



The Romans in Gloucester

Glevum

Gloucester owes its name, location and much of its physical layout to nearly five hundred years of Roman occupation.

The first settlement was a military fortress at Kingsholm, guarding the lowest crossing point of the *Sabrina Fluvius* (River Severn) and the route to Wales. This garrison was moved away to Caerleon in AD65 and 30 years later, the fort was replaced by a Roman town where the city of Gloucester stands today.

Glevum's Glory

The city's Roman name was *Colonia Nervia Glevensium*, or Glevum. Glevum was a Colonia, a very special high-status town, one of only four to be established in Roman England. Colonias were founded as towns for retired Roman soldiers. Glevum became an important Roman town and a powerful centre of Romano-British culture. Its inhabitants had the full rights of Roman citizenship, and their city was a showcase for Roman ideals, values and beliefs.

Its military origins were reflected in its huge walls, gates and street layout, but Glevum was also a great cultural city, boasting impressive civic buildings, imposing statues, a basilica, forum and baths. Many of its private homes would have had piped water, central heating and luxurious decoration.

The existing street patterns of today's city centre often follow those of Roman Glevum, especially along Southgate, Northgate and at the Cross. When the Roman legions were withdrawn from Britain in 410 AD, the Colonia and its great buildings gradually fell out of use. The only visible remains of Roman Glevum to be seen today are 2 stretches of the city wall located at St Lucy's Garden in Hare Lane and in the basement of the City Museum, some recycled Roman masonry at St Oswald's Priory and a fragment of mosaic floor under St Mary de Lode.

When the Roman army came to the area around 49 AD, the original fort was built at Kingsholm, probably by the Twentieth Legion. This fort was probably built at a river crossing because Gloucester was historically the lowest point of the river that it was possible to ford. It is fairly certain that this fort was the centre for the Romans to advance their military power into Wales. It would have been a banked enclosure with wooden walls and gates. Today some of the armour found here is on display at the Gloucester City Museum.

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Roughly twenty years later (60-70 AD) this fort was dismantled and a new fort was built overlooking the river from a small hill. At this site, they built huge clay ramparts enclosing approximately 43 acres. The ramparts had wooden gates which were set in each of the 4 sides. Watch towers and a wooden walkway were also built. In Eastgate Street one of the enormous wooden timbers that supported the gates is still on display. The timbers were oak and probably felled in the Forest of Dean.

Only towns were recognised by the Roman Empire as true centres of civilisation and so it was part of imperial policy to create towns in newly conquered areas. At Gloucester (Glevum) the colony gained its buildings by converting the old timber barracks into shops and houses. The new colonists were retired Romans who provided a core of Roman Citizens.

The colonists were given a plot of land in the countryside as well as a house in the town and they governed the town by electing a council of 100 Decurions. This council elected four magistrates who organised and financed (by taxes) the rebuilding of the new city.

By the second century it had a forum, baths and a basilica. At this time a stone wall was built to replace the clay rampart. The gates were so massive that they were in use for the next nine hundred years and the final remnants of North Gate were only demolished in 1974!

During the 2nd century the town became densely populated with extensive suburbs. Cemeteries were placed about 1 mile outside the City, because Roman law forbade the burying of the dead within town boundaries. This growth was due to the increase in industry and trade taking place throughout Roman Gloucestershire. The increase in the county's Roman economy was largely due based upon agricultural produce from the Cotswolds (where large estates based upon roman villas were thriving), iron and timber from the Forest of Dean and also the maritime trade along the River Severn.

Even today, whenever building work is undertaken, Roman remains come to light.