Fishbourne Roman Palace

Property Information

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Fishbourne Roman Palace – background information

The Roman Palace was discovered by accident in 1960, during the digging of a water main trench that cut through mosaic floors and massive wall foundations. Local archaeologists recognised the importance of the site and as a consequence, the local Civic Society instituted a campaign of excavations on the site. These were directed by Barry Cunliffe and lasted from 1961 to 1969.

In the early 1960s the site was purchased by Ivan D Margary and presented to the Sussex Archaeological Trust (now Sussex Archaeological Society) for its long-term care. He also generously paid for the construction of the cover building over the remains of the palace’s north wing, which allows the remarkable collection of mosaics to be seen by the public. The buildings were designed by Carden, Godfrey and MacFadyen and the museum display was created by Robin Wade, supported by the Sunday Times.

The site opened to the public on 28th May 1968 and in the first season was visited by almost a quarter of a million visitors. To date, over four and a half million people have visited the site, of which approximately one third have been school children.

Today, visitors can see the remains of the north wing of the palace, with its fine mosaic floors, including the famous, mid-second century ‘Cupid on a Dolphin’ mosaic. In addition there are under-floor heating systems, plunge bath, etc, all inside the protecting building which was totally refurbished in 2005-6. The adjoining museum gallery exhibits the most important finds from excavations that have taken place on and around the site up to the present. The story of the site is told through an audio-visual presentation that includes computer generated images of the palace as it would have appeared, and forms an excellent introduction to the site.

Collections Discovery Centre

A Collections Discovery Centre was constructed in 2005-6 and officially opened to the public on 1st March 2007, by Tony Robinson, presenter of Channel 4’s Time Team. This new building was part of the £3.5m refurbishment and building project, generously supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, Chichester District Council and other trusts, foundations and public donations. It was designed by architects, Miller Hughes, of Chichester and built by builders and contractors, W Stirlan Ltd of Birdham. The building was designed to house the reserve archaeological collections of both Fishbourne Roman Palace and Chichester District Museum. It has a sensitive store with a controlled environment for material that is prone to deterioration, a bulk store for more robust material, an education workshop, a research room for people wishing to work on the collections, a conservation laboratory and a dark room/X-ray room. Visitors are encouraged to visit the building where they can undertake a self-guided tour, using the information provided on large graphic panels and looking through viewing windows into the conservation laboratory and the two stores. In addition there are daily CDC tours with an opportunity to handle artefacts from the collections.
Approximately two thirds of the palace remains have been excavated, but the remainder is inaccessible, being under either private houses and gardens or the main road through the village, the A259. Although most of the east and west wing remains have been excavated, they have been re-buried for their preservation. The west wing includes the fragmentary remains of five more mosaic floors. In total, the palace covered an area of 2.3 hectares (5.6 acres), which makes it the largest domestic Roman building yet discovered in Britain. But what is it?

Excavation and other research suggest that it was possibly the home of a local client king, Tiberius Claudius Togidubnus. He was probably a direct descendant of Verica, king of the local tribe, who sought help from the Emperor Claudius, thus precipitating the Roman invasion of Britain in AD43. The plan of the building clearly shows its Mediterranean origins, with numerous courtyards and colonnades and is the product of Roman architects and immigrant craftsmen. Of the original one hundred or so rooms, most probably had mosaic floors and almost thirty percent of these survive in differing states of preservation. One, the famous mid-second century 'Cupid on a Dolphin mosaic', is almost complete, whereas some of the others are more fragmentary. Many were laid at the time of the construction of the palace circa AD80, which makes them some of the earliest in Britain: overall Fishbourne boasts the largest collection of in situ Roman mosaics in the country.

The palace does not represent the first human activity on site. The excavations have revealed that flint working was taking place in the Mesolithic period, perhaps some 7,000 years ago, but significant activity began in the early first millennium AD, prior to the Claudian invasion. At the time of the invasion, which may have entered Britain through Chichester Harbour, military store buildings were erected, followed by what may have been a military headquarters building. By AD60, two other masonry buildings were constructed, one which the excavator believed to be the direct predecessor of the palace, but which should now, perhaps, be seen as a bath complex.

The palace survived for some 200 years before it was destroyed by fire, the result, perhaps, of a sea-born raid. It then became a source for stone for all local building projects, probably including the defensive walls around Roman Chichester. After this four human bodies were buried on the site in either late Romano-British or Anglo-Saxon times and subsequently the land was used for agriculture.

**Fishbourne Roman Palace Gardens**

Outside, the northern half of the formal Roman garden has been replanted to its original plan, as discovered in the 1960s excavations. Although there was no definite evidence of the plants grown, the replanting was based on the writing of Pliny the Younger, who wrote extensively of his own gardens. However to give the visitors a better understanding of the range of plants that may have been grown at Fishbourne, a new plant demonstration area was opened in 1995. This is enhanced by a Roman Gardens Museum.
Fishbourne today

Today, the site is a busy tourist attraction of international significance, drawing in visitors from all over the world, although the majority of the circa 75,000 annual visitors come from Britain. Their needs are catered for both by paid staff and volunteers. Over 600 groups visit the site annually and these include c 25,000 schoolchildren, a large percentage of whom benefit from the 800+ hands-on workshop sessions provided by the education team. Over recent years the team has also been developing a broad based education provision for a wide cross-section of the public.

The general day-to-day activities on site are supplemented by an expanding programme of special events, ranging from classical concerts, plays, operas and cooking demonstrations to re-enactment events with Celts, Roman soldiers and gladiators. The latter events are made possible through the generous help of a large number of volunteers.

Volunteers have been a significant element of life at Fishbourne since the beginning of the excavations in the early 1960s and remain so today. We hope that Fishbourne is as important to our volunteers as they are to us. That our longest serving volunteer came to help us every week for over twenty-five years suggests this may be the case. To keep our volunteers in touch, we send them all a newsletter, ‘Roman Times’, two or three times a year.

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Volunteers
There are approximately 30 volunteers at Fishbourne, who assist both in the Collections Discovery Centre, and in the main Museum.

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