ENGLISH HERITAGE

SPEAKING WITH SHADOWS

Transcript of Episode 6: Far From Home – The People of Hadrian's Wall

Josie: I'm Josie Long. Welcome to Speaking with Shadows. This is the podcast that listens to the people that history forgot.

If I told you I was traveling to a fort along Hadrian's Wall, you'd probably assume that this episode was all about Roman soldiers with feathery helmets. What I remember from being a child learning about Hadrian's Wall was having a bookmark with a really intense looking soldier on it. But I'm hoping that you've got a little bit wise to my surprises by now.

Instead I'm about to find out about the diverse community that lived at Birdoswald Fort in Cumbria from the Roman period and the years following. And it's not what you'd expect. It's easy to assume that the heroic white men that feature in our films, TV programs and classrooms represent some kind of bona fide version of Roman society, but this site is absolutely roaring with clues of a far richer, far more complex, far more interesting story of Roman civilization.

Hadrian's Wall became a meeting place for people from across Rome's vast empire: Syrians, North Africans, people from Spain, Holland, Romania all found their way here. And it wasn't just soldiers who lived here. For 300 years of Roman occupation and for about a hundred years after that, Birdoswald on Hadrian's Wall was home, not just to a military settlement of a thousand soldiers at its peak, but a whole community in its own right, and it's their story we'll hear today.

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Josie: I'm here with Dr Andrew Roberts. Hi!

Andrew: Hello!

Josie: There's a sheer drop to one side of us where the river's running by – it's beautiful. We've got a great view. Where are we?

Andrew: We're to the south of the fort and we're standing looking southward back down the valley.

Josie: What would it have looked like in Roman times?

Andrew: If we turn northward and look towards the fort itself, what we would have seen would have been the high walls of Birdoswald Fort or Banna, as the Romans would have termed it, and the fort would have been filled full of buildings – some of them quite considerable, some of them very tall and

impressive looking. But it wasn't, of course, just the fort that would have been here. Outside the south wall, outside the east and west walls, would have been settlements – probably for some civilians that would have lived at Birdoswald – that were vital to the functioning of the fort, and indeed to the Wall.

Josie: Like a very living village around us.

Andrew: Yes, it's a small town. It's not an inconsiderable town effectively. When Hadrian ordered the building of Hadrian's Wall, the original plan was that it would be a wall stretching 73 miles from the east coast to the west coast of Britain. And initially the plan was always to have very small military installations, but then for reasons that we don't entirely understand, the plans changed and large forts were also added to the design. This meant that places like Birdoswald became occupied – became garrisoned. Essentially what you have now is an extended community of thousands of people, not just the soldiers but their families and the traders, and the farmers and people that are going to live around these installations.

Josie: That's going to massively change the area, isn't it?

Andrew: Absolutely.

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Josie: Andrew, we're in front of quite a well preserved area of stones. What are we looking at?

Andrew: We're looking at a gate way, and it's the main east gate of Birdoswald Fort. One of the nice things about the Romans is they like to put their names on things when they built them, proclaiming who built it and when they built it.

Josie: I'm very much the same.

Andrew: Indeed! And in the 1850s, when some of the first excavations were taking place here, the archaeologists found an inscription. I have a copy of it here for you to see.

Josie: It's in really good condition isn't it.

Andrew: The text is very clear. Basically this is a record of who the governor was at that time, who the commanding officer was in the fort, what the garrison was called, and it says that this was the first cohort of Dacians. It basically proclaims that they rebuilt this gatehouse and that they were now the garrison of Birdoswald.

Josie: Where were the Dacians from?

Andrew: Well, the Dacians were from the Roman province of Dacia which roughly corresponds to modern-day Romania. They were conquered by the Romans, by Hadrian's predecessor Trajan in about 100 AD. And it was quite typical for the Romans that once they'd conquered a kingdom or territory, they would recruit or force –

Josie: It was very much a choice of join us or –

Andrew: Yes. Join the army, be enslaved, or die.

Josie: It's not a great choice!

Andrew: No, it's not a fantastic choice. And the reason why they did this is that once they had conquered a territory, they wanted to swell the numbers of their army – the Roman army – and also break the connection between the soldiers of that area with the land. So they would make them join the army and transport them across the empire so they couldn't cause any trouble

Josie: But when that happened these people still brought their cultures and their traditions and their beliefs with them didn't they?

Andrew: Well that's what appears to be the case. So if you look closely at the inscription, there's actually a carving, a relief –

Josie: Oh yes, a sword –

Andrew: Yes, a sword – a particular kind, a distinctive kind of sword, with a curved end. It is what we call a falx and it was the traditional weapon of the Dacians. What we do have are the names of two children that unfortunately died young and were buried here. And their memorial stones, or at least one of their memorial stones, contain the name Decebalus, which is a Dacian name, and quite remarkably is actually the name of the king that Trajan defeated when he conquered the Dacians centuries before.

Josie: Oh wow, so it's almost like a resistance thing.

Andrew: I don't know if it would have been like a resistance. I think that's difficult to tell, but certainly there's some kind of cultural memory of that event, or it's just that it's a common Dacian name that's been passed down the generations.

Josie: And on top of that it was a polytheistic society wasn't it? So they were still allowed to have different religion to what the bosses might have had – bosses is the wrong word, but it's very much how I see the world.

Andrew: Yes, so the Roman Empire does insist upon certain ways of behaving – certain religious practices – so if you're a soldier you have to worship the main gods as part of your duties. You would have mass participation worship led by your commanding officer where you'd dedicate altars and you'd

praise Jupiter for example, but then it didn't necessarily follow that in your personal life, you had to worship the same gods as everybody else. Often when new garrisons came to new locations they got to know who the local gods were – the gods that existed before the Romans arrived – and they thought that they were as important as the gods that they brought with them. So we find records along Hadrian's Wall of instances whereby Celtic gods are picked up and worship by the soldiers.

Josie: Wow, which I don't think is something you'd expect from something that was so all-conquering and pervasive – to have that pluralism as well.

Andrew: Yes, I think it's part of the success of the Romans in the sense that, while there are certain things that they do insist upon – loyalty to the emperor, certain cultural practices – they're not overly bothered about certain elements of personal choice.

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Josie: These excavations give such a good impression of how built up this area would have been, and you've got to imagine as well that there are people from all over the Roman Empire and beyond commingling here. So it would have been a really busy place with lots of different people.

Andrew: Yes absolutely and where we're standing would have been the main road of the fort and the main road of the frontier. So the road that passes through the east gate where we just were, out through the west gate, would have run the entire length of the frontier. The thing about Hadrian's Wall is that people think that it's a border, a boundary. And it is that, but it's also a means of connecting.

Josie: So we were talking about the Dacians and those people being garrisoned here, but it doesn't end there in terms of the stories of different people being in this part of the country does it?

Andrew: No absolutely not because you need thousands of soldiers to garrison Hadrian's Wall, and these were drawn from the auxiliaries of the Roman army, which came from as far afield as North Africa, from Syria, Spaniards from Asturias in northern Spain –

Josie: I've been there, it's great.

Andrew: Yeah it's a lovely place. Soldiers from Gaul, soldiers from Germania, and they're serving in garrisons like Birdoswald.

Josie: It's so interesting to think of this place as being that multicultural and having that many different influences at that time.

ENGLISH HERITAGE

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Josie: Next I'm going to find out more about the clues the archaeology from this area has given us about communities from long ago. If I head across the courtyard to the exhibition in the farmhouse buildings here I should be able to meet Dr Frances McIntosh who's the curator of Hadrian's Wall and the North East at English Heritage. Hello!

Frances: Hi there, welcome.

Josie: Thank you. It's really nice to be here. I should say it's the most beautiful day of the year out here. I've been walking around – there are lambs gambling – but we've come inside to talk a bit about archaeology. Obviously archaeology is not new to the area, but when did local farmers actually hand over the site and let you really get stuck in?

Frances: Well, actually there's been archaeology and excavations for a long time before the farmers gave up farming the land – for the last 150 years.

Josie: What's been found here that gets you most excited? What's been the most thrilling thing?

Frances: There are two aspects to it really: excavations at Birdoswald have found evidence of really late occupation, which is really exciting. But what we're inside the visitor centre to look at in particular and talk about, is the end of Roman life: death. So in the 1950s those farmers we were talking about were ploughing fields outside of the fort, and tombstones and cremation urns – pots with the remains of cremated individuals – came up.

Josie: Just the juxtaposition between somebody ploughing so they can plant something that's going to be harvested six months later and urns that have sat there for 1000 years, 2,000 years. It's astonishing isn't it.

Frances: It is, and thankfully, archaeologists had a really good relationship with the farmers at the time so they immediately reported it, and as soon as things started coming up that land was put under pasture and not ploughed anymore. But what it meant was that we'd found the location of the cemetery. The Roman rules were that the dead were not allowed to be buried inside a town or a settlement. So what was really exciting was, because all these cemeteries are outside of the forts on Hadrian's Wall, quite often we don't know where they are. So the fact that this farmer found it meant that we were able to put under protection. Then unfortunately in 2008 – the river Irving has a big cliff going down to it and it looks like quite a small river, but it has a lot of force when it's in full spate – in the winter of 2008 we lost a huge amount, a couple of metres. So the decision was taken to excavate a strip about 20 metres wide, and that would clear the archaeology. So we knew that land was safe to go. We weren't going to lose any archaeology. And so that's what happened in 2009.

Josie: We're next to the cabinet and there are five urns just in this cabinet and they're so complete – it's astonishing. And that was just in that strip?

Frances: Well, this is only a small portion of what we found. There were nearly 50 burials of various forms, at least 12 of which had urns or pots made out of ceramic in them. And what we did for the exhibition here was choose the five with the most interesting stories and the best things to be able to tell visitors about.

Josie: So if we look at this first urn, it's got contents that have been preserved.

Frances: Yes, and this was the only one that had things inside the pot other than cremated human remains. You can't really see in detail what they are because of they all coalesced together with corrosion. However, we were able to use X-rays and CT scans, and this is an urn that contained part of a young woman aged between 20 to 40.

Josie: So then you know that there were young women here, and then you can find out more clues as to how they lived, from that.

Frances: That's right, and this urn just kept on giving in terms of information and surprises and questions. So the orangey mass that you can see a surrounding all the other items in the urn – that's iron mail, ring mail.

Josie: Wow, so it's somebody's chain mail?

Frances: Well chain mail is a Victorian made-up term –

Josie: No!

Frances: So even when we talk about medieval knights wearing chain mail, it's not actually chain mail. It's rings that are all linked together.

Josie: Right, so it's ring mail. So that would have been somebody's armour.

Frances: Yes, so it's a fragment of it. Unfortunately we don't know how big it is because we haven't been able to unfold it – that would be really exciting. It's obviously just a little fragment and might be a cut square of something. So why has a woman got it in her burial? Women were not allowed to be soldiers legally. Was her husband a soldier and he's left an offering? The only evidence we have of women being buried in the Roman period anywhere in the empire with mail, is in southern Poland, and that's just a few burials and they also don't know what that means. So it's really exciting, but there are still so many questions that are unanswered.

This lady also has another potential story: she was buried next to another small urn, but after it.

Josie: And it's a tiny child's tooth.

Frances: Yes, and so our specialists were able to tell us that that tooth came from a five-year-old child. So obviously you start to think: mother and child –

Josie: Is it a family?

Frances: Who knows, and then you think, maybe the dad was a soldier. I love that. I'm an archaeologist, I like to work in facts, but I also think these are the stories that inspire people to think about real life on the wall, not just the soldiers marching up and down. That's the traders who are supplying the soldiers with things. It's the families and dependents who live around local settlements. The soldiers are just one part of that military community and what we see in the cemeteries is just a little glance into that.

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Josie: There is something really unusual and special about being here – the sense of layer upon layer of civilisation is really present in the landscape, and in the man-made structure that intersects it. In Roman times this area became known as Banna but modern-day Birdoswald was a farm until the 1980s that worked alongside one of the longest surviving stretches of Hadrian's Wall, which blows my mind. It's such a strange interplay of the regular, the everyday, the temporary and massively important historical things.

Today the area is a hot spot for walkers, cyclists and visitors paying homage to the remains of the fort: one of 16 along the wall. Just today we've already seen about five very serious cycle guys with their bikes and panniers stopping, taking a good look around and then getting back on their way. I'm about to meet someone who's travelled a bit to be here themselves. Malcolm Redman owns the Bush Nook Guesthouse in nearby Upper Denton and he's a bit of a history fan himself.

Hi, it's nice to meet you.

Malcolm: Nice to meet you as well, Josie.

Josie: The wind is so high!

Malcolm: Well the fact we're on the top of a Cumbrian hillside does help the wind a bit!

Josie: How long have you been here?

Malcolm: We're coming up on just the end of our tenth year on the Wall. If you look straight across, we're just behind the hill over there, if you're looking south from there. I watch the sun rising and shining on Birdoswald every morning!

Josie: When it's sunny, it's beautiful.

Malcolm: Exactly!

Josie: You're from Northern Ireland.

Malcolm: Yes, originally from County Armagh, a place called Portadown. And my family roots actually go back to north west Cumbria. My family were Anglo Normans who landed here in 11th or 12th century.

Josie: It's like a personal excavation for you.

Malcolm: Very much so, yes.

Josie: And you run a guesthouse – is tourism a really big thing for the community around here?

Malcolm: Believe it or not, when we first arrived here I had no idea what we were coming to, but we very quickly realised that the prehistory and the post history of Hadrian's Wall is very, very important to this area because you've got the all the early Celtic connections taking it right back in time right through Romans, Anglo-Saxons, reivers, right through to the modern time – all the industrial history.

Josie: Why does this place feel so special as a place to live?

Malcolm: Well, I think just take a look around us this afternoon – the sun's shining, we're on a lovely little hillock, we can see a 360 view all around us. The air is fresh and open.

Josie: As someone who lives in London, what I'm doing is taking great gulps of air that I can take back down with me.

Malcolm: If we were standing here in AD122, I can imagine there would be hundreds of people milling around here. There would be Romans and all the various nationalities that they brought in with them. You would have had local Celts who without the Romans – they were supplying the Romans with beer beef, corn, barley – so they sustained a community here that was probably better off than a lot of other areas in the country at the time.

Josie: Thanks so much for coming and chatting to me, Malcolm. It's been really interesting and I can't wait to come back.

Malcolm: Well, please do. There's a bed for you in Bush Nook if you fancy it.

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ENGLISH HERITAGE

Josie: It's not surprising that the Wall has inspired many works of art and writing. One creative writing project commissioned by Art UK invited international writers from the countries that once patrolled Hadrian's Wall to visit the remains of the Wall today. Denisa Comănescu is a Romanian poet who wrote about the Dacians and their community at Birdoswald in her poem 'A Birdoswald Sequence'.

Denisa:

A child was named Decebalus.
He was born in AD 205 in the valley of Irthing,
beyond the Roman fort.

His father guarded the Wall –
endlessly patrolling
his ears ready to catch
the slightest sound rushing from the North.
The wind had emptied his mind
so that he could easily have written poems.

His Brigante lover did not know
why their son had got this name,
she was only praying
her Dacian soldier might neither be moved away
or be killed by the Picts.

He kept saying
that after ten years he would be freed,
awarded some land, marrying her
and happily living together
just here, beyond the Roman fort.

Their common language was the Wall.

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Josie: Next up, I'm going to meet a passionate modern-day Banna-ite, Angela Stephenson, who works with the visitor team here at the fort.

Angela, hi. It's really nice to meet you. Tell me a bit about what you do here.

Angela: Well, I'm a Historic Steward and my main role is to welcome visitors to the fort.

Josie: So you live locally as well.

Angela: Yes, I do now.

Josie: How long have you lived here?

Angela: Since I married my husband, which is 34 years ago.

Josie: Oh that's nice, congratulations!

Angela: Thank you. I moved all the way from South Shields.

Josie: Oh so a big culture shock!

Angela: (*laughing*) Absolutely! He is Cumbrian and so I settled in the area and I've been working here about 11 years.

Josie: What does the place mean to you?

Angela: What's incredible about the Roman army is that they were the first ones to consolidate – you had your surveyors, you had your masons, you had all sorts of engineers. You had all these other people who weren't just fighting. So they were wanting to – I should imagine – expand and make it as good a life as they could.

Josie: And I suppose what that means is it's a much more integrative society. What happens is then people do put down roots, they do integrate, they do make friends and join up with the people who already live there.

Angela: Yes, obviously, they've been here for over 300 years, but then of course things start to change in Rome. So by this time you've got integration, not only the settled – the vicus on either side of the fort is where the families are living – they've got children, they're settled, they've got a nice living as well. Also, when the Roman soldiers retired they were able – if you can imagine – they had a bit of land and a bit of farming, and they've got family here –

Josie: They just lived their life here.

Angela: Because it's still very much that way today in that, in the winter months, you've got more local people coming in, because we've got a huge network of sharing in local businesses. So when you think of everything from bed and breakfast, all the accommodation, we've got the cheese people who are doing cottage industries. We've got breweries. We've got all sorts of networks that have built up around. And I would say that is the time when all the staff and everybody get to network really.

Josie: So it's really similar to 2,000 years ago

Angela: Yes, we may be wearing different clothes, but I would say it's still very similar!

ENGLISH HERITAGE

Josie: Thank you, that was so great. It's so nice to meet you.

Angela: Thank you very much.

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Josie: It's amazing to hear about the legacy that lived on after the Romans left Birdoswald. I thought I'd pop back outside to ask Andrew a little more.

After the Romans left, the settlement remained didn't it?

Andrew: Yes, that's one of the most fascinating things about Birdoswald is that the Romans decided to withdraw from the province, officially, but they don't all just leave. It's not like every soldier goes back to Rome –

Josie Because, it makes sense, it's been hundreds of years! It's not just two years or something.

Andrew: Exactly, because they're not all from Rome. They're originally drawn from across the whole breadth of the empire and indeed would have settled in places like Birdoswald and would have been brought up in places like Birdoswald and served here. And so when the Roman Empire effectively collapses in Britain, the garrison at Birdoswald stays and carves out a community independent from the Empire.

Josie: And then what happened to that community in the longer term afterwards?

Andrew: It's difficult to say. We have some evidence that they continued living here for around a hundred years, perhaps more, but in this point in the history of Britain, we don't have too many written sources telling us exactly what –

Josie: The Dark Ages!

Andrew: (*laughing*) Yes, well the traditional term is the Dark Ages, but it's a bit of a misnomer because although we don't have a lot of information about this period it's not to say that these societies were in any way backwards or unsophisticated. Actually they were probably very sophisticated societies. They just didn't necessarily express that sophistication through literature.

Josie: What I'm finding a lot with recording these is that a lot of the things I was just summarily taught as a young person – I now say to people: I mean, that's a very basic way of describing this! I find it really interesting because I'm like, wow, everything I knew is just not quite fit for purpose.

Andrew: Well, it's always good to have a starting point, but it's always good to think that they are just starting points and they're a way into a deeper and more nuanced conversation.

ENGLISH HERITAGE

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Josie: It's been really interesting finding out more of the details about what actually happened here, who lived here, the length of time that there was a community here, and how diverse it was. I find it really satisfying to think about the fact that identity is never been simple and that the culture in Britain has never been one single thing. It's never been something simple to explain. And I love that you've got this interplay of people moving here, settling here and then putting down their roots afterwards.

I discovered that Roman society was slightly more permissive than I'd thought in terms of individual freedoms and choice. The fact that people could carry their customs and their traditions with them to some extent is fascinating to me. Again, it's always more complicated than you might think, and it's always richer than you think in terms of what you might find out, and how sophisticated society has always been. It's interesting to think that long after the Romans left, people were still living here as a community.

So, that is the end of our series, Speaking with Shadows. And I really hope it's got you excited to find out more about the areas of history that we haven't yet been to, the corners that we haven't delved into. There's so much more to discover. It's been so thrilling talking to historians and them saying 'we've got more to research and we've only just started on this'. You really feel when you visit these places the layers of history and how many different stories are in all of them.

So what I would recommend is come to one of the sites, chat to the team and see where it takes you.

You can find out more about the story today at english-heritage.org.uk/speakingwithshadows. And if you have a question for any of our experts or you just want to weigh in with your own opinions on this stuff, tweet us. We've got a hashtag #speakingwithshadows. And if you've enjoyed the episode, please recommend it to your friends. You can share it. You can leave us a review.

Thanks so much for listening. I really hope you've enjoyed the series. My name is Josie Long, and you've been listening to Speaking with Shadows.