

COLCHESTER  
A WALKING  
TOUR OF THE  
ROMAN AND  
MEDIIEVAL  
GATES





Middleborough Mosaic (detail), AD 175

## WALKING TOUR BEGINS HERE



### BALKERNE GATE

The Balkerne Gate is the largest surviving town gateway from Roman times in Britain. Its size was determined by the fact that it incorporated a triumphal arch built to commemorate the conquest of Britain by the Emperor Claudius in AD 43. Originally, it would have been the gate for the main road leading towards London. There were two large archways for wheeled vehicles and two smaller ones for pedestrians. Around AD 300 the outer defensive ditch was extended across the London road, blocking the gate, perhaps because it was seen as a weak point in the town's defences. Today, only the southern pedestrian archway and guardroom survive, representing less than a quarter of the original gateway.

Standing outside and facing away from Balkerne Gate, turn right and walk down the hill. At the corner follow the pavement round to the right to reach the site of North Gate.



### ST MARY'S STEPS

St Mary's Steps were created in the 15th century when a Roman drain was enlarged to create a small pedestrian gate or postern. Nearby is the base of an internal rectangular tower of Roman date. The name of the gate comes from the nearby St Mary at the Walls Church, now the Colchester Arts Centre.

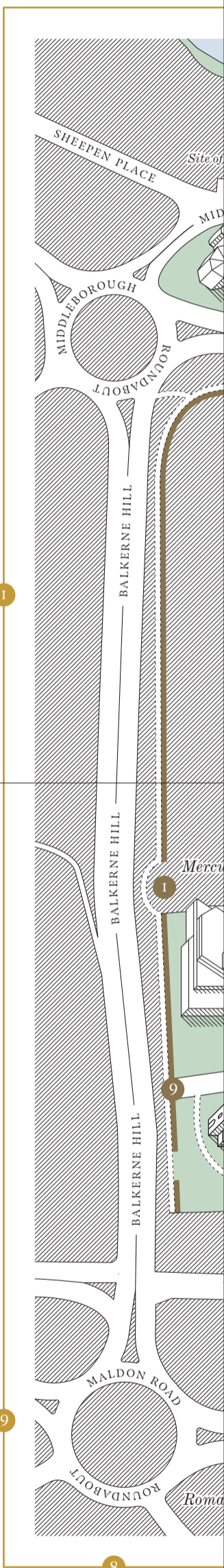
Continue to walk up the hill to return to the starting point at the Balkerne Gate.

#### ROMAN CHURCH

Thought to be the earliest known Christian church in Britain, this building was constructed around AD 330.



Detail from an engraving by John Prior, 1724, showing North Gate from the outside, looking up North Hill



### HEAD GATE

Head Gate became the main gate for the road to London when Balkerne Gate was



Detail from an engraving by John Prior, 1724, showing North Gate from the outside, looking up North Hill



### NORTH GATE

North Gate provided access to the river Colne and the northern suburbs of Colchester.

The original Roman design is thought to have been a single archway with an overhead walkway. North Gate remained in use for many centuries and was only demolished in 1823.

From this point the wall is hidden by later buildings. Cross North Hill and continue into St Peter's Street. Walk to the end of the street until you see

Castle Park ahead of you. Cross over to the park side of the road, do not enter through the park gates, but instead follow the railings to the right to reach the site of Rye Gate.

**ROMAN THEATRE**  
Used for the performance of plays and as a venue for public speeches. The auditorium could seat 5,000 people.



### RYE GATE

Rye Gate was a medieval gate that gave access to the river bank and a water mill at Middle

Mill. It may have been formed by enlarging a Roman drain arch. It was demolished in 1659 and its precise site is unknown, but is assumed to have been near here.

Keep the park railings on your left and follow the footpath, with a house to your right, into Castle Park. You are now walking along the line of the wall, which

eventually appears to your right. Climb the slope to reach Duncan's Gate.

**COLCHESTER CASTLE**  
This is the oldest stone castle in Britain and was built as a royal palace by William the Conqueror. Its large size results from the re-use by the Normans of the foundations of the Temple of Claudius.



### DUNCAN'S GATE

Duncan's Gate is named after Dr PM Duncan who led one of the earliest archaeological

excavations in Colchester here in 1853. As well as the remains of the single entrance, you can also see some fallen masonry which was part of the archway over the gate. This gate was conserved and left visible following further excavations by Rex Hull, the Curator of the Castle Museum, in the 1920s.

Continue along the footpath, keeping the wall on your right. At the corner turn right and walk across the grassed area, again keeping the wall on your right, until you reach the end of the open space. A narrow path to your left now leads onto Land Lane. Turn right and walk towards East Hill. Turn right on East Hill and walk up the hill to reach the site of East Gate.

**CLAUDIUS GATEWAY**  
Inside this café are exposed foundations of the wall surrounding the precinct, or open space, containing the Temple of Claudius. This wall surrounded the precinct on all four sides and was in the form of an arcade, or covered walkway, which provided shelter for worshippers visiting the temple.

**ST JAMES' CHURCH**  
This is the largest parish church in Colchester and dates back to the 1100s. It was extensively rebuilt in the late medieval period, including in 1490 when money was raised by a street entertainment on East Hill.



### EAST GATE

East Gate was built in the Roman period to provide access to the town's port on the river Colne. It is likely to have had a double archway and an overhead walkway. The gate was rebuilt in the medieval period, but was badly damaged in the Siege of Colchester in 1648 and collapsed three years later. Nearby, in St James Rise, is the well preserved outlet of a Roman drain in the wall.

Now turn back and walk down the hill to enter Priory Street on the right. Walk all the way along Priory Street until its junction with St Botolph's Street. Turn right to find the site of St Botolph's Gate.



Berryfield Mosaic (detail), AD 200

**BERRYFIELD MOSAIC**  
Set into the floor of Firstsite Art Gallery, this mosaic was found on the site in 1925. It was originally laid as the floor of a Roman dining room and is decorated with flowers and mythical sea creatures.

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Standing outside and facing away from Balcerne Gate, turn right and walk down the hill. At the corner follow the pavement round to the right to reach the site of North Gate.



### ST MARY'S STEPS

St Mary's Steps were created in the 15th century when a Roman drain was enlarged to create a small pedestrian gate or postern. Nearby is the base of an internal rectangular tower of Roman date. The name of the gate comes from the nearby St Mary at the Walls Church, now the Colchester Arts Centre.

Continue to walk up the hill to return to the starting point at the Balcerne Gate.

**ROMAN CHURCH**  
Thought to be the earliest known Christian church in Britain, this building was constructed around AD 330.



### HEAD GATE

Head Gate became the main gate for the road to London when Balcerne Gate was

blocked in the late Roman period. Head Gate was built as a double-arched gateway and its foundations have been found in recent years. In medieval times it was rebuilt as a single, wide gateway and continued to function as Colchester's main town gate. Head Gate had been demolished by 1766.

Cross Head Street at the traffic lights and turn left to

enter Crouch Street. Walk along Crouch Street until the junction with Balcerne Hill, then turn right to reach St Mary's Steps.

**HOLY TRINITY CHURCH**  
A church was built on this site shortly before AD 1000. The tower was built of materials salvaged from the ruins of the Roman town.



### SCHEREGATE

Scheregate was built in the medieval period. It takes its unusual name from the

Anglo-Saxon word 'sceard', meaning a gap or notch, as it gave townspeople a short cut through the town wall to St John's Abbey to the south. As in the medieval period the gateway still has shops to either side.

Continue straight along Sir Isaacs Walk to reach the site of Head Gate.



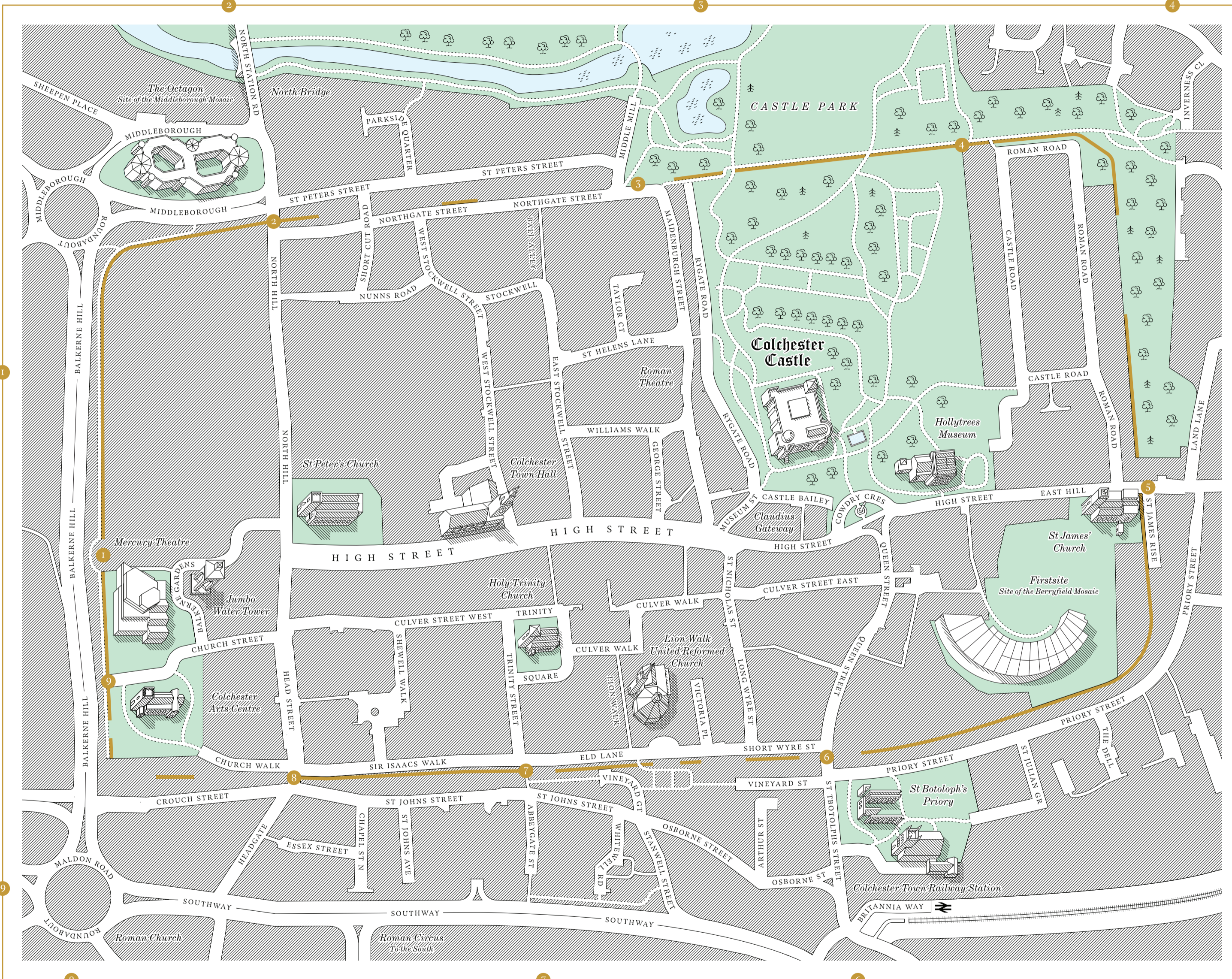
### ST BOTOLPH'S GATE

St Botolph's Gate was originally a Roman gate used to reach the cemeteries outside the

town wall. It was also on the processional route between the Temple of Claudius and the Circus, or chariot-racing track. The gate was demolished in 1814. Possible foundations were recorded by the archaeologist William Wire in 1848.

Cross St Botolph's Street and walk along Short Wyre Street. Continue straight on into Eld Lane to reach Scheregate.

**ST BOTOLPH'S PRIORY**  
Founded in 1099, this was the first house of Augustinian canons, or priests, in England. The priory was badly damaged in the Siege of Colchester and the only building to survive is



# COLCHESTER A WALKING TOUR OF THE ROMAN AND MEDIEVAL GATES



MIDDLEBOROUGH MOSAIC (DETAIL), AD 175

## INTRODUCTION

Colchester has the earliest, best preserved and one of the longest Roman town walls in Britain. Its construction began in the period AD 65 to 80 following the destruction of the town during the revolt by Queen Boudica against Roman rule. The entire wall circuit is 2,800 metres, or 1¾ miles, in length and it once stood nearly 6 metres high.



BALKERNE GATE

In the Roman period the wall had six gates located at regular intervals. Of these only two survive above ground today: Balcerne Gate and Duncan's Gate. The locations of the others – North Gate, East Gate, St Botolph's Gate and Head Gate – are marked by metal plaques and strips set into the pavement.

During the medieval period three further gates were added to the wall. Scheregate and St Mary's Steps are still in use, but no trace of Rye Gate can be seen today.

This walking tour starts at Balcerne Gate and takes you around the outside of the wall in a clockwise direction. As well as the gates themselves other significant Roman and medieval sites are passed on the walk. Look out for the distinctive interpretation panels.

### OTHER PLACES TO VISIT

#### COLCHESTER CASTLE

Internationally important Roman collection and interactive displays  
www.cimuseums.org.uk/castle

#### ROMAN CIRCUS CENTRE

Exposed remains and interactive displays  
www.romanancircus.co.uk

#### CLAUDIUS GATEWAY

Exposed remains of the Temple of Claudius  
www.worldfoodaid.org/claudius-gateway

#### ROMAN THEATRE

Exposed remains in Maidenburgh Street

#### WEBSITES AND RESOURCES

VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRE  
www.visitorcolchester.com

#### FRIENDS OF COLCHESTER ROMAN WALL

www.romanwall.org

HISTORIC COLCHESTER  
Guidebook available from Colchester Castle and Visitor Information Centre

Project designers

Dallas-Pierce-Quintero

## THE TOWN WALL IN CLOSE-UP

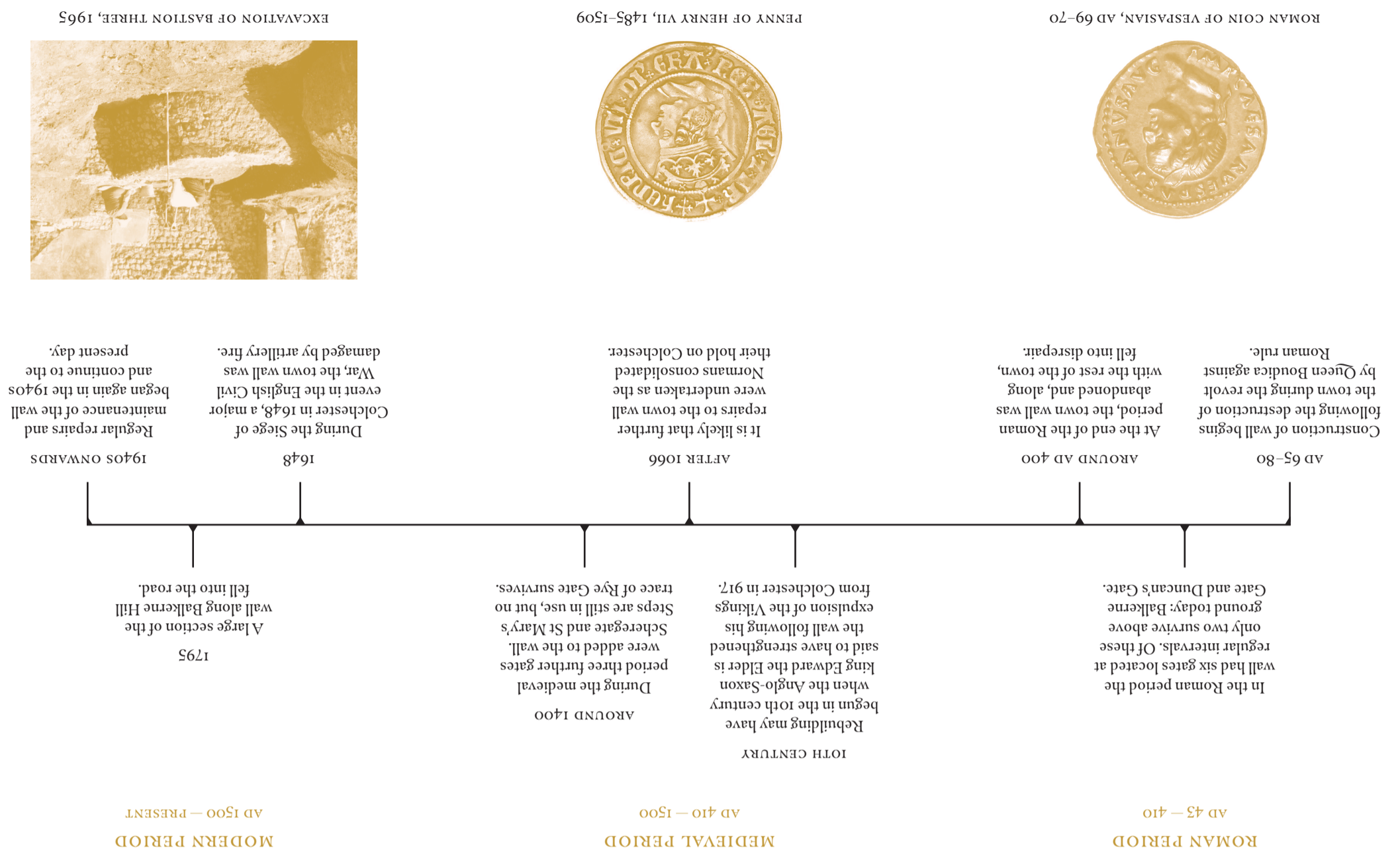
The Romans constructed the town wall at Colchester not only to defend the inhabitants against attack, but also as a statement of their power. The very significant investment in resources required to build the wall indicated that the Romans were here to stay.

At an early stage the Romans must have realised that what is now Essex has no natural, good quality building stone. The wall was therefore constructed of fired clay bricks, flint and septaria, a brittle, easily fractured stone collected from the Essex coast.

The wall was built over a foundation trench 3 metres wide and 1.2 metres deep, which was filled with layers of mortar and septaria. Above ground, the wall consisted of three parts: inner and outer faces constructed of courses of clay bricks and stone blocks, 'dressed' to a roughly square shape, and an inner core of rubble and mortar.

In many places the outer and inner faces have been removed after the Roman period and used in new construction projects in the town so that only the rubble core remains. However, at the best preserved stretch of the wall near Balcerne Gate, the outer face

## TIMELINE



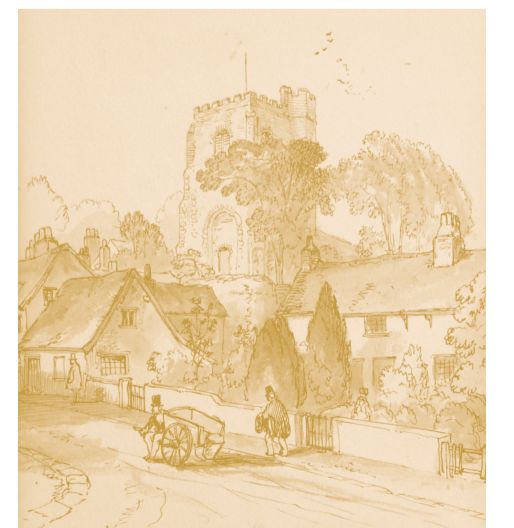
survives revealing its distinctive banding of brick and stone.

When it was first built the wall was freestanding. However, after about a hundred years an internal bank or rampart was added to strengthen the wall. This can still be seen in Castle Park, close to Duncan's Gate. Also at an unknown date a V-shaped ditch was dug around the outside of the wall which was later widened to increase its defensive capabilities.

The wall included a series of rectangular towers and drains at the points where streets ended against the wall. None of the towers survive above ground, but the bases of several have been seen in archaeological excavations. The drains channelled rain and waste water from inside the town into the external town ditch. A particularly good example of a drain outlet is visible close to East Gate.

At the end of the Roman period, around AD 400, the town wall was abandoned and, along with the rest of the town, fell into disrepair. Rebuilding may have begun in the 10th century when the Anglo-Saxon king Edward the Elder is said to have strengthened the wall following his expulsion of the Vikings from Colchester in 917.

After 1066 it is likely that further repairs to the town wall were undertaken as the Normans consolidated their hold on Colchester. The main evidence for the medieval period is however the surviving bastions, or round towers, in Priory Street



BALKERNE HILL, 1849