

**An archaeological watching brief
on a new cable trench at the
Abbey Field sports pitches,
Circular Road North,
Colchester, Essex
October 2006**

**report prepared by
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**on behalf of
Atkins Defence**

CAT project code: 06/10b
Colchester Museums accession code: 2006.123
NGR: TL 9957 2454 to 9932 2433



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1 Summary

Observations were made during a watching brief at the Abbey Field sports pitches south of Circular Road North, Colchester, Essex. A trench 245m long and 300mm wide was excavated by contractors under archaeological supervision to lay replacement electricity cables in an earlier cable trench. Four archaeological features were observed. Three of these features are associated with the circus: the in situ remains of the southern outer cavea wall foundation and the robbed-out wall lines of the central barrier or spina. The excavation of the original cable trench in 2000 had damaged the upper level of the outer wall foundation, and appears to have removed all traces of the inner cavea wall foundation.

2 Introduction (Figs 1-2)

This is the archive report on an archaeological watching brief carried out at the Abbey Field sports pitches during the contractor's excavation of an electricity cable trench to replace existing electricity cables supplying floodlights along the western edge of the Abbey Field sports pitches, between the 11th and 16th October 2006.

The archaeological watching brief was commissioned by RPS Planning (RPS) on behalf of Atkins Defence. The work was carried out by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) under RPS project management. The project was monitored by the Archaeology Officer of Colchester Borough Council (CBCAO) and RPS.

The investigation followed a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) prepared by RPS in association with CAT, dated October 2006, and agreed by the CBCAO. All fieldwork was done in accordance with a research design prepared by RPS in 2004 (RPS 2004) and a specification agreed with the CBCAO. This report mirrors the standards and practices contained in Colchester Borough Council's *Guidelines on the standards and practice for archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester* (CM 2002) and *Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester Museums* (CM 2003), and the Institute of Field Archaeologists' *Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief* (IFA 1999) 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), *Research and archaeology: a framework for the Eastern Counties 1. Resource assessment* (EAA 3), *Research and archaeology: a framework for the Eastern Counties 2. Research agenda and strategy* (EAA 8), and *Standards for field archaeology in the East of England* (EAA 14).

The new trench runs from National Grid Reference or NGR TL 9957 2454 to TL 9932 2433, along the north-west side of the football pitch (CGG55) and the all-weather hockey pitch (CGG56). These pitches are located immediately adjacent to Circular Road North on the western edge of the Abbey Field.

The site is located on the north side of a dry valley which slopes down from north to south to a plateau where the military hospital was formerly situated. The base of the valley is respected by the line of the Circular Road South running east-west. Drift geology of the area is predominantly sands and gravel. This is occasionally in a clay matrix, and is sometimes capped by cover loam.

3 Aims and objectives

The aims and objectives of the archaeological watching brief were to preserve by record any archaeological features or deposits which might be damaged or removed by the excavation of the new cable trench. This watching brief has the following objectives:

- to establish the presence/absence of human burials

- to establish whether the site was rural or domestic in character
- to establish whether there is any evidence of buildings or other structures on site (in the form of post-holes, gullies, etc).

4 Archaeological background

The Abbey Field has traditionally been used for Army training purposes, with the Cavalry Barracks and Le Cateau Barracks to the west of Circular Road North operative since the 19th century. The watching brief site falls within the north-eastern corner of the Abbey Field. Maps pre-dating the garrison suggest that this area was farmland in the 17th century. The Le Cateau Barracks were built in the early 1860s. The OS 1st edition 1:10,560 map of 1874-76 shows that, after the construction of barrack blocks to the west, the area continued to be open, and was used as the drill ground by the Army. The historic maps from 1876 to the present day show no structures in the vicinity of the watching brief site. No archaeological finds are recorded on the site in the Essex Historic Environment Record (EHER) held by the Essex County Council (ECC) or the Urban Archaeological Database (UAD) held by Colchester Museums. However, the archaeological context of the location is now relatively well understood following a series of evaluations and excavations conducted in adjacent areas since 2000 (CAT Report 54; CAT Report 138).

There is some evidence for prehistoric activity in the area: Middle Bronze Age vessels, probably burial urns, were found on the north-western boundary of the Garrison Urban Village (GUV) redevelopment Area J1 in 1908 (UAD event no 1247). Several Bronze Age to Early Iron Age features were found nearby in 2005 during the Urban Village excavations at the former Le Cateau Barracks, adjacent to Le Cateau Road (Area J1 North). In addition, Bronze Age pits were found in 2004 in Areas C1 and C2, of the same project, to the west and south of Flagstaff House respectively (CAT Report 272; CAT report in prep).

Roman Colchester is particularly significant for the study of cemeteries and funerary practices in Britain, because the town started off as a coming together of two different populations, ie the indigenous, largely Romanised British community and an immigrant 'Roman' one, each of which had their own beliefs and funerary practices.

The archaeological remains in the north-western part of the Abbey Field are well understood. At least 28 Roman burials were found during construction of the athletics track and sports pitches to the south in 1925 (Hull 1958; UAD event no 1099; TL 9940 2430). Trial-trenching and excavation for the all-weather hockey pitch (immediately to the south) by CAT in 2000 recovered 73 more cremation burials, some only 300mm below existing ground-level (CAT Report 97; CAT Report 54; TL 9954 2441; Fig 2). A north-south ditch-defined track was also plotted extending approximately through the middle of this distribution of burials. Further concentrations of Roman burials (a mixture of inhumations and cremations) were excavated in 2004 and 2005 in GUV Area J1 North (360 burials) and Area C2 (66 burials); see Figure 2 (CAT report in prep).

A Roman circus was identified during the archaeological investigations of 2004-6 in GUV Areas C1, C2 and J1 (Fig 2; CAT report in prep). In addition, the work by CAT which was managed by RPS and funded by the Time Team has confirmed the remains of the southern wall line of the circus extending across the northern part of the Abbey Field (CAT report in prep; Fig 2, TTT3-TTT7). The approximately 450m-long circus was orientated east-west and extended from the area now occupied by the garden of the Sergeants' Mess north of Le Cateau Road to terminate in the area of the grounds of Flagstaff House to the east. The double-walled form (of the ground-fast elements of the stand) is now reasonably well understood. The starting gates appear to have been located at the western end of the structure, with the semi-circular end at the east end. CAT also located the probable line of the central barrier (*spina*) at the northernmost point of the Abbey Field in September 2005 (CAT report in prep; Fig 2, at Flagstaff House, trench FHT4), whilst a substantial monument base on the line of the barrier was

identified at the crossroads of Flagstaff Road/Circular Road East and Napier Road/Circular Road North in 2006 (Fig 2, watching brief, trench WBT3; CAT Report in prep). Importantly, the new cable trench reported on here crosses the *spina* and southern wall (both of which appear to have been robbed out in the Abbey Field, although it is possible that parts of the lower courses of foundation survive locally). The circus is unique in Britain and as such is of national importance.

5 The watching brief

5.1 Introduction (Figs 1-3)

A trench 300mm wide and 245m in length was excavated by contractors under archaeological supervision to replace existing electricity cables supplying floodlights next to the Abbey Field sports pitches. Table 1 below gives grid co-ordinates for the ends of the cable trench, its length, and heights above Ordnance Datum for modern ground-level and the level of natural subsoil. Next, a summary and list of contexts and archaeological features is given (section 5.2 below). This is followed by a general discussion of the finds in section 6 and the archaeology in section 7.

5.2 Cable trench and the features cut by it (Figs 1, 3-4)

The trench was located on the north-western side of the football pitch and all-weather hockey pitch on the west edge of the Abbey Field (Fig 1). Four archaeological features were identified in the trench (F1-F4). F1-F3 are Roman and are structural elements of the circus. Foundation F3 was at least 1.5m wide, indicating that it must incorporate an external buttress. F1 and F2 are the north and south foundations of the central barrier (*spina*). F3 is the foundation of the south outer *cavea* wall. Datable Roman features were sealed by the base of the dark earth L2. All the features cut natural layer L3. The new cable was laid over F3 to leave it undisturbed.

Table 1: Trench co-ordinates and heights above OD for modern ground-level and natural subsoil.

Terminal co-ordinates	Trench length (in metres)	OD level on ground-level	OD level on natural
NW: 9957 2454 SW: 9932 2433	245	34.22 m AOD	33.52 m AOD

Table 2: context list.

Feature or layer no	Type	Dated finds	Date
L1	Topsoil	Peg-tile fragments (not retained)	modern
L2	Base of dark earth	Roman pottery and ceramic building material, some with <i>opus signinum</i> adhering to surface	post-Roman
L3	Natural	None recovered	-
F1	Robbed wall line	Greensand or sandstone, mortar, tile fragments	Roman
F2	Robbed wall line	Greensand or sandstone, mortar, tile fragments	Roman
F3	Wall line	<i>In situ</i> greensand or sandstone chippings, mortar	Roman
F4	Pit	Tile, stone chippings	post-Roman

6 The finds

General

The finds are listed in Table 3 (below) which gives descriptions for stratified finds. Post-Roman peg-tile and modern brick from topsoil L1 were not retained.

Examples of Roman building material were recovered from the robbed Roman structural features and from the post-Roman pit F4. This material consisted of greensand chippings and small lumps, and fragments of ceramic building material (CBM) with *opus signinum* adhering to their surfaces. This material is *in situ* as the lower levels of the wall foundations and where found loose is presumably waste associated with the late Roman/post-Roman robbing of stone and tile from the circus structure.

Table 3: finds list.

Finds bag no	Context	Description	Weight (g)
1	F1	CBM	190
	F1	Greensand or sandstone chippings	194
2	F2	CBM	376
	F2	Greensand or sandstone chippings	2,180
3	F3	Greensand or sandstone chippings	625
4	F4	CBM	464
4	F4	Greensand or sandstone blocks	1,388

7 Discussion

Four archaeological features observed during the watching brief were structural remains of the Roman circus. Further evidence of the alignment of the southern outer *cavea* wall of the circus was provided by wall foundation F3. The latter was at least 1.45m wide, indicating that this part of the foundation must have incorporated an external buttress. No evidence of the corresponding inner *cavea* wall was seen. However, the foundation for this feature has been consistently shallow in all investigation areas and it is likely it was removed by the excavation of the cable trench in 2000. The most interesting features identified during the watching brief are wall foundations F1 and F2. These share the same alignment and are approximately parallel to the east-west outer wall F3. It is of note that wall F2 does not match the alignment of the *spina* suggested by the fragment of foundation recorded in the Time Team-funded work of 2005, in trench TTT6 (Fig 2). Instead it appears to be slightly too far south.

F4 was a pit of post-Roman date cut into the subsoil to the south of the outer wall F3. It contained residual Roman building material which is likely to be associated with the robbing out of the structure in the late or immediately post-Roman period. Modern disturbance was limited to the digging of the earlier cable trench in 2000 which had damaged the top of the outer *cavea* foundation (F3).

No burials were encountered.

8 Acknowledgements

The project was commissioned and funded by Atkins Defence. The project consultants were RPS Planning. The project was monitored by Martin Winter, the CBCAO. RPS provided EOD cover. The fieldwork was undertaken by M Górniak and C Lister.

9 References

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|----------------|---------|--|
| CAT Report 54 | | An archaeological evaluation at the Garrison sports ground, Circular Road North, February-March 2000, Colchester, unpublished CAT archive report, by Howard Brooks, 2000 |
| CAT Report 97 | | An archaeological desk-based assessment of the Colchester Garrison PFI site, unpublished CAT archive report, by Kate Orr, 2000 |
| CAT Report 138 | | Archaeological excavations at the Garrison sports pitch, Circular Road North, Colchester, Essex (Abbey Field), February-March 2000, unpublished CAT archive report, by Carl Crossan, 2001 |
| CAT Report 272 | | An archaeological evaluation by trial-trenching at Area O of the Garrison Urban Village, Colchester, Essex, May 2004, unpublished CAT archive report, by Ben Holloway, 2004 |
| CAT report | in prep | Colchester Garrison Urban Village excavations in 2004-5, by B Holloway and L Pooley |
| 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> |
| 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 |
| Hull, M R | 1958 | <i>Roman Colchester</i> , RRCSAL, 20 |
| IFA | 1999 | <i>Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief</i> |
| IFA | 2001 | <i>Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials</i> |
| MAP 2 | 1991 | <i>Management of archaeological projects</i> , second edition (English Heritage) |
| RPS | 2004 | <i>Research design for archaeological investigations for the alienated land, Colchester Garrison</i> |

10 Glossary and abbreviations

Anglo-Saxon	the period from c AD 410 to AD 1066
AOD	above Ordnance Datum
Bronze Age	c 2000 BC-700 BC
CAR	<i>Colchester Archaeological Report</i>
CBCAO	Colchester Borough Council Archaeology Officer
CBM	ceramic building material, ie brick, tile
context	specific location on an excavation, especially where finds are concerned
cut	an unspecified hole in the ground
EHHER	Essex Historic Environment Record, held by Essex County Council
EOD	Explosive Ordnance Disposal
Iron Age	7th century BC to Roman invasion of AD 43
Late Iron Age	c 200 BC-AD 43
medieval	from AD 1066 to Henry VIII
modern	19th and 20th centuries
NGR	National Grid Reference
post-medieval	after Henry VIII and to the end of the 19th century
prehistoric	pre-Roman, or generally the years BC

residual	something out of its original context (ie a Roman coin in a Victorian pit)
Roman	the period from AD 43 to c AD 410
RPS	RPS Planning
septaria	local stone used as building material by Romans
tessera	red baked clay cube from Roman tessellated or mosaic floor
UAD	Urban Archaeological Database, held by Colchester Museums

11 Archive deposition

The finds, paper and digital archive are held by the Colchester Archaeological Trust at 12 Lexden Road, Colchester, Essex CO3 3NF, but will be permanently deposited with Colchester Museums under accession code COLEM 2006.123

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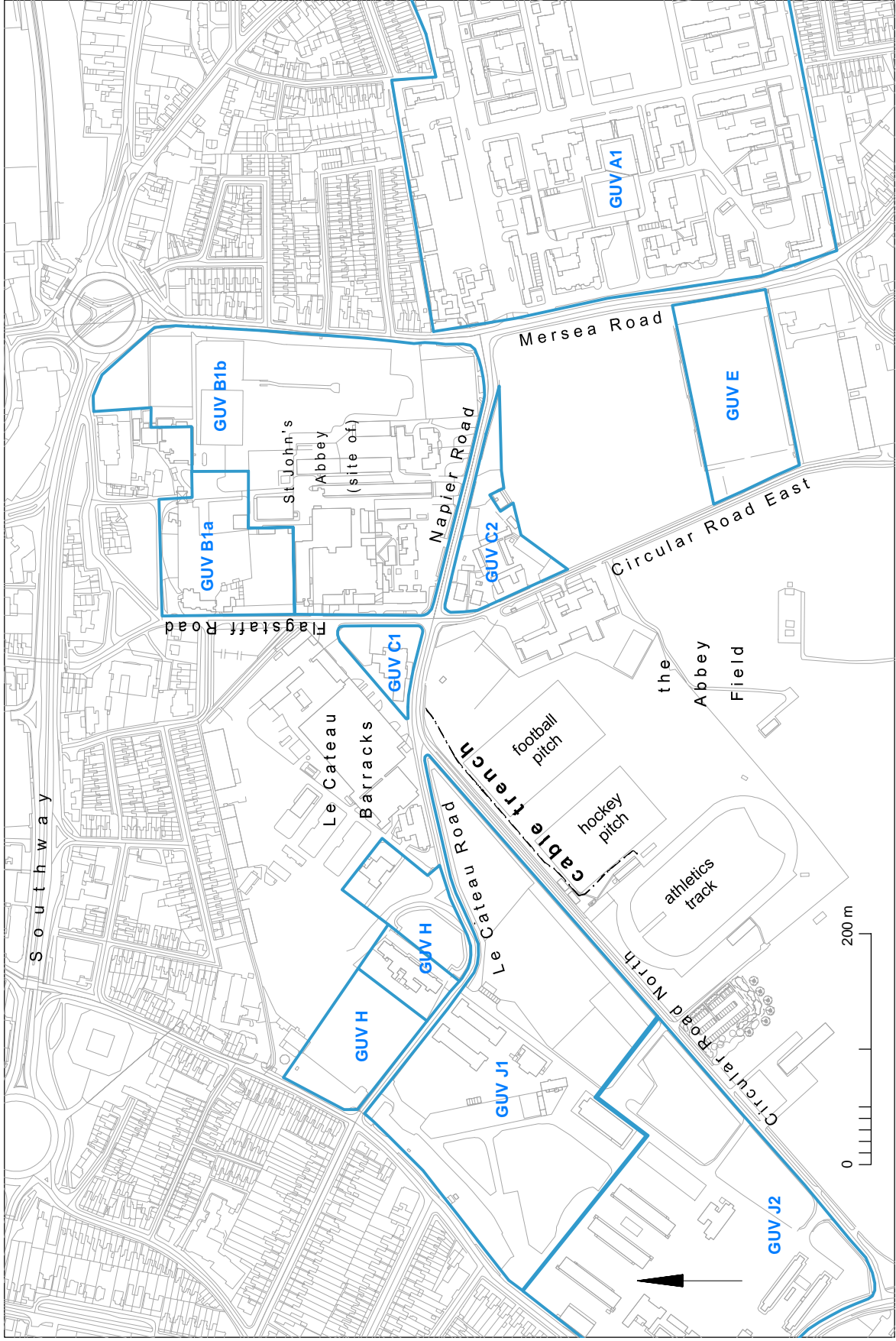
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Fig 1 Watching brief site location.

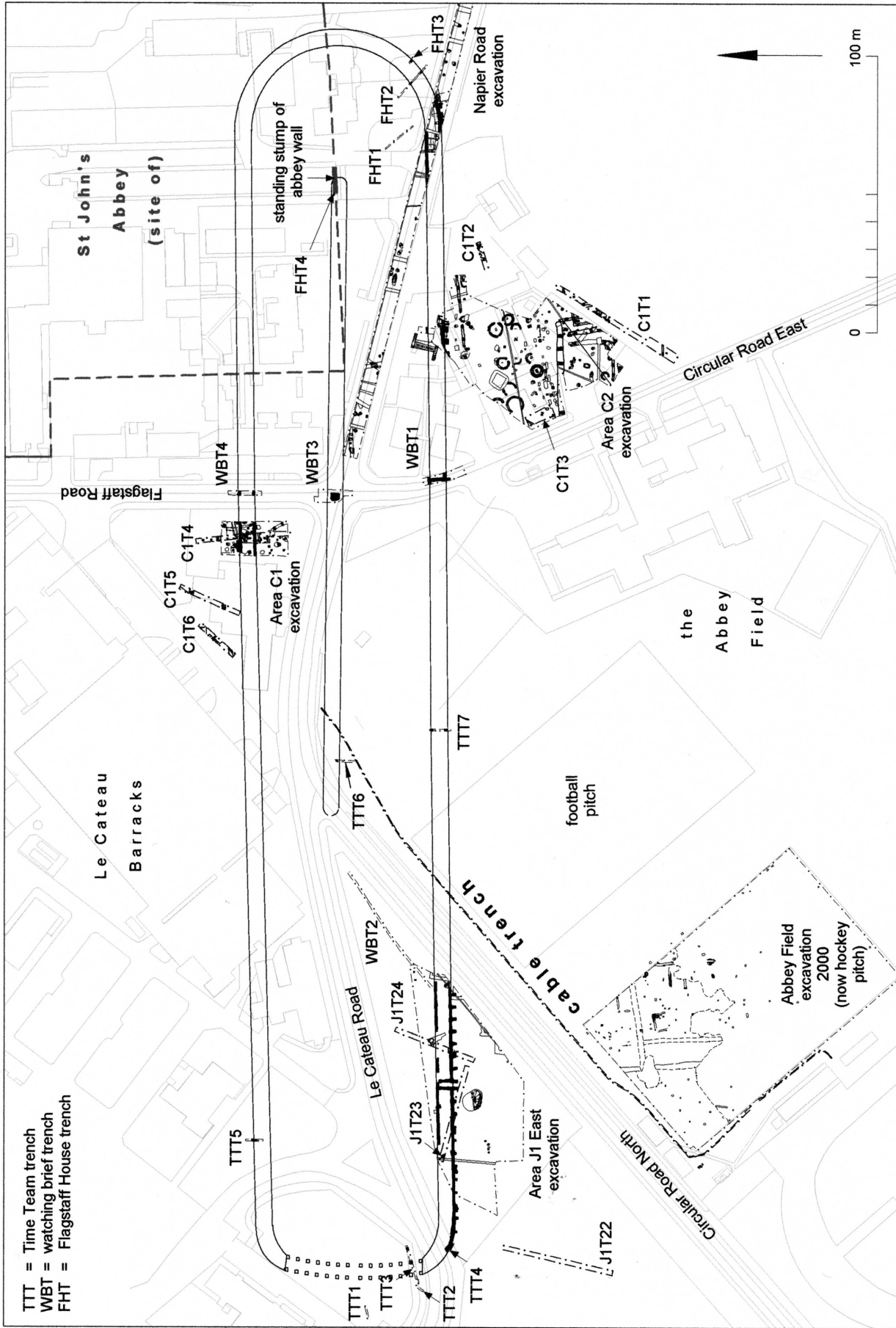
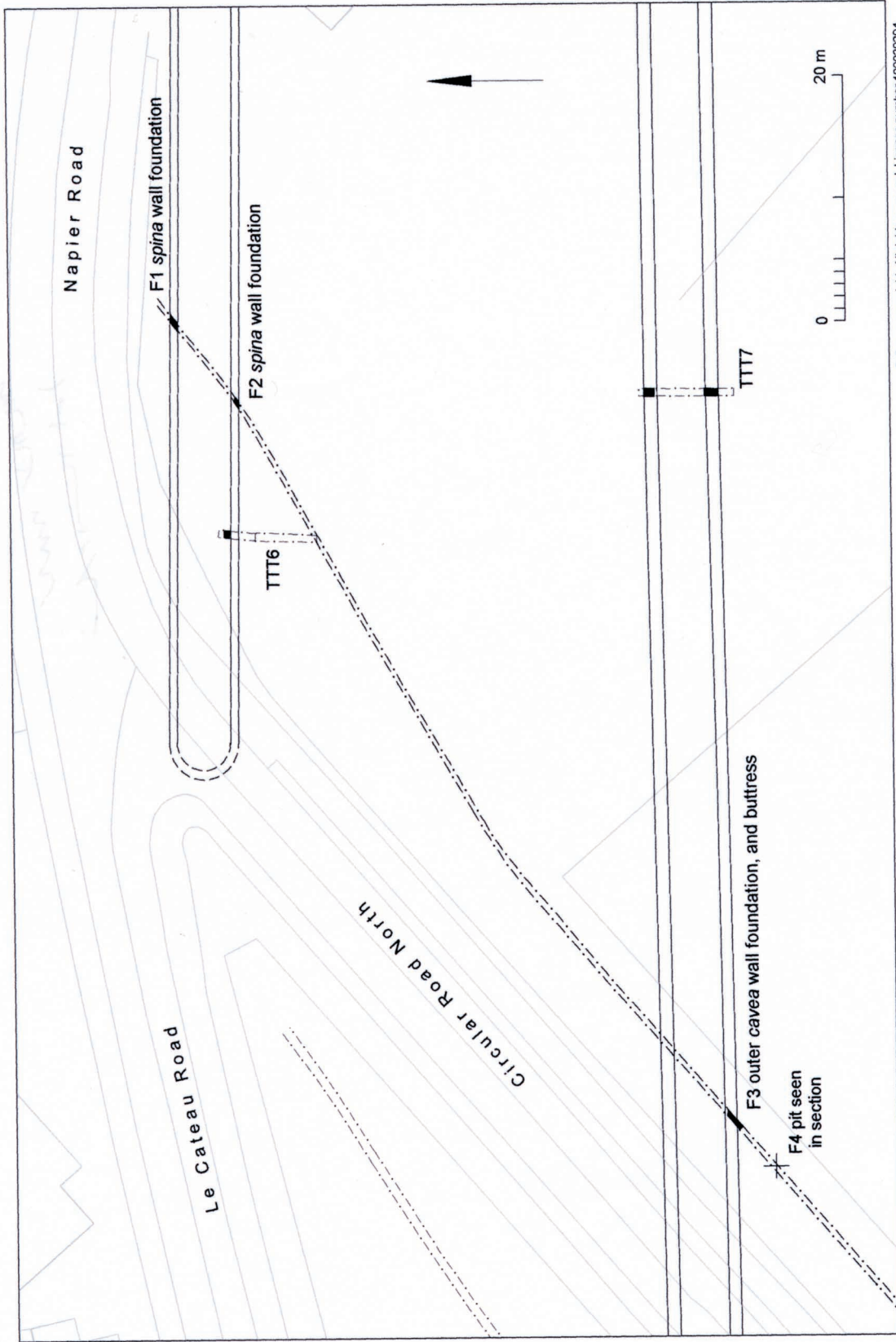


Fig 2 The watching brief site in relation to the circus and recent excavation work.



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Fig 3 Probable alignments of the spina foundations (F1 and F2) and the outer wall foundation of the circus (F3).

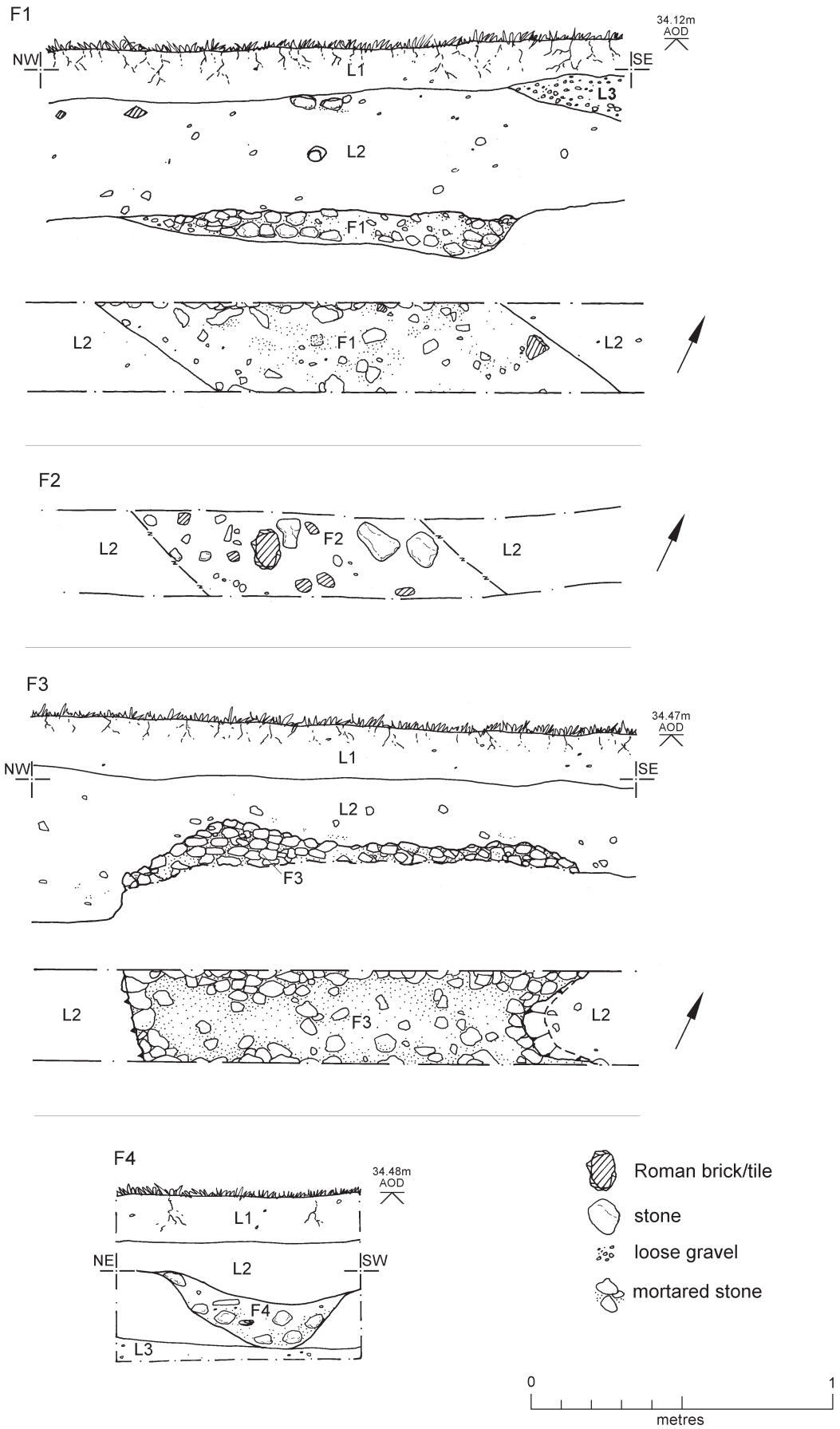


Fig 4 F1: section and plan; F2: plan; F3: section and plan; F4: section.

Essex Historic Environment Record/ *Essex Archaeology and History*

Summary sheet

Site address: the Abbey Field sports pitches, Circular Road North, Colchester, Essex	
Parish: Colchester	District: Colchester
NGR: TL 9957 2454 to TL 9932 2433	Site code: 2006.123
Type of work: Watching brief	Site director/group: Colchester Archaeological Trust
Date of work: 11th-16th October 2006	Size of area investigated: cable trench 245m x 300mm
Location of finds/curating museum: Colchester Museums	Funding source: Developer
Further seasons anticipated? No	Related EHER nos: N/A
Final report: CAT Report 393 and summary in EAH	
Periods represented: Roman/post-Roman	
<p>Summary of fieldwork results: <i>Observations were made during a watching brief at the Abbey Field sports pitches south of Circular Road North, Colchester, Essex. A trench 245m long and 300mm wide was excavated by contractors under archaeological supervision to lay replacement electricity cables in an earlier cable trench. Four archaeological features were observed. Three of these features are associated with the circus: the in situ remains of the southern outer cavea wall foundation and the robbed-out wall lines of the central barrier or spina. The excavation of the original cable trench in 2000 had damaged the upper level of the outer wall foundation, and appears to have removed all traces of the inner cavea wall foundation.</i></p>	
Previous summaries/reports: None	
Author of summary: Ben Holloway	Date of summary: December 2006