

Hands On Learning

with Reading Museum Service

ROMAN HYPOCAUST

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One type of hypocaust - the Roman equivalent of central heating - consisted of raising the floor on brick columns (pilae) to create a hollow space underneath. A fire in a small adjoining room produced hot air which flowed through the hollow space, heating the floor. The hot air was then carried up through special hollow tiles set in the wall, which spread the heat further. All of these features can be seen in the model.

Hypocaust systems are often associated with bathhouses, where they were used to create the correct temperature for the warm room (tepidarium) and the hot room (caldarium). In bathhouses the floors laid over the pilae often consisted of large stone or tile slabs. Hypocaust systems are also found in larger houses and are sometimes found under mosaic floors, as in the model.

Mosaics were made of tesserae of cut stone, or tile. These were set into a thin layer of fine mortar which was spread over a concrete floor. The tesserae were grouted with mortar and polished with abrasive stones. The floor may also have been polished with beeswax to enhance the colours.

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Heating large houses posed considerable problems. Most rooms were probably heated by braziers. Unfortunately for the house owner, burning coals seem to have frequently fallen from the brazier and scorched their fine mosaics! One elaborate mosaic from Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester) in the Museum of Reading shows both scorching and a circular patch where the blackened tesserae (small cubes) have been removed and an attempt made to repair the damage. The scorching and the circular repair are indicated by the orange marker on the illustration below.



An alternative, though more expensive solution, was to build a hypocaust system under the mosaic floor. The illustration below, which is all that is left of what was once a grand mosaic, comes from another house in Silchester. It is thought to show one of the Four Seasons (possibly Spring or Summer). There was a hypocaust underneath this mosaic. It is thought the room was a triclinium - a dining room. The hypocaust would have allowed the rich owner of the house to welcome guests for a meal in comfort all year round. Little remains of the mosaic, either because after the house was abandoned someone salvaged the hypocaust tiles that lay under the mosaic, or because the mosaic collapsed into the hypocaust.

