

## Gladiators of Britain

Dorset Museum & Art Gallery (25 January – 11 May 2025)

Northampton Museum & Art Gallery (24 May – 7 September 2025)

Grosvenor Museum (20 September 2025 – 25 January 2026)

Tullie House Museum & Art Gallery (7 February – 19 April 2026)

*Supported by the Dorset Foundation*

Press images: <https://bit.ly/3YLVq6d>

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**LONDON, 21 August:** A major new touring exhibition will tell the story of the gladiators who fought and died to the roar of the crowd in Britain.

A British Museum Partnership Exhibition with Colchester + Ipswich Museums, *Gladiators of Britain* will travel to four venues around the UK, starting at Dorset Museum & Art Gallery from January 2025.

Bringing together some of the country's most important objects from the period, the exhibition will look at the history of gladiatorial fights in Britain, who gladiators were and the importance of spectacle in Roman culture.

Inspired by the recent exhibition at Colchester Castle, *Gladiators: A Day at the Roman Games* which featured British Museum loans, the tour will explore Roman spectacle in the local region of each venue, following in the footsteps of the gladiators who fought in the amphitheatres of Britain.

Occupying Britain for over 350 years, the Romans introduced many aspects of their culture including gladiatorial fights for public entertainment. The events of the amphitheatre, with its wild beasts and enslaved fighters, are one of the most enduring aspects of Roman culture that still capture the public imagination today.

As the first capital city of Roman Britain, Colchester is one of the most significant locations for exploring Roman history in the country. Objects from Colchester featured in this tour, such as the Colchester Vase, have provided the first direct evidence for the presence of gladiators in Britain, prompting further exploration around the UK. At Dorset Museum & Art Gallery, for example, visitors will find out about the history of the Maumbury Rings, a Neolithic henge that was later transformed into a Roman amphitheatre. Grosvenor Museum will explore the history of Chester's amphitheatre, which is the largest example in Britain, featuring objects found at the site such as an altar to the goddess Nemesis.

*Gladiators of Britain* will look at the social position of enslaved fighters, who were both vilified and admired as the celebrities of their day. Considered as *infamis* in Roman law and society, they were excluded from having the rights of other citizens. Visitors will also find out about the many different classes of gladiator and how they were ranked, including beast-fighters known as *venators*, who clashed with predators including lions and bears.

Taking visitors back nearly 2,000 years to the Roman province of Britannia, the exhibition will bring together 25 items from the British Museum and Colchester Museums collections, as well as items from each local museum partner.

Key objects loaned by the British Museum will include:

- **Hawkedon Helmet (1st century AD)** The only confirmed piece of gladiatorial armour found in Roman Britain. It may have been looted from Colchester during Boudica's rebellion against Roman rule. Recent metallurgical research by the University of Reading has revealed this helmet would have been made on the continent and imported to Britain.
- **Murmillio figurine (1st–2nd century AD)** This bone figurine found near Colchester depicts a gladiator of the heavily armoured *murmillio* class, named for the stylised fish sometimes featured on their helmets.
- **Marble relief featuring a beast fighter (1st–2nd century AD)** A relief that illustrates a fight between a lion and a specially trained beast fighter (*venator*). The Greek inscriptions indicate he was 'taken away for burial' at the end of the fight.

Key items loaned by Colchester + Ipswich Museums include:

- **Colchester Vase (2nd century AD)** A cremation vessel found in a Roman grave, thought to feature a real battle between gladiators Memnon, Valentinus, and beast-fighters Secundus and Mario. Research has confirmed this vessel was made in Colchester, with its inscription revealing it to be the first real evidence of actual battles taking place in Britain.
- **Glass sports cup (1st century AD)** Glass cups featuring events such as gladiator fights and chariot races are thought to have been mass produced as souvenirs.

Thorsten Opper, Curator of Roman Collections at the British Museum, said:

*"While gladiators have always captured the public imagination, their presence in Britain has been less widely understood. New research has now proven that the spectacles of Rome's Colosseum were experienced as far away as Colchester. But who were these enslaved fighters, and how did they come to be in Britain? We are now able to start answering these questions and it is fascinating to see how each venue brings these stories to life."*

Nicholas Cullinan, Director of the British Museum, said:

*"We are delighted to announce this major tour with our partners around the UK. Following on from the British Museum's popular Legion exhibition, which looked at the lives of soldiers in*

*the Roman army, Gladiators of Britain will again reveal the humans behind the helmets. It's fantastic that so many people around the UK will have the chance to see this unmissable exhibition in their local region."*

Councillor Natalie Sommers, Portfolio Holder for Communities, Heritage and Public Protection at Colchester City Council said:

*"We are thrilled to be partnering with the British Museum to bring Gladiators of Britain to venues next year. This exhibition sets the record straight about the lives of gladiators in Britain and how gladiatorial combat and entertainment took place in Britain nearly 2,000 years ago. Visitors are in for both a visual and intellectual feast. Our country has a rich heritage, and this exhibition delves deeper into the spectacle of the games and all that surrounds it."*

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## Notes to editors

[Gladiators of Britain](#) will be on display at Dorset Museum & Art Gallery, Dorchester (25 January – 11 May 2025); Northampton Museum & Art Gallery (24 May – 7 September 2025); Grosvenor Museum, Chester (20 September 2025 – 25 January 2026); and Tullie House Museum & Art Gallery, Carlisle (7 February – 19 April 2026).

There will be a press view at Dorset Museum & Art Gallery on Friday 24 January.

## The British Museum's National Programmes

The British Museum is committed to sharing the collection and our knowledge as widely as possible to create a positive educational, social and economic impact across the UK. In 2023/24 we lent nearly 2,000 objects to over 100 museums and galleries, reaching around 8 million visitors outside of London. Our loans to partnership museums and galleries facilitate new perspectives on our shared global history, reflecting diverse viewpoints, lived experiences and collective ideas.

The British Museum also manages the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) in England, recording and sharing British archaeological discoveries to help shape our understanding of the past.

Our National Programmes work is supported by the Dorset Foundation in memory of Harry M Weinrebe.



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### Further information

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High resolution images and caption sheet available at: <https://bit.ly/3YLVg6d>