

An archaeological evaluation at 4 St Peter's Street, Colchester, Essex

October 2001

**on behalf of
RLMH Ltd,
Builders and Developers**

NGR: TL 9942 2554
CAT project ref.: 01/10a
Planning application no: F/COL/01/1337
Colchester Museum accession code: 2001.200



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CAT Report 164
November 2001

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1 Summary

An evaluation by two trial-trenches at 4 St Peter's Street, Colchester, Essex located a mortar floor at 1.5m below present ground. The associated dating evidence is not conclusive; the floor could be medieval or Roman. Fragments of a medieval louver suggest that a high status medieval house stood nearby.

2 Introduction

- 2.1 This is the report on an archaeological evaluation carried out by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) on the 16th and 17th of October 2001 on behalf of RLMH Ltd, Builders and Developers. Proposed work is the construction of five terraced houses which is the subject of planning application F/COL/01/1337.
- 2.2 The site of no 4 St Peter's Street is occupied by a disused building (which is to be demolished) and its yard. It fronts St Peter's Street and is located on the east side of North Station Road (Fig 1), at National Grid Reference TL 9942 2554. The site is divided from the car park of St Peter's Court by a brick wall and lies approximately 0.8m above it. The site was overgrown at the time of the evaluation.
- 2.3 This report follows the standards set out in the Borough Council's *Guidelines on standards and practices for archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester* (1999) and *Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester Museums* (1996), and the IFA's *Standard and guidance for an archaeological evaluation* (1999).

3 Archaeological background

- 3.1 The site is in an archaeologically sensitive area, being only 35m north of the wall of the Roman town. Although extra-mural, the site is near the River Colne and the presumed Roman river crossing, and downhill from the north gate of the Roman military fort and *colonia*.
- 3.2 Some 220m to the west, in 1979, CAT excavated Roman buildings, kilns and a road at the Middleborough site (now occupied by the Royal London Insurance Building: Essex Heritage Conservation Record or EHCR no 13293; Brooks & Crummy 1984, 155-209). To the north, Roman masonry walls have been discovered at 6 Middleborough (EHCR 12282) and under what is now St Peter's Court.
- 3.3 Medieval activity might also be expected here close to the north gate. John Speed's map of 1610 shows development along the south edge of St Peter's Street at that date. There were medieval houses fronting Middleborough in the medieval period.
- 3.4 An archaeological evaluation was carried out in 1998 by CAT, two blocks to the east at St Peter's House. The ability of waterlogged soils to preserve organic materials was demonstrated on this site by the discovery of post-medieval timber piles, a wooden water-main and a leather shoe. The 1998 evaluation also recorded a substantial Roman gravel construction, possibly a bank or a road along the previous course of the river or a now defunct creek (Benfield 1998).
- 3.5 The site is therefore likely to be in an area of Roman suburbs and riverside activity, as well as potential medieval suburbs.

4 Aims and objectives

The aim of the archaeological work was to determine the location, character, extent, date, significance and quality of any surviving archaeological remains. Using this information, an informed decision can be made on any future necessary archaeological work.

5 Methods

- 5.1 The fieldwork was carried out by two professional archaeologists from CAT and the project management by Howard Brooks. It was monitored by Martin Winter, the Archaeological Officer for Colchester Borough Council. Two trenches in the L-shaped area adjoining no 4 St Peter's Street were excavated by mini-digger with a toothless ditching bucket. The size of the trenches was dictated by the narrow area available and the lack of space for spoil.
- 5.2 All exposed sub-soil features and archaeological deposits were manually cleaned, drawn in section and plan and examined in sufficient detail to allow their nature, date and importance to be assessed and excavated.
- 5.3 Individual records of excavated contexts, layers, features or deposits were entered on pro-forma record sheets.
- 5.4 Registers were compiled of finds. Finds were washed, marked and bagged according to context and seen by specialists.
- 5.5 Two soil samples were taken from Layer or L5, and sent off for analysis to Val Fryer, an environmental specialist (Appendix 1).
- 5.6 The photographic record consists of general site shots and shots of all archaeological features and deposits. Standard 'record' shots of contexts were taken on a digital camera. Colour transparencies were used for overall site shots and all important contexts.

6 Results

6.1 Trench 1 (Figs 2-5)

The trench was dug on the northern side of the disused building. A concrete surface was taken off. The trench was started at 1.8m wide but had to be narrowed to 1.2m wide to avoid a drain. Under the concrete, a brick wall foundation on the northern side of the trench had to be cut through. This ran east to west and was made of red unfrogged bricks measuring 65mm x 110mm x 210mm. This was probably part of a building which is shown still standing here on the 1:500 aerial survey of Colchester Borough taken in 1976. The make-up for the concrete surface consisted of dark brown sandy loam and brick hardcore (L1), and it extended to approximately 200-350mm below ground-level (bgl).

Under the make-up for L1 were post-medieval layers L2-L4, which extended to a depth of between 1.3m and 1.5m bgl and consisted of clays with different contents of silt and sand. These sealed layers L5, L6 and L7, and contained abundant peg-tile and post-medieval pottery.

On the extreme western edge of the trench underlying layers L2-L4 was a yellow-brown clay and mortar layer containing *opus signinum* chunks and Roman brick (L6). This appeared to be debris from the demolition of a Roman structure, perhaps associated with the floor below (see Feature or F1). L6 was adjacent to and partially covered by a 200mm-thick, organic and odorous layer of dark brownish black clay (L5). This layer contained abundant wood and charcoal, Roman tile, sea shells, medieval pottery, peg-tile, and *opus signinum* chunks. L5 started at 1.35m bgl and extended over the western half of the trench. It is curious that there should be medieval material lying over what appears to be a Roman floor surface, especially with the adjacent layers (L6) of Roman mortar with *opus signinum* and *tesserae*. Normally, Roman floors are deeply buried by debris by the time that peg-tiles and fabric 20 pottery are in circulation, so we need to be clear about the implications of this. First, it is possible that the floor is medieval, not Roman at all, and that the Roman material is adjacent to it by accident. This would explain why medieval pottery is found in the layer over the floor. Second, and less likely, it is possible that there has been some erosion from the river, and that Roman (and post-Roman material) has been eroded off the site down to the Roman levels, after which material containing medieval pottery and peg-tile has been deposited on the surface F1.

On the eastern side of Trench or T1, a light brown silty layer containing abundant mortar flecks, oyster shell, medieval pottery and tile was recorded (L7). This layer started between 1.3m and 1.5m bgl and was partially overlain by L5. This must also be a medieval layer.

A section was taken across L5 to establish its depth, and a mortar floor surface was exposed underneath (F1). The eastern extent of the floor was found halfway along the trench (adjacent to L7). To the south, north and west, the floor appeared to extend beyond the limit of the trench. The surface of smoothed mortar was intact in most places, otherwise a loose creamy yellow mortar could be seen. Several loose *tesserae* were found, but none *in situ* as a tessellated floor. The top of this floor was at 1.54m bgl.

6.2 Trench 2 (Figs 2, 3, 4, 6)

This trench was dug to the east of the disused building to a width of 1.4m. The ground surface was slightly higher here than in the area of T1. The concrete was taken off and then the trench was dug to 740mm depth. Made-up ground of mid-brown sandy loam mottled with yellow sand and containing modern brick and slate was recorded (L8). Due to a lack of space for spoil, it was not possible to dig any deeper along the entire trench. Therefore a sondage was dug at the northern end to assess the depth of deposits (this is the part of the trench shown in Fig 5). At 1.8m bgl, a drain-pipe was encountered and therefore the trench was not taken any deeper. All the ground above this was the same disturbed ground, ie the fill for the pipe trench or material dumped after the laying of the trench. No significant archaeological deposits were reached.

7 Finds

7.1 Finds list (excluding pottery) by Howard Brooks

Table 1 Finds list.

Trench	Bag no	Context	Quant	Wt (g)	Description	Date
1	1	L2	1	155	<i>tegula</i> flat piece	Roman
1	1	L2	1	132	<i>imbrex</i> fragment	Roman
1	1	L2	2	240	animal bones	
1	2	L3	1		copper-alloy coin, 27mm diameter - illegible, probably a half-penny	post-medieval
1	2	L3	3	195	peg-tiles (2 with holes), of which 2 @ 100g discarded	medieval or later
1	2	L3	1	154	post-medieval brick fragment (discarded)	post-medieval
1	2	L3	1	26	animal bone	
1	2	L3	2	11	oyster shells	
1	3	L4	6	388	peg-tile fragments (1 with hole) of which 5 @ 327g discarded	medieval or later
1	3	L4	1	45	post-medieval brick fragment (discarded)	post-medieval
1	3	L4	1	19	oyster shell	
1	3	L4	1	5	animal bone	
1	4	L5	3	70	<i>tesserae</i> with mortar and/or <i>opus signinum</i> adhering	Roman
1	4	L5	1	72	<i>opus signinum</i> fragment	
1	4	L5	1	9	brick fragment	post-medieval?
1	4	L5	1	82	tile brick fragment probably Roman	Roman?
1	4	L5	6	227	peg-tiles (one with hole) of which 5 pieces @ 158g discarded	medieval or later
1	4	L5	1	2	modern-looking mortar fragment	modern?
1	4	L5	4	56	oyster-shell fragments	?
1	4	L5	3	11	clam-shell fragments	?
1	4	L5	6	46	peg-tiles	medieval or later
1	4	L5	1	25	Roman box flue-tile fragment	Roman
1	4	L5	3	111	indeterminate brick/tile fragments	?
1	4	L5	3	47	animal bones	
1	4	L5	1	113	animal bone	
1	4	L5	1	9	mortar fragment	
1	4	L5	2	36	<i>tesserae</i>	Roman
1	4	L5	3	9	clam shells	
1	5	L6	1	139 7	brick fragment 135mm+ x 180mm+ x 35mm thick	Roman
1	5	L6	1	146	tile fragment, almost certainly <i>tegula</i> flat piece	Roman
1	5	L6	1	48	animal bone	
1	6	L7	1	18	Fe nail	
1	6	L7	1	19	oyster shell	
2	7	L8	1	99	peg-tile	medieval or later
2	7	L8	1	143	animal bone	

7.2 Medieval and later pottery by Howard Brooks

Introduction

This is a report on a pottery group excavated by Colchester Archaeological Trust from a site at 4 St Peter's Street, Colchester, Essex in October 2001. The archive will be deposited in Colchester Museum under accession code 2001.200.

The material

A total of 27 sherds weighing 970g were examined. These came from 5 bags representing 5 site contexts. The material was classified according to Cotter (Cotter 2000). Material from each bag was listed, weighed and identified. These lists are summarised here as Table 2.

Discussion

This group is dominated by medieval grey wares (fabric 20) and locally-produced Colchester-type ware (fabric 21a) which form some 54% and 36% of the group by weight respectively. Colchester-type ware sherds with parallels are: a storage jar rim (*ibid*, fig 87.89) and a cooking pot (*ibid*, fig 91.123). Other fabrics include small quantities of post-medieval red earthenwares (fabric 40) and modern ironstone (fabric 48d). There was a single residual Roman grey ware sherd (fabric GX).

The group includes part of a louver. Although it is tempting to see this fabric as a reduced Colchester-type ware, it is in fact an undecorated and unglazed coarse grey, slightly sandy ware which is closest to fabric 20. One sherd shows part of a vertical opening. A second body sherd with an opening also has an adjoining fragment from a projecting canopy (Fig 6). This group is too fragmentary for any realistic reconstruction. Cotter (*ibid*, 159-65) would place this uncommon grey ware type in the 13th or 14th century. The sherds are from L2 on this site, which also has fabrics 40 and 48d (19th-20th century). In the unlikely event of a medieval louver only falling to the ground after some 600 years, we must conclude that the louver is residual in L2 on this site.

Table 2: weight of fabric types per bag and context.

Bag	Cont	20 qt	20 wt	21a qt	21a wt	40 qt	40 wt	48 qt	48 wt	Other qt	Other wt	Group date
1	L2	0	0	0	0					1	17	Roman
1	L2	0	0	0	0			1	8			19th-20th cent
1	L2	0	0	0	0	3	71					17th-19th cent
1	L2	5	500	0	0							Fragments of louver - fabric is coarse grey ware fabric 20
2	L3			1	35							Burnt and heavily reduced jug rim, probably fabric 21a
2	L3			1	8							15th-16th cent
3	L4	0	0	4	128							1450-1550; see Cotter 2000, fig 87.89
4	L5			8	156							15th-16th cent
4	L5	1	15	0	0							13th-15th cent
6	L7	0	0	1	26							Burnt, 15th-16th cent
6	L7	1	6									13th-14th cent
Total		7	521	15	353	3	71	1	8	1	17	997

8 Discussion

The remains of a mortar floor were found at 1.5m below ground-level in T1. The nature of the floor and the associated *tesserae* and *opus signinum* fragments would suggest a Roman date for this structure, but the finds overlying the floor were medieval pottery and tile. The natural assumption would be that the pottery dates the floor to slightly before the 13th-15th centuries. The problem with that interpretation is that it doesn't explain the Roman *tesserae* and mortar found in close association with the floor. Is there another explanation? The proximity to the river may be a clue. It is possible that river erosion has reduced ground-level here down to such a level that medieval material was dumped on the floor in the 13th century or thereabouts. There seems no strong case either way, but on balance a medieval date for the floor seems more likely. The discovery of sherds of a medieval grey ware louver in a residual position in L2 suggests there was a high status medieval house on or near this site. Louver sherds were also found at Middleborough (Cunningham 1984), which perhaps demonstrates that this was a prosperous corner of the medieval town.

9 Archive deposition

The full archive including a copy of this report, finds, digital data, photographs, plans and site notes will be deposited permanently with Colchester Museum under accession code 2001.200.

10 Acknowledgements

Colchester Archaeological Trust is grateful to Richard Hudson of RLMH Ltd, Builders and Developers, for commissioning the work, and to Martin Winter, Archaeological Officer for Colchester Borough Council.

11 References

- | | | |
|----------------------------------|------|--|
| Benfield, Steve | 1998 | An archaeological evaluation at St Peter's House, St Peter's Street, Colchester, CAT Report 25 |
| Cotter, John | 2000 | <i>Post-Roman pottery from excavations in Colchester, 1971-1985</i> , Colchester Archaeological Report 7 |
| Crummy, Philip | 1984 | <i>Excavations at Lion Walk, Balcerne Lane and Middleborough, Colchester, Essex</i> , Colchester Archaeological Report 3 |
| Cunningham, C | 1984 | 'Colchester-ware louvers', in Brooks & Crummy 1984, 211-14 |
| Brooks, Howard, & Crummy, Philip | 1984 | 'Excavations at Middleborough 1979', in Crummy 1984, 155-209 |

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Date: 27.11.01

Appendix 1: Plant macrofossils and other remains from 4 St Peter's Street, Colchester, Essex: an assessment

by Val Fryer

Introduction

Excavations at 4 St Peter's Street, Colchester, Essex revealed a deposit of organic material (described as river wash by the excavator) lying on top of a surface which may be a Roman floor-level. Two bags of material were removed for plant macrofossil analysis.

Methods

Sub-samples of the material were processed by manual water flotation/washover, collecting the flots in a 500 micron mesh sieve. As waterlogged plant remains were seen to be abundant at the time of processing, the flot was kept wet until sorted. The wet retents were scanned under a binocular microscope at magnifications up to x 16, and the plant macrofossils and other remains noted are listed on Table 1. Nomenclature in the table follows Stace (Stace 1997). With the exception of a single charred seed, all plant material was waterlogged.

The non-floating residues were collected in a 1mm mesh sieve and sorted when dry. Rare fragments of animal bone, tile and marine mollusc shell were noted. Waterlogged wood fragments were abundant.

Results

Plant macrofossils

Seeds/fruits of common weed species were generally present at a low to moderate density. Preservation was poor to moderate with many seeds being badly degraded and fragmented. It is of note, however, that fat-hen (*Chenopodium album*) seeds were abundant and well preserved, possibly indicating that these may be a later inclusion in the deposit. Other taxa noted within the assemblage included stinking mayweed (*Anthemis cotula*), cornflower (*Centaurea* sp.), nipplewort (*Lapsana communis*), indeterminate grasses (Poaceae), meadow/creeping/bulbous buttercup (*Ranunculus acris/repens/bulbosus*), lesser stitchwort (*Stellaria graminea*), and chickweed (*S. media*).

Wetland plant and tree/shrub macrofossils were also present at a very low density and included sedge (*Carex* sp.) and spike-rush (*Eleocharis* sp.), nutlets and seeds of rush (*Juncus* sp.), ragged robin (*Lychnis flos-cuculi*), lesser spearwort (*Ranunculus flammula*), and elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*). Other plant macrofossils included bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) pinnule fragments, small pieces of moss, and indeterminate seeds.

Other materials

Waterlogged arthropod remains were moderately common, but no other materials were noted.

Discussion

At the time of excavation, it was suggested that this deposit was possibly water-laid material derived from the River Colne. However, the matrix of the sample comprises a loose mat of waterlogged stem/root and wood fragments within which seeds/fruits and other plant remains are caught. Given that the majority of the seeds are of grassland taxa (most notably dry meadow species) and, to a lesser extent, ruderal plants, it appears most likely that this material represents a layer of hay/dried grass spread on a floor surface which subsequently became waterlogged/flooded. At present, the relationship of this deposit to the river and the post-depositional status of the context are not known, but the degraded state of many of the macrofossils may indicate that this deposit was subjected to intermittent periods of drying and re-wetting after the initial flooding. It is perhaps of note that fat-hen seeds are numerous within the assemblage and are notably better preserved than the other macrofossils. It is perhaps reasonable to assume that these are intrusive within the context, possibly introduced by subsequent animal activity.

Conclusions and recommendations for further work

In conclusion, the assemblage appears to be derived from a deposit of hay, which subsequently became waterlogged, possibly due to catastrophic flooding.

Although the species list for the sample is comprehensive, it is unlikely that quantitative analysis would further add to the given interpretation. Therefore, no further work is recommended.

References

Stace, C, 1997 *New flora of the British Isles*

Table 1: Plant macrofossils and other remains from 4 St Peter's Street, Colchester, Essex.

Context no		1 Trench 1, L5
Dry land herbs	Common name	
<i>Agrostemma githago</i> L.	Corn cockle	xf
<i>Anthemis cotula</i> L.	Stinking mayweed	xx
Apiaceae indet.		x
Asteraceae indet.		x
<i>Carduus</i> sp.	Musk thistle type	xcf
<i>Centaurea</i> sp.		xxfg
<i>C. cyanus</i> L.	Cornflower	x
<i>Chenopodium album</i> L.	Fat Hen	xxx
Chenopodiaceae indet.		xx
<i>Cirsium</i> sp.	Spear thistle type	xcf
<i>Euphorbia helioscopia</i> L.	Sun spurge	x
<i>Fallopia convulvulus</i> (L). A. Love	Black bindweed	x
<i>Galeopsis</i> sp.	Hemp nettle	x
<i>Lamium</i> sp.	Dead-nettle	x
<i>Lapsana communis</i> L.	Nipplewort	xx
<i>Papaver somniferum</i> L.	Opium poppy	x
Poaceae indet.	Grasses	xx
<i>Polygonum aviculare</i> L.	Knotgrass	x
<i>Potentilla anserina</i> L.	Silver-weed	xcf
<i>Ranunculus</i> sp.	Buttercup	x
R acris/repens/bulbosus	Meadow/creeping/bulbous buttercup	xx
<i>Reseda</i> sp.	Weld/mignonette	xcf
<i>Rumex</i> sp.	Dock	x
<i>Silene</i> sp.	Campion	x xc
<i>Sonchus asper</i> (L.) Hill	Spiny sow-thistle	x
<i>S. oleraceus</i> L.	Sow-thistle	x
<i>Spergula arvensis</i> L.	Corn spurrey	x
<i>Stellaria graminea</i> L.	Lesser stichwort	xx
<i>S media</i> (L.) Vill.	Chickweed	xx
<i>Torilis japonica</i> (Houtt.) DC	Hedge parsley	xfg
<i>Urtica dioica</i> L.	Stinging nettle	x
Wetland plants		
<i>Carex</i> sp.	Sedge	x
<i>Eleocharis</i> sp.	Spike-rush	x
<i>Juncus</i> sp.	Rush	x
<i>Lychnis flos-cuculi</i> L.	Ragged-robin	xcf
<i>Ranunculus flammula</i> L.	Lesser spearwort	x
Trees/shrubs		
<i>Sambucus nigra</i> L.	Elderberry	x
Other plant macrofossils		
Charcoal <2mm		x
<i>Pteridium aquilinum</i> (L.) Kuhn (pinnule fragments)	Bracken	x
Indet moss		x
Indet seeds		xx
Waterlogged root/rhizome/stem		xxx
Waterlogged wood		x
Other material		
Waterlogged arthropods		xx
Sample volume (litres)		7ss
Volume of flot (litres)		0.6
% of flot sorted		<10%

Key to table:

x = 1-10 specimens
xx = 10-100 specimens
xxx = 100+ specimens
tf = testa fragments
fg = fragment
c = charred
ss = sub-sample

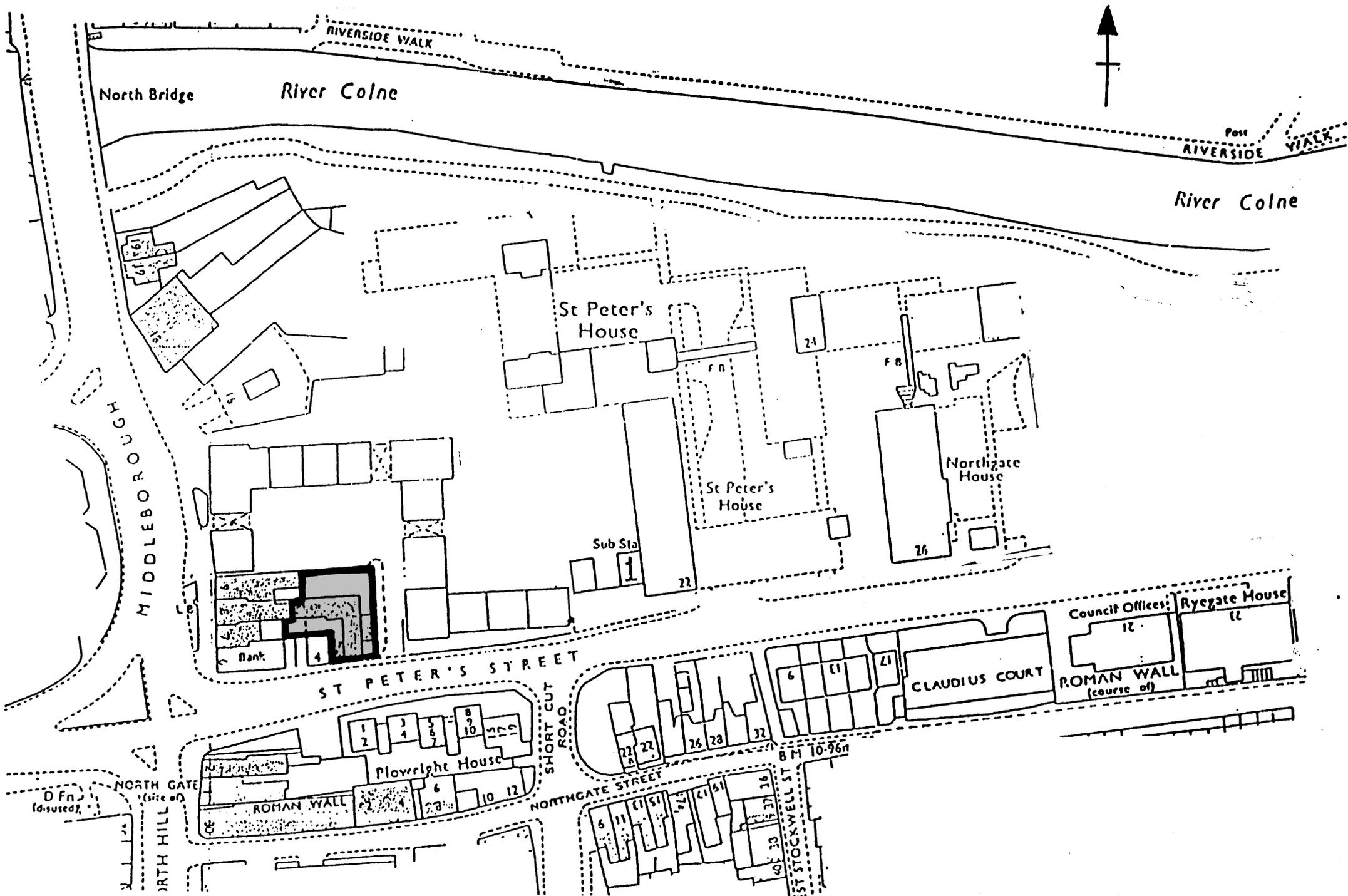


Fig 1 Site location.

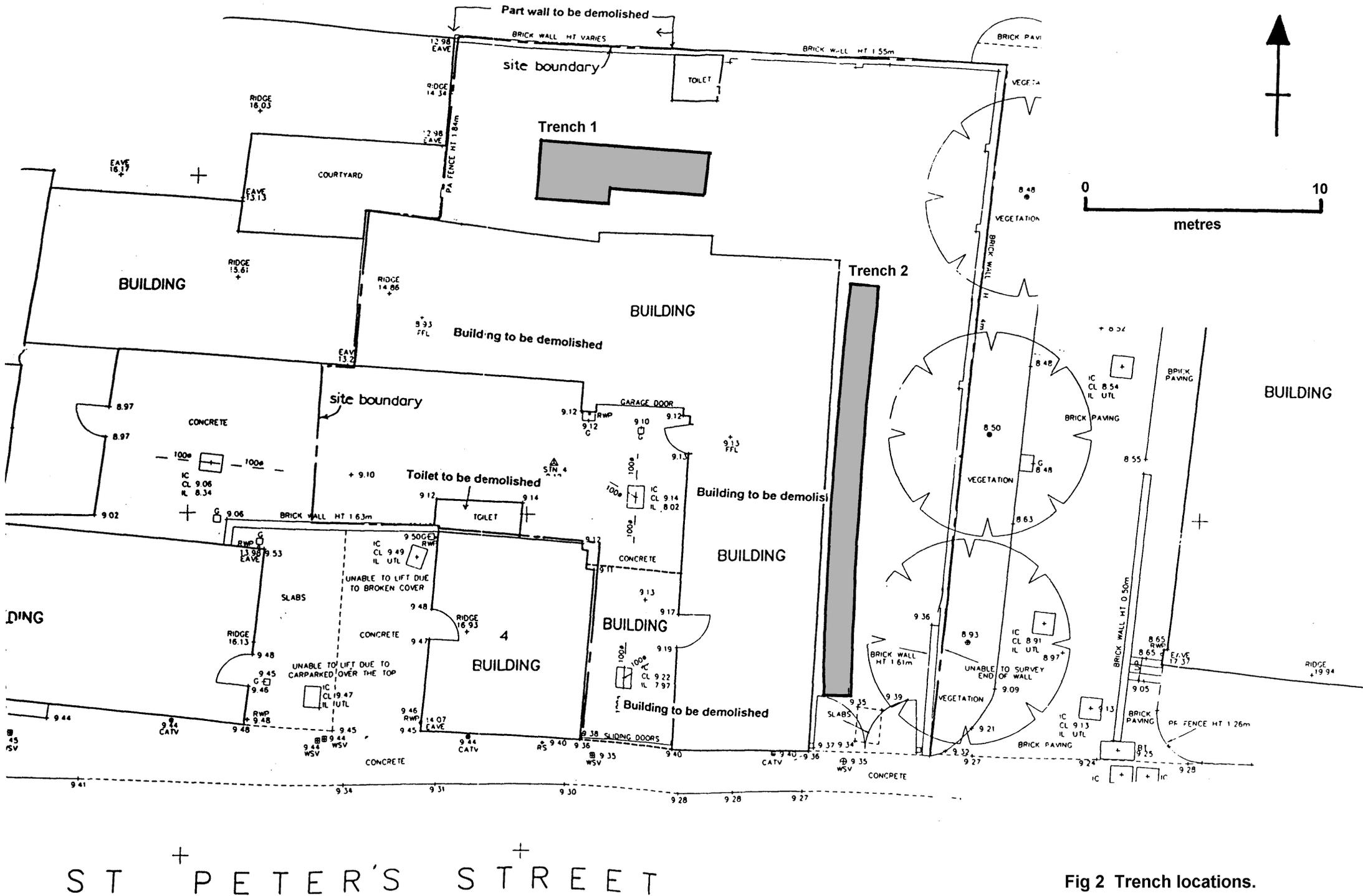


Fig 2 Trench locations.

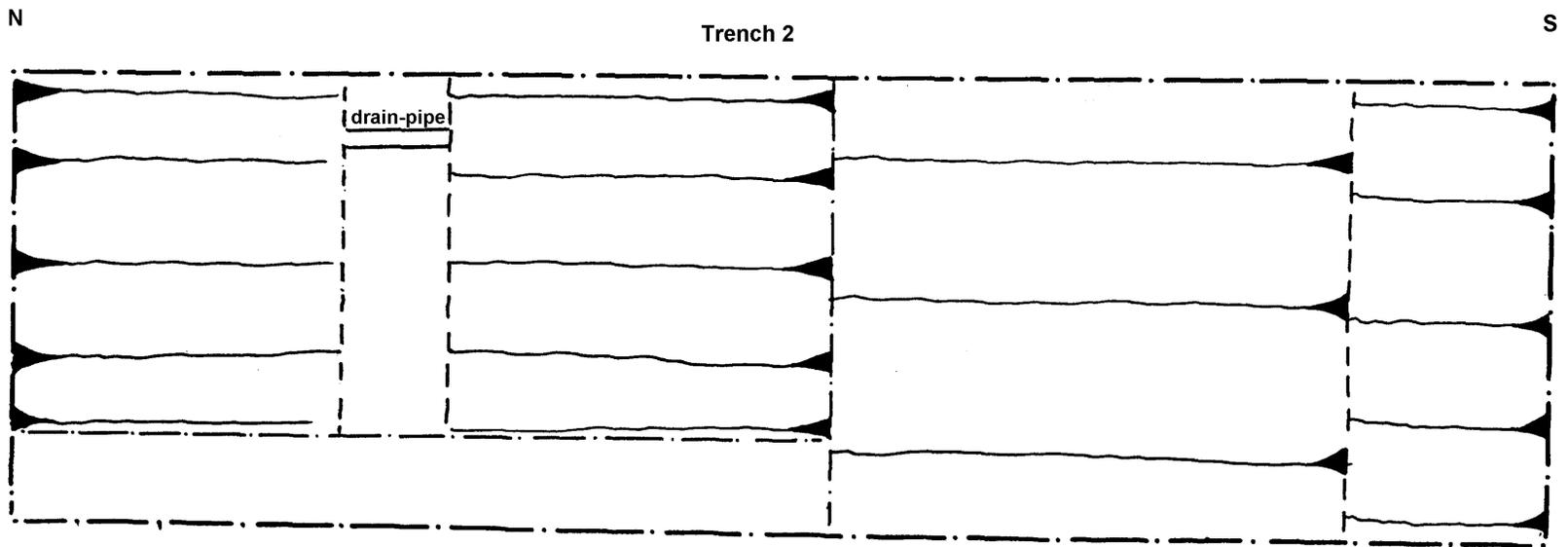
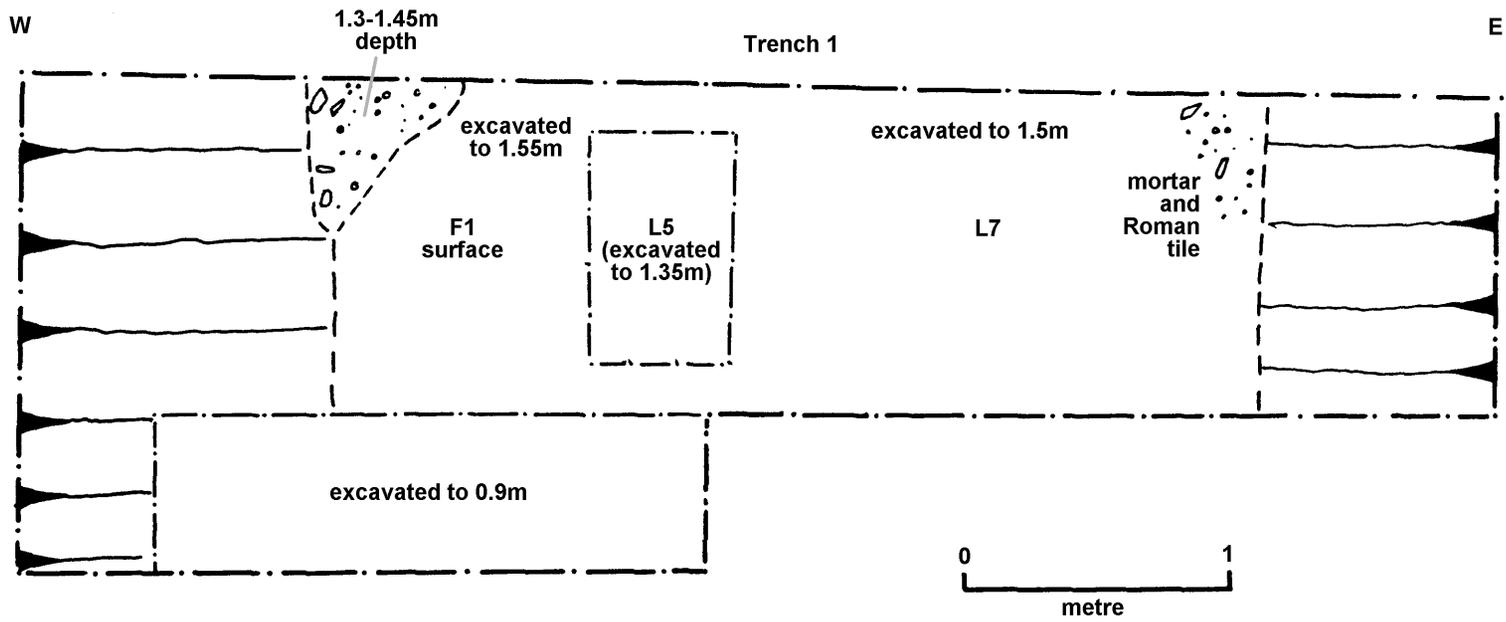


Fig 3 Plan of Trench 1 and Trench 2.

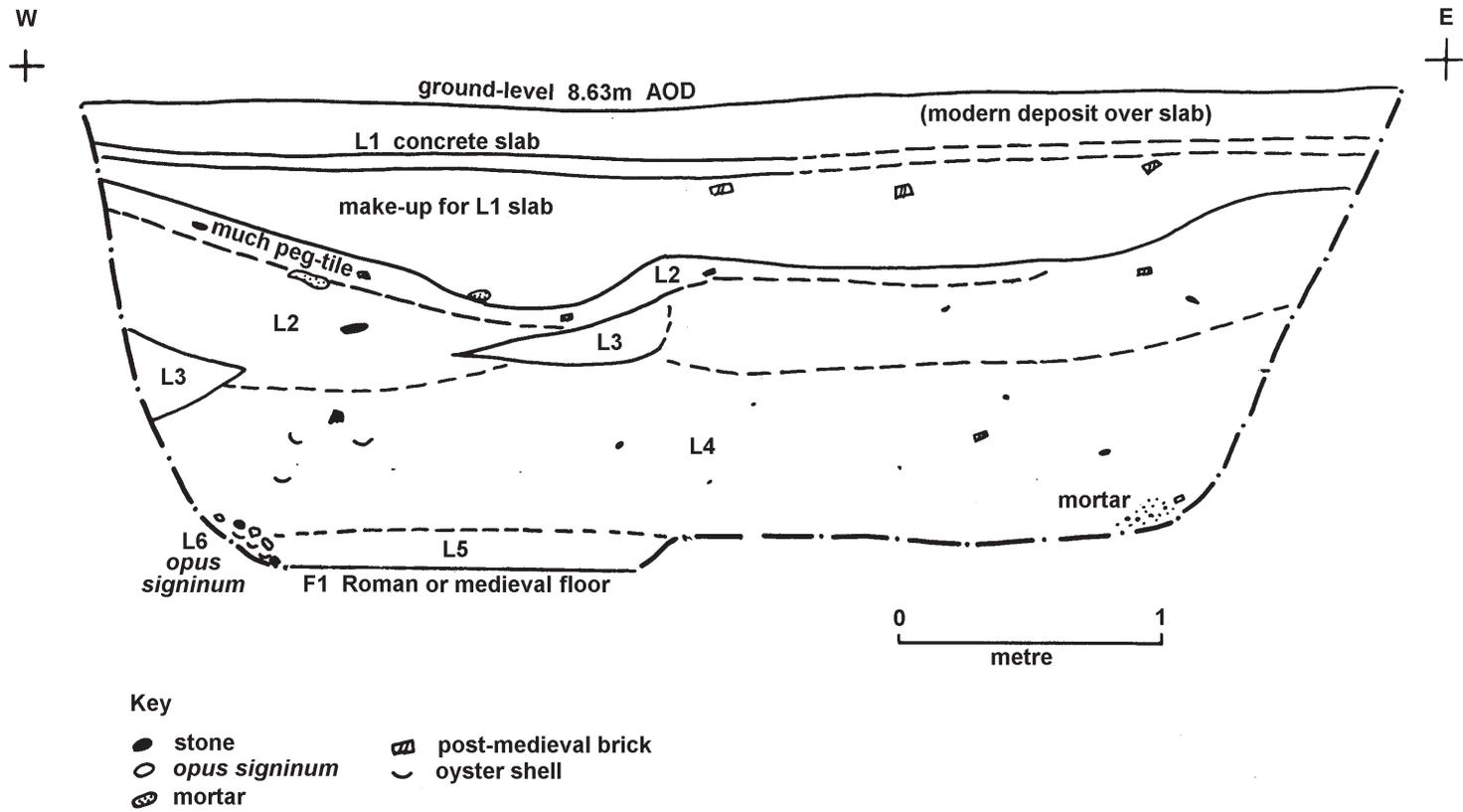


Fig 4 Section of Trench 1.

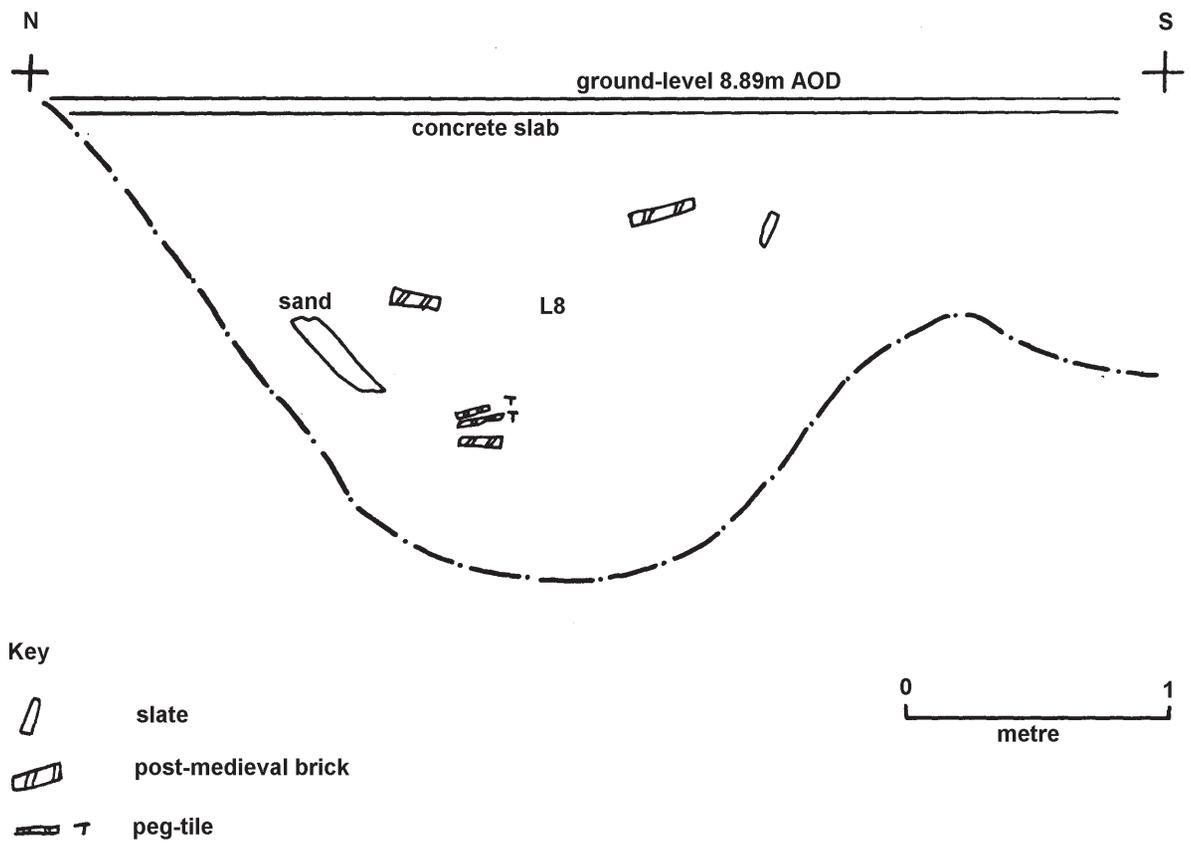


Fig 5 Section of Trench 2.

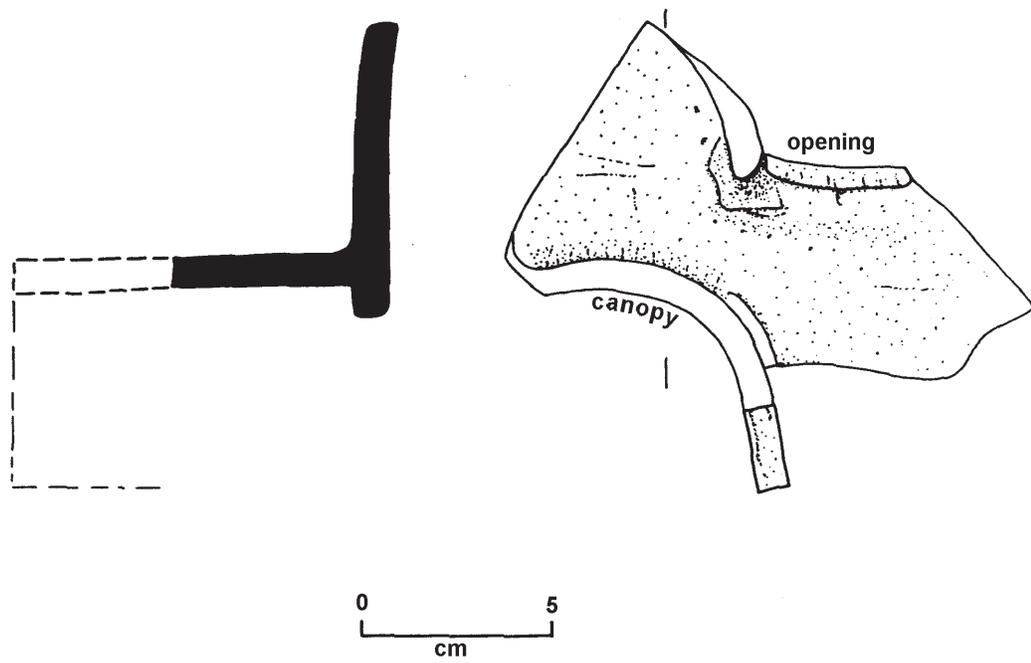


Fig 6 Louver fragment from L2: section and front view.

**Essex Sites and Monuments Record/
Essex Archaeology and History**

Summary sheet

Site name/address: 4 St Peter's Street, Colchester, Essex	
Parish: Colchester	District: Colchester
NGR: TL 9942 2554	Site code: 2001.200
Type of work: Trial-trenching evaluation	Site director/group: H Brooks, Colchester Archaeological Trust
Date of work: 16th-17th October 2001	Size of area investigated: approx 1m ²
Location of finds/curating museum: Colchester Museum	Funding source: Developer
Further seasons anticipated? No	Related SMR nos: 12282, 13293
Final report: CAT Report 164	
Periods represented: Roman and medieval	
Summary of fieldwork results: An evaluation by two trial-trenches located a mortar floor at 1.5m below present ground. The associated dating evidence is not conclusive; the floor could be medieval or Roman. Fragments of a medieval louver suggest that a high status medieval house stood nearby.	
Previous summaries/reports: None	
Author of summary: Kate Orr and Howard Brooks	Date of summary: November 2001