

Arbeia Fort Transcript Season 3, Episode 5

Hello, and welcome to the Time Pieces History Podcast. Today, we're looking at Arbeia Roman fort. Don't forget, shownotes, transcript and links can all be found on my website, and you can leave a comment on any podcast platform you use, or over on Twitter @GudrunLauret.

So, if you've been reading my blog at all, you'll know that Arbeia Roman Fort in the North East of England, is one of my favourite places to visit. It was number 40 in my Time Pieces History Project and I wrote about the site and the commanding officer's quarters for my Visit North East Project. Still, as we're working our way down the country, I thought I'd include it here too!

Arbeia sits in a residential area in South Shields, a coastal town a few miles from where I live. It was first rediscovered in the 1870s, and the land was built on and used for a century after that. The modern buildings were removed in the 1970s.

The whole place has been lovingly and lavishly restored, making visitors to Arbeia feel like they've stepped back 2,000 years in history. From the carefully recreated soldier and commander barracks, to the family dwellings and the stunning tiled entrance court (cloister) with a mosaic garden outside, it's an impressive sight and a great place to learn more about life for the Romans in the North East.

We learn from the information boards at the site that the fort was built to protect a seaport. The port has never been found, but given the fort's position on the Lawe, a headland above the mouth of the river, it's reasonable to assume that it was somewhere just below Arbeia.

The ruins date to around AD160, and the fort was rebuilt twice, each time from stone. An earlier fort, its exact location unknown, stood at approximately the same place and dates back to 40 years before the current structures. It was occupied until the Romans left in the 5th century.

As well as being used as a port, the fort was also a northern base for the Roman army, with 600 troops being stationed there at one time or another. It was also used as headquarters for the emperor Septimius Severus when he decided to invade Scotland.

It was also home to Mesopotamian boatmen from the Tigris, so the name Arbeia may mean 'fort of the Arab troops.' A Spanish cavalry was also based there – the First Asturian. Apparently, it wasn't unusual for forts to be under the responsibility of squadrons or legions brought in from other parts of the empire.

The fort commander would have lived in a house of his own, along with his family and attendant servants. This one was reconstructed in 2000, and shows a house which was originally built in AD175, after a fire in the fort.

From fragments that survived, the re-constructors knew that the walls of the house were highly decorative, and roof tiles would have been used. Access to the Commander's home was controlled by a porter, who only let VIPs through. The house had a summer dining room and a separate, heated one to use in winter.

The décor is based on examples from Europe, while the style of the building is modelled on those seen in Syria and North Africa. Privacy wasn't really a thing in Roman times, and all of the rooms would have been multi-usage.

The centurion, who was in charge of the soldiers, had his own quarters, although he would have shared it with a slave and junior officers, or his wife and family if he wasn't single.

The regular soldiers were bunked eight to a room, where they had to store all their equipment and cook their food. They would have used a bucket as a toilet at night, and would have shared beds or slept on mattresses.

There was a latrine available for use during the day, which was built over by the defensive wall. They were constantly flushed by water coming from the fort's drains, and wooden seats were positioned over the channels which took the waste out of the fort wall and into a ditch. The latrines sound a lot like the famous long drops at Glastonbury festival, but without individual cubicles and moss for hygiene purposes!

Arbeia is thought to be the birthplace of King Oswine, who ruled the southern part of Northumbria, known then as Deira. The northern part of the county, Bernicia, was ruled by Oswiu, a relative. Oswine had succeeded King Oswald, who installed Aidan at Lindisfarne.

Arbeia boasts the only example of stone-built granaries in Britain. If any others exist, they've yet to be discovered. The granaries were constructed in AD160, at the same time as the first fort. Stone supports were used to raise a wooden floor so that the grain and other foods would stay dry.

The building, constructed of limestone, also featured a portico to keep wagons dry when goods were unloaded. It was later demolished to make way for two kilns, which were put up in AD275 to make roof tiles.

When the new granary (horreum) was built, it had stone floor slabs which were supported by low walls so air could circulate below them. The outer walls, one metre thick and strengthened by buttresses, also had ventilation slots to allow more air through. A fireproof stone slate roof and a loading platform completed it.

By AD 208, South Shields was a key supply base for the area, necessitating the construction of an additional 23 granaries. However, with the arrival of the boatmen, the buildings were partitioned and turned into barracks to accommodate the new squadron.

Let me know if you've been to Arbeia, and what you thought of it. That's all for today, so please tune in next time.