

Walks around Redesdale
High Rochester
Bremenium



*The Fort on the
Edge of the Empire*

*For 250 years Bremenium was
the most northerly occupied fort
in the Roman empire.*

*Today you can explore this
fascinating site and discover
its hidden past.*

Edge of Empire

The fort occupies a strong position on a low hill with extensive views over Upper Redesdale and beyond. The site was chosen by Julius Agricola, a brilliant Roman commander and Governor of Britain in the late 1st century AD. His legions temporarily conquered the whole of northern Britain as far as Invernesshire in Scotland.

Following a retreat from Scotland, the new frontier of Hadrian's Wall was completed by AD 138. Within a few years the Romans marched north again and built the Antonine Wall across Scotland to mark the limit of their empire in Britain. However, Scotland again proved difficult to hold, so they pulled back to Hadrian's Wall, which became the permanent frontier in Britain for more than 200 years.

Bremenium was one of five outpost forts maintained as early warning stations for Hadrian's Wall. From then until it was abandoned about AD 340, Bremenium remained the most northerly occupied fort on the very edge of the Roman Empire.



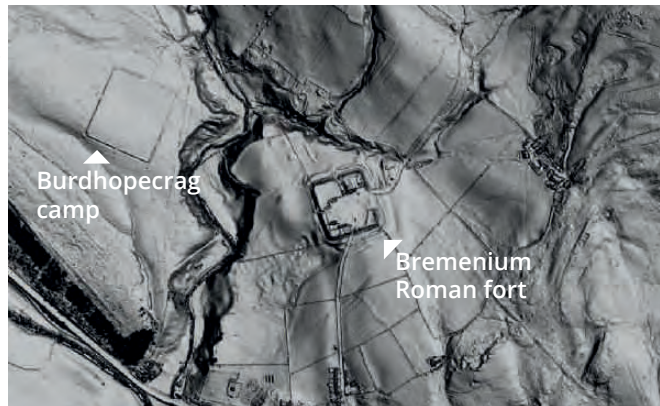
Location in relation to Hadrian's Wall, Antonine Wall & Roman road network

Roman milestone near West Woodburn



Photo: Chris Woodcock

Credit: © Environment Agency



Lidar image showing Bremenium Roman fort. Burdhopecrag Roman marching camp is visible to the west. To the south-west of the fort are the remains of a possible vicus (civilian settlement). The line of Dere Street can be seen coming from the bottom right of the image up to the right of the fort.

Dere Street – Invasion Highway

The Romans controlled their Empire by a system of roads and forts. Good roads allowed troops to move quickly to a trouble spot and deal effectively with any insurrection. Forts provided a secure base from which to mount an attack or to keep a watchful eye on the local population. Bremenium started life as a supply fort on the major military highway built by Agricola for his invasion of Scotland and control of the north. We do not know the Roman name for the road, but 1,000 years later in medieval times it was known as 'Dere Street'.

Dere Street roughly follows the line of today's A68 from Corbridge. It passes Bremenium's east gate, but can best be seen from the west gate. Visible as a dark line in the landscape, it climbs the far bank of the Sills Burn, then bears right.

After a short distance it has been resurfaced by the Ministry of Defence as a modern military road, on the Otterburn Training Area. It then runs up the valley, past a number of Roman marching camps and practice camps, and on beyond the complex of earthworks at Chew Green into Scotland.

Dere Street continued to be the main highway between England and Scotland until the late 18th century. It was then replaced by 'The New Line' (A68), which passes through Redesdale and crosses the border at Carter Bar. Although Dere Street declined in use, today's troops based at Otterburn Camp still travel on the same route as the Roman infantry, cavalry, couriers and traders. The instruments of war may have changed over 2,000 years, but Redesdale is still a military training area.

Illustration: Bremenium - Keith Copper



Troops who died during their tour of duty were buried according to Roman custom, either in graves flanking roads where they could be seen by travellers, or in a cemetery within site of both the road and the fort. The dead were cremated over a grave pit. When the fire cooled, the remains were placed in a pot, which was left at one end of the grave. The cover shows one of the tombs.

Walk : Bremenium Fort Loop

Distance: 2.05 miles / 3.3 km (¾ to 1hr)

Grade: Moderate

Start & Parking: Rochester Roundhouse
Please park sensitively in Rochester village.

- 1 Go through the wooden gate to the right of the interpretation monolith adjacent to the café car park. Ahead of you is the Rochester Roundhouse, a rectangular timber pavilion and outdoor space within the walls of a derelict roundhouse. Designed and constructed by Newcastle University students in 2016 it provides a multi-purpose community space.
- 2 Head diagonally left in front of the Roundhouse to cross the field to reach a kissing gate in the back left corner of the field. Go through the gate and follow the path along the top of an embankment with a fence to your right. Continue past the remains of a wall end to reach a waymarked metal gate in the fence.
- 3 Go through the gate and head diagonally uphill to the far left corner of the field to cross the perimeter field wall at a ladder stile. Skirt alongside the perimeter wall of Bremenium Roman Fort on your right, stopping at the west gateway where there is an interpretation board. Continue to follow the perimeter wall heading towards a waymarked ladder stile in the field wall just beyond, on your right.

4 Cross over the wall and continue alongside the perimeter to the north gateway before bearing left towards a gully and stream. Cross the stream at a small wooden bridge at a small waterfall. From the bridge bear left to follow a rough track to cross another stream over a ford (there is also a footbridge a little further up).

5 Turn off the track shortly after the stream to follow a faint path to the right of the wall to the adjacent field. The path rises uphill through the bracken to reach a ladder stile at the top corner of the field.

6 Cross the stile to skirt around the edge of the field, turning left in front of Hillock farmhouse to reach a waymarked gate at the junction of the fence and farm boundary wall.

7 Turn immediately right through a waymarked gate to follow the farmhouse track to join the main forest track. At the junction with the forest track turn right, passing a small pond on the right and through another waymarked gate.

8 Follow the track as it bears to the right to reach a finger post and military firing range notice. Continue to follow the track as it bears round to the right back down to the fort. Go straight over the crossroads with the Dykefield farm track and follow the now tarmacked track into the fort.

9 Follow the road through the fort and out on the southern edge. Shortly after exiting the fort there is a gate on the right and a ladder stile on the left. The stile to the left forms part of the perimeter walk around the fort. Go through the gate on the right into the field to retrace the first part of the walk back to the road. Alternatively you can continue to follow the lane down to the main road. At the junction turn right and follow the pavement on the right hand side of the A68 back to the start of the walk.

An audio trail of the Roman fort also starts at this point. Download the app and listen to it for free through the Echoes app.



Lime kiln from above

Uncovering the Fort's Secrets

Investigations in the 1990s revealed that a large late Iron Age enclosure occupied the site before the Romans arrived and is partly buried beneath the western defences of the fort. Research carried out by the Revitalising Redesdale Landscape Partnership in 2021 revealed two large annexe enclosures to the west of the fort, and the remains of a well-preserved lime kiln. A large quantity of Roman pottery was found, mainly dating to the 3rd century, along with glass-making waste, suggesting glass manufacture was happening at Bremenium. Finds also included the well-preserved remains of a Roman leather shoe, probably dating to the 2nd century and two Roman coins.



Top: Hadrian and Trajan coins.

Bottom: Roman pottery found during 2021 excavation.

Right: The sole of a Roman leather shoe from late 2nd or 3rd century AD.



Venus and attendant nymphs frieze found at Bremenium in 1855.

Holding the Fort

Nowadays it is hard to imagine that 1000 men once lived here in the 3rd century. They were auxiliaries, recruited from France, Belgium, northern Spain and the former Yugoslavia – countries already conquered by Rome.

The garrison included infantry and cavalry and, in the 3rd century, a unit of scouts – the Numerus Exploratores Bremenenses. This crack fighting force policed the countryside, giving advance warning of any build-up of trouble further north that might threaten the security and stability of the province of Britain. When times were quiet the garrison would be out on patrol, training at one of the practice camps or maintaining Dere Street, the fort and their weapons.



The Bastle at High Rochester

A Sad End

When the Roman Empire began to collapse in the 4th century, the garrison was withdrawn and Bremenium was left to its fate. The local population probably moved in.

Little is known about Bremenium during the so-called Dark Ages that followed. But over 1,000 years after the Romans had left, the fort walls still offered a measure of protection during the lawless era of the Border Reivers. In 1581 High Rochester was 'laid waste' by marauding Scottish reivers.

The inhabitants took stone from the Roman fort to build two 'bastles' as a safe refuge. These thick-walled defensible farmhouses still survive today.

Stone robbing was the beginning of the end for the old fort. In the late 18th century stone was taken for field walls in the area. By 1810, Mr Jollie and Mr Hope, two local Presbyterian ministers, had, over a period of 30 years, systematically dismantled most of the south and east walls and the south gateway. Some of the stone can be seen in local buildings. The central area, now the village green, was excavated in the 1850s by the Newcastle Society of Antiquaries. You can see many of the finds from these and more recent excavations in the Great North Museum: Hancock in Newcastle upon Tyne.

An Outpost Fort

Bremenium is built to a pattern standard throughout the Roman Empire, so that troops would be familiar with the layout no matter where they were stationed. The fort is rectangular with rounded corners – like a playing card – with a gate in each wall and towers at intervals. Banks and ditches surrounded the fort, but are most obvious on the south side, where they protected the easiest approach.

The earliest defences consisted of an earth and turf rampart, topped by a wooden palisade and an outer ditch. The fort was rebuilt in stone in the mid 2nd century, when Bremenium had become the most strategically important outpost north of Hadrian's Wall. It guarded the junction between Dere Street and a new branch road running east to join the Devil's Causeway, another Roman road, at the Bridge of Aln on today's A697.

Most of what you can see today is early 3rd century, when the Emperor Severus ordered the reorganisation of frontier defences. This followed a serious incursion by Caledonian (Highland) tribes in the 180s.

An artistic reconstruction drawing of Rattenraw

Romano-British settlement and field system at nearby Rattenraw, about 2km south east of Bremenium.

There is evidence of a considerable population of native farmers in Redesdale in Roman times. They lived in roundhouses within small farmsteads. The practised mixed farming, probably supplying the garrison at Bremenium with grain, meat and hides. Cereals were grown in large open fields in narrow plough rigs known as 'cord rig'.



Illustration: Keith Cooper

Bremenium

Place of the Roaring Stream

High Rochester today is a small hamlet in Upper Redesdale. Its claim to fame is that it nestles within the ramparts of Bremenium, a Roman fort built almost 2,000 years ago. Bremenium means 'Place of the Roaring Stream'. The roaring stream is the Sills Burn, which flows through the small narrow valley to the west of the fort. After prolonged rain or when there is a rapid thaw of snow, High Rochester really does echo to the sound of roaring waters.



South interval tower



The West gate. On the left are the mounded cap and springer, which supported the arch. Towers built of large stone blocks were on either side.

Please note that Bremenium Roman Fort is a Scheduled Monument protected by law. It is illegal to disturb it in any way. To protect wildlife and farm animals, please keep your dog on a lead at all times.

This leaflet is dedicated to the memory of Beryl Charlton, local historian, archaeologist, author and resident of High Rochester. Content other than walk description written by Beryl Charlton and Karen Collins. Access for part of the Walk route is by permission of the landowner.

Other Places to Visit in Redesdale

This is one of 6 walk leaflets created by the Revitalising Redesdale Landscape Partnership Programme that ran from 2018 to 2022.

There are many wonderful sites to explore in Redesdale.

For more information on these sites, please visit

www.revitalisingredesdale.org.uk

Scan Me



Where is Redesdale - how to get here



How to Find Bremenium

Bremenium lies just off the A68. It is easily reached from Otterburn (5 miles), Rothbury (22 miles), and Hexham (28 miles). When visiting Bremenium, you should park sensitively in Rochester village. Less able visitors can drive directly to Bremenium Fort and carefully park on the green. For public transport options see: www.travelinenortheast.info

Every effort has been made to ensure accuracy of the walk descriptions and maps but changes can occur. We recommend using the relevant Ordnance Survey maps which show more of the surrounding area. This leaflet is covered by OL42 (Kielder Water & Forest) 1:25,000 / Land Ranger 80 (Cheviot Hills and Kielder Water) 1:50,000.

Please follow the Countryside Code, check the weather before you set off and wear appropriate outdoor clothing.

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