

CHESTER ROMAN AMPHITHEATRE - FROM THE MESOLITHIC TO THE 20TH CENTURY

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The first modern indication of the existence of the Chester amphitheatre came in 1738 when a wall plaque of a Retarius was discovered in the vicinity of St Johns Street – the only curved street in Chester. Plaster casts were made, but the plaque itself disappeared until the 1980's, when it was finally identified by the British Museum and returned to Chester.

The amphitheatre was not discovered until 1929, when excavations for the installation of a heating system at Dee House revealed some remains. The following year a road development cutting across the site was proposed. This led to a campaign to save the amphitheatre, backed by some senior politicians, including the Prime Minister of the day, Ramsey MacDonald, and Mussolini, the Italian dictator. In 1932 the road scheme was cancelled, further buildings were demolished and work began on the excavation of the site.

Between 1957 and 1969 Thompson conducted excavations. Unfortunately, because of the conduct of the excavations, e.g. the arena wall excavated without respect to the associated deposits, the northern half of the arena walls and seating were demolished, there was a massive loss of information on 1500 years of the history of Chester. To make matters worse, a huge concrete wall was built across the amphitheatre. Thompson's conclusion was that there had been 2 amphitheatres on the site, an early one of wood and a second one built of stone. These matters stood until 1993, when excavations restarted and continued in 1995, 1999, 2000 – 03, 2004 -6 and 2015.

The Roman legionary fort at Chester, of which the amphitheatre was a part, was probably located to act as a buffer between the tribes of Wales and the North Britons. It is the largest Roman Military site in Europe, containing, inter alia, a governor's enclave, an elliptical building which may have been a shrine, which is a unique discovery, and a principia and bath house, both made of stone.

In 2004 a geophys survey was undertaken and excavations in Area A in the northwest quadrant started in 2006. Roman foundations and imprints of decayed timbers were unearthed. It was established that the arena had been dug down to the bedrock and the upcast material formed a mound on which the seating was built. This mound lies on top of prehistoric archaeology. Mesolithic flints from 6800 – 4000BC indicated flint workings on the site. Neolithic/Early Bronze age discoveries were dated to circa 2500BC and remains of an Iron Age roundhouse and a 4 post structure were uncovered. Rare evidence for the separation and retention of waste products from cereal production was discovered, dating up to 200BC.

From 200BC to 79AD the site was ploughed. Iron Age ridge and furrow agricultural earthworks were discovered. Although found in the north of England, these were the first discovered so far south. The Romans built their first amphitheatre on land commandeered by the Army, in 79AD. This structure was mostly erased by the building of the second amphitheatre. The ground plan was constructed in accordance with Roman survey manuals and based on the premise that the intersection of 4 circles creates a perfect oval. In circa 100AD, alterations were made to add timber-framed seating and a shrine to Nemesis. Remains of an external staircase were unearthed, which corresponds exactly to one at Paestum. The archaeologists recorded 15 timber frames in detail. These were all prefabricated and made of oak.

There was evidence of activities outside the amphitheatre. Between the walls and a kerbed road, post holes indicated the presence of stalls (*cf Pompeii*) and remains pointed to the selling of food and souvenirs (miniature Samian ware bowl depicting gladiatorial combat). A band of yellow sand indicated that piles of sand were stored outside the walls for use in the arena, which came from quarries ½ mile away. This is the only evidence found in Europe of a sand industry directly related to an amphitheatre.

Detailed mathematical measurements of the remains of the 2nd Chester amphitheatre, built circa 200 AD, and comparisons with other (more complete) amphitheatres, confirmed that the original design is based on an isosceles triangle, so there is no force on the outer walls. The foundations were 3m wide and 1.5m deep. Decorative pilaster bases were evenly spaced around the walls. There was no major western entrance. The main north gate was a single ramp, with double timber gates which, when opened, blocked the entrances to the stairs, so animals could be safely driven into the arena.

The elaborate eastern entrance revealed 2 small entrance ramps on each side of the main entrance, which led directly to the prime viewing area at the centre of the short access. A coping stone inscribed "Serano Locus" gave credence to this theory. Further mathematical calculations established that the arena had a capacity of 7000 – 8000 people, 7037 seated and 620 standing.

The amphitheatre was built of pink sandstone with a plastered and painted interior. The discovery of a tethering stone in the centre of the arena indicated that it was also used for wild beast hunts. Seven phases of post-Roman occupation have been uncovered. Post holes in a defended circle in the centre of the arena date to the Middle Saxon period and the blocking up of the entrance to the vomitorium indicated a defensive role for the arena. The insertion of post-Roman masonry in the east entrance is comparable with the formation of a crypt in the amphitheatre in Durres in Albania. Perhaps this was a forerunner to St Johns Church.

The discovery of C10th Scandinavian cross heads indicated the presence of an Anglo Saxon settlement in the amphitheatre. Robbing trenches date to the early Norman period. The Normans recycled the stones of the amphitheatre to build St Johns Cathedral. Despite its later exterior, the interior of St Johns is pure Norman.

From C12 – C16, mediaeval cess and rubbish pits indicated a monastic phase of occupation. A Tudor pit revealed the remains of a very high status feast and some gold jewellery as well as a very rare tin-glaze owl, of unknown origin.

Evidence of the 1645 siege of Chester was discovered across the site in the form of musket and pistol balls and associated military equipment. From late C17, houses were built outside the walls, with gardens being established on the softer ground of the old arena. Evidence of C19 & C20 occupation comes from sewers all over the site and even a car inspection pit built into the original floor of the amphitheatre. In its present incarnation the amphitheatre forms an important part of the Chester cityscape.

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