

Colchester Archaeological Trust Ltd

## **Archaeological Evaluation**

**The Old Poultry Market Site,  
North Station Road, Colchester**

**for the Anglia Housing Group**

June 1998

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NGR: TL 9931 2570

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#### **Introduction**

On the 23rd and 24th May 1998, a field evaluation commissioned by Anglia Housing Group took place to investigate the archaeological implications of proposed redevelopment at the site known as the Old Poultry Market in North Station Road, Colchester.

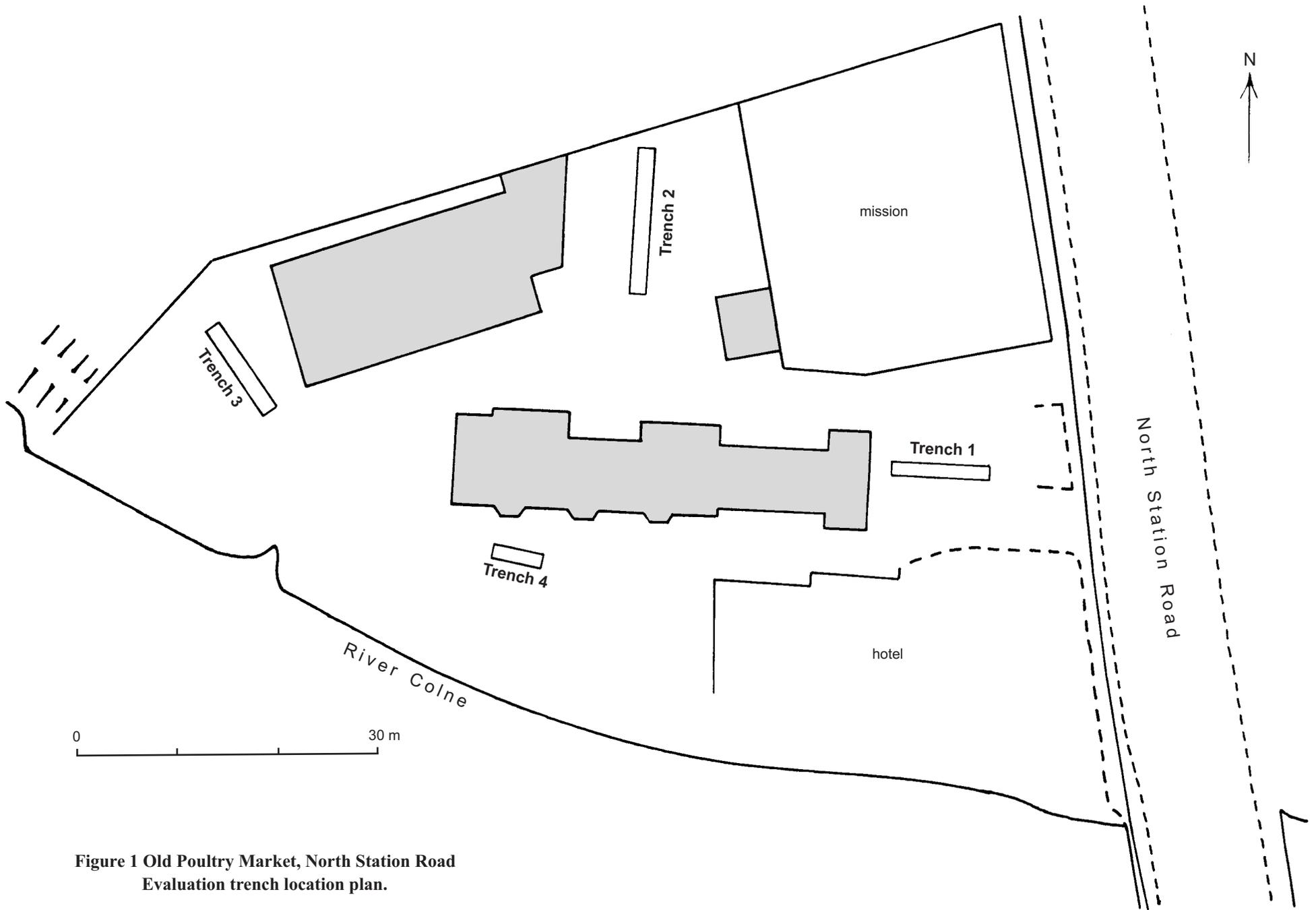
The site covers an area of approximately 0.28 hectares between 30m and 60m to the north-west of North Bridge. It has a 20m frontage on North Station Road (between No. 2 and the Railway Mission) and a 70 metre length of its southern boundary adjoins the River Colne. Archaeologically, the land lies 400m beyond the North Gate of the Roman and medieval walled town in an area which contained a Roman suburb of unknown extent. Past discoveries to the north of the site include a Roman house beneath the Midland Bank offices at No. 26 and Roman pavements elsewhere in the region of Victoria Chase (Appendix A, reproduced from Colchester Archaeological Reports, Vol 6. pp.345-6). To the south of the river, excavations in 1979 at the Royal London Insurance site in Middleborough revealed a number of Roman buildings variously in use from the late 1st to the end of the 3rd century, as well as medieval activity and buildings (summarised in Appendix B, from Colchester Archaeological Reports, Vol 3. pp.155-6).

#### **Site Condition**

The site is more or less level with North Station Road and at the time of the evaluation was occupied by a fire-damaged office building and a warehouse (both shown in grey on Fig. 1).

#### **Methods**

The investigation consisted of four machine-dug trenches situated as near as was practically possible to the locations proposed in the Colchester Museums Service Evaluation Brief dated May 1998. Trenches 1 to 3 were excavated by mechanical digger equipped with a 1.5m wide toothless ditching blade, then examined manually down to a depth of 1.2m. Deposits beyond 1.2m were not closely inspected since the trenches were not shored. Trench 4 was machine-dug in an area infested by rats. For health reasons no attempt was made to enter this trench and finds were not retained.



**Figure 1 Old Poultry Market, North Station Road  
Evaluation trench location plan.**

## The Results

The locations of the four evaluation trenches are shown in Figure 1. Detailed soil and feature descriptions are included in the archived site record lodged with Colchester Museum. In some instances interpretation and period determinations are provisional due to the limitations of small-scale machine trenching.

### Trench 1 (Figure 2)

The position and length of this trench was dictated by the need to avoid buried services which enter the site through the North Station Road frontage.

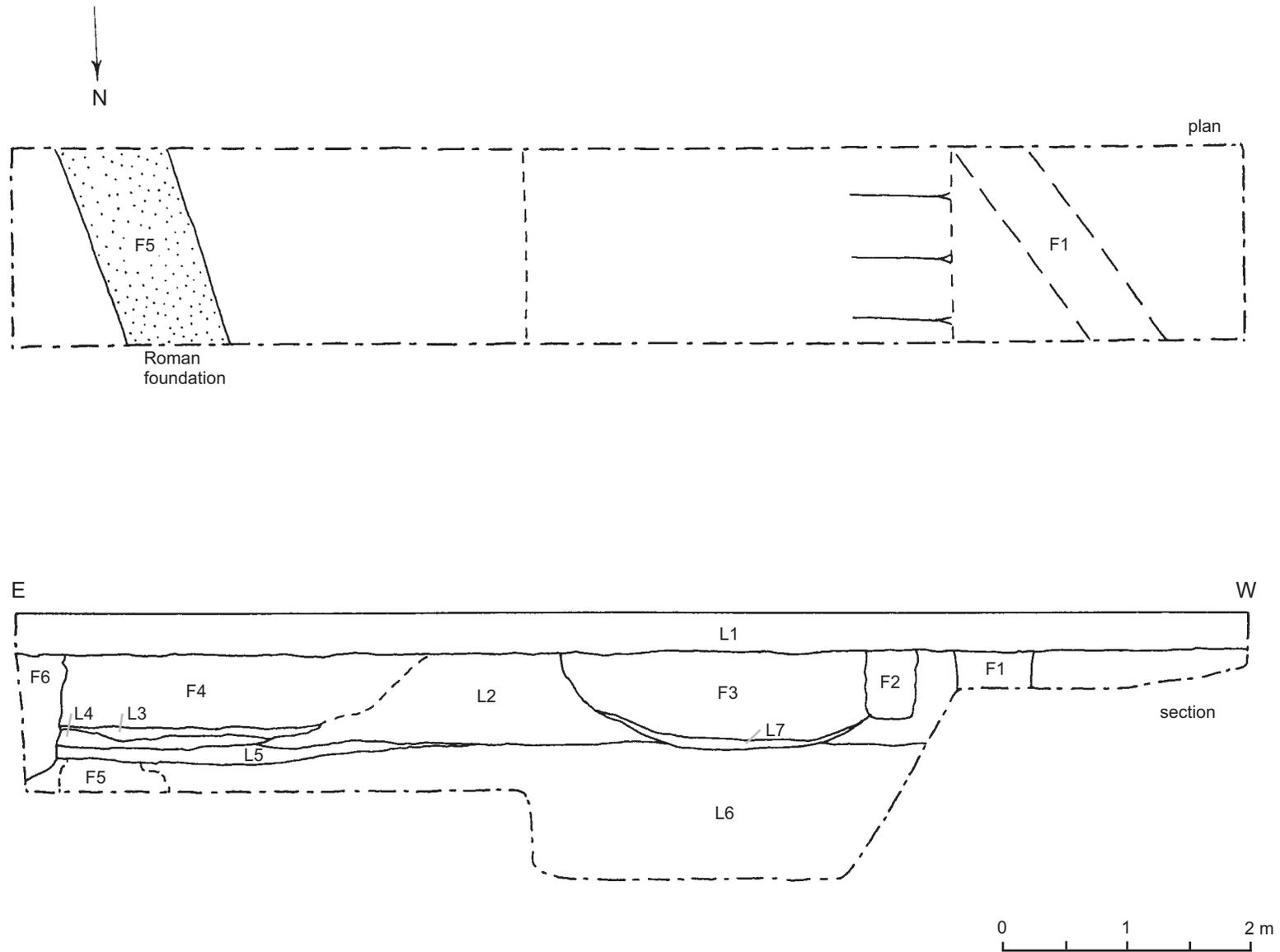
Removal of the modern concrete slab [L1] revealed a mixed post-Roman layer [L2], composed mainly of dark greyish brown sandy loam, which extended to an overall depth of 1.05m. The surface of L2 was cut by four features. The latest was F1, which housed a modern drainpipe and obstructed deeper exploration at the west end of the trench. At a point 14m back from the modern road frontage lay a 40cm-wide north-south wall foundation [F2], constructed of loosely mortared septaria and peg-tile fragments. The wall is assumed to have been at or near the rear of a post-medieval property, although a late medieval date for the feature is possible. The wall foundation cut a large pit [F3] which was part-lined with charcoal-rich soil [L7]. The main fill of F3 was very similar to L2, but with a high content of peg-tile fragments. At the extreme eastern end of the trench was an intrusion [F6] of unknown extent, with a fill of very dark greyish brown sandy loam and a high content of septaria fragments. In addition to the four features noted above, a pit [F4] was possibly cut from the top of L2 and may be associated with the same phase of activity as F3. In common with F3, the main fill of F4 was barely distinguishable from L2. Its lower level was more clearly defined by thin deposits of sand [L3]. Below L3, a layer composed mainly of red burnt clay with occasional charcoal flecks may either be part of the fill of F4, or associated with the underlying L5, a clay loam above thin lenses of charcoal which extended across the eastern half of the trench.

Removal of L5 exposed a nnw-sse oriented Roman foundation [F5] at the eastern end of the trench. Beneath the uppermost fragmented 20cm the intact top of the 80cm-wide foundation was constructed of approximately 70% reddish yellow slightly shelly mortar with septaria and Kentish ragstone fragments varying in size from 2 to 15cm. The foundation was cut into a thick layer of greyish brown silt loam [L6] containing occasional oyster fragments and charcoal flecks. In the middle part of the trench this material was removed to an overall depth of 2.1m at which point excavation ceased due to the ingress of water.

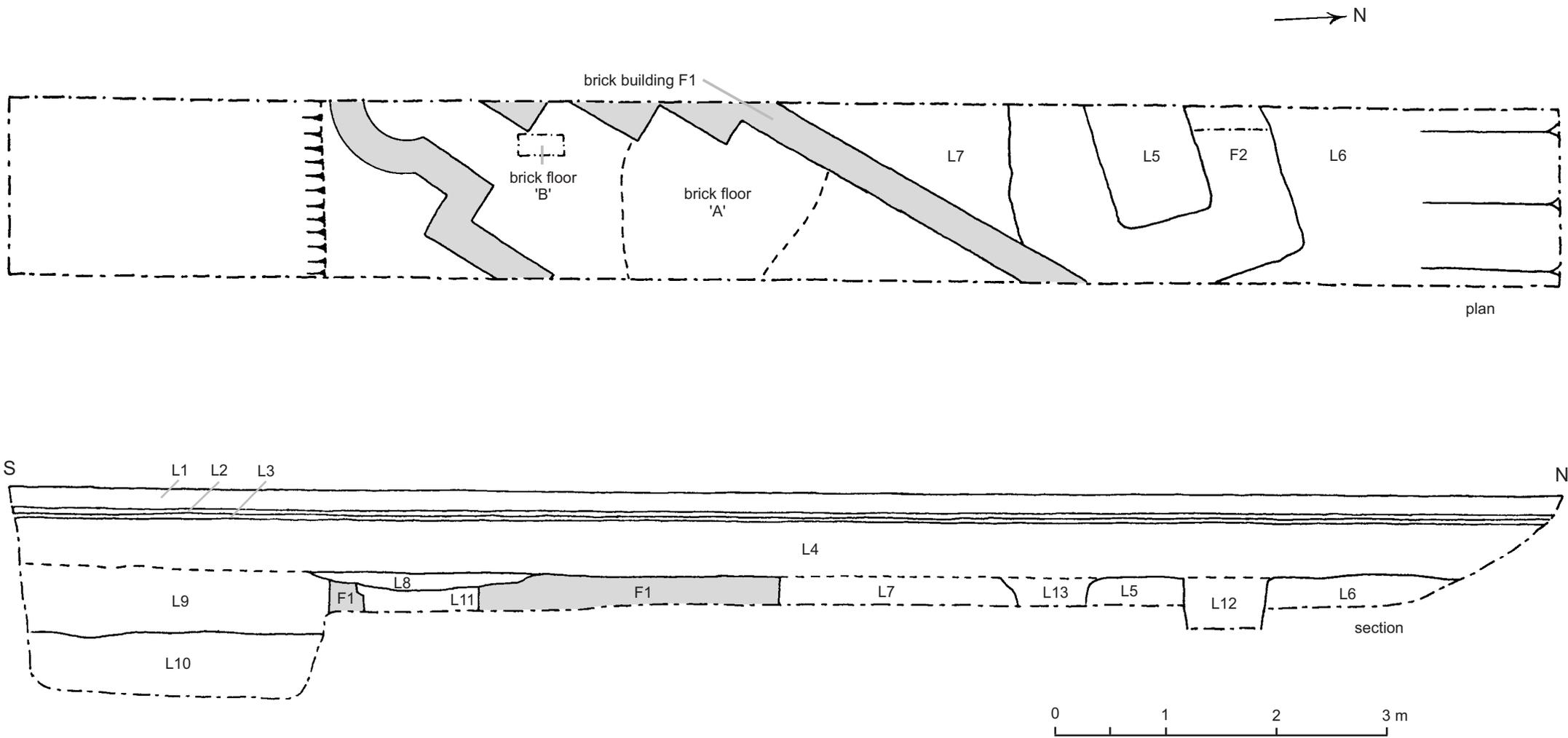
Among the fragments of Roman building materials residually present in the post-Roman deposits was a 12cm thick lump of *opus signinum*, a pink mortar formulated for its water-resistant properties.

### Trench 2 (Figure 3)

The uppermost 30cm consisted of modern tarmac and hardcore [L1] laid over thin spreads of soil mixed with brick and mortar fragments [L2, L3]. These sealed a 40-45cm thick deposit of very dark greyish brown sandy loam with occasional peg-tile, mortar, oyster shell and rare septaria fragments [L4].



**Figure 2 Old Poultry Market, North Station Road  
Trench 1. Plan and Section**



**Figure 3. Poultry Market, North Station Road  
Trench 2. Plan and Section**

Removal of L4 exposed a part of a brick building [F1] at an overall depth of 0.75m. The walls were constructed of plain red brick, 213mm long, 115-127mm wide, 48mm thick ( $8\frac{3}{8} \times 4\frac{1}{2}$ -5 x  $1\frac{7}{8}$  inches) and formed a distinctive ground plan in which the southern end of the structure narrows in a series of offsets to connect with a circular projection with an internal diameter of 90cms. Two intact brick floors were revealed: floor "A" (Fig. 3), beneath mortary destruction debris, was constructed of orange-red brick measuring 210mm x 102mm x 48mm ( $8\frac{1}{4} \times 4 \times 1\frac{7}{8}$  inches). At the southern part of the building, destruction debris sealed ashy deposits at the level of floor "A". A probe in this area uncovered a small part of floor "B" which lay 10cm below the level of the adjacent floor "A". Floor "B" was constructed of brown, possibly locally discoloured brick, measuring 203mm x 102mm x 48mm ( $8 \times 4 \times 1\frac{7}{8}$  inches).

In both instances the brick was laid flat. While the exact function of the building is uncertain, the southern part seems to have been purpose-built to house an oven or similar feature. The bricks showed no signs of reuse and appear to be no later than 17th century in date.

In the northern part of the trench, L4 sealed gravel deposits [L5, L6, L7] of which L5 had a fairly smooth and compacted surface containing occasional impressed fragments of Roman tile. The gravels were cut by a 65cm-wide right-angled linear trench [F2] which lay at a similar orientation to that of the Roman foundation in Trench 1. A small exploratory section was cut across F2, removing part of the upper fill, which was a dark greyish brown sandy loam with occasional Roman tile inclusions [L12]. In the northern side of the section L6 was found to rest on a gravelly deposit of similar appearance to L7.

Beneath L4 in the southern end of the trench was a 0.6m-thick deposit of very dark greyish brown sandy loam with oyster and undateable minute red tile inclusions [L9]. This material sealed clean mid greyish brown silt loam which lay at 1.3m [L10].

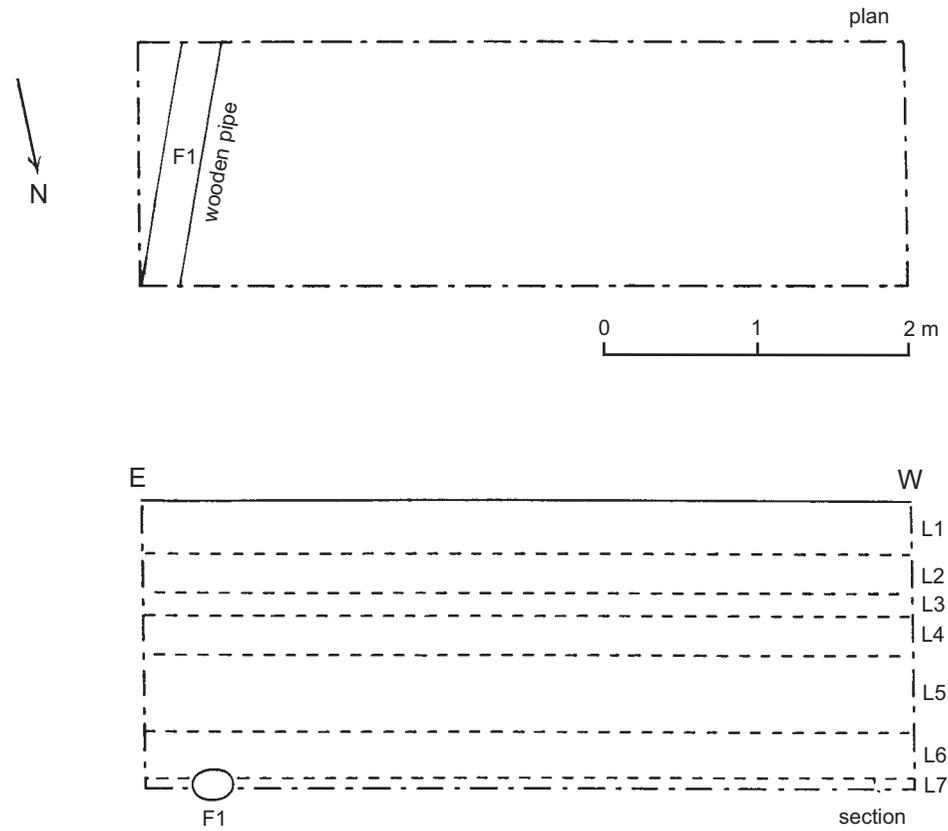
### Trench 3 (not illustrated)

No structural features or intrusions were discernible in this trench. The uppermost 0.65m consisted of modern topsoil and refuse above spreads of 19th-20th century building debris [L1, L2, L3]. Beneath the modern material was a layer of very dark greyish brown sandy loam with a low content of peg-tile and small red brick fragments [L4], which was of similar appearance to L4 in Trench 2. This continued to 1.2m, where it sealed a mixed, apparently dumped layer, consisting mainly of mid grey silty clay loam, which seemed to contain Roman brick and roof tile fragments at various levels [L5]. Natural grey clay was exposed at 1.9m.

### Trench 4 (Figure 4)

In this instance the machine excavation was observed and recorded entirely from the surface and from a short distance to avoid contact with rat-contaminated soils. The descriptions, depths and dimensions given below are therefore approximate.

Modern debris and topsoil deposits [L1, L2, L3, L4] extended to 1m, where they sealed a 0.5m-thick layer of very dark greyish brown sandy loam [L5] with red brick or tile inclusions. This material continued to a depth of 1.5m, overlying a mid grey silty clay [L6]. Several Roman tile fragments noted in the spoil heap appeared to be associated with L6. Natural grey clay [L7] appeared at an overall depth of 1.8m.



**Figure 4 Old Poultry Market, North Station Road  
Trench 4. Plan and Section (schematic).**

A well-preserved length of cylindrical timber drain pipe was exposed at 1.8m. The pipe had an external diameter of 25cm with a bore of 15cms and continued in the direction of the river. In terms of the trench stratigraphy, no cutting for a pipe trench was discernible in the overlying L6, but this is of doubtful significance given the lack of scope for close inspection of this trench. However, more clearly defined post-Roman deposits above L6 appeared to be free from interruptions, leaving an uncertain but possibly early date for this feature.

## Discussion

The ground examined by trenching represents a sample of approximately 2.2% of the total site area.

The earliest identifiable activity belongs to the Roman period and is most clearly represented by the foundation F5 in Trench 1. It shares the same nnw-sse orientation as the Roman buildings previously discovered in the Victoria Chase area (Appendix A) and is the most southerly evidence of the Roman suburb yet to be found to the north of the river. The foundation was cut into a thick grey silty layer [L6]. The presence of charcoal flecks distributed at various levels within this material suggests that it was deliberately dumped to make up the local ground level. Similar soils occurred in other trenches [Trench 3, L5 and Trench 4, L6] but these may not belong to the same phase of ground make-up since their inclusions differ. In Trench 3, L5 appeared to contain Roman brick and roof-tile fragments throughout (rather than limited to its surface) which suggests that some building demolition had taken place by the time the material was deposited.

In Trench 2, a linear feature [F2] also lies at a similar orientation to the Trench 1 Roman foundation. Limited excavation suggests that the feature may be a slot or possibly a robber trench. The gravelly deposits [L5, L6, L7] pre-date the cut of F2 and may thus be early, rather than associated with the adjacent brick building [F1].

Most of the later deposits and features were characterised by the presence of peg-tile inclusions, rather than other types of more closely dateable artefacts. Evidence of later building and other activity at the street frontage was provided by the wall foundation [F2] and pits [F3 and F4] in Trench 1. Further west, the brick building [F1] in Trench 2 is noteworthy since its presence indicates that later activity was not limited to the street frontage.

The results of the evaluation suggest that material of definite or possible archaeological sensitivity occurs at the following depths:

Trench 1:	1.05m (Roman), 0.3m (post-Roman)
Trench 2:	0.75m
Trench 3:	1.2m
Trench 4:	approximately 1.5m

## Archive

The detailed site record, photographs and finds are being prepared for permanent deposition with Colchester Museum under cover of COLEM accession code 1998.100.

1st June 1998

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## Appendix A

No 26 North Station Road and the known Roman remains in the surrounding area.  
 Reproduced from Colchester Archaeological Reports 6. p346-7).

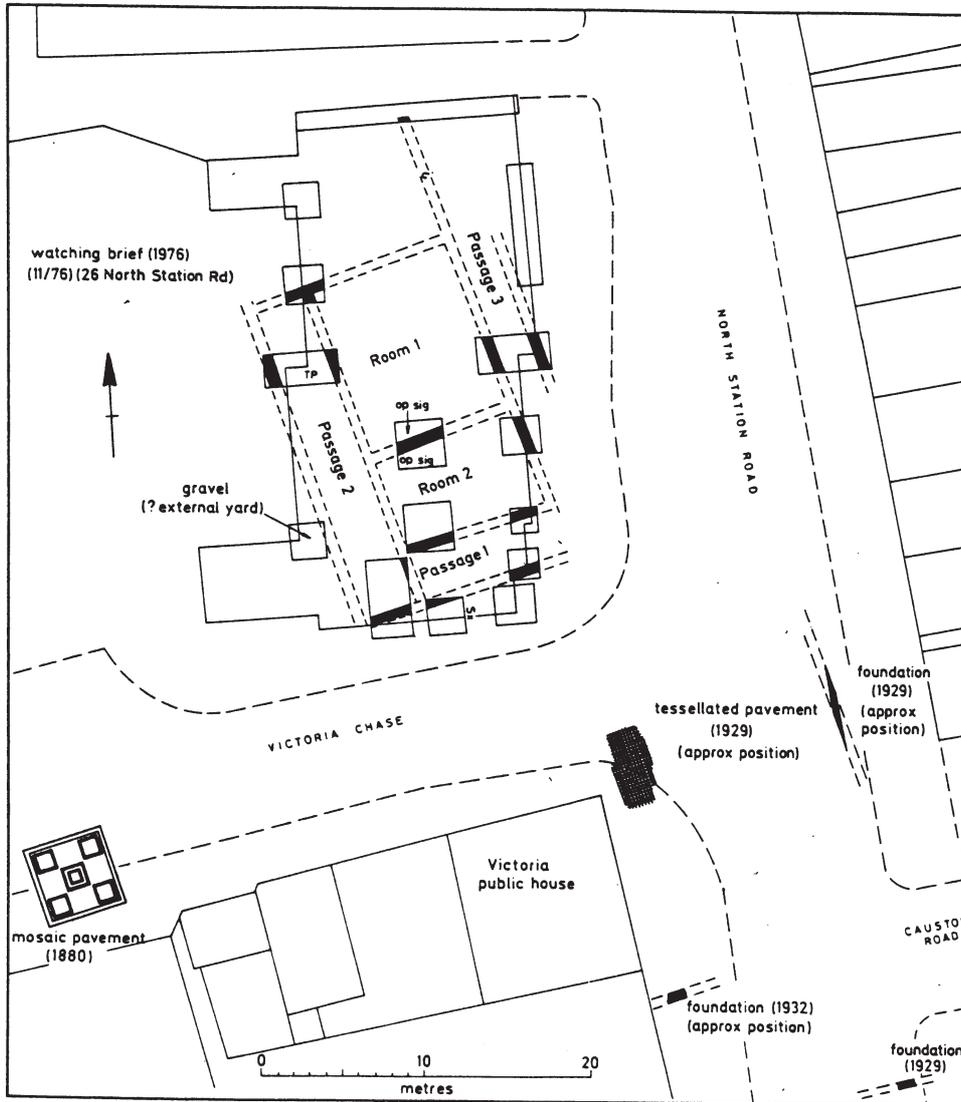


Fig 13.58 No 26 North Station Road (11/76) and the known Roman remains in the surrounding area.

26 North Station Road  
 Figs 13.58-9

Reason: new office development  
 Record/report: CC/PC

The foundation work for the new building involved the digging of stanchion holes across most of the site. Many of these cut through the remains of a Roman house, the plan of which is reconstructed as far as possible on Figure 13.58. The foundations of the building consisted of trenches, 1.0 m or so deep, filled with septaria and mortar. The reconstructable elements of the plan point to an arrangement which is commonly found elsewhere, i.e. a range of rooms (Rms 1 & 2) and cross passages (P1), flanked by passages or ranges of narrower rooms one to each side (P2 & P3). The floor of the rear passage (P2) was at least in part of plain red tessellation whilst Rooms 1 and 2 seemed to have had plain mortar floors. A layer of red-painted wall plaster lay at the south end of the building and represents debris from the demolition of the building (section on Fig 13.59, microfiche p 825).

Other remains have been noted to the south of this building (Hull 1958, 240-1), notably a mosaic found in 1880 to the south-east. These are summarised on Figure 13.58. There is also a record of a black and white pavement of geometric design found in 1927 in Orfeur's Yard 100 feet back from the street frontage (TEAS, 29, 133). The pavement was destroyed during the installation of a petrol tank. Unfortunately the site of Orfeur's Yard is obscure but the indications are that the 1927 find was the 1880 pavement rediscovered.

Conceivably the 1880 mosaic could have lain in a south wing of the 1976 house. However the other foundations recorded in the area are widely spaced and positioned in such a way that it is hard to reconcile all the known remains with just one house.

The alignment and position of the Roman house noted in 1976 suggest that there was a Roman street to the east on to which the building fronted. The alignments suggest that the street led from a crossing point over the River Colne a short distance to the east of the site of the present North Bridge.

## Appendix B

### The 1979 Excavations at Middleborough: Summary and Plan Reproduced from Colchester Archaeological Reports 3. p155-6).

#### Introduction

[MID general site plan Fig 144, p156]

The site lay on the southern edge of the river Colne, between the Roman town wall and the river (Fig 1, p1). Ground levels before excavation were 8.5 m above Ordnance Survey datum on the south-east side of the site and 7.1 m on the north-east side. The eastern half contained a Roman street and buildings which dated from about the late 1st century and had previously been unknown. The remainder of the site had been covered with topsoil and, probably because of the high water-table, had seen little occupation of any period except near the street. The latter had continued along the north side of the site where on its southern frontage there had been a pottery kiln in the 1st or early 2nd century.

The excavation was confined to the east side of the site (p1), the nature of the remainder being established primarily by some barren machine test pits (Fig 144) and a geophysical survey prepared for the developers. The part of the site where the ground disturbance was expected to be at its greatest was on the west side where a large basement was planned. The area concerned was not excavated by archaeological means beforehand but, as indicated in the trial trenches, it proved to be sterile except at the north end where the pottery kiln was encountered.

Some limited trial trenching was carried out on the adjacent site to the north where, as part of the same redevelopment project, it was proposed to build a multi-storey car park (Fig 144). A note about this work is given at the end of the report (p209).

#### Summary of the archaeological remains (late 1st century to 1978)

[General site plan Fig 144, p156]

Apart from the street, a kiln and some wells, the Roman remains are described in terms of three periods. These derive from the development of Buildings 67, 69, and 70 which all shared the same plot (Fig 144). To Period 1 belonged Buildings 67 and 68. It began in the late 1st century and ended with the demolition of Buildings 67 and 68 during the early to mid 2nd century. No evidence was found of occupation earlier than Period 1 although, because of the limited nature of the excavation, this possibility cannot be ruled out. At the start of Period 2, Building 69 replaced Building 67 and perhaps Building 68. In c 150, the first phase of Building 70 was constructed incorporating parts of Building 69. The dates of the construction of Buildings 71-3 are not known but all the buildings including Building 70 appear to have been demolished in c 300 at the end of Period 3. The pottery kiln

belonged to the Flavian-Trajanic period whilst three timber wells (or at least the only one to produce dating evidence) were of mid-2nd- to 3rd-century date. The earliest post-Roman remains were four inhumations possibly of the 10th or 11th centuries. The foundations of the Roman buildings were extensively robbed in the 11th and 12th centuries. A series of pottery kilns was in use in the 12th century and was possibly contemporary with the post-built structure Building 74. In about the 14th century Buildings 75 and 76 were built on the street frontage. Subsequently both were much altered. A substantial part of the timber-frame of Building 76 survived until its demolition in 1978. This was recorded in detail and can be reconciled with the archaeological remains which underlay it.

#### Buildings 67 and 68 (Period 1)

[General plan Fig 146, p158; detail plan Fig 145, p157]

Building 67 (Figs 145 & 146) was a timber-framed building erected in the late 1st or early 2nd century. It was presumably a strip-house only part of which was uncovered. The building was of two phases (Periods 1a & 1b). Shallow slots (F957-9, F980, F988, F991, & F997) indicated the positions of the ground-plates which had all been surface-built without foundations. Occupation layers of Period 1 were observed in section about 7 m west of the excavated area indicating that Building 67 had extended at least this far west.

##### *Phase 1 (Period 1a)*

Room 1 contained two post-pits (F998 & F999) which probably were of secondary origin. Both were packed with broken tile and fragments of greensand and both had their posts removed when the building was altered in Period 1b. Rooms 2 and 3 each contained a hearth (F993, Fig 147, p159) built on a single tile against the centre of the west wall of each room. Room 4 may not have been a proper room but a platform of some kind on the street frontage. It was a small compartment with at least two internal slots (F981/2 & F983/4) possibly indicating joists and thus a wooden floor. The relationship between the pit F955 and the slots was unclear because the stratigraphy had been distorted by subsidence into the pit. The joists may have sealed the backfilled pit and been intended to counteract the effects of settlement, or the digging of the pit may have post-dated the removal or decay of the joists. The southern end of the east wall of Room 3 had been burnt although there was no evidence elsewhere to suggest destruction by fire.

To the south was a substantial gravel-and-mortar layer forming an alley or yard which continued for a few metres east of Building 67. In the machine-dug trench to the east, the layer directly overlay the

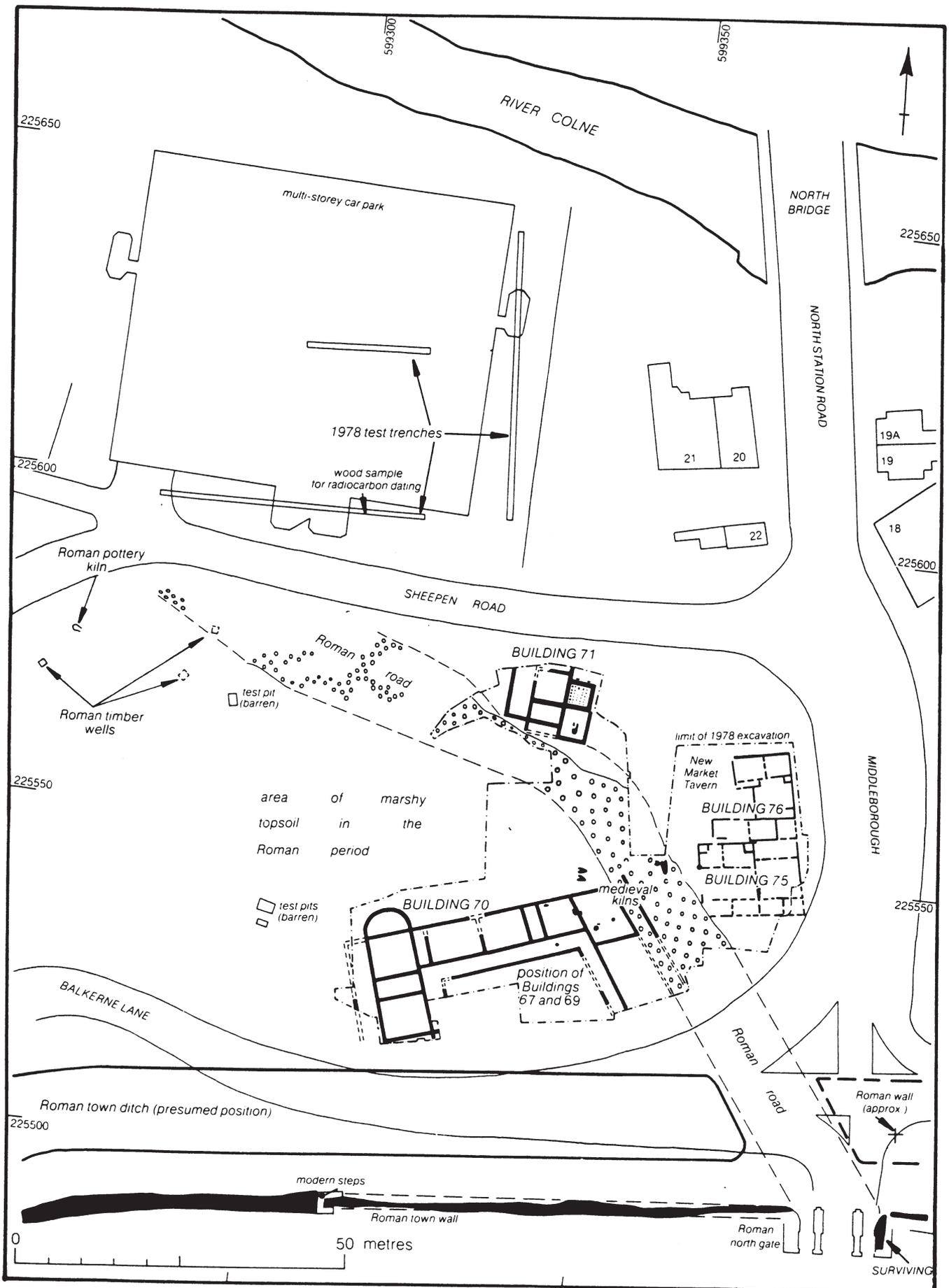


Fig 144 The Middleborough site in relation to the river Colne and the north-west corner of the colonia. © Crown copyright. All rights reserved. Licence number 100039294. [Page 155]

## Appendix C

Old Poultry Market Site, North Station Road.  
Finds and Samples from the May 1998 Evaluation, Code 1998.100.

<d> = item discarded after cleaning and identification.

Finds No	Context	Description
1	Trench 1. F2.	2 peg-tile samples: (i) flat, 13mm <d> (ii) slightly cambered, 12mm <d>
2	Trench 1. F5.	2 stone samples: (i) septaria <d> (ii) kentish ragstone <d>
3	Trench 1. F5.	mortar sample. <d>
4	Trench 2. L7, impressed in surface.	2 Roman brick samples, 1 with op. sig. adhering. <d>
5	Trench 2. top of F1.	brick fragment <d>
6	Trench 2. interface, L4/L7.	black bodysherd, Roman.
7	Trench 2. L12.	black bodysherd, Roman.
8	Trench 3. L5.	Samples: (i) 2 Roman brick frags. <d> (ii) 1 tegula frag. <d>