

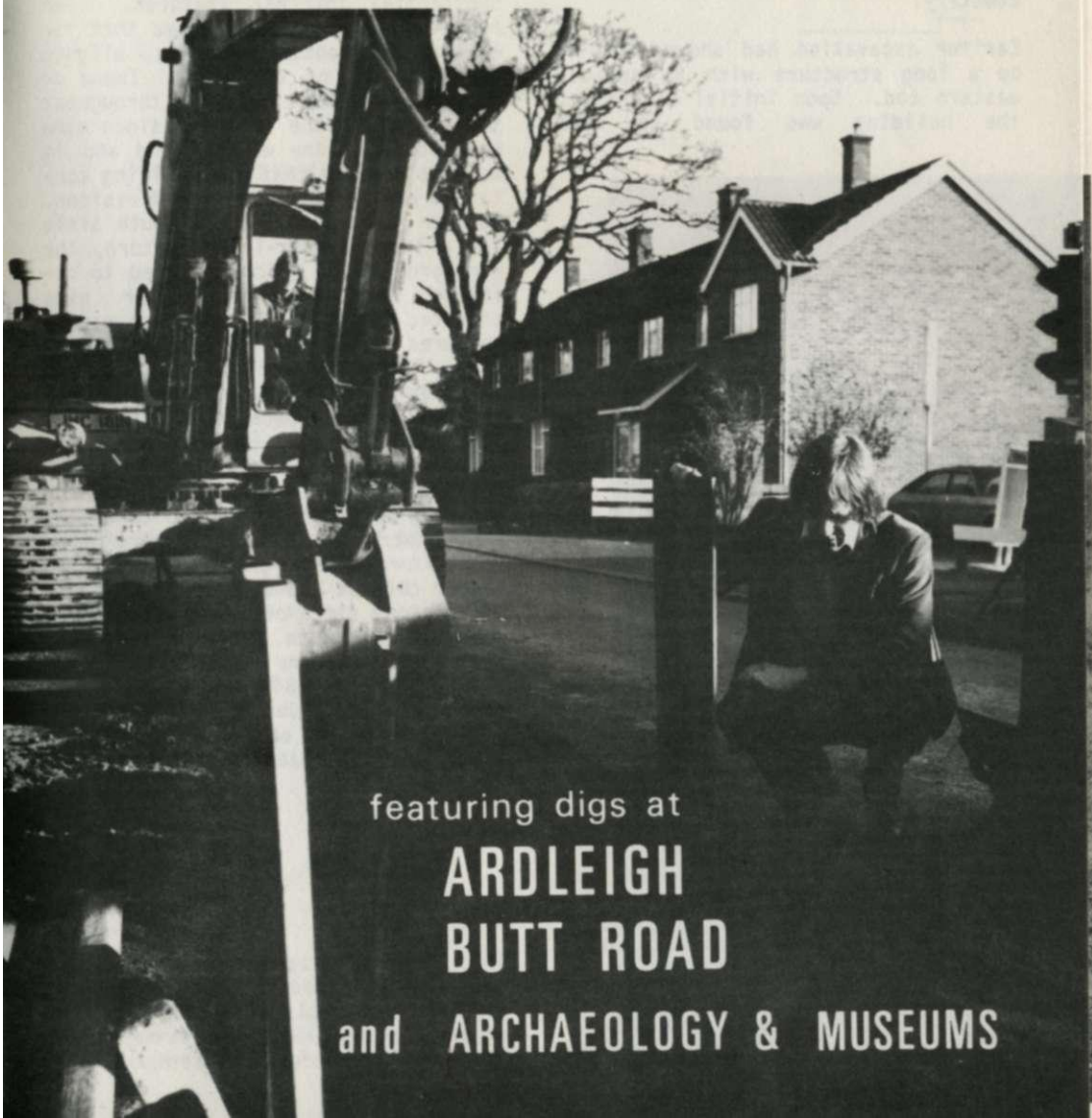


# CATALOGUE

NEWS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS IN COLCHESTER

number 6

winter 1980



featuring digs at

**ARDLEIGH  
BUTT ROAD**

and **ARCHAEOLOGY & MUSEUMS**

# THE BUTT ROAD EXCAVATIONS

Six hundred and ninety graves have been examined in the course of the cemetery excavations at Butt Road which ended in June 1979. One major objective of the final season's work was to examine more fully the Roman building which lies to the north of Denmark Street in order to determine its purpose and relationship to the cemetery.

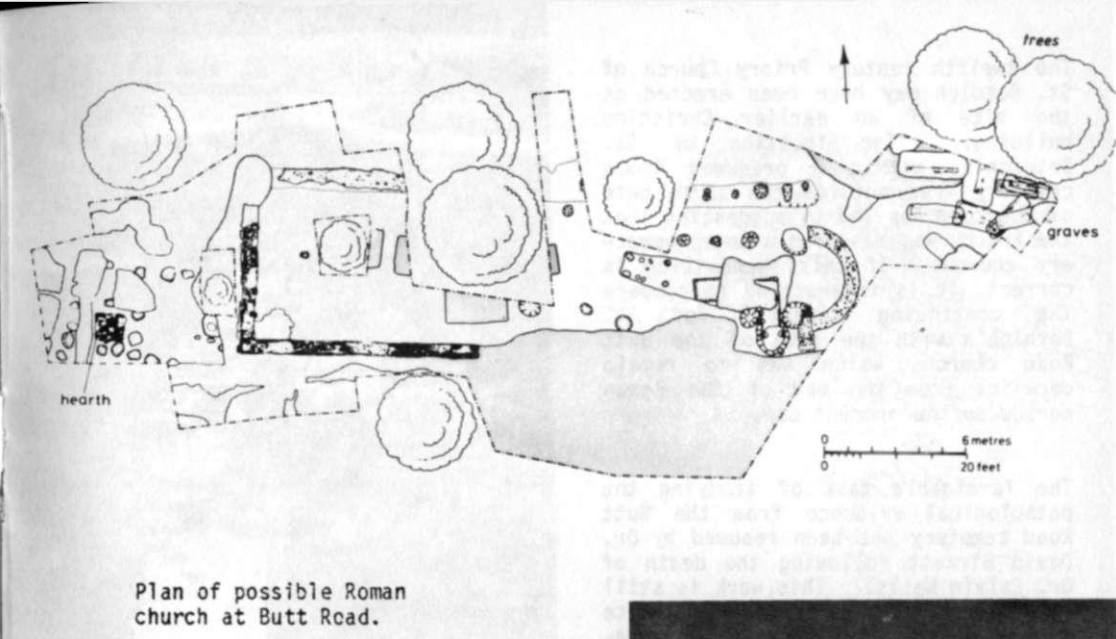
Earlier excavation had shown this to be a long structure with an apsidal eastern end. Upon initial clearance, the building was found to have

suffered extensive damage from nineteenth century sand pits and other recent forms of disturbance. In places these removed the Roman features to a depth of nearly two metres below the original floor level. In spite of this destruction, sufficient evidence survived to permit a partial reconstruction of the more substantial internal features. Two rows of post holes indicated that the eastern end contained aisles, aligned with the end of the apse. These do not appear to have extended throughout the length of the building since none were found at the western end and it must be assumed that the building contained one or more internal divisions. Between two posts of the south aisle lay a long, timber-lined feature, the northern end of which appeared to coincide with two rectangular pits situated to the west. Although partly obscured by ground disturbance, it seems likely that two of these features were graves which occupied a position of some prominence within the building.

The cemetery area to the east of the building was found to extend to within a few metres of the apse, where excavation revealed graves containing timber coffins and skeletal remains in an advanced state of decomposition. A study of the coin evidence indicates that the building was in use from around A.D. 320-340 until the fifth century, and was contemporary with the later period of east-west orientated burials in the adjacent cemetery area.

## Grave 35

This young man (aged 22 - 26) suffered from wide-spread bone infection and probably multiple ulcers in other organs. He must have been severely ill for some time before he died.



Although the available evidence is by no means conclusive, the period of use, orientation, grave-like features and distinctive plan suggest that this building may have been a "martyrium", a cemetery church housing the remains of a saint. Christianity was adopted as the official religion of the Roman empire in A.D. 312 and the existence of Christian communities in fourth century British towns has been established from excavations at Dorchester and elsewhere. If this building is indeed a cemetery church, it is unlikely to have been the only one of its kind in late Roman Colchester.

## Grave 172

A woman who, at some point during her life, suffered a depressed fracture of the skull. She appears to have recovered from this injury and died in middle age (aged 35 - 50).



The twelfth century Priory Church of St. Botolph may have been erected on the site of an earlier Christian building. The location of St. Botolph's, within a presumed Roman cemetery area outside the south gate of the town has led to suggestion that the Priory was based on a Roman cemetery church. If this supposition is correct, it is interesting to compare the continuing tradition of St. Botolph's with the fate of the Butt Road church, which was to remain derelict from the end of the Roman period to the present day.

The formidable task of studying the pathological evidence from the Butt Road cemetery has been resumed by Dr. David Birkett following the death of Dr. Calvin Wells. This work is still at an early stage but results to date include evidence of arthritis, periostitis, and sinusitis. Two of the less fortunate inhabitants of late Roman Colchester are illustrated here.

Carl Crossan

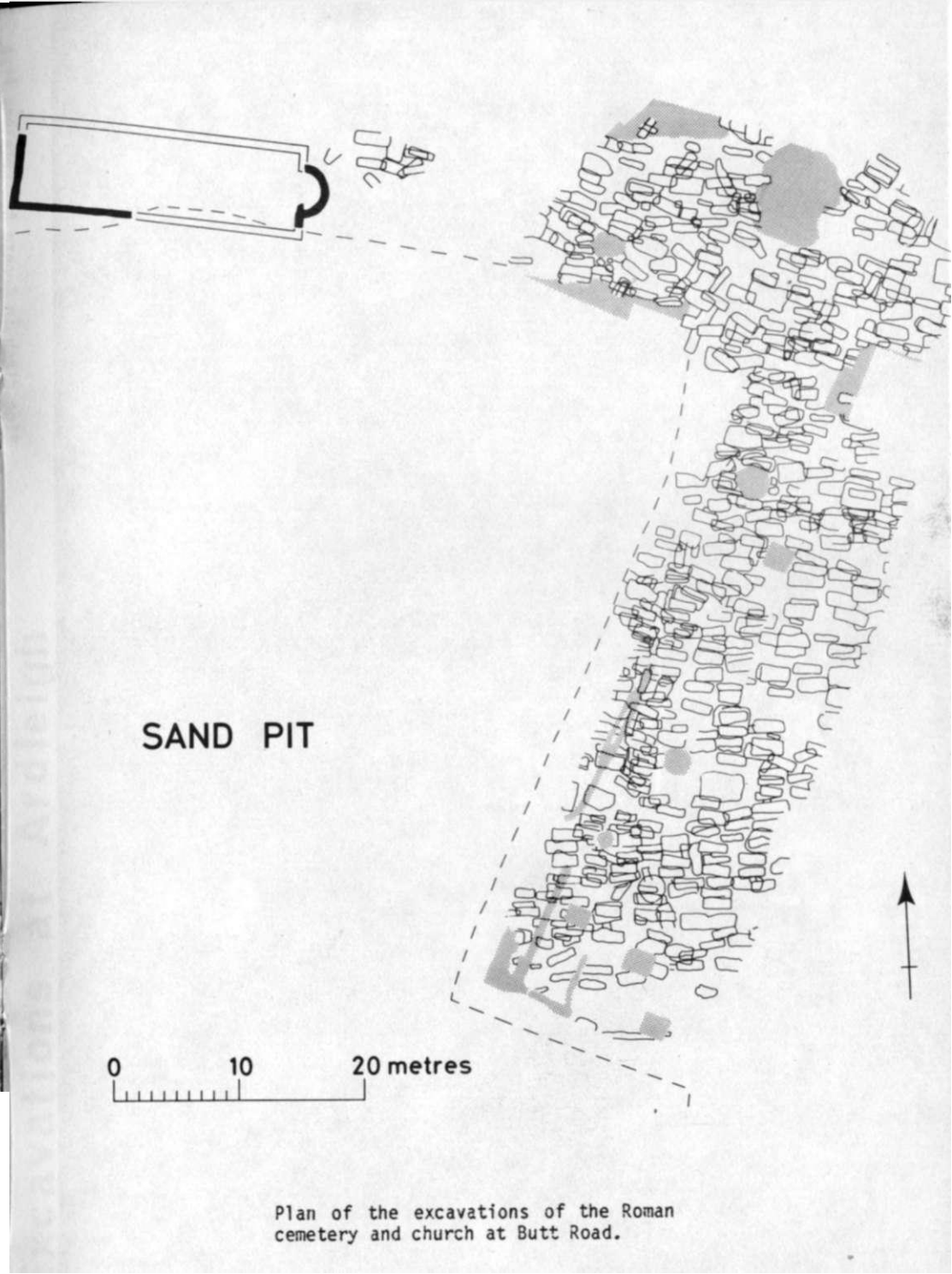


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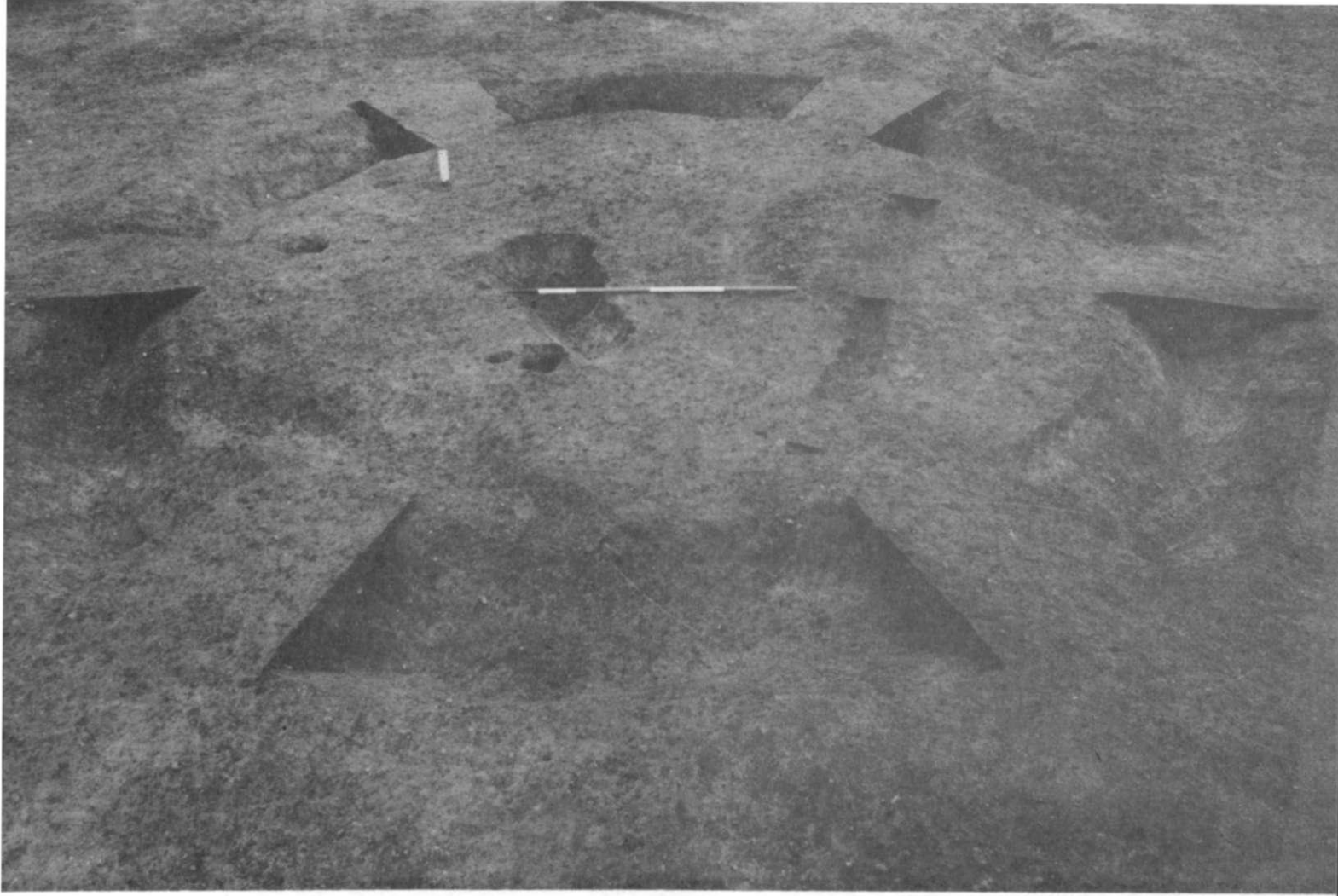
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View of the south-west corner of the church during excavations in 1977. The walls are built of Kentish ragstone and layers of Roman tile. When the Police Headquarters are built on this site it is hoped that the re-excavated church will be preserved in a permanent display there.



Plan of the excavations of the Roman cemetery and church at Butt Road.



*Ring ditch in Bronze Age Cemetery Area*

## Excavations at Ardleigh

The extensive cropmark complex at Ardleigh has been known for some years, principally from the aerial photographs of Commander Farrands and Mrs Macmaster. Excavations by Felix Erith, on whose farm the southern half of the cropmark complex lies, and by the Colchester Archaeological Group have revealed the presence of a large Middle Bronze Age cremation cemetery. They have also revealed evidence for the occupation of the site from the Iron Age to the Roman period.

The bulk of the site lies under arable farm land, although part has been destroyed by gravel excavation. The Central Excavation Unit of the Department of the Environment are at present carrying out further work on the site to assess the effects of cultivation and, it is hoped, to answer a number of questions raised by the earlier work and by aerial photography.

A sample area investigated in the general vicinity of the Middle Bronze Age cemetery has demonstrated the presence of a considerable number of

small ring ditches, presumably the sites of levelled barrows. Only three cremations survived within the excavated area which was located in a part of the cemetery from which none had been previously excavated. The general absence of cremations is almost certainly due to the effects of cultivation, although of what date is unclear - the barrows had certainly been levelled by the early Roman period when the area was occupied by a circular hut defined by a circular gully which cut across a number of the earlier rings. The Bronze Age cemetery appears to resemble in character that excavated at Chitts Hill by the Colchester Archaeological Trust. It is hoped that further work in the area after the 1980 harvest will establish the relationship between the previously excavated burials and the rings which show as cropmarks in their vicinity.

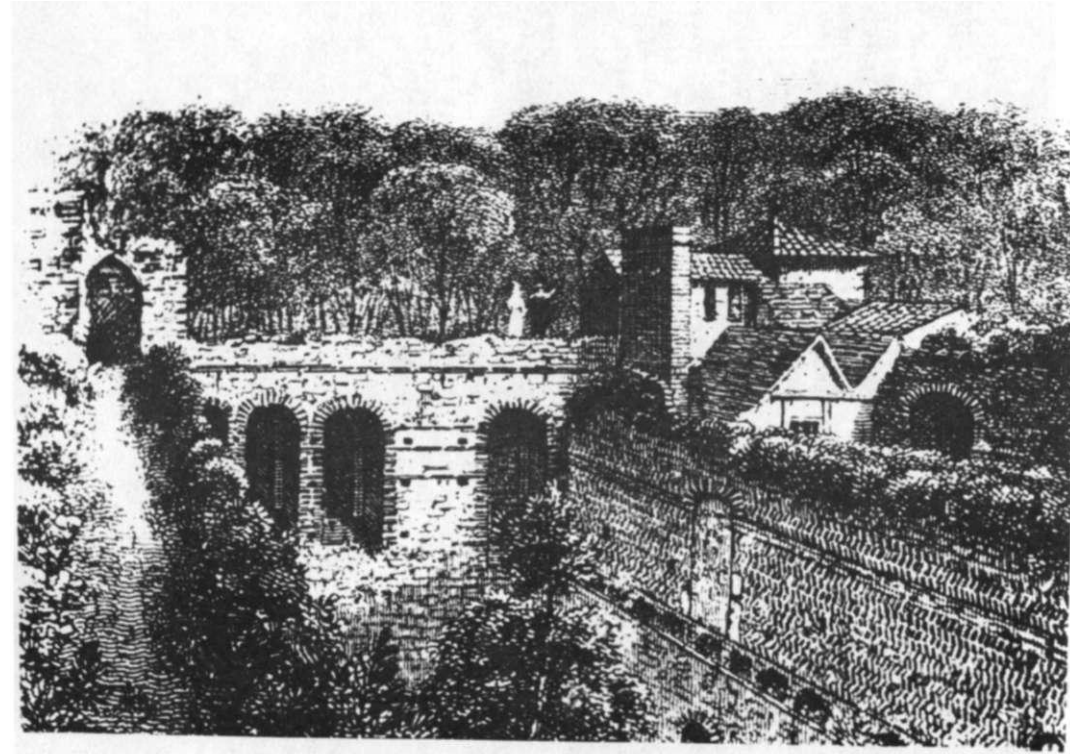
The excavation of a large ring ditch at the northern end of the cropmark complex revealed at its centre a small pit containing a cremation laid on a bed of charcoal. Within the excavated

area were located six inhumation burials, five of which lay in a row across the ring ditch which at this time was probably reduced to a low mound. Very little bone survived but the graves produced an interesting group of grave goods including iron weapons and coffin fittings, bronze and iron brooches and pottery vessels which included Hadham products. Two of the graves also contained faceted jasper beads. All the graves were aligned north-south. A single cremation burial in a vessel of the late second century A.D. was also found to the north of the ring.

Excavation work is at present continuing in the area of the late Iron Age/early Roman occupation. Future work will include an intensive field-walking program which it is hoped will fill out the picture provided by the cropmarks.

John Hinchliffe

# Archaeology and Museums



Engraving of the Castle in 1818.

History is basically about people. Archaeology is one way among many for the writing of history, in this case by studying the material evidence. Museums are the reservoir of that evidence and, by continuing the metaphor, collect it, conserve it, and distribute it where it is required. Water engineers rarely hit the headlines, unless there is a drought or an epidemic, but a high degree of skill is needed for the regular maintenance of the service. The same is true of museums.

Consider a few examples. Casual notes, made perhaps many years ago, may provide valuable clues in selecting a site for excavation; records and finds from previous excavations can be re-studied to provide new interpretations; objects themselves can be assessed for typological information;

first aid or long term treatment can rescue delicate objects; existing objects can supply distribution patterns and comparative evidence. The entire archive of completed excavations is stored for future research, its principal objects displayed to increase and encourage public interest and its photographs, plans and finds are used for education at all levels.

In order to achieve all this the museums' principle problem is what is fashionably termed "information retrieval" which means, in every day language, where to find what. Imagine assembling the data you need to complete an Income Tax Assessment, multiply this by the half million or so items in the collection and again by the 2,000 enquiries received annually and you get some idea of what can be involved.

Everything depends on data. A coin, for example may have some numismatic interest but if it can be proved that it came from the 1969 High Street hoard this enhances its general interest and research value. For the full benefit both the object and data are vital and must be so cared for as to be inseparable.

For this reason every object needs a number, various index cards, photographs and often a personal dossier. Our records, in the Castle Museum, go back to 1846, when the collection was begun, but in 1860 the Essex Archaeological Society agreed to combine its collection with that of the Borough, and premises for display were then

opened in the crypt of the then ruined Castle. In return the Society received, and continues to occupy, four seats on the Committee. Subsequently the Castle was roofed (1923-35) and additional premises acquired; the Hollytrees (1928), the Natural History Museum (1958) and the Museum of Country Life and Crafts (1972), the last two in redundant churches. We also look after the town walls and various other monuments.

Telling the story to new generations is an essential part of the service.



# CULVER PRECINCT

## -the biggest challenge

As a result of this initial County-wide interest the collections are drawn from all over Essex though the subsequent creation of other museums has substantially reduced the commitment. Archaeology, however, no longer stops at the Dark Ages and there must be a place for the parasol as well as the palaeolith. With ever increasing material production this creates its own problems.

More significantly, however, we live on a planet whose constitution affects our life in every aspect, so natural history is an essential and primary constituent of the overall picture. In terms of excavation human and animal bones, pollen and seed samples, insects from Roman middens are of as much interest to the naturalist as to the archaeologist.

Collecting data could easily become an end in itself. Its use for research is self evident, but it is equally important for the generally understood task of museums, that is, for display. Today's public are today's taxpayers; they expect, and they are entitled to expect, value for money. This means that objects must be set out attractively and informatively, and the right balance struck between the conflicting needs of scholarship, security, conservation and imaginative presentation. Try to draft a label in not more than 100 words on, say, the Roman Conquest, which is comprehensible and interesting to a 14 year old and will not evoke criticism from a professional archaeologist, and you will see what I mean.

In the light of all this it must be clear that museums need space and money. Here in Colchester we hope that the proposed development of Alstons Warehouse will help in solving the problems of living in four historic, but inconvenient buildings. It should be obvious that museum workers, in addition to a scholarship embracing most of the works of man and nature, need the ability of a window dresser, weight-lifter, computer processor, teacher, author and detective. Maybe that is exactly why we get them.

David Clarke

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For the first time in over eight years there are currently no archaeological excavations going on in Colchester. This will, however, probably change soon.

Colchester's town centre has seen many changes over the last decade and with the completion of the redevelopment scheme near the public library, the so-called "Culver Precinct", the town will have undergone a series of upheavals unlikely to be matched in our lifetime. The large redevelopment projects in the heart of the town centre; i.e. in Long Wyre Street, Lion Walk and soon Culver Street West; have gone hand in hand as part of the overall town centre redevelopment plan embodying the construction of the inner relief road and, along its route, some multi-story car parks. The resultant loss of archaeological remains has been immense; of this there is no doubt. Yet, despite continuous excavations throughout most of the 1970's, severe shortages of finance have meant that only about a third of what was threatened by destruction could be excavated and recorded in detail. The most spectacular loss of archaeological remains was at Lion Walk when the digging of a large hole for the underground services meant the complete and inevitable destruction of about an acre of the remains of the Roman and later town centre. Here, as everywhere else where excavations have taken place, the developers were extremely helpful and cooperative and much was achieved. But, as always, the problem was insufficient money.

With the impending development of "Culver Precinct" the scale of destruction of archaeological remains could be on a par with that at Lion Walk. Yet the economic climate is such that



we have even less money for excavations than before. At Culver Precinct we can expect to find the remains of part of the Roman fortress, buildings and streets of the later Roman town and the remains of medieval and later Colchester, all within the top eight feet or so of the modern surface. No archaeological excavations have ever taken place in this part of the town, although when the library was being built in 1938-39 it was observed to be on the site of a Roman cross-roads. The whole area is clearly very important in terms of the origin and development of the town and there can be no doubt that the archaeological remains here are extensive.

Lion Walk redevelopment in progress; looking east with Culver Street on the left.

Keep your fingers crossed in the hope that, in the next issue of Catalogue, we can bring you news of excavations just beginning in Culver Precinct!

Philip Crummy

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# Sewer trenches reveal iron age defences

Since last summer the Borough Engineer's Department has been engaged in constructing a new sewage system in the Shrub End area. By the time this work is finished later this year several miles of new sewer will have been laid. This is providing us with an opportunity to establish the exact position of some of the many ditches of Iron Age and Roman date that lie to the west of the town.

The largest ditches form part of the complex system of defences or dykes which protected late Iron Age and early Roman Colchester. Originally this consisted of many miles of deep ditches each with a high bank behind but now, two thousand years later, most of the banks have gone and all that remains are the filled-in ditches which leave little or no indication of their presence on the surface. The

smaller ditches also had banks and served to form fields and other enclosures, all now vanished. By carefully watching the progress of the sewer trench, and recording the ditches cut by it, a surprising amount is being found out about the defences and fields of Iron Age Colchester.

Nick Smith

## NEW BOOKLET ON COLCHESTER EXCAVATIONS

In Search of Colchester's Past is selling well in local bookshops; it has reached number two in Colchester's best-selling paper-back book lists. The booklet is 60 pages long, well illustrated and written by Philip Crummy, Director of CAT. Copies are available at bookshops and the Castle Museum at £0.75 each.

Cover Photograph:

Recording filled-in ditches of Iron Age Colchester at Shrub End.

## FRIENDS OF THE COLCHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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.

The FRIENDS OF THE COLCHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST has been formed to provide a means of keeping interested members of the public informed about the archaeological work going on in and around the historic town of Colchester. The Friends provide the funds to publish CATALOGUE - the Newsletter of the Colchester Archaeological Trust. Mike Corbishley organises the Friends and edits the Newsletter.

Friends receive two newsletters a year, attend an annual programme of lectures on the previous year's progress, are given conducted tours of current sites and can take part in a regular programme of archaeological visits to sites and monuments in the area.

The annual subscription rates are as follows: Adults £1.50, Children and Students 75p, Family Membership £2.00 and Institutions or newsletters-only £1.00.

You will find a membership form inside this newsletter. Subscriptions should be sent to Mrs G. Chadwick, Treasurer, Friends of the Colchester Archaeological Trust, 171 Wivenhoe Rd. Alresford, Colchester C07 8AQ.