

How I Discovered the Roman Wall

My earliest recollections are of living in a tenement block, Rochester Dwellings, riverside Walker, a squalid, run-down dockland/shipbuilding area of Newcastle; mind you I didn't realise it was squalid, rundown or riverside at the time or, as I found out much later in life - a notorious hotbed of crime and violence. It was just where we lived. In fact I don't think I had developed the concept of living in places yet, it was just how it was.



Rochester Dwellings

Things I remember most ... the stench of the nearby boneyard; kids swinging from ropes tied to balconies; lighting rubbish fires in the middle of the square; a big queue to see the weeping Madonna of Walker ... oh yes and Arthur Blenkinsop' the Labour MP for Newcastle East who lost his seat in the 1959 general election. No ... I wasn't a political prodigy, I just remember a van going round with a big horn loudspeaker blaring 'vote for Arthur Blenkinsop' to the tune of 'Battle Hymn of the Republic' (Glory, Glory Hallelujah) ... a grubby, rollicking gang of kids, cheering, shirt tails flapping, bottoms hanging out of trousers, some barefoot running after the van and singing along "vote, vote, vote for Arthur Blenkinsop". I must have been 5 or 6 at the time and didn't know who or what Arthur Blenkinsopp was of or even what 'vote, vote, vote' meant ... it's just the funny stuff that sticks in your head. The weeping Madonna was a statue of the Virgin Mary, said to be crying real tear. Some enterprising family (suppose that's my cynicism) were charging people sixpence a go to see the miracle ... punters were queuing 4 or 5 deep and halfway round the block for days, they must have made a fortune.



Queuing to See the Weeping Madonna

Whether it was a scam or a genuinely devout Christian family who truly believed in their revelation from heaven, I suppose I'll never know but I do remember wishing that we could have one and thinking about what we could do with hundreds of sixpences. I

remember reading years later that the guy was a rag and bone man who kept his horse in the flat.

I remember starting infant's school while living in Walker ... wasn't there long though, probably less than a year, the first day of horror etched indelibly in my memory ... dragged, screaming by my mam all the way and left sitting cross legged, on a bare wooden floor, with a bunch of strange kids ... still screaming. That must have been September 1955. I was 5 in May of that year so would've been eligible to start school in the autumn.

The only other substantial memory I have of school in Walker is sitting in a field with the teacher and class on a bright, sunny day eating cherries, a light warm breeze, butterflies fluttering, ladybirds ... well it was one cherry actually. The teacher had brought a punnet which she shared out amongst the kids. I'd never tasted cherry before, it was wonderful, marvellous; even heavenly. Some kids, (probably teacher's pets) got two cherries; not me though. The only time I ever got two cherries was as the booby prize on a one armed bandit. Other kids would ask 'can I have another one miss', I was too shy, but I really, really wanted another. If I just sat there looking really good she might give me one I thought... but she didn't

I don't remember friends, I just remember playing with my younger sister or hanging around pestering my mam. My older sister, Catherine never seemed to be around much, either at school or playing with friends, she always had friends ... leaving me and Eleanor to play our (mainly girlie) games with dolls and tea sets; well when I say dolls and tea sets, I mean one doll and two plastic cups. That's all we had. I didn't fancy the rough and tumble of the streets much ... loud shouting, fighting and throwing things ... wild games played by wild boys ... didn't play football or cricket either, all that running round pushing and shoving, shouting and falling over, scraped knees, gashed elbows, it seemed exciting but I was far too timid, at that time to join in. I grew up with a mother and two sisters. My father, a glum, remote figure generally only ever spoke before dishing out what he referred to as 'a good hiding'; I just kept quiet when he was around and tried to keep my head down as much as possible. 'A good hiding' ... what the hell is that anyway. I can categorically state that there was nothing good about the hidings ... I thought the expression was stupid then and, well I suppose I still do ... like I say, what's good about it and anyway if you were hiding, then you wouldn't get one would you. Another common expression I couldn't get my head round was 'you'll be laughing on the other side of your face in a minute' ... my mam used to say it a lot. My sister and I tried it for years, keeping one side of our face serious and laughing with the other ... we'd end up with all kinds of daft facial contortions and end up laughing with both sides, unless the old man was around of course then sides of faces laughed not at all.

In general, I just liked to read or play quite gentle, pretend games or plonk on the piano (only if the old man was out of course as this would have been a hiding offence). My little sister and I would make a house with a bed-sheet and a couple of chairs and cut up old magazines into rectangles, pretending we had wads of money ... I used to make origami wallets or purses to put the pretend money in and we would then play at being rich ... Stomping into the bed-sheet house wearing my dad's wellies and using my gruffest attempt at a posh voice I would say 'Have yooer gort my tea orn yert ... Eeelenoor' ... 'Oh yers I hurve' she would reply in her pretend posh voice and then we would drink pretend tea out of toy plastic cups and have daft pretend conversations that we thought 'the posh people' would have ... we had a baby of course... it was called 'Bohbah' ... 'Bohbah Johnson' this was what we thought posh people would call their babies

'I saay Eeelenoor whar is the Bohbah'

'Ohh the Bohbah is in the barth'

Bobah had no head!! ... It never seemed to make affect our games though. When we were having high tea (cos posh people always had high tea you see) we would just pour it down the hole in her neck ... what high tea actually was, we had no idea ... I would just say 'Is the teaah rerdy' and Eleanor would say 'High teah or low teah' then we'd howl with laughter, not really knowing why and I'd answer in my fake, gruff voice 'Oh low teaaha please' ... 'Oh nooah we murst harve high teaah' she would answer ... then we would throw Bobah through the ventilation hole (a missing brick) above the bedroom door and shout 'Our Eli' then howl with laughter ... oh yes you could only shout 'Our Eli' if Bobah actually went through the ventilation hole without touching the sides. We would also make an 'Our Eli' by tying a piece of wool to a used thread bobbin ... you could then swing it round and round and then launch it at the ventilation hole ... 'Yay ... OUR ELI' we would scream every time it sailed through ... or 'booh' when it missed.

Somehow we'd got the idea that high tea meant you held up your little finger while drinking and low tea was when you didn't bother. So essentially, our idea of how posh people lived was that they all had massive wads of cash which they kept in wallets or purses and every day the husband would get home, wearing wellies asking if the tea was on. The wife would then pour tea into plastic cups which they would then sip daintily, holding up their little fingers and making posh 'mm' or 'erm' noises and occasionally pouring a slurp down the hole in the baby's neck before throwing it through a hole in the wall ... It's amazing how close we were to the truth.

We moved to Wallsend in 1956 which was about 2 to 3 miles along the river Tyne from Walker. Much of the Newcastle conurbation is built along the Tyne with the city lying about 10 miles from the river mouth, an almost unbroken series of little industrial towns merging one into the other beginning at North Shields and ending at Scotswood. These towns had seen the booms and the busts ... the Industrial revolution ... the war years when the country needed the coal, ships, tanks and the other heavy industrial items required to pound the Wehrmacht and the Luftwaffe into a pulp. In the late 50s the area was approaching the end of a boom period; real recession hadn't hit the since 'Jarrow March' day's though and jobs where easy to come by although wages, by today's standards were poor. I suppose I really mean that people didn't have as much stuff as they do now but probably of course it's because the stuff we have now didn't exist then. When I think back, I suppose a normal working class family could just about afford to buy all of the stuff that was available then like a gas water heater or a single (or even twin) tub washing machine or a vacuum cleaner or a black and white 405 Line VHF TV that could receive two channels ... some families even had cars, a Ford Popular or Morris Oxford. A family with all five would be classed as posh or aspiring to be posh at least... Keeping up with the Jones's it was called in those days. We were poor i.e. my mam had a Hoover single tub washer which had a mangle attached ... it was my job on a Saturday to turn the handle as my mam or sisters fed in the wet clothes. The only luxury in our two bedroom downstairs flat was an Ascot water heater ... hot water at the turn of a tap, this was amazing ... I would rush in on cold winter days and run the hot water over my hands ... "stop that" my mam would say ... 'It'll give ye chilblains' ... I did it anyhow and the mysterious chilblains, whatever they were, some sort of a blain you get because of the chill I supposed (but what's the hell is a blain?) ... never manifested. I don't think I know exactly what chilblains are now ... Oh yes, of course I could Google it but I don't want to ... I've managed get through my life so far not knowing exactly what chilblains are ... maybe if I look it up I'll find I've actually got them or I might start contracting the bastards ... chilblains are best left alone

I must have been about 8 or 9 when I began to get really interested in the Romans. There was no Internet in those days of course and so all of my research had to be done in the local library or by asking people things. I'd found out shortly after moving, that Wallsend was the 'at the end of the Roman wall. It made sense now ... Walls - End ... mmm ... the end of the wall ... seems obvious now of course. Everyone knew it was the end of the Wall but little else; In fact no-one seemed interested in the Romans at all ... other kids seemed interested only in football or war games or running wild around the streets and the adults, generally came out with stuff like

"Why eye bonny lad wha at the end of the Romin wall, It's why yive gorra romin nose ... romin all owah yah face like ... hah hah hah"

or ... "Eye kidda a foond a Romin candle wunce like ... mind you it was afta bonfire neet ... hur hyur"

As well as my interest in the Romans I'd discovered ... 'exploring'. Having no friends and plenty of unsupervised time on my hands I took to walking, mostly alone but sometimes I'd take my sister. Adults didn't seem to worry about what kids got up to or where the hell they were in those days. I could just wander for miles, playing on building sites, bomb sites, railway lines and as long as I managed to wander home just before dark nothing was said. There'd be the odd good hiding of course for transgressions committed earlier in the day but nothing for wandering god knows where for god knows how long and talking to god knows who.

We lived in a two bedroom terraced flat on a steep cobbled street, one of a dozen or so that ran at right angles downhill towards the river. A railway line ran parallel to the river and so passed along the bottom of all of the streets adjacent to ours. A main road ran along the top forming a sort of grid pattern, main road running along the top, railway 200 yards or so away towards the river, running parallel to the road and the cobbled streets acting like rungs of a ladder connecting the main road with the railway line.

Our street, 'Gerald' was 5 streets from the left (if facing the river) and was the only one with a hill. Our house was positioned about midway down on the right hand side and was where the gradient changed from a gentle slope to a sharp drop which ran quickly down to the railway wall at the bottom. Kids used to flock from miles around to skateboard in the summer or sledge in the winter. Of course skateboards as we know them now didn't exist; kids would use a normal skate and an old book ... I became pretty expert at flying down the street either sitting on the skate-book or lying down in skeleton-bob fashion ... The road became really steep over the last 10 to 20 yards and dropped even further as it swept to the right around the end of the last house and ended abruptly at a set of stone steps that led to an underpass of the railway line. If you were good you could use your feet to steer by scraping a foot on the ground and leaning as you flew down towards the wall. On a good run I could take the bottom bend at about 15 miles an hour and shoot past the underpass slowing down as the road started to slope upwards. It was my favourite thing in all of the world



Bottom of Gerald St

Oh yes, and we had a lamppost... a lamppost outside our door ... the only one on the street ... It was great we thought of it as our lamppost, you could swing round on it, tie skipping ropes to it or climb up to the horizontal bar just below the lamp itself. When it was foggy (which was often) it could be made out, glowing through the mist, identifying our home ... like something from a Lewis Carol story.



Gerald St - Lamppost on the right

Mrs Holmes, the old woman who lived upstairs would hang out of her window and shout 'whaatyidoin' ... 'get doon' ... 'aahl cutyahtailsoff' She always threatened to cut kids tails off, in fact her main function of her life seemed to be hanging out of her window shouting and threatening to cut kids tails off. I never really knew what she meant by 'cutyahtailsoff' although it sounded pretty nasty... and it's strange how it never seemed funny that neighbours could bollock each-others kids with latitude ... wouldn't happen nowadays I suppose. When it was misty she would materialise, eerily through the haze like a wicked witch, the wicked witch of Gerald St ... evil, mean ... hanging from her lair and spoiling our fun ... Victorian clothes, hair in a bun, sharp pointy nose, evil beady eyes and a sharp nasty voice, cutting through to the very marrow. When she was at her window we just didn't go out; we'd take turns sneaking out of the front door to look up ... 'Is she there' we would whisper. Every Christmas we would get a hardback book from her. Our mam would say 'Ye havte see Mrs Holmes ... away ye go the noo'. I'd tap-tap on her door knocker, an ancient, black cast iron thing like a

demons head, hollow rap-rap echoing up the bare wooden staircase, praying she was out ... but she was never out. 'Come up' she'd screech, banshee like ... 'the doors open'. I'd trudge wearily up the dark gloomy stairs, into the bleak cheerless living room with its antiquated cooking range, vases, pots and pans, ancient furniture, ancient books ... and she'd give me a glass of ginger wine and a book and tell me that she'd cut my tail off. I'd think of wicked witches who offered kids sweets and stuff and then cooked them in the oven. There was a large ornately framed print of a dying Jesus hanging in his final agony from the cross with those eyes that follow you around the room. I tried not to look as it was so scary but it had a sort of macabre magnetic effect on the eyes

... no don't look, don't, don't look ... **oh no I've looked**

... don't look again then ... I won't ... I won't ... **arrgh I've looked again.**

I would stand there, terrified in the gloom, in front of her rocking chair, clutching my book and sipping my ginger wine while she creaked back and forth lecturing me about being good and what the repercussions would be if I wasn't and how my tail would be cut off, and my eyes would drift involuntarily, over her shoulder to the horror of crucifixion, Jesus hanging there looking down at me, agonised but reproachful yet compassionate and caring during his divine torment ... 'YES MY SON, SHE WILL CUT YOUR TAIL OFF'. You can go' now she would say eventually, after what seemed like an eternity and I would bolt for the door.

I remember one year she gave me Great Expectations ... Christ almighty (no... I've looked again) I was only nine ... I did read it though but not for a year or two but by then most of the cover had been worn off from skateboarding

If you stood outside my front door and looked down the street towards the river you could see the railway wall, and beyond that, the shipyard, the current hulk looming massively over the locale. A ship would grow ... slowly and almost imperceptibly, becoming part of the landscape, merging into daily life. The ships became alive, became of the community. Almost everyone in the area worked in the yards and the name; type of ship and who was likely to launch it were all common knowledge

'Biggist in the world kidda'

'Wees ganna lonch it like'

'Princiss Margrit man'

'Gerriway'

No-one seemed to notice the ship until it was gone ... the launch, the jubilation ... skyline now empty, strange, naked ... the comforting, reassuring colossus departed. Community focus lost ... the mother-ship, the town's lifeblood, and jobs ... all gone. No more the banging, the whirring, the winding, the grinding, the myriad of strange noises we lived with day and night ... now all gone ... a strange silence in the evenings ... strange silence ... emptiness inside ... a loved one wrenched away ... a member of the family dead, gone ... never to return



The Railway Wall and Shipyard - The ship is a lot further away than it looks

My first exploring expedition at about the age of 7 was to the bottom of our street. I reached the railway wall which varied in height along its length between about five and six feet and was made from irregular chunks of stone with raised blocks every couple of feet or so ... it seemed a bit like the battlements of a castle to me and appeared enormous. To the left the wall stretched as far as the eye could see and disappeared mysteriously in a bend to the right.

A narrow cobblestone road ran adjacent to the wall and at the end of each of the streets that ran down towards the river. At the bottom of our street and some 10 to 15 yards to the right was an underpass which ran under the railway line, again built from irregular stone blocks with battlements. The wall above the underpass stairs was a bit higher than the rest of the wall and to my eyes looked a like the tower of an ancient castle with steps down into the dungeons (it was some time before I dared explore the dungeon steps). It was actually one of the walkthroughs to the shipyard. There was a single terraced street with a pub at either end concluding starkly in a stretch of wasteland with a steep bank leading down to the ferry landing which was used in the film *Get Carter*. To the right of the underpass the wall ran up a hill and disappeared into the distance around a left hand bend. My first decision as an explorer was 'do I go left, right or down'. This was all very exciting, nothing like boring old Walker. Down into the dungeon was far too scary so I opted to march left. I followed the wall uphill for about half a mile, pretending to troop soldier style until it ended abruptly in strange, steep rocky outcrop with a flight of steps running down to a road which in turn ran to the right under a railway bridge and then into the main gates of Swan Hunters Shipyard. I didn't know it was a shipyard at the time of course. There was a gate house (didn't know it was a gatehouse either) with scary, official looking blokes, or gadgies as the kids used to call them in those days ... and beyond that ... strange noises ... banging, droning and lights, far off men walking around and doing odd things, very strange and a bit scary. At certain times of the day, suddenly, hundreds of men would appear and come rushing out of the gates, black as coal, ragged clothing, steel boots, wellies, running up the hill as if their life depended

on it. Stranger and stranger behaviour! Little did I know that within a few years I'd be one of them... doing odd things and strangely charging up the hill, past the gadgies gatehouse.

The rocky outcrop became one of my favourite places ... my secret place, no other kids use to hang out there, so it was mine and to my young mind it was a mysterious and ethereal place, I could dig exotic items up from the rocky outcrop or 'rock garden' as I came to call it ... I could take my sister to play mountain climbers, roping ourselves together and climbing the rocks adjacent to the flights of steps ... or we could slide down the steel balustrade or try to tightrope walk on it and no one appeared to tell us to stop it or get off anything.

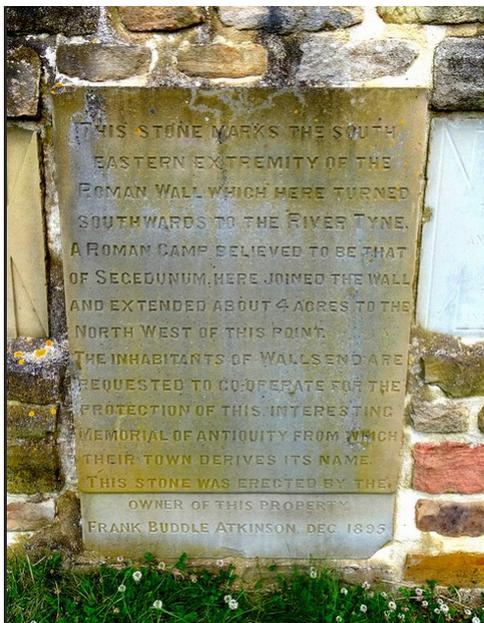


Swans Bank - My rock garden can just be seen to the right of the railway bridge at the bottom. Apart from four times a day i.e. at the end of shifts it was deserted. The gadgies gatehouse is just under the bridge to the right.

The wall to the right hand side of the underpass at the bottom of Gerald St (my castle tower) took a short rise and continued for about half a mile past a bridge over the railway before ending at some mysterious industrial buildings and a stretch of inaccessible wasteland. At some places along the wall there were stones missing and an adventurous kid could climb up and sit on the wall. Looking across the railway and down onto the shipyard ... you could just make out tiny ant men scurrying around in the shadows of the half built hulk. Towards the right of the shipyard (and better viewed once a ship had been launched) you could make out the far side of the river and the 'Mountains of Heaven'. I longed to cross the river and climb those heavenly hills. I did accomplish this some years later but after I'd found out it that it was Hebburn not heaven and they were slag heaps not mountains ... well actually they were ballast hills from the sailing ship days ... if ships were empty they became unstable and could capsize so had to be weighed down ... sand and rubble were used as ballast and was dumped in massive heaps before the ships were filled with coal and piloted down the coast to deliver their loads to customers in the big smoke.

As related earlier in my narrative I had become very interested in the Romans and would read everything I could get my hands on about the subject, books, magazines, newspapers ... I'd listen avidly if anyone spoke about the Romans and would ask questions of as many people as I could. I found out that the Romans had built a wall from Wallsend to Bowness in Solway in order to keep the wild northern tribes at bay and that parts of the Roman wall still existed in exotic far off places like Hexham and Corbridge. My mam, being Scottish (and like all scots), claimed the wall was built to keep the Picts and Scots out as being really tough, they couldn't be conquered. This is not strictly true of course because a) there were no scots in those days and b) there was at least a hundred miles of country north of the wall inhabited by the Northumbrian Brittonic tribes but that's a different tale.

One summer day, during one of my railway-wall walks I noticed a small fenced off garden at the end of one of the streets. It was about 10 feet by 20ft and was surrounded by five foot tall iron railings... dilapidated, disused and overgrown with shrubs, bushes and weeds it remained relatively unremarkable and mostly unnoticed. It must have been at least a year before I actually gave it any consideration at all. If you looked between the railings and through the dense shrubbery, mysterious rocky shapes could just be made out, like gravestones. It wasn't until the onset of autumn as the leaves died and the bushes thinned out that I could get a better look and make out a scattering of old stones and a plaque which proclaimed 'This stone marks the south eastern extremity of the Roman Wall' and also marks the spot of the Roman camp of Segedunum. 'How come no one in Wallsend knows this' I thought ... I was fascinated of course and I told my mam ... 'Guess what, the Roman name for Wallsend is ... its Segedunum' ... 'Oh aye ... is that right ... wash yer hons, yer teas oot'



One bright autumn day, day shortly after my discovery of the stones and plaque and while idly sitting on the wall, my legs dangling on the railway side I decided to play Roman walls and pretend that the railway wall **was** the 'Roman Wall'. When I looked down towards the shipyard and to the left and right I could see that the railway had been built along a natural ridge which ran parallel to the river. I don't think I had the words 'natural ridge' or the concept of 'running parallel' ... I just thought that the ground looks like it hasn't changed ... probably for hundreds of years. The ground below the railway ridge dropped sharply and by as much as 50ft or so to the flat reaches of the shipyard which were probably originally marshy or swampy areas, drained and paved over by

ancient shipbuilders. The railway line swept left and right along this natural ridge and it occurred to me that if anyone wanted to build a defensive wall along the river the ridge that the railway had been built upon would be ideal. After some days of conjecture I deduced that maybe, possibly ... the railway wall really was the Roman wall. It looked like pictures of the Roman wall I'd seen in books, it was built in the right place and the ancient plaque said that this had been a Roman fort. The main problem I had in justifying my theory was that I knew the original Roman wall had been wide, 8 to 10ft wide, with a road running along the top. It was sort of like, two walls built in parallel and infilled with rubble and then flattened on top to form the road ... but I reasoned that, if after hundreds of years one side and the middle section had fallen down and all that was left was one single course of stones it could actually look like my railway wall and when they built the railway the wall was already there and they just fixed it up a bit ... that would explain everything ... yes this was the Roman wall, or the remains of it. The more I thought about it the more I convinced myself ... Whether I was playing a pretend game I don't really know now ... I did actually start it as a pretend game though ... right how could this be the Roman wall... hmm well if the original wall fell down and men fixed it etc etc

Then one day I was standing beside our lamp looking down the street and imagining I was with a tribe of Picts getting ready to storm the wall and our Eleanor came out to play ... 'Is she there' she whispered ... 'No' I replied After a quick furtive shift upwards in-case I was kidding her on and the witch was there ... she came out and started swinging round the lamp

'Have you heard of the Roman wall' I said pompously

'Yes' she replied ... it's what the Romans built'

'Well that's it at the bottom of our street'

'Really' she said

'Yes, honest it is ... I've found it out' ... I declared

'Don't be so stupid' rasped sarcastic voice from behind ... oh no I thought it's our Cath

'How can it be the Roman wall you idiot, it's the railway ... you're so stupid' ...

'But I... I... I...' I stammered ' ... I found a thing that said ...'

'shut up and don't be so stupid ... you're stupid, you are'

'Whaaats gannin on oot heeyah' screeched a familiar voice from above

'Aahl cutyah tails off' ... It was the dreaded Mrs Holmes the wicked witch of Gerald St ... I was for it now. If she complains to our dad it's a good hiding for me (it's always my fault whatever the circumstances).

'Whaat yi shoutin about'

'It's him, he's stupid, he says that that's the Roman wall down there'

'How di yee knar it's not the Roman Waall then ... eh eh ... it could be the Roman Waall coudinit' the witch snapped

'Well it's not ... it's just the railway wall' Cath sulked in reply

'If he waaants ti think it's the Roman waall he can think it's the Roman waall' Mrs Holmes rasped again

'now leave im alone ... or aaahl cutyah tail off'

Our Cath beat a hasty retreat and Mrs Holmes withdrew to her den. Result.

Well Imagine my surprise when, years later during the demolition of our street the demo guys unearthed the most complete Roman Camp to be found, anywhere in the world along with lost stretches of the Roman wall, and a bathhouse ... the area around our street is now a World Heritage site



Railway wall with ridge - The other side of the railway track drops down sharply to the flood plain and shipyard

The wall originally ended at Newcastle, probably the fort at Benwell but had to be extended to protect the important Tyne shipping which was prone to attack and also to block any attempts by insurgents to infiltrate Roman territory by crossing the river. Once you get past Wallsend the river becomes increasingly difficult to cross with small boats or rafts and would have been patrolled by Roman military vessels protecting the important port at South Shields so extending the wall to Segedunum was a case of job done.



Roman Wall Wallsend

The wall would have been built along the river almost certainly utilising the natural ridge which was in turn used by the railway company hundreds of years later ... and it's even possible ... possibly even likely ... that stones discovered during the construction of the railway foundations were used to build the railway wall ... why haul in stones when there were cart loads of em just lying around

So essentially it's in your face our Cath ... It was the Roman Wall all along ... and nice one for a belligerent but very insightful and caring old witch-like battle axe who kept a watchful eye over us kids and got me reading Dickens and other classics like Tom Browns School Days, Treasure Island and Robinson Crusoe and didn't cut my tail off.