

Box contents and background information

LIFE IN ROMAN BRITANNIA



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This collection is designed to help pupils understand what life was like in Roman Britannia once the Romans were well established here, focussing particularly on **change and continuity** - what changed and what stayed the same for people living here at the time. It is important that pupils understand that distinct but parallel lifestyles existed in Britain during the Roman period; whilst some Britons fully adopted Roman lifestyles (Romano-Britons) and others took advantage of some aspects of Roman innovation and culture many others simply continued to follow the same lifestyle that had existed before the Roman conquest. Roman influence was most pronounced in the south-east and least pronounced in the north and north east, however, there were still pockets of strongly Iron Age or strongly Roman culture dotted about in all areas of England. Scotland remained largely unchanged, apart from defences such as the Antonine Wall.

When they first arrived in Britain Roman soldiers quickly built camps and forts across the country and linked them by roads to maintain control. Next came the process of Romanisation. Soldiers built towns in each British tribal area. Towns were designed to encourage local people to adopt the Roman way of life by providing services such as markets, shops, public bath houses, clean water supplies, even theatres and amphitheatres in some places. Markets encouraged local people to visit the towns to trade goods they made, or produce they grew for money that they could then use to buy items such as luxury items and imported goods from all across the Roman Empire.

The Romans did not compel ordinary people to change the way they lived, farmed or their beliefs. Nonetheless, some practices did change over time as the lure of a better lifestyle and the availability of new products took hold.

Roman/Romano-British and British Iron Age clothing

According to Roman reports the contrast between Roman clothing and the clothing worn by Britons was quite striking:

'The way they dress is astonishing: they wear brightly coloured shirts with trousers called bracae and cloaks fastened at the shoulder with a brooch, heavy in winter, light in summer. These ... are striped or checkered in design, and in various colours'

Diodorus Siculus (A Roman historian)

Female and male Romans/Romano-Britons' clothing



Female and male Britons' clothing



Britons who adopted Roman culture adopted often adopted their fashion too. [Rosemary Sutcliffe's *Eagle of the ninth*](#) has a good example of this in Chapter 5, saturnalia Games, where she describes the 'ultra-Roman' couple, Kaeso and Valerian, Cottia's parents.

In Chapter 6, Two worlds meeting, she further explores the differences between the Romans and Britons.

Daily life

An amphora – these pottery containers were used to store and transport foodstuffs like olive oil, fish sauce and wine across the Roman Empire. Their tops were sealed with clay or wooded bungs. They could be reused by sinking the pointed end into the ground. Food and fast food shops in Roman towns had holes in their counters for amphorae to sit in.



Basket of fruits and vegetables

Before the Romans came to Britain the range of fruits, vegetables, herbs, nuts and seeds that grew here was quite limited. As well as importing specialist foods, the Romans began growing food crops that were popular in other parts of the empire. Eventually these newly introduced foods became part of many British people's normal diet.



Hanging iron candle holder and a duck shaped oil lamp.

Iron candle holders such as this could easily be made by any blacksmith. We do not know if these are of Roman design or if the local people would have used them before the Romans arrived, but candles would seem to be a risky thing to use in thatched roof roundhouses! Beeswax or tallow candles (sheep's fat) could have been produced here easily too.



Oil lamps and the olive oil used to fuel them were in use during the Roman period and, possibly shortly before, for Iron age tribes with strong links to the Romans. Most oil lamps at the time were made of pottery and thousands of them would have been made and used across the empire.



However, this bronze version is a much more luxurious item that would probably have been imported to Britannia and owned by a wealthier Roman or Romano-British family.

Metal spoon

Copper or iron spoons like this are another item which have been found in the archaeological



record within the Roman period, which could be of Roman design or pre-date the Romans, as they could easily be made by any blacksmith.

Ungentarium and bronze mouse ornament

These two items are evidence of the sort of imported luxury goods that could easily be obtained in Britain once the Romans were well established here. The ungentarium would have been used to store perfumes (unguents), cosmetics, scented oils or medicinal potions.



More expensive glass bottles were also available for those that could afford such things.

Iron drop spindle

Most ordinary Iron Age and Romano-British people wore clothes made of woollen cloth that was generally made at home. Drop spindles were used to twist sheep's wool into long continuous threads that could be woven into cloth using a loom or knitted into small garments like socks or underpants. Flax was also used to make linen thread and cloth. Woollen or linen cloth was a product which could be traded at markets in the new Roman towns if there was any spare after a family's needs had been met.



Toys and games - Knucklebones and a toy wheeled horse

The game Knucklebones is similar to jacks or snobs/ dibs. The game would be played by adults as well as children, particularly when visiting the baths or for soldiers as a way of whiling away the hours at quiet times in the forts.



The toy horse is a replica of a Roman child's toy of a type that is still played with by young children today, only more colourful than this period replica.



Items associated with bath houses and hygiene

A sponge on a stick, a strigil and a chatelaine.



The Romans were fastidious about personal and general hygiene, hence bath houses, toilets and clean water supplies were provided across all their territories. These were completely new innovations in Britannia.

The sponge on stick was the Roman equivalent to toilet paper and would be found in communal toilet blocks across the empire.

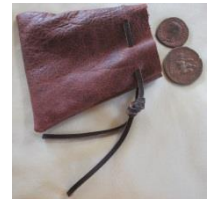
Strigils were used in bath houses to clean and smooth the skin. Olive oil was rubbed all over the body then scraped off using a strigil taking any dead skin cells and grime with it.

The chatelaine's various implements would be used during most Roman's and possibly many Romano-Briton's daily ablutions. Children will probably relish discovering they include an item is for cleaning out the ears or nose!

Other items

Two Roman coins in a leather drawstring purse

Although several Iron Age tribes made coins before the Roman conquest it is thought these were often not used as money but exchanged as gifts between rulers and/or they were buried in the ground as gifts to the gods.



The Romans were accustomed to using money for trading goods, whereas in pre-Roman Britain trade was usually by exchange of goods or services to obtain items that people could not grow or make themselves or to have specialist work done. Once the Romans became established in Britain the use of money for trade soon became quite widespread as ordinary people could trade their excess produce, cloth etc. in the markets and received money for them. They could then use the money in shops and markets to buy produce or goods they could not grow or make themselves.

Wax writing tablet

Wax tablets were commonly used by the Romans across the empire to record things in writing. Many tablets have been found at forts on Hadrian's Wall.

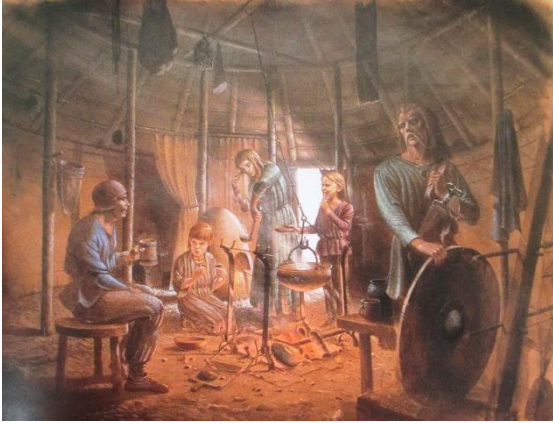


Although the wax had gone indentations in the wooden bases show they were used for all sorts of written messages – communiqués, shopping lists, school work. So we know from these that they were used by all sorts of people: soldiers, their wives and even children. Styli were used to write in the wax. They had a pointed for writing and a flat end for smoothing the wax to write something else once the list or message had been dealt with.

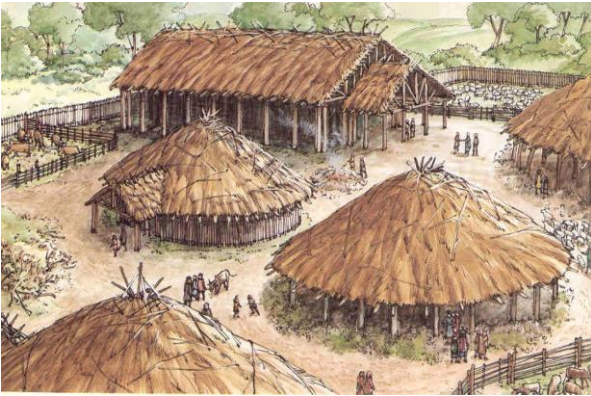
Illustrations

The illustrations are provided to support the activities suggested in these notes (see next and following pages).

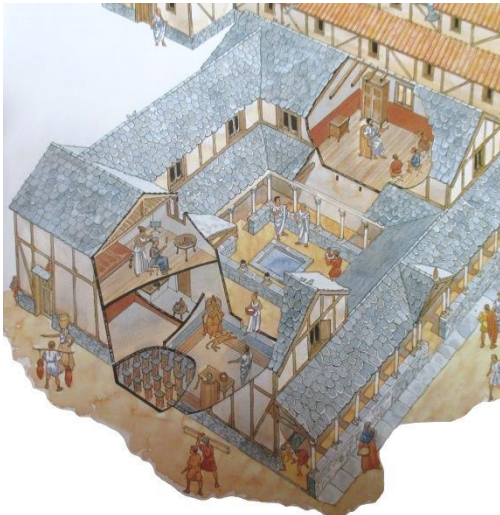
Interior of an Iron Age roundhouse



Iron Age homestead (small settlement)



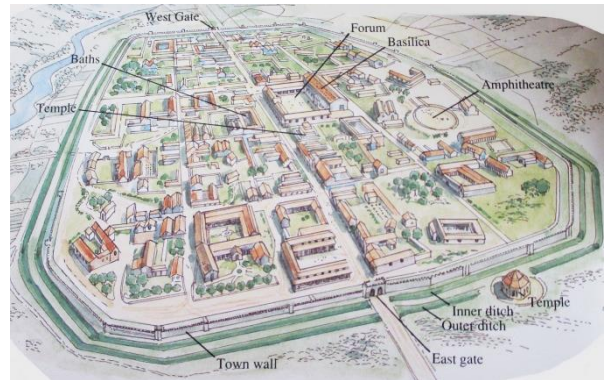
Roman town house interior



The forum complex in Silchester



Plan of Caerwent Roman town, Wales



Roman town street scene

