

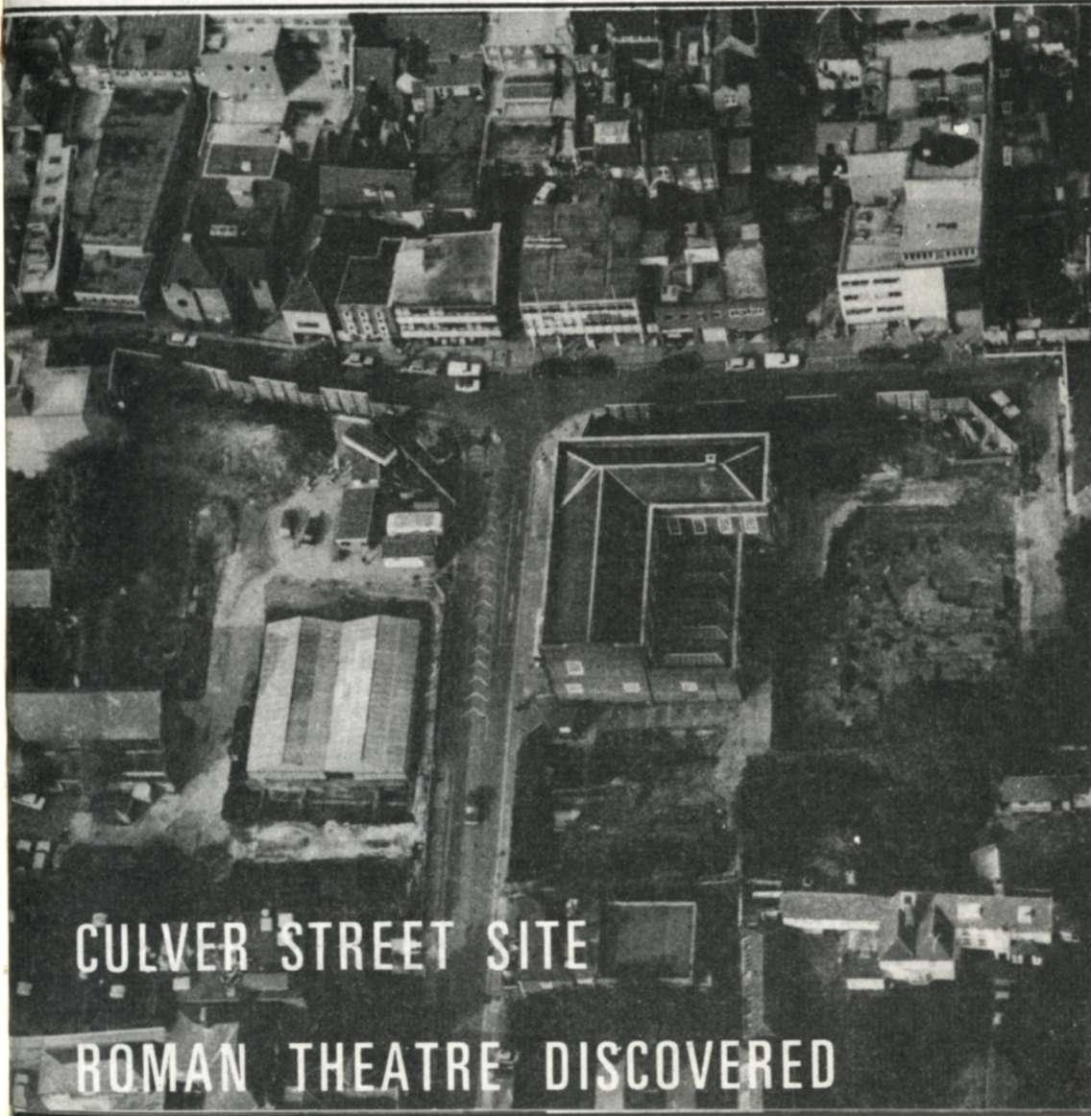


CATALOGUE

NEWS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS IN COLCHESTER

number 10

winter 1982



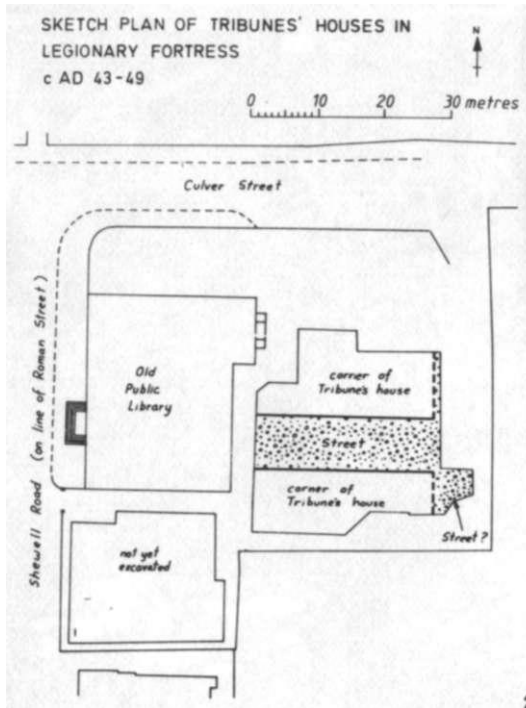
CULVER STREET SITE

ROMAN THEATRE DISCOVERED

CULVER STREET CONTINUES....

Even the worst December weather for 100 years did not completely stop progress on the excavation, such is the urgency to complete the digging on a site that has produced more interesting and exciting material than we could have hoped for; in the autumn we uncovered the foundations of our most important building so far - a massive late Roman hall that may have been a church. Now we are working on the excavation of parts of two of the officers' houses belonging to the fortress; this too is a first as before now the only buildings excavated within the fortress have proved to be barrack blocks.

Between the conquest of southern Britain in AD 43 and the end of Britain as part of the Roman Empire 350 - 400 years later, the site underwent five major redevelopments.



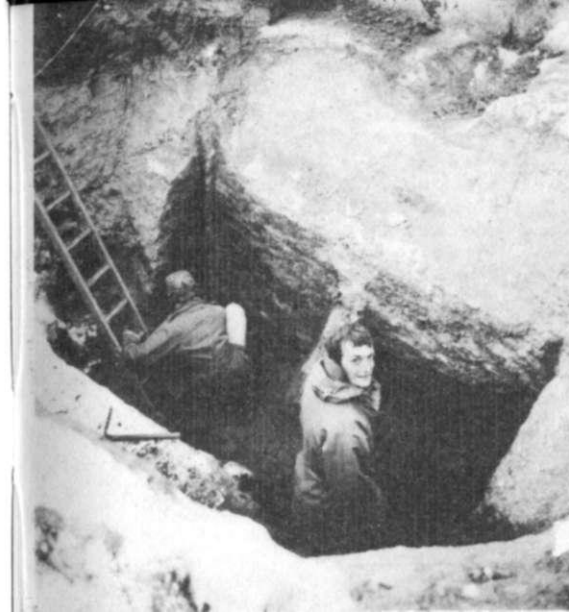
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The Roman Fortress

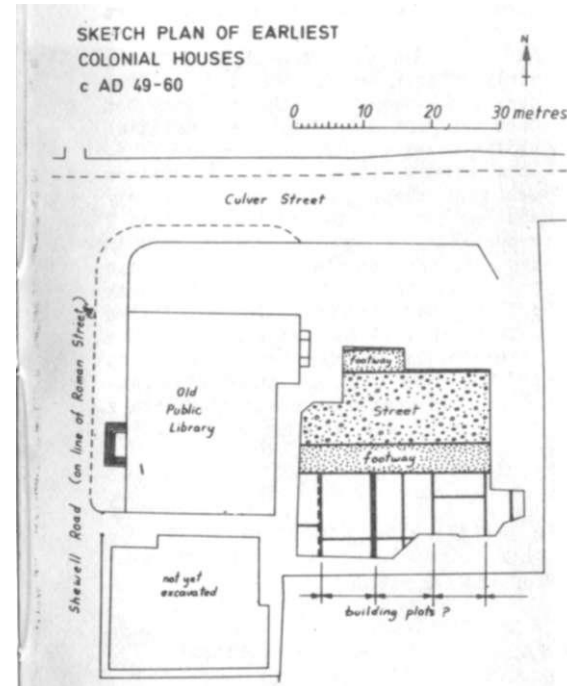
The earliest buildings on the site belong to the period between AD 43 and 49 when Colchester was the fortress of the Twentieth Legion. Although we have only just begun to excavate these buildings we can be fairly certain that they are parts of the houses of two of the tribunes of the legion; these were high ranking officers who each lived in what amounted to a sizeable house that covered an area of over 1,500 square metres (that is, over twice the area covered by the old Public Library). The houses fronted on to the main street of the fortress (now underlying Shewell Road) and were separated by a narrow gravelled street. What is interesting about these particular buildings is that they were not built in the same way as the centurions' quarters that lay to the west (see Catalogue 9). Whereas the centurions' quarters had clay walls resting on plinths made of stone and mortar, the tribunes' houses had walls of posts set in narrow trenches cut deep into the natural sand. This was a type of construction commonly used by the Roman Army; it has been recorded at many other military sites but this is the first time it has been found at Colchester. Excavation of these important buildings continues.

The early colony

In AD 49 the Twentieth Legion was moved from Colchester to the west of Britain and the fortress was no longer required by the army. In keeping with practice elsewhere it was then converted to civilian use as a colony for retired army veterans. Some of the buildings, such as the centurions' quarters already referred to, were easily converted to private houses and so were retained. However, the tribunes' houses on the present site were demolished, largely because one of them partly occupied space needed



*Excavation of a timber-lined cesspit in the street between the two tribunes' houses. The dark stain on the vertical sides is where the timber-lining had been left to rot in position.



3

for an east-west street - the fortress did not have the complete grid of streets that was needed for a town.

The gravel street that was laid across the site was 10 metres (33 ft) wide with covered footways to either side. The frontage to the south of the street seems to have been divided into plots 8 or 12 metres wide on each of which was erected a timber-framed building. These were the houses allocated to individual colonists at the time of establishment of the colony. The rooms were floored with clay and several contained small hearths of tile.

The Boudican revolt and the late 1st century

These houses were destroyed along with the rest of the town during the Boudican revolt in AD 60. As was expected, the evidence of this violent destruction was clearly to be seen in the blackened floors and charred wall-plates sealed beneath a layer of debris and burnt fragments of clay walls. After the revolt the mass of debris had to be cleared and the remainder levelled out before rebuilding could take place; it is quite possible that some of the plots remained vacant for a while before new buildings were erected. It is unfortunate that because of pressure of time it was not possible for us to excavate by hand the buildings that replaced those burnt down but we do know that they had walls of timber-framed and clay block construction with some gravel-filled foundations to prevent their subsiding into earlier pits. The street was relaid in the position it had occupied before the revolt and remained in use until the end of the Roman period.

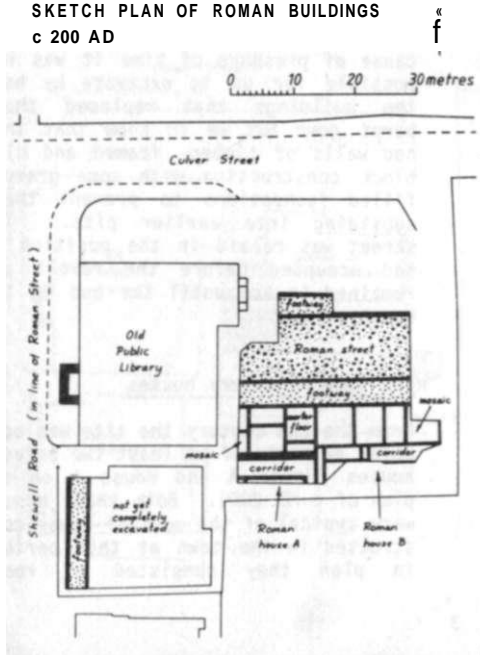
The second-century houses

From the 2nd century the site was occupied by parts of at least two private houses (House A and House B on the plan of c AD 200). Both these houses were typical of the sort of house constructed in the town at this period; in plan they consisted of rooms



* A late 2nd-century Roman jar with lid, found beneath the floor of one of the 2nd-century houses. Perhaps buried with an offering to ensure good luck to the household.

SKETCH PLAN OF ROMAN BUILDINGS
c 200 AD



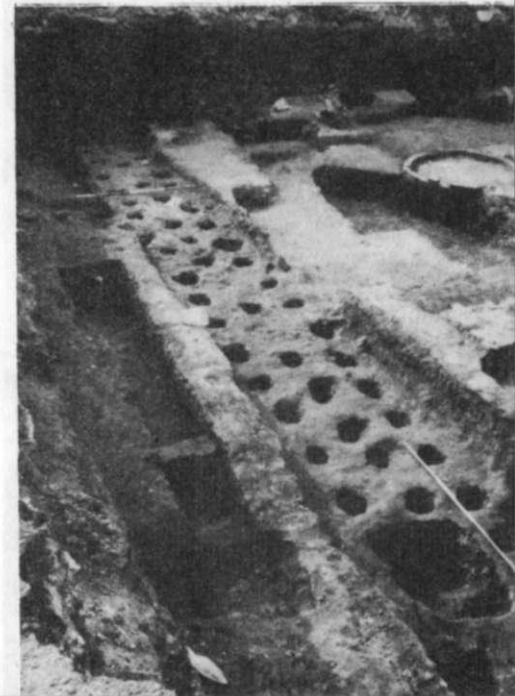
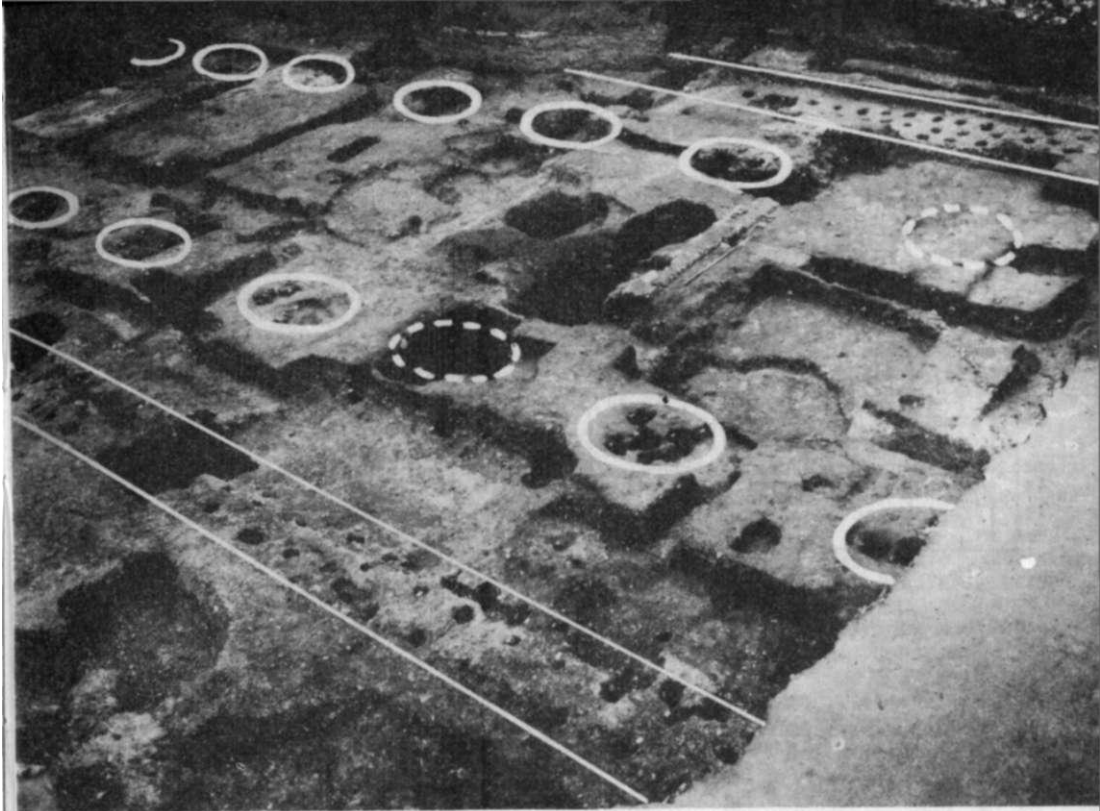
entered from a corridor that ran round a central courtyard - these courtyards lie beyond the southern limit of the excavation. The foundations were of rubble and mortar but the walls above ground were of clay blocks or timber-framing with clay infill. The floors were of clay, mortar or tessellated with small cubes of brick. In each house one of the rooms, probably the principal one, had a mosaic floor, but unfortunately these had been destroyed by later disturbances. The discovery of fragments of pink mortar and tiles of the type used to conduct hot air through channels in the walls suggested that House B may have had a bath suite at its western end.

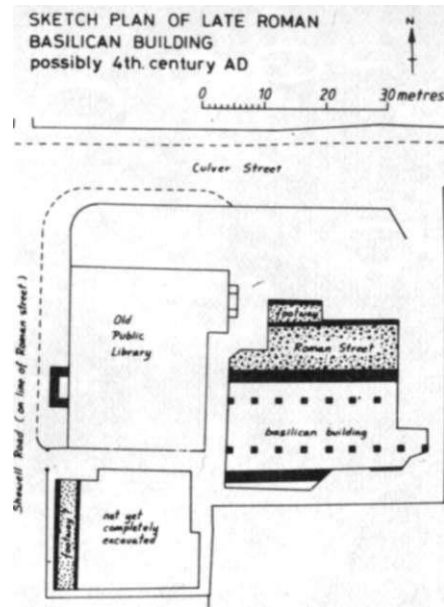
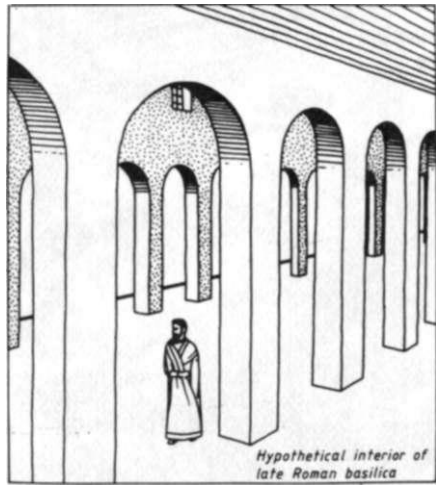
The Roman ?church

At some time during the Roman period, possibly during the 4th century, the private houses were demolished and a single large building was erected in their place. This building was nearly 60 feet wide and at least 100 feet long; it covered the earlier footway and even encroached on the street. The foundations of its outer walls were nearly 5 feet wide and between them were two rows of bases for piers or columns. Although the foundations had been largely removed during the early Middle Ages, the little that survived showed that the builders had used the rubble left by the demolition of the previous buildings on the site. One interesting and unusual feature was that these foundations were only shallow and had rows of wooden piles 2 metres long driven in beneath them in order to provide stability. Of course the piles had long since rotted away but they had left holes loosely filled with earth that had trickled in as the piles themselves decayed. A building of this type or plan, known as a basilica, was commonly constructed when a large hall was required for public

* A general view showing by white lines the 'pile-holes' of the ?church. Looking East (top).

* Excavation in progress (bottom).





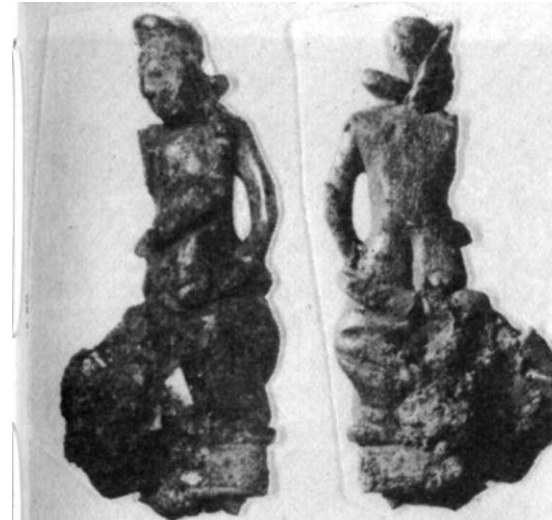
purposes, such as a market hall or exercise hall attached to public baths. It is likely that this building was constructed as a church: its form and date make this a possibility but in the absence of further evidence its function must remain uncertain. The building extends beyond the limits of the present excavation but we hope to find its western end when we examine the area to the south of the old Public Library.

After the Roman Period

As a result of medieval cultivation, the floors of the basilican building no longer survived and it was impossible to tell if there were any subsequent periods of Roman occupation on the site. The only obvious evidence for activity before the 11th or 12th century, when most of the Roman foundations were robbed of their stones, consisted of two graves, one badly disturbed but the other containing a skeleton complete but for the skull, fragments of which were found in an adjacent later pit. These graves are hard to date closely and belong to the period between the end of the Roman town and the early Middle Ages. The site remained as unoccupied ground or gardens until the 19th century.

N.A. Smith

SOME FINDS



A small exhibition of some of the most recent finds is on view in the Castle Museum. While the excavation continues photographs and plans may be seen in the exhibition hut on site.

Probably the most interesting small find to date from the Culver Street excavation was found just before Christmas (top). It is a bone handle from an iron clasp knife (surviving length 7 cm). The handle is carved, rather crudely, in the shape of a human figure, almost certainly female though there is no apparent bust, naked but for drapery around the hips, and ending at the knees. The edge of the right side of the figure is broken off from shoulder to hip, but traces of the slit for the knife blade can be seen, and part of the blade survives, corroded to the thigh. The blade was fixed in the bottom of the handle, an oval-section band, which was apparently covered with a collar of bronze, only traces of which survive. The figure has an elaborate hair-style, with one lock of hair falling over the left shoulder. Wrapped around the hips and climbing up the torso is a snake, the head of which rests on or below the left breast. The figure is probably Minerva, who is represented on knife handles from London and Silchester. She is associated with a snake, or with a snake-haired Medusa medallion on her breast.



Fragments of a pipeclay figurine of Minerva with a Medusa medallion have also been found at Culver Street. The figurine (bottom) shows the goddess seated, and possibly represents Minerva in her capacity as a healer, as does the knife handle, rather than in her usual warlike aspect.

Nina Crummy

* Excavation of a skeleton buried some time between the end of the Roman Period and the early Middle Ages.



THE ROMAN THEATRE

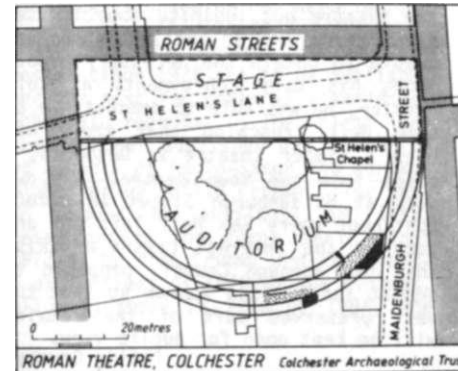
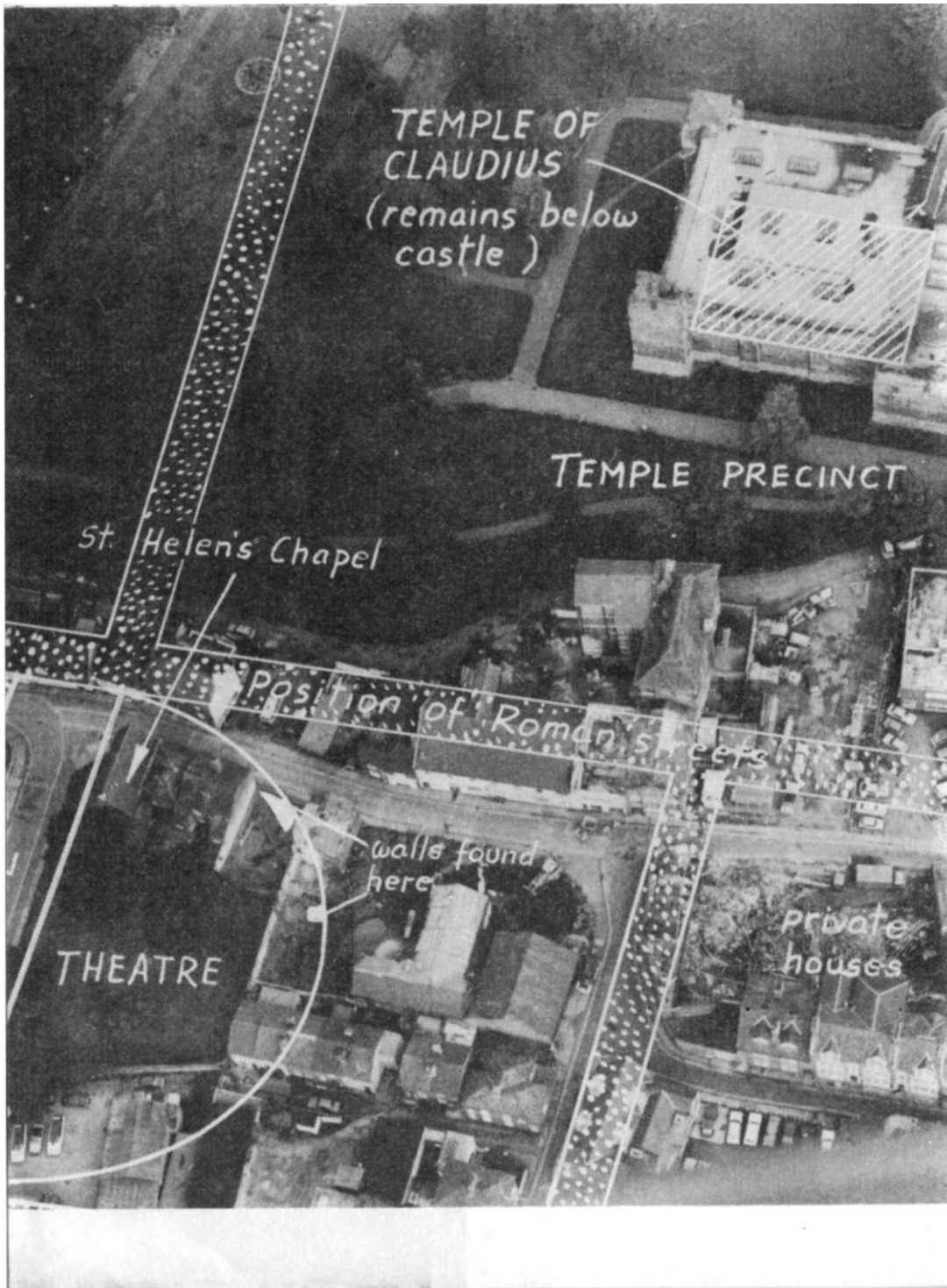
An important feature of every large Roman town was its theatre so that the recent confirmation of the supposed site of the theatre at Colchester is a most significant and exciting step forward in the study of the Roman settlement.

The discovery was made in part of the area now being redeveloped for housing by the Colchester Borough Council as its 'Dutch Quarter Phase 3' scheme. Here, with the co-operation of the Borough Council and as part of a MSC Youth Opportunities Project, a small archaeological excavation was undertaken at a spot adjacent to where in 1891 several large walls were found, one of which was apparently curved. As a result parts of two foundations were found, each five feet wide and curved, sharing a common centre. Between these was a well-preserved mortar floor which formed a passage. When plotted and projected, these walls fit in very well with the street system of the town as reconstructed on the basis of the various discoveries and records of streets going back over many years. Moreover the diameter formed by these walls and streets coincides with the north wall of St Helen's Chapel. This wall has long been thought to have been of Roman

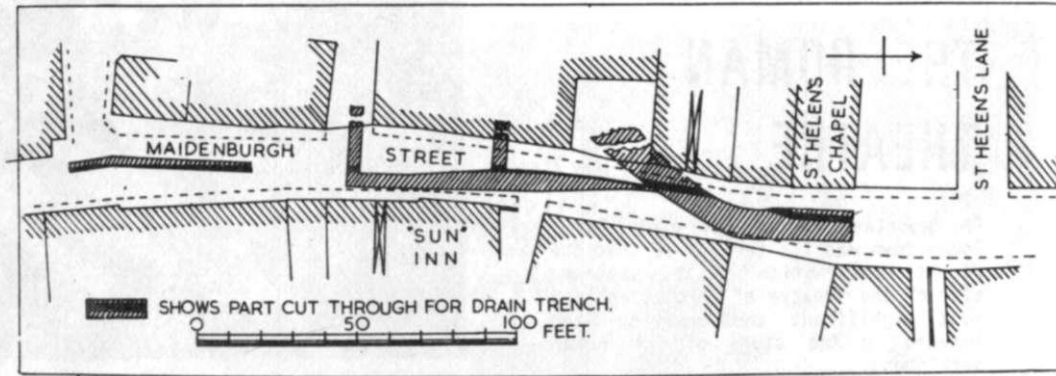
origin; Roman masonry is clearly visible at its foot and higher up, behind the surface applied during the Victorian restoration, much if not all of the wall may be of this period.

The chapel has traditionally been associated with Roman times since from part of the so-called 'Colchester Chronicle' (a brief and rather difficult medieval text) we are told that the chapel was thought to have been built by St Helena and we can infer that it was restored in the late 11th or early 12th century. But why was part of the theatre thought to have been a chapel? After the end of the Roman period either the Roman building was misunderstood and wrongly identified as a chapel (which is the most

* Reconstruction of the theatre and adjacent Temple of Claudius. Part of a drawing by Peter Froste (shown in Catalogue 9).



NOTES



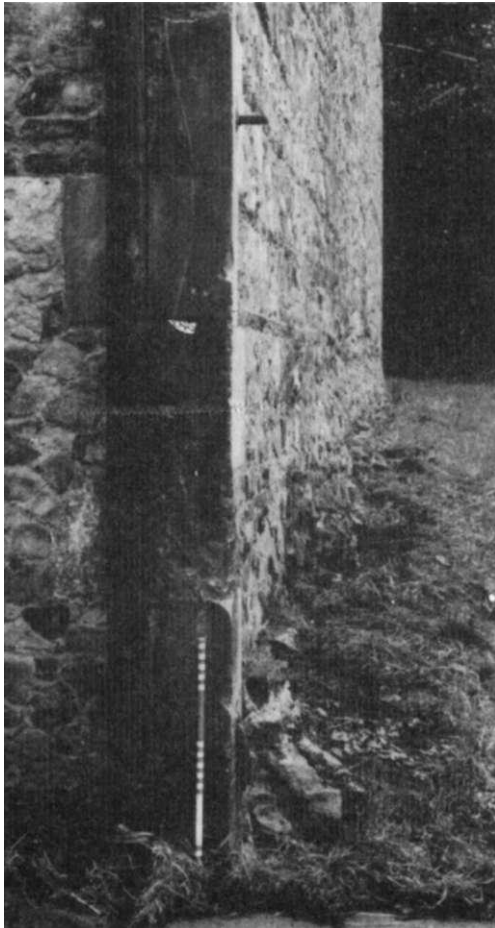
likely explanation) or a Roman chapel had indeed been built in the north-east corner of the theatre. Whatever the explanation, we can be sure that the link with St Helena is no more than medieval fantasy.

The theatre would have been able to house several thousand people and would have been used for the performance of Greek and Roman drama. Across the street was the precinct of the magnificent Temple of Claudius so that together, the group would have been an impressive sight. Tacitus mentions a theatre at Colchester before the town's destruction by Boudica and her followers. This early theatre is likely to have been of wood and its remains probably lie under those found recently.

If anyone can be said to have discovered the theatre at Colchester, it must be Rex Hull, Curator of Colchester Museum from 1926 to 1963. On the basis of the 1891 plan, he firmly believed this to have been the site of the theatre but, despite some limited exploratory work in the 1950's, he was unable to obtain the necessary proof. Among his many achievements at Colchester, he was able to demonstrate by some deft trenching that there had been a timber theatre at Gosbecks, 2 miles from the town centre. Our own work at Maidenburgh Street in effect continued where Rex Hull left off and such is the interest caused by this, that the Borough Council proposed to adjust its housing scheme so that the best preserved part of the remains will be kept open for public view.

Philip Crummy

* Base of the north wall of St. Helen's Chapel.



first of the detailed site reports should be in print.

Friends can obtain copies of Aspects of Anglo-Saxon and Norman Colchester from the Council for British Archaeology, 112 Kennington Road, London SE11 6RE, at a reduced price of £12.00 including post and packing. The volume is 91 pages long, A4 size, and contains 69 figures and photographs.

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.

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 Brenda May, Treasurer, Friends of the Colchester Archaeological Trust, 5 William Close, Wivenhoe, Colchester.

Thanks to our voluntary guides

About 300 parties have been given tours around the Culver Street site, many of which have been conducted by local voluntary guides. These were Jo-Ann Buck, Gabrielle Chadwick, Mary Hughes and her daughters Kate and Sarah and Mr. R. Privett. Their assistance has been of great help and is much valued. If you would like to help in this respect, please ring Colchester 61285 and ask for Debbie Lloyd.

Friends visit Harwich

On 20th September some Friends and their families went to Harwich for an afternoon tour. We were met at the Redoubt by Mrs. Cooper, the founder of the Harwich Society, who subsequently impressed all of us by her knowledge of the town.

After being shown round the Redoubt, which has been extensively renovated by the Harwich Society, we moved on to visit the lighthouse and the old timber treadmill crane.

The tour ended at the waterfront after Mrs. Cooper had shown us the Electric Palace and several other interesting old houses in and around the High Street.

Brenda May

Colchester Archaeological Reports

Details of the excavations in Colchester since 1970 are to be published over the next few years as a series of technical reports. The first has recently been published and is entitled Aspects of Anglo-Saxon and Norman Colchester by Philip Crummy. The next two should be available in 1983. These concern the Roman small finds (1971-9) by Nina Crummy and the Sheepen excavations of 1970 by Ros Niblett. Following these in 1983 or 1984, the

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.

Cover Photograph:

Culver Street site from the air.



The Fifth Day of Christmas - a Seasonal Story

To most people, archaeology means digging, or objects in museums. But just as few appreciate the extensive preparatory work and logistical provision which go before a successful excavation, so, too, few appreciate the complex negotiations before which an object does (or, as we shall see, does not) appear in the museum.

1980/81 was the Year of the Three Gold Rings. This is what happened.

Ring One was found by a resident digging his garden. He sent it to London for sale. He noticed it in a catalogue, but as there was no mention of Colchester, we took no action. Later in the year the story surfaced on the grapevine, we wrote to the vendors, who kindly forwarded our letter to the purchaser. He replied from Italy, offering to exchange the ring for coins from our excavations, with studied courtesy we explained that British archaeology does not work like that, and he offered us a photograph, which we still hope to receive.

Footnote 1. It is illegal to export objects recovered from the soil of Britain without previously obtaining a licence.

Footnote 2. Objects of gold, etc., recovered from the soil must be reported to the Coroner to decide if they are Treasure Trove.

Ring Two was a casual find. It had an engraved intaglio depicting Mars. The finder showed it to us, but was reluctant to let us retain it for very long. He had no intention of selling it, he would wear it himself. Some weeks later a loyal Scot kindly telephoned me to say there was ring, authenticated by Colchester Museum, in a dealer's catalogue. By the time we had tracked this down it was too late.

Footnote 3. The price quoted in the catalogue was the same as we had offered. The ring must therefore have been sold for much less.

Ring Three is, however a happier story. It was found on the surface in spoil tipped from St. Mary's car park. The finder brought it to the museum, it was reported to the Coroner and cleared, and then purchased by the museum. At first we thought that, because of its elaborate gold setting, it was Renaissance, but the British Museum, after detailed enquiry, decided it must be late Roman, which makes it all the more interesting. The stone is a pale sapphire, which is unusual.

Regular readers will forgive us drawing a moral. The museum is provided by the community to record, and if possible, preserve, the history of Colchester, and hence to make this history available to everyone interested. We are deeply grateful to the citizen who was prepared to help, but two beautiful, and not insignificant fragments of our history have now disappeared, perhaps for ever.

Someone gained, but we are all the losers.

D.T.D. Clarke
Colchester Museum

