

History

Enquiry: How “dark” were the Dark Ages?

The end of Roman Britain

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Rome abandons Britain

In 410AD, a group of important Romans in Britain sent a request to the **emperor** in Rome. They asked for Roman soldiers to help them protect themselves. Britain were under attack from **barbarians** and the Roman soldiers who had been in Britain for 300 years had been removed a few years before. The emperor didn't have any spare troops because he too was trying to protect other parts of his empire. A few years after this letter was sent, the old Roman towns were empty and the country palaces called **villas** had been abandoned . Britain's links with the Roman Empire had been cut.



Building a picture of Roman Britain

Many people used to think the collapse of Roman Britain happened because the British Isles were invaded by **tribes** called the Anglo-Saxons. However, recent historians have used new **evidence** which suggests the Anglo-Saxons did not destroy Roman Britain. Instead, they think Roman Britain had already collapsed before they invaded. Even though nothing was written down during this time, we can build a picture of what life was like in Roman Britain by digging up ruined buildings and graves buried deep in the ground.



The rise

Over the course of several hundred years after the arrival of the Romans, Britain became a developed and wealthy place. **Archaeologists** have found evidence that there were lots of busy towns where people bought and sold products brought to Britain from across the Roman Empire, like olive oil and fish sauce. People also used coins to buy and sell things, which only happened in wealthy societies. There were public baths and **temples**, like there were across the Roman Empire. Archaeologists have also found the remains of countryside palaces, called villas, where the richest Romans lived. Inside, beautiful **mosaics** have been found, and evidence of underfloor heating. Archaeologists have also dug up a Roman graveyard, and looked closely at the skeletons, finding that Roman Britons combed their hair (sometimes even dying it) and ate well.



The fall

Within a few years, Roman Britain had collapsed. People stopped living in towns and started building their homes out of wood rather than stone. People also stopped making pottery on a large scale. We know this because of what archaeologists have found during their work. People moved back into **hillforts** that had been abandoned when the Romans arrived centuries before. Some people stayed behind in towns and tried to keep the streets clear, but left the bigger buildings to fall into ruin. And at some army camps in the north of England, a handful of soldiers stayed behind to protect their families from Scottish and Irish invaders. Most of the people living in Britain ended up living in small villages made up of huts, farming just enough to keep themselves alive during winter.



Glossary

An empire: a country or group of countries ruled by a single person

A villa: a country palace where rich Romans lived

A barbarian: the word used by Romans to describe a person from outside the empire

An archaeologist: a person who digs up the ground looking for human remains

Evidence: something used by a historian to prove that something happened

A temple: a place where people worship

A mosaic: a piece of art made from small stones

A hillfort: a safe place on top of a hill



Comprehension Questions

1. Why did a group of important people in Britain send a letter to the emperor?
2. What is the name of a person who digs up the ground looking for the remains of human activity?
3. What has been found in the ground that tells us about life in Roman Britain?
4. Where did people live after the Romans abandoned Britain?
5. How do we know that some people lived well in Roman Britain?
6. How do we know that the Roman Empire abandoned Britain?

