

The Rose Theatre, London: the state of knowledge and what we still need to know

Jon Greenfield¹ & Andrew Gurr²

The Rose theatre – the place in Elizabethan London where one could see Shakespeare and Marlowe performed – may have started life as a bear-baiting arena. This is one of the deductions drawn from this new study of the archive from the excavations of 1989. The authors also present a new model for the theatre’s evolution, offer a fresh reconstruction of the building in its heyday and put in a powerful plea for more archaeological investigation on the ground.

Keywords: London, Southwark, post-medieval, sixteenth century, theatre, bears, dogs, Shakespeare

*“Can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did afright the air at Agincourt?” Henry V, prologue*

Introduction

The site of *The Rose* playhouse, first uncovered fifteen years ago, has become an extraordinary crossroads. It is now a meeting-place for actors, architects, theatre designers and historians of early theatre, a multitude of enthusiasts for Shakespeare and Marlowe, and of course the archaeologists who recorded the remains for the Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS), Julian Bowsher and Simon Blatherwick. Key designers of the replica of the neighbouring *Globe* theatre, namely the architect, Jon Greenfield and Peter McCurdy, the master carpenter, and historians such as John Orrell and Andrew Gurr have converged on the archaeologists and their evidence in the hope of learning more about the theatre where almost all of Marlowe’s and at least two of Shakespeare’s plays were staged (*1 Henry VI* and *Titus Andronicus*), and possibly where Shakespeare himself acted.

We present here a summary of what we have gleaned from a study of the MoLAS records of the 1989 dig, which have become available in the last two years. The new deductions mark out *The Rose* as a site that deserves to be celebrated as more than just the third of London’s Elizabethan playhouses; it contained features which throw light on the development of theatre-building during one of the greatest periods of play-writing the world has known.

¹ *Parameta Architects, 70 Cowcross Street, London EC1M 6EJ, UK, Director, Rose Theatre Trust (Email: jongreenfield@parameta-architects.co.uk)*

² *Department of English, The University of Reading, P. O. Box 218, Reading RG6 2AA, UK, Director, Rose Theatre Trust (Email: andyguru2@aol.com)*

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The Rose in documents

First constructed in 1587 by a new entrepreneur, Philip Henslowe, ten years after the first two of London's open-air theatres were built, *The Rose* was enlarged five years later, and two years after that in 1594 it became one of the only two theatres to be officially licensed for use in London. The other, the Theatre in Shoreditch, was pulled down in 1599 and reconstructed as *The Globe* only fifty yards from *The Rose*. The two sites in Southwark's Park Street are the only fragments so far to be uncovered of the playhouses that Shakespeare and Marlowe used. That gives the archaeological sites their unique status, though it does not say much for London's historical priorities that we have been able to do so little up to now towards a thorough analysis of what they have to tell us about Shakespeare's workplaces.

The Rose is central to the study of Elizabethan play-going not only because all the foundations have survived, but because it features prominently in the Henslowe papers, housed in Dulwich College. They are a unique day-by-day record of what plays were staged at *The Rose* and what money they brought in between 1592 and 1597, together with inventories of the costumes and properties *The Rose* actors used. There are also some accounts about rebuilding work in 1592 and 1595. But these documents tell us very little about the first five years of the playhouse from 1587.

Up to 1989, when the remains were first uncovered and partly analysed, the only information about the shape of *The Rose* was a pair of sketches published on the same engraving in 1600 by John Norden, a Londoner. He drew a panorama of London from the tower of Southwark Cathedral (as Wenceslas Hollar later and more famously did for his 'Long View' of London). Norden's main design (Figure 1) showed the playhouse as six-sided, but an inset drawing (Figure 2) made it round and called it not the Rose but *The Stare*, presumably the result of a mistake from thinking the Tudor rose on its flag was a star. Norden was mistaken about the six sides too, since the theatre's footprint dug out in 1989 showed it had fourteen.



Figure 1. *The Rose* with six sides, as drawn by John Norden from the tower of Southwark Cathedral in 1600.

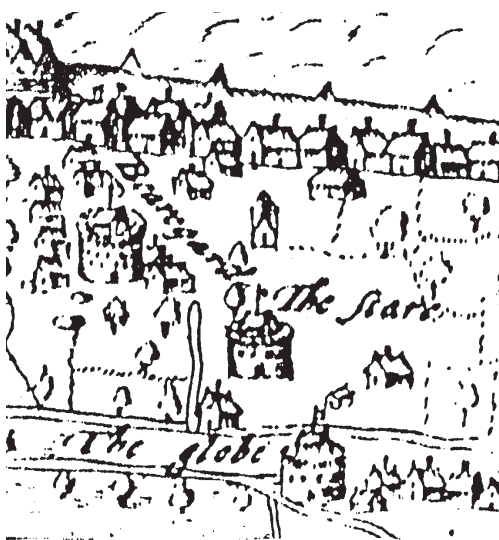


Figure 2. Norden's inset map of 1600, showing the Rose as 'The Stare' sited north of Maiden Lane (now Park Street), between the Old Bear Garden and the Globe.

If the documents are unspecific about the early form of *The Rose*, there are nevertheless other references which will prove useful in the interpretation of the archaeological remains. Philip Henslowe, the Rose's financier, was famous for many theatre-related and profitable activities over the years. One of them was a contract he took out in August 1614, less than a month after the destruction of the nearby *Globe* by fire, to build a multi-purpose arena, for baiting bears every Thursday (Henslowe had become Master of the King's Bears in 1604), and to stage plays on every other day of the week. Before 1587 London's only bear-baiting house was in the same area by the River Thames (Figure 3), and Henslowe must have found it enticing to watch the crowds flocking to the shows there. His later building of 1614, which he called, ironically as it turned out, *The Hope*, in fact proved deeply unpopular with the actors because of the stench from the bears and hundreds of dogs in their kennels next to the new playhouse. After less than one year as a dual-purpose venue the actors fled and the new structure frustrated Henslowe's expectations by turning into just a bear garden. The name survives in the alley off Park Street called Bear Garden, and Wenceslas Hollar in his 'Long View' just called it a bear-baiting house, though his engraver did manage to reverse the titles of the two adjacent amphitheatres, misnaming one the 'beere baiting h.' and the other 'the Globe'.

In Southwark bear-baiting had preceded play-acting as the local spectacle, and the two could theoretically be combined.

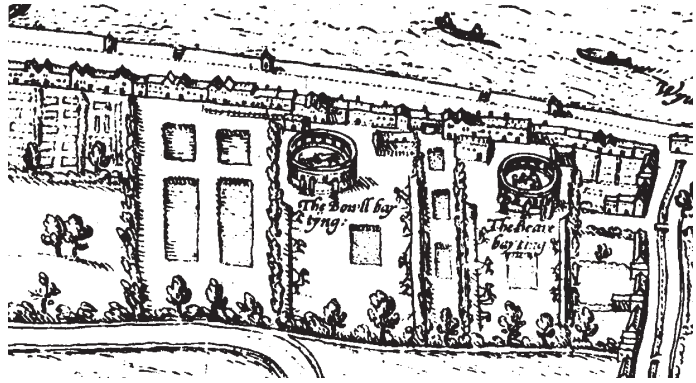


Figure 3. The bull and bear-baiting house as they were in 1572, fifteen years before the Rose was built south of them.

The archaeology of *The Rose*

The discovery of *The Rose's* foundations in February 1989 caused enormous excitement, and enormous trouble for the development company who had the job of building a ten-storey office block (now Rose Court) over it. The diggers were pulled off the site in April after uncovering only a portion of the remains, and had no time for the thorough analytical excavation that was needed (see Orrell & Gurr, 1989b). Since then the site has been kept in a reasonable state of preservation by English Heritage, covered in sand, concrete and water in what was intended to be Rose Court's underground carpark. Its benign fate and its availability for further discoveries contrasts with *The Globe* site, 50 yards away. Ten per cent of that playhouse was uncovered in October 1989, but the remains are now sealed in under cobblestones, with no likelihood of any further excavation in the foreseeable future.

The 1989 excavation of *The Rose* was carried out by two separate archaeological units: the Museum of London's Department of Greater London Archaeology Unit (formerly MoLAS) and English Heritage's Central Unit. Both their data sets have recently been combined into a single digital file, so that the more difficult parts of the site, particularly the fragmented

southern portion, can now be examined in context with the rest of the auditorium more easily. In 1998 Julian Bowsher published a book about the findings, *The Rose Theatre: an archaeological discovery*. It was written as the first draft of an archaeological interpretation in response to the public interest, and was not based on the usual 'post excavation analysis', which MoLAS have only just started. It cites many of the questions the abbreviated dig left open. Now that Jon Greenfield and Peter McCurdy have subjected the archive to careful and exhaustive new scrutiny, their findings do not just raise fresh questions about the design but they put the whole building into a new perspective. This fresh perspective raises more questions, which can only be answered by further analysis of the site itself. The case for uncovering *The Rose* again in order to make possible a comprehensive archaeological and historical analytical record has become imperative.

The story so far – the ground plan

The foundations of the early playhouses were built upwards from a stone-filled trench, on which were set the brick walls which took the wooden groundsills of the playhouse's framing timbers. Revisiting the layout of *The Rose's* stones with a fresh approach has significantly refined our understanding of the remains. We now have a geometry that appears to make

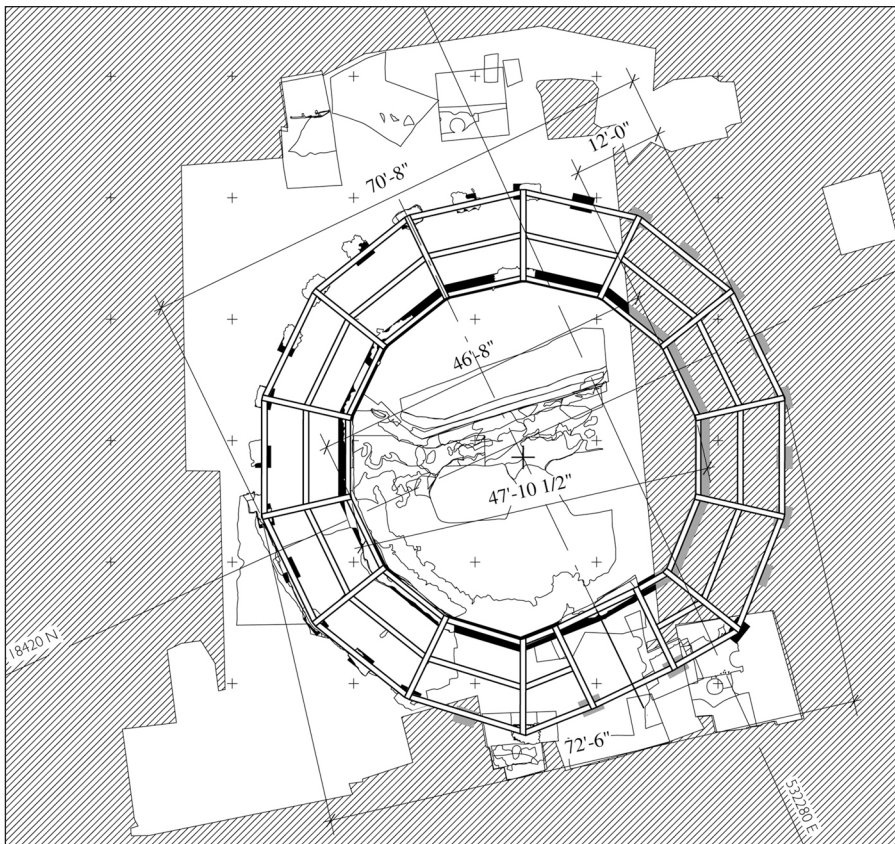


Figure 4. The site layout and the shape of the Rose.

sense of the archaeological record. By concentrating the new investigation on the stones that were uncovered closest to the surface, the ones, it could be argued, that most reflected Griggs's superstructure and not his rough-laid, mass masonry foundations, we found the riddle we faced could be reduced to a small number of accurately positioned points. These results were fed back to see how they fitted the more general archaeological record in the better and more coherent data set that is now available.

One of the most obvious of the familiar questions is why and how did the builder, John Griggs, give the theatre fourteen sides? (Figure 4) It was not laid out as a perfectly regular polygon, because the side nearest Maiden Lane (now Park Street) is quite a lot broader than the other sides of the polygon. It may have been made wider because that was where the auditorium's principal entrance was, bringing people in to face the stage on the opposite northern flank. But the stage is not located precisely opposite that side, and in any case there are doubts about whether the extra-large side of the polygon was the only entranceway for the audience. The many possible explanations why the stage was built off-centre, as were both the first one built in 1587 or 1588 and the rebuilding in 1592, leave an enigma that only a detailed re-scrutiny of the evidence on the ground and a deeper dig can explain.

In parallel with our study of the records, we looked at the knowledge of Cartesian geometry that was current in 1587 and would have been used by John Griggs. This offered a neat solution to the initially baffling discovery that the Rose footprint is based on the unexpected geometry of a fourteen-sided figure. Albrecht Dürer in 1520 published a method for dividing a circle into seven equal parts, a method that would certainly have been known to Griggs (Figure 5). It is not a mathematically perfect method, but the inaccuracies in it are very small. It is easy to do, and was useful to practitioners such as carpenters and painters. Looking at the archaeological record of the whole footprint, Jon Greenfield worked out a solution to the question of the fourteen sides by using the standard surveyor's measure of one rod, or

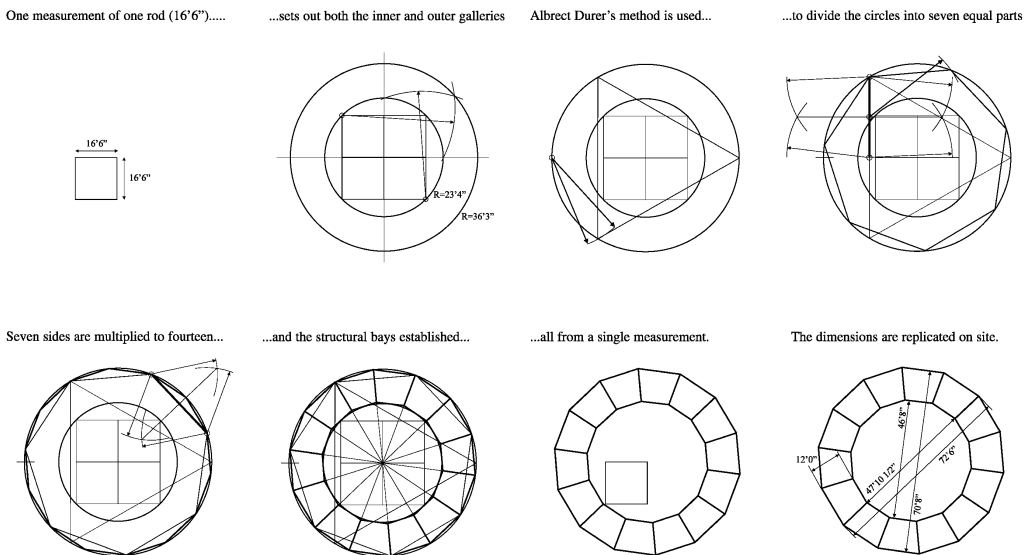


Figure 5. Setting out the Rose. Using one measurement and a pair of compasses, or a string line on site.

sixteen feet six inches. A rod triangulated makes the right number of angles, and creates a seven-sided structure which can easily be doubled up by marking a circle linking the seven points and then bisecting each side and extrapolating the halfway point out to the edge of the circle. Joining the fourteen points with straight lines creates the fourteen sides. The resultant ground-plan has exactly the diameter identified by MoLAS at the Rose, seventy-two feet.

The discovery that the inner ring of *The Rose* is based on the diagonal of a square of one rod (16 feet six inches), the common land-surveying measure of the time, and that an equally simple geometry can extend the measure to establish the outer ring of *The Rose*, came to us as a 'Eureka!' It means that on paper, with just one measurement to represent a rod, used only once, the whole of *The Rose* can be set out with just a pair of compasses (standard in an Elizabethan carpenter's tool kit) and a straight edge. Or, by extension, the whole of the building can be set out in pegs on the ground using one surveyor's rod for the first measurement and several string lines. The correspondence between these two methods is astounding.

The developing superstructure

A commission from Shakespeare & Company, the Massachusetts-based theatre group that plans to reconstruct *The Rose*, encouraged us to return to the records and search for the elements of the original building of 1587. Fortunately MoLAS could extract the primary features from their records, but the result contained some surprises. Figure 6 summarises the structural sequence so far deduced from the archaeological evidence, from its hypothetical

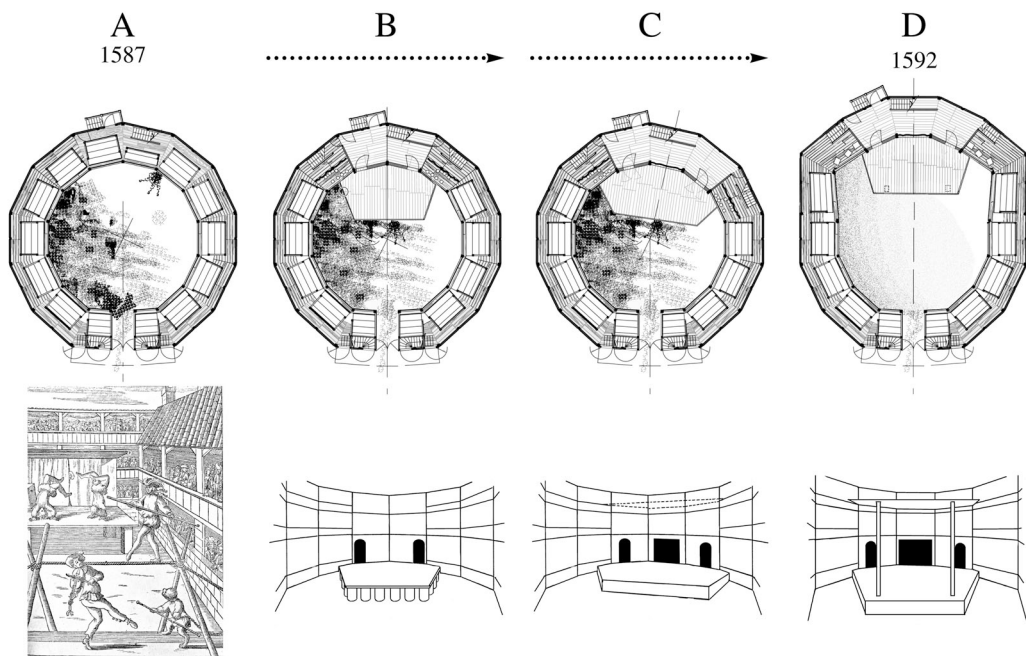


Figure 6. Stages in stages.

earliest plan (A) in 1587 to the rebuilding of 1592 (D). It seems that the first building was positioned to exploit a natural hollow in the ground. The yard has a slight dish, and features a plain slope downwards to the north, over which a permanent stage was, at some time, introduced. This suggested the possibility that the first building did not actually have a stage, an idea for which there was some corroboration from the ground levels. When we related the yard levels inside the 'wooden O' with those on the ground outside and plotted the most likely heights of the brick footings and timber cills, we found a surprising difference in height (Figure 7). The most pronounced effect is to the north, where the floor level of the lowest gallery would have been 4 feet 10 inches above the yard, and if we add the height of the balustrade around the front of the gallery we find a sheer wall over seven feet high. At that time the average height of a man was only five feet six inches. Why did Griggs set the first gallery so high? A possible explanation seems to be that *The Rose* was first constructed as a bear-baiting house, or as a dual-purpose theatre and baiting house, and that its designer expected that there would be fierce animals in the yard, bears and bulls, being baited by dogs. Of course, if animals were being baited in the yard there would have been no standing audience there, and no stage.

Examination of the site drainage, and particularly of a magnificent box drain unearthed in the northern segment behind the stage to carry water away from what became the stage tiring house or dressing room, reinforces our conclusion that *The Rose* was first built without a stage. Figure 8 shows how well the yard was drained, through this box drain and into the northern boundary ditch if the yard is imagined without a stage. The addition of a stage, perhaps put in expediently but certainly thoughtlessly, disrupted the pre-established course of the rainwater run-off from the yard (Figure 6b). No wonder the area in front of the stage became a churned up muddy puddle and was eventually eroded away, as the mortar surfacing shows.

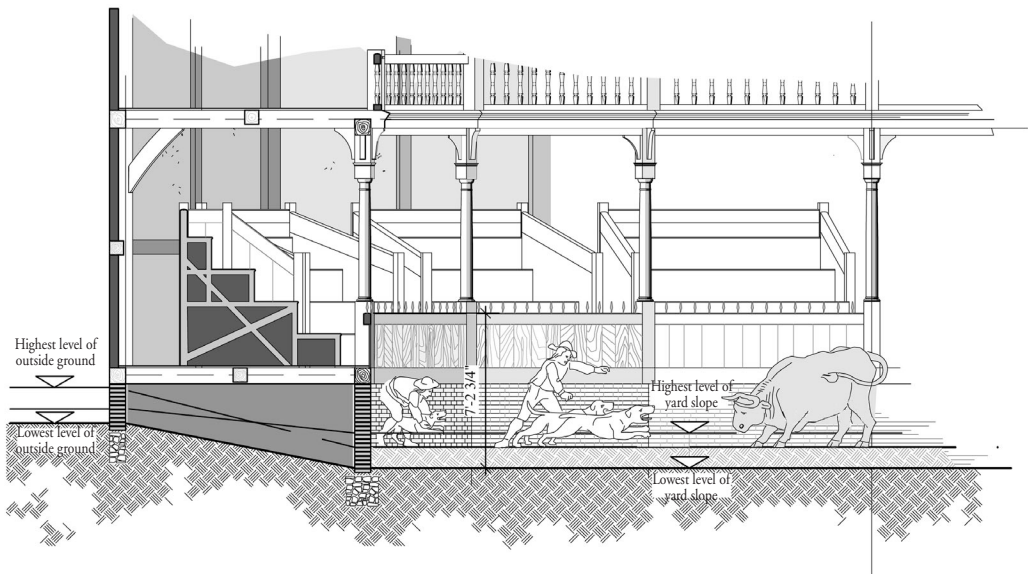


Figure 7. Site levels and the yard

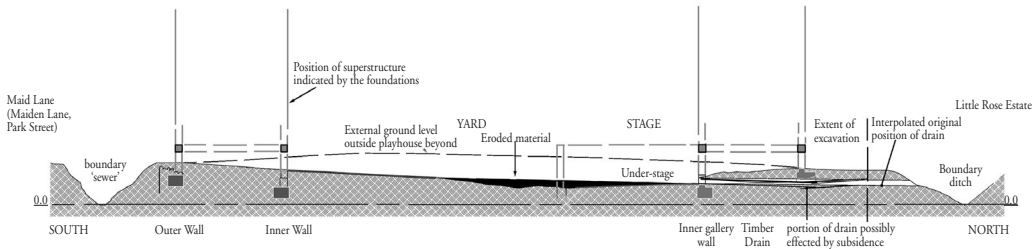


Figure 8. Section showing the ground levels in 1587.

After the initial construction of the arena in 1587, the stages appear to have been developed in a very different way to the galleries of the auditorium, perhaps by someone other than Griggs. If Henslowe initially built *The Rose* as a simple circular (or ‘conjoined’) set of standings for shows of dancing, displays of combat juggling and animal baiting (see Figure 6a) he soon responded to the demands of his audience and built a stage. His first attempt would almost certainly have been to place the stage on the polygon’s axis. This, however, had the great disadvantage that it could only have accommodated two stage entry doors, because a central post would have occupied the ‘discovery’ position (see Figure 6b) which had to be wide enough open to admit major actor-entries, including perhaps the chariot pulled by four kings on which Tamburlaine made his entrance. Could it have been that the actors, unable to make the best use of such a stage, demanded a central opening so that they could do productions more like the ones that Burbage was putting on at the Theatre across the river? If so, the easiest way of modifying the stage to give a central opening would have been to twist it just enough to make it miss the central post. This is a nice thought, because that way the stage ends up in exactly the skew position the archaeologists unearthed in 1989, and which has so far defied explanation (see Figure 6c). The implication is that *The Rose* contains the imprint of some of the fundamental changes in stage structure for staging purposes that characterised this period in English drama.

Questions to be answered next

The recent analysis has produced some striking answers to the questions raised in 1989, and of course raises even more. Jon Greenfield’s ground plan gives a width for each gallery of the polygon of just twelve feet, close to, but smaller than, the twelve feet six inches found on *The Globe* site, and incidentally just what was specified in the contract to build *The Fortune*, *The Rose*’s successor, which is preserved in the archives at Dulwich. *The Rose*’s actual gallery widths as measured from the archaeology records at MoLAS suggest a size between 12 feet and 12 feet 4 inches. Re-excavation of the site should confirm those measurements, and allow extrapolation of the various sections of the theatre foundations which are damaged or missing.

The implication of *The Rose* starting without a fixed stage as a precursor to Henslowe’s nearby *Hope* of 1614 raises a mass of new questions. Only a year after its construction, in April 1588, the local Sewer Commission called it “the new Play-house”, so by then it evidently was being used for plays. Was the first stage structure a temporary affair made of planks laid on barrels, as shown in pictures of innyard stages, or was it made as a permanent structure, integrated with the adjacent gallery timbers? The angled wall foundations of the two stages uncovered in 1989

join the inner walls of the galleries at peculiarly irregular points. Moreover there is no sign of any bases for stage posts to support a cover over the stage in the remains of the 1587-8 design, so perhaps the original stage cover was cantilevered out from the gallery walls, as specified in the contract for *The Hope*. Or was there a canvas awning stretched over the stage? The absence of evidence for any foundations for stage posts in the remains of the first stage has led to the view that it was left uncovered, which given London's weather and the high cost of the stage costumes is highly unlikely. More evidence about the date and longevity of the first stage structure may survive under the surface of *The Rose's* yard, which has yet to be excavated.

The eastern section of *The Rose*, also not yet excavated, may offer much more than a simple confirmation of the polygon's symmetry. A map of the South Bank area made in 1628 shows *The Swan*, built in 1595 well to the west of *The Rose*, as having fourteen sides (not the twenty or twenty-four of the notorious De Witt drawing of *The Swan's* interior), and a stair turret on its north-eastern flank. Stair turrets were an invaluable feature in the open-air theatres, because they gave the audience direct access to the upper galleries, and thus saved on the seating space inside the frame that would otherwise have to be taken up by interior staircases. *The Hope* contract specified that its stair turrets should be copied from *The Swan*. The logical place for a stair turret at *The Rose* would be on the north-eastern side, closest to London Bridge which most customers from the city would have used to get to the playhouse. Excavating the eastern section of the site might tell us a great deal about the disposition of the Rose's structure above ground.

There are many other questions about *The Rose* design that need facing. Were there two galleries or the three that Norden seems to depict in his first engraving, for instance? The erosion trench cut into the mortar surface of the yard by constant dripping of water from the thatch of the gallery roof is noticeably closer to the inner gallery walls than the one that the drips have marked in the new Globe's yard. *The Globe's* three galleries include two *jutties* or extensions forward into the yard from the second and third levels of gallery. The erosion trench at *The Rose*, being nearer the inner gallery wall, may show the position of thatch covering only two galleries, with a single jutting. That is one question which calls for renewed study. Another is that if the intended use was for a baiting arena, it would have demanded a highish wall protecting the lowest gallery on the inside facing the arena, in order to keep the spectators well above the animals. That possibility was not in anyone's mind when the first investigation of the site took place. It too needs a fresh scrutiny, since it could lead to a radical reinterpretation of the entire site design of 1587.

Then there is the question of the drainage. On such a marshy site, with a distinct low area in what became the middle of the yard, its drainage to the river was from the outset a major problem for the builder. There were almost no indications before April 1989 to say how it worked. The substantial wooden drain leading northwards was found a little below the main foundation level behind the stage, probably, it was thought, to take away water from the gutters over the stage. Otherwise, all the evidence about what kept the yard dry lies undiscovered beneath its mortar surfaces. A barrel-head was found set in the mortar of the yard, off-centre on the western flank of the second stage's foundations of 1592. It is not really likely that this was intended to be a sump draining water from the centre of the yard, but it is a possibility. Excavation might determine if it was a sump or a barrel left behind from underpropping used to make a temporary booth stage in 1587-8.

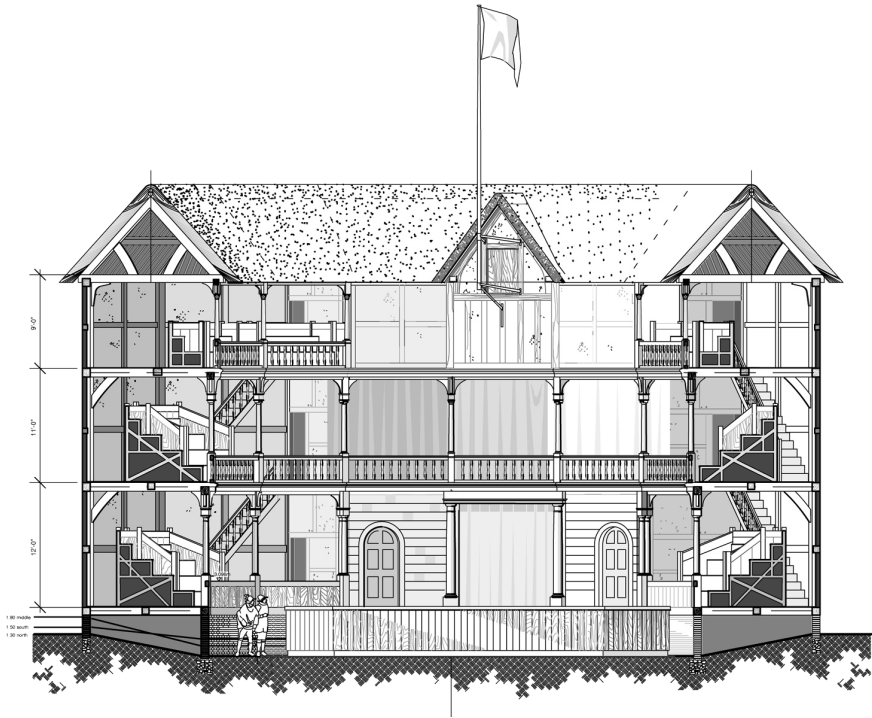


Figure 9. Section through the auditorium.

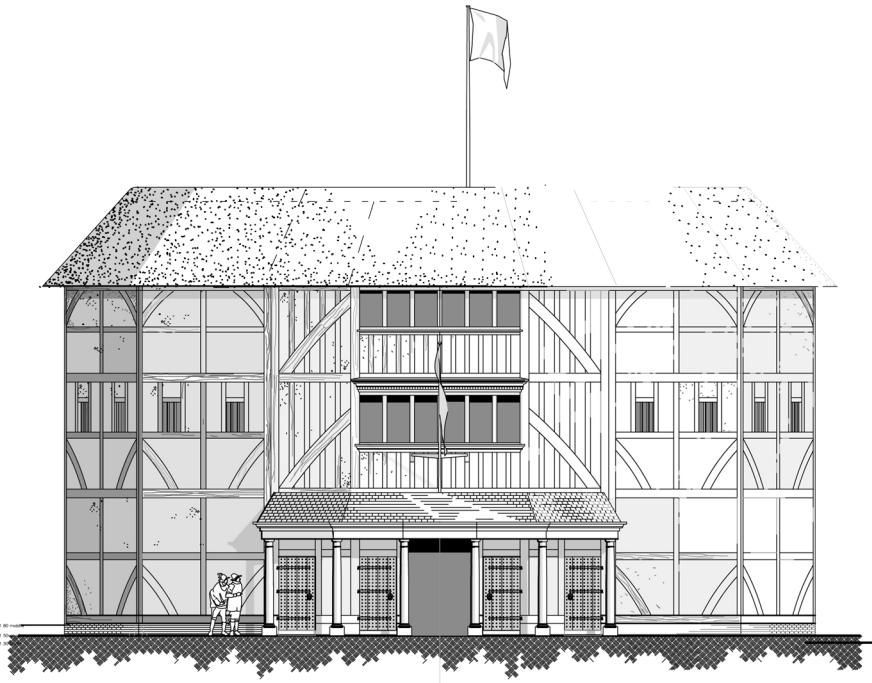


Figure 10. Elevation of the conjectured entrance gatehouse.

The recent analysis has begun to provide a richer, fuller picture of the theatre where Shakespeare and Marlowe played, making possible a new architectural reconstruction (Figures 9, 10). Meanwhile we are conscious that there is still much to confirm or discover. To this end, *The Rose Theatre Trust* is preparing an application for funding to help finance a renewed dig, and set up a display putting the remains on show to the public. Southwark Council and the owners of Rose Court are happy with these plans. A major US acting group, led by Tina Packer once of the RSC, called Shakespeare and Company in Lenox, Massachusetts, wants to build a replica in the Berkshires, near the Boston Symphony Orchestra's summer home at Tanglewood. There has never been a better time to complete the excavation that was stopped short in 1989.

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