

A Royal Tiff (traditional)

Arthur and his Queen were one day sat on those great rocks to the north of the castle, which still bear as names the King's and the Queen's Crag. As they talked, Guinevere chanced to make a remark which angered Arthur, whereupon he snatched up a nearby rock and hurled it at his royal consort.

At that moment, Guinevere was combing her long, fair locks, but she saw the stone come hurtling through the air. With remarkable presence of mind and dexterity, she used her comb to fend off the missile, so that it fell to the ground, doing no harm.

If anyone should disbelieve this tale, the rock lies there to this day, with the marks of the teeth of the Queen's comb on it still for all to see. The distance that the King hurled this missile is about a quarter of a mile, and the stone itself may weigh around twenty tons!



Prehistoric cup-marked stone near Kings Crag. © ERA database
The origin of the myth?

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

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Timeline



Links:

Hadrian's Wall Country: www.visithadrianswall.co.uk

Hadrian's Wall Path: www.nationaltrail.co.uk/hadrians-wall-path

Housesteads: english-heritage.org.uk/housesteads

Vindolanda: www.vindolanda.com

Once Brewed National Park Centre: visitnorthumberland.com/tourist-information-centre/once-brewed-national-park-centre

Cover image: Hadrian's Wall at Walltown Quarry. © TOTF Archive.

Tales of the Frontier

People, places, past and present
around **SEWINGSHIELDS**



No. 5 Central Crag: Sleeping Knights and Sunken Treasure

The dramatic scenery of the central section of Hadrian's Wall provides the backdrop to a number of myths – perhaps influenced by the presence of the mighty monument as it snakes across the crags. The Wall has an enduring physical and emotional presence and has inspired mythology, folklore, and poetry in the surrounding countryside. Might stories of kings, knights, and treasure be traced to distant folk memories of the strange, colourful soldiers who built the frontier? Could they reflect early ideas that the Wall was built by noble, civilised Romans to control the wild, northern savages, with Arthur's gallant knights following in a similar role?

Come and be inspired by this mythical and mysterious landscape



VERCOVICIUM

The Roman fort was built high on a dramatic escarpment in around AD 124, soon after the construction of the Wall began in AD 122. A substantial civil settlement (vicus) existed to the south, outside the fort, including the "Murder House", where archaeologists found two skeletons beneath the floor.

The fort's orientation is unusual, with its long axis parallel to Hadrian's Wall (which forms its northern defensive wall). Most other early forts straddle the Wall and so extend into barbarian territory. It had no running water supply, and series of stone-lined tanks were used to collect rain-water. The fort has some of the best-preserved remains in Roman Britain - including some stone latrines!

Housesteads Farm

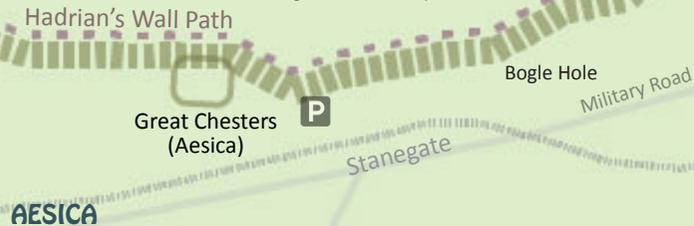
The ruins of Vercovicium lay on land that was once part of Housesteads Farm. In the late 17th century, Housesteads was the home of the Armstrongs, a notorious family of Border Reivers. They lived in a defensive bastle house, built against the south gate of the Roman fort, and used the old fort as a corral for their stolen horses and cattle.



© English Heritage, drawing by Phillip Corke. The 17th century bastle at Housesteads.

In the 19th century the site was bought by John Clayton, a keen antiquarian whose dedication to Hadrian's Wall proved invaluable for its preservation. He remained an active field archaeologist until his early 90s.

Bogle, boggie or bogill: a British (esp. Northumbrian and Scots) term for a ghost or an evil spirit.



AESICA

Completed in around AD 128, the purpose of this Roman fort was to guard the Caw Gap, where the Haltwhistle Burn crossed the Wall. The fort was supplied by an aqueduct, which wound for 10 km from the head of the burn. At different times the fort was garrisoned by soldiers from Belgium (early 2nd century), Switzerland (late 2nd century) and Spain (3rd century)



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Haltwhistle

2 km

The Story of the Sunken Treasure (traditional)

Long ago a resident of Sewingshields Castle needed to flee the country. He rowed into the deep lough and heaved his gold overboard, casting a spell so that it could only be recovered by:

"Twa twin yauds, twa twin oxen, twa twin lads, and a chain forged by a smith of kind."

One day a man set about recovering the sunken chest. The twin horses, oxen, and lads were quickly found but the "smith of kind" was more difficult, this being a blacksmith whose ancestors for six generations have been smiths. But a smith was found, and the treasure-hunter set out across the lough, laying the newly forged chain across the water.

The horses were hitched to one end and the oxen to the other, then the animals were started by the twin lads. The chain swept over the bed of the lough, and caught fast on something heavy. Alas! The man had not fully investigated the smith's ancestry. There was a flaw in his pedigree...the chain soon broke at a weak link!

The chest remains at the bottom of the lough to this day.

It is said that the surface of the lough where the gold sunk is disturbed by neither wind nor gale....

Greenlee Lough

Broomlee Lough

Housesteads (Vercovicium)

King's Crag

Queen's Crag

Site of Sewingshields Castle

Busy Gap

King's Hill

"Though the history of Sewingshields castle is blended with legends of British days, its size never entitled it to a higher name than a tower... But...we will enshrine it here within the sound of Roman trumpets, and in sight of the armies of the Mistress of the World, as they make their well-defended marches from sea to sea."

Rev J Hodgson

Sir Walter Scott, 1817

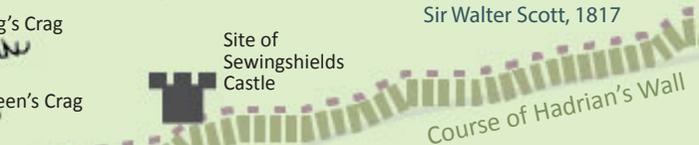
*'No towers are seen,
On the wild heath, but those that Fancy builds.
And save a fosse that tracks the moor with green,
Is naught remains to tell of what may there have been.'*

Sewingshields Castle

Ploughed out ditches and fishponds are the only visible remains of this 14th or early 15th century pele tower. A 1541 survey records:

"At Sewyngshealles is an old towre of thinherytaunce of John Heron of Chypchase esquier in great decaye in the rooffe & flores & lyeth waste & unplenysned."

In 1741 a visitor noted buildings constructed of Roman stones. Walls 1.5m high and vaults still existed in 1841 but all had gone by 1897.



The Witless Wight of Sewingshields (traditional)

You may have heard how the great King Arthur, his queen and his court were enchanted in a cave below the mighty Castle of Sewingshields. It is said that when Britannia is in danger, Arthur will rise again to engage the enemy, but that the King and his court will remain entranced until someone first blows a bugle and then, with the "sword of the stone", cuts a garter placed beside it.

None had found the cave, until one day a shepherd dropped his twine in the briars. Searching for it, he stumbled into a deep passage under the crag. The brave shepherd moved toward a distant light until he came upon a vast, vaulted hall. A huge fire blazed and in its glow he saw the monarch and his queen and court, asleep on thrones and rich couches.

On a table beside the fire lay the horn, sword, and garter. Our hero drew the sword from its rusty scabbard. The monarch and his courtiers began to stir. The shepherd cut the garter but, as he slowly sheathed the sword, the spell assumed its ancient power, and they all gradually sunk to rest; but not before the King exclaimed:

*"O woe betide that evil day, on which this witless wight was born,
Who drew the sword - the garter cut, but never blew the bugle-horn!"* Haydon Bridge

Terrified, the shepherd ran back along the passage, and through the briars. He could never again find that opening into the crags.

Based on a story collected by the Rev J Hodgson and Miss Carlyle, recounted by Rev J C Ollingwood Bruce.



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Steel Rigg

P



Sycamore Gap

Once Brewed

P



Vindolanda

P

Bardon Mill

P

River South Tyne

A69

VINDOLANDA

This fort guarded the Stanegate, the Roman road from east to west, forming a frontier even before Hadrian's Wall. The first, small timber fort was probably built in about AD 85. In the 1930s, the site was purchased by archaeologist Eric Birley. In 1973 his son Robin, also an archaeologist, discovered the first Vindolanda Tablets, fragments of thin, wooden leaves with writing dating to the 1st and 2nd centuries.

They are the oldest surviving handwritten documents in Britain, and they record military matters as well as personal messages involving soldiers and their families.