

**An archaeological  
watching brief on a gas-pipeline trench  
along Culver Street West,  
Colchester, Essex  
May-July 2003**

**report prepared by  
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**on behalf of  
Transco plc**



CAT project code: 03/5d  
Colchester Museums accession code: 2003.208  
NGR: TL 9962 2515 to TL 9941 2519



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## 1 Summary

An archaeological watching brief was carried out along the road line of Culver Street West during trenching for the installation of a new gas pipeline. Most of the route of the trench proved to be cut through ground which had already been disturbed by earlier service-trenches. However, there were some significant discoveries. Two Roman foundations were unrobbed, thus suggesting that Culver Street pre-dated the period when robbing for building materials was commonplace, ie the late 11th and 12th centuries. Also the presence of an inhumation under the north end of Trinity Street suggests that the cemetery of Holy Trinity church was reduced in size to create the street. It is hoped that the inhumation can be radiocarbon-dated to provide dating evidence for this event.

## 2 Introduction

- 2.1 This is the archive report on an archaeological watching brief carried out on a service-trench which was dug to lay a new gas pipeline along the road line of Culver Street West, Colchester, Essex. The trench was dug from the corner of Culver Street West and Pelham's Lane to the junction of Culver Street West and Head Street, from NGR TL 9962 2515 to NGR TL 9941 2519 (see Fig 1).
- 2.2 The work was carried out by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) from May to July 2003 on behalf of Transco plc, according to the brief set out by Martin Winter, archaeology officer for Colchester Borough Council.
- 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, updated 2002) and *Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester Museums* (1996, updated 2002), and the IFA's *Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief* (1999).

## 3 Archaeological background

The gas-pipeline trench was excavated in the centre of the historic town. During extensive archaeological excavations which took place to the south of Culver Street West in the early 1980s and in the general area since then, a wealth of Roman urban buildings plus some Anglo-Saxon structures have been recorded. Roman barrack blocks from the military period were recorded as well as part of the Roman street system as it developed from the *via principalis*. During the excavations, successive phases of Roman occupation including Boudican destruction and rebuilding were recorded. An early Anglo-Saxon sunken hut was uncovered to the south of Culver Street West and to the west of Shewell Walk. This had been dug through Roman occupation layers and consisted of two main post-holes and stakeholes (CAR 6, 21-125). A possible hut of uncertain date was recorded to the south of Culver Street West and east of Shewell Walk. It appears to have belonged to the 6th-8th centuries or the 12th century.

## 4 Aim

The aim of the watching brief was to identify and record any surviving archaeological features, finds or deposits which were disturbed by the groundworks.

## 5 Methodology

- 5.1 The trench was dug by Transco plc contractors from the corner of Culver Street West and Pelham's Lane westwards for a distance of approximately 220m to the junction of

Culver Street West and Head Street. The trench was dug in three sections, section A being the stretch from Pelham's Lane to Trinity Street, section C being the longest section from Trinity Street to Head Street, and section B being a small north-south section linking sections A and C (see Fig 1).

- 5.2 The trench was dug by contractors using a mechanical excavator with a toothed bucket. It was within the road line of Culver Street West. It followed the route of an existing gas-pipeline trench, so therefore only intermittent visits by an archaeologist were required.
- 5.3 The width of the trench was 500mm. The depth of the trench ranged mainly from 550mm to 850mm with some stretches reaching a depth of 1.2m.
- 5.4 Individual records of excavated contexts, layers, features and deposits were entered on pro-forma record sheets.
- 5.5 The trench and the features and layers were planned at a scale of 1:50. Sections were recorded at a scale of 1:10 and 1:20.
- 5.6 A photographic record was kept consisting of general site shots and shots of all archaeological features and deposits.
- 5.7 Finds were registered on CAT record sheets and assigned find numbers according to context. Finds were washed, marked and bagged according to context.

## 6 Results

- 6.1 The trench was dug through the road surface of modern paving stones, set into yellow sand 50mm to 100mm deep (Layer or L1). Beneath L1, two modern make-up layers were recorded - L2, tarmac, which was 50mm to 150mm deep, and L3, concrete, 30mm to 100mm deep. Underlying these modern layers was L4, a mid to dark brown silt of post-medieval or modern fill which represented disturbance over the area. L1-L4 spanned the entire length of the trench with intermittent cuts made by various modern service-trenches for gas, electricity and cable TV extending north to south and east to west (Feature or F4 and F5).

### 6.2 Trench section A

Trench Section A contained the layers described above in section 6.1.

### 6.3 Trench section B (see Fig 2 and Table 1)

L6, L7, L8, and F1 were sealed by L1, L2 and L3 and cut by F4 and F5. L6 was a reddish/orangey brown loam which contained burnt brick and charcoal flecks. L6 sealed a thick layer of street metalling (F1) made up of densely packed stones, mixed with yellow to mid brown sand and loam. The top of F1 was 500mm below modern street-level. The metalling (F1) sealed L7 which was a reddish orange brown loam containing burnt brick and charcoal. L7 in turn sealed L8, a grey brown loam with mortar, brick/tile and charcoal. In the top of L8, parts of a human cranium including the maxilla (find no 4) were recovered. The brick and mortar in L7 and L8 presumably derived from the demolition of Roman buildings in the vicinity.

A few fragments of the skull and maxilla (find no 4) were all that remained of an inhumation *in situ*. Bones (find nos 3 and 8) from the upper part of the body, including more of the skull and fragments of mandible, were recovered unstratified in the spoil close to the stratified fragments. Together these clearly represent the partial remains of a small adult who had been buried in a shallow grave. The inhumation had been orientated east-west with the head to the west. The fragment of skull lay on its side indicating that the head had been tilted to the south.

The base of the skull was so close to the base of the later metalling F1 that the deposition of the latter could only have been achieved if the ground-level was reduced and the upper part of the grave inadvertently truncated. The reduction of the ground-level must have been carried out as preparatory work for the laying down of the metalling F1.

**Table 1: List of human bone fragments (all apparently from the upper part of the same body).**

Find no	Section letter and context	Description
3	section B, U/S	Fragments of mandible, ribs (many), humerus, vertebra, clavicle, scapula, and radius (proximal end only)
4	section B, inhumation	Part of cranium (right side) including part of the maxilla
8	section B, U/S	Most of a cranium

#### 6.4 Trench section C (see Figs 3 and 4)

Within section C of the trench, L9, F2 and F3 were sealed by the modern street (ie L1, L2 and L3) and cut by modern drains F4 and F5. L9 was sealed by L4 and consisted of a thick layer of dark orange/brown clay, containing brick and charcoal of an uncertain date. F2a consisted of a layer of burnt brick fragments set in a mortar and mid brown loam overlying F2b which was a foundation of tile and stone rubble set into a yellowish/pale pink mortar. F2a/F2b was shallow, starting at 150mm below modern ground-level, and is likely to be the remains of a north-south aligned Roman foundation. F3 also appeared to be the remains of a Roman foundation. It consisted of stone and mortar fragments extending to within 350mm of the modern ground-level.

## 7 The finds

7.1 Except for the human bone already mentioned, other finds were also recorded from the trench (see Table 2 below). They were removed by the mechanical excavator and are therefore classed as unstratified. Stephen Benfield and Howard Brooks, both of CAT, identified the Roman and post-medieval/modern pottery respectively.

**Table 2: List of finds other than human bone.**

Find no	Section and context	Description	Qt.	Wt. (g)
1	section A, U/S	Roman tile	7	1849
		Animal bone	2	14
		Oystershell	1	29
2	section A, U/S	Roman tile	10	1002
		Peg-tile	1	35
		Animal bone	12	202
		Roman grey ware pottery fragment	1	22
		Iron strip (small find no 1)	1	24
3	section B, U/S	Animal bone		110
5	junction of sections B and C, U/S	Peg-tile	10	768
		Animal bone	3	100
		Roman samian ware fragment	2	18
6	junction of sections B and C, U/S	Post-medieval glass	1	6
7	section C, U/S	Modern stoneware pottery fragment	1	23
8	section B, U/S	Animal bone		67
		Roman pottery	1	3
9	section C, U/S	Metal devotional appliqué or pilgrim badge (small find no 2)	1	11
13	section C, U/S	Animal bone	5	79

## 7.2 The small finds by Nina Crummy

SF 1. (2). Trench section A. Unstratified. Small fragment of an iron strip with many flint pebbles attached. Maximum dimensions 20 by 12 mm.

SF 2. (9). Trench section C. Unstratified. Metal devotional appliqué or pilgrim badge depicting Our Lord crucified. Length 68 mm. The figure is naked to the waist and wears a long loin-cloth falling to at least mid-calf. Most of the right arm is missing, as is the end of the left; the head is crushed and the upper part missing. The feet are each pierced by a small rivet for attachment. The back of the figure is hollow. The rivets and hollow back indicate that the figure was riveted to the cross, rather than cast as one piece as were medieval Rood scene pilgrim badges from London (Spencer 1998, nos 180-190). The cross was presumably also thin metal, as the rivets are not long enough to pierce wood. The loin-cloth is unusual, but, as Christ is sometimes shown crucified fully clothed, does not affect the identification.

The metal in which the figure is cast is unusual and may be quite modern. It does not appear to be a tin-lead alloy (pewter was usually used for medieval pilgrim badges). Superficially it appears to have some iron content, though it does not react to a magnet. It shows some sign of copper corrosion, and copper-alloy pilgrim badges began to be made in the late medieval period. It may therefore date to that time, though the possibility that it may be a more modern alloy and a general devotional appliqué rather than specifically a pilgrim badge is most likely.

## 8 Discussion

The watching brief produced evidence which relates to the development of Colchester's post-Roman street system and the evolution of Holy Trinity church.

The existence of unrobbed Roman foundations under Culver Street suggests that the street pre-dates the late 11th or 12th centuries, since this was the time when the robbing of building materials from buried Roman remains for reuse became common and widespread. The value of this discovery is limited, because this is not the first time that unrobbed Roman foundations under Culver Street and streets like it have been found (eg Hull 1958, 197; *CAR 6*, 367-8 (Maidenburgh Street)), and the *terminus ante quem* provided by such discoveries for the creation of the Colchester's present-day street system is rather late to be really useful. However, these latest discoveries are of value since they seem to confirm the pattern noted from earlier work, ie that Roman foundations under streets of medieval origin are unrobbed.

The inhumation is easily the more significant discovery. This is by virtue of its location. The base of the skull is 800mm below the threshold of the door in the tower of Holy Trinity church (Fig 5) showing that the depth at which the inhumation was found is compatible with an inhumation in the churchyard. More importantly, if dated the inhumation would provide a *terminus post quem* for the creation of Trinity Street. The part of Culver Street immediately west of Trinity Street was widened in 1947 with the demolition of no 1 Trinity Street (*CAR 6*, 347-8). Thus, although the inhumation was found under the junction of Culver Street and Trinity Street, prior to 1947 it lay under the north end of Trinity Street and clear of Culver Street (Fig 5). The location of the inhumation thus suggests that the cemetery of Holy Trinity was larger than it is today and that Trinity Street was created by sacrificing the western part of the church graveyard.

There is a possibility that most of Colchester's medieval streets were laid out as a single operation in the 10th century, and that this planned system included Culver Street and Trinity Street (*CAR 1*, 71-4). The discovery of the inhumation under Trinity Street does not invalidate this suggestion, since it does not rule out the possibility that both streets were created at the same time. However, this would mean that Holy Trinity

church was probably an early foundation (ie early to mid 10th century at the latest), despite the case for supposing that the church and its parish were no earlier than c AD 950 (CAR 1, 50). On the other hand, the fact that Trinity Street appears to have been laid out some time after the establishment of Holy Trinity church strengthens the possibility that it also post-dates the creation of Culver Street. If true, then the inhumation and thus the creation of Trinity Street could be relatively late. The earliest documentary reference to Trinity Street is early to mid 16th century (CAR 1, 79), which is late compared to most other streets. The creation of Trinity Street could thus be as late as say the 14th or 15th centuries (which would be very surprising). Clearly the date of the inhumation is crucial to these interpretations. The stratigraphic evidence for the date of the inhumation is slender and imprecise, but fortunately radiocarbon-dating offers the possibility of an effective solution, and it is proposed that the inhumation should be dated in this way in the near future.

## 9 Archive deposition

The paper and digital archive are held by CAT at 12 Lexden Road, Colchester, Essex, but will be deposited permanently with Colchester Museums under accession code 2003.208.

## 10 Acknowledgements

The Colchester Archaeological Trust would like to thank Transco plc for commissioning and funding the work. Site work was carried out by Karly Weller of CAT.

## 11 References

- |                            |                    |   |
|----------------------------|--------------------|---|
| CAR 1                      | 1981               | <i>Aspects of Anglo-Saxon and Norman Colchester</i> , Colchester Archaeological Report 1, by P Crummy   |
| CAR 6                      | 1992               | <i>Excavations at Culver Street, the Gilbert School, and other sites in Colchester, 1971-85</i> , Colchester Archaeological Report 6, by P Crummy |
| Colchester Borough Council | 1996, updated 2002 | <i>Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester Museums</i>  |
| Colchester Borough Council | 1999, updated 2002 | <i>Guidelines on standards and practices for archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester</i>  |
| Hull, M R                  | 1958               | <i>Roman Colchester</i>   |
| IFA                        | 1999               | <i>Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief</i>   |
| Spencer, B                 | 1998               | <i>Pilgrim souvenirs and secular badges</i> , Medieval finds from excavations in London, 7  |

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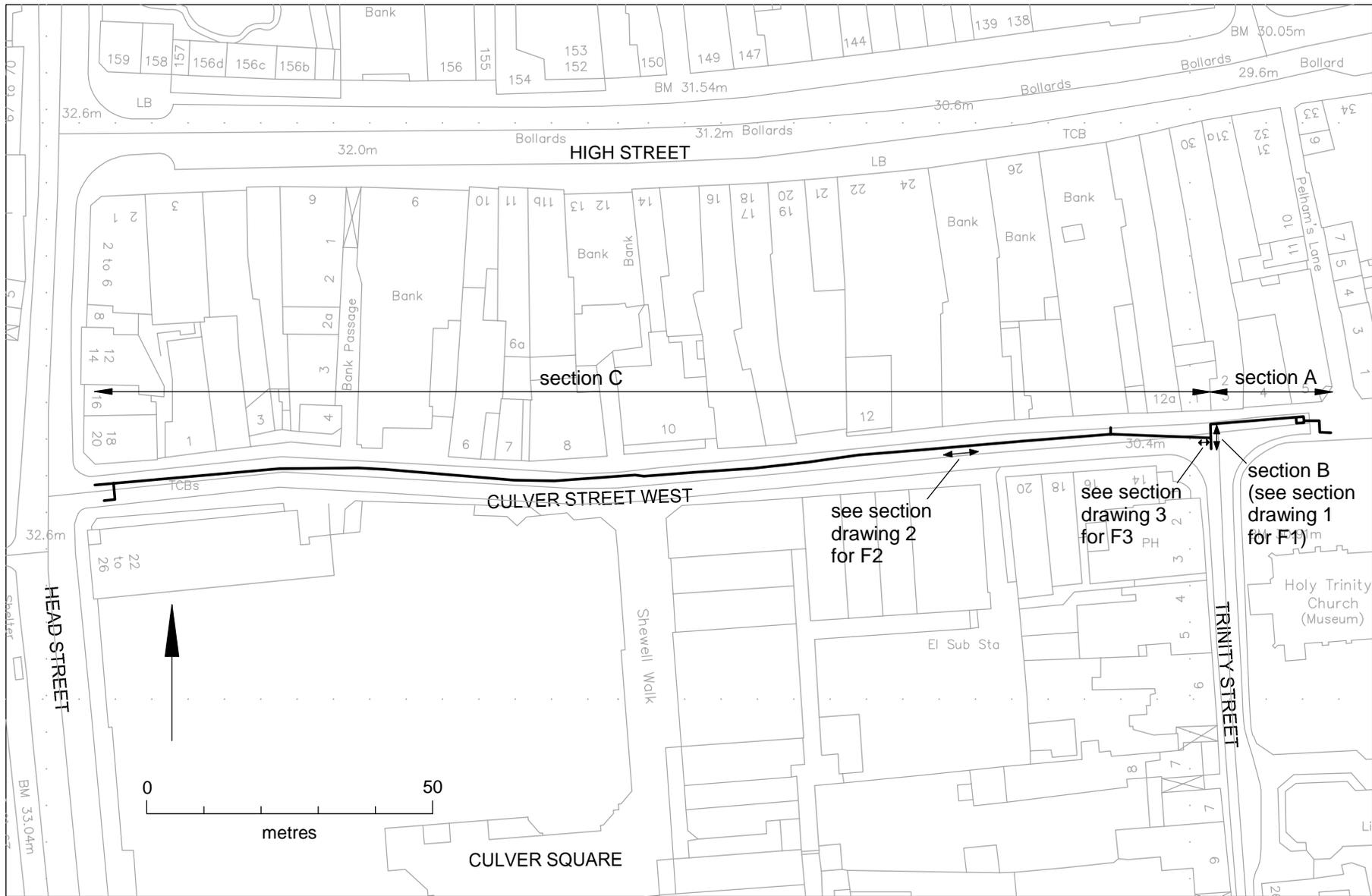
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Fig 1 Trench location. (Scale 1:1000).

- F1 densely packed stones, 20-80mm deep, mixed with yellow-mid brown sand and loam
- F4 mid dark brown silty loam containing modern building debris and tarmac (backfill of pipe trench)
- F5 mid dark brown silt containing modern building debris and tarmac (backfill of pipe trench)

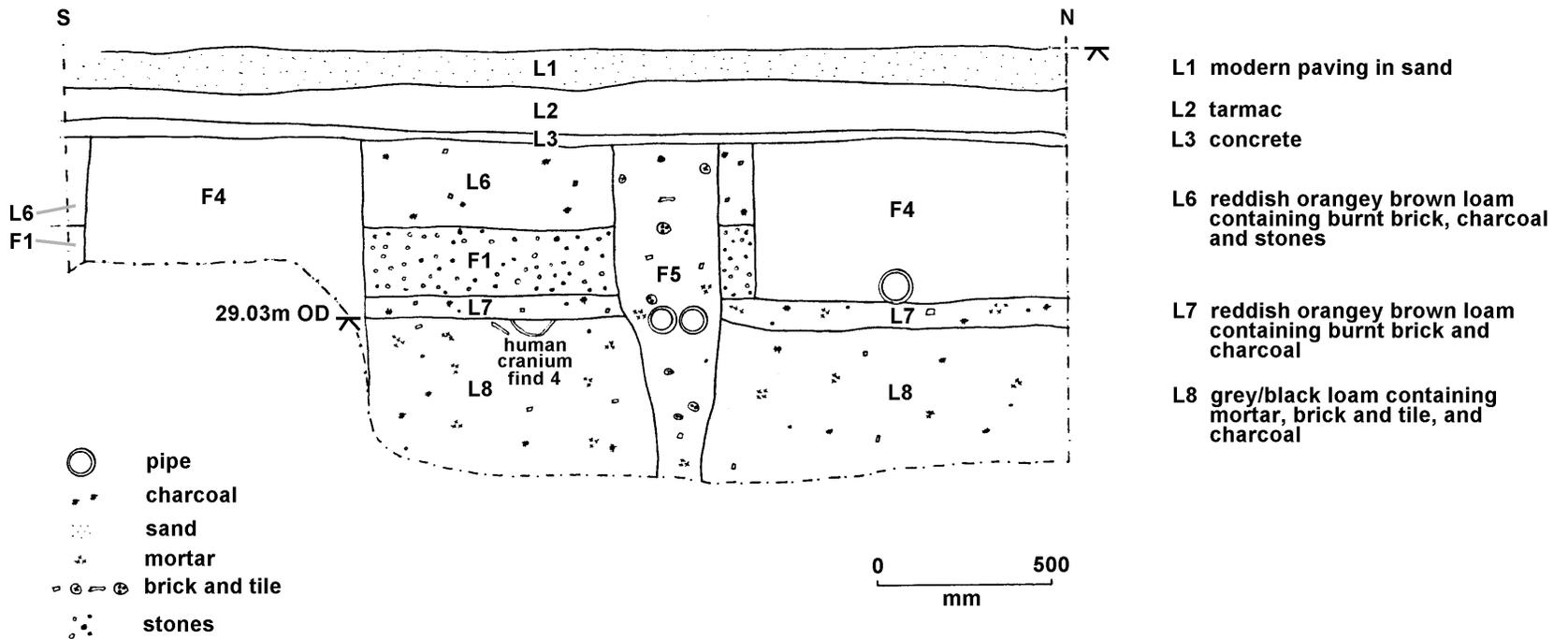
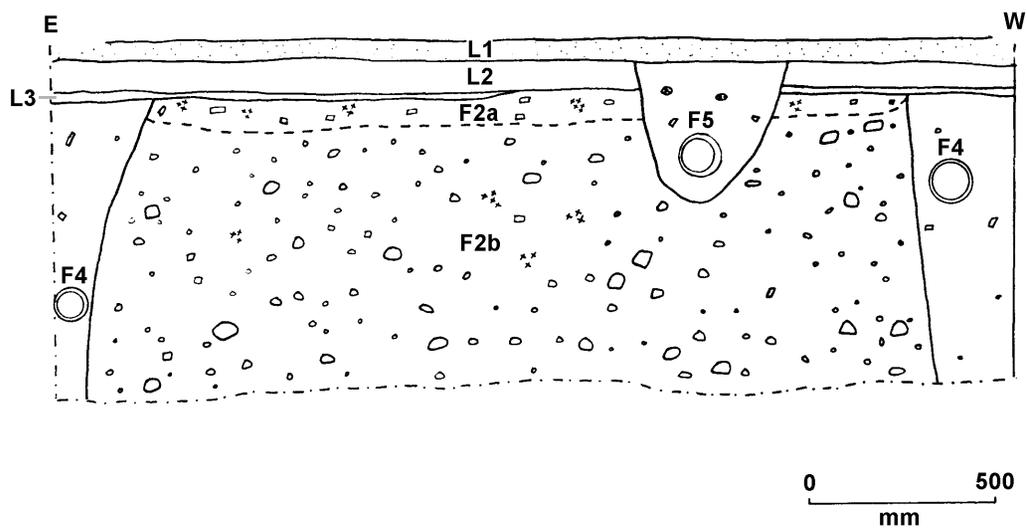
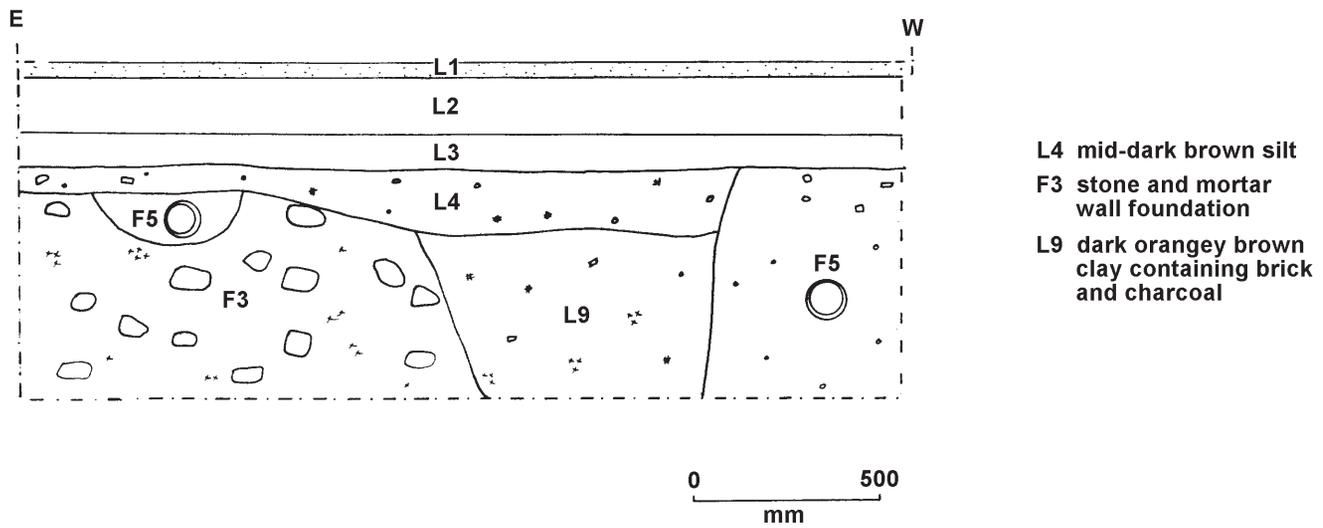


Fig 2 Trench section B: F1 - east-facing section, scale 1:20.



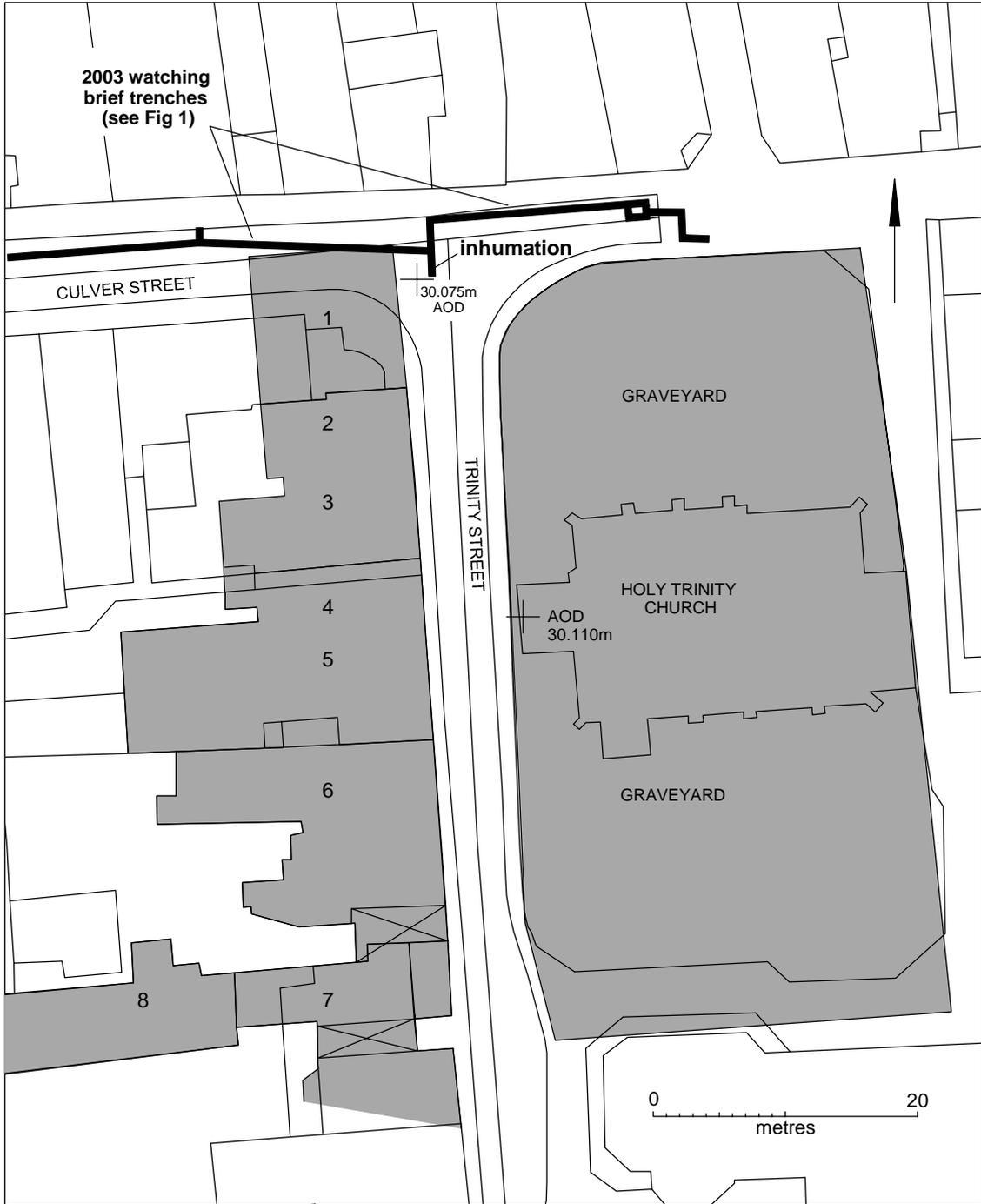
F2a brick fragments set into mortar and mid brown loam  
 F2b tile and stone rubble set into yellowish/pale pink mortar - wall foundation

Fig 3 Trench section C: F2 - north-facing section, scale 1:20.



- L4 mid-dark brown silt
- F3 stone and mortar wall foundation
- L9 dark orangey brown clay containing brick and charcoal

Fig 4 Trench section C: F3 - north-facing section, scale 1:20.



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 = 1818 Trinity Street frontage

Fig 5 The location of the inhumation in relation to Trinity Street, Culver Street and Holy Trinity Church in 1818.

# Essex Heritage Conservation Record/ *Essex Archaeology and History*

## Summary sheet

<b>Site name/address:</b> Culver Street West, Colchester, Essex	
<b>Parish:</b> Colchester	<b>District:</b> Colchester
<b>NGR:</b> TL 9962 2515 to TL 9941 2519	<b>Site code:</b> CAT: 03/5d Colchester Museums: 2003.208
<b>Type of work:</b> Watching brief	<b>Site director/group:</b> Colchester Archaeological Trust
<b>Date of work:</b> May-July 2003	<b>Size of area investigated:</b> 220m x 500mm
<b>Location of finds/curating museum:</b> Colchester Museums	<b>Funding source:</b> Transco Plc
<b>Further seasons anticipated?</b> No	<b>Related EHCR nos:</b>
<b>Final report:</b> CAT Report 244 and summary in EAH	
<b>Periods represented:</b> post-Roman	
<p><b>Summary of fieldwork results:</b>  <i>An archaeological watching brief was carried out along the road line of Culver Street West during trenching for the installation of a new gas pipeline. Most of the route of the trench proved to be cut through ground which had already been disturbed by earlier service-trenches. However, there were some significant discoveries. Two Roman foundations were unrobbed, thus suggesting that Culver Street pre-dated the period when robbing for building materials was commonplace, ie the late 11th and 12th centuries. Also the presence of an inhumation under the north end of Trinity Street suggests that the cemetery of Trinity church was reduced in size to create the street. It is hoped that the inhumation can be radiocarbon-dated to provide dating evidence for this event.</i></p>	
<b>Previous summaries/reports:</b> None	
<b>Author of summary:</b> Kate Orr/Philip Crummy	<b>Date of summary:</b> October 2003