

**An archaeological watching brief at  
St Leonard's church,  
Hythe Hill, Colchester, Essex**

**May 2010**



**report prepared by  
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**on behalf of Dorvell Construction**

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**CAT Report 559**  
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## 1 Summary

*An archaeological watching brief on the contractor's excavation of trenches for the strengthening of the southern graveyard wall at St Leonard's Church revealed a brick burial vault and a large quantity of fragmented disarticulated human bone (this was reburied on site).*

*The large quantity of bone close to the wall is probably the result of the re-deposition of bone collected during an apparent re-alignment of the graveyard wall in the 19th century. This realignment allowed a widening and straightening of Hythe Hill by removing a small area of the southern edge of the graveyard.*

## 2 Introduction (Fig 1)

- 2.1 This is the archive report on an archaeological watching brief on the contractor's excavation of trenches along the southern graveyard wall at St Leonard's Church, Hythe Hill, Colchester. The trenches were excavated prior to the insertion of metal rods through the wall and into the graveyard to provide support for the wall. The work was carried out on behalf of Dorvell Construction by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) during May and June 2010.
- 2.2 Two long trenches roughly 600mm wide were excavated along the graveyard wall. The western trench was 13.1m long and the eastern trench 5.5m long. Two smaller holes were excavated in the area between the two trenches, where there were standing gravestones and an established tree. Excavations initially continued to a depth of 750mm below modern ground level (bgl), with subsequent further reduction in the two long trenches to 1.1m bgl.
- 2.3 The site is at NGR TM 0127 2472.
- 2.4 This report mirrors standards and practices contained in the Institute for Archaeologists' *Standard and guidance for an watching brief* (IfA 2008a) and *Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials* (IfA 2008b), 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

St Leonard's church dates from at least AD 1237, although it is probably considerably older (CAR 1, 47) with most of the surviving work of 14th- and 15th-century date. The church is a large and complex structure, with a fully-aisled nave and chancel, and a west tower. St Leonard's was one of the first churches to suffer damage in the Siege of Colchester in 1648, and it was also shaken in the earthquake of 1884.

The graveyard is disused, and has a few early 19th-century monuments, most of which are in a poor state of repair. Partial clearance has taken place, and some headstones have been placed around the boundary. Burial has probably been intensive, and Manning (1884) recorded that 'the proportions of the tower are sadly marred by the fact of the soil of the churchyard having been raised to the level of the old west door by the burials of successive generations'.

There have been two previous CAT projects at St Leonard's: two test pits were excavated against the inner face of the south retaining wall of the graveyard in March 2000 (CAT Report 68), and an archaeological watching brief on foundation trenches for the strengthening of the northern graveyard wall in June 2009 (CAT Report 517). No archaeological features were recorded during either project,

although a quantity of loose human bone collected during each project was reburied in the excavated pits at the end of the work.

#### 4 **Aim**

The aim of the watching brief was to record the character, extent, date, significance and condition of any archaeological remains and deposits affected by groundworks and to ensure disturbance to burials was kept to a minimum.

#### 5 **Results** (Figs 1, 2)

The southern graveyard wall divides the graveyard from the pavement on the north side of Hythe Hill. Ground level in the cemetery is roughly 1.7 metres higher than the level of the pavement. The purpose of the construction project was to provide additional support to this retaining wall by anchoring it in the graveyard. Steel rods attached to plates were inserted through the wall, tightened hydraulically and then curved over and anchored in the graveyard. To facilitate the insertion of the rods through the brickwork trenches were hand-excavated along the inner face of the wall by Dorvell Construction employees, under the supervision of a CAT employee.

The ground level in the graveyard is roughly 300mm below the top of the graveyard wall and covered by grass. Beneath the grass was a medium brown sandy-loam topsoil between 350mm and 450mm thick. Underlying the topsoil were mixed deposits of brown loam and orange stony sand that varied in constituent proportions. These mottled soils were presumably formed by the mixture of topsoil with natural sand and gravel upcast during the excavation of graves, and during the construction of the graveyard wall. The mixed deposits with a high brown loam content were observed to a depth of around 800mm bgl. Beneath the mixed deposits in the eastern half of the western trench was a homogenous brown sandy loam that continued to the bottom of the trench and may have been an earlier topsoil (perhaps predating the construction of the wall). Elsewhere a coarse orange sand underlay the mixed deposits (disturbed natural sand) and continued to the limit of excavation 1.1m bgl. A small pit excavated between the two long trenches was only excavated to a depth of 750mm bgl through topsoil and mixed deposits. No undisturbed natural was encountered in any of the trenches. For a more detailed account of the stratigraphy against the graveyard wall see *A report on test pits dug in the churchyard of St Leonard's church, Hythe Hill, Colchester, Essex March 2000* (CAT Report 68).

A large quantity of human bone was recovered. Although there were notable concentrations, bone was recovered from throughout the trenches at varying depths, though mostly from the lower deposits. No undisturbed burials were encountered, and none of the human bone recovered was articulated. All skeletal elements were represented in expected proportions. The bone was highly fragmentary. All bone fragments observed were recovered and stored on site and then buried in the trench once works were completed. Associated finds such as coffin nails and handles were also buried with the bone.

In the disturbed natural sand at the bottom of the eastern trench numerous fragments of building material were recovered. These were mainly septaria, but included flint and sandstone, and are likely to be derived from either the church fabric or from a previous graveyard wall.

A second small excavation between the two long trenches uncovered a series of mortared limestone slabs buried beneath 500mm of topsoil. Excavations were widened to investigate further. Once the slabs were recorded, the smallest was lifted to reveal a subterranean brick burial vault. The vault was not entered and was covered back over shortly after being opened. In plan, the vault was 'coffin shaped' (a tapered hexagon) and barely larger than the remains of the coffin it contained. The bottom of the vault was over 1.5m below the top of the limestone slabs, with accurate measurement of the depth prevented by the presence of a decomposed coffin. The wooden coffin had collapsed but enough survived to cover any skeletal remains that may have survived inside. A large hinge was observed on the southern

side of the coffin and a large ornate plaque was located on the coffin lid. Holes in the brickwork on opposing sides of the vault may once have housed timbers to aid access to the vault or to hold a coffin off the vault bottom. No brickwork could be seen at the base of the vault, and it is conceivable that there was more than one coffin in the structure.

The vault was located directly adjacent to the southern graveyard wall. Its bottom was located at least 400mm below the level of the pavement of Hythe Hill, and its western end was identified in the edge of the small excavation to the west. It was constructed of unfrosted bricks, the uppermost brick level being constructed of cream bricks 233mm x 115mm x 52mm in size. The bricks beneath were red and a similar length and depth (the edges were obscured by the mortar). Although numerous standing gravestones were located in the vicinity, none appear to be obviously associated with the vault.

## 6 Finds

Most of the finds recovered were collected from the spoil heaps or hand-collected by Dorvall Construction staff during excavations. Apart from generally being associated with post-medieval and modern graveyard soils, these finds do not have any specific context.

A large quantity of human bone and associated coffin furniture was collected (mostly iron nails and coffin handles), and all of it was reburied on site. Modern artefacts including a scaffold clip, a rubber ball, batteries, a horse shoe and a small iron nail were all recorded and discarded.

Recovered finds include four sherds of glazed post-medieval red earthenware (Fabric 40: 17th/18th century (pottery codes after *CAR 7*)), modern ironstone sherds (Fabric 48d: 19th/20th century); two almost complete Victorian bottles; animal bones (mostly sheep); fragments of stone, brick and peg-tile; and clay tobacco-pipe stem and bowl fragments. The bowls included an almost complete bowl of Colchester Type 4 dated to c 1640-60 (*CAR 5*, 48-9); and an almost complete bowl of Colchester Type 12 dated to c 1780-1820 (*CAR 5*, 52/54) and stamped 'SC' (Stephen Chamberlain) on the spur (Stephen Chamberlain lived at 21-22 George Street, Colchester). The clay tobacco-pipe fragments best illustrate the dates of the soil horizons dug through by the contractors, ie 17th-19th centuries.

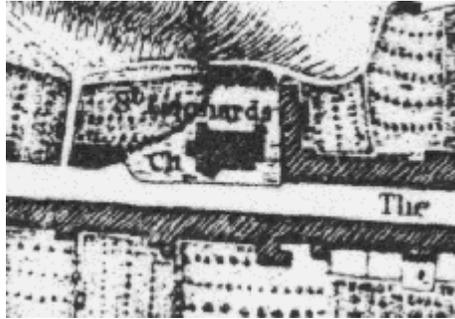
## 7 Discussion

The 2010 trenching along the graveyard wall cut mostly through soil which had previously been disturbed and which consequently contained many fragments of human bone. Groundworks associated with the construction of the graveyard wall and excavations for graves and vaults would all have disturbed the soil along the graveyard wall during the 18th and 19th centuries. It was not possible to distinguish which soil deposits related to which of these activities, but the cumulative effect of these activities has created a very mixed soil on the southern edge of the graveyard. The only deposit which had not definitely been disturbed was the brown soil uncovered 0.8m bgl in the western trench. This may have been an earlier topsoil layer, perhaps predating the construction of the current brick wall.

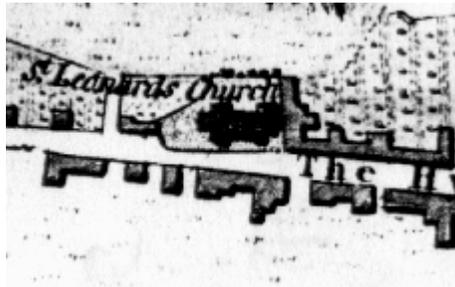
The finds recovered were not well-stratified, but did attest to activity in the graveyard from the early post-medieval period up to the early 20th century (there should have been no burials here after the closing of urban graveyards under the 1850 *Metropolitan Interments Act*).

Three aspects of the human bone are noteworthy. First, the large quantity of bone (which must represent a considerable number of individuals). Second, the density of bone fragments. Third, fragmentary nature of the bone. Where did this bone come from? The bone density seems too high to merely represent charnel (ie occasional loose bones resulting from the cutting of one grave into an earlier one). A likely explanation is based on a study of old maps (plates 1-4). These show that when the current graveyard wall was constructed, part of the southern edge of the graveyard

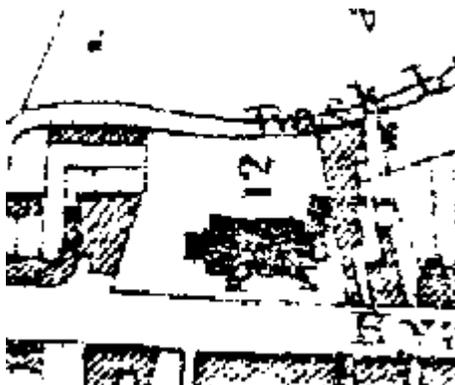
was removed to widen Hythe Hill and allow the alignment of the graveyard wall with the rest of the street frontage. The graveyard can be seen to protrude out into Hythe Hill in both the Chapman & Andre map of 1777 (Plate 1) and the Cole and Roper map of 1815 (Plate 2). However, in the Monson map of 1848 (Plate 3) and the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey of 1881, the wall appears to be straight and more in line with the road up Hythe Hill. (The southern porch of the church also appears to change at the same time). The removal of the soil in this area of the graveyard may have resulted in the collection of the large quantity of fragmented human bone subsequently placed in the foundation trench for the new wall, and the spreading of soil from these excavations over the southern edge of the graveyard (which may explain the thickness deposits here). Indeed some of the gravestones currently leant against the western wall of the graveyard may have come from this lost area of graveyard. Based on the map evidence, the construction of the current brick wall can be placed in the first half of the 19th century. The soft red bricks in the wall measure 230 x 110 x 60mm, and the absence of frogs probably dates them to the early 19th century. Manning (1884) notes that the church tower was repaired in brick *circa* the 1820s. If the wall were not already built by that time, then it may date to the 1820s.



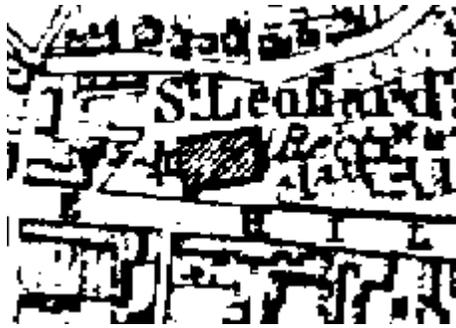
**Plate 1: Extract from Chapman & Andre map of 1777**



**Plate 2: Extract from Cole and Roper map of 1815**



**Plate 3: Extract from Monson map of 1848**



**Plate 4: Extract from Ordnance Survey 1st Edition 1:10,560 map of 1881**

Whether the brick vault predates or post-dates the construction of the wall is uncertain, but the former seems more likely, with the vault remaining in position when the graveyard wall was relocated farther to the north. In any case, it must predate the 1850 Act which closed the graveyard and led to the creation of municipal cemeteries.

## **8 Archive deposition**

The paper archive is currently stored by CAT at 12 Lexden Road, Colchester, but will be permanently deposited with Colchester and Ipswich Museums under accession COLIM 2009.37.

## **9 Acknowledgements**

CAT would like to thank Dorvell Construction for commissioning and funding the work, and for their help on site. Site work was carried out by Adam Wightman and Donald Shimmin.

## **10 References**

- |                |       |   |
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| CAR 5          | 1988  | <i>The post-Roman small finds from excavations in Colchester 1971-85</i> . Colchester Archaeological Report 5, by Nina Crummy.  |
| CAR 7          | 2000  | <i>Colchester Archaeological Report 7: Post-Roman pottery from excavations in Colchester, 1971-85</i> , by J Cotter   |
| Cat Report 68  |       | <i>A report on test pits dug in the churchyard of St Leonard's church, Hythe Hill, Colchester, Essex March 2000</i> , unpublished CAT archive report, by H Brooks, 2000 |
| Cat Report 517 |       | <i>An archaeological watching brief at St Leonard's church, Hythe Hill, Colchester, Essex, June 2009</i> , unpublished CAT archive report, by C Lister, 2009            |
| CIMS           | 2008a | <i>Guidelines on standards and practices for archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester</i>  |
| CIMS           | 2008b | <i>Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester and Ipswich Museums</i>  |
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Manning, F J	1884	'St Leonard's Church, The Hythe', <i>Transactions of the Essex Archaeological Society</i> (new series) <b>4</b> , 161-71
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## 11 Glossary

context	specific location on archaeological site, or where finds are from
EHHER	Essex Historic Environment Record, maintained by Essex County Council
IfA	Institute for Archaeologists
medieval	period from AD 1066 to c AD 1500
modern	period from c AD 1800 to the present
NGR	National Grid Reference
post-medieval	after c AD 1500 to c AD 1800

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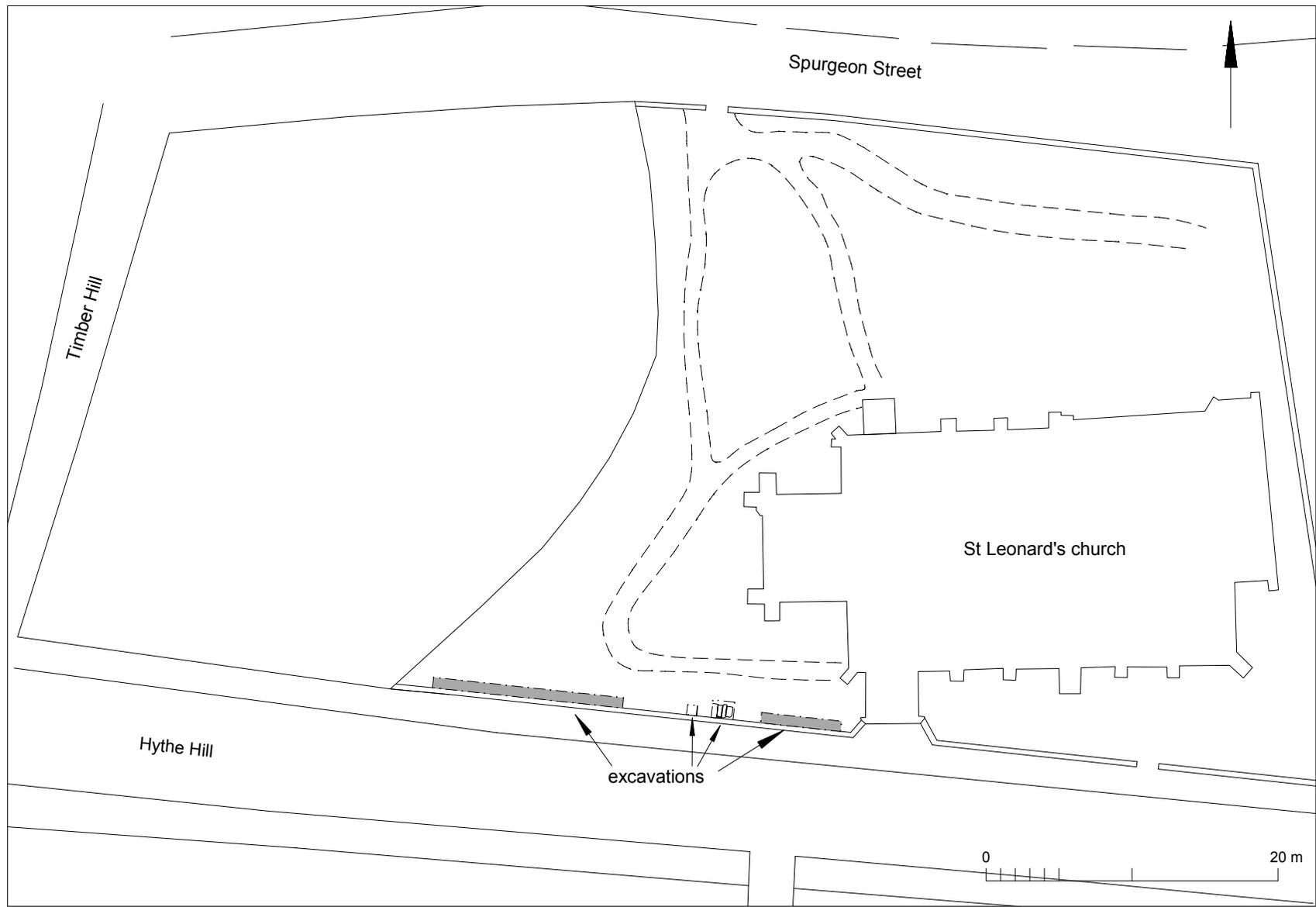


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Fig 1 Site plan showing the location of the trenches.

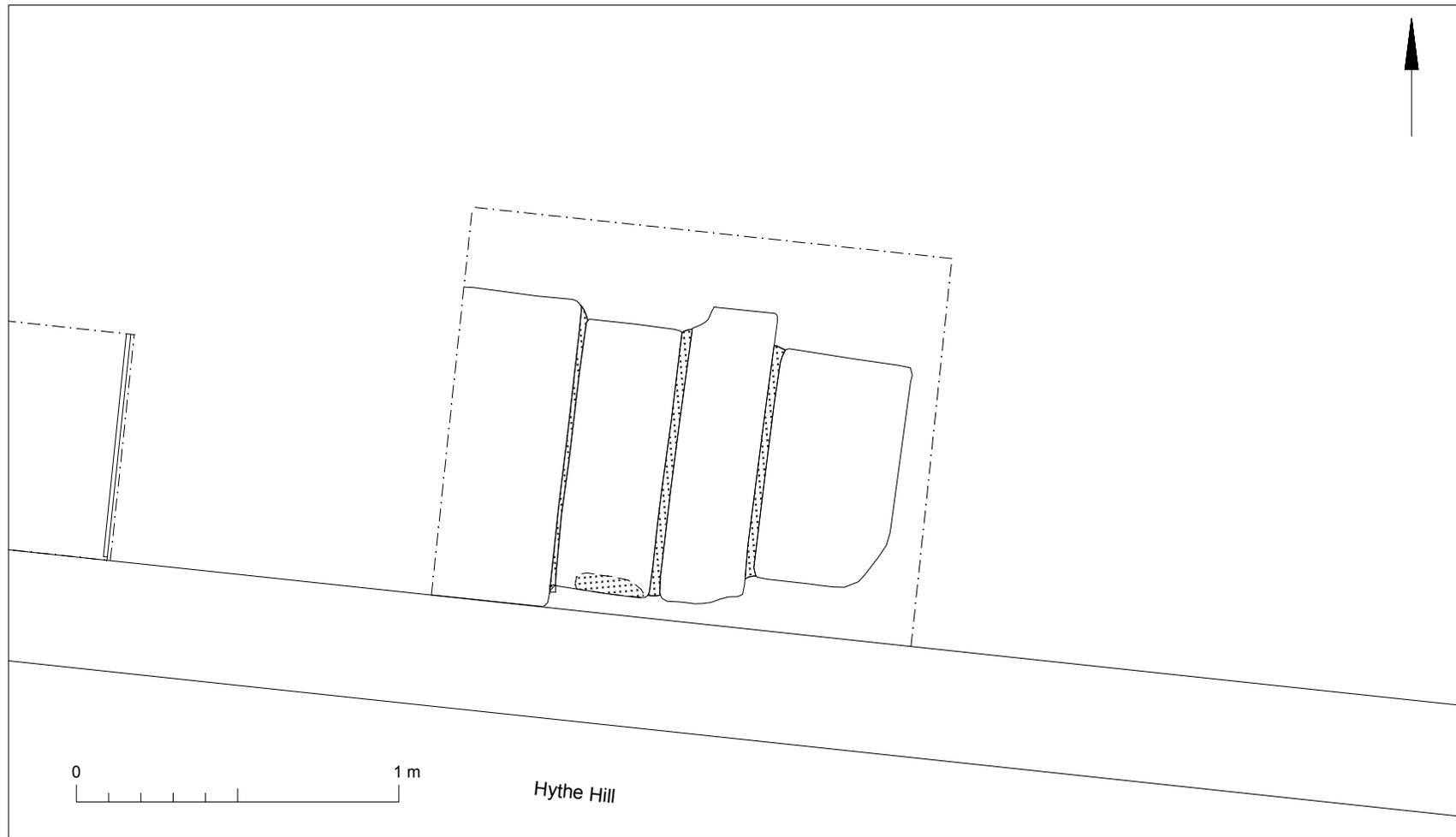


Fig 2 Plan of the limestone and brick vault.

# Essex Historic Environment Record/ Essex Archaeology and History

## Summary sheet

<b>Site address:</b> St Leonard's Church, Hythe Hill, Colchester, Essex	
<b>Parish:</b> Colchester	<b>District:</b> Colchester
<b>NGR:</b> TM 0127 2472	<b>Site codes:</b> CAT project – 10/5d
<b>Type of work:</b> Watching brief	<b>Site director/group:</b> Colchester Archaeological Trust
<b>Date of work:</b> May/June 2010	<b>Size of area investigated:</b>
<b>Curating museum:</b> Colchester and Ipswich Museums accession – COLIM2009.37	<b>Funding source:</b> Developer
<b>Further seasons anticipated?</b> No	<b>Related EHER No's:</b> 31259
<b>Final report:</b>	CAT Report 559 and summary in EAH
<b>Periods represented:</b>	post-medieval, modern,
<p><b>Summary of fieldwork results:</b>  <i>An archaeological watching brief on the contractor's excavation of trenches for the strengthening of the southern graveyard wall at St Leonard's Church revealed a brick burial vault and a large quantity of fragmented disarticulated human bone (this was reburied on site).</i></p> <p><i>The large quantity of bone close to the wall is probably the result of the re-deposition of bone collected during an apparent re-alignment of the graveyard wall in the 19th century. This realignment allowed a widening and straightening of Hythe Hill by removing a small area of the southern edge of the graveyard.</i></p>	
<b>Previous summaries/reports:</b> CAT Reports 68 & 517	
<b>Keywords:</b> Church, burials	<b>Significance:</b> *
<b>Author of summary:</b> Adam Wightman	<b>Date of summary:</b> July 2010