

# VINDOLANDA

## CHARITABLE TRUST

### Excavation News 2002

#### Early 2002

The first nine weeks of excavation have demonstrated that the search for the western ramparts and ditches of the large pre-Hadrianic forts is going to be a difficult task. At the northern end of the site, clay subsoil lies little more than four feet from the modern turf level, but further south it is closer to twelve feet - and the pre-Hadrianic remains are covered by much later occupation material. To make life more challenging, there is a powerful water flow from north to south at a depth of only three feet. However, it does mean that considerable quantities of Roman leather are being recovered - and the 2002 footwear count has passed 140 already!

Further to the east, the 2001 excavation area, dealing with the probable praetorium of period IV (AD 105-c.120), is being extended to the south. The excavators are currently working down through the civilian and Severan military remains, which include a massive clay rampart with ditch, and have discovered a Severan well on the inner edge of the rampart. It proved to be 15 feet deep, built of un-mortared stones - and filled with demolition material when the Severan buildings were leveled around AD 212. Near the bottom of the fill lay two small votive stone altars, one without inscription and the other dedicated to the god HVVETER - a spelling variant of VETERIS or VETERES. A few feet to the east of the well, another stone votive altar has been recovered, dedicated to DIBVS VETERIBVS. Dedications to this god or gods, now with eleven dedications at Vindolanda, have largely been found in the central sector of Hadrian's Wall, and are believed to have originated with German troops. Work will now concentrate upon the pre-Hadrianic timber remains - and the first of the 2002 ink writing tablets have been found (although only small fragments so far).



The Severan Well during excavation



Small votive stone altar

### **Mid 2002**

The Northern Rock-sponsored excavations are now coming to an end for the season, and the research work on the massive quantity of finds will occupy the archaeological and laboratory staff for the next six months. By April it is hoped to have the report on the 2001-2002 work ready for the printers. Over 150 volunteers spent between a week and five weeks helping on the dig between April and August - including 16 from the United States - and their presence was also appreciated by the local B/B establishments. Visitors spent many exciting hours watching the progress of the excavations, and were able to see some of the astonishing finds minutes after they emerged from the ground. The constant dialogue between excavators and visitors was rewarding to both parties.

Some of the results of the excavations will only become apparent when the research is completed, but we now know that multiple timber buildings lie beneath at least two successive stone buildings as far as 190 metres to the west of the stone fort - right up to the western field boundary of the Trust's property. In other words, settlement at Vindolanda, both military and civilian, has been much more extensive than previously thought. Closer to the stone fort, work below the foundations of both civilian and Severan military buildings has revealed more of the exceptionally well-preserved pre-Hadrianic forts, although later fort ditches have cut a swathe through some of the remains.

Outstanding finds have included five small 'votive' altars, two of which had been dedicated to the popular by mysterious Veteres gods; some 45 more ink and stylus writing tablets; at least 400 items of footwear (regrettably!); some very fine tools, including a knife with cutler's stamp; a beautifully made wicker basket lid; a complete small box-wood container, with its lid in position and contents intact (due to be analysed shortly); several finger-rings and gemstones from others; and a number of spear-heads and miscellaneous weapons. But the greatest surprise was the discovery of a human skull in a sealed second century ditch - exhibiting signs of brutal treatment. Full forensic analysis has yet to be completed, but we do know that it was the skull of a 23 to 30 year old

Caucasian male - he might have been a native warrior, or perhaps a sacrificial victim. At any rate, once the police saw the location of the exhibit, they decided the crime was too ancient to warrant their attention. Alongside the skull lay the complete skeleton of a small dog, which had also met a brutal end.

Excavation is due to resume early in April, 2003 - weather permitting!



Ditch tablets area



The human skull

**Consolidation of excavated buildings for display** Work has now been completed on the western half of the stone fort's southern wall, where it stands nearly two metres high in places, together with the range of strange circular huts and late fourth century buildings just to the north. Visitors can now gain access to that area. Work is well in hand on the consolidation of the 16 seater latrine buildings in the SE corner of the stone fort, and the remainder of the fort wall will be dealt with after that. In 2003 work will start on the consolidation of the small Romano-Celtic temple near the Admission building, followed by the major project designed to preserve the huge pre-Hadrianic bath house.

**Vindolanda film for the Discovery Channel** A six man film crew has just spent a week at Vindolanda, making a programme for showing initially in the USA on the Discovery Channel - due for first screening in March or April 2003. It concentrates on the discovery of the famous writing tablets, and looks at the extraordinary information that they have revealed about life on the Northern Frontier in the years before the construction of Hadrian's Wall. [The publication date for the next volume of Vindolanda writing tablets - Vin. Tab. III - is September 2003, and it will contain all the ink texts found in the 1990s. It is likely that another volume will also be published in 2003, devoted to the stylus tablets].

**The Eagle's Eye Project** With the assistance of grants from the HLF and Leader programmes, the ambitious Eagle's Eye project is now being produced, ready for its first screening at the Roman Army Museum in February 2003. It will provide a superb view of the outstanding Roman frontier remains between Carvoran fort, next door to the Roman Army Museum, and Vindolanda, with a return journey showing the frontier reconstructed and in action. This is the kind of view that has never been seen before, and should provide a memorable experience for all visitors who are able to see it.

**[www.romanbooks.com](http://www.romanbooks.com) & [www.romanbooks.co.uk](http://www.romanbooks.co.uk)** As a part of efforts towards economic recovery after the 2001 Foot and Mouth troubles, the Trust's Web Site (which receives over 8,000 hits a month) has had its shopping arm upgraded to emphasise its comprehensive Roman bookshop. Over 140 Roman titles are currently available.

**The Carvoran Project** Work continues on this exciting project, which aims to excavate and then reconstruct to full size the walls and gateways of the fort next door to the Roman Army Museum. In October and November Andrew Birley will be conducting trial excavations on the site, to see how much remains of the fort walls and the south gate - although it is expected that stone robbing will have left little of the masonry.

**On-going Research Projects** A host of Vindolanda Research publications can be expected in the near future. Apart from the major Tablet publication by Professors Bowman and Thomas, and the volume on the stylus tablets by Bowman and Roger Tomlin, work is progressing well on the following subjects: Vindolanda's coins, by Richard Brickstock of Durham University; Vindolanda's wooden objects, by Drs Jon Hather, of UCL, and Rob Sands, of Dublin University; Roman developments in the production of steel, on the evidence of Vindolanda objects, by Dr David Sim, Reading University; the pre-Hadrianic pottery, by Dr Vivien Swan; the Vindolanda textiles, by Dr J.P.Wild, Manchester University; the people of Vindolanda, by Anthony Birley, Trust Chairman; and the Trust's Director of Excavations, Robin Birley, is working on his major Vindolanda volume, dealing with the work of the past 35 years.



Justin Oven  
**Late 2002**

**The Vindolanda writing tablets** *Voted number one by an independent panel of specialists for the British Museum's Top Ten Treasures from Britain's past.*

Early in 1973 two thin slivers of wood, apparently stuck together, were found in a deep modern drainage trench on the southern fringes of the settlement area outside the site of the later stone fort. When casually peeled apart, in the trench, the internal faces of the slivers were found to be covered in tiny, spidery, ink writing. It was not immediately apparent to the excavator what the language was, and by the time the wood was delivered to an expert for analysis, a few hours later, all traces of the writing had disappeared. Happily, infra-red photography later revealed the faded script, and eventually it was deciphered, to reveal part of a letter to a soldier at Vindolanda, promising the despatch of a parcel containing shoes, socks and underpants. A new era in Roman-British history had dawned.

Vindolanda's Roman writing tablets now number some 1,900, and the total will increase as excavations continue, as they must, for decades to come. The information they supply is of the most unexpected and exciting kind, revealing in the greatest detail the concerns of both the garrison and its civilian tail. The tablets are of great importance because they are the earliest reports of everyday life in Britain, concerned with ordinary peoples' daily lives here on Rome's northern frontier. They are Britain's earliest written records.

**Vindolanda excavation and research update, mid October 2002:** During the consolidation work on the southern wall of Stone Fort 2, near the latrine sewer outlet, important information emerged about the different line taken by the earlier stone fort's wall, as well as vivid testimony of the collapse and subsequent attempts to repair the later stone wall. The earlier fort wall extended nearly two metres to the south of the later fort wall at the south east corner, but it then ran on an alignment 4 degrees to the north of that wall, passing underneath it some 15 metres from the corner. This was to create huge problems for the stability of the later wall, which had stood firm where it was bedded on the earlier wall, but it had slipped nearly 60 cms to the south where its foundations lay outside that line. Some later Roman garrison had tried to rebuild the wall, using massive stone blocks removed from some prestigious building - but that had slipped off the foundations as well. The entire southern wall should be consolidated for public inspection by the end of October.

#### **Top Ten Treasures:**

1. Vindolanda Tablets, Northumberland
2. Sutton Hoo Ship Burial, Suffolk
3. Hoxne Hoard, Suffolk
4. Snettisham Hoard., Norfolk
5. Lewis Chessmen
6. Mold Gold Cape, north Wales,
7. Mildenhall Treasure, Suffolk
8. Fishpool Hoard, Lancashire.
- 9 Cuerdale Hoard, Lancashire
10. The Ringlemere and Rillaton Cups, Kent.

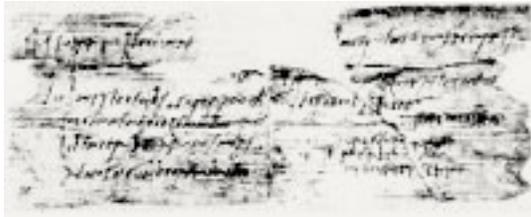
Research on the stone-built civilian settlement, constructed around AD 213 to house dependents of the newly arrived Fourth Cohort of Gauls, is beginning to build a strong case for major army involvement in the planning and infra-structure of the village, with the provision of a comprehensive drainage system as well as very fine roadways. The civilian settlement did not 'grow up' - it was created in an orderly manner by the army. And contrary to some earlier views propounded by coin experts, there is plenty of evidence for occupation during the fourth century as well as the third. There are few fourth century coins, but there is a good scatter of pottery types that must date later than AD 350.

The 50 odd writing tablets recovered during the 2002 excavations have now emerged from conservation, and are due to receive infra-red photography next week. The majority are fairly small scraps - casually dropped waste paper - but there is one complete document, written on an oak tablet, and inspection through the hand-held viewer suggests that it may prove to be a duty roster.

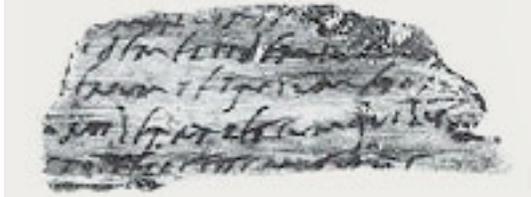
Andrew has just completed the first exploratory trench at Carvoran - Roman Magna - to provide information that could be helpful to the Carvoran project. His trench across the southern end of the east wall and ditch has revealed that stone robbers had removed all but the bottom foundation course of flags and rubble. It is suspected that this happened during the building of Blenkinsopp Castle nearby, in the mid fourteenth century, because the Carvoran land was a part of the Blenkinsopp estate.

Finally, a message from our Director of Excavations for those who have looked up 'Robin Birley' on the Web, and have arrived at an entirely false conclusion. There are

TWO Robin Birley's, and the Vindolanda director is NOT the multi-millionaire!! He wishes it were so.



Birthday Invitation from Claudia Severa to Sulpicia Lepidina, the wife of Vindolanda's prefect. It dates to the period A.D. 100/104, and the closing salutation, in Claudia Severa's hand, represents the earliest surviving writing by a woman.



The first tablet to be found, recording the dispatch of presents including socks and underpants



Childrens sock and Ink pen from Vindolanda