

SELF-LED ACTIVITY

BATHING ROMAN-STYLE



KS1–2

Recommended for

KS2 (History)

Learning objectives

- Understand Roman bathing traditions and use the correct terminology to describe the bath suite at Wroxeter.
- Explore the experience of bathing on the spot where it happened.

Time to complete

20–30 minutes



A reconstruction drawing of the 'basilica' (exercise hall), which you can find a full-page version of on page 40.

SUMMARY

The public baths, along with some pillars from the forum, are uncovered and on display at Wroxeter Roman City. Porticoes (covered walkways) and other open corridors are marked out in red gravel, interiors are marked with cream gravel, and areas of cold water with black gravel.

Gather pupils in the 'basilica' and ask them to close their eyes. Read aloud Seneca's description of a Roman bath house on page 45. Get students to open their eyes and discuss, in pairs, the things they might have seen, heard and smelt at Wroxeter's bath house.

Walk your pupils through the remains of the bath suite and ask them to mime the following:

1. Work up a gentle sweat by exercising in the hall ('basilica'). Typical exercises include wrestling, lifting weights or ball games.
2. Get changed in one of the two small rooms at the end of the basilica ('apodyteria'). If you were rich, you could tell your slave to watch your clothes while you're gone.
3. Enter the bath suite into the unheated room ('frigidarium').
4. Relax in the warm room ('tepidarium'). Notice the tile stacks which were used to create space under the floor (hypocaust) so heat from the furnace could move around and keep the room warm.
5. Choose which room to go into next, either of dry heat, like a sauna ('sudatorium') or wet steamy heat, like a Turkish bath ('caudarium'). All the hot rooms have under-floor heating and are right next to a furnace. They are much hotter than the rooms you've just come through so you'd need to wear wooden bathing shoes to stop your feet from burning.
6. Get a massage from one of the hot room attendants. Bathers were massaged with oils, then the oil and dirt was removed with a metal scraper, called a 'strigil'.
7. Return to the 'frigidarium', and take a refreshing plunge in the baths of cold water there, or take a dip in the equally cold outdoor pool, known as the 'natatio'.

Continued...



A reconstruction drawing of the 'natatio' (outdoor plunge pool). Go to page 41 for an enlarged version.

As you walk through the various rooms, you could show your students the reconstruction drawings on pages 42 and 43 to help them picture what the Roman baths may have looked like.

MORE LEARNING IDEAS

Back in the classroom, students could design and label their own bath suite. They should include these things: 'basilica', 'frigidarium', 'tepidarium', 'cauldarium', 'sudatorium', furnaces (nearest to the 'cauldarium' and 'sudatorium'), and a cold plunge pool (indoor or outdoor).

They could also write a diary entry, imagining they are someone living at Wroxeter in the 2nd century, describing their day at the baths. Pupils can use Seneca's description on page 47 as inspiration.



A reconstruction drawing by Ivan Lapper of the 'cauldarium' (hot, steamy room) at Wroxeter, showing the highly decorated floor, walls and ceiling. Bathers wore wooden shoes to protect their feet from the underfloor heating. They could get an oil massage from a hot room attendant then have the oil and dirt scraped off their skin with a metal 'strigil'.



A reconstruction drawing by Ivan Lapper of the baths (centre) and the market hall (top left) as they may have looked in the 2nd century AD. Beyond the market hall, the front of the forum can be seen.

PAINTED WALL PLASTER

This section of plaster is from the entrance to the hot room at Wroxeter's baths. When the Romans invaded Britain, they brought with them new types of interior design, introducing a more detailed and highly-decorated style than people were used to. Beautiful patterns like this were painted directly onto the plastered walls and ceilings at the baths.



23. Seneca Letter 56.1-2

'My dear Lucilius,

If you want to study, quiet is not nearly as necessary as you might think. Here I am, surrounded by all kinds of noise (my lodgings overlook a bath house). Conjure up in your imagination all the sounds that make one hate one's ears. I hear the grunts of musclemen exercising and jerking those heavy weights around; they are working hard, or pretending to. I hear their sharp hissing when they release their pent breath. If there happens to be a lazy fellow content with a simple massage I hear the slap of hand on shoulder; you can tell whether it's hitting a flat or a hollow. If a ball-player comes up and starts calling out his score, I'm done for. Add to this the racket of [...] a thief caught in the act, and a fellow who likes the sound of his own voice in the bath, plus those who plunge into the pool with a huge splash of water. Besides those who just have loud voices, imagine the skinny armpit-hair plucker whose cries are shrill so as to draw people's attention and never stop except when he's doing his job and making someone else shriek for him. Now add the mingled cries of the drink peddler and the sellers of sausages, pastries, and hot fare, each hawking his own wares with his own particular peal...'

This extract is from a letter written by Seneca, a famous Roman philosopher, playwright, tutor and later advisor to Emperor Nero (r.AD 54–68). It is from one of his many 'moral letters' to his friend Lucilius, an important Roman knight and writer. In this dramatic account, Seneca describes the hustle and bustle of a nearby bath house, which he can hear as he tries to study.

There is a bright spring morning overhead, the old wall standing close by looks blank at us; here and there a stray antiquary clammers among the rubbish, careless of dirt stains; an attentive gentleman on the crest of a dirt heap explains Roman antiquities to some young ladies in pink and blue, who have made Wroxeter the business of a morning drive. An intelligent labourer, who seems to be a sort of foreman of the works, waits to disclose to the honorary secretary the contents of a box in which it is his business to deposit each day's findings of small odds and ends...'

This extract is from an account by Charles Dickens, the famous author, which he wrote after visiting Wroxeter on 14 May 1859. He describes an excavation taking place at Wroxeter in Victorian times.