

**An archaeological watching brief at  
the Abbey Field sports pitches,  
Circular Road North,  
Colchester, Essex  
December 2005**

**report prepared by  
Ben Holloway**

**on behalf of  
RMPA Services and Atkins Defence**

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Colchester Museums accession code: 2005.152  
NGR: TL 9953 2389 (c)



**Colchester Archaeological Trust**  
12 Lexden Road,  
Colchester,  
Essex CO3 3NF

*tel.:* (01206) 541051  
*tel./fax:* (01206) 500124  
*email:* [archaeologists@catuk.org](mailto:archaeologists@catuk.org)

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Summary sheet

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## 1 Summary

Observations were made during a watching brief at the Abbey Field sports pitches south of Circular Road North, Colchester, Essex. An area 34m x 4m was stripped prior to the construction of a seating stand adjacent to the football pitch. No archaeological features were observed during the stripping although faced blocks of greensand or sandstone were recovered from the subsoil. This building material is likely to have derived from the Roman circus the site of which is 10m to the north of the stripped area. The only identified feature was a modern power cable associated with the floodlights surrounding the pitch.

## 2 Introduction (Figs 1-2)

This is the archive report on an archaeological watching brief carried at the Abbey Field sports pitches during groundworks for a new seating stand, on the 12th and 13th December 2005.

The archaeological watching brief was commissioned by RPS Planning Transport and Environment on behalf of RMPA Services and Atkins Defence. The work was carried out by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) under RPS project management. The project was monitored by the Archaeology Officer of Colchester Borough Council (CBCAO) and RPS.

The investigation followed a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) prepared by RPS in association with CAT, dated September 2005, and agreed by the CBCAO. All fieldwork was done in accordance with a research design prepared by RPS in 2004 (RPS 2004) and a specification agreed with the CBCAO. This report mirrors the standards and practices contained in Colchester Borough Council's *Guidelines on the standards and practice for archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester* (CM 2002) and *Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester Museums* (CM 2003), and the Institute of Field Archaeologists' *Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief* (IFA 1999) and *Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials* (IFA 2001). Other sources used are *Management of archaeological projects*, second edition (MAP 2), *Research and archaeology: a framework for the Eastern Counties 1. Resource assessment* (EAA 3), *Research and archaeology: a framework for the Eastern Counties 2. Research agenda and strategy* (EAA 8), and *Standards for field archaeology in the East of England* (EAA 14).

The proposed seating stand site at the Abbey Field is centred on National Grid Reference or NGR TL 9953 2389, located mid-way along the north-east side of the football pitch (CGG55). This pitch is located immediately adjacent to Circular Road North and to the north-east of the existing all-weather hockey pitch (CGG56) on the western edge of the Abbey Field.

The site is located on the north side of a dry valley which slopes down from north to south to a plateau where the former military hospital was situated. The base of the valley is respected by the Circular Road South running east-west. Drift geology of the area is predominantly sands and gravel. This is occasionally in a clay matrix, and is sometimes capped by cover loam.

## 3 Aims and objectives

The aims and objectives of the archaeological watching brief were to preserve by record any archaeological features or deposits which may be damaged or removed by the groundworks. This watching brief will be seeking the following objectives:

- to establish the presence/absence of human burials
- to establish whether the site is rural or domestic in character
- to establish whether there are any buildings or other structures on site (in the form of post-holes, gullies, etc).

#### 4 Archaeological background

The Abbey Field has traditionally been used for army training with the Cavalry Barracks and Le Cateau Barracks to the west of Circular Road North operative since the 19th century. The watching brief site falls within the north-eastern corner of the Abbey Field. No features are shown in the vicinity of the site of the proposed seating stand on early maps pre-dating the garrison. Map evidence suggests that this area was farmland in the 17th century. The Le Cateau Barracks were built in the early 1860s. The OS 1st edition 1:10,560 map of 1874-76 shows that, after the construction of barrack blocks to the west, the area continued to be open, and used as the drill ground of the Army. The historic maps from 1876 to the present day show no structures within the area of the watching brief. There have been no previous archaeological finds within the site (the Essex Historic Environment Record or EHER held by the Essex County Council (ECC) and the Urban Archaeological Database (UAD) held by Colchester Museums of Colchester Borough Council). However, the archaeological context of the location is now relatively well understood following a series of evaluations and excavations conducted in adjacent areas since 2000 (CAT Report 54; CAT Report 138).

There is some evidence for prehistoric activity in the area: Middle Bronze Age vessels, probably burial urns, were found on the north-western boundary of the Garrison Urban Village redevelopment Area J1 in 1908 (UAD event no 1247). Several Bronze Age to Early Iron Age features were found nearby in 2005 during the Urban Village archaeological excavations for Taylor Woodrow at the former Le Cateau Barracks, adjacent to Le Cateau Road (Area J1 North). In addition, Bronze Age pits were found in 2004 in Areas C1 and C2, of the same project, to the west and south of Flagstaff House respectively (CAT Report 272; CAT report in prep).

Roman Colchester is particularly significant for the study of cemeteries and funerary practice in Britain, because the town started off as a coming together of two different populations, ie the indigenous, largely Romanised British community and an immigrant 'Roman' one, each of which had their own beliefs and funerary practices.

The archaeological context of the north-western part of the Abbey Field itself with regard to further cemetery areas is reasonably well understood. At least 28 Roman burials were found during construction of the athletics ground and sports pitches to the south in 1925 (Hull 1958; UAD event no 1099; TL 9940 2430). Trial-trenching and excavation for the all-weather hockey pitch (immediately to the south) by CAT in 2000 recovered 73 more cremations, some only 300mm below existing ground (CAT Report 97; CAT Report 54; TL 9954 2441). A north-south ditch-defined track was also plotted extending approximately through the middle of this distribution. Further concentrations of Roman burials (a mixture of inhumations and cremations) have been excavated in 2004 and 2005 in Urban Village Area J1 North (360 burials) and Area C2 (66 burials); see Figure 2.

A Roman circus was identified during the archaeological investigations managed by RPS and conducted by CAT in 2004/5 in Urban Village Areas C1, C2 and J1 (Fig 2). In addition, the work by CAT managed by RPS that was funded by the Time Team has confirmed the southern wall line of the chariot-racing arena running through the northern part of the Abbey Field (CAT report in prep). In particular, a trench intersecting the walls was investigated approximately 10m to the north of the proposed seating stand on the current site (Fig 1). The circus was orientated east-west and ran from the garden of the Sergeants' Mess north of Le Cateau Road to terminate in the grounds of Flagstaff House to the east. The double-walled form (ground-fast elements of the stand) of the approximately 450m-long building is now reasonably well understood. The starting gates appear to have been located at the western end of the structure with the semi-circular end at the east end. CAT have also located the probable line of the central barrier ('spina') at the northernmost point of the Abbey Field in September 2005 (CAT report in prep). The southern walls close to the proposed structure appear to have been robbed out, although it is possible that segments of the lower courses of foundation survive locally. The circus is unique within Britain and as such is of national importance.

Significantly, burials appear to have been deliberately distributed around the perimeter of the circus (including the area to the south within the Abbey Field). However, there was a gap of about 20m to the south of the southern circus walls in Area C1, to the east of the proposed seating stand, within which burials were not encountered. To the south, in Area C1, burials were found in high density. Similarly, in Area J East, to the west of the Circular Road North and on the same line of latitude as the proposed seating stand, very few features were encountered in the 20-25m zone to the south of the defined circus walls. It is, therefore, considered possible that the site of the proposed seating stand may lie in a relatively archaeologically 'quiet' area containing mainly demolition debris from the circus. Nonetheless, there remains a potential for burials and/or features such as surfacing or external shops or stalls close to the circus.

## 5 The watching brief

### 5.1 Introduction (Figs 1-3)

An area 34m x 4m was stripped under archaeological supervision to create the base slab for a seating stand adjacent to the Abbey Field football pitch. Table 1 below gives grid co-ordinates for the ends of the stripped area, its length, and heights above Ordnance Datum for modern ground-level and the level of natural subsoil. Next, a summary and list of contexts is given for the stripped area (section 5.2 below). This is followed by a general discussion of the archaeology in section 7.

**Table 1: Trench co-ordinates and heights above OD for modern ground-level and natural subsoil.**

Terminal co-ordinates	Trench length	OD level on ground-level	OD level on natural
NW: 224485 599571 SW: 224458 599593	34m	34.22	33.52

### 5.2 Description of the archaeological sequence

This section gives an archaeological summary of the stripped area with a tabulation of context and finds dating information.

### 5.3 Stripped area: summary (Figs 1, 3, 4)

The stripped area was located on the north-eastern side of the football pitch (Fig 1). No datable archaeological features were identified in the stripped area. Datable residual Roman material was however recovered from the subsoil L2. The only identified feature was a modern cable-trench cutting L2 and L3.

**Table 2: Trench 1 – archaeology.**

Feature or layer no	Type	Dated finds	Phase
L1	Topsoil	Peg-tile fragments (not retained)	modern
L2	Subsoil	Roman pot and building material	post-Roman
L3	Natural	None recovered	-
F1	Cable-trench	Modern brick/peg-tile fragments (not retained)	modern

## 6 The finds

### 6.1 General

The finds are listed in Table 5 (Appendix) which gives descriptions for stratified finds; summaries of the Roman pottery and other material follow below.

### 6.2 The Roman pottery

by Stephen Benfield

A mere 40 grams of Roman pottery was collected. The assemblage contained three sherds of grey ware (Fabric GX) and a single sherd of Colchester colour-coated ware (Fabric CZ). Although the material was very abraded, the material could be accommodated within a date range of 1st-3rd century. (Fabric descriptions are after CAR 10; CAM form numbers are after Hawkes & Hull 1947 and Hull 1958.)

#### Other finds

In addition to the Roman pottery, examples of Roman building material were also recovered. This consisted of greensand or sandstone blocks, and fragments of CBM with *opus signinum* mortar adhering to the surface. The material was residual in the subsoil L2 but is likely to be associated with the Roman circus.

## 7 Discussion

No archaeological features were observed in the course of the watching brief carried out on the soil-stripping prior to the construction of a seating stand at the football pitch at the Abbey Field. Modern disturbance took the form of a cable-trench excavated for floodlights in 2000. When the soil-stripping was complete, a test-pit was dug at the northern end of the stripped area to establish the depth of the natural geological levels (L3). Subsoil (L2) continued for a depth of 250mm before geological sand and gravel was encountered (Fig 4). Finds were recovered from both the test-pit and the general area stripping. These came from the interface between the topsoil (L1) and the subsoil (L2). The material consisted of faced greensand or sandstone blocks and tile fragments, building material which is thought to have derived from the circus the site of which is 10m to the north.

**Table 3: summary of all features.**

(1) number of each context type

(2) that number as a percentage of all contexts

(3) that number as a percentage of cuts only (ie discounting layers).

	topsoils, subsoils, other layers	prehistoric features	Roman features	Anglo-Saxon and medieval features	post- medieval and modern features	undated features	natural features
(1) number	3	0	0	0	1	0	0
(2) as % of all contexts	75	0	0	0	25	0	0
(3) as % of all cuts	-	0		0	100	0	0

## 8 Acknowledgements

The project was commissioned and funded by RMPA Services and Atkins Defence. The project consultants were RPS Planning Transport and Environment. The project was monitored by Martin Winter, the CBCAO. RPS provided EOD cover. The fieldwork was undertaken by Ben Holloway assisted by Chris Lister.

## 9 References

- |                            |         |  |
|----------------------------|---------|--|
| CAR 10                     | 1999    | <i>Colchester Archaeological Report 10, Roman pottery from excavations in Colchester, 1971-86</i> , by R P Symonds and S Wade, edited by P Bidwell and A Croom                               |
| CAT Report 54              |         | An archaeological evaluation at the Garrison sports ground, Circular Road North, Colchester, by Howard Brooks, unpublished CAT archive report, 2000  |
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| CM                         | 2002    | <i>Guidelines on standards and practices for archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester</i>   |
| CM                         | 2003    | <i>Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester Museums</i>   |
| EAA 3                      | 1997    | <i>Research and archaeology: a framework for the Eastern Counties 1. Resource assessment</i> , East Anglian Archaeology, Occasional Papers, <b>3</b> , ed by J Glazebrook                    |
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| Hawkes, C F C, & Hull, M R | 1947    | <i>Camulodunum, first report on the excavations at Colchester 1930-39</i> , RRCSAL, <b>14</b>  |
| Hull, M R                  | 1958    | <i>Roman Colchester</i>  |
| IFA                        | 1999    | <i>Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief</i>  |
| IFA                        | 2001    | <i>Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials</i>  |
| MAP 2                      | 1991    | <i>Management of archaeological projects</i> , second edition (English Heritage)   |
| Masefield, R               | 2002    | The new garrison composite environmental statement   |
| RPS                        | 2002    | <i>Colchester Garrison PFI Health and Safety plan</i>  |
| RPS                        | 2004    | <i>Research design for archaeological investigations for the alienated land, Colchester Garrison</i>   |

## 10 Glossary and abbreviations

Anglo-Saxon	the period from c AD 410 to AD 1066
AOD	above Ordnance Datum
Bronze Age	c 2000 BC-700 BC
CAR	<i>Colchester Archaeological Report</i>
CBCAO	Colchester Borough Council Archaeology Officer
CBM	ceramic building material
context	specific location on an excavation, especially where finds are concerned
cut	an unspecified hole in the ground
EHHER	Essex Historic Environment Record, held by Essex County Council
EOD	Explosive Ordnance Disposal
Iron Age	7th century BC to Roman invasion of AD 43
Late Iron Age	c 200 BC-AD 43
medieval	from AD 1066 to Henry VIII
modern	19th and 20th centuries
NGR	National Grid Reference
post-medieval	after Henry VIII and to the end of the 19th century
prehistoric	pre-Roman, or generally the years BC
residual	something out of its original context (ie a Roman coin in a Victorian pit)
Roman	the period from AD 43 to c AD 410
RPS	RPS Planning Transport and Environment
septaria	local stone used as building material by Romans
<i>tessera</i>	red baked clay cube from Roman floor
UAD	Urban Archaeological Database, held by Colchester Museums

## 11 Archive deposition

The finds, paper and digital archive are held by the Colchester Archaeological Trust at 12 Lexden Road, Colchester, Essex CO3 3NF, but will be permanently deposited with Colchester Museums under accession code 2005.152

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### Distribution list:

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**Colchester Archaeological Trust**

12 Lexden Road,  
Colchester,  
Essex CO3 3NF

tel.: (01206) 541051

tel./fax: (01206) 500124

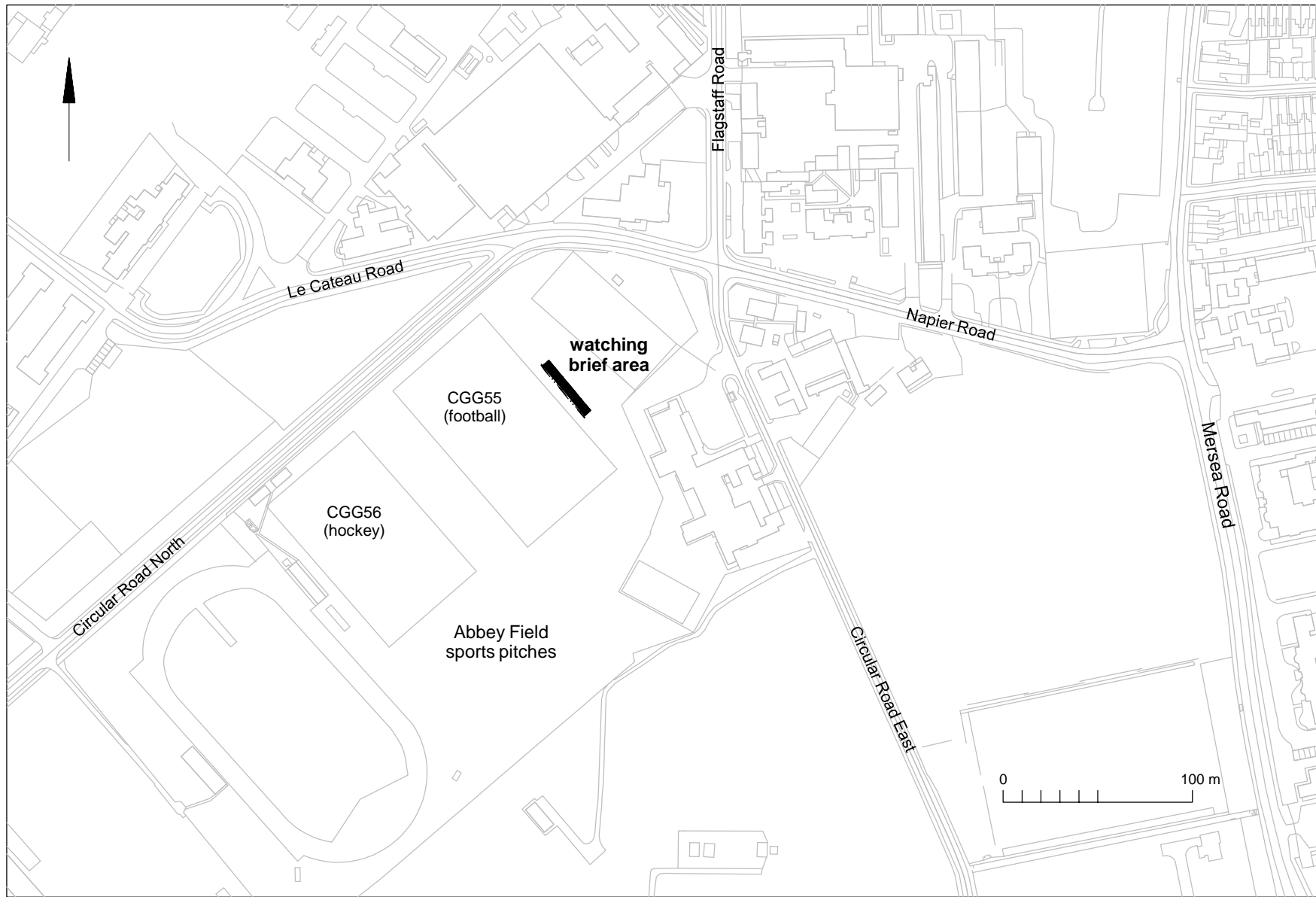
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**Appendix -  
Table 5: finds list.**

<b>Finds bag no</b>	<b>Context</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Weight (g)</b>
1	L2	CBM	191
1	L2	Greensand or sandstone chippings	62
1	L2	<i>Tessera</i> cube	26
1	L2	Roman pot	40
1	L2	Bone	14
2	L2	CBM	842
2	L2	Greensand or sandstone blocks	8,000



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Fig 1 Location of watching brief.

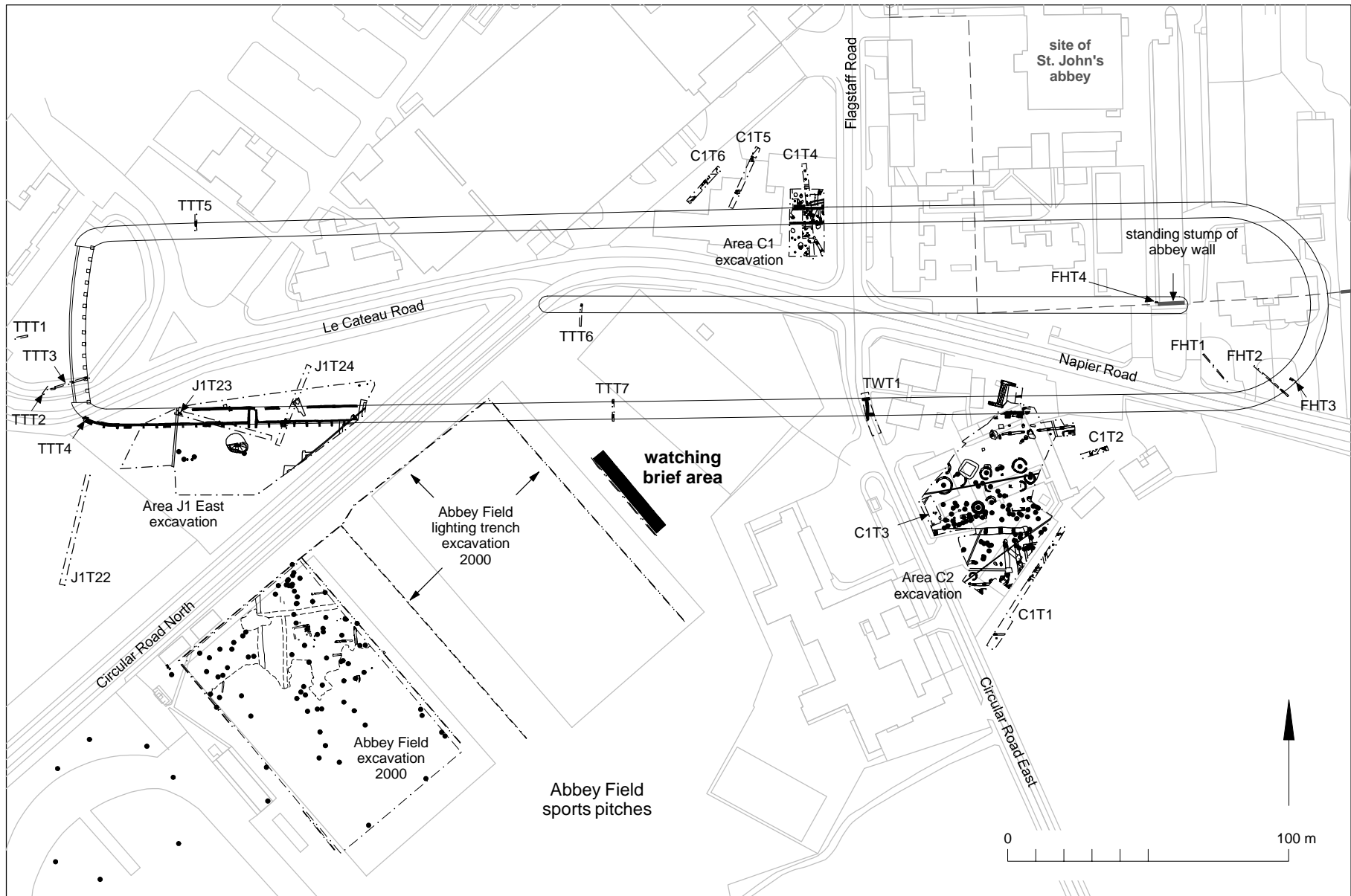
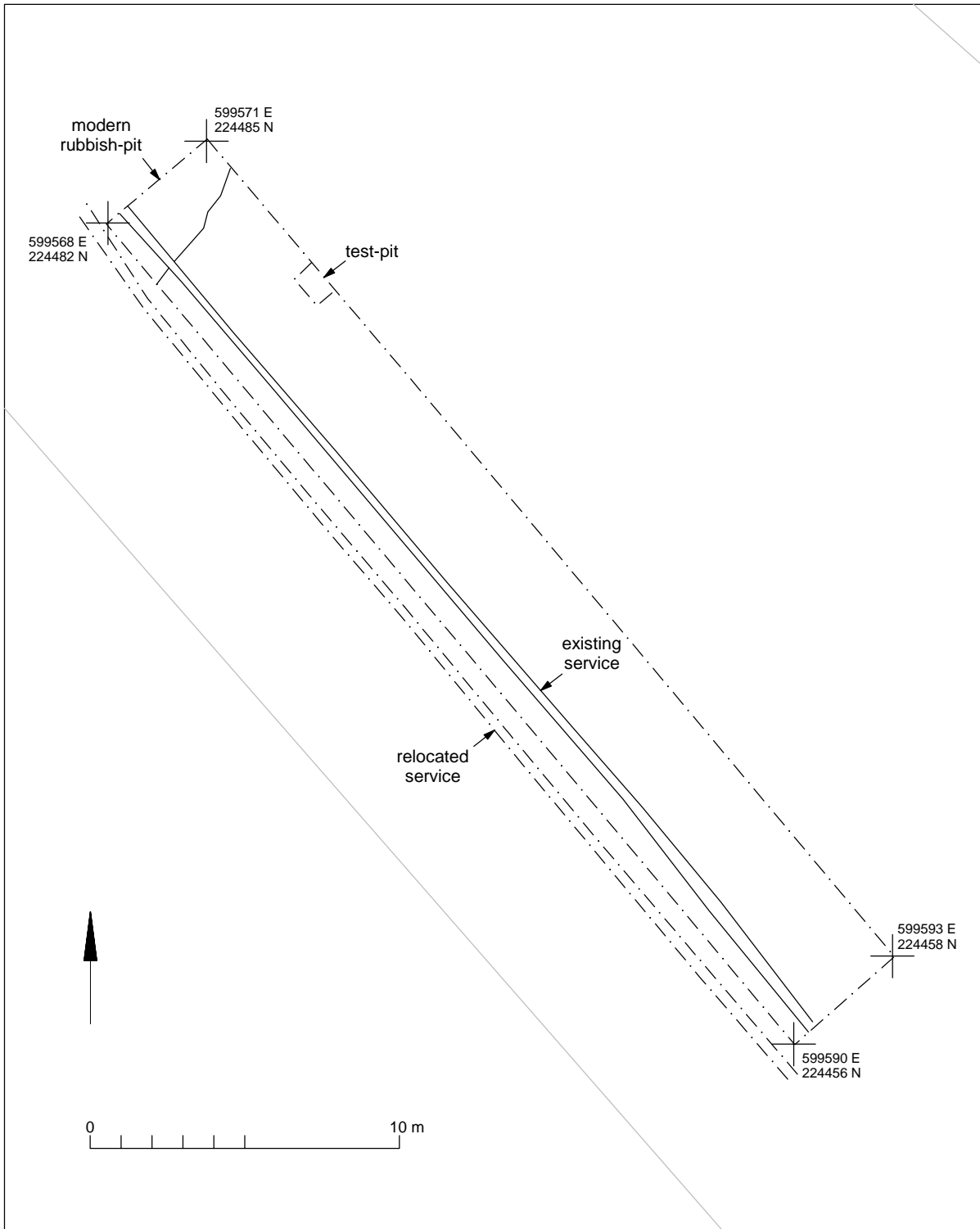


Fig 2 The watching brief in relation to the circus and recent archaeological work.



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Fig 3 Plan of fully stripped watching brief area.

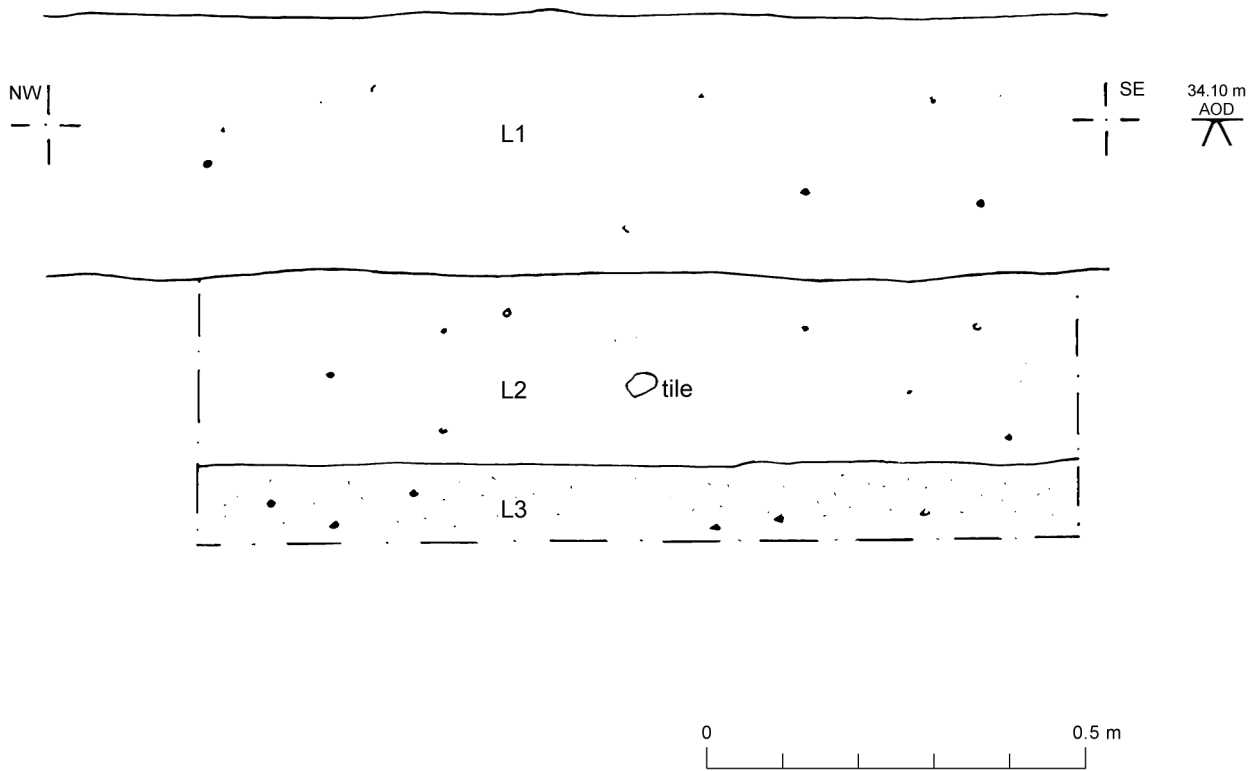


Fig 4 Representative section of stripped area including the test-pit.

**Essex Historic Environment Record/  
Essex Archaeology and History**

**Summary sheet**

<b>Site address:</b> the Abbey Field sports pitches, south of Circular Road North, Colchester, Essex	
<b>Parish:</b> Colchester	<b>District:</b> Colchester
<b>NGR:</b> TL 9953 2389 (centre)	<b>Site code:</b> Museum accession code 2005.152
<b>Type of work:</b> Evaluation	<b>Site director/group:</b> Colchester Archaeological Trust
<b>Date of work:</b> December 2005	<b>Size of area investigated:</b> 136 square metres
<b>Location of finds/curating museum:</b> Colchester Museums	<b>Funding source:</b> Developer
<b>Further seasons anticipated?</b> No	<b>Related EHER nos:</b> 1099
<b>Final report:</b> CAT Report 353 and summary in <i>EAH</i>	
<b>Periods represented:</b> modern disturbance and cable-trench; residual Roman building material (in subsoil) associated with Roman circus	
<p><b>Summary of fieldwork results:</b>  <i>Observations were made during a watching brief at the Abbey Field sports pitches south of Circular Road North, Colchester, Essex. An area 34m x 4m was stripped prior to the construction of a seating stand adjacent to the football pitch. No archaeological features were observed during the stripping although faced blocks of greensand or sandstone were recovered from the subsoil. This building material is likely to have derived from the Roman circus the site of which is 10m to the north of the stripped area. The only identified feature was a modern power cable associated with the floodlights surrounding the pitch.</i></p>	
<b>Previous summaries/reports:</b> CAT Report 97	
<b>Author of summary:</b> Ben Holloway	<b>Date of summary:</b> December 2005