

Westway/Sheepen Place, Colchester

Archaeological Evaluation

ARCHIVE REPORT

November 1997

Application: COL 97/1197
Colchester Museum site accession code: 1997.71

BERMAC PROPERTIES PLC

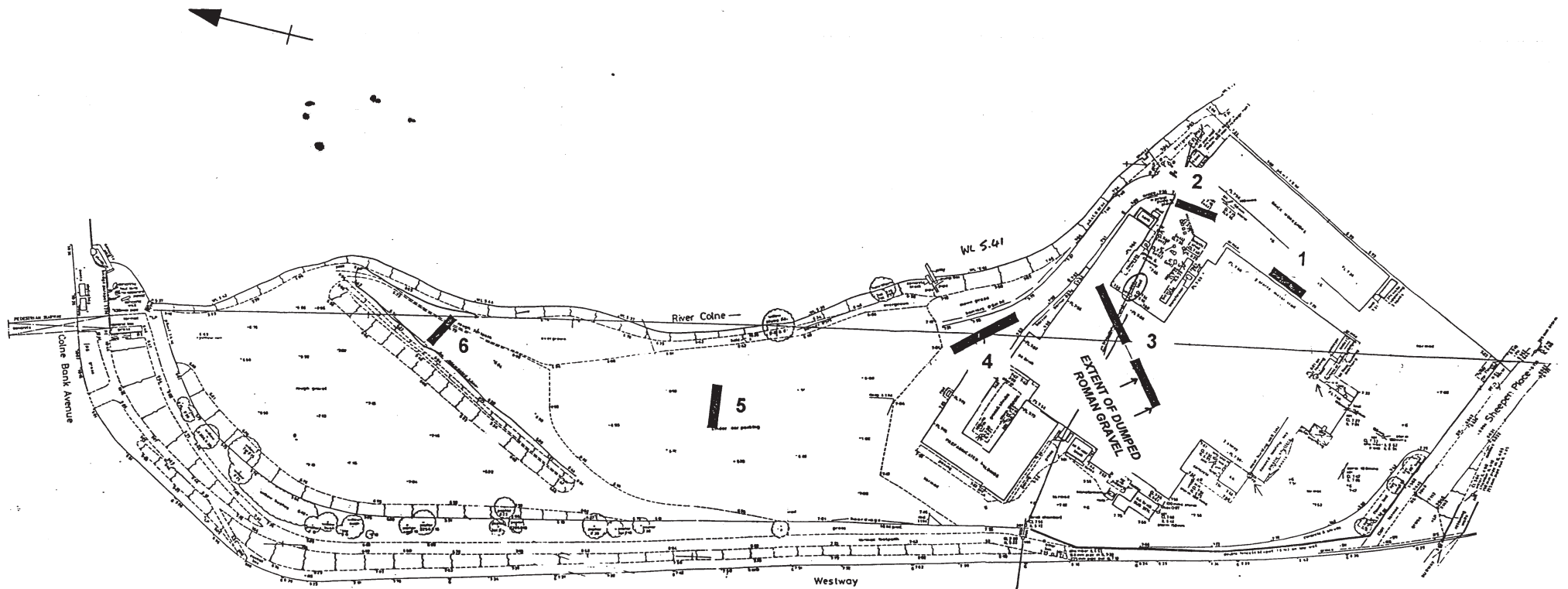
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WESTWAY/SHEEPEN PLACE, COLCHESTER. ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION, NOVEMBER 1997.

ARCHIVE REPORT

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Figure 2: Trench locations (over survey of old printworks) showing Roman dumped gravel

1 SUMMARY

An evaluation on the car park east of Westway and north of Sheepen Place, Colchester has shown that there is virtually no survival of significant archaeological deposits on this site. The deposits exposed in the evaluation consist primarily of the foundations of a recent factory, lying on top of several metres of disturbed Victorian topsoil.

In only one location (Trench 3) were there any pre-Victorian remains - in this case a patch of dumped gravel lying over the natural clay subsoil. To judge by the very abraded finds, this gravel was dumped in Roman times, presumably to raise local ground level.

Finds were restricted to several pieces of fired clay and a piece of abraded pottery from the dumped gravel. Many Victorian and early 20th century glass bottles or fragments were found during the evaluation. These were not kept. Also identified from the Victorian horizons were several dateable ironstone fragments. Likewise, these were noted but not retained.

Archaeological evaluations of this type are based on a limited sample of the site. There can be no guarantee that the remains exposed in the evaluation and reported on here are truly representative of the buried archaeological remains on the site.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 This is the archive report on an archaeological evaluation on the car park site, lying east of Westway and north of Sheepen Place, Colchester, Essex (figure 1). The evaluation was commissioned on behalf of Bermac Properties by Robert Thurley Associates, and was carried out by Colchester Archaeological Trust in November 1997.
- 2.2 The work was carried out according to a brief written by the Archaeology Officer of Colchester Borough Council Museums Service.
- 2.3 The proposed development is the subject of planning application COL/97/1197.
- 2.4 The site consists of approximately 1.84 hectares of rough land, and lies on flat ground on the south bank of the river Colne, approximately 300 metres north of the Roman town walls of Colchester, and slightly to the north of the modern town centre. The site is bounded on its west side by Westway, on its east by the river Colne, and on its south by Sheepen Place. The southern part of the site is now a car park, lying above the concrete slabs and other remains of a demolished BPCC print works. The northern part is largely overgrown waste ground, heavily dug over by bottle hunters. The extreme northern point of the site is so very heavily overgrown as to be inaccessible for the purposes of this evaluation. The site is relatively flat, and ground level is generally 7.0m AOD on the Sheepen Place frontage, sloping down to 6.0m on the river edge at the extreme northern edge of the site.
- 2.5 Local geology is London Clay, which lies between 1.5 and 2.0 metres below present ground level.
- 2.6 NGR for the site centre is TL 992 258
- 2.6 The site archive is currently in storage at Colchester Archaeological Trust headquarters at "Camulodunum", 12, Lexden Road, Colchester, but will ultimately be deposited at Colchester Museum (accession 1997.71).

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

- 3.1 There are no records of archaeological discoveries from the site itself.
- 3.2 However, there are but there are many discoveries of archaeological material from the vicinity. The site lies only just north of the Roman town, and there are known Roman suburbs slightly to the east in Middleborough (around the Royal London Insurance building)¹, and to its north around the Midland Bank on North Station Road ². The pre-Roman settlement at Sheepen lies only 800 metres to the west, and a major Roman temple is located under St Helena's School, only 400 metres west of the site³. There are also records of individual discoveries, such as the Bronze Age burial site and Roman amphora from Sheepen Road ⁴.
- 3.3 Local ground conditions (possibly wet ground near the river) are favourable for the preservation of archaeological deposits

4 PROJECT AIMS

The brief defined the following aims for this evaluation: to establish, as fully as possible, the horizontal and vertical extent, character, condition and quality of archaeological deposits within the site.

5 METHOD

- 5.1 All archaeological work was done according to a brief written by the Archaeology Officer of Colchester Borough Council Museums Service. Six trenches totalling some 85 metres in length were opened under archaeological supervision using a wheeled Hymac with a flat-edged ditching bucket (figure 2). Trench location was specifically targeted on the areas where the site would be affected by the proposed development - trenches 1-3 covered the proposed cinema complex, trench 4 the pub/restaurant area, and trench 5-6 the car park areas. The intention was to machine down to the highest significant deposit. In reality, the absence of any significant deposits meant that trench bottom was generally on natural clay, except for trench 3 where a deposit of dumped gravel was located. In all cases where natural clay was reached, an extra depth of clay was dug out just to confirm that it was natural clay and did not mask underlying deposits.

¹ Crummy 1983

² Crummy 1992, 346.

³ Crummy 1992, 345.

⁴ Hull, *Roman Colchester* - "Gazetteer of finds outside the walls", and Colchester Sites and Monuments Record nos 11811-12, 11930.

6 DESCRIPTION OF EXCAVATED TRENCHES

An account is given here of the deposits revealed in each trench. Heights in metres above Ordnance Datum have been projected from the 1989 survey of the site, and are given for guidance to the depths of deposits - they may only be accurate to within 20 cm. "Ground level" refers to 1997 ground level.

6.1 TRENCH 1 (figure 3).

Comment

Top 60 cm is dominated by a modern buff brick wall, and layers of dumped concrete. There is also a layer of orange sand which (elsewhere on the site) underlies tarmac surfaces associated with the printworks foundations. Below lies 1 metre of recently disturbed topsoil - witness the concrete slabs laid right down at the bottom of this topsoil layer. Under slab level lies a deposit of slimy grey river silts. However, these produced Cunningham fabric 48d sherds of 19/20th century date, and so they cannot be of any antiquity. Below lies natural clay.

	Heights
Modern ground level	7.3m
Victorian topsoil	6.7m
Natural Clay	5.3m

6.2 TRENCH 2 (figure 4).

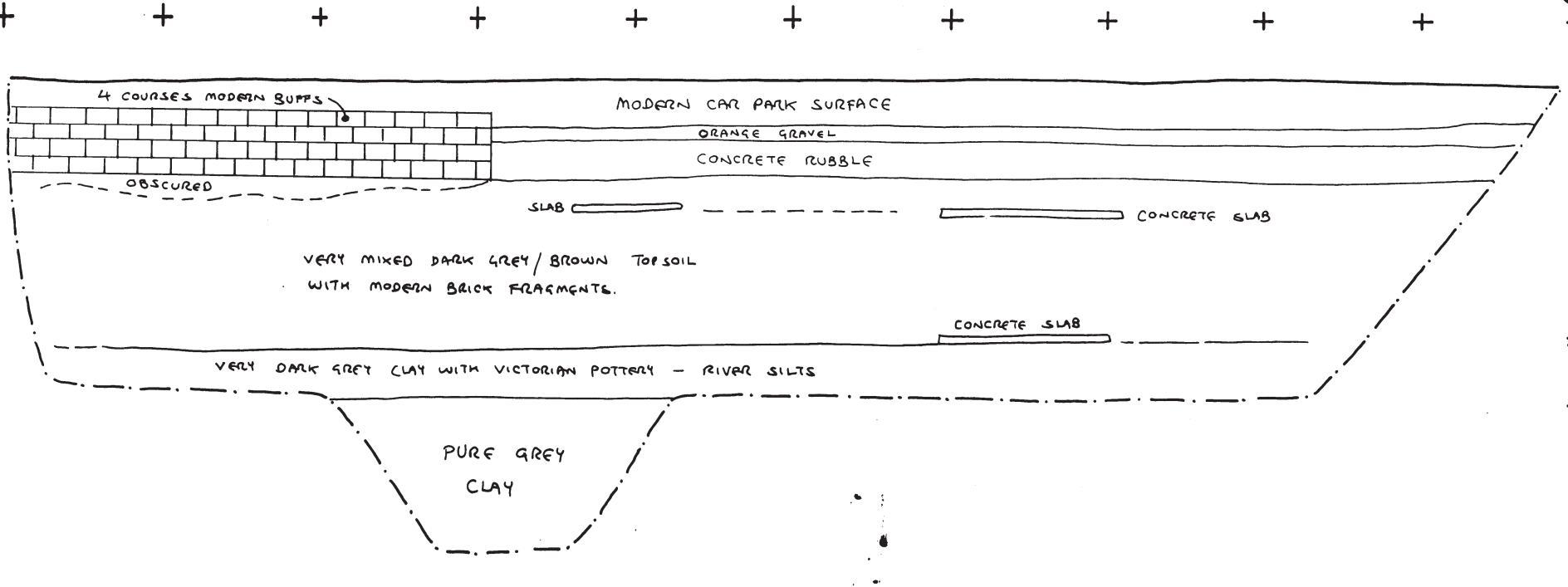
Comment

Lying under the present car park surface is a modern brick wall associated with a tarmac surface. This lies on top of a depth of topsoil with Victorian glass, which has modern ceramic drains and a huge concrete footing cut down through it. Natural clay lies below.

	Heights
Modern ground level	7.1m
Victorian topsoil	6.5m
Natural Clay	5.2m

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DATING

19/20th CENTURY

19th CENT

NATURAL GROUND



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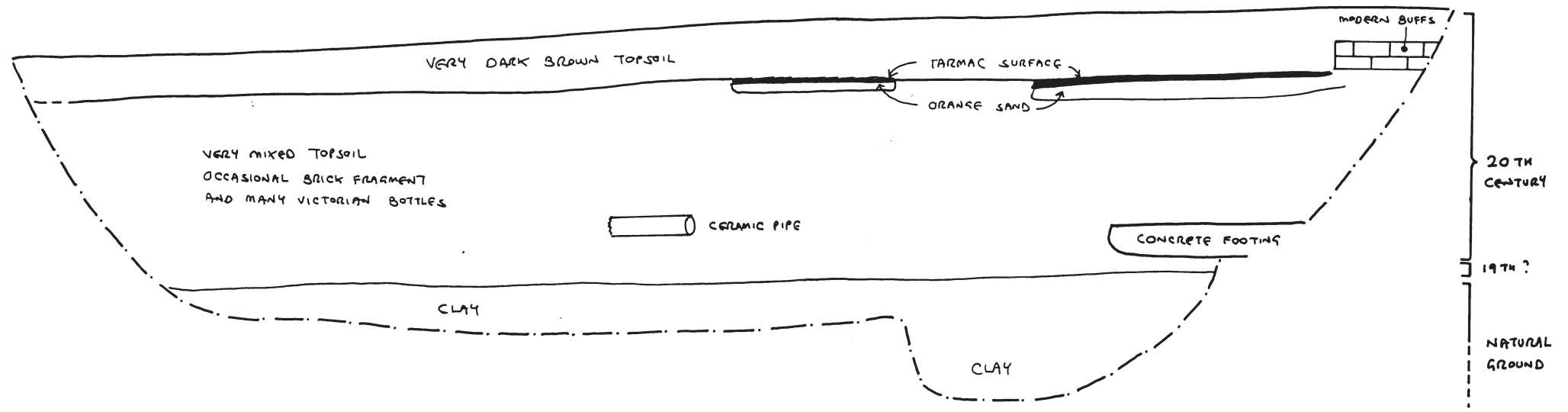
Figure 3: Trench 1 Section

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DATING



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Figure 4: Trench 2 Section

6.3 TRENCH 3 (figure 5).

Comment

This trench was the only one which revealed anything apart from the normal sequence of modern carpark/topsoil/natural clay. Under the modern stone chip car park surface lay up to 1.9 metres of topsoil, again well dated by Victorian and early 20th century glass. In the northern part of this long trench, the topsoil came right down to the top of the natural clay. I suspect that there has been some truncation of deposits here - why are there no river silts as in trench 1? However, in the southern part of trench 3 there was a deposit of sandy gravel lying on top of the natural clay. If it were not for the finds which it contained, there would be every reason to suspect this was a natural layer. However, finds were secured from it - a probable Roman potsherd, and some unidentifiable brick fragments, probably Roman.

| | Heights |
|---------------------|---------|
| Modern ground level | 7.6m |
| Victorian topsoil | 6.7m |
| Roman gravel? | 5.8m |
| Natural Clay | 5.6m |
| Water level | 5.0m |

6.4 TRENCH 4 (figure 6).

Comment

This trench exhibited quite clearly the depth of penetration of recent bottle hunters. Below an irregularly deep modern topsoil lay an upper band of very loose topsoil down to slightly over a metre below modern ground. This was full of fragments of Victorian bottles, and the looseness of the layer is without question due to the close attention of bottle hunters. Below this horizon the topsoil was much firmer and apparently less disturbed. The topsoils came down onto natural clay. In some trenches the natural is very blue/grey, or blotchy blue and grey. Here there was a distinct brown clay layer over the grey clay.

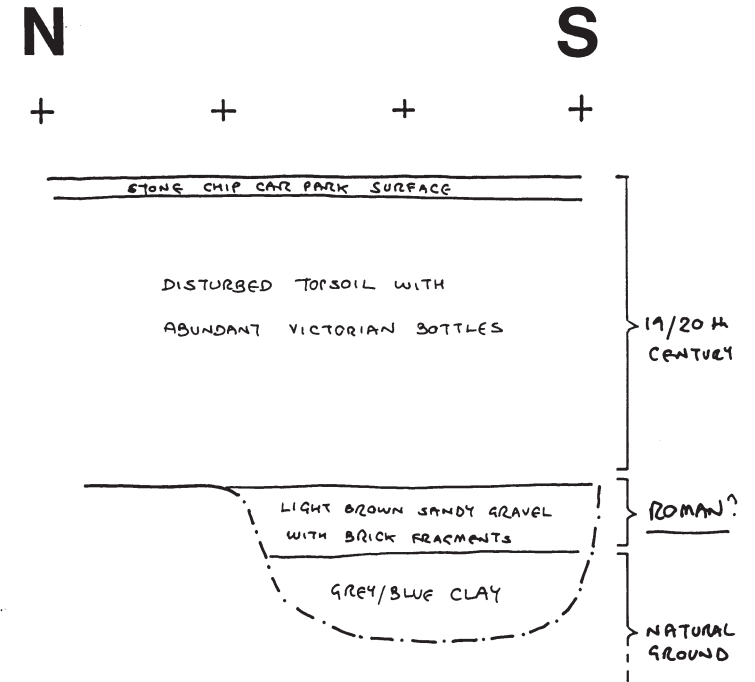
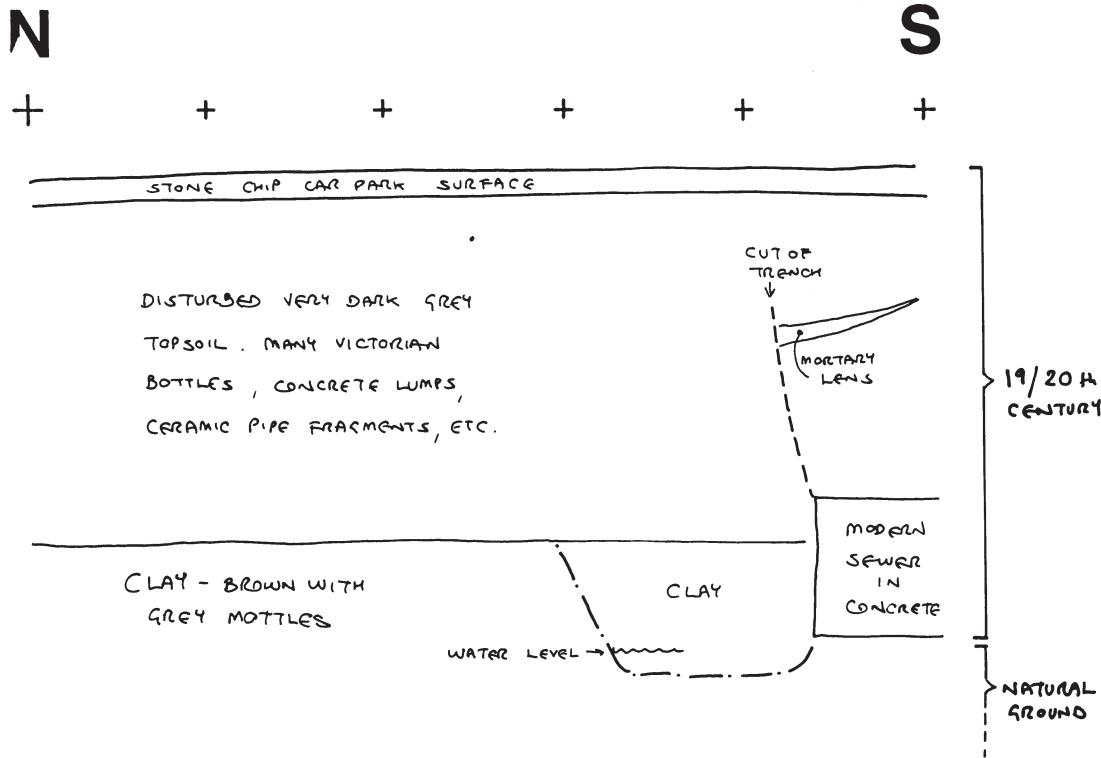
| | Heights |
|---------------------|---------|
| Modern ground level | 7.0m |
| Victorian topsoil | 6.8m |
| Natural Clay | 5.0m |

6.5 TRENCH 5 (figure 7).

Summary

This trench was at the point on the site where modern ground level is lowest, consequently topsoil is shallower, and natural clay comparatively nearer the surface. There was an additional horizon in this trench, a band of charcoally mortary sandy topsoil - all convincingly recent - lying over natural clay

| | Heights |
|---------------------|---------|
| Modern ground level | 6.5m |
| Victorian topsoil | 6.5m |
| Victorian dump? | 5.3m |
| Natural Clay | 4.9m |



0 1 metre

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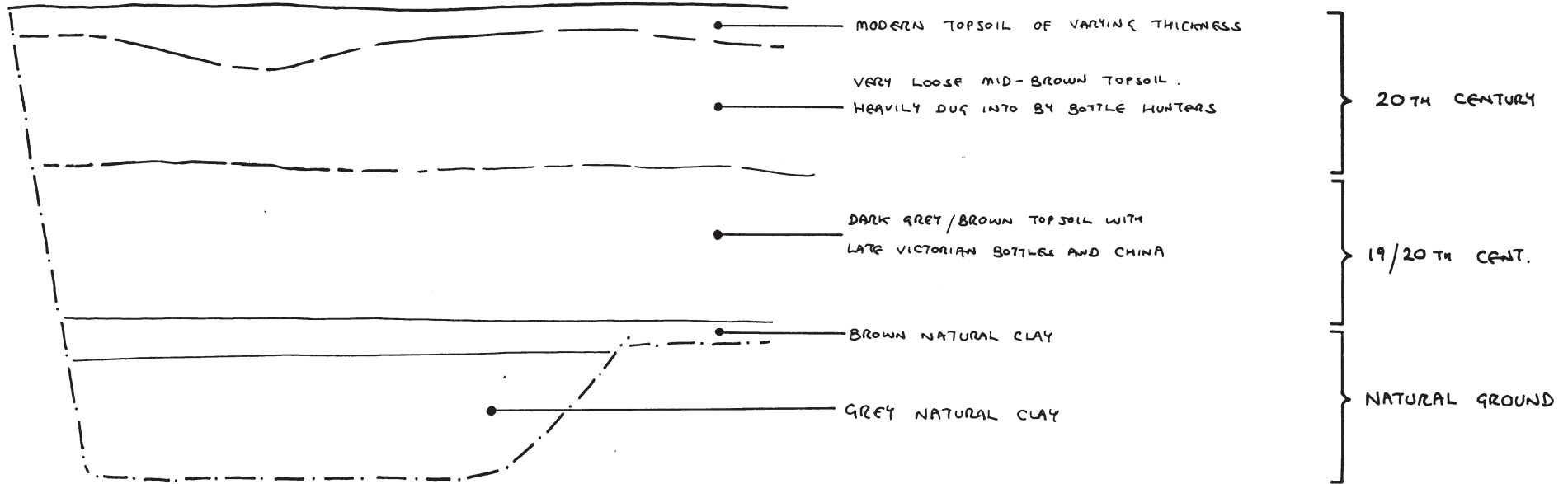
Figure 5: Sample sections of trench 3 north (left) and south (right).

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(TRENCH END AT 17.5 METRES →)



0 1 metre

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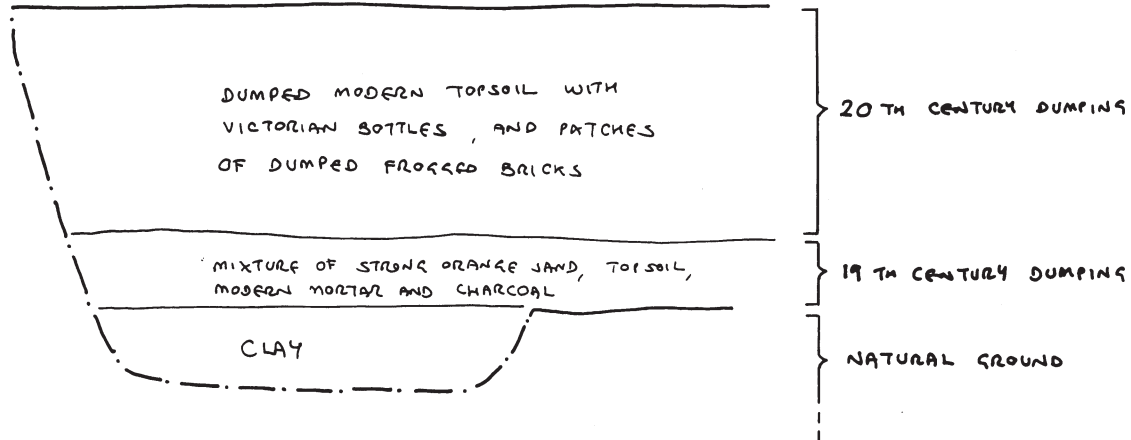
*Figure 6: Sample section
of north end of trench 4.*

W

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TRENCH END AT 10.5 METRES →



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Figure 7: Sample section of west end of trench 5.

0 1 metre



6.6 TRENCH 6 (figure 8).

Summary

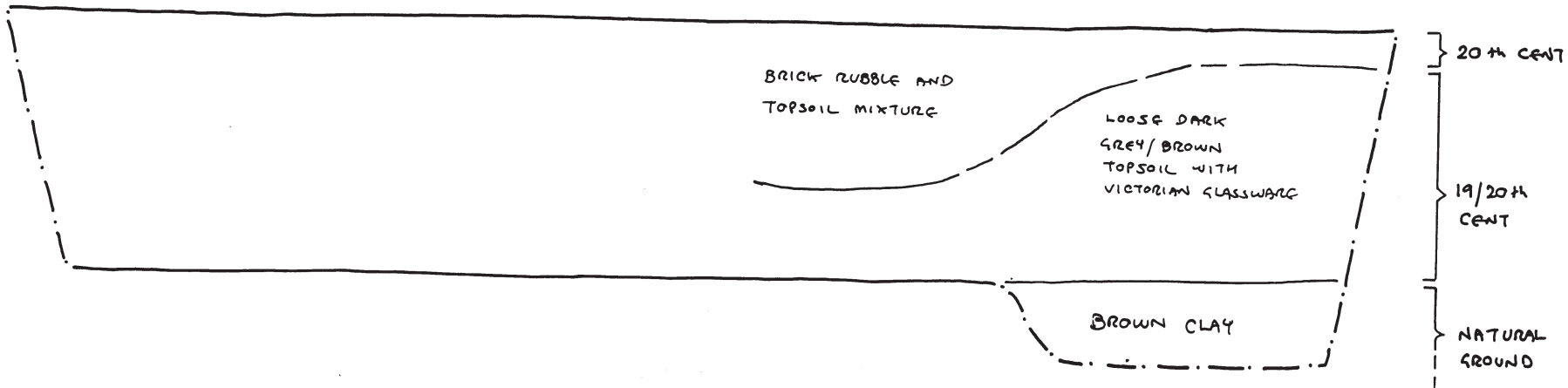
Ground level was Victorian topsoil capped by patches of tipped brick rubble (very recent). Natural clay lay below.

| | Heights |
|---------------------|----------------|
| Modern ground level | 6.8m |
| Natural Clay | 5.2m |

W

E

+ + + + + + + + + +



0 1 metre

Westway / Sheepen Place, Colchester

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Site code: 1997.71

Figure 8: Sample section of east end of trench 6

7 FINDS

There were very large quantities of Victorian and early 20th century glassware in the topsoil horizons. These were useful as a guide to the dating of the topsoil, but were not kept. Likewise several pieces of Cunnigham fabric 48d ironstone were identified but not kept. The only retained finds were seven pieces of fired clay (total weight 23 grammes) from the gravel horizon in trench 3, and a very abraded potsherd, in an orange fabric (Munsell 2.5YR 4/6 Dark Red). If this is indeed a potsherd, its fabric type is more likely to be Roman than anything else. While the brick fragments are not easily dated, they could very well be Roman.

8 SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

A deposit of dumped gravel, very likely to be Roman in date, was located in trench 3. Apart from that, there was nothing of archaeological significance from this evaluation. Despite the potential of the site for the preservation of organic deposits, none were found.

The site history, as seen in this evaluation, can be summarised as follows. The site was unused until the dumping of the gravel layer, probably in Roman times. This was undoubtedly to raise ground level away from the damp ground which must have existed so close to the river. However, there was no subsequent Roman activity here, despite the clear evidence of Roman suburban activity on either side - at Middleborough, and out towards Sheepen Hill.

There is a very great depth of topsoil on this site, full of late Victorian glassware and various common ceramic types. Whether or not it was official Borough policy, there seems little doubt that the whole of this riverside area was used for rubbish tipping throughout the later 19th and early 20th centuries.

The building of the printworks on the site cut down into this topsoil layer, and concrete slabs were laid right down into the top of the natural clay subsoil (this was presumably the highest "firm ground"). The activity which led to the laying of these slabs, as in trenches 1 and 2, may have removed any surviving river silt deposits.

After the demolition of the factory, the site was heavily exploited by bottle hunters digging deep pits, and fly tippers dumping waste material (including brick debris) on the northern part of the site.

9 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Bermac Properties for commissioning the archaeological evaluation, through the good offices of Paul Thurley Associates.

The excavation was carried out by Colchester Archaeological Trust - Director Philip Crummy, Westway/Sheepen Place site manager Howard Brooks. Recording, photography, illustrations and report by HB.

Martin Winter of Colchester Museums (CM) provided curatorial advice on the site work.

10 REFERENCES

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H Brooks 25/11/97