

What was life like in Roman London?

Londinium (Roman London) was founded in about AD50 and soon became the centre of administration for the province of Britannia. The population was a mix of civilians, families, soldiers, sailors, workers and slaves. Many of them were from all parts of the Roman Empire, but the majority were native Britons.

Daily life in Roman London was hard. Most Roman Londoners had to work long hours to make a living, rising at dawn and stopping only for a lunchtime snack. They worked a seven-day week, but there were numerous festivals and feast days in honour of the gods, which enabled them to have a break.

So, although the workers lived and worked in small cramped houses and workshops, they also knew how to enjoy themselves and would go to the baths and taverns or seek entertainment at the amphitheatre.

Roman London was finally abandoned in AD410.

Who lived in Roman London?

Roman London was a cultural melting pot. Officials were sent from every corner of the Roman Empire to help run the new province of Britannia. Administrators, merchants, soldiers, retired soldiers and specialised craft workers were needed. They would have brought their households along with them.

Excavations of Roman cemeteries show that the town was overwhelmingly populated by civilians rather than soldiers. The majority were probably native Britons drawn to the new town, hopeful of making their fortunes as labourers, craft workers and shopkeepers. As well as fresh food, the busy population needed clothes, shoes, pottery and tools, all of which were made locally.

Citizens were at the top of the social ladder, followed by non-citizens and then slaves. However, some slaves rose to relatively high positions in government service working for the province or the treasury. This tablet uniquely shows that slaves could buy their own slaves.



Early 2nd century deed of sale for a female slave called Fortunata (Lucky). She was bought by another slave

Childhood diet leaves evidence in tooth enamel. Analysis of one woman buried at Spitalfields showed she was born in Rome.

What was it like to live in Roman London?

Most buildings were built along Roman London's busy main roads, running through the town. The roads were made of hard-packed gravel with drainage ditches on either side. Planks were laid across the ditches to enable people to cross more easily.

Houses, separated by narrow alleyways, were tightly-packed with small backyards and outhouses for keeping pigs and chickens. They had few rooms, some of which may have been rented out. Shops and workshops were often attached.



Iron strigil with a glass bottle for perfumed oils, 2nd – 3rd century

Richer houses were sometimes located away from the centre. They often followed new fashions such as mosaic floors, wall paintings and underfloor heating.

Going to the public baths or the amphitheatre were social events. While the amphitheatre provided release from the cares of life, the baths were a place to exercise and get clean. After a cleansing sweat, bathers used an iron **strigil** (scraper) like this to exfoliate and then rubbed in perfumed oils.

Roman Londoners had a relatively healthy diet, but used spices and a strong-tasting fish sauce to mask the taste of ageing meat.

What was family life like?

In most families, the father was head of the household, making all financial decisions. He led prayers at the family shrine and made the daily food offerings to ensure everyone's safety and wellbeing.

The mother ran the house, cared for the children and supervised the servants and slaves. In poorer households, the mother and children probably helped in the family business, with little free time.

Women went shopping, made and mended the family's clothes and cooked at hearths, either set in clay-lined hollows in the ground or on brick structures like a barbecue.

In the evenings, when the day's work was over and meals eaten, board games were very popular as lamps or candles gave out little light.

Very little evidence survives that can tell us about family life, but this marble tombstone shows us the strong ties between a mother and her much-missed son, who died aged 15.



Marble tombstone of a boy aged 15 from the early 3rd century

Board games like backgammon were played with counters of glass, bone, wood, or clay and bone, stone or wooden dice.

What sort of jobs did Roman Londoners have?

Most Roman Londoners spent their days at work.

As well as the **forum** (marketplace) selling fresh food and trinkets, a busy town like London needed shops and craft workers. There is considerable evidence for pottery kilns, glass working and leatherworking, including shoemaking. The intricate design cut from these shoes would have shown off the wearer's coloured stockings!

Each member of the family would have contributed to small businesses. Craft workers worked from home or in the main industrial area, set beside a stream, but away from the main settlement.

At times, London must have been one big building site. Carpenters were needed to build furniture and houses, plasterers to finish off walls and stone masons, mosaicists and wall painters for public buildings and big houses.

Military and financial staff worked in stone-built government offices, while rich merchants and bankers went to work at the forum, upmarket shops or riverside warehouses.



Leather shoes,
late 1st – 2nd century



The Romans recycled old and broken glass vessels by melting them down to make new ones.

What did Roman Londoners believe in?



Marble head of the god Mithras, late 2nd century

Religious belief played an important part in all areas of Roman Londoners' lives. They looked to the gods to help them make decisions, to heal injuries or for good luck.

On religious holidays, Roman Londoners celebrated at the temple of the god whose feast day it was. They prayed to them and made sacrifices to ensure the deity favoured them.

Mostly, they worshipped the empire's official gods, inherited from the ancient Greeks, such as Jupiter, Minerva and Mars. However, other deities, like Mithras and Isis, had also been adopted from other parts of the empire.

For a time, Mithraism was very popular. It was a secret society for soldiers, merchants and administrators. This marble head was found underneath the floor of his temple in Roman London.

Gradually, other religions open to both men and women became more popular. Christianity was one of them.

Londoners cursed someone by writing their name on lead tablets. Mirror writing made this request to the gods more potent.

See also

Collections Online is an online database which allows users to find out more about the Museum of London's objects, both on display and in store. Go to

www.museumoflondon.org.uk/collections

Museum of London's online resource:
Living in Roman London

www.museumoflondon.org.uk/londinium

Further resources for teachers/tutors

Explore the images for this topic in the Picturebank:

www.museumoflondon.org.uk/picturebank

Visit the Museum

The Roman London gallery at the Museum of London will help you find out more about life in Roman London.

Further reading

Alcock J., *Life in Roman Britain* (English Heritage, 1996)

Birley A., *Life in Roman Britain* (Batsford, 1976)