

# the **Colchester** archaeologist



**Eureka!  
A Roman  
circus**

**The railway  
comes to  
Colchester**

**Beeleigh Abbey**

**News of  
excavations in  
Colchester**

**Beyond the wall:  
Osbourne street  
quarter**





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Front cover. Archaeologist Cat Bell holding the harness pendant from the site of the circus.

Illustration of Ben Hur style chariot (and thus not archaeologically accurate) by Peter Froste.



The team on the garrison excavation in January 2005.

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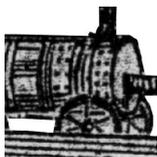
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# contents



|  |            |
|--|------------|
| Eureka! A Roman circus! <i>by Philip Crummy</i>  | 2          |
| As luck would have it <i>by Nina Crummy</i>  | 9          |
| A special fee for the ferryman <i>by Nina Crummy</i>                                     | 10         |
| The racing chariot <i>by Nina Crummy</i>   | 11         |
| Race for victory <i>by Nina Crummy</i>   | 12         |
| A day at the Circus Maximus <i>by Nina Crummy</i>  | 14         |
| The price of fame <i>by Nina Crummy</i>  | 15         |
| A first-hand account of a race in the 5th century <i>by Nina Crummy</i>                  | 15         |
| Running rings around the Area – Roman burials at the garrison<br><i>by Howard Brooks</i> | 16         |
| Abbeyfield – a modern community in the making<br><i>by Taylor Woodrow</i>                | 20         |
| The railway comes to Colchester <i>by Peter E Thompson</i>                               | 22         |
| An unusual railway buff <i>by James Fawn</i>   | 24         |
| Beyond the walls <i>by Carl Crossan</i>  | 26         |
| Butchers in St Botolph's Street <i>by Philip J Wise</i>                                  | 27         |
| New arts centre <i>by Carl Crossan</i>   | 28         |
| St Helena and Colchester's Creation Myth <i>by Tom Hodgson</i>                           | 29         |
| White Canons and blacksmiths at Beeleigh Abbey<br><i>by Howard Brooks</i>                | 30         |
| Spoil heap <i>by Kate Orr</i>  | 32         |
| Friends of the Colchester Archaeological Trust <i>by Nina Crummy</i>                     | 33         |
| Where Ben Hur went wrong <i>by Nina Crummy</i>   | back cover |

# Eureka!

# A Roman circus!



Of all the towns in Britain that might have had a Roman circus, Colchester would be top of the list. The recent discovery of some tantalising foundations to the south of Colchester town centre caused great excitement, because everything about them appears to fit the bill.

## Discovery

The first sight of the circus was in May 2000 when a Roman foundation was observed by CAT in the sides of a narrow trench dug for electric cables for some new lighting around the football pitch in the north-west corner of Abbey Field. The find was carefully recorded at the time, but its significance could not be appreciated, because only a tiny fragment of foundation was exposed, and odd exposures of unattributable foundations of this sort are not infrequent in and around the centre of Colchester.

The next exposure was in 2002 when another short stretch was investigated during early archaeological work in a paddock near the Cavalry Barracks. Various trenches had been dug by machine as part of a sampling process to look for significant archaeological remains that might need further investigation prior to the redevelopment of the area for housing. Again too

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The archaeological excavations are being undertaken by the **Colchester Archaeological Trust** (P Crummy, B Holloway, D Shimmin). The project is being managed by **RPS Planning, Transport and Design** (R Masefield, K Whittaker, C Lequesne). The investigations are being carried out on behalf of **Taylor Woodrow** who are funding the work.

little could be uncovered to make much of it. However, as we shall see, full-scale excavation later on made all the difference.

In 2004, two areas close to Flagstaff House on Circular Road North were excavated in quick succession. As luck would have it, one site turned out to include part of the south side of the circus, and the other the north. The remains took the form a pair of parallel foundations of unequal width. In both cases, the wider of the two foundations had square/rectangular projections along one side showing that it had also been buttressed. In terms of plan, one pair of foundations was the mirror image of the other, so that the narrower walls were to the inside of the circus and the outer wall was buttressed externally.

The stone used in all four foundations is interesting for various reasons. Firstly, it is greensand. Stone of this type does occur in other Roman buildings in Colchester, but it is not the commonest material. It came a poor second to septaria, so the presence of greensand in both pairs of foundations provides some support to the view that they are likely to belong to the same building. Furthermore, the use of greensand gives us dating evidence for the building. This material does not seem to have been widely used in the earliest days of the Roman town — it does not appear for example in the town wall which is datable to c AD 65-80. Thus its appearance in the four foundations suggests that the building is unlikely to date to before the late 1st century. Finally, much of the greensand was in the form of little chips and splinters showing it to be masons' waste, left over from making neatly-squared-off blocks of stone. These chips therefore show that the building, like the town wall, was probably of an ashlar construction (coursed inner and outer faces with a rubble and mortar core). The faces would probably have been made of perhaps four courses of greensand blocks alternating with four courses of brick.

Thus the two pairs of foundations resembled each other in composition and plan, making it reasonable to speculate that they were parts of the same structure. At that stage it was hard to imagine what structure that might be. Various possibilities were considered such as a temple precinct, but none of them seemed particularly convincing.

Left. Foundations of the seating area on the Cavalry Barracks site (Site J).

Right. Laura Pooley cleaning part of the foundation of the outer wall of the circus.

Then followed the excavation of some areas in the vicinity of the Cavalry Barracks. Most of it was concentrated in places where the machine trenching had earlier revealed Roman burials (see pages 16-19), but there was one area which was designed mainly to investigate the foundation mentioned above in the paddock. Not just one foundation was uncovered, but two looking in composition and plan just like the two pairs found in the excavations near Flagstaff House to the east. The newly-uncovered foundations were uncovered over a distance of c 75 m and, when carefully plotted on an large-scale Ordnance Survey map, turned out to align exactly with the southern pair of foundations near Flagstaff House. The alignment was impressive, especially considering that the two areas were about 230 m apart.

Again it appeared to be the same structure. But what a size! Apart from the weird shape, it would have been too big for a temple precinct and it was hard to rationalise in terms of a defensive wall. Then the penny dropped — a Roman circus!

An examination of the plans of various circuses known abroad showed that the circus is unlikely to have been much longer than the distance we had already traced it over. Could we find an end? Fortunately it proved possible to squeeze a few very narrow slit trenches in between some trees just west of the most westerly point we had traced the circus in the riding paddock. Our luck was in again, because we found the outer wall just starting to curve inwards. It was the beginning of what must be the semicircular west end of the circus. This



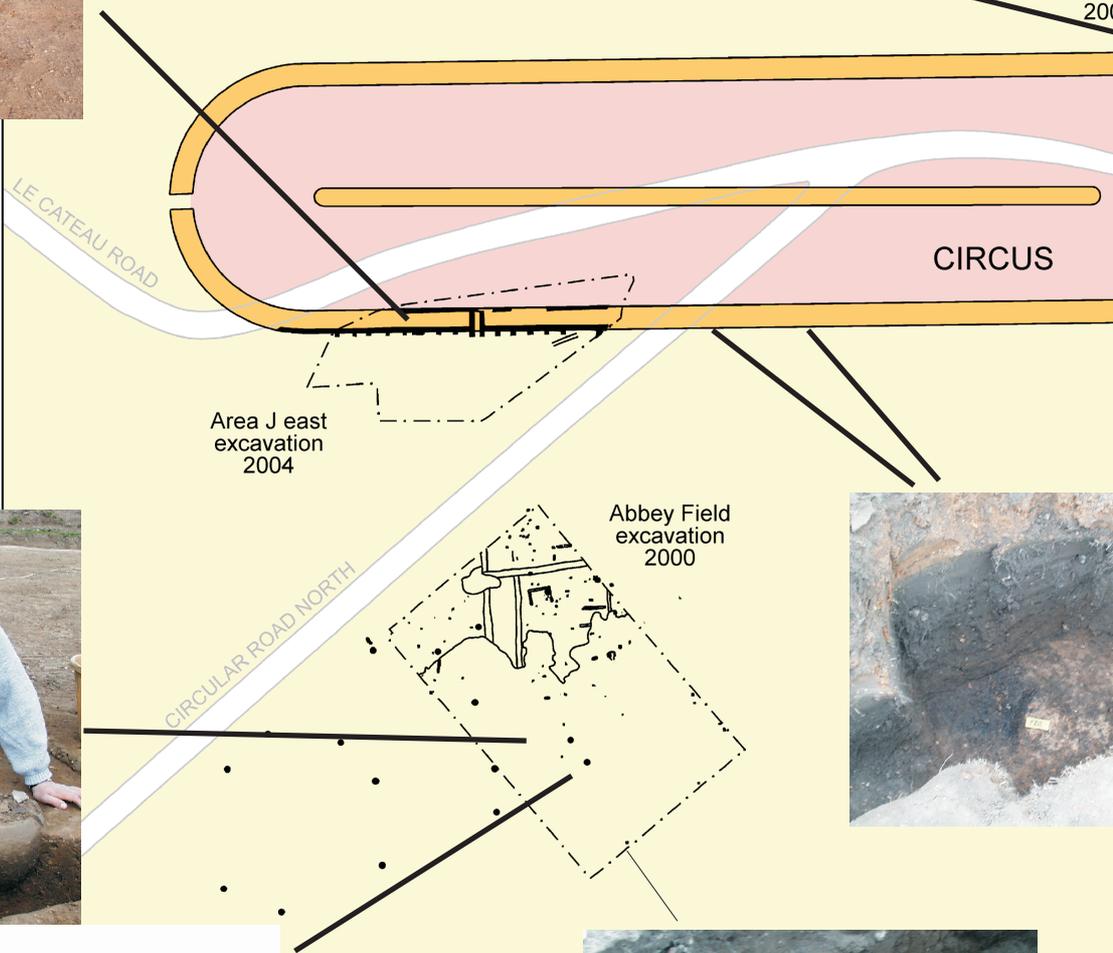
# Excavations in and around the site of the circus

Excavating circus foundations and burials. July 2004. Site C1.

Excavating part of a buttressed circus foundation in November 2004. Site J East.



Area excavated 2004



Abbey Field excavation 2000



Excavating cremations at the Abbey Field before the construction of an all-weather sports pitch. March 2000.



Tile cist excavated. May 2000.

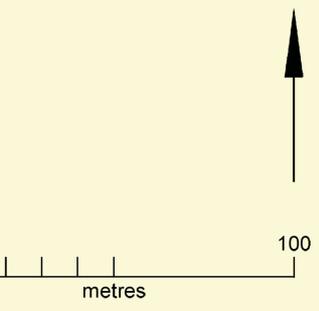
**St John's Abbey wall.  
Built c 1100.**



**Roman ring-ditch burials and the remains of two demolished World War 2 air raid shelters.**



**Fragment of circus foundation seen in a watching brief in May 2000**



**Carefully lifting of a cremation pot in August 2004. Site C2.**

fortunate find left us with the convincing plan of a circus.

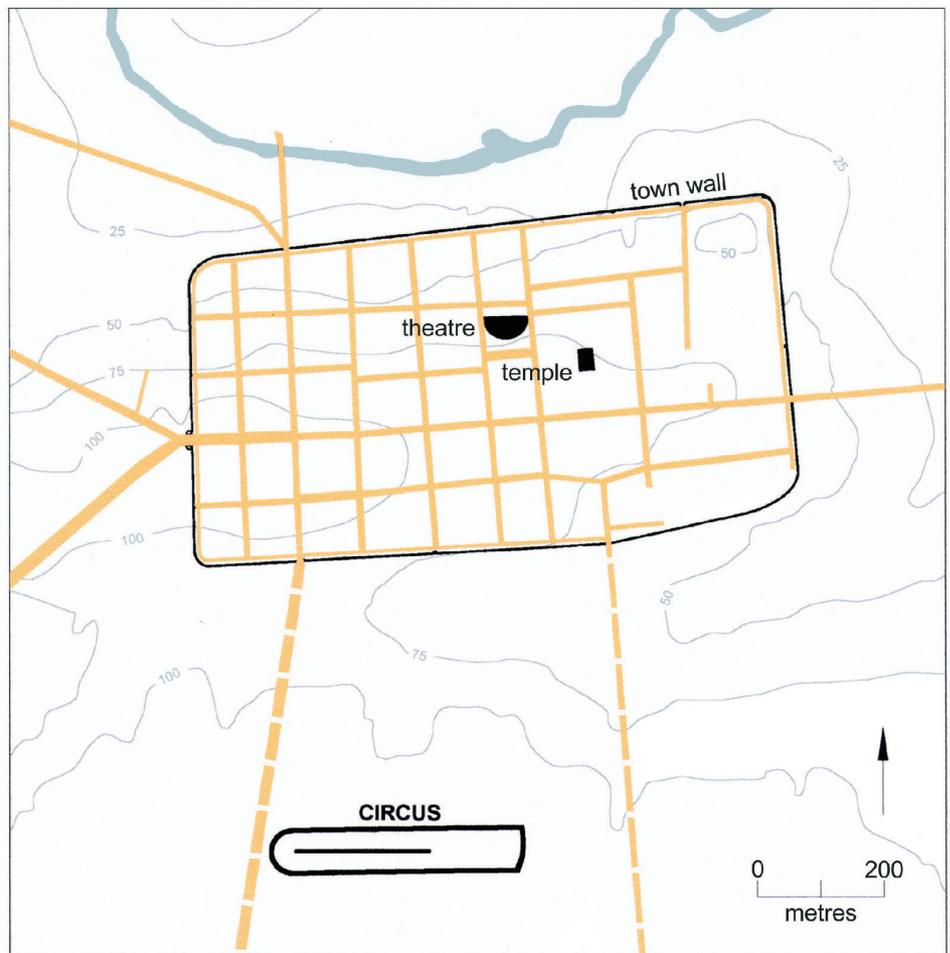
### Roman circuses

Chariot racing was the most popular of the mass spectator sports in Roman times. People flocked in their thousands to watch famous charioteers risk life and limb hurtling on light-weight chariots pulled at breakneck speed by teams of horses of various numbers. A day at the races was not only a time for great thrills and potentially lethal spills, but a chance to meet up with friends and an opportunity to place some bets and go home the richer for it.

Many, perhaps most, Roman towns must have had a circus of some sort. It needn't have been much – two posts in a flat field would have been enough. More important places though had purpose-made stone circuses where the sides of the arena were lined with permanent seating set in tiers. These structures ranged in size and complexity from the Circus Maximus in Rome which was capable of holding a staggering 150,000 people (at least) to the more modest, yet basically similar, structures such as the circus at Colchester. The differences lie not so much in the size of the arenas, but in the size of the seating areas. For example, the arena of the Circus Maximus measured c 79 x 580 m which, as we shall see, is not nearly that much bigger than Colchester's as the difference in capacity might suggest.

There is more to the design of stone circuses than might appear at first sight. They were carefully planned with two principal aims in mind. One was that each of the competitors should have an equal chance of winning regardless of the gate from which they started. The other was that each of the spectators should have as good a view as possible of the arena and everything that happened in it. Essentially there are four elements which made up the circus: the track, the seating area, the central barrier and the starting gates. At one end of the arena were the starting gates. There would have been twelve of these, each built in stone and fitted with an iron barrier which would have been raised mechanically to start off the race. Two turning posts (*metae*) were placed in the arena and an elaborate barrier (*spina*) constructed between the two. The barrier would have included monuments of various kinds and lap counters in the form of dolphins and eggs (see further on pages 12-13). Many of the grandest of the circuses not far from Egypt included obelisks relocated from temples from that country.

One of the turning posts was placed in the centre of the semicircle forming one end of the arena. The other one was located about two thirds along the length of the arena, about 150 m or so from the starting gates. A white line was



The circus in relation to the natural contours and the walled Roman town.

drawn on the ground between this post and the arena wall to the right of the charioteers. Each charioteer would have wanted to be the first to reach the line, because lane discipline ceased at this point and he would have been free to pull in front of his competitors if he could (see further on page 14). It would have been a dangerous moment if all the chariots in a twelve-chariot race reached the line at the same time. The near post would have caused a bottleneck at the end of that opening dash to reach the line so, to ease the congestion, the post was sited four or five metres into what should have been part of the return track. This is why in circuses generally the central barrier is always slightly out of alignment with the sides of the arena.

The gates were not set in a straight line at right angles to the sides of the arena, because this would have meant that the distance to the white line would have varied according to lane (see figure). To ensure that the race was fair, the row of starting gates was curved just enough to make this distance the same for all the competitors.

The seating would have been raised in tiers to give the spectators a good view. In most circuses, the seating was provided on a stone substructure consisting of short vaults set side by side

at right angles to the arena. The roofs of the vaults tapered downwards towards the arena to create a ramped base for the seats. In more elaborate circuses, there would have been a colonnaded gallery (*portico*) at the rear of the seating. Being roofed, the passage would have provided spectators with shade in the sunshine and shelter in the rain.

### Colchester circus

Much of the plan of the Colchester circus can now be reconstructed. Major elements are still missing, but the plans of circuses elsewhere allow the gaps to be filled in to a degree. The main uncertainty now is its length, because the end with the starting gates is yet to be located. All that has been found so far is parts of the seating area. The position of the starting gates is unknown, and nothing has as yet been seen of the central barrier.

At Colchester, the arena was at least 350 m long and 69 m wide. One end was semicircular in shape where the chariots turned 180 degrees. The other end was squared off to accommodate the starting gates. Tiers of raised wooden benches surrounded the arena except across the end with the starting



Excavation in 2004 of part of the southern foundation of the seating area of the circus (Site C2). The foundation extends diagonally across the picture from bottom right to top centre. Two rectangular buttresses can be seen projecting to the left of the foundation. They lie at either end of the ranging rod.

gates. There was no colonnaded gallery as occurs in some other circuses. The benches were supported on a mound of earth retained in place by a low wall on the inside and a taller, buttressed wall on the outside. The distance between the two walls was around 4.7 m, which to judge by well-preserved circuses abroad, would have been enough for four tiers of benches. On the assumption that five people would need between 2.0 and 2.3 m of bench, the capacity of the Colchester circus would appear to have been around 7,000-9,000 depending on its length.

Although unusual in circuses, the use of an earth bank for the seating rather than stone vaulting is a technique already seen in Britain in its amphitheatres and two of its four theatres (Verulamium and Gosbecks in Colchester). The thin external wall strengthened by buttresses is also particularly reminiscent of the external wall for the seating (*cavea*) at the Gosbecks theatre.

Nearly ten per cent of the seating area has been excavated to date. Small parts of the arena have also been examined, but this presents us with a problem. The arena floor needed to be soft enough not to lame the horses, but not so soft that it would rut easily. It probably took the form of a layer of sand over a solid base. But no trace of a surface or any sort of base have as yet been found. The upper levels of the arena were destroyed by cultivation in the medieval or post-medieval period — this is apparent on site. By whether the destruction went deep enough to remove all traces of the base is questionable. It may be that the arena of the circus at Colchester was simply a dirt track covered on the day of the races with a layer of sand.

### Lingering doubts

Identification of the foundations as being parts of a circus seems almost certain, but more work is needed to remove lingering doubts. There are a few big problems. The foundations, especially the inner one, seem to have been rather shallow for the likely height of the walls they were intended to support. No physical remains of the arena have as yet been found except topsoil under it. Finds in general are very limited in quantity, and major elements of the plan have as yet to be seen. And finally, too little has been seen of the curve to rule out the slight possibility that the starting gates were in fact at the west end and not the east despite the hint of

a curve apparent in the slit trenches dug immediately west of the most recent excavation area (see above).

However, the use of geophysical survey techniques (magnetometry and resistivity by Tim Dennis of the University of Essex)) should resolve some of these problems in the near future. Prospects for locating the central barrier by this means are good. More of the seating area may also be traceably by these methods too. An investigation of the west end is likely to be especially important since it should confirm the semicircular shape.

### Who built the circus and why?

The dating evidence for the circus is as yet limited and relatively broad. As already explained, the use of Kentish greensand suggests that it was not early, ie late 1st century at the earliest. It would not have represented nearly as large a civic project as the building of the town wall c AD 65-80, but it would still nevertheless have been a very expensive undertaking. Public buildings were generally paid for by wealthy citizens, but the cost of the circus must have been so great that government funding seems likely. This raises the question as to which emperor was responsible. The stock reply to this question would be Hadrian (AD 117-138) whose visit to Britain in 122 is associated with Hadrian's Wall and a revival of public building in towns. On

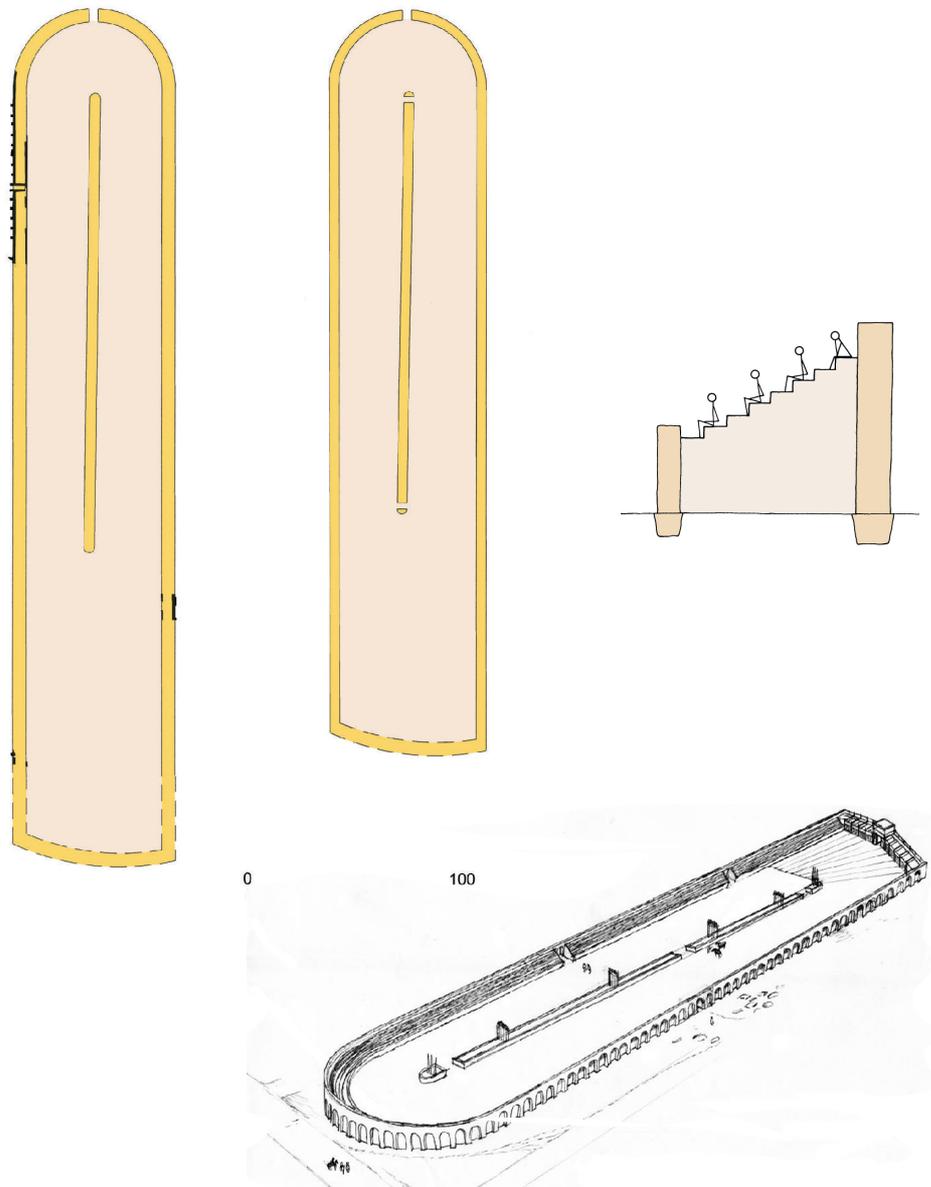
the other hand, Marcus Aurelius (161-180) can perhaps be ruled out because of his dislike of gaming. This kind of approach needs some proper consideration, but ultimately what is really needed is what is lacking at present — some good solid archaeological dating evidence.

The building of the stone circus is likely to have been the upgrading of an earlier, more modest circus. Indeed, there is an earth-filled feature under the outer foundation on the Cavalry Barracks site (Site J East) which conceivably might be a construction trench for a timber predecessor. But this is yet to be examined, and it might simply prove to have been an earlier boundary ditch of some sort. The presence of a modest number of mid-1st-century glass cups in the town with circus scenes (pages 12-13) hint at a popular interest in circuses before the stone one was built. The foundation of Roman Colchester in the AD 50s would be the most likely period for the construction of an early circus. The town was the centre of the Imperial Cult (emperor worship) as witnessed by the Temple of Claudius, the remains of which can be seen in the basement of Colchester Castle. Circuses were associated with festivals and ritual as well as racing and other sporting activities, and a connection between an early circus such as this and the establishment of the Imperial Cult is a possibility.

### End of the circus

The dating evidence for the end of the circus is even scantier than for its construction. Pottery in 'robber trenches' indicate that parts of the foundations were dug up for their building materials in the 12th century. The Norman period was a time when there was much building work in stone and brick in the town (eg the castle, St John's Abbey, St Botolph's Priory, and some of the churches). The work was undertaken almost entirely with reused Roman building materials obtained by knocking down standing Roman ruins and digging up many of their foundations. The east end of the circus appears to coincide with the southern part of the precinct of St John's Abbey where there are irregularities in the plan of the Norman precinct wall. Since the abbey was founded c 1095, it is conceivable that the odd shape of the precinct somehow reflects parts of the ruined circus which were still standing at that time.

However there is another possibility. Excavations at Balmerne Lane and Middleborough (both extra-mural sites) have shown that the suburbs of the Roman town were demolished without replacement during the last quarter of



Above left. Conjectural reconstruction of the plan of the circus at Colchester (left) in comparison with the circus at Sagunto in eastern Spain (right).

Above right. Conjectural section across the seating area (cavea) of the Colchester circus.

Below. The Colchester circus. Preliminary sketch by Peter Froste.

the 3rd century AD. The circus might have met the same fate. Had this happened, we might expect to find 4th-century burials within the site of the circus. But no such burials have been found, and the evidence is ambivalent.

### Future of the monument

In the short term, there will be more (but limited) investigations to clarify various key issues to do with the plan and purpose of the building. In the longer term, those parts of the monument which lie within the Taylor Woodrow development site are to be permanently protected. The surviving foundations (at least those parts which have been

uncovered so far) are probably too delicate to survive long-term exposure, so they are to be reburied for safe-keeping. It is early days yet in terms of planning, but Taylor Woodrow are excited about the find and have stated that the circus is to be incorporated into their new development in such a way that the remains will be protected and the site of the circus left as open space, at least as much of it as lies within their development. Details are yet to be decided, but the intention is that the site of the circus will become a permanent and visible feature of Colchester in years to come.

Philip Crummy (CAT)

# As luck would have it...

The circus has yielded surprisingly few finds. But of those few, one proves to be especially interesting. This is the first of a number of contributions by **Nina Crummy** (pages 9 -15 and the back cover) on chariots, charioteers, the races, and finds possibly associated with the Colchester circus.

## The harness pendant

Though most of the surfaces associated with the circus have been ploughed away by medieval and later farming, one of the few finds that has come from it is an unusual harness pendant.

Most harness pendants known from the Roman world are military. The cavalry often used them on the harness of their horses, sometimes purely for ornamental effect on parade. Many had a distinctive two-piece form, the upper part of which was riveted to a strap and had one or more rectangular loops on the reverse to hold the strap in position, while the lower part was freely suspended from the top piece by a hook or small hinge, allowing it to swing with the motion of the horse and both catch the sunlight and rattle against the other part, adding extra sparkle and noise to the occasional flash and clinking of more ordinary harness.

In the 1st century AD these fittings were quite large and were often plated with silver or tin and inlaid with patterns of niello to create a striking black-on-white design. By the 2nd and 3rd century they had decreased in size and were rarely plated, but they still had the characteristic two-piece form. As well as having a rectangular loop on the upper part, some also had a riveted projection on the back of the lower part where it was attached to a second strap. This allowed the junction of the two straps to swivel a little when the action of the horse required a bit of 'give'.

The Garrison harness pendant belongs to this type. The upper part is a round

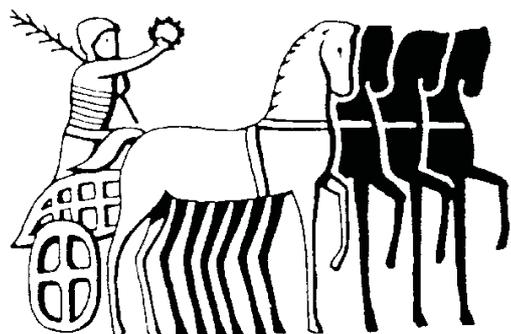
boss with a central decorative knob and three similar knobs projecting at the top and sides of the rim; the knob on the right-hand side is missing. The back is hollow and the rectangular loop reaches across the full width of the boss. Instead of a knob, on the lower edge is a more or less oval loop with two short side projections, again the right-hand one is missing, which probably means that there was more stress and wear on that side. The lower element of the pendant is much longer than the upper one, but repeats the knobbed boss design at the top. Its uppermost knob has an elongated hooked stem, which passes through the oval loop on the upper boss. The bottom end is flat and has side volutes and a terminal knob.

Some auxiliary cavalry harness pendants of the 2nd and 3rd century have side volutes on the lower element, but none are exactly the same and none have the knobbed bosses of the Garrison fitting. Could this be a new type of harness pendant used for the horses that raced at the Colchester circus? Its recovery from the site suggests that this is precisely the case, and that it was used either on the harness of ridden horses, or of the driven pairs, threes or fours that pulled the racing chariots. One thing is certain, as the horses had loads to pull or carry, the weight of their harness would have been kept to a minimum, so there would not have been many of these pendants around to survive to the present day. It is a stroke of luck that this one was lost and found in the very place that helps identify its original use.



Above. The harness pendant from the Garrison site.

Below. Typical 1st-century AD tinned and nielloed harness pendant. Half original size.



The Trust's logo proved to be a better choice than we ever imagined it might be. It derives from fragments of a glass sports cup found during the major archaeological excavation at Balkerne Lane in 1976. The charioteer Olympus is doing his lap of honour having just won his race. He holds a wreath in his right hand and has a palm branch over his left shoulder. Both are symbols of victory.

# A special fee for the ferryman

A bronze coin found in a cemetery near the circus has the image of a chariot drawn by four horses. Was one of the dead person's ancestors a charioteer or is there some other explanation for the find?

It was a widespread practice in the Roman world to place a coin (or two or more) in graves so that the dead person could pay Charon, the ferryman, to carry their soul across the river that was believed to separate the living world from the underworld. Such coins were known as 'the ferryman's fee'. If the burial rite used was inhumation, the coin might be placed in the mouth or in the right hand, where Charon could easily find it, or sometimes a coin was placed on each eye. In cremation graves the coin was placed in the burial pit with the other grave goods, but sometimes they were burnt on the pyre with the dead person.

In many cases the coins used were just those in circulation at the time of death, but occasionally they were antiques that must have been treasured even when they no longer had any real monetary value, usually because either the obverse (front) or the reverse image was rich in funerary symbolism. This is most noticeable in the case of coins in children's graves, which might be between 100 and 200 years' old, sometimes even more, when placed in the grave and which often have designs of protective gods, goddesses, or animals on the reverse. Because the passage of the soul to the underworld was seen as a journey, sometimes the coins bear 'travel' images, such as an antique coin in a grave at Poundbury in Dorset which had a galley on the reverse. Another theme was the all-conquering power of death, which was inextricably linked to the triumph of life-everlasting over death. A lion on the reverse could be seen both as a symbol of the all-devouring jaws of death and as a powerful guardian of the soul that might meet all sorts of ghastly terrors on its journey to the underworld.

One of the graves on the Garrison site contained a coin that offers a similar glimpse of layers of symbolic meaning. It is a *dupondius* (a low value copper-alloy

coin) of Germanicus, the nephew of the emperor Tiberius (AD 14–37) who adopted him as his son in AD 4, the father of the emperor Gaius Caligula (AD 37–41), and the brother of the emperor Claudius (AD 41–54). Born Nero Claudius Drusus Germanicus, on his adoption by Tiberius he took the name Iulius Caesar Germanicus. Both his natural father Drusus and his uncle/adoptive father Tiberius, the sons of Augustus's wife Livia by her first marriage, had campaigned long and hard against the Germans, and Germanicus too served as commander-in-chief in Gaul and Germany. Though never emperor himself (he died, perhaps of poison, in AD 19), he was tremendously popular with the army and with the Roman people in general, and his son Gaius Caligula minted some coins in his memory. Coins minted by Caligula are comparatively rare in Britain (he had only a short reign and died two years before the conquest of Britain), but over 70 have been found in or around Colchester, mainly from Sheepen, and several of these are commemorative coins of Germanicus.

The obverse of the coin from the Garrison site shows Germanicus in a triumphal chariot drawn by four horses. He holds an eagle-tipped sceptre in his left hand. The legend reads GERMANICVS CAESAR. On the reverse he is shown in military dress with a cloak over his left arm, standing with his right arm and hand outstretched in the attitude of command and carrying an eagle standard in his left hand. The legend reads SIGNIS RECEPT DEVICTIS GERM, and below it are S and C in large letters, standing for *Senatus consulto* (by decree of the senate) who nominally had to give permission for the minting of coins.

The progress of Germanicus in the triumphal chariot can be taken simply at face value. He was awarded a triumph in Rome in AD 17 following a successful campaign against the Germans in which he recovered legionary standards lost in



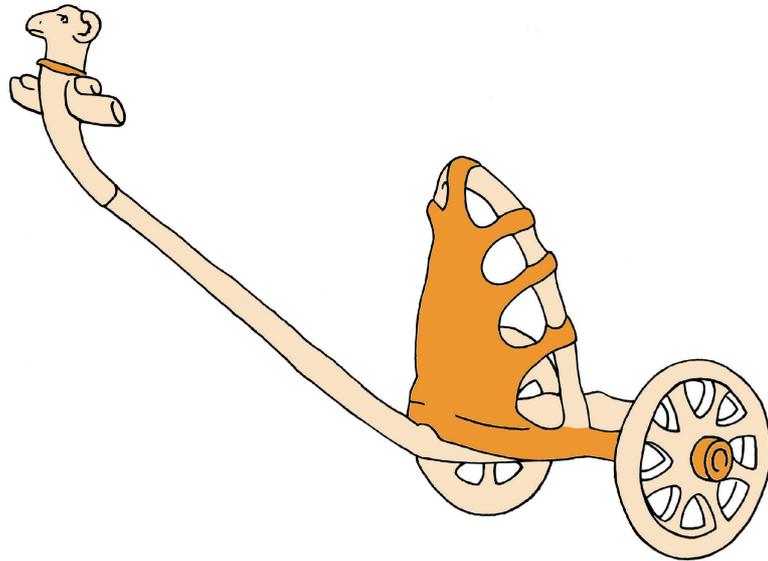
Above. The coin of Germanicus from a grave on the Garrison site (Site J North).

Below. A well-preserved coin of the same type (after *Roman Imperial*

AD 9, when three legions led by Quintilius Varus were massacred and their standards captured. The capture of the eagles was considered to be a great disaster, as they represented the heart and spirit of the legions, in the same way as regimental flags did for the British army in later times. The legend SIGNIS RECEPT DEVICTIS GERM can be translated as 'he took back the standards from the conquered Germans'. When the coins with this design were minted it was supposed to remind the Roman people of Germanicus's military success, which effectively wiped the slate clean of the Varus disaster, and to suggest that his son Gaius Caligula was of the same courageous stock.

The soil conditions have made the coin corrode and degrade over the many hundreds of years it has lain buried, and despite being old when placed in the grave, when it first came out of the ground it did not look as if it had seen much wear through use, though it is slightly underweight compared to mint-condition coins. It would be much more worn if it had been in circulation for about 50–100 years, so it must have been carefully treasured through two, three, or even four generations before it was used as the ferryman's fee. One simple explanation is that the coin was kept by the family of someone who had

# The racing chariot



served with Germanicus during his campaigns, but over the years and successive generations its military significance had ceased to have any real impact and it was finally buried as payment for Charon.

Alternatively, the extra layers of meaning attached to coins in graves could mean that the chariot on the front was intended to refer to the journey to the underworld – being a triumphal progress, the dead person was approaching Hades both with no fear of death and under the protection of the triumphant commander. The imposing attitude of Germanicus on the reverse could also be taken to mean that he was acting as the protector of the dead soul. This is reinforced by the eagle-tipped sceptre and the eagle standard, which represent the power and might of the Roman state as well as of its army.

If the coin had been found in any other cemetery in Colchester, then one of the two explanations above would be considered appropriate for its choice as Charon's fee. The grave, however, was in the cemetery that lay close by the circus found at the Abbey Field, and this suggests that a third explanation might be more appropriate. Could it be that this was the grave of a charioteer, or of a member of a charioteer's family, or of some other person involved in chariot-racing? Though the triumphal chariot (*currus triumphalis*) was heavier than the racing chariot (*currus circensis*) and had larger wheels, such differences would have had no real importance in the face of death – the image of a *quadriga* would be all that was important. The message carried by the coin to the underworld might therefore be that of announcing the dead person's occupation or family connections, but probably still carried the idea that they approached the underworld in triumph and without fear.

Most contemporary pictures of Roman circus races show the *quadriga*, drawn by teams of four horses, but sometimes the *biga*, pulled by two horses, was used. There was also the *triga*, pulled by three horses, though this fell out of favour early on in the development of the Roman state, and sometimes when particular displays of skill were called for teams of six, eight, ten or even twenty horses were put in harness, always lined up side by side, rather than in a line.

No racing chariot (*currus circensis*) or even part of one has ever been found on an archaeological excavation, but there are a number of models that were used as toys. The historian Suetonius complained that the emperor Nero would rather spend time playing with his model chariots than deal with the business of government. These models and the illustrations of *quadrigae* on pots, lamps, glass vessels etc show that compared to the triumphal chariot (*currus triumphalis*) the racing chariot was a lightweight contraption, built for speed, control, and to prevent the horses tiring quickly. Estimates of the weight of a chariot place it at about 25-30 kg, so that, when the weight of the charioteer is added in, the maximum a single horse might be expected to pull was only 25 kg for a team of four, 50 kg for a team of two.

The chariot frame was of wood, with a springy floor of interwoven straps, and a low breastwork that was probably made of hide. The floor was low and wheels were small, keeping the centre of gravity as close to the ground as possible. There was no unnecessary ornament, and metal fittings would have been kept to a minimum to avoid adding to the weight. A curved pole about 2.3 metres long ran from the underside of the chariot up to

Sketch of a *biga* (two-horse chariot), showing the pole and yoke. After a model said to have been found in the river Tiber, Rome, and now in the British Museum.

the height of the withers of the two central horses (*iugales*) in a team of four, where a crossbar, or yoke, about 1 metre long, was attached to their harness. The two horses attached to the yoke provided the motive power and stability, and the pole was comparatively short to keep them close in to the chariot and make them easier to control. So that their tails did not get caught in the breastwork of the chariot or in the reins, they were bound with ribbons. The two outermost horses (*funales*) were not harnessed to the pole as they provided the speed and turning ability at the bends. The left-hand horse would be trained to take the bend as close in as possible, while the right-hand horse kept the speed going.

The charioteer wore a short tunic, a protective hat of leather or felt, straps bound about his torso to protect his chest, and more straps about his lower legs. He did not just hold the reins in his hands, but also wrapped the ends about his body. This not only meant that he could regather them easily if he dropped them, but also that he could use his body weight most effectively for control. He always wore a dagger so that he could cut them loose in an accident. Despite this, fatalities were high, and chariot-racing can be best compared to today's Formula One or TT racing, with high financial rewards for the victor, but also a high risk of an early death.

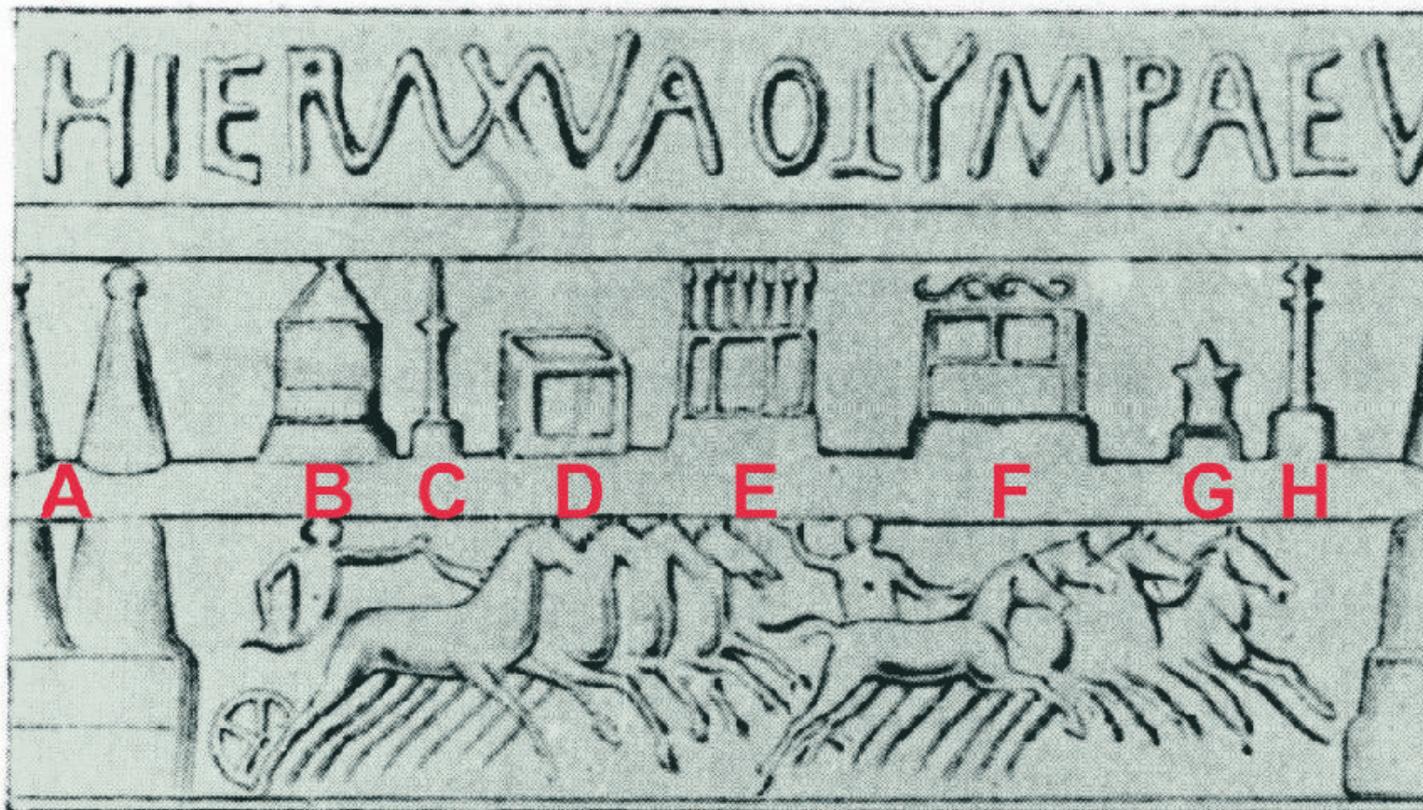
# Race for victory

The image of a charioteer driving a *quadriga*, a four-horse racing chariot, has been used as the logo of the Colchester Archaeological Trust since the mid 1970s, ever since four joining fragments of glass with that design were found on the Balkerne Lane site, during excavations in advance of the construction of St Mary's car park (see page 9). The fragments came from a type of glass vessel called a circus, or chariot-race, cup, made in the late Claudian and Neronian period, from about AD 50 to the mid 60s. Cups of this form were made by blowing glass into a clay mould, and some are in strong colours such as dark blue or green, others in pale glass tinted with yellow, pale blue, or blue/green. The Balkerne Lane cup fragments are pale yellow-green.

There are two main types of circus cup, those with a single main frieze of decoration around the main part of the vessel, and those with two friezes. Related types, sometimes called arena cups, have a single main frieze showing fighting gladiators or athletic contests. All these types can be subdivided again according to the details of the decoration. At least thirteen circus and arena cups have been found in Colchester, decorated with nine different designs.



The replica two-frieze chariot-race cup from Colchester. Made by Mark Taylor and David Hill.



Single-frieze circus cups show four teams of four-horse chariots parading from left to right, with one charioteer holding a palm branch and wreath to show he was the victor. A narrow band at the top gives the names of the charioteers, and another narrow band at the base is decorated with images of wild animals and trees or shrubs. The Balkerne Lane fragment belongs to this type, and its charioteer, who carries the symbols of victory, is named Olympus; *Olympe va* is what the crowd would have shouted as they cheered him round. Some specialists interpret *va* as short for *vale* (farewell), others as *vade* (go).

A complete cup of this particular type has been found in a grave at Couvin, Belgium, and gives the names of the other three charioteers as Pyramus, Eutycus, and Ierax. There is another group with the names Musculosus, Eutyclus, Olympus and Poenix, on which Poenix is shown as the victor. Part of a cup belonging to this group was found in the mid 20th century on the site of the General Post Office in Head Street (now the Odeon cinema).

A complete two-frieze chariot-race cup was found in the 19th century in a cremation burial in west Colchester; part of the Pollexfen Collection, it is now in

the British Museum. All the cups are thin-walled, and the pale yellow-green glass of this example and the Balkerne fragment makes them seem particularly delicate.

On this cup the inscribed panel below the rim names the charioteers as Hierax, Olympus, Antilocus and Cresces. The upper frieze shows fourteen structures that decorated the spina, the central barrier, of the circus. In the order shown in the illustration here they are: the top of one set of triple turning posts, a two-storey pavilion with a conical roof, a statue on a column, an altar, seven eggs on a four-columned frame, a shrine, an altar, and a statue on a column; then comes the top of another set of triple turning posts, followed by seven dolphins on a four-columned frame, a statue on a column, an altar, a two-storey pavilion, an altar, an obelisk, and a statue of a lion. The seven eggs and seven dolphins were used to count off the seven laps of each race. The bottoms of the turning posts appear on the bottom frieze, which shows the four teams of four-horse chariots. None of the charioteers carries a wreath and palm frond, but three have *va* after their names while Cresces has *av*; this may stand for *ave* (hail) and could mean that he was the victor, alternatively it may be

that the mould-maker mistakenly reversed the *a* and *v* of *va*.

So far no production site has been located for circus cups, though their distribution is restricted to the north-western and western provinces of the Roman Empire, with concentrations in Switzerland and elsewhere in the upper Rhineland, Cologne and the lower Rhineland, France, and Britain. There is a possibility that glassmakers travelled around with their moulds, producing just enough cups to satisfy local demand in the towns and military sites they visited. Could they have been made to celebrate particular race days at these places? After all, there is no reason to suppose that chariot-racing only took place in purpose-built circuses; provided the turning points were marked in some way any flat area would be suitable, in the same way as any grassy area can be used for football today provided the goal mouths are marked by jackets or jumpers. This could mean that chariot-racing took place in Colchester right from the founding of the colony in AD 49, and it may well be possible that the stone circus at the Abbey Field had a timber predecessor, in the same way that the stone amphitheatre in London replaced an earlier timber one.

The parts of the central barrier shown on the cup are as follows: turning post (A), pedimented building (B), columned statue (C), altar (D), eggs (E), pavilion or altar (F), altar or statue (G), columned statue (H), turning post (I), dolphins (J), columned statue (K), altar or shrine (L), pedimented building (M), altar (N), obelisk (O), feline on high pedestal (P). (After *Roman Circuses*, by John H Humphrey, pp 189-91).



# A day at the Circus Maximus



The races in Rome developed as part of the ceremonial games that took place over several days and during the Roman games (*ludi Romani*) there were five days of racing, in the plebeian games (*ludi plebei*) only three. Under Augustus usually twelve races were run on each day, but this was doubled under Gaius Caligula and 24 became the norm. Race days might also be held as part of the celebrations for a triumph or some other special public occasion. Each race was made up of seven laps, with a total distance per race of nearly 4 km. All 24 races covered a distance of about 95 km or 59 miles. As well as chariot races there were also acrobatic races, with riders coping with two horses and jumping from one to the other in turn at high speed. There might in addition be boxing, athletics, and gladiatorial contests, which did not only take place in the amphitheatres.

The four racing factions, Blues, Greens, Reds and Whites, had their stables out on the Campus Martius, about 1 mile from the Circus Maximus. Hundreds of people were involved in looking after the horses and preparing them for the races: trainers, grooms, stable lads and vets, and then there were also the chariot-makers, tack-makers, tailors, acrobatic horsemen, charioteers and doctors, as well as guards who were posted to prevent dirty work by the rival factions or supporters. A minimum of four teams entered each race, one from each faction, and a maximum of twelve. If all the races had involved twelve four-horse teams this would mean 1,152 horses in all to be groomed, harnessed and taken down to the circus, as well as the acrobats' horses. Some races only used two-horse teams, but others might use anything up to ten, so about 700-1,000 horses might be involved each day.

Other staff worked down at the circus itself: the mechanics in charge of the starting gates, the men who cleared the arena of debris and wounded and dead horses and men during and after each race, and the race officials such as the referees, lap-counters, and trumpeters. Some pictures of race scenes show horsemen riding alongside the chariots; these were the *hortatores* or *iubilatores*, names that suggest that they acted like modern-day cheer-leaders, but it is more likely that they rode ahead and helped to guide the drivers around

wreckage and pointed out gaps where a spurt of speed might allow the team to overtake. An unenviable task was that of the *sparsores*, young boys who stood around the edge of the arena and tried to refresh the horses and drivers with water. Many died beneath the hooves and wheels of the galloping teams.

Before the racing started there was always a formal procession, led by the presiding official in a heavy triumphal chariot drawn by four horses. Following him came men carrying religious statues, while other sacred objects might be drawn along on carts. Musicians and dancers added to the spectacle, which ended with a parade of the competitors.

The Circus Maximus changed considerably over the centuries, with successive Roman leaders and emperors adding various improvements. Under Caesar it could seat about 150,000 spectators, but by the time of Trajan its capacity was up to about 255,000. It was an imposing structure, measuring 600 by 200 metres, and on the outside its arcades provided places of business for sellers of refreshments, astrologers, prostitutes, and other small businessmen and women, all hoping to relieve the race-goers of some ready cash. Bets were placed on the races, and the supporters of the rival factions frequently argued and came to blows. The chatter of all these people coupled with the roar of the spectators during the races must have rivalled that of modern-day races and football matches, and would have added to the pent-up agitation of the horses and drivers.

The excitement was general, and the poet Ovid in his *Art of Love* suggested that the circus was a good place for young men to go and pick up girls. *I came here, in fact, so that I might sit beside you and talk to you. I didn't want the love which you stir in me to be concealed from you. So, you watch the races and I'll watch you. Let's each watch the things we love most, and let's feast our eyes on them... Why are you edging away from me? It's no use. The seat marker forces us to touch... Oh dear, your skirt is trailing on the ground. Lift it up, or here, I will do it...*

But even Ovid's imaginary young man broke off his pursuit of his heart's desire to watch the race. The teams were each allocated a starting-box by the drawing

of lots. The boxes really were just that, a totally-enclosed space with double doors facing the arena that were closed under tension. The presiding official dropped a white napkin as the signal for each race to begin, and a central bolt was pulled so that all the starting-gates flew open at the same time. The teams sprang into action, all racing straight ahead for a white line marked on the ground between the central *spina* and the right-hand wall. Once they had passed this line, they could start cutting across each other, all trying hard to get into the lead and tuck in as close to the *spina* as possible.

Estimates of the speed they could reach suggest it was up to about 75 kph on the straight, but this had to drop to about 25-30 kph at the turns. A collision at this speed would be disastrous, and the Latin name for such a crash was *nafragium*, shipwreck, which conveys the mangled wreckage of chariot, drivers and horses that must have been the result. In seven laps, the dangerous tight turns had to be negotiated thirteen times before the final burst of speed for the finishing line. The laps were counted off by devices consisting of seven dolphins or seven eggs fixed in a frame, and a second frame with eggs was placed on the edge of the arena where it could be seen by the charioteers.

As soon as the race was over the winner was presented with the prize money, a symbolic palm frond of victory, and a wreath (usually a circlet of flowers or metal, rather than laurel) by the presiding official and then drove a lap of honour round the course. Sometimes prizes were also awarded to those coming in second, third or fourth. This brief pause for the victory celebrations allowed the arena to be cleared and prepared for the next race, and then it all started once more.

At the end of the day a banquet was served, and gifts were tossed into the crowd. They might be snacks, money-filled purses, or 'raffle tickets' that gave the lucky catcher a chance to win a house, a farm, or even a ship. These gave even the punters whose bets had failed to net them a fortune during the course of the day the chance to recoup their losses.

And such was the taste of the Roman populace for this entertainment that they all went back again for the next day's sport.

# The price of fame

A successful charioteer could become a rich man.  
But for some, life was short...



Though the allegiance of race-goers lay with the factions, the Blues, Greens, Reds and Whites, rather than with the charioteers themselves (just like in football today), successful charioteers and their horses became household names. The obituary of the famous Scorpus, who died in his mid 20s, was composed by the poet Martial, a devotee of the circus. Charioteers were usually of low social status, either freedmen or slaves bought by the factions and trained up, but they could become millionaires in even a short career, as the financial rewards were very high. The purse money per race might be between 15,000 and 60,000 *sestertii* (high-value copper-alloy coins) – compared to a legionary's annual pay of 900 *sestertii*.

However, the risk of death was also very high, though certainly not as bad as for gladiators. Crescens, born in Mauretania, North Africa, and probably brought to Rome as a slave, drove for the Blue faction. He died aged 22, after

winning 47 out of 686 races and earning 1,558,346 *sestertii*. Another driver died at 29 and had driven for all four factions in the course of his career. He won 739 races, some for driving six-horse, eight-horse and ten-horse teams. His brother died at 20 but even by then had also driven for all four factions and had won 125 races.

Not all charioteers died in their youth. A Spanish charioteer, Diocles, who raced first for the White and then for the Red faction, began racing at 18 and drove for 24 years before retiring at 42. He entered 4,257 races, and won 1,462 of them. In all he won 2,900 purses, some for second, third and fourth place totalling 35,863,120 *sestertii*. He usually drove *quadrigae* but some of the purses he won were for driving with teams of two, six and seven horses. He was obviously a master of tactics, because in 815 races he took the lead from the start and held it to the end.

Other charioteers won even more races: Epaphroditus won 1,467 races, Scorpus

2,048, and Pompeius Musclosus a magnificent 3,559. Gifts were showered upon them by successful punters, and officialdom usually turned a blind eye on any fights or illegal escapades. If they were slaves, and if they lived long enough, they could use their winnings to purchase their freedom.

Successful horses were also held in high esteem. Crescens' epitaph records the name of the four horses he drove in his first winning race: *Circius* (Whirlwind), *Acceptor* (Hawk), *Delicatus* (Sweet Delight) and *Cotynus* (Dark Bay). If the horses survived to the end of their careers, they were not slaughtered but put out to pasture and treated with respect, even having a decent burial and a gravestone raised in their honour. Though most race-horses were stallions, a tombstone offers this tribute to an African mare, *Spendusa*: *Sired on the sandy plains of Gaetulia by a Gaetulan stallion, fast as the wind, incomparable in your life, you now, Spendusa, dwell in the realm of Lethe.*

## A first-hand account of a race in the 5th century

The vivid description below by the 5th-century poet Sidonius Apollinaris of a four-team race in which his friend Consentius took part brings home both the excitement and the danger as well as the tactics involved, with two drivers working together to cut out the other two.

*The four team colours are clearly visible: white and blue, green and red. Grooms are holding the heads and bridles of the horses ... calming them with soothing pats and reassuring them with words of encouragement. Still the horses fret in the gates, lean against the starting barrier, and snort loudly. ... They rear up, prance, and kick impatiently against the wood of the gates. A shrill blast of the trumpet and the chariots leap out of the gates onto the track... The wheels fly over the ground and the air is choked with the dust stirred up on this track. The drivers urge their horses with whips. Standing in the chariots they lean far forward so that they can whip even the shoulders of the horses... The chariots fly out of sight, quickly covering the long open stretch... When they have come round the far turn, both the rival teams have passed Consentius, but his partner is in the lead. The middle teams concentrate now on taking the lead on the inside lane. If the driver in front pulls his horses too far right toward the spectator stands, he leaves an opening on his left, in the inside lane. Consentius, however, redoubles his efforts to hold back his horses and skilfully reserve their energy for the seventh and last lap. The others race full out, urging their horses with whip and voice. The track is moist with the sweat of both horses and drivers ... And thus they race, the first lap, the second, the third, the fourth. In the fifth lap, the leader is no longer able to withstand the pressure of his pursuers. He knows his horses are exhausted, that they can no*

*longer respond to his demand for speed, and he pulls them aside. When the sixth lap had been completed and the crowd was already demanding that the prize be awarded, Consentius's opponents thought that they had a very safe lead for the seventh and last lap, and they drove with self-confidence, not a bit worried above a move by Consentius. But suddenly he loosens the reins, plants his feet firmly on the floorboard, leans far over the chariot... and makes his fast horses gallop full out. One of the other drivers tries to make a very sharp turn at the far post, feeling Consentius close on his heels, but he is unable to turn his four wildly excited horses and they plunge out of control. Consentius passes him carefully. The fourth driver is enthralled by the cheers of the spectators and turns his galloping horses too far right towards the stands. Consentius drives straight and fast, and passes the driver who has angled out and only now, too late, begun to urge his horses with the whip. The latter pursues Consentius recklessly, hoping to overtake him. He cuts in sharply across the track. His horses lose their balance and fall. Their legs become tangled in the spinning chariot wheels and are snapped and broken. The driver is hurled headlong out of the shattered chariot which then flass on top of him in a heap of twisted wreckage. His broken and bloody body is still... And now the emperor presents the palm branch of victory to Consentius.*

Sidonius Apollinaris, *Poems*, 23.323-424

# Running rings around the Arena – Roman burials at the garrison

By Howard Brooks (CAT)

Most of the northern part of the Colchester Garrison redevelopment coincides with the cemeteries of Roman Colchester. As reported in *Colchester Archaeologist 16 and 17*, CAT has been fieldwalking, trial-trenching and excavating at the garrison since 2002, and is currently excavating Roman burials at the Cavalry Barracks (Site J), and near the Arena Leisure Centre (Site C2)\*.

(\*The investigations near the Arena Leisure Centre are part of the Taylor Woodrow project - see page 2 for details.)



It was not normal practice in the Roman period to bury the dead inside the walled towns. Instead the favoured places were alongside the main approach roads into Roman towns and cities. In Colchester, extensive areas of Roman cemeteries have been discovered around the western and southern sides of the town – from Balkerne Hill to Lexden Road, and along the south part of the town between the Maldon and Mersea Roads. There were smaller and separate cemeteries along other roads lines – for instance the cemetery excavated at the Asda superstore site in 1997 (*Colchester Archaeologist 11*). Previous CAT excavations in the cemeteries include St Mary's Hospital (over 70 burials), Butt Road (over 700 inhumations), the Abbey Field (73 cremations: *Colchester Archaeologist 14*), and the recent Handford House site in Lexden (54 cremations and 9 inhumations: *Colchester Archaeologist 17*).

## Roads, boundaries and burials at the Cavalry Barracks

When the Le Cateau Barracks were built in the 19th century, a great number of Roman burials were found. Exact records of location and numbers were not kept, but Roman burial pots were so common that in one instance they were described as 'like currants in a bun'. It was therefore no surprise when excavations on Site J, at the adjacent Cavalry Barracks (recently the Garrison

Above. Jet bear (before cleaning).

Left. Emma Sandford excavating a cremation burial. A shallow bowl was placed upside down over the pot containing the cremated bones.



Above. Some of the Roman ring ditches. Note the rectangular pits in the centre of each of them where the cremations were buried.

Below. Delicate work lifting grave goods in a cremation burial. Left to right: Laura Pooley, Ben Holloway, and Cat Bell.

Saddle Club) turned up a huge number of burials. At the time of writing, some 270 burials have been excavated. These range from very simple 'unaccompanied' burials (ie without grave goods), to cremations and inhumations with grave goods (pots which presumably contained food and drink for the journey to the afterlife). Some of the simple cremations are extremely simple – just bowl-shaped pits containing a single vessel containing the dead person's cremated remains – whereas the richer burials could contain a large number of pots, and such items as lamps, small decorative wooden caskets, and pieces of personal jewelry. One burial contained an exquisite carved jet bear, which is reminiscent of the two carved jet bears found at the Abbey Field in 2000. It seems that both the poor and the wealthy were buried here.

It is now becoming apparent that the Roman cemeteries were not just large areas of burials – they were split up into a number of distinct compartments or plots by boundary ditches and even metalled roads. This was first seen at Butt Road in the 1970s, and has now been confirmed at the Garrison, where boundary ditches and distinct clusters of



**CIRCUS FOUNDATION**





Above. Excavation of a Roman cremation burial in progress.

Left. The circles are the remains of the Roman ring-ditches. The two rectangular buildings are the remains of demolished World War 2 air raid shelters. Part of the buttressed south wall of the circus can just be made out in the shade of the trees at the top of the photograph.

burials have been discovered. Perhaps the existence of separate cemetery plots explains why different types of burials occur in different areas – the Butt Road site contained exclusively inhumation burials, yet the Cavalry Barracks has revealed mainly cremation burials. In one part of Site J, the burials were all small – was this a child’s cemetery area?

### The ring ditches near the Arena

A particularly fascinating site is Area C2, immediately east of the Arena Leisure Centre (formerly the NAAFI). Discoveries here include a buttressed wall (part of the Roman circus), and another 76 or so burials. However, what makes this site uniquely interesting is the fact that some of the cremation burials are centrally located inside *ring-ditches*. Most people will be familiar with

ring-ditches as the remains of Bronze Age barrows, such as those excavated by CAT at Chitts Hill in the 1970s. But the Garrison ring ditches are not Bronze Age in date – they are quite definitely *late Roman*. At the time of writing, research is underway to try to find parallels for these burials, and to place them into some kind of context. For such small ring ditches (they are generally between 4 and 6 m in diameter), there are many parallels on Saxon sites such as Sutton Hoo in Suffolk, and Orsett and Alresford in Essex, but nothing like this has been seen before in Colchester, and no late Roman, British parallels have as yet been identified.

Although we have many Roman cremation burials of the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD in Colchester, inhumation burial had generally become the favoured burial rite by the 4th century. This was especially so after the Edict of Constantine permitted and promoted Christianity in the year AD 313. Therefore, in ‘the archaeological record’, one would expect to see pagan style cremation burials gradually replaced by the Christian-style inhumations, so that by the mid to late 4th century the overwhelming majority of burials should be inhumations.

The discovery of 4th-century cremations inside Saxon type ring ditches obviously prompts a number of questions. Whose burials are these? Do the ring-ditches

give any clue to the origin of the people? The ring-ditches are a distinctly Saxon (ie German) rather than a Roman phenomenon, so they might indicate a Germanic origin for those buried here. If these people were of Germanic stock, then that might suggest a link with more Saxon material found only 200 m to the east. During the 19th century, Saxon jewelry, spear-heads and shield bosses were found on the east side of Mersea Road. Although the material was not recovered under ‘controlled conditions’, objects of this type invariably come from cemeteries, and so a Saxon cemetery must have existed there. In addition, a burial in a burnished Saxon pot is recorded from the adjacent Meeanee & Hyderabad barracks.

So it appears that we have an area of Saxon or Germanic burials on Mersea Road, and a further group (the ring-ditch burials) near the circus. Are these two areas part of the same, large cemetery where people of Germanic origin are buried? And who are they – citizens of Colchester who just happened to be German? Or are they German mercenary soldiers of the type known to have been drafted in by the Romano-British authorities in the later 3rd and 4th centuries? Or maybe they were even the families of circus performers! Seems very unlikely, but you never know.

# Abbeyfield – a modern community in the making



Abbeyfield  
COLCHESTER • ESSEX



Bryant Homes  
by Taylor Woodrow

Archaeological excavations on the new Abbeyfield development were conducted on behalf of leading national housebuilder, Taylor Woodrow. The company is thrilled to be part of such a discovery and believes it can only have a positive affect for Colchester and future residents of Abbeyfield.

Peter Andrew, Taylor Woodrow Eastern regional managing director, said: 'The excavation of a Roman Circus is a fantastic discovery for Colchester and has caused a great deal of excitement. We are delighted to have supported the Colchester Archaeological Trust in revealing such significant finds and will endeavour to preserve as much of the remains as possible for future generations.'

The discovery of the only verified example of a Roman circus in Britain has generated a great deal of national and regional media attention and is sure to add to the growing interest in Abbeyfield from local residents.

Abbeyfield will be an exciting new urban village within walking distance of Colchester town centre. It will feature more than 2,500 new homes, refurbished Grade II listed buildings and work units set in acres of landscaped open space, leafy paths and cycle-ways and children's play areas.

Abbeyfield Project Manager, James Moodie said: 'We have been working closely with the town council to ensure that Abbeyfield is not only Colchester's most attractive development for new residents, but also, that its impact on existing residents is entirely positive.

'One of the most important tasks is to ensure that Abbeyfield provides the best of the basics; transport, education and health. You can then add to those three other amenities like shops and opportunities for small businesses.

'The facilities provided by our plan will not only cover the needs of the new residents but will also be sufficient to improve the provision for people who already live around the development.

'New and improved roads, a redevelopment of the train station, a new health centre and contributions to improve educational facilities will all benefit existing and new communities.'

Leisure is becoming increasingly important to buyers and Abbeyfield will be one of the best provided areas in the region.

James said: 'For children and young people, there will be 14 new playgrounds, provisions for youth centres and improved communication links to the town.



A picture Taylor ' Woodrow's memory lane. Artillery training on the Abbey Field prior to 1914. From *Colchester, a Pictorial History* by John Marriage.

'Sporting facilities will be extended and enhanced with a new leisure centre planned and extra sporting pitches. Abbeyfield will also be one of the greenest and most spacious new developments in the UK with acres of open green space, including cycle-ways, bridleways and open parkland.'

Finally, the look of the Abbeyfield will be completely in keeping with the current spirit and culture of Colchester. 'The architectural plans are little short of stunning,' said James. 'We have worked extremely hard to ensure Abbeyfield will be as pleasing to the eye as it will be to live in. Essex's most ambitious choice of housing styles will mix with tree lined avenues and other visually appealing features to make the area second to none.'

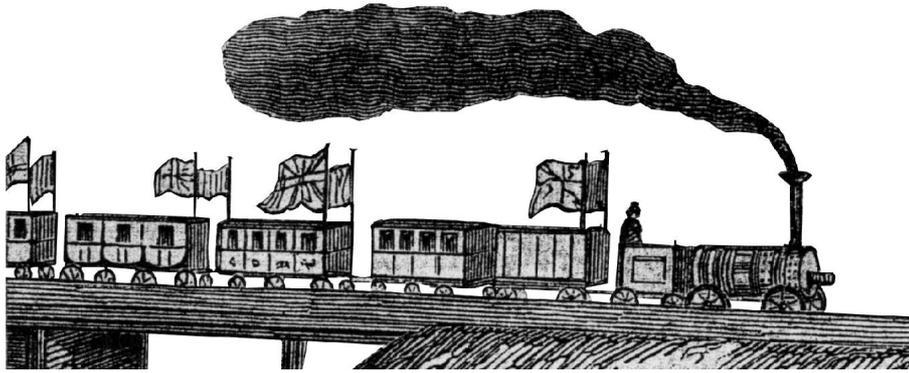
Everyone who has registered an interest in Abbeyfield will be invited to the opening of the state of the art sales centre in a few months. The building will be the focal point of the regenerated Abbeyfield area. It will contain plans, drawings and models of each proposed phase of construction. Staff at the centre will be able to answer queries relating to the development as well, of course, as helping buyers choose their ideal new home.

The new centre will also host a number of exhibitions, the first of which will be a display of some of the interesting archaeology which has been uncovered.

The second will be a display of a more recent trip down memory lane. Liz Robinson, sales and marketing director for Taylor Woodrow explains: 'We are looking for pictures, drawings and anecdotes from people who have lived in and around the area. Communities have been enjoying Abbeyfield for thousands of years and we would like to gather a pictorial and narrative record from Victorian times to the present day.' If you have any information, please get in touch via the Abbeyfield website - [abbeyfield.com](http://abbeyfield.com).

# The railway comes to Colchester

By Peter E Thompson



First train to Colchester from Ipswich in 1846.

Transport of goods in bulk began in the industrial areas of the kingdom as a natural evolution. Canals were an established system, but being constrained to follow a winding path to maintain level water, their journeys were long and time-consuming. Any attempt towards shortening the distance by building locks to surmount gradients was very expensive in infrastructure and in fact introduced even more undesirable delays due to congestion. Counter-productive in today's language. And in most cases, the horse was still king, commanding both weight hauled, and speed of travel.

East Anglia was able to live without all this hurley-burley for a few years longer than the rest. It had an extensive coastline with many rivers. Goods could be landed and various improvements to waterways such as the River Stour permitted delivery quite long distances inland. It became apparent that higher prices for produce could then be fetched in the Great Wen, because delivery after cropping was faster and the item was consequently fresher for the consumer.

There was no instant change. Stratford was still open fields that had only recently been covered with green-houses. It would take something very persuasive to overcome the resistance to a change of lifestyle by the smallholders living on Stratford Marshes. It is still only three miles from the River Lea to the City.

But industry and commerce was spreading outwards from Thames-side. Housing estates were being built in vast

numbers, the residential workforce was moving away from its workplace and transport was feeding the demand for mobility.

Stratford Marsh was infilled and the new town stretched into the distance from the windmill towards the east. Thornton Fields became a twenty-road set of carriage sidings and the two-platform station at the Stratford junction of the new lines to Cambridge and Colchester metamorphosed into today's twelve. In 1938, Stratford was the largest steam locomotive depot in Europe with 300 engines allocated to its filth-encrusted sheds. But what about Colchester?

## The fringe

It was said that one should beware of visiting places like Tollesbury or Brightlingsea in case one fell over the edge of East Anglia and was never seen again. An apocryphal tale, but the demand for mobility was a long time gestating. However the word was out. These new-fangled railway machines could cover 25 miles in an hour, and a journey to London AND BACK could be completed within daylight.

The Eastern Counties Railway reached Colchester in 1843, running out of money in the process and pausing in its struggle towards Ipswich. Business men and persons of wealth or importance found it necessary to make the adventurous journey to London to oversee the efficient expansion of their investments. The Country was coming to Town at last.

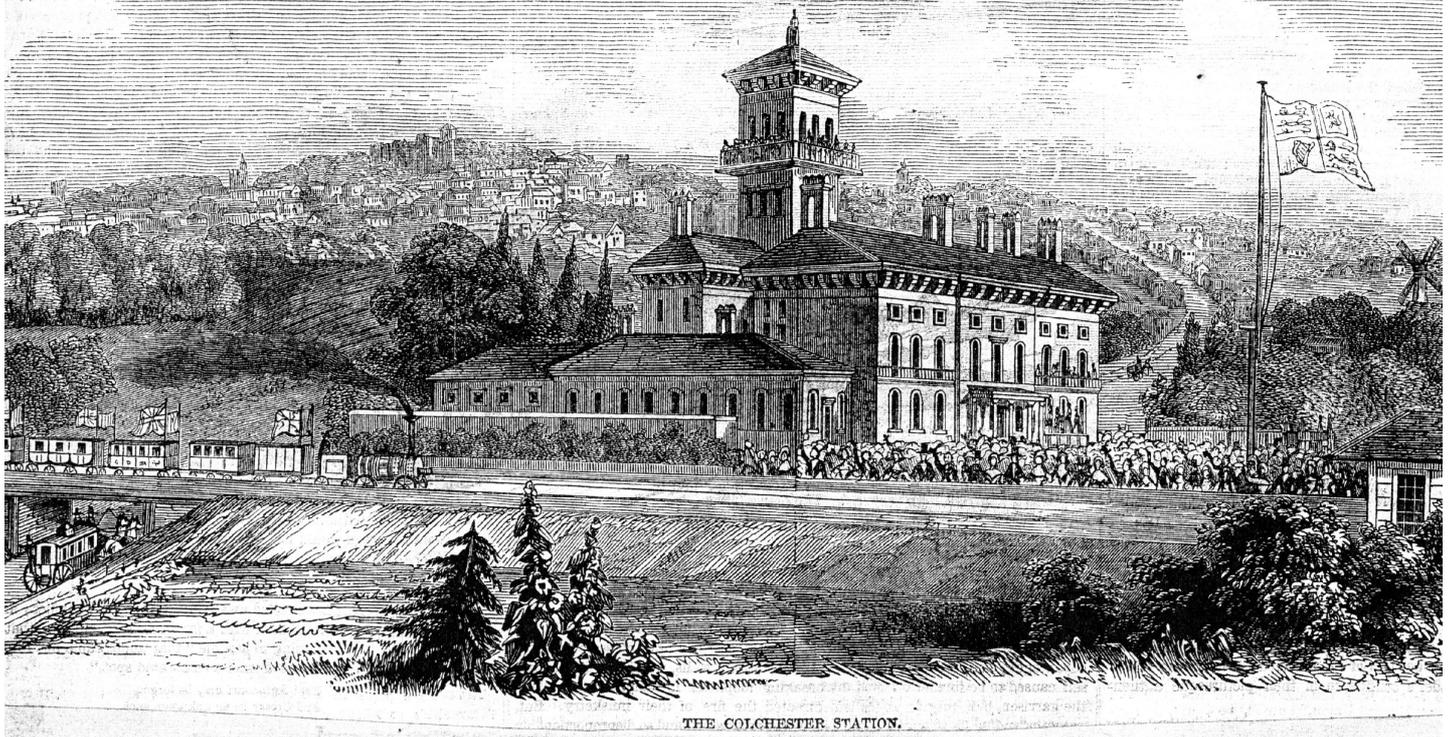
## Service

The railways struggled for quite a long time to find their identity in an era of social change. The biggest impact was made by those who had the biggest purses – nothing new there – but it was manifested in many different ways.

Groups of businessmen demanded that railways be built from their town 'A' to the next largest, 'B', and by skilful inclusion in the group of strategic landowners, who were often well paid in company shares or coin of the realm for parcels of land previously worth very little, their targets were achieved. If their need was to shift a product to a particular place, eg not necessarily to be part of the national network, then so it was.

In 1846, the Colchester, Stour Valley, Sudbury & Halstead Railway Company obtained an Act for its construction, followed soon after by further legislation to extend the railway from Colchester to the Hythe, Colchester's seaport. There was an option to build a curve from north to west at Marks Tey, where it had running powers over the Eastern Counties Railway to Colchester from a north to east connection, to take trains direct to London. Land was purchased and the station suitably designed. But it held no interest for the Board of the C.S.V.S. & H. They wanted only to reach the sea via Colchester and the 'London' curve was never built. After 158 years of changing trains for their journey to London, the citizens of Sudbury have probably got used to the idea that it never will be. A recent plan for massive

OPENING OF THE EASTERN UNION RAILWAY.



Opening of the East Union Railway in 1846. Illustration from the *Illustrated London News*. Elements of the picture are imaginary.

development at Marks Tey included a new station in a different location, but still no chance of a 'London' curve.

However, in the 1850s, this did not prevent passengers from making many and vociferous complaints about the trains, few in number though they were. They said that the trains were often an hour or more later than their advertised time, citing as the reason 'the prolonged delays caused by the stopping at every station to carry out shunting, and the attaching and detaching of wagons.' This sometimes involved the passenger-carrying vehicles and their occupants. They might have been good ol' Suffolk boys, but the inadequate brakes of the time must have provided a degree of excitement not often found on a four-wheeled two-horse dray on the Ipswich Road.

### Class

The other side of the coin is more applicable to Colchester as the railhead and principal town in the county. Every main station, and a tidy few of the smaller ones depending on their nearness to the landed gentry, had a short stub siding in a bay platform at each end. This was the dock siding and within it could be loaded cattle, horses, or four-wheeled flat trucks with minimal

side-planking called 'carriage trucks'. The approach roadways to the station were arranged to lead to the buffer stops at the end of this siding, and flap plates could be hinged over to fill the gap.

The carriage truck stood ready at the stops and the carriage owned by the First Class passenger that brought him to the station was loaded on to it. If he was travelling to his London in-town residence, there would also be a horse-box for his animals, and possibly a family saloon if he was not alone. It was not unknown for him to remain in his carriage on the truck – a bit like Eurostar? Certainly there was space in the horse-box for the groom and driver.

The travelling public, eg Second and Third Class, could only expect two or three trains each way per day. The biggest revenue coming from the movement of freight made sure that this type of train took priority. They did not always move at speed. The 'block trains' carrying just one commodity such as coal, bricks, oil, or cement had yet to be invented, and wagons were added or dropped off at many stations and sidings along the route. This left gaps in the timetable and there existed a thriving business in the provision of private trains. Our First-Class horse-drawn carriage owner could make a deal with

the station master to supply a locomotive and wagons for his journey and depart at a time that he found convenient, and so it was arranged.

Interestingly, complaints from carriage owners about the damage caused by cinders to the paint finish of their emblems of status led to the design of vans with end-doors, named by the railways as C.C.T.s (covered carriage trucks), and still called that until their demise 120 years later after national motor-rail services finally ceased.

Second Class had roofs, padded seating, and sometimes lights – offered on payment of a fee and hung on a hook by the door. In severe weather, foot-warmers and rugs could be ordered and paid for at the start of the journey. Third Class had wooden planked seats, sometimes with backs, and wagons that often, but not always, had a roof. But in its wisdom, or more probably because the railways avoided carrying the common man if at all possible, the government of the time ordered that one train should run every day (except Sunday) the full length of every railway in each direction, stopping at every station, and must have Third Class provided. The 'Parliamentary' entered railway language and became an acronym for slow stopping trains.

# An unusual railway buff

William Wire was a Victorian antiquarian with an unusual interest in the railway. James Fawn dips into Wire's diary to discover how upset he was because of what had been done to the Roman gate on Balcerne Hill, so that customers in the King's Head could watch the trains coming in and out of Colchester's new railway station.



William Wire was a watchmaker and jeweller with a shop on North Hill; he was also an antiquarian and 'dealer in curiosities'. He kept a journal in which he recorded Colchester events in the mid 19th century. Today, this and other documents by him, which have been preserved, are valuable sources of information for local historians and archaeologists. He also collected antiquities that were then being found in large numbers as Victorian Colchester grew. Like other antiquarians of that period he appears not to have excavated himself, but visited sites where chance finds were reported or might be found, such as the lengths of railway being built around Colchester.

The railway line from London started out as the Eastern Counties Railway, which opened in 1838 with a service from the first terminus at Shoreditch to Stratford. Construction did not reach the Colchester district until four years later. In June 1842 Wire records that he had purchased a medieval ring from a railway labourer who had found it near the viaduct being built at Stanway. From then on Wire frequently visited the considerable earthworks, cuttings and embankments made by the navvies with picks, shovels and wheelbarrows.

Sometimes he made purchases of artifacts for modest sums, which he recorded in his journal, but often he

entered '*Nothing found*'. The navvies would be encouraged to work quickly as their task was to build a railway and not indulge in archaeological exploration. There was competition from other would-be purchasers and collectors, eager to acquire antiquities – just like today. Moreover, in so deep an excavation as a railway cutting one would expect any finds to be in the upper layers only and the number found would be small in relation to the quantity of soil moved.

On 23 August 1842 he notes that the foundation for the station (North) was '*begun the day before. Nothing found*'. On 30 August he found the navvies '*getting on with the station which appears from its slight construction to be but for a temporary purpose*'; certainly a quick job because on 3 September the building was '*nearing completion*'. (The premises have been much altered and enlarged since!) By the end of the year he had made another twenty-five visits to the works at the station and west of it, including a Boxing Day visit to Stanway where he walked across the new viaduct. He noted that the surface had been covered with '*a pitch-like substance*' for water-proofing. Obviously it then lacked a track-bed, but the latter had been laid by 10 February 1843, for on that day a '*train drawn by an engine arrived at the station.*'

On 29 March the first train for passengers to London '*left at nine-o'clock this morning*'. A great number of people went to the station to see trains arrive and depart. With the completion of the terminus Wire's visits became less frequent, temporarily.

However, on 15 June he '*visited railway, found every accommodation for travellers*', a comforting observation but more was to come. Earlier, on 24 November 1842 he mentions the digging of foundations for a building near the station, which became the Victoria Station Hotel. He included the site in his other visits, but little seems to have been found there. Opened in August 1844, the hotel was not a railway venture, being built by the engineering contractor Samuel Morton Peto. It failed because the Red Lion and The Three Cups promoted transport up North Hill to their own more convenient establishments in the town, away from the noise of the trains and nearer the amenities.

The Eastern Counties owned two and a half miles of land to the east of the station as the beginning of an extension, but it was another company, the Eastern Union, which built the line to Ipswich and beyond. Wire walked to the station on 3 March 1844 when labourers were levelling the ground on the north side of the engine house which was on the east

side of the bridge crossing North Road and this was the first of many visits to the extension works.

Wire concentrated on two cuttings that might be expected to produce more finds. One just to the east of the station was the shallower, but it produced the most finds, mainly Roman cremation urns. Before the recent Turner Road development, in which much of this cutting disappeared, the Trust excavated in the area and confirmed the existence of a Roman cemetery. The other deeper cutting leading beneath the bridge under the Ipswich road yielded some fossils, but disappointingly few artefact finds. Wire realised that only the surface layers would produce results and that the bulk of the cutting would be sterile. Interestingly, he made a note of that vital element of modern archaeology, the stratification; *'three feet artificial soil, four feet gravel, under which blue clay'*.

While the construction to Ipswich continued Wire made his first railway journey to London. On 19 August 1844 he caught the luggage train which left Colchester at 1.30 am and arrived at Shoreditch (still no Liverpool Street) at 4 am. Travelling in the small hours like the charter flights of today, he paid four shillings (20p). The return journey two days later, also by luggage train from 6.40 pm to 8.30 pm, was more congenial. During his stay he visited the British Museum, the museum of the Royal College of Surgeons, met Charles Roach Smith, his friend and a notable archaeologist of the day, and walked through the Thames Tunnel built by the famous Victorian engineers, the Brunels.

The day after his return he breakfasted with a visitor at the Victoria Hotel which had opened on the previous Monday. On 11 June 1846 the line to Ipswich opened and The London Illustrated News marked the occasion by publishing an engraving of the opening train arriving at Colchester (see page 23). It mistakenly described the hotel as the station, *'a handsome pile in the*

*Italian style'*. The lower and humbler station buildings were in fact on the right of the scene, on either side of the tracks. Enlarged, the station has seen off the hotel, which became Essex Hall by 1850, called with Victorian directness the Essex Asylum for Idiots, and was demolished in 1985 to make way for housing.

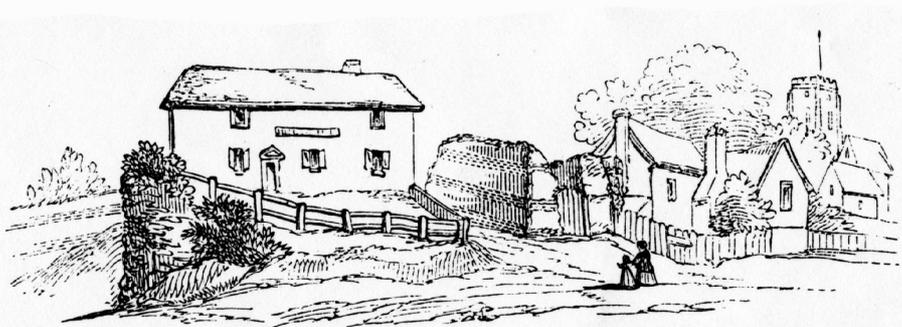
Shortly before the opening of the Ipswich line the Stour Valley Railway started to construct its short branch from the main line to the Hythe, which later formed part of the extension to the coastal resorts as they developed in the latter part of the century. From May 1846 to the opening in March 1847, Wire recorded eight visits to the works and procured some fossils, but nothing else. This may have been because the branch was embanked apart from the cutting to the north of East Gates and the banked soil contained few finds.

Wire's entry for 9 May 1843 expressed indignation. *'When I was walking up Balkerne Hill I saw that a portion on the North side of the Balkon Fort had been destroyed in order to build additional rooms to the Kings Head Inn to command a view of the Railway. What a pity that one of the best preserved remains of Roman times should be destroyed to administer to the sensual pleasures as it may be considered only as*

*a decoy to induce persons to enter the house to drink.'* We now know that the remains were not those of a 'Fort', but of the ornamented west gateway to the Roman town.

Wire's stricture on the destruction was justified and even today such concern for the town's monuments is necessary. If he had entered the inn, he would have seen trains only on the Eastern Counties line west of the station, and the Victoria Hotel would have at least partially obscured the latter. However, one may still partake of one of the sensual pleasures at the inn now known as The Hole in the Wall. Unless you are a commuter, perhaps, you may enjoy a sensual view of the railway, now more restricted by buildings than it was in Wire's day. The trains are still to be seen west of the station, albeit without a plume of steam, and indeed more of the station may be now visible as the platforms are longer.

Wire continued to record the town's events and to acquire 'Curiosities' until he died in 1857, but his interest in railways had lapsed when the local works were completed. While his methods and practices would raise eyebrows nowadays, we are indebted to him for revealing to us as much of mid-Victorian Colchester as he did.



The King's Head Inn.

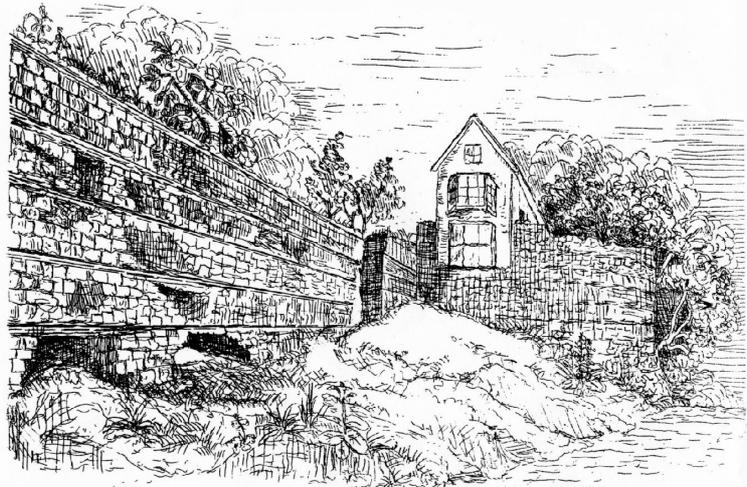
St. Mary at the Wall.

Above left: the gable and windows in the Hole in the Wall public house which were made in 1843 to provide a better view of the railway.

Below left: the view of the station today from the lower window of the pub.

Above right: the King's Head (now the Hole in the Wall) and the Balkerne Gate as they appeared before the alterations of 1843.

Below right: the Roman wall and the King's Head between 1843 and 1858.



# Beyond the walls



## St Botolph's Quarter development

Much of Colchester's imposing Roman and medieval town wall can still be seen today encircling the 108 acres that make up the town's historic core. Yet even from its early days, Colchester's settlement was by no means confined to the limits of the town's defences. In the past, fieldwork in the regions just beyond the town walls has repaid the archaeologists' efforts handsomely with abundant remains of Roman and later activity, particularly in the areas outside the north and west gateways which are now known to have contained extensive Roman suburbs.

Opportunities to probe these areas seldom arise, but one such occurred recently at Vineyard Gate, a three acre region between Vineyard Street, Osborne Street and St Botolph's Street on the south-eastern fringe of the town centre. Since most of the area is built over, the investigation involved squeezing trenches into back yards, grass verges, car park

spaces, and on occasions even digging up warehouse floors. In all, eighteen exploratory trenches were dug with the aim of learning more about the condition and depth of early remains in this region, which lies immediately beyond the southern stretch of the town wall. The main gateway in this part of the town was the South Gate which once stood in nearby St Botolph's Street and through which much of the town's commercial traffic bound for the river quays has passed since Roman times.

In Vineyard Street car park the trenching exposed parts of the Roman and medieval defensive ditches in front of the town wall, as well as nearby indications of Roman building activity from the first century onward. To the south, trenches in properties along the length of Osborne Street produced striking evidence of changes in ground level over the last two thousand years. In the central part of the street, Roman clay floors, slots and post-holes were found to survive to within a metre of the modern surface with later Roman pits

An evaluation trench at the west end of Osborne Street.

and tips of refuse on higher ground to the west. In contrast, on lower ground near the eastern end of Osborne Street, the water table prevented excavation to the earliest levels. Trenches here were dug to depths of up to 3.5 m, reaching only a short way into the medieval levels. Although difficult to excavate, the waterlogged ground conditions resulted in the recovery of well-preserved timbers and leatherwork belonging to the medieval and post-medieval periods.

The work was funded by Colchester Borough Council and the project managed by Oxford Archaeological Associates Ltd. The results will be taken into account in developing a strategy for regeneration in the St Botolph's Quarter of the town.

Carl Crossan(CAT)

# Butchers in St Botolph's Street

Philip J Wise  
Colchester Museums



One of the most interesting results of the Trust's recent excavations within the St Botolph's Quarter has been the evidence for how life was lived in this part of Colchester over many centuries. It is clear that since the Middle Ages this area outside the south gate of the town has been the home of craftsmen and traders.

Earlier excavations during the construction of the Osborne Street car park had revealed the remains of a shoemaker's workshop dating to the years after 1300. The 2004 dig added to this picture of medieval craft activity by discovering large numbers of animal horn cores. These were the waste left over when the outer layer of horn had been removed. The resulting horn sheets were used as window panes or the translucent sides of lanterns. Evidence of the working of horn in the 18th century was also found, although by then glass had replaced horn as the main material for window panes. Horn sheets were still used for lanterns, however, as well as small items such as combs and ink wells.

However one particular discovery by the Trust has led to a detailed study of the history of a property in St Botolph's Street. The remains of a building, probably dating to the 18th century, were found beneath the yard to the rear of Allen and Son's butcher's shop at no. 13. This had a foundation constructed of re-used Roman building stone and a clay floor. Remarkably there is surviving documentary evidence which sheds light on this building and the surrounding area.

Amongst the deeds of the land now occupied by Allen's butcher's shop is a mortgage agreement dated 17 August 1757. The agreement was made between Mrs Elizabeth Goslin, a widow, and Mr Samuel Wall, who is described as a gentleman. It is stated that Mrs Goslin's late husband was a Stephen

Goslin whose occupation is given as a fellmonger, that is one who prepares and sells animal skins. This in itself is interesting as it confirms that the area was being used for the production of animal products in the 18th century as had been suggested by the discovery of the horn cores.

However, the 1757 mortgage refers to an earlier indenture of 29 January 1752, now lost, again between Elizabeth Goslin and Samuel Wall. In this, Elizabeth Goslin in return for £80 sold to Samuel Wall 'those six dwelling houses in Buttolph Street... Four of which were in the several tenures of James Brockwell, James Inman, Benjamin Knock and the widow Eagle and were in the several occupations of James Brockwell, William Boys the Younger, the widow Knock and Hannah Eslin and the other two in the several tenures of John Dykes yarn maker and [William] Barrell and in the occupation of John Dykes only...'

It is clear that in the mid 18th century, the site was subdivided into several properties occupied by artisans or widows of artisans, although only one trade, that of yarn maker, is given. The building remains found in the butcher's yard probably represent one of those 'six dwelling houses'.

A further document of 1837 contains fascinating details about the site at the end of the 18th century. It refers to the purchase of the property in 1799 by a Stephen Matthewman, who is described as a butcher, and provides the earliest reference to the use of the site for a butcher's shop. As well as a shop, the document lists 'outhouses, a bullock yard, slaughter houses, stables, piggeries and a cattle pound'. There is also a description of the existing passage to the right of Allen's butcher's shop which was therefore already in existence in 1799. The alley could be closed off from St Botolph's Street by the 'great gates'.

St Botolph's Street in 1906. The shop to the left of the tram was to become Allen's butcher shop. Photograph Colchester Museums.

This 1837 document also includes a detailed map not only showing the layout of the buildings to the rear and sides of 13 St Botolph's Street but also the names of the various occupants. A number of the buildings shown on the 1837 map still survive, especially around the rear yard. The adjacent properties in St Botolph's Street were occupied in 1837 by, amongst others, William Dearn, an ironmonger and James Hitchcock, a plumber and glazier.

Lastly the 1837 document is actually a sale agreement between Mary Ann, the daughter of Stephen Matthewman, and her husband Thomas Challis and another butcher whose name was Daking Bear. Daking Bear was in business until the 1860s and after that the shop at 13 St Botolph's Street was owned by several other butchers until it was purchased by the Allen family in 1930.

The existing Allen's butchers shop is therefore on a very historic site and one which has been associated with animal products for many years. Although the shop fronting onto St Botolph's Street probably dates to the early 19th century, some of the ancillary buildings to the rear and the side passage are over two hundred years old. There has been a butcher's on the site since 1799 and before this animal skins were prepared and sold. Here is remarkable evidence of continuity.

## Acknowledgement

I am very grateful to Mr John Allen for the opportunity to study the title deeds of 13, St Botolph Street.

# New arts centre

Exploratory investigations have taken place on the site of the proposed visual arts facility so that the archaeological remains can be taken into account in an early stage of the planning of the project.



Visualisation of the proposed new visual arts facility designed by Rafael Vinoly Architects.

Located next to St James's church at the top of East Hill, East Hill House was among the grandest of Georgian Colchester's residences with grounds which originally extended over six acres inside the south-east corner of the town centre. Although now reduced in size, the grounds still stretch south as far as the Priory Street corner of the town wall, where a former playing field has now been earmarked as the site for a proposed visual arts centre as part of the regeneration scheme for the St Botolph's Quarter of the town. To help assess the archaeological impact of the new building, Colchester Borough Council commissioned a geophysical survey of the area by Stratascan via Oxford Archaeological Associates, then engaged the Trust to dig nine small exploratory trenches within the footprint

for the planned arts building. Since the area is a scheduled ancient monument, the aim at this early stage was to keep ground disturbance to a minimum by digging down to expose the top of buried Roman levels and go no further once the depth of sensitive levels was established. The site is some distance away from the nearest medieval and later street frontages, so it came as no surprise to find that the area for the most part had been left as open ground after the end of the Roman period. After removing the medieval and later soils, the Roman levels were generally found to lie at depths of between 40 and 60 cm, but in places were as little as 15 to 20 cm below the surface due to the effects of modern garden landscaping. The exposed material included spreads of Roman building debris including wall

plaster, brick and tile, also at least one robbed wall foundation and possibly a gravelled area at the eastern side of the site. At present these are mere glimpses, but if the development materializes, it could offer a rare opportunity to learn more about this corner of the early town. The aim of the work was to provide information to help in the planning of the arts centre to ensure that disturbance to the buried archaeological remains is kept to an acceptable minimum.

Carl Crossan (CAT)

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# St Helena and Colchester's Creation Myth

By Tom Hodgson  
Curator of Social History, Colchester Museums

On 11 October a statue of St Helena was presented to Colchester Town Hall for display in the Mayor's Parlour. The statue had originally been carved in plane wood by Donald Simpson in 1950 for Colchester Youth Hostel which had newly opened in East Bay House. The Youth Hostel closed in 1997 and the statue was given to Colchester Museums to save it. Before its presentation to the Town Hall the statue was carefully restored to its full glory by the very man who had created it.

St Helena is part of the creation myth that arose in the early Middle Ages to explain the Roman ruins at Colchester and the name of the town itself. There are a number of slight variations on the myth, but a popular version was as follows. King Coel founded Colchester in AD 219 and later became ruler of Britain. In 260 the Roman general, Constantius, sailed from Spain and besieged Colchester for three years. The conflict was settled by the offering of Coel's daughter, Helen (or Helena), in marriage to Constantius. Their son was born in Colchester and became the first

Christian emperor, Constantine the Great. Helen, in later life, made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land where she miraculously discovered fragments of the True Cross and the graves of the three kings which elevated her to sainthood and gave Colchester the symbols on the Borough arms. As with all good myths, there are elements of truth within it. For instance, Helena was indeed the mother of Constantine, but in reality came from the area of modern day Croatia and had no links with Colchester.

The myth was strongly embedded by the 12th century when it was recorded by Henry of Huntingdon in his history of the English. Its most striking medieval record is in the charter granted to Colchester in 1413 by Henry V. Here St Helena appears as the patron saint of Colchester gazing out from within the illuminated initial letter of the charter and with the earliest known representation of the Borough arms below her.

The Town Hall is the physical embodiment of the civic pride that fired late Victorian Colchester. So, it is no surprise



Topping out the Town Hall, 1902. A roll call of Colchester's civic dignitaries on high with St Helena. (From left to right, Gurney Benham, CC Thompson (representing the architect), James Paxman, Claude Egerton Green, Wilson Marriage).



St Helena, carved and restored by Donald Simpson.

that St Helena is part of the rôle call of figures from the town's past that decorate the building. She is represented in stained glass in the Council Chamber and most prominently in the statue atop the tower that was paid for in its entirety by James Paxman, Colchester's most successful industrialist. The more modest statue that now adorns the Mayor's Parlour is testimony to how a good myth has become a reality that still shapes our actions today.



# White Canons and blacksmiths at Beeleigh Abbey

Howard Brooks of CAT and David Andrews of Essex County Council explain the background to the latest discoveries at Beeleigh Abbey near Maldon in Essex.

Lying in a quiet rural location west of Maldon is Beeleigh Abbey, a solid and comfortable Tudor country house. But appearances can be deceptive. The Tudor house contains fragments of a much earlier and much grander building – the medieval Abbey of Maldon (later called Beeleigh Abbey), founded in about 1180 as a Premonstratensian (White Canon) house.

The White Canons combined the contemplative with the active religious life, and were engaged in the celebration of the liturgy, and in preaching, mission work and education. Later records show that there was a Children's Chamber in the abbey, and it was here that young children given to the church (oblates) may have slept. Among their number was the important but virtually unknown Saint Roger of Beeleigh, who rose to prominence as Archdeacon of Colchester and later Bishop of London and was a witness to the re-issue of Magna Carta. After his death in 1241, St Roger was buried in St Paul's Cathedral, but his heart was kept at Beeleigh in a 'heart shrine' which was important enough to have been visited by royalty. Roger had been canonised by 1249.

Along with many other religious houses, the original Beeleigh Abbey ceased to exist in 1536, when it was closed down under the Act of Dissolution and its lands and properties seized by the Crown (Henry VIII). Many of our Colchester religious houses suffered badly during the Dissolution of the Monasteries. St Botolph's Priory still stands as a romantic ruin, and St John's Abbey Gatehouse is intact, but the Abbey Church of St John and Crouched Friars (on Crouch Street) have disappeared almost without trace. Many

dissolved religious houses (Beeleigh among them) were rebuilt or adapted as country houses – Audley End, and Sir Richard Rich's Leez Priory are notable Essex examples.

So, what (if anything) of Roger's home church can still be seen? Fragments of the east range of the abbey cloister are still visible in the Tudor structure, but due to the near total destruction of the site after Dissolution, the full layout of the original abbey is not known. The accompanying figure shows a hypothetical abbey layout superimposed over the present day Beeleigh Abbey.

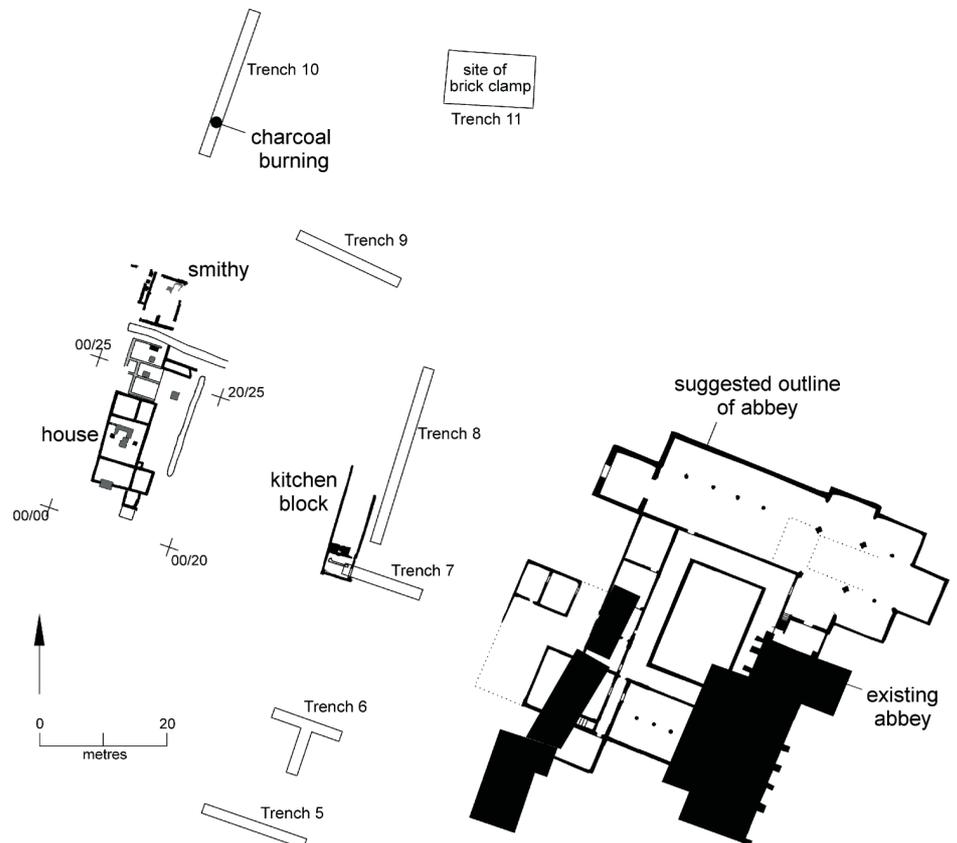
Excavation on the abbey site proper has been extremely limited, but there has been excavation in the meadow west of the abbey. The year 2004 marked the fourth season of excavation by the Maldon Archaeological and Historical Group. In 2003 and 2004 the work was directed by Howard Brooks of the Colchester Archaeological Trust and Trevor Ennis of the Essex County Council Field Archaeology Unit. Evaluation trenching in 2001 and excavation in 2003-4 had uncovered the ground plan of a medieval hall house dating from the 15th century or earlier, and pulled down at the Reformation. It consisted of the usual medieval plan of parlour, hall, cross-passage and service end, with other rooms (such as a stair tower and possible cess chute) added later. Its relationship to the abbey was unclear, as the precinct boundaries have not been discovered. The most convincing explanation is that it belonged to the almoner, the officer responsible for dispensing alms and charity, and whose house was normally at the edge of the precinct.

The plan for 2004 was to complete the excavation of outbuildings adjacent to

this house, and to explore as much of the meadow as possible. A resistivity survey carried out by the group identified seven areas which looked promising. These were then tested with trial trenches. Three were not very productive, containing only gravel surfaces, dumped building material and areas of burning. A fourth trench revealed kitchen waste from the adjacent abbey kitchen (see hypothetical position of kitchen on accompanying figure). In the remaining trenches, however, new buildings were discovered, and in another a brick clamp was found.

One of the new buildings was to the north of the hall house and in line with it and its outbuildings. Beneath a large quantity of tile rubble, walls made of roof tile laid at an angle were found. In the north-east corner close to the wall, there were two very well used hearths made of roof tile set on edge. A combination of burnt material, great quantities of iron slag, nails and other small iron objects indicate that the building was a smithy. The use of a magnet confirmed this when it picked up debris scattered from the hammering of objects on the anvil. The relationship of this smithy to the buildings to the south is obscured by a later ditch which separates them. But in view of its proximity and similar alignment, it would be logical to conclude that the house belonged to the abbey's smith rather than the almoner. The house and buildings fronted on to the lane down to the abbey mill, and so must have been at the edge of the monastic complex, presumably representing part of a hamlet that had grown up around the precinct.

In a trench to the east of the hall house and close to the west side of the abbey



cloister, a wall made of roof tile and a gravel surface were found. Further stripping of the topsoil revealed that this wall was fragmentary, having been cut by a later building. Initially, the latter seemed to be 5m wide by 9m long, but subsequent investigation showed it to be at least 18m long. It was timber built, with footings of brick levelled up with roof tile, and datable to the 15th century. It was divided into two by a partition wall, against which was a very large hearth which must have had a timber chimney. There were traces of a mortar floor; unusually, the mortar seems to have been carried on up the walls as a thick layer of white plaster. Because the large hearth must have been used for cooking, and the building was located so close to the abbey, it is thought to have been a monastic bake-house or brewhouse.



In many ways, the biggest surprise was in a trench at the north end of the field, not far from the river Chelmer. This was identified as an area of potential interest by an elderly lady who had kept horses and donkeys on the field in the time when Christina Foyle lived at the abbey. Her husband had tried to build a shed in this area, but gave up because there was so much rubble in the soil. This proved to be spreads of brick rubble, much of it burnt and vitrified. Excavation showed that there were a series of east-west 'stripes' of brick and charcoal. Pat Ryan, the historian of Essex brick, concluded that it was a brick clamp. Unlike a kiln, which is a fixed building, a clamp is a way of firing bricks by carefully building them up into a rectangular structure with the fuel incorporated into it, and then setting light to it. The 'stripes' represented the tunnels within the clamp which contained the bundles of faggots. Clamps were a common method of firing bricks, and indeed were used into modern times for London stock bricks, but very few have been found in excavations. Finds associated with the clamp were few, but suggest that it dated from after the Reformation and was used to make bricks for the Tudor mansion into which the abbey was converted.

The picture that has emerged of the meadow in the past is of a service area for the main abbey buildings. Close to the abbey, there was a kitchen. Further

Above. Site plan showing house, smithy, and kitchen with suggested outline of abbey over existing buildings.

Below left. the brick clamp.

away, there was a smithy and a house which probably formed part of settlement at the edge of the precinct, though the precise boundaries of this remain elusive. After the Reformation, the area became a builder's yard. Material from the dismantled buildings was dumped there. In particular, a very large quantity of window glass has been found, some of it painted. In the northern corner of the field, bricks for the Tudor mansion were burnt in a clamp. Later the area was tidied up and formed part of the walled enclosures around the house. The wall in Tudor bricks along the lane to the mill survives in part today. The study of the pottery and other artefacts from the excavation will provide detailed information which should help show how accurate this picture is, and also clarify aspects of it.

The work was made possible by a generous grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, and also the help and cooperation of the owners of the site, Mr and Mrs C. Foyle. Much information on the White Canons and St Roger is taken from Stephen P. Nunn's *St Roger of Beeleigh* (Maldon Archaeological and Historical Group, 2001).

# Spoil Heap

By Kate Orr (CAT)

## Dead but not gone

Cremated and inhumed, Roman and medieval, urban and rural – remains of the dead cannot be avoided. Further excavations were carried out at Birch Sand and Gravel Quarry this year. This was near Maldon Road, to the south of last year's excavations of a Bronze Age cemetery (CA 17). The contractors were stripping soil near the spot where CAT had identified two Roman buildings through fieldwalking in 1992. There was a small number of Roman cremations, some of which were without urns, plus one pit containing pyre-related debris. These people living and working in the countryside did not have large cemeteries, but buried their dead in the fields and by trackways.

## Something for the journey

Most of the burials that have been recorded have been from Roman urban cemeteries especially the cemetery to the west of Colchester. At 25 Endsleigh Court, contractors building an extension disturbed four urned cremations. At 21 West Lodge Road, three disturbed cremations were revealed during groundworks for the extension of the house. One cremation contained debris from the pyre, deliberately deposited around the urn, for reasons that we can only guess at. A mirror had been deposited inside the urn, together with three coins which had been placed reverse upwards. It is likely that this is the grave of a child and that the coins were deliberately chosen because the images on the reverse were believed to act as guardians to protect a child during their journey to the underworld, and to pay the mythical ferryman. Next door, at Handford House, analysis of the coins from cremations has shown a similar burial rite.

## Body and soul

At 15 West Lodge Road, Roman burials (two cremated and one not) were exposed during an evaluation. This is part of Taylor's West Lodge Estate. At 3 Beverley Road, one inhumed burial was disturbed during works to widen a cellar. The former St Mary's Hospital site is still giving up its secrets; a watching brief is

being maintained during the 'Balkerne Heights' development. Large fragments of two 4th-century lead coffins plus one cremation have turned up. It is thought that the lead coffins were not *in situ* when disturbed as they were not found with any human bone. This transition from cremation of the body to un-burnt burials, sometimes in coffins, reflects the change in tradition, and possibly belief, starting in the 3rd century AD. It may have to do with an emerging belief in the resurrection of the body.

## A place by the sea

Well-heeled Romans who could afford fancy burial rites also lived in West Mersea. A previously known Roman mausoleum from the town was investigated by the Trust at the end of 2003. The evaluation, in conjunction with aerial photographs, allowed its position in a back garden to be pinpointed and also identified the depth and the condition of the surviving remains.

## Crouching friar, hidden foundation

Two evaluation trenches were dug at 38-40 Crouch Street, next-door to Cash Converters. This is where the remains of the medieval Friary of the 'Crouched Friars' has been excavated previously. Several phases of activity were revealed including burials, which could be Roman or those of the Friars some 1,000 years later. Roman and medieval foundations were also exposed plus robbed walls and rubble spreads from more recent buildings. The later activity may relate to the demolition in the early 18th century of the former residence of Sir Harbottle Grimston. Grimston's house had become the town workhouse after being badly damaged during the Siege of Colchester in 1648.

## Sacred and profane

At the Castle pub on Colchester High Street, a new bar extension was recently built. Customers sit above the buried remains of an arcade which stood on the south side of the precinct of the Temple of Claudius. During groundworks, the Roman building material was encount-



Small handled Roman mirror from West Lodge Road dating to the second half of the 1st century AD and probably made in Nijmegen, Netherlands

ered as well as a hard surface at 1.5m depth which obstructed the piles. This is not the first time the precinct or 'temenos' wall has been seen under properties along this stretch of High Street.

## Medieval life

Information about medieval occupation along East Hill and East Street has also come to light. Speed's early 17th century map of Colchester shows properties along this road. Since the last issue of CA, the renovation work to 'Charlie Brown's' has been completed. Whilst contractors were digging out new foundations, the Trust found clay floors and burnt occupation layers dating to the 12th or 13th century. These pre-date the 14th century open hall and may represent a detached kitchen to an earlier building.

At 83-88 East Hill, a peg tile and mortar wall or plinth to a medieval building was exposed in one of the footings dug for new houses. Next to it were waterlogged morticed and tenoned timbers that appeared to line a cellar or tank. Oyster shells were scattered in the surrounding soil. Richard Shackle from the Local Studies Library has recorded these timbers and suggests they may have lined an oyster pit, which would have been used by residents of a house on East Hill.

# Friends of CAT

The Friends of Colchester Archaeological Trust was founded in 1977 to keep interested members of the public in touch with the work of the Trust in and around the historic town of Colchester. The membership in 2004 numbers about 450 households, mostly in Colchester and north Essex, but with some as far afield as Wales, Scotland, Germany and the USA.

Every January the Friends meet to hear about the excavations and other work that took place the previous year, and in 2004 there were talks in the sanctuary of the Lion Walk Congregational Church on the sites at Handford House, Colchester Garrison, Charlie Brown's, and Beeleigh Abbey near Maldon.

The Church also provided the venue for a session in March where Steve Benfield of the Trust taught members how to identify particular types of Roman pottery, such as colour-coated wares, samian ware, and mortaria, the vessels with gritty bases used in food preparation. Friends worked hard to master the identifying characteristics of the forms and fabrics, and the session proved to be so popular that it will be repeated late in 2005 or in 2006 and will be extended from a two-hour to a four-hour event.

In May a coach party of members were shown around some of the lesser-known medieval monastic and hospital buildings in Canterbury associated with pilgrims visiting the shrine of St Thomas à Beckett, as well as the castle, town walls, and the sites of some Roman buildings. The tour was led by Jenny Watson of Ashford School, who then took us on to visit Julieberries Graves, a Neolithic long barrow, and Chilham, a hill-top village that has managed to preserve its medieval character with a central wide market area surrounded by stone-built shops and houses, and with a castle at one end facing the church at the other.

In late June, the Friends visited Hadleigh, where they first had a guided walk around some of the most interesting parts of the town, which is rich in well-preserved late medieval and early post-medieval houses, as well as the fine St Mary's Church, the Corn Exchange, and the Deanery Tower. Tea was then provided in the beautiful timber Guildhall, which has a lovely garden



Friends of CAT at Great Braxted church.

filled with old-style roses and herbs. The day ended with a tour of the Guildhall itself, which has served in its time as a meeting-place for the medieval craft guilds, an Assembly Room for Regency period balls, and a corset factory; it is currently used for weddings and other functions and also houses some council offices.

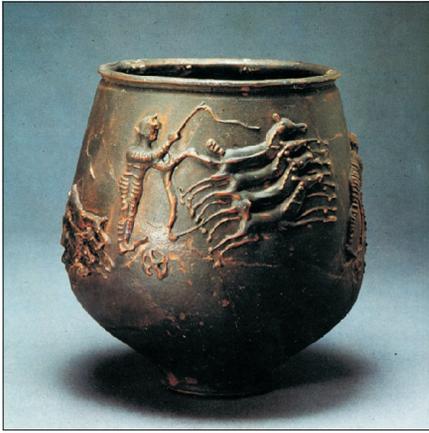
On a bitterly cold day in late September, the Friends went to King's Lynn, which enabled them to admire the stamina and determination of the town's fishermen and merchants as they sailed the chilly waters of the Wash and the North Sea. The town is fortunate in having managed to avoid much of the modern development that has affected other historic towns in Britain, and rejoices in a wealth of fine old buildings, including the Custom House, St Margaret's Church, the old Gaol House, and many merchants' warehouses, including one built by the Hanseatic League, as well as many domestic houses. The Friends were taken on a tour of the best-preserved parts of the town by the town guides, and were left feeling that they had only scraped the surface of this wonderful place.

The Friends' annual churches trip is always popular, and November 2004 was no exception. The theme was

churches containing medieval Coggeshall brick, and the first stop was the chapel of St Nicholas at Little Coggeshall. St Nicholas was the *capella extra portas*, the chapel outside the gates, for Coggeshall Abbey, is highly distinctive, having its windows, quoins, and other features built with large locally-made bricks which rank among some of the earliest made in medieval England. The next church was Holy Trinity at Bradwell-juxta-Coggeshall, which also uses Coggeshall brick in its fabric and has the bonus of some beautiful early 14th-century wall paintings and other interesting features. Finally, the Friends went to All Saints at Great Braxted, where the Trust had earlier done some excavation in advance of new building work, and ended up for tea at Perrywood's Nursery at Tiptree.

Just before Christmas the Friends were able to visit part of the excavations at the Garrison development, where they were shown round the site, had a chance to look at some of the finds and were able to visit one of the old stable blocks. The part of the site open for visiting at that point was the cemetery on the Butt Road side of the stable blocks.

Nina Crummy



A team of four horses shown on a pottery jar from Colchester. Note the small low-set wheels and the bound-up tails of the horses. Colchester Archaeological Trust would like to express its gratitude to the Department of Prehistory and Europe at The British Museum, who kindly allowed the photograph to be reproduced here.

## Where Ben Hur went wrong

The famous chariot race in the 1959 Hollywood film *Ben Hur* is misleading on several accounts not least because the high-born tribune Messala and Ben Hur himself, who though a Jew was also the adopted son of a Roman admiral, would never have been able to take part. Messala's career and social status would have been in tatters, and whether he won or lost it would have been political damaging to the Romans; if he won it would have angered the locals, if he lost they would have been all too happy!

The film shows a stone-built circus on the Roman pattern made famous by the Circus Maximus, but race-courses in the east at that period were based on the much simpler Greek hippodrome, a large flat space with turning posts. *Ben Hur* has nine teams racing, but Roman-style racing was at that period always based on the four factions, Blues, Greens, Reds and Whites, so there might be four, eight or twelve teams, but never nine. This was not

necessarily so in the east, where privately-owned teams might be driven by hired-in professional charioteers, much like horse-racing today, but then it is not an eastern-style race that is shown in the film.

The horses driven by Ben Hur are supposedly Arabs acquired from a Bedouin sheikh, but the Bedouin rode camels until many hundreds of years later, and Arab horses had not been developed then. The best circus horses came from North Africa and Spain, and were probably most like today's Andalusians and Lusitanos; some successful animals also came from Cappadocia in Asia Minor, from Greece and from Sicily. However, by chance the real horses driven in the film were fairly similar to the race horses of the period as they were Lipizzaners from Yugoslavia, a breed much cross-bred with the ancient Iberian strain from Spain.

Of the nine teams starting the race in *Ben Hur*, six crash and are written off. However, a specialist in Roman spectator sports has studied the film carefully and noticed that four

teams pass the finishing line – a miracle! In the 1926 version of the film about a hundred died, but despite the crashes in 1959 animal welfare was taken much more seriously and there were no fatalities. The vicious axle blades used by Messala to cut the wheel-spokes on the other chariots are pure Hollywood and would never have been allowed in a real race – the whole system was arranged so that all the entrants had an equal chance.

Finally, the chariots used in the film were completely wrong and made the job of the horses much more difficult. Instead of a lightweight wood and leather affair, they were made of steel tubing and thick carved wood, more like the *currus triumphalis* (triumphal chariot) that was built for display rather than speed. They had an iron axle and steel floor, weighing in total about 0.4 of a metric tonne compared to the 25-30 kilograms of a real Roman racing chariot. In consequence, the 1959 teams could only manage to run a lap at a time, four times a day, with rests in between, whereas the Roman chariot teams ran seven laps in about 11 minutes.

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