

Roman Amphitheatre.



Information sheet

London's Roman Amphitheatre

Uncovered prior to the start of building work on the new Guildhall Art Gallery in 1988, the discovery of London's Roman Amphitheatre was heralded as one of the most important archaeological finds in the capital for over a century. The remains were immediately protected by the government and the interior of the Art Gallery redesigned in order to accommodate them *in situ*.

The earliest amphitheatre on the site dated to around AD 70 and was constructed entirely in wood. In the early second century this was enlarged and a number of the most important walls were rebuilt in stone and tile. It is the remains of this structure that are visible today. Subsequent restorations and refurbishments suggest the amphitheatre remained in use until the start of the fourth century when it was dismantled and most of the material salvaged for use elsewhere in the city.

Archaeologists have only uncovered part of the amphitheatre: one of the principal entrances, the eastern entrance. Today, you enter the ruins at the back of the amphitheatre and walk down through the entrance into the arena, following in the footsteps of the gladiators. A number of features are visible along the way:

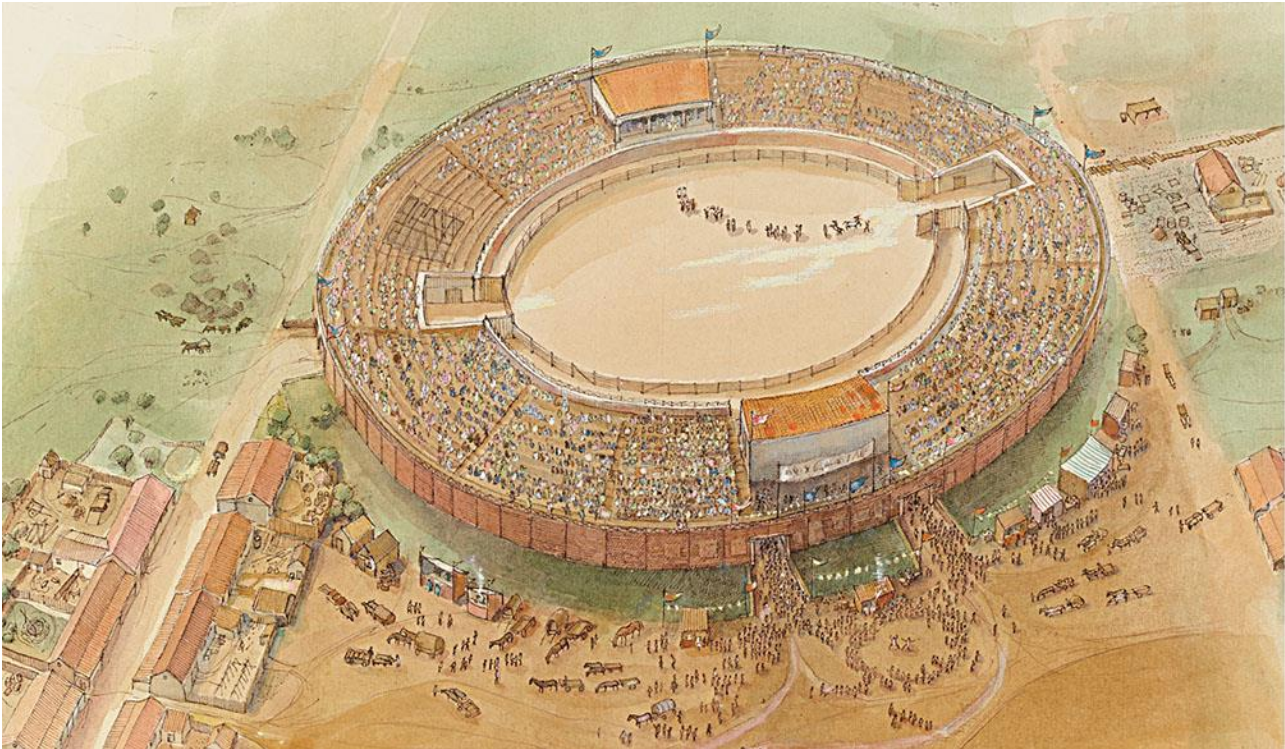
- Parallel walls lining the entrance. Built of alternate bands of stone and tile, these walls are typical of Roman construction methods.
- Drains. Preserved beneath the two glass panels on the floor are sections of wooden drain, a rare survivor from the Roman world. Forming part of an extensive system of drains designed to carry water away from the arena, their original course is marked by a broken metal line set into the floor.
- Rooms flanking the entrance to the arena. At least one of these rooms, the southern room, was probably used to store wild animals before they were released into the arena. The large white threshold stone, cut with a series of grooves across the front, provides the evidence for this. These grooves secured the base of a vertically opening, wooden trap door that allowed animals to be released into the arena, the door being operated from a safe location above the room.
- Arena wall. This curved wall, a comparatively unusual feature in Roman architecture, alerted archaeologists to the fact that they had uncovered something really important.

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Reconstruction of the amphitheatre



Reconstruction of the amphitheatre as it may have appeared in about AD 130 (view looking north (Judith Dobie)) © MOLA

Points of interest:

- Resembling a modern sports stadium, the flat area at the centre where all the action took place (arena) was surrounded by tiered banks of wooden seating.
- A line of gladiators has just entered the Amphitheatre through the open gates of the east entrance, the one preserved in the basement of the Guildhall Art Gallery. The audience would probably have entered via entrances on the two long sides.
- Boxes on both of the long sides of the amphitheatre. The boxes provided dignitaries with a degree of comfort and allowed them to be easily seen by the audience.
- Arena. Covered with sand and surrounded by a high wall, this was where all the action took place. Originally, the arena would have occupied most of Guildhall Yard. A line of dark stone in the courtyard marks the line of the arena wall.
- Market. As with any modern entertainment venue, food, drink and souvenirs would all have been available on the day of the games.