Colchester Archaeological Trust Archive Report

Archaeological Evaluation Trenches and Watching Brief at Turner Rise, Colchester

Former British Rail Car Park Site

SUMMARY

Trial trenching followed by a watching brief revealed sporadic evidence of a Roman cemetery area, including an inurned cremation burial, an undated east-west inhumation grave-like feature, and an unstratified Roman pot, as well as scatters of Roman finds.

INTRODUCTION

Archaeological work took place from April to June 1996 in the former British Rail car park (TL 9940 2645), east of North Station roundabout, during the early stages of development at Turner Rise.

Previous recorded discoveries from the site itself were negligible, although Roman finds were reported during the cutting of the railway embankment immediately south of the site in the 1840's. William Wire mentions two `amphora burials' at this time, as well as several more probable cremation burials, and one of the former was apparently found in the northern edge of the embankment, immediately adjacent to the more recent car park (Hull 1958, 257; Fig 1). These interments perhaps formed part of a cemetery area, which also included a larger group of burials found in brickyards some 200-300 m to the east in 1928-30, and which may have served Roman Colchester's northern suburbs (CAR 9, 261). Evidence for post-Roman activity was limited to use as fields, as shown on 19th century Ordnance Survey plans and other early maps, such as Monson's of 1848, although the arrival of the railway entailed some encroachment over the southern edge of the site.

The site lies on a slight south-west facing incline, sloping from approximately 26.5 m to 17 m O.D. The contractors' soil survey had confirmed that below recent `made ground' there were extensive deposits of London Clay close to the surface, sealed in places by pockets of sand and gravel, and by periglacial deposits. In this report, the terms `recent' and `modern' refer to the period anytime from the coming of the railways in the 1840's to the present day.

The finds from the site, together with the detailed site records, will be archived with Colchester Museums (CM 96.8).

EVALUATION TRENCHES (Fig 1)

An archaeological field evaluation, consisting of a series of trial trenches, was commissioned by the developers, Turner Rise Development Consortium Limited (TRDCL), in order to assess the threat of development to the buried remains on the site, especially in view of the

19th century discoveries. After initial delays, the machine-dug trial trenches were finally excavated along the southern and eastern sides of the site on April 19th 1996 (Trial Trenches 1-5; fig 1). The trenches were dug into the top of the natural subsoil, usually to a depth of 1-1.5 m, although occasionally slightly deeper; trial trenches 1 and 2 were 0.95 m wide, and trenches 3-5 were 1.8 m wide.

Trial trenches 1 and 2 were dug on waste ground south-west of the car park, and revealed only modern dump layers up to 1.4 m deep, including over a metre of coal dust and clinker in trench 2. Further deposits of the latter, up to a depth of 2.1 m below the car park surface, were observed in the western end of trench 3, and this material was probably used to backfill the enclosure for a railway turntable, which survived in use perhaps as late as the early 1960s. A large modern north-south brick foundation (F4) lay towards the eastern edge of the enclosure.

In the central portion of trench 3, natural clay was only 0.4 m below the modern ground surface, and was sealed by a mixed dump layer (L2; see below), 0.25 m thick, which was probably of late 19th or early 20th century date, rather than being modern make-up for the car park surface. This layer extended over the eastern end of trench 3, where it sealed a lighter topsoil (L3; see below), up to 0.5 m thick, which appeared to represent a post-medieval or earlier ploughsoil of limited extent, truncated elsewhere as a result of the extensive modern disturbance on the site.

At the western end of trench 4 a large modern pit or pits (F2; see below), 1.3 m deep, had removed all trace of L3. The backfilled pit, which extended for some 30 m eastwards although becoming shallower, was sealed by the fragmentary remains of a modern brick structure with a thin mortar floor and a series of narrow brick foundation, immediately below the car park make-up. This was presumably a railway building, perhaps associated with a former coal yard close by to the east.

A small grave-like feature (F1; Fig 2) was uncovered at a depth of 0.8 m in the bottom of trench 4, immediately east of the brick structure. The feature was 2.5 m long, 0.8 m wide, and survived up to 0.3 m deep. It was aligned east-west, and was cut into natural sand, although its original depth and stratigraphic position was unclear. The main fill of F1 was a light grey loamy sand, although this was sealed by a less extensive brownish-grey upper fill 0.05 m thick, which may have represented a soil stain, perhaps of decayed organic material. The size and orientation of F1 suggests that it may be a truncated inhumation burial, the contents of which had almost completely decayed in the acidic soil. Unfortunately no finds were recovered from the feature, although a Roman date, perhaps from a late phase of use of the cemetery area, seems quite feasible. The proximity of modern features does of course imply that caution is required over this interpretation.

Natural subsoil was close to the car park surface at the eastern end of trench 4 and also in trench 5, indicating again the extent of recent terracing. The mixed, modern dump layer (L2) was encountered in trench 4 and more pronounced in trench 5, where it was 0.25-0.35 m thick. An almost complete Roman pot (96.8 (1); see below) had been discovered to the west of trench 5 by a digger driver on the day before the evaluation.

The evaluation trenches demonstrated that, despite extensive modern disturbance, significant archaeological remains such as Roman burials may well be present, albeit sporadically, within the redevelopment area.

WATCHING BRIEF

As groundwork had already begun at the time of the evaluation, a watching brief was maintained on the site continuously until June 1996. Machine stripping in advance of roadworks proceeded from north-east to south-west down the slope, and involved the removal of from 2 m to over 5 m of soil, mostly London Clay. On the basis of the evaluation, archaeological deposits as well as more modern fill could be expected in the uppermost 1-2 m, but the speed and method of stripping meant that detailed observations of areas at this level was difficult. However as material was dug away in strips, successive section faces could usually be rapidly assessed and recorded.

ROMAN BURIAL (Figs 1&3)

The Roman grey ware vessel (96.8 (1)), which was discovered at an early stage of machining, came from a much disturbed area to the north-east of the car park, although its exact context was unclear. The pot did not apparently house cremated bone, but it seems likely to have derived from a burial, even though it may have been redeposited as a result of more recent activity. Two further sherds of Roman pottery (96.8 (8)) were found in the vicinity of the pot, although over much of the surrounding central and eastern areas, only modern material was recovered from heavily disturbed contexts (see below).

One area which appeared relatively less affected by modern activity was situated immediately north of the railway embankment, towards the middle of th south side of the car park. A distinctive layer of light greyish brown topsoil (L3; see below), which had been cut by trial trench 3, covered an area of some 30 m by 10 m, and underlay the modern deposits. The survival of this layer of probable medieval or post-medieval date indicated that still earlier deposits may also be present. Interestingly, this was adjacent to where an `amphora burial' had been recorded in the 1840s.

Close examination of the contractors' sections revealed a Roman inurned cremation burial (G1; Figs 1&3), sealed by L3. A grey-ware jar, the north side of which had been broken off by machine, contained the cremated bone, and had been set towards the western edge of a small pit, some 0.55 m wide and 0.35 m deep. The pit was cut into natural sand and gravel; slight irregularities in the surrounding subsoil were probably natural phenomena, rather than associated with the pit. Both the pot and pitfill were stained with a reddish-brown (?ferromanganese) deposit. Before recording was complete and before the burial could be excavated, the section face, which consisted largely of fine sand, collapsed. The pot and its contents were recovered, although some further damage to the pot, notably the rim, occurred.

The burial G1 seems to be a fairly typical, if rather poorly endowed, cremation of broad 1st to 3rd-century date, which probably belonged, together with the 1840s examples, to the north-western edge of a widespread cemetery area. It is unlikely that other accompanying vessels or grave-goods were lost as a result of the collapse. The cremated bone will be extracted and examined under laboratory cvonditions, in order to gain possible information relating to the age, sex, patology, etc., of the individual.

Much of the remaining area found to be sealed by L3 was subsequently cleared down to the top of natural sand. There was some modern disturbance, notably service trenches, but the extent of the sand further attested the lack of later terracing, unlike elsewhere on the site, where sand and gravel, apart from occasional deep pockets, had been stripped off. Surprisingly however no more burials were located, although a marked scatter of Roman pottery (96.8 (6)) was recovered from the spoil. It would seem therefore that in this part of

the cemetery area, burials occurred only sporadically. The unstratified pottery comprised 3 amphora sherds and a dozen other sherds, including a first century rim, some of which may have derived from burials.

Over the remainder of the car park, Roman finds were sparse, reflecting perhaps the extent of modern disturbance, rather than an absence of Roman features. However during initial topsoil stripping to the south-east of the car park, where recent activity appeared less marked, a spread of Roman pottery and tile was noted over an area of some 100 m (Fig 1) adjacent to the railway embankment. The finds included 10 undiagnostic tile fragments, and a dozen sherds of pottery, which were not strikingly funerary in character, and were perhaps indicative of Roman occupation rather than burials.

POST-ROMAN DEPOSITS (Fig 3)

Only a small area of undisturbed post-Roman topsoil survived on the site, consisting of a light greyish-brown (10YR 6/2) sandy loam (L3; Fig 3), 0.2-0.35 m thick, at the southern edge of the site, and this probably represents a post-medieval ploughsoil. As noted above, topsoil, containing a scatter of Roman and later finds, survived in the area to the east of the car park.

The remaining deposits on the site probably post-dated the introduction of the railways in the 1840's. A series of large shallow pits extended across the central (F3) and south-eastern (F2) parts of the site. They were typically 1.3-1.5 m deep, and were distinguished by only slight differences in fills, which were mixed greyish-brown (10YR 6/1 - 2.5Y 6/2) sandy clay loam, often with a greenish tinge and with reddish-brown ?ferromanganese staining; abundant inclusions included brick, coal, cinders, charcoal, ash and gravel. The pits were probably broadly contemporary and of late 19th or early 20th century date. They were clearly cut into London Clay rather than simply the backfill of natural hollows, although their purpose was uncertain; the clay of course had various uses, including the reformation of the embankment edge.

Extensive terracing also took place across the site, as west of F3 and east of F2 London Clay was very close to the modern surface, with only occasional intervening pockets of sand/gravel, and a small area of topsoil (L3). Much of the area was sealed by a thin, mixed dump layer (L2; Fig 3), similar to but slightly darker than the fills of F2 and F3, which were sealed by L2. Finds of white `china' and other modern objects suggested a late 19th or early 20th century date, rather than a more recent date as car park make-up.

Further evidence was uncovered during the watching brief of the modern buildings observed in trial trenches 3 and 4, notably the turntable enclosure, backfilled with huge quantities of coal dust and cinders, in the south-west corner of the site, and the brick structure with a concrete floor, which sealed F2, in trench 4. The embankment edge was also found to have been reshaped with large quantities of dump, mainly redeposited clay.

Acknowledgements

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Abbreviation

CAR 9 N. Crummy, P. Crummy and C. Crossan, 1993, Excavations of Roman and later cemeteries, churches and monastic sites in Colchester 1971-88.

Reference

Hull, M.R., 1958, Roman Colchester

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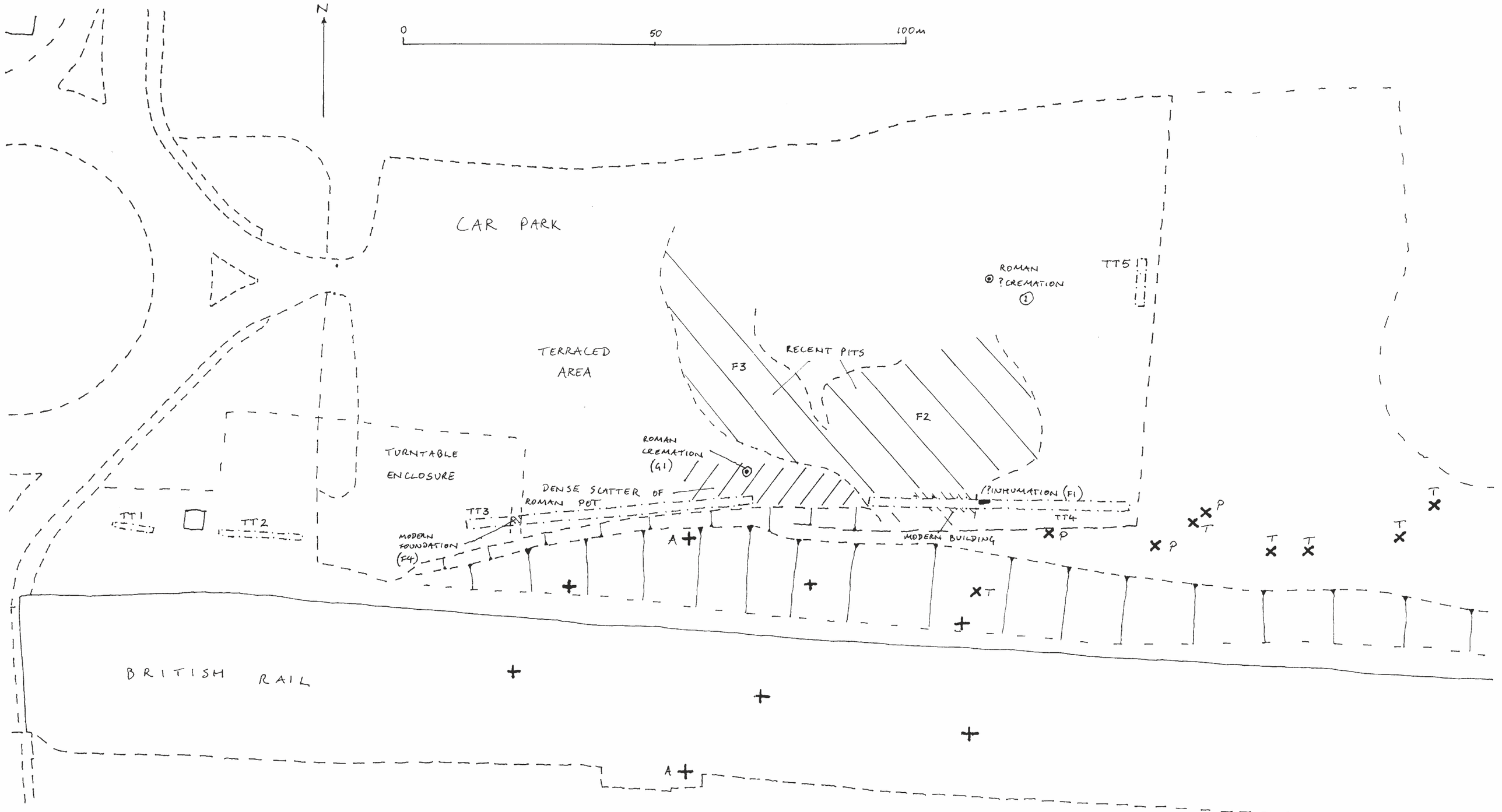

FIG 1. TURNER RISE 1996.
PROVISIONAL PLAN OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES IN THE CAR PARK AREA.

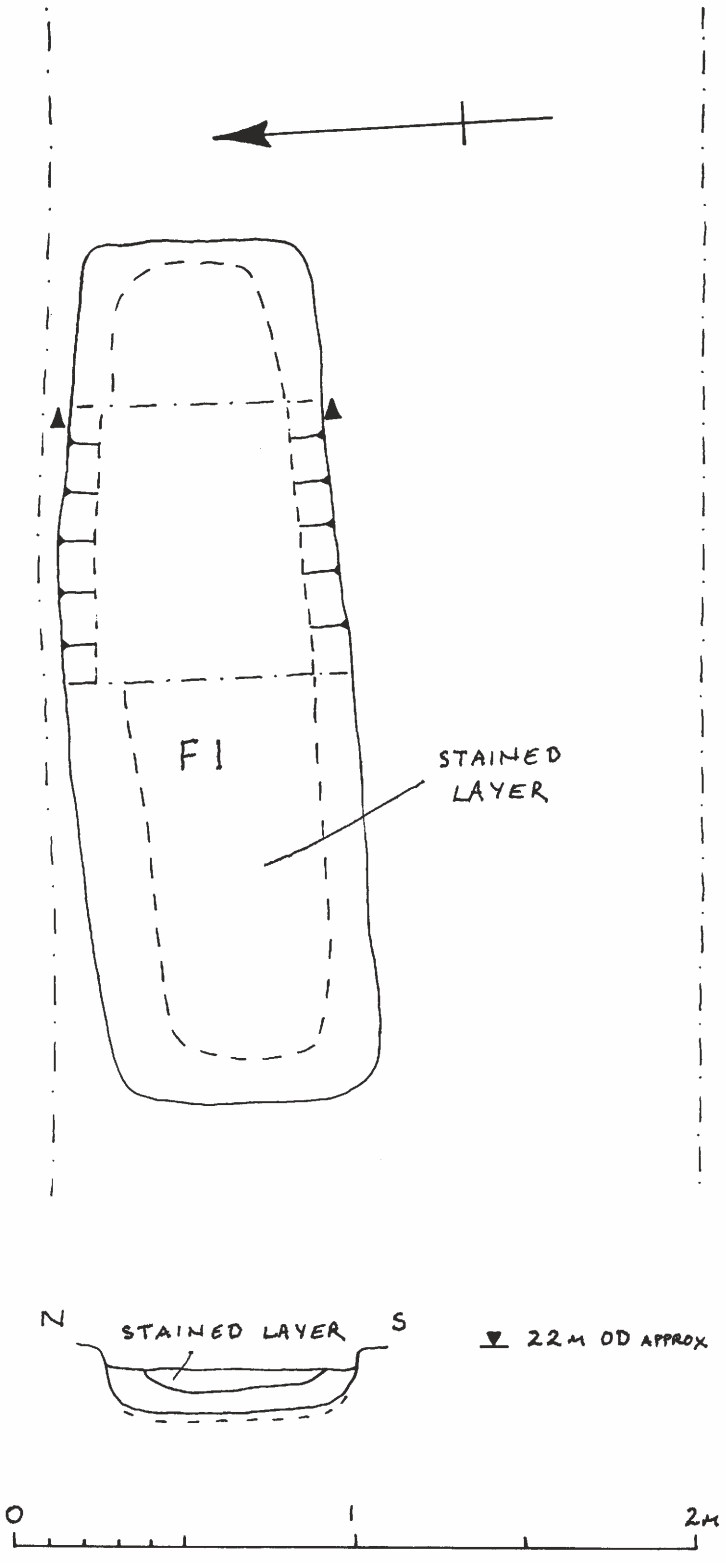

FIG 2. THE ?INHUMATION IN TRIAL TRENCH 4.

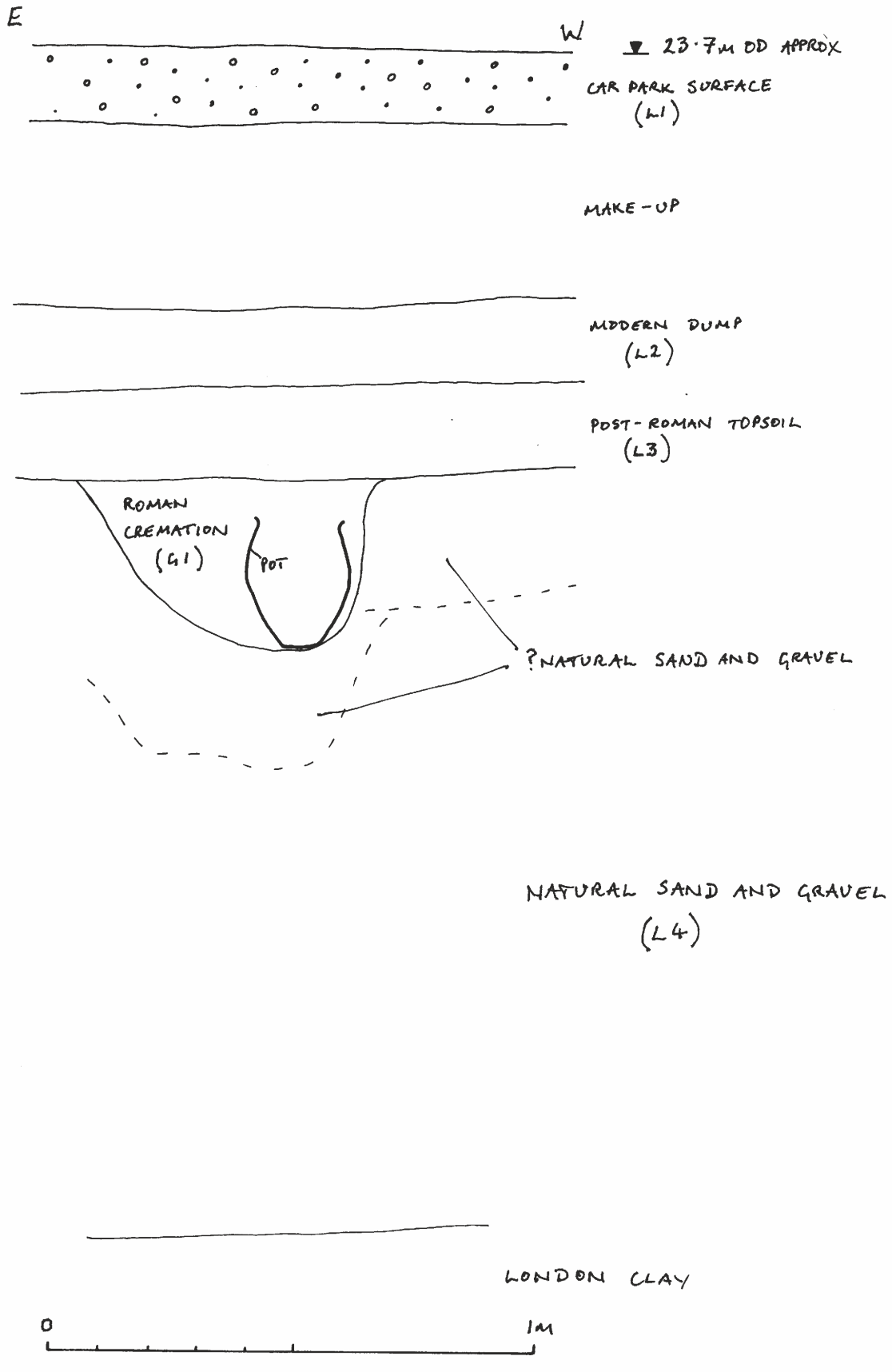

FIG 3. SKETCH SECTION OF ROMAN CREMATION (G1).