

Archaeological assessment at
Gosbecks Farm, Colchester, 1994
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Introduction

Archaeological assessment was carried out in advance of the proposed residential development at Gosbecks Farm (on the south-western outskirts of modern Colchester) by Colchester Archaeological Trust Field Projects. This consisted of archive research, fieldwalking survey, sample trenching, and geophysical and metal-detector surveys.

The development site is part of the internationally important Gosbecks area, the focus of which is a Romano-British theatre and temple, surrounded by a native Iron Age and Romano-British settlement with associated ditches, field systems and trackways. Much of this area is a scheduled ancient monument.

A proposal for the creation of the Gosbecks Archaeological Park (incorporating a significant part of the area of archaeological importance) includes residential development and construction of an access road on its northern edge.

An evaluation was commissioned by the developers, Galliford Homes, to assess the condition, extent, date and importance of the archaeological deposits, so that an informed decision could be made on their future.

Methodology

The sample trenching was conducted in two stages during February/March 1994 and July/August 1994. Stage One trenches were situated to the west of Olivers Lane, on the proposed route of the new access road (T1-T7) and within the residential development area (T8-T16). The line of the new road to the east of Olivers Lane was examined for the first time in Stage Two (T20-T25) in addition to its amended route further west (T17-T19). In total, 1420 m of trenches were opened by machine stripping, equivalent to 2584 sq metres, or 2.6% of the development area.

The strategy adopted was to sample potential features indicated by aerial photography in addition to apparent 'blank areas' to provide a reasonable assessment of the archaeological remains likely to be disturbed. Concurrent with excavation, fieldwalking, geophysical and metal-detector surveys were undertaken. The fieldwalking was undertaken using a 20% sampling strategy and covered the whole of the proposed development area together with a substantial area beyond the southern boundary. The metal-detector survey covered all the trenches, a substantial portion of the south-western area, and an east-west transect across the site. The geophysical (resistivity) survey was undertaken over a 40 x 40 metre area, at the point where a Roman road is crossed by the proposed road line.

Results

Examination of cropmarks at Gosbecks, derived from over half a century of aerial photography, reveals a complex of ditched boundaries and trackways. In addition a Roman road running south-west from the Roman town to the Gosbecks complex crosses the development area to the east of Olivers Lane.

Over the central area two long sinuous ditches run on an approximately north-south alignment converging towards the north. The easternmost of these ditches was sampled in two places (T7 and T11), producing a small quantity of pottery datable to the late Iron Age/early Roman period. Further south this ditch crosses Olivers Lane and is abutted at right angles by a trackway which runs to the north-east. This trackway, represented by a pair of almost parallel field ditches, was sampled in five places (T21-T24) and shown to be post-medieval in date.

The south-western area contained a concentrated complex of cropmark ditches. These are bounded by a trackway beyond the southern limits of the development (running approximately along the northern edge of the small valley) and two parallel ditches to the north-east. Trenching in this area (T1-T3 and T12-T16) confirm these cropmarks as major ditches and date them to the late Iron Age/early Roman period. In addition several other smaller ditches of the same period were revealed together with a number of small pits. Several features produced surprisingly large amounts of pottery in relation to the limited areas of excavation, together with several large parts of individual vessels. Small amounts of light industrial slag and burnt building daub were also recovered. This concentration of material would tend to indicate settlement of the late Iron Age/early Roman period within the immediate area. No evidence was found to extend this activity much beyond the middle of the 1st century AD. Only a very small quantity of later Roman material has so far been recovered.

A single iron jointing collar covered with mineralised wood residue was recovered from a large flat-bottomed trench in the western end of trench 2. This was identical to a number excavated at Balcerne Lane (Crummy 1984, 115-17 & fig. 107) and indicates the existence of a water-main. This feature, which shows as a cropmark running across this part of the site, was further sampled in trench 14 where it cut through the fill of a late Iron Age/early Roman ditch.

Evidence of prehistoric activity was limited to the pottery contained in two features and surface finds of prehistoric worked flint. A possible ditch excavated in trench 20 produced three sherds of flint tempered pottery that could only be dated generally to the prehistoric period. Two Late Neolithic Grooved Ware sherds were found in the fill of a feature in trench 18. Due to disturbance of its upper fills it was not clear whether this was a linear feature or a pit.

Two further cropmark features were examined, a field boundary running east-west crossing the sinuous ditches, confirmed by excavation (T10 and T11) as modern, and (to the east of Olivers Lane) a ditch, running slightly south of the southern edge of Gosbecks Road, contained 19th century pottery (T23-T25).

The opportunity was taken during the assessment for an appraisal of the evidence for two specific features. The first, a record of a 'dark line on air photograph' (Hull 1958, fig. 113) just to the east of Maldon Road, could not be located despite the use of several photographs with good differential crop resolution. Secondly, the present line of Gosbecks Road has been claimed as fossilising the line eastwards of a major Iron Age earthwork, the Shrub End Dyke (Rodwell 1976, 343 & 344, figs 50 & 51.2). Examination of RAF photographs taken in 1933, before development along Gosbecks Road, showed no evidence of such an earthwork. Trench 8 was located to test this hypothesis. A recent roadside ditch was found, but there was no evidence for a dyke.

The distribution patterns produced by the field-walking support the results of the trial trenching. Although the conditions for the survey were generally good, the level of material recovered was very low, even in the south-western area, where the finds were more numerous.

The metal-detecting survey produced mainly recent or undated material, although there were a few finds of intrinsic interest. A worn copper-alloy coin, probably early Roman, and a lead cloth seal (with 15th-century parallels) came from the spoil next to trenches 23 and 20 respectively.

Discussion

The archaeological work undertaken at Gosbecks Farm, although limited to assessment and sample excavation, has allowed a preliminary interpretation of the archaeology to be made.

Activity predating the late Iron Age is indicated by surface finds of prehistoric flints and two features containing prehistoric pottery. Whilst this evidence may be significant, it is not substantial enough to speculate on the character of this activity.

The major period of archaeologically recognisable activity over the site probably spans a short period of about 60 years during the late Iron Age/early Roman period. This was concentrated in the south-west of the development area, and consisted of fields/paddocks, a trackway and probable settlement. Further details could only be elucidated by further excavation, although it is clear that some of the ditches had time to silt up, and be recut. The only direct relationship between two archaeological contexts is between the Roman water-main and a ditch abandoned before the main was constructed. Beyond this, there are almost no archaeologically detectable signs of use of the area

into the Roman period. Roman pottery has a high survival rate in plough soil, and if the area had been used for settlement or cultivation involving the spreading of manure incorporating ceramic waste, this would normally have been evident in the fieldwalking results.

The impression therefore is of an area of settlement beginning in the late 1st century BC-early 1st century AD, with associated enclosures of fields/paddocks, and a trackway to the south directing movement through this area to more open land to the north and east. A substantial lump of slag (furnace bottom?) in the fill of a ditch may also indicate metal-working in this area. Some indication of the status of this settlement is obtained by comparison of the relatively large amounts of pottery recovered from this area to an equivalent assemblage from the Sheepen site at Colchester (Hawkes and Hull 1947; Niblett 1985). This later assemblage has been dated to the period AD 5-60 (Niblett 1985, table 1). The major contrast between these assemblages is the virtual absence at the Gosbecks site of mortaria and amphorae, fine vessels in samian and glass, and the limited amounts of other fine wares such as butt beakers and terra nigra. To some extent this may be the product of a limited sample, but it seems clear that the assemblages in use at these two sites were substantially different.

At some point in the early Roman period this area was abandoned as a focus of activity and a water-main was laid through it. The direction of the flow of water through the main is not clear. However it heads towards the spring which lies just to the north of the temple and portico in the centre of the Gosbecks site. This suggests that the main carried water northwards, and that there was a water-works at the head of the stream.

In relation to the proposed continuation of the Shrub End Dyke alongside Gosbecks Road, the evidence for this rests entirely on the interpretation placed on documentary sources concerning the perambulation of the bounds of the Borough Liberty, quoted by Morant in 1748 and summarised by Rodwell (1976). No physical evidence for such an earthwork exists along the line of this road. Philip Crummy has suggested that the interpretation of the documentary sources is in error, these having been misread, and actually referring to Gryme's Dyke at Lexden Heath, and not to a major earthwork on the line of Gosbecks Road (Hawkes and Crummy 1995, 170-71).

There is no evidence of further activity after the early Roman period until the post-medieval trackway ditches east of Olivers Lane were cut. These produced a single sherd of 17th-century pottery, but contained no peg-tile, which is common within the ploughsoil. This may indicate that the ditches had silted up before this material was spread across the area. The two north-south sinuous ditches are probably contemporary with this trackway, given the relationship between the easternmost ditch and the western end of the

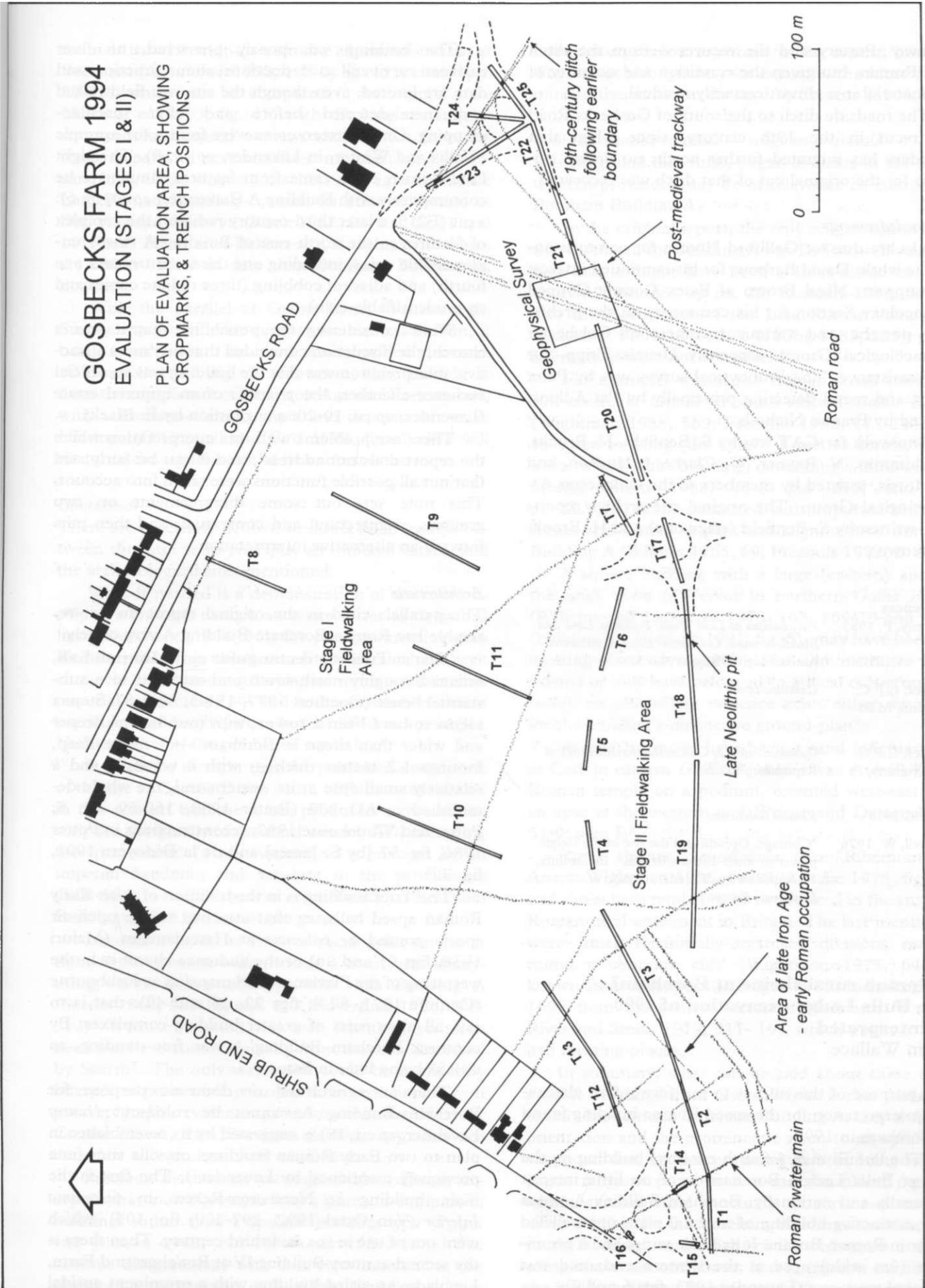


Fig. 2 Plan of archaeological evaluation at Gosbecks 1994.

trackway. Pottery and tile recovered from the ditch were Roman, but given the condition and quantity of this material it is almost certainly residual.

The roadside ditch to the south of Gosbecks Road was recut in the 19th century, since when that boundary has migrated further north; no dating evidence for the original cut of that ditch was recovered.

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**A Roman rural shrine at Boreham?
The Bulls Lodge excavation of 1990
re-interpreted
Colin Wallace**

The purpose of this note is to put forward an alternative interpretation for the apsed Roman building found at Boreham in 1990.

The late Roman (?fourth century) building on the site at Bulls Lodge, Boreham is of no little interest regionally and nationally. Boreham Building A was a very distinctive building of unusual plan, unparalleled so far in Roman Britain. It had side wings and a prominent (9m wide) apse at the western end, and was oriented west-east (Lavender 1993, figs 6 and 7).

The building was poorly preserved, no floor surfaces survived, so deductions about function and date are limited, even though the site was fieldwalked and metal-detected before and after machine-stripping. Only thirteen coins were found, for example (Wallis and Winter, in Lavender, *op cit*, 9). The eight Late Roman coins came from features thought to be contemporary with Building A (Lavender, *op cit*, fig 6): a pit (F215, a later third-century radiate), the complex of features to the north-east of Building A (three unidentifiable coins, including one third-century and one fourth) and adjacent cobbling (three radiate copies and an unidentifiable coin).

While considering the possibility that it was a church, the discussion concluded that the 'most attractive' interpretation was that the building was an official audience-chamber, the *principia* of an imperial estate (Lavender, *op cit*, 19-20: a suggestion by E. Black).

There are problems with this interpretation which the report does not address', and it can be fairly said that not all possible functions were taken into account. This note sets out some disagreements on two grounds, architectural and contextual, and then puts forward an alternative interpretation.

Architectural

The parallels cited in the original report do not resemble late Roman Boreham Building A very closely.

That at Trier is a rectangular early Roman hall, oriented roughly north-south and attached to a substantial house (Goethert 1977, 151-3, Abb. 8). Stonea seems to have been a tower, with foundations deeper and wider than those at Boreham — 1 metre deep, footings 1.2 metres thick — with a vestibule and a relatively small apse at its western end, the whole demolished c. AD 200 (Potter 1989, 160-69, fig. 5; Potter and Whitehouse 1982; reconstructions in Potter 1986, fig. 57 [by S. James] and de la Bedoyere 1991, fig. 72).

The Trier building is in the tradition of other Early Roman apsed halls, eg that attached to the open-air sports ground or *palaestra* at Herculaneum (Maiuri 1958, figs 91 and 96) or the audience-chamber in the west wing of the Flavian-period mansion at Fishbourne (Cunliffe 1971, 87-8; figs 22, 23 and 42): that is to say, all were parts of greater building-complexes. By contrast, Boreham Building A was free-standing, as well as being later in date.

That an agricultural or domestic purpose for Boreham Building A cannot be ruled-out (*contra* Lavender, *op cit*, 19) is suggested by its resemblance in plan to two Early Roman buildings on villa sites (one previously mentioned by Lavender'). The first is the main building at Neerharen-Rekem in *Germania Inferior* (Van Ossel 1992, 297-300; fig. 105), which went out of use in the mid third century. Then there is the second-century Building IV at Roughground Farm, Lechlade: an aisled building with a prominent apsidal