

**An archaeological watching brief
and partial excavation at
Topfield, Rawstorn Road,
Colchester, Essex
August 2006-May 2007**

**report prepared by
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**on behalf of
Albermarle Developments**

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1 Summary

An archaeological watching brief and partial excavation were undertaken during a small residential development at Topfield, which is part of a known Roman cemetery area in Colchester. Two Roman inhumation burials were exposed in the south-eastern part of the site. These can be added to the four inhumations found during the 2001 evaluation, and are most probably outliers to the known Roman cemetery at the adjacent St Mary's hospital site. Downslope, in the north-western area of the site, waterlogged wooden posts probably dating to the Iron Age or Roman period were removed by machine during the digging of a sewer trench.

2 Introduction (Fig 1)

- 2.1 This is the report on an archaeological watching brief and partial excavation at Topfield, Rawstorn Road, Colchester, Essex.
- 2.2 Planning permission was given for a small residential development of three houses with a block of garages. Due to the site's archaeological sensitivity, an archaeological condition was attached.
- 2.3 The site is located to the west of and adjacent to the former St Mary's hospital (now the Balkerne Heights residential development), at National Grid Reference TL 9902 2522. The area is a triangular-shaped parcel of land of approximately 0.216 hectares which slopes down from south-east to north-west. A derelict house occupied part of the central southern area of the site and the remainder was covered by rough vegetation.
- 2.4 The new dwellings were of piled construction. Due to the slope of the land and the presence of relatively shallow archaeological deposits, the floor level was designed to be suspended rather than the ground being reduced. However, some reduction took place to enable a flat surface for the piling rig and also to create a raft foundation for the garages.
- 2.5 The archaeological work was carried out by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) between the 2nd August 2006 and the 4th May 2007, on behalf of Albermarle Developments.
- 2.6 All fieldwork was done in accordance with a specification agreed with the Colchester Borough Council Archaeological Officer (CBCAO), who also monitored the project. This report conforms to standards and practices contained in the Institute of Field Archaeologists' *Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief* (IFA 1999a), *Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials* (IFA 2001) and *Standard and guidance for archaeological excavation* (IFA 1999b), and Colchester Borough Council's *Guidelines on standards and practices 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). Other sources used are *Management of research projects in the historic environment* (MoRPHE), and *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).

3 Archaeological background

- 3.1 The site lies approximately 250m west of the Roman town wall. An archaeological trial-trenching evaluation was carried out at Topfield in 2001 (CAT Report 134). The evaluation demonstrated that, in the central and south-eastern areas of the site, there are Roman ditches and pits dug possibly for rubbish-disposal and quarrying. At least two inhumations (at 1.0m and 1.1m below ground-level) and further possible grave cuts were found on the east side of the site nearest to the St Mary's hospital site, where other Roman burials have been recorded. All features in the trenches were shallow and sealed by at least 800mm of topsoil.

- 3.2** Extra-mural Roman occupation on this side of the town wall has been subject to archaeological excavation at Balkerne Lane (*CAR 3*) and the former St Mary's hospital site (CAT Report 3 and CAT report in prep). At Balkerne Lane, buildings and property plots fronting the Roman road leading west from the Balkerne Gate were recorded. Evidence of further buildings and activities including horticulture and sand-quarrying was recorded on areas away from the road frontage.

At the St Mary's hospital site, excavations in 2001-3 uncovered early Roman houses destroyed in the Boudican revolt of AD 60/61. The suburb was rebuilt and a road leading to Sheepen to the north-west was created, plus smaller lanes connecting the houses. By the 4th century AD, settlement had moved back inside the town walls and the area was turned over to use as a cemetery. In all, 86 Roman burials were excavated, mainly from the north and eastern areas of the site (CAT report in prep).

- 3.3** Earlier recorded finds from the area of the former St Mary's hospital include a small group of Roman burials, mostly inhumations with a few cremations in lead urns, known as the 'Union Cemetery' (Hull 1958, 254-5; *CAR 9*, 261-2). There have also been several individual finds of objects, mostly of Roman date, but which include a few prehistoric artefacts, eg a Mesolithic flint axe (Essex Historic Environment Record or EHER no 12372) and fragments of a Late Bronze Age bucket urn (EHER no 12367).
- 3.4** To the north-west and west of the site, evidence of concentrations of Late Iron Age and Roman occupation, and Roman industrial activity, has been recorded. Approximately 400m to the north-west is the important late Iron Age and Roman site at Sheepen, the main period of occupation of which is c AD 5-60 (Hawkes & Hull 1946; Niblett 1985), though Bronze Age occupation is also attested there (*CAR 11*, 132-3). Approximately 400m to the west is a concentration of Roman kilns, the majority of which were in use during the 2nd-3rd centuries (Hull 1963).

4 Aims

The aim of the watching brief and partial excavation was to record the location, extent, date, character, condition, significance and quality of any surviving archaeological remains which would have been affected by the development. Particular attention was paid to the potential for Roman inhumation burials.

5 Methods

- 5.1** An archaeologist from CAT was present during the majority of the contractors' groundworks to carry out the watching brief. This included the levelling of the slope to make a flat surface for the piling rig, the piling work itself, excavation of service trenches and manholes, and the excavation of the raft foundation for the garages. Ground beams were not monitored, but these were placed in shallow trenches which probably had limited impact on any buried remains. Extra time was given to archaeologists to partially excavate two inhumation burials.
- 5.2** All the groundworks were carried out by contractors using a mechanical excavator with a toothless ditching bucket.
- 5.3** Potential archaeological deposits which were exposed were cleaned by hand where it was safe to do so. Individual records of layers were entered on CAT pro-forma record sheets.
- 5.4** Section drawings were made at a scale of 1:10. Features were planned at a scale of 1:20.
- 5.5** Finds and small finds were registered on CAT pro-forma record sheets and assigned finds numbers according to context. Finds were washed, marked and bagged according to context.
- 5.6** Colour photographs of the trenches and features were taken with a digital camera.

6 Results (Figs 2, 3-4)

2nd-3rd August 2006

The ground levelling for the piling rig was observed. This levelling involved cutting into the slope in the area of the footprint of the three new houses in order to make a flat surface for the piling rig. Over 1m of soil was cut through on the south-eastern side of the site. The material which was dug through was mainly disturbed and redeposited topsoil, which was humic and contained a large amount of plant roots. However, on the south-eastern side of the site, yellow sandy natural ground was reached.

22nd-25th and 29th August 2006

Visits were made every day during pile drilling for the three houses. Forty-one piles in total were drilled. A dark charcoally soil was brought up from pile 30 which was at the western edge of the footprint of the new houses. A sample of the soil was taken (finds no 2). There were no associated finds. Another dark layer was encountered in pile 40 which was drilled between plots 2 and 3. The dark material came from 300-500mm depth and there were no associated finds. Small amounts of artefactual material were retrieved from the upcast from the piles including tile, oystershell and pot sherds. The archaeological layers tended to be deeper towards the western side of the footprint of the new houses.

18th September 2006

Visits were made after the ground beams had been inserted. Some clearance work was taking place around the footprint of the new houses. The clearance work included removing an earth ramp on the south-eastern side of the levelled area. Removal of this ramp exposed two Roman inhumation burials east of piles 6, 7 and 8 (burials F1 and F2). Both F1 and F2 were visible as darker grave cuts within natural sand. They occurred at 1m below pre-reduction ground-level. No bone survived in F1 but two iron nails were found at the western end of the grave cut which may be coffin nails. One flint flake was also found at the western end of F1, but its presence in the grave may be coincidental, especially given its location at what was either the head or foot end of the grave. Burial F1 was aligned WNW to ESE. It was seen in plan and in section (see Figs 3-4).

Only the northern end of burial F2 was visible, in the section of the levelled area (see Figs 3-4). The skull was exposed, recorded and removed. The burial was aligned north to south, with the head to the north. Fragments of Roman pottery and an iron nail, possibly a coffin nail, were visible at the head end of the grave. F1 and F2 were in an area where Roman inhumations were found during the 2001 evaluation.

Animal bone and Roman pottery were found on the western edge of the levelled area, at the base of the levelling. However, no associated feature was visible.

26th-27th September

Two visits were made but no groundworks had taken place since the last visit.

9th-10th October 2006

On the 9th October, a manhole (3m x 3m) was inserted downslope at the north-western end of the site, in an area which is to be public open space. The manhole was between 800mm and 1.3m deep. Natural ground was reached but no archaeological features were observed. A sewer trench was then dug from the manhole up the slope. This was 900mm wide and 2.0m deep. Wet natural sand and gravel was observed at 1m below ground-level near the manhole. Above this was dark earth and topsoil. The depth of the topsoil and dark earth increased to 2m depth further up the slope. Peg-tile was observed higher up in the soil profile and Roman tile lower down. One would normally expect a greater build-up of hillwash at the bottom of a slope rather than near the top, which leads one to suppose that either the slope had been deliberately made-up in the past or that there had been some ground reduction at the bottom of the slope. Waterlogged timber posts, 110mm wide, and probably dating to the Iron Age or Roman period, were seen on the spoil heap. These presumably came from near the base of the trench where the

conditions were wetter, but nothing could be seen in section and the trench was too deep to enter.

On the 10th October, the sewer trench was extended further up the slope to the east, and a second, smaller manhole dug. The sewer trench then turned 90° to the south to join the southern site boundary. This southern arm of the sewer trench was only dug to approximately 1m depth. Most of what was observed was modern backfill containing frogged brick, slate and concrete. Some but not all of this modern material may have been backfill to trench 1 of the 2001 evaluation.

5th and 13th February 2007

A service trench had been dug from Pope's Lane to the front of plot 1. The trench was 450mm wide and between 500mm and 750mm deep. The trench had been dug through topsoil. It was inspected on 5th February.

On the 13th February, a visit was made after this trench had been extended to plot 3. At this point it was 1m deep and again did not appear to be penetrating below topsoil. A service trench being excavated to the rear of the new properties was also observed.

5th and 18th March 2007

Two visits were made but no further groundworks had taken place.

3rd-4th May 2007

An area measuring 8m by 5m was stripped in order to make a level area for the raft foundation to the new garages. The north-west end of the strip was 500mm deep and did not penetrate below topsoil. The south-eastern end was stripped to 1m depth, at which point natural sand was beginning to appear. No further burials were visible but pot, tile, oystershell and a few fragments of human bone were present in the topsoil.

7 Finds

7.1 The pottery

by Stephen Benfield

Only a small quantity of pottery (1,419 g) was recovered during the watching brief. Almost all of this pottery is unstratified. Apart from a single post-Roman (modern) sherd (12 g), identified by Howard Brooks, all of the pottery (1,407 g) is of Roman date. The fabric code for the post-Roman sherd refers to post-Roman pottery fabric codes used in *CAR 7* and the full name of the fabric type is provided, in brackets, with the code in the catalogue of pottery below. The Roman pottery was recorded using the Roman pottery fabric type series devised for *CAR 10* in which all the fabrics are recorded as two-letter codes (Table 1). Where appropriate, reference has been made to the corresponding fabric types described in the National Roman Fabric Reference Collection (Tomber & Dore 1998). The vessel forms were recorded using the Camulodunum (Cam) Roman pottery form type series (Hawkes & Hull 1947; Hull 1958). The pottery fabrics and the vessel forms present in each site context were recorded for each finds number. The number of sherds and the identifiable pottery forms were recorded for each fabric. The total weight of pottery and an overall spot date was recorded for each finds number. This information is set out in the catalogue of pottery below.

The quantity of pottery is small and almost entirely unstratified, so that it requires little more than brief comment. The single modern sherd (finds no 1) requires no comment beyond its date. Of the Roman pottery, two sherds were recovered stratified in the fill of F2, a Roman inhumation burial. While one sherd was current in the 1st-early 3rd century, the other can only be dated as Roman. Together these two sherds should not be more closely dated other than as Roman. The unstratified remainder of the Roman pottery can be usefully looked at in terms of date. Of the sherds that can be closely dated, either by form or fabric type, all can be encompassed within an approximate date range of the 1st-mid 3rd century. While the quantity of pottery is small and not all of it can be closely dated, this dating can

be seen to reflect the reduction of extra-mural occupation, recorded from other sites, from about the late 3rd century, after which these areas were commonly used for Roman inhumation burials (CAR 10, 18).

Table 1: Roman pottery fabric codes and fabric names used in this report (after CAR 10).

Fabric code	Fabric name	National Roman fabric reference collection Fabric
AA	amphoras, all excluding Dressel 20 and Brockley Hill/Verulamium amphoras	BAT AM 1, BAT AM 3
BA	plain samian	
BA (EG)	East Gaulish plain samian	
BX	decorated samian	
BX (EG)	East Gaulish decorated samian	
DJ	coarse oxidised and related wares	COL WH
DZ	fine oxidised wares	
GA	BB1: black-burnished ware, category 1	DOR BB1
GB	BB2: black-burnished ware, category 2	COL BB2
GX	other coarse wares, principally locally-produced grey wares	
HZ	large storage jars and other vessels in heavily-tempered grey wares	

Catalogue of pottery

F2 (inhumation burial)

Finds no 11 (406 g); Fabric AA, 1 sherd, 1st-early 3rd century; Fabric GX, 1 sherd, Roman.

U/S

Finds no 1 (768 g);

Roman pottery (756 g); Fabric AA, 2 sherds representing 2 vessels, 1st-early 3rd century; Fabric BA(EG), 1 sherd, early-mid 2nd to mid 3rd century; Fabric BX(EG) 1 sherd, Dr 37 bowl, early-mid 2nd to early 3rd century; Fabric DJ, 1 sherd, 1st-2nd/3rd century; Fabric DZ, 1 sherd, Roman, ?1st-mid 2nd century; Fabric GA, 3 joining sherds, Cam 279A/B, decorated below rim, early-mid 2nd century; Fabric GB, 1 sherd, rim, Cam 278, early-mid 2nd to mid 3rd century; Fabric GX, 5 sherds, Roman

Post-Roman pottery (12 g); Fabric 48D (Staffordshire-type white earthenwares/modern ironstones), 1 sherd from a handle, modern.

U/S (soil from pile 11)

Finds no 4 (13 g); Fabric GX, 1 sherd, Cam 243-244/246, discoloured, burnt or kiln second?, 1st-early 2nd century.

U/S

Finds no 5 (232 g); Fabric DJ, 1 sherd, 1st-2nd/3rd century; Fabric HZ, 1 sherd, rim, Cam 273, 1st-2nd/3rd century.

7.2 Report on the flint flake

by Hazel Martingell

Finds no 6, F1 – middle fill. One patinated flint flake was recovered from a Roman inhumation burial. Only the dorsal surface is patinated; it is possible that the flake was struck from a large patinated artefact like an axe. Its presence in the grave is most likely coincidental, but it is possible that the flake was a ‘tool of convenience’ for use as a knife or strike-a-light. It could have been in a pouch or pocket in the clothes of the buried person.

7.3 Other finds

Table 2: list of other finds.

Finds no	Context	Description	Weight (in g)
1	U/S – surface finds	Roman roof tile	348
1	U/S – surface finds	Animal bone	216
1	U/S – surface finds	Roman pottery	788
1	U/S – surface finds	Human bone – skull fragments	91
2	Pile 30 – the north-eastern side of the footprint of the new houses	Charcoally soil sample (not processed as not datable)	
3	Pile 14 – the north-eastern side of the footprint of the new houses	Roman tile	29
3	Pile 14 – the north-eastern side of the footprint of the new houses	Oystershell	2
4	Pile 11, 300mm depth – the central part of the north-western edge of the footprint of the new houses	Roman pottery	13
5	U/S ground levelling	Roman pottery	232
5	U/S ground levelling	Human bone	487
7	F1 – middle fill	Iron nail – 42mm long; head 32mm wide	
8	F1 – middle fill	Iron nail – 60mm long	
9	F2 – lower fill	Whole human skull	
10	F2 – lower fill	Iron nail head – 21mm wide	
10	F2 – lower fill	Iron object – ?nail 37mm long	
11	F2 – lower fill	Roman pottery	406

8 Discussion

Two Roman inhumation burials were exposed during work to level out the slope in the south-eastern part of the site. These can be added to the four inhumation burials found during the 2001 evaluation and are most probably outliers to the known Roman cemetery at the adjacent St Mary's hospital site (Hull 1958, 254-5; CAR 9, 258-63; CAT report in prep).

The site occupies a north-west facing slope and depths of deposits vary widely over the site as a result. There also appears to have been some dumping of modern material.

Downslope, in the north-western area of the site, waterlogged wooden posts were removed by machine during the digging of a sewer trench. These appeared to be of some antiquity and are likely to belong to the Late Iron Age or Roman period as the site was merely in use as pasture in the post-Roman period. These were not seen *in situ*, only on the spoil heap, but came from near the bottom of a 2m-deep trench.

9 Archive deposition

The paper and digital archive is held by the Colchester Archaeological Trust at 12 Lexden Road, Colchester, Essex CO3 3NF, but it will be permanently deposited with Colchester and Ipswich Museums under accession code COLEM 2006.104.

10 Acknowledgements

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The fieldwork was carried out by S Benfield, W Clarke, A Nelson and K Orr.

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12 Abbreviations

- | | |
|-----|--------------------------------------|
| AOD | Above Ordnance Datum |
| NGR | National Grid Reference |
| U/S | unstratified, ie without any context |

13 Glossary

feature	an identifiable thing like a pit, a wall, a drain, a floor; can contain 'contexts'
layer	distinct or distinguishable deposit of soil
medieval	period from AD 1066 to c AD1500
modern	period from the 19th century onwards to the present
natural	geological deposit undisturbed by human activity
peg-tile	rectangular thin tile with peg-hole(s) used mainly for roofing, first appeared c AD 1200 and continued to present day, but commonly post-medieval to modern
post-medieval	from c AD 1500 to around the late 18th century
post-Roman	period after c AD 410
Roman	period of assimilation of Britain as part of the Roman Empire, c AD 43-410

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Appendix 1: the human skeletal remains

by Francesca Boghi, Norfolk Archaeological Unit

Summary

A skull from an inhumation burial and a small amount of unstratified human bones were found during the watching brief/partial excavation at Topfield, in the vicinity of a known Roman cemetery. The remains account for a minimum of two individuals. The skull from F2 showed a possible well-healed nasal fracture due to accident or interpersonal violence which resulted in noticeable facial asymmetry.

Introduction

A skull from an inhumation burial (F2) and a small amount of unstratified disarticulated human remains (U/S 1 and U/S 5) were found at Topfield during the watching brief/partial excavation.

The site lies immediately to the west of a known Roman cemetery area, situated outside the western walled area of town, where about 20 inhumations and a small number of cremations were found in the 1930s (CAR 9, 259-62).

Methodology

Recording used the *Standards for data collection from human skeletal remains* (Buikstra & Ubelaker 1994); the *Guidelines to the standards for recording of human remains* (Brickley & McKinley 2004); *A rapid method for recording human skeletal data* (Connell & Rauxloh 2003); and the Global History of Health project, *Data Collection Codebook* (2005). A full catalogue of the human remains is not included in this report but is included in the archive.

Inhumation burial F2

This consisted of one almost intact skull and mandible from an old (50+ years) male individual. The nasal bones showed deviation of the nasal septum (which may be of congenital or traumatic origin) and a possible well-healed nasal fracture. The bone changes consisted of bevelling and deviation of the nasal rim in a left lateral direction, though a fracture line could not be detected. The bones appear to have reunited at an angle causing asymmetry to the face with the nasal bone skewed to the left (Plate 1). This injury may have been accidental or caused by interpersonal violence.



Plate 1: possible nasal fracture of skull from F2.

Deviated nasal septa and fractured nasal bones are a common finding in modern populations but are rarely recorded in archaeological samples due to preservation factors (Mann & Murphy 1990, 24-5). No Roman or medieval examples were found in the WORD

osteological database, though a number of nasal fractures were recorded in the post-medieval sample of St Brides Lower Church (WORD – online resources). In Roberts and Cox (2003), only 0.2% of the Roman skeletons under study (N.4862) were reported to have suffered facial fractures.

Other pathologies observed in this individual consist of minor congenital variations in the teeth and dental pathology including one abscess, a small degree of calculus and mild periodontal disease (details are given in the archive).

The disarticulated remains

These consisted of 116g of unstratified and disarticulated human bone accounting for a minimum of one individual.

Table 3: summary table (disarticulated HSR).

Context	Weight (g)	Description	MNI adults (> 20 years)	MNI juveniles (< 20 years)	Pathologies
U/S 1	84	Elements of skull (right and left frontal bone)	1		Deep vessel marks and arachnoid granulations (age-related non-pathological changes)
U/S 5	32	Elements of femur (middle shaft)	1		None observed

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Appendix 2: animal bone

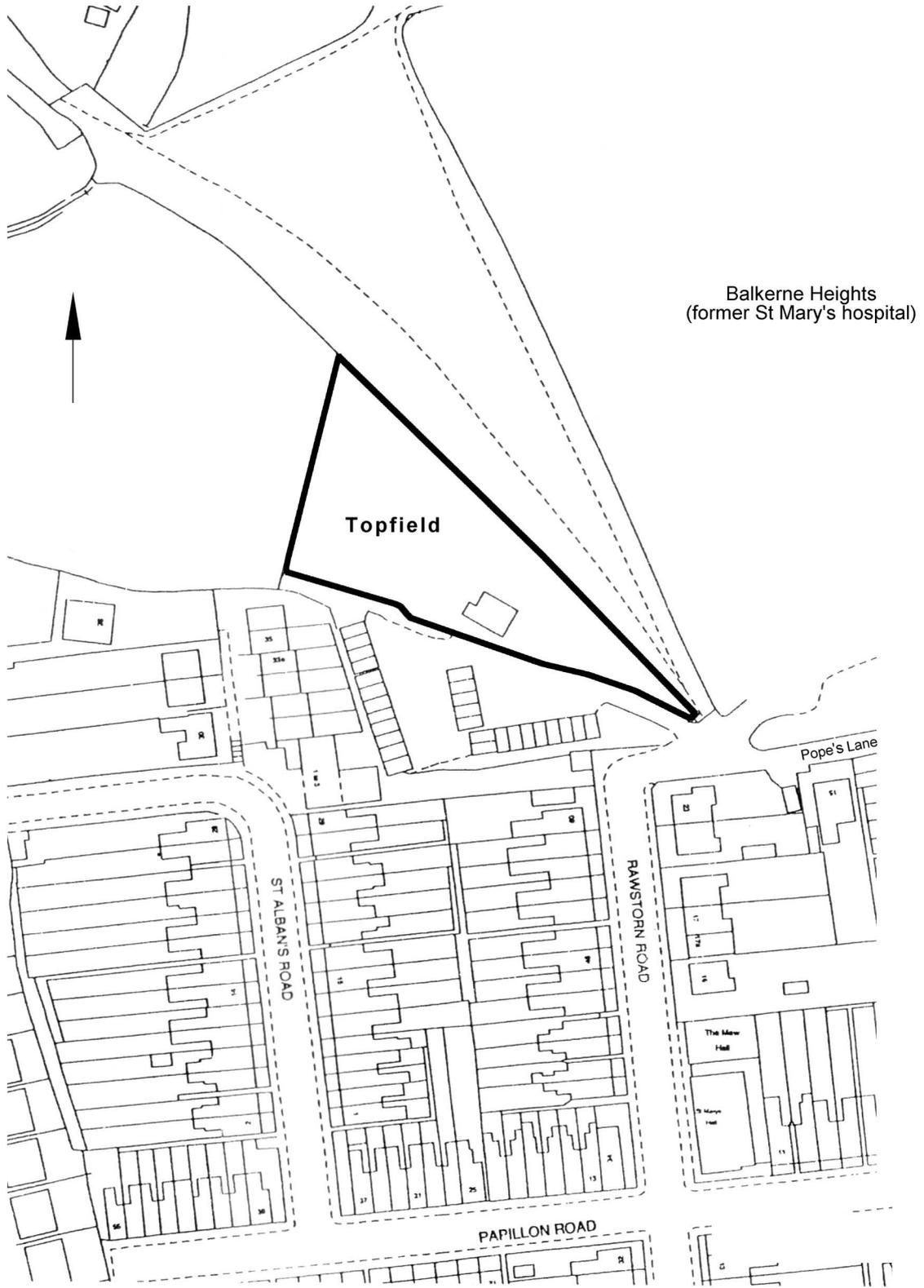
by Julie Curl, Norfolk Archaeological Unit

Finds number 5, unstratified

A total of 0.500kg of faunal remains was recovered along with the human remains.

The faunal assemblage largely consists of the butchered fragments of vertebrae and ribs of cattle. These would suggest food waste.

A single distal equid metatarsal was also identified. This equid bone is in a much poorer condition than the cattle remains and is probably residual.



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Fig 1 Site location, showing site of previous dwelling.



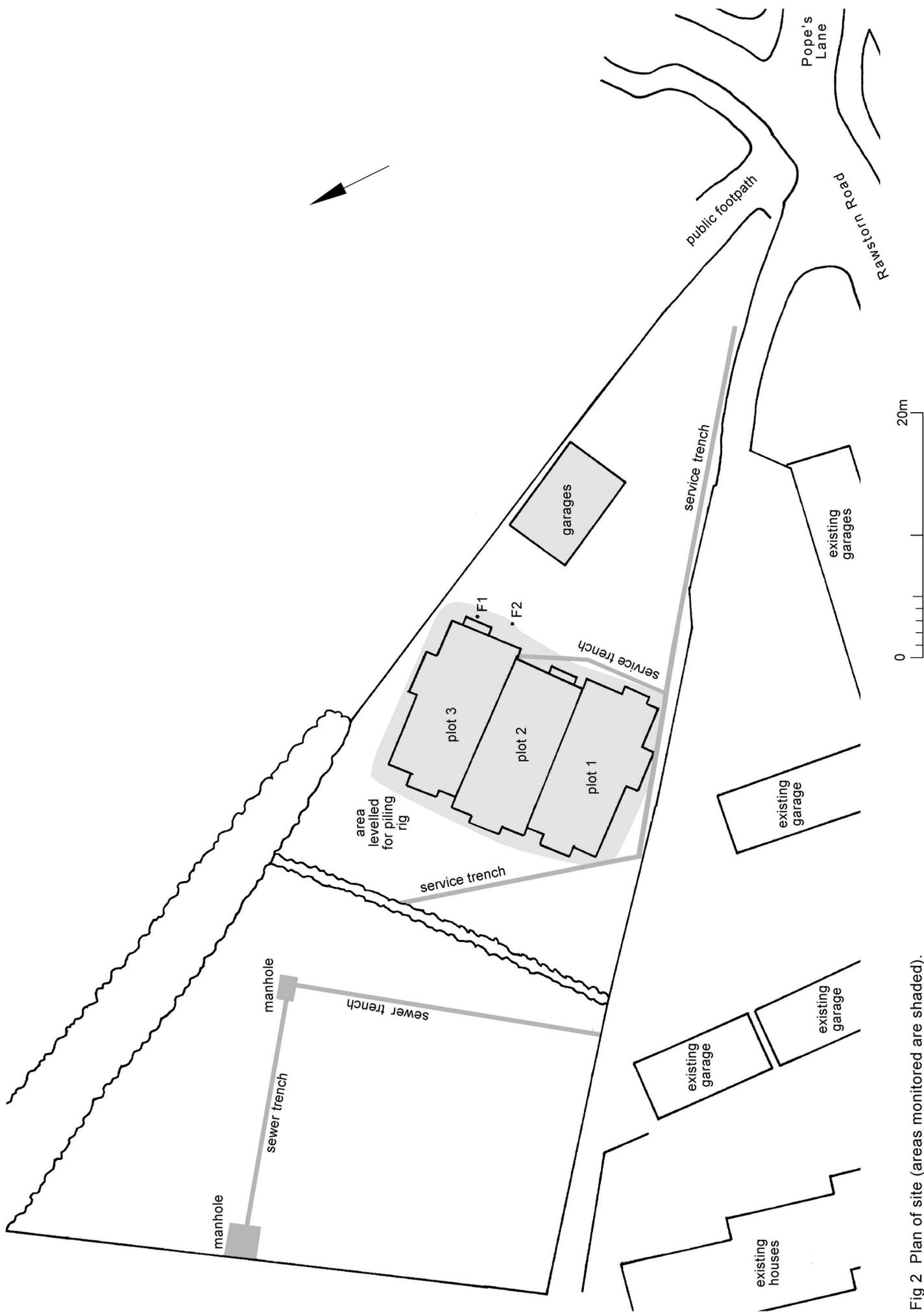


Fig 2 Plan of site (areas monitored are shaded).

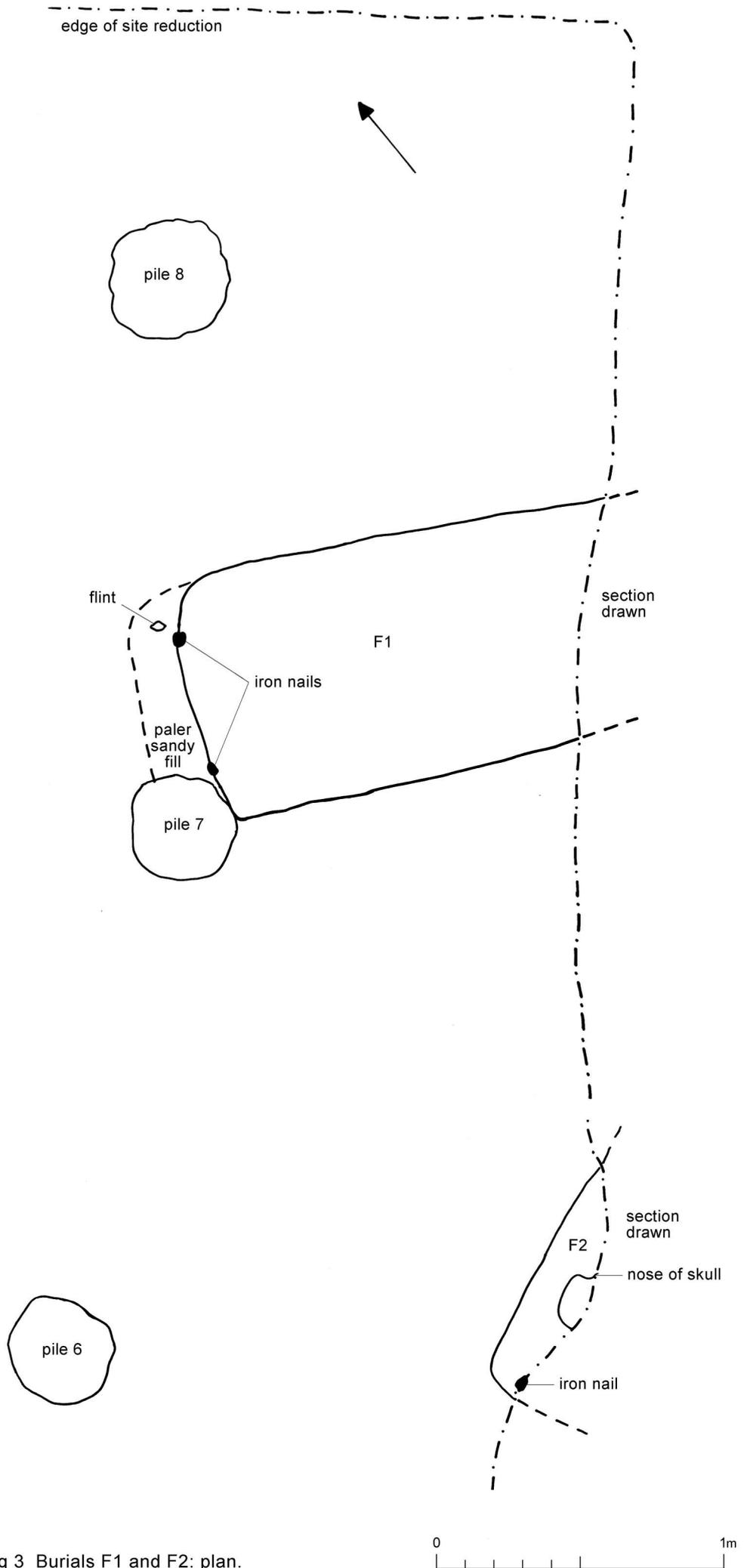


Fig 3 Burials F1 and F2: plan.

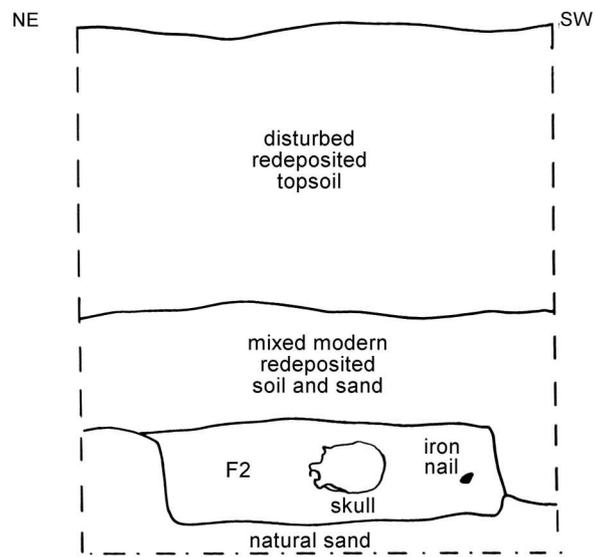
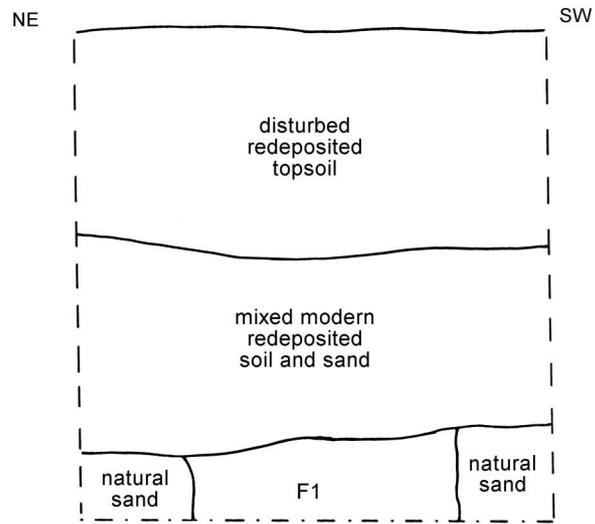


Fig 4 Burials F1 and F2: sections.

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

Summary sheet

Site address: Topfield, Rawstorn Road, Colchester, Essex	
Parish: Colchester	District: Colchester Borough
NGR: TL 9902 2522	Site code: COLEM accession code 2006.104
Type of work: Watching brief and partial excavation	Site director/group: Colchester Archaeological Trust
Date of work: August 2006-May 2007	Size of area investigated: 0.216 ha
Location of finds/curating museum: Colchester and Ipswich Museums	Funding source: Developer
Further seasons anticipated? Yes	Related EHER nos: 12372, 12367
Final report: CAT Report 423 and summary in EAH	
Periods represented: Roman	
<p>Summary of fieldwork results: <i>An archaeological watching brief and partial excavation were undertaken during a small residential development at Topfield, which is part of a known Roman cemetery area in Colchester. Two Roman inhumation burials were exposed in the south-eastern part of the site. These can be added to the four inhumations found during the 2001 evaluation, and are most probably outliers to the known Roman cemetery at the adjacent St Mary's hospital site. Downslope, in the north-western area of the site, waterlogged wooden posts probably dating to the Iron Age or Roman period were removed by machine during the digging of a sewer trench.</i></p>	
Previous summaries/reports: CAT Report 134	
Author of summary: Kate Orr	Date of summary: June 2007