



# Roman life and Villas

Julius Caesar led two Roman invasions of Britain, in 55 and 54 BC. His troops won several battles against the Celtic Britons before withdrawing back across the Channel. Failed attempts at invasion also took place during the reigns of the Emperors Augustus and Caligula. It was not until 43 AD, under the Emperor Claudius, that the Romans invaded and successfully conquered much of Britain.

**The Romans were not just a destructive force. They built new settlements and roads, and also spread their lifestyle, culture, language and laws.**

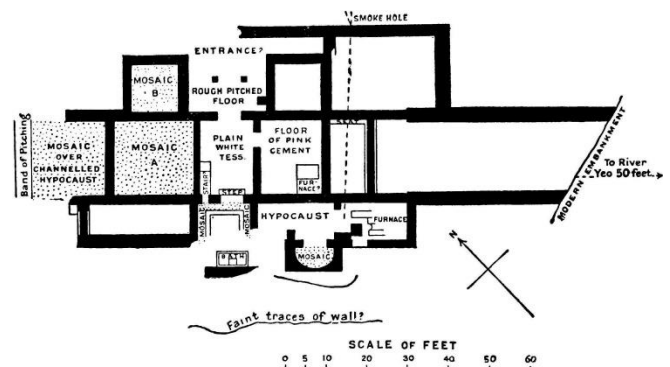
The Roman army probably reached the West Country around 45-47 AD. The local Iron Age tribe, the Dobunni, were no match for the highly trained soldiers. One of the invasion's goals was to take control of Britain's natural resources. Lead was particularly important, and this was found in abundance in the Mendip Hills. The mines at Charterhouse provided vast quantities of lead that the Romans would use in water pipes, plates and jugs. Lead was also used in cosmetics, even though it is highly toxic. Silver was mined and minted into coins to pay the legionaries, as Roman soldiers were known.



*A Roman hypocaust in Bath © Ad Meskens*

The Romans created a small town at Charterhouse with its own amphitheatre. The local people would have produced pottery from clay found in places like Congresbury, and local farms would produce food to feed the workers. Many tribal Britons would have been enslaved, but some would have adapted to, and enjoyed, the Roman lifestyle.

Roman officials required houses that would reflect their wealth and position. Those occupied by Celtic Britons would not have been good enough. They would certainly not have had baths or heating so the Romans built their own homes, known as villas.



*A floor plan of the Villa at Great Wemberham  
© courtesy of the Victoria County History, University of London*

## What would life in a Roman villa have been like?

Compared to the houses occupied by most Britons at the time, even the simplest villa would have been luxurious. The roofs were generally tiled. Some villas used an early form of central heating known as a hypocaust. Stacks of tiles supported a suspended floor which was covered with tiles and concrete, and then finally the floor tiles of the rooms above. A wood-fired furnace produced hot air and smoke, warming the floors before passing through pipes in the walls to outlets in the roof. Hypocausts were expensive to run - the furnaces needed constant attention and a lot of fuel - so they were usually only found in larger villas.

Villas were often decorated with wall paintings and mosaic floors. Roman mosaics were made by putting together small cubes of cut stone, known as tesserae, to form a design. These could be geometric patterns, images of animals, or figures from history and mythology. Tesserae were usually made from natural stone such as limestone. Pieces of brick, tile and pottery would be added to create colours such as blue, black, red, white and yellow. Marble, glass, small pebbles and precious metals such as gold were also used in mosaic design. Most mosaics were multi-coloured, but single colour examples have also been found.



*The Great Wemberham Mosaic* © courtesy of SAHNS Somerset Archaeological Proceedings

Roman gardens grew fruit, vegetables and herbs for food and medicine. They were also used for decorative purposes, and as outdoor rooms – just like many of ours are today. The Romans introduced ornamental gardens to Britain. The climate was very different from the Mediterranean, but Romano-British gardens were still used to entertain guests, relax and unwind. Villas often had courtyard-style gardens surrounded by covered walkways to provide cover from the wind and rain.

**In North Somerset, Roman villas have been recorded at places such as Banwell, Gatcombe, Locking, Wraxall and Yatton.**

The remains of a Romano-British villa were discovered at Wint Hill near Banwell in 1968. The finds included a bath house, hypocaust, pottery, mosaic and coins from the first to fourth centuries AD. Earlier excavations in 1956 had unearthed an engraved glass drinking bowl dating from about 350 AD. Now in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, the bowl was probably made in Germany. It is 7 cm high and 19 cm in diameter and shows a horseman and two hounds chasing a hare into a net. The Latin inscription around the edge reads “Drink, live with your (folk)”.



*The Wint Hill Bowl* © courtesy of Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

The villa at Great Wemberham near Yatton may have been involved in the other major resource of this area at the time: salt. The North Somerset coastline was producing salt by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, which was essential for preserving meat and fish. There were no fridges! The villa was excavated in 1884 and revealed 14 rooms, five with mosaic floors. On the right of the columned entrance were small heated rooms with colourful floors. On the left was a kitchen and baths. There was a staircase to a second floor. There was a possible shipping dock. Twenty-one coins from the Emperor Gallienus 253-268 AD were found at this site.

Archaeological evidence indicates that the villas were left to decay after the Romans withdrew from Britain. Most Roman buildings in North Somerset are no longer visible above ground. This includes the villas at Banwell and Wraxall. Fortunately some items from local sites can be seen in the museum today.

