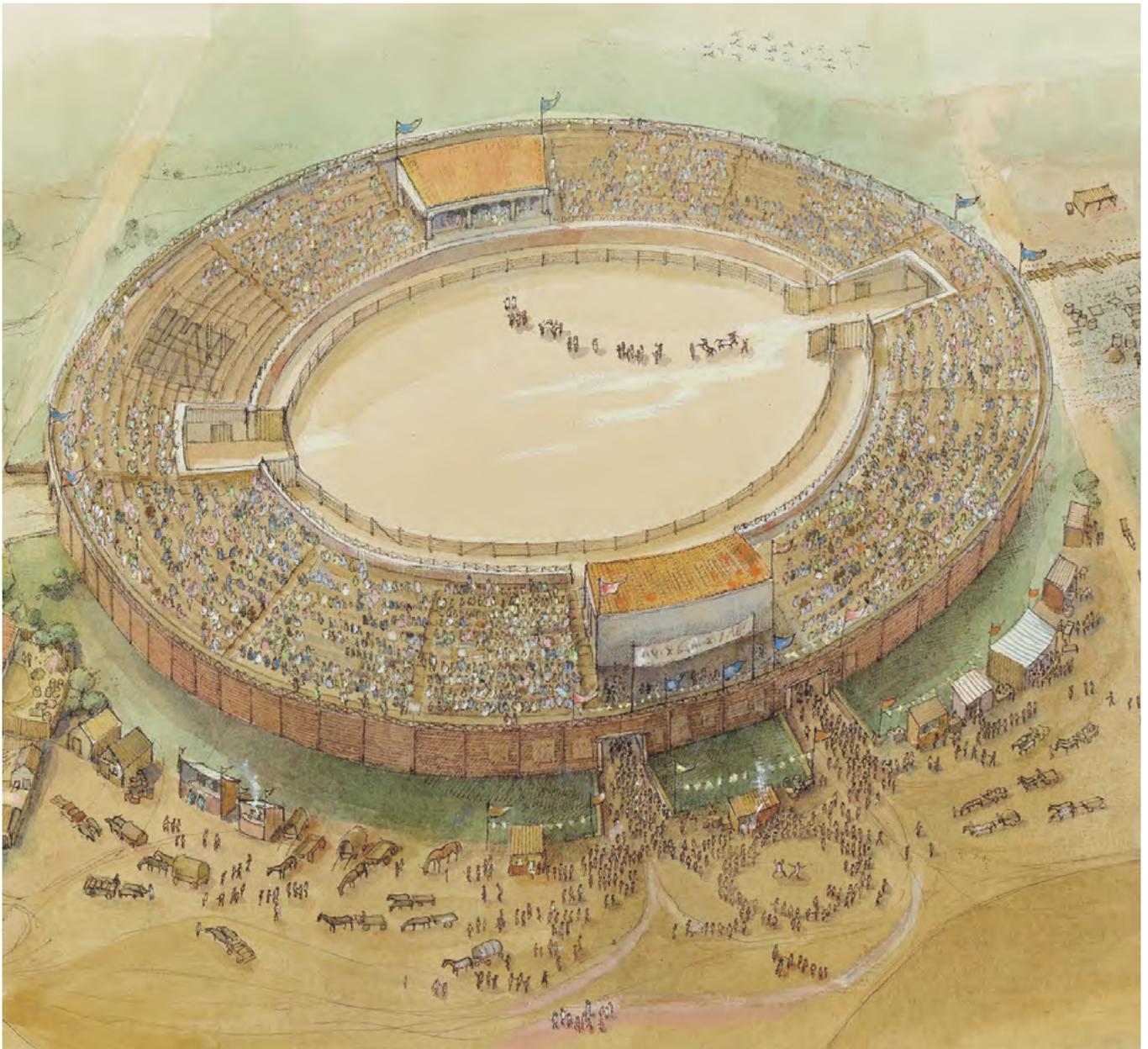




Historic England

# Roman Amphitheatres, Theatres and Circuses

Introductions to Heritage Assets



# Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which have previously lacked such a published summary, either because the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood.

This IHA provides an introduction to Roman amphitheatres, theatres and circuses – the three principal classes of purpose-built entertainment structure in the Roman world, which are all represented in Britain. Amphitheatres are all either oval or elliptical in plan. Roman theatres, such as the Gosbecks Farm site near Colchester, are semi-circular structures. The Roman circus generally consisted of an elongated oval track surrounded by tiers of seating along both its long sides and one, curved, end. Descriptions of the asset type as well as its associations and a brief chronology are included. A list of in-depth sources on the topic is suggested for further reading.

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## Front cover

Detail of reconstruction painting of the London amphitheatre.

# Introduction

Roman amphitheatres, theatres, and circuses – the three principal classes of purpose-built entertainment structure in the Roman world, are all represented in Britain. These, especially amphitheatres, are iconic structures of the Roman Empire, which capture the imagination of the public, especially given their frequent appearance in film. It is a common fallacy to confuse classical theatres with amphitheatres.

The classical theatre is a structure originating in ancient Greece, and comprises a semi-circular auditorium, with a wall, usually ornamented with columns and niches, built along or close to the line of the diameter of the circle, in front of which is the stage. In the theatre the attention of the audience is focused on the stage. Theatres hosted plays and similar stage performances. Some in the eastern Roman Empire were converted to allow the presentation of spectacles usually associated with the amphitheatre.

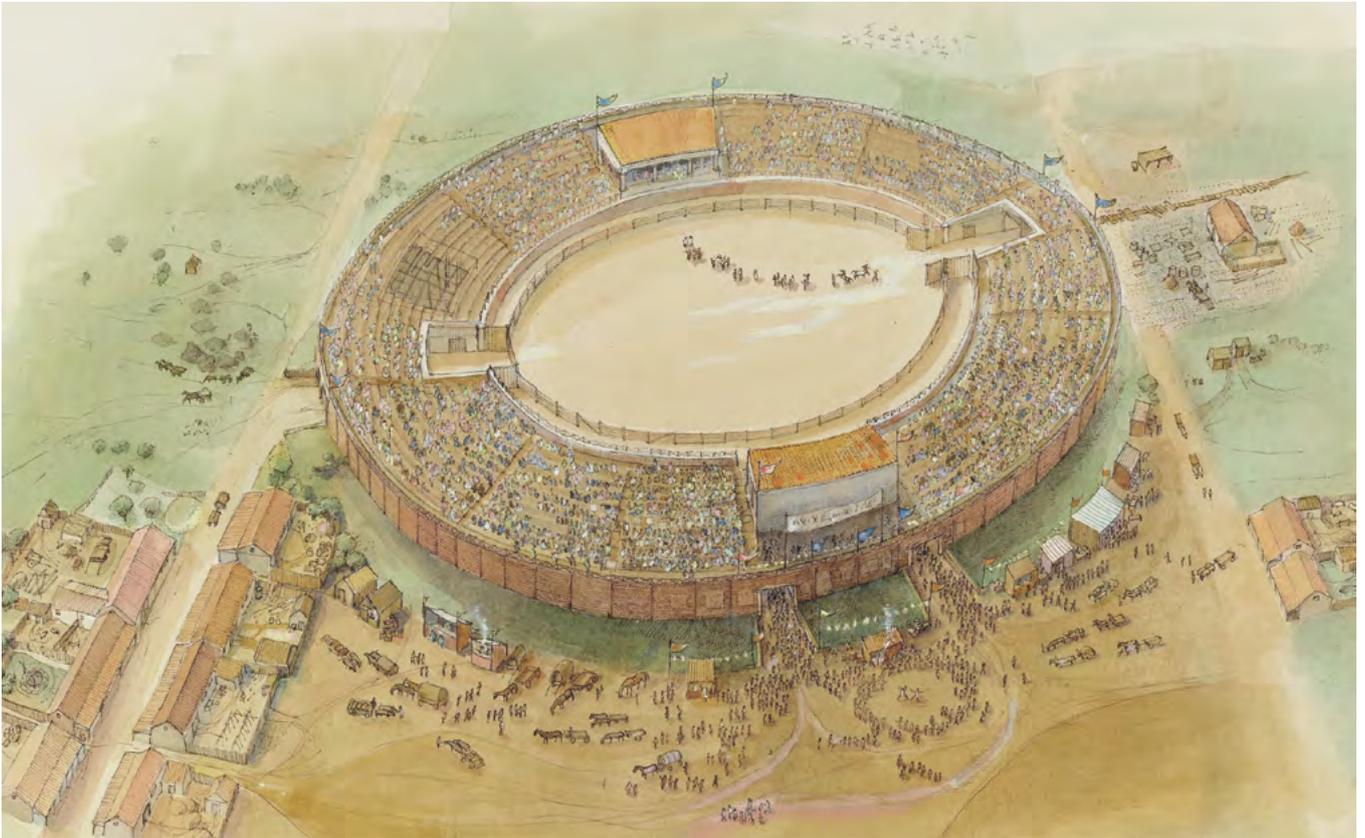
Advice on theatre construction was set down in the only surviving Roman treatise on building, Vitruvius's late 1st century BC *De Architectura*. The first theatre to be identified and excavated in England was that at Verulamium, St Albans (Hertfordshire) in 1849. It was completely excavated in the 1930s. Other theatres have been identified in towns at Colchester and Canterbury, and also in the rural sanctuary at Gosbeck's Farm (Essex).

The word amphitheatre is a Greek term meaning 'theatre on all sides.' Amphitheatres are either oval or elliptical with seating all the way round a central open area – the arena (derived from the Latin *harena* = sand). They resemble two theatres placed face-to-face, with the stage and equipment removed. In an amphitheatre audience attention is concentrated on the central arena. The amphitheatre was one of the few building types created by the Romans *de novo*. Its purpose

was to stage spectacles (*spectacula*). These included wild beast hunts (*venatoria*) including the throwing of criminals to the beasts (*damnatio ad bestias*), other forms of criminal execution, and gladiatorial fights (*munera*). The classic event was the so-called *munus legitimum*, a spectacle that would include animal spectacles in the morning, executions at midday and gladiatorial fights in the afternoon.

By the time of the Roman invasion of Britain in AD 43, the amphitheatre was a well-established building form, reaching its ultimate archetype in the construction of the Colosseum under the Flavian emperors Vespasian, Titus and Titus Domitian spanning AD 69-96. Amphitheatre construction in Britain tended to take place during the 1st and 2nd centuries, though they were generally maintained into the mid-4th century. The distribution of known amphitheatres in Roman Britain is limited to areas immediately outside legionary fortresses, auxiliary forts, and towns, principally the *civitas* (that is, town community) capitals of the province.

The first amphitheatres to be identified in Britain were those at Richborough (Kent), Dorchester (Dorset) and Silchester (Berkshire), all of which appear in William Stukeley's *Itinerarium Curiosum* (1724). Through the 19th century a variety of structures were identified as amphitheatres, often based upon very little tangible evidence. Since this time, and with increasing and improved



**Figure 1**  
Reconstruction painting of the London amphitheatre.

knowledge and techniques, scholars now agree which sites can be assigned to this type.

It is almost certain that amphitheatre sites remain to be identified in Britain; two of the three largest are 20th century discoveries, at Chester (1929) and London (1989). In Gaul and Britain, so-called 'mixed edifice' structures combined elements of the theatre and the amphitheatre.

The Roman circus was a large, open-air entertainment structure used for chariot racing. Though circuses have been found in many places in the Roman Empire, the known examples are principally in the eastern Empire, north Africa, the Iberian peninsula and southern France.

There was an outlier in the major city of Trier in Germany, which was a late imperial capital. There is only one known example of a circus in Britain, recently discovered during development work in Colchester (Essex), and since scheduled. This is the largest example outside Italy.

# 1 Description

## Amphitheatres

Amphitheatres are readily identified by their form. They are all either oval or elliptical in plan. At the centre is an open, level central arena space, usually sunken beneath contemporary ground level. The arena is surrounded by either a high timber palisade or a stone wall depending on the building material employed. The arena is surrounded by seating. Usually the seating (*cavea*) survives as an earthwork, as in most cases the banks were formed using the material won from the excavation of the arena.

Often the site was chosen to allow the arena to occupy an existing depression in the ground, the shape and side of which was adapted to shape. Entrances into the arena were provided

(as a minimum) at each end of the long axis of the structure. This provides a characteristic and unmistakable geophysical profile, as at Richborough (Kent) and Caistor St Edmund (Norfolk). In some structures, small chambers flanking the entrance passages at the arena end were probably *carceres* or beast pens.

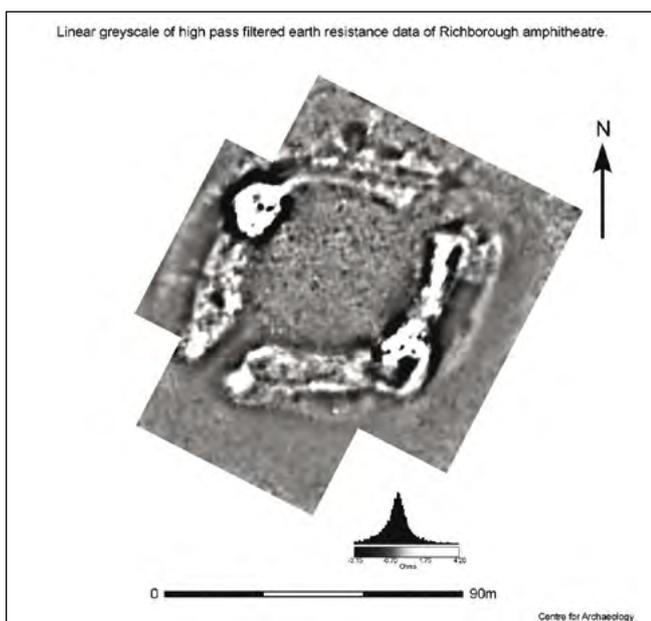
Amphitheatres vary considerably in size and structure, often in response to the requirements of the communities they served. For the military community, those built for the legions were large, in fact the largest in the province, and were stone-built. Amphitheatres serving auxiliary establishments were small earthworks, possibly constructed for single events on a temporary basis. The London amphitheatre (Figure 1) began in timber and was partially converted to stone, and the structures at the *civitas* capitals were predominantly large earthworks.

The legionary fortresses and the new city of London were settlements of non-native peoples, the citizen troops of the legions, and incoming traders and administrators in London. It is worth noting that the only evidence from amphitheatre sites for gladiatorial spectacles comes from the legionary sites, while the only evidence for specific amphitheatre-related religious practice, the worship of Diana-Nemesis, is from London and the legionary sites.

## Legionary amphitheatres

Two are known, at Caerleon and Chester (Figures 3-5), both being situated outside and close to one corner of the fortress.

It is possible that others remain to be discovered, the most likely potential location being the third



**Figure 2**  
Resistivity survey of the Richborough amphitheatre. The dark areas pick out the shape and outline of the amphitheatre.

permanent legionary base, at York. The principal feature of these buildings is the fact that they had both stone arena walls and stone outer walls surrounding the *cavea*. Entrances into the arena at the ends of the long axes were vaulted, and subsidiary entrances affording access to the arena and to the *cavea* were provided at the ends of the short axes. It seems that boxes for the use of presiding magistrates may have been positioned over one of the short-axis entrances.

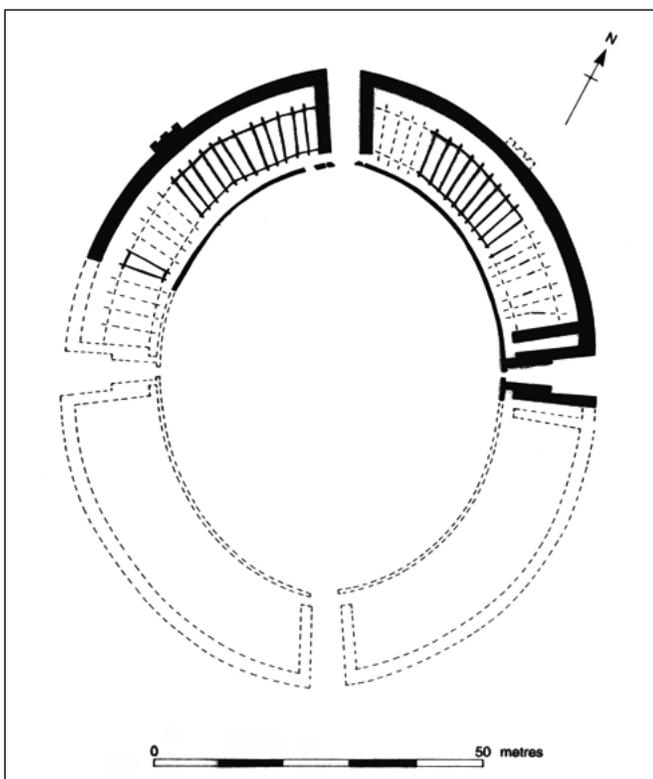
The two places provide three radically different forms of amphitheatre. At Chester I, external stairways gave access to the *cavea* over the top of the outer wall, while four additional entrances at Caerleon provided access at podium level through additional entrance passages provided between those at the major axes. As well as the four axial entrances Chester 2 was provided with eight *vomitoria* (vaulted entrances within the thickness of the *cavea* affording access via steps to the auditorium) and also with pilaster bases for decorative treatment of the stone outer wall. This is the only British amphitheatre with these features. At both sites there was evidence for

timber framed seating; in the case of Chester this was free-standing and formed of pre-fabricated frames placed into radial slots, the frames

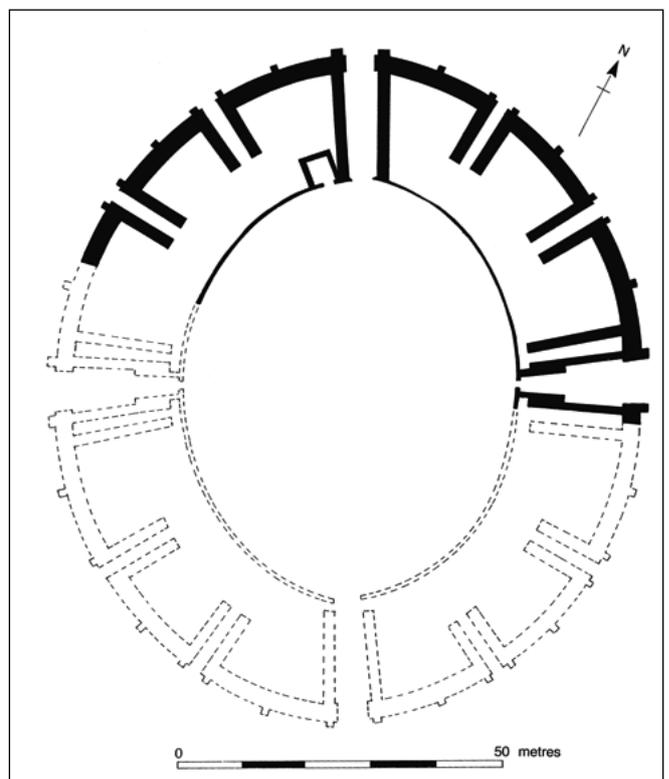


**Figure 4**  
Excavation of the timber framework supporting the seating of the first amphitheatre at Chester.

then supported in position by dumping the material from the excavation of the arena around their bases.



**Figure 3**  
Plan of the first amphitheatre at Chester.



**Figure 5**  
Plan of the second amphitheatre at Chester.

## Auxiliary amphitheatres

Three have been identified in Britain, but only one, at Charterhouse-on-Mendip (Somerset), in England. These are small oval earthworks with no outer walls and entrances at each end of the long axis; they may have had timber palisade arena walls. Such structures, when excavated on the Continent, prove to have had timber-framed seating structures encapsulated in an earthen bank.

## Urban amphitheatres

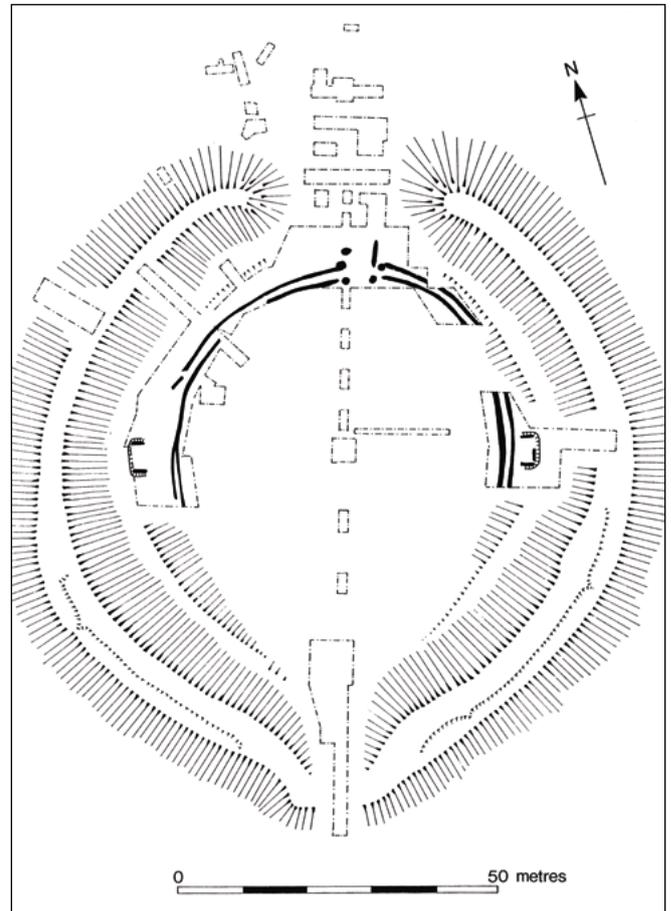
The amphitheatres provided at the *civitas* capitals are all located outside the limits of the urban area, as is the standard for amphitheatres Empire-wide. All comprise earthworks. They were built on sites featuring existing natural depressions or dry valleys, which were shaped to form the arena. The *cavea* banks were formed using material excavated from the arena, probably supplemented by material from elsewhere. All have the standard entrances at the ends of the long axes.

The earliest forms of the structures, all of 1st century date, featured timber-built arena walls (Figures 6 and 7). The entrance passages were also lined with timber walls, and there was evidence for timber gates into the arena at the



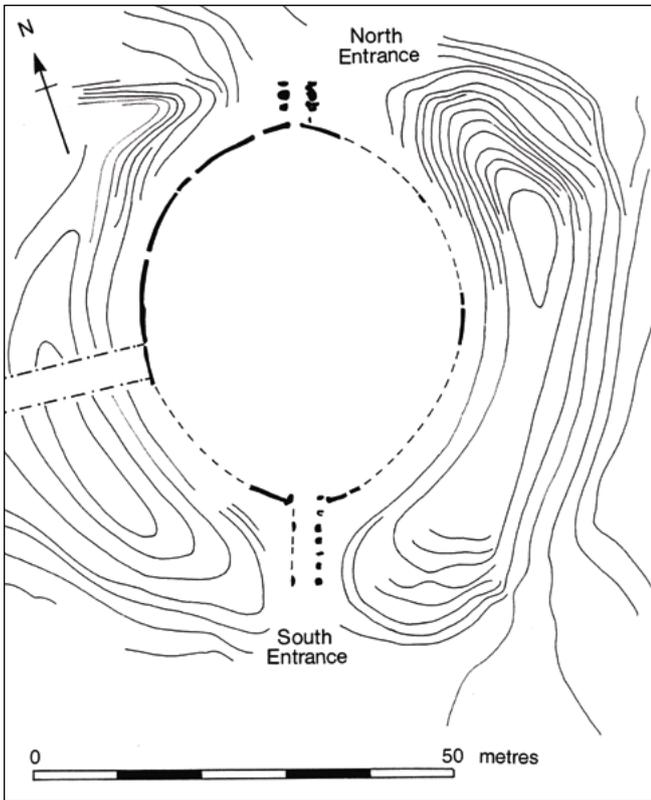
**Figure 6**  
The amphitheatre at Maumbury Rings, Dorchester

ends of the entrance passages. In all cases the timber arena and entrance walls were replaced in stone at a later phase, mostly in the 2nd century. The structures had no outer retaining walls to the earthwork *cavea*, and access to the *cavea* was via desire paths over the back of the earthworks.

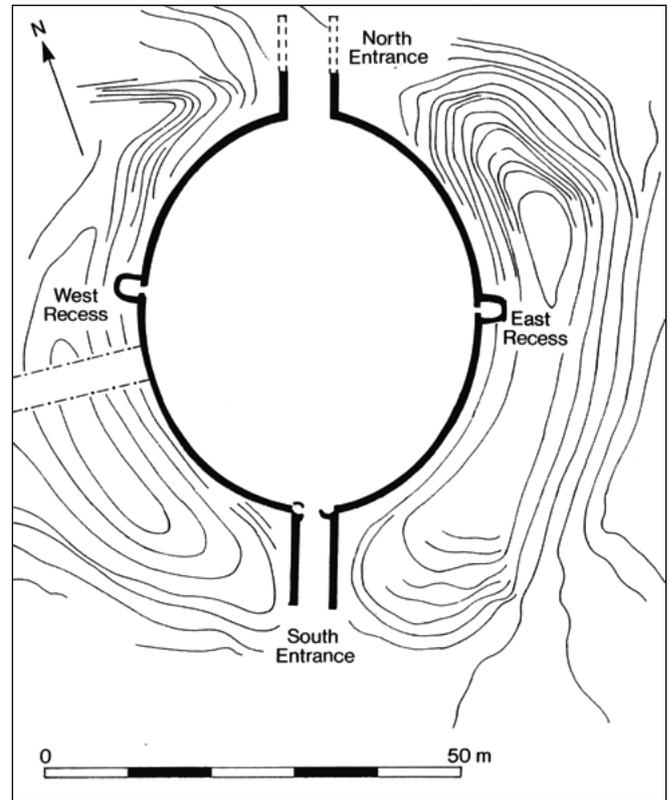


**Figure 7**  
Plan of the amphitheatre at Maumbury Rings, Dorchester, showing earthworks and timber arena and entrance revetment.

At Silchester (Figures 8 and 9) the outer wall to the earthwork amphitheatre was at first revetted by turf, with earthen ramps imitating external stairs. Where evidence survives for structures on the bank, these seem to comprise terraces, possibly for a standing audience. This has clear implications for the duration and type of spectacles that may have taken place. In some cases niches were provided in the arena walls on the short axes. These might have been shrines and/or supported a box or tribunal.



**Figure 8**  
Plan of the second phase of the Silchester amphitheatre, showing earthworks and timber revetments to the arena and entrances.



**Figure 9**  
Plan of the third phase of the Silchester amphitheatre, showing earthworks and stone revetments to the arena and entrances.

The exception among urban amphitheatres is in London, a settlement initiated by traders from outside the province. The amphitheatre here, built into a shallow valley (and now in the heart of the City, beneath the Guildhall), had a timber outer wall, arena wall and passage walls, as well as timber-framed seating. It was later partly rebuilt in stone, with at least the arena and passage walls replaced. It is possible, however, that the outer wall was always timber.

## Theatres

Roman theatres, such as the Gosbecks Farm site near Colchester, are semi-circular structures. At Gosbecks the earliest theatre was timber-built, and this was succeeded by a building consisting of a stone-revetted, turf and earth banked *cavea*. The stone walls enclosed the circumference of the *cavea*, and ran along the diameter of the circle, interrupted in the centre where a semi-circular orchestra and a timber-built stage were situated. This was not built on the Vitruvian pattern with an

elaborate *scaenae frons* (decorated background) at the rear of the stage. The first phase of the Canterbury theatre was similar to Gosbecks, while the second phase at Canterbury was a 'mixed edifice' type of structure, like that at Verulamium (Figure 10) – a fusion of theatre and amphitheatre architecture and function.

The Verulamium theatre again has a *cavea* of piled turf and earth revetted by stone walls. The orchestra is massively expanded to become a circular arena, hollowed into the ground like an amphitheatre arena. Entrances gave level access to the arena. In the first phase, the stage was a modest timber-floored structure, which interrupted the curve of the *cavea*. In the second phase the building was extended, and the emphasis was placed on the stage. The arena was reduced in size, and the space between the front seats and the stage became an orchestra in the true classical sense. To the rear of the stage four piers supported Corinthian columns, creating a provincial take on the classical architectural backdrop of the *scaenae frons*.

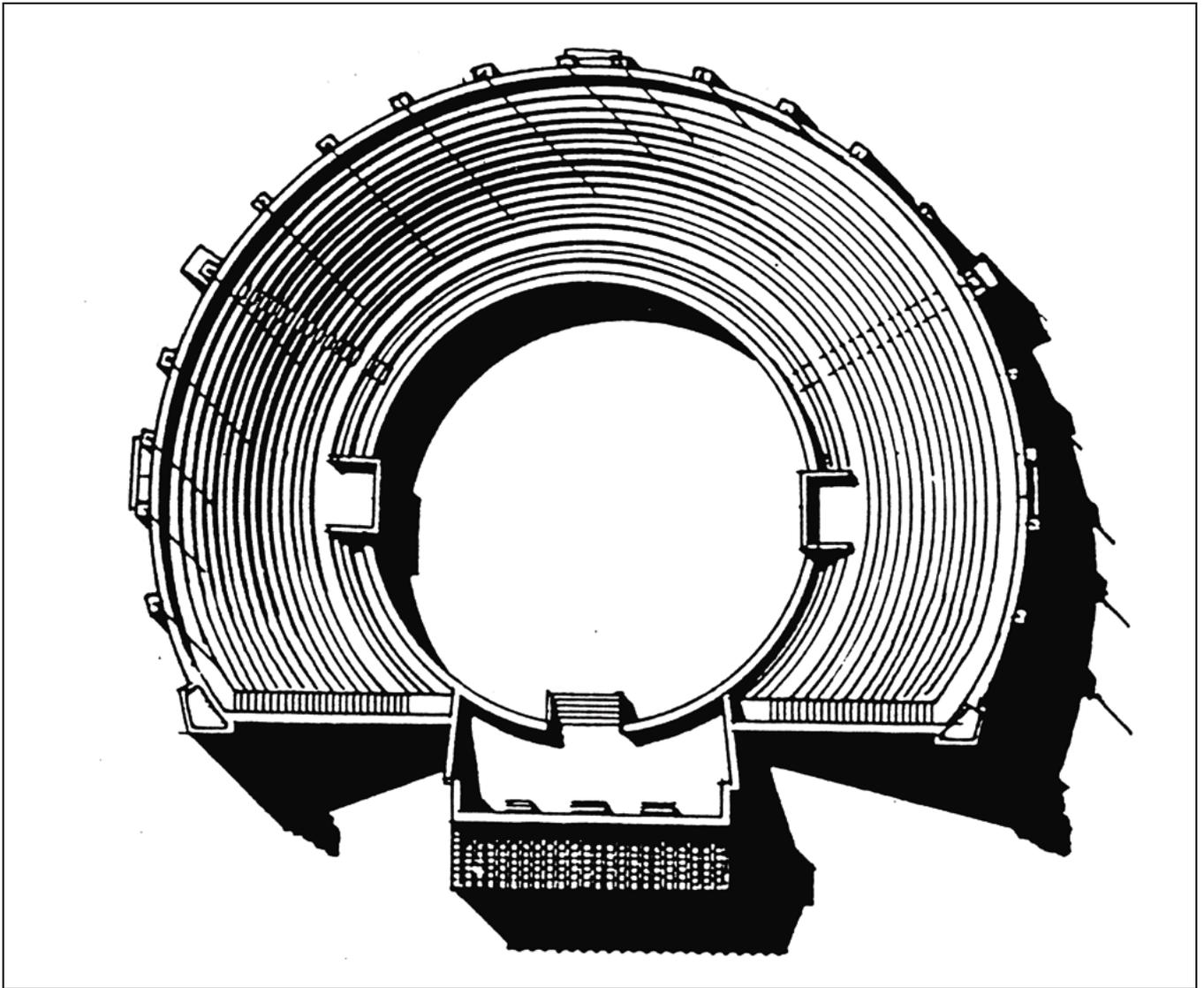


Figure 10  
Reconstruction, by Anthony Lowther, of the first phase of the Verulamium theatre.

## Circuses

The Roman circus generally consisted of an elongated oval track surrounded by tiers of seating along both its long sides and one, curved, end. The other end was open, and contained the starting bays (*carceras*). In the centre of the open space of the track was a barrier (*spina*), sometimes decorated along its length with architectural adornments such as obelisks, which acted to prevent collisions. Posts at either end of the *spina* marked the turns (*metae*).

The only British example, at Colchester, was built like the amphitheatres of Roman Britain outside the city walls. It was probably constructed towards the end of the 1st century AD, and may

have stood as a ruin until the Norman period. It was 448.2 m long and between 71.1 m and 74.2 m wide (excluding buttresses). The circuit measured 62.4 m wide at the east end, tapering to 59.5 m at the west. The starting gates appear to have been located at the western end of the structure with the semi-circular end to the east. The seating bank (*cavea*) varied between 5.8 m and 6.0 m in total width. It was constructed of earth retained by stone or timber walls, a method of construction found in theatres and amphitheatres in Britain and Gaul. It is possible that the inner *cavea* wall was timber-framed, while the outer wall was of stone, 4-5 m high with supporting buttresses. It has been calculated that its seating capacity was around 12,500-15,000.

# 2 Chronology

The chronology of amphitheatres in general is noted above. The chronologies of British amphitheatres, where known, are summarised in the following table:

	Flavian (AD 69-96)	Trajanic (AD 96-117)	Hadrianic (AD 117-136)	Later 2nd Century AD	3rd Century AD	4th Century AD
<b>Silchester</b>	Timber Phase 1: c AD 55-75		Timber phase 2		Stone phase 3	Disuse: c 350
<b>London</b>	Phase 1: c AD 70-71		Phase 2: stone- built			Disuse: c 350
<b>Dorchester</b>	Construction c Mid-Flavian				New entrance	Disuse: c 350
<b>Chester</b>	Construction c AD 80	Timber seating inserted c AD 100		Amphitheatre 2 built		Disuse early 4th century
<b>Caerleon</b>				Entrances altered c AD 140	Alterations c AD 220	Disuse early 4th century
<b>Cirencester</b>		Phase 1: after c AD 104-107	Phase 2	Phase 3		Disuse: c 340-350
<b>Chichester</b>		Construction: c Flavian/Trajanic				Disuse: early 4th century
<b>Carmarthen</b>			Construction c AD 125			

# 3 Subsequent History

It is apparent that at least some amphitheatres were re-used for occupation in the post-Roman period. At Chester, an early post-Roman settlement exploited the stone walls for defence, and was built in the arena. At Silchester and Cirencester medieval re-occupation took place (the former was converted to a ringwork castle in the 12th century Anarchy; the latter had its entrances blocked, perhaps to create an agricultural enclosure), and the Dorchester amphitheatre (Figure 6) was re-used as a fortification during the English Civil War.

Excavations at the 7th century Northumbrian palace site of Yeavering found a wedge-shaped structure (Building E), which has generally been interpreted (both by its excavator Brian Hope-Taylor, and by later commentators) as a grandstand for public assemblies, apparently modelled on amphitheatre seating. Air photographs hint at similar structures elsewhere.

# 4 Associations

As already noted, amphitheatres are associated with Roman forts and fortresses, and with towns and cities. There are no examples yet known of amphitheatres associated with shrines or temples in a rural context.

More British circuses may yet be found. The Colchester example joins the theatres and amphitheatres as a major building constructed for purposes of entertainment in Roman Britain, and associated with large Roman towns.

# 5 Further Reading

The best general summary of the history of the amphitheatre in English, remains D Bomgardner, *The Story of the Roman Amphitheatre* (2000).

A survey of the monument class and its context has recently appeared in T Wilmott, *The Roman Amphitheatre in Britain* (2008).

A collection of papers on the subject provides recent insights on amphitheatres in Britain and further afield, as well as other concerns in amphitheatre studies; T Wilmott (ed), *Roman Amphitheatres and Spectacula; a 21st Century Perspective* (2009).

The fullest reports on the excavation of British amphitheatres are:

N Bateman, C Cowan and R Wroe-Brown, *London's Roman Amphitheatre* (2008).

R Bradley, 'Maumbury Rings, Dorchester: The Excavation of 1908-1913', *Archaeologia* 105 (1975), 1-97.

M Fulford, *The Silchester Amphitheatre: Excavations of 1979-85* (1989).

F H Thompson, 'The Excavation of the Roman Amphitheatre at Chester', *Archaeologia* 105 (1975), 127-239.

R E M and T V Wheeler, 'The Roman Amphitheatre at Caerleon, Monmouthshire', *Archaeologia* 78 (1928), 111-218.

The classic excavation report on the Verulamium theatre is:

K M Kenyon, 'The Roman Theatre at Verulamium, St Albans', *Archaeologia*, 84 (1935), 214-61.

The standard reference work on circuses is John Humphrey's 1986 *Roman Circuses: Arenas for Chariot Racing*, while a report on the Colchester building has been published by P Crummy, 'The circus at Colchester (*Colonia Victricensis*)', *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 18 (2005), 267-77.

Yeavinger is reconsidered in:

P Frodsham and C O'Brien, *Yeavinger: Power, People and Place* (2005)

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# 7 Acknowledgments

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Figure 3, 7, 8-9: © Chris Evans

Figure 4: © Chester amphitheatre project

Figure 6: © Tony Wilmott



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