

**An archaeological evaluation at  
the EDF Energy site,  
Osborne Street, Colchester, Essex  
June-July 2006**

**report prepared  
by Donald Shimmin**

**on behalf of  
Colchester Borough Council**

NGR: TL 9988 2488  
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## Summary

*An archaeological evaluation at the EDF Energy site, Osborne Street, Colchester, Essex revealed significant deposits of medieval and later date, including foundations and a wood-lined drain. Roman remains probably survive in the northern half of the site, but were below the depth to which it was possible to excavate. However, a quantity of Roman finds was recovered in later levels as residual material.*

## Introduction

An archaeological evaluation was carried out by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) on behalf of Colchester Borough Council in advance of the proposed redevelopment of an area on the south side of Osborne Street. The EDF Energy site lies at the eastern end of this area, at the junction of Osborne Street and St Botolph's Street (Fig 1; National Grid Reference TL 9988 2488).

This evaluation is part of a long-term fieldwork programme prompted by a need to assess the archaeological implications of the proposed Vineyard Gate regeneration scheme, which affects a large part of the area bounded by the Vineyard Street town wall, St Botolph's Street and Osborne Street.

Descriptions of the excavation and recording methods used may be found in the Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) for the site produced by CAT in June 2006.

This report follows the standards set out in Colchester Borough Council's *Guidelines on standards and practices 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 archaeological field evaluation* (IFA 1999) and *Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials* (IFA 2001). The guidance contained in the documents *Management of archaeological projects* (MAP 2), and *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) was also followed.

## Archaeological background

A recent study divided the Vineyard Gate area broadly into three zones (Johnson *et al* 2003). The high ground in front of the Vineyard Street stretch of the Roman town wall can be seen as a defensive zone containing the Roman and medieval town ditches. Beyond the defences are two zones which were subject to settlement: one on higher ground in Vineyard Street and the other on the lower slopes to the south in the Osborne Street/Arthur Street area. Here relatively wet ground conditions may have influenced the nature of past development.

Excavation took place in 1988-9 on the south side of Osborne Street prior to the construction of the NCP multi-storey car park. It revealed floors belonging to a Roman building at the eastern end of the site (site A; Shimmin 1994; Urban Archaeological Database or UAD no 3028), within the limits of the EDF Energy site. These lay at a depth of 3.0-3.5 m, and were sealed by the well-preserved remains of medieval wicker-lined drains and fences. These deposits were sealed in turn by the remains of a series of later medieval and post-medieval buildings which occupied a plot of land fronting onto St Botolph's Street to the east. At the Stanwell Street end of the site (site C), the excavation exposed the floors of a 16th- to 17th-century timber-framed building which had been destroyed by fire, probably during the Siege of Colchester in 1648.

Roman tessellated floors and cremation burials appear among records of chance discoveries made in the Osborne Street area in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Hull 1958, 244-5 & 294-5). Since these were recorded with varying degrees of precision, their exact locations are in the main uncertain.

A series of archaeological evaluation trenches was dug to the north of Osborne Street between January and May 2004, as part of an assessment of the archaeological potential of the Vineyard Gate area of Colchester (Crossan 2005, 26). These revealed extensive Roman remains, especially towards the western end of Osborne Street. Further east, medieval deposits were partially uncovered at depths of up to 3.5 m and included well-preserved wood, leather and other organic remains. Here the height of the water table prevented excavation down to Roman levels.

## Aims

The aim of the evaluation was to establish and record the depth, extent, date, significance and condition of the archaeological remains surviving on the site. This information could then be combined with the existing knowledge of the site and surrounding area in order to assess the likely impact of the proposed development on the archaeological remains.

## Evaluation trenches

The evaluation involved the excavation of two trenches, each 5m long and 1.4m wide. They were both aligned approximately east-west; one in the southern half (Trench 1) and the other in the northern half (Trench 2) of the site (Fig 1). Both trenches were extended slightly in order to facilitate safe excavation.

The trenches were dug on the 26th and 27th June 2006 by a mechanical excavator with a toothless ditching bucket. The existing surface was removed with the help of a mechanical breaker and the overburden was progressively stripped until levels of archaeological significance were reached. Further excavation was carried out by hand.

### Trench 1

In Trench 1, natural sand and gravel (Layer or L12, L17) was reached at a depth of approximately 1.6 m (16.52 m AOD) below the modern ground-level (Fig 4). This was sealed in places by a thin, sandy, dump layer (L16, L24) which contained both Roman and earlier medieval sherds.

A drain or gully (Feature or F6; Fig 2), 0.65 m wide and 0.5m deep, extended from east to west. The well-preserved remains of part of the wooden base of the feature survived in the bottom at the western end of the trench. From the lower fill of F6 came sherds of 12th- or 13th-century date, as well as numerous fragments of wood. The date of this feature may therefore equate to Period 2a of the 1988-9 excavation (c 1150/75-c 1250). The drain was associated with and sealed by layers of topsoil or 'dark earth' (L9, L10, L11; Fig 4), which in places contained patches of sandy and cassy materials and patches of clayey materials.

The 'dark earth' was sealed by a series of post-medieval and modern make-up layers (L7, L8) containing much brick rubble and including a brick surface. Two modern features (F3, F4; Figs 3-4) were excavated at the eastern end of the trench; F4 contained what appeared to be the sawn-off bottom of a large post, up to 0.36 m in diameter. A modern, ceramic, north-south sewer pipe (F5) was uncovered across the middle of the trench, and was sealed by the existing concrete surface (L6).

### Trench 2

Natural sand and gravel and Roman levels were not reached in Trench 2 due to the depth of these deposits and the difficulties of excavation.

Excavation in Trench 2 was limited to a depth of approximately 1.9 m (15.65 m AOD) below the modern ground-level (Fig 5). The earliest levels reached were thick deposits of post-Roman topsoil or 'dark earth' (L4, L19, L22; Fig 5) interspersed with spreads of sand and gravel (L18, L20, L21) containing a few fragments of mortar and septaria (L23) and oyster shells (L14). The latter may have filled a slight north-south gully across the western half of the trench. The 'dark earth' contained the remains of many wooden stake fragments *in situ* as well as other pieces of wood

including probable roots. The stakes probably formed part of a series of drains and fences similar to those excavated in 1988-9 (Fig 2; Shimmin 1994, 48-9). Finds were fairly sparse but indicate a 13th- to 14th-century date for these deposits, probably equivalent to Period 2b in the 1988-9 excavation (c 1250-c 1350).

Remains of a brick, tile and stone, east-west foundation or footing (F7; Fig 2) were uncovered in the south-east corner of the trench associated with more wooden stakes. These were probably late medieval in date and belonged to an early phase of Building 179 (Shimmin 1994, 49-50).

Several later layers contained brick rubble (L3, L13), probably incorporating demolition debris from post-medieval or Victorian structures on or near the site. A possible post-medieval clay floor (L15) was uncovered on the southern edge of the trench. At the eastern end of the trench, there was a large, north-south, brick and timber foundation (F1; Fig 3), which belonged to the brewery built on the site in the mid 19th century (*ibid*, 51-2). Traces of an east-west brick foundation (F2) extended slightly from the south section. This either belonged to a late phase of Building 179 (*ibid*, 51) or was associated with F1.

Subsequently several thick layers of modern make-up (L2) were dumped on the site. The north-east corner of the 1988-9 excavation trench (ie site A; Fig 3), backfilled with 'hoggin' (L5), was uncovered in the south-west corner of Trench 2, and was sealed by the existing concrete surface (L1).

## Finds

The main categories of finds from the evaluation trenches were pottery, building materials and animal bone. Small quantities of Roman pottery and building materials were recovered from both trenches, residual in later contexts. Several fragments including a *tessera* cube were found immediately above natural sand in Trench 1.

A small quantity of 12th- to 13th-century pottery was recovered from Trench 1, notably from the wood-lined drain F6. Later medieval pottery was excavated from both trenches. The medieval pottery consisted mainly of sandy wares (Fabric 20), although much of a Colchester-type ware (Fabric 21a) jug with combed decoration under a green glaze, of probable 14th-century date, came from L11 in Trench 1. (Fabric descriptions follow those used in *CAR 7*.)

Post-medieval and modern pottery, peg-tile and brick were common in both trenches.

Animal bone was well-preserved and quantities of it came from both trenches. An interesting group from L19 in Trench 2 included a dozen sheep/goat and cattle horn-cores. This provides further evidence for a horn-working industry in the Osborne Street area (Wise 2005, 27).

## Discussion

The evaluation trenches demonstrated that significant archaeological deposits of medieval and later date survive on the site. Roman remains are probably also present, notably in the more northerly Trench 2, but these must survive beyond the limits of excavation of this small trench which was not extensively shored. Organic materials such as wood, bone and leather were well-preserved due to the damp, anaerobic soil conditions, which are unusual in Colchester.

Small quantities of Roman finds were recovered from both trenches, residual in later levels. On the basis of the evidence from the 1988-9 excavation, Roman levels could be expected at a depth of approximately 2.5-3.5 m (14-15 m AOD) below the modern ground-level in Trench 2. A scatter of Roman finds was found immediately above natural sand in Trench 1, although no Roman features were observed. Although only 17 m south of Trench 2, Trench 1 lay further up the slope and natural sand was only 1.6 m below the modern ground-level (approx 16.5 m AOD). It may therefore have been on the edge of extra-mural settlement in this part of Roman Colchester.

A medieval wood-lined drain (F6) was excavated in Trench 1, although the lack of other features suggests that the southern end of the site was also not as densely occupied in the medieval period as the northern part. Only the upper medieval levels were uncovered in Trench 2 and these consisted of topsoil or 'dark earth' associated with numerous wooden stakes and a foundation or footing (F7). These remains indicate that there was extensive medieval occupation in this part of the site, although it may have been situated close to the southern edge of the water-course which in recent times surfaced further east in the grounds of St Botolph's priory.

Rebuilding of the plots, especially over the northern half of the site, continued into the post-medieval and modern periods, and, on the basis of the evidence from the 1988-9 excavation, these buildings would have included features such as ovens, timber-lined pits and mortar-mixing barrels.

## Acknowledgements

The evaluation was funded by Colchester Borough Council, and monitored by Colchester Museums (Philip Wise) and Oxford Archaeological Associates Ltd (Simon Collcutt). We are grateful to EDF Energy for permitting access to the site.

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### **Archive deposition**

The evaluation archive, including the site records, photographs and finds, will be permanently deposited with Colchester Museums under accession code COLEM 2006.80.

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### **Distribution list:**

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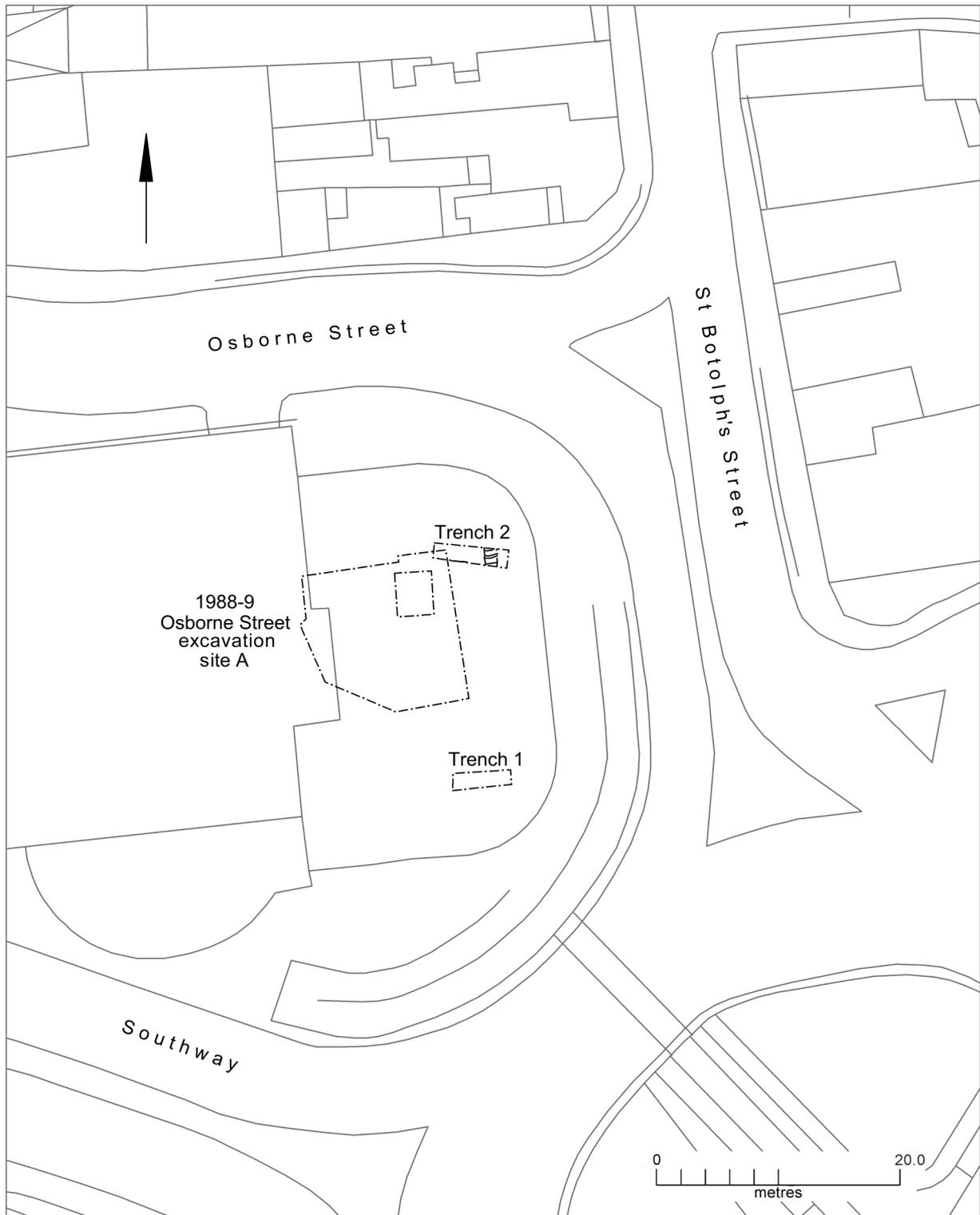


Fig 1 Location of trenches.

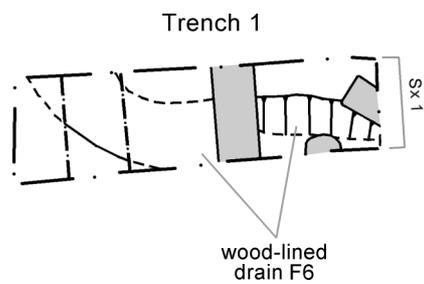
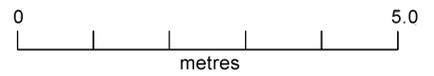
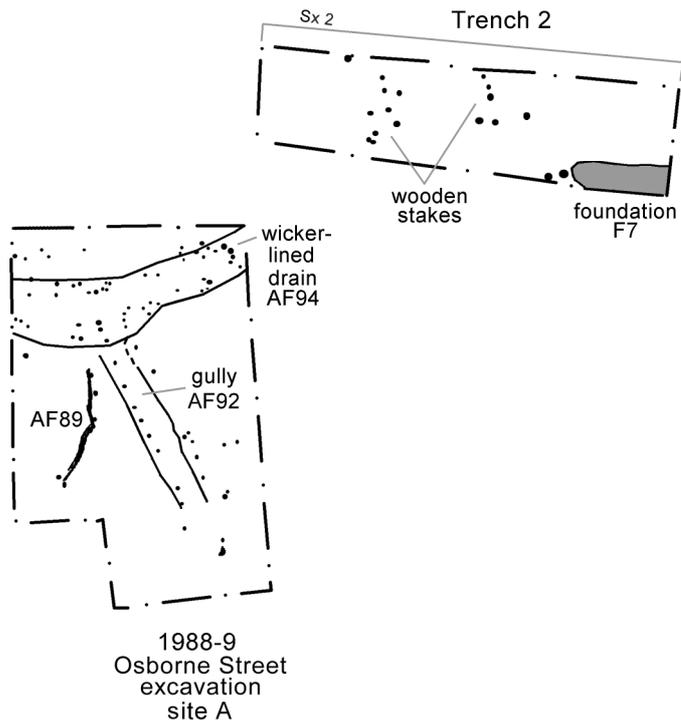


Fig 2 Medieval features.

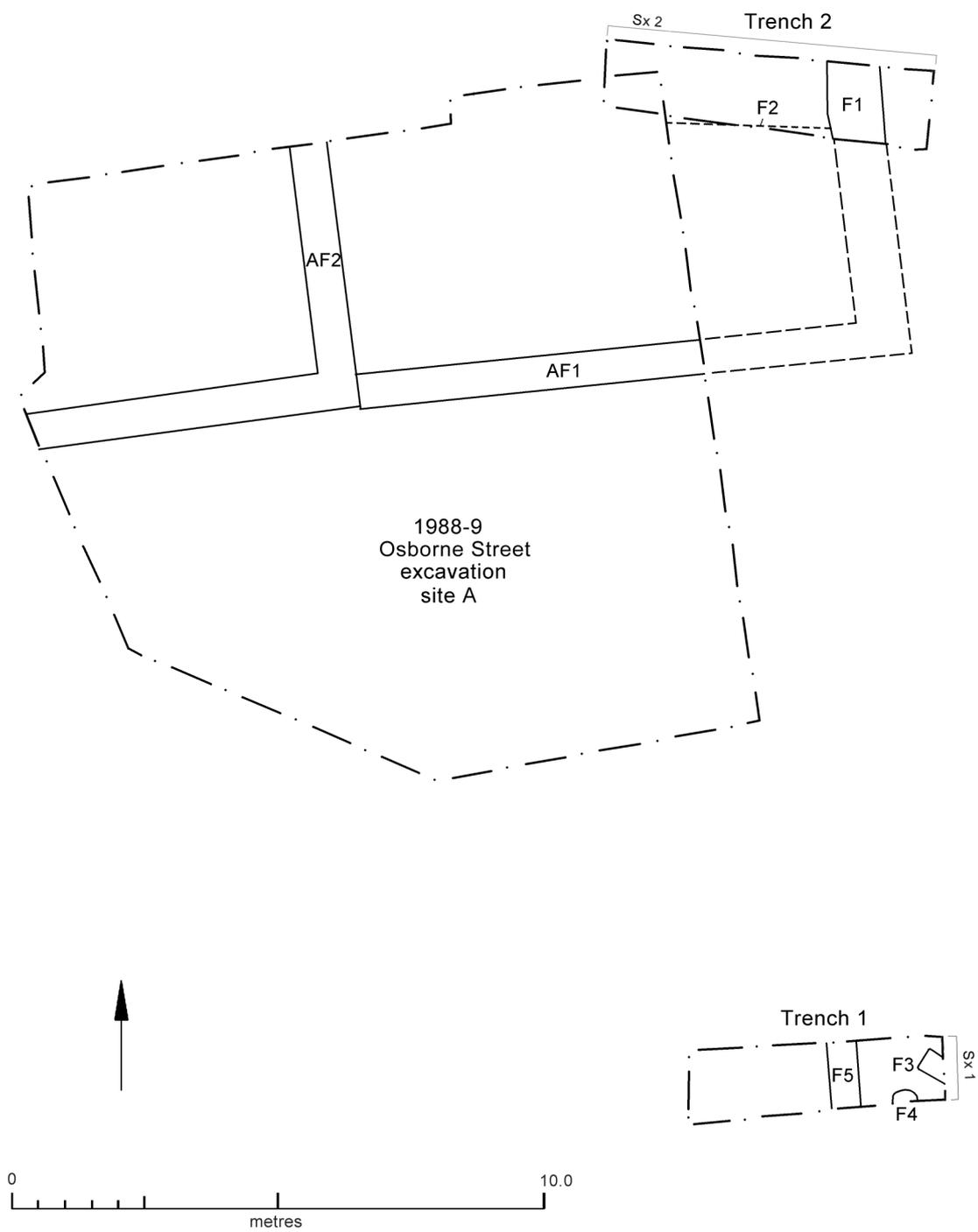
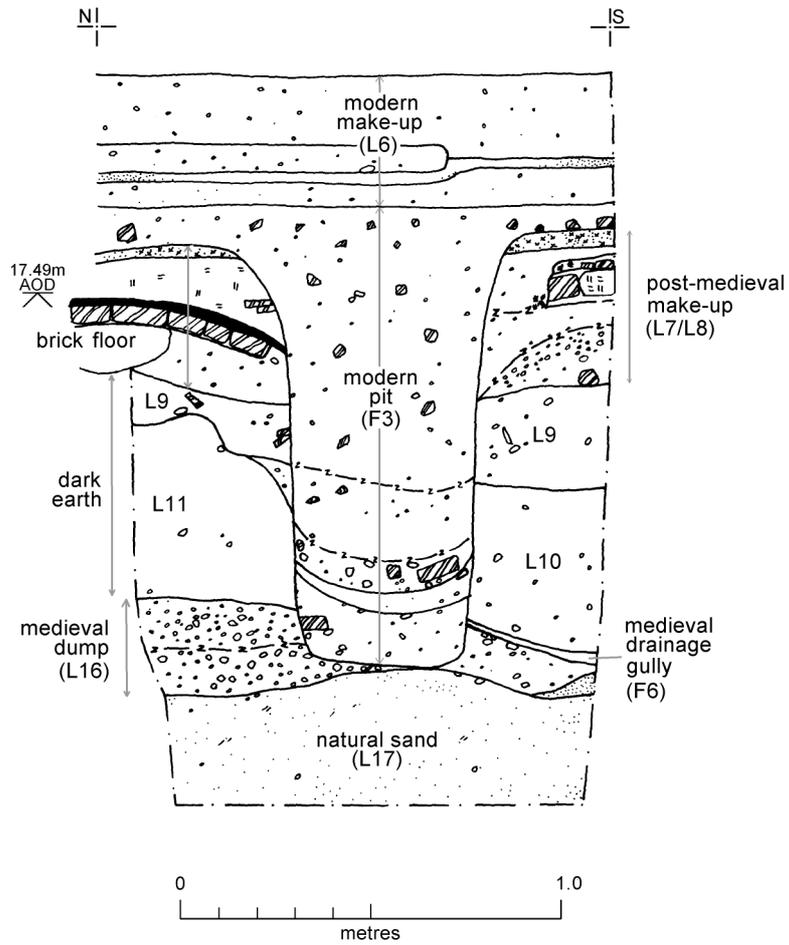
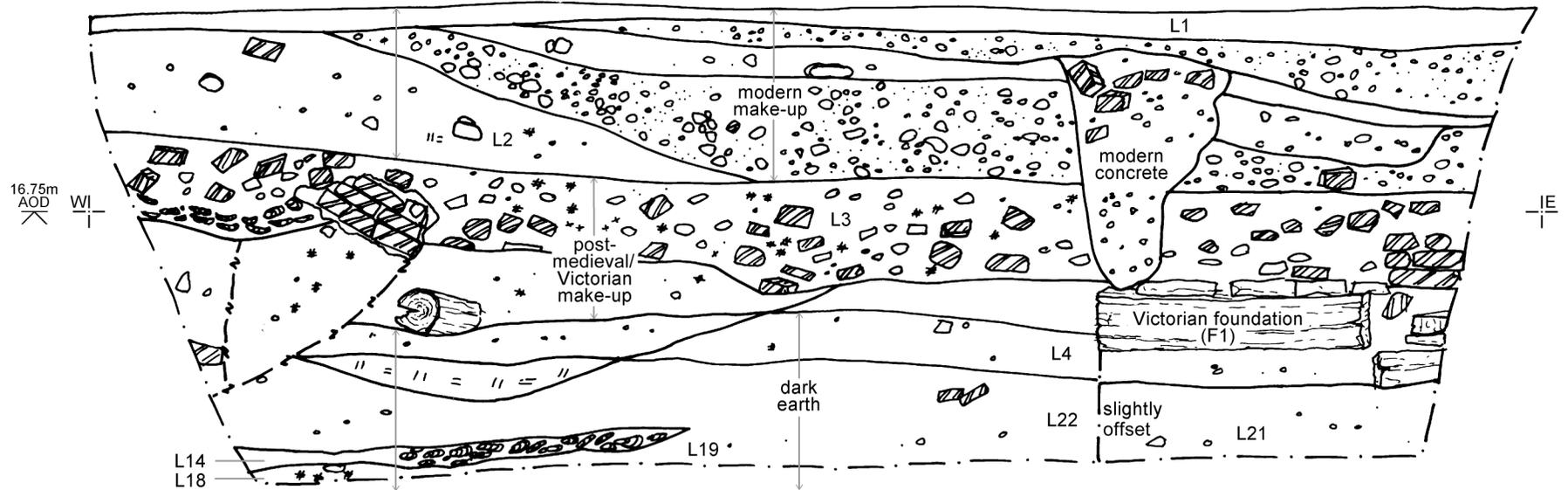


Fig 3 Post-medieval and modern features.



-  sand
-  stone
-  clay
-  post-medieval ceramic building material
-  charcoal fleck
-  thick charcoal
-  mortar

Fig 4 Trench 1: Sx 1.



- sand
- ⊞ stone
- ≡≡≡ clay
- ▨ post-medieval ceramic building material
- ## charcoal fleck
- thick charcoal
- xx mortar

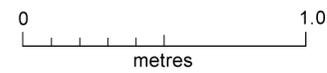


Fig 5 Trench 2: Sx 2.

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

**Summary sheet**

<b>Site address:</b> the EDF site, Osborne Street, Colchester, Essex	
<b>Parish:</b> St Giles	<b>District:</b> Colchester Borough
<b>NGR:</b> TL 9988 2488	<b>Site code:</b> Museum accession code: 2006.80
<b>Type of work:</b> Evaluation	<b>Site director/group:</b> Colchester Archaeological Trust
<b>Date of work:</b> June-July 2006	<b>Size of area investigated:</b> 14 sq m
<b>Location of finds/curating museum:</b> Colchester Museums	<b>Funding source:</b> Colchester Borough Council
<b>Further seasons anticipated?</b>	<b>Related EHER nos:</b>
<b>Final report:</b> CAT Report 378 and summary in <i>EAH</i>	
<b>Periods represented:</b> Roman, medieval and post-medieval	
<b>Summary of fieldwork results:</b> <i>An archaeological evaluation at the EDF Energy site, Osborne Street, Colchester, Essex revealed significant deposits of medieval and later date, including foundations and a wood-lined drain. Roman remains probably survive in the northern half of the site, but were below the depth to which it was possible to excavate. However, a quantity of Roman finds was recovered in later levels as residual material.</i>	
<b>Previous summaries/reports:</b> 'Excavations at Osborne Street, Colchester', by D Shimmin, in <i>EAH</i> <b>25</b> (1994), 46-59	
<b>Author of summary:</b> D Shimmin	<b>Date of summary:</b> August 2006