The programme extract starts with the image of a Roman scroll which unwinds to reveal a screen. Several people interviewed in the street appear on the screen. They are talking about the study of Latin in schools.

First young man: It makes things a lot easier to learn - learning French or Spanish. It makes it a lot easier to learn.

First young woman: Unless you are going to be a lawyer I can't see it being relevant massively.

Second young man: If you're interested in getting back to what they really meant then, then it would be useful. But in everyday language – er – maybe not so much.

Older woman: Studying Latin and Greek could be very useful but I didn't think so when I was at school.

Middle-aged woman: I think we should be teaching children French and Spanish and things like that because most of our children don't know a second language and it's really sad.

Second young woman: I took German to GCSE and I haven't really found that very helpful. But I think languages should be promoted. I don't think it should be Latin especially.

Middle-aged man: I think if something is taught well then that is interest and you have a go. It does help you. It broadens you. It broadens your mind and your intellect.

Charlotte Goddard is a teacher at a secondary school.

S. Reid: Look who we've got: a Roman legionary, Matthew ---, and Charlie ---, who you may have met earlier, who teaches Latin in schools. Matthew you give tours around Chester – in Latin?

Matthew: Not in Latin entirely. Obviously there are various bits of Latin which turn up, but most of it is in English.

S. Reid: Did you learn Latin in school?

Matthew: Yes, I did.

S. Reid: And did you – are you able to do a lot of deciphering and. . . .?

Matthew: Yes. Obviously it's got a bit rusty since it's been a bit of time since I last studied it at school, but yes. . . .But I brush it up a bit as I go along.

S. Reid: (to Charlie) Do you know what the helmet is?

Charlie: ... sal- ... no...

C. Stayt: It's a code for - if you learn it you can communicate with people. Because you can't really communicate with that many people with Latin, you look at it quite in the abstract, which enables you to understand the grammar and how the language works, and how English works in comparison...

S. Reid: It's a code for... - a phrase for... gratias do...?

Charlie: Yes, like the fundamental aspects of grammar which isn't really taught in English any more, like when I was in high school.

C. Stayt: The thing is, if it works... do you see? What ages are you working with?

Charlie: They're 12.

C. Stayt: So they're 12, 13. Do you see a change in the way they go about other things?

Charlie: It's very early in the project which we're doing, but in other places there has been some success with it.

C. Stayt: What is the theory behind it - why choose Latin to do that?

Charlie: Latin is a slightly different to other languages. When you have languages such as French or Spanish it's very conversational the way you learn it. You learn it though topics so you can communicate with people. Because you can't really communicate with that many people with Latin, you look at it quite in the abstract, which enables you to understand the grammar and how the language works, and how English works in comparison...

S. Reid: Did you fight against it? Did you see the benefits at the time? Did you see it as a waste of time?

Matthew: When I started to study the history books, the literature, that I began to discover a passion for it.

S. Reid: And do your students, Charlie, think that you are somebody evil that has come to persecute them, or do they find that they grasp it and find I useful?

Charlie: There's a mixture: there are some who are terrified of it, and there are some who are really they really want to figure out how it works. Some who are very excited by it.

C. Stayt: How do you say thank you?

Matthew and Charlie: ... Erm...

S. Reid: I'm not sure there was a phrase for that, was there?

Charlie: There was a – gratias – gratias do, I give thanks.

C. Stayt: gratias do. Thank you.

S. Reid: (to camera) I hope my Latin teacher's not watching this!
The question of the relevance of Latin surfaces from time to time, particularly, so it seems, at moments of educational reform or papal elections. Susanna Reid introduced this programme in the context of the latter: ‘The Vatican does a lot in Latin which is why we are doing a lot about it this morning’. Indeed, only two days before the broadcast, Pope Benedict announced his resignation from the papacy in Latin, which, besides calling a shocked world to attention, inadvertently gave a little limelight to the only journalist whose Latin had been good enough to follow the unexpected announcement. For Giovanna Chirri, a knowledge of Latin won her the enviable scoop. For others, the usefulness of Latin is still debatable.

On this question, the selection of vox-pops which opened the programme revealed diverse opinions, but they shared a sense of vagueness about how the study of Latin could be put to practical use. Only two of the seven contributors had any concrete suggestions. One suggested that ‘unless you are going to be a lawyer I can’t see [Latin] being relevant’. In fact, although knowledge of Latin has some direct (and considerably more indirect) application in a legal career, it is neither a prerequisite to a Law degree nor part of a lawyer’s training. Another contributor said of Latin that ‘it makes things a lot easier to learn – learning French or Spanish’. I would agree. But if the primary purpose of Latin is to learn modern languages more easily, it begs the question whether schools would be better advised to put their limited time and resources into modern languages and save the expense of hiring a Latin teacher.

Schools are expected to educate children for the modern world, and the modern world is changing so fast, that much of what is taught now, especially in technical and skills-based subjects, will become outdated by the time school students are in the world of work. There was widespread acknowledgement in the programme, particularly in the introduction, about the desirability of learning modern languages. In this field in particular there is rapid change: we are already seeing a shift away from the tradition of learning the languages of our nearest European neighbours towards languages thought to be influential in the global economy, and future decades might see further change. Therefore schools should teach transferable skills which can be adapted to meet the challenges of later life. Latin is particularly rich in such skills: its tight linguistic structure, unsullied by the modifications of a spoken language, reveals the elements of grammar more clearly than any modern language and far more clearly than English. Indeed, as the programme acknowledged, ‘grammar … isn’t really taught in English anymore.’ There is some truth in this, and this is partly because English does not lend itself readily to grammatical analysis. However, Latin does, and in addition it rewards its students by facilitating the study of any language, including, incidentally, the language of computer programming, and many other tasks which require analytical thinking.

Latin therefore has some value as a means to an end, but an end which might have nothing to do with enjoyment of the Classical world. There was much in the programme which supported this view. The presenters interviewed a teacher working on a project teaching Latin to children who were struggling with literacy. The ensuing discussion brought to light some of the advantages of Latin as a value as a bearer of transferable skills, but the presenters’ questioning suggested wariness: ‘Did you fight against it?’ asked Charlie Stayt. ‘Did you see it as a waste of time?’ Susanna responded to the suggestion that Latin may have been ‘an evil plot .. to make my life hard’, with the words ‘That will resonate with a lot of people’. The implication that Latin, however beneficial a discipline, is somehow unpalatable at the point of delivery, might stem partly from memories of the less agreeable methods of past generations of Latin teaching, and perhaps partly from a universal tendency to associate the wholesome with the unpleasant. It is this perception, rather than any perceived irrelevance of the subject, which should concern us more, since our child-centred education has little tolerance of a subject whose benefits can only be seen some years hence.

This is where the presenters missed a trick. Even though one of their interviewees, dressed as a Roman legionary and evidently representing an accessible face of Latin, explained that it was Roman history and literature which gave him a passion for his subject, the presenters did not take up the baton, still pursuing the question of the Latin teacher as ‘evil persecutor’. It was therefore a significant omission of the programme that many other features of a Latin education went unmentioned. The wider context of the Roman world, its literature and history, its debt to Greek culture and its underpinning of the institutions of western civilization are all on offer to the student of Latin, and these should certainly have a place in any discussion of the study of Latin’s relevance or usefulness. These are also the features which tend to have a more immediate appeal, and which might have been raised in answer to the opinions voiced in the programme that school students do not always appreciate Latin at the time of learning it.

There was mention throughout the programme of ‘bringing Latin alive’, whether by giving tours of Chester in legionary costume, broadcasting the news in Latin from a Finnish radio station, or the Vatican’s use of Latin as a lingua franca. These, each in their own way, keep or bring Latin alive, or at least keep the language in our hearing. The presenters did not say whether they thought that those who use Latin in this way make a persuasive case for the usefulness of Latin. That question was never explicitly asked in the programme, but this seemed to be what the viewers were invited to ponder. It would, I think, have been a difficult case to argue, not least because the Latin of the Finnish news and of the Vatican bear little resemblance to the Classical Latin taught in schools. Besides, the key benefits of learning Latin, the purity of its grammar and historical context of its literature, arise because of the very fact that it is a dead language. Bringing Latin to life would do nothing to enhance these benefits. Giovanna Chirri happened to be in the right place at the right time to exploit her Latin studies. The rest of us should be satisfied with very different reasons for enjoying the benefits of a Latin education.