

**An archaeological evaluation  
by trial-trenching  
at St Helena School,  
Colchester, Essex  
March 2010**

**report prepared by  
Ben Holloway and Howard Brooks**

**on behalf of LCE Ltd**

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

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

**CAT Report 544**  
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## 1 Summary

*The St Helena School site lies on the eastern side of the nationally important Late Iron Age and early Roman site of Sheepen, which is the northern focus of the oppidum of Camulodunum.*

*An evaluation by a single trial trench on the site of a proposed new building has revealed a gravelled surface and a Roman pit. The gravel surface may have been associated with the adjacent Roman Temple 2, whose eastern temenos wall lies 35m to the west, or (less likely) it may have been the surface of a minor gravel road running along the eastern side of the temple temenos.*

*Finds from this evaluation are of early Roman date, which is in keeping with other finds from Sheepen and the St Helena School site.*

## 2 Introduction

This is the archive report on the archaeological evaluation by trial-trenching carried out on behalf of LCE Ltd by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) at St Helena School, Sheepen Road, Colchester, Essex. Site centre was at NGR TL 9651 5590.

The site is currently occupied by the former caretaker's house and its associated fenced garden. Proposed works involve the demolition of the caretaker's house, and the construction of a new dyslexic unit with a larger footprint.

A brief describing the required archaeological work (CBC 2009) was produced by Mr Martin Winter, the Colchester Borough Council Archaeological Officer (CBCAO). In response to this brief, CAT wrote a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI), essentially a description of our proposed evaluation methodology, which was approved by CBCAO (CAT 2010).

All archaeological site work was carried out in accordance with CBC 2009 and CAT 2010 on 15th March 2010.

This report mirrors standards and practices contained in the Institute for Archaeologists' *Standard and guidance for archaeological field evaluation* (IfA 2008a) and *Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials* (IfA 2008b), and Colchester Borough Council's *Guidelines on standards and practices for archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester* (CIMS 2008a) and *Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester and Ipswich Museums* (CIMS 2008b). Other sources used are *Management of research projects in the historic environment* (MoRPHE) and *Standards for field archaeology in the East of England* (EAA 14).

## 3 Archaeological background (Fig 1)

- 3.1 The site lies on the eastern side of the important Late Iron Age and early Roman settlement known as Sheepen (Scheduled Ancient Monument no 46). Extensive excavations there in the 1930s and smaller-scale work in 1970 and later have produced evidence of workshops engaged in a range of industrial activities including metal-working, enamelling, pottery-making and leather-working (Hawkes & Hull 1947; Niblett 1985, *The Colchester Archaeologist*, **22** (2009) 2-7).
- 3.2 A late 1st-century temple was excavated by the Colchester Excavation Committee in 1935 on the site then about to be developed as St Helena School (Hull 1958, 224-34). The temple site consists of a Romano-Celtic temple (Temple 2 in the series of Colchester Temples) occupying a site slightly north of centre within the *temenos* (a sacred space defined by an outer precinct wall). Immediately north of the north wall of the *temenos* is Building 159. This was discovered in 1976 (CAR 6, 345-6), and although absolute proof is lacking, its position means that it is a reasonable hypothesis that it was connected with the temple site (perhaps as

lodging for a priest or for visitors, or as a shop). The relationship between the school, modern roads, and Roman remains can be seen on Fig 1.

- 3.3** There have been a number of recent projects at St Helena School. In connection with the a proposed extension of the western and southern edges of the Drama Block, an evaluation in November 2007 found three cut features dating to the 1st century AD (CAT Report 351). This was followed by an excavation in June 2006 on of the footprint of the Drama block extension (CAT Report 384). This project involved the excavation of pits, ditches and gullies dating to AD 5-60 and connected with the domestic and industrial activity on the Sheepen site.
- 3.4** Watching briefs on minor works such as cable laying have taken place in October 2005 (CAT Report 349), and in July-August 2007 (CAT Report 451). Generally speaking, the contractors' works observed by these two watching briefs did not result in the digging of trenches deep enough to penetrate to significant archaeological levels.
- 3.5** The largest-scale archaeological intervention in the last 10 years took place in 2007 when CAT excavated six trial trenches (coincidentally around the caretaker's house) in connection with a proposal to extend the car-park (CAT Report 414). The six trenches are marked on Fig 1 as "2007 T1-T6". Two of the trench positions were within the *temenos* (2007 T1-T2), and four were to its east (2007 T3-6). The eastern *temenos* wall was identified in its expected position at the east end of 2007 T1, and the other trenches revealed Roman pits, ditches and a metalled surface.

#### 4 Aim

The aim of the evaluation was to establish the character, extent, date, significance and condition of any archaeological remains likely to be affected by the development.

#### 5 Results (Figs 1-3).

A single evaluation trench (T1) was positioned to the south of the caretaker's house. Using a tracked excavator under archaeological supervision, the following horizons were removed mechanically: modern topsoil L1 (300-400mm thick), and an accumulated soil layer L2 (300mm thick). L2 sealed archaeological deposits and, at the western end of the trench, natural L3.

##### T1: summary

The evaluation trench was located. The trench contained three archaeological features, a compacted gravel surface (F1), a pit (F2), and modern service run (F3).

Patches of gravel (F1) were exposed throughout the full the trench. The more highly consolidated gravel was at the east and west ends of the trench, the gravel in the centre of the trench having been eroded or truncated by pit F2. Pit F2 contained a large group of Roman pottery (see pottery report below).

A modern service-run (F3) had truncated the archaeological deposits along the whole of the southern side of the trench.

##### Trench 1 – contexts and finds dating.

Context no	Context type	Dated finds	Period
F1	compacted gravel surface	Roman pottery and tile	Roman
F2	pit	Roman pottery and tile	Roman
F3	service run	modern brick, concrete (not retained)	modern
L1	Topsoil/turf	-	modern
L2	Accumulated soil	-	post-Roman
L3	Silty clay (cover-loam?)	-	-

## 6 Finds

### 6.1 Roman pottery

by Stephen Benfield

#### Introduction

In total 50 sherds of Roman pottery weighing 708g were recovered during the evaluation. This pottery has been recorded using the Roman pottery fabric type series devised for *CAR 10* in which the fabrics are recorded as two letter codes. These letter codes, together with the full fabric name, are set out in Table 1. In addition the fabric Romanising coarse ware (Fabric RCW) has been introduced and this fabric is described below. The number of sherds and weight recorded for each fabric type was recorded and is presented in Table 1. The pot forms were recorded, where possible, using the Camulodunum (Cam) pottery form type series (Hawkes & Hull 1947, Hull 1958). Samian vessels are recorded using Dragendorff (Dr) form numbers, or other common form-type references following those used in Webster 1996. Dating of the pottery broadly follows the dating of pottery fabric and forms in *CAR 10*. A full catalogue of all of the Roman pottery, listed by find number for all of the numbered contexts and unstratified material is contained in the site archive.

Fabric RCW, Romanising coarse wares. Surfaces are generally dark. The fabric is commonly grey-brown with red-brown margins and contains fragments of burnt organic matter and grog. The fabric sometimes has a tendency to laminate (Hawkes & Hull 1947, 206-7 & Niblett 1985, 52 Fabric B).

Fabric code	Fabric name	sherds	wt. g.
AA	amphoras, all (excluding Dressel 20 and Brockley Hill/Verulamium region amphoras)	4	177
BA	plain samian forms	0	0
SG	South Gaulish plain samian (La Graufesenque)	5	43
CZ	Colchester and other red colour-coated wares	1	4
DJ	coarse oxidised and related wares	20	259
GX	other coarse wares, principally locally-produced grey wares	6	11
HZ	large storage jars and other vessels in heavily-tempered grey wares	1	55
RCW	Romanising coarse ware	11	90
TZ	mortaria, Colchester and mortaria imported from the Continent	1	64
UR	terra nigra-type wares	0	0
LTC	local traded coarse ware	1	5
	total	50	708

**Table 1: Roman pottery, showing quantity by sherds and weight for each fabric type**

#### The pottery

The pottery was recovered from three contexts. These contexts are a gravel surface F1 (31 sherds weighing 441g); a pit F2 (18 sherds weighing 263g) and an accumulation layer L2 (1 sherd weighing 4g). The condition of the pottery from the features (F1 & F2) is generally good, but with some abrasion to the coating of the samian sherds. There are also some joins between sherds within the features. The pottery does not appear to have been freshly broken, but equally does not appear to be a collection of old sherds which have lain exposed for any significant amount of time. However, the single sherd from L2 is quite abraded. Given the condition of the other pottery this abrasion does not appear to be influenced by the soil conditions and probably indicates a long depositional history before being incorporated into this context. Overall the average sherd weight is about 14g.

The pottery from F1 & F2 can be discussed together as this appears to be of similar early Roman date and a few sherds from these two contexts may also be parts of the same pot. Definite imports from abroad consist of sherds of samian and amphoras.

The small quantity of samian, represented by sherds from a minimum of three pots, is all South Gaulish and of 1st century date. The samian pots represented are two different cups of form Dr 27, sherds from which came from F1 & F2 and the base from another cup, probably of form Dr 24/25 or Ritterling 8, from F1. The surviving part of the base has one end of the impression from a name stamp block but no lettering can be made out. Both the forms Dr 24/25 and Ritterling 8 can be dated to the pre-Flavian period (c AD 43-69). There are sherd from at least two amphoras, all of which were recovered from F2. One amphora is probably of Gaulish type and cannot be closely dated. The other, which is probably a wine amphora of form Dressel 2-4, almost certainly dates to the 1st-early 2nd century. A single sherd may be part of a 'carrot' amphora, of form Cam form 189 or possibly kingsholme form 117, and if so would date to the 1st century.

The remainder of the pottery from F1 & F2 is probably of local production and consists mostly of sherds of coarse oxidised wares (Fabric DJ) and black surfaced Romanising coarse ware (Fabric RCW). Forms recorded in Fabric DJ are a ring-necked flagon of form Cam 154 (dated Claudio-Neronian) from F1 and rim sherds from a reed-rimmed bowl of form Cam 243-244/246 (dated 1st-early 2nd century) single sherds of which came from both features. Only one form could be tentatively identified in Fabric RCW, this is a large narrow-mouth jar Cam 231-232 which came from the surface F1. Most of the sherds of Romanising coarse ware are probably part of this one pot, although the neck sherd from a bowl is also present. One other sherd can be closely dated. This is from the rim of a platter or dish of form Cam 27 (Fabric UR LTC) which came from F2 and is of 1st century date. In addition there are a few sherds of Roman grey ware (Fabric GX) as well as single sherds from a mortarium (Fabric TZ) and a large storage jar (Fabric HZ).

It is possible that some of the samian sherds of form Dr 27 recovered from F1 & F2 are part of the same cup and this is also the case with the reed-rimmed bowl rim (Cam 243-244/246) sherds recovered from the two features.

However, it should be noted that there are differences in the pottery from the these two contexts (F1 & F2). The largest fabric group among the pottery from the pit (F2) is the Roman Fabric DJ, which includes bases from two flagons which cannot be closely dated other than as 1st-2nd century. Also, the few early dated sherds from F2 are mostly small and as two or three sherds from the two features appear to be parts of the same pot, these sherds might be disturbed from F1.

The single sherd from the accumulation layer (L2) is of Colchester colour-coated ware and is current from the early 2nd century to mid-late 3rd century.

### **Roman pottery discussion**

Overall the pottery from both the gravel surface (F1) and the pit (F2) can be dated to the early Roman period. The sherds of Romanising coarse ware from F1 could date to the Late Iron Age while of some of the other sherds are, or are probably of pre-Flavian date. This is in keeping with larger assemblages recovered form close to this area (Hawkes & Hull 1947, Niblett 1985). However, the small quantity of pottery inhibits such close dating with any real confidence and a more general dating of 1st century is probably to be preferred. Also, the pottery from F2 is dominated by sherds from Roman flagons which cannot be more closely dated than 1st-2nd century. A small number of the early dated sherds from the two features appear to be parts of the same pot and these, together with the other early date sherds in F2 might be disturbed from F1. As such, while there are no sherds present which can be closely dated to the 2nd century or later, the pit F2 might possibly be of a later date.

## 6.2 Roman brick and tile

by Stephen Benfield

### Introduction

A total of 22 pieces of Roman tile and brick, together weighing 962g, were recovered. In this report all of this material is referred to in a general way as tile, except in specific instances where Roman brick could be specifically identified. Almost all of the tile is in red coloured sandy fabrics. The type of tile, where this could be identified, was recorded, as well as the thickness of the tile and any cut-aways and distinguishing features. Otherwise, nondescript pieces were simply recorded as Roman brick or tile (rbt). A full quantification is given in the site archive.

### The Roman tile

The largest quantity (12 pieces weighing 438g) was recovered from the gravel surface (F1). The pit (F2) produced slightly less (7 pieces weighing 308g) and the accumulation layer (L2) produced a smaller quantity again (3 pieces weighing 216g). Most of the tile consists of undistinguished pieces of Roman brick or tile (rbt). Some of these pieces (rbt) from F1 and L2 were noted as abraded.

There is one *tegula* lower cut-away. This came from the fill of the pit (F2). Only the cut-away itself remained, but this was sufficient to identify it as Warry's Type C5 (2006, fig 1.3). Warry (*ibid*, 63) suggests that this type of cut-away can be dated to c AD 160-260. The thickness of the tile base, measured from the scar at the side edge, is 21 mm.

The remaining tile could only be identified based on thickness or shape. Three pieces could be identified as *imbrex* because of their curvature. These were all recovered from F1 and varied in thickness between 15 & 18 mm. Pieces of flat tile which, based on the recorded thickness, are mostly probably from *tegulae* were recovered from all three contexts. In total there are six pieces, however that they are from *tegulae* cannot be confirmed as there are no flanges on any of them. Their thickness varied between 14 mm and 21 mm, although only one piece, from L2, was over 18 mm thick. In addition, one piece of tile from L2 may be part of a Roman brick or flat tile as it is 34 mm thick.

### Roman brick and tile discussion

The tile recovered during the evaluation, although only a small collection of pieces is of some interest as much of it comes from features which produced pottery dated to the early Roman period of the 1st century and which might be pre-Flavian. A recent study of Roman *tegula* tiles has suggested that different forms of lower cut-away types form a typological development which can be used to help date the tiles (*ibid*, 63). The lower-cut away from the fill of the pit F2 is of Warry's Type C5, which he dates to the period of the mid 2nd-mid 3rd century. It should be noted that the although the pottery from this context (F2) is dated as 1st century, it may possibly date later. However, lower cut-aways of this Type (C5) are recorded from a Boudican context at the Lion Walk site, Colchester (CAR 3, Micofiche Appendix 5 fig 203 E). The thickness of the base of *tegula* has also been proposed as a guide to the date of these tiles in Colchester, with tiles less than approximately 20 mm thick only becoming common in the later 2nd century (Black 1998 & forthcoming). However, it can be noted that most of the tile pieces here that are probably *tegulae* bases and which were recovered from both F1 & F2 are less 20 mm thick. While the pit F2 might possibly date to after the Early Roman period, the pottery associated with F1 is more closely dated to the 1st century and is possibly pre-Flavian.

### 6.3 Animal bone

by Adam Wightman

#### L2

*Finds number 2*

Infant cattle, left metacarpal, 22.7g. No evidence of butchery or modification

#### F1

*Finds number 3*

Cattle molar, not well-preserved. 3 fragments, 10.6g. Minimum number of elements (MNI) = 1.

## 7 Discussion

The archaeological context of this site is interesting and important: it is situated on the Sheepen site, and it is close to Roman Temple 2 and its *temenos* wall.

The evaluation trench revealed a consolidated gravel surface and a Roman pit. The pottery from the pit is of early Roman date, which is in common with previous finds from the St Helen School site in particular and Sheepen in general.

The early Roman pit implies that the gravel surface is also of early Roman date. There are several ways in which this gravel surface can be interpreted. It may have simply been a gravel surface whose function (domestic or industrial?) is unclear, or it may have been associated with the temple. A gravel surface revealed by Trench 1 of the 2007 evaluation, within the *temenos* and on its eastern side (CAT Report 414) shows that there are gravel surfaces in this area.

An alternative interpretation is the gravel may have been the surface of a Roman road. Recent excavations at St Mary's Hospital (*The Colchester Archaeologist* 16 (2003)), and at the Colchester Institute site (*The Colchester Archaeologist* 22 (2009) 2-7), have shown that Sheepen was served by a network of gravel roads. Whether or not the gravel uncovered in 2010 is part of such a road can only be proven by future work.

## 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 and Ipswich Museums under accession code COLIM 2010.11.

## 9 Acknowledgements

The Trust would like to thank the LCE Architects Ltd (Mr J Scrivener) for commissioning and funding the evaluation.

The fieldwork was conducted by C Lister and B Holloway. The project was monitored by Martin Winter on behalf of Colchester Borough Council.

## 10 References

Note: all CAT reports, except for DBAs, are available online in .pdf format at <http://cat.essex.ac.uk>

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## 11 Glossary

CIMS	Colchester and Ipswich Museums
context	specific location on an archaeological site, especially one where finds are made, usually a layer or a feature
EHER	Essex Historic Environment Record, held by the ECC
feature	an identifiable thing like a pit, a wall, a drain, a floor; can contain 'contexts'
IfA	Institute for Archaeologists
<i>imbrex</i>	half-tube Roman roof tile designed to cover flanges of <i>tegula</i>
layer	distinct or distinguishable deposit of soil
medieval	period from AD 1066 to Henry VIII
modern	period from the 19th century onwards to the present
natural	geological deposit undisturbed by human activity
NGR	National Grid Reference
residual	out of context, ie Roman coin in Victorian pit
Roman	the period from AD 43 to AD 410, approximately
RRCSAL	Report of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London
<i>tegula</i>	flat Roman roof tile with upright flanges along both sides
UAD	Urban Archaeological Database, held by Colchester and Ipswich Museums

## Colchester Archaeological Trust 2010

### Distribution list:

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**Colchester Archaeological Trust**

12 Lexden Road,  
Colchester,  
Essex CO3 3NF

*tel.:* (01206) 541051  
(01206) 500124

*email:* [archaeologists@catuk.org](mailto:archaeologists@catuk.org)

*Checked by:* Philip Crummy  
*Date:* 09.04.10

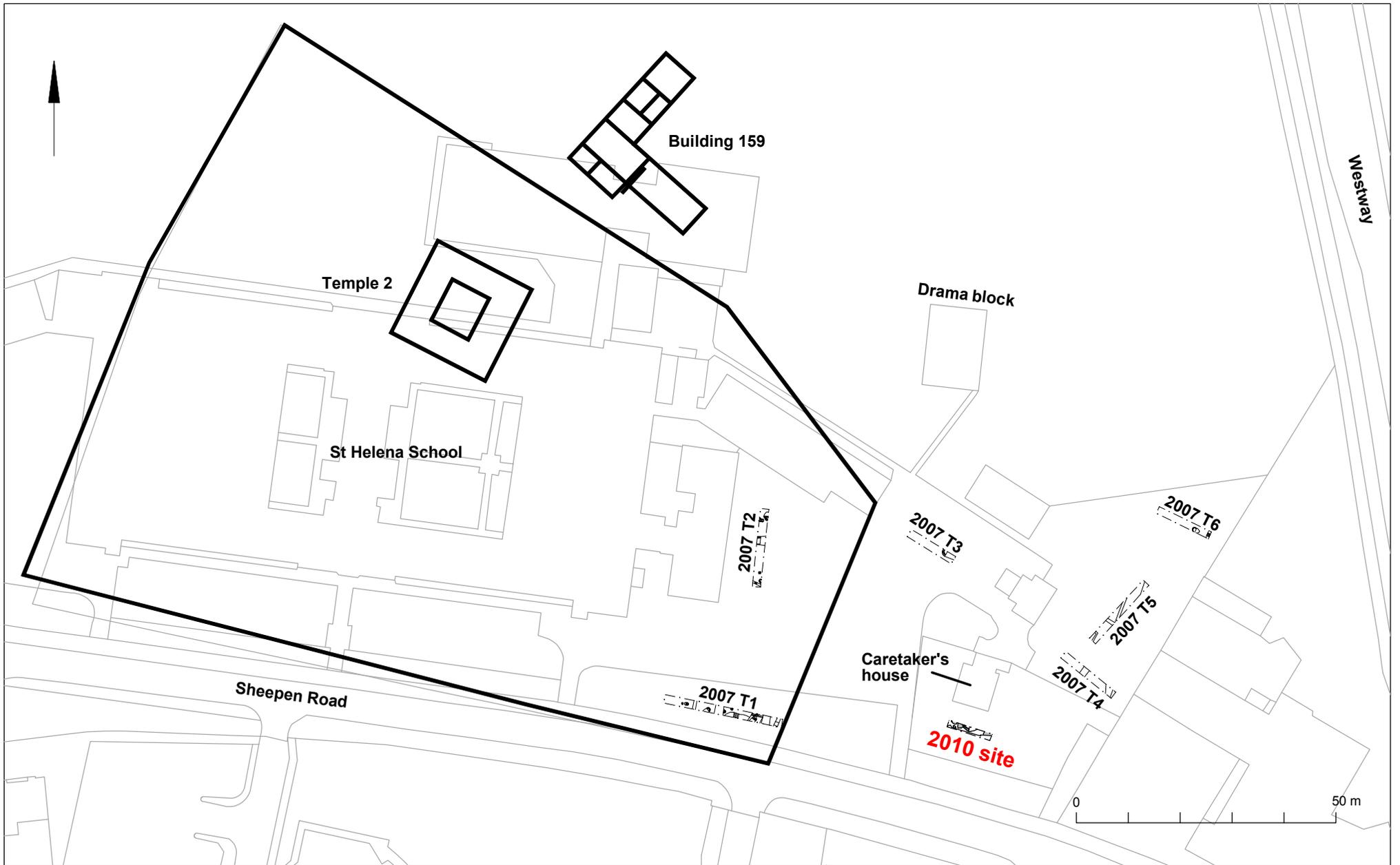


Fig 1 Site location, showing plan of Temple 2, and recent archaeological investigations.

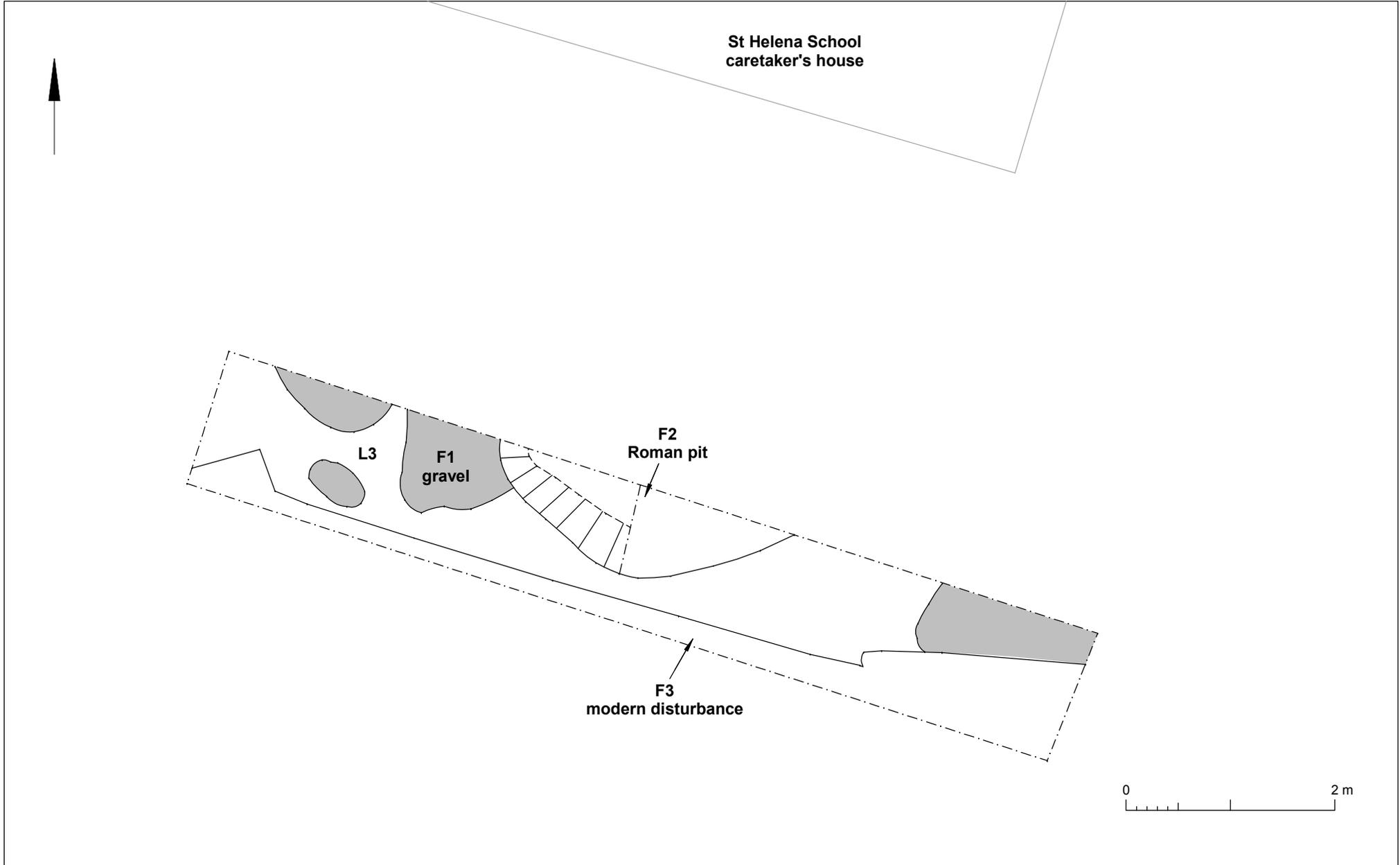
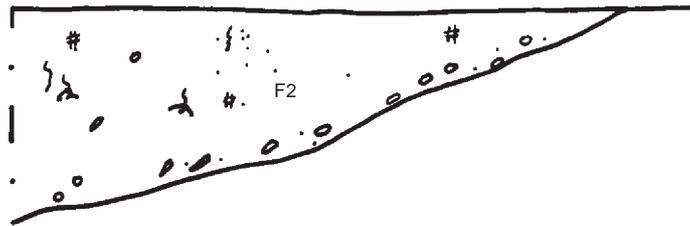


Fig 2 Results.

NE | SW 7.39m  
| | AOD  
| |



- ○ ○ stones
- ● ● sand
- # # # charcoal
- ▨ ▨ ▨ Roman tile

NW | SE 7.94m  
| | AOD  
| |

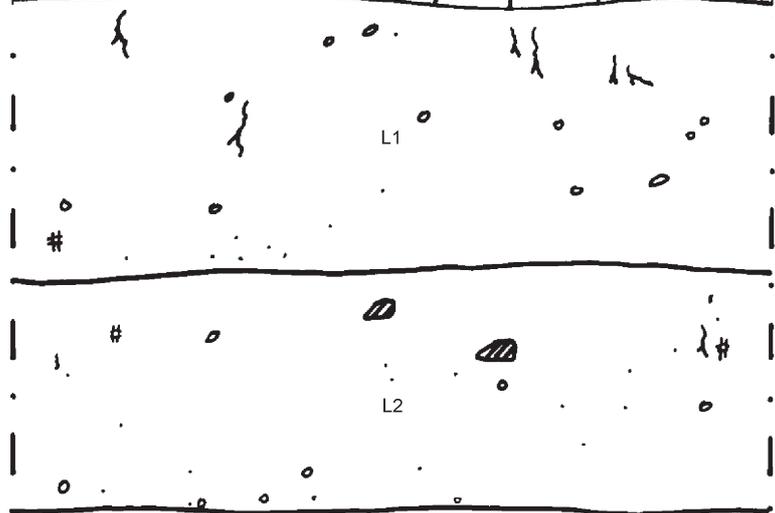


Fig 3 Sections.



# Essex Historic Environment Record/ Essex Archaeology and History

## Summary sheet

<b>Site address:</b> St Helena School, Sheepen Road, Colchester, Essex	
<b>Parish:</b> Colchester	<b>District:</b> Colchester
<b>NGR:</b> TL 98970 25770	<b>Site codes:</b> CAT project – 10/2d
<b>Type of work:</b> Evaluation	<b>Site director/group:</b> Colchester Archaeological Trust
<b>Date of work:</b> 15th March 2010	<b>Size of area investigated:</b> 1 trench 1.8m x 8.7m
<b>Curating museum:</b> Colchester and Ipswich Museums, accession COLIM 2010.11	<b>Funding source:</b> Developer
<b>Further seasons anticipated?</b> Yes	<b>Related UAD no:</b> none
<b>Final report:</b> CAT Report 544 and summary in <i>EAH</i>	
<b>Periods represented:</b> Roman	
<p><b>Summary of fieldwork results:</b>  <i>The St Helena School site lies on the eastern side of the nationally important Late Iron Age and early Roman site of Sheepen, which is the northern focus of the oppidum of Camulodunum.</i></p> <p><i>An evaluation by a single trial trench on the site of a proposed new building has revealed a gravelled surface and a Roman pit. The gravel surface may have been associated with the adjacent Roman Temple 2, whose eastern temenos wall lies 35m to the west, or (less likely) it may have been the surface of a minor gravel road running along the eastern side of the temple temenos.</i></p> <p><i> Finds from this evaluation are of early Roman date, which is in keeping with other finds from Sheepen and the St Helena School site.</i></p>	
<b>Previous summaries/reports:</b> none	
<b>Keywords:</b> Roman temple, temenos, Roman road, Roman pit	<b>Significance:</b> **
<b>Author of summary:</b> B Holloway and H Brooks	<b>Date of summary:</b> April 2010