

The Romans

Unit 4



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About this Unit

Unit 4: The Roman Timeline in Wales

Unit theme

A clear and understandable timeline. Sharing an overview of established Roman sites in chronological order.

Learning Objectives

This unit focuses on the work of archaeologists and their discoveries here in Wales. Learners will be encouraged to create a mini excavation, to focus on the importance of physical evidence in the form of artefacts found underground to our understanding of a particular historical period. It will help them to understand the concept of stratigraphy – how objects are deposited in layers, with the most recent nearer the surface.

Links to the Curriculum for Wales

Curriculum Purposes

Help to develop the skills necessary to interpret and articulate the past and the present.

Area of learning

Humanities

Statement of what Matters

This unit will encourage enquiry and discovery, as learners are challenged to be curious and to question, to think critically and to reflect upon evidence.

In detail

Encourages learners to critically review the ways these events and experiences are perceived, interpreted and represented.

An appreciation of identity, heritage and 'cynefin', including the history of Wales and the World, can influence learners emotionally and spiritually, and help build their sense of self and of belonging.

Enable learners to identify what makes places and spaces distinct, and to develop an awareness of the interconnections between humans and their environment in both contemporary and historical contexts.



Introduction

What is an archaeologist?

Archaeology helps us find out about the everyday lives of people from the past.

Humankind is almost 4 million years old. But our history has only been written down for about 5,000 years. So, archaeologists help us to fill these big gaps. They do this by digging up the ground to find out how ancient people lived, this is called an 'excavation' or a 'dig'. An archaeologist doesn't just dig, however. They have to know their history and be able to interpret what they've found.

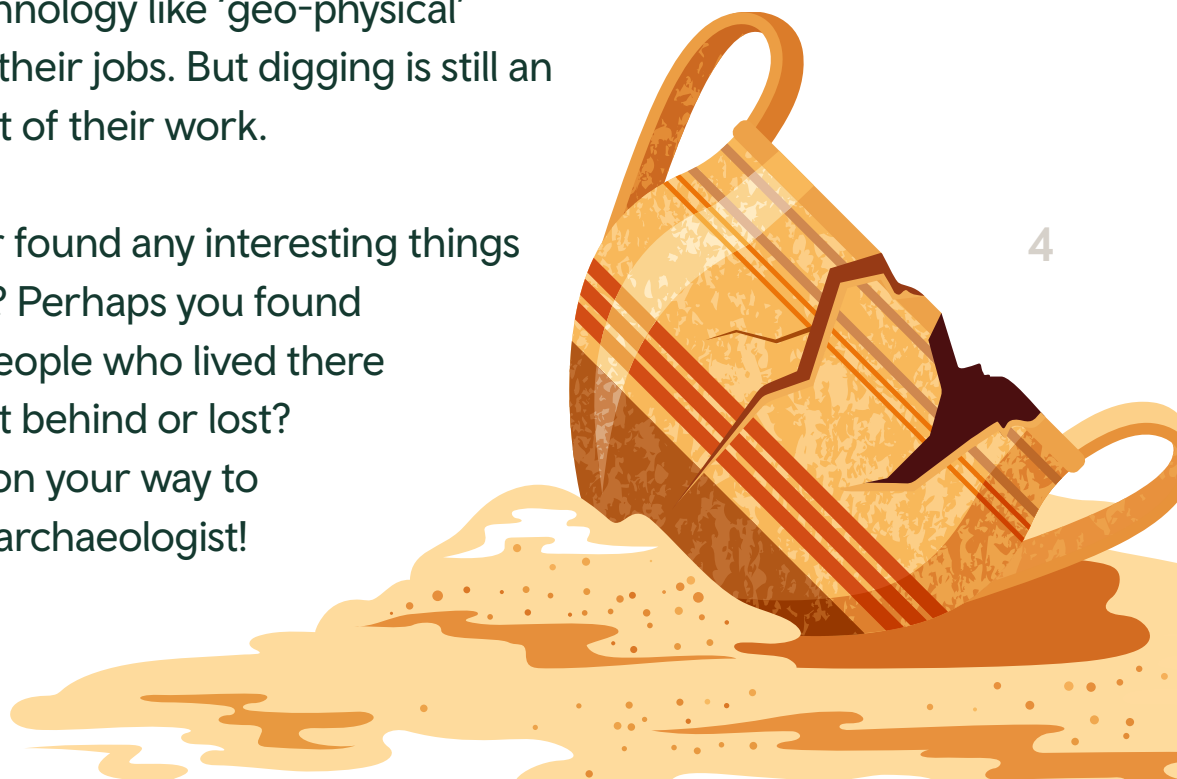
These days archaeologists can also use drones and other technology like 'geo-physical' surveys to do their jobs. But digging is still an important part of their work.

Have you ever found any interesting things in the garden? Perhaps you found objects that people who lived there before you left behind or lost? You could be on your way to becoming an archaeologist!



Find out!

Go online and learn which methods archaeologists use in their work today. Find out what archaeologists have used to make discoveries in Wales.



Discovering Roman Caerleon

Did you know in 1926, 30,000 tonnes of soil were removed in Caerleon to uncover the Roman amphitheatre there? It took three summers from 1927-1929 to complete the dig which uncovered the remains of the Barracks there too. Can you imagine how exciting it would have been to come across these amazing historical finds? Here's an image of 'Trowelblazer', Tessa Wheeler, in Caerleon, with the newly discovered amphitheatre.

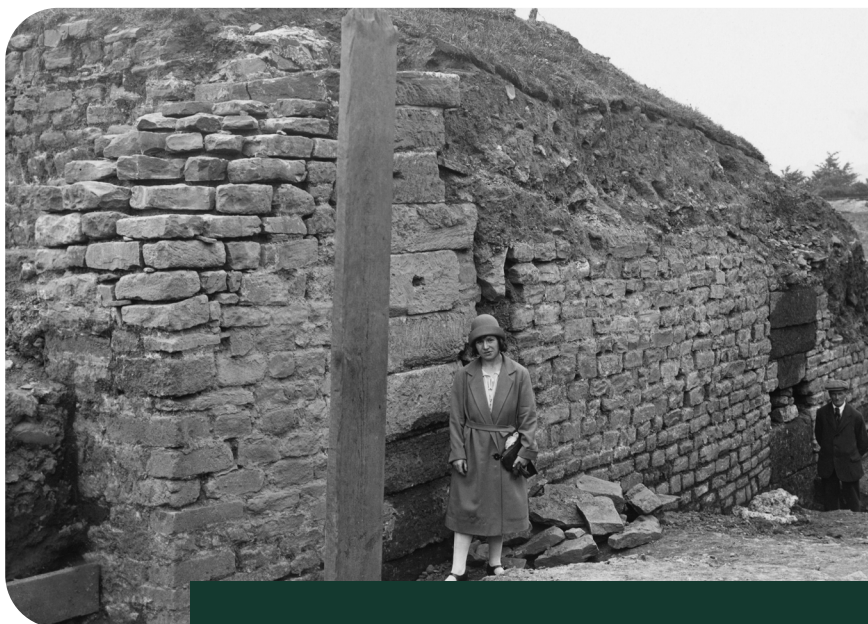


Caerleon amphitheatre
© Visit Wales

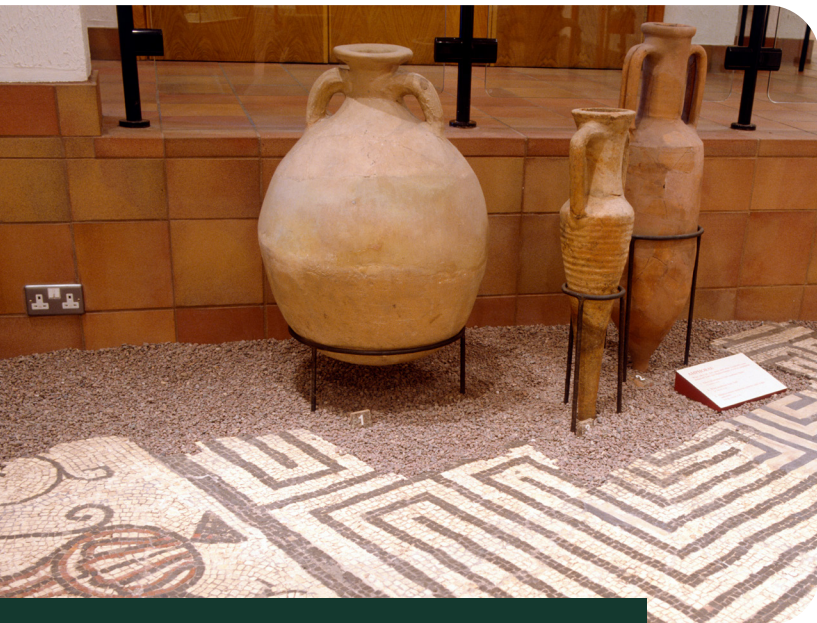


Some facts about artefacts

Archaeologists often find interesting objects people from the past left behind; these are called 'artefacts'. Over the years the things they threw away and even old buildings and entire towns can get buried deep beneath the ground.



Archaeologist Tessa Wheeler at Caerleon in 1926
© National Museum Wales



Roman artefacts and a mosaic floor discovered in Caerleon
© National Museum Wales



Caerleon Roman barracks
© Visit Wales



Hoards and treasure

Find out!

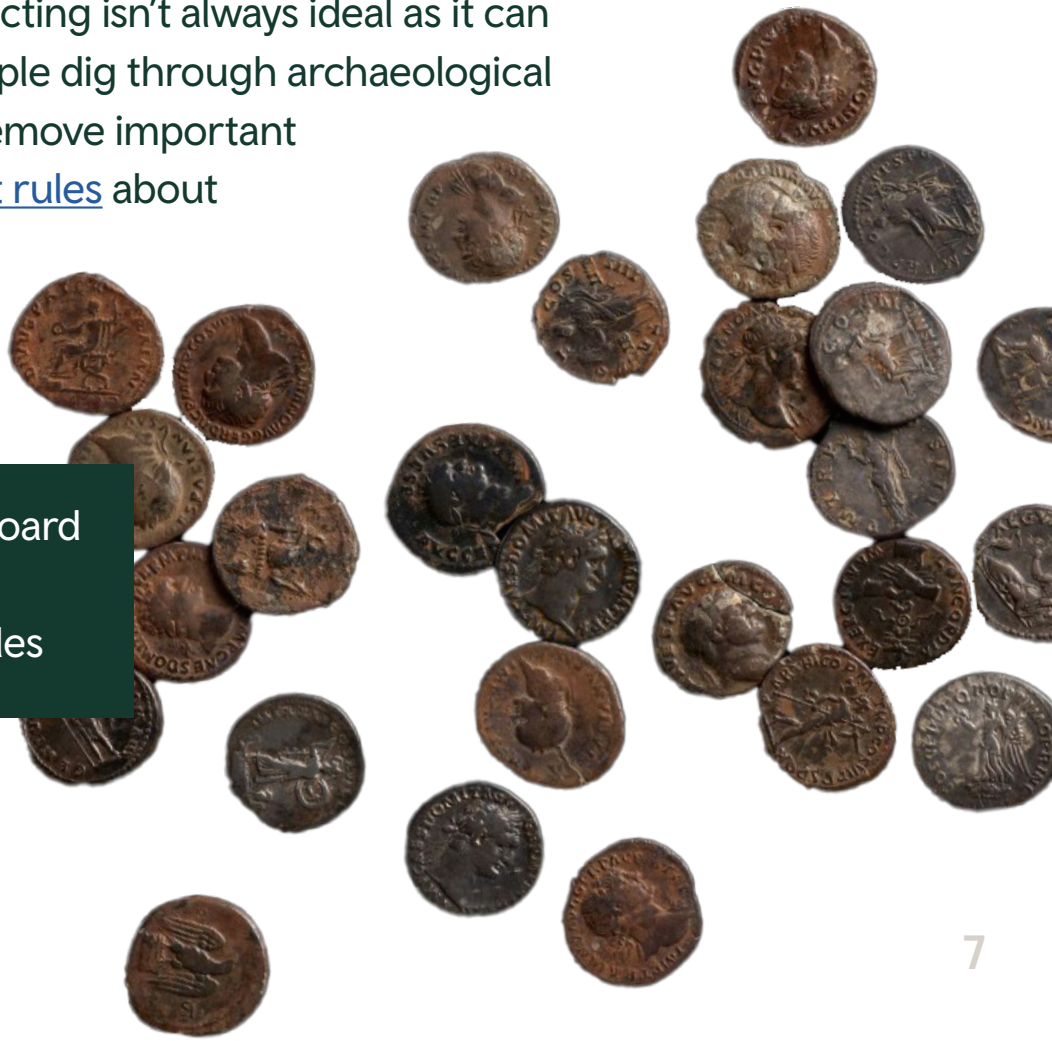
Go online and find out more about the most important Roman finds in Wales. Make a list of the most common and the rarest finds.

Roman coins, jewellery and precious metals have been found too. If there's a lot, this is called a 'hoard'. Most Roman hoards are made entirely of coins. There are over 1,200 known examples in Britain!

You don't have to be an archaeologist to find artefacts. A group of metal-detectorists found a hoard of 29 Roman silver coins in 2021 in Builth Wells, Powys. It may have been buried for safe-keeping or as an offering to the gods between AD 145 - 160. There were so many coins, this hoard was officially declared to be treasure!

However, metal-detecting isn't always ideal as it can cause damage if people dig through archaeological evidence and then remove important finds. [Cadw has strict rules](#) about people using metal detectors on their sites.

The Roman silver coin hoard
found in Builth Wells
© National Museum Wales



The secrets of the soil

The archaeologists also look carefully at the soil from the sites which can tell them all kinds of things. Just looking at the soil can reveal what kinds of plants were growing at the time. They can also work out the crops that would have grown there. This then tells them what people from that time period were eating too.

Did you know that archaeologists found out that 50 new foods were introduced by the Romans to Britain just by studying the soil? They could work out how popular they were as well. In the countryside, celery, coriander and dill were all the rage. But some others, which depended on nice weather like dates and olives, were rarer.



Ditches, pits, and the remains of walls can also help archaeologists piece together what the buildings looked like.

You'd never guess today that the stone walls you can still see in farmland near Brecon were part of the Romans' largest inland forts. Brecon Gaer, which was founded around AD 75, was chosen as a location by the Romans as it was in a handy meeting point of two major roads. Highly trained soldiers or legionnaires of the Vettonian Spanish Cavalry Regiment protected it.

You can find out more about Brecon Gaer and what archaeologists found there later in this Unit on our Roman timeline.



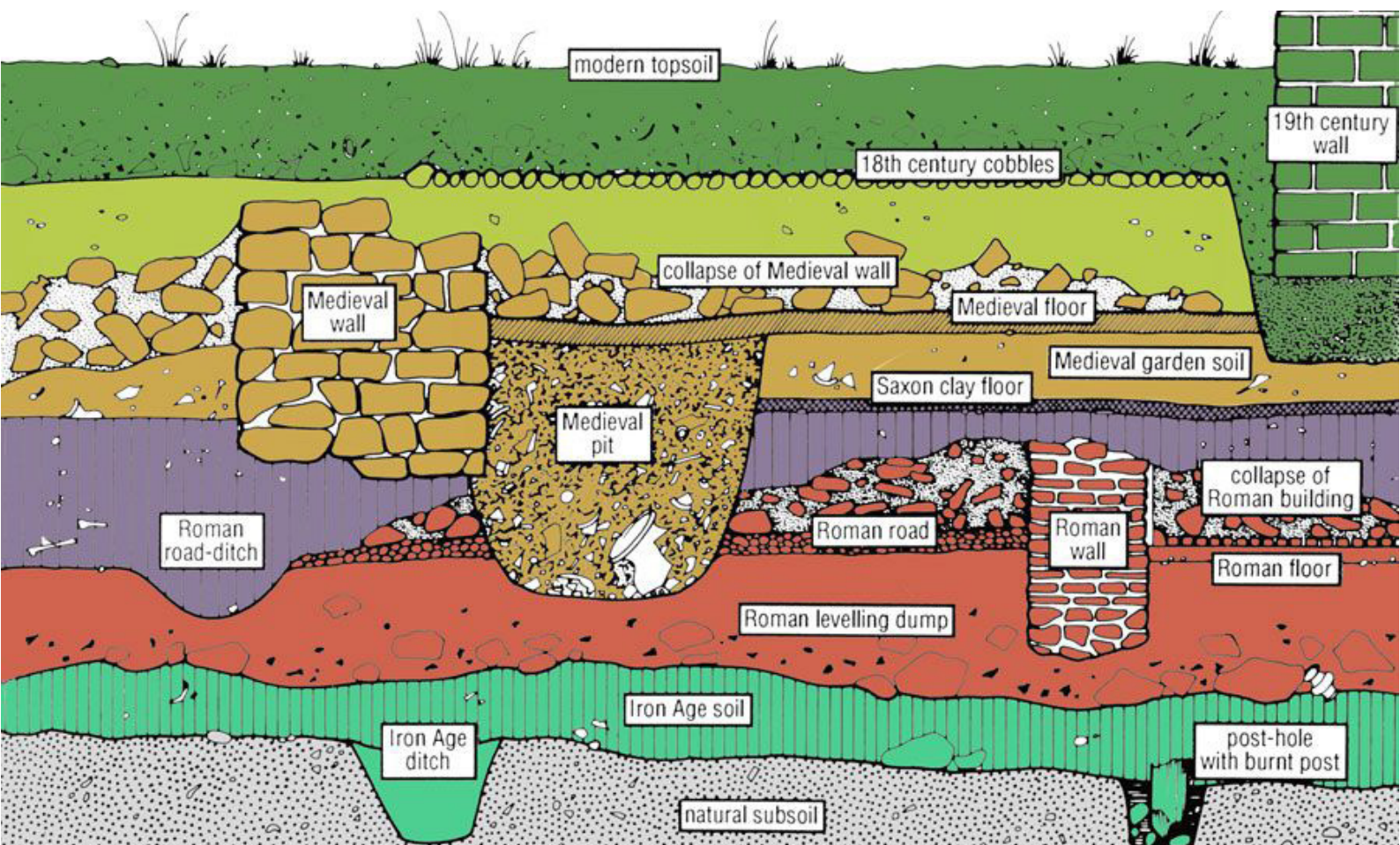
Remains of Brecon Gaer
Roman fort © Visit Wales



Layers of time

The further archaeologists dig down, the further they get back in time! Look at this graphic.

How many layers do you need to dig down before you reach the Romans?



Roman finds in Wales

We know that archaeologists have found lots of exciting things from Roman times in Wales, and they are still making new discoveries.

In 2011 a team of Welsh archaeologists found the remains of a 2000-year-old Roman port, where ships used to come and go, in Caerleon near Newport.

[Watch this excellent video](#) which shows what they think the site would have looked like at the time.

In 1978, Archaeologists found part of the Roman Baths in Caerleon dating from AD 75 under the living room of someone's house!



Roman baths in Caerleon
© Visit Wales



Roman sandals found in Caerleon © Visit Wales

Find out!

Have there been any exciting discoveries of Roman artefacts near where you live?



Explore the Roman timeline in Wales

The Roman conquest, occupation and settlement of Wales took place over the course of 360 years from AD 47 – 410. Take a look at our interactive Roman timeline which shows you which sites you can visit and why they are so interesting. We start our journey through time with the oldest sites and work our way from there right up until the end of Roman rule in Wales.

Cardiff Castle

Y Pigwn

Castell Collen

Dolaucothi

Brecon Gaer

Caerphilly Castle

Caerleon (Isca)

Caerwent (Venta Silurum)

Segontium

Caer Lêb

Caer Gybi

Din Lligwy



Cardiff Castle

Occupied: Around AD 50 - 300



The remains of the Roman wall within Cardiff castle's walls

For nearly 900 years, Cardiff Castle's Roman past remained hidden and forgotten and the remains of a Roman fort were only discovered in 1888. Now known as the site of one of the oldest forts in Wales, it's believed there were four forts in all, each of a different size. The first fort, a wooden one, was built after the defeat of Caractacus (or Caradog) whom we met in Unit 1.

It was rebuilt again around AD 75 once most of Wales was under Roman control. In AD 300 a stone wall and an earth bank were added. It was used as a naval base to defend against attacks from the west and the south.

Fantastic finds include the remains of the old Roman wall in the Visitor Centre. Find out more and visit the [Cardiff Castle website](#).



Y Pigwn

Occupied: Around AD 70 - 84



In the western wilderness of the Brecon Beacons, you can walk on a real Roman road. Straight as an arrow in true Roman style, you can walk across the high ground between Llandovery and Trecastle, which was a Roman fortlet.

As you walk past, you'll see some odd-looking humps, bumps and dips in the ground. These are all that remain of the Pigwn. This is where the Roman soldiers would camp if they had an overnight marching trip. There were two camps in the Pigwn, surrounding the summit of a 1,350-foot hill overlooking the 'Waun Ddu' (or the Black Bog). It sounds quite eerie!

You can close your eyes and imagine the wind howling around the soldiers as they bedded down for the night. The Romans had to march long distances to battle as they tried to quash those pesky Silures tribes in South Wales.

Getting there: Find out more about the Pigwn and other Roman Roads of interest [on the Cadw website](#). You can also download the [Walking with Romans app](#) which will give you a guided tour of the Pigwn marching camps.



Castell Collen, Llandrindod Wells

Occupied: AD 70 - early 4th century



Castell Collen Roman fort © People's Collection Wales

The Romans chose this site as it was in a tactically strong position overlooking the River Ithon near Llandrindod Wells. We can still see evidence of a rectangular, round-angled enclosure with banks and ditches. If you went up in a helicopter you could see the remains of digs made by Archaeologists in 1911 and 1913 from the air!

Further digs in the 1950s revealed a bathhouse built outside the main walls. In 2011, even more exciting discoveries were made by archaeologists.

Fantastic finds include enough Roman brick and tile fragments to suggest they could have been made nearby. One of the most interesting finds is a piece of carved stone with the likeness of a griffin. A griffin is a mythical creature, part lion, part eagle. It was inscribed in Latin and translated as 'A Flag Section of the Second Augustan Legion made this fort.' You can see these finds at the Radnorshire Museum in Llandrindod Wells.

Getting there: Visit the [Coflein website](#) to find out how to access Castell Collen.



Dolaucothi, Pumsaint

Occupied: Around AD 75 - 140



Roman workings at the Dolaucothi mine

Dolaucothi is the site of the only known Roman gold mine in Britain. It was tricky to get the gold out of solid rock, but the Romans managed it. They dug tunnels and developed advanced techniques including building special water channels or leats. These diverted 14 million litres of water every day to the mines. They were so sophisticated the remains of a Roman waterwheel were discovered inside one of the caverns! This water would be shot through at high pressure washing away all the dirt so they could get hold of the gold.



Fantastic finds include beautiful examples of Welsh gold jewellery now on display in the British Museum.



Gold Roman bracelet from
1-2C found in Dolaucothi
© British Museum

Getting there: You can visit the mines by road and have a guided tour, pan for gold and learn more about the Roman mining methods on site. Find out more on the [National Trust website](#).



Brecon Gaer

Occupied: Around AD 75 - 200



Remains of Brecon Gaer
Roman fort © Visit Wales

Hidden away behind a farm, this was an important Roman fort and the territory of the Silures tribe, who caused a lot of trouble! This spot was selected as it was the meeting point of two major roads. The fearsome and highly trained legionnaires or soldiers from the Vettonian Spanish Cavalry Regiment would have stomped around here during the reign of Emperor Claudius. The gravestone of a young cavalryman named Candidus was found nearby and can be seen in the local Brecknock museum.

Fantastic finds include evidence of a large guardhouse, a granary where the Romans stored grain and a heated bathhouse. You can still see the perimeter wall today with the corner turrets still preserved. They even had an underground chamber to hide their valuable items!

Getting there: You can access the site by road. [Find out more on the Cadw website.](#)



Caerphilly Castle

Occupied: AD 75 until around AD 250



Did you know that Caerphilly castle once housed a Roman Fort? In 1963 the architect JM Lewis was excavating a corner of the castle looking for evidence from the 1645 Civil War. But instead, he stumbled upon evidence of a much larger Roman fort, dating from the first century!

The Roman site had a bank of turf and clay on top of a base of cobbles. The archaeologists discovered that it was about 360 feet square, and an area of about 3 acres which is quite big! It's thought that it might have housed around 500 soldiers or a 'garrison'. There was probably a small settlement of people living outside the fort too.

Fantastic finds include late first century pottery, pieces of glass bottles and small pieces of lead.

Getting there: You can visit the site of this majestic castle by road, rail, bus or bike. Find out more on the [Cadw website](#).



Caerleon (Isca)

Occupied: AD 75 - 300



Caerleon amphitheatre
© Visit Wales

The perfect introduction to Roman Wales, a visit to Caerleon is a must. It was known as Isca to the Romans, after the river Usk/Wysg on which it was situated. Caerleon was the permanent base of the Mighty Second Legion Augusta who stayed there for over 200 years.

These soldiers were from the warmer regions of northern Italy, southern Spain and Provence so they wanted some home comforts. As a result, they built the amazing fortress baths. They had a state-of-the-art leisure centre and a spa! They could even visit a masseur and then enjoy a sauna. You can explore the remains of the huge 'natatio' or open-air swimming pool today. You can even see a Roman soldier diving its depths (thanks to some film wizardry).

Caerleon is the only site in Europe where you can see the Roman Legionary barracks where the soldiers slept and kept their weapons. You can also explore the best surviving amphitheatre in Britain in Caerleon where the gladiators fought to the death.



Fantastic finds include an amazing collection of 88 engraved gemstones rescued from the bathhouse drain! These and many more artefacts are all on display in the excellent museum on site.



One of the gemstones discovered in the Roman Baths of the goddess Minerva © National Museum Wales

Getting there: You can visit Caerleon by road, rail, bus, or bike. Visit the [Cadw website for more information](#).



Caerwent (Venta Silurum)

Occupied: From AD 75 - 4th Century



Roman site in
Caerwent
© Visit Wales

Caerwent may not be as famous as nearby Caerleon (Isca), but it's an important site, nonetheless. This is because it's an example of a Roman settlement of the defeated Silures tribe. Like other Roman locations, choosing Caerwent as a site was no accident. It was built on a crossroads between other important towns, like Gloucester and Cardiff. It also had its own public baths and a very well organised Roman grid. Caerwent has the best-preserved Roman town walls in Britain. Over a mile of the original walls can be seen to this day. They are now about 5 metres high in places but were 7 metres high in their Roman heyday!

Fantastic finds include the foundations of a row of shops, a Forum and a 'highly intricate' coloured floor mosaic.

Getting here: You can visit Caerwent by road, rail or bus. Visit the [Cadw website for more information](#).



Segontium

Occupied: Around AD 77 – 394



Aerial view of
Segontium
© Visit Wales

The longest occupied fort in Wales for over 300 years, Segontium controlled the important island of Anglesey (Mona). This was a hugely impressive site with spectacular views across Caernarfon and the Menai Strait. Shaped a bit like a playing card, it had defences of earth and timber. The gates were placed in a typically neat Roman symmetrical manner and timber-framed buildings lined the streets.

Roman soldiers from modern Northwest France were stationed here until AD 394. It was designed to hold over a thousand soldiers! A settlement or 'vicus' was built around it which included traders and eventually the families of soldiers.



Fantastic finds here include Roman coins, the remains of a bathhouse, a guest house or 'mansio' and a temple to the god Mithras.



A gold and copper Roman good luck charm found in Segontium - inscribed in Greek. © British Museum

Getting there: You can travel to Segontium by road and visit the on-site exhibition. Find out [more on the Cadw website](#).



Caer Lêb, Anglesey

Occupied: AD 200 - 300



Caer Lêb is very old and an example of a prehistoric settlement which means many different 'tribes' or people lived there over time. It lies west of Brynsiencyn near Llanfairpwll. It's most likely to be an Iron Age settlement which continued into the Roman period.

Fantastic finds include pieces of pottery, a Roman coin and a brooch dating from between AD 200 and AD 300. Also found were the remains of a round house with a stone floor and an unusually placed fireplace (near the wall rather than in the centre).

Getting there: You can travel to the site by road or by train to Llanfairpwll. Find out more [on the Cadw website](#).



Caer Gybi

Occupied: From around the 3rd century



Remains of the Caer Gybi Roman Fortlet
© Visit Wales

Caer Gybi is a striking site located on low cliffs overlooking the sea at the centre of Holyhead. This strongly suggests that it was part of a coastal network of Roman defences to protect them from possible attacks from the sea. It may also be linked to the late Roman watchtower at Caer y Tŵr at the top of Holyhead Mountain. You can imagine a Roman watchman peering out from the watchtower in case of an attack from the fierce Irish pirates!

Fantastic finds include the walls of this rectangular shaped fort today standing up to 4m high and 1.5 thick! You can also see the remains of the four corner towers. Today only the north-west corner tower remains from Roman times.

Getting here: You can visit by road or by rail. [Visit the Cadw website](#) for more information.



Din Lligwy

Occupied between the 3rd and 4th centuries



Din Lligwy was a late Roman settlement used by local Britons in the third and fourth centuries AD. It covered an area that was larger than a quarter of a football pitch. It's a fascinating ancient village well worth a visit. You can still see the remains of two round huts and several rectangular shaped buildings. These could have been used as barns and workshops. The site was encircled by a large stone wall which was 15 metres thick. As the Din Lligwy villagers were a farming community, these walls were built to keep their animals from wandering.

Fantastic finds discovered here show that the people did follow a Roman way of life. These include Roman coins, pottery, glass, a small silver ingot and remains of metalworking.

Getting here: You can visit the site by road. Find out more [on the Cadw website](#).



Awesome Activity 1

Now you've learnt about these places on the timeline why not go on Cadw's Roman Conquest and Settlement of Wales trail? It will help you see for yourself the profound effect the Romans had on our landscape.



Statements of What Matters

Being curious and searching for answers is essential to understanding and predicting phenomena.



Awesome Activity 2

Why don't you do a 'mini excavation' too?

There are lots of ways you can recreate a mini archaeological dig. You could use a shoe box, a sand tray, or even a plastic paddling pool! (Ask permission first!)

Select some artefacts from the list below. You can choose three organic things (things that were once living) and three inorganic things (things that were never living):

Organic

- Apple core
- Leaves
- An empty shell (e.g. a seashell)
- A piece of wood
- A newspaper page

Inorganic

- A piece of metal like a coin
- A stone
- A piece of pottery (e.g., an old mug or broken piece from a garden pot - making sure it's not sharp).
- Something made from plastic (put this at the top layer of your dig as this is the 'newest' material on your list).



Awesome Activity 2 (cont.)

Then bury your artefacts carefully by placing about 10cm of soil into your plastic container and burying two artefacts in each layer. Try and think about which artefact should go first (remembering its age). Then swap around your trays with other classmates.

Use the tools of the trade such as trowels and brushes, start uncovering your buried artefacts and carefully record them on a grid to show where each object was found. You could sketch each one too, just like archaeologists do.

You could also create an archaeology field diary to record, identify, describe and analyse your finds. Then you could create a fun display to show off your important finds! You could even leave your container for eight weeks outside before doing your mini excavation when the artefacts are sure to have changed.



Statements of What Matters

Enquiry, exploration, and investigation inspire curiosity about the world, its past, present and future.

Appropriate disciplinary approaches, including digital humanities will help learners gather, justify, present, analyse, and evaluate a range of evidence.

