

The Excavation of the Roman Theatre at Gosbecks

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THE Romano-British theatre at Gosbecks is situated in the parish of Stanway, three miles west of the *colonia* at Colchester on a small promontory between the Roman river and a lesser tributary. It lies on the eastern edge of a thirty-acre area which was covered in Roman times by numerous buildings including a possible bath-building, the large Gosbecks temple standing within its own temenos, and a massive walled 'fairground'.¹ The theatre lies 125 yards due south of the temple and may well have stood within the 'fairground'. The entire area (FIG. 1) falls into a class of rural site widespread in Roman Gaul where large temples are associated with theatre, *mansio* and bath-buildings, but where private houses and town walls are absent.²

As the Gosbecks theatre lies on flat ground the *cavea* had to be artificially built up and is still clearly visible today as a roughly D-shaped mound, 4½ ft. high, with marked depressions over the orchestra and entrance. This mound was first mentioned in written records in 1847³ when the rector of Stanway, the Rev. H. Jenkins, dug into its western edge.⁴ The true identity of the mound as a theatre *cavea* was not realized until trial excavations were conducted by M. R. Hull in 1948–50, mainly on the periphery of the mound. Mr. Hull established that a south-facing theatre, at any rate in part masonry-built, had occupied the site; unfortunately, lacking financial resources he was unable to recover any details of the plan of orchestra or stage. The 1967 excavations, which are the subject of the present report, were undertaken in the face of long-term threats to the site as a whole from gravel-extraction and from building. In addition to this, annual deep ploughing was rapidly denuding the *cavea*, which in 1967 stood only four and a half feet high in contrast to six feet in 1950.

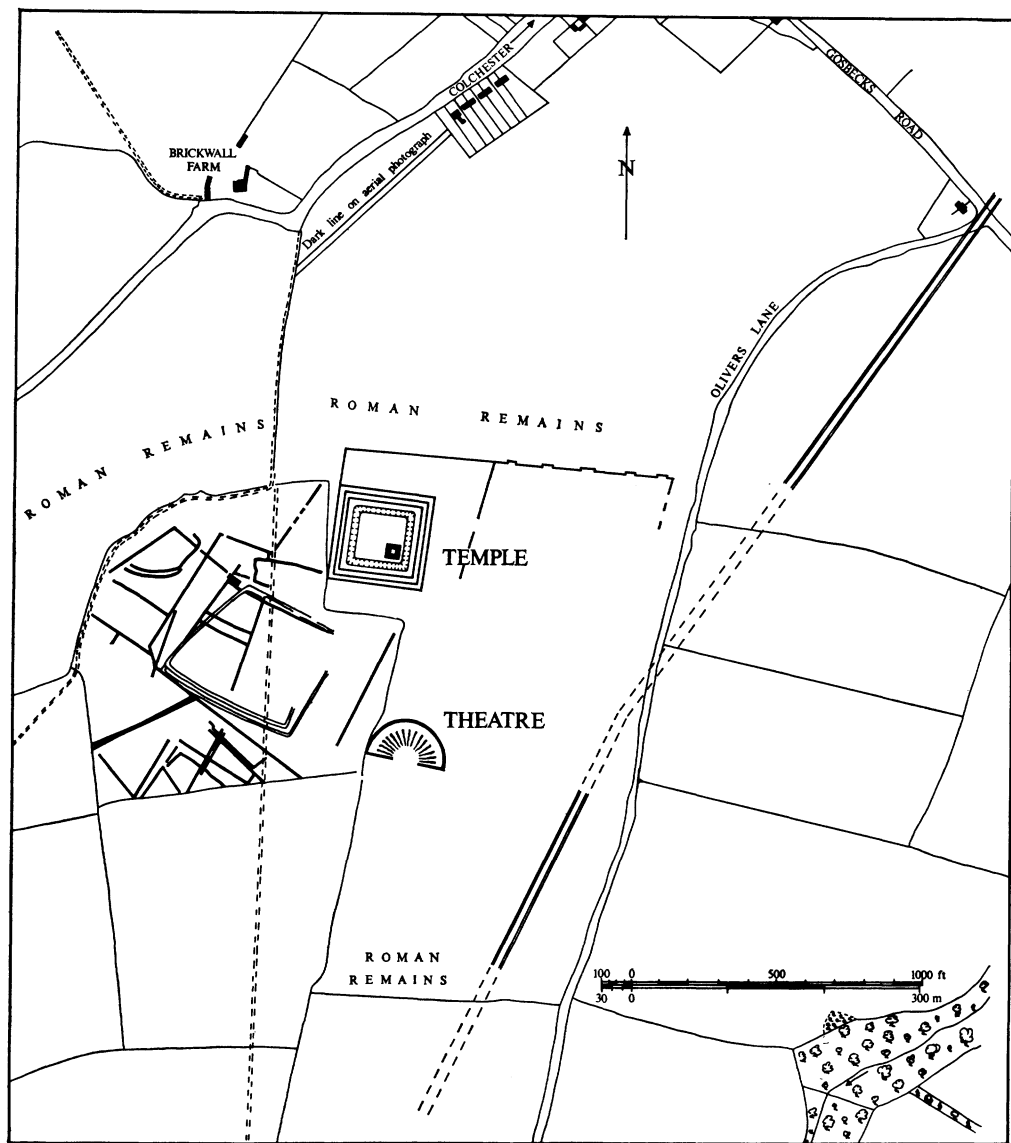
Today the theatre lies in farmland, and the Colchester Excavation Committee is deeply indebted to the farmer, Mr. A. Barbour, for his kind co-operation throughout the dig. The work was financed by the Colchester Excavation Committee, relying on generous grants from the Pilgrim Trust, the Colchester

¹ M. R. Hull, *Roman Colchester*, Oxford 1958, 259–70.

² e.g. Berthouville, *Antiq. Journ.* viii, 322; Champlieu, Grenier, *Manuel d'Archeologie Gallo-Romaine*, 181, fig. 10; *Bulletin Monumental* 28 (1868), p. 421; Drevant, *Bulletin Monumental* 31 (1860) p. 100, *Gallia* xix (1961), p. 327; Le Mont Castillon, *Gallia* vii (1949), p. 114; Sanxay, *Trier Jahresberichte*, 111, 62 ff, *Gallia*, iii (1944), 43–120, fig. 28; Le Vieux Evreux, *Antiq. Journ.* viii, 320; Woodeaton, covering 50 acres, may turn out to be another British example.

³ *Journ. Brit. Arch. Assn.*, xi (1885), 48.

⁴ No sign of these excavations was found in 1967 or in the previous excavations by Mr. Hull.



(By permission of the Society of Antiquaries)

FIG. 1
The Theatre and Temple at Gosbecks Farm, near Colchester.
(redrawn by Roger Goodburn)

Borough Council, the Essex County Council and numerous donations from private individuals. To all these the Committee is most grateful. The actual work was carried out over a period of six weeks in August to September, 1967, by one hundred and three volunteers, to all of whom the writer expresses her sincere

thanks, and in particular to the site supervisors.⁵ Finally grateful thanks are due to the Army for their generous provision of accommodation and equipment, and to the officers of the Colchester Excavation Committee for their unfailing help at all times both before, during, and after the excavation.⁶

THE EXCAVATION

In view of the limited time available, two months between harvest and the autumn ploughing, it was decided to excavate only the western half of the theatre: since the building was presumably symmetrical the excavation of one half should enable the plan of the entire structure to be restored.

THE PRE-ROMAN OCCUPATION

The earliest activity on the site was represented by four pits cut into the natural gravel subsoil.

Pit 1. An oval pit, 12 ft. by 7 ft. and $3\frac{1}{2}$ ft. deep (FIG. 2). It was steep-sided with a flat base (FIG. 4, section C-D) and completely filled with layers of silt interspersed with bands of clean gravel. This was doubtless due to natural silting, a process which in the loose gravel subsoil must have occurred fairly rapidly. The top layer of silt yielded a couple of sherds of hand-made pottery (see FIG. 6, No. 21). *Pits III-IV.* These three pits were shallower than Pit 1, with a depth of only 18 in. to 2 ft., but their filling was identical. Pit III produced from its base a small lump of iron, possibly a nail head. All four pits were certainly artificial, but had become completely silted up and sealed by a thick turf-line before the erection of the earliest Roman building on the site. No other pre-theatre structures were found, but lying on the old turf-line beneath the *cavea* were a number of pieces of Iron-Age pottery, identical with that from Pit 1. Further examples were found in the actual body of the *cavea* (p. 44f). Since, as will be shown below, the turf of which the mound was built must have been gathered from over a wide area, and the pottery presumably with it, its occurrence here cannot be taken as further evidence for pre-Roman occupation on the actual theatre-site itself. Presumably, however, the turf came from the immediately surrounding area, and if so suggests an earlier occupation there. The presence of the pottery in the pits *may* be fortuitous, but in any case both pits and pottery pre-dated the Roman theatre by many years. The discovery of pre-Belgic pottery in the area is of considerable interest in view of Professor Hawkes's suggestion of the pre-Belgic importance of the Gosbecks site and the primary date of the Heath Farm dyke among the Camulodunum defences.⁷ It must be emphasized, however, that the pottery was all extremely fragmentary and cannot be taken as evidence of any concentration of occupation in the area.

⁵ Miss P. Cullen, Messrs. D. Kidd, N. Reed and C. Young. Also to Miss E. Waite who ran the pottery shed.

⁶ In particular to Mr. D. T-D. Clarke, Curator of the Colchester and Essex Museum and to his assistant, Mr. D. G. Davies. I am also most grateful to Professor S. S. Frere for reading the draft of this text and for many helpful comments.

⁷ C. F. C. Hawkes and M. R. Hull, *Camulodunum* (Oxford 1947), 10-12.

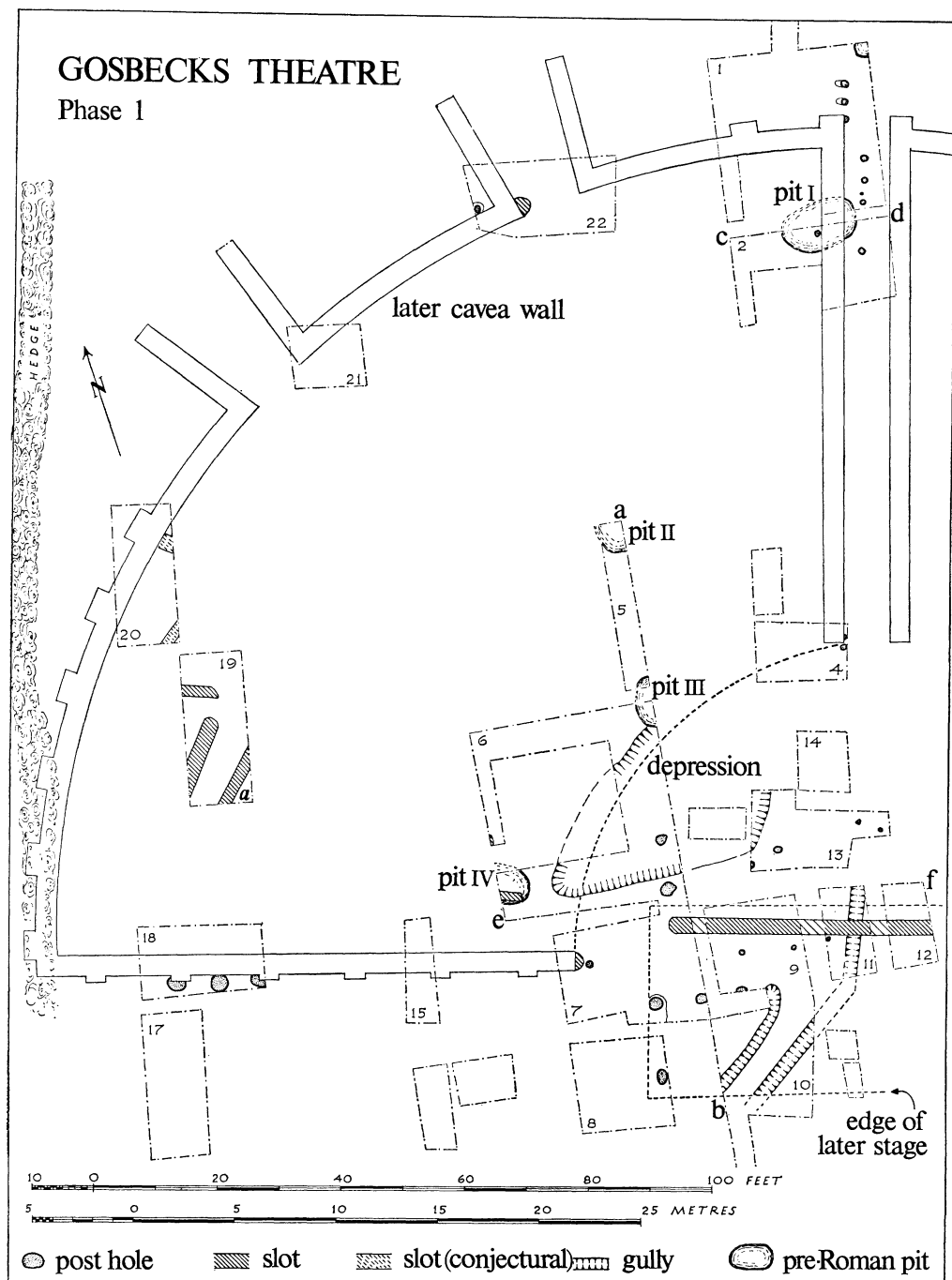


FIG. 2
The timber phase and earlier pits.

THE ROMAN PERIOD. PHASE I: THE WOODEN THEATRE (FIG. 2)

In its earliest phase the plan of the theatre was simple, consisting of a semi-circular timber *cavea* with a single northern entrance, a relatively large orchestra and a rectangular timber stage.

The Cavea

In both the 1948 and the 1967 excavations traces of timber features were found, beneath and apparently pre-dating the later *cavea*. Mr. Hull found traces of sleeper-beam slots clearly sealed by the later mound material near the northern entrance and the south-west *cavea* wall (point *a*, FIG. 2), while the current excavations exposed additional examples in Trenches 6, 18, 19 and 20 (FIG. 2), lying radially and concentrically to the line of the later *cavea* wall. Unfortunately, the south-western wing of the *cavea* had been so extensively mutilated by roots and burrowing animals that in most cases the outlines of the features could not be accurately measured. The better-preserved slots in Trenches 6 and 19 marked on FIG. 2 measured 1 ft. 9 in. wide by at least 24 ft. in length and were sunk 6 in. into the subsoil. As far as could be ascertained the other slots in Trenches 6, 19 and 20 were of very similar dimensions. None of the timbers could be traced up into the mound.

While the beam slots pre-dated the construction of the mound, they were clearly cut through the turf that sealed the earlier pits, and must consequently be assigned to an intermediate phase. (They are here treated as belonging to the Phase I theatre.)

The Cavea wall

In Trench 18, immediately south of the south-west radial wall of the later *cavea* and partly overlain by it, was a line of three massive post-pits, 20–30 in. in diameter and 2 ft. 5 in. deep (PL. VIII A). As no trace of the actual posts could be found, the exact dimensions of the uprights are not known. Almost certainly the timbers had eventually been dug out. Another post-hole, 2 ft. 6 in. deep, with a diameter of 10 in. and a discernible post-pit, was found partially sealed by a later staircase on the north-western edge of the *cavea*, while a stakehole of similar stratigraphical date, 2 ft. east of the end of the later south-west *cavea* wall, may be a continuation of the line of holes in Trench 18. With the exception of the last, the loamy filling of all the holes had been disturbed by the foundations of the succeeding theatre but were themselves cut through the old turf-line. They also must be assigned to an intermediate phase, and taken with the beam-slots as part of the timber theatre.

The entrance

Beneath the earliest floor of the entrance of the later theatre was a thick layer of very dark and, when dry, remarkably friable soil. Cut into this layer was a line of post-holes, 12 in. deep, with diameters of approximately 15–20 in. and set 5 ft. 6 in. apart. Between the post-holes were varying numbers of stakeholes, 9 in. deep. They ran roughly up the centre of the later entrance-

passage but on a slightly different alignment from it, and two further post-holes on the same line at the south-west corner of the later entrance almost certainly represent a continuation of the row. What appeared to be a second parallel line ran 6 ft. to the west, beneath the west wall of the later entrance. In Trench 2 a small post-hole partially underlay the foundation-offset of this wall, while three post-holes 20 ft. further north on the projected line of the west wall probably represented a continuation. All of these holes certainly pre-dated the later entrance; they cannot be regarded as remains of scaffolding-poles for the construction of the later building since they were sealed not only by the first floor of its entrance but also by the construction rubble associated with the building.

The Orchestra

Beneath that part of the area later occupied by the orchestra of the Phase 2 theatre the old turf-line had been removed and the underlying natural gravel dug away to a depth of 15–18 in. over an area measuring approximately 60 ft. by 60 ft. (see FIG. 2, 'depression'). This was bounded on the north and west by the line of the later orchestra, on the east by a line from the centre of the later stage to the west edge of the entrance passageway, and on the south by the front of the stage. Not only was the old turf-line clearly cut by this depression but the earlier Pit III had also been sliced through. On the other hand it was demonstrably earlier than the later orchestra floor, and so must also be associated with the features of the Phase I wooden theatre.

The numerous hollows in the floor of the depression rendered its surface extremely uneven, but the absence of silt and the sharp edges of the hollows, which in the loose gravel subsoil could not have stood up to weathering or wear, indicated that the surface had never been exposed. A large number of nails was found lying in the base of the depression and in the material that later filled it; it may therefore have been protected by a timber floor. The four post- and stake-holes in the area, approximately 5 ft. apart, could be interpreted as floor-supports and so explain the fresh appearance of the gravel.⁸

One curious feature was the absence of any sign of a revetment around the edge of the depression; there was no evidence of any weathering of the edge, however, so some sort of support must be assumed. It is also not clear where the material dug out of the orchestra depression was dumped. No trace of it was found anywhere in the current excavations.⁹

The stage

The numerous features south of the depression in the area occupied by the later stage were extremely difficult to disentangle. The features themselves were not easy to distinguish in the dry gravel subsoil, while the renewal of some of the later uprights made the situation yet more complicated.

⁸ They may have supported timber seats in the orchestra. Vitruvius, v, vi 2.

⁹ Professor Frere suggests that this depression might have resulted from the digging out of a large tree, and the resultant hollow then filled with turfy material before the construction of the wooden theatre.

The earliest posts, however, had been ultimately dug out leaving holes which were markedly shallow in relation to their diameters. These had been filled with tightly-packed grey gravel, more clayey in consistency and darker in colour than the subsoil. This deposit (FIG. 4, Section A-B, layer 4) had spread around the post-holes and covered the entire stage area, forming a more or less continuous layer sealing the early features, whereas later ones were cut through it.

It seems unlikely that layer 4 was deliberately laid as an artificial surface. It probably resulted, at any rate in part, through people trampling on the gravel subsoil, possibly in wet weather. This would presumably have happened only during building operations, since at other times the ground-surface would have been protected by the timber floor which the uprights presumably supported.

The features sealed by layer 4 are plotted on FIG. 2, from which it can be seen that they comprised a slot (20 in. wide, 11 in. deep, with almost vertical sides and a flat base), numerous stakeholes and four substantial post-holes on the southern side. The slot was interpreted as a beam-slot (rather than as a gully) on the grounds of the total absence of any silt in its base and of its steep un-weathered walls. It ran on an alignment slightly different from that of the later building, but was at right angles to the line of post-holes in the entrance.

The actual plan of these timbers can only be tentatively restored. Those north of the slot have already been suggested as floor-supports. Although the southernmost post-hole is 20 ft. south of the slot, the structure associated with it was probably only about 11 ft. wide. The line of post-holes approximately 11-12 ft. south of the slot, though not quite parallel to it, seems more likely to mark the back of the structure, since one of the two shallow clay-lined gullies in the area started on this line and it is difficult to see why such a gully should start *beneath* a structure. The second gully ran south from the orchestra and presumably went under the stage. The fact that both gullies were clay-lined suggested that they were designed to carry off surplus water, an arrangement which would not normally have been necessary in the easily drained gravel subsoil; but if, as has already been suggested, the orchestra was both timber-floored and sunk to a level lower than the surrounding area, some such provision might well be needed to prevent rainwater accumulating in it. An iron collar found unstratified in the south of the orchestra is unlikely to have been connected with either gully; it was more probably a binding for the base of a post. As mentioned already, these features pre-dated the later structure in the stage area which was cut through layer 4, and in any case four of the post-holes in Trenches 6 and 7 can be stratigraphically associated with the orchestra depression (FIG. 4, Section A-B).

Summary: Phase I Theatre

Preceding the construction of the theatre with which the artificial *cavea* mound was associated, but post-dating the earliest occupation on the site, were a number of features occurring beneath the later structure in the orchestra, stage, entrance and *cavea*. Furthermore, under the stage, entrance, and *cavea* wall these features followed lines very similar to those of the later building. In the

case of the west wall of the entrance and the *cavea* wall, the lines of the later structure had obliterated those of the earlier. Thus, although the overall plan of these timbers does not appear on paper to add up to very much, if the plan of the later building is superimposed, many of the gaps in the earlier plan are explained, while the close similarities of the two become apparent. The timbers under the entrance passageway were much slighter than the timbers elsewhere and could hardly have taken sizeable uprights. They are more suggestive of a timber-walled entrance which did not have to support a great weight. The sleeper-beam slots beneath the *cavea*, on the other hand, were large enough to accommodate sizeable beams.

It is therefore tentatively suggested that these early timber features were part of an entirely timber building adhering closely to the plan of the later theatre, the earlier building being aligned two degrees east of the later structure.¹⁰ The timbers beneath the later *cavea* mound are best explained as supports for a free-standing timber auditorium similar to that of the earliest phase of the Chester amphitheatre; the absence of nails both on the underlying surface and in the actual mound-material suggest that at Gosbecks the stand was pegged rather than nailed.

The dating evidence for this phase is meagre. It consisted only of an early second-century flagon-rim (FIG. 6, 1) which lay beneath the loamy layer of the Phase 1 entrance. It provides a *terminus post quem* of c. A.D. 100. The Phase 1 theatre could not have stood for long; the absence of any evidence of timber-renewal suggests a life of not more than twenty-five years. Furthermore, the end of the Phase 1 building cannot have long predated the construction of the succeeding theatre, for which the finds in layer 4 provide a firmer initial date of c. A.D. 150–200. No masonry appeared on the site before Phase 2, but the small stake-holes at the entrance were all filled with masons' ragstone chips and the larger post-holes with small ragstone boulders. These holes were therefore open when Phase 2 was under construction and, as they would not have remained unsilted for long, the posts can have been withdrawn only shortly before the re-building took place. Allowing for a maximum life of twenty-five years for the Phase 1 timbers, the date 150–200 for the construction of the succeeding building would seem to indicate a date for the first in the reign of Hadrian or perhaps in that of Antoninus Pius.

PHASE 2: THE VISIBLE THEATRE

The second building on the site was that to which the artificial *cavea* mound belonged. It proved to be a part-masonry structure where an outer stone shell surrounded a turf and timber interior.

The Cavea

The *cavea* mound survived to a height of 4½ ft., two feet lower than in 1950 when Mr. Hull worked on the site. The top 17 in. had been much disturbed by

¹⁰ Professor Frere has drawn my attention to an inscription mentioning an apparently timber theatre of Claudian date at Feurs near Lyons. *ILS* 5639 = *CIL* xiii 1642. *Divo Augusto sacrum pro salute Ti. Claudii Caesaris Augusti. Germ. Ti. Claudius Arucae fil. Capito sacerdos Aug. theatrum quod Lupus Anthi f. ligneum posuerat d.s.p. lapideum restituit.*

deep ploughing but the lower $3\frac{1}{2}$ ft. were preserved intact. The *cavea* had been entirely built of turf: there was no central core of earth or gravel common in most Roman turf works. In the surviving portion the seven lowest courses, remarkably neatly and regularly laid, were very clearly identifiable. The numerous turf lumps in the silt overlying the orchestra and entrance were clearly derived from the upper parts of the mound and indicated that these also were turf-built. This method of construction, while answering the previously unexplained question of where the mound material had originated in view of the absence of any quarry, meant that an extremely wide area had had to be stripped of turf. Assuming that the mound at its highest point was 10 ft. high and sloped down at an angle of 10 degrees to the orchestra wall, fifteen acres would have had to be stripped of their turf.¹¹

The deep ploughing and erosion that removed the upper parts of the *cavea* had also destroyed all traces of the seating arrangements; these were probably of timber, though they could have been simply stepped turf. A *cavea* of the suggested dimensions would have been able to accommodate 4,000 spectators. This estimate allows three square feet per person and a total of twelve thousand feet for hypothetical gangways.¹² The turf mound sealed numerous ragstone chips, and immediately north of the south-west *cavea* wall spits of mortar were found at intervals up through the turf, showing that the *cavea* and wall were built contemporaneously. A small stake-hole 9 in. north of the south-west *cavea* wall in Trench 18 had as a *packing-stone* a small piece of ragstone and must therefore be assigned to Phase 2. Since it was sealed by the turf mound, however, it must have been connected with the building of the theatre and not with its use.

The Cavea Wall

This was normally entirely robbed out, though in a few places the lowest courses of the foundations survived (PL. IX A). The only superstructure to survive was a short length on the east side of the entrance, so here alone could the character of the wall be assessed. The foundations, wherever they survived, were trench-built of alternate layers of septaria, often quite small chips, and hard yellow mortar. Above ground, Kentish ragstone and a rather paler mortar were used and the wall was faced with high-quality ashlar. The difference in mortar does not indicate a difference in building periods. Numerous small pieces of ragstone occurred all along the robber trench of the *cavea* wall, indicating that the superstructure elsewhere was also built of ragstone. The width of the wall above foundation level was 2 ft. 4 in.; the footings were roughly 6 in. wider. Normally the foundations were dug 2 ft.–2 ft. 6 in. below the contemporary ground surface, though on the south side of the *cavea* they were only 1 ft. deep.

The external face of the wall was relieved by small buttresses or pilaster bases. These also had generally been entirely robbed out, but enough survived

¹¹ This estimate allows a thickness of 4 in. for each turf. At the base of the mound they were compressed to $1\frac{1}{2}$ in. Approximately 73,000 square yards of turf of this thickness would be needed.

¹² This estimate assumes that the *cavea* mound reached up to the top of the *cavea* wall and sloped down to ground-level at the orchestra. It is likely, however, that the base of the *cavea* was some feet higher than the Phase 2 orchestra floor.

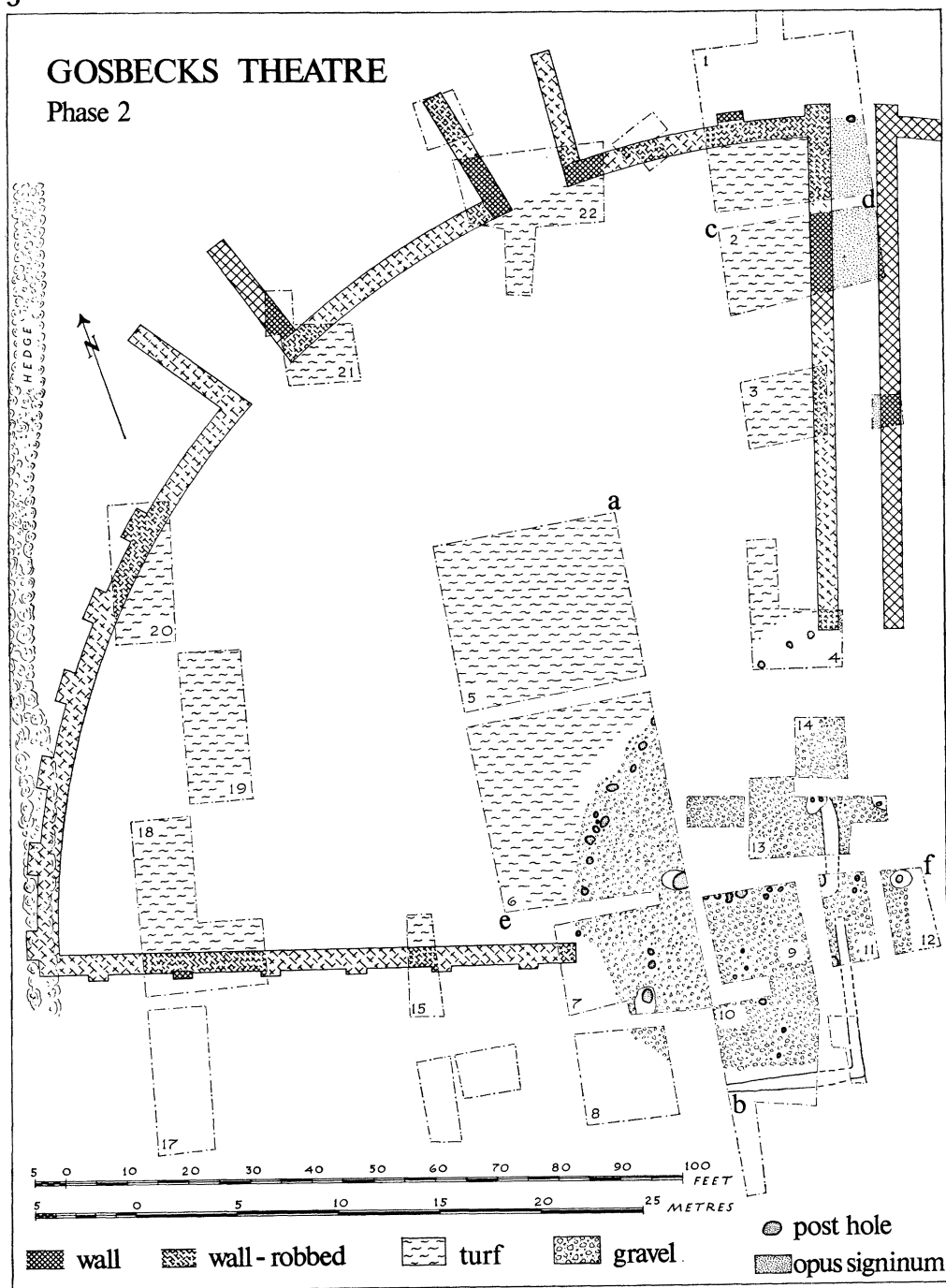


FIG. 3
The later theatre.

of Nos. 7 and 19 show that they were of one build with the *cavea* wall. They occurred at intervals of 9 ft., were 5 ft. broad and projected 2 ft. from the wall (PL. VIII B). On the south wall they were smaller still, 3 ft. by 11 in., in keeping with the slighter character of the wall itself on this side.

The small size of these features, even at foundation level, militates against their interpretation as buttresses: the bases for decorative pilasters or engaged half-columns is a more likely explanation.

The projecting masonry found by Mr. Hull in 1950 (FIG. 3, Trench 15) can now be seen to be pilaster 24, and the irregularity in the *cavea* wall near the south-east corner, revealed by him in 1949, must also have been caused by a pilaster, now numbered No. 17 (FIG. 5). The west wall of the entrance, and presumably the east one also, projected 2 ft. north of the main *cavea* wall, thus forming two more pilasters symmetrically placed 10 ft. apart from No. 7 and the hypothetical No. 10, east of the entrance. At two points, at the east end of the south-west radial wall of the *cavea* and the west side of staircase 2, the *cavea* wall ended in a shallow semi-circular depression 1 ft. deep and filled with very fine-grained rubble rather different from the filling of the actual robber-trench.¹³ The function of these features is not certain, but it is possible that they represent the remains of earlier (Phase 1) features obliterated elsewhere by the wall trench (PL. IX A).

The Staircases

At two points in the *cavea* wall 42 ft. and 94 ft. west of the entrance, gaps 10 ft. wide occurred in the wall, marked on either side by slightly splayed walls running 20 ft. out from the main *cavea* wall. These were of the same build as the main wall. At first the gaps were thought to be radial entrances to the *cavea*, but it quickly became clear that the turf bank had continued uninterrupted across them, with no sign of any break in it (PL. IX A). The most reasonable interpretation for these features, therefore, was as bases for staircases leading up to the top of the *cavea*-bank and giving access to the rear seats of the auditorium.

The pilaster bases did not occur in their expected positions immediately next to the stairs. The presence therefore, of pilaster 6 in its normal position means that if a third staircase existed it must have occupied the position of pilasters 3 and 4 and so destroyed the symmetrical spacing of 41 ft. 6 in. between staircases. It is therefore fairly safe to assume that a third *western* staircase did not exist. Staircases 1 and 2 incidentally occupied the positions recommended by Vitruvius for internal radial staircases to the auditorium.¹⁴

The twenty-foot length of the staircase bases provided some indication of the height of the wall. The narrow width of the foundations might be taken to suggest a relatively low revetting wall, but it has to be borne in mind that the turf mound would to a large extent have been self supporting, and the thrust on the wall consequently small. The ten-foot spacing of the pilaster bases would demand a height of at least ten feet if the pilasters were not to appear stumpy.

¹³ That at the end of the south-west *cavea* wall was first recorded by Mr. Hull. It was re-excavated in 1967.

¹⁴ Vitruvius, v, vi 2.

On the other hand a greater height for the wall is ruled out since the stairs would run up at an angle of 45 degrees for a ten-foot wall, and a wall any higher would demand stairs rising at a very steep angle.¹⁵ Approximately 10 ft. is therefore suggested as the height of the wall.

The entrance

A marked depression in the mound indicated the position of the northern axial entrance.¹⁶ The walls of the entrance have already been described, and consisted simply of a continuation of the *cavea* wall, inturned to form a passageway 8 ft. wide. This was floored in rough *opus signinum* on a make-up of masons' ragstone chips. In many places the *opus signinum* had been worn away and the underlying chips exposed and weathered. The surface itself had been renewed twice, first by another *opus signinum* floor on a make-up of broken tiles, and finally by fine cobbles (PL. X B). In the centre of the entrance, on the line of the *cavea* wall, was a large post-hole, 15 in. in diameter and 18 in. deep.

For most of its length the entrance was open to the sky. PL. X B shows the exceptionally clean nature of the soil overlying the latest entrance surface and the total absence of any masonry or rubble on it. Had the entrance been vaulted, even very careful robbing would surely have resulted in some rubble being deposited on the surface. The only area where such rubble was found, however, was over a stretch 18 ft. long at the north end, where a layer of mortar and tile rubble, 2½ ft. thick, overlay the cobbled surface. This suggested that there had been an arch over the actual entrance, but one that did not extend more than 17 ft. down the entrance. The large number of broken flat tiles in the rubble implies that the arch was turned in tile; tiles were totally absent from the robber-trench elsewhere, and bonding-courses in tile seem unlikely. The walls of the entrance passageway presumably grew lower nearer to the orchestra, and in Trench 4 the foundations of the west wall were consequently slightly built, being sunk only 1 ft. into the subsoil, and so comparable with the south-west radial wall of the *cavea*.

From the north the theatre must originally have looked fairly impressive, with two massive staircases on either side of the arched entrance, and between these the series of decorative pilasters. No trace was found anywhere in the excavations of decorative moulding, sheathing, or even painted wall plaster, but these may formerly have existed nonetheless. The turf and timber interior, however, would have presented a very different appearance. No masonry had ever been employed here, and the simple interior fittings followed closely the design of the earlier structure.

The Orchestra

The entrance passageway led directly to the orchestra, with no sign of a door or even a sill at the orchestra end. Two post-holes next to the west wall

¹⁵ This assumes that the stairs led up to the top of the wall. It is possible however that the height of the mound was less than that of the wall, which would then have projected above it. In this case the stairs presumably would only have led to an opening through the wall, level with the top of the *cavea* mound.

¹⁶ M. R. Hull, *Roman Colchester* (Oxford 1958), 296.

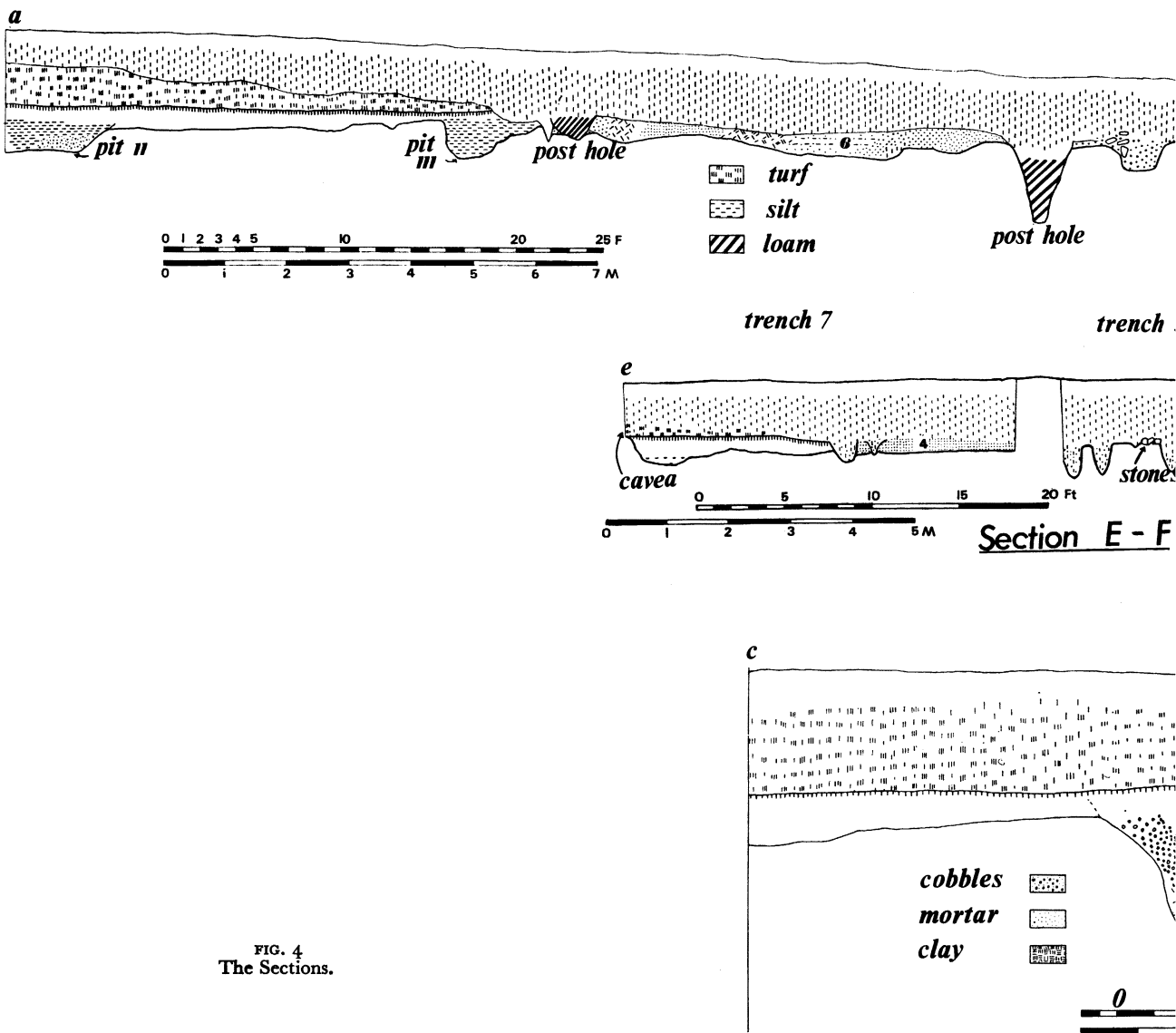
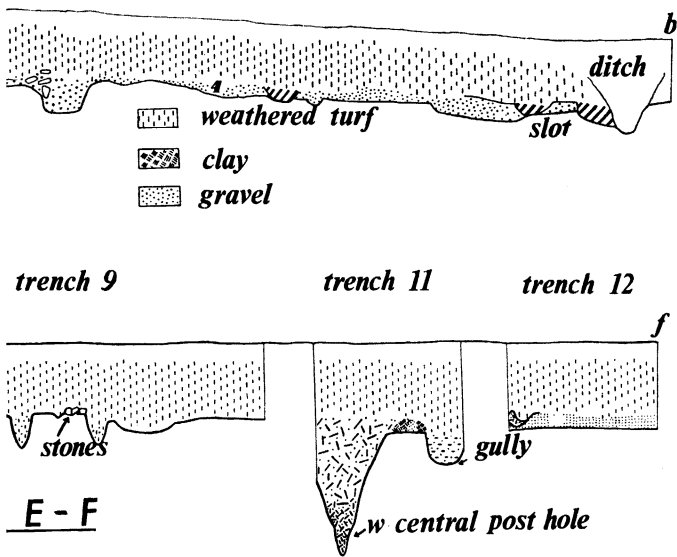
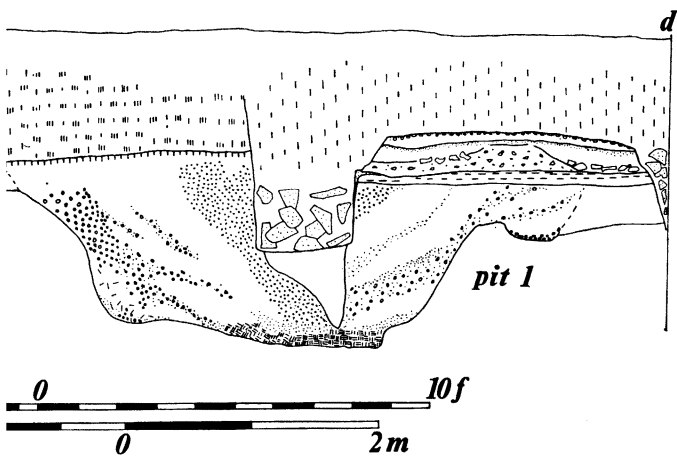


FIG. 4
The Sections.

SECTION A - B



Section C - D



at its junction with the orchestra wall were of Phase 1 date and partially sealed by the later foundations. Tips of clean sterile sand and gravel had been dumped—mainly from the northern edge—into the orchestra depression, levelling and raising the surface 1 ft. 6 in.—2 ft. to bring it up almost to the level of the entrance passage, that is 6 in. above that of the original ground surface. The steep angle of the tips and the absence of any silt or humus clearly showed that they were an artificial deposit, and not the result of natural silting. No actual floor survived, and the resulting surface was consequently patchy. It is possible that it had originally been floored with timber planks, but neither floor-joist impressions nor nails survived.

The orchestra wall was cut through this filling, so clearly must be associated with the second phase. It consisted of a line of rather irregularly sized and spaced post-holes, 9–18 in. in diameter, curving round between the east end of the south-west radial wall and the south end of the entrance passage. The actual post-holes could not be distinguished in the loamy filling of the post pits, but their shallow depth of 8–12 in. suggested that the orchestra wall was made up of rather small stakes, supporting a slight fence rather than a true wall (PL. x A). The turf of the *cavea* could be traced to within 18 in. of the orchestra wall, but its absence immediately behind the stakeholes could be due to the lesser protection afforded by the tail of the bank, and the exposure of the turf to erosion. The orchestra floor itself was featureless except for some indications of timber-work near its centre, which will be described below in connexion with the stage.

The Stage

The stage, though remaining simple in plan, was now re-built considerably larger. The width of 70 ft. was retained, but the depth was increased to 34 ft. The front was supported by uprights 6–9 in. in diameter, 12–15 in. apart and driven on average 12 in. into the ground. In most cases these post-holes had been packed with ragstone chips.

At the north-west corner of the stage a large post-hole was set 8 in. forward into the orchestra, which, with a diameter of 2 ft. and a depth of $3\frac{1}{2}$ ft. would have accommodated a very substantial timber upright. For reasons of symmetry a similar post may be presumed at the north-east corner of the stage. Immediately opposite the projected lines of the two passage-way walls, on the centre of the stage, were two more large post-holes, 2 ft. in diameter and 7 ft. deep (PL. ix B). All three posts had been set in large post-pits; that of the west central post yielded a sherd of later second-century pottery (FIG. 6, No. 8). There were no signs of any intermediate massive posts between these three and, had any existed, the edges at any rate of the post-pits would have shown in Trenches 7 and 11.

Massive uprights in these positions are of course exceptional, and at first it was thought that they might have been holes for curtain-raising poles.¹⁷ The sparse and irregular setting, however, militates against this interpretation, and

¹⁷ As at the Verulamium theatre, *Archaeologia* lxxxiv, 225–6.

in any case the depth of the north-west hole was not great enough to accommodate a curtain-raising pole. Moreover, associated with the west central post-hole was a slot leading 14 ft. out into the orchestra, where it terminated in a large post-pit with three small stake-holes in its base. The absence of any silt in the base of the slot and its steep unweathered sides suggested its use as a beam slot rather than as a gully. The function of the three post-holes in the orchestra is not known, but the eastern two might have been connected with a similar feature associated with the east central post-hole. The whole complex could then possibly have been a staircase leading from the orchestra to the stage; but as the stage seems only to have been a few feet high this arrangement may hardly have been necessary: larger supports would be needed to take the weight of the top of a staircase, but even so the two central posts seem excessively large.

Under the stage itself thirteen small post-holes and stake-holes and a north-south beam-slot, 15 in. wide, had been cut through layer 4 and were presumably supports for the stage floor. There were very large quantities of nails lying all over the stage area, but these formed no definite pattern and had presumably fallen at random as the stage decayed. The back of the stage was represented by a beam slot running parallel to the stage front and cut through the edge of layer 4. No stage buildings were found in the trenches dug on the west side of the stage, and a trial trench dug for 80 ft. south of the rear east-west slot also proved featureless. A large quantity of roofing tiles, both *tegulae* and *imbrices*, were found in the centre of the stage, particularly concentrated around the massive central post-holes. These may indicate the existence of a roof over part of the stage, supported in front by posts in the massive post-holes and sloping down at the back to uprights morticed into the rear sleeper-beam. No roofing tiles were found anywhere else in the excavation.

The construction of the stage presents very difficult problems. The dimensions, 34 ft. by 70 ft., compare well with those of the third and fourth phases of the Verulamium theatre. The three large frontal post-holes would have been capable of supporting very substantial timbers, the two central ones perhaps rising 20–30 ft. above ground level. The maximum depth for the post-holes along the front of the stage, however, was only 15 in. and the average depth 12 in. This implies that the height of the stage was not more than 2 ft. 6 in.–3 ft., and so would scarcely demand a staircase-base extending 14 ft. into the orchestra.

Anyone approaching the stage down the entrance passage would therefore have been confronted with a low timber platform with a large upright set forward into the orchestra at the north-east and north-west corners, and two massive uprights at the centre of the stage. These latter posts may have supported a tiled roof, and the roofed central portion of the stage was possibly approached from the orchestra by a shallow flight of timber steps or possibly by a timber-revetted ramp. It need hardly be pointed out that such a stage plan was extremely unorthodox, and it is impossible to envisage actual dramatic performances being produced on it, as the large posts in front of the stage would seriously impare the view from all parts of the *cavea*.

The date of the theatre

Dating evidence for Phase 2 was very meagre: indeed, the total volume of datable finds from the excavation as a whole was very slight. The only useful pieces for dating Phase 2 came from layer 4 in the stage area and from the filling of the west central post-pit. Both are strictly constructional deposits, and so the mid to late second-century pottery and coin of Hadrian in them¹⁸ provide a *terminus post quem* for the building. Although at least one of the uprights at the front of the stage had been renewed and the irregular spacing of the post-holes of the orchestra wall should also probably be explained as the result of timber-renewal, the building did not appear to have stood very long, and a life of more than 50 years seems unlikely.

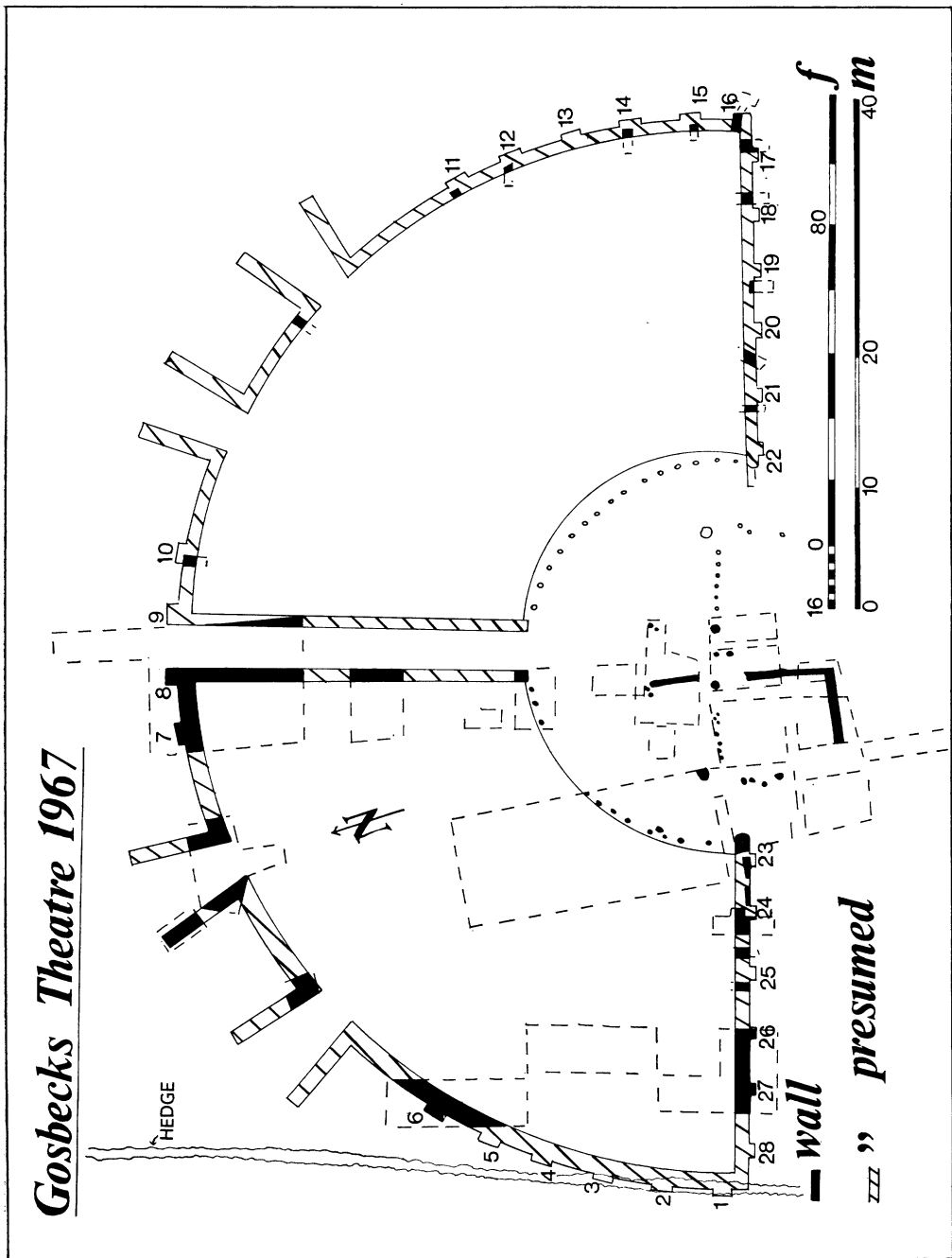
There was an absence both in the current excavations and in the work under Mr. Hull of stratified coins and pottery later than the early third century. Some of the unstratified pottery from the weathered turf in the orchestra and entrance could have been produced in the third century but equally well could date from the Antonine period. With the exception of one unstratified coin, finds certainly diagnostic of the third and fourth centuries were not encountered; and in view of this absence it seems certain that the theatre was abandoned by the mid third century, and probably much earlier.

Soon after the abandonment of the theatre it was carefully demolished. The orchestra and stage were covered with weathered turf which in its lower level contained numerous sizeable lumps of recognizable sods, clearly derived from the weathered *cavea*. In the entrance this weathered turf was found lying directly on the latest entrance floor; there was no sign of any dirt having accumulated on the gravel surface prior to the deposition of the *cavea*-derived turf. Since this turf could not have been washed into the entrance while the passage walls were still standing, it must have accumulated after they had been robbed out. Thus the absence of dirt on the southern, unvaulted end of the passage, on which—since this part of the entrance was open to the sky—it would have quickly accumulated, shows that only a very short time could have elapsed between the abandonment of the theatre and its demolition. Similar deposits of silt, with relatively large turf lumps in them, occurred all round the outer *cavea* wall in Trenches 6, 7, 8 and 15 and indicated an identical sequence of events. Presumably the demolition of the *cavea* wall and entrance was undertaken because of the value of the Kentish ragstone, which is much superior to the local septaria. The almost total lack of large pieces of stone on the site indicates how competently this robbing had been conducted. There was no sign that the timbers of Phase 2 had been withdrawn; no traces were found of later disturbances around any of the post-holes that might suggest that the uprights had been dug out.

Summary: The Visible Theatre

FIG. 5 illustrates a reconstructed plan of the theatre, assuming that it was broadly symmetrical about its north-south axis. It is a plan with very marked peculiarities, and parallels are hard to find. Basically the Phase 2 plan does not

¹⁸ See pp. 44-6, pottery report No. 8 and coin report No. 2.



differ much from that of Phase 1. In essence all that was altered was the Phase 1 free-standing auditorium, which was replaced in Phase 2 by a more permanent turf-built *cavea*. In Phase 2, also, the external appearance of the theatre from the north was made more dignified by the addition of a masonry wall adorned with decorative pilasters, an arched entrance and four prominent external staircases. Inside the building a simple rectangular stage was retained, but with the addition of four massive posts along the front, and a possibly roofed central portion with a flight of steps leading up to it from the orchestra. The clay-lined gullies of the earlier phase were no longer found necessary, nor is there any sign of possible seating arrangements in the orchestra itself.

CONCLUSIONS

Roman theatres can be broadly divided into the truly Roman (Vitruvian) type—that is masonry-built with a large stage organically connected with the *cavea*—and Romano-Celtic theatres, to which less study has been devoted. In 1934¹⁹ Dr. Kenyon defined the ‘cock-pit’ type of Romano-Celtic theatre in which the arms of the *cavea* were prolonged and the orchestra consequently enlarged. The stage is usually comparatively small and attention focused more onto the orchestra.

The Gosbecks theatre does not fall into either type. The stage is simple, but the orchestra could not have been used for the performances sometimes carried out in the ‘cock-pit’ type orchestra, e.g. ritual observance, dancing or declamation. The Gosbecks theatre is clearly a religious building designed to house a congregation to witness primarily religious rites, and as a meeting place for pilgrims to the cult centre.

As has already been pointed out, Gosbecks falls into the class of rural sacred sites well known from Gaul. These were studied in 1943 by Baudot²⁰ who considered that they usually originated on pre-Roman sacred sites whose religious importance was sufficient to continue to attract large numbers of worshippers throughout the Roman period, and which accounts for the large number of Roman buildings, such as *mansiones*, bath-buildings and smaller structures that may surround the temple and *temenos*. There is ample evidence that Gosbecks was a site of special significance in pre-Roman Camulodunum,²¹ which would thus explain its continued development in the Roman period.

In summary therefore it is suggested that the Gosbecks theatre was used as a place of assembly at times of festivals associated with the neighbouring temple. In view of the presence at Gosbecks of a purely timber-built theatre it is possible that further, so far unsuspected, timber-built theatres may be found in the future at other religious sites. It should be remembered that the only trace of the theatre, visible even from the air, belonged to the Phase 2 turf and masonry structure.

¹⁹ *Archaeologia* lxxxiv, 242–7.

²⁰ M. Baudot, *Gallia* ii (1943), 191–206.

²¹ C. F. C. Hawkes and M. R. Hull, *Camulodunum*, Oxford 1947, 9–12.

THE SMALL FINDS

A. COINS. Identified by Richard Reece

- | | | |
|--|---------|--|
| 1. Trajan, <i>RIC</i> 926 | 114-117 | Lying on latest surface of entrance passage. |
| 2. Hadrian, Reverse illegible | 117-38 | Layer 4. Stage area. |
| 3. Marcus Aurelius, <i>RIC</i> 926 | 166 | Lying on latest surface of entrance passage. |
| 4. Marcus Aurelius, cf. <i>RIC</i> 961 | 161-180 | Lying on surface of natural, south of stage (Trench 11). |
- Unstratified in topsoil
- | | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|----------------------------|
| 5. Republic | pre 30 B.C. | Stage area. |
| 6. Domitian, Reverse illegible | 81-96 | Stage area. |
| 7. Constantine I, <i>RIC</i> 7 Lon 13 | 313-14 | North of entrance passage. |

B. BRONZE (FIG. 6)

- Small bronze object consisting of a small loop with a long curved tang, triangular in section with one side pronouncedly concave. The loop is rounded with marked signs of wear on the upper side. Similar objects are not uncommon in Colchester.²² They have been described by Hull as amulets. The present example obviously hung from either a strap or chain as is indicated by the degree of wear on the upper edge of the loop: a harness pendant seems as likely an explanation for it as an amulet. From the turf of the *cavea* mound. Phase 2, Trench 18.

C. IRON (FIG. 6)

- Fragment of a heavy iron bolt (not illustrated), Trench 10. Weathered turf from stage area.
- Fragment of iron strap with a flat cross-section and two terminals, one of them with a recurved tip, the other broken. The fragment is slightly bent longitudinally. There is no sign of any means of attachment to anything. Trench 22. Robber trench fill.
- Iron bolt with heavy rounded head. Trench 10. Weathered turf from stage area.
- Iron bolt and washer. The washer was found round the neck of the bolt immediately beneath the round head. Trench 9. Weathered turf from stage area.
- Iron bar. Square-sectioned with one end pointed and the other bent over. Trench 10. Weathered turf from stage area.

D. THE COARSE POTTERY

The Pre-Roman Pottery

A dozen body-sherds of coarse hand-made pottery were found, but only three were large enough for illustration. No profiles of pots could be restored. Six pieces were sealed in the old turf-line below the *cavea*, and four from pre-Roman Pits II and IV. Fabric: coarse reddish brown, usually with dark burned surfaces. Fairly heavily gritted with sand and white shell inclusions. Occasional larger grits; surfaces plain and rough with the exception of No. 1 below.

- Sealed in pre-Roman Pit 1 under entrance. Very weathered. Rather micaceous. Reddish brown surface, grey in interior. Unusual in that the exterior is decorated with two incised horizontal lines (Fig. 6, 21).
- Rim of necked jar with a faint cordon on the shoulder, made in the usual red/brown fabric, but the dark surface is burnished. Lying in the make-up for the Phase II theatre (Fig. 6, 22).

²² *Colchester Museum Report*, 1937, pl. xiii, Nos. 8-10. See also B. W. Cunliffe, *Fifth Report on the Excavation of The Roman Fort at Richborough*, Oxford 1968, Pl. xxxix, No. 142.

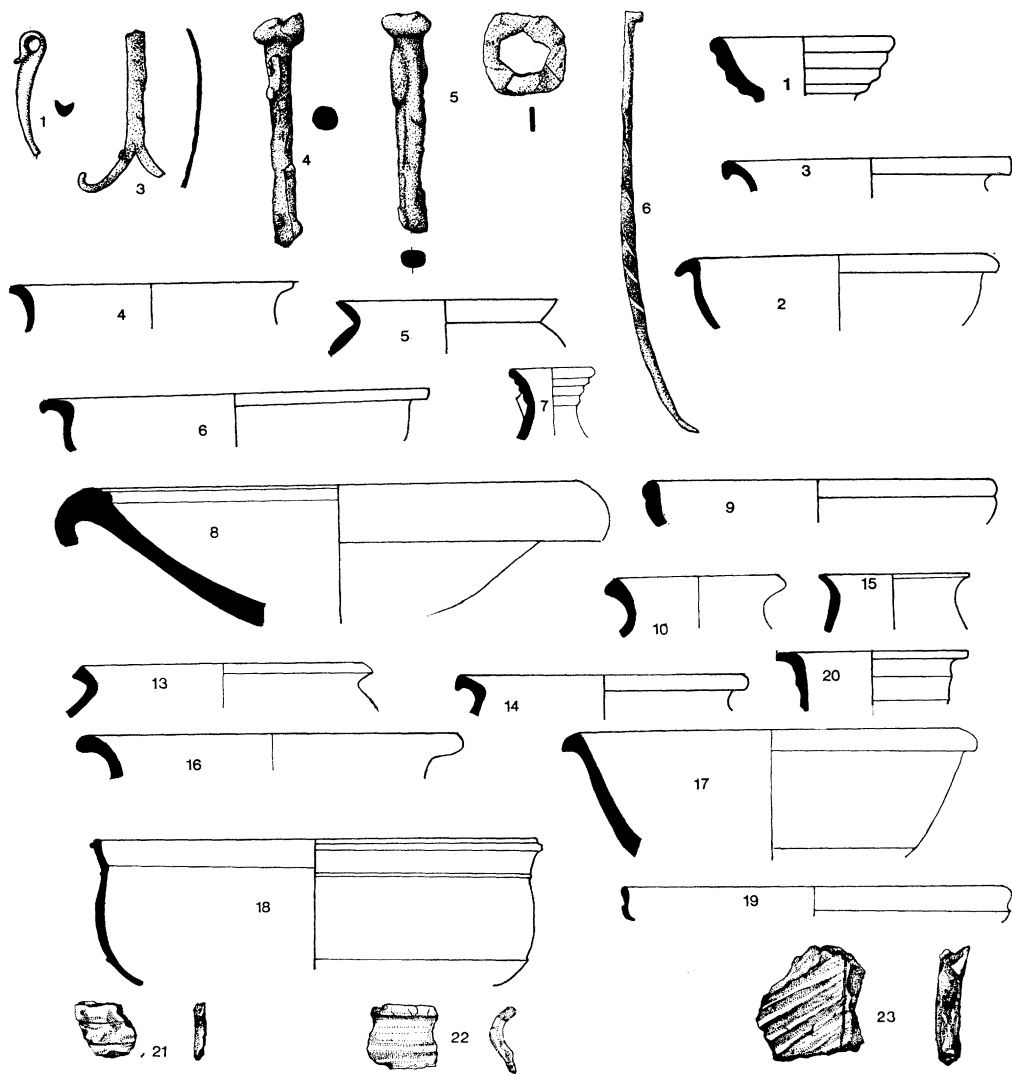


FIG. 6

The pottery and small finds of bronze (No. 1) and iron (Nos. 2-6) ($\frac{1}{4}$).

3. Hard sherd with scored surface. Fabric differs from the above and is hard, grey and dense. This may be a Belgic sherd. From the weathered material in the Phase II orchestra (Fig. 6, 23).

These hand-made sherds, some of them occurring in contexts pre-dating the first Roman occupation (see above p. 29) and, with the exception of No. 3 above, which is not securely stratified, showing no Belgic influence, should be connected with the pre-Belgic Iron Age. Pit I, which produced three of these sherds, also produced P small scrap of iron.²³

²³ I am grateful to D. G. Davies for drawings Nos. 1-3.

Roman Period: Phase 1, From the black loamy layer beneath the first metalled surface in the entrance (FIG. 6)

1. Rim of a large cupped flagon in pale buff fabric with occasional minute grit temper. This type of flagon-rim does not occur in Colchester before the very end of the first century but continues in use until the end of the fourth.

Roman Period: Phase 2, From layer 4

2. Small open bowl with curved shoulder and everted down-turned rim. Fabric soft, sandy and bright red with smoothed black micaceous surface. This form occurs in later first-century layers in Colchester but does not appear in contexts later than the early second century. Cf. report on Insula I in *Trans. Essex Arch. Soc.*, 1970 (forthcoming): Trajanic.
3. Hard, brick-red fabric, grey at core and with black, very micaceous surfaces. Simple, slightly pointed rim. Not closely dateable.
4. Rim of a beaker in very fine red fabric with smoothed grey surfaces. Straight upright neck with simple out-turned rim. Not closely dateable.
5. Very fine hard, pale grey fabric. Original surface completely weathered away. *Roman Colchester*, form 279a: early second century.
6. Rim of bowl in granular grey fabric, with a large number of grit inclusions producing a rough lumpy surface. Two slight grooves around the upper surface of the rim. Late first–early second century. Related to *Roman Colchester*, form 246.
7. Rim of a flagon with splayed mouth. Fabric very soft and friable. Brick red in colour with smooth surface and rather ill-defined rings. Date: Flavian period onwards.

Phase 2, From the filling of the post-pit of the west central post-hole

8. Mortarium rim. Well-bent flange rather squared on the tip. Fabric soft, creamy yellow, heavily gritted on the interior with black, white, brown and grey gravel. Herring-bone stamp, similar to that illustrated by Hull²⁴ with a single central rib and rather carelessly executed diagonal lines. This however, is, as Hull says ‘a particularly featureless stamp’. Date: c. A.D. 150–200.

Phase 2, From the turf of the cavea mound

9. Rim of an open bowl in rather coarse brown fabric, black at the surfaces. Exterior burnished and decorated with broad shallow grooves below the simple unexpanded rim. Allied to the late pre-Roman bowls²⁵ and probably not later than the early second century.

From the weathered bank over the orchestra and stage, not stratified

10. Very friable, gritty, brown-grey fabric with smoothed fumed surface and everted rim. Not closely dateable.
11. Base of a colour-coated beaker in brick red dense fabric, with a dark blue-grey colour coat. Antonine or later (not illustrated).
12. Body fragment of a colour-coated thumb beaker in white, soft fabric with applied scale decoration. Later second or early third century, lasting to the fourth century (not illustrated).
13. Rim of a small jar in sandy brown-grey fabric with occasional mica specks and a few grit inclusions. Rough dark fumed exterior. First century onwards.
14. Everted rim of a cooking pot in dense gritty red fabric with rough black fumed surfaces. Rather micaceous. Late first to early second century.
15. Good brown-grey fabric with smoothed black surfaces. Slightly micaceous with small outbent unexpanded rim. Not closely dateable.
16. Dark grey granular fabric with occasional sand inclusions.

²⁴ M. R. Hull, *The Roman Potters' Kilns at Colchester*, Oxford 1964, 112–13.

²⁵ Probably related to *Camulodunum* form 251.

17. Rim of dish in hard dark gritty grey fabric with a pink tinge towards the surfaces. Micaceous rough surfaces, fumed on the exterior and decorated with burnished oblique lines. Later second century. *Roman Colchester*, form 303.
18. Soft, rather poor-quality fabric grey at core, red at the surfaces. Surfaces carefully smoothed. An unusual form in Colchester with a small flange beneath the rim, now broken off.
19. Rim of a fine bowl with upright neck and angular shoulder. Good gritty grey micaceous fabric with smoothed grey surfaces.
20. Hard dense grey fabric with roughly smoothed surfaces. Upright neck with slightly everted flat-topped rim. Exterior decorated with broad shallow grooves and narrow, rather pointed intervening ridges.

For Nos. 21–3 see above under Pre-Roman Pottery (p. 44).

County Museum, Aylesbury

PLATE VIII



A. Gosbecks Theatre: two post-pits of Phase I south of the robbed *cavea* wall of Phase II in Trench 18, looking E. (p. 31).

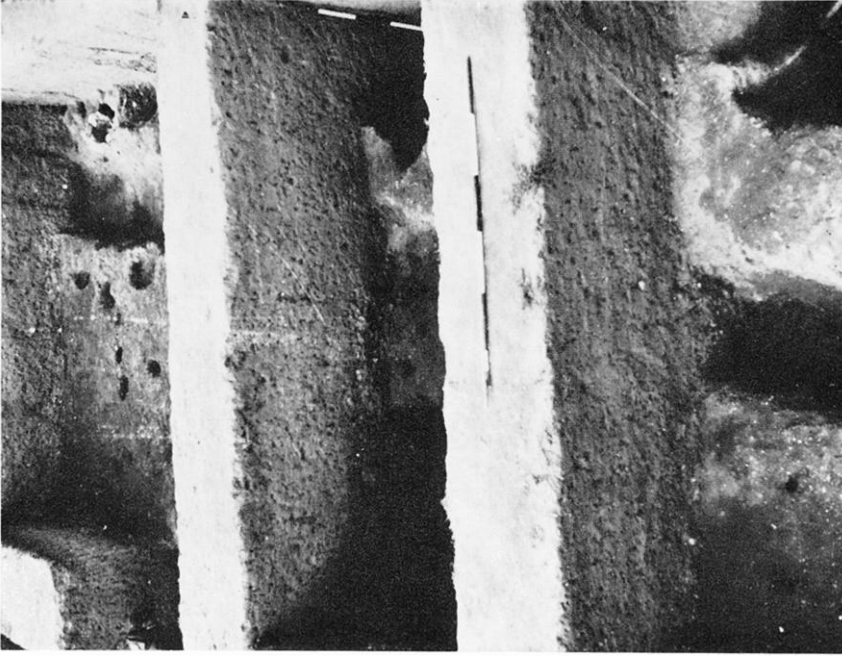


B. Gosbecks Theatre: robber-trench of *cavea* wall and buttress No. 6 in Trench 20, looking N. (p. 37).

PLATE IX

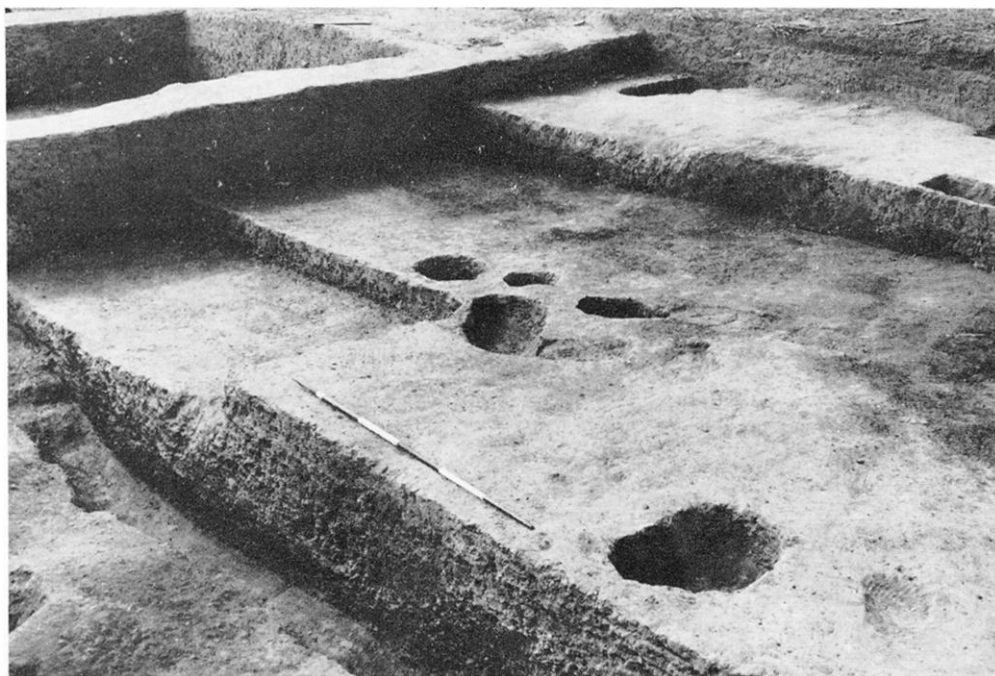


A. Gosbecks Theatre: Staircase 2 in Trench 22, looking E., with remains of semicircular depression at the end of the *cavea* wall west of the gap (foreground) and turf bank blocking it (right, centre) (pp. 35, 37).



B. Gosbecks Theatre: Front of the stage showing Trenches 9, 11 and 12, looking W. The upright staff stands in the west central post-hole in front of the stage of Phase II (p. 39).

PLATE X



A. Gosbecks Theatre: post-pits of the orchestra wall, Trench 6, looking SW. In foreground the make-up of the orchestra floor of Phase II has been removed to show the Phase I surface (p. 39).



B. Gosbecks Theatre: latest cobbled surface in the north entrance with central post-hole, looking S. (p. 38).