

Letters

Post-medieval almshouse and hospital sites

I HAVE BEEN compiling information on excavations at post-medieval almshouse and hospital sites (16th to 18th centuries). I notice that at various times you have listed excavation projects at the Whitgift Hospital in Croydon. I was wondering if anything has been published on this work, or if there are any short reports that may be available on this work or on the history of this early almshouse.

In 1986 we conducted rescue excavations at the site of a 17th and 18th century almshouse in Albany, New York, and I would like to have information on the types of material that have been excavated at other almshouse sites. I have been doing research for an article that I plan to write on the history and archaeology of almshouses, hospitals, and orphanages of this period. Any assistance or suggestions will be greatly appreciated.

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Metropolis in Mayfair?

IN HIS intriguing theory, placing the earliest Roman administrative headquarters in Mayfair, Bill Sole freely admitted a lack of archaeological support (*LA* 7, no. 3, 122). "The ultimate test of this hypothesis must lie in the ground" (*ibid.* 127) is a statement with which all your readers will concur, but how many of them were reminded of an apocryphal story that was in circulation about 20 years ago? In brief: building workers on a site off Park Lane, W1, were astonished to uncover a well-preserved tessellated pavement. When they brought it to the attention of their foreman, his peremptory command was to dig through it with all possible speed; "Time is money" and he felt his employers would not brook the delay that this unexpected find would cause.

The ready dismissal of this tale, hitherto, as but another urban legend may prove unjustified!

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I WAS VERY interested to read Bill Sole's article in the *LA*. When I was researching for my *History of Greenwich*, more than twenty years ago, I set down every bit of information then available about Greenwich as a Roman town; but, presumably because I was an historian rather than an archaeologist, my findings were never seriously looked at, though your magazine did print a not unfriendly review.

There is no doubt that the *first* Roman road from the Kent coast to London did come through what is now Greenwich Park; traces are still visible. It stopped at a point still called Straightsmouth (Streetsmouth) and there was, and still is, a Thames-side dock there, called Billingsgate. When Harvey Sheldon dug at the so-called Roman villa in the Park, I felt very sorry that he did not extend his investigations further.

The road over Blackheath and along the Old Kent Road was a later diversion, necessitated by catastrophic river floods. In that respect Bill Sole's map is wishful thinking. The straight line from Shooter's Hill would have touched the Thames at two places, Greenwich and Westminster, and we know it did. The Romans may have hated water, but once a base was established, river transport must have been a very valuable means of keeping

it reinforced. In that event, Greenwich would be a far better staging post than anywhere along the Old Kent Road, which was too far from the river.

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I WAS surprised that you herald Bill Sole's thesis of 'Roman Mayfair' as 'one of the most original ideas on Roman London for a generation'. Those of us who were around in the 1950s and '60s will recall that this was one of the rival possibilities then being actively canvassed. Dr Francis Celoria made at least one unsuccessful attempt at the time to find positive evidence for a Claudian base around the Edgware Road/Oxford street junction. Whether his failure was because of excessive post-Roman disturbance, or because his excavation was in the wrong place, or because no such Claudian base existed, one cannot say. The 1950s and '60s were, of course, a time of keyhole excavation on a shoestring budget.

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THE IDEAS contained in Bill Sole's article are hardly new. Seventeen years ago I published an article (*Surrey Archaeol Collect* 71 (1977) 43-55) which came to somewhat similar conclusions, though I hope it was better argued. This article was stimulated by the discovery of the Montague Close road, of which Sole seems to be unaware. Where my model diverges from Sole's is in what happens between 44 and 50. I argued that the 'Westminster event' was confined to the invasion period and did not directly give rise to *Londinium* which had, I suggested, a civilian origin (though the military road system and bridges did provide the locus for this development) and I did adduce some evidence for this; indeed the idea of a civilian origin did become fashionable in the 1980s though I do not know what the current consensus is.

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(Further replies to Bill Sole's article will be published in the next issue — editor)

The Roman London amphitheatre

FOLLOWING THE excellent lecture given by Nick Bateman on the event of the 25th anniversary of *London Archaeologist*, I would like to note one or two thoughts raised by the discoveries.

Nick Bateman, the director of the tremendous excavations organised by the Museum of London, reported that the arena was built in a small valley, and showed photographs of the preservation of a remarkable series of drains running underneath the amphitheatre. These two facts may well be easily explained by the obvious explanation that a valley helps reduce the amount of work required to build up the earthen banks, and the drains keep the site dry.

However, since first seeing those drains in another of Nick's excellent lectures some years ago, another possible explanation has suggested itself to me, namely that the site was chosen deliberately to provide a ready supply of water.

Documentary evidence makes it clear that water played an important role in the *Ludi* or sports put on by Romans. Perfumed water fountains were used to cool and freshen the air. Water was used in the Colosseum, particularly by Domitian, to heighten the dramatic effect of the bloody pageants put on in the arena. These included the construction of artificial islands, and the flooding of the arena to allow crocodiles and hippopotami to take their rightful place in the list of living creatures degraded in the name of Roman civilisation. For the opening of the Colosseum, Titus has the arena flooded, and the crowds delighted to see horses and performing bulls especially trained to work in water. They were followed by a re-enactment of the naval battle between Corinth and Corfu. It may be a coincidence but the Colosseum in Rome was itself built in a drained lake.

The relatively small-scale naval battles allowed in the arena were augmented by full-scale naval re-enactments or *naumachia* held on artificial lakes.

Whether any of this is relevant to London is a moot point, and as I do not have the time to investigate this issue properly, my comments are only intended to point out the possibilities. Certainly, the technology involved would not need to be complex, and the Romans were superb hydraulic engineers. The requirements would appear to be a ready supply of water, a diverted stream, a sluice gate, and good drains to drain away the water quickly once no longer needed. All of these factors are clearly possible in the London site. It is even possible that the presence of an inner (but not outer) masonry wall to the arena of the London amphitheatre may have been useful to retain water. The gravelled floor would have allowed a swift drainage once the water was no longer required. (I presume that as the water level would only need to be kept up for a short time, the leakage of water from the site would not be a major problem). Even if the water was not brought in to flood the arena, it may have been needed for fountains, watering the animals (and spectators!), washing away blood and perhaps even humbler activities like cleaning.

In case anyone still has any doubts as to the feasibility of this, it should be remembered that in the 18th century the Sadlers Wells theatre had a flooded arena which was used for re-enactments of British naval triumphs. In 1804 Charles Dibden put on *The Siege of Gibraltar* in the Clerkenwell Theatre, with no fewer than 117 model ships. Subsequently, he staged the Battle of Trafalgar. The ships were steered by waterboys, and the spectacle included canon fire, fire, and explosions.

Returning to Rome, I would like to augment Nick's discussion of the role of the arena as an expression of state power. Juvenal's memorable phrase 'Bread and Circuses' is often used as shorthand for the important role of the Games and the Dole in dampening popular discontent. The phrase, however, has an unfortunate effect and colours our view of the people of Rome — it implies that the plebeians were willing to give up their democratic rights in return for trifles such as Bread and Circuses.

In fact, as John Morris pointed out, the phrase should more correctly be translated as 'Food Subsidy and Sports', and further analysis shows that the Games had an important role in the expression of public opinion.

The *Ludi* were part of the religious calendar of the Roman year: the circus, the arena, and the theatre were all important civic amenities provided as a right to citizens, and were attended by the people, ruling classes and the Emperor. In addition they provided employment, and crucially provided a place where the people could make their voice heard. They were of course no substitute for the old assemblies of the

people in the Republican period, but these themselves were heavily controlled to maintain the oligarchic nature of the Roman constitution.

The following examples make the role of the *Ludi* clear:

'What feeling the Roman people showed . . . was made plain . . . (when) the senators . . . returned one by one from the Senate to see the shows . . . When the Consul himself . . . took his seat, people stood up with outstretched hands giving thanks . . . But when Clodius arrived, the Roman people could scarcely restrain themselves, men could scarcely help wreaking their hatred upon his foul and abominable person, cries, menacing gestures, loud curses came in a flood from all . . . Even the actors did not spare [him] when a comedy . . . was being performed, the whole company, speaking all together in loud tones, bent forward threateningly and looking straight at the foul wretch, loudly chanted the words 'This, Titus, is the sequel, the end of your vicious life.'"

(Cicero, *pro Sestio* 115-126)

In letters to Atticus II 19,3 Cicero wrote:

'Popular sentiment has been most manifest at the theatre and the shows . . . both the show master and his guests were overwhelmed with hisses. At the games of Apollo Diphilus the actor attacked poor Pompey quite brutally: 'To our misfortune art thou Great' there was a dozen encores . . . When Caesar entered applause was non-existent. He was followed by Curio junior, who received the sort of ovation that Pompey used to get in the days before freedom fell.'

These quotations pre-dated the Empire, and there were occasions when the Emperors wreaked revenge on those using the cover of the crowd to express themselves freely, but evidence suggests the shows continued to play an important part in allowing the authorities to gauge opinion.

The good opinion of the people was vital to an Emperor because part of his claim to legitimacy was his claim to be the people's representative — the Tribune of the people. Indeed, one explanation of the success with which the Julio-Claudians slaughtered the senatorial class was the lack of support given to the would-be oligarchs of the aristocracy by the people.

This 'democratic' role of the arena as a gathering place of the people is confirmed in the immediate post-Roman period, when St Germanus of Auxerre met the people of a British town in an amphitheatre. The location of the Guildhall on the site of the amphitheatre makes one wonder if the City government owes its location to this democratic use of the arena in the Roman and post-Roman periods.

My final thought is to remind people that the Roman people should not shoulder the blame for the excesses of the arena alone — it should be placed fairly and squarely on the shoulders of the authorities. Consider the fact that the ratio of sizes of audience the Romans had for the circus (200,000+ seating in the Circus Maximus), the Colosseum (60,000+) and the theatres (c 3,000) is surprisingly similar to that which we have today for our activities of horse racing, football and theatre. I'm suggesting that the basic profiles of our two societies are not dissimilar, and were the government to allow, we could easily fill an 80,000 stadium for our own blood-thirsty games, and wouldn't it be interesting to see the reaction of the massed ranks of people when the Prime Minister was 'welcomed' into the arena!

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