

Caerleon Roman Amphitheatre: changing ideas

As part of the celebrations marking the 150th anniversary of the Roman Legionary Museum, Caerleon, the amphitheatre was once again populated by the Roman army (the Ermine Street Guard) and nine gladiators imported from Italy. The Roman indulgence of gladiatorial combat returned to Caerleon for the first time in almost two thousand years. A huge crowd, squeezed onto the surviving banks of the amphitheatre, looked on in anticipation, but although no blood was spilt a number of ribs were cracked and the spectators went home satisfied. The amphitheatre still makes an excellent arena for events today, but what did it look like in Roman times?

The well-preserved oval amphitheatre, known to local folklore as King Arthur's Round Table, lies outside the walls of the Roman fortress. The archaeologist most closely associated with the amphitheatre is Dr R. E. M. Wheeler (later Sir Mortimer), who was appointed Keeper of Archaeology at the National Museum of Wales in 1920. He launched himself into an extensive programme of excavation in Wales at the Roman forts of Segontium (Caernarfon) and Brecon. His great energies were readily recognized and in 1924 he was appointed as Director of the Museum, during a period of extensive building work and the need for rapid fund raising. Archaeologically, Wheeler determined that the examination of the great legionary fortress would be his next advance. He decided to begin his campaign at the amphitheatre, since it was well-known, free of later buildings and 'likely to attract the considerable funds required for a long-term programme of work'. This magnetic quality of the site, he saw at once, would owe much to the fortuitous connection with King Arthur, and he was accused by some of shameless exploitation. Wheeler announced his project to the press and the bait was snapped



Italian gladiators in the Roman amphitheatre, Caerleon in 2001. In Roman times the amphitheatre would have served for parades and weapon-training, as well as degenerate and bloody pastimes



Daily Mail, 17 March, 1926

up: the *Daily Mail* sent their man immediately to Cardiff and within moments, around midnight we are told, an agreement was made that the paper should provide £1,000 for exclusive rights and daily reports on the uncovering of King Arthur's Round Table. In the event the *Daily Mail* eventually trebled its original offer and presented the excavated remains to the then Office of Works (a predecessor of Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments) as a national monument.

At the beginning of 1926, Wheeler announced that he was leaving for the post of Keeper of the London Museum. It was evident that he would not be able to direct the excavations scheduled for the summer and autumn, but the sponsorship from the *Daily Mail* made the project irrevocable and urgent. His wife, Tessa, took on the advance preparations for the dig and the crucial first season was supervised by Nowell Myres, a promising recent graduate from Oxford. Wheeler himself masterminded the excavation in the background, and Tessa rushed down when she had spare time from moving her

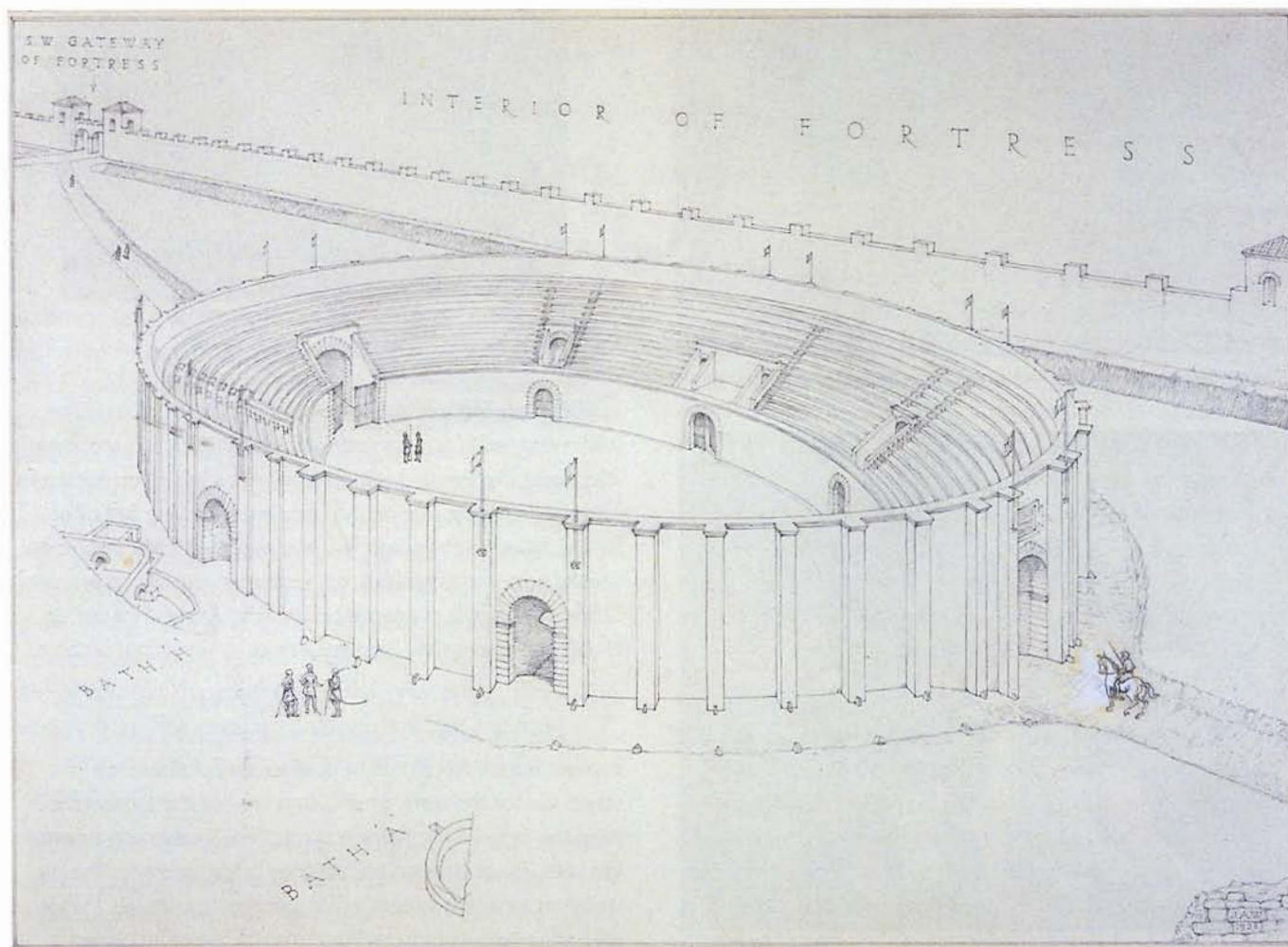
household to London. To redeem Wheeler's pledge, every evening Myres had to supply the *Daily Mail* with a newsworthy story on the day's discoveries, with 'sensational' headlines such as 'Where Gladiators Fought'. When Myres was obliged to quit Caerleon to take up his research fellowship, Tessa Wheeler assumed direction. It was apparent by this stage that the task was going to take very much longer than anticipated. She had to toil for a further eight months and she only returned to London when the history of the amphitheatre had been elucidated and it was ready to be handed over to the Office of Works for consolidation. Photographs and sections of the excavations reveal that all effort was devoted to emptying and investigating the arena, the entrances and exterior wall. It is recorded that the examination and cartage of nearly 30,000 tons of soil cost a total of two shillings a ton.

The Wheelers concluded that the amphitheatre had been constructed about AD 80, several years after the initial foundation of the fortress. In their report, published in 1928, they reconstructed the amphitheatre as an earthen and masonry structure; the auditorium was supported by a bank of earth retained by inner and outer walls of masonry. The outer

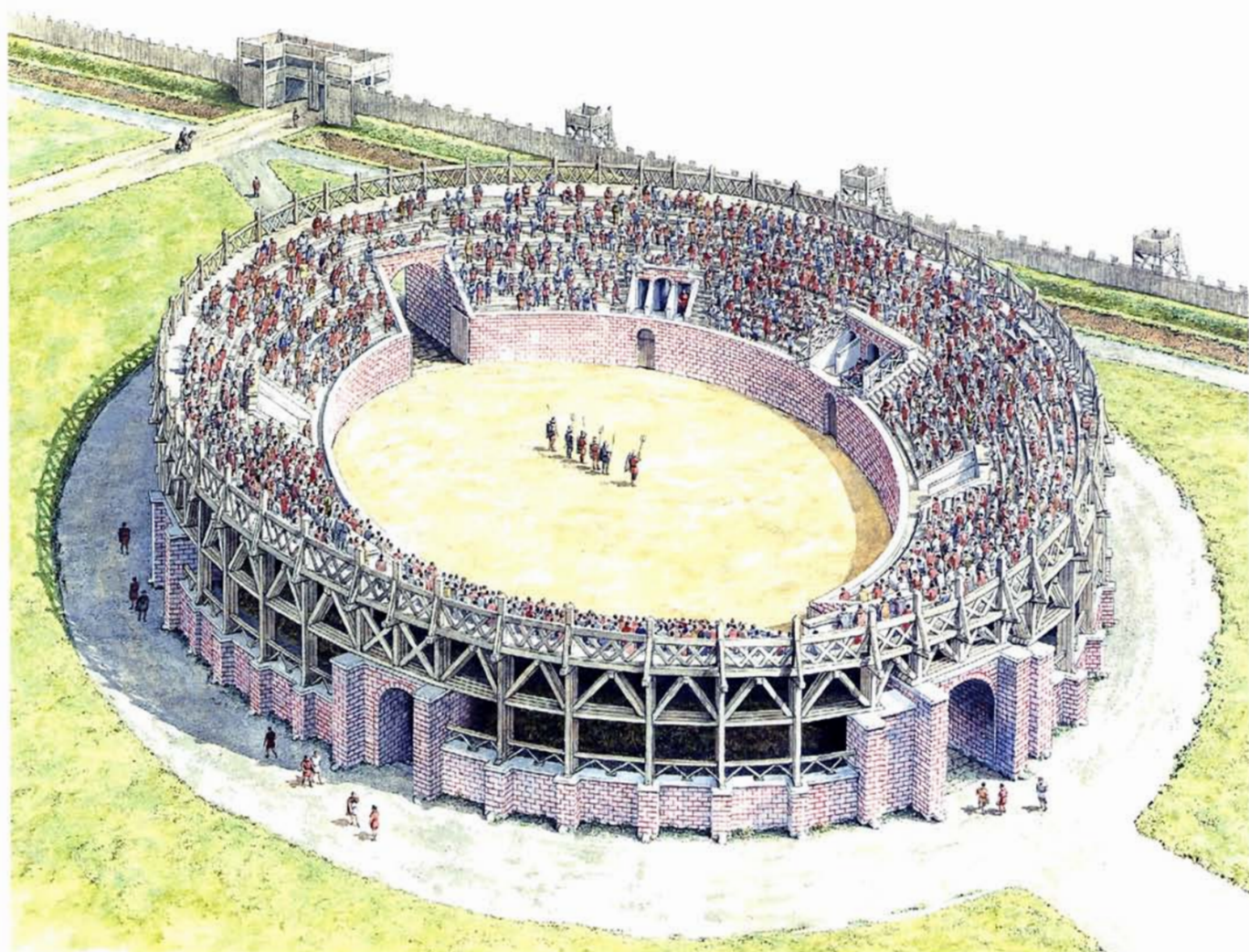


Mrs T. V. Wheeler standing in entrance B of the amphitheatre during its excavation

wall was supported and strengthened by external and internal buttresses. The original height of the whole structure could be determined with some accuracy, for the remains of the arches and the actual vaulting in the main entrances gave the rake of the vaults, which would have carried the seating over the



Reconstruction of the Caerleon amphitheatre by J. A. Wright for the Wheelers' report on the excavations in 1928. The amphitheatre is shown as a masonry structure to its full height



Artist's impression of how we now think the amphitheatre may have appeared in the late first century. Illustration by Dale Evans (1988) after the reconstruction by R. A. Anderson (1981) (*Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments, Crown Copyright*)

entrances. From this it was estimated that the arena wall must have risen to a height of four metres while the external wall must have reached a height of about ten metres. It was concluded that the seats were almost certainly of wood, for no vestige of stone seat was found during the excavations. This is despite the observations reported by Archdeacon William Coxe in 1801 that: 'within memory of persons now living stone seats were discovered on opening the sides of the cavity' – the masonry seen was presumably derived from the surrounding walls.

Alan Sorrell (1904-74) – perhaps the best known painter of archaeological reconstructions in more recent years – also shows the amphitheatre built in masonry to its full height in his painting of 1939. Indeed, it was not until 1962, when George Boon (then Assistant Keeper in the Department of Archaeology, but subsequently Keeper and then Curator) excavated a small trench in the bank between entrances D and E of the amphitheatre, that a fundamental reappraisal of its superstructure was undertaken. This excavation revealed that the banks were

never higher than today, for the metallised surface of the original bank was found not far below the turf. Cut into the surface of the bank were pits, a metre square and deep. Boon concluded that these pits had held the vertical members of an openwork timber grandstand. Since then, the amphitheatre has been reconstructed with its lower part in stone, but with a timber superstructure. Although the timber grandstand was perhaps intended as a temporary measure, it may never have been replaced in stone. An amphitheatre of similar construction is depicted on Trajan's Column at Dobreta, the Roman base on the Dacian (Romanian) side of the Danube bridge.

It is estimated that the timber grandstand at Caerleon contained 6,000 seats, approximately the full complement of the legion. Events at the amphitheatre, although undoubtedly less bloody, continue to attract large audiences.

Richard J Brewer
Keeper, Department of Archaeology & Numismatics