

## RAVENGLASS ROMAN BATH HOUSE

### Audio Guide Transcript

Jess Freeland: Andrew, we're here in Ravenglass. We've stopped at the top of Walls Drive. Where are you taking me today?

Andrew Roberts: Well, Jess, I'm taking you to see Ravenglass Roman Bath House, and I'm really excited to be doing so because it's one of the best-preserved Roman buildings in the north of Britain. And it's really evocative of what life was like here almost 1,900 years ago. And it will tell us quite a lot about the people that lived in the community of Ravenglass.

Jess: It sounds amazing. So that's about, what would you say, five, ten minutes down the road?

Andrew: Yep. About that.

Jess: Show we go?

Andrew: Yeah, let's go.

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Andrew: So we're walking through this rather lovely woodland on the edge of this rolling farmland. There's a few sheep in the fields beyond here. It might be quite surprising to learn that actually, if we were here 1,900 years ago, we would be walking through a small Roman town. Perhaps we'd hear the sounds of the traders. There'd be kind of metalworking going on. You get the kind of sights and smells of that, mixing in with the sea breeze. Now, just up ahead of us, you'd see the imposing walls of a Roman fort. Unfortunately, though, none of that really survives above ground. But what does survive is what's just up here on the left here and these are the imposing walls of the bath house itself.

Jess: It's really amazing, Andrew. I didn't expect it to be quite so tall. This is not what we were expecting. How tall is it?

Andrew: About 4 metres.

Jess: That's really impressive. It's quite amazing that it's standing here, well, what did you say – 1,900 ...?

Andrew: 1,900 years later, yes. And these are the remains of a Roman bath house, and only part of a Roman bath house. Because when the Romans built bath houses, they took it really, really seriously. So this would have been one of the most important buildings in this entire community.

Jess: But let's go back a bit first. Why? Why were the Romans here in the first place?

Andrew: Well, Ravenglass fort was built in around AD 130. So we're in a period where the empire is under the control of the emperor Hadrian. Now, the Romans had arrived in Britain around about 80 years prior and had steadily expanded their control over the province, what they called Britannia. But in Hadrian's time, the empire had been rapidly expanding. And this had caused a lot of problems in these frontier provinces. And so what Hadrian was doing was he was consolidating these frontiers, reorganising how the army was distributed. And, of course, famously, he builds Hadrian's Wall to the north, sealing off the northern border of the province.

Jess: Of course, and you forget, actually, you've got that massive wall in the north, but you need to defend the coast as well, I suppose.

Andrew: Indeed. And parts of Hadrian's Wall were actually some of these military installations down the coast of Cumbria itself. But here in Ravenglass, we are on the north-western frontier of the Roman Empire, and he's doing something a little bit different. He's using forts and indeed a road in order to control what we know as the Lake District today.

Jess: Okay. But why – I understand how he's trying to control the coast in general – why Ravenglass specifically?

Andrew: Well, Ravenglass is one of the few places where you have access to the Lake District from the sea. And there was probably a quite useful natural harbour at Ravenglass in Roman times. And Ravenglass and its fort stood at the head of a road that ran up Eskdale via the Hardknott Pass and across to Ambleside at the, really at the centre of the Lake District. And there was a fort here at the start of that road, and there was a fort at Ambleside at the end. And really, this allows the Romans to essentially communicate across the Lake District and also to control these important strategic locations.

Jess: So a real network in the area then?

Andrew: Yes, it's a real network, and it's part of a much broader network as well, because this network would then connect also to the main north-south road running up the western coast of Britain. This network itself has forts along it and they're part of a much wider network which will also connect up with Hadrian's Wall.

Jess: Shall we go take a closer look at the bath house then?

Andrew: Yes, let's.

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Jess: We're now standing in the bath house itself. And you really do get a sense of how tall these walls are, don't you?

Andrew: Yes. So I've been to Roman sites across Britain, and it's so rare to have their walls tower up above your head. And you can see that, or hear that our voices have changed as the sound is actually reverberating off the walls.

Jess: Definitely – it feels like a proper room, doesn't it? And so is this still Roman? Has this kind of been restored?

Andrew: It's been propped up a little bit. Obviously the stones are all still Roman. And actually, quite surprisingly, a lot of the mortar is still Roman as well. And that's quite a rarity to have still with us 1,900 years later.

Jess: Unbelievable, isn't it? And so, where are we standing now, and what is lost of this bath house complex?

Andrew: Well, there are essentially four rooms – so the better part of four rooms that you can see today. The two rooms that are nearer to the small road are probably the ones that are most complete. And these were probably, one of them was probably a changing room. The other one is a *frigidarium*, the Roman term for an unheated room. We're not entirely sure exactly what their functions were. And then the two spaces that are further away from the road, they are not complete, or not as complete as the two smaller rooms. They would have been much longer, running away from the road into the field behind us. And these would have been the *tepidaria*, we think, so the warm rooms. And crucially, in the 19th century, when they were excavated, the archaeologists would have found the remains of these stacks of Roman tiles that they called *pilae*. And basically they hold up the floor of these rooms and allow hot air to circulate as part of the hypocaust – the heating system that kept the baths warm.

Jess: And I suppose if you've seen bath houses at other Roman sites in Britain, that's the really recognisable element, isn't it? You see those kind of little stacks?

Andrew: Yeah. They are characteristic of bath houses. You don't always find them in bath houses. They were sometimes in well-appointed rooms of Roman houses. But generally speaking, if you find a hypocaust, it's likely to have been a bath house. In terms of what's missing, well the rest of the *tepidaria*, possibly a *caldarium* (a hot room) as well, and we'd normally expect a bath house like this – so there are some on Hadrian's Wall, for example, which have hot baths, cold baths, a cold plunge pool, as they call it, and also maybe a fountain, and actually then some sort of more sort of ambient nice feature. So they might well be quite nicely painted. And then they have nice bells and whistles, much like the one that we can see just to my left here, which is a niche. And this niche has still got this rather nice white plaster. It's crowned with this red brick arch. And I would expect this to have held a statue to a god or goddess.

Jess: But why was there a bath house here in the first place, as part of the fort? Why were people not bathing in their homes, bathing in the sea? Why? Why go to the effort of building such a large complex as this?

Andrew: So bathing together communally is such a quintessentially Roman practice. The Romans thought it was really vital for their physical health, for their wellbeing. But also it was a sign that

you were Roman. It's what set them apart from the non-Romans, really. And so there were bath houses like this at every fort, including the ones on Hadrian's Wall. There are public baths in large towns. There are private baths in the elaborate villas and townhouses of the wealthy, not only in Britain, but right across the Roman Empire. So the people living here at Ravenglass are going through the same process as the Romans living in the city of Rome itself.

Jess: That's amazing that they kind of brought it this far across their entire empire. Who at Ravenglass, who in the community was using the bath house here?

Andrew: So the soldiers themselves, obviously the garrison themselves are using it. But Roman bathing is really open to all. And here we're not actually inside the fort. The bath house is just outside the fort gates. And so presumably this is open to the community that's living around the fort itself. So regardless of gender, status, age, you might have an opportunity if you're living at Ravenglass to come and use the bath house. It's a reminder that while perhaps the original purpose of Ravenglass Fort is strategic, military control of this area, these places were also acting as ways to establish Roman culture, the Roman style of life within the general population.

Jess: And so I suppose that spread of culture is actually a very effective way of controlling the local area as much as military power as well.

Andrew: Yeah, absolutely. So shall I take you through the process of Roman bathing?

Jess: Please do.

Andrew: Well, the first thing we have to do is we have to get changed, presumably in the changing room here. And then the Romans liked to begin the bathing process with some gentle exercise.

Jess: OK.

Andrew: So they're particularly fond of wrestling.

Jess: OK.

Andrew: Sometimes they lifted weights. And then once you'd worked up a gentle sweat, you're going to head off next door into the warm room, to get a little bit warmer of course. Then finally into the *caldarium*, the hot room, where you might like to relax in the hot pool. And once you'd had enough of that heat, you'd head back to the unheated room, the *frigidarium*, where you'd have a cold plunge, which would be nice and refreshing. And at some point you're going to get oiled up, and then you're going to use a specially curved metal stick called a *strigil* to scrape all of the grime and the dirt that you have from presumably a hard day's patrolling the frontier of the Roman Empire.

Jess: Gosh, I don't think I'd want that job. Are you doing it yourself or someone doing it for you?

Andrew: I think if you were poor, or you had no mates, you'd probably do it yourself. But maybe you'd ask one of your comrades to do it or there may well be bathing attendants who you could pay to do that for you.

Jess: Right. So I'm all clean. All the grime's been scraped off. Now I want to head back home, I suppose. Where am I going?

Andrew: Well, back to the fort. So you carry on further up the road, and it's just on your right.

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Jess: Right, so we've just walked over the road to the gate. There's actually quite a few people here today, and I suppose that actually gives you an idea of what this would have been like when it's a fort full of people. But you've brought me to this gate. We're looking over this field. What are we looking at, Andrew?

Andrew: So the bath house sat about 50 or so metres outside the north-eastern corner of the fort itself. But none of the buildings of the fort are discernible above ground. But if you have a keen eye and you know roughly what you're looking at, you can actually make out where the fort itself once stood. So if we look over this gate, about 20, 30 or so metres ahead of us, we can see that there's a little ditch and then it starts to rise up. And you can make out sort of a slightly higher level, more or less level patch of ground. And that's where the fort itself was.

Jess: It's actually quite difficult because it depends on how much growth and how many nettles and things are in the field at the time, really. But you can just about see where the ground starts rising up. Is that where we're talking about?

Andrew: Yeah. And I think the one feature you'll be able to pick out is the ditch, which is one of the defensive features of the fort itself. It runs away from us down towards where the railway line is today, and it starts to broaden out a little bit and forms a natural hollow. And then also, if you carry on walking up the road, parallel to the road, over the hedge line would have been the easternmost defences of the fort itself. And you can sometimes see them as you're walking along.

Jess: And so what do we know about the fort? It sounds like you're starting to describe a square shape?

Andrew: It's more of a kind of an oblong. Typically, Roman forts have this playing card outline, so they're rectangular with curved corners. And we know a little bit about it because there were excavations here in the 1970s. They discovered that there was a fort with room here for a garrison of around about 500 soldiers. They found the remains of some of the barracks that were here, that were originally built of wood, which partly explains why there's not much left. Also because a lot of it has been destroyed when the railway was built. But then there would also have been other typical buildings that you find in Roman forts. In the centre there were the principal buildings, so the headquarters, the commanding officer's house, the granaries, etc. What they also discovered was that while this was built originally in around about AD 130,

around about AD 200 at least part of the fort was actually burned and had to be replaced. And at the same time, they strengthened the defences with a stone wall, adding to the timber and turf rampart. We're not entirely sure whether this was due to enemy action or not.

Jess: And so 500 soldiers, that really sounds like quite a substantial fort. Do we know anything about who these soldiers were, who was living here?

Andrew: Well, we know the name of the garrison that was here in about AD 160. That's the first cohort, Alia Classica. Now, 'Alia' refers to Hadrian's family name, so they're probably raised as a regiment during the reign of the emperor Hadrian. 'Classica' means that they were part of the Roman fleet. So that would imply, therefore, that they're stationed here in order to monitor shipping along the coast and to protect what is an important harbour. But we also know that one of their members was a cavalryman. And obviously horses, mounted troops would be perfect for patrolling this kind of wide, open area at the head of the Eskdale valley. Now, they're a particular kind of unit known as auxiliaries. So the Roman army is split into legionaries, who are citizen soldiers – a bit higher paid than the others. And then there are auxiliaries, who are non-citizen soldiers, and they're recruited into the army and they often have kind of complementary abilities such as horsemanship, archery, boats, in the case of the fleet. And the deal is that they serve in the army for 25 years, and if they do so successfully, they survive being at the kind of the sharp end of Rome's imperial wars. They can achieve the *honesta missio*, which is kind of an honourable discharge. And it means that they can then retire as Roman citizens and get all the rights and privileges that come with this.

Jess: And that was 25 years.

Andrew: 25 years of service. It's a long time.

Jess: And so is anyone else living there? Are they bringing any family with them, or is it just the soldiers?

Andrew: We think that they would have travelled with their family, or else they would have potentially had families with people living locally. And then when they get to retire, they probably go off and live in the civilian settlement. And that's in stark contrast to the other known person that we have living here, who was the commanding officer in around about AD 160. His name was Caedicius Severus. We know a little bit, or we can discern and work out a little bit about him thanks to the name. The family name suggests that he's actually from Italy, possibly from Rome or the port, which is Ostia. And unlike the garrison, who are these non-citizen auxiliaries, he is a long-standing Roman citizen. He's probably very wealthy, probably in modern terms a millionaire. And he's kind of climbing the Roman imperial career ladder. And a command like this might be the first posting, a stepping stone to a more prestigious command elsewhere. And so while the soldiers are living in cramped barracks and coming out here and using the communal baths, he's got a large, comfortable house with his family inside the fort and probably his own private bath house as well.

Jess: Wow. And earlier, you mentioned the fact that these soldiers could move into a civilian community. Was that part of this fort? Was it outside close by? Whereabouts was that?

Andrew: Well, these forts typically had a settlement that grows up around their walls. We find them outside these forts across Roman Britain. And the people that live here were probably veterans, in part, but also potentially members of the local community, the existing communities, I should say, who come to these areas to come to the forts in order to exploit the spending power of the comparatively well-paid soldiers and provide them with the services and amenities that they might need. So, you know, making maybe pottery or metalwork, selling them goods that they might need for their life at Ravenglass. And it's also potentially where their families are living as well. And we know a little bit about that because around about ten years ago, there was some archaeology conducted around the fort. And the size of the settlement at Ravenglass was quite considerable. And, you know, it's very well positioned here. You're on the coast, so there's probably lots of trade, lots of import and export of goods. And obviously, you've got the soldiers here that bring a bit of wealth to the area.

Jess: Definitely. And so how long was Ravenglass – how long was the fort here for?

Andrew: Well, Ravenglass, as we said, was established in Hadrian's time. As far as we can tell, there's continuous occupation right up until the end of Roman Britain. So some 270 years later in about AD 400. So they're here for quite some time.

Jess: You mentioned earlier the fort's harbour. Where would that have been in relation to where we're standing now?

Andrew: Well, if we carry on along the road and then follow it around to the right, we'll then start to go downhill underneath a railway bridge. And then we'll find ourselves on the shore.

Jess: And how long do you reckon that'll take us?

Andrew: It's going to take us about 5 minutes, but it's really worth the walk.

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Jess: We've made it to the beach. So you start to understand why the fort was here, I suppose. And I suppose we're actually on the estuary. We're not immediately on the sea yet, are we? And I guess the way that we've walked down, does that mean we've got the fort behind us? We've got these sea defences and then the fort?

Andrew: Yes. So if we stand with our backs to the sea defences, the fort is behind us and the river Esk is just in front of us. And we're a point where it intersects with two other rivers and then they empty into the Irish Sea. And today the Esk is not a particularly deep or fast flowing river, but in Roman times we think that it would have been far more navigable for larger ships. And it's likely that in the lee of the fort would have been a perfectly serviceable natural harbour.

Jess: I guess it was quite a strategic location here then.

Andrew: Yeah. Sea routes are really important in the Roman world as they are today. Obviously, the Romans were famous for their roads. And there's a legacy of this network in Britain. But often the roads are only the last portion or the beginning of a journey that takes place in Roman Britain. And if you're looking to trade long distances, you're probably going to do that via rivers, and you're going to do that definitely by ship. So we know that some of the items that were used in the settlement and in the fort come from across the Roman world. So we have amphorae, we have ...

Jess: What's amphorae?

Andrew: What's amphorae? Amphorae are sort of the generic transportation vessel for olive oil, let's say, for wine, for all sorts of foodstuffs, and drink as well, and they get shipped long distances across the empire.

Jess: So not having English wine while they're here.

Andrew: No. They're not having English wine. No, I mean, maybe if you're unlucky. But if you were, maybe if you're the commanding officer, you might expect to get the finest ...

Jess: Italian vintage.

Andrew: Italian Falernian was very popular in Roman times. There's also samian pottery, which is made in central Gaul. That's kind of like fine tableware. And even items such as jet that were made in Britain probably ended up at Ravensglass via sea.

Jess: And so is that common that the Romans were trading all of these materials and foods across their empire? They're not necessarily getting everything they need from the local landscape.

Andrew: It's a mixture of both.

Jess: Okay.

Andrew: If you can get it locally, then you're going to do that. And particularly sort of everyday foodstuffs, you're going to trade with the local population. And indeed some things were made locally. So we know that just up at Muncaster there were some pottery kilns which would have supplied pottery, maybe tiles for the fort and the settlement. But Roman culture to a certain degree is quite generic. They expect to have the same kind of, maybe spices and things that they get elsewhere in the empire. They expect the same kind of goods that would sit on the tables in Gaul or in Italy itself. And that's one of the differences that you have in Britain under the rule of the Romans. There's more of a sort of standardisation of material culture and certain practice, as we seen, like bathing.

Jess: And we're kind of slightly sheltering from the wind with these sea defences here. They're quite hard to miss – huge great boulders. And we've said how the fort would have been



immediately behind. Is the fort at risk from the sea, do we think? Would it originally have been right on the sea edge?

Andrew: Yes, it would have originally been right on the sea edge. And one of the reasons for the sea defences and indeed one of the reasons for the excavations that took place in the 1970s is that part of the fort was essentially being eroded by the sea. And indeed, some 50 or so metres of it has actually been lost. So it's just sort of a reminder about how fragile sometimes our archaeology is in this country, and it needs to be actively conserved or else we lose this evidence of the past. So the foreshore has often seen Roman objects sort of falling out, as it were, from the fort itself. And they've been collected. Indeed the most famous one that that's been found here was found in the mid-nineties by a dog. This dog discovered one of the rarest sort of Roman documents that one can find. It's a military diploma. And these things were given to the auxiliary soldiers if they managed to serve 25 years.

Jess: Oh, yes. You mentioned this earlier.

Andrew: Yeah. So it's basically kind of proof that they've served the empire faithfully, and now have those rights and privileges that are granted to all Roman citizens. And it's quite interesting. We don't have the entirety of the documents. We kind of sort of have to piece things together a little bit. We don't know the name of the man, but we know that his father was called Cassius and he retired in AD 158. And if we kind of piece together the clues, it's likely that he was from Syria and likely drafted into the Roman army under the reign of Hadrian. And then the unit was transported later in Hadrian's reign to Britain, where they eventually ended up at Ravenglass. And these documents were hugely significant. So it's likely that it would have been kept close to hand. So more than likely that when he retired, he retired and lived out his days in Ravenglass.

Jess: Okay. I'm pleased about that. I was worried he's just lost it. This is not something you're just losing on the beach. So, no, we think that they settled here in the civilian settlement then, I guess.

Andrew: Yes, presumably the veterans tended to settle in the places that they serve rather than maybe go back to where they were recruited from. But I'd like to think that he was sort of taken in by this rather gorgeous view and thought, yeah, no, I think I'll give up Syria and I'll live out my days on the on the Cumbrian coast.

Jess: Yeah, I can see that.

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Jess: Andrew, I couldn't resist coming down to the water's edge, which is obviously such a crucial part of why the fort was here at Ravenglass. We're looking back into the landscape, looking at what would have been the fort. And you've done such a brilliant job of sharing the significance of what is still standing, but also kind of revealing what is still hidden within the landscape. What makes Ravenglass special to you?

Andrew: We're so lucky to have such an evocative building, a building that speaks to one of the fundamental aspects of Roman culture here at Ravenglass. I love the fact that you can walk



through the same doorways that the bathers walked through 1,900 years ago. I love the fact that you can see the wear on the thresholds from countless footsteps of the people that once lived here at the farthest flung shore of the Roman Empire. But then I also like the fact that there is so much that has gone and so much that is missing, because I think it's a salutary reminder that we are lucky to have what we have, and that we have to actively conserve and preserve and keep on rediscovering the past in order to make sense of it and to find significance in it.