

Welcome to the Corinium Museum where you will discover the archaeology and history of Cirencester and the Cotswolds.

Prehistory

The earliest people arrived in the Cotswolds during the Pleistocene Ice Ages, which began 2 million years ago and lasted until 12,000 years ago. These people lived by hunting, fishing, and gathering plants. The period between 1,000,000-10,000 BC is known today as the Palaeolithic and it was during the early Upper Palaeolithic, about 35,000 years ago, that modern human beings (*Homo Sapiens Sapiens*) first appeared in Britain. Little is known of the people who lived in the Cotswolds at this time and our only evidence comes from their worked flint tools, most commonly 'hand axes'.

Following the last Ice Age, the climate became warmer, sea levels rose and Britain became an island. The period between 10,000 - 3,500 BC shows a marked technological change in tool manufacture and use. It is known as the Mesolithic. Evidence for the Mesolithic period in the Cotswolds comes mostly from flint scatters. The Cotswolds were apparently wooded and people roamed in small groups hunting and gathering.

During the Neolithic period (3,500 – 2,300 BC) people began to work together to grow crops and domesticate animals. In the Cotswolds woodland was cleared creating open fields for farming. Tools were increasingly specialised and included polished stone axes, which were widely traded. Society became more settled and structured and large settlements were built, such as Crickley Hill and Cowley Peak near Stroud. The people of the Neolithic period buried their dead in large burial monuments like the one at Hazleton. This burial mound had 2 chambers and held about 23 bodies. The gallery contains a reconstruction of its south chamber.

Around 2300 BC another major technological change took place with the introduction of bronze metalworking. As skills in metalworking developed a wide range of weapons and personal ornaments were produced, including swords, spears, rings and pins, (examples of which can be seen in the cases in this gallery). The greatest concentration of settlement in this period was in the Thames Valley, where the gravels were fertile and easy to plough.

The Iron Age

The peoples of Britain began to use iron rather than bronze for tools and weapons about 700 BC. The 7th and 6th centuries BC were a period of increasing social unrest and fortified villages or hill forts were built. Evidence from early Iron Age settlements suggest that this was a period of massive population growth, resulting in changes in the organisation and use of the land. Distinct tribal groups emerged throughout Britain by the 2nd century BC and the local tribe in this region was the Dobunni.

By the 1st Century, this tribe had an extensive defended settlement (81 hectares) at Bagendon, 6 kilometres from Cirencester. They had developed a mint and continental trade links, evidenced by the wine amphora found in excavations. Horses were of special significance to the Dobunni as can be seen by their depiction on Dobunnic gold and silver coins and finds of harness fittings (including one from South Cerney) made to adorn a chariot horses.

The Roman Fort

Soon after the Romans arrived in Britain in AD43, a cavalry fort was built on the outskirts of present day Cirencester. The discovery of the two military tombstones belonging to Sextus Valerius Genialis and Dannicus show how established the fort was and give valuable information about these cavalrymen, for instance – Genialis was a Frisian tribesman from modern Holland and Dannicus was from August in Switzerland.

Roman Corinium

By 75AD, this fort had been dismantled and over the next fifty years the town of Corinium Dubunorum was laid out in traditional Roman style. It became an important administrative and trading centre. The town had an area of 96 hectares (the outline of the Roman walls is still visible). It is estimated that the Roman population of the town may have reached 10-15,000, similar to that of today. An extensive programme of public building took place between 100-150 AD, including the Basilica/Forum complex (the second largest in Roman Britain), a theatre and the amphitheatre (which could seat 8,000 people). Some idea of the scale and elaboration of these buildings can be gained from the two large Corinthian capitals on display; one decorated with acanthus leaves is from the Basilica and the other has gods and goddesses linked to Bacchus on each of its four sides and is from a free-standing Jupiter column (which can be seen reconstructed at the end of the gallery).

Another sign of Corinium's wealth and status is the number (over 90) and quality of mosaic floors found in the town and surrounding villas. The 'Hunting Dogs' and 'Four Seasons' mosaics date to the 2nd century and came from a large Roman town house excavated in Dyer Street in 1849. The 'Hunting Dogs' shows some sign of contemporary damage and repair – the dogs should be chasing something; now missing, and the two sea serpent and dolphin scenes have different artistic characteristics. The other images are of Neptune and Medusa. The 'Four Seasons' mosaic shows the heads of Flora (Spring), Ceres (Summer), Pomona (Autumn), sadly winter is missing. There are also depictions of Silenus, a companion of the god Bacchus and Actaeon in the process of transforming into a stag and consequently being attacked and eaten by his hunting dogs. Many of the 4th century mosaics have such similar designs that archaeologists think there were probably two workshops based in or around Cirencester. One of the most spectacular of these mosaics is the Hare mosaic in the Museum reception area. The Hare design is unique in Britain.

At the end of the 3rd century, Corinium was made the capital of the Province of Britannia Prima, an area that included the whole of south-western Britain. This is confirmed by the discovery of the so-called "Septimius Stone", a dedication from a Jupiter Column set up in Corinium, which describes Lucius Septimius as the Governor of Britannia Prima. As a provincial capital, Corinium became a centre for the collection of taxes and produce to supply the army and administration. Unlike many towns in Roman Britain Corinium continued to flourish in the 4th century, new houses were built and the town walls repaired.

The villas around Corinium would have been used for extensive sheep rearing and grain farming. The villa at Kingscote is just one example, and one of its mosaic floors – featuring Venus – and the panel of figurative of wall plaster from the same room, show that the wealth was not confined to the towns but was evident in the large farms around Corinium.

Mezzanine Floor

Roman Cirencester has produced many Roman objects, which illustrate what life was like in a Romano-British town. The gravestones provided such details as age, names and places of origin, which show how cosmopolitan the town must have been. The stone altars and religious sculpture are evidence of the variety of religious beliefs practiced in the Cotswolds. There are altars to Mercury, the god of commerce and trade, who is often shown with a cockerel, the genii *cucullati*, and the three Mothers. The latter two are Celtic deities. There is also the Acrostic – a Roman word square that reads the same forwards as backwards. This is one of only 11 found to date in the world and one explanation is that it holds a secret Christian code.

Anglo-Saxon Cotswolds

When the Roman administration collapsed in Britain at the beginning of the 5th century, Corinium went into decline. Settlers from northern Europe such as the Angles and Saxons moved into Britain bringing

different ways of living. Locally the most extensive evidence of Anglo-Saxon life comes from Lechlade and the cemetery site at Butler's Field. This cemetery dates from the 5th century to the 7th century and there is evidence of that the later Christian cemetery overlay the earlier pagan one. There were over 202 individuals buried here, including men, women and children. Most people have grave goods. One grave in particular, was that of a woman aged between 25 -30 years, nicknamed 'Mrs Getty', by archaeologists because of the huge number of high quality grave goods she was buried with. These included amber beads, from the Baltic, gilded bronze brooches and silver rings. During the 7th century some individuals were buried with gold and garnet pendants or cowrie shells showing evidence of trading routes stretching to the Indian Ocean. Wool combs were also found in two graves, which imply that these peoples' wealth may have come from trading wool. During the late Saxon period Cirencester became the centre of a Royal estate and minister church was built sometime in the 8th century.

Medieval Cotswolds

In 1117 Henry I founded Cirencester Abbey and gave the Royal manor of Cirencester to the Abbott. From the 12th century a trade in Cotswold wool began to develop which by the 14th and 15th centuries was on an international scale. Indeed Francesco Datini, an important Italian merchant from Prato, stated that "the best wool in Europe came from the Cotswolds and the best wool in the Cotswolds came from Cirencester". Wool was such an important commodity throughout the Cotswolds that many of its medieval churches were built and adorned with money from the rich Cotswold wool merchants, such as William Grevel of Chipping Camden and John Tame of Fairford. The Abbey with its extensive land holdings also took part in the wool trade and became the second richest Augustinian House in England. The main abbey buildings were located directly behind the present Parish Church. Successive Abbots extended and beautified the Abbey as can be seen from the remains of sculpture on display and found during excavations. The Abbey was dissolved under Henry VIII in 1539 and the buildings were demolished and the land sold. John Coxwell (1516-1618), whose portrait is on display at the end of the gallery, bought some of the Abbey property, in what was Abbott Street but was later renamed Coxwell Street. Despite plague and high inflation, the Cotswolds continued to prosper in the late 16th century.

The Civil War

In the 1640s, however, the area was plunged into turmoil by the English Civil War. Prince Rupert, on behalf of King Charles I, launched a successful attack on Cirencester on the 2nd of February 1643. Over 300 defenders were killed and 1,200 prisoners were taken and marched to prison in Oxford. The town was ransacked and wool and horses were seized. The Weston-sub-Edge hoard of silver coins dates to this period when it was hidden in a piece of tubing directly beneath the centre beam of the Hall of friendship to be retrieved later ...in 1981!

18th and 19th century Cirencester

By the 18th century the town had changed little since the Medieval period; there were two major landowners, the Master family to the east and the Bathurst family to the west. The trade in wool was still important but mixed farming was increasing. The Thames and Severn Canal, Cirencester branch was opened in 1789. In the 19th Century the market place was cleared of its slums, a workhouse was built and two railways came into the town. New houses were built – which allowed Roman Cirencester to be rediscovered and to go on display in the town's first museum in 1869. The museum was subsequently moved to its present position in the 1930s where it has remained since.