

South Ribble Primary Schools

Local History Project

The Romans in Central Lancashire



This document provides additional local material to teachers for the teaching of the National Curriculum (History) in Primary schools and has been compiled by Dr David Hunt. These take the form of teaching notes highlighting local links based around a Time Line. They should be seen as a supplement to the mass of national material available on the Internet and on CD.

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1 Introduction and Time Line

The Roman option suggested by the National Curriculum is a most attractive one, from the point of view of both teachers and pupils. A very large array of videos and compact discs is available and the provision of relevant web sites is excellent. Children will be familiar with the many television programmes exploring all aspects of the Roman world (for example the programme 'What the Romans did for us'). A large number of Roman sites have been preserved and are open to the public, and our schools have the largest one of all within a day's trip - Hadrian's Wall.

South Ribble is particularly well placed in this regard following the excavations at Walton-le-Dale and our easy access to the fort at Ribchester — indeed both sites can be comfortably visited in a single day. The museum at Leyland holds the pottery finds from E. E. Pickering's excavations at Walton in the 1950s where they can be seen, and examples may be borrowed by prior arrangement. As in the subsequent Sections 2 (the Dark Age) and 3 (the Tudors) this outline will draw together the local evidence.

Focussed on the southern shore of the Ribble estuary and the lower river valley the Borough of South Ribble occupies a highly strategic location, astride both the main route into Scotland and one of the easier crossings of the Pennines into Yorkshire and the east of England. These general considerations are given a sharp focus by the river crossing at Walton - for many centuries was the lowest bridging point on the river. Indeed the bridge itself replaced the natural fords in the vicinity. Any organisation - such as the Roman military - which viewed Britain from a purely strategic point of view would be strongly attracted to the lowlands on the lower Ribble and the crossings to the south of what became the town of Preston. Here in short is the explanation for the marked concentration of Roman activity in our district.

The Roman option thus draws on many related subject areas, with geography well to the fore. Two main routes passed through Lancashire: the major more inland line crossed the Ribble by the fort at Ribchester, with the lower Wigan-Lancaster route crossing at Walton. The east-west corridor had an extension from Ribchester across the north of Preston (traditionally via Watling Street road) to the small fort at Kirkham and from there to a landing stage somewhere on the coastal estuary, perhaps near Freckleton or maybe Fleetwood. This activity has left a wealth of interesting sites and materials, enabling the unit to be given a strong local feel in the classroom.

Romano-British Time line

1000BC Britain is part of the Celtic World. Trade and Cultural links with Ireland and Europe.

55BC Julius Caesar comes and goes on his 1st expedition to Kent.

July 54BC The invasion in force, and the Britons are defeated. Returns to Gaul in September and revolts there in 54 and 53 prevent a return. But the Britons are now aware that the Empire has reached the adjacent Channel coast.

23BC-14AD Emperor Augustus

34, 28, 27BC Augustus plans to invade Britain but nothing is done. Diplomatic contacts with the British tribes kept up by him and his successor Tiberius.

14-37AD Emperor Tiberius.

Diplomatic contacts with British tribes continue to be maintained.

c30 Death of Jesus Christ: his followers quickly spread his message throughout the Empire.

37-41AD Emperor Caligula.

40 Caligula's planned invasion of Britain ends in fiasco, and the job is left to Claudius.

41-54AD Emperor Claudius.

The perceived anti-Roman attitude of the British 'kings' Caratacus and Togodumnus forms the pretext for the long expected invasion.

43 Conquest begun: Plautius commands 40,000 troops.

43-47 The occupation of lowland England establishes a line from the Severn to the Humber along the Fosse Way, with a legionary fortress at Colchester (Camulodunum). Here a temple is dedicated to Claudius 'God of the Britons'. An early fort may have been established at Chester.

The invasion is followed by a second 'army' of mineral prospectors, salesmen and entrepreneurs.

Guerrilla warfare continues in Wales and the north (Brigantia).

49 Revolt in East Anglia

52 The Triumphal Arch of Claudius erected in Rome: 'To the Emperor Claudius ...Erected by the Senate and People of Rome because he received the formal submission of I I British kings ...and because he was the first to bring barbarian tribesmen across the Ocean under the sway of the Roman people'.

In the following centuries the ambitions of military officers stationed here would occasionally cause the province to leave the Empire, but each time control was restored.

54-68 Emperor Nero

57 Initially Nero considers withdrawing from Britain but decides to push on with the venture.

60 Revolt of Boudicca: Destruction of Colchester, Verulamium and London (which had already emerged as an important route centre, port and supply base). The revolt is put down and does not occur again. The governors at this time establish

the basis for the subsequent advances under Nero's successors.

69-79 Emperor Vespasian

Founder of the Flavian dynasty.

70 The alliance with the Brigantes - which safeguards the province's northern frontier - breaks down: the decision is made to occupy the island of Britain and eventually to withdraw the army from most of lowland Britain. Attention now focuses on the northern military zone.

71-4 Governor **Petrillus Cerialis**. He establishes a major fort at the heart of Brigantian territory in York; it has been the military capital of northern England ever since.

The road north through Walton was probably laid out and activity on our local sites may date from this period.

Although direct Roman control was thus extended to the north of England Cerialis's precise activities along the western route through Lancashire are uncertain.

74 A dated ingot of silver reveals exploitation of the North Wales silver deposits by this time.

78-84 Governor **Julius Agricola** completes the work of Cerialis in the north of Britain and almost doubles the size of Roman Britain.

79 Advance north begins with the first of Agricola's six campaigns here, based on twin advances from bases at York and Chester. Agricola himself probably led the western advance and in his account of his father-in-law's campaigns the historian Tacitus calls the inhabitants of the north-west the Setantii. The 'Dwellers by the waters' well describes the inhabitants of our district.

Romans stations established at Ribchester, Kirkham, Lancaster and Walton-le-Dale.

80 Campaigning reaches the river Tay. The first timber fort at Ribchester was probably built in the 80s.

81 The boundary is established on the neck of land between the Forth and Clyde estuaries.

A lead ingot dated to 81 indicates that the Yorkshire ore fields were now being exploited.

82 A sea-borne invasion (in which the west coast sites must have been deeply involved) raids a surviving British pocket across the Solway in Ayrshire.

83 Agricola advance into the Scottish Highlands. New fortress established at Inchtuthill north of the Tay.

84 Clever of sea and land forces continues. Agricola at last forces the Caledonians into a decisive battle at Mons Graupius, somewhere near Inverness.

10,000 Caledonians killed for the loss of 360 Roman troops. The Roman fleet sails around the north of Scotland proving that Britain is an island. Agricola returns to Rome.

By the end of the first century the new towns were developing rapidly, along with,

Roman habits, dress and speech.

Late 1st early 2nd century: main building phase at Walton-le-Dale.

98-117 Emperor Trajan.

Trajan's reign marks the final phase of Roman 'world conquest'. His successors are more interested in maintaining frontiers and 'keeping the Barbarians out'. Gradual retreat from the front line established by Agricola in Scotland.

c105 The legionary fortresses at York and Chester are rebuilt in stone. The fort in Hardknott Pass in the Lake District is built.

113 Trajan's triumphal column is erected in Rome: the decoration illustrates Roman life and military tactics at the time.

117-138 Emperor Hadrian

118 A serious revolt in the north is suppressed: the Romans suffer heavy losses.

122 Hadrian visits Britain and orders the construction of a stone wall to separate the Briaantes from their allies to the north.

Hadrian's Wall continues to be developed long into the 130s. It required a full garrison of around 12,500 men.

It defines the western boundary of the Roman world.

Around this time the timber fort at Ribchester is rebuilt in stone.

130 Serious fighting in Britain.

138-161 Emperor Antoninus Pius

Rethinking of policy in Scotland, Hadrian's Wall abandoned and the frontier is pushed north again.

140 A major campaign to reconquer Lowland Scotland results in the construction of a wall to the north of Hadrian's Wall between the firths of Forth and Clyde.

The Antonine Wall comprises a turf rampart behind a large ditch, it was 37 miles long and took its name from that of the Emperor.

154 Serious revolt among the Brigantes in Northern England: Antonine Wall abandoned and Hadrian's Wall hurriedly restored. Sequence of revolt and suppression into the 160s. Roman authority restored behind the Antonine Wall. Roman commanders were particularly apprehensive over the security of the Lancashire-Cumbrian region. Northern England as a whole was held by over 25000 troops - well over half of the army in Britain.

c160 Leyland Moss Hoard hidden.

c180 Barbarians break through the Antonine Wall: fighting continues into the mid-180s, and the frontier is withdrawn to the line of Hadrian's Wall.

Late second century: Saxon pirates and raiders make their appearance on the east coast. Coastal defences begin to be erected.

Occasional references about this time to the introduction of Christianity to Britain probably by eastern traders.

192 Civil War in Rome.

193-211 Emperor Severus

Severus emerges but a fellow claimant Albinus (the Governor of Britain) invades Gaul with his 'home' forces including the garrison of Hadrian's Wall. He is defeated and killed at Lyon (197) and chaos in Britain ensues.

196-211 Serious unrest in northern Britain:

207 Hadrian's Wall is re-established.

Britain is divided into two south-north provinces:

Britannia Superior (includes Chester),

Britannia Inferior (includes York).

208-209 St. Alban becomes the first British Christian martyr.

208-209 A major campaign reminiscent of those of Agricola penetrates far into north-east Scotland and a revolt in Southern Scotland is put down.

210 The British frontier is now to be at peace until 296, but the defence of the province as a whole places an increasingly onerous burden on the Empire.

212 The disputed succession to Severus results in unrest among the troops in Britain.

214 An edict confers Roman citizenship on all the free peoples of the Empire. The early third century is a period of prosperity: a greater sense of community between the troops stationed here and their neighbours develops and accordingly the hostility of the Brigantes in the Pennines seems to fade.

225-235 Temple at Ribchester built.

244-284 Grave Imperial troubles: inflation and 55 Caesars! Britain remains remote from most of these troubles apart from inflation.

268-282 The problem of Saxon Sea Raiders becomes acute. Britain's prosperity in the fourth century reverses the previously adverse balance of trade with the continent.

c285 Worden Hoard hidden.

284-305 Emperor Diocletian.

286-293 Carausius establishes himself in Britain and declares himself Emperor. He strips the province and Hadrian's Wall of troops prior to his defeat and death. This results in the usual uprisings among the Picts, suppressed by a punitive raid in 306 and the restoration of Hadrian's Wall.

By the end of the third century activity at Walton-le-Dale is in decline. On the death of Emperor Diocletian the army at York declares his son Constantine emperor - which in due course he becomes.

Emperor Constantine 274-337 (sole Emperor 324-337)

313 Constantine adopts Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire.

314 The Church's Council of Arles is attended by three British bishops.

324-337 Emperor Constantine: Capital of the Empire moved east with Constantinople established as the new capital.

A mid-fourth century mosaic floor in Dorset has a centrepiece figure of Christ.

359 British bishops attend the Church's Council of Ariminum,

360 Christian church at Silchester.

360 Attacks by Irish Scots and Picts in the frontier region: troubles throughout the 360s.

367 Military situation worsens greatly as Irish, Picts, Gauls and Saxons stage coordinated

attacks on the Province. Hadrian's Wall is over-run, and troops desert in what soon becomes a military disaster. It takes two years to restore order. **369** Invaders are cleared out and a restoration programme begins. Hadrian's Wall is restored for the fourth time.

360-380 Pagan temples still being erected in Britain.

383 and **407** In these years there are repeated reductions of troops in Britain to

support usurpers to the Roman throne.

383 Withdrawal of the 20th Legion from Chester.

394 The Empire is divided into Western and Eastern Empires: the Western survives until 476 and the Eastern (Byzantium) to the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans over a thousand years later in 1453.

400 St. Ninian preaching in Britain: Christianity had thus made considerable progress in Britain long before the Roman withdrawal.

c400 Occupation of Hadrian's Wall ends.

403 Troops are withdrawn from Britain for the defence of Italy against Alaric.

407 Hordes of Vandals cross the Rhine into Gaul.

407 Final withdrawal of troops from Britain in support of the usurper Constantine.

410 End of the Roman province of Britannia.

Most troops have already been transferred from Britain. Formal central government now failed and with it Roman administration in Britain. Many residents, concluded that they would be better able to organise resistance to the Saxon raids by themselves. The majority of villas do not appear to have come to a violent end, and in many parts of the country 'Roman Civilisation' would survive for another 50 years into the 'Age of King Arthur'.

Fifth Century: the Irish Sea now becomes the centre of a Celtic and increasingly Christian province.

389-461 Legend of St. Patrick at Heysham.

The golden age of the Irish Saints in the north-west: it lasts to the Synod of Whitby (664).

c450-525 St. Brigid.

430-50 Period Saxon settlement.

c490 Birth of St. David of Wales.

c500-570 St. Gildas. His chronicles describe the Saxon invasion as a fire which raged from sea to sea.

563 St. Columba lands on Iona.

570 Anglo Saxon families begin to migrate into the county from the east.

578 Death of St. Brendan the voyager. Did he 'discover' America?

597 St. Augustine at Canterbury.

b British defeated by Anglo Saxons at battle of Chester. End of the Anglo-Saxon conquest. 'Tun' place-names; Pres-tun, Wale-tun.

634-709 St. Wilfrid

664 Synod of Whitby. Celtic and Roman Christians join forces; 'ecles' place names.

670 St. Wilfrid's abbey at Ripon is granted lands along the Ribble.

A settlement at 'Preston' probably existed by this time and so the history of the town can be said to have begun.

2 What did the Romans call the places in mid-Lancashire?

A number of early geographies (early atlases without maps, they are lists of places with the distances between) list some of the place names in Roman Britain. The following were listed by Ptolemy in the second century ad:

Belisama Fluvius, the 'beautiful stream' (R.Ribble)

Seteia Fluvius (R.Mersey)

Moricambe Aesturium (Morecambe Bay)

Portus Setantiorum, the 'Port of the Setantii' (the lost port on the Ribble to the west of Kirkham: for the 'Setantii' see below)

A much later seventh century classical text, the Ravenna Cosmology lists:

Bremetenacum Veteranorum (Ribchester)

Pampocalia (precise location unknown, but possibly might be either Kirkham or Walton).

3 What did the Romans call the inhabitants – us?

Writing at the end of the first century ad Tacitus calls us the Setantii, and we had our own port in the Fylde, Portus Setantiorum. The name translates as the 'dwellers by the waters', and is well suited to a people whose settlements were strung out along the mosses and fens which then (and for many centuries after) so characterised the landscape of western Lancashire.

The Setantii were a sub-clan of the Brigantes.

4-9 Gazetteer of Places

4 Walton-le-Dale

The site at Walton has been excavated in the last 25 years, and is not yet finally published. Accordingly the following is an outline of the most recent publications on the subject.

Extract from www.roman-britain

A Roman Military Supply Depot

The major Romano-British settlement at Walton-le-Dale near Preston in Lancashire developed on the north bank of the River Darwen and south of the River Ribble just to the east of the confluence of the two streams. Both of these watercourses were forded a little way upstream of the point where they merged. The settlement has no defensive ditches or banks but was excellently protected by the two rivers, which almost completely enclosed the settlement on all sides, being open to attack only from the east.

Excavations conducted during the 1980s revealed that a substantial Romano-British settlement was established here sometime during the Hadrianic period (I 17-38ad.- for the reigns of the emperors and related events see the Roman Timeline). Although no evidence of actual military occupation was uncovered, in the form of identifiable defensive structures or buildings with an obvious military function, the internal

layout of the settlement is reminiscent of the interior of a Roman military camp, with ordered streets set out in a grid-like pattern. Evidence suggests that Walton-le-dale was the scene of substantial industrial development, with many of its workshops producing military equipment. Production continued here until the late Antonine period (138-61ad), after which, many of the industrial portions of the village were given over to warehouses and granaries, and the emphasis shifted from production of military hardware to the storage of materials and foodstuffs.

Over the centuries since the Romans established their military supply depot, the riverside margins of the settlement have been worn away, and a substantial portion of the original occupation area has been lost to the effects of river erosion.

The most recent statement at 1-1-07, ahead of publication of the excavation Report...

The main advance on the previous note is the earlier date for establishment of the site, and the sequence of reports are consistent in placing the earliest Roman activity on the site ever earlier in the context of the conquest of Britain. In the years ahead further research will no doubt cast more light onto this area. The following account is an edited version of the preamble to the forthcoming excavation report.

A Possible Roman Industrial Estate at Walton-le-Dale

Investigations have shown that the first Roman structure on the site was a road, built in the later first century AD, which ran north from the Midlands to Lancaster. It crossed the river Ribble downstream of the present bridge, and the land here may have already been cleared and cultivated by the locals.

The site was laid out shortly afterwards, some time at the end of the first or beginning of the second century. The earliest buildings were located at the north end of the site close to the junction of the two rivers, from where the complex subsequently expanded to the south.

Many of the structures seem to have been used as workshops; blacksmithing, copper-alloy working, and even silver-working took place inside the long, narrow, open fronted buildings, and there was also some evidence for tanning or linen netting at the edge of the settlement.

Some of the buildings could have been warehouses, storing pottery and possibly grain, brought upstream and unloaded onto the riverbank. These products were then moved on by land and sea to Roman forts and settlements in the region reaching perhaps as far north as Hadrian's wall.

The finds indicate that quite a mix of people lived at or visited the site. There is evidence for soldiers and possibly quite high-ranking civilians, but also extremely poor civilians (or slaves) who probably did most of the work and lived in the workshops.

The industrial settlement seems to have prospered during most of the second century but appears to have fallen into a decline at the end of the third. This may

have been as a result of the abandonment of the fort at Kirkham to the west, and changes at the important cavalry fort at Ribchester to the east.

Early in the third century a major fire meant that large parts of the settlement had to be rebuilt. Many of the workshops were reconstructed but other new buildings were used for agricultural purposes. By the end of the century the settlement was in decline, many of the buildings were disused or abandoned, and by the fourth century the site was more or less derelict and the inhabitants had moved on.

Some favourite questions asked about the Walton site...

Who were the first people on the site?

The excavations on the Roman site have had a spectacular impact on our knowledge of prehistoric settlement in the region. Flintwork left by hunter-gatherers and early farmers has been found, along with fragments of Bronze Age pottery, pushing back the story of the settlement of our area well beyond 4000BC.

When did the Romans occupy the site?

The region was probably well known to the invading army by the time that Roman control of Southern England (south of a line from the Severn to the Humber) was established by 50ad. Our three local sites emerged after 70ad with the decision to occupy the north, the establishment of the important legionary fortress at York and Agricola's campaigns into Scotland (78-84ad). The coastal road to the north was an important feature of these operations and the earliest Roman evidence from Walton comes from coins of the mid-first century ad.

What did the Romans find at Walton?

A settled and cleared Iron Age landscape.

When did Roman use of the site end?

Erosion has damaged the upper levels of the site, but surviving evidence indicates some continued occupation by a potter and his family in the late third century.

Why did it end? Did it end in violence?

The services provided by the site were either no longer needed or came from elsewhere. The site gradually and peacefully reverted to agricultural use for another 1500 years.

Was Walton a fort?

No. It was a supply base serving the Roman forces in the North-west of Britain.

Did the site have towers and ramparts?

The Victorian writers thought that it did, but they were wrong: the place name 'Walton' does not derive from 'Walled-town' and no defences have ever been found. Alternatively the site was surrounded on three sides by water and could only be approached on land from the east.

Did Walton need to be defended anyway?

Not really. Roman control over the local area was complete, large periods of the site's

history were peaceful and strong forces were stationed at Ribchester.

Why Walton?

Important roads north-south and east-west cross in the vicinity of the principle ford on the river Ribble and there was plenty of flat 'building land'. The area was already settled and so a workforce was to hand.

Was Walton a Port?

Many writers have thought so, and there may be archaeological evidence of a quay. The river is tidal some way upriver of the site and passage from the sea would be possible particularly on high spring tides. Before Preston Dock was created very large ships (by Roman standards) could have made the passage upstream. Interestingly Walton could have provided a safe anchorage and useful workshops to undertake ship repairs.

Has the sea level changed here?

No. The Victorians were very keen on sweeping sea level changes but tides at Walton bridge are virtually unchanged since Roman times: this might change in the children's lifetimes with 'global warming'!

I can remember seeing the area flooded: was this a problem? If not why not?

The area of Walton Flats has frequently suffered extensive floods with loss of life, and was deliberately shunned for housing before 1800. This problem may have been made worse by the deforestation of the valleys draining into the Ribble in medieval times, and so may not have been so prevalent in Roman times.

What were the buildings like?

Systematically laid out rectangular buildings in rows up to three deep were orientated end-on to the substantial road. Although they were rebuilt and modified from time to time the site maintained this regular plan. They may have had two storeys.

What were the buildings used for?

Each structure was associated with hearths and pits, suggesting their use for some sort of industrial process using a combination of heat and water. In the third century many of the buildings may have been used for the storage of goods or raw materials.

What was being made at Walton?

The really simple questions are always the hardest to answer! Probably metalwork. This sounds like a well-located distribution centre, comprising an industrial estate with warehousing...

Yes, that's about it, for industrial activity on quite a large scale.

So how do we find the site today?

It is basically below the Capital Centre car park, bowling alley and cinema! It can best be assessed when viewed on the Walton-le-Dale local History walk.

5 Penwortham

During the nineteenth century it was decided to enlarge the churchyard at the parish church. As work progressed a number of strange carefully made stone balls - up to about 4 inches in diameter - was found. These were carefully collected and placed in a glass case by the altar where they can still be seen to this day. They are very similar to the 'artillery shells' or 'bolts' fired by a Roman Ballista, a weapon which is a sort of cross between a catapult and a cross-bow. The museum at Ribchester has an interesting collection of ballista bolts on display.

If a visit to the museum is preceded by a trip round the church site (medieval church, Norman motte and bailey castle etc) the children can try to work out all the possibilities that this might suggest. Certainly the site at Penwortham is a most strategic one, but who or what might the catapult be fired at? Are the stones Norman, from the Civil War or do they have an entirely innocent explanation?

The children can learn by experience the great lesson of archaeology: that although the spade cannot lie, this is only because it cannot speak. Despite all the clever television programmes there are many questions that simply can never be satisfactorily cleared up.

6 Leyland

It seems hard to imagine that the marked agricultural advantages of Leyland's old town centre were overlooked during Roman times, particularly since the road from Wigan followed a similar line to the A49 (Wigan Road). Indeed driving along from Bamber Bridge we must be actually over the ancient road in places.

Direct evidence is elusive apart from two hoards.

The Worden or more properly the Leyland Hoard was found close to the town centre in 1850; it comprised over 120 coins buried about 18 inches deep in the soil and dating from 258-282ad.

The Leyland Moss hoard was found by turf-cutters in 1819. It was earlier in date than the Worden Hoard comprising just 11 coins dating from 96-160ad. Both hoards are thus well in keeping with the high-water mark of the Roman establishments at Walton and Ribchester.

7 Bamber Bridge

Station Road (the old A6) forms the villages link with the Romans. It follows very closely, and in parts may actually lie upon the Lancaster-Walton-Wigan Roman road. This particularly applies to the length north from the Hob Inn to the railway where the road followed the eastern rim of Walton Moss. The great legions, perhaps with Agricola himself at their head probably passed along it.

8 Kirkham and the 'Lost Port' on the Ribble

Very early in the Roman occupation a fort was established at Castle Hill, Kirkham. Comparatively little is presently known about it but it seems to have originated as a marching camp around the time of Agricola in the 80sAD (see Roman Timeline). This structure was replaced by a small stone fort early in the second century. It was at least intermittently in use until the third century, and clearly was a significant element of the Roman geography of the district. Although it had a direct road link to the much more substantial fort at Ribchester (across the north of 'Preston' at Sharoe Green perhaps via 'Watling Street Road') it may originally been more closely related to the north-south coastal road which passes through Walton-le-Dale.

The question of why to build a fort in the remote Fylde has led to endless speculation. Much of this has centred on the suggestion that Kirkham defended the way to a now lost port on the river. This could have provided a 'beach head' and then subsequently supplied the invaders as they made their way up the west coast in the first century. Many writers have identified it with the Portus Setantiorum, the 'Port of the Setantii' mentioned by Ptolemy in the second century.

In 1936 the Kirkham Hoard was discovered. Since it contained coins dating from 114-238ad it was probably put away not much later than 240ad, and may today be seen in the Harris Museum.

9 Ribchester

Roman Ribchester is an extremely well known and easily accessible site: the outline of the fort can be followed under the modern village, the remains of the bath house and granaries are open to the public, and a modern museum stands at the centre of the fort. The latter is a superb purpose-built facility from which school parties can also explore Ribchester itself (fine medieval church, handloom weaver houses etc). In short anyone offering a course on this period is strongly recommended to arrange a group visit. What follows is thus merely a brief introduction intended for classroom purposes.

The six-acre stone fort at Ribchester was an important centre of Roman power in the north of England. It occupied an important position on the road network leading north from Manchester, at the junction with the east-west Pennine crossing to York via Skipton. To the west an extension led to Kirkham via Walton — which itself stood on the rather less important lower road north from Wigan to Lancaster. The main line of the Roman system in the Greater Preston area thus lay some way to the east of the present M6. From an inscription we know that the fort was known as Bremetennacum.

A short history of the site

The occupation of the North-west has traditionally been associated with the campaigns of Agricola (78-84ad). This is now questioned since tree-ring dating at Carlisle puts the construction of that fort back to the early 70s and the campaigns of the Roman general Cerealis (71-74) - or even earlier. He may have constructed the earliest timber fort discovered at Ribchester, during excavations in 1989.

The ramparts of this fort were of timber and earth, with timber barrack blocks and stables. Important remains may lie beneath the later stone structures excavated by the late Victorians who may have failed to find them only because they were not looking for them. This site already had a bath house and a large adjacent civilian settlement. After about 50 years the site was rebuilt in stone. The fort was the base of a cavalry unit of 500 men, but the manning levels changed from time to time with modifications to the deployment of the forces based on Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall. After 175 Ribchester was garrisoned by cavalymen from Sarmatia, a province beyond the river Danube. When their period of duty ended they were unable to go home because their land was no longer within the Empire, so the veterans and their families settled here. The site was functioning in the fourth century, but there is no clear date for the end of the 'Romans at Ribchester' - because in a sense all the locals had become 'Romans'.

The Ribchester Parade Helmet Hoard

In 1796 John Walton, son of the village clogger Joseph Walton, was digging in a piece of ground at the back of their house. This stood at the end of the main street and backed onto the river. Why he was digging we do not know but we do know that he began to find things in the ground. His father took over and unearthed a collection of over 30 Roman objects most of which were eventually purchased by the antiquary Charles Towneley of Towneley Hall, Burnley. The nature of the hoard's discovery makes it very difficult to unravel the story and the context of its burial, but we do at least have most of the objects.

Luckily on 3 August 1796 the exciting discovery was reported in the local newspaper, the Blackburn Mail:

'A few days ago some ancient figures etc. were discovered in a scar on the Ribble side near Ribchester, a few miles from this place, about 9 feet below the surface of the earth. The river had washed part of them there, which induced the persons who discovered them to dig up the earth, where they found a metal helmet or cap-a-pie, embellished with a number of small figures of men on horseback, with swords in their hands: also some small figures or busts in relievo (relief); and a red earthen dish, which holds about three quarts, having a pouring spout, and a rim round it, on which are the initials B.O.R.J.E.D.F. with a number of small metal dishes: an oak chair having the remains of a leather bottom, and a quantity of old leather lying near it; and different other matters — the whole of which are now in the possession of a person at Ribchester. The kind of metal of which the figures are composed being of so high a colour is not yet perfectly known to the people there; and the person who sent this account is in doubt whether it may be gold. It is supposed by some discerning persons that it must have lain there some hundred years '

The ornate bronze helmet, carefully modelled to represent a wearer's head and face (complete with ears) is one of the most famous Roman objects ever found in Britain: virtually all of the books on the 'Romans' include a photograph of it, and though the original has pride of place among the British collection in the British Museum the Harris Museum at Preston has a copy. It was a helmet of a specialist type, to be worn by a senior cavalry officer at important parades.

Less well-known are the remains of a horse's harness, raising the suggestion that a complete set had originally been included in the collection. Three bronze 'camp kettles' were also found. Before Towneley was able to buy the finds some items had been given to Walton's niece and nephew, perhaps to play with. among these seems to have been a small bronze 'sphinx' — and it was perhaps they who lost it!

The question of how the items came to be buried is the most difficult of all to answer. It seems unlikely that they were simply 'lost', and they must have been put away very deliberately. The reference to leather and a 'chair' may indicate their burial in some form of container. The whole issue is further complicated by the loss of much of the south-east corner of the fort to river erosion, but clearly the hoard was deposited very close to the ramparts.

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In 2006 South Ribble Borough Council was awarded a grant to run an educational programme by the American Alcoa Foundation. The objective was to provide key source materials to teachers to supplement the teaching of Local History at Key Stage Two with information which they may not otherwise have the time to locate themselves.