

Archaeological monitoring at Mercury Theatre, Balkerne Gate, Colchester, Essex, CO1 1PT

December 2017 – January 2018



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fieldwork by Chris Lister and Ben Holloway

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

NGR: TL 99281 25157 (centre)

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CAT project ref.: 17/12a

Colchester Museum accession code COLEM: 2017.155

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OASIS reference: colchest3-302929



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CAT Report 1333

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1 Summary

Archaeological monitoring was carried out at the Mercury Theatre, Balkerne Gate, Colchester, Essex during the excavation of six window sample boreholes and 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 surviving wall foundations, tessellated and mosaic floors.

Monitoring of four of the window sample boreholes and the two boreholes revealed modern horizons to a depth of 0.6-1.25m below current ground level (bcgl). Beneath these horizons were Roman contexts ranging from 1.15m to 2.05m thick. Natural was recorded at depths of between 2.1-3.15m bcgl.

Two of the window sample boreholes were excavated through the backfill of an early 19th-century reservoir. The backfill sealed natural which was recorded at depths of c 2.7-2.8m bcgl.

2 Introduction (Fig 1)

This report presents the results of archaeological monitoring at the Mercury Theatre, Balkerne Gate, Colchester, Essex which was carried out on 18th December 2017, and 17th and 22nd January 2018. The work was commissioned by Lee Spalding, on behalf of Colchester Borough Council, during the excavation of window samples and boreholes associated with the Mercury Rising 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 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 (see Fig 2 for locations)

The following archaeological background draws on the Colchester Archaeological Trust report archive, the Colchester Historic Environment Record (CHER) accessed via the Colchester Heritage Explorer (www.colchesterheritage.co.uk).

The development site is located within the southwestern corner of the early Roman legionary fortress (CHER MCC477) and the later Roman walled town of Colchester (MCC9314). It lies adjacent to the Roman town wall (MCC859; scheduled monument nos. 1003772 and 1123664) and immediately to the southeast of the Roman Balkerne Gate (MCC555; scheduled monument no. 1123668).

The Roman wall was built around the town in the later 1st century AD following the revolt led by Boudica. It is constructed of a core of layered septaria and mortar faced with coursed septaria and tile. A recent study by Philip Crummy (2003) has concluded that the wall has an average width of 2.67m (including offsets) which is equivalent to precisely nine Roman feet (*pedes Monetales*), with a hypothetical cross-section of the wall showing the foundations as being 3.77m wide. Previous work shows that some of

the wall foundations were surprisingly shallow at 0.6m deep (Hull 1958, 25-6), with other sections being 1.2m deep with wooden piles below (CAT Report 347), although water-logged ground conditions at this location might explain the exceptional depth. A rampart was piled up behind the wall and deep V-shaped ditch dug along its foot to improve the defensive capabilities (Crummy 2001).

Balkerne Gate is the main west gate of the Roman colonia. A freestanding monumental arch (MCC718), probably constructed when the colonia was founded in AD 49, was incorporated into a larger gateway when the town wall (MCC859) was built. The surviving (south) pedestrian archway, and the southern guardroom, is only a small part of what was a massive entranceway (30m long N to S) into Roman Colchester from the west. Most of the gate was demolished, and the gap filled in, c AD 300.

The development site is located within insula 25a of the Roman town, and takes up virtually the entire insula block. The insula is likely bounded on all four sides by metalled streets, of which the east/west street on the northern edge of the development site led through Balkerne Gate) (CAR 6).

The following is a list of archaeological interventions within the development site with a summary of findings (also see CAT Report 858 – a preliminary desk-based assessment produced by CAT in 2015). See Fig 2 for a plan of all of the previous archaeological interventions and interpretations.

Hull (1958) lists two archaeological finds within insula 25a relevant to the current development. The first is a reference by Morant (the Rector of St Mary's) to a tessellated pavement in the cherry garden of the Rectory of St Mary's (Hull p192, no. 91). The second is another tessellated pavement found under the east wall of the southeast bay window of the rectory when it was built in 1781, together with foundations (Hull p192-3, no.92).

Two other tessellated floors were identified in 1959 and 1968 during the excavation of cable and drainage trenches (Dunnett 1971).

The 1965 trial-pits (Holbert 1966)

In 1965, Colchester Archaeological Group dug ten trial-pits in what was then the grounds of St Mary's Rectory. They found the gravel foundation of a north/south Roman metalled street on the eastern side of insula 25a, robbed-out Roman walls, Roman wall foundations, clay floors and a tessellated pavement. The report describes significant remains (ie, Roman floors) between c 0.76m and 1.52m below current ground level (bgl). Two sections show floors at c 1.2m bcgl. The findings were summarised by Holbert as 1st and 2nd century clay floors, finds evidence suggesting the presence of a 1st century pottery kiln (*which would be unusual in the centre of the Roman town*), and the damaged tessellated floor and wall foundations of a later Roman town house.

The 1967 and 1970 evaluations (Dunnett 1971)

In 1967 the Colchester Excavation Committee dug nine trenches on the development site, prior to the construction of The Mercury Theatre. These found significant lengths of *in situ* Roman walls and floors representing earlier (pre-Boudican) structures and later Roman town houses. A trench behind the Roman town wall identified earlier structural remains sealed by a north/south street, both of which were sealed by the later rampart of the town wall.

Another trench across the town rampart was excavated in 1970 to confirm the sequence of archaeological remains found in the 1967 trench.

The results of these evaluations were published and include two sections drawings (Dunnett 1971, Figs 39 and 40), both of which show Roman remains starting at c 0.6-1m bcgl.

The Mercury Theatre

Aside from the investigations mentioned above, no archaeological work took place during the construction of the theatre. However, Philip Crummy (pers comm) remembers walking past the site during construction and seeing significant archaeological remains, including tessellated pavements, exposed in the edges of the development site. The Mercury Theatre, designed by Norman Downie, was opened on 10th May 1972.

The 1996 evaluation and monitoring (CAT project codes 96/1a and 96/11c: this project has never been written-up, the archive is still held at CAT).

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 excavating nine trial-trenches. Mortar floors, robbed walls, a tessellated pavement and mosaic floor were among the Roman remains identified depths of 0.8-1m bcgl. Later that year a small trial-hole was excavated and a probable Roman wall foundation was identified at approximately 1.3m bcgl.

The 1997 mitigation (CAT project code 97/6a: this project has never been written-up, the archive is still held at CAT).

An archaeological mitigation was carried out by CAT in 1997 and all the stanchion holes for an eastern extension to the theatre were excavated. The excavations revealed more tessellated floors, robbed-out Roman walls, clay floors and timber slots, and the intact plinth of a fortress building. Roman features were identified at approximately 1.2-1.9m bcgl.

2016 boreholes (CAT Report 1048)

Two boreholes (Boreholes 1-2) were excavated in December 2016 and revealed probable Roman remains starting at 1.2-1.4m bcgl and continuing to a depth of 2.3-2.8m bcgl.

In summary, previous archaeological investigations on the site have confirmed the existence of:

- metallated street surfaces surrounding insula 25a,
- 1st century military plinths exposed in 1997 relating to the early Roman fortress,
- other pre-Boudican deposits/structures identified beneath the later Roman town houses,
- one or more Roman town houses with walls, mosaics and tessellated floors surviving *in situ*.

Any development on this site therefore has the potential to impact on these significant archaeological remains.

Early 19th-century reservoir

Two of the window sample boreholes are located within the footprint of a large backfilled reservoir (see Fig 2). The reservoir was constructed sometime in the early 19th century. It is not present on the Cole and Roper map of Colchester dated c 1800-1815 but is on Gilbert's map of 1846. It was positioned on one of the highest points of the town and was built to provide a better source of water to the inhabitants. It was eventually replaced by 'Jumbo' the water tower in 1883, although the reservoir is still shown on an OS map published in 1955.

4 Results (see Fig 2 for locations and Fig 3 for depths)

All groundworks were carried out by the contractors under the supervision of a CAT archaeologist.

Window sample boreholes (WSA-WSF)

Six window sample boreholes were excavated (see Fig 2 for locations) measuring 0.4-0.6m wide. The measurements presented here are based on those reported by RSA Geotechnics Ltd (2018) and notes taken by the supervising CAT archaeologist. However, due to the limited scope of this project (ie the small size of the samples) the depths and interpretation of some of the horizons recorded may alter if future work is undertaken.

WSA

Modern horizons were observed to a depth of 1.1m below current ground level (bcgl) (c 0.4m of paving and sub-base sealing 0.7m of a dark brown sandy-silty clay). Roman contexts were observed below this depth and consisted of 0.5m of dark brown silty-sandy clay, 0.5m of brown silty-clay, 0.2m of a firm red silty-sandy clay (possible Boudican destruction layer), 0.1m of a brown/dark-brown silty-sandy clay, 0.75m of coarse brown sand with some bone fragments in the last 0.15m. Natural sands were recorded at a depth of 3.15m bcgl.

WSB – excavated through the backfilled reservoir

WSB was hand-excavated through c 0.3m of clean black topsoil, c 0.5m of dirty black topsoil containing large fragments of modern CBM and concrete, and c 0.3m of soft brown silty-clay. The percussive sampling machine was then employed revealing 0.6m of dark brown silty-sandy clay and 0.4m of brown silty-clayey sand. Natural sands were recorded at a depth of c 2.5m bcgl. No Roman contexts were identified.

WSC – excavated through the backfilled reservoir

Similar to WSB, WSC was hand-excavated through c 0.1m of topsoil, c 0.6m of firm brown silty-clay and c 0.4m of dirty dark brown silty-sandy clay. The percussive sampling machine was then employed revealing c 0.8m of brown silty-sandy clay, c 0.8m of a brown/dark brown silty-clayey sand which contained modern debris. Natural sands were recorded at a depth of c 2.7m bcgl. No Roman contexts were identified.

WSD

WSD was hand-excavated through modern topsoil and made ground to a depth of 1.1m bcgl. Roman contexts were observed at this depth and consisted of a further 1.1m of brown silty-sandy clay sealing 0.3m of compacted sand and gravel (Roman metalling). Natural sands were recorded at a depth of 2.5m bcgl.

WSE

WSE was excavated through 0.35m of paving slab, concrete and sub-base onto 0.25m of a dark brown silty-clay. Roman contexts were observed at this depth and consisted of 0.8m of a dark brown silty clay and 0.6m of a brown sandy-silty clay, both containing fragments of Roman brick/tile, oyster shell and charcoal flecking. At the base of the sample was 0.4m of a brown silty sand sealing natural sands, recorded at 2.4m bcgl.

WSF

Modern topsoil and made ground was observed to a depth of 0.95m bcgl. Roman contexts were observed at this depth and consisted of 0.65m of brown silty-sandy clay. This sealed 0.5m of a light brown coarse sand. Natural sands were recorded at a depth of 2.1m bcgl.

Boreholes (BH3-4)

Boreholes 3 and 4 were excavated during this phase of monitoring (see Fig 2 for locations). Boreholes 1 and 2 had already been excavated in December 2016 (CAT Report 1048).

Borehole 3

Approximately 0.3-0.4m of tarmac and type 1 sub-base sealed a dark grey/brown silt which was observed to a depth of 1.2-1.3m bcgl. Beneath this Roman contexts were observed to a maximum depth of 2.6m bcgl where natural was encountered. Roman contexts included a possible demolition horizon of grey/brown clay and floor/occupation deposits.

Borehole 4

Approximately 0.2m of paving and sub-base sealed c 1m of modern made ground. Beneath this Roman contexts were observed to a depth of 2.8m bcgl where natural was encountered. Roman contexts included a possible demolition horizon of grey/brown clay and floor/occupation deposits.

5 Finds

No archaeological finds were retained from the samples. However, most of the Roman contexts did contain fragments of Roman ceramic building material, oyster shell, mortar, fired clay and some charcoal.

6 Conclusion

WSA, WSD-WSF, Boreholes 3 and 4

The window sample boreholes and boreholes carried out at the Mercury Theatre indicate varying depths of modern made-ground across the development site. These horizons ranged in thickness from 0.6m to 1.3m, with many probably associated with the construction of the Mercury Theatre and associated landscaping.

Sealed directly beneath the modern horizons were Roman contexts. Significantly these appear to include a section of Roman metalling (probably a road surface) in WSD (at 2.2m bcgl) and a possible Boudican destruction layer in WSA (2.1m bcgl). These Roman contexts ranged from 1.15m to 2.05m thick and sealed natural sands. Natural was recorded at depths of between 2.1-3.15m bcgl.

WSB-WSC

Window samples WSB and WSC were located within the footprint of the backfilled, early 19th-century reservoir. The original depth of this reservoir is uncertain, but modern backfill was recorded in these two samples to a depth of 2.5-2.7m bcgl where they sealed natural sand. No Roman contexts were observed.

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 C Lister and B Holloway. Figures were prepared by M Baister and L Pooley. 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>
Brown, N & Glazenbrook J	2000	<i>Research and Archaeology: a Framework for the Eastern Counties , 1 research agenda and strategy.</i> East Anglian Archaeology Occasional Papers 8 (EAA 8).
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	2017	<i>Health & Safety Policy</i>
CAT Report 347	2009	<i>Roman buildings, the rear face of the Roman town wall and archaeological investigations in Insulas 1a, 1b, 9a and 9b, at the Sixth Form College, North Hill, Colchester, Essex: April 2005-March 2006</i>
CAT Report 858	2015	<i>A preliminary archaeological desk-based assessment: Mercury Theatre, Colchester, Essex.</i>
CAT Report 1048	2017	<i>Archaeological monitoring and recording at the Mercury Theatre, Balkerne Gate, Colchester, Essex, CO1 1PT: December 2016</i>
ClfA	2014a	<i>Standard and Guidance for an archaeological watching briefs</i>
ClfA	2014b	<i>Standard and guidance for the creation, compilation, transfer and deposition of archaeological archives</i>
ClfA	2014c	<i>Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials</i>
Crummy, P	2001	<i>City of Victory: the story of Colchester – Britain's first Roman town</i>
Crummy, P	2003	'Colchester's town wall' in <i>The archaeology of Roman towns: studies in honour of John S Wacher</i> , P Wilson (ed)
DCLG	2012	<i>National Planning Policy Framework</i>
Dunnett, R	1971	'Excavations in Colchester, 1964-68: Excavation on the site of the former St Mary's Rectory, 1967', in <i>Transactions of the Essex Archaeological Society: A Journal of Essex Archaeology and History Volume III Part 1</i> , 62-77.
English Heritage	2006	<i>Management of Research Projects in the Historic Environment (MoRPHE)</i>
Glazebrook, J	1997	<i>Research and Archaeology: a Framework for the Eastern Counties , 1 resource assessment.</i> East Anglian Archaeology Occasional Papers 3 (EAA 3).
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Holbert, P R	1966	'Preliminary report on the excavations in the garden of St Mary's Rectory, Colchester, 1965', in <i>Colchester Archaeological Group Bulletin</i> 9.
Hull, M R	1958	<i>Roman Colchester, RRCSAL 20</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)
RSA Geotechnics Ltd	2018	<i>Supplementary investigation at Mercury Theatre, Balkerne Gate, Colchester, Essex, CO1 1PT for Colchester Borough Homes Ltd. Geoenvironmental Report.</i> Ground investigation report number 14663SI

9 Abbreviations and glossary

CAT	Colchester Archaeological Trust
CBC	Colchester Borough Council
CBCAA	Colchester Borough Council Archaeological Advisor
CBCPS	Colchester Borough Council Planning Services
CHER	Colchester Historic Environment Record
ClfA	Chartered Institute for Archaeologists
context	a single unit of excavation, which is often referred to numerically, and can be any feature, layer or find.
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
Roman	the period from AD 43 to c AD 410
wsj	Written Scheme of Investigation

10 Contents of archive

Finds: n/a

Paper and digital record

One A4 document wallet containing:

The report (CAT Report 1333)

Original site record (typed notes)

Digital photographic thumbnails and log

Digital record

The report (CAT Report 1333)

Digital photographs, thumbnails and log

Graphics

Survey data

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: 2017.155.

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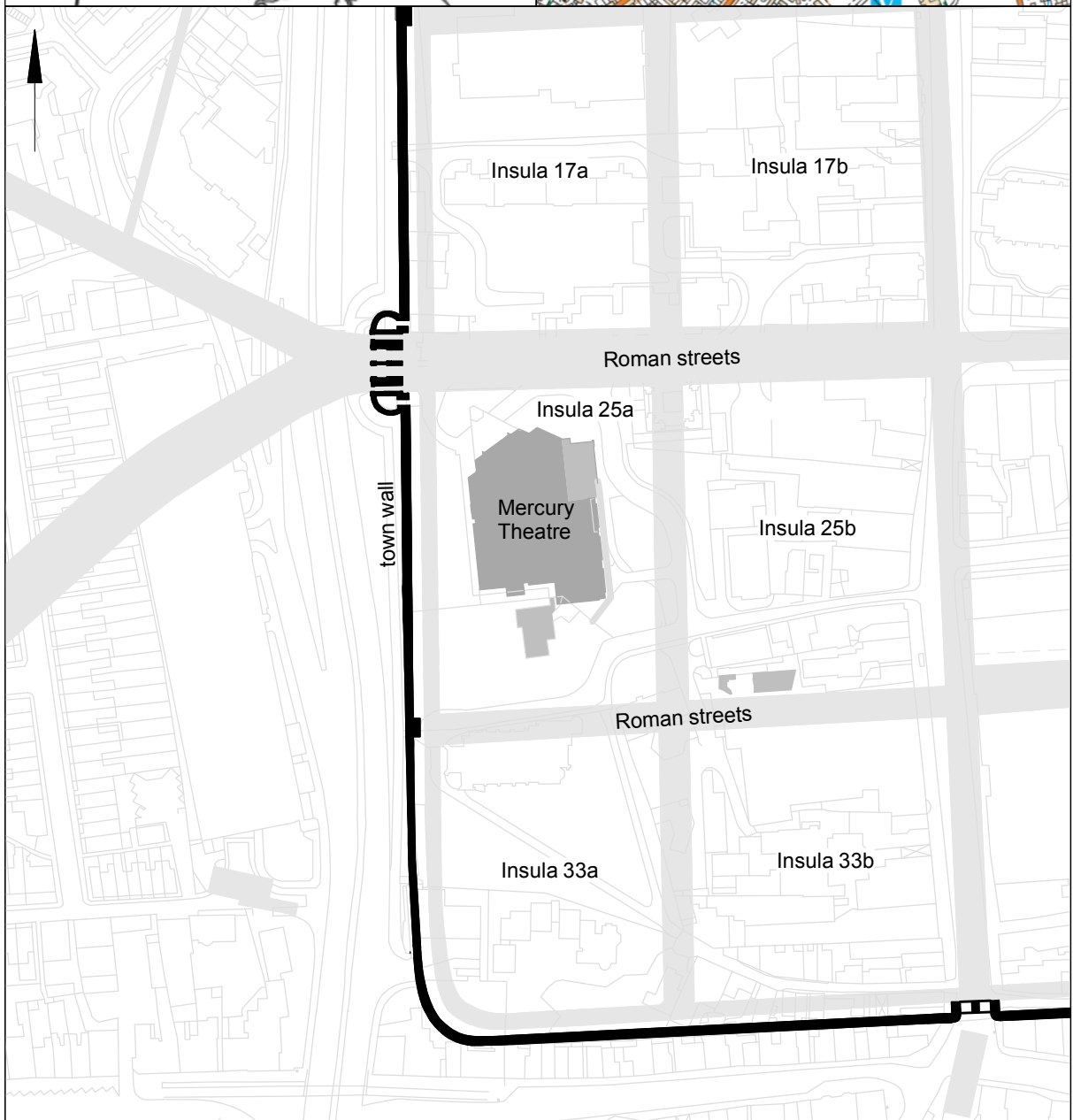
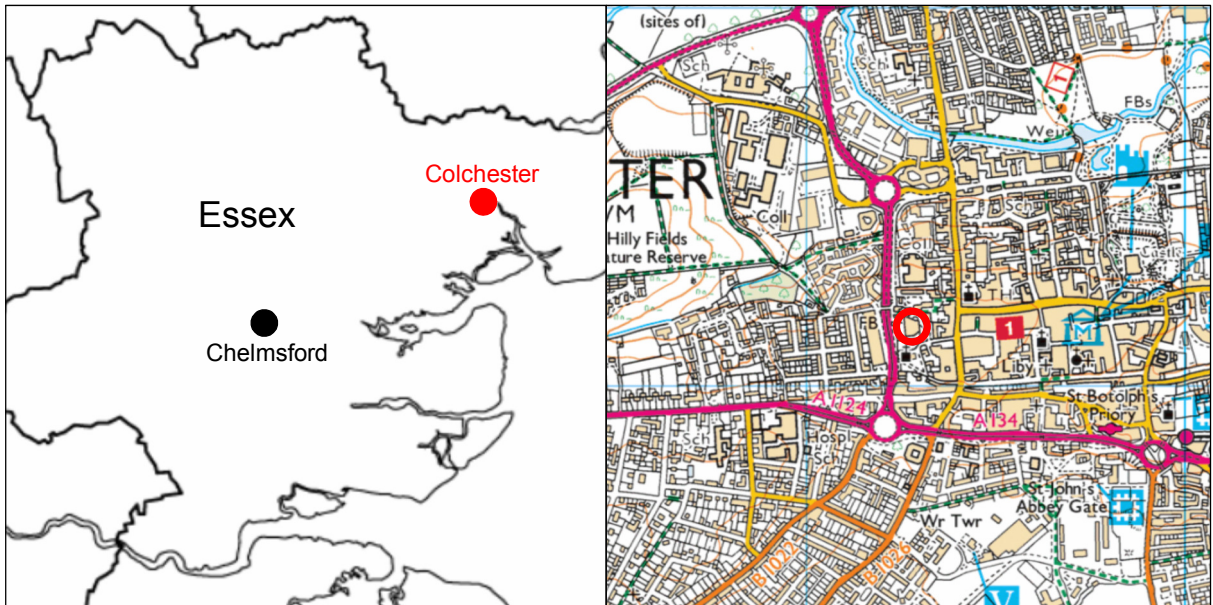
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Date: 10.10.2018



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Fig 1 Site location.



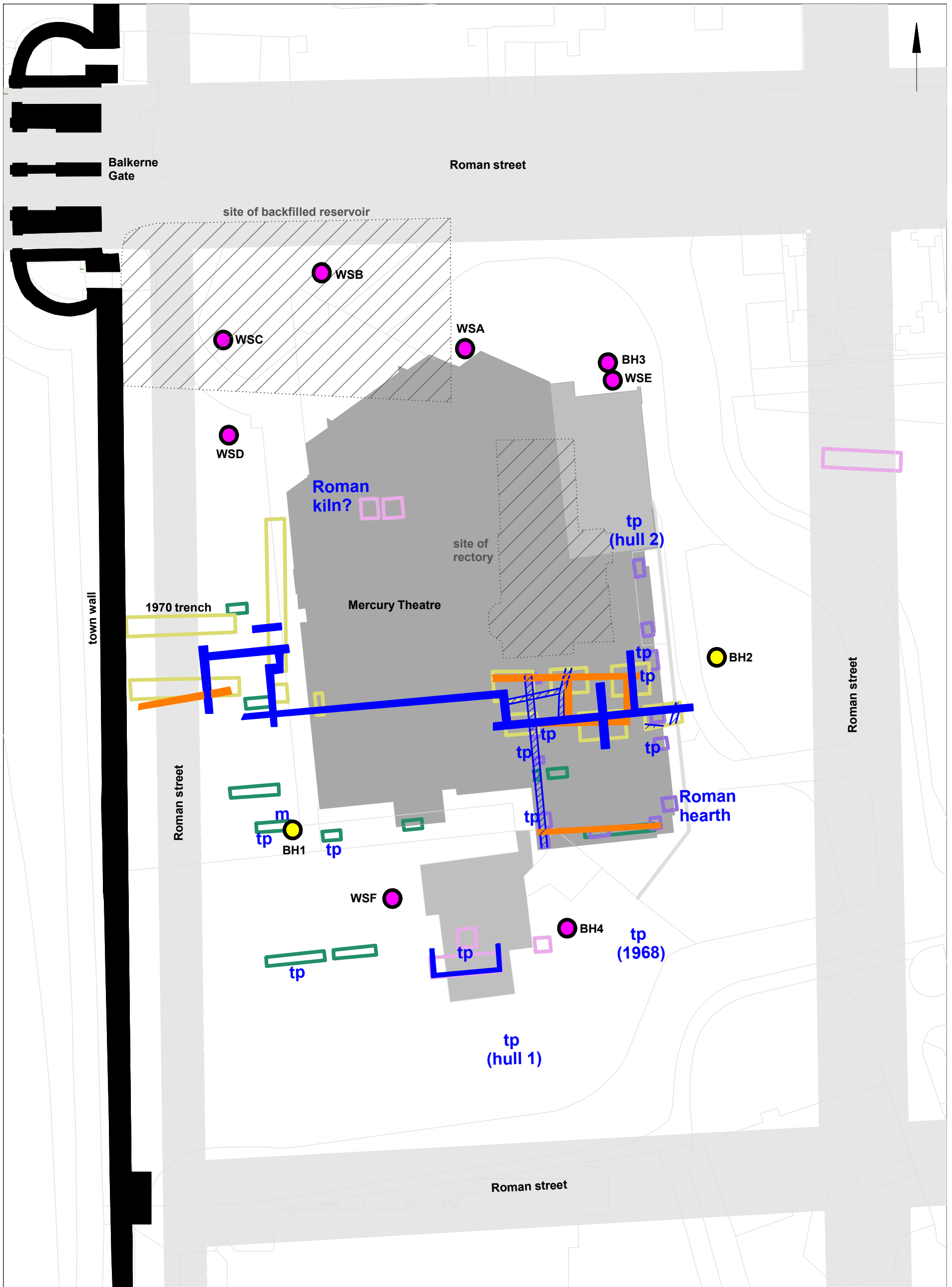


Fig 2 Detailed plan of site showing the 2017-8 window samples and boreholes (pink circles) in relation to previous archaeological work.

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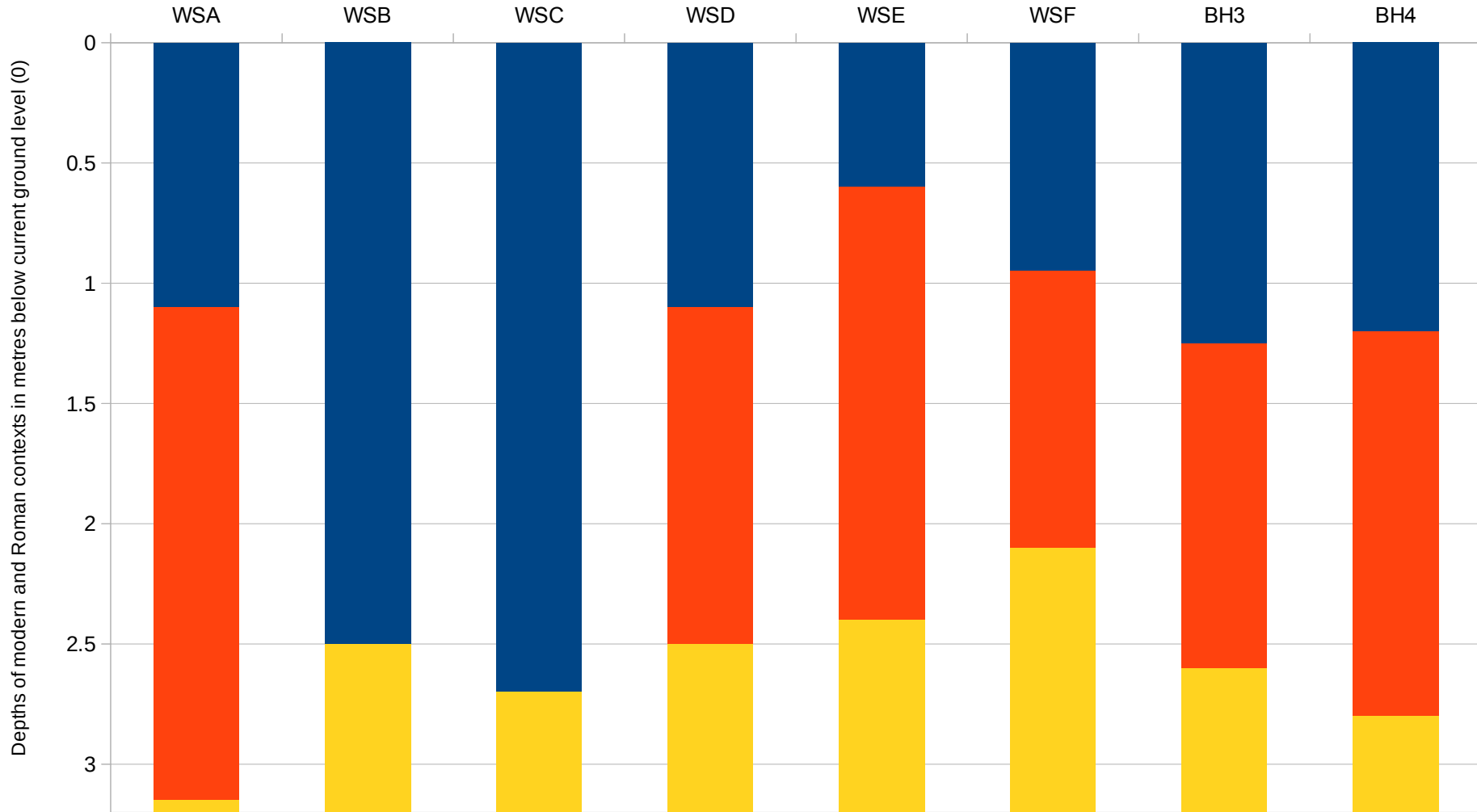
<u>previous archaeological work</u>		<u>known archaeology</u>	
	1965 evaluation		2016 boreholes
	1967 evaluation		2017-8 boreholes
	1996 evaluation		Roman walls (pre-Boudican)
	1997 evaluation		Roman walls
			Roman walls (robbed out)
			tp tessellated pavement
			m mosaic

Fig 3 Graph showing the depths of Roman archaeological contexts (red) below current ground level

0 = current ground level; blue = modern; red = Roman; yellow = natural



Essex Historic Environment Record/ Essex Archaeology and History

Summary sheet

Address: Mercury Theatre, Balkerne Gate, Colchester, Essex, CO1 1PT	
Parish: Colchester	District: Colchester
NGR: TL 99281 25157 (centre)	Site code: CAT project ref.: 17/12a CHER ref: ECC4117 OASIS ref: colchest3-302929
Type of work: Monitoring and recording	Site director/group: Colchester Archaeological Trust
Date of work: 18th December 2017 – 22nd January 2018	Size of area investigated: 0.48ha
Location of curating museum: Colchester museum accession code COLEM: 2017.155	Funding source: Colchester Borough Council
Further seasons anticipated? yes	Related CHER/EHER number:
Final report: CAT Report 1333	
Periods represented: Roman, modern	
<p>Summary of fieldwork results:</p> <p>Archaeological monitoring was carried out at the Mercury Theatre, Balkerne Gate, Colchester, Essex during the excavation of six window sample boreholes and 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 surviving wall foundations, tessellated and mosaic floors.</p> <p>Monitoring of four of the window sample boreholes and the two boreholes revealed modern horizons to a depth of 0.6-1.25m below current ground level (bcgl). Beneath these horizons were Roman contexts ranging from 1.15m to 2.05m thick. Natural was recorded at depths of between 2.1-3.15m bcgl.</p> <p>Two of the window sample boreholes were excavated through the backfill of an early 19th-century reservoir. The backfill sealed natural which was recorded at depths of c 2.7-2.8m bcgl.</p>	
Previous summaries/reports: CAT Reports 858, 1048	
CBC monitor: Jess Tipper	
Keywords: –	Significance: *
Author of summary: Laura Pooley	Date of summary: October 2018

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Project details

Project name	Archaeological monitoring at the Mercury Theatre, Balcerne Gate, Colchester, Essex, CO1 1PT
Short description of the project	Archaeological monitoring was carried out at the Mercury Theatre, Balcerne Gate, Colchester, Essex during the excavation of six window sample boreholes and 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 surviving wall foundations, tessellated and mosaic floors. Monitoring of four of the window sample boreholes and the two boreholes revealed modern horizons to a depth of 0.6-1.25m below current ground level (bcgl). Beneath these horizons were Roman contexts ranging from 1.15m to 2.05m thick. Natural was recorded at depths of between 2.1-3.15m bcgl. Two of the window sample boreholes were excavated through the backfill of an early 19th-century reservoir. The backfill sealed natural which was recorded at depths of c 2.7-2.8m bcgl.
Project dates	Start: 18-12-2017 End: 22-01-2018
Previous/future work	Yes / Yes
Any associated project reference codes	17/12a - Contracting Unit No.
Any associated project reference codes	ECC4117 - HER event no.
Any associated project reference codes	COLEM: 2017.155 - Museum accession ID
Type of project	Recording project
Site status	None
Current Land use	Other 14 - Recreational usage
Monument type	METALLED SURFACE Roman
Significant Finds	N/A None
Investigation type	"Watching Brief"
Prompt	Planning condition

Project location

Country	England
Site location	ESSEX COLCHESTER COLCHESTER Mercury Theatre, Balcerne Gate
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 Organisation	Colchester Archaeological Trust
Project brief originator	CBC Archaeological Officer
Project design originator	Laura Pooley
Project director/manager	Chris Lister
Project supervisor	Chris Lister
Type of sponsor/funding body	Developer

Project archives

Physical Archive Exists?	No
Digital Archive recipient	Colchester Museum
Digital Archive ID	COLEM: 2017.155
Digital Contents	"Stratigraphic","Survey"
Digital Media available	"Images raster / digital photography","Survey","Text"
Paper Archive recipient	Colchester Museum

Paper Archive ID COLEM: 2017.155
Paper Contents "Stratigraphic","other"
Paper Media available "Miscellaneous Material","Photograph","Plan","Report","Section"

Project bibliography 1

Publication type Grey literature (unpublished document/manuscript)
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