

# the Colchester archaeologist

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TIME TEAM



# ASDA superstore site



Archaeological excavations on the site of the ASDA superstore at Turner Rise in Colchester, funded by ASDA

**The extensive redevelopment on the north side of Colchester on Turner Rise near North Station, including the new ASDA superstore, led to rescue excavations in the winter of 1996/97 by the Colchester Archaeological Trust — sometimes in the snow! — which revealed a large Roman cremation cemetery.**

## Roman cemetery

The existence of a Roman burial ground in the vicinity of North Station has been known for many years, although recent archaeological investigations ahead of the building of the new ASDA superstore provided us with the first opportunity to explore the cemetery in detail in modern times. The earliest-known archaeological discoveries from here were

made on the adjacent site of the railway embankment, where the Victorian amateur archaeologist William Wire recorded several Roman burials in the 1840s, during the building of the railway. These included two burials in amphoras, one containing six glass vessels. Later, in the 1920s, over 30 burials were found in clay pits just to the south of the railway line. Then, between November 1996 and February 1997, our work on the ASDA site showed that this same cemetery had extended north of the site of the railway and that it probably contained hundreds of burials.

## Work in 1996/7

This recent work shows that the burials were loosely strung out from north to south, in small irregular clusters.

Careful machine stripping and trenching was necessary to find them. In about 20 examples, the cremated bone had been buried in a pottery vessel, but there was also a surprising variety of other forms of burial, ranging from small pits with only bone, to pits containing the remains of wooden caskets with iron fittings, and large regularly-shaped pits each containing as many as five vessels. Other grave goods included copper-alloy brooches, discs of worked bone, pottery lamp fragments, and a miniature pewter vessel. In most graves, the cremated bone was distributed throughout the fill as though it had been scattered into the grave as it was backfilled.

The burials can be broadly dated from the late 1st to the 3rd centuries, and form part of Roman Colchester's northern cemetery area. This was possibly associated with a Roman suburb (known from earlier discoveries) which was situated north of the river in an area around what is now the Victoria Inn in North Station Road.

Many cremation vessels have been collected in Colchester, mainly by antiquarians in the last century, but this is the first time that a Roman cremation cemetery has been excavated and recorded in detail in the town. In the past, detailed records were not made and many finds were not kept, especially such things as bone, nails and other small objects. However, at this site, we have now recovered a lot of information relating to such topics as burial rite and cemetery organisation. Further analysis of the bone and the pottery will produce even more data about the population of the Roman town and use of the cemetery.

## Other findings

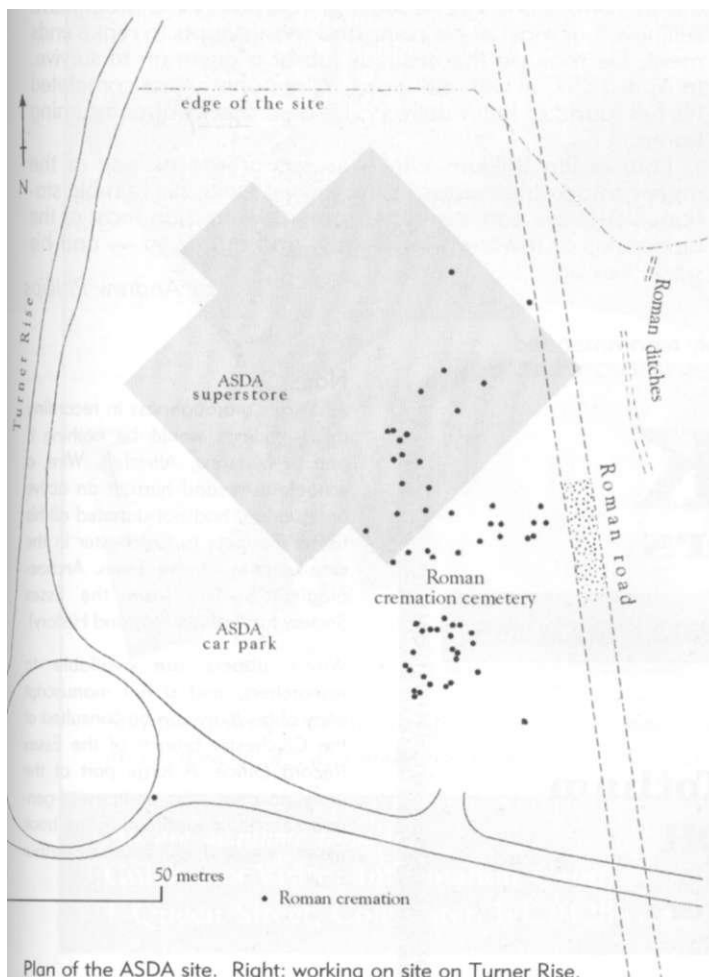
To the east of the burials lay a previously unknown north-south Roman road, the lower layers of which were quite well preserved. The cemetery lay on the west side of the road, and fronted on to it.

Wire noted in his diary that a Roman kiln had been discovered during excavations for clay near the brick kilns east of the station. This would place it about 250 yards east of the cemetery. The kiln was here because of the clay, and there must have been similar Roman kilns in the area which have not been found or recorded. Thus the discovery of the road clarifies the layout of the area in the Roman period. We can now see that the cemetery was on one side of the road, with pottery working on the other.

The low quality of some of the pots from the cemetery is interesting. Some may be unsaleable products from the nearby kilns. The grave goods here are so poor that this must have been the burial place of a relatively poor section of the town's Roman community. The nearby pottery kilns suggest that pottery workers were buried here. More interestingly, it also suggests that such people were poor compared with the typical person buried close to the town centre. This is of great interest because it is rare for archaeological discoveries in Colchester to provide such clear indications of the marked social divisions which existed at that time.

We also found a 19th-century brick kiln (presumably one of those referred to by Wire) and clay pits nearby. Industrial remains such as these are also of interest, since they are rarely recorded and yet provide evidence of important local industries of the more recent past.

by Don Shimmin



Plan of the ASDA site. Right: working on site on Turner Rise.

