

The Walls of Venta

by

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Beneath the steady rein of God and the vagaries of a Silurian climate persist, in long defiance of forgotten foes, the stolid, silent walls of Venta.

The noontide sun of June beat down upon the South-facing white limestone rampart, corroded but unbroken by its two millennia. The sweat poured from me. I swooned and steadied. My broken and partially-repaired right arm ached, but not so much after 800mg of Ibuprofen. My black rucksack rested behind on the lawn berm. I continued with my little steel rule to measure the three nominal dimensions of random ashlar blocks. I tremulously noted the statistics in almost-illegible red scribbles on my field form.

This is how I like it. Doing field work silently, almost furtively, beyond the eyes, and the queries, of the curious. For if asked what I do I would be half embarrassed to admit, like the man in the old joke, that I would not know until I had done it.

A short and stocky man in a blue pullover was stealthily approaching along the fosse with, it seemed to me, interrogative intent. I had been in such situations in my youth where bailiffs or proprietors had approached me to ascertain if in some way I violated their rights.

I say a short man for at a mere five foot five I am far from a fine figure of one, but the gentleman was shorter.

"Not bad for four thousand Welsh slaves!" challenged the man with a cheery smile.

"They had to have good leadership!" I reposted.

I dimly remembered from my Tacitus that the Roman had said something about the stocky, swarthy physique of the Silurians. Something along these lines¹:-

The dark complexion of the Silures, their usually curly hair, and the fact that Spain is the opposite shore to them, are an evidence that Iberians of a former date crossed over and occupied these parts.

Tacitus also complimented their martial talents in no mean terms. I am cynical enough to think that no intelligent man will disparage his enemies, lest the reader reckon the intelligencer himself the shorter².

The Brigantes indeed, when a few who were beginning hostilities had been slain and the rest pardoned, settled down quietly; but on the Silures neither terror nor mercy had the least effect; they persisted in war and could be quelled only by legions encamped in their country.

Tacitus makes it plain what pains the Romans took. Eventually, the emperor dispatched a veteran commander of many Continental campaigns, the magnificently-monikered Publius Ostorius Scapula, with his son Marcus Ostorius Scapula, who latter would be decorated for saving the life of a Roman in Britain. Publius, however, lost many crack

units to the Silures, and Tacitus says he died of worry. That may be so or equally of course he may have committed suicide. When Romans eventually subdued refractory tribes they sometimes planted commercial cities, initially unfortified, in the center of the relevant territory, maybe to encourage a local economic stake in The Imperium, maybe also to facilitate taxation. *Venta Silurum*, the modern village of Caerwent, was one such tribal nucleus. *Venta Silurum* means literally "the marketplace of the Silurians". Caerwent is a village of some 1791 living souls and probably more trees. Its human population may be twenty or twenty-five percent of its Roman complement. Certainly the intramural built area is much less than it was.



Figure One
South Wall with Bastion and the Man in the Blue Pullover
The Walking Stick is 0.88 Meters Long

At the foot of the wall slept many *Helix Aspersa*, inoffensive but surprisingly able and resilient creatures. They love, the sun, the rain, the Sudbrook Limestone, and the many safe retreats afforded by the corroded masonry. They say the Romans brought these snails to Britain to eat. Whatever the truth, it is *Helix* who have stayed and prospered, secure from all but the birds. In my carelessness I stepped on several: Injuries unwarranted and always regretted.



Figure Two
South Wall with Bastion looking East

As with many liminal places nationality is a sensitive topic in Monmouthshire. During the Dark Ages, maybe two hundred years after the Romans left, a Celtic kingdom called Gwent was established in Eastern Siluria, somewhat between the River Wye in the East and the River Rhymney in the West. The Saxons encroached and by the time of the Norman Conquest the territory was definitely considered part of England, at least by the English. The status of the county remained ambiguous, technically Welsh it was mostly treated as a department of England until 1972AD, when the county was re-christened "Gwent" and ceded definitively to Wales. It remains under the Welsh Government. I was very surprised when the government abolished Gwent for a second time and re-instituted the very English designation "Monmouthshire" in official literature. Maybe some politician or bureaucrat had discovered Gwent to be a foreign name, imposed by an alien coloniser: Modern scholarship considers "Gwent" to be a corruption of the Roman word *Venta*. Or perhaps the gesture is merely anti-capitalist! Or perhaps it was discovered to mean something rude in Serbo-Croat?

The Welsh are a devout and very excellent people, but definitely not English. As I alighted from my train at Chepstow on the West bank of the River Wye and meters within Wales I was struck by the laid-back character of those around. The station needed more than a lick of paint, more like a full re-timbering, and young people lounged unregarded on the platform and at bus-stops, often with a bottle of wine or beer beside them: They would have been arrested in England. But they seemed perfectly sober, as did everyone else. Admittedly the weather was maybe twenty-eight degrees in the shade, oppressively still and with thunder storms forecast for the late afternoon. I climbed a very steep hill to the bus stop in the town center. Seven weeks after a cardiac triple bypass I was gratified to note there was no angina, though I had to stop twice to recover my breath! At the bus-stop people were very friendly and warned me that the bus for Caerwent would confusingly change its number from

C1 to 73 *after* it had parked. Standing eight hundred meters inside Wales I wondered if the bus's electronic logging machine would recognise the old person's bus pass that entitles me to travel anywhere in England outwith the morning rush hour: It did not. The bus driver asked me for £2.80. I said I only had £2.70 in silver, which she courteously accepted.

When, eight kilometers later, I alighted in the middle of tiny Caerwent two ladies stepped down with me. One entered the adjacent public lavatory and I asked the other where the return bus stop was (I had failed to locate it with StreetView[®]). She said she thought it by the War Memorial, but would ask her friend to confirm the fact when she returned to us. Then something very remarkable happened. The friend emerged from the lavatory and said something to the waiting woman in Welsh. This you may think very *unremarkable* but believe me this is the only time in my life I have heard the Welsh language used for communication as opposed to affectation.

"You can get lunch and a drink in The Coach and Horses", she added unexpectedly, "They are very friendly in there".

"I will need a drink soon!" I remarked.

Of the roughly three million Welsh, about 25000 were monoglot Welsh speakers in 1964, but today it is thought there are none over the age of five:- Indeed there may be more in Argentina. Clearly, though twenty percent have some knowledge of spoken Welsh, the vast majority speak English amongst themselves, albeit with a clean mouth, a poetic spirit, and of course their lovely voices. Welsh has joined Latin as a dead language, but like all the dead, it is venerated whatever its merit in life.

The lady switched to English on seeing me, and strongly recommended the Roman ruins, especially the foro-basilican complex, the temple, and the shops near the cottage where she was born. She confirmed there was no opposing bus stop, and accordingly no up-to-date return timetable displayed!

"People come from all over the World to see Caerwent", the lady added with justifiable pride.

I digress.

"I saw your bag in the grass and thought it was a dog", explained my new friend in the blue pullover as we chatted in the glare of the South wall. His tone seemed somehow justificatory, almost apologetic. Rightly or wrongly, I formed a notion that he was a volunteer curator acting on behalf of CADW, the Welsh Ministry of Antiquities. He too was no kid.

"I have seen a lot of them in the last few minutes", I offered vaguely.

"Yes, I have warned three people in the last week, but they still keep coming", he said.

"Yes, they are a nuisance", I agreed, "That is the last thing I want on my boots" referring obviously if obliquely to dog excrement rather than the dogs or the people themselves.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"Birmingham", I said. People do not tend to know where Walsall is. Indeed, when I was a boy I used to confuse it with Warsaw, and wonder what my Nan was doing working there. It is hopeless to tell people I live in Bloxwich. The few who have heard of it either commiserate, or respond with a fit of snobbish revulsion.

"Are you staying at a B&B or here for a day trip?"

"I am here for a few hours. This is the first time I have really been to Monmouthshire", without elaborating what an "unreal" presence might entail.

"I have intended to come for thirty years", I added, "But somehow never managed it".

"I have lived here all my life. People come from all over the World to see this place: America, Australia, New Zealand", said the man.

"You are very, very lucky", I told him, and meant it.

The man gazed steadily into my eyes. He said nothing.

"This is a nice, friendly village. You can get a drink and a meal at The Coach and Horses. They are very friendly in there".

The man giggled and making to touch my forearm added, "I am not the owner!"

I recoiled instinctively, but I hope not obviously.

"I will need a drink soon!" I replied.

"I recommend the Wye Valley. You can get a boat cruise from Ross through the gorge all the way to Chepstow. They stop at Tintern Abbey which is worth seeing. Henry the Eighth demolished most of it but the ruins are splendid. The people here used the Roman ruins to build their houses".

"Yes, they did not care in those days. The stone was just there", I answered with no little banality, but baleful accuracy.

"Enjoy your trip!" the man exclaimed, this time touching my arm successfully, and took his leave.

I continued to measure the ashlar of the original wall, possibly contemporaneous with the withdrawal of Legio II Augusta from nearby Caerleon, which took place around 293AD; and also the bastions, thought to have been added in 349AD under Constans I³).

I sat on the berm, drank my cola and ate my sandwiches. I felt stronger and continued my circumperambulation until I reached the ruins of the West Gate. In the field opposite, on the parched grass, about a hundred cars were parked, as if for a fete or gymkhana. But the still silence continued, if stasis is capable of continuity, as opposed to being timeless.

A man was lying on the steps of the ancient guardroom. As I approached I perceived that it was not the man in the blue pullover.

"Why are all those cars parked there?" I shouted to him in a somewhat accusative tone.

"They have come for a big funeral", he stated briefly but patiently, as if explaining to an idiot.

"Oh, right", I answered with hurried contrition.

I crossed the decumanus maximus, now of course tarmacadamed and the main street of the village, its busiest, and the route of buses and lorries.

As I stood, just outwith the gate I heard loud and tuneful singing and the expert playing of an organ from the Anglican church of Saints Stephen and Tathan, the latter a native of this place, as allegedly was Saint Patrick. The church is a good 250 meters from where I heard the music.

On the Northern side the CADW Visitor Center was closed but someone had thoughtfully left the lavatory door open so that strangers could see there was a lavatory there and avail themselves of its succour if needful.

When I was young the university hostel where I lived aped the forms of an English public school, the provenance of most of its inmates, with the exception of a few, such as I. On high days and holidays the Warden, the late Dr John Hartshorne, would lead us in singing the collegiate anthem ("Hulme!, Hulme! All the best men go to Hulme!") to the tune of "The Banks of the Rhondda" by James James. It is difficult to think of anything more preposterous and I then thought the tune lugubrious.

Later I learnt that this travesty adapted *Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau*, (Old) "Land of my Fathers", written by a father and son. I am glad the congregation did not sing it. I would have wept. Wales is a very little country with a very big song⁴.

*Mae hen wlad fy nhadau yn annwyl i mi,
Gwlad beirdd a chantorion, enwogion o fri;
Ei gwrol ryfelwyr, gwladgarwyr tra môd,
Tros ryddid gollasant eu gwaed.*

*Chorus:
Gwlad, Gwlad, pleidiol wyf i'm gwlad,
Tra môr yn fur i'r bur hoff bau,
O bydded i'r heniaith barhau.*

*This land of my fathers is dear to me
Land of poets and singers, and people of stature
Her brave warriors, fine patriots
Shed their blood for freedom*

*Chorus:
Land! Land! I am true to my land!
As long as the sea serves as a wall for this pure, dear land
May the language endure for ever.*

I walked toward the village center and turned south along the cardo. This would have been busy and splendid under Rome: Today it is a dairy track to access the back of farm buildings and the small pastures beyond. I do not know why. I wanted to be at the old South Gate again, perhaps better to study its impost. I do not recall seeing these mouldings in Italy. My pet theory, for what it is worth, is that they were designed to deflect the torrential rains usual in Wales away from the pointing of the load-bearing arch piers. Pointing erosion could of course have destabilised the gate arch itself, and indeed have lent purchase to the crowbars of assailants. The North and South Gates of Caerwent, never sufficient to large vehicles, were carefully infilled with fine ashlar some time near the end of Roman occupation, and both gateways exhibit interesting later adaptations, including in the case of the South Gate a drainage aperture and much later fenestration with what looks like twentieth-century wrought iron reinforcing.



Figure Three
The South Gate: Impost and Late Infill



Figure Four
Caerwent: The Church of St Stephen and St Tathan

In any event, I returned northwards along the cardo track. When I reached the corner of the churchyard I saw a vast black-clad congregation clustered about the priest. In a perfect English cadence, neither patrician nor plebeian, he spoke rather than declaimed the Anglican Order for Funerals rite of burial, The Committal⁵:-

*We have entrusted our sister C- to God's mercy,
and we now commit her body to the ground:
earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust:
in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life
through our Lord Jesus Christ,
who will transform our frail bodies
that they may be conformed to his glorious body,
who died, was buried, and rose again for us.
To him be glory for ever.
Amen.*

The silence was perfect. Not a bird sang, nor an insect buzzed, neither a child chatted nor a cow lowed. There was the hot sun on the brick walls and the drystone boundaries. I wondered if the shades stood unseen to witness the sacrament, perhaps to hallow and approve, and if the trees blessed their visitation with unfelt chill.

I suppose I prefer the poetry of older forms, maybe⁶:-

FORASMUCH as it hath pleased Almighty God of his great mercy to take unto himself the soul of our dear sister here departed, we therefore commit her body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ; who shall change the body of our low estate that it may be like unto his glorious body, according to the mighty working, whereby he is able to subdue all things to himself.

I returned to the village center and the War Memorial and went a little further to study the shops in Pound Lane. The persistence of the Roman ground plan amazed me as it always does. Yet so much has changed. In Roman times the artisans worked successively at blacksmithing, brewing, leatherworking or all sorts of useful things and lived over their shops, literally, adapting the structures to the trades in hand. Today it is difficult to know what the villagers do for a living, or how they live, but being Welsh they are cheerful and comradely. How much this is to do with their religion is unknown, perhaps unknowable. It is very possible that Christianity has continued in Gwent since the days of Constantine, if not much earlier. Recently, many cist burials have been excavated in and about the Anglican churchyard, where it is thought an elaborate monastic settlement existed in the Dark Ages. These inhumations are not Roman, for of course the Romans buried their dead extramurally. As to the current uses of this most pleasant little settlement, it is sometimes employed as a set for Hollywood action films, and otherwise and more persistently as a repository for nuclear weapons.

One wonders what Claudius, his general Ostorius Scapula, or his British enemy Caratacus would have made of it all.

A bit further east I went to look at the foundations of the civic basilica. On its Northern side was once the curia, the seat of the local council or ordo, where the footings of the parliamentary benches, themselves long since rotted, may still be discerned. Even more impressively the South wall of the Curia survives to a height of about five feet, almost certainly because of incorporation in a medieval building, or use as an orchard boundary.

This is one of the very rare continuously-subaerial Roman building fragments in Great Britain, though other walls known to have been incorporated in later buildings have been disclosed, especially in cities, and many more are suspected.

One wonders what the curiales in their pomp would think of their domain today, or of the little fragment of their hall, a shade from the sun for saplings⁷:-

*Alexander returneth into dust; the dust is earth; of
earth we make loam; and why of that loam, whereto he
was converted, might they not stop a beer-barrel?
Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away:
O, that that earth, which kept the world in awe,
Should patch a wall to expel the winter flaw!*

Not far from there, between the forum pavement and the decumanus, today of course the tarmacadamed village high street, were the excavated foundations of a four-square Roman temple. I hesitate to call it a pagan temple because its Southern apartments appear to have been altered and partitioned at some late but Classical date, I suspect for adaptations to Christian worship.

I was now opposite the lane to the church and I wanted to enter to pray and if possible to see the Roman altars that had been salvaged from later use as structural stone. By now the sacramental part of the funeral was complete and well over a hundred immaculately-dressed adults in black and white mourning suits were chatting garrulously within the churchyard, occupying the pathways and spilling over the graves. Photographers and morticians abounded busying to and from their highly-polished black Mercedes. I thought absurdly and wholly inappropriately how much the tight gathering resembled a roost of guillemots or perhaps a nursing flock of penguins. But I was glad of the fortuitous circumstance that I could penetrate relatively inconspicuously in my unzipped black fleece that disclosed a pristine white surgical brace above my black trousers. Perhaps I was mistaken for an unapproved but nevertheless faithful mourner. I entered the church porch and was disappointed to see the Roman altars secreted there, the largest, sandstone relic literally hidden behind the outer door. I felt they should be in the chancel, for whatever else is True of The True Redeemer it is that He is able to subdue all things and render harmless whatever dark powers may still abide. I took a pew in the otherwise empty nave and prayed. The priest emerged in full funereal dress from a door in the chancel. We silently nodded our greetings as he passed. I wondered if the church would have been open if the funeral had not been progressed there. As I left I noticed that two glossy funeral programmes and valedictory liturgies remained on the font cover. On the front they had a photograph of a smiling woman, no older than thirty-five, and probably much younger. She knelt in a field and embraced four new-born lambs. I remember her name. I shall of course not state it. Later, I attempted also to enter the village non-conformist chapel that scheduled many services: Almost daily it seemed, and three on a Sunday. But the chapel was locked.



Figure Five
A Limestone Roman Altar in the Church Porch



Figure Six
A Sandstone Roman Altar in the Church Porch

I had not completed my circumperambulation of the town wall and was especially desirous of seeing and photographing The North Gate. Most of the North Wall is on private property and only glimpses could be got as I walked beside the modern motor road. But I knew The North Gate to be in the garden of the recently-closed North Gate public house, and hoped I would be allowed to study it for a little while.

When I arrived at what is now the North Gate bed-and-breakfast guest house one of the proprietresses was washing a car. I asked if I could briefly go to photograph the gate which was in sight of the public road. She agreed and I was able to photograph this interesting structure and its inner impost from close quarters.



Figure Seven
The North Gate: From the North



Figure Eight
The North Gate: An Internal Impost

After that I completed my walk south along the East Wall, accessible and almost as complete as the South. Finally, at the South-East corner of the Roman wall I inspected the Norman motte, a small defensive mound constructed in around 1070AD. By the time of The Conquest, Harold Godwinson had already constructed a coastal redoubt at Portskewett, four kilometers South-East of Caerwent, and the Normans decided to build their major local fortress on the banks of the Wye at Chepstow. Portskewett rapidly declined as a military outpost, and Caerwent was ever only minor to the Normans. The motte's surmounting fortification would only ever have been of timber, but I consider that its builders demolished the two nearest South Wall bastions to provide a stabilising foundation for the mound, if not the superstructure.

I walked back to the War Memorial in the village center. I decided to position myself strategically at the junction of School Lane and the curiously-unnamed decumanus. The bus stopped fifty meters away by the War Memorial. I boarded and left for home. It had already clouded over at three in the afternoon. Behind the stratus blanket cumulonimbus towered in ominous lividity. The weather was more oppressive than ever. I had enjoyed my three hours in Caerwent. I had broken the jinx. I had worn the same leather boots, and carried the same rucksack, that I had worn and carried when I had had the accident that led, directly and indirectly, to six months of invalidity. My renewed strength lent me the promise of a few more years in which to finish my literary and scientific labours. Maybe I could walk again in the hills. At any event, I had renewed my acquaintance with the lively, optimistic Romans and their cheerful, indomitable enemies. I had never been before, but I was glad to be back.

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