At 330m (1050ft) above sea level, Epiacum (Whitley Castle) is the highest stone-built Roman fort in Britain. It housed a garrison of about 500 men, and was probably built to control mining for lead and silver. Although we have yet to discover evidence for Roman mining in the North Pennines, archaeological surveys have revealed the fort in this region in 1980. We can now appreciate the information this gives us for the history of the area.

Aerial view of Whitley Castle Roman Fort

Epiacum’s unique rhomboidal form (most Roman forts were more rectangular in plan) is due to the shape of the gently sloping knoll on which it is built. The fort defences consisted of a stone wall surrounded by earthworks and ditches which survive today as some of the best-preserved fort ramparts in the entire Roman Empire. Large stone towers stood at the corners of the fort. Access to the interior was typically through four massive stone gateways, one in each side. Turf-covered foundations of buildings, including the headquarters building and barrack blocks, can still be seen on the ground within the fort.

Whitley Castle

At 330m (1050ft) above sea level, Epiacum (Whitley Castle) is the highest stone-built Roman fort in Britain. It housed a garrison of about 500 men, and was probably built to control mining for lead and silver. Although we have yet to discover evidence for Roman mining in the North Pennines, archaeologists agree that it must have taken place here. The Roman road known as the Maiden Way (between the forts at Kirkby Thore, in the Eden Valley, and Carvoran, on Hadrian’s Wall) passes close by the fort. Free guided walks for groups of 6+ can be arranged by contacting Elaine Edgar:

elaine.edgar@btinternet.com
telephone 01434 381773

We can now appreciate the information this gives us for the history of the area.

Epiacum’s unique rhomboidal form (most Roman forts were more rectangular in plan) is due to the shape of the gently sloping knoll on which it is built. The fort defences consisted of a stone wall surrounded by earthworks and ditches which survive today as some of the best-preserved fort ramparts in the entire Roman Empire. Large stone towers stood at the corners of the fort. Access to the interior was typically through four massive stone gateways, one in each side. Turf-covered foundations of buildings, including the headquarters building and barrack blocks, can still be seen on the ground within the fort.

Pottery from a small excavation in the 1950s suggests that the fort was built at about the same time as Hadrian’s Wall, in the year 122. It was rebuilt on at least two occasions before apparently being abandoned in the later fourth century.

The archaeological survey in 2009 has revealed the fort in great detail, along with the remains of a civilian settlement (‘vicus’) north and west of the fort ramparts. Further research, conservation and interpretation work is planned over the next few years and results will be posted on the ADHS website.
The walk

1 Start at the South Tyndale railway car park. Walk back over the level crossing, turn right and walk up the road, turning right at the top. Continue along the street, pass the turning to the left towards the town centre.

Alston is reputedly the highest market town in England. Recorded in twelfth-century documents, it stands at the crossroads of the North Pennines, with roads following ancient routes north into Tynedale, east to Weardale, south-east to Teesdale and south-west to the Eden Valley. The ancient medieval church was demolished and a new one built in 1769, to be replaced in turn by the present church in 1869. Its medieval and post-medieval history is closely linked to the local lead industry and many of the town's buildings date from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when this industry was at its height.

About the railway

The railway from Haltwhistle to Alston was opened in 1852 to serve the local lead industry. It closed in 1976 and the track bed is now followed by a narrow-gauge railway managed by the South Tyndale Railway Preservation Society. For more information on the railway visit www.strsp.org.uk.

For timetable information telephone 01434 382828.

2 Continue, past a garage, round a bend and over the bridge. Turn right on (the road to Brampton), then immediately right again onto a track (signed Pennine Way). This bridge over the South Tyne was built in 1836 to replace an 'ill formed and narrow' one of 1770. In the 19th century there was a brewery adjacent to the bridge, this closed in about 1880 but the buildings here are still known locally as 'The Brewery'.

3 Keep to the track as it bears left, through trees. Go through a gate, then stay on the track to a small gate to the left of a house. In the early 19th century ‘Towler Hill’ had a 56th high lead shot tower over a 50ft shaft, down which molten lead ore was poured, cooling as it dropped, to form round pellets. The tower has now gone, but the factory became a house, and the name survives. Follow the narrow path, between a wall on your left and a fence and hedge on your right.

4 Go through a stone squeeze stile and continue beside a wall. Looking down towards the river you will see a substantial earthwork, beyond which a hollow way leads to a former ford.

5 You come to a gateway with grand stone pillars. This is the old carriage way to Harbut Lodge, built in 1838. Go through the gate and bear left up the field following Pennine Way waymarkers. Go through a field gate and follow the track past a house on your right. Turn right and walk across the field to a stile. Cross the stile and turn left onto a stony track.

6 Follow the track up to the road Turn right and walk along the road for about 50m and (taking care) cross to a kissing gate.

7 Climb the field ahead, following Pennine Way markers, through several kissing gates and over two stone stiles. The Enclosure Act for Alston Moor was passed by Parliament in 1803, following which much previously open moorland was transformed into enclosed fields by the construction of many miles of drystone walls. Many of the fields were then improved through drainage and the application of lime and fertiliser.

8 Drop down to Golderdale Burn. Cross the footbridge and keep to the path, climbing then contouring round a hilllook and following the track straight on. A Roman bridge carrying the Maiden Way over the burn must have stood close to this footbridge, but no sign of it has yet been found.

9 You have now reached the great Roman fort of Epacum (Whitley Castle). It must have dominated the landscape during the second, third and fourth centuries. Feel free to explore the fort more closely. Enter the area through the gate in the bottom right corner (as seen from the path). Continue along the Pennine Way through a kissing gate to the left of Castle Nook Farm.

10 Keep following the Pennine Way, down to the left of the farm buildings and through trees to the road. Taking care, cross over the road and cross fields to Dyke House. The farm buildings here date originally from about 1700. They stand exactly on the line of the Maiden Way, the route of which you can see in the fields to the north. Follow the path through several gates, then diagonally right down to Kirkhaugh railway bridge.

Ancient cross outside Kirkhaugh Church

© Marcus Byron

Kirkhaugh Church before its rebuilding in 1869

© Marcus Byron

Harbut Lodge, built in 1838.

© University of Newcastle upon Tyne

A 4000 year-old Bronze Age burial cairn, one of three in this area, was excavated in 1935 and found to contain a pottery beaker, some flint tools and a very rare gold earring of a type known from only two other sites in England.

The earrings and other finds are known from only two other sites in England.

The railwa y from Haltwhistle to Alston was opened in1852 toserve

The railwa y from Haltwhistle to Alston was opened in1852 toserve

Alston

Tynedale

Railway

South

Tyndale

Railway

Station

Harbut Lodge, built in1838.

© University of Newcastle upon Tyne

A tower is recorded herein A 4000 year-old Bronze Age burial cairn, one of three in this area, was excavated in 1935 and found to contain a pottery beaker, some flint tools and a very rare gold earring of a type known from only two other sites in England.

The earrings and other finds are known from only two other sites in England.

The railwa y from Haltwhistle to Alston was opened in1852 toserve

Alston

Tynedale

Railway

South

Tyndale

Railway

Station

Harbut Lodge, built in1838.

© University of Newcastle upon Tyne

A tower is recorded herein A 4000 year-old Bronze Age burial cairn, one of three in this area, was excavated in 1935 and found to contain a pottery beaker, some flint tools and a very rare gold earring of a type known from only two other sites in England.

The earrings and other finds are known from only two other sites in England.

The railwa y from Haltwhistle to Alston was opened in1852 toserve

Alston

Tynedale

Railway

South

Tyndale

Railway

Station

Harbut Lodge, built in1838.

© University of Newcastle upon Tyne

A tower is recorded herein A 4000 year-old Bronze Age burial cairn, one of three in this area, was excavated in 1935 and found to contain a pottery beaker, some flint tools and a very rare gold earring of a type known from only two other sites in England.

The earrings and other finds are known from only two other sites in England.

The railwa y from Haltwhistle to Alston was opened in1852 toserve

Alston

Tynedale

Railway

South

Tyndale

Railway

Station

Harbut Lodge, built in1838.

© University of Newcastle upon Tyne

A tower is recorded herein A 4000 year-old Bronze Age burial cairn, one of three in this area, was excavated in 1935 and found to contain a pottery beaker, some flint tools and a very rare gold earring of a type known from only two other sites in England.

The earrings and other finds are known from only two other sites in England.

The railwa y from Haltwhistle to Alston was opened in1852 toserve

Alston

Tynedale

Railway

South

Tyndale

Railway

Station

Harbut Lodge, built in1838.

© University of Newcastle upon Tyne

A tower is recorded herein A 4000 year-old Bronze Age burial cairn, one of three in this area, was excavated in 1935 and found to contain a pottery beaker, some flint tools and a very rare gold earring of a type known from only two other sites in England.

The earrings and other finds are known from only two other sites in England.

The railwa y from Haltwhistle to Alston was opened in1852 toserve

Alston

Tynedale

Railway

South

Tyndale

Railway

Station

Harbut Lodge, built in1838.

© University of Newcastle upon Tyne

A tower is recorded herein A 4000 year-old Bronze Age burial cairn, one of three in this area, was excavated in 1935 and found to contain a pottery beaker, some flint tools and a very rare gold earring of a type known from only two other sites in England.

The earrings and other finds are known from only two other sites in England.

The railwa y from Haltwhistle to Alston was opened in1852 toserve

Alston

Tynedale

Railway

South

Tyndale

Railway

Station

Harbut Lodge, built in1838.

© University of Newcastle upon Tyne

A tower is recorded herein A 4000 year-old Bronze Age burial cairn, one of three in this area, was excavated in 1935 and found to contain a pottery beaker, some flint tools and a very rare gold earring of a type known from only two other sites in England.

The earrings and other finds are known from only two other sites in England.

The railwa y from Haltwhistle to Alston was opened in1852 toserve

Alston

Tynedale

Railway

South

Tyndale

Railway

Station

Harbut Lodge, built in1838.

© University of Newcastle upon Tyne

A tower is recorded herein A 4000 year-old Bronze Age burial cairn, one of three in this area, was excavated in 1935 and found to contain a pottery beaker, some flint tools and a very rare gold earring of a type known from only two other sites in England.

The earrings and other finds are known from only two other sites in England.

The railwa y from Haltwhistle to Alston was opened in1852 toserve

Alston

Tynedale

Railway

South

Tyndale

Railway

Station

Harbut Lodge, built in1838.

© University of Newcastle upon Tyne

A tower is recorded herein A 4000 year-old Bronze Age burial cairn, one of three in this area, was excavated in 1935 and found to contain a pottery beaker, some flint tools and a very rare gold earring of a type known from only two other sites in England.

The earrings and other finds are known from only two other sites in England.

The railwa y from Haltwhistle to Alston was opened in1852 toserve

Alston

Tynedale

Railway

South

Tyndale

Railway

Station

Harbut Lodge, built in1838.