

An archaeological evaluation at St Peter's House, St Peter's Street, Colchester, in 1998

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with a contribution by Alec Wade

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Summary

This report is an account of an archaeological evaluation carried out in October 1998 at St Peter's House, Colchester. The investigation involved machine-dug trenches as specified in a brief prepared by Martin Winter of Colchester Museums. The work was commissioned and funded by Jaygate Homes.

During the evaluation, features of the post-medieval and Roman periods were recorded. All site levels below about 1.0m are generally wet, and between this level and 1.5m become water-logged. It is therefore likely that any deposits below 1.0m may contain preserved organic remains, and by 1.5m down are almost certain to do so.

Post-medieval features occurred over the whole of the site area, generally at between 0.6m and 1.0m below the present surface levels. These included a ditch, a set of timber piles, and a wooden water-main. The timber piles, driven into the silts of a probable old river channel, were the deepest of the features of this period at between 1.2m and 1.5m below modern ground. A pottery sherd associated with them can be dated to the 16th-17th century. The wooden water-main (constructed from bored elm trunks) had been laid in a trench with the pipe at just over 1.0m below modern ground. This main was laid at some time between the 17th and 19th centuries, and this type of water-pipe is known to have been laid in Colchester as late as the early 1800s. Part of a leather shoe also survived in the cut of this feature.

In the Roman period, the site appears to have included part of the river frontage which was located approximately across the centre of the development area. Here a substantial gravel construction, possibly a bank or road, separates riverine deposits to the north from layers of Roman make-up on the south of the site. The top of these surviving Roman levels is at between 1.0m (bank or road) and 1.4m (make-up deposits). It seems probable that the old silted river channel was open in this period, and if so the top of the Roman deposits in this probably start at about 1.6m to 1.7m below the modern surface. The road or bank would almost certainly have required a revetment along its northern riverside and this should survive in the wet conditions on the site. Some wood was observed in the upper Roman make-up levels to the south. Pottery from the make-up layers suggests that the consolidation of the river frontage here took place no earlier than the early-mid 2nd century, though this is not certain as the work may be of more than one phase. No clear signs of structures or buildings were seen on the areas of Roman make-up, though one gravelly deposit could represent part of a metalled surface.

Several large fragments or pieces of stone were recovered from the Roman make-up. One piece weighed 10kg and shows signs of working on two of its faces. This may have come from an important building or monument in the area.

It is not certain that natural subsoil levels were reached during the evaluation. On the northern half of the site a clay layer was encountered in the base of the deeper sections at between 1.8m and 2.5m. This varied in composition between trenches and did not appear to be present in deep sections on the south of the site. It may be natural subsoil or a further riverine deposit. Gravels were found in the base of all the deep sections, generally between about 2.3m and 2.7m, though in one section at 3.4m.

This general consistency of presence and depth suggests that this might be a natural subsoil layer.

Introduction

This evaluation relates to the St Peter's House site on the western part of the development area where demolition followed by the construction of buildings were planned. The buildings occupying the eastern half of the development were retained. The on-site work was initially completed on 1st-2nd of October 1998. Following the results of this, Jaygate Homes kindly agreed to provide for a further day of on-site work which was carried out on the 8th of the same month.

Archaeological background (Fig 1)

The known on- and off-site surrounding archaeology is comprehensively summarised in CAT Archive Report 7. Briefly, the development area, situated between the Roman town wall and the present course of the River Colne, had no record of any significant archaeological remains. The only reported finds were a Roman lamp and Roman pottery found in 1892 to the rear of 18 St Peter's Street. This now lies under the site of the present St Peter's House.

However, the true nature or archaeological potential of the site was difficult to assess. Roman and medieval use of the immediate extra-mural area to the east of the site (less than 100 m from the present site boundary) was intensive, including settlement, industrial utilities, and burial. Settlement has been continuous here from the later medieval period to the present day. But this occupied relatively dry areas around an important road just outside the main north gate. This use related to the suitability of a particular area in relation to natural and imposed human topographies. The main factor influencing the historical development of the St Peter's House site is always likely to have been the immediate environment of the River Colne. In such close proximity to a riverine environment, rapid changes in the intensity and nature of human occupation and activities could be expected. So the known archaeology at Middleborough was difficult to relate to the present site despite its proximity. Detailed maps from the 17th century onwards show probable agricultural-based use of the immediate riverside area of the present development until the 19th century (CAT Archive Report 7). This, together with the absence of any reported solid archaeological features or obstructions, such as mortared walls or floors, in more recent decades (certainly when St Peter's House, Northgate House, and Stuart House were erected in the 1960s), indicated that the general archaeology of the site was probably not similar to the Middleborough area. However, beyond this, less physically substantial yet equally important archaeology could exist buried on the site, especially given the probability of large accumulations of riverine or reclamation deposits. The site also lies directly downhill from the north gate of the early Roman legionary fortress which would suggest that some use of this area may have been made at that time (Fig 14). This might have taken the form of convenient supply from small river boats. The possibility of high levels of organic preservation in water-logged ground of items hardly ever surviving on dry sites added a further important dimension to the potential of this site.

The archaeological evaluation

Initially three archaeological trenches each 15 m long were planned, though slight modifications were required during the evaluation, dictated mainly by the position of existing services (Fig 2, T1-T3). Following the results of this work, permission was obtained to open a fourth trench (Fig 2, T4) and Trench 3 was extended slightly to the west. This work was aimed at resolving the nature of an archaeological feature first seen in Trench 3 (thought possibly to be a Roman road), which is important to the

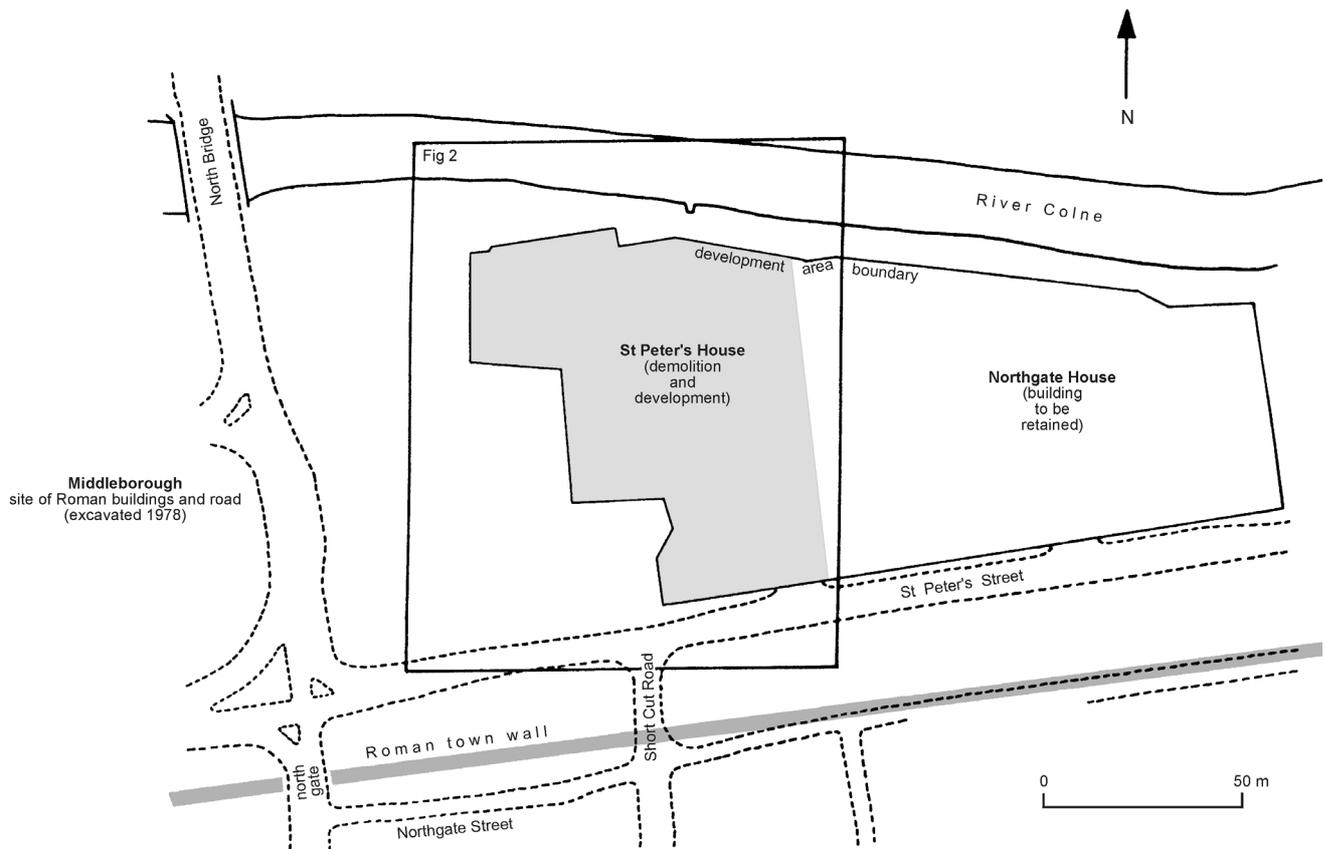


Fig 1 Site location. Reproduced from Ordnance Survey mapping on behalf of The Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office © Crown Copyright 100039294 2004.

understanding of the archaeological potential of the site and the archaeology of the town in general.

All of the trenches were excavated by machine, and the conditions for observation and recording were generally quite good despite the wet conditions. However, the trenches could not be entered for the most part, and much of the recording had to be completed by observation. Some parts of trenches had to be abandoned when water became too much of an obstacle to further recording. Finds recovery was also limited by the same factors, and much of this was done using the machine bucket. This is shown by the high proportion of samian recovered from the Roman levels in Trench 4 as this is highly visible in relation to much other pottery.

The archaeological sequence

Trench 1

The southern 5m of this trench could be reduced little more than 1.0m due to two modern service pipes, and all of the deposits to this depth were of recent origin. For the remainder of the trench, modern deposits were also encountered to 1.0m below the present surface (Fig 4). This material sealed layers of dark sandy silts and clayed silts which became increasingly wet and water-logged.

From 1.2m down, the central area of the trench contained a number of wooden stakes driven vertically into the ground (Figs 3-4). During the excavation it appeared that these related to two or more episodes of consolidation. The upper group, which began within L3 at about 1.2m, seemed to contain more

numerous small stakes (up to 10cm diameter), while lower down, the second group contained most of the larger stakes (Fig 3 sketch). This lower group began at about 1.5m at the base of L3, which may show the level from which they were inserted. The level from which the upper group was inserted is not necessarily represented by their surviving tops, as their upper parts may have rotted away. Apart from occasional fragments of peg-tiles, the only find from L3 was a pottery sherd of 16th- to 17th-century date. This suggests that this material is post-medieval, and it is tempting (though not necessarily correct) to link both groups of piles to this period. The lower group may have been intended to consolidate an existing surface, while the upper were possibly to consolidate material used to raise the ground-level. That they are probably of the same general period is further suggested by their relationship to the underlying topography. Neither set appears to continue further north than the upper edge of a rising deposit of yellowish brown clay (Fig 3, L8), interpreted as being the bank of an ancient river channel. This must have formed an area of particularly unstable (possibly low-lying) ground which was stabilised by piling.

The lower group of stakes had been driven down from just above a layer containing numerous small shells (L4), possibly a riverine deposit. Below this, the layers became more clay-like with more or less common patchy lenses of brown organic deposits. This material sealed cleaner yellowish brown clay which began to appear at the north end of the trench at about 1.8m, sloping down under the dark organic clay silts. This slope is interpreted as being the north edge of a former river channel filled with the more

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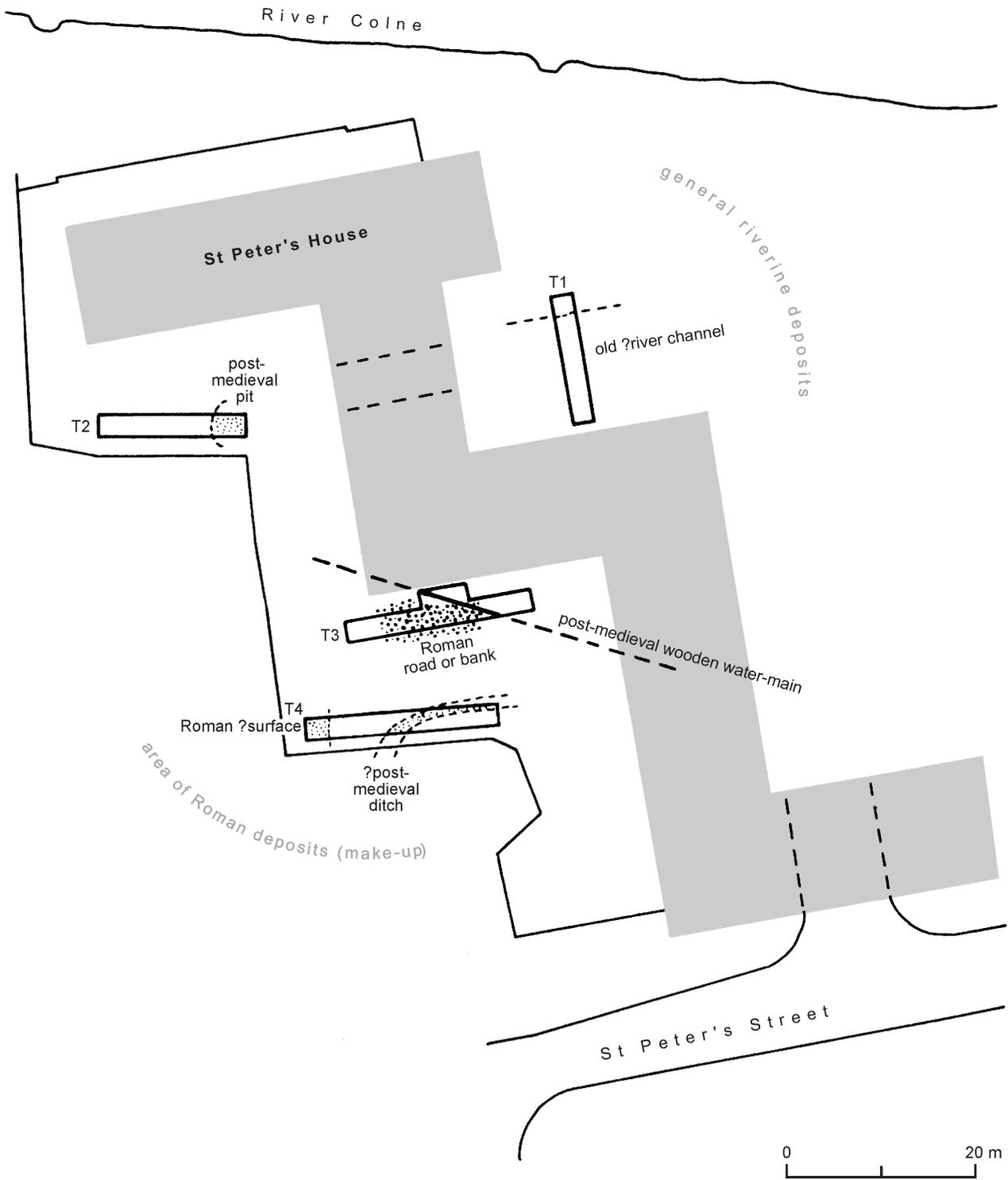


Fig 2 Evaluation site plan. Reproduced from Ordnance Survey mapping on behalf of The Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office © Crown Copyright 100039294 2004.

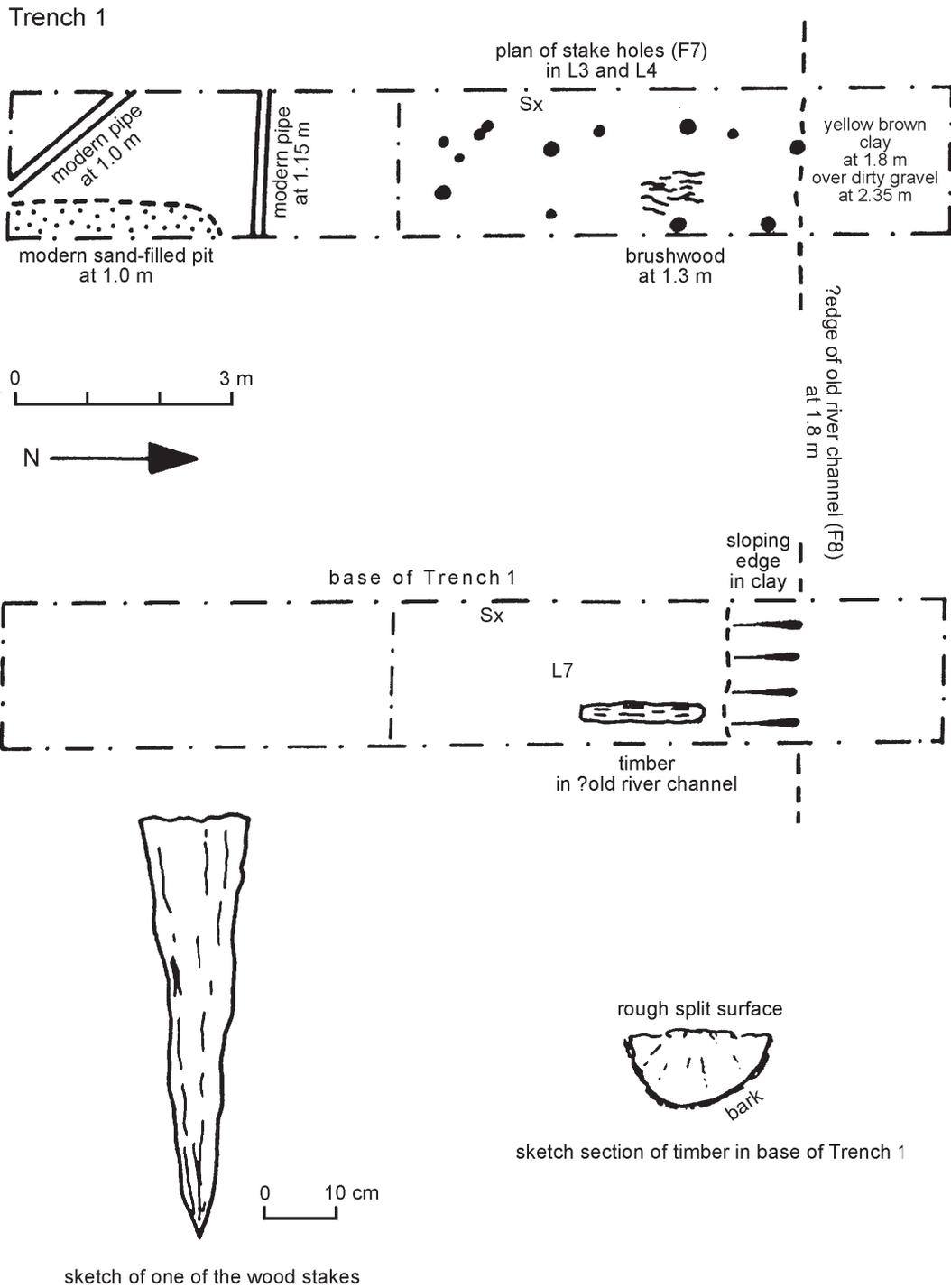


Fig 3 Trench 1: plan.

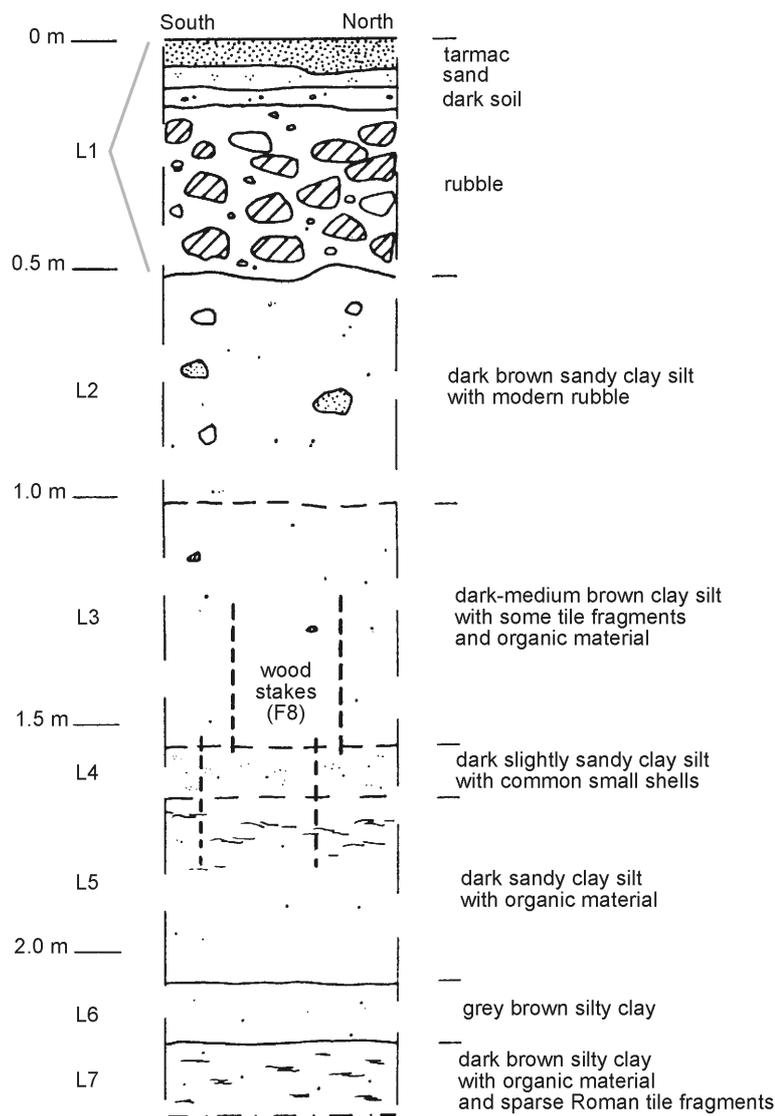


Fig 4 Trench 1: section.

organic deposits described above. The base of this was not reached since it extended below 2.35m where the trench began to fill rapidly with water. The lowest level seen in the presumed channel (L7) contained large pieces of Roman *tegulae* and a split wood log about 1.7m long (Fig 3 & sketch). It is possible that the yellowish brown clay (L8) at 1.8m and the dirty gravels sealed beneath it (L9) at 2.35m, in the north end of the trench, represent natural subsoil. However, this is not certain, and they may also relate to river-based deposits.

Trench 2

The deposits in the area of Trench 2 are represented generally by section 1 (Fig 6). The make-up for the modern surface (L1) is about 0.5m in depth, and below this is an almost uniform, thick deposit of dark sandy silt to about 2.2m down (L2). A slight change in consistency was noticed in this material at about 1.0m, but this level also corresponds with that at which water began to seep into the trench, which would affect the appearance of the deposit. However, support for a slight change between the upper

part of L2 and the lower is provided from two sources: above this level, fragments of peg-tile were found, below only Roman tile fragments, and in section 2 (Fig 7) a thick deposit of fine sand incorporating tiny fragments of tile (F1 below) also relates to this level. At the base of L2 was a deposit of yellowish brown clay (L3) with pale yellowish brown gravelly sand extending from 2.5m to beyond the base of the trench at 2.8m. These last two layers probably correspond to those in the base of the north end of Trench 1 (L8 & L9 above).

Further archaeological detail is provided by sections 2 and 3 (Fig 7 & Fig 8). Thick deposits of fine pale sand with common tiny tile fragments (Fig 5; F1 & F2) are probably water deposited, and brown (peaty) organic material occurs at the base of them at about 1.6m. Toward the east end of the trench, this organic level is sealed by a reddish deposit made up of tile and ?daub fragments at about 1.6m (Fig 8; F3). The fragments are small and difficult to identify securely, but appear to be Roman. The level of the more organic-rich deposits here approximately correspond to

similar material filling the presumed ancient river channel in Trench 1.

At the east end of this trench was a large pit (F4) which contained a considerable quantity of animal bone, with some articulated rib sections and numerous horn cores. A selection of this material was examined by Alec Wade who made the following brief identifications. The horn cores are from cattle; however, the radius bones present are horse and at least two mature individuals are represented. The ribs are from a large mammal but of themselves are difficult to attribute to a species. There are no apparent butchery cut marks on these bones, and given their articulated state they probably form a further part of the horse remains.

The only other finds from the pit were some fragments of peg-tile. The animal remains appeared at about 1.0m down and were the first clear sign that there was a large pit here, but it was cut from higher than this. Limited examination of the section suggested a cut from about 0.6m. This pit is certainly of post-medieval date.

Trench 3

The stratigraphy at the eastern end of this trench is similar to that encountered previously in Trenches 1 and 2 (Fig 9). The main difference here is the composition of the deposits below L1 to about 1.5m. In Trench 3, the dark brown silts of the previous trenches are replaced by slightly lighter layers which contain a higher proportion of sand (Fig 9; L2-L5). Some fragments of peg-tile were observed in L4, while the sandy layer below this (L5) contained numerous tiny tile fragments and is probably a similar deposit to F1 and F2 in Trench 2 (Fig 7) which occupy the same level (between 1.1m and 1.6m) in that trench. As in Trench 2, this material sealed a thin dark silty organic layer (L6); and below this a thick dark clay silt with some organic lenses or layers (L7) rests on mottled clay at 2.5m (L8). Gravel (L9) was reached at just under 3.0m below the modern surface.

The central area of Trench 3 was not reduced much more than 1.0m as it was found to contain a large wooden water-main (F5) at this level (Fig 15b). The wooden main runs in a NW-SE alignment across the trench, and initially a 4.0m section was exposed. However, as this section of the main was all part of one pipe, the trench was extended to see how the pipes were jointed together (Fig 5). The main is constructed from lengths of tree trunks retaining their bark, and for the most part these are between 20cm and 30cm in diameter. No full single pipe was uncovered, but the section lengths here were in excess of 6.0m. The water channel was formed by an 8cm-diameter round bore down the middle. Jointing the pipe lengths together consisted of shaving down the end of one and providing an expanded receptor hole in the end of the next (Fig 15c). This join was then compressed by banging an encircling iron ring into the back of the receptor pipe close to the joint (Fig 5 sketch). Once in place, this helped prevent the wood splitting. As well as peg-tile fragments and part of a leather shoe, two sherds of pottery were found in the construction trench housing the pipes. These sherds can only be broadly dated to the 17th-19th century and the main must have been built at some point during this period. A section of the wood from the southern pipe length was examined by Anne-Marie Bojko of Colchester Museums and identified as elm.

The southern edge of the water-main had been cut through a hard gravel surface (F6) which appeared at about 1.1m down (Fig 5). When sectioned this proved to be the uppermost of a series of gravel layers 1.3m thick (Fig 10 & Fig 15a). The top 0.25m was of clean yellow and orange-brown compacted gravel separated in one area by a dark silty lens (L5). The next two gravel layers (L7 & L8) both contained small pieces of unidentified stone. The upper of these was rather dirty in appearance, and also contained some Roman tile fragments and septaria pieces. Below these were two more gravel layers both

containing some admixture of soil, and separated by a layer of dark brown clay silt (L9-L11). At the very base of this feature (at 2.3m) was a thin organic layer of sparse brushwood material. This feature (F6) is the same in construction technique and appearance as streets in Roman and later Colchester until the introduction of tarmacadam. The extent of this prepared surface or area is not known, except that it was not present in the eastern end of the trench and there must be an edge here approximately coincident with the water-main.

Below the road or bank was a thick deposit of dark silts (L13) over gravel (L14) occurring at 3.3m down. The layer of clay which had sealed these gravels in the trenches to the north and in this trench at the eastern end was absent here.

Trench 4

Trench 4 was excavated with the possibility in mind that the gravel deposits in Trench 3 (F6) might represent a Roman road approaching a bridging point on the River Colne, possibly from the north gate of the Roman fortress. In the event, no road was found in this trench, but it revealed a significant change in the nature of the archaeology between the northern area of the site closer to the river and that toward St Peter's Street (Fig 2 & Fig 11).

At about 1.4-1.5m down, beneath the modern surfacing (L1) and dark silts containing peg-tile fragments, were layers of Roman material up to 1.0m thick. These probably represent make-up to raise and stabilise the ground. This material was only certainly fully sectioned towards the centre of the trench (Fig 12), where the upper part consisted of a greyish brown clay-silt 0.6m in depth (L3), and the lower a mixture of silt, sand and gravel about 0.3m thick (L4). Both layers contained quantities of Roman building materials: tile, plaster, mortar, stone and pinkish mortar with crushed tile (*opus signinum*). These finds ranged in size from small fragments to large lumps. The stone is of particular interest as several large fragments or pieces were recovered. These appear to be all of the same stone type (unidentified). One of the stones weighed 10kg and has evidence of working on two faces, one of which is smooth while the other has tooling marks. These stones may have come from an important building or monument. Both make-up layers contained oyster shells which were more abundant in the lower layer. About two-thirds of the way along the trench was a concentration of this material (F12) which may define a pit, but the possibility that it may also be part of a robber trench cannot be entirely excluded.

These Roman deposits appeared to be consistent for almost the entire length of the trench except at the west end. Here the upper clay-silt was replaced by dirty gravel (F9/L8) about 0.2m thick, which may represent part of a gravelled surface. This sealed a layer of predominantly yellowish brown clay (L9) of 0.3m thickness. The finds from these layers appeared to be generally no different from those already detailed above.

The small amount of pottery recovered from all the layers of make-up suggests a date not before the early-mid 2nd century.

Below these levels is a thin dark organic-rich layer, present in both sections, though at greater depth in the area of section 1. Only this section was able to penetrate deeper as this area filled less slowly with water. After a thin silty gravel deposit (L5) below the organic layer, dark brown silts were again encountered at just above 2.5m. These appeared to be replaced by gravel at about 2.7m.

Two features of post-medieval date were also found in this trench. At the western end was a small pit (F10) full of animal bones (leg bones from a large mammal, probably horse or cattle) which became visible at about 0.6m. A second feature, the ditch (F11), is probably of this date, though only Roman material was seen in its dark silty fill. This probably derived from the Roman make-up into which it had been cut. However, a Roman date for

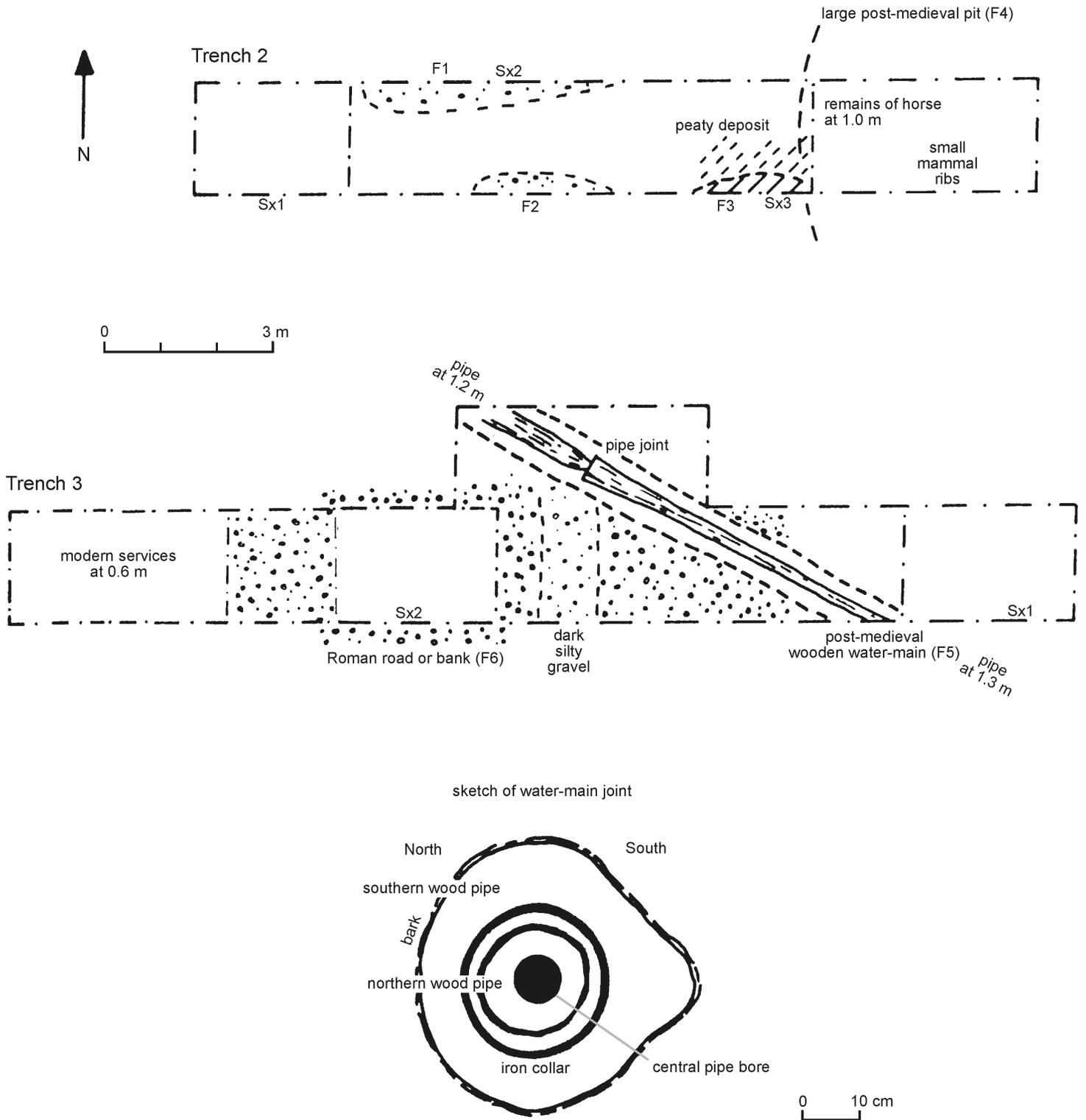


Fig 5 Trench 2 and Trench 3: plans.

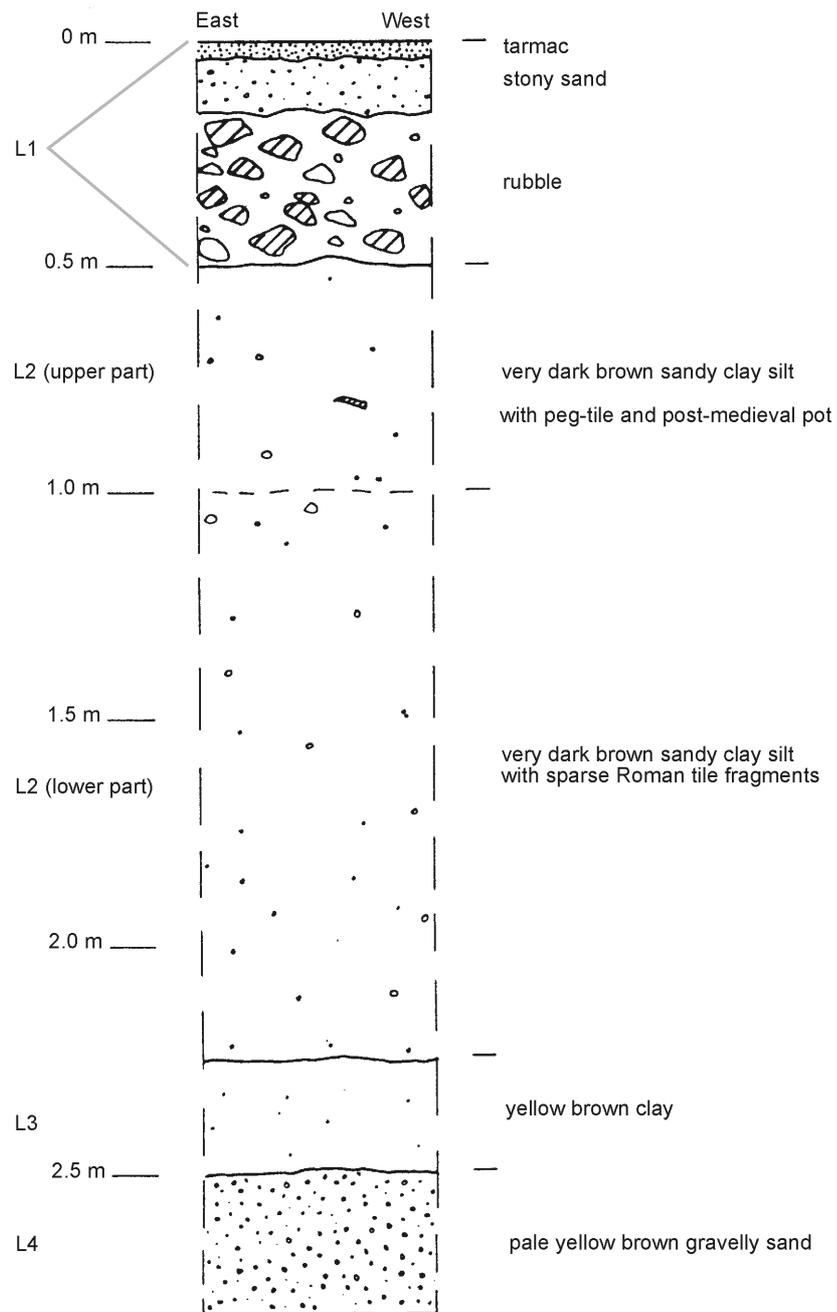


Fig 6 Trench 2: section 1.

this feature cannot be excluded. The ditch was first seen where its fill contrasted with the upper Roman levels at 1.5m.

Conclusions and general discussion

Two periods of archaeological activity are represented on the site, Roman and post-medieval. Overall, any level on the site below about 1.0m-1.5m below present ground can be expected to contain preserved organic materials.

Roman

The Roman bank or road (F6) in Trench 3 appears to divide two very different archaeological sequences in the Roman period. To the north, almost all the deposits encountered (Trenches 1 & 2)

are formed of dark sandy silts and clay-silts, much of which probably accumulated in a riverine environment, with only small quantities of archaeological finds. It seems probable that the clay slope (L8) in Trench 1 represents the northern edge of a river channel in this period. Deposits deeper than about 1.6m-1.7m below the present surface in this channel are probably Roman in date. This is supported by the Roman material (F3) at the same level in Trench 2 (Fig 8). To the south (Trench 4), at about 1.5m, are relatively find-rich deposits of Roman dump or make-up which are up to 1.0m thick. Although there is some possibility that two or more phases of activity may be represented, the finds recovered suggest that these layers were formed no earlier than the early-mid 2nd century.

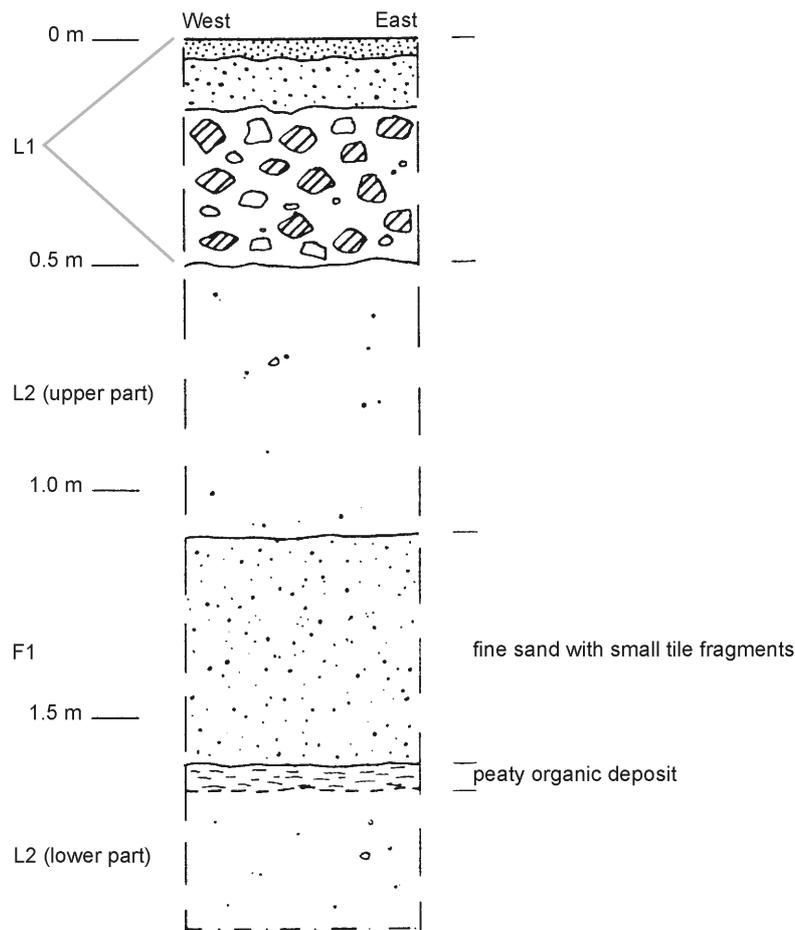


Fig 7 Trench 2: section 2.

Initially it was considered that F6 might be part of a road from the north gate of the Roman fortress, continuing the line of the *via principalis*, to a crossing point or landing area on the River Colne. This principal north-south street through the Roman fortress was effectively replaced by a street further west, on the line of the present Head Street and North Hill, when the Roman town wall was built c AD 65-80 (Fig 14). It now seems that F6 probably represents either a Roman bank or revetment fronting onto the river area or an east-west road. If a bank or revetment, it is perhaps similar to structures along the margins of tidal stream channels in Southwark, London of the same period (Hinton 1988, p 59). These have a retaining wooden revetment fronting the river channels, and any such feature would almost certainly survive in the water-logged conditions on the site. If it is a road, then it could originate from North Gate, heading for a bridging-point to connect with the line of the Roman road recorded on the site of the ASDA store, Tumer Rise in 1997 (Fig 14; Shimmin forthcoming). In this case, parts of the Roman bridge might be located on the site.

No undoubted traces of structures were seen on the areas of Roman make-up in Trench 4, but again should any be present, even if of light timber construction, then it is likely that parts of their wooden framework would still survive. Indeed a small timber piece was observed in L8 in Trench 4 during the evaluation. The

large pieces of stone recovered may indicate the presence of an important building or monument in the area.

Post-medieval

Post-medieval features were recorded in all of the trenches on the site, indicating that the river by this time was probably confined toward the area of its present channel north of St Peter's House.

The earliest datable find was a pottery sherd of the 16th-17th century associated with the timber piles (F7) in Trench 1. These piles appeared to be of two phases, and directly related to the area of a presumed earlier river channel.

Elsewhere two pits containing animal bone (F4 & F10) are of this general period. One of these (F4) in Trench 2 appeared to be quite large, containing numerous horn cores and the part-articulated remains of one or more horses. It is also probable that the ditch seen in Trench 4 (F11) is post-medieval in date, with a dark silty fill not readily distinguishable from L2 directly above in that trench. Only Roman material was observed in the fill, but this would derive from the Roman layers which it cut. A piece of frogged brick may have come from this feature, but it may be intrusive.

Perhaps the most interesting feature was the wooden water-main (F5) in Trench 3. This was constructed from bored-out trunks of

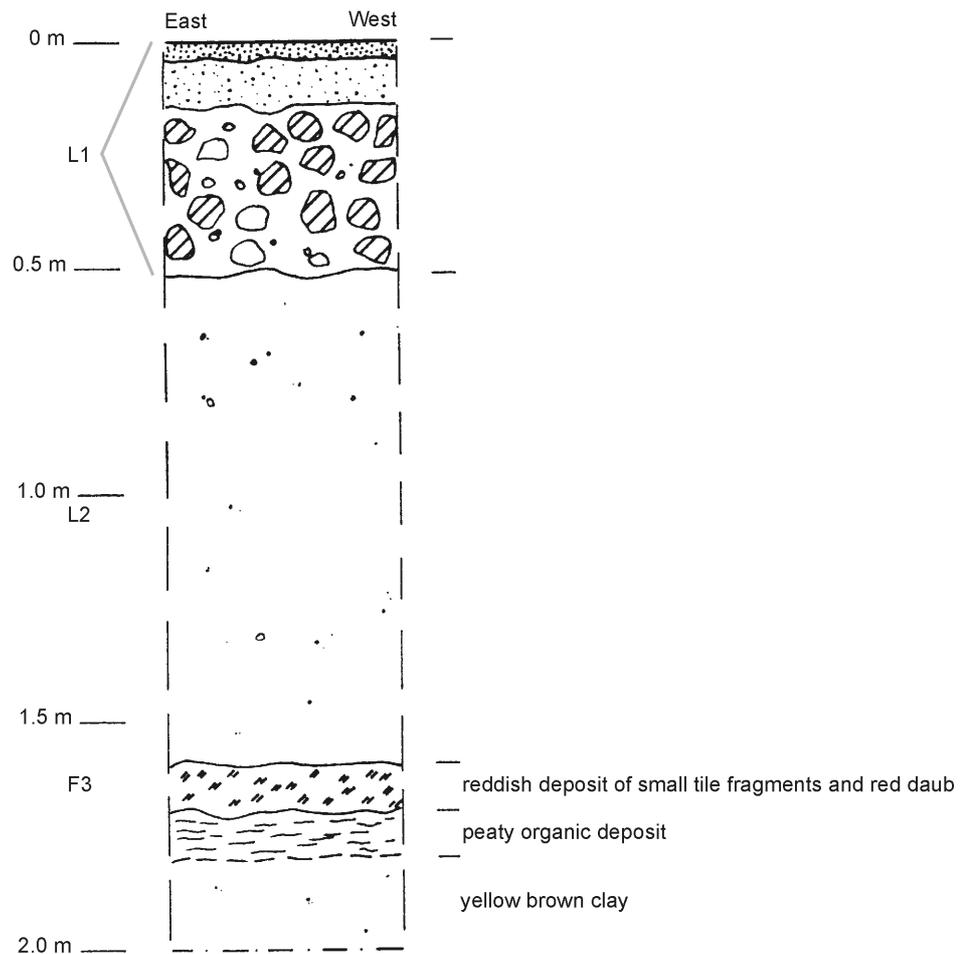


Fig 8 Trench 2: section 3.

elm more than 6m in length, and the joints reinforced by an iron ring (see Trench 3 above). Pottery from this feature can be dated no more closely than 17th-19th century. Wooden water-pipes are known to have been laid in Colchester as late as the early 1800s after which time they were made out of cast-iron (Andrew Phillips pers comm).

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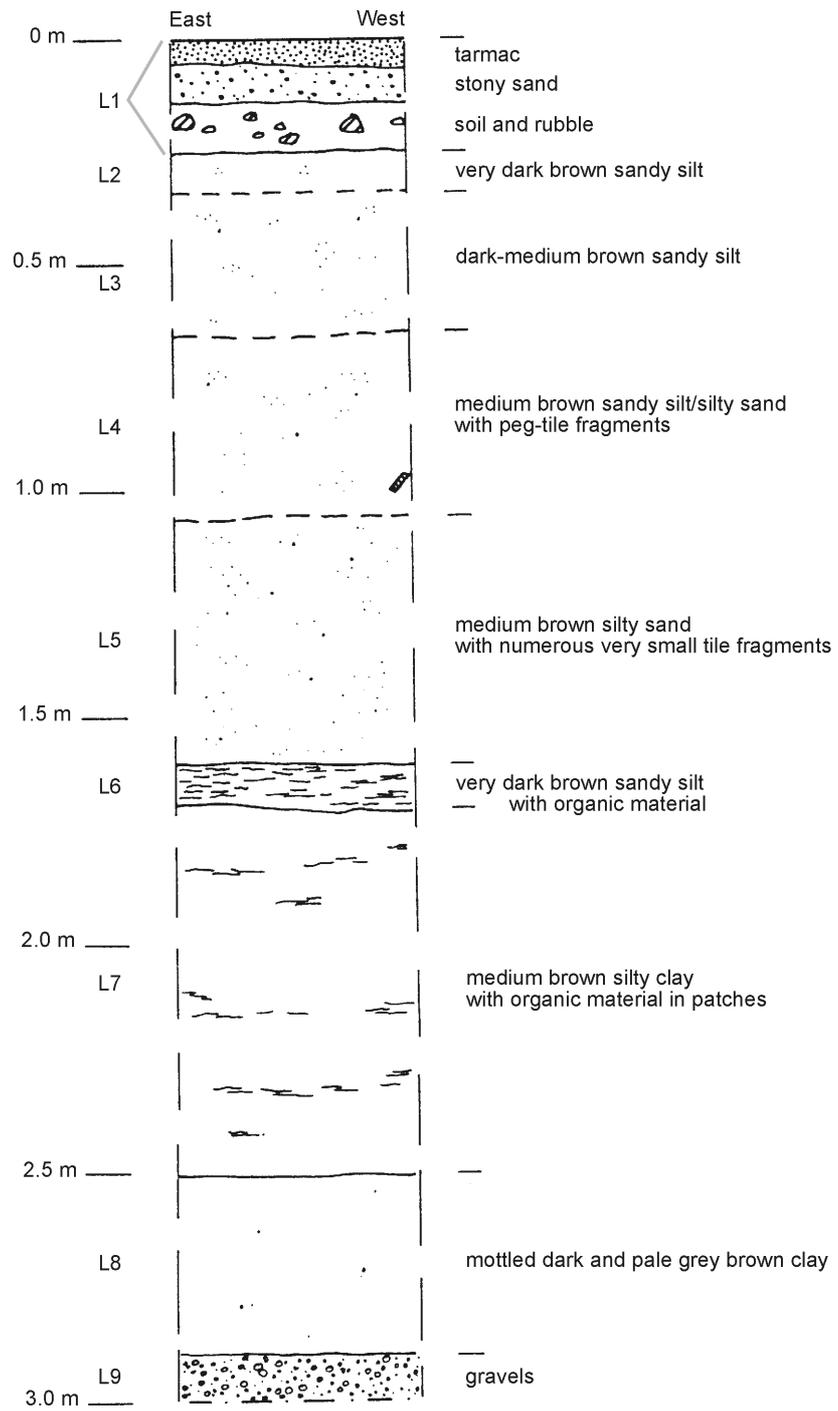


Fig 9 Trench 3: section 1.

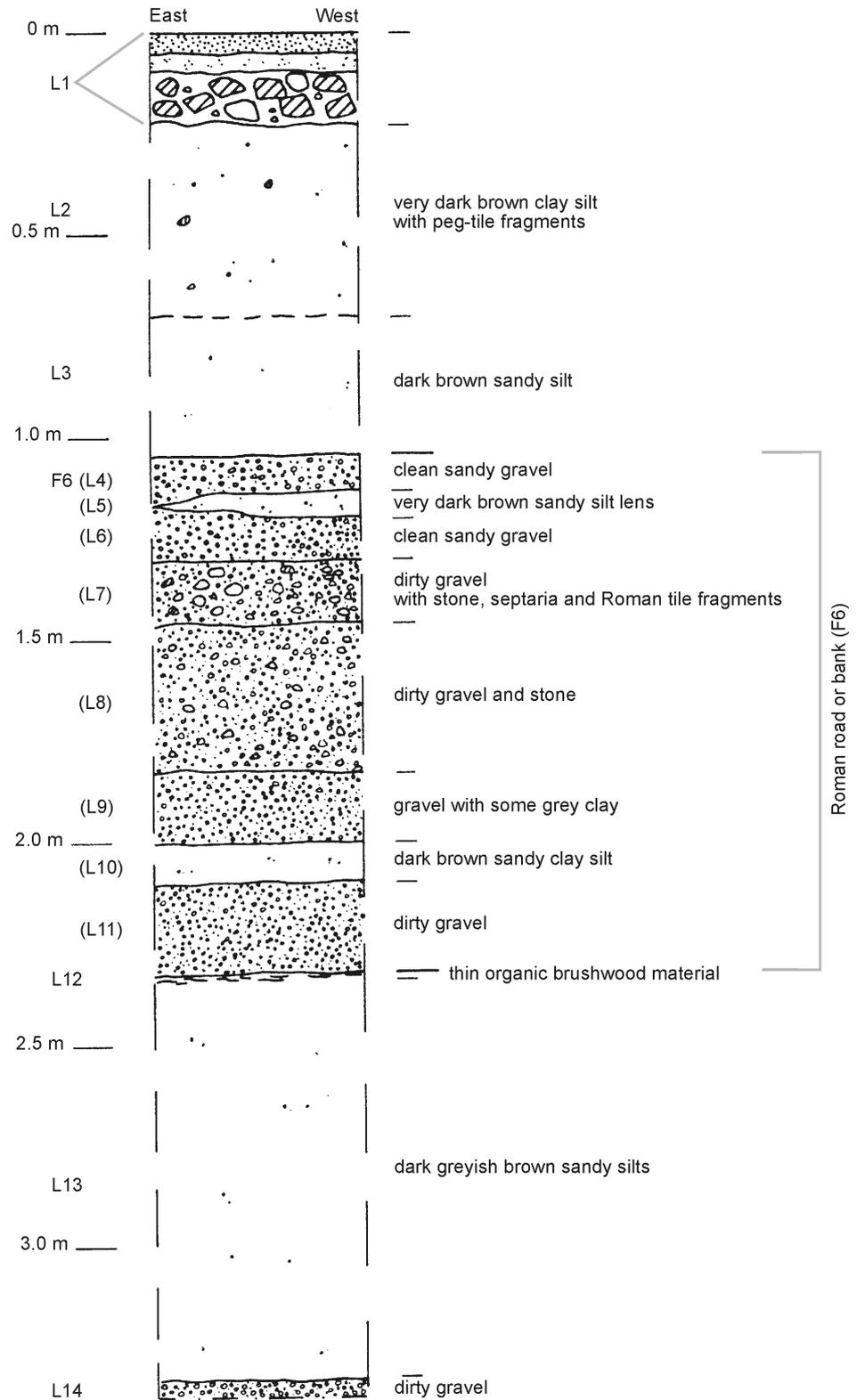


Fig 10 Trench 3: section 2.

Trench 4

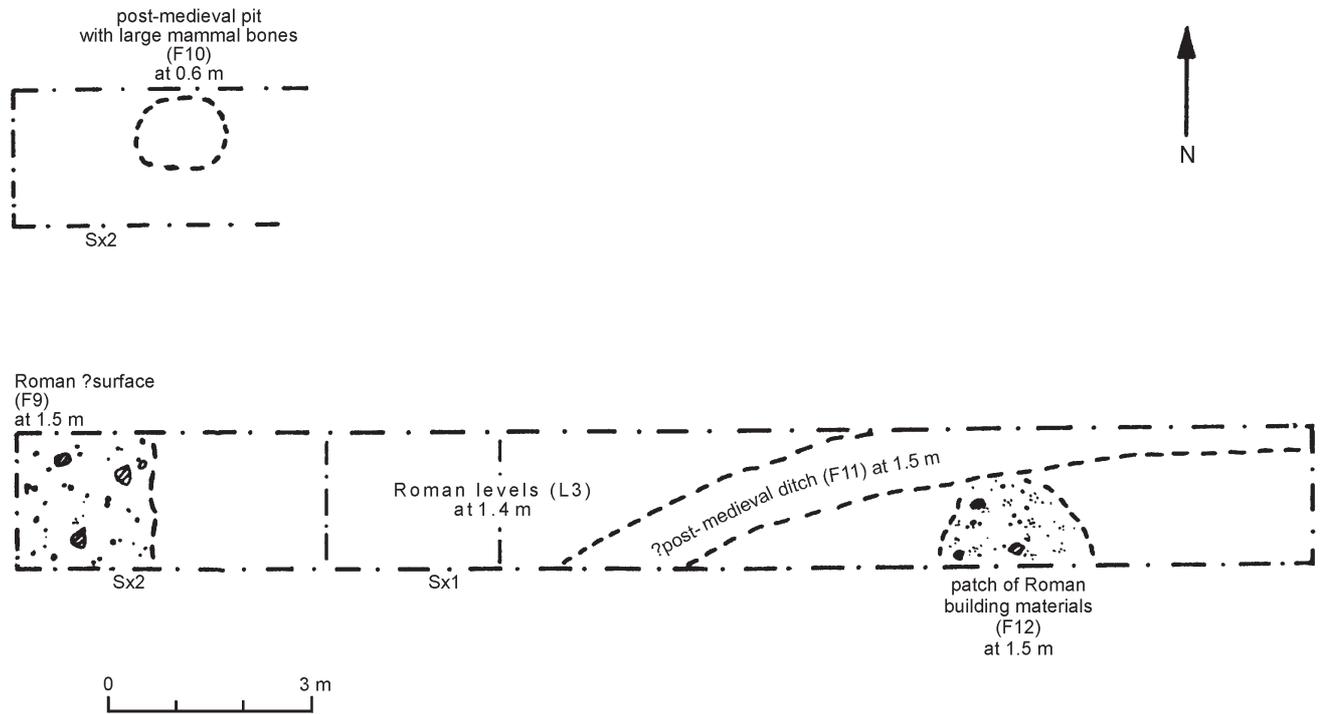


Fig 11 Trench 4: plan.

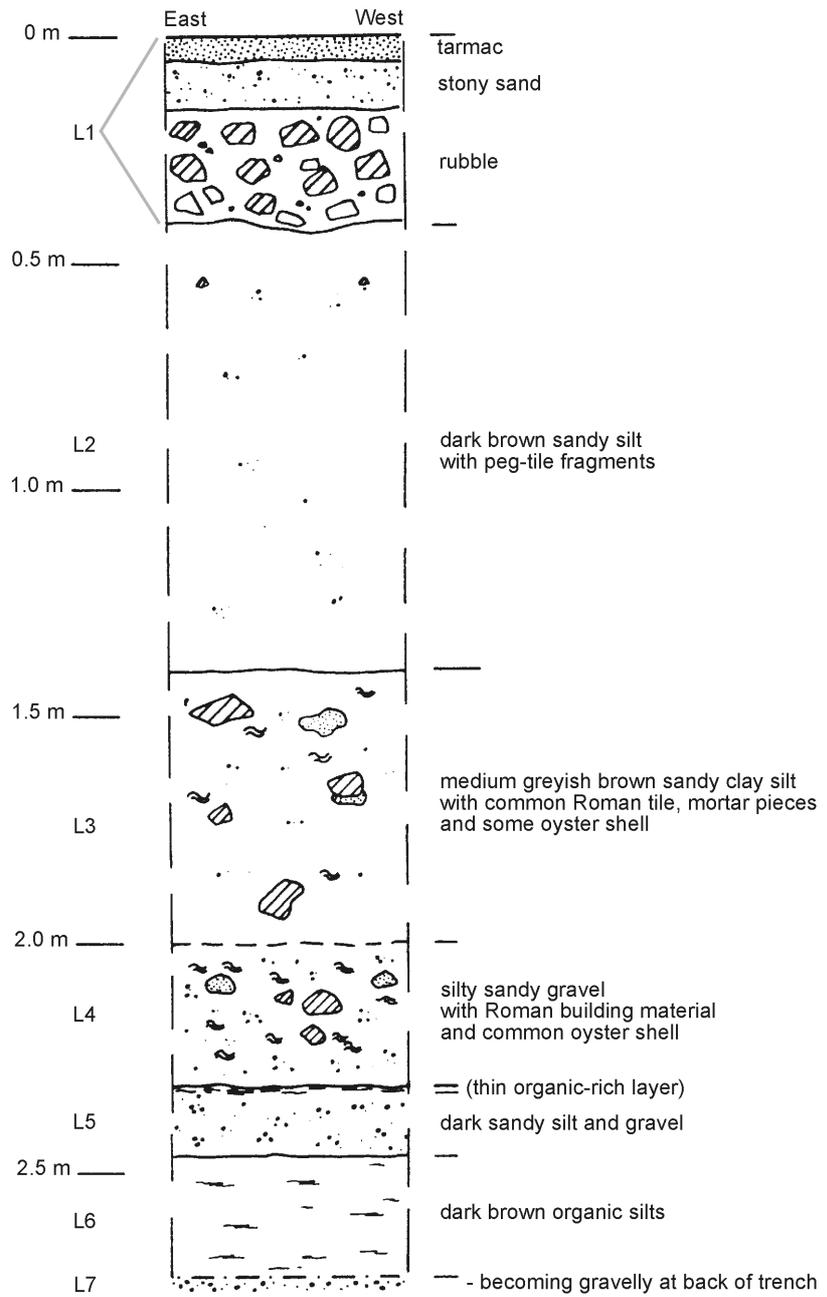


Fig 12 Trench 4: section 1.

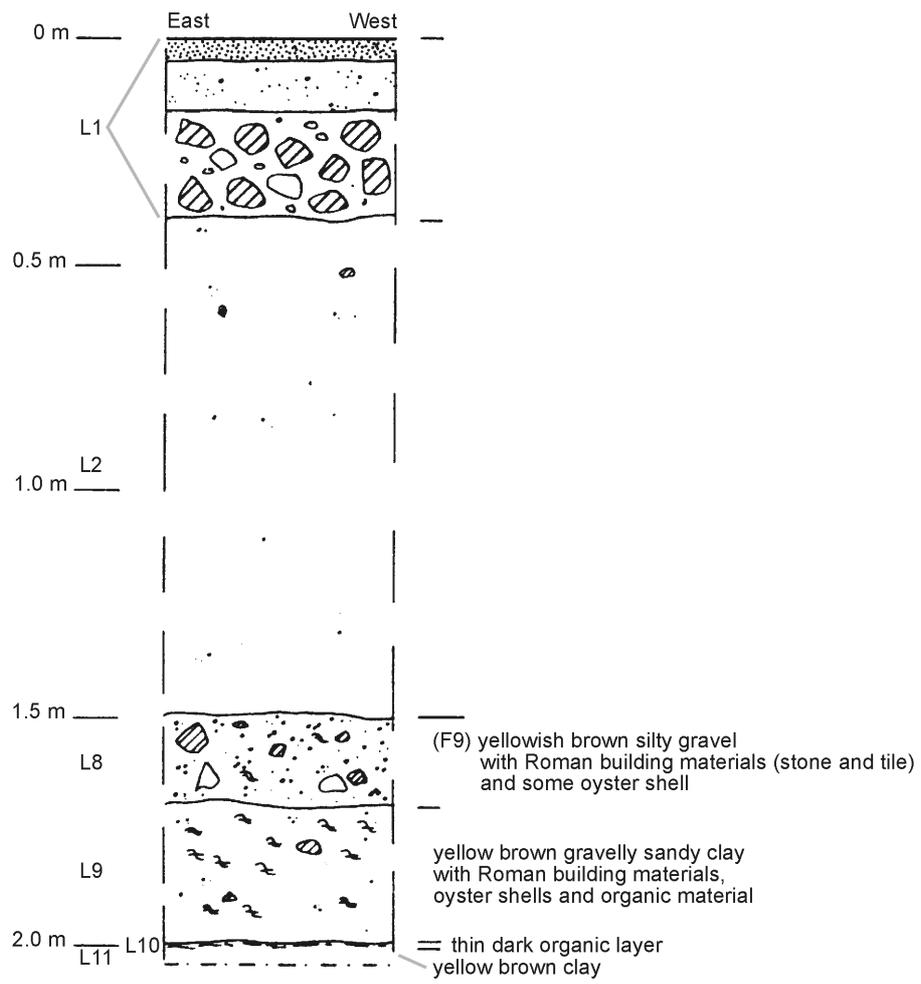


Fig 13 Trench 4: section 2.

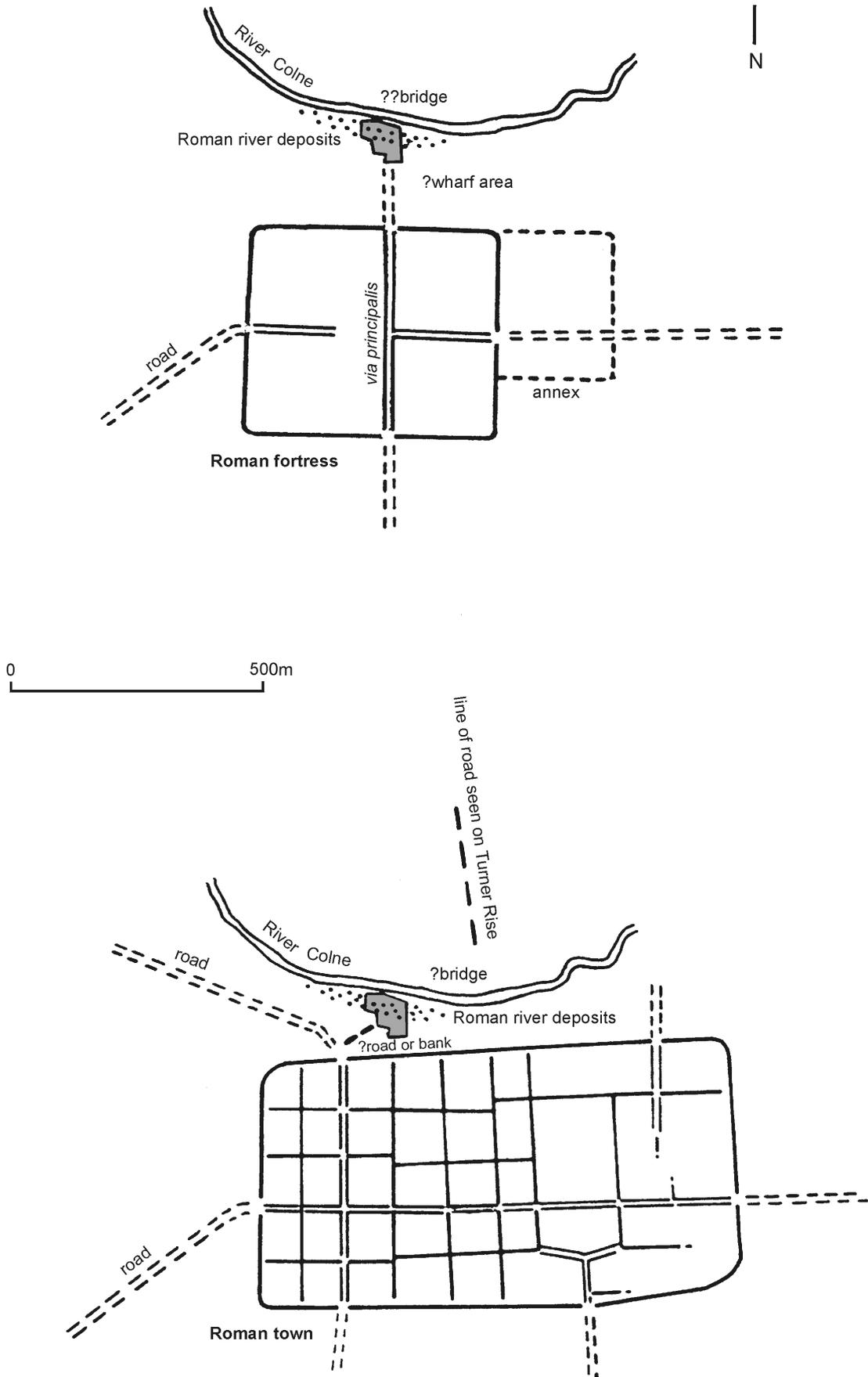


Fig 14 Location and archaeological potential of the site: the Roman period. Reproduced from Ordnance Survey mapping on behalf of The Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office © Crown Copyright 100039294 2004.



Fig 15 Top, a – Roman road or bank; left, b – post-medieval water-main; right, c – post-medieval water-main joint.