

Roman Roads

Within four years of invading Britain in AD 47, the Romans had built over 1,000 miles of roads!

When they first arrived, the Roman Army had to use the old grass and mud track ways which the Britons had used. These track ways were sometimes thousands of years old and often went up and down hills for reasons that nobody could remember. They were very difficult to travel along.

Source A: Pre-Roman pathway



The Roman Army needed better roads because it had to be able to move quickly to areas of trouble to keep the Britons under control. The Roman generals needed good roads so that they could send orders to the Roman soldiers who might be stationed in forts as far away as Hadrian's Wall. The roads were also important for moving supplies of food and weapons to the soldiers. In times of peace, good safe roads meant more trade and more trade meant more taxes for the Emperor.

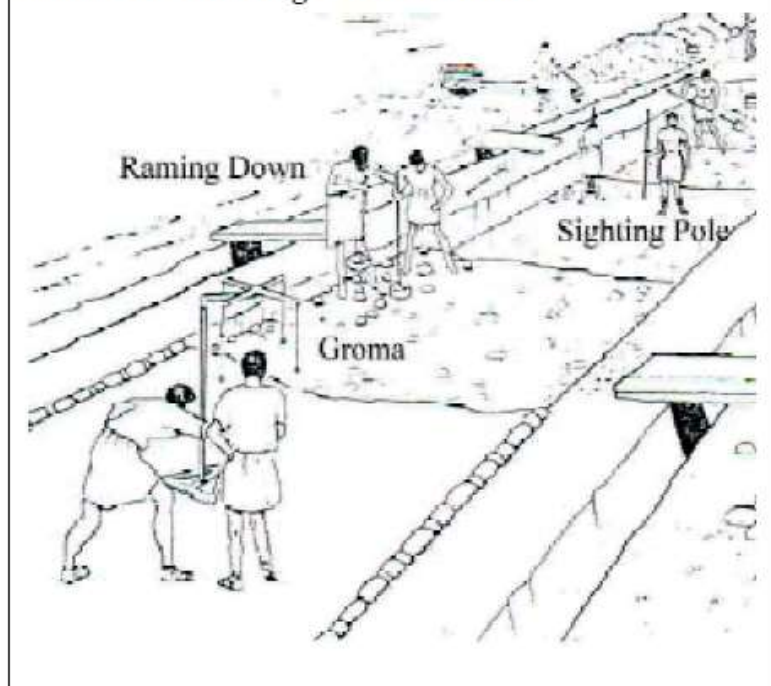
The army was given the important task of planning and building roads. These roads did not always run perfectly straight, they sometimes zigzagged up hills and often avoided obstacles. However, long stretches of Roman roads did run straight and this is what Roman roads are remembered for.

So how did the Romans manage to build such straight roads?

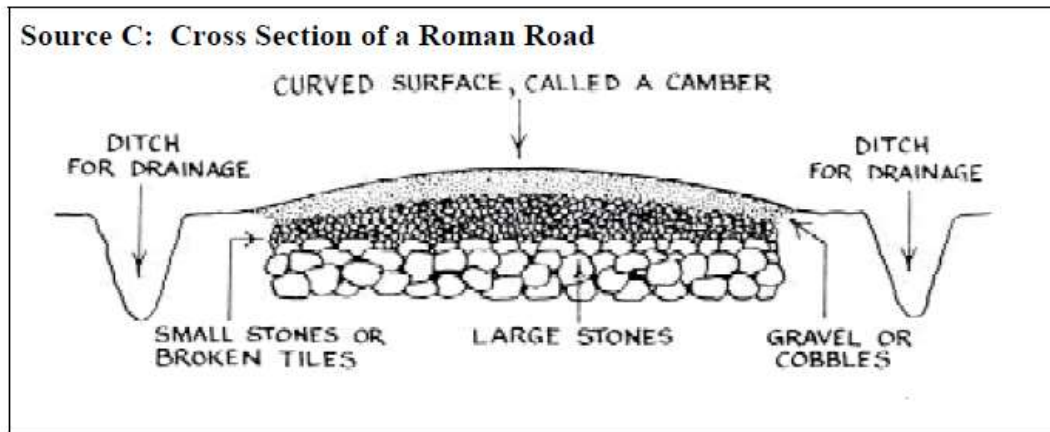
Roman engineers used an instrument called a Groma.

This was a pair of boards fastened together into a cross shape. Lines with weights were hung from each corner so that they could get a straight line by lining up the weights with a pole a hundred metres or so away. In forest areas they built fires in a straight line and used the smoke as markers for the Groma.

Source B: Building a Roman Road.



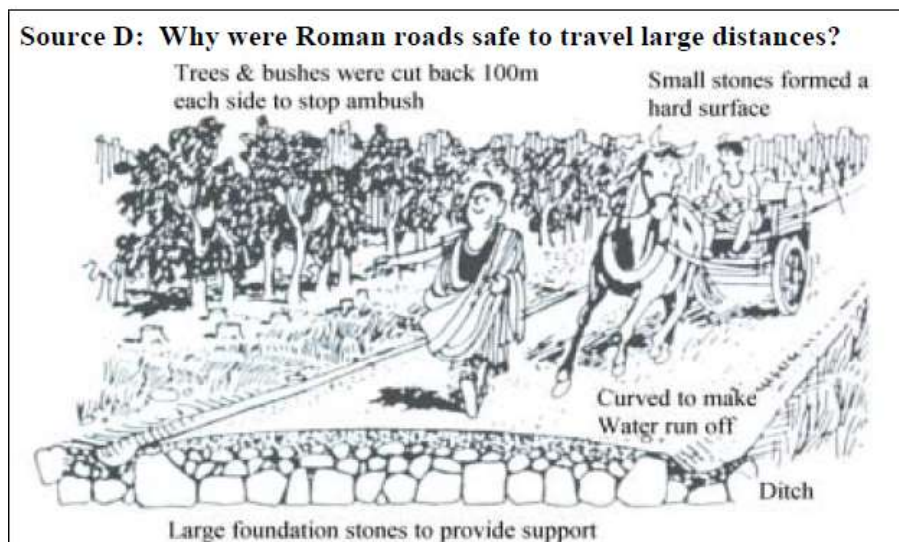
Once the road had been planned the Roman soldiers dug two ditches on either side of the road



to act as drains. The earth from these ditches was piled into the centre and rammed down. Stones were then gathered from the local area and laid down in different layers until they formed a hard surface that could take the weight of heavy carts. The surface of a Roman road was shaped into a camber so that rain water would run off into the ditches.

Roman roads were very quick and safe to travel large distances. The Roman soldiers were not the only people to use them. Merchants used them to carry goods all over the Roman Empire. The Romans built Britain's first proper roads. After the Romans left they were allowed to decay because people forgot how to rebuild and repair them.

People continued to use the roads the Roman Army had built until 1745. Many modern roads are built along the original routes planned out by the Romans.



Questions

1. List the reasons why the Roman Army build roads?
2. Which of these reasons do you think is the most important?
3. Look at Source B. Explain in your own words what a Groma was and how it was used to build straight roads.
4. Look at Source D. Why were Roman roads quick and safe to travel on?
5. Why was the surface of a Roman road curved?