

Homecoming

Since January I have been embroiled in the housing market, an activity which to some extent explains the recent drop in my contributions to this section of the website. Not only do you lose the will to write, but sometimes even the will to live, even though my experiences have not been as bad as some. Now on the cusp of (hopefully) moving, just one small example of the nonsense that can now confront the seller. Who knew (I didn't) that new windows, like new babies, require a birth certificate called a FENSA. My failure to legitimise the recent installation of two new windows has resulted in the compulsory purchase of an indemnity insurance policy on behalf of my buyer, costing £25. What he is being indemnified against is something of a puzzle for me. That the new windows may one day start sobbing: "We are just poor little double-glazed bastards and no-one cares! Send for the social services!" But without doubt another nice little earner for the rip-off insurance industry.

I did briefly contemplate a return to my youth and the city of Winchester where I went to school and spent my teenage years. A quick visit to Zoopla knocked that nail firmly on the head. As the *Sunday Times Property Section* regularly drools: "Winchester has become a "hot spot" and how!" Newly-built, two bedroomed terrace houses are on the market for £500 000. That is half a million pounds for the sort of house the Victorians built for £50 and which artisans like my grandfather could rent for a shilling a week. Who on earth is able to buy these places today?



In order to distract myself a little I turn, as always, to the Romans. Did they have to cope with a housing crisis and "hot spots"? Did they have to show that their central heating systems were regularly serviced by "a recognised engineer"? Did they have Fensa certificates, which after all is probably a corruption of the Latin word for a window "*fenestra*"? Did surveyors come to prod and poke and check the mosaics and the fresh water supply when a villa went on the market? And how was their housing market organised? How did you go about finding a house in the Roman Empire? It is not easy to find answers to these last two questions. It was not a topic which seemed ever to occupy a Virgil or Tacitus or Seneca.

There are however some interesting parallels between the Roman housing world then and the British situation today, especially in the way in which the housing market is and was divided.

At the top end of the market in the Roman world was the **VILLA**, the luxury accommodation which only the very rich could afford. Archaeology is uncovering more and more of these in this country, indicating that there was a well-established land-owning elite living under luxurious conditions which we might still envy today. They would in time be replaced by the mansions of the English aristocracy, - the Chatsworths, the Blenheim Palaces, the Burghley Houses and the like. Today this segment of the market seems to have been taken over by more dubious elements, - Russian gangsters and Nigerian fraudsters, for whom British top-end property is a safe haven for their ill-gotten gains.

Occupying the middle price range in the Roman world, particularly in cities like Rome or Cologne was the **DOMUS**. These were occupied by what we might call the wealthy middle class. How luxurious these houses were depended on the individual income, but they were

very comfortable places in which to live with most of the mod-cons enjoyed in the villa. A parallel in our times might be the large Victorian houses along the Halifax road in Edgerton, although most of these have been converted into flats and the middle class who once lived in them being forced to downsize to more modest accommodation, but which nevertheless still reflects their social status.

At the bottom end of the market, and by far the largest segment, was the housing provided for the poor. This was in the form of tenement blocks called **INSULAE**. These were up to nine stories high and generally consisted of one room apartments used mainly for sleeping. The tenements were built round a central courtyard where residents could do their cooking and washing. They were not usually connected to a water supply or sewerage system. They were basically slums the like of which we created in our own cities in the 19th century. Often being built of wood they were also a major cause of fires, especially in Rome.

What particularly intrigues me at the moment, as I am about to organise the movement of myself and my possessions, aka clutter, from A to B, is how the Romans did the same. We know from all the evidence that there was great mobility throughout the Roman Empire. Syrians and Spaniards were living in York. A citizen from Britain died in Cologne and his gravestone survives. The Roman army of course took mobility quite literally in its stride and it is well documented. But what of the individual Roman traveller, a bureaucrat perhaps, sent by the Senate in Rome to a post in Londinium? If he chose to travel with wife and family, and many did, as we know from the Vindolanda letters, how did they cope with the journey? Did he have to buy himself a truck and a team of mules to transport his possessions, or was there the Roman equivalent of a “man with a van” who did all the donkey work? And when he reached the English Channel did the Roman navy operate a regular ferry service across to Dover? And once in Londinium did he have to go house hunting or did he expect to find a property ready and waiting? If so, who provided it and did he buy or rent? And did the cost come as a nasty shock, as it does today? (Recently a former 3 bed terrace council house in Hackney was auctioned for £1 500 000.)

I recognise that some will regard these as rather geeky, “train-spotterish” type questions, scarcely worthy of consideration. But I disagree. The nitty-gritty of every day Roman life, its very ordinariness, is only poorly recorded, (although Pompeii sheds some light). This reflects history’s preoccupation with big events and the actions of the powerful, whilst the small, the everyday, passes unrecorded. But one thing I can confirm, if any Roman spirits are reading this. In my dealings with estate agents, solicitors, house viewers and men with vans the Gods of the Underworld, so important in the Roman psyche, have been conspicuous by their lack of assistance.

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