**Roman Colchester**

Colchester started life as a centre of the local Celtic tribe, the Trinovantes. It was a group of settlements and farmland surrounded by a network of ditches. The site was about 12 square miles or 20 square kilometres.

**The Romans invaded Britain in 43 AD** and they built a fort in a piece of high ground in this centre about 44 AD. The fort was surrounded by a ditch and an earth rampart with a wooden palisade on top.

The Romans left the fort about 49 AD. The Romans thought that the local tribes were now pacified and the area was safe. (They were wrong!). Still, the old fort was taken over by civilians and turned into a town. It was settled by retired Roman soldiers. About 54 AD a stone temple was built for Emperor Claudius (Roman emperors commonly claimed to be gods). Roman Colchester was called Camulodunum, from the name of the Celtic god of war Camulos and the Roman word dunum meaning fort.

In 61 AD Queen Boudicca led a rebellion and she attacked Colchester. The defenders took refuge in the **temple of Claudius** but the rebels broke in. They killed the people and burned the temple. They also burned the rest of the town (an easy task as most of the buildings were made of wood). However, after the rebellion was crushed the Romans rebuilt Colchester. **Between about 65 and 100 a wall was built around the town**. There was also a small fort at Gosbecks.

Roman Colchester probably had a population of 10-12,000. That seems small to us but in those days England had a tiny population and settlements were much smaller than they are today. By Roman standards, Colchester was a large and important town. It was also an important port because of its position near the sea.

**Colchester is the earliest recorded town in England. It was first recorded in the year 77 AD.**

Inside Roman Colchester potters worked in clay. Other craftsmen worked in glass. Some made things of bone. There were also blacksmiths and bronze smiths. Tiles and bricks were also made in the town.

There were at least 8 temples in Colchester. By the 4th century, there was a considerable Christian community in the town and Britain’s earliest known Christian church was in Colchester. The Romans also built a theatre at Gosbecks. This would have been an open-air theatre in the shape of a semi-circle.

In the 4th century Colchester, like other Roman towns declined. The last Roman soldiers left Britain in 407 AD and Roman civilization slowly broke down as fierce Saxons from Germany invaded.

**Saxon Colchester**

Town life may have ended after the Romans left. Most of the buildings in the Roman town were of timber and would soon have decayed and fallen to pieces. A small number of Saxons may have lived within the walls of Colchester and farmed the land there but it ceased to function as a town. Nevertheless, the Saxons gave Colchester its name. They called it Colne Ceaster. Ceaster was the Saxon word for a group of Roman buildings.

For hundreds of years, history was silent about Colchester. In the 9th century, the Danes invaded England and conquered the eastern region including Colchester. But the English fought back from the South and West. The Danes probably used Colchester as a stronghold as it still had its Roman walls. Both sides, the Danes and the English used old Roman towns and forts as strongholds where the local men could gather in the event of an enemy attack.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a sort of national diary, mentions Colchester in the year 917 when the English recaptured it from the Danes. The Chronicle says: ‘The people gathered that Autumn, from Kent, Surrey, and Essex and the nearest burghs (fortified towns). They went to Colchester, besieged the town, and fought till they overcame it and killed all the people except those who fled away over the wall’. The English then repaired the damage to Colchester and occupied it.

**By the late 10th century Colchester had a mint so it must have been a settlement of some importance**. It also had a weekly market.

**Colchester in the Middle Ages**

**In the late 11th century the Normans built a castle in Colchester**. It was probably begun around 1079 and was completed by 1100. The castle was built on the vaults of the old temple of Claudius. In 1216 some barons rebelled against King John and brought soldiers from France to help them. The French soldiers occupied Colchester castle. John’s men besieged the castle and expelled the French.

**In 1095 St John’s Abbey** was founded outside the South Gate. **St Botolph’s Priory was founded around 1100**. (A priory was a small monastery). Early in the 12th century St Mary Magdalene’s ‘hospital’ for lepers was founded outside the town to the Southeast. Magdalen Road is named after the Leper Hospital.

**In the 13th century, friars arrived in Colchester**. Friars were like monks except that rather than withdrawing from the world they went out to preach. In the town, there were Franciscans (known as Grey friars because of the colour of their habits). There were also crutched friars (Augustinians). They had a cross sewn on their habits. They were first called Cruxed friars from crux the Latin word for cross. It became corrupted to crutched.

At the time of the Domesday Book, in 1086, Colchester had 419 houses. It may have had a population of between 2,000 and 2,500, which made it a fair-sized town. It also had 4 watermills that ground grain to flour for the townspeople and 2 parish churches. By the 14th century, it probably had a population of around 4,000, which made it quite a large town by the standards of the time.

In 1189 Colchester was given its first charter (a charter was a document allowing the townspeople certain rights and privileges). In the Middle Ages, Colchester had 2 weekly markets and the merchants were allowed to elect bailiffs who ran the town.

The main industry in Medieval Colchester was wool (by far England’s most important export). Wool was woven in the town. It was also fulled. This means it was cleaned and thickened by pounding it in a mixture of water and clay. Wooden hammers powered by watermills did this. When it dried the wool was dyed.

As well as wool there was also a leather industry in Colchester. There were many tanners. Leather was used to make all kinds of goods such as shoes, hats, saddles, and bottles.

Grain was exported from the port at the Hythe, which was founded by the 12th century. (Hythe is an old English word for landing place for ships). There was also oyster fishing in the River Colne. For centuries Colchester was famous for its oysters.

By 1104 Colchester had a fair. In the Middle Ages, a fair was like a market but it was held only once a year and would attract buyers and sellers from London and all of East Anglia.

The fair in Colchester was held by St John’s Abbey. The Abbott had the right to charge tolls on stallholders at the fair. From 1189 the Hospital of St Mary Magdalene was allowed to hold a fair. **From 1310 St Botolph’s Priory was allowed to hold one.**

By the late 12th century there was a community of Jews in Colchester. But in the late 13th century all Jews were expelled from England.

Colchester was given a new charter in 1413. At that time the town gained its coat of arms. St Helena, the patron saint of Colchester is supposed to have found the true cross of Christ. This is shown on the coat of arms. The red background represents the blood of Christ.

In the 15th and 16th centuries by law, every man had to practice archery on Sunday at the Butts. Butt Road is so named because it led to the Butts just outside the town.

**Colchester in the 16th century**

**In 1538 Henry VIII closed the Abbey, the priory, and the friaries.** His daughter Mary 1553-1558 tried to undo the religious changes of the first half of the century. During her reign, some 23 Protestants from Colchester and the surrounding area were martyred in the town.

**In 1565 Queen Elizabeth allowed refugees from Holland to come to Colchester,** **(Dutch Quarter)**where they made bays, a kind of cloth. By 1575 at least 500 Dutch settlers had come to Colchester. The area north of the High Street became known as the Dutch Quarter.

Bourne Mill was built in 1591 (although it was originally a fishing lodge).

**Colchester in the 17th century**

In 1635 Colchester was given a new charter and gained its first mayor. However, like other towns in the 16th century and 17th century Colchester suffered outbreaks of plague. There were severe outbreaks in 1603-4 and 1665-66. The latter outbreak may have killed half the population, (which was about 8,000). But each time Colchester soon recovered. There were always plenty of people in the countryside willing to come and work in the town.

**The civil war between the king and parliament raged between 1642 and 1646.** Colchester escaped the fighting as it was in an area controlled by parliament during the war. Originally the townspeople supported parliament but they seem to have grown disillusioned.

**A second civil war broke out in 1648. In June of that year, a royalist army approached Colchester.** The gates were closed but after a short fight, the royalist soldiers were allowed in. A parliamentary army came and laid siege to the town. The siege lasted until the end of August and the townspeople were reduced to eating cats and dogs. Furthermore, many houses in Colchester were damaged by cannon fire. Inevitably the town surrendered. Afterward, 2 of the royalist commanders were executed next to the castle. The people of Colchester were also forced to pay a fine of 12,000 pounds (a very large sum in those days).

At the end of the 17th century a travel writer, Celia Fiennes described the town: ‘Colchester is a large town. You enter the town by a gate. There are 4 in all. There is a large street that runs a great length down to the bridge, it’s nearly a mile long. Through the middle of it runs another broad street nearly the same length in which is the Market Cross and Town Hall and a long building, like stalls, on which they lay their bays, exposed for sale. Great quantities are made here and sent in bales to London. The whole town is employed in spinning, weaving, washing, drying, and dressing their bays in which they seem very industrious. The town looks a thriving place judging by the substantial houses. It has well-paved streets, which are broad enough for 2 coaches to go abreast’.

**Colchester in the 18th century**

The Bluecoat School, a charity school for boys and girls, opened in 1710. It was called that because of the colour of the school uniforms. Hollytrees, which is now a museum was built in 1718. Colchester gained its first theatre in 1764. **The Minories, which is now an art gallery, was built in 1776.**

During the 18th century, the cloth trade in Colchester declined in the face of competition from the North of England. By the early 19th century it had died out. However, at the end of the 18th century, a silk weaving industry began. Colchester dwindled to being a market town where agricultural produce was bought and sold. But it was still a fair size. In 1801 the population of Colchester was around 11,500, which was quite large by the standards of the time. In the early 19th century fulling mills (used to clean and thicken wool) were converted for milling grain to flour.

In the 18th century, Colchester became famous for candied eryngo (sea holly) roots. A writer said: ‘To the Colchester oysters let me subjoin another thing which Colchester is famous for viz. the excellent sweetmeats made of eryngo roots’.

**Colchester in the 19th century**

**Essex County Hospital was built in 1818 and the Corn Exchange where grain could be bought and sold was built in 1820. St Botolph’s Church was built in 1837. The Garrison church was built in 1856. The Castle Museum began in 1860.**

In the 18th century, Colchester had night watchmen who patrolled the streets at night but the first modern police force in the town was formed in 1836. The railway to London opened in 1843. By 1851 Colchester’s population had reached 19,000.

In the late 19th century Colchester became famous for engineering. Machines such as steam engines were made in the town. There was also some brewing and a boot and shoemaking industry. On the other hand, the silk industry died out by the late 19th century. The harbor at the Hythe faced competition from the railway but it continued to be important in the 19th century. Much of the trade was coastal. Commodities like coal were bought from other parts of the country along the coast to Colchester.

**During the Napoleonic war, barracks were built in Colchester**. Most of them were sold when the war ended in 1815 but new barracks were built in the 1850s and 1860s when Colchester became a garrison town.

From 1819 Colchester had gas streetlights. The first cemetery in Colchester opened in 1856 and the first public library in the town opened in 1894. In the early 19th century people obtained water from wells or pumps. **In 1880 the town council decided to build a piped water supply. In 1882-3 a redbrick water tower was built, it is known locally as Jumbo.** Meanwhile, a volunteer fire brigade was formed in Colchester in 1878.

Life in 19th century Colchester gradually improved. In the mid-19th century, some sewers were built in the town centre but most people continued to use an earth closet. In the 1880s the council began building a proper system of sewers for the town. **Castle Park opened in 1892.**

In 1884 Colchester suffered an earthquake. Only 1 person was killed but many buildings were damaged.

**Colchester in the 20th century**

By the beginning of the 20th century, the population of Colchester had reached about 38,000, less than half its present size. Boot and shoemaking died out in the early 20th century but engineering continued to flourish.

The first electric lights in Colchester were switched on in 1901 and from 1904 electric trams ran in the streets. Buses replaced them in 1929. Meanwhile, Colchester Town Hall was built in 1902, and Severalls Hospital was built in 1913. Colchester gained its first cinema in 1910. **The War Memorial was built in 1923 and Hollytrees Museum opened in 1929.**

Although the majority of houses built in Colchester in the early 20th century were private the council did build some houses in the 1920s. In the 1950s the council built estates at Shrub End and Monkwick. In the 1950s the army built the Montgomery estate. In the 1960s the council built Greenstead estate. Private houses were built on St John’s estate in the 1960s. In the 1980s private houses were built at High Woods, North of the town.

Meanwhile, the *Natural History Museum in Colchester opened in 1957.* The Colchester Institute opened in 1959 and the University of Essex opened in 1961.

In the late 20th century industries in Colchester included electrical equipment, bearings, and diesel engines. Colchester’s harbor, the Hythe, flourished in the late 20th century.

The Social History Museum in Colchester opened in 1974 and Bosbeks Archaeological Park opened in 1995.

Meanwhile, the shopping centre in Colchester was developed. Lion Walk precinct was built in 1976. Culver Street Precinct opened in 1987 and St Johns Walk in 1990. Meanwhile, In the 1980s an inner relief road was built at Colchester. Furthermore, Colchester General Hospital opened in 1985.