

HARDKNOTT ROMAN FORT

Audio Guide Transcript

Jess Freeland: We're here to visit Hardknott Roman Fort. And we've driven east up the Hardknott Pass. Not the whole way, but even this bit – it's quite touch and go, isn't it, Andrew?

Andrew Roberts: Yeah. It's not something you want to be doing on a wet or icy day.

Jess: No. And we've parked in, there's two laybys on either side of the fort and we've come to the one that's slightly higher. You can park in one that's a bit lower down, but it's a bit of a steeper walk up to the fort. And we can just about see the walls, can't we, poking – hidden in the landscape. Yeah, that's what we're off to see.

Andrew: It's quite astonishing, really, to find a fort in this majestic location. And the Romans built it because they had already built a road going up Hardknott, like that the modern-day road does today. And so they needed a fort in order to control who had access to that road. And for me, this is the most spectacular site that English Heritage look after.

Jess: I'm excited to take a look. So we're just heading in the direction of the fort, I guess?

Andrew: Yes, it's just north-west. About 5 minutes' scramble up the bank. And we're going to go to the remains of the southern gate. On the way we're going to pass some other ruins as well, which we're going to come back to a little bit later. But we're going to head for the fort itself first.

Jess: Okay. So we'll save those until later on.

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Andrew: We've just marched through the south gate of the fort, taken a left turn and come up to some slightly higher ground, where we really can begin to understand what a spectacular location this fort sits in. It's on a spur just above Hardknott fell. And from here, we get some absolutely spectacular views.

Jess: It's a bit of a slow march, I suppose – it gets a bit boggy in places, doesn't it? It's all right up here.

Andrew: Yeah, we hopped a bit across some of the streams and that, but it's reasonably okay here and we've got a fabulous day for it. And from here we can really take in some of the great sights of the Lake District. We've got Scafell Pike to the north. We've got the Hardknott Pass itself to the east. And if we look west down the valley, we can actually see the Irish Sea. So you can

kind of understand why the Romans thought that this was a good location because it gives them really commanding views of this whole area.

Jess: Definitely. But what were the Romans controlling? Why here in the first place?

Andrew: Well, the Romans have been in the north of England since the AD 70s, so some 30 years after the initial invasion of Britain. But in the 70s and 80s, they're pushing northwards. So they're bypassing this part of Cumbria. They're moving northwards to Carlisle and then pushing into Scotland. But then in the AD 90s, they retreat from Scotland and they establish a frontier zone just to the north. And it seems at that point they decide that they want to consolidate their position in the Lake District itself. So at Ambleside, which is really at the heart of the Lake District, they built a fort and then they construct a road that runs down from Ambleside all the way to the coast. And they put a small fort at a place called Ravenglass. And in between they build Hardknott Fort. And this controls that road as it passes through this vital valley and across one of the few passes that allows you to traverse the Lake District itself.

Jess: So it's kind of breaking up the journey between the two, would you say?

Andrew: Yeah, it's breaking up the journey between the two. So if the Romans need to march between the two, they've got a place to stop. But also then they can keep an eye on anybody else that's moving through this landscape.

Jess: And this is just one route in, I suppose. Is that how they were controlling the wider area further into Cumbria? Was it kind of a much larger network?

Andrew: Well, yes and no, in that this is really the only route through the Lake District. And Ravenglass on the coast is really the only point at which you can enter the Lake District via the sea. However, it is part of a wider network. So you have a chain of forts down the Cumbrian coast, which is part of the Hadrian's Wall network. And then if you were at Hardknott and you're marching to Ambleside, you'd then be able to continue with the road network across to where modern-day Penrith is and a fort at Brougham Castle.

Jess: So when exactly was the fort here at Hardknott, and when did the remains that we can see, when do they date to?

Andrew: Well the fort at Ambleside is built in the AD 90s, and it seems that then about 20 or 30 or so years later under the emperor Hadrian, there's a process of consolidating the frontier provinces of the empire and putting their garrisons in order. So he seems to order the rebuilding of the fort at Ambleside. And then at that point he orders the construction of a fort here at Hardknott.

Jess: And it's so substantial, it almost looks part of the landscape. Was it here for a long time?

Andrew: It's one of the amazing things about Hardknott, when you walk through the gates between these imposing walls, you think, Oh, this is something that really marked out Roman power for centuries. But actually, Hardknott was only really operational for about 20 years. So

they build it under Hadrian and it may even be the case that they abandoned it at the end of Hadrian's reign because they felt that they didn't need it any more, because not only did they have the fort at Ambleside, but they also then rebuilt a larger fort down on the coast at Ravenglass and Hardknott basically becomes redundant.

Jess: So all that effort, bringing all these stones here for just 20 years, that's crazy.

Andrew: It is, yeah. But then that's kind of the life of a Roman soldier. When the emperor tells you to do something, you have to work hard in order to achieve it. And then maybe the policy moves on, emperors move on, and actually, you just have to up and leave and go somewhere else.

Jess: Yeah. From this slightly higher ground, you can really get a sense of this large enclosure that were the fort's outer walls. I'm struggling slightly to understand what the layout would have been like.

Andrew: It's difficult to understand from the ground. And that's because the topography here is very up and down, okay. It's not an ideal place to build a Roman fort. You want a really nice flat area of ground where everything is level so you can have a nice ordered, structured fort. But actually, if you zoom out a bit, if we could sort of you know, fly up above the fort and look down upon the fort – and you can do that if you drive from the east – you'll see that it's roughly square, which is quite unusual for a Roman fort. They're normally rectangular. But presumably you couldn't fit that in on this tiny bit of ground. There are, of course, four walls. In those four walls, there are four gates, one for each wall. And then at the corners, the walls curve around. And there's a small corner tower in order to provide a bit of elevation so you can monitor what's moving around.

Jess: You definitely get such a good view down both directions into the pass, don't you.

Andrew: I don't think anyone's going to sneak up Hardknott Pass on the Romans. I don't think anyone would dare. And then inside the fort, albeit it's somewhat broken up by the rocky ground, there are the remains of three substantial buildings, albeit originally this whole area would have been full of buildings, but most of them now do not survive, probably because they were wooden and they've long since disappeared.

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Jess: From that gate. We've walked straight ahead of us into the middle of what looks like this complex of buildings. We've got all of these low lying remains around us. We've walked through what looks like a bit of an entrance and now in like a courtyard or something. Where are we, Andrew?

Andrew: You're absolutely right. This is a courtyard, and it's the courtyard of the most important building in the fort, the *principia*, the headquarters building. And this really is the nerve centre of the fort, but also kind of the heart of the fort because of all of the different activities that go on here. And so the first space that you come to is an open courtyard. Around it, there are these L-shaped rooms that were possibly used for storage. But this is more of a place to kind of

congregate. And then ahead of us over this low wall, there is a long cross hall which would have had a very sort of high roof, almost like a nave of a small parish church. And this was a really important part of the fort because this was where orders might have been given by the commanding officer. This is where discipline would have been enforced. And also where important religious ceremonies would have been conducted. And then behind that again, you have a range of three rooms. The one on the left and one on the right are probably offices for administration purposes. And then the one in the middle, it doesn't look like much, but really, this is the sacred heart of the fort. This is the *aedes*, the shrine. And in it, not only was the money kept, the pay for the soldiers, but there were also the standards of the unit. These were venerated objects carried in front of the unit in battle. And here they are, placed in the most protected part of the shrine and only brought out for special occasions.

Jess: So it really was the heart of the fort. There so many different functions that you've just gone through. It's quite interesting that they were able to do all of these things here.

Andrew: It's really, really important because essentially a garrison, a fort, is a community. And based upon the way that it's organised, it's based upon the organisation of a Roman town. And in the heart of a Roman town, you would have the forum where you have your law courts, you have your administration, you have your markets in your forum as well. And so the *principia* sort of mimics all of those different functions that the soldiers are going to need to live here.

Jess: And so are they likely to have had a market here, up in the mountains?

Andrew: Difficult to know. Certainly they would have had to have had traders come along at some point I imagine to give them things that were needed. I suspect that you probably got some pretty intrepid traders – they're going to make it up here to set up shop and sell goods to the soldiers. But maybe it happened.

Jess: Definitely. And kind of further in the direction of the sea, there's further buildings – would that have been part of this central hub?

Andrew: Yes. So a Roman fort is split, broadly speaking, into three parts. You have the kind of the front bit which was nearest to the south gate. You have the back bit, which is obviously the furthest away from us. And where we're standing is the middle range, where all the most important buildings were situated. And next to the *principia*, you had a building called the *praetorium*, which is the commanding officer's house. So in this building, the commanding officer would be doing the sort of the day job, presiding over the running of the unit. And then he'd be able to retire to a rather lavish house. It doesn't look like much today because we think that only the rear part of it was stone and the rest of it was wood, and has long disappeared. But we think it would have been roughly the same size as the *principia* in its original ...

Jess: It's very substantial.

Andrew: Yeah, very substantial. So in its original layout, it would have come as far forward as the line of the *principia* as well. Again, like the *principia* based around a courtyard. And very similar to Roman townhouses in the towns and the cities right across the province and right across the

empire. And the reason for that is that the commanding officers were quite considerable individuals. They were quite wealthy. They were sort of millionaires by modern-day standards. And so when they were here, they were posted to take control of garrisons like this. And it was part of their effort to kind of climb the career ladder. And when they arrived, they would have brought their family with them.

Jess: I was just about to ask.

Andrew: Yeah, they would have had their family with them, possibly some slaves, and they were expecting to live in the sort of comfort that they would live in their home.

Jess: Okay, So you've told me about the commanding officer, their family and where they live. But they're obviously only a tiny fraction of who would have been here in the fort. Where were with the soldiers?

Andrew: Well, if we just walk about 20 metres or so upwards, to visit the third of the three buildings of the central range, we can get a sense of where the barracks were and also how the fort was organised.

Jess: Great.

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Andrew: So we've just walked up the hill and we're looking back down across the fort and down the valley.

Jess: The higher we come, the view just gets better and better. You don't think it's going to – but we can just about even make out the Isle of Man. I think the clouds are starting to roll in, the rain's coming down a little bit, but really the more you explore, you really get a sense of how amazing this landscape is. And you also get a really good idea of those buildings that we were just standing in. You really get a sense of that layout that you are talking about.

Andrew: Yeah, you do. But actually, they're only sort of one-third really of the buildings that would have been here originally. So if you're looking for where the soldiers lived, you'll be looking for a long time because there's nothing much to be seen of the barrack buildings. But either side of the central buildings, there would have been rows and rows of barracks. And there were excavations here in the 1960s that didn't find much, but they did find some evidence of where the barracks once stood. It's probable that those barracks would have been made of wood, so hence they don't survive as well as some of the stone-made buildings of the central range.

Jess: And so who were the soldiers that were stationed here?

Andrew: Well, we have comparatively little information about the regiments that were stationed or the regiment that was stationed at Hardknott. But we have one inscription, so a kind of a proclamation written in stone that was found here, that says that one of the cohorts was a cohort of Dalmatians, from essentially where the modern-day Balkans are. And they would have

been a cohort of around about 500 soldiers – auxiliaries that were non-citizen soldiers that were recruited into the Roman army in order to serve in frontiers like this and to do a lot of work that the main sort of legionaries, the citizen soldiers, wouldn't want to do or couldn't do. And they were here for, as we said, around about 20 years, and they would have been living sort of ten to a barrack in these wooden barracks, a very different life to that of the commanding officer in his lovely, lovely house.

Jess: Oh, definitely. And a very different life to Croatia or wherever specifically they would have been from. Again, in the middle of winter, I imagine that being quite tricky up here. And so were they able to bring their families with them like the commanding officer, or would they have been by themselves?

Andrew: It's a really interesting question. We can never be quite definitive about it, but it does seem as though auxiliary soldiers had at least unofficial families that might well have been able to follow them around or else they may have had families in the locations. Certainly the centurions – so the officers who were in command of around about 80 soldiers – would have been allowed to live in the barracks in the fort with their wives and their children as well, much like the commanding officer.

Jess: So it does actually feel much more like a community than – when you say fort, you think of it being a very military operation, whereas actually you'll have children running around here, playing together. This is actually, this is their lives.

Andrew: It is their lives. Yeah. And it was thought for a long time that these were very kind of men only sort of environments. But that that's a view that's very much informed by 19th- and 20th-century professional armies. But if you're spending 25 years in the army, which was the deal, if you were an auxiliary you're supposed to serve 25 years, then you're living out your life here. So they would either officially have families with them or sometimes unofficially they might be living in settlements around the fort.

Jess: And so there were people outside the walls as well as in the fort.

Andrew: Maybe. So generally speaking, at a fort like this – so for example the fort at Ambleside, which is not too far away, the fort at Ravenglass – we would find settlements around the walls of the fort where you would likely find the families of some of the ordinary soldiers. However, we've never discovered a similar settlement here, and that might just be because it doesn't survive, or we've not been able to locate it. Or it might be just because Hardknott was not here long enough to have a little town like that establish itself.

Jess: So you had all these soldiers here in this very remote location. What were they actually doing on an average day?

Andrew: That's a very good question. I think when we think about the Roman army and we think about all the conquering that Rome does, we might expect them to be fighting battles and waging wars all the time. But actually, despite Rome's expansionist nature, in the career of a soldier, you're probably not going to have to fight a battle very often. It's more likely that if you

are going to do any fighting, you're going to be dealing with maybe low-level raiding, which seems to be a big reason why there's so many Roman garrisons in this area. But even that, it's probably a rarity. And the day to day would look more mundane, I would imagine. You're maybe going off on patrol. You may be monitoring movement through the landscape. And then there's actually a lot of kind of chores and tasks that you have to do in order just to keep the garrison running. So you might be baking bread, for example, in order to make sure that you and your mess mates – your *contubernia* – are well-fed for the day. You might be fixing things, fixing your equipment. We often find remains of Roman kit and craft material that soldiers would have used on a daily basis. Or else there might be time for a bit of R&R, a bit of relaxation. And often we find Roman games – dice – so Roman soldiers really liked to gamble so we often find these in Roman forts.

And of course there are two activities that we definitely know that the soldiers at Hardknott did. The first would be that they would train. And we know that because there's a parade ground here. And the second thing that we know that they did was that they would go to the baths, because there's a small bathhouse just outside the south gate.

Jess: And you mentioned baking bread. Where are they getting their food from? Are they responsible – are they having to do farming? It doesn't seem like the kind of area that you'd be able to use the environment very much. Are they trading with local people? How are they feeding themselves?

Andrew: I doubt they're doing farming themselves. But if there's an opportunity to trade or to co-opt local supplies, they are probably doing that. In this immediate environment there's probably not a lot of things growing, but perhaps further down the valley, you would have arable farming and that might be able to provide grain to support the garrison. But certainly they're bringing it in, and whether that's from reasonably locally or from further afield and making use of this large road network and the network of transportation logistics of the army, it's probably a bit of a combination of both of those things, I would imagine. And once you've got it here, you'd need somewhere to store it. And so if we turn to look at the third building of the central range here – a little bit more substantial than the other two.

Jess: Yeah, definitely.

Andrew: And it's actually a very distinctive shape. If you know your Roman forts.

Jess: Getting there!

Andrew: You can normally spot a granary because it has these very strong sort of wide walls, but also these projections coming out the side, these buttresses to hold up what was a very heavy wall and a very heavy roof. And then at the front, we've also got these larger projecting platforms, which are the remains of the loading bay. So when the carts, or probably – I doubt you'd get a cart up here – maybe the mules that you got up here, you may be able to unload your wares here at the granaries.

Jess: And with, I guess, 500 soldiers, maybe a few hundred extra people with family and the commanding officer and things – that’s a huge amount of people here, really. You can understand why they needed such a substantial storage space to keep them sustained for any length of time, really. It’s really impressive in such a remote location. So where next, Andrew?

Andrew: We’re going to continue up the hill through the gap in the walls, which is actually the east gate of the fort. And then we’re going to walk for about 200 metres until we find a very conspicuous area of flat ground. And that was the parade ground for the garrison.

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So we’ve walked out of the east gate and there’s a sort of rambling path going steadily uphill that picks its way past the rocky outcrops, and there’s some stones strewn about along it, which you can normally make out. And this is actually the remains of a short Roman road that links the eastern gate and the parade ground. And after about 200 metres, the ground sort of flattens out and the path ends. And there’s this area that’s reasonably flat. It’s about 140 metres by about 80 metres wide. And the optimist in me looks at this and thinks, oh, you could probably play, well, an unpredictable game of football on this if you were minded to do so. But this is – if we look around, if we look at the rest of the landscape here, this is clearly not a natural feature.

Jess: It’s a bit steep just coming onto that flat bit, and then you can see it’s noticeable.

Andrew: Yeah. It’s a man-made feature. And effectively what’s happened here is the garrison has created this flattened area, hacked it out to the rock, moved about 5,000 cubic metres of stone and earth, rectified about a 3.5 metre difference between one end and the other and created a parade ground for themselves.

Jess: That’s an absolutely colossal effort for, I don’t know – why?

Andrew: Why? Well, I think that it’s really important to the function of the Roman army that they get to practise their battle technique. It’s also really important to the discipline that they are kept busy, they are kept doing things, they’re kept getting used to following orders. And it’s great to have this feature. It’s only one of two in the entirety of Europe that you can actually see, although these would be at most forts originally. And so this massive investment of time and effort was to ensure that the army maintained its discipline and was an effective fighting force.

Jess: So do we know what kind of drills or exercises the soldiers might have been doing here on the parade ground?

Andrew: Yes. So we’re quite lucky that at the time that the soldiers were here at Hardknott, so during the period of the reign of the emperor Hadrian, there’s a Roman governor called Arrian, who’s actually one of Hadrian’s friends, who wrote a book about war strategy and training for war. And he records the manoeuvres that the cavalry units did in order to prepare themselves for battle. Now, we don’t know that it was a cavalry garrison here, but it’s not unlikely, given the size of the parade ground. And Arrian describes these really complex manoeuvres, complex

patterning that the soldiers, the horsemen had to take. They would also throw their spears at targets, all under the watchful eye of the commanding officer standing on the tribunal.

Jess: And so would the commanding officer be watching all of these exercises? Would it be on special occasions, do you think?

Andrew: Probably special occasions. I think there would be some potentially some day to day training that went on and then there might be a bit more of an event for special occasions. We know that, for example, they wore this really elaborate parade armour, some of which has been found not too far away from here as well. And yeah, I think that they're really having to sort of impress their commanding officer with their skill. And also presiding over these events would have been the gods of the parade ground. So if we turn with the fort to the left, we look towards the side of the parade ground. We can see that there's this actually man-made sort of wedge-shaped mound looming up above us. And we're not entirely sure what it was for, but they've gone to some considerable effort to create this. We think it may well have been the base for the shrine of the Campestres, who were the gods of the parade ground who the soldiers thought were looking out for them and watching over what they were doing here.

Jess: So no pressure then?

Andrew: No.

Jess: And I suppose it would have been quite a spectacle seeing all those hundreds of soldiers here doing their drills, perhaps having the commanding officer and the shrine looking down on them. It's a really good vantage point.

Andrew: Yes, it is. And I think that's part of the point of having this fort here. Yes, it's on the road. Yes, this is an important communication line. But being seen, dominating the landscape, was also an important part of Roman strategy, projecting their power to those living here who might not have been very happy that the Romans were controlling this place. And if you're a local, perhaps thinking about rebelling against Roman control, if you're looking up at this place, seeing the soldiers practising, hearing the sounds of their weapons reverberating down the valley ...

Jess: Yes, shouting.

Andrew: Exactly. You might think twice before trying it.

Jess: Oh, I can imagine. So, where are we heading to next?

Andrew: Well, we're going to go back the way we came, down the path back towards the fort, in through the east gate of the fort. And then we're going to head down to the south gate.

Jess: Where we – almost where we started.

Andrew: Where we started, yeah. Continue going down towards the road and hopefully on our way down that hill we'll be able to see the remains of the Roman bath house.

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Jess: We've made it to the bath house, and you can just about see the top of the fort wall, but it's actually set quite far back from it. Do we know why it was where it is?

Andrew: Well, Roman auxiliary forts are laid out in such a way that there's no room for a bath house. So we normally find them outside of the fort and close to a source of water, which is vital for Roman bathing.

Jess: Yeah, that makes sense. And you can hear the streams around us as well already. And so we're looking down at the remains. We're kind of slightly on a bit of a hill looking down towards the road. Can you talk me through the remains that are in front of us?

Andrew: So we have this long rectangular building and it's actually subdivided into three rooms. The largest of those rooms is the closest to us. And it looks like two rooms, but it's actually one which has a small subdivision inside it. And on the left-hand side, as you look down towards the road, that's actually the remains of a cold plunge pool. And then on the right-hand side is the rest of the room, which probably doubled as a changing room and also an unheated room. What the Romans called a *frigidarium*. Then beyond that, you would have had a warmer room, what the Romans called a *tepidarium*. And then furthest away from us, you'd have the hottest room in the bath house, the *caldarium*. And beyond that, where there's a conspicuous gap in the wall, you probably would have had the furnace that would have kept the *caldarium* nice and hot. And there was probably likely to have been a hot bath in that space as well.

Jess: And this quite mysterious looking round room. What's that?

Andrew: That is a *laconicum*. So that's an alternative kind of bathing experience to what's going on in this row of rooms here. So in this row of rooms, the heat is kind of quite a wet heat. And then if you were to go to the *laconicum*, it would be a drier heat, a bit more like a modern-day sauna. So the Romans liked a bit of choice in their bathing experience. They could kind of go round, switch between the two, maybe go round a couple of times, but you're always ending up in the cold plunge, where you get to refresh yourself after the heat of the *caldarium* or the *laconicum*.

Jess: Okay, so you're moving from hot to cold. I can't really see any kind of thresholds, any doors. Does that mean we're a lower level? Was the bath house a lot taller than what we're looking at now?

Andrew: Yeah, we're looking at the foundations and maybe the lower levels of the walls. It's often difficult to get your sense of how these places work, not least because a lot of the material doesn't survive Antiquity. But also when this was first excavated in the 18th and 19th centuries, they did find remains of the furnaces. They also found remains of the *pilae*, the stilts that held up the floors and created a cavity so that the hypocaust system – the heating system – could keep the hot rooms hot. But they've long since disappeared.

Jess: And you hear of baths at villas and forts and well, you have Bath. But to have built one in such a remote location – bathing must have been so important to the Romans.

Andrew: It's a vital part of Roman life. Every Roman bathes, whether you're living here on what is pretty much the frontier of the Roman Empire or you're living in the city of Rome itself. Romans bathe, they bathe communally. And they did this because they considered it vital to their health and wellbeing.

So particularly if you've got this garrison of 500 soldiers here, performing this vital task of controlling this environment, you want to keep them healthy and happy. And it was believed that bathing did just that. It was almost a pre-emptive way of keeping your body healthy. And indeed, if you were sick also, you'd often find that Roman doctors would prescribe bathing, or bathing in certain ways, maybe keeping to the hot room or maybe keeping out of the hot room, depending on what ailment you had. So this is a vital part of keeping the garrison healthy, but also happy as well, because it's a nice place to come: perhaps after a hard day's garrisoning Hardknott pass, you can come and relax here, spend a bit of time perhaps with your comrades and just kind of loosen up a little bit.

Jess: Yeah, I think a wet day on patrol, I think a sauna is just what I'd be after.

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Even though we've come down the hill slightly, the views here are absolutely staggering. I just love how the fort just kind of nestles into the landscape. It's just amazing. I can really see why you think it's such a magnificent sight. What do you think makes Hardknott so special?

Andrew: Well, it's not its historical contribution – that's almost trivial. The soldiers are here for almost 20 years. Yet it has – it's such a special place that its legacy really transcends that contribution. And it occupies an outsized place in our imagination of Roman Britain. It helps that it's one of the best-preserved forts that we have, and we have such interesting features such as the parade ground. But above all, it's really this sublime setting that inspires the imagination. It's so unexpected, almost kind of preposterous that in this inaccessible, impractical location, you have soldiers really hacking this fort out of the rock. So it kind of crowns this plateau above the valley.

Jess: Yes, I know what you mean. It's just so evocative, isn't it?

Andrew: It is evocative. And William Wordsworth, who lived and travelled in the Lake District, he was inspired to compose a short sonnet about this place, which was really important in making this a popular destination. And he described it as a 'lone camp on Hardknott height / whose guardians bent the knee to Jove and Mars'. And he really kind of transports us to this place and imbues it with a sense of its former Roman presence. And I think that sometimes as a historian, I'm very much focused on the evidence, the archaeology and the history. But as a person, and as people, there are places where we feel, I think, closer to the past and to the people of the past. And here I think the setting provokes our imagination, and we're filled with a really close sense of who the Romans were who laboured to build this place and lived here, however briefly.

