

**An archaeological excavation and
watching brief at
Birch airfield compost site,
Birch, Colchester, Essex
May-August 2005**

**report prepared by
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**on behalf of
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1 Summary

A watching brief on drainage works and depth-limited soil-stripping within a large compost-production site at Birch airfield resulted in the discovery of linear features and pits dating from the Late Iron Age/early Roman period onward. The observations were too fragmentary to yield an integrated picture of the earlier activity, but the evidence includes ditches and gullies belonging to field systems, possibly with associated structures. The nature and distribution of finds suggest that a focus of Roman occupation lies within or in the immediate vicinity of the north-western region of the airfield.

2 Introduction

- 2.1 This report sets out the results of archaeological fieldwork that took place between May and August 2005 at the Birch airfield compost site, and was carried out by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT).
- 2.2 The fieldwork was prompted by the enlargement of the compost hardstanding area and improvements to the site drainage. These involved ground-stripping over a total area of approximately 7,500 sq m together with excavations to create a 3m-deep lagoon fed from a new 200m-long ditch.
- 2.3 A brief for the proposed fieldwork was drawn up by Essex County Council's Historic Environment Management (HEM) group whose members also monitored the project at key stages in its progress.
- 2.4 This report follows the standards set out in Colchester Borough Council's *Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester Museums* (CM 2003) and *Guidelines on standards and practices for archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester* (CM 2002), the Institute of Field Archaeologists' *Standards and guidance for an archaeological watching brief* (IFA 1999a), *Standards and guidance for archaeological excavation* (IFA 1999b), and *Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials* (IFA 2001). Other sources used are *Management of archaeological projects*, second edition (MAP 2), and *Research and archaeology: a framework for the Eastern Counties 1* (EAA 3), *Research and archaeology: a framework for the Eastern Counties 2* (EAA 8), and *Standards for field archaeology in the East of England* (EAA 14).

3 Site location (Fig 1)

The site lies at the western corner of a former World War 2 airfield (NGR: TL 911 198) and is approached along disused runways to the west of Blind Lane, Birch. The land in this corner of the airfield was in agricultural use before being adopted as a site for large-scale compost-production and storage in 2002.

4 Archaeological background

- 4.1 Prior to the early 1990s, little was known of the archaeology in this part of Birch. Aerial surveys had previously recorded abundant cropmark patterns indicating early activity in fields on rising ground to the north-east of the Hardy's Green to Birch road (EHER no 11924) but, apart from a few fragmentary marks near Curate's Cottage, no substantial cropmark evidence was apparent in the expanse of land to the south-west occupied by Brake's Farm, Palmer's Farm and the airfield itself.
- 4.2 Between 1992 and 2004, a series of field investigations took place in and around Hanson Quarry Products' Birch Pit, which lies from 1km to 2km to the south-east of the present site. These have produced significant additions to knowledge of prehistoric and Roman activity in this region of Birch and are summarised below.
- 4.3 In 1992, a fieldwalking survey over 73 hectares of mainly cultivated land extending from the eastern side of Blind Lane (formerly an airfield runway) to Curate's

Cottage identified two surface concentrations of Roman pottery, tile and building stone in the region to the north-east of Palmer's Farm (CAT Report 8). A targeted programme of fieldwalking in 1997, followed by a geophysical survey and trial-trenching in 1998 on the more southerly of these concentrations, suggested the presence of the remains of at least two Roman structures (CAT Reports 8 and 23). The southern fringe of this area was stripped of topsoil in 2004, revealing prehistoric pits, a group of Roman cremation burials, and Roman ditches and pits, together with fired clay and charcoal debris probably from a hearth or oven, in the field east of Palmer's Farm and north of Maldon Road (NGR: TL 925 192: CAT report in prep).

4.4 In 1995, a watching brief on quarry soil-stripping to the north of Brake's Farm led to the discovery and excavation of a Roman oven or kiln at NGR TL 9333 2002.

4.5 Part of a cemetery dating to the Middle Bronze Age was excavated in 2003 at NGR TL 8583 2886 (CAT Report 289). Three ring-ditches and sixteen unurned and urned cremation burials were examined, the latter dated to c 1400-1200 BC. Nearby ditches may represent the boundary of a contemporary settlement or define an agricultural enclosure. The 2003 excavation also revealed part of a prehistoric trackway or driveway and two large Roman quarry-pits.

5 Aims

The aims of the fieldwork were to establish and record the character, extent, date significance and condition of any archaeological remains affected by the development.

6 Methods

6.1 The project was carried out in accordance with the requirements set out in a brief issued by the ECC HEM group on 18th May 2005. The methods adopted for the field investigation, recording, post-excavation processing and archival work are detailed in the CAT Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI), a copy of which is included as the appendix to this report (section 13).

6.2 The fieldwork took place in two phases. The first phase involved investigation of the sites for a proposed 3m-deep lagoon (Area 1 on Fig 2) and a 200m-long feeder ditch (Area 2 on Fig 2). This commenced with archaeologically controlled soil-stripping in which topsoils were progressively removed by machine down to the uppermost archaeologically sensitive level. At that point, exposed ground features were manually investigated to establish their character and date.

6.3 The second phase of fieldwork was concerned with soil-stripping in an adjoining area of 6,500 sq m which is to be used as hardstanding (Area 3 on Fig 2). Here, a box scraper was used initially to remove the uppermost levels of topsoil. This was followed by fine topsoil-stripping down to a predetermined depth using a machine equipped with a toothless ditching bucket. The reduced ground was covered with 'Terram' geotextile sheeting, then hardcore was laid over the stripped area. The north-western part of this area was concreted over and the remainder was made up to form a hardcore surface. The area stripping was monitored to ensure that no archaeologically significant deposits were removed by the machining without record. Exposed ground features were plotted and incorporated into the site plan.

7 Results

7.1 Post-Roman truncation

The topsoil in this area is a sandy clay loam, typically 30cm in depth. This lay directly on natural pale yellowish brown clay/silty clay loam with common small chalk inclusions. The observed stratigraphy suggests that there has been a loss of intermediate soils, perhaps due in part to agricultural erosion, but more extensively resulting from levelling works for the WW2 airfield. The extent of that loss was most apparent in Area 1 (the lagoon), where early linear features were found to be

shallow. Here, the surviving eastern end of the Roman ditch F1 was 19cm deep, increasing to 27cm at the western end (Fig 3 sections). F1 probably extends further west, appearing in Area 2 as the ditch F12, which was 38cm deep where sectioned (Fig 4 section).

7.2 Areas 1 and 2

Excavations were focused on the Area 1 lagoon and Area 2 feeder ditch sites since both involved the removal of archaeological material. In total, 38 individual ground features were recorded in these areas, of which 34 were investigated. All of the features, including those associated with the airfield, were sealed by the topsoil.

The table below gives a brief description of the features together with a period attribution based on the available finds evidence. The features are illustrated in plan on Figure 2 and in section or profile form on Figures 3-8.

Table 1: list of features in Areas 1 and 2.

Feature number	Summary description	Period
F1	ditch, continuation of F12	(Late Iron Age?) - Roman
F2	ditch	(Late Iron Age?) - Roman
F3	pit and ditch: group number covering F37, F38	Roman
F4	airfield runway foundation	modern (1943)
F5	gully	Roman
F6	burnt area	indeterminate
F7	rectilinear pit	Roman
F8	charcoal patch	possibly Roman
F9	shallow groove/gully	(Late Iron Age?) - Roman
F10	(cancelled)	(cancelled)
F11	pit	probably Roman
F12	ditch, continuation of F1	(Late Iron Age?) - Roman
F13	ditch/gully	(Late Iron Age?) - Roman
F14	ditch/gully	Roman
F15	pit	(Late Iron Age?) - Roman
F16	pit	Roman
F17	airfield drain, continuation of F36	modern (1943)
F18	natural feature	-
F19	natural feature	-
F20	gully	Roman
F21	ditch	Roman
F22	gully	Roman
F23	gully	Roman
F24	ditch	Roman
F25	ditch/gully	(Late Iron Age?) - Roman
F26	charcoal patch	probably Roman
F27	linear depression, possibly natural	indeterminate
F28	ditch	post-medieval/modern
F29	ditch	indeterminate
F30	linear depression, possibly natural	indeterminate
F31	pit	Roman
F32	natural	-
F33	gully	Roman
F34	pit	indeterminate
F35	pit	Roman
F36	airfield drain, continuation of F17	modern (1943)
F37	pit	Roman
F38	ditch	(Late Iron Age?) - Roman
F39	small pit	indeterminate
F40	ditch	modern

The fills of the more substantial ditches F31, F38 and F1/F12, together with the Roman pits F15 and F37, produced a sufficiently large ratio of finds in relation to the

excavated soil volume for them to be satisfactorily dated to the Roman period. In other instances, features with a lower yield of exclusively Roman finds have been attributed to the Roman period, but with some reservations because of possible finds residuality. The features that come into the latter category include F5, F11, F16, F20, F25 and F35. The dating evidence for the three burnt features (F6, F8, F26) is slim. None of the three are conclusively early, although the iron joiner's dog in F26 is probably Roman and the nail in F8 is consistent with a Roman date.

Late Iron Age-Roman period

Late Iron Age grog-tempered pottery occurred in the fills of the ditches F1/F12, F2, F38, the linear features F13, F25, and the pit F15, in conjunction with early Roman fabrics. Such features may be part of the pre-conquest landscape, retained in the Roman period. Alternatively, the Late Iron Age material might be a residual indication of local pre-Roman activity pre-dating their contexts.

The only two features to yield late Roman finds (ie pottery, probably of 4th- or later 4th-century date) were the pits F7 and F37. None of the linear feature fill samples produced material of equivalent late Roman date. In one instance, the pit F37 was cut into the upper fill of the earlier ditch F38 which was clearly no longer in use at this late stage in the Roman period.

The more substantial linear features are probably field or trackway ditches. Others (listed as gullies) were relatively shallow and may also represent pens, byres or similar light structures. The shallow linear features were examined for the presence of stake holes or post-holes but none were discernible.

Medieval

No medieval finds were recovered from the site although it is possible that some of the currently undated features may belong to this period.

Post-medieval to modern

Post-medieval to modern activity was represented by the ditches F28, F40, an airfield drain (F17/F36), and the buried edge of a runway (F4).

7.3 Area 3

The topsoil-stripping stopped short of the depth necessary to reveal underlying archaeological levels over most of the area intended for hardstanding. The exceptions were confined to three areas at the south-western side of the site, where topsoils were removed completely, exposing features cutting natural subsoil (Fig 2).

In total, 17 features were recorded in Area 3. The features were not excavated since they were under no threat of removal. Superficial examination yielded datable material in three instances: Roman brick in F43 and F44, and modern brick in F57. F56 appears to be natural.

The expanse of residual topsoil separating the Area 3 features from those in the neighbouring Area 2 obscured any discernible relationships between the two groups. Generally, the Area 3 features are of similar character but projections of the linear features did not align well with those revealed to the east in Area 2. Most, therefore, remain undated although possible associations are discussed in section 9.

Table 2: list of features in Area 3.

Feature no	Summary description	Date
F41	ditch	indeterminate
F42	pit	indeterminate
F43	pit/post-hole	Roman
F44	pit or ditch fill	Roman
F45	ditch?	indeterminate
F46	ditch	indeterminate
F47	charcoal patch	indeterminate
F48	pit	indeterminate
F49	linear feature	indeterminate
F50	ditch	indeterminate
F51	ditch	indeterminate
F52	pit	indeterminate
F53	ditch	indeterminate
F54	ditch	indeterminate
F55	ditch	indeterminate
F56	natural	indeterminate
F57	ditch	modern

8 Finds

In addition to the three reports reproduced below, the site archive includes quantified lists of building materials and shell.

8.1 The Roman pottery

by Stephen Benfield (CAT)

The pottery was recorded using the Roman pottery fabric types devised for CAR 10 and pottery form types of the Camulodunum (Cam) Roman pottery type series (Hawkes & Hull 1947; Hull 1958). LIA = Late Iron Age and U/S = unstratified.

The following Roman pottery fabric codes and fabric names are used in this report:

Fabric code	Fabric name
AJ	amphora, Dressel 20
BA	plain samian forms: BA (SG) south Gaulish plain samian
BX	decorated samian BX (SG) south Gaulish decorated samian
CZ	Colchester and other red colour-coated wares
DJ	coarse oxidised and related wares
DZ	fine oxidised wares
GB	BB2: black-burnished ware, category 2
GTW	Late Iron Age grog-tempered ware
GX	other coarse wares, principally locally-produced grey wares
HD	shell-tempered and calcite-gritted wares
HZ	large storage jars and other vessels in heavily-tempered grey wares
KX	black-burnished ware (BB2) types in pale grey ware
TK	Oxford mortaria, white/cream, unslipped, with pink grits
TR	<i>terra rubra</i>
UR(LTC)	<i>terra nigra</i> -types wares, local traded coarse ware
WPW	north Gaulish (Gallo-Belgic) white ware 1

Table 3: the Roman pottery by numbered bag.

BFT – brick-like fragments with flint or chalk temper or inclusions.
Sherd quantity – VSQ = 2-5, SQ = 5-10, Q = 10-20, LQ = 20-50.

feature	bag	sherd quantity	weight (in g)	fabrics recorded	pot forms	comments	bag dated
U/S	48	1	64	GB	Cam 305 B	U/S	later 3rd century
F1	1	SQ	358	HZ		dung or grog-tempered	?LIA-1st century
F1	2	1	46	HZ		dung temper	?1st century
F1	3	VSQ	37	GTW, ?GX	Cam 266	bowl rim in GTW & jar rim	LIA-?early Roman
F1	10	Q	336	GTW, GX HZ		includes LIA sherd	1st century, early Roman
F1	20	SQ	110	GTW, GX	Cam 222	These sherds are probably predominantly of LIA type but the context is probably early Roman	LIA and early Roman
F1	23	LQ	610	GX, HZ		Fabric GX bowl with some grog/dung temper	1st century, early Roman
F2	4	1	14	KX	Cam 305B		mid-late 3rd+
F2	11	1	103	GTW		hand-made feel, grog-tempered, possibly a large storage jar	LIA-?later 1st century
F2	11	VSQ	61	GTW		reduced GTW and fine oxidised ware with some grog temper, also 1 sherd flint - tempered prehistoric	LIA -?early Roman
F2	14	VSQ	6			BFT	
F2	16	SQ	345	GX, HZ	Cam 273		1st -2nd/3rd century
F3	5	2	172	GX, HZ	Cam 273		1st-2nd/3rd century
F3	6	1	12	GB	Cam 37	probably Cam 37B	2nd-3rd, probably late 2nd to mid-late 3rd century
F3	7	1	65	HZ			1st-2nd/3rd century
F5	9	VSQ	21	GX			Roman
F7	15	SQ	81	GX, HD, ?CZ		the shell-tempered ware is probably late Roman	probably 4th or later 4th century
F7	18	VSQ	14	GX		Roman grey ware and 1 other soft ?early Roman sherd	Roman
F9	19	VSQ	77	GTW, ?GX		grog-tempered and ?dung-tempered sherds, BFT	LIA-?early Roman
F11	22	1	1	GX			Roman
F12	25	Q	465	DZ, GTW, GX, TR	Cam 56 Cam 257	Fabric DZ - decorated sherd from a ?butt-beaker, also TR cup	LIA-early Roman (pre-Flavian)
F12	25	SQ	27			BFT	

feature	bag	sherd quantity	weight (in g)	fabrics recorded	pot forms	comments	bag dated
F13	8	SQ	36	DZ	Cam 113?	butt-beaker rim, red fabric with traces of white slip	LIA-?early Roman
F13	26	SQ	53	GTW, GX			early Roman
F13	50	SQ	41	GX		GX & sherds of ?oxidised GX, ?some grog temper	Roman 1st century
F13	50	1	10			BFT	
F14	29	SQ	33	GX			?early Roman
F14	30	1	2	GX			Roman
F14	51	2	10	GX			Roman (?early Roman)
F15	27	SQ	17			BFT	
F15	27	VSQ	10	GX		also ?BFT fragment	Roman
F15	27	1	2	GTW			LIA
F15	35	VSQ	21			BFT	
F15	35	Q	165	GTW, GX, HZ, WPW	Cam 212-217, Cam 266	Gaulish flagon base, fine dense cream white ware, probably imported (burnt) also possibly sand-tempered LIA sherd	?LIA-early Roman, pre-Flavian
F16	28	SQ	50	GX		some thick sherds (?Roman or prehistoric) sand-tempered, also 1 fragment of BFT	Roman
F20	47	VSQ	37	BA(SG), GX	Dr 29		1st century
F21	49	Q	267	DJ, GX, HZ, HD, UR(LTC)	Cam 8/24 Cam 273		early Roman to pre-Flavian
F22	12	Q	99	GX			Roman (?1st-2nd century)
F22	53	LQ	870	DJ, GX, HZ	Cam 266		1st-early 2nd century
F23	13	1	72	KX	Cam 39B	black tarry deposit on outer surfaces	early 2nd to mid-late 3rd+
F23	54	VSQ	12	GX			Roman
F24	55	LQ	717	DJ, GX, HZ	Cam 266		1st-early 2nd century
F24	56	Q	368	GX, HZ, UR(LTC)	Cam 14/28		early Roman (?pre-Flavian)
F24	57	SQ	379	GX		lower part of jar or jar/bowl with 3 holes (post-firing) through base	?1st-early 2nd century
F24	61	SQ	61	DJ		flagon base	1st -2nd century
F24	62	VSQ	38	GX		?dung temper	?early Roman
F25	63	VSQ	11	GX			Roman
F25	65	1	3	GTW			LIA
F31	39	Q	82	DJ, GTW, GX, HZ		1 sherd prehistoric flint-tempered	Roman ?1st-2nd century
F31	45	2	7	GX			Roman
F31	52	SQ	52	GX			Roman
F31	52	1	3	GX			Roman (?early

feature	bag	sherd quantity	weight (in g)	fabrics recorded	pot forms	comments	bag dated
							Roman)
F31	52	1	53	HZ			1st-2nd/3rd century
F33	33	SQ	54	HZ, GX			Roman (?1st - 2nd/3rd century)
F33	34	1	4	GX			Roman
F35	31	2	8	BX(SG), GX	Dr 37		Roman (1st century)
F37	36	SQ	87	AJ, GX, ?CZ HD	?Dressel 20	the shell-tempered ware is probably late Roman	probably 4th or later 4th century
F38	37	LQ	300	DJ, GX, HD, HZ	Cam 266	overall appears 1st-2nd century but the Fabric HD is more common in the early and late Roman period	1st-2nd century (but possibly late Roman)
F38	38	SQ	76	?CZ, DJ, GX, HD, TK	Cam 505		late 3rd-4th, probably later 4th century
F38	41	1	8	HZ			?1st century
F38	41	2	8	GTW, ?TR or CZ		small colour-coat sherd, abraded, brownish coat on pale red-buff fabric	?LIA-early Roman

8.2 The small finds and bulk ironwork

by N Crummy

The objects range in date from early Roman (SF 1) to modern (SF 3). The Colchester BB brooch dates to c AD 60-80 and the decorative openwork catchplate suggests it may be early within this range. The brooch is in excellent condition and appears to have seen little wear. The fragment of Millstone Grit has decorative mouldings and was probably part of an architectural feature, but slight striations on the opposite face, as well as wear along one side that matches a hand-grip, suggest that it may have been reused as a rubbing stone.

The iron nails are all probably Roman and contemporary with their contexts, though that from F38 could be more post-medieval or later. Both the nail from undated feature F8 and the joiner's dog from undated feature F26 may be Roman. The tanged sickle blade and the ?battery fragments are again contemporary with their contexts. (SF = small finds).

Fig 9. SF 1. (46) F21. Ditch; Roman. A copper-alloy Colchester BB derivative brooch, complete apart from the pin. The spring is of ten turns; the side wings are curved and each has a moulding at the tip. The bow is of D-section and plain, with a slight step on each side of the head and with two transverse grooves across the tip. The catchplate has ornamental openwork and the slot for the pin is well-defined. Length 65 mm. Date range: AD c 60-80.

SF 4. (42) F38. Ditch; Roman. Fragment of Millstone Grit with one straight original edge. One face has two parallel mouldings separated by a deep groove, the other is smooth and flat and has slight striations. Maximum dimensions 85 by 58 by 40.

(23) F1. Ditch; Roman. Iron nail shank. Length 55 mm.

(32) F2. Ditch; Roman. Iron nail with flat round head (damaged). Length, incomplete, 38 mm.

(37) F38. Ditch; Roman. Iron nail with round domed head. Length, complete, 73 mm.

(53) F22. Ditch/gully; Roman. Iron nail with round domed head. Length, incomplete, 35 mm.

(17) F8. Charcoal patch; date uncertain, ?modern. Iron nail with flat round head (damaged). Length, incomplete, 65 mm. Possibly Roman.

(59) F26. Charcoal patch; date uncertain, ?modern. Iron joiner's dog, the end of one arm missing. Length 40 mm, width 50 mm. Probably Roman.

SF 2. (60) F28. Field ditch; post-medieval/modern. Tanged sickle blade, with the tip missing. The tang is short; the blade is triangular section. Length (incomplete) 235 mm, width of blade 16 mm.

SF 3. (64) F40. Ditch; modern. Fragments of copper-alloy sheet originally encasing a piece of ?graphite, and two short fragments of copper-alloy wire. Probably part of a battery.

8.3 The faunal remains

by Julie Curl (Norfolk Archaeological Unit)

Summary

A total of 1.819kg of faunal remains, comprising of 161 pieces, was recovered from the site. Six species were identified, including deer. A small breed of dog, probably a lap-dog, was also recovered from a Roman ditch fill.

Methodology

All of the bone was examined to identify species and types of bone present and any butchering that has occurred. The condition of the bone was recorded, along with any other information such as the estimated age of animals at death. The weight and total count was recorded for each context; each identifiable species was also counted for each context. All of the information was recorded on the faunal remains recording sheets and a summary of the information is included in a table with this report.

Results and conclusions

This is a small assemblage, highly fragmented due to butchering and wear and in fairly poor condition. Bone was produced from 33 fills. The majority (62%) was recovered from ditch fills, 20% of the bone was yielded from a variety of pit fills, the remaining 18% of the assemblage was produced from gully, pit/ditch and charcoal deposits; the vast majority of the faunal remains were from fills of a Roman date.

Six species were identified. Sheep/goat were the most frequently recorded, these were mostly from adult animals, but a young juvenile, of around 2 months old (aged by wear on the deciduous pre-molar) was recorded, suggesting local breeding. Adult sheep teeth, including a well-worn third molar, were found, suggesting an age of approximately 4-6 years. Sheep in particular were an easily kept and useful animal in the Roman period, providing wool, milk, lambs, lanolin, meat, fat, hides and horn; sheep (and goats) were the primary providers of milk in the Roman period. Most of the sheep/goat remains had been butchered. Elements recovered were predominantly from primary and lower quality meat producing bones, possibly suggesting that the good-quality meat was consumed and/or deposited elsewhere.

Cattle were the second most common species in this assemblage. All cattle remains were from adult animals; these animals had a primary use as traction animals in the Roman period and were not used for milking, hence the lower numbers or absence of juveniles of this species in Roman assemblages. Butchering was recorded on most of the cattle remains. Most of the elements recovered were from primary butchering and lower-quality meat bones, again suggesting that the good-quality meat was consumed/deposited elsewhere.

Sparse remains of equids and pig were recorded, both from adult animals. Two fills produced Red Deer, including a fragment of metatarsal in pit fill F37, Finds no 36; this suggests that Red Deer were being hunted, probably locally, and contributing a small amount to the diet at this site.

One small canid humerus was recovered from the ditch fill F1, Finds no 23. It is possible that this canid humerus is from a small fox, but more likely to be from a small breed of dog, of terrier or small spaniel size. Small dogs are thought to have been introduced by the Romans (Maltby 1979) and numerous very small individuals

have been found in Colchester assemblages (CAR 12) and are thought to be lap-dogs. It is possible that the individual from this site was a lap-dog or used for small-scale hunting. Canid gnawing was also noticed on a few bones, particularly in F38, Finds no 37. Gnawing is commonly thought to be an indication of scavenging activity, but could equally be remains of food given to domestic or working dogs.

Table 4: the faunal remains.

Finds no	Feature/ Layer no	Feature/ Layer description	Date	Total quantity	Weight (g)	Species	Species quantity	Butchering	Ages	Comments
10	F1	ditch	Roman	2	5	Mammal	2			
20	F1	ditch	Roman			Mammal	14	butchered		
20	F1	ditch	Roman	15	110	Pig	1	cut/chop	adult	skull fragment
23	F1	ditch	Roman			canid	1		adult	humerus from small fox or dog
23	F1	ditch	Roman			Mammal	1			
23	F1	ditch	Roman	6	30	Sheep/ goat	4	cut/chop	adult	metatarsals, femur head, molar
11	F2	ditch	Roman	13	27	Mammal	13			fragmentary
14	F2	ditch	Roman	1	3	Sheep/ goat	1	?butchered		metatarsal shaft fragment
9	F5	gully	Roman	2	5	Mammal	2			
15	F7	pit	Roman	11	114	Equid	2		adult	well-worn molars
15	F7	pit	Roman			Mammal	9			
22	F11	pit	prob Roman	1	2	Mammal	1			
25	F12	ditch	Roman			Cattle	1		adult	tooth
25	F12	ditch	Roman			Mammal	12			medium to large mammal fragments
25	F12	ditch	Roman			Sheep/ goat	5	chopped	adult	axis vertebrae, scapula, metapodials
26	F13	ditch/ gully	Roman	5	13	Mammal	5			
50	F13	ditch/ gully	Roman	7	12	Mammal	7	butchered		large mammal fragments
30	F14	ditch/ gully	Roman	4	49	Cattle	3	cut/chop	adult	molar and cut/chopped ribs
30	F14	ditch/ gully	Roman			Mammal	1			
27	F15	pit	Roman	1	3	Mammal	1			
27	F15	pit	Roman	1	4	Mammal	1	chopped		rib, probably cattle
35	F15	pit	Roman			Mammal	1			
35	F15	pit	Roman	8	9	Sheep/ goat	1	chopped	adult	calcaeneus
28	F16	small pit	Roman	3	22	Cattle	1	cuts	adult	proximal phalange
28	F16	small pit	Roman			Mammal	2			
47	F20	gully	Roman	4	13	Mammal	4			fragments of large mammal
49	F21	ditch	Roman	4	16	Cattle	1	chopped		vertebrae fragment
49	F21	ditch	Roman			Mammal	2			
49	F21	ditch	Roman			Sheep/ goat	1		adult	tooth
53	F22	gully	Roman	3	19	Mammal	3	butchered		fragments of large mammal

54	F23	gully	Roman	2	5	Sheep/ goat	2	chopped		metapodial shaft fragments
55	F24	ditch	Roman			Mammal	13	butchered		
55	F24	ditch	Roman	15	72	Sheep/ goat	2	chopped	adult	tibia, radius
56	F24	ditch	Roman	9	312	Cattle	1	chopped	adult	tibia
56	F24	ditch	Roman			Equid	3		adult	upper molars
56	F24	ditch	Roman			Mammal	5	butchered		
57	F24	ditch	Roman	1	6	Sheep/ goat	1	cuts		tibia shaft, 3 knife cuts
61	F24	ditch	Roman			Mammal	2			
61	F24	ditch	Roman	5	15	Sheep/ goat	3	chopped	juv	radius, unworn molar, Dp4 - little wear
58	F26	char- coal	prob Roman	1	3	Mammal	1		juv	?cattle tail vertebrae
45	F31	large pit	Roman	1	2	Mammal	1			
52	F31	large pit	Roman	5	9	Mammal	5			inc poss sheep/goat metapodial fragment
33	F33	gully	Roman	8	30	Mammal	8			large mammal fragments
31	F35	pit	Roman	1	3	Mammal	1			large mammal fragment
36	F37	pit	Roman			?Red Deer	2	?butchered		metatarsal shaft fragments - groove at rear
36	F37	pit	Roman	18	82	Cattle	1	chopped	adult	jaw
36	F37	pit	Roman			Mammal	15			
37	F38	ditch	Roman		787	Cattle	13	cut/chop	adult	talus, cut calcaneum, metapodials, radius/ulna +
37	F38	ditch	Roman			Mammal	25	butchered		some canid gnawing
37	F38	ditch	Roman			Red Deer	1		adult	well-worn molar
37	F38	ditch	Roman			Sheep/ goat	3	chopped	adult	worn third molar, second molar, tibia
38	F38	ditch	Roman	1	2	Mammal	1			
41	F38	pit/ ditch	Roman	3	35	Cattle	1		adult	proximal phalange
41	F38	pit/ ditch	Roman			Mammal	2			

9 Discussion

9.1 Overall, the fieldwork has revealed elements in the earlier agricultural landscape dating back at least as far as the early Roman period and perhaps extending to the Late Iron Age. Due to the nature of the development, the resulting picture is fragmentary and does not lend itself to detailed phasing and interpretation. The more substantial Roman features include a number of field ditches, and perhaps indications of a trackway represented by F1/F12 and F2 at the northern end of the site. Other shallower features of more limited extent such as F5 and F13 may be pens or light structures but, without larger-scale stripping, this remains conjectural.

9.2 Roman features and finds were common in Area 1 and in the northern and central stretch of Area 2 where the presence of Roman roof tile and brick indicates one or more buildings either on the site or nearby. In relation to the small volumes of fill examined, many of the excavated features yielded pottery and butchered bone in sufficient quantities to indicate that Roman domestic occupation existed in the immediate vicinity.

9.3 In Area 3, it is probable that a number of the features listed as being of indeterminate date in Table 2 are early, although they currently lack the finds to substantiate this. Spatially, a link of sorts can be made with projections of the

following Area 3 ditch alignments in relation to Roman ditches in Area 2: F55 (with Area 2 F31); F51/F54 (with Area 2 F25); F50 (with Area 2 F22). Of the more recent ditches, F57 and Area 2 F28 may also be related. However, with a broad intervening area obscured by topsoil, these associations are tenuous.

- 9.4** The Late Iron Age pottery content within certain features known to have been open in the Roman period has already been commented on in section 7.2. Additionally, it is worth noting that this contrasts with the results from the nearby Roman site in the western extension at Birch Quarry (NGR: TL 925 192), where no Late Iron Age pottery was found in an area containing 1st- to 2nd-century Roman cremation burials and 1st- to 4th-century ditches and pits (2004 watching brief and excavation, CAT report in prep). This may point to a distinct Late Iron Age element on this site which is not generally characteristic of the locality.

10 Archive deposition

The site records and finds are currently held by the Colchester Archaeological Trust at 12 Lexden Road, Colchester, Essex CO3 3NF. These will be deposited permanently with Colchester Museums under cover of museum accession code 2005.51.

11 Acknowledgements

The fieldwork was commissioned by Mr J Strathern of Park House Farm, Layer Marney. The Trust is most grateful to Mr Strathern, his family and employees for their patience and co-operation throughout the course of the work. The Trust would also like to thank Pat Connell and Richard Havis of the HEM group at Essex County Council for their assistance and involvement in the project.

In addition to the contributors named elsewhere in this report, the following CAT staff undertook the fieldwork: Brian Hurrell (excavation) and Chris Lister (surveying).

12 Abbreviations and bibliography

12.1 Abbreviations

AML	Ancient Monuments Laboratory
CAT	Colchester Archaeological Trust Ltd
CBC	Colchester Borough Council
EHER	Essex Historic Environment Record (formerly Essex Heritage Conservation Record, Essex Sites and Monuments Record)
OASIS	Online Access to the Index of Archaeological Investigations
RRCSAL	Reports of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London

12.2 Bibliography

CAR 10	1999	<i>Colchester Archaeological Report 10: Roman pottery from excavations in Colchester, 1971-86</i> , by R P Symonds and S Wade, ed by P Bidwell and A Croom
CAR 12	1993	<i>Colchester Archaeological Report 12: Animal bones from excavations in Colchester, 1971-85</i> , by Rosemary Luff
CAT Report 8		A fieldwalking survey at Birch, Colchester, unpublished CAT archive report, by Carl Crossan, 1997
CAT Report 23		Geophysical survey and trial-trenching at Birch, unpublished CAT archive report, by Carl Crossan, 1998

CAT Report 141		An archaeological evaluation at Birch Pit, northern extension, Colchester, Essex, unpublished CAT archive report, by Don Shimmin, 2001
CAT Report 289		An archaeological excavation at Birch pit, Colchester, Essex, unpublished CAT archive report, by Ben Hollway and Patrick Spencer, 2005
CAT report	in prep	A watching brief on the western extension (phase 2), Birch Pit, Maldon Road, Colchester, Essex
CM	2002	<i>Guidelines on standards and practices for archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester</i>
CM	2003	<i>Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester Museums</i>
Crossan, C	1992	1992 archaeological survey, land adjacent to Birch sand and gravel pit, Colchester, Essex, unpublished CAT archive report
EAA 3	1997	<i>Research and archaeology: a framework for the Eastern Counties 1. Resource assessment</i> , East Anglian Archaeology, Occasional Papers, 3 , ed by J Glazebrook
EAA 8	2000	<i>Research and archaeology: a framework for the Eastern Counties 2. Research agenda and strategy</i> , East Anglian Archaeology, Occasional Papers, 8 , ed by N Brown & J Glazebrook
EAA 14	2003	<i>Standards for field archaeology in the East of England</i> , East Anglian Archaeology, Occasional Papers, 14 , ed by D Gurney
Hawkes, C F C, & Hull, M R	1947	<i>Camulodunum, report on the first excavations at Colchester 1930-1939</i> , RRCSAL, 14
Hull, M R	1958	<i>Roman Colchester</i> , RRCSAL, 20
IFA	1999a	<i>Standards and guidance for an archaeological watching brief</i>
IFA	1999b	<i>Standards and guidance for archaeological excavation</i>
IFA	2001	<i>Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials</i>
Maltby, M	1979	<i>The animal bones from Exeter, 1971-1975</i>
MAP 2	1991	<i>Management of archaeological projects</i> , 2nd edition (English Heritage)

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13 Appendix:

Written Scheme of Investigation for archaeological monitoring and possible excavation at Birch airfield. May 2005 - submitted to Essex County Council Historic Environment Management Group 19th May 2005

Written Scheme of Investigation

for

archaeological monitoring and possible excavation at

Birch Airfield
Birch
Essex

Planning application no.
ESS/0011/04

May 2005



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Written Scheme of Investigation for archaeological monitoring and possible excavation at Birch airfield, Birch, Colchester, Essex

1 Introduction

- 1.1 This is a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) for archaeological monitoring and possible excavation at Birch Airfield, Birch, Essex (NGR: TL 911 198)
- 1.2 This WSI has been written by Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) to fulfil the requirements of Historic Environment Management Team (HEMT) of the Historic Environment Management Branch of Essex County Council.
- 1.3 The proposed development involves the development of a composting site on approximately 2ha of land at Birch Airfield.
- 1.4 This WSI sets out proposals for the conduct of an investigation in the area to be affected by the proposed development. The scope of the investigation covers on-site monitoring of soil stripping and excavation of any exposed features or deposits of archaeological significance. The fieldwork will be followed by post-excavation work, the production of an archive and (if necessary) publication texts.
- 1.5 Any variations in this WSI will be agreed beforehand with HEMT.

2 Archaeological background

- 2.1 The overall archaeological potential of this region of Birch is demonstrated by the presence of cropmarks in the area (Essex Historic Environmental Record nos. 11548, 11577, 11582) and especially the impressive rectangular enclosure with associated trackways and fields (EHER 11924).
- 2.2 The development site lies approximately one kilometre to the west of the Hanson Aggregates Birch pit, where a series of investigations since the early 1990s has revealed extensive evidence of early activity.
- 2.3 A fieldwalking survey carried out by Colchester Archaeological Trust in 1992, of 73 ha of land at Birch Pit identified two concentrations of Roman pottery, tile and building stone (Crossan 1992). A further programme of fieldwalking in 1997 focused on the more southerly of the concentrations which is to the north-east of Palmer's Farm. This survey revealed evidence for one or more Roman buildings in the vicinity of the farm (CAT Report 8).
- 2.4 An archaeological evaluation was carried out by the Colchester Archaeological Trust in May 2001 of land affected by a northern extension to the pit (CAT Report 141). This led to the identification on the north-east corner of the site of significant archaeological features of predominantly prehistoric and Roman/Saxon date, as well as a large WWII dump relating the USAAF/RAF base at Birch. The features in the north-east corner included a probable prehistoric ditch of unusual profile, a pair of parallel ditches and two Roman quarry pits, the upper fills of which produced a small quantity of probable Saxon pottery.
- 2.5 Excavations were carried out in 2003 by CAT at Birch Pit in advance of the Northern Extension (focusing on the area of prehistoric/ Roman activity noted in 2.3 above). A group of nine Middle Bronze Age cremation urns were recorded, most of them were inverted in the ground. The urns were of the 'Deverul Rimbury Ware' type dated 1400-1200 BC, and most contained cremated bone. There were also seven pits containing cremated bone but without urns. The burials lay between three ring ditches, which are presumably ploughed-out barrows. These groups of Bronze Age circular ditches seem characteristic of North East Essex and comparisons can be

made with sites at St Osyth (Past and Present 2002), Ardleigh and Brightlingsea. A scatter of hearths or fire pits were revealed but further away from the burials. Elsewhere were probable Bronze Age or Iron Age field ditches which may indicate that the landscape changed from funerary to agricultural use. Centuries later there is evidence that the Romans quarried the site as well (CAT Report 289).

- 2.6 In the summer of 2004 a watching brief on topsoil stripping in a field to the east of Palmers farm revealed three shallow pits, probably all of later Bronze Age date. Features and finds representing Roman activity were more common and included ditches and pits, variously dated between the 1st - 2nd and 3rd - 4th centuries, and a small cluster of Roman cremation burials of 1st - 2nd century date (CAT forthcoming).
- 2.7 Birch was one of a large number of airbases built by the United States Army Air Force in eastern England from 1942 onwards. The base was briefly occupied by units of the USAAF IX Bomber Group and then by the RAF in preparation for the invasion of the Rhine. Virtually nothing now remains visible on the site. One of the 2001 evaluation trenches did however, locate a large dump of material presumably deposited shortly after the end of the war and the subsequent closure of the airfield.

3 Aims

- 3.1 The aims of the fieldwork will be to establish and record the character, extent, date, significance and condition of any archaeological remains affected by the proposed development. In establishing the significance of such remains, the post-excavation analysis will attempt to relate the results to evidence from previous fieldwork in the vicinity of the site.

4 Methodology

- 4.1 The formation of the composting pad will involve overall stripping of 22-25cm topsoil from the site, followed by the excavation of a 3m deep lagoon in an adjoining area of approximately 1200 sq m. The initial shallow area stripping will be monitored on a regular basis to ensure that no archaeologically sensitive levels are removed. In the area of deep excavation for the lagoon the stripping will continue progressively under supervision until the uppermost archaeologically sensitive level has been established. At that point a meeting will be held on site with a member of HEMT to agree an appropriate strategy for any necessary further investigation.
- 4.2 All forms of mechanical ground stripping and excavations for the lagoon will be carried out using machinery fitted with a toothless bucket.
- 4.3 Exposed features or deposits of potential archaeological significance will be manually investigated to an extent necessary to achieve the aims set out in Section 3. Archaeological features will normally be subject to 50% excavation, apart from long linear features which may be sampled at between 5% and 10% excavation, and structural features (e.g. post-holes and beam slots) which will normally be fully excavated. All significant archaeological features will be half-sectioned. Fast excavation techniques involving (for instance) picks, forks and mattocks will not be used on complex stratigraphy.
- 4.4 Individual records of excavated contexts, layers, features or deposits will be entered on CAT pro-forma record sheets. Registers will be compiled of finds and samples.
- 4.5 The normal recording scale will be feature plans at 1:20 and sections at 1:10.
- 4.6 A metal detector will be used to check spoil heaps and any suitable strata, and the finds recovered. This will not normally be done on demonstrably modern strata.
- 4.7 The photographic record will consist of general site shots, and shots of all archaeological features and deposits. Standard "record" shots of contexts will be taken on a digital camera. Colour transparencies will be used for overall site shots and *all* important contexts.

5 General

- 5.1 All works will be undertaken by professional archaeologists employed by CAT. The officer(s) will have a level of experience appropriate to the work.
- 5.2 All the latest Health and Safety guidelines will be followed on site. CAT has a standard safety policy, which will be adhered to.
- 5.3 A site code will be obtained through HEMT. For purposes of deposition of the archive, a museum accession code will be obtained from Colchester Museums. All codes will be quoted in any reports arising from the work.
- 5.4 The *Code of Conduct* and the relevant *Standards and Guidance* note of the Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA) will be followed.
- 5.5 Immediately before the fieldwork begins, an OASIS online record will be initiated and key fields completed on the details, location and creators forms.

6 Finds

- 6.1 If any human remains are exposed, HEMT and the client will be notified. All human remains will be left and recorded *in situ*. A Home Office license to remove the remains will be sought if this is the appropriate course of action. Due attention will be paid to Health and Safety.
- 6.2 All finds of archaeological relevance will be retained. Policies for later disposal of any finds will be agreed with HEMT and the site owner.
- 6.3 All finds, where appropriate, will be washed.
- 6.4 A policy of marking for pottery and other finds will be agreed with Colchester Museums. Marking will include the site code and context number.
- 6.5 The site archive will be presented to Colchester Museums in accordance with their requirements
- 6.6 All finds of potential treasure will be removed to a safe place, and the coroner informed immediately, in accordance with the rules of the Treasure Act 1996. The definition of treasure is given in pages 3-5 of the Code of Practice of the above act. This refers primarily to gold or silver objects.
- 6.7 Finds work will be to accepted professional standards and adhere to the Institute of Archaeologists' published booklet *Guidelines for Finds Work*.
- 6.8 A list of specialists available for consultation is given at the end of this WSI.

7 Results

- 7.1 Notification will be given to HEMT when the fieldwork has been completed.
- 7.2 The full report, including full reports on artefacts will be submitted within a length of time not exceeding 12 months from the end of fieldwork, with two copies supplied to HEMT, and Colchester Museums.
- 7.3 This report will include:

- The aims and methods adopted in the course of the fieldwork.
 - Location plan of the trenches, with 10 figure grid references at two points on the trenches.
 - A record of the depth of deposits including present ground level.
 - The evaluation methodology & results with a suitable conclusion & discussion.
 - All specialist reports and assessments.
 - A concise non-technical summary of the project results.
- 7.4 An appropriate archive will be prepared to minimum acceptable standards outlined in *Management of Archaeological Projects: 2*.
- 7.5 Within four weeks of the end of fieldwork, HEMT will be supplied with a completed HER summary sheet and plan showing the area subject to fieldwork. A summary and plan will be supplied even if the project has a negative result.
- 7.6 If, after discussion with HEMT, the results are considered worthy of publication, a report (at least at a summary level) will be submitted to *Essex Archaeology & History*.
- 7.7 All parts of the OASIS online form will be completed for submission to HERT.

8 Archive deposition

- 8.1 The full archive will be deposited at Colchester Museum within 2 months of completion of final publication report on the project, and confirmed to HEMT. All requirements for archive storage as required by Colchester Museums.
- 8.2 Finds (and other retained materials) will be bagged and boxed in the manner recommended by Colchester Museum.
- 8.3 Plans will be presented on hanging strips to fit Colchester Museums storage systems.
- 8.4 Photographic archive is to be presented as follows: colour slides in hanging strips or in folders of archival quality, original digital data on discs, hard copies of digital photos on high quality paper, or as otherwise requested by Colchester Museums.
- 8.5 A summary of the contents of the archive shall be supplied to HEMT at the time of deposition at the museum

9 Monitoring

- 9.1 HEMT will be responsible for monitoring progress and standards throughout the project, and will be kept regularly informed during fieldwork, post-excavation and publication stages.
- 9.2 HEMT will be notified when the fieldwork is about to start, and when it is complete.
- 9.3 Any variations of the WSI shall be agreed with HEMT in writing prior to them being carried out.
- 9.4 The involvement of HEMT shall be acknowledged in any report or publication generated by this project.

10 References

- | | | |
|----------------|------|---|
| CAT Report 8 | 1997 | <i>A Fieldwalking Survey at Birch, Colchester.</i> |
| CAT Report 141 | 2001 | <i>An archaeological evaluation at Birch Pit, northern extension,</i> |

Crossan C.	1992	<i>Colchester. 1992 Archaeological Survey, Land Adjacent to Birch Sand and Gravel Pit, Colchester, Essex. (CAT archive report)</i>
Colchester Borough Council	1999	<i>Guidelines on Standards and Practices for Archaeological Fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester.</i>
Colchester Borough Council	2003	<i>Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of Archaeological Archives to Colchester Museums.</i>
English Heritage	1991	<i>Management of archaeological projects, 2nd edition</i>
Institute of Field Archaeologists	1999	<i>Standards and guidance for archaeological watching brief.</i>
Institute of Field Archaeologists	1999	<i>Standards and guidance for archaeological excavation.</i>

cc19/5/2005

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APPENDIX: TEAM STRUCTURE

List of team members

Finds consultants

Howard Brooks (CAT): Medieval and later pottery

Stephen Benfield (CAT): LIA/Roman pottery

Joanna Bird (Guildford): Samian ware

Sue Tyler (ECC): Saxon Pottery.

Ernest Black (Colchester): Roman brick/tile

Hazel Martingell: Lithics

Dr Hilary Cool (Nottingham): Roman glass

Nina Crummy (Colchester): Small finds

Sue Anderson (SCCAS): Human bone

Jacqueline McKinley (Warminster): Human osteoarchaeology

Julie Curl (NAU): Animal bone

John Davis (Norwich Museum): Roman coins

Val Fryer (UEA/Loddon): Environmental

Valerie Rigby (British Museum): LIA ceramics

Dr Paul Sealey (Colchester Museums): Roman Amphoras, prehistoric & Roman pottery

**Essex Historic Environment Record/
Essex Archaeology and History**

Summary sheet

Site name/address: Birch airfield compost site, Birch, Colchester, Essex	
Parish: Birch	District: Colchester
NGR: TL 911 198	Site code: HEM site code: BICS05 - museum accession code: 2005.512005.51
Type of work: Excavation and watching brief	Site director/group: Colchester Archaeological Trust
Date of work: May-August 2005	Size of area investigated: approx 0.75ha overall
Location of finds/curating museum: Colchester Museums	Funding source: Mr J Strathern (developer)
Further work anticipated?: No	Related EHER nos: 11924
Final report: CAT Report 326 and summary in <i>EAH</i>	
Periods represented: Roman	
<p>Summary of fieldwork results: <i>A watching brief on drainage works and depth-limited soil-stripping within a large compost-processing site at Birch airfield resulted in the discovery of linear features and pits dating from the Late Iron Age/early Roman period onward. The observations were too fragmentary to yield an integrated picture of the earlier activity, but include ditches and gullies belonging to field systems, possibly with associated structures. The nature and distribution of finds suggests that a focus of Roman occupation lies within or in the immediate vicinity of the north-western region of the airfield.</i></p>	
Previous summaries/reports:	
Author of summary: C Crossan	Date of summary: February 2006