

FRIENDS OF FISHBOURNE ROMAN PALACE

NEWSLETTER

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Billingsgate Roman house and baths



A talk given after the Friends' AGM by Leanne O'Boyle. Leanne had just been appointed Executive Director of the Sussex Archaeological Society, following the resignation of Andrew Edwards. Leanne joined the Society earlier this year as Historic Properties Manager – see her introduction in the February Newsletter. Before this her job included supervision of this site.

Hidden below a modern office building is what Leanne claimed to be the most important archaeological site in London! It is the only accessible Roman domestic structure, the first archaeological building in London to be preserved in situ, and provides evidence from after the end of the Roman empire in Britain.

The site is in Lower Thames Street, and would have had access to the river. Built in the mid second century, it is thought to have consisted of three wings (east, north and west), but only the east and part of the north have been found. Evidence of a hypocaust was found in the east wing, along with the associated flues and furnace. The bathhouse is on

what would have been the open space enclosed by the wings. Leanne speculated on why the owners decided to block their view with such a building, and thought that perhaps the building of the stone city walls pre-empted that decision, as the view was lost anyway. Or maybe they simply valued the pleasures of the bathhouse over that view.

The bathhouse was first discovered in 1848 when the Coal Exchange was being built. (This was an important and interesting building in itself, demolished after World War II so the street could be widened. The dragons now on plinths on the Embankment were on the front.)

In 1859 a second excavation had found evidence of a house. In the 1960s City of London archaeologist Peter Marsden set about trying to find more of this building. Leanne explained that he saw the opportunity given by the bombing of the city to find out as much about its past as possible. His official remit was to collect artefacts; there was no funding for excavation. He funded the Billingsgate dig by using half his team of volunteers to excavate the neighbouring print works to find lead to sell! Unfortunately much of Dr Marsden's work remains in unpublished notebooks at MOLA, but a project is under way to change this.

The bathhouse is an almost square building with two apsidal wings on the north side separated by a passage. One of these was the hot room, and one the warm room. Both have hypocausts. Oddly, the bathhouse was entered through this passage. The square area was the cold room. It had a cold water tank against the southern wall. There was no hot plunge bath; the bathhouse operated more like a sauna. The square part had thick walls, including where the apsidal parts touch, indicating perhaps that the latter were added later. That then poses the question of what the earlier part was. Speculation continues!

At the end of the Roman era squatters moved in. The heating system was deliberately blocked up – saving fuel? preventing draughts? A coin hoard of 273 copper coins was discovered, which must have been hidden after 395.

After 410 the hill into which the house has been built began to fall into the site, and the building subsequently collapsed. Amazingly, a mid-5th century Saxon brooch was found on top of broken roof tiles. This timing was completely unexpected and has changed the understanding of what was going on then.

This was a well presented, informative and entertaining talk enthusiastically received by those present.

Visiting the site is possible by joining a guided tour. Details on the City of London website.

Further information about the site is available on various websites including <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/billingsgate-roman-house-and-baths/NglSZAAaL1hOILg> which contains a video of the 1960s excavation.

Sarah Parker joined the staff of the Palace earlier this year. She introduces herself ...

I am delighted to have taken over as Property Manager at Fishbourne, a place that enthralled me growing up locally, and visited during a school visit many years ago. I was dumbstruck and delighted to discover recently that the very teacher who took me on that school trip is now a long-standing volunteer at the palace. It has given me an even closer connection to the palace and I have come full circle! My visit to Fishbourne inspired my love of all periods of history. Who knew that school girl would one day be managing the site, an enormous privilege.

My background is a Curator; I have also worked in Museum Management for many years. After my Masters, my passion for heritage and museums led me to work at some of the UK's leading heritage organisations including Society of Antiquaries of London; Historic Royal Palaces; The Churches Conservation Trust; Gloucester Cathedral; and the Royal Collection Trust. More recently I have enjoyed sharing my knowledge and experience as a Museum Consultant, which is how I initially came to be at Fishbourne. Fishbourne is another 'palace' string to my bow having worked at several over the years including Hampton Court Palace, the Tower of London, Kensington Palace, Kew Palace, St James's Palace and even Buckingham Palace!

I am enjoying living by the coast again and working in West Sussex after many years away. In addition, I am very fortunate to have such a great team around me. Together, we are facing and striving to overcome many challenges post-Covid and beyond. This is in common with the heritage sector in general.

As we all know, however, Fishbourne also offers a wealth of un-tapped potential and opportunity. Prioritising, fundraising and planning for these in conjunction with SAS, the Friends of Fishbourne, volunteers and our external stakeholders, is our next challenging task. I look forward to collaborating with the Friends on this exciting prospect and journey ahead.

The AGM, for those who missed it

The AGM was held in the Rudkin Room at the Palace and 18 Friends attended. As neither Sarah Parker nor Rob Symmons was able to attend due to other engagements their reports were read by the Chairman followed by his own report, all three of which you will have received with the Minutes. The financial position is good with over £9,000 in the bank and the membership fee remains unchanged. The AGM will return to its Spring date next year.

Two Committee members have retired – Dorothy Lawson who was co-opted in 2021 to act as Secretary and Graham Pound, co-opted earlier this year as an ordinary member. David remains Chairman and Richard Treasurer; Debbie Mansfield becomes Secretary. Mary Haskins (Membership Secretary), Jacqui Watson, Sue Soames and Pat Barlow are ordinary members (but far from ordinary! – Ed.) Pat was on the committee some time ago, but Sue, a member for several years, is new.

There was a proposal under Any Other Business that in exceptional circumstances Officers should be able to serve for a further period if their four-year term had come to an end. It has been difficult to recruit Committee members and this would provide continuity- after discussion this was agreed and a joint note from the Chairman and Treasurer was circulated after the meeting.

The café provided lunch this year and we were joined by our Speaker, Leanne. We were able to congratulate her on her promotion and wish her well on behalf of the Friends.

Dorothy Lawson

From the chair

I have had to revise my first draft of this report following the October AGM, before which there was considerable uncertainty about the future composition of the committee or, indeed, whether there would be sufficient support at the AGM to keep the Friends in existence. I am pleased to say that all went well, although we say both goodbye to and welcome committee members. In the shuffle, we see the departure of Dorothy Lawson as Secretary and recent addition, Graham Pound who has to say farewell for personal reasons. Thank you, in particular, to Dorothy for all her hard work on behalf of the Friends over many years. Debbie Mansfield takes over the role of Secretary and new volunteer, Sue Soames, is welcomed to the committee. I continue as Chair for another year but will be stepping down at that point due to pressure of other commitments.

For your diaries, please note that the AGM next year (2023) will return to the pre-pandemic slot of April/May, date to be confirmed.

Updates since the last newsletter include a very useful meeting with Rob Symmons at the Palace regarding fundraising. This was specifically to discuss ways in which the Friends could hold fundraising events or assist the Palace without conflicting with any plans by the Sussex Archaeological Society. Ideas ranged from lectures to Roman dinners. Some ideas have previously been tried by the Friends and abandoned, so careful planning will be required to make these work. Sarah Parker, the new Property Manager for the Palace, subsequently joined us at a committee meeting and there were very positive discussion around mutually beneficial potential activities. In addition, the large plant pots recently funded by the Friends have been installed to prevent car parking along the access road to the Palace.

The committee has also been looking at producing some form of commemorative memorial to David Rudkin. We have settled on the idea of a Blue Plaque. We have draft wording and design, but the proposal has yet to be submitted to and agreed with the Sussex Archaeological Society.

As the Palace picks up pace again post-Covid, there will undoubtedly be many more ways in which assistance can be provided by the Friends. Your continuing support is very much appreciated.

David Bone

Student Ben Cooper will be working with Rob over the next year. He introduces himself ...



I am an undergraduate student at Exeter University studying Archaeology with Forensic Science. Working at Fishbourne constitutes part of my degree as a placement year before continuing on to 3rd year of my studies.

I am really enjoying working here and am learning a lot about the behind the scene workings of such a fascinating site. So far, I have learnt about: using and editing a catalogue; layout and protocol within the

stores; communication between groups and individuals to provide them with the resources they may need; grant applications; digitising of slides for use within the catalogue and a whole lot more.

I am now also making sure that the mosaics are kept clean and tidy. This entails spending a bit of time each week removing the dust from them and checking their condition. Over the course of about 3 months, all of the mosaics should be checked and cleaned. The other aspect of doing this is the public interaction. Many people have come up to me and asked what I am doing, including school parties. This gives me the opportunity to explain the role I play and the interest of working at a place like Fishbourne.

Overall, the couple of months that I have been here have made me fairly certain that this is the sort of thing I wish to do after I graduate from university. I look forward to maybe meeting some of you in person at some point over this year and am very grateful for this opportunity that Rob and the rest of the team have given me.

Curator Rob sets new world record

On 15 August Rob Symmons carried out his mad plan to cycle to six hypocausts in one day, thus unofficially setting a new world record. It all started because he and Dr Miles Russell had a long-running social media 'row' about who got to stand in Fishbourne's hypocaust. Dr Russell argued that if Tony Robinson could (and he had), then so could he. Rob disagreed. This set off the much-followed [#HypocaustGate](#) on Twitter (have a look!).

With no outright victory on either side, Rob hatched a cunning plan – to set a record for the number of hypocausts one person could stand on in one day. Starting at Brading, he then caught the ferry back to the mainland and cycled to Chichester to stand in The Novium, then on to Fishbourne where he ticked off three, and then finally on to Bignor. That was a ride of 45 miles on and off road – including part of Stane Street. His progress was enthusiastically followed on social media.

Afterwards Rob said "Given the 'disagreement' went on for so long, I knew it would take something quite special to draw a line under things, which is why – with the help of friends – I dreamt up this slightly odd attempt. After extensive research, it appeared that no one has been silly or mad enough to attempt it before, which makes it a world record in my eyes at least. I feel quite relieved to have completed it and know that while there is no changing Miles' view on this, it would have made him laugh a lot."

Flowerpots



Photo: Mary Haskins

Members who have visited the Palace recently will have seen some impressive plant pots along the driveway. These were provided by the Friends and positioned to stop people parking on the grass. They can be moved by the Palace staff on the rare occasions when access is allowed or needed. I hope you agree they are much nicer than bollards or chains! Plans are in hand for a suitable plaque to acknowledge the donation from the Friends.

Anne de Potier

Read any good books lately?

If there is a book you have recently read which you think other members would like, why not write a review for the Newsletter? It need not be long or learned – just something tempting. And if you bought the book in the Bookshop why not say so!

Join the Museums Association

The Museums Association is a membership organisation, representing and advocating for UK museums and those that work in and with them. They say:

Our members range from those that are employed in museums to volunteers, trustees, students, and those looking to work in the sector. We would like to offer a discount to FRIENDS OF FISHBOURNE ROMAN PALACE members to join the Museums Association, by using the code FRIENDS15 to get a 15% discount on membership. Our membership starts at only £49/year or £4.60/month by Direct Debit.

Members get free entry to museums and ticketed exhibitions at over 900 museums and galleries around the UK. Visit their website for a list of these, and more information on benefits

<https://www.museumsassociation.org/>

Standing Order Forms

If you requested a Standing Order Form to pay your annual renewal fees from February 2023, I will be sending them out after the AGM. Please take or send it to your bank. (Do not return it to me.) If anyone else would like a copy of the form, please let me know.

Mary Haskins, Membership Secretary.

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