

Fig. 1: site location.

The discovery of Londinium's amphitheatre: excavations at the Old Art Gallery site 1987-88 and 1990

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The site (Fig. 1)

The Guildhall Art Gallery site¹ was excavated by the DUA from 22 June 1987 to 15 April 1988, and a short watching brief was carried out in February 1990. The site forms part of a much larger redevelopment which will incorporate the construction of basements underneath Guildhall Yard and, it is intended, Portland House to the east.

The site lies south east of the second-century Roman Fort, bordering the east side of Guildhall Yard and adjoining the south face of the Guildhall itself. On the south side of the Yard is the church of St Lawrence Jewry; because of this ring of protected buildings

there had been little archaeological investigation in this area of the City. The only site excavated recently in the area was at the corner of Gresham St with the entrance to Guildhall Yard in 1985². It had produced evidence for several Roman buildings, some of which are referred to below.

The site was divided into seven areas by the foundations of Guildhall chapel and by large brick foundations crossing the southern part of the site. In February 1988 we started to speculate that the Roman deposits in the separate excavation areas of the site might form part of one massive building, although the walls seemed not to lie at right angles to each other.

1. GAG 87. This five-figure code is used by the DUA to refer to sites and their archives. Others are referred to below.

2. GDH 85. Ken Steadman. Archive report *Excavations at Guildhall House*, see fn. 1.

In order to check this, a machine was brought in to extend the area of excavation. More of the Roman walls were exposed, as well as large areas of associated floor surfaces, and by the last week of February it was apparent that there was indeed one very large building.

This building was on a site provisionally identified by the DUA team as Londinium's amphitheatre. Although the excavation was scheduled to finish at the end of February more time and money was negotiated from the Corporation of London to excavate what they recognised as an important national monument.

Pre-amphitheatre structures (Figs. 2 and 3)

Natural (OA1)³

Natural deposits comprised alternating bands of sand silt and gravels recorded down to at least 7.55m (25ft) OD. They sloped slightly from north to south but there was no evidence for any soil horizon which might represent the original ground surface. Over most of the site natural was truncated down to *c* 9.0m (30ft) OD or lower. However, in Area A it survived up to *c* 10.05m (33ft) OD, and in Area G to *c* 9.50m (31ft), where it was sealed by redeposited brickearth dumps (OA2).



Fig. 2: 1st-century amphitheatre, showing the timber piles of the early amphitheatre. On the left is the arena wall.

Possible early timber amphitheatre (S1)

Dating evidence: mid to late 1st century⁴

There is definite evidence for a large timber structure (S1) which preceded, and was indeed demolished to make way for, the amphitheatre (B1): it might represent a smaller and earlier version of the amphitheatre.

The main element of this structure was the feature recorded in Areas A, E and H, comprising a row of substantial squared timbers set in a curving foundation trench, which may represent the remains of a timber wall or palisade⁵. To the west of this was a large open space in which were compacted gravel surfaces.

An entrance across a threshold defined by the large sill beam (Figs. 2 and 8) connected the open space with a subsurface room to the east. Part of this seems to have been provided with a planking floor, most of

3. Codes such as OA1, S1 or B1 refer to the DUA's computerised indexing system for categories of phased site data: in this case, Open Areas, Structures and Buildings. The codes given are those used in the archive report. In order that this article can be used to provide access into that archive the same numbers have been used. Since this is only an introductory article, not a comprehensive assessment, this has meant that some less important Structure/Building/etc numbers have not been referred to at all.
4. Initial dendro analysis of some five timbers from the structure has produced the following dates: AD 55-75+; 28+; 65-75+; 60+; 60+.
5. Silchester excavation report: M. Fulford 'Excavations on the site of the amphitheatre and forum basilica at Silchester: an interim report' *Antiq Journ* 65 (1985) 39-81.

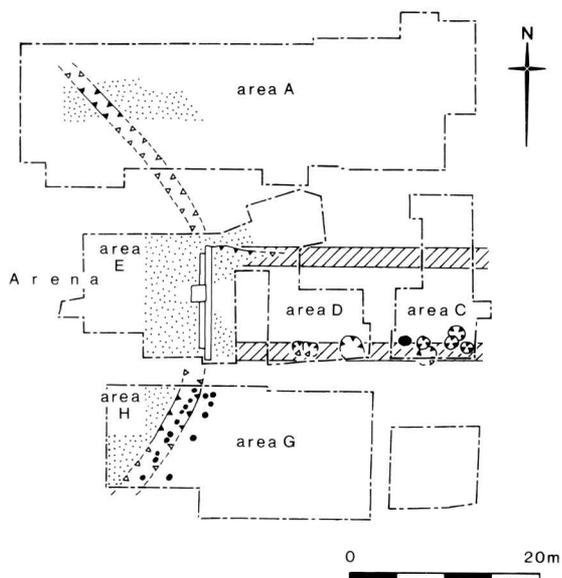


Fig. 3: 1st-century amphitheatre.

which was later robbed. On both sides of the threshold were substantial timber uprights, joined by nailed half-lap joints to the horizontal timber.

On the west side of the beam was a subsurface timber-lined drain of very unusual construction which fed into a solidly-built timber water collecting tank. Since the drain was co-extensive with the timber sill, it may have served to channel off ground water (Fig. 9).

Throughout Roman Britain, and indeed Europe, it was common for early smaller timber amphitheatres to be rebuilt in stone⁶. Furthermore, on the GDH 85 excavation to the south, there was evidence of 1st century timber buildings radiating out around an unidentified building or area which appears to have a centre and dimension remarkably similar to the later stone amphitheatre (B1). However, the evidence at the GAG 87 site for any early timber amphitheatre is not as convincing as for its later stone counterpart: the timber wall does not appear to form a true curve or ellipse and there is much uncertainty about the level, nature and number of the surfaces which were laid within this walled area.

The amphitheatre (B1) (Figs. 4 – 6)

*Dating evidence: early to mid 2nd century date for the construction; late 4th century date for the abandonment*⁷

It is clear that such a large building must also have been important and probably public. There is virtually nothing in the finds recovered from the site which gives a clue as to function, but comparison of the form with other known buildings led to the conclusion that

the building was an amphitheatre, the large open space being the arena; Room B being the ceremonial 'entrance way' into the arena; Rooms C and D being changing rooms or shrines giving access to both⁸ (Fig. 7).

The walls and surfaces

All the walls incorporated a lower foundation of ragstone rubble over which a double tile course was laid. This latter formed the string course separating subsurface foundation from superstructure. Above this, differential truncation resulted in considerable variations in survival, and some of the surviving superstructure represents later rebuilds.

Within the arena (Fig. 4), the first surface laid was a patchy *op sig* which was continued up the face of the arena wall as rendering. If the walls which defined the arena continued at the same curvature they would define an elliptical shape which would be unlikely to be less than c 100m (330ft) wide at its maximum⁹.

The 'entrance way' (Fig. 4) is so defined by the large gap separating the northern stretch of curving wall from its southern counterpart. The extent of the surfaces within indicates that the 'entrance way' must have continued beyond the eastern limit of excavation although the eastward extent of the walls was more ambiguous. The lowest and earliest surface comprised a thick deposit of large ragstones and tiles, the top of which was firm and compact. In spite of being perhaps more distinctive than any later surface, in Areas F and B it was not traced where the succeeding surfaces were recorded.

Within the 5.0m (16ft) gap of the 'entrance way' through the arena wall were a number of features representing the foundations and sills for a large doorway. In Areas F and D there were thick timber beams of similar length, level and orientation. The timber in Area D passed into a deliberate recess in the north end of the door jamb wall, and there can be little doubt that they were contemporary. In the centre of the Area D timber was an iron socket which was probably used for the pivot of a door.

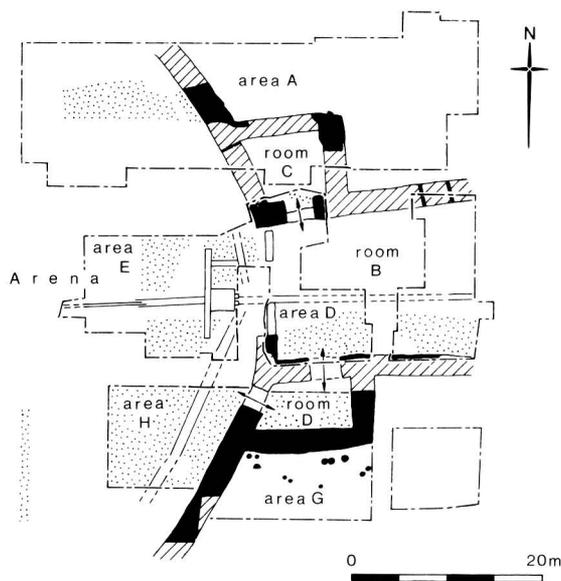


Fig. 4: 2nd-century amphitheatre as originally built.

6. Chester excavation report: F. H. Thompson 'The excavation of the Roman amphitheatre at Chester' *Archaeologia* 105 (1975) 127-239.
7. Little in the way of useful pottery but one coin of 98-117 from low down in the arena surface sequence. The final backfills of the recut central drain contained several 4th century coins, the latest of which was dated AD 364-367.
8. E.g. amphitheatre shrines at Chester.
9. Alternatives include the possibility that the walls enclosed a half ellipse and not a full one: i.e. that at some point beyond the limit of excavation a straight wall passed north-south to connect the two stretches of curving wall, giving a roughly D-shaped rather than O-shaped open space. Amphitheatres of the O-shaped variety are more common.

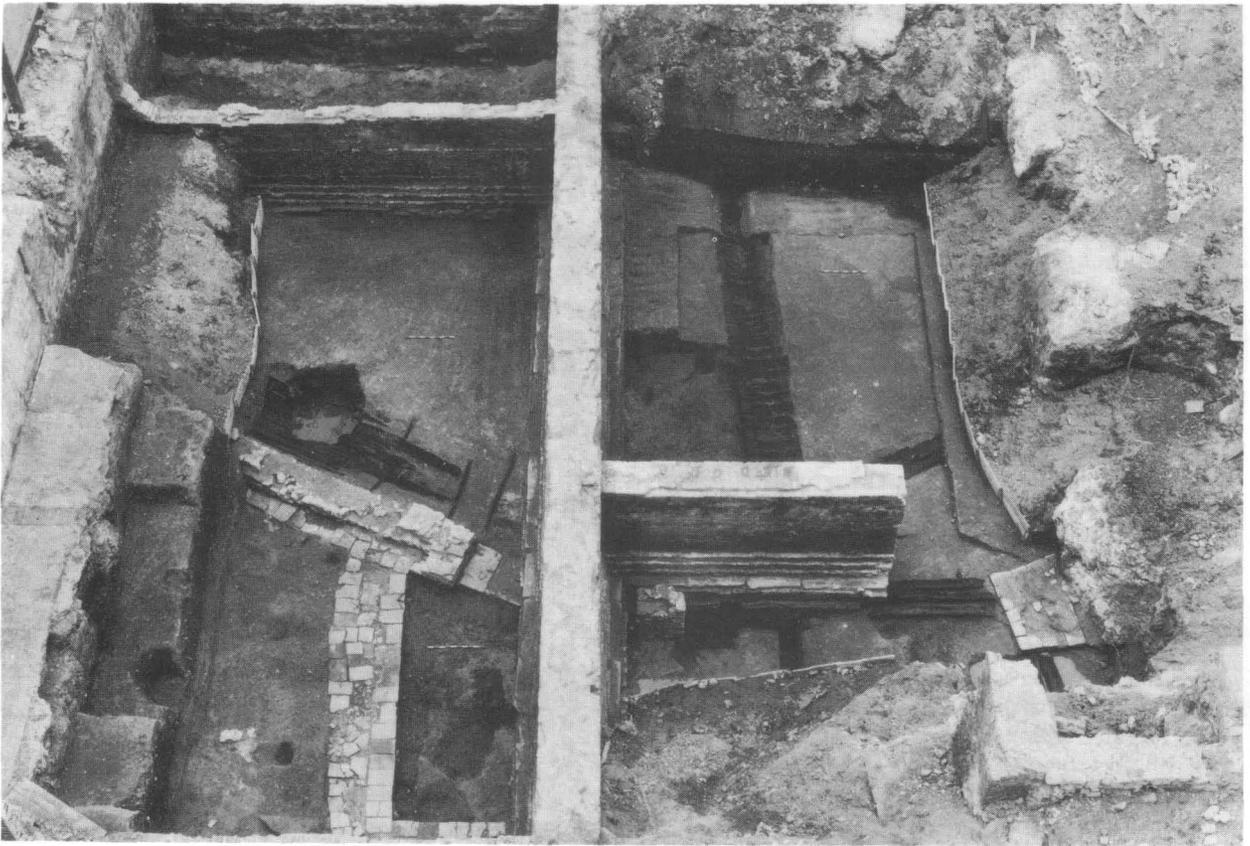


Fig. 5: looking west over the amphitheatre. The main entrance way (between arrows) is slightly obscured by the Victorian foundation. The central timber drain can be seen extending west through the arena.

In front of the thresholds leading from the arena to the 'entrance way' was a porch-like timber structure. The massive squared timber which formed the baseplate had mortises at each end which must have supported timber uprights (Fig. 8). There were two distinct phases of mortises, but no evidence for the putative uprights which were robbed from higher levels, being freed from surfaces which accumulated over and around the timber sill. It is certain is that the porch structure must have been dismantled long before the final abandonment of the rest of the amphitheatre.

Two small antechambers (Fig. 4) were built on the north and south sides of the wide 'entrance way'. They were quite different in size and neither was rectangular, but both had doorways with timber thresholds giving access to the 'entrance way'. In addition the south chamber had a stone-flagged threshold leading onto the surfaces of the arena (Fig. 6), and the north chamber may have had a similar arrangement.

Drainage

The amphitheatre was served by two associated

drains, one of them running west-east from the arena through the 'entrance way' and probably draining into one of the tributaries of the Walbrook; and the other running round the inside of the arena wall – in the south but not, curiously, in the north.

There was a marginal drop of $\approx 50\text{mm}$ (2in) on the bottom of the west-east drain which seems to suggest the direction of flow. For part of its length, the base of the drain was plank lined and in all three areas it was equipped with plank-revetted sides (Fig. 9). Small horizontal timbers fitted into dovetails cut into the upper edge of these side planks and served to keep the sides of the drain from collapsing inwards. In the arena the drain lay between squared beams supporting a plank lid, and in the 'entrance way' the drain channel was set within a wider cut revetted with vertical planks. It is likely that the surfaces of the arena and the 'entrance way' extended over the planking lid.

The change in alignment between the drain in the arena and the 'entrance way' is small but reflects some real and deliberate difference. The line of the drain within the arena was parallel to the main axis of the

building, but the line of the drain through the 'entrance way' was not even square to the wall immediately south of it. The purpose of this is uncertain but may reflect an adjustment towards the general flow of the tributary into which the water was drained.

The change of alignment occurred on either side of the timber collecting tank which was contemporary with the drain. This was a solidly built structure, comprising thick timber planks laid vertically on edge on top of each other and joined with dovetail joints to form a strong square box. It may have functioned as a kind of settling tank to remove silts from the water.

The peripheral drain identified in Areas E and H comprised a narrow channel cut into natural, revetted on either side with vertically placed tiles and stones, and covered over with a thick timber plank (Fig. 6). There did not appear to be any counterpart to this drain in the north of the site.

The seating

The whole building was terraced into natural, deeper at the north end than at the south. The curving wall which defined the arena must have supported the front of the rows of terraced seats. The rear wall, which supported the back of the seating, was not found within the area of excavation and must, therefore, have been situated further east (see section on adjacent sites below).

It is possible that the seating was carried over the top of the 'entrance way' and the two 'side chambers'. This may explain why so little evidence for structural activity or surfaces was found in the areas north-east and south-east of those 'side chambers'. Although brickearth dumps were identified there is no evidence that these were truncated and originally extended higher, or that the seating once rested directly on the dumped deposits. Given that the top of the arena wall – and thus the very lowest point of the overlying seating – cannot be less than $\approx 2.5\text{m}$ (8ft) above the arena (for obvious reasons of safety) it seems likely that the seating had been supported by some other means above the dumps – possibly a timber structure and creating here an unused space. This might provide an explanation for the post-holes identified in Area G. These were noted to have a slightly divergent radial pattern and they could be seen as rows of posts supporting a timber superstructure radiating out from the arena wall. However it should be noted that only one small hole was identified in Area A.

Evidence from adjacent sites for the amphitheatre (Figs. 1 and 12)

Evidence for parts of the amphitheatre may have been



Fig. 6: on the left is the tile-built arena wall and the later ragstone rebuild directly over it. In the bottom corner is the stone threshold leading into the arena. The timber lid of the first peripheral drain is on the right and the gully of the second peripheral drain lies between them.

picked up on a site to the south (archive report GDH 85). Along the north of this site ran a substantial wall of a similar width and build to the GAG 87 walls. Only two small stretches of extant wall were found, with a larger extent of robbing trench between these two. Since the dating evidence for this wall suggests it was built in the 2nd century, it might represent the corresponding 'outer wall' of the amphitheatre, supporting the highest tier of the seating and superstructure.

The only other excavation which may have exposed part of the amphitheatre was a small watching brief in 1953 under the Guildhall itself¹⁰. This exposed a large Roman buttress built of courses of bonding tile. It appears to lie on the alignment of the arena wall and, given that the foundation is L-shaped, it might

10. In 1951, one of a series of trial holes dug beneath the foundations of Guildhall revealed a substantial Roman buttress (*London Archaeol* 4 no 5 (1981)). In 1965-6, excavations were carried out in advance of the construction of the Library extension of the west wing of Guildhall. No masonry features were identified, only a series of pits, ditches and gullies.

represent part of the side of another 'entrance way' or even the footings of a more substantial grandstand.

Amphitheatre later history (Fig. 10)

Because of the division of the stratigraphy into separate areas, it is not really possible to construct a simple phasing for the later development of the amphitheatre as a unit. A brief summary is given below of the sequences which were recorded in each area or room.

Later surfaces

Within the arena a variety of surfaces were laid, accumulating to a depth of $\approx 0.60\text{m}$ (2ft). The first surface after the *opus signinum* surface was a distinctive soft silty sand. This was sealed by a second *op sig*

surface at $\approx 9.40\text{m}$ (31ft) OD, and the highest surfaces comprised a series of highly-compacted gravel metalings at $\approx 9.60\text{m}$ (31½ft) OD in all areas.

Within the 'entrance way' surfaces accumulated to a similar level as the arena. Immediately above the cobbled surface were very patchy layers comprising sandy mortar, thin white chalk, and gravel. These were followed by an *op sig* surface and the highest surface identified was of compact mortar and tile at $\approx 9.60\text{m}$ (31½ ft) OD.

In the north chamber up to (?) four separate surfaces were identified in section only. The top of the sequence lay at $\approx 9.70\text{m}$ (32ft) OD, similar to the top of the sequences in the arena and the 'entrance way'.

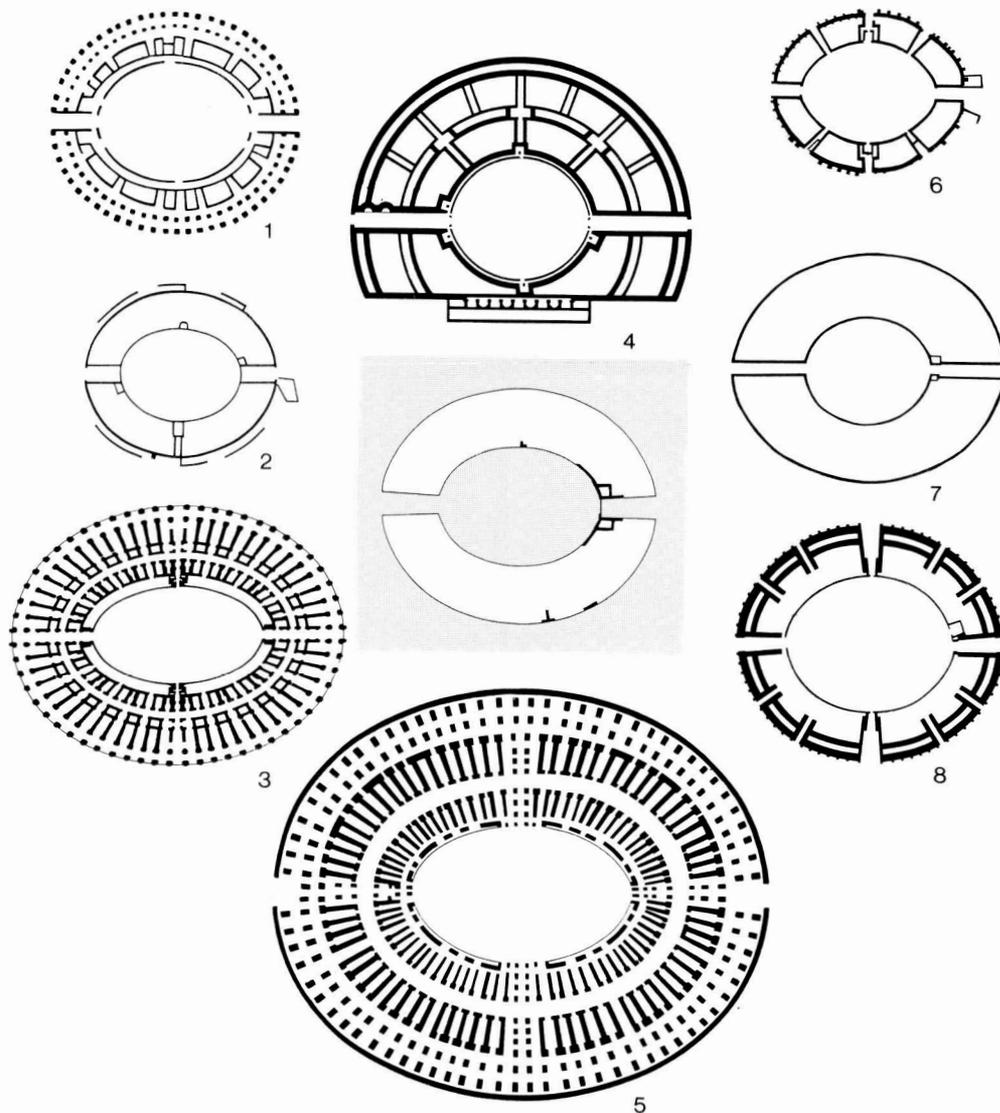


Fig. 7: the London amphitheatre with comparative forms from Xanten, Germany (1); Martigny, Switzerland (2); Arles, France (3); Lutèce, France (4); Rome (5); Caerleon (6); Cirencester (7); and Chester (8).

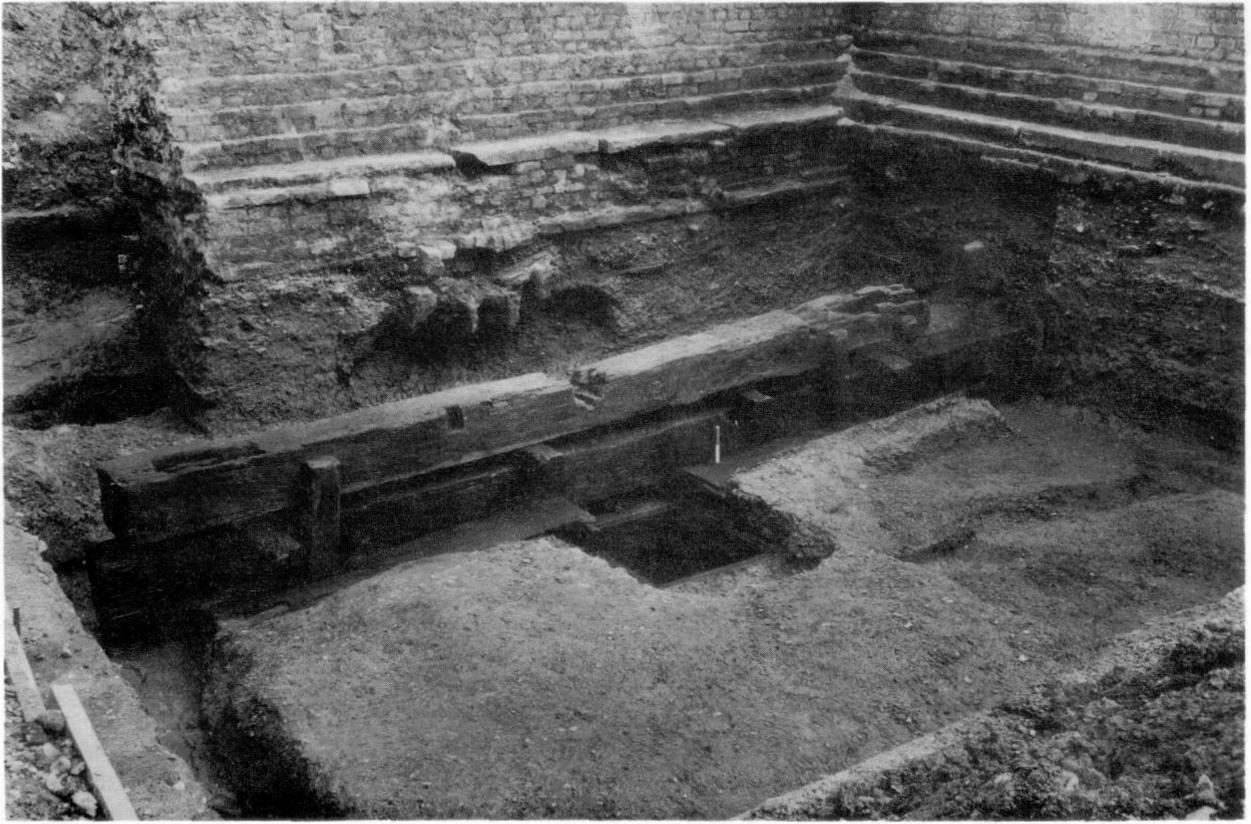


Fig. 8: the timber sill of the 2nd-century amphitheatre entrance way supported on small wedges over the sill of the earlier timber amphitheatre. In front of the latter is its related timber drain and collecting tank.

In the southern chamber two thin but compacted surfaces were identified at *c* 9.30m (30½ft) OD. Over these lay a gravel surface which was associated with a timber sill replacement for the original stone threshold leading into arena.

Later drains

The central drain was replaced by another timber-lined drain on the same alignment and directly over it. This drain comprised an open plank-lined gully set at the base of an apparently unrevetted steep cut. Its final fill contained pottery and coins of the mid 4th century.

The peripheral drain was also replaced but in this case not only was the new drain in a slightly different position (Fig. 6) but there was conclusive evidence for its existence in Area A as well. The timber lid of this drain did not survive in the north of the site.

Rebuilds (Fig. 10)

The curving arena wall was rebuilt at least once. In Areas G (Fig. 6) and less certainly in Area D, there were surviving masonry courses which did not appear to be part of the initial build of the amphitheatre, and

in Areas G and A there were later robber cuts marking the presence of this rebuild. The rebuild was reduced in width to *c* 0.80m (2ft 7in) and was directly associated with one of the higher surfaces in the 'entrance way' and the arena.

Robbing of Room D

*Dating evidence: later than mid 2nd century*¹¹

The southern of the two 'side chambers' (Room D) flanking the 'entrance way', was robbed out and sealed over, but the dating evidence associated with this event is limited. It is completely unclear how much of the rest of the amphitheatre was retained, still in use (even if separately) or even still standing. Given that it was such a major structural and functional alteration to the whole building (necessitating not only the removal of a complete room but presumably also requiring substantial alterations to the seating carried over it) the robbing might be seen as part of the final demolition of the amphitheatre. However the apparent stratigraphic linking of this event with the rebuild of the curved arena wall (see above) makes this a more complex matter. If the rebuild of the curved

11. Not very useful pottery dates and one coin dated AD 138-161.

wall is to be seen as part of the continued use of the amphitheatre, then it could be that the amphitheatre, although extensively changed, was still still in use even after the robbing of the southern chamber.

Structure over robbed out Room D of amphitheatre (S7) (see Fig. 10)

Critical evidence for the later history of the amphitheatre consists of the surfaces lying over the robbed remains of Room D. These surfaces were limited along the edges by structural cuts and slots which were roughly square to each other. It is unclear how the north-south slot, which contained several post holes, could have related to the masonry wall to the west since it was too close to allow passage between them and yet not close enough to be integrated together.

That some kind of structure was built over the robbed and sealed remains of Room D is certain. What remains uncertain is how much of the rest of the amphitheatre was still extant above contemporary ground level and possibly in use.

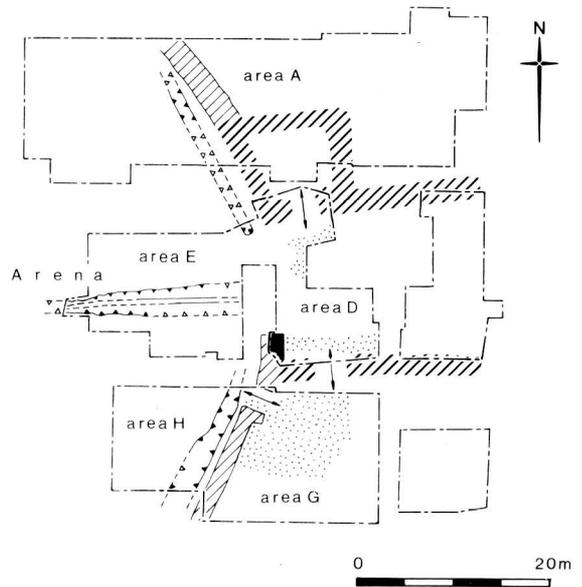


Fig. 10: 2nd-century amphitheatre modifications and rebuilds.



Fig. 9: view down the central timber drain. The drain sides are held apart by small cross braces. Part of the planking lid can be seen at the top.

Amphitheatre: relationship to contemporary Roman activity (Fig. 1)

There is not much evidence for other Roman activity from sites in the immediate vicinity. The orientation of the amphitheatre does not seem to bear much resemblance to the alignment of the known street pattern to the south and south west. If however, as seems likely from the evidence of GDH 85 and other sites in Britain and abroad, the amphitheatre was surrounded not only by a circumferential street but also a number of radially orientated buildings (some of which may have been associated with the amphitheatre functionally), then it would have been the focus of its own localised street pattern.

The main known Roman feature in the vicinity is the fort immediately to the north-west. Such close proximity with forts is quite common at many amphitheatre sites in Britain and abroad: indeed, with the wisdom of hindsight, the amphitheatre might have been anticipated at such a distance, the closeness being more than just coincidental.

Some archaeologists suggest that there are basically two types of amphitheatre – military and civil – and that not only their initial builders but their clientele were quite distinct. The currently accepted date for the construction of the Roman fort, *c* AD 120, is remarkably close to the date provisionally suggested for the construction of the second amphitheatre. It might, therefore, be suggested that the amphitheatre was re-built by the Roman army at about the same time as the fort. Could this mean that it was a

“military” amphitheatre, not used by the other inhabitants of Londinium? If, on the other hand, it was a “civil” amphitheatre, what was its relationship to the adjacent fort and the Roman military? It is worth noting that, at present, it is difficult to find real structural differences between “military” and “civil” amphitheatres. Furthermore, might it not be possible to see the civil and military elements of the Roman establishment as to a great extent interchangeable as well as interdependent? Whether for the first amphitheatre of c AD 70, being definitely earlier than the fort itself, any links could be suggested for an equivalent military use of that area at the time is an interesting consideration.

The end of the amphitheatre Destruction layer and general dumps over Rooms A and B (OA4) and (OA5)

*Dating evidence: mid to late 4th century*¹²

Much of the amphitheatre was sealed by a layer of destruction debris, presumably derived from the final dismantling of the walls of the amphitheatre (in Area D and elsewhere). It raised the ground level slightly but there is no substantial evidence that any structural activity took place at this level. The layers suggest that the amphitheatre had definitely gone out of use, and indeed some of the layers actually seal the robbed top of one of the walls, but there is no way of knowing how much of the amphitheatre had been robbed, and how much was ruinous but still visible.

There is some evidence for temporary structures erected within the ruins of the amphitheatre (S6 and S8). Since these ‘structures’ and the destruction dumps were sealed by the same deposits they must represent isolated localised activity between the demise of the amphitheatre and the deposition of the dark earth.

Final robbing of amphitheatre walls (OA7) (Fig. 11)

Dating evidence: none

Evidence for the final robbing of the reduced width circular wall of the arena was found in Areas A and G. It appeared to be later than the latest activity in the arena but before the whole of what had previously been the amphitheatre was sealed by thick ‘dark earth’

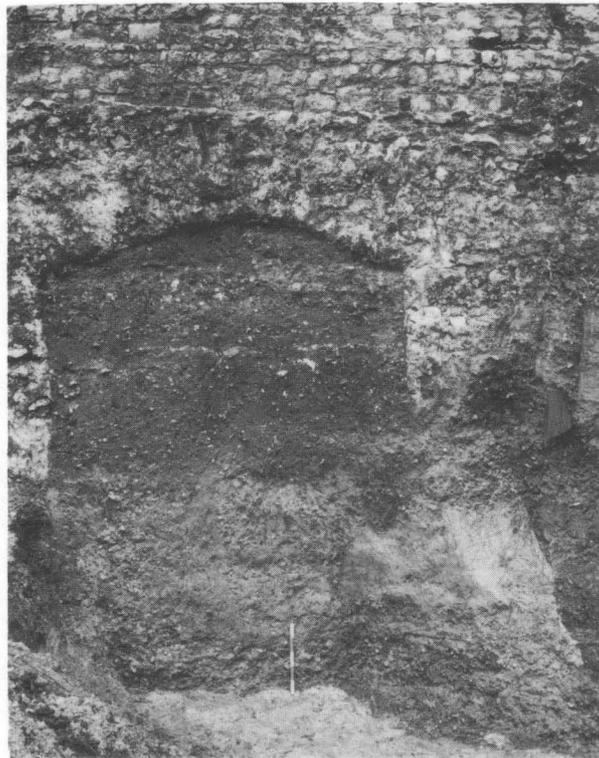


Fig. 11: the scale rests on the remains of the arena wall (1). Directly above the wall are the robber trench infills (2) which are themselves sealed by ‘dark earth’ (3) and later medieval surfaces (4).

deposits. It is probable that this final robbing was carried out in one phase, but just possible that it was robbed out piecemeal.

Dark earth and pits through it (OA9)

Dating: redeposited late Roman

The whole site was sealed with a thick deposit of largely sterile dark grey silts with little or no destruction debris in them (Fig. 11). The mechanics of the deposition of this layer remain uncertain whether accumulating naturally or as a single dump. The deposit has been provisionally identified with the so-called ‘dark earth’ deposit which seals much of late Roman London. There was no evidence for structures or buildings laid out immediately on the top of this deposit. There was however a number of pits which appeared to have been cut from this level. The whole site seems to have been used as a large open external

deposits and were themselves cut by several phases of pits. These layers were cut by the construction of several phases of substantial masonry buildings including a substantial c.12th building with latrine (B5); the C13th Guildhall Chapel (B7); the c.14th Guildhall College (B8); the C15th Chapel (B9); the C15th Guildhall Library (B10).

12. Pottery from destruction debris layers dated AD 350-400.

13. There is not sufficient space in this report to deal with the early to late medieval redevelopment of this site. In brief it comprises a succession of Open Areas (OA9, OA10, OA11, OA12, OA13, OA14, OA15 and OA16) which were laid over the dark earth

area, possibly gardens or waste land, though there is no evidence of soil horizons.

Amphitheatre influence on later topography (Fig. 12)

It is interesting to note that the GAG 87 site has a long history as an open area: from the time when there was an amphitheatre arena through to the early medieval period (not discussed here)¹³. This appears to suggest some kind of continuity from the arena. Furthermore it has been noted that early street plans of this area of London, and in particular Leake's map of 1666, show a distinct curvature of the adjacent streets, Aldermanbury and Bassishaw, around some large space of which the Guildhall lay at the centre¹⁴. The fact that the earlier of the crypts of Guildhall, which has itself been suggested as the remains of the 13th century Guildhall, lies directly over the projected lines of the amphitheatre walls, seems to add further weight to the suggestion that the ruins of the

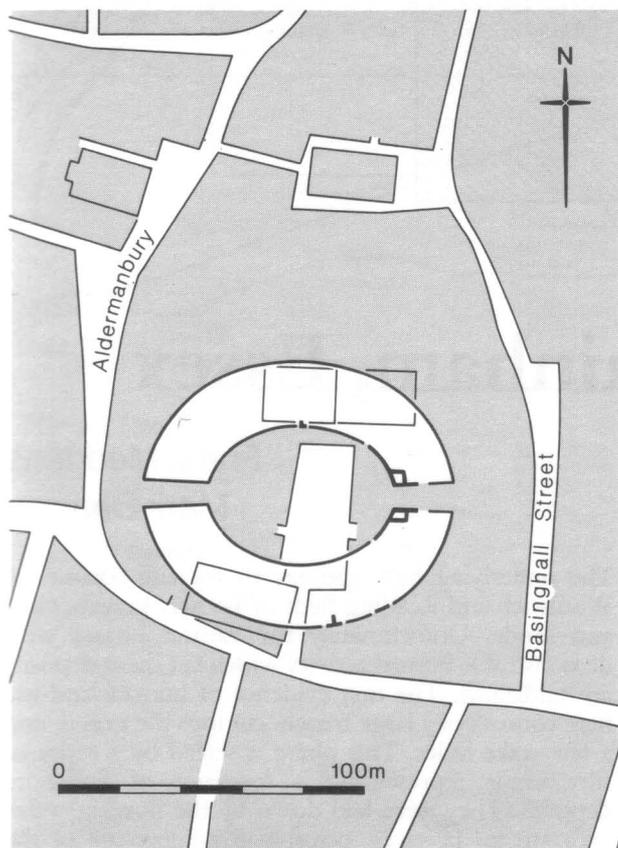


Fig. 12: the position of the amphitheatre as located by the excavations in 1951¹⁵, 1985 and 1987, in relation to the Guildhall (13th century and possibly earlier) and the late medieval street pattern. These features seem to respond to the shape of the amphitheatre and may indicate that elements of the Roman structure were still surviving in the early medieval period.

amphitheatre could have survived for almost 1000 years before being finally lost beneath the Guildhall precinct complexes of the 13th and subsequent centuries.

Unfortunately, as I have shown above, all the archaeological evidence from this site, and indeed GDH 85 to the south, points to the conclusion that the amphitheatre walls were completely robbed out before the deposition of the 'dark earth' deposits (OA9).

Is it possible that the amphitheatre was only partially robbed out and that large stretches of wall, though not those on either GDH 85 or GAG 87, did survive to influence later topography? It is clearly of the greatest importance that the seeming conflict between these two sets of evidence should be resolved. There will be an opportunity for this when the remaining part of the GAG87 redevelopment, under Portland House, becomes available for excavation. This site lies not only over the continuation of the ceremonial 'entrance way' but also the external curved wall. Not only will it answer crucial questions about the form of the amphitheatre; it should provide an answer to the question of the final fate of the amphitheatre, and the relationship of this to the semi-legendary origins of the Guildhall, the administrative centre of the medieval and modern city.

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14. J. Maloney 'Fun and games in Roman London' *Illus London News* 276 No. 7078 (May 1988) 49.
15. Trial hole excavation by I. Noel Hume, see R. Merrifield *Roman London* (1965) Site 129, 227.