FISHBOURNE AND THE EARLY DAYS OF ROMAN SUSSEX

Dr Helen Poole 18 July 2013

Fishbourne, just west of Chichester, is probably the county’s best-known domestic inheritance from the Roman era. Its remarkable mosaic floors and recreated garden attract many visitors. But most of us remain ignorant of how the Romans governed Sussex during their long occupation of Britain, and on one of the hottest evenings of the year we gathered to hear Dr Helen Poole give a brisk, witty, well-informed and well-illustrated talk on the subject.

As we learned at school, the first Roman invasion was by Julius Caesar; he told us so in his own book. Caesar landed in eastern Kent, probably at Richborough, and actually did so twice, in 55 and 54 BC. It is likely that his expeditions were aimed, at least in part, in interrupting the support that the Celts of Britain were giving to their relations the Gauls, against whom Caesar was waging a major war. Capturing enemies for slavery might have provided another motive, and no doubt his men were also spying out the land for possible future invasions.

Caesar would have found a remarkably civilised Celtic people in the South East, as evidenced by their surviving artefacts in the form of weapons and personal ornaments. These people lived in thatched roundhouses and were organised into tribal kingdoms whose names have come down to historians but whose boundaries and forms of governance remain largely unclear, because, unlike the Romans, they left no written records. Despite their skill in metal-working, they appear not to have used much armour in battle, preferring near-nakedness and woad. The latter is a useful coagulant in case of wounds but, as Dr Poole pointed out, this was little use against the kind of weaponry ranged against them.

At this point and for a long time afterwards the Romans were at the top of their military form. Their commanders and legionaries had learned from their enemies and outpaced them in tactics and technology. They had good armour and used it sensibly – as for example in the testudo formation, guarded by shields on all sides and above, which allowed a squad to make rapid advances without serious danger to it, having hurled their lances. They could also inflict substantial damage from a distance with the bolts from the ballista. Against these devices the Celts of Britain could rarely prevail.

It is almost certain that Caesar’s Romans made no attempt to reach Sussex. They were uncomfortable with long sea passages; the county was very well-forested; their time in England was brief. The story of a battle on Mount Caburn by Lewes is likely to be untrue, and certainly no archaeological evidence has survived to support it.

Some decades later, under the emperor Caligula, a second invasion was planned but called off at the last minute and, after his murder, it was left to his uncle Claudius to carry it out in AD 43. The reasons for it are not wholly clear, but we do know that some, if not most, of the British tribes were closely related to those in Gaul and likely to have continued to supply them with help in their opposition to the Roman occupation there. To defeat and subdue
them would have been a logical aim if Gaul were to be finally pacified. A pretext was therefore found in the form of a professed invitation from this side of the Channel from a local king, Verica, who was an ally of Rome but who had been expelled from his kingdom.

In principle, Sussex would have been a prime site for an invasion. In particular, Fishbourne, at the head of Chichester Harbour, would have provided a sheltered anchorage and ample supplies for the men, but there is no actual evidence to suggest that it was used. It is unchallenged that the Romans once again chose eastern Kent as their landing-place. It was a huge invasion – perhaps by 40,000 men with all their equipment – and the shortest possible Channel crossing would have been advisable. In the event it was highly successful, and very quickly the whole south-eastern part of England fell to the invader. Claudius himself paid a brief visit and issued the customary edicts, but the Roman in charge of the operation was Vespasian (later himself emperor). Of course there was opposition, – Boudicca is, without doubt, the best-known rebel, but she struck later, in about 65 AD – but there must have been others. She took the Roman centres of St Albans, Colchester and London but was eventually defeated.

Once established, the Romans garrisoned strong points but allowed the Britons very largely to govern themselves through their existing tribal structures. There would have been no doubt that the Romans were in charge, though local Celts useful to them could petition for Roman citizenship. The senior caste of Romanised Celts must have had an easy life. The local tribes in Sussex were the Atrebates or the Regnenses, and the king’s name that has come down to us is that of the Romanised Celt Cogidumnus or Togidubnus, who may have come originally from Silchester in Berkshire. He is mentioned by Tacitus (whether accurately or not) and there is an inscription at Chichester that hints strongly at his role. He is the most likely early occupant of Fishbourne, but whoever it was, he would have been assured of some safety because Chichester itself was a major Roman centre, big enough to have its own amphitheatre.

The building of Fishbourne was begun at about the time that Boudicca revolted. Despite its Celtic connections, the palace is a Roman rather than a Celtic building. Its layout and surviving decoration are Roman not local; and it is very large. In fact, its floor plan makes it the largest secular Roman building north of the Alps, and visitors see only a part, for a substantial part remains hidden under the houses of the village. While everything above ground level has disappeared, enough has survived beneath for archaeologists to have some confidence that it had arched colonnades and a large garden (since reconstructed) in its inner courtyard. On the south side, now still buried, would have been a portico above an entrance leading to the garden and across it to the audience chamber in the north wing. It was supported by piles driven into the mud beneath. It would have had plastered walls and the usual statuary. Rings, seals and pottery fragments – some of Aretine ware, which preceded the better-known Samian – have survived. It is most famous for its mosaics, originally in black and white but later overlaid with polychrome tesserae. We do not know whether craftsmen were imported for the purpose or recruited locally.

Sufficient remains have been found in the rest of Sussex to show the extent of Roman influence. The early Wealden iron industry is evidenced by bloomeries, for example at Beauport. Villas of the early period are well-known, for example at Southwick which revealed good mosaics with unusual tesserae, probably from the Near East. It now lies
almost entirely under housing, and that at Eastbourne has been claimed by the sea. Few others have survived. Coins and ornaments abound. The Roman roads are well-known and would have been an improvement on the original need to proceed along river courses or ancient trackways, neither of which would have been very suitable for large bodies of soldiery on the move.

There were also coastal forts, though mostly established later when the Saxons became troublesome. The large castle at Pevensey, for example, probably dates from the fourth century. It was at the beginning of the fifth century when the overstretched Romans withdrew to concentrate on their continental possessions.

There must be many more reminders of Roman times still hidden from us, and continued development (such as the building of new roads) may well provide some of them. It is almost certain that we already possess all the relevant documentation about the period; what is missing is the fuller picture to be provided by further archaeology. It may be possible that modern non-invasive technology can provide it.

George Kiloh

Model of the Roman Palace as it may have appeared to the late first century AD