

**An archaeological evaluation
on the west side of
St John's abbey precinct wall,
along Mersea Road,
Colchester, Essex**

February 2002

**on behalf of
Purcell Miller Tritton**

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1 Summary

Three test-trenches were dug on the west side of St John's abbey precinct wall along Mersea Road, Colchester, Essex, to allow a structural engineer to assess the condition and stability of the structure. The three test-trenches exposed the inner face of the precinct wall below ground-level, showing it to be in varying states of condition and preservation, with evidence of previous patches and repair work.

2 Introduction

- 2.1 This is the archive report on an archaeological evaluation by test-trenching on the west side of the precinct wall of the former St John's abbey, along Mersea Road, Colchester, Essex. The test-trenches are located at the following NGR: Test-trench 1 is at TL 9989 2455; Test-trench 2 is at TL 9990 2460; and Test-trench 3 is at TL 9991 2468.
- 2.2 The three test-trenches were dug along the abbey precinct wall by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) between the 1st and 6th of February 2002.
- 2.3 All fieldwork was done in accordance with a specification agreed with the Archaeology Officer of Colchester Museums.
- 2.4 This report mirrors standards and practices contained in Colchester Borough Council's *Guidelines for the standards and practices of archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester* (1999).

3 Archaeological background

(extract from CAT Report 97)

3.1 Prehistory

St John's abbey grounds:

Late Bronze Age pottery in shallow pits and a flaked Neolithic/early Bronze Age blade with secondary working were found during an excavation in 1972. **Urban Archaeological Database** or **UAD event no 3019**, Sites and Monuments Record or SMR nos 12674 and 12622. TL 9988 2478.

3.2 Roman

St John's abbey grounds:

Pinnacle Garden (abbey gardens) – human skeletons were reported here by William Wire in 1843. **UAD event no 1195**. TL 9989 2481.

St Giles' church - lead coffins were recorded here by Wire in 1846. **UAD event no 1130**. TL 9980 2480.

St John's abbey grounds - according to the 1882 1:2500 map, a burial was found on St John's Mount in 1867 (**UAD event no 1197**). Dietz (Dietz 1986) alludes to a tradition that victims of the plague were buried in a mass grave here. The mount is still visible in the undergrowth to the south of the Officers' Club and just behind the wall dividing it from the car park on Napier Road. TL 9985 2456.

St John's abbey grounds excavation site - this site was excavated in advance of the construction of the St Botolph's roundabout and Southway from 1971 to 1985. Thirty-four Roman inhumations were found, mainly in coffins, from approximately 1m or more below ground-level (Crummy *et al* 1993, 205-215). **UAD event no 3019**. TL 999 248.

Osborne House, Flagstaff Road – cremations were found here (Hull 1958, no 128). **UAD event no 1068**. TL 996 247.

3.3 Anglo-Saxon

3.3.1 Church

St John's abbey grounds - an excavation in 1972 uncovered the remains of the small Anglo-Saxon church of St John. This pre-dated the foundation of the abbey. Four sherds of grass-tempered pottery were also found. No settlement remains were found (Crummy *et al* 1993, 205-215). **UAD monument no 345**. TL 9989 2479.

3.3.2 Other material

St John's abbey garden - a coin of Ethelred was reported from here by Wire in 1852. **UAD event no 1181**. TL 9978 2472.

3.4 Medieval

3.4.1 Churches and religious houses

St John's abbey (TL 998 247)
(UAD event nos 1194, 1302, 1304 and 1303
and **UAD monument nos 369, 367 and 343,**
SMR nos 12539, 12558 & 12559)

St John's Abbey was built by the Benedictine Order; it was completed by 1115 but burnt down in 1133. It was rebuilt in the early 13th century. The cruciform-shaped church is thought to have stood in the north of the abbey precinct. A wall was seen during the investigations at St Botolph's roundabout in 1972 and 1986 which might be part of the church. Human remains, which were certainly medieval burials associated with the abbey, have been recorded several times in this area (Crummy *et al* 1993, 203-221). The church was added to and altered in the 14th and 15th centuries. To the north of the church were the cloister, chapter house and domestic buildings. Some of the domestic buildings were said to have been moved to the south side of the church after 1133, and this has been supported by archaeological evidence (Crummy 1981, 28-30). In 2001, CAT carried out a geophysical survey in the abbey grounds as a research project to try and locate the church and other abbey buildings.

The Abbey was dissolved in 1538 and its buildings started to fall down or be demolished from this time. The former abbey passed through many hands including the Lucas family, was confiscated during the Civil War, and then changed ownership several times until it was bought by the War Office in 1860. Maps from 1610 and 1648 show part of the abbey church, other abbey buildings and part of the precinct wall still standing. These maps may not be entirely accurate; however, some abbey buildings may still have been standing at this time but performing different functions. The Lucas house was one of these buildings. There also appear on these maps to be buildings to the west of the abbey gatehouse (where Abbey House is now) and to the north of the Lucas house (on the modern Flagstaff Road). To the north and east of the abbey gatehouse are the remains of a 15th-century porter's lodge (VCH, 304).

Most of the abbey precinct - including the abbey gatehouse and surviving precinct walls - is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM no 26307).

Gatehouse

The surviving abbey gatehouse was built in the 15th century as the main gatehouse, giving access from the town. The upper storey was damaged during the Siege of Colchester in 1648, and it was rebuilt probably in the 1840s (**UAD event nos 1526, 1582 and 519** and **UAD monument no 343**, SMR no 12356). This building is Grade I Listed and also a Scheduled Ancient Monument. It is possible that there was a second southern gatehouse, in the modern Flagstaff House area.

Precinct wall

The abbey and St Giles' church were surrounded by a precinct wall with towers. The wall dates from before the 13th century and was refaced in parts in the 16th century. It was partly demolished during the construction of St Botolph's roundabout in the early 1970s, but part of the wall was recorded before its destruction (Crummy *et al* 1993, 219). Surviving stretches (some refaced in brick) can be still be seen in various places, ie north to south on the eastern boundary of the Officers' Club grounds parallel with Mersea Road; east to west to the rear of the car park on Napier Road; north to south along the northern half of Flagstaff Road; and east to west adjacent to St Giles' church. A map from 1965 shows the wall lying east to west behind Flagstaff House.

Early maps show the precinct wall, and as these seem to tie in with what is visible above ground we can use these maps to plot its full course. One would expect therefore that this follows a line south from Abbey House, makes a slight dog-leg turn to the east halfway along what is now Flagstaff Road, and then continues south between 1 and 2 Napier Road. Before reaching what is now Napier Road, the wall turns a corner to the east, following a line south of the Mount and joining up with

what is now Mersea Road. It then follows a line due north to what was Stanwell Street, and turns west to the north of St Giles' church. It then turns south to the gatehouse and then west again back to Abbey House.

Church of St John

In 1972 the remains of the small Anglo-Saxon church of St John were excavated before the construction of St Botolph's roundabout (**UAD event no 3019** and **UAD monument no 345**. TL 998 248). This was found to pre-date the foundation of the abbey.

St Giles' church

This church was built to the north of St John's Abbey soon after its foundation, and it is thought to have replaced the Anglo-Saxon church of St John, sited 100 yards away. Excavations in the nave of the church in 1975 revealed the north wall of the nave of the Norman church as well as the 14th-century aisle and tower and several burials (Crummy *et al* 1993, 221-35). The excavations also confirmed 17th-century cartographic evidence that St Giles' church lay within the precinct of St John's Abbey. In 1982, a watching brief was carried out when a doorway was being cut through the south wall of the nave, and this provided an opportunity to see the relationship between the south porch, the tower and the nave (Crummy 1992, 203 & 230). This building is listed and has now been converted into a masonic centre (**UAD event nos 533, 628 and 1518** and **UAD monument nos 342 and 377**, SMR no 12423. TL 998 248).

4 Aim

The aim of the evaluation was to expose the inner face of the precinct wall of St John's abbey below ground-level to enable a structural engineer to assess both the condition and the stability of the surviving precinct wall.

5 The test-trenches

5.1 Test-trench 1

Test-trench 1 was located 5m from the southernmost end of the precinct wall (Fig 1) and was 80 x 80cm. It was excavated with hand tools to a depth of 1.40m after first clearing ivy from the immediate area and from the face of the wall above ground-level. The trench was cut through a dark brown, very organic topsoil layer (Layer or L1) which contained large amounts plant-root activity caused by the scrub woodland in which the site is located. L1 extended to a depth of 60cm, where it interfaced with a light brown sand, L2 (Fig 5). This layer also contained some organic material, possibly indicating a buried topsoil. No features were exposed in either L1 or L2. As the test-trench was excavated, the inner face of the precinct wall was exposed to enable the structural engineer to assess its condition and stability.

5.2 Test-trench 2

Test-trench 2 was located 27.80m from the southern corner of the concrete shelter (Fig 1) and was 100 x 80cm. It was excavated with hand tools to a depth of 1.40m, again after clearing ivy and other plant material away from the surrounding area and from the face of the precinct wall. The trench was cut through a dark brown, very organic topsoil (L1) which contained a large amount of plant material and plant-root activity. L1 extended to a depth of 60cm, where it interfaced with a light brown sand, L2 (Fig 6). As in Test-trench 1, L2 contained some organic material, which indicates that it may be a buried topsoil. No features were exposed in either L1 or L2. As the test-trench was excavated, the inner face of the precinct wall was exposed to enable the structural engineer to assess its condition and stability.

5.3 Test-trench 3

Test-trench 3 was located 52.38m from the north side of the concrete shelter (Fig 1) and was 140 x 100cm. It was excavated with hand tools to a depth of 1.75m after first clearing the surrounding area and the wall of ivy and other plant material. The trench was cut through a dark brown, very organic topsoil (L1) which contained large amounts of plant material and plant-root activity. L1 extended to a depth of 30cm, where it interfaced with a light brown sand (L2) which was probably a buried topsoil. L2 extended to a depth of 30cm before it interfaced with a layer that was not present in either Test-trenches 1 or 2 (L3). L3 was an unconsolidated, non-compacted mix of

rubble and mortar, consisting mainly of peg-tile and mortar lumps and brick. L3 was 1.10m deep and contained much plant-root activity. Below this rubble layer there was a further deposit (L4), which was an orange/brown sand that contained no plant-root activity or organic material and was possibly the natural. No features were exposed in any of the layers L1, L2, L3 or L4. As the test-trench was excavated, the inner face of the precinct wall was exposed to allow the structural engineer to assess its condition and stability.

6 The finds

6.1 The finds list

Weights are in g, d = discarded.

Trench	Context	Finds no	Weight	Quantity	Description	Discard
T1	L1	1	220	8	peg-tile	d
T1	L1	1	80	5	modern glass	d
T1	L1	1	75	2	animal bone	
T1	L1	1	30	1	oyster shell	
T1	L1	1	1014	1	<i>opus signinum</i>	
T1	L2	2	15	1	oyster shell	
T1	L2	2	85	3	peg-tile	d
T2	L1	3	41	1	Fe bar	d
T2	L1	3	78	1	Fe plate	d
T2	L1	3	305	7	modern glass	d
T2	L1	3	75	3	oyster shell	
T2	L1	3	5	2	animal bone	
T2	L1	3	790	3	peg-tile	d
T2	L1	3	760	4	Roman tile	
T2	L2	4	30	4	animal bone	
T2	L2	4	4	2	oyster shell	
T2	L2	4	85	4	peg-tile	d
T2	L2	4	2	1	modern glass	d
T2	L2	4	90	2	shell mortar	
T2	L2	4	150	2	<i>opus signinum</i>	
T2	L2	4	1250	10	Roman tile/CBM	
T1	L1	5		1	Cu alloy buckle	
T3	L1	6	125	4	modern glass	d
T3	L1	6	5	1	clay pipe	
T3	L1	6	10	1	animal bone	
T3	L1	6	60	1	peg-tile	
T3	L2	7	30	3	Fe nail	d
T3	L2	7	80	2	Fe object	d
T3	L2	7	55	5	oyster shell	
T3	L2	7	105	1	Roman plaster	
T3	L2	7	10	2	clay pipe	
T3	L2	7	15	2	modern glass	d
T3	L2	7	40	1	animal bone	
T3	L2	7	95	1	glazed tile	
T3	L2	7	65	1	burnt CBM	
T3	L3	8	160	2	peg-tile	d
T3	L3	8	1029	5	Roman tile	
T3	L3	8	105	10	animal bone	
T3	L3	8	80	5	oyster shell	
T3	L3	8	1000	21	plaster	

6.2 Small finds

by N Crummy

The copper-alloy buckle

SF 1. (5) L1, T1. Rectangular cast copper-alloy buckle, slightly distorted and worn on the outer edge near one corner, with a central bar for the tongue. The latter is a tapering strip of metal with the widest end wrapped around the bar. There is no surface decoration or visible finishing marks on the frame, which is of angular section and hollow on the underside. Length 41.5 mm, width 29 mm.

While the method of attaching the tongue is very simple, and might be expected to indicate that this buckle is of some antiquity, the section of the frame is unparalleled on late medieval or early post-medieval buckles of similar form. This economising

with the metal, coupled with the crispness of the section on the upper side and the lack of finishing marks, suggest that the object is of late post-medieval or modern date.

6.3 Roman and later pottery

by Stephen Benfield and Howard Brooks

6.3.1 Introduction

This is a report on the pottery group excavated by CAT from three engineering test-trenches on the west side of St John's abbey precinct wall, along Mersea Road, Colchester, Essex in February 2002 (NGR TL 9990 2473 centre). The archive will be deposited in Colchester Museum under accession no 2002.43.

6.3.2 The material

A total of 69 sherds weighing 1062g was examined. These came from 6 bags representing 6 site contexts. The material was classified according to Hull (Hull 1958) and Cotter (Cotter 2000). Material from each bag was listed, weighed and identified. These lists are summarised here as Table 1 (see below).

6.3.3 Discussion

Although there are a few Roman and medieval sherds, they all occur residually in much later contexts which are dated to the 19th-20th century by the presence of Fabric 48d ironstone wares. Only bag 4 (from L2) contains purely Roman material. However, finds from against the abbey precinct wall can (by definition) only be medieval or later, and the known history of this site, with its evidence of much post-medieval soil dumping (Crummy *et al* 1993, 203), makes it very likely that this too is a post-medieval context.

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

			fabrics										
			R qt	R wt	20/ 21a qt	20/ 21a wt	40/ 45 qt	40/ 45 wt	48 qt	48 wt	Other qt	Other wt	Comments/date
Trench	Bag	Cont											
T1	1	L1									1	10	unidentified
T1	1	L1	1	3									samian Drag 37 bowl - 1st-2nd century
T1	1	L1	1	5									coarse oxidised ware - flagon?
T1	1	L1	0	0					14	185			19th-20th century
T1	1	L1	0	0			1	2	0	0			modern stoneware
T1	1	L1	0	0			1	105	0	0			stoneware inkpot
T1	2	L2	1	4			0	0	0	0			samian ware
T1	2	L2	2	15			0	0	0	0			Roman grey ware
T1	2	L2	1	3			0	0	0	0			Oxford ware - later 4th century
T1	2	L2	0	0			0	0	12	145			19th-20th century
T1	3	L1	1	15			0	0	0	0			BB1? - circa AD 120-4th century
T1	3	L1	0	0			0	0	12	120			19th-20th century
T1	3	L1	0	0			1	65	0	0			Fabric 40 unglazed (or is this tile?)
T1	3	L1	0	0			1	45	0	0			Fabric 40 teapot base - 19th century+
T1	3	L1	0	0			1	5	0	0			German stoneware
T1	3	L1	0	0			2	75	0	0			modern stoneware jar and bottle fragments - 19th- 20th century
T2	4	L2	1	25			0	0	0	0			Cam 268 jar rim - early 2nd-late3rd/ early 4th century
T2	4	L2	5	30			0	0	0	0			Roman grey wares
T3	6	L1	2	25			0	0	0	0			Roman grey wares
T3	6	L1	0	0	1	5	0	0	0	0			Colchester-type ware
T3	6	L1	0	0	0	0	1	25	0	0			19th-20th century
T3	7	L2	2	10	0	0	0	0	0	0			Roman grey wares
T3	7	L2	0	0	1	10	0	0	0	0			Fabric 20 medieval coarse ware - 13th- 14th century
T3	7	L2	0	0			0	0	2	25			19th-20th century
T3	7	L2	0	0			0	0	1	105			modern stoneware - 19th-20th century
			17	135	2	15	8	322	41	580	1	10	TOTALS

Groups which define the date of a context are shown **bold**.

Key:

R = Roman

20 = medieval coarse ware, 13th-14th century

21a = Colchester-type ware, 15th-16th century

40 = post-medieval red earthenware (PMRE), 17th-19th century

45 = stoneware

48d = modern ironstone (19th-20th century)

qt = quantity

wt = weight

7 Discussion and interpretation

7.1 Test-trench 1

The condition of the exposed face of the precinct wall is variable. Above ground-level, where the wall is exposed to the elements, it has suffered from weathering and as a result has also been patched and repaired over time. Some of these repairs have been carried out using modern materials such as brick, while others appear to have reused original materials. Below ground-level, the condition of the wall is also variable (Fig 2). The further down the trench was excavated, the better the state of preservation of the wall became. From ground-level to 60cm, the courses of the wall are dotted with repairs and repointing. One section of the wall face, from 30cm to 60cm, appears to have been completely refaced at some time (the end of this refacing appears to coincide with the interface between the current topsoil L1 and the buried topsoil L2). Below the 60cm level there are more distinctive courses, with much less tile and larger stones used in the construction of the wall. Finds from the test-trench are very mixed; pottery from the trench ranged from modern through the medieval period with a few sherds of Roman pottery. Other finds from the trench included modern glass and building materials such as peg-tile, as well as animal bone, oyster shell and *opus signinum*. The majority of the finds from Test-trench 1 came from the topsoil L1, and look as though they were redeposited against the precinct wall when soil-dumping took place on the site at some time during the post-medieval period (Crummy *et al* 1993, 203). The height of the wall to external road-level is 3.45m, showing the amount of build-up against the inner face of the precinct wall.

7.2 Test-trench 2

The precinct wall above ground-level appears to have been extensively repaired and refaced using modern materials such as brick and peg-tile as well as reused original building materials. In some parts there is only mortar visible in the face of the wall. Below ground (between ground-level and 60cm; Fig 3), courses in the wall are indistinct, and there is evidence of patching and repair using tile and other original materials, and in some places repointing (where there is only mortar visible in the face of the wall). Below 60cm (as in Test-trench 1) there are more distinct courses and there is less use of tile and more large stone blocks. Also as in Test-trench 1, the finds from Test-trench 2 are very mixed. They include modern, medieval and Roman pottery and other finds such as iron objects, modern glass and peg-tile, brick, Roman tile, animal bone, oyster shell, mortar from the construction of the wall, and *opus signinum*. The nature of the material from both the topsoil L1 and from L2, and the fact that the same mixture of finds came from both contexts, indicates that (as in Test-trench 1) there has been significant redeposition due to soil-dumping on the site in the post-medieval period (Crummy *et al* 1993, 203). The height of the wall to the external level of the road is 3.45m, showing the amount of soil build-up against the inside of the precinct wall.

7.3 Test-trench 3

Above ground-level, the precinct wall has been repaired and patched using a combination of both original building materials and modern brick and peg-tile. Below ground-level (Fig 4), the upper 60cm of the wall appears to have been extensively repaired using tile and brick. There is also a course of peg-tile built into the wall at 65cm below ground-level. There is slightly more evidence of visible coursing in the structure of the wall, although there are still large amounts of tile and tile fragments. The whole wall also appears to have been faced at some time, covering the stone and tile. At 80cm there is a fragment of plaster adhering to the surface of the wall, which possibly explains the covering of the wall face. The plaster on the face of the wall also goes some way to explaining the presence of the rubble and mortar of L3. L3 contained building rubble and large amounts of the same kind of plaster as the fragment still attached to the precinct wall. L3 could represent rubble from the demolition of a building or structure that stood against the precinct wall, the inside of which was roughly plastered and then whitewashed. As with Test-trenches 1 and 2, the finds from Test-trench 3 are very mixed. The pottery is as before a mixture of modern, medieval and Roman sherds. The other finds are a mix of material that ranges from peg-tile and modern glass to Roman tile, animal bone and oyster shell. Test-trench 3 does, however, contain the rubble L3 under the organic topsoil L1 and the buried topsoil L2, indicating that the structure had been demolished before these layers were deposited (at a similar period to L1 and L2 in Test-trenches 1 and 2). The soil was probably dumped on the site during the post-medieval period (Crummy *et al* 1993, 203).

8 Acknowledgements

Site work was carried out Ben Holloway, Chris Lister and Simon Rulton. The project was monitored by Martin Winter for Colchester Borough Council.

CAT would like to thank Purcell Miller Tritton (Simon Marks) for commissioning the work and for access to the site.

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10 Glossary

CBM	ceramic building material
ceramics	pottery
context	specific location on an archaeological site, especially one where finds are made
feature	an identifiable thing like a pit, a wall, a drain, a floor; can contain 'contexts'
medieval	from AD 1066 to Henry VIII
NGR	National Grid Reference
natural	geological deposit undisturbed by human activity
<i>opus signinum</i>	Roman pink mortar
post-medieval	after Henry VIII and up to Victoria
Roman	period from AD 43 to around AD 430
SAM	Scheduled Ancient Monument
SMR	Sites and Monuments Record
UAD	Urban Archaeological Database

11 Archive deposition

The finds and paper archive are held at Colchester Archaeological Trust, 12 Lexden Road, Colchester, Essex CO3 3NF, but both will be permanently deposited at Colchester Museum under accession code 2002.23.

12 Site data

12.1 Site context list

Trench	Context	Description	Finds date	Context date
1, 2, 3	L1	Topsoil	modern-Roman	modern
1, 2, 3	L2	Subsoil (buried topsoil)	modern-Roman	natural layer disturbed in post-medieval period
3	L3	Rubble/mortar	modern-Roman	demolition layer
3	L4	Natural sand		glacial/post-glacial

12.2 Soil descriptions

Trench	Context	Description
1, 2, 3	L1	Dark brown organic silty soil, contains frequent stones and large amounts of leaf litter and plant-root activity from scrub and ivy.
1, 2, 3	L2	Light brown sandy soil, contains some organic material, plant-root activity and frequent small stones.
3	L3	Loose uncompacted rubble and mortar layer, mostly peg-tile and shell mortar, also contains septaria chips and some modern brick.
3	L4	Orange/mid brown sand, contains occasional small stones.

Ben Holloway, February 2002

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