

WALK STARTS HERE

1 BALKERNE GATE

The Balcerne Gate is the largest surviving town gateway from Roman times in Britain. Originally, it would have been the gate for the main road leading towards London. Around AD300 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.

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.

2 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.

3 RYE GATE

Rye Gate was a medieval gate that gave access to the riverbank 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.

4 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 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.

5 EAST GATE

East Gate was built in the Roman period to provide access to the town's port on the river Colne. The gate was rebuilt in the medieval period but was badly damaged in the Siege of Colchester in 1648 and collapsed three years later.

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.

6 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.

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

7 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.

8 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. 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.

9 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.

Colchester has the earliest and best-preserved Roman town wall in Britain. Its construction began in AD65 to AD80 following the destruction of the town during the revolt by Queen Boudica against Roman rule.

The entire wall circuit is 2,800 metres in length and it once stood nearly 6 metres high. In the Roman period the wall had six gates. Of these only two survive above ground today. The locations of the others are marked by metal plaques and strips set into the pavement. During the medieval period three further gates were added to the wall.

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 interpretation panels.

THE TOWN WALL IN CLOSE-UP

The Romans constructed the town wall at Colchester to defend the inhabitants against attack and 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 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.

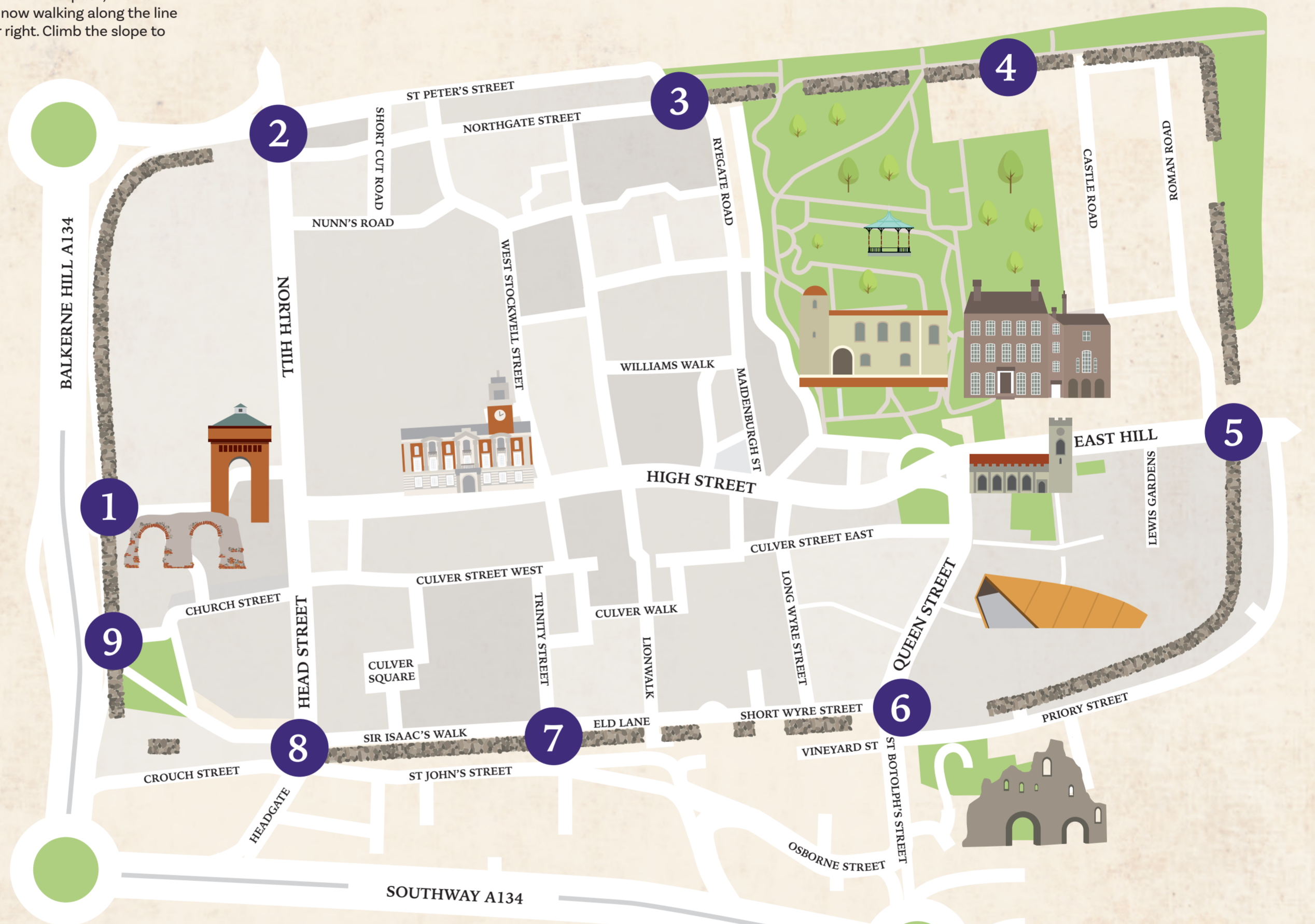
The wall was built over a foundation trench 3 metres wide and 1.2 metres deep, which was filled with layers of mortar and septaria. Above ground, the wall consisted of three parts: inner and outer faces constructed of courses of clay bricks and stone blocks, 'dressed' to a

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, near Balcerne Gate the outer face survives. When it was first built the wall was freestanding. However, after about a hundred years an internal bank was added to strengthen the wall. This can still be seen in Castle Park, close to Duncan's Gate.

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. At the end of the Roman period, 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 removal of the Vikings from Colchester in 917. After 1066 it is likely that further repairs to the town wall were undertaken as the Normans strengthened their hold on Colchester.

The main evidence for the medieval period is however the surviving bastions, or round towers, in Priory Street and Vineyard Street on the south-east stretch of the wall. Originally eight were constructed of which four remain above ground today. During the Siege of Colchester in 1648, the town wall was damaged by artillery fire. At the end of the siege, Parliament decided to demolish part of the wall in Priory Street to prevent it being used for defensive purposes in the future. After this the wall lost its significance and ceased to be regularly maintained.

Houses were allowed to be built up against the wall, passages and cellars were cut through and into the wall and stone was removed for new building projects. In 1795 a large section of the wall along Balcerne Hill fell into the road. Regular repairs and maintenance of the wall began again in the 1940s and continue to the present day.



COLCHESTER

A Walking tour of the Roman and Medieval Gates



TIMELINE

Roman Period AD 43 - 410

AD 65 - AD 80
Construction of wall begins following the destruction of the town during the revolt led by Queen Boudica against Roman rule.

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.

Around AD 400 - At the end of the Roman period, the town wall was abandoned and, along with the rest of the town, fell into disrepair.

Medieval Period AD 410 - 1500

10th century
Rebuilding may have begun in the 10th century Saxon - when the Anglo 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.

Around 1400
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 survives.

Modern Period AD 1500 - present

1648 - During the Siege of Colchester in 1648, a major event in the English Civil War, the town wall was damaged by artillery fire.

1795 - A large section of the wall along Balcerne Hill fell into the road.

1940's Onwards - Regular repairs and maintenance of the wall began again in the 1940s and continue to the present day.