

An archaeological evaluation at the Co-operative Society's store, 21-31 Long Wyre Street, Colchester, Essex, in 1997

by Howard Brooks

with contributions by E W Black, Stephen Benfield, and Alec Wade

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Summary

An archaeological evaluation by five small hand-dug trenches was carried out on behalf of the Colchester and East Essex Co-operative Society Ltd in December 1997 (CAT Archive Report 14). The trench positions (Trenches 1-5) are shown on Figure 2. The evaluation revealed up to 1m of stratified Roman deposits, including burnt debris from the Boudican revolt, septaria walls and a mosaic floor (part of a Roman town house), and Roman gravel street. The Roman deposits were heavily cut by medieval and later pits, and by the footings of the Co-operative Society's store building. In some areas, the Roman strata were buried beneath a blanket (up to 1.2m) of post-medieval soils.

Previous work on this site

Previous archaeological work on this plot and in the vicinity is described fully in the report on the 1998 excavation (p 26 below).

Description of the excavated remains

Trench 1 (Figs 4-5)

The archaeological remains were deeply buried in the vicinity of Trench 1. Under the modern slab and its foundation rubble (L101-L102) lay a mortary band (L103) which was probably associated with the two brick footings F101 and F103 on the north and west sides of the trench. By reference to the 1st edition OS sheet of this area (Fig 3), it can be seen that these footings belonged to a Victorian outbuilding at the rear of the Long Wyre Street frontage. The footings F103 cut through three earlier topsoil or dumped soil layers (L104, L105, L107). L104 and L105 contain Fabric 48d ironstone and are no earlier than 19th century in date. L107 may be slightly earlier – the latest material in it is a glazed Fabric 40 which is probably 16th-17th century. L107 lay over a clayey layer (L108) which might be a remnant clay floor, post-medieval because of its context and its finds (post-medieval peg-tile). This sealed L109, presumably a dump or make-up layer for the floor, which is dated by a glazed Surrey White Ware-type sherd (16th-17th century). There is also much residual Roman material from these contexts. By weight, around 60% of the finds are Roman.

Apart from the possible floor L108, the next important horizon in this trench was a combination of a possible wall footing F106 and patches of a contemporary clay floor L110. The wall footing F106 consisted of flints in gravel, and was rather flimsy. It was probably the remains of a plinth to support a timber-frame (now missing). The soil layer under F106 was L111, dated to late medieval or early post-medieval by Fabric 23 pottery types. The conclusion must be that there was a timber-framed building here in late medieval or early post-medieval times, its floor being L110 and its wall F106. L108 might be a later floor repair.

Under the above sequence lay a series of layers which are difficult to interpret from such a small trench. Starting at the bottom, a Roman wall consisting of septaria and tile in mortar (F109) lay next to a Roman layer (L115). This was covered by horizons L114 and L113. L114 contained 4th-century type black-burnished ware, and so the whole sequence of deposits over the wall is later Roman. Walls such as these appear to be most common in the 2nd and 3rd centuries (CAR 6, p 31), and there is no reason to suppose otherwise here. The sequence therefore points to a 2nd-century(?) wall (part of a building) which was covered by demolition material after the wall and building were taken down in the 4th century. The demolition material was sealed by a deep soil layer L112 and was cut by F108. It is possible that L112 is the fill of pit F108. L112 contained 11.275 kg of Roman finds, most of which were roof tiles and other material derived from demolished buildings. The pottery is late and includes Hadham Wares and Nene Valley colour-coats, all of which are 4th century. Thus L112 is the fill of a late Roman pit. However, it may not be quite so straightforward, because, if it is, then there is a lot of late Roman activity on this spot. Pit F108 might be medieval, perhaps speculative digging by stone robbers (who succeeded in finding the wall in trench 4).

Trench 2 (Figs 6-7)

The removal of the modern floor slab and its rubble base (L201-L202) revealed a relatively straightforward sequence of deposits. A very recent ceramic drain (F201) lay over a demolished wall foundation with a channel extending down its centre and a concrete apron to its east (F202). The wall and channel were of recent (20th-century) brick, a date confirmed by the absence of a wall in this position on the Victorian plan (Fig 3). Thus this wall/channel is associated with a late 19th- or early 20th-century structure predating the present configuration of the houses around this spot (ie the Co-operative Society's store layout).

After the removal of a thin layer associated with pit F205, the top of a thick gravel deposit was revealed (F203). This gravel is the body of a Roman street dividing Insulas 37 and 38a of the Roman town, which should be in precisely this position. What is not known is whether the thick gravel deposit is anywhere near the original surface of the street, but the fact that the floor slab directly overlay the top of the Roman street means that there has been considerable truncation here. In other words, the uppermost layers had already been removed. This is obvious when the level of the floor slab inside the building is compared with level of the modern street surface outside in Victoria Place. In view of this truncation, it is reasonable to assume that an unknown amount has been shaved off the top of the Roman street.

The uppermost surviving part of the Roman street was cut by a medieval pit F210 and its western edge had been completely dug away by a series of pits (F204, F205, F211) spanning the early medieval period (F211 is dated to the 12th -13th century by the presence in it of early medieval ware Fabric 13), through early post-medieval (F205 is dated to 16th or 17th century by glazed whitewares), to modern (F204 contains concrete). The medieval and post-medieval pits do not appear to contain much domestic debris, so they are probably quarry pits dug to remove the Roman gravel rather than domestic refuse pits.

The road and the early medieval pits overlay two Roman deposits: L210 over cut F213 over L211. The dating of these is of interest. The lowest deposit L211 is undated, but L210 contained samian ware dated 1st or 2nd century and amphora dated 1st to early 3rd century. However, the construction of the Roman street (ie F203) is elsewhere firmly dated to after the Boudican revolt of AD 60/61 (CAR 6, 355). There were fragments of burnt brick and daub in L210 which must derive from post-Boudican clearing and tidying up in the vicinity.

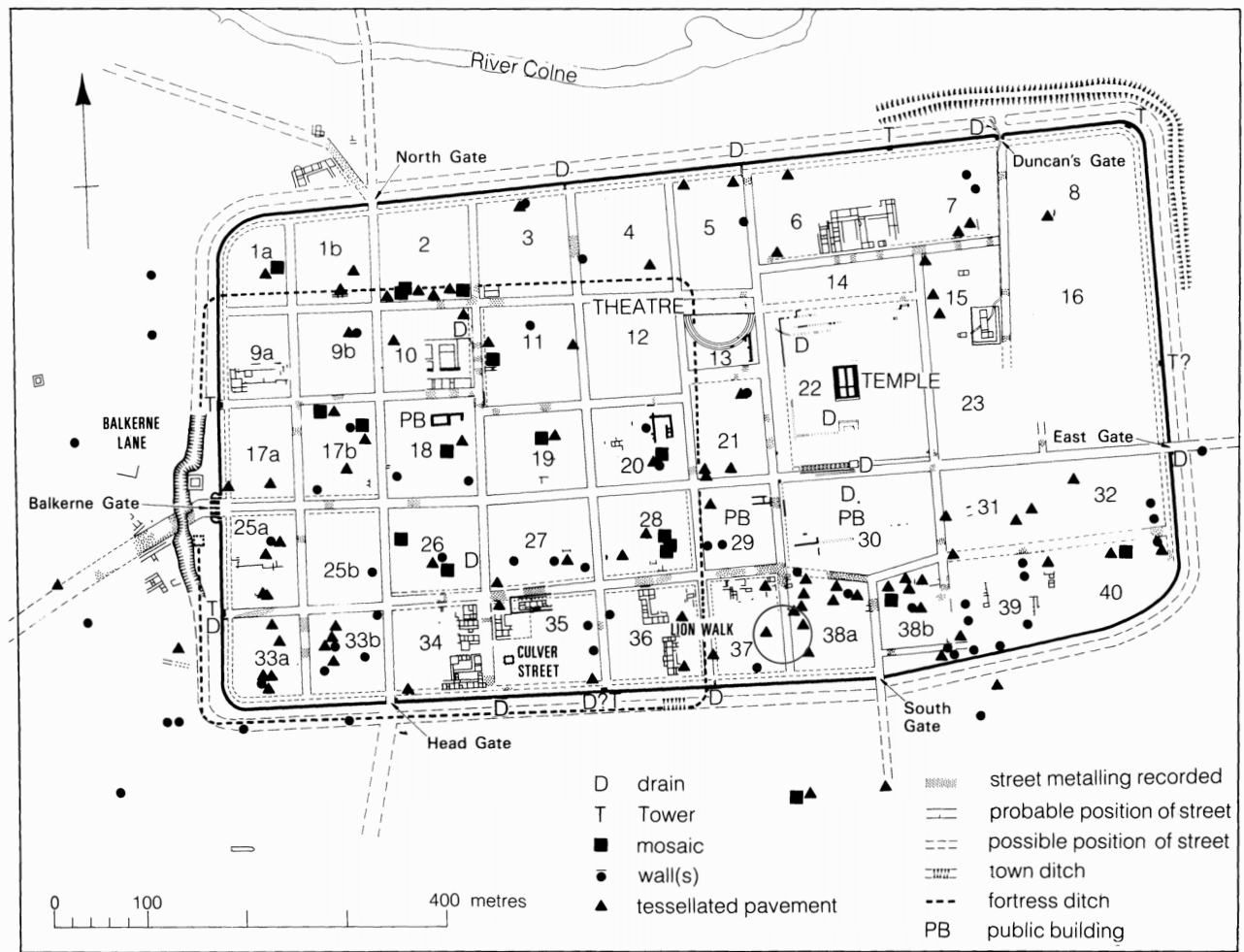


Fig 1 Roman Colchester c AD 300. The location of the site at 21-31 Long Wyre Street is circled. Reproduced by kind permission of Ordnance Survey © Crown Copyright NC/2004/24432.

Trench 3 (Figs 8-9)

This trench was characterised by a series of post-medieval and modern soils and intercutting pits, with Roman material revealed only in section or at the bottom of later pits. Figure 3 shows that this pit is located outside the Victorian properties, and therefore probably outside their medieval predecessors as well. In this position, one would expect rubbish-pits.

With the exception of two modern concrete stanchions (F301, F302), the former a part of the existing Co-operative Society's store structure and the latter part of a previous building, the main problem here was in unravelling the sequence of soil layers and trying to establish how much of the trench was pit fill and how much was other soil. However, the sequence was probably as follows. The latest context was a modern pit F304 whose upper fill was L305 and whose lower fill was L307. This cut a modern soil layer (L303) which is possibly upcast from pit-digging. L303 contained Fabric 48d ironstone (19th-20th century), and sealed another modern pit F303. Pit F303 cut a soil layer (L306) which, again, might have been the fill of another pit which has been entirely cut away. F303 contained modern glass.

The main bulk of the material in this trench, therefore, is a series of modern pits and fills. However, there was a series of earlier deposits visible in section which are certainly medieval or Roman

in character. Roman deposits L308 and L309 and what appeared to be the top of a robber trench F305 (presumably medieval) were visible in the side of F304. L309 looked very much like reworked natural, and so is likely to be close to the bottom of the archaeological sequence. A clay loam layer (L310), probably loosely equivalent to L308, was observed in F303.

Trench 4 (Figs 10-11)

This trench provided a good sequence of archaeological material. Under a capping of modern floor slab and rubble (L423, L424), topped by a carpet, were a couple of very recent contexts. These were a concrete stanchion (F404) and a pit (F404), both 20th century in date. Underneath those were two post-medieval contexts: a soil layer L403 (perhaps an earlier layer disturbed in post-medieval time) and a deep pit F402. Both were dated by sherds of glazed Fabric 40 (17th-19th century).

This layer and pit sealed or cut a sequence of medieval contexts, ie pit F408 loosely dated by peg-tile, and robber trench F409. Layers L413, L426, L414, L411 and L425 were the fills of the robber trench. The crucial dating evidence was provided by a fragment of early medieval ware in L411, all the other finds being residual Roman. The north-south Roman foundation represented by this robber trench had no contemporary floor-levels associated with it because of the effects of post-Roman

truncation over this part of the site. A patch of rubble (L409) lying at the bottom of the robber trench is evidence for the removal of the Roman foundation for use elsewhere in medieval buildings. The highest surviving Roman deposit was L404 on the east edge of the trench. This must be make-up for the (missing) floor of the Roman house. L404 contained a Roman coin (probably a Claudian copy). There was also a ridge of earlier Roman material (L429) containing wall-plaster and mortar, which was presumably the demolished remains of a Roman structure pre-dating the robbed foundations.

Trench 5 (Figs 12-14)

This trench was the most interesting from an archaeological point of view. The modern floor slab and its base (L501 and L502) sealed a modern pit F501, which cut a modern soil layer L503 and a huge pit F503. F503 contained modern glass and Fabric 48d pottery (19th-20th century), and may have been cut as the construction trench for the brick-built soakaway F504.

Below the large pit in which the brick soakaway sat was another medieval or post-medieval pit (F506) which cut right down to natural sand (L509), cutting through a Roman mosaic pavement F507 on a gravel foundation L507 (Fig 15).

A plain red border on the south side of the trench indicated that the south edge of the Roman room lay in this direction, while the centre of the floor must be within or slightly north of Trench 5. Next to the red border were five rows of white *tesserae*, and then a black-bordered, two strand, red, white, and cream guilloche rope-knot design. North of that was an alternating black and white dogtooth decorated border. The main motif of the floor was not seen (having been cut by pit F503). While gravel is not the most common foundation for a mosaic (in Colchester they are usually laid on mortar), it is clear that this trench has cut down into one of the more important rooms in a Roman town house. There is every chance that it is the same structure as the robbed-out wall F409 in T4, but this cannot be proved. Under the mosaic floor was a layer of make-up L508, but there were no finds in this. However, L508 sealed three other layers whose date must be clear. L510 was a layer of burnt debris dating from the Boudican revolt of AD 60/61. This lay up against a dry-built septaria wall foundation F509 which must *de facto* be pre-Boudican. On the other side of the wall was another layer (L511) which must also be pre-Boudican, but which only contained 'Roman' pottery. The wall F509 was sealed by a mortar-rich layer L512. The sequence is therefore as follows: a pre-Boudican wall (F509) and layer (L511) were sealed by a deposit of Boudican destruction debris (L510). The overlying layer L508 was dumped down to allow the laying of the mosaic pavement.

There was also a little pocket of strata in this trench which was not understood. Cut by a post-medieval pit F508 was a sequence of three undated deposits. A rubble layer L504, a clay ?floor L505, and an underlying deposit L506. They appear to be Roman, but there was no dating evidence. If L505 was a Roman floor, it would have been part of the house with the mosaic pavement.

The finds

Finds list by context

Table 1 (pp 23-4) is a list of finds providing key dating evidence for the stratigraphic sequences on the site. The table represents an abbreviated amalgamation of tables in the archive report listing Roman pottery (by Stephen Benfield), post-Roman pottery (H Brooks), and building materials (E W Black). The small finds from the evaluation and subsequent excavation have been combined to produce a single report (see pp 33-6).

The faunal remains by Alec Wade

This is a summary of a fuller report in CAT Archive Report 14. The evaluation produced 355 pieces of bone weighing 7.220kg. Most of it was in less than fair condition, suggesting a degree of residuality within the deposits and consequently poor survival conditions. This factor, coupled with the hand collection of the material, will have resulted in a bias towards the bones of the larger animals and cause the smaller species to be under-represented in the assemblage. Cattle or other large mammal bones were generally the most numerous species represented in all periods.

The most prolific period for diversity of species was the 19th-20th century, followed by the post-medieval and Roman periods. Most of the butchered bone was also produced by the 19th- to 20th-century contexts followed by the post-medieval and Roman periods.

The species identified in Roman period contexts included the domestic species of cattle, pig, sheep or goat, horse and dog. Roe deer was the only wild species identified, although a small quantity of bird, fish and small mammal bone was also found.

Most of the cattle bone in the Roman contexts was consistent with butchery waste such as pieces of scapula, mandible and maxilla fragments, metapodials and other ankle and foot bones. Nine pieces bore cut marks and included pig and sheep or goat bone. Signs of gnawing by dogs was noted on a small amount of the material, indicating a degree of residuality within the Roman contexts.

The only piece of worked bone found during the evaluation was from the post-medieval period and was a working off-cut. It was the distal end of a cattle metacarpal which had been sawn from the remainder of the shaft. The shafts of metapodials were commonly utilised for working on account of their smooth tubular shape for fashioning items such as handles.

Table 2 (p 25) summarises the distribution of the bone by period, species, number of pieces and weight in grammes.

Interpretation

Prehistory

A single prehistoric flint is the only evidence for prehistoric activity here.

Early Roman (pre-Boudican)

This is the first period of major activity. The pre-Boudican remains consist of a wall and dump layer in T5 and a layer under the street in T2. Evidence of the Boudican fire is provided by a considerable lump of burnt debris in T5 and scraps of burnt debris from under the Roman street in T2. After the Boudican revolt, the Roman street noted in T2 was laid out.

Roman (2nd century)

There is good evidence of a major period of rebuilding in stone, probably in the 2nd century. A rubble foundation was observed in T1, and a robbed-out wall line in T4. The mosaic floor in T5 belongs to the same period. There is a considerable amount of clay dump mixed in with wall-plaster and mortar lying under the floors of this period. This must be debris from an earlier phase of building (after the Boudican revolt but before the stone houses) which was not clearly seen in this evaluation.

Later Roman

Late Roman pottery provides evidence for activity in the late Roman period such as the dumping of soil and pit-digging in T1.

Saxon

There is no evidence of Anglo-Saxon activity on the site.

Medieval and later

Medieval remains consist primarily of the possible wall line and patches of floor from T1. These are part of a medieval house on the Long Wyre Street frontage. Remains in this position show that the plots were built up quite a long way back from Long Wyre Street. Other medieval activity in the north and central part of the site is of a different character. There are several medieval pits dug through the Roman street in T2, probably to remove the gravel for building. In T4 there is a classic medieval robber trench from which Roman building materials have been removed and used elsewhere.

In later medieval and post-medieval times, the intensity of pit-digging increased (T3, T2, T5, T4). This reflects an increase in domestic activity in the immediate vicinity. By the Victorian period, the map evidence that the area was more or less completely built up is confirmed by the discovery of Victorian wall lines in four out of five trenches. There is also a very considerable amount of Victorian pit-digging, leading to a very high turnover of soil in the back-yard areas (T3).

There is evidence that the site has been terraced. A comparison of the depth burial of the Roman remains in T1 (approximately 2m down) and T4 (only 0.5m) shows that the effect of Victorian and modern building has been to remove soil from the northern part of the site, and thereby reduce the slope of Long Wyre Street. The central part of the site has, in addition, had its floor level reduced by over a metre. The effect of this has been to remove all the Victorian and medieval deposits, which is how the Roman street came to be just under the modern floor slab.

References

- CAR 6 Colchester Archaeological Report 6, *Excavations at Culver Street, the Gilbert School, and other sites in Colchester, 1971-85*, by P Crummy, 1992
- CAT Archive Report 13 *Co-operative Stores, Long Wyre Street, Colchester: archaeological evaluation, a preliminary report*, by H Brooks, 1998

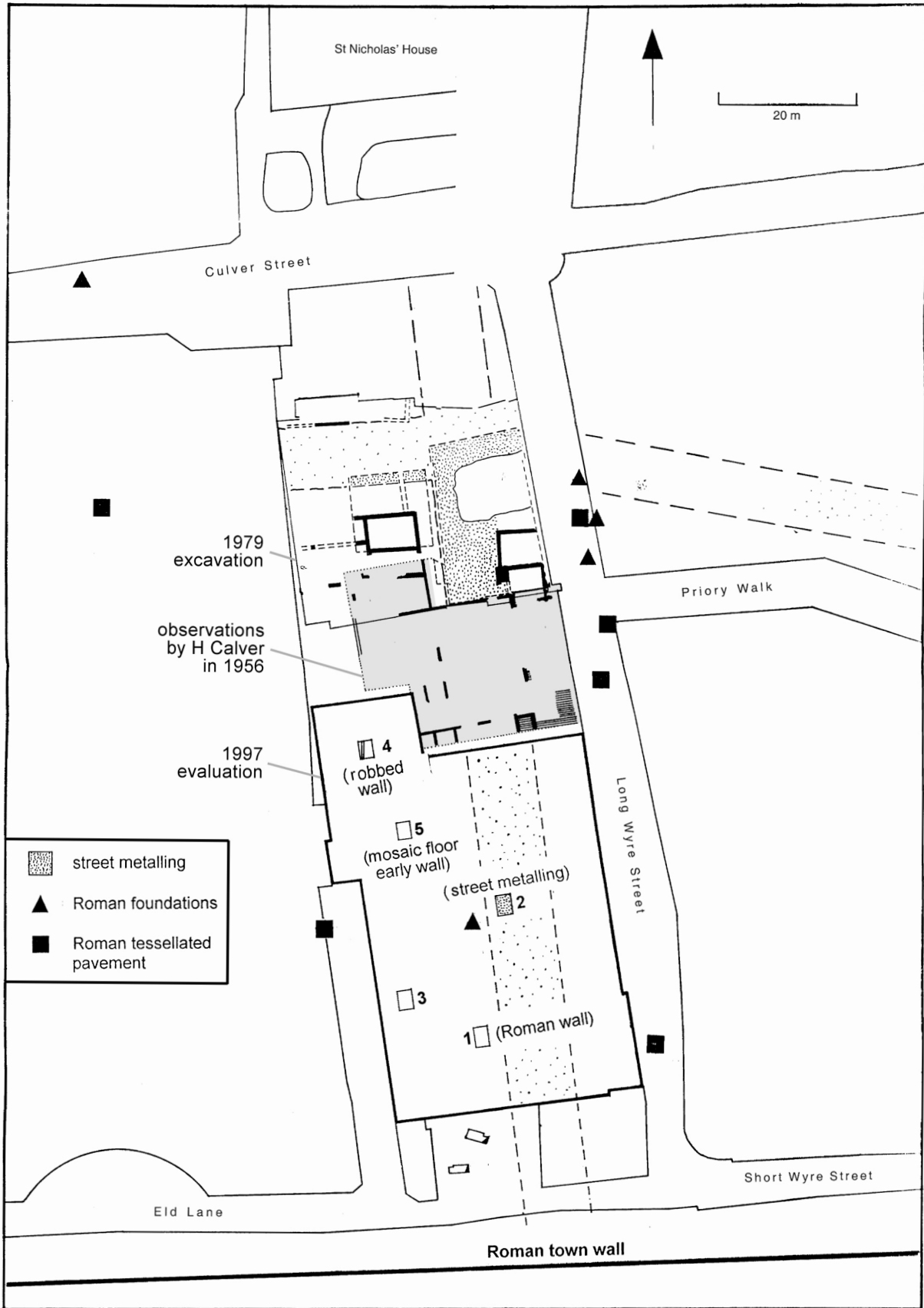


Fig 2 Site location showing previous archaeological excavations and discoveries on the site and in the vicinity, including the 1997 test-trenches 1-5 (The line of the Roman road has been projected through the site.) Reproduced by kind permission of Ordnance Survey © Crown Copyright NC/2004/24432.

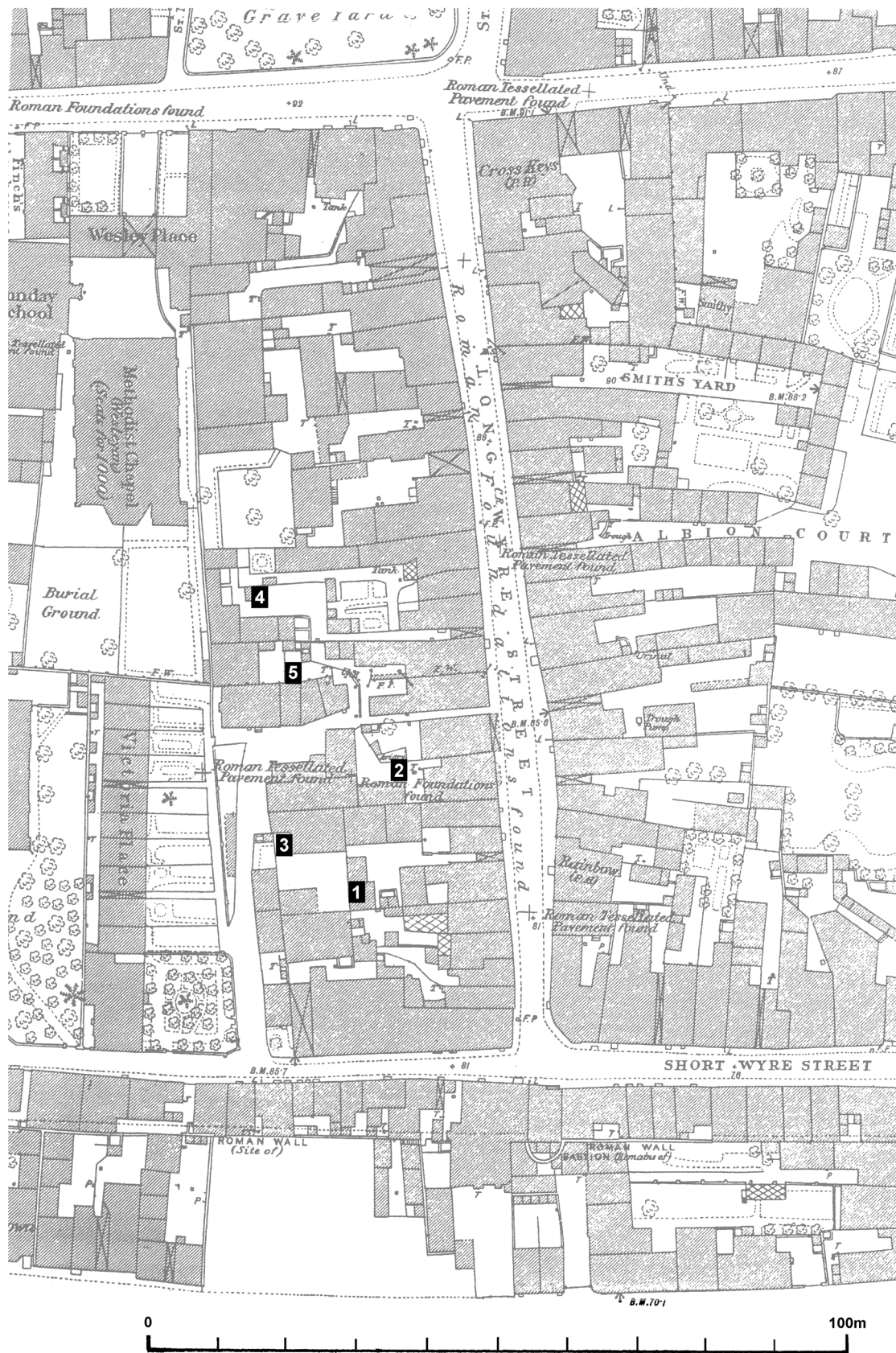


Fig 3 The site and the surrounding area in Victorian times, showing the positions of the 1997 trenches 1-5. Plotted on an extract of the 1st edition OS 1:500 map dated 1876.

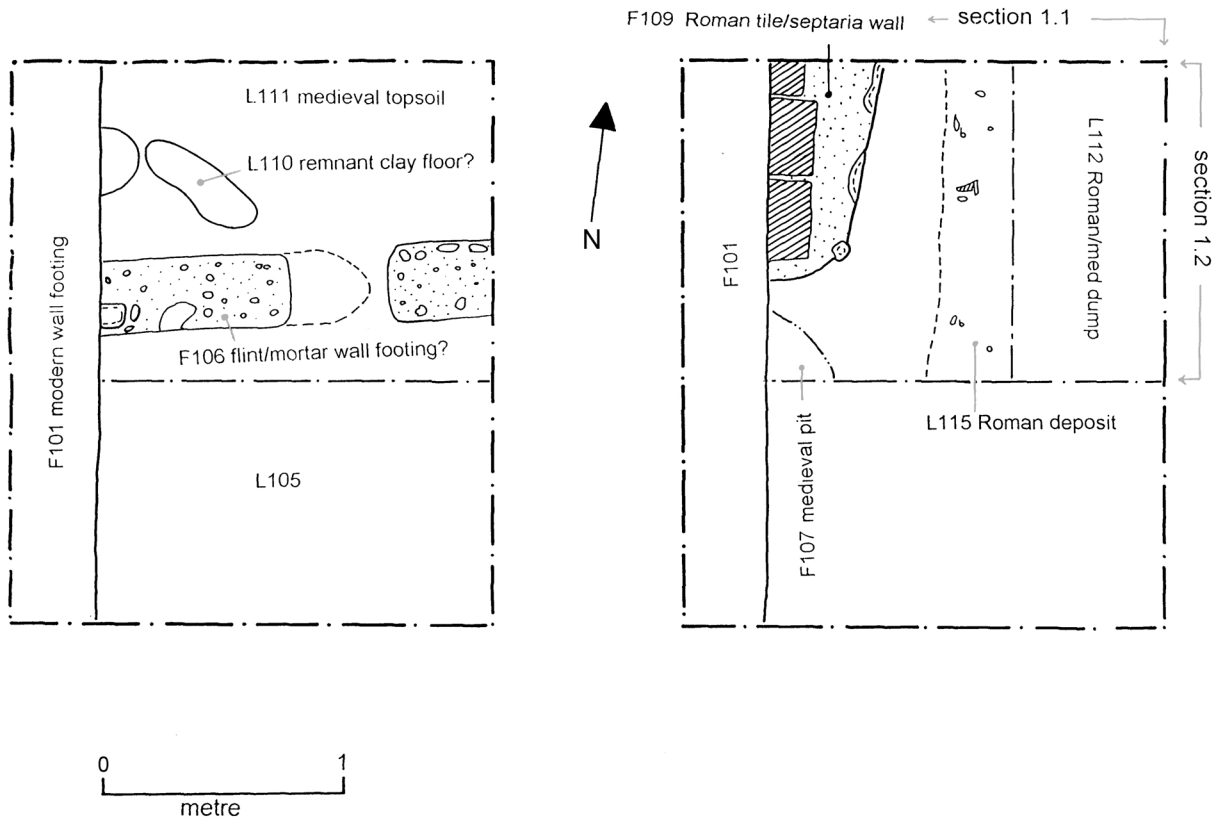


Fig 4 Trench 1 plans.

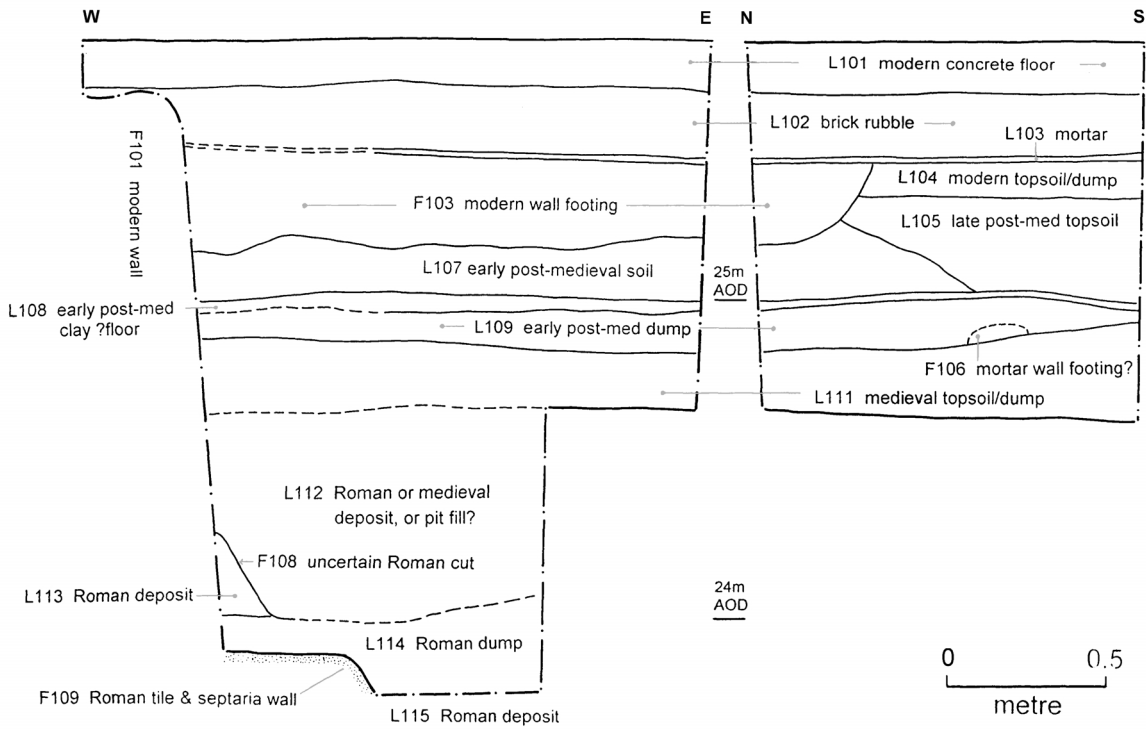


Fig 5 Trench 1: sections.

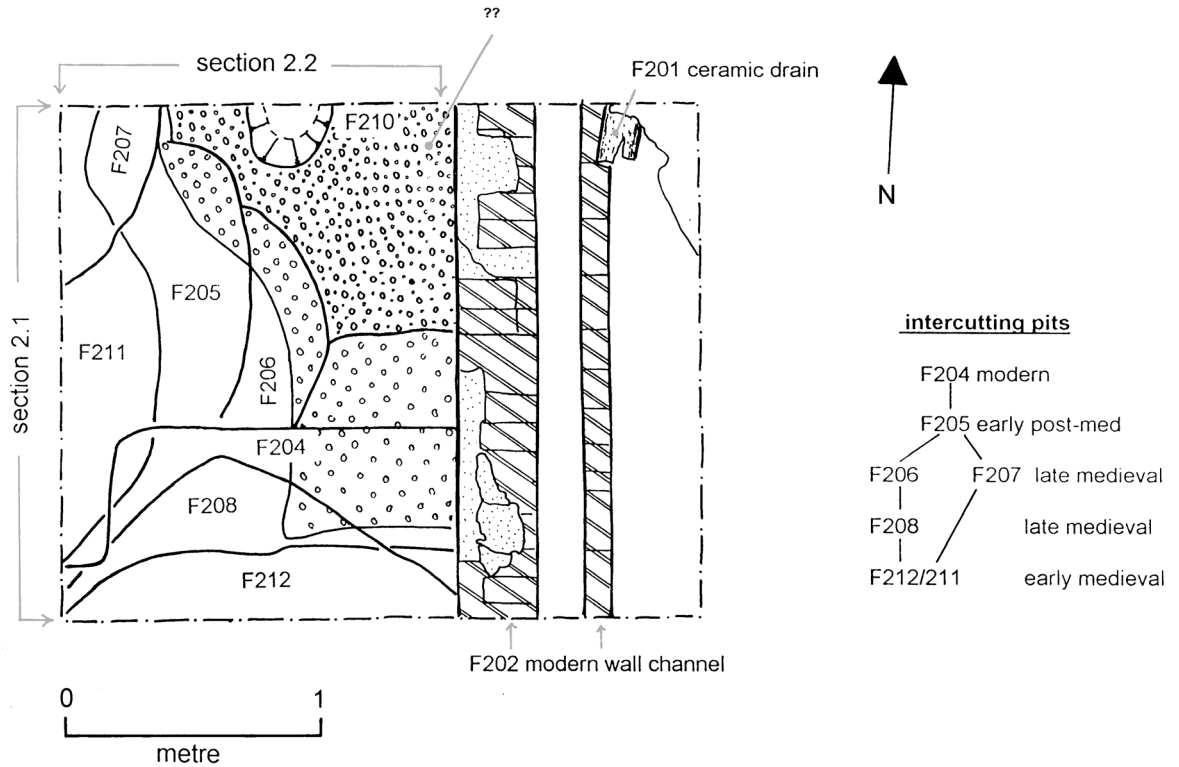


Fig 6 Trench 2: plan.

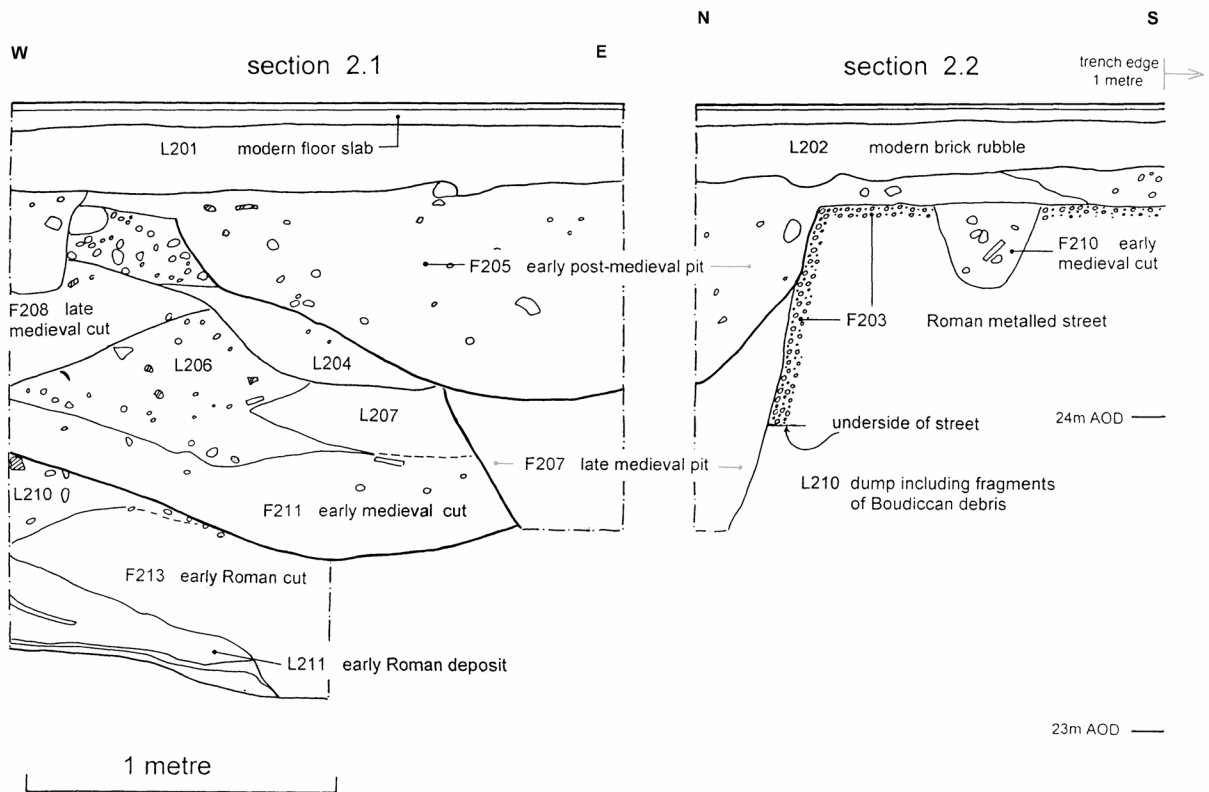


Fig 7 Trench 2: sections.

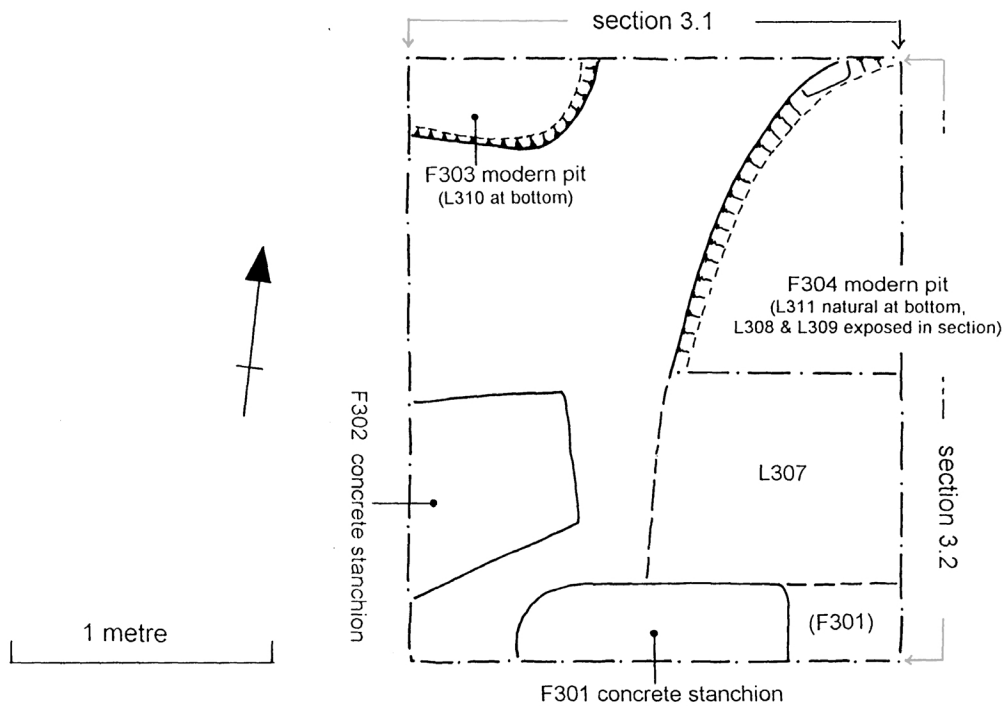


Fig 8 Trench 3 plan.

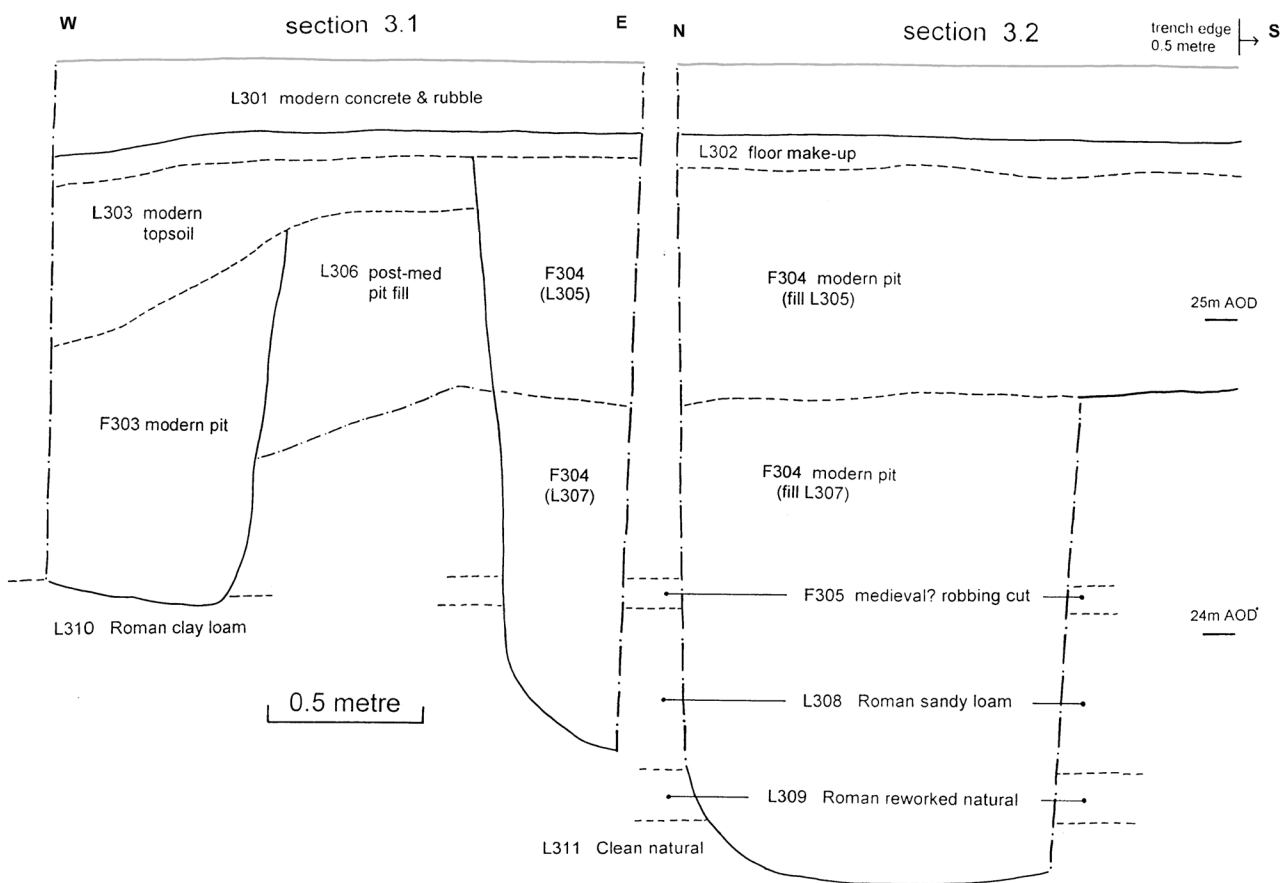


Fig 9 Trench 3: sections.

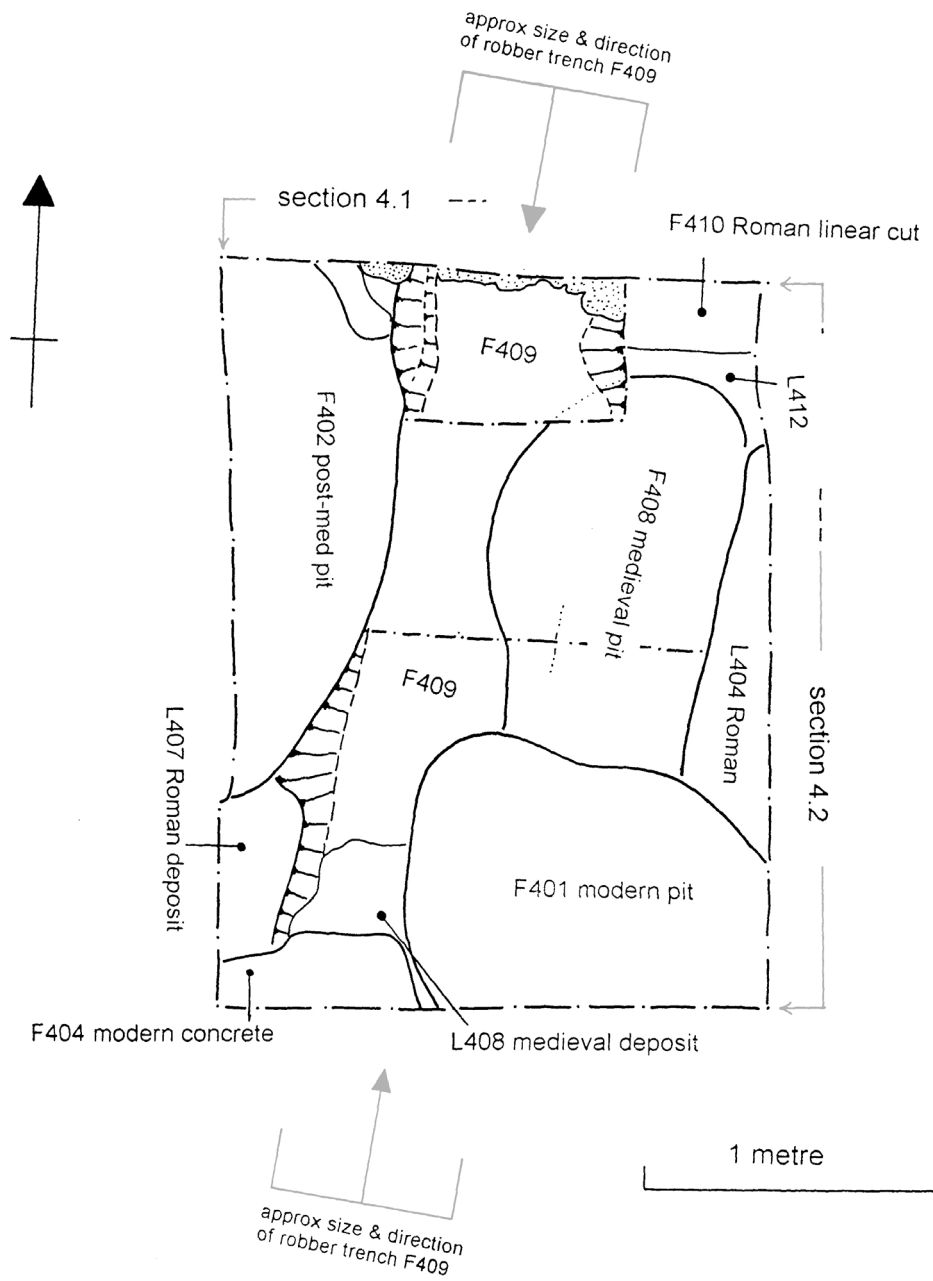


Fig 10 Trench 4: plan.

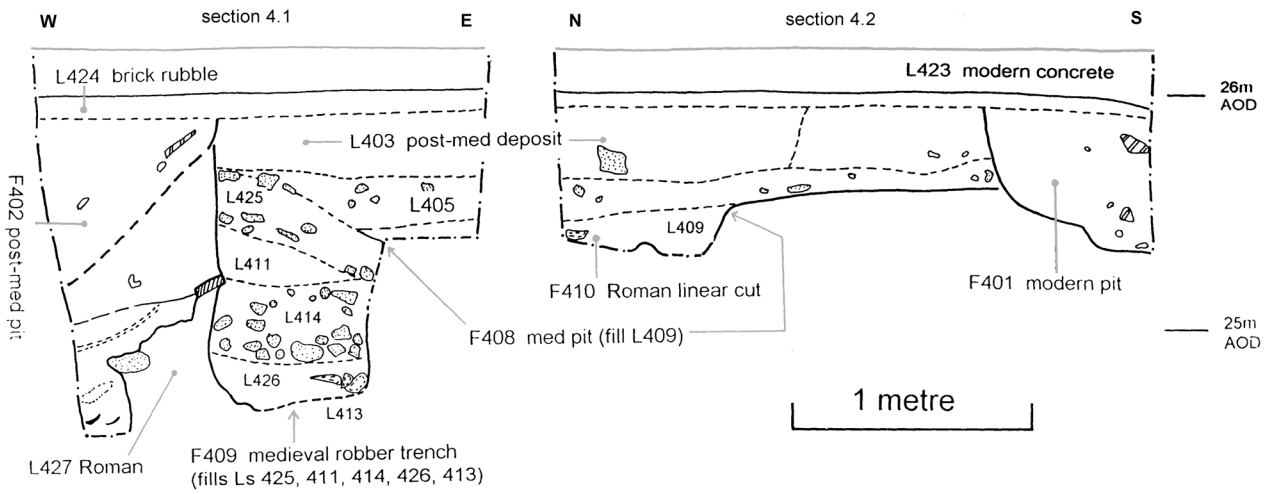


Fig 11 Trench 4: sections.

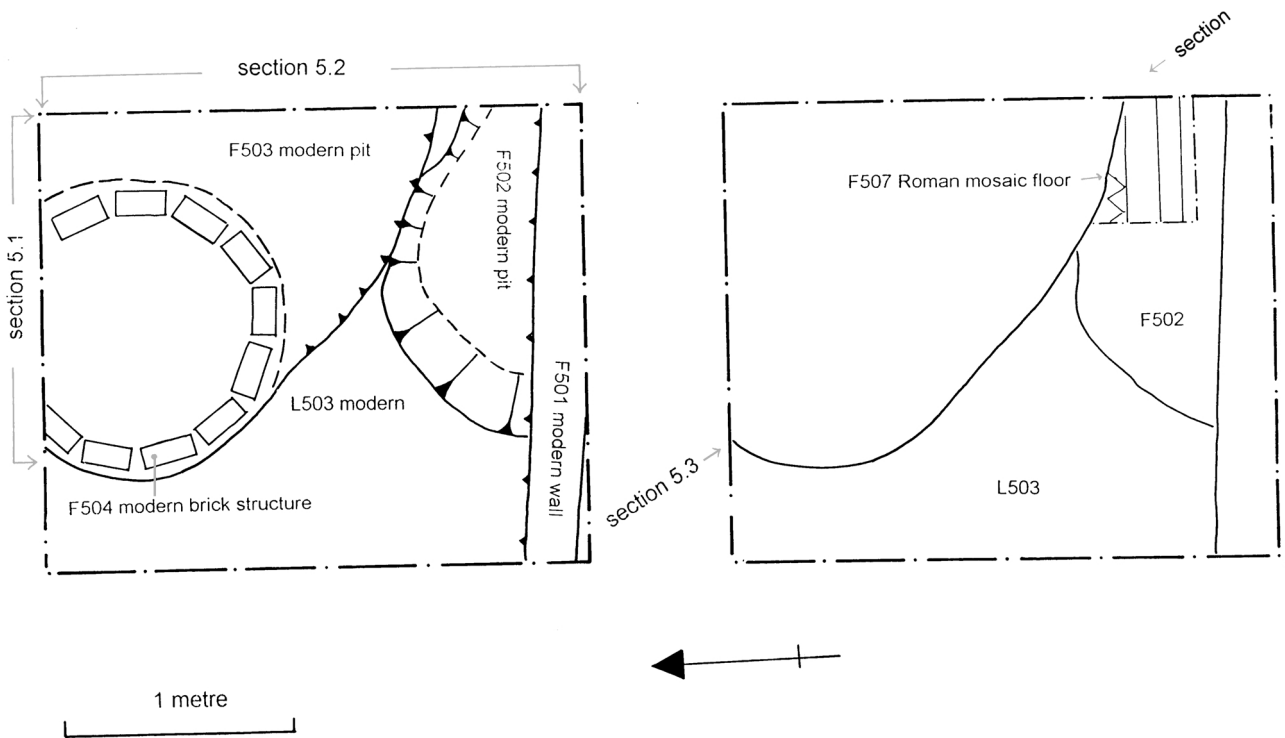


Fig 12 Trench 5: plans.

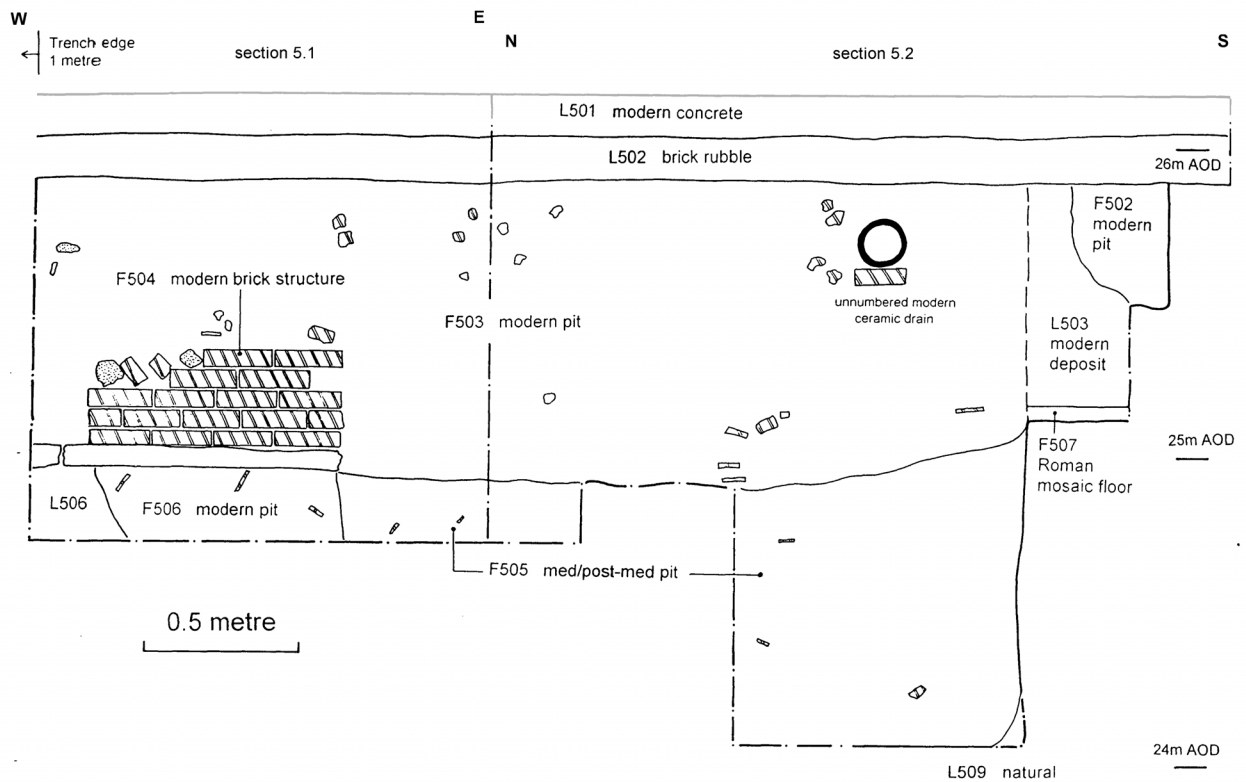


Fig 13 Trench 5 sections (i).

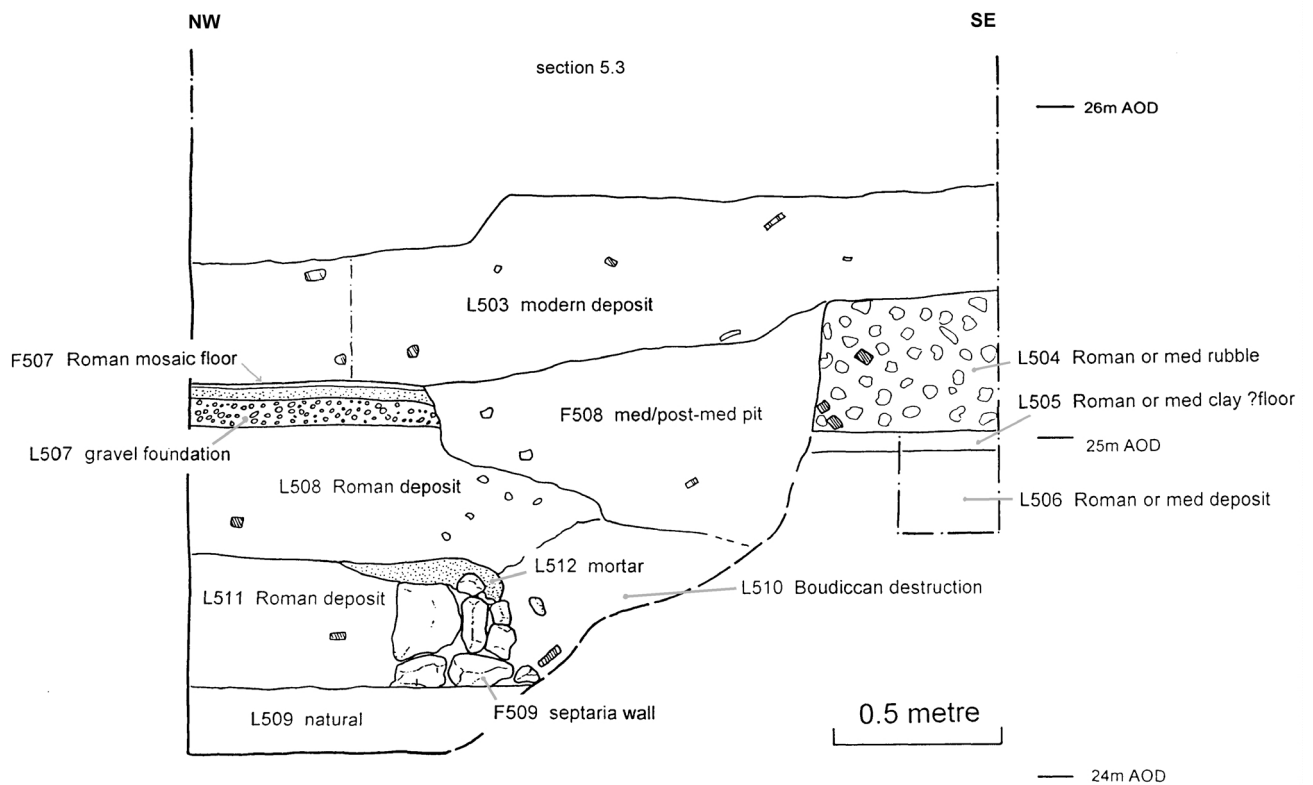


Fig 14 Trench 5 sections (ii).

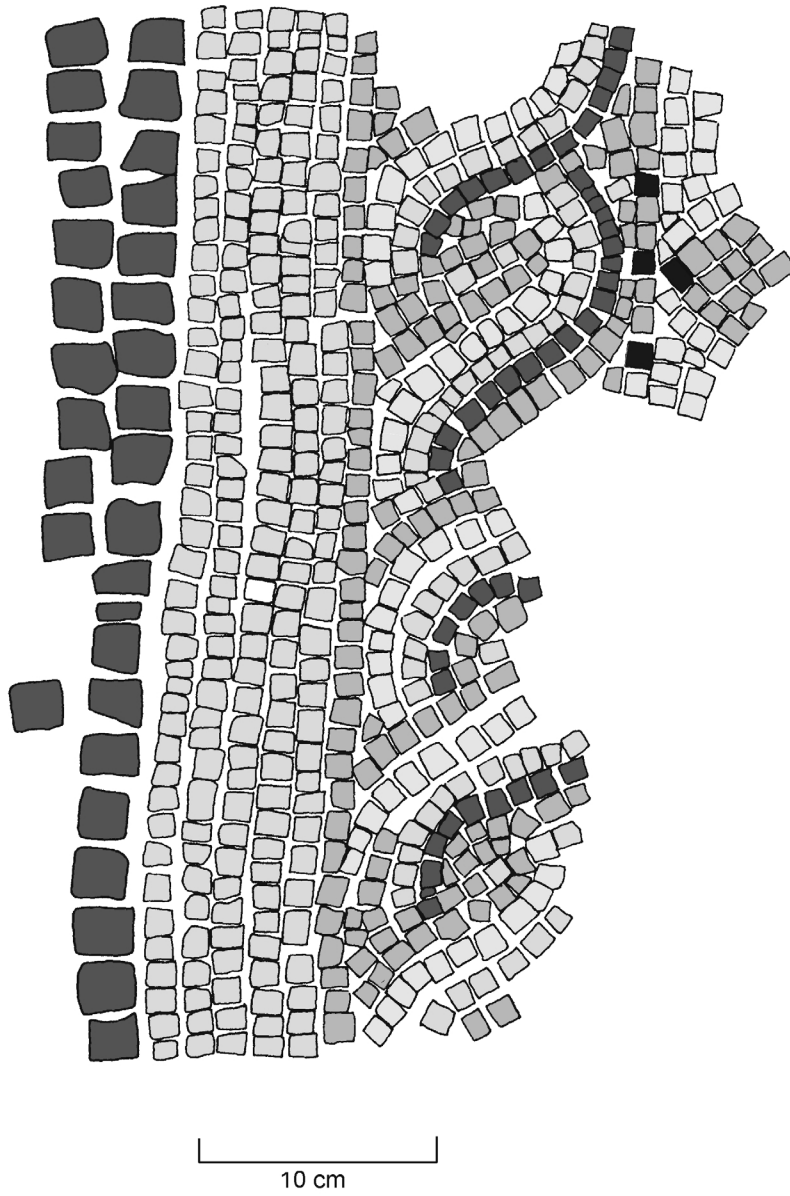


Fig 15 Mosaic pavement from Trench 5. See cover for colours.

Table 1. Key dating evidence.

Context	Bag no	Description	Date
F101	37	Staffordshire slipware (Fabric 50): clay pipe	17th-18th century
F104	47	glazed Fabric 40	17th-19th century
F106	62	medieval coarse ware	12th-14th century
F107	75	Colchester ware (Fabric 21a)	15th-16th century
F204	5	concrete lump	modern
F205	23	medieval coarse ware (Fabric 21)	14th-16th century
F205	23	glazed Fabric 21	15th-16th century
F206	24	black-burnished (BB) types: colour-coat?	2nd century+
F206	24	glass, modern ? – intrusive?	modern?
F207	34	1 sherd	Roman
F208	43	medieval coarse ware	14th-16th century
F209	44	1 unusual base	1st century?
F210	59	1-2 sherds	2nd century+
F211	70	early medieval ware (Fabric 13)	11th-12th century
F212	95	sherds	Roman
F213	77	indeterminate brick/tile	
F303	19	Fabric 40 glazed	17th-19th century
F304	20	stoneware (Fabric 45)	17th-18th century
F401	3	Fabric 48d	19th-20th century
F402a	26	glazed Fabric 40	17th-19th century
F402b	27	peg-tile	medieval+
F402d	29	glazed Colchester ware (Fabric 21a)	15th-16th century
F402e	25	peg-tile	medieval+
F402f	89	amphora Dressel 20: +	1st-early 3rd century
F402f	89	samian Curle 11 South Gaulish	1st century
F403	30	peg-tile	medieval+
F406	53	peg-tile?	medieval+?
F407	82	brick	Roman
F409	84	1-2 sherds	2nd century+
F502	14	glazed Fabric 40	17th-19th century
F503	15	ironstone (Fabric 48d)	19th-20th century
F504	16	brick sample, deep frog	later 19th century
F505	33	chamber pot (Fabric 40)	17th-19th century
F506	39	glazed Fabric 40	17th-19th century
F507	40	grey and white stone <i>tesserae</i>	Roman
L104	36	ironstone (Fabric 48d)	19th-20th century
L105	48	Fabric 48d	19th-20th century
L106	45	unglazed Fabric 21a	15th-16th century
L106	45	stoneware	17th-18th century
L107	50	glazed Fabric 21 or 40	16th-17th century
L108	46	peg-tile with mortar on sides	medieval+
L109	51	glazed Surrey Whiteware (Fabric 23)	16th-17th century
L110	72	burnt Roman brick	Roman
L111	61	Surrey Whiteware (Fabric 23)	16th-17th century
L112	64	BB type: Dressel 20: Hadham ware	3rd-4th century
L112	68	sherds: BB type: Nene Valley colour-coat	3rd-4th century
L113	71	brick	Roman
L113	71	tile	Roman
L113	71	<i>imbrex</i>	Roman
L113	71	sherds: BB type: large storage jar: ++	AD 120+
L114	74	Roman grey ware: BB types:++	4th century

Table 1 continued.

L114	74	samian sherd: Drag 37	2nd century
L114	74	large flagon	
L114	74	mortarium sherds	Roman
L202	1	Fabric 48d	19th-20th century
L208	58	medieval fineware or Surrey White (Fabric 23)	16th-17th century
L210	76	amphora sherd: Dressel 20	1st-early 3rd century
L210	76	samian: Drag 27	1st-2nd century
L303	2	stoneware (Fabric 45)	17th-18th century
L304	7	Fabric 48d	19th-20th century
L305	8	modern glass	19th-20th century
L305	8	glazed Fabric 40	17th-19th century
L401	10	peg-tile?	medieval+?
L401	10	Roman grey wares, BB type: +	4th century
L403	9	glazed Fabric 40	17th-19th century
L404	4	Roman grey wares	2nd century+
L404	6	Roman coin: Claudian copy?	late 1st century
L405	11	medieval coarse ware rim	12th-14th century
L406	13	sherds: BB types: small flask	AD 120+
L409	87	Nene Valley colour-coat	3rd-4th century
L409	87	Oxford colour-coat mortarium	3rd-4th century
L411	80	early medieval ware	11th-12th century?
L413	79	sherds	Roman
L428	88	grey ware	2nd century+
L503	73	medieval coarse ware (Fabric 20)	14th-16th century
L506	41	<i>imbrex</i>	Roman
L506	41	peg-tile?	medieval+
L510	66	Roman brick	Roman
L511	65	sherds: all Roman?	Roman?

Table 2. Faunal remains. Breakdown of site periods by species, number of pieces and weight. Weights in grammes.

species	Roman	medieval	medieval-post-med	15th-16th century	post-medieval	19th-20th century	modern
Cat	-	-	-	-	1@1	2@10	-
Cattle	16@484	7@289	-	3@120	12@944	20@1198	1@2
Chicken	1@6	1@1	-	-	1@6	1@4	-
Dog	1@4	-	-	-	7@94	1@2	-
Goat	-	-	-	-	-	1@8	-
Hare	-	-	-	-	2@7	-	-
Horse	1@32	-	-	-	-	-	-
Pig	4@94	3@60	3@40	-	7@216	5@194	-
Roe deer	1@52	-	-	-	-	2@68g	-
Sheep or goat	3@70	1@12	-	3@41	7@140	8@134	1@10
Identified total	27@742	12@362	3@40	6@161	37@1408	40@1618	2@12
Bird indet.	2@4	1@6	-	-	7@15	-	-
Fish indet.	1@1	-	-	-	-	-	-
Large-sized mammal	46@835	6@131	3@44	3@100	24@590	15@382	1@108
Medium-sized mammal	1@6	2@8	-	1@8	17@71	5@64	4@43
Small-sized mammal	1@2	-	-	-	4@9	2@6	-
Unidentified	20@122	7@19	6@32	14@67	21@63	7@78	7@63
Unidentified total	71@970	16@164	9@76	18@175	73@748	29@530	12@214
Grand total	98@1712	28@526	12@116	24@336	110@2156	69@2148	14@226