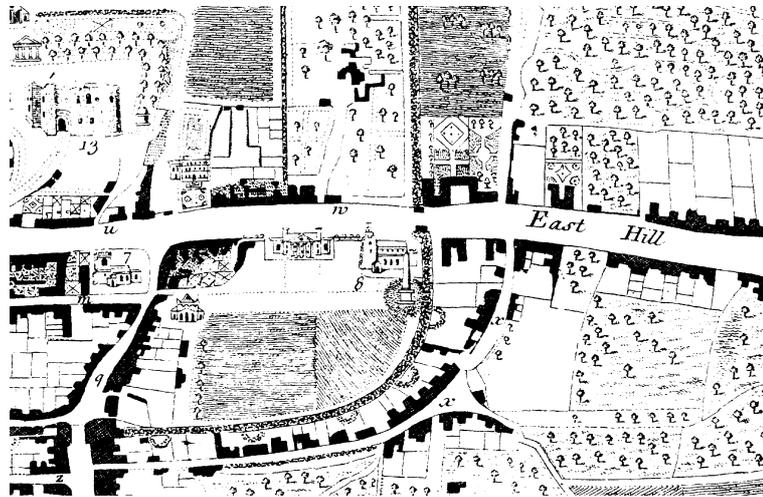


A report on test pits dug at the church of **St James the Great,** East Hill, Colchester, Essex

March 2000



on behalf of
Purcell Miller Tritton



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CAT REPORT 72

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dug at the church of
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report by Howard Brooks

CAT site code: JAM 2000
CAT project code: 00/3g
Colchester Museum accession code: 2000.26



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Front cover:

St James' church (no 8) in detail from map of Colchester in History and antiquities of Colchester (Morant 1748).

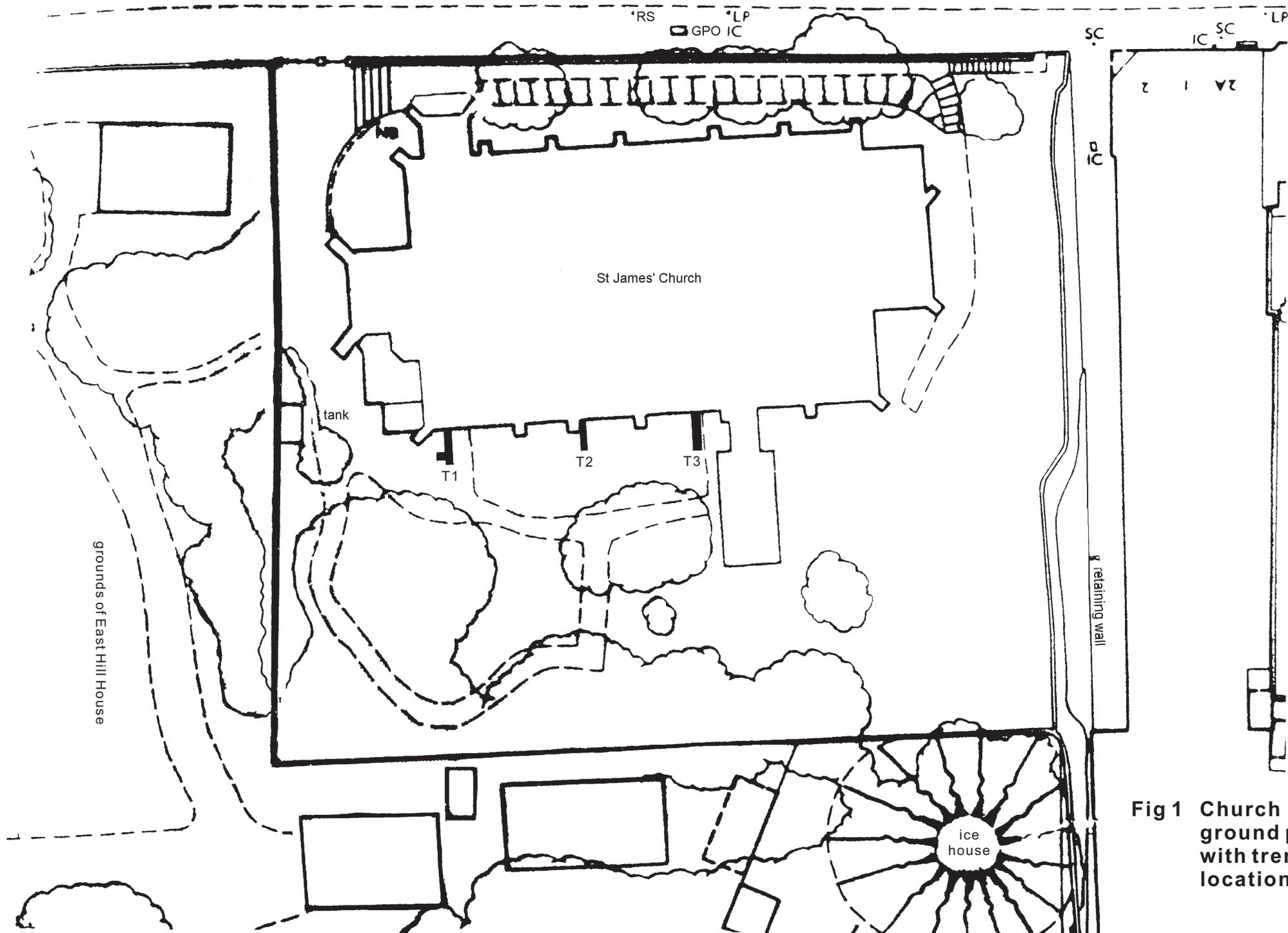


Fig 1 Church ground plan with trench locations.

A report on test pits dug at the church of St James the Great, East Hill, Colchester, Essex

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1 Summary

The drains running along the outside of the south aisle wall of St James' church had become blocked. Holes in the open surface drainage channel implied that there was an underground drain to collect surface water. Three trenches were therefore cut to intercept the drain line and to examine its condition.

The results can be considered from two points of view: the drainage and the archaeology. All three trenches located the underground ceramic pipe into which the surface channel drained. In Trench 1, the detailed working of the drain was revealed. The perforations in the stone surface channel marked the position of an underground brick sump, approximately 500m x 500m and six courses (450m) deep. A pipe led down and southwards from the brick sump to a connecting drain.

No burials were disturbed during the work, although there was a quantity of loose human bone (charnel) which was reburied in the trenches at the end of the work. From the archaeological point of view, two of the trenches merely showed graveyard soil cut by the modern drain. The other (Trench 2) revealed the outer face of the south aisle wall, and the face of one of the buttresses.

2 Introduction

- 2.1** At the request of Purcell Miller Tritton, three test pits were cut against the south face of St James' church (centred on TM 0015 2522).
- 2.2** All fieldwork was done in accordance with standards and practices contained in Colchester Borough Council's *Guidelines for the standards and practice of archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester*.

3 Archaeological background

St James the Great is the largest and architecturally the most impressive church in Colchester¹. It is described by Morant² as 'large, regular and tolerably handsome'. The structure is essentially of the Perpendicular period, with a major restoration in 1870-71. Traces of the early medieval form of St James' church can be detected by, for example, the remains of the Roman brick quoins of the once aisleless nave. As at St Peter's church, St James' can be reduced to an early medieval transeptal building by stratigraphic dissection. Tradition says that a shrine of wattle and daub stood here for the use of travellers arriving at the east gate of the town. The large transeptal structure encapsulated in the present structure cannot be regarded as that shrine - St James' must have been rebuilt by the 12th century at the latest.

Virtually nothing is known of the archaeology of this part of the town, in either the Roman or later periods. The nearest important monument is of course the Roman town wall, which lies only 10m east of the east end of the church. There has been a considerable build-up of deposits against the face of the wall here, and the church probably stands over deeply buried Roman structures.

4 Aim

The aim of the trenching was to locate and assess the condition of the drainage outside the south face of the church, and in addition to record any visible archaeological remains.

5 The trenches (Figs 2-8)

5.1 Trench 1 (Figs 2-3)

This 2.3 x 0.46m trench (Trench 1 or T1) was hand-dug in the location shown on Figure 1, immediately west of the south door. The width was determined by the width of a stone slab (Layer 1 or L1) which was lifted to reveal a sealed topsoil layer, an older ground level (L2).

Drainage

The drain consisted of a ceramic pipe laid in a trench (Feature 3 or F3) at a distance of 1.7m from the church wall. The pipe top was at 520mm below modern ground level and 470mm above the top of a brick sump (F2) which was revealed by the lifting of the stone surface drain blocks (F1). The sump was approximately 500 x 500mm in plan (not always a consistent dimension on the surface and in section) and 450mm deep (six courses of soft reds, loosely mortared). A short pipe running south and down connected the sump to the main drain line. The brick sump was full of soil, and breaking into the connecting pipe showed that this, too, was clogged with soil.

¹ Rodwell & Rodwell 1977, 34
² Morant 1748c

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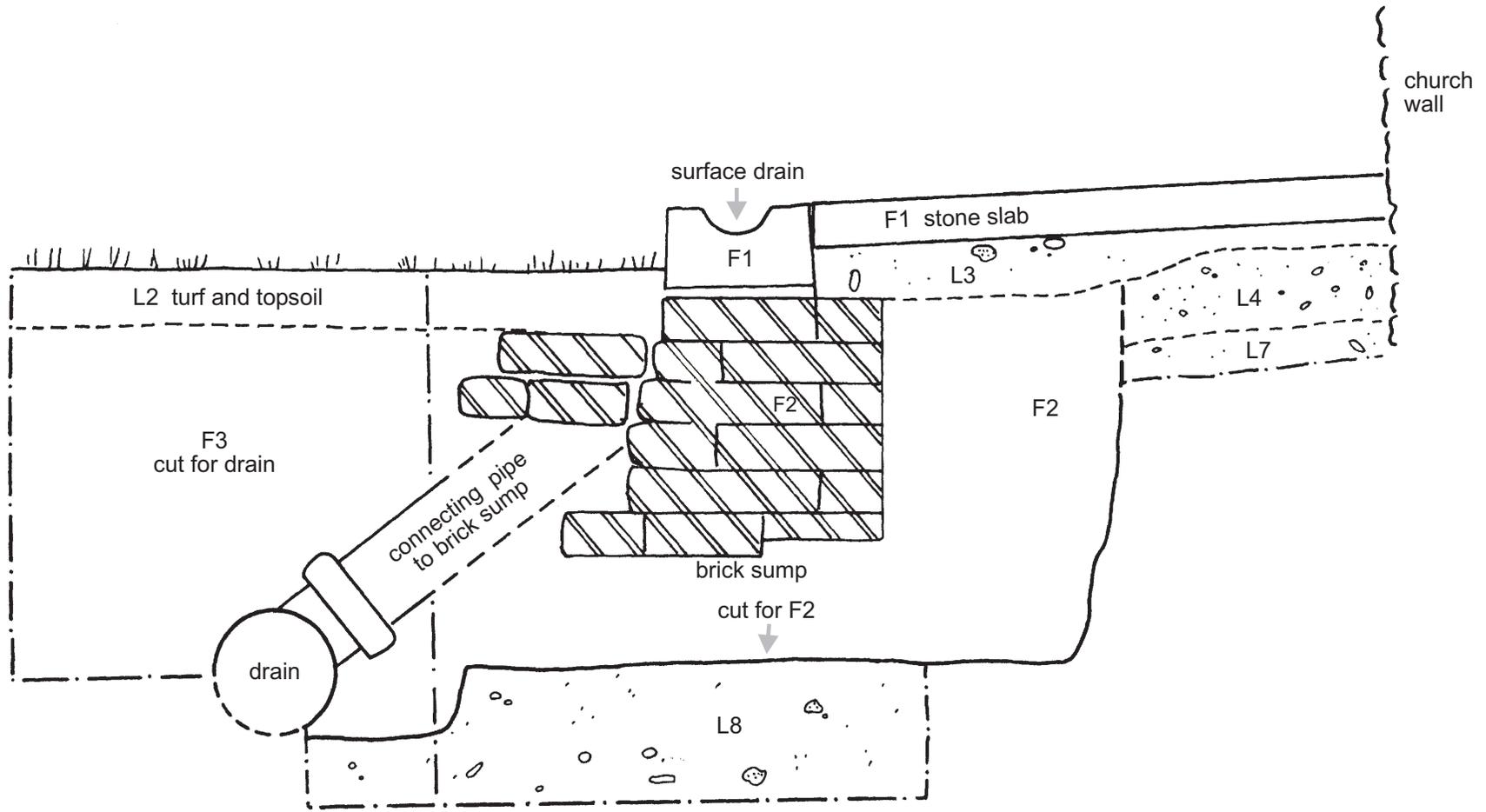
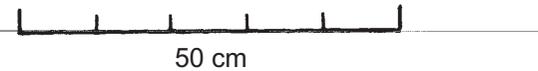


Fig 2 West face of Trench 1, and common conventions.



Roman brick



post-Roman brick



septaria



other stone



mortar



pebbles



charcoal

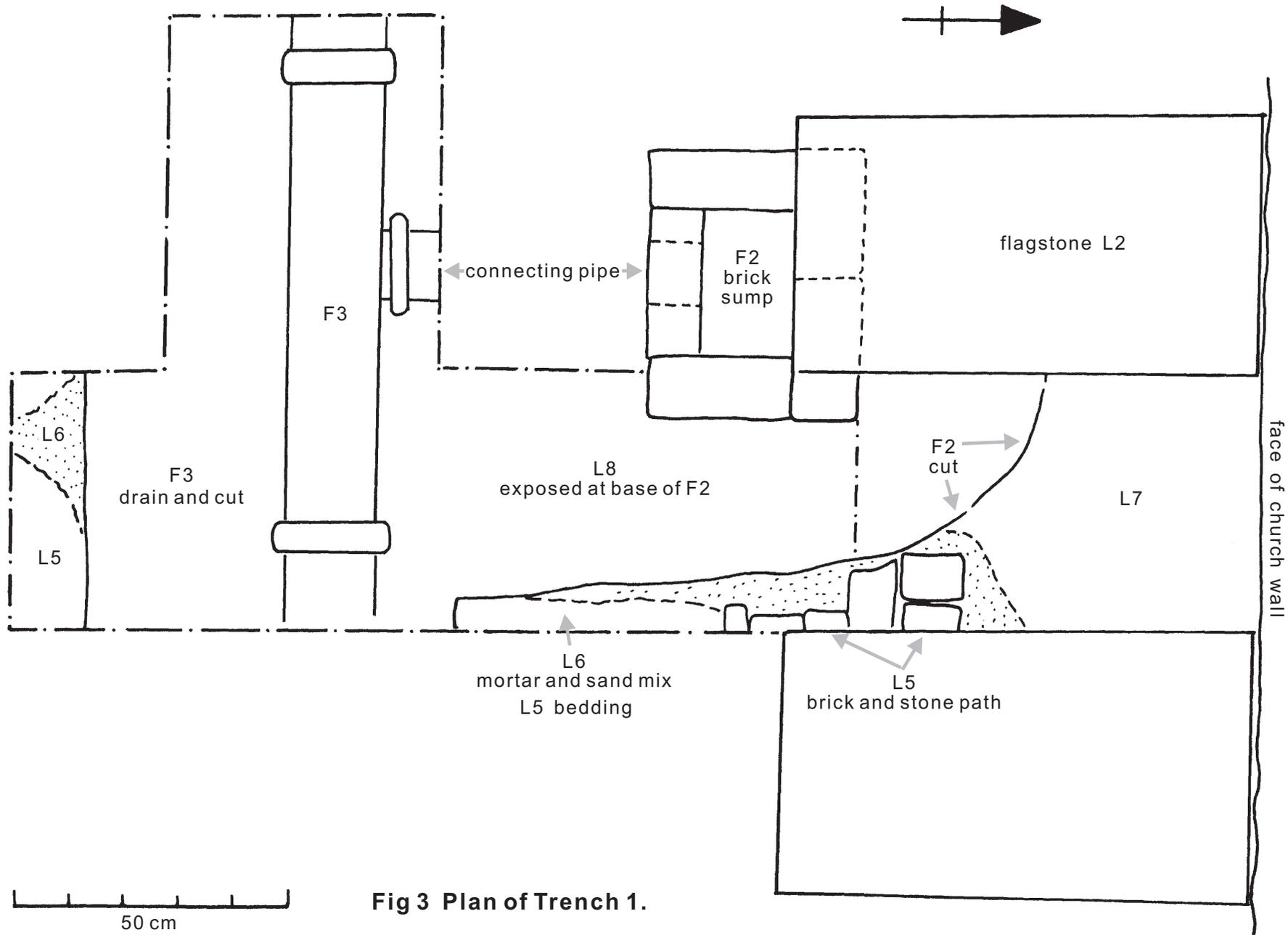


Fig 3 Plan of Trench 1.

Archaeology

The lowest horizon (L8) contained peg-tile, and is therefore most likely to be medieval or post-medieval. The next lowest, L7, which is sealed by L4 close to the church wall, also contained peg-tile, along with occasional Roman tile and amorphous mortar lumps. It is likely that all the Roman debris in L4, L7 and L8 is derived from demolished Roman buildings under or close to the church. L4 was cut by F2, the cut for the construction of the brick sump (also F2). This is contemporary with F3, the cut for the connecting pipe (and the pipe itself). The dating of F3 is given by a single piece of Fabric 40 ware of 16th- to 19th-century date (not very precise). Elsewhere this same trench (ie F7 in T2) is dated by finds to the post-medieval period. The drain cuts (F2, F3) are sealed by L3 and L2 topsoil respectively.

5.2 Trench 2 (Figs 3-6)

Drainage

Here, as in T1, the stone slab L1 was angled so that rainwater would drain off south into the surface channel, and thence into the drain via the brick sump. The ceramic drain was intercepted at a distance of 1.5m from the face of the church wall, and at a depth of 700mm below the top of the brick sump and 750mm below modern ground. The archaeological feature F7 was the trench cut to lay the pipe (this is the same trench as F3 in T1 and F10 in T3). On the eastern edge of the trench, the side of a brick sump (similar to that fully exposed in T1) was seen. It consisted, in section, of six courses of mortared brick, 430mm (18 inches) deep. Limited surface clearance at ground level on the east side of the trench exposed the top of the sump. It was seen to be full of soil, but it was not emptied.

Archaeology

This was the most interesting trench from an archaeological point of view. The top surface near the church was a stone slab (L1). South of the drain line it was the grass cover over topsoil (L2) in the graveyard. L1 was lifted, to reveal a grave (F5) which had been cut hard against the angle of the buttress and church wall. It was not the intention to excavate graves unnecessarily, so this was only emptied as far down as was reasonable to expose the architectural detail of the church wall (800mm deep). At this level, no coffin or bones were visible.

The exposed church wall was constructed as follows. The wall was not built on natural ground, but on L9 (a gravelly sand) which sealed L10 (a stony clay silt deposit). L9 and L10 extended below the bottom of the trench. At the base of the wall where it cut L9 were three thin bands of material, as follows (from top to bottom): beige sandy mortar (20mm thick); orangey brown sandy silt (20mm thick); and sandy clay with small stone fragments (40mm thick). Over those bands lay two courses of septaria stone in a brownish yellow mortar. The block sizes were typically 150mm wide by 100mm deep. Over that lay two loose courses of septaria and brick (not dated) in the same brownish yellow mortar. The total depth of the two regular plus the two irregular courses was 450mm (18 inches), and this was offset 100mm south of the church wall. Above that level, and set back 100mm north, was a band of mortar obscuring the wall face, and above that the main fabric of the church wall which was (where drawn here) septaria and Roman brick in brownish yellow mortar. The question of whether the adjacent

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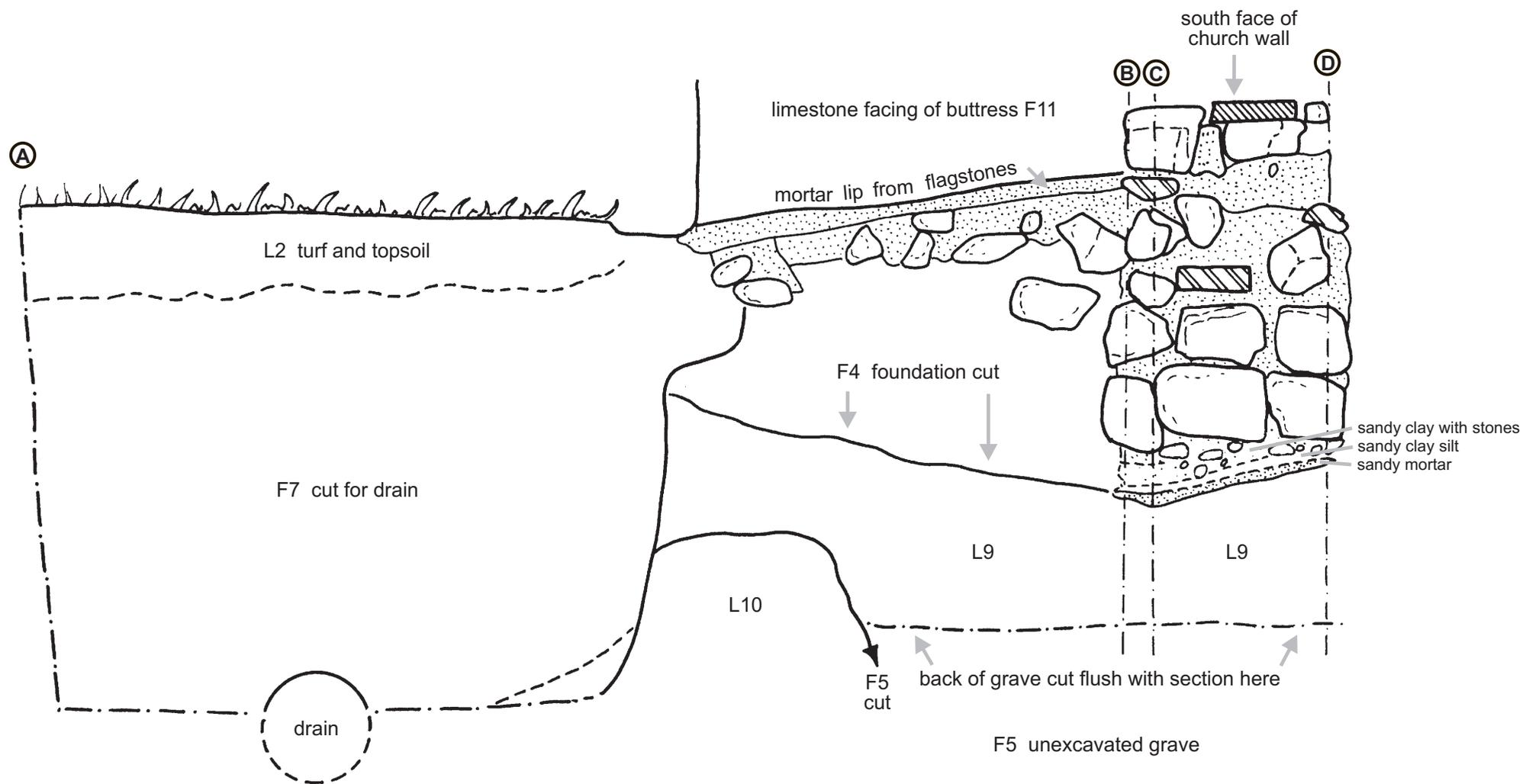
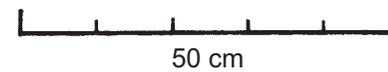


Fig 4 West face of Trench 2 and south wall of church.



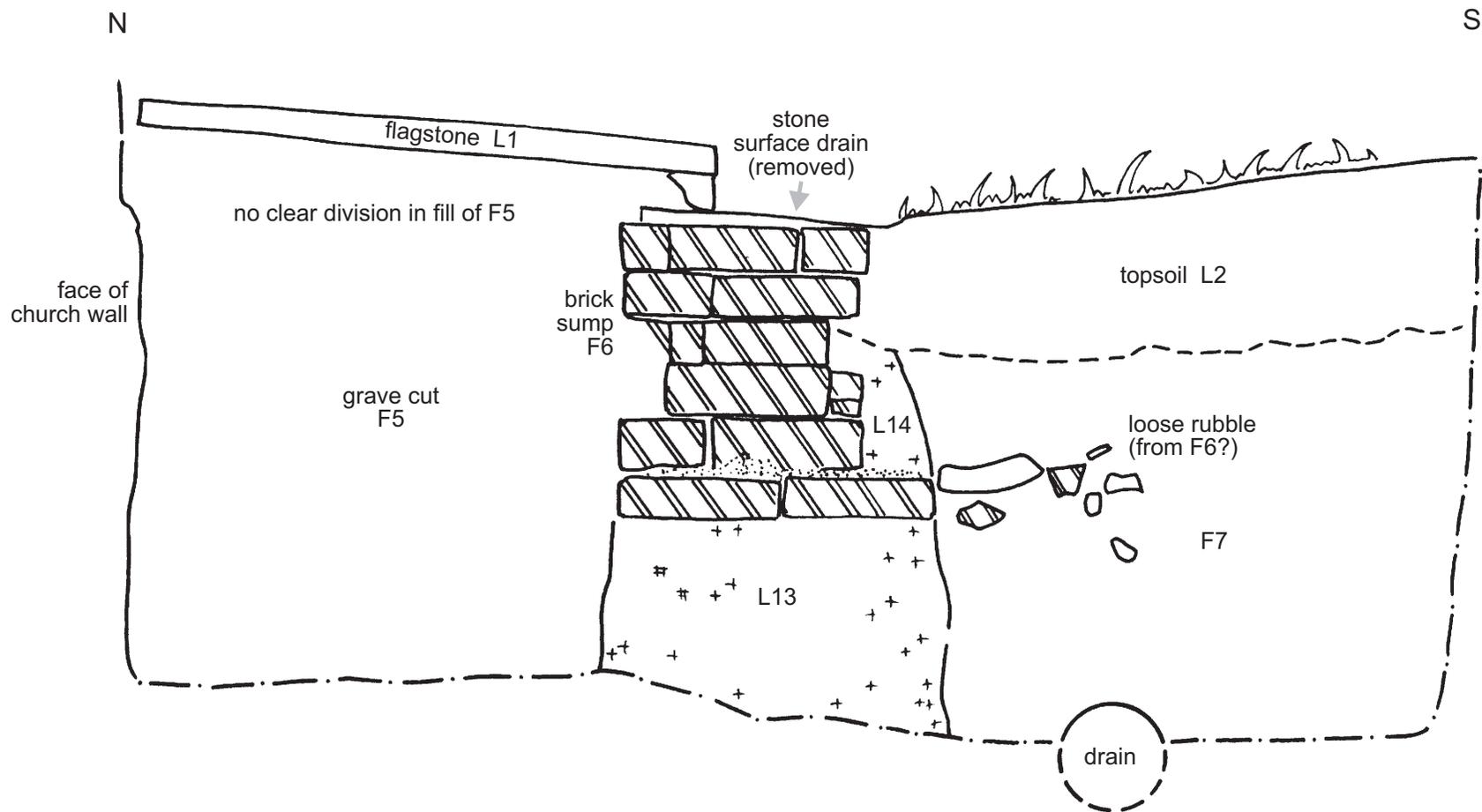


Fig 5 East face of Trench 2.

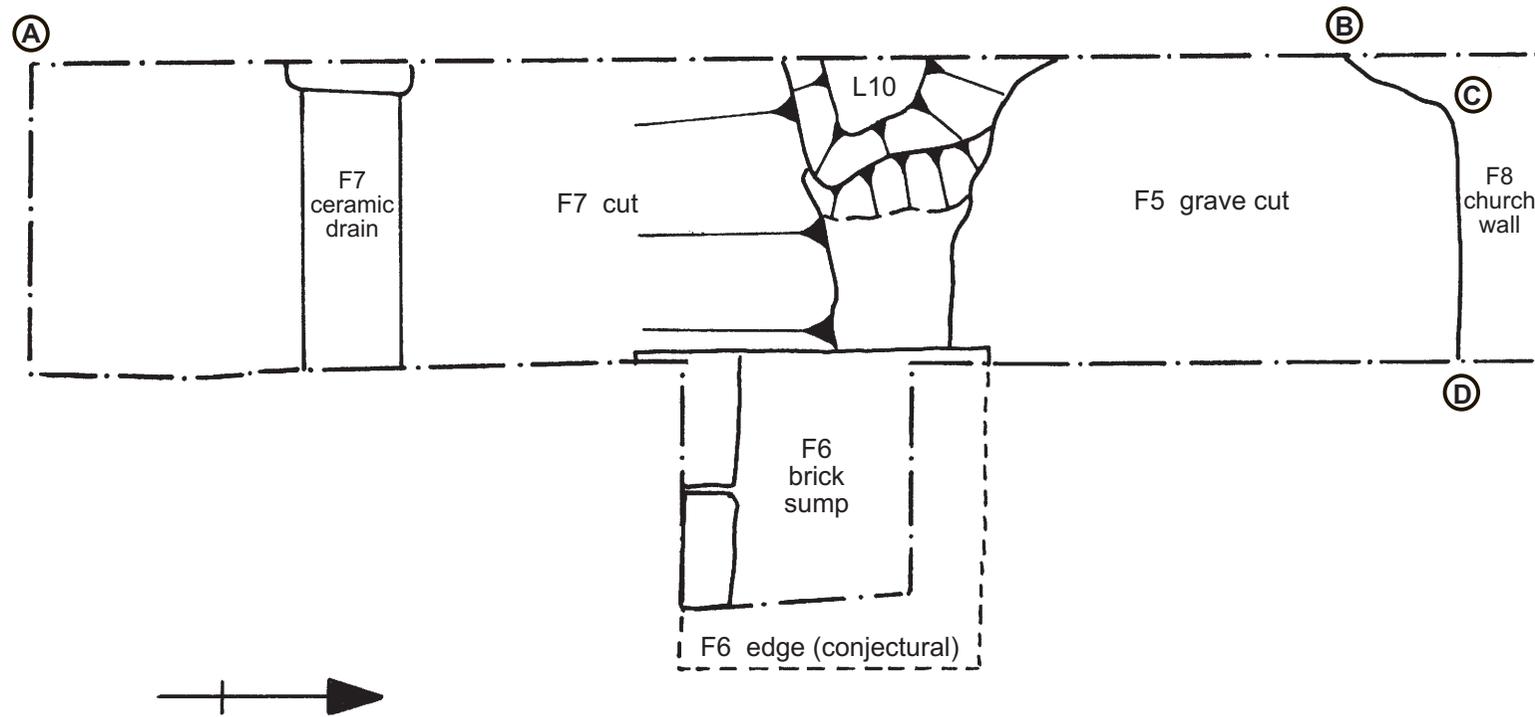


Fig 6 Plan of Trench 2. (A) - (D) refer to Fig 4.

50 cm

buttness was contemporary with the wall is difficult to answer. At the base of the ashlar blocks at the foot of the buttness was a band of modern mortar 20-50mm thick (associated with the flagstones). Below that was a layer of uncoursed septaria in brownish yellow mortar (60-150mm thick). Due to the position of septaria blocks at the point where the buttness met the wall, it was impossible to tell whether the buttness was applied to an existing wall. There was no detectable difference in the mortars between wall and buttness. Below the septaria-in-mortar layer, the buttness foundation was different to the church wall foundation. A trench F4 had been cut down to the level of the church foundation, and then filled with a rather loose gravelly sand with occasional septaria blocks. F4 had been cut (as had the wall foundation) into L9. This may imply that the buttness was applied to an existing wall, and that the builders dug down to find the bottom of the church wall, infilled the trench with gravelly sand, and built the buttness on top.

Trench 2 matrix

Cuts	Detail	Date
F5	grave cut	later 19th century
F6	brick sump	19th century?
L13	graveyard soil	post-medieval
F11	buttness	15th century?
F4	buttness foundation	15th century?
F8	church wall	Norman
L9	demolition debris	Norman or Roman
L10	demolition debris	Norman or Roman

5.3 Trench 3 (Figs 7-8)

This trench was dug against the west edge of the pathway leading to the pebble-dashed church extension (Fig 1).

Drainage

The ceramic drain was found at a depth of 900mm, and 1.5m south of the church wall. The archaeological feature F10 is the trench which was dug to lay the drain.

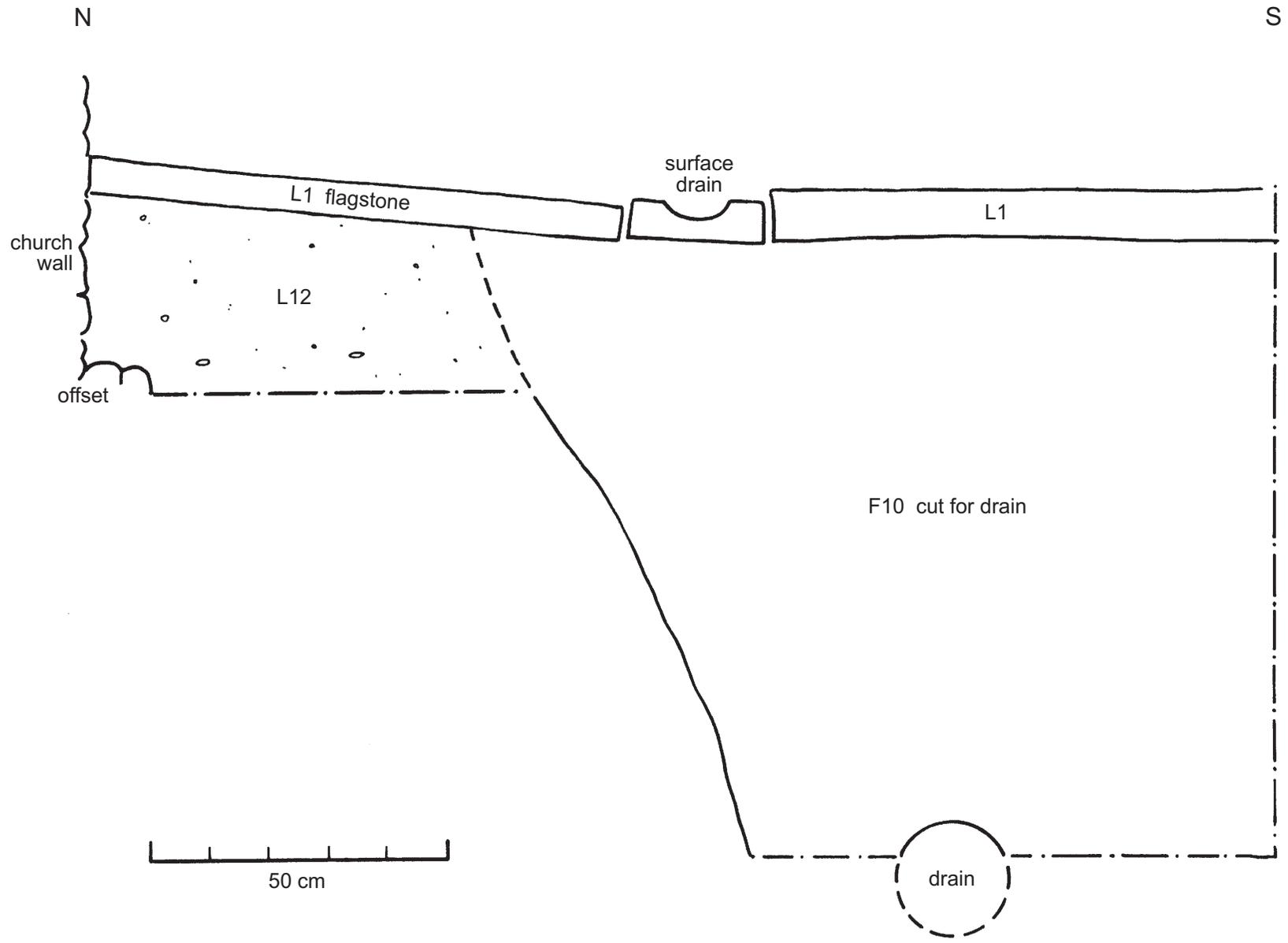
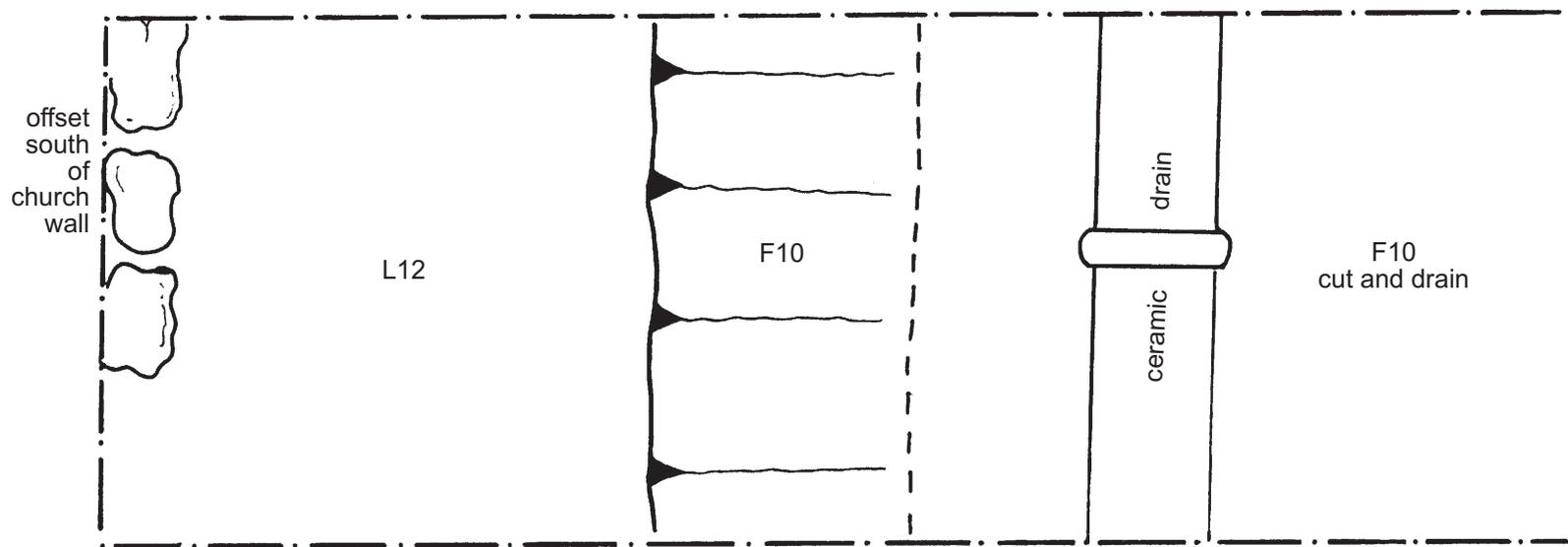


Fig 7 East face of Trench 3.



offset
south
of
church
wall

L12

F10

drain

ceramic

F10
cut and drain



Fig 8 Plan of Trench 3.



50 cm

Archaeology

F9 was an offset of the south church wall, projecting 100mm south of the wall face. This was sealed by a thick deposit (L12) of dark yellowish brown sandy loam, which must be graveyard soil (mixed soil upcast by grave-digging). This was cut by a trench F10 in which the ceramic drain had been laid. This drain cut was sealed by the surface drainage channel, and by the stone slabs L11 (though not directly over this trench).

6 The finds

6.1 Finds list ³

Weights are grammes. Medieval and later fabrics are after Cunningham (1985) and Cotter (forthcoming).
U/S = unstratified

T	Context	Bag no	Qty	Wt	Description	Finds date
1	F3	2	1	35	Dark green-glazed base fragment from a jar in Fabric 40.	16th-19th cent
2	F7	1	1	330	Edge fragment of limestone ashlar with traces of fine tooling; tiny piece of 2.5mm-thick adhering plaster - face worn but probably white painted - 82 x 67 x 47mm.	medieval or post-medieval
2	F7	1	1	125	Heavy cistern? Base in Fabric 40, ginger-colour glaze inside and outside.	16th-19th cent
2	F7	1	1	35	Plain handle fragment in Fabric 21 or 21a.	15th-16th cent
2	F7	1	1	3	Clay tobacco-pipe stem fragment; 8mm diameter, 3mm bore.	post-medieval
2	F7	1	1	20	Ring-necked flagon fragment.	Roman
2	F7	1	1	5	Sherd of stoneware Fabric 45a.	16th-17th cent
2	F7	1	1	2	Sherd of stoneware Fabric 45-type.	16th-17th cent
1	L4	3	1	170	Fragment of floor tile in a pale orange to orange fabric with some grog temper of the same colour - incomplete size: 75 x 80 x 27 mm - dark green glaze on upper surface.	post-medieval

³ Roman pottery by Stephen Benfield (CAT); medieval and later pottery by Howard Brooks (CAT).

7 Discussion and interpretation

- 7.1** The exploratory trenches have revealed a drainage system which works as follows: the perforations in a surface-built stone drainage channel allow rainwater to run into below-ground brick sumps. From the sumps, connecting pipes transfer the water to the main drain-pipe, which falls quite steeply to the east. The construction date of this drain is not known with any precision, but it is certainly post-medieval, and might be contemporary with the 1870-71 repair work at the church.
- 7.2** The pipe sits in a deep trench which has cut through all the archaeological deposits on the site. The trench bottom was not reached, but can be estimated at 600mm below modern ground at T1, and at 1.0m below modern ground at T3. At that depth, the pipe trench was still in a medieval or post-medieval horizon - nowhere were Roman levels or natural ground seen. It would seem, therefore, that there is an area of already-disturbed soil along the line of the drain, and repair work to the drain (if along the present course) would not damage anything of archaeological value.
- 7.3** It is more difficult to extrapolate the information from this exercise to other points on the site. It is certainly true that nothing earlier than medieval or post-medieval deposits were seen at the maximum excavation depths, but excavations to a greater depth elsewhere on the site may penetrate into earlier, undisturbed, and more important archaeological deposits.
- 7.4** The archaeological information can be broken down into two distinct points. First, the deposits not directly connected with the drainage system were graveyard soils - upcast from many centuries of grave-digging - which is precisely what one would expect on this site. Second, there was not much information about the fabric of the church. The position of T2 would be at the south end of the original south transept (if the hypothesis that the church was originally transeptal is true). Therefore the church foundation as seen in Figure 4 may be taken as the normal arrangement for the early medieval church. The point of interest here is whether the buttress was original to that period, or applied later. The difference in construction between wall and buttress would certainly imply that the buttress was applied to an existing wall. In fact, this may be inferred from Rodwell and Rodwell's figure 10.8 (Rodwell & Rodwell 1977), where this particular buttress is not shown in the plan of the late medieval church. An appropriate date for the addition of the buttress might be the 15th century, when RCHM⁴ suggests a period of rebuilding on the south aisle.
- 7.5** The deposits seen in the test trenches are not necessarily pre-medieval at all. The lower deposits did contain sufficient Roman derived debris to suggest that demolished Roman structures lie below the church, as one would expect within the town walls of Roman Colchester.

4

RCHM 1922, page 36

8 Acknowledgements

The work was commissioned by Mr Simon Marks of Purcell Miller Tritton on behalf of the Parish of St James'. Site work was supervised by Howard Brooks, and carried out by Alec Wade and Nigel Rayner; original figures by AW and NR. The project was monitored by Martin Winter for Colchester Borough Council and by David Andrews for the Diocese.

9 References

- | | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|---|
| Cunningham, C M | 1982 | 'A typology for post-Roman pottery in Essex', in <i>Post-medieval sites and their pottery: Moulsham Street, Chelmsford</i> , by C M Cunningham and P J Drury, CBA Research Report 54 , 1-16. |
| Cotter, John | forth-coming | <i>Medieval and later pottery from excavations in Colchester 1971-86</i> , Colchester Archaeological Report 7 . |
| Morant, Philip | 1748 | <i>History and antiquities of Colchester</i> . |
| RCHM | 1922 | <i>An inventory of the historical monuments of Essex: North-East Essex</i> . |
| Rodwell, Warwick, and Rodwell, Kirsty | 1977 | <i>Historic churches: a wasting asset</i> . Council for British Archaeology Research Report 19 . |

10 Glossary

ceramics	pottery
context	specific location on an archaeological site, especially one where finds are made
ESMR	Essex Sites and Monuments Record
feature	an identifiable thing like a pit, a wall, a drain, a floor. Can contain 'contexts'
intrusive	early material out of place in a later context (eg a Coca-Cola bottle in a Roman pit)
medieval	from AD 1066 to Henry VIII
NGR	National Grid Reference
natural	geological deposit undisturbed by human activity
post-medieval	after Henry VIII and up to Victorian
residual	an earlier object out of place in a later context (eg a Roman coin in a Victorian pit)
Roman	period from AD 43 to around AD 430
U/S	unstratified (no context)

11 Archive deposition

The finds and paper archive are held at Colchester Archaeological Trust, 12 Lexden Rd, Colchester, Essex C03 3NF, but both will be permanently deposited at Colchester Museum, under accession code 2000.26.

12 Site data

12.1 Site context list

Trench	Context	Description	Finds date	Context date
1	F1	Stone drain slab		1870s?
1	F2	Brick sump and its cut		1870s?
1	F3	Drain and its cut	post-medieval	1870s?
2	F4	Foundation cut		15th century?
2	F5	Grave cut		later 19th?
2	F6	Brick sump and its cut		1870s?
2	F7	Drain and its cut	post-medieval	1870s?
2	F8	Church wall		Norman
3	F9	Church wall offset		Norman
3	F10	Drain and its cut		1870s?
2	F11	Buttress		15th century?
1	L1	Flagstone		1870s?
1	L2	Topsoil		post-medieval
1	L3	Topsoil		post-medieval
1	L4	Demolition debris	post-medieval	post-medieval
1	L5	Brick floor		post-medieval
1	L6	Foundation for L5		medieval/post-medieval
1	L7	Demolition debris		medieval/post-medieval
1	L8	Graveyard soil		post-medieval
2	L9	Demolition debris		Norman or Roman
2	L10	Demolition debris		Norman or Roman
3	L11	Flagstone		modern
3	L12	Graveyard soil		post-medieval
2	L13	Graveyard soil		post-medieval
2	L14	Graveyard soil		post-medieval

12.2 Soil descriptions

Context	Description
L1	Stone flagstone.
L2	Very dark brown sandy loam with common small grits, occasional small stones.
L3	Very dark brown sandy loam with common small grits, occasional small stones.
L4	Yellow brown sandy loam flecked with mortar. Common small grits, occasional small stones, peg-tile, human bone.
L5	Surface consisting of cream coloured and red bricks, and pieces of limestone.
L6	Very light yellowish brown sandy mortar mix.
L7	Yellow brown sandy loam flecked with mortar. Common small grits, occasional small stones, peg tile, human bone.
L8	
L9	Orange brown sandy clay silt with common stones.
L10	Mid orange brown sandy clay silt with occasional small stones, and occasional flecks of charcoal and mortar.
L11	Modern concrete path.
L12	Dark yellow brown sandy loam, common mortar flecks, peg tile, brick frags, human bone.
L13	Very dark greyish brown slightly sandy clay loam with occasional stones, flecks of mortar.
L14	Dark greyish brown slightly sandy clay loam with occasional stones, flecks of mortar.

Howard Brooks
8th May 2000

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