

Philip Crummy: The Roman Circus in Colchester

When developing ground for new housing in Colchester, builders are well aware that caution is needed and that the whole process could be prolonged. Roman remains are all too common, thus teams of archaeologists are contacted from the start. Such was the case in 2004 when remains of a wall with buttresses became apparent on land to the east of the town. It quickly became clear that it was not 'just a wall', but something of far greater significance.

Principal archaeologist, Philip Crummy, humorously explained how, after much painstaking digging, a complete Roman Circus was discovered, the only known one in Britain. Dating from the 2nd. century A.D., a time when Colchester was at its most prosperous, the enormous structure, built with a large obelisk on an imposing central barrier, plus a piped in water system, would have held up to 8000 spectators enjoying the thrills and spills of an exceedingly dangerous sport. Light weight chariots, each pulled by four horses and usually driven by young slaves, would have charged out of eight starting gates and raced around the seven laps of the circuit. Eating, drinking and betting doubtlessly ensured much raucous behaviour, and the charioteers who won regularly often became rich celebrities – if they lived that long!

Today, with good support from Taylor Wimpey, the builders, and other sponsorship, the Colchester Archaeological Trust has opened a Visitors' Centre with gardens and tea room. Admission is free, whilst tours are available for a small payment. Although much of the site is under roads, building and grassland, it is possible to walk around a good amount to get some idea of the vastness of this comparatively local, important historical discovery.