

St Albans Museums: 'Talking Buildings' project, 2016	
Building:	The Alban Arena
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This research was undertaken by volunteers and is not an exhaustive history of the building but captures what intrigued them during the project. If you have any memories you'd like to share, or any queries about the research, please do let us know: museum@stalbans.gov.uk	

Around the end of the 1950s, it became clear that new civic buildings would be required, and the first to be finished was Forrester House in 1960 on St Peters Street, followed by a police station, offices and in 1968 an entertainment hall known at first as The City Hall, and now known as The Alban Arena. The area where the civic buildings were to be built was the gardens of 18th C house now the Nationwide Building Society, once the home of John Osborne, Mayor of St Albans. The civic area was finished in the 1980s by the addition of the Council Offices and Crown Court (by a different architect and design).

These 1960s buildings were designed by Sir Frederick Gibberd who was already a distinguished architect with many public buildings already built. The early ones included Pullman Court in Streatham and Ellington Court in Southgate, both in the fashionable Modernist style, in the early 1930s. These were built in concrete with flat roofs, metal windows and horizontal lines. Later, came Harlow New Town, two Heathrow Terminals, the Central London Mosque and the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Liverpool and many other public buildings.

It is possible to trace the development of Gibberd's style through his long career and see how its changed from strict Modern principle , (the motto of two contemporaneous architects being 'More Is Less' and 'Form Follows Function') to a more decorated style such as in Liverpool Cathedral.

The Alban Arena was built on Modernist principles but with a reference to the great cruise liners of the 1930s, so beloved of designers and architects of the time. The large glass corners appear to hover over two small areas of water, making it appear as if it was a liner moving across the ocean. There are balconies which look like decks and a flagpole on the flat roof. Unusually for Modernist buildings, the main part of the structure is built of brick rather than concrete.

Inside the Arena there is seating for an audience of over 1000 , in seats which are three sides of a square, the last side being the stage, and with good uninterrupted views from all seats, both circle and stalls. During the interval the audience can walk out on to open balconies or gather in the bar in the foyer for coffee or a drink.

Unfortunately, the most interesting feature of the foyer cannot be seen. It is a 3rd century Roman mosaic uncovered during the 1931 excavations by the Wheelers, and subsequently reburied. It was re-exposed in the 1960s and lifted by a company called Art Pavements Ltd, no longer trading, who had also been involved with conservation and restoration of mosaics at Bignor Roman Villa and Fishbourne Palace. Consisting of 2 panels from 2 adjoining rooms, it was originally planned to be the main feature of the entrance hall, to emphasize St Albans connection with its Roman past. However, in the interests of entertainment, it was later proposed to build a bar in the area where the mosaic lies. And so it was covered up again, this time under a wooden floor, overlaid with carpet. A subsequent inspection in 1973 showed no further damage and today it lies hidden with occasional exposure on Heritage Open Days in September. It was uncovered for two weeks in August 2016 – more information can be found on the Museum's blogs [here](#) and [here](#).



The mosaic panel in the Alban Arena



Photo from 1930s excavation

References

Email correspondence with David Thorold, Curator, St Albans Museums
www.mosaicmatters.co.uk/features/artpavements.htm (Accessed May 2016)
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Gibberd - Wikipedia