

**An archaeological evaluation at  
the Sixth Form College, North Hill,  
Colchester, Essex  
December 2003-January 2004**

**report prepared by  
Ben Holloway**

**on behalf of  
Roff Marsh Partnership**

CAT project ref: 03/12b  
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**CAT Report 260**  
February 2004

## Contents

1	Summary	1
2	Introduction	1
3	Archaeological background	1
4	Aims and objectives	1
5	The trenches	2
6	Finds	3
7	Discussion	4
8	Archive deposition	4
9	Acknowledgements	5
10	References	5
11	Glossary	5
12	Appendix 1: site data	7

Figures

EHCR summary sheet

## List of figures

- Fig 1 Site location.
- Fig 2 Plan of trenches.
- Fig 3 Ordnance Survey levels of the present ground surface and the top of the surviving Roman deposits.
- Fig 4 Trench sections.
- Fig 5 Location of Roman house in the grounds of the Sixth Form College in relation to Insula 1 and the north-western part of the Roman walled town.
- Fig 6 Graffiti and mosaic fragments.

## 1 Summary

*Five evaluation trenches were dug at the Sixth Form College, North Hill, Colchester, Essex in preparation for the design of a new IT building, planned as part of the mid-site development. The majority of the archaeological features recorded were of Roman date, and included tessellated and mortar floors as well as the robbed-out foundations of a large town-house.*

## 2 Introduction

2.1 This is the archive report on an archaeological evaluation carried out for Roff Marsh Partnership on behalf of the Sixth Form College, North Hill, Colchester, Essex (NGR TL 9930 2544) prior to a planning application for the 'mid-site' development in the college grounds.

2.2 The work was carried out by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) between the 17th December 2003 and the 7th January 2004.

2.3 All fieldwork was done in accordance with a specification agreed with the Archaeology Officer of Colchester Borough Council. This report mirrors standards and practices contained in Colchester Borough Council's *Guidelines for the standards and practice of archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester* (1999) and the IFA's *Standard and guidance for an archaeological evaluation* (1999).

## 3 Archaeological background

The southern part of the search area lies within the Roman legionary fortress, dated to AD 44-49. The line of the ditch and possibly the rampart encircling the fortress extend across the development site in an east-west direction. The remains of metalled streets also cross the site. These consist of an east-west street (dividing Insulas 1 and 9a/9b) (probably with a footway to either side) and a minor street extending around the inner side of the rampart.

Evidence of buildings dating from the years of the Roman colony have been recorded in the vicinity on various occasions in the past (Hull 1958, 76-7, 93-97; CAT Report 247). There is evidence for at least two large town-houses or public buildings within the development site. These buildings are likely to have been constructed in the 2nd or 3rd century, as they included tessellated and possibly mosaic floors. The site is bordered by the 1st-century Roman town wall which is a scheduled ancient monument. The wall has a rampart against the inner face; this is no longer visible due to the build-up of material against the wall. The Roman buildings appear to have been demolished and the site turned over to agricultural and/or horticultural use during or later than the 4th or 5th centuries.

There is no evidence of post-Roman settlement or industry within the development site. Two Royalist cannon positions are shown on the siege map of 1648, but there are no visible traces of these works today. Medieval and post-medieval activity appears to have been confined to the properties fronting North Hill, many of which are still standing and are listed. Buildings in the north-eastern corner of the development site are shown on Morant's map of Colchester in 1748 (Morant 1748). These must represent Bowler's Brewery or buildings which predated it.

## 4 Aims and objectives

The aim of the evaluation was to determine the location, depth, character, extent, date, significance and quality of any surviving archaeological remains, so that the likely impact of the proposed development can be assessed and an appropriate mitigation strategy devised.

## **5 The trenches (Figs 1-5)**

**5.1** All the evaluation trenches were dug using a mini-digger with a toothless ditching bucket, and all were excavated to the tops of the first archaeological layers at which stage the investigation proceeded by hand. The locations of the trenches are shown on Figures 1-2.

### **5.2 Trench 1**

Trench 1 measured 6m x 1.5m and was excavated through modern topsoil (Layer or L1). The dark earth topsoil L1 continued for a depth of between 800mm and 900mm, below which Roman material was encountered. Two features were identified in Trench 1; at the north end, sealed by L1, was a dump of septaria chippings (Feature or F1). This material is possibly associated with repair or construction. At the south end of the trench, F1 had been cut by a modern rectangular concrete slab F3. This feature was aligned east-west and continued into both sides of the trench.

### **Trench 2**

Trench 2 measured 6m x 1.5m and, as in Trench 1, was excavated through topsoil L1. The topsoil continued to a depth of between 800mm and 900mm, below which Roman material was identified. There was one feature in Trench 2, ie a robbed-out foundation F2. This consisted of mortar lumps, septaria chips and tile fragments. Associated with the robbed-out foundation was a layer of clay demolition material L7 and a dump of painted wall-plaster L5. These two layers represent the remains of the walls of the building.

### **Trench 3**

Trench 3 measured 30m x 1.5m. As in Trenches 1 and 2, it was dug through between 800mm and 900mm of topsoil L1. The topsoil sealed demolition material L10 and L11. Four features were identified in Trench 3. These were a tessellated floor F4, robbed-out foundations F5, F6 and F8, and a mortar and tile chip floor-base F7. The *tesserae* in the floor F4 were set in a pink mortar base (*opus signinum*; L13) which itself incorporated a plain mortar base L12. The features identified in this trench indicate a Roman building.

### **Trench 3a**

Trench 3a measured 5m x 1.5m and was a spur extending east from Trench 3. The trench was excavated to establish the extent of the mortar floor-base F7 which had previously been observed in Trench 3. An additional robber trench F8 was also identified during the excavation of this spur. Both F7 and F8 were sealed by demolition material L11, which was sealed by the topsoil L1 as in Trench 3.

### **Trench 3b**

Trench 3b measured 5m x 1.5m and, like Trench 3a, was a spur extending east from Trench 3 to establish the extent of the tessellated floor F4. An additional section of the robber trench F5 was exposed, as was the mortar-base layer for the floor L12. F4 was sealed by demolition material L10, which was sealed by topsoil L1.

### **Trench 4**

Trench 4 measured 10m x 1.5m. As in the previous trenches, Trench 4 was excavated through topsoil L8 (equivalent to L1). The topsoil extended down to a depth of 1.10m where L9, an accumulation layer, was encountered containing Roman pot and tile. No features were identified in the evaluation trench.

### **Trench 5**

Trench 5 measured 6m x 1.5m. The trench was dug through topsoil (L1) to a depth of between 800mm and 900mm. The topsoil sealed an accumulation layer (L4) which contained Roman material including tile and pottery. The accumulation layer sealed a layer of demolition material (L2). The demolition material contained mortar, tile and septaria fragments and is likely to be the same material as the demolition layer L10 in Trench 3. No features were recorded in the trench.

## 6 Finds

Bulk finds list (see Appendix 1).

### 6.1 Pottery

#### Post-Roman pottery

There was one sherd of post-Roman pottery (16 g) recovered from the evaluation. The fabric is Fabric 20 which is sandy orange ware (*CAR 7*), datable to the 14th to 16th centuries. It was found in the dark earth (L1) which sealed the septaria dump F1 in Trench 1. No other post-Roman material was recovered from the evaluation.

#### Roman pottery (Appendix 1.4)

There were 93 sherds of Roman pottery at a total weight of 2.25kg. All of the pottery is datable to between the 1st and 4th/5th centuries AD. The pottery breaks down into the following fabric groups as defined in *CAR 10*:

- Fabric AA all amphorae (excluding Dressel 20 and Brockley Hill/Verulamium region amphorae)
- Fabric AJ amphorae, Dressel 20
- Fabric GA BB1: black-burnished ware, category 1
- Fabric GB BB2: black-burnished ware, category 2
- Fabric CH oxidised Hadham wares
- Fabric HG Eifelkeramik/Mayen ware
- Fabric MQ white-slipped fine wares and parchment wares
- Fabric EZ other fine colour-coated wares, mostly white/buff
- Fabric EA Nene Valley colour-coated ware
- Fabric GX other coarse wares, principally locally-produced grey wares
- Fabric BA plain samian ware

The Roman pottery covers a wide range of dates from the 1st to the 3rd centuries. Though there are a few later sherds of 4th- to 5th-century material (Fabric HG, Mayen ware), the majority of the pottery is datable to the 2nd and 3rd centuries. The later pottery was recovered from the demolition debris L10, and thus presumably indicates when the building was demolished. The pottery assemblage consists mainly of coarse grey wares with some examples of finer vessels such as Nene Valley colour-coated ware, black-burnished ware and plain samian ware.

### 6.2 Painted wall-plaster (Appendix 1.5; Fig 6)

There were 194 fragments of painted wall-plaster recovered during the evaluation. Almost all the plaster came from the building demolition material L10 and L11 in Trench 3. The plaster which was recovered consists of pieces which are 4 to 200cm<sup>2</sup> in area. The decoration was simple consisting of plain panels surrounded by horizontal and vertical stripes of various colours. The majority of the plaster fragments were red, yellow, pink or white, although there were fragments of blue and fragments of green. There was also a piece of moulded cornice plaster from around a window or door. Some of the pieces of plaster had surviving fragments of second colour adhering to the surface suggesting some redecoration or alterations to the scheme had occurred.

### 6.3 Tesserae

Loose *tesserae* recovered from the evaluation are of three types: red tile measuring 200mm x 200mm x 100mm, chalk measuring 250mm x 150mm x 100mm, and grey stone (presumably septaria or greensand) measuring 250mm x 150mm x 100mm. The red *tesserae* came from the demolition material L11 and are likely to be associated with the tessellated floor F4, as do the white and grey *tesserae*. As well as the loose *tesserae*, L11 also contained pieces of a destroyed mosaic floor. These are made up of black and white *tesserae* and are likely to have formed a geometric pattern (Fig 6). As L11 is demolition material which sealed F7, it seems likely that the mosaic fragments derive from a mosaic floor in that room.

#### 6.4 Graffiti (Fig 6)

by Mark Hassall

The two examples of graffiti from the evaluation both come from the demolition layer L11 which sealed the mortar and tile floor base F7. The first example has been scratched into the slip of a white-slipped fine ware pot and reads ALICIA. This may be for It]alica. There are other possibilities among personal names, but all have only been seen one or two times each, whereas there are 26 examples of the cognomen Italicus/a. The second example of graffiti from the evaluation has been scratched into the surface of wall-plaster. It reads MARI. This is likely to be either Mari[us/a or Mari[nus/a. Marius/a is a statistically more common name than Marinus/a.

#### 6.5 Other finds (Appendix 1.3)

As well as the pottery and wall-plaster, a large amount of other material was recovered during the evaluation. This material included Roman tile, animal bone, iron nails, box flue tile, and oyster shells. The majority of the material was recovered from the demolition layers L10 and L11 in Trench 3 and contained large amounts of building materials such as tile and box flue tile. This material is likely to be associated with the demolition of the Roman house.

### 7 Discussion

The majority of the material from the evaluation is of Roman origin. There was no evidence of medieval or post-medieval activity on the site except for a single pot sherd. This is unsurprising because there appears to have been very little post-Roman activity in the north-west corner of the town. The land seems to have been given over to agriculture/horticulture, which is in keeping with for the considerable depth of dark earth topsoil evident during the evaluation. The main post-Roman activity would appear to have centred on the properties along North Hill, the boundaries of which lay outside the evaluation area.

Roman material was found in all the evaluation trenches. In Trench 1, the septaria dump F1 appears to be made up of unmortared chippings. It is possible that these are associated with the facing-up septaria which was used in buildings within the town or even (but less likely) in the town wall itself. The most significant Roman discovery centres on Trench 3. The robber trenches F5, F6 and F8 for wall foundations plus the tessellated floor F4 and its mortar and tile base, all indicate that this is the site of a substantial Roman house. Trenches 2 and 5 contained material which appears be associated with building demolition. It is likely that this material is the same as that found in Trench 3, in which case the remains may represent parts of the same house. Houses in the town were up to 40 m or so square, so a property of this size would not have been exceptional. The large amount of box flue tile in the demolition material from all the trenches suggests that the house was heated, and the wall-plaster and the mosaic fragments indicate that the building was well appointed. The pottery from the demolition layers associated with the house is 2nd and 3rd century, indicating the period when the building was in use. The demolition material also contains pottery dating to the later 4th and earlier 5th century, indicating when the house was demolished.

No features were identified in Trench 4, although the existence of Roman layers L9 were identified as existing below 1.10m of dark earth L8.

### 8 Archive deposition

The paper and digital archive is held by the Colchester Archaeological Trust at 12 Lexden Road, Colchester, Essex CO3 3NF, but it will be permanently deposited with Colchester Museums under accession code 2004.25.

## 9 Acknowledgements

The investigation was funded by the Sixth Form College. The fieldwork was carried out by Ben Holloway, Chris Lister, Nigel Rayner and David Ross. CAT is grateful to the Sixth Form College, Bob Ward of Roff Marsh Partnership, and Martin Winter of the Colchester Borough Council for their help and co-operation.

## 10 References

- CAR 7 Colchester Archaeological Report 7, *Post-Roman pottery from excavations in Colchester, 1971-85*, by John Cotter, 2000
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- Morant, Rev P, 1748 *The history and antiquities of the most ancient town and borough of Colchester*

## 11 Glossary

context	specific location on an archaeological site, especially one where finds are made
feature	an identifiable thing like a pit, a wall, a drain, a floor; can contain 'contexts'
Fe	iron
IFA	Institute of Field Archaeologists
medieval	period from AD 1066 to Henry the VIII
modern	period from the 19th century onwards to the present
NGR	National Grid Reference
natural	geological deposit undisturbed by human activity
post-medieval	after Henry VIII to around the late 18th century
Victorian	period from 1837 to 1901

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## Appendix 1: site data

### Appendix 1.1 Site context list

Context	Location	Description
L1	T1, T2, T3, T5	Modern topsoil
L2	T5	Roman demolition
L3	T5	Occupation layer
L4	T5	Accumulation (only visible in section)
L5	T2	Roman wall-plaster dump
L6	T2	Compacted surface of small stones and septaria chips
L7	T2	Roman dump layer
L8	T4	Modern topsoil (as L1)
L9	T4	Accumulation (as L4 visible in section only)
L10	T3	Roman building demolition
L11	T3	Roman building demolition
L12	T3a	Mortar base for tessellated pavement F4
L13	T3	<i>Opus signinum</i> base of tessellated pavement F4
F1	T1	Dump of septaria chippings
F2	T2	Robbed-out Roman foundation
F3	T1	Modern concrete slab
F4	T3, T3a	Roman tessellated pavement
F5	T3, T3a	Robbed-out Roman foundation
F6	T3	Mortar base of a Roman wall
F7	T3, T3b	Roman mortar/tile chipping floor-base
F8	T3b	Roman wall foundation

### Appendix 1.2 Soil descriptions

Context	Location	Description
L1	T1, T2, T3, T5	Dark brown fine silt, large amount of plant-root activity, some oyster shell and tile fragments
L2	T5	Crushed mortar and wall-plaster, <i>opus signinum</i> and septaria pieces
L3	T5	Dark yellow/brown sandy silt, and tile and mortar fragments
L4	T5	Grey/brown sandy loam with occasional mortar and stone fragments
L5	T2	Painted Roman wall-plaster within the robber trench
L6	T2	Dark grey sandy silt with common small stones
L7	T2	Mid yellow/brown clay/silt with common wall-plaster fragments
L8	T4	Dark grey/brown sandy silt with occasional Roman tile
L9	T4	Grey/brown sandy silt with occasional tile and septaria pieces
L10	T3	Large amount of crushed mortar, wall-plaster and stone chippings
L11	T3	Grey/brown silt with occasional tile and mortar fragments
L12	T3a	Yellow mortar
L13	T3	<i>Opus signinum</i>

### Appendix 1.3 Bulk finds

Description	Finds no	Layer	Feature	Weight (g)
box flue tile	24	L11	-	489
tile	21	-	F1	1625
box flue tile	7	L10	-	670
tile	6	L10	-	13000
tile	11	L11	-	730
tile (with boot imprint)	17	L10	-	318
tile	25	L10	-	2000
box flue tile	25	L10	-	1347
tile	19	L11	-	16000
tile	23	-	F1	3000
tile	9	L10	-	6000
box flue tile	9	L10	-	93
tile	4	L2	-	67
tile	20	L11	-	120
tessera (1)	23	-	F1	41
tessera (7)	11	L11	-	156
oyster shell	23	-	F1	20
oyster shell	11	L11	-	78
fe nails (2)	21	-	F1	19
fe nail (1)	24	L11	-	9
fe nails (5)	7	L10	-	71
fe nails (3)	12	L11	-	36
animal bone	21	-	F1	376
animal bone	20	L11	-	300
animal bone	11	L11	-	37
animal bone	2	L10	-	978
tesserae and mosaic fragments	15	L11	-	471
pot (3)	25	L10	-	48
pot (6)	21	-	F1	240
pot (18)	14	L11	-	134
pot (5)	1	-	F2	191
pot (12)	24	L11	-	186
post-Roman pot (1)	23	-	F1	16
pot (7)	23	-	F1	129
pot (2)	11	L11	-	230
pot (6)	11	L11	-	52
pot (2)	3	L6	-	67
pot (14)	7	L10	-	512
pot (1)	5	L3	-	4
pot (1)	19	L11	-	7
pot (16)	20	L11	-	503

#### Appendix 1.4 Pottery dates

Trench no	Feature no	Layer no	Find no	Roman pot form/fabric	post-Roman pot	Roman spot date
T1	F1		21	Cam 496 variant ?Drag 27 (BA) ?Cam 221 (GX) ?Pelichet 47/Cam 188 (AA) (GB)		early 2nd-3rd century, ?early/mid 2nd century
T1	F1		23	Cam 40B (GB) Drag 33 (BA) Drag 18 or Drag 18/31 (BA) (AA)	1 sherd Fabric 20	early 2nd-mid/late 3rd century (post-Roman, 14th-16th century - ?intrusive)
T2	F2		1	Dressel 20 (AJ) CL (NF) EA ?Cam 308		mid 3rd-4th century, ?mid-late 3rd century
T2		L6	3	GX		Roman
T3		L10	25	(GX) (EA)		mid-late 3rd-4th century
T3		L11	19	(GX)		Roman
T3		L11	20	Cam 243-244/246 (GX) Cam 37A (GB) Cam 278 (GB) Drag 27 (BA) Drag 18/31 (BA)		early-mid 2nd century
T3		L11	11	Dressel 20 (AJ)		1st-early 3rd century
T3		L11	14	?Cam 189 (AA) pot sherd with graffiti (MQ) Cam 243-244/246 (GX) roughcast beaker (EZ - Cologne colour-coat ware)		later 1st-early 2nd century
T3		L11	24	?Cam 330 (CH) ?Cam 278 (GB) ?Dressel 7-11 basal spike (AA)		later 3rd-4th century
T5		L3	5	?Drag 33 (BA) ?CG)		?2nd century

## **Appendix 1.5 Summary of wall-plaster fragments**

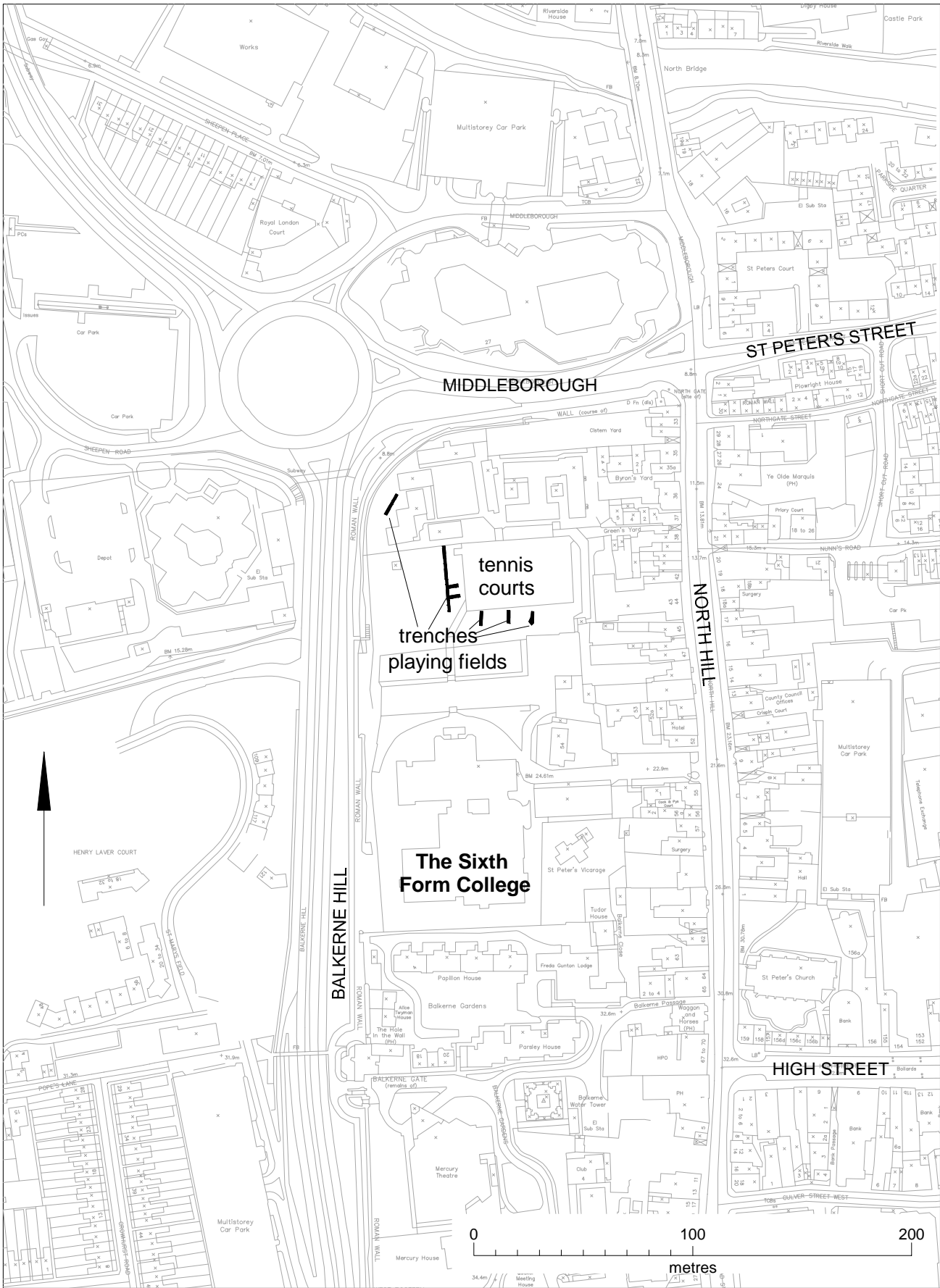
		Total area cm sq
T001	red/white/yellow stripes with blue	9.00
T002	white	77.00
T003	blue	7.00
	brown and yellow stripes	11.00
	brown/yellow	7.00
	dark red	670.00
	dark red and med red stripes	29.00
	dark red and white	11.00
	dark red and white and yellow stripes	36.00
	dark red and white stripe	54.00
	dark red and white stripes	60.00
	dark red and yellow	11.00
	dark red corner piece	102.00
	dark red faded	54.00
	dark red faded with brown marking	38.00
	dark red residue	16.00
	dark red residue and white stripes	13.00
	dark red slightly faded	1.00
	dark red very faded	4.00
	dark red white and brown stripe	14.00
	dark red with grey	25.00
	dark red with grey/green marking	52.00
	dark red with hint of yellow	22.00
	dark red with pink stripe	33.00
	dark red with remnants of yellow and blue	17.00
	dark red with small patch of yellow	9.00
	dark red with white	20.00
	dark red with yellow and green	28.00
	dark red with yellow stripe	15.00
	dark yellow	9.00
	faded blue,brown,white,yellow and red strip	114.00
	faded dark red	25.00
	green	50.00
	green/grey	20.00
	grey poss blue	34.00
	grey/green	73.00
	grey/green poss blue	25.00
	grey/green poss blue + dark red stripe	12.00
	grey/green poss blue + white and red mark	31.00
	grey/green/poss blue	10.00
	light red	16.00
	light red and dark red stripe	12.00
	light red broad stripe and thin white stripe	56.00
	med red with thin red stripe	15.00
	med red with thin white stripe	20.00
	medium red	262.00
	medium red and white	21.00
	medium red and white (stripes)	21.00
	medium red with dark red stripe	35.00
	medium red/dark red stripes	15.00
	medium red/white broad stripe with touch of	59.00
	medium red/white stripe	30.00
		<b>3788</b>

Total area cm sq

medium red/white/dark red stripes	19.00
pale red and yellow stripes	13.00
pink	122.00
pink and dark grey (? orig green)	30.00
pink dark red and yellow stripes	39.00
pink with medium red stripe	9.00
red	71.00
red (very faded)	18.00
red and white stripes	17.00
red and yellow stripe	12.00
striped yellow, light brown, med red, grey/gr	100.00
very faded red and dark red stripe	12.00
white	107.00
white and blue	2.00
white and dark red	33.00
white and medium red	12.00
white stripe/light brown	12.00
white with dark red and yellow stripes	12.00
white with dark red residue	22.00
white with dark red stripe	50.00
white with faded medium red stripe	21.00
white with graffiti	38.00
white with grey/green poss blue stripe	17.00
white with medium red stripe	10.00
white with pink stripe	7.00
white with pink yellow and brown stripes	28.00
white with touch of blue and yellow	24.00
white with yellow	17.00
white with yellow residue	25.00
white,brown, yellow with red stripes	21.00
yellow	201.00
yellow and brown	8.00
yellow and medium red	47.00
yellow and medium red stripes	59.00
yellow and red	22.00
yellow and white	7.00
yellow red and white stripes	25.00
yellow with brown	67.00
yellow with brown stripe	53.00
yellow with dark red stripe	11.00
yellow with touch of red and dark yellow	30.00
yellow/white and dark red	14.00

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3874



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Fig 1 Site location.

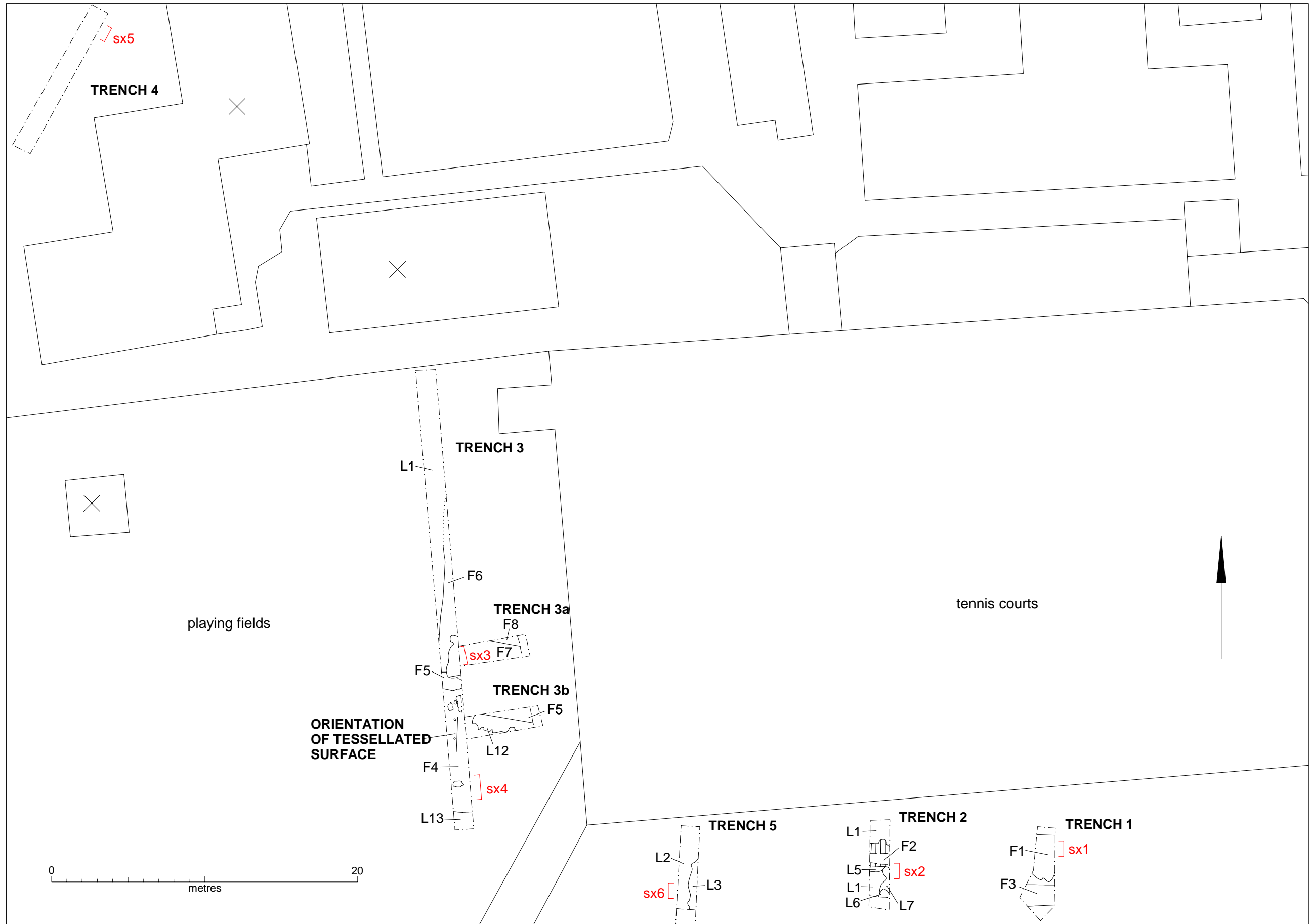


Fig 2 Plan of trenches.



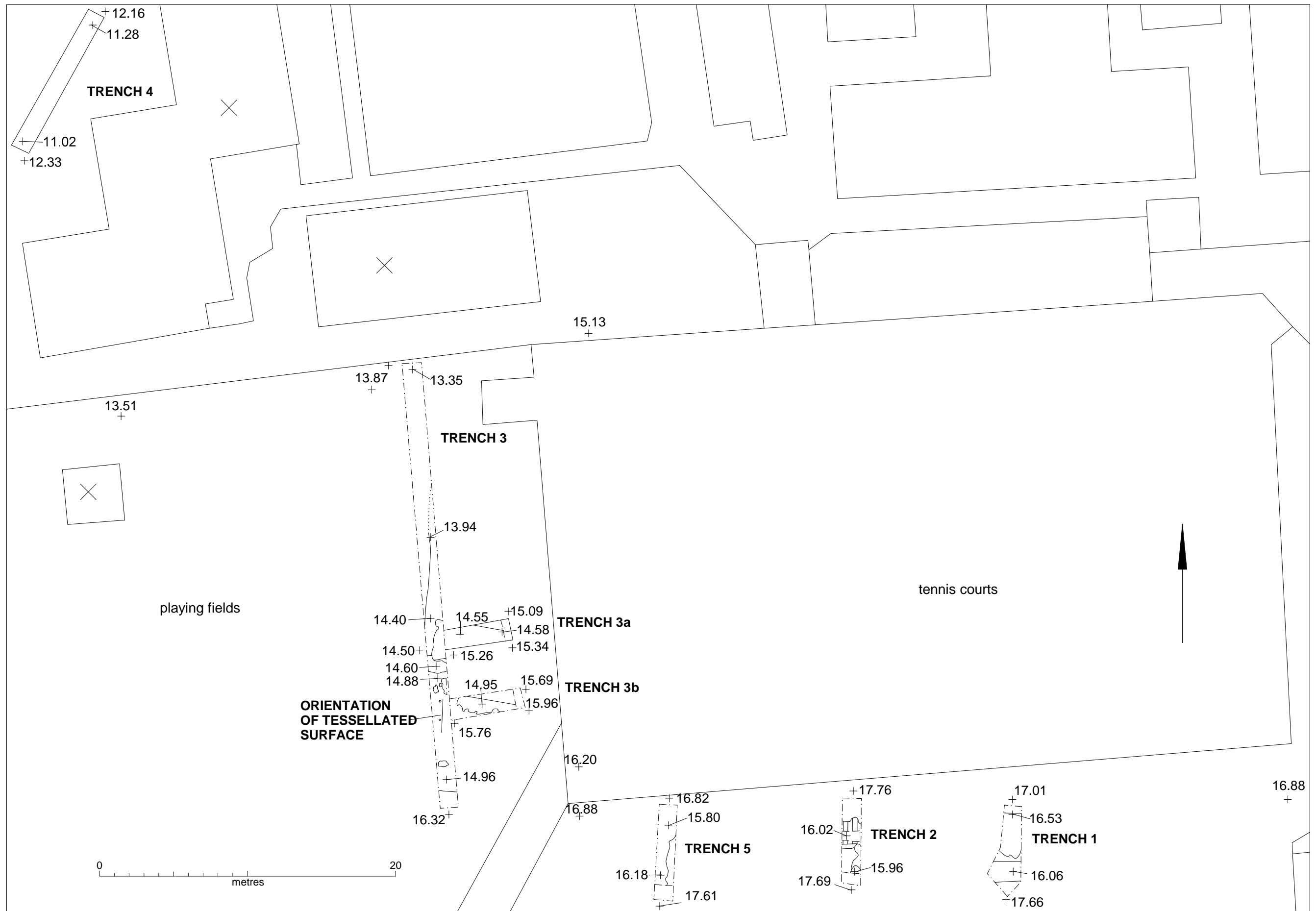


Fig 3 Ordnance Survey levels of the present ground surface and the top of the surviving Roman deposits.

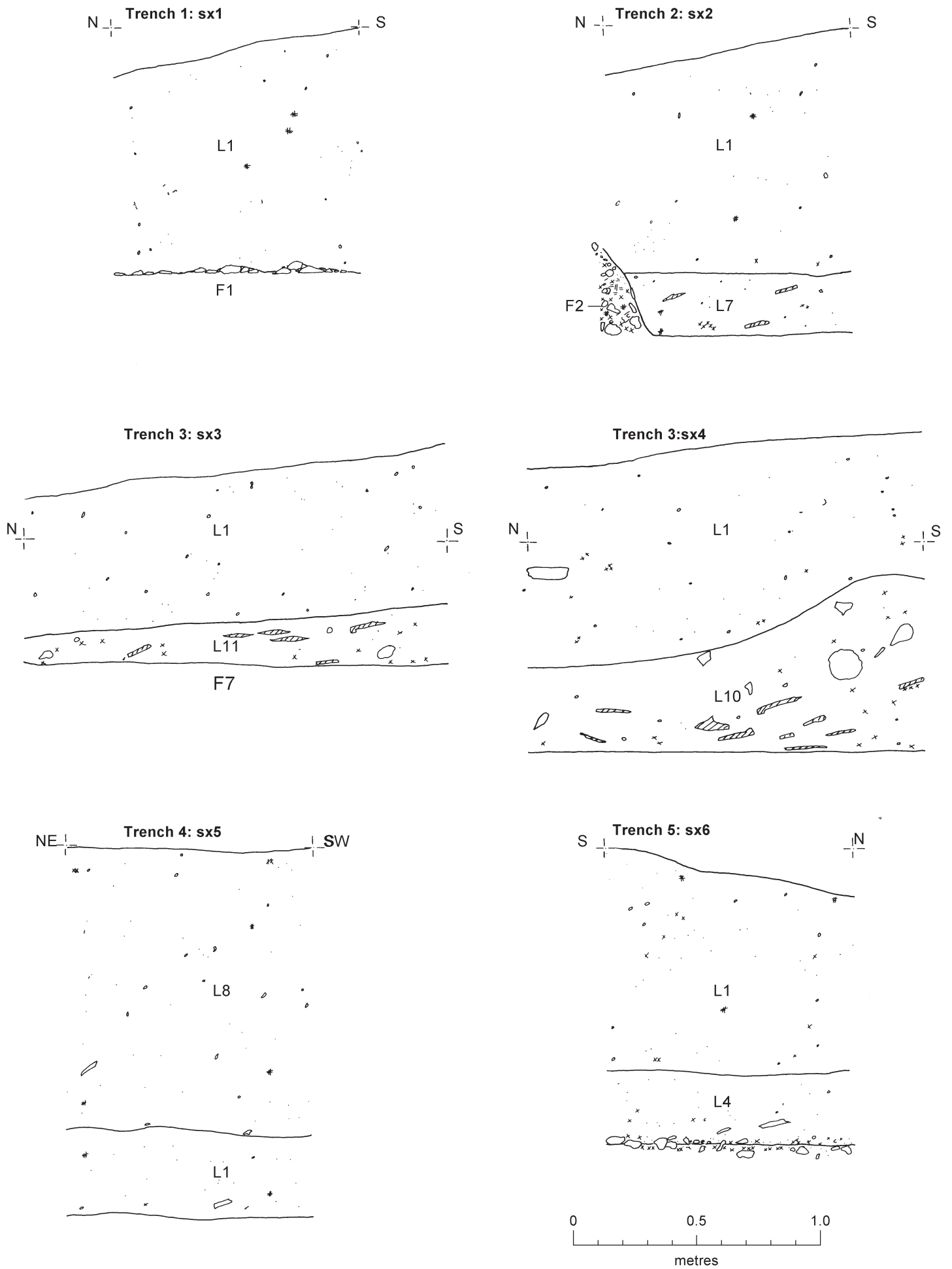


Fig 4 Trench sections.

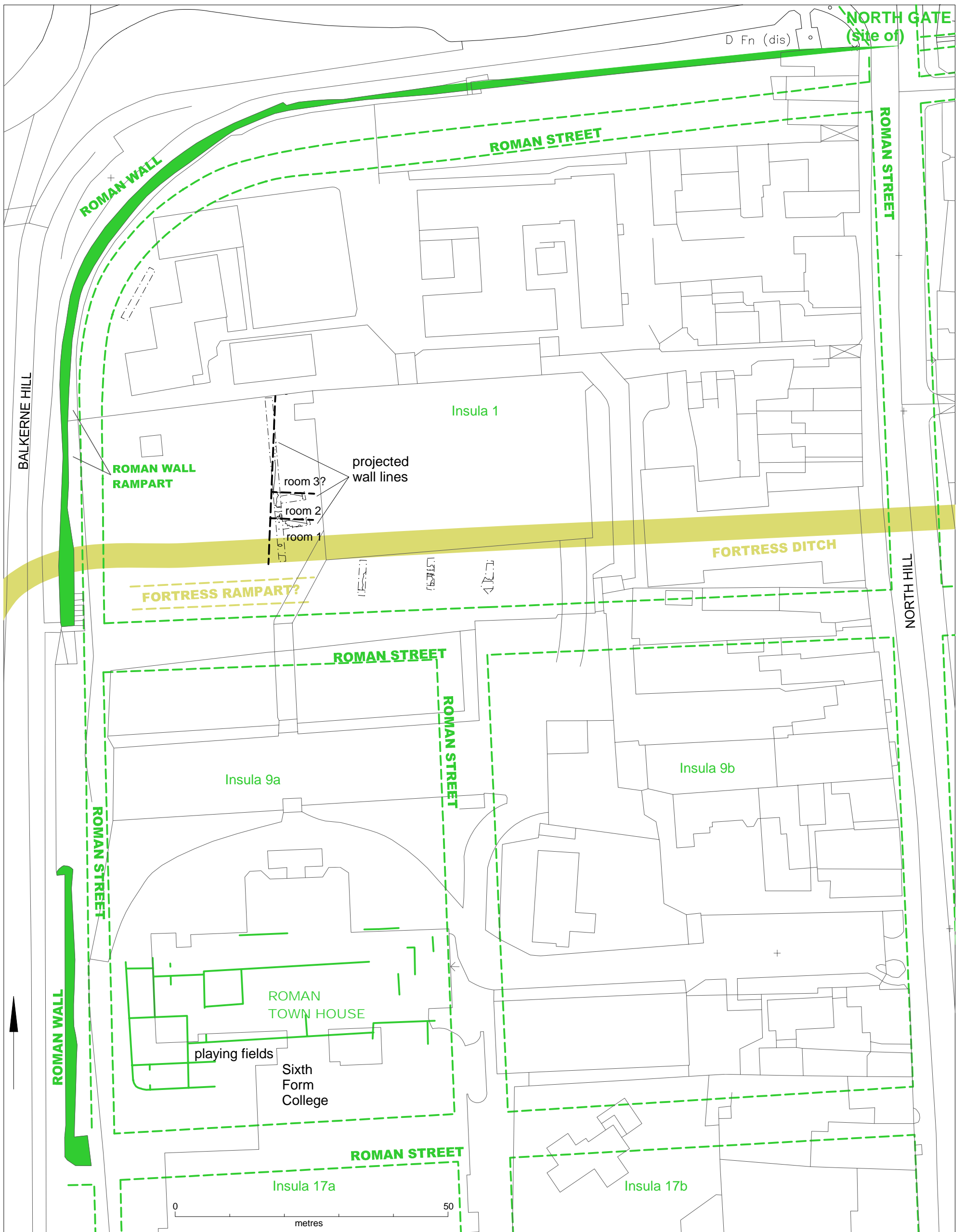
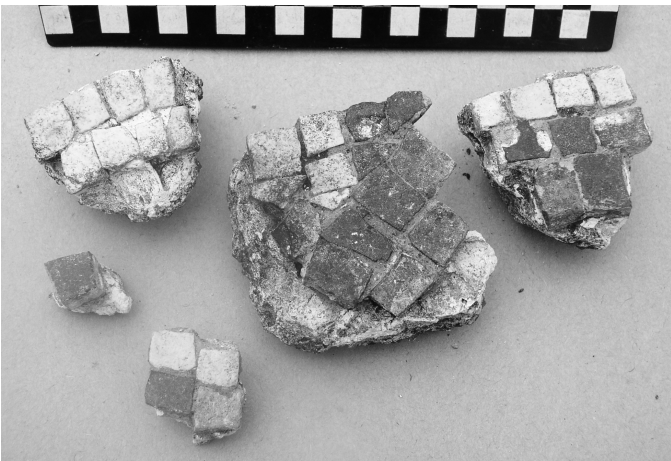


Fig 5 Location of Roman house in the grounds of the Sixth Form College in relation to Insula 1 and the north-western part of the walled Roman town.



**Fig 6 Graffiti (above and centre) and mosaic fragments (below).**

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

**Summary sheet**

<b>Site address:</b> Sixth Form College (mid-site), North Hill, Colchester, Essex	
<b>Parish:</b> Colchester	<b>District:</b> Colchester
<b>NGR:</b> TL 9930 2544	<b>Site code:</b> Museum accession 2004.25
<b>Type of work:</b> Evaluation	<b>Site director/group:</b> Colchester Archaeological Trust
<b>Date of work:</b> December 2003-January 2004	<b>Size of area investigated:</b> 102 square metres
<b>Location of finds/curating museum:</b> Colchester Museums	<b>Funding source:</b> Developer
<b>Further seasons anticipated?</b> No	<b>Related EHCR nos:</b>
<b>Final report:</b> CAT Report 260 and summary in <i>EAH</i>	
<b>Periods represented:</b> Roman buildings	
<p><b>Summary of fieldwork results:</b>  <i>Five evaluation trenches were dug at the Sixth Form College, North Hill, Colchester, Essex in preparation for the design of a new IT building, planned as part of the mid-site development. The majority of the archaeological features recorded were of Roman date, and included tessellated and mortar floors as well as the robbed-out foundations of a Roman town-house.</i></p>	
<b>Previous summaries/reports:</b> N/A	
<b>Author of summary:</b> Ben Holloway	<b>Date of summary:</b> February 2004