

ROAMIN' COLCHESTER

From gladiatorial games and extant Roman architecture, to oyster feasts and a stunning new arts centre, Deborah King takes a tour of what purports to be Britain's oldest town.



Colchester's history is certainly a colourful one. Once known as Camulodunum – meaning 'fortress of the (war god) Camulos' – the Essex town served as the first Roman capital of Britain in AD43, and was later the site of a major siege during the Second English Civil War. But it's not just a place for historians to relish: a thoroughly modern new arts centre, opening late this year, will create a cultural

hub for the region, offering free admission to exhibitions, theatre and music events. Wherever you go in Colchester, even the shortest of walks sees you spanning the centuries with every stride.

1 From Colchester Town railway station turn right along St Botolph's Street, an area set for regeneration. Turn right into St Botolph's Church Walk, bear left at the church and ahead is St Botolph's Priory. This magnificent structure, made from Roman bricks, was mainly untouched during the Dissolution of the Monasteries but badly damaged during the siege of 1648. Leave the priory from the first exit and turn right along Priory Street, looking out for sections of the wall that were repaired after the siege. At the end is East Hill.

2 Turn right here to visit the Siege House on the River Colne, where, on 5 July 1648, more than 500 Royalist foot soldiers and 200 horses stormed East Bridge and the mill. The battle scars left by musket balls can still be seen on the pitted walls.

3 Retrace your steps and continue along East Hill, turning left into The Minories – an art gallery and café with sculptures and a folly in the grounds. Behind this is firstsite:newsite, the striking contemporary cultural and arts centre due to be completed early next year (visit www.firstsite.uk.net for more details).

4 Back on East Hill, cross the road by the Tourist Information Centre and enter Colchester Castle Park via Hollytrees, the town's finest Georgian mansion and home to an eclectic museum of local history. The castle, which has the largest Norman keep in Europe, influenced the plans for the Tower of London, so any similarity is not imaginary. Inside is a chance to discover what it must have been like to live in Colchester during the 11-week long Civil War siege. It's also home to one of the country's finest collections of Roman artefacts, including

the underground remains of the Temple of Claudius dating from AD54. Colchester transforms once more into a Roman town on 4-5 October, when Lower Castle Park will host chariot racing and gladiators with a cast of more than 300 re-enactors.

5 Pass to the right of the castle, through the award-winning gardens of Castle Park, to the obelisk that marks the spot where the Parliamentarians shot Royalist leaders Sir George Lisle and Sir Charles Lucas. Lisle apparently asked the marksmen to move nearer in case they missed him. There are 33 acres to explore with riverside paths, sections of the Roman wall and formal gardens, including a lovely sensory garden. A fireworks display will be held here on 5 November. Bear left and leave the castle grounds through the small iron gate, then go through an alley into Maidenburgh Street.

6 In the 16th century, Flemish Protestant weavers settled in the attractive timber-framed houses with overhanging upper storeys that make up the town's Dutch Quarter. Go along St Helen's Lane, turn left and then right along Quaker's Alley and walk through the churchyard of St Martin's, whose medieval tower was destroyed by cannon balls during the siege.

7 Turn right along West Stockwell Street to see the blue plaque on numbers 11-12, where in 1806 Ann and Jane Taylor wrote *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, recently voted Britain's favourite nursery rhyme. Retrace your steps and carry on to the High Street, passing to the right of one of the oldest timbered buildings – a former wool merchant's house and now a solicitors' office.

8 Turn right at the town hall and look up to see its elaborate stained-glass windows and carved stonework. This is where the annual Oyster Feast takes place, usually on the last Friday of October. The succulent Colchester native oysters have been farmed here for centuries. Continue past the famous department store, Williams & Griffin, then cross North Hill at the traffic lights and walk along Balcerne Passage.

9 Now pass to the right of Jumbo, a Victorian water tower, and The Mercury Theatre, one of the best repertory theatres in the country, to the Balcerne Gate. Much of Colchester's Roman wall survives and this splendid archway was the original main entrance to the town.



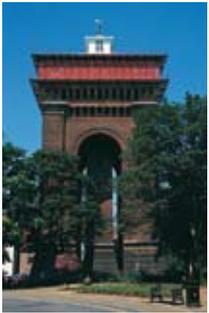
Looking up the High Street to the town hall.



A continental flavour: the 16th-century Dutch quarter.



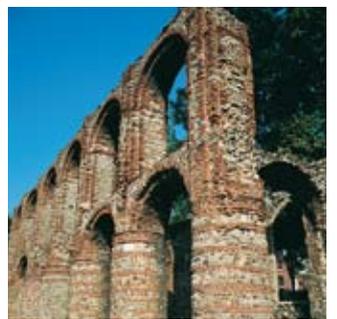
Castle Park's award-winning gardens to the rear of the Norman Castle.



Jumbo - the town's Victorian water tower.



Eld Lane's tempting specialist shops and boutiques.



St Botolph's Priory - survived the Dissolution, ruined by the Civil War.

10 Turn left, following the Roman wall, and walk up the steps on the left to St Mary-at-the-Walls church - now Colchester Arts Centre staging live comedy and music. Walk through the churchyard and along Church Walk to the crossroads.

11 Cross Head Street and continue along Sir Isaac's Walk into Eld Lane, a delightful pedestrian area of specialist shops. At the Vineyard Steps look ahead to see the ornate 15th-century Tudor gatehouse of St John's Abbey, the sole survivor of the Benedictine abbey of St John which was stormed by Parliamentarian soldiers during the Civil War siege. Now go down the steps or take the lift to the car park. A market is held here on Fridays and Saturdays.

12 Walk along Vineyard Street and notice a long section of the Roman wall on the left. Turn right into St Botolph's Street and retrace your steps back to the station.

WALK IT!

TIME: Allow 1.5 hours for the walk and another 3-4 hours for attractions.

GETTING THERE: Local trains run into Colchester Town station, as well as a link line from Colchester (North) station to London.

INFORMATION: The TIC is in Queen Street opposite the castle, ☎ 01206 282920, www.visitcolchester.com.