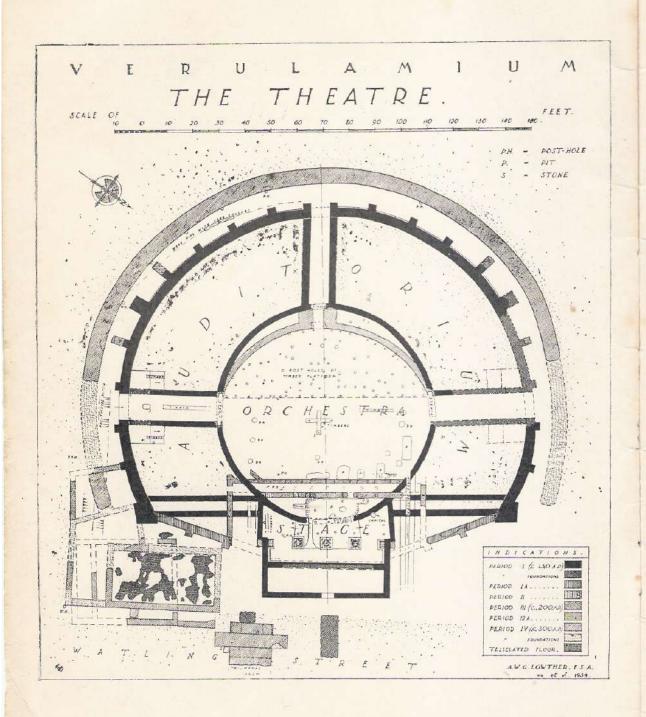
THE ROMAN THEATRE OF VERULAMIUM

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The Roman Theatre of Verulamium

BY KATHLEEN M. KENYON, M.A.

HE credit for the discovery of the Roman Theatre at Verulamium, which is the only one known in Britain, is due in the first place to a local antiquary, Mr. Grove Lowe. His attention was drawn by the farmer to some walls in a field on the west side of the Gorhambury Drive. In 1847 he cleared these sufficiently to recognize that the structure was a theatre, on which he presented a report to the St. Albans Architectural Society in 1848. On more than one occasion since, the walls have again been laid bare, but always covered over again. The excavation of Mr. Grove Lowe was for its period excellently carried out. But the science of excavation has taken many strides since 1847, and it was clear that many points left unsettled, such as the date of the structure, could be elucidated by a fresh excavation. Neither Mr. Grove Lowe nor his successors had attempted to do more than clear the walls, so there was no doubt that the original stratigraphical evidence remained undamaged. In view of these considerations, Lord Verulam was approached in 1933, while the excavations on other parts of the city were in progress. He at once realized the importance of the site, and not only gave permission for the excavations to be carried out, but the Gorhambury Estates most generously provided the funds, necessarily an expensive undertaking. The excavations proved an even greater success than had been expected, and both archaeologists and the public in general owe a very great debt to Lord Verulam for his public-spirited action in causing the uncovering and permanent preservation of such an exceedingly interesting monument. Also, both Mr. Asprey, the agent for the estate, and Messrs. Crawford, the farmers, were most helpful during the course of the excavations.

The theatre stands in the northern half of the second century Roman city, immediately west of Watling Street, on to which it fronts. This part of the city was obviously that of important public buildings. On the south side the theatre is separated by one insula, as yet (1934) unexcavated, from the Forum, which was the centre of the municipal life of a Roman town. Immediately to the west of it is a small temple of the Romano-Celtic type enclosed in a wide courtyard, while on the other side of Watling Street is a large building, obviously not a private house, whose excavation has not

yet been completed.

The plan of the theatre is very interesting (Fig. 1), and, as will be seen later when the plan of the normal Roman theatre is examined, has many points of difference from this type of building. It is built on ground that slopes only slightly down to the north-east so that the slope on which the seats were placed was largely artificial. The orchestra, or central area, was sunk into the natural soil, and the earth excavated from this was piled up round the outside, against solid outer walls, with its surface, on which would have been tiers of wooden seats, sloping down towards the centre. When the outer walls were robbed, probably by the Normans, down to the Roman ground level, this artificial bank collapsed and was gradually ploughed away, so that what we have remaining is the part which was sunk into the ground, while the part which stood above the general outside level has disappeared.

PERIOD I.

The theatre was built, as shown by pottery and coins from beneath its floors, in the second quarter of the second century A.D., probably between 140 and 150. The original building consisted of a completely circular orchestra, with the bank of the auditorium enclosing two-thirds of it. In the space not occupied by the seats was a small stage building. Originally, the front of the stage was merely the circular wall of the orchestra (Fig. 7).

The two walls across the front are later additions, as are also the piers, so that the stage originally consisted only of this curved front wall, with side walls bonding into it, and a back wall which divided it from a shallow room in the rear. The floor of the stage was of wood, which was supposed to improve the acoustics, and the



Fig. 7. Stage, showing original curved wall front, with later straight ones.

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holes in which stood the uprights supporting it were found (Fig. 7). There was probably a flight of wooden steps down into the orchestra in the centre of the front of the stage, where the orchestra wall seems never to have been carried up to its full height, and there were probably one or more similar flights leading down from the room at the back, as that was the only way in which

the stage could have been reached.

The earth bank which formed the substructure of the seats was supported at the back by a stout wall, strengthened by a series of buttresses (Fig. 3). Opposite these and also intermediately, were a series of large posts six feet away, which may have supported a wooden gallery, or may have been merely fence posts. At the east end this original wall terminated in big piers (Fig. 4) which probably held statues or some architectural features. From here, the end wall of the seating bank originally ran straight across to the stage, joining the stage walls near their junction with the orchestra wall. At an early period, however, these were destroyed, and the existing wall built, running at a more oblique angle.

The auditorium bank was divided by three broad gangways leading down into the orchestra (Fig. 5). These would originally have been vaulted over, to carry the upper part of the seats, which has now vanished. The floor of the west gangway was of extremely hard cement, about six inches thick, while that of the north and south gangways was probably of wood, since a slot has been found which may have held the main timber supporting the surface boards. These all led only into the orchestra, which was separated by a wall at least four feet high from the lowest seats. Access to the seats on the bank was gained in the first period only by external staircases, one in each segment of the auditorium. These must have been of wood, supported on a central stone pier (Fig. 6), while at a later period the normal buttresses on each side of this pier were extended, and probably the stair built more of stone.

In the centre of the orchestra was found a curious cross-shaped cutting in the ground. This clearly held two cross-pieces with a central wooden upright, but there is no evidence as to its purpose, whether gibbet or maypole or posts to which baited beasts could be chained.



 F_{1G} . 3. View from west, showing buttresses against original outer wall.

PERIOD II.

At a date not very much later than the original building, probably between 150 and 160 A.D., several very important modifications were made in the structure of the theatre. The most important was that the stage was given a straight front, by the building of the inner of the two front walls (Fig. 7). This considerably increased the size of the stage, but at the same time, three square piers were built towards the back, and nibs added to the side walls (Fig. 8), which curtailed the free space in the rear. These piers certainly supported columns, and a small portion of one, and half of one of the capitals, in the Corinthian order (Fig. 9), were found. The floor level was raised, though its surface was still of wood, and portions of the yellow wall plaster remain on the south wall.

At the same time, nearly half of the orchestra was given up to seating, as was the usual Roman plan. These seats were supported on a wooden platform, and the holes into which the uprights supporting them were driven have been found, but have had to be filled in again. They were driven as much as three feet into the ground, and were about eleven inches square, tapering towards the tip. They probably supported low broad steps, on which the armchairs or thrones of the notabilities of the town were placed, corresponding exactly to our stalls. A further alteration was that from the lateral gangways, side staircases were made to reach the seats on the bank. These probably had wooden steps (Fig. 5).

PERIOD III.

The alterations of Period III, which dates to about 200 A.D., affect only the stage. Elsewhere, new floors were laid down, but for the most part there were no structural modifications. A new front wall was built to the stage, four feet in front of the original one (Fig. 7). One end of this curves forward, and may have supported a flight of steps. The purpose of this may merely have been to increase the area of the stage, as did the contemporary setting back of the side wall. It is possible, however, that it was to provide a slot into which the curtain could be lowered. In the Roman theatre, this was always lowered to disclose the stage, and not



Fig. 4. View from east, with massive terminal pier.

raised. It was, as a rule, supported on a number of telescopic poles, which could be caused to telescope together or to sink into holes in the ground as the curtain was lowered. In between the two front walls of the stage at Verulamium were a series of holes cut in the natural soil, in which it is tempting to see the counterpart of the holes for such posts (Fig. 10). The difficulty, however, is that they were undoubtedly filled in long before the outer front wall was built. It is possible that they were originally intended for such a purpose, with an outer wall of wood, but proved unsatisfactory, and were filled in. On the other hand, a series of rather similar holes, but much rougher, in front of the outer front wall, and subsequent to it, were almost certainly for drainage, and these may have been for the same purpose.

The only other addition, probably, of this period, but possibly partly of Period II, was that of small wings adjoining the stage, but not connected to it. That in the south-east angle can be clearly traced, and almost certainly that in the north-east existed too. Here, however, the natural level drops steeply, and the theatre was built on made-up soil. This has sunk to a surprising degree, and all trace of the building has disappeared.

PERIOD IV.

During the course of the third century, the theatre seems to have fallen completely into ruin. This is in accord both with the known history of the Roman Empire, and with the results of excavations in other parts of the city. There was a continuous series of revolts and usurpers in Britain in the latter part of the century, and most of the buildings in the town seem to have suffered severely. At the end of the century, with the subjection of Britain once more to the official Roman Emperor, there came a general revival and rebuilding all over Verulamium, in which the theatre shared.

Parts of the theatre were rebuilt on the same lines, but a number of alterations were made. The principal one was the addition of a new outer wall, six feet broad. The buttresses on the original outer wall were cut down, and between it and the new wall a vaulted corridor was



Fig. 5. South gangway, with lateral staircases,

made, over which the upper seats would be carried, thus extending the auditorium. This was also extended at the lower end, at the expense of the orchestra area. From the west side of the two lateral gangways, the orchestra wall was brought round in a flatter curve, thus adding eight feet to the seating bank by the west entrance, and a diminishing amount towards the sides. The wooden platform in the west half of the orchestra, which had existed till now, was abolished, and the supporting posts cut down to below floor level. There is no evidence that there were any seats in the orchestra in this period. The wings on either side of the stage were rebuilt on slightly different lines, and slightly larger. It is to this period that the remains of the brick tessellated floor in the south-east room belong. The other walls were rebuilt on the existing lines, and it is evidence of the extensiveness of the preceding destruction, that almost every single one had to be rebuilt from a low level.

An addition belonging to this period is that of a Triumphal Arch spanning Watling Street. One side is underneath the existing road, but the edge of the debris caused by its robbing has been traced, and shows that there was sufficient width for a single roadway only.

All the floor levels of the theatre were raised during this building, and the material making up these new floors produced quantities of pottery and coins to date the alterations. The latest were coins of Carausius, 287-293 A.D., but there were a very great quantity of the last half of the third century. The most interesting find was in the make-up of the floor of the stage, where was discovered a hoard of 80r minims, running down to minute coins 5 mm. in diameter, all being imitations of the radiate crowns found on the official coinage of the second half of the third century. The fact that these barbarous coins were in use at almost the same time as the official ones they were imitating, is very interesting and important.

DECAY OF THE THEATRE.

The last stage in the history of the theatre is almost as interesting as the constructive ones. There is no defi-



Fig. 6. Theatre from south, showing supports of external staircase.

nite evidence as to how long it continued in use, though alterations to the south-east wing suggest that it had at least a moderate length of life. But all over the city, so far as excavated, have been found traces of gradual decay in the fourth century, and a general lapse into comparative barbarism. The theatre is the most striking example of this. By the second half of the century at latest, the site was being used as the municipal dumpheap. The walls were still standing, but the interior was gradually filled with refuse of all kinds, which produced, in the course of time, an extremely rich organic earth. Masses of broken pottery and other household rubbish were included in this, but most remarkable is the number of fourth-century coins that were found. The total number is not yet known, but it amounts to some thousands. These run right down to a coin each of Honorius and Arcadius, the latest Emperors whose coins are found in Britain, which occurred in the upper level. That one of the principal public buildings of the city should be put to such a degrading use is a vivid commentary on the decay of Verulamium.

COMPARISON WITH THEATRES ELSEWHERE.

The general type of Roman theatre was thoroughly stereotyped, and it is worth while considering it in comparison with the Verulamium theatre. There was a clear-cut difference between a Roman and a Greek theatre. The latter developed out of dances to Dionysus, which took place in a circular dancing place, or orchestra, which was the nucleus of the theatre. The stage was a later addition, and though the importance of the individual actors grew at the expense of the chorus, the importance of the orchestra, where the latter performed, was always maintained. The seats were arranged so that all could see the orchestra clearly, and they occupied as much of the entire circle as was not required for the small stage buildings. The Roman drama, on the other hand, grew out of burlesques which were always performed on a low stage, and the auditorium was so arranged that all should have a good view of it. At first the spectators merely stood in front of the stage, with the space immediately in front of it

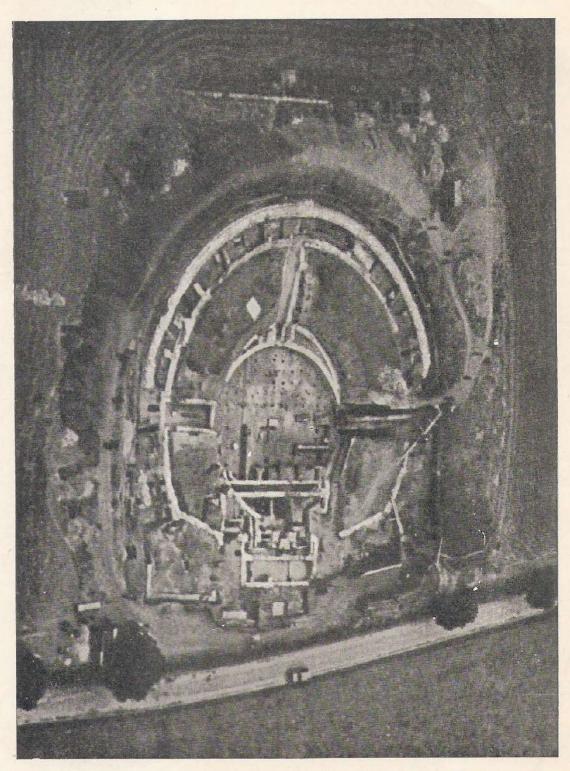


Fig. 2. Air view of theatre.

[Photo by Major Allen.

reserved for the senators. When seats were provided this area was still reserved for the notabilities with low broad steps for their chairs, while the less important seats rose in tiers above. In order that all should be able to see the stage comfortably, the auditorium or cavea never exceeded a semi-circle. The length of the stage was twice the diameter of the orchestra in order to provide sufficient room for the large number of actors taking part, and the stage buildings and the cavea were united into one building, with the back wall of the stage reaching to the same height as the back of the cavea. This back wall was always elaborately ornamented with columns and statues. In the Greek theatre the entrances to the orchestra were between the stage and the cavea. When, in the Roman theatre, these were united into one building, the orchestra could only be reached by vaulted passages, for which the lower seats were cut away, always immediately adjoining the front of the stage. A curtain across the front of the stage was essential, and seems to have been supported by telescopic posts operated by ropes and pulleys, which descended into a series of holes leading down from the main slot for the curtain. This type of theatre was very well established and is known both from existing remains, and from literary descriptions, particularly that of Visruvius.

It was used for various kinds of theatrical representations, orginially often for the production of the classical Greek dramas, but in course of time the type of plays degenerated very much. In the period of the Empire, they consisted mainly of pantomimes and burlesques, and had something in common with variety performances of the present day, for they often included conjuring, acrobatics, and similar turns. The theatre, however, remained a different institution from the amphitheatre, which was a structure resembling our sports arenas, with seats all the way round, in which games and beast fighting took place. Amphitheatres are considerably more common than theatres, and a number have been found in England, while so far a theatre has been found only at Verulamium.

It is at once clear, however, that the theatre at Verula-



Fig. 8. Stage,

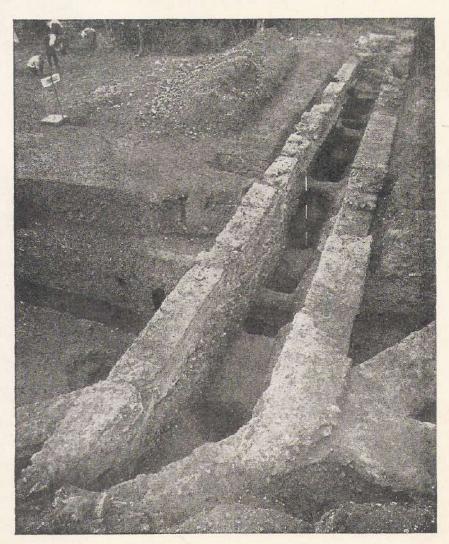
mium does not conform to the normal Roman type. The auditorium far exceeds the semi-circle, so that a considerable number of seats must have faced right away from the stage and towards the centre of the orchestra. The stage is extremely small in proportion to the size of the theatre, being only a little more than half the diameter of the orchestra, instead of twice that length. The cavea is pierced by three large gangways, none of them in the usual position, while the orchestra is divided by a four-foot wall (at least) from the cavea. All these divergences make it clear that the Verulamium theatre was not intended for dramatic performances of the ordinary Roman type.

There are, however, some close parallels to this theatre. In the north of France there is a group of theatres which exhibit the same characteristics. They have circular, or nearly eircular, orchestras, very small stages, and vertical gangways, as at Verulamium. Further, two, at Paris and at Drévant in the province of Cher, have what are obviously intended as dens for wild animals, which throws some light on the use of this type of theatre. That they were not intended solely for beast fights is shown by various facts, principally the existence of the stage, which must have served some purpose, and by the fact that they are far too small for the grandiose spectacles expected by the Romans. They must sometimes have been used for them, however, and also possibly for cock-fighting, for which their sizes suited them far more than the ordinary amphitheatre. Also, some kind of games or dancing may have taken place in them, possibly round a central upright, as clearly existed in Verulamium. It is very interesting to note that this type of theatre is confined to Northern Gaul and Britain, while in the south of Gaul there are a large number of theatres of the ordinary classical type. Both this type of theatre, and the Romano-Celtic type of temple, whose distribution closely follows that of the theatre and of which an example had been found in the adjoining insula, occur in parts of the Roman Empire which were not so thoroughly Romanized, and where native traditions could still modify Roman institutions.

The second period at Verulamium clearly represents



Fig. 9. Portion of Corinthian Capital from Stage.



Page Nineteen Fig. 10. "Curtain slot" of stage.

an attempt to convert the theatre as far as possible into the more classical type, by giving the stage a straight front, and columns at the back, and by the provision of seats in the orchestra. This suggests that Verulamium was by now becoming more Romanized, and the native element was waning.

The theatre at Verulamium is thus not only interesting as the only known Roman theatre in Britain, but also as example of the type of culture found in the outlying parts of the Empire. As it also presents an epitome of the history of Verulamium and even of Britain, its importance and interest can hardly be surpassed.