



MarkHitsTheRoad

Great Places. Cool Sights. Across America. Around the World.™

Europe Trip, Visiting the Balkans... and Beyond (E19A-6)

United Kingdom – Roman Britain and Nearby Historical Sites

In 2019, I took a trip to Europe. Although my focus was on some of the countries in the Balkans, I book-ended the trip with stays in London. In addition to my general London-area sightseeing, covered separately, I included an exploration of sites related to the region's Roman history. This included day trips to Colchester and St. Albans as well as in London itself. This summary focuses on my exploration of Roman Britain.

Julius Caesar briefly invaded Britain in 55-54 BC, but withdrew. Over the next 95 years, several invasions were planned but were not carried out.

But in 43 AD the Romans under Emperor Claudius landed near Camulodunum (present-day Colchester), the capital of Britain's most powerful tribe. Over the next 40 years, the Romans conquered present-day England and Wales, and at times occupied parts of southern Scotland, killing as many as a quarter million Britons along the way. Camulodunum would become Rome's first provincial capital of Britain.

The Romans established Londinium on the north bank of the River Thames as a trade center and important port. Within decades it replaced Camulodunum as provincial capital.

The Roman city of Verulamium (present-day St. Albans), established at the site of a Celtic city of the same name, was granted city status in 50 AD. It would become the third largest Roman city in Britain.

There were some setbacks. Queen Boudica led an uprising of the Celtic Iceni tribe against the Romans in 60-61 AD. The Iceni destroyed Camulodunum and burned both Londinium and Verulamium, killing as many as 80,000 people in those cities before they were defeated in what is sometimes called the Battle of Watling Street. Boudica died soon after.

The Romans rebuilt these cities and added fortifications to strengthen their hold over Roman Britain. Roman power over Britain began to fade in the 4th century AD, and the island was subject to an increasing number of raids by the Saxons and others. The imperial layers of the military and civilian government were gone by 410 AD.

Urban areas substantially depopulated after that, although new cities would emerge at the sites of these Roman cities during medieval times.

I visited Colchester for one of my day trips, reached by train from London's Liverpool Station.

Colchester dates back to Celtic times and some records suggest that it is the oldest recorded town in Britain. It controlled much of southern and eastern Britain when the Romans invaded in 43 AD.



An elephant greets visitors at the Colchester train station, along with a historical marker about the Roman invasion. When the Romans invaded Britain, they brought elephants with them. Elephants and markers lead visitors to the city center, but I planned on a more roundabout route to the city center.

When the Romans rebuilt Camulodunum after Boudica's attack, they fortified it with walls. My visit to Colchester first followed the Roman walls, particularly the best-preserved western wall that follows Balkerne Hill Road.



Part of the original Roman wall, reinforced during medieval and more modern times. The Roman fortifications I've seen are generally built with stone with some layers of red brick.



Balkerne Gate is the largest surviving Roman gateway in Roman Britain. The road from Londinium entered Camulodunum here.



Butt Road Roman Church site. The church was built probably before 340 AD, and had a large cemetery, apparently located on top of an earlier pagan cemetery.



A fragment of a Roman Circus, the only certain Roman Circus ruins in Britain. Building a circus (long oval track) was a major undertaking, which is why they're relatively uncommon in general. This circus was more than a quarter mile long and could seat 16,000 people. It was in use for about 100 years. Today, much of it has been built over, but a small part of it is exposed here. A small museum that provides additional information about the circus is adjacent to this site.



St. John's Abbey Gate is all that's left of St. John's Abbey. Construction of the abbey began in 1096 AD on the site of an earlier Saxon church, although there was much reconstruction after an 1133 fire. The abbey had disputes with townsmen as well as with nearby St. Botolph's Priory that spanned centuries. This included an attack on the abbey during the Peasants Revolt of 1381. The abbey was dissolved in 1539 as part of Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries that followed the Church of England's break from the Catholic Church.



Meet the flint stones. The gate's construction is unusual in Colchester because it uses flint blocks with other stones and bricks to create the patterns in its walls. This was rather expensive in its day, providing an indication of the importance of the abbey.



St. Botolph's Priory was founded in 1099 AD as the first house of Augustinian priests in England. Only ruins of the priory church survive. It was built in 1177 mostly using bricks and stones recovered from the ruins of Camulodunum. The priory was dissolved by Henry VIII in 1536, although the church was used until it was badly damaged in the 1648 Siege of Colchester during the English Civil War.



The Church of the Holy Trinity is the oldest surviving church building in Colchester, dating back to about 1020. Parts of the church tower feature Anglo-Saxon design and construction techniques.



Medieval Colchester's city walls utilized the old Roman walls. Scheregate, pictured here, is one of four additional gates cut through the walls during medieval times.



Colchester Castle is a well-preserved example of a Norman era castle keep. The keep was constructed in the late 11th century AD. With a base of 152 feet by 112 feet, it is the largest keep built in Europe – it is 50% bigger than White Tower in the Tower of London.

The size is a direct result of a decision to reuse the foundation of the old Roman Temple of Claudius, built shortly after the Romans arrived in Colchester, as well as rubble from the old Roman town ruins.

Today the castle houses the Colchester Museum, which does a good job of presenting artifacts from Colchester's history, from prehistoric times, through the Roman era, medieval years and more modern times.



(Left) The Colchester Vase, on display in the museum, is an example of Roman pottery of exceptional quality and detail. (Right) A novelty sculpture of Henry VIII, also on display.



Ruins of Duncan's Gate in the old Roman wall.

Colchester also has the remains of a Roman theatre, but access is via guided tour.

Beyond its Roman heritage, Colchester lays claim to "Old King Cole", "Humpty Dumpty" and "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star". The city was the site of a nuclear detonation in the book "1984". Author Daniel Defoe ("Robinson Crusoe"), members of the band Blur, and former prime minister Margaret Thatcher are among those who have lived in Colchester.

I visited St. Albans for another one of my day trips, reached by train from London's St. Pancras Station.

The Iron Age settlement of Verulamium became a major power center of the Catuvellauni Celtic tribe around 20 BC, which lasted until the Roman invasion of 43 AD. The Romans developed their own city here – it was granted city status in 50 AD, although Boudica sacked and burned it in 61 AD. The Romans rebuilt it and added fortifications. It would eventually have a forum, basilica and theatre. After the Romans withdrew from Britain, the Waeclingas Anglo-Saxon tribe settled in the area, and the town of St. Albans grew up near the ruins of Verulamium.

Romans did not much tolerate early Christians, and one such Christian in Verulamium, Alban, was martyred (Britain's first recorded martyr) and buried on a nearby hill outside the city. He was eventually elevated to sainthood, and the St. Albans Cathedral is believed to have been built over or near his grave. It is the oldest site of continuous Christian worship in the United Kingdom.



Most of the accessible Roman sites in St. Albans are found in or near Verulamium Park.

This gully was actually constructed as a defensive ditch during the Iron Age.



These preserved ruins mark the site of the London Gate (accessing Watling Street, the road to London) in the wall that surrounded Verulamium. There were three other gates, including one for the road east to Colchester.



A surviving segment of the Roman wall around Verulamium. As with the wall in Colchester, note the stone construction with some rows of red bricks.



Another segment of Verulamium's city walls. There are a number of slight rises in the lands in and around the park where there are additional ruins. Some have been excavated, but many have not.



The tile mosaic floor of a Verulamium villa is preserved where it was found. The opening at the lower right provides a view into the hypocaust – hypocausts were used to send fire-warmed air under the floors to help heat rooms or baths.



Ruins of a Roman theatre at Verulamium, built around 140 AD. It is the only Roman theatre found in the UK that is a theatre with a stage rather than an amphitheatre.



The small Verulamium Museum does an excellent job of telling the story of Verulamium and presenting artifacts from the archaeological excavations there. This wall features original wall-paintings excavated from Verulamium presented with additional context to show how a room might have actually looked.



A mosaic found in the ruins of Verulamium, on display in the museum



I checked out St. Michael's Church, located near the museum, because it was built on the site of ancient Verulamium's forum and basilica. I learned that it was founded in the 10th century, and is regarded as an outstanding example of Anglo-Saxon architecture.

The church has a monument to English statesman and philosopher Sir Francis Bacon (mmm, Bacon!), who was also Viscount St. Alban. He was buried at the church.



Located on the road between old Verulamium and modern St. Albans is the Ye Olde Fighting Cocks pub. Tradition holds that the pub dates back to the 8th century, and parts of the current building date back to the 11th century, supporting the claim that it is the oldest pub in the UK (acknowledged in the Guinness Book of World Records).

It was known as the Round House before the current name was adopted.



St. Albans Cathedral, believed to have built over or near the burial site of Britain's first Christian martyr. The church was founded in the 8th century, although the current building dates to the 11th century with some subsequent additions. Its church tower is the oldest cathedral tower in the UK still standing. The Normans built it between 1077 and 1088 using bricks from the ruins of Verulamium as well as flint.



The Shrine of St. Alban inside the cathedral



Restored medieval murals on the church walls. When Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries, the walls were whitewashed over.



After the dissolution, parts of the church continued in service as a parish church and local school. But many of the buildings from the associated abbey were mostly demolished over the years. The one exception was the Abbey Gateway. Today it is part of St. Albans School, which was founded in 948 AD, making it one of the oldest schools in the world. Notable students include Nicholas Breakspear who became Pope Adrian IV, the only English pope, theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking, and lyricist Tim Rice. Musician John Grimaldi of Argent used to hold his head up here.



I visited St. Albans on a Wednesday which along with Saturday are market days. A street market with more than 160 vendor and food stalls lines St. Peters Street. You might not think that's particularly interesting. But the St. Albans Market was granted a Royal Charter in 1553 and actually dates back to the 9th century.



The 64-foot-tall St. Albans Clock Tower was built in the early 1400s and may be the only remaining medieval town belfry left in England. During the Napoleonic Wars its roof served as a semaphore station, helping to convey messages from London to Great Yarmouth in just five minutes.

Nearby is the old Fleur de Lys Inn, built on the site of a house where the King of France was held in 1356 after he was captured in the Battle of Poitiers (Hundred Years War).



This souped up motorcycle features dozens of headlights and rear-view mirrors. Frankly, I think having that many rear-view mirrors would be quite distracting when I'm driving, but the cycle did seem to catch the eyes of a lot of passersby. Or maybe it was just one eye, reflected in all those mirrors.

Greater London consists of 32 London boroughs and the City of London. Except for the Tower of London, the Monument to the Great Fire of London, and St. Paul's Cathedral, most tourists spend most of their time in the boroughs rather than the City. After all, the City is only 1.12 square miles, and it is primarily home to the UK's banking and financial industries.

But the City's boundaries roughly correspond to the walled Roman city of Londinium. As Londinium was generally abandoned and then later built over by medieval London, built over again after the Great Fire of London, and once more with the buildings and streets of modern London, much of what has survived from Roman Londinium is either buried, has been removed or is mostly out of sight. But you can find pieces of it if you know where to look.

I explored Londinium – Roman London sites – during a walk that took me from the Tower of London to the Museum of London, making a number of stops along the way. I had seen some of these sites during past visits, but others were new to me.



A segment of the London Wall is preserved across the street from the Tower of London. Although the London Wall dates back to Roman times, it was rebuilt or reinforced in many places during medieval times.



A segment of the London Wall near The Crescent. Note the Roman era red brick in the lower part of the wall. Medieval reinforcements are higher up.



All Hallows-by-the-Tower Church was founded in 675. It includes an Anglo-Saxon arch from that time, the oldest church construction in London. The crypt museum under the church (a.k.a. Undercroft Museum) features this segment of Roman pavement and other artifacts found beneath the church during 1926 excavations. William Penn, founder of Pennsylvania, was baptized here in 1644. President John Quincy Adams was married here in 1797. Albert Schweitzer recorded organ music here.



Billingsgate Roman House and Baths archaeological site is located in the basement of this building at 101 Lower Thames Street. The Roman house was built in the 2nd century and the baths were added in the 3rd century. The complex was in use until the Romans withdrew from Britain. The only way to visit the ruins is via guided tours that are available only on summer Saturdays and must be booked in advance.



When construction was underway on the skyscraper 30 St. Mary Axe (a.k.a. the Gherkin), workers found an isolated grave of a Roman girl. Pottery found at the site suggested that she was originally buried in the late 4th century. After 12 years (and a change in City of London burial laws), she was reinterred at the location where she was first buried, and a marker was added to the site.



Londinium had a number of small streams that ran through it down to the River Thames, but they've long been lost to development, pavement and skyscrapers. Artist Cristina Iglesias created Forgotten Streams, a sculpture installation that reminds people of the Walbrook that used to flow here.



The London Mithraeum (a.k.a. Temple of Mithras) ruins are located in a museum in the basement at 12 Walbrook Street. Mithraism was a Roman religion focused on Mithras that was practiced widely across the empire. It rivaled early Christianity, but after Christianity was legalized across the empire and later became the official religion of the Roman Empire, Roman Christians suppressed Mithraism and then eliminated it across the empire.



Artifacts excavated from the London Mithraeum site



Watling Street was an early travel route that the Britons created between what are now Canterbury and St. Albans. It passed through what would become the Londinium area. During the Roman period, the Romans paved it. A number of modern highways now follow the old Watling Street route. A small section of the route pictured here, named Watling Street, leads to St. Paul's Cathedral.



A small section of a Roman amphitheatre is on display beneath the Guildhall Art Gallery along with some artifacts from the site. The Romans built a wooden amphitheatre in 70 AD, replacing it with this stone and tile version in the following century.



Near the Museum of London are more ruins from the Roman's London Wall, again including reinforcements from medieval and more modern times.

The remains of an old Roman fort are located near here – actually displayed in the lower level of an adjacent parking garage (accessed via guided tour).



Ruins of Bastion 14 in the London Wall



This bastion features 13th century masonry on top of a Roman era foundation



My walking tour ended with my 3rd or 4th visit to the Museum of London. The museum provides a nice walkthrough of the entire history of London, from pre-Roman settlements through Londinium to medieval London and then modern London. Artifacts from all eras are on display, including these from the Roman years.

There is of course a lot more to Roman Britain, such as Bath, which I visited on a previous trip, and Hadrian's Wall, which I haven't been to yet. But if you're interested in Roman Britain, the combination of the City of London with day trips to Colchester and St. Albans provides a good introduction.