

ROMAN DEPARTURE FROM BRITAIN

A Brief Overview

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(This material has been compiled from various unverified sources)

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Roman Departure from Britian- c. 409 AD

The Britons expelled their Roman magistrates in 409, having lost the protection of the army, which was taken by Constantine III to Gaul in 407 to establish himself as Western Roman Emperor. Facing invasion by Picts, Irish, and Saxons, the British cities appealed to Emperor Honorius for aid.

Unfortunately, Honorius was trapped in Ravenna with the Goths sweeping through Italy, and responded by telling the cities of Britain to fend for themselves. It is unclear whether the appeal preceded or followed the expulsion of the magistrates.

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The Honorian Rescript - c. 410 AD

Occupied with the constant barbarian threat and the continental machinations of the usurper, Constantine III, the legitimate emperor, Honorius, "sent letters to the communities of Britain, bidding them defend themselves."

This event is usually, erroneously, referred to as "The Roman Departure from Britain" or something similar that. The fact is that the bulk of the Romans had already departed the island long before, and Honorius' message was simply an official acknowledgement of that reality.

It is not specified whether Honorius' intentions were for a "final severing" of relations with Britain, at this time. He could have simply meant that the Britons were temporarily on their own, while Roman forces were otherwise engaged in Europe. In any case, for some years there may have been a lingering influence for the locals as Roman subjects; however, following this crucial point, Rome was unable to exert any further control or influence over the populace of Britain.

The rule of "Britannia" then fell to a series of Romano-British "tyrants" (Jerome, "Epistola", 133.9, 14) and, subsequently, to the Saxons.

In this significant year, 410 AD, the Goths, under Alaric, sacked Rome.

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Bignor Roman Villa, West Sussex

The Roman villa at Bignor was discovered in 1811 when George Tupper, whilst ploughing his field, struck a large stone believed to have been the piscina (Roman and Medieval artificial pool) in the Ganymede room. A local man, John Hawkins, and a leading antiquary, Samuel Lysons, commenced excavation work shortly afterwards and had uncovered more or less the entire site by 1819, coinciding with the death of Samuel Lysons. No further work was carried out at Bignor Roman Villa until 1925.

As with most Roman villas, the site evolved over several centuries, starting life as a simple farmstead with timber buildings in c. 190 AD. During the 3rd century, a masonry building was constructed comprising of just four rooms, which formed the basis of the west wing of the final site. Sometime later

northern and southern wings were added, and then it was extended further still by the addition of an eastern wing. The final building now formed a complete square around a central courtyard, and comprised some 65 rooms in the main complex, with another nine rooms located in various outbuildings.

The majority of what remains today comprise the rooms in the western end of the north wing, and the bathhouse in the south eastern corner. These rooms, including the changing area of the bathhouse, contain some of the best preserved Roman mosaics in England, including the remains of the north corridor mosaic which extends some 79ft (24m) and would have originally run the complete length of the wing.

There is a summer and a winter dining room (one was heated under-floor, one was not), the summer room containing a beautiful mosaic of Ganymede being carried by an eagle from Mount Ida. The winter dining room also displays a fabulous mosaic depicting Venus and the gladiators but, unfortunately, the lower panel has suffered some destruction, due to the floor collapsing into the under-floor hypocaust. All eleven rooms open to the public have mosaic floors that have survived to varying degrees, and all very impressive even now. It is difficult to imagine just how sumptuous these would have looked in Bignor Roman Villa's heyday.

The bath complex in the south eastern corner was accessed through the Medusa room - a changing area - which contains a particularly nice mosaic with the head of the gorgon at its centre. This mosaic is quite unusual in that it is bordered by square red tiles and black shale slabs. The baths form the traditional layout of warm rooms, hot room and cold plunge pool.

The later history and decline of the building is not well documented and, at present, the assumption is that the site was abandoned following the Romans' departure from Britain (c. 409 AD).

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