

**Archaeological evaluation by trial-trenching at
Colnebank House, 30 St Peter's Street,
Colchester, Essex
March 2013**

**fieldwork by
Adam Wightman
finds by
Stephen Benfield**

**report prepared by
G Adams**

CAT project ref.: 13/01d
NGR: TL 99651 25590 (c)



Colchester Archaeological Trust

Roman Circus House,
Circular Road North,
Colchester,
Essex CO2 7GZ

tel.: 07436273304

email: archaeologists@catuk.org

CAT Report 692
March 2013

Summary

The results from this evaluation by test-pitting within the building of Colnebank House are similar to those of the evaluation by trial-trenching undertaken by CAT in the area around the building in 2009 (CAT Report 526). Beneath the modern layers associated with Colnebank House are the remains of the 19th-century silk mill, the buildings of which dated from 1826 and were demolished in 1967 for the construction of Colnebank House.

The mill was constructed on top of a thick deposit of alluvial silts containing occasional pottery sherds, CBM and oyster shells, which probably represent rubbish dumped in this area from the Roman period until the post-medieval period, when it was probably marshland between the town wall and the River Colne. However, concentrations of Roman finds were found just above the river gravels which very likely relate to the remains of a landing area along the south side of the River Colne to service the movement of goods between the Roman town and the Colne estuary.

All site levels below about 2.55 m are water-logged and this may represent a Roman river frontage. The archaeological evaluation undertaken by CAT in 1998 to the west of the current site, at St Peter's House, identified a similar gravel area which separated riverine deposits to the north of the site from layers of Roman make-up on the south of the site (CAT Report 25) and presumably represents part of the same landing area.

Introduction

Colnebank House, 30 St Peter's Street, Colchester, Essex, stands on a site which is to be redeveloped. Following a planning application for the site, a brief for an archaeological watching brief was issued by Martin Winter, CBCAO (CIMS 2012). The Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) produced a WSI in response to the brief in October 2012 (CAT 2012).

On the 15th and 18th March 2013, CAT undertook an archaeological evaluation by test-pitting within the building. The site is at NGR TL 99651 25590 (c), approximately 40 m to the north of the walled area of Colchester town centre. It occupies a low-lying site on the south bank of the River Colne. The site is approximately 50 m square, on the north side and towards the eastern end of St Peter's Street. Colnebank House, formerly the Royal Mail sorting office, was built in 1967.

Archaeological background

The site lies immediately to the north of the walled area of the historic Roman and later town of Colchester and within the Late Iron Age *oppidum* of Camulodunum. Discoveries of archaeological material from the site and surrounding area are listed on the Urban Archaeological Database (UAD) held by Colchester and Ipswich Museums. The more significant of these discoveries are outlined below.

Fragments of Roman samian pottery were uncovered in 1940 during the excavation of an air-raid shelter immediately to the east of the site (CBC 2009). An archaeological evaluation by ASC Ltd in January 2008, also just east of the site, at the former Colchester Borough Council (CBC) depot at Middle Mill, revealed shallow pits with Roman building material, and 1.55 m-thick alluvial deposits, but no evidence of structures (UAD no 4167).

A more recent excavation by CAT, on the south side of St Peter's Street, adjacent to Claudius Court and approximately 40 m to the south-west of the site, revealed a Roman metalled road aligned north-south, and the possible position of a previously-unrecorded gateway in the town wall (*The Colchester Archaeologist* magazine, **21**, 2-5). To the west of St Peter's Street, major excavations in the 1970s revealed a substantial area of Roman suburbs at Middleborough, outside the Roman north gate (*CAR* **3**, 155-209).

An archaeological evaluation by four trial-trenches was carried out on the site by CAT in 2009 (CAT Report 526). This exposed foundations and surfaces which were probably part of the 19th-century silk mill. The mill buildings were constructed by Stephen Brown & Co and date from 1826. They were demolished in 1967, and Colnebank House was built by the Royal Mail on the site soon afterwards (CBC 2009). The modern features sealed river silts containing residual Roman brick and tile. River gravels were reached below the silts at depths of between 2.1 m and 2.5 m below the current ground-level.

There is little evidence of medieval activity in the immediate vicinity of the site. Cartographic evidence indicates that the site remained undeveloped in the post-medieval period, and remained so until 1826 when the silk mill was built.

Aims

The aims of the evaluation were to record the depth and extent of any archaeological remains on the redevelopment site, and to assess the date and significance of these remains should any survive here.

Results

All of the following observations were made from the top of the three test-pits (TP1-TP3) excavated inside Colnebank House. Trench sheets were available if entry to the test-pits was required but, due to the presence of brick foundations in two of the test-pits, it was felt that the restricted room would create problems and this fact, combined with the non-complex character of the archaeology here, led to the conclusion that it was not necessary to enter the test-pits.

Test-pit 1 (TP1)

The uppermost 1.1m of TP1 consisted of two layers of concrete and two layers of crushed brick which are all associated with the construction of the modern Colnebank House building. A brick wall constructed of large, unfrogged, soft red bricks (230 mm x 110 mm x 60 mm), bound in a white mortar, was encountered beneath the modern building layers. This wall is part of the remains of an early 19th-century silk mill which formerly occupied the site. The wall continued to a depth of around 2.0m below modern ground-level where it appeared to rest on a shallow concrete foundation. The brick wall was cut into a soft dark grey/black alluvial silt which contained frequent stones and oyster shells (L3 in the 2009 evaluation; CAT Report 526). Occasional small CBM fragments and animal bone were observed in the silt layer. The water-table was reached at a depth of 2.54m below the internal ground-level. Just below the water-table, a relatively compact gravel level was encountered consisting of large rounded flint nodules. A close examination of the gravels in the upcast material revealed Roman pottery sherds mixed with the flint nodules. It is most likely that the Roman finds were stratified just above the gravel in the base of the dark silt deposit just below the water-table. Smaller gravels in a light grey/orange sandy matrix were encountered at a depth of 2.7 m below internal ground-level. This deposit was interpreted as the natural river gravel, so excavations ceased at this level.

Test-pit 2 (TP2)

In TP2, the concrete floor overlay a layer of crushed bricks and concrete rubble, as in TP1. However, the second layer of concrete only covered the southern third of the test-pit in the area to the south of a large east-west orientated brick wall. Once again, the brick wall was constructed of large, unfrogged soft red bricks (230 mm x 110 mm x 60 mm), bound in a white mortar, and is presumed to be associated with the 19th-century silk mill. A small north-south orientated section was excavated through the wall, which continued below the water-table to a depth of approximately 2.6 m below the internal ground-level at which point a solid concrete foundation was encountered. The concrete layer to the south of the

wall overlay a very loose, deep deposit of crushed concrete, which in turn overlay a thin concrete floor. A layer of render on the southern face of the brick wall suggests that this may be the internal face of a wall, perhaps a cellar which was backfilled prior to the construction of Colnebank House. To the north of the wall, a loose dark silt containing frequent brick fragments continued beneath the water-table. This deposit is interpreted as the backfill material which was banked up against the wall following its construction. Two old services were encountered in the loose dark silt, ie an old cable and an old water pipe. In summary, all the ground excavated in TP2 had been disturbed/built up between the construction of the silk mill in 1826 and the construction of Colnebank House following the demolition of the mill in 1967.

Test-pit 3 (TP3)

The uppermost 1.0 m of TP3 consisted of two layers of concrete and two layers of crushed brick which are all associated with the construction of the modern Colnebank House building. The modern building layer overlay the same soft dark grey/black alluvial silt identified in TP1 (L3 in the 2009 evaluation; CAT Report 526). As well as small stones and oyster shells, post-medieval pottery, animal bone and Roman tile were all observed in the uppermost 1.0m of the dark silt (to a depth of approximately 2.0 m below internal ground-level; see finds section below). Just above the water-table, at a depth of 2.4m below modern ground-level, a layer consisting mostly of medium-sized flint nodules was encountered. As well as flint nodules, four septaria blocks were identified (the largest of which was 210 mm x 100 mm) and fragments of Roman pottery vessels and animal bone were recovered. This deposit continued below the water-table and was approximately 250 mm deep. At a depth of 2.65 m below internal ground-level, the same river gravel in a light grey/orange sandy matrix was encountered as in TP1.

The finds

by Stephen Benfield

Introduction

A small quantity finds of Roman and post-medieval date was recovered from two of the test-pits (TP1, TP3). The finds consist of pottery and ceramic building material (CBM), and food debris represented by animal bone and oyster shells. The finds are listed by context and described in Table 2 (below). The Roman pottery was recorded with reference to the Colchester Roman pottery fabric series (CAR 10). Roman vessel forms refer to the *Camulodunum* (Colchester) type series (Hawkes & Hull 1947; Hull 1968) and samian forms refer to Webster 1996. The post-Roman pottery was recorded with reference to the Colchester post-Roman pottery fabric series (CAR 7). The pottery fabrics recorded are listed in Table 1 (below).

Table 1: pottery fabrics.

Fabric	Description	Fabric date
<i>Roman:</i>		
AJ	South Spanish amphoras (Dressel 20)	mid 1st-2nd/early 3rd century
BA(MDV)	Les Martres-de-Veyre samian	early 2nd century
BA(CG)	Central Gaulish samian	early/mid-late 2nd century
CS	Pompeian-red wares	mid-late 1st century
DJ	Coarse oxidised and related wares	Roman (mid 1st-2nd/ 3rd century)
GB	BB2: black-burnished ware, category 2	early/mid 2nd-mid/late 3rd century
GX	Other coarse wares, principally locally-produced grey wares	Roman

Fabric	Description	Fabric date
<i>Post-Roman</i>		
50A	Staffordshire-type iron-streaked earthenware	late 17th-18th centuries

Table 2: finds by context and find number with context spot-date.

location	context type	finds no	description of finds	finds spot-dating
TP1		1	<p>Pottery Roman (6@ 210 g), Fabric AJ, Dressel 20 oil amphora (Spanish import) (mid 1st-2nd/early 3rd century); Fabric BA(MDV), 1 sherd, Curle 11 (flanged bowl) (c AD 100-120); Fabric GX 3 sherds, includes probable neck sherd from Cam 268 (jar) dated mid 2nd-late 3rd/early 4th century.</p> <p>CBM post-Roman (2@ 105 g), peg-tile, encrusted with white mortar, re-used (medieval to post-medieval/modern); brick fragment with white calcareous deposit, fabric suggests a post-Roman date (probably late/post-medieval or modern).</p> <p>Mortar (1@ 9 g), fragment, fine white mortar on coarse buff-brown base, some fragments of crushed brick/tile, probably Roman from a floor with fine mortar setting for <i>tesserae</i>.</p> <p>Animal bone (6@ 216 g), broken/split (butchered) cattle metapodial pieces, skull fragment.</p> <p>Shell Oyster (5@ 63 g), shells and shell pieces.</p>	post-medieval/modern (residual Roman)
TP3 (upper part)		2	<p>Pottery post-medieval (1@ 4 g), Fabric 50A, dark reddish-brown mottled/streaked glaze, internal and external, base sherd, probably from a drinking vessel (?tankard) (late 17th-18th centuries).</p> <p>CBM Roman (1@ 230 g), back corner of a <i>tegula</i> roof tile with upper cutaway (Roman)</p> <p>Animal bone (1@ 6 g), tooth from a medium-sized domesticate.</p>	post-medieval, late 17th-18th centuries (residual Roman)
TP3 (lower part)		3	<p>Pottery Roman (9@ 218 g), Fabric BA(CG), 1 sherd, form Dr 33 (cup) (early/mid 2nd-late 2nd century); Fabric CS, 1 sherd, edge from a lid with sooted rim, coarse buff micaceous fabric, possibly the lid from a Pompeian-red ware dish (Claudio-Neronian to early Flavian); Fabric DJ, 3 sherds, includes large flagon base (mid 1st-2nd/3rd century); Fabric GB, 1 sherd, base from a bowl (early/mid 2nd-mid/late 3rd century); Fabric GX, 3 sherds (Roman).</p> <p>Animal bone (4@ 18 g), medium-sized domesticates, metapodial with other long-bone fragments, all broken/split (butchered), tooth from a medium-sized domesticate.</p>	Roman, 2nd-3rd century

Discussion

This evaluation by test-pitting corroborates the conclusions drawn from the earlier evaluation by trial-trenching around the perimeter of the building in that no evidence was found of any significant archaeological remains that had not been identified before.

The stratigraphic sequence, as far as can be determined from both phases of evaluation, is as follows. The uppermost 0.75 -1.25 m consist of 19th- and 20th-century deposits relating to the silk mill and Colnebank House. Underneath these and down to a depth of c 2.4 m is a post-Roman accumulation of dark earth which, as far as can be determined, is of limited archaeological significance. The underlying continuation of the dark earth appears to be Roman in date and includes Roman finds which we associate with the landing area along the south bank of the River Colne, between the river and the town wall. The base of the dark earth is c 2.65 m below which there are natural deposits of sand and gravel.

No clear evidence has been found of any Roman structures on the site, and nor has any evidence been found for any structures or occupation between the Roman period and the construction of the silk mill in 1826.

It needs to be stressed that the investigations were conducted by means of sampling and there is, therefore, the possibility that significant remains may survive between the sampled areas. However, the balance of probability is that the area under and immediately around Colnebank House is typified archaeologically by the stratigraphy observed in the trial-trenches and test-pits.

The test-pitting within Colnebank House revealed that in places the foundations of the silk mill are substantial and deep and that should the site be piled for the new building, parts of these foundations will presumably need to be removed before piling can successfully take place. Since some of these foundations are probably bedded on the natural gravel (which, as we have explained, is c 2.65 m below ground-level), it would be desirable for their removal to be monitored archaeologically. Otherwise, on the basis of the results from the evaluations, it would appear that no archaeological monitoring or investigations should be required for any groundworks within the uppermost approximate 1.5 m.

Recommendation for future archaeological work

Apart from the piling, any ground disturbance below 1.5 m should be monitored archaeologically. This would include excavations for any ground beams, pile caps, and service runs that exceed this depth as well as the grubbing up of deep foundations.

Any ground disturbance within the uppermost 1.5 m would not require any archaeological monitoring or further investigations.

This recommendation is consistent with the condition attached to the planning consent (019665) for the proposed development and has been verbally confirmed by Colchester Borough Council's archaeology officer.



Colchester Archaeological Trust

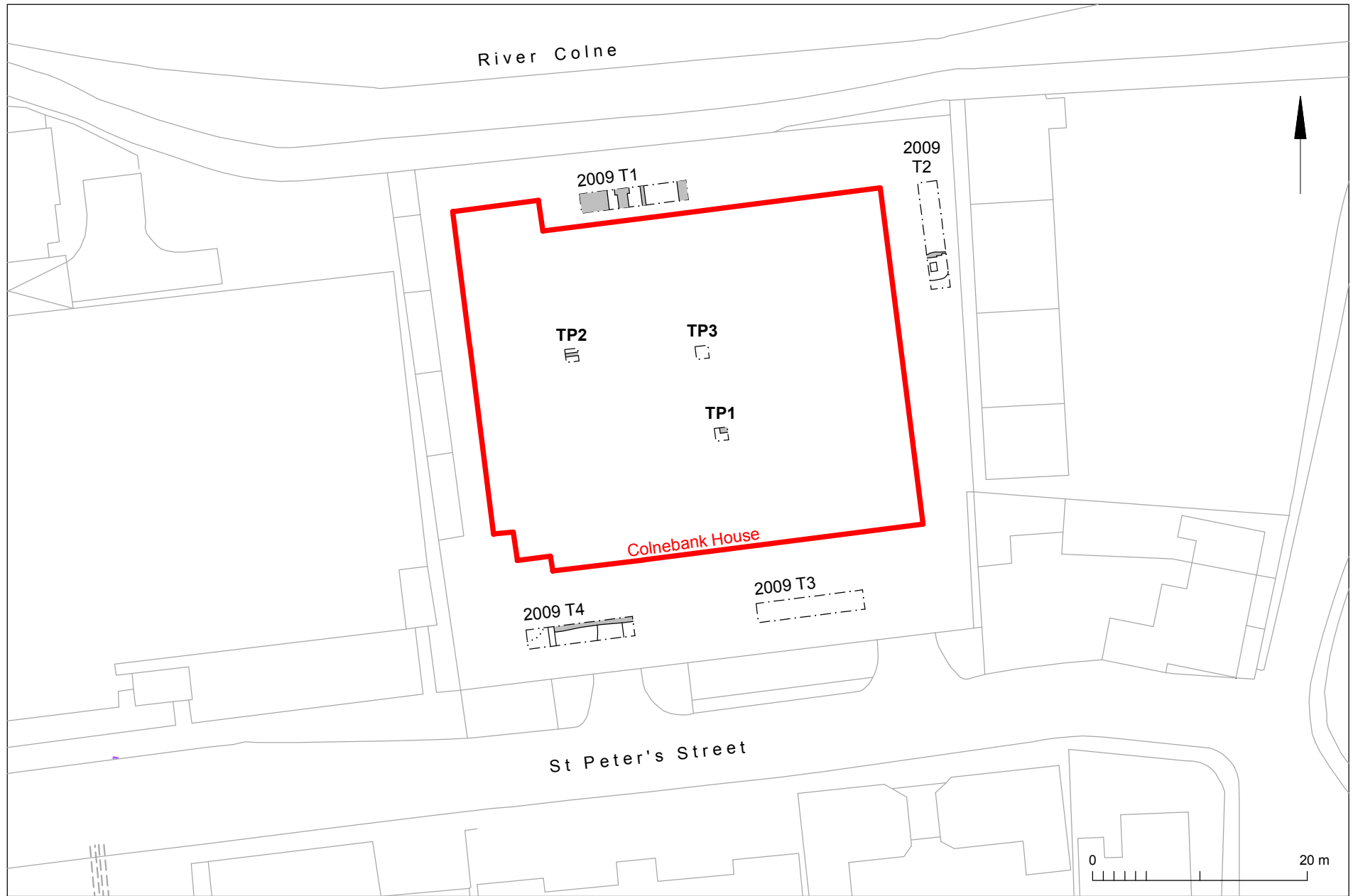
Roman Circus House,
off Circular Road North,
Colchester,
Essex CO2 7GZ

tel.: 07436273304

email: archaeologists@catuk.org

checked by: Philip Crummy
date: 20.03.13

Adams x c:/reports 13/colnebank house/report 692.doc



Copyright Colchester Archaeological Trust. © Crown copyright. All rights reserved. Licence number 100039294.

Fig 1 Site location, showing the three test-pits (TP1-TP3) and the 2009 evaluation trenches (2009 T1-2009 T4).



Copyright Colchester Archaeological Trust. © Crown copyright. All rights reserved. Licence number 100039294.

Fig 2 Site plan, showing the results in the three test-pits (TP1-TP3) and in the 2009 trenches (2009 T1-2009 T4) (foundations toned grey).

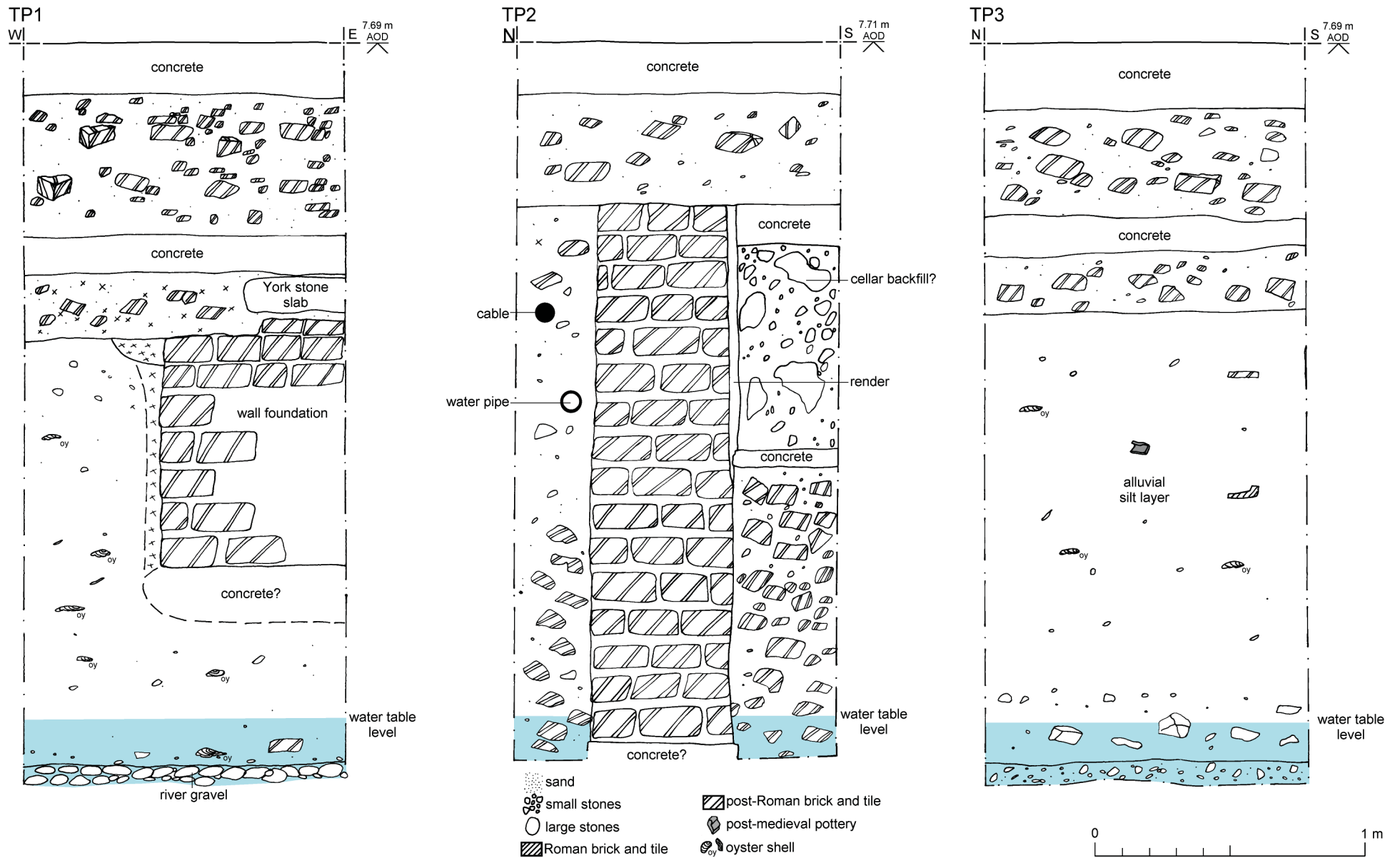


Fig 3 Test Pit sections.