

# Colchester town wall: miscellaneous sites from 1987 to 2000

on behalf of  
Colchester Borough Council

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**CAT Report 144**

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## Introduction

The following report consists of accounts of a number of small sites dug between 1987 and 2000 on the line of the Roman town wall.

The sites (Fig 1) are described in clockwise order starting from Northgate.

[Notes?? Nos are project codes?? Project codes = ??]

## The sites

### 87/4a rear of no 1 Middleborough (Fig 2)

In 1987, three small trenches were dug at the request of the landowner Mr F Clater at the rear of no 1 Middleborough, to determine the position of the Roman town wall. Trench A revealed the core of the wall immediately below the tarmac surface at the base of the upstanding wall. The tarmac surface starts to fall away about 1 m from the core of the wall to a depth of 0.8 m where the wall face was encountered. This consisted of a course of four tiles, and below this two courses of dressed squared septaria were exposed (this being the limit of the excavation at 1.2 m). This face was unrobbed though weathered and set in pink *opus signinum* mortar. The face started 0.8 m below the modern surface. The trench started to show signs of stratigraphy at a depth of 0.9 m, with the dark silty clay loam being replaced by a silty clay, possibly indicating some activity other than simple build-up of dark earth. Trench B was dug to a depth of 0.5 m without encountering any wall, apart from large amounts of debris derived from the wall. Trench C revealed the top of the core. The north side of the wall dropped steeply away, suggesting robbing. The exact position of the face was not defined. The most northerly exposed masonry was north of the probable line of the north face of the wall (assuming it to be about 2.6 m wide), and therefore was presumably part of the foundation.

Fieldwork: G Carter.

Report: C Crossan.

Archival photographs: Miscellaneous sites 4, 69-81.

### 89/5a warehouse west of no 2 Northgate Street (Fig 2)

The warehouse occupies a 26.5 m frontage between no 2 Northgate Street and the rear of no 30 North Hill. The aim of the fieldwork was to establish the condition and exact location of the town wall underlying the north side of the building, as a preliminary to subsequent redevelopment. In the event, the inner face of the town wall was located at two points beneath the warehouse floor.

The existing concrete floor was broken open in four places by the contractor (Trenches 1-4). The wall lay immediately below the modern floor in Trenches 3 and 4. Part of the inner wall face was exposed by hand and its location was plotted in relation to the existing north wall of the warehouse. In Trench 2, manual excavation to a depth of approximately 1.4 m failed to locate the wall due to later ground disturbance. At the eastern end of the building, no evidence for the wall was found in Trench 1 which lay to the south of its projected course.

Fieldwork: C Crossan and S Garrod.

Report: C Crossan.

Findings: X495, sample of white substance from the face of the town wall.

Archival photographs: Miscellaneous sites 4, 187-95.

**94/1a nos 22 and 22a Northgate Street** (Fig 3)

The south part of nos 22 and 22a Northgate Street is built on the buried remains of the Roman town wall. This caused subsidence and cracking in the house, and the Roman wall was uncovered during underpinning and other remedial works.

The wall proved to be well preserved to its full width, with no robbing of either face and with part of an interval tower on the south side. Like most of the other towers known so far, it lines up neatly with the centre-line of the north-south street to the south.

The wall was exposed in two rooms, and difficulty was experienced in getting the plans in both rooms to line up properly. As a result, there is a discrepancy in the width of the wall as shown in section (2.60 m) and on plan (2.66 m). On balance, the section seems more likely to be correct.

Fieldwork: S Benfield.

Archival photographs: Miscellaneous sites 5, 131-46.

**87/4b Claudius Court** (formerly Rennie Roberts' Garage) (Fig 4)

Three trenches (Trenches 1-3) were dug by machine against the south boundary of the site to determine the exact location of the town wall, which at that time was buried. The core of the wall was exposed in three places, with no clear trace being noted of the face. The new housing development was designed so that the wall would be exposed and not affected directly by the building works. Subsequently the exposed part of the wall was recorded (see 00/5h).

Fieldwork: G Carter.

**87/10c Claudius Court** (formerly Rennie Roberts' Garage) (Fig 4)

Four trenches were dug in the north pavement of Northgate Street to establish the position and depth of the south face of the town wall. The face was found in all the trenches and proved to be well preserved a short distance below the surface of the footpath. The depths of the highest surviving parts of the wall are as follows: Trench A: 0.29 m; Trench B: 0.89 m; Trench C: 0.80 m; and Trench D: 0.20 m.

Fieldwork: C Crossan.

Archival photographs: Miscellaneous sites 4, 161-4.

**00/5h Claudius Court** (formerly Rennie Roberts' Garage) (Fig 4)

In 2000, a plan (Fig 4) was made of the section of town wall which is permanently exposed between the north pavement of Northgate Street and the block of flats comprising Claudius Court. A north-south profile (Fig 4) across the highest part of the wall was drawn on the same occasion. The wall was surveyed so that reports could be prepared on the earlier exposures of the wall.

Fieldwork: S Benfield.

**89/12c nos 76-78 Northgate Street** (subsequently Castle Court) (Fig 5)

Following the demolition of nos 76-78 Northgate Street in 1989, an area was cleared by machine against the southern boundary of the site to determine how much of the town wall still survived and to locate the depth and position of the remains. The full width of the wall was proved to survive, including the front and rear faces. The rear face was the best preserved. The coursing was set in *opus signinum*. It was not clear if the same was true of the front face.

Fieldwork: S Benfield.

Archival photographs: Miscellaneous sites 4, 206-213.

**90/10a nos 76-86 Northgate Street** (subsequently Castle Court) (Fig 5)

On 12th October 1990, prior to redevelopment at nos 80-86 Northgate Street, a 1.6 m-wide trench was machine-dug by Hills building contractors, to establish the condition and exact location of the town wall in relation to the southern boundary of the site. The trench was located against the edge of the Northgate Street pavement line, 6 m east of the boundary with 25 St Peter's Street (an office building occupied at that time by Barratt).

The trench was dug to a depth of 1.8 m below the level of the kerb-stones to the south on Northgate Street. The core of the wall was encountered at 0.8 m, and the uppermost surviving part of the south face was found at a depth of 1.1 m. The exposed face, consisting of four courses of tile above two courses of septaria, was at a point 1.8 m north of the Northgate Street kerb-line. No attempt was made to locate the north face.

Near the trench were several loose septaria facing blocks which appeared to have been disturbed by the machine, probably from a point above the tile courses.

Fieldwork and report: C Crossan.

Archival photographs: colour transparencies, nos 76-86 Northgate Street??.

**89/8a rear of no 4 Roman Road** (Fig 6)

At the request of Mrs Cooper, the owner of no 4 Roman Road, the Trust inspected a piece of wall that she had uncovered when digging a small hole in her back garden. The wall proved to be part of a tile course forming the rear face of the Roman town wall.

Fieldwork: C Crossan and K Orr.

**89/7a rear of no 89 East Hill** (Fig 6)

When renovations were proposed for no 89 East Hill, the architects decided that there was a need to establish the course of the Roman town wall where it passed under the property, if possible. No trenches were possible in the house, so the investigation concentrated on the rear garden. Four trenches were dug, all located hard up against north brick boundary wall.

Little of the town wall proved to survive in the garden, and possibly none survives under the house itself. The highest part of the property is the centre and rear parts of the garden, where the base of the wall foundation still exists (Trenches 3 and 4). Elsewhere, near the house (Trenches 1 and 2), the ground-level has been lowered to a point where even the base of the wall foundation has been removed. This fits in with East Hill??, since it seems that the gradient of the street was reduced on at least one occasion in the 18th or 19th century.

The width of the wall shown on Figure 6 is based on measurements from elsewhere on the circuit. The east edge of the wall in Trenches 3 and 4 as shown in Figure 6 seems too far west if, as seems likely, this represents parts of the edge of the foundation. The explanation for the discrepancy may be related to the fact that there is a large difference in levels between the garden of no 89 and the gardens of the houses fronting onto Roman Road, and it is difficult to relate the areas accurately in plan.

Fieldwork: C Crossan and S Garrod.

Archival photographs: Miscellaneous sites 4, 196-201.

**94/6b Priory Street car park** (Fig 7)

Part of a brick facing to the town wall collapsed onto the car park in Priory Street in 1994, revealing another brick wall behind it. The newly-exposed wall proved to be a continuation of the brick wall immediately west of the collapsed section, and the latter a localised refacing of it. The original wall and its refacing are similar in appearance

and are both likely to be 17th century in date. They presumably represent repairs to the town wall where it had been largely destroyed during the Siege of Colchester in 1648.

More of the damaged wall was pulled down (to a width of about 25 m) to make the area safe and to create a sound base for the new brick wall which was built to replace it.

Fieldwork: C Crossan.

Archival photographs: *Colchester town wall*, 1, nos 191-3.

Location and sketch on town wall survey drawings.

#### **94/8a and 97/7b no 48 St Botolph's Street (Figs 8-9)**

The removal of a short length of modern brickwork against the south wall of no 48 St Botolph's Street, approximately 7 m back from the street frontage, revealed an earlier stretch of east-west wall which lay on the projected line of the inner face of the Roman town wall. The exposed section was 1.3 m long and 1.75 m high, and included a blocked archway which was 1 m high and just over 1 m wide (Fig 9). The insertion of modern brickwork to a height of 1.65 m had destroyed the eastern side of the archway together with most of the wall face further east. At the time of the recording, modern panelling masked the western and upper extent of the archway, while the base was obscured by a concrete floor.

The wall was mainly made of Roman building materials, including septaria, flint, tile and fragments of *opus signinum* set in a firm whitish mortar. However, traces of an earlier yellowish mortar adhered to some of the fragments, indicating reuse.

The material formed a well-preserved facing, rather than rubble core. There was no trace of the bands of septaria and tile courses characteristic of Roman work. A thin tile fragment, presumably peg-tile, suggested a post-Roman construction date, although the post-Roman brick was not conclusively primary. There was little evidence for pointing, garreting or indeed weathering, so that maybe the walling had been intended for internal use.

The four-centred arch was apparently an original feature, but it did not have a well-defined stone or brick lining. The rather slight nature of the archway may indicate that it formed a recess, rather than a doorway associated with a major rebuilding of the town wall such as that of c 1400.

A small group of bricks set into the wall face immediately west of the arch was probably a later repair. These bricks were similar to, and presumably contemporary with, those used to block the archway. The bricks included narrow examples (50 x 225 mm), possibly of 17th- or 18th-century date, as well as some larger ones (65 x 230 mm) of perhaps 18th- or 19th-century date, although their width and whether any were frogged remains unclear.

The archway was probably blocked in the 18th or 19th century, and it appears to represent a relatively late episode in the rebuilding of the Roman town wall, from which much of the building materials were presumably derived. The recently uncovered section of wall perhaps originated as part of the interior of a building of medieval or later date. Norden's map of Colchester in 1610 does not appear to show any structure against this part of the town wall, raising the possibility of a 17th-century date for the work, maybe even as part of a rebuilding after the Siege of Colchester.

Fieldwork and report: D Shimmin.

#### **91/11c Robert's Pool Club, St John's Street (Fig 10)**

Two small exploratory trenches were dug to the rear of the property. The base of the town wall was uncovered in Trench 1. It was battered in the same way as the wall at Lion Walk, 150 m to the west, where it was shown to be part of a refacing to the town wall of c 1400 (*CAR 3*, 84-5).

No part of the town wall was found in Trench 2.

Fieldwork: J Partridge.

Archival photographs: *Colchester town wall*, 1, 187-90.

**88/2b no 11 Short Wyre Street** ('Swagshop') (CAT Archive Report 113)

A large part of the inner face of the Roman town wall was recorded in 1988 during redevelopment works. The wall had formed the south side of a cellar, and it was fully exposed following the demolition of the standing building. Of note was the discovery in the wall of the remains of a drain arch. In addition to the recording of the wall, two trenches for stanchions were archaeologically excavated in advance into the rampart behind the wall, and parts of the late medieval refacing of the south side of the wall were subsequently noted in the contractor's foundation trenches south of the wall. Details can be found in CAT Archive Report 113 by S Benfield.

Archival photographs: ?? transparencies??, 'Swagshop', no 11 Short Wyre Street, Colchester.

**89/4a nos 20-22 Eld Lane** (Fig 11)

In 1989, the core of the town wall was exposed in the south-west corner of the cellar under no 21 Eld Lane when a hole was made in the cellar wall during refurbishment works. When the wall was being recorded, it was noticed that part of the north (ie the inner) face of the town wall was incorporated in one of the walls of the adjacent cellar under no 22. The position of the face could only be plotted to within  $\pm 0.8$  m north to south on the site plan, because the thickness of the cellar wall could not be determined.

Access to the cellars was kindly provided by the Royal London Asset Management Group.

Fieldwork: C Crossan.

**88/5b no 43 St John's Street** (Fig 12)

In 1988, part of the Roman town wall was exposed at the rear of no 43 St John's Street. The wall was of particular interest, because it incorporated part of a drain arch.

The full width of the Roman town wall could not be established because it had been too badly damaged. The position of the north face (which was unrobbed in places) closely corresponded to the line of the frontage along Sir Isaac's Walk. Nothing survived of the south face or the southern side of the foundation.

The upper part of the wall has been destroyed and its outer (ie southern) face has been completed?? leaving the core exposed. In places, the latter had been removed for almost the full width of the wall so as to expose the inner ends of some of the tiles forming the inner (ie northern) face of the wall. The drain, being completely built of tile, could not be so easily dismantled, with the result that it survived the robbing process better than the wall. The western half of the wall is the worst damaged, since most of it, including the western half of the drain arch, was removed to enlarge the north-west corner of the backyard. The remains of the wall are so thin in places that the wall has cracked into separate pieces, and part of the inner face has tipped forward in the same way as the wall about 20 m to the west which was recorded during the Culver Street excavations in 1985 (CAR 6, 63-4).

The pattern of tiles in the north face suggests the existence of a tower to the west, where there are no tiles and core material extends right up to the north boundary of the site. The approximate position of the east side of this postulated tower is shown on Figure ???. It appears that the wall has not moved where it incorporates the tower, despite extensive robbing; whereas, immediately east of the drain arch, the reduced state of the wall has led to cracking and the remains sliding forwards. However, given the way that different parts of the wall have moved, the tower could be illusory.

No direct dating evidence was found for any of the robbing of the wall, but it seems almost certain that the removal of the western part must post-date the Siege of Colchester when the wall was still functional.

A large section of detached masonry immediately south of the core incorporated a fragment of peg-tile and presumably represents the remains of the refacing of the wall of c 1400 noted at Lion Walk (CAR 3, 84) and elsewhere.

Fieldwork: S Benfield.

Archival photographs: *Colchester town wall*, 1, 121-53.

#### **88/4b rear of nos 6 and 7 Church Walk (Fig 13)**

Two exploratory trenches were located on or close to the course of the town wall at the rear of nos 6 and 7 Church Walk. The work was done in advance of redevelopment. The trenches were excavated to a depth of 2 m, then probed by auger for a further 1 m, making 3 m in all. What appeared to have been part of the core of the town wall was noted in the south side of the southern trench. No masonry was seen elsewhere.

Fieldwork: C Crossan.

Archival photographs: Miscellaneous sites 4, 183-6.

#### **98/10a rear of?? no 33 Crouch Street**

A section of town wall was exposed at the rear of no 33 Crouch Street when the shop was being refitted. Only core was exposed as the wall face had been cut back to a distance of about 0.8 m. A measured sketch and some photographs of the exposed wall are included in the archive.

Fieldwork: H Brooks.

#### **88/9?? south of the Balkerne Gate**

A small trench measuring approximately 1.3 x 0.6 m in area was dug to a depth of 0.8 m at the rear of the town wall. The trench was located about 1 m to the south of the entrance to the southern guardroom of the Balkerne Gate. The purpose of the trench was to obtain samples of the white deposits which are frequently found on the face of the wall where it is well preserved.

The rear face did prove to be well preserved. Eight courses were exposed in the trench: four of tile over four of septaria, and with the mortar joints picked out with lines made with the tip of a pointing trowel, as seen elsewhere (ie *Roman Colchester*, ??).

Fieldwork: T Cook.

Archival photographs: *Colchester town wall*, 1, 154-72 & 176-82.

## **References**

*CAR 3 Colchester Archaeological Report 3, Excavations at Lion Walk, Balkerne Lane, and Middleborough, Colchester, Essex*, by Philip Crummy, 1984, p 84

*CAR 6 Colchester Archaeological Report 6, Excavations at Culver Street, the Gilbert School, and miscellaneous sites in Colchester, 1971-85*, by Philip Crummy, 1992, pp 63-4

Benfield, Stephen "Swagshop", 11 Short Wyre Street, Colchester (1988)', CAT Archive Report 113, 2000

*Colchester town wall*, 1, 121-53, 154-72, 176-82, 187-90, 191-3

Miscellaneous sites 4, 69-81, 161-4, 183-6, 187-95, 196-201, 206-213

Miscellaneous sites 5, 131-46

**format of archive ref.s??**

*Roman Colchester*, ??

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*Philip Crummy, July 2001*

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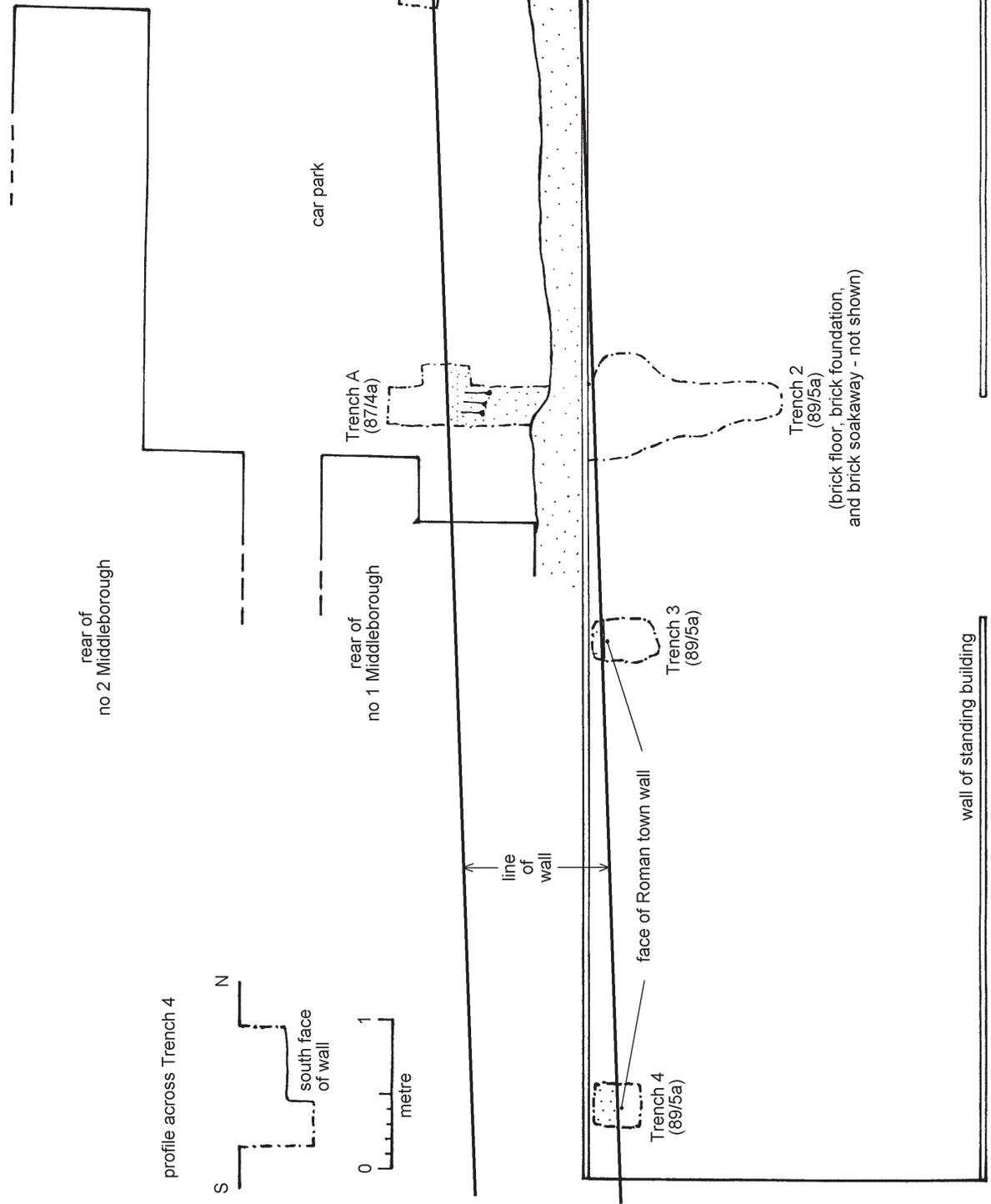
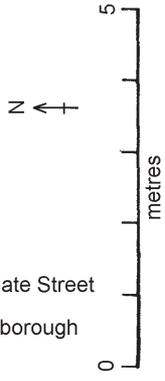
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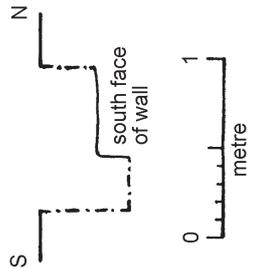


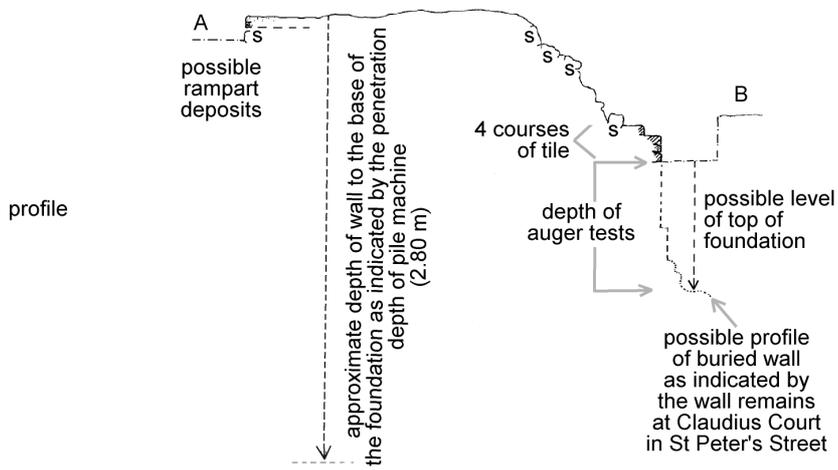
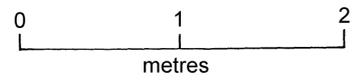
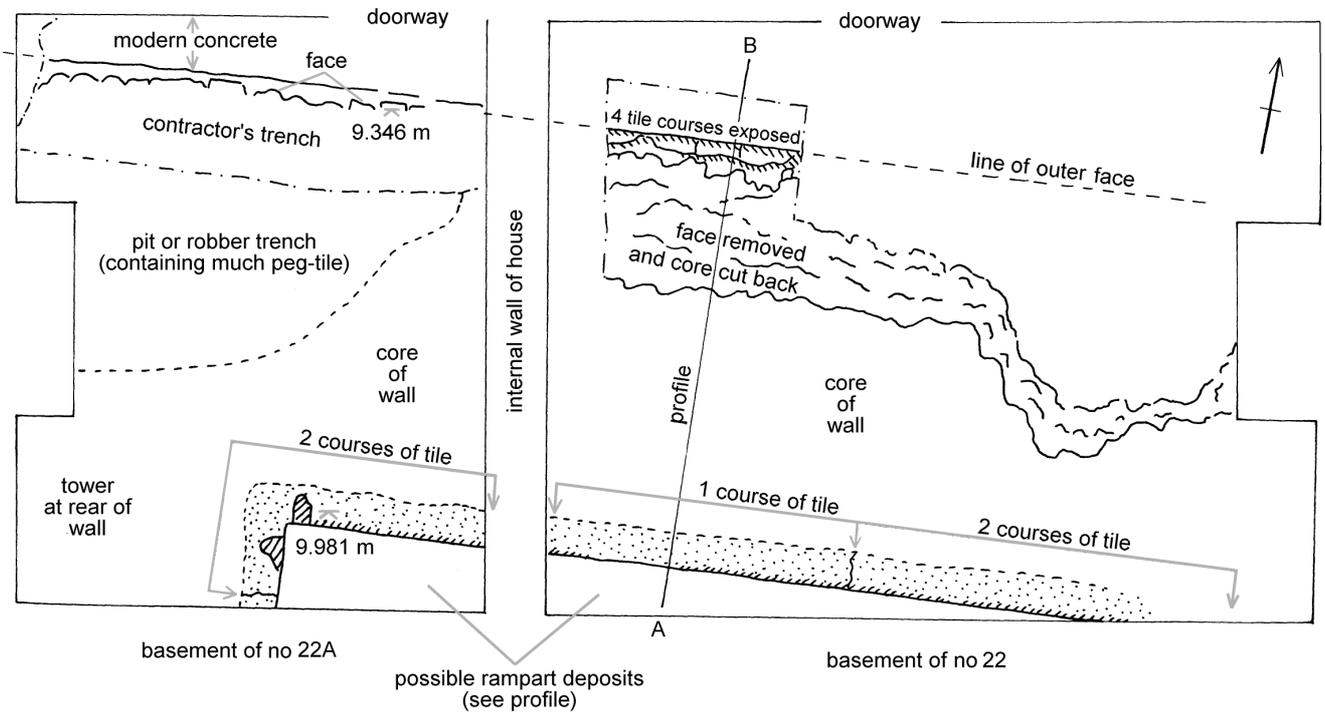
Fig 7 Priory Street car park (94/6b).

87/4a  
87/89  
2 Northgate Street  
and  
1 Middleborough



profile across Trench 4





- opus signinum
- ▨ tile
- ⌋ septaria

Fig 3

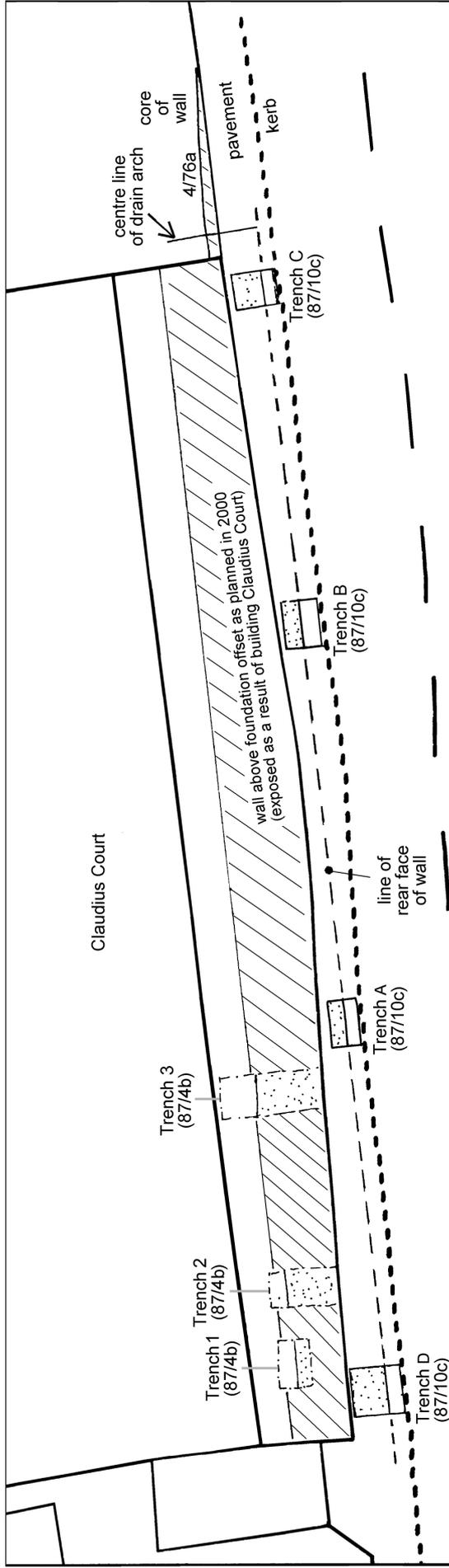
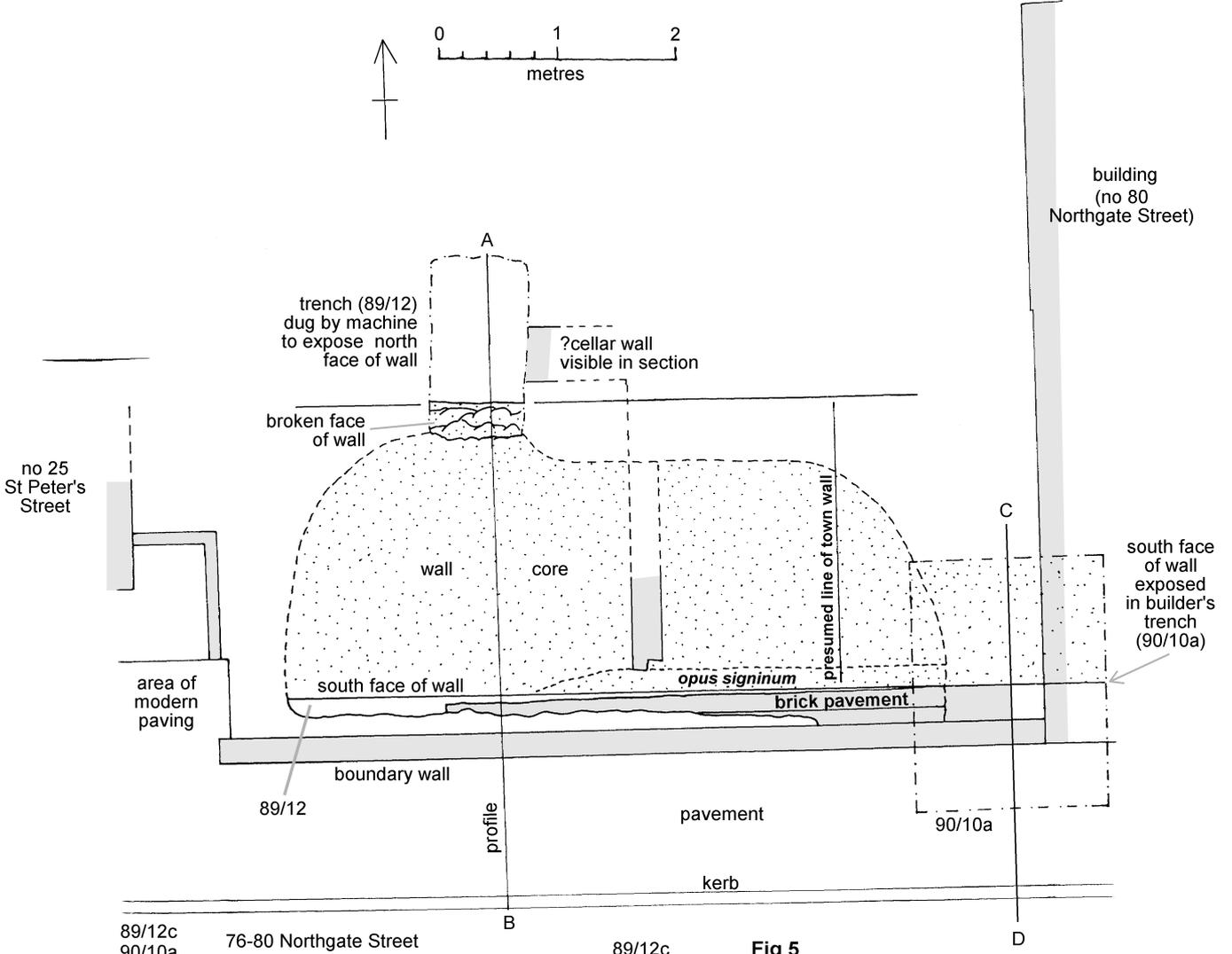
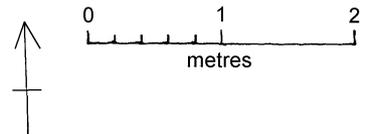
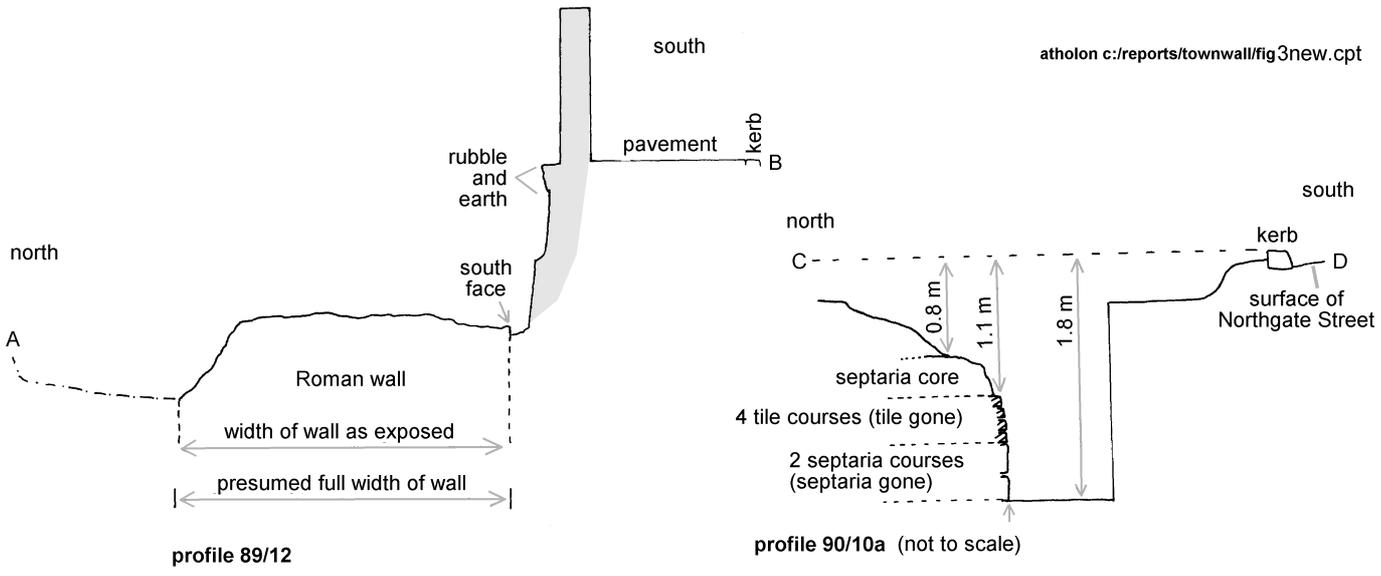


Fig 4



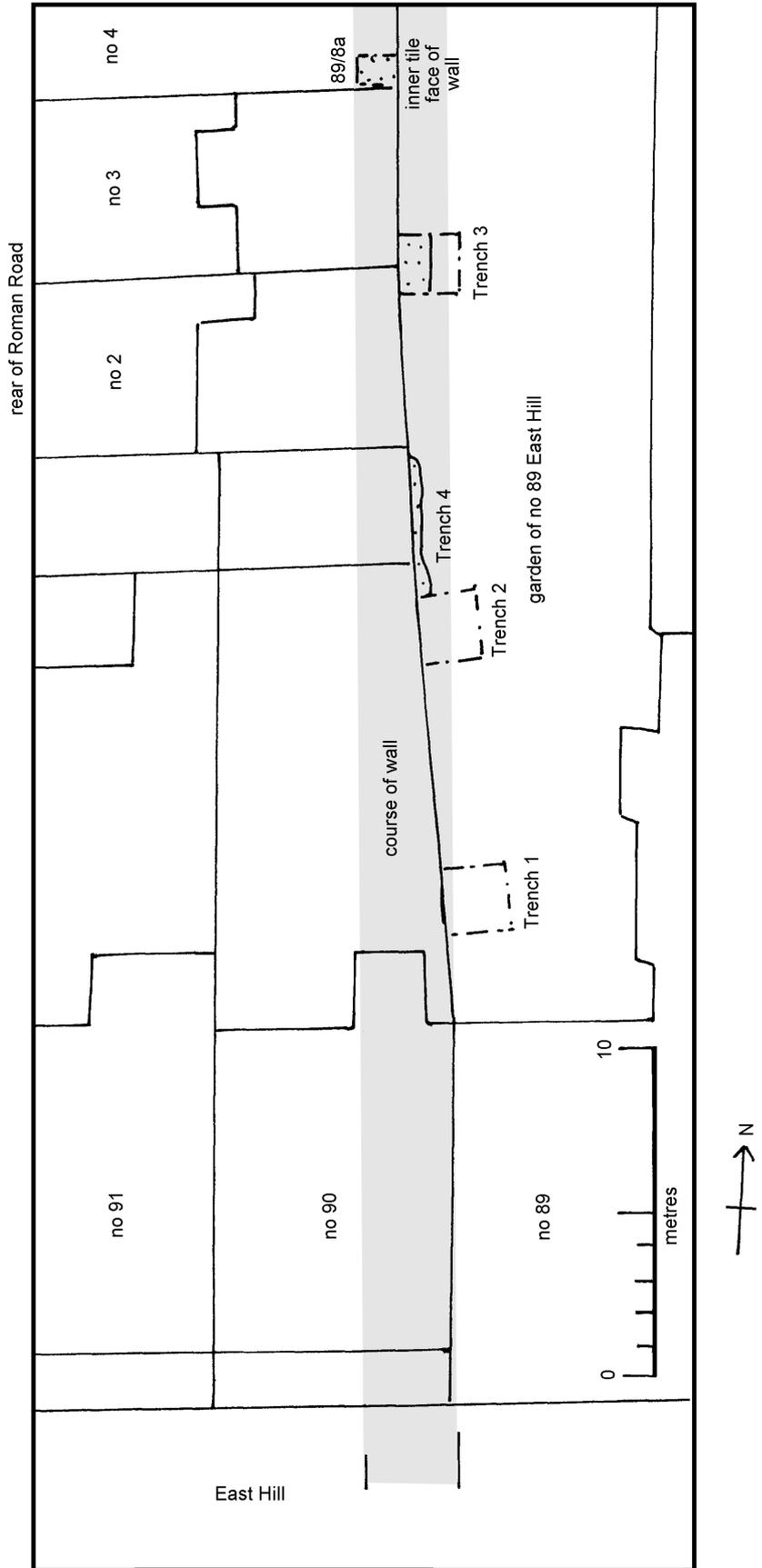


Fig Fig 6



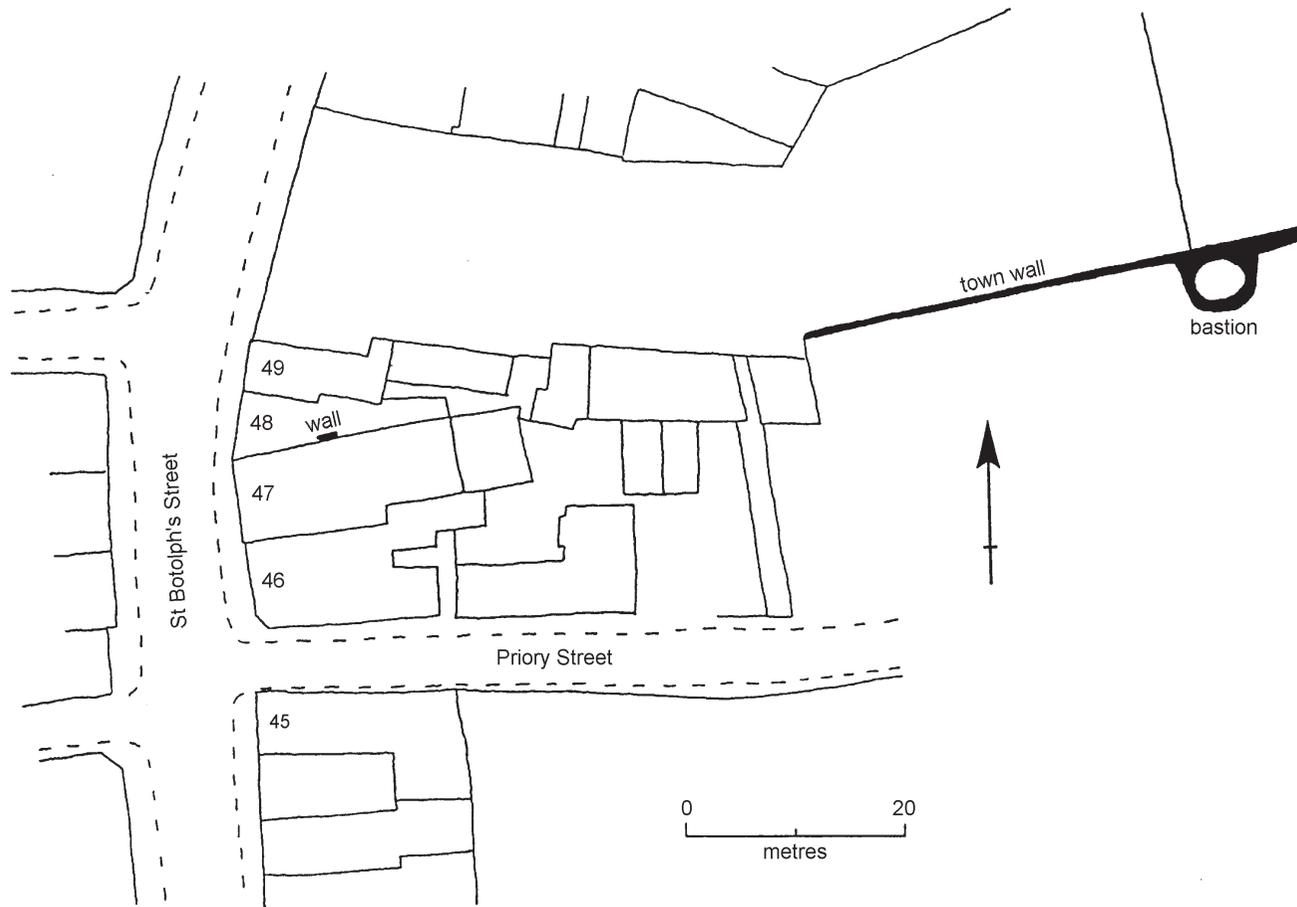


Fig 8 48 St Botolph's Street

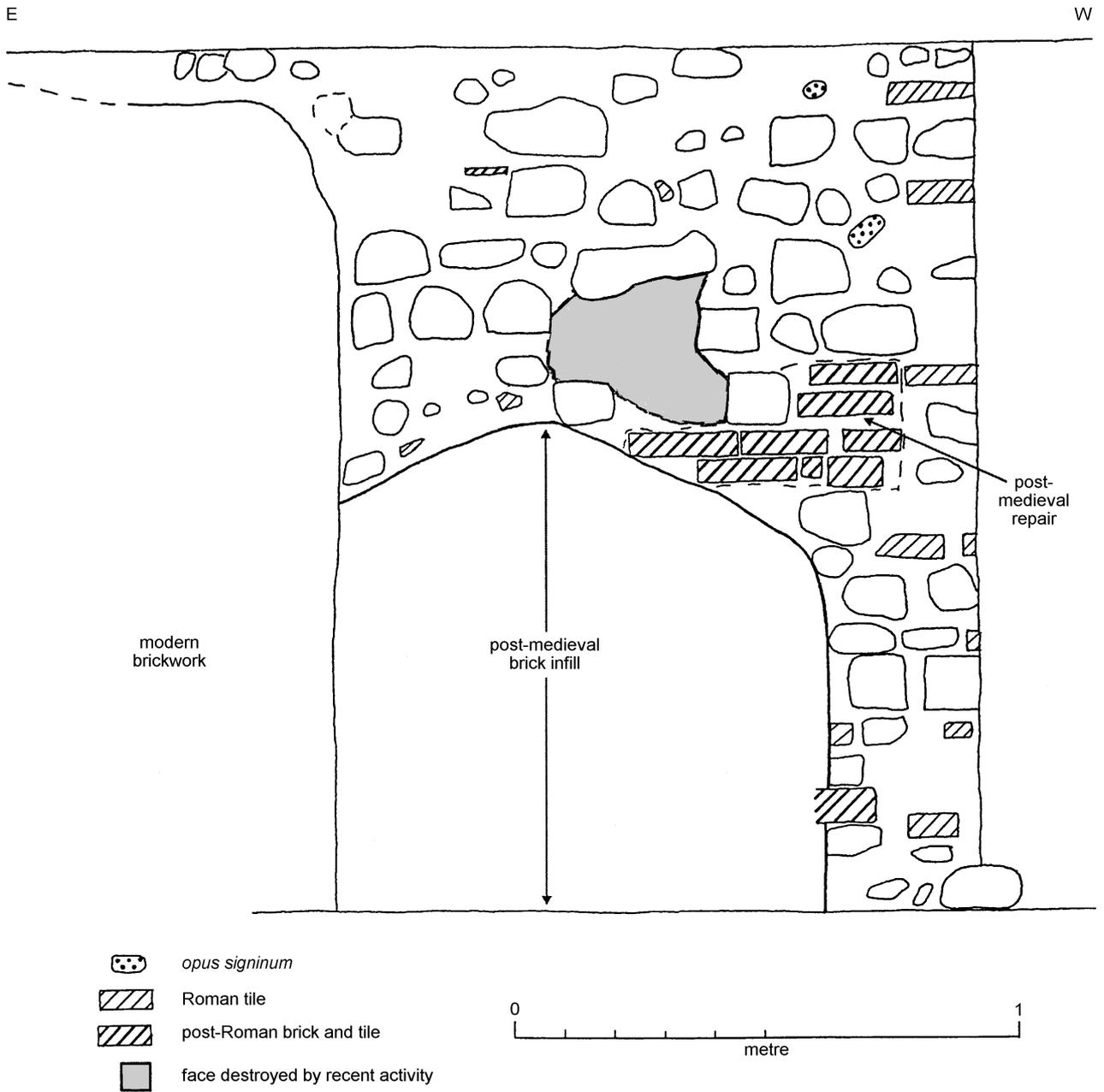
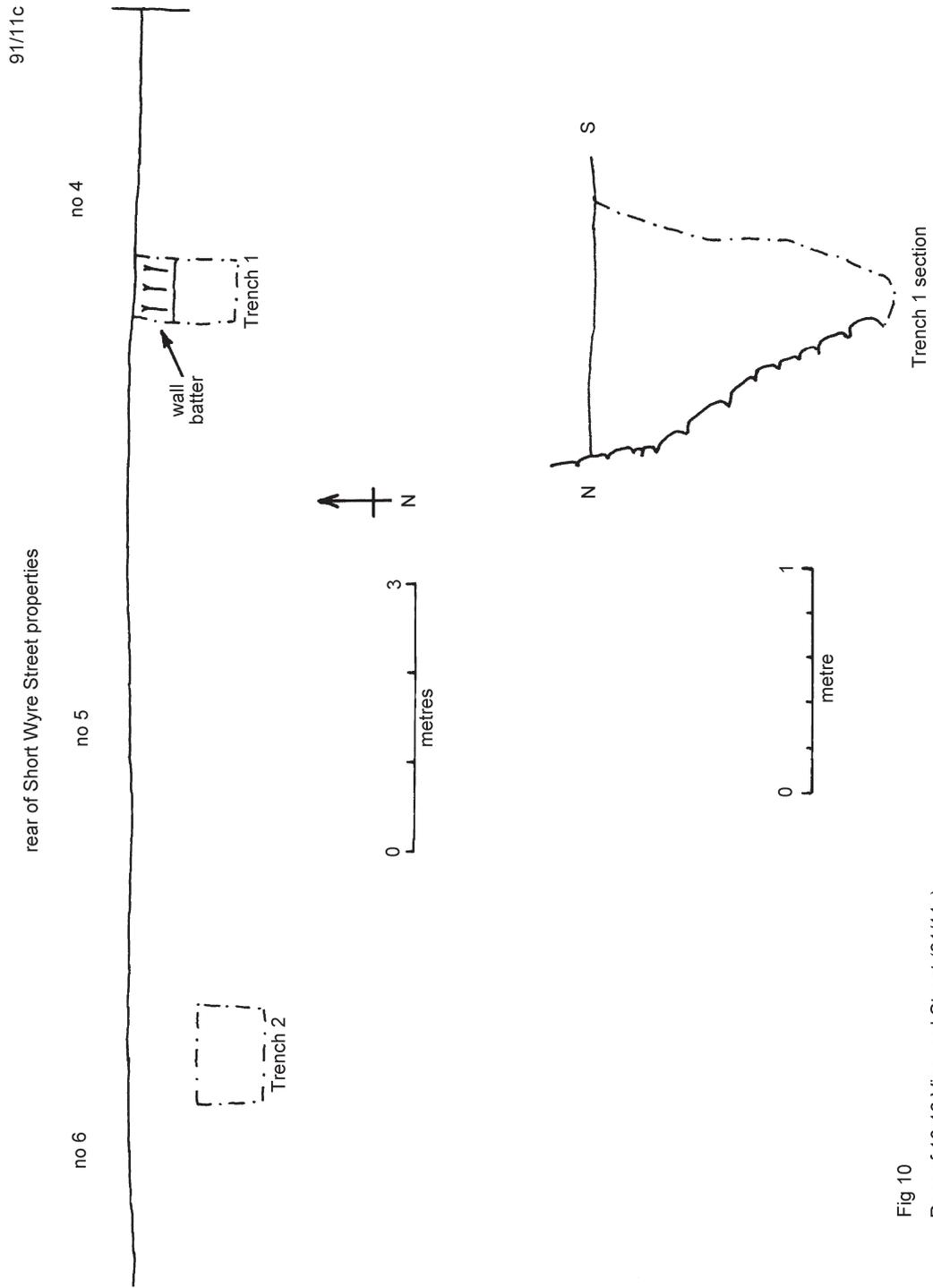
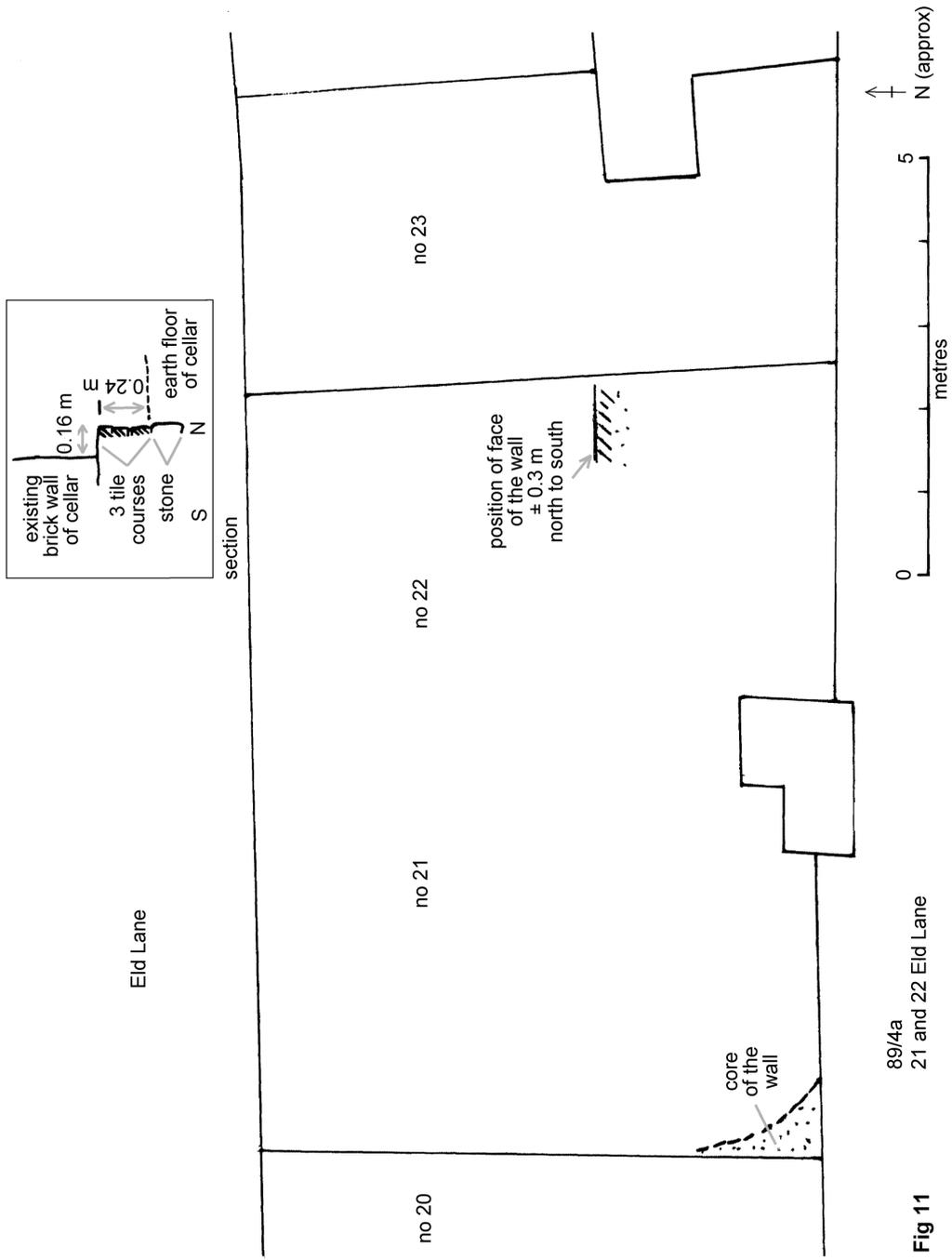


Fig 9 48 St Botolph's Street



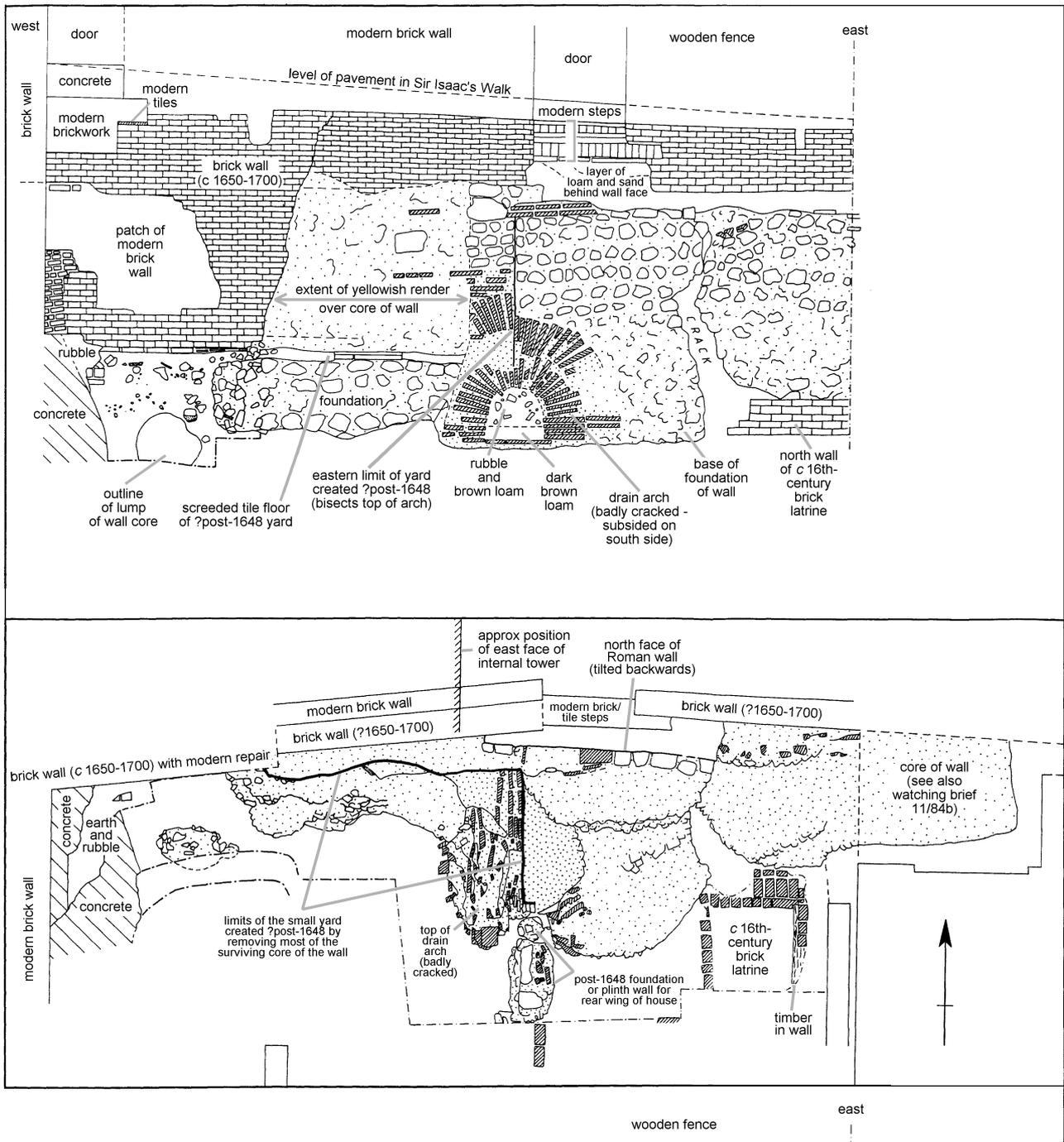
91/11c  
rear of 10-16  
Vineyard Street

Fig 10  
Rear of 10-16 Vineyard Street (91/11c)

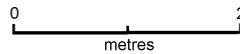
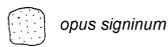


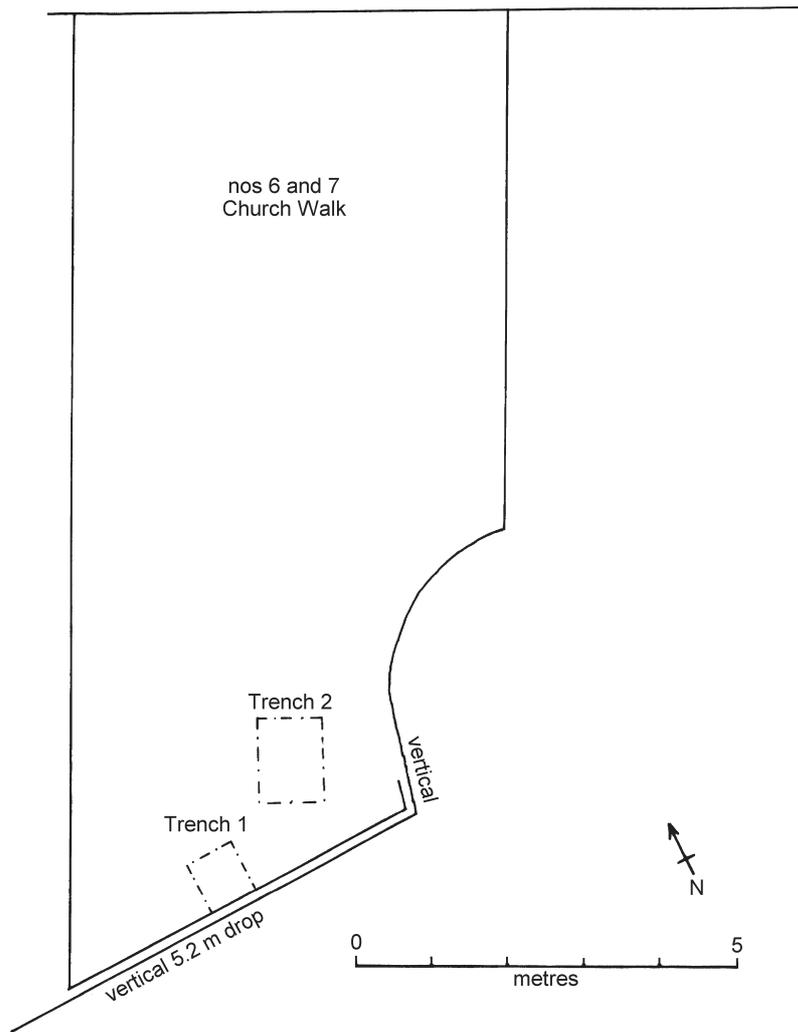
89/4a  
21 and 22 Eld Lane

Fig 11



partial key





88/4b  
Fig 13 Nos 6 and 7 Church Walk