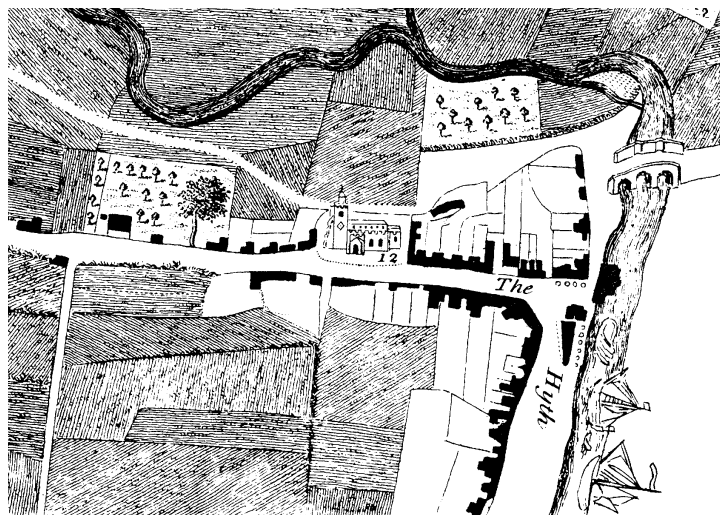


# A report on test pits dug in the churchyard of St Leonard's church, Hythe Hill, Colchester, Essex

March 2000



on behalf of  
**Colchester Borough Council**



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**CAT Report 68**

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**March 2000**

**on behalf of  
Colchester Borough Council**

*by  
Howard Brooks*

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*Front cover: detail from map of Colchester in The history and antiquities of Colchester by Morant (1748).*

# **A report on test pits dug in the churchyard of St Leonard's church, Hythe Hill, Colchester, Essex**

**March 2000**

## **1 Summary**

*Two test pits were sunk against the inner face of the retaining wall on the south side of the churchyard to establish the depth of the wall foundation in relation to present churchyard ground level and pavement level outside. No burials were disturbed, although there was a quantity of loose human bone which was reburied in the excavated pits at the end of the work.*

## **2 Introduction**

- 2.1 At the request of Colchester Borough Council, two test pits (TP 1-2) were cut against the inner face of the churchyard wall on the south edge of St Leonard's church, Hythe Hill (Figs 1, 2).
- 2.2 The work was carried out, according to guidelines written by David Andrews (Diocesan Archaeological Advisor), between 20th and 24th March 2000 by Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT). Post-excavation work took place between 27th March and 17th April 2000.
- 2.3 In a separate exercise, two small test pits (TP 3-4) were dug on the north side of the church under instruction from Mr Simon Marks of Purcell Miller Tritton. While these are not part of the project reported here, it is sensible to include the results from that exercise in the discussion of the material found in TP 1-2.
- 2.4 Archaeological Licence for the removal of human remains was obtained from the Home Office. Faculty was also granted by the Bishop of Chelmsford.
- 2.5 All fieldwork was done in accordance with a specification agreed with the Archaeology Officer of Colchester Museum.
- 2.6 This report mirrors standards and practices contained in Colchester Borough Council's *Guidelines for the standards and practice of archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester*.

### 3 Archaeological background

#### The Hythe

The Hythe area has been the main port for Colchester probably since the Norman period. Originally known as 'New Hythe', it seems to have superseded an earlier landing place at Old Heath (*Ealdeheth*) which was located closer to the mouth of the River Colne (Crummy 1981, 47 & fig 40). However, very little is known about the early development of the medieval Hythe as a port, and no early waterfronts or port facilities have been located. The location and form of the port facilities of the Roman town are also unknown. The alignment of a known Roman road from the direction of Mistley to within half a mile of the Hythe suggests a possible crossing point on the river in this area, which may also indicate a focus for other Roman activity, though to date there is almost no evidence for Roman occupation or use of the Hythe area.

#### St Leonard's church

The church is known to date from at least as early as 1237, though it is probably considerably older (Crummy 1981, 47), and the area around the church is likely to have been a focus for occupation at least since its foundation. The church is a large and complex structure, with a fully aisled nave and chancel and a west tower. Most of the surviving work is of 14th- and 15th-century date. There is a marked mis-alignment of the chancel to the nave, which is presumably a relic of an earlier plan. Pevsner (1954) described the church as 'impressive, but much restored'. St Leonard's was one of the first churches to suffer damage in the Siege of Colchester in 1648, and it was also shaken by the 1884 earthquake. The history of its restoration has been chequered: for example, the repair to its tower was described by Manning (1884) thus: 'The upper story of the tower is a monument of a *crime*. The tower had fallen in, when the churchwardens of about 60 years ago undertook to restore it. They erected the present hideous superstructure of red brick, and finding that the cost exceeded the funds in hand by £70, they sold one of the finest bells to supply the deficiency'.

The graveyard is disused, and has a few 19th-century monuments; partial clearance has taken place, with the headstones placed around the boundary. Burial has probably been intensive, and Manning (1884) recorded that 'the proportions of the tower are sadly marred by the fact of the soil of the churchyard having been raised to the level of the old west door by the burials of successive generations'. The ground level is still high, but in places it was drastically cut down in the 19th century (Rodwell & Rodwell 1977, 36-7).

## **Adjacent excavations**

**79 Hythe Hill (1994-95)** - site code HHC 94; Colchester Museum accession code 1994.50

Excavations in advance of the construction of the Colchester Eastern Approaches road (Maudlyn Road), on the site of 79 Hythe Hill, Colchester (formerly Colchester Tractors), revealed a series of medieval and post-medieval buildings (Brooks 1995).

An earthfast post building of the 15th or 16th century was the first structure on site (Period 1). This was followed by a three-roomed 16th-century structure with dwarf stone plinths, clay floors, and hearths (Period 2). This is Building 182 in the Colchester buildings series. In Period 3 (mid 17th century), the structure was completely rebuilt on the same spot as a four- or five-roomed structure (Building 189 in the Colchester series).

Later periods (Periods 4-5) involved the insertion of a chimney breast and the building of a detached smithy building. The whole site was rebuilt in brick in the 19th century, when the building on the street frontage was named 'St Leonard's House' (Period 5). Romano-British, Saxon and early medieval material was found in residual contexts, including a rare late Saxon iron strap end.

**64-76 Hythe Hill, Colchester (1999)** - site code HHC 99; Colchester Museum accession 1999.143

The excavation was carried out on a plot on the corner of Parson's Lane and Hythe Hill, just west of the 1994 excavation site. This followed an archaeological evaluation which showed the surviving remains of early post-medieval buildings occupying the area of the Hythe Hill road frontage opposite St Leonard's church (CAT Report 36).

There were residual finds of undiagnostic prehistoric struck flint flakes, Roman tile, septaria fragments, Roman greyware pottery and one fragment of Roman red-painted plaster. Period 1 (12th/13th-14th/15th century) consisted of a number of large pits, and a possible post-built building or structure. Period 2 included four phases of 15th- to 16th/17th-century buildings. Period 3 (18th/19th to 20th century) included brick walls on plinths.

## **4 Aim**

The aim of the work described here was to establish the depth and condition of the foundation of the retaining wall on the south side of the churchyard, with minimal disturbance to any burials.

## **5 The test pits (Figs 2-4)**

### **5.1 General**

The pits were hand-dug. Shoring braces were installed east-west across Test pits 1-2, and they were stepped out on their northern side to allow safe access. Excavation generally proceeded in spits of 10-15cm depth. Test pits 3-4 were much smaller (1m square, 0.5m deep) and were not shored.

### **5.2 Test pit 1 (Fig 3)**

**5.2.1** TP 1 measured 2.1m long by 1.1m wide, and was eventually 2.0m deep against the face of the brick wall (Feature 1 or F1). The topsoil Layer 1 or L1 (up to 450mm deep) was cleaned off to reveal L2, a very dry and compact brown sandy loam (max depth 220mm). Fragments of human bone were recovered from both L1 and L2. A large root 100mm in diameter provided clear evidence of root activity in L2. One feature cut L2. This was a shallow pit of unknown purpose (F2). Its fill was dark grey loam with grey wood ash, which might suggest a bonfire pit or even the burning of a tree root.

**5.2.2** L2 sealed L3, an orange brown stony sandy loam (max depth 150mm) which was strongly reminiscent of L7 in the west pit, though it was higher up in the sequence than L7. Fragments of human bone were recovered from this layer.

**5.2.3** Below L3 was L4, a brown sandy loam extending from here 1.2m to the bottom of the excavated trench and 1.95m below graveyard level. This was quite different to the west pit where a soft fill layer L8 had allowed the orange gravelly layer L7 to slump down by up to 250mm. Here in the east pit, the relative firmness of L4 had not allowed the gravelly L3 to settle to any great extent. Fragments of human bone were recovered from this layer.

**5.2.4** The constructional details of the brick wall suggest a better standard of brickmanship than in the west pit. There was an internal offset at 1.4m below the top of the present capping stone (350mm above outside pavement level), and another single brick offset at the bottom of the wall, which rested on a 150mm+ thick lime mortar mix. This is presumably the original work, as opposed to the repair seen in the west pit.

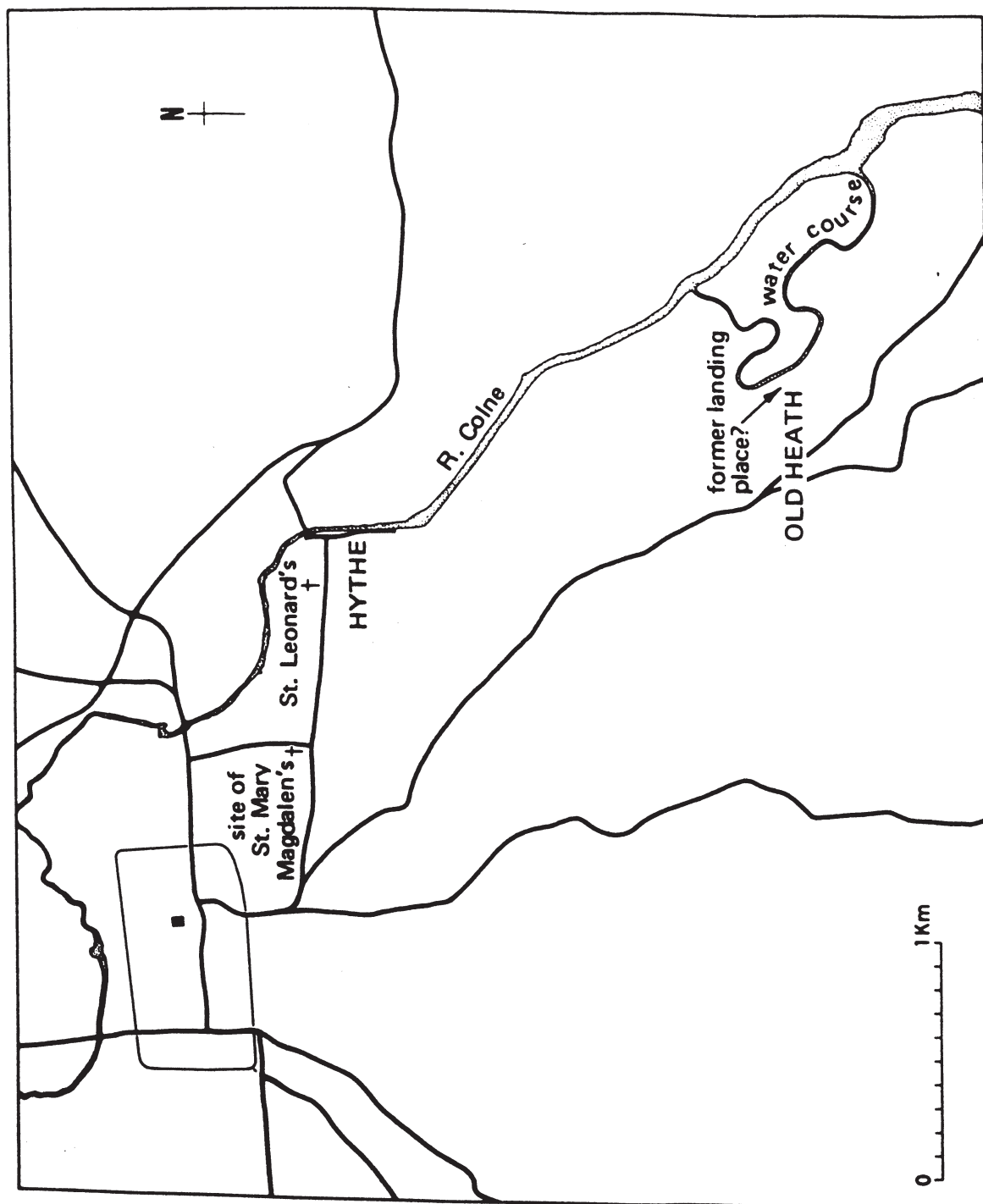
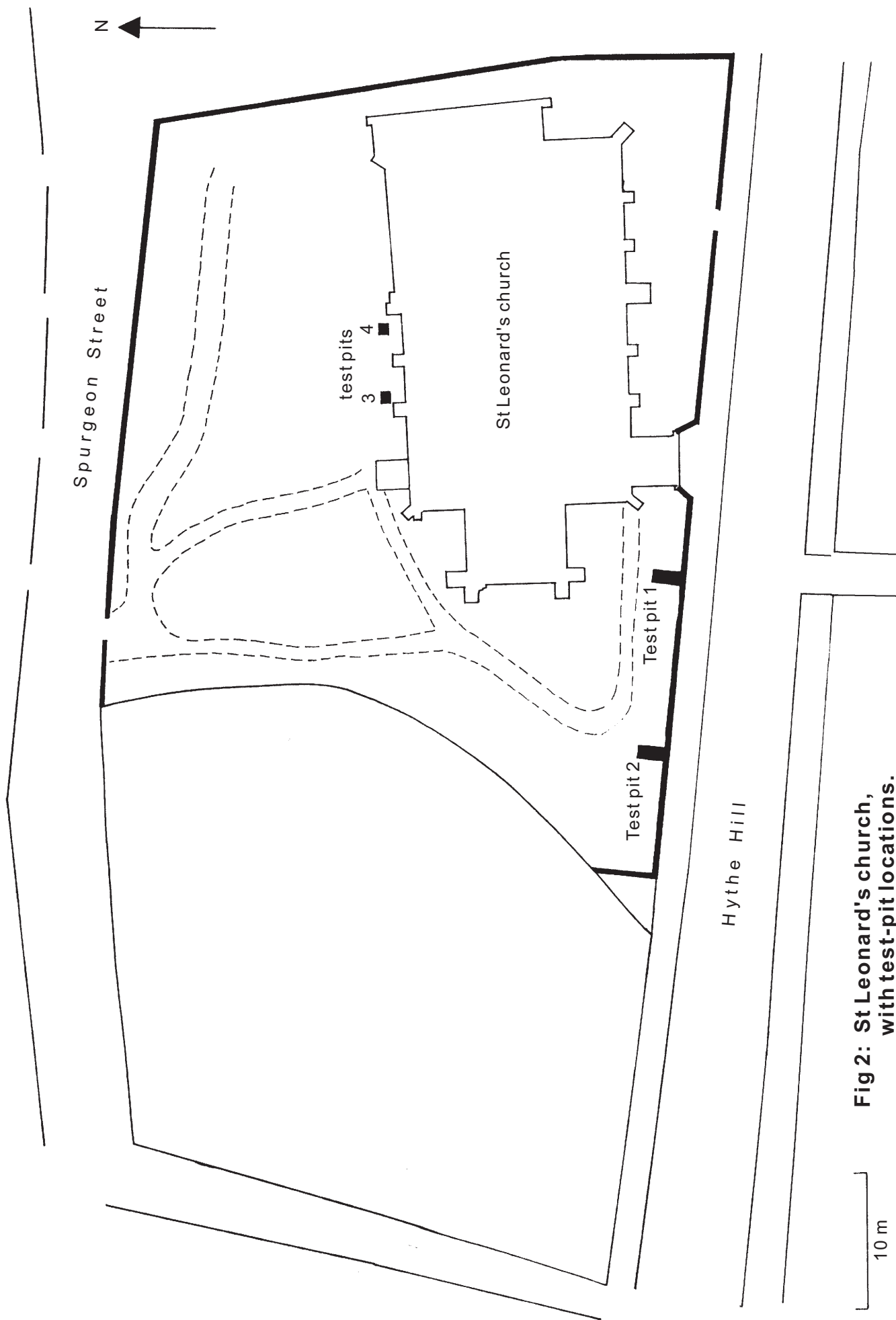
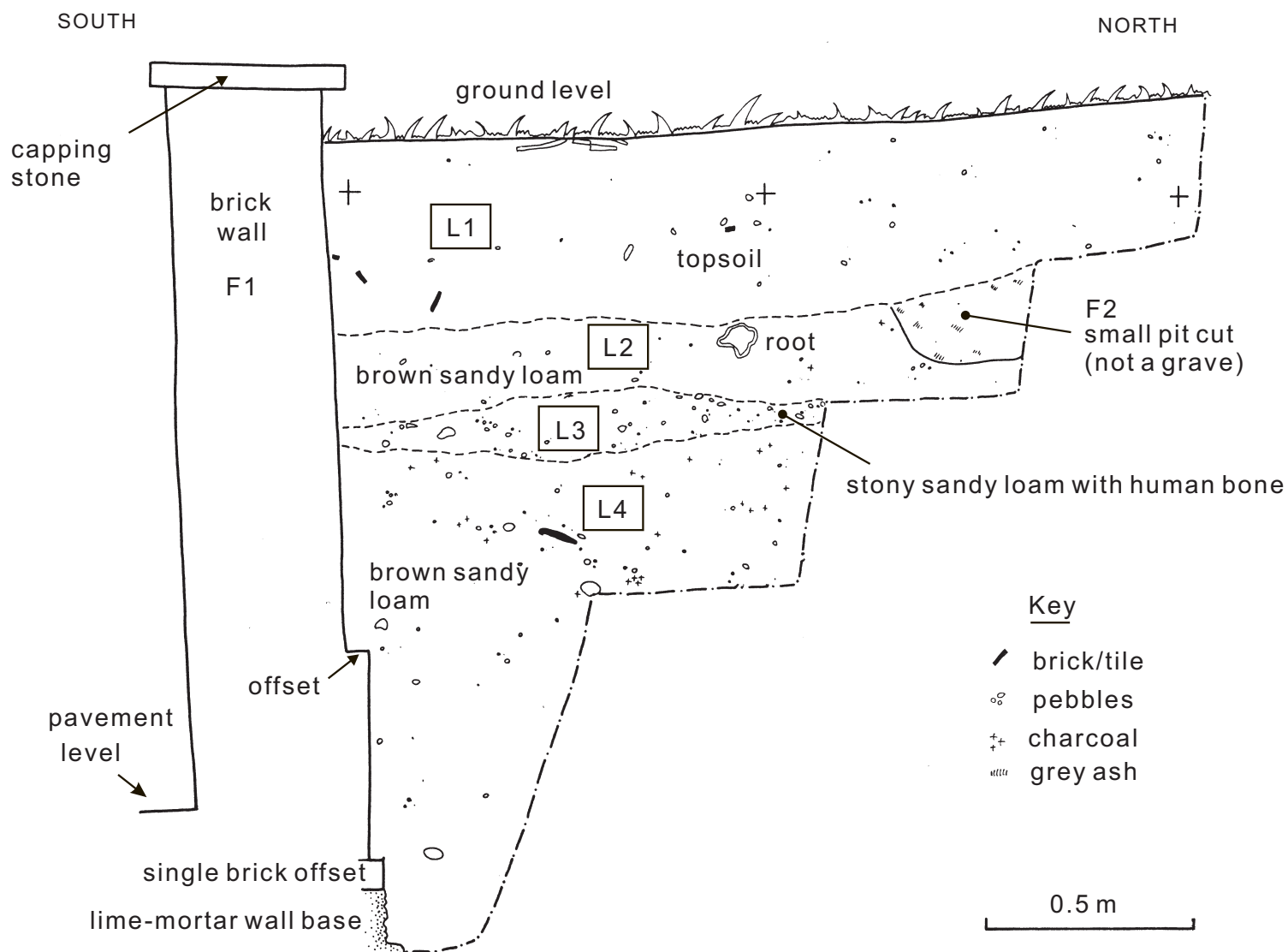


Figure 1: St Leonard's in relation to walled town and the Hythe





**Fig 2: St Leonard's church,  
with test-pit locations.**



**Fig 3: Test pit 1 section.**

### 5.3 Test pit 2 (Fig 4)

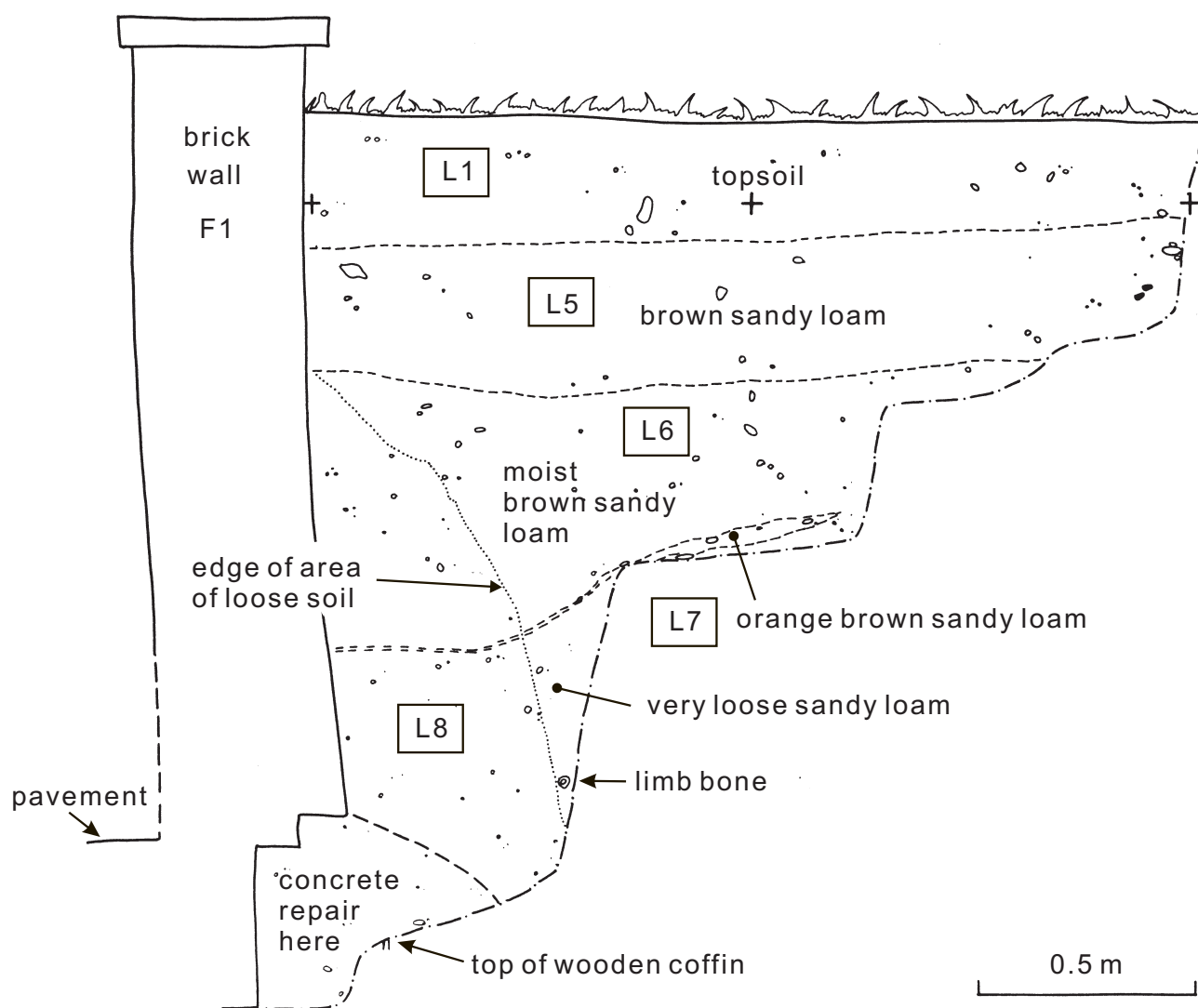
- 5.3.1** TP 2 measured 2.1m long by 1.1m wide, and was eventually 2.0m deep against the face of the brick wall (F1). The topsoil L1 (up to 300mm deep) was cleaned off to reveal subsoil L5, a pebbly brown sandy loam, 350mm deep. Fragments of human bone were recovered from both these layers.
- 5.3.2** The underlying layer L6 (max depth 630mm) was a slightly less stony version of L5. Up to this point, the stratification was almost horizontal and parallel to modern ground, but the bottom of L6 was defined by a thin sloping lens L7 (max depth 40mm), an orange brown sandy loam with small pebbles. L7 was quite clean compared with the overlying material, and it might be natural soil upcast from grave-digging. On the other hand, the natural ground over the road at the 1994 and 1999 excavation sites was clay or brickearth.
- 5.3.3** The southern edge of L7 had slumped down into the underlying soft L8. This was a medium brown sandy loam with lenses of yellow brown sand, small stones, fragments of peg-tile and human bone. The general softness of this layer suggests it is upcast from graves - it was certainly not firm enough for natural ground.
- 5.3.4** L8 sealed a very rough concrete wall repair at 1.6m below graveyard level and 80mm above the outside pavement level. The state of construction of the wall foundation here seems to be a botch job, unless the concrete is an under-pinned repair work to a better-constructed original wall.
- 5.3.5** Investigation below this point was difficult, as we did not want to loosen the foundation, but a thin brown line of decayed wood at 1.85m below graveyard level showed that there was an underlying coffin burial here. Once the wood stain was seen, no further excavation was done, but the position of the wood stain would indicate that it was the south edge of a coffin. The obvious question here is, was the soft L8 the fill of the grave cut containing the coffin stain seen at the trench bottom? This is not entirely impossible, but there was no cut line for the southern edge of the grave (unless the brick wall served as the back edge of the grave), nor was there any north edge of the cut visible in the excavated trench (though it may have been farther north beyond the trench edge). In conclusion, L8 might, in retrospect, have been a grave fill.
- 5.3.6** The presence of a concrete mix repair at the foot of the wall has implications for the date of all this stratified sequence. On the assumption that concrete is unlikely to be pre-1830s <sup>1</sup>, the whole sequence exposed in the west trench must be Victorian and later.

<sup>1</sup>

Portland Cement was patented by Joseph Aspdin in 1824 (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

SOUTH

NORTH



**Fig 4: Test pit 2 section.**

## **5.4 Test pit 3 (Fig 2)**

- 5.4.1 TP 3 was dug on the north side of the church, in the bay east of the north door bay. The stratification was straightforward. L9 topsoil (100mm deep) lay over L10, a dark brown sandy loam with peg-tile fragments and small gravel - very similar to L2 and L5 in the earlier pits. Maximum excavation depth was 500mm (still in L10). The topsoil here is very shallow (100mm, compared with 450 mm in TP 1 and 300 in TP 2) which implies that ground level has been reduced here.

## **5.5 Test pit 4 (Fig 2)**

- 5.4.1 TP 4 was dug on the north side of the church, two bays east of the north door bay. As in TP 3, the stratification was straightforward. L9 topsoil (200mm deep) lay over L11, a dark brown sandy loam with smashed brick, peg-tile and sewer-pipe fragments and small gravel. Maximum excavation depth was 500mm (still in L11). Although the topsoil was not as shallow as in TP 3, ground level has been reduced here. The presence of sewer-pipe fragments would indicate the replacement of an old drain line.

# **6 Finds**

Finds consisted of loose fragments of human bone, and three coffin handles. These were all reburied on site. Loose scraps of undifferentiated peg-tile (L1, L4, L8) and septaria (L2) were not kept.

# **7 Discussion and interpretation**

## **The retaining wall on the south side of the churchyard**

The Ordnance Survey 1st edition sheet shows the arrangement of porch and graveyard wall in what appear to be their present condition. On this basis, the graveyard retaining wall is certainly pre-1896. There was no opportunity to examine the surface of the bricks to check for frogs, but these soft reds could date to the 18th or 19th century. Manning (1884 in Rodwell & Rodwell 1977) notes that the church tower was repaired in brick *circa* the 1820s. If the wall were not already built by that time, then it may well date to the 1820s.

This brick wall had a foundation of lime mortar (TP 2), and had subsequently been badly repaired (TP 1) with a concrete patch. It may be that the occasion for this repair was the digging of a grave against the wall face some time in the early 19th century (evidence of a coffin in the form of a wood stain was seen at the bottom of TP 1).

## Burials

No burials were cut through by the test pits, although evidence of a coffin (in the form of a wood stain seen at the bottom of TP 1) shows that a grave had been dug against the wall face some time in the early 19th century. It is assumed that no burials took place in this graveyard after the Burial Act of 1852.

## Ground reduction and soil accumulation

Burial has probably been intensive in this graveyard throughout the post-medieval period (Rodwell & Rodwell 1977), and this has resulted in an accumulation of soil against the south boundary wall. Judging by Manning's comments (1884) that *'the proportions of the tower are sadly marred by the fact of the soil of the churchyard having been raised to the level of the old west door by the burials of successive generations'*, most if not all of the strata seen in TP 1-2 were probably already there by Manning's time. The exception would be the topsoil L1, which has presumably grown deeper in the intervening period.

The ground level is still high on the south edge of the graveyard, but the shallow topsoil in TP 3-4 shows that there has been some ground reduction here. This activity is dated to the 19th century by Rodwell and Rodwell (1977, 36-7).

The church fabric was not seen in any of the test pits.

With regard to the date of the strata observed at St Leonard's church, the following sequence of events can be suggested:

Period	Activity
18th/19th century	construction of retaining wall F1
18th to early or mid-19th	use of graveyard resulting in accumulation of graveyard soil L4
early to mid-19th century	grave cut (L8) against inner face of retaining wall and concrete repair (TP 2)
early to mid-19th century and up to 1852	intensive graveyard use leading to deposition of graveyard soils L2-L3, L5-L7, L10-L11
after 1852	accumulation of topsoil layer L1, L9
after 1884?	reduction of ground level on north side of church (L9 only)

## 8 Acknowledgements

Site work was supervised by Howard Brooks, and carried out by Nigel Rayner and Alec Wade. Original figures by AW. Thanks to Alan Frost of Colchester Borough Council, Simon Marks of Purcell Miller Tritton, and the Parish of St Leonard's for access and assistance.

## 9 References

- |                                       |      |  |
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| Rodwell, Warwick, and Rodwell, Kirsty | 1977 | <i>Historic churches: a wasting asset.</i> Council for British Archaeology Research Report <b>19</b> .                                   |

## 10 Glossary

context	specific location on an archaeological site, especially one where finds are made
feature	an identifiable thing like a pit, a wall, a drain, a floor. Can contain 'contexts'
intrusive	early material out of place in a later context (eg a Coca-Cola bottle in a Roman pit)
lens	a thin layer, often lens-shaped in section
medieval	from AD 1066 to Henry VIII
NGR	National Grid Reference
natural	geological deposit undisturbed by human activity
post-medieval	after Henry VIII and up to Victorian
residual	an earlier object out of place in a later context (eg a Roman coin in a Victorian pit)
Roman	period from AD 43 to around AD 430
Saxon	after Roman and up to AD 1066
septaria	local mudstone used as building stone by Romans
u/s	unstratified (no context)

## 11 Archive deposition

The paper archive is held at Colchester Archaeological Trust, 12 Lexden Rd, Colchester, Essex C03 3NF, but will be permanently deposited at Colchester Museum, under accession code 2000.25.

## 12 Site data

### 12.1 Site context list

Pit	Context	Description	Cuts/seals	Context date
1, 2	F1	brick wall	-	18th century?
2	F2	cut - wood-burning pit?	L2	19th/20th century
1, 2	L1	topsoil	L2, L5	late 19th to 20th century
2	L2	dumped soil	L3	later 19th century
2	L3	dumped gravelly soil	L4	mid to late 19th century
2	L4	graveyard soil	-	mid to late 19th century
1	L5		L6	later 19th century
1	L6	dumped soil	L7	mid to late 19th century
1	L7	dumped gravelly soil	L8	mid to late 19th century
1	L8	grave fill??	-	mid 19th century
3, 4	L9	topsoil	L10, L11	late 19th to 20th century
3	L10	graveyard soil	-	mid to late 19th century
4	L11	graveyard soil	-	mid to late 19th century

### 12.2 Soil descriptions

Pit	Context	Description
1,2	L1	Topsoil and turf. Dark brown sandy loam, occasional small-medium pebbles. Human bone.
2	L2	Compact and dry mixed yellow brown sandy loam with dark brown sandy loam. Occasional small pebble. Pieces of unshaped septaria and sandstone. Human bone.
2	L3	Compact and very dry orange/brown sandy loam with small stones. Human bone.
2	L4	Compact and very dry yellowish brown sandy loam. Very mixed. Common small to medium pebbles, occasional peg-tile, brick, mortar scraps. Human bone
1	L5	Moist, compact dark yellow brown sandy loam with common small stones and human bone.
1	L6	As L5 but less stony.
1	L7	Loose and moist orange brown sandy loam with occasional small pebbles.
1	L8	Very loose, moist mid brown sandy loam with lenses of yellow brown sand. Occasional small stones and pieces of peg-tile. Human bone.
3, 4	L9	as L1.
3	L10	Dark yellow brown sandy loam, smashed brick, peg-tile, Roman tile, and sewer pipe fragments.
4	L11	Dark yellow brown sandy loam, occasional peg-tile and small pebbles.

Howard Brooks  
19th April 2000

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