

FISHBOURNE'S MAGNIFICENT SHIELD OF MITHRAS

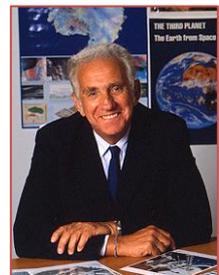


Visitors to the Palace during Roman Army Week (last week of October) will have another opportunity to see this beautiful shield in the reproduction Roman room of the museum. Katrina Burton, Property Manager and Head of Learning, says: "Since acquiring it we have used it, as intended, to inspire our visitors of all ages. It comes out and gets displayed every Roman Army week. We've also shown it to a few keen youngsters on work experience and some of the kit (although not the shield) was worn by Tony [Muzzall] when he went to the Hampton Court flower show in 2013 to promote Fishbourne alongside a fabulous Roman style garden display".

The cult of Mithras sprang up in the 1st century AD. The unique underground temples or Mithraea appear suddenly in archaeology in the last quarter. During the 2nd and 3rd centuries, there are a great many Mithraea, some of them being rebuilt or enlarged. References in the 4th century are however few and the cult seems to have died out in the 5th century. 10 such temples are known in Britain; none is in the Chichester area (possibly because there were no large Roman forts here). Alexander Armstrong's programme "Rome's Invisible City" on BBC1 on 1 June about underground Rome revealed that there are 35 Mithras temples there, often in old quarries.

The myth states that Mithras was born out of a rock and that he hunts and slays a bull. The shield depicts the killing of the bull, a dog and a snake licking up blood, and a scorpion attacking the bull's genitals. There are also three ears of wheat protruding from the wound, another standard part of the representation. The figure at the top must be Sol Invictus with, below him, two naked, lion-headed figures with four wings, entwined by snakes. There is information on all these cult figures on Wikipedia.

The shield and other articles of a Roman General's uniform (breastplate, leather tunic, helmet, sandals, cloak and weaponry) were generously loaned to the Palace by the widow of the late Douglas Arnold, right, who supported and guided Legio II Augusta of the Roman Living History Society as a centurion and later as a senior officer, over many years. He died in 2006.



Douglas Arnold, as the Emperor, attending a banquet of the Association for Roman Archaeology at Fishbourne. Richard Bridgland is on the left, Mrs Arnold in the centre, and John Brinded (a member of the Friends of Fishbourne) on the right.