

# **Watching brief at 40 Osborne Street**

**August 1999**

**for B.G. Macnally & Co**

CAT Report no 41



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# A watching brief at 40 Osborne Street, Colchester

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## **Summary**

*Observations during contractors' machine reduction of the north-eastern area of 40 Osborne Street revealed a sequence of post-medieval deposits and occupation. At the base of the excavation were dark brown sandy loams (between 1.0 m and 0.7 m below the modern pavement level) which possibly represent accumulation into the small valley of the now infilled stream south of the town. The upper part of these deposits (between 0.9 m and 0.7 m below the pavement level) appear to be of at least 17th-century date. No features were observed pre-dating the brick foundations of a building which had been cut into these accumulation layers. The building had a brick-built cellar at its west end and a room to the east of this contained a fireplace. All of these foundations appeared to be contemporary with one another and the bricks (recorded samples taken from the cellar wall) were thin and unfrogged and suggest that the building is of earlier post-medieval date. The frontage of this building, represented by the foundations, was set back about 1.0 m from the present frontage line on Osborne Street. To the west of the building were a series of yard surfaces (at between 0.8 m and 0.55 m below the modern pavement); initially of brick, which was replaced by cobbles, and finally a softer mortar surface which may indicate that this area was later covered over.*

*No finds were retained from the site and this report constitutes the full site archive.*

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

The site is extra-mural, located on the south side of Osborne Street, approximately 50 m south of the town wall and 70 m south-east of Scheregate, and the watching brief was carried out in August 1999 in response to redevelopment which involved some reduction to existing ground levels. The watching brief took place over two days during the early stages of the development programme (following demolition of the existing property), and was only concerned with the north-eastern area of the site fronting onto Osborne Street where levels needed to be reduced to facilitate the installation of a concrete support raft. The necessary reductions were carried out by the contractors using a mechanical excavator, and the archaeological observations and recording were made while this operation was in progress.

## **2 The site** (Fig 2 & Fig 3)

The site area here refers to the area of reduction outlined in Figure 2. Demolition work on the existing building had resulted in a stepped effect to this area from west to east. The area occupied by the building had been reduced by the demolition work to 0.78 m below the pavement level of the Osborne Street frontage, and a large cellar at the west end of the property had been consolidated by infilling with concrete to 1.0 m below the pavement level. Most of the lower parts of the wall foundations were still present, though partly obscured by redeposited spoil, and no floor levels remained. At the west end of the site, beyond the demolished building, a narrow strip remained within the proposed reduction area most of which was still at pavement level, though sloping down towards the south. The observed contractors' work involved the reduction of the eastern end of the site beyond the infilled cellar by a further 0.22 m to a final level of 1.0 m below the pavement, and the reduction of the narrow strip west of the cellar by up to 1.0 m to achieve the same final level across the site area.

### *2.1 Deposits pre-dating the demolished building on the eastern site area* (Fig 3 Section 1)

On the eastern part of the site, the brick foundation walls and cellar of the demolished building were cut into dark brown sandy loam. This material is equivalent to the dark brown sandy loam deposit recorded towards the base of Section 1 (Fig 3) and contained occasional brick, peg-tile and mortar fragments, and some fragments of clay-pipe stems were also present. However, little pottery appeared to be present, and the one green glazed sherd recovered is not easily or closely datable and may be of earlier post-medieval or relatively modern date. Though the machined surface was not clean, no concentrations of material or any changes of soil colour were visible, and no features (other than the brick walls) appeared to be cut into this deposit on the site area. As the recorded finds material was spread thinly throughout the deposit, even though the absence of intrusive features is not certain, the types of finds recorded should be associated with it and it can therefore be dated to the 17th century or later. The soil deposit across the site area appeared consistently dark, though a change to a slightly lighter, medium brown sandy loam deposit below was recorded in section (Fig 3 Section 1) under the south edge of the Osborne Street pavement. The absence of this layer on the site could indicate a slope in deposits from north to south into the course of the now buried stream south of the town walls.

Only one pit was seen during the watching brief. This was in the section of the eastern site area below the Osborne Street pavement (4.25 m from the east property boundary) where it was just clipped by the site edge. It appeared to have been cut from approximately 0.5 m below the modern pavement level at the base of the uppermost layer in Section 1 (Fig 3), a

medium brown sandy loam which is probably of relatively recent origin, and appeared to be about 0.45 m deep, penetrating almost to the base of the section. This feature was packed full of peg-tile fragments and possibly represents a small soakaway.

### *2.2 The remains of the demolished building (Fig 2)*

The surviving brick foundation walls of the demolished building (apart from the cellar light or chute fronting Osborne Street and possibly the walls to the rear of the cellar) appeared to be contemporary with one another, and the recorded plan from the building foundations is of two areas. There was a brick-built cellar at the west end and a large room to the east with a fireplace setting approximately mid-way along the south wall. No foundation walls were observed to the west of the cellar, where instead a number of surfaces were recorded (see section 2.3 below), and it appears that the building did not continue beyond that point. Bricks from the walls, where they could be observed, were unfrogged mostly in dull red fabric, though some were dull orange, and a few were pale yellowish-cream. A complete example from the cellar wall was of size 4 x 2 x 8.25 inches (102 x 51 x 209 mm). On removal the remaining foundation wall stubs were found to survive up to 0.4 m in height. As these walls and the cellar cut the dark brown sandy loam deposit (section 2.1 above & Fig 3 Section 1) they therefore must also date to the post-medieval period, and are of 17th-century date or later, while the bricks used suggest they should belong to the earlier part of the post-medieval period rather than later. In the centre of the north wall of the cellar, fronting Osborne Street, was the fragmentary remains of what appeared to be a brick-built cellar light or chute, which was associated with frogged bricks and appeared to be a later addition. To the south of the cellar, at the rear of the building, a brick base within another set of brick wall foundations were briefly observed which also appeared to be later additions, though it is not clear that the brick base and these walls were contemporary. The laid top of the brick base indicated a finished surface rather than a truncated foundation approximately 0.8 m below pavement level.

### *2.3 Deposits to the west of the cellar (Fig 3 Section 2)*

The deposits in the narrow strip (approximately 1.0 m wide) west of the cellar were the only part of the site reduction area which remained to surrounding present surface levels following demolition of the building. However, most of the deposits here had been removed by modern pipe trenches, one of which housed a sewer pipe located at the base of the reduction at 1.0 m down. The small undisturbed area revealed a series of surfaces beyond the western end of the demolished building (Fig 3 Section 2) and which did not appear to extend beyond the line of the building frontage along Osborne Street as represented by the

foundations. However, no closely datable material was found in any of the deposits in the sequence, though the common occurrence of brick from almost at the base of the section, and comparison with the levels and material on the eastern part of the site suggests that they are probably entirely, or almost entirely, post-medieval in date. The earliest surface was constructed of brick fragments (no whole bricks were seen) which appeared to be of the same type as those recorded from the cellar walls, and was 0.8 m below the present ground (pavement) levels (Fig 3 Section 2). This is at approximately the same level as the neat brick base noted to the rear of the cellar (section 2.2 above). The brick surface rested on a prepared base of brick rubble and soil which sealed a medium-dark brown sandy loam containing some brick and peg-tile fragments, and which is probably equivalent to the sandy loam layers recorded at the base of Section 1 (Fig 3). The brick surface was sealed by a thin (0.1 m thick) layer of dark brown sandy loam soil and brick rubble, on which a cobbled surface had been laid made up of stones of approximate size 0.15 x 0.10 m. This (and possibly also the earlier brick surface) indicates an external yard west of the building. Immediately above the cobbles was a 0.07 m thick layer of softish greyish-white mortar or plaster which should probably represent an internal or covered surface rather than an external one. This series of surfaces was sealed by approximately 0.47 m of medium brown sandy loam soil containing fragments, and numerous tiny fragments, of brick/tile and mortar up to the modern surface concrete slab at pavement level.

### **3 Discussion**

The deposits and building recorded at 40 Osborne Street appear to represent a sequence of earlier post-medieval to modern accumulation and occupation. However, though only limited dating evidence for the earlier deposits and building remains on the site area was encountered, the small amount of finds material present suggests that all except possibly the very lowest soil levels seen were of post-medieval (17th-century or later) date. This relies on the small number of clay-pipe stems in the dark sandy loam near the base of the sequence on the eastern area, but is possibly supported by the small but consistent presence of brick fragments in the same layer. As the site was reduced by machine and finds were infrequent, it is difficult to be certain that these finds are not intrusive, either from undetected features such as pits or from the machine pull. However, both watching during stripping and close observation of the reduced surface failed to reveal any features on the site area (other than the building foundations), and the thin spread of finds is also suggestive of general incorporation in the deposits rather than concentrations in unseen features.

The archaeological sequence can be summarised as follows. At the lowest levels (between 0.7 m and the base of the excavation reduction at 1.0 m below the modern pavement) were dark sandy loams, possibly representing accumulation into the small valley of the now infilled

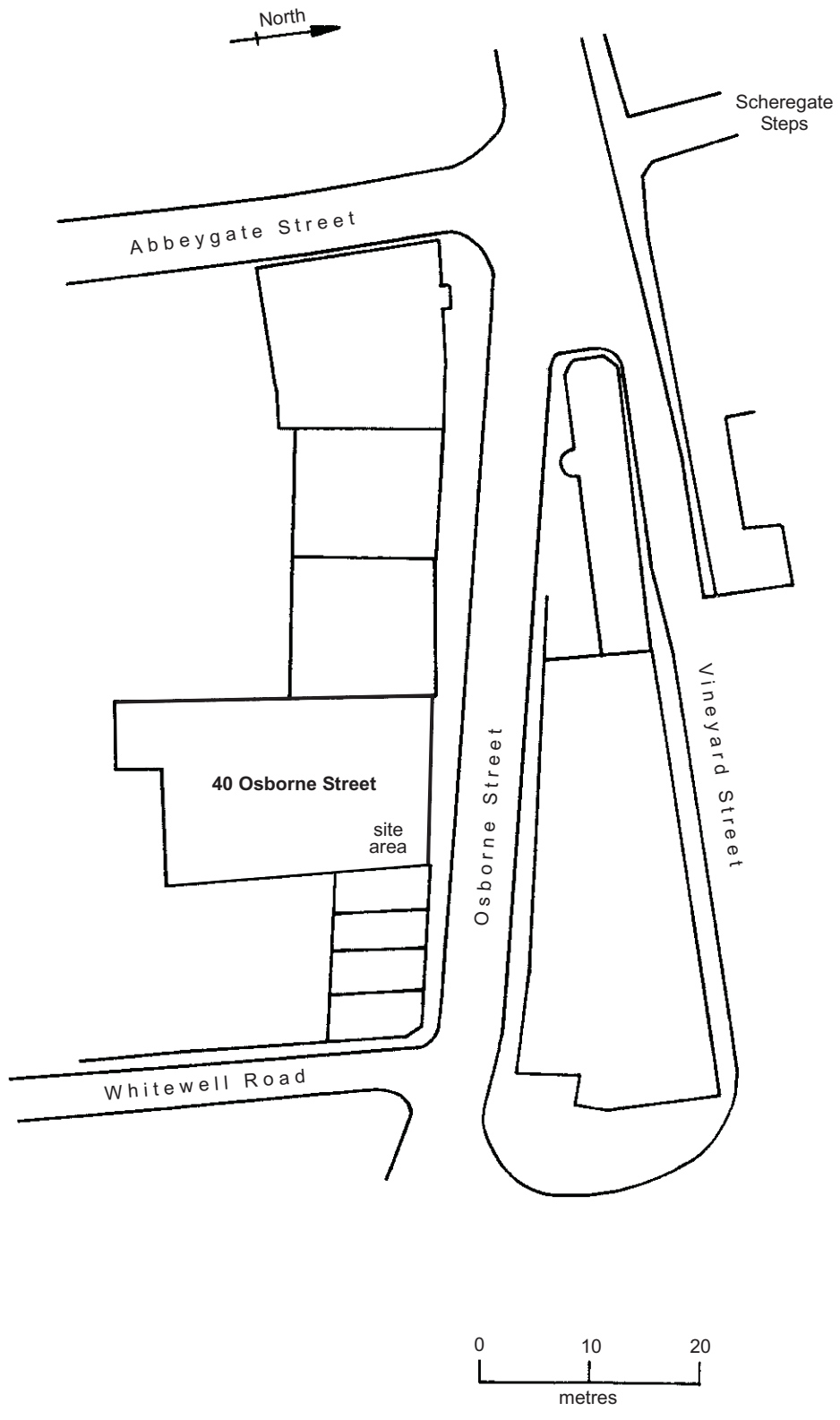
stream south of the town. The upper part of these deposits appear to be of at least 17th-century date. These had been cut by the brick foundations of a building which had a brick-built cellar at its west end and a room to the east of this containing a fireplace. The frontage of this building, represented by the foundations, was set back about 1.0 m from the present frontage line on Osborne Street. To the west of the building were a series of yard surfaces (at between 0.8 m and 0.55 m below the modern pavement); initially of brick, which was replaced by cobbles, and finally a softer mortar surface which may indicate that this area was later covered over.

*Stephen Benfield*

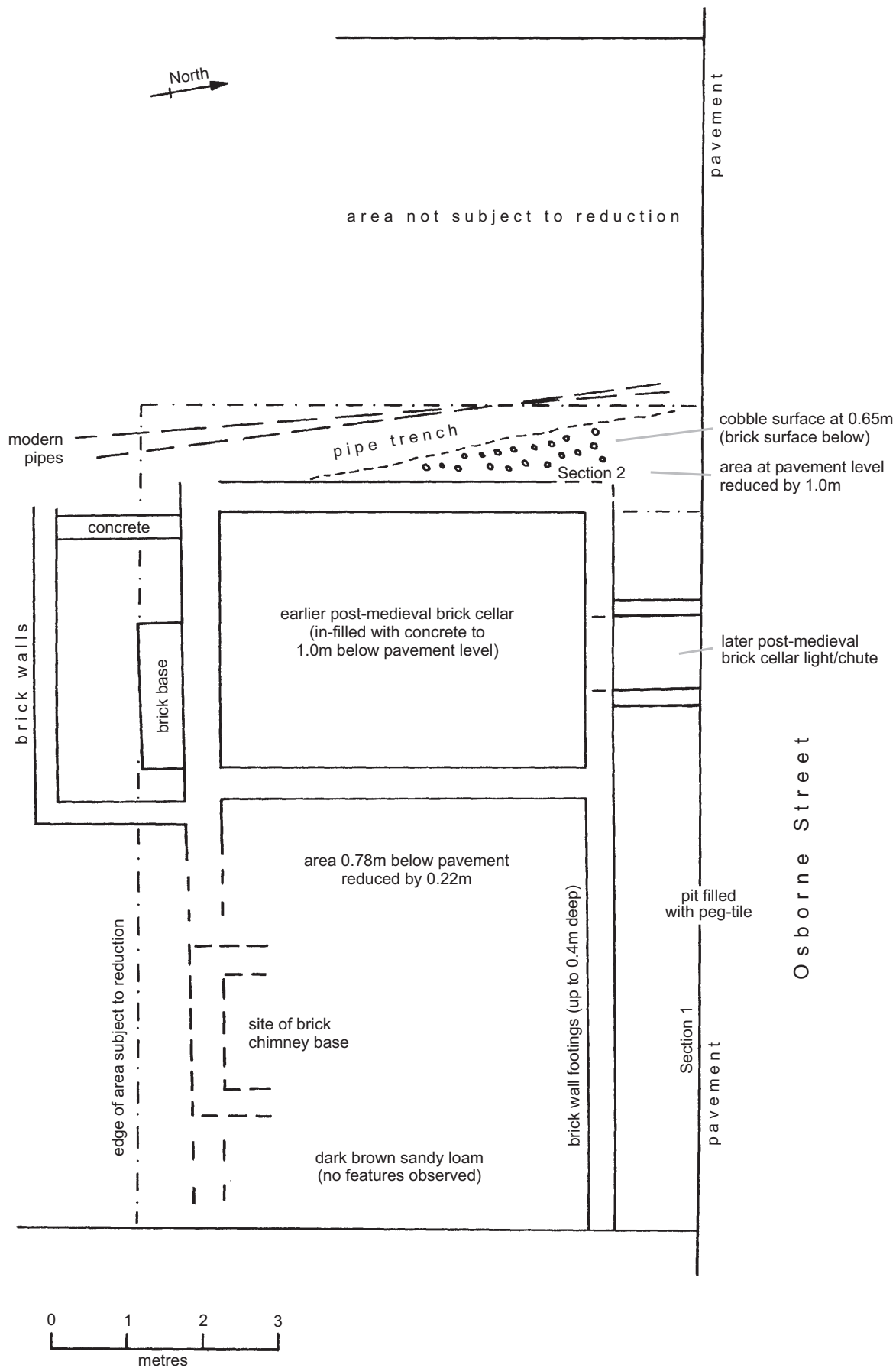
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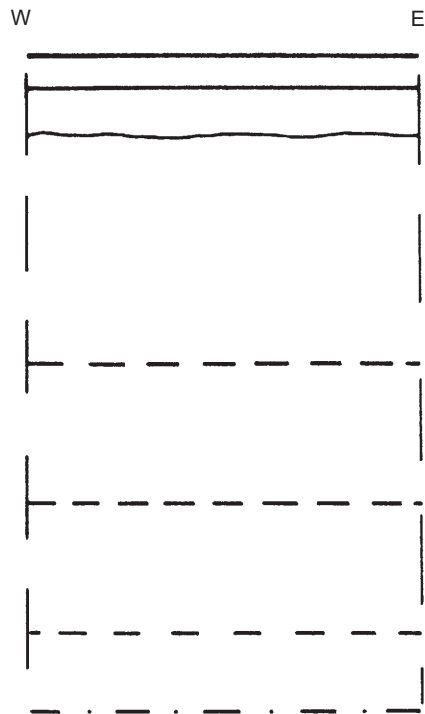
**Fig 1 40 Osborne Street: site location**



**Fig 2 40 Osborne Street: site plan**



Section 1



paving slabs (Osborne Street)

concrete

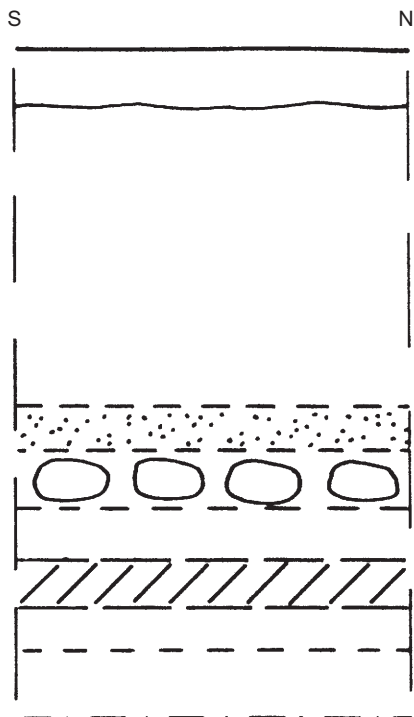
medium brown sandy loam with brick, peg-tile and mortar fragments

medium-dark brown sandy loam with brick rubble and some ?brickwork

dark brown sandy loam with occasional brick, peg-tile and mortar fragments and some clay pipe stems

medium brown sandy loam with rare brick, peg-tile and mortar fragments

Section 2



concrete slab (approx same level as Osborne Street pavement)

medium brown sandy loam with numerous small brick, tile and mortar fragments

grey-white mortar surface

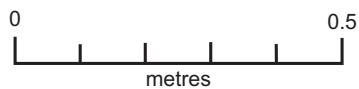
cobbled surface

dark brown sandy loam with brick rubble

brick surface (unfrogged 4x1.75 inches)

brick rubble

medium-dark brown sandy loam with some brick and peg-tile fragments



**Fig 3 40 Osborne Street: sections**