

# Archaeological monitoring and recording at the Mercury Theatre, Balkerne Gate, Colchester, Essex, CO1 1PT

December 2016



by **Laura Pooley**

figures by Howard Brooks (with additions by Laura Pooley)  
and Emma Holloway

fieldwork by Nigel Rayner

**commission by Lee Spalding  
on behalf of Colchester Borough Council**

NGR: TL 99281 25157 (centre)

Planning reference: n/a

CAT project ref.: 16/12e

Colchester Museum accession code COLEM: 2016.122

CHER ref: ECC3924

OASIS reference: colchest3-271366



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**CAT Report 1048**

January 2017

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Fig 2 Borehole sections

## 1 Summary

*Archaeological monitoring and recording was carried out at the Mercury Theatre, Balkerne Gate, Colchester, Essex during the excavation of two boreholes as part of preliminary work for the Mercury Rising project. The theatre is known to be located on the site of one or more Roman town-houses with robbed-out walls, tessellated and mosaic floors. Roman layers were encountered at 1.4-2.8m below current ground level in borehole 1 and 1.2-3m bcgl in borehole 2.*

## 2 Introduction (Fig 1)

This report presents the results of archaeological monitoring and recording at the Mercury Theatre, Balkerne Gate, Colchester, Essex which was carried out between 12th-14th December 2016. The work was commissioned by Lee Spalding, on behalf of Colchester Borough Council, during the excavation of boreholes associated with the Mercury Rising development project, and was undertaken by Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT).

In response to consultation with Colchester Borough Council Planning Services (CBCPS), the Colchester Borough Council Archaeological Advisor Jess Tipper advised that in order to establish the archaeological implications of this application, the applicant should be required to commission a scheme of archaeological investigation in accordance with paragraphs 128, 129 and 132 of the *National Planning Policy Framework* (DCLG 2012).

All archaeological work was carried out in accordance with a *Brief for Continuous Archaeological Recording*, detailing the required archaeological work, written by Jess Tipper (CBCPS 2015), and a written scheme of investigation (WSI) prepared by CAT in response to the brief and agreed with CBCPS (CAT 2015).

In addition to the brief and WSI, all fieldwork and reporting was done in accordance with English Heritage's *Management of Research Projects in the Historic Environment (MoRPHE)* (English Heritage 2006), and with *Standards for field archaeology in the East of England* (EAA 14 and 24). This report mirrors standards and practices contained in the Institute for Archaeologists' *Standard and guidance for archaeological watching brief* (ClfA 2014a) and *Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials* (ClfA 2014b).

## 3 Archaeological background

The following archaeological background draws on the major published sources for Colchester archaeology (listed below), and also on the Colchester Historic Environment Record (CHER) and the Essex Historic Environment Record (EHER).

A preliminary archaeological desk-based assessment for the Mercury Theatre site was produced in August 2015 (CAT Report 858, by Howard Brooks). The following is a summary taken from that report.

Three major archaeological projects have taken place on the Mercury Theatre site.

### The 1965-7 evaluations

In 1965, Colchester Archaeological Group dug ten trenches in what was then the grounds of St Mary's Rectory. They found the gravel foundation of a Roman metalled surface on the eastern side of insula 25a, a robbed-out Roman wall, and a tessellated pavement (i.e., a Roman floor made of small red ceramic cubes – effectively a plain mosaic floor) (Holbert 1966). The report describes significant remains (ie, Roman floors) between c 0.76m and 1.52m below ground level (bgl)). Two sections show floors at c 1.2m bgl).

The Group returned in 1967 and dug nine more trenches. These found significant lengths of Roman walling – undoubtedly more parts of the same Roman town house which came to light in 1965. They also trenched across the Roman rampart behind the Roman town wall. The results of this dig were published (Dunnett 1971) but unfortunately no depths or sections were recorded, although it seems unlikely that there is much variation from the depths recorded in 1965 (above).

#### **The 1996 evaluation**

In advance of major proposed changes at the Theatre (which were never carried out in full), Colchester Archaeological Trust was commissioned to evaluate the site by means of nine archaeological trenches. Mortar floors, robbed walls, a tessellated pavement and mosaic floor were among the Roman remains identified at a depth of 0.8-1m below ground level.

#### **The 1997 mitigation**

An archaeological mitigation was carried out by CAT in 1997 and all the stanchion holes of the new eastern extension were excavated. The excavations revealed more tessellated floors, robbed-out Roman walls, and the intact plinth of a fortress building (the 1st-century fortress underlies the late Roman town). Roman features were encountered between 1.2m – 1.9m bgl.

Together these investigations show that the Mercury Theatre site contains the remains of one or more Roman town-houses with mosaic and tessellated floors surviving *in situ*. Earlier first-century military plinths associated with the 1st century fortress also appear to have survived. Any development around the Theatre could potentially have a significant impact of these archaeological remains.

## **4 Results** (Figs 1-2)

Two boreholes were excavated on the southwest corner of the theatre and to the east. The boreholes measured 0.3m diameter and were hand-dug to a depth of 1.2m and machine-excavated thereafter.

See Fig 2 for full description of layers.

Borehole 1: Roman layers were encountered at depths of 1.4-2.8m below current ground level with a possible demolition spread sealing possible Boudican layers.

Borehole 2: This borehole was not as clear, but Roman layers appear to have been encountered at depths of 1.2-3m below current ground level.

## **5 Finds**

No archaeological finds were retained but where seen are listed on Fig 2.

## **6 Discussion**

The two boreholes around the Mercury Theatre indicate that Roman layers will be encountered at depths of 1.2-3m below current ground level.

## **7 Acknowledgements**

CAT thanks Lee Spalding and Colchester Borough Council for commissioning and funding the work. The project was managed by C Lister and carried out by N Rayner. Figures were prepared by L Pooley and E Holloway. The project was monitored for CBCPS by Jess Tipper.

## 8 References

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

Brown, D	2007	<i>Archaeological Archives: A guide to best practice in creation, compilation, transfer and curation</i>
CAR 6	1992	<i>Colchester Archaeological Report 6: Excavations at Culver Street, the Gilbert School and other sites in Colchester, 1971-85</i> , by P Crummy
CAT	2014	<i>Health &amp; Safety Policy</i>
ClfA	2014a	<i>Standard and Guidance for an archaeological watching brief</i>
ClfA	2014b	<i>Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials</i>
Crummy, P	1997	<i>City of victory, the story of Colchester, Britain's first Roman town</i>
DCLG	2012	<i>National Planning Policy Framework</i>
Dunnett, Rosalind	1971	'St Mary's Rectory', pages 62-77, <i>Transactions of the Essex Archaeological Society, Vol III (New Series), part 1</i> .
English Heritage	2006	<i>Management of Research Projects in the Historic Environment (MoRPHE)</i>
Gurney, D	2003	<i>Standards for field archaeology in the East of England</i> . East Anglian Archaeology Occasional Papers 14 (EAA 14).
Holbert, P R	1966	'Preliminary report on the excavations in the garden of St Mary's Rectory, Colchester, 1965. <i>CAG Annual Bulletin</i> 9 (1966), 10-14.
Hull, M	1963	<i>Victoria County History (VCH), Volume 3 Roman Essex</i>
Medlycott, M	2011	<i>Research and archaeology revisited: A revised framework for the East of England</i> . East Anglian Archaeology Occasional Papers 24 (EAA 24)

## 9 Abbreviations and glossary

CAT	Colchester Archaeological Trust
CBCPS	Colchester Borough Council Planning Services
CBM	brick/tile (ceramic building material)
CHER	Colchester Historic Environment Record
ClfA	Chartered Institute for Archaeologists
context	specific location of finds on an archaeological site
feature (F)	an identifiable thing like a pit, a wall, a drain: can contain 'contexts'
layer (L)	distinct or distinguishable deposit of soil
modern	period from c AD 1800 to the present
natural	geological deposit undisturbed by human activity
post-medieval	from Henry VIII to c AD 1800
Roman	the period from AD 43 to c AD 410
UAD	Urban Archaeological Database
WSI	Written Scheme of Investigation

## 10 Contents of archive

**Finds:** n/a

### **Paper and digital record**

One A4 document wallet containing:

The report (CAT Report 1048)

CBCPS Evaluation Brief, CAT Written Scheme of Investigation

Original site record (Feature and layer sheets, Finds record, plans)

Site digital photos and log, Architectural plans, Attendance register, Risk assessment

## 11 Archive deposition

The paper and digital archive is currently held by the Colchester Archaeological Trust at Roman Circus House, Roman Circus Walk, Colchester, Essex, CO2 7GZ, but will be permanently deposited with Colchester Museum under accession code COLEM: 2016.122.

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### Distribution list

Lee Spalding, Colchester Borough Council  
Jess Tipper, Colchester Borough Council Planning Services  
Essex Historic Environment Record



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Date: 22.12.2016

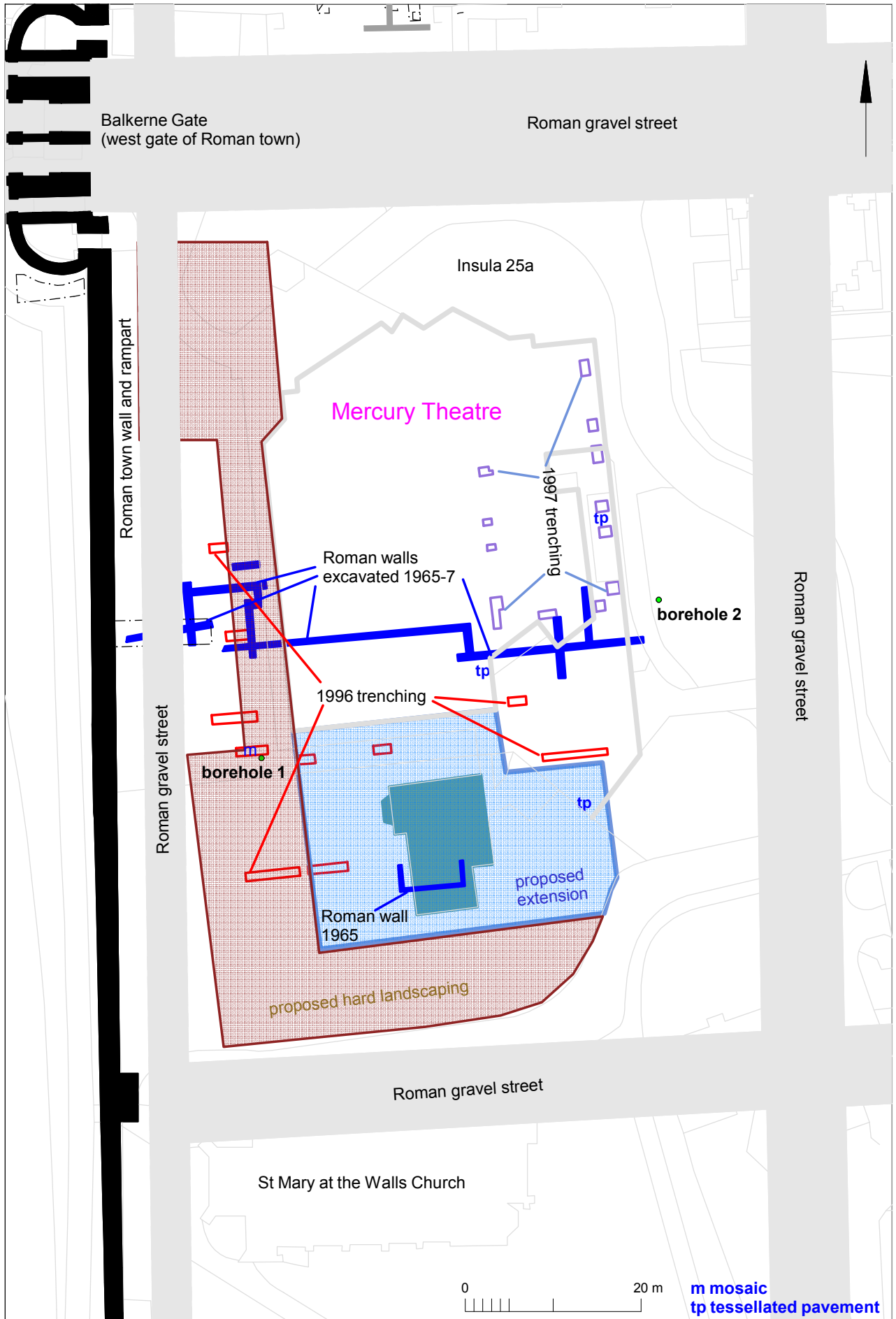


Figure 1 Proposed new building (blue tone) and landscaping (brown tone) with boreholes shown as ● Shown in relation to the 1965-7, 1996 and 1997 archaeological work on and around the theatre site

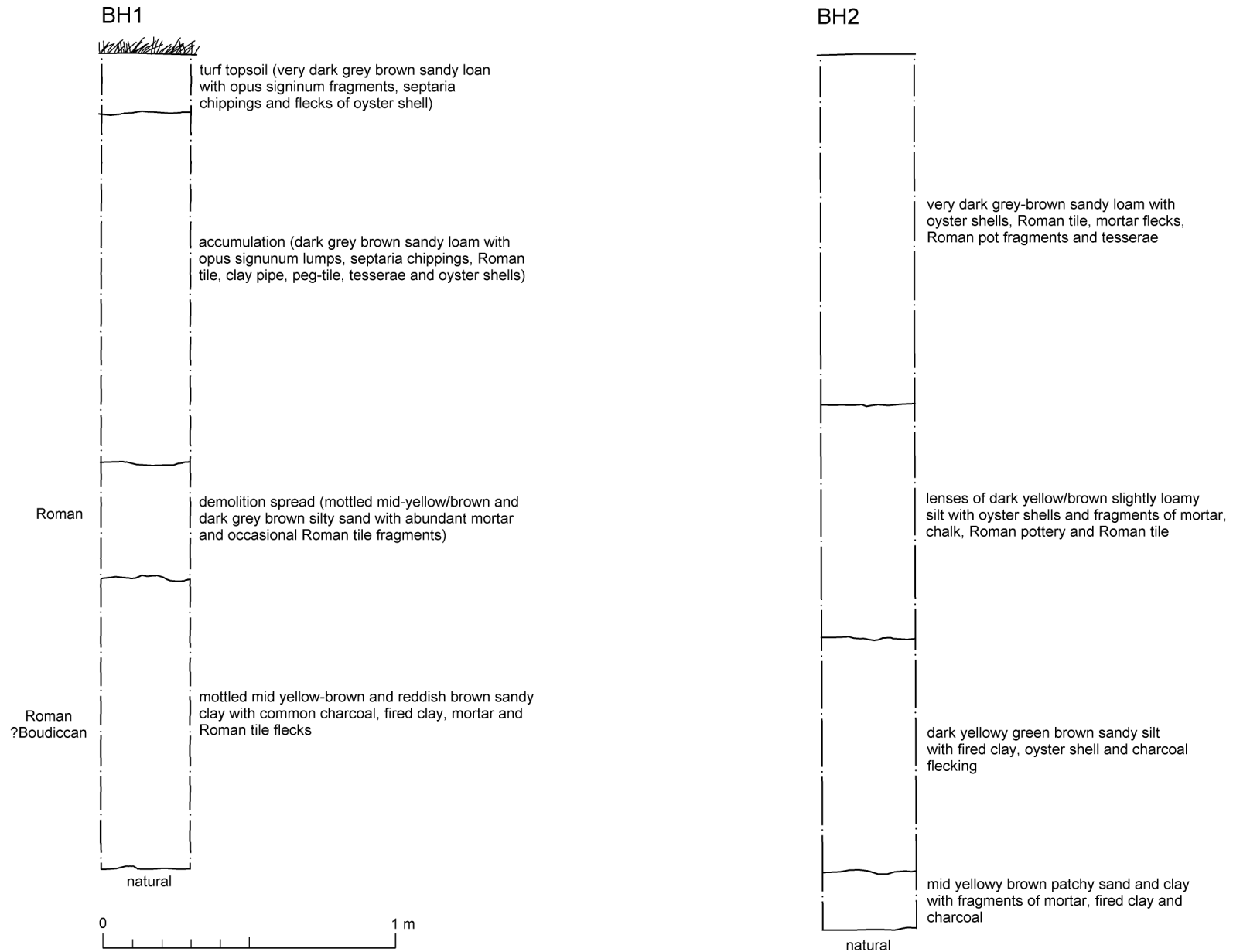


Fig 2 Bore-hole sections.



# Essex Historic Environment Record/ Essex Archaeology and History

## Summary sheet

<b>Address:</b> Mercury Theatre, Balkerne Gate, Colchester, Essex, CO1 1PT	
<b>Parish:</b> Colchester	<b>District:</b> Colchester
<b>NGR:</b> TL 99281 25157 (centre)	<b>Site code:</b> CAT project ref.: 16/12e CHER ref: ECC3924 OASIS ref: colchest3-271366
<b>Type of work:</b> Monitoring and recording	<b>Site director/group:</b> Colchester Archaeological Trust
<b>Date of work:</b> 12th-14th December 2016	<b>Size of area investigated:</b> 0.48ha
<b>Location of curating museum:</b> Colchester museum accession code COLEM: 2016.122	<b>Funding source:</b> Colchester Borough Council
<b>Further seasons anticipated?</b> yes	<b>Related CHER/EHER number:</b>
<b>Final report:</b> CAT Report 1048	
<b>Periods represented:</b> Roman, Modern	
<b>Summary of fieldwork results:</b> Archaeological monitoring and recording was carried out at the Mercury Theatre, Balkerne Gate, Colchester, Essex during the excavation of two boreholes as part of preliminary work for the Mercury Rising project. The theatre is known to be located on the site of one or more Roman town-houses with robbed-out walls, tessellated and mosaic floors. Roman layers were encountered at 1.4-2.8m below current ground level in borehole 1 and 1.2-3m bcgl in borehole 2.	
<b>Previous summaries/reports:</b> CAT Report 858	
<b>CBC monitor:</b> Jess Tipper	
<b>Keywords:</b> –	<b>Significance:</b> –
<b>Author of summary:</b> Laura Pooley	<b>Date of summary:</b> January 2017

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## Printable version

**OASIS ID: colchest3-271366**

### Project details

Project name	Archaeological monitoring and recording at Mercury Theatre, Balcerne Gate, Colchester, Essex, CO1 1PT
Short description of the project	Archaeological monitoring and recording was carried out at the Mercury Theatre, Balcerne Gate, Colchester, Essex during the excavation of two boreholes as part of preliminary work for the Mercury Rising project. The theatre is known to be located on the site of one or more Roman town-houses with robbed-out walls, tessellated and mosaic floors. Roman layers were encountered at 1.4-2.8m below current ground level in borehole 1 and 1.2-3m bcgl in borehole 2.
Project dates	Start: 12-12-2016 End: 14-12-2016
Previous/future work	Yes / Not known
Any associated project reference codes	16/12e - Contracting Unit No.
Any associated project reference codes	ECC3924 - HER event no.
Any associated project reference codes	COLEM: 2016.122 - Museum accession ID
Type of project	Recording project
Site status	None
Current Land use	Community Service 2 - Leisure and recreational buildings
Monument type	N/A None
Significant Finds	N/A None
Investigation type	"Watching Brief"
Prompt	Planning condition

### Project location

Country	England
Site location	ESSEX COLCHESTER COLCHESTER Mercury Theatre
Postcode	CO1 1PT
Study area	0.48 Hectares
Site coordinates	TL 99281 25157 51.888765674 0.896239129735 51 53 19 N 000 53 46 E Point

### Project creators

Name of	Colchester Archaeological Trust
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Organisation	
Project brief originator	none
Project design originator	none
Project director/manager	Chris Lister
Project supervisor	Nigel Rayner
Type of sponsor/funding body	Borough Council

### Project archives

Physical Archive Exists?	No
Digital Archive recipient	Colchester Museum
Digital Contents	"none"
Digital Media available	"Images raster / digital photography"
Paper Archive recipient	Colchester Museum
Paper Contents	"none"
Paper Media available	"Miscellaneous Material", "Photograph", "Plan", "Report", "Section"

### Project bibliography 1

Publication type	Grey literature (unpublished document/manuscript)
Title	Archaeological monitoring and recording at Mercury Theatre, Balcerne Gate, Colchester, Essex, CO1 1PT: December 2016
Author(s)/Editor(s)	Pooley, L.
Other bibliographic details	CAT Report 1048
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Place of issue or publication	Colchester
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