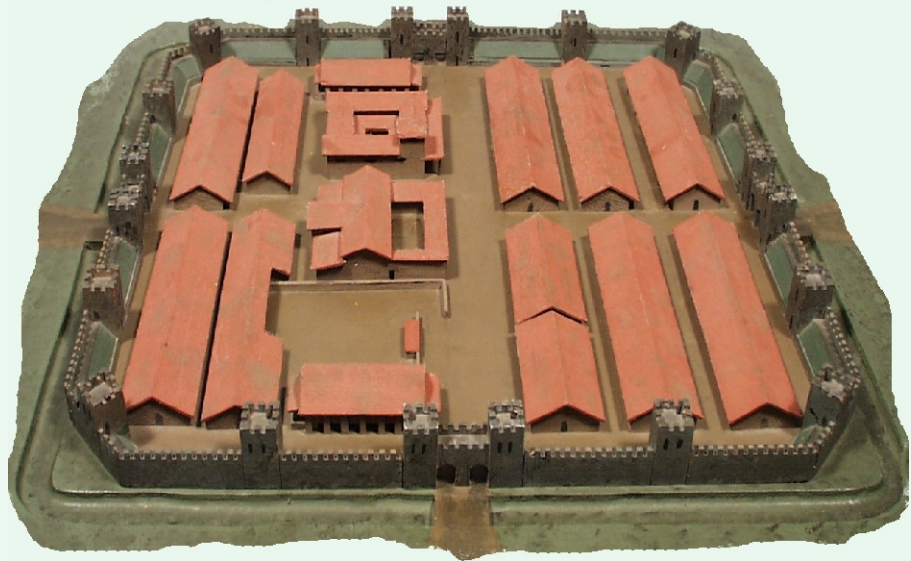


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ROMAN FORT

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The Roman army worked with relentless efficiency. It was its organisation and discipline which filled its opponents with dread. A spade, along with a sword, was an essential item of equipment for the ordinary soldier. When on campaign, soldiers would be expected to end each day's march by constructing a rectangular earth embankment around their tents.

It was these temporary camps that provided the prototype for the permanent forts that were later constructed wherever soldiers needed to be based mainly around the edges of the empire.

The model shows a typical fort.

Layout

Roman forts tended to be built following a similar plan. The walls were generally rectangular in shape, though with curved corners, giving it a characteristic 'playing card' shape. The first forts had earth and timber walls, but over time these would be rebuilt in stone. The walls were surrounded by a vallum (a rampart) and a fossa (a ditch). Usually there were four gates, with four main roads converging on the headquarters building.

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The headquarters building (Principia) faced the front gate. The Principia had an assembly hall where the orders were issued, and there was a shrine to the imperial cult, where statues of the Emperor were kept. The legion's standards and cash to pay the soldiers would be kept here too.

The commandant's house (Praetorium) had rooms for domestic use. Granaries (Horrea) were designed to keep the food inside dry. Most of the area, though, was given over to housing the troops. At Housteads, on Hadrian's Wall, the barracks had a veranda, facing onto the street. They were divided into ten units for the troops, plus larger apartments for the Centurion. They had low walls of sandstone, which supported timber frames with wattle and daub walls. Many forts also included a Valetudinarium a hospital building.

Outside the Walls

The fort itself was a strictly military structure, but often civilian settlements developed outside the walls, called a Vicus. The Vicus would contain shops, baths and often a mansio, a guesthouse. If the soldiers were married, though this was not supposed to happen - this is where their wives would live. The Vicus would be the place where soldiers relaxed when they were not on duty. The military life was not all that different from being a civilian - most of the time. A fascinating collection of texts written on small wooden tablets have been found at the site of Vindolanda, a fort near Hadrian's Wall. These wooden tablets give us a good idea of what life was like in one of these forts. One of them, for example, shows that of the 343 men present, 12 were making shoes, 18 were building a bath-house, others were out collecting lead, clay and rubble, while still more were assigned to the wagons, the kilns, the hospital and on plastering duty. Clearly military life wasn't all marching and fighting!

One of a set of badges which would have been attached to a military leather baldric. The inscription reads (in English): '[Jupiter] best and greatest, preserve.' This item was found at Silchester, although it was not a garrison town.



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Walls around Civilian Towns

Many towns in Roman Britain had walls built around them, but that does not mean that soldiers were present in them. At Silchester (Calleva Atrebatum) an earth bank and a ditch were constructed around end of the second century. A fine stone wall was constructed in the third century. Probably the gates would have been closed at night, but Calleva, like most towns in the southern half of Britain, was never a military town.



The Latin word for a fort was castrum. When the Anglo-Saxons came to dominate Britain the word survived to describe any settlement where walls were still visible. Castrum became, in the Old English language, ceaster. In Modern English the word is chester. Any town with chester in it, such as Colchester, Manchester, Chesterfield or Silchester, indicates that there was once a Roman walled settlement on the site.



Top: An artist's impression of Silchester after its stone walls had been completed. Below: A photograph taken in the late nineteenth century showing the walls which were then covered in vegetation.