

An archaeological evaluation
at
**36a North Hill,
Colchester, Essex**

August 2000

commissioned by Roff Marsh Partnership
on behalf of Davent Securities



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CAT Report 92

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An archaeological evaluation at 36a North Hill, Colchester, Essex

1 Summary

The site lies 40m from the Roman North Gate, and is within the Roman walled town. A small evaluation trench in the rear yard of the property revealed a Roman tessellated pavement at a depth of 1.1m.

The pavement extended beyond the limits of excavation to the south and east, and a short stretch of intact wall foundation marked its northern extent. The western part of the pavement was cut by a drainage channel constructed entirely of Roman building materials.

2 Introduction

2.1 This is the archive report on an archaeological evaluation by trial trench on the site of a proposed new development rear of (south of) the existing premises at 36a North Hill, Colchester, Essex. The archaeological work was commissioned by Roff Marsh Partnership on behalf of Davent Securities. The site is centred at TL 9936 2548.

2.2 The current development proposal is the subject of Colchester Borough Council application no F/COL/00/0532.

2.3 Fieldwork was carried out by Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) between the 15th and 22nd August 2000, and post-excavation work took place after that date and up to 15th September. All work was done in accordance with a brief issued by the Archaeology Officer of Colchester Museums.

2.4 Present condition

No 36a is a derelict building, formerly part of a brewery, situated behind 35 North Hill. The evaluation trench was located in the yard adjoining the south side of the building.

The highest point of the site is at the western end of the yard, where the present ground is approximately one metre above the level at the North Hill frontage.

- 2.5 This report mirrors standards and practices contained in Colchester Borough Council's *Guidelines for the standards and practice of archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester*.

3 Archaeological background

The plot at 36a North Hill is situated within the Roman town, in Insula 1b. Any Roman buildings within this plot would have had a frontage onto the Roman street running between Headgate and North Gate. There are a large number of records of archaeological finds and excavations of various scales in the vicinity of this site, eg:

No 49 North Hill (CAT site 8/74b)

Removal of 1.4m of topsoil in 1974 revealed three Roman masonry foundations and two tessellated floors, one of which may have been a mosaic. This was interpreted as part of a Roman town house. The Roman strata were cut by a post-medieval well, a cellar, and many pits ¹.

No 45 North Hill - Roman tessellated pavement, 25 feet wide, reported in 1849 ².

No 40 North Hill (CAT site 12/79)

A Roman clay deposit (clay floors), and a redeposited piece of *opus signinum* (another floor fragment?) showed that there had been Roman buildings on this site. Roman strata were heavily cut by post-medieval pits ³.

Bowlers Brewery

There are also records of a multicoloured mosaic floor from Bowlers Brewery, which incorporates the present site. However, as Hull reports (1958, 76), the exact location is not known. Hull prefers a location well to the west of the present site (in Insula 1a, near the east end of the brewery).

4 Aim

The aim of the evaluation was to locate, identify and assess the quality and extent of any surviving archaeological remains on the site.

¹ Crummy 1992, 799
² Hull 1958, 76
³ Crummy 1992, 937

5 The evaluation trench (Figs 2-4)

- 5.1** A single 4.6m-long trial trench was dug in the location shown on Figure 2. The trench was progressively stripped by a mechanical digger using a 1.5m-wide toothless ditching bucket. The upper surfaces were progressively stripped off until significant archaeological deposits were reached. The brick rubble surface (L01) was worked off, and the underlying post-medieval soils (L02-L05). These soils had a high peg-tile content, and could be easily identified as of recent origin. Brick culverts (F05 and F06) were also taken out by machine.
- 5.2** The lower levels were worked off by hand. These were layers L21 and L20. L21, a dark greyish brown loam, contained much residual Roman greyware pottery and roof-tile fragments, but was dated by Fabric 40 sherds to the 16th century or later. This sealed (L20), a very dark greyish brown sandy loam with a similar mix of Roman and medieval or post-medieval finds.
- 5.3** Removal of L21 and L20 revealed F01, a tessellated pavement (TP) cut by a channel (F03). The TP was thinly littered with oyster shells, also occasional animal bones, which formed a compacted deposit adhering to its surface (L09=L21). The pavement had been laid on a thin bed of mortar which in turn rested on a clayey deposit of unknown depth (L23). Some *tesserae* had been dislodged in the past, leaving bare patches with the underlying mortar showing through. The highest point of the floor was in the south-eastern part of the trench, with minor settlement (up to 50mm) evident in places elsewhere. There were two connected points. First, a stretch of septaria mortar and tile walling (F02) on the east edge of the floor is probably contemporary with the floor. Second, a short line of stones (F04) had been laid up against the western edge of the TP floor, aligned with the tessellation. This may be either later intrusive work, or more likely a repair to the floor surface, or perhaps even a threshold into an adjacent room.
- 5.4** Cutting the western side of the floor was a channel (F03). The top 4cm of the fill was excavated - this produced a Fabric 40 potsherd (post-medieval). This feature is rather odd. It was built entirely of reused Roman septaria and brick, and it cuts a curve across the Roman floor. It was presumably a drain of some kind.

6 Finds list

Weights are grammes. Roman fabrics are after Symonds & Wade 1999, medieval and later fabrics are after Cunningham 1985 and Cotter forthcoming; u/s = unstratified.

Context	bag no	Qty	Wt	Description	Date
L20	1	2	492	<i>tegula</i> flange fragments	Roman
L20	1	1	138	<i>imbrex</i> fragment	Roman
L20	1	2	192	peg-tile fragments (both with peg holes)	med/post-med
L20	1	1	9	cockspur	
L20	1	31	394	greyware sherds Fabrics GX and GA including 3 Fabric GA rims (see Symonds & Wade, fig 6.44 no 121), and a GX rim	Roman
L20	1	1	71	jar? sherd	Roman?
L20	1	1	193	box-tile fragment	Roman
L21	2	1	573	<i>tegula</i> flange fragment	Roman
L21	2	1	103	<i>imbrex</i> fragment	Roman
L21	2	1	46	plain red <i>tessera</i>	Roman
L21	2	3	38	greyware sherds Fabric GX	Roman
L21	2	1	2	samian ware sherd	Roman
L21	2	1	120	Colchester ware Fabric 22a jug rim with handle stub	15th-16th cent
L21	2	1	6	Fabric 40 post-medieval red earthenware (PMRE) sherd	16th-19th cent
L21	2	1	25	Fe nail	?
L21	2	1	6	animal vertebra (small mammal)	?
L21	2	1	6	slag lump	?
L21	3	4	17	sherds Fabric 21 sandy orange ware	13th-16th
L21	3	3	34	Fabric 40 PMRE sherds	16th-19th
L21	3	1	34	slag lump	?
L22	4	1	8	Fabric 40 PMRE sherd	16th-19th

7 Discussion and interpretation

- 7.1 The discovery of Roman tessellated pavement on this site is entirely in keeping with previous discoveries in this *insula*, where there are many records of tessellated floors (see section 3 above). Like the remains from 45 and 49 North Hill, this floor is probably part of a Roman town house.
- 7.2 It was not possible to resolve the date of the channel (F3), since to do so would have required excavation on a more extensive scale than that attempted in the present evaluation. Its top fill is clearly post-medieval, but its construction might arguably be earlier. Its position (almost flush with the floor), and the apparently plentiful supply of good-quality Roman building material used in its construction, tend to suggest an earlier date, perhaps late Roman or immediately post-Roman. If so, then it may be an earlier feature re-exposed by much later excavation, since the soil filling the channel contained post-medieval pottery, as did the material almost immediately above the floor. There are references to the discovery or perhaps repeated discovery of tessellated floors in this area of the town, and even to deliberate trenching to look for Roman remains⁴. In this context, this floor may have been exposed before and subsequently covered in again. This would explain why post-medieval soils are found so close to Roman floor levels, and why post-medieval pottery may have found its way into the top fill of the channel.
- 7.3 The deposits over the Roman material suggest the abandonment of the site, and the gradual accumulation of soil in medieval and post-medieval times.
- 7.4 The brick culverts bear witness to a higher level of activity in the 19th century, perhaps associated with the brewery which stood here in the 19th century.

8 Acknowledgements

Thanks to Davent Securities (Mr and Mrs Davey) for commissioning the work through the good offices of Roff Marsh Partnership (Colin Perry). Site work was supervised by Carl Crossan, and carried out by Kate Orr, Harry Speller, and James Fawn. The project was monitored by Martin Winter for Colchester Borough Council. Thanks also to Peter Crafford of Abbots.

⁴

Hull 1958, 77 (site 163)

9 References

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- Hull, M R, 1958 *Roman Colchester*, Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London, Report **XX**
- Symonds, R P, & Wade, S, 1999 *Roman pottery from excavations in Colchester, 1971-86*, edited by P Bidwell & A Croom, Colchester Archaeological Report **10**

10 Glossary

context	specific location on an archaeological site, especially one where finds are made
Fe	iron
Feature	an identifiable thing like a pit, a wall, a drain, a floor; can contain 'contexts'
<i>imbrex</i>	Roman roof tile (stops rain getting between <i>tegulae</i>)
intrusive	early material out of place in a later context (eg a Coke bottle in a Roman pit)
medieval	from AD 1066 to Henry VIII
NGR	National Grid Reference
natural	geological deposit undisturbed by man
<i>opus signinum</i>	pink Roman mortar with some waterproof qualities
post-medieval	after Henry VIII and up to Victorian
PMRE	post-medieval red earthenware
residual	an earlier object out of place in a later context (eg a Roman coin in a Victorian pit)
Roman	period from AD 43 to around AD 430
septaria	local building stone used by Romans
<i>tegula</i>	Roman roof tile
u/s	unstratified (no context)

11 Archive deposition

The finds and paper archive are held at Colchester Archaeological Trust, 12 Lexden Road, Colchester, Essex CO3 3NF, but both will be permanently deposited at Colchester Museum, under accession code 2000.89.

12 Site data

12.1 Site context list

Context	Description	Cuts/seals	Finds (or bag no)	Finds date	Context date
F01	tessellated floor				Roman
F02	wall foundation				Roman?
F03	linear feature	F02	(see L22)		
F04	stone edging	F01			Roman
F05	brick drain	L02, L03			
F06	brick drain	L03, L05			
L01	hardcore	L02, F05			20th century
L02	topsoil	L03, F06	peg-tile	post-medieval	19th century
L03	topsoil	L04, L05	peg-tile	post-medieval	post-medieval
L04	probably the fill of a shallow cut	L05	red brick	post-medieval	post-medieval
L05	dump	L06-L07, L14	peg-tile	post-medieval	post-medieval
L06	dump	L08, L09	peg-tile	post-medieval	post-medieval
L07	dump	F01	peg-tile	post-medieval	post-medieval
L08	dump		peg-tile	post-medieval	post-medieval
L09		F01			late R or post-R
L10	= F1 tessellated pavement	L05, L07, L09			Roman
L11	= F05	L02, L03			
L12	= F06	L03, L05			
L13	dump	L09	peg-tile	post-medieval	post-medieval
L14	dump	F02, L13	peg-tile	post-medieval	post-medieval
L15	fill of F06			post-medieval	post-medieval
L16-19	not used				
L20	demolition debris	F01	1: peg-tile	post-medieval	post-medieval
L21	dump	L20	2, 3: Fabrics 21 and 40	16th century +	16th century +
L22	fill of F03		4: Fabric 40	16th century +	16th century +
L23	make up for F01 floor				Roman

12.2 Soil descriptions

Context	Description
L01	Grit on bed of brick hardcore.
L02	Mainly very dark greyish brown sandy loam with high content of small (approx 3cm) red brick fragments and occasional small peg-tile fragments. Rare small fragments of septaria.
L03	Mixed mainly dark greyish brown sandy loam with very high content (approx 80%) of small to medium rounded pebbles, also common fragments of peg-tile and red brick. Occasional oyster shell.
L04	Similar to L03 but with higher content of septaria and red brick fragments. This might be a truncated shallow pit.
L05	Dark grey brown sandy loam with scatter of peg-tile and septaria fragments. Occasional oyster shell. One red <i>tessera</i> .
L06	Dark greyish brown sandy loam with very high content (approx 80%) of peg-tile, medium content of septaria and scattering of very small oyster shell fragments.
L07	Same as L06.
L08	Similar to L07 but with higher content of peg-tile fragments.
L09	Thin deposit containing very high content of oyster shell and occasional loose <i>tesserae</i> . One animal bone.
L10	Equals F01 - tessellated pavement.
L11 = F05	Brick culvert. Unfrogged red brick 9 inches x 2¾ x 4 inches wide. Runs NNW-SSE. Curved base, arched top.
L12 = F06	Brick culvert. Unfrogged red brick 2¾ high x 3¾ inches wide. Runs SW-NE. Not examined.
L13	Dark brown sandy loam with small but distinct clay content. Occasional peg-tile.
L14	Dark greyish brown sandy loam with common peg-tile fragments and rare oyster shell. Probably the fill of a cut.
L15	Very mixed, mainly dark grey brown sandy loam with low content of small stones and occasional mortar fragments.
L16-L19	not used
L20	Mixed, mainly very dark greyish brown sandy loam with high content of oyster shell, tile fragments, small mortar fragments, occasional loose piece of <i>tessera</i> , rare animal bone.
L21	Mainly very dark greyish brown sandy loam, scatter of small mortar fragments, occasional tile.
L22	Fill of F03, similar to L21, slightly lower tile content.
L23	Yellowish brown silty loam.

12.3 Site levels

The following Ordnance Datum levels are based on readings taken from the 13.81m (45.31 ft) Ordnance Survey benchmark between 21 and 22 North Hill (curiously, the 1876 Colchester plan shows a benchmark at the same spot, but quotes a level of 46.9ft).

Location	Ordnance Datum level
Pavement at the North Hill entrance to the yard.	11.78m
Present ground level at the rear (west end) of the yard.	12.76m
Ground level at the top of evaluation trench (stone slab at southern end of trench).	12.24m
Highest point of the Roman tessellated pavement.	11.14m

e&oe

*Carl Crossan and Howard Brooks
September 2000*

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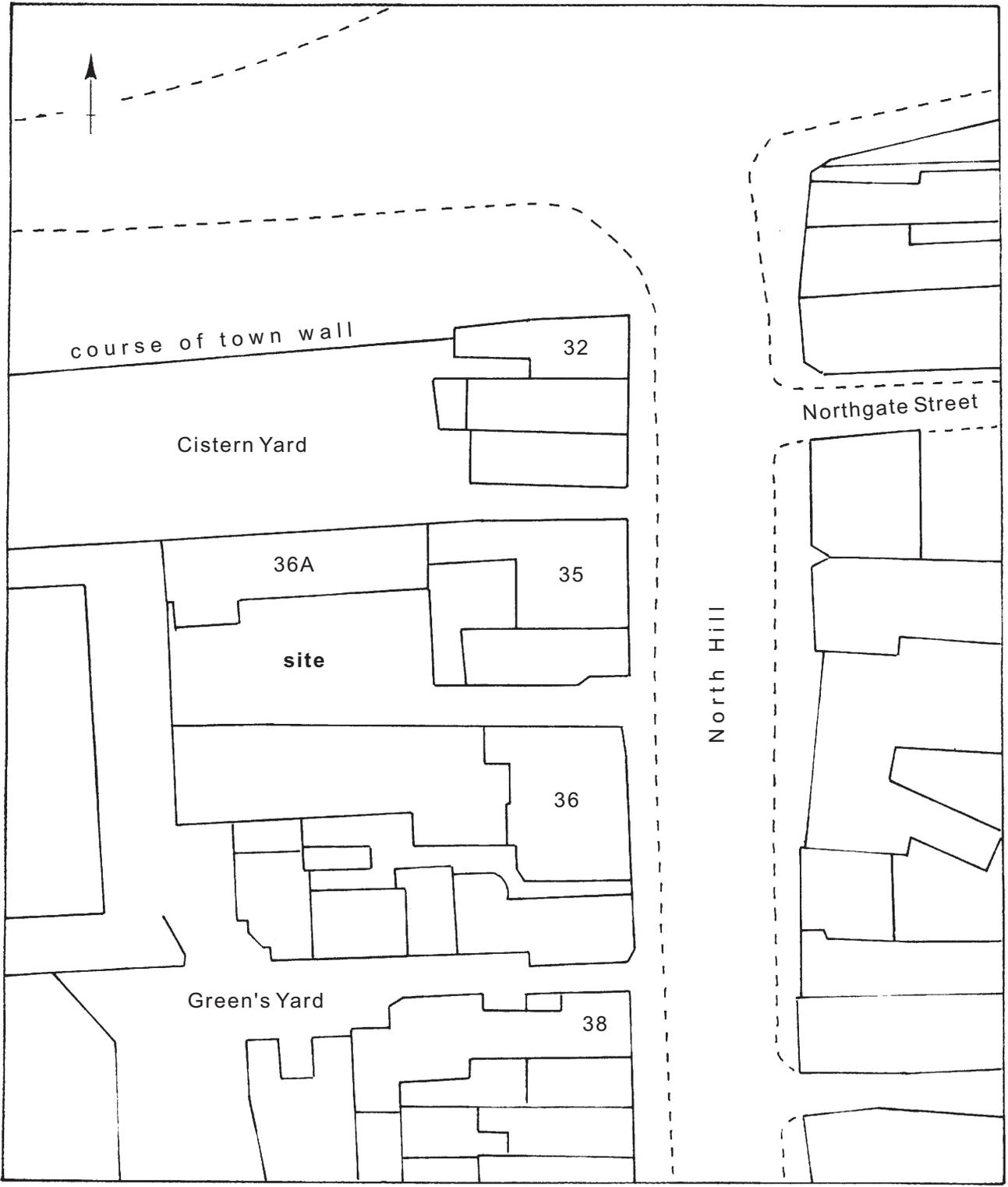


Fig 1 Site location.

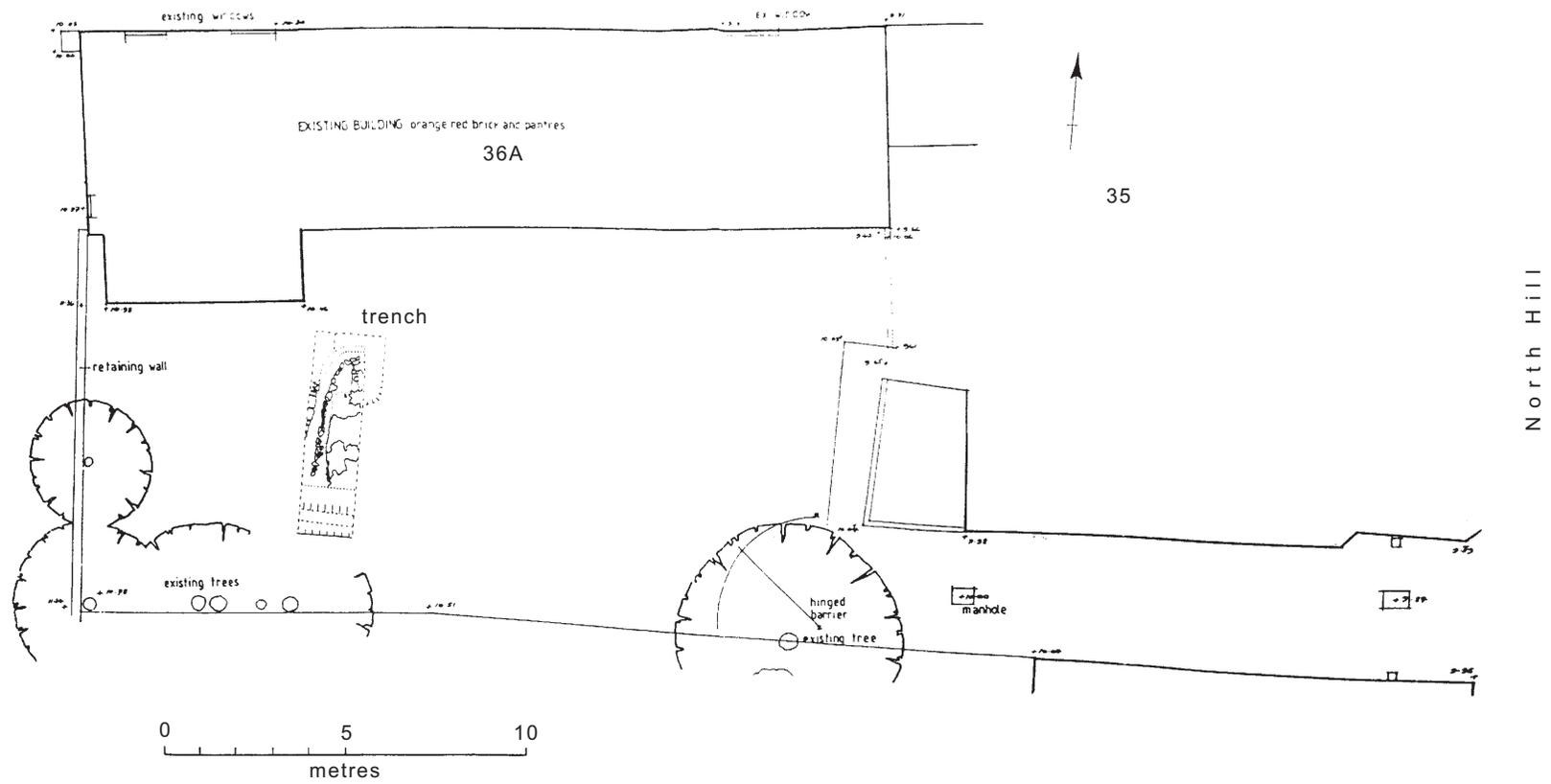


Fig 2 Trench location.

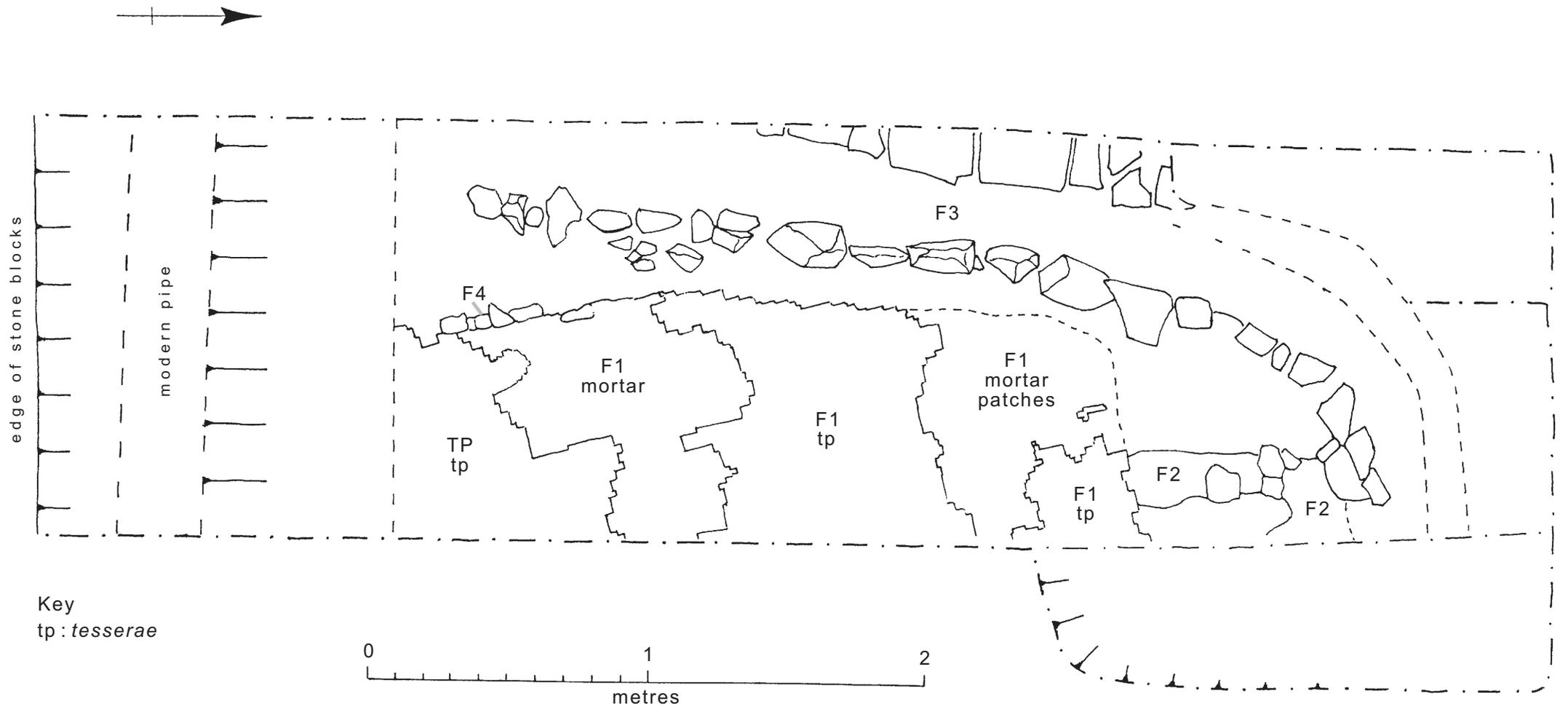


Fig 3 Trench plan.

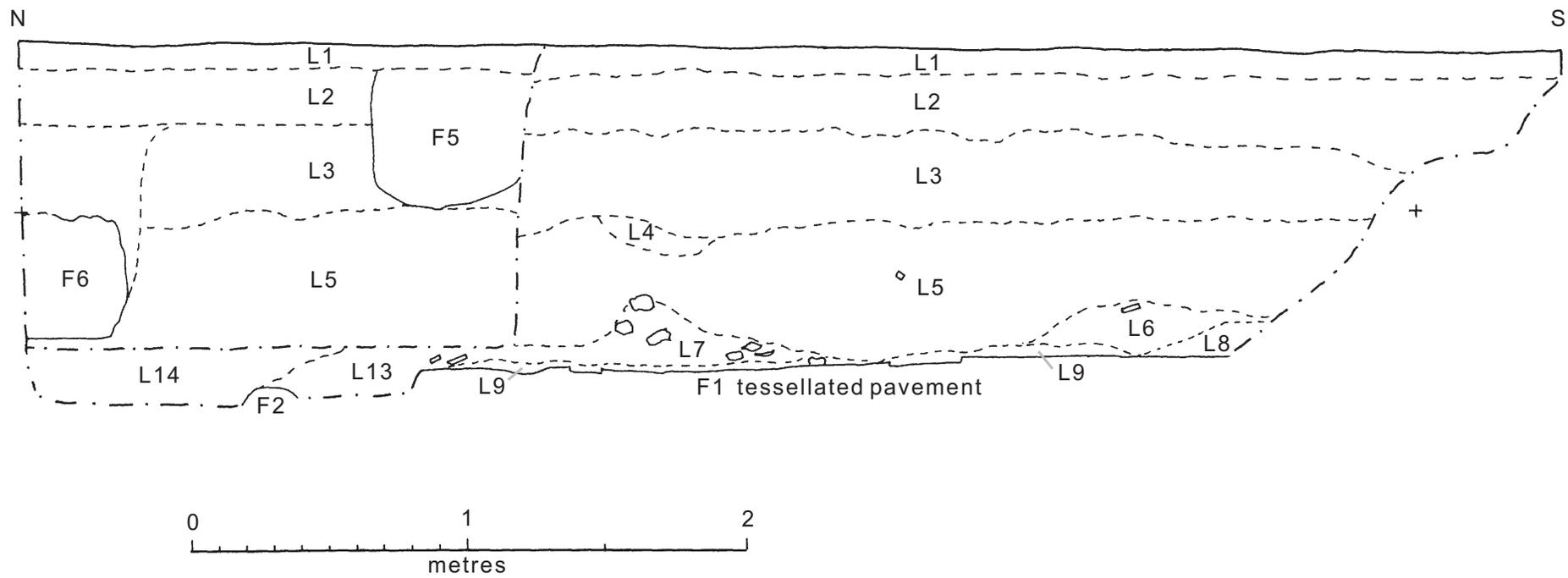


Fig 4 Section: east face of trench.