

A watching brief on the erection of a gate and railings in St Botolph's priory grounds

May-June 2000

**on behalf of
Colchester Borough Council**

TL 9999 2497
CAT project ref: 00/4D
Archive code: 2000-35



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Summary

Post-pits for a new gate and 190m of railings in the grounds of St Botolph's priory revealed residual human remains and light scatters of re-used early building materials. The majority of pits were no more than 70cm deep and did not penetrate beyond post-medieval levels.

Introduction

In May and June 2000, contractors for Colchester Borough Council erected a new gate and railings along the perimeter of the grassed area to the east of St Botolph's priory church. A guardianship monument (Essex SAM no 4), maintained through a local management agreement between English Heritage and Colchester Borough Council, St Botolph's is primarily of archaeological importance as the site of the earliest house of Augustinian Canons in England. In the priory grounds, the area enclosed by the new fencing is known to contain buried remains of the priory church, and also graves and Roman remains. The archaeological involvement in the work took two forms: a regular watching brief on the contractor's pits for railing posts, and advance excavation of larger trenches for gateposts at the St Julian Grove entrance to the grounds.

The archaeological fieldwork was commissioned by Colchester Borough Council and observed the requirements detailed in the Borough's *Guidelines on standards and practices for archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester* (1996a) and *Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester Museums* (1996b).

A small quantity of human skeletal material was temporarily removed from the site with the permission of the Home Office (licence no A2595) under Section 25 of the Burial Act (1857). The remains were subsequently reinterred in the priory grounds.

Results

St Julian Grove gate

At the St Julian Grove entrance to the grounds, trenches for the three main gateposts were manually excavated by Colchester Archaeological Trust. Trenches 1 and 2 were combined into one with the smaller Trench 3 located 4m to the north (Fig 1). The stratigraphy noted below was similar in both trenches, with modern intrusions in the form of a concrete post foundation (Fig 2: F3) and drain (Fig 3: F1).

Trench 1/2 (Fig 2: plan and section)

- L1 Topsoil, imported for landscaping in 1992.
- L2 Dark greyish brown sandy loam with occasional fragments of slate, Roman tile, peg-tile, mortar and oyster shell.
- L3 Dark brown sandy loam with common fragments of peg-tile, also occasional Roman tile and septaria.
- L4 Yellowish brown sandy loam with occasional small fragments of tile, oyster shell and septaria. This layer appeared at the bottom of the trench and was not excavated.

Trench 3 (Fig 3: plan and section)

- L1 Topsoil, imported for landscaping in 1992.
- L5 Dark brown sandy loam with occasional small fragments of mortar, Roman tile and oyster. Earlier topsoil, pre-dating construction of the engineering factory.
- L6 Yellowish brown sandy loam with occasional small fragments of tile, oyster shell and septaria.

Pottery from L3 and L5 indicates that almost all of the exposed soil stratigraphy was post-medieval and later. The exceptions were the identical layers L4 and L6, which in composition differed from the overlying soils and lacked any discernible post-medieval inclusions. These may be associated with an earlier phase of activity.

Railings

The erection of approximately 190m of railings involved over 70 post-pits, most spaced at 2.75m intervals. The post-pits were typically 30cm x 55cm x 70cm deep, with some variation from pit to pit. The accompanying plan (Fig 1) shows the locations of specific pits referred to in this report: more detailed layout plans and records may be found in the site archive.

Line A

On this part of the east boundary, twelve 60cm x 50cm trenches were dug to a depth of 75cm, revealing modern infill material.

Line B

Six holes were observed, all 25cm square and 60cm deep. All six revealed only modern rubble.

Line C

This length of railings was erected alongside a breeze-block boundary wall and entailed excavation of a 25cm deep continuous trench with 80cm-deep offsets at 2.75m intervals. In total, five post-pits were inspected in the western and central stretch. The overall stratigraphy

in this region consisted of 30cm of modern topsoil (L7) above a yellowish brown sandy loam with occasional small fragments of oyster shell and tile (L8). The bottom of the pit situated 14.5m from the north-east corner (Fig 1, pit C3) contained a number of bone fragments including a child or infant's right mandibular condyle and parts of an adult's left tibia, as well as an iron nail and a small to medium-sized animal femur. The human remains appear to be residual and although tentatively attributed to the widespread deposit L8, it is possible that they might be associated with a localised feature which was obscured by the limited size of the post-pit.

Line D

Section D was a short single panel north-south offset between sections C and E. At its northern end the 60cm deep post-pit, dug from the higher level of the garden behind the former St Botolph's parish hall, exposed the base of the breeze-block wall at the west boundary of no 2 Priory Street. The breeze blocks were found to have been laid on an earlier footing constructed from a variety of red bricks, the latest of which was 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches thick.

Line E

Five post-pits were inspected along the length of section E. The pits varied in depth from 75cm to 90cm and at no point penetrated soils earlier than 19th-century in date.

Line F

The pits for the four uprights nearest to the north gatepost were between 50 and 60cm deep, 35cm wide, and 55cm to 65cm long. In all four pits, 10cm of recently deposited topsoil rested on a thick layer of dark greyish brown sandy loam topsoil which extended beyond the bottom of the trench.

Line G

Trenches along the south side of the St Julian Grove pavement were on the line of a modern brick foundation.

Line H

This length of fencing flanked the north transept of the priory church. The post-pits here were 70cm deep, with the exception of pit H5 (Fig 1) which was dug to 1.35m. The five pits on the east-west line contained 15-20cm of dark modern topsoil (L31) above a similar but earlier layer of dark greyish brown sandy loam with occasional minute flakes of oyster shell and very small red brick fragments (L32). This material extended down beyond the limit of excavation in four pits. In the deepest pit (H5), it continued to 1.05m overall, where it merged into a dark brown sandy loam (L33) containing occasional small septaria fragments. Adult human skull and distal tibia fragments with old breaks were recovered from L33, which evidently includes the contents of disturbed graves. The date of this layer is uncertain. On balance, it seems more likely to be post-medieval than earlier, given the inclusions which point to demolition in association with disturbed burials. Human bone was also found at an overall depth of

approximately 60cm within L32 in pit H6. In this instance, the find was a residual tibia fragment which again displayed old-established breaks.

Line J

The easternmost five posts were mounted on ground-plates since they stood over a partly filled underground chamber belonging to the engineering works which occupied the site until the 1980s. The results from the other five observed holes to the west were unremarkable, exposing 60cm of dark greyish brown sandy loam which, from the results of previous exploratory trenches in this region (CAT Reports 32 and 39), is likely to be of 19th-century and later date.

Finds

Finds by context:

Finds no	Context	Description
1	Trench 1/2: L2	Pottery: samian, Drag 36 plate rim.
2	Trench 1/2: L3	Pottery: Fabric 40 post-medieval red earthenware, 16th- 19th century; base of grey ware jar, Roman.
3	Trench 3: L5	Pottery: yellow-glazed post-medieval, 16th-19th century; grey ware sherd, Roman.
4	pit C3: L8	Pottery: grey ware sherd, Roman.
5	pit C3: L8	Iron nail.
6	pit C3: L8	Human bone: child/infant's right mandibular condyle and skull fragments; adult (age 16-23+) proximal left tibia with several shaft fragments. Animal bone: femur shaft of a small to medium-sized mammal, possibly a cat. Small quantity of other unidentified bone which could include human material.
7	pit H6: L32	Human bone: tibia fragment.
8	pit H5: L33	Human bone: adult distal tibia and skull fragments, unidentified rib fragment.

Archive

The site records and finds will be deposited with Colchester Museum for permanent storage under cover of CM archival code 2000-35. All human remains affected by the works have been reinterred in the priory grounds.

References

CAT Report 32: A watching brief at Britannia Works, March 1999

CAT Report 39: An archaeological evaluation at St Botolph's priory, July 1999

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Mr J Barber and Mr M Winter of Colchester Borough Council, and also Singer and James Ltd for their interest and co-operation in the course of the works. The gatepost trenches were excavated and recorded by Nigel Rayner. Finds were identified by Alec Wade (human and animal bone from C3/L8), Stephen Benfield (Roman pottery), and Howard Brooks (post-Roman pottery).

Carl Crossan, December 2000

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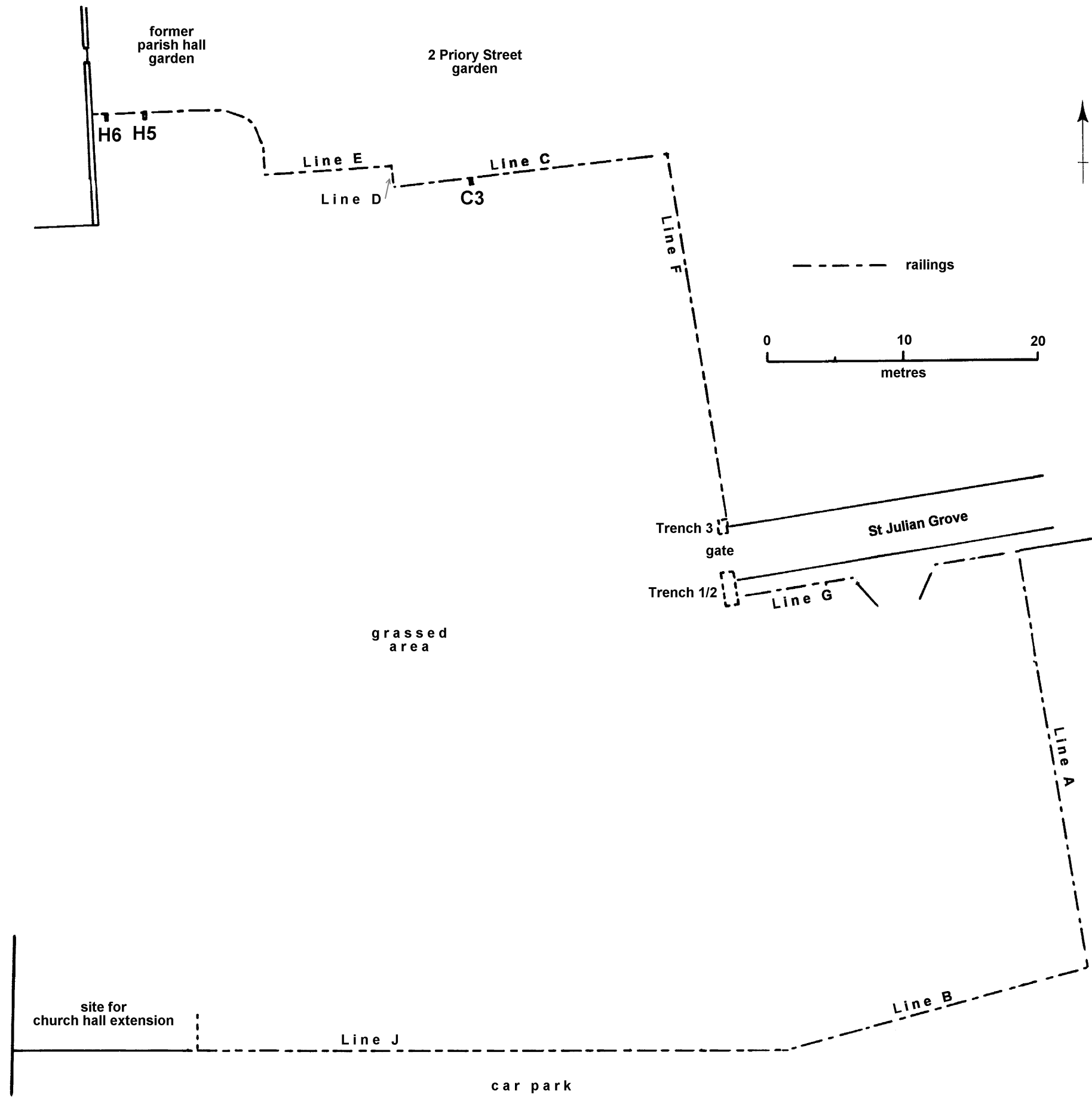


Fig 1 Site plan.