

An archaeological watching brief at  
**St Peter's Vicarage,**  
North Hill, Colchester, Essex

September 2001

on behalf of  
**Colchester Borough Council**

CAT project ref.: 01/8e  
NGR: TL 9935 2530  
Colchester Museum accession code: 2001.172



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**CAT Report 156**

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## 1 Summary

*Observations were made of groundworks for a new sewer-trench at St Peter's Vicarage, North Hill, Colchester, Essex. The watching brief revealed part of a possible Roman tessellated floor and a probable robber trench. These features may have been from a house fronting the Roman street. An almost complete Roman jar may be part of a votive deposit associated with the house.*

## 2 Introduction

- 2.1 This is the report on an archaeological watching brief carried out by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) on the 22nd of September 2001 at St Peter's Vicarage. The work was necessitated by the laying of a new sewer-pipe to the front of the house.
- 2.2 The Vicarage is situated in the town centre, on the western side of North Hill, and to the north of Balkerne Gardens Rest Home (Fig 1). The site is located at National Grid Reference TL 9935 2530.
- 2.3 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 No previous archaeological excavation has actually taken place within the watching brief area. However, the site lies inside the town wall of the Roman legionary fortress and later town of *Colonia Claudia Victricensis*. It lies within Insula 17b and on or near the site of a Roman east-west street. A mosaic and tessellated pavement to a Roman building have been found in the immediate area (Crummy 1992, 15).
- 3.2 A rescue excavation was carried out from 1984 to 1985 by the Colchester Archaeological Trust at the Gilbert School when it was about to be converted to the Sixth Form College. A large annexe was built to the south of the main school building. The excavation of the area of the new annexe revealed the men's quarters of a Roman legionary barrack-block situated toward the rear of the fortress, dating from the Roman invasion of AD 43. These barrack-blocks were then built over when the *colonia* was built. Roman Colchester was destroyed during the Boudican revolt of AD 60/61. Evidence for post-Boudican occupation was sparse but included the edge of one building and a small structure of probably 3rd- or 4th-century date (Shimmin 1992, 127-39). A watching brief on building work for a new extension to the main school building was carried out in 1997, and an early Roman plinth was found which was probably part of a barrack-block (Shimmin 1997).

## 4 Aims and objectives

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

## 5 Methods

- 5.1 The fieldwork was carried out by Stephen Benfield. The visit was made after the sewer-trench had been dug.
- 5.2 A record of the position of the site excavations was made which has been reproduced as Figure 1. Soil types were noted and section drawings made, which have been reproduced as Figure 3. Artefacts were retrieved, washed, marked and bagged. The Roman pot was drawn (Fig 4).

## 6 Results

- 6.1 A sewer-trench was hand-dug by the contractors to the south of the front door, 500mm wide and between 600mm and 700mm deep. In the trench, 300mm of dark brown loam topsoil with tile and mortar overlay dark brown loam with common tile and mortar. Within this layer, a possible robber trench filled with yellow-brown mortar and small to medium stones was recorded (see section drawing Fig 3a).
- 6.2 A possible fragment of Roman tessellated floor was recorded in the foundation trench to the west of the front door at 400mm below ground-level. A few fragments of both cream and red *tesserae* on a base of *opus signinum* mortar sat on top of a layer of brownish yellow sandy mortar. This in turn overlay a banded grey, slightly greenish brown sandy loam (see section drawing Fig 3b).
- 6.3 A fragment of an adult human jaw was found by the contractors in the fill of the sewer-trench (Fig 2).
- 6.4 A brick sewer junction box was removed as part of the work. Directly behind the brickwork, the contractors found a nearly complete Roman pot standing upright in the ground. The base of the vessel was 550mm below ground-level (Figs 3 and 4). It would originally have been used for cooking. However, the completeness of the pot and its reported upright position indicate that it probably represents a Roman votive deposit (see appendix).

## 7 Discussion

- 7.1 The watching brief revealed part of a possible Roman tessellated floor and a probable robber trench dug to remove a Roman wall. These features may have been from a house fronting the Roman street, which would be expected from this area of the town. An almost complete Roman jar may well be part of a votive deposit associated with the house, and it may have contained food. It was common to bury votive deposits under floors.
- 7.2 It is not known how the human jaw came to be there or whether, if a larger area had been excavated, further human remains would have been found. This is unlikely as Roman cemeteries at Colchester as elsewhere are located outside the town walls. It may have been brought in with soil from another area.

## 8 Archive deposition

The full archive including the finds and a copy of this report will be deposited with Colchester Museum under accession code 2001.172.

## 9 Acknowledgements

The Colchester Archaeological Trust is grateful to Martin Winter, Archaeological Officer for Colchester Borough Council, and the contractors for their help and co-operation.

## 10 References

- Crummy, P, 1992 *Excavations at Culver Street, the Gilbert School, and other sites in Colchester 1971-85*, Colchester Archaeological Report 6
- Shimmin, D, 1992 'Excavations at the Gilbert School, North Hill, 1984-85', in Crummy 1992, pp 127-39
- Shimmin, D, 1997 A watching brief at the Sixth Form College, North Hill, Colchester

Kate Orr, September 2001

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## **Appendix: the Roman pottery**

*by Stephen Benfield*

### **The Roman pottery**

There was approximately 0.4 kg (411g) of Roman pottery from the watching brief. Six of the sherds (54g) are from fine ware vessels which consist of imported plain samian of probable Central and possibly East Gaulish origin and colour-coat wares which are probably Colchester products. The coarse wares are dominated by reduced grey wares of indeterminate though certainly local origin. Amongst these are a few sherds from vessels in black-burnished ware (BB) forms, some of which may be Colchester black-burnished ware type 2 products, and there is one mortaria sherd which is probably also a Colchester product. The edges of one of the grey ware sherds (finds group number 43) have been deliberately rounded off, and though it is slightly irregular in shape this almost certainly represents a pottery counter. The most closely dated vessels are mostly confined to the fine wares which are of 2nd- to mid 3rd-century date (though the white slipped or painted vessel could be later). All of the datable coarse ware vessels, which are the black-burnished ware types, are of early to mid 2nd-century date or later, though one bowl can be more closely dated to the early-mid 2nd to mid 3rd century. Overall the indications are that the majority of the Roman pottery recovered is probably of 2nd- to 3rd-century date. Though it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions from small unstratified groups of pottery, the sherd sizes and condition indicate close proximity to their original point of disposal, that is close to or within the settlement area from which they originated, and the high incidence of fine ware, especially samian with four different vessels represented, probably indicates a reasonably high status or level of Romanisation.

### **Table of Roman pottery**

Roman fabric codes refer to **CAR 10**.

#### *Fine wares:*

samian

CG Central Gaulish samian

EG East Gaulish samian

CZ later Colchester and other red colour-coat wares

MQ white-slipped fine wares and parchment wares

#### *Coarse wares:*

TZ Colchester mortaria and mortaria imported from the Continent

GB black-burnished ware type 2

DJ coarse oxidised and related wares

GX other coarse wares principally locally-produced grey wares

HZ large storage jars and other vessels in heavily-tempered grey wares

Samian form numbers refer to Dragendorff form types, Cam numbers refer to the Camulodunum Roman pottery form type series (Hawkes & Hull 1947; Hull 1958).

Find no	Context	Fabric code	Description/comments/date	No of sherds	Wt (g)
1	L2	GX	Grey ware sherd	1	5
2	L4	?CG	Samian form 33 rim (date range 1st-2nd century, probably 2nd century)	1	4
8	Burial 3	DJ	Oxidised ware body sherd	1	4
10	L4	CG/EG	Samian form 18/31 rim (earlier 2nd century, body sherd from second vessel form 18/31 (earlier 2nd century)	2	37
10	L4	GX	Small group of sherds, includes rim from Cam 279 type jar (2nd century+) and part of bowl with chamfered base (2nd century+)	10	82
16		GX	Rim from Cam 37A (earlier 2nd to late 2nd or early 3rd century)	2	39
16		MQ	Oxidised rim sherd with traces of white slip or paint	1	7
21		GX	Rim sherd of hook rim jar Cam 270B (pre-conquest to 2nd/3rd century)	1	25
35		HZ	Body sherd	1	67
38		GX	One sherd possibly black-burnished ware (BB) type form, rather micaceous fabric, possibly Colchester fabric group WA (probably 2nd century+)	4	29
40		CG	Samian sherd (2nd century)	1	2
40		?GB	Two sherds from probable black-burnished ware (BB) or BB type form (2nd century+)	2	10
43		GX	One sherd is probably a pottery counter, possibly broken along one edge	3	35
45		GX		1	12
47		CZ	Body sherd (early-mid 2nd to mid 3rd century)	1	4
47		GX		2	15
51		TZ	White ware mortaria body sherd	1	30
51		GX		1	4

### The Roman pot

The Roman pot (Fig 4) is a coarse ware jar with a cream slip; it is broken though almost complete, and with only a few small sherds missing which include a small section of the rim. There is a mixture of old and fresh breaks, and some of the missing fragments relate to fresh fractures, while the edges of all the joining broken sherds knit together well.

The jar is in coarse oxidised ware (Colchester fabric group DJ: coarse oxidised and related wares). The fabric itself is a dull reddish brown tending to dark grey brown on the exterior with a slightly sandy appearance. The whole surface of the vessel, both inside and out, is covered with a cream slip (fabric sub-group DJ.I) which has flaked off in places, especially on the lower exterior. The vessel appears to have been used as a cooking-pot as there are dark sooty deposits on the upper body, which form an almost continuous band just below the shoulder extending onto the top of the rim, while inside is a white calcareous deposit within the turn of the shoulder. The closest recognised Colchester Roman pottery form type is that of Cam 268/Cam 277, a cooking-pot with under-cut rim and grooves on the shoulder dated early/mid 2nd century to late 3rd/early 4th century (CAR 10, 479). However, this form type is reserved to describe a range of jars in local coarse grey ware fabrics (Colchester fabric group GX: other coarse wares, principally locally produced grey wares), and therefore it is not used to describe oxidised vessels. In CAR 10, general oxidised jar forms are listed as miscellaneous jars, though there is no exact parallel for this vessel illustrated in that volume (CAR 10, fig 6.9 & fig 6.10).

The contractors uncovered the vessel and reported that it was whole, sitting upright in the ground, though the old breaks show that it was already cracked or partly broken. No lid or cover to the vessel was observed by the contractors. The old breaks may relate to the earlier construction of a brick sewer junction box immediately beside the find location of the vessel, and which was in the process of being removed when the contractors uncovered the pot. The completeness of the pot and its reported upright position all indicate that it probably represents a Roman votive deposit.

### **Abbreviations**

**CAR 10**

*Colchester Archaeological Report 10, Roman pottery from excavations in Colchester, 1971-86, by Robin P Symonds and Sue Wade, 1999*

### **References**

Hawkes, C F C, & Hull, M R, 1947

*Camulodunum, first report on the excavations at Colchester 1930-39, RRCSAL, 14*

Hull, M R, 1958

*Roman Colchester, RRCSAL, 20*



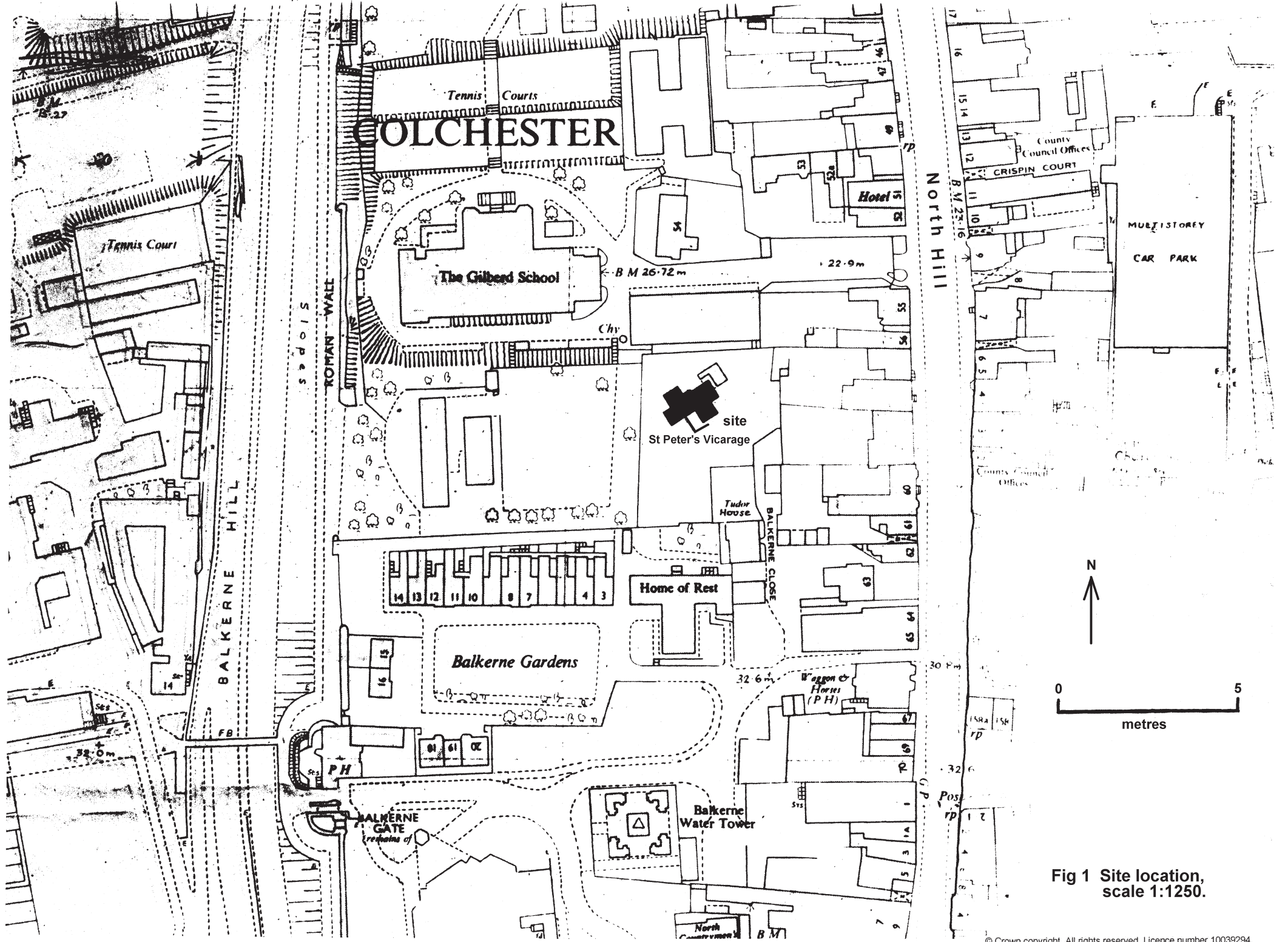


Fig 1 Site location, scale 1:1250.

St Peter's Vicarage

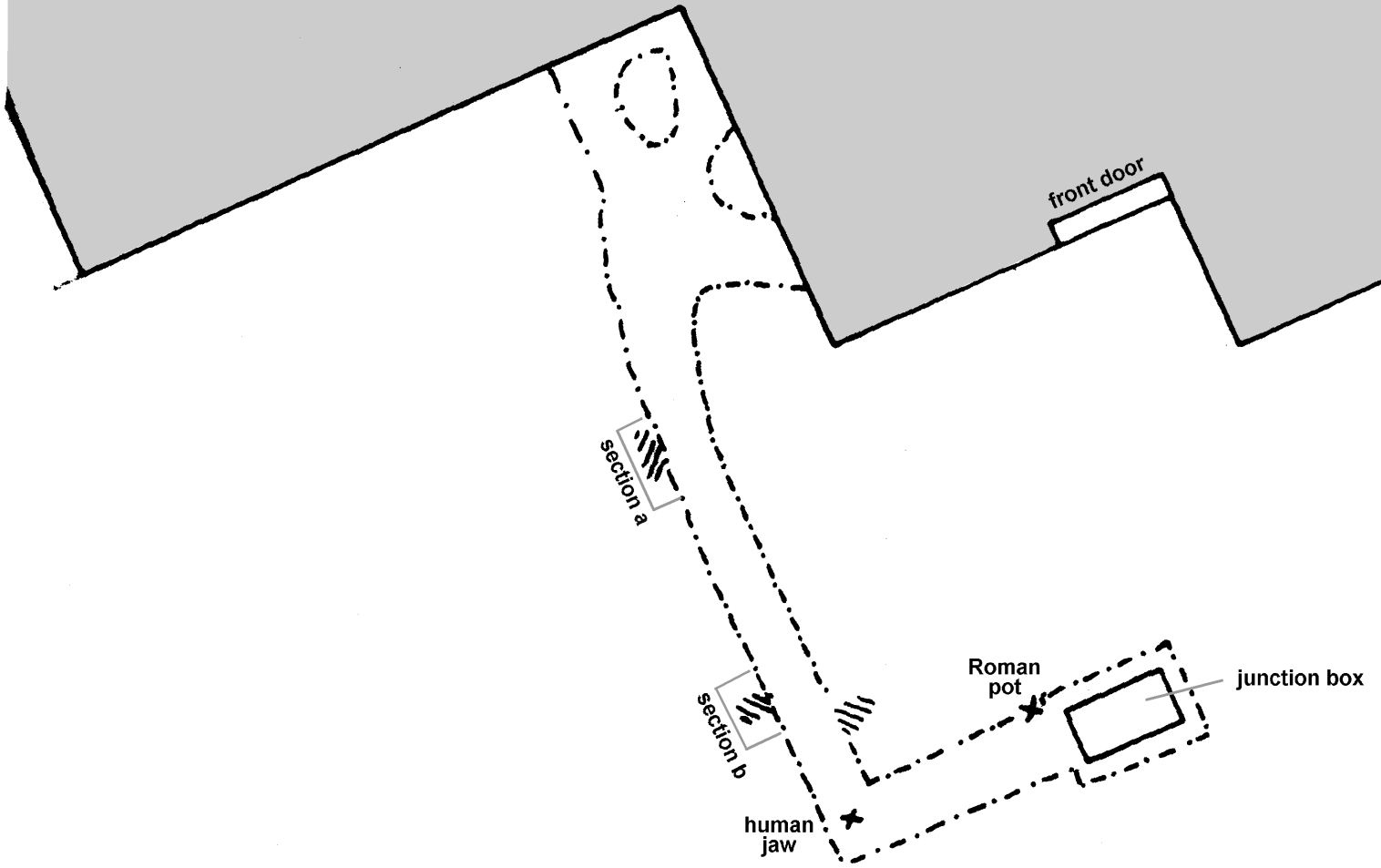
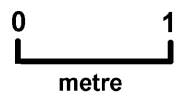
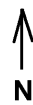
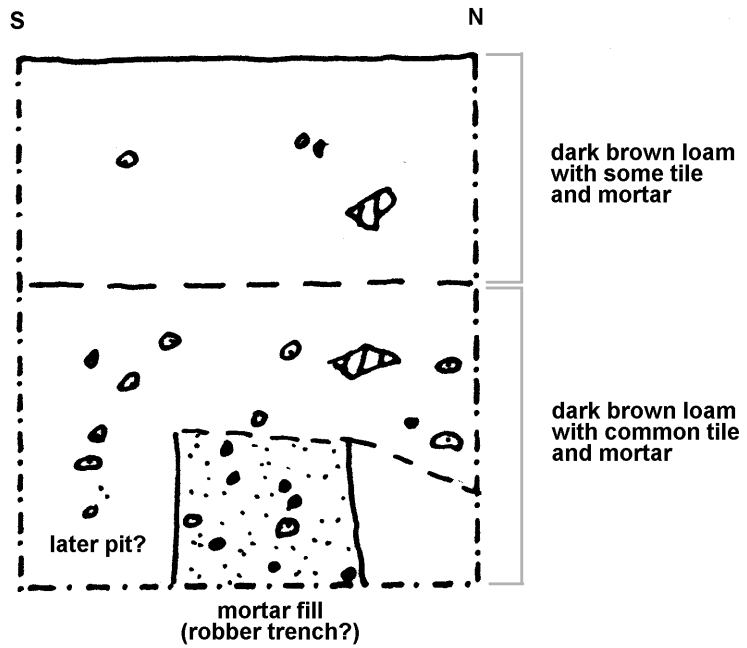
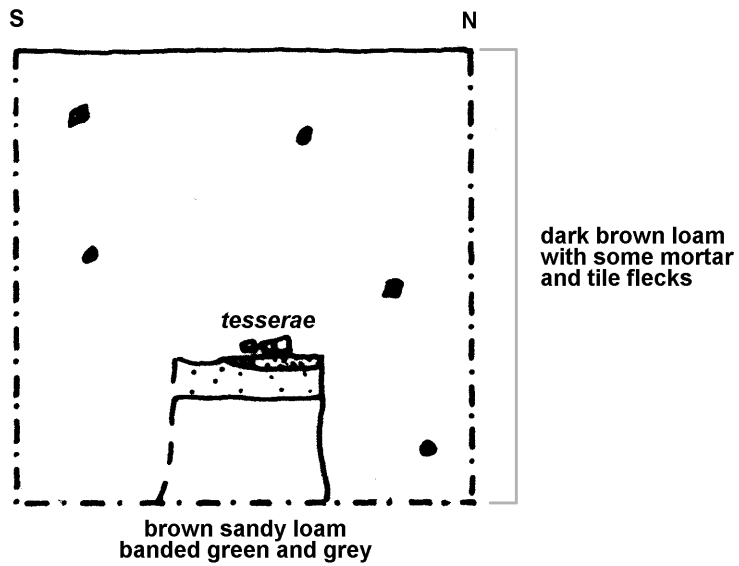


Fig 2 Plan of trench, scale 1:50.





section a



section b



Fig 3 Section drawings, scale 1:10.

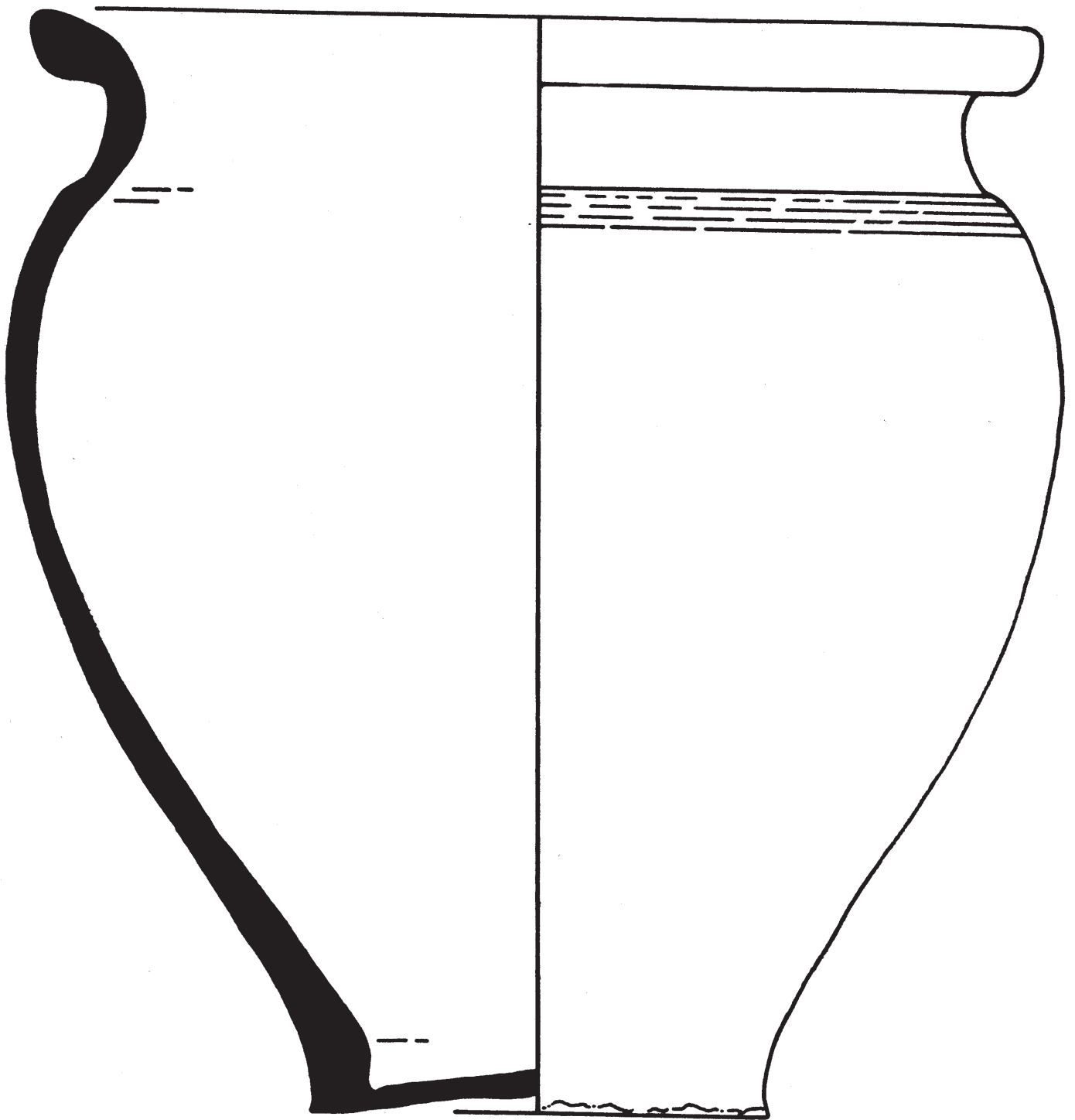


Fig 4 Section drawing of the Roman pot, scale 1:1.

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

**Summary sheet**

<b>Site name/address:</b> St Peter's Vicarage, North Hill, Colchester, Essex.	
<b>Parish:</b> Colchester	<b>District:</b> Colchester Borough
<b>NGR:</b> TL 9935 2530	<b>Site code:</b> 2001.172
<b>Type of work:</b> Watching brief	<b>Site director/group:</b> Colchester Archaeological Trust
<b>Date of work:</b> 22nd September 2001	<b>Size of area investigated:</b> 6m x 3m
<b>Location of finds/curating museum:</b> Colchester Museum	<b>Funding source:</b> Colchester Borough Council
<b>Further seasons anticipated?</b> No	<b>Related EHCR nos:</b>
<b>Final report:</b> CAT Report 156 and summary in <i>EAH</i>	
<b>Periods represented:</b> Roman	
<p><b>Summary of fieldwork results:</b></p> <p>Observations were made during and after groundworks for a new sewer-trench. The excavations revealed part of a possible Roman tessellated floor, and a probable robber trench dug to remove a Roman wall. These features may have been from a house fronting the Roman street which would be expected from this area of the town. An almost complete Roman pot may well be part of a votive deposit associated with the house, and it may have contained food. It was common to bury votive deposits under floors.</p>	
<b>Previous summaries/reports:</b> N/A	
<b>Author of summary:</b> Kate Orr	<b>Date of summary:</b> September 2001