

Appendix 1: Roman Circus 200m south of Abbey House

Overview

Heritage Category: Scheduled Monument

List Entry Number: 1021426

Date first listed: 13-Nov-2007

Location

County: Essex

District: Colchester (District Authority)

National Grid Reference: TL 99618 24534

Reasons for Designation

The Colchester Roman Circus is a unique archaeological monument in Britain. It is the only place in the country where there is excavated and convincing evidence for a circus and is one of only six locations in the north west provinces of the Roman empire where circuses have been securely identified. The area excavations and numerous trenches investigated highlight the archaeological potential of the site and the scope for improving the knowledge and understanding of such buildings not only nationally but in an international context. The Roman circus must be considered in conjunction with other monumental buildings or structures surviving from Roman Colchester. It provides further evidence of the importance of Colchester as one of the principle urban centres of Roman Britain.

Details

The monument includes the buried remains of a Roman circus or chariot racing track and a section of the precinct wall relating to the Benedictine Abbey of Saint John. The monument is orientated east to west and is situated to the south of Colchester town centre on the crest of a prominent ridge. The classic Roman circus is an elongated oval track flanked by cavea (tiers of seating) along two sides and around the curved end. A low barrier known as a spina runs down the centre to prevent collisions. Turning posts known as metae were placed at either end of the spina and at the open, non curved, end was a row of starting bays known as the carceras. Circuses were used originally for chariot racing and boxing but athletics and wrestling also became popular. The Colchester circus is orientated east to west and measures 448.2 meters in length and between 71.1 and 74.2 meters in width. The area of protection also includes a ten metre buffer zone around the circus which is considered necessary for the support and preservation of the monument. Three area excavations and a number of evaluation trenches have been investigated and all contribute to our understanding of the form and fabric of the circus. Most recent excavations (2007) by the Colchester Archaeological Trust have exposed a section of the spina at the junction between Napier Road and Circular Road North. All the evidence helps to illustrate and confirm the archaeological potential of the monument. It has been calculated that the circus had a

seating capacity of around 8,000 - 15,000. The starting gates are thought to have been situated at the western end of the structure with the semi circular end to the east. The stand or cavea at Colchester varied between 5.8m and 6.0m in total width. It was built of earth but was retained by stone or timber walls, a similar method of construction to that found in theatres and amphitheatres in Britain and elsewhere. At Colchester it is thought the inner cavea was built of stone. The large exterior buttresses with parallel, less substantial walls 5m inside imply the outer cavea wall was of stone and has been estimated to be at least 2m in height. These may have supported blind arcading enhanced with pilasters much like examples on the continent. Finds from robber trenches certainly confirm the presence of Romanised decorative architecture such as tile coursing, opus signinum facing mortar (fine Roman concrete), and a piece each of column and incised marble facing (possibly Purbeck). The stone used in the foundations of the cavea is greensand which is rare elsewhere in Colchester probably because it had to be bought in from Kent. On the whole dating evidence from the circus is limited but based on the dated contexts of the stone elsewhere in the area the use of Kent greensand implies it was built in the second century AD. The sheer scale of the building was so great that it is believed that the emperor must have paid for its construction. Hadrian's visit to Britain in AD122 is associated with a revival of public buildings in towns and it is thought that he may have been responsible for the construction of the circus at Colchester. A number of glass and pottery finds discovered in Colchester in the past depict images of chariot races. Given the discovery of the circus it is now thought that some of these may be souvenirs of actual events. New finds associated with the sport include a piece of horse furniture which was recovered from the robber trench of the inner wall. A coin from a grave dated to the early first century AD features a four horse chariot and rider and is a rare find in Britain. A silver coin found in a rare hoard dated to between 150BC and AD117 also depicts a four horse chariot. It is unclear when the circus came out of use but analysis suggests the circus was probably levelled in the late Roman period, whilst the footings were subsequently robbed in the medieval period. Early medieval pottery from a trench dug to extract building material suggests that some material may have been dismantled and used in the abbey construction. The abbey precinct wall exhibits some odd bends in the south west corner and implies that its alignment may have been, at least in part, determined by elements of the surviving circus. A section of the precinct wall lies approximately 60m west from the eastern end of the monument. It stands to almost 2.5m high and although there is evidence of dressed facing stone it survives mainly as a randomly coursed stone core. This section of walling is included in the scheduling. Excavation also confirmed that the circus was surrounded by a contemporary cemetery. A total of 516 burials have been excavated and recorded. The known areas of the cemetery have been fully excavated and preserved by record and are not therefore included in the scheduling. All buildings, with the exception of the upstanding precinct wall are excluded from the scheduling as are all road and path surfaces, fences, signage and tennis courts. However, the ground beneath all these features is included.

MAP EXTRACT The site of the monument is shown on the attached map extract. It includes a 10 metre boundary around the archaeological features, considered to be essential for the monument's support and preservation.

Legacy

The contents of this record have been generated from a legacy data system.

Legacy System number: 35614

Legacy System: RSM

Sources

Books and journals

Crummy, P, 'Journal of Roman Archaeology' in The circus at Colchester, , Vol. 18, (2005), 267-277

Crummy, P, 'Colchester Archaeologist' in Circus Revealed, , Vol. 19, (2006), 2-8

Masefield, R, 'British Archaeology' in When the Circus came to Colchester, , Vol. 81, (2005), 14-15

Other

Colchester Borough Council, Colchester Roman Circus management plan, 2006, JUNE

Legal

This monument is scheduled under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979 as amended as it appears to the Secretary of State to be of national importance. This entry is a copy, the original is held by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

End of official listing