

**An archaeological
watching brief on the
'north site' development at
the Sixth Form College,
North Hill, Colchester, Essex
July-September 2003**

**report prepared by
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**commissioned by
Roff Marsh Partnership**

**on behalf of
the Sixth Form College**

CAT project code: 03/7e
Colchester Museums accession code: 2003.209
NGR: TL 9928 2545 (c)



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CAT Report 302
December 2004

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1 Summary

CAT carried out a watching brief at the Sixth Form College during the construction of a new computer block (the 'north site'). Groundworks in the northern part of the site did not extend deep enough to impact archaeological remains. The one service-trench monitored was dug to a depth of 1.4m and archaeological levels were not reached. However, at the southernmost end of the site of the computer block, an area of tarmac path was cut into to a depth of 1.2m. A layer of demolition debris containing painted wall-plaster from a Roman building was recorded, starting at 700mm below the level of the tarmac path. Adjacent to this layer, a robbed-out wall deriving from a Roman building was observed, just below the level of the tarmac path. A pit containing animal bones may represent the remains of post-medieval leather production.

2 Introduction (Fig 1)

- 2.1 This is the archive report on an archaeological watching brief carried out on the 'north site' development at the Sixth Form College, North Hill, Colchester, Essex by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT). The work was necessitated by the construction of a single-storey computer block with a footprint of approximately 30m x 35m. The planning permission (planning application no F/COL/00/1761) was given with a condition for a watching brief.
- 2.2 The Sixth Form College is situated to the north-west of Colchester town centre, within the walled part of the town and west of North Hill (NGR TL 9928 2545 (c)). The Sixth Form College was built between 1910 and 1912 as the 'Technical Institute'. The development site is at 27m above Ordnance Datum and lies at the bottom of a steep north-facing slope, which has been terraced.
- 2.3 The watching brief was commissioned by Roff Marsh Partnership on behalf of the Sixth Form College, according to the brief set out by Martin Winter, Archaeology Officer for Colchester Borough Council (CBCAO).
- 2.4 The work was carried out by CAT between the 23rd July and the 23rd September 2003.
- 2.5 All fieldwork was done in accordance with a specification agreed with the CBCAO. 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* (1999) and *Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester Museums* (1996, updated 2002), and the IFA's *Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief* (1999).

3 Archaeological background

- 3.1 The 'north site' development occupies an area which is rich in Roman remains dating from the earliest military occupation to the later Roman period. It lies within the area of the Roman legionary fortress which is dated to AD 44-49 (Essex Heritage Conservation Record or EHCR nos 3530 and 12341). Metalled streets, possibly with footways, intersect within the college grounds on north-south and east-west alignments (EHCR nos 12341 and 13108). The development site is inside the walled part of the Roman town (Insula 1). The town wall was constructed in the 1st century AD and is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (EHCR no 13112).
- 3.2 Over the last 150 years, remains of Roman buildings have been recorded in the immediate area of the site and there is evidence for at least two large Roman town-houses or public buildings within the development site. These buildings are likely to have been constructed in the 2nd or 3rd century AD as they featured tessellated and possibly mosaic floors as well as painted walls (EHCR nos 12433-12437). Further details of these finds can be found in Hull (1958). In January 2001, during an evaluation within the footprint of the new computer block conducted by Essex County Council Field

Archaeology Unit, between 1.4m and 2m of topsoil and 'dark earth' covering demolition deposits of a Roman building were recorded (ECC FAU Report 830). In 2004, five evaluation trenches were dug by CAT in the college grounds in preparation for the proposed 'mid-site' development. The majority of the archaeological features recorded were of Roman date, and included tessellated and mortar floors as well as the robbed-out foundations of a large town-house. These features were covered by between 600mm and 1.1m of topsoil and dark earth (CAT Report 260).

- 3.3 The Roman buildings appear to have been demolished and the site turned over to agricultural or horticultural use at the end of the Roman period. Excavations have shown a considerable depth of 'dark earth', which formed in the post-Roman period, sealing the Roman remains.
- 3.4 The Colchester siege map of 1648 shows two Royalist cannon positions, the sites of which must lie in the college grounds (CAT 1998). Until the mid 18th century, occupation appears to have been confined to the properties fronting North Hill, many of which are still standing and are now listed buildings. Cartographic evidence from the late 17th and 18th centuries shows the site as gardens with some areas covered by trees and tents. Buildings (now demolished) are depicted in the north-eastern corner of the development site on maps from the 18th century onwards. These probably belong to Bowler's Brewery which is first named on the OS 1876 map. There would have been a ready supply of water for the brewery from springs in the vicinity.
- 3.5 Further details of the archaeology of the development site can be found in CAT Report 247 and of Middleborough in *CAR 3*.

4 Aim

The aim of the watching brief was to identify and record any archaeological remains that were exposed during the construction of the new computer block and to assess the quality and extent of any remains that were encountered.

5 Methods

- 5.1 The new computer block was constructed using piles and no pile caps. Ground-beams were dug to within 1m of finished ground-levels in order to keep any damage to archaeological remains to a minimum. Drains were dug to no deeper than 1.4m below finished ground-level. Six visits were made by a CAT archaeologist as groundworks progressed.
- 5.2 Individual records of layers and features were entered on CAT pro-forma record sheets. All exposed sub-soil features, archaeological deposits or negative features were manually cleaned and drawn in section.
- 5.3 Section drawings of features and layers were made at a scale of 1:20.
- 5.4 Standard 'record' shots of contexts were taken with a digital camera.

6 Results (Figs 2-3)

- 6.1 Three visits were made during soil-stripping and the excavation of ground-beams within the footprint of the new computer block. A tarmac path and the area underneath it were removed to a depth of 1.2m in order to level out the slope. Beneath the tarmac path, starting 200mm below the surface, was a robbed-out wall foundation filled with mortar, stone chippings and some wall-plaster (Feature 2 or F2). This had been cut into grey brown silty topsoil containing some modern demolition rubbish (Layer 1 or L1). F2 was aligned north to south. L1 sealed L2, a layer of demolition from a Roman building, consisting of light yellow brown clay with frequent mortar, tile and septaria chips, painted

wall-plaster fragments and lumps of *opus signinum*. F2 had the appearance of a Roman wall robbed in the medieval period. However, it was cut through a modern layer (L1) and occurred just below the tarmac surface. L2 started at 1m below the tarmac surface and resembled debris from a demolished Roman building, next to the robbed wall (F2). L2 extended for 8m to the west, beyond the limit of the stripped area.

- 6.2** Prior to stripping the footprint of the new building, contractors uncovered a pit (F1) while uprooting a tree. This pit contained 5.5kg of animal bone, mainly cattle and horse (F1, see section 7). F1 was covered by 1m of topsoil and was filled by mid brown silt. A CAT archaeologist viewed the pit, which was not fully excavated, and retrieved some of the bone. The depth of topsoil covering the pit makes it likely that it is post-medieval in date.
- 6.3** A sewer- and storm water-trench was dug to the north of the new computer block, by the Roman town wall. This trench was between 1m and 1.4m deep. Topsoil L1 merged into mid brown silty sand containing slate, Roman tile fragments and Roman pottery (L4). No archaeologically significant deposits were observed.

7 Finds

Table 1: finds list.

(Roman pottery identified by S Benfield of CAT; fabrics are after *CAR 10*).

Find no	Layer no	Feature no	Description	Date	Weight (in g)
1		F1	animal bone (discarded)	undated	5,500
2	U/S		dish (Fabric DJ, type 18)	Roman – 2nd or 3rd century	279
3	L2		Roman brick	Roman	541
3	L2		painted wall-plaster – green but mainly plain pink and 2 bits of pale blue	Roman	4,105
4		F2	wall-plaster	Roman	189
5	L2		painted wall-plaster – green, purple, pink and white	Roman	1,190
5	L2		Roman brick	Roman	859
6	U/S		decorated sherd of pottery, highly micaceous, possibly from an imported large jar or amphora	Roman	39
7	L4		brick fragments	modern	67
7	L4		coal	post-medieval or modern	4
7	L4		oyster shells	undated	5
7	L4		grey ware pottery	Roman	5
7	L4		peg-tile	medieval-modern	53
7	L4		slate	undated	19
8	L1/L4		Roman brick	Roman	328
9	L2		septaria	Roman	119
9	L2		slate (intrusive?)	undated	8
9	L2		peg-tile (intrusive?)	medieval to modern	46
10	L4		leather	undated	2

Table 2: Quantities of animal bone from F1, find number 1.

	Humerus	Femur	Radius	Ulna	Rib	Pelvis	Vertebra	Feet	Scapula	Metacarpus
Cow	1 complete	1 complete & 2 halves	1/2	1 complete						
Horse	1/2	1 complete & 2 halves		2 complete		1 complete				3 complete
Deer?			1 complete							
Cow or horse					several		13 complete	3 complete	2 fragments	

The bones from F1 were mainly cattle or horse bones. The pit was not fully excavated, with the result that not all the bone was retrieved. Small cut marks could be seen on some of the bones, but there were no large chop marks. Additionally, where the bones had been broken, the breaks were uneven which suggests that they were broken after deposition and not with a cleaver. The cut marks could have resulted from skinning, suggesting the presence of a tannery nearby. The close proximity of springs to the site supports this interpretation as a tannery would have needed a good water supply.

Table 3: Areas in cm² for Roman wall-plaster.

Find no	Context	cm ²	Description
3	L2	63	green
3	L2	198	pink
3	L2	6	yellow and red stripe
3	L2	130	pink and green stripe
3	L2	9	cream
3	L2	216	pink
3	L2	35	green
3	L2	144	grey and red stripes and dots
3	L2	63	pink and green
3	L2	25	pink and white
3	L2	15	yellow and green
3	L2	225	red and green and grey and white stripe
4	F2	90	off-white
5	L2	84	white and grey and red stripes
5	L2	65	green
5	L2	24	dark red
5	L2	9	pink
	total	1,401	

5.484kg of wall-plaster was collected, amounting to 1,401cm². This mainly derived from demolition layer L2. Pink and red were the most common colours, with the majority of pieces being plain panels with stripes of various colours. Dots were seen on one piece but no shapes could be discerned.

8 Discussion

Groundworks in the northern part of the site of the computer block did not extend deep enough to impact archaeological remains. On the southernmost side, the soil-stripping exposed part of a Roman building, the remains of which consisted of a robbed-out Roman wall with demolition debris adjacent to it. Judging from what is known about this area of Colchester, and from a Roman dish found on the surface, the building probably dates from the 2nd or 3rd century. The presence of painted wall-plaster indicates the high status of this property. This accords with what has been found at the site previously, except that Roman remains are far more deeply buried by topsoil and dark earth elsewhere on the site. Animal bones from a pit in the vicinity are unlikely to be Roman and may well represent the remains of post-medieval leather production.

9 Archive deposition

The finds, paper and digital archive is held by the Colchester Archaeological Trust at 12 Lexden Road, Colchester, Essex CO3 3NF, but it will be permanently deposited with Colchester Museums under accession code 2003.209.

10 Acknowledgements

CAT is grateful to Roff Marsh Partnership for commissioning the work and to the Sixth Form College for funding it. W A Hills the contractors allowed access to the site. The fieldwork was carried out by Ben Holloway, Kate Orr and Laura Pooley.

11 References

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|-----------------------|------|---|
| CAR 3 | 1984 | <i>Colchester Archaeological Report 3, Excavations at Lion Walk, Balkerne Lane, and Middleborough, Colchester</i> , by Philip Crummy |
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| CAT
CAT Report 247 | 1998 | <i>The Siege of Colchester</i> leaflet
An archaeological desk-based assessment of the 'mid-site' development and 'north site phase 2' developments at the Sixth Form College, North Hill, Colchester, Essex, unpublished CAT archive report, by Kate Orr, 2003 |
| CAT Report 260 | | An archaeological evaluation at the Sixth Form College, North Hill, Colchester, Essex, 2004, unpublished CAT archive report, by Ben Holloway, 2004 |
| ECC FAU Report 830 | | 'Colchester Sixth Form College north site, North Hill, Colchester, Essex, archaeological evaluation, 2000', Essex County Council Field Archaeology Unit report |
| Hull, M R | 1958 | <i>Roman Colchester</i> , RRCSAL, 20 |

12 Glossary

context	specific location on an archaeological site, especially one where finds are made
feature	an identifiable thing like a pit, a wall, a drain, a floor; can contain 'contexts'
IFA	Institute of Field Archaeologists
medieval	period from AD 1066 to Henry VIII
modern	period from the 19th century onwards to the present
NGR	National Grid Reference
natural	geological deposit undisturbed by human activity
<i>opus signinum</i>	Roman mortar mixed with crushed tile
post-medieval	after Henry VIII to around the late 18th century
Roman	the period from AD 43 to AD 410
tenters	outdoor frame used for stretching cloth
tessellated floor	a floor consisting of plain small ceramic or stone cubes set into mortar
U/S	unstratified

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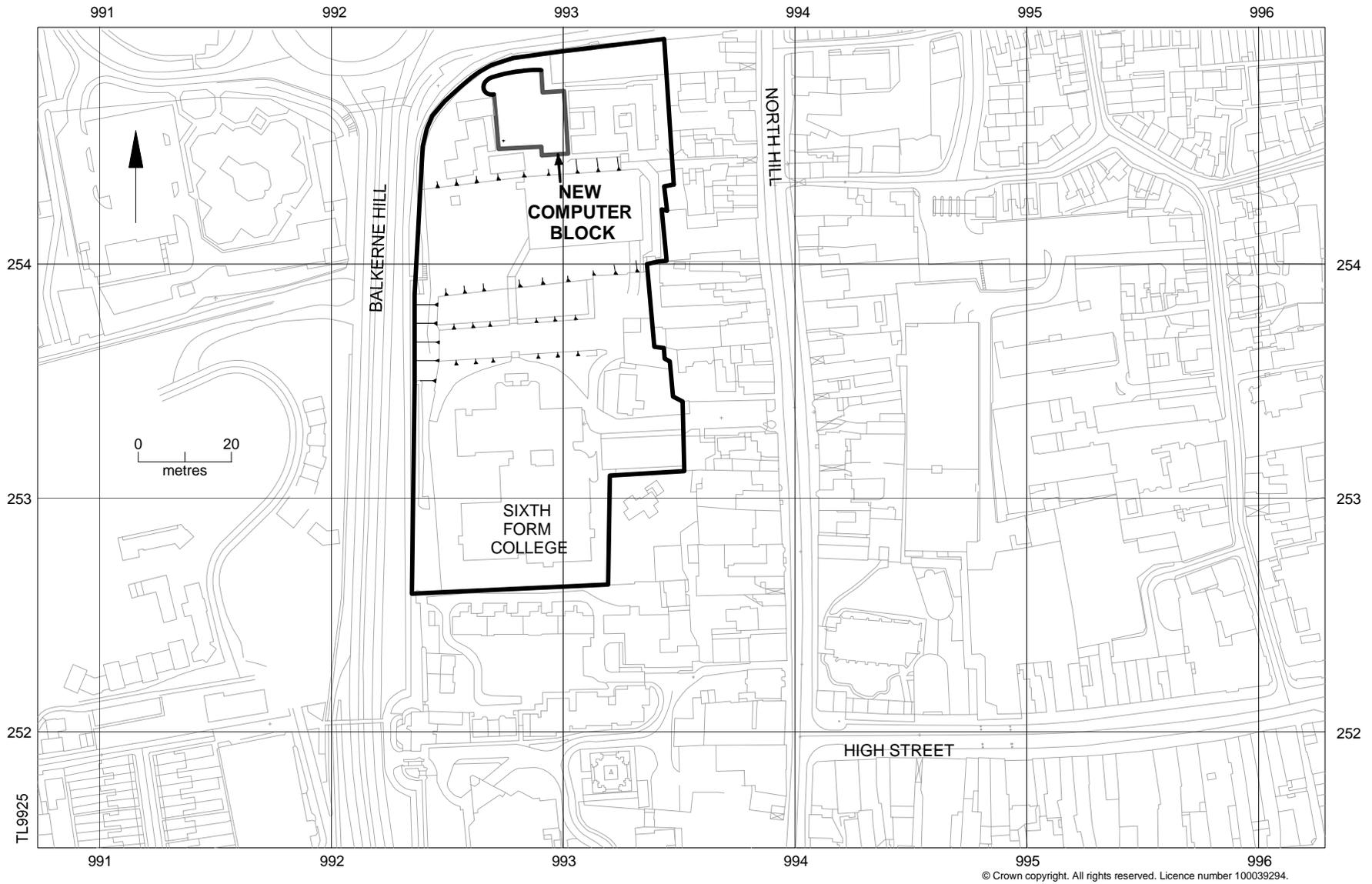
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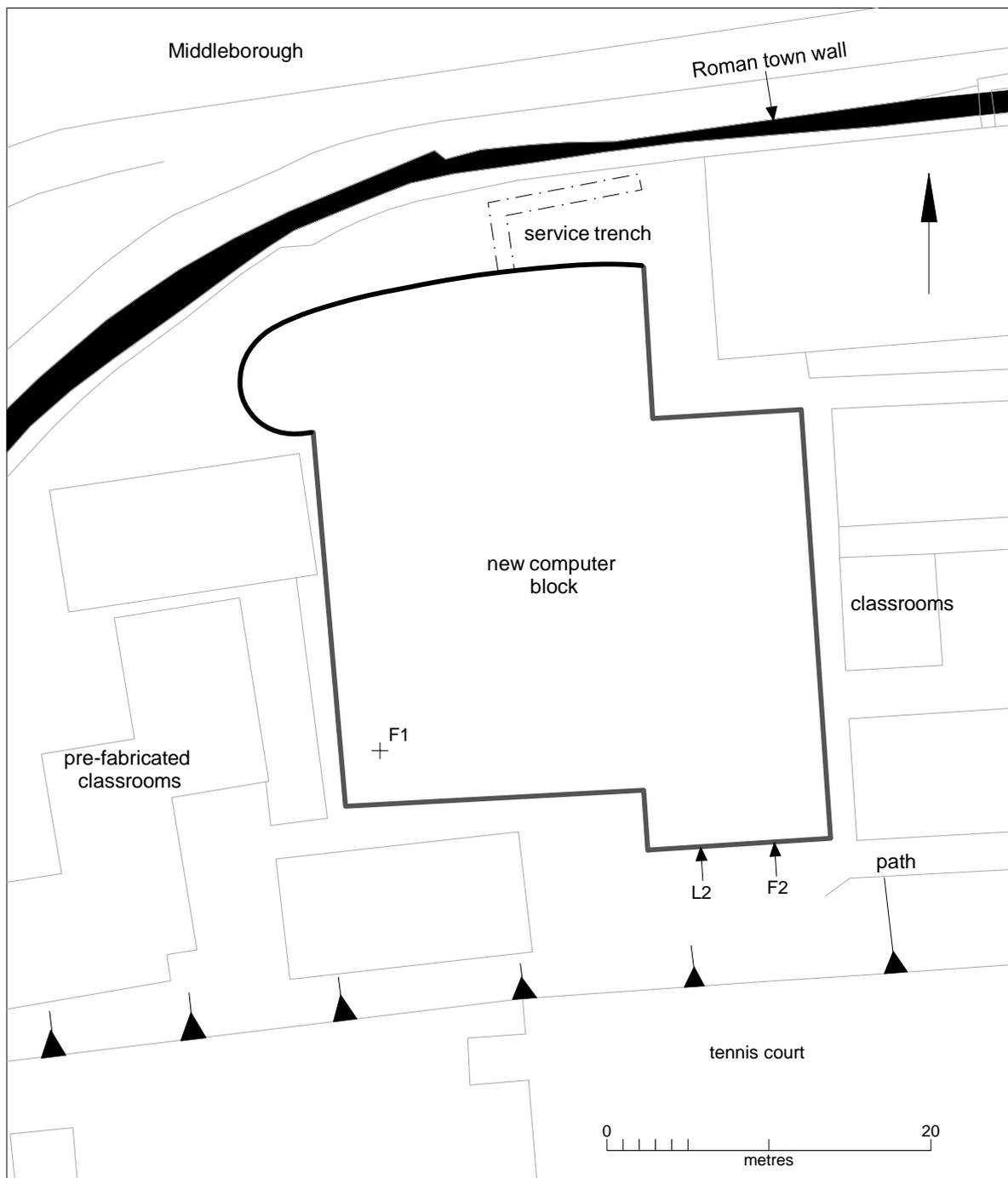
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Fig 1 Site location.



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Fig 2 Location of features.

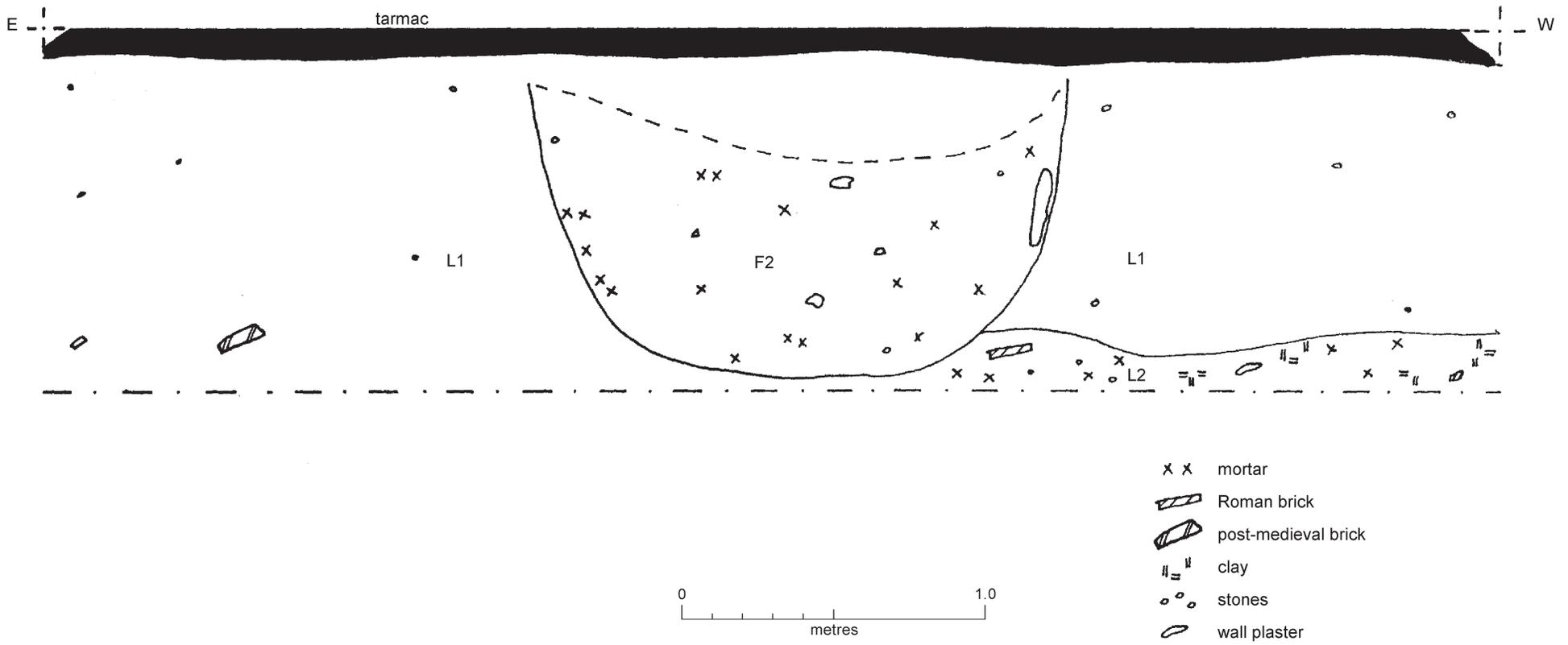


Fig 3 North-facing section of F2 and L2.

**Essex Heritage Conservation Record/
Essex Archaeology and History**

Summary sheet

Site address: the 'north site' development at the Sixth Form College, North Hill, Colchester, Essex	
Parish: Colchester	District: Colchester
NGR: TL 9928 2545 (c)	Site code: Museum accession code 2003.209
Type of work: Watching brief	Site director/group: Colchester Archaeological Trust
Date of work: July-September 2003	Size of area investigated: 35m x 30m plus one service-trench
Location of finds/curating museum: Colchester Museums	Funding source: Sixth Form College
Further seasons anticipated? Yes	Related EHCR nos: 3530, 12341, 13108, 13112, 12433-12437
Final report: CAT Report 302 and summary in <i>EAH</i>	
Periods represented: Roman, medieval, post-medieval	
<p>Summary of fieldwork results: <i>CAT carried out a watching brief at the Sixth Form College during the construction of a new computer block (the 'north site'). Groundworks in the northern part of the site did not extend deep enough to impact archaeological remains. The one service-trench monitored was dug to a depth of 1.4m and archaeological levels were not reached. However, at the southernmost end of the site of the computer block, an area of tarmac path was cut into to a depth of 1.2m. A layer of demolition debris containing painted wall-plaster from a Roman building was recorded, starting at 700mm below the level of the tarmac path. Adjacent to this layer, a robbed-out wall deriving from a Roman building was observed, just below the level of the tarmac path. A pit containing animal bones may represent the remains of post-medieval leather production.</i></p>	
Previous summaries/reports: CAT Reports 148, 247 and 260	
Author of summary: Kate Orr	Date of summary: December 2004