

OUT & ABOUT

HISTORY EXPLORER

Extravagance in Roman Britain

As part of our series in which experts nominate British locations to illustrate historical topics, Miles Russell visits **Fishbourne Roman Palace**, once a sumptuous building with possible royal connections

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Fishbourne is one of the great success stories of British archaeology. The site was first discovered in 1960, when a mechanical excavator digging a trench for a water main hit a mass of tile and rubble. Subsequent excavations revealed a well-appointed, mosaic-filled palace (it is quite wrong to call it a 'villa') comprising four colonnaded wings set around an open courtyard. Put together by an army of highly skilled architects and craftsmen brought in from the European mainland, the site would have cost, in today's terms, around £8m to build.

The palace we see today developed from a Mediterranean-style courtyard house, constructed at some point in the mid-60s AD. Although small by the later standards of the palace, it possessed an exquisite level of internal decor, including columns topped with Corinthian capitals, painted wall plaster, stucco, marble from eastern France and Italy, and black and white geometric mosaics. A fragment from a marble portrait of the young emperor Nero, on display in the museum, hints at possible links between the owners of the house and the imperial family.

Whatever the nature of this first grand design at Fishbourne, it seems it was never completed. Buildings west of the courtyard house were not much above foundation level before construction work ceased and a more extravagant building project undertaken. The new palace was constructed on a scale unprecedented in northern Europe.

Visitors to the site today often find it hard to comprehend the sheer size and scale of the remains set out before them, the modern visitor building protecting only two thirds of one wing (the northern), with the eastern, western and southern ranges all lying buried beneath gardens, housing and a modern road. At just over 150 metres square, the footprint of the building is greater than that of Buckingham Palace. To a native of Rome, such an exotic repertoire of decorative and architectural features would have appeared quite normal, but to the indigenous Briton, all this colour and fancy stonework would have been mind-blowing.

The original entrance to the palace was via a large hall, set on the central axis of the east wing. To the north of this entrance, separated from it by a range of administrative offices, was an aisled hall probably intended for semi-public assemblies and meetings between the outside world and representatives of the palace. Space to the south was dominated by a luxurious bathing suite.

The east entrance led directly on to a large open courtyard. Excavation here has revealed the bedding trenches for an ornamental hedge (now replanted), a Roman innovation that marks the beginnings of the British obsession for gardening.

The western range, containing areas of reception and entertainment, was originally constructed on a raised platform so that it would dominate the complex, and, as a result, has suffered significantly from later ploughing. Nevertheless, it is clear that the main focus of the wing was a large apsed

PHILIP HARTLEY



“To an indigenous Briton, Fishbourne’s fancy stonework would have been mind-blowing”

DR MILES RUSSELL

Miles Russell stands cautiously next to Fishbourne’s famous ‘cupid on a dolphin’ mosaic, one of the finest floors to survive from Roman Britain

Photography by Philip Hartley



Fishbourne's underfloor heating system (*hypocaust*) was the epitome of Roman comfort

room, almost certainly the main dining space (*triclinium*). The apse was designed to hold a curved dining couch (*stibadium*) where guests could sit, eat, chat and enjoy between-course entertainment.

The north wing at Fishbourne formed the focus for three major units of accommodation. These took the form of apartments, each with their own bedrooms and dining room/reception areas. Such organisation of space raises questions as to how this range originally functioned. It may be that accommodation was set aside for important visitors or that separate residential areas were used by more than one high-status family.

Sadly, very little is known about the south wing at Fishbourne, most of which presently lies beneath the A259. Limited investigation in the gardens of houses that border the road suggests the range looked out towards a terraced ornamental garden and the sea. The bones of wild boar and deer recovered here may indicate that the palace owners had their own herds and hunting ground.

So who lived in a palace like this? It's a question archaeology has yet to answer convincingly. The probability is that it was a

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newly installed administrator, state official (such as the governor or tax collector), businessman or merchant, desperate for the comforts of Rome, or someone who had aided the Roman cause: a prominent British aristocrat with connections. It is tempting to link the palace to two historically attested figures: Tiberius Claudius Togidubnus, a man cited on an inscription from nearby Chichester as a “Great King of the Britons”, and Tiberius Claudius Catuarus, a wealthy Briton whose name was inscribed on a gold ring found just to the east of the palace.

But Fishbourne was only one of a number of early Roman palatial buildings established along the south coast of England in the latter half of the first century AD. Whoever the movers and shakers of the developing Roman province were, they seem to have enthusiastically developed ostentatious new homes at no little expense. The probability is that they were Britons on the make.

Within a few years, however, everything had changed. In the first decades of the second century, the great aisled hall at Fishbourne was torn down and a bath suite inserted into the north wing; the private apartments were dissolved and all larger spaces subdivided. This suggests that the period of single-occupancy was over and the palace building was in the possession of two or more separate owners. It is from this later phase that the most famous ‘cupid on a dolphin’ polychrome mosaic, one of the finest floors to survive from Roman Britain, was created.

As the farming estates of southern England prospered through the third and fourth centuries AD, Fishbourne contracted and declined. Perhaps, given that the palace



Miles Russell explores the site of the palace



This fire-damaged statue, found at the site, is now believed to be a young Nero

was a place where the nouveaux riche spent their money swiftly and conspicuously, this is hardly surprising. The first villas, although influenced by the architectural repertoire of Fishbourne, were centres where wealth was generated, farming estates evolving gradually over time, their owners buying into Roman culture as and when finances allowed. Fishbourne had no way of sustaining its high level of expenditure and, when the money finally ran out, the building began to stagnate. In the later third century, a final, devastating fire ended whatever plans anyone had for the structure. ■

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ON THE PODCAST

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PHILIP HARTLEY

BUILDING ROMAN PALACES AND VILLAS: FIVE MORE TO EXPLORE



Fishbourne Roman Palace

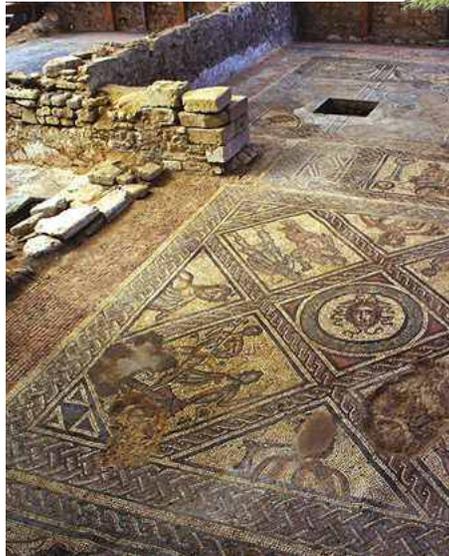


Roman Way, Fishbourne,
West Sussex PO19 3QR
● sussexpast.co.uk

1 Brading Villa, Isle of Wight

● bradingromanvilla.org.uk

Medusa features heavily in the mosaics at Brading, as do more unusual images such as the famous 'cockereled-headed man'. Ovens and metalworking furnaces provide clues as to what happened here once the villa ceased to operate as a residence. Examination of an aisled building nearby suggests that it may have originally functioned as the estate manager's house.



Medusa forms the centre image of one of Brading Villa's mosaic floors

2 Bignor Villa, West Sussex

● bignorromanvilla.co.uk

Bignor represents one of the finest examples of a well-to-do third to fourth-century Roman villa in Britain. The sequence of house development – from third-century cottage to three-winged villa – is marked out on the ground, while the best mosaics, depicting Venus, Medusa, cupid gladiators and Ganymede being abducted by Jupiter in the guise of an eagle, are covered by a series of thatched cottages, first erected to protect the villa in the early 1800s.



● Fishbourne Roman Palace,
West Sussex

3 Lullingstone Villa, Kent

● english-heritage.org.uk

The importance of Lullingstone lies not just with its fine mosaic, Europa being abducted by Jupiter in the guise of a bull, but the religious symbolism on the walls. Late in the fourth century, the owner commissioned a series of scenes depicting robed characters in prayer (with arms outstretched) and a Chi-Rho – an early Christian symbol, taking the first two letters from the Greek word for Christ. It seems that, late in its life, this villa may have functioned as a house church.

4 Rockbourne Villa, Hampshire

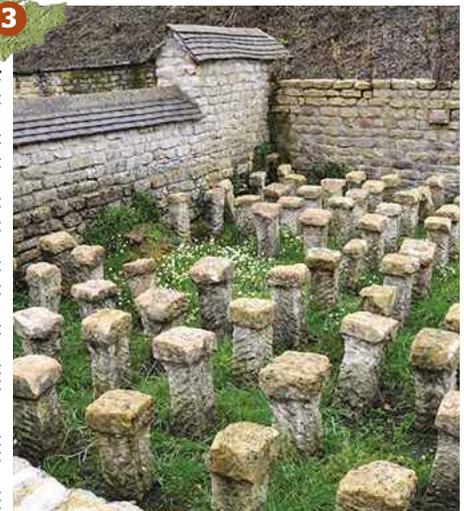
● hants.gov.uk

Apart from its small on-site museum, the chief interest of Rockbourne is the way that the entire villa sequence can be clearly seen laid out on the ground today from prehistoric roundhouse, to three-room cottage, to extensive tripartite villa. The latter was set around a courtyard with bath house, corn-drying ovens and an aisled building (the estate manager's house). Buried each winter to protect them from the elements are areas of the bath house and a small dining room with a curious geometric design that was possibly created in order to best position dining furniture.

5 Chedworth Villa, Gloucestershire

● nationaltrust.org.uk

Chedworth is a fine example of a later Roman country estate. New cover buildings let visitors get close to the four seasons mosaic of the dining room and the bath house, one of the best preserved of any in Britain. The changing room (*apodyterium*), warm room (*tepidarium*), hot room (*caldarium*) with underfloor heating, and cold room (*frigidarium*) with cold plunge bath, are all visible. On the approach to the villa, the main latrine, a no-doubt common feature but one rarely found in archaeological excavations, can also be seen. A shrine with an octagonal pool marks the villa's natural source of running water.



The remains of Chedworth's underfloor heating system. Stone pillars supported a floor through which hot air would rise