

NUFFIELD PRIMARY HISTORY



KS1: THE WAY OF LIFE OF PEOPLE WHO LIVED IN THE MORE DISTANT PAST IN BRITAIN

THE ROMANS: ROMAN BATHS

This lesson does need careful preparation and consultation about what you propose to do. You may need to consult parents as well as school management.

The whole unit was focused on enactive learning – learning by doing. So, for example, the children handled Roman artefacts, built a Roman road, and created Roman baths and a Roman market. They loved it. Parents reported that all their children talked about was the Romans, and were amazed at how much they knew about Roman life.

The account tells how we recreated a Roman bath house in the Reception/Year 1 classroom during a ten-week unit learning about the Romans, in Harrogate, North Yorkshire. The Roman baths lessons took place during the seventh and eighth weeks of the unit.

The KS1 children at the school usually looked at the Victorians when they studied *'the way of life of people who lived in the more distant past in Britain'*. However, the school taught the Victorians in Year 4, and the KS1 teachers felt this was repetitive for the children. So, they wanted to find another period suitable for their young pupils, one we could bring alive for them. We decided on the Romans, because in KS2 the school focused on the Vikings (rather than the Romans or Anglo-Saxons). In addition, there is a range of Roman artefacts available for loan in Yorkshire (both genuine and reproduction). Best of all, we could visit the Victorian baths near the school. Harrogate was a popular spa town in Victorian times, and the baths were built for visitors who flocked there to take the waters.

Even if you are not near a spa town, modern leisure complexes include features (such as saunas and gymnasia) that the Romans enjoyed in their bath houses. A visit to them would give children a sense of the many activities that took place at the Roman baths.

For the Roman baths lessons, the main teaching approaches were: historical role play, a visit to the Victorian baths, comparing bathing now and then, and scientific investigation.

Year group/class

40 children, Reception/Year 1. (The lessons were repeated later with 38 Year 1/Year 2 children.)

Teaching time

Two half days, a week apart, with a follow-up half-hour lesson.

Learning objectives

For the children to:

- understand enactively the sequence of activities within a Roman bath house
- gain an insight into the social dimensions of Roman baths
- investigate the effectiveness of the Romans' cleansing regime
- appreciate the differences and similarities between our bathing and that of the Romans.

Key questions

How did the Romans keep clean?

What happened at the Roman baths?

Is olive oil as good as soap for washing?

How is Roman bathtime different from ours?

Resources

Resource sheets supplied with this lesson: 'A visit to the Roman baths', Picture sheet, and 'Timetable at the baths' (for teachers' use)

A range of topic books about the Romans

Olive oil

Soap

Grapes, bread, olives

Ribena (for wine)

Brown pottery mugs

Picture of a pair of strigils

'Strigils', cut from hard acetate sheets (strong cardboard would probably do as well)

Plastic washing-up bowls, 2

Smaller bowls, to hold the olive oil, 2

Sponge and bucket

Bricks for headrests, 4

Movable screens

Trays, 2

Classroom tables, covered with sheets, 4

Large tea urn from the school kitchen (care!)

Plastic pool on legs (the Reception class's water play pool), filled with cold water

Access to the Victorian-built Turkish baths in Harrogate, or whatever you have available

Safety

Check your plans with others in the school.

If you bring a tea urn into the classroom you must obviously make *very* sure that it is nowhere that children could touch it and burn themselves, or worse knock it over full of boiling water. There must be close adult supervision of the urn.

Beware water (and olive oil) on the floor. Make sure you have a sponge and bucket handy to mop up spills immediately. Supervise this closely too.

As you know, it is sometimes hard to foresee what young children will do!

The teaching: Lesson 1

This was the visit to the local Turkish baths in Harrogate, ten minutes' walk from the school. They are in a large, imposing Victorian building. Inside, there are enough similarities to Roman baths to give the children an idea of the scale and pattern of activities that took place 2000 years ago. The Harrogate baths boast a changing room, a cold plunge bath, a steam room, a hot dry room, and a massage room.

The manager of the baths kindly agreed to give the children a guided tour of the bath complex, in two groups of twenty. Each visit lasted just under an hour, with the walk there and back taking another twenty minutes in all.

At the baths, the manager greeted us and began his tour. The children were awed by the grandeur of the high, decorated ceilings, the intricate tiled floors, and the sheer size of the rooms – some as large as the school hall. We passed through the changing rooms and the steam room (*Ooh, I'm sweating in here*, said Mark), then slowly walked the length of the long, very hot and dry hot room. The children were exhausted when they reached the other end, collapsing

onto the bench against the wall. Next came the relief of the room containing the cold plunge bath, filled with Harrogate's own mineral spa water. The children squatted at the edge and dangled their hands in the water to cool off. They would have loved to swim in it. Finally, we passed through the massage room, where visitors lying on stone slabs receive vigorous soapy massages. The children were particularly impressed by the curved wooden headrests on the slabs.

While one group of children was at the baths, the other group examined the Roman topic books for information about Roman baths, developing their reference skills while learning history. With Mary, their teacher, they investigated and discussed when the Romans visited the baths, the different rooms and other spaces, and what happened there. They started planning how we would set up our own Roman baths in the classroom. Fortunately it is a very large room, with ample space to accommodate our Roman bath complex (changing rooms excepted – we used the infants' changing rooms outside the classroom).

Finally, we reminded the children to bring their swimsuits and towels next week, for our very own Roman baths re-enactment.

The teaching: Lesson 2

Episode 1

Focus: Preparing the bath house.

We consulted with school management before this lesson.

Mary and I brought in soap and a bottle of olive oil for washing; Ribena for wine; brown pottery mugs; grapes, olives and bread for snacks. We borrowed the large tea urn, two plastic bowls and two trays from the kitchen, and filled all the bowls and urn with water. The day before, we had cut out twenty 'strigils' from the hard acetate sheets.

Now we set about dividing the classroom into five separate areas, corresponding to some of the rooms in a Roman bath house. The central heating was on, and the room was comfortably warm.

We placed the urn on a low table in a corner of the classroom, took off the lid and turned it on. (*Care!* Constant adult supervision.) We added two benches for bathers to sit on, formed 'walls' with two screens, and – hey presto! We had a steam room. (The classroom stayed humid for days afterwards.)

Next, we divided off the warm room with a row of tables. On them we arranged the two small bowls of olive oil, the acetate 'strigils', the soap, and the two washing-up bowls of warm water. The warm room was where the Romans would laze in the warm water and chat to friends. We replaced the lazing with a scientific investigation: to test which substance cleansed and cared for skin better – our modern soap or the Romans' olive oil. Chatting to friends would still be part of the scenario.

Meanwhile, the children changed into swimsuits, then helped the adults to set up the remaining three areas of the baths. In the massage area, we covered the four tables with sheets, arranged them in a row and placed a brick at the head of each. In the cold room we filled the pool with water and put two benches beside it for visitors to put their towels on. We laid two exercise mats down in the exercise yard.

Finally, we and the five areas were ready:

The urn was pouring out clouds of steam in the steam room (*caldarium*).

In the exercise yard (*palaestra*) I waited to lead the gymnastics.

Several self-appointed slaves (children) waited by the massage tables for customers, while others poured ‘wine’ into the mugs and put them on trays with the snacks, ready to serve.

The classroom assistant took up her post beside the pool in the cold room (*frigidarium*), from where she could keep a close eye on the steam room too.

In the warm room (*tepidarium*) Mary was ready with the soap, olive oil, strigils, and bowls of water to conduct the scientific tests.

Episode 2

Focus: Role play – at the baths.

With 40 children in the classroom, it was not feasible for them all to follow the same sequence of activities. So, we divided them into four groups:

- Group 1 came to the *palaestra* for some exercise before entering the bath house proper. I put them through several vigorous bending, jumping and stretching exercises.
- Group 2 started in the steam room, sitting on the benches with their towels around their waists, becoming warmer and damper by the minute.
- Group 3, which included the six self-appointed child slaves, went straight to the massage room. The remaining four children lay on the tables and were massaged by four slaves (closely supervised), while the other two slaves brought round drinks and snacks on trays.
- Group 4 lined up to wash their left forearms with soap and water, and their right forearms with olive oil and strigils.

We had intended, after twenty minutes, to move each group with military precision to its next activity. In the event, the children simply moved from one area to another, trying each one in turn. There was no congestion, and all were happily engaged, so we didn’t interfere. The whole role play took on a natural life of its own, with the children settling into the social rhythm of an afternoon at a Roman

bath house. Looking around, we were rewarded with glimpses of bathers talking and drinking ‘wine’ in the steam room; a slave dropping grapes one by one into a prone bather’s mouth; bathers energetically scraping the sweat and olive oil off their forearms and exclaiming at how soft their skin felt afterwards.

The teaching: Lesson 3

Episode 1

Focus: Comparing bath-time, now and then.

After lunch, Mary gathered the children together to draw out and discuss the understandings they had gained from the role play. On the flipchart, she wrote the heading: BATHING, then two column headings: Us and The Romans.

Mary asked: How is our bath time nowadays different from how the Romans did it? After much discussion, Mary and the children drew up a comparative list (see next page).

At the end, the children decided that the Romans had far more fun bathing than we do. Bright spark Tom exclaimed: *Their bath houses are a bit like the Academy* (a local leisure and sports complex). Yes, well spotted.

Episode 2

Focus: Writing – a visit to the Roman baths.

We did not do this final activity with the younger children, but have included it here as a valuable recording and assessment opportunity for the role play (I used it later with a split Year 1/2 class).

Give out the table: ‘A visit to the Roman baths’ and the sheet of pictures for cutting out, one per pair of children. Ask them to fill in, in order, all the activities they would do during an afternoon at the baths, and the areas they would do them in.

Learning outcomes

The children:

- learnt, through role play, the sequence of activities within a Roman bath house
- gained an insight into the social dimension of the Roman baths
- tested the cleansing capacity of olive oil and strigils and discovered that they are effective
- appreciated the differences and similarities between our bathing and that of the Romans.

BATHING**Us**

We usually bath by ourselves.

We bath to get clean.

We bath in our own houses.

We wash with soap, sponges, scrubbing brushes, bath bubbles.

We don't have slaves serving us in the bath.

We don't spend all afternoon in the bath.

We don't pay to go to our bathroom.

The Romans

The Romans bathed with lots of other people.

The Romans go to wash, but also to meet friends, exercise, have a massage, eat and drink.

Most people in towns went to the town baths (only very rich people had their own at home).

The Romans clean themselves with oil and strigils.

They had slaves or servants to serve them, and to scrape and massage them.

The Romans stayed at the baths all afternoon, and sometimes even all day.

They had to pay an entrance fee to get into the bath house.

Nuffield Primary History project

General editor: Jacqui Dean

Author of this unit: Jacqui Dean

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