Chapter Three

ROMAN BRITAIN

EVERYWHERE the Romans went they took their civilisation with them, one which had evolved in the warm south of the Mediterranean. Although mostly sensitive to the peoples that they conquered, they nonetheless superimposed upon them a whole way of life. The ruins of their cities and villas which we can still visit today are remarkable, above all, for the fact that, whether they are in Africa, the Middle East or Britain, they are all the same, both in their planning and use of classical architecture. And these were not the only things which were uniform: so was the structure of government the Romans imposed upon their empire, and its language, both spoken and written, which was Latin.

For four centuries Britain was one province of the greatest empire the world has ever known. That the Romans could transform the Celts with such speed was due to the fact that their army was also their civilisation on the move. Among the thousands of soldiers there would be those who knew how to read and write, plan cities and design buildings. There were others who could construct roads and waterways or possessed skills such as medicine. Without these abilities such a rapid transformation could not have taken place, one which saw a scattered rural society change itself into a society whose focus was to be something quite new, the town.

The army combined strength with knowledge, and Roman Britain was to burgeon and prosper as long as it remained. The province called for fifty-five thousand men to maintain it, initially as an army of occupation but later as one defending what had become Romano-British society. These soldiers were divided into two groups, the first being made up of legions all of whose members were Roman citizens. Citizenship could be granted by the emperor to anyone and gave that person not only certain rights but status within society. Legionaries came from all over the empire, not only from Italy but from places like Spain and Gaul. Each legion was made up of five thousand five hundred men, a hundred and twenty of those being cavalry, and each, in the early days of empire, was commanded by a Roman senator, a member of the governing body, with fifty-nine senior officers or centurions below him.

There was a second group called the auxiliaries. They too could come from any-

The Romans conquered Scotland and then were forced to abandon it. The tribes within it were kept at bay by an eighty-mile long wall stretching from the Tyne to Solway. The section here at Housesteads is one of the most spectacular surviving parts.

where but were unlikely to be Roman citizens, a privilege which was only extended to them later. These men were employed for various specialist purposes such as archers, slingers or skirmishers. To both these groups of land forces must be added a fleet, probably based in Dover whose main task was to patrol the seas against any potential invaders.

Roman soldiers looked very different from the Celts they defeated. They wore metal helmets and articulated plate armour and carried shields of wood and leather with a sword and dagger suspended from a belt. Each legionary had to carry two javelins which, on going into battle, were hurled at the enemy after which the sword and dagger came into play in hand-to-hand combat. Their life was one of unremitting discipline, with a nineteen-mile march and drill twice a day, every day. A high degree of fitness was demanded so that a legionary could leap fully armed onto a horse or swim with all his equipment across a river.

Dotted across Britain the legions were established in forts sited to achieve maximum strategic defence. These forts were all laid out to a uniform pattern, rectangles of fifty acres or more housing upwards of six thousand men. In the centre of the enclosure was the general's headquarters with a road crossing in front dividing the site into two, and a second road leading up to it. In this way the area was divided into three blocks containing barracks, hospitals, granaries, storerooms, bath houses, stables and workshops. Outside the confines of the fort there were private houses for the soldiers' families, temples for worship and an amphitheatre for sports and entertainment.

The army, after its initial conquest of the island, spent the majority of its time in peacetime tasks. The most important of these was governing the country. At its head was the governor, appointed directly by the emperor for a period of between three and five years. He was always chosen from among the most outstanding of the legionary commanders. The governor resided in London which by 60 A.D. had become the administrative capital of Britain, something which it has been ever since. The governor was complemented by a second official of almost equal power and independent of him, the procurator, again appointed by the emperor. He was the civil servant in charge of finances, seeing that taxes were collected and that the army was paid.

The system of government was not only made up of a network of garrisons stretching over the country but also of towns connected by roads. Roads were constructed by the legionaries as they conquered the country, and were essential for ensuring the swift movement of goods and commerce. These great highways, some twenty to twenty-four feet wide, were carefully built up in several layers of sand, gravel and stones and subject to constant maintenance. They are easily

Tombstone of a Roman centurion of the Twentieth Legion. Marcus Favonius Facilis, buried at Camulodonum, present day Colchester. The attire is that of a soldier with cuirass, sword, and javelin in his right hand.

recognisable today in any stretch of straight road connecting two towns whose origins were Roman. The network was not haphazard either for they all converged on London, giving it a primacy which has never been lost.

The greatest change of all, however, was the introduction of towns. To the Romans, urban life was the only one they recognised, something totally alien to the Celts who dwelt in scattered enclosures, often on hilltops. From the very outset the Romans began erecting towns of a kind which incorporated all the features which were to be found in the towns of their native Italy. They were all laid out to a similar pattern, a rectangular grid of streets covering anything between a hundred and three hundred acres. At the centre there would be a group of public buildings: a forum surrounded by a colonnade which acted as a civic centre with a marketplace either in or near it; on one side there would be the basilica or town hall from where the town was governed and where the law courts were situated. These headed a long list of other communal buildings which embodied the Roman way of life, to which the Celts were successfully converted. Each town had its own public baths, often several of them, with elaborate changing rooms, a gym, cold baths and rooms which ranged in temperature from tepid to hot. The Romans were masters in handling water, everything from aqueducts to bring it from rivers and springs outside a town to the drainage and sewerage within.

Each town also had its own amphitheatre on the outskirts, a large oval area surrounded by tiered wooden seats where races, combats, beast hunts and bear and bull-baiting could take place. Some also had theatres which were similar in construction but D-shaped where the citizens could enjoy plays, pantomime, singing and recitation. Both inside and outside the built-up area there would be many temples dedicated to the gods, not only the Roman ones, such as Jupiter, Juno and Minerva, but also to the emperor as a living god. At Camulodunum there was the headquarters of the imperial cult, with a huge temple which was the setting for ceremonies acted annually by delegates from all over the island. Over the centuries, shops which began as being of wood set on a stone base gradually became ones entirely built of stone. Initially the towns were constructed without walls but later, as the threats of invasion multiplied, they were added.

For the Romans, towns were an essential element of the pattern of government which they introduced. Each town had what was called a senate, an assembly of its most important citizens. Four magistrates were elected annually, two to act as judges and two others to control finance and building. In this way, fanning out from London along the roads, the decrees of the emperor and the orders of the governor and the procurator reached the furthest boundaries of the island.

The Romans brought their culture with them. Few aspects of that have survived better than the rich mosaic floors of their villas. This one is from a vast villa covering twenty-six acres at Woodchester in Gloucestershire dating from the fourth century. The wide range of local stones contributed to the quite exceptional colour and variety of mosaics executed in Britain.

Unlike the small Celtic rural communities, towns were by no means self-sufficient, for they depended on foodstuffs being brought into the marketplaces along the roads by cart from the countryside. The countryside, too, underwent a reorganisation in the form of the villa, a change which was far less revolutionary to the indigenous population. Villas began as the main farmhouse of an estate around which the old Celtic native huts clustered. They were simple but comfortable structures with central communal rooms and wings projecting at either end, and verandahs around them. Only the most splendid were of such a size as to form a complete courtyard. As time passed they became more luxurious with comforts like underfloor heating, mosaic floors and wall paintings. Occasionally, as at Fishbourne, they could almost be palaces. That villa covered no less than five acres with a colonnaded courtyard at its heart, and walls adorned with imported marble.

These villas presided over an agriculture which was not so very different from that practised by the Celts. The Romans, however, introduced new vegetables such as the cabbage, peas, parsnips and turnips, and new fruits too, apples, plums, cherries and walnuts. Better varieties of cattle were imported and the domestic cat arrived. Flowers such as the lily, rose, pansy and poppy were brought not only for their medicinal properties but for their decorative ones as well. For the first time men made gardens.

From the farms the produce not only went to the towns but, in the case of grain, to the ports for export to the mainland. Tin, copper, lead and, above all, iron ore, were excavated. Stone was quarried for building. Bricks and tiles were manufactured and jewellery, pottery and glass were made. With an abundance of wool, a textile industry developed.

Roman Britain was held together by a strong system of government. The creation of towns and villas formed a ruling class, one which could, and indeed did, include Celts who were Romanised, lived in towns and spoke Latin. In the country Celtic survived as the language of the peasantry. This new governing class was also in part held together by worship of the emperor, and through that gained allegiance to the whole idea of the Roman Empire.

The Romans, however, were tolerant in matters of religion, except in the case of cults which involved human sacrifice. That was why they eradicated the Druids. Otherwise the gods of the Celts lived on side by side with those introduced by the Romans. Later came new cults such as that of the Persian god, Mithras, or the Egyptian goddess, Isis. Christianity, too, reached Britain. As early as the beginning of the third century it was written that 'parts of Britain inaccessible to the Romans have been subjected to Christ'. Its early history is extremely obscure until, at the beginning of the fourth century, Christianity became the official faith of the Roman Empire. In

391 the Emperor Theodosius ordered the closure of all pagan temples. By then the British church was highly organised, sending its bishops as delegates to the great councils held on the mainland.

At its height in the third and early fourth century Roman Britain must have been spectacular, with its bustling, prosperous towns adorned with handsome public buildings and its countryside dotted with gracious villas. Life seemed full only of certainties, abundant food, ease of travel and increasing wealth. Little thought was given to the savage tribes which lived on the other side of Hadrian's wall, let alone those which could cross the seas. Even if these wild peoples did erupt from time to time to disturb the imperial peace, they were soon put to flight by the military might of the legions. Everything worked as long as those legions were in place. When circumstances arose which would lead to their withdrawal the civilisation of Roman Britain was seen to be hanging by a thread.

Finds at the Roman fort of Vindolanda, modern Chesterholm, in Northumbia. One is a betrothal medallion carved from Whitby jet, probably in York, and the other a letter written in pen and ink, probably to a soldier sending him socks, sandals, and underpants.

The only surviving body of what is likely to have been a Briton from the late Roman period found preserved in peat near Wilmslow in Cheshire. It is likely that he was clubbed to death, then garrotted, having his throat cut also as part of a ritual sacrifice. The fact that his finger nails were carefully manicured indicate that he was civilised.