

## THE ERMINE STREET GUARD – 50<sup>TH</sup> YEAR

In the autumn of 1971 I was lying in Cheltenham General Hospital having been gored by a boar just above my left kidney (boars don't bite, they slash) and was visited by the Rector of Witcombe and Bentham, John Thornton. After enquiring about my health he outlined a plan he had to raise the final funds needed for a New Village Hall. At the time parishioners had the choice of using a prefabricated hall with a concrete floor that stood in Pillcroft Close, or Bentham School Hall. The one was horrific and the other too small. The Rector's idea was to hold a historical pageant to be called Ermine Street Ghosts in July 1972 to show the various historical periods of the parish and I and others were asked if we would be involved and in particular make the kit for eight Roman Soldiers.

Work began in earnest in January 1972 in the coach house at Witcombe Rectory to produce the armour whilst other parishioners worked on the costumes for other periods. A full scale mock-up of the iron age fort gateway on Crickley Hill was built in the rectory garden and a working Roman artillery weapon, an Onager, was re-constructed. So it was that eight Roman soldiers, which including Bill Mayes, Dave Cooper and Steve Townsend and yours truly marched out to shoot the Onager many times over the weekend of the 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> July as part of a programme showing various periods of our history. The pageant was a great success and raised £1500 towards the hall fund. The following month the Roman Soldiers, now numbering nine, marched the 11 miles from Cirencester Market Square to Witcombe Cricket Field where the annual Flower Show was held at that time. This raised a further £300 for the hall fund.

Having put so much work into making the armour the group decided that it would continue and on the spur of the moment decide to call itself "The Ermine Street Guard". It soon became apparent that the equipment we had made was not very accurate. So began a programme, which continues to this day as more research and archaeological evidence is found, to replace the armour with more authentic reconstructions. To this end the society has established a relationship with many archaeologists and academics who are experts on the Roman Army and its armour and equipment. The Guard has now become renowned worldwide for the

accuracy of its historical interpretation and in 2008 Her Majesty the Queen approved an MBE to me for services to Roman History. This, I feel, is a reflection of the standing of the group as a whole not one individual.

In the early years public displays were given locally but as the society became more established we started to travel further afield to appear at major Roman British sites such as Hadrian's Wall, Bath, The British Museum, Caerleon, Dover, Wroxeter, Old Sarum to name just a few. The Guard first travelled abroad in 1983 when it toured France, Belgium, Germany and Switzerland. Since then we returned to these countries and others in Europe many times and continue to do so at least once a year. In 1997 the Centurion was taken to New York by Gloucester City Council to promote tourism.

The Group has taken part in many Television programmes during its 50 year history, mainly documentaries. In 2010, we played a part in a 3D film for the refurbished Roman Army Museum on Hadrian's Wall which is shown to visitors eight times each day. Early 2011 found us very involved with a programme for National Geographic called "Roman Murder Mystery" about the discovery of a child's skeleton which was found in suspicious circumstances at Vindolanda. For this we filmed over a long weekend near Painswick and on the following weekend at two sites on Hadrian's Wall. Our participation in this programme involved the provision of Roman soldiers, Celts and civilian re-enactors, transport, catering, the finding of locations and the provision of all props. Other filming in 2011 involved participation our sixth appearance on Time Team, which will be shown on March 18<sup>th</sup>. In September a very strange two days was spent on Hadrian's Wall with Jedward for CBBC and in December on the Brecon Beacons a day was spent in two inches of snow, with temperatures well below freezing, filming a trailer for Six Nations Rugby.

In the first years the members of the society lived in close proximity to Witcombe with Bentham. However over the years membership increasingly came from all over Britain. Today we have members living as far north as Aberdeen, as far south as Exeter, as far east as Kent and Pembroke in the west. Members come from all walks of life and range in age from 16 to 84 who are all brought together by a common interest in the Roman Army. A fair number of the members have had military experience. Two of the founding members still participate Mike Garlick,

who lived in Dog Lane for many years, and the author. Bill Mayes from Jones House, Bentham, who made such a large contribution to the Group, sadly died in 2005 at the age of 84. His son, Jeremy, returned to the ranks after over 20 years away.

CHRIS HAINES MBE

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