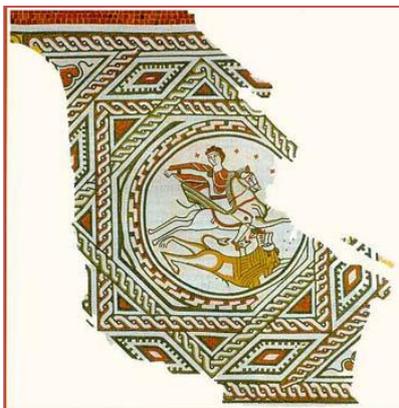


## ROMAN MOSAICS

Dr Stephen Cosh

A number of years ago Dr Stephen R. Cosh, editor of ASPROM (the Association for the Study & Preservation of Roman Mosaics), in partnership with David S. Neal, undertook the massive task of recording and drawing in colour every known Roman mosaic in Britain. The result is a corpus of five large volumes. As well as describing and illustrating the mosaics the corpus deals with context and evidence. There are also accounts of excavations, photographs of all figured mosaics, reproductions of early engravings and detailed plans of villas. Dr Cosh concentrated in his talk on Volume 3 of the series, covering southeast Britain, including the mosaics of Fishbourne.

He began by defining what a mosaic is: a pattern made up of small coloured cubes, *tesserae* in Latin, usually of stone or tile but less frequently of glass, shell or fragments of pottery. Mosaic making is a laborious process. The technique used is to press the *tesserae* into a layer of lime mortar on a rigid base to construct a floor mosaic or, less often, a wall mosaic. In the former case, the resulting surface is rubbed down and made smooth. Mosaics were very expensive, so the finest were generally found only in the houses of the wealthy and were a status symbol. The vast majority of the survivals are decorated in black and white geometric patterns characteristic of the earlier Imperial period; polychrome, figurative examples started to predominate from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century onwards. The best were almost certainly the work of professional mosaicists from the continent, but the technique will have been taught to less-skilled Romano-British craftsmen. The subjects of these mosaics were usually mythological or inspired by Roman literature such as Virgil's Aeneid. They showed that the owner of the building where they were found was a sophisticated and wealthy person who wished to demonstrate to his visitors his *Romanitas* (his allegiance to Rome and its culture).



**Bellerophon slaying the Chimera - mosaic from Croughton showing misaligned central roundel**

Dr Cosh showed images of a variety of mosaics, including representations of gods (Bacchus was a popular subject, notably at Thrupton in Hampshire where he is seated on a leopard and from Leadenhall Street, London where he reclines on the back of a tiger), and heroic figures such as Dido and Aeneas, animal hunts, and the four seasons. British hunting dogs were much in demand in the Roman empire; at Withington in Gloucestershire dogs are chasing a boar while the famous Hinton St. Mary mosaic from Dorset (the central panel of which is displayed in the British Museum) shows hounds with docked tails chasing deer around what may be the first known representation of Christ. Charioteers appear on mosaics from Horkstow, Lincs. and Rudston, Yorks. both in the Hull and East Riding Museum. Cupid gladiators appear with their trainers on the Venus Mosaic from Bignor.

It has taken Stephen and his colleague many years to record these mosaics (some 2000 of them). They were drawn on high quality art paper, given a background wash, and then the individual *tesserae* were painted. Photographs were also taken of every square yard. All the mosaics at Fishbourne were drawn meticulously. They are of particular importance because approximately eighty rooms in the Palace, the largest Roman residential building in Britain, originally had a mosaic floor, mainly in the fashionable black and white pattern. The stone for the *tesserae* was brought to Fishbourne from Dorset where there was a natural rich supply. Some of the mosaic patterns are very similar to French mosaics, demonstrating the close cultural links across the Channel at the time. A particular example from Besançon was shown. Another from central France has similarities to both the 'Fortress mosaic' and the mosaic rescued from the south end of the west wing in 1987. There is some polychrome in the mosaics of the North Wing of Fishbourne, one, remarkably, of late first century date, has concentric bands of simple guilloche and leaves and flowers with fish, dolphins and wine vases in the corners. However, the best known is the later second century mosaic with the

centrepiece of Cupid riding a dolphin. It is flanked by sea- horses, sea- panthers, *cantharoi*, (drinking cups associated with Bacchus) and scallop shells. Dolphins are one of the most popular images on Romano-British mosaics, sometimes appearing with Neptune and in other marine scenes and were probably regarded as good luck symbols.

The fine mosaics at Bignor Roman villa date from the 3<sup>rd</sup>- 4th century, a time of gradual economic and political chaos and decline in Roman Britain. Mosaics were at their best in the 2nd century AD and are generally found in towns. There is a good example under the floor of Chichester Cathedral. Some excellent work survives at Dorchester and Cirencester. Decorative details can be recognised as rather similar from place to place suggesting that high quality mosaicists who could master the art of polychrome may well have been itinerant and highly sought after.

*Friends of Fishbourne newsletter, October 2012*