Gardens at Fishbourne Roman Palace

The Roman Palace is unique in Britain in having a formal garden that has been replanted using the original late first century bedding trenches. These had survived centuries of later ploughing and were discovered by archaeologists during the excavations in the 1960s. They showed up as dark grey loam against an ochre coloured clay and gravel subsoil. Samples were taken for analysis in the hope that traces of pollen had survived from flowers and shrubs that had grown in the garden. Unfortunately only a small quantity of pollen from weeds of cultivation, such as plantain and daisy, remained.

As no positive evidence survived on site, other sources of information had to be found. The Roman writer, Pliny, refers to box lining the edges of the pathways in his gardens. Certainly, this lime-loving shrub would have been very appropriate in the deliberately marled loam of the Roman Palace bedding trenches. In 1968, box was planted and has thrived.

On the eastern side of the formal garden the archaeologists found alternating tree-pits and postholes, which suggested an original arrangement of trees or shrubs planted against a trellis. Indeed, Pliny referred to espalier fruit trees planted against a trellis in his gardens, where they ‘added an air of rustic simplicity to an otherwise formal setting’. Espalier apple trees have been planted at Fishbourne.

A large tree-pit was found towards the western side of the garden. An imported Italian cypress has now been planted here, but not without problems, caused by the local climate. This reflects the problems that the Romans must have had to contend with when they imported the large number and range of plants that were required to stock the formal, landscaped and vegetable gardens that they created in and around the Palace.

Beneath the surface of the garden the archaeologists discovered lines of ceramic pipes. They ran from the remains of the base of what is assumed to have been a water storage tank in the north west corner of the formal garden. One line of pipes probably fed a pool in the entrance hall while others supplied small semi-circular basins set in recesses in the box hedging. Half a marble basin was found in the 1960s.

There is circumstantial evidence for there having been a vegetable garden in the angle between the ends of the north and west wings of the Palace. This comprises a dark, humus-rich soil containing heavily abraded pottery, suggesting that the soil had been intensively cultivated. It also had its own water supply, provided through wooden pipes with iron collars.

Limited excavations to the south of the Palace revealed an artificial terrace which bore evidence of landscaping, including a pool, gravel path, possible bedding trenches and what may have been the base for a column or statue. Excavations to the east of the Palace in the mid 1980s uncovered evidence for semi formal gardens.