



CATALOGUE

NEWS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS IN COLCHESTER

Number 20

Winter 1987



**Angel Yard
Unusual Roman Burial**

MORE ABOUT THE ANGEL YARD.....

The excavation at Angel Yard has now finished, having more than fulfilled its promise as an important and interesting town centre site. It produced an unbroken sequence of layers and features dating from the Roman period to the present day. Parts of eight medieval/post-medieval and two Roman buildings were found. A large amount of pottery, bone and other material was recovered and now awaits specialist study.

Since my report in the summer edition of Catalogue, demolition of standing buildings not only provided new areas for excavation but also some surprises amongst the bricks and mortar. When the rear of 1 West Stockwell Street was knocked down, part of the west wall of an unsuspected 17th-century timber-framed building was revealed. The surviving timber-work included three carved timber shoulders for supporting a first-floor jetty and probably represented all that remained above ground level of the Angel Inn. As demolition was already well advanced, meticulous recording of the framework was not possible. However, the timber-framed rear part of 134 High Street, demolished at the same time, was recorded in detail leading to, amongst other things, the discovery of a

diamond-pattern lead-glazed window buried in one of its walls.

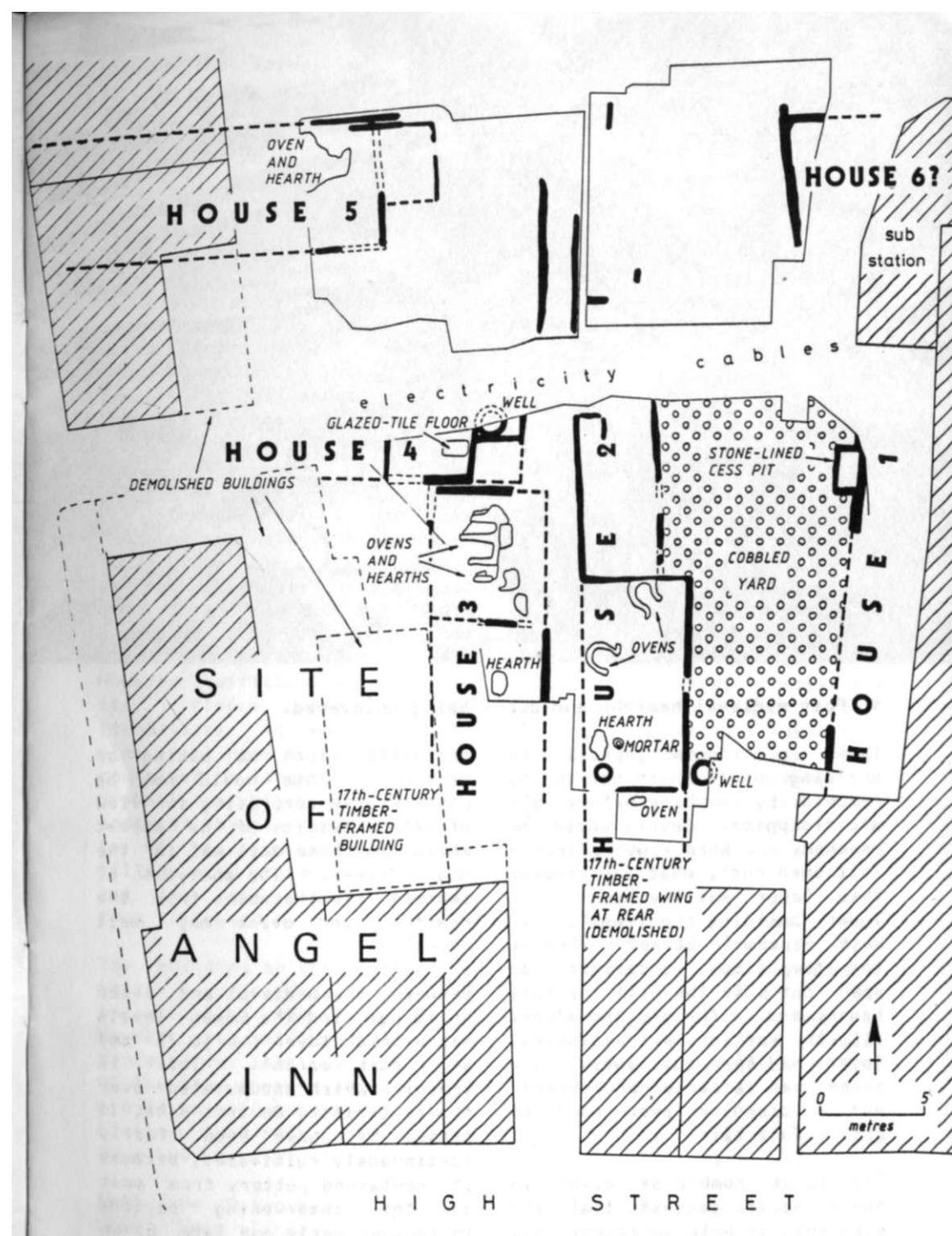
The rear wing of the 15th- to 16th-century house described in the last Catalogue was notable for its series of large tile-lined ovens and hearths. Similar remains were uncovered to the west, also with large hearths floored with peg tile. North of this, fronting on to West Stockwell Street, lay the rear part of a house, this time with a well-preserved floor of glazed tile.

In the north-west corner of the site was an unexpectedly deep

*** Carved jetty belonging to part of the Angel Inn.**



* Cover photo: Roman burial group found recently near St John's Street (see page 11).





*** Post-medieval hearths and ovens being uncovered.**

layer of modern topsoil and building rubble which had to be removed by machine before the archaeological levels could be reached. When we finally 'bottomed out', what lay beneath this layer was the back of a Tudor building fronting on to West Stockwell Street. Due to the steep slope, a terrace had been cut into the hill for this house, and in the process almost all the earlier archaeological layers had been cut away. The house had a large open hearth and a circular oven made of broken roof tile.

The large number of ovens in these houses suggests that the occupants of both buildings may have been engaged in commercial

activities such as baking or brewing. This would not be particularly surprising in view of the proximity of the market which in those days was in the High Street. The analysis of charred plant remains from the hearths and ovens may well reveal all.

Between the medieval and later buildings and the Roman levels was a thick layer (up to 75 cm) of 'dark earth'. This is topsoil which accumulated over the centuries. On this site, it seems to have been fairly continuously cultivated, because it contained pottery from most of the intervening periods including early and late Saxon sherds. Some pits had been dug

through this layer, most dating to the early medieval period, but at least one seems to be late Saxon in date, a rare find in Colchester. The dark earth itself produced an exceptional number of coins. The possible significance of these is discussed below.

Finally, after removing the 'dark earth' the top of the Roman remains were reached. Hasty examination showed these to consist of parts of two substantial houses fronting on to a street which lay north-south on the western part of the site. The houses shared a party (or common) wall which lay beneath the main cross section of the site (the central baulk). The remains of the southernmost house proved to have been badly damaged during the digging of pits in post-Roman times. However sufficient survived of its floors and gravel foundations to work out the plan. A room on the west side contained a large oven and was probably a kitchen. To the south of this lay what appeared to be the remains of a cellar filled with broken roof tiles and daub and painted plaster from collapsed walls.

The building to the north was better preserved, possibly because like the later Tudor houses, it had been built on a terrace cut into the hillside. Of the four rooms examined, one proved to be unexpectedly large hinting that this building may have been special in some way.

Both the Roman houses seem to have been large and well-constructed. An unusual feature

was the exceptional number of whole pots buried upright next to wall foundations. Most sites produce a few examples but the total of thirteen from the Angel Yard is unusual. They would have probably contained food or drink as offerings to the gods. Two were still sealed by pottery lids so that analysis of any residues may throw some light on their contents.

Geoff Carter

SOME SMALL FINDS

Most sites produce a fair number of small finds which can be called 'rubbish' - small unidentifiable scraps of corroded metal objects. Most sites produce a fair number of 'good' small finds - broken but recognizable buckles, belt-fittings, brooches, tools etc. Most sites produce a fair number of coins - usually between 10 and 20 per cent of the total number of small finds. Most sites produce at least one rare item.

The Angel Yard has only conformed to two of these generalizations, It **has** produced an unusual object, and it **has** produced a fair amount of 'rubbish'. However an enormous number of coins was found, 32.5 per cent of the total, and there are only very few 'good' small finds. The reason for the scarcity of the latter is probably because few pits, usually the repositories of 'goodies', were excavated and occupation levels within

buildings predominated. If houses were kept clean and tidy then not much is left for the digger to find. However, one object which does fit into this category is a beautiful model stand. Made of copper-alloy and decorated with enamel, it dates to the second century. Similar stands are found in both military and civilian settlements in Roman Britain, and in civilian contexts are often associated with shrines. This example may have been used in a household shrine, with a votive object or figurine set on the top.



*** The enamelled stand from the Angel Yard.**

The reason for the high proportion of coins from the site is probably twofold. First, the 'dark earth' (see Geoff Carter's report) was excavated by hand instead of being stripped off by machine as often happens when time and money are short. The dark earth often contains quite high numbers of 3rd and 4th century coins due to cultivation disturbing the upper levels of the buried Roman deposits. A second reason may be that we have a dispersed late Roman coin hoard. Later activity on a site can cause a hoard to be separated from its original container and scattered over a wide area. It can then become mixed with other coins deposited through casual loss. However, a hoard is still detectable in the coin graph for the site as a whole by a marked peak for the period during which the coins were collected. On the Cups Hotel site (now Greytown House) a dispersed hoard of coins collected over the period AD 330-50 was clearly visible on

the site graph. At this stage we cannot be sure that there is a scattered hoard from the Angel Yard, so we aren't getting too excited until all the coins are cleaned and identified! If there is one, it will almost certainly date to either the mid or late 3rd century, or the middle years of the 4th century.

And the Angel Yard's rare small find? It's one of the largest and heaviest 'not-so-small' finds I've ever seen. It's big enough to bath a baby in, and four people are needed to lift it. It's a huge mortar (as in mortar-and-pestle) made of Purbeck marble, with four projecting lugs. Pat Ryan of the Essex County Council's Archaeology Section has made a study of mortars large and small and knows of only two more of similar size, one in the churchyard at Little Baddow (where it may have been used as a font at one time), and one illustrated in the Luttrell Psalter of c 1340, where a man is shown in a manorial kitchen standing beside a mortar which



*** The Purbeck marble mortar. It measures two feet across at the lugs, and stands between ten and eleven inches high.**

comes up to his knees and pounding something in it with a wooden pestle taller than himself. Smaller mortars are not uncommon in the Roman, medieval, and post-medieval periods, and were used to grind or mash up grain, spices, and possibly meat, a cross between a quern and a mincing machine. These larger mortars may just have been used to deal with larger quantities of grain or meat, such as might be needed in a big household (as that illustrated in the Luttrell Psalter), or for commercial purposes. Large quantities of grain were usually ground by wind- and water-mills, but

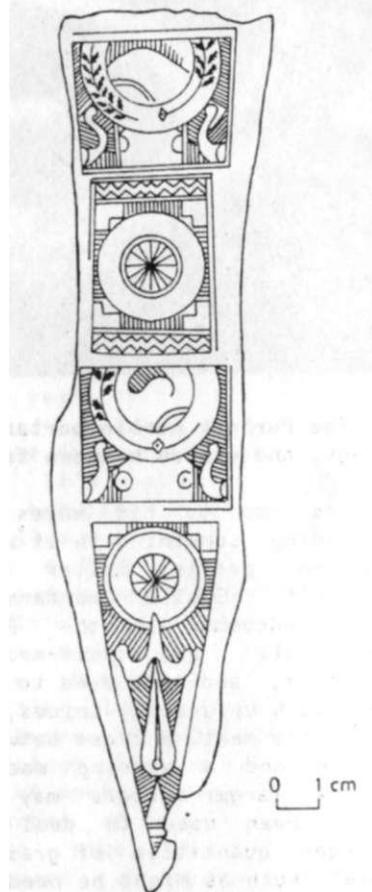
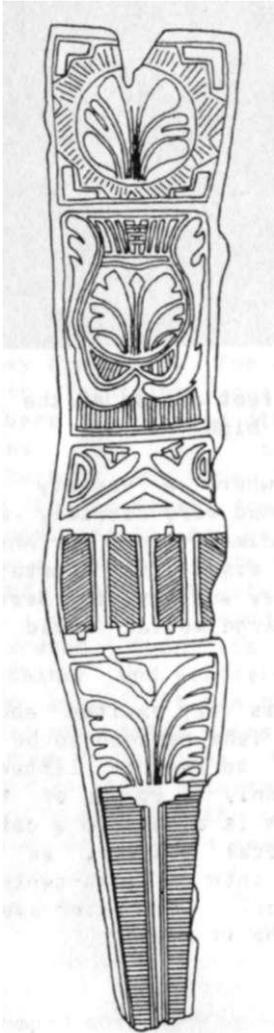
perhaps where a variety of grains ground very coarsely was needed (animal feed), or where grain was mixed with something else (barley and hops for beer), then a large mortar would be required.

Pat Ryan is very excited about our mortar (she managed to be in Colchester to see it lifted), for not only is it one of the biggest, it is also from a dated archaeological context, as it was set into a 16th-century 'clay' floor. Colchester seems to have done it again!

THE COLCHESTER DAGGER SCABBARDS

Conservation of the early Roman military dagger scabbard from the Gilbert School site reported on in **Catalogue 19** is now almost complete. All but the lower end is clean enough to show the fine detail of the scheme of inlaid decoration. The first and third zones are alike, with a rosette

of alternate brass and red enamel petals set within a wreath (brass) and framed by four L-shaped red enamel motifs. The second zone is divided by narrow brass lines into a central square flanked by upright rectangular panels. The side panels almost certainly



Right: the dagger scabbard from the Gilbert School. **Above:** the design on the Telephone Exchanges scabbard. **Left:** the design on the Balcerne Lane scabbard.



held a line of wreath. The central square contains a rosette with curved petals (also alternately brass and enamel) and has three dots in each spandrel. The triangular zone running down towards the tip contains an inverted chevron of alternate brass and enamel petals, framed by a wreath. The roundel at the tip has a central rivet and may have been decorated. Of two scabbards in the British Museum from the Roman fort at Hod Hill, Dorset, one has a roundel with a central enamel boss framed by a brass border, and the other seems to be plain.

Of all the 1st-century military dagger scabbards (over 80) known, both from Britain and the continent, no two are exactly alike. The pattern on the Telephone Exchange scabbard (found in 1966 by Ros Dunnett, then Director of Excavations) has obvious points of similarity with the Gilbert School example (rosettes and wreaths), but is really very different. Its inlay is of silver and enamel. The Balcerne Lane scabbard uses a completely different set of motifs (palmettes and temple) and only silver is used in the inlay. Current research indicates that the early Type A scabbards (Gilbert School and Telephone Exchange) were made by civilian highly-skilled specialist craftsmen with contracts to supply the army with weapons, whereas the later Type B scabbards (Balcerne Lane), which exhibit less skill in both design and execution, were made in the army's own workshops.

Another first for Colchester

Among the many tonnes of pottery being carefully examined and quantified by the Trust's Roman pottery team, there are many items of interest, but there are very few vessels or sherds which can be called unique. We often find new - or rather, previously unrecognized - forms of well-known pottery types, but these tend mostly to be variations of a relatively subtle nature. A remarkable exception to this rule was discovered last summer when we were visited by Dr David Williams, one of Britain's foremost specialists on Roman amphorae.

David Williams found many amphorae to interest him in our substantial collection, but none more so than the vessel illustrated here, which he identifies as a Peacock 4 Williams Class 7, or a Dressel form 21/22. This is a 1st-century amphora type which frequently has painted inscriptions, the study of which has indicated that the vessels were made in Italy, probably at Campania or Lazio, and probably contained fruit. They occur mainly in the western



Mediterranean, especially in Italy.

The vessel from Culver Street is slightly different to the standard Dressel type. There is also a finely-executed, though rather enigmatic, painted inscription just under the rim. As far as David Williams is aware, this is the first and only example of the type to have been found and identified in Britain.

Robin Symonds

 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. 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 & Institutions £2.00, Family membership £2.50, Children & 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-

Unusual Roman burial

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NEW STYLE CATALOGUE

There will be a new publication to replace **Catalogue** but not until the middle of this year. 'Technical hitches' which have until now stood in the way have been sorted out so this should be the last edition of Catalogue in its present form. The new publication should be a block buster with lots in it about Culver Street (now that we have had time to take it all in) and the Angel Yard-

FUTURE DIGS

By the time you receive this, the excavation at the Butt Road Roman cemetery site should be underway. We hope that you will be able to come and see the site (see page 12).

In the spring, exploratory work should begin at the Stanway gravel pit off the Maldon Road.

During the course of alterations to a health food shop in St John's Street, an unusual discovery was made which threw more light on burial practices in Roman Colchester.

A small exploratory hole was dug in the basement of the shop which, as luck would have it, coincided exactly with base of an inverted buried pot. The pottery vessel was first exposed only a few inches below the surface of the floor of the basement. Fortunately the proprietors were kind enough to inform the Trust, but they could hardly believe their eyes at what followed.

Inch by inch as the hole was extended downwards, a complete, upturned Roman storage jar appeared. It turned out to be an 'amphora', a type of vessel used primarily for importing wine and pickled fruits- It is two and a half feet long and a foot and a half wide-

Close inspection of the vessel showed that, although still in position, the neck and rim of the vessel was not attached to the body of the pot. This part had been carefully detached in antiquity - rather like taking the top off of a boiled egg- Tension mounted as the body of the amphora was lifted off and placed, appropriately perhaps on adjacent sacks of dates, sunflower seeds and other health foods. What remained at the

bottom of the hole was extraordinary. Set upright on the neck of the amphora was a large pottery jar containing cremated human remains.

The amphora had in fact been used as a sort of rudimentary chamber and to get the pot with the remains inside it, the top of the vessel had to be removed.

The jar and its contents were carefully lifted and finally the amphora neck and rim were removed. As well as the cremated bone, the jar also contained fragments of beads, a brooch and a bone pin. The cremation, probably of a woman, dates to around the second century, a time when cremation was still the normal burial rite.

A few other cases of 'amphora burials' are known from

Colchester but none include an amphora inverted in this way. The other examples use the type of amphora which is globular in shape thus enabling the pots containing the cremations to sit directly on the base.

The St John's Street amphora is of a form predominantly made in southern France, at various sites near the mouth of the Rhone. It was also one of the types made at recently excavated kilns not far from Orleans in central France. The type is commonly found throughout northern Europe and Italy, and may also have reached the eastern Mediterranean. The jar is very unusual, possibly unique, partly because of the combination of designs it incorporates.

Donald Shimmin & Robin Symonds

RECENT MEETINGS

The first event of the year was a fund-raising concert given by the Bianchi String Quartet under their leader Howard Marshall. Recent agricultural life was the topic of our May outing when members visited the East Anglian Museum of Rural Life at Stowmarket, and July found us in the far corners of Essex visiting the Stansted Airport excavations and the reconstructed Norman motte and bailey castle at Stansted Mountfitchet. The site of the famous ship burial at Sutton Hoo was the destination of our September trip, followed by a visit to the Woodbridge tide mill in operation. The final outing was our ever-popular churches trip in November.

FUTURE MEETINGS

The AGM will be in the Public Library on Saturday 24th January and the annual business meeting will be at 10.00 am on the same day at 12 Lexden Road. All welcome.

Between 2.00 and 4.00 pm on Saturday 7th February, you are invited to visit to the Butt Road Roman cemetery site and 12 Lexden Road (nearly) to see a small display about the site.

On 14th March and 16th May, trips are planned to **Lavenham** and Harwich respectively. See enclosed leaflet for details.

Howard Brooks