

Report on a watching brief: CAT Report 440

Site address: 99 High Street, Colchester, Essex
Date of fieldwork: 5th-6th December 2006
NGR: TL 9986 2523
Location plan attached?: Yes (Fig 1; and plan Fig 2, sections Fig 3)
Museum accession code: 2006.144
CAT project code: 06/12b

Summary

The north side of a well-preserved west-east Roman drain, constructed of brick set in opus signinum, was uncovered during rebuilding work at the rear of 99 High Street.

Introduction (Fig 1)

An archaeological watching brief was carried out by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) in December 2006 during rebuilding work at the rear of 99 High Street. The site lies on the north side of the High Street in a yard on the west side of a narrow lane known as Crowther's Entry.

The height of the modern ground-level in the yard is 25.2m above Ordnance Datum.

Archaeological background

Excavations in 1964 immediately north of the present site revealed part of the well-preserved Roman masonry arcade which formed the southern boundary of the precinct of the Temple of Claudius (Hebditch 1971, 117-120). To the south of the arcade, in a trench along the western side of the site, were traces of several Roman drains aligned west-east. The earlier ones were probably timber-lined. These were followed by a stone-lined drain and one constructed of brick (*ibid*). There were also some later gullies (*ibid*, 120). They lay immediately to the north of the large defensive ditch dug along the south side of the Norman castle bailey. The 1964 excavations confirmed the results of work carried out nearby in 1931 and 1953 (Hull 1958, 169-75).

The 1931 excavation revealed the remains of the western part of a monumental arch centrally placed in the south precinct wall, 12m north-east of the 99 High Street site. Part of the same large foundation for the arch was uncovered in evaluation trenches at the rear of 95-6 High Street earlier in 2006 (CAT Reports 360 and 380). This was 1.55-1.65m below the modern ground-level and the part exposed probably lay under the middle of the carriageway through the arch.

Methods

The building contractor, Steve Smy, informed staff at Colchester and Ipswich Museums that archaeological remains had been uncovered in a trench dug for a foundation at the rear of 99 High Street. The modern foundation trench was 0.62m wide, 1.5-1.8m deep and 12.1m long. It was aligned east-west and was dug slightly to the north of the existing north wall, within a yard area, during rebuilding work on the property. Further remains were also uncovered in the bottom of a service trench dug just under 1m to the east of the modern foundation trench.

Cleaning and recording of the remains in the trenches were carried out by CAT on 5th-6th December 2006. Details of the recording methods used can be found in the CAT document *Policies and procedures* (CAT 2006).

Results

Roman drain (F1; Figs 2-3)

The north side of a well-preserved drain (F1) aligned west-east was uncovered for a distance of 5.46m in the eastern half of the modern foundation trench, and for 1m in the service trench to the east. The total length over which it was traced was 7.4m. It lay approximately 0.9m below the level of the existing yard surface. It was 0.4-0.45m wide and

was constructed of Roman brick set in a hard pinkish mortar (*opus signinum*). The channel of the drain lay under the south section and remained unexcavated.

The rough vertical face that formed the northern, outer edge of F1 was exposed in the trench. This was up to 0.65m deep and would have been buried in Roman times when the drain was in use. The upper 0.5m consisted of broken fragments of Roman brick set in *opus signinum*. These were the backs of eight to nine courses that would have formed the north face and base of the drainage channel. The lower 0.15m consisted of a pale yellowish-brown mortar containing fragments of septaria. This was probably a bedding layer for the drain, although it could possibly be the remains of an earlier feature. A possible construction trench for F1, 0.6m deep, was visible in section (Fig 3, Sx 1).



Plate 1: the Roman drain (F1), viewed from the west.

Other deposits (Fig 3)

Other Roman and later deposits were observed in the sides of the modern foundation trench, although it was not always possible to examine these in any detail. Natural cover loam was reached in places at the bottom of the trench at a depth of 1.75m below the modern ground-level.

There were patches of reddish-brown Boudican destruction debris (L1; Sx 2-Sx 3), 0.1m thick, at a depth of approximately 1m below the modern ground-level. No definite burnt Boudican surface was observed. A well-preserved patch at the western end of the trench was sampled and fragments of burnt daub, plaster and Roman brick/tile, as well as a small quantity of animal bone and a piece of human bone (see below), were recovered. Human bone has previously only rarely been found in deposits associated with the Boudican revolt (Crummy 1997, 80). The burnt structural daub and other building materials probably derive from wooden buildings which had existed nearby (Hebditch 1971, 117).

Elsewhere in the trench, the Boudican destruction debris was more mixed, with smaller inclusions, and had probably been re-worked to form a make-up layer. At the western end of the trench, the well-preserved patch was sealed by a clayey make-up layer 0.15m thick with small fragments of burnt daub, which clearly included some re-worked Boudican destruction debris.

Much of the remaining Roman deposits in the sides of the trench, both pre- and post-Boudican, consisted of thick gravelly layers (Sx 3). These did not have well-defined metallised surfaces, and so could have been make-up rather than street metallising. Hull

states of the 1931 excavation: 'From the drain to the wall the surface was level, made up with dirty gravel' (Hull 1958, 65). There were also some clayey make-up layers.

In parts of the western half of the trench, the natural cover loam was sealed by a layer of septaria chips 0.11m thick (Sx 3), which was possibly mason's waste. In the north-west corner of the trench (Sx 2), natural subsoil was not reached in a trial hole 0.35m deep (1.85m below the modern ground-level) in the bottom of the trench. This may indicate that there was a pre-Boudican feature such as a pit or ditch in this area.

The drain was sealed by post-Roman topsoil ('dark earth'), 0.6-0.7m thick (Sx 1-Sx 3), which contained a moderate amount of septaria, Roman brick/tile and mortar fragments and gravel. At the western end of the trench, the 'dark earth' was cut by the 1964 excavation trench, which was 1.85m wide (Sx 2). The 'dark earth' was sealed by modern rubble make-up and the existing concrete yard surface, 0.2-0.5m thick.

Finds

A small quantity of finds was recovered during the watching brief and these are listed in the site archive. Among the finds from the Boudican destruction debris (L1) was a small quantity of bone.

Francesca Boghi writes:

A total of 19.3g of bone remains was received for analysis. One bone fragment (15g) is a fragment of right human ilium from an adolescent (15-20 years) to adult (>20 years) individual of uncertain sex. The age at death is uncertain because unfortunately the iliac crest was abraded. No morphological or metric criteria were available to determine gender. The rest of the fragments (4.3g) are cattle remains (identification by Julie Curl).

A sherd of medieval pottery was recovered from spoil from the service trench at the eastern end of the site.

Howard Brooks writes:

The single piece of medieval pottery (finds no 1, unstratified; 40.1g) is a Fabric 20 (medieval sandy grey ware) rim sherd (fabric description follows *CAR 7*). Fabric 20 made its appearance in Colchester in the late 12th century, but was not common until the later 13th century. The rim form is, in some respects, reminiscent of a Thetford-type ware, but the fabric is thinner and sandier than the Thetford specimens in the CAT reference collection. It may be that the potter was working in a 'tradition' where Thetford types had not entirely disappeared from the potter's consciousness.

Conclusions

The drain F1 was probably the most southerly of the Roman drains previously excavated to the south of the temple precinct wall and arch (Hull 1958, 65, 170, 172-3; Hebditch 1971, 117-20). These had inadvertently been preserved under the Norman defensive bank piled up around the castle bailey. They probably lay between the precinct wall and an east-west street which was destroyed when the Norman defensive ditch was dug.

The total width of the drain in the earlier excavations was 1.8-2m. The width of the channel was 0.9m and it survived up to 0.3m (five brick courses) deep. Stratigraphically F1 was post-Boudican in date, although the top of F1 survived only 0.15-0.2m higher than the probable Boudican horizon. The evidence from the 1964 excavation suggested that the drain was in use from the first half of the 3rd century to the mid 4th century (Hebditch 1971, 120).

The drain remained undamaged during the rebuilding work. The recording work has enabled the location and depth of the drain to be plotted more accurately, and thus the impact of any future redevelopment can be assessed with more confidence.

Archive deposition

The archive from the watching brief, including the site records, photographs and finds, will be permanently deposited with Colchester and Ipswich Museums under accession code COLEM 2006.144.

Acknowledgements

CAT is grateful to Colchester Borough Council for funding the watching brief, to Steve Smy for informing Colchester and Ipswich Museums about the archaeological remains and for his help on site, and to Francesca Boghi and Julie Curl for identifying the bone. The work was monitored by Philip Wise of Colchester and Ipswich Museums Service.

Report author: Donald Shimmin

Report date: January 2008

References

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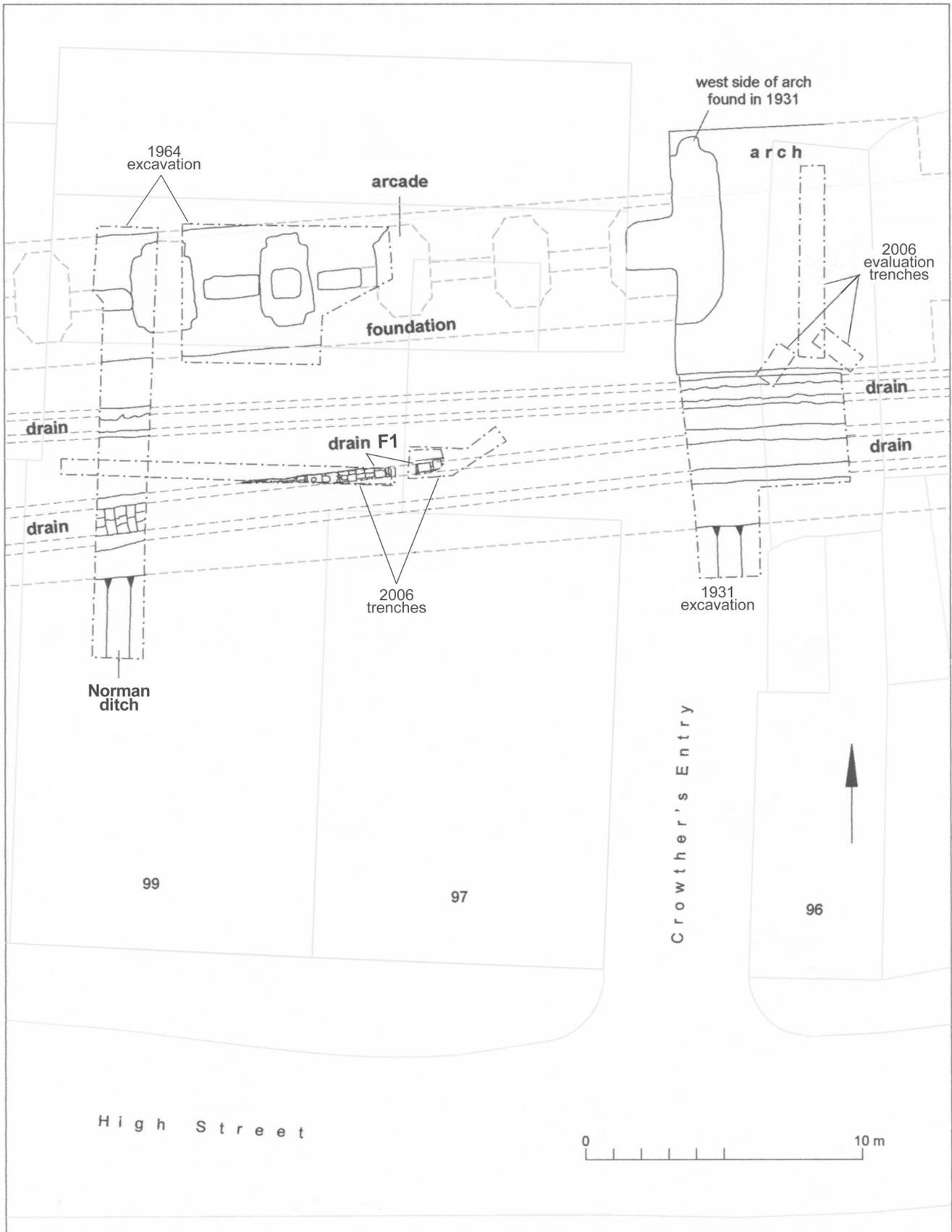
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Fig 1 Location plan showing the 2006 trenches in relation to earlier excavations.

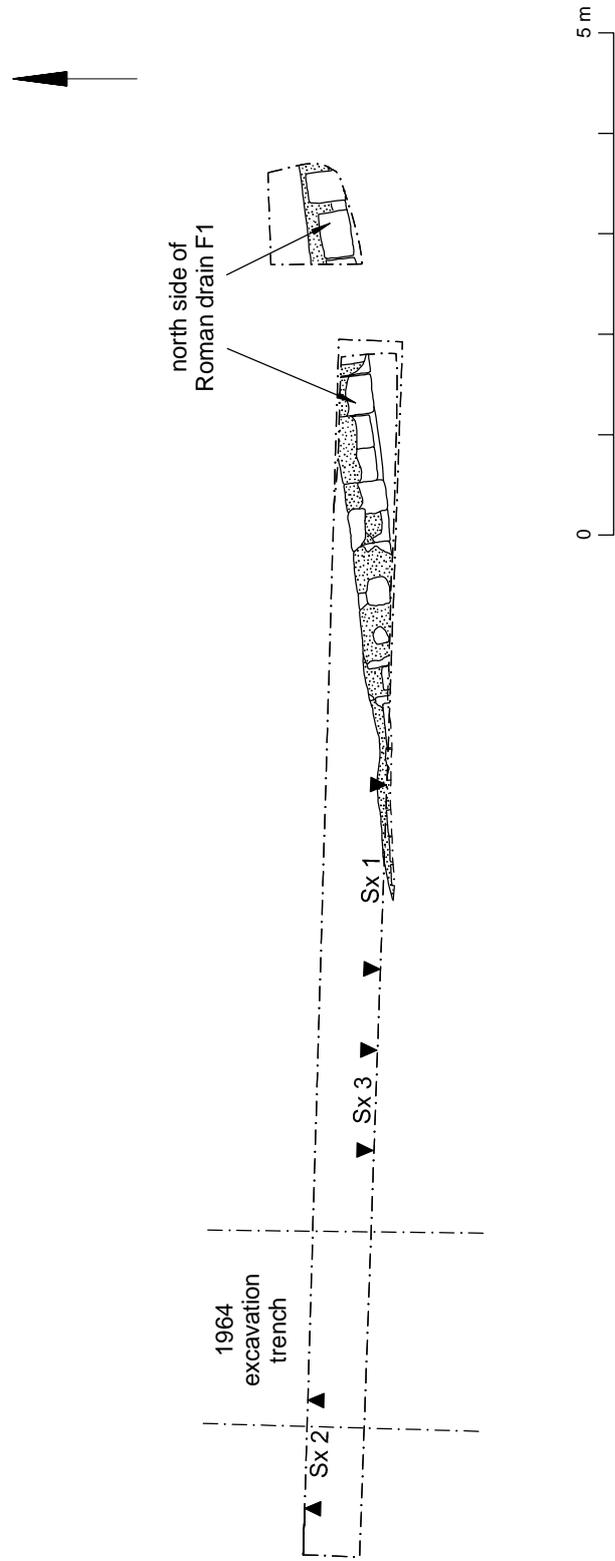


Fig.2 Plan of Roman drain F1.

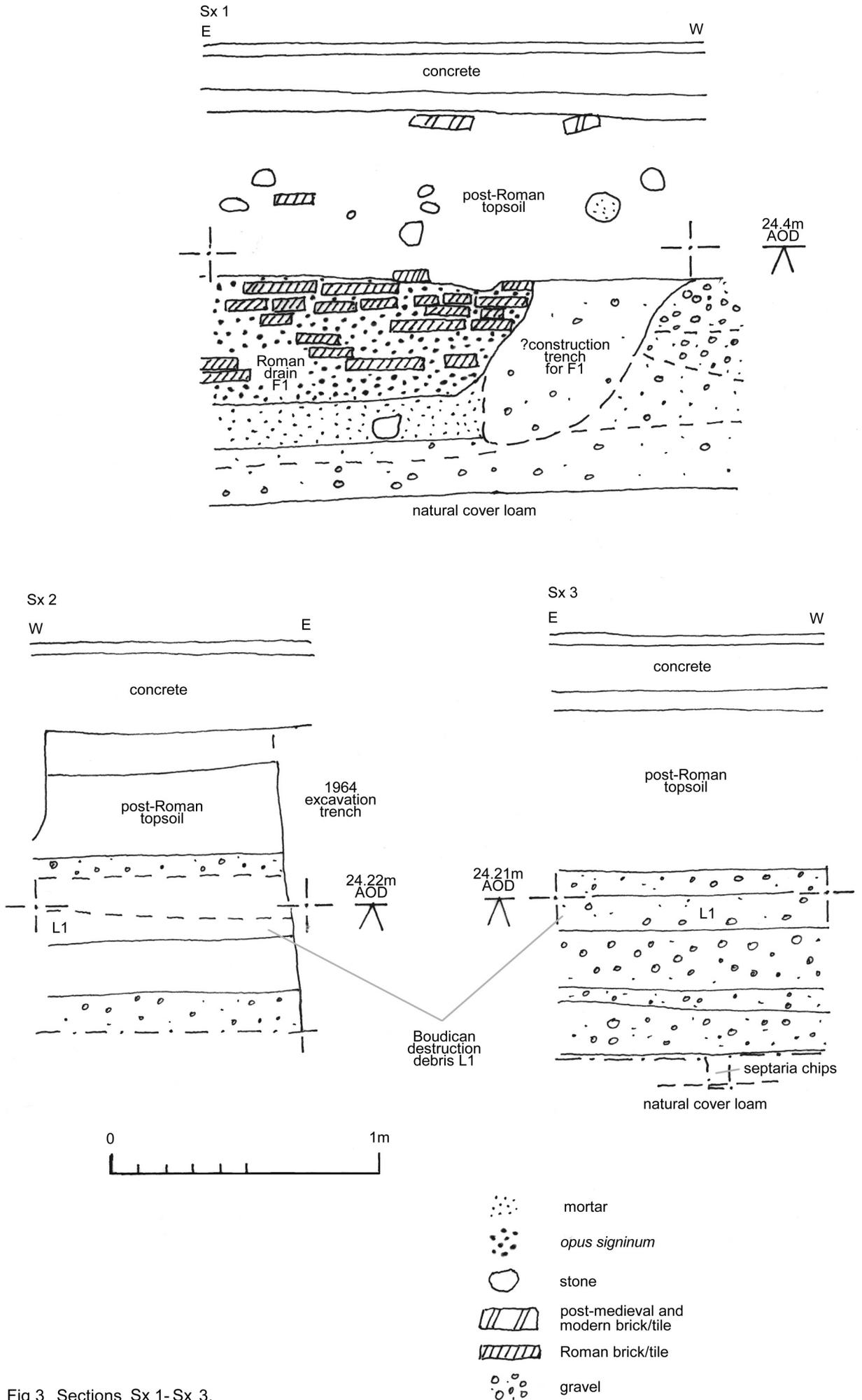


Fig 3 Sections Sx 1-Sx 3.

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

Summary sheet

Site address: 99 High Street, Colchester, Essex	
Parish: All Saints	District: Colchester
NGR: TL 9986 2523	Site code: Museum accession code COLEM 2006.144
Type of work: Watching brief	Site director/group: Colchester Archaeological Trust
Date of work: 5th-6th December 2006	Size of area investigated: 8.4 sq m
Location of finds/curating museum: Colchester and Ipswich Museums	Funding source: CBC
Further seasons anticipated? No	Related EHER and UAD nos:
Final report: CAT Report 440 and summary in <i>EAH</i>	
Periods represented: Roman	
Summary of fieldwork results: <i>The north side of a well-preserved west-east Roman drain, constructed of brick set in opus signinum, was uncovered during rebuilding work at the rear of 99 High Street.</i>	
Previous summaries/reports: None	
Author of summary: Donald Shimmin	Date of summary: January 2008