

# Vigo Nicholson

## Birdoswald centre warden

We head to Birdoswald Roman Fort in Cumbria to discover the challenges of maintaining this famous site and the longest continuous remaining stretch of Hadrian's Wall

INTERVIEW OLIVER HURLEY PHOTOGRAPHS ED SMITH

**M**y job covers a complete myriad of tasks. I work from Birdoswald Roman Fort and I do absolutely everything you can think of in grounds and buildings maintenance, as well as looking after the historic stonework of Hadrian's Wall. I maintain a lot of the unmanned sites along seven or eight miles of the wall as well. I've been here about 17 years.

The Hadrian's Wall corridor is a stunning place to work, especially on a nice day – which we could do with a few more of! The weather is one of the main challenges of looking after Birdoswald, because so much of the work is outside. It's all on high ground here and there's not a lot of shelter, so we get a lot of wind and rain. Even just doing the grass-cutting, the ground's absolutely soaked.

Hadrian's Wall has been maintained in different ways in the past, not all of them brilliant. Years ago, cement mortar was used. The cement will crack alongside the stone, water will get in and, because it's such a hard mortar, it'll be the stone that will erode rather than the mortar. A softer lime mortar, which is what the wall was originally built with and is what we use now, is more flexible and breathable, and if water gets in, the lime mortar will erode, not the wall.

The main threats to the preservation of the wall are the weather and people. We want to get as many people here as we can to enjoy it but we do try and encourage people not to walk on the wall – it isn't good for it. It's hard to keep an eye on though, as a lot of it is up on the crags in the middle of nowhere. Many years ago, working on the Housesteads estate, I even saw somebody park up beside the wall and put a bit that had collapsed into his boot. He said he thought it wasn't any good for anything and would look good in his rockery.



Above Birdoswald Roman Fort is famous for having the longest continuous remaining stretch of the Wall. Right As the area is so damp, a lot of moss grows on the wall, which Vigo removes with a stiff brush

Birdoswald has been inhabited since Roman times almost without a break. A lot of Hadrian's Wall is just about Roman history. Here, there is history right up to the present day. It's a beautiful site as well. We're on a spur above a river, 150ft above the Irthing gorge, with beautiful views across to the Lake District hills, and there are good stretches of wall either side of the fort. It's a lovely place to come.

I do checks on a lot more sites than I do the maintenance on, over a stretch of 20-odd miles. I make notes, take photographs and then, once a quarter, send my reports in. If anything needs doing, a works request is given to the relevant manager and then they get the right contractor in to do it. It can be pest control, repairs to fencing or gates, erosion in the ground – it's all sorts of things. But it all has to be paid for and any money visitors spend at Birdoswald does go towards the maintenance and the upkeep. As we are a charity now, every penny counts.

SEE IT FOR YOURSELF  
For information on visiting Birdoswald Roman Fort, go to [www.english-heritage.org.uk/birdoswald](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/birdoswald)

*'It's a beautiful site and there is history right up to the present day'*

