

THE FISHBOURNE CONTUBERNIUM* – ROMAN SOLDIERS AT THE PALACE

John Brinded



At some time during the holiday and half-term activity days at the Palace, visitors will have noticed the presence of the Roman military, sometimes accompanied by a female civilian. The legionaries, auxiliary and romanised local lady are provided by "The Fishbourne Contubernium*", a group of independent re-enactors and volunteers dedicated to recreating the look of the Roman army and its dependants at a time when the Palace was in use. Indeed, whether Fishbourne was the administrative seat of Togidubnus, the loyal client king, or the summer residence of the Imperial Governor, one would expect such an important place and such important people to be guarded. The army of the time were the only effective police force.

There is ample archaeological evidence for a Roman military presence on the Fishbourne site and at nearby Chichester. In the city itself, sections of V-shaped ditch, traces of military-style buildings and fragments of arms, armour and equipment have been identified over the years. Of particular interest is the sword blade of a Tiberius-type gladius. At Fishbourne, prior to the building of the proto-palace, there appear to have been Roman military buildings, storage facilities, granaries, barracks (?) with associated bits of armour, equipment, weaponry and gaming items (an indication that whoever was based there had time on their hands !) And from Chichester harbour came the bronze helmet of Coolus-type F, complete with attached oyster shell. It is also interesting to note that pottery found in the same context has often been early enough to indicate a pre – 43 A.D date of the presence of the Roman army. Were they here as advisors or as an advance-guard to facilitate the smooth operation of the eventual Claudian "invasion"? To this end, our kit is "museum standard", made of the same material, the same weight and as near copies of the originals as possible. The armour alone weighs as much as 12 kilos. Sometimes we are on patrol or Protection Duty for important visitors, carrying the *fustis*, the Roman soldier's club. At others, especially Roman Army Week, we use a table so that we can put out a more detailed display of military equipment and the bits and pieces relevant to a soldier's life. These include the heavy marching pole loaded with impedimenta, the writing implements of the military clerk plus examples of writing tablets, knuckle-bones and dice, an arm-purse and coinage etc. Our romanised lady shows off her Roman-style clothing as well as the trappings of her self-imposed cultural "enslavement", her manicure set and strigil ! With our replicas, we try to reflect some of the real items in the museum show-cases.



Roman Army Week – Richard Bridgland, Kim and John Brinded with Amelia Miller, a young visitor from the Midlands (Grotmaster studio)

Some of us are teachers or ex-teachers, and/or ex-members of large re-enactment groups, or educators or enthusiasts. All of us have an in-depth knowledge of our subject which we hope can add a different dimension to the public's experience of the Palace. Our role is to educate, enlighten and inform. Many of the children now study the Romans at school though the information available to them is not always accurate and can be superficial. Many adults are seriously misinformed and, having forgotten what they learnt, tend to rely on TV and film for their knowledge. We try hard to redress the balance. One of the most common misconceptions is to address all Roman soldiers as "centurion" - we now carry pictures of Chris Haines of the Ermine Street Guard to show people what a centurion really looked like.

Being there for the sake of the public can be an intriguing experience. Some are immediately fascinated and engaged, asking questions of everything. To others we are just there to be photographed with, much as you would with characters at Disney World. To some we are some sort of alien aberration to be avoided at all costs ("Don't make eye-contact, Ethel, they may try and talk to us!") Despite the fact that "living history" has a higher profile nowadays, thanks to broadcasters like Dan Snow and Ruth Goodman among others, there is still a British reticence about those who "dress up" (unless it's Santa, in drag for a joke or for a fancy-dress party !) Certainly some young children find us intimidating. To them, being confronted by a Roman soldier in full kit must be like seeing a Dr. Who cyberman or a Star Wars stormtrooper ! Our Roman lady can usually break the ice and comfort the little ones. Most of the time, children are fine (one once rushing towards us with open arms) - they love putting on the helmet and holding the shield while doting parents or grandparents click away on various devices (sometimes even cameras!) We have to stress that we are soldiers/civilians of the Roman Empire, not from Rome itself, either from Britannia or at least Northern Europe – this was much to the relief of one adult who had previously wondered how so many "Romans" could have come from one city! Our table of replica artefacts can also cause a stir – the knuckle-bones are of great interest and the use of the arm-purse always provokes delighted comment. Perhaps best was the lady who picked up a phallic amulet for closer inspection. As it gradually dawned on her what she was actually looking at, she began to blush. When the Roman lady simply said "Yes it is.....", the unfortunate lady went puce, to which her accompanying friend snorted "Oh trust you !"

Our finale is usually to ask what folk think the sponge-on-a-stick is for (children invariably know, thanks to "Horrible Histories" !) For us, our appearances give another dimension to a Palace visit and provide a "living history" educational experience but, just as importantly, we thoroughly enjoy doing it and love being part of the Fishbourne family !

The **contubernium was the smallest organized unit of soldiers in the Roman Army, composed of eight legionaries, the equivalent of a modern squad. The men within the contubernium were known as contubernales.^[1] Ten contubernia were grouped into a centuria. Soldiers of a contubernium shared a tent, and could be rewarded or punished together as a unit.*

At right – the helmet from Chichester harbour (photo R Bridgland)

