

Archaeological evaluation at St Botolph's priory, Colchester

for St Botolph's Parochial Church Council



The Priory of St Botolph, Colchester

CAT Report 39

July 1999



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Summary

A 2 x 2.5m trench was manually excavated to a depth of 1m to establish the archaeological implications of a proposed church extension in St Botolph's priory grounds. The uppermost 60 cm of the trench was occupied by modern deposits, sealing a thick layer of dark soil which extended beyond the bottom of the trench. Finds from the lowest exposed level of the dark soil indicate that its deposition occurred no earlier than the 19th century.

Introduction

The need for ground investigation arose from a proposal to construct a 15 x 10m extension to the east side of the vestry of St Botolph's Church (Colchester Planning Application No COL/99/0617). The site for the proposed extension lies approximately 50m to the south of the medieval priory church (Fig. 1), within grounds designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (Essex SAM No 4).

The investigation was carried out in accordance with the specification contained in the site Evaluation Brief issued by Colchester Borough Council's Museums Service (March 1999), observing the requirements detailed in Colchester Borough Council's *Guidelines on Standards and Practices for Archaeological Fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester (1996a)* and *Guidelines on the Preparation and Transfer of Archaeological Archives to Colchester Museums (1996b)*.

A Class 7 Scheduled Monument Consent for the trench was issued to Colchester Borough Council by English Heritage on 25th June 1999 (ref. SMC/362/99).

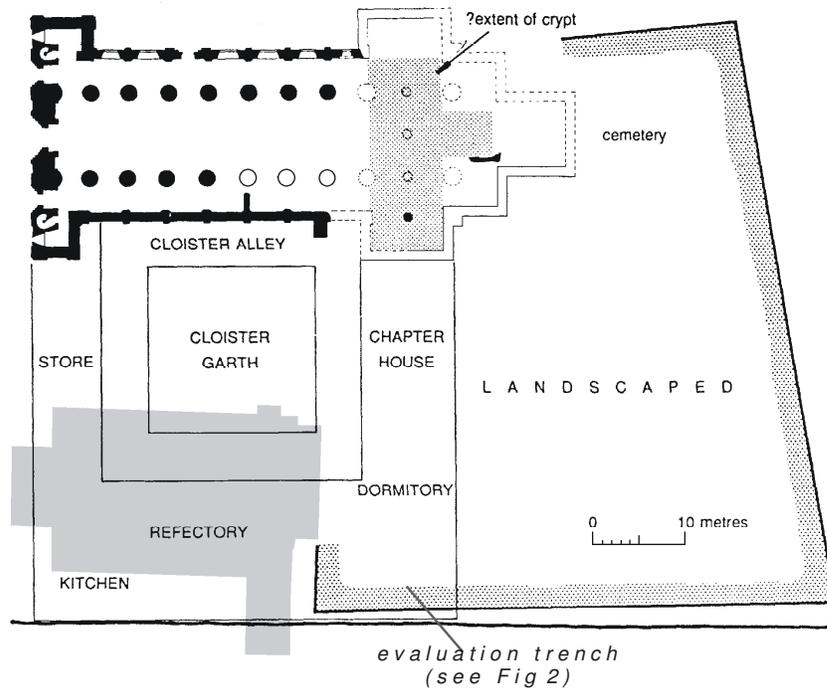


Fig 1 Outline plan of the priory church and landscaped area.

The site

St Botolph's priory church ruins are among the most impressive in Essex, standing in grounds of considerable archaeological importance as the site of the earliest house of Augustinian canons in England. A large part of the grounds now open to the public was acquired by the Borough following the 1980s' closure of an engineering factory that occupied the site for much of the present century.

In 1991, exploratory excavations established the ground plan of the demolished eastern part of the priory church. The excavations, carried out by Colchester Archaeological Trust, located the church's extensively robbed eastern wall foundations and encountered important evidence pointing to the presence of a crypt or undercroft beneath the south transept. Also revealed was part of a Roman building underlying the church to the east of the crossing (Fig. 1).

In the following year the positions of the demolished walls and piers were marked out permanently on the ground as part of a wider scheme involving landscaping and improved public access to the site.

Aims and methods

It is understood that the extension is to be built on piled foundations. The aim of the evaluation was to determine the depth, nature and state of preservation of any archaeologically significant deposits or features that may be affected by ground beams, pile caps and floor foundations.

A 2 x 2.5m trench, located within the footprint of the extension (Fig. 2), was excavated by hand to an overall depth of 1 metre from the present ground level.

Results

Excavation revealed the following deposits (Fig. 3):

- L1 Brown silt loam, grassed. Imported topsoil.
- L2 Dark brown sandy loam with a very high content of small stones, also fragments of concrete, brick and slate.

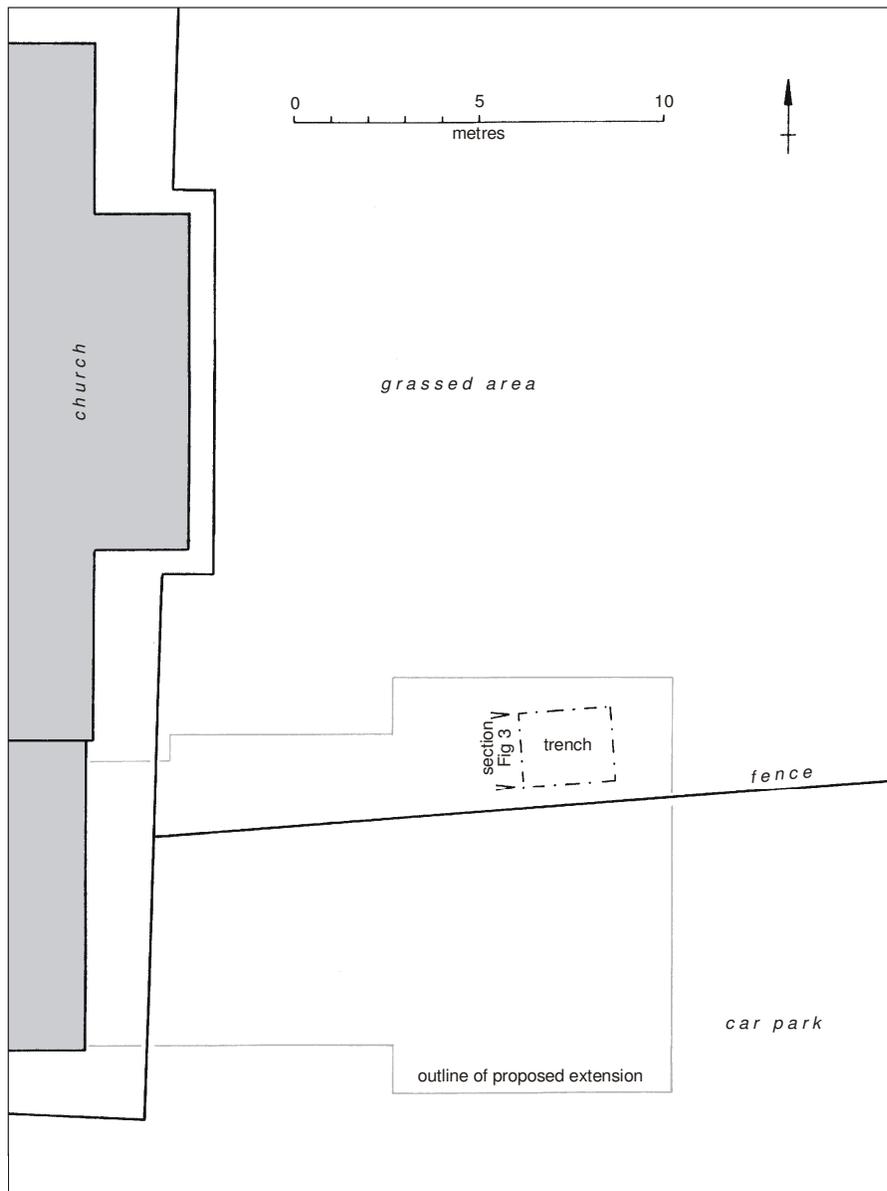


Fig 2 Trench location.

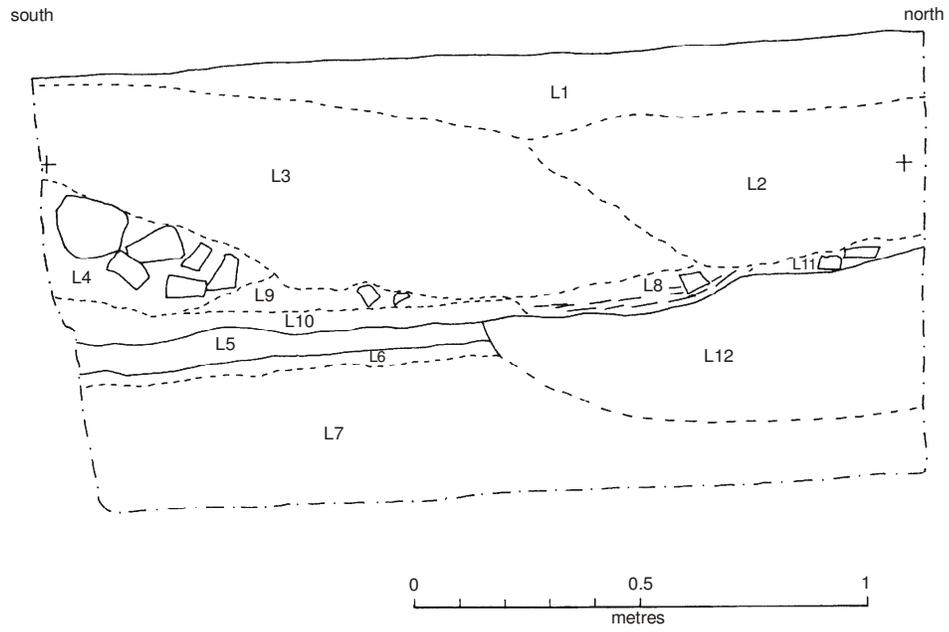


Fig 3 Trench section.

- L3 Dark greyish brown sandy loam.
- L4 Sand dominated by concrete and brick rubble.
- L5 Brown sandy loam dominated by gravel.
- L6 Brown sandy loam with very high content of small tile fragments, also occasional fragments of slate, mortar, septaria and Roman tile.
- L7 Dark greyish brown sandy loam with rare small fragments of peg tile, mortar and shell, also rare flecks of charcoal.
- L8 Dark brown sandy loam with high content of slate and occasional small brick fragment.
- L9 Sand and crushed brick fragments. Limited to western part of trench.
- L10 Sand stained with red substance.
- L11 Dark brown sandy loam with mortar, brick and tile fragments. Small local deposit.
- L12 Dark greyish brown sandy loam with occasional small fragments of brick, peg tile and mortar, also rare flecks of charcoal. Fill of an east-west linear cut.

The stratigraphy illustrated in Figure 3 was broadly similar throughout the trench, except where indicated in individual layer descriptions or disturbed by modern intrusions. The uppermost 60 cm (L10 and above) was clearly of 20th-century date, associated with the construction of the engineering works and the subsequent clearance and landscaping of the site. Underlying this material was a thin spread of gravel (L5) laid on a bed of tile (L6) with sherds of Fabric 51A late slipped kitchenware and Fabric 48D Staffordshire-type earthenware at the interface between the two. These layers sealed a thick deposit of dark soil (L7) which extended down beyond the 1m limit of excavation. Finds from the lowest excavated part of L7 included a sherd of Fabric 48D Staffordshire-type white slipware of 19th- to 20th-century date.

Overall, the uppermost 1m in the sampled area appears to be modern, with no evidence of activity earlier than the 19th century.

Archive

The fieldwork records and finds will be lodged permanently with Colchester Museums under cover of their accession code number 1999-102.

Acknowledgements

The fieldwork was commissioned by Tim Venn Design (Mr T. Venn) on behalf of St Botolph's Parochial Church Council, and took place with the co-operation of Colchester Borough Council (Mr S. Collis). The assistance of the Borough Archaeological Officer (Mr M. Winter) in obtaining scheduled monument consent is gratefully acknowledged.



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