

Houses in Roman Leicester

Leicester's Roman inhabitants lived in a wide variety of houses, ranging from rows of small, simple rectangular buildings built along street fronts (with domestic rooms located behind shops or workshops) to larger, elaborate townhouses built around colonnaded courtyards.

Roman Townhouses

Roman houses were built of stone, dried clay bricks, timber, or a combination of the three. Poorer homes would have had thatched roofs, whilst other buildings used slate or tile. Most floors would have been made of compacted earth, but in some houses more important rooms had concrete floors or were decorated with mosaic pavements. Walls and ceilings were covered with plaster and painted with a variety of effects, including imitation marbling, geometric panels, architectural friezes (horizontal bands of sculpted or painted decoration, usually on a wall just below the ceiling), painted figures and foliage.

Several of Leicester's Roman townhouses are known about because of the discovery over the last 300 years of many mosaic pavements across the city. Some of these are amongst the finest in Britain, including the Peacock Mosaic found at St Nicholas Street in 1898 (now St Nicholas Circle), which features a magnificent peacock in its central panel. The Blackfriars Mosaic was found at Jewry Wall Street in 1832 (now beneath the viaduct of the former Great Central Railway Station).



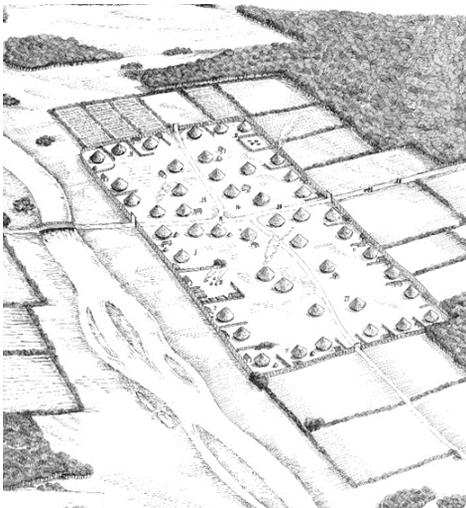
The Vine Street House

This is one of the largest town houses found in Leicester, and the only house in the town where the complete floor plan is known. Built in the early 3rd century, this spacious and luxurious home measured 40 by 40 m, with four ranges of rooms linked by corridors surrounding a central courtyard. The house was stone built and roofed with diamond-shaped slates; it had at least 26 rooms, many of which were furnished with painted walls and concrete floors or mosaic pavements. Some rooms were heated under the floor through hypocausts (a central heating system which allowed hot air to circulate below the floor of a room).

The reception rooms faced the entrance and were surrounded by everyday living spaces and smaller service rooms. In one corner of the building was a kitchen, and other rooms would have been used as dining rooms, sitting rooms, bedrooms and offices. Just like our houses today, rooms often had more than one function. The large and impressive courtyard could be viewed from all sides and contained an ornamental pool; land behind the house may have been laid out as a garden.



The central panel of the 2nd-century Peacock mosaic pavement discovered in 1898 on St Nicholas Street, now part of St Nicholas Circle.
Credit: ULAS



Houses in Leicester before the Roman invasion

The reconstruction drawings above show Iron Age Leicester as it may have looked during the early 1st century AD. Credit: Sarah Greeves / ULAS. Reconstruction on the right by Giacomo Savani.

In the countryside, many people continued to live in this style of house during the Roman period.