

The Roman Invasion of Britain

55BCE

In 55 BCE it was mainly Celts that lived in Britain. The Roman army had been fighting in France (then part of Gaul, or Gallia in Latin) and the Celts in Britain had been helping the Gauls as they fought against the Romans. Julius Caesar was the leader of the army in Roman Gaul. He was angry with the Celts for helping the Gauls so he took some of the Roman army across to Britain to teach them a lesson.

Two legions of Roman soldiers crossed the English Channel and landed in Kent. Caesar wanted to land at Dover, but lots of Celts were waiting there so they changed the plan. The Celts followed the Romans to their landing place and a battle took place on the beach. The Romans, who were used to fighting on dry land, were forced to fight in the water because the Celts charged down the beach.

Despite the efforts of the Celts, the Romans managed to win a few battles. However, Julius Caesar realised that the Celts were not going to give up without a fight and went back to Gaul.

54BCE

The following year, 54 BCE, Julius Caesar made another summer trip to Britain. This time he had 5 legions and 2,000 cavalymen. The Celts were not ready for them. Britain at that time had many kings or chieftains ruling lots of different tribes so they weren't fighting together as one country. The Roman army fought one tribe at a time, reaching and crossing the River Thames.

Some tribes decided to seek a peaceful solution and agreed to pay tributes to Rome rather than fighting them.

Before he was able to go any further Caesar had to leave Britain with his army to go and fight in Gaul.

The Romans hadn't totally disappeared though. The Roman traders saw a good opportunity for trade with the local tribes, and many goods were bought and sold, making their way across the Roman Empire to and from Britain.

43CE

It was the real deal this time. Emperor Claudius was in charge and he was looking for a way of impressing the Romans to make his position stronger. He wanted to conquer Britain and extend the Roman Empire.

Many people also believe that the Romans invaded Britain because they needed resources, such as slaves, metals and land to help build the Roman Empire.

Emperor Claudius sent General Aulus Plautius and four legions of soldiers, plus about the same number of auxiliary soldiers, to Britain. They were split into three divisions.

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They landed in the South East again. The first division marched west through the south. The second division marched North West towards North Wales and the third marched north towards York.

The first division captured the hill fort of Hod Hill and set up their camp. Evidence of a particularly gruesome battle in the South can still be seen in the war cemetery at Maiden Castle, full of enemy remains.

The Celts had tried to defend themselves and the fort by bringing up thousands of stones from the beach and using slingshots, but this was no match for the Roman army. This Southern division, led by Vespasian (later to become an Emperor of Rome) defeated tribes all the way to Exeter.

Many Celtic tribes realised how strong this Roman army was and their chieftains or kings made deals to keep the peace. They agreed to obey Roman laws and pay taxes. In return they were allowed to keep their kingdoms. These were known as 'client kingdoms'.

It was a common Roman tactic to take over without using force so they could concentrate the power of the army on the tribes or kingdoms still resisting.

Emperor Claudius travelled to Britain the following summer, by which time many chieftains had submitted to Roman rule.

The Roman Army was incredibly strong, but the Celts were also very skilled and brave warriors. The fighting continued for many years.

The Romans were still fighting in Yorkshire and other parts of Northern Britain forty years later. They never actually gained full control of Britain although they were still there almost 400 years after the invasion.

The Roman Invasion of Britain - Questions

55BCE

- 1) Who was living in Britain in 55BCE?
- 2) Who was the leader of the Roman Army in Gaul?
- 3) Why didn't the Romans land at Dover as they had planned?
- 4) When the Roman Army landed, what did the soldiers have to cope with that they weren't used to?

54BCE

- 1) How many Roman legions were sent over in 54BCE?
- 2) What was it about Britain at that time that made it easier for the Romans to fight?
- 3) What was the peaceful solution on offer to the tribes?
- 4) What was the good thing about the invasion in 54BCE?

43CE

- 1) Why did Emperor Claudius want to invade Britain?
- 2) Where did the Roman Soldiers set up camp in the South?
- 3) What evidence is there of a fierce battle at Maiden Castle?

Think carefully about the following questions and give full answers:

- 1) The Celts tried to defend themselves with thousands of stones from the beach put into slingshots. How do you think historians know this?
- 2) If you were a Celtic chieftain or king, would you submit to the Romans or fight them? Why?
- 3) Why do you think Emperor Claudius travelled to Britain the following summer instead of leading the invasion?
- 4) Why do you think the Romans chose to stay in Britain so long despite the North's constant resistance?