

Rome: the British Dimension

A Pocket Timeline and Student Traveller's Crib Sheet


The following table will be a useful guide to planning the best moment to visit. As a rule of thumb, avoid periods of civil war and mass butchery, since there is a surplus of soldiery and you may end up as a victim. Artillery is very indiscriminating of nationality.



Names in bold indicate that they actually ruled in Britain. Gaps mean that your news is coming from the continent.

Day Trip		
	Julius Caesar	<p>Two brief incursions into Britain, in 55BC and 54BC, end in tribute and prestige but no lasting conquests. But it is a chance to see a glimpse of the Republic, including Trebonius – active on the Ides of March – and Cicero's brother.</p> <p>Conquest is subsequently considered but not carried through, when it's calculated that the cost of garrisoning the country if captured will be more than the assessed revenue. Also, the high tariff rates on both imports and exports (ivory jewellery, gemstones, glassware) from the Empire would have to drop if the trade became internal between provinces.</p>






High Season: the Golden Age of Empire. When men were men and barbarians were afraid.		
	Caligula	AD 40, the insane emperor orders his army to parade on the seashore as if to invade Britain. Instead of ordering them to embark, they are ordered to attack the sea and then collect shells in their helmets as trophies. Britain gets a brief reprieve.
41-54	Claudius	AD 43, it's invasion time for real. The Roman army at first is frightened at a naval assault, but is calmed by Claudius's ex-slave. Four legions move into southern Britain. One of the generals is the future emperor Vespasian. After commander Aulus Plautius does the main work, Claudius assumes command, and the campaign reaches its high point when he visits Camulodonum in person. He returns to Rome to celebrate a triumph. He clearly considers the move an important one and worthy of a bit of propaganda: he renames his two year old son Germanicus, Britannicus, and builds a triumphal arch in Boulogne. Attempts by Caractacus to fight on meet with failure.
54-68	Nero	<p>Britannicus never makes emperor: he's outmanoeuvred by his adopted brother Nero, and poisoned.</p> <p>AD 60-61 marks a terrible season. The legions assault Mona and wipe out the druids. In their absence, the Iceni under Boudicca revolt, leading to the destruction of much of what the Romans had built. The disaster is, however, turned by general Gaius Suetonius Paulinus and the rebellion crushed.</p> <p>Vespasian's son, Titus, another future Emperor is another figure who serves in Britain as a military tribune during this period, where he is credited with saving his father's life. Afterwards, a commission is set up headed by one of Nero's</p>



		<p>freedmen to apportion blame. One commander, Poenius Postumius, has already fallen on his sword after keeping his forces well clear of both the huge British army and the massive Roman victory. Nero's man, Polyclitus, arrives in the country with a huge entourage. He causes much sniggering even now amongst the locals at the way in which the mighty Roman generals are frightened by this ex slave.</p> <p>Nero's own downfall heralds a major series of civil wars. Happily, Britain itself will mostly avoid being directly caught up as a battleground, since all eyes are on capturing Rome.</p>
68-69	Galba	<p>At the time of Nero's downfall some soldiers from Britain find themselves posted to the area around Rome. Many in turn end up amongst the mutinous troops that join the conspiracy against Nero's successor, Galba. One of them, Sulpicius Florus, plays a key role. After Galba's murdered, his designated heir Piso Licinianus, a descendant of both Pompey and Crassus and a promising young man, swiftly and prudently does a runner and hides in the Temple of the Divine Julius in the Forum (a stroll from the Temple of Hercules pictured). Florus displays his ingratitude at having just been made a Roman citizen by Galba. Along with a Praetorian, he drags Piso from his hiding place and kills him. The murderers then sell Piso's head back to his widow and brother Scribonianus. Florus later becomes a marked man along with 120 other killers when yet another Emperor subsequently comes to the throne.</p>  <p>We're not sure which is more astonishing; that a British auxiliary is going around killing imperial princes, or that just eight years after the Boadicean carnage they are trusted enough to be let into the army.</p>
69	Otho	<p>The XIV legion, the highly-prized veterans of the Boadicea campaign from Britain, support Otho and back him in war in northern Italy. Suetonius Paulinus, whose reputation after Boadicea puts him at the forefront of Roman commanders, is one of the three leading (and prudent) Othonian commanders; but despite winning a battle his natural caution adds to suspicion about his motives and his sensible advice is ignored. At Bedriacum, Otho's forces unwisely throw away a defensive advantage. Otho's front line initially breaks the enemy and seizes an eagle, but these rally and in turn Otho's men break. The XIV in reserve in turn is attacked and routs. Otho is defeated and to spare further bloodshed, kills himself.</p>
69	Vitellius	<p>Trebellius Maximus is the governor of Britain. He's formal and proper but also lazy, unmilitary, and greedy, and with it hated by the army. He gets involved in a squabble with legate Roscius Caelius of the XX legion and they accuse each other of treason and fraud; the result is that military discipline collapses and the auxiliaries even openly insult the governor. With political control in the northern empire collapsing into confusion as Vitellius takes over the German legions, Trebellius flees the province which swings behind the new claimant. Britain remains quiescent and effectively falls under martial law.</p> <p>Vitellius wins and Otho's XIV legion is sent off over to Britain where it had been posted in previous years. This move gets an angry and unruly unit out of the way that despite its recent defeat was making Vitellius's men very nervous. Over in Britain it's safely outnumbered by the local legions who back the new emperor.</p> <p>Suddenly news breaks of an attack on Italy from Vespasian's men, and reinforcements are rushed from the island. These arrive too late, but some</p>


		<p>detachments from the Second, the Ninth and the Twentieth legions are on hand to fight at the terrible battle of Cremona, and are defeated. The last service British troops perform for Vitellius is supplying a cavalry detachment as part of an escort for one of Vitellius's generals going up to north Italy to try to bolster the front. Vespasian's forces soon after bloodily triumph and seize Rome.</p> <p>The news is swiftly couriered to Britain by Vespasian's men. The Second had already gone wobbly, remembering Vespasian's time with them years before, and only the presence of large numbers of junior officers in the other legions who've recently been promoted by Vitellius has delayed the whole island shifting support earlier on finding Vespasian is now in the game.</p> <p>Britain's hapless exiled governor is replaced by Vettius Bolanus, an upright man who's served against the Parthians, but a bit soft on discipline. Happily, he has Agricola to help him get things back in order, and perhaps from Bolanus in turn Agricola picks up the need to be discreet to avoid being seen as a political threat.</p>
69-79	Vespasian	<p>Increased provincial taxation and inflation follows measures to restore the ravages of civil war. It is unlikely that many residents of Britain will be rewarded after backing Vitellius in the war. Different opportunities, however, emerge as the legions advance in conquest west and north across Britannia. In far off Judea, the little-known city of Jerusalem is sacked by Vespasian's son Titus in AD70, and the Jewish occupants expelled.</p>
79-81	Titus	
81-96	Domitian	<p>Roman forces under Agricola push to the very furthest wastes of the north, leading to a climactic battle at Mons Graupius c. AD83. However, these gains are abandoned by Domitian and a settled frontier set up further south. As a good public image move, a huge arch is built around this time at Rutupiae, the gateway port into the province.</p>
96-98	Nerva	<p>A short reign masks the start of a period of stability and continuity across the Empire and what was seen at the time as a golden age of civilisation and (mostly) good government. One of his favoured individuals is Frontinus, a former governor of Britain, and a writer of some importance on military matters and engineering.</p>
98-117	Trajan	<p>AD101, troops are brought over from Britain to take part in a huge campaign across the Danube. The fearsome Dacians are conquered.</p>
117-138	Hadrian	<p>The emperor writes off 900 million sesterces of uncollected state debts with a public burning – of the books, not of the debtors. Dealing with disturbances in the north, Hadrian visits Britain in person in AD 122 and orders the construction of a great wall. It is his one visit – there are after all three dozen provinces requiring his personal attention.</p> 
138-161	Antoninus Pius	<p>AD 142, fighting in the north leads to the construction of a new defensive perimeter further up, called the Antonine Wall.</p> 
161-180 Jointly 161-169	Marcus Aurelius Lucius Verus	<p>AD 161, a brief period of military difficulties in the north of Britain once more. AD 166-9+, a terrible plague hits the empire, brought back after a war in the east. In the following decade, the emperor sends over to Britain a large force of Sarmatians, fierce and imposing armoured cavalry from the great eastern plains. Best steer clear of raiding right now, unless you are <i>really</i> good at running.</p>

Mid-Season: after the golden times, the age of "iron and rust" (Dio Cassius). Even so, the close of the third century sees lots of villas springing up just as Britain is seen as a safer place than the continent. So despite being a period of troubles, in Britain there is a lot of wealth and partying around.

180-192	Commodus	A megalomaniac emperor. Expect to see an abundance of his statues in the province, as even the months are renamed in his favour. The state is near-bankrupted. British legionaries declare their support for Priscus, who rejects them. A large group marches on Rome to lobby for the death of a former commander, Perennis, which is granted. We suspect that right now Commodus is reflecting on the fact that his great great great uncle was the very Piso Licinianus whose head had to be ransomed back from the British soldier who removed it in the time of Galba's overthrow in AD69. The future emperor Pertinax is nearly lynched in Britain trying to get the army under control.
192-193	Pertinax	Assassinated in Rome by soldiers when trying to fix things. He didn't learn from his British experience (or possibly, learned too well).
193	Didius Julianus	After Pertinax's murder, in a return to the bad old days, several other pretenders to the throne emerge. In Britain, the declared emperor is its governor Clodius Albinus . He reaches an agreement with a competitor, Severus, and stays on there as Severus's heir (193-197).
(193)-211	Septimius Severus	<p>Severus unfortunately discovers that Albinus is engaged in plotting behind his back while he sorts out the other pretenders to the throne. While the mood in Rome is for a settlement, Severus has other ideas. Albinus recognises the writing is on the wall and strikes first. He crosses into Gaul and raises forces. But he fails to push into Italy, and in a gigantic and horrific battle at Lugdunum (Lyon) he is defeated and afterwards commits suicide. His head is chopped off; his family are killed.</p> <p>At the close of his reign, Severus (AD 209) takes his sons Caracalla and Geta to Britain. He is accompanied by another relative, the future emperor Elagabalus. The locals north of the border had previously been bought off for a large sum of money, but that was indecent and the troops were underemployed and at risk of becoming restless. Severus dies on campaign.</p>
211-217 Jointly 211	Caracalla Geta	<p>Briefly, Britain and specifically Eboracum (York) becomes the heart of the whole empire and the city where the fate of nations will be decided. At the time of their father's death, Caracalla is in charge of the military and Geta the civil administration. But hurts will not heal. They travel back to Rome, where Geta is murdered. His supporters are killed in their thousands: residency in Britannia is no safety as members of Geta's old court in Eboracum end up decapitated too.</p> <p>Around this time measures are put in place to divide Britain into two provinces, Inferior and Superior (Lower and Upper is northern and southern; all is measured from Rome).</p> 
217-218	Macrinus	

218	Diadumenianus	
218-22	Elagabalus	Despite (dare we say, because of?) his brief time in Britain as a very young child, Elagabalus is more fascinated by the exotica of the Eastern Empire during his brief reign.
222-235	Severus Alexander	Killed by his troops for buying off the enemy. Don't expect the bribes to last in this era, since soldiers demand booty.
235-238	Maximinus Thrax	A peasant boy giant of a soldier made good, who deified his wife Paulina. The decline in the Empire is now obvious to all.
238	Mixed	Gordian I (formerly a governor in Britain, but now around eighty years old) and Gordian II raise a revolt that lasted a few weeks before they died. Their reigns are officially recognised retrospectively by Gordian III. Pupienus and Balbinus are recognised jointly by the Senate, before being murdered by soldiers.
238-244	Gordian III	
244-249	Philip the Arab	
247-249	Philip the younger	
249-251	Decius	First widespread persecution of Christians, with the requirement of citizens to show a document given as a receipt when you make a pagan sacrifice. Note this may be targeted at <i>all</i> worshippers of all non-standard gods so make your barbarian nationality known when challenged. 
251-253 jointly	Trebonianus Gallus Volusianus	AD 251, another large bout of plague.
253	Aemilius Aemilianus	
253-260	Valerian Co-Emperor	Ends his days as a prisoner, used as a footstool to help the Sassanid Emperor of Persia mount his horse. When he dies he is skinned and stuffed as a trophy. Do not try this with a live Emperor.
253-268	Gallienus	Initially co-Emperor covering the West, he would lose control over much of it. The Gallic Emperors AD 261, Britain joins the Germans, Gauls and Spanish in recognising Postumus as emperor, who initially may have rebelled after a quarrel over booty. After some initial fighting, Gallienus concentrates on his problems in the east while Postumus gets on with the job of governing what he has. His lack of bloody ambition ultimately is his undoing. He is murdered in 269 and replaced by Marius , in turn murdered and replaced by Victorinus . Victorinus has difficulties keeping Spain and Gaul from going their own way, and is murdered in 271. Tetricus I takes over (271-274). He is defeated and deposed by Aurelian, but he and his co-ruling son Tetricus II are spared. The 'Gallic Empire' returns to the Roman Empire. For thirteen years Britain has been away.
268-270	Claudius II (Gothicus)	
270-275	Aurelian	Currency reform helps trade. Introduction of Sun worship. 
275-276	Tacitus	

276	Florianus	Supported by the west, including Britain, while the east supported Probus. During a lull in the campaign his troops change their mind and kill him.
276-282	Probus	Major problems in Gaul over this period thanks to invading barbarians will likely reduce contact and trade between Britain and the rest of the Empire. Probus defeats the Burgundians, a number of whom are enrolled as auxiliaries and see service in Britain.
282-283	Carus	
283-285 Jointly 283-284	Carinus Numerianus	In 284, Carinus campaigns in Britain: the first sighting of a ruling universally-acclaimed emperor in three generations. As a result of this expedition, both emperors take the title Britannicus Maximus. It triggers a rare piece of poetry on the province by a leading poet of the day, Nemesianus: <i>"Nor let me fail to tell what campaigns you first ended, Carinus, beneath the Northern Bear with victorious hand, well-nigh outstripping even your divine father."</i>
284-305 From 285 From 293	Diocletian Maximianus Constantius	Order will finally be restored across the Empire, though it will still take some time in Britannia. Massive administrative reform occurs, including in Britain. The two provinces become a single Diocese, but divided into four new provinces; Britannia Prima in the west, Britannia Secunda in the north, Flavia Caesariensis in the east, and Maxima Caesariensis in the south. Diocletian also divides the imperial job. In 285 he makes Maximianus his colleague responsible for the west. In 293, he sub-divides both parts again, meaning in the west that Gaul and Britain now become the responsibility of Constantius . With Galerius also enthroned in the east, this made up the first four Emperors running the Tetrarchy . Keeping tabs on who is the actual local monarch now becomes a bit tricky for outsiders. 
285-305	Maximianus Herculius	Maximianus loses Britain to the hands of the two British Emperors . Carausius is an admiral from Belgica, thus being one answer to the ancient Sphinx riddle asking the traveller to name ten famous Belgicans. He defeated the Saxon pirates in AD 286 but kept some of the loot, for which reason his arrest was ordered. Instead, he flees to Britain and sets up his own government. In AD 293 he suffers a reverse in Bononia in northern France, and is murdered by his successor Allectus . Allectus holds on until defeated by Constantius who invades in AD 296. Britain is restored to the tetrarchy.
293-306	Constantius I Chlorus	AD 303: Great Persecution. Britain and Gaul avoid the worst of it, perhaps thanks to Chlorus. British craftsmen get sent over to Gaul to help rebuild the place after a series of troubles. Chlorus again gets promoted in the west when both senior tetrarchs retire (Maximianus perhaps unwillingly). Chlorus immediately makes another trip to Britain to fight the Picts. However, he dies at Eboracum with his son at his side. 
305-307	Severus II	Appointed by Galerius in the east as the replacement for Constantius when he died. Maxentius, the son of Maximianus, begs to differ and leads a revolt which ultimately ends in Severus's death
306-337	Constantine I	Constantius Chlorus's soldiers also beg to differ. They hail Chlorus's son, Constantine (later the Great) as Augustus. Constantine does not remain long in Britain, having urgent need to settle his uncertain inheritance. The Christian Church is now officially tolerated but under direct imperial patronage. Defeating his rivals, he reunites the Empire.
337-340	Constantine II	On his father's death, and something of a family bloodletting, he takes over

		Britain, Gaul and Spain. He dies fighting his brother, Constans, in southern Gaul.
337-350	Constans I	Having defeated his brother he takes over his territory, and unexpectedly appears in Britain in AD 343.
350-353	Magnentius	The first known properly-British Emperor (his father came from the island), though he never quite makes the full grade. His Caesar, or second in command and heir, is Decentius . He controls most of the west but is gradually pushed back and defeated by Constantius. Both he and Decentius kill themselves.
337-361	Constantius II	There is some dispute whether a Carausius II briefly appears in Britain filling a power vacuum. If so, this doesn't last as Constantius restores power in the west for the family of Constantine. It's a mixed blessing, as the infamous Paulus Catena does his work tracking down political victims. An incursion in the north by Scots and Picts is repulsed under Julian's cavalry commander, Lupicinus.
361-363	Julian	A pagan who briefly restores the old gods. In Britain, Alypius of Antioch governs moderately. Grain production and export is restored, with Britain playing an important part in supplying its neighbours with food.
363-364	Jovian	
364-375	Valentinian I	<p>Rules in the west while his brother Valens governs in the east. A competent general, which is just as well. AD 367: big trouble in Britannia as local government collapses, possibly through revolt, just as the whole frontier comes under pressure from a 'barbarian conspiracy'. Scots from Ireland, Attacotti, Picts and Saxons pile into the province. Nectaridus, the count of the coastal defences, is killed; considerable burning, looting and murder takes place. An optimal business opportunity for barbarians.</p> <p>Valentinian sets out to settle things in Britain in person. With the emperor first ill then distracted by events in north Gaul, several commanders, including the father of the future emperor Theodosius (possibly with his son), are sent in turn to try to bring things under control. Deserters are recalled by a pardon; small unit tactics break up the plundering parties; and towns are set in order again. Around this time, a fifth British province is created, Valentia.</p> <p>In AD 369, Valentinus tries to raise a revolt. He is of a previous imperial family and has been exiled to Britain. His moves are pre-empted and he is executed.</p> <p>In AD 372, subdued Alemanni under their king Fraomarius are co-opted as auxiliaries and sent to Britain.</p>
The Low Season: going downhill in a barrel of flaming pitch. Public buildings are getting pulled down or turned over to industrial use, litter's clogging up the streets, and things are visibly not what they were. Still, with large scale distance trading down, there's room for your wares.		
367-383	Gratian	<p>Named co-Augustus by his father Valentinian I, an unusual move, not least as he was a child. When Valentinian I dies, the army plumps for half-brother Valentinian II as senior instead. The settlement leaves Gratian in charge of Gaul, Britain and Spain.</p> 
383-388	Magnus Maximus	<p>A general in Britain who had been fighting in the north under Gratian. He revolts, and invades northern Gaul, where he defeats his former boss. With Gratian killed, a peace settlement is reached with Valentinian, and Maxentius holds Britain, Gaul, Spain, Africa and parts of Germania. Dynastic ambitions mean the deal doesn't last. He defeats his rival, but help from Constantinople ends his chances.</p> <p>The season of barbarian power within the empire begins, both within the palace,</p>

		and within the army. Being British meanwhile is becoming in literary terms almost synonymous with disloyal and nasty.
375-392	Valentinian II	
392-394	Eugenius	Front emperor in the west for the barbarian behind the throne, Arbogast, after Valentinian's body is found swinging in the Palace.
378-395	Theodosius I the Great	Theodosius in the East disapproves of the barbarian's choice and deposes him, briefly ruling the whole empire, united for one last time.
395-423	Honorius	<p>Rules the western half after it is partitioned again. At this point, everything goes fruit shaped.</p> <p>AD 406-7, Marcus declared emperor in Britain. AD 407, Gratian. AD 407-411, Constantine III. Constantine invades Gaul in 407 and advances to the south. His son, Constans, seizes Spain. In AD 409 Britain revolts against Constantine, however, and after losing Spain power trickles from his hands quickly.</p> <p>Honorius does not have the resources, however, to reimpose a military presence in Britain. His harsh punishments may also have suggested to past revolters their actions would not be forgiven. So Britain is left to go its own way for now.</p>
410+	Notional recognition of Rome only	<p>Rule is local, with power held by those in a position to wield it or take it: "a land fertile in tyrants".</p> <p>AD 415, the church rejects the teachings of British monk Pelagius, who disapproves of St Augustine's views on original sin (where everyone is guilty from Adam and Eve's day) in favour of free will (people make their own choices in life and can redeem themselves).</p> <p>AD 429 St Germanus visits to combat Pelagianism, and takes a military hand while he is there.</p>



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