

Episode 28: Hadrian's Wall

Summary

Last year, Nick and Wendy spent several days walking alongside Hadrian's Wall in northern England. In this conversation, they talk about their visit and about the Wall itself.

Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are talking about Hadrian's Wall, which is a wall in the north of England. It's the, uhh, biggest legacy of the Roman occupation of Britain, so it's, uhh, by now, almost a 1,900-year-old wall. And last year we went and had the pleasure of hiking along the Wall for a couple of days.

Wendy: Yeah, it was great. I really enjoyed.

Nick: And so, I actually had been by myself, uhh, I think, two years before, because I had a work contract that I was doing in Glasgow, in Scotland, which is just north of where the Wall is. The Wall's in England, not in Scotland, but it's very close to the English-Scottish border. And so I decided that because, uhh, Glasgow was close, more or less, to the Wall, and I'd wanted to see the Wall and to hike along it for many years, I decided to take a couple of extra days and to do that, uhh, by myself. Unfortunately you weren't there, and you were in China, learning more Chinese, uhh, at the time. Umm, but it was funny because I remember talking to my brother, who lives in England, and he had visited the Wall just a few months, I think, before me. And he went with a couple of other guys and they had cycled alongside the Wall, or, I don't think you can cycle exactly alongside the Wall, for, certainly not for the stretches¹ that we know.

Wendy: No.

Nick: But they cycled near the Wall, or as near as you can get to it. And I remember that I told him that I was interested in going, and I wanted to go and hike along the Wall, and he said to me, 'You know it's just, it's just a wall. It's just like a small wall, it's one metre high and there's not really a lot to see.' And I said, 'Yes, Tim, I know what it is, don't worry about that.' Umm, and it was just funny because he's not really into history the way that I am and he didn't appreciate it the way that I did.

¹ stretches: continuous sections or parts (a noun in this case; although it can also be a verb)

And so ... but it is interesting, because, yeah, that's basically what it is now. It's just a pretty small wall, and if you just look at one section of it in isolation, well, there's not much to see, is there? It's just a few stones that are piled on top of some other stones, and that's basically it.

Wendy: Yeah, and if you compare it to ... I mean, we've been to plenty of walled cities, umm, you know, where you have old walls that surround a city and there are ... sometimes those are really impressive and quite tall and, umm, you know, imposing kind of monuments. Whereas Hadrian's Wall really is not, it really is pretty small.

Nick: Yeah, it's very much a crumbling² structure. It doesn't have the grandeur³ that, for example, the Great Wall of China has...

Wendy: Right.

Nick: ...that we talked about a few episodes ago.

Wendy: Umm-hmm.

Nick: Umm, and so you have to be prepared for that, I guess, on a visual level, that it's not something that you're going to look at and just be astounded by how enormous it is.

Wendy: Right.

Nick: It's not that kind of site. But what makes it really interesting - and again, like the Great Wall of China - is that if you walk along it, firstly that's a great experience to get, uhh, the historical monument, umm, the landscapes that you get to see and the exercise that you get or the enjoyment that you get from hiking while you're doing it. To have all those three things together is always something special. But as you walk along it, it reveals more of itself to you. Umm, and there's just a lot of interesting things about it. Firstly, you get to see the Wall undulating⁴, going up and down, with the landscape of that part of England, so you see it going up and down these little hills, umm, and it's just tied to the landscape in that way. And you can just imagine the challenges that there were in building it to fit the landscape that it was in.

Wendy: Yeah.

² crumbling: falling apart

³ grandeur: large size or impressiveness

⁴ undulating: moving in a curved or wave-like motion

Nick: And then there's also plenty of other things. It's not just one wall, umm, there are other parts to it as well. So there are several fortresses that are there along the Wall, and today you can't see, uhh, again, you can't see the grandeur of these fortresses. What you're seeing is the, sort of, base of them.

Wendy: The foundation.

Nick: The foundations of them. But some of them like, uhh, Housesteads Fort and Chester's Fort are quite famous, uhh, in England for being the most impressive forts that you have along the Wall. And then you can really understand the life of the Roman army that was defending the Wall.

Wendy: Right. Umm-hmm.

Nick: And so you see the barracks⁵ where the soldiers slept, and you see certain rooms that were for certain things. You see the latrines. Umm...

Wendy: Oh yeah, I do remember the latrines, yeah. Because they're ... well, we've seen a few Roman latrines before, because we've seen quite a few, uhh, ancient Roman sites around the world. But, yeah, the latrines are memorable, because, uhh, they're just open. So they're toilets, if you're not familiar with the word latrine, basically, it's a way of saying toilets. Umm, but there's no individual stalls⁶, they just all sat there right next to each other.

Nick: Yeah, so you really ... yeah, you can really see that. Umm, and so it's always quite interesting to see. Umm, another thing that they have are these what they call milecastles, which are towers - and again, you only see the foundations of the towers - umm, but they're every mile, every Roman mile, along the Wall. And the Wall is, now I've forgotten exactly, I think it's 74, maybe 84 miles, something like that, umm, in length. And so every mile, you would have one of these milecastles, uhh, and so I remember Milecastle 42, for example, was one of the ones that we saw and it's probably the most famous one actually, because you can climb up to a ridge right near it and you get this great bird's eye view⁷ looking down, uhh, at the foundations of this milecastle and you can see how it's perfectly square, perfectly proportioned that way. And, again, you just have this idea of firstly the construction...

Wendy: Right.

⁵ barracks: a place for soldiers to sleep, always plural

⁶ stalls: cubicles, separated areas with a toilet in modern bathrooms (in this context)

⁷ bird's eye view: the view from the sky looking down, as a bird would see it

Nick: ...and how impressive that was, and Hadrian who was the emperor who commissioned the Wall was himself very interested in architecture, and in, uhh, military defensive systems and things like that. And so it's no coincidence, I guess, that this Wall was built under his guidance or at least, uhh, on his orders. Umm, but you can see just what an immense task this would have been to have built this Wall, firstly, and secondly to have maintained it and to have defended it. And so you have, you know, all of these different forts at various places along the Wall, and then you have these milecastles as well, uhh, and so you can just imagine the soldiers there looking out into the vast wilds⁸ of Scotland and, umm, defending, you know, what they believed was right on the Roman side of the Wall, I guess.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: And so we spent a couple of days walking along the Wall.

Wendy: Umm-hmm. It would have been nice to be able to do the whole thing. But we just didn't have the time for that at the time.

Nick: Yeah, I think you can do it in maybe six days, if I'm not mistaken. But there's one stretch that's more or less in the middle, and that's the most famous or the most commonly walked section because, uhh, several of the forts that I mentioned before are there, and some of these nice milecastles, and then there's some nice bits of the Wall going up and down the hills as well. And so we chose a section in the middle, and I'd done part of that, I think, when I went by myself. Umm, but we also walked a couple of new areas that I hadn't walked on before. Umm...

Wendy: And we just had one base where we stayed both nights. We were there for two or three nights, I guess. And then we would take a bus. There's a bus that goes to the different places along the Wall, and so we would, yeah, go to different places each day and then walk from there.

Nick: Yeah, so the city we stayed in was called Hexham, and the bus was the AD 122, uhh, which is the year that the Wall was built or at least that it began to be built. Uhh, and that's really quite a good system because, yeah, the bus drops you off at these certain places and you can easily walk for however long you want to walk to another point and then just jump back on the bus and that'll take you to a new section of the Wall or back to Hexham if you want, or somewhere else. Umm, and so we spent a couple of days walking along the Wall and, umm, and it's really nice to be out there. There were a few other people, not too many I don't think, from what I remember.

Wendy: No, not too many, but there were, there were some people. It was beautiful weather, which is pretty unusual in England so we got really lucky with that. Uhh, it

⁸ wilds: uncultivated or uninhabited areas (often plural in the context)

didn't rain at all, it was really sunny. And actually I remember one local English person complaining to us that it was too hot which I thought was really funny.

Nick: Yeah, that was funny. Because I think it was, uhh, even, not even summer. It was in May perhaps, late May or something like that. And, yeah, we did have a beautiful day. Umm, and, yeah, so there are more people around the forts, umm, but then once you start walking between them you can really go off the beaten track⁹, so to speak, and, umm, and just really enjoy walking along the Wall.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: So, if, uhh, you're ever in the north of England and you fancy¹⁰ walking around a little bit, then Hadrian's Wall is a great place to do it.

Wendy: Definitely.

⁹ off the beaten track: away from the areas that most people go

¹⁰ fancy (as a verb): like, think you would like

Comprehension Questions

1. Had either Nick or Wendy been to Hadrian's Wall before the trip they described in this episode?
2. What does Wendy say is interesting about the Roman latrines that you can see on the Wall?
3. How did Nick and Wendy travel around the Wall?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. If you fly into or out of Geneva on a clear day, you get a _____ of the Alps from the plane window.
2. "Do you _____ going out for some pizza tonight?"
3. If you go to a concert or a sporting event where there are a lot of people, the bathroom _____ can be very dirty.
4. There are several _____ of the road where it's very narrow and two cars can't pass each other.
5. The _____ of the pyramids in Egypt is still impressive to us today even thousands of years after they were built.
6. If you go to a very popular destination like Italy, there will be a lot of tourists there. Try to go _____ so you can make discoveries for yourself.
7. There are a lot of _____ ruins in Europe that are hundreds of years old.
8. The _____ of Scotland can be a great place to go hiking, but the weather can be bad and can change at any moment.
9. The soldiers' _____ were very neat and well maintained even though they were at war.
10. There are a lot of _____ roads near the beach that follow the curves of the coastline.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Would you like to hike along Hadrian's Wall, or would you prefer to visit it by car, bus or bike?
2. If you have seen ancient Roman sites yourself, which one did you find the most impressive, and why?
3. Are you more like Nick who likes visiting historical sites, or more like Nick's brother Tim who isn't very interested in them?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. Nick had been by himself two years before, and wanted to return with Wendy, who had never been.
2. That they don't have individual stalls, and the Romans went to the bathroom in the open.
3. They used a hop on, hop off bus service and hiked along the Wall between the bus stops.

Exercises

1. bird's eye view
2. fancy
3. stalls
4. stretches
5. grandeur
6. off the beaten track
7. crumbling
8. wilds
9. barracks
10. undulating