

Archaeological excavation at St Helena School, Sheepen Road, Colchester, Essex

September 2013



report prepared by Ben Holloway

on behalf of Ingleton Wood

CAT project ref.: 13/08f

NGR: TL 9886 2584

Colchester and Ipswich Museum accession code: 2013.36



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CAT Report 716
September 2013

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Front cover: view of site.

1 Summary

St Helena School is within the oppidum of Camulodunum and the Later Iron Age and Roman trading depot at Sheepen, and within its grounds are the remains of two Romano-Celtic temples. Proposed work is the construction of a link canopy between two existing school buildings. In terms of below-ground disturbance, this involved the excavation of twelve foundation pads each measuring 0.8m square and 0.80m deep. The position of the new canopy straddles the predicted line of the northern wall of enclosure (temenos) of Temple II.

The excavation of the pads revealed no sign of the temenos wall (destroyed by previous building work?) or any cut features, but there were patches of compacted gravel in two of the pad-holes. A very small quantity of Roman tile and a mid-1st century sherd were recovered from the gravel. Layers of gravel have been seen at St Helena in 1935, 2007, and now twice in 2013. The gravel is too widespread to have been a road, so it is more likely to have been a Roman courtyard surface. However, it may slightly predate the temple, which was founded in the late 1st or early 2nd century.

2 Introduction and planning background (Fig 1)

This is the report on the archaeological excavation carried out prior to the construction of a link canopy between two existing classroom blocks on the eastern edge of the school (NGR TL 9886 2584).

The archaeological work, commissioned by Max Chapman of Ingleton Wood on behalf of St Helena School and funded by Essex County Council, was carried out by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) between the 2nd and 3rd of September 2013. Post-excavation work was carried out in September 2013.

A large part of the Sheepen site (ie the modern Hilly Fields, the Colchester Institute and its playing fields, and St Helena School and its grounds) is Scheduled Ancient Monument (Listing EX 46, HA1002173).

A discussion with Martin Winter, Colchester Borough Council Archaeological Officer (CBCAO) and Deborah Priddy of English Heritage confirmed that archaeological work would be required prior to construction.

Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC) for the works was granted by English Heritage on 19th July 2013 (their reference S00064534). All archaeological work was carried out in accordance with the SMC terms and with standards and practices contained in the documents DCLG 2012, CAT 2012, IfA 2008a, IfA 2008b, CIM 2008a, CIM 2008b, EAA 24, and English Heritage 2006. The work was also informed by the recent Brief and Written Scheme of Investigation for trenching work carried out on the same site in April 2013 (CBC 2013: CAT 2013).

3 Archaeological background

This section is based on major published works on the archaeology of Colchester by C F C Hawkes and Rex Hull (Hawkes & Hull 1947; Hull 1958), and by Philip Crummy (Crummy 1980, 248-52; Crummy 1997; *CAR 11* with C F C Hawkes), supported by other records held by Essex Historic Environment Record (EHER) and the Urban Archaeological Database held by Colchester and Ipswich Museums.

The site is in an area of high archaeological importance - the enclosed *oppidum* of Camulodunum, and specifically within the trading depot at Sheepen, which is (along with Gosbecks) one of the principal centres of the *oppidum*. Extensive excavations prior to the construction of the Avenue of

Remembrance (then the Colchester Bypass) in the 1930s showed that this area was an important focus of Late Iron Age settlement and early Roman military activity (Hawkes & Hull 1947). The school site coincides with the location of two Romano-British temples (Hull 1958), and the current site straddles the northern temenos (sacred enclosure) wall of Temple II.

Recent evaluations and watching briefs in response to small-scale development in and around the school have revealed substantial Roman deposits here (CAT Reports 188, 349, 351, 384, 414, 451, 544).

The most recent archaeological work was an evaluation in April 2013 approximately 65m to the west, just beyond the main structure of Temple II and within the precinct. Here, an evaluation by four trial-trenches revealed three Roman pits, a compacted gravel surface, and a dump of ceramic building material. One of the pits contained a group of five, low denomination Roman coins dated to c AD 43-64. These are from a hoard or purse group possibly deposited at the time of the Boudican revolt, pre-dating the construction of the temple in the late 1st or early 2nd century.

4 Aim

The aim of the excavation was to record the character, extent, date, significance and condition of any archaeological remains likely to be disturbed by the proposed works, in particular the Roman temples.

5 Excavation results (Figs 2-4)

This section gives an archaeological summary of the excavated foundation pads (Pads 1-12), with context and finds dating information.

The 0.80m x 0.8m foundation pads were excavated under archaeological supervision using a tracked excavator, through two layers: L1, a modern hardstanding and its associated sub-base 250-300mm thick, sealing L2, a silt/clay accumulation horizon 400-500mm thick. L2 sealed either L3 (natural boulder clay with occasional patches of gravel), or (in pads 9 and 12) a Roman compacted gravel layer (L4). There were no archaeological cut features.

Foundation Pads 1- 8, 10-11

No archaeological features, deposits or finds were revealed during the excavation of these pads (to a formation depth of 800mm), but modern service runs were seen in Pads 1-3 and 7. Pad 11 could not be fully excavated due to the presence of modern foundations and a service run.

Foundation Pad 9

Under L1 and L2, Pad 9 revealed a compacted gravel surfacing (L4). L4 sealed natural L3.

Context	Description	Date
L4	compacted gravel surface	Roman, mid-late 1st century?

Foundation Pad 12: summary

Pad 12 contained the same Roman compacted gravel surface (L4). Roman tile fragments and a Roman sherd came from this context.

Context	Description	Date
L4	compacted gravel surface	Roman, mid-late 1st century?

6 Finds

by Stephen Benfield

A small quantity of Roman tile and a sherd of 1st century pottery was recovered from the gravel surface in pad 12. The pottery is a body sherd from a storage jar, and the date and form is typical for the Sheepen site (ie, early to mid 1st century AD).

L4, finds number 1

1 grog-tempered sherd from storage vessel. Sheepen period, early-mid 1st century AD, 73g.

1 Roman tegula fragment 245g, 27mm thick.

1 Roman tile, superficially like a box-tile fragment, but with a chamfered corner.

Burning on upper? (interior?) surface, 78g

2 animal bone fragments, probably large mammal leg bones, 28g

7 Discussion

Since this excavation area straddled the *temenos* (sacred precinct) of Colchester Temple II and its north wall, the results are of interest.

The absence of any sign of the *temenos* wall in those foundation pads closest to its course (ie, pads 1 and 6) is an indication that the wall has been destroyed here by previous building work at the school.

The principal point of interest is that patches of a compacted gravel layer were seen at the base of pads 9 and 12 (Fig 3). In fact, a common feature of projects at St Helena School is the discovery of gravel surfaces. The first was in 1935, when Hawkes and Hull trenched the site and first discovered the temples (Hull 1958, 224-33), and their trench intercepted a band of gravel approximately 12m wide. Interestingly, this was only 7 m to the west of the gravel exposed in T4 of the April 2013 (CAT Report 699), and it may be regarded as the same gravel layer. The next was the gravel intercepted during the CAT evaluation on the eastern side of the school site in 2007. This evaluation cut four trenches outside the *temenos*, and three within it. One of the 2007 trenches within the *temenos* intercepted the robbed-out *temenos* (precinct) wall (as T1, F1: CAT Report 414, 3), and also revealed a patch of gravel. The gravel patches seen in pads 9 and 12 lend weight to the idea that a large area of what is now St Helena School is underlain by either one large or several smaller gravelled surfaces. Although it is tempting to relate the gravel surface(s) to the temples, the available dating evidence (Hull 1958, 226) indicates that they date to the mid-to-late 1st century (as did the April 2013 coin hoard).

In other words, the gravel and other features could all pre-date the temples, and be part of the general 'Sheepen-period' activity here (ie AD 5-60) before the temples were built. The gravel patches revealed by the current excavation are also dated early to mid 1st century AD, a date which is consistent with the wider pattern here.

8 Acknowledgements

CAT thanks Mr Max Chapman of Ingleton Wood for commissioning the work on behalf of St Helena School and Essex County Council for funding the work. The project was managed by B Holloway, and fieldwork was carried out by BH and M Baister. The project was monitored by CBCAO Martin Winter and Deborah Priddy of English Heritage.

9 References

Note: all CAT fieldwork reports are published online at

<http://cat.essex.ac.uk>

- | | | |
|--------------------------------|-------|--|
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| CAT | 2013 | <i>A Written Scheme of Investigation for an archaeological evaluation at St Helena School, Sheepen Road, Colchester</i> |
| CAT Report 188 | 2002 | An archaeological watching brief on the installation of tennis court floodlights at St Helena School, Sheepen Road, Colchester, Essex, March 2002, by B Holloway |
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| Hull, M R | 1958 | <i>Roman Colchester</i> , Report 20 of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London |
| IfA | 2008a | <i>Standard and guidance for archaeological excavation</i> |
| IfA | 2008b | <i>Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials</i> |

10 Abbreviations and glossary

CAT	Colchester Archaeological Trust
CBM	ceramic building materials (brick, tile, tessera).
context	specific location of finds on an archaeological site
ECC	Essex County Council
EHHER	Essex Historic Environment Record, held by Essex County Council
feature	an identifiable thing like a pit, a wall, a floor; can contain 'contexts'
fill	the soil filling up a hole such as a pit or ditch
HEM	Historic Environment Management
IfA	Institute for Archaeologists
<i>imbrex</i>	half tube roof tile to cover tegula flanges (plural <i>imbrices</i>)
Iron Age	period from 700 BC to the Roman invasion of AD 43
Late Iron Age	from around 200 Bc to AD 43
natural	geological deposit undisturbed by human activity
NGR	National Grid Reference
Roman	the period from AD 43 to around AD 430
Romano-Celtic	a fusion of Roman and native tradition
sealed	covered over, and therefore post-dated
<i>tegula</i>	Roman tile, with flanges covered by <i>imbrices</i> on complete roof
<i>temenos</i>	sacred enclosure around temple, defined by wall

11 Archive deposition

The paper and digital archive is currently held by the Colchester Archaeological Trust at Roman Circus House, Circular Road North, Colchester, Essex CO2 7GZ, but will be permanently deposited with Colchester and Ipswich Museums under accession code COLEM 2013.16.

12 Contents of archive

Finds archive

1 polybag containing all retained finds (CBM, pottery, bone)

Paper archive

1 A4 wallet containing:
this report
original site record (context and finds sheets)
section drawings
trench sheets
digital photo log
attendance record
sundry papers
digital photos on disc

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Distribution list:

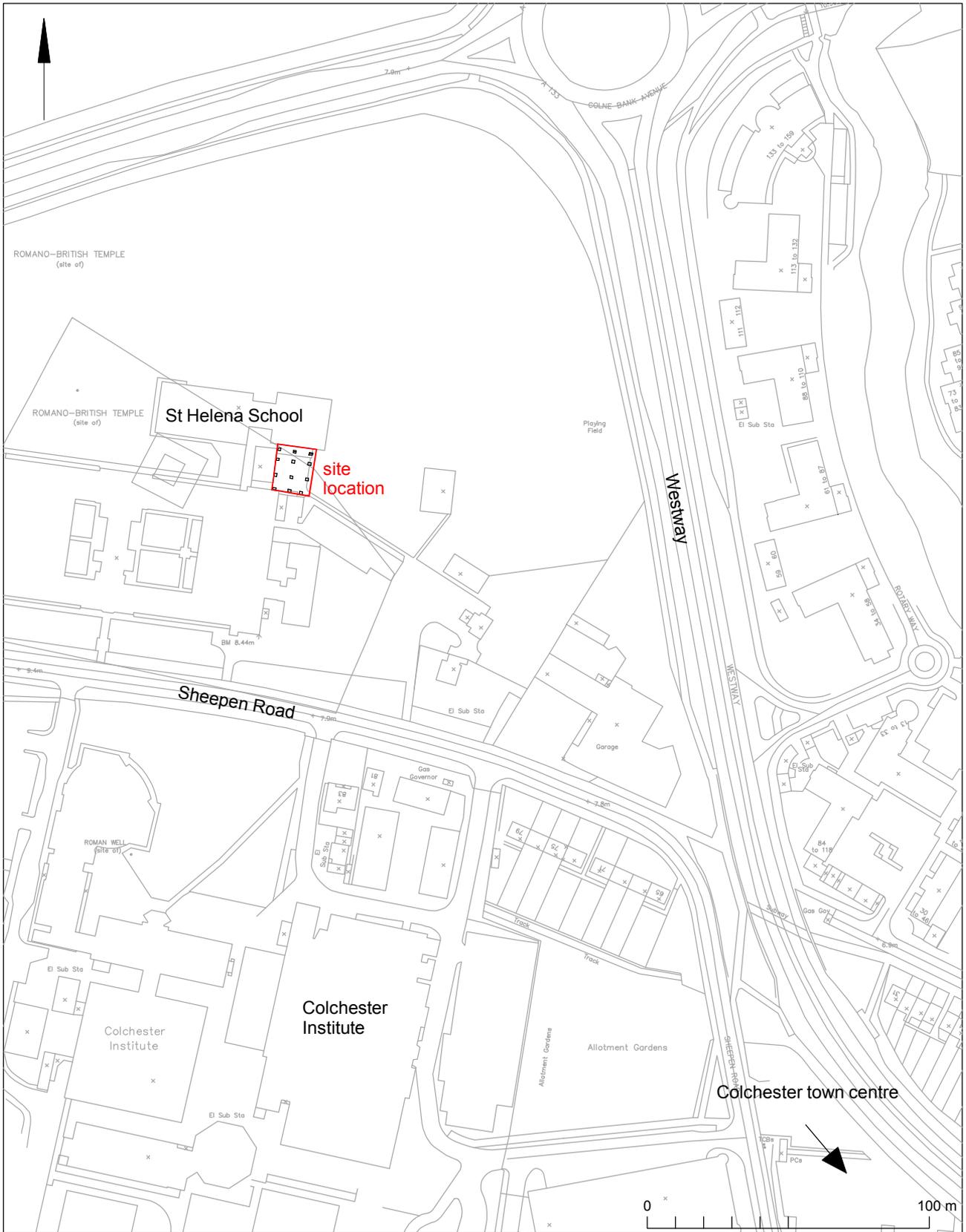
Max Chapman of Ingleton Wood
Deborah Priddy of English Heritage
Martin Winter, CBC Archaeological Officer (CBCAO)
Adrian Gascoyne, ECC Historic Environment team
Essex Historic Environment Record, Essex County Council



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Fig 1 Site location.

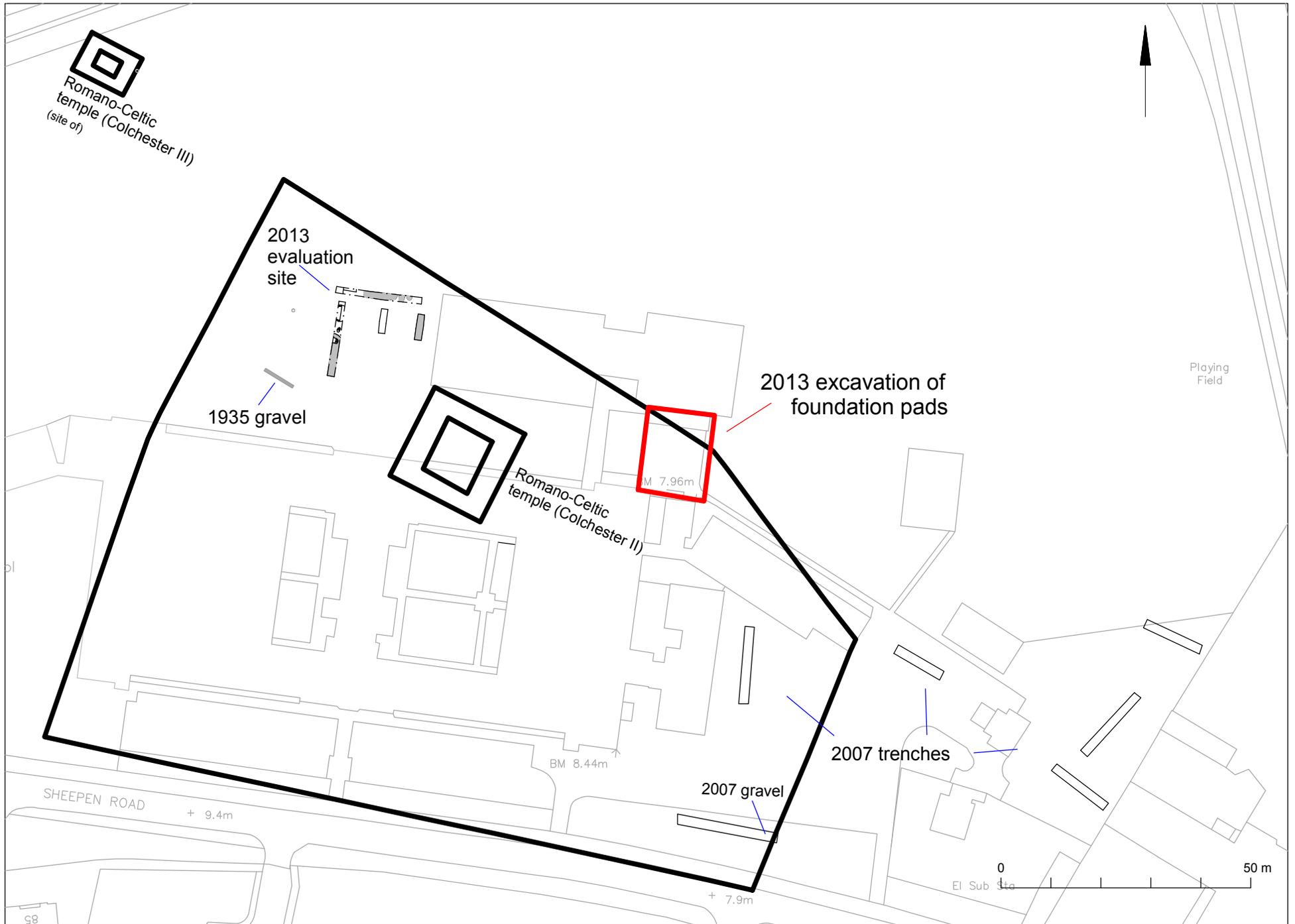
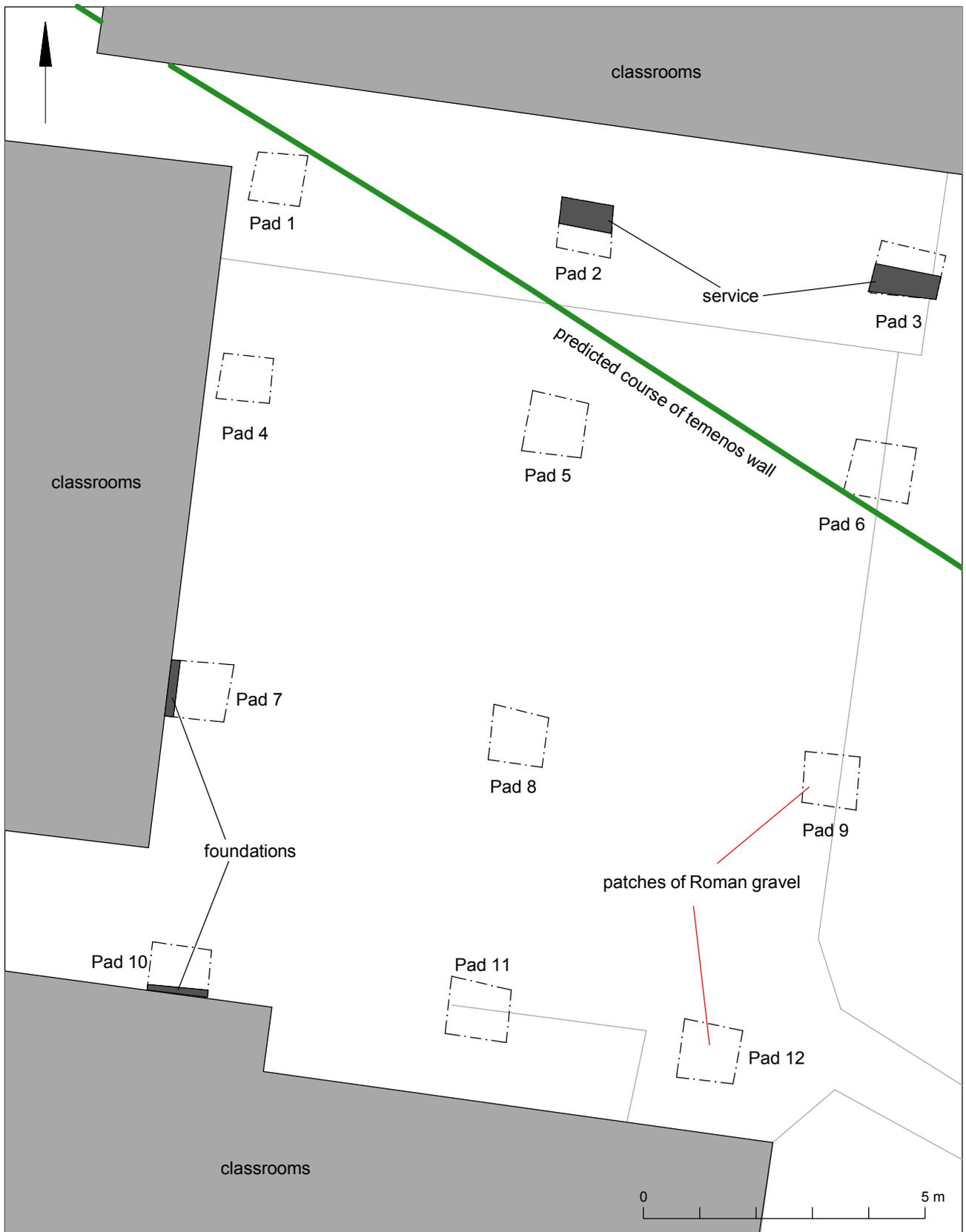


Fig 2 The Romano-Celtic temples in relation to previous trenching and observation at St Helena



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Fig 3 Plan of excavated pads, in relation to existing classrooms and predicted course of temenos wall.

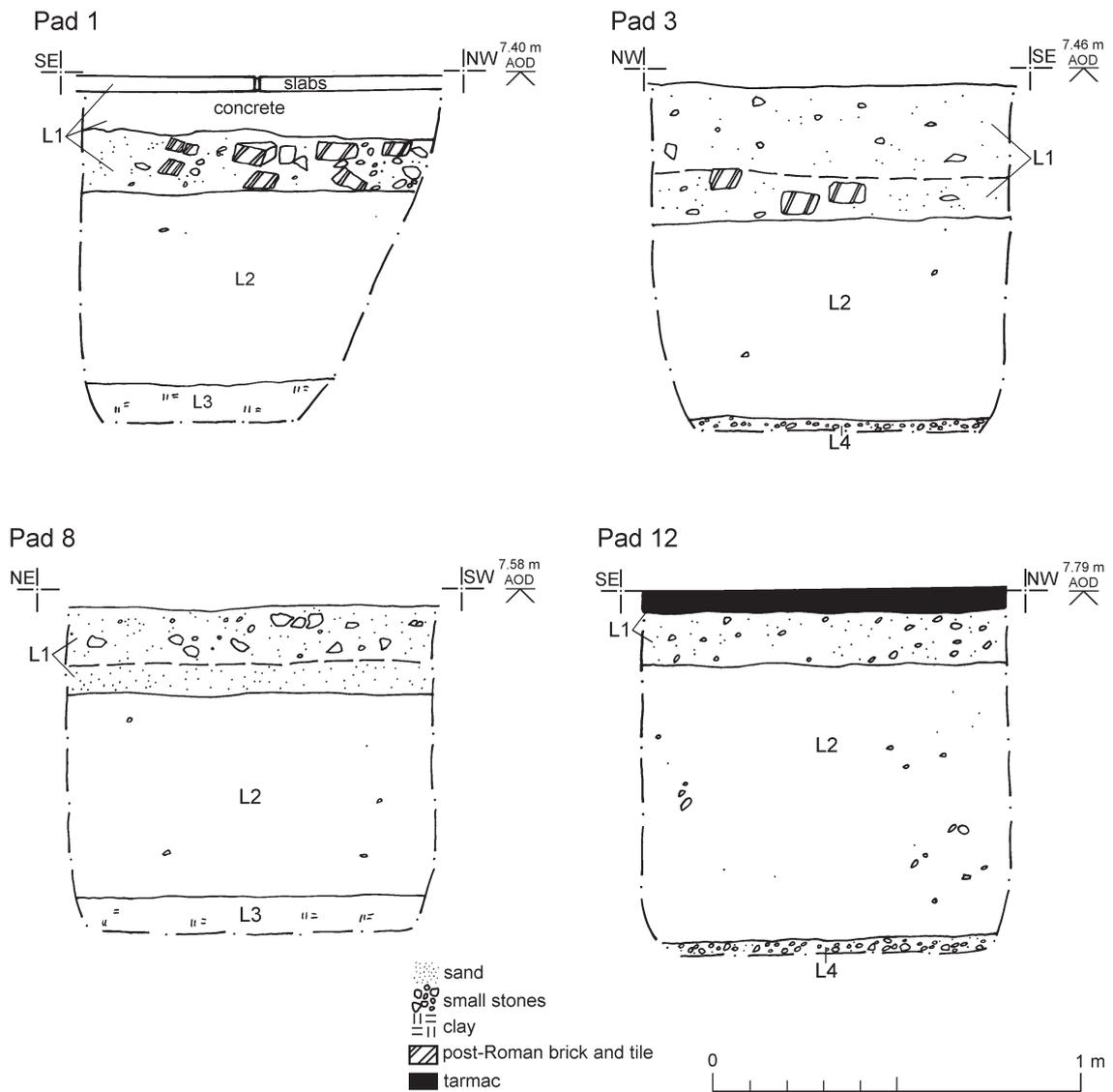


Fig 4 Pads 1, 3, 8 and 12: Representative sections.

Essex Historic Environment Record/ Essex Archaeology and History

Summary sheet

Address: St Helena School, Sheepen Road, Colchester	
Parish: Colchester	District: Colchester
NGR: TL 9886 2584	Site code: CAT project code – 13/08f
Type of work: Excavation	Site director/group: Colchester Archaeological Trust
Date of work: 2nd-3rd September 2013	Size of area investigated: Twelve 1x1m ² foundation pads
Location of curating museum: Colchester and Ipswich Museum accession code : 2013.36	Funding source: Developer
Further seasons anticipated? Yes	Related EHER number: SAM (Essex) 46
Final report: CAT Report 716	
Periods represented: Roman	
<p>Summary of fieldwork results: <i>St Helena School is within the oppidum of Camulodunum and the Later Iron Age and Roman trading depot at Sheepen, and within its grounds are the remains of two Romano-Celtic temples. Proposed work is the construction of a link canopy between two existing school buildings. In terms of below-ground disturbance, this involved the excavation of twelve foundation pads each measuring 0.8m square and 0.80m deep. The position of the new canopy straddles the predicted line of the northern wall of enclosure (temenos) of Temple II.</i></p> <p><i>The excavation of the pads revealed no sign of the temenos wall (destroyed by previous building work?) or any cut features, but there were patches of compacted gravel in two of the pad-holes. A very small quantity of Roman tile and a mid-1st century sherd were recovered from the gravel. Layers of gravel have been seen at St Helena in 1935, 2007, and now twice in 2013. The gravel is too widespread to have been a road, so it is more likely to have been a Roman courtyard surface. However, it may slightly predate the temple, which was founded in the late 1st or early 2nd century.</i></p>	
Previous summaries/reports: CAT Reports 349, 351, 384, 414, 451, 544, 699	
CBC Monitor: Martin Winter	
Keywords: Romano-Celtic temple, temenos, gravel surface	Significance: *
Author of summary: Ben Holloway	Date of summary: September 2013