

**An archaeological watching brief
on the Phase II development
at 'Topfield', Rawstorn Road,
Colchester, Essex
April-May 2008**

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

CAT project ref.: 08/2a
Colchester and Ipswich Museums accession code: 2007.70
NGR: TL 9900 2520 (c)



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CAT Report 480
July 2008

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Fig 1 Site plan, showing plot numbers 1-8, 2001 evaluation trenches (01 T1-01 T3), 2007 evaluation trenches (07 T1-07 T2), and Roman burials discovered in 2001, 2006 and 2007.

1 Summary

The Topfield site lies to the west of the walled Roman town, and immediately west of the former St Mary's hospital site (now the Balkerne Heights residential development), where Roman burials and domestic activity have been recorded.

There is a great depth of topsoil on this site, masking at least six Roman inhumation burials, probably outliers of the Roman cemetery at the adjacent St Mary's hospital site, and a probable quarry-pit. The burials were all placed in the northern and more sloping part of the site, which may have been deliberate.

Roman pottery from the 2008 watching brief confirms the results of a previous evaluation that there had been a Roman occupation site nearby.

Although it cannot be proven, a case can be made that the site was initially used for sand-quarrying, with some nearby domestic occupation, but was later used as an inhumation cemetery, probably after the mid 3rd century. This change in use may be related to the contraction of the Roman suburbs, when sites previously built on became vacant and, in some cases, were used as burial grounds.

2 Introduction

- 2.1 This is the archive report on an archaeological watching brief on the Phase II development of the Topfield site, Rawstorn Road, Colchester, Essex, carried out on behalf of Albermarle Properties by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) in April and May 2008.
- 2.2 The development site, which is located to the west of the site of St Mary's hospital, now occupied by the Balkerne Heights residential development, centred at NGR TL 9900 2520, is a triangular-shaped parcel of land approximately 80m long and 25 wide at its widest point. The triangular parcel of land to the north of the Phase II site was developed as Topfield Phase I.
- 2.3 Construction on the Phase II site is in the form of a residential block consisting of plots 5-8, plots 1-4 being Phase I. Successive evaluations on this site (CAT Reports 134, 423, 429) have established that there is a sufficiently deep accumulation of topsoil on the site to enable the new build to intrude as little as possible into the archaeological horizon. This working arrangement was formalised in a Written Scheme of Investigation agreed with the Colchester Borough Council Archaeological Officer (CBCAO).
- 2.4 The fieldwork and report-writing stages of this project follow the standards set out in 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), and the Institute of Field Archaeologists' *Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief* (IFA 2001a) and *Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials* (IFA 2001b). Other sources used are *Management of archaeological projects* (MAP 2), and *Standards for field archaeology in the East of England* (EAA 14).

3 Archaeological background

Previous work and discoveries in the vicinity of the site

The site lies approximately 250m west of the walled Roman town. The remains of extra-mural Roman occupation in this area outside of the town wall have been subject to archaeological excavation at Balkerne Lane (CAR 3) and the former St Mary's hospital site (CAT Report 3; CAT Report 484). At Balkerne Lane, buildings and property plots fronting the Roman road extending west from the Balkerne Gate were investigated. 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 recorded plus smaller lanes connecting the houses. By the 4th century AD, settlement had moved back inside the town wall and the area was turned over to use as a cemetery. In all, 86 Roman burials were excavated, mainly in the north and eastern areas of the site.

Earlier finds from the St Mary's hospital site include a small group of Roman burials, mostly inhumations with a few cremations in lead urns, known as the 'Union Cemetery' (Hull 1958; CAR 6, 261-2). There are also a number of individual finds of objects, mostly of Roman date, but which include a few prehistoric artefacts including a Mesolithic flint axe (EHER no 12372) and fragments of a Late Bronze Age bucket urn (EHER no 12367).

Approximately 400m to the north-west is the important Late Iron Age and Roman site at Sheepen, the main period of occupation of which was c AD 5-60 (Hawkes & Hull 1947; 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 belonged to the 2nd-3rd centuries (Hull 1963).

Previous work and discoveries on the Topfield Phase I site

An archaeological trial-trenching evaluation carried out at Topfield in 2001 demonstrated that the central and south-eastern areas of the site were occupied by Roman ditches and pits dug for rubbish-disposal and/or sand-quarrying. At least two inhumations 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 are known (CAT Reports 3 and 484). All features in the trenches were shallow and were sealed by at least 800mm of topsoil (CAT Report 134).

Watching brief and evaluation 2006/2007

Two Roman inhumation burials were exposed in the south-eastern part of the site. Previously, four inhumations had been found here during an evaluation in 2001 (see paragraph above). All six burials were probably outliers of the Roman cemetery on 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 (CAT Report 423).

Evaluation 2007

Following the watching brief and partial excavation described above, an investigation by two trial-trenches failed to locate any further Roman burials. However, small and large pits of Roman date were found, as well as an area of compact gravel which may be part of a pre-Roman metalled trackway or a geological layer (CAT Report 429).

4 Aim

The aim of the watching brief was to record the character, extent, date, significance and condition of any archaeological remains and deposits affected by groundworks, in particular any evidence for Roman burials.

5 Results

7th April 2008

NR watched ground reduction of south and south-western part of the site, along the length of the boundary wall (mainly to the rear of plot 4). Some concrete footings had been removed in the south-east corner of the site.

Victorian and later rubbish-pits cut post-medieval and modern topsoils, consisting of either dark yellow/brown or grey/brown sandy loam. This area was reduced to a depth of 2m at its deepest point, in the extreme south-eastern corner. Topsoil still showed at this depth, and no archaeological features were seen. Although 2m of ground was removed at the south-east corner of the site, the natural drop in ground-level meant that no ground was removed at the mid-point of the southern edge of the site, ie roughly south of the southern point of plot 5.

Roughly at the junction between plots 6 and 7, formation level dropped at 1.6m and a small patch of natural sand was exposed. The rest of the lowered ground exposed only topsoil.

1st May 2008

NR watched ground reduction on plot 8 at the south-west corner of the site, to a depth of 0.90m below formation level, approximately 12.90m. Still topsoil exposed, apparently undisturbed.

In the south-east corner of plot 8, natural was visible at a depth of about 1m below original ground-level.

Also, in the garden area (ie south of plot 8), an area of approx 4m x 4m of topsoil was reduced to a depth of 1m, revealing natural.

2nd May 2008

AW watched further reduction north and west of plot 8. Deposits become quite deep, as south of plot 5, cutting some 0.50m into natural ground. No archaeological features or finds were recorded.

Ground reduction south of plot 7 unearthed a yellow plastic tag marked 'L4'. This yellow tag must be from L4 in T1 of the 2007 evaluation (CAT Report 429).

6th May 2008

SB watched a small amount of ground reduction (through modern topsoil) in plot 7. Nothing of archaeological significance was seen.

15th May 2008

NR watched ground reduction of plot 6. Topsoil was removed so as to reveal natural at 1m depth at the south edge of the plot and at 1.4m on the front (north) edge of the plot. Topsoil was still visible at the front of plot 6. This could have been the fill of a large pit, or, more likely, was the topsoil sloping away to the north.

16th May 2008

NR watched ground reduction of plots 5 and 6. Topsoil was removed to expose natural at approximately the same depths as on 15th May.

A small patch of very dark grey to almost black loam was seen at a depth of about 1.50m below ground-level to the front (north) of plot 5. It contained oyster shell fragments, a very small amount of degraded cremated bone (not kept), and a few fragments of Roman pottery (finds no 3). The spoil heap was metal-detected by Brian Hurrell, but nothing of archaeological significance was found.

28 May 2008

NR watched ground reduction on plot 5 to a depth of 1.20m. Topsoil was still visible at this depth. Ground reduction to the rear (ie the garden areas) of plots 7 and 8 was not seen by CAT, and was reduced by approximately 1m. A small area of burning was seen to the front of plot 4 at approximately 1.5m depth. This area produced a large group of finds (finds no 4), which are probably redeposited as they seemed to be within the topsoil accumulation rather than in a pre-topsoil context.

6 Finds

6.1 The Roman pottery

by Stephen Benfield

A small quantity of Roman pottery (2,215 g) was collected during the watching brief. All of the pottery is unstratified. This 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). In addition, a code for Late Iron Age grog-tempered wares (Fabric GTW) has been added. This fabric is described below. 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). Samian vessels were recorded using Dragendorff (Dr) form numbers or other common form type references following those used in Webster 1996. 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 Roman pottery below.

Fabrics and descriptions additional to *CAR 10*

Fabrics used in this report:

Fabric GTW, Late Iron Age grog-tempered wares. Generally thick sherds with patchy red-brown, brown or grey-brown surfaces. Fabric contains various quantities of crushed fired clay (grog).

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	
AJ	amphoras, Dressel 20	BAT AM 1, BAT AM 2
BA	plain samian	
BA(SG)	South Gaulish plain samian	LGF SA
BA(CG)	Central Gaulish plain samian	LEZ SA 2
BX	decorated samian	
BX(SG)	South Gaulish decorated samian	LGF SA
BX(CG)	Central Gaulish decorated samian	
DJ	coarse oxidised and related wares	COL WH
DZ	fine oxidised wares	
EA	Nene Valley colour-coated ware	LNV CC
GA	BB1: black-burnished ware, category 1	DOR BB1
GB	BB2: black-burnished ware, category 2	COL BB2
GTW	grog-tempered wares of Late Iron Age type	SOB GT
GX	other coarse wares, principally locally-produced grey wares	
KX	black-burnished ware (BB2) types in pale grey ware	
MQ	white-slipped fine wares and parchment wares	
HZ	large storage jars and other vessels in heavily-tempered grey wares	
TZ	mortaria, Colchester and mortaria imported from the Continent	
UR	terra nigra-type wares	GAB TN 1
LTC	terra nigra-type local traded coarse wares	

Roman pottery discussion

Given that all of the pottery is unstratified, there is little to add to the pottery catalogue (below) other than a few general comments. The pottery spans the Late Iron Age to late Roman period, probably the 1st century AD to the mid-late 3rd to 4th century. None of the closely-datable pottery is specifically of 4th-century date. The latest-dated sherd is from a flanged bowl of form Cam 305A (finds no 2) in BB1 (Fabric GA), and which is dated from after the mid-late 3rd century (*CAR 10*, 481-2). It is interesting, though perhaps not surprising, to note a number of pot forms and fabrics which are common at Sheepen but either absent or rare in the Roman fortress and *colonia*. These are: a platter of form Cam 2B (finds no 2), a fine locally-produced girth beaker, with combed wavy-line decoration, of form Cam 84 (finds no 3) in Fabric DZ (Hawkes & Hull, 232, fabric TR4); and two sherds of grog-tempered ware (Fabric GTW) from finds nos 2 and 3 (*CAR 10*, 468, 471, 491). Among the later-dated pottery there is an example of the samian bowl form Dr 81 (finds no 1) in Central Gaulish fabric (Fabric BA(CG)), which, while not rare, is not one of the more common samian vessel forms.

Catalogue of Roman pottery

Unstratified

Finds number 1 (414 g).

Fabric AJ, 3 sherds; Fabric BA(CG), 2 sherds, Dr 81; Fabric DJ, 3 sherds, all base sherds, from, or probably from, flagons; Fabric EA, 1 sherd, Cam 408-410, dark-grey/black surface with white paint decoration of diagonal lines and dots; Fabric GB, 1 sherd, Cam 40; Fabric GX, 4 sherds, includes lid sherd; Fabric KX, 2 sherds; Fabric TZ, 2 sherds, Cam 497 variant. Pottery dated: early-mid 3rd to 4th century.

Unstratified

Finds number 2 (1,153 g).

Fabric AA, 1 sherd, possibly from a Gaulish amphora; Fabric AJ, 2 handles from 2 separate amphoras; Fabric BA(SG), 1 sherd from a large rouletted dish or platter; Fabric BA(CG), 2 sherds, Dr 18/31 and ?31; Fabric BX(SG), rim sherd from a Dr 29 bowl; Fabric DJ, 8 sherds; Fabric GA, 2 sherds, Cam 303, Cam 305A; Fabric GB, 3 sherds, Cam 37B; Fabric GTW, 1 sherd; Fabric GX, 18 sherds; Fabric HZ, 1 sherd; Fabric MQ, 1 sherd; Fabric TZ, 2 sherds, Cam ?479 variant; Fabric UR, 1 sherd, Cam 2B platter; Fabric UR(LTC) 1 sherd, Cam 28, black vitreous burnt residue on interior surface.

Pottery dated: mid-late 3rd to 4th century.

Unstratified (plot 5)

Finds number 3 (104 g).

Fabric BA(CG), 1 sherd, Dr 33; Fabric DJ, 1 sherd, fine white ware, probably from a flagon; Fabric DZ, 1 sherd, Cam 84 girth beaker, in fine orange fabric, Fabric TR4 (Hawkes & Hull, 232) decorated with combed wavy lines; Fabric GTW, 1 sherd; Fabric GX, 3 sherds; Fabric HZ, 1 sherd.

Pottery dated: 2nd century.

Unstratified (plot 4)

Finds number 4 (544 g).

Fabric BA(CG), 1 sherd, Dr 38; Fabric BX(CG), 1 sherd, Dr 37 bowl, ovolo and a bird with fragments of other decoration; Fabric DJ, 2 sherds, one is a handle from a large flagon or possibly an amphora; Fabric GX, 18 sherds, most are from a large Cam 268 jar; Fabric TZ, 3 sherds, from 3 different mortaria, all can probably be classified as Cam 479 variant.

Pottery dated: 2nd, probably later 2nd, to 3rd century.

6.2 Other finds

by Howard Brooks

D = discarded.

All finds are unstratified.

Finds number 1

3 sherds of modern ironstone (Fabric 48d) pottery, including much of an ?inkpot, 441g, D.

1 sherd of modern stoneware (Fabric 45m) pottery, probably blacking bottle top, 19g, D.

1 Roman tile fragment, 164g, D.

1 Roman *imbrex* fragment, 145g, D.

Finds number 2

2 sherds of post-medieval red earthenware (Fabric 40) pottery, 180g, D.

1 sherd of modern stoneware (Fabric 45m) pottery, 15g, D.

1 piece of slate, 3g, D.

7 Discussion

Previous archaeological work has shown that the Topfield site has a considerable depth of topsoil, which, in places, is as much as 1.3m deep. This topsoil masks two different sets of archaeological material. Firstly, it masks Roman burials, six of which have been found here. These are probably outliers of the Roman cemetery at the adjacent St Mary's hospital site (Hull 1958, 254-5; *CAR* 9, 258-63; CAT Report 484). In terms of distribution, the burials are all in the northern and more sloping part of the site, ie on the Topfield Phase I site. Perhaps this more sloping part was deliberately chosen for burial, so that the cemetery would be visible from the River

Colne valley to the north and west. Secondly, the topsoil masks Roman quarry-pits and domestic debris.

Previous archaeological work has shown that there are large pits on the southern side of this site. One was not bottomed, but it was at least 1.1m deep or 2.4m below modern ground-level. Pits of this size may have been quarry-pits for the extraction of sand or gravel. Other features such as small pits show that there was probably some domestic occupation here alongside, or perhaps replaced by, the quarry-pits.

The 2008 watching brief has produced a relatively large group of Roman pottery sherds (slightly over 2kg), which is almost certainly domestic waste from a nearby Roman occupation site. The pottery spans the 2nd century to the 4th century, but none of the sherds need necessarily be later than the mid-late 3rd century. It cannot be proven from the small sample given by this site, but the case can be made that the site was initially used for sand-quarrying, with some nearby domestic occupation, and that, at a later date, probably after the mid-3rd century, at least the northern edge of the site was used as an inhumation cemetery. It remains to be seen whether this later use of the site ties in with evidence for the contraction of the Roman suburbs after the mid-3rd century (Crummy 1997, 118).

8 Archive deposit

The finds and paper archive are currently held by CAT at 12 Lexden Road, Colchester, CO3 3NF, but will be permanently deposited with Colchester and Ipswich Museums under accession code COLEM 2007.70.

9 Acknowledgements

CAT would like to thank Albermarle Developments Ltd (Mr Les Levine) for commissioning and funding the work. Site work was undertaken by S Benfield (SB), N Rayner (NR), A Wightman (AW) and B Hurrell; digital survey was by C Lister. The project was monitored by Mr Martin Winter for Colchester Borough Council.

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- | | | |
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11 Glossary

CBCAO	Colchester Borough Council Archaeology Officer
EHER	Essex Historic Environment Record
feature	an identifiable thing like a pit, a wall, a floor
IFA	Institute of Field Archaeologists
<i>imbrex</i>	Roman curved roof tile
medieval	period from AD 1066 to c AD 1500
modern	period from c AD 1800 to the present
natural	geological deposit undisturbed by human activity
NGR	National Grid Reference
post-medieval	after c AD 1500 to c AD 1800
RRCSAL	Report of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London

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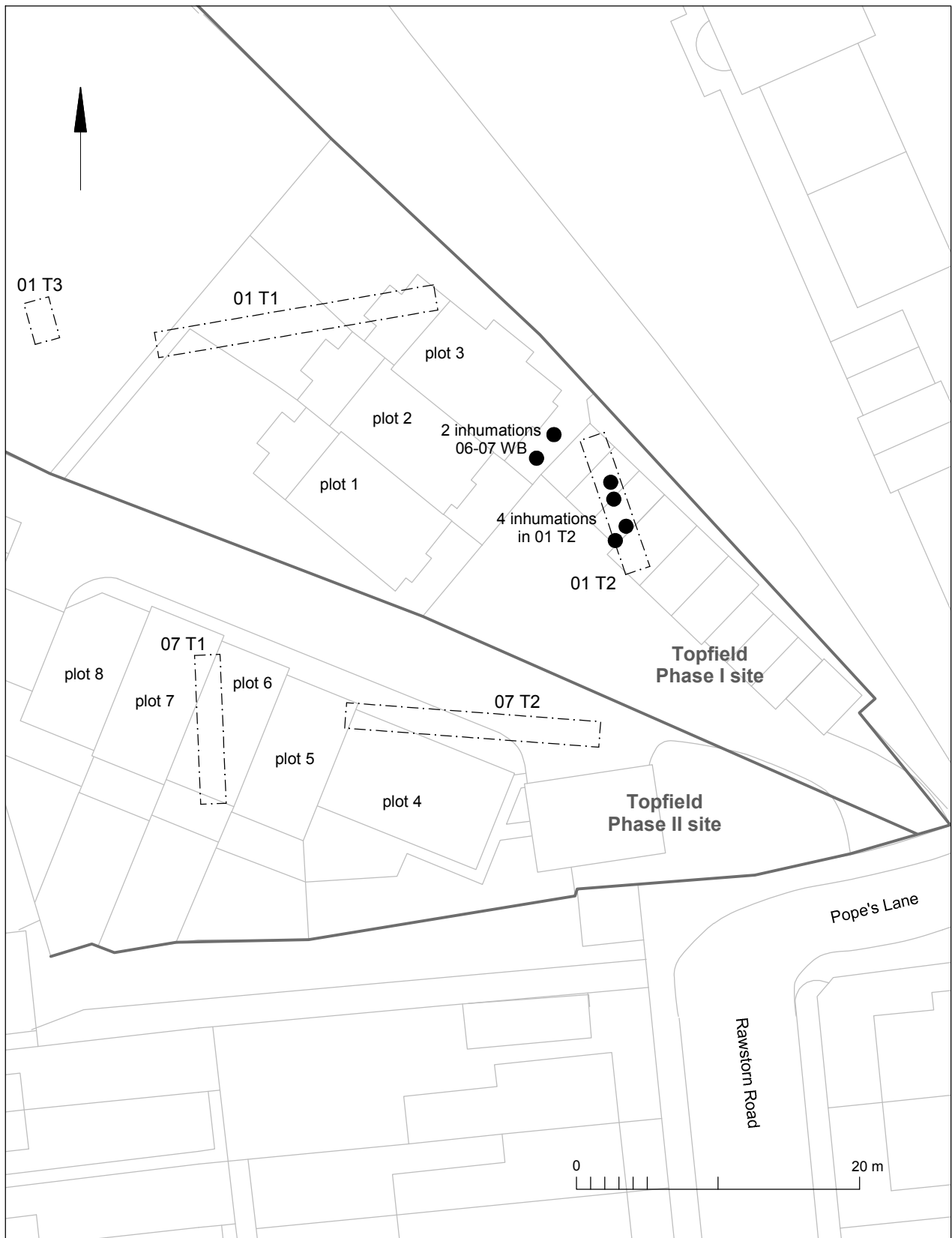
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● = Roman burial

Fig 1 Site plan, showing plot numbers 1-8, 2001 evaluation trenches (01 T1-01 T3), 2007 evaluation trenches (07 T1-07 T2), and Roman burials discovered in 2001, 2006, and 2007.

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

Summary sheet

Site address: Topfield (Phase II), Rawstorn Road, Colchester, Essex	
Parish: Colchester	District: Colchester
NGR: TL 9900 2520 (c)	Site code: CAT project code 08/2a Museum accession code 2007.70
Type of work: Watching brief	Site director/group: Colchester Archaeological Trust
Date of work: April-May 2008	Size of area investigated: Triangular plot 80m x 25m (max)
Location of finds/curating museum: Colchester and Ipswich Museums	Funding source: Contractor
Further seasons anticipated? No	Related EHER nos: 12367, 12372
Final report: CAT Report 480	
Periods represented: Roman	
<p>Summary of fieldwork results:</p> <p><i>The Topfield site lies to the west of the walled Roman town, and immediately west of the former St Mary's hospital site (now the Balkerne Heights residential development), where Roman burials and domestic activity have been recorded.</i></p> <p><i>There is a great depth of topsoil on this site, masking at least six Roman inhumation burials, probably outliers of the Roman cemetery at the adjacent St Mary's hospital site, and a probable quarry-pit. The burials were all placed in the northern and more sloping part of the site, which may have been deliberate.</i></p> <p><i>Roman pottery from the 2008 watching brief confirms the results of a previous evaluation that there had been a Roman occupation site nearby.</i></p> <p><i>Although it cannot be proven, a case can be made that the site was initially used for sand-quarrying, with some nearby domestic occupation, but was later used as an inhumation cemetery, probably after the mid 3rd century. This change in use may be related to the contraction of the Roman suburbs, when sites previously built on became vacant and, in some cases, were used as burial grounds.</i></p>	
Previous summaries/reports: None	
Keywords: Roman pottery, quarry-pit, inhumations	Significance: *
Author of summary: Howard Brooks	Date of summary: July 2008