

# See Londinium and Thrive!



Excavations at the Bloomberg site in the City of London have produced some of the best preserved personal artifacts and items ever discovered on a British Roman site. These range from leather boots to jewelry. What has aroused the most attention and excitement, however, is the treasure trove of some 400 Roman writing tablets, of which over 80 have been deciphered and translated. They predate the Vindolanda letters by several decades. Perhaps the most significant is a contract dated October 22, A.D. 62 concerning the transport of 20 loads of provisions from Verulamium (St. Albans) to London, which shows that within a short period of time after the Boudican revolt Roman London was up and running again as a commercial centre with plenty of financial wheeling and dealing. It seems to have continued in this role ever since. (***Current Archaeology*** August 2016, Issue 317, has an article on these tablets, and the Museum of London (MOLA) website, [www.mola.org](http://www.mola.org) offers more information and images.)

As an erstwhile and continuing student of the Latin language these writing tablets offer evidence, rather belatedly in my case, that Latin was indeed a language spoken by “normal” people in “ordinary” situations. This was not something that might have been deduced from the way Latin was taught in our grammar schools in the 1950s, and the curriculum that was followed. There was never any reference to the people of Rome, except occasionally to Julius Caesar as a basher of barbarians. Latin lessons consisted in the main of a struggle to come to grips with grammatical structures which seemed to grow ever more complex and ludicrous as the school years passed. In the “O” level year a large dollop of Virgil’s Aeneid was added to the mix. The language was never spoken. At least the textbooks for French and German made some effort to relate the language to the people who actually spoke it in real life. After three or four years of trying to digest Latin grammar (deponent verbs, anyone?) some of us came to the conclusion that Latin could never have existed as a language spoken by real people, that it had in fact been invented by a bunch of bitter and grumpy professors at Oxford University whose intention was to try to stop us doing really interesting things like train-spotting or roller-skating.

And of course classical Latin has long been declared a “dead” language in the sense that no-one today uses it to communicate. But its deadness has perhaps been somewhat exaggerated. Latin survives. It is just that the leopard has changed its spots. Spanish, Italian and French are simplified, watered-down versions of Latin, more accessible, more user-friendly, (which begs the question, why couldn’t Latin have been like that in the first place?) And thanks to the Norman invasion Latin plays a major role in modern English today, having attached itself to the existing national language of Anglo-Saxon. The English are, linguistically speaking, bilingual.

As for the tablets again one records that a certain Titus had become a laughing stock in London financial circles for losing all his money on a dodgy business loan. Plus ça change.....