



CATALOGUE

NEWS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS IN COLCHESTER

Number 17

Summer 1985



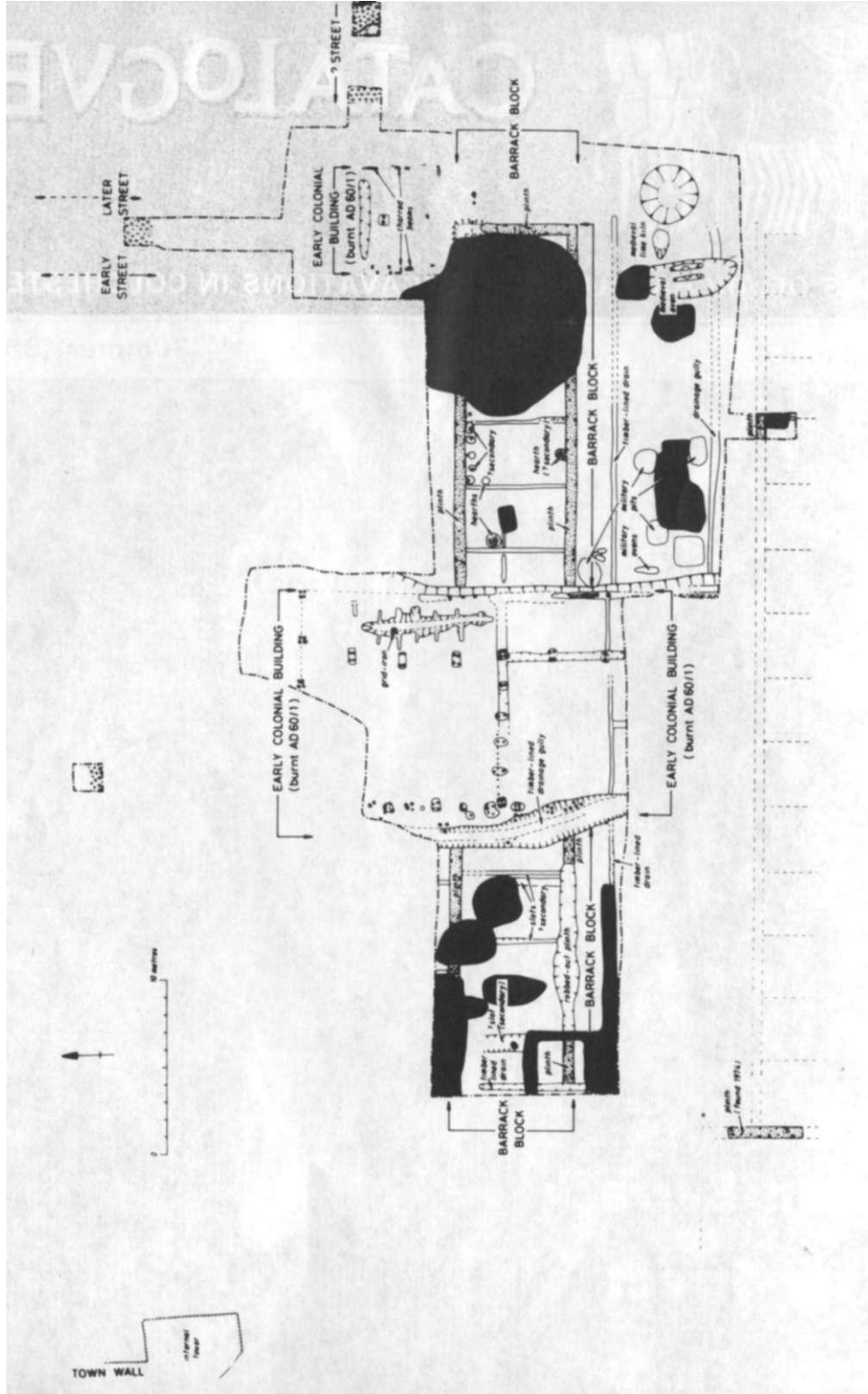
Roman Barrack

5 cm

Culver Street

Recent Finds

CENTURY BARRACKED AT THE GILBERD



The proposal by the Essex County Council to erect a large annexe in the playground immediately south of the main Gilbert School building presented the Trust with an exciting opportunity to examine a town-centre site which had not been built on in recent times. In particular it was hoped to concentrate on the military deposits belonging to the 49-acre legionary fortress built in the winter of AD 43-4, which we suspected would lie at the bottom of the archaeological sequence and would probably include remains of barracks. The initial indications last autumn were not particularly auspicious; however as the area under excavation was enlarged, the remains became more promising with the south-eastern corner of a barrack block being uncovered in December (see **Catalogue 16**).

Excavation continued through the bleak winter months and into the spring with the site being further extended. Confirmation in February of the proposal to go ahead with the sixth-form college Plan including the new multi-million pound annex, served to hasten the digging and strengthened the resolve to excavate as much as possible. This was greatly helped by the surprising

lack of Roman remains later than the mid first-century AD, allowing us to work down quickly to the military remains. The end result was impressive with a large part of one barrack block being exposed along with an unexpected, substantial building of slightly later date.

A fifty-yard stretch of the barrack block was uncovered. This coincided almost exactly with the area allocated to the men's quarters and took the form of a long row of rooms which in most barracks elsewhere in Britain was separated from an adjacent street by a verandah. There was probably a total of fourteen 'contubernla', some of which may have been used for storage. The importance of the Gilbert School excavation lies in the unique opportunity it provides to excavate the men's quarters on a substantial scale.

The rest of the building had been occupied by the unit's centurion. Nothing survives of this part of the barrack block because it had been destroyed when an air-raid shelter was built on its site during the last world war.

Each barrack would have



* The Gilbert School barrack block viewed from the east.

housed a 'century', which, although originally consisting of 100 men, by this time numbered 80 soldiers. The contubernia measured about 22 by 11 feet and many were subdivided by slots for timber-framed partition walls. Each 'contubernium' would have housed eight men, the number being derived from the unit of soldiers who shared a tent and pack horse and mule during marches. Conditions must have been rather cramped and uncomfortable, if all eight soldiers were asleep at the same time - a fact verified, if not tested scientifically, by those diggers who have experienced

dormitory-type accommodation for months on end. Possibly the situation was alleviated by the system of guard duty, and they might conceivably have had bunk beds!

Only a few internal features survived, the commonest type being a hearth or small oven built up against a wall. These were probably primarily for warmth, because most of the cooking was done in ovens set into the rear of the rampart, an example of which was excavated at Lion Walk. As there were no communal messes, the soldiers probably ate in the open or in their barrack block.

Surprisingly, there was no evidence that each of the 'enhtuberna' was subdivided into a pair of rooms, one for sleeping and one for storage, although this was to be the normal arrangement in later first century military sites in Britain, such as Caerleon, Inchtuthil and Exeter. Similarly there was no positive structural evidence, such as post-holes or slots, for a covered verandah, another common later military feature, although a timber-lined drain lay along the side of the alleyway in a position suggesting that a verandah had existed.

The fortress of course proved to be fairly short-lived, the Twentieth Legion leaving in AD 18/9 for more active service in Western Britain. Evidence in recent years from Lion Walk and Culver Street has however indicated that much of the layout of the fortress, and also some of the military buildings themselves, were reused to form part of the colony founded soon afterwards for retired veterans. Initially the Gilbert barrack block was reused, but it had largely been built over by the time of the Boudican revolt in AD 60/1.

The most notable early colonial building on the site was a substantial timber-framed structure, about 45 feet wide and at least 80 feet long, which

had been terraced through the central part of the barrack block. The plan of the building was clearly delineated by shallow slots and groups of pile-holes. These latter were intended as additional supports for the timber uprights, and were a somewhat unusual constructional feature at this date. The building, probably a private house or perhaps a shop, had been burnt down in AD 60/1, with scorched floors and occasional charred wall-stumps surviving 'in situ'. A well-preserved gridiron, of unusual semicircular design, was recovered from one of the rooms. It was probably used for cooking, although in this case the final meal must have had a bitter aftertaste.

Post-Boudican occupation on the site continued to be sparse, although the robbed-out walls at the rear of one or two buildings, of 2nd to 3rd-century date, were traced at the western end of the site. As expected, trenching located Roman streets lying along the northern and eastern margins of the site, forming the north-east corner of Insula 17a. The east-west street would have stopped at an internal tower at the rear of the town wall. This internal tower, one of the best preserved in Colchester, is accessible from the footpath halfway up Balcerne Hill.

Donald Shimmin

SOME RECENT FINDS

Donald Shimmin's article in this issue on the Gilberd School excavation describes the well-preserved nature of its Roman levels, dated c AD 43-60/1. Not surprisingly, several groups of small finds reflect this early occupation, both military and colonial, giving us a fine collection of what can be generally called 'pre-Flavian' objects.

Military equipment is one such group, with finds including numerous copper-alloy fittings from legionary armour, a bone sword grip, and a copper-alloy mount from a sword scabbard.

Brooches were also used by the Roman army, and the Gilberd School site has turned up several of the types we would expect from a pre-Flavian military establishment (Colchester, Hod Hill and Aucissa brooches). Moreover, a most unusual brooch was found, for which the only parallel I have found to date comes from Mainz, West Germany. It is a copper-alloy brooch, coated in a white metal (either tin or silver), in the shape of a cornu, a type of horn used by the Roman army. Unfortunately, the brooch was found in modern topsoil during the cleaning of the site prior to excavation proper, but the

method of attaching the spring to the body of the brooch indicates a date of between AD 40-70. This, together with its shape, suggests that it was originally lost during the early Roman period, and later activity on the site led to its redeposition in the topsoil.

Perhaps the most striking small find (and the largest and heaviest!) from the Gilberd School is a gridiron, for broiling food over an open fire. It was in a context burnt during the Boudican destruction of the town in AD 60/1. More or less D-shaped, it is wrought (not cast), with bars set in an elegant form, rather like a candelabrum. Rectangular Roman gridirons are not uncommon, but tend to be smaller, and I am tempted to suggest that once again Colchester has an early 'biggest and best in Roman Britain' with this gridiron. (On a cautionary note, the search for parallels continues!)

Friends may remember Robert Kenyon's article in **Catalogue 15** outlining his ideas for an early Roman mint in Colchester producing copies of the official Claudian coinage. The Gilberd School excavation has turned up a considerable number of these copies, and Robert is keenly

awaiting the completion of their conservation, so that he can examine them and see if they confirm his theories.

Phase 1 of the Culver Street excavations provided many of the well-stratified Claudian copies which helped Robert formulate his dated groups for the products of his Colchester mint. Unfortunately, Phase 2 (ie since the resumption of excavations last November) has turned up disappointingly few examples so far, in part due to the destruction in places of the earliest Roman levels by later Roman activity.

However, two of our most 'good-looking' finds come from Culver Street Phase 2. One is a Jet intaglio showing Minerva, goddess of war, in a typical pose with helmet, shield and spear. The other is a carved fragment of a marble table leg showing the head and shoulders of a panther (see cover photograph). Using stable isotope analysis the British Museum Research Laboratory has established that the piece is made from Greek Parian marble (very high class), and Susan Walker, of the BM's Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities, believes that the it is of continental workmanship, dating to the Severan period (c AD 200). It would have been one of a pair supporting a shelf-like table set against a wall.

Nina Crummy



*Above: intaglio (about a quarter of an inch long) showing the goddess Minerva. Below: gridiron in situ.

RECENT MEETINGS

The AGM was held on February 2nd. As usual it was a bipartite event, with the business meeting held at 12 Lexden Road in the morning, and the chairman's report, Philip's illustrated talk on the previous year's work, and tea, in the lecture room of the Public Library in the afternoon.

On March 30th there was a rather muddy Open Day for Friends on both the Gilberd School and Culver Street sites, and in May Friends were able to join with members of the public for another Open Day. The developers of the Culver Precinct erected a large notice board for our use on the Sir Isaac's Walk frontage of the site. This has proved to be very popular with passers-by wishing to keep up with the excavation's progress.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

The year's full day trip, organised by Jenny Watson, will take place on July 27th, taking in Chatham dockyards, Rochester Cathedral and Castle, and Upnor Castle. This event is so close to the time of my writing that by the time Catalogue is printed it will be a 'recent meeting' rather than a 'date for your diary'. However, a full description of the trip will be included in the next issue.



*The recent open day at Culver Street.

Saturday September 28th is the day of our fund-raising event at Essex University (see enclosed leaflet), entitled 'Bath through the Ages'. There will be two speakers, Professor Barry Cunliffe of Oxford University on 'The Spa and Shrine at Roman Bath', and Mr Sam Hunt, Curator of the Bath Museums Service, on 'Bath - a Georgian Spa'. The talks will take place in Lecture Theatre 6 at the University, beginning at 2.00 pm, and ending at 4.00 pm. Few towns have caught the attention of tourists, both British and foreign, quite so much as Bath, so the afternoon promises to be interesting.

November Saturday 9th is the date fixed for this year's coach trip to churches in the Colchester District. This year I hope we can take in Aldham, Chappel, Wakes Colne, and Wormingford. The

cost of the trip is £2.00 per seat. The coach will leave the War Memorial by the Castle Park at 1.00 pm, and return at about 5.00 pm. Please send the enclosed booking form to Brenda May.

Sometime in the new year, we hope to organize a concert at the Arts Centre to raise funds to reprint Mike Corbishley's guide to Colchester's Roman walls. Further information will be sent out nearer the date.

Following the success of last year's weekend trip to Wessex, if there is sufficient interest, Jenny Watson and I will combine to organize a weekend in Kent. Provisionally, the trip would be based in Canterbury, with an itinerary along these lines: depart Friday am Colchester, call at Lullingstone Roman villa, Coldrum and Kits Coty House Neolithic chambered tombs, to arrive in Canterbury for early afternoon. Saturday, visits to Richborough Roman site, Dover (Castle & Roman 'painted room'), and other sites along the way. Sunday, return to Colchester via Knole, the home of the Sackville family built in the 15th century and so much added to in later years that it is supposed to be the largest private house in England. At a rough estimate the weekend will probably cost about £70 and will take place early in September 1986. As with the Wessex trip I need to know

positive numbers well in advance to enable me to book a suitable hotel, so will Friends wishing to go on this trip please let me know by October 1st. Write to me at 2 Hall Road, Copford, Colchester, Essex C06 1BN.

Nina Crummy

THE FRIENDS OF THE COLCHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST has been formed as means of keeping interested members of the public in touch with the archaeological work in the historic town of Colchester. The Friends provide the funds to publish CATALOGUE - the newsletter of the Colchester Archaeological Trust. Friends receive two newsletters a year, attend an annual lecture about the previous year's work, are given conducted tours of current sites and can take part in a regular programme of visits to archaeological sites and monuments in the area.

The annual subscription rates are as follows: Adults and Institutions £2.00, Family membership £2.50, Children and Students £1.00. Those who live too far away to attend meetings or go on trips can receive newsletters only at a reduced rate of £1.50. Subscriptions should be sent to: Brenda May, Honorary Treasurer, Friends of the Colchester Archaeological Trust, 5 William Close, Wivenhoe, Colchester, Essex.

CULVER STREET

Digging at one of Colchester's most significant excavations draws to a close. The work at Culver Street is providing valuable details about a large part of one of the most important areas of Roman Colchester. The basic elements of the layouts of the buildings and streets of the area are being established and plans of a large number of Roman houses and other buildings are being recovered.

Just like Colchester today, the Roman town was not static: the limits of the settlement changed and its buildings were renewed. On any site within the town walls, there can be an accumulation of the remains of up to five sets of buildings. The complexity of it all is why sites like Culver Street are so difficult and time-consuming but yet are so rewarding.

The Roman town was divided

***Left: foundations and paved floors of Roman houses under the former Daniels car park. This represents only about a fifteenth of the basement area and a thirtieth of the complete redevelopment site?**

***Right: mosaic pavement under the former Friends Meeting House.**



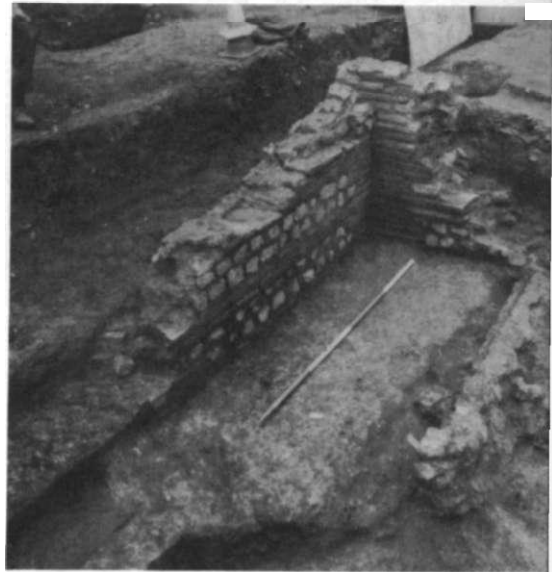
up by a grid of streets into a series of rough rectangles ('insulae'). The proposed basement at Culver Street is to be about two acres and to include in its west side almost half of one insula. The priority of the rescue excavation at Culver Street is to record as much as possible within the basement area so that the layout and character of the area can be worked out. The Culver Street area would have changed substantially throughout the Roman period with the effect that four or five different layouts of houses and streets are to be expected.

Large parts of a about a dozen Roman houses have been uncovered plus small areas of many more. Particularly important are the six Roman barracks and the two large square buildings which belonged to the army fortress predating the Roman town.

Finds are being made by the ton and include pottery, personal adornments, coins, fragments of household equipment and fittings, and food refuse (mainly in the form of discarded animal bones). Outstanding is an unusual panther head (p 7).

But much more of all this in the next issue of Catalogue when the excavation will be finished and the dust will have had time to settle

Philip Crummy



***Above: Roman 'cellar' in which a marble panther head was found. The walls were built of stone and tile. Below: remains of steps leading to cellar.**

***Cover photograph: part of a marble table leg in the form of a marble panther.**