

# Colchester: Britain's First Roman City

## The Romans: They Came, They Saw, They Conquered

Colchester is famous as a Roman town, but its origins pre-date the Romans. Two thousand years ago, much of the area surrounding Colchester was occupied by the Trinovantes tribe. Towards the end of the first century BC the Trinovantes created a settlement on the River Colne which became known as Camulodunum, meaning 'Fortress of Camulos', a Celtic war god.

The Romans were well aware of the growing importance of Camulodunum and referred to its powerful ruler Cunobelin as King of the Britons. Cunobelin's death around AD40 rekindled thoughts of invasion and when the Roman army did arrive in AD43, the capture of Camulodunum was its primary objective.



## Roman Life in Colchester

The Roman Emperor Claudius spent just sixteen days in Britain, long enough to lead his troops and his elephants into Camulodunum and receive the submission of several British kings. The Roman army then built a legionary fortress on the highest ground inside Camulodunum, the site of the present town centre.

The High Street still follows the central axis of the original fortress while the intersection of Head Street and North Hill marks the main cross-roads of the subsequent Roman town.

As the Roman army moved north to conquer the rest of Britain, new military bases were built on the way. By AD49 the fortress at Camulodunum had been turned into a civilian settlement named Colonia Claudia after the Emperor and this became the first capital of the new Roman province of Britannia.

The colonia was home mainly to retired soldiers whose role was to spread Roman civilisation and keep an eye on the natives. Many of the military buildings were retained and converted, but the legionary defenses were dismantled leaving the town fatally unprotected.



Large public buildings were built, including a **theatre**, part of which can be seen today in Maidenburgh Street, and a senate house. Grandest of all was the **Temple of Claudius**, built to worship the Emperor after his death in AD54, when he was made a god. The foundations of the temple still survive beneath Colchester Castle and can be visited on guided tours in the Castle.

Roman Colchester was virtually destroyed only a few years after the town was founded. In AD60 Queen Boudica of the Iceni tribe, led a major rebellion against Roman rule and the Romans had refused to accept her status after the death of her husband Prasutagus. A revolt erupted and Boudica led her followers and joined with the Trinovantes tribe to attack the Roman capital at Camulodunum, which was undefended.

Despite the scale of the destruction, Colchester was quickly rebuilt but this time enclosed by a substantial defensive wall. Some two-thirds still stands; the **oldest town wall in Britain**. Of particular interest is the **Balkerne Gate**, the original main entrance to the town, which probably began as a triumphal arch celebrating the conquest by Claudius.

Roman Colchester lasted at least 400 years. The distinction between conquerors and conquered faded. To be Roman was to be civilised and this is well illustrated at Gosbecks on the south-western edge of the modern town. Nearby the largest of the five known Roman theatres in Britain was built with seating for up to 5,000 people. There was also an impressive Romano-Celtic temple complex. The discovery nearby of the **Colchester Mercury**, the finest bronze figure from Roman Britain now on display in the Castle Museum, shows that even native religion was becoming Romanised. Gosbecks is now preserved as an **Archaeological Park** and its various historic features are explained on site.



## **Roman Discoveries Still Taking Place**

Archaeological excavations over the last 80 years have revealed a town of importance and sophistication. Artifacts from these excavations can be seen in the internationally important archaeological collections in **Colchester Castle Museum**.

One of the most important recent excavations was the discovery of a **Roman Circus** in 2004. Built around 3AD it had a seating capacity of around 15,000. It is hoped that a funding bid will enable visitors in 2011 to view some archaeological remains of the circus, see a virtual reality film about what it would have been like to spend a day at the races and follow a trail around most of the perimeter of the circus.

## **Britain's Oldest Recorded Town**

The earliest record of the town's existence is a reference by the Roman writer, Pliny the Elder in AD77. In describing the island of Anglesey, he wrote that 'it is about 200 miles from Camulodunum, a town in Britain'. Camulodunum being the pre-Roman name for Colchester. This is the first known reference to any named settlement in this country. Pliny died in AD79, one of the victims of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius which destroyed Pompeii.

## **Colchester: Did You Know?**

It was the capital of Roman Britain when London was just a trading post. It has the largest surviving Roman gateway in Britain. It has 1½ miles (2½ km) of Roman wall, the oldest town wall in Britain. Colchester Castle is the largest surviving Norman keep in Europe. Colchester Castle pre-dates the

Tower of London and was in fact the blueprint for it. Colchester Castle was the first Royal Castle outside of London. Colchester Castle is built on the massive foundations of the Roman Temple of Claudius.

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