

OFF THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW: May 20, 2021 David Ross

David Ross, one of our local U3A members, spoke about his discoveries whilst undertaking a 300 mile ramble, following the route of the Roman Ninth legion, starting in Richborough on the Kent coast and finishing in York, often following the course of the old Roman road, Ermine Street. His talk focused on some of the features of Roman history he found during his walk. As well as visiting Roman sites, his route involved passing through the scenes of some of the key events in Britain's non-Roman history which he also described.

A helpful introduction preceded the account of David's walk with explanations of the various types of settlement, from major cities or 'coloniae', such as London, York, Colchester and Lincoln, to 'civitates', including Brough and Water Newton which were smaller Roman settlements of lesser significance. The initial conquest attempt under Julius Caesar from BC 55 to 54 was outlined and a map demonstrated the route pattern devised for the invading legions under Claudius in 43 AD. Their force numbered 20,000 legionaries and 20,000 auxiliaries and included elephants. Each legion of 80 men was equipped with a tent, kettle and millstones carried by a mule along with basic food, fodder and firewood; horses were used for the fighting. David followed the northerly course taken by the Ninth legion.

David's journey fell into two parts with a break after a few months whilst it was too cold for comfortable walking, just as the Romans stopped fighting during the winter. Stage one went from the Kent coast to London and on to Colchester via Watling Street where possible. The second phase, going further north, largely followed Ermine Street but the logistics of route planning were complex as much of the northern part of the route is now covered by dual carriageways and motorways, hardly appropriate for walkers.

The key places David visited started with Richborough, the site of a Roman fort whose outline is still clearly visible. From there he went on to Canterbury, an old Roman 'civitas', with Roman remains still apparent in the current structure of St Martin's church which was the first Christian church in Britain. Additionally, there is part of a Roman mosaic floor in the museum which also has interesting reconstructions of Roman buildings. Rochester was the next Roman settlement on his route, followed by Faversham with its nearby Roman amphitheatre.

Of particular significance was London, a 'colonia' which became the Roman capital of Britannia. Whilst complete buildings have not survived, remnants of several can still be seen. There is still a fragment of a Roman bridge over the Thames, and a small part of the amphitheatre is visible below the Guildhall Art Gallery. The sites of the forum, baths, the Mithraic temple, fort, walls, and the governor's palace, have each been identified and the Museum of London includes further Roman remains.

Next came Colchester, again a 'colonia', with Roman remains incorporated into the castle, Roman tombstones to be seen, and part of Roman town wall along with the Balkerne gate dating from 60s AD. St Botolph's Abbey also includes Roman stones and bricks in its fabric.

Stage two, the northern section, of David's journey was much longer but yielded fewer signs of Roman settlement. Once places of some significance under the Romans, Braughing and Godmanchester have few remains although David was more impressed by Water Newton, once a 'civitas' specialising in pottery. As a 'colonia', Lincoln had been a major Roman town and fragments of its gateway, the Newport arch and part of its wall can still be seen.

Much more can be viewed in York, again a 'colonia' whose river, the Ouse, was a great artery of trade. In York, David explored its Roman wall and intriguing multangular tower, seeing also the Roman column built by the Ninth legion in 100AD, and the modern statue of the Emperor Constantine, both near the Minster. A bust of Constantine, and the tombstone of Flavia Augustina, the wife of a Roman soldier, together with the family, are now in the Yorkshire Museum. Remains of the legionary headquarters can be viewed below the minster in its undercroft and one of the York pubs, appropriately called 'The Roman Bath', has been built over a former bath-house. Altogether, David found York the best place to see signs of Roman Britain.

The talk was very well received and yielded a range of interesting questions. For further reading, he recommended, 'Roads of Britain' by Ivan Margary; and 'The Oxford History of Roman Britain' by Peter Salway. David Ross has himself written a book on the journey: 'Off The Straight And Narrow: A Modern Roman Road Trip' published in 2018. Half of the profits from sales go to Cancer Research.



Roman Emperor Constantine the Great, by York Minster

