

The Romans in Devon

2,000 BC to 400 AD

Select the caption you wish to read from the index below or scroll down to read them all in turn

The Romans in Devon

- 1 - Dagger scabbard frame
- 2 - Replica dagger and scabbard
- 3 - Spearhead
- 4 - Hook from a legionary helmet
- 5-6 - Legionary armour hinges
- 7 - Legionary armour tie hook
- 8-9 - Legionary armour buckles and hinged fittings
- 10 - Bone belt buckle
- 11-12 - Decorative fittings
- 13 - Legionary apron fittings
- 14 - Strap ends
- 15 - Wooden tent peg
- 16 - Horse harness fitting
- 17 - Horse harness pendant
- 18 - Horse harness fittings
- 19 - Horse bridle fittings

- 20 - Brooches
- 21 - Finger ring with seal
- 22 - Finger ring
- 23 - Melon beads
- 24 - Iron stylus
- 25 - Key handle
- 26 - Grooming kit
- 27 - Medical spatula
- 28 - Spoon-probe
- 29 - 'Carrot' amphora
- 30 - Olive oil amphora
- 31 - Wine amphora
- 32 - Stamped amphora handle
- 33 - Amphora sherd with graffiti
- 34 - Glass bottle handles
- 35 - Colour-coated beaker
- 36 - Rough-cast beaker
- 37 - Terra nigra platter
- 38 - Pompeian red ware pottery
- 39-40 - Glazed pottery
- 41 - Lyon ware cups
- 42 - Oil lamp fragment
- 43 - Samian ware pottery

- 44-45 - Mortaria mixing bowls
- 46 - Tile waste
- 47-48 - Flagons
- 49-52 - Black-burnished ware pottery
- 53 - Food storage jar
- 54-55 - Small jars
- 56-58 - Fortress ware pottery
- 59 - Jar with rouletted decoration
- 60 - Cheese strainer
- 61 - Terra nigra bowls
- 62-63 - Glass cup and jug
- 64-65 - Chariot race cup and replica
- 66 - Millefiori glass fragments
- 67 - Coloured glass fragment
- 68 - Patera saucepan
- 69 - Patera saucepan handle
- 70-77 - Soldier's burial
- 78-80 - Soldier's burial
- 81-87 - Soldier's burial
- 88 - Panther statuette
- 89 - Fragments of a glass bowl
- 90 - Tile with Latin alphabet
- 91 - Rim sherd stamped with the name 'Vitanius'

- 92 - Portrait of a man
- 93 - A soldier named Lucius Julius Hipponicus
- 94-95 - Roman concrete
- 96-97 - Purbeck marble mouldings
- 98 - Stone mouldin and splashbacks
- 99 - Hypocaust tiles
- 100 - Hypocaust tile
- 101 - Stone floor tiles
- 102 - Stone fragment with engraving
- 103 - Part of a Purbeck marble basin
- 104 - Mosaic fragment
- 105 - Mosaic fragment
- 106 - Blue glass tessera
- 107 - Wall plaster with graffiti
- 108-109 - Strigils
- 110 - Carved sculpture of a bird
- 111 - Painted wall plaster
- 112 - Window glass
- 113-116 - Antefix tiles with faces
- 117-118 - Antefix tiles with dolphins
- 119 - Cast of a dolphin roof tile

1 - Dagger scabbard frame

About 55-75

Found in Goldsmith Street, Exeter

2 - Replica dagger and scabbard

Modern

3 - Spearhead

About 55-75

Found at Mermaid Yard, Exeter

Spears were an essential part of a soldier's equipment. The spearhead was attached to a long wooden shaft which could be thrown at the enemy from a distance.

4 - Hook from a legionary helmet

About 60-65

Found in Cathedral Close, Exeter

This hook is from the back of a legionary soldier's helmet. It was used to attach the helmet to his equipment, making it easier to carry while he was marching.

5-6 - Legionary armour hinges

About 55-75

Found in Exeter

The type of armour worn by the legionary soldiers in Exeter was called lorica segmentata. It was made from bands of metal held together by leather straps and metal fittings.

7 - Legionary armour tie hook

About 55-75

Found in Exeter

The lorica segmentata armour was fastened by a row of leather ties down the front which were attached to loops like this.

8-9 - Legionary armour buckles and hinged fittings

Around 55-75

Found in Exeter

Hinges and fittings made the lorica segmentata armour flexible to wear, and easier for the soldier to put on. There were hinges on the front and the back of the armour.

10 - Bone belt buckle

Around 75-80

Found in Rack Street, Exeter

11-12 - Decorative fittings

Around 55-200

Found in Exeter

Soldiers sometimes personalised their equipment with decorative metal fittings like these.

13 - Legionary apron fittings

About 55-75

Found in Exeter

Legionary soldiers wore an apron of leather straps fitted with metal discs. These made a loud jangling noise, which enhanced the soldiers' fearsome appearance.

14 - Strap ends

About 60-200

Found in Exeter

The ends of the soldier's leather apron were decorated with metal fittings. These were often embellished with coloured enamel, or shaped as amulets.

15 - Wooden tent peg

About 55-75

Found in Trichay Street, Exeter

Tents were a standard piece of campaign equipment used as temporary accommodation while buildings in the fortress were

being constructed. Wooden tent pegs were easier to make than metal ones, and lighter to carry.

16 - Horse harness fitting

About 55-75

Found in Bartholomew Street, Exeter

Pendants were used to decorate horse harnesses. This one is made from copper coated with silver or tin to make it appear more impressive. Finds like this suggest the presence of cavalry soldiers in the Exeter fortress.

17 - Horse harness pendant

Around 55-75

Found in Fore Street, Exeter

This pendant was discovered in 1837. Recognised as a Roman object, it was among the earliest clues to Exeter's Roman origins.

18 - Horse harness fittings

About 55-75

Found at St Nicholas Priory and Bartholomew Street, Exeter

19 - Horse bridle fittings

Around 55-75

Found at Mermaid Yard, Exeter

This iron curb bit and chain are part of a horse's bridle. Curb-bridles were designed for horse-riding rather than pulling carts, as the bridle gave rapid control over the horse's movements.

20 - Brooches

Around 55-100

From various sites in Exeter

Both men and women wore brooches, usually on the right shoulder to fasten a cloak. People chose brooches which reflected their tastes and current fashions. Several of these were richly decorated with coloured glass or paste.

21 - Finger ring with seal

About 75-125

Found in Pennsylvania, Exeter

This signet ring shows the image of the god Mercury, who was associated with trade and wealth. The image was stamped into wax as a personal seal to documents.

22 - Finger ring

Around 55-100

Found in Rack Street, Exeter

Engraved into this iron ring are the Roman numbers XIV, or 14. It may have belonged to a soldier who had served in the 14th legion before he came to Exeter.

23 - Melon beads

Around 55-100

Found in Exeter

The beads could be worn singly or in strings as a necklace, and were probably worn by both men and women.

24 - Iron stylus

Around 55-100

Found at Mermaid Yard, Exeter

Used for writing on wax tablets, one end was pointed for writing text, while the other was flat for erasing mistakes. Tools like this emphasise the Roman army's role in bringing reading and writing to areas like Devon.

25 - Key handle

Around 70-75

Found at Mermaid Yard, Exeter

The Roman army introduced the use of metal locks and keys to secure doors, cupboards, trunks and boxes containing personal items. This key, missing its teeth, was part of an elaborate 'tumbler' lock mechanism.

26 - Grooming kit

Around 75-125

Found in Paul Street, Exeter

New ideas about medicine and health were spread by the Roman army. This small tool was for personal hygiene. At one end is a small scoop, possibly for cleaning the ears, and at the other is a nail cleaner.

27 - Medical spatula

Around 75-125

Found in Bear Street, Exeter

This spatula could be used as a tongue depressor, a surgical tool or for stirring medicines and cosmetics.

28 - Spoon-probe

About 75-125

Found in Paul Street, Exeter

With a spoon at one end and a probe at the other, this implement could be used for mixing and applying medicines or cosmetics.

29 - 'Carrot' amphora

About 65-75

Made in the Middle East

Amphorae shaped like this one were used to import exotic fruits from the Mediterranean. They are frequently found on Roman military sites, suggesting the soldiers enjoyed food from their home countries.

30 - Olive oil amphora

Around 55-75

Made in Spain

Olive oil, used for cooking, lighting and bathing, was imported in these large storage jars. Hundreds of fragments of pottery like this are known from excavations in Exeter.

31 - Wine amphora

About 55-75

Made in Rhodes, Greece

This is the neck of a storage jar used to import wine from the Greek island of Rhodes. Like the carrot amphora, this type of vessel is most often found on Roman military sites, showing the soldiers enjoyed drinking wine.

32 - Stamped amphora handle

About 100

Made in southern Spain

Stamped into this handle is the name Q.A.GEMELLI - the name of the man who made it. The handle was thrown away at least 100 years after it was made. This suggests these large vessels were kept and reused for several generations.

33 - Amphora sherd with graffiti

About 55-75

Made in Rhodes, Greece

Scratched onto this sherd are the Latin words for 'bucket... sweet unmixed wine'. This describes what the amphora contained, and shows the soldiers in Exeter had a taste for imported wine.

34 - Glass bottle handles

Around 50-75

Probably made in Italy or Gaul

Glass storage vessels were introduced to Devon by the Roman army. As glass was expensive it was often recycled, rather than thrown away as rubbish.

35 - Colour-coated beaker

Around 55-75

Made in Spain

Spanish pottery of this type is usually found in North Africa, Italy and France, so this find from Exeter is very unusual. It may have belonged to a soldier who had served in a more exotic location before coming to Devon.

36 - Rough-cast beaker

About 55-75

Probably made in Britain

The Roman army established new trade routes between the South West and other parts of Britain, as well as importing from further afield. This beaker is typical of the new sorts of pottery which came to Devon.

37 - Terra nigra platter

Around 50-85

Made in France or Belgium

Terra nigra literally means 'black earth' and is the modern name for this silky, grey tableware. The mark of the man who made it is stamped in the centre of the plate.

38 - Pompeian red ware pottery

About 55-75

Made in France

The Victorians named this type of pottery after wall plaster discovered at Pompeii, which had a similar colour. These fragments come from high quality platters and lids used for cooking and serving food.

39-40 - Glazed pottery

About 55-75

Made in France

These small cups were made in central Gaul, only fragments now survive. They are decorated with small blobs of clay and are among the very few types of Roman pottery which were glazed.

41 - Lyon ware cups

About 55-75

Made near Lyon, France

Good quality cups for drinking wine, like these, would have been bought by individual soldiers for their personal use.

42 - Oil lamp fragment

Around 55-75

Made near Lyon, France

Oil lamps are uncommon finds from Exeter, although often found in other parts of Britain.

This upper part of a lamp is decorated with three slaves carrying a bundle of twigs.

43 - Samian ware pottery

About 55-70

Made in France and Germany

Samian ware was mass-produced in France and Germany and traded across the Roman Empire. It was made in a wide range of shapes including these cups and bowls.

Some bowls were decorated with scenes of everyday or mythical life. These fragments show images of a dog, bear, hare, birds and plants.

Two of the bowls are stamped with the name of the potter who made them. Perhaps this was an early form of marketing, or a mark of quality.

44-45 - Mortaria mixing bowls

Around 55-200

Found in Exeter

Mixing bowls were essential for making the foods enjoyed by Roman soldiers. The grits in the pottery helped grind the herbs and spices, which could be mixed with olive oil and poured out of the spout.

46 - Tile waste

Around 60-200

Found at Princesshay, Exeter

This block of ceramic building tiles have accidentally fused together during manufacture. They were made at a tilery outside the fortress defences. Ceramic tiles were just one of many new building methods introduced by the Roman army.

47-48 - Flagons

About 55-75

Made in the Exeter area

Flagons were a common style of pottery, used for storing and serving wine. After the army arrived in Devon, new local potteries were set up by enterprising craftsmen to make pottery to sell to the soldiers.

49-52 - Black-burnished ware pottery

Around 55-300

Made in Dorset and Devon

This pottery, first made in Dorset, typically has shiny black surfaces and scratched line decoration. Potters around the South West soon started making their own versions of this very marketable item.

53 - Food storage jar

About 50-75

Found near South Street, Exeter

When archaeologists discovered this black-burnished ware storage jar it was partly buried in the floor of a Roman building.

54-55 - Small jars

About 55-75

Made in south-west Britain

These small jars were probably used for storing food. Archaeologists are not sure exactly where they were made, but this particular type of grey pottery is found at sites across Devon, Somerset and Cornwall.

56-58 - Fortress ware pottery

About 55-75

Made in the Exeter area

These are typical shapes of bowls and jars used by the army in Exeter. The shapes of Fortress ware pottery were influenced by local, native pottery styles, as well as styles from the rest of the Empire.

59 - Jar with rouletted decoration

About 55-75

Made in south-west Britain

Archaeologists call this type of pottery 'sandy grey ware'. Unlike other local pottery industries which collapsed when the army left the region, this pottery continued to be made into the early years of the Roman town.

60 - Cheese strainer

About 55-75

Found in Fore Street, Exeter

The holes in the base of this bowl suggest it was a colander or cheese strainer. With a rounded base, it could sit on top of a jar to collect liquid dripping from it. Only a small piece of the original bowl survives. The rest has been reconstructed based on similar pots from Roman Britain.

61 - Terra nigra bowls

About 55-75

Made in France or Belgium

Small bowls with flanges around the middle were a popular Roman shape, made at many different potteries across the Empire.

62-63 - Glass cup and jug

Around 55-125

Found in Fore Street, Exeter

Glass was so precious it was often recycled when it had been broken, so large fragments like these are not common finds. The cup was found in the 1950s by workmen digging the foundations for a new building.

64-65 - Chariot race cup and replica

About 55-75

Found in Topsham

These delicate fragments are from a cup, probably bought as a souvenir. The scene shows a chariot race with Cresces and Pyramus racing to be the winner. Pyramus may have been a celebrity as he is shown on several designs of glass cup in Britain.

The complete glass cup is a modern replica and suggests what the Topsham fragments originally looked like.

66 - Millefiori glass fragments

About 55-70

Found in Cathedral Close, Exeter

Millefiori glass is made from tiny rods of coloured glass. It would have been very expensive to purchase. These fragments are from bowls, and are among the only pieces of millefiori glass known from Roman Devon.

67 - Coloured glass fragment

About 55-75

Found in Combe Street, Exeter

Coloured glass is much less common in Exeter than pale blue-green glass. This small bowl fragment was found on the site of a military compound situated outside the fortress defences. It may have been a supply depot for the army.

68 - Patera saucepan

About 55-75

Found in Friernhay Street, Exeter

Each soldier had his own patera saucepan to cook and eat his meals. This is one of two which archaeologists found buried in a pit.

69 - Patera saucepan handle

About 55-75

Found in central Exeter

This saucepan handle is in the shape of a ram's head with its horns curling around its face. It was probably made in Germany.

70-77 - Soldier's burial

About 61-64

Found in Holloway Street, Exeter

These finds were placed with a cremation burial, one of three discovered by archaeologists which are all thought to be soldiers.

This one was buried with food and drink for the afterlife, and personal belongings. Some items were deliberately broken before they were placed in the grave.

70 Glass jar from Germany

This is an unusual find in Exeter and must have been a highly prized belonging.

71 Samian ware platters

72-73 Wine flagons

74 Cooking pots

75 Glass vessels

76 Glass gaming counters

77 Figurine of Victory

Victoria, the goddess of Victory, was popular with Roman soldiers. This figurine was probably a much-treasured personal possession. It has been badly disfigured by the heat of the cremation process.

78-80 - Soldier's burial

About 54-75

Found in Holloway Street, Exeter

These are some of the objects from a second cremation burial.

78 Jar made in Colchester

This was used to contain the cremated remains of the soldier. Pottery like this is very unusual in Exeter and may have belonged to the soldier. Perhaps he bought it while based near Colchester, before the army moved to Exeter.

79 Glass funnel

Glass funnels were usually buried with their opening above the ground surface. Mourners could use them to pour drink and liquid foods into the burial to sustain the deceased in the next life.

80 Amphora fragments

Only a few sherds of amphora were found with this burial, showing the vessel had been broken before it was buried. They are from an olive oil amphora, and may have symbolised food for the deceased in the afterlife.

81-87 - Soldier's burial

About 75-85

Found in Holloway Street, Exeter

The third cremation burial discovered by archaeologists was of a person buried around a time of great change for Exeter, when the army left and the new town was established.

81 Black-burnished ware bowl

Found complete in the bottom of the cremation pit, the style of decoration of this pedestalled bowl is similar to native Iron Age pottery.

82 Samian ware cups and bowls

83 Fragment of olive oil amphora

84 Wine flagons

85 Cooking pots and bowls

86 Glass unguent bottle

Unguent bottles contained ointments or perfumed oils. Unlike other items in these cremation burials, this glass bottle has not been damaged by heat on the cremation pyre. Instead, the contents may have been used during the burial ceremony.

87 Oil lamp

This is one of two metal oil lamps known from Roman Exeter. Evidence from other burials in Roman Britain suggests lamps were alight when they were placed into the grave.

88 - Panther statuette

About 75-80

Found in Holloway Street, Exeter

A statuette cast in the form of a galloping panther, which was once part of a cremation burial. Like other items which were broken before burial, its legs have been deliberately removed.

89 - Fragments of a glass bowl

About 55-75

Found in Holloway Street, Exeter

These are fragments from the rim of a glass bowl. Archaeologists discovered them near the three cremation burials, and it is likely they were part of a burial too.

90 - Tile with Latin alphabet

About 60-65

Made in Exeter

The person who made this tile used the wet clay to practise their writing. They scratched into it the letters IABCDIIF. It was the Roman army that introduced the skills of reading and writing to Devon, as well as the new language of Latin. This tile is among the earliest evidence of literacy, and is the earliest recorded use of the Latin alphabet in Devon.

91 - Rim sherd stamped with the name 'Vitanius'

About 60-75

Found in Bartholomew Street, Exeter

This is the rim from a pottery mixing bowl. It was made at a pottery workshop near the fortress. The man who made it has stamped his mark 'Vitani' onto the rim.

92 - Portrait of a man

About 60-100

Found at Goldsmith Street, Exeter

An unflattering stone portrait of a middle-aged man, made from fine marble imported from Italy. It was probably part of a memorial in a private house or possibly a tomb.

93 - A soldier named Lucius Julius Hipponicus

Around the years 55-65

Found at Goldsmith Street, Exeter

The owner of this Samian ware cup has scratched his name onto it 'L IVLI IPPONIA'. Lucius Julius Hipponicus was probably a soldier, and is one of the first residents of Exeter whose name is still known today.

94-95 - Roman concrete

About 60-65

From the legionary bath-house

Concrete called opus signinum was used extensively throughout the army's bath-house. It was made locally and includes pieces of broken tile and purple volcanic stone quarried from the Rougemont area of Exeter.

96-97 - Purbeck marble mouldings

About 60-65

From the legionary bath-house

These carved fragments were used around a door or window, or above the splashboard of the baths. They are made from Purbeck marble, imported from Dorset.

98 - Stone mouldin and splashbacks

About 60-65

From the legionary bath-house

Purbeck marble was a luxurious material imported from nearby Dorset. Large carved fragments were used around the edges of rooms, doors and windows. Splashbacks made from marble were situated near the baths.

99 - Hypocaust tiles

About 60-65

From the legionary bath-house

The hypocaust was the central heating system for the bath-house. Stacks of tiles supported the floor, underneath which hot air circulated. The heat was generated from a furnace located to one side of the building.

Heat was an essential element of the bathing experience, needed to create tepid and hot rooms, to contrast with a cold room and plunge pool.

100 - Hypocaust tile

About 60-65

From the legionary bath-house

The soot-covered surface of the tile shows it to be part of the hypocaust heating system. The lighter stripes indicate how the tile sat on an iron grid, leaving these areas undamaged by soot. The dog's paw prints probably resulted from an accident while the tiles were being made.

101 - Stone floor tiles

About 60-65

From the legionary bath-house

Several rooms in the bath-house had tiled floors made from grey and white stone. They were probably laid in a chequerboard pattern.

102 - Stone fragment with engraving

About 60-65

From the legionary bath-house

This stone was built into a wall of the caldarium, or hot room, but was not visible in the room. The engraved pattern may have been the mark of the stone mason, or a talisman to ward off evil spirits.

103 - Part of a Purbeck marble basin

About 60-65

From the legionary bath-house

This is a fragment of a large stone bowl which stored water so bathers could splash themselves in the caldarium, or hot room, of the bath-house.

104 - Mosaic fragment

About 60-65

From the legionary bath-house

The earliest known coloured mosaic from Roman Britain, it comes from a large floor. The top area shows two animal legs with hooves next to a large coloured disc. These are probably emblems of the legion. The lower area is filled with leaves.

105 - Mosaic fragment

About 60-65

From the legionary bath-house

This design is made up of tesserae of white and blue stone, and Samian ware pottery. The image is thought to show the handle and edge of a pottery vessel called a cantharus.

106 - Blue glass tessera

About 60-65

From the legionary bath-house

Glass tesserae were very rare in Roman Britain, and this is the only one known from Exeter. It was probably used as the detail for a human eye in a wall mosaic.

107 - Wall plaster with graffiti

About 60-65

From the legionary bath-house

The plaster walls in the bath-house provided a suitable surface for soldiers to mark with graffiti. Among the doodles on this fragment are parts of the words cave canem, meaning 'beware of the dog'.

108-109 - Strigils

About 65-100

Made from copper and iron

Strigils were an essential part of the bathing routine. Bathers were first covered in olive oil which was then scraped off, removing the accumulated dirt and grim of daily life. The iron strigil fragments were found in Exeter, while the complete example, from Kent, shows what the Exeter strigil would have looked like.

110 - Carved sculpture of a bird

About 55-75

Found in Trichay Street, Exeter

Although this bird is missing its head, wings and feet, its shape still suggests it is an eagle. It was once part of an elaborate monument, possibly commemorating an emperor. Many such stone sculptures would have graced the bath-house building.

111 - Painted wall plaster

Around 80-180

From the basilica-forum

These decorative fragments, showing geometrical designs and plants, come from Exeter's basilica-forum, built on the site of the bath-house. Similar schemes would have been used in the bath-house building.

112 - Window glass

About 60-65

From the legionary bath-house

Glazed windows were one of the many new building techniques brought to Exeter by the Roman army. Panes of glass were set into large frames of wood or lead, and flooded the bathing rooms with light.

113-116 - Antefix tiles with faces

About 60-65

From the legionary bath-house

Antefix tiles were fixed to the outside of the bath-house roof. They were decorative, but also functional as they protected the roof timbers from rain. These tiles are in the shape of a face, possibly the goddess Medusa.

117-118 - Antefix tiles with dolphins

About 60-65

From the legionary bath-house

Some of the antefix roof tiles at the bath-house were decorated with dolphins. Dolphins were a symbol of prosperity, as well as being suitable for buildings associated with water.

119 - Cast of a dolphin roof tile

Modern

From a tile in Caerleon, Wales

This replica is cast from a tile found at the legionary fortress at Caerleon, Wales. It is identical to the dolphin tiles from Exeter, and shows they were made from the same mould – a mould that must have moved with the army.

This is the only physical evidence that it was the Second Legion who were stationed in Exeter.