

Milecastle 38, Hadrian's Wall and the "Dutch bankers"

Introduction

The following is an account of two very large-scale events that have left their mark, literally, etched on the minds of every archaeologist and manager of archaeological sites along Hadrian's Wall World Heritage Site. The aftermath of the first visit, in January 2003, shook the Wall to its very foundations and fuelled a debate about the management of large groups that continues to this day. The term the *Dutch bankers*, was soon coined, and remains a metaphor for both good, and poor, organisation of events. News filtered back to the Netherlands and was even reported in NRC HANDELSBLAD, a Dutch broadsheet, with the headline:

"Het wandelpad langs Hadrian's Wall in Groot-Brittannië is een enorm success. Zo groot dat het antieke monument er door bedreigd wordt. Vooral een groep Nederlandse bankiers richtte veel schade aan, zeggende de Britten." (2/5/06) Translation to follow

(which translates into – "The walking route along Hadrian's Wall in Great Britain is a great success. So much so, that the ancient monument is threatened by it. Especially a group of Dutch bankers have caused a lot of damage, said the British.")

This case study focuses on the damage caused in 2003 to Milecastle 38 on Hadrian's Wall. The *Dutch bankers* actually walked 2½ miles along the National Trail but it is the damage at the pinch-point of Milecastle 38 that caused the most concern. It will also review the very different approach by the same company to its follow-up visit in September 2006.

Hadrian's Wall – a protected landscape

Hadrian's Wall is probably one of the most protected landscapes anywhere in the UK. Awarded World Heritage Site status by UNESCO in 1987, on account of its *outstanding universal value* to mankind, it boasts not only a national park with extensive tracts under National Trust ownership, but also an AONB and, for good measure, several SSSIs. As Britain's longest Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM) it remains an enigma because the story of the Wall, the northern limit of the Roman Empire, and constructed under the order of the Emperor Hadrian, is yet to reveal itself in full. This is the lure of Hadrian's Wall, not to mention the drama of the Whin Sill escarpment that, for many, is reason enough to visit England's narrowest point.

Background to Milecastle 38

Milecastle 38, or Hotbank, is a SAM; it also lies within the Roman Wall Escarpments SSSI, designated as such on account of the nationally important geomorphological features of the Whin Sill. It comprises the remains of a Roman milecastle which survives as an obvious earth bank, square in shape, with evidence of other archaeological features in the form of several lumps, bumps and hollows in the ground. Any works to the monument or path, therefore, require statutory permissions - both Scheduled Monument Consent (from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport) and Operations Likely to Damage Consent (from Natural England).

The modern history of Hadrian's Wall (post World War II) has witnessed sustained visitor pressure both to the Wall in general and to Milecastle 38 in particular. It lies roughly a

third of the way along one of the most popular stretches of the Wall, between Steel Rigg car park in the west and Housesteads Roman fort in the east. It also carries two National Trails:

- the Pennine Way, which opened in 1965, increased the footfall of visitors through the milecastle and,
- the Hadrian's Wall Path (opened in 2003).

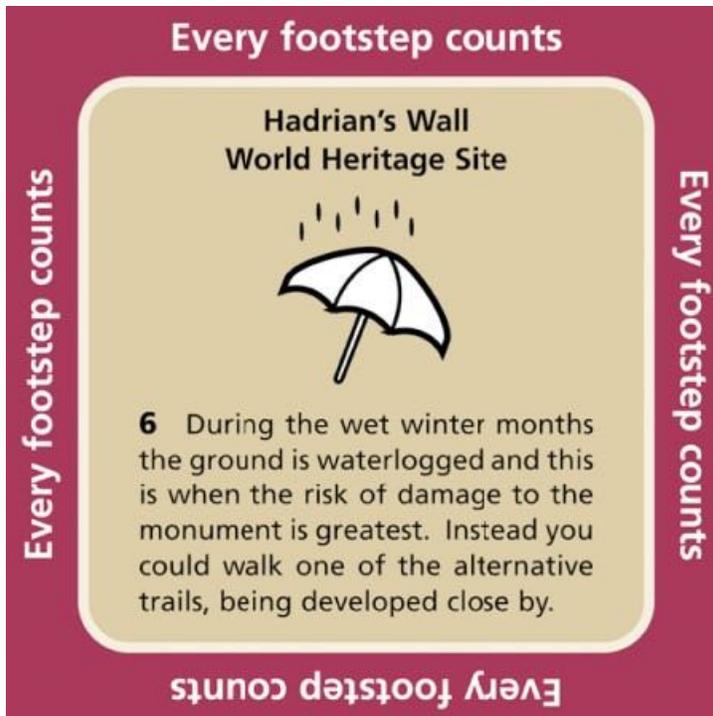
Apart from modern field walls this relatively small site has no archaeological masonry for the visitor to see. The milecastle, complete with its lumps, bumps and hollows, is an earthwork and is presented in a natural, essentially unimproved, grassland setting. The management aim is to retain it as such, which explains why it is subject to a regime of intensive visitor and grassland management. During the spring and summer of 2007, for example, there was an on-site staff presence, on average, on two or three days a week.

Setting the Scene - The Dutch Bankers' first visit (in January 2003)

The visit in January 2003 by 850 *Dutch bankers* from AMRO bank in Amsterdam resulted in untold damage to the milecastle within the space of only a few minutes. With the underlying soils at field capacity, or saturated, there was almost no load-bearing capacity and the site was as vulnerable to damage as it could possibly have been.

During the second week of January the Hadrian's Wall Path National Trail Officer (NTO) at the Countryside Agency received a call from the bank requesting permission to bring over from Holland, the following week, a party of 850 walkers to the Wall. AMRO's objective was to provide a suitably inspirational backdrop for a team-building event and, with a daily ferry across the North Sea into the River Tyne at North Shields, Hadrian's Wall was but short hop away from Amsterdam. A telephone conference involving the NTO, the Trail's consultant archaeologist, English Heritage, the National Trust, Hadrian's Wall Tourism Partnership, Northumberland County Council and Northumberland National Park Authority (NNPA), revealed a mixture of surprise and trepidation in equal measure.

This sort of thing had not happened in living memory, perhaps not even since the time of the Roman occupation itself, which ended some 1600 years ago. It would certainly set a modern precedent! However, *Every Footstep Counts*, the World Heritage Site's *Code of Respect* that all of the Wall's agencies signed-up to in 2001, positively discourages walking beside the Wall when the ground is saturated (the so-called "winter message") so there was a policy context against which to respond to the Dutch approach.



© Natural England

Attempts were made by the NTO, on behalf of the consortium of organisations listed above, to influence the event's timing but that proved to be impossible – the ferry and accompanying logistical support, including refreshment vehicles, were booked, and the date was fixed. Then, with only days to go, a plan was put to the company responsible for organising the visit to alter the course of the route so as to avoid some of the more archaeologically-sensitive earthworks. However, the event marshals were not due to arrive until the actual day, so there was no way of properly briefing them. Northumberland National Park Authority pledged what ranger support it could for the day but, at short notice, it could not be extensive.

Concern was also expressed by both English Heritage and the Trail's consultant archaeologist about the potential threat to the integrity of Milecastle 38. It was suggested that a layer of straw through the site would offer some protection but this, too, was impracticable at short notice because there was concern about the trip hazard that straw might present.

The day arrived and the scene was set. Rain had continued to fall in the days leading up to the visit and the ground, in places, was very soft. All that could be done was to photograph the route (to provide a baseline for future reference) the day before the event, a task shared by the NTO and English Heritage. The 850 *Dutch bankers* were brought in seventeen coaches from North Shields to Steel Rigg car park in Northumberland National Park and, despite being briefed to walk side-by-side, so as to reduce the wear and tear to the path/monument, they set off in single file. It was also a very strange site to observe because there was no talk or chatter from the party – they had been instructed to walk in silence!

Photo © David McGlade

The group arrived at Milecastle 38 for refreshments before setting off again for Housesteads for the team-building exercise. Perhaps, rather predictably given the earlier pattern of behaviour, they headed-off in single file towards the narrower gaps in the earthworks. This only exacerbated the damage at the pinch-points.



The aftermath of the first visit

Everyone concerned with the World Heritage Site agreed that an event of this size, in the middle of winter, threatened the integrity of the site and was inappropriate for the long-term welfare of Hadrian's Wall. While people do have a legal right to visit the Wall via the public rights of way, and gain access to it whenever they choose, the countryside management and tourism professionals associated with the World Heritage Site should attempt to influence groups towards the drier months of the year when the grass sward has a higher carrying capacity and, because the soils are drier, there is less risk of erosion.



The National Trail team now attempts to do this through its summer passport scheme, which operates between 1st May and the 31st October each year.

Photo © Neil Rimmington

After the event the National Trail encapsulated the walking side-by-side message into what is now called a *conservation tip*. This is promoted extensively today, indeed, the map publisher Harvey Maps should be thanked for giving it prominent coverage on its National Trail strip map.

Getting it Right Next Time - the second visit (in September 2006)

When, in June 2006, another call was received from AMRO Bank's management consultancy, announcing the arrival in September of 1400 *Dutch bankers*, the response was one of disbelief! We were tempted to say "No – go somewhere else" but decided that it was possible to have our cake and eat it – to achieve "the Best of Both Worlds". This how we got it right second time around.

Preparation

The National Trail Officer invited the consultancy's event manager over to the Wall for an initial discussion. Detailed planning would be the key to the visit's success but this time it would be pivotal that AMRO understood the reasons why everyone on the Wall was so concerned about its conservation. The initial meeting was convened without delay and the AMRO representative was found to be very receptive; the bank clearly wanted to avoid a repetition of the events of 2003 and their plans were open to influence.

Fundamentally, it was explained, archaeology is a finite resource; if any part of it is lost or damaged, it can never be the same again. The international significance of Hadrian's Wall as one of the main chapters in the history of the World, as a component of the now pan-European *Frontiers of the Roman Empire World Heritage Site*, was this time appreciated by an AMRO Bank willing to cooperate in the interests of all concerned. They were aware of the risks associated with planning a large-scale event in the middle of winter when the soils are waterlogged and vulnerable to erosion, hence their decision this time to visit the Wall in the drier summer months.

Confronting Conflict

The NTO, in partnership with the Northumberland NNPA ranger service, took the lead in discussions with the bank. English Heritage, the National Trail's consultant archaeologist and the National Trust also played key roles but subsequent communications between the UK and Holland were found much easier to manage through just one or two spokespeople.

The remaining concerns were the sheer size of the group and the fear that, even during a spell when the ground is dry and the conditions underfoot firm, 1400 people might still compromise the integrity of the monument and some of its earthworks. The Bank agreed to consider splitting the event into more than one group, in other words spreading the visitor load over a much wider landscape. They also agreed to prepare a wet weather contingency plan in case, by the time the event took place, ground conditions had deteriorated.

The National Park Authority helped to manage the parking and other logistical matters, including the recruitment of local guides and putting AMRO in touch with local suppliers. AMRO were also sympathetic to the reality of meeting the cost in staff time, both during the planning and the event itself, and agreed to meet any reasonable costs incurred by the NNPA and the Countryside Agency.

Route to Consensus – how we came to agreement

The outcome was that the group would be split into four separate parties which would follow different sections of Hadrian's Wall. There would be some overlap but it was a much more satisfactory plan than before. Furthermore, the Dutch marshals were to be properly briefed prior to the event and several organisations including NNPA, the National Trust, the Countryside Agency (now Natural England) and Hadrian's Wall Heritage Limited, along with National Trail's voluntary wardens, provided supplementary supervision where the Trail's consultant archaeologist felt that walkers should be directed around sites that were identified as archaeologically very sensitive.

Reaching and Sustaining Consensus

As it turned out, the second event passed without incident and no damage was done to the Wall's archaeology. This can be attributed to having clear aims and objectives, undertaking careful planning and research, and a willingness of the event organiser to make compromises.

Developments arising from the experience

Hadrian's Wall Heritage Limited and NNPA are to publish joint guidelines for organisers of events along Hadrian's Wall within the World Heritage Site. They have benefited from the lessons learned from the AMRO visits which were, in hindsight, unique learning opportunities for all concerned. The lessons and the guidelines are also transferable to other archaeologically sensitive landscapes. They demonstrate that, with a willingness to compromise, for most of the time it should be possible to achieve a reasonable balance between the needs of conservation and recreation.

There is still some discussion to be had about whether a maximum size should be set for a large event; that will in any case be determined by local considerations, for example, the logistics of coach parking capacity and fitting in other needs such as portable WCs. (It should be noted that parking of twenty-eight coaches in September 2006 was not an easy task – if the event had been planned for a bank holiday weekend then in all probability it would have been impossible). Above all, event organisers should bear in mind the considerable skill that countryside and heritage site managers employ in trying to find an acceptable balance between the needs of recreation and enjoyment, conservation, and the economic well-being of the locality, including that of the farmers whose land we all use.

Appendix 1 provides further elaboration on the lessons learnt, that may be of interest for other site managers.

David McGlade
Hadrian's Wall Heritage Ltd
01-02-08

APPENDIX 1 – LESSONS LEARNT ABOUT EVENT ORGANISATION

1. Tips on pre-planning for an event

For a *responsible* organisation, the key to a successful event is to ensure that it is practicable, not only in terms of size, logistics and timing, but also that conservation issues are given due consideration. A key test is whether broad agreement of the managers of the site or sites involved can be obtained; don't assume that you have all the bases covered and be prepared to modify your plans in the light of their advice. Remember that a well-run event can generate a lot of goodwill, enhance a group's reputation and boost the chances of getting copy inches in the media, if that is one of your objectives. Of course, a poorly-run event can have the opposite effect.

Allow for as long a lead-in time as possible and never announce an event until it is agreed with all concerned. Countryside site managers want to give their help and advice but generally do not welcome the prospect of a large group descending on them at short notice. An event may well be on a Public Right of Way, and members of the public may have an absolute right to be there, but it is always better to avoid a clash of dates with other large groups, and there will be the very practical issues of car parking, WCs etc.

Countryside site managers will also pay regard to the farming calendar, want to avoid disturbance to the farmers whose land people will be crossing, and will give their advice accordingly.

By all means approach the organisations that you think might be able to advise you at the initial planning stage, although it a good idea to do at least some of your own research beforehand. In any case, it is worth investing as much time as possible with this important task; the following check-list should be a useful guide:

- site dynamics – is it a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM)? If yes, then it is at least nationally (sometimes internationally) important. If it contains archaeological earthworks then it is inevitable that there will be sensitivities associated with it. Find out if a site is a SAM from the government website (www.magic.gov.uk) by searching the geographical datasets. Another good source of information, with links to individual county council Site and Monument Records (SMRs), and other databases, is the English Heritage micro-site *Heritage Gateway* (www.heritagegateway.co.uk). It links to *Pastscape*, another English Heritage micro-site (www.pastscape.org/homepage) where you can view photographs of many of the SAMs.
- visit the site in advance of the meeting, take lots of photographs and collect as much information as possible from local information centres, national park offices, libraries etc. Get an impression of the terrain bearing in mind that lumps, bumps and hollows may well turn out to be archaeologically important. A good indicator of the potential for damage is evidence of erosion that is there already;
- seasonality – what month is the event planned for? Avoid the wet winter months but note that in the north of Britain, and in upland areas, soils can remain at field capacity all year round. Look to see if any of the paths cross wet areas; juncus grass is a good indicator of this;

- carrying capacity – without very careful planning one large-scale event can cause severe damage to an archaeological site; consider the possibility of limiting the size of the event although setting the limit calls for professional judgement and good local knowledge;
- provide an alternative wet-weather route – even during the summer months, a period of prolonged rainfall can see soils reach field capacity and, when this happens, the risk of erosion increases. It is always a good idea to present ideas to site managers, or ask their advice, on contingency plans for alternative wet-weather routes;
- where a route crosses a sensitive archaeological site consider whether a large group could be split into two or more smaller parties? Consider the possibility of marshalling walkers on slightly different courses around sensitive features. If the alternative routes are not on a Public Rights of Way, does the event require special landowner permissions (or Consents for the various authorities)?
- can a large event be staggered over several days?
- assess the number of marshals required. For sensitive sites marshals should field-walk the route before the event in order that they know precisely where the sensitive sites are located and how the walkers are to be instructed.

2. Making contact with site managers

Depending on the size and scale of the event, be prepared to talk to, and meet, several of them. They may in turn bring in archaeological and other experts (including ecologists if a site or area of countryside is also a SSSI) to give advice depending on an event's size and scale. You may encounter sites or countryside in the ownership of many organisations including private landowners, and/or larger bodies such as the National Trust, county wildlife trusts, the RSPB and the Woodland Trust, although the following would normally be a first point of contact:

- National Trail Managers (NTMs) – if the event involves a National Trail. They will have expert local knowledge of their route and be able to give advice on everything from site sensitivities, car parking, and the range of other contacts and permissions that may be required. Contact details for individual NTMs can be found at Natural England's National Trail website (www.nationaltrail.co.uk);
- National Parks – (www.nationalparks.gov.uk);
- Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty – (www.aonb.org.uk);
- County Councils – Ask to speak to the area Countryside Officer or Public Rights of Way Officer (www.direct.gov.uk).

3. The event plan

Having met the appropriate countryside site managers and archaeologists and agreed everything from event numbers, wet weather routes, to marshalling and car parking, the key task is to prepare a detailed event plan. Invest as much effort as possible with this – it will save time and trouble later on. Make sure that every detail is covered and accounted for, including contingency plans; write out a check-list and ensure that both

marshals and countryside site managers are fully briefed and have copies of it on the day.

Top tip - an event will earn considerable goodwill from the host community if it is seen to be using local businesses for transport, refreshments and tour guides etc, instead of bringing all its own infrastructure with them.

The event plan should include a post-event de-briefing with both event marshals and countryside site managers. The latter will appreciate this. If there are aspirations to repeat an event in subsequent years then it is vital that an honest appraisal is made of the lessons learned and pitfalls, the things that worked well and those that did not.

Top tip – offer to make a financial contribution to one of the organisations that has given you advice and assistance. Countryside site managers will appreciate such a gesture; remember that the cost of staffing commitments in giving event organisers assistance can be considerable and can put strain on under-staffed countryside management projects.