

FISHBOURNE PALACE - A ROMAN THEME PARK?

Gordon Hayden



our most recent speaker, He is a familiar face at Fishbourne Roman Palace where he is currently Cataloguing Co-ordinator and a museum guide. For a number of years he has studied the Iron Age/Roman transition in Britain. Gordon gave the Friends a very lively and thought-provoking talk, 'Iron Age Memory versus Roman Metaphor', demonstrating how the word "Roman" has many positive and negative connotations which polarize opinion not only amongst the public but also between archaeologists themselves.

The Roman invasion of 43AD brought great changes to Britain, but change was not something new, although then, as now, changes were not always welcomed. Between 90 and 50 BC the main contacts and trade links of the Atrebates in the Chichester area with continental Europe were centred heavily on Normandy. This contact almost died out after Julius Caesar's conquest of Gaul and the flight (or banishment) to Britain of Commius, chief of the Atrebates in what is now Belgium. Thenceforward the main links were between Commius' new seat and the area he had left. The arrival of the Romans brought a new wave of change, but Gordon contends that the Roman occupation of these islands had only superficial effects. The native population, while adopting some refinements of Roman civilization, continued to cling on to many aspects of their familiar ways, in their pottery and grave goods, in respecting Iron Age landscape features such as ditches and pathways when constructing new settlements, and in their preference for living in roundhouses instead of Roman rectangular buildings even within the *insulae* of towns. 'Romanisation' was a defensive mechanism for them, complying with the invaders only to the extent necessary. Once the legions were withdrawn this Romanised veneer mostly disappeared.

Speculating on the history of Fishbourne Roman Palace, Gordon pointed out that the Romans were big on symbolism. The pillars for the Pantheon in Rome, for instance, originally built by Marcus Agrippa after the battle of Actium in 31BC, are of grey granite from Mons Claudianus in Eastern Egypt, no doubt symbolizing Rome's mastery over that country. Studying the stone used in the construction of Fishbourne Palace Gordon found that an overwhelming proportion had been brought from the Isle of Wight, Dorset (especially Purbeck marble) and the West Country. Construction of the Palace began about 70AD when Vespasian was emperor. Gordon suspects that the Palace was a Roman theme park, built for the cult of Vespasian, not for the Romans' 'client king' Togidubnus. Was the architect lauding in masonry Vespasian's conquest of those parts of the country when legate of the Legio II Augusta? He died in 79AD; Gordon speculated that the Palace might have held a shrine or even a temple to the deified Vespasian. Perhaps the West Wing contained the shrine and Togidubnus was housed in the proto palace. As to why the Fishbourne stream was moved when the Palace was built, Gordon suggests that the Romans may have wished the entrance to be across water, symbolising their crossing (conquest) of the Channel.

Gordon Hayden holds an MA in Ceramic and Lithic Analysis for Archaeologists from the University of Southampton.