

A walk around Olicana Roman Fort

AD 79 is regarded as the year the Romans came to Ilkley. At that time Gnaeus Julius Agricola was governor of Britain. Vespasian was emperor and it was one of his strategic aims to extend Roman control over northern Britain. Accordingly Agricola had orders to deal with the Brigantes whose land included present day Lancashire, Cumbria and Yorkshire.

It seems that Agricola carried out a pincer movement, moving up the east and west coasts and then striking inland along river valleys. The pincers may have met at Ilkley which the Romans thought of as approximately the centre of the island.

To secure the land they took, the Romans left forts every twenty miles or so – a day's march apart. Ilkley was a good place for a fort. The site commanded one of the fords for crossing the River Wharfe. It may have been an existing settlement and was certainly close to the cup and ring stone sites on Ilkley Moor which probably needed watching. It was also within striking distance of the important lead mines in Nidderdale which might need protection from Brigante interference.

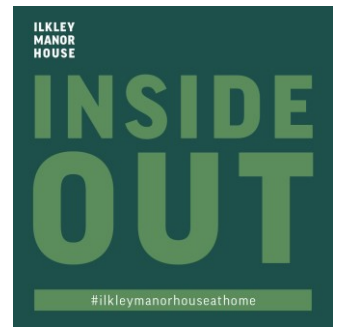
As usual the fort took the shape of a playing card and was built over 4.5 acres to accommodate a cohort of some 480 infantry and 120 cavalry. This was a larger proportion of cavalry than usual probably to enable policing of the hill and moorland country. They would also be needed to keep up with the Brigantes who were skilled horse people.

Start with your back to the Manor House main door and face towards the archway onto the main road. You are looking over the site of the cavalry barracks which stretched south as far as the A65 and then, behind you, north towards the end of the level ground at the back of the House. There were four of these barracks, two in front of the House and two behind. Each accommodated a basic unit or turma of 30 and was divided into a line of ten cells. At the front of each cell was the stable, with the riders' living quarters at the back.

Look across to the cottages. Half way up the end wall of the nearest cottage wall you will see a plaque. This marks the west gate, one of the four gateways of the fort. This plaque is one of four set up by the Friends of the Manor House to mark the 1900th anniversary of the fort. The road from the western gate leads down Castle Hill towards Elslack and the west.

Move right and turn round the western end of the Manor House and down the path leading to the river. On your right beside the path is the only part of the fort still above ground. This is the northern end of the west wall, much decayed. Originally the wall would have been two metres wide and five metres high, with a parapet inside. The fort corners were curved. You can still see the north west corner, though each year the stones which form it get less.

Walk down the path to where the mound turns right and join the flagged path and follow the mound round. One purpose of the fort was to overawe people approaching from the north, across the river. Here you can get a good impression of that impact. At the corners of the fort and along the walls there would have been artillery positions for torsion-based catapults. These



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would have had a considerable range for firing rounded stones, metal bullets and bolts which could have kept at bay any large group seen as a threat on the far side of the river.

Walk two thirds of the way alongside the path and look up to see, on a concrete block, the plaque for the northern gate. The road which came through there would have gone across the river and then split, going north to Bainbridge and east to Aldborough, which the Romans established as the regional town for the Brigantes.

Carry on to New Brook Street and turn right uphill on the pavement. The northern wall of the fort actually continued to the line of the apartments on the far side of the road. Those apartments are built going uphill on the line of the eastern wall. Half way up the road, on the edge of the apartments wall, you can see the plaque for the eastern gateway. The eastern wall of the fort continued to the Crescent Hotel.

Proceed along the pavement up New Brook Street. Before the traffic lights turn off right and take the flagged path towards the church entrance, The fort's southern wall ran along far side of the A65 under the shops and down the hill towards Skipton.

Stop before steps at the church gateway. On the far side of the A65 you can see the lane between the shops and the Black Hat pub. Here you may be able to make out the plaque (now painted black) to mark the southern gate of the fort. That gate led to the civilian settlement or vicus. Here merchants lived and the families of the fort soldiers. South of the vicus, on the line of Grove Road, was the main road from York (Eburacum) to the west coast. York was the garrison of the legion which provided the principal support for Ilkley in the event of unrest.

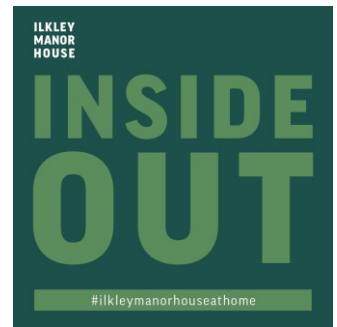
Turn round and then proceed around the end of the church. Many of the larger stones of the church were reused from the Roman fort.

Turn left and follow the path between the flower beds. This is the site of the six infantry barracks, each of which held some 80 legionaries.

Walk to the end of the flower beds and turn left along the path lined by trees on the left, which takes you back to the Manor House. You are now going through the other main buildings of the fort. Where the church stands were two granaries. These were built on low piles to air the grain. Each fort had enough grain to last a year in case of being cut off by local revolt. Between the church and the line of trees was the principia, the headquarters area, where the treasury was and the sanctuary for the unit's standards. To your right was the praetorium, the private quarters of the commander of the unit and his family.

Walk towards the Manor House and take care on the final slope which can be slippery in damp weather.. The House was also initially built largely with stone from the fort.

Walk round to the front of the Manor House.



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Pause at the first window to view the Heritage Gallery.

Look across the room – depending on the light you may be able to see inside. There is a Roman tombstone from about AD90, to Vedica, a Cornovian woman from the Chester area, who died aged 30. To its left is another tombstone for a family of three from about AD250, found when the foundation for the new church on The Grove was dug on the line of the east/west Roman road.

Not visible is an altar to Verbeia from about AD190AD. Its inscription states that it was dedicated to Verbeia by Clodius Fronto commander of the Second Cohort of Lingones. This is the only occurrence of the word Verbeia, but etymologically there can be little doubt that this was the Latin name of the Wharfe.

It is likely that part of the fort remained in Roman occupation until about 400AD. By that time links with Italy, particularly payment for the soldiers, were deteriorating. In the end, as occurred on Hadrian's Wall, the soldiers probably merged with the local population.