

Visiting a Roman Bathhouse

The Romans loved bathing and washing. They built large public bathhouse complexes called **thermae**, so that they could meet up with their friends to wash, relax and have fun. It was a bit like a leisure centre.



1 The bathhouse under excavation in September 1972.

Source: <https://www.exploringexeter.co.uk/exeter-roman-baths-history-devon>

In the 1970s a Roman Legionary Bathhouse was discovered in Exeter. This picture was taken on Exeter Cathedral Green. To keep it safe, it was filled in with sand, before putting back the grass and road (now paved steps). The military bathhouse was inside the fortress and was not open to ordinary people. It was demolished when the legion left in 70 AD. However new public bathhouse was built for the new Roman town of *Isca Dumnonrium*. Remains of this have been found under the Deanery Gardens and South Street¹.

This Legionary Bathhouse was called *Isca Thermae*. Isca means 'water' or 'river'. Bathhouses would have been spectacular buildings. The one in Exeter was the same size as the floor area of the cathedral, and this was small compared to the average! They

¹ Bidwell, P (1979) The Legionary Bath-house and Basilica and Forum at Exeter.
©2020 Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery

would have had mirrors on the walls, glass windows and magnificent mosaic floors. Take a look at the [Exeter Time Trail website](#) for lots more pictures of the bathhouse.

Going to the bathhouse

When you arrived at a public bathhouse you would pay an entrance fee, the military baths were more than likely free. You would then go into a changing room to take off your clothes.

A bathhouse would usually have three main rooms. These were:

- A *tepidarium* (a warm room)
- A *caldarium* (the hot room)
- A *frigidarium*, where there was a cold pool.



2 A Roman perfume bottle and a strigil, used in the caldarium, from RAMM's collection

The Romans didn't have soap, they used oil instead. In the caldarium (hot room), slaves would rub you with perfumed oil, kept in a bottle like the one above, and then scrape the oil, sweat, dirt and dead skin off with a *strigil*. If you look carefully at the picture, it looks a bit like a hook.

Make a leaflet to advertise the new public baths

Today is your lucky day! You have been given a new job, Head of Promotion for the new public bathhouse.

Use all your knowledge of the bathhouse to make a leaflet that will encourage people to come and use the bathhouse. You can draw this on paper or use your favourite app on your computer or tablet.



3 An example front cover for a leaflet about the baths
Picture Source: www.visitbath.co.uk

- First you will need an eye-catching front cover. Think about the different things you would find in a Roman bathhouse
- Divide your leaflet into three sections:
 - How to find us
 - What the baths look like
 - What to bring
- Write about what visitors will find when they visit the *public Thermae*. You could talk about the three different rooms of the bathhouse
- Use words to make visitors want to come to the bathhouse:
 - Amazing, relaxing, luxurious, serene, beautiful, grand, peaceful, steamy
 - Remember to include some pictures to make your leaflet really stand out

Make your own papier-mâché antefix



This is a picture of an antefix. They were found on important buildings and protected the wooden supports from rain. They were a kind of Gorgon to scare away evil spirits. This one was found at the Exeter Legionary Bathhouse excavation site.

To make your own antefix you will need: old newspaper or scrap paper, PVA glue, paintbrush, paint or used teabags.

- ▶ Scrunch up a long sausage shape out of newspaper to make the hair. Stick this in an oval shape onto your piece of card
- ▶ Now use scrunched up paper to make shapes for the eyes, nose and mouth and stick them on to your card. Leave it to dry
- ▶ Rip some strips of tissue paper or toilet roll and using some PVA glue (watered down with a little water), cover your rough face shape. Press down in the middle of your eyes to make pupils
- ▶ Leave to dry, then decorate with paint or stain it by wetting used teabags and dabbing them over your design.



Example papier-mâché by S Creek.

You could add some text to your sign: SALVOM LAVISSE which means 'a bath is good for you'!

Don't forget to take a photograph of your finished creations to show your teacher.

Plan and create your own spa experience for your family

Visiting a *thermae* was a bit like a modern-day spa. Some would even have offered massages. Plan a spa experience for your family or for a person who is special to you.

- Create a plan of things you have to have at your spa.
 - Will you have relaxing music?
 - Will you have a nice calming smell in the air?
 - What will your spa offer? A head, shoulder or hand massage, or maybe a bubble bath would be a welcome treat.
 - Will you offer any refreshing drinks or healthy snacks?

- You could create a poster to advertise your spa experience. How many people are interested in coming to your spa?

Play your own game of Trigon

Roman Baths usually included an exercise area.

Trigon, an Ancient Roman ball game may have been played.

Historians don't know the exact rules, but here are the best rules we know. You will need at least one tennis ball or similar, but you can use multiple balls!

- ▶ Three people or more stand in a triangle/circle, two metres apart
- ▶ Start by throwing one ball from one to another, but you catch with one hand and throw it with the other
- ▶ You then increase the difficulty by having more than one ball going around at the same time
- ▶ You can also increase the distance you are standing from each other

It would be ideal to have someone else to keep score. Score could be kept on how many times the ball was passed successfully, or it may be easier to say the person is out when they have dropped a ball three times.