



CATALOGUE

NEWS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS IN COLCHESTER

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Culver Street Excavation

The story of Colchester

Shortly after the start of the Roman invasion of Britain in AD 43, a legionary fortress was founded in the heart of the Iron Age capital 'Camulodunum'. A few years later, the garrison was withdrawn and the fortress was made into a Roman town. In AD 60/61 with enormous loss of life, the settlement was burnt to the ground during a native uprising. The revolt was finally crushed and the town rebuilt. It flourished until the fifth century when the Roman-British community succumbed to Anglo-Saxon pressure. The following five hundred years was a period of gradual decay and sparse occupation until probably the tenth century when the town was revitalised with a new street system much of which survives in the Colchester of today.

Culver Street-First Results

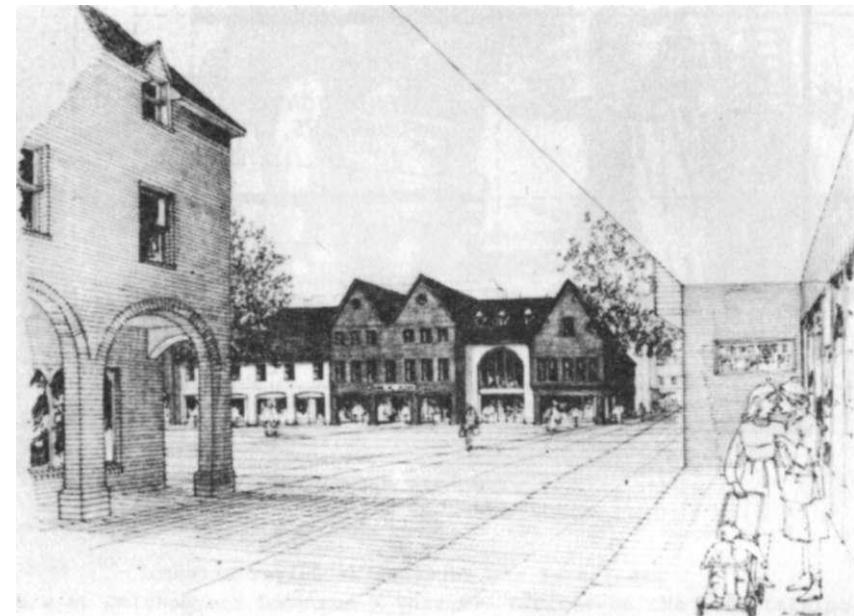
THE CULVER STREET EXCAVATION PROMISES TO BE THE MOST EXCITING AND INFORMATIVE EXCAVATION TO TAKE PLACE IN COLCHESTER. TODAY MOST OF US LIVE IN TOWNS AND TAKE TOWN-LIFE FOR GRANTED. THE EXCAVATION AT CULVER STREET IS RELEVANT TO US ALL BECAUSE IT IS IN EFFECT A STUDY INTO HOW TOWNS BEGAN IN THIS COUNTRY - A STUDY TOWARDS WHICH COLCHESTER IS MAKING AN EXTRAORDINARY AND REVOLUTIONARY CONTRIBUTION.

Background

The excavation is taking place before the construction of the Culver Shopping Precinct begins. The latter will involve the digging of a large basement up to twenty-feet deep over most of the site so that the new shops and offices can be serviced from an

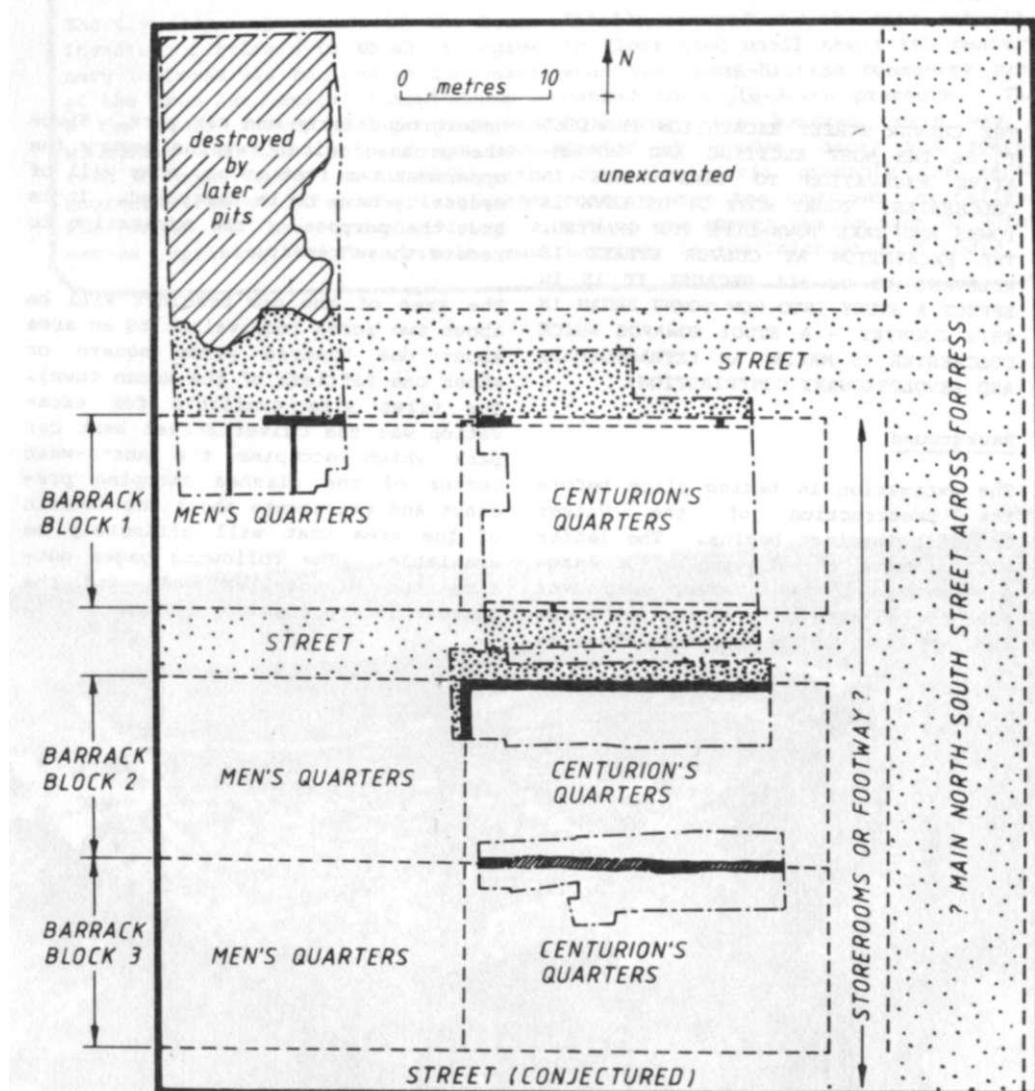
underground lorry and car park. Since the archaeological remains occupy the uppermost ten feet or so, they will of necessity have to be destroyed. It is thus the purpose of the excavation to record these remains.

The area of the new precinct will be about two acres (equivalent to an area about one hundred yards square or about one fiftieth of the Roman town). The first site available for excavation was the Culver Street West car park which occupies the north-west corner of the planned shopping precinct and represents about one seventh of the area that will ultimately be available. The following pages outline the discoveries made and the current interpretation of them.



An imaginative view of Roman Colchester in CAD 200 seen from the south-west. The area of the Culver Street excavation is indicated by a white dashed line.

Artist's impression of what the new Culver Street shopping precinct will look like. (Courtesy Duncan Clark & Beckett.)



Remains of the fortress at Culver Street.

The Roman fortress

The first buildings to have been erected on the site are identifiable as barrack blocks of the legionary fortress. Each block would have been about 250 feet long and accommodated a company (or century) of eighty soldiers commanded by a centurion. The latter lived in comparatively spacious quarters at one end of his century's block. Usually the barracks were grouped into units of six correspond-

ing to a cohort, ten of which made up a legion. The arrangement of the six barrack blocks was standard: Blocks 1 and 2, 3 and 4, 5 and 6 faced one another across narrow streets with Blocks 2 and 3 and Blocks 4 and 5 being back-to-back. At Culver Street, it appears that the centurions' quarters of three barrack blocks have been found (see plan) with a further three to the south yet to be discovered.



Soldiers at Colchester: Longinus a Thracian officer on the left talking to Facilis a centurion of the Twentieth Legion on the right. (Drawn from their tombstones found in Colchester in the 19th century and now in Colchester Museum.)

The New Town

When the legion was transferred to the frontier in Wales, the fortress was no longer required by the Roman Army and rather than demolish it, the base was converted into a town. As recent excavations have shown much of the old fortress was retained but there were also many changes. The military defences were levelled, many new buildings were erected including the magnificent Temple of Claudio, and many new streets were laid out where the military ones did not exist or had been too narrow for civilian use. At Culver Street and no doubt many places elsewhere, the barrack blocks, especially the centurions' quarters, proved very suitable for conversion to private houses. The major change which took place at Culver Street was not demolition of buildings but the widening of the most northerly of the east-west military streets to form a broad thoroughfare flanked by two footways.

The idea that some towns were founded by reusing redundant fortresses is recent and novel; Colchester is one of the best examples of this phenomenon.

The Boudican Revolt

In AD 60 or 61, disaster struck when during the native revolt led by Boudica, Queen of the Iceni, the new town was burnt to the ground. From excavations around the town it is clear that this destruction was nearly total - almost without exception every building seems to have been destroyed by fire. Despite their tiled roofs, their stone plinths, their daubed and plastered walls, these early buildings contained much timber and could easily be set on fire.

And so it has proved to have been at Culver Street where the destroyed remains were exceptionally well preserved and plain to see. Floors were scorched all over bright red and black in the intense heat. And in many

places, bases of daub walls survived in place as bright red stumps sealing strips of charcoal that were all that survived of their timber frames. The whole area was covered by a layer up to a foot or more thick of lumps of daub burnt red and black and mixed with fragments of burnt wall plaster and charcoal. To the inhabitants at the time, the full horror of the event would have defied description; to the modern archaeologist, the holocaust presents a marvellous opportunity to examine the remains of buildings not only preserved to an extraordinary degree but also perfectly dated.

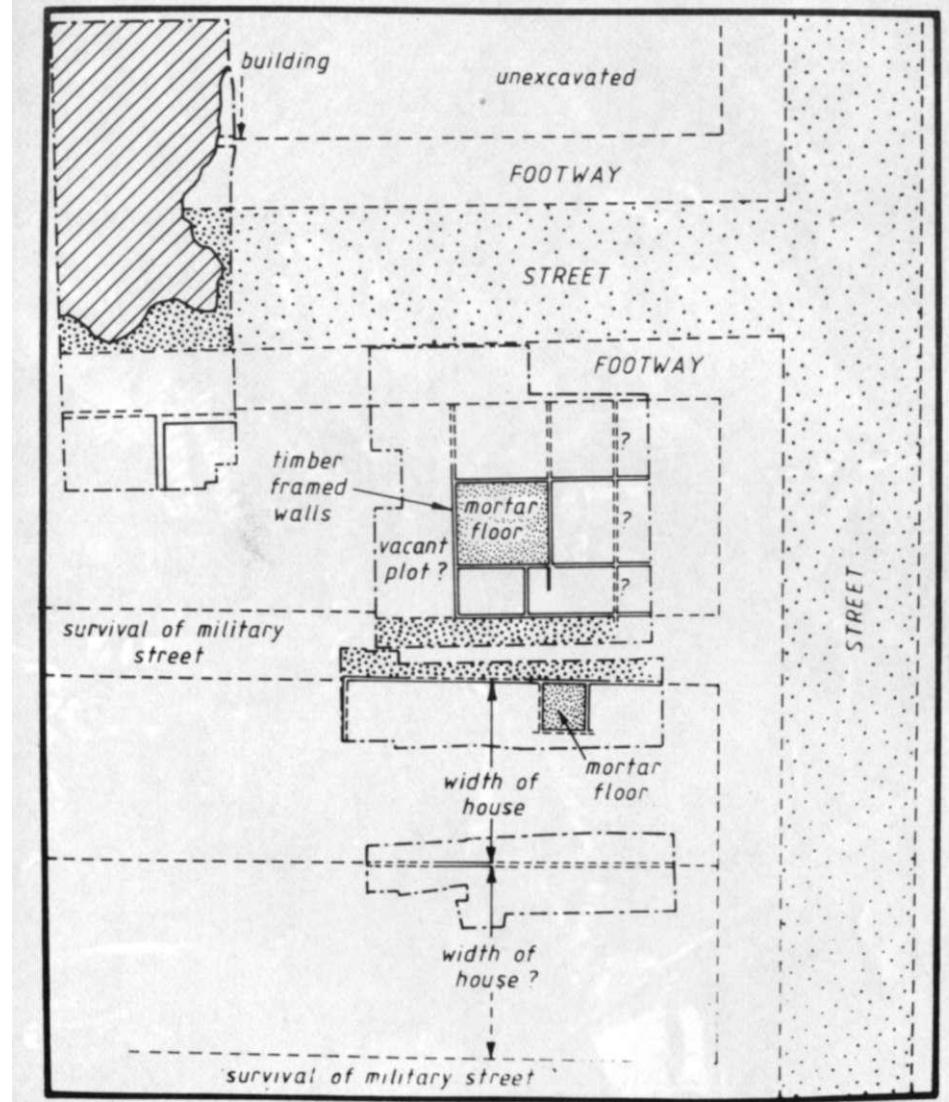
The Rebuilding

After the fire, new buildings were erected on the same plots as before and the narrow streets which had been retained from the fortress were cleared of debris and resurfaced. The new buildings were built in much the same manner as the earlier ones (see plan); they had walls which were framed in timber, and then daubed, plastered and painted.

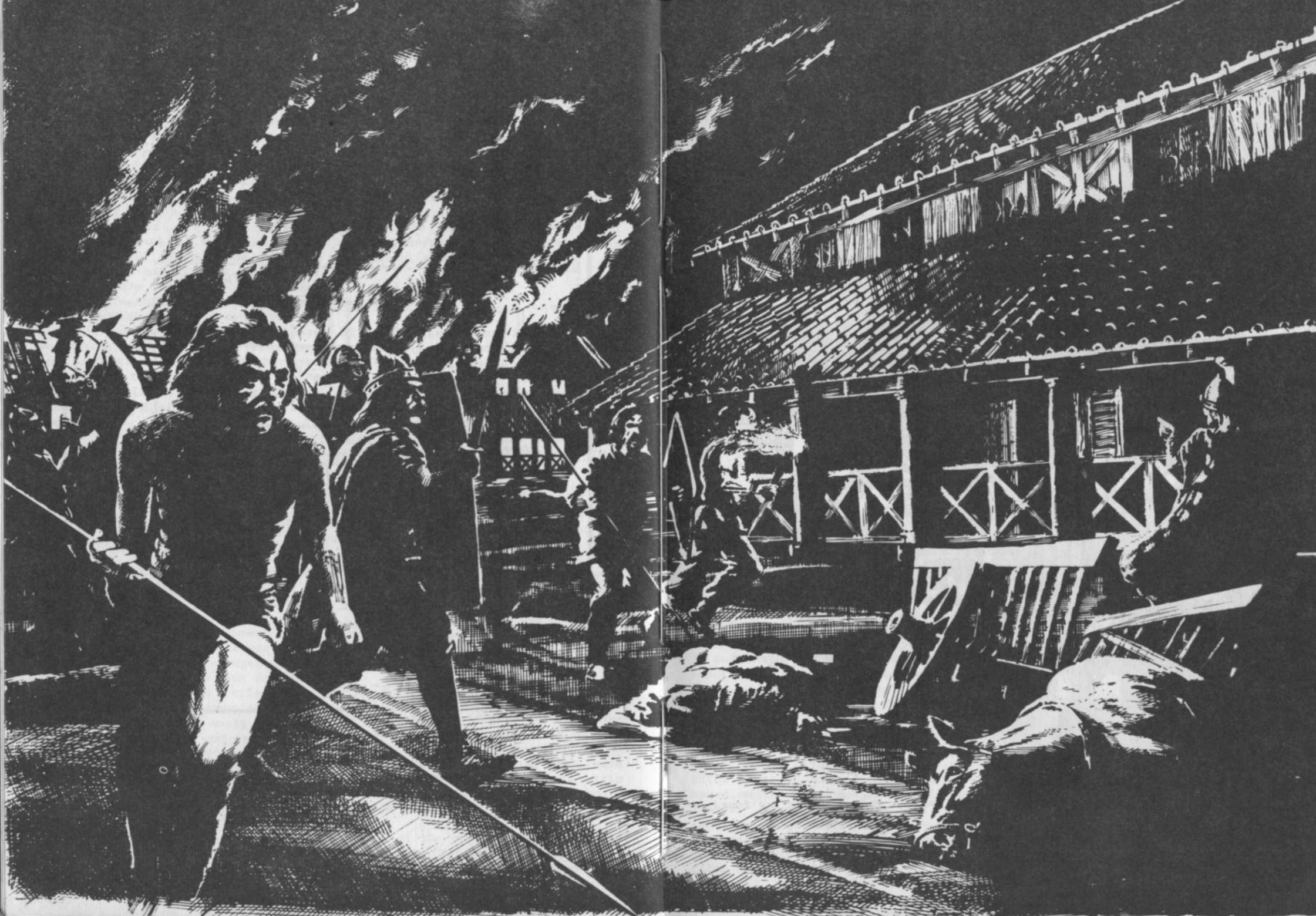
During the second century, the area saw gradual and piecemeal change. The northern building was subdivided and rebuilt as several small shops, presumably taking advantage of the considerable traffic along the east-west street which it fronted. To the south the two buildings were rebuilt so that the narrow street which had originally separated Barrack Blocks 1 and 2 disappeared.

The form of this alteration is not yet clear. Possibly the two properties were amalgamated to form a simple substantial house incorporating a central courtyard and fronting onto the north-south street or possibly both were rebuilt as two long east-west strip houses. (Further excavation should clarify this matter.)

In one of the rooms of the ?courtyard house, there had been a small mosaic. This was almost certainly the one dis-

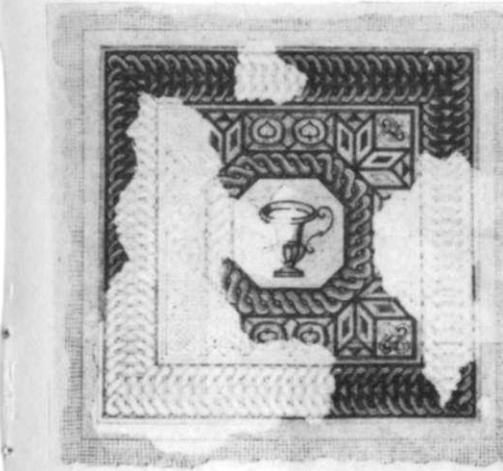


The buildings erected after the Boudican revolt at Culver Street.

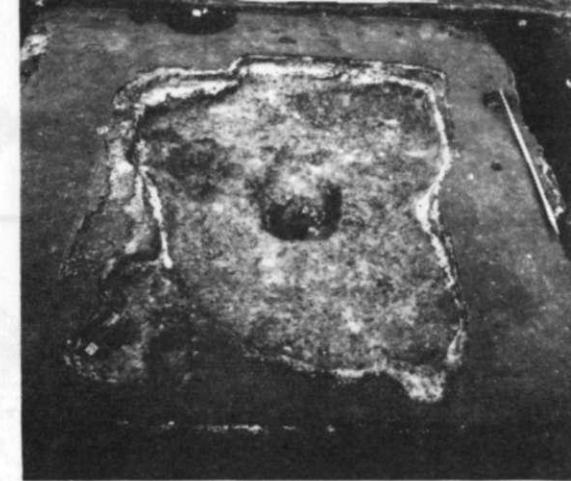




Imaginative reconstruction of the 1881 excavation when a mosaic was found.



The mosaic found during the excavation of 1881.



The hole in the paved floor caused by the attempt to lift the mosaic in 1881.

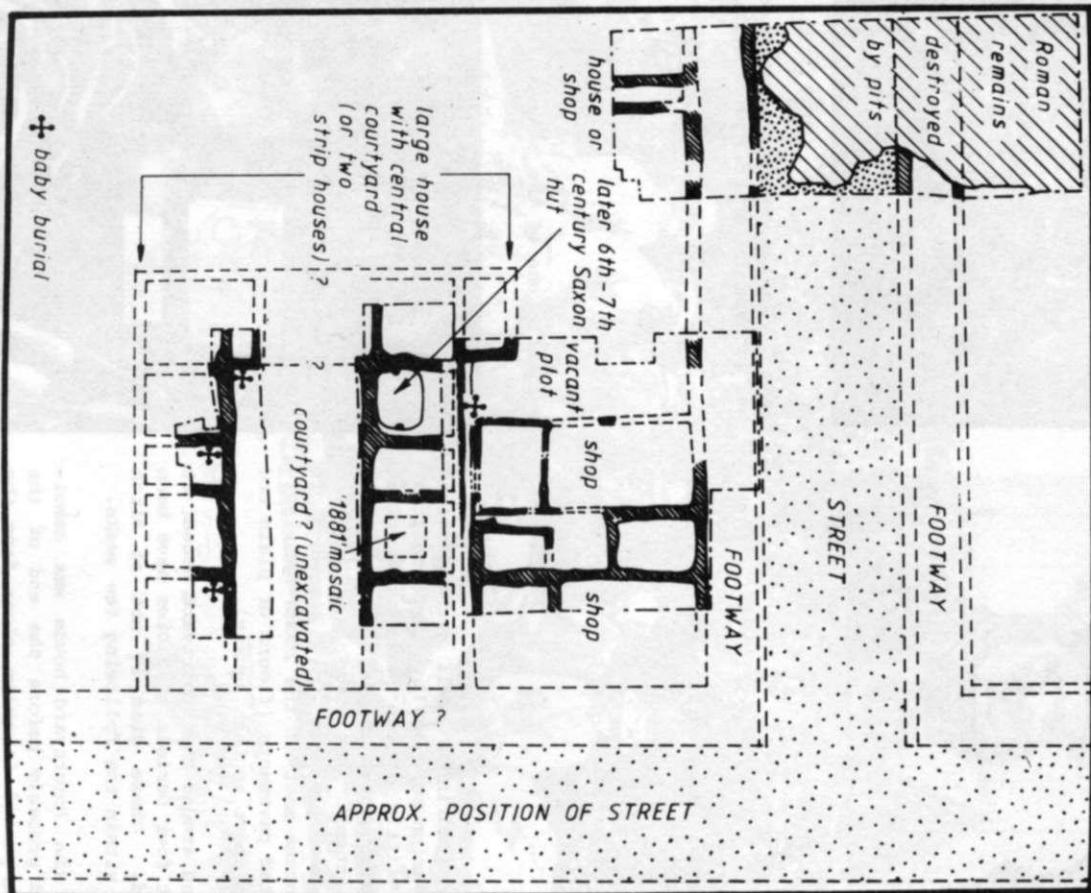
Remains of one of the baby burials.

covered during a small archaeological excavation of 1881. Unfortunately very little of the pavement survived suggesting that in 1881 an unsuccessful attempt must have been made to lift and preserve it. Elsewhere in the house most of the rooms had tessellated pavements (floors of plain red cubes about an inch square).

In and around the ?courtyard house, at least four burials of babies have been found. These died if not at birth then within the following few weeks.

That the ?courtyard house was demolished probably before the end of the Roman period is quite clear from the thick layer of daub from the demolished walls which sealed its latest floors. Possibly the same fate overtook the shops to the north so that the area was devoid of buildings when the Saxons took over the town in the fifth century.





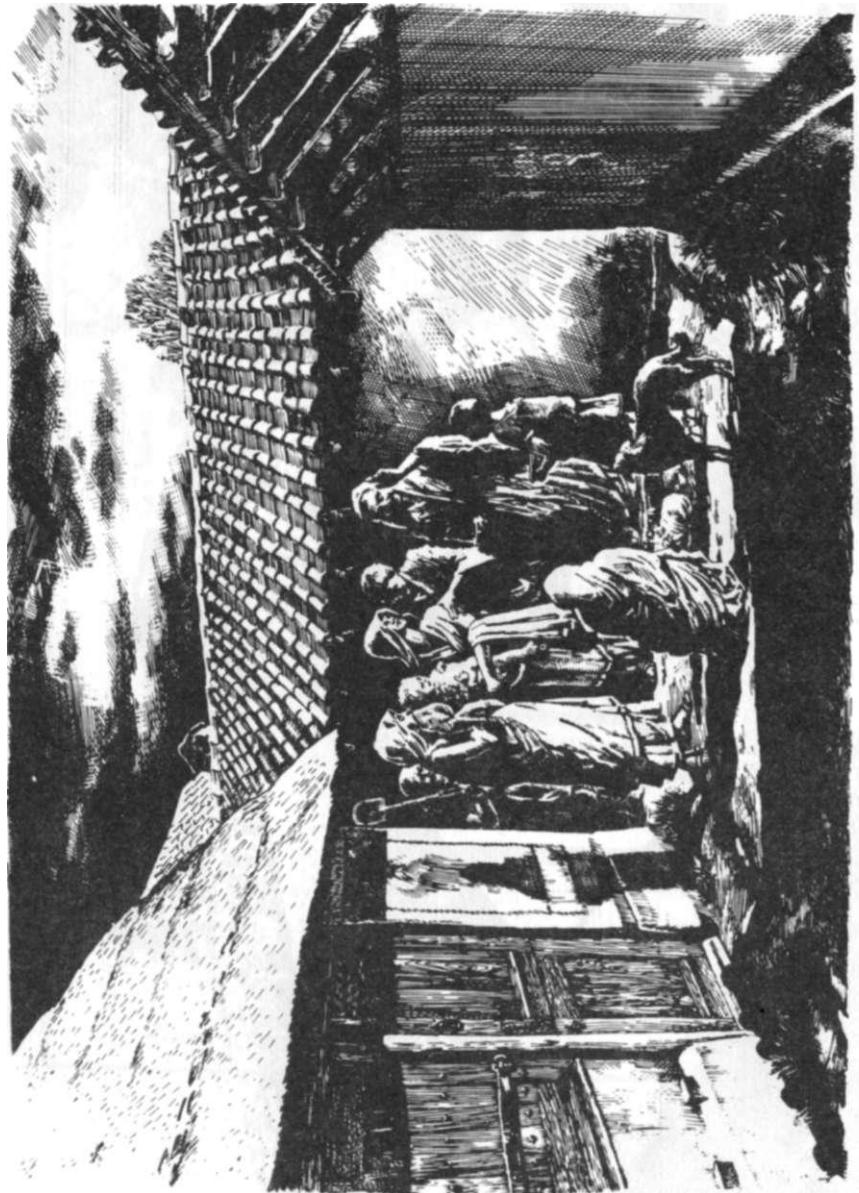
Culver Street during the second century and later.

12



Imaginative reconstruction of the Roman houses at Culver Street in AD 200, looking south-east.

13



Imaginative reconstruction of the burial of one of the babies found outside the ?courtyard house. Note the dead baby lying wrapped in a shroud on the ground, and the pots containing offerings ready to be buried with the baby, while the mother, holding another child, is being comforted.



Imaginative reconstruction of the Anglo-Saxon hut.

The Anglo-Saxons

Evidence for Saxon occupation of Colchester comes in the form of various Anglo-Saxon objects found in and around the town over the last century or so and - most important - two Anglo-Saxon huts discovered during the Lion Walk excavations of the early 1970s. At Culver Street, yet another hut was found bringing Colchester's total to three. This example was well preserved and contained large quantities of pottery dating it to the 6th or 7th centuries. Huts of this kind were usually very small and were built around a hollow in the ground which frequently was used as the floor. The Culver Street hut was only 13 feet long and had a sunken floor peppered with stakeholes. Very often buildings such as these seem to have been used primarily for weaving rather than habitation.

The Anglo-Saxon hut showing its sunken floor and stakeholes.





Thanks to all our helpers

The dig at Culver Street is being carried out with the help of many people, principally by digging, pottery washing and giving guided tours. Much of this work is voluntary and all of it essential and highly valued. If you think you could help in some way, either visit the site and ask for Debbie Lloyd or telephone Colchester 61285.

The Colchester Archaeological Trust is greatly indebted to Colchester Borough Council, the Department of the Environment and the developers the Carroll Group and Balfour Beatty whose help and co-operation have made the Culver Street excavation possible.

The Friends of the Colchester Archaeological Trust wish to thank Philips Business Systems for their generous gift towards Catalogue 9, and for the Philips P7000 word processing facilities to prepare the text for printing.

The COLCHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST is composed of representatives of local and national bodies as well as a few co-opted individuals and employs a permanent staff of archaeologists to deal with the rescue sites in Colchester.

The FRIENDS OF THE COLCHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST has been formed to provide a means of keeping interested members of the public informed about the archaeological work going on in and around the historic town of Colchester. The Friends provide the funds to publish CATALOGUE - the Newsletter of the Colchester Archaeological Trust. Mike Corbishley organises the Friends and edits the Newsletter.

Friends receive two newsletters a year, attend an annual programme of lectures on the previous year's progress, are given conducted tours of current sites and can take part in a regular programme of archaeological visits to sites and monuments in the area.

The annual subscription rates are as follows: Adults £1.50, Children and Students 75p, Family Membership £2.00 and Institutions or newsletters-only £1.00.

You will find a membership form inside this newsletter. Subscriptions should be sent to Brenda May, Treasurer, Friends of the Colchester Archaeological Trust, 5 William Close, Wivenhoe, Colchester.

This newsletter was prepared by Nick Smith and Philip Crummy. Drawings are by Peter Froste and photography by Alison Colchester.