Roman Fort Life

Cumbria formed part of the military zone acting as a buffer between the 'barbarian' north of Britain and the richer 'civilised' or 'Romanised' south. Local hostile enemy action was a constant threat of loss of life and injury. Forts were sometimes overrun and destroyed, but often as not, repulsed such attacks, for example Ambleside.

These forts came in many different sizes from the large legionary forts, to the smaller auxiliary forts like Hardknott, Waterhead, Ambleside and Watercrook here in Kendal, to supply depots such as Ravenglass. Life in these forts was very much like that within present day military camps. Training along with routine chores and specialised duties were the order of the day. New recruits would be put through an intensive basic training to increase fitness, improve on weapons use and learn how to fight as part of a unit.

Hardknott Fort

Model of Harknott fort (mounted on wall)

Hardknott fort was built and occupied during the Hadrianic period 117-138AD. It stood guard over the road connecting the Roman forts at Ambleside and the coastal port of Ravenglass,

Situated high above the Esk Valley it is perhaps the most dramatically sited of all forts within the former Roman province. The fort was garrisoned for some time by the 4th Cohort of Dalmatians, evidence coming from an inscription built into the main gate.

When the northern frontier was advanced under Antoninus Pius 138-161 AD the fort was mothballed, but was brought back into service before being finally abandoned in the late 2nd century, possibly as a direct result of troubles with the local tribesmen in 196-7AD.

Remains of the headquarters buildings and two granaries can be seen within the fort walls, along with angle towers. Outside is a bath house and a well preserved parade ground. Local grey volcanic rock was used throughout the building of the fort, but red sandstone carted from the coast was used to frame the gateways and possibly other features.

Roman Soldiers

The wall display shows soldiers of the different military ranks, outside the main gate of Hardknott fort.

Centurion	Regular veteran Roman officer in charge of approx. 80 men
Standard-bearer	The guardian of the company's finances and its 'colours'
Legionary	Roman heavily armed enlisted soldier of Roman citizenship
Auxiliary	Non-Roman soldier of conscripted into the army
Cavalryman	Lightly armed mobile auxiliary horseman

Fort Building and Maintenance

Fort building and maintenance was undertaken by the soldiers themselves, as was road construction, surveying and the many different trades needed to keep the army self-sufficient. Finds of hand tools, pottery, coins and weapons and even written orders and letters, on wooden tablets have been found during archaeological excavations on forts. Waterlogged conditions preserved the latter at Vindolanda and construction timbers at Waterhead, Ambleside. The selection of unused iron nails displayed here come from a find made in the temporary legionary fortress of Inchtuthil, Perthshire.

When the fortress was abandoned in a hurry, the defences were taken down along with the internal buildings and the external bathhouse. But due to a lack of time, and presumable wheeled transport, heavy portable items such as unused pottery and glassware were smashed and the nails, approximately one million of them were buried to put them out of reach of the enemy. A similar scene may well have occurred in our local forts.

1. Nails
Iron	Pinhata Castra, Scotland	KMA 1979.110

2. Knives
Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.271
Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.289
Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.298
Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.288
Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.287
Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.109
Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.312
Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.321
Iron	Untraced	Unknown

Knife Sharpener
Wood	Ambleside, Cumbria	KMA 1980.196

This object is made of boxwood and was used for whetting or sharpening knives. Over time it has cracked and shrunk due to its environmental conditions.

3. Building tools
Awl/Drill
Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.325
Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1980.202

Handle of an engravers or surveyors tool
Bronze	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.207

4. Window or door reinforcement bracket
Bronze	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.203

5. Cramps/spikes
Timber cramp
Iron	Fort Vicus, Ambleside	KMA 1978.8
Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.249
Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.267

Fastening

Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.251
Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.246

Spike

Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.244

This collection of building materials shows the variety available. Each of these different materials would have different purposes and structural functions. Cramps were used for securing timbers, and would have been very important in the stability and maintenance Watercrook Fort. The two iron fastenings would similarly be used to clamp and clench adjacent timbers together, whist the iron spike would provide further structural security.

6. Patera Handle and Pot hanger

Pot Hanger

Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.250

Patera

Late First Century/Second Century AD

Bronze	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.232

This fragment of handle was found at the site of Watercrook Fort to the south of Kendal. A patera was a type of pan carried by Roman soldiers as part of their standard kit. It was used for both cooking and eating from. Patera handles all had a hole in the end which was probably used to suspend the pan for storage, possibly on the pot hanger. The handle is decorated with six interlocking concentric circles and there is the faint trace of a stamp of which the surviving letters read ANDID. The golden replica shows what the patera would have looked like when first made.

7. Shackle, Locks and Keys
Shackle fragments

Iron	Ambleside Fort, Cumbria	KMA 1983.6

The shackle fragments are part of a pair of handcuffs; these could be used on either slaves of prisoners, but most likely this specific pair found at Ambleside Fort were used on prisoners. Similarly the chain links would presumably have more utilitarian and practical purposes than slave securement.

Chain link

Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1980.71
Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.320

Bolt

Bronze	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.213

Lock

Bronze	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.212

Key

These Roman keys may have been used for a variety of purposes ensuring the security of not only physical security of the soldiers or the detainment of prisoners, but even for the safety of the food rations, especially the grain in the grain house.

Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.314
Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.313

Latch

Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.194
Iron	Ambleside Fort, Cumbria	KMA 1979.311

8. Arrowheads
Reconstructed Arrow

Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.284

Arrowheads

Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1982.94
Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1982. 93
Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1982.95

These lightweight arrowheads are tangled and triple barbed, making the removal of them extremely difficult. As these arrowheads were so difficult to remove they caused more damage when they finally were. This particular arrowhead has been mounted on a modern shaft.

9. Weapons

Balista Bolts

Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1983.2
Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1983.3
Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1983.4
Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1983.5

These iron projectile heads were fired from mounted, powerful, hand winched crossbow type weapons operated by teams of soldiers.

Calthrop

Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1983.1

These iron-spiked objects were routinely used to hinder the enemy, particularly horsemen. Thrown on the ground by the handful, one spike always faced upwards, they caused severe injuries if trodden on.

10. Horse bit and 'hipposandal'

Roman harness, tack and other equestrian equipment are very similar to that used today.

Bit

Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1981.9
Bronze	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.198
Iron	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.192

Vehicle Fitting

Bronze and Enamel	Watercrook, Kendal	KMA 1979.242

This fitting was probably used to secure a cart.

'**Hipposandal'**

Iron   Kirby Lonsdale, Cumbria   KMA 1979.180

These iron objects are fairly common and are thought to have strapped to the foot of a horse that had gone lame or possibly needed to be restrained.

11. Wooden stake

Oak   Waterhead, Ambleside   KMA 1978.7

This wooden stake was found from Roman road foundations at Waterhead, Ambleside. The stake still retains the axe marks and other worked physical scars.