

When is a Palace not a Palace? – When it's a villa

Visitors carry in their minds a picture of the Roman palace in its heyday, as portrayed on the literature and the website. The guidebook and the guides tell them how the site developed, but the full story may be quite quickly forgotten.

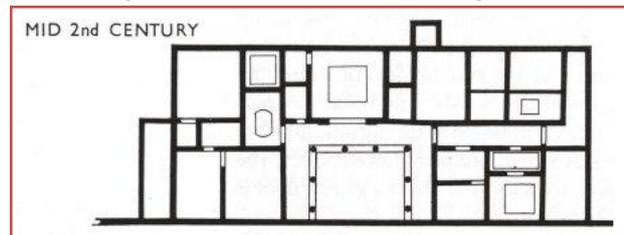


Construction of the Palace began under the Emperor Vespasian in 75 AD. It is thought that the client king Togidubnus lived there. He probably died some time in the 90s. Under Roman practice client kingdoms reverted to the state so the palace and the kingdom of the Regni would have been swallowed up by the province of Britannia. It may well be significant that marked changes were

made to the Palace after this date.

During the 2nd century occupation centred on the North Wing (now under the cover building). A new bath suite and exercise hall, "modest but comfortable" according to Prof. Cunliffe, were built at the east end and expensive mosaics were laid. It appears that the aisled assembly hall was no longer required and the formal garden, which must have required an army of gardeners and slaves, was going out of use. However the quality of the buildings remained high.

In the mid-2nd century the east end of the North Wing was demolished, including the new bath suite. It is thought that this was due to subsidence caused by building over the remains of an old timber building and ditches. New baths were constructed in the courtyard of the East Wing, well planned, spacious and comfortable, reflecting a rise in the affluence of the owner. Some of the remaining larger rooms in the North Wing were split up by wooden partitions and the layout was reconfigured. Two more hypocaust-heated rooms were fitted in and new mosaics were laid, including the famous Boy on a Dolphin in what seems to have become the main room. After these expensive alterations the villa now faced north onto the old service road. Prof Cunliffe writes: "During the first 50 years of the 2nd century the Palace changed from a vast semi-public residence set in landscaped surroundings into a smaller, no doubt more comfortable, villa concentrated in the west part of the North Wing. Its owners had virtually constructed within the shell of the old structure a completely new villa geared to a smaller establishment of staff and the domestic needs of a single family, but in a style still exceptional in the contemporary countryside. Extremely few 2nd or even early 3rd century villas could boast four new polychrome mosaics and a bath suite."



The imposing entrance hall of the East Wing, facing Chichester, continued in use for some time. There was heavy traffic from the road across the garden; it is not clear why. Then the roof collapsed.

In the late 3rd century a new building programme began. The building was now 200 years old and had not been modernized for at least 80 years. In the north-west corner of the Palace a new hypocaust system was being installed, but was never finished. In the West Wing a mosaic was uprooted and the tesserae were shoveled into heaps. "In the province generally the late 3rd and early 4th centuries were a time of massive rebuilding..... the great country mansions were beginning to reach their most developed form. Perhaps the owners of Fishbourne were ready for large-scale rebuilding to bring the old villa up to date, but this was never to be for a disastrous fire destroyed the inhabited part of the North Wing."

The West Wing was probably also affected but the East Wing baths survived untouched. 43 coins from the bathhouse indicate that the fire probably happened at the end of the 290s.

The villa was not rebuilt, perhaps because water levels were rising and Fishbourne has always been a very marshy area. Several years later, between 310 and 320, the site was robbed of useful stone and flint and in the medieval period quite deep flint footings were robbed out for use in the houses of the nearby village, and the Palace was lost until its rediscovery in 1960.

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