

# FRIENDS OF FISHBOURNE ROMAN PALACE

## NEWSLETTER

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### Oyster Helmet on display



A mysterious Roman helmet that pre-dates the Roman invasion of Britain is on display at the Palace, along with other pre-invasion artefacts – a sword scabbard fitting and an Iron Age crucible.

The helmet, known as the Oyster Helmet of Chichester, is one of just four Coolus helmets in the UK. It was produced during the first century AD, before the Romans began their conquest of Britain. It was acquired by the Sussex Archaeological Society in 1893, and though much of its journey has been lost to

history, it is thought to have been found in the mudflats of Chichester Harbour

The scabbard fitting, which is made of copper alloy like the helmet, sparks further debate. Though it is Roman, it was found in an Iron Age ditch. The crucible offers yet more evidence of Iron Age Britons having interacted with the pre-invasion Roman world.

There is much speculation about how the helmet came to be here, and who wore it. Perhaps it was collected by an antiquarian in Europe centuries after the Romans, and then lost overboard. It could be that a Roman soldier had kept his Coolus helmet even after newer helmet designs had replaced it. Maybe a local person had acquired it and had decided to dress in Roman gear. Perhaps this helmet was worn by an enslaved person, possibly someone from Gaul, who had been conscripted by the Roman army.

We do know that the helmet was mass-produced, made cheaply for a lower status soldier, because it has very few decorations and was 'spun' on a lathe. It almost certainly was not made in Rome.

Though the helmet had little in the way of decoration when it was worn, it now has an oyster shell attached, evidence of the time it spent underwater.

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## From the Chair

It has been a busy time for your committee since my last report in February. First, there was the sad news of the unexpected death of our membership secretary, Joan Rundle, in February during the period of membership renewals. We extended our sympathies to her husband, Ed, and her family at this time. Fortunately, Mary Haskins quickly stepped in to take over the role and has done an



excellent job of getting the process back on track. With the updated membership list, I was interested in seeing the geographical spread of our 70 currently renewed members (see map). This clearly shows the distance that some members need to travel, which is relevant to any member's events that we might arrange.

In March, we sent out an urgent plea for new committee members following a committee meeting at which we realised that we were no longer quorate following the loss of Joan. Three people kindly stepped forward to be co-opted onto the committee – Debbie Mansfield, Graham Pound, and Jacqui Watson. This puts the committee back on a stronger footing and is much appreciated. The Palace also has a new Property Manager, Sarah Parker, and I look forward to working with her on behalf of the Friends.

In March, I attended a meeting in Lewes organised by the Sussex Archaeological Society (SAS). This was attended by the five Chairs of the Friends organisations of the different SAS properties. The idea was for the new executive officers to gain a better understanding of the role of the Friends and possible mutual benefits of working more closely together. It was a useful meeting, but any next step has yet to be decided.

Some concerns had been raised about the condition of a walnut tree that had been pot-planted some years ago to commemorate Margaret Rule. We have learned from Simon Holman (Palace gardener) that it is been transplanted, along with the commemorative plaque, into the meadow area on the west side of the collections building. It should in time become a sizeable tree. This set the committee thinking about something to formally commemorate the many years that David Rudkin was involved with the Palace. Several ideas are being considered and, hopefully something will be possible.

Following on from the revised timing of the AGM last year, the committee has decided to continue on that basis with the next AGM being held on **1st October 2022**. Plans are underway and more details will follow in due course. Our Secretary, Dorothy Lawson, will be stepping down at this time, so we are seeking volunteers. Can you help?

**David Bone**

## **Crime at the Palace**

Back in January we took advantage of our closed period to welcome a group from Cranfield University. The six students and two tutors weren't here to learn about the Palace, but to spend three days honing their skills at solving heritage crime. The Heritage Crime postgraduate course at Cranfield is one of the only places where it is possible to specialize in this area of forensic science and the chance to visit a site like ours and investigate realistic mock crime scenes, especially created for the purpose, is an invaluable part of the course.



After an orientation around the site the students were confronted with a scene where the glass on one of our museum cases had been smashed (in fact carefully removed and replaced with glass fragments) and a valuable ring stolen. They quickly secured the site, and began the task of hunting for fingerprints, interrogating CCTV footage, and taking samples for DNA.

The following day they returned to the site to be told that suspicious activity had been noted overnight. A drone survey soon revealed a series of holes, seemingly dug by illegal metal detectors. Casts of footprints had to be gathered, 3D scans taken and a thorough search of the area for additional evidence, before writing a thorough report.

The next exercise focussed on the discovery that some objects were missing from our store. These had to be identified and as much information about them recovered from the archive, so that local police, museums and auction houses could be alerted.

Of course, each "crime" was entirely fabricated (although it was still alarming to see the site adorned with "Crime Scene" tape). Nevertheless, it gave the students a unique opportunity to put into practice what they had previously learned in the classroom, as well as to learn direct from heritage professionals the security challenges that museums face in general.

This was very much a "pilot project" and was such a huge success that the University are hoping to roll it out across Europe. We are really looking forward to welcoming the team from Cranfield back next year for a bigger and better Heritage Crime Exercise.

**Rob Symmons**

## **Annual General Meeting 2022**

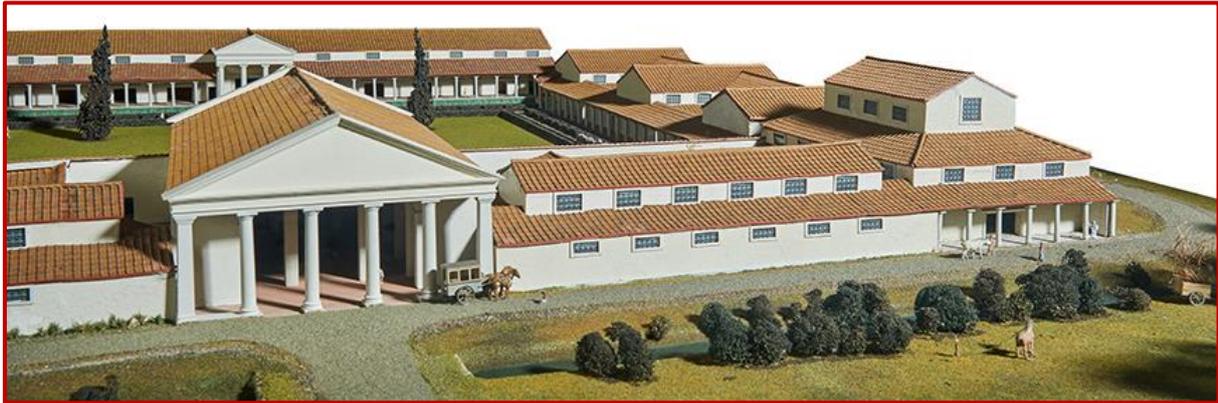
This will take place in the Rudkin Room on **SATURDAY 1st OCTOBER** at 10.30am with coffee available from 10am so please put the date in your diaries. You will remember that last year's AGM was held in September once the lockdown due to Covid had been relaxed - holding another meeting in April was considered to be too soon so we will meet in October this year and after all the problems of the past two years look forward to renewing our acquaintance with old friends and meeting new ones. As usual lunch will be available (advance payment required) and then in the afternoon Leanne O'Boyle from Sussex Archaeology Society, who liaises with Friends' groups, will talk to us about the excavation at Billingsgate Roman Villa which she supervised. We hope that this will also provide an opportunity for you to become acquainted with her and hear about her plans for the future.

The appointment of new committee members is more vital than ever as the co-opted members of the Committee (including the Secretary) will be stepping down at the meeting and we must have replacements so we would urge you to volunteer. Last year the Friends of Fishbourne Roman Palace was in grave danger of closing down due to a lack of both officers and ordinary members of the committee and was only saved after the meeting by two people volunteering - if we do not have a viable committee this year then the Friends will have to close. The Committee has been operating with only five members so was not quorate and we are very grateful to the three volunteers, Deborah, Jacque and Graham, who joined us on a temporary basis following the appeal earlier this year, without them we were unable to authorise payments to the Palace for items which the Friends were asked to provide.

We hope to see a large number coming to the AGM this year to help decide how the organisation will operate in the future to help the Palace staff with their work at this unique site.

***Dorothy Lawson***

***Hon. Secretary***



## **New Guidebook coming**

Way back during Lockdown 1 (remember that?), we started the process of refreshing the Palace guidebook. The old guidebook, by Barry Cunliffe, was great of course, but was starting to show its age. While its content was excellent, it was very much focussed on the specialist archaeologist and contained detail that could easily be found elsewhere.

So, we approached Dr Miles Russell, from Bournemouth University, to write a new text and were delighted when he agreed! Miles is a great supporter of the Palace, a renowned expert, and has published books on the Romans in Sussex, as well as co-authored the core text on Bignor villa. We also approached Jarrold Publishers who were pleased to produce the new guidebook.

That was back in the summer of 2020. Of course, finding funding for this project was no small task and, once the budget was available, the text had to be written, checked, checked again, and checked yet again! We couldn't be more excited that we FINALLY have a text that is ready for sign off.

Of course, we had to arrange for images to be produced to accompany the text. This was achieved in a single (albeit incredibly long!) day of photography, and everyone who has seen the photos agrees the results are fantastic. The old book wasn't lavishly illustrated, but the new one will be crammed with great quality images of the site and our artefacts. We hope it will be a colourful souvenir that visitors will take home and return to, to remind them of a great day out.

Once the images have been agreed and the text signed off, we are assured that production should happen quite quickly. We'll let you know when it finally appears on the shelves and hope you agree that it's an approachable, great-looking and informative introduction to the Palace and our amazing collections.

## **Rob Symmons**

*Mary Haskins, Membership Secretary, adds that those who joined the Friends last year and didn't receive a guidebook will get one as soon as copies are available.*

## Tales from the stores

Mary Haskins



*Mary working on the collections*

Back in the mists of time, most of the material from the Fishbourne dig was kept in the garden shed. It was not ideal as ivy grew in through the cracks. Rain and the occasional bird got in and left deposits on the topmost boxes. By the time plans for the new Collections Discovery Centre (CDC) were being drawn up, the boxes weren't in very good condition. Volunteers were recruited to sort through the boxes, replace bags and boxes where necessary and generally make sure that the collections were ready to be moved into their new home. My late husband (Nev) joined the team in early 2005 and when I took early retirement a few months later, I was also roped in.

It was great when we moved into the CDC – all that lovely clean and dry space. We carried on with the sorting and getting everything just so for the new curator (Rob Symmons). We worked on the collections in the sensitive store, the paper archive, transcribing field notebooks and also other collections from digs close to Fishbourne which are held by Fishbourne.

After a few years, Paddy Thomas, Nev and I were the only volunteers in the stores left from the pre-CDC days. As most of you know, the stores are shared with the Novium Museum, Chichester. When Rob had the Fishbourne material sorted to his liking, Nev and I started work on the Novium collections. These are more extensive and are from a much larger area.

Some of this work has been challenging. When the District Council Museum was set up, most things offered to the museum were accepted. It came in boxes of all shapes and sizes, and packing in the boxes certainly would not comply with modern standards. Now with space at a premium, there is a policy on what is accepted and how it should be packed. There is also a charge for each box accepted.

In the past all kinds of containers were used. There was a collapsed roman tiled roof (from the Cattle Market excavation 1968) packed in 12 wooden tomato crates, presumably collected from the local greengrocer.

Bagging and re-boxing them kept me quiet for a couple of days plus moving the boxes of tiles around gave me a

good work out – who needs gym membership?

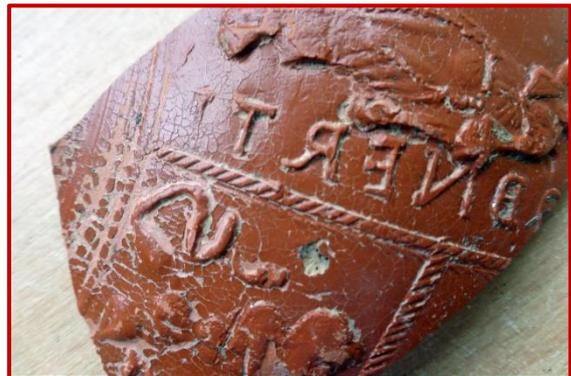
At the other end of the scale was an old cigar box containing a collection of clay pipes mostly found field walking. The elderly gentleman was really interested in the pipes and included a notebook detailing each type and where each one had been found. He donated the box to the museum when he decided his days of wandering around looking for more examples were over.



On one site from the late 1970s, the finds were packed into small domestic type plastic bags closed with a wire closure. Some of the bags had luggage labels attached but they must have run out. An enterprising archaeologist improvised and used the back of cut up wedding invitations for the rest of the labels. We did wonder if the invitations were incorrect and needed reprinting, the wedding was called off or just too many had been printed. Needless to say, the finds are now in archive quality labelled sealable bags.

There are also gems. You never know what you are going to find and one of the digs in Chichester has a fragment of Samian ware with the mould maker's

mark. There is a series of letters across the fragment but they are mirror writing



The mould maker incised his name into the mould, so when the clay was pressed into the mould the letters were reversed. A maker's mark on the base of pots is relatively common but this is the first mould maker's mark I have come across in the collections. We have been unable to establish who the mould maker is, so if you or someone you know can help us with that, we would love to hear from you.

### **GUY LOCKTON**



Guy has been a member of the Friends for many years and during that time has given constant support to Fishbourne Roman Palace both as a committee member, Treasurer and then Editor of the Newsletter, a post which he continued to occupy after his move away from the district. In addition, he and his wife Mavis have helped with children's activities during the summer holidays and other occasions and always been ready with advice and assistance. He has truly been a good Friend and it has been decided to award him Life Membership in thanks for all he has done. We wish both him and Mavis many happy years in their home in Bath.

