

The Story of Eastbourne

Roman Eastbourne

Use this box to explore and uncover the Roman story of Eastbourne and the surrounding area.

Find a selection of real artefacts used and made by people in Eastbourne as well as suggested learning activities. This box also features digital files including an introduction to Roman Eastbourne

Since 1712, as Eastbourne's seafront gradually developed, workers kept digging up bits of a vast building with tessellated corridors, stone columns, underfloor heating and even a bath-house. This building was Eastbourne's Roman Villa.

Current estimates put this building at about the same size as the famous Roman Palace at Fishbourne and it was probably built by as early as 60AD. This was a fitting residence for an Important Roman Official, or even a local ruler who had thrown in their lot with the invaders.



Other Roman families lived in farmsteads on the Downs, particularly in the area around Beachy Head. There have been many Roman coin hoards found nearby, they nearly all date to the 3rd Century AD and are a type of fairly low value currency made locally as copies of official imperial coinage. We don't know why they were buried but it was a time of unrest, rebellions, civil wars and raids along the coast.

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Base of a Roman Cup

Romano British pottery, made here in Britain was completely different to the Iron Age pottery that came before it. This cup would have been made on a potter's wheel and fired in a kiln rather than moulded by hand and fired in an open fire.



Hypocaust tiles

Roman hypocaust systems were essentially underfloor heating. They allowed hot air to circulate beneath the floor and through the walls of buildings. Floors were raised on brick columns (pilae). Hot air from a wood-burning furnace outside the house would have been drawn under the floor and flowed between the stacks. The hot air would also have been channelled up the walls through pipes and out at roof level. Tiles like these were used to form the hollow pipes to carry the hot air throughout the Roman house.

The grooves and lines on the tiles are mostly functional - to provide a rough surface for mortar on the tiles to attach to each other or to the outside wall.

Hypocaust systems would only be in wealthy people's houses or baths.



12 x Roman Coins

These coins are part of a coin hoard found buried in a Roman pot on the Downs. The coins are known as Barbarous Radiates and date to the 3rd Century. They are a type of fairly low value currency made locally as copies of official Imperial coinage. We don't know why they were buried but it was a time of unrest, rebellions, civil wars and raids along the coast.



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Roman Rings and Brooch pins

Many rich Roman women owned expensive jewellery. They wore precious stones such as opals, emeralds, diamonds, topaz and pearls set as earrings, bracelets, rings, brooches, necklaces and diadems.



Roman Mortaria pottery

These pieces are from Mortarium bowls. This is a Latin word for 'mortar', as in 'pestle and mortar'. It was used for grinding up food such as herbs, and as a general mixing bowl. Small stones (called 'trituration grits') were deliberately added to the inside surface to help grind the food.

They might also have been used to make Roman toothpaste... A delicious mixture containing ground up mouse skulls!



Roman Oil Lamp found in Eastbourne's Roman Villa, Royal Parade

Oil was expensive in Britain so not everyone would have had an oil lamp like this one. It used a wick made from linen or similar fiber that stuck out the end and the oil would go in the hole in the middle. The wick could then be lit and used by the owner to find their way around their villa after it got dark.



Roman Brooch with enamel decoration
Brooches were used to fasten various items of clothing for both men and women and the majority were made of copper alloy.