Wall Essentials

Hadrian's Wall is often used as an umbrella term for a monumental complex that includes many distinct elements. This guide provides an identification of those separate elements, which will help in further understanding the archaeology of the frontier zone. Key terms used throughout the course are noted in bold.

Looking at the Wall in cross-section from north to south, there are 5 main features (right to left in the image below): a ditch, a berm sometimes bearing obstacles, the curtain of the Wall itself, the Vallum, and the Military Way.

A cross section of the Wall © Newcastle University

The **ditch** was cut/dug out of the earth in a steep V-shape; in some locations it was hewn from bedrock.

The **berm** is the narrow stretch of ground between the base of the Wall curtain and the ditch, approximately 3m in width. At the eastern end of Hadrian's Wall, pits have been found on the berm that would have held obstacles consisting of sharpened stakes and branches that functioned like barbed wire does in modern times.

The **curtain** is the actual stone or turf construction that people usually think of in reference to Hadrian's Wall. The curtain was originally built in stone from Wallsend to Birdoswald, and in turf and timber from Birdoswald to Bowness-on-Solway; later, the
turf portion of the Wall was rebuilt in stone. Bridges carry the curtain across the River North Tyne (at Chesters) and River Irthing (at Willowford). Built into the curtain are turrets, milecastles, and forts, and occasionally gates (see below). The thickness of the stone curtain varies and changed through the building process, but the height is generally agreed to be around 4.5 m.

The Vallum is a monumental feature in its own right, consisting of a steep flat-bottomed ditch with an earth mound immediately to its north and south. The Vallum ran east-west behind Hadrian’s Wall from Newcastle in the east to Bowness in the west. In the central sector, the Vallum is approximately 1 km south of the Wall, but in the eastern and western sectors, it often runs very close to the Wall and its course deviates around forts. At the forts, there were also crossings across the ditch and through the mounds.

The Military Way was a narrow road that ran behind the Wall curtain and was built later in the 2nd century. In some places, the Military Way was constructed on top of the north mound of the Vallum, while in other places, it had its own course closer to the curtain. The road provided a direct link to the forts, milecastles, and turrets build into the curtain.

The curtain of Hadrian's Wall linked a number of installations of different scale: turrets, milecastles, and forts. There were also gates.

Turrets are the common name for stone-built towers along the Wall. They are found approximately every one-third of a Roman mile, with two turrets found between each milecastle. The full height of turrets is uncertain, but there is a general consensus that it was approximately 8-10 m. Turrets were probably used as observation platforms.
Milecastles are fortlets of square or rectangular shape that occur every Roman mile along the Wall. They can vary in size, but are generally not very large. Milecastles are important because they provided gateways through the Wall curtain, though it is unknown if anyone besides soldiers could use these gateways. So milecastles may have allowed people to pass through the Wall, but they also provided a local staging point for the soldiers that were posted in the turrets.

Forts were the largest installations to be found along the Wall, typically build in stone in a rectangular shape. Most Wall-forts sit astride the Wall, with the north end projecting to the north of the Wall, but there are a few forts that lie behind the Wall, sharing the northern defensive wall with the Wall curtain. Forts were the primary base for soldiers along the Wall, and contained a number of specialized buildings.

There were two main Roman roads that ran north across Hadrian's Wall, at Carlisle in the west and near Corbridge in the east. Where this eastern road, known today as Dere Street, passes through Hadrian's Wall there is a gate built into the Wall curtain called the Portgate.

It is also important to remember that south of Hadrian's Wall was the Stanegate Road, which had a number of forts along its course and served as a useful road for most traffic east-west along the Wall corridor.