

Excavation at Gosbecks Archaeological Park

July-August 1999

for Colchester Borough Council

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Figure - Gosbecks Archaeological Park 1999: trenches

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Summary

A summer excavation on Gosbecks Archaeological Park was undertaken between 5th July and 27th August 1999, with a view to investigating the character and locations of the temple enclosure complex and the theatre perimeter. Three trenches were positioned to investigate the theatre enclosure, and six were to concentrate on the enclosure around the temple.

Introduction

Four initial trenches (T2, T3, T4 & T9) were located by geophysics to ascertain the wall lines of the temple enclosure but yielded negative results. Excavation of these trenches revealed either underlying natural gravels or gravels with pockets of silts presumably of post-glacial origin. Given the problems that the underlying surface geology was presenting to both resistivity and magnetometry, it was decided to utilise the plan from Hull's 1948 excavation. A new trench to locate the north-south alignment of the inner temple enclosure was excavated (T10). Investigation uncovered the robbed-out wall and additional underlying stratigraphy. Two trenches (T1 & T11) were then located on a 'best fit' basis according to Hull's plan to ascertain the position of the 343m-long east-west wall alignment. Neither of these produced any evidence of a wall line. Consequently, it was decided to follow the inner enclosure robbed wall line northwards to find the T-junction. Former excavation activity was encountered, but the junction was ascertained to within an estimated error of approximately 0.5m. The negative results of Trench 2, Trench 3, Trench 4 and Trench 9 are difficult to explain. The plot of the geophysics for a linear feature, ie a wall line, was not borne out by excavation even in terms of a linear anomaly of natural origin. Each of the trenches Trench 3, Trench 4 and Trench 9 produced a different profile, which suggests that Olivers Lane was possibly creating a parallel 'ghosting' effect on the geophysical resistivity.

The three trenches positioned on the theatre enclosure were Trench 6, Trench 7 and Trench 8. Trench 6 was partially excavated to uncover the underlying archaeology. Trenches 7 and 8 resulted in the revealing of a ditch which possibly formed an enclosure around the theatre.

Method

Preliminary geophysical survey work using a combination of a Fluxgate FM16 gradiometer and a resistivity meter was carried out in order to locate a series of up to nine trenches. In addition to this, cropmarks plotted during the summer of 1995 were used in conjunction with the geophysics for the location of trenches on the theatre enclosure. In early 1995, the fields at Gosbecks were converted from arable land to a public open space and seeded with a wild grass and herb mix. Observation during the summer months showed that a low-growing plant birds-foot trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*) was providing a positive indication for potential underlying archaeological features. This was especially the case with the enclosure around the theatre, and indeed for the temple ditch, both of which had clearly shown from aerial photographs taken when the fields were under crop. The birds-foot trefoil was giving a fairly accurate alignment on the ground for these more distinct features. The growth of this plant was affected by the park's management regime and where grasses and other herbs had not been mown, then the birds-foot trefoil did not act as a strong indicator, presumably due to the taller plant species out-competing the lower-growing plants. Further study is required into the growth patterns and distribution of this plant.

Excavation of all trenches was by hand, and all cultural material recovered by sieving through a 1cm mesh. The ploughsoil was removed in metre and half-metre squares for the purposes of basic volumetric quantification of finds. Three categories used for finds quantification were brick/tile, imported building material, and miscellaneous - ie all other cultural material. Recording involved photographing, planning at 1:20 and section drawing at 1:10. At the end of the excavation season, all trenches were backfilled.

The excavation

Trench 1 (6x1m)

Initially a 4x1m trench, extended to 6x1m, Trench 1 was located on the projected alignment of the west-east wall and to coincide with a large L-shaped cropmark. Removal of the ploughsoil uncovered a uniform deposit of yellow loam (L18) cut by a feature (F8) running close to the east side of the trench. This feature displays a near-vertical but relatively shallow cut with a flat bottom. The full extent of this feature is unknown. However, a cropmark plot does show the presence of a large L-shaped feature in the approximate location of Trench 1. Preliminary dating of finds from this feature imply that it is Roman; however, the limited extent of excavation precludes any conclusion until further work can put the feature in context with the surrounding archaeology. The yellow loam which the F8 cuts contained very small fragments of cultural material including a coin (undated as yet). No evidence for the west-east temple enclosure wall line was recorded.

Trench 2 (3x1.5m)

Located by geophysical resistivity, this trench was positioned to coincide with one of the bays of the temple's exedral west-east outer enclosure wall. Removal of the ploughsoil (L1) revealed a mixed sand/silt (L2). Of note from sieving the ploughsoil was the lack of any significant quantity of Roman material, particularly brick, tile or imported building stone. Similarly, Layer 2 only yielded few fragments of Roman tile. Layer 2 was a thin layer overlying natural sands and gravels with no archaeological features. No evidence for the bay or wall line was found.

Trench 3 (3x1.5m)

Located by geophysical resistivity, this trench was positioned to locate the north-east corner of the temple's outer enclosure. Removal of the ploughsoil revealed a mixed sand and silt (L2) which overlay a very compacted subsoil. Interestingly, the section highlights the ploughshare blades cutting into the lower layer. Both Layer 1 and Layer 2 produced cultural material in small quantities. The layer below consisted of a sandy loam - possibly of relic agricultural origin. Beneath this horizon was a mix of natural sands, gravels and loam. No evidence for the north-east corner of the temple's outer enclosure was found.

Trench 4 (3x1.5m)

This trench located by geophysical resistivity near to Olivers Lane was positioned to ascertain the outer north-south alignment of the temple enclosure, in conjunction with Trench 9. The finds from the ploughsoil include only small fragments of Roman tile and a lack of any building stone. Further excavation revealed no evidence for a wall line at all. Instead, the underlying stratigraphy comprised varying deposits of gravels and loams, lacking in any finds. It was concluded that these were natural of post-glacial origin. No evidence for a wall line was found.

Trench 5

This trench was not excavated.

Trench 6 (maximum dimensions 6x1.5m)

Located on the north side of the theatre, but on the same enclosure alignment as Trench 7 and Trench 8, geophysical magnetometry showed two linear features separated by approximately 7m. Initially, a 3x1.5m area of ploughsoil was removed over the southerly of the two features, and then a further 3x1m trench was extended towards the northerly feature. Time constraints meant that no further excavation was undertaken.

Trench 7 (4x1.5m)

Trench 7 was located over the theatre ditch enclosure, which is parallel to the adjacent Roman road line. Removal of the ploughsoil uncovered a uniform layer of sandy loam over the whole of the trench. The finds from this context (L9) included Roman pottery, but also a fragment of modern glazed pot. Evidence of animal activity and former deep-ploughing (F9 & F10) seem likely to account for the later finds being intrusive from above. The thickness of Layer 9 was approximately 0.25m before the west edge of the ditch was revealed. This layer was of a consistent thickness across the whole trench. The interpretation of this context can only be very speculative due to the limited trench size. It is possible that previous deep-ploughing over time has obliterated any edge which may have existed in Layer 9, or indeed that this deposit does seal the ditch. The absence of an east edge necessitated the eastward extension to the trench by 1m. This adequately exposed the entire ditch (F5), measuring approximately 2.5m

in width and 1.0m in depth and displaying a V-shaped profile. The ditch fill consisted of two main fills - both sandy loams with pot and tile within, but in a small quantity. The pottery dating spans residual late Iron Age to mid/late 3rd century.

Trench 8 (4x1.5m)

Beneath the ploughsoil, a mixed slightly silty sands (L17) of between 0.20m and 0.40m depth was encountered before any definite gravel edges for a feature occurred.

Excavation of the feature (F6) revealed a shallow and weathered ditch (approximately 0.50m deep) which appeared to cut an earlier feature (F7) in the north-west corner which was probably of natural origin. This section through the same ditch line contrasted with Feature 5 found in Trench 7. Apart from the differing profiles, the fill of Feature 6 was predominantly mixed sands with very few finds.

Trench 9 (3x1.5m)

Located south of Trench 4 near Olivers Lane, this trench revealed no evidence for a wall line. Excavation to a depth of approximately 0.8m below the surface only yielded few finds which included some small fragments of Roman tile. These were confined to the ploughsoil, except where animal activity had taken fragments to lower contexts. No evidence for a wall line was found.

Trench 10 (4x1m)

Using the plan of Hull's excavations in 1948 of the enclosure wall, a 'best fit' alignment for the long west-east wall was positioned on the ground. The potential problems envisaged stemmed from the points of reference as used by Hull. The north-east corner was located from an old gatepost and entrance on the west side of Olivers Lane (the post assumed to be the same plotted by on the 1948 plan). Olivers Lane is now a tarmac-surfaced road much narrower than the lane which was probably a gravel track 50 years ago. To minimise errors, measurements were taken from the mid-point of the modern lane. The north-west wall corner was located using the hedge boundary to the west of the temple. With this projected alignment, the likely position of the internal north-south enclosure wall (508 ft from the north-west corner) was plotted and a 10x1m-trench positioned across, approximately 11m south of the predicted junction.

An initial 4m-length was excavated, and this revealed a robbed-out wall line (F2) which corresponds to the inner enclosure north-south alignment. The bottom of the robber trench was found approximately 0.9m below the surface, with no surviving foundation remaining. The robbing phase cut through two different deposits. That to the west side sealed a crude prepared surface (F3), which may have butted up against the wall. A small fragment of a copper-alloy brooch was found beneath this feature. To the east of the robber trench was a mixed deposit (L22) containing pottery, animal bone and many flecks of pink-coloured *opus signinum*. The very limited pottery finds from this context date to the early 1st century. Beneath the surface Feature 3, a homogeneous deposit (L27) sealed a linear feature (F13), and to the east of the robbed wall line a linear feature (F12) aligned with Feature 13 was revealed below Layer 22. Provisional interpretation indicates that the construction phase of the wall cut through the ditch line, whereupon the ground level was raised on either side. Dating of this ditch is very difficult due to the few sherds of pottery which identify as Roman and of the 1st-3rd century.

Trench 10, north extension (8x1m)

Having established an approximate position for the inner enclosure north-south wall line, this new trench was located to extend up to 8m to the north in order to ascertain the junction with the west-east wall alignment, given that it now had to be south of Trench 11. The problems envisaged for excavation of this area were that both Jenkins (c 1842) and Hull (1948) had excavated here before. Indeed Hull comments that 'at the corner itself a trench was cut, but work here was not of sufficient extent to be useful' (Hull 1958, 266). This ambiguous statement suggests that he encountered difficulties arising from the work of Jenkins, highlighted by his comment while trying to follow the alignment southward that 'its course was marked only by a dark and rather shapeless trench' (Hull 1958, 266).

Excavation revealed that for just under 2m north a genuine undisturbed robber trench existed. However, the remainder of the trench bore out the fact that Hull had recut into where Jenkins had excavated (F19 in T10, F15 in T11), and indeed had possibly undertaken additional work. A tin-foil wrapper found at the bottom of the trench verified Hull's earlier presence. Previous excavation activity had removed the evidence for the exact continuing wall alignment, and indeed there were additional cuts which are difficult to explain. Presumably they are part of the previous excavation strategies. However, the previous work had neglected to remove the very bottom (0.1m) of the

robbed wall line such that it was just possible to allow for a projected alignment to be plotted. The north edge of the west-east alignment at the T-junction had also been destroyed, but a small break of slope on the south edge gave the only indication, albeit tenuous, to the likely junction. Using this and the point Hull located for the north-east corner of the enclosure as being the most accurate, the west-east wall alignment was plotted. From this the north-west corner of the temple enclosure is calculated to be approximately 28.1m (92ft) north of the outer temple portico. This figure conflicts with Hull's distance of 120ft (36.60m). However, further work is necessary in order to confirm the alignment of the temple enclosure.

Trench 11 (5x1m)

This narrow north-south 5x1m trench was located by projecting the alignment of the robbed wall (F2) in Trench 10 northwards leaving a gap of 8m. According to Hull's plan, it should then lie over the T-junction of the inner temple enclosure. Removal of the ploughsoil uncovered a considerable quantity of building material (L30, F16 & F17), mostly ragstone with some septaria along with Roman tile. The stone and tile was found throughout the trench and seems to be a dump of debris which in a small trench could not be put into context. This dump deposit overlay brownish yellow loam (L30, L31, L32 & L33) undulating throughout the trench. No evidence for the temple enclosure walls were present. Therefore the junction had to be south of this trench.

References

Hull, M R, 1958 *Roman Colchester*, Reports of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London, xx

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List of finds from selected contexts

Trench 1:

F8 (LIA/Roman)

Trench 7:

L9 Roman, early mid 2nd-early 3rd century

L14 Roman, 1st-2nd century

F51 - post-medieval pot fragment (likely intrusive), Roman, 2nd-3rd century

Trench 10:

L22 Roman, late 1st century

F12 Roman, 1st/2nd century

F13 Roman, 1st-3rd century

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