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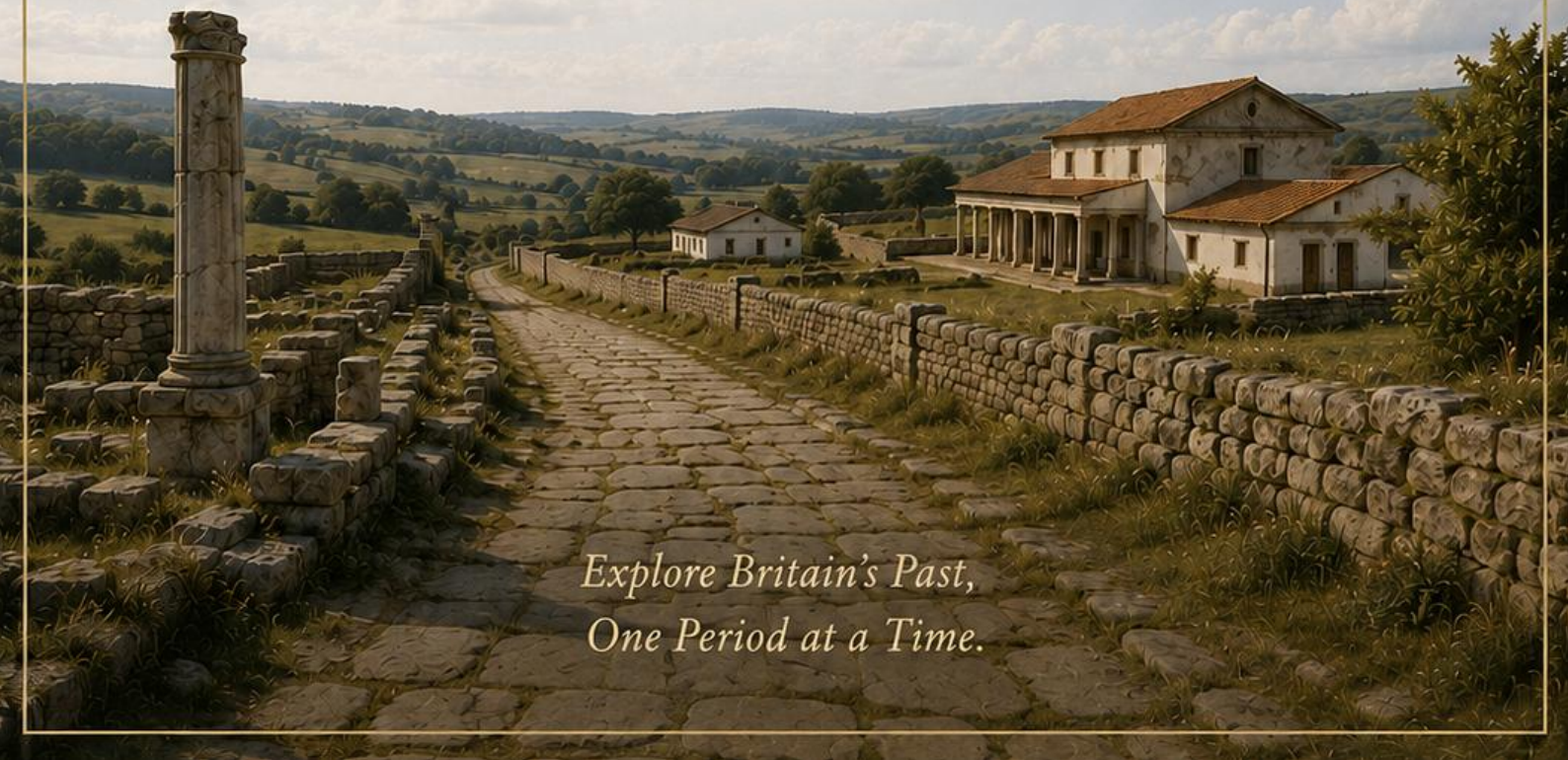
LEARNING COMPANION 8

ROMAN BRITAIN

Conquest, Settlement and Life in a Provincial World

A companion research paper supporting the *Roman Britain* section of *Before England*

MATTHEW ARMITAGE



Explore Britain's Past, One Period at a Time.

Before England Learning Companion 8

Roman Britain

Conquest, Settlement

and Life in a Provincial World

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Matthew Armitage has asserted his right to be identified as the author of this work.

Part of the Before England Learning Companion series.

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BEFORE ENGLAND LEARNING COMPANION 8

Welcome to the Eighth Volume in the Before England Learning Companion Series

Each Learning Companion explores the archaeological evidence behind one period of Britain's past. Rather than presenting a complete history, these guides explain how archaeologists reconstruct ancient lives through discoveries, scientific investigation and the evidence preserved in the landscape.

Roman Britain began with the invasion of CE 43, when the armies of the Emperor Claudius crossed the English Channel and established permanent Roman rule. Over the following three and a half centuries, Britain became one of the north-western provinces of the Roman Empire. Although not every part of Britain was conquered, Roman influence transformed much of the landscape through the construction of roads, forts, towns, villas and frontier defences.

The Roman conquest did not replace the people who already lived here. Instead, native British communities gradually adapted to new ways of life while retaining many of their own traditions. Across the province, Roman customs mixed with local practices to create a distinctive Romano-British culture. In towns, people lived alongside soldiers, merchants and craftsmen from across the Empire, while in the countryside many farming communities continued to occupy land that had been settled for generations.

Unlike the prehistoric periods that came before, Roman Britain is illuminated by both archaeology and written history. Excavations have uncovered forts, settlements, temples, bathhouses, villas, workshops and cemeteries, while inscriptions, official records and remarkable discoveries such as the Vindolanda writing tablets allow us to hear the voices of people who lived nearly two thousand years ago. Scientific techniques continue to reveal new information about where people came from, what they ate and how they lived.

This companion introduces the principal archaeological discoveries, important sites and scientific evidence that allow us to understand Roman Britain and the political, technological, economic and cultural changes that reshaped Britain between the Roman conquest and the end of imperial rule.



Claudius sestertius (*Spes Augusta*), Wikimedia Commons (public domain).

Period at a Glance

Dates: CE 43–410

Who lived in Britain?

Native Britons, Roman soldiers, merchants, craftsmen, farmers, officials, enslaved people and families from many parts of the Roman Empire.

How people lived

Most people continued to farm the land, but Roman rule introduced towns, villas, roads, bathhouses and forts. Britain became part of a vast trading network that stretched across Europe, North Africa and the Near East. Some people adopted Roman customs, while others continued long-established British traditions.

Important developments

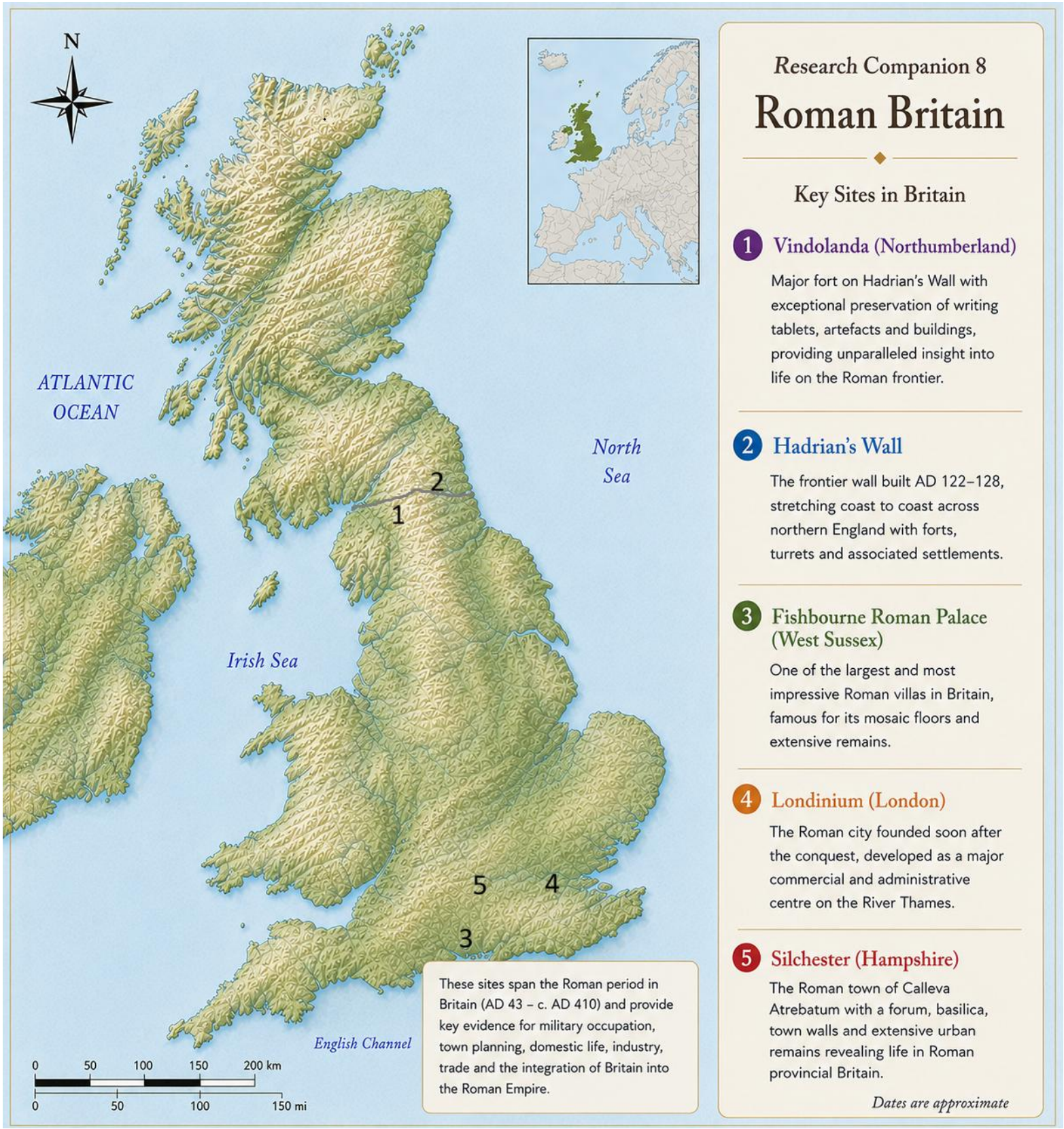
- The Roman invasion begins in CE 43.
- Britain becomes a province of the Roman Empire.
- Roads, forts, towns and villas are built across much of the country.
- Hadrian's Wall marks the Empire's northern frontier.
- Trade links connect Britain with the wider Roman world.
- Christianity arrives during the later Roman period.
- Roman rule ends in the early fifth century.

What archaeologists find

Stone buildings, roads, forts, town walls, villas, mosaics, bathhouses, temples, coins, pottery, glass, jewellery, tools, weapons, writing tablets, inscriptions, burials, seeds, animal bones and thousands of everyday objects.

Why this period matters

Roman Britain connected Britain with one of the greatest empires of the ancient world. Its roads, towns and buildings transformed the landscape, while its archaeological remains provide one of the richest and most detailed records of any period before the Middle Ages. Many features of modern Britain still follow patterns first established during Roman rule.



Research Companion 8

Roman Britain

Key Sites in Britain

1 Vindolanda (Northumberland)

Major fort on Hadrian's Wall with exceptional preservation of writing tablets, artefacts and buildings, providing unparalleled insight into life on the Roman frontier.

2 Hadrian's Wall

The frontier wall built AD 122–128, stretching coast to coast across northern England with forts, turrets and associated settlements.

3 Fishbourne Roman Palace (West Sussex)

One of the largest and most impressive Roman villas in Britain, famous for its mosaic floors and extensive remains.

4 Londinium (London)

The Roman city founded soon after the conquest, developed as a major commercial and administrative centre on the River Thames.

5 Silchester (Hampshire)

The Roman town of Calleva Atrebatum with a forum, basilica, town walls and extensive urban remains revealing life in Roman provincial Britain.

Dates are approximate

These sites span the Roman period in Britain (AD 43 – c. AD 410) and provide key evidence for military occupation, town planning, domestic life, industry, trade and the integration of Britain into the Roman Empire.

What Was Roman Britain?

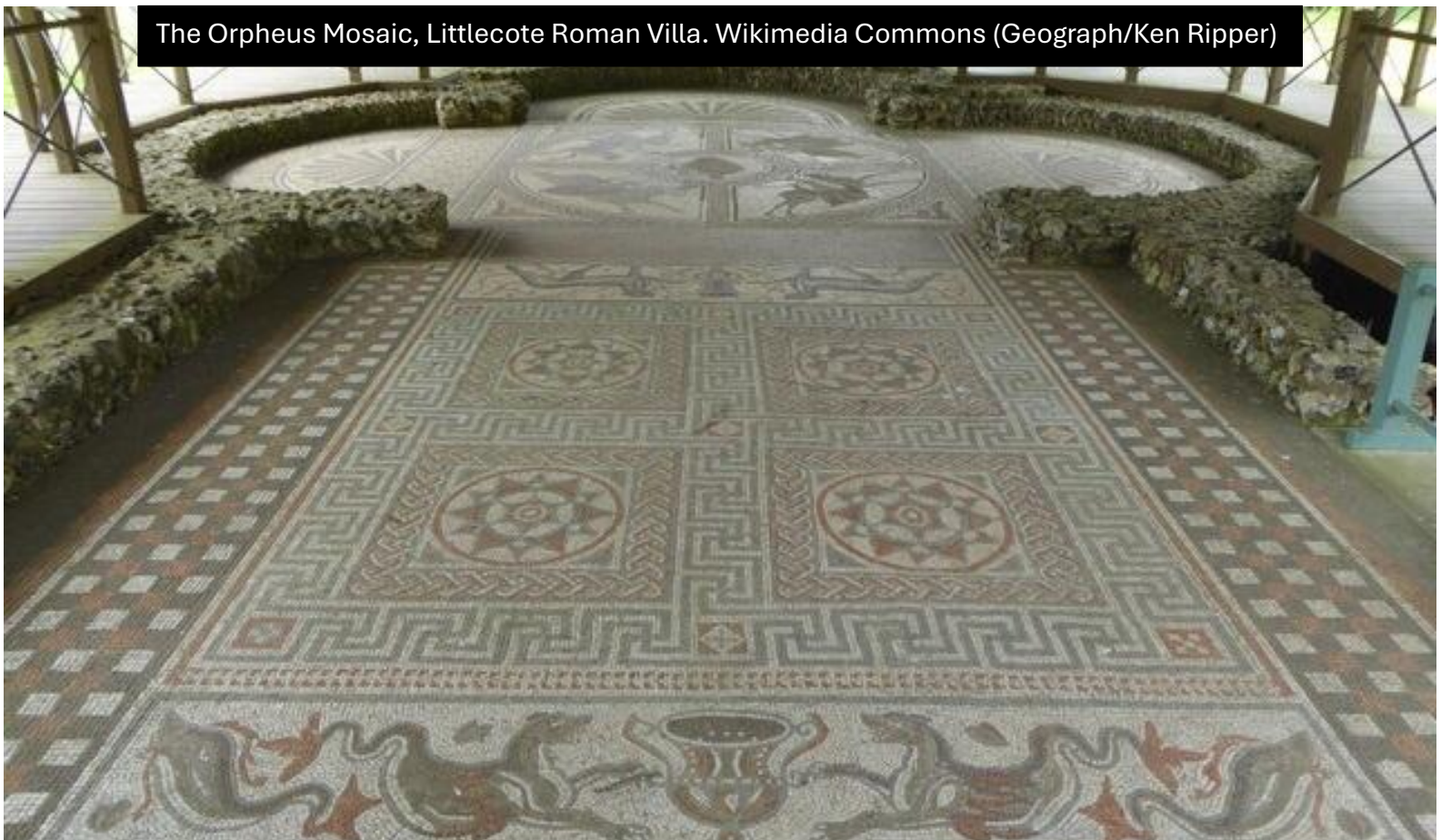
Roman Britain was the part of Britain that came under Roman rule following the invasion of CE 43. For almost four centuries, much of England and Wales, together with parts of southern Scotland, formed a province of the Roman Empire. During this time Britain was governed by Roman officials, defended by Roman armies and connected to an empire that stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the deserts of North Africa and the Middle East.

The Roman invasion was not the beginning of contact between Britain and Rome. Long before Roman soldiers landed, traders carried goods across the English Channel, and British tribal leaders had established diplomatic and commercial links with the Roman world. Imported wine, fine pottery and luxury goods found at Iron Age sites show that these connections were already well established before the conquest.

The arrival of the Roman army changed Britain in ways that no previous period had done. New roads linked every part of the province, allowing soldiers, officials and merchants to travel quickly across the landscape. Forts secured strategic positions, towns became centres of government and trade, and wealthy villas appeared in many of the richest farming districts. Stone buildings, bathhouses, temples and public monuments introduced styles of architecture that had never before been seen in Britain.

Not every part of Britain experienced Roman rule in the same way. In the south and east, towns and villas became common, and many people adopted aspects of Roman life. In the north and west, military forts dominated the landscape, while beyond the frontiers many communities remained outside direct Roman control. Throughout the province, local traditions continued alongside Roman customs, creating a culture that was both British and Roman.

Roman Britain came to an end during the early fifth century as the Western Roman Empire faced increasing political and military problems. Around CE 410, Roman administration was withdrawn, and Britain was left to govern itself. Although imperial rule had ended, the roads, towns, forts and buildings remained, leaving a legacy that can still be traced across the British landscape today.



The Orpheus Mosaic, Littlecote Roman Villa. Wikimedia Commons (Geograph/Ken Ripper)

Who Were the Romano-British People?

The people who lived in Roman Britain came from many different backgrounds. Most were native Britons whose families had occupied the land for generations before the Roman conquest. Alongside them lived soldiers recruited from every corner of the Empire, merchants seeking new opportunities, skilled craftsmen, government officials and their families. Over time these communities mixed, creating the diverse society that archaeologists describe as Romano-British.

The Roman army was one of the greatest influences on life in Britain. At its height, tens of thousands of soldiers were stationed across the province, serving in legions and auxiliary units. Many auxiliaries were recruited far from Britain, arriving from places such as Gaul, Germany, Spain, Syria and North Africa. When they completed their military service, some settled permanently, marrying local women and raising families in Britain.

Most people, however, lived in the countryside. Farmers continued to cultivate fields, raise livestock and manage the landscape much as their Iron Age ancestors had done. Some adopted Roman building styles and new farming techniques, while others maintained older traditions. Life in rural Britain was shaped as much by the seasons as it had been before the conquest.

The towns brought together people from many walks of life. Merchants imported goods from across the Empire, blacksmiths forged tools and equipment, potters supplied households with everyday vessels, and builders erected houses, temples and public buildings. Markets provided opportunities to buy and sell produce, while bathhouses and forums became places where people met to conduct business and socialise.

Archaeological discoveries show that Roman Britain was more diverse than was once believed. Scientific analysis of human remains has revealed that some individuals had travelled from distant parts of the Empire. Inscriptions record names from many different cultures, while imported objects demonstrate the movement of goods and ideas across thousands of kilometres. Roman Britain was not an isolated frontier but a province connected to an international world.

Although people adopted many aspects of Roman life, they did not abandon their own identities. Local languages continued to be spoken, traditional beliefs survived alongside Roman religions, and regional customs remained strong. The Romano-British people were neither entirely Roman nor entirely Iron Age Britons. They created a society that combined influences from both worlds, leaving behind one of the richest archaeological records in British history.

How Do We Know?

Roman Britain is one of the best understood periods of British history because archaeologists can combine physical evidence with written records. Excavations reveal the buildings, objects and landscapes left behind by the people who lived during the Roman occupation, while Roman historians, official inscriptions and surviving documents provide valuable information about events and everyday life. Together, these different sources allow archaeologists to build a detailed picture of Roman Britain.

Excavations have uncovered thousands of Roman sites across Britain. Forts, towns, villas, bathhouses, temples, workshops and cemeteries reveal how people lived, worked and worshipped. Many Roman roads are still visible in the landscape, while the buried remains of buildings continue to be discovered beneath modern towns and cities. Every excavation adds new evidence, helping archaeologists understand how Roman Britain developed over nearly four centuries.

Artefacts provide another important source of information. Pottery, coins, jewellery, glass, tools, weapons and household objects reveal what people bought, made and used in everyday life. Coins often bear the portraits of Roman emperors, allowing archaeologists to date sites accurately, while inscriptions carved into stone record the names of soldiers, officials and ordinary people who once lived in Britain.

Some of the most remarkable discoveries come from sites where organic materials have survived. At Vindolanda, near Hadrian's Wall, waterlogged conditions preserved wooden writing tablets, leather shoes, textiles and many other objects that would normally have decayed. The writing tablets include letters, shopping lists, military reports and invitations, providing an extraordinary glimpse into the lives of people living on Rome's northern frontier.

Scientific techniques continue to transform our understanding of Roman Britain. Radiocarbon dating, dendrochronology, environmental archaeology, isotope analysis and ancient DNA all help archaeologists investigate when sites were occupied, how people managed the landscape, what they ate and, in some cases, where they were born. These methods allow evidence recovered from excavations to be studied in far greater detail than ever before.

Unlike earlier prehistoric periods, Roman Britain can also be compared with the writings of contemporary authors such as Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio. Although these writers viewed Britain from a Roman perspective and their accounts must be treated with care, they provide valuable information when considered alongside the archaeological evidence. Together, archaeology, science and written history make Roman Britain one of the richest and most thoroughly understood periods of Britain's past.

TIMELINE

55 BCE — **Julius Caesar invades Britain**
Caesar leads two military expeditions to Britain. Although he establishes diplomatic links with some British tribes, no permanent Roman occupation follows.

54 BCE — **Caesar returns to Gaul**
After a second campaign, Caesar withdraws his army. Trade and contact between Britain and Rome continue to grow over the following decades.

CE 43 — **The Roman invasion begins**
Emperor Claudius orders a full-scale invasion of Britain. Roman forces land in south-east England and begin the conquest of the island.

CE 47–50 — **Roman control expands**
The Roman army establishes forts, builds roads and extends its control across much of southern Britain.

CE 60–61 — **Boudica's revolt**
Queen Boudica of the Iceni leads a major uprising against Roman rule. Londinium, Camulodunum (Colchester) and Verulamium (St Albans) are destroyed before the rebellion is defeated.

CE 70s–80s — **Conquest reaches northern Britain**
Roman armies campaign into Wales and northern England, building forts and roads as they advance.

CE 79–83 — **Fishbourne Roman Palace completed**
One of Britain's largest and most luxurious Roman residences is built in Sussex.

CE 122 — **Construction of Hadrian's Wall begins**
Emperor Hadrian orders the construction of a frontier wall across northern England to mark the Empire's northern boundary.

CE 142 — **The Antonine Wall is built**
The Roman frontier briefly moves north into Scotland, although the army later withdraws to Hadrian's Wall.

Third Century CE — **Roman Britain prospers**
Towns expand, villas become more widespread and trade flourishes across the province.

Fourth Century CE — **Christianity spreads through Britain**
Christian communities become established alongside traditional Roman and native religions.

CE 410 — **Roman rule ends**
Roman administration is withdrawn from Britain. The province is left to govern itself, marking the end of Roman Britain and the beginning of the early medieval period.

Main Discoveries

Roman Britain has produced some of the most important archaeological discoveries in Europe. From frontier forts and thriving towns to luxurious villas and remarkable written records, these sites reveal how people lived throughout nearly four centuries of Roman rule. Together they provide an exceptionally detailed picture of military life, farming, trade, religion and everyday society.

Vindolanda, Northumberland

Vindolanda is one of the most important Roman archaeological sites in Britain. Built just south of Hadrian's Wall, the fort and its surrounding settlement have been excavated for more than fifty years. Waterlogged conditions preserved thousands of objects that rarely survive elsewhere, including wooden writing tablets, leather shoes, clothing, wooden tools and children's toys. These discoveries provide an extraordinary insight into the daily lives of soldiers, their families and the civilians who lived alongside them.

Evidence found: Writing tablets, leather shoes, wooden objects, military equipment, pottery, textiles, coins, buildings and everyday household items.

Hadrian's Wall

Built from CE 122 during the reign of Emperor Hadrian, Hadrian's Wall stretched across northern England from the River Tyne to the Solway Firth. It marked the northern frontier of the Roman Empire and was defended by forts, milecastles and watchtowers. Excavations have revealed barracks, workshops, bathhouses and civilian settlements, showing that the frontier was a busy and well-organised military zone rather than simply a defensive barrier.

Evidence found: Stone walls, forts, milecastles, barracks, bathhouses, inscriptions, weapons, pottery and military equipment.

Londinium (London)

Founded soon after the Roman invasion, Londinium became the largest town in Roman Britain and the centre of government and trade. Excavations beneath the modern City of London have uncovered streets, warehouses, temples, markets, bridges and thousands of everyday objects, allowing archaeologists to reconstruct the growth of one of the Empire's most important provincial capitals.

Evidence found: Streets, buildings, bridges, coins, pottery, glass, inscriptions, writing tablets and imported goods.

Fishbourne Roman Palace, West Sussex

Fishbourne is the largest Roman residence ever discovered in Britain. Built during the first century CE, it contained magnificent mosaics, formal gardens, bath suites and richly decorated rooms. The palace demonstrates the wealth enjoyed by parts of the Romano-British elite during the early years of Roman rule.

Evidence found: Mosaics, painted plaster, bathhouses, gardens, sculptures, pottery and luxury goods.

Silchester (Calleva Atrebatum), Hampshire

Silchester preserves one of the best examples of a Roman town in Britain. Unlike many Roman towns, it was never built over by a modern city, allowing archaeologists to excavate its complete street plan, public buildings, houses and defensive walls. The site shows how an Iron Age settlement gradually developed into a prosperous Roman town.

Evidence found: Forum, basilica, temples, houses, streets, town walls, workshops, coins and pottery.

Why These Sites Matter

Each of these sites reveals a different aspect of Roman Britain. Some show how the army defended the frontier, others illustrate the growth of towns, while villas and rural settlements reveal how most people lived and worked. Together they demonstrate that Roman Britain was a complex province where military life, farming, trade, engineering and local traditions combined to shape a society unlike any that had existed in Britain before. Ongoing excavations and new scientific techniques continue to add to our understanding of this remarkable period.

Climate and Environment

The climate of Roman Britain was broadly similar to that of today, although there were periods that were slightly warmer and drier, particularly during the early centuries of Roman rule. These favourable conditions supported productive farming across much of the province and helped sustain a growing population. Seasonal changes remained important, with successful harvests depending upon careful management of crops, livestock and the land throughout the year.

By the time the Romans arrived, much of southern Britain had already been shaped by thousands of years of farming. Woodland had been cleared to create fields and grazing land, while trackways and settlements spread across the countryside. The Romans expanded this managed landscape by building roads, bridges, towns, forts and villas, but agriculture continued to dominate much of the province.

The countryside remained the heart of Roman Britain. Most people lived in rural communities, cultivating wheat, barley and oats, while raising cattle, sheep, pigs and horses. Large villa estates developed in some regions, producing food not only for local communities but also for nearby towns and military garrisons. In less fertile areas, smaller farmsteads continued to support families much as they had during the Iron Age.

Rivers remained vital to everyday life. They supplied fresh water, supported fishing and provided important transport routes linking inland settlements with the coast. The Thames, Severn, Trent and other major rivers carried goods between towns and ports, while harbours connected Britain with the rest of the Roman Empire. The sea was no longer a barrier but a busy highway linking Britain to continental Europe.

Environmental archaeology has transformed our understanding of Roman landscapes. Pollen, seeds, charcoal and animal bones recovered during excavations reveal the crops people cultivated, the animals they kept and the changing appearance of the countryside. Scientific studies show that woodland continued to be managed for timber and fuel, while fields and grazing land expanded to meet the demands of a growing population.

Although the Romans introduced impressive towns and monumental buildings, Britain remained a largely agricultural province. The landscape was shaped by farming as much as by roads and cities, and the careful management of the countryside provided the food, timber and raw materials needed to support life throughout the province.

Did You Know?

Many of Britain's modern roads follow the routes first laid out by Roman engineers almost two thousand years ago. In some places, these ancient roads are still used every day.

Everyday Life

Life in Roman Britain was shaped by work, family and the changing seasons. Although impressive towns, forts and villas often attract the most attention, most people lived in the countryside, where farming remained the foundation of everyday life. Crops had to be sown and harvested, animals cared for and buildings maintained, just as they had been before the Roman conquest. Roman rule introduced new opportunities and technologies, but the rhythm of life was still closely linked to the land.

Homes varied greatly depending on wealth and location. Many farming families lived in simple timber houses or continued to occupy traditional roundhouses, particularly during the early years of Roman rule. In towns, houses were often built from timber and later stone, with tiled roofs, plastered walls and, in some cases, underfloor heating. Wealthy landowners lived in spacious villas that contained mosaics, bath suites and private courtyards, while ordinary people occupied much smaller and more modest homes.

Food reflected both local traditions and new influences from across the Empire. Wheat and barley remained the principal cereal crops, while vegetables, fruit and herbs became more widely cultivated. Beef, pork, lamb and poultry were common, together with fish and shellfish where these were available. Imported foods such as olive oil, wine and spices reached Britain through Roman trade, although they would have been beyond the reach of many ordinary families.

Towns became busy centres of trade and daily activity. Markets sold food, pottery, tools, clothing and imported goods, while craftsmen worked as blacksmiths, potters, carpenters, stonemasons and leatherworkers. Public bathhouses provided places where people could wash, exercise and meet friends, making them an important part of social life as well as personal hygiene.

Children learned practical skills from an early age by helping their families with farming, craftwork and household tasks. Some received a formal education, particularly in larger towns, where reading, writing and mathematics were taught. The discovery of writing tablets, pens and inkpots shows that literacy was far more widespread than in earlier periods, especially among soldiers, merchants and officials.

Life was not the same across Roman Britain. A soldier serving on Hadrian's Wall experienced a very different daily routine from a merchant in Londinium or a farmer living in a rural village. Yet throughout the province, communities adapted to changing circumstances while maintaining many long-established traditions. The archaeological evidence reveals a society that combined Roman innovation with British experience, creating a distinctive way of life that endured for nearly four centuries.

Did You Know?

Thousands of Roman leather shoes have been discovered at Vindolanda. They include soldiers' boots, children's shoes and finely made sandals, giving archaeologists an extraordinary insight into everyday life on Britain's northern frontier.

Technology and Innovation

The Roman conquest introduced new technologies and engineering on a scale never before seen in Britain. Although many Iron Age skills continued to be used, Roman knowledge transformed the way roads, buildings, water supplies and military defences were constructed. These innovations supported the army, encouraged trade and improved communication across much of the province.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of Roman engineering was the road network. Surveyors carefully planned routes that linked forts, towns, ports and important settlements. Roads were built in straight sections wherever possible, using layers of stone and gravel to create durable surfaces that could withstand heavy traffic. These routes allowed soldiers, merchants and officials to travel quickly across Britain and many remained in use long after Roman rule had ended.

Roman builders introduced new construction techniques using dressed stone, brick, roof tiles and strong mortar. Public buildings such as bathhouses, temples, basilicas and amphitheatres became familiar features in many towns, while wealthy villas displayed mosaics, painted walls and underfloor heating. These buildings required skilled architects, stonemasons, carpenters and plasterers, many of whom brought techniques from elsewhere in the Empire.

One of the most impressive Roman innovations was hypocaust heating. Hot air produced by a furnace passed beneath suspended floors and through hollow walls, warming rooms above. This system was used in bathhouses and in the homes of wealthy families, providing a level of comfort unknown in earlier Britain.

Technology also improved farming. Iron ploughs, sickles, axes and other tools continued to increase agricultural efficiency, while watermills began to grind grain in some parts of the province. Better roads and organised markets allowed food and other goods to be transported more easily between farms, towns and military forts, helping to support Britain's growing population.

The Romans also introduced new methods of manufacturing. Pottery was produced in specialised kilns on a large scale, glassmaking expanded, and metalworkers manufactured everything from weapons and armour to jewellery and household utensils. Coins became the standard form of currency throughout the province, making trade simpler and allowing goods to be bought and sold across vast distances.

Writing became an important part of everyday administration. Official records, military reports, letters and business accounts were written on wooden tablets, wax tablets and papyrus. Pens, ink and writing materials have been discovered at many Roman sites, showing that literacy played a far greater role in society than during any earlier period in Britain.

The archaeological evidence shows that Roman Britain was a place of remarkable innovation. Roads, engineering, architecture, manufacturing and written communication transformed everyday life and connected Britain more closely than ever before with the wider Roman world.

Did You Know?

The Romans introduced underfloor heating to Britain nearly 2,000 years ago. Known as a hypocaust, it circulated hot air beneath stone floors to keep bathhouses and wealthy homes warm during the winter.

People and Society

Roman Britain was a diverse society made up of people from many different backgrounds. Native Britons lived alongside Roman soldiers, merchants, craftsmen, officials and their families, while people from every corner of the Empire travelled to Britain to serve in the army or seek new opportunities. Although Roman rule brought new forms of government and administration, family and community remained at the heart of everyday life.

Most people continued to live in the countryside, where farming provided food and employment for the majority of the population. Families worked together to cultivate crops, care for livestock and maintain their homes. Villages, farmsteads and villas formed the backbone of the rural economy, supplying food to nearby towns and military garrisons.

Towns became important centres of administration and commerce. They contained markets, workshops, temples, bathhouses and public buildings where people met to trade, conduct business and take part in civic life. Craftsmen produced pottery, metalwork, leather goods, glass and textiles, while merchants imported products from across the Roman Empire. These busy settlements brought together people from many different cultures, languages and occupations.

The Roman army also shaped society. Thousands of soldiers were stationed throughout Britain, particularly along the northern frontier. Around many forts, civilian settlements developed where traders, craftsmen and the families of soldiers lived and worked. These communities often remained long after military units had moved elsewhere, becoming permanent settlements in their own right.

Roman society was organised in a clear hierarchy. Wealthy landowners, senior officials and military commanders occupied the highest positions, while merchants and skilled craftsmen formed an important middle group. Most people, however, were farmers, labourers and servants whose daily lives were shaped by hard work and the demands of the seasons. Enslaved people were also part of Roman society and carried out many forms of domestic, agricultural and industrial labour.

Children grew up learning the skills they would need as adults. In farming communities they helped with crops and livestock, while in towns many learned family trades such as pottery, blacksmithing or carpentry. Some children received an education and learned to read and write, particularly those from wealthier families. The survival of school exercises and writing tablets shows that literacy played a much greater role than in earlier periods.

Roman Britain was also a multicultural society. Scientific studies of human remains, together with inscriptions and written records, show that people travelled to Britain from across Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. Soldiers from Syria served on Hadrian's Wall, merchants arrived from Gaul and officials came from Italy and other provinces. Britain became one small part of a vast empire whose people, goods and ideas moved across thousands of kilometres.

The archaeological evidence reveals a society that was both local and international. Ancient farming traditions continued alongside new Roman customs, while communities adapted to changing circumstances without losing their own identities. Roman Britain was a province where different cultures lived together, creating a society unlike any Britain had experienced before.

Did You Know?
An inscription discovered at Hadrian's Wall records soldiers from Syria serving in northern Britain. It is a reminder that people from across the Roman Empire lived and worked in Britain nearly two thousand years ago.

Beliefs and Religion

Religion played an important role in Roman Britain, but it was very different from the beliefs that had existed before the conquest. Rather than replacing native traditions, Roman religion often blended with local customs, creating a rich mixture of old and new beliefs. Across Britain, people continued to regard rivers, springs, hills and other natural places as sacred, while also worshipping Roman gods introduced by soldiers, merchants and settlers from across the Empire.

Temples were built in many towns and military settlements, but religious life extended far beyond these buildings. Shrines stood beside roads, within forts and at country villas, while household altars allowed families to honour their own gods at home. Offerings of coins, jewellery and other valuable objects were left at sacred places, continuing traditions that stretched back into prehistory.

Many Roman gods became familiar throughout Britain. Jupiter, the king of the gods, was widely worshipped by soldiers and officials, while Mars was associated with war and military success. Mercury was regarded as the protector of merchants and travellers, and Minerva was linked with wisdom and skilled crafts. Local British gods also continued to be honoured, often becoming associated with Roman deities. This blending of beliefs allowed many communities to preserve older traditions while adopting new forms of worship.

The Roman army brought even greater religious diversity. Soldiers serving in Britain came from many parts of the Empire and introduced the beliefs of their own homelands. Archaeologists have discovered altars dedicated to gods from the eastern Mediterranean, Germany and North Africa, showing that Roman Britain was home to a remarkable variety of religious traditions. Along Hadrian's Wall, temples and shrines reveal communities made up of people from many different cultures living side by side.

During the fourth century, Christianity began to spread across Britain. Churches were established in some towns, Christian symbols appeared on jewellery and personal objects, and written records suggest that Christian communities had become established before the end of Roman rule. Even so, older religions did not disappear immediately. For many years Christianity existed alongside the traditional Roman and native beliefs that had shaped life for generations.

Archaeology provides much of our knowledge of Roman religion. Temples, shrines, altars, inscriptions, sculptures and religious objects reveal how people worshipped, while burials provide evidence of changing beliefs about death and the afterlife. Written sources add further information, although they often reflect the views of Roman authors rather than the ordinary people who practised these religions.

The evidence shows that Roman Britain was a place of remarkable religious diversity. Ancient British traditions, Roman beliefs and the new Christian faith all left their mark on the landscape, creating a rich spiritual world that reflected the many cultures living within the province.

Did You Know?

At the Roman baths in Bath, hundreds of people threw coins and inscribed lead tablets into the sacred spring as offerings to the goddess Sulis Minerva. Many of these objects have survived for nearly two thousand years, giving archaeologists a unique insight into Roman beliefs and personal hopes.

Britain in the Wider World

Roman Britain was part of one of the largest empires the world has ever known. From the moment of the conquest in CE 43, Britain became connected to an international network of trade, travel and communication that stretched from the Atlantic coast to the Middle East and from northern Britain to the deserts of North Africa. Goods, people and ideas moved across these vast distances, making Roman Britain far less isolated than at any earlier time in its history.

Britain exported many valuable resources to other parts of the Empire. Grain from fertile farmland helped feed both the army and civilian populations, while lead, silver and iron were mined in large quantities. Wool, leather and livestock also formed important exports, contributing to Britain's growing economy.

In return, ships arrived carrying goods from across the Roman world. Wine came from Gaul and Italy, olive oil from Spain, fine pottery from Gaul and the Rhineland, and luxury goods from many other provinces. Glassware, jewellery and decorative objects reached Britain through well-established trading networks, allowing even distant frontier settlements to obtain products from across the Empire.

Travel became easier because of the Roman road network and regular sea routes. Merchants carried goods between towns and ports, government officials travelled throughout the province, and soldiers were transferred between different frontiers of the Empire. Britain's ports linked the island with continental Europe, while roads connected these ports with towns, forts and rural settlements across the country.

Ideas travelled alongside these goods. Roman laws, engineering, architecture and styles of dress spread throughout the province, while local British traditions continued to influence everyday life. New religions, artistic styles and technologies also reached Britain through contact with people from many different cultures. At the same time, Britain contributed its own resources, skills and people to the wider Empire.

Although Britain formed part of the Roman Empire, it remained a frontier province. Hadrian's Wall marked the northern limit of Roman rule for much of the occupation, and the army played a greater role in Britain than in many other provinces. This military presence attracted people from across the Empire, making Britain one of the most culturally diverse regions of the Roman world.

The archaeological evidence shows that Roman Britain was connected to an international world in ways that would have been unimaginable during earlier prehistoric periods. Trade, travel and communication linked Britain with lands thousands of kilometres away, creating a society that was both distinctly British and unmistakably Roman.

Did You Know?

Archaeologists have discovered amphorae, which are large pottery containers used to transport wine, olive oil and fish sauce, from Spain, Gaul and North Africa at sites across Roman Britain. These everyday containers show just how extensive Roman trade networks had become.

Why Roman Britain Matters

Roman Britain marks one of the greatest turning points in British history. For nearly four centuries, Britain formed part of the Roman Empire, bringing lasting changes to government, engineering, trade and everyday life. Although the Roman occupation eventually came to an end, many of its achievements continued to shape Britain for centuries afterwards.

The Roman army transformed the landscape by constructing roads, forts and frontier defences on an unprecedented scale. Many modern roads still follow Roman routes, while the remains of forts, bridges and Hadrian's Wall continue to dominate parts of the countryside. These monuments demonstrate the remarkable engineering skills that the Romans brought to Britain.

Roman towns introduced a new way of living. Centres such as Londinium, Verulamium and Eboracum became places of government, trade and industry, linking Britain more closely with the rest of Europe than ever before. Public buildings, bathhouses, markets and temples created communities very different from the farming settlements of the Iron Age, although most people continued to live and work in the countryside.

The period is also important because it is the first in British history where archaeology can be studied alongside contemporary written records. Roman historians described Britain, inscriptions recorded the names of real people and the remarkable writing tablets from Vindolanda preserved personal letters, military reports and everyday messages. For the first time, archaeologists can combine physical evidence with the written words of the people who actually lived through the period.

Modern archaeological discoveries continue to transform our understanding of Roman Britain. Excavations at Vindolanda, Silchester, Londinium, Fishbourne and many other sites reveal new evidence every year, while scientific techniques such as isotope analysis, environmental archaeology and ancient DNA help archaeologists understand where people came from, how they lived and how communities changed over time.

Perhaps most importantly, Roman Britain formed the bridge between prehistoric Britain and the early medieval world. When Roman administration ended in the early fifth century, Britain did not return to the society that had existed before the conquest. The roads, towns, fields and settlements remained, influencing the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms that followed and helping to shape the development of England itself.

The story of Roman Britain is therefore not simply one of conquest. It is the story of how different peoples, cultures and traditions combined to create a new society whose legacy can still be seen in Britain's landscape, archaeology and history nearly two thousand years later.

Did You Know?

Many Roman towns continued to thrive long after Roman rule ended. Places such as London, York and Chester remained important centres and helped shape medieval England.

Glossary

Amphitheatre – A large open-air arena used for entertainment, including gladiatorial contests and public spectacles.

Amphora – A large pottery container used to transport goods such as wine, olive oil and fish sauce around the Roman Empire.

Artefact – Any object made or used by people in the past.

Auxiliary – A soldier serving in the Roman army who was not a Roman citizen when he enlisted.

Bathhouse – A public building where people bathed, exercised and socialised.

Basilica – A large public building used for law courts, administration and business.

Centurion – A professional officer who commanded a company of Roman soldiers.

Excavation – The careful archaeological investigation of a site by digging and recording evidence.

Forum – The main public square of a Roman town where markets, government and public meetings took place.

Fort – A defended military base occupied by Roman soldiers.

Hadrian's Wall – The frontier wall built across northern England from CE 122 to defend the northern boundary of Roman Britain.

Hypocaust – A Roman underfloor heating system that circulated hot air beneath floors and through walls.

Inscription – Writing carved into stone, metal or another durable material.

Isotope Analysis – A scientific technique used to investigate where ancient people grew up, what they ate and how they moved during their lives.

Legion – A large unit of the Roman army made up of professional soldiers.

Mosaic – A decorative floor or wall made from thousands of small pieces of coloured stone or glass.

Pottery – Clay vessels used for cooking, storage and transport.

Radiocarbon Dating – A scientific method used to determine the age of organic materials.

Roman Britain – The period between CE 43 and CE 410, when much of Britain formed part of the Roman Empire.

Villa – A Roman country house, often the centre of a farming estate.

Suggested Reading

Bishop, M. C. *The Secret History of the Roman Roads of Britain*.

Cunliffe, B. *Roman Britain*.

Frere, S. *Britannia: A History of Roman Britain*.

Mattingly, D. *An Imperial Possession: Britain in the Roman Empire*.

Millett, M. *The Romanization of Britain*.

Salway, P. *Roman Britain*.

Shotter, D. *Roman Britain*.

Places to Visit

Vindolanda, Northumberland

Hadrian's Wall, Northumberland and Cumbria

Roman Baths, Bath

Fishbourne Roman Palace, West Sussex

Chedworth Roman Villa, Gloucestershire

Silchester (Calleva Atrebatum), Hampshire

The Roman Palace, Fishbourne, West Sussex

Museum of London (London Museum) Roman Collections

The Great North Museum: Hancock, Newcastle upon Tyne

Yorkshire Museum, York

About the Author

Matthew Armitage is a writer and former archaeologist who worked with five major archaeological organisations before moving into the heritage sector. His field experience includes excavation, landscape survey and artefact recording across Britain and overseas.

He is the author of *Before England*, a narrative history of Britain from the Ice Age to the Norman Conquest and writes to make archaeology accessible through evidence-based storytelling.

Matthew is also Managing Director of the historic Tooley's Boatyard in Banbury and continues to promote Britain's archaeological and industrial heritage through research, publications and public engagement.

About Before England

Before England traces Britain's story from the earliest evidence of human occupation to the Norman Conquest, following almost a million years of history through archaeology, landscape and changing environments.

The *Before England Learning Companion* series complements the book by exploring the archaeological evidence behind each major period. Together they provide both the story of Britain's past and the discoveries that allow archaeologists to reconstruct it.

Continue Exploring Britain's Past

This guide is one volume in the **Before England Learning Companion** series.

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   Neanderthals and Ice Age Britain
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5. **The Neolithic**
   Farmers, Monuments and the First Communities
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   Farming, Communities and the First Landscapes
7. **The Iron Age**
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