ENGLISH HERITAGE EDUCATION

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

DISCOVER THE STORY OF RICHBOROUGH ROMAN FORT AND AMPHITHEATRE

Below is a short history of Richborough Roman Fort and Amphitheatre. Use this information to learn how the site has changed over time. You'll find the definitions of the key words in the Glossary.

RICHBOROUGH BEFORE THE ROMANS

Before the Romans invaded in AD 43, Britain was made up of small kingdoms and territories each with its own ruler. These kingdoms quarrelled frequently and often fought each other. Two of the kingdoms, the Catuvellauni and the Atrebates, were in conflict with each other just before the Roman invasion and the Romans exploited the situation.

During this period, Britain was rich in minerals including metals. Tin and iron found in the ground could be made into coins, jewellery and tools. Iron Age (c.800 BC–AD 43) people also farmed the landscape and built farmsteads and larger settlements. Lots of evidence of Iron Age settlements and agriculture has been found in Kent.

A reconstruction of the Iron Age settlement at Silchester (Calleva) in Hampshire by Peter Urmston. Before the Romans arrived in Britain, there were Iron Age settlements like this in Kent.

EMPEROR CLAUDIUS'S INVASION OF BRITAIN

Julius Caesar (100 BC–44 BC) was a famous Roman general and politician who made two military expeditions to Britain (in 55 and 54 BC). He defeated some tribes in battle and found out more about Britain's resources, but it was only under Emperor Claudius (10 BC–AD 54) that the Romans successfully conquered Britain.

Claudius became Emperor of Rome in AD 41 after the death of his nephew, Caligula. Many people underestimated Claudius because he had physical disabilities – some sources suggest he had a limp and a speech impediment. The emperor needed to show that he was a strong leader and decided to conquer Britain. This was something even the respected Julius Caesar hadn't done.

A 1st-century marble bust of Emperor Claudius. His army successfully invaded Britain in AD 43.

A Roman general called Aulus Plautius commanded the emperor's army of four legions (20,000 men) and 20,000 auxiliary soldiers. They probably crossed from Boulogne in Gaul (modern-day France) to Richborough on the south coast of Britain. Although Richborough is inland today, in AD 43 it stood above a natural harbour where the Romans could safely dock their ships.

AD 43: THE ROMANS ARRIVE

When Claudius's army arrived at Richborough they built long earth ramparts with ditches in front. This protected their encampment, and the ships anchored along the shore, from any Britons who wanted to defend the area.

This reconstruction by Ivan Lapper shows the timber and earth defences built by Claudius's soldiers shortly after they arrived in Richborough.

Soldiers in the Roman army were trained to do more than just fight. They were expected to build and look after infrastructure (like forts to protect themselves and roads to assist the movement of supplies and equipment). The soldiers' building skills helped them to create a settlement at Richborough. This developed into a port known throughout the Roman Empire as Rutupiae (pronounced RUH-tu-pee-eye).

Find out more about what life was like for Roman soldiers in Britain by searching the English Heritage YouTube channel for 'Meet a Roman Legionary' (3 minutes 1 second).

RESISTING THE ROMANS

After the Romans' relatively easy landing at Richborough in AD 43, they soon faced resistance. The most powerful tribe in the south, the Catuvellauni was led by brothers Caratacus and Togodumnus. The Catuvellauni fought and lost two battles against the Romans – the first probably at the river Medway and the second on the banks of the river Thames. Claudius followed his army and arrived in Britain in time to witness the final attack on the Catuvellauni's capital at Colchester and its capture by the Romans.

A map showing two alternative invasion routes and the approximate areas of Roman military campaigns and control, AD 43–47.

With the Catuvellauni defeated, the Romans were in control of southern Britain. It would take many decades for them to conquer the west and the north and they faced major resistance. In AD 60–61, Boudicca, the leader of the Iceni tribe, rebelled against the Romans and burned the towns of St Albans and London to the ground before she was defeated. The Brigantes, a tribe living in the north of Britain, was led by Queen Cartimandua. They worked with the Romans at first, but later resisted them in AD 52–7 and again in AD 69.

Although the Romans successfully defeated all of these tribes, they weren't able to conquer the whole of Britain. Instead, they settled on creating a border in northern England, Hadrian's Wall, which was begun in AD 122.

GATEWAY TO BRITANNIA

Richborough soon became the 'Gateway to Britannia' – the main entrance to Britain for people and goods, similar to how ports like Dover are thought of today. A large Roman road called Watling Street began at Richborough and linked the port with other towns and cities established by the Romans as

A reconstruction illustration by Peter Lorimer showing Richborough at its largest in about AD 120.

they conquered Britain. This included Londinium (London), Verulamium (St Albans) and Viriconium (Wroxeter). Unlike other Roman settlements, Richborough was used for the entire Roman occupation of Britain (around four hundred years).

By AD 70, Richborough was a bustling town and thriving port. People from across the Roman Empire came to trade goods or passed through as they travelled for their military duties and government jobs.

BUILDING A TOWN AT RICHBOROUGH

Richborough's location at the beginning of Watling Street meant that it was very well connected to other Roman towns and a popular starting point for journeys through Roman Britain. Those living in Richborough met lots of different people from across the Empire and probably heard many different languages spoken in the town. This might have included Greek as well as languages spoken in Gaul (modern-day France) and others from the Middle East. **Latin** was used as a common language and speaking Latin well was a sign of *Romanitas* (Roman-ness or how to act like a Roman).
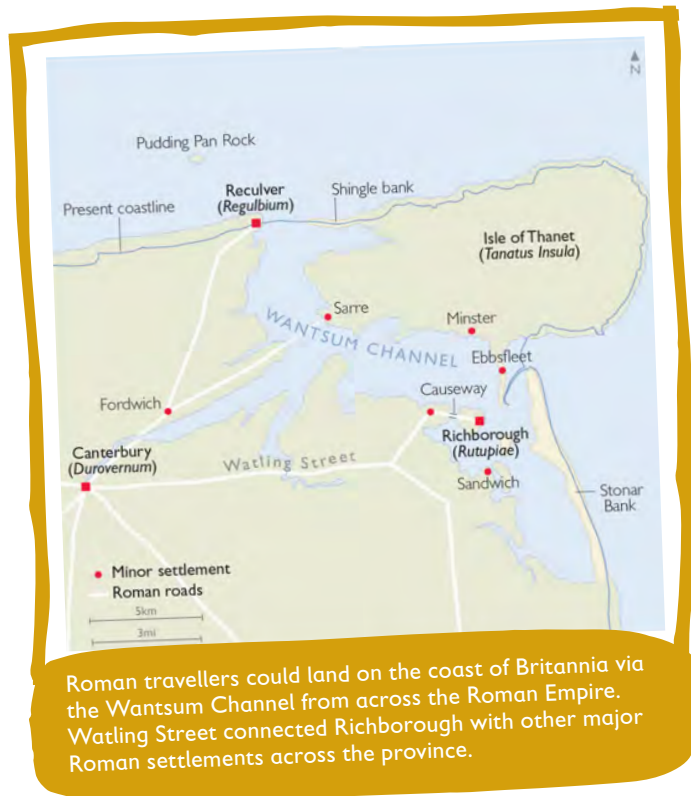

Roman travellers could land on the coast of Britannia via the Wantsum Channel from across the Roman Empire. Watling Street connected Richborough with other major Roman settlements across the province.

Archaeologists have found a system of streets at Richborough lined with many buildings that included shops, houses and storehouses. There were also impressive public buildings like temples and a monumental arch. These show how large and busy Richborough was during the Roman period.

A reconstruction illustration by Simon Edwards showing the bath house as it may have looked in the 3rd century.

Originally, these buildings were made of timber but from AD 85 onwards more buildings were made with stone. On the seafront there was a **mansio**, a hotel where official travellers could stay, pick up fresh horses and bathe.

Although the baths you can see at Richborough today are from the 3rd century, it's likely that there were baths in the town before this. Baths were an important part of daily life for a Roman citizen and using them was a sign of *Romanitas*. Typically, they had a changing room (**apodyterium**), unheated room (**frigidarium**), warm room (**tepidarium**) and a hot room (**caldarium**). Only the wealthiest people in the town could afford a private bath at home, so most people bathed in the public baths.

THE MONUMENTAL ARCH

The Romans built arches to commemorate important events like military victories and imperial visits. They also created arches to mark boundaries. The Richborough arch may have been built to celebrate an emperor— possibly Domitian who came to power in AD 81 around the time it was constructed.

The original arch was a quadrifrons clad in white Carrara marble from the imperial quarries in modern-day Italy. Surviving bronze fragments suggest there may have been a large statue on top of the arch.

At 25 metres tall, this arch was one of the largest in the Empire and visible to ships miles out to sea, making it useful for navigating. In AD 250, a small fort was built around the arch and it was probably used as a watchtower. Around AD 275, the arch was demolished and its materials were used to make a new large stone fort.

A reconstruction illustration of the Richborough arch by Peter Lorimer. The arch was the tallest and most impressive building in Roman Richborough.

EVIDENCE OF ROMAN LIFE AT RICHBOROUGH
EATING LIKE A ROMAN

Before the Romans arrived, Britons grew and ate grains like wheat and barley; and vegetables like peas and beans. The Romans introduced over fifty new foods including fruits like figs, grapes and apples; vegetables like cucumber and celery; nuts like almonds; and herbs and spices like coriander and dill. These foods could be grown in Britain during the Roman period due to the climate at the time.

People in settlements on the coast enjoyed seafood as part of their diet. Richborough became famous throughout the Roman Empire for its oysters. They were even mentioned in poetry by writers like Juvenal (Source 4).

Other luxury foods travelled to Richborough in amphorae. Archaeologists have found an amphora at the fort which originally came from the area around Mount Vesuvius.

The Romans used amphorae to store food and drink including wine imported to Britannia from across the Empire.

LEISURE AND ENTERTAINMENT

Gambling and dice games were popular Roman pastimes. They played games like *duodecim scripta* or *tabula*, similar to backgammon. The remains of several stone gaming boards have been found at Richborough. Archaeologists have also found bone plaques which might have been part of a *pyrgus*, or dice tower. The Romans used these towers to roll their dice, making it more difficult to cheat.

An amphitheatre was discovered and excavated at Richborough in 1849. This likely developed as Richborough grew because it was built outside of the main town. Amphitheatres were venues for public spectacles and entertainments like wild animal hunts. They were also used for gladiator fights and executions. Going to events like these was an important part of Roman life.
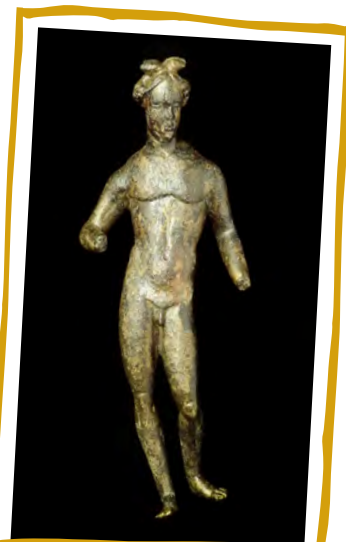

Evidence of a pyrgus, or 'dice tower' found at Richborough suggests that the Romans were trying to stop each other cheating at dice games.

ROMAN GODS AND THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

The Romans were polytheistic. When they conquered new places, they often combined gods already worshipped in the local area with similar Roman gods. At Richborough, archaeologists have found a statuette of Apollo, the Roman sun god, and a fragment of locally made ceramic showing a sun god. This could have been an aspect of Apollo or a separate god worshipped alongside him.

Although the Romans welcomed new gods, they weren't as accepting of Christianity to begin with. This was partly because Christians only worship one god. However, there were many Christians throughout the Empire even before Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in AD 312. Christianity eventually became the Roman Empire's official religion in AD 325.


A statuette of the Roman sun god Apollo. Objects like this were often imported into Britain from elsewhere in the Roman Empire.

The baptismal font at Richborough dates from the late 4th century, showing that by this time Christianity had spread from the Middle East on one side of the Roman Empire to Britain on the other.

ATTACKS ON BRITANNIA AND THE END OF ROMAN RULE

Conflicts within the Roman Empire in the 3rd century led to big changes at Richborough. All the settlement's central buildings were demolished by AD 275 and replaced with the stone fort you can see today. By the end of the 4th century, Richborough was one of 11 shore forts defending Britain's south and east coasts from attacks on Britannia by Saxon raiders.
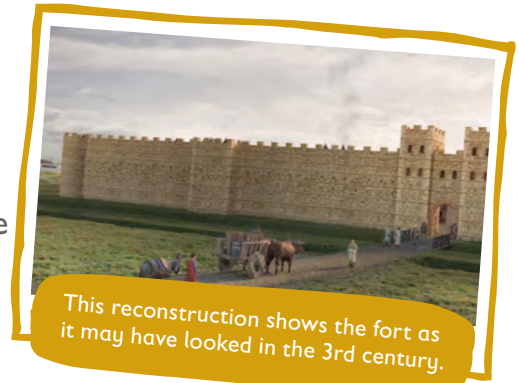
This reconstruction shows the fort as it may have looked in the 3rd century.

The end of Roman rule in Britain happened against a backdrop of civil war within the Roman Empire. Britannia had become a drain on the Empire's resources and by AD 410 the Roman occupation of Britain ended after nearly four hundred years. What happened at Richborough after this is uncertain, but by the medieval period only a small town and the docks remained. The Wantsum Channel had silted up and other nearby ports directly on the sea, like Sandwich, grew.

Over time, the ruins of Richborough began to attract tourists interested in the area's Roman history, including the Tudor antiquary John Leland who visited in 1540.

ARCHAEOLOGY AT RICHBOROUGH

Archaeologists and historians are still discovering more about Richborough's history. Although there was a small dig at the amphitheatre in 1849, most of the artefacts that have helped us understand Roman Richborough were found by JP Bushe-Foxe and his team of archaeologists and miners who dug the site between 1922 and 1938. Bushe-Foxe's careful and thorough approach meant that he found and recorded as much as possible. Over two thousand people came to visit the dig site as the excavations were coming to an end in 1938.

Archaeologists explored the amphitheatre at Richborough in 2021 to find out more about how the building was used.

In September 2021, archaeologists began to investigate the amphitheatre to find out what it may have looked like, how it was built and what happened after it was no longer used. The dig revealed fascinating finds including a carcer and an almost complete skeleton of a Roman cat. One of the most interesting finds was a Roman painted scene on plaster – one of the only surviving examples in Britain. After the three-month dig, the trenches the archaeologists were working in were carefully refilled.

RICHBOROUGH DURING THE WORLD WARS

A major temporary port was created to the east of Richborough during the First World War. Supplies were sent from here to the Western Front (France and Belgium).

During the Second World War, Richborough acted as a gateway once again. In 1939, it was the site of a **refugee** camp called 'Kitchener Camp'. According to one of the refugees who stayed at Richborough during the war, '5,000 Jewish men from Germany and Austria, and many of their families, owe their lives to this forgotten spot'. The Jewish refugees had fled Nazi **persecution** and sought safety in Britain.

'Kitchener Camp' at Richborough received Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany and Austria in 1939. © Mary Evans/Robert Hunt Collection

In 1940 the British Army was preparing for the **Battle of Britain**. Soldiers dug trenches and built gun pits at Richborough to help in the fight against the German Air Force, the Luftwaffe. The army was aware of the historic importance of the site and soldiers were told to sift for Roman coins as they dug. Richborough was also used as a base to transport supplies to the front line.

RICHBOROUGH IN LITERATURE

Rosemary Sutcliff (1920–92) was a writer who used the past as inspiration for some of her novels. She was educated at home rather than at a school because she had Still's disease, a form of **arthritis**. Rosemary's interest in history came from the books she read at home with her mother.

Rosemary's novel *The Lantern Bearers* (1959) won a Carnegie Medal. The story features a soldier at Richborough as the Romans are leaving Britain. To help her writing, Rosemary researched the fort and learned about its archaeology.

Rosemary Sutcliff researched the history of Richborough and its monumental arch to create her novel, *The Lantern Bearers*.

You can read an extract from *The Lantern Bearers* in Source 7 which includes a re-imagined description of the town's monumental arch as a Roman lighthouse (*Pharos*).
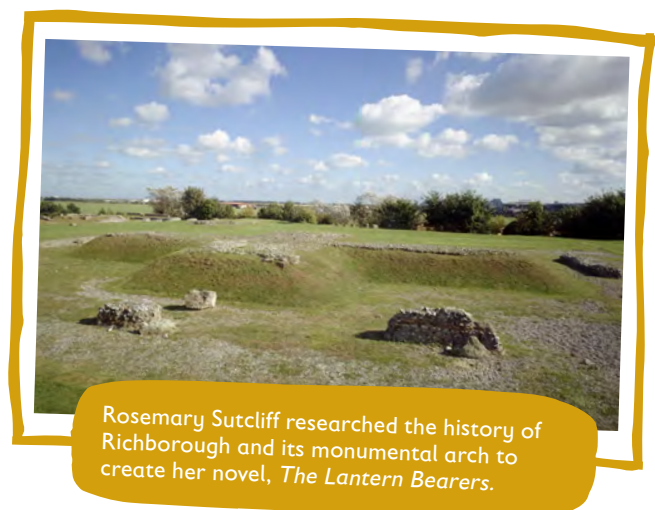
SELF-LED ACTIVITY
GATEWAY TO EMPIRE

KS2   KS3

Recommended for

KS2–3 (History, Geography)

Learning objectives

• Explore how Richborough was connected to the wider Roman Empire.

• Understand the importance of transport and trade across the Empire.

• Develop map-reading skills.

Time to complete

Approx. 60 mins

This reconstruction by Peter Lorimer shows Richborough around AD 120 when the settlement was at its largest.

SUMMARY

Richborough was a major point of connection between the Roman province of Britannia and the rest of the Roman Empire. This activity highlights the extent of these connections, encouraging students to consider who was travelling across the Empire and how, as well as developing their map-reading skills.

SUGGESTED APPROACH

• Read the Historical Information on pages 6-13 as a class to establish the importance of Richborough as a link between Britannia and the rest of the Roman Empire.

• Discuss who was travelling through Richborough based on the information students have found out. Answers may include military personnel, government officials, messengers and merchants.

• Introduce the idea that Roman travellers could access many major Roman settlements via Watling Street which began at Richborough. Sea connections between Richborough and Gaul (modern-day France) opened routes across the rest of the Empire.

• Share Stanford University's map of the Roman world (ORBIS) with students.

• Set Richborough (Rutupiae) as your starting point and ask students to explore the map, using the activity sheet on page 28 to guide them. Answers are in the Teachers' Notes on page 29. You may find comparing locations on the Roman Empire map with a modern online map or atlas useful.

MORE LEARNING IDEAS

Ask students to research Roman travel further and use the online map and their findings to create short stories from the perspective of someone travelling through Richborough for the first time. They could be a Briton experiencing Roman buildings for the first time or a Roman citizen from elsewhere in the Empire.

GATEWAY TO EMPIRE

The Roman Empire connected Britain with Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. People could travel in safety and communicate using Latin as a shared language. Richborough (Rutupiae) was the main route in and out of Britain for around four hundred years.

Use Stanford University's online interactive map of the Roman world and a modern online map of the UK or an atlas to answer the following questions:

1 Which Roman city is closest to your school?
Is it north, south, east or west of your school?

2 Find these cities on the Roman online map. What do we call these today?

TIP: You might find it helpful to compare the town names on the Roman map with a modern map.

A. Roman city: Londinium
    Modern name:

B. Roman city: Eburacum
    Modern name:

C. Roman city: Camulodunum
    Modern name:

3 According to the Roman online map, which major Roman city is furthest away from Richborough? Which direction is it in (north, south, east or west)?

How long is the route in kilometres (km) and how many days would it take to reach Richborough from this city on foot

A. in the spring?

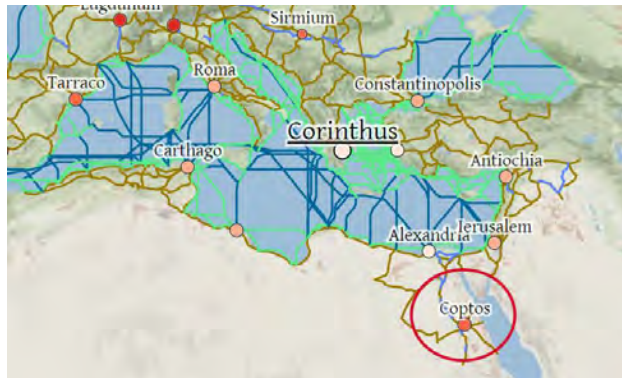B. in the summer?

C. in the autumn?

D. in the winter?

GATEWAY TO EMPIRE
TEACHERS' NOTES

ANSWERS TO STUDENT ACTIVITY SHEET

1. This answer will be dependent on your location.

2. The modern names for the Roman cities listed are:

A. **London**

B. **York**

C. **Colchester**

3. The major Roman city furthest away from Richborough is **Coptos (modern-day Qift in Egypt)**.

It is between **4,803km** and **4,806km** away from Richborough depending on the route taken. The route was dependent on the time of year a journey was made.

A. In the spring the route would be **4,803km** and it would take **66** days on foot.

B. In the summer the route would be **4,805km** and it would take **55** days on foot.

C. In the autumn the route would be **4,803km** and it would take **53** days on foot.

D. In the winter the route would be **4,806km** and it would take **74** days on foot.

Travelling by road would often take longer than travelling by sea.

Students can also use the online Roman map to discover how much these journeys would cost. Travelling in the summer was easier and so cost less than travelling in the winter.