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COLCHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

FIELD PROJECTS

EXCAVATION to rear of 21 NORTH HILL, COLCHESTER

March 1994

Commissioned for Southburn Property Co.

by Heritage Planning

COLCHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST: FIELD PROJECTS

EXCAVATION to rear of 21 NORTH HILL, COLCHESTER

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SUMMARY

Excavations revealed a sequence of Roman, medieval and post-medieval activity on the site. No prehistoric or Saxon material was present.

Two Roman floor levels, at 0.45 and 0.8m below present site level, each sealed by a layer of demolition debris. Both floors were cut by a large, early medieval pit. Subsequently, in the post-medieval period, topsoil formed over the Roman deposits, and was disturbed (by cultivation?). In the later 20th century, construction of a retaining wall and a car park have respectively cut through all the earlier material, and caused several soil layers to be dumped on top of it.

A large quantity of residual Roman material was recovered, including *opus signinum* and *tesserae*. The only finds of any intrinsic importance were a few sherds of Thetford Ware.

DESCRIPTION of EXCAVATION

A trench measuring 1 x 1 metre was laid out in the position shown on figure 1. The original plan was to position it 30cm farther to the west, but it was relocated to avoid having to cut through the concrete yard floor, or the brick and breeze-block wall (F3).

Layer 1 (the make up for the modern car park) which only covered the east edge of the trench, was removed swiftly. This revealed L2, an obviously recent skim of topsoil which had probably been put there for mainly cosmetic reasons, and probably at the time when the present retaining wall (F3) was built. The removal of layer 2 revealed L3, a cindery topsoil which was also dumped recently on the west edge of the site, although the fact that it was cut by the construction trench (F2) for the present wall (F3) means that it slightly predates it.

After the removal of L3, L4 was revealed - the first deposit which was not of obviously very recent origin. This is probably the old topsoil on the site before the more recent activity (i.e. layers 1-3, F2-3), and is post-medieval in date. The removal of L4 exposed the highest Roman deposits (L10 and L5).

Layer 10 was a band of clay with Roman brick fragments, and was much more obvious in section than it was in excavation. It overlay L5, a thin (1cm) layer of crumbly Roman mortar. L5 did not really have a "surface" as such, but had all the appearances of being the abraded base of a mortar floor. It is interesting that several plain red *tesserae* (floor mosaic cubes) were recovered from the trench. To suggest that L5 is the base of what was a plain red tessellated floor is to go beyond the excavated evidence, but this possibility cannot be

discounted. Under Layer 5 were two contexts which were left *in situ* in the trench. The first was L8 a band of topsoil with mortar lumps and Roman brick fragments. This probably represents some sort of demolition activity on or near to the site, and the use of the debris to level up the site before the laying of the floor (layer 5).

Underneath L8 was L9, a very firm band of brown clay which was almost certainly an earlier Roman floor level. It might be sensible to suggest that the building whose floor was L9 was demolished, and its remains (i.e. L8) were used as a base for the next floor (L5) which was presumably part of a building which replaced the earlier one. The large quantity of Roman brick, tile, and mortar from this trench is consistent with several phases of demolition and rebuilding, notwithstanding the fact that some of the disturbance may have been caused after the Roman period.

To return to the situation after the removal of L4, the contexts which have just been described (layers 10, 5, 8, 9) were all truncated on their western sides. It was very difficult to judge, in the small trench, whether they were cut by a large pit, or merely sealed by a succession of layers. For this reason a preliminary photo was taken with the label F1 (and see figure 3), but the layers were individually numbered L6, and L7. With hindsight, it is probably correct that there is a large medieval pit F1 which cuts layers 10, 5, 8, and 9, and that the excavated layers 6 and 7 are in fact its fills. Layer 7 goes deeper than the required excavation depth (1 metre), so there is more of it below the excavated trench depth. Despite the large quantity of Roman material recovered from these contexts, they are dated (i.e. F1 is dated) by early medieval pottery, including Thetford ware, to the 11th to 12th centuries.

HISTORY of SITE

As far as it is possible to judge from a small trench, the following sequence of events may be suggested (Roman A-C does not imply strict dating, it is merely a sequence).

Roman (A)

There was an early Roman building on the site, known only by its clay floor (L9).

Roman (B)

The building was demolished (producing debris L8) and a new floor L5 was laid (in a new building?).

Roman (C)

The new floor was covered by demolition debris (L10), and the building went out of use.

Early medieval

A large pit (F1 - containing fills L6, L7) was dug through the earlier Roman deposits. Although it cannot be demonstrated here, the probability is that this was a pit dug into the garden behind a medieval house on the North Hill frontage. The occurrence of a few sherds of Thetford ware, also previously located at both 17 and 49 North Hill (Crummy 1981, 39 and figure 29), confirms early medieval activity in this area.

Post-medieval

A depth of topsoil (L4) accumulated over the site. Although it may be medieval in origin, L4 contains post-medieval material, and so was disturbed and/or added to in post-medieval times.

Later 20th century

A layer of topsoil (L3) was dumped on the west edge of the site, presumably against the previous retaining wall.

Subsequently, the retaining wall was rebuilt (as F3) in a construction trench F2. F3 is of one build with the present yard surface to the rear of 21 North Hill. A thin layer of topsoil L2 was spread over the site, and a car park foundation L1 was laid on top of it.

REFERENCES

- | | |
|-------------------|--|
| Crummy, Philip | <i>Aspects of Anglo-Saxon and Norman Colchester</i> . Colchester Archaeological Trust Report 1. Council for British Archaeology Research Report 39. 1981 |
| Cunningham, Carol | <i>Post-medieval sites and their pottery: Moulsham Street, Chelmsford</i> . Chelmsford Archaeological Trust Report 5. Council for British Archaeology Research Report 54. 1985 |

Appendix 1

Correlation of 1994 excavated contexts with 1989 observations

In 1989 Carl Crossan carried out a preliminary investigation of the site by means of six machine cut trenches. His Trench 2 was quite close to the 1994 trench, and is marked on figure 1. Despite the fact that site level has changed since then, it was possible to locate the brick course from which 1989 site levels had been measured.

Notes on the 1989 trench are here followed by 1994 comments in italics.

35 cms of topsoil (*broadly equivalent to 1994 layers 3-4*)

6 cm layer - Top of Roman deposits (*no specific match - 1994 layer 10?*)

34 cm layer - layers of alternating sandy loam/silty loam. Make-up (*no specific match - 1994 layer 10?*)

1cm mortar floor - (*apparently good match - 1994 layer 5*)

Appendix 2

CONTEXT LIST & SOIL DESCRIPTIONS

CONTEXT LIST

<u>No.</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Cuts/seals</u>	<u>Period</u>
F1	Pit?	L5	Medieval
F2	Construction trench	L2 - L5	20th century
F3	Wall	(in F2)	20th century
L1	Car park surface	L2	20th century
L2	Topsoil	L3	20th century
L3	Dumped topsoil	L4	20th century
L4	Disturbed topsoil	L10, L6-7	Post-medieval
L5	Abraded mortar floor?	L8	Roman
L6	Lens in L7		Medieval
L7	Layer (or fill of F1?)	L8	Medieval
L8	Dump/demolition debris	L9	Roman
L9	Clay floor?		Roman
L10	Demolition debris	L5	Roman

SOIL DESCRIPTIONS

- L1 Smashed Victorian brick in 7.5yr strong brown gravelly clay matrix.
- L2 10yr 3/2 V dark grey brown humic topsoil with 5% brick fragments
- L3 10yr 2/2 v dark brown humic topsoil with about 20% admixture of cinders/coke frags and up to 5% each of small rounded stones and bits of Roman brick/tile.
- L4 10yr 3/2 v dark greyish brown humic topsoil with 2-5% small stones and frags of Roman brick. Occasional large tegula fragment.
- L5 10yr 6/6 brownish yellow sandy mortar. Occasional bits of white ?lime and *opus signinum*
- L6 as L7
- L7 10yr 2/2 v dark brown topsoil with up to 10% of individually large tiles and septaria fragments, otherwise quite clean, perhaps only 2% small stones.
- L8 Mostly 10yr 3/3 brown sandy topsoil with 5% brownish yellow mortar pockets and occasional tile/brick fragments.
- L9 Very firm 10yr 6/6 brownish yellow clay, clean apart from occasional brick or oyster shell fragment.
- L10 10yr 4/4 dark yellowish brown sandy clay with occasional mortar flecks and brick fragments.

Appendix 3

FINDS LIST

(all weights in grammes: material marked **R** is residual in this context: post-medieval fabric description is after Cunningham 1985)

<u>Bag No</u>	<u>Context</u>	<u>Description</u>
1	L3	1 sherd early medieval 22g R 3 sherds Roman pottery. 2nd Century+.44g. R 1 piece modern glass. 4g 2 sherds 19-20th cent china.4g 1 teapot lid frag 20th cent 22g 1 med/post med tile fragment 80g
2	L2	1 sherd glazed fabric 40 17-19th century 12g
3	L4	1 Thetford ware sherd 10g R 1 sherd ironstone 18th cent+.26g 2 Roman <i>tegula</i> frags 436g. R 2 Roman brick frags 60g R 1 plain red <i>tessera</i> . 32g. R 2 oyster shells. 52g 1 lump Roman mortar. 126g 1 iron fragment. 34g 5 animal bones. 92g
4	L4	1 Roman brick fragment. 1155g. R 1 Roman brick fragment. 725g. R 1 frag oolitic shelly limestone. No worked surfaces. 690g
5	L6	1 Roman brick frag 40g. R 3 irregular <i>tesserae</i> . 74g. R 3 animal bones. 60g 1 frag post-med glass 4g
6	L7	2 Roman brick frags. 510g. R 1 Roman tile frag. 74g. R 1 Roman <i>tessera</i> . 26g. R 1 lump <i>opus signinum</i> . 30g 5 animal bone frag. 144g 2 sherds 11-12th century pottery. 24g
7	L7	1 Roman brick fragment. 1030g. R 1 abraded ?Roman tile. 292g 1 unworked, fine grained limestone frag. 935g
8	L7	1 Roman <i>tegula</i> frag. 1140g R 1 Roman <i>tegula</i> /brick frag 870g. R

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Figure 1: Trench location

Scale 1:50

Site Boundary

Car Park

Site Boundary

Kerbstones

1989 Trench 2

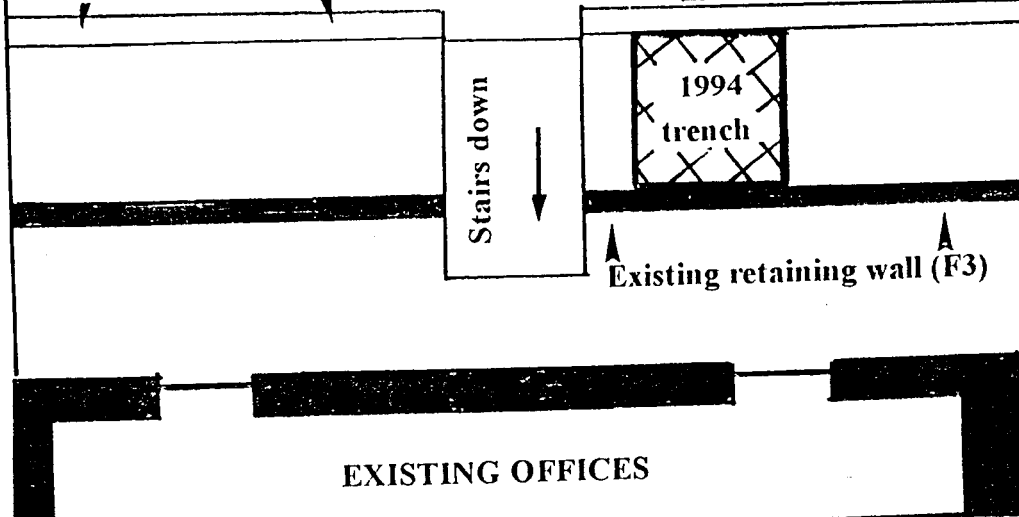
Stairs down

1994
trench

Existing retaining wall (F3)

NUNNS ROAD

EXISTING OFFICES

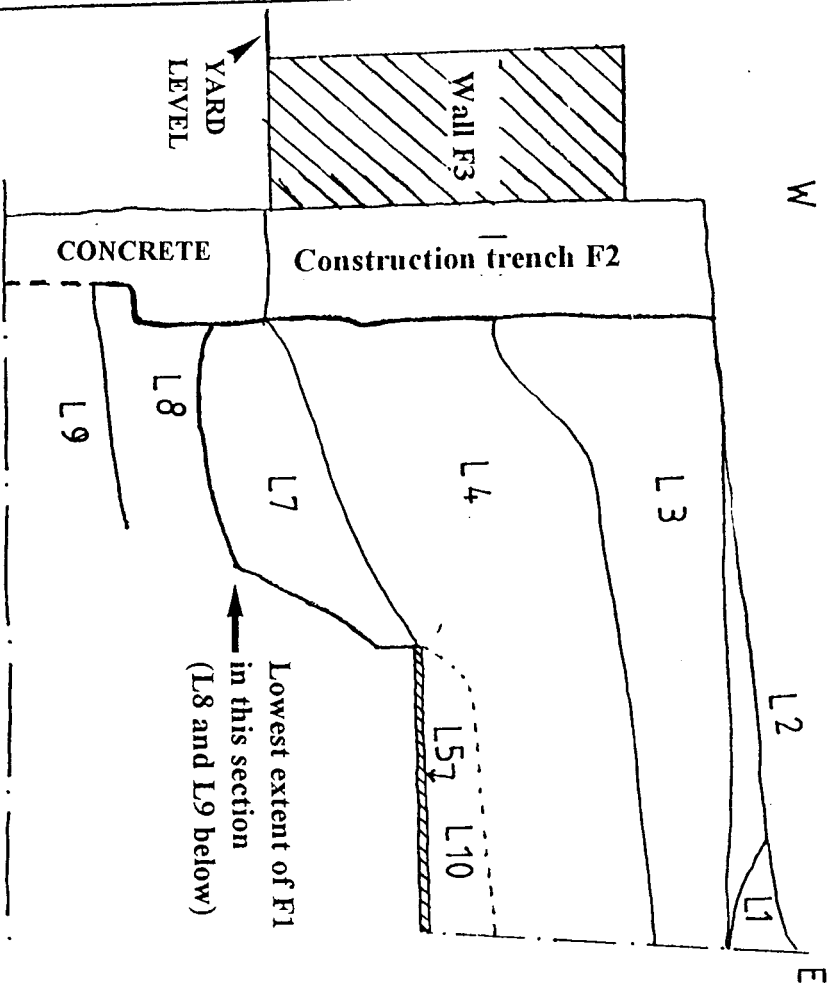


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Figure 2 : Section, north face

Scale 1:10

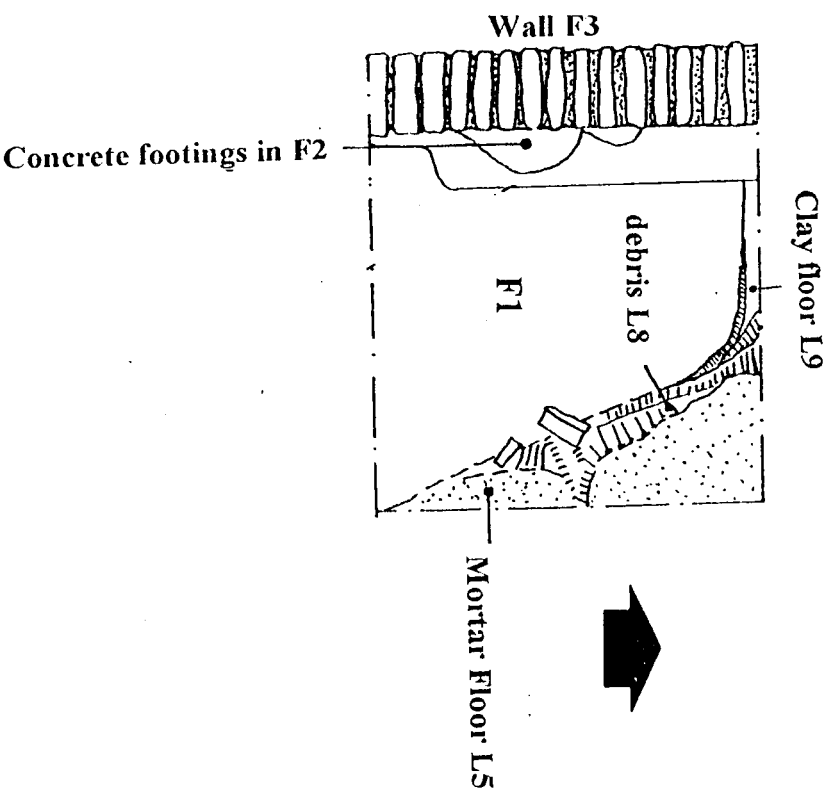


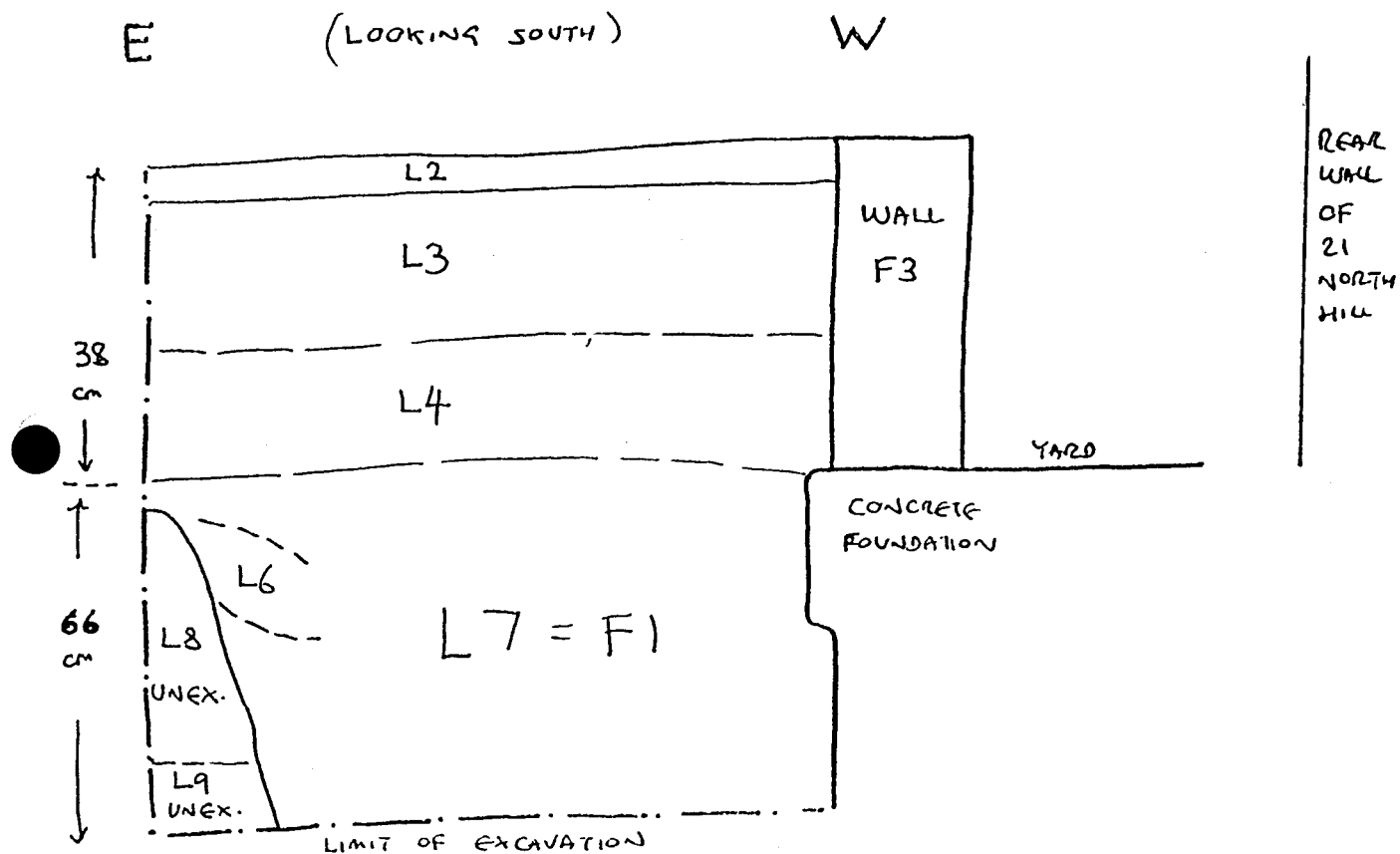
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Figure 3: Trench plan

Scale 1:20



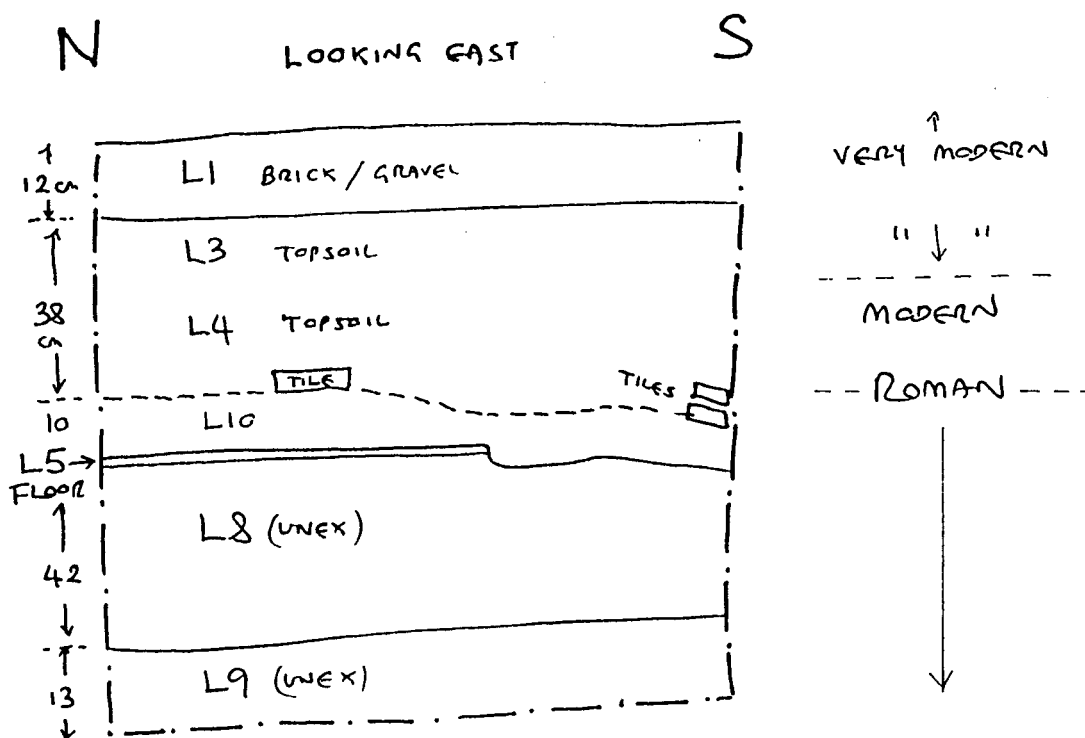


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*Figure 4: sketch section
south face of trench*

Scale 1:10



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*Figure 5: sketch section
east face of trench*

Scale 1:10