

MINIMUS FOR VETERANS

Two and a half years ago a group of nine keen would-be Latinists (seven women and two men, all over 50), having seen a notice in the local magazine of the University of the Third Age, assembled for their first meeting with me. I asked them why they wanted to learn Latin and received a variety of answers: to learn more about Romano-British history; to learn more derivations of English words; to be able to read inscriptions at historic sites and on historical documents; to get the old brain working again.

I showed them *Minimus* and told them that it was designed in the first place for primary school children aged eight. They threw up their hands in delight, exclaiming that that was just right for them. So we started and found it highly enjoyable.

As readers of *JCT* know, *Minimus* is the brain-child of Barbara Bell of Bristol, designed to encourage the learning of Latin at primary school level, if not on the syllabus, then outside it, in lunch-hour clubs or after school. It has been nurtured by the Cambridge University Press and to date has sold nearly 70,000 copies, a quarter of them in the USA. It is to appear in an enlarged edition in Italian in 2007.

My group was entranced to discover that *Minimus* is a mouse who lives with a Roman military family at Vindolanda, near Hadrian's Wall, and his adventures are set against the scenes of life portrayed in the written wooden tablets dug up, amazingly preserved, in the last 30 years. The group were amused to learn that the tablets have revealed the Latin for 'underpants' as worn by Roman soldiers in Britain's cold climate.

The attractively illustrated story in strip cartoons proved a joy, and the dialogue which is meant to be read aloud soon convinced them (as I never was) that Latin was actually spoken. The tape produced by Barbara Bell helped their faltering speech with the pronunciation. When I undertook this job, I soon realised that I did not know the Latin for ‘yes’ or ‘no’ – despite a Classics degree.

The group soon warmed to the family: the father the garrison commander, the mother with a daughter and two sons, the older a teenager, along with a slave girl and two male slaves, also a cat and a mouse. The many aspects of everyday life portrayed and the myths and legends told to the children very quickly endeared the book to all the class. And all the while they were learning the Latin language!

The book was devoured in about a term and a half, and by then *Minimus Secundus* had appeared, where the family moves to York and the older boy joins the army and is sent to Dacia where he, and we, learn a good deal about bridge-building. The daughter is married and produces twins, and the younger boy starts learning Greek. Here was even more fascinating material to make Wednesday the most anticipated day of the week.

We read all the Latin aloud, dramatising it where possible, and we found the tape useful for pronunciation. (I had to re-learn v’s as w’s and had to accept ‘weni, widi, wici’!) Some had a little Latin before but had forgotten most of it. We found the gentle introduction into grammar, particularly the inflexions, effective and not too painful, and

the excursuses (or is it excursus?) into baths, weapons, presents and soldiers' underwear lightened the load. At Christmas we sang 'Adeste fideles' and 'Ten green bottles'.

We decided to work school terms, meeting for one and a quarter hours every Wednesday morning in my house. We finished *Minimus* in about a term and a half and were delighted to know that *Secundus* had arrived. We finished him off by the end of the first year. By then we had added Peter Jones' *Learn Latin* to the menu in order to strengthen our grammatical structure: after all, he does start with *amo, amas, amat....!* We enjoyed his humour and also his working from original sources: the poetry of Catullus, the Vulgate and the Bayeux tapestry, and we burst into song with *Carmina Burana*. We even tackled scansion and managed to swallow the elegiac couplet, though one unmusical member found it rather indigestible.

By the end of the second year we were ready for tougher stuff including translation into Latin, and we started on Part II of the Oxford Latin Course. (The combination of *Minimus*, *Minimus Secundus* and *Learn Latin* had just about covered Part I for us.) This has proved highly satisfactory, not least because of the cartoons and the historical background to Horace (or Quintus Horatius Flaccus) whose adventures we follow keenly. In October 2005 (the beginning of our third year) we are about two-thirds of the way through and hope to move on to the Part III reader with extracts from writers in prose and verse. The commentary amplifies the social and political upheavals of the period 50-40 BC, and the young Quintus goes to Rome and to Athens to complete his education. The group has found that two grades of vocabulary, one to be learned and the

other for assistance in translating, is a helpful division. But most would have preferred to have had the grammar and exercises in the body of the book, not in an appendix for each chapter at the back.

The greatest satisfaction which members have found is the sudden realisation that they can make sense of a passage which had been simply a jumble of words. They have also been greatly encouraged by the company of other keen learners. *floreat Minimus.*

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