

PAST TIMES

History

THE CIRCUS: ORIGINS AND HISTORY



The idea (0) of travelling performers has its origins far back in history. (1) It is believed that the Ancient Egyptians had groups of travelling acrobats, and people may have been entertaining each (2) other in similar ways even further back in time.

The word *circus* comes from the Ancient Greek and Roman word for 'circle' because acts (3) were performed in round arenas. The Ancient Greeks (4) loved have chariot races, horse shows, staged battles, and displays by jugglers and acrobats in these places. In the ancient city of Rome there was a fixed place where the shows used to take (5) place. The first one to be built was called the Circus Maximus. This stone stadium could seat as (6) many as 200,000 people.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, these large circus stadiums fell (7) into of use. Instead, performers travelled between towns in Europe performing at local fairs. Groups of entertainers and acrobats have done this for hundreds of years – and they will probably (8) continue so for many years to come.

By far the most famous Roman circus building was the Colosseum in Rome, built during the time of the Flavian emperors. Construction of the Colosseum was begun sometime between 70 and 72 CE, during the time of Vespasian. It is located just east of the Palatine Hill, on the grounds of what was Emperor Nero's Golden House.

The water was removed from the artificial lake that was the central feature of that palace, and the Colosseum was built there – a decision that was made for largely

political reasons. Vespasian, whose path to power had relatively poor beginnings, chose to replace the unpopular Nero's private lake with a public amphitheatre that could hold tens of thousands of Romans.

The structure was officially opened in 80 CE by Titus, in a ceremony that included 100 days of games. Later, in 82 CE, Domitian completed the work by adding the top storey. Unlike earlier amphitheatres, which were nearly all dug into convenient hillsides for extra support, the Colosseum is an independent structure of stone and concrete, measuring 189 by 156 metres overall.

The amphitheatre seated around 50,000 spectators, who were protected from the sun by a massive cloth roof called a *velarium*. Hundreds of Roman sailors were required to pull the ropes that opened and closed this roof! The Colosseum was the scene of thousands of hand-to-hand fights between gladiators, of contests between men and animals, and of many larger battles.

The Colosseum was damaged by lightning and earthquakes in medieval times and, even more severely, by theft and criminal damage. All the seats and decorative materials disappeared, as the site was treated with very little respect for more than 1,000 years. Work to preserve the Colosseum began properly in the nineteenth century, and a project to restore it was started in the 1990s. It has long been one of Rome's major tourist attractions. Many changing exhibitions relating to the culture of Ancient Rome are now held here.

5 Read the rest of the text and choose the correct answers.

- 1 Work on the Colosseum was started by the Roman Emperor *Vespasian* / *Nero* / *Palatine*.
- 2 The Colosseum was built for the benefit of the Roman *people* / *Emperor* / *environment*.
- 3 The roof of the Colosseum was operated by *gladiators* / *spectators* / *sailors*.
- 4 Most of the damage to the Colosseum was caused by *natural disasters* / *war* / *people*.

6 Match the **highlighted** words in the text to the meanings.

- 1 level of a building _____
- 2 very seriously _____
- 3 outside events where you can play games and go on rides _____
- 4 almost completely _____
- 5 very large _____