READING MUSEUM SERVICE

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

ROMAN ROAD CONSTRUCTION — AH5



Tracks in pre-Roman Britain wandered and weaved across the countryside, avoiding swamps and slopes. The Romans introduced undeviating roads. It took a long time, but gradually the landscape was covered with a web of relentlessly straight roads.

This model shows a party of soldiers building one of these roads. All across the empire the process of construction followed a broadly similar pattern.

Firstly, the route had to be surveyed. Teams of surveyors would set out along the route. They would head for patches of high ground and using such vantage points set out lines of ranging-poles to mark out the route.

The poles were set out in as straight a line as possible using an instrument called a groma. One of them can be seen being used in the model. The groma consisted of a horizontal wooden cross, mounted on a stand. Hanging from the end of each arm of the cross was a plumb line. The surveyor could look along two of the plumb lines to establish a straight line.

The Romans were phenomenal builders and it could be argued that their conquests owed as much to the engineering skills of their army as it did to their fighting skills. Julius Caesar, in his description of the conquest of Gaul, describes how the native tribes were astounded to find their supposedly secure hill forts overwhelmed by huge siege ramps, which the army could construct within a few days.

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