

The Romans in Devon

Teachers Information



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Introduction

This information accompanies a series of worksheets aimed at KS2 pupils, exploring a variety of aspects of Roman life in Devon and Exeter. The activities have been based around RAMM's collections of artefacts, and we encourage you to access these objects online through our collections database rammcollections.org.uk.

Exeter has one of the longest and most distinguished histories of any British city, and you can explore over 250,000 years of it through [RAMM Time Trail](#). The story is told through hundreds of objects from RAMM's collections including images of historic buildings and archaeological sites. Try our games and puzzles section to have a go at building a Roman mosaic or explore historic Exeter in Minecraft.

Background to RAMM's Roman Collection

The collection of Roman objects at RAMM have come from numerous sources. Some were gifts, but the majority are finds from archaeological digs in the second half of the 20th Century. A number of these digs are well known, such as the discovery of the Roman Bathhouse under Exeter Cathedral Green (1970s), the building of the Guildhall Shopping Centre (1970s) and Princesshay (1990s). Some are less well known such as Quintana Gate and St Loyes (2010s). It would be impossible for RAMM to take everything that is discovered as we would need many large warehouses to store all the finds. Instead we only take material that substantially adds something to our collection of which we don't already have a good example. After all there are only so many broken pieces of identical pottery you can collect!

The Conquering Romans

The Romans arrived in South West England 50 to 55 AD, nearly 100 years after Julius Caesar set his sights on conquering Britain. Caesar's first expedition to South East England in 55BC was moderately successful. It was mostly used to increase his standing in Rome. Britain was an unexplored area, due to its remote geographical position and the hazardous English Channel crossing. 54 BC was Julius Caesar's second visit to Britain. This met with more success, leading to treaties requiring British tribes of the South East to pay tribute to Rome.

At this time there was no common identity amongst the native people and no concept of a united country called Britain or England. The country was ruled by a number of kings

split into tribal territories. The country was also heavily wooded with high and low lands that were not easy to travel across.

When Claudius, who was not previously a military man, became Roman Emperor in AD 41 he needed a significant military campaign to strengthen his position. In AD 43 Claudius invaded Britain, travelling as far as Colchester. Eleven British Kings surrendered to him.

The future emperor, Vespasian, as *legatus* (a high ranking general) led a legion, *Legio II Augusta*, towards South West Britain and Wales. However, it is believed Vespasian was recalled to Rome before reaching Exeter. The legion continued to move westward establishing the fortress of *Isca* near the River Exe and conquering the local tribe, the *Dumnonii* (pron. Dumb-no-knee-eye). The Dumnonii territory stretched roughly from Lyme Regis up to North Somerset, encompassing the whole of Devon and the Cornish peninsula.

The army brought with them an organised and technological way of life that had never been seen before in Britain. In contrast, the local population were living an agrarian lifestyle in roundhouses in kinship (family) groups.

Between 70 to 75 AD the Roman army left Exeter and marched to Caerleon in Wales to defeat the local tribes. When leaving Exeter they demolished the wooden fortress and the stone bathhouse. There is evidence to show the *Legio II Augustus* travelled to Caerleon, as we have a replica of a roof [antefix](#) found in Caerleon very similar to one found in Exeter.

The Roman Military

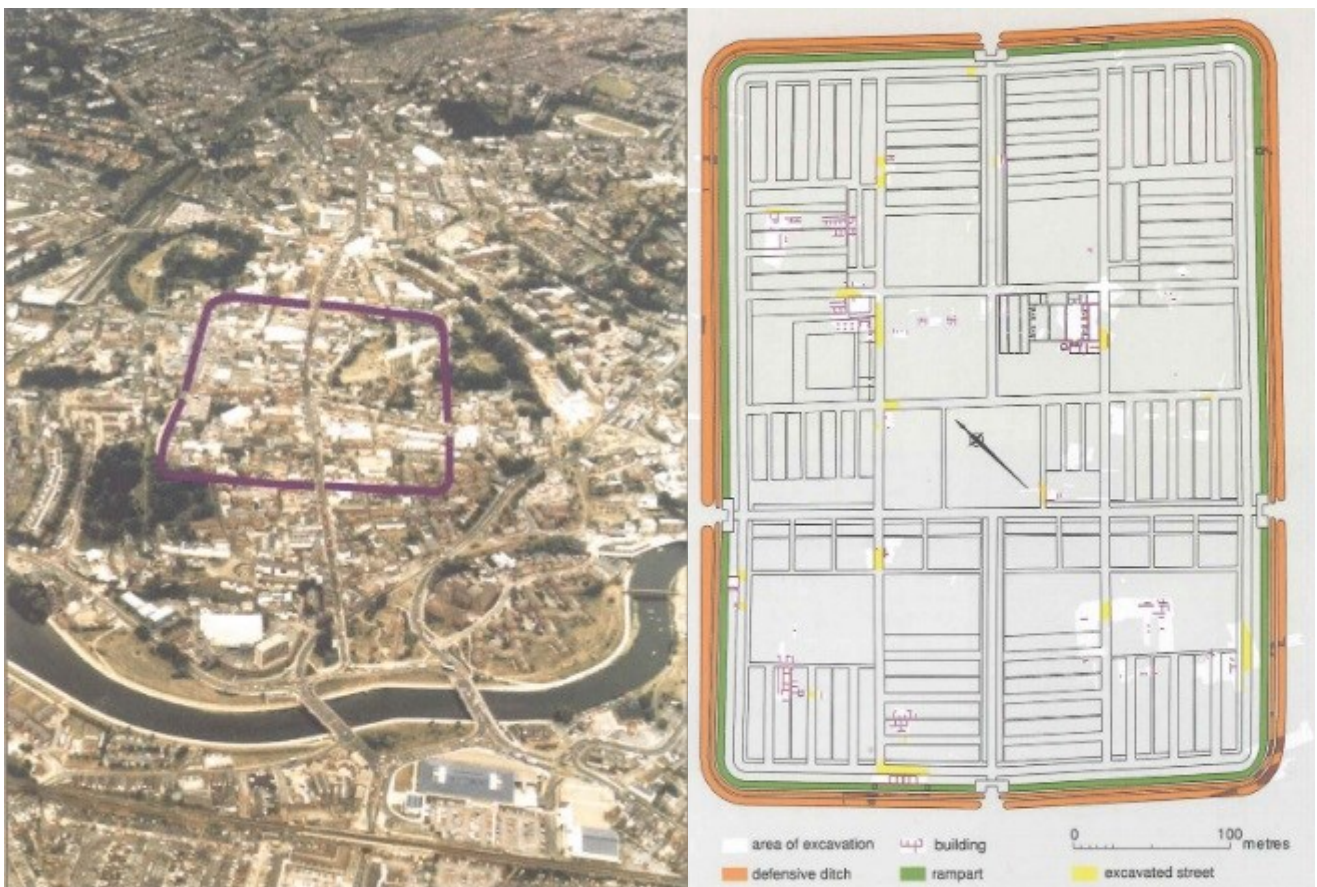
The Roman Fortress in Exeter (Isca)

When the Roman legion arrived in the area, they will have scouted for the most suitable place to build their fortress. They chose high ground, a flat plateau above the river Isca at a point which was narrow enough for a river crossing and yet was still navigable from the sea and the estuary.

The area in which they built the fortress was referred to as Isca, meaning 'water' or 'river' in the Celtic language, and the name Exeter derives from this.

It is often mistakenly thought that the Roman Fortress was made of stone and the remains of Roman walls that exist in Exeter today formed part of it. The fortress was made of wood, covering 42 acres (1,070 square metres) and occupied a portion of what would become the walled town. It was built to the standard Roman pattern, and was a rectangle surrounded by a wooden palisade with defensive ditches. Its centre was close to the crossing of North Street, South Street, High Street and Fore Street today.

The Roman governed town of *Isca Dumnonium* wasn't established until the army had left, and the defensive stone walls were not built until 190 AD.



1 Aerial view of central Exeter, with the outline of the fortress superimposed and indicative internal layout
Source: *An Intro to the Roman Legionary Fortress at Exeter* (2005)

At its peak, the fortress had six thousand soldiers, plus all of the slaves, the craftspeople, and their families. They weren't supposed to be married but some of them were. The Roman town, by contrast, had a maximum of 3,000 people.

The fortress was first discovered in the 1970's, so we've only known about it for 50+ years.

The fortress was one of four in the country. This makes it a significant site, and it was the main military base while they overwintered in this region. In the winter all the soldiers were here, crafting new tools, maintaining their equipment, practicing fighting, keeping up their physique as well as having some rest and relaxation. There was no public access to the fortress. It was a highly restricted military zone. Local people would have seen this huge structure being built, seen the army coming and going, but were not allowed in. In the summers' the army went out, on campaign, to a series of forts around Devon.

The Exeter fortress was like a small town with all that was needed to maintain an army and its requirements. It was smaller than usual possibly because some of the legion were stationed elsewhere, or due to a loss of men in battle. Hence its size of 42 acres instead of the usual 50. As with other Roman forts it is playing card shaped. It was surrounded by a wooden rampart just over a mile in length, with four gates and approximately 44 towers. The rampart was made of earth and timber with a deep defensive *punic* ditch in a V shape.

The fortress contained everything the army needed, a bath house, granary stores, hospital, workshops, and headquarters building. These were positioned near the centre of the fortress. The barrack blocks were positioned around the edges. The barracks were built to accommodate 80 men with a section the width of the building at one end to house the centurion. Most of the buildings were timber framed with clay floors and tiled roofs. The streets were laid out in a grid pattern.

Clay deposits, including tile waste, has been found in Southernhay West indicating the probable site of a pottery. More recently a lime kiln has been discovered during the excavation of a site half-way down Fore Street, which is an indication of an industry that would have been just outside the southern end of the fortress.

Roman Forts and Fortlets

A number of smaller forts and even smaller fortlets were established in the local, and wider, area to establish authority over the local people, and defensive positions from enemies. Many of these were built on the sites of Iron Age Hill forts.

With the introduction of modern archaeology techniques and a change in planning policy, (requiring archaeological investigation to be carried on before a building can be constructed) more evidence of Roman activity in the South West is emerging. It was once thought that the Romans only came to Exeter and its immediate area, with little activity elsewhere on the South West peninsula.

Topsham became a significant trading harbour and supply route for the Fortress. Topsham Road is a Roman road and recently the site of St Loyes, now Millbrook retirement village, has further confirmed this with archaeological evidence of warehouses, blacksmiths, defensive ditches and living accommodation for a commander and soldiers who protected the site. This antefix was discovered on the site.



A complete smoke-blackened terracotta antefix tile was found in one of the lower fills of a Roman pit which appears to have been infilled at some stage in the latter part of the 2nd century. The antefix portrays a human face (probably female) framed by hair. The face probably represents a gorgon to frighten away evil spirits and demons.

Antefixes are decorative tiles which serve as finials on the eaves or gable ends of prestigious buildings. This one has the same form as those used on the military bath-house in Exeter and so must have come from there or been destined to go there.

How the Legion was organised

The Roman army was made up of cavalry, officers and soldiers from Rome and Roman occupied countries, bringing with them their native languages, customs and gods. Soldiers from the same country served together in the same units.

Only Roman citizens could become legionaries, foreigners made up the auxiliary units. Each legion consisted of about 60+ centuries. A century had 80 men and a century had 10 *contubernium*, which is the smallest organised unit of soldiers. These were groups of eight men who fought together and were housed in the same barracks.

Military Armour and Kit

- **Short tunics** were worn just above the knee, shorter than everyday tunics. The length of their tunics was seen as a status symbol within the army.
- **Cloaks and capes** were woollen, fastened with a brooch at the right hand shoulder or worn as two rectangles joined at each side and put on over the head. These had a split up the front as far as the neck allowing the sides to be thrown over the shoulders.
- **Sandals** were made from vegetable tanned ox or cow leather and were comprised of three pieces: the sole, inner sole and the upper tied with leather laces. They were designed to allow air to circulate, preventing trench foot and were adjustable around the foot. [Hobnails](#) kept the leather inner and outer together, giving long lasting wear. The hobnails were noisy and intimidating when marching. Woollen socks were sometimes worn. However, the socks did not always cover the toe or heel!
- **Belts** were made of leather and were used to hang a sword and dagger from. The best belt buckles were made of bone.
- **Brooches** were for fastening cloaks. Beads and rings could have been worn by soldiers.
- **Lorica Segmentata** body armour was fastened around the upper body and shoulders with leather straps. They were segmented for flexibility and were relatively quick and easy to put on. They were joined with [metal hinges, buckles](#) and leather straps. These made an intimidating sound when marching.
- **Helmets** had large metal ear and cheek flaps which tied under chin with a brow and a neck guard.
- **Daggers** were carried by auxiliary infantry, legionaries and some cavalrymen. There is a [replica](#) on display at RAMM, together with a genuine [frame of a scabbard](#) that would protect the dagger.

- **Gladius** was a type of sword and was carried in a scabbard made of leather or wood. The pommel or handguard was usually made of wood or sometimes ivory or bone.
- **Spatha** was longer than a *gladius* and used by auxiliaries.
- **Shields** were made of wood and leather with iron or copper bosses. The shield was covered in goatskin when not in use. They were rectangular and curved or oval.
- **Spears** were thrusting weapons used in hand to hand combat or to be thrown from a greater distance. They had an Iron head, wooden shaft and iron butt.
- **Tents** were made from stitched leather were waterproof and were secured with wooden tent pegs.
- **Tools.** The soldiers carried a pick axe for digging hard ground, road building and ground clearing.



2 Peter Ashmore, a modern Exeter citizen, displaying the kind of armour worn by a legionary soldier in Exeter in the First Century AD
Source: *The Introduction to the Roman Legionary Fortress at Exeter* (2005)

The Military Bathhouse

The remains of the military bathhouse was discovered in the early 1970s. There was a plan to build an underground car park under the Cathedral Green. They started excavating and rapidly found the remains of this massive Roman building. It was 4,000 square metres in size, which is equivalent to 60 modern three bedroom houses or Exeter Cathedral itself! The architecture is Mediterranean in origin, something the army brought with them from elsewhere in the Roman Empire. The most similar comparisons to the style of architecture are some of the bathhouses at Pompeii.



3 The bathhouse under excavation in September 1972.
Source: <https://www.exploringexeter.co.uk/exeter-roman-baths-history-devon>



4 Bathhouse Pompeii. Source: Simon Tootell (2009)

The building contained things like big stone basins called labrum which had cold water in them that you could splash your face with.

It wasn't open to the public. It was accessible only to the military in the heart of the fortress, however it would have been visible from outside the fortress' defences. It was somewhere that soldiers could go to for recreation and have a nice bath, a sweat (like our saunas today) and get rid of all the dirt. A slave would cover you in oil, which was brought in the amphora, and then it would be scrapped off with the *stridgil*.

To use the bath-house, the soldiers would have moved through the building by going through the three main rooms, the *frigidarium*, the *tepidarium* and the *caldarium*. Each room being at a warmer temperature than the last. The heating for the structure would have been supplied from furnace rooms. The steam would have permeated under the floors through the hypocausts then up through the walls, with vents at the top of the walls just under the roof. The building would have looked like it was on fire from all the steam and smoke coming from it!

The daily supply of water needed was about 70,000 gallons (318,200 litres). There were no plugs in the bathhouse and the water would just flow through. There were wells in the vicinity of the fortress but not likely to have been sufficient to supply this amount of water. It has been suggested that the supply for the bathhouse came by way of gravitational aqueducts from springs in the north eastern part of the city, in the St Sidwell's (Well Street) area.

The bathhouse was also a focus for the religious part of the fortress. This is where they had the shrines venerating the Emperors and all the local Gods. It is where they would have paid their taxes and received their salaries.

It is significant for British Roman history because it is one of the earliest stone built buildings in the whole of Roman Britain. Maybe even *the* earliest! The bathhouse also contained some of the earliest coloured mosaics in the country. It has a band running across the middle. Above it, top right, are the front hooves of an animal, either a horse or possibly a goat, and a disc next to it which is either chariot wheels or the sun. It is possible that those are the emblems of the legion.



5 Mosaic from the bath-house

The Romanisation of Britain

Before the arrival of the Romans, people living in the area were living in small communities of roundhouses in family groups. Archaeological remains of Roundhouse communities have been found under Trickhay Street which is now under the Guildhall shopping centre (where Argos is today). There are some out at Digby and Topsham. There are also some at Monkerton, the new housing development going out towards Pinhoe on the edge of the town.

The arrival of the Roman legion and construction of the fortress brought with it mass migration of foreigners from all over the Roman Empire into the area. The Roman's brought with them their culture, food, clothing and technology which was adopted by local people establishing the Romano-British culture and civilisation that would continue until 410 AD.

Although a small number of Roman sites have been known about in Devon for many years, such as a stretch of Roman military road and fort at North Tawton discovered in the 1950s, modern archaeological techniques are enabling us to discover more.¹ Recent investigation at Bow towards Crediton and on the bank of the river Taw across Rowden Moor towards Okehampton, has revealed evidence of two previously unknown stretches of military road. This suggests that there is potentially more buildings and further stretches of road to be found.

Isca Dumnoniorum

Following the departure of the military, the town known as *Isca Dumnoniorum* developed. Houses were built on top of the site of the Roman fortress, often in the style the Romans had introduced.

It was a new concept to live in buildings with straight lines rather than in roundhouses. Many open spaces within the walls were used for livestock. Two Roman villas were discovered under the Princesshay development.

The Basilica and Forum were built over the bathhouse. The area became the central government location, as well as a general market place.

Hundreds of years later the first Saxon church was built on this site and then later to one side the Cathedral.

The town declined rapidly following the departure of the Romans from Britain in 410 AD and only re-emerged as a town under the rule of King Athelstan in the 10th Century.

¹ Salvatore, Kaye, Sticker and Toller. *Proc. Devon Archaeol. Soc.* 77 (2019) 297-319.
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6 Plan of Exeter showing the relationship between the fortress and the Roman city walls.
Source: *An Introduction to the Roman Legionary Fortress at Exeter* (2005)

Roman Villas in Devon

Evidence is emerging of many Romano-British settlements throughout Devon. Here is an example of two that have been particularly rich in finds:

Holcombe Villa

This site near Lyme Regis was excavated in 1850 and, although we believe it was a farming estate, evidence shows that it could have been a centre of iron production. Wooden buildings had been replaced by a Roman style stone villa. Later this was enlarged to include many rooms and a bathhouse and was decorated with painted plaster.

Local finds include painted plaster and carved masonry. Also found were the bones of ox, pig, horse, sheep, thrushes, duck and salmon. Artefacts showing evidence of iron working include a hammer head AD300-400, a blacksmith's punch for punching holes in metal AD300-350, a carpentry axe AD300-400, iron knife blades AD400, tumbler locks AD300-350, an iron horseshoe AD300-400, and blacksmith's tongs AD300-400.

Coins were found hidden in an iron container AD388, concrete (*opus signinum*), mosaic fragments, tiles from a hypocaust system, painted wall plaster, stone and ceramic roof tiles and stone roof finials were also found.

Seaton Villa – Honeyditches

We have sufficient evidence from the Villas at Holcombe and Seaton to give us an idea of what they would have looked like. Evidence shows they had stone walls. We have similar tiles from a [hypocaust heating system](#) in our collection. Fragments of vibrant painted plaster have been found as well as window glass.

Finds at the Honeyditches also include a copper finger ring AD200-300, glass beads AD200-300, brooches AD75-125, jet beads AD200-400, and an intaglio finger ring 200-300. A pottery feeding cup AD200-400 was found near Honiton. Honeyditches is also the closest villa/*mansio* (agricultural estate/administrative centre) to the site that the Seaton Roman Coin Hoard of 22,888 coins were found in 2013.

Pottery

Amphorae were transported by ship across the Roman Empire. The example you see below is called a [Carrot amphora](#), because of its shape. It was made in Palestine and used by the Roman soldiers to preserve the exotic fruits and oils imported from Europe. It was found in North Street, Exeter (1931).

[Samian pottery](#) was made in moulds, hence its smooth appearance. This was used as tableware.

[Iron Age black burnish](#) ware continued to be used for cooking and the preparation of food.

[Mortarium mixing bowls](#) used for cooking or grinding foodstuffs were probably thrown on a wheel.



7 Four pots - A carrot Amphora, Samian ware bowl, black burnish ware and a mortarium mixing bowl

Reading and Writing

It was the Roman army that introduced the skills of reading and writing to Devon, as well as the new language of Latin.

Scratched onto the surface of this tile [90] is the Latin alphabet which tells us that someone was probably trying to teach him/herself by practicing their writing.

Other evidence of literacy in Roman Britain is the name of *Lucius Julius Hipponicus*, scratched on a [Samian pottery cup](#) to claim as his own, just as we today might write our names on our mugs at work. This is the earliest evidence for a named individual in Exeter.



8 Samian cup with graffito

Measuring and Maths

Measuring

Roman measurement has an ancient origin stretching back to the Ancient Greeks, who in turn adopted many aspects of their system from Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt.

Roman measurement has greatly influenced the system of measure that we use today. The most basic unit measurement used by the Romans was the Roman foot (pes/pedes). Amongst Roman ruins brass measuring rods have been found. The foot was sub-divided and multiplied as follows:

Roman Unit	English name	Equal to	Metric equivalent	Notes
digitus	finger	$\frac{1}{16}$ pes	18.5 mm	
unica pollex	inch thumb	$\frac{1}{12}$ pes	24.6 mm	
palmus	palm	$\frac{1}{4}$ pes	74 mm	
pes (plural. pedes)	Roman foot	1 pes	296 mm	
palmipes	foot and a palm	$1 \frac{1}{4}$ pedes	370 mm	
cubitum	cubit	$1 \frac{1}{2}$ pedes	0.74 m	
passus	pace	5 pedes	1.48 m	
decempeda pertica	perch	10 pedes	2.96 m	

Roman Unit	English name	Equal to	Metric equivalent	Notes
stadium	stade	625 pedes	1.85 m	600 Greek feet
mille passus mille passuum	Roman mile	5000 pedes	1.48 km	1000 passus or 8 stadia
leuga leuca	(Gallic) league	7500 pedes	2.22 km	

*9 Ancient Roman units of length. Source: Smith, Sir William; Charles Anthon (1851)
A new classical dictionary of Greek and Roman biography, mythology, and geography*

Maths

We still use Roman numerals today, but only in a number of limited places such as the date a film was released. However it wasn't great for maths as there was no zero! It worked on a base of 10. It was used throughout the ancient and modern world for over 1,000 years!

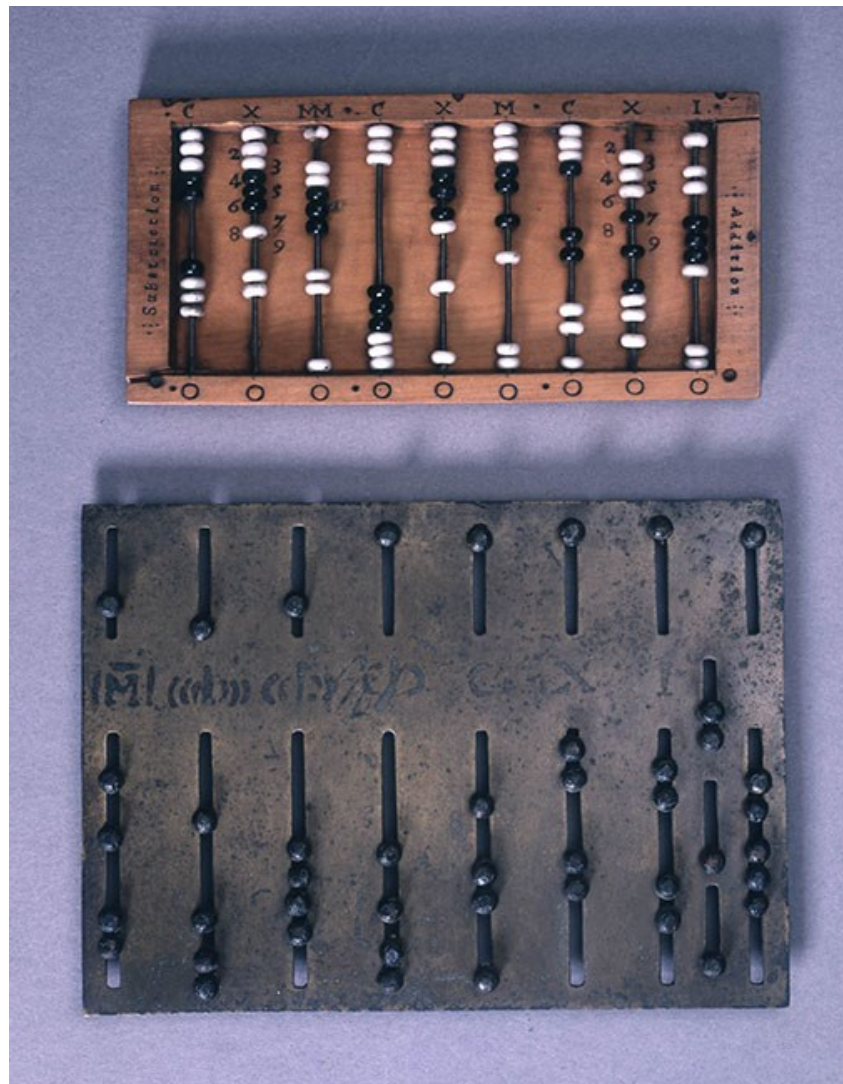
It used Roman letters rather than numbers, and the arrangement of the letters denoted its value. For example:

Roman Numeral	Decimal Value	Notes
I	1	II = 2, III = 3
V	5	IV = 4, VI = 6
X	10	IX = 9, XI = 11
L	50	XL = 40, LX = 60, IX = 49, XI = 51
C	100	XC = 90, CX = 110, XL = 150
D	500	CD = 400, DC = 600, LD = 450, DL = 550
M	1000	MD = 1500, CM = 900, MC = 1100

Because of the use of the system that required you to add or subtract the value of numbers, such as IV to represent 4, it made maths difficult as the numbers had to be converted first into plain notation such as IIII and once the sum had been completed the answer had to be converted back. It was done like this to make the number of letters required shorter. For example:

XL + IV = Converted to LXXXX + IIII = LXXXXIIII = Converted back XCIV
90 + 4 = 94

Often a Roman abacus would be used. It was a progression on the Greek and Babylonian abaci, as these were much easier for calculations.



10 18th century replica of a Roman abacus. Source British Museum

Gods and Religion

The Romans worshiped many gods. They accepted the gods of the peoples they conquered, often incorporating these into their own belief system. The exception was monotheistic religions which by their nature of one god denied the legitimacy of the Roman gods.

The Romans were very ritualistic in their worship. Each aspect of their lives was believed to be influenced by the gods.

Within the Roman army many gods were worshiped according to the soldiers' country of origin.

Roman emperors were worshiped as gods. Temples dedicated to them were erected in the major towns in Britain as well as those of the major gods such as Jupiter, Juno and Minerva, reinforcing the rule of Rome in Britain and the belief in the deity of emperors. This was aimed at the conquered. The temples and sculptures of the emperor strengthened the support of the army towards Rome and the legitimacy of the power of Rome within the empire.

Grave goods have been found locally showing evidence that Roman soldiers were cremated. Their remains have been found with burned pottery, broken pot sherds, gaming counters, and cooking pots as well as a figurine of victory.

A glass funnel and amphora fragment were also found. It is believed the funnel was placed in the ground next to the grave through which an alcoholic libation was poured to enable the deceased to take part in the celebration feast.



11 This glass funnel is a rare survival from Roman Britain. It was discovered with a cremation burial on a road leading from the fortress. Objects with Roman cremations were often ritually broken before being placed in the burial.

Constantine I was the first Roman Emperor to become tolerant of Christianity from 312 AD. He later actively supported the conversion of the empire to Christianity between 324 and his death in 337.

The Seaton Down Hoard

The Seaton Down Hoard was discovered in 2013 by the metal detectorist Laurence Egerton. It is the fifth largest Roman coin hoard to be found in Britain. The hoard consists of 22,888 coins. Most were legal tender, some were forgeries.



12 A Clump of coins from the Seaton Down Roman coin hoard

Before the arrival of the Romans the Dumnonii did not use money.

The coins were found on Clinton Devon Estate near Seaton, and close to Honeyditches Villa. The hoard was buried in a stony bank which meant it had been protected over the years from disturbance by farm machinery. The soil in the bank was sandy as opposed to the acidic Devon soil so the coins are well preserved.

They may have been buried in a leather bag as traces of leather were found stuck to some of the coins. The coins had been stacked. The coins were buried with three iron ingots wrapped in sheep's wool placed on top.

By examining the dates on the coins we can see they were buried a decade after Emperor Constantine's death, a time of turmoil within the Roman Empire.

The coins are made of copper alloy with a small amount of silver and weigh seventy eight kilos, heavier than one man could carry.

They were minted in 19 countries within the Roman Empire. Depicted on the coins are the images of Constantine I, Helena his mother and Theodora his step mother, Licinius, joint emperor at one time with Constantine I, Licinius II the son of Licinius, Delmatius and the sons of Constantine I, Constantius II and Constans his youngest son.

The images on the adverse of the coins were used as propaganda. Most people could not read or write so images were a powerful method of reinforcing the might of Rome and the idea that the Romans established peace, as well as depicting the various characters vying for power.

The coins are all the same denomination- a *nummus*, worth about one euro. Two *nummi* could buy a flagon of wine or a sack of dried lentils.

We have no information as to why the coins were buried, who they belonged to, or why they were never reclaimed.

The discovery of the hoard was reported to Devon County Council archaeologist Bill Horner, before the Portable Antiquity scheme was informed. The hoard was excavated professionally then sent to the British Museum for conservation and evaluation.

It was declared treasure at a Devon Coroner's inquest on 12th September 2014. The coins were then valued at £50,000. RAMM was then given the opportunity to purchase the hoard and it has been on display since 2017 in the museum.



13 Nummus of Constantine I with the glory of the army GLORIA EXERCITVS

Answers to questions in worksheets

Measuring, Numbers and Treasure

The year that Claudius starts to conquer Britain: XLIII = 43 AD

The year the Romans left Britain: CDX = 410 AD

Year you were born in Roman numerals:

	Roman		Roman		Roman
1991	MCMXCI	2001	MMI	2011	MMXI
1992	MCMXCII	2002	MMII	2012	MMXII
1993	MCMXCIII	2003	MMIII	2013	MMXIII
1994	MCMXCIV	2004	MMIV	2014	MMXIV
1995	MCMXCV	2005	MMV	2015	MMXV
1996	MCMXCVI	2006	MMVI	2016	MMXVI
1997	MCMXCVII	2007	MMVII	2017	MMXVII
1998	MCMXCVIII	2008	MMVIII	2018	MMXVIII
1999	MCMXCIX	2009	MMIX	2019	MMXIX
2000	MM	2010	MMX	2020	MMXX