

**A watching brief at
the site of the former St Paul's church,
Belle Vue Road, Colchester, Essex
September-October 2000**

**on behalf of
Colchester Borough Council**

CAT site code: 9/00i
Colchester Museum accession code: 2001.85
Planning consent application no: F/COL/00/0910
NGR: TL 9915 2608



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CAT Report 137

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Plate and figure

Plate 1 The two skulls from Soakaway 1, looking south.

Fig 1 Site location, scale 1:500.

1 Summary

Three human burials and a probable fourth burial were recorded during the construction of a bungalow on the former St Paul's church site. These burials were within the graveyard but unmarked. They are thought to date from the Victorian period and to be the burials of residents of nearby Essex Hall asylum.

2 Introduction

- 2.1 This is the report on a watching brief carried out by Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) at Belle Vue Road, Colchester, Essex on the 29th of September and the 3rd of October 2000, on behalf of Colchester Borough Council.
- 2.2 The construction of a large bungalow on the site of the former St Paul's church and churchyard was given planning permission under application no F/COL/00/0910. A condition was placed on the permission for archaeological monitoring. The bungalow is a piled structure. A parking area is to be situated in front of the bungalow, on the road frontage. The work was carried out by Carter Builders of Colchester.
- 2.3 The site is situated on the north-east bank of the River Colne, just north of Colne Bank Avenue, at National Grid Reference TL 9915 2608. The western side of the plot slopes acutely down to the river. The plot had previously been occupied by the 19th-century church of St Paul, which was demolished two years ago (Fig 1).
- 2.4 This report follows the standards set out in the Borough Council's *Guidelines on standards and practices for archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester* (1999) and *Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester Museums* (1996), and the IFA's *Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief* (1999).

3 Archaeological background

- 3.1 The site is outside the Roman town walls, and it is close to a Roman kiln-site on the bank of the River Colne (EHCR no12542).
- 3.2 The church of St Paul's was built between 1869 and 1879 (Cooper 1994, 336) and it was formerly a chapel to nearby Essex Hall, an asylum on North Station Road. It was demolished two years ago because it was sliding down into the river bank and had become unsafe (David Brown pers comm). The foundations and bottom course of walls of the church of St Paul were still visible on the site before the bungalow was built. The churchyard surrounded the church on all sides, although only the graves to the north and south are marked. There are no gravestones within the plot boundary; however, there was the possibility of unmarked graves being disturbed by the groundworks for the services.

4 Aims and objectives

The aim of the watching brief was to identify and record any archaeological features or deposits revealed by the groundworks.

5 Methods

Fieldwork was undertaken by a professional archaeologist from CAT (Kate Orr), who monitored the digging of the first soakaway. The other two soakaways and all the other services were dug without the knowledge of CAT and were therefore not monitored archaeologically. However, a representative from the Chelmsford Diocesan Office and an undertaker were present for these works. The church foundations were removed, and a 450mm-deep ring-beam and a piled structure were constructed on the footprint of the former church. It was not considered necessary that this stage of the work was monitored archaeologically as the area had previously been built on.

6 Results

- 6.1 On the 29th of September 2000 a visit was made to check that no burials had been disturbed. At that time the site was being cleared of the top 300mm of material. This consisted of topsoil which had been brought in to cover the site after demolition, and the bottom few courses of brick walls. A sketch plan was made of the church foundations.
- 6.2 On the 3rd of October 2000, a second visit was made just after the first soakaway, which was 2.67m wide, had been dug by machine on the western boundary of the site. This was an area that the vicar had warned might contain unmarked graves, but there was no room to put the soakaway anywhere else. Two human skulls had been exposed by the machine 2.6m below ground-level, approximately 1m apart. The northernmost skull was complete, with the lower and upper mandible still intact. This appeared to be the skull of an adult, but as the rest of the body was still underground it was difficult to confidently age it. The southernmost skull had been clipped by the bucket of the digger. It looked to be that of an adult, but again this was not definite as the rest of the skeleton was not visible. The jaw of the southernmost skull was under the soil. The soil surrounding the skulls consisted of a dark brown silty clay with stones (Plate 1).
- 6.3 There was no trace of a coffin surrounding these burials. However, in the south-western corner of the soakaway, at the same level as the skulls, was one end of a wooden coffin which extended under the western side of the trench. There were no bones from this coffin, but presumably they survive outside the limit of the trench. A small piece of wood, four iron nails and twelve studs from this coffin were retrieved for dating purposes. Other finds from the same level were retrieved: a piece of peg-tile and a piece of brick. The brick is only 32cm wide and is comparable to 19th-century floor tiles (Andrews & Ryan 1993, 95). At their request, the CAT archaeologist did not excavate the burials but left them *in situ* for the vicar and undertaker to remove.
- 6.4 Further works were carried out at the end of 2000 and in 2001 without archaeological monitoring. These consisted of the excavation of a further two soakaways, drain-trenches, and an inspection chamber. A drain running to the road disturbed some very decomposed fragments of human bone and fragments of timber representing a human burial in a coffin. These were found 2.1m below ground-level, on the extreme eastern edge of the site. A representative from the Chelmsford Diocesan Office was present (David Brown and Phil Cook pers comm). There was no grave furniture to date the burial.
- 6.5 Father Peter Walker, the vicar of St James' Church in Colchester, arranged the necessary licence for removal and re-burial of all the human remains from the site. The other finds from the soakaway were discarded after having been looked at by specialists at CAT.

7 Discussion

- 7.1 The watching brief recorded two adult burials without trace of a coffin and a probable third burial in a coffin within Soakaway 1, at 2.6m below ground-level. A further burial was found, possibly that of a child, in a coffin, while a drain-trench was being dug on the eastern boundary of the site. All the graves were unmarked and are thought to be the burials of residents of nearby Essex Hall asylum on North Station Road. Essex Hall was converted from a former hotel in 1850 to accommodate mentally handicapped residents, at first mainly children. From 1935 it was used for female residents. It was closed in 1985 (Cooper 1994, 288-9).
- 7.2 The church of St Paul was built in 1869 and the graveyard ceased to be used at some time before 1900, and therefore the burials must be late Victorian. The small brick from Soakaway 1 would tie in with this dating.

8 Archive deposition

A copy of this report, the three digital photographs and the finds will be deposited with Colchester Museum under accession code 2001.85.

9 Acknowledgements

Colchester Archaeological Trust is grateful to the following for their co-operation at various stages of the project:

David Brown, Chelmsford Diocesan Office

Phil Cook, Carter Builders

Martin Winter, Archaeological Officer for Colchester Borough Council

10 References

- Andrews, D, & Ryan, P, 1993 'A brick typology for Essex', in *Cressing Temple - a Templar and Hospitaller Manor in Essex*, by D Andrews (ed), Essex County Council
- Cooper, J (ed), 1994 *The Victoria History of the County of Essex: vol 9, Colchester*

Kate Orr, May 2001

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Plate 1 The two skulls from Soakaway 1, looking south.

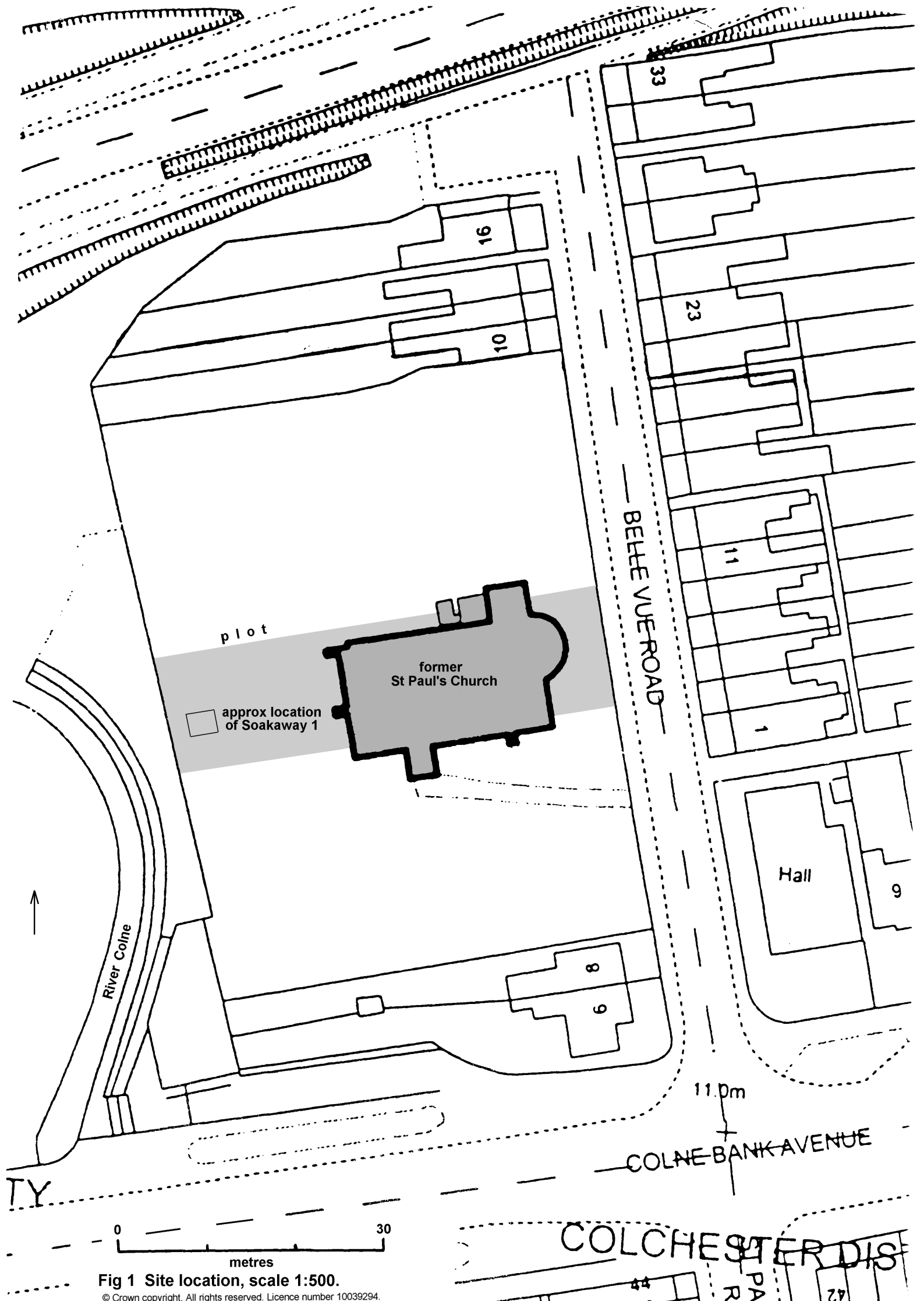


Fig 1 Site location, scale 1:500.

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**Essex Heritage Conservation Record/
Essex Archaeology and History**

Summary sheet

Site name/address: The site of former St Paul's Church, Belle Vue Road, Colchester, Essex	
Parish: Colchester	District: Colchester Borough
NGR: TL 9915 2608	Site code: 2001.85
Type of work: Watching brief for large bungalow	Site director/group: Colchester Archaeological Trust
Date of work: 29/09/00 and 03/10/00	Size of area investigated: 45m x 20m approx.
Location of finds/curating museum: Colchester Museum	Funding source: Colchester Borough Council
Further seasons anticipated? No	Related EHCR nos: 12542
Final report: CAT Report 137	
Periods represented: Modern	
<p>Summary of fieldwork results:</p> <p>The watching brief recorded, within the first soakaway, two adult burials without trace of a coffin and a probable third burial in a coffin, all at 2.6m below ground-level. A further burial was found, possibly that of a child, in a coffin, during the digging of a drain-trench on the eastern boundary of the site. This burial was not seen by an archaeologist but was recorded at being 2.1m below ground-level. The graves were unmarked and are thought to be the burials of residents of nearby Essex Hall asylum on North Station Road. Essex Hall was converted from a former hotel in 1850 to accommodate mentally handicapped residents, mainly children at first. From 1935 it was used for female residents. It was closed in 1985 (Cooper 1994, 288-9).</p> <p>The church of St Paul was built in 1869 and the graveyard ceased to be used at some time before 1900, and therefore the burials must be late Victorian. The small brick from soakaway 1 would tie in with this dating.</p>	
Previous summaries/reports: None	
Author of summary: Kate Orr	Date of summary: May 2001