

Great Archaeological Sites in Newport



2. CAERLEON LEGIONARY FORTRESS



When the Romans conquered South Wales, they initially set up a command centre at Usk under the Twentieth Legion. However, new campaigns led to changes in deployment: the Twentieth moved north in the 70s to be replaced by the Second Augustan Legion, and the command centre was moved to a new fortress at Caerleon (centred ST 3390 9060).

Initially the new fortress was constructed for speed in earth and timber, defended by an earthen rampart and ditch, and with almost all the buildings inside in timber. Only later, at the start of the 2nd century, did rebuilding in stone take place, starting with facing the rampart with a stone wall. But one building was different – the baths needed to be in stone right from the start because of the heating system they incorporated. Analysis of those parts which have been excavated shows that the architects involved were working to the most advanced design principles anywhere in the empire at the time. The main part provided what we would think of as a Turkish baths routine, but it was also combined with swimming, opportunities to work out, and food – in short, the baths were what we would think of as a leisure centre for the troops as well as a way of keeping clean.

Another form of leisure activity, although not one that we would approve of, was provided in the amphitheatre which lay just outside one of the gates. It was oval in shape, with the spectators massed around a central arena. Stone walls retained the earthen bank that supported the seating. There would have been boxes for the commander and other dignitaries in the prime positions at either end of the short axis, at right angles to the processional entrances to the arena on the long axis. We don't have any definite information about exactly what spectacles took place there,

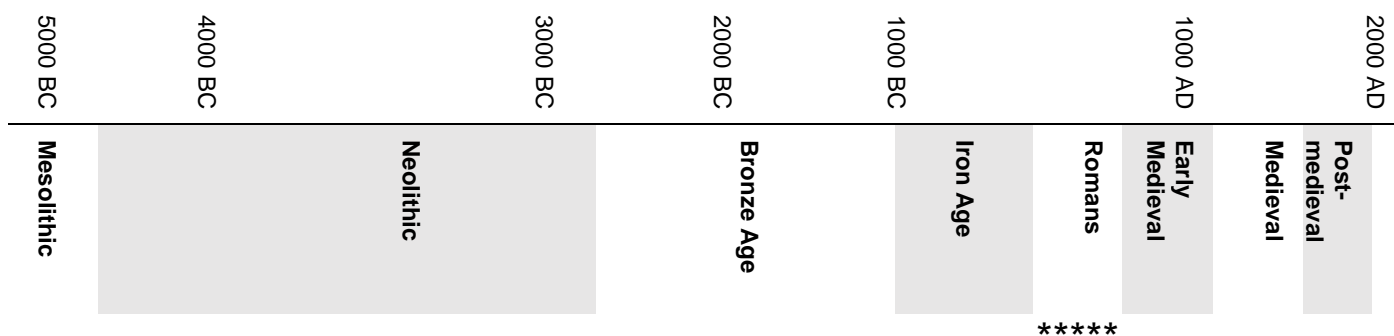
but they are more likely to have involved bear-baiting, wild beast hunts and the execution of criminals rather than contests between professional gladiators.

The amphitheatre, parts of the baths, and parts of the defensive walls complete with their turrets were all excavated in the 20th century. All these can be seen at Caerleon today, as can a latrine in the corner of the defences, and a few of the many barrack blocks which will originally have occupied most of the internal area. But there were other buildings too – the headquarters building, granaries hospital, officers' houses, workshops, not to mention the buildings of the town that grew up outside the walls with its own houses, shops and temples, but now lies beneath green fields.



The Roman remains in Caerleon are spread around the modern village (NP18). There is limited parking near the baths (by the Bull pub) and the amphitheatre, and more in the car park off Cold Bath Road near the Prysog Field barracks. See the Cadw website for opening times and entrance charges for the baths. Visit the museum to see finds discovered in the fortress and surrounding area. Maps: OS Landranger Series sheet 171, Explorer Series sheet 152.

Timeline (the asterisks indicate the time-span)



You can learn more about this site, and other similar archaeological sites in Wales, by going to <https://www.archwilio.org.uk/arch/>. Please read and observe the Conditions of Use. The fortress has the overall PRN (Primary Record Number) 00514g, with individual elements given their own separate numbers (south corner turret 00518g, Prysog field barracks 00530g, amphitheatre 00550g, fortress baths 02210g). You can search for other similar sites here too. You can contact us via social media or through the methods given at the bottom of the page. See more about the Romans in South Wales at http://www.ggat.org.uk/cadw/romans_in_south_wales/index.html