

# ◆ Fishbourne revisited

by Barry Cunliffe

It seems a lifetime ago that I first visited that now-famous field at Fishbourne on a cold, damp January day in 1961 with Margaret Rule and her husband Arthur. Contractors, laying a water main in the previous spring, had left it a mess. The fields had been pasture for decades and carefully maintained by the farmer, Ferdinand Ledger, had developed a thick, rich, stone-free topsoil. Now the carefully tended pasture was scored by a muddy gash roughly backfilled with gravel, clay and building rubble — Farmer Ledger was angry but we were incredulous, for the rubble clearly came from a substantial Roman building constructed of fine, squared, greensand blocks, with plastered and painted walls and mosaic floors. The Chichester Civic Society, to whom the initial discovery had been reported, thought that the site should be investigated and so our job that day was to persuade the reluctant Mr Ledger to let us disturb more of his field to find out something of the Roman building before the long-promised Folkestone to Honiton Trunk Road was gouged across the landscape. Eventually it was agreed that we could come back at Easter to dig some trial trenches, but only on the strict understanding that the turf was properly cut and stacked, the topsoil removed and kept separate and that we backfilled by hand immediately at the end of the operation.

That Easter we behaved ourselves impeccably — I have a photograph of David Baker and myself backfilling in the torrential rain — the archaeology was impressive and Mr Ledger became our firm friend.

The much larger summer excavation which followed still has a dreamlike quality. Our task was quite simply to demonstrate the quality and extent of the building — and proclaim it loudly so as to bring pressure on the planners to move the road line. This we did with some success helped by the gods of the place! The results were spectacular — a large part of the east and north wings of an unusual building was exposed in outline and seven mosaics identified and partly uncovered, the dating evidence pointing to a remarkably early construction date in the Flavian period. In October of that year the now

sadly-defunct weekly magazine *The Illustrated London News* devoted five pages to an account of the find under the less-than-racy title, 'Britain's earliest Roman Mosaics discovered in a large Roman building uncovered near Chichester'. It was copiously illustrated and included a double-page spread of photographs of mosaics . . . printed in sepia — what a different world it was! The Chichester Civic Society republished the text and illustrations in booklet form as a Chichester Paper for local circulation and the next year the first of a series of Interim Reports appeared in the *Antiquaries Journal*. With a full spectrum of opinion-forming public now well-informed the site was safe. And so the excavation could progress at a more leisurely pace, the project eventually culminating with the opening of the site and museum to the public in 1968 and the publication of the excavation report three years later.

None of us, on that miserable January morning, could have begun to accept, if told then, that after 43 years Fishbourne would continue to hold centre stage in so many ongoing archaeological debates. And yet, one has only to glance through the detailed report to follow in this volume to appreciate that the questions opening up now could not have been conceived of when work began all those decades ago. Fishbourne offers a microcosm of all that is fascinating in archaeology.

In inviting me to write this introduction John Manley urged me to descend into a little reminiscence — an indulgence it is difficult entirely to resist — if only to highlight how fast archaeology has developed over the last 40 years. The 1961–9 excavations were undertaken entirely within the framework of the grand amateur tradition of summer fieldwork — a tradition begun by the Curwens in Sussex in the 1920s and continued by George Holleyman and Phil Burstow in the post-war period. I was initiated into that tradition at the last of the Holleyman and Burstow excavations at Muntham Court in 1955 and the link was continued with Phil Burstow's regular participation at Fishbourne — his wry, good humour so often calming jangled nerves.

The 60–80 volunteers a day who took part (once peaking at 120) lived in moderate squalor in the classrooms of a primary school in Chichester and were expected to walk the two kilometres to and from the site every day. This they did with good grace arriving on site (it was the height of the 1960s flower-power revolution), their hair-bands suitably decorated, leaving the front gardens *en route* increasingly depleted as the season wore on.

The excavation itself was a time of contrasts with long periods of grinding hard work moderated by the excitement of seeing the remarkable story of the site unfold. There were good and bad times. The spectacular and quite unexpected discovery of the cupid and dolphin mosaic, appearing just below the shallow plough soil in a narrow trial trench dug on the last afternoon of the first season, could not have been better publicity and ensured the future of the site. In contrast I remember the nail-biting near despair of the long period of torrential rain in the summer of 1966. Much of our effort had been invested in digging a trench 6 m wide and more than 50 m long across the central courtyard of the palace in the hope of tracing bedding trenches, dug for planting hedges in the garden, some evidence of which had been found in the previous year. Nearly two weeks into the excavation nothing had been found and the trench regularly flooded — one day even requiring the fire brigade to pump it out. I was beginning to doubt the wisdom of this all-or-nothing strategy — thinking of how to justify 300 m<sup>2</sup> of natural gravel and clay to a bedraggled labour force — when the first of the bedding trenches appeared . . . and the sun came out.

The excavation coincided with the opening of the Chichester Festival Theatre and since archaeology was then considered to be a somewhat refined cultural phenomenon occasions were engineered for the two groups of performers to meet. A trip to the excavations became an afternoon out for off-duty actors while tired diggers paid a return visit to the theatre to watch the actors at work in the evening. One memorable occasion was the arrival on site of Dame Sibyl Thorndike. To get to the gate it was necessary to cross a stream on a bridge made of two railway sleepers — a difficult task for an elderly lady. Once across she paused to get breath, making dramatic use of the occasion to act out a sweeping survey of the scene and then, when the moment was right, booming, ‘Is *this* the Roman Excavations?’ ensuring that all eyes were on her as she made her

entry. Others came too. Sir Michael Redgrave, after what we assumed to have been a challenging lunch, was just saved from stepping off the edge of a deep trench, while Laurence Olivier was seen to offer cigarettes to the diggers with an unassuming, ‘They’re named after me you know’.

There were, of course, many archaeological visitors. Sheppard Frere came frequently, providing much needed support and good advice. Sir Ian Richmond was another tower of strength throughout. I had been warned that he was rather fond of cream buns so at the end of his first visit with Ivan Margary (the doyen of Sussex Archaeology and later the benefactor of the site) a large plate of buns was provided at tea. Both happily indulged and as he was leaving Richmond said quietly, ‘Those buns were a good idea. Old Margary loves them. You know, I do believe he had three’. All six buns had indeed gone and Richmond’s contented face was well dusted with icing sugar. I judge the success of that afternoon from the fact that within months Ivan Margary had begun negotiations to buy Fishbourne for the Sussex Archaeological Society and I received a kind note from Ian Richmond inviting me to visit him in Oxford in the autumn to talk about the excavation. It was to be the first of many invigorating meetings, Ian always so generous of his time, and I so needing to learn what archaeology was really about.

Chance also played a part. I remember, with much humility, one particularly fraught final afternoon when the gates had been slammed and the ‘Excavations closed to public’ notice firmly nailed up. People had been peeping in, and sensing from their reception that the notice was for real, hastily retreating. Towards the end of the afternoon a rather timid man in a dirty raincoat strolled on to the site and asked if he could take a quick look at what there was still to see. Instead of my usual response, something — perhaps it was the gods of the place — made me suddenly relax and let him through with a muttered apology for the chaotic state of things. When he left about an hour later he handed me his card saying if there was anything he could do to help I was to let him know. He was Denis Hamilton, managing director of *The Times* and *Sunday Times*. Thus began an extremely fruitful partnership with *The Sunday Times* bringing together the talented team of Robin Wade and Ken and Pat Pearson who provided the inspiration (and the funds) for laying out the museum and the gardens.

Those times seem distant now — another age —

before professional archaeological units and evaluations, before research designs and gantt-charts and of course before computers — a time when a six-week excavation season could be run for £1000 and post-excavation research was done unpaid in the evenings and at weekends. In many ways Fishbourne 1961–9 marked the end of an era. Its publication in 1971 coincided with the creation of the first professional archaeological unit in Britain.

In the decade that followed Fishbourne was quiet, apart from the tens of thousands of visitors who enjoyed the site each year. But the 1980s saw renewed activity first as three of the 2nd-century mosaics had to be lifted and relaid and later, in 1987–8, when the southern half of the west wing became available for excavation. All this remedial work and trial excavation was carried out and efficiently published by the curator of the site, David Rudkin. In the same period the local stretch of the Folkestone–Honiton Trunk Road (no longer so-called because the project had become something of a joke) at last became a reality inspiring Alec Down to carry out a trial excavation in 1983 in the field immediately east of the palace. This was followed up by a gruelling rescue excavation along the road line in the vicious winter of 1985–6. It is enormous credit to Alec and his team that so much was achieved in such appalling weather conditions with the work being so seriously under-funded. The results were fully published in 1996. Rescue work continued in the 1990s, still further to the east, at Westward House (1992), along Fishbourne Road East (1994–5) and at Glebe Meadow (1998) this time conducted by the professional unit, Southern Archaeology. From the brief notes reporting on these programmes it is clear that much of considerable interest was discovered, but little information is yet in the public domain.

The year 1995 saw a fresh beginning at Fishbourne with the instigation of the new research programme, organized by the Sussex Archaeological Society and directed by John Manley and David Rudkin, of which the following report records the results of the first five years. In many ways the wheel has come full circle. Fishbourne is now firmly back on the research agenda embedded in the activities of the County Society. Each year large numbers of volunteers take part and in so doing learn the skills of practical archaeology. More to the point the work is carried out to a high standard without the corner cutting and loss of quality that is sadly becoming an all-too-familiar feature of commercial archaeology,

and without the vicissitudes of the unit world that leave so much unpublished and inaccessible. The great pioneers of Sussex archaeology, the Curwens, father and son, A.E. Wilson, George Holleyman and Phil Burstow, would be well content if they could see how creatively the current work at Fishbourne is developing the research tradition which they initiated and nurtured in the tender years of archaeology.

While the infrastructure of archaeology and its aims and aspirations change, the one constant that remains is the remarkable quality of the archaeological record of Fishbourne, so much of which still remains in the ground, unexplored. Even after 43 years of excavation it would be naïve to suggest that we have any real grasp of what there is still to be discovered. So let us take this opportunity to do a little stocktaking. The principal achievement of the 1961–9 excavation was to characterize the Flavian ‘palace’ in all its glory and to begin to place it in its physical setting with its fenced boundary to the north, extensive garden terrace leading down to the marsh and open water to the south and with hints of domestic activities to the west. In all this the greatest unknown is what was happening to the west where scraps of buildings have been identified. Here lies the opportunity to define estate yards, store buildings and the infrastructure necessary to maintain such a vast establishment. Modern buildings will prevent any large-scale investigation but opportunities will occur to test what was going on in this area and the problem is well deserving of further attention.

The questions of the date and ownership of the ‘palace’ have been discussed from time to time and will no doubt continue to exercise us. I still feel, having reviewed all the evidence, that the most likely bracket for the original construction is AD 75–80 and that the instigator is likely to have been the client king Tiberius Claudius Togidubnus, but new discoveries could at any time upset the suggestion — all we can do at present is to keep an open mind.

To establish what happened at Fishbourne in the century or so before the ‘palace’ was built presents one of the greatest challenges. Most of the relevant issues have been highlighted in the judicious debates presented in the report to follow. The excavation of Building 3 and its thorough publication here introduce an important, albeit enigmatic, new factor. But given the extreme paucity of reliable dating evidence (all clearly laid out in the report) it cannot be made to fit too tightly into a

chronological scheme except to say that its existence before the construction of the 'palace' is reasonably established.

Building 3 was broadly contemporary with the 'protopalace' and its baths (Building 2) — evidently a residential structure of some quality — and with another more massive masonry structure (Building 1) which appears to have been unfinished and lies now beneath the west wing of the 'palace'. Any one of these structures would have been intriguing, but to have three (at least) set within a landscape ordered with gravelled roads and ditched boundaries raises a number of fascinating and still unanswered questions. What were the functions of Buildings 1 and 3? Building 3 has been extensively discussed in this report but no firm conclusions reached. I must confess I favour a religious/ritual explanation — could it, for example, have been a mausoleum from which the burial was later translated? It is, I think, a strong possibility, but then so are several other entirely different explanations. And what of Building 1? Had it been finished it would have been an impressive structure, but we don't even know its full plan. Here surely is a lack which can be addressed by judicious trial excavation.

Many opportunities could be made for advancing our understanding of these early structures but the greatest potential lies in the continuation of the current programme of research excavation in the area between the embankment of the A27 and the 'palace'. This, together with a full publication of the rescue excavations of the 1990s to the east, will greatly help to clarify the context within which the early masonry buildings were erected. Was it a piecemeal development about the harbour end, or the beginnings of an urban plan that was aborted, or . . . ? The possibilities are many. What I think we can be reasonably sure of, *contra* John Manley's entertaining and provocative suggestion (Manley and Rudkin 2003), is that the masonry buildings post-date the conquest of AD 43 — at least the weight of the evidence points that way.

But that said, what of the earlier period of occupation? It has long been recognized, since Geoff Dannell studied the samian pottery from the '61–9 excavation, that the collection included a significant percentage of Arretine pottery of Augustan/Tiberian date difficult to explain in a post-AD 43 context. As the excavations have progressed more and more early pottery has come to light, including Gallo-Belgic imports, which together points strongly

to the suggestion that occupation began before the invasion. More recently the discovery of a ditch (on site B) containing what would appear to be a well-stratified pre-conquest assemblage offers further support. Once the possibility is allowed, a trawl of the earlier reports allows other possible pre-Roman structures to be identified. In the '61–9 excavation, for example, gullies 8a and 14 are noted as plausible contenders and a range of local coarse wares of the Late Iron Age was identified (Cunliffe 1971 (II), fig. 72). Taken together, there is now sufficient evidence to argue for the likelihood of occupation in the 50–60 years before the invasion, though there is no necessity to see the occupation as continuous before the invasion.

That actual structures of pre-conquest date have hitherto proved elusive need occasion no surprise given that comparatively little of the original ground surface has been exposed. Indeed it is quite possible that the nucleus of the Late Iron Age settlement lies wholly beyond the present limit of excavation and we have so far merely been dabbling in the fringes. Only further excavation will tell.

If the case for pre-conquest occupation, carefully summed up in the report below (pp. 138–45), is now looking stronger than before, the nature of that occupation must remain entirely speculative. John Creighton (2000) has raised the interesting possibility that there may have been a Roman military or trading enclave on the site in the pre-conquest period. The idea has been eagerly explored by John Manley (Manley & Rudkin 2003) and some of the possible historical parallels for military detachments in unconquered territories have been listed (below, p. 145). The activities of Roman traders in barbarian territories beyond the frontiers are well known. They vary in audacity from the merchants who had established themselves in the Gaulish oppidum of Cenabum (Orléans) to make a quick profit as Caesar's army was moving through Gaul, to the merchants comfortably ensconced in the palace of King Maroboduus of the Marcomanni (then in Bohemia). They included, says Tacitus, 'businessmen and camp followers from the Roman province. They had been induced first by a trade agreement and then by hopes of making more money to migrate from their homes to enemy territory. Finally they had forgotten their own country' (*Annals* 62). It is not at all unlikely that enclaves of this kind had established themselves in all the major oppida of south-eastern Britain to facilitate the burgeoning

trade which developed between Britain and the Roman world in the aftermath of Caesar's conquest of Gaul. If, as now seems increasingly possible, Fishbourne was an oppidum then Roman traders might be expected to have been among its residents. There is, however, no *need* to interpret any of the presently-known structures as belonging to this pre-conquest period, nor is there any need to require foreign traders to have lived in structures recognizably Roman. Once more we must keep all options open until more evidence has been amassed.

The importance of the programme of research excavations which began in 1995 is that it has reminded us how much more there is to learn of this remarkable site before we can begin to claim to understand it. The new initiative has provided us with an agenda. In the short term it is imperative to make sure that the rescue excavations of the 1990s are comprehensively published while at the same time the relevant experts should be brought together to reassess the evidence for pre-conquest occupation

in the Fishbourne/Chichester region. In the middle term we can look forward to the continuation of the Society's programme of research excavations to provide a secure framework for understanding the pre-Flavian occupation. But there is more. The huge potential of the harbour area, which we know to contain well-preserved waterlogged deposits, has barely been touched. What is the configuration of the ancient harbour?, where is the water mill (of which we have a millstone)?, how did changes in sea-level affect the site? . . . the questions are many. And then there is the estate of the 'palace' – its out-buildings, workshops, farms, boundaries, internal communications . . . but time to stop.

The publication of the first stage of the Society's research programme has provided us with a pause to consider, to look back (with some nostalgia) at what has been achieved at Fishbourne and to look forward (with, I hope, growing excitement) at what there is still to be done. In the perspective of things we are off to a good start.

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