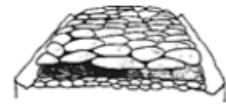


Roman Roads



The Romans were famous for their roads. You can still see some Roman roads today, two thousand years after they were built.

The Celts rode horses, walked, or travelled in carts pulled by oxen. Before the Romans arrived, Britain had no proper roads. There were paths and tracks to connect local farms and hamlets, and there were some longer routes for trade. These tracks were often in very poor condition.

It is quicker and easier to move on well made, solid roads. The Romans needed better quality roads so that they could move troops and supplies, trade goods, and send messages around the Empire. This meant they could keep control of the Empire and make more money.

The old roads were useful for the Celts, but the Romans built their new towns away from the Celtic settlements, so they needed the roads in different places. They were famous for building straight roads, and often filled in wet ground or cut a way through small hills. However, if faced with a large natural obstacle they would build the road around it, or zigzag a road up a hill. They weren't stupid!



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Troops and supplies arrived in Britain from across the sea and landed at ports in the South East. The Romans needed to get them to the military centres in Londinium (London) and Camulodunum (Colchester), so this is where the first roads were built. After this, the next job was to be able to move troops and supplies between the military centres and the forts that the Romans had built on their front line.

The first frontier was set up along a road that went from Exeter to Lincoln, running through Bath, Gloucester, and Leicester. This was known as the Fosse Way, the first great Roman road in Britain. The word Fosse comes from the Latin word for ditch (Fossa). For many years the land occupied by the Romans in Britain was protected by a defensive ditch running between Exeter and Lincoln. It is unknown whether the ditch was filled in and the road built later, or whether the road was built to follow the ditch.

As the Romans took control of more land, the roads were extended. Other famous Roman roads are Stane Street, Dere Street, Ermine Street, Akeman Street, Portway and Watling Street. Once the main routes had been built they started increasing the number of minor roads to and from the new towns they had built, to make trading easier. During the first hundred years of Roman occupation it is believed that between 8000-10,000 miles of roads were constructed. All by hand!

The Romans did not have a compass or map to help them build roads. Surveyors used a tool called a **groma**. This was an instrument that had two pieces of wood nailed together at right angles to make a cross. There was a weight hanging from each of the four ends. The surveyor

knew that he had a straight line when one lead weight from the same piece of wood lined up with the one in front of it. Wooden posts were then dug into the ground to mark out the straight line that the road would follow.

The roads were literally highways, they were built higher than the ground around them to help the rain drain off. Two ditches, each about 60cm wide, were dug either side. The roads were built wide enough for two chariots to pass each other. The earth dug from the ditches was piled in the middle to build the road up. The materials used varied depending on what was available in the area, but there tended to be three layers. The first layer would be large, rough stones to make a hard surface. Broken stones or tiles would form a second layer, perhaps mixed with sand or cement. The top layer was gravel or small stones, compacted to make a smooth, hardwearing surface. Some roads would have paving stones laid on the top. This was more usually done in larger towns.

It was Roman soldiers that were tasked with most of the road building. They were well practiced, so knew what they were doing, and they were trusted to do a good job.

When the Romans left, the stubborn Britons did not bother using the roads they had built!

Roman Roads Comprehension

Answer the questions below in full sentences.

1. How did the Celts travel around Britain?
2. Why did the Romans put so much effort into building roads?
3. Why didn't the Romans just improve the existing roads?
4. Where did they build the first roads? Why?
5. Where did the Fosse Way start and finish?
6. Can you explain in your own words how a groma was used?
7. How wide were the roads?
8. Why do you think they didn't use paving stones on all of the roads?
9. Why was it Roman soldiers not slaves who built the roads?
10. Why do you think the Britons didn't use the roads that the Romans had made?

