

# Whose *Londinium*? theirs or ours?

Francis Grew

"He dreamed of flying out of his bedroom window to discover that there, below him, was -- not Bombay -- but Proper London itself, Bigben Nelsonscolumn Lordstavern Bloodytower Queen." (Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*)

WE MIGHT guess that the young Salahuddin Chamcha had derived his image of London mostly from travel brochures and the BBC World Service. His mother, on the other hand, thought of the English as people who shared each other's dirty bath water. But is either of these images one that most Londoners have of their own city or of themselves? If not, why not, and what alternative images might there be?

The making of *Londinium's* history (Figs. 1-2) How do most of us picture *Londinium* early in the 2nd century? Probably it is something like this: *Londinium* originated as a settlement of merchants and, seventy-five years on, trade is if anything more important. The population is a cosmopolitan one, with immigrants from all over the empire. There are several well-known landmarks: a gigantic Forum/Basilica, a bath-house terraced down to the river, and London Bridge. The army may have had a hand in designing these monuments, but soldiers are not much in evidence, except for ceremonial duties. London is, after all, the capital of *Britannia* and the seat of the Governor.

Yet how often do we pause to consider exactly how this image came to be created? Deductively, from facts that are objectively 'true' and have an existence independent of the ways in which they have been transmitted? Or under the influence of numerous hidden agendas: fashions in historiography and archaeological interpretation, changing perceptions of the world around us, or images that the Romans wished to create about themselves?

A particular problem we face when studying Roman Britain is that the only historical texts available were written by men who lived all or most of their lives outside the province. Most, including Caesar and Tacitus, were aristocrats and politicians with a thorough grounding in the long traditions of Graeco-Roman historiography. One, Dio Cassius (whose account of the Boudican uprising was written 150 years after the event), had been born in Asia Minor and made no secret of his dislike for both the inhabitants and the culture of

the West. He must have counted himself lucky never to have been posted to Britain; the Danubian province of Pannonia, which he governed for several years, was uncouth enough. Nevertheless, the influence of such writers has been enormous, and to a remarkable extent their testimony has been taken at face value. Commentators may have agonised about distortions caused by rhetoric in Tacitus or by self-justification in Caesar, but we have

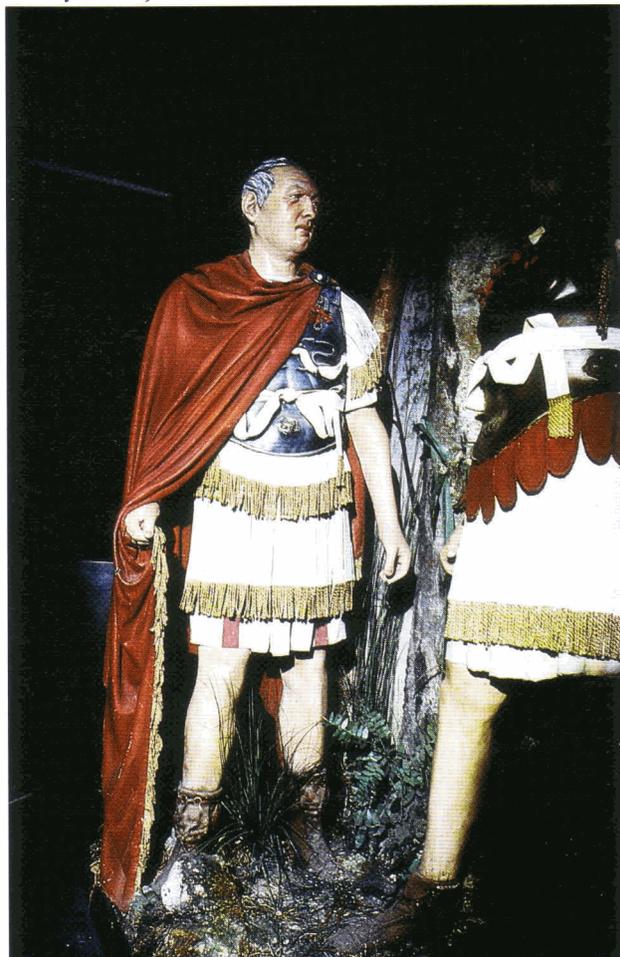


Fig. 1: Roman soldiers in about AD 50, selecting the best point to cross the Thames. These figures formed part of the Tower Hill Pageant, a 'dark ride' and museum that was open in London between 1991 and 1997. Note the cleanliness of the armour and the careful sheathing of the weapons -- details that affirm the benevolence of Rome and the uncontested nature of the conquest. Unconsciously, perhaps, the model-maker has worked entirely within a Roman 'discourse', and has perpetuated the image the Romans created of themselves.



Fig. 2: a merchant's shop on the eve of the Boudican uprising (AD 60), reconstructed as part of the *High Street Londinium* exhibition at the Museum of London (July 2000 – January 2001). This exhibition, with its emphasis on timber building and frugal, unpretentious styles of living, succeeds in presenting a vision of a *Londinium* far removed from Classical ideals. Nevertheless, many stereotypes remain. Note that the pottery for sale is neatly stacked on shelves and that the owner is assumed to have sat at a table rather than squatted at an upturned barrel or packing case.

barely recognised that their 'world view' may represent a *particular* view, which may not have been shared by people who actually lived in *Britannia*.

Recently, there has been much discussion of the ways in which 18th- to early-20th-century western writers created images of India, Africa and the Americas as seen entirely through the eyes of the *colonisers* rather than the *colonised*. At one level, the aim might be to justify (explicitly or implicitly) the entire programme of colonisation, but at another level, distortion might occur simply because the only descriptive terms available to the writer were those generated by western ideas and institutions. A typical example of this was the practice of describing societies in the form of tribes. Because it was believed that tribal society was a rung on the ladder to civilisation, it was inevitable that all writers, from administrators to ethnographers,

when brought into contact with new people, would immediately try to isolate and characterise different tribes. These tribal identifications were often made with the minimum of research or understanding, and so bore little resemblance to native people's perceptions of their own society. Yet they had a remarkable tenacity and often became institutionalised – sometimes with disastrous effects – in the colonial administration<sup>1</sup>.

Parallels with descriptions of Roman Britain are obvious, though we should beware of equating the nature and values of Roman imperialism directly with those of modern western imperialism. When it comes to assessing western colonial literature, however, critique and deconstruction can usually start by examining a small body of literature produced by the 'colonised'. This is simply not available for Roman Britain – which is why we find it so difficult to think outside the conceptual

1. M L Pratt *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992) 38-68; S Jones *The Archaeology of Ethnicity* (1997) 40-51; S James *The Atlantic Celts: ancient people or modern invention?* (1999) 62-5, 103-4.

framework, the 'discourse', that the Graeco-Roman world itself created. The problem is compounded by our own history and cultural values. British colonial administrators and the British education system in the 19th century regularly referred to the Roman empire as an example of 'best practice'; while in the early 20th century, at a particularly formative period in the development of Romano-British studies, leading scholars were strongly influenced, consciously and unconsciously, by the colonial conditions of the world around them<sup>2</sup>.

It was not only through literature that the Graeco-Roman discourse was established and perpetuated. Tombstones and Classical-style sculpture brought a means of representing religious or philosophical beliefs, but at the same time they brought an implicit assumption that the beliefs represented would broadly conform with those which the Graeco-Roman world had itself created or endorsed. For this reason, Romano-British sculpture often seems 'naïve' or 'incompetent', and we are only gradually beginning to recognise that at least some of it may have been created by people using a new language of representation to express ideas that were entirely their own<sup>3</sup>. Consider also the role of institutions. Students of recent colonisation have again stressed the extent to which the Western Powers used the education system, in particular, to impose their own values on colonised populations -- though in practice the colonised might use the education they had received to subvert the colonial system itself<sup>4</sup>. So too with Roman Britain, where fora and baths were evidently used to 'educate' the provincials. For us, as interpreters, this raises some important questions. Are Romano-British buildings and institutions merely imperfect replicas of Graeco-Roman 'originals'? Or can we recognise a response by a 'different' population to a newly imposed education system? We must, at all events, resist the temptation to equate the 'real' *Londinium* only with those parts of the city that apparently made use of Graeco-Roman lifestyles and architecture.

### *Londinium* in AD 61-2

Our impression of *Londinium* in the 1st century often seems to rely on one scrap of testimony, almost to the exclusion of the rest of the evidence

put together. This is the statement by Tacitus that, at the time of the Boudican uprising, the place was: *cognomento quidem coloniae non insigne, sed copia negotiatorum et commeatuum maxime celebre* ('not indeed distinguished by the name of 'colony' but very famous for (or 'crowded with') numerous merchants and supplies').<sup>5</sup>

The clause has not only generated a vivid picture of a thriving trading-post -- a picture corroborated, to some extent at least, by archaeology -- but it has also given rise to endless debate about the legal status of *Londinium*. If it was not a colony or *municipium*, what constitutional arrangements could have been made for the city? When subsequently did *Londinium* attain a higher constitutional status? Does the construction of a forum/basilica denote the grant of a new charter? In the absence of inscriptions, such questions are almost unanswerable. In any case, I suggest, they entirely miss the point.

A particular feature of the Graeco-Roman 'discourse' was the value placed on urbanism and the role of the city. Aristotle had theorised the organisation of the city-state, and both Romans and Greeks had established numerous colonies, so that when Caesar, for instance, came to describe Britain or Gaul it was almost inevitable that he would articulate his narrative around *oppida* ('towns'). For Tacitus too, cities will have been the building-blocks of society, and a *colonia*, in particular, would have been synonymous with *Romanitas*. Consequently, when it came to the events of AD 61-2, the destruction of chartered towns such as Colchester or *Verulamium* could be easily understood in terms of a binary opposition between 'Roman' and 'barbarian'. However, because London was *not* a *colonia*, things would have seemed less clear cut, less explicable. To provide the explanation, Tacitus drew attention to the crowds of traders and merchandise, enabling him to play on the assumption -- common in colonial discourses -- that 'natives' are always likely to vandalise property and are stereotypically avid for booty. On this reading, the comment concerning the legal status of London becomes not an objective remark, almost casually made, but one bearing a special significance within the context of Roman imperialist philosophy.

In passing, it is worth considering how far Tacitus's account of the uprising as a whole should be taken at face value. Recalling 16th- and 17th-century

2. R Hingley 'Britannia, origin myths and the British Empire' in S Cottam, D Dungworth, S Scott & J Taylor (eds) *TRAC94: Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Theoretical Archaeology Conference, Durham 1994* (1994) 11-23; R Hingley 'The 'legacy' of Rome: the rise, decline, and fall of the theory of Romanization' in J Webster & N Cooper *Roman Imperial-*

*ism: Post-Colonial Perspectives* (Leicester Archaeology Monographs 3, 1996) 35-48.

3. See, for example, M Green *Celtic Art* (1996) 147-9.

4. G Viswanathan *Masks of Conquest: literary study and British rule in India* (1998) 68-93.

5. C D Fisher (ed) *Cornelii Taciti Annalium Libri* (1906) XIV.33.

engravings of America<sup>6</sup> -- personified as an Amazon, dangerous yet strangely appealing to voyeuristic male eyes -- the Boudica who emerges from the pages of the *Annals* is so ideal a rebel leader that, if she had never existed, some Roman historian, some day, would surely have created her. Not only are preconceptions about gender and role harnessed to reinforce preconceptions about 'Roman', 'native' and transgression of the natural order, but the story of the rape of Boudica's daughters translates into a domestic setting the one-sided contest between invader and invaded. To some extent, perhaps, the rape story had a cathartic value: it enabled Romans to feel disgust for some of the consequences of invasion, yet did this in a safely constrained micro-environment that never questioned the fundamentals of expansion and imperialism. A further detail in Tacitus's account of the uprising is particularly intriguing. This is the statement that *Legio II Augusta* -- presumably based at that time in the west country -- failed to march out against the Britons. The commanding officer, one Poenius Postumus, committed suicide rather than face a court martial. Did Tacitus choose to present a major defeat simply in terms of the incompetence and cowardice of one man -- a tactic sometimes used by more recent governments to conceal political or military humiliation?<sup>7</sup> Was the real purpose of Boudica's army not merely to destroy cities but to link up with a second, successful uprising in the territory of the Durotriges?

But let us return to *Londinium*. The purpose of this critique has been to propose guidelines for interpreting the description in *Annales XIV*, not to suggest that that account is entirely fictitious. On the contrary, there is sufficient amphora, samian and other imported material to confirm the presence of abundant *commeatus* -- and, presumably, some *negotiatores*. Yet was London at this time simply a trading post, peopled entirely by immigrants? If not, what social dynamics may have characterised the growing settlement and how might we identify them? To tackle these questions,

6. A Loomba *Colonialism/Post-colonialism* (1998) 76-7.

7. *Op cit* fn 5, XIV.37. As an example from recent times, consider the career of Neville Chamberlain, who was regarded as his country's saviour in 1938 yet was vilified as a virtual traitor in 1940. His successors found it convenient to load him with almost sole responsibility for the British Government's policy of appeasement in the Thirties, yet to pass over his role in issuing -- and enforcing -- the ultimatum that led to war in 1939.

8. Supply systems at the Dutch (VOC) colony on Saldanha Bay (founded 1669): C Schrire *Digging through Darkness: Chronicles of an Archaeologist* (1995) 94-6. Transculturation: Pratt, *op cit* fn 1.

it may be helpful to review some ideas generated by recent colonial archaeology and history.

Official documentation on the establishment by Dutch and British trading companies of settlements in the New World, shows that they might be provisioned for a time by ship from the home country -- often, mainly with seamen's rations. Very soon, however, this method of provisioning was supplemented or replaced by local supplies, so that a hybrid form of diet can be recognised in the archaeological record. There were many reasons for this: local availability of comparable foodstuffs, the difficulty of guaranteeing long-distance supplies, or the need to adapt to different environmental conditions. However, the change entailed a complex series of negotiations between settlers and indigenous population, so that current students of colonial practice regularly stress the importance of the 'contact zone' where a process of two-way 'transculturation' could take place<sup>8</sup>.

Might this model be helpful in interpreting *Londinium*? While it is true that pre-Boudican Fire levels have yielded a higher proportion of imported pottery (Gaulish pottery, in particular) than those of any other period, there is often a degree of circularity in the inferences from such evidence. If we rely heavily on ceramics to identify and characterise the relevant deposits -- hypothesising that pre-Boudican London was mostly confined to the hill east of the Walbrook -- we are liable to overlook precisely those 'contact zones' where ceramics may have played a different role or may not have



Fig. 3: mica-dusted pottery manufactured in London in the very late 1st or early 2nd century. At least some of the kilns lay immediately to the east of the fort, in the upper Walbrook valley. Technically and stylistically the ware has features in common both with the products of some military potteries and with vessels more commonly made in copper-alloy or precious metals. Ram's or phallic-headed *paterae* and tall jugs are especially distinctive items, which may have had a specific function in the Graeco-Roman world during ceremonies of ritual cleansing.

been used at all. Significantly, on the western outskirts of London, where round houses were standing in the 50s, imported pottery comprised a much smaller proportion of the assemblage<sup>9</sup>. Crucial to any such investigation is analysis of the animal bone, but this remains almost entirely unpublished. Tantalisingly, at Leadenhall Court (one of the few published groups) the late Neronian and Flavian levels reveal evidence of local animal husbandry in the form of neonatal sheep, calves and pigs. Overall, the Leadenhall Court assemblages of this date match many from Romano-British military sites or towns; but, interestingly, they do not match so closely those from legionary fortresses or places in Britain and Germany where immigrants from the Mediterranean are believed to have formed a substantial proportion of the population<sup>10</sup>.

### *Londinium* in the early 2nd century

We have no contemporary descriptions of the city at this time. Instead, we are easily seduced by the imposing manifestations of a reassuring Classical architecture into imagining a place of harmony, order and stability, which was unobtrusively and benevolently governed. But, we may ask, is that how it really was? Does the adoption of Graeco-Roman forms of architecture imply the adoption of a Graeco-Roman style of living? The animal bone assemblages are of great interest in this context, because evidence from several sites both north and south of the Thames suggests that pork was now being consumed in large quantities for the first time<sup>11</sup>. Pork was the favourite meat among the inhabitants of Narbonensis and Italy, and was popular also among legionaries in both Britain and Germany. Perhaps people in *Londinium* were indeed becoming more 'Romanised' -- but we do not yet know whether this was so in all areas of the city and among all sectors of the population.

So far as artefactual assemblages go, the turn of the century seems to have been a time when fascinating developments occurred. Glasshouses were es-



Fig. 4: tombstone of a Roman soldier, whose ashes were probably interred just outside Bishopsgate in the late 1st or early 2nd century. Fragments from several such monuments have been found in London. They were a frank declaration of power, showing pride in the soldier's rank and staking the army's claim to a share in controlling the affairs of *Londinium*.

tablished within the town; fineware pottery kilns were built alongside to produce unusual forms in eggshell, glossy black or mica-dusted fabrics (Fig. 3); and it is possible that a range of rare, almost pure tin, plates and canisters was made locally<sup>12</sup>. The factories, where known, seem to have been concentrated in the area of present-day Moorgate and along London Wall, and so it may be that these new product ranges reveal the presence of military craftsmen based just to the west in the newly-

11. King, *op cit* fn 10.

12. Glasshouses: M Heyworth & J Shepherd 'Le Travail du Verre dans Londres romain (Londinium): un état de la question' in D Foy & G Sennequier (eds) *Ateliers de Verriers de l'Antiquité: la période pré-industrielle* (Association française pour l'archéologie du verre. Actes des 4<sup>ème</sup> rencontres, Rouen 24-25 Nov 1989, 1991), 13-22. Pottery: G Marsh 'Early Second Century Fine Wares in the London Area' in P Arthur & G Marsh (eds) *Early Fine Wares in Roman Britain* (British Archaeological Reports Brit Ser 57, 1978) 119-223; J Drummond-Murray, *pers comm*, for more recent discoveries. Metalwork: C E E Jones 'A Review of Roman lead-alloy material recovered from the Walbrook Valley in the City of London' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 34 (1983) 49-59.

9. Pottery: B Davies, B Richardson & R Tomber *The Archaeology of Roman London, 5: A Dated Corpus of Early Roman Pottery from the City of London* (CBA Research Report 98, 1994) 167, Fig 143. Round houses: D Perring & S Roskams *The Archaeology of Roman London, 2: Early Roman Development of Roman London west of the Walbrook* (CBA Research Report 70, 1991) 3.

10. B West 'The Animal Bone' in G Milne & A Wardle 'Early Roman Development at Leadenhall Court, London and Related Research' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 44 (1993) 67-79; A C King 'Animal Bones and the Dietary Identity of Military and Civilian Groups in Roman Britain, Germany and Gaul' in T F C Blagg and A C King (eds) *Military and Civilian in Roman Britain: cultural relationships in a frontier province* (British Archaeological Reports Brit Ser 136, 1984) 187-21.

constructed 12-acre fort. However, to understand the social context within which such wares may have been produced, it is worth considering some further parallels from colonial archaeology.

Work on sites both in north America and South Africa has shown the extent to which utilitarian goods might be used by *colonists* in an effort to affirm their identity in opposition to the *colonised*<sup>13</sup>. For employees of the Dutch East India Company at the Cape settlement, a close copy of humble Dutch Red Earthenware was manufactured locally. It seems not only to have been used for this purpose by Company employees themselves but also as part of an attempt to enculturate other sectors of the population into a more 'European' identity. So, too, at the Massachusetts Bay colony in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, where imitation British red earthenware served to create or preserve the image of a colonial elite. In some situations (at the Cape, for instance) such developments began almost immediately, but in others they took place several generations after the foundation of the colony, at a time when statuses began to be questioned and identities were under threat of merger. Transferring this analogy to *Londinium*, might we postulate a similar maturing of the settlement fifty years after it had been founded and a similar crystallisation of perceived identities? For whatever reason (and indeed as sometimes happened in the colonies) such developments were both sudden and brief.

This was indeed a time of change. How far did the very establishment of the fort both symbolise and engender a new interest in distinctions between 'Roman' and 'non-Roman', between ruling and ruled? The conventional view holds that London's garrison had an administrative or ceremonial function. The conclusion undoubtedly derives from study of military sculpture and epigraphy from *Londinium*, but it may also draw unconsciously upon perceptions of the present-day role of the armed services in London pageantry. In its own day, the Cripplegate fort, encompassing about 12 acres and surrounded by a high stone wall, will have represented a major physical intrusion into the cityscape, while in the cemeteries soldiers began setting up life-sized sculptures of their dead comrades (Fig. 4). Clearly visible to all those who approached the town, such tombstones were never

common in *Britannia* and represented something of an anachronism in the empire at this time<sup>14</sup>. They emphasised the exclusivity of the London garrison as a sector in society, and symbolised in perpetuity the role of the deceased as an agent of the Roman government.

Potential enough for creating stress in the social fabric -- but why should we habitually turn a blind eye to the potential of the Roman army to act as a repressive force, in civilian areas no less than on the northern frontier? Interestingly, since the early years of this century, when much of the agenda for Romano-British studies was set, it has become customary to regard the defence of the frontiers and the civilisation of lowland Britain as two separate, though complementary, aspects of Romanization. The possibility of intervention by the army in the 'civilian' areas of Britain after the Boudican revolt has rarely been discussed. Occasional finds of military equipment in the countryside of the south are dismissed as relics lost by soldiers 'passing through' or 'on leave'. To turn for a final time to modern parallels, it is clear that colonial control generally depended on the twin, complementary, methods of physical coercion and intellectual acculturation. Once-colonised peoples often feel that western post-colonial deconstruction tends to emphasise the role of the latter -- which might be regarded as 'civilised' if not entirely acceptable -- and to downplay the role of the former<sup>15</sup>. Perhaps many inhabitants of *Londinium* would have felt the same way.

### Conclusion: the future of London's past

The purpose of this article has been to provoke a critical reappraisal of the ways in which evidence about *Londinium* is accumulated and interpreted. We should beware of assuming that there is an objective reality 'out there' which we currently fail to recognise simply because of the lack of a few vital scraps of information. Instead we should acknowledge that all perceptions -- ancient as well as modern -- pass through the filter of the perceiver's world view, be this consciously or unconsciously expressed. Nor should we conclude that the filtering applies only to verbal testimony. In place of the long-standing assumption that Roman-style artefacts must invariably have been used in Roman ways -- or, put another way, to suppose that the only question is how far a particular city, building

13. Cape Town: S C Jordan 'Coarse Earthenware at the Dutch Colonial Cape of Good Hope, South Africa: a history of local production and typology of products' *Int J Hist Archaeol* 4.2 (2000) 113-43. Massachusetts Bay: S B Turnbaugh '17th and 18th century lead-glazed redwares in the Massachusetts Bay Colony' in C E Orser (ed) *Images of the*

*Recent Past: Readings in Historical Archaeology* (1996) 215-34.

14. H Gabelmann 'Die Typen der römischen Grabstelen am Rhein' *Bonner Jahrbücher* 172 (1972) 104-15; M C Bishop 'The Camomile Street Soldier Reconsidered' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 34 (1983) 31-48.

15. Loomba, *op cit* fn 6, 31.

or individual matched up to a supposed Roman ideal – we should ask how people used the materials and artefacts available to them to express their identities, to meet their particular needs and generally to live within the world at that time. On this reading, those who lived without samian pottery on the rural settlements being excavated in increasing numbers throughout Greater London, were no less important participants in the Roman world than those who drank Rhône-valley wine in the city.

To future observers, then, will *Londinium* seem a less friendly, less comfortable, less Roman city? Perhaps. On the other hand, even after he had lived

there several years, the middle-aged Salahuddin Chamcha continued to see London through rose-tinted spectacles ....

### Acknowledgements

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## A visitor's view of the exhibition

Ruth Orton

*High Street Londinium* is the name of a replicated reconstruction of the findings of the excavation at No. 1 Poultry in the City of London, a site where unusually good preservation of buildings from the Roman period led to the idea of a unique type of reconstructive exhibit at the Museum of London. The nature of the display, its portrayal of one particular site, naturally imposes limitations on its content. One might like to see more rooms, a greater variety of occupations represented or a wider range of artefacts which did not feature at the 1 Poultry site. However, the Museum's adjoining *Roman Gallery* covers all aspects of life in Roman Britain and therefore enables the visitor to follow up areas of interest or place the site within a wider context.

The comparatively small scale of the exhibition negates the need for costumed interpreters or modern guides. The display is preceded by an informative, well-subtitled, five minute video which the visitor is "recommended" to watch before entering. This explains the background and nature of the exhibit and its importance for archaeological London. The visitor is also offered a map with explanatory notes on individual rooms which prevents the necessity of providing modern labelling or explanatory notes in the display itself. The exhibition is "peopled" by a bustling soundtrack evoking busy street life and in one of the rooms a video reconstruction shows the life of a busy Roman street outside one of the windows. These effects give the visitor the uncanny impression that the inhabitants have but briefly stepped

outside and might return at any moment to their workshops and living quarters.

A good variety of levels of Romano-British society are represented in the room layouts and artefacts. There is also a convincingly "lived in" feel to the place. It is explained that some of the dwellings are older than others and one still under construction by its Roman owners, and everything looks as though in everyday use. Any item or artefact which is not either self-explanatory or covered by the notes on the map provided, is very likely to be explained in more detail in the more formal display cases at the end of the tour where the original finds can be compared and matched to what the visitor has just experienced.

What really sets this exhibition apart is that because the entire area, the building work, furniture and objects are all modern replicas, it is possible for the visitor to view, touch, pick up and handle items which would normally be beyond reach. For those who have squinted awkwardly in frustration at exhibits, asking questions such as "How is that made?", "What does the back look like?" or "How heavy is that?" the Museum of London's approach to their new display is truly revolutionary. Although the experience is specifically aimed at the younger age groups, it will be enlightening for those of all ages. In many ways it is more satisfying even than the concept of "dark rides" (such as those at the *Yorvik Viking Centre* or the former *Tower Hill Pageant*). At *High Street Londinium* the visitor can travel at their own pace and connect in a much more intimate way with their surroundings.