

The London Mithraeum

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Just after Christmas Ed and I decided to brave the London Underground and visit the newly opened London Mithraeum, again occupying its birth space some 25 feet below the pavements of present-day Walbrook. Mind you, we almost missed it altogether, as it is housed now under the European Headquarters of the Bloomberg Media Group, an ultramodern cathedral of glass and concrete just a short way up from the Royal Exchange at No.12 Walbrook. The sign welcoming you to the Mithraeum is somewhat discreet.

We walked into an enormous vestibule, handed in our booking slip and were directed to what can only be described as a Wall of Discovery, a sort of 3D patchwork displaying around 600 artefacts, a mere fraction of the 14,000 items recovered during the excavations carried out in advance of the new building project. That we have so many finely preserved things is due to the waterlogged area which is all that now remains of the Walbrook River. Coins, jewellery, knives, shoes, wooden spoons – almost too much to take in. Favourites have to be an amber pendant fashioned as a gladiator's helmet; a set of tiny balances, possibly used for weighing gemstones (it was far too small for spices); pretty leather sandals; a gruesome set of 'tweezers' or probes which we thought could have been used by a barber, a doctor or a mortician! Also included in the display are a selection of the writing tablets found in the vicinity. This is the largest number of tablets found in Britain and the earliest in date. On one is the earliest known reference to Londinium and another one is written as an IOU for a loan. The Mithraeum provides the use of interactive tablets to study the Finds Wall in depth.

To reach the Mithraeum you literally descend into the depths of time. Key dates are etched into the black granite along the staircase wall starting with Blitz in 1941 which destroyed practically everything on the ground in this part of the City, and finishing at AD410, when the Romans withdrew from Britain. The lighting is dim, beginning to create an atmosphere of mystery and expectation. By the time you reach the mezzanine level you are on the ground level as it was at the end of the Romano British era. The space is shrouded in black, and the 'antichamber' features a screen of changing images of the original excavation and three beautiful interpretations of Mithras to be explored via touch screens. At last we are ushered into the Mithraeum itself.

The reconstruction we are now in is the excavated ruin as was finally uncovered in October 1954. Some 18 metres long and 8 metres wide, it has two aisles with a central nave. The solid remains of stone and brick are enhanced by pillars of light depicting the colonnades and at the far end opposite the entrance, set on a podium, is a tauroctony panel etched on glass depicting the legendary image of Mithras slaying the bull. The rites of the cult would have centred round a similar Mithraic image. Other small cult images would have been displayed in this part of the temple. We were encouraged to circumnavigate the temple on an elevated walkway with a viewing platform and benches in appropriate spots. Though the rituals of the cult were secret there is evidence of a basin set into the floor next to the podium to receive the blood offering from a sacrifice. We were told that it was highly unlikely that worshippers would have been able to sacrifice a fully grown bull in this confined space!

It is posited that benches would have been set between the pillars for members to both partake in the rituals and later to socialise and enjoy sharing food and wine. Mithras was an Eastern god, popularised by the Roman legions and a favourite of merchants and travellers. The Mithraeum would have been an ideal 'clubhouse' to meet and greet visitors from abroad.

It has all been so carefully done; everything rebuilt exactly as it was originally and the 'gaps' plugged with newly quarried ragstone from Kent and new hand-made bricks. These were used on those places in the original structure that were rendered anyway, so what is on view is the actual stone and brick as excavated. The lime mortars are based on samples from other Roman buildings in London. This attention to detail underscores the whole experience and thus it takes only a little imagination to absorb yourself into an ancient time

and space. Any visiting females should feel especially privileged as this is the first time in 2,000 years that they have been allowed to enter!

Back on the ground floor, there is time to gaze again on the wall of finds and to absorb the enormous tapestries forming the inaugural Bloomberg Space exhibition. Bloomberg Space is intended to showcase outstanding pieces of contemporary art. The artist Isabel Nolan has based her piece 'The Barely Perceptible Vibration of Everything' on schematic representations of the Walbrook River. They are a riot of colour and form.

Was it worth the trip? Oh, yes absolutely, totally. From the young greeters booking us in, making sure we had the (Free) guide book and knew how to access the lift, to the stewards who timed our exploration of the Temple itself and made sure the older visitors had somewhere to sit, it was clear that this was a smoothly run operation, showcasing not only the Bloomberg Space artworks, but also incredibly well-preserved remains of a rare Roman religious site. Everything is beautifully displayed, the descent to the Mithraeum level evokes its own sense of time and mystery, and the use of lights a la son et lumiere is quite magical.

Did we like it? Oh, yes we did! Well worth a visit, but don't forget to book via the website first and factor in the need for refreshments as these are not available on site.