

A Beginner's Guide to **COMITATVS**

By John Conyard and Stephen Kenwright



*“When starting any new hobby it is difficult to know where to begin. This guide is designed to de-mystify Comitatus and make it easier for beginners to know how to get started. There are excellent articles on the website www.comitatus.net giving more detailed information, including the **Comitatus Kit Guides** found online at www.comitatus.net/research.html, but this should answer some initial questions.”*

~ Ste & John

Introduction

Put simply, Comitatus is a society of friends who enjoy bringing history to life. We are more experimental archaeologists and historical interpreters than traditional re-enactors. We entertain and educate members of the public about Late Roman Britain and the Anglo-Saxon settlement of England. The group aims to take its members to very special places of great natural beauty and of great historic interest and is designed to appeal to families as well as single people. Comitatus is cheap to join and the hobby is not an expensive one.

What does Comitatus do?

Primarily, we stage Roman events for the general public. We specialise in the Late Roman period, from the ascension of Constantine in York in 306A.D. until the early 5th century. Specifically, we recreate members of the Praesidiensis, a legion based in Yorkshire.

We generally gather at venues on a Friday afternoon/evening and set up camp. Most members camp in relatively authentic tents made from canvas. Some of us will be cooking Roman food over real fires, some will be cooking modern food out of a tin over a gas fire and some will be doing something in between.

During the hours of 10am and 5pm on Saturday and Sunday the camp is ‘authentic’ – modern gear is stowed out of sight and kit is worn – and we will be putting on hourly displays and talks about the training and military life as well as the craft skills of the legionaries and their families. Saturday evening is a special time and we always try to eat together, in the middle of the campsite. We return to the modern world on Sunday evening.

Why join?

There are as many reasons as individual members. The group provides many different opportunities for members to enjoy themselves. During the off season the group stages themed marches and walks with the chance to experience period camping and cooking. There are regular Roman style riding sessions for beginners upwards. You can learn traditional craft skills to portray in the camp.

We have enjoyed opportunities to row and steer clinker-built ships and boats, as well as paddling a cow hide coracle. We camp in castles, at stately homes, museums and archaeological digs. You'll meet friendly people with stories to tell and skills to share. There is a great sense of camaraderie. You can learn a huge amount about the dress, tools, weapons and armour of the past - and have some fun using them.

Existing members span all backgrounds and ages. We are a society that families find easy to be a part of. Children of all ages can be spotted having fun around the tents and even in the arena. They get to do things most children can only dream about.



Can women portray soldiers?

The group believes in equal opportunities and we have several female members who successfully create a soldier 'alter-ego'. All of our individual impressions usually involve some suspension of disbelief in terms of average height, weight, age, health, hair style, ethnicity and language and we all do our best to disguise obvious anachronisms such as modern tattoos or piercings. A helmet and baggy tunic cover up well, while mail tends to drape rather closely, unless worn over padding, such as a *subarmalis* (somewhat similar to the later *gambeson*).

Training and safety

All beginners receive instruction from their file leaders until safe to participate in the weapons practice displays. We portray training sparring, not combat, so there is no need to feign fighting frenzy or push any safety limits. Well padded training 'spear -shafts' are aimed to make a positive 'touch' on any of the major muscle groups, steering clear of the face. Gloves are not evidenced, but can be used for training. However they cannot be used when throwing missiles or around the general public.

What do I need? How much does it cost?

The sheer variety and amount of equipment displayed by some members can put off potential recruits, but the essentials are very simple.

Comitatus must be one of the very cheapest societies to join: weekend membership is currently £5 per adult, covering insurance and allowing you to get a taster of the group.

Full membership costs £10 per adult per year and carries with it many benefits. As well as insurance cover, you receive newsletters, group emails and even expenses towards travelling to some events.

Please don't go out spending lots of money on eBay. It is always better to spend a little on looking right, than spend a lot on looking wrong. Late Roman research is rapidly expanding all the time, so few traders are familiar with authenticity for our period and experienced group members can be more accurate guides than even some books on the subject and some make kit to higher standards than can be purchased commercially. Many helpful details are in our Handbook and you may enjoy making some kit by hand - we have at least one kit-making weekend per year where you can work with support.



Initially, people will be willing to lend you clothing and equipment, even a tent for a fee of a bottle of wine. This will give you the opportunity to see and experience equipment in use before getting your own.

You need to start with clothing: you can join us for a day with just clothes to stand up in. Material can be purchased from the group, or at one of the many reenactment markets, but please take advice on colour and weave before purchasing. In northern Britain, wool would be the preferred material, with linen a relatively high status second. A variety of appropriate cloth is available mail order from 'Bernie the Bolt', who knows what you mean when you ask for "cloak weight wool": Bernard Hunt, The Willows, Five Oaks Lane, Chigwell, Essex IG7 4QP Tel. 020 8502 6790

Footwear

The group can give you a simple pattern that you can cut out yourself, using a sheet of vegetable-tanned leather. Thicker soles can be nailed to the base of the sandal. There is a minimum of basic stitching up the back of the heel. This can produce a simple hard wearing and cheap shoe. Period footwear can be purchased from between £50 and £110. *Morgan Hubbard* of Plantagenet Shoes makes a very tough boot based on an example excavated in London:

www.plantagenetshoes.freeserve.co.uk/

Sarah Juniper makes excellent shoes for our period, and typically can produce a pair to order within 6 weeks.

<http://www.sarahjuniper.co.uk>.

Cheap shoes can be purchased from Armamentaria:

http://www.armamentaria.com/store/index.php?main_page=index&cPath=19.

Handmade examples of fell boots and other designs can be purchased from Rigorevail:

<http://www.rigorevali.co.uk/prod03%5BVF1%5D.htm>.

Socks

These can be made from wool or linen and sewn to shape, or woollen socks could be made using sprang work or naalbinding techniques. A simple way to achieve a good visual effect is to use some spare cloth to cover the top of the foot, securing it in to the leg wrap.

Female clothing

Initially, 3m of wool for around £18 will easily be enough for a tube dress. The design is simply sewn down one side. Please hand finish at least all the visible seams and make use of the selvage edge. The dress will need to be fastened at the shoulders with a pair of brooches. Simple examples sell for as little as £10 per pair.

A linen or wool under dress could add to your comfort. This will be tailored closer to the body. Talk to existing members before cutting out.

Male clothing

Likewise a very good and very cheap male costume can be got together very quickly. Depending on height, purchase 2-3m of offwhite wool. The width of the body is to the elbow, the length when folded over the shoulders is to the knee. A simple slit suffices for the head. You can find a pattern in the Handbook and Comitatus member *Claire Marshall* can make them for you - email via the group e-list. The offcuts from under the arms will make a pair of leg wraps, simple rectangles of material wrapped around the leg. These can be secured by linen string below the knee and above the ankle.

The biggest challenge is perhaps the patterns applied to the tunics. The strips across the shoulders are known as clavii, and the roundels on the front, back and sometimes shoulders are known as orbiculi.



There are a number of ways these intricate patterns can be accomplished: Some re-enactors use plain coloured cloth to create orbiculli and clavii, but these are both inaccurate and unattractive. Plain colours are out. Members should adopt plain off white tunics (easy for new recruits), and can chose between:

1. Plain linen/wool patches with painted decoration
2. An applied weave (tablet weave etc.), stitched in place
3. Embroidered decoration, done with needle and thread
4. Decoration actually woven into the cloth during manufacture (let us know if you can do this!)

A source for images of Coptic Tunics:

www.housebarra.com/EP/ep01/07coptic.html

Another good site for clothing images:

www.gryph.com/byzantine/tunica.htm

Belts

A simple cloth or tablet weave belt is a civilian option, but the wide military belt is the mark of a soldier. Generally left as waxed vegetable-tanned leather, for senior ranks it can be painted red. Comitatus member *John Conyard* can make or help you to make belts. Email via the site.

Cloaks

Not just for keeping warm, but part of everyday wear, pinned at the right shoulder for men, centrally for women.

In the summer, short cloaks in light wool and linen, in winter, longer and in good heavy wool, perhaps lined in wool. The military *sagum* was a large rectangle. The cloak found at Thorsbjerg was 69" by 93"; the Vehenmoor example was 69" by 112". Yellow-browns were common. If buying, sixty inch wide fabric (2 – 3 meters of fabric) makes a good cloak.



Military brooches

The Late Roman soldiers and officials usually wore 'crossbow' brooches on their cloak, often bronze, sometimes silvered or even gilt. It is easy to order bronze crossbow brooches from *Raymond's Quiet Press* in Albuquerque, they can silver plate for very little and order times are very good:

[www.nmia.com/~rqpltd/Roman Brooches and Belt Fi.html](http://www.nmia.com/~rqpltd/Roman_Brooches_and_Belt_Fi.html)

We also recommend: <http://www.hr-replikate.de/katalog/en/index.html>

And: http://www.armamentaria.com/store/index.php?main_page=index&cPath=46



Tents

If you are reasonably hardy, our marching tents cost under £15 in materials. You can order cheap medium weight cotton canvas or the more expensive but more authentic linen canvas from:

www.whaleys-bradford.ltd.uk/

A simple cotton wedge tent costs around £100 and large, better made versions are available for a corresponding increase in price.

Victor James makes a range of plain wedge or Saxon types:

427 Anglesey Road, Burton- on-Trent, Staffordshire DE14 3NE Tel/Fax:01283-510285

Personal equipment

It's fun to eat and drink with authentic items. These can be made of wood and members often produce cups and bowls for sale. A cup of your own helps you share water, to keep hydrated in between displays. Period pottery can also be purchased.

Late Roman soldiers are usually pictured in 'pill-box' style hats, which we identify as 'Pannonian caps', which can be made from just a circle and a rectangle of your cloak material sewn together.



A satchel of cloth or leather can be convenient for carrying extra clothes, lunch etc and are very useful for the marches. Hand forged tools can be purchased from Dennis Riley of Sheffield at a range of events, or by email: drmt@bushinternet.com

Weapons, shields and armour

The basic combination is long weapon and a shield. The short spear known as a *spiculum* can be used for marching around and as part of the missile display. They can be purchased via *John Conyard*. A head costs £20, a ferule for the butt £5 and you shaft them yourself. For the combat display, you can cap a plain shaft with a leather/cloth pad, or even a slit tennis ball, well disguised under a few layers of cloth.



You can add additional weapons to your repertoire for show and for display use as time goes by and you have a chance to try them out. Stephen Atkinson makes spatha blades and scabbards; contact him via the website. Shields can be purchased with the correct design already painted for £60 from Comitatus member *Colin Greenfield*. You personalise the inside of the shield to your own personal taste based on authentic designs. The colours for the front of the shield are from the Craig and Rose 1829 Edinburgh range of Authentic Period Colours sold at B&Q. They are: Acrylic Eggshell, Ming Period Oriental Red and Victorian Period Smalt (blue). All are thick, matt chalky paints.

A ridge helm adds to the look of a soldier, but don't rush to buy armour: in the 6th century sources sometimes only the front two ranks might wear mail.

Re-enactors' Markets

Jorvik Viking Festival, York, February – There is normally a Viking Market at Barley Hall and also one at the Merchant Adventurer's Hall.

St Nicholas Fayre, York, November – Barley Hall

The Original Re-enactors' Market – At: Connexion, Leamington Rd, Ryton on Dunsmore, Coventry. March & November

Tewkesbury Mediaeval Festival, Gloucs, July



Some introductory guides

Elliott, Paul, 2007 *The Last Legionary*, Spellmount

MacDowall, Simon & Embleton, Gerry, 1994 *Late Roman Infantryman 236-565AD*, Osprey

MacDowall, Simon & Hook, Christa, 1995 *Late Roman Cavalryman 236-565AD*, Osprey

MacDowall, Simon & McBride, Angus, 1996 *Germanic Warrior 236-568AD*, Osprey

Southern, Pat & Dixon, Karen R, 1996 *The Late Roman Army*, Batsford

Sumner, Graham, 2003 *Roman Military Clothing (2)*, Osprey.

See also Salvianus' "Listmania" booklist '[Late Roman Re-enactment](#)' on amazon.co.uk

One step at a time

There is no 'rank' system for members or minimum period before you can appear with certain kinds of kit. Development of your impression is limited only by your pocket/craft skills and research, but there is no rush - most members extend their range of equipment and activities over time. You don't need a tent of your own to begin with - you can attend for a day or borrowing shelter as a soldier's slave or camp follower.

In good weather you can appear in a plain tunic & trousers or simple tube dress with, perhaps, a straw hat for the Sun, a sack for stowing modern gear and a concealed travel wallet for valuables. With luck, you might be pressed into service on the training field (*campus*).

For increased comfort, you will definitely want simple shoes, perhaps with foot cloths. If it turns cold or rainy, add leg bindings / wrappings, a woollen cloak closed with a thorn or bone pin and dream about nice warm breeches, a scarf, wool over-tunic or hood.

A raw recruit's priority would be to add plain wool decoration to the tunic, a broad military belt and 'Pannonian cap'. They might want their own gloves and a padded spear shaft for combat training and sleep in a borrowed tent or their own patrol tent.

Once you are settling in to your new career as a trainee you will probably want your own shield, simple ridge helmet and short spear (*spiculum*). You might have decorated your tunic and might carry a satchel to hide gloves in and for items like a cup, bowl, spoon and a handy knife.

A fully fledged foot-slogger would be proud to wear a crossbow cloak brooch, to carry a long spear (*lancea*) and to display his skills with javelins (*verutae*) and perhaps a training longbow. He might have picked up a shirt of cheap butted mail, worn over a thick tunic or padded *subarmalis* and have a hand axe for close weapons training.



Experience may have taught him the value of a water flask, strong boots for marching, large enough for comfortable naalbinded socks and greaves to deflect missile attack. He can relax in his own tent in the worst of weathers and might have his own portable cooking kit and tools: basket, saw, pickaxe and sickle.

The veteran will carry a *spatha* and might have collected more exotic weaponry: the *francisca* throwing axe, recurved composite bow, sling, staff sling or even crossbow. Perhaps they wear a scale cuirass or a fine mail shirt with alternate links punched and rivetted. Some may be equipped as a cavalryman with a smaller round shield and more elegant helmet. Their tent has an awning for pursuing their craft skill and with wares on display. They might have some of the considerable camp comforts of the day: stool, bench and trestle table, fire base and tripod with pots and pans, Crambeck Ware pottery, bucket, lantern and chests for stowing it all.

Just remember, for all their kit, their smiles can get no bigger than those of the raw recruits.
