

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION AT 47 BUTT ROAD, COLCHESTER

DECEMBER 1997



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SUMMARY

A small evaluation trench situated to the rear of the property at 47 Butt Road revealed an inhumation burial of probable late Roman date cut into natural sand at a depth of 16cm (0.16m) below the present yard surface. Another similar feature suggests there is a second burial present. This demonstrates that the site lies within the area used for Roman burial, and further inhumations should be expected.

The shallow depth of the confirmed burial is probably due to 19th-century terracing and only deep features earlier than this reduction in ground level would be expected to survive. However it is clear that any ground works which affect deposits below 0.16m have the potential to damage or destroy significant archaeological remains.

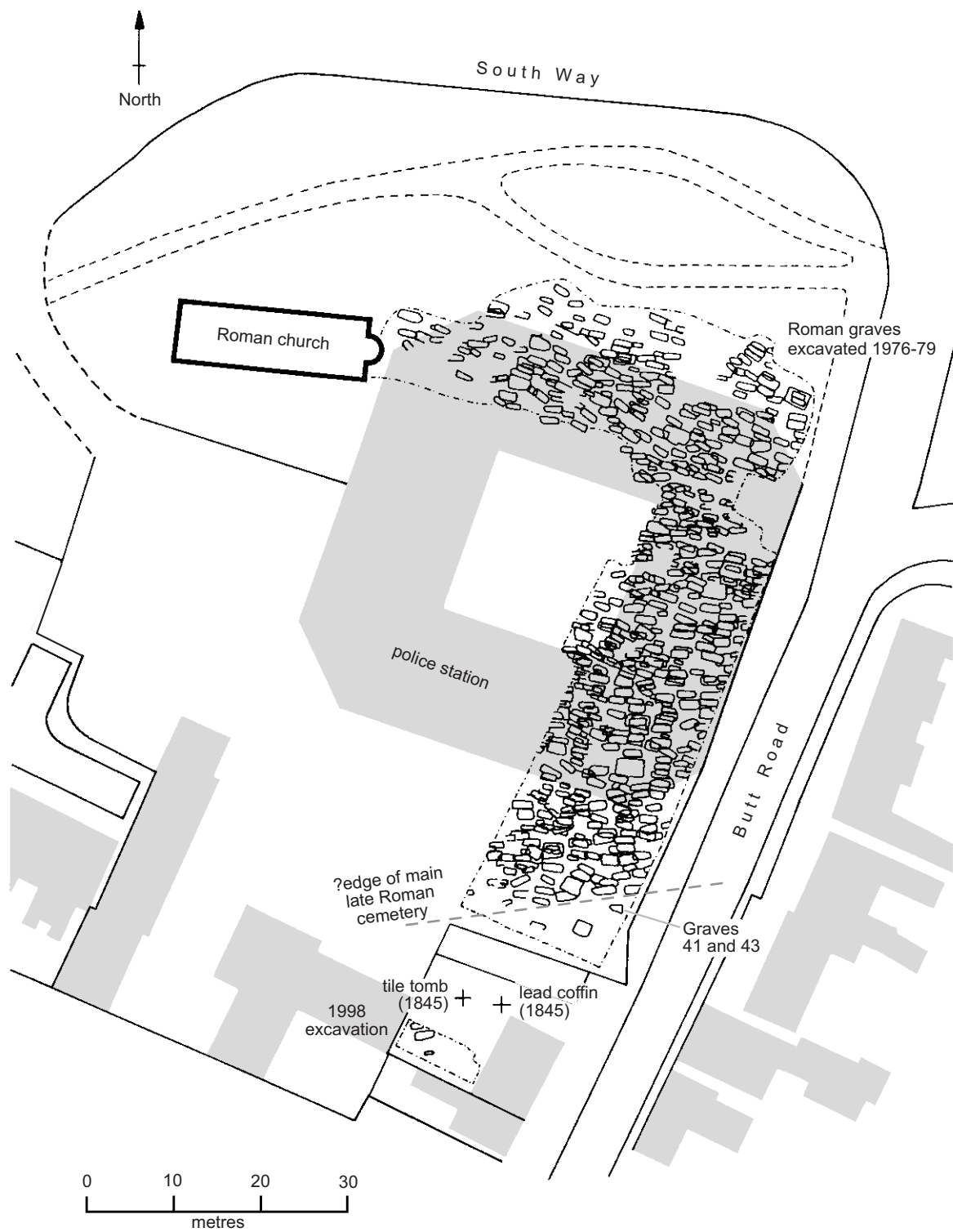


Fig 1 47 Butt Road: site location.

INTRODUCTION

(Figs 1 & 2)

This evaluation was carried out to assess the archaeological implications of a proposed office extension at the rear of number 47 Butt Road. A small trench was opened in the south west corner of the yard behind the property, which is situated on the west side of Butt Road just south of the new police station.

Our knowledge of the archaeology of this area derives in part from observations made during the 19th-century, especially during extensive sand extraction in the area of the new police station (summarised in Hull 1958, & CAR 11 p.5-7, Fig 2.1) and from recent detailed excavations prior to the construction of the police station building (CAR 11). These records show that the evaluation site lies toward the northern edge of a major Roman burial area which was in use throughout the Roman period. The cemeteries contained both cremations and inhumations, with a major late phase of east-west aligned inhumations in the 4th-century A.D. Parts of this general area were also used for sand extraction and industrial activities in the Roman period with substantial features such as sand pits, wells and pottery kilns in the vicinity. Beyond the 4th-century there is little record of any subsequent activity other than agriculture until the 19th-century sand extraction, though a few finds may indicate some activity continuing in the early Saxon period (CAR 1, p.12 & CAR 11 p.163).

ARCHAEOLOGY AS REPRESENTED BY THE EVALUATION TRENCH

(Figs 3 & 4)

The relatively slight concrete and tarmac hard-standing of the yard rests on a thin layer of dark soil (L1) containing modern brick, tile and pottery fragments. This directly seals the natural sand subsoil at a depth of approximately 16cm (0.16m.) below the present yard surface. The removal of L1 revealed a number of features cut into the underlying sand, which included the disturbed remains of a late Roman burial. For this to be so close to the present surface would indicate that the general site levels have been substantially reduced, and the slighter features which are present would suggest that this took place no earlier than the 19th-century. Current levels are probably the result of Victorian terracing and later work to create the present hard-standing. It is not anticipated that any features other than those of reasonable depth would survive from any period prior to the 19th-century. The features present are in accord with this interpretation as they appear to be divisible into two distinct chronological groups.

There are a number of features of clearly relatively recent origin which have distinctly medium/dark brown or very dark brown fills and represent small pits or post holes. They generally contain material similar in appearance to L1 with a range of modern ceramic detritus. In addition there is a substantial feature (F4) filled with modern brick and mortar rubble which is earlier than one of the dark filled pits. The linear appearance of this feature would suggest that it is the remains of a broken-up footing, though a large soakaway might be another explanation.

A second group of features is differentiated by a lighter appearance, with light to medium brown and grey-brown mottled sandy fills. The removal of L1 immediately disclosed one of these (F1) to be a human burial with a general east-west orientation, the head being at the west end. This shares the general orientation of the 4th-century Roman cemetery, though it tends towards one end of a range of individual grave alignments present (Fig 1). The burial had been partly disturbed, either by the reduction in ground levels or possibly by F4. The skull had been removed except for the lower jaw, which was itself damaged with most of the right side missing. Two long bones were also uncovered in the relative positions of the humerus of each arm, the left one showing signs of considerable damage by disturbance or decay. No other bones or any grave fittings were visible at this level, though the outline of the grave cut was quite clearly defined and continued into the baulk at the east end of the trench. The burial was not excavated further and was left in situ.

The presence of a possible second grave was indicated by a rectangular feature (F2) which had a similar fill to F1. This feature has been cut away at its east end by F4. Though it does not share the same alignment as the grave F1 it again has a general east-west orientation which can be accommodated within the range of grave alignments of the late Roman cemetery (Fig 1). No other indications of its possible function as a grave were visible at this level, so it is presumed that any human and artefact remains are contained at a lower level.

A large feature on the northwest of the evaluation trench (F3) had a pale sandy silt/sandy clay fill. Material recovered from its surface consisted of a sherd of Roman pottery and a piece of modern window glass, but these finds are probably intrusive and derive from L1. Below this level three joining sherds from a Roman pottery tazza of 1st- to 2nd-century date were recovered from within the upper fill. However they were nested together in a tight group which gave the impression of a circular hole and it seems probable that these were introduced during the breaking of the surface concrete. On balance this poorly defined area probably represents a natural feature or change in the subsoil, though a former sand quarry edge cannot be excluded.

Note: Colchester and Essex Museum Accession Code 1997/77

STEPHEN BENFIELD, DECEMBER 1997. FOR:

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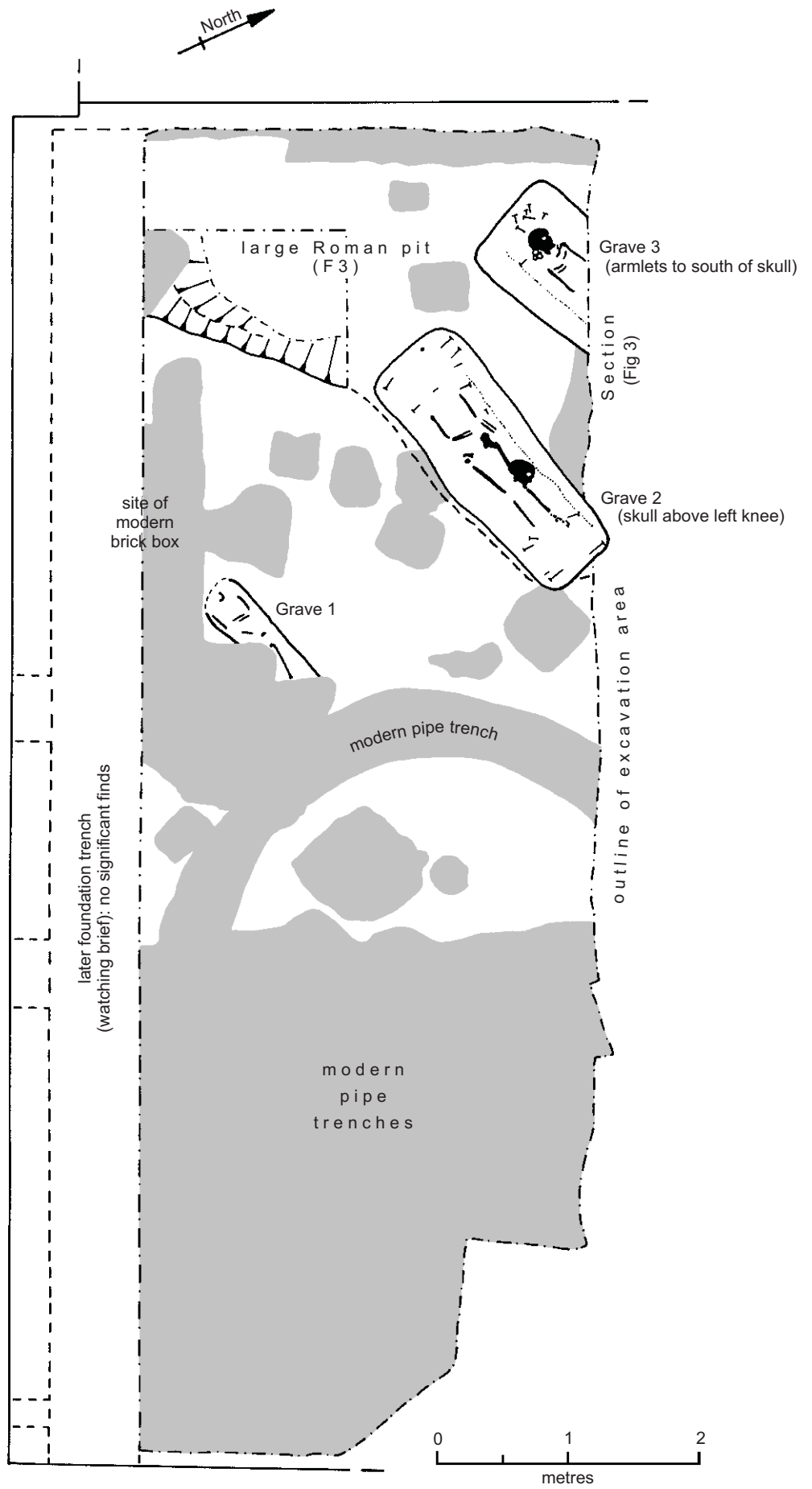


Fig 2 47 Butt Road: site plan (modern features shaded).

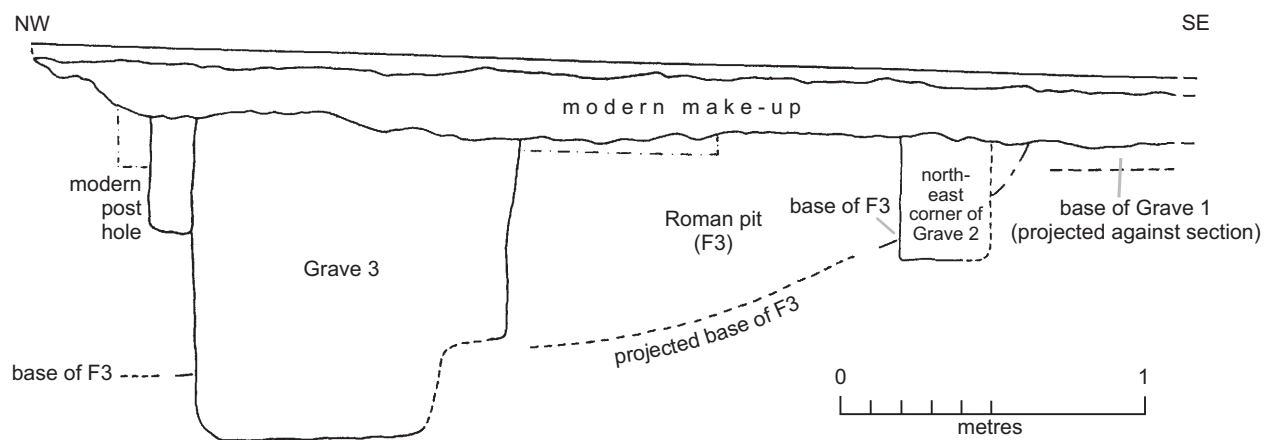
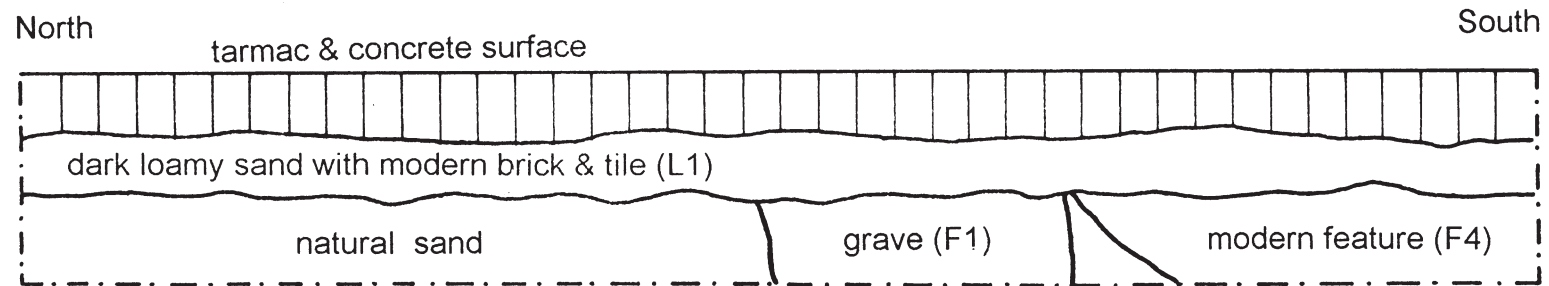


Fig 3 47 Butt Road: section.



BUTT ROAD 1997
Fig 4: SECTION