

The story of Londinium: Roman London

The Romans conquer Britain and build Londinium

About 2000 years ago Britain was ruled by tribes of Celts. The Romans had been building an Empire across Europe for about 100 years. They wanted to conquer Britannia because the metal and cattle there would make the Empire richer. Julius Caesar unsuccessfully invaded in 55BC and 54BC. The Romans captured Britannia in AD43 when Emperor Claudius invaded. Around AD47 the Romans built Londinium, a new Roman style city. It was built at a prime location for trade; a bridge across the Thames connected many important towns by road, while boats from the Empire could reach the city by river.

A multicultural city from the beginning

A large Empire meant the Romans mixed with cultures across Europe, the North of Africa and the Middle East, which helped the Empire thrive. The Romans were most successful when they were inclusive; welcoming immigrants into their societies, extending citizenship to new residents, and mixing local culture and faiths into their settlements. The different cultures had to work together. London was a diverse city right from its earliest days. While most buildings in Londinium were built in the Roman style, some native Britons lived in British style roundhouses.

Division and enslavement of people

The people of Londinium were an always-changing racial mix, but they were strongly separated in other ways; men/women, rich/poor, free/enslaved. Society was strongly prejudiced against women, there was a strict class system, and slavery was common - men, women and children were enslaved. People that were enslaved were mainly prisoners captured in battle and came from countries across the Empire including Britain, slavery was not based on race. If a person who was enslaved married and had children, the children would be enslaved.

The Boudican rebellion

Invading a country wins you enemies. One such enemy of the Romans was Queen Boudica and the Iceni tribe. Boudica's husband had been a client King in a region of Britannia. After he died in AD60 their people assumed Boudica would inherit her husband's status and remain an ally of Rome. The Romans had different ideas, and they attacked her and her daughters. In retaliation Boudica led her army in the destruction of Camulodunum (modern Colchester), and then on to Londinium. Londinium was a symbol of Roman imperialism. Her army burnt the city to the ground, though they left the British style roundhouses.

A thriving Londinium rises from the ashes

In Autumn Boudica's army were defeated by the Roman army. Londinium had to be protected and rebuilt from scratch. By AD61 a fortified area was built, but it took over a decade before the full rebuilding began. Londinium became a thriving city of trade and multiculturalism again though, offering opportunities, commerce and citizenship. About AD70 a Roman amphitheatre was built. By AD100 Londinium was probably the largest, most important settlement in Britannia. The amphitheatre was rebuilt and enlarged around AD120 to meet the city's status. Today the remains of London's Roman Amphitheatre can be visited in the basement of Guildhall Art Gallery.

Londinium's decline and abandonment

Around AD200 the status of Londinium started to decline, as the province of Britannia was subdivided, firstly into two, and later around AD300 into four separate provinces. A city wall was built at about AD200-220, but the fort was demolished. Many public buildings fell out of use: the main public bath houses around AD 200, the forum basilica around AD300 and the amphitheatre by AD350. By AD410 the army were withdrawn from the city. As public services failed and buildings became unsafe, the city was abandoned around AD450.

Note: The second and third paragraphs are undated and students may fit them elsewhere in the story. Part of the exercise is for them to justify placing the paragraphs in the order they have.