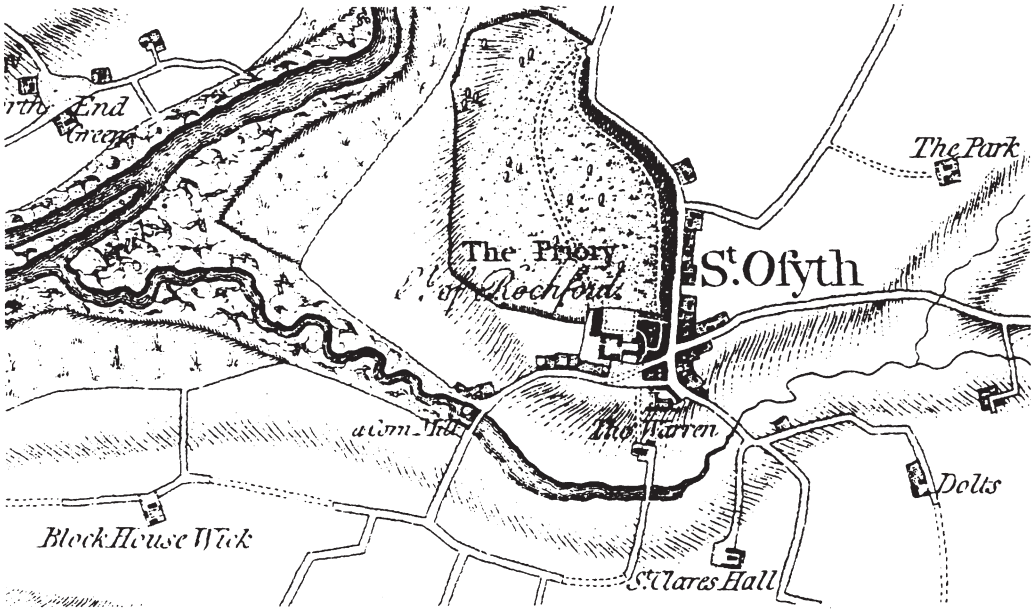
An archaeological evaluation at Old School Chase, St Osyth, Essex

August 1999

for J.R. Trodd Builders Ltd



Essex Heritage Conservation Group ref.: STOSC99
Colchester Museum accession code: 1999.107

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CAT Report no 43
September 1999

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NGR: TM 1230 1551

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Colchester Museum accession code: 1999.107
CAT project ref.: 1999/8a
CAT Report 43

1 Summary

A field evaluation was carried out in advance of proposed housing on a 0.25ha-site adjacent to St Peter and St Paul's churchyard, St Osyth, Essex. Approximately 10% of the site was examined, revealing a late Bronze Age or early Iron Age ditch, traces of a medieval clay floor and medieval and later pits. Residual Roman and Saxon pottery were also recovered from the site.

2 Introduction

This report describes the results of a field evaluation commissioned by J R Trodd Builders Ltd to investigate the archaeological implications of a proposal to erect five houses and four bungalows on 0.25ha of land adjoining the south side of St Peter and St Paul's churchyard, St Osyth, Essex.

An application for the redevelopment of the site was submitted to Tendring District Council in April 1999 (TEN/0435/99), following which the Essex County Council Planning Department's Heritage Advice, Management and Promotion Section (HAMP) recommended that an archaeological evaluation be carried out and any appropriate mitigation proposals sought from the applicant prior to the planning decision being made. At the request of J R Trodd Builders Ltd, the Colchester Archaeological Trust submitted a detailed work specification to the County Council for validation in accordance with an evaluation brief prepared by HAMP in June 1999. The resultant fieldwork took place between 2nd and 20th August 1999.

3 Historical and archaeological background: a summary

According to tradition, St Osyth was a 7th-century Saxon princess who became abbess of a nunnery at *Cicc*, where she was murdered on the doorstep of her chapel. *Cicc* was later renamed St Osyth in her honour, and by the early 14th century was rated among the top third of Essex towns for taxable value (Thornton 1998). The principal standing remains of the medieval settlement are clustered around the crossroads where Spring Road, Colchester Road, Mill Street and Clacton Road meet. Remains of St Osyth's 12th-century priory lie to the north-west of the junction and to the south stands the 12th-century church of St Peter and St Paul. Between the church and the priory, Church Square is believed to be the site of the medieval market-place. To the east of the church two 14th-century houses survive in Spring Road; one at nos 3-9 and the other, "The Old House", at the junction with Spring Lane.

The archaeological record for St Osyth is currently sparse, reflecting a past lack of development-driven fieldwork rather than any absence of antiquities in the area. Prehistoric activity is represented by chance finds of a mesolithic axe (ESMR 2871) and late Iron Age pottery (ESMR 3002). Roman pottery has been discovered in the priory grounds (ESMR 2822, 2823, 2826 and 2827), and reused Roman brick noted in the surviving fabric of the priory (ESMR 2820). The Colchester Museum collection includes some 8th- to 10th-century Saxon pottery, and also a Viking-type bone comb believed to have been found in St Osyth.

4 Site location and condition

Old School Chase lies on the south side of the medieval core of the village, 70m from the 12th-century church and approximately 200m south-east of the priory. Among the earliest of the immediately neighbouring houses fronting Spring Road are nos 38 and 40 and Chestnut Cottage (17th- to 18th-century timber-framed) at the entrance to the Chase, and also nos 37, 39 and 41 (17th century) opposite. At the rear, the site boundary backs onto farmland where aerial survey has revealed traces of earlier but as yet undated rectilinear field systems in the region approximately 200m south-west (SMR 2990).

The site was previously occupied by the village school which was built in 1853, enlarged in 1871 and again extended in 1897. The school closed in 1970 and following its demolition three houses were built in the Chase. The development proposals affect

the remaining three plots of land (Fig 2), which at the time of the evaluation were overgrown. The ground level in the largest of the plots, adjacent to the churchyard, is up to 1m higher than the lowest measured point in the area to the south of the Chase.

5 Aims

The aims of the work were to identify and record the nature, date, depth, condition and importance of archaeological features or deposits on the site.

6 Methods

Ten 2m-wide trenches were dug by a machine using a toothless bucket, followed by manual examination of exposed features. The initial mechanical excavation involved progressive horizontal stripping of soils until either an archaeological or natural subsoil horizon was reached. Subsequent manual excavation and recording was carried out in accordance with the appropriate sections of the HAMP brief and CAT evaluation specification, observing the requirements detailed in Colchester Borough Council's *Guidelines for the Standards and Practice of Fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester (1996a).*

7 Results

7.1 General stratigraphy

Apart from a very small area close to the Spring Road frontage (the eastern end of Trench 8), the overall soil stratigraphy consisted of the following:

a Modern dumped topsoils, frequently mixed with demolition debris, in many places overlying intact 19th-century school floors and playground surfacing.

b An earlier long-term soil accumulation of dark greyish brown sandy loam, becoming slightly paler and sandier with increasing depth. Soil cultivation over a lengthy period resulted in considerable difficulty in accurately determining the point from which many features were cut. With the exception of the latest intrusions, most features were only discernible at, or approaching, the natural subsoil horizon.

c Cover loam, a very pale brown silt loam periglacial subsoil. This was present to some extent in the majority of trenches.

d Natural sand, varying in texture with gravels in places.

Evidence of deep root activity was common: the natural sand in many places was heavily flecked with decomposed matter at depths in excess of 1m.

7.2 Features

In total, 54 features were recorded. All but nine obviously modern features were manually excavated to varying levels. The features and associated finds belong to the following periods:

7.2.1 Prehistoric

At the southern end of Trench 5, machine stripping revealed a curvilinear intrusion (F39/F56) which on investigation was found to have a roughly V-shaped profile with its inner side cut closer to the vertical than the outer (Fig 3). The feature, which extended beyond the limits of the trench, appears to be a ditch, although some difficulty was experienced in determining continuity along its exposed length: it is possible that the curved outline was formed by two features of unknown length, or that the southern part (F56) is a secondary cut into F39. No finds were recovered from F56. The fill of F39 (sampled, see below) contained one sherd of late Bronze or early Iron Age pottery, a number of burnt flint pebbles and a localised concentration of charcoal.

7.2.2 Roman

No Roman features were found. Sherds of Roman grey ware pottery were recovered from pits F37 and F40; also possible examples of grey ware were found in F5 and F9. In each instance the features are of later origin and the occurrence of Roman material is residual.

7.2.3 Saxon

Two sherds of Saxon pottery were retrieved from later contexts. One was residually present in pit fill (F9) together with a piece of cambered peg-tile; the other came from a post-medieval pit (F20).

7.2.4 Medieval

A small sequence of medieval stratigraphy was revealed at the Spring Road end of

Trench 8 (Fig 4). Here, the earliest feature was a pit (F24), no earlier than 13th century in date, which was sealed by a clay layer up to 10cm thick (L84) which may represent a clay floor. The extent of the clay is unknown: its south-eastern side was eroded and to the west it was cut by a pit (F26) with a fill enriched with clay from L84. Overlying the clay was a spread of gravel, L83, with no datable finds. Although there was no direct relationship between F26 and L83, an absence of stones in the pit fill suggests that F26 predates the gravel. From the finds and relationships (Fig 4 section) it appears that F24, L85, L84 and possibly F26 are of medieval origin. The date of the later gravel (L83) is uncertain and it may well be associated with a post-medieval phase of frontage occupation.

Elsewhere on the site, the medieval period was represented by pits. From the pottery recovered it is clear that there has been a good deal of medieval activity in the vicinity, but there are difficulties in discriminating between medieval pits and those that may be somewhat later but lack a representative range of finds. This is due to the generally isolated nature of the pits and limitations in discerning stratigraphic relationships within soils subject to long-term cultivation. On the basis of finds, other inclusions and available stratigraphy, the pits F2, F34 and F35 (Fig 2) appear more likely to be medieval. Others, which can only be broadly phased, are detailed in the next section.

7.2.5 Medieval to post-medieval

For the reasons noted above, a number of features lack sufficient evidence to be more narrowly phased other than within a broad medieval to post-medieval date range. These include pits F4, F5, F8, F9, F30, F44 and F46. Within this range are further groups: pits F7 and F22, which are evidently no earlier than 13th century, and also pits F1, F15 and F20 and a shallow trench F45 which can be more closely bracketed as no earlier than 15th century.

7.2.6 Post-medieval

Of the features illustrated in Figure 2, the following pits yielded sufficient evidence in the form of inclusions and/or stratigraphic relationships to be satisfactorily attributable to the post-medieval period: F25, F27, F28 and F42. In addition, ditch fill F18/F37 and pits F16, F17, F29, F33, F41, F43 and F53, although probably post-medieval, may possibly be of more modern origin.

7.2.7 Modern (early 19th to 20th century)

The 19th-century school foundations were found to be too shallow to affect archaeologically sensitive levels. These, and superficial modern features, are omitted from the overall plan (Fig 2). Deeper modern intrusions, mainly pits and services, are shown on the plan in grey, except where individually described below.

One of the aims of the evaluation was to establish whether churchyard burials might ever have extended beyond the present boundary into the area affected by proposed redevelopment. Whilst no inhumations were encountered in the four trenches flanking the boundary, one short feature in Trench 10 (F51) bore some resemblance to a grave in outline and profile. The feature was 1.5m long and 0.7m wide, with near-vertical sides and a more or less flat bottom. For safety reasons manual excavation ceased at an overall depth of 1.7m, and augering established the bottom of the feature to be 2.15m below the present ground surface in the nearest part of the churchyard, which lies 5m to the north. Finds included 19th-century pottery, clay tobacco pipe, and also two iron nails from the upper levels of the fill. Most of the gravestones in the adjacent part of the churchyard are heavily worn; the few inscriptions that are legible quote dates in a range from the end of the 18th to the mid-19th centuries, and from their positions mark conventional east-west orientated graves. On balance, this isolated feature, which is orientated northwest-southeast, appears to be a 19th-century trench, dug for an unknown purpose.

In Trench 2, a section across a 2m-wide linear feature (F11/F12) recovered 19th- to 20th-century pottery from the fill. Safety considerations prevented excavation to its full depth, but from the available profile the feature is assumed to be a ditch, marking a north-south boundary.

7.3 Ditches

In addition to F11/F12 (noted above), Trench 4 revealed a similarly aligned north-south ditch (F18/F37) and part of an east-west ditch (F38). The relationship between the two is unknown since the intersection lay beyond the limit of the trench. Finds indicate the infill of F18/F37 to be post-medieval or possibly later. If associated, F38 may have ceased use at the same time: the single datable find from F38 established its fill to be 15th century at the very earliest. In all three instances the features indicate boundaries square with the church although their extent and duration is unknown.

8 Finds

8.1 Medieval and later pottery by Howard Brooks

8.1.1 The material

A total of 344 sherds weighing 12.1 kg was examined. These came from 44 bags representing 33 site contexts. The material was classified according to Cunningham (1985) and Cotter (forthcoming). Material from each bag was listed, weighed and identified. These lists are summarised here as Table 1. Other details are in the archive.

8.1.2 Discussion

This group of pottery was very largely a post-medieval and modern collection, dominated by Cunningham fabrics 40 (post-medieval red earthenware), 48 (modern ironstones) and 51 (flowerpot), which collectively account for 55% of total sherd weight. However, there was also a very large group of fabric 21 (sandy orange ware: 36% of sherd weight), dating from the 13th to the 16th centuries. There were also a few pieces of fabric 13 (early medieval coarse ware) occurring residually in later contexts (1% of sherd weight). There was also a large group of fabric 20 (medieval coarse ware: 5%), indicating a period of medieval activity on or near this site in the 12th to 14th centuries. Broadly speaking, the fabrics 13, 20 and 21 should be seen as indicative of the same medieval period of activity on the site during, perhaps, the 14th to 16th centuries. Activity then continued into the post-medieval period, as indicated by the fabric 40, 48 and 51 sherds. The single largest group of material was a large group of flowerpots (fabric 51B: 41% of total sherd weight). There were small quantities of stoneware (fabric 45), Surrey-Hampshire whitewares (fabric 23), and London ware (fabric 36: all three totalling 1.5% of sherd weight).

One prehistoric sherd and three Romano-British sherds were noted. There were also two Saxon vegetable-tempered sherds - in one case, by itself in a feature, in the second case, residual in a later context.

Types of vessels recovered included mainly cooking-pots, with smaller quantities of bowls and jugs, and single examples of cisterns and tripod cooking-pots. Cunningham rim types and forms were as follows: cooking-pots rim forms E1 and E2 (fabric 40), E1 (fabrics 20 and 21), B1, D1, E5 (all fabric 20), a form C15 cistern base (fabric 21), and a tripod pot base (fabric 21). One of the fabric 21 pots had external sooting, showing that its contents had been heated over an open fire.

On balance, the pottery suggests very small-scale activity in or near the site in the prehistoric, Roman and Saxon periods, with longer-term activity starting, perhaps, by the 14th century and continuing through until the 20th century. The very mixed nature of some of the groups, with earlier pieces occurring residually, implies that the site has been heavily disturbed over the centuries. The strong presence of cooking-pots indicates that this site is not too far away from the kitchen area of whatever the medieval settlement was, and there is nothing to suggest anything other than a normal domestic assemblage. In contrast to this, the large group of flowerpots suggests some kind of large-scale gardening activity, possibly commercial, in the 19th and/or 20th centuries.

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		fabrics													
		P	R	1	13	20	21	23	36	40	45	48	51	unid	Group date
bag	context														
01	F01	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	15th-16th
02	F02	0	0	0	0	15	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13th-16th
03	F05	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	Rom or med
04	F07	0	0	0	0	0	20	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13th-16th
05	F09	0	10	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	Saxon
06	F27	0	0	0	15	0	170	0	0	245	0	0	0	0	16th-19th
07	F28	0	0	0	0	0	55	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13th-16th
08	L87	0	0	0	0	0	285	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13th-16th
09	F12	0	0	0	0	385	105	0	0	0	0	0	5000	0	19th-20th
10	L21	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	365	0	0	19th-20th
11	F15	0	0	0	15	65	60	0	40	0	0	0	0	0	late 13th-16th
13	F01	0	0	0	0	35	30	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13th-16th
14	F11	0	0	0	0	0	80	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13th-16th
15	F18	0	0	0	0	0	245	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13th-16th
16	F17	0	0	0	0	0	705	0	0	120	25	0	0	2	16th-19th
17	L82	0	0	0	0	0	35	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13th-16th
18	F25	0	0	0	0	50	15	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13th-16th
19	L85	0	0	0	0	20	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	12th-14th
20	F24	0	0	0	15	5	15	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	13th-16th
21	F26	0	0	0	0	75	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13th-16th
22	F27	0	0	0	25	0	95	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	15th-16th
23	F28	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	190	0	0	0	0	16th-19th
24	F19	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	0	0	19th-20th
25	F17	0	0	0	0	0	190	0	0	140	0	0	0	0	16th-19th
27	F32	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	55	0	0	0	17th-18th
28	F31	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	19th-20th
29	F32	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	15	0	0	19th-20th
31	F28	0	0	0	20	0	0	0	0	70	0	0	0	0	16th-19th
32	F34	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13th-16th
33	L87	0	0	0	0	0	60	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	15th-16th
34	F37	0	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	0	0	0	0	16th-19th
35	F38	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	15th-16th
36	F39	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	prehistoric
38	F20	0	0	10	0	0	20	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	15th-16th
40	F42	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	15	0	0	0	0	16th-19th
41	F23	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	15	0	0	19th-20th
42	F21	0	0	0	0	20	40	0	0	5	0	105	0	0	19th
43	F22	0	0	0	0	2	20	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13th-16th
44	F42	0	0	0	0	0	45	0	0	40	25	0	0	0	17th-18th
46	F45	0	0	0	95	0	1910	15	0	0	0	0	0	0	15th-16th
49	F51	0	0	0	0	0	85	0	0	55	0	75	35	15	19th-20th
50	F51	0	0	0	0	0	10	0	0	25	0	0	0	0	16th-19th
51	F45	0	0	0	0	0	75	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13th-16th
53	F40	0	2	0	0	0	60	0	0	0	0	0	70	0	19th-20th
Total (g)		**10**	**22**	**20**	**185**	**677**	**4457**	**25**	**40**	**915**	**105**	**590**	**5035**	**27**	**12108**

Table 1: Weight of fabric types per bag and context.

P = prehistoric R = Roman unid = unidentified
Fabric 48 column includes fabrics 48d and 48p; fabric 21 column includes fabric 21a.

10

8.2 Prehistoric and Roman pottery by Stephen Benfield

This group is too small for comment.

Feature	*find*	*sherds*	*weight grams*	*description*	*date*
5	3	1	4	sherd - grey ware?	?Roman or medieval
9	5	1	10	small possible Roman grey ware sherd	?Roman
37	34	1	10	small Roman grey ware sherd	Roman
39	36	1	10	heavily flint tempered sherd	late Bronze Age-early Iron Age
40	53	1	2	small fragment of Roman grey ware, abraded	Roman

Table 2: Prehistoric and Roman pottery.

8.3 Environmental samples

Two environmental samples were taken. One, from the fill of pit F15, was subsequently felt to lack sufficiently narrow dating evidence to be of research value and was discarded. The second, from the late Bronze/early Iron Age F39, has undergone specialist analysis by V. Fryer.

8.3.1 Charred plant macrofossils and other remains from St Osyth, Essex: an assessment by V. Fryer

8.3.1.1 Introduction

A small evaluation excavation at St Osyth, Essex, carried out by Colchester Archaeological Trust, revealed a possible ditch-like feature, dated by pottery to the Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age. A single sample was taken and submitted for assessment.

8.3.1.2 Methods

The sample was processed by manual water flotation/washover, collecting the flot in a 500-micron mesh sieve. The dried flot was scanned under a binocular microscope at low power and the charred plant macrofossils and other remains noted are listed in Table 3. Modern contaminants including fibrous roots, seeds/fruits and arthropods were noted at a very low density.

8.3.1.3 Plant macrofossils

With the exception of charcoal fragments, plant macrofossils were extremely rare and preservation was poor. A single fragmentary and abraded wheat (*Triticum* sp.) glume base was noted and the only seed recovered was of a small indeterminate grass. Charcoal fragments were abundant.

8.3.1.4 Other materials

Fragments of black porous 'cokey' material and black tarry material are probably residues of the combustion of organic materials at extremely high temperatures.

8.3.1.5 Discussion

It is perhaps of note that the bulk of the charcoal recovered was in the form of thin tangentially-split flakes. This is frequently the result of the combustion of ring porous wood at very high temperatures. The presence of other burnt residues (see above) may also suggest burning at high temperatures. In such conditions, any more delicate macrofossils present, including seeds and chaff, are often largely destroyed. This may explain why such a low density of material was recovered.

8.3.1.6 Conclusion

This material appears to be a dump of heavily burnt material, principally charcoal. It is impossible to ascertain whether this assemblage is an accurate reflection of the material prior to burning or whether the composition of the assemblage has been radically altered during combustion. The extremely low density of material recovered precludes any further interpretation of this sample or of the feature from which it came. Because of this low density of material and the difficulty of interpreting any feature in isolation, no further quantitative work is recommended.

Sample no	54
Context no	F39
Cereals	
Triticum sp. (glume base)	x
Herbs	
Small Poaceae indet.	x
Other plant macrofossils	
Charcoal <2mm	xxx
Charcoal >2mm	xxx
Charred root/rhizome/stem	x
Other	
Black porous 'cokey' material	xx
Black tarry material	x
Bone	x
Small coal	x
Sample volume (litres)	2.5
Volume of flot (litres)	0.4
% flot sorted	100%

Table 3 Charred plant macrofossils and other remains from St Osyth, Essex.

8.4 Animal bone

Animal bone was recovered from a number of pits in the more broadly phased 15th-century and later categories. None of the contexts was felt to be sufficiently securely dated to justify analysis.

9 Discussion

In total, the area examined amounts to 268 square metres, which is approximately 10% of the overall site area. The sample revealed *in situ* prehistoric, medieval and later features with residual artefactual evidence of Roman and Saxon activity in the vicinity.

In relation to the proposed development layout (Fig 5), the main areas of known archaeological sensitivity are as follows:

9.1 Plot 6 (Trench 5)

In building plot 6 the prehistoric ditch (F39/F56) underlies the proposed location for the rear wall of a detached house. A further stretch of the feature may expected at a depth of approximately 80cm (15.80m OD) from the present site surface.

9.2 Spring Road frontage

The small area within 25m of Spring Road appears to contain evidence of medieval occupation and related activity at 16.10m OD, which is within 40cm of the present ground level. This part of the site is currently designated for surface parking, but may also be affected if any new off-road mains services are to be laid.

9.3 Plots 1 and 2 and terraced bungalows plots 9-12

The medieval and post-medieval pits were focused on the regions of the site closest to Spring Road (ie within about 50m of the frontage). These areas would be affected by detached houses in plot 1, plot 2, and to the north of the Chase, the bungalow block, where the features were noted at the following depths:

	trench	*depth below present ground level*	*Ordnance Datum level*
Plot 1	Trench 2	60cm	15.65m OD
Plot 2	Trench 1	90cm	15.35m OD
Bungalow block	Trench 7	60cm	16.45m OD
Bungalow block	Trench 8 (w)	40cm	16.45m OD

10 Archive

The evaluation archive consists of: site records and processing data (2 indexed binders); plans on film; colour transparencies and digital photographs; and finds (3 boxes). The archive will be deposited with Colchester Museum for permanent retention under cover of museum accession code 1999.107.

11 Acknowledgements

The Trust is grateful to the Essex County Council Heritage Conservation Group (Mr P Connell, Ms A Bennett and Mr P Gilman) for their assistance at various stages in the course of the work. The excavation machinery was kindly provided by J R Trodd Builders Ltd (Mr S Rust and Mr C Catchpole). Thanks are also due to their architects, The David Webber Partnership (Mr D Webber) for the supply of site plans.

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report by Carl Crossan
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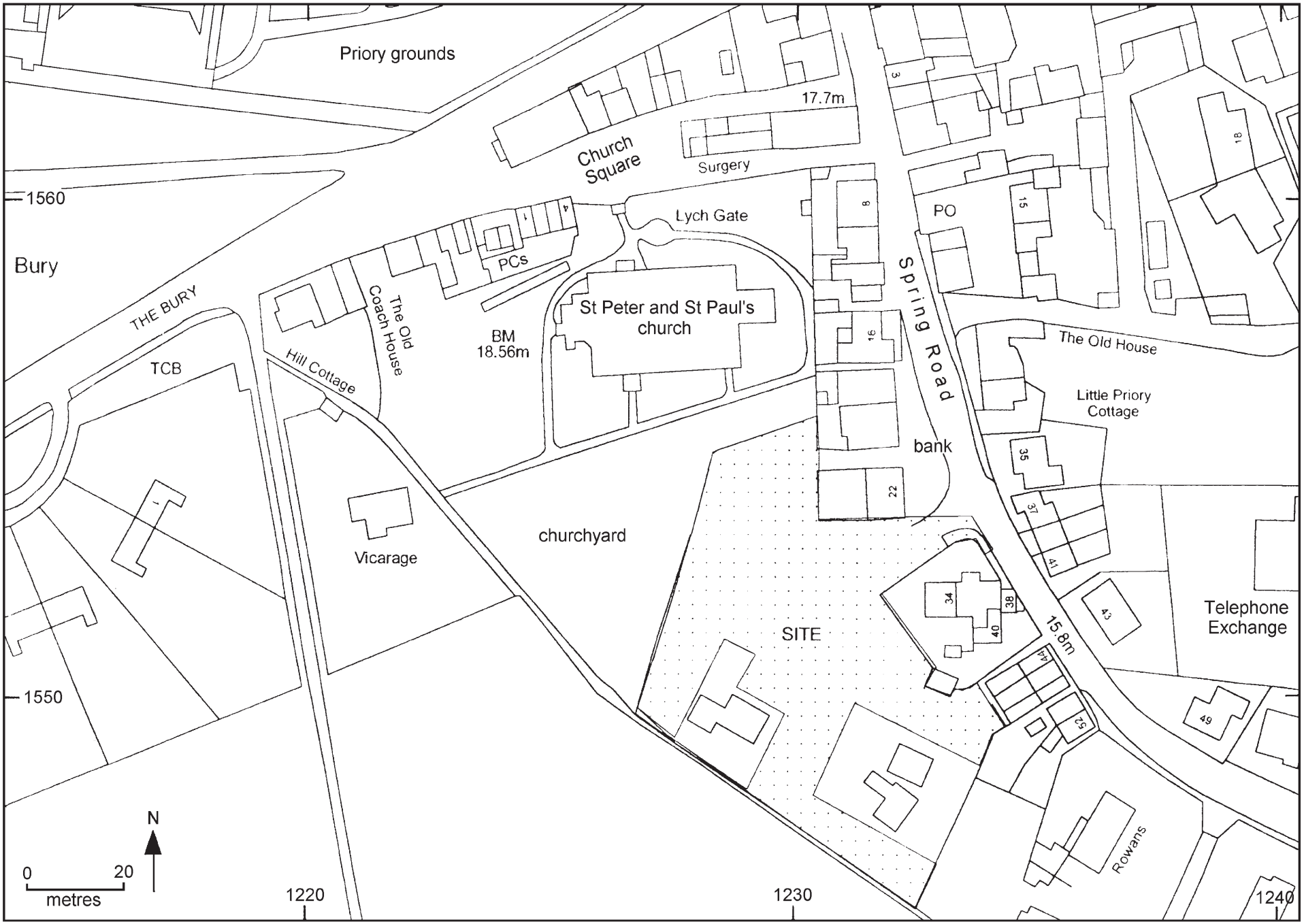


Fig 1 Site location *(area of site stippled)*.

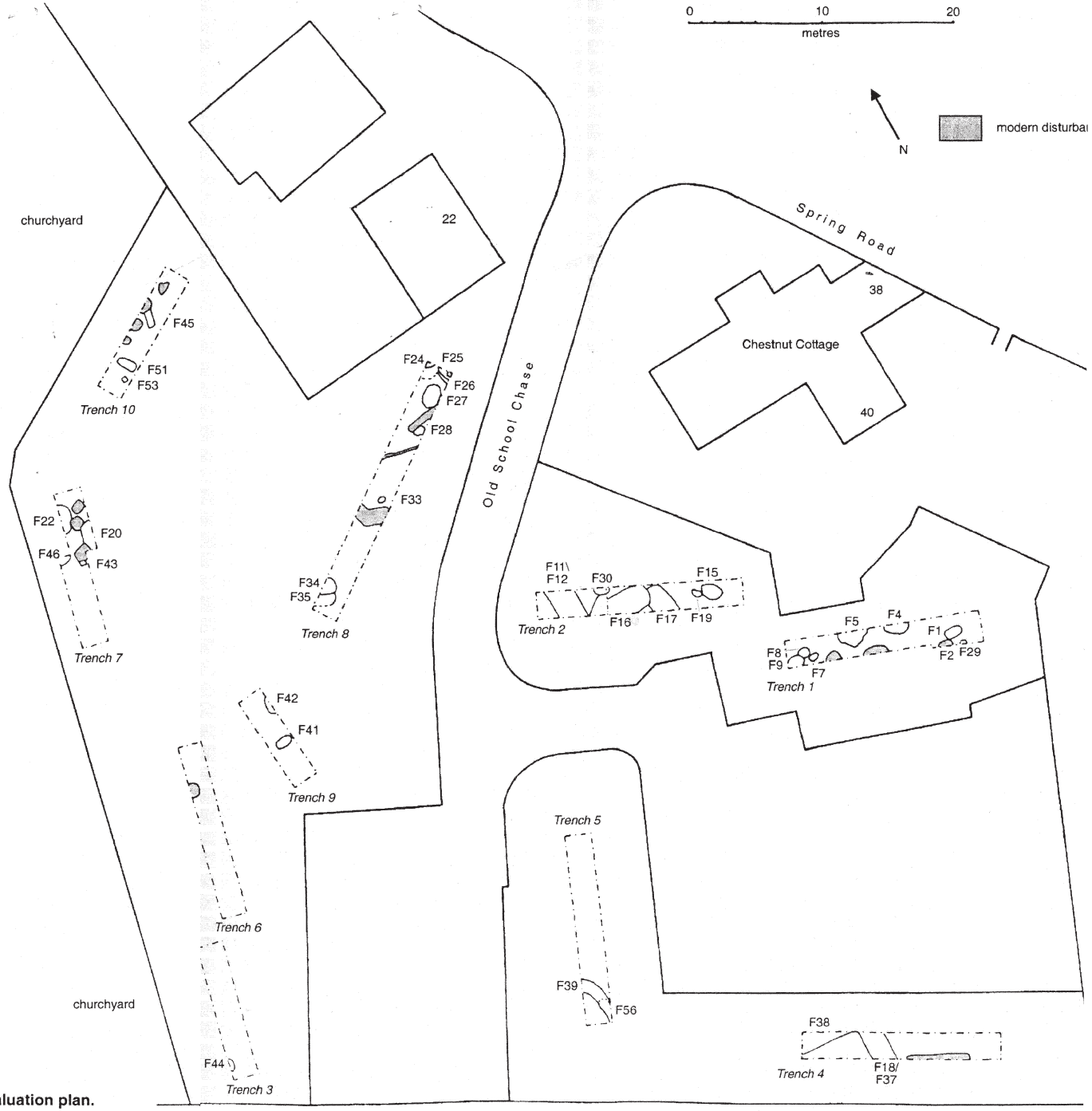
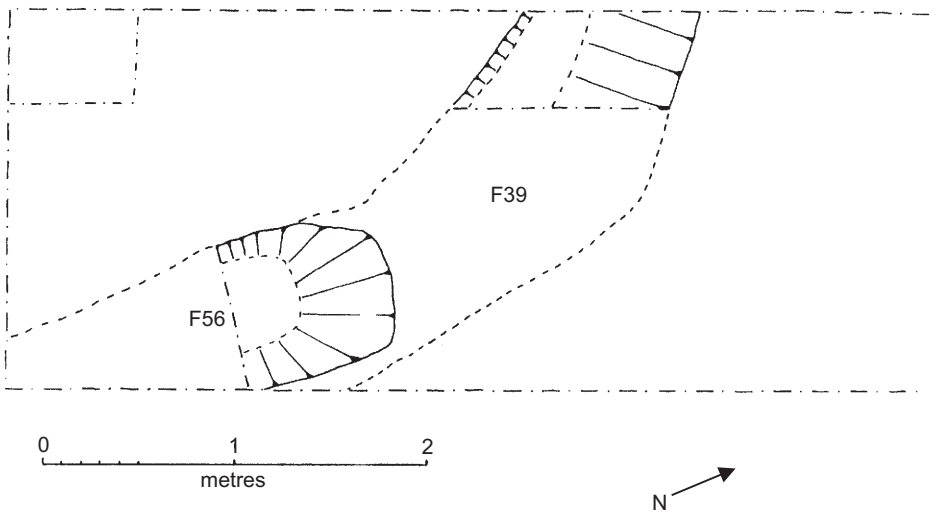


Fig 2 Evaluation plan.

Plan



Section

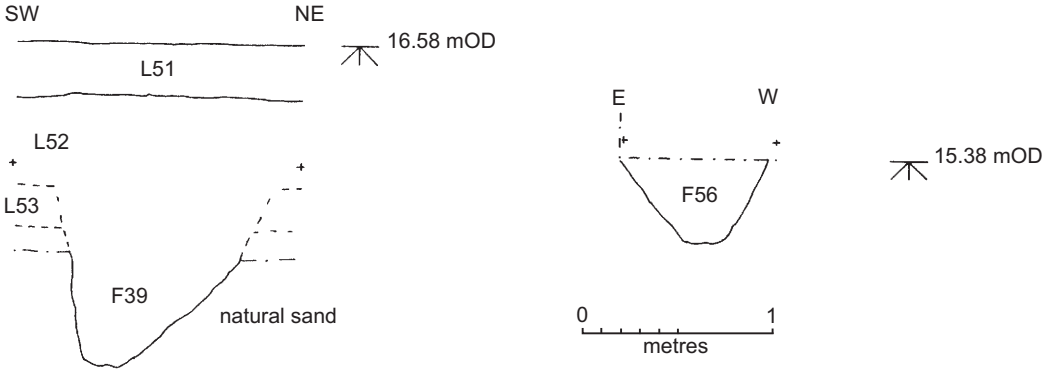
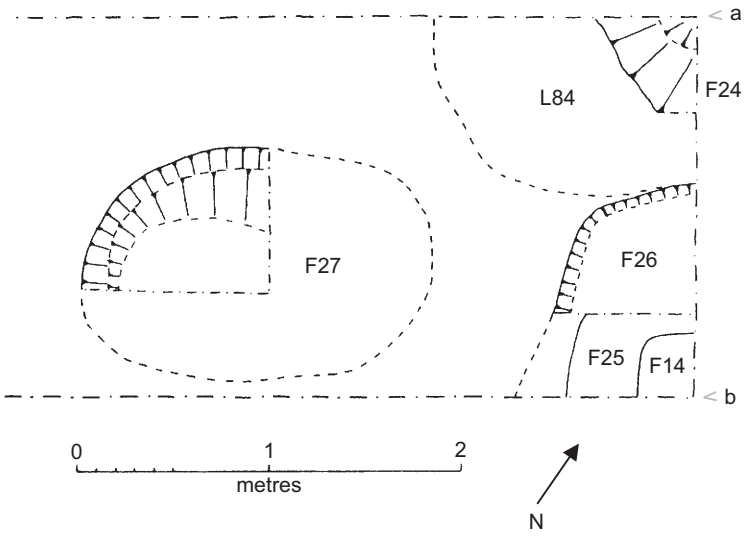


Fig 3 Trench 5.

Plan



Section a-b

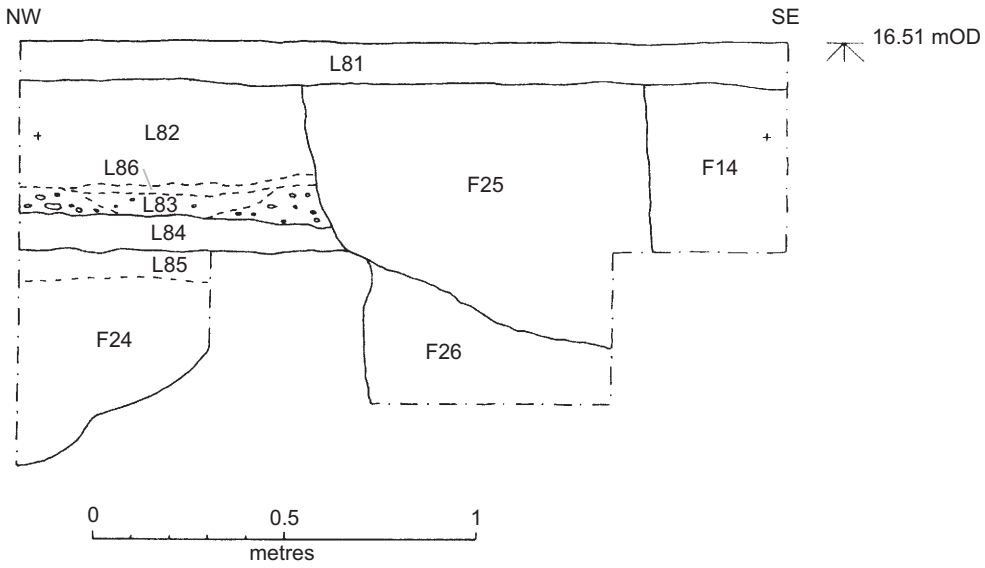


Fig 4 Trench 8: north-east end.

Fig 5 Proposed development (1:500 scale).