

**An archaeological evaluation at
St Benedict's College,
Norman Way, Colchester, Essex
September 2003**

**report prepared by
Kate Orr**

**on behalf of
St Benedict's College**

CAT project ref.: 03/9a
NGR: TL 9765 2468 (centred)
Colchester Museums accession code: 2003.219



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1 Summary

During a magnetometer survey and evaluation by trial-trenching at St Benedict's College, no features of archaeological significance were observed. The ground showed very little evidence of disturbance. This, coupled with the scarcity of finds, indicates that the ground had been left untouched for a long period of time. The lack of much Roman pottery or tile suggests that there were no centres of Roman occupation in the vicinity. No cremation burials were observed during the evaluation, nor was there any evidence of Iron Age or Roman ditches.

2 Introduction

- 2.1 This is the archive report of an evaluation carried out by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) in the grounds of St Benedict's College, Norman Way, Colchester, Essex. The college has submitted an application to the Forestry Commission, under a Woodland Grant Scheme, to plant trees as an extension to the north side of the copse in the college grounds. The archaeological evaluation was necessary to assess any surviving archaeological remains which may be affected by the scheme.
- 2.2 The evaluation site is located 2km west of Colchester town centre, behind properties on Fitzwalter Road, at National Grid Reference TL 9765 2468 (centred). The land, which is currently under grass, is situated in the north-west corner of the college grounds with tennis courts to the east, a copse immediately south and a footpath and rear gardens of Fitzwalter Road immediately north. The site covers an area of 0.41 hectares.
- 2.3 All fieldwork was done in accordance with a specification submitted by CAT which followed a brief written by the archaeology officer of Colchester Borough Council.
- 2.4 This report mirrors standards and practices contained in Colchester Borough Council's *Guidelines for the standards and practice of archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester* (1999, updated 2002) and *Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester Museums*, and the IFA's *Standard and guidance for an archaeological evaluation* (1999).

3 Archaeological background

- 3.1 The site lies within the Late Iron Age *oppidum* as defined by a system of dykes on the western side of what was Camulodunum. One of these dykes – the Lexden Dyke – runs 200m to the west, and the college buildings overlie the line of the Heath Farm Dyke (Hawkes & Crummy 1995, 29-33).
- 3.2 The 'Lexden cemetery' is a late Iron Age burial ground located on the western side of St Clare Road which was used into the early Roman period. Since the early 1900s, 27 vessels representing at least 10 grave groups have been identified from an area approximately 75m across (Crummy *et al* 1993, 261, 265; Hawkes & Crummy 1995, 164-9).
- 3.3 The main reason for the archaeological investigation was the close proximity to the Lexden Tumulus, a Scheduled Ancient Monument lying some 100m to the north-west of the site. This was excavated in 1924, resulting in the discovery of a rich late Iron Age cremation dating to the late 1st century BC (Foster 1986).

4 Aim

The evaluation was designed to locate, identify and assess the quality and extent of surviving archaeological remains prior to a decision being taken on the preservation or otherwise of deposits and the need for further work and/or mitigation.

5 Methods (Figs 1, 2 and 5)

- 5.1 On the 15th of October a magnetometer survey was carried out over 0.11 hectares of the site (see appendix).
- 5.2 On the 17th and 18th of October four trenches were excavated equating to 3% of the 0.41 hectare area. All trenches were excavated using a mechanical excavator with a toothless 1.6m-wide ditching bucket, under archaeological supervision.
- 5.3 Individual records of layers and features were entered on CAT pro-forma record sheets.
- 5.4 Section drawings of features and layers were made at a scale of 1:10. Plans of the trenches were made at a scale of 1:50.
- 5.5 Finds were registered on CAT record sheets and assigned find numbers according to context. Finds were washed, marked and bagged according to context.
- 5.6 Colour photographs of features were taken with a digital camera and a 35mm transparency camera.

6 Results

6.1 Geophysical survey (see Appendix and Fig 5)

The magnetometer survey revealed a strong linear anomaly in the north-eastern corner which on later excavation proved to be modern. Two other faint linear anomalies could not be traced by the trial excavations.

6.2 Trench 1 (Figs 3-4 and plate)

Trench 1 was dug in the southern part of the site. It was 30m in length and between 580mm and 720mm in depth. Approximately 200mm of grass and light greyish brown stony silt topsoil (Layer or L1) was stripped off. This topsoil contained occasional small pieces of peg-tile, charcoal flecks and clay-pipe stem fragments. The topsoil was very compacted due to the dry weather conditions. Under L1 was 250-300mm of light yellowish brown stony silt subsoil containing occasional tile flecks (L2). At between 550mm and 650mm below ground-level, natural red sand and gravel appeared (L3). This soil profile was common to all four trenches. Cutting the natural sand and gravel were two features (Feature or F1 and F2) which appeared at first to be ditches. When excavated they were found to be the same feature, an irregularly-shaped natural periglacial gully, probably formed by melt-water from glaciers. The 'feature' was sectioned at three points and contained variously yellowish brown silt, reddish brown sand and buff sand. Worm disturbance was present throughout. The fill did not contain any finds (Fig 3). The gully was cut into a ridge of natural sand and gravel, which was 450 mm below ground-level. A patch of silt and a patch of reddish clay in the south-west and north-eastern ends of the trench respectively were cleaned by hand but not excavated, as they too appeared to be natural features.

6.3 Trench 2

Trench 2 was dug in the middle of the site and was 29.5m in length and between 680mm and 760mm in depth. The soil profile in this trench resembled Trench 1. Within the natural L3 there were three silty patches and one patch of dark clayey sand. These were cleaned by hand but not excavated as they appeared to be natural features. There was no trace of the northernmost of the faint linear anomalies identified on the magnetometer survey (see appendix).

6.4 Trench 3

Trench 3 was positioned in the western corner of the site, on the same alignment as Trench 1 and Trench 2. This 7m-long trench was dug to a depth of between 570mm and 710mm and was completely devoid of features. The soil profile consisted of L1-L3, the same as Trenches 1-2.

6.5 Trench 4

Trench 4 was dug in the extreme north-eastern corner of the site, adjacent to the tennis courts and at right-angles to the three other trenches. It was 20m long and dug to a depth of between 750mm and 760mm. As with the other three trenches, the trench was stripped till natural ground L3 was reached. A few fragments of a Roman grey ware jar were retrieved from the interface of L1 and L2. One narrow curving feature was excavated by hand and found to be another natural gully filled by

reddish sand, containing no finds. The trench was cut through the strong linear feature showing up on the geophysical survey (see appendix). A layer of tarmac was observed under the grass, which may be the remains of a modern path.

7 Discussion

No features of archaeological significance were recorded during the evaluation and the only definitely pre 18th-century finds were fragments of Roman storage jar and Roman tile. The ground showed very little evidence of disturbance. This, coupled with the scarcity of finds generally, indicates that the ground had been left untouched for a long period of time. The scarcity of Roman pottery and tile suggests that there were no centres of Roman occupation in the vicinity. There was no evidence of burials or Iron Age/Roman ditches.

8 Acknowledgements

The Colchester Archaeological Trust would like to thank Mr Whybrow and St Benedict's College for commissioning the work, the Essex Heritage Trust for funding the work, and Martin Winter, archaeology officer for Colchester Borough Council, for preparing the brief and monitoring the project.

The fieldwork was carried out and supervised by Kate Orr, assisted by Don Goodman. The geophysical survey was carried out by Dr Tim Dennis of the University of Essex with the assistance of Sarah Rice and Lucy Vearer.

9 References

Cotter, J, 2000 *Post-Roman pottery from excavations in Colchester, 1971-85*, Colchester Archaeological Report 7

Crummy, N, Crummy, P, & Crossan, C, 1993 *Excavations of Roman and later cemeteries, churches and monastic sites in Colchester, 1971-88*, Colchester Archaeological Report 9

Foster, J, 1986 'The Lexden tumulus: a reappraisal of an Iron Age burial from Colchester, Essex', *BAR*, British Series, 156

Hawkes, C F C, & Crummy, P, 1995 *Camulodunum 2*, Colchester Archaeological Report 11

Symonds, R P, & Wade, S, 1999 *Roman pottery from excavations in Colchester, 1971-86*, Colchester Archaeological Report 10, ed by P Bidwell & A Croom

10 Glossary

| | |
|----------------|--|
| 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 |
| glacial | deposits laid down by the action of glaciers |
| medieval | period from AD 1066 to approximately AD 1500 |
| modern | period from the 19th century to the present |
| NGR | National Grid Reference |
| natural | geological deposit undisturbed by human activity |
| <i>oppidum</i> | a high-status Late Iron Age defended settlement |
| periglacial | features formed at the end of the last Ice Age, c 8000 BC |
| post-medieval | approximately AD 1500 to around the late 18th century |
| Roman | the period from AD 43 to around AD 410 |
| tumulus | burial mound |

11 Archive deposition

The finds and paper archive are held by the Colchester Archaeological Trust at 12 Lexden Road, Colchester, Essex CO3 3NF, but both will be permanently deposited with Colchester Museums under accession code 2003.219.

12 Site data

12.1 Table 1: list of contexts.

| context | location | description | context date |
|---------|--------------|--|---------------------------|
| L1 | all trenches | Light greyish brown silt topsoil with frequent to abundant small to medium angular and rounded stones, containing occasional pieces of peg-tile, charcoal flecks and one piece of clay-pipe stem | modern |
| L2 | all trenches | Light yellowish brown silt with frequent to abundant small to medium angular and rounded stones, containing very occasional tile flecks | medieval or post-medieval |
| L3 | all trenches | Natural red sand and gravel | glacial |
| F1 | Trench 1 | Irregularly-shaped periglacial gully filled by yellowish brown silt, reddish brown sand and buff sand | periglacial |
| F2 | Trench 1 | Same feature as F1 | periglacial |

12.2 Table 2: list of finds.

Post-Roman pottery was identified by Howard Brooks of CAT. Fabric numbers refer to Cotter 2000. Roman fabrics refer to Symonds & Wade 1999.

| find no | context | description | date | weight (g) |
|---------|-----------------|---|------------------------|------------|
| 1 | Trench 1, L1 | Brick fragments | post-medieval | 37 |
| 1 | Trench 1, L1 | Peg-tile fragment | medieval to modern | 60 |
| 1 | Trench 1, L1 | Clay-pipe stem | post-medieval | 2 |
| 1 | Trench 1, L1 | Slag | undated | 32 |
| 1 | Trench 1, L1 | Glass fragment | post-medieval | 5 |
| 1 | Trench 1, L1 | Roman tile fragments | Roman | 50 |
| 2 | Trench 2, L1 | Roman tile | Roman | 67 |
| 2 | Trench 2, L1 | Clay-pipe stem | post-medieval | 1 |
| 2 | Trench 2, L1 | Fragment of ironstone pottery (Fabric 48d) | 19th-20th century | 6 |
| 3 | Trench 4, L1/L2 | Fragments of a rim of a storage jar (Fabric HZ) | Roman, 1st-3rd century | 32 |
| 4 | Trench 4, L1/L2 | Animal bone fragments | undated | 6 |
| 4 | Trench 2, L2 | Peg-tile | medieval to modern | 57 |
| 5 | Trench 4, U/S | Fragment of ironstone pottery (Fabric 48d) | modern | 3 |

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Distribution list:

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13 Appendix: Magnetometer survey report

by Dr Tim Dennis, Department of Electronic Systems Engineering, the University of Essex

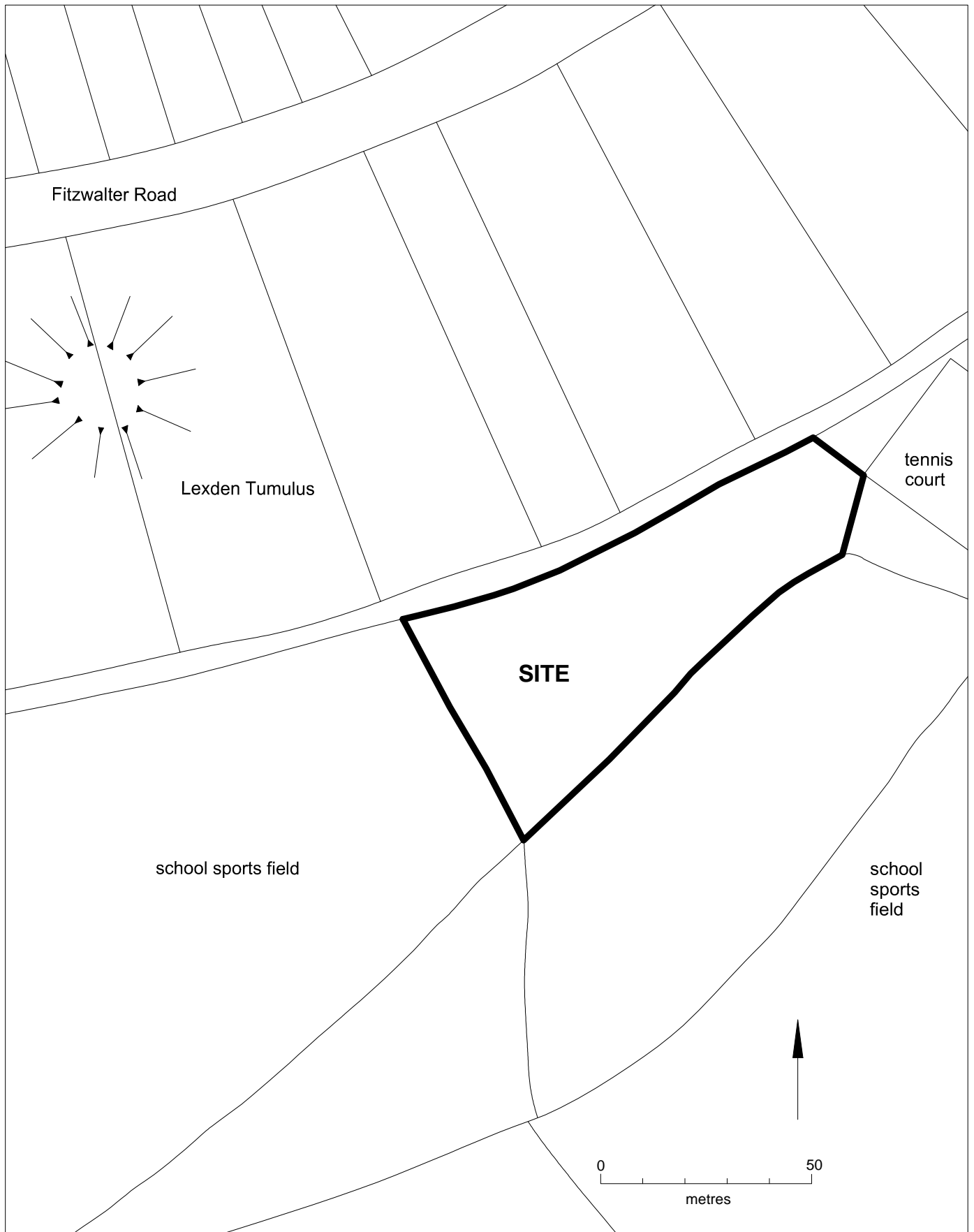
Three 20m x 20 blocks were surveyed, scanning at two tracks per metre, taking four samples per metre along each track. The westernmost area was not surveyed due to the chaotic pattern of anomalies in the westernmost block. These may well have been caused by ferrous studs from football boots and other debris if the site has at some stage been part of a sports field. The strong linear feature in the north is some kind of recently filled-in trench, visible on the surface. It does not correspond to any field boundaries on 19th-century maps.

There is a faint linear feature parallel or nearly parallel to the footpath, extending through all three blocks: in site coordinates it runs from (-20, -26) at its west end to (40, -6). It could be a residual cultivation mark, but not near-surface or recent. Its width can be estimated from the central block as approximately 4 metres. Another finer linear feature is visible to the north of the first, running from (-20, -13) to (40, -6). The 'sharpness' of this is characteristic of it lying on or near the surface, and it may also be due to cultivation, but recent.

High contrast details along the north edge of the plot, close to the footpath, are due to a wire-mesh fence.



Plate Trench 1, F1 - view south-east.



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Fig 1 Site location.

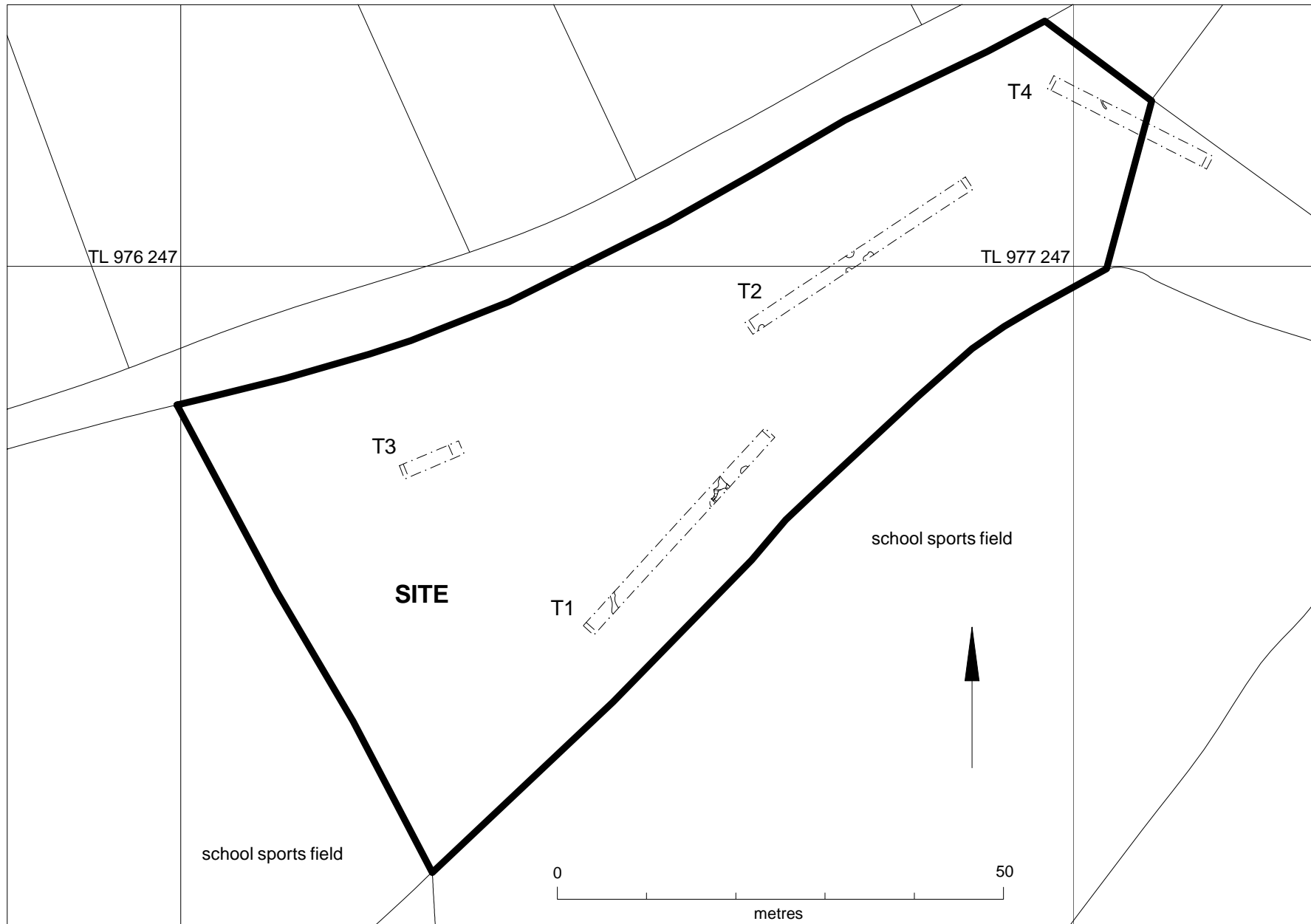
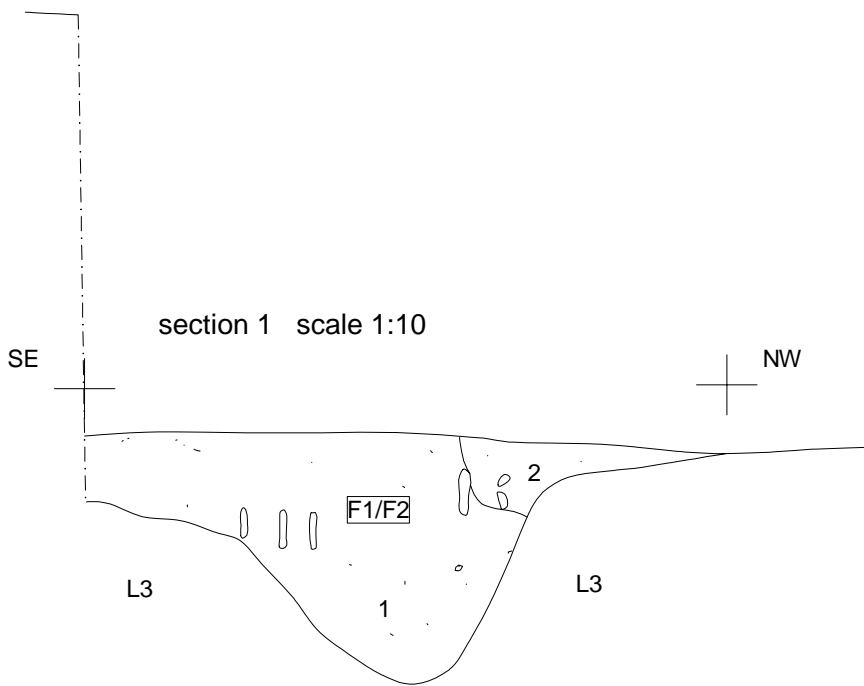


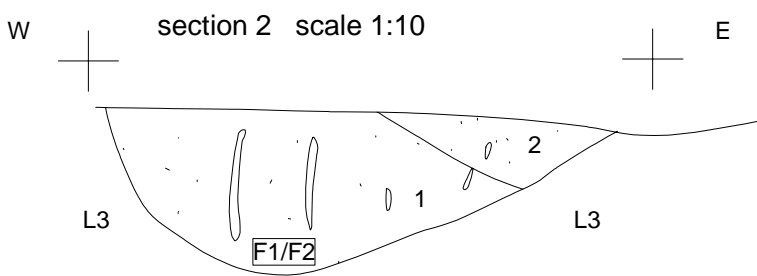
Fig 2 Location of trenches.



F1/F2 1 reddish brown silty sand with mid brown sandy worm disturbance

F1/F2 2 buff sand with mid brown sandy worm disturbance

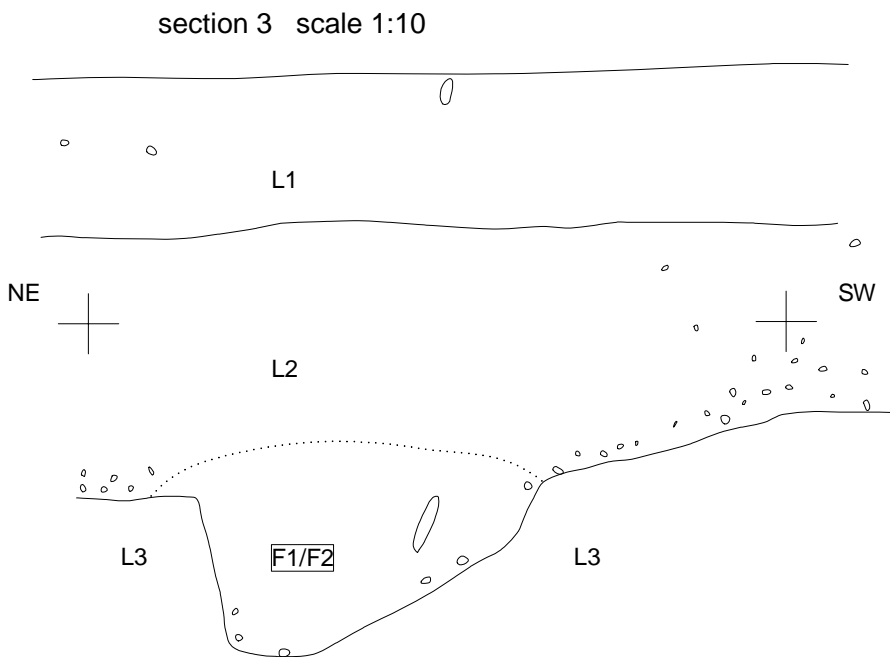
L3 natural red sand and gravel



F1/F2 1 orangy sand with worm disturbance

F1/F2 2 buff sand

L3 natural red sand and gravel



L1 light greyish brown sandy silt topsoil

L2 light yellowish brown stony silt subsoil

F1/F2 yellowish brown silt with worm disturbance

L3 natural red sand and gravel

Fig 3 F1/F2: sections.

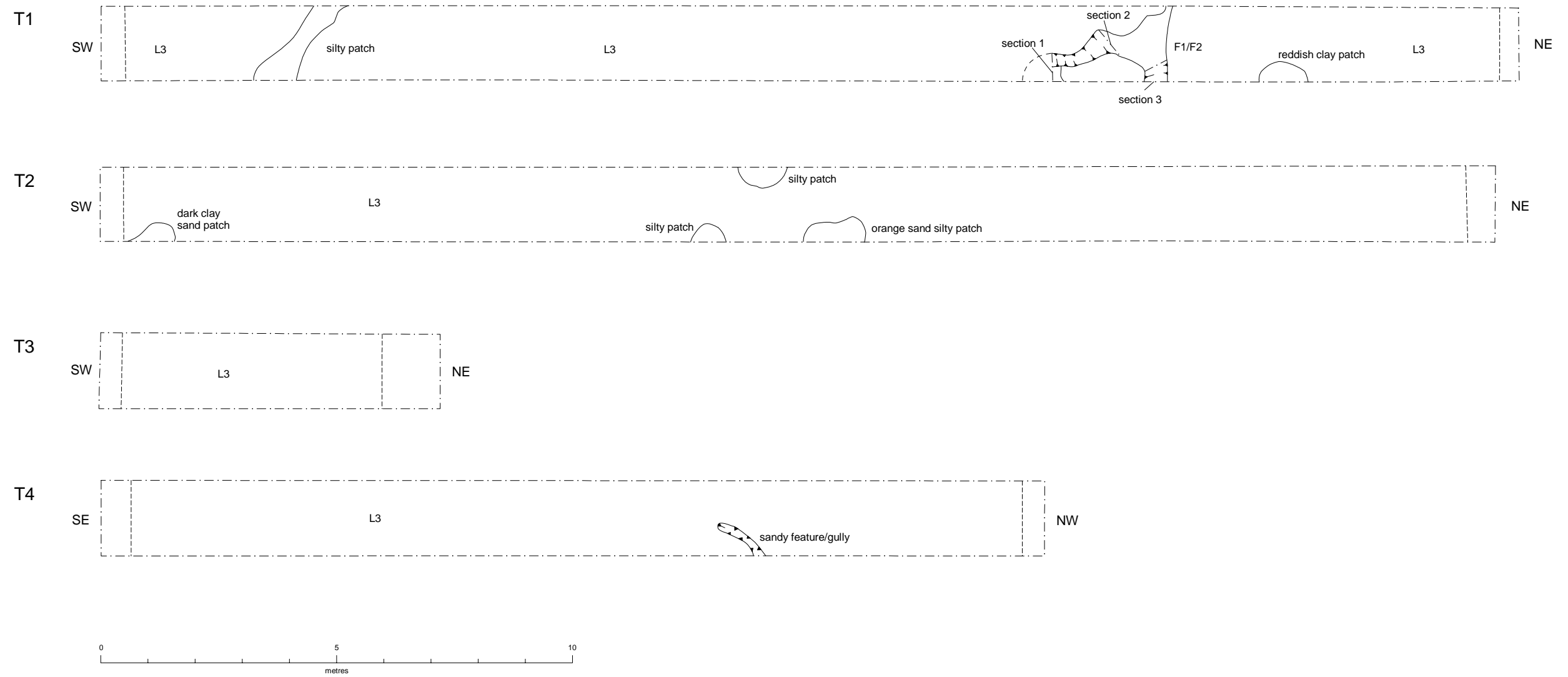


Fig 4 Plan of trenches 1-4.



Fig 5 Magnetometer survey.

Essex Heritage Conservation Record/ *Essex Archaeology and History*

Summary sheet

| | |
|--|--|
| Site name/address: St Benedict's College, Norman Way, Colchester, Essex | |
| Parish: Colchester | District: Colchester |
| NGR: TL 9765 2468 (centred) | Site code: 2003.219 |
| Type of work: Evaluation | Site director/group: Colchester Archaeological Trust |
| Date of work: 15th-18th September 2003 | Size of area investigated: 0.41 hectares |
| Location of finds/curating museum: Colchester Museums | Funding source: Forestry Commission |
| Further seasons anticipated? No | Related EHCR nos: 11712-11714 & 12535 |
| Final report: CAT Report 245 | |
| Periods represented: None | |
| <p>Summary of fieldwork results: <i>During a magnetometer survey and evaluation by trial-trenching at St Benedict's College, no features of archaeological significance were observed. The ground showed very little evidence of disturbance. This, coupled with the scarcity of finds, indicates that the ground had been left untouched for a long period of time. The lack of much Roman pottery or tile suggests that there were no centres of Roman occupation in the vicinity. No cremation burials were observed during the evaluation, nor was there any evidence of Late Iron Age or Roman ditches.</i></p> | |
| Previous summaries/reports: None | |
| Author of summary: Kate Orr | Date of summary: October 2003 |