

## Redevelopment of Colchester Castle – Visitor Services



Rodger Tambllyn

Colchester Castle reopened on 2 May 2014 after a substantial redevelopment programme which has made many improvements and developments, creating a high-quality, exciting and fit-for-purpose visitor attraction.

Colchester Castle now offers visitors the very best in terms of visit experience, facilities, displays, events and interpretation in one of Britain's most important historic buildings.

The £4.2 million project has been funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, Colchester Borough Council, the European Regional Development Fund, as part of the Norman Connections Project, and a range of other funders including the Friends of Colchester Museums and the Roman Walls.



The museum has worked with Redman Design to develop lively displays with the aim of attracting family and school groups as the primary audiences. The story of Colchester is told from its foundation over 2000 years ago to the Siege of Colchester in 1648 during the English Civil War. The displays integrate showcases containing the museum's Designated Roman archaeology collections with hands-on

interactives and audio-visual exhibits to provide a sensory and object rich visitor experience. The Castle displays are also being used as a starting point and a link to discovering other heritage sites in Colchester like the Town Walls, Duncan's Gate and the newly discovered Roman Circus.

This signposting link enriches a visit in several ways – visitors can appreciate and discover not only the story of the Castle but also the town's rich and varied heritage. This encourages visitors to stay longer in Colchester, to come back for future visits and brings economic benefits to the town. We want visitors to be excited by Colchester's past and inspired to explore the wider heritage having visited the museum.

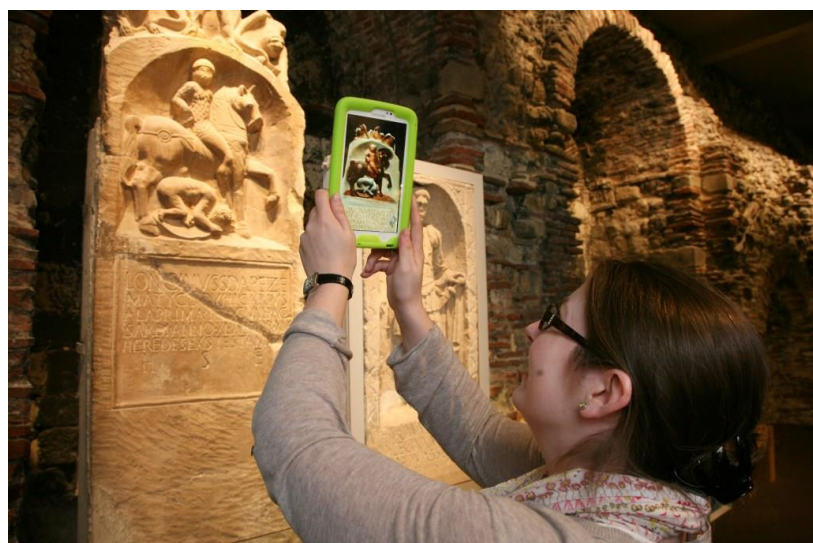
The history and features - both internal and external - of Colchester Castle, such as the fireplaces and re-used Roman brickwork, have been revealed and interpreted to give people a much better sense of the scale and importance of this unique building. The display arrangement of new glass cases with a minimal use of panelling means that new sight lines along the walls and diagonals across the space to the first floor are constantly opening up as visitors progress through the building.

A daily programme of guided tours of the building, including the Roman vaults and Great Stairs and roof and Castle enabling visitors see areas of the Castle not accessible to general visitors has been redeveloped and are offered every day.

There have been so many changes to the Castle over the years that it is now hard to picture how the interior would have looked when the Castle was newly built 900 years ago. This issue has been addressed in a number of ways. A virtual reality film of the Castle with a fly through of the rooms shows visitors how the Castle and rooms would have appeared in Norman times. The film has been created by Virtual Past.

Peel Heritage have developed a digital App that includes a 360 degree reconstruction of the Castle's Great Hall that once existed on the first floor and was where the King entertained guests during his occasional visits.

The app plays on a hand-held digital tablet that visitors can take around the Castle with them. The feedback from visitors on the app has been very positive. The app enables visitors to both "see" what the rooms might once have looked like when the Castle was newly built as well as navigate themselves around the Castle easily and effectively.



There are a number of “it happened here” stories associated with the Castle. The final stand of the Romans in the Temple of Claudius during the destruction of Colchester in AD60 by Boudica and the fate of the Royalist commanders, held in the Castle at the end of the Siege of Colchester are told through immersive Audio Visuals created by Spiral Productions. Visitors get an all-round sensory experience through sight, sound and touch which leads to a greater engagement with the stories and objects.



The internal dividing wall in the Castle has been cleared of obstructions and serves visitors as a large screen for three dramatic light projections, created by The Projection Studio. The light projections highlight incidents in the long history of the Castle site and are dramatic and informative for visitors – they give a snapshot of the overall story. The films are shown at intervals during the day and it is an innovative use of technology which is normally associated with outdoor, night-time *son et lumieres*.



A chariot race where visitors can take up the reins and pit their wits against three other chariots in an interactive AV is proving very popular with all visitors. The exhibit

is inspired by the recent discovery in Colchester of the only Roman Circus known in Britain.

The highlights of the collections on display for visitors include:

- The tombstones of Marcus Facilis and Longinus Sdapeze, two Roman soldiers who took part in the invasion of Britain in AD43. They are the starting point for a multimedia interview with a Roman soldier and a currently serving soldier in the British Army to compare and contrast their experiences of military life, then and now.
- The Doctor's Grave is a burial of an important local man who died soon after the Romans had arrived. The grave is full of imported Roman goods, but is exceptional because it contains a set of surgical instruments and what have been interpreted as divination rods. This combination of wealth, medicine, religion and status is examined through replicas, the real objects themselves and a computer game which leads visitors to ask and answer questions about how archaeologists piece together the past.
- Fine examples of Roman glassware, which have been described by one expert as having "a very good claim to be the national Romano-British collection" are displayed in a showcase with illuminated shelves for maximum impact and look very beautiful as well as being important in themselves.

The general visitor facilities have also been thoroughly overhauled. We have completely refurbished the toilet block, installed automatic opening doors, installed wifi network points throughout the public areas of the building, created better lighting, a new more efficient heating and insulation system and created a new shop and reception area.

The Castle received 113,477 visitors in total in the first 12 months since re-opening, compared with a figure of 85,114 in the last 12 months before redevelopment.