

AMBLESIDE ROMAN FORT

Audio Guide Transcript

Jess Freeland: We're here in Ambleside. Well, I suppose actually we're just south of Ambleside at Waterhead, on the northern tip of Lake Windermere, aren't we. And we've come through Borrans Park really close to the road, and we've just come in through this gate here. I'm looking for Ambleside Roman Fort, Andrew, but I'm not sure what I'm looking at here.

Andrew Roberts: Yes. So if you keep your back towards where the modern wall is and the gate is, keep the lake on your left, you can maybe discern the slightly raised area of ground ahead of us and some sort of small, low lying stones. These are the remains of Ambleside fort. And it doesn't look like much today. But this fort was crucial in establishing Roman control of the Lake District. So if we keep moving forward about 30 or so metres ahead of us, we'll actually find the remains of the main gate of the fort.

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Jess: Now, we haven't had to walk very far before encountering the fort. I can see these low-lying foundations of something. What are we looking at, Andrew?

Andrew: Well, we're looking at three pieces of wall. Two are in these U shapes and equidistant between the two we've got this shorter section. Now, either side of the shorter section in the middle, you would have had two passageways with arches above them so you could pass in and out of the fort. And then these U-shaped structures with their quite wide walls would have been the bases of quite tall towers, which would have offered good views of the surrounding landscape.

Jess: So I suppose it would have been quite an impressive structure. Which leads me to wonder why were the Romans here in Ambleside anyway?

Andrew: So the Romans get to Ambleside in about AD 90, so it's about 50 or so years into their conquest of Britain. And now initially, when the Romans first make it into the north of England in the AD 70s and 80s, they bypass Cumbria and they're moving on into Carlisle, modern-day Carlisle, northwards to Scotland. But then in the 90s, they come back and they consolidate a frontier just to the north of us, really. And then they start to take a bit of an interest in Cumbria. And it seems that at this point, a fort was built here at Ambleside, right at the heart of the Lake District, to really consolidate direct Roman control over this landscape. That fort is here for about 20 or 30 years.

Jess: Okay.

Andrew: And then there's a change of emperor. The famous emperor Hadrian comes along, and after a period of expansion of the empire, Hadrian is trying to reorder, consolidate his frontier provinces, of which Britannia, which is the Roman name for Britain, was one. And at this time, it seems as though this wooden fort that was here originally is replaced by some of the remains that you can see today, a stone fort. And that fort is going to sit here at the heart of the Lake District on a road that connects together Ambleside to the sea at a place called Ravenglass. And this road and the forts that are along it allow the Romans to control this area.

Jess: Okay. So this kind of network that is being built, that fits into the context of Hadrian's Wall being built to the north, then. So it's all a much wider network rather than just here in the Lake District.

Andrew: Yeah, there's a much wider network. So what Hadrian's Wall is doing, it's preventing access into the province and preventing raiding into the province. And then places like Ambleside, they are perhaps monitoring the local population that might not be so happy with Roman rule here. And then also allowing them to kind of control access along these routeways.

Jess: And so we're at the main gate here – what kind of layout is the rest of the fort?

Andrew: So this gate here is one of four gates. The fort itself would have originally been in a playing shape with curved edges. Now, those strong walls, once strong walls, have long since disappeared.

Jess: Yes, it's kind of hard to make that out now.

Andrew: It is, yeah. So they were once excavated but then covered back up again. So they are lurking there somewhere. And at various points you can also see some of the remains of the towers at their corners. But this is quite a considerable fort here with room for a garrison of around about 500 soldiers.

Jess: And I can make out some further foundations further into the fort. Should we take a look at those?

Andrew: Yeah. So if we carry on walking, keeping the lake on our left, we'll get to the central range of the fort where the most important buildings were located.

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Jess: So we've walked over from the main gate, walking through what looks like it would have been some sort of passageway and over the low-lying wall that was in front of us, and we're now in some sort of enclosed space. Where would we be standing? It really feels like we're in the centre of the fort here.

Andrew: We're absolutely in the centre of the fort, both physically and also conceptually, because we're standing in the *principia*, the command centre of the fort. And specifically we're standing in

the cross hall, which is a basilica. So probably about the size and the shape of the nave of a small church. And this particular space is probably the tallest building in this entire fort and in the settlement that surrounds it, and it's from here that the commanding officer would probably give his instructions to the garrison, maybe carry out any military discipline that needed to happen, and also important religious ceremonies as well. And the area we just stepped out of would have been an open courtyard, and it was indeed a passageway that we stepped through to begin with. And if we turn with Lake Windermere to our left and look ahead of us, we've got these three small rooms that were offices. And this rather conspicuous ...

Jess: Mysterious pit!

Andrew: ... Hole in the ground, yeah. And this is actually something that's really, really special.

Jess: It does feel very unusual. You kind of see these low-lying remains, but actually, this feels like quite a complete space, doesn't it?

Andrew: It is, yes. So the room that we're looking at would have been the sacred heart of the fort. This is the *aedes*, the shrine, in which the regiment would have kept their standards that they would have carried before them in battle.

Jess: So are these flags?

Andrew: They're banners, basically, with the emblems of the regiment on them. And they would have been protected here in the shrine and actually they would have been venerated by the soldiers. And then beneath them in this pit, you would have had the money. This is the treasury. So maybe in strong boxes here, you would have had the pay for the soldiers. And it's a reminder that there's a lot of kind of admin going on behind the scenes. You're going to get paid from this treasury. Records are going to be kept of your payment in the rooms either side.

Jess: And I suppose with quite a number of soldiers here you're going to have quite a bit of money.

Andrew: Yeah, quite a bit of money. And actually, compared to the general population, the soldiers here are quite well paid.

Jess: Regular job.

Andrew: Decent job, decent pay by the legions. Okay. It's a bit dangerous. But you've got adequately compensated. And this is part of the reason why these forts actually become settlements and people come from the local area to live around them as well.

Jess: Okay. So now moving away from the pits and looking away from the lake, there's quite a lot of low-lying remains, all in quite a tight space. What was this part of the fort?

Andrew: Well, if we walk about 10 or so metres up to this small ridge, we can get a better sense of what these buildings are. They are the granaries. And so they are one of the three most

important buildings in the fort. And they have quite a distinctive layout. There are two of them here. And they're these long, rectangular buildings with these distinctive short projecting walls, which are the buttresses that are there in order to hold up these heavy walls and indeed the heavy roofs above them. And these are really for storing all of the food that you need to feed the garrison that operates from here.

Jess: So some more than just grain.

Andrew: More than just grain, yes. So there would have been grain here because that's an important part of the Roman diet. But you've got anything that's perishable. And the idea is that they're going to be kept nice and fresh and cool in these structures. And we have some clues here as to how that was achieved. Because there are slightly narrower walls running the length of their interior. So in this nearer granary here, we have three such, what are called dwarf walls. And they're not particularly high, and they're just high enough to create a cavity underneath the floor that they support. And the point was that it would allow air to circulate underneath the building and keep what was inside nice and cool and protected from – hopefully protected from any rodents that might have a nibble on your grain.

Jess: And there's kind of small gaps in these outer walls, are they part of the granary structure?

Andrew: Yeah. That's a really good spot, actually, because they're there to allow air into the basement, essentially, and then they become air cooled.

Jess: And so all of the food that's stored here in the granaries, are the soldiers extracting that from the local landscape or they kind of shipping that in from elsewhere?

Andrew: Probably a bit of both. The Roman army's likely to try and find its resources from as nearby as possible because that makes it a lot easier and lot cheaper to do. But when you've got a garrison of 500 soldiers, it may be the case that you don't have enough food produced in the local landscape to sustain that. And the Roman army had quite a considerable chain of logistics in order to supply these places if need be. And then there's this other issue with these granaries, is that it's a bit of a mystery as to why they are somewhat bigger than you might expect in a fort like this. So it might be the case that these granaries are also storing food that is going on elsewhere, maybe to other forts in the chain, perhaps over to Hardknott, and they're having to take on extra capacity in order to keep this wider system running.

Jess: Yeah, it really is a substantial building. This footprint is massive really. And you get a real sense standing on this slight ridge of this large central range that goes through the middle of the fort. And we've talked about these two buildings at this end. But there's one remaining further towards the lake, isn't there?

Andrew: Yes, there's one more building. That's the *praetorium*. And that's the commanding officer's house. And that's quite a lavish house for one individual and his family. So we can go and have a little explore of that now.

Andrew: We're now standing on a raised area at the centre of this quite large square building that occupies the same amount of ground as the *principia* or the granary.

Jess: Okay,

Andrew: So it's a very sizeable structure. And this was given over to the commanding officer and his family. It's a little bit difficult to understand because only part of it has been excavated. But you can see that there are these whole series of rooms.

Jess: You can see quite a few here, can't you.

Andrew: Yes, to the back and on the side that's nearest the *principia*. And then on the other side, there's less detail. And this is the bit that's unexcavated. But in its original format, it would have been a large square house built around a courtyard.

Jess: Okay.

Andrew: And built to the kind of specification that you might find in towns and cities across the empire. And the reason for that is that the commanding officer was very considerable, very high up within the Roman Empire, expected a standard of life wherever he was living. He had his family here with him, probably had slaves as well, to wait on them. And so the house had to be able to accommodate all of these different people. It had to have a nice dining room, had to have kitchens. Some commanding officers' houses also had their own personal stables and little bath houses as well. So all in all, it's not a bad way to live out your life here on the frontier of the Roman Empire.

Jess: Yeah. Not bad lakeside position, is it? And so do you think this is quite a typical layout of the commander's house, would you say?

Andrew: Yes, it is very typical, actually. And indeed, Ambleside is in some ways quite a typical Roman fort. The *principia* looks very similar to others. The granaries are in the same position. They have the same layout to other examples. And then the walls, that playing card shape, very, very similar to forts that we find across Roman Britain.

Jess: Okay, So if this is typical, does that mean we know where the soldiers were in their barracks?

Andrew: Yeah, we do. So we know that partly through excavations in the early 20th century, but also because we know normally where the barracks are within Roman forts. So where we are here in the central range, between here and the main east gate ...

Jess: Okay. So toward towards the road.

Andrew: Back towards the road, would have been filled with barracks. And also then the other side of the central range between here and the other wall of the fort, there would have also

have been mainly barracks as well. And these barracks were long, narrow buildings. They were subdivided into smaller compartments, which would have held maybe about ten soldiers.

Jess: Quite tight.

Andrew: Quite tight, quite cosy in there compared to the sort of the lavish lifestyle, spacious rooms ...

Jess: Nice lakeside house we're in.

Andrew: Yeah, in here. And then somewhere between these two different kinds of lifestyle, you would have had a small, essentially apartment, at the end of each barrack, which would have been occupied by the centurion, who was in charge of 80 men, and probably his family as well.

Jess: Okay. So if the centurion has his family, so does the commanding officer, presumably, are the soldiers bringing their family as well? Are they anywhere?

Andrew: We don't think that the soldiers were allowed to bring their families into the fort, but there was a settlement around the fort, and it's likely that the soldiers would have had families living in the settlement.

Jess: And do we know where this where the settlement was? Who was living there?

Andrew: The settlement mainly would have been to the north of the fort. So basically, if you turn and look with your back towards Windermere, you turn and look to where there's a few trees, a few rocky outcrops. That's the Borrans field, and that's probably where the majority of the settlement would have been. But also back in Borrans Park as well, we think there may well have been a settlement there.

Jess: So that's a huge amount of people spending their lives here in the fort. Do we know what kind of daily life would have been like for the soldiers?

Andrew: I think daily life is pretty routine, maybe even mundane for a lot of the soldiers. A lot of their time is probably taken up with kind of running the place, you know, getting food ready, maybe looking after their equipment, maybe going out on patrol, things like that. And then maybe sporadically you might get, you know, times where you have to respond to trouble in this area. A bit of trouble. Yeah, possibly. One of the likely reasons that Ambleside is established here is because the Romans were trying to impose their rule on the local population. So it's likely that they probably saw action.

Jess: And do we know if there was any action here at Ambleside?

Andrew: Yes, we do, actually. We have very, very rare evidence of fighting taking place here and actually casualties that occurred. And this comes from an inscription that was found here. Now, an inscription is sort of carving into stonework. And the Romans did this to memorialise those that had died in the same way as we have gravestones today. And there was one that was

found here that records the death of a retired centurion called Flavius, who lived until he was 55. But potentially more interestingly, also the death of his son, a man called Flavius Romanus, who was a clerk. So he would have been one of the people who would have been allowed into the offices at the *principia*. And quite intriguingly, it says that he was killed at the age of 35 in the camp. So in the fort by the enemy.

Jess: And that seems a little bit unfortunate that a clerk was the one to get killed.

Andrew: Yes. So if there was some sort of an attack, which seems to be implied here, even if you were a clerk and your job was to do a lot of the administration, you were a soldier first. And so you'd have to respond to the enemy and confront them in battle. And unfortunately for him, he died fighting.

Jess: That's quite a remarkable survival, isn't it?

Andrew: It's so rare to find evidence of how people died. And I think it's practically unique that we find evidence of a Roman soldier dying inside their own fort.

Jess: Now we're making our way gradually closer to the lake. It is pretty hard to ignore. Is there more that we can see over there?

Andrew: Yes. So if we go about 20 or 30 or so metres closer to the lake, we can actually see the remains of the south gate of the fort. And maybe we can talk a little bit more about why the fort's positioned so close to Lake Windermere.

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Jess: We're at the south gate and it looks quite different to that main gate that we came in from. It looks a lot smaller.

Andrew: Yeah, it's a less impressive structure. It's a single passage gateway and you can just see there are two lines of stones either side of what would have been the carriageway. But we have this rather nice large stone with a raised edge, and that would have been the threshold of the gateway. And if you look closely on that stone, there are two circular impressions in it. And those are basically where the doors would have been hung. And then just next to it, in this this narrow little ditch, you could actually see the foundations of the wall itself.

Jess: Yeah, You really do get a sense of it, don't you? And so we're still a little way from from the lake itself. Was that the same back when the Romans were here?

Andrew: No. We think actually that Windermere was almost up to where we are standing at the south gate. And that's precisely why this location is chosen. Windermere is really, really important to communications in this area. Conceivably, you could sail down Windermere and ultimately end up at the sea. And that's a really important routeway in Roman times. Of course, we often think of Roman roads when we think about communications, but actually water transport is arguably more vital because it allows you to travel long distances relatively cheaply. So if you're importing

or exporting supplies and you're trading over long distances, this is a really important location. And it's one of the reasons why Ambleside is such a good spot, because we also have a roadway that goes to the west.

Jess: Still here!

Andrew: Yes. Still here – well, we have a roadway heading north here. And actually from Ambleside, there would have been a road that runs through the Rothay valley and eventually you would have been connected to the Roman network, which ends up at Hadrian's Wall. And to the west of us, you go down the Brathay valley, and then you have a Roman road that runs across to where Hardknott Fort is today. And then eventually you end up again on the Cumbrian coast at a place called Ravenglass, where there was another Roman fort there that controlled that vital harbour.

Jess: Yeah. You really get a sense of how Ambleside was plugged into this much, much larger network, don't you?

Andrew: Yes, that's right.

Jess: So being so well connected as they were here at Ambleside, did that bring prosperity to the people that were living in and around the fort as well?

Andrew: It's likely that's the case. We know that there's a sizeable settlement in and around the fort. Partly that's because of the economic, the spending power of the soldiers, but also probably because this was a place of exchange. You know, there's some speculation that there was a dock, a Roman dock here. It's likely a good kind of hub at the centre of this network. And you'd need a bit of trade, a bit of exchange in order to sustain such a sizeable community.

Jess: And I guess, is that one of the reasons why the fort lasted so long here as well?

Andrew: Potentially, yes. I think initially you're certainly here for its strategic value. But if you can establish a community and you can establish trade in this region, then it becomes somewhat self-sufficient. And we do know, unlike the other, the nearest Roman fort, which is at Hardknott, which was only in place for, say, 20 or so years, Ambleside is here right up until, well, the late 4th century, almost up until the end of Roman Britain.

Jess: Now, that's actually quite a long time that they were here, isn't it? So what kind of effect was that having on the local community? Were they kind of spreading their Roman culture?

Andrew: Definitely here, they were. So we know from the archaeology, from some of the finds that are here, that very typical Roman goods, Roman pottery for example, was used by the local population. So if, as we suspect, some inhabitants of Cumbria came to live at places like Ambleside and other forts, they were probably living something that approximated a Roman lifestyle. But Cumbria is perhaps a little bit distinct from other areas of Britain, particularly in the south, where we have large towns. We also have very typical Roman countryside living where it seems as if the population is becoming more Romanised. The picture here is a little bit more

mixed. In places like Ambleside, places like Ravenglass, we have these long-standing military presences, which actually implies that maybe the population wasn't too sure about Roman life. And elsewhere, outside of these areas, life often seems to continue in a very similar fashion to how it went on before. So maybe there's a bit of a mixed picture. Some people adopt Roman ways and habits, live a bit like Romans, and then some are able to basically continue life much as they did previously.

Jess: What I think is so remarkable about this site is that we're so close to the road. We've got loads of people driving past, walking past. And yet really, this site is still so hidden in the landscape, so many people could miss it.

Andrew: And what is hidden is a really big part of the Roman occupation of Cumbria. We're here for over 300 years of Roman Britain. And what I really like about it is that the reason why we have the modern-day settlement here, we have flocks of tourists coming here really to the heart of the Lake District, is the same reason why the Romans came here. It was to be connected to this magnificent lake behind us and all the benefits that bestows from living in this landscape. And I think that people perhaps wouldn't associate the Lake District with the Romans. But there's such a deep and rich history to be explored.