

THE FISHBOURNE

THE Roman Palace at Fishbourne, the greatest and the most extraordinary villa in Roman Britain, lies just over a mile from the centre of the Roman town of Noviomagus—modern Chichester. Fishbourne was at one time the port of Noviomagus, and is situated on a gravel ridge at the head of a creek, where a long arm of the sea insinuates itself into the low lying plains that cover the couple of miles between the foot of the chalk downs and the sea. A special road probably ran from the town to the palace, and the visitor would arrive at the middle of the east wing of the palace, which, in the shape of a hollow square spread out over six acres. Here he would be confronted by a wide and presumably magnificent gateway—the wall was especially thick at this point as if to support a lofty superstructure.

The Entrance

Passing through, he would enter the entrance hall (*b* on the plan). At either side there was an arcade (supporting a clerestory?) behind which was a row of small cubicles or niches. At the far end was a large ornamental fountain, the foundation of the basin of which still survives in a distinctive red concrete, and is marked on the plan. Passing by the side of this, the visitor would enter the magnificent garden in the central courtyard, across which an avenue led to the audience chamber situated

in the middle of the opposite wing (a on the plan). The garden was surrounded by a colonnade which supported a covered verandah running round it: when complete there must have been some 100 columns in all, of which nearly three survive together with details of the stylobate and gutter.

In the garden, fountains were playing. The water pipes that fed these are still preserved, and have been traced under the garden for a length of 1,200 ft.—in one place a continuous length of 100 ft. was found intact. The pipes ran from a reservoir in the North-West corner in a double system. (This had to be omitted from the plan in the interests of clarity, but it shows up well in the photo). One system ran along in front of the north wing, and then turned south along the north half of the east wing, while the other system followed approximately the same line to the middle of the east wing, whence it fed the fountains along the southern half of the east wing, and perhaps part of the south wing. Presumably this double system was necessary in order to preserve sufficient pressure to operate all the fountains. The pipes were made out of fired clay and look suspiciously like modern field drains! Where the fountains probably stood the line is broken, for later robbers removed the joints which would have been made of lead. However, fragments of no less than four marble fountains have been discovered.

In addition to the fountains it has also proved possible to trace the complete layout of the garden. The ground naturally sloped down from west to east, and the Romans therefore artificially levelled the garden by taking soil from the west side, and dumping it on the east; as a result the west wing of the palace is set some 6 ft. above the level of the rest of the palace. But as the resulting subsoil was slightly acid and infertile, the Romans, being good gardeners, did the correct thing and dug out shallow bedding trenches which they filled with topsoil that had been artificially marled to counteract the natural acidity. The excavators, by a stroke of genius and good fortune, managed to pick up these bedding trenches, and by following them were able to reveal the whole plan of the garden, as shown by the dotted lines on the plan. The main feature was the pathway across the middle leading from the entrance hall to the audience chamber (see illustration of this on page 144). This was lined by a double, and in parts treble, row of bedding trenches, with recesses that were alternately rectangular and semi-circular. A smaller pathway also ran around the edge of the garden, with smaller recesses. On the east side however, the bedding trenches give way to a series of small pits which doubtless held shrubs.

Behind the formal layout of the bedding trenches was nothing—just a wilderness. About two-thirds of the available area—the northern

HO