

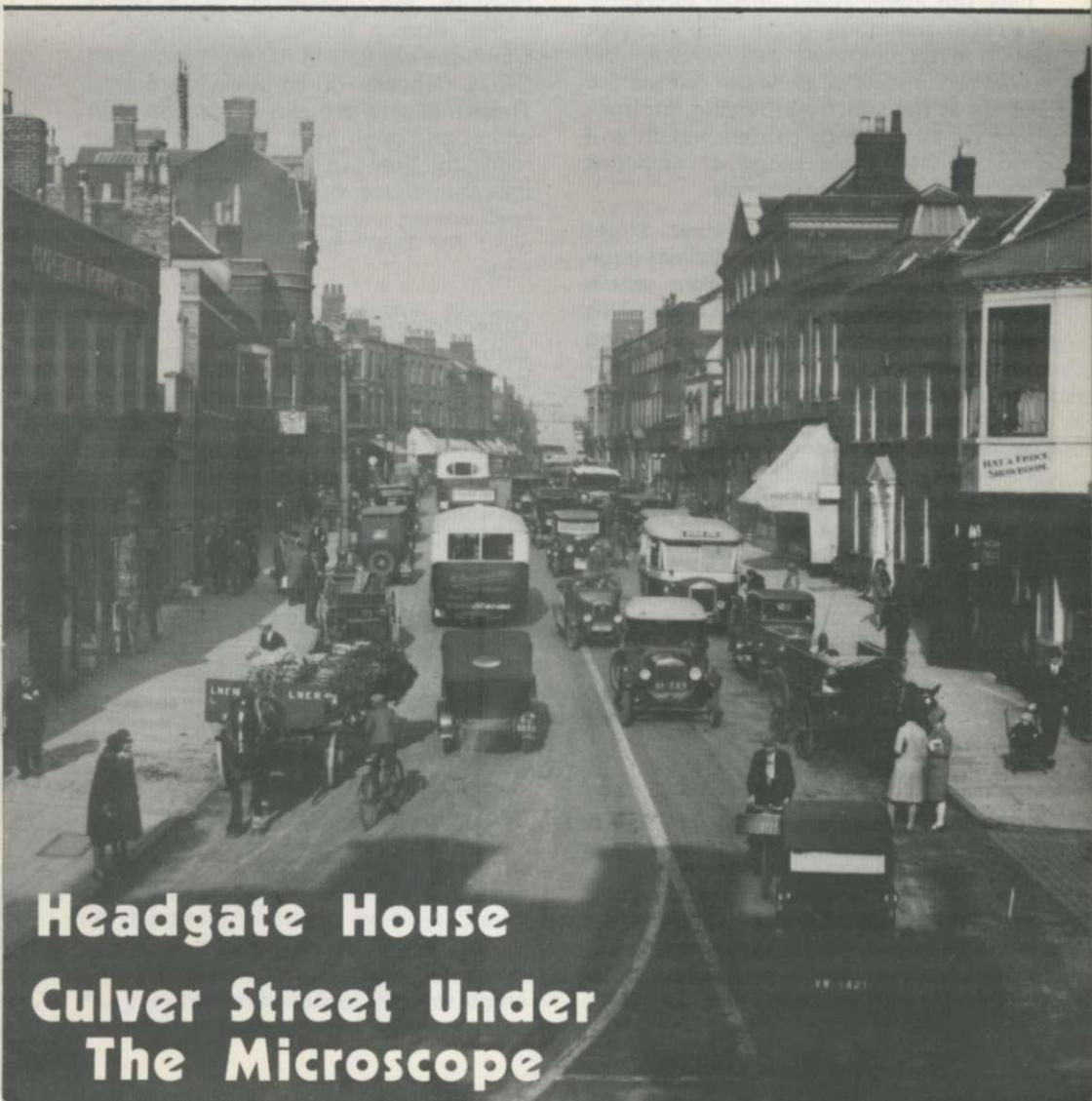


CATALOGUE

NEWS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS IN COLCHESTER

Number 18

Winter 1985/6



**Headgate House
Culver Street Under
The Microscope**

CULVER STREET UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

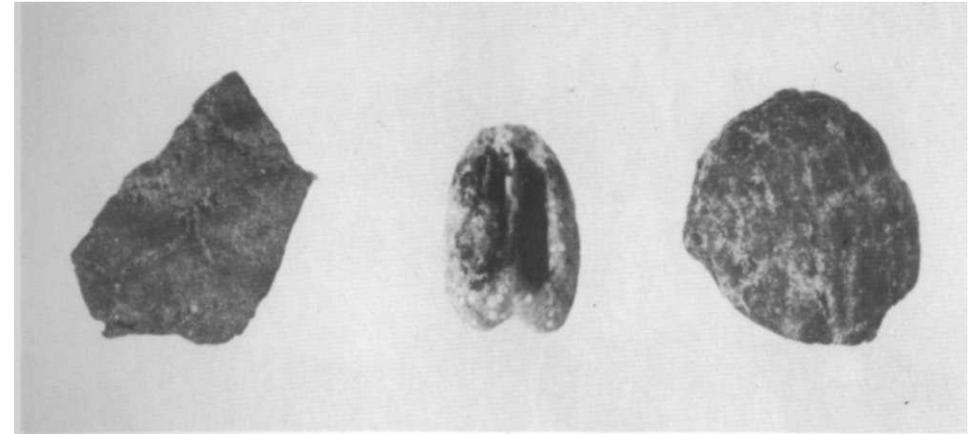
Anyone who has visited an archaeological excavation will have noticed that large amounts of plant and animal remains are present in the soil. Animal bone, shells, and layers of charcoal are perhaps the most conspicuous examples, but many much smaller biological remains commonly occur. The study of such material, known as *Environmental Archaeology*, helps to fill out our picture of life at the site, by providing information on such things as diet, health and indeed the whole range of activities involving plants and animals.

Recent excavations at Culver Street provided an opportunity to collect large numbers of soil samples from which biological material was extracted. This was done using a flotation/bulk sieving tank. The samples were placed on a 1 mm supporting mesh and then immersed in water in the tank. A through-flow of water was then used to separate light materials, such as charcoal and carbonised seeds, which floated off and were collected in a 0.5 mm mesh. The remaining dense material (the residue) including pebbles, bones, and shells was wet-sieved in the 1 mm mesh. The floated material and the residues were then dried and sorted in the laboratory to extract all the plant and animal remains present in each sample. These were then identified by comparison with modern reference specimens. At present, full analysis of all categories of material has not been completed; several specialists are involved in the work. However some results are available.

A wide range of food plants was identified in samples from the Roman deposits by means of seeds and other plant remains. These include spelt, emmer and bread wheats, barley, oats,

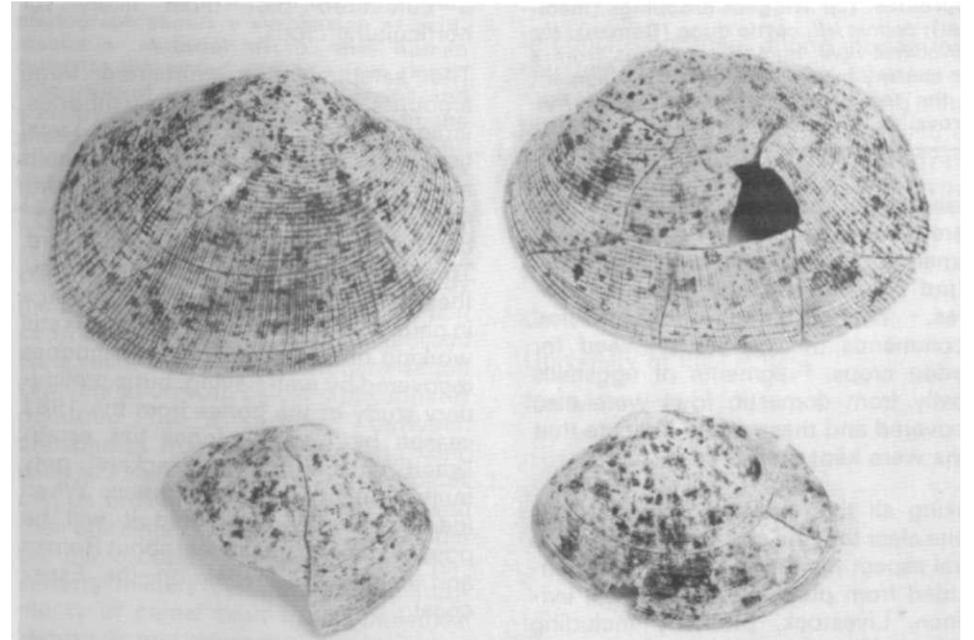
rye, horse-bean, pea, lentil, hazelnut, walnut, sloe, cherry, bramble, raspberry, elderberry, olive, fig, mulberry, grape, and opium poppy. Medieval layers produced remains of bread wheat, barley, oats, rye, bean, pea, lentil, apple, cherry, bramble, and elderberry. Burnt layers within Roman buildings destroyed by Boudica's warriors in AD 60/1 produced dense deposits of carbonised cereals. These included deposits of cleaned spelt wheat and spelt malt. The malt, stored ready for brewing, was identified from the abundance of sprouted grains of spelt wheat, a crop known to have been used for beer production in Roman times.

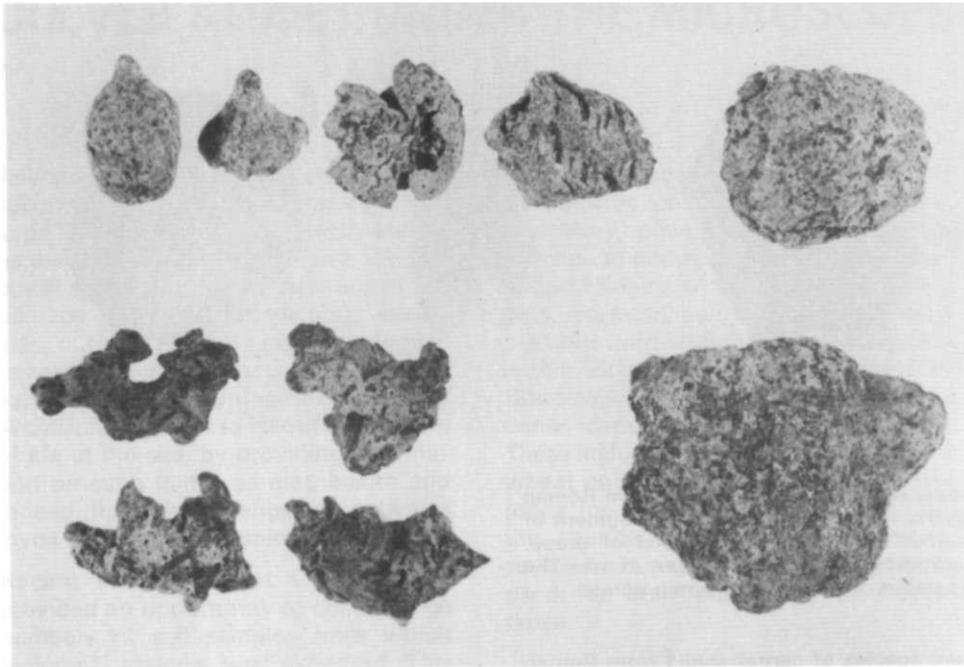
Other Roman layers at the site produced carbonised remains of hay, consisting of partly burnt grass stems with many seeds of grassland plants. In some of these samples, there was an admixture of barley, a crop widely used as animal fodder. Also in these deposits there were coprolites - mineralised animal dung. These deposits, from layers of 1st- to 4th-century date, seem to represent stable or byre sweepings of litter, spilt fodder and dung which had been partly burnt, and indicate that livestock were kept at, or close to, the site. Studies of soils by Dr Richard MacPhail have shown that during the Roman period part of the site was under cultivation and it is probable that some of the material mucked-out from byres and stables was used as manure. There is also evidence for another type of manure - seaweed. Although the weed itself has not survived, remains of small intertidal invertebrate animals including shore crabs, barnacles, small inedible molluscs, and single-celled organisms known as *foraminifera* were present in the ar-



Some remains of food plants from Roman layers. *Left to right:* carbonised fragment of walnut shell, mineralised seed of grape, carbonised fragment of olive stone. The fragment on the right is 6 mm across.

Two species of carpet shells from Roman layers. The shells at the top are 45 mm across.





Coprolites. *Top left: goat droppings (medieval); bottom left: cattle dung (Roman); top and bottom right: human coprolites from a 1st-century military cesspit. The fragment in the top right-hand corner is 15 mm across.*

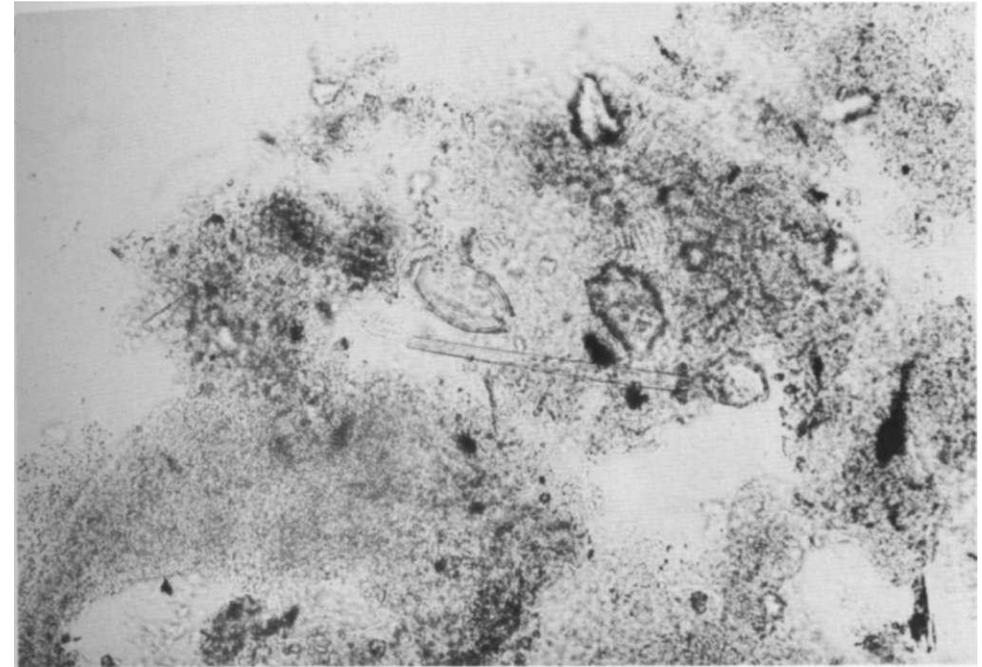
archaeological deposits. These creatures were clearly not brought to the site as human food, but they are commonly found on seaweed and along strand-lines. The Roman writer Pliny recommends the use of seaweed for garden crops. Fragments of eggshells mostly from domestic fowl were also recovered and these could indicate that hens were kept on the site.

Taking all this evidence together it is quite clear that the site had a much more rural aspect than might have been concluded from purely archaeological evidence. Livestock, probably including cattle and fowl, were kept and there was

a cultivated plot—most likely for horticultural crops.

The samples also contained large amounts of shells and fishbones, indicating the importance of coastal fisheries in the Roman period. The shells are mostly of familiar species - oysters, mussels, cockles, winkles, and whelks—but carpet-shells were also identified. Though not eaten in this country today, these shellfish are considered a delicacy in parts of France. Dr Alison Locker is still working on the thousands of fishbones recovered by wet-sieving, but a preliminary study of the bones from the 1981 season by Andrew Jones has established that herring, eel, mackerel, grey mullet, and plaice were eaten. When identification is completed it will be possible to say a great deal about Roman and medieval fisheries on the Essex coast.

The cesspits of Roman and medieval



The contents of a human coprolite. *This photograph shows a suspension of acid-insoluble material from the human coprolite illustrated opposite (top right). Fragments of plant tissue, sand grains, and a whipworm egg (near the centre of the photograph) can be seen. The photograph shows an area just under half a millimetre wide.*

date produced many of the seeds already mentioned and also contained human coprolites. These are in a mineralised state, almost like stone. Mineralisation (impregnation with calcium phosphate) occurred by a reaction between phosphates from the faeces and lime, used as a sterilising agent. The coprolites can be broken down in dilute acid and their contents can then be studied under the microscope. Coprolites from a 1st-century military cesspit included fragments of cereal bran from wholemeal foodstuffs and also eggs of an intestinal

parasite—the whipworm.

In conclusion, then, during modern excavations the archaeologist attempts to recover not just 'finds' and building plans but also information on the daily life of the site's inhabitants. By studying remains of plants and animals we can put flesh on the bones of a site.

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THE HOUSE THAT ANN AND HUGH BUILT

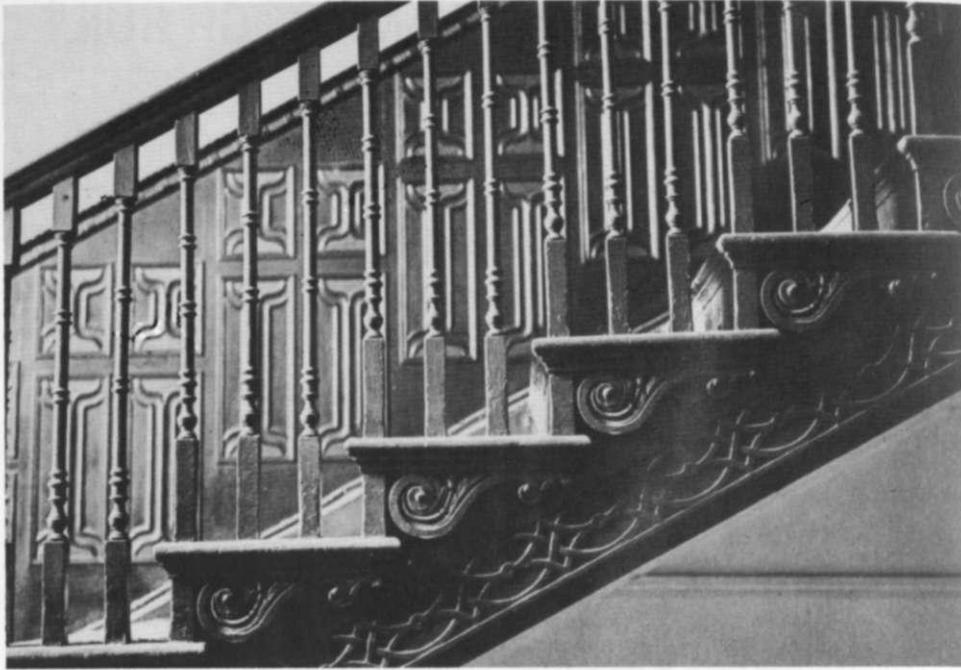
On 17th May 1741, Hugh Osborne had ample cause to celebrate his twenty-first birthday: he and his wife had just come into £20,000. Ann, his wife, was to have half as 'pin money', to use the interest for her personal and household expenses. A condition of the endowment (various East Indies and South Sea stock) was that the couple were free to sell and reinvest all or parts of it either in property or in other stock. Twenty-two years later, Ann was to take advantage of this condition and was to sell a large part of her investments to provide her husband and her son John with possibly

the finest family house in the town.

The house stood in the centre of the east side of Head Street and was subsequently known as 'Headgate House'. The Osbornes bought the building in 1763 from Thomas Lawrence for £800 and over the next three years spent £3,222 18s 5d on rebuilding and refurbishing it. As befitted the fashion of the time, the new house was to be in the neo-Classical style and accordingly was to incorporate a fine central doorway and architectural detail which included a triangular pediment at eaves level. The front half of the original house (ie the block along the street) was completely rebuilt in red brick but much of the rear part was kept and encased in a handsome external facade which matched the rebuilt front. A new roof covered the

Left The finest fireplace in the dining room.
Below: Detail of the mantelpiece. [Photographs courtesy of the Essex County Standard.]





The central staircase. [Photographs courtesy of the Essex County Standard.]



Thirteenth- or fourteenth-century cellar, built of peg-tile and reused Roman materials. Part of the original house bought by the Osbornes. Discovered in 1985 during rebuilding works.

reversed the direction to complete the splendid staircase at first-floor level.

As expected, the house was well equipped. Most rooms contained fireplaces and stoves. Cupboards stood in the butler's pantry, the house keeper's room, the laundry, and elsewhere in the house. A fine mirror in a papier-mache frame graced the dining room, and dressers with turned columns and folding doors stood in the kitchen and the dispensary. Ironing boards were to be found in the the butler's pantry and the laundry, and an iron range and two stewing pans set in brickwork were installed in the kitchen. Water was easily available throughout the house with the use of pumps built into the house-keeper's room, the scullery, the wash-house, the garden, and the courtyard. The coal office and the scullery contained lead-lined sinks and lead cisterns. A dovecote and four clothes poles stood in the poultry yard and two lamp posts provided lighting for the coal

whole building but parts of the original rear roof were left intact underneath. A coach house was erected on the south side of the house on a plot formerly occupied by a small house acquired and demolished for the purpose.

No expense was spared in fitting out and decorating the interior of the house. The plasterwork was of the best quality especially in the dining room which was on the ground floor overlooking the garden. And the central staircase, which dominated the house, was wide, elegantly carved, and arguably the best in town. A flight of sixteen steps led to a semicircular landing lit by a round-headed window in the centre of the rear wall of the house. Another ten steps



office. And a variety of locks, bolts, and bell pulls were fitted at various points throughout the house and its offices.

By 1776 Ann and Hugh were dead and the house and fittings were sold for a mere £1150-over £3,000 less than the Osbornes spent on it a decade earlier! The building was snapped up by Richard Twining who appears to have been acting on behalf of an unscrupulous relative, Francis Smythies. The latter had been the Osbornes' lawyer and had been involved in the various transactions connected with the house's acquisition and refurbishment. After a decent lapse of time (seven years), Smythies bought the house from Twining for precisely the amount Twining paid for it. The house then remained in the possession of the Smythies family for more than a hundred years.

The slow physical decline of Headgate House started around the turn of this

Head Street in about 1902 when Headgate House (centre right) was still a private house with its original entrance doorway. [Photograph courtesy of the Colchester and Essex Museum.]

century when the front ground-floor windows were removed to allow the insertion of two shop fronts and the central doorway was replaced with a new one a few yards to the north. In 1934 two of the ornately-plastered walls of the dining room were destroyed when one of the shops was extended. In 1965, alterations for Tescos led not only to the demise of the dining room but also the loss of the fine central staircase (despite attempts to preserve it). Fortunately the finest fireplace in the dining room was rescued by the builders and is now in the Colchester Museum.

Currently the house is being extensively refitted as part of the works for the new

Culver Street shopping precinct. The brick facade is being kept, the windows are to be restored to their original design, and the moulded plasterwork (now only surviving in one room) is to be retained. To a house which once boasted amongst its occupants the Earl of Chatham, (Commander-in-Chief of the Colchester Garrison in Napoleonic times), the noise of busy tills is quite a contrast to the Garrison band. But at least from the outside, Headgate House will still be there for us all to enjoy.

Philip Crummy

We are very grateful to John Bensusan Butt for providing the information used above. Headgate House is currently being recorded by the Trust with the permission of Balfour Beatty.

NOTES

RECENT MEETINGS

The day trip to Kent was thoroughly enjoyable, and well organised by Jenny Watson and her husband John (not forgetting baby Richard). Many members who went on the trip had personal links with Chatham dockyards or the area, which always makes the day that much more interesting. Upnor Castle, built in the 16th century, was a real change from the Norman and medieval castles we are used to, and linked in well with Chatham.

The 'Bath' event at the University was highly entertaining. I am sure that we couldn't have had two more experienced and entertaining speakers than Professor

Cunliffe and Mr Hunt. All who went were unstinting in their praise.

The November coach trip had its by now traditional damp weather. Fortunately it seemed only to rain while members were in the coach between churches! We visited Little Tey, a reprise from last year, to see the recently-uncovered wall-paintings, then moved on to Aldham where Mrs Mason, one of the churchwardens, gave us a most informative talk on the history of the church, its predecessor on the other side of the parish, and the social history of the village at the time the present church was built. Last stop was Fordham, beautifully situated above the Colne Valley.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

The **business meeting of the AGM** will be held on **Saturday 18th January 1986** at Lexden Road, Colchester at 11.30 a.m. On the following **Saturday, 25th January**, in the lecture room of the Colchester Public Library, we will have our afternoon session of talks followed by tea. Please do not confuse the days! The two parts of the meeting have been split to enable the Trust's committee members to attend our afternoon session. Speakers will be Philip Crummy on the **Culver Street site** and the subsequent watching briefs (such as Headgate House), and Donald Shimmin on the **Gilbert School excavation**. The talks will be followed by tea.

In March we have our long-promised **concert** by Howard Marshall and friends. This will be held in the hall of the Castle Methodist Church (entrance down Maidenburgh Street), on the evening of **Saturday March 22nd**. The programme details are enclosed in this

edition of Catalogue on a separate sheet. Do not lose it!

On **Sunday 18th May** there will be a trip to **Stowmarket Museum of East Anglian Life**. The trip is on Sunday because that is the day for blacksmith and spinning and weaving demonstrations. Also at the museum that day will be some early powered bicycles. Major new exhibitions will also have opened for the new season by then. If having the trip on Sunday causes difficulties for those living outside Colchester to get in, please let me know and I can arrange lifts and/or coach pick-up points. The party rate for entrance to the museum is £ 1.25 for adults, £0.75 for senior citizens and students, and £0.50 for children. This will be collected on the coach, so please have the correct money to hand. The coach will leave the War Memorial by the Castle Park at 11.45 a.m. so I suggest a picnic lunch to be eaten en route. For the cost of the trip (not including the entrance fee), see the enclosed booking slip.

I shall be retiring from the job of Social Secretary at the AGM, so Stowmarket will be my last responsibility. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of you who have come on trips during my time in office for making the job such a pleasant one. You have all been tolerant of the problems that arise, such as the coach breakdown on the way to Peterborough, the sudden change from a visit to the Sutton Hoo site to a lecture in Ipswich Museum, the weather, the traffic, the thunder bugs at Finchingfield, and all those things that make life interesting! I hope you will be as kind to my successor, and to wish you all many happy outings in the future.

Nina Crummy

CULVER STREET

The second and last stage of the excavations at Culver Street finally finished last September after almost a year of continuous digging. Work has now started on the preparation of the site report which will set out all the discoveries in detail. We hope to give readers of **Catalogue** a summary of the whole project in the next issue.

THE FRIENDS OF THE COLCHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST has been formed as a 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.

Cover:

Head Street in about 1930. Headgate House, with shops on the ground floor, is on the centre right. [Photograph courtesy of the Colchester and Essex Museum.]