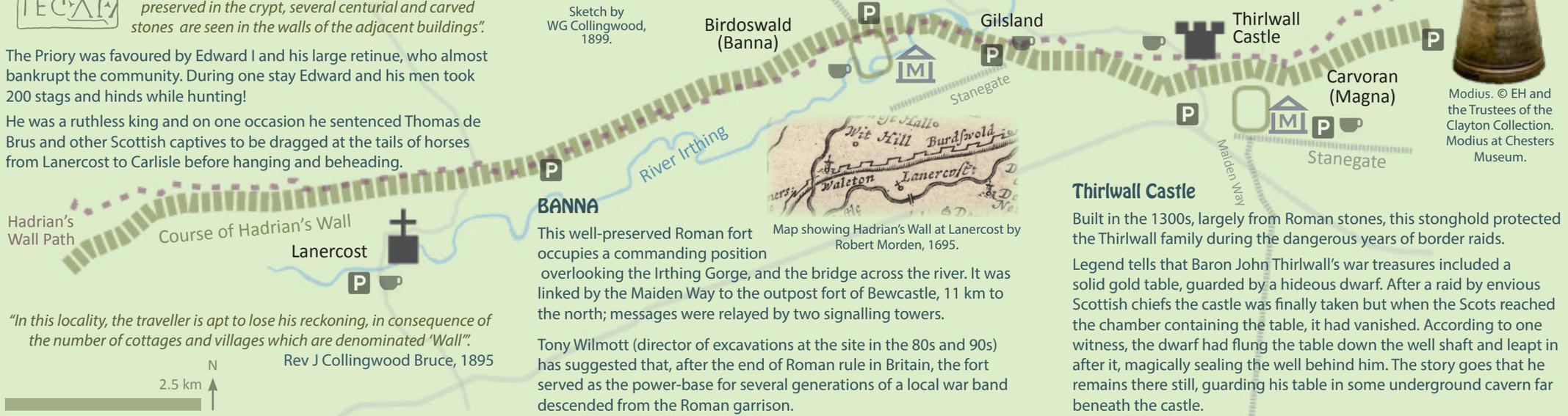
Magna was occupied by soldiers from all around the Roman world. The first garrison was a mixed regiment of cavalry and infantry from an island in the Rhine Delta. Then came a unit of archers from Syria, and in the 3rd century the bowmen were replaced by cavalry and infantry recruited from the Dalmatian tribes of an area which is now part of Croatia.

## Sneaky measures?

A rare find at Magna was a bronze, bucket-shaped vessel known as a 'modius', used for measuring corn. An inscription on the vessel indicates that it holds 17½ sextarii or 16.8 pints. In fact, it holds 20 pints (11.4 litres). The modius is now in the Chesters Museum.



Modius. © EH and the Trustees of the Clayton Collection. Modius at Chesters Museum.



Birdswald (Banna)

Gilsland

Thirlwall Castle

Carvoran (Magna)

Stanegate

Lanercost

## BANNA

This well-preserved Roman fort occupies a commanding position overlooking the Irthing Gorge, and the bridge across the river. It was linked by the Maiden Way to the outpost fort of Bewcastle, 11 km to the north; messages were relayed by two signalling towers.

Tony Wilmott (director of excavations at the site in the 80s and 90s) has suggested that, after the end of Roman rule in Britain, the fort served as the power-base for several generations of a local war band descended from the Roman garrison.

Map showing Hadrian's Wall at Lanercost by Robert Morden, 1695.

## Thirlwall Castle

Built in the 1300s, largely from Roman stones, this stronghold protected the Thirlwall family during the dangerous years of border raids.

Legend tells that Baron John Thirlwall's war treasures included a solid gold table, guarded by a hideous dwarf. After a raid by envious Scottish chiefs the castle was finally taken but when the Scots reached the chamber containing the table, it had vanished. According to one witness, the dwarf had flung the table down the well shaft and leapt in after it, magically sealing the well behind him. The story goes that he remains there still, guarding his table in some underground cavern far beneath the castle.