

# Excavation and recording at 11 Short Wyre Street, Colchester, Essex, in 1988

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## Summary

The archaeological work at 11 Short Wyre Street took place during the contractor's redevelopment works. The site straddles the Roman town wall on the south side of the wall circuit, and the archaeological work consisted of the recording of the north (inner) face of the Roman town wall and a Roman culvert within a modern cellar, a small excavation into the Roman rampart, and limited recording of deposits in the contractor's stanchion holes to the south of the town wall. The Roman town wall survived to the height of the top of the second band of tile courses. The inner face where sealed by the rampart was covered with a white deposit.

The Roman culvert was constructed of mortared tiles with an arched roof, and projected back from the wall line a short distance into the town area. The culvert incorporated a relieving arch of tiles where it passed through the town wall. The culvert was on the eastern side of the north-south Roman street forming the western boundary of Insula 38a. This aligned it approximately with the right-hand side of the street looking towards the centre of the Roman town. This is the usual position for culverts in the town wall (Crummy 2003), though it is a little further to the east than might be expected for it to relate directly to the outside edge of the street footway. Evidence from two earlier excavations (7-15 Long Wyre Street in 1978-9 (CAR 6, 355-65) and the Co-op excavation 1998, pp 26-104) suggests that this street was a post-Boudican addition to the street grid, while the position of the culvert in relation to the right-hand side of the street suggests that this part of the latter post-dates the building of the town wall. Interval towers on the town wall are also known to be located at the ends of street lines adjacent to culverts; however, the inner wall face showed that there was no interval tower at this location. The outer face of the town wall had been refaced in the medieval period and had a substantial batter, though the opening of the Roman culvert had been retained. The edge of a large cut south of the wall may represent the location of the north side of the medieval town ditch.

## Introduction (Figs 1 & 2)

The archaeological work at 11 Short Wyre Street took place early in 1988 during redevelopment of the site for a new 'Swag Shop' premises. The site spans the area of the Roman town wall between Short Wyre Street and Vineyard Street, and a major part of the redevelopment involved the construction of a new floor which was cantilevered over the town wall and supported on stanchions located on both sides of the wall line. The archaeological recording and excavation were carried out during the early phase of this work.

The site consisted of three areas. Inside the town wall (in Insula 38a), most of the site was occupied by a deep cellar, the south wall of which was the Roman town wall. The floor of the cellar was just below a wall offset at the base of the inner face of the Roman wall. In the centre of the wall were the well-preserved remains of a Roman culvert. A breach through the wall had been

made to provide an access to the cellar. This had resulted in the removal of 1.5m of the wall and part of the culvert.

To the west of the cellar, a small part of the rampart survived within the limits of the site. The top of the rampart was just below the level of the modern street surface. The site continued south of the wall, where it was at a lower level than the floor in the cellar, and extended as far as the positions of the in-filled Roman and medieval town ditches.

## The inner face of the Roman town wall (Fig 3)

The Roman town wall had been used to form the south wall of the cellar and was well preserved over the entire length of the cellar, about 9.0m east to west. On the east side, much of the internal wall face was preserved to the top of the second tile course at approximately 1.8 m high. In the centre of the wall was a Roman culvert. However, the construction of an access to the cellar had removed a length of approximately 1.5m of the wall just to the west of the culvert. The wall face was recorded photographically as far as possible, although small parts of its surface were obscured by modern render.

The foundation of the Roman wall was only seen in the contractor's trench to the east of the Roman culvert, where it was 0.95m deep and consisted of septaria pieces set in a brown sandy loam mortar. At the top of the foundation was a small offset about 0.2m in height, which is the beginning of the faced wall, and which consisted of one course of septaria blocks below a single course of tile. Above the offset, the construction of the wall face was as follows: three courses of septaria blocks (total height about 0.4 m), four courses of tile (total height about 0.25 m), four courses of septaria blocks (total height about 0.62m), and four courses of tile (total height just over 0.25 m). All of the facing had been completed in *opus signinum* mortar. Many of the tiles used in this section of the Roman wall face were clearly broken pieces rather than whole tiles, an occurrence which has been noted in other sections of the Roman town wall (CAR 6, 18; Crummy 2003). The wall face to the top of the second tile course only survived in the eastern part of the wall. West of the modern access, the face had been robbed and replaced by brickwork above the first line of the second course of septaria.

## The Roman culvert (Figs 4 & 5)

The contractors had exposed the culvert during the excavation of a foundation trench along the inner face of the Roman wall. This had removed much of the east side of the culvert and cut through its base. However, part of the culvert had been removed previously when a concrete foundation pillar was inserted into it. The exposed culvert was planned and sections drawn.

The culvert consisted of a single arched tile-built structure mortared with *opus signinum* on a yellow-brown mortar base. The total width of the structure is estimated to be about 1.2 m and it is about 1.1m high. The central culvert channel formed by the culvert was approximately 0.6m wide and just over 0.6m high with a downward north-south gradient of about 1 in 25. The culvert extended approximately 1.3 m north of the inner face of the wall with a roughly-finished end at that point. Where the culvert passed through the town wall, a relieving arch of tiles had been constructed over it, creating a double-arched structure, estimated to be just under 2.0m wide.

The culvert had been built in a trench cut into the natural sand which, on the exposed east side, was between 0.2m and 0.3m wider than the finished culvert. The material filling the cut was almost identical to that of the wall foundation, only being distinguishable from it by the apparent absence of septaria. Approximately 0.05m of this material underlay the base of the culvert. The base of the culvert, estimated to be approximately 1.0m wide, was constructed of large broken pieces of tile mortared together with *opus signinum* on a raft of yellow-brown

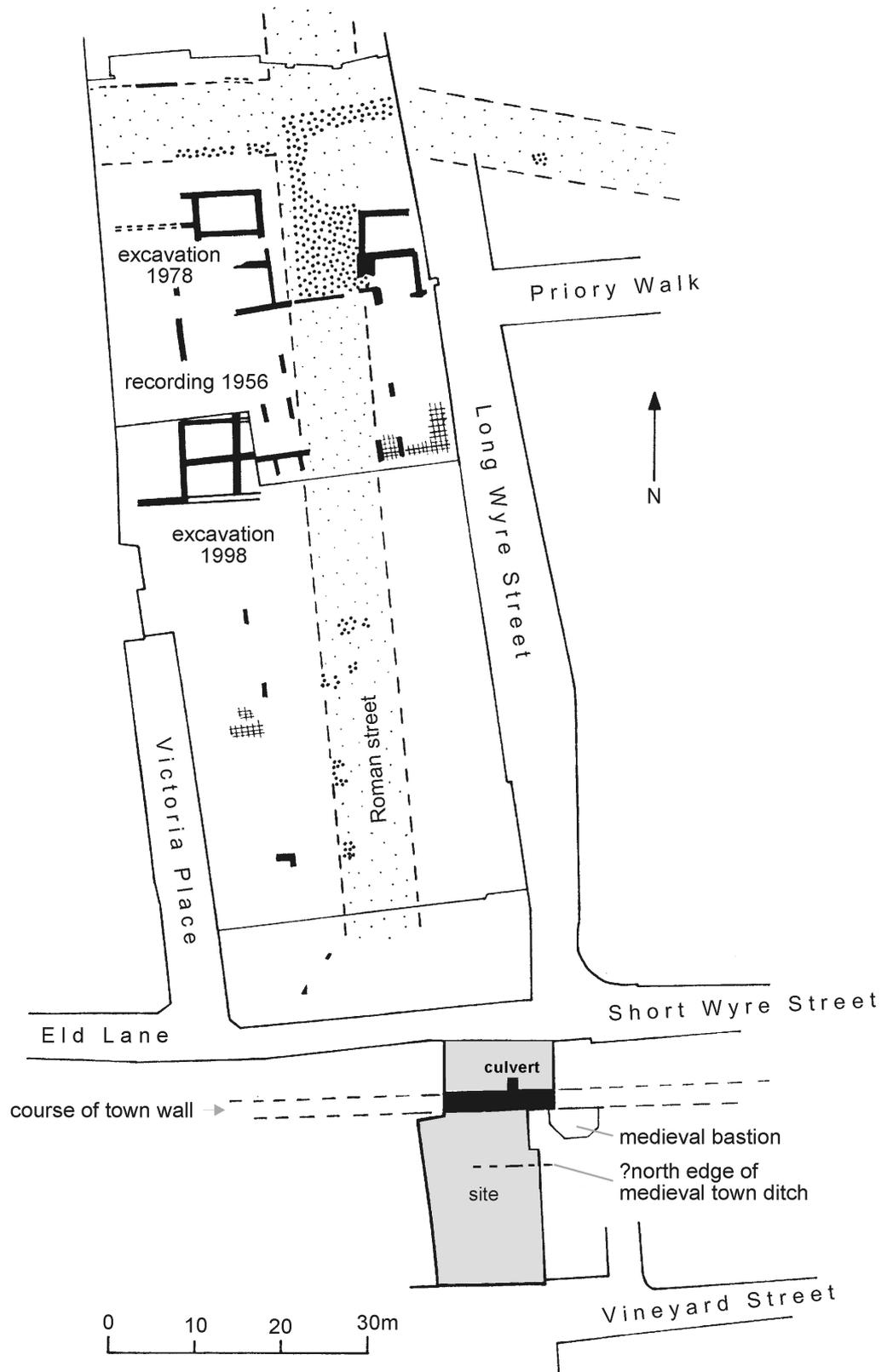


Fig 1 Site location showing the position of the Roman culvert in relation to the Roman streets. Reproduced by kind permission of Ordnance Survey © Crown Copyright NC/2004/24432.

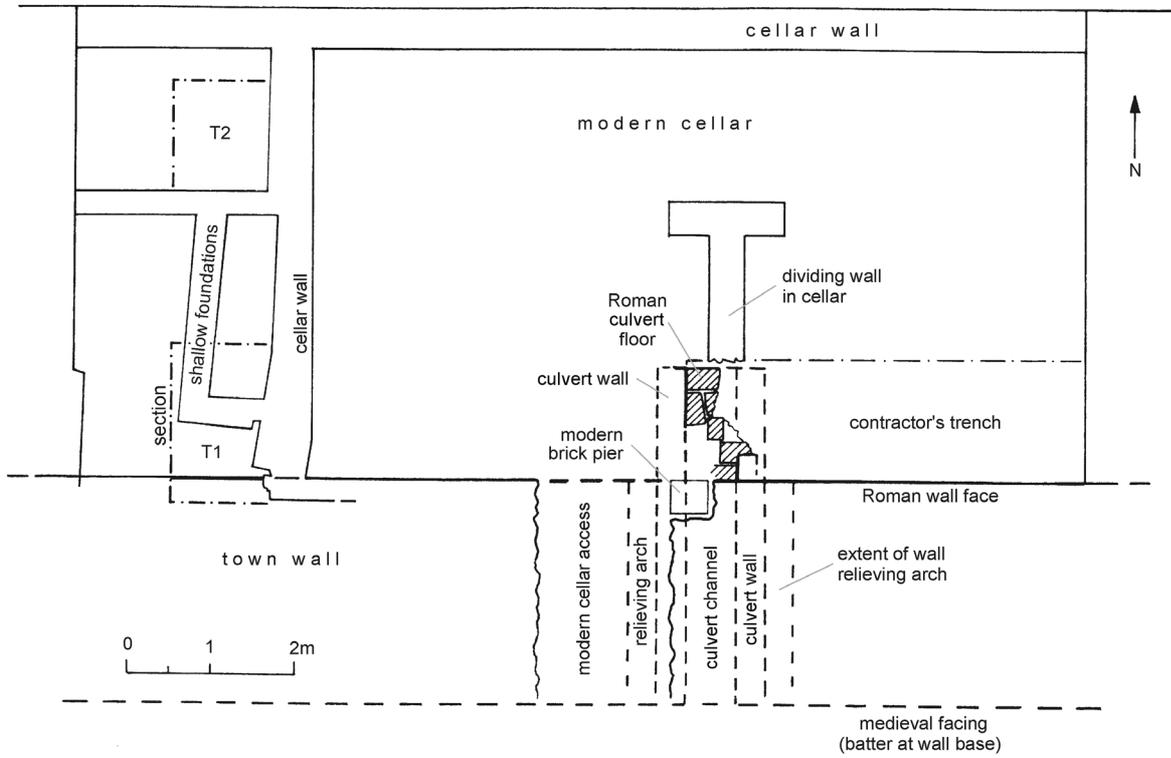


Fig 2 Detail of north area of the site. North extent of the cellar is shown approximately. The width of the town wall based on the section in CAR 6, 62.

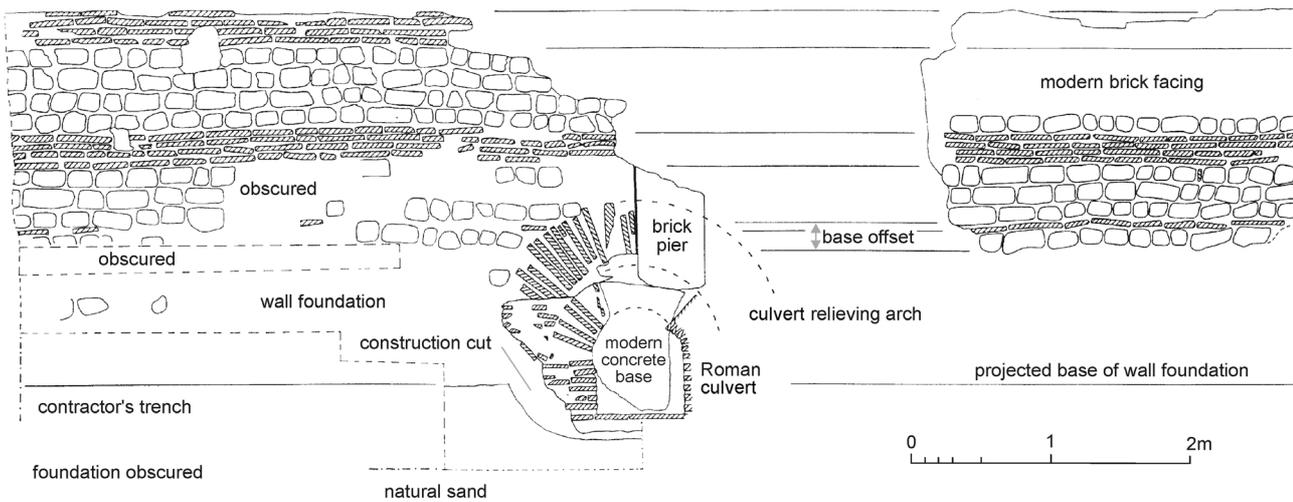


Fig 3 Elevation showing the interior face of the Roman town wall and the Roman culvert.

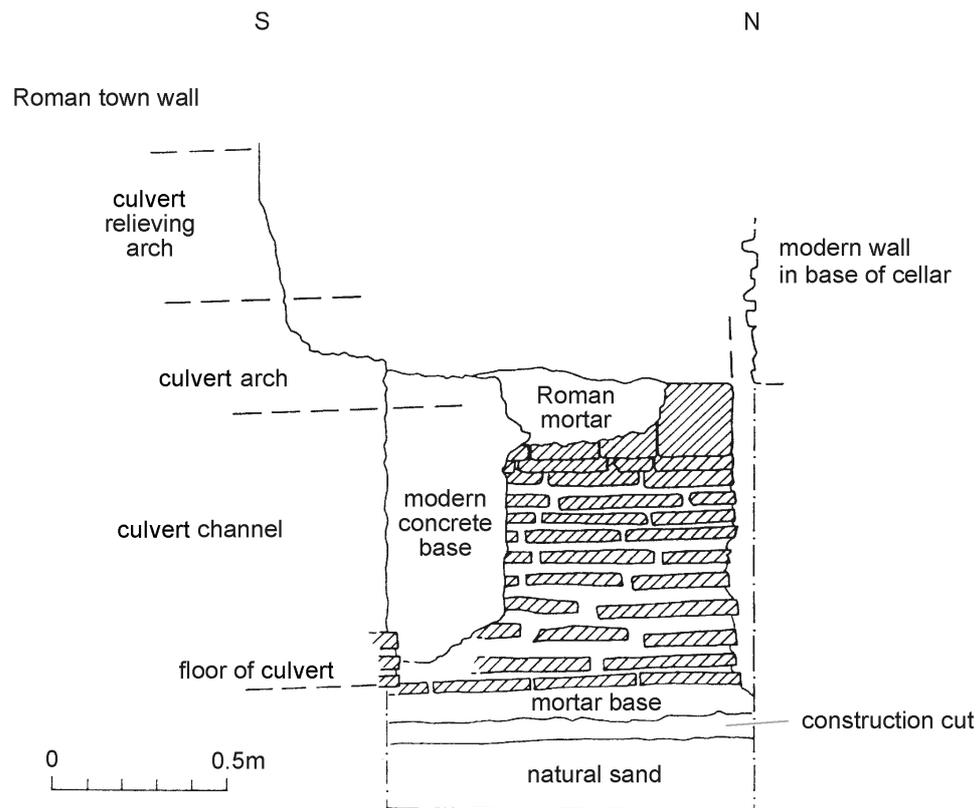


Fig 4 Lengthwise section through the culvert.

mortar just under 10cm thick. The upper surface of one of the tiles carried a large C- or J-shaped signature mark. The two sides of the culvert were built on this base. They were constructed of tiles set in *opus signinum*, so as to leave a central channel 0.6m wide. At approximately 0.5m above the culvert floor, the tiles were tilted to form the culvert arch. The exterior shape of the side of the culvert, represented by the east side close to the wall face, sloped up from the base to the full width of the relieving arch, and this appeared to be of one build. The Roman town wall was carried over the culvert on the relieving arch.

On the culvert floor, a thin layer of dark silt survived which was considered to be *in situ* material from the use life of the culvert. This was collected as a sample and examined by Peter Murphy. He described the material as 'a muddy deposit with a high sand content containing charcoal, mollusc shell, small vertebrate remains etc, but with no real organic content' (letter dated 29.02.88).

#### Discussion of the culvert and town wall in relation to the Roman streets

Almost all of the known Roman wall culverts are located at the ends of the streets in the Roman town (Crummy 2003; CAR 6, fig 2.9). They are built in masonry where they pass through the town wall, but for the most part the drains for which they provide the outfalls would have been made of timber. These culverts are usually located on the right-hand side of the street as viewed inwards towards the centre of the town (Crummy 2003). The culvert at 11 Short Wyre Street is in this position in relation to the

north-south Roman street in Insula 38a (Fig 1, p 11). Although the culverts were associated with interval towers, being both at the ends of streets where they meet the wall (Crummy 2003), it is clear from the internal wall face of the town wall exposed at 11 Short Wyre Street that there was no interval tower adjacent to the culvert here.

The excavation in 1978-9 at the northern end of Long Wyre Street indicated that the stretch of street forming the western boundary of Insula 38a was a post-Boudican extension of one of the major north-south streets laid out c AD 50 for the foundation of the colony (CAR 6, 355-65). Subsequent work further down Long Wyre Street in 1998 (pp 26-103) supports this conclusion and the post-Boudican date proposed for the street.

The position of the culvert at 11 Short Wyre Street and the absence of an adjacent interval tower both provide yet more evidence that this part of the street system was a later addition. The culvert is not aligned exactly on the eastern side of the street or footway, but instead lies a few metres east of the east side of the street and this part of the street were not conceived as one. Moreover, the absence of an interval tower suggests that there was no street in this position when the town wall was built since the towers seem to have formed stops to the streets where they met the wall. Since the construction of the town wall is dated to c 70-85 (Crummy 2003), then the section of street forming the west side of Insula 38a was presumably constructed in the late 1st or first part of the 2nd century. This would place it in Colchester Period 4 (CAR 6, 15-18).

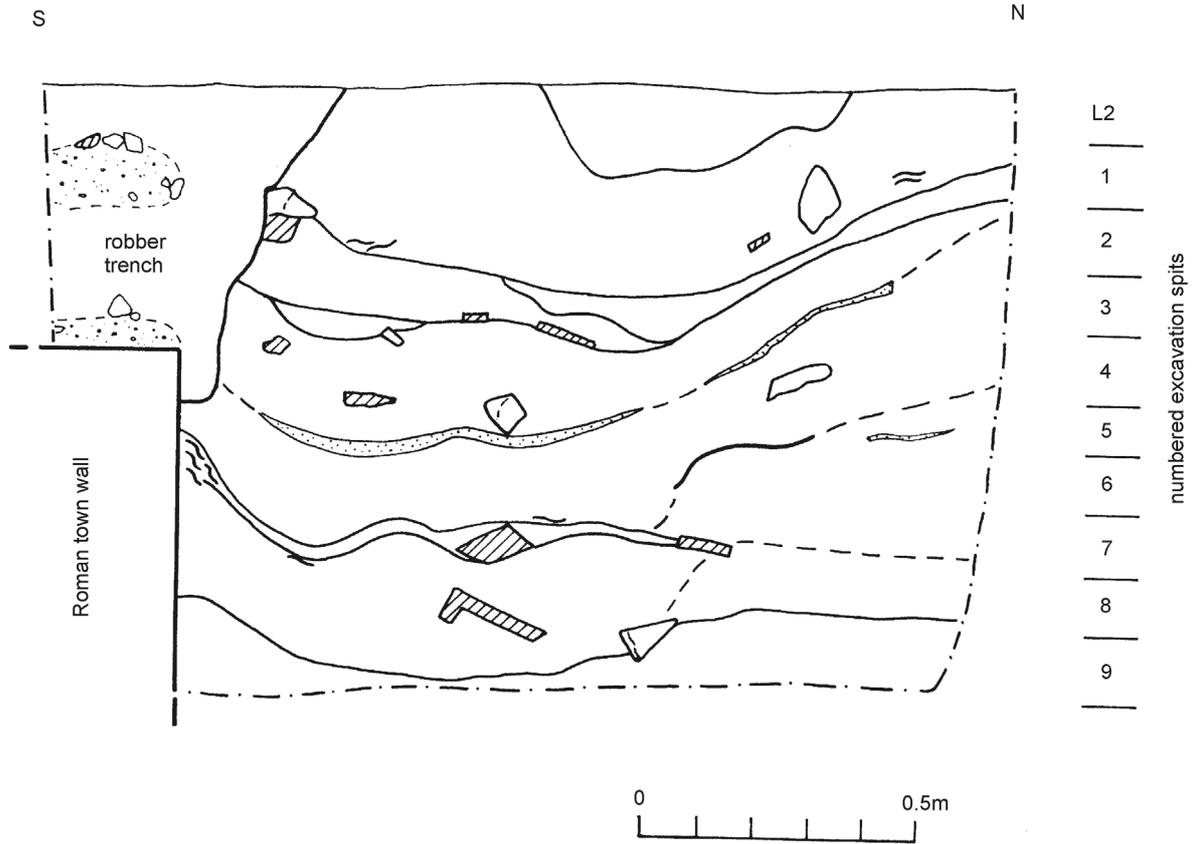


Fig 5 Trench 1, section in rampart.

**Other construction work in the cellar area and elsewhere**

In addition to the trench in front of the wall which exposed the Roman culvert, two stanchion holes were excavated by the contractors in the cellar area. These appear to have been located in the north-west and north-east corners of the cellar, though there is no record of their exact positions. There are two section drawings in the original site record which relate to these two stanchions and which show the depth of stratigraphy below the southern edge of Short Wyre Street on to natural sand as 2.9m in the NW stanchion hole and 2.5m in the NE stanchion hole.

Observations of contractor's stanchion holes south of the town wall revealed a batter at the base showing that the wall had been refaced in the medieval period, and that the Roman culvert had been retained as an open feature at that time. Part of a large feature, possibly the north edge of the medieval town ditch, was recorded 6.5m south of the wall line

**The excavation of the rampart (Figs 2 & 5)**

The rampart survived to the west of the cellar to just below street level such that the uppermost part of it (measuring in area about 2.0 m x 5.0 m) was approximately level with the top of the remaining Roman town wall on the east side of the cellar. This indicated a total depth of surviving deposits here of approximately 1.8 m above the base of the wall offset. Two trenches were excavated in advance of the contractor's groundworks, in positions which more or less corresponded to the sites of two stanchion bases. Trench 1 (1.8m x 1.0m) partly straddled the inner wall face, and Trench 2 (1.25m x 1.0m) was located just to the south of Trench 1 close to Short Wyre Street. The site of Trench 2 was found to have been heavily disturbed by

post-medieval pitting. However, Trench 1 proved much more useful since, apart from a robber trench along the line of the inner wall face and a small modern pit, it cut well-preserved Roman rampart. This trench was excavated to a depth of 1.1m, and since it was difficult to distinguish and follow individual tip-lines in the body of the rampart, the excavation was carried out in 9 spits each approximately 10 cm deep.

**The excavated sequence in Trench 1**

The trench partly straddled the line of the inner face of the town wall which was not a surface feature at this point. The wall was located approximately 0.5 m down at the base of a robber trench which was clearly recognisable as it was filled with pockets of debris from the robbed wall. This feature was excavated before the rampart was reduced in spits. Although the rampart make-up survived up to the cleared ground-level, the upper surface was cut by shallow foundations of modern walls (F5 and F7), and a modern pit (F9) had removed part of the rampart deposits in the north-east corner of the trench.

The excavation section showed that the rampart comprised at least 14 recognisable layers of material, all of which appeared to slump slightly into an area just behind the wall line. The individual layers were not readily recognisable during excavation and presumably they represent dumping, probably discrete tips, of material on to the rampart which were difficult to isolate (CAR 3, 14). These were all composed of sandy loam, though the layers in the lower half of the section had a slightly higher sand content. As in other sections of the rampart, the layers contained small quantities of demolition debris made up mainly of tile, mortar, plaster and probable fragmented daub blocks (CAR 3, 14).

### The dating evidence for the rampart

The dating of the rampart deposits at 11 Short Wyre Street relies entirely on a small quantity of stratified pottery, weighing approximately 2.5 kg. This material is listed in the archive report together with all other stratified finds from the rampart.

As there are no clear differences in the dates of the pottery sherds in terms of depth, the material can be treated as one group. The latest-datable pottery types appeared in the early-mid 2nd century, and all of the excavated rampart here must be of at least of that date as pottery of this period was recovered from the lowest spit (spit 9). The two samian sherds are both probably South Gaulish and 1st century in date. The latest-datable pottery types are as follows (pottery fabric codes and dating as in CAR 10):

- a small quantity of black-burnished ware (BB1 and BB2) (CAR 10, Fabric GA and GB) sherds from jars of form CAM 279A, Hadrianic-mid 2nd century (spits 7 and 9), and a bowl CAM 37A, Trajanic/Hadrianic-late 2nd/early 3rd century (spit 4).
- part of a Late Colchester colour-coat roughcast folded beaker (CAR 10, Fabric CB) which dates from the early-mid 2nd to mid 3rd century.
- rim from a CAM 268 jar in coarse grey ware (CAR 10, Fabric GX) early-mid 2nd to late 3rd/4th century (spit 3).

Though some of the pottery types have a wide date range, there is an absence of material that need date later than the 2nd to early 3rd centuries, and this date can be assigned to the pottery from the rampart in Trench 1. This is generally in accord with pottery dating obtained from other sections of the rampart of c AD 150 (CAR 3, 14). The date of this material suggests that the deposits excavated are part of the main phase of the rampart (Rampart 1), as pottery from a later phase identified at Lion Walk (Rampart 2) is dated c AD 250-350 (CAR 3, 73).

### The Roman town wall in Trench 1

Below the robber trench, excavation of the rampart deposits exposed the inner Roman wall face to a depth of about 0.65 m. The sealed face was covered with a white deposit which has been observed previously at other sites on the wall (CAR 6, 64), and samples of this were taken. Analysis of material from other sites has shown this phenomenon to be of natural origin and not a coating such as whitewash (CAR 6, 64-5).

### The extra-mural area south of the town wall (Fig 1)

The area south of the wall was bounded by Vineyard Street and encompassed the area occupied by the backfilled series of ditches of Roman to medieval date known to front the town wall. On this part of the development, the contractor excavated three parallel rows (north-south) of stanchion holes. A watching brief was maintained during the excavations, though observation was difficult as shuttering often obscured the sides.

The stanchion hole in the north-east corner of this area had been cut at the base of the wall just in front of the outlet for the Roman culvert. The lowest part of the wall here had a substantial batter, projecting at its base approximately 0.5m proud of the wall face. This shows that this section of wall had been refaced in the medieval period c AD 1400), as the batter is a feature of this work (CAR 3, 84). It should be noted that the end of the Roman culvert was blocked with bricks, which suggests that this was retained as an open feature when the wall was refaced. At this point, the natural sand was encountered at approximately 2.2m below the ground surface. Away from the wall, the sides of the stanchion hole showed only dark brown sandy loam overlying natural. The only recorded feature was a layer of peg-tiles at between 0.7m and 1.0m below ground level, but peg-tile fragments extended through the soil almost to the top of the natural.

The next stanchion hole to the south in the eastern row revealed a cut into the natural sand at its base (2.7m deep), the edge of which was approximately parallel with the line of the town wall. The cut was filled with dark brown sandy loam, indistinguishable from the rest of the soil in the section above it. This cut may represent the north edge of the medieval town ditch as it occurred in approximately the same position in relation to the town wall as at Lion Walk (CAR 3, sheet 6a, Sx 62).

### Finds

There is some discussion of finds in the section on dating evidence for the rampart (above). Other finds are listed in the archive report.

### References

- CAR 3 Colchester Archaeological Report 3, *Excavations at Lion Walk, Balke Lane, and Middleborough, Colchester, Essex*, by Philip Crummy, 1984
- CAR 6 Colchester Archaeological Report 6, *Excavations at Culver Street, the Gilbert School and other sites in Colchester, 1971-85*, by Philip Crummy, 1992
- CAR 10 Colchester Archaeological Report 10, *Roman pottery from excavations in Colchester, 1971-86*, by R P Symonds and S Wade, ed by Paul Bidwell and Alex Croom, 1999
- CAT Archive Report 44 Excavations at the Co-operative Society's store, 21-31 Long Wyre Street, Colchester, April-May 1998, by Howard Brooks, 1998
- Crummy, Philip, 2003 'Colchester's Roman town wall', in *The archaeology of Roman towns: Studies in honour of John S. Wacher* (ed Pete Wilson), 44-52