Map showing the circus' position relative to the colonia

- Overall spine (Latin: *spina* or *euripus*) length: c. 250 metres, suggesting a race length for the chariots over seven laps as being c. 3,700 metres (2.3 miles, or a rounded 2.5 Roman miles). The spine was around 6 metres wide (to be confirmed).
- Distance from starting gates to *spina*: c. 150 metres.

Whilst no records exist as to when the Colchester circus was constructed, the experts believe it would have been during the period of the Emperor Hadrian (Latin: *Caesar Publius Aelius Traianus Hadrianus Buccellanus Augustus*) from AD 117 to 138.

The circus appears to have fallen out of use by c. AD 270, where evidence of its decay and disintegration has been found. Thus, its life is suggested as having been around 150 years; which accords with other evidence of the general wealth of the community, new building activity, etc. of the time.

Here, in Colchester, our circus foundations are relatively accessible for archaeological examination. There is some encroachment by buildings and other structures; with 'Napier Road' and 'Circular Road North' cutting across it. Much is still unexplored, especially the north side. Availability of funding and land owner permission are needed to discover more. Evidence shows that the above ground masonry of the inner and outer walls of the *cavea* and *spina* was extensively plundered in the medieval period, presumably for building materials for St John's Abbey and other structures in medieval Colchester. Some of these foundations are displayed under glass within the grounds of Roman

The illustration above, by Peter Partner, is taken from a contemporary bas relief of a circus scene and shows how the chariots were clearly built for lightness and stability, with the charioteer applying his body weight to give extra stability around the corners. Note also the *metae* cones and the dolphin counters. The charioteers were the people's heroes of the day and the successful ones must have been very wealthy individuals.

The illustration to the left shows a mosaic from Trier, in Germany, showing the victorious charioteer POLYDUS, of the red team, and his named lead horse COMPRESSORE. Teams were divided by colours red, green, blue and white. As with football teams of today, the spectators were fiercely loyal to the colours, rather than the charioteers (Latin: *aurigae* or *agitatores*).

Circus House. The starting gates and outer walls of the circus foundations are marked out on the ground surface. But what is most remarkable of all is that the whole of the west end of the circus, with its starting gates, were found to be fitting perfectly within the confines of the semi-circular garden of what was originally the Royal Artillery Officers' Quarters, later to become the Sergeants' Mess (this building is Grade II listed). An amazing coincidence - or did they always know it was there?

Up to 400 horses would have been needed for a race day, assuming that no horse would run twice and that the four-horse chariots (Latin: *quadrigae*), as opposed to a two-horse chariot (Latin: *biga*) were used throughout. The horses and chariots would have needed a large space nearby to prepare and to wait their turn to race. The Colchester circus was located on open land, some 400 metres to the south of the walls of the colonia. The circus was surrounded by Roman period cemetery plots so, due to a lack of buildings, it would have been clearly visible on the sky line when viewed from the colonia. As might be expected, archaeologists have yet to find any burials within the circus envelope itself.

As time goes on and development of the area proceeds, the footprint of the circus at Colchester will be marked out on the ground surface using earth banks and coloured bricks or asphalt on hard surfaces. The SAM status prevents any new buildings from being constructed within 10 metres of the circus footprint. In due course, grant applications and other funding will enable other interpretive work to be done to further this heritage site's attraction as a visitor and educational destination.

This information leaflet is independently produced and will be updated periodically as our knowledge of the circus site increases over time.

For further details please contact the Colchester Archaeological Trust, Roman Circus House, Colchester, Essex. CO2 7GZ. Telephone: (01206) 501785.

We gratefully acknowledge the permissions from the Colchester Archaeological Trust and Peter Froste, for the use of their illustrations.

COLCHESTER'S ROMAN CIRCUS

A City Guide

an illustration by Peter Froste

The Roman Circus at Colchester is a comparatively recent and remarkable archaeological discovery. It was identified as a result of a 'eureka moment' in 2004 when archaeologists were undertaking an evaluation of Colchester's Victorian garrison land, ahead of proposed house building. It is the only known Roman chariot circus in Britain.

What was a Roman Circus?

A Roman circus was a large, open-air place that was mainly used for chariot racing. Rather than being circular in shape, as are our modern day circuses, it was long and narrow, with a central spine, around which the chariots raced. The Romans took the idea from the Greek hippodromes - and developed it. The Roman circus would have had other uses too, mainly to celebrate important events in the Roman calendar. The most famous circus of all must surely be the Circus Maximus in Rome, made widely known by the book and films, 'Ben Hur'. As a result, circuses (Latin: *circii*) were one of the main places for public entertainment, as were theatres and amphitheatres.

Where were they to be found?

Today, there is physical evidence of approximately 40 circuses from the period of the Roman Empire, with the earliest known being the circus in Rome (later to be known as the Circus Maximus), dateable back (in stone) to at least 200 BC, and c. 600 BC in early form. There are ancient references to as many as 100 circuses in total, although physical evidence of them is obscure. They are to be mainly found around the Mediterranean Sea, in modern day Algeria, France, Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Portugal, Serbia, Spain, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey. Only two are known to be

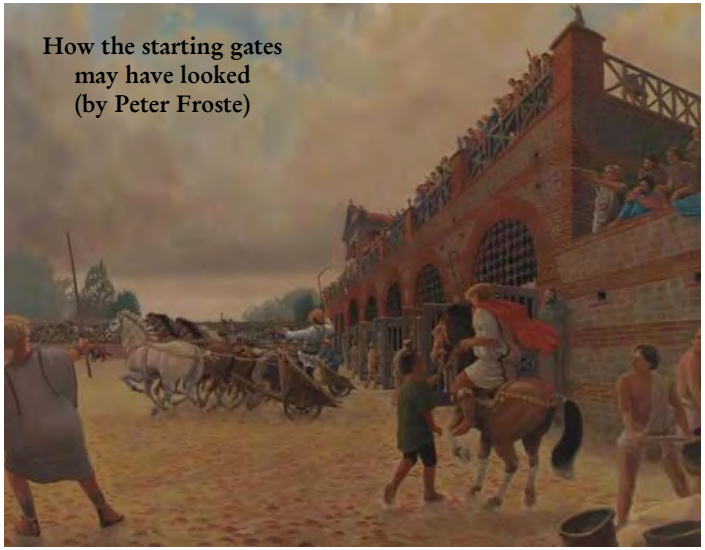
The Colchester circus footprint overlaid onto a modern day aerial photograph.

north of the Alps, one in Trier, Germany, and the other, the most northerly in the Roman Empire, in Colchester.

Most have been built over, with barely any evidence of their existence. Thankfully, the Colchester circus foundations appear to be extensive with a minimal amount of buildings overlying it.

What size and shape was a circus?

In general, a circus was a long and narrow rectangle, with a semicircular end and an almost right angled opposite end that formed the starting gates for the chariots. Along the centre was a spine or island, that was around two-thirds the length of the circus. The longest plain section of track was between the starting gates and the spine, thus creating a substantial distance to enable the charioteers to sort out their track positions before they reached the spine. Looking at all the known circuses, their sizes varied from c. 350 metres long, c. 75 metres wide, 8 starting gates, capacity 12,000 people, up to the largest known, the Circus Maximus in Rome at c. 620 metres long, 150 metres wide, 12 starting gates, capacity at least 150,000 people.



How the starting gates may have looked (by Peter Froste)

How did the circus work?

There were no 'pole positions' as we have today in motor racing. All the chariots started together from the starting gates (Latin: *carceres*), which were set up so as to give the charioteers an equal chance of getting to the spine first. The spine itself was slightly offset so as to assist with this. The chariots raced in an anti-clockwise direction and, from contemporary illustrations and ancient writings, they raced seven laps (as shown by the dolphin and the egg counters located on the spine), a distance in total of between 3500 and 6000 metres (2.2 to 3.8 miles), depending on the size of circus.

At the ends of the spine were the turning posts (Latin: *metae)*, around which the chariots had to steer and to enable the charioteer to know where he was on the circuit at all times. There were also other ornate features such as columns, commemorative obelisks, statues of the gods – and the, all important, lap counters. We have no idea of exactly what the Colchester circus had and can only draw ideas from what is known of other sites. What we do know however is that Colchester's spine was also a large water feature, although where the water came from to fill it remains unknown at present.

The arenas of circuses were normally surrounded by ascending seating along the length of both straight sides and around the curved end. There were breaks in the seating to provide access to the circus or the seating, or to provide for special viewing platforms for dignitaries and officials. The spectators entered and left the circus via numerous arched stairways, known as *vomitoria,* which were designed to provide rapid egress (spewing-forth) for large crowds at amphitheatres and stadiums, as they do in modern sports stadiums and large theatres.

The Circus Maximus in Rome - It is known that the spine of the Circus Maximus was decorated with monuments, including a fountain with seven bronze dolphins, seven enormous eggs, used to indicate how many laps had been completed, and two Egyptian obelisks. The eggs were the symbol of Castor and Pollux, who were the patron saints of Rome. The dolphins were sacred to Neptune, who was the patron saint of horses. There were turning-posts at each end of the spine, as is normal. Set within the seating on the southern side was the Temple of the Sun and Moon. At the western end of the circus were twelve starting gates; the eastern end featured an arch celebrating the triumph over Judaea by Vespasian and Titus.

The Roman Circus at Colchester

Some of the Colchester circus statistics are:

- Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM) No. 46327
- Overall circus length: c. 450 metres (which seems to fit in with the average size of the majority of others),
- Overall circus width: 71 to 74 metres wide, excluding wall buttresses (which is quite narrow by comparison with others). There is uncertainty with fixing the north circus wall position at present.
- Overall arena width: 59 to 62 metres.
- Its orientation is almost perfect east-west, as was the Roman fortress. However, circuses, in general, do not appear to have been constructed with any special compass orientation.
- The seating area (Latin: *cavea*) was around 4.5 metres between the inner and outer walls and could have accommodated up to 12,000 spectators, based on six tiers of seating. The overall width of the seating area was 5.8 to 6.1 metres.
- Its foundations were built almost entirely of greensand (Kentish Ragstone), rubble set in mortar. It would presumably have also used locally produced Roman tiles for wall dressings and timber for the seating over the earth banking of the *cavea*.
- It had eight starting gates (Latin: *carceres*), each allowing the chariot a width of 3.25 metres of space (or 11 Roman feet).

Peter Froste's Colchester Roman Circus mosaic design, which was later re-produced by local students. It is now displayed at Roman Circus House. It measures 6m x 3m and weighs 1500kg.