

THE ROMAN CITY



Clockwise from the right: the public entrance to the bathhouse; the *caldarium* showing the furnace and the hypocaust; the house; the *tepidarium* with floor; visitors on the walkway with guide Marilyn Greene (left)

INTERIOR PHOTOS BY JOHN THEI;
EXTERIOR PHOTO THANKS TO
LEANNE O'BOYLE



Billingsgate Roman bathhouse

It isn't the swankiest of sites. There are no sound and light shows and no state-of-the-art display cases. Until last year, when the frosted window was adorned with a depiction of Roman London and a sign saying 'You are here' in capitals, it was very hard to find, even if you knew it was there. Yet, this is one of the most important sites of Roman London.

In 1848, the remains of a small private *balnea* or bathhouse were discovered during the construction work for the Coal Exchange in Lower Thames Street. The architect of this late-lamented building, the wonderfully named James Bunstone

Bunning, had the foresight to preserve the remains (then just the *tepidarium*). The story appeared in *The Illustrated London News* and attracted a good deal of attention. Bunning's decision is particularly remarkable when you consider that just a few years later Roman masonry was being dynamited out of the way for new building works. Once the Exchange was completed it was still possible to access the remains via a spiral staircase.

In 1859, when warehouses were being constructed next door, the hot room (*caldarium*) and the cold room (*frigidarium*) were found. Although not accessible, they too were preserved.

The demolition of the Coal Exchange in the 1960s, tragedy that it was, at least gave archaeologists the opportunity to excavate further, and the remains of a late-Roman house were discovered next to the bathhouse. We have the north and east wings of what was a comfortable house, with underfloor heating. Perhaps there was a west wing but for the moment, unless any changes to the buildings enable further excavation, it remains inaccessible.

The site is in the basement of an anonymous, and frankly dull, office building and is still reached via a staircase – thankfully, no longer a spiral one. It has always had private tours and



Jo Wilkinson describes the unexpected delight of this underground site, which is just about to open again

tours by the Museum of London, and been part of Open House weekends, but it's never been well known or easily visited by the general public.

In training

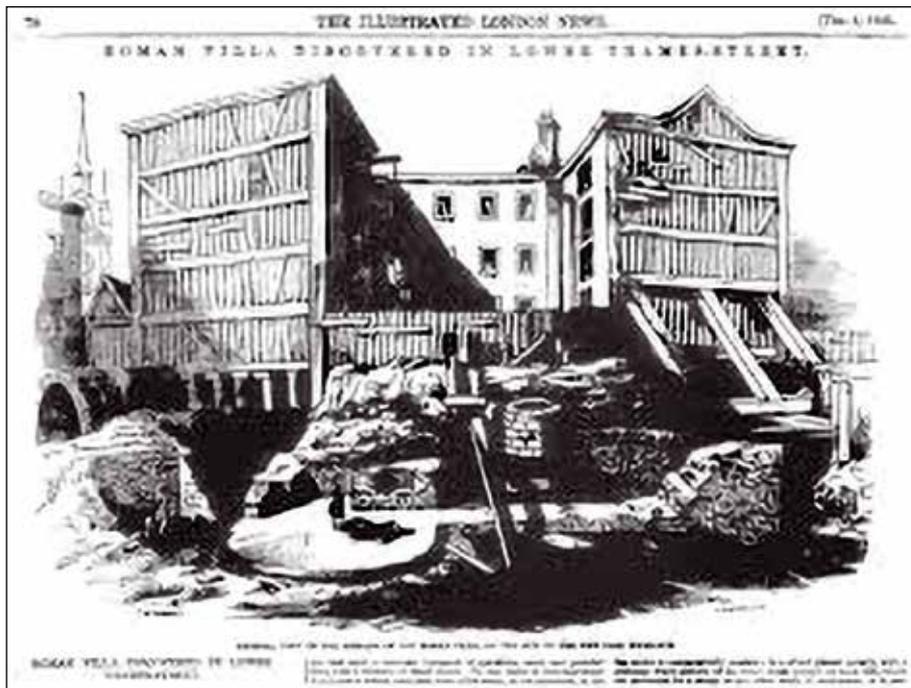
All that changed at the end of March 2018, when a doughty team of 24 City Guides were recruited to offer regular tours each Saturday until 23 November. Three 50-minute tours allowed visitors to experience this late-Roman domestic site, which gives us so much information about the last gasp of Roman London. We trained on visits to the site with Leanne O'Boyle from the Corporation, whose knowledge and enthusiasm

were impressive and infectious. In addition to learning more about the discovery and the importance of the evidence for life at the very end of the Roman occupation, we encountered the mysteries of the alarm systems and the practicalities of guiding in this very different space. There are walkways above the site, so you can look down at the remains, but they have weight limits. Our safety warning had to include reminding people to spread out lest they find themselves having a rather closer look than they wanted. Because the site is a scheduled Ancient Monument no-one is allowed to go down on to it, so we had to give another stern warning

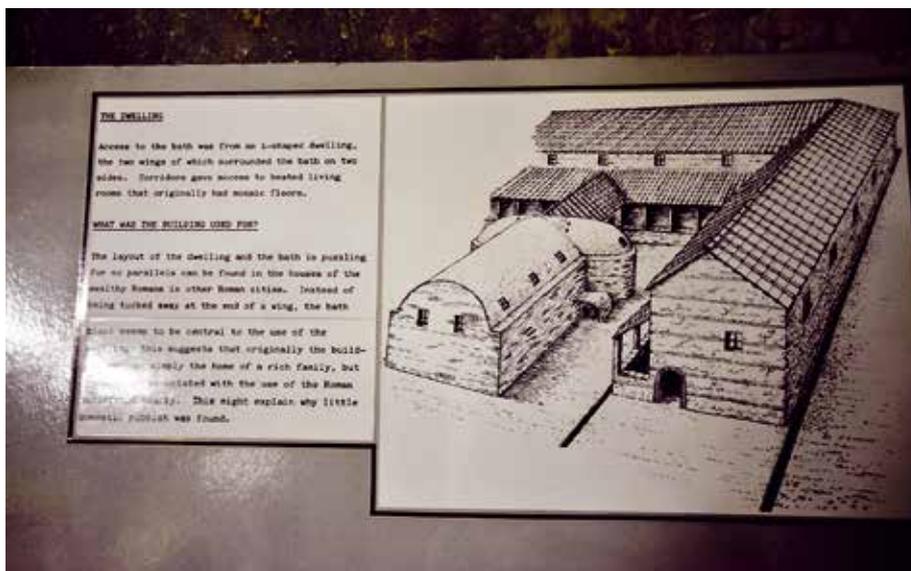
to visitors not to drop anything (keys, phones, glasses, etc) as these would have to stay in place until arrangements could be made for a qualified person to retrieve them. I am delighted to say that in all the tours (99) we had only one droppage – a pair of glasses belonging not to a visitor but to one of the guides, whose blushes I intend to spare.

Access from the street is through a sliding door. People sometimes could not find the doorbell and could be seen in silhouette outside, waiting for us to rescue them. Once safely inside, they would find themselves in a plain waiting area with metal cupboards, a few stools and some

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Above: *The Illustrated London News* reports on the discovery of the bathhouse in 1848. Below: an artist's impression of how the building would have looked in its heyday



illustrations on cupboard doors to give an introduction to the site. Not the most prepossessing of waiting areas, but it makes the site even more of a surprise.

Domestic scale

The 1,556 visitors we took round were all amazed and impressed. One young visitor described it as ‘totally awesome’. It is small, but because it is a domestic space – a house, perhaps, or maybe an inn, or even a brothel – it is easy to understand. The rooms with their underfloor heating tell

the story of what must have been a comfortable, well-appointed residence.

The Bath was built later than the house, providing an added attraction for its visitors and residents, although why the house’s only open space should have been filled up with the bath house is a question impossible to answer now. I like the idea that the owner, having found the British weather so inhospitable, thought a bathhouse was the best answer. If it was an inn (or a brothel) the bath would have been a welcome facility.

And the design is rather suggestive, as one amused visitor pointed out to me!

As you go around the site, it’s possible to see the furnaces where the ashes of the last fire were found, and to see where heating vents were blocked up when times got harder and, presumably, there weren’t the resources to keep the heating going. Visitors see exactly where coins and pottery were found that confirm when the furnaces were last lit and provide evidence of life and commerce carrying on despite increasingly uncertain times. We even know that a Saxon was here, in the deserted Roman city, at some point, because he or she lost a brooch, found centuries later.

This is very much a working site, surrounded by shelves filled with boxes of archaeological finds and also the mugs of present-day conservators and archaeologists working on the site. The story of the conservation process is almost as fascinating as the site itself, and we all learned a lot about cement and mortar. Conservation and cleaning work are ongoing. The proximity to the river means that damp is a problem, as is the dirt from traffic fumes.

Two-way learning

So, what’s it like, guiding in a place like this? For me, and I know for others, the most magical time was unlocking the place and having it to oneself. It was possible to feel the real house and not just the site, as if the occupants had just left. We met some fascinating visitors too, to answer questions for us. They included an engineer, with a love of Roman architecture and an understanding of mortar, volcanic ash and cement. I did say we learnt a lot about cement and mortar.

We had our moments, with malfunctioning alarms that wouldn’t be set or wouldn’t turn off, doors that wouldn’t close and even a small flood, but with the help of the out-of-hours engineers and the Corporation staff, we got through them. We are back again this year, starting this month, with more tours to build on last year’s success. If you haven’t been yet, there’s no excuse now, as you will have many opportunities to visit with a well-informed and enthusiastic guide. ■