

## Fishbourne's amazing gardens – laid out with Louis XIV finesse

So said Professor Sir Barry Cunliffe, excavator of the Palace, who also described the great formal gardens as "essentially a showpiece to show off the building to the amazement of visitors". And amazing they must have been, not only to the Regni living in the area, but also to visiting Romans, for whom formal gardens had only become popular in the period of Hellenisation in the first century BC. No other gardens of this type have been discovered in Britain.



*The Palace as shown in David Rudkin's guide*

The formal gardens, of an impressive 75,000 square feet or 7000 square metres, were irrigated by a complicated system of pipes fed by a spring and by runoff from the extensive roofs. Statues and garden furniture would have stood in the recesses of the box hedging lining the central pathway and when the water supply was turned on gentle streams would have bubbled up in stone basins laid around the paths. Approaching the steps leading up to the West Wing audience hall a large plinth, not shown in the illustration,

suggests the presence of a great statue. It would be nice to think it may have been of Emperor Tiberius Claudius, saviour of the Atrebates, whose names Togidubnus adopted. Facing the East Wing would have been fruit trees and roses alternating with posts, a system widely used by the Romans. At the exterior angle of the North and West wings were the kitchen gardens, a common adjunct to private houses and villas in Italy. Did the Romans keep the grassy areas mown or long? Sir Barry says the evidence suggests that the grass was kept short.

To the south of the site, in the small area not lost to housing and the main road, the Roman plants garden (right) gives visitors an idea of the variety of medicinal and culinary herbs, fruits and ornamental plants introduced by the conquerors, including figs, citrus fruit, grapes, broad beans, leeks, parsnips, thyme and acanthus. This garden was laid out in 1994 by Clare Ryley, then Education Officer at the Palace, who just happened to be a keen plantswoman and member of the RHS and the Garden History Society, whom the Director,



David Rudkin, invited to research which plants would have been available to the owner of the Palace. She took up the task with enthusiasm and her work informed the stocking of the garden and led to her book *Roman Gardens and their Plants* published in 1998 and available in the Palace gift shop. Clare continued to work at Fishbourne until about 2004 and then at Michelham Priory, another of the properties of Sussex Archaeological Society.

How ever many gardeners would have been needed to maintain these extensive grounds? The present Head Gardener declines to make an estimate, commenting merely that slaves must have been cheap. Even with half the gardens lost under later construction it was not possible for him and a handful of casual volunteers to keep the remaining gardens in good order, so it was a relief when the Sussex Archaeological Society found the funds last year to take on two assistant gardeners. Their help, and that of the many dedicated garden volunteers, has made a huge difference to the appearance of the site. The Friends have been able to contribute to this by financing the replacement of the log edging to the Roman garden and the installation of new explanatory panels which are expected shortly to replace the temporary ones seen in the picture above.

Sadly, the heyday of the formal gardens was but brief. The Palace was constructed between 75 and 80AD; the gardens must have been the last part to be finished. King Togidubnus, or whoever lived there, probably died late in the century when, according to Roman practice, ownership of the complex would have passed to the Emperor. The Romans

did not perpetuate client kingdoms. In the next fifty years the Palace was converted into a still luxurious but much reduced villa centred on the west end of the North Wing. The imposing entrance hall of the East Wing, where the road from Noviomagus Reginorum (Chichester) arrived, continued in use for some time, slowly deteriorating. There appears to have been heavy traffic through the hall and across the central pathway of the gardens. Eventually the hall's roof collapsed and we have no idea of what happened there until the disastrous fire broke out in the late 290s, after which the site was never rebuilt.

Now meet the garden staff:



#### **Martin Flux, Head Gardener**

Martin is responsible for the grassy areas, the beds, the picnic area, Roman garden and spoil heaps. He started his career as a trainee at Chichester Parks Department, then was Assistant Gardener at the University of Chichester from 1987-95, when he moved to Fishbourne. His only previous visit to the Palace was as a child at primary school.



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#### **Michele Revrenna, Assistant Gardener**

Michele is Italian, from Vicenza. He studied land management in Italy. He and his fiancée, whom he has known since they were both 8, came to Brighton, then to Essex, then to Chichester. He got this job after responding to an advertisement in the Chichester Observer and started work at the Palace last summer. He also works at Petworth Park, former home of the Earls of Egremont and now a National Trust property.



#### **Lynne Napier, Assistant Gardener**

Lynne took a diploma in plants and garden history at Edinburgh University. Her speciality is plants of the Mediterranean, especially perfumed plants. Fishbourne was one of the six historic gardens in Britain and two in the Mediterranean area which she studied. She met Martin Flux on her visit here. She has worked with plants for the past 20 years.



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The gardening team is complemented by **Stewart Clarke, the handyman**, who has worked at the Palace for four years. Stewart's background is in buildings maintenance and bricklaying. He is responsible for the upkeep of all the buildings, walls, paving etc.

What strikes the visitor talking to any member of the gardens team is their boundless enthusiasm and pride in what they are achieving, reflected in comments by visitors such as in February this year: *"The gardens were amazing. I really enjoyed visiting."* And last November: *"I loved everything, but I really liked the outside"*.