

# Is Roman Britain Sexy?

by Caroline Lawrence

Way back in the late 70's when I was studying Classics at Cambridge, I had to take some courses on Roman Britain. Try as my lecturers would, they could not make it sexy. Not compared to debauched Rome and sun-soaked Greece...

Later, when I decided to write mystery stories set in the first century AD with a Roman version of Nancy Drew, I decided they should be set in Italy, Greece and North Africa. That way, the research would be fun.

The 17 books take place over the two and a half years of Titus' reign, and real events provide the backdrop of several books. Flavia's father is a sea captain so in that time span I was able to take my young detectives to Rome, Pompeii, Sorrento, Corinth, Delphi, Athens, Rhodes, North Africa, Egypt and Turkey.

For a short time I also toyed with the idea of taking my young Roman detectives on a jaunt to Roman Britain. But the timing of a voyage from Rome to Britannia and back would take up too much time in the historical scope of the series. Gratefully, I turned a novel-length trip to Roman Britain into an armchair short story, *The Legionary from Londinium*, in which *detectrix* Flavia Gemina solves a mystery in Britannia without ever leaving Ostia.

So when, in 2014, my publishers suggested that I write a series of books for children set in Roman Britain, my heart sank.

How could grey Britannia compare with the sunny Med? And how would I find historical events as exciting as the eruption of Vesuvius, the opening of the Colosseum and the mysterious death of the Emperor Titus?

To inspire myself, I sat down and made a list of sexy things about Roman Britain:

## 1. Julius Caesar's brief invasion

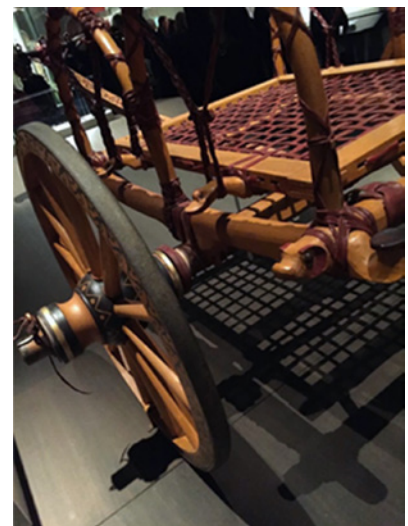
He came, he saw, he nearly got conquered. Twice in quick succession. As much by the weather as by the half-naked, tattooed warriors. Both times, Caesar managed to get back to Gaul (France) safely. Apart from a quick visit by Caligula in AD 40, Roman soldiers were not to set foot on the soil of Britannia for nearly another century.

## 2. Claudius' conquest, with elephants!

The doddering emperor Claudius needed to gain the respect of the senators and citizens of Rome. So he decided to do what even the great Julius Caesar hadn't managed: conquer Britannia, the mysterious land at the edge of the world. Of course he didn't do it himself; he sent his best troops and then turned up after for a triumph. It was the great achievement of his life, and he named his son Britannicus in honour of it.

## 3. Boudicca, warrior queen of the Iceni

Whether her hair was red or not, Boudicca has fired the imagination of women and men since she led her troops to destroy three Roman towns in Britain and slaughter as many as 70,000



**Figure 1. | Replica Iron Age chariot from the Celts exhibition at the British Museum.**

people. Much has been written about her but this warrior queen will run and run, not least because she can be re-marketed for any generation. More than one Year 4 teacher has said they console red-haired girls in their class with the example of the Iceni Queen.

4. Mystical, mysterious Druids

As the spoof band members in the cult movie *This is Spinal Tap* say: 'Nobody knows who they were or what they were doing...' Because we



**Figure 2. | Wicker man (Cernunnos) being burnt at Butser Ancient Farm April 2016.**

know so little about the Druids, you can do almost anything with them. The more I ponder them, the more I suspect they must have a lot in common with nature-loving Native Americans. Especially spooky is the idea of the burning wicker man, a practice that has been revived recently at sites like Butser Ancient Farm, though happily without the living sacrifice.

5. Legionaries, forts and battles

There's lots of fun to be had detailing the life of a legionary, the structure of the Roman army and some exciting battles. Schoolchildren love it when a 'real' Roman soldier comes in to teach them to march or charge or lets them heft his shield. Britain has the remains of many forts and fortresses, some with reconstructed barracks and entryways.

6. Famous for hunting dogs and prowling wolves

Kids love animals and Roman Britain was famous for them, not least for the

fact that one of Britannia's major exports was hunting dogs. The ancient versions were probably closest to today's Irish Wolfhounds and greyhounds. Don't quote me; I've got to do more research.

7. Blue tattooed warriors with twisty gold torcs

The recent Celts exhibition at the British Museum showed the type of bling the Britons loved. Gold torcs, silver and enamel brooches, chariots of leather, iron, hide and wood. On all of them animals and faces are hidden in mystic swirls and spirals, once again attesting to the Britons' passion for living creatures. If you missed it you can see bling galore at the British Museum's permanent exhibition.

8. Bath Spa

With its creative use of coloured lights and holograms around the ancient ruins of the thermal springs, The Roman Baths



**Figure 3. | Gorgon head from pediment of the temple of Sulis-Minerva at Bath Spa.**

Museum is probably my favourite in the world. Sometimes you will even find actors dressed as ancient Romans eager to tell you about their lives in *Aquae Sulis*. The steamy green water would have been clear in Roman times but the place is still wonderfully

atmospheric. Sites like this, which cater to schools and tour groups, would be especially good to use in my books.

9. Fishbourne Roman Palace

Discovered in the 1960's, Fishbourne is an opulent Italian structure plonked on the south coast near Chichester. Built in the early days of the Roman occupation of Britain, its garden might possibly be the first on this island, as the natives did not have the Roman concept of imposing order upon nature. Often the site of re-enactment displays and Roman craft workshops, Fishbourne Roman Palace is another great site for schoolchildren to visit.

10. Londinium's amphitheatre

Underneath London's Guildhall are the remains of an amphitheatre for beast fights, gladiatorial combats and other Roman hijinks. Sometimes you



**Figure 4. | Gladiator Games at London's Guildhall, August 2015.**

can even attend gladiatorial combats performed by enthusiastic re-enactors. These include appearances by various emperors in horse-drawn chariots, period instruments and plenty of fake but realistic blood. Great fun for the whole family.

11. Sexy Re-enactors

Speaking of re-enactors, I have got to know members of groups like *Britannia*, *Leg II Aug* and *The Ermine*



Street Guard in the past 15 years of researching my Roman books. These guys (and gals and kids!) know how it feels to march in hobnail boots and a chain mail tunic with a heavy *furca* over one shoulder. They know what it's like to sleep on a bearskin under a goat-leather tent. They know how to spark a fire with flint, iron and horse-hoof fungus. Always cheerful and eager to impart their knowledge, they are pure inspiration.

12. Roman Wall Blues

A decade or so before the extraordinary Vindolanda tablets came to light, the poet and classicist

auxiliary soldier serving on Hadrian's Wall. Beginning with the wonderful lines *Over the heather the wet wind blows, I've lice in my tunic and a cold in my nose...* it is one of my favourite poems in the whole world. It makes me chuckle and then swallow a lump in my throat, all in seven short stanzas.

13. Museums and Collections of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Since my Cambridge days, museums have improved astronomically. There are now some superb museums with Roman collections, ranging from the

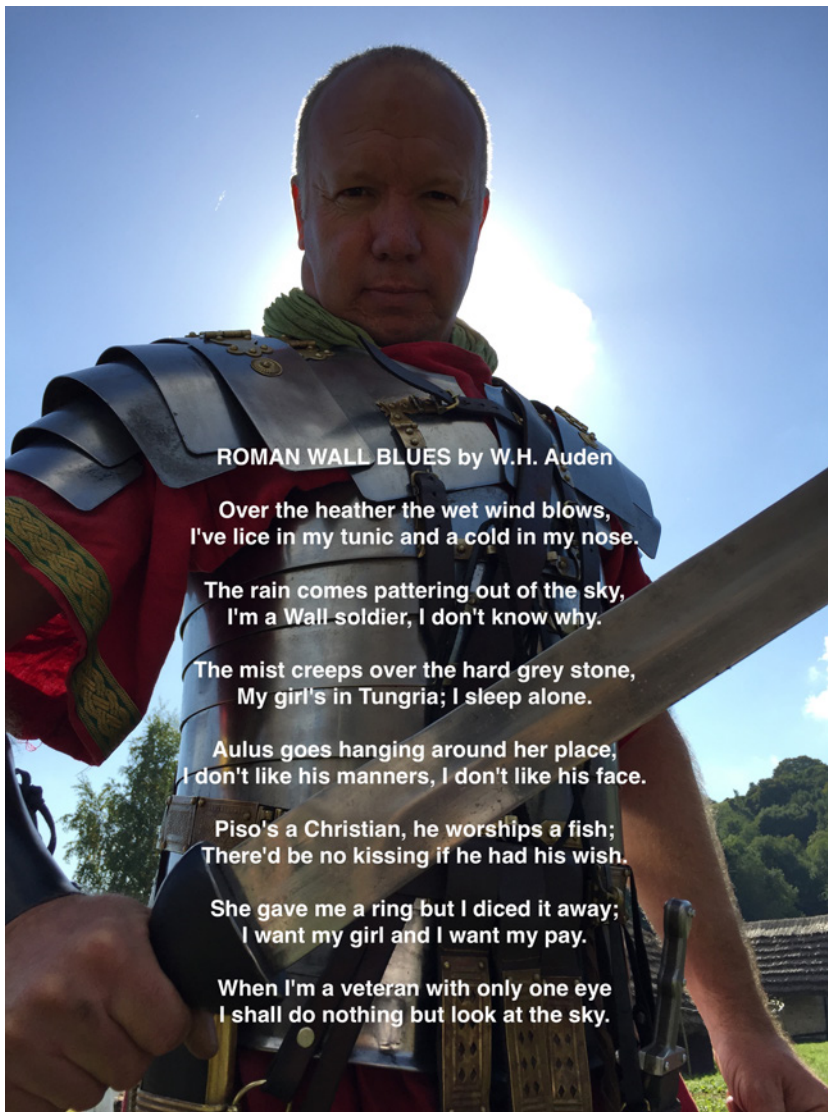
collections like that at the Corinium Museum, the Ashmolean and the Yorkshire Museum, to small gems like the Roman Museum in Canterbury or the Vindolanda Museum.

14. Getting to Know All About Yew

As I started to research the books, especially the Iron Age settlements



**Figure 6. | Caroline climbing a non-native Blue Cedar in Wandsworth Park, June 2016.**



**Figure 5. | Roman legionary at Butser Ancient Farm with Roman Wall Blues.**

W.H. Auden wrote a poem from the point of view of a Roman

British Museum and Museum of London to medium-sized

here in Britain, I realised that I needed to be able to identify native British trees. I'm a transplanted Californian and although I've been in this country for nearly 40 years, I still don't know the names of the trees outside my flat, the ones I walk by at least twice a day. So the summer of 2016 became my #SummerOfTrees. I didn't even have to go into the countryside to do my research. As Jack Cooke says in his wonderful book *The Tree-Climbers Guide*, London has over seven million trees, many of them native species.

15. Decapitated Heads and DNA

Finally, we now have almost daily discoveries in London of Crossrail skulls and wood tablets. Add to that the 21<sup>st</sup> century ability to decode DNA via isotope readings and bring back letters through laser imaging, so there has never been a more exciting time to write about Roman Britain.

Roman Britain sexy? Hell, yeah!



Figure 7. | First two books in Caroline's new series: *The Roman Quests*.

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*Roman Quests: Escape from Rome* (ISBN 978-1510100237) is out now. *Roman Quests: The Archers of Isca* (978-1510100268) is out in October 2016. *Roman Quests: Death in the Arena* and *Roman Quests: Return to Rome* are planned for 2017.

All photographs in this article are by Caroline Lawrence.