

## So where did it all go wrong.....?

One of the great puzzles of history, (or at least it puzzles me greatly), is why those who took up the reins of power after the collapse of the Roman Empire seemed totally incapable of profiting from and building on the legacy bequeathed to them by Roman civilisation. Yes, the Latin language lived on, mainly as the lingua franca of the Catholic church and the legal system, but all the rest, - the roads, houses with central heating and baths, good quality water supply and the hygienic disposal of sewerage, the use of high quality cement and concrete in construction, objective scientific discourse and scholarship, - (“*what have the Romans ever done for us...?*”), all of this seemed beyond their powers of comprehension, almost as though they were confronting for the first time the remains left by some alien invaders. When Hairy Hermann from Hamburg scrambled ashore on the east coast of England in the sixth century and saw his first Roman villa it was beyond his powers to say:

*“Oh look! The Romans used tiles on the roofs of their villas. How clever! So much better than bundles of straw, my dear. And just look at their bathroom. And that mosaic floor! So easy to clean.”*

In fact we seemed to regress for almost the next two thousand years, the social and physical infrastructure the victim of endless religious wars and the struggles for political power. Roman Cologne, *Colonia Claudia Ara*, had been one of the jewels in the crown of the Empire, its fresh water supplied by a 100km long underground conduit and producing high quality glass ware exported throughout the Roman world. By the late 18th century it had become, like most towns and cities in Europe, a stinking slum. The poet Coleridge bears witness:

In Köln a town of monks and bones,  
And pavements fanged with murderous stones,  
And rags, and hags and hideous wenches,  
I counted two and seventy stenches,  
All well defined, and several stinks,  
Ye nymphs that reign o’er sewers and sinks!

Vitruvius, the first century BC author of Ten Books on Architecture, which set down the principles of all aspects of Roman building, the proper use of concrete and the importance of a clean supply of water, would have been aghast at such “progress”.

Closer to home and nearer in time my grandmother’s 18th century cottage in rural Wiltshire had no services whatsoever until the late 1950s, when at long last mains electricity and water were installed. For most of her life there the only mod.con had been the black kitchen range fitted in so many houses in the UK in Victorian times when the railway had helped to reduce the cost of coal to a level which most could afford. The irony though is that a few hundred yards away on the banks of the Wiltshire Avon there had once been a swish Roman villa. It was excavated in the 1950s and its mosaic floor is on display in Salisbury museum. The Romano-Brits who lived there in comparative luxury in the 3rd and 4th centuries, revisiting the village in the mid 20th century, would, like Vitruvius, have been astounded at what the future had wrought.