

An archaeological watching brief at
Colchester Institute,
Sheepen Road, Colchester, Essex

January-March 2001

on behalf of
Colchester Institute

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Colchester Museum accession code: 2001.3
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CAT Report 131

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1 Summary

The site lies on the eastern side of the late Iron Age and early Roman industrial centre and settlement at Sheepen. The watching brief produced an assemblage of mainly 1st-century AD Roman amphoras and pottery of types found previously at Sheepen. Several pits were recorded, one of which was dated by pottery to the early Roman period. A short stretch of mortared Roman tiles, presumed to be a Roman wall or foundation, was found by the contractors after the watching brief had finished.

2 Introduction

- 2.1 This is the report on an archaeological watching brief carried out by Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) between the 5th January and the 19th of March 2001, during the development of land for a new catering block at Colchester Institute.
- 2.2 The Institute is located on the north-west outskirts of Colchester at national grid reference TL 9883 2570. The development site lies on level ground and is situated to the north of 'D-block' and to the south of Sheepen Road (Fig 1).
- 2.3 Previous to the site being stripped, the area had been mainly grass, with some trees, and was used as open space and for an access road for the Institute.
- 2.4 A planning application was submitted in April 2000 for the erection of a catering block, under application no F/COL/00/0692. An archaeological evaluation was carried out in August 2000. Planning permission was given with the condition that an archaeological watching brief be carried out.
- 2.5 This report follows the standards set out in the Borough Council's *Guidelines on standards and practices for archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester* (1996) and *Guidelines on the preparations and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester Museums* (1996), and the IFA's *Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief* (1994).

3 Archaeological background

- 3.1 The site lies on the eastern side of Sheepen, a late Iron Age settlement and industrial centre established by the Trinovantes tribe and maintained in the years after the Roman conquest (Scheduled Ancient Monument no 46). Extensive excavations in the 1930s and smaller-scale work in 1970 and later have produced evidence of

workshops engaged in a range of industrial activities, including metal-working, enamelling, pottery-making and leather-working, in the areas to the west of the site (Hawkes & Hull 1947; Niblett 1985). A kiln is known just to the west of the Institute (kiln 23, Fig 3).

- 3.2 A Roman road linking Sheepen with the Roman legionary fortress or later *colonia* is shown crossing the north-east corner of the development site in Symonds & Wade 1999 (Fig 3). The course of this road is hypothetical, however.
- 3.3 A late 1st-century temple was excavated by the Colchester Excavation Committee in 1935 on the site of St Helena School, opposite the development site (Hull 1958, pp 224-34). The outer 'temenos' wall of the temple precinct appears to lie underneath Sheepen Road (Fig 3).
- 3.4 A Roman timber-lined well was found in the 1930s to the north-east of D-block, just outside the footprint of the new catering block.
- 3.5 An evaluation at the development site consisting of the excavation of two trial trenches was carried out in August 2000 by CAT (Crossan 2000). This revealed pits and pottery dating to the late Iron Age to early Roman period, corresponding with the major occupation at Sheepen dated c AD 5-60. Apart from the evaluation, no other archaeological investigations have taken place within the development area.

4 Aims and objectives

The aim of the watching brief was to identify and record any archaeological features, finds or deposits revealed by the groundworks.

5 Methods

- 5.1 Eleven visits were made to the site. The first visit was on the 5th of January, after approximately 500mm-700mm of topsoil had been stripped off an area of 800m² by JCB and before most of the area was covered over with a layer of sand and rubble. The entire available area (approximately 90%) was walked over and inspected.
- 5.2 Subsequent visits were made in February and March by the author and Carl Crossan during the machine excavation of ground-beams, pile caps, lift-shafts and a sewer-trench. The ground-beams were dug to approximately 450mm below the stripped ground-level and were approximately 450mm wide. Pile caps were dug to between 620mm and 750mm below the stripped ground-level and their width was

approximately 1m. In most cases the officer from CAT was not present during the actual excavations, but visited after each stage of the work had been carried out and before the trenches were filled in.

- 5.3 Approximately 75% of the trenches were monitored and their sections examined. Changes in soil layers within the foundation trenches were recorded. Features were recorded on pro-forma CAT record sheets and their locations are shown on Figure 2.
- 5.4 Finds were retrieved and assigned bag numbers using pro-forma CAT record sheets. All finds were washed, marked, bagged and were identified by specialists (see Appendices 1, 2 and 3). The three main concentrations of finds were given area numbers. A record was made of the proximity of finds and features to ground-beams and pile caps. Measurements were also taken where possible from fixed points such as existing roads so that they could be plotted on the site plan (Fig 2).
- 5.5 Five digital photographs were taken.

6 Results

05/01/01

Approximately 500mm-700mm of turf and topsoil had been stripped off over the area of the footprint of the new building (800m²). The site was very muddy and rutted by machines (Plate 1). All available areas were walked over; however, an area in the south-west was obscured by a large heap of gravel (see Area 3). There were also holes where trees had been removed.

An area - 'Area 1' - of dense Roman pottery was noticed at approximately 700m below original ground-level. This was by the northern baulk, 16m east of the access road (in the area later dug for Pile cap 5). Within an area of approximately 1m², three large bags of Roman pottery were collected, mainly consisting of Dressel 20 amphora sherds but also samian, one sherd of mortaria plus grey ware, and some animal bone. These finds were in a dark sandy silt. The section of the baulk was checked and no clear layers or features were discerned. No features were observed in plan, which may have been due to lack of visibility caused by machine ruts in the mud.

To the south-west, 10m east of the access road, a large rim of mortaria was found along with a few other Roman sherds and a piece of glass in 'Area 2'. These were found together but no features were observed.

Roman pottery was found over the most of the rest of the site, but the only concentrations found during soil-stripping were in Area 1 and Area 2.

The level at which the pottery was found ties in with the layers of Roman material found during the evaluation.

12/02/01

A visit was made after some of the pile caps in the western part of the site had been dug out. The site was very muddy and the trenches were filled up with water. Nothing of archaeological significance was observed.

15/02/01

A visit was made when work was resumed after the rain stopped. The main south-east to north-west drain was obscured by continuous shoring which was put up as the contractors went along, and therefore it was not possible to monitor the drain properly.

Pile caps and ground-beams, however, were open along the south-western edge of the site, near D-block. Most intrusions in the south-western corner looked modern, ie associated with the construction of D-block. There was one possible early intrusion (Feature 1 or **F1**) in the southernmost lift-shaft. This feature is a pit with a greyish brown silt loam fill with a light scatter of charcoal flecks. **F1** was seen in two sections of the lift-shaft. It was sealed by modern make-up (probably for D-block) and there were no finds.

At the western edge of the site, natural was observed at 500mm depth, from the concrete access road.

16/02/01

A number of intrusions were observed in the north-south line of the pile caps and beam-slots along the western edge of the site. These all had very mixed fill, and none were convincingly early. There were no finds.

19/02/01

Ground-beams and pile caps were inspected at the south-eastern end of the site. An abundance of large Roman amphora sherds of five different types and a small amount of Roman pottery and brick was retrieved from the eastern end of Ground-beam 19, in 'Area 3'. These were found in the sections, 0-230mm below stripped ground-level, in a dark brown clay loam also containing charcoal, possibly a pit (**F2**).

A possible pit was also observed in the northern section of Ground-beam 20 (**F3**) with a similar fill to **F2**; however, there were no finds from this feature.

Natural ground was not reached in the ground-beams but natural orangey red sand was observed in the pile caps.

21/02/01

Pile caps 34 and 37 had already been covered over or filled in as had the rest of Ground-beam 19, and therefore there was nothing to observe.

22/02/01

Ground-beams and pile caps in the centre west were observed. Pile cap 33 had already been filled in. Nothing of archaeological interest was observed. A natural orange sand was observed in the pile caps.

26/02/01

Many trenches had already been filled in or covered over since the last visit. A few trenches in the central area were monitored, but unfortunately it was not clear which ground-beam or pile-cap numbers they were (possibly Pile cap 23 or 24). Two pieces of modern tile were picked up from the edge of one of the trenches.

27/02/01

A visit was made after Ground-beams 14, 15, 16 and 17 and Pile caps 16 and 18 had been dug out in Area 3 in the south-eastern area. More large sherds from four different types of amphora were found densely deposited on top of each other in a fairly small area in the western section of Pile cap 18. The sherds lay 150mm-200mm below the stripped ground-level and were contained within a mid brown silty clay with charcoal, which appeared darker and less sandy than the surrounding material. No modern material was found with the Roman pottery or below it, and therefore the artefacts may be *in situ* in a pit. Ground-beam 19 had been partly filled in and partly covered in plastic, so it was impossible to see if the possible feature continued into Ground-beam 19. However, the feature is likely to be part of the pit **F2**.

The layer below the amphoras appeared to be a mottled light brown and orange sandy clay. It did not contain any artefacts and may be natural.

The contractors also dug up some Roman pottery, mainly amphoras, from this area and left it on the side. Four different types of amphora were represented; one of the amphora pieces came from the same vessel as one found in **F2** and so probably came from Pile cap 18.

02/03/01

Ground-beams 12 and 13 and Pile caps 13 and 14 had already been dug and concreted. Pile caps and ground-beams in the north-eastern area were monitored as well as the northernmost lift-shaft.

A possible feature (**F4**) was observed in the eastern and southern sections of Pile cap 8a in the north-eastern area. This looked like a large ditch, 380mm deep, cut into natural orange brown clayey sand and sealed by 300mm of modern silty clay and rubble that had been deposited in January. The bottom layer consisted of a black burnt-looking layer. There were no finds from this feature so it is not datable. This is Area 1, near where a concentration of amphora was found.

A possible pit (**F5**) was observed in the north-eastern section of the lift-shaft. The shaft was too deep to enter and therefore no finds were retrieved.

The contractors had retrieved more amphora sherds, some from the area of Pile cap 13 and some from Ground-beam 14.

19/03/01

After the watching brief had finished, the contractors contacted CAT to report a quantity of 'early brick' that they had dug out of a new sewer-trench on the northern boundary of the site. The trench had already been filled in. A visit was made to retrieve the brick and to find out where it had been found. The digger driver reported that it had been found between Pile cap 8 and Ground-beam 5 which is 28m east of the access road.

Apparently the bricks had not been loose but had been packed together as a wall and had been difficult to remove with the bucket. He reported that there was approximately 500mm of soil above the wall. Eleven large flat pieces of Roman brick/tile had been set aside and were retrieved by CAT. The thickness of each brick is 37mm. Although there were no complete bricks, it was possible to work out the length (420mm) and width (370mm) of two large pieces. A large amount of *opus signinum* mortar was still attached to the bricks. The feature was not seen by CAT staff but presumably what was uncovered was a mortared wall or foundation to a Roman building, running in an approximately east-west direction across the north-south sewer-trench. The alternative interpretation would be a Roman tiled drain (**F6**).

7 Finds

7.1 The non-amphora pottery included some fine wares and derives from the main period of occupation at Sheepen of c AD 5-60. However, two sherds can be dated to the late 1st-earlier 3rd century, demonstrating that some at least of the pottery derives from activity occurring later than the main occupation period.

7.2 A good assemblage of amphora sherds was found during the watching brief, mainly of

types already found from the excavations at Sheepen. The datable amphora sherds are pre-AD 75 which corresponds to the dates of most of the other pottery found here.

- 7.3** Apart from the Roman pottery, the other finds consisted of a large amount of mortared Roman brick/tile plus a few modern artefacts.

8 Conclusion

- 8.1** Despite probable severe truncation of archaeological remains by site levelling during the construction of the Institute, the watching brief was very productive in terms of the amount of Roman material found. Most notably this included an assemblage of sherds of amphoras from Rhodes, Spain, Italy and France. Most of the datable pottery was of 1st-century date and of types identified during other investigations at Sheepen.
- 8.2** Five possible pits were exposed in the trench sections; however, only one produced any datable finds.
- 8.3** Mortared tiles forming part of what is believed to be a Roman building were exposed and removed by the contractors after the watching brief had finished. No other finds were retrieved from this feature. If it is a building and not Roman drain, then this is the first Roman structure to be found on the site. As the feature was not seen by a CAT officer, it is not known definitely in which direction it runs nor its width or exact depth. The feature is too far south to be part of the temple at St Helena School. It may, however, be a dwelling or a workshop.

9 Archive deposition

The archive, which includes a copy of this report, the finds, digital photographs and site notes, will be deposited permanently at Colchester Museum under accession code 2001.3.

10 Acknowledgements

The Trust is grateful to the following for their help and co-operation during the course of the fieldwork:

Mrs J E Dickinson of Colchester Institute

John Medcalf and Ryan Jones of Wates Construction

P R Sealey of Colchester Museum for the identification of the amphoras

Martin Winter, Colchester Borough Council's Archaeology Officer

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Kate Orr, March 2001

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Appendix 1

Report on the Roman amphoras by Kate Orr

(identification provided by P R Sealey)

Cam numbers refer to the Camulodunum type series (Hawkes & Hull 1947; Hull 1958).

The overwhelming proportion of finds retrieved was amphoras (19.3kg) imported from Rhodes, Spain, Italy and France as containers for olive oil, wine and fish sauce.

The most common type of amphora (13.5kg) from the watching brief was the Dressel 20 (Cam 187) and this is true of Colchester sites in general. They are thought to have been made in a series of production centres/estates between Seville and Corduba in southern Spain and their principal content was olive oil (Symonds & Wade 1999, 153). Some of the stamps act as brand names for the production centres and which may have been in use for over a century. The Dressel 20 stamp from Area 3 reads 'SLT SAXIF...'. The rest is too worn to read, but another stamp has been found in Colchester and from this we can assume that the stamp would have read 'SLT SAXIFERRI' (Fig 4). SAXIFERRI is the name of the estate in Huertas del Beln near Corduba in Spain where the olive oil was produced. This production centre was in operation from before AD 50 to the late AD 140s (Symonds & Wade 1999, 159 & 161, no 55). The two other stamps, both from Dressel 20 handles, are too worn to be legible. A rim found from one of these amphoras is datable to AD 30-70.

Salazones are a group of Spanish amphoras used to transport fish sauce. Twenty-one sherds of this type were found on the site. The Dressel 2-4 (Cam 182-183) amphoras were used to carry wine. Ten sherds of this type were found. The black volcanic sand fabric in some of the sherds shows that three of them come from the Pompeii region of Italy. One spiked base of a Haltern 70 (Cam 185a) amphora was found. This would have been part of a vessel which transported wine or a grape syrup from southern Spain and is dated to before AD 75. One sherd of an amphora from Rhodes was found (Cam 184). This would have been used to carry wine. A rim of a Dressel 7-11 amphora dated to AD 75 or earlier was found. A flat base and a handle from a Gauloise 4 amphora from France were found.

The amphoras found during the watching brief are of the type that have already been found at Sheepen. Those that are datable are mainly pre-AD 75 which accords with the main phase of occupation at Sheepen.

Find group no	Location	Description	Sherds	Weight
3	Soil stripping - Area 1	Dressel 20 body sherds, rims and handles	113 body sherds, 3 rims and 4 handles (4 bags)	7870g
4	Soil stripping - other areas	Dressel 20 body sherds	17	673g
5	Area 3 – Ground-beam 19	Cam 184 amphora handle, from Rhodes - RHO AM 1	1	80g
5	Area 3 – Ground-beam 19	Salazon from Cadiz, all from same vessel	8	2000g
5	Area 3 – Ground-beam 19	Dressel 20 handle	1	269g
5	Area 3 – Ground-beam 19	Dressel 20 body sherd	1	20g
5	Area 3 – Ground-beam 19	Dressel 2-4 handle	1	25g
5	Area 3 – Ground-beam 19	Italian amphora body sherd, with black volcanic sand fabric. Dressel 2-4?	1	10g
6	Area 3 – Ground-beam 19	Salazones, not from the same vessel	3	428g
6	Area 3 – Ground-beam 19	Dressel 20 body sherds	4	1200g
6	Area 3 – Ground-beam 19	Dressel 20 handles from different vessels, one with a stamp	2	468g
6	Area 3 – Ground-beam 19	Italian Dressel 2-4 amphora with black volcanic sand fabric	1	81g
6	Area 3 – Ground-beam 19	Dressel 2-4 body sherds from the same vessel.	2	429g
7	Area 3 - Pile cap 18	Italian Dressel 2-4 amphora with black volcanic sand fabric - same vessel as 5 and 6	1	30g
7	Area 3 - Pile cap 18	Body sherd of a Dressel 2-4 from Catalan	1	67g
7	Area 3 - Pile cap 18	Body sherd of a Dressel 2-4	1	274g
7	Area 3 - Pile cap 18	Rim of a Dressel 20 in two pieces, AD 30-70	1	314g
7	Area 3 - Pile cap 18	Unidentified	2	101g
7	Area 3 - Pile cap 18	Salazon	2	172g
7	Area 3 - Pile cap 18	Dressel 20 body sherds inc 1 piece of handle	4	864g
7	Area 3 - Pile cap 18	Rims of a Dressel 20	2	282g
10	Area 3 - area of Pile	Rim of a Dressel 7-11	1	114g

	cap 18 and Ground-beams 14-17 - found by contractors	Salazon, AD 75 or earlier		
10	Area 3 - area of Pile cap 18 and Ground-beams 14-17 - found by contractors	Handle of a Gauloise 4	2	214g
10	Area 3 - area of Pile cap 18 and Ground-beams 14-17 - found by contractors	Body sherds of a Dressel 2-4, from the same vessel as no 6	3	381g
10	Area 3 - area of Pile cap 18 and Ground-beams 14-17 - found by contractors	Handle of a Dressel 20 with a stamp 'SLT SAXFER'	1	349g
10	Area 3 - area of Pile cap 18 and Ground-beams 14-17 - found by contractors	Dressel 20 body sherds	2	169g
10	Area 3 - area of Pile cap 18 and Ground-beams 14-17 - found by contractors	Unidentified body sherds, possibly amphora	2	94g
10	Area 3 - area of Pile cap 18 and Ground-beams 14-17 - found by contractors	Salazon body sherds	6	100g
11	Area 3 – Ground-beam 14 - found by contractors	Base of a Gauloise 4 - from Gaul	1	457g
11	Area 3 – Ground-beam 14 - found by contractors	Salazon from Cadiz	1	156g
11	Area 3 – Ground-beam 14 - found by contractors	Dressel 20 body sherds	3	267g
12	Pile cap 13 - found by contractors	Dressel 20 sherd	1	356g
12	Pile cap 13 - found by contractors	Dressel 20 handle with a stamp	1	368g
12	Pile cap 13 - found by contractors	Spiked base of a Haltern 70, dated pre-AD 75	1	607g

Table 1: Amphoras.

Appendix 2

Report on the Roman pottery other than amphoras

by Stephen Benfield

There was just under 2.0kg (1982g) of Roman pottery other than amphoras from the watching brief (Table 2). The pottery finds groups are mostly small (2-5 sherds), and only two of these groups (group 1 and group 4) contain a more significant quantity of pottery which includes fine wares. Apart from one or two sherds from finds group 4, the pottery is generally datable to the early Roman period (1st-early 2nd century) and several of the more closely datable pottery forms are of Claudio-Neronian date, so that most of the material probably derives from the main period of occupation at Sheepen of c AD 5-60 (Hawkes & Hull 1947; Niblett 1985). However, group 4 contains a sherd of Central Gaulish samian of 2nd-century date and a sherd of colour-coat ware (probably Cologne colour-coat) which can be dated to the late 1st-earlier 3rd century, demonstrating that some at least of the pottery derives from activity later than the main occupation period at Sheepen.

Pottery forms: Cam numbers refer to Camulodunum type series (Hawkes & Hull 1947; Hull 1958); S&W forms as per *CAR 10*.

Fabric codes refer to *CAR 10*:

- SG South Gaulish samian
- CG Central Gaulish samian
- TZ Colchester mortaria and mortaria imported from the Continent
- EZ other fine colour-coat wares, mostly white/buff
- DJ coarse oxidised and related wares
- GX other coarse wares, principally locally-produced grey wares
- HZ large storage jars and other vessels in heavily-tempered grey wares.

Finds group no	Fabric group	Weight	Sherds	Comments
1	SG	127g	4	South Gaulish samian - Drag 24/25, pre-Flavian; Drag 15/17, 1st century; unidentified base of bowl form probably Curle 11 (1st - early 2nd century) or Ritterling 12 (Claudio-Neronian - early Flavian)
1	TZ	81g	1	Mortaria, Cam 192B, Neronian
1	DJ	61g	6	Includes flagon handle
1	GX	66g	6	Jar, Cam 218, Claudio-Neronian - early 2nd century
1	HZ	196g	5	
2	TZ	502g	1	Imported mortaria, Cam 195, 1st century
2	DJ	39g	2	
2	GX	21g	3	
4	CG	8g	1	Central Gaulish samian, Drag 18/31, 2nd century
4	TZ	50g	1	Mortaria, Cam 191B, LIA - Claudio-Neronian
4	EZ	5g	1	Probably Cologne colour-coat ware (roughcast), late 1st-2nd century
4	DJ	50g	17	Includes flagon handle and neck sherd
4	GX	260g	13	Jar Cam 266, 1st century
4	HZ	177g	6	
5	DJ	56g	4	
7	DJ	18g	2	
10	TZ	196g	1	Imported mortaria sherd
10	DJ	69g	4	Flagon unclassified form similar to S&W fig 6.19, 499 and probable variant of forms Cam 148 (Claudio-Neronian) and Cam 150 (Claudio-Neronian - Trajanic); flagon neck probably from large two- handled vessel, probably Claudio-Neronian

Table 2: Roman pottery other than amphoras.

Appendix 3

List of other finds by context

(identification by Stephen Benfield and Howard Brooks)

The identification of the modern pottery sherd no 4* makes reference to Cunningham 1985.

Find group no	Location	Description	Quantity	Weight
1	Soil stripping - Area 1	animal bone	1	
4	Soil stripping - other areas	modern glass and undated nail	2	
4	Soil stripping - other areas	Roman brick/tile	2	113g
4	Soil stripping - other areas	Roman roof tile	2	407g
4*	Soil stripping - other areas	modern ironstone 19th- to 20th-century pottery - Fabric 48D	1	15g
8	Central area - surface find	modern tile	2	136g
9	Pile cap 14 - Area 1	Roman tile	2	196g
13	Between Ground-beam 5 and Pile cap 8 - found by contractors	Roman tiles	11	35kg

Table 3: Other finds.



Plate 1 Photograph of the whole site after soil-stripping, looking south-west.

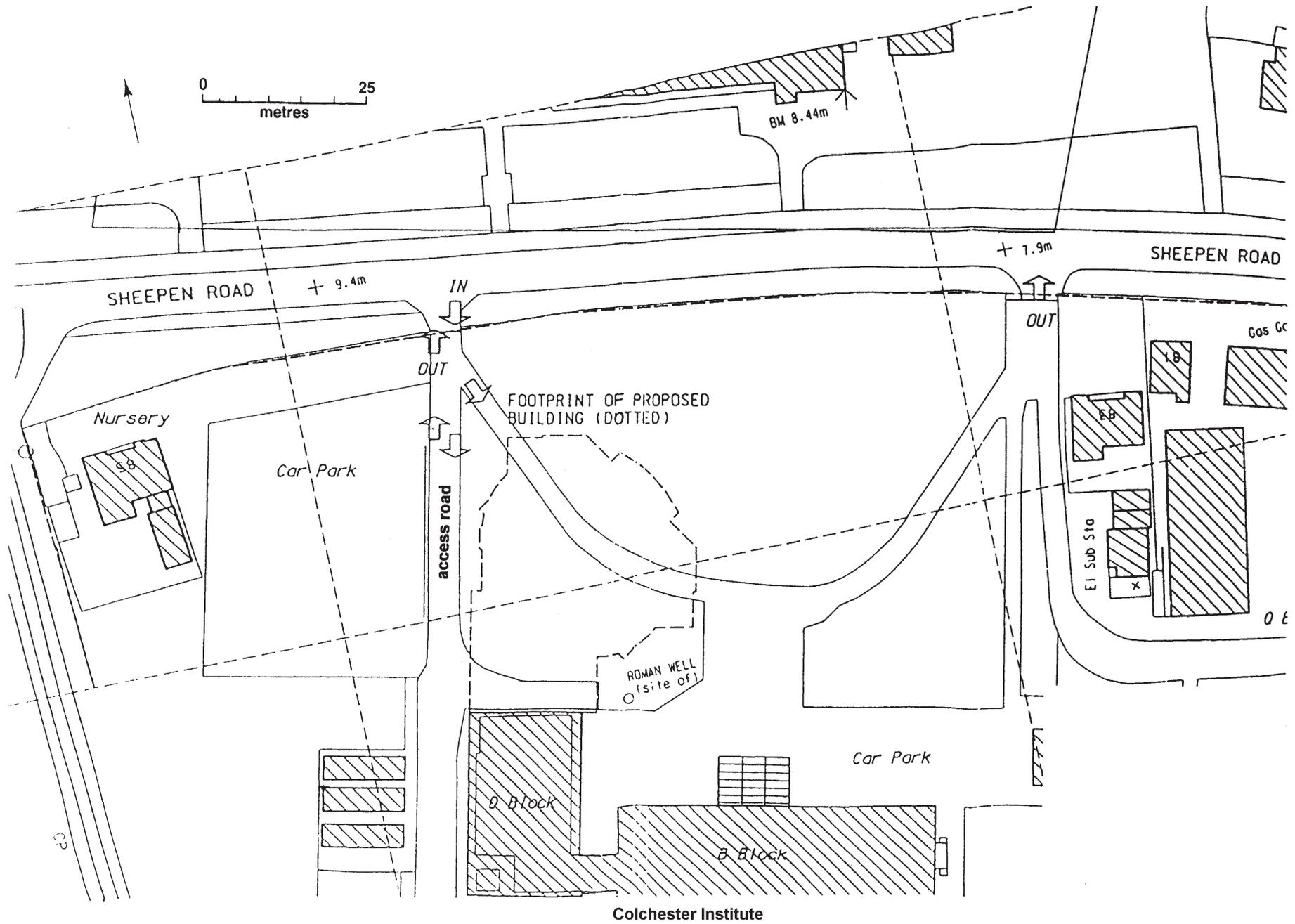


Fig 1 Location plan: scale 1:800.

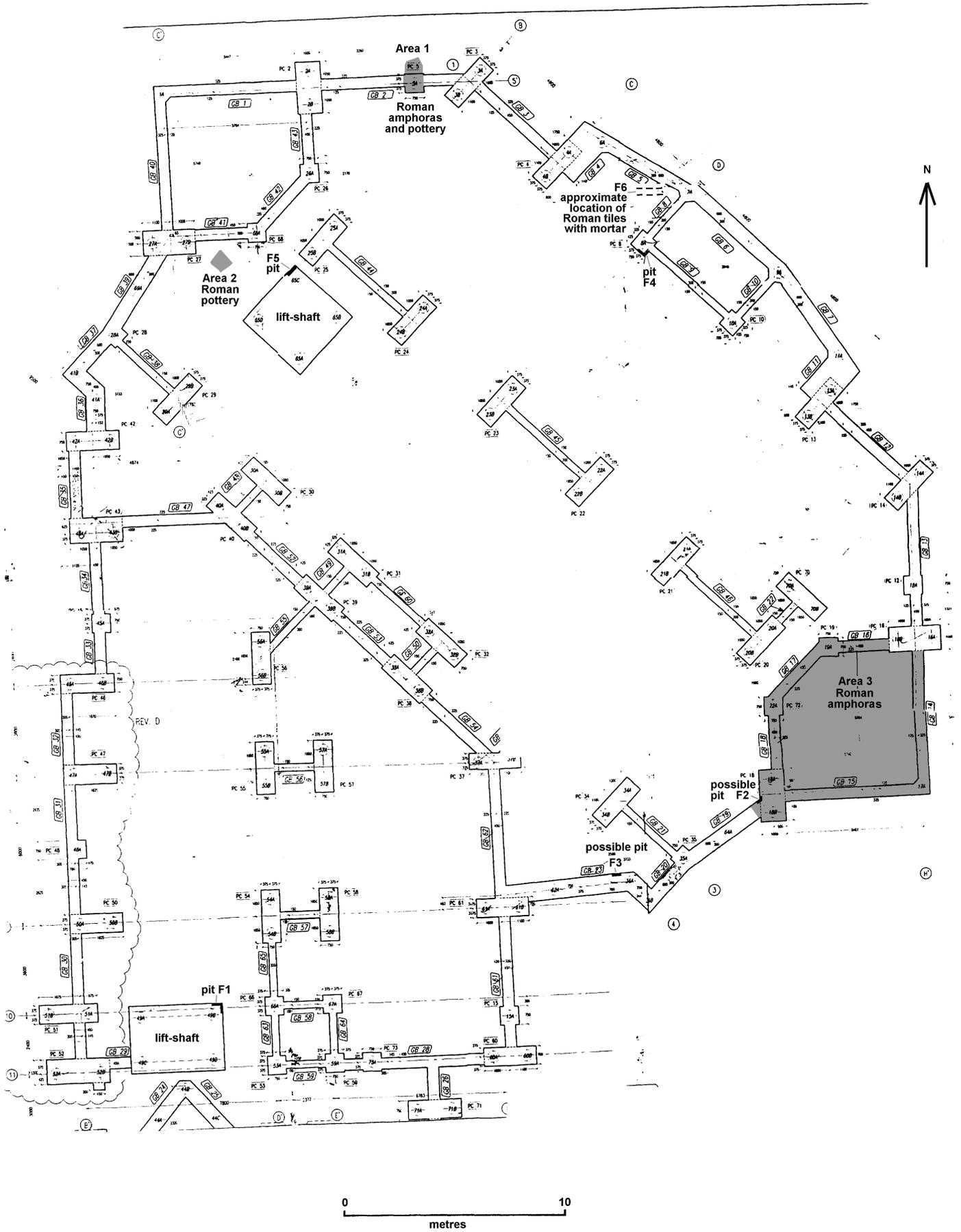


Fig 2 Site plan, showing locations of features and finds: scale 1:170.

A hand-drawn sketch of a rectangular stamp impression. The text 'SLT SAXIFERRI' is written in a stylized, blocky font. The letters are slightly irregular, suggesting a stamped or hand-painted origin. The 'S' is the largest and most prominent, followed by 'L' and 'T'. 'SAXIFERRI' follows in a similar style. The entire inscription is contained within a simple rectangular border.

**Fig 4 Drawing of SLT SAXIFERRI amphora stamp,
taken from Symonds & Wade 1999 (fig 3.17, no 55).**

**Essex Sites and Monuments record/
Essex Archaeology and History**

Summary sheet

Site name/address: Colchester Institute, Sheepen Road, Colchester, Essex	
Parish: Colchester	District: Colchester Borough
NGR: TL 9883 2570	Site code: Colchester Institute 2001.3
Type of work: Watching brief	Site director/group: Colchester Archaeological Trust
Date of work: January-March 2001	Size of area investigated: 800m ²
Location of finds/curating museum: Colchester Museum	Funding source: Colchester Institute
Further seasons anticipated? No	Related SMR nos:
Final report: CAT Report 131	
Periods represented: late Iron Age and early Roman	
<p>Summary of fieldwork results:</p> <p>The site lies on the eastern side of the late Iron Age and early Roman industrial centre and settlement at Sheepen. The watching brief produced an assemblage of mostly 1st-century AD Roman amphoras and pottery of types which had been commonly found previously at Sheepen. Several pits were recorded, one of which was datable to the early Roman period by the pottery within it.</p> <p>A short stretch of mortared Roman tiles presumed to be a wall or foundation to a Roman building was found by the contractors after the watching brief had finished.</p>	
Previous summaries/reports: CAT Report 103	
Author of summary: Kate Orr	Date of summary: March 2001