
Waiting for Posterity:

*Excavations at Fishbourne Roman Palace 2002
by members of the Sussex Archaeological Society*

*An interim report on possibly the last ever excavations by the
Society at the Palace*



Preamble

The publication on *Britons and Romans* (2001 – eds Millet & James), endorsed by English Heritage, specifically commented upon the recent excavations (1995-99) of the Sussex Archaeological Society, and their contribution to a key research agenda – the Iron Age-Roman transition:

Fishbourne is fortunate. A further series of excavations is taking place there, conducted by..... the Sussex Archaeological Society. New buildings are being found related to the early phases.

Encouraged by this response the Sussex Archaeological Society decided to mount a further three-season campaign of excavations (2002-4) to provide further information relating to this research topic.

Introduction

The principal result of the 95-99 excavations had been the discovery of a large courtyard building (Building 3), pre-dating the Palace. Completion of the draft report of the 95-99 dig (for pdf text only version see <http://www.sussexpast.co.uk/researchjfm/dig2002.htm>) highlighted that key questions remained which could be answered by a further three seasons. These questions included the need to acquire more data to ascertain the date, function and fills of the pre-AD43 ditch, the need to locate any features associated with the early ditch, the resolution of where the northern boundary wall for Building 3 turned or stopped, and the nature of the midden, and the artefact distributions contained therein, to the north of Building 3.

With this research agenda firmly in mind an area to the north of Building 3, measuring some 15 metres N-S by 16 metres E-W was opened (fig 1). This area encompassed the small 5m by 5m trench (Area B) in which a section of the early ditch had been located in 1999. One of the first tasks of the excavation, after the removal of c400mm of topsoil from the whole site by machine, was the re-excavation of the backfill from this 5m square trench to reveal the line of the early ditch.

Principal discoveries

It is important to say at the outset that none of the considerable quantities of finds from the 2002 season has been seen by specialists at the time of writing, and only a few contexts have been spot-dated on site by Malcolm Lyne. The following therefore is little more than a list of the main features uncovered; any indication of their phasing has been determined by stratigraphic observations. This report is very much a first statement and should not be quoted in any other published report¹. For ease of description the archaeology can be divided into four distinct east-

¹ We place emphasis on this remark since this interim report is distributed to colleagues and institutions with the intention of letting them know, and their students, the kind of finds we have made, for their own personal uses. It is

west zones: north of the early ditch; the early ditch itself; the lines of post-holes, and south of the early ditch.

1. North of the early ditch

All of the archaeological remains in this area seem to have post-dated the deliberate backfilling of the early ditch. In essence they comprised part of a timber building with a red-clay floor, numerous drainage gullies and some small pits. The features could be divided stratigraphically into four phases (figs 2&3):

Phase 1: A small circular pit (1063), from which a gully (1062) led into the top of the backfilled ditch. The function of the pit is unknown. To the south-east of the gully was a small, shallow rectangular pit (1161). The bottom of this pit contained some large but unhewn greensand slabs, the remains of two smashed pottery vessels and some oyster shells.

Phase 2: A longer N-S drainage gully (1162) ran from the northern edge of the excavation across the top of the backfilled ditch and was then cut by the foundation trenches for Building 4 (see below).

Phase 3: It was in this phase that a timber building stood in the north-western corner of our excavations. It had a clay floor (1188) measuring some 3m N-S by 2m E-W but only a small part of the floor was in our trench. The building clearly continued both to the north and to the west



for unknown distances. The timber walls of the building sat in horizontal beam-slots (1165). To the east and south of the building was a series of shallow drainage channels (1113, 1158, 1095, 1117) which seemed to have been used to drain surface water away from the building. Dumps of tile and charcoal (1066) were placed on the floor of the building, seemingly when the internal partitions of the structure were still standing.

Phase 4: Two shallow pits (1153, 1156) probably belong in this phase; the small square pit (1156) contained the base of a grey ware pot.

Dating evidence: Preliminary spot dating of pottery from contexts sealing some of these features produced a date range of AD70-150. It is likely, therefore, that most, if not all, of these features fall in the period AD50 to AD70 (ie before the construction of the large Flavian Palace).

not distributed so that interim conclusions and statements presented here can be discussed critically in national journals as if they were definitive statements; sadly this occurred without our knowledge with previous interim reports. If you want to comment on our excavations please do us the courtesy of waiting until our final excavation reports are published, or at the very least contact us beforehand!

2. The Early Ditch

As expected, the early ditch (a 5m length of which had been excavated in 1999) continued to the east and ran straight across the middle of the trench. It had been deliberately slighted in antiquity with a backfilling of red clay. In size it measured some 2.6m in width and was on average about



1.3m deep. Excavating the very bottom of the ditch proved as challenging as it had done in 1999, due to the slumping of the clay sides, and it cannot be stated with any certainty that the ditch had anything resembling a 'cleaning slot' at the bottom, although something like a slot was more observable in the western half of the ditch.

Nevertheless there was ample evidence for an accumulation of grey silt at the bottom of the ditch. During this silting a considerable quantity of sherds had been deposited in the ditch (305 to be precise) and, very distinctively, a thick band of charcoal and silt (1140, 1084) had

accumulated against the south side of the ditch. Apart from pottery this charcoal-rich silt also contained a quantity of animal bones and some oyster shells. The latter categories of finds gave the assemblage a rather 'domestic' feel. The fact that these deposits were found exclusively on the south side of the ditch (exactly as Alec Down had observed them in the same ditch under the A27 to the east) might be taken to indicate that they had probably been dropped or thrown into the ditch from the south. In other words, although absolutely no trace of any associated bank was found in the 2002 excavations to go with this ditch, the inside of the enclosure probably lay to the south.

Dating evidence: We now have a numerically significant assemblage of sherds from the very bottom of this ditch. In 1999 we recovered some 111 sherds, and we can now add to that total another 305 sherds, making a grand total of 416. The pottery assemblage looks like it will



contain a mixture of locally produced ware and imported wares that will be dated to the early decades of the first century AD. A spectacular find from the charcoal-rich silts was a copper alloy fitting from a wooden sword scabbard. According to Mike Bishop² the piece has no known parallels but could be a Roman military fitting and Augustan in date. It would be premature to comment much beyond this at present. The scabbard fitting, if indeed it does turn out to be of early Roman imperial date, might be taken as pointing again in the direction of a Roman military presence at Fishbourne prior to AD43. There are

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other interpretations, however, and it must be noted that the pottery is a mixture of both imported and local wares. What is beyond question is that the key to an understanding of the Fishbourne landscape at this early period lies in a better understanding of the nature and extent of this early ditch.

3. The lines of post-holes

To the south of the early ditch lay a number of post-holes (nearly 30) and one small pit (1154) (fig 2). The post-holes were not all contemporary, nor did they form any meaningful patterns, save for a line of six post-holes (1074,1073,1072,1116,1069,1118) some 2m to the north, and to the north-west, of Building 4. Various observations were made during the excavation that will help to phase the post-holes. For example, some (eg 1107,1077) had been dug into the backfilled



red clay covering the early ditch. One (1075) had been dug through the gully, which was full of oyster shells. Another (1190) was cut into the top of the filled-in pit (1154). The packing materials used in the post-holes varied considerably. The five westernmost post-holes of the most obvious line used flint nodules as packing. Other post-holes contained tile packing (eg 1050,1020), greensand (1070), non-local stone (1148) or no packing at all (1106). Some of the post-holes seemed quite substantial. For example, the westernmost post-hole in the most obvious line measured some 0.45m deep by 0.6m in diameter. Whether this line represents a fence-line or something more substantial needs further evaluation. The small pit (1154) was filled with, *inter alia*, an assemblage that appeared to be

‘domestic’ in character: pottery, a neck of a flagon, animal bones and oyster shells.

Dating evidence: Stratigraphic observations would suggest that many of the post-holes are not the earliest features on the site, but relate to the later phases of activity. This was borne out by the discovery of a large body sherd of samian, dating to the late first/early second centuries AD, from post-hole 1020.

4. Building 4 and the deposits beneath it, including the large circular pit

One of the unanticipated discoveries of the 2002 season was the masonry foundations (1032) of a rectangular structure, the north-west corner of which appeared towards the southern side of the trench. The building (christened unoriginally Building 4) is probably orientated east-west as are



all of the buildings in our excavation. The structure was marked by an east-west external wall, with a north-south external wall on its western side, and an internal wall further to the east. The distance between the western external wall and the internal wall was a little over 7m. Some of the masonry foundations were intact; other sections had been robbed, probably in antiquity. It is obvious that most of this structure must lie to the east and to the south, beyond the 2002 trench.

It became apparent that the construction of Building 4 was not the first thing that had happened on the site in the Roman period. (This is a considerable contrast to Building 3, to the south, which does appear to represent the first Roman activity). The westernmost wall of Building 4 had cut through the filled-in remains of a small gully (1098). The northernmost wall of Building 4 had cut through an irregular arrangement of large, but non-local stones (1126).

The gully (1098) contained a considerable quantity of finds, including large amounts of oyster shells, many samian sherds and some tile; it also contained the almost complete remains of one small carinated vessel in a black fabric. The gully itself cut through the fill of a pit? (1171) in the south-west corner of the trench. The fill of this pit, possibly something related to the stream, which lies to the west, contained a column capital of greensand. To the west of Building 4 a deep, circular pit (1180) was discovered. This measured some 1.5m in diameter by about 1m deep. It had been carefully dug to a round shape, and was deliberately back-filled with clean clay devoid of finds.



Dating evidence: Finds from the drainage gully 1098 were plentiful and spot-dating suggest sherds of the period AD60 to 120 were recovered. This is suggestive of a date in the second century for the construction of Building 4.

Finds and Samples

A considerable number of small finds (4074 to be precise again) were three-dimensionally recorded (ie in terms of their absolute location). Since one of the research questions we were interested in investigating was the distribution of bulk finds (ie tile, coarse pottery, animal bone)



over the site we divided up contexts that covered large areas into 5m by 5m units. Preliminary indications, and observations noted on site, suggest the denser finds concentrations were to the south, with the finds becoming progressively fewer and less varied the further north. It also became clear that the oyster shells lay predominantly on the southern edge of our excavations. The majority of the finds appear to be 'domestic' in character. More work is required, however, to clarify our understanding of finds depositions, and indeed to define more closely what we mean by the term 'midden'.



Throughout the excavations numerous bulk soil samples were taken for processing in the on-site flotation machine. Practically the entire contents of the gully 1098 were processed in this way. These produced materials, which now await analysis, but they will contain significant insights into the diet of the inhabitants of the area in the first two centuries AD.

Discussion

It is too early to come to any conclusions about the archaeology excavated in 2002, its relationship to the results of the 95-99 digs, or indeed to the wider Fishbourne area. Nevertheless, some tentative thoughts can be offered here.

In terms of phasing of the 2002 features it seems probable that the early ditch represents the earliest feature on site, dating to the first half of the first century AD. It is possible, that after the ditch was deliberately back-filled, the timber building north of the ditch, and the features south of the ditch (underlying Building 4) were formed. Quite what the nature of these features represents remains to be clarified, but they probably date to the second half of the first century AD. It seems that Building 4 was constructed in the second century AD, and that some of the post-holes are associated with areas outside this building. It can be noted that the western side of Building 4 is set a little way back from the western side of Building 3, although both buildings may have their long axes aligned east-west. The foundations of Building 4 seemed slighter than those of Building 3, and has been remarked above, it may be that the nature of Building 4 is domestic, in contrast to Building 3. What is beyond doubt is that this area, in front of the Flavian Palace, was very built up and saw lots of activity in the Roman period; it was not an area of semi-formal gardens.

Acknowledgements

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Waiting for Posterity

As has been stated above, this was intended as a three season (2002-4) campaign to answer some specific research questions. However, at the time of writing, there is some doubt over whether the two remaining seasons will take place. The field where we have excavated from 1995 is not a Scheduled Ancient Monument. Following visits by English Heritage (EH) staff during the 2002 season, and subsequent discussions with officers of the Society, EH threatened to schedule the site (and so stop the Society's excavations) unless the Society adopted a more 'targeted' approach to excavation. The practical, on-the-ground reality of such an approach was to sample the area at no more than a 5% level. It was clear also that EH had reservations about excavating the site with volunteer members of the Society. As a result of these reservations, and also because the Society thinks that a 5% sample would run the risk of destroying, unrecognised, more archaeology than it understood, this research campaign of excavations will probably be curtailed. The focus of our work will now turn to publishing the results of our excavations as quickly as possible.

To be fair and even-handed in respect of EH, the site where the Society has excavated is clearly a site of national importance, and EH policies are, we believe, to preserve for 'posterity' such sites. Whether 'posterity', as a future golden era we all await with anticipation, has ever been defined enough so that we will recognise it when it comes, for us anyway, remains unclear. If EH is preserving the past for posterity, we are willing to countenance the fact posterity will not occur in our lifetimes, but would welcome some reassurance that it would happen in the lives of our successors. Without such reassurances and clarifications, EH's policy of 'preserving for posterity' will be interpreted by the general public as one that stops excavation, discourages involvements of the voluntary sector, and is anti-research; preserving for posterity will be construed as denying opportunities in the present. Of course, posterity, defined admittedly by the narrow criterion of being able to excavate 'nationally important' sites, has occurred in the past. We need look no further back than the 1960s and the excavation, over ten seasons, of the Palace itself. Here was a site that must have been recognised as 'nationally important' from the first season, but thankfully excavations continued, the excavation report was published with admirable speed, and members of the Sussex Archaeological Society purchased the land and opened a museum, which recently greeted its 4 millionth visitor, and which now welcomes over 30,000 children a year. It is clear, therefore, that currently we are between posterities, which doesn't somehow seem quite so bad.

JM/DR November 2002

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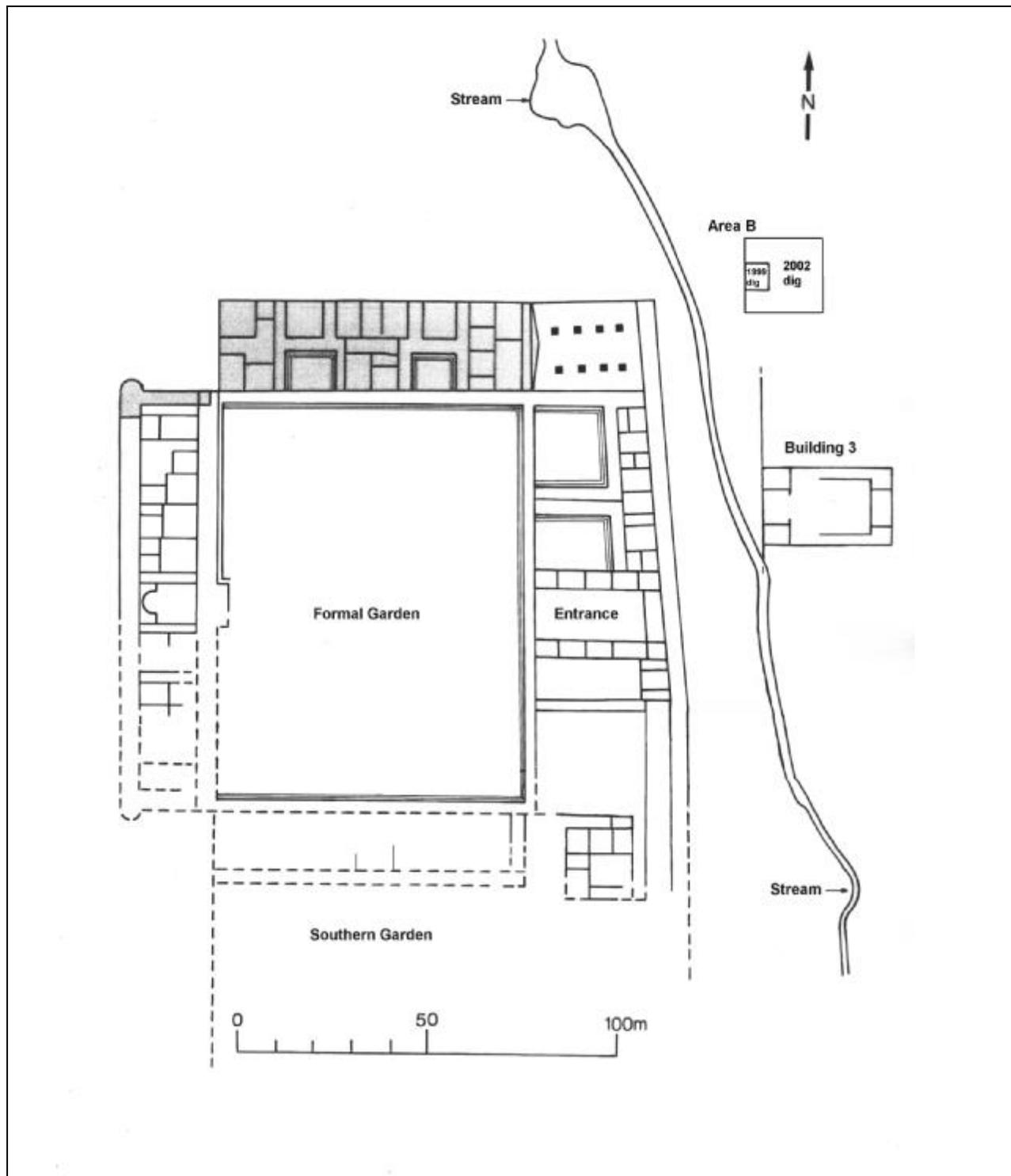


Fig 1: Plan of Fishbourne Roman Palace, showing location of the 2002 dig

