

Report on an  
Archaeological Watching Brief  
at the former  
Sargeant's Engineering Works,  
Northgate Street, Colchester:  
1996 - 1997

March 1998

Colchester Museum Accession Code: 1998. 16

**FOR**  
**COLNE HOUSING SOCIETY LTD**



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# Report on an Archaeological Watching Brief at the former Sargeant's Engineering Works, Northgate Street, Colchester: 1996-1997

by Howard Brooks, Colchester Archaeological Trust

## **1 Summary**

*A watching brief on the site of Sargeant's Engineering Works recorded the remains of Roman town houses - principally robbed wall lines, tessellated pavements and mortar floors. This confirmed the result of a 1993 evaluation on the same site, which suggested that Roman deposits probably existed below the level of the 1993 test trenches.*

## **2 Introduction**

- 2.1 This is the archive report on an archaeological watching brief carried out on behalf of the Colne Housing Society by Colchester Archaeological Trust at the former Sargeants Engineering Works, rear of 97 Northgate Street, Colchester (NGR TL 9972 2551), from December 1996 to March 1997. All site work was by Colin Austin, Stephen Benfield, Carl Crossan and John Mabbitt, who are credited in each separate recording session below (part 4).
- 2.2 The watching briefs were carried out to follow up an evaluation of the site in November 1993,<sup>1</sup> which demonstrated that Roman material may have existed below the level of the evaluation trenches. That evaluation has already been reported on <sup>2</sup>, but it is also attached here (Appendix 1) for convenience.
- 2.3 The watching brief actually fell into several component parts, including a few trenches dug during ground reduction on the site. These will be described separately below (part 4)

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<sup>1</sup> directed by Carl Crossan

<sup>2</sup> *Archaeological Evaluation, Sargeant s Engineering Works, Northgate Street, Colchester* (November 1993).

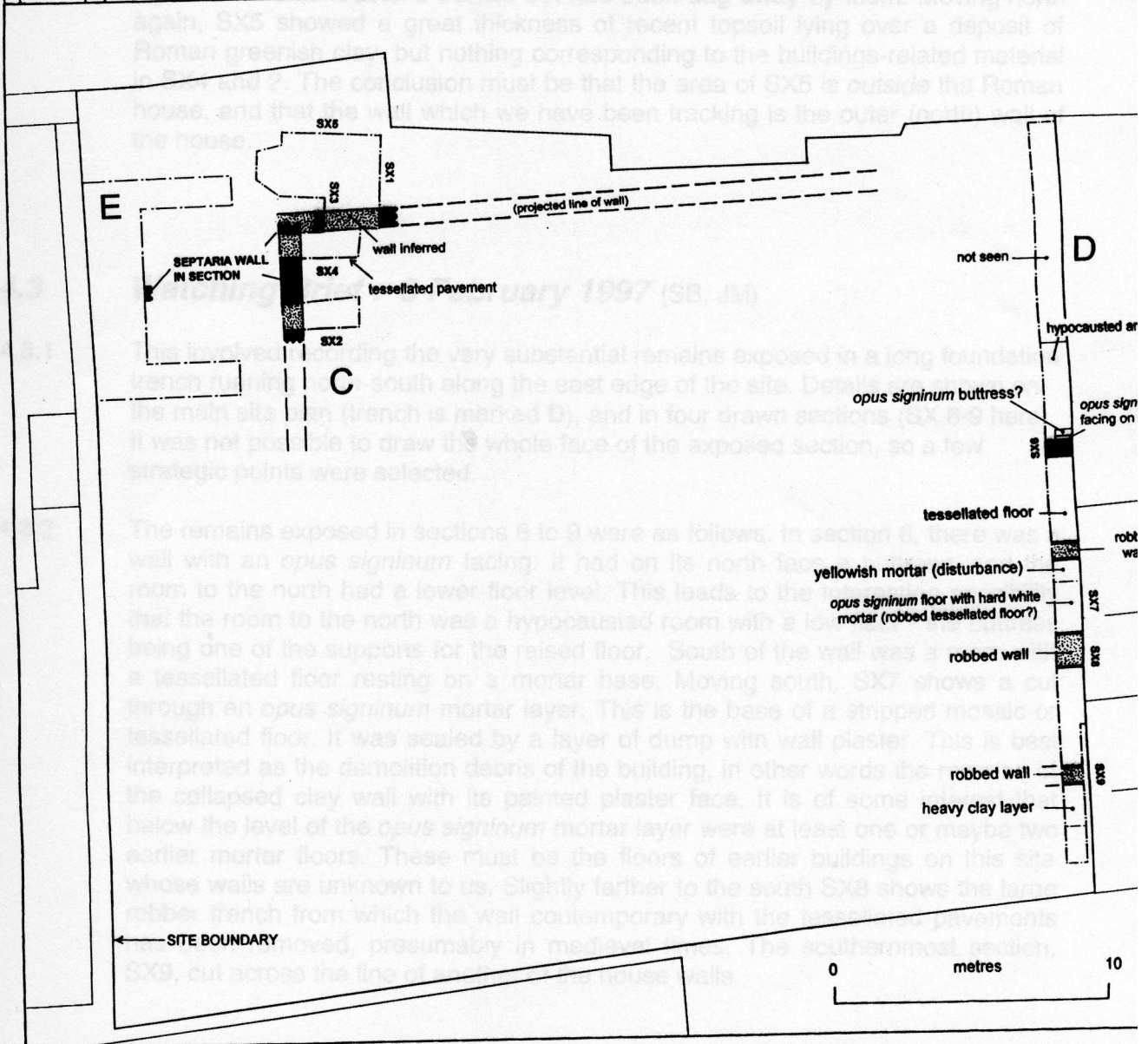
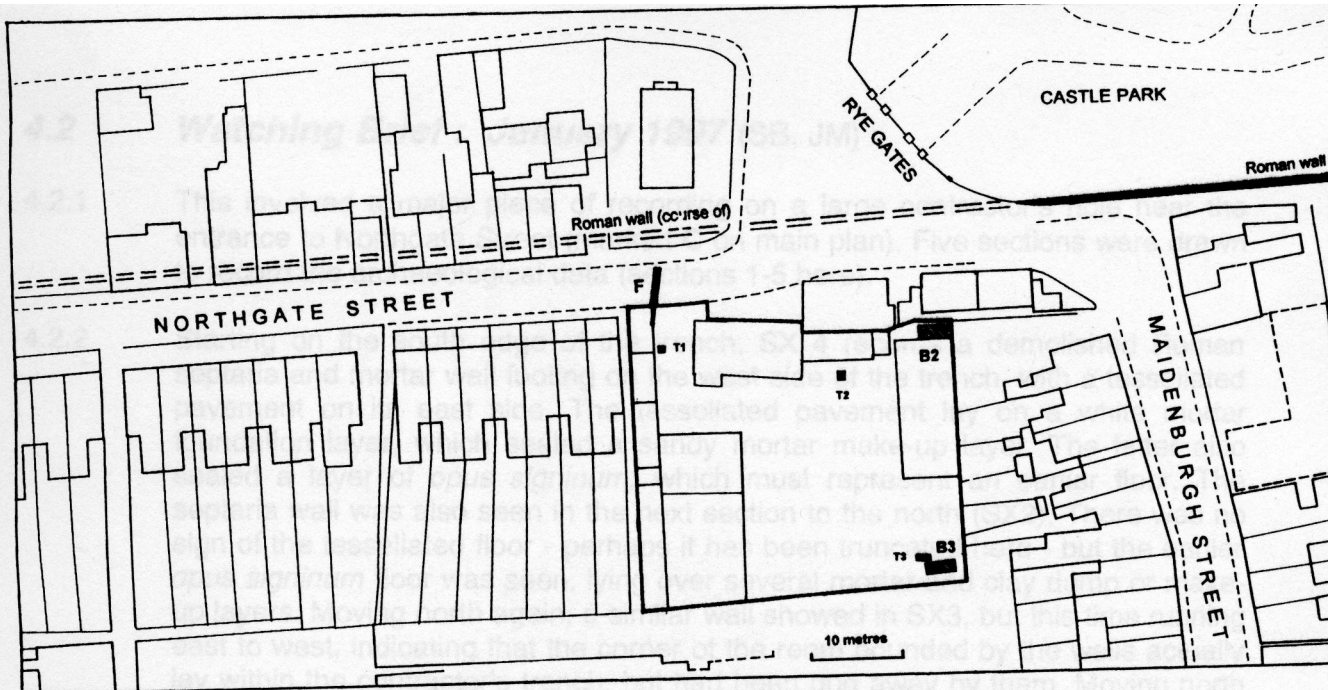
### **3        *Archaeological background***

- 3.1        The 1993 evaluation was requested because of the archaeological importance of the site, lying as it does in the north-east corner of Insula 5 of the Roman town, whose north edge is bounded by the Roman town wall. This *insula* is not known in any great detail, apart from the fact that the street dividing Insula 4 from Insula 5 probably passes immediately west of the present site.
- 3.2        Previous discoveries in Insula 5 include a Roman wall and drain seen in the cellar of a house on the east side of Maidenburgh Street in 1849, and (actually within the site area) a tessellated pavement reported in the yard of Messrs Truslove in 1920 (Hull 81). Judging by the position in which Hull plots this, there is every reason to believe that this is the same pavement seen in 1997 in the north-west corner of the site, near the entrance to Northgate Street (section drawing 4).

### **4        *The Watching Briefs***

#### **4.1        *The ground reduction: December 1996 (CA)***

- 4.1.1      During ground reduction works in December 1996 two trenches were cut to confirm the 1993 evaluation results. They are marked as shaded areas on the main site figure, and labelled B2 in the extreme north-east corner of the site (reasonably close to 1993 T2) and B3 in the south-east corner. There was no trench 1 because at the time there was no reduction in the vicinity of 1993 T1.
- 4.1.2      Strata recorded in B2 and B3 are shown on sections 10 and 11 respectively. They are all post-medieval or modern deposits, and relate to the 1993 results in the following manner. Trench 1996 B2 layer 2 (containing bits of drain pipe) is of very recent origin, and layer 3 is equivalent to 1993 T2 L3. In trench B3, layers 1 and 2 correspond directly with 1993 L1 and L2.



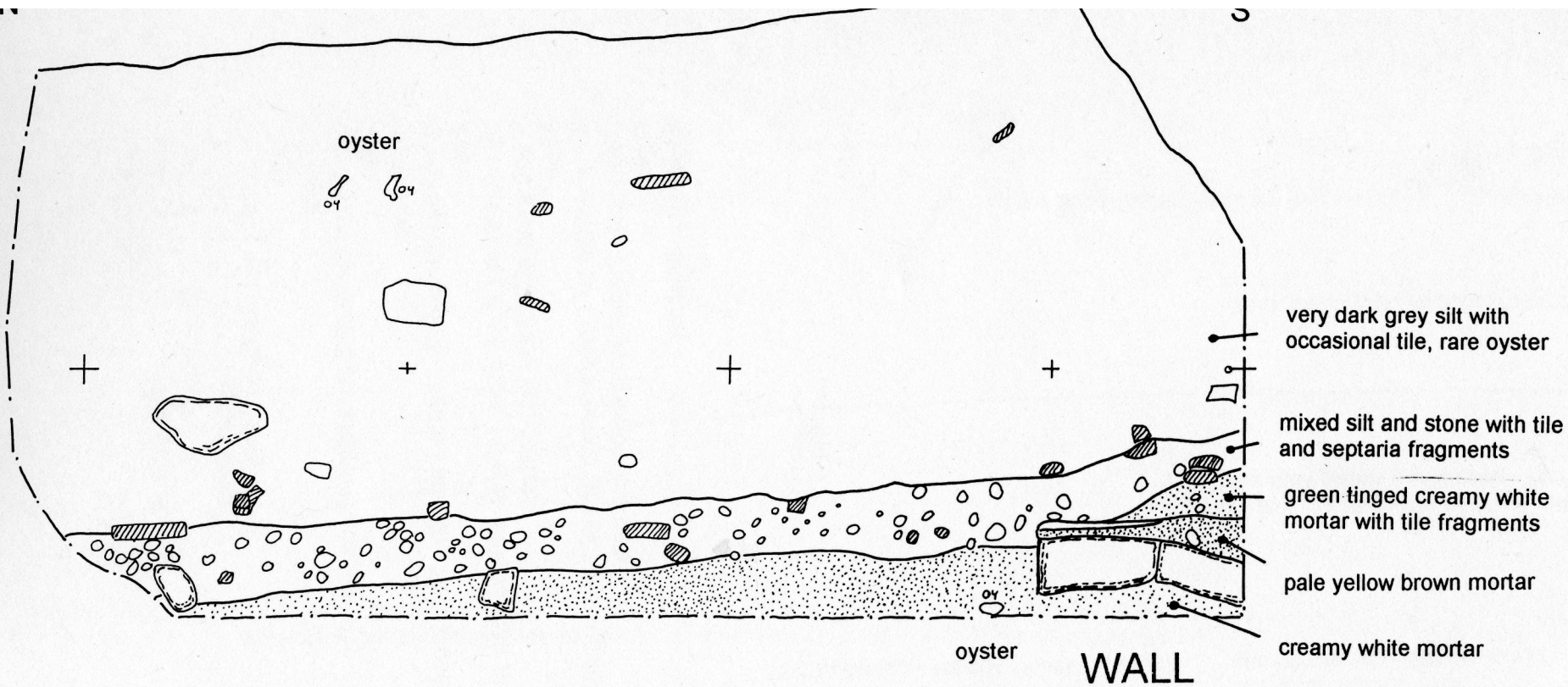
**Sargeants Engineering Works, 97 Northgate Street, Colchester**  
 Site location (above), 1993 trenches, and 1996/97 watching briefs

## **4.2      *Watching Brief : January 1997* (SB, JM)**

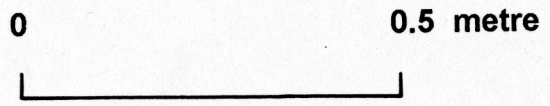
- 4.2.1      This involved a major piece of recording on a large contractor's hole near the entrance to Northgate Street (marked **C** on main plan). Five sections were drawn to record the archaeological data (sections 1-5 here).
- 4.2.2      Starting on the south edge of the trench, SX 4 records a demolished Roman septaria and mortar wall footing on the west side of the trench, with a tessellated pavement on its east side. The tessellated pavement lay on a white mortar foundation layer, which sealed a sandy mortar make-up layer. The latter also sealed a layer of *opus signinum*, which must represent an earlier floor. The septaria wall was also seen in the next section to the north (SX2). There was no sign of the tessellated floor - perhaps it has been truncated here - but the earlier *opus signinum* floor was seen, lying over several mortar and clay dump or make-up layers. Moving north again, a similar wall showed in SX3, but this time running east to west, indicating that the corner of the room bounded by the walls actually lay within the contractor's trench, but had been dug away by them. Moving north again, SX5 showed a great thickness of recent topsoil lying over a deposit of Roman greenish clay, but nothing corresponding to the buildings-related material in SX4 and 2. The conclusion must be that the area of SX5 is *outside* the Roman house, and that the wall which we have been tracking is the outer (north) wall of the house.

## **4.3      *Watching Brief : 5 February 1997* (SB, JM)**

- 4.3.1      This involved recording the very substantial remains exposed in a long foundation trench running north-south along the east edge of the site. Details are shown on the main site plan (trench is marked **D**), and in four drawn sections (SX 6-9 here). It was not possible to draw the whole face of the exposed section, so a few strategic points were selected.
- 4.3.2      The remains exposed in sections 6 to 9 were as follows. In section 6, there was a wall with an *opus signinum* facing. It had on its north face a buttress, and the room to the north had a lower floor level. This leads to the interesting possibility that the room to the north was a hypocausted room with a low floor - the buttress being one of the supports for the raised floor. South of the wall was a room with a tessellated floor resting on a mortar base. Moving south, SX7 shows a cut through an *opus signinum* mortar layer. This is the base of a stripped mosaic or tessellated floor. It was sealed by a layer of dump with wall plaster. This is best interpreted as the demolition debris of the building, in other words the remains of the collapsed clay wall with its painted plaster face. It is of some interest that below the level of the *opus signinum* mortar layer were at least one or maybe two earlier mortar floors. These must be the floors of earlier buildings on this site whose walls are unknown to us. Slightly farther to the south SX8 shows the large robber trench from which the wall contemporary with the tessellated pavements has been removed, presumably in medieval times. The southernmost section, SX9, cut across the line of another of the house walls.

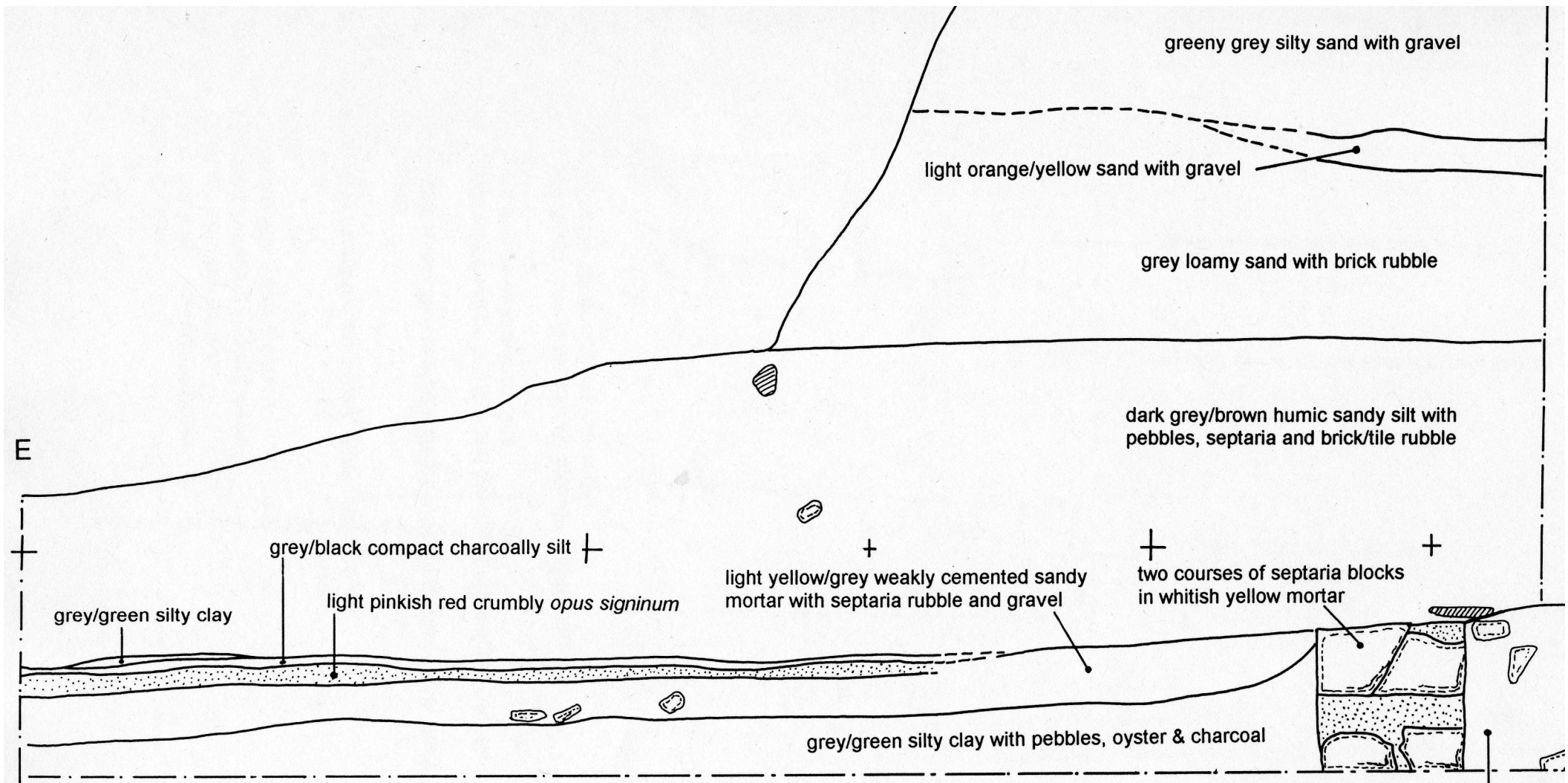


- very dark grey silt with occasional tile, rare oyster
- mixed silt and stone with tile and septaria fragments
- green tinged creamy white mortar with tile fragments
- pale yellow brown mortar
- creamy white mortar



NORTHGATE STREET 1997

SECTION 1



greeny grey silty sand with gravel

light orange/yellow sand with gravel

grey loamy sand with brick rubble

dark grey/brown humic sandy silt with pebbles, septaria and brick/tile rubble

E

grey/black compact charcoally silt +

grey/green silty clay

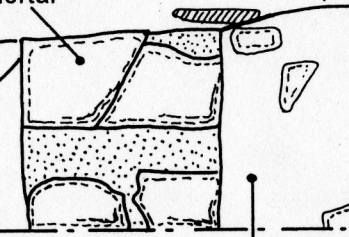
light pinkish red crumbly *opus signinum*

+ + +

light yellow/grey weakly cemented sandy mortar with septaria rubble and gravel

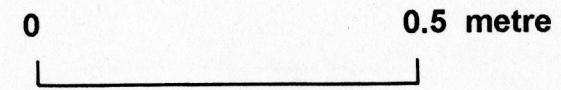
two courses of septaria blocks in whitish yellow mortar

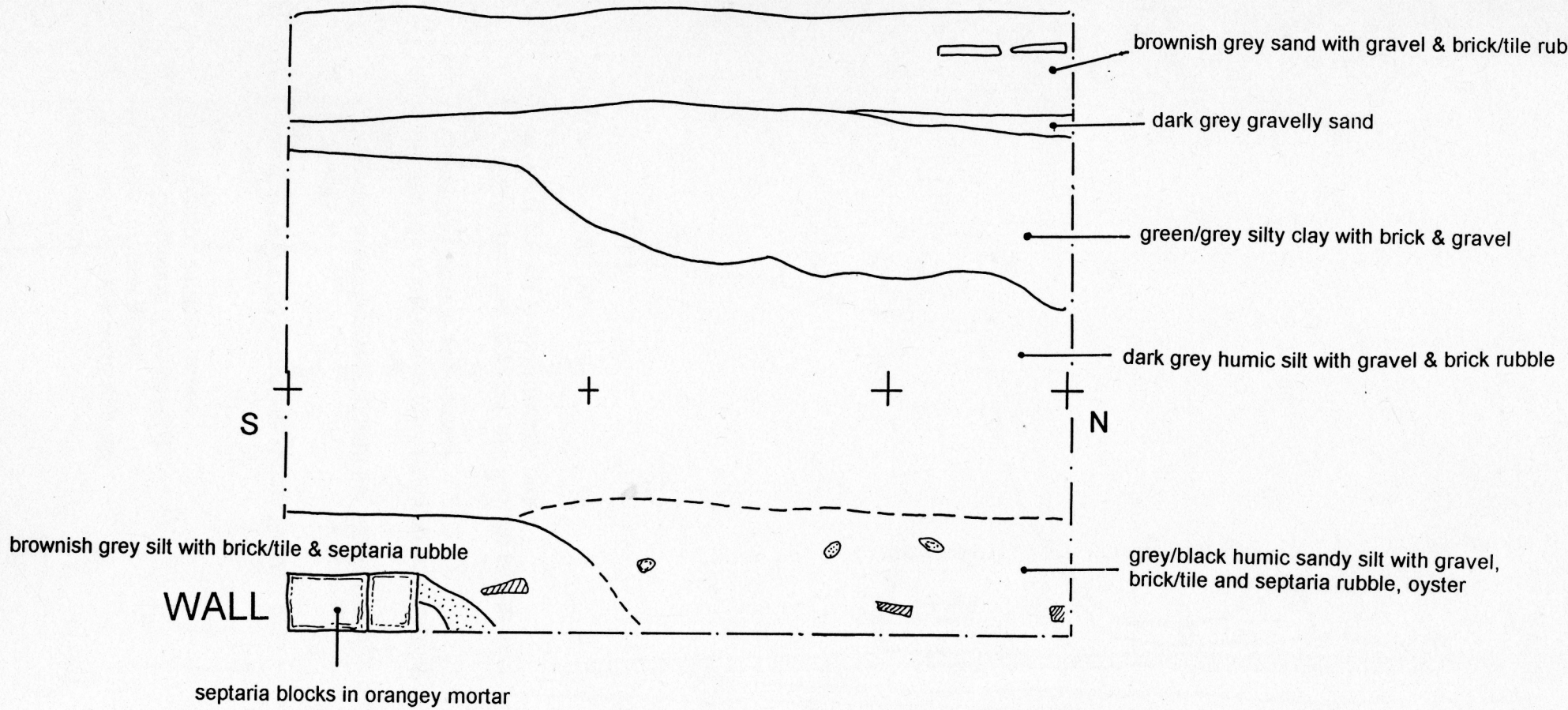
grey/green silty clay with pebbles, oyster & charcoal



WALL

light yellowish grey v  
cemented sandy mo  
possibly same as in



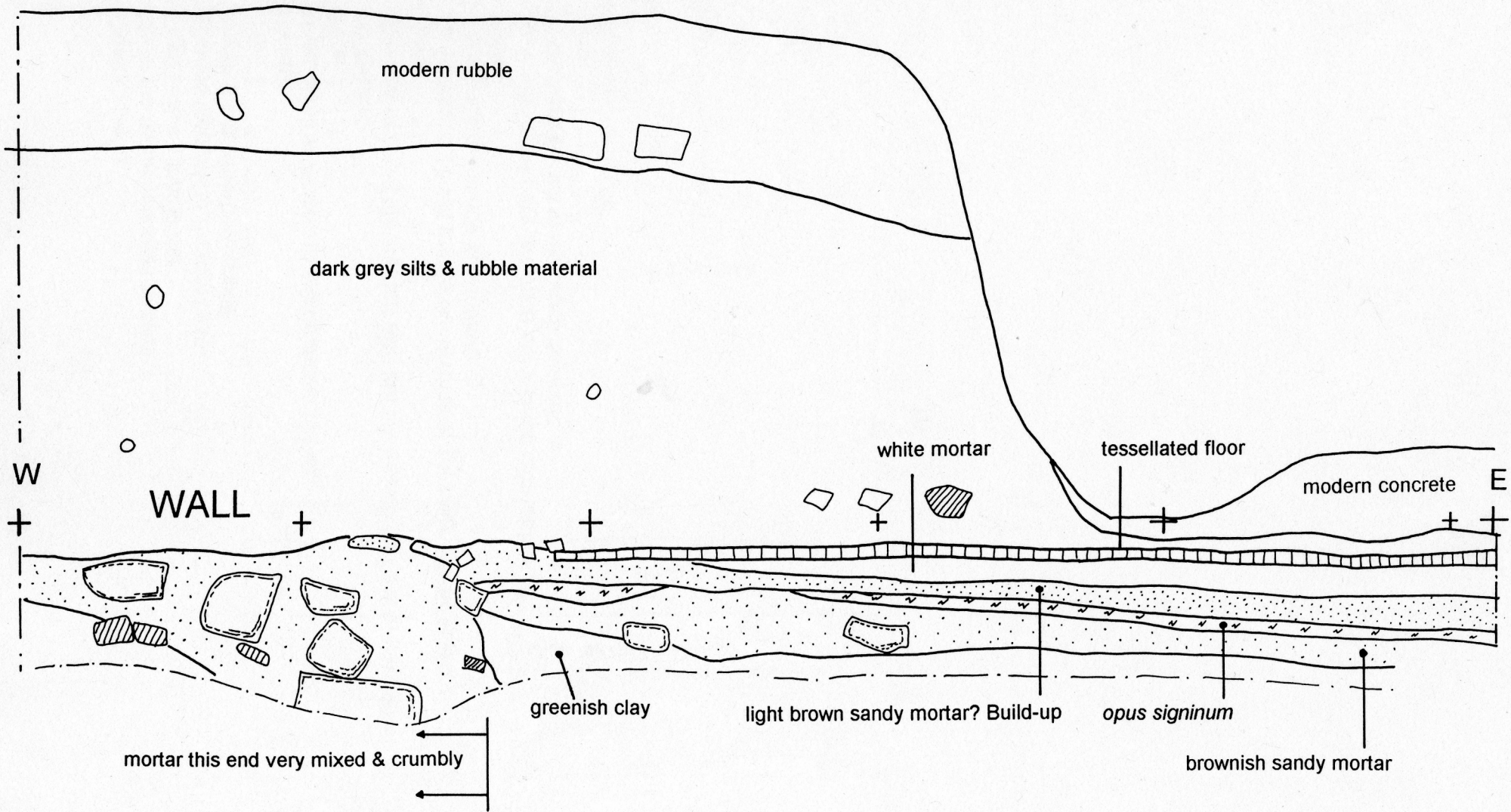


**NORTHGATE STREET 1997**

**SECTION 3**

0 0.5 metre

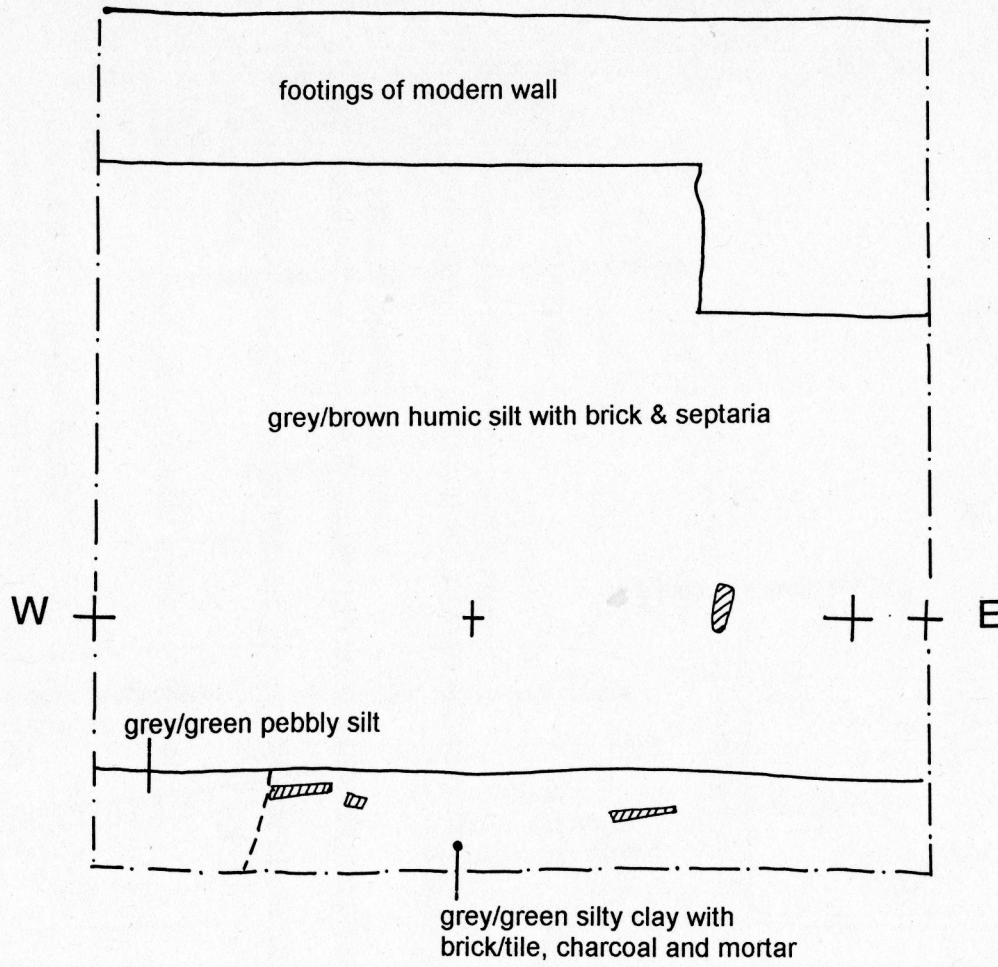




**NORTHGATE STREET 1997**

**SECTION 4**

0 0.5 metre

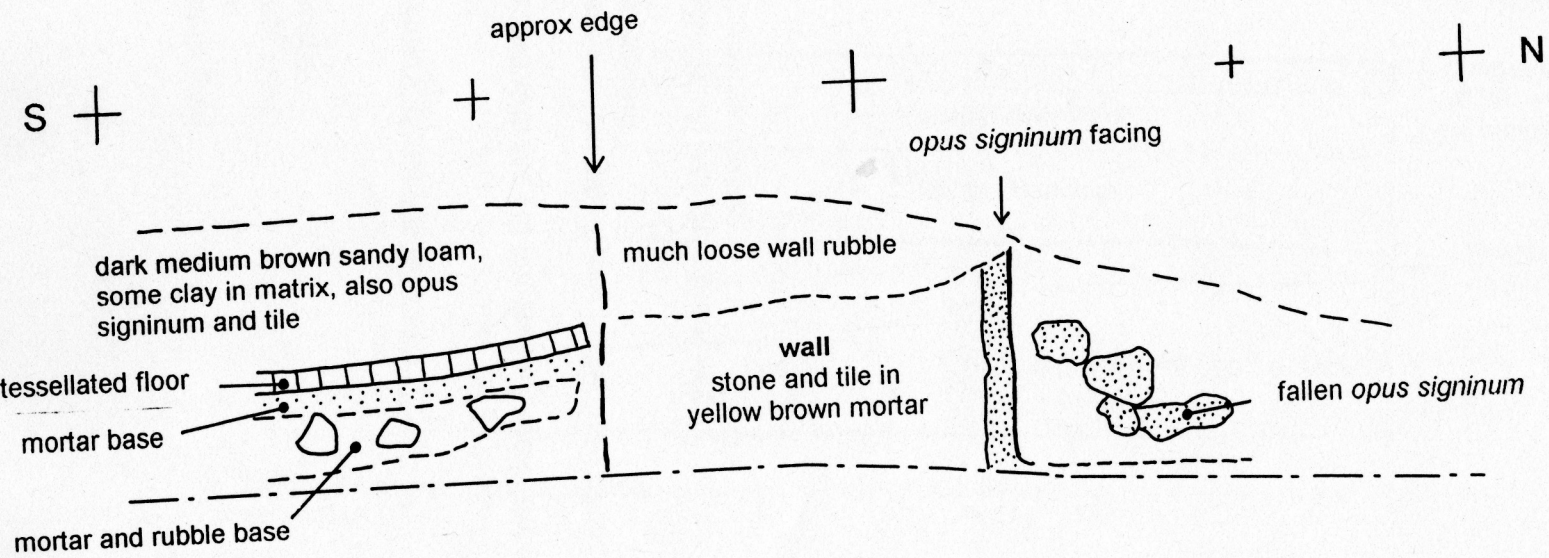


NORTHGATE STREET 1997

SECTION 5

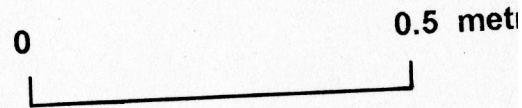
0 0.5 metre

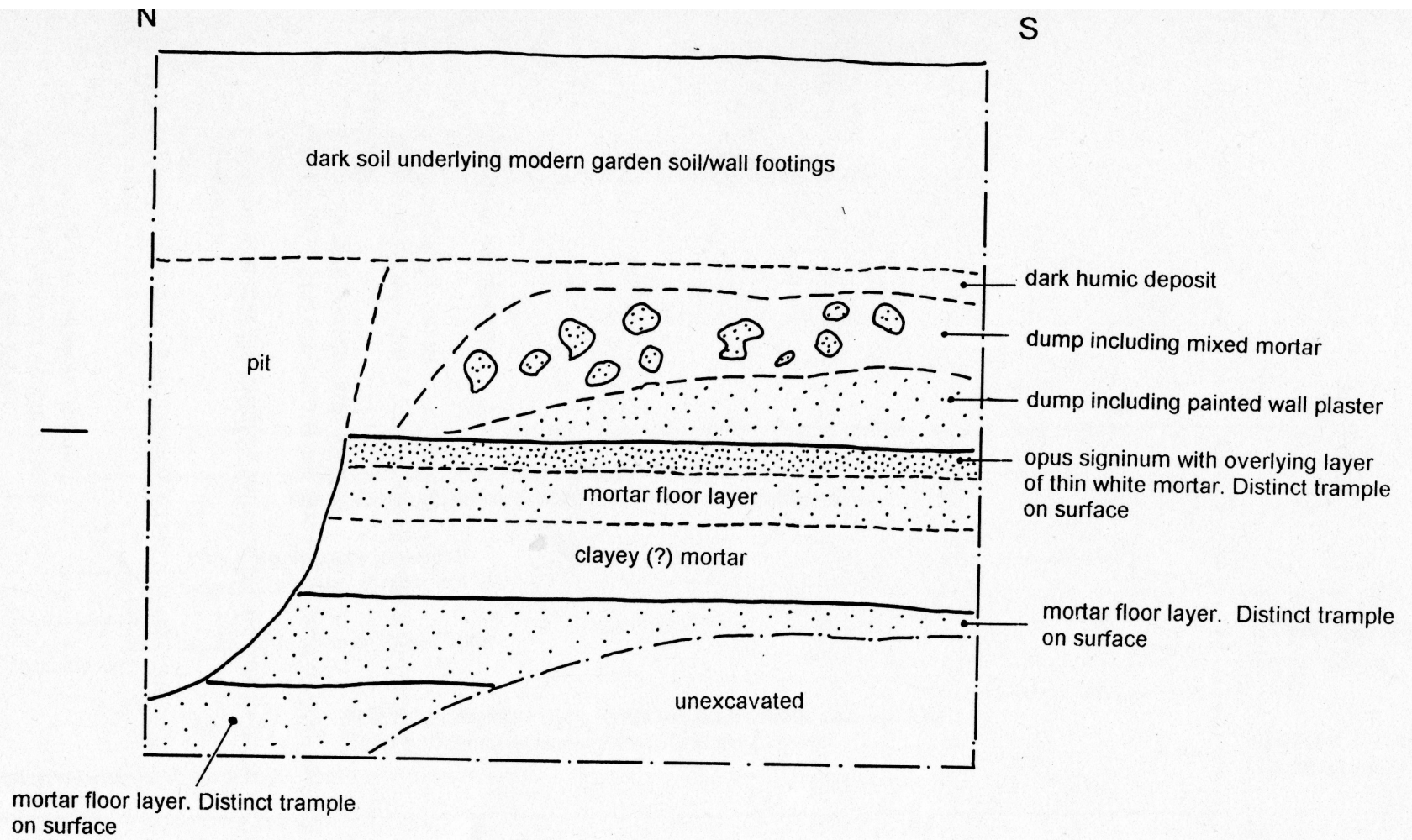
dark brown sandy loam with modern inclusions



NORTHGATE STREET 1997

SECTION 6

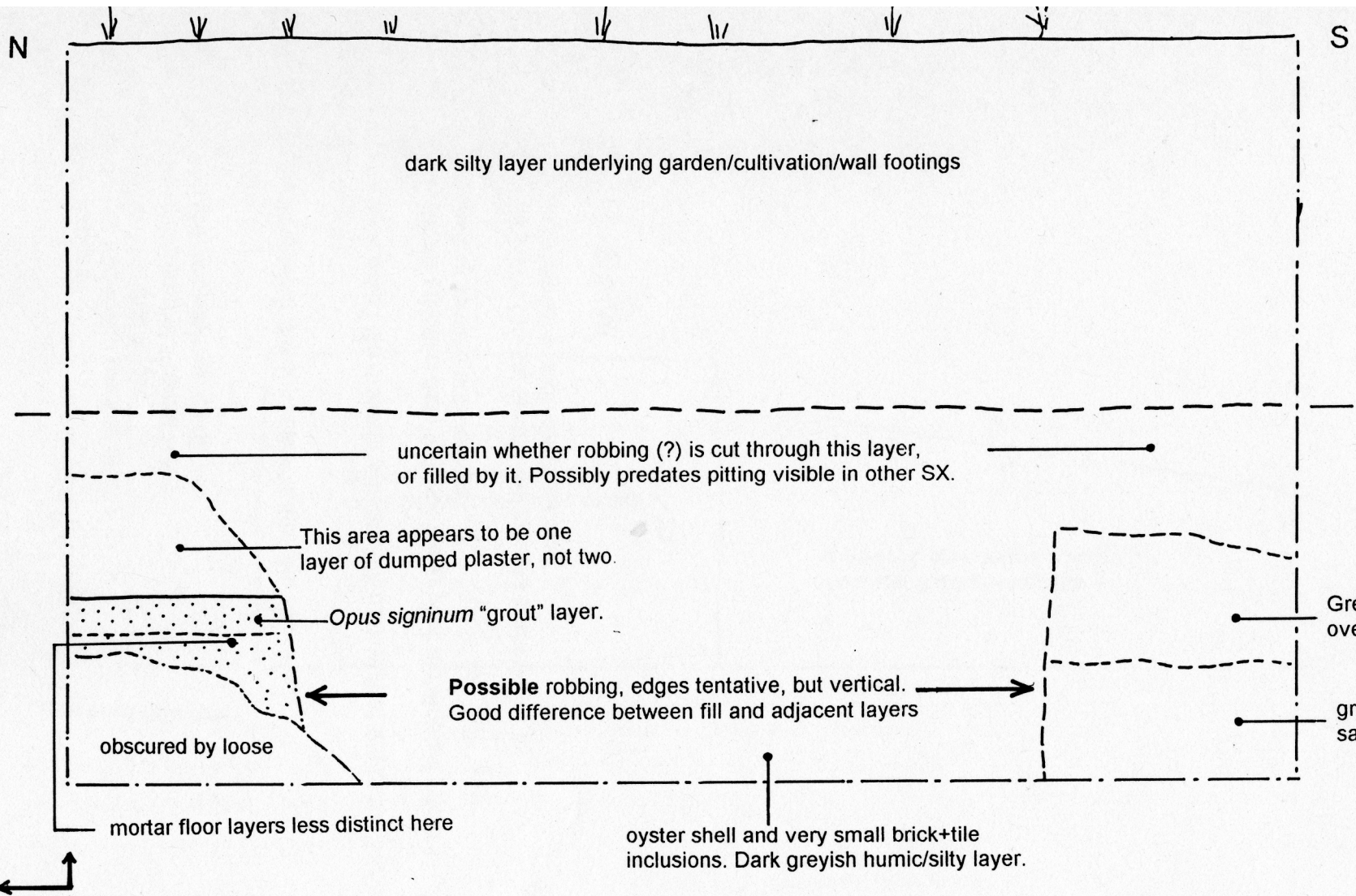




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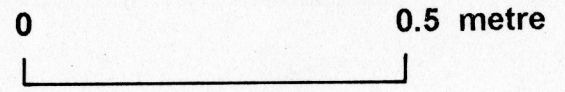
**SECTION 7**

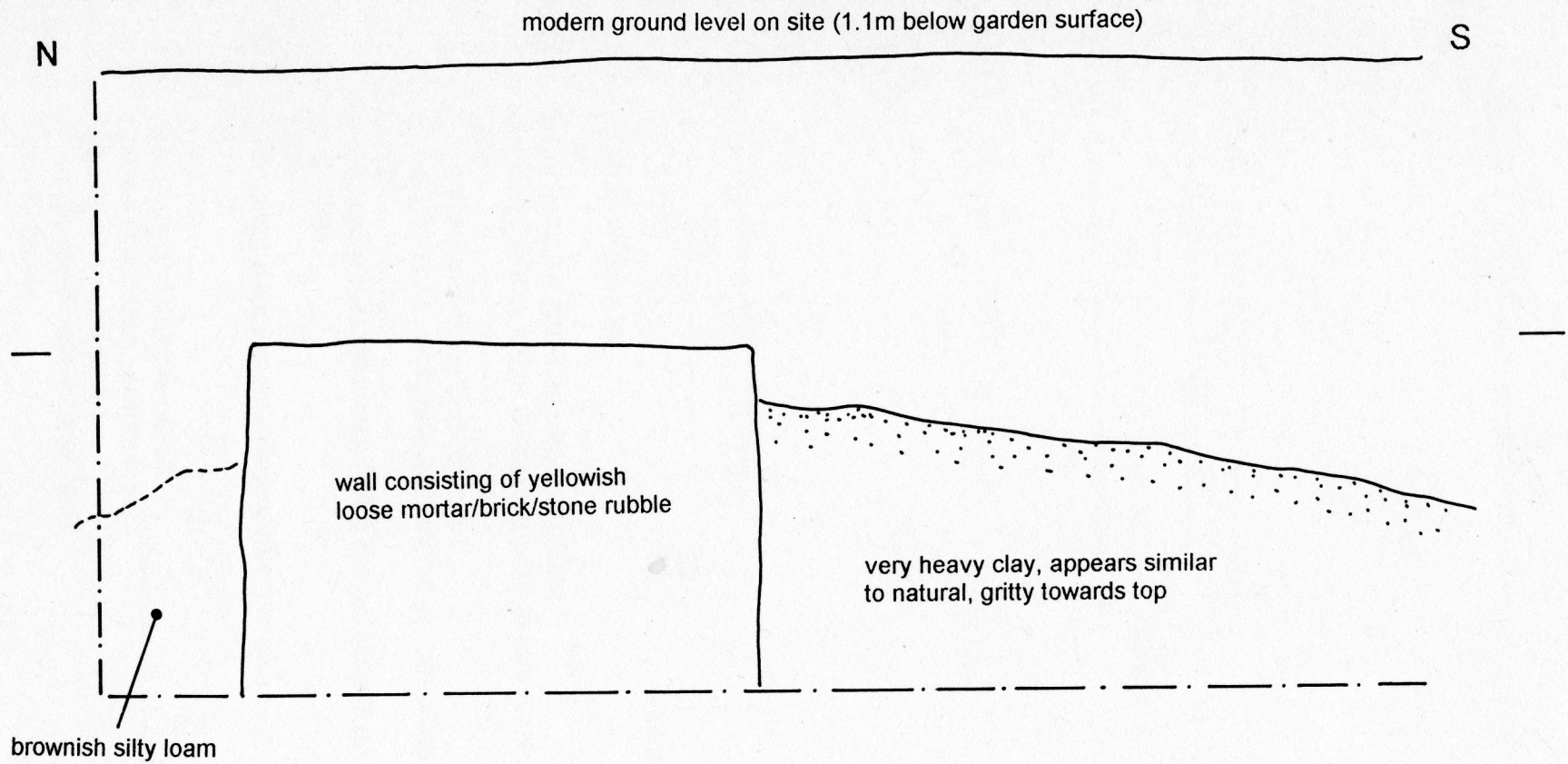
0 0.5 metre



**NORTHGATE STREET 1997**

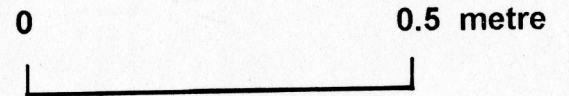
**SECTION 8**

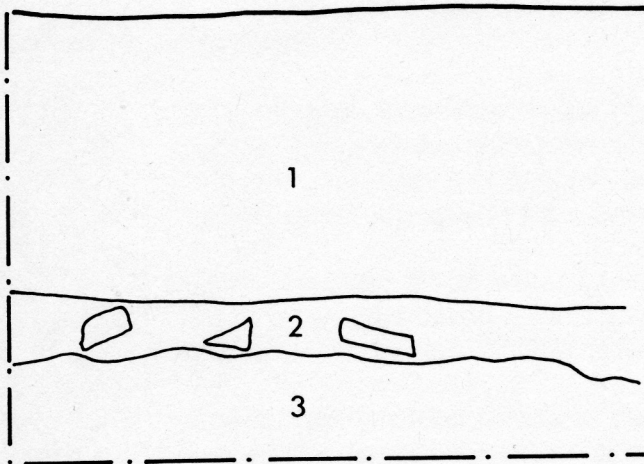




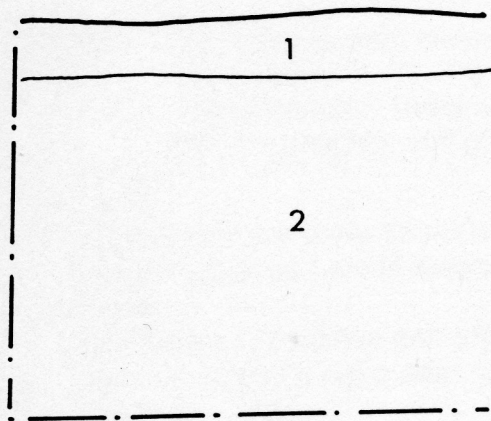
NORTHGATE STREET 1997

SECTION 9

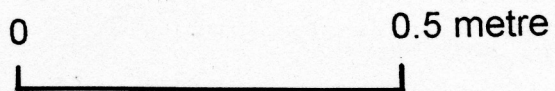




- L1 = dark grey brown loam with occasional oyster shell 0.55m deep
- L2 = mid/light brown clay with brick rubble & drain pipe 0.2m deep
- L3 = brown loam, 0.10m deep



- L1 = Rubble and debris. 0.25m.
- L2 = Very dark grey brown sandy loam with small fragments of oyster shell. 0.95m deep.



#### **4.4      *Watching Brief : 17-21 February 1997* (CC)**

- 4.4.1      This involved recording the remains exposed in a large contractor's trench (marked **E**) on the west edge of the site and quite close to the previous large hole marked **C**.
- 4.4.2      The principal observation in the northern half of the trench was a Roman wall, at a point shown on the main plan. This does not seem to line up with the walls seen in hole C. The wall was septaria in yellowish brown mortar. Survived 55cm wide, though much dug about by contractor.
- 4.4.3      Other observed strata were: L1, very dark brown sandy loam. Typical depth 1 metre from construction level. The lower 10 cm are slightly lighter, but there is no hard and fast division. Bottom of trench obscured by water at 1 metre down.
- 4.4.4      A later visit recorded details in the southern half of this hole. Stratigraphy here was similar to that described above (L1), except that at 1.5 metres there was change to a pale brown silty sand (L2).

#### **4.5      *Watching Brief : 28 March 1997* (CC)**

- 4.5.1      This involved the observation of a trench dug from inside the site into Northgate Street.
- 4.5.2      No sections were drawn, but the following observations were made. The trench (plan F) was dug to 1.3 metres deep through the pavement and 0.8 metres deep along the road. There were no significant deposits revealed - only modern service trenches and post-medieval and modern material.



## 5 Conclusions

There is an obvious risk in extrapolating information from the observation of trenches dug for non-archaeological purposes on a project where archaeology is not the prime directive.

Nevertheless, there are one or two general points that can be made. The watching briefs recorded the remains of several different Roman structures. The most extensive was a building which is no doubt to be interpreted as a normal Roman town-house, occupying the north-west corner of Insula 5 of the Roman town. There were Roman walls on both the west and east sides of the site. It is not possible to say whether these are part of one house, or several. On balance, and because this is the corner plot in the *insula*, it is quite likely that all the walls recorded are part of one building.

The house was built in the normal fashion with stone<sup>3</sup> plinths, and its rooms were floored with tessellated paving, and possibly mosaic in one case. The tessellated floor in the north-west corner of the site has been seen before, in 1920 when the site was occupied by Messrs Truslove. There is some reason to suppose that the room at the north end of the east side of the site was not a normal room. It had a low floor, and may therefore have been a hypocausted room, or maybe a cellar.

It is difficult to comment on the layout of the house, but the wall on the north edge of the site is probably the outside wall of the house. The trench down the east side cut through several wall lines quite close together, at least one of which is presumably a corridor or similar narrow room.

Houses of this type, with masonry walls and tessellated floors, are normally of second-century date in Colchester, and there seems no reason to think otherwise in this case. However, there is very good reason to suspect that this was not the first building on the site, because there were at least one if not two earlier floors exposed in some of the trenches. These will conventionally be first-century or early second-century structures of the types commonly seen elsewhere in *Colonia Claudia Victricensis*.

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<sup>3</sup> septaria mudstone in yellow or brown mortar, in this case.

## 6 Reference

Hull, M.R., *Roman Colchester*, 1958

## 7 Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Colne Housing Society Limited for sponsoring the work, and especially to Sandra Howard. Thanks to Stanley Bragg for plans supplied, and other assistance given. All site recording by Colin Austin, Stephen Benfield, Carl Crossan, and John Mabbit. Text and graphics by HB.

## 8 Glossary

<i>Colonia Claudia Victricensis</i>	official name of Roman Colchester
dump	material dumped to raise ground level
hypocaust	Roman underfloor heating system
make-up	material dumped to provide level area (e.g. for a floor)
medieval	AD 1066 to Henry VIII
mosaic	Roman pink mortar (sometimes waterproof)
OS	Ordnance Survey
post-medieval	after Henry VIII
residual	not in its original position (e.g. a Roman coin found in a Victorian pit)
Roman	AD 43 to around 410
sealed	lay on top of (and was therefore later than) something else
septaria	local mudstone
stratigraphy	the arrangement or sequence of archaeological layers
tessellated	plain red mosaic floor
truncation	physical removal of early material (e.g. Victorians digging away Roman floors)

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# ***Appendix 1***

**1993 Evaluation report**

# COLCHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST LTD

Archaeological Evaluation

Sargeant's Engineering Works

Northgate Street

Colchester

NGR: TL 99712551



## Background

The site lies within the walled Roman town and is thought to contain the north-western part of Insula 5, an urban block which occupied the region between the Roman theatre and the north wall of the town. It is currently the subject of a redevelopment proposal which will involve lowering the southern part of the property by up to 1.5 m to form a terrace, followed by construction of houses on a system of piles and groundbeams, the latter restricted in depth to avoid a high local water table.

## The Evaluation

To assess the archaeological implications of the proposal three small exploratory trenches were excavated at the locations shown on the attached plan. The trench stratigraphy was as follows:

### *Trench 1*

Width: 1 m

Length: 1 m

Depth: 1.1 m

L1. 0.25 m. Asphalt and two layers of concrete above brick hardcore.

L2. 0.85 m. Very dark greyish brown sandy loam with occasional small tile fragment, including peg-tile, and rare minute oyster flecks.

L3. At limit of excavation. A compacted layer composed mainly of small stones with occasional septaria and Roman tile fragments resting and embedded in its surface. Ground water entered the trench at this point, submerging L3.

#### *Trench 2*

Width (E-W): 1.1 m

Length (N-s): 0.93 m

Depth: 1.25 m

L1. 0.15 m. Asphalt above brick hardcore.

L2. 0.47 m. Very dark greyish brown sandy loam with occasional oyster shell and minute tile fragments.

L3. 0.63 m and continuing beyond limit of excavation. Similar material to L2 but lighter in colour and slightly higher content of oyster and tile.

#### *Trench 3*

Width: 1.05 m

Length: 2.2 m (upper part), 1 m (lower part)

Depth: 2.3 m

Safety considerations prevented manual cleaning and close in-situ examination of the lower levels exposed in this trench.

L1. 0.2 m. Topsoil, coal dust, mortar and brick rubble.

L2. 0.9 m. Very dark greyish brown sandy loam with occasional very small fragment of tile, also low content of oyster shell present in lower levels.

L3. 0.4 m - 0.5 m. Light brown sandy clay loam with common mid to dark brown sandy loam mottles, occasional small fragments of yellowish brown mortar and rare minute tile fragments.

L4. 0.1 m. Similar to L3, but with a high content of yellowish brown Roman mortar fragments, some plastered and painted white; also common small fragments of Roman tile and one small piece of opus signinum.

L5. 0.12 m. Olive-tinged brown sandy clay loam containing rare minute flecks of mortar.

L6. 0.15 m. Light brown sandy clay loam.

L7. 0.4 m. Olive-tinged brown sandy clay loam.

L8. 0.05 m. Exposed at limit of excavation. Mixed light brown loamy sand and pale grey silty clay. Spoil heap samples (possibly contaminated) contained very rare minute fragments (1 mm - 2 mm) of tile and a trace of a fibrous root-like material.

Apart from building material, the only datable find was a small black pottery body sherd, probably Roman, retrieved from an excavated heap of L3 material.

## Interpretation

The thick layer of dark soil (L2 in all three trenches) is a post-Roman accumulation of limited archaeological value other than as an indicator of local non-occupation for certain periods in the town's history. In Trench 2 the lower levels consisted of a slightly lighter variant of this material but in the absence of datable inclusions it was not possible to establish the significance or date ranges of the respective levels.

In Trench 1 the feature of principal interest was L3, a compact stoney layer with Roman building material resting and embedded in its surface. Flooding prevented further investigation but from the available evidence the feature appears to represent relatively early metalling, possibly Roman.

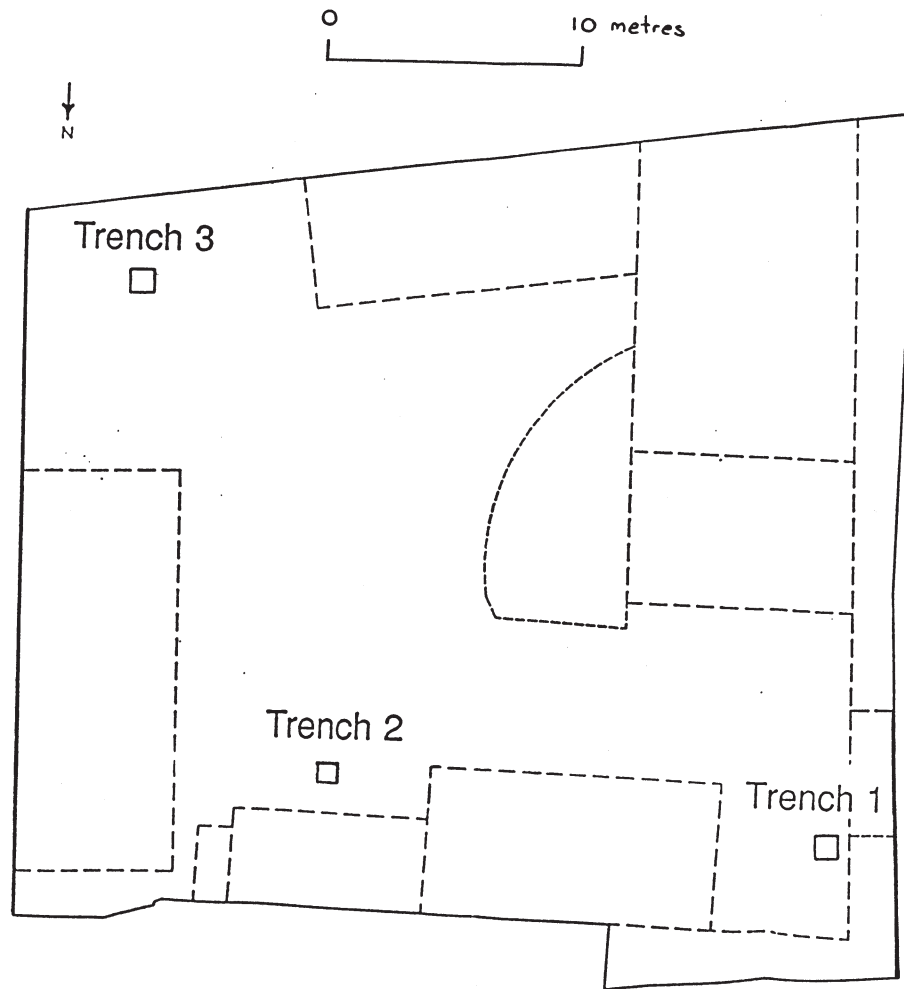
In Trench 3 the dark post-Roman soil (L2) sealed horizontal deposits containing destruction debris from Roman buildings in which re-usable material such as stone was noticeably absent (L3, L4). These layers would be consistent with an established phase of early medieval robbing of Roman buildings. The underlying layers (L5-L7) appear to be spreads of dumped material, sealing a mixed deposit of clay and sand (L8) which lay at the limit of excavation. An excavated sample of this layer was found to contain rare minute fragments of tile, which suggests the possible presence of further Roman levels at a greater depth than examined on this occasion.

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