

Roman Britain

The Romans first came to Britain in 55 BC when Julius Caesar, a Roman general, sailed to the south coast, briefly fought with some of the local tribes, and returned to Rome. Although he came again a year later, the visit was again quite brief.

Over a century later in AD 43, the Roman emperor Claudius invaded and conquered Britain, after which the Romans ruled England and Wales for almost four hundred years. Claudius and his army arrived with a large fleet of ships, bringing with them, amongst other things, elephants with which to intimidate the native Britons.

Although the Romans ruled England and Wales, they never conquered Scotland. The Scottish border caused the Romans constant problems, as raiding parties of Scottish tribes often came south to pillage the local area. As a result, in AD 122, the emperor Hadrian instructed his army to build a wall, running from one side of the country to the other to keep the Scottish tribes out. Building the wall also kept his troops busy, thus preventing them from rebelling.

Gradually, most of the original inhabitants of Britain adopted the Roman way of life and the remains of many of the different types of structures the Romans introduced to the country still survive. These include Hadrian's Wall itself, large parts of which can still be seen, together with the foundations of milecastles and turrets dotted along its length. The remains of roads, lighthouses, town walls, gateways, amphitheatres, villas and bath houses, together with the underfloor heating systems the Romans brought to Britain, also survive at some sites.

1. What happened in 54 BC?

2. Who do you think deserves to be more famous, Julius Caesar or Claudius? Explain why.

3. What might a native Britain standing near to the coast have seen in AD 43 and how might he or she have felt?

4. Who was Hadrian and why is he still famous?

5. What makes Roman Britain an especially interesting period of history to study?
