

# An archaeological evaluation at the rear of Middleborough House (21 Middleborough), Colchester, in 1999

by Howard Brooks  
with contributions from Nina Crummy and Philip Crummy  
(First issued as CAT Archive Report 42)

## Summary

An archaeological evaluation in September 1999 in the form of two trial trenches in the garden west of 21 Middleborough revealed post-medieval dumped soils sealing archaeological deposits at depths between 1.8m and 2.0m below modern ground-level (ie 4.35-4.15m AOD). These deposits consisted of archaeological finds mixed in with riverside silts and gravels, and date between the later Roman period and the 16th century. Finds were plentiful, and included medieval leather fragments, Roman pottery and tile, and two large timber pieces which may be Roman in date.



Fig 1 Site location. Reproduced from Ordnance Survey mapping on behalf of The Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office © Crown Copyright 100039294 2004.



Fig 2 Trench locations. Reproduced from Ordnance Survey mapping on behalf of The Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office © Crown Copyright 100039294 2004.

The investigation was conducted in accordance with a brief prepared by Martin Winter of Colchester Museums. The work was commissioned and funded by Chase Racing 4 Ltd.

### Archaeological background

The site is situated in a known suburb of the Roman and medieval town of Colchester (Fig 9). During excavations in 1978-79 on the site of the Royal London Insurance building (directly south of the present site), evidence of several Roman houses, some with mosaic and tessellated floors and one with a hypocaust, were observed. There was also a Roman gravel road, timber wells, and kilns of Roman and medieval date (Brooks & Crummy 1984).

Local archaeological evaluations and excavations have shown that there is a considerable amount of variation in the depths and dates of archaeological deposits near the river. Trial-trenches in 1978 on the site of the multi-storey car park (only 20 m west of the current site) revealed a sandwich of post-medieval dumped soil layers and river silts (*ibid*). The highest river silt was at 1.4m below contemporary ground-level (ie at 5.3m AOD), below which was a layer of post-medieval dumped soil at 1.75m below contemporary ground-level (at 4.95m AOD), and below this were more river silts (down to 2.45m below contemporary ground-level to 4.25m AOD).

During an evaluation on a riverside development at St Peter's House in 1998 (150m east of the site), a great depth of deposits was observed (see pp 4-20 above). Closer to the riverside (trench 1), Roman deposits were seen at 2.3m below modern ground-level (ie at 3.9m ). Farther back from the river frontage, Roman ground-level was at 2.3m below modern ground-level (4.00m AOD), above which was a 1.2m-thick dumped Roman gravel bank (CAT Archive Report 25). There are no known discoveries from the Middleborough House site itself.

### Description of the evaluation

Two trial-trenches (2 x 2.5 m) were dug in the locations specified in the Colchester Museums brief. The excavation was done using a mechanical digger fitted with a 2m-wide flat-edged ditching bucket. Material was removed in spits no more than 10 cm deep. The machine work was closely observed to recover finds from the correct deposit. Due to the depth of the trenches and the high water-table, no excavation was carried out in the trenches themselves – it was too dangerous. Photographs were taken of the trench locations and sections, and section drawings were prepared by dropping tapes down the face of the trenches and drawing from above.

#### Trench 1 (Figs 3 & 5)

All excavation was by machine. Ground-level was 6.15m AOD. The strata removed were as follows:

*Context A:* Topsoil: 50cm thick: this contained modern brick flecks and is undoubtedly modern.

*Context B:* A yellow brown sandy loam, 30cm thick. Make-up layer with crushed mortar and brick, and gravel. Post-medieval dumped soil. Finds were residual medieval pottery, and Roman brick and tile.

*Context C:* Dark greyish brown river silts, 40cm thick. Finds included peg-tile and medieval pottery and residual Roman brick/tile. A medieval date is therefore suggested for this horizon.

*Context D:* A gingery brown gravelly layer – river deposit, 10cm thick. Finds consisted of Roman brick and undated brick. This is either a medieval or a Roman horizon.

*Context E:* Dark grey river silts, 40cm thick. No finds. Probably Roman at this depth.

*Context F:* Yellow brown sandy gravel layer, probably a river deposit (10cm thick to trench bottom). Finds were plentiful, and

all Roman (brick, tile, septaria, pottery, animal bone). The brick and tile from this context was heavily water-worn. It would appear that it had been rolling around in the gravels of the river bank for some time. The Roman pottery probably dates after AD 120. Water level coincided with the top of this context (approximately 4.45m AOD).

Cut into this horizon was Feature 1 (F1). This was only seen briefly under the machine bucket, and the plan (Fig 3) is a sketch. This appears to be a channel cutting through the river silts underneath. It is impossible to say whether or not it is man-made.

#### Trench 2 (Figs 4 & 6)

All excavation was by machine. Ground-level was 6.35m AOD. The strata removed were as follows:

*Context A:* Topsoil: approximately 40 cm thick: brick and mortar fragments. Modern.

*Context B:* Dark yellow brown sandy loam with common mortar and brick fragments (85cm thick). Finds are residual Roman. Post-medieval dumped soil, probably contemporary with the improvement of the Colne banks at North Bridge in 1891.

*Context C:* Greeny brown sandy gravel, 25cm thick. No finds. Probably post-medieval dumping.

*Context D:* Dark grey river silts, 50cm thick. Finds include leather fragments, peg-tile, stoneware. This context is 16th or 17th century.

*Context E:* Dark grey river silts with small grit, 50cm thick. Finds are predominantly Roman, but include a single piece of medieval Fabric 13s, which is 12th century in date. If this is not intrusive, then this dates the context.

*Context F:* Dark brown river silts, 30cm thick (to trench bottom). Finds are entirely Roman, and possibly late Roman if the tentative identification of a piece of Hadhamware is correct.

### The finds

#### Bulk finds

by Howard Brooks and Philip Crummy

The limited finds recovered during the evaluation are listed in Table 1 (p 27). Categories of finds included in the table are Roman pottery, post-Roman pottery, bone, building materials, flint, and leather. Weights are in grammes. Roman pottery fabric references are after CAR 10. Medieval and post-medieval fabric references are after Cunningham 1985 and CAR 7. The only significant group of material is the leather. This is described and discussed below and followed by the preserved timbers.

#### The leather from Trench 2 context D (Figs 7-8)

by Nina Crummy

This small assemblage contains shoe soles of late 14th-century date, offcuts from leather-working, and an unusual piece consisting of two straps held together by a thong. While this collection, apart from the latter item, is not remarkable in a national context, it is of some local significance in that very little leather has been recovered from Colchester. Leather requires water-logged anaerobic deposit conditions for survival, and so rarely survives in the dry sandy soil of this area. On only two other sites in Colchester have water-logged deposits containing leather been excavated. At Osborne Street over 300 scraps of leather were recovered, mainly consisting of shoe-manufacturing waste dated c 1150/75-c 1250 and small dumps of shoe and clothing fragments ranging in date from the 13th to the 17th century (Crummy & Hind 1994, 59). At Middleborough, not far

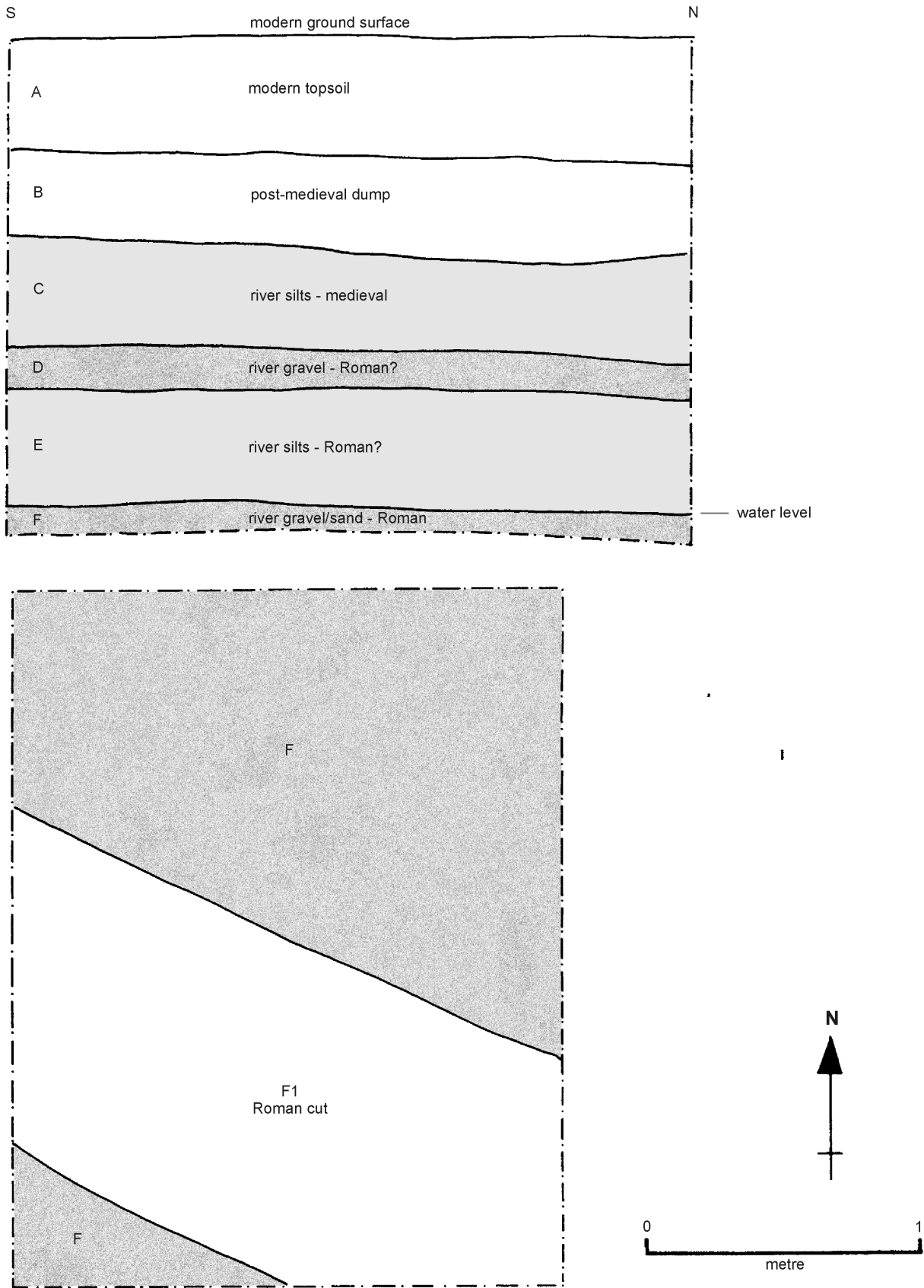


Fig 3 Trench 1: section and plan.

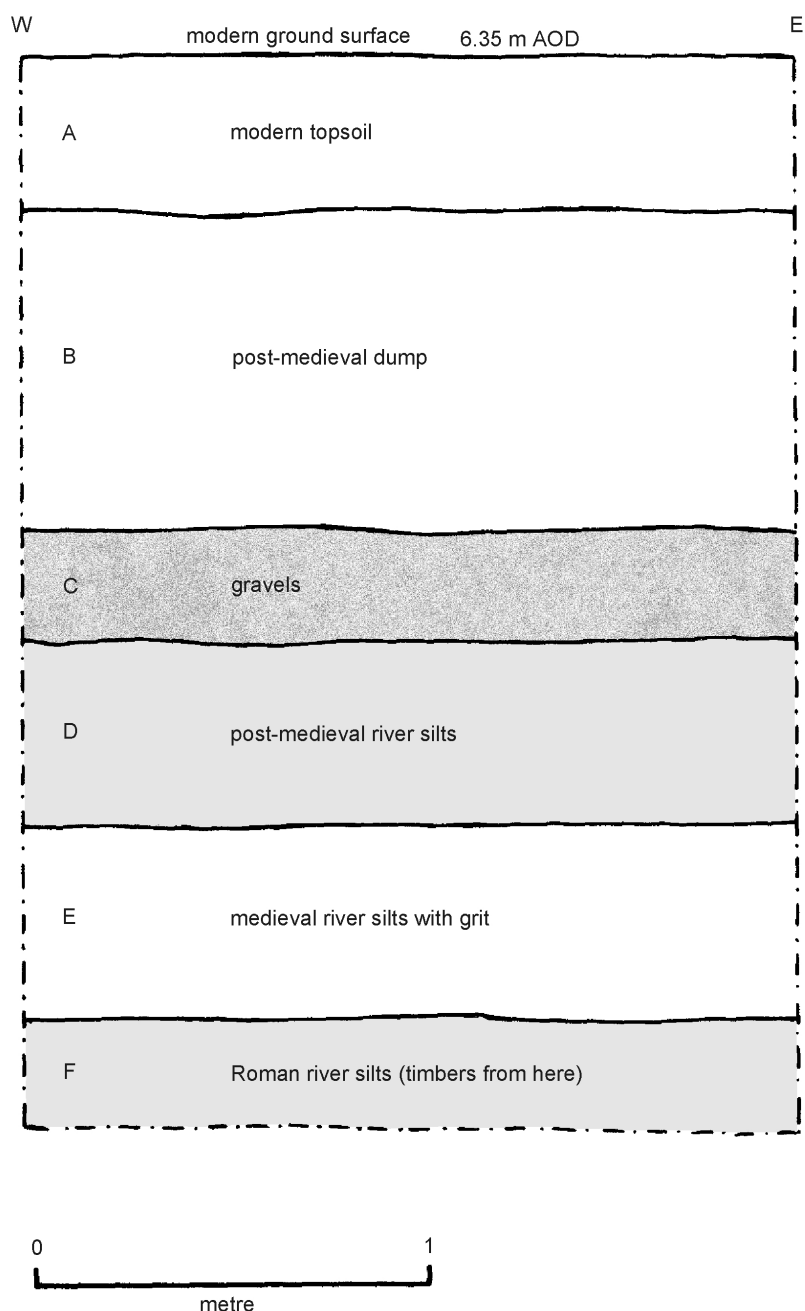


Fig 4 Trench 2: section.

from the present site, two post-medieval pits produced fragments of welted shoes probably post-dating c 1500 (CAR 5, 21).

While shoemaking and cobbling can be carried out in any location, the tanning process requires access to large quantities of running water, and was also a noxious process preferably sited well away from dwellings. While there is no evidence that hides were trimmed before tanners sold them on to leather-workers, it is interesting to note the presence in the Middleborough House assemblage of an offcut with the flesh side poorly-finished.

1 Fig 8; T2-D. Left shoe sole with edge/flesh stitching on the margin (Fig 7, b). Length 175 mm. The heel is worn and part of the margin beneath the big and first toe is missing. The sole narrows markedly at the waist and the heel is also

narrow. One-piece soles of this form chiefly date from the late 14th to early 15th century (Armstrong 1977, fig 21, 14; Grew & de Neergaard 1988, figs 101, 106). The association of the piece with a large adult sole with the extended toe typical of the late 14th century suggests that it too belongs to that period.

2 Fig 8; T2-D. Toe end of a left shoe sole with edge/flesh stitching around the margin (Fig 7, c). Length 170 mm. The leather beneath the big toe is missing, and a patch beneath the tread has worn through. The sole has the extended and blunt-ended toe (*poulaine*) of late 14th-century shoes, though it is a modest version (*ibid*, figs 100, 102). The fragment ends at the waist, where it has been pulled away from the heel. The edge is angled rather than vertical for



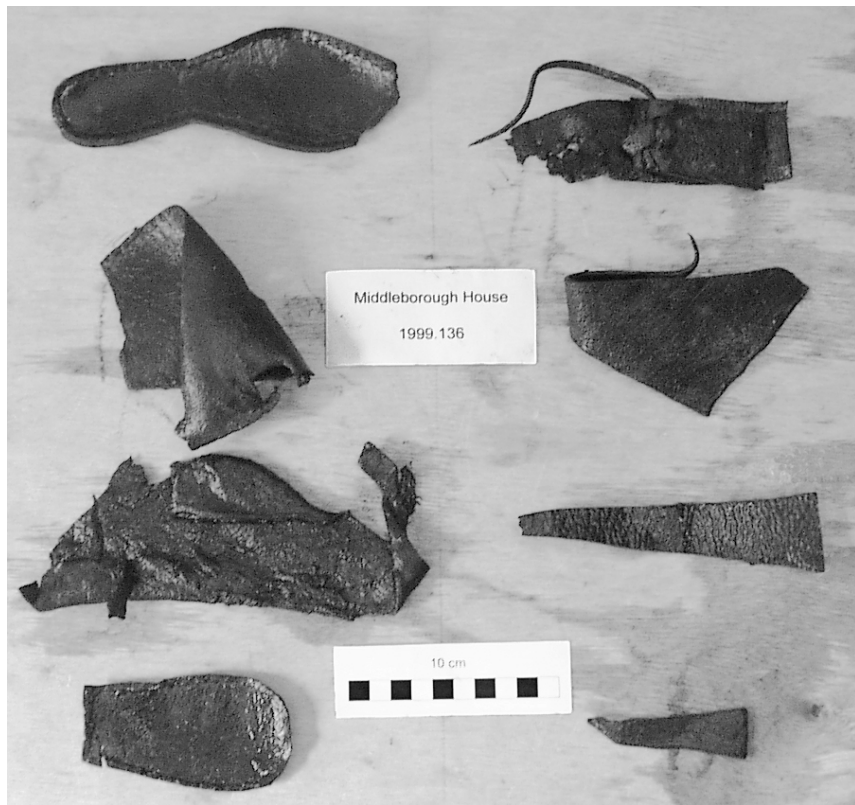
*Fig 5 Trench 1.*



*Fig 6 Trench 2.*

Table 1: list of finds

Trench	Context	Quant	Weight (g)	Description	Date
1	B	1	175	Roman brick	Roman
1	B	2	150	fragment from flat piece of <i>tegula</i>	Roman
1	B	1	2	sherd of Hadham ware (Fabric CH)	late Roman (mid 3rd-4th)
1	B	1	5	Roman grey ware (Fabric GX)	Roman
1	B	1	60	Fabric 20 handle fragment	13th-14th century
1	C	3	190	animal bones	
1	C	3	125	peg-tiles	medieval or post-medieval
1	C	1	100	<i>tegula</i> flange fragment	Roman
1	C	1	65	fragment from flat piece of <i>tegula</i>	Roman
1	C	2	25	Fabric 20 body sherds	13th-14th century
1	D	1	35	indeterminate burnt tile fragment	?
1	D	1	65	fragment from flat piece of <i>tegula</i>	Roman
1	F	1	400	Roman brick	Roman
1	F	1	90	<i>tegula</i> flange	Roman
1	F	1	70	flue tile, very water-worn	Roman
1	F	1	75	septaria lump	Roman
1	F	7	145	worn brick/tile fragments	Roman
1	F	5	80	Roman orange ware sherds	Roman
1	F	7	85	Roman grey ware sherds	after AD 120
1	F	2	15	animal bones	
2	B	1	5	leather fragment	
2	B	1	150	animal bone	
2	B	1	175	combed flue-tile fragment	Roman
2	B	2	60	fragment from flat piece of <i>tegula</i>	Roman
2	D	7	145	animal bones	
2	D	3	12	<i>Ostrea Edulis</i> (oyster)	
2	D	8	400	leather fragments (in bags in water)	14th-15th century
2	D	1	60	peg-tile with peg hole	medieval or post-medieval
2	D	1	15	indeterminate tile	?
2	D	1	3	Stoneware (Fabric 45), possibly one of the earlier fabrics such as Raeren or Frechen	16th, possibly 17th, century
2	E	5	630	animal bones	
2	E	1	1250	animal bones	
2	E	1	3	Roman grey ware (Fabric GX)	Roman
2	E	1	50	samian, form 29 or 37 bowl	after AD 70
2	E	2	1500	Roman brick, very water-worn	Roman
2	E	1	155	<i>imbrex</i> fragment	Roman
2	E	1	105	flue-tile fragment, water-worn	Roman
2	E	1	3	Roman sherd	Roman
2	E	1	4	Fabric 13S sherd with shell on surface	12th century
2	F	2		timbers: one pile, one log	
2	F	1	1000	Roman brick	Roman
2	F	1	2	<i>Ostrea Edulis</i> (oyster) shell	
2	F	1	15	flint, slight nibbling on one side, genuine?	prehistoric
2	F	1	5	indeterminate tile fragment	
2	F	1	15	samian ware cup, form Dragendorff 33	1st, probably 2nd century
2	F	1	20	Roman grey ware (Fabric GX)	Roman
2	F	1	25	base, Roman colour-coat (Hadham ware?)	late Roman



a



b

c



d



Fig 7 Leather from Trench 2, context D: a group; b shoe sole (Catalogue 1); c shoe sole (Catalogue 2); d straps (Catalogue 5).



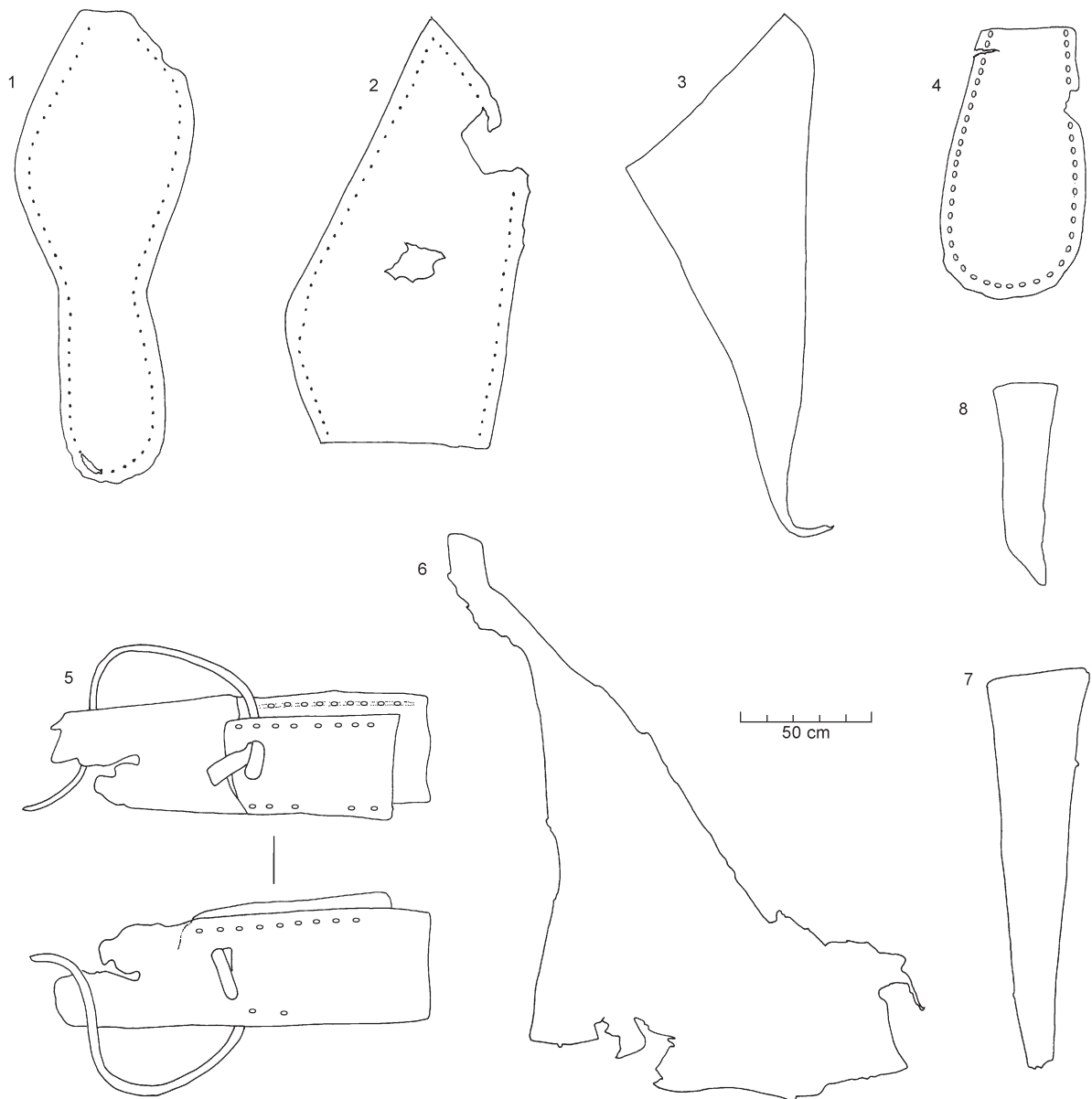


Fig 8 Leather from Trench 2, context D.

most of its length, and does not appear to have been cut. There are very slight linear indentations on the vertical face which may be thread impressions from edge/flesh stitching. The repair of one-piece soles by removing a worn heel at the waist and butting on a new heel became common in the medieval period (see 4). This sole, before it also wore through at the toe end, appears to have been repaired in this manner, but the two sections later parted when the seam gave way.

- 3 Fig 8; T2-D. Creased and folded roughly triangular leather fragment with one extended corner. No stitching is visible, though some edges appear cut. Possibly an offcut, possibly an unused or very worn upper fragment. Maximum dimensions 265 by 71 mm.
- 4 Fig 8; T2-D. Heel repair fragment, with grain/flesh stitching around the margin and across the waist where it was butted onto the toe piece. Length 100 mm. The use of grain/flesh

stitching suggests that this was the outermost piece of a composite sole, or a patch sewn directly onto the worn sole (Clarke & Carter 1977, fig 167, 52).

- 5 Fig 8; T2-D. Fragment with two broad straps held together by passing a tapering thong twice through a pair of holes, slipping one (broad) end through the loop thus formed on one side, and passing the other (narrow) end up between the two straps (Fig 7, d). One strap is slightly wider than the other, 38 and 43 mm. Each has the grain side facing inwards, has been reinforced along the edges with running stitch, and has laminated into two sections. Each has been cut at one end, and the narrower piece has also been cut immediately adjacent to the lashed thong. The inner section of the broader piece has worn through at the same point, but the outer section continues on for some length, though it has also worn through at that end. Length of broader strap 142 mm, length of narrower strap 65 mm. No parallel for this



a



c



b



d

Fig 9 Timbers from Trench 2: a log and pile; b chop marks on log; c pile; d detail of joint on pile.

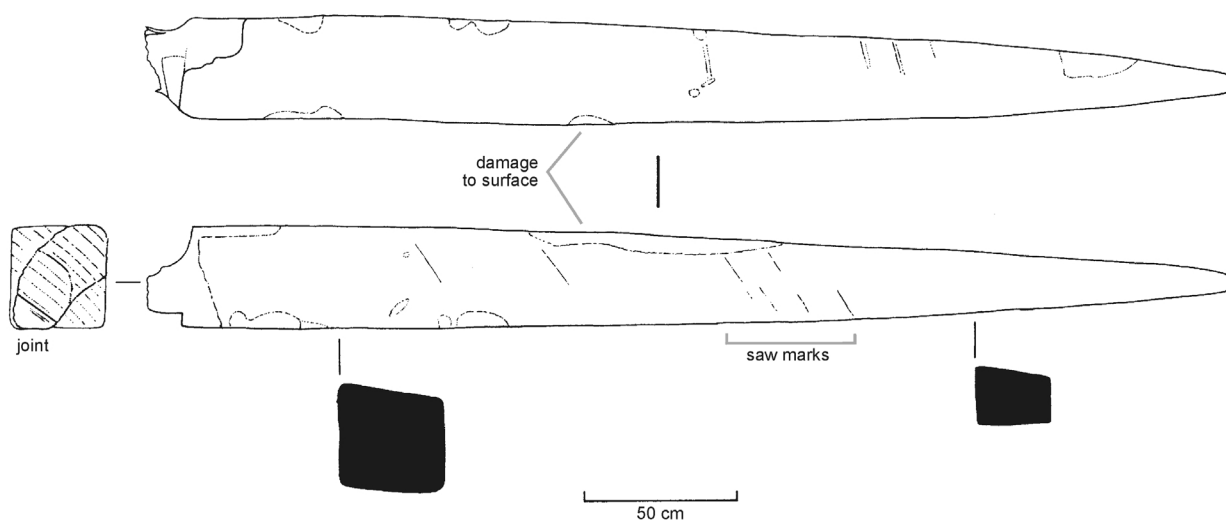


Fig 10 Detail of pile.

piece has been found. The join is clearly intended to be at least semi-permanent, and the placing of the grain side innermost suggests that it is not intended to be seen. The most likely location for such a feature may be on loose covers, perhaps for furniture or in a vehicle.

- 6 Fig 8; T2-D. Large roughly triangular offcut, no stitching. Slightly shaped at one corner. Possibly from cutting out shoe uppers, but the flesh side is poorly-finished, and this may be a rejected section from the edge of a hide. Maximum dimensions 209 by 85 mm.
- 7 Fig 8; T2-D. Thick triangular offcut, tip missing. Probably from cutting out dagger sheaths. The grain is very pronounced. Length 143 mm, maximum width 39 mm.
- 8 Fig 8; T2-D. Small roughly triangular offcut, no stitching. Probably an offcut from cutting out straps. Maximum dimensions 75 by 23 mm.

#### The preserved timbers (Figs 9-10)

We are grateful to Anne-Marie Bojko of Colchester Museums for identifying the wood. Two timbers were recovered from Trench 2 context F (Fig 9, a). The first was a piece of elm tree trunk with bark still adhering to one side. Three (possibly four) logs had been cut off this trunk, which is presumably a waste piece. Abundant chopping marks in one surface show that it was used as a chopping block (Fig 9, b).

A second timber is of more interest (Fig 9, c and d; Fig 10). This was an oak pile, 140 cm (4ft 7 inches) long, 13x12 cm in cross-section (5 x 4¾ inches), and tapering to a point. To judge by the grain, this was made out of a quartered oak trunk. Although the top was broken, it appears that 2.5cm has been removed on either side of the thickness of the pile, making a tenon 7cm (2¾ inches) broad and 4cm (1½ inches) long (where broken). Though it has been rubbed smooth, there are saw marks on the side of the pile.

When found, this was lying flat and clearly not in its original position. Its original use can only be guessed at, but in this location it was perhaps part of a wooden structure which formed a timber revetment to the river bank, or even a jetty or landing place.

## Discussion and interpretation

### Modern

#### Dumping

The two trenches revealed river deposits (either silts, silts with grit, or gravel) overlain by dumped soils. The dumped soils are certainly post-medieval and modern. The 16th- or 17th-century date of the highest underlying deposit (Trench 2 context D or T2-D) provides a good *terminus post quem* for the start of the dumping, and the improvement of the river bank at North Bridge in 1891 may have been the occasion of more dumping here. (A plaque on North Bridge records this date.)

### Medieval

#### Dumping

The date of the material sealed by the post-medieval dumping varies quite considerably. In Trench 1, it was river silt containing pottery of the 13th-14th century. In Trench 2, it was (except for an undated gravel band T2-C) river silts containing 16th- or 17th-century pottery (T2-D), underlain by a thick band of river silts dated to the 12th century (T2-E). This leads to the conclusion that there was medieval and early post-medieval tipping of domestic rubbish on the river bank during those centuries. The source of such rubbish is clear. There were medieval houses on the west side of Middleborough (on the site of the Royal London Insurance building: CAR 3, 109-209), and the post-medieval buildings shown by John Speed's map (1610) and Keymer's version of the 1648 plan of the Siege of Colchester all around Middleborough and North Bridge by the 17th century (including no 21 Middleborough) may well have had earlier (medieval) antecedents.

### Leather-working

Context T2-D contained a large number of leather pieces. These included shoe soles of late 14th-century date, offcuts from leather-working, and an unusual piece consisting of two straps held together by a thong. The context also contains pottery of 16th- or 17th-century date, so the leather is slightly residual in this context. As Nina Crummy points out in her report, a riverside location would be a suitable place for tanning leather, and it is

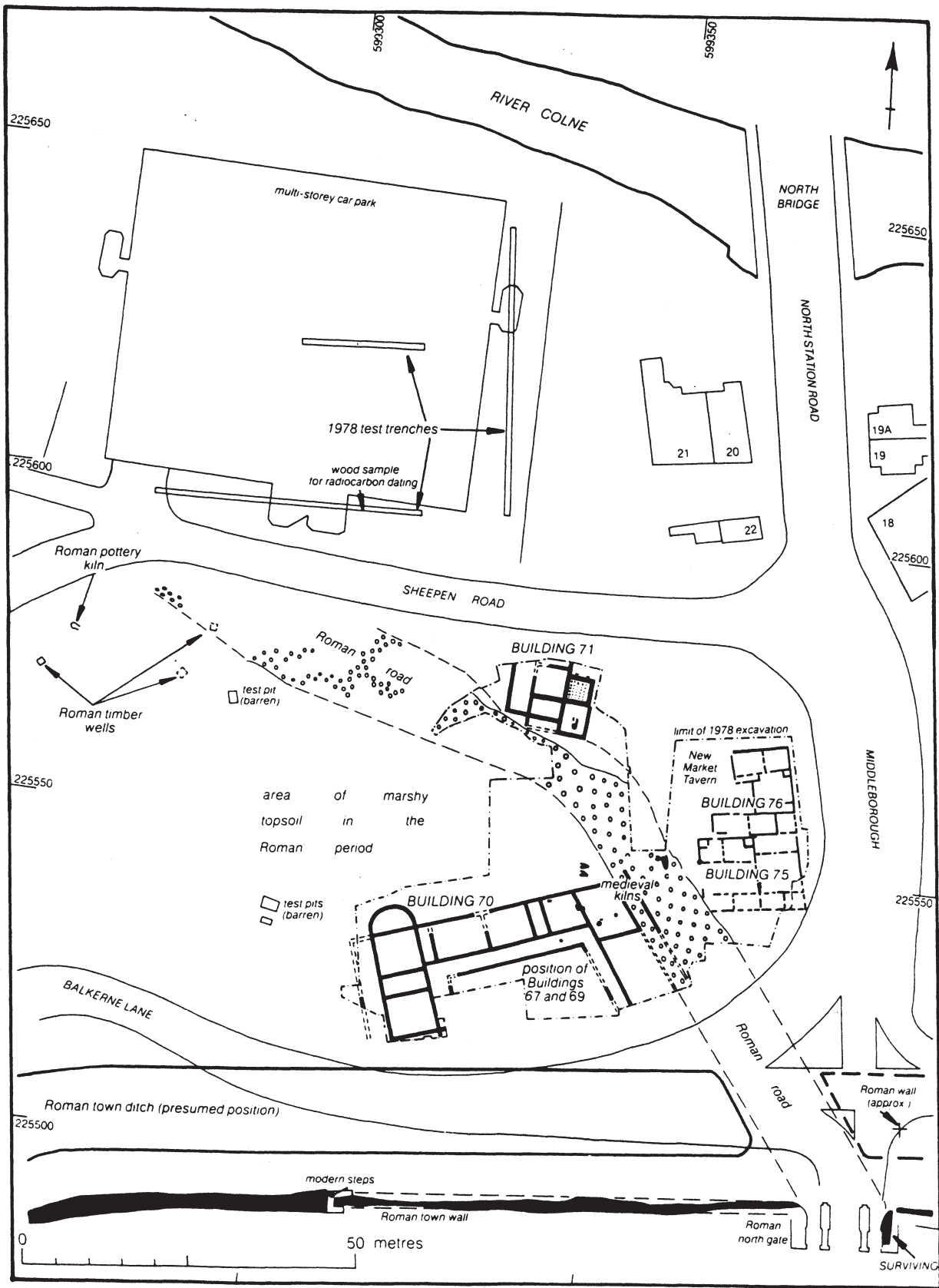


Fig 11 Archaeological discoveries in the area: hypocaust building is Middleborough Building 71; medieval houses are Buildings 75-76. Reproduced from Ordnance Survey mapping on behalf of The Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office © Crown Copyright 100039294 2004.

possible (if this material was dumped close to the place where it was tanned and presumably also made into leather articles) that the medieval tannery was somewhere close to the current site.

#### Roman

##### Dumping

Underneath the medieval dumping in T2 is a horizon which is undoubtedly Roman, in the sense that it is river deposits containing Roman material – pottery, brick, oyster shell – and a possible prehistoric flint. This is at 2.5m below modern ground-level (3.85m AOD), a level comparable with the top of the Roman deposits (4.0m AOD) recorded in Trench 1 at St Peter's House in 1998 (p 8, Fig 10, top of L7). It seems clear that the dumping of rubbish at the river edge was an activity common to the Roman and medieval periods; the Roman rubbish probably came from Roman houses recorded on the site of the Royal London Insurance building (Fig 11). Likewise in T1, the medieval dump sealed a gravel horizon containing only Roman brick (T1-D) which in turn sealed an undated (but probably Roman) river silt deposit (T1-E). At the bottom of the sequence was T1-F which contained water-worn Roman brick and tile (including flue tile), pottery and septaria. The pottery dates to after AD 120. In terms of the date, these contexts cannot be regarded as 'closed', bearing in mind the tidal movement of objects in these deposits.

##### A Roman wharf?

Two large timbers were recovered from T2-F. The first was a waste piece, the second was an oak pile. The question is what the pile belonged to. It may have been part of a revetment of the river bank, or part of a bridge structure or landing place. The wood is undated, but it is assumed here that it is Roman, since the other material in the context was also Roman.

The question of the location of the Roman bridge across the River Colne has not been resolved. The most obvious course for a Roman road would be to emerge from the Roman north gate, cross the Colne at the modern North Bridge and then correspond with North Station Road. Unfortunately, this road alignment cannot work because it would cut through the middle of a group of Roman buildings found at the Midland Bank and Victoria Inn on North Station Road (CAR 6, 346-7).

The precise location of the Roman Colne crossing therefore remains unknown. In fact, Rex Hull was in favour of there having been a Roman bridge on the site of the present North Bridge. The following is a typescript note to this effect in the manuscript of his *Roman Colchester* (Hull 1958), in the archives in Colchester Museums Resource Centre:

*"In 1957 after some old property on the E side of Middleborough was demolished, a new Garage was erected [Lasts' Garage, now demolished and replaced with St Peter's Court]. The following information has reached me some weeks after the event.*

*When a pit was sunk for the petrol tank a large excavation was made 15ft deep, reaching down into the mud of an ancient river-bed. In this was a row of oaken piles, with pointed ends, but the tops cut off quite flat, and not showing marks of having been driven. Some where in the hole also there was found a solid pier of masonry 5 or 6 ft thick, which had to be broken by pneumatic drills. The row of piles was parallel to the modern street.*

*The piles extracted (they had to be drawn, they could not be cut) were allowed to dry and split up. The museum was not informed in case the work should be held up.*

*One thinks of a timber bridge followed by one of masonry, but one can have little confidence in such unsatisfactory evidence. The position of the discovery is more directly opposite North Gate than is the modern North Bridge, and would suit the line of a Roman street better, avoiding the remains of the Roman House. [He is referring to the Roman building under the present HSBC Bank in North Station Road.] But it also avoids the site of the solid*

*masonry at the North end of North Bridge which can hardly have been other than Roman, and which had been happily regarded as the abutment of the Roman bridge. Obviously we do not know sufficient yet about what happened here. Laver speaks of one (or more?) river channels nearer the town than the present one, and this evidence from the garage is to the same effect. The river seems to have been nearer the town in Roman times. (Could this account for the few finds dragged from it?)"*

Hull's speculation about the river (or one of its channels) coming this far south is now to be taken in the context of the 1978 excavation of the Middleborough sites (directly south of the current site) and the timbers recovered from the present site. Despite the dry ground found on the site of the Royal London Insurance building, the Last's Garage timbers and the Middleborough House pile do reinforce Hull's speculation that there could have been a channel or an inlet of the Colne under Middleborough House and as far south as the former Last's Garage site.

##### A Roman bath-house or hypocausted room

The Roman tile included flue tile, which is usually derived from a hypocaust system. There were three pieces from this evaluation, perhaps more than one would expect from a project of this size. It would be tempting to infer a riverside bath-house as a source for the flue tile, but a more likely source is hypocausted room in a house like the one recorded at Middleborough in 1978 (Fig 11; CAR 3, 171-9), which is only 50 m south of this site.

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