END OF EMPIRE?



Wallsend UK

Roman fort at the end of Hadrian’s Wall. I dug here in 1975; I was 15 and I loved fieldwork. I remember the town the most. The site is right by Swann Hunter Shipbuilders, one of the big firms on the Tyne. My dad worked here – late 60s. Most of the old heavy industry has, of course, gone now. Simpson?s Hotel was on the corner – notorious for its low life, they said. Swann Hunter still struggles on.

Th site is now an award winning museum with a nine storey viewing room overlooking what is left of the fort, and the river valley beyond. You can look at the lines to mark barrack foundations with an accompanying VR movie showing you what it might have looked like through the ages. Downstairs are the usual dioramas/reconstructions, here of the Commanding Officer’s house. I didn’t get to the reconstructed bath house at the other side of the site.



School parties look to be the main visitors – the site telling them the story of Roman Britain, with all the anecdotes I got as a child about central heating, communal latrines, wine that was like vinegar.

Very bleak – and it wasn't the weather. Is it just me that is tired of this sort of place? It all looks the same the world over to me – the souvenir shop at the entrance, the same subdued lighting in the galleries, the same finish to the dioramas, the same lines of building foundations, the same look to the VR movies.

It is now a cliché – these sites of heritage industry develop in a climate of imperial decline. This kind of history is all there is left here.

I did like the ship models though.