

# Archaeological trial-trenching evaluation at the Sixth Form College, North Hill, Colchester, Essex

August 2014



report prepared by **Ben Holloway and Howard Brooks**  
on behalf of **Plater Claiborne and Sixth Form College**

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**CAT Report 784**  
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Cover: view of evaluation site, looking NE

## 1 **Summary**

*An evaluation by two linked trenches on the proposed site of a new student services building has shown that 700 mm of post-Roman deposits overlies the Roman horizons.*

## 2 **Introduction** (Fig 1)

This is the archive report for the archaeological trial-trenching evaluation carried out at Sixth Form College, North Hill, Colchester, by Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) on 20th August 2014. The work was commissioned by Plater Claiborne Architecture + Design on behalf of the Sixth Form College.

The site (TL 9926 2541) is a grassed area on the western side of the college grounds, west of the new 'midsite' building. It is also in the SW corner of *insula* 1a of the walled Roman town. Proposed works involve the construction of a student services building.

The project is currently pre-planning, with application in process. The evaluation reported here was commissioned to establish the depth at which significant archaeological material was likely to be encountered. This information could be used to inform foundation design.

The archaeological work was carried out in accordance with a WSI (Written Scheme of Investigation) produced by CAT (2014) and agreed with the Colchester Borough Council Archaeological Officer (CBCAO).

In addition to the WSI, all fieldwork and reporting was done in accordance with the CAT *Policies and procedures* (2012), the Institute of Field Archaeologists' *Standard and guidance for archaeological field evaluation* (IfA 2008a) and *Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials* (IfA 2008b). The guidance contained in the documents *Standards for field archaeology in the East of England* (EAA 14) and *Research and archaeology revisited: A revised framework for the East of England*, East Anglian Archaeological Occasional Papers 24 (EAA 24) was also followed.

## 3 **Archaeological background**

This section is based on records held by The Essex Historic Environment Record (EHER) and the Colchester Urban Archaeological Database (UAD).

The Sixth Form College (formerly the Gilbert School) occupies a sizeable proportion of the north-west corner of the walled Roman town. Within the walled Roman town, metalled streets running north-south and west-east define a number of *insulae* (blocks). Modern scholars have numbered these *insulae* 1-40, and they are often subdivided (eg, *insulae* 1a, 1b: CAT Report 247).

In the college grounds, Roman streets pass north-south under the east edge of the old college building and through the centre of the 'mid-site' development, and west-east under the 'south-site'. Thus the college site straddles *insulae* 1a, 1b, 9a and 9b, and 17 and 17b of the Roman town, and *insulae* 1a and 9a are wholly within the college grounds (EHER 12341 and 13108).

The southern half of the college site also lies within the area of the Roman legionary fortress, founded *circa* AD 44 (CAR 3, EHER 3530 and 12341). The northern edge of the fortress should run under the 'mid site' complex, with the fortress rampart to its south (coinciding mainly with the grassy slope between the 'south-site' and 'mid site' buildings).

Normally, the *insulae* would be occupied by Roman buildings – usually town houses. In fact, a large part of a Roman building was discovered on the Technical College site in 1865 and 1910. This building had tessellated and possibly mosaic floors, and painted

walls, and is likely to have been constructed in the 2nd or 3rd century AD (Hull 1958, 93-94: EHER 12433-12437).

In 1984-85, there was a major excavation on the site now occupied by the 'south-site' buildings. Parts of the *contubernia* (men's quarters) of a barrack block belonging to the Roman fortress were excavated (CAR 6, 134).

In January 2000, an evaluation within the footprint of the proposed new computer block was conducted by ECCFAU. This uncovered between 1.4m and 2m of topsoil and covering a deposit probably derived from the demolition of an underlying Roman building (ECC FAU 2000).

In 2003, five evaluation trenches were dug in the college grounds in preparation for the proposed 'mid-site' development. These exposed Roman tessellated and mortar floors, as well as the robbed-out foundations of a large Roman building (probably a town-house) covered by between 0.6m and 1.1m of topsoil. 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 (CAT Report 260).

Additional evaluation work in 2005 (CAT Report 309) in what was then the tennis court (now the 'mid-site' building) confirmed the earlier evaluation findings and gained useful data on the possible extent of the town-house identified in 2003 (CAT Report 260).

Archaeological work was conducted between August 2005 and March 2006 (CAT Report 347), during the groundworks associated with the 'mid site' complex. Investigation revealed a Roman metalled street surface, which divided *Insulas* 1a and 1b, and two large Roman buildings. The first building, in *Insula* 1b, was a Roman town house with surviving *in situ* masonry wall foundations and *opus signinum* floor surfaces. The second building, in *Insula* 1a, was an extremely large and high-status building consisting of surviving *in situ* masonry wall foundations, robbed-out wall lines, and floors of mosaic, tessellation and *opus signinum*, and a well preserved room which appears to have been part of a bath complex. The size of this building, its high-status decoration consisting of large quantities of elaborate painted wall plaster (some of which was designed to imitate imported marbles) and the presence of a bath complex suggest that this may well have been part of a *mansio*.

Most recently trial-trenching and watching brief work was carried out in advance of the construction of a new languages facility (June 2011 - CAT Report 596). As has been observed in previous episodes of evaluation a thick deposit of topsoil (between 0.7 and 1.1m in thickness) sealed deposits of Roman demolition material. Material recovered from the demolition included flue tile and finely-painted wall-plaster, both of which are evidence of high status Roman buildings dating principally to the second century AD.

There appears to have been very little in the way of post-Roman activity on the land now occupied by the Sixth Form College. Recent excavation and evaluation work has shown that a substantial depth of topsoil accumulated over the site in this period. The usual interpretation of this phenomenon, often found in Colchester, is that the land was left open and probably used for small-scale agriculture or horticulture. Building work seems to have been confined in the medieval and post-medieval periods to the properties lining North Hill, many of which are still standing and are listed buildings.

#### **4 Aim**

The aim of the evaluation was to establish the depth of post-Roman overburden.

## 5 Results of the evaluation (Figs 1-2)

The trench had two arms, one running N-S along and the other E-W.

This section gives an archaeological summary of the evaluation trench (T1), with context and finds dating information.

### Trench 1: summary

T1 was positioned in the footprint of the proposed new student services building to the west of the main 'midsite' complex.

T1 was excavated under archaeological supervision using a tracked excavator. Two layers were removed by machine - modern turf and imported topsoil L1, which was 130 – 230 mm thick, and the underlying earlier topsoil L2, which was 450-600 mm thick. L2 sealed a Roman demolition horizon (L3). The combined thickness of both layers above Roman deposits was 700mm.

Since it was the object of the evaluation to establish the depth below modern ground level of the top of the Roman horizons, excavation was halted when L3 was seen. In all likelihood there will be solid Roman floors somewhere below L3, but this could not be established by this evaluation.

Apart from the deposit L3, no other Roman material or features were revealed. What was seen was the top of a concrete WWII air raid shelter at the southern end of the N-S arm of T1, and a modern service pipe trench towards the eastern end of the E-W arm. Part of one of the 2005-6 service trenches should have been intercepted by the 2014 trench, and was seen in the expected place.

### Trench 1: contexts and dating

| Context no | Type                      | Dated finds              | Phase         |
|------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|---------------|
| F1         | concrete air-raid shelter | concrete                 | WWII          |
| unnumbered | modern service trench     |                          | modern+       |
| L1         | imported topsoil          |                          | modern        |
| L2         | older topsoil             | coin of George III       | post-medieval |
| L3         | Roman demolition deposit  | Roman tile, wall-plaster | Roman         |

## 6 Finds

### L2 topsoil

#### *Finds number 2*

Copper coin George III

### L3 Roman demolition deposit

#### *Finds number 1*

Fragments of Roman box-tile, tesserae, painted wall-plaster, mortar

#### *Finds number 3*

Roman pottery counter

## 7 Discussion

This evaluation has shown, in common with recent projects at the Sixth Form College, there is a blanket of soils overlying the Roman horizons. In the case of the current site, there is a covering of approximately 700 mm of soil (here, L1, L2) over the uppermost Roman level (L3), which is a deposit of Roman demolition debris of unknown depth.

It is very likely that intact Roman floors, whether tessellated, mortar, or clay, survive at lower depths, but to find the depths of such floors was not the aim of this project.

## 8 Acknowledgements

CAT thanks Mr Simon Plater of Plater Claiborne Architecture + Design and the Sixth Form College. The project was managed by B Holloway, and the fieldwork was carried out by BH, and M Baister. Site plans by MB and sections by E Holloway. The project was monitored for CBC by Chris Lister.

## 9 References

|                            |       |   |
|----------------------------|-------|---|
| CAR 3                      | 1984  | <i>Colchester Archaeological Report 3: Excavations at Lion Walk, Balcerne Lane, and Middleborough, Colchester, Essex</i> , by P Crummy  |
| CAR 6                      | 1992  | <i>Colchester Archaeological Report 6: Excavations at Culver Street, the Gilbert School, and other sites in Colchester, 1971-85</i> , by P Crummy   |
| CAT                        | 2012  | <i>Policies and Procedures</i>  |
| CAT                        | 2014  | <i>Written Scheme of Investigation for archaeological evaluation at the Sixth Form College, North Hill, Colchester, Essex</i> . February 2014   |
| CAT Report 247             | 2003  | An archaeological desk-based assessment of the 'mid-site' and 'north site phase 2' developments at the Sixth Form College, North Hill, Colchester, Essex, November 2003, prepared by Kate Orr                                     |
| CAT Report 260             | 2004  | 'An archaeological evaluation at the Sixth Form College, North Hill, Colchester, Essex: December 2003-January 2004', by B Holloway,   |
| CAT Report 309             | 2005  | 'Archaeological monitoring and recording at the Sixth Form College, North Hill, Colchester, Essex: February 2005', by H Brooks  |
| CAT Report 347             | 2009  | 'Roman buildings, the rear face of the Roman town wall and archaeological investigations in Insulas 1a, 1b, 9a and 9b, at the Sixth Form College, North Hill, Colchester, Essex: April 2005-March 2006', by H Brooks <i>et al</i> |
| CAT Report 483             | 2008  | 'An archaeological evaluation of the proposed extension to the "south site" buildings at the Sixth Form College, North Hill, Colchester, Essex: May 2008', by B Holloway and H Brooks,  |
| CAT Report 596             | 2011  | An archaeological evaluation by trial-trenching and borehole watching brief at the Sixth Form College, North Hill, Colchester, Essex: June 2011, CAT archive report, by Mark Baister  |
| CIMS                       | 2008a | <i>Guidelines on standards and practice for archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester</i> (CBC)   |
| CIMS                       | 2008b | <i>Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester and Ipswich Museums</i> (CBC)  |
| EAA 14                     | 2003  | <i>Standards for field archaeology in the East of England</i> East Anglian Archaeological, Occasional Papers, 14, ed by D Gurney  |
| EAA 24                     | 2011  | <i>Research and archaeology revisited: A revised framework for the East of England</i> , East Anglian Archaeological Occasional Papers, 24, ed by M Medlycott   |
| ECC FAU                    | 2000  | Report 830: <i>Archaeological evaluation at Colchester Sixth Form College North site, North Hill, Colchester, Essex</i>   |
| Hawkes, C F C, & Hull, M R | 1947  | <i>Camulodunum</i> , Report of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London, 14   |

|           |       |   |
|-----------|-------|---|
| Hull, M R | 1958  | <i>Roman Colchester</i> , RRCSAL, <b>20</b>   |
| IfA       | 2008a | <i>Standard and guidance for archaeological field evaluation</i> . Institute for Archaeologists.  |
| IfA       | 2008b | <i>Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials</i> . Institute for Archaeologists. |

## 10 Abbreviations and glossary

|               |   |
|---------------|---|
| BP            | Before Present era, alternative to BC                                     |
| CAT           | Colchester Archaeological Trust   |
| context       | specific location, usually of finds, on an archaeological site            |
| ECC           | Essex County Council  |
| EHHER         | Essex Historic Environment Record, held by Essex County Council           |
| feature       | an identifiable thing like a pit, a wall, a drain, can contain 'contexts' |
| fill          | the soil filling up a hole such as a pit or ditch                         |
| IFA           | Institute of Field Archaeologists   |
| modern        | 19th -21st centuries  |
| natural       | geological deposit undisturbed by human activity                          |
| NGR           | National Grid Reference   |
| post-medieval | 1530 to about 1800  |
| Roman         | the period from AD 43 to around AD 430                                    |

## 11 Contents of archive

**Finds:** one bag

### **Paper archive**

*A4 wallet containing:*

This report (CAT Rep 784)

Original site record (context and finds sheets)

CAT WSI

Photo catalogue

Photos on CD

Sundry papers

## 12 Archive deposition

The paper and digital archive is currently held by the Colchester Archaeological Trust at Roman Circus House, Circular Road North, Colchester, Essex CO2 7GZ, but will be permanently deposited with Colchester and Ipswich Museum under accession code COLEM 2014.77

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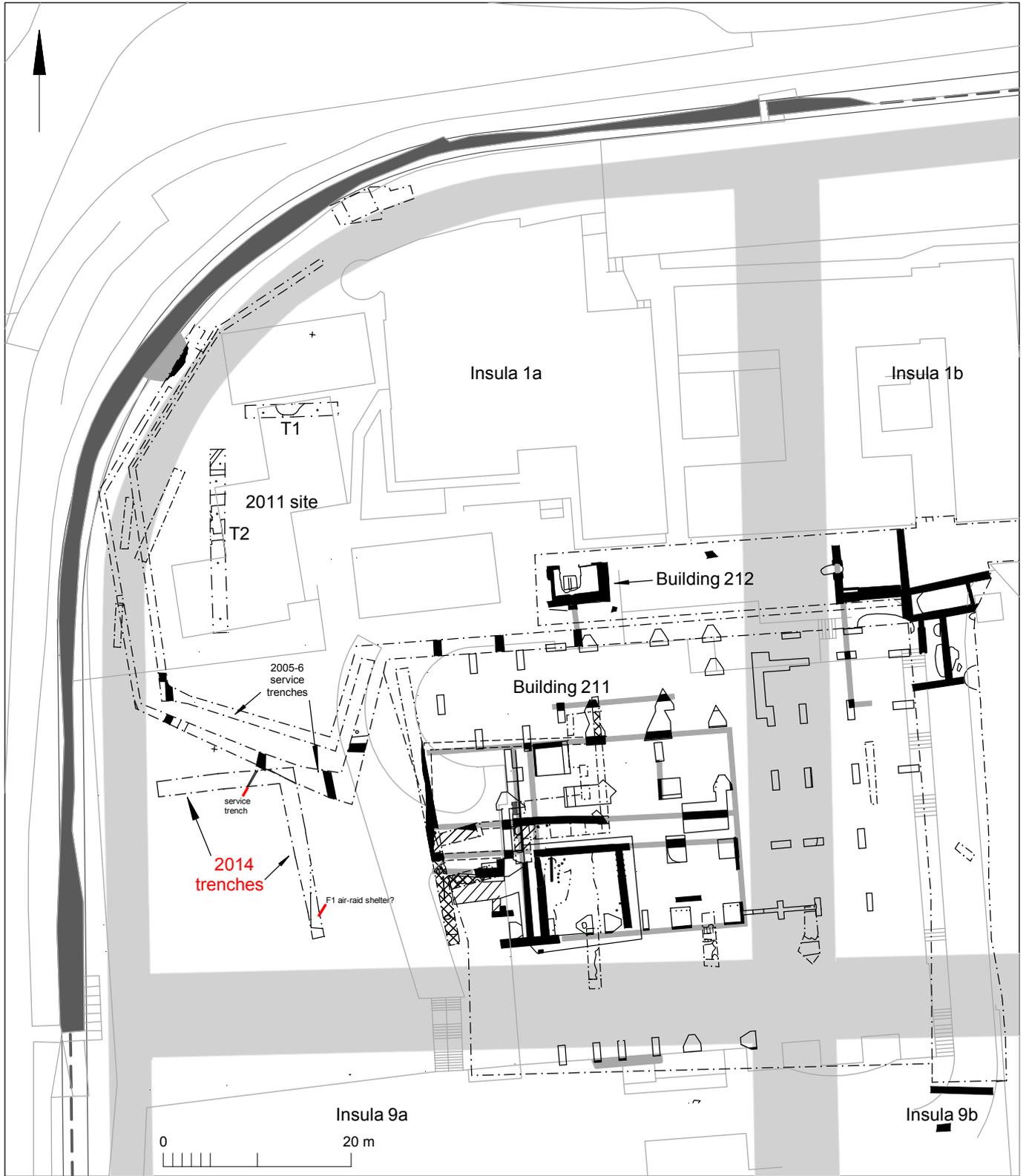
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Fig 1 Site location, showing previous excavations, Roman streets (grey tone), and Roman buildings on college site.

-  Roman house wall
-  (projected wall)
-  limit of excavation
-  town wall
-  Roman street

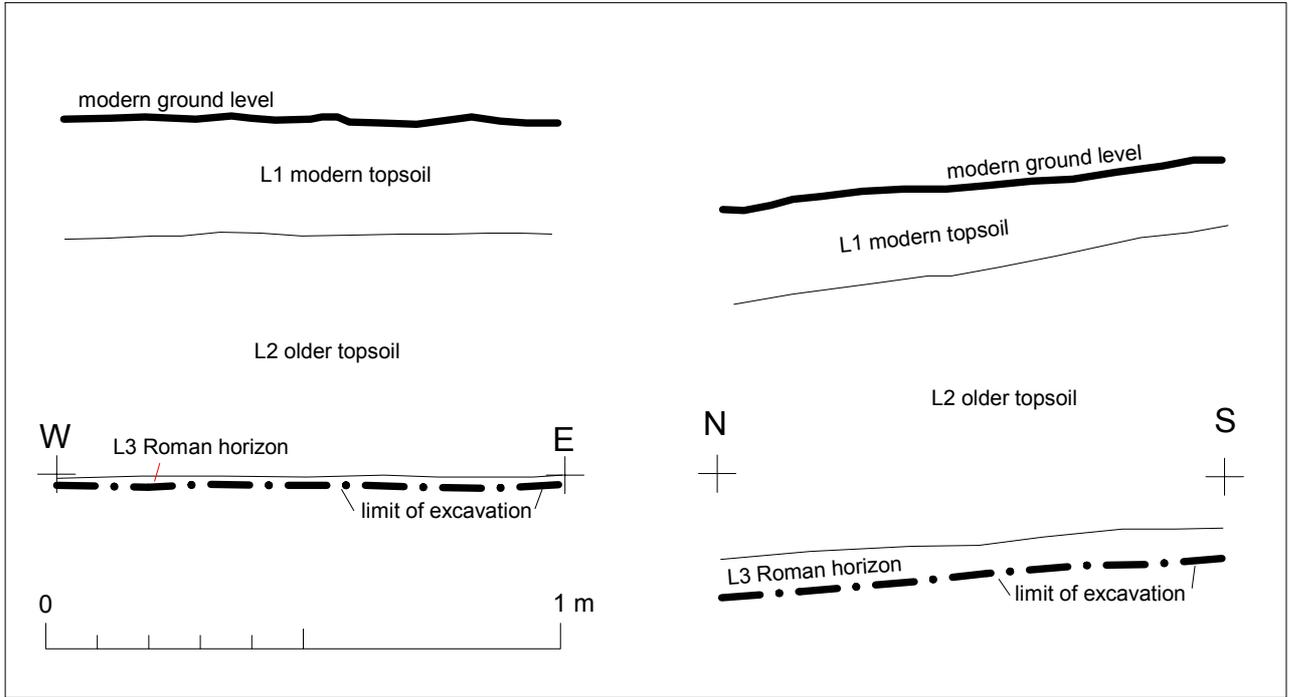


Fig 2 Sections: left is at northern end of trench, right is at southern end (where ground rises). Both sections show approximately 700mm of deposits (L1 + L2) over the Roman horizon (L3).

## Essex Historic Environment Record/ Essex Archaeology and History

### Summary sheet

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Address:</b> Sixth Form College Colchester, North Hill, Colchester, Essex  |  |
| <b>Parish:</b> Colchester   | <b>District:</b> Colchester                                    |
| <b>NGR:</b> NGR: TL 9926 2541   | <b>Site code:</b><br>CAT project code – 14/7e                  |
| <b>Type of work:</b><br>Evaluation  | <b>Site director/group:</b><br>Colchester Archaeological Trust |
| <b>Date of work:</b> 20th August 2014   | <b>Size of area investigated:</b><br>30m (linear)              |
| <b>Location of curating museum:</b><br>Colchester & Ipswich Museum<br>accession code : 2014.77  | <b>Funding source:</b><br>developer                            |
| <b>Further seasons anticipated?</b><br>Yes  | <b>Related EHER number:</b><br>--                              |
| <b>Final report:</b> CAT Report 784   |  |
| <b>Periods represented:</b> Roman, post-medieval, modern  |  |
| <b>Summary of fieldwork results:</b><br><i>An evaluation by two linked trenches on the proposed site of a new student services building has shown that 700 mm of post-Roman deposits overlies the Roman horizons.</i> |  |
| <b>Previous summaries/reports:</b> CAT Rep 247, 260, 309, 596   |  |
| <b>CBC monitor:</b> Chris Lister  |  |
| <b>Keywords:</b> Roman  | <b>Significance:</b> *   |
| <b>Author of summary:</b><br>Ben Holloway   | <b>Date of summary:</b><br>August 2014                         |