

Some entertainment in Londinium

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AS THE ADMINISTRATIVE capital of the province of Britain, *Londinium* appears to lack the evidence for the expected major places of entertainment (apart from baths), some or all of which occur in many other Roman cities: theatre, odeon, amphitheatre and *circus*. This article examines the evidence for such places of entertainment at two areas in the western part of the City of London.

Area 1 – south-west of St. Paul’s

From the topographical evidence the most likely area for a theatre or odeon is that to the south and west of St. Paul’s, because the steep slope could be used to support the tiers of seats. The concept of a theatre in this area gains credence from the arch, frieze and other sculptured and inscribed stones found in the make-up of the riverside defensive wall some 50m (165ft) east of the Mermaid Theatre in Puddle Dock. In the discussion on the arch, which is perhaps Severan in date, there are suggestions that it relates to a nearby complex with temples, possibly public baths (to replace those demolished at Huggin Hill in the 2nd century) and even a theatre¹.

Having in mind the many continental parallels, the hypothesis was evolved that a Roman theatre may well have survived into the Middle Ages as a fortified building. Such possible structures are known in this area – Baynard’s Castle which William the Conqueror ‘built’ as a counterpart to the Tower of London, and the Tower of Montfichet. In 1275 the castle site was given to the Dominicans (Black Friars) for the construction of a house and church: “two lanes or ways next the street of Baynard’s Castle and also the Tower of Montfichet, to be destroyed”².

A 10ft (3m) thick wall running north-south in line with Ludgate and composed of “large unhewn stones imbedded in a sort of grouting composed of powdered bricks, lime and gravel” was found in the area of the Blackfriars Convent. Merrifield places this wall immediately east of Church Entry and notes

not only that another account records three walls of this character running north-south, but also that there are reports of a wall to the south, whose construction is described as “of the Roman city wall”, an 8ft (2.4m) thick Roman wall at an angle to the city wall somewhere north of Carter Lane, and a “Roman Aqueduct ... carried round a Bath which was built in a Roman Forme with Nitches at an equal distance” in the Ludgate Square area³.

The description of the 10ft thick wall tallies with neither the above-ground levels of Kentish ragstone and bonded tiles of the Roman city wall nor with its foundation which, including a section in Warwick Square just north of Ludgate, was composed of flints and clay⁴; the “powdered bricks” could indicate a Roman date for the wall, which appears to be a foundation. If this reference is to the Roman city wall, it might indicate that a length of substantial wall of an earlier building was incorporated in the perimeter in the same way as were the north and west sides of the Cripplegate Fort.

A search of pre-fire material shows that on Agas’ map of the 1550s the former Blackfriars Convent had a large, roughly ‘D’-shaped garden with the bar of the ‘D’ being close to, or in line with, the conjectural continuation of the Roman city wall from Ludgate (Fig. 1). Assuming that the back wall of the stage of the posited Roman theatre lay on the conjectural line of the city wall⁵, with the curve of the ‘D’ extending to the curve of St. Andrew’s Hill, a bisecting measurement of some 75m (250ft) would be produced (Fig. 2). This may be compared with the measurement of 89m (290ft) from the theatre at Vienne, which was not only the biggest in Gaul but also one of the largest in the Empire⁶.

It is difficult to judge whether *Londinium* warranted such a large theatre, but an alternative theory would see the building as the type of ‘theatre-amphitheatre’ common in Gaul, particularly in the north where, for example, the bisecting

1. C. Hill, M. Millett, and T. Blagg *The Roman Riverside Wall and Monumental Arch in London* L.A.M.A.S. Special Paper No. 3 (1980) 177-81 and 202.
2. A. W. Clapham ‘On the Topography of the Dominican Priory of London’ *Archaeologia* 63 (1912) 56-8; J. Stow *Survey of London* ed. Kingsford (1598) 127; F. M. Stenton *Norman London* (1960) 39.

3. R. Merrifield *The Roman City of London* (1965) gaz. W60, W61, 24 and 23.
4. *Ibid* gaz. W3, 10, 20, 24, 26 and 30; P. Marsden *Roman London* (1980) 121.
5. Merrifield *op cit* gaz. W60
6. J. Formigé *Le Théâtre Romain de Vienne* (1949) 3 and fig. 30.
7. J. F. Drinkwater *Roman Gaul* (1983) 149-50.

measurement of the one at Paris is c 160m (525ft)⁷. Of the four known theatres in Britain only the one at *Verulamium* is of this design with, in period IV, a bisecting measurement of c 50m (165ft)⁸.

In Roman theatres there was a tower containing props, a staircase and changing rooms, on either side of the back wall of the stage. Parallels from elsewhere in the Empire indicate that each of the towers of the postulated theatre at *Londinium* would be of the order of 25m (80ft) in length and 15m (50ft) in depth, with the back wall of the stage measuring some 60m (200ft) in length (Fig. 2).

In the context of the postulated theatre, it may be possible to interpret the Roman wall at an angle to the city wall as its curving northern boundary wall, and the 'aqueduct' with niches at regular intervals in an apparent curve as the row of arches forming the final curved storey of the building.

The concept that elements of a Roman theatre survived intact enough into the 11th century for it to be a castle, may find support from the contemporary *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio*. Biddle has noted that the lines in which William threatens to level the bastions (*turres*) to the ground and to destroy the lofty tower (*elaiam turrem destruet*), give "a glimpse of a stone tower or particularly massive gate which is otherwise quite unknown"⁹. Further possible support comes from a charter of c 1114 in which Henry I grants part of the ditch of his unlocated *castellum* for the building of the wall of (old) St. Paul's¹⁰.

Dating the posited theatre is difficult, but if the wall of unusual construction does relate to the back wall of the stage, then its building must have taken place before, probably decades before, its inclusion in the Roman city wall of c AD 200. Because most theatres have at least two periods, the origins of the *Londinium* example probably lie much earlier again. The dates of the earliest periods of the other British theatres are: *Camulodunum* – pre-Boudiccan¹¹, *Durovernum* (Canterbury) – c AD 80-100¹², but recent work suggests a somewhat earlier start, more in the region of AD 75¹³; Gosbecks – Hadrianic or possibly Antonine¹⁴; and *Verulamium* – mid/late 2nd century¹⁵.

Leaving aside Gosbecks because it is a 'local duplication' of the *Camulodunum* theatre, the

8. B. Wachter *The Towns of Roman Britain* (1976) 58.
9. M. Biddle, D. Hudson and C. Heighway *The Future of London's Past* (1973) 22.
10. *Mun. Gild*. II (*Liber Cust*) i 340; Stenton *op cit* 8, fn. 2 gives full text and a discussion.
11. Tacitus *Annals* 14.32.
12. S.S. Frere 'The Roman Theatre at Canterbury' *Britannia* 1 (1970) 110.

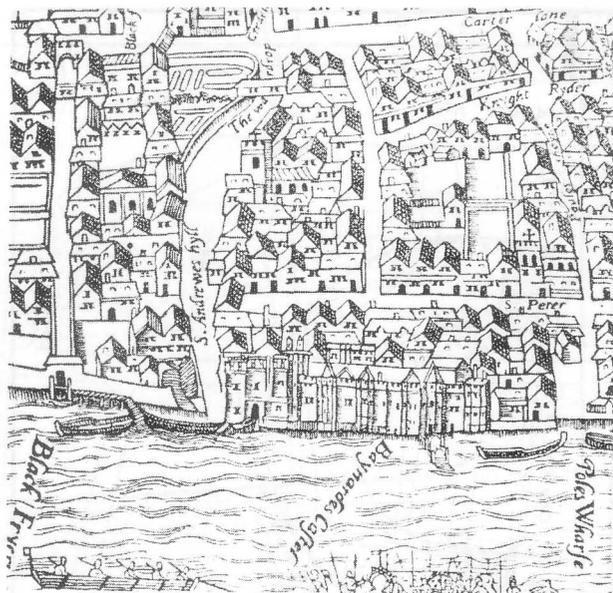


Fig. 1: Agas' map of the 1550s with the rounded boundary of the Blackfriars Convent garden on St. Andrew's Hill showing clearly. In the 13th century Baynard's Castle was rebuilt on a new, riverside site and then rebuilt again as depicted here.

(Guildhall Library, City of London)

widely spaced dates of three others are not very helpful. However, a late 1st or early 2nd century date would seem a reasonable estimate for the first period of a theatre in *Londinium*.

Because Baynard's and Montfichet's castles appear to have been so close to each other (above), it seems possible that their keeps may represent the survival of the two towers of the postulated theatre. Montfichet may have been the "old and ruined" tower which in 1272 lay between Ludgate and Baynard's Castle¹⁶.

Area 2 – south-east of St. Paul's

The two parallel walls without crosswalls under the former eastern end of Knightbridge Street have long been an enigma. As recorded, the northern one is 2³/₄ft (0.8m) wide and at least 400ft (120m) long while the southern, downhill, wall is 4ft (1.2m) thick and at least 250ft (75m) long¹⁷ (Fig. 3). At one site the foundations of the northern wall cut through a large rubbish pit containing pottery of the late 1st century¹⁸, while the constructional materials appear

13. P. Bennett, Canterbury Archaeological Trust, *pers comm*.
14. R. Dunnett 'The Excavation of the Roman Theatre at Gosbecks' *Britannia* 2 (1971) 34.
15. Wachter *op cit* 210.
16. Stenton *op cit* fn. 2, 39.
17. Merrifield *op cit* gaz. 93-8 and 100-2.
18. *Ibid* gaz. 93.

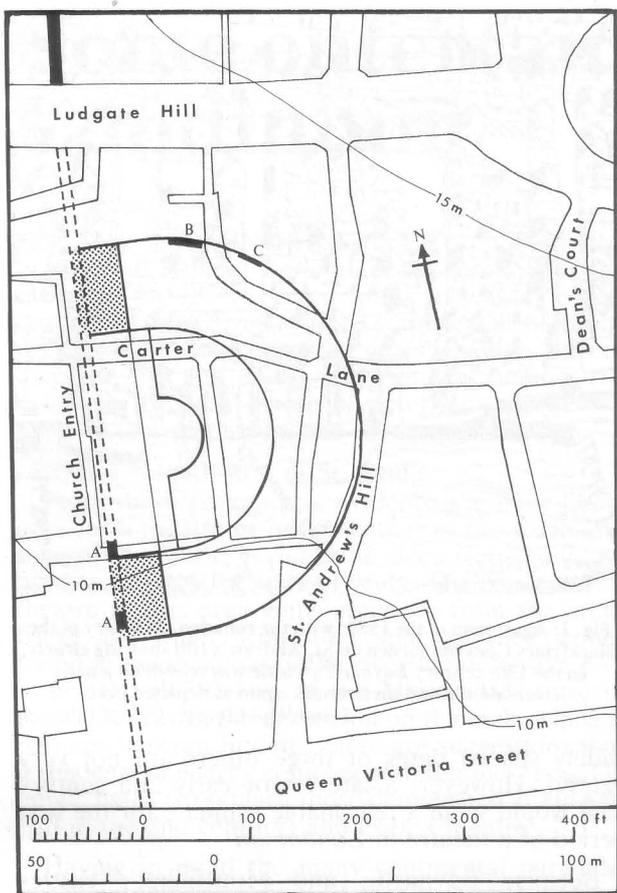


Fig. 2: A possible plan of the postulated Roman theatre with its towers shown in stipple, overlaid on a modern map (after Merrifield 1965). From the survey by Losse in 1550 (Clapham (1912) 62) the northern tower would appear to equate with the location of the Anchoresses' House and the southern with the infirmary. 'A' indicates the city walls as shown on Merrifield's map; 'B' and 'C' represent possible locations of a wall and some arches in the area.

to date the two walls to the late 1st to early 2nd century¹⁹.

It is generally accepted that these two parallel walls whose outward faces lie some 38ft (11.5m) apart, are related. Because the extra width of the southern one indicates that either it carried a higher structure, be it of masonry or wood, or had to resist a greater thrust as a retaining wall (possibly for an earth mound), it is suggested that these early parallel walls served as supports for a north-facing seating stand for a *circus*.

19. Marsden *op cit* 195.

20. Merrifield *op cit gaz.* 81.

21. *Ibid gaz.* 99.

22. *Ibid gaz.* 93.

23. *Ibid gaz.* 83 and 84; Hill *et al op cit* 201.

An undated 70ft (21m) long wall, apparently at right angles to the parallel walls, has been found in Sermon Lane (Fig. 3). At each end the wall seemed to have turned under the houses to the east²⁰, although, because the lane kinks to the westward at the point where its southern end terminated, the turn here may have been more imagined than real. On the assumption that this wall is related to the Knightrider walls, it may be interpreted as the end inner wall of the *circus*, giving it an inner width of at least 50m (165ft).

To the east, a slightly curved or angular wall has been found running diagonally across the junction of Friday Street and Knightrider Street²¹; its method of construction appears to have been the same as the westernmost part of the northern Knightrider wall²². The angled or curved wall in the Friday Street could be construed as being part of the *carcares* (starting traps) at the east end of the *circus*.

Excavations within the area of the postulated *circus* show that Roman gravel pits had been backfilled in the late 1st century before the walls were built²³. The digging of these pits may have produced a rough terracing which then has been developed to provide a flat surface for the race track and a mound (the natural hillside) to the north for the seating of spectators.

The dimensions of the postulated *circus* for *Londinium* may be compared with that of Jerash which was one of the smaller ones in the Empire²⁴:

	<i>Londinium</i>	Jerash
External length	c 207m	261m
External width	c 73m	76m
Internal width	c 50m	c 50m
External width of seating	c 11.5m	13m

The two sets of dimensions are similar except that the length of the *Londinium circus* is very much on the short side but this factor depends heavily upon the undated wall in Sermon Lane; local traditions may also have influenced the length. If however the *circus* extended beyond Sermon Lane, perhaps as far as Dean's Court where the ground begins to drop to the west of St. Paul's, then it could easily exceed in length the one at Jerash (Fig. 3).

A *circus* would seem singularly appropriate for the chief town of an island whose inhabitants are reported to have used chariots in battle against the Romans on four occasions (Caesar 54 BC, Medway AD 43, Boudicca's final battle AD 60 and *Mons Graupius* AD 83). There are also literary references

24. E. B. Müller in *Gerasa - City of the Decapolis* ed. C. H. Kraeling (1938) 87.

25. *Juvenal Satires* 4.126-7.

26. Polyaeus *Stratagemas* 8.23.5 - see *London Archaeol* 5 (1985) 108.

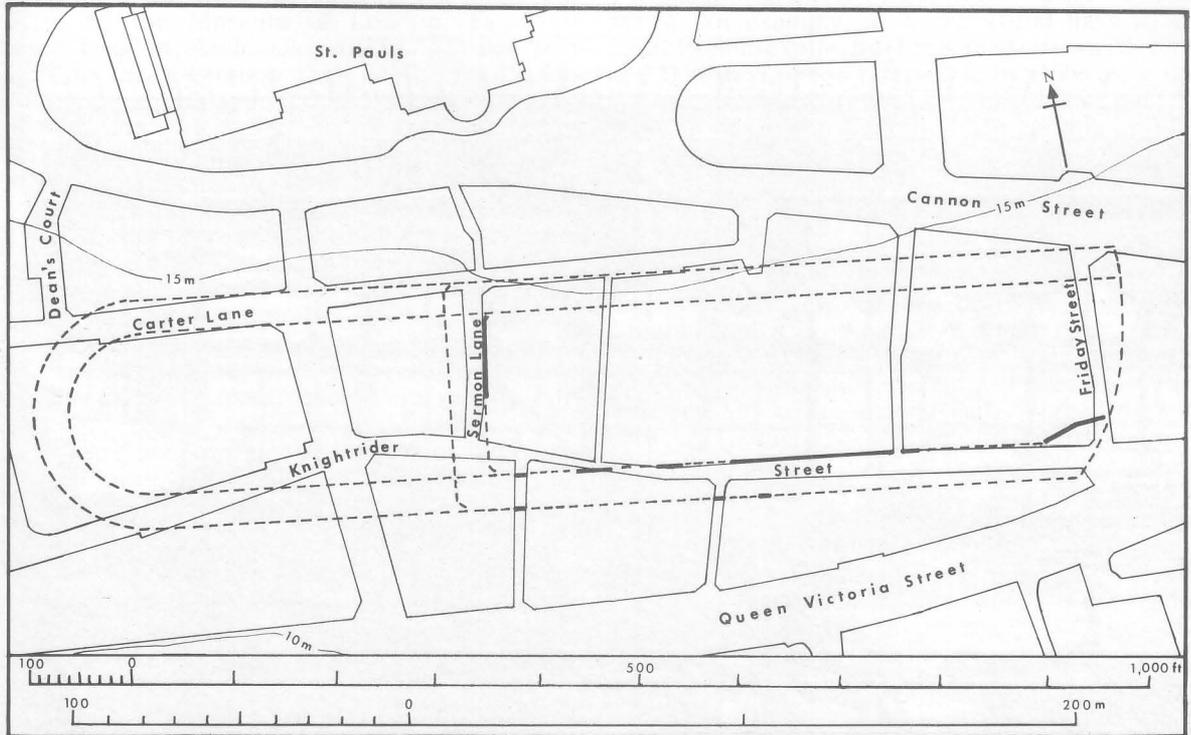


Fig. 3: Two possible plans of the postulated *circus*, the shorter one including the undated wall in Sermon Street, which could produce a square end similar to the structure at Wroxeter; the Roman walls are shown blocked in. The 15m (50ft) contour line approximates to the edge of the capping of brickearth over the gravels on St. Paul's hill. The consequent ease of access to the gravel in the two building blocks west of Friday Street probably accounts for the Roman quarries there.

to a chariot-borne British chief²⁵ and chariots being used against 'Caesar'²⁶.

A possible British parallel for the Knightrider walls may occur in a feature at Wroxeter where two parallel walls form three sides of a rectangular enclosure; the fourth side has not yet been located. The outer wall is 1ft 11in (0.58m) wide and the inner one is 2ft (0.61m) wide, both being built on foundations 4ft 6in (1.37m) wide. The two walls have rounded corners, are 13ft (4m) apart and enclose a space 144ft (44m) wide; the enclosure is at least 188ft (31.5m) long. It has been suggested that the enclosure, which lies behind a temple, may have been a form of amphitheatre²⁷ or may have been used for the enactment of religious ceremonies²⁸. Neither explanation appears to be convincing, but the feature might possibly have been a *circus*.

Before concluding, it should perhaps be noted that the postulated London *circus* lies along the line

of the tantalisingly named Knightrider Street, probably called 'Riderstrate' in 1298²⁹. Would it be too outrageous to speculate that the street may have acquired its name from a Roman bas-relief or statue related to the postulated *circus*?

Conclusions

The literary and topographical evidence for a Roman theatre being later transformed into the medieval Baynard's Castle and the Tower of Montfichet seems, to the author, to be fairly strong, while on the other hand the question of the *circus* is much more speculative. As always the truth of the matter will have to wait upon future excavations taking place in the right areas³⁰.

I am grateful to John Clark for drawing my attention to the possible former name of Knightrider Street and for pointing me in the direction of some sought after sources of medieval evidence.

27. J. P. Bushe-Fox *Third Report on the Excavations on the Site of the Roman Town at Wroxeter, Shropshire* 1914 (1916) 20.

28. G. Webster *Trans Shropshire Archaeol Soc* 57 (1961-64) 118.

29. E. Ekwall *Street Names of the City of London* (1954) 82-3.

30. While this article was in press, J. H. Humphrey *Roman Circuses* (1986) was published. On p. 431 the author reaches essentially the same interpretation of the Knightrider Street walls as that above; he also reviews all the indirect evidence in Britain, including London, for chariot-racing.