

TAKING A BATH

BATHING IN ROMAN LONDON



Bathing was important to the Romans, and bathhouses were built because of this.

Bathers went first to the dressing room (*apodyterium*), where there were niches and cabinets to store their street clothes and shoes. Many bathers were accompanied by one or more slaves to carry their gear and guard their clothes in the dressing rooms, but the bathhouses provided attendants who would watch over the belongings of the poorest for a fee.

Sometimes the dressing room also served as the *frigidarium*, containing a small cold-water pool or basin of cold water.

Although the evidence is not clear about exactly what the Romans wore when bathing, it seems probable that they may have worn some light covering in the baths. Within the baths special sandals with thick wooden soles were needed to protect the feet from the heated floors.

After changing clothes and oiling their bodies, male bathers typically began their bathing regimen with exercise, ranging from mild weight-lifting, wrestling, various types of ball playing, running, and swimming (if the baths had a pool).

Although there were some women athletes in Roman times it seems that most of those exercising in the *palaestra* were likely to be men.

Then the bathing proper began.

Accompanied perhaps by slaves carrying their towels, oil flasks and strigils, bathers would progress at a leisurely pace through rooms of different temperatures.

They might start in the warm room (*tepidarium*), which had heated walls and floors but sometimes had no pool, and then proceed to the hot bath (*caldarium*), which was closest to the furnace. This room had a large tub or small pool with very hot water and a fountain with cool water to splash on the face and neck.

After this the bather might spend some time in the *tepidarium* again before finishing in the cold room (*frigidarium*) with a refreshing dip in the cold pool or by splashing cold water from a bowl.

Other rooms provided moist steam, dry heat like a sauna (*laconicum*). Bathers would have any dirt, dead skin and old oil scraped from their bodies with a curved metal implement called a strigil and they would then be massaged with perfumed oils.

After their visit to the baths (and some baths were very large and sumptuous), bathers could stroll in the gardens, visit the library, watch performances of jugglers or acrobats, listen to a literary recital, or buy a snack from the many food vendors.

Doubtless the baths were noisy, but the baths were probably very attractive places. Although most of the fine decor has not survived, many writers comment on the beauty and luxury of the bathhouses, with their well-lighted, airy rooms with high vaulted ceilings, lovely mosaics, wall paintings and coloured marble panels.

