Discovering Roman Colchester

This short guide introduces you to the visible remains of Roman Colchester.

The town of Colchester in north-east Essex has a long and complex prehistory and history. Camulodunum was a tribal centre of the Catuvellauni in Iron Age Britain and it was here that the Roman invasion force, under the Emperor Claudius, headed in AD 43 to establish a new province of the Roman empire. The Roman army’s Twentieth Legion was garrisoned on a hill overlooking the capital of the Catuvellaunian centre until AD 48-9. The military garrison was then replaced by a colonia – a place where veteran soldiers were settled and a model urban centre could promote Roman life in the new province. The new Roman town of Camulodunum was called Colonia Victricensis.
The Temple of Claudius [1]
The largest classical temple known in Britain is the Temple of Claudius, which later formed the base for the Norman castle, now the town’s principal museum. The castle walls were built mainly from Roman brick and stone reused from the temple itself and other Roman buildings. The temple’s foundations (and further information) can be seen inside the Castle Museum.

Below the Castle Museum, in Castle Park, there are the remains of two Roman features. To the right of the children’s playground you can see below the iron grills a Roman drain [2] which took excess and waste water from the town and out under Duncan’s Gate. Just past the bandstand Sir Mortimer Wheeler excavated two Roman houses in 1920 [3]. Some of the walls of one house, built in the 2nd century AD, have been outlined and there is an information panel here.

Roman theatre [4]
The Roman theatre, which was partially excavated by the Colchester Archaeological Trust in 1982, originally held at least 3,000 people. A short section of the outer D-shaped wall’s foundations has been preserved and may be seen from Maidenburgh Street. A continuation of this wall is outlined in coloured bricks along the street. Further down you will see the chapel in St Helen’s Lane. Its bottom layers were probably part of the back wall of the theatre and may well have been reused in the construction of a Christian church in Roman times.

The Roman town wall
A stone and brick wall, 2,800m long, was built around AD 65-80 to protect the town after the revolt of Boudica in AD 60-61. Its foundations were about 1.2m deep and the wall was at least 6m high and about 2.4m wide. The wall had at least six gates and between 12 and 24 rectangular watch towers built on the inside of the wall. A ditch was dug outside the wall to make attack more difficult. Later a rampart of earth and rubbish from people’s houses was constructed on the inside to strengthen the wall. Just inside Balkerne Gate (beside the Mercury Theatre) you can see a well-preserved section of the rampart behind the town wall.

Good sections of the wall can be seen at [5] at the bottom of Castle Park west from Duncan’s Gate [6] and from the bottom of North Hill up to and beyond Balkerne Gate [7]. Another section of wall can be followed along Vineyard and Priory Streets (where you can see round towers which were added to the Roman wall between 1382 and 1421). Cross East Hill and you can follow the Roman wall back to Duncan’s Gate.

The town’s existing gates
Balkerne Gate [7] was originally built as a monumental arch on the site of the west gate of the legionary fortress to form the main entrance to the new Roman colony. The arch’s two entrances became carriageways with the addition of matching pedestrian ways and guard towers in about AD 65-80. There is an information panel here.

Duncan’s Gate [6] was named after Dr P M Duncan who discovered and excavated this gate in 1853. The gate is narrow but wide enough for one cart and had a guard tower built over it. There is an information panel here.

The Roman church [8]
During excavations in the 1970s and 1980s, the Colchester Archaeological Trust carried out excavations prior to the building of a police station. The excavations revealed a large 4th-century AD cemetery and the remains of a Christian church built around AD 330. Its apse was added around AD 330 and new aisles a little later. The remains were consolidated and opened to the public. There is an information panel here.


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