

newsletter

keeping you up to date with all the latest discoveries at the chester amphitheatre excavation

WELCOME TO OUR THIRD SEASON OF EXCAVATION AT THE AMPHITHEATRE ...

introduction

The third season of excavation began on the 12th June and will run until September 1st 2006. In this newsletter you will find:

- The background to the project
- An overview of the history of the amphitheatre site
- A summary of the results so far
- Finds update
- Environmental update

background to the project

Chester's Roman amphitheatre is a monument of international importance. Although parts of the site have been excavated in the past, there is much we still have to learn about its history over the last 2,000 years. It is a major part of the city's townscape, yet its environment and presentation is far from ideal.

In order to plan future improvements to the site and the surrounding area, Chester City Council and English Heritage have joined together to create The Chester Amphitheatre Project. This is a three year programme of research and investigation, involving excavation, examination of old records, and geophysical and architectural survey.



This year's excavation started on June 12th. The workforce consists of a team of professional archaeologists from Chester City Council, supplemented by students from Liverpool University and Chester University, along with volunteer helpers.

The amphitheatre site is open to the public Tuesday to Saturday, with a purpose-built walkway allowing you to see all aspects of the work as it progresses. The work on the finds, which usually takes place 'behind the scenes', is on view at our workroom on the first floor of Chester Visitor Centre. You can also watch the sieving of the environmental samples from the walkway on site.

the story so far

The first stage of the work involved a variety of non-invasive survey techniques, which have been used at the amphitheatre and the surrounding area, including St. John's Church, Grosvenor Park and the Roman Gardens. They have included geophysical survey (resistivity, magnetometry and ground penetrating radar) topographical survey, and aerial photography using an unmanned aerial vehicle (or in simple terms a balloon with a digital camera attached to it.) All the results will be pulled together on a Geographic Information System database along with the cartographic and pictorial evidence.

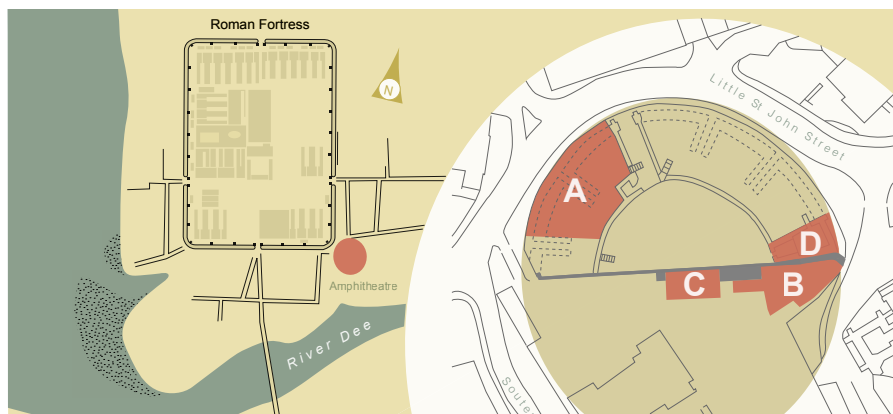
Illust: aerial view of area A. 2006

Architectural analysis has also been carried out on surrounding historical buildings including St. John's Church, Bishop's Palace and the Anchorite's Cell. The exposed upstanding remains of the amphitheatre have also been laser scanned in order to create a 3D-model.

The project also aims to improve site interpretation. New signs already installed consist of a series of panels telling the story of the amphitheatre, including finds already recovered from the site, and an artist's impression of how the building might have looked at full height. Another significant improvement is the demolition of the brick wall marking the edge of the gardens to Dee House where the walkway now runs.

discovery & excavation

No-one knew that Chester had an amphitheatre until 1929, when a large curved wall appeared while an underground boiler room was being built onto the south side of Dee House. A local school-master, W. J. Williams, was the first to recognise its significance. In the early 1930s parts of the western entrance, the outer wall, the arena walls and the arena itself were discovered. However, in 1926 Chester Corporation had put forward proposals to straighten the road between the New Gate and St. John's church. This would have cut straight across the centre of the amphitheatre. There were many angry protests and the dispute reached the national newspapers. Eventually there was a change of heart, and it was agreed that the new road would curve round to the north of the monument. The Second World War halted progress, and it was



not until 1959 that the new road was built. Large-scale excavations uncovered the northern half of the amphitheatre from 1960 to 1969, and the site was laid out for public display between 1970 and 1972. New excavations using modern techniques began on a small scale in 2000. The results showed that the history of the site is far more complicated than was previously thought, and the current dig is intended to unravel the secrets of Roman Chester's finest monument.

location

Chester's amphitheatre lay outside the south-east corner of the legionary fortress, on a rise overlooking the River Dee. Its main entrances faced north and

south with smaller entrances facing east and west. In between each of these entrances were two doorways leading to a corridor running around the outside of the building and staircases leading up to the seats. Like all Roman military bases, Deva was surrounded by a civilian settlement. To the west lay the harbour, with warehouses and perhaps the homes of wealthy merchants. To the south was the mansio or official guest-house. To the east lay an area of shops, workshops and taverns, extending along the present Foregate Street. As far as we know, the amphitheatre was used by both soldiers and civilians.

illust: the amphitheatre in relation to the Roman fortress of Chester

NEWS FLASH ... NEWS FLASH ... NEWS FLASH ... NEWS Imperial Amphitheatre Centre still on track ...

Chester City Council is looking at alternative ways of funding a cultural centre after the Big Lottery Fund turned down a bid for a development grant. Had the bid been successful, the city council would have used the money to make a detailed case for a second stage bid for £19million. However, the council is now turning its sights to other possibilities. Portfolio holder for culture, Councillor Ann Farrell, said: "Although we are disappointed that our exciting proposals to the Big Lottery Fund, which had good local support, were not short listed in this highly competitive round, our plans for the overall scheme are still on track. Portfolio holder for economy, Councillor Reggie Jones said: "The Imperial Amphitheatre Centre will provide a modern, fully accessible facility, which will not only benefit residents and visitors, but also protect this unique site which forms the cornerstone of our culture park programme. We will continue to work hard with all parties to secure this vision for Chester and the North West."

chester amphitheatre excavations : the results so far

area A: latest thoughts

prehistoric archaeology

A pair of large post-holes were discovered beneath the pre-Roman ground surface at the end of the 2005 excavation season. The size of these holes suggests that they held timber posts 50cm in diameter. Wood charcoal from one of these post-holes was sent to the University of Waikato in New Zealand for radio-carbon dating at the end of May this year and the results came back early in June. They indicate that the posts date to the middle of the Iron Age. This is a period for which we have very little evidence in the Northwest and represents the first Iron Age archaeology ever to be found in Chester. A larger area of the pre-Roman ground surface is being removed this year to try and locate more of these post-holes in order to identify what type of structure they belong to. Some prehistoric flint tools have also been recovered from the excavation suggesting activity in the Neolithic period (4,000 - 2,500 BC.)

Overlying these post-holes was a thick grey layer which appeared to cover most of the trench. This layer is believed to represent the original (pre-Roman) ground surface. Pollen samples taken from this layer have produced good results and an initial assessment has identified alder, hazel, grass and cereal pollen suggesting that the surrounding area may have been an Iron Age farm.

During August we finally removed the remains of the seating bank deposits to the first amphitheatre, and have now exposed the pre-



Roman ground surface over nearly the entire excavation trench. This has allowed us to see what has survived on the site from the period immediately before the Romans began to build the first amphitheatre. On the south-western edge of the excavation a shallow hollow in the pre-Roman ground surface has been uncovered which may indicate the location of a large underlying feature possibly a ditch. This hollow appears to have been wet and muddy shortly before it was covered by the construction of the first amphitheatre and we have found the impressions of footprints in this ground surface. These seem to show a mixture of human and animal tracks suggesting that livestock was being herded across the site. Also, very close to these footprints was a line of timber post-settings which might be the fence line of a stock enclosure. Towards the northern end of the trench we have now uncovered a series of narrow, parallel

ridges that clearly pre-date the outer wall of the first amphitheatre. This type of earthwork is known as 'cord rig' and has been identified on upland areas like the Cheviots of Northumberland and on excavations beneath Roman forts on Hadrian's Wall. It usually consists of a series of narrow ridges less than a metre apart, formed as the result of cultivation and it is thought to date to the late pre-Roman Iron Age. So we are getting an emerging picture of pre-Roman arable farming with a related field system that has previously been very elusive in the Chester area.

the first amphitheatre

The first significant event was the construction of the outer wall, which consisted of military style sandstone blocks with a rubble core and bonded with puddled red clay. This wall was set in a shallow foundation trench that was not

Illust: Iron-age post holes

deep enough to reach bedrock, and a masonry specialist felt that this wall had been built in “a bit of a rush.” Once the outer wall had been built a large dump of clay was tipped against its inner face. This clay is thought to be from the excavation of the arena. A terrace was cut into the clay, which was then cut by a network of slots acting as a foundation for a timber framework. In 2005 we gained a great deal of new information on this structure. The red sand which was dumped over the timber retained the imprint of the original uprights and bracing for the scaffolding which held the seating. These survived as mineralised remains of wood. The uprights were supported by diagonal braces set at 45 degrees, which were, perhaps surprisingly, not jointed but nailed from the side. Nails were found at most of the junctions of beams and uprights, and it seems that individual frames were prefabricated before being positioned on site. After the frames were erected they were held in place with dumps of red sand which was quarried from the arena during the second stage of its excavation. A coin found in these dumps shows that the timber framework was constructed shortly after AD95-96.

The first amphitheatre was surrounded by a road, which was subsequently cut by postholes. Most of these posts relate to small timber booths or stalls, and finds of chicken and beef bones suggest these were selling snack food to spectators. Near the main entrance a small masonry structure, originally decorated with painted plaster, may have been a shrine. Most of the deposits around the building consisted of fine yellow sand. This was

probably originally used to floor the arena, and brought out after performances, doubtless soiled and bloodstained, and simply spread out around the walls of the building.

A Roman cess-pit was recently uncovered in the south-western corner of the excavation and we think this represents one of the latrines from the first amphitheatre. We were not able to excavate the whole pit as it disappears under the edge of our trench and underneath the public highway. However, we have wet sieved all of the fills from the pit, and we are still sorting through the drying residues for all manner of artefacts and ecofacts. This process is proving to be highly rewarding as we are retrieving large amounts of fish bone and some intact coprolites. We are also finding some really small objects such as individual iron chain links from a mail shirt and a finely carved intaglio. Subsequently this pit was covered by a series of Roman road surfaces. The subsidence that this pit caused in the later road surfaces must have been notorious in Roman Chester for hundreds of years!

the second amphitheatre

The outer wall was a massive construction with sandstone foundations 2.7m wide excavated down to bedrock. These foundations cut through the booths and stalls of the first amphitheatre - proving that it was a later addition. The wall was made from well-dressed stone blocks bonded in a brown lime mortar and of superior workmanship compared to the outer wall of the first amphitheatre. The external face of the outer wall had stone bases at regular intervals. Mortar pads on top of these bases - and the fact that

the bases had been crushed by considerable weight - suggest that they supported decorative half columns. An ornamental façade of this kind is unique in Britain, though familiar from amphitheatres elsewhere in the Roman Empire, including the Colosseum, and shows that this was a building of Imperial pretensions.

The entrance (*vomitoria*) walls were also added at this time though the construction trench for these walls was no deeper than the foundations of the concentric wall and they were not as massive as the foundations of the outer wall. Even so the massive size of the vomitorium foundations would suggest that they were intended to bear a heavy load as one might expect from stone vaulting designed to carry the upper rows of seating in the enlarged amphitheatre. It was clear that the construction of the vomitorium walls would have necessitated the removal of the timber framework seating of the first amphitheatre, suggesting that an entirely new arrangement for the seating would have been installed.

Beyond the external face of the outer wall there was a series of between five and six metalled road surfaces - the earliest one of which appeared to be contemporary with the construction of the second amphitheatre. These road surfaces have still to be excavated but it is hoped that they may yield vital dating evidence for the construction and use of the second amphitheatre.

the wall robbing

Two episodes of wall robbing were found. The earlier seems to have concentrated on the outer

wall and the vomitorium suggesting that there was a desire to keep the outer wall standing to a significant height – perhaps for defence. The second phase of robbing was aimed at the outer wall, but interestingly the stone was only removed from the outer face, which led to the inner face of the wall surviving to a much higher level – possibly to maintain an existing property boundary.

The dating of the stone robbing is still tentative, but some late Saxon Chester ware pottery may be present in the backfill of the stone robbing trenches. Certainly the amphitheatre walls had been robbed before the appearance of medieval cess pits on the site during the 12th and 13th centuries.

later pits

From the 12th century onwards area A appears to have been to the rear of properties fronting on to Little St. John Street and was largely used for cess pits. The distribution of medieval pits may enable us to distinguish individual properties though the property boundaries themselves did not survive. These pits produced a good assemblage of medieval artefacts including some exceptional finds such as the bone hair comb and the complete pottery jug. They also produced a wealth of environmental samples which have produced plant seeds, fish bone and even parasite remains.

modern archaeology

Despite the fact that some substantial buildings were still standing in the area up until the 1950's very little evidence was found. Two flights of stone steps were identified along the north-western edge of the excavation, which led

to cellars now buried beneath the modern road. The main feature of these buildings present on the excavation was a network of salt-glazed sewer pipes which probably served outside toilets at the back of the properties. A brick built garage with a concrete floor and car inspection pit was also identified.

The northern limit of Professor Newstead's excavation trench from 1930 was re-excavated and this suggested that the stone foundations of the amphitheatre recorded by Newstead had been removed as part of his excavation process. Conversely the 1960's excavation carried out by F H Thompson had left far more intact archaeology in the ground than we had predicted – leaving much of the timber grillage intact.

area B: latest thoughts

This trench has been put-to-bed for this season and is covered in a breathable textile called Terram which helps to protect the fragile archaeology from the elements. At the end of the 2005 excavations Roman archaeology had been exposed over the entire area with deep deposits of red and yellow clay-sand representing the amphitheatre seating-bank surviving to a height of over 2m. In the edge of the deep cellar (an 18th century structure) a mass of dark soil and rubble could be seen This was the filling of a trench dug to remove the side wall of one of the vomitoria. It seems likely that this side of the amphitheatre was plundered for stone to build St.John's church and monastery. The centre of the trench was occupied by a sand-stone retaining wall, probably medieval in date, which separates the

high area to the east from the lower western part of the trench which lies partly over the arena of the amphitheatre. In the western part of the trench are remnants of several medieval walls. Though these are so fragmentary that it is impossible to reconstruct a building plan, they probably represent monastic buildings. To the far west of the trench is a key-hole shaped extension containing a broad wall which may have been the wall of the monastic precinct, and an associated fine cobbled surface, probably part of a garden or corridor.

The medieval walls had been cut through by a series of bedding trenches for a formal garden. This possibly relates to a high status building of Tudor date, as building material including painted glass, fine ceiling plaster and glazed floor tiles from this period have been found. The formal garden was probably growing during the Civil War, as musket and pistol balls dating to the period of the siege of Chester in September 1645 were found here. The deep stone lined feature on the far side of the trench is a cellar dating to the 18th century, and the building of which this was a part also had a garden. More bedding trenches have been excavated in the key hole-shaped extension to the trench, extending towards Area C.

area C: latest thoughts

Area C has now been backfilled. It was completely excavated last year to examine a section of the arena floor. The floor was found at a depth of 4.2m below walkway level. The upper 4m of back-fill proved to be cultivation soils and dumps



of building debris that had built up during the medieval and post-medieval periods. At various times large pits had been excavated into these soils. One notable example was a large square cess-pit dating to the first half of the 16th century. This pit contained large amounts of animal bone, and this has led us to conclude that the back-fill was the debris from a large feast. Several prestigious items were also found in this pit including an inscribed gold ring and a very rare pottery owl cup.

When we uncovered the arena floor itself we found that it was littered with post-holes and pits associated with a period of occupation. At this stage we know that this activity pre-dates the Norman Conquest, but we are waiting for radio-carbon dates to give us a more precise date.

The most enigmatic feature on the arena floor was a large rectangular stone block. This block was located exactly in the centre of the amphitheatre's arena and had originally included an iron ring which was anchored to the stone with molten lead. We believe that this stone block was used to tether wild beasts, criminals and gladiators as part of the entertainment at the amphitheatre.

area D:

We had hoped that a new trench was to be excavated in the eastern entranceway this year. As although most of the archaeology was removed during excavations in the 1930s and 1960s, an exploratory trench excavated in 2002-03 demonstrated that early Roman archaeology that possibly pre-dated the amphitheatre still survived in

tact. We had intended to fully excavate this remaining archaeology in the hope that we could answer outstanding questions about the earliest Roman use of the site but the archaeology has been so rich in area A we have had to concentrate our skills there.

roman finds: latest thoughts

Most of the finds recovered so far from this season have come from the Roman cess pit and there have been some exciting discoveries. Many of these have been picked out while carefully sifting through the residues of soil samples. Our main reason for taking these was to recover environmental information.

Amongst the pottery that we would expect to find, such as fragments of jars, beakers and bowls, there are three pieces of pottery from a vessel, probably a small bowl, that had been glazed. Roman glazed vessels are very rarely found in Chester, but we do have evidence that they were made at Holt, 12 miles (7 km) from Chester, in the late first and early-second centuries. The colour of the glaze varied from light yellow to green and dark brown. There was also a fragment of a black-slipped ceramic lamp, probably imported. Glass from the pit included fragment of a beaker which has been decorated by cutting out oval-shaped facets from the surface.

Military finds are represented by numerous small iron rings, which are the links from chain mail armour. There was also a small metal stud decorated with a face, which may have been attached to a soldier's belt or 'apron' - a series of vertical leather straps which hung from the belt. An

item of personal adornment was a very finely worked gemstone, just 1 cm in length. The gem, which would have been set into a ring, appears to be made of chalcedony, a type of quartz. The face engraved on the surface may be that of a Satyr, a Greek god of the woodland.

All of these finds will help us to understand when the pit was being used and provide us with some very valuable information about life in Chester in Roman times.

portable oven fragments



© David Heke

A small but significant group of Roman portable oven (clibanus) fragments was recovered from post-Roman layers in Areas A and C during excavations in 2004 and 2005. A thumb-impressed rim fragment was also recovered from excavations at the site in the 1960s, although it went unrecognised at the time. Two of the wall sherds have a distinctive pattern of finger-wiping on the outer surface. One is also sooted on the inside, as a result of charcoal-staining during use. A slightly thicker wall fragment, with a smooth outer surface, is also lightly sooted on the inner and outer surfaces. One of the base fragments has a flanged outer edge, the other bears the edge of a knife-cut opening.

The clibanus was one of a number of different types of small, portable oven or baking cover that were used

throughout the Roman period. Clibani were often made of clay but sometimes also of bronze or iron. They were chiefly used to bake bread and cakes, to roast meat and vegetables, and to keep food hot. They may also have been used to heat materials of a magical or medical significance.

The clibani made at the legionary tile and pottery works at Holt in North Wales are barrel-shaped, have a large opening at the top with a thick, thumb-impressed rim and a semi-circular opening near the base. Only a handful of fragments of clibani have so far been found in Britain and only two have been found near-complete – one from Holt and the other from Prestatyn, a Romano-British industrial settlement, which was also supplied by the Holt kilns.

Because none of the fragments from the amphitheatre have come from Roman contexts, we cannot say for certain that they were used at the site. However, clibani were fairly large, heavy and bulky items and it is unlikely that they would have been broken up and thrown away too far from where they were used. We can speculate that they may have been used by market traders who had set up stall nearby, possibly selling hot snacks to passers-by as well as to spectators at the games.

Illust: Rim, wall and base fragments of the Chester amphitheatre clibani

the 'tudor feasting pit'

One of the most important discoveries of the excavation was a 16th century refuse pit in Area C. Previously we reported the discovery in the pit of a pot made in

Surrey and the remains of a metal vessel, possibly a dish. Now we also have the remains of some very rare and attractive glass and ceramic objects. It is possible that these objects may have been used at the same feast at which all the rich food was eaten.

The glass ranges in date from the late fifteenth to the sixteenth century and includes fragments of flasks and wine glasses. Outstanding amongst these are pieces of one or more glass beakers decorated with enamelling. Several pieces join together and are decorated with red, white and blue enamel with a distinctive band of white lettering below the rim. Unfortunately not enough letters survive to make any words but similar glasses found elsewhere have mottos written in French. The beaker is in the style of Venetian glass but it was probably made in France in the first half of the sixteenth century. Enamelling is a difficult process so this high quality vessel would have been an expensive item.

Very little pottery was found but one vessel is virtually complete and very unusual. It is a tin-glazed ware owl jug or cup. The vessel consists of two parts in the shape of an owl's body and head. The head acts as a lid or cover to the body which would have served as a container for liquid. Wings and feet are moulded in relief and feathers and features are painted in blue. The head has moulded eyes, ears and a beak. It also has blue markings but traces of gold leaf suggest that the eyes and beak were gilded. The owl stands c.160 mm high. Stoneware owl jugs were made in Cologne in the sixteenth century and silver ones in Germany and the Low Countries but less is known about tin-glazed ware

owls, although complete examples are known on the Continent. It is possible that this one was made somewhere in the Low Countries in the sixteenth century. The owl may have been displayed as a novelty ornament or it could have been used for drinking a toast on ceremonial occasions. A sixteenth century stoneware owl jug is owned by the Worshipful Company of Armourers and Brasiers in London and their records show that it was an expensive gift made to them in 1537. Perhaps a similar guild or other organisation owned this owl and it is the remains of their feast we have discovered. Alternatively it could have belonged to a wealthy townsman or churchman.

Found in the layers above the pit a sixteenth-century gold ring reminds us of some of the complex and expensive ceremonies that accompanied the appointment of high ranking officials and professionals in the medieval and early post-medieval periods. The ring has an inscribed and black enamelled Latin motto and is decorated with red and white enamelled flowers. It is known as a sergeants-at-law ring. Sergeants-at-law were high-ranking barristers and their appointment was marked by great ceremony including a feast at the Inns of Court in London and the giving of gifts. Specially made gold rings were given to friends, colleagues, important officials and sometimes the monarch. Needless to say sergeants-at-law had to be quite rich both to pay for their training and the feast and gifts on their appointment.

More work on the whole finds assemblage from the pit is planned over the coming year when we will try to answer the many questions we have about this unusual group.

wide range of foods eaten at the roman amphitheatre

Some late 1st or early 2nd century AD Roman cess and rubbish pit de-posits have been wet sieved to reveal a variety of food and butchery waste in association with relatively large amounts of wood charcoal and other rubbish. These previously undisturbed deposits give us a fascinating insight into the wide range of foods apparently cooked just outside the amphitheatre and available to visiting spectators.

Cattle, calf, pig and sheep, lamb and kid are most obvious amongst the remains. Cattle and pigs are well known as domesticated staples of the Roman military but this assemblage is notable for many additional species that have not always been recovered in previous excavations. Amongst the wild mammals, there are meat bearing bones of red deer, roe deer and hare. Amongst the bird remains are the bones of chicken, duck, woodcock and some small passerine bird species. Amongst the smallest fragments there are bits of eggshell and hazelnut. A member of the salmon family (tentatively *Salmo salar*) and various smaller fish (including probable Pleuronectidae flatfish) are also present. There is much interesting work to do before we have a definitive list of the species recovered. However, another group of fish bones from just to the south of the amphitheatre include flat-fish (possibly flounder or plaice), salmon and trout, herring or smelt, and eel. It is thought possible that many of these fish could have come from the River Dee (*Jones, A. 2001). Marine mussel and some oyster fragments are common from many wet sieved samples from between the walls or just outside the outer

concentric wall. These marine molluscs were probably brought in along the Welsh coast. We know that the Roman military mined lead in North Wales from the mid 70's AD and brought it to Chester along the River Dee and we think that shell fish may have arrived the same way.

Groups of bone from within the fortress are usually dominated by cattle and pig bones and many have been butchered in similar ways to the ones recovered here. However there appears to be a significant difference between this and many other Roman assemblages regarding the proportions of smaller and younger mammals, birds and wild animals and certainly regarding the number of fish bones recovered. Fish bones are occasionally hand recovered but never in the quantities that can be collected through wet sieving. Many of the large excavations of Roman sites within the fortress were undertaken before wet sieving was considered a necessity and thus there are few fish bones (or small bird bones) from them. In fact we have recovered many more fish bones from a single pit on this site than were recovered from all the major Roman excavations within the fortress put together. This assemblage clearly demonstrates the vital role of wet sieving in zooarchaeological finds recovery. Much work remains to be done on identification and analysis but the amphitheatre assemblage will certainly be important for our developing understanding of diet (and hunting, fishing and animal husbandry) in early Roman Chester.

**Jones, A. (2001) Fish remains from Dee House; Unpublished report for Gifford and Partners from a watching brief on the south side of the amphitheatre.*



**Chester
City Council**



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