



# CATALOGUE

NEWSLETTER OF THE COLCHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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# THE BUTT ROAD CEMETERY

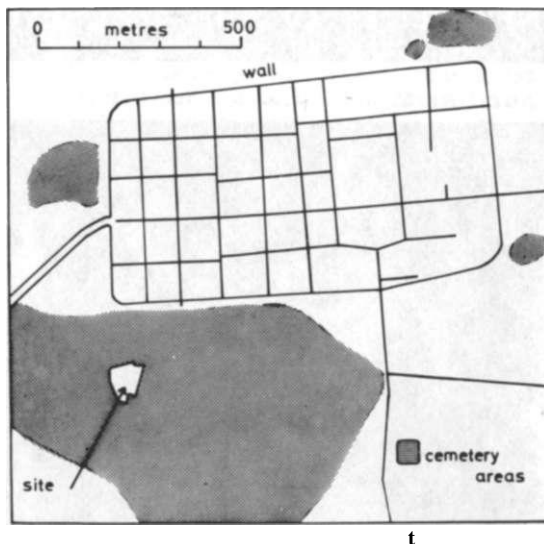
"Another skeleton was found this very day, very much decayed, coffin nails were found with it at the head and feet, the former to the west..."

Wire's Journal  
15 November 1845

This description, one of many references to discoveries in the Butt Road area, was penned by William Wire, postman, shopkeeper and amateur antiquarian of nineteenth century Colchester. Working on his own initiative and surrounded by an atmosphere of general indifference to the town's archaeological heritage, Wire was a frequent visitor to the building sites of the time and daily entries in his journal now form a valuable part of Colchester's archaeological record. From his and later notes of chance finds of skeletons and cremated remains, an indistinct picture of Colchester's Roman cemeteries has emerged.

In accordance with Roman practice, the cemeteries were established outside the town walls. They grew so large that the overall area used for the burial of successive generations of its citizens became greater in size than the inhabited town itself. By far the largest of these sites was to the south of the town where burials cover a broad strip of land between the modern Mersea Road and Park Road, a vast cemetery zone of over **150** acres which probably still contains a large proportion of the population of Roman Colchester. It is impossible to estimate accurately the size of that population but nonetheless it is an interesting mathematical exercise. Cemetery studies elsewhere suggest a life expectancy of around **35** years for the average Romano-Briton, so if we were to assume that Colchester's population may have averaged **10,000** (and this is possibly on the low side), and calculate this over four centuries, we end up with a total of **100,000**. It is therefore hardly surprising that such a large area of land should have been needed for burials.

Very little is known of the organization and development of the cemeteries within this area and until recently no large-



LOCATION OF ROMAN CEMETERY AREAS IN COLCHESTER (above)

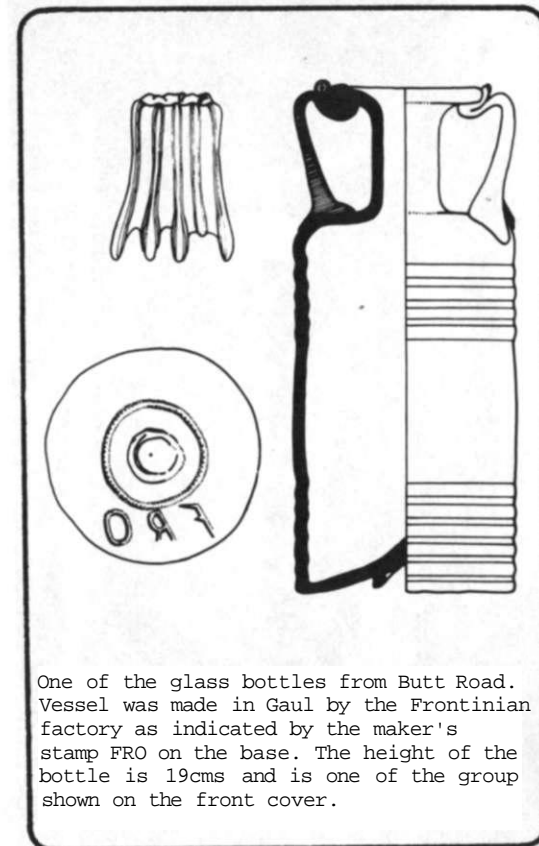
scale excavation had taken place. The opportunity came when the Essex County Council announced their intention to build a new Police Headquarters on a 1 1/2 acre site at the northern end of Butt Road. This area was a particularly attractive excavation prospect as it includes the remains of a Roman building which has excited the curiosity of many since its discovery over a century ago. In the past this building has been interpreted as a pagan temple, shrine or early Christian church. A thorough re-excavation of this site to clarify its purpose and relationship to the surrounding burials should provide a valuable bonus to the work on the cemetery. The site, which is in the centre of the main southern cemetery area and less than a quarter of a mile outside Headgate, may also contain Roman kilns and a stretch of the main Headgate Roman road, the course

of which is a mystery at present. The principal attraction, however, was the cemetery itself and the opportunity a site of this size would give to examine a Roman burial ground on a very large scale, as early estimates suggested that the site might contain up to one thousand graves. All this will be destroyed by landscaping and foundations for the Police Headquarters, so in the spring of 1976, and with the co-operation of the County Council, rescue excavations commenced.

We were soon in for a surprise. The density of graves, which we already expected would be high, was found to be twice as great as our original estimate, giving a potential of around 2,000 burials over the entire 1 1/2 acre site. If this figure were realised, the excavation may become the largest of its type ever carried out in Britain with results statistically comparable to those from similar sites in Germany, Hungary and North Africa.

To date, one fifth of the site has been examined and 454 graves excavated. The majority of these belong to a late Roman cemetery dating to the second half of the fourth century. The graves spread across the excavated area in fairly regular rows with the foot of each grave pointing east. Few of the surface features of the cemetery have survived later stripping but occasionally a small group of stones or upright tiles remain to suggest individual plots.

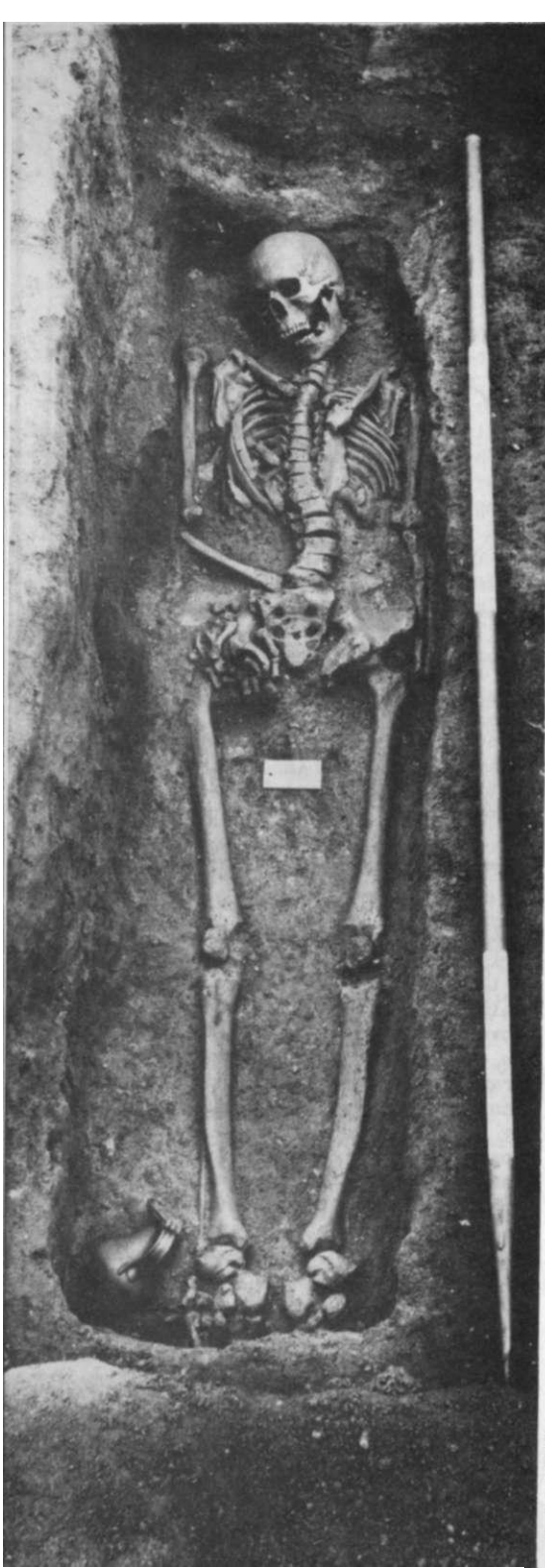
The commonest type of coffin in this cemetery was made of wooden boards nailed together to form a simple rectangular box without fittings. Other coffins of split and hollowed tree trunks, tile and lead-lined timber have been unearthed and several unusually large graves have been found containing timber chambers within which coffins were deposited. Family groups can be identified in places, some by an intensive series of burials within a very limited space, others by similarities in burial custom such as the three adjoining graves which contained a glass bottle at the foot of each coffin. Although few of the adult graves in this cemetery contain grave-goods it is interesting to see that bereaved parents usually ensured that their children were accompanied by small personal items for their journey to the afterlife.



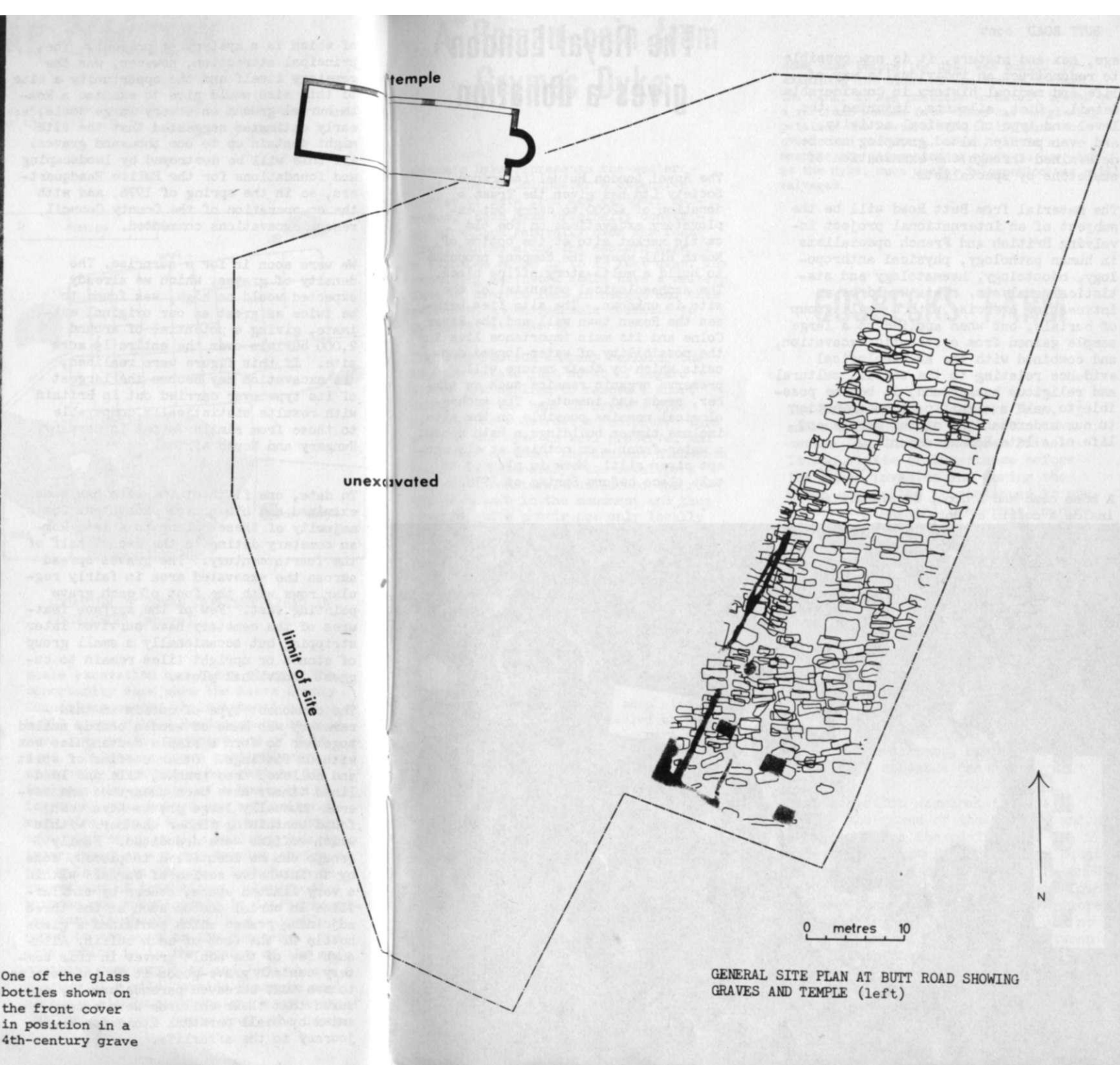
One of the glass bottles from Butt Road. Vessel was made in Gaul by the Frontinian factory as indicated by the maker's stamp FRO on the base. The height of the bottle is 19cms and is one of the group shown on the front cover.

A number of graves along the western fringe of the excavated area belong to a third century cemetery, most of which will be examined when the excavations move to the western part of the site. In common with the later cemetery these graves also contain nailed timber coffins, but they otherwise differ markedly as they have been laid out with a north-south orientation and more often than not they contain simple grave-goods. The cemeteries overlap so that the later east-west orientated graves cut across their north-south predecessors, often causing considerable disturbance to the earlier burials.

It is perhaps only within the last decade or so that the potential of cemetery excavations has begun to be realized. Much of this is due to advances in the study of human remains, so that in addition to the usual estimations of



One of the glass bottles shown on the front cover in position in a 4th-century grave



GENERAL SITE PLAN AT BUTT ROAD SHOWING GRAVES AND TEMPLE (left)

age, sex and stature, it is now possible to reconstruct an individual's way of life and medical history in considerable detail. Diet, ailments, injuries, the level and type of physical activity, and even perhaps blood grouping can be determined through the examination of skeletons by specialists.

The material from Butt Road will be the subject of an international project involving British and French specialists in human pathology, physical anthropology, odontology, haematology and statistical analysis. This would be an interesting exercise with a small group of burials, but when applied to a large sample gained from systematic excavation, and combined with the archaeological evidence relating to the social, cultural and religious background, it become possible to make a significant contribution to our understanding of the people and life of a late Roman community.

C. E. C.

A bone comb and a group of bracelets inside a coffin at Butt Road



## The Royal London gives a donation

The Royal London Mutual Insurance Society Ltd has given the Trust a donation of £2000 to carry out exploratory excavations on the old cattle market site at the bottom of North Hill where the company proposes to build a multi-story office block. The archaeological potential of the site is unknown. The site lies between the Roman town wall and the River Colne and its main importance lies in the possibility of water-logged deposits which by their nature will preserve organic remains such as timber, seeds and insects. The archaeological remains possible on the site include timber buildings, a bath house, a water-front - or nothing at all except river silt! Work is planned to take place before Spring of 1978.

## A Roman coin from Gryme's Dyke

Gryme's Dyke represents the western-most line of Colchester's extensive series of late Iron Age earthen defences. Each dyke originally consisted of a bank generally over six feet high, placed along the eastern edge of a V-shaped ditch up to 13 feet deep. The resulting earthwork could have a western face of over 20 feet in height and thus represent a considerable obstacle to potential attackers.

The construction company building the housing estate just south of Dugard Avenue had applied to remove a short section of the bank of Gryme's Dyke in order to construct a footpath. This part of the dyke is well preserved and is protected under the Ancient Monuments Acts. Unfortunately, the developers somewhat prematurely bulldozed the required breach in the monument and thus created quite a stir not only locally but also nationwide. Not only was the incident mentioned in at least two national newspapers but the subject was brought up in the House of Commons. It had been hoped that the Trust would have excavated the section of dyke so that the archaeological evidence could at least have been properly recorded before being destroyed.

After the machine work was completed, the remains of the dyke were tidied up and the damage assessed. Fortunately part of the base of the bank still survived and in it was found a badly corroded Roman bronze coin datable to no earlier than AD 37. Since this coin could not have been incorporated in the bank before AD 37 (because the coin had not been made before then), the bank itself must date (at the very earliest) to AD 37. Since the dyke almost certainly predates the Roman invasion (because it is part of the pre-Roman system of defences), then the coin indicates that the dyke must have been constructed between AD 37 and 43. The coin must be one of the most significant ever found during excavations at Colchester. Under the bank a series of small pits was found containing pottery datable by comparison with pottery from elsewhere to between 15/10 BC and AD 25 and relating to human activity in the area

some time before the dyke was built. By examining the sides of the trench through the bank, it was possible to detect traces of a vertical wooden face which had originally retained the western side of the bank and overlooked the ditch. Thus, all in all, despite the disappointing start to our work at the dyke, much useful information was still salvaged.

P.C.

## GOSBECKS FARM

The Roman site at Gosbecks Farm, 2 1/2 miles southwest of Colchester town centre, is unique in Roman Britain. It was a site of importance before the Roman invasion and during the Roman occupation it continued in use as a religious and commercial centre of a type found widely in Roman Gaul. Our knowledge of the Romano-Celtic temple, theatre and other features of the site is based on excavation and aerial photographs, since all that now remains above ground is the theatre mound. Because of the great importance of the site and the fact that the land is under continuous cultivation, the Department of the Environment requested that a small excavation be carried out in 1977 to see how much archaeological material remains and whether agricultural operations are continuing to cause damage.

Our excavation examined two small areas; the mound of the theatre and a section across the position of the three walls that formed a large square enclosure round the temple. The three walls and their foundations were found to have been almost completely removed, possibly in the last century, and no trace of any floors remained between them. Both the temple and the theatre were badly scored and rutted by several sets of ploughmarks as a result of agricultural operations in the past. However, the theatre mound was still about

as high as it had been when excavated by Miss Dunnett in 1967 and this suggests that recent ploughing has not caused serious damage.

Our thanks are due to the farmer Mr Barbour for permitting the excavation to take place. A full report is being prepared for submission to the Department of the Environment.

N.A.S.

## A HOARD FROM COLCHESTER

In September 1977, during machine work by building contractors in Balkerne Gardens, about sixty coins were found by workmen sorting through a heap of redeposited spoil. Reports conflict as to the exact number of coins found, but sixty are positively from the hoard. How large a part of the original deposit is represented is unknown; no container was found. Thirty-four coins were loaned by the finders to the Trust for identification and recording and a further twenty-six, plus three extraneous, were recorded while temporarily in the Castle Museum.

The coins in the hoard were all folles, a bronze denomination first introduced by Diocletian, and covered the period AD 294, the earliest issues of the First Tetrarchy, to AD 317, issued by Licinius I. Half the coins were minted in Trier, eighteen in London, and others in Lyons, Aries, Rome and Antioch. One of the coins was a previously unrecorded reverse type.

N.C.

Contributing to this issue were:

Carl Crossan .... a site director  
Philip Crummy ... the Trust's Director  
Nick Smith ..... a site director  
Nina Crummy ..... the research assistant

Bob Moyes, the chief draughtsman, designed our front cover and Alison Colchester took the photographs.

# NOTES AND NEWS

Excavations began on the Cattle Market site at Middleborough during the second week in January. Initial clearance by machine has revealed the remains of a stone building and a gravel surface or road, both of Roman date. Prospects look good for a very productive excavation.

In our last newsletter we asked for Volunteers to help with the backlog of uncleaned animal bones from six years of excavation by the Trust. Thanks to the response from the Friends the backlog is diminishing - slowly. We still need help, if you can spare a few hours a week Vicky, who introduced the volunteers to the 'art' of bone washing has just had a baby (called Harry). Congratulations Vicky - when will Harry be old enough to help? Until then, if you wish to help, please contact Karen at the Trust's headquarters at East Hill House, 76 High Street, Colchester (Tel. 41051).

The Colchester Archaeological Trust is composed of representatives of local and national bodies as well as a few co-opted individuals and employs a permanent staff of archaeologists to deal with the rescue sites in Colchester. Last year the Friends of the Colchester Archaeological Trust was formed to support the Trust's work. The subscription per year is - Adults and Institutions £1.50, Family Membership £2.00, Children and Students 75p. For letters a year, are able to attend a lecture on the year's work and will be given conducted tours of the current sites. Mike Corbishley organises the Friends and edits the newsletter, but subscriptions should be sent to Mrs G Chadwick, Treasurer, The Friends of the Colchester Archaeological Trust, 171 Wivenhoe Road, Alresford, Colchester, C07 8AQ. You can contact the Colchester Archaeological Trust via the Castle Museum, Colchester.