

Colchester: Britain's Oldest Recorded Town and First City

Colchester: the town with the city outlook

Colchester's history may have shaped its streets and its skyline, but we haven't let ourselves be shackled by it – it gives us confidence in our past and hope for our future.

We're proud of our town and our borough and we enjoy sharing it with visitors, businesses, students and the growing numbers of new people who move here to work and live, making a positive contribution to our wider society.

We absorb the best of what new influences can teach and share with us – and our outlook is the more generous for it.

We're a proud borough, but we're not inward looking. We were Britain's first city, but it hasn't left us with a sense of entitlement.

And as a new city we'll remain a community in which we relish the things we have in common – and learn to be the better for our differences.

This is our story.

Britain's oldest recorded town

When Pliny the Elder gave readers of his *Natural History* directions to the Island of Anglesey, he reached for the name of the nearest important settlement.

"It is about 200 miles from Camulodunum, a town in Britain," he wrote.

It was the kind of self-confident remark you might hear from one of our residents today, but when Pliny penned it in the middle decades of the 1st Century AD he also immortalised Camulodunum – Roman Colchester – as Britain's first recorded settlement.

In exactly the same century it became its first city – and its first capital.

The early royal stronghold

To fully understand modern Colchester, you need to know it was forged in a Roman crucible. It shaped our streets and it shaped our international outlook.

The Iron Age settlement of Camulodunum (meaning 'Fortress of Camulos, god of War') had grown to be the most significant in Britain by the end of the 1st Century BC. On the site that includes the present-day Gosbecks Archaeological Park, it was the capital and stronghold of the Trinovantes – a powerful tribe that held sway over much of modern-day Essex and southern Suffolk – and was the royal seat of a succession of native kings.

One of those kings was Cunobelin, who is best known to us as the inspiration for Shakespeare's romance, *Cymbeline*. He was king of the Trinovantes' greatest rival tribe – the Catuvellauni – and was minting coins at Camulodunum as early as AD 9. He used the Latin title 'Rex' on those coins, indicating he had strong links with Rome, while archaeological evidence shows that Camulodunum was the port through which luxury goods such as Italian wine, Spanish sauces and Gallo-Belgic tableware entered Britain.

By AD 43, Camulodunum was a royal stronghold of Cunobelin's son Caratacus – and it became the principal prize of that year's Roman invasion, with the Emperor Claudius taking the fortification at the head of his legions – with war elephants – and receiving the submission of 11 British kings.

Colchester at a glance

- **Britain's first city** and Roman capital
- A 2,000 year **military tradition** and home to a respected 21st century garrison
- An **international centre** since classical times
- Strong **royal links** throughout medieval and modern times
- More **architectural continuity** than any other town in England
- A thriving **cultural centre** of national importance
- **Britain's fastest-growing town**
- Has **more quality-assured visitor attractions than any other town** in England
- Home to **Britain's most international university** and many **international companies**
- Site of new buildings **by international architects** – Viñoly's *firstsite* and Libeskind's Institute for Democracy and Conflict Resolution

Colchester's confidence is rooted in its shared achievements and culture – and a talent for holding its own on an international level.

Britain's first city

The Roman conquest did more to shape our town's fabric and outlook than any other historical event. Its effects are still visible today.

One of the Romans' first actions was to build a major legionary fortress near the original settlement. It was the first in Britain ever to be built using bricks and mortar, but before it had even been finished, its purpose changed: in AD 50 it became a *colonia*, a city for retired Roman soldiers, and was named *Colonia Victricensis* – or 'City of Victory'.

In building the *colonia* within the bounds of the legionary fortress, using its street plan and converting the barracks into houses, the Romans not only created Britain's first city but – thanks to our modern-day garrison – one with a military heart that beats just as strongly to this day.

Capital of Britannia

As Britain's first *colonia*, Colchester became the Roman's administrative capital in Britain, but it was almost completely destroyed in AD 60 by the famous rebellion against Roman rule, led by Queen Boudica of the Iceni. Her warriors laid waste to the town, burning down the Temple of Claudius and slaughtering all who had taken refuge there.

Although Boudica's uprising was ultimately crushed, the Roman capital moved to Londinium. But Colchester soon rose from the ashes – and its status as an international city within the Roman Empire is indelibly written into the fabric of our modern town.

Our High Street follows the line of the *Via Praetoria* and both Head Street and North Hill follow the *Via Principalis*.

They are the oldest urban streets in Britain – and today they are among its most rich and vibrant, their fine architecture now bristling with shops, restaurants, cultural venues and places of education.

"While the Britons were preparing to throw off the yoke, the statue of victory, erected at Camulodunum, fell from its base, without any apparent cause, and lay extended on the ground with its face averted, as if the goddess yielded to the enemies of Rome."

Tacitus

An international city for two millennia

Our Roman heritage helps us to trace Colchester's cosmopolitan way of life and outlook to a two-thousand-year old city – a city that was home to:

- **The temple of the deified Emperor Claudius** – the largest classical temple in Britain – upon which our Norman castle is built
- **Britain's only known Roman circus** – capable of seating a crowd of 15,000 and a testament to Colchester's significance in this period
- **The most complete Roman city walls in Britain** – containing the country's largest surviving Roman gateway
- **Two Roman theatres** – including the largest known in Britain, seating 5,000 people
- **Over 50 mosaics** – some in a remarkably fine state of preservation
- **A 4th Century Christian church** – one of the earliest known in the UK
- **International trade** – silk from China and amphorae from Egypt can be counted among our finds

These treasures provide us with valuable evidence for a city of status, culture, architecture, business and sport – and one in which people of many nationalities learned to coexist peacefully.

Not unlike Colchester as it is today.

The shaping of our confidence and culture

If our confidence and culture can be traced to Roman times, our identity and traditions have been forged and shaped by many subsequent influences.

These are just some of them.

Royalty

As Britain's first city, Colchester has always benefited from close Royal connections – and they continue to this day.

The Saxon kings Athelstan and Edmund held *witans* – royal councils – here in the 10th century; and by 1086, with a population of around 2,500, Colchester was one of 14 settlements described as *civitas* (a city) in the Domesday Book.

Colchester's value to William I, along with its strategic importance, ensured it gained the first royal castle in England (outside London) that he built of stone. With the largest Norman keep ever constructed, the castle was placed on the foundations of the Roman temple to Claudius – a lasting metaphor for Colchester's ability to incorporate the best of its past into its future.

King Richard I confirmed the Colne Oyster Fishery to the borough of Colchester in 1189. By the 16th century, a close season from Easter to Holy Rood day (14 September) was declared, allowing oyster stocks to replenish. In an annual ceremony that dates back to 1540 and continues to this day, Colchester's mayor samples the first new crop of oysters and offers a toast of gin and gingerbread to the monarch – Queen Elizabeth II is now sent a telegram proclaiming the fishery to be open.

Colchester is one of only two towns in mainland Britain that is a Royal Saluting Station – and HM The Queen's birthday is marked annually with a 21-gun salute in Castle Park. The privilege was granted to Colchester in 2006, and it would be a great honour for the town to attain the city status of these other saluting stations – London, Edinburgh, Cardiff, York, Stirling and Plymouth.

The Military

Colchester first became a garrison 2,000 years ago, and today its military tradition is an essential part of its outlook and character.

Our first modern garrison was built during the Napoleonic Wars and was the largest in Britain by 1805, with a larger and permanent one established during the Crimean War.

“The conferring of saluting station status on Colchester acknowledges the growth in prestige of the town with its unique and valued military community.”

Colonel Tony Barton
Garrison Commander, 2006

Today the Garrison is home to the 16 Air Assault Brigade, which comprises 3 air assault infantry battalions, 3 air assault aviation battalions, 1 artillery regiment and a number of supporting units.

With many recent casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan, Colchester is fiercely supportive of its Garrison and proud of its achievements. In February 2011, a turf cutting ceremony was held to mark the beginning of the first purpose-built Personnel Recovery Centre (PRC) – a Help for Heroes and Royal British Legion funded facility that will help soldiers through their injury or illness and return to duty or into a supported civilian life.

Architecture

The magnificent buildings of Roman Colchester – from the Temple of Claudius to Britain's only known Roman circus – began a tradition of architectural excellence that continues to this day. The borough of Colchester contains 22 conservation areas, 1,555 listed buildings and 52 scheduled ancient monuments. We have a distinctive skyline, instantly recognisable from the silhouettes of our grand Victorian town hall and 'Jumbo', our imposing central water tower.

Many of these buildings are detailed in our submitted profile of Colchester, including the new *firstsite* building – a cultural and arts centre designed by the award-winning Rafael Viñoly that is opening in late 2011. Its unique engineering preserves the Roman treasures that may lie beneath it and allows future access to them.

Legends

With such a long history, it's not surprising that Colchester has produced many legends.

“Colchester has significance as a town in the constellation of wonderful places the UK has, but it also has a special quality of its own. Creating the *firstsite* gallery within this extraordinary well of tradition goes well beyond what is typical even in the UK and will make a visit to Colchester part of an international conversation that makes the most of what the town itself and the people in it are like.”

Rafael Viñoly, *firstsite* architect, 2008



The Colchester Legend claims that Helena our patron saint, the daughter of King Coel and mother of Constantine the Great, was born in Colchester. Credited with discovering the graves of the Three Kings and with discovering relics of the True Cross, these elements feature in the Borough's arms.

The nursery rhyme Old King Coel is connected with Colchester, as is Twinkle Twinkle Little Star – familiar to almost every child, it was written by sisters Ann and Jane Taylor who lived in West Stockwell Street from 1796 to 1811.

Colchester isn't alone in claiming to be the scene of the Humpty Dumpty rhyme, and although the story is likely to be legend rather than fact it is tied to one of the most significant events in our history – the Civil War Siege of Colchester. It's said that a Royalist cannon placed on the tower of St Mary-at-the-Wall was hit by returning fire from Lord Fairfax's troops, causing the gun – or Humpty Dumpty – to come tumbling down.

Traditions

Related to the annual opening of the Oyster Fishery at Colne (see 'Royalty' above'), our most renowned tradition is the Colchester Oyster Feast. Originally dating back to the medieval St Denis' Fair, the modern feast traces its roots to 1845 and is held on the last Friday in October. Guests have included members of the Royal Family (including George VI and Edward VIII) as well as prime ministers David Lloyd George, Winston Churchill, Ramsay MacDonald, Harold Macmillan, Harold Wilson and Edward Heath.

Not all our traditions are rooted in the past – one of the most important is very much of the present. Since the 16 Air Assault Brigade was honoured with the Freedom of the Borough in 2009, it has exercised its right to march through the town – to the great support of local people.

Internationalism

Colchester's location, thriving community and accessibility from Europe have ensured it has retained a international dimension for two millennia – whether through war, trade, religion, education or cultural exchange.

Colchester russet cloth was exported as far as Damascus in the 13th century, and by the 14th Century Flemish settlers arrived in the town to work in the cloth industry. Two hundred years later, large numbers fled here to escape religious persecution and settled in what became known as the Dutch Quarter (which, even earlier, was the centre of Colchester's medieval Jewish community).

In the 19th Century, the British German Legion was stationed at the Garrison during the Crimean War, and during the Second World War American servicemen had a strong presence in and around the town – many of their descendants still live here.

More recently, Colchester has become a popular visitor destination and its links with Europe are as strong as ever – many local businesses trade through the international port of Harwich and the town is twinned with Avignon (France), Wetzlar (Germany) and Imola (Italy). The University of Essex is the most international in the country, and our blossoming cultural scene further contributes to the cosmopolitan mix of the area.

Culture

Colchester is the acknowledged 'Cultural Capital' of Essex. Unique in Roman times for its two theatres, it is now home to a bustling cultural scene.

Some notable Colchester residents

Thomas Malory (c1405-1471): author of *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

William Gilbert (1544-1603): Chief physician to Queen Elizabeth and pioneering Experimental scientist, coined the word 'electric' and first to recognise the Earth as a giant magnet.

Margaret Cavendish (1623-1673): poet, philosopher and essayist, writing under her own name on topics including women's and animal rights, and one of the earliest examples of science fiction (1666).

Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892): Victorian England's greatest preacher.

Sir Archibald Wavell (1883-1950): Field Marshal, commander of the British Army in the Middle East in World War II

Sir Roger Penrose (b. 1931): physicist and mathematician, co-recipient with Stephen Hawking of 1988 Wolf Prize for their contribution to the understanding of the Universe.

Damon Albarn (b. 1968): singer-songwriter

front man for Blur and Gorillaz. info@benlocker.co.uk

Jay Kay (b.1969): Jamiroquai singer

Dermot O'Leary (b. 1973): TV and radio presenter.



Today Colchester is a hub for world-class arts and cultural activity, with three organisations funded under Arts Council England's new National Portfolio – Colchester Arts Centre, The Mercury Theatre and *firstsite*.

Residents and visitors alike are drawn to our theatres, galleries, music venues and cinema, and culture is also key to our present-day regeneration – the focal point of our new cultural quarter, *firstsite*, is a major arts and cultural centre built by an award-winning architect.

Firstsite will help stimulate further regeneration, but the green shoots of the quarter are already visible with a creative members' hub thriving at 15 Queen Street and Slack Space Colchester encouraging arts usage of empty shops and locations to promote local artists, present new work to the public and generate a cultural buzz in the town centre.

Business and Economy

As a young city in the making, Colchester has productive partnerships between the private, public and third sectors which together contribute to a diverse economy that's worth in the region of £17 billion. Colchester also plays a leading role in Regional Cities East, a consortium that works to improve infrastructure, tourism, enterprise and employment in East Anglia's main regional centres.

Our borough is a nursery for entrepreneurship, and with a strong culture of self-reliance and opportunity it's a natural location for people wanting to start their own businesses. The Colchester Business and Enterprise Agency (COLBEA) supports business start-ups through their early stages, and its success has led it to open a new Business Incubation Centre in North Colchester – in a location where new businesses rub shoulders with big players like Care UK, Park City Consulting and AXA Insurance. Similarly, The Knowledge Gateway at the University of Essex will soon bring together businesses and other organisations together in the same campus as the academic community.

Colchester is also main regional centre for shopping, with visitors drawn from a wide area – attracted by the town's shopping centres, supermarkets and diverse independent retail sector. It is classified as Primary Centre in the 2010 CACI Retail Footprint survey.

Looking ahead to the future, Colchester's international links and digital strategy are opening it up further to the global marketplace – and taking Colchester's spirit of entrepreneurship to countries across the world.

Colchester's modern renaissance

Colchester's bid for city status isn't simply about recognition of its history or achievements.

We'll always remain proud of our past, our traditions and our place in the world.

But pride in our past and our position is only part of what it means to be a city.

And while any town can have historic foundations, what marks out a city is the outlook of its people – an outlook that's characterised by tolerance, openness to change and confidence in the future.

Colcestrians have it already.