

Report on a watching brief: CAT Report 426

Site address: High Street, Colchester, Essex
Date of fieldwork: 23rd April 2007-16th May 2007
NGR: TL 9985 2520
Location plan attached?: Yes (Fig 1)
Museum accession code: 2007.44
CAT project code: 07/4d

Summary

A series of small trenches was dug by contractors at the east end of the High Street during the replacement of gas mains. Most of the trenches were too shallow to reach significant archaeological deposits, although part of a large Roman foundation was observed in one of the deeper trenches.

Introduction (Fig 1)

An archaeological watching brief was carried out on behalf of National Grid during the digging of trenches for the replacement of gas mains under the east end of the High Street. It was undertaken by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) in April and May 2007.

The contractors, Morrisons, dug a series of small trenches within an 88m stretch of the High Street between the Natural History Museum (formerly All Saints' church) to the east and the north end of St Nicholas' Street to the west.

Archaeological background

The east end of the High Street was diverted southwards in the late 11th century to make room for the castle bailey ditch. The present High Street still follows this line, although the ditch was later backfilled and built over.

Little archaeological evidence had previously been discovered from beneath this part of the High Street. It overlies the northern end of *Insula* 30 in the Roman town. A large public building may have occupied much of this *insula*, although the evidence for this is very limited (Crummy 1971, 107).

Methods

The trenches were initially dug by the contractors to relocate both redundant and live gas mains. The trenches varied in size and shape, but were usually small and fairly shallow. The gas mains were typically located at a depth of 0.6-0.7m below modern ground-level, and the trenches were rarely more than 1m deep.

Work started on the southern half of the street, and then moved over onto the northern half. Although the trenches were largely dug through the tarmaced street surface, on the north side some trenches were dug under the pavement and also at the southern end of the narrow street known as Crowther's Entry.

Details of the recording methods used can be found in the CAT document *Policies and procedures* (CAT 2006).

Results

The trenches were numbered (T1-T12; Fig 1). As the trenches were usually shallow and followed the lines of existing service trenches, they often did not reach or uncover significant archaeological deposits. The detailed records of the individual trenches are in the site archive.

Roman foundation (F2; T3)

T3, at the north end of St Nicholas' Street, was dug deeper than most of the other trenches in order to gain access to a mains junction. The middle of the trench was approximately 2.15m deep. Natural sand was possibly seen on the western side of the trench at a depth of 1.8m.

A large Roman wall foundation (F2) was observed in the north-eastern part of the trench at a depth of between 1.4m and 1.95m. It was constructed of septaria blocks with

occasional fragments of Roman brick set in a hard pale brown mortar. It was not possible to examine F2 in detail and recording had to be done from street level.

The exposed masonry was cut by modern service trenches to the south and west. A west-facing section of the foundation was exposed for a length of 1m. This was aligned roughly NNW-SSE. However, this edge was probably where it had been cut by a service trench and the real edges of the foundation were not visible. Although difficult to interpret with certainty, the masonry seemed most likely to be part of a large north-south foundation.

Despite much later disturbance, some of the stratigraphy post-dating the foundation F2 was visible in the north section of T3. A mixed yellowish-brown clayey layer, 1.1-1.4m below modern ground-level, sealed F2. This was probably demolition debris derived from the sandy clay walls of a Roman building on the site.

A gravelly rubble spread at 1m below modern ground-level in T3 was perhaps a road surface of medieval or later date. This was sealed by several layers of make-up (L3) of probable post-medieval or modern date.

There did not appear to be a well-defined layer of post-Roman topsoil or 'dark earth' (CAR 3, 92) in T3. However, dark greyish-brown topsoil (L4) was observed in the bottom of some of the other trenches, notably T6 and T7. This probable 'dark earth' lay roughly 0.5m below modern ground-level and was at least 0.5m thick.

Series of post-medieval and/or modern make-up layers (L3), 0.25-0.6m thick, were observed in most of the trenches. These were cut by numerous modern service trenches, including one for a redundant iron gas main (F1) which extended along the southern side of the High Street. These deposits were sealed by modern concrete make-up (L2), 0.25-0.35m thick, which underlay the existing tarmac road surface (L1).

No finds were recovered during the watching brief.

Comment

The large size of the Roman foundation F2 in T3 indicated that it could have belonged to the projected public building in *Insula 30* (Crummy 1971, 107). Its position suggests that, while it was close to the western edge of the *insula*, it was probably not on the street frontage.

Archive deposition

The archive from the watching brief, including the site records and the photographs, will be permanently deposited with Colchester and Ipswich Museums under accession code COLEM 2007.44.

Acknowledgements

CAT is grateful to National Grid and Morrisons for commissioning and funding the watching brief, and to the workmen from Morrisons for their help on site.

References

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| CAR 3 | 1984 | <i>Colchester Archaeological Report 3: Excavations at Lion Walk, Balkerne Lane, and Middleborough, Colchester, Essex</i> , by P Crummy |
| CAT | 2006 | <i>Policies and procedures</i> , Colchester Archaeological Trust |
| Crummy, P | 1971 | ' <i>Insula 30</i> ', in <i>Transactions of the Essex Archaeological Society</i> , 3, 3rd series, part 1, 107-111 |

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Report date: June 2007

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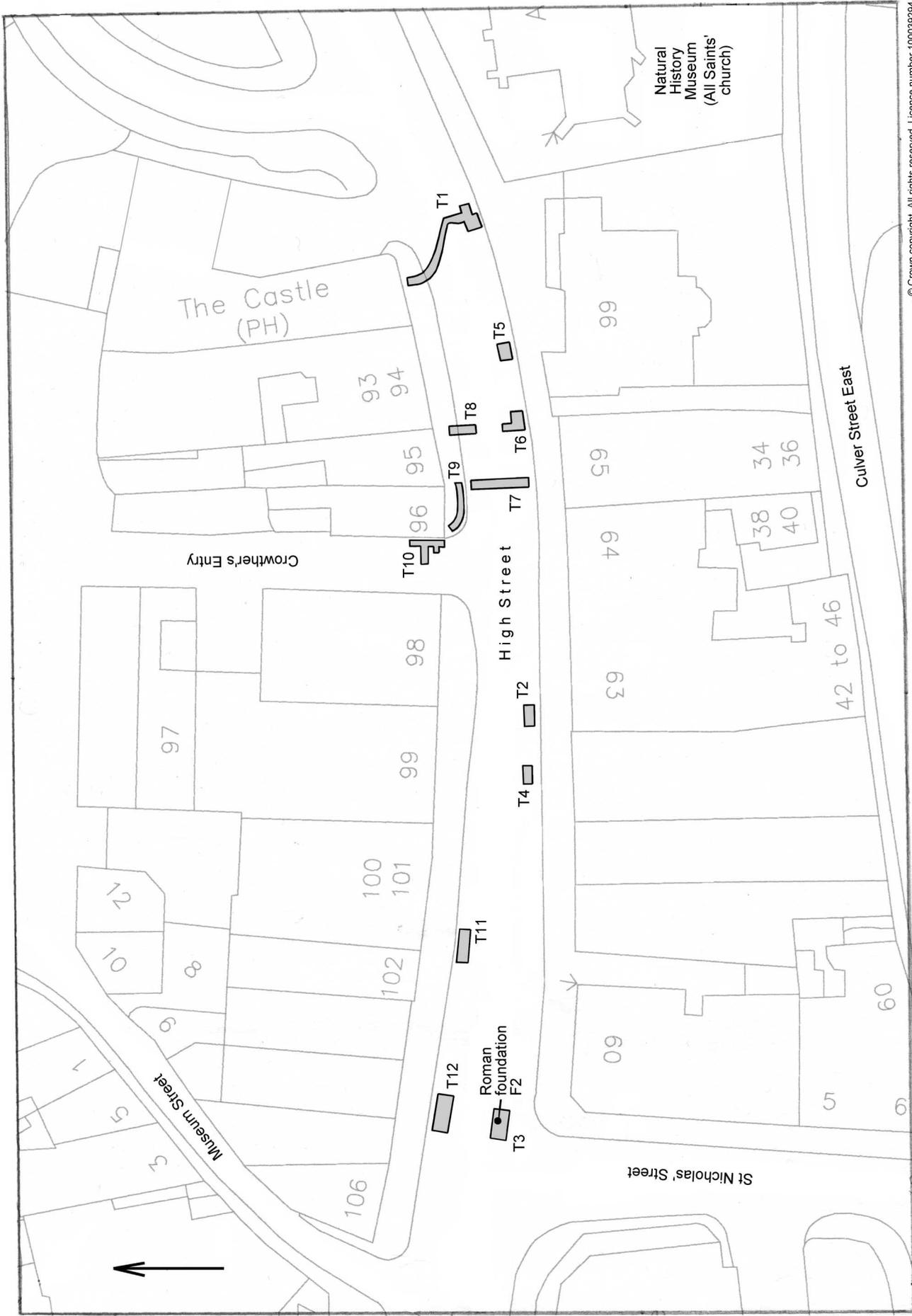


Fig 1 Location of trenches T1-T12.

**Essex Historic Environment Record/
Essex Archaeology and History**

Summary sheet

Site address: High Street, Colchester, Essex	
Parish: St Nicholas'/All Saints'	District: Colchester
NGR: TL 9985 2520	Site code: Museum accession code COLEM 2007.44
Type of work: Watching brief	Site director/group: Colchester Archaeological Trust
Date of work: 23rd April-16th May 2007	Size of area investigated: 30 sq m
Location of finds/curating museum: Colchester and Ipswich Museums	Funding source: National Grid/Morrisons
Further seasons anticipated? No	Related EHER and UAD nos:
Final report: CAT Report 426 and summary in <i>EAH</i>	
Periods represented: Roman	
Summary of fieldwork results: <i>A series of small trenches was dug by contractors at the east end of the High Street during the replacement of gas mains. Most of the trenches were too shallow to reach significant archaeological deposits, although part of a large Roman foundation was observed in one of the deeper trenches.</i>	
Previous summaries/reports: None	
Author of summary: Donald Shimmin	Date of summary: June 2007