

**An archaeological evaluation
at 8 St Botolph's Street,
Colchester, Essex
April 2006**

**report prepared by
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Summary

The site lies 55m beyond Colchester's Roman and medieval town wall. A small exploratory trench in the rear yard of the property revealed a gravel surface at a depth of 1.3m. The date of the surface is uncertain but it may be associated with similar material, thought to be Roman, previously noted in nearby evaluation works. The surface had been cut on its northern edge by a post-medieval feature.

Introduction

This report is one of a series describing the results from recent excavations of archaeological exploratory trenches in the Vineyard Gate area of Colchester. To date, 21 locations have been investigated within a region bounded to the north by the Vineyard Street stretch of the town wall and to the south by Osborne Street. The subject of this report is a single trench in the rear yard of no 8 St Botolph's Street. The trench location is shown in Figure 1.

Historical background

Colchester's status as England's oldest recorded town owes its origin to events 2,000 years ago when the regional tribal stronghold of Camulodunum became the prime target for the Roman invasion of AD 43. The victorious Roman army established Britain's first military fortress in the western part of the area now occupied by the walled town centre. In the years that followed, the fortress was developed into a major town which was destroyed during the Boudican revolt of AD 60/1. After the suppression of the uprising, the town was rebuilt and provided with the town wall that we know today. Roman settlement spread well beyond the limits of the walled town; suburbs have been recorded outside the north and west gates and cemeteries along the lines of the main approach roads. The Roman town survived for about 400 years until the start of the Anglo-Saxon period in the early to mid 5th century. In the following centuries, the town was sparsely occupied and its Roman buildings were left to decay and collapse.

Colchester re-established itself as a major provincial town and trading centre in the medieval period. The century following the Norman conquest of AD 1066 saw the construction of the castle, an ambitious undertaking with the largest Norman keep in Europe, together with the monastic houses of St John's abbey and St Botolph's priory outside the town wall to the south. The main gateway in this region of the town was the south gate, which stood at the junction of St Botolph's Street and Short Wyre Street. This was the closest gateway to Hythe quay and would have served as a main entry and exit point for goods traffic on the one-mile route between the walled town centre and the medieval quayside. Medieval and later activity in the locality are reflected in the earlier street names, which often related to local drinking houses and trade. Vineyard Street, known in the 14th century as Beres Lane, later became Blackboy Lane (1678) and then Brickyard Street (19th century). Arthur Street and Osborne Street are named after Arthur Osborne, a local mid 19th-century brewery owner.

Archaeological background

Archaeologically, this region of Colchester is of interest because it adjoins the town's southern defences and lies close to the site of a major Roman gateway.

A recent study divided the area broadly into three zones (Johnson *et al* 2003). The high ground in front of the town wall can be seen as a defensive zone containing the Roman and medieval town ditches. Beyond the defences are two zones subject to settlement; one on higher ground in Vineyard Street and one on the lower slopes to the south where relatively wet ground conditions may have influenced the nature of past development activity. The only substantial archaeological excavation to have previously taken place within the area was prompted by the breach of the town wall in the 1970s to

form the Vineyard Gate service entrance to the Lion Walk precinct. A section dug through the town defences encountered a series of Roman and medieval ditches up to 5m deep, with a possible medieval street to the south and remains of post-medieval and later buildings over the backfilled ditch (CAR 3, sheet 6a, sx 55). In Osborne Street, systematic investigation has previously occurred only on the south side of the street, where an excavation in advance of the construction of the NCP multi-storey car park revealed floors belonging to a Roman building at the eastern end of the site (Shimmin 1994). These lay at about 3m depth, below the well-preserved remains of medieval wicker-lined drains which were followed by a series of later medieval and post-medieval buildings belonging to a plot extending back from the St Botolph's Street frontage. At the Stanwell Street end of the site, the excavations exposed the floors of a 16th- to 17th-century timber-framed building which had been destroyed by fire, probably during the 1648 siege of Colchester during the Civil War. Roman tessellated floors and cremation burials appear among records of chance discoveries made in the Osborne Street area in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Since these were recorded with varying degrees of precision, their exact locations are in the main uncertain (Johnson *et al* 2003).

Results

The figures at the end of this report include an annotated plan and section drawing of the trench. Numbers preceded by an 'L' or 'F' are ground layers and features which were individually identified, investigated and recorded. A guide to terms used may be found in the glossary.

Trench 1 (plan: Fig 2; section, Fig 3)

Location: yard at the rear of 8 St Botolph's Street

NGR: TL 99870 24965

Trench dimensions: 1.1m x 1.1m

Surface level: 17.34m OD

The uppermost 350mm consisted of modern concrete hardstanding (L1) laid on hardcore (L2). Beneath this was a layer of modern make-up composed of ash-rich soil with common brick and tile fragments (L3). The more recent modern material continued to an overall depth of 600mm, where L3 was found to seal a post-hole (F1) which appears to be part of a fence-line removed at the same time or shortly before the modern deposition of L3. From 600mm to 1300mm depth, the excavation revealed dark earth with occasional oyster shell inclusions (L4). At an overall depth of 1.3m, the dark earth sealed a 40mm- to 50mm-thick surface made up of cobbles, medium-sized stones and gravel set into a greenish-yellow discoloured sand (F2). At the northern end of the trench, the dark earth (L4) sealed a linear feature (F3) which cut the gravel surface F2. The fill of F3 included peg-tile and brick fragments.

The excavation did not extend below the stony surface (F2) for safety reasons. A 700mm-deep auger probe into the levels below F2 (ie to an overall depth of 2m) produced cores of water-saturated grey/black fine alluvial silt. Natural sands and gravels were not recorded.

Discussion and conclusions

The main archaeological feature to be identified in this trench is the gravel surface F2, which lies at a depth of 1.3m. Gravel surfaces, probably representing yards or trackways, have previously been found at similar depths in trenches adjoining the upper part of Arthur Street. The dating evidence currently available for F2 is limited; its date is likely to lie at some point within a broad range from Roman at the earliest to medieval (or even early post-medieval) at the latest. Favouring a Roman date is the similarity in the soil sequences between this trench and an exploratory trench dug 20m to the west in 2004 (area 10 in CAT Report 269), where a similar gravel surface appeared on

balance to be Roman, rather than later, in date. However, peg-tile in the fill of the cut F3 suggests a post-medieval date both for F3 itself and for the dark earth (L4) which seals F3 and the gravel F2. If F2 is Roman, then there is an abrupt change from post-medieval to Roman with no surviving medieval material in this trench. Alternatively, if the gravel surface is medieval, it may be that significant Roman deposits lie deeper within the unexplored waterlogged levels that it was only possible to sample by auger on this occasion.

Finds

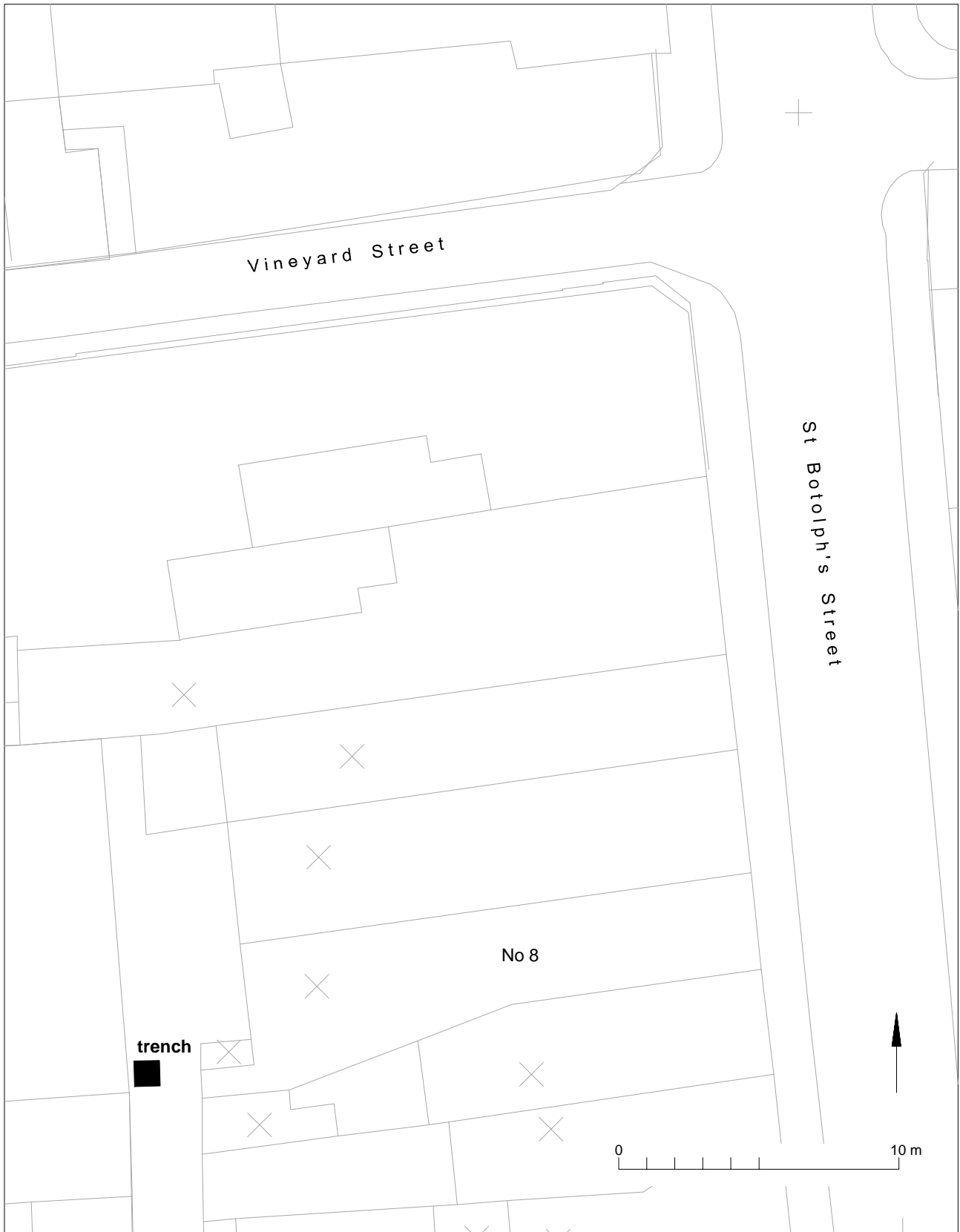
The main categories of finds from the trench were pottery, building materials and animal bone, all of which are undergoing specialist analysis. The pottery sherds and loose building materials variously belong to the medieval and later periods.

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to the site's owners, and their agents Whybrow Chartered Surveyors for their kind co-operation in permitting the trenching to take place. The investigation was funded through Colchester Borough Council, and conceived and organised by Colchester Museums (Philip Wise) and Oxford Archaeological Associates (Simon Collcutt).

Glossary and abbreviations

CBC	Colchester Borough Council
context	specific location on an excavation, usually relates to finds
cut	an excavation of unspecified purpose
make-up	material dumped to raise ground level
medieval	the period from AD 1066 to Henry VIII
modern	19th century to the present
NGR	National Grid Reference
OAA	Oxford Archaeological Associates
OD	Ordnance Survey datum point based on mean sea level at Newlyn, Cornwall
post-medieval	after Henry VIII and up to Queen Victoria
prehistoric	pre-Roman, or more generally the years BC
residual	something out of its original period context (eg, a Roman coin in a modern pit)
Roman	the period from AD 43 to c AD 430
Anglo-Saxon	the period from c AD 430 to AD 1066
<i>tegula/tegulae</i>	a type of Roman roof-tile



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Fig 1 Trench location plan.

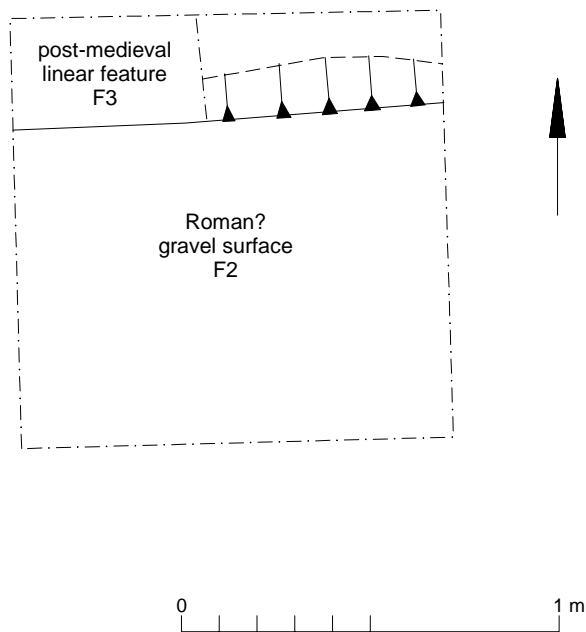


Fig 2 Trench 1 plan.

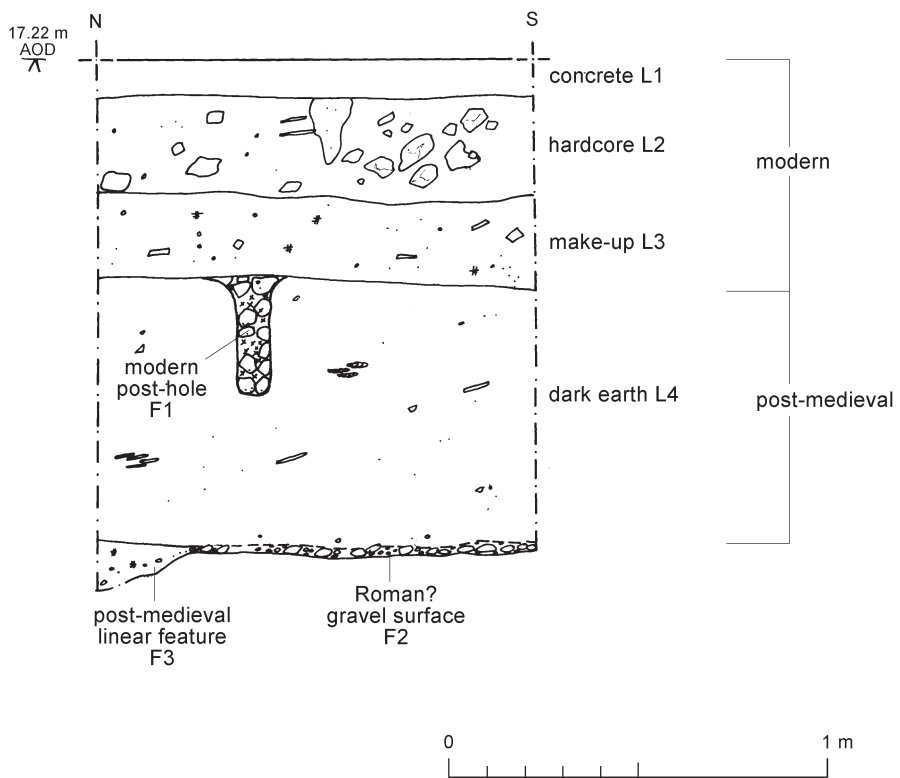


Fig 3 Trench 1: west-facing section.