

# **An archaeological watching brief at St Botolph's Church, Colchester, Essex**

**April-June 2001**

**for  
Tim Venn Design**

**on behalf of  
St Botolph's Parochial Church Council**

NGR: 9999 2492  
CAT project reference: 01/3G  
Colchester Museum Accession Code: 2001.62



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**CAT Report 143**

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## 1 Summary

*Observations were made during groundworks for an extension to St Botolph's Church. Disturbance due to the Britannia Engineering Works and other works was recorded down to a depth of at least 1m. Apart from a small amount of residual Roman pottery which was retrieved from the spoil-heaps, nothing of archaeological significance was recorded.*

## 2 Introduction

- 2.1 This is the report on an archaeological watching brief carried out by Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) between the 3rd of April and the 23rd May 2001, during the construction of an extension to St Botolph's Church. Planning permission and Scheduled Ancient Monument Consent were given with the condition that an archaeological watching brief be carried out.
- 2.2 The site of the extension is located in the centre of Colchester, to the rear (east) of the Georgian church of St Botolph's and south-east of the remains of the medieval priory church of St Botolph's. The site is located at National Grid Reference TL 9999 2492 (Fig 1).
- 2.3 This report follows the standards set out in the Borough Council's *Guidelines on standards and practices for archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester* (1999) and *Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester Museums* (1996), and the IFA's *Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief* (1999).

## 3 Archaeological background (Fig 2)

- 3.1 The remains of St Botolph's priory church are among the most impressive in Essex, standing in grounds of considerable archaeological importance as the site of the earliest house of Augustinian canons in England. As such the site has been designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM no 26301). The house was founded by the Augustinians between 1093 and 1100, and it was built using tile and brick from surrounding Roman buildings. It is thought likely that it was built on an existing Anglo-Saxon monastic institution. The priory's precinct is thought to be large (Crummy 1981, 74), and it may extend into the current church extension area.
- 3.2 In 1991, exploratory excavations established the ground-plan of the demolished eastern end of the priory church. The excavations, carried out by Colchester Archaeological Trust, located the church's extensively robbed eastern wall foundations and encountered important evidence pointing to the presence of a crypt or undercroft beneath the south transept (*The Colchester Archaeologist* magazine 1991-2, 5). A large part of the grounds now open to the public was acquired by the Borough Council following the 1980s' closure of the engineering factory that occupied the site for much of the present century. In the following year, the positions of the demolished walls and piers were marked out permanently on the ground as part of a wider scheme involving landscaping and improved public access to the site.
- 3.3 The exploratory excavations also revealed part of a Roman building underlying the church to the east of the crypt.
- 3.4 In 1999, CAT excavated one evaluation trench (Shimmin 1999) in the north-eastern part of the area of the new extension. The trench was dug to 1m depth and there was no evidence of remains pre-dating the 19th century. Much disturbance had been caused by the construction of the engineering works and the subsequent clearance and landscaping of the site.
- 3.5 In 2000, CAT undertook a watching brief of two boreholes and a test-pit at the site. Borehole 1 was positioned just north of the extension and recorded modern deposits to a depth of 1.2m. Borehole 2, located in the south-eastern corner of the area of the extension, recorded modern deposits to a depth of 2.2m. Beneath these lie deposits of potential archaeological value. A piece of leather probably from a shoe was found in borehole 2 at 4.4m depth (Crossan 2000).

## 4 Aims and objectives

The aim of the watching brief was to identify and record any archaeological features, finds or deposits revealed by the groundworks. Particular attention was paid to possible remains of priory buildings.

## 5 Methods

- 5.1 An intermittent watching brief was carried out by Don Shimmin in April and Kate Orr (both of CAT) in May and June. The size of the extension, including the areas dug for services, was approximately 14m x 11.5m. The contractor's excavations were of various depths and sizes. The depths of the pile caps were up to 14m. It was not safe to observe the pile caps being drilled, and therefore only the spoil-heaps were checked at this stage. The depth of the ground-beams was between 450mm and 600mm. The width of the drain trench varied from 600mm to 800mm and the depth from 650mm to 800mm. The sections and bottom of these trenches were checked for features and finds.
- 5.2 A record of the position of the site excavations was made which has been reproduced as Figure 2. Soil types and features were recorded and are listed in section 6. Artefacts were retrieved, washed, marked with the site code and context, and bagged. Most finds were discarded.

## 6 Results

*03/04/01*

A visit was made while demolition was in progress. There was no trenching to observe.

*04/04/01*

A visit was made while a trench was being dug for re-routing an electricity cable immediately to the south of the extension. Only modern fill was observed in the 500mm-deep trench. Surface-stripping in the north-western area of the extension was also monitored.

*06/04/01*

Hardcore was laid down on the surface. A modern brick soakaway was being dug out 9m to the north of the extension. Turf and modern topsoil was observed down to 250mm. This overlaid 450mm of modern make-up, mainly brick, cinders and sand. Under this layer was 800mm of dark brown sandy loam post-medieval and modern topsoil.

*10/04/01*

Several small test holes were open, 500mm-1m deep. These were mostly filled by post-medieval and modern topsoil, sealed by modern make-up. Some modern foundations were observed in a trench at the south-eastern corner of the extension. This cut a thin layer of oyster shells at a depth of 800mm which extended for 500mm and is thought to be medieval or later. This sealed a grey silty clay loam which was probably natural. A small patch of yellowish mortar appeared to seal the oyster shells which was probably part of the modern foundation but possibly earlier. The upper fill of the trench was modern make-up.

*12/04/01*

Several more test holes were monitored. A layer of fine sand and gravel was observed in a trench which was 1-1.25m east of the extension, at a depth of approximately 1.25m. The gravel was probably natural although possibly the remains of a medieval or later surface. It was 200mm thick and sealed greyish silty clay loam, possibly natural. The trench was 1.7m deep and elsewhere it was filled with topsoil/pit fill sealed by 300mm of very modern make-up. At the south-eastern corner of the extension, on the line of the south wall, a large east-west brick culvert was observed in the south section, just under 1m deep.

17/04/01

A large trench immediately inside the southern edge of extension was dug to just over 1.5m deep. There were thick deposits of post-medieval/modern topsoil/pit fill, and some modern foundations and drains were observed in the trench sides.

18/04/01

A large trench approximately 2m square and 2m deep was excavated in the south-eastern corner of the extension, approximately 1m from the southern edge. A modern brick culvert extended east-west down the centre of the trench. This had probably been replaced by a large modern east to west concrete sewer extending under the northern edge of the trench. The fill in the trench sides was modern topsoil/pit fill.

23/04/01

There was no significant trenching.

25/04/01

There was no significant trenching. Work was delayed due to an environmental health inspection.

02/05/01

There was no trenching or piling.

15/05/01

The watching brief was resumed after piling had started. The spoil-heap was checked but only modern brick and tile was observed.

16/05/01

During piling, contractors retrieved one sherd of Roman samian pottery from one of the southern pile-caps. Otherwise just modern brick and tile was observed in the spoil-heaps.

21/05/01

Contractors found another sherd of samian on the spoil-heap. Otherwise just oyster shell was retrieved from the spoil-heaps. This was the last day of piling.

23/05/01

Ground-beams being dug to a depth of approximately 650mm on south and west sides were monitored. Their excavations were mainly just going through made-up, heavily disturbed ground. Brick foundations to the previous building were seen on the south side. There had been much disturbance through old culverts and contractor's test-pits. One sherd of a post-medieval jug handle and an oyster shell were the only finds.

21/06/01

Drains were being dug on the southern, eastern and northern sides of the new building.

The southern drain trench exposed an existing electricity cable along its full length. This trench was dug to 650mm depth and consisted of modern made-up ground all the way down, with concrete and brick rubble.

The northern trench appeared to be slightly less disturbed. The following layers were observed:

L1 - 0-300mm of modern sandy silty material with concrete and brick rubble.

L2 - 300-500mm - mixed asphalt layer with slate, modern bottles and modern pottery.

L3 - starting at 500mm - dark brown silt former topsoil with very little in it. The bottom of the trench could not be seen as it had already been filled in with gravel.

The north side of the eastern trench was similar to the northern trench. The south side of the eastern trench was much more disturbed. One set of brick foundations was noted running east to west and there was also a brick culvert, both of which were observed when the test-holes were monitored in April 2001. Oyster shells were retrieved from the south-eastern corner where they had also been found when the test-holes were monitored.

## **7 Discussion**

- 7.1** The watching brief did not record any finds or features of archaeological significance. Brick footings of the Britannia Engineering Works were recorded in the southern part of the site. Culverts and old services crossing the site will have caused some disturbance to buried remains. The deeper holes for the test-pits and soakaway may have impacted medieval layers, eg the layer of oyster shells recorded at 800mm below ground-level. The piling is likely to have impacted deeper layers, but it was not possible to look down the pile holes and therefore any deposits or features will have been missed. The ground-beams and drain trenches were not deep enough to impact anything of archaeological significance.
- 7.2** Two sherds of Roman pottery were retrieved from the spoil-heaps at the piling stage but there was no tile, *tessera*, mortar or septaria found. It is unlikely therefore that the piling impacted actual Roman layers; the material may be residual, ie mixed in with later layers. In any case the pottery indicates Roman activity in the area, perhaps associated with the Roman building under the church. The other finds consist of a mix of post-medieval and medieval tile fragments, a 19th-century clay tobacco pipe, animal bones, and a post-medieval jug handle (see Appendix).
- 7.3** This investigation and the previous evaluation and watching brief suggest that archaeological remains may be deeply buried on the site, at over 1m below ground-level.

## **8 Archive deposition**

A copy of this report, site notes and the retained finds will be deposited permanently with Colchester Museum under accession code 2001.62.

## **9 Acknowledgements**

Colchester Archaeological Trust is grateful to the following for their help and co-operation:

W A Hills (Builders and Shop Fitters Ltd)  
Mr T Venn of Tim Venn Design  
St Botolph's Parochial Church Council  
Martin Winter, Archaeological Officer for Colchester Borough Council  
Deborah Priddy, English Heritage

## 10 References

- Colchester Archaeological Trust, 1991-2 *The Colchester Archaeologist* magazine, 5, 6-10
- Cotter, John, 2000 *CAR 7, Colchester Archaeological Report 7, Post-Roman pottery from excavations in Colchester, 1971-85*
- Crossan, Carl, 2000 Engineers' trial work in St Botolph's priory grounds, CAT Report 71
- Crummy, Philip, 1981 *CAR 1, Colchester Archaeological Report 1, Aspects of Anglo-Saxon and Norman Colchester*
- Shimmin, Don, 1999 Archaeological evaluation at St Botolph's Priory, Colchester, CAT Report 39

Kate Orr, July 2001

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Checked by: Howard Brooks  
Date: 02.07.01

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**Appendix: list of finds** (all unstratified) by Howard Brooks

Quant	Weight	Descriptions	Discard
4	65	Indeterminate post-medieval brick fragments.	✓
1	33	Peg-tile fragment; medieval or post-medieval.	✓
1	169	Corner of floor tile, 25mm thick, pale orange fabric - traces of pale brown glaze (sometimes over a white slip?); probably 14 <sup>th</sup> -16 <sup>th</sup> century.	
1	74	Fabric 51a flowerpot rim sherd with inscription "...TERY"; 19 <sup>th</sup> or 20 <sup>th</sup> century.	✓
2	10	Samian ware.	
4	90	Oyster shells ( <i>Ostrea Edulis</i> ); one burnt.	✓
1	7	Clay tobacco-pipe stem and bowl fragment; fluted bowl, probably mid 19 <sup>th</sup> century.	
1	102	Handle in stoneware fabric 45, probably 45d; late 16 <sup>th</sup> -17 <sup>th</sup> century.	
3	115	Animal bones.	✓

Pottery fabric descriptions after Cotter 2000 (CAR 7).



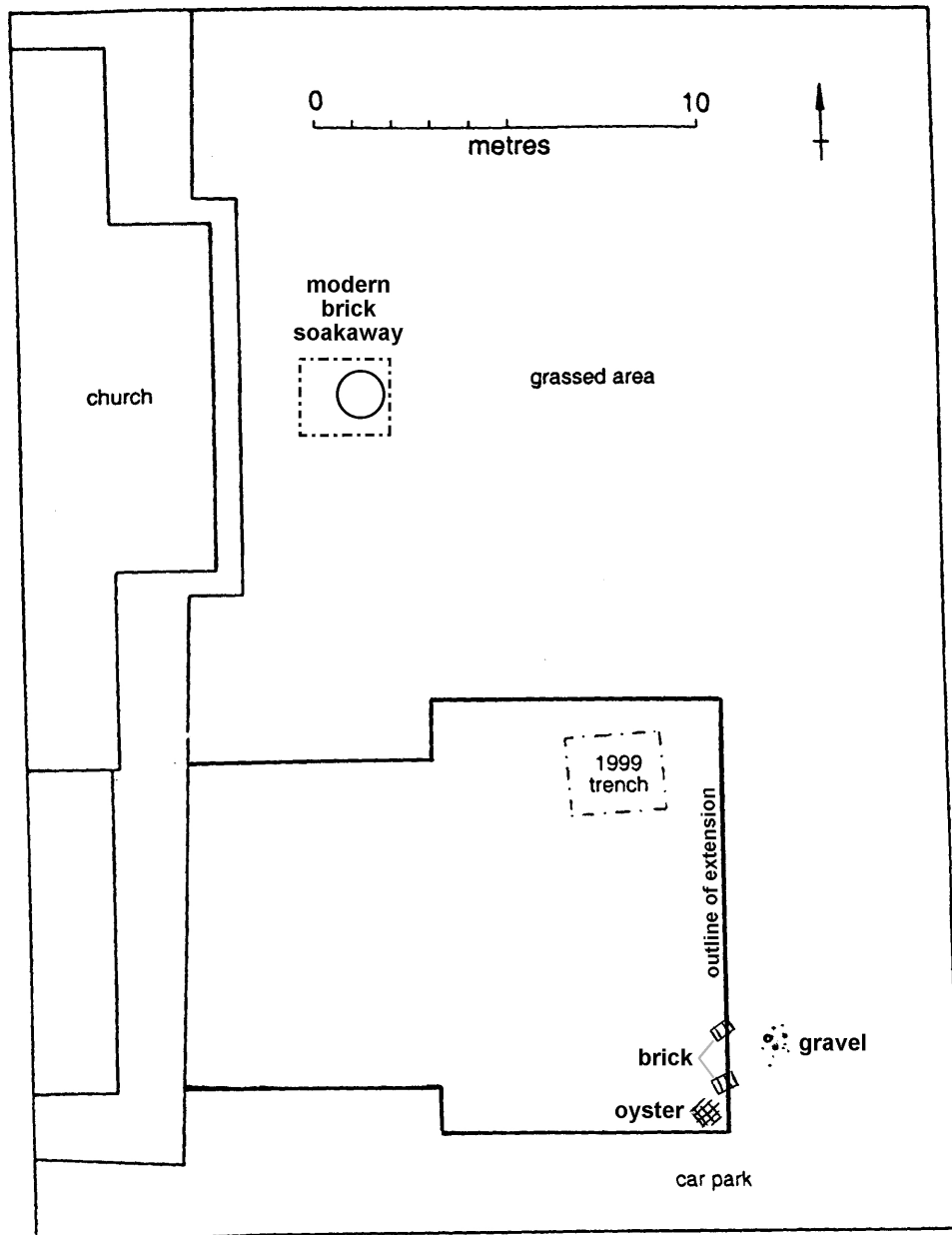


Fig 1 Site location, scale 1:200.

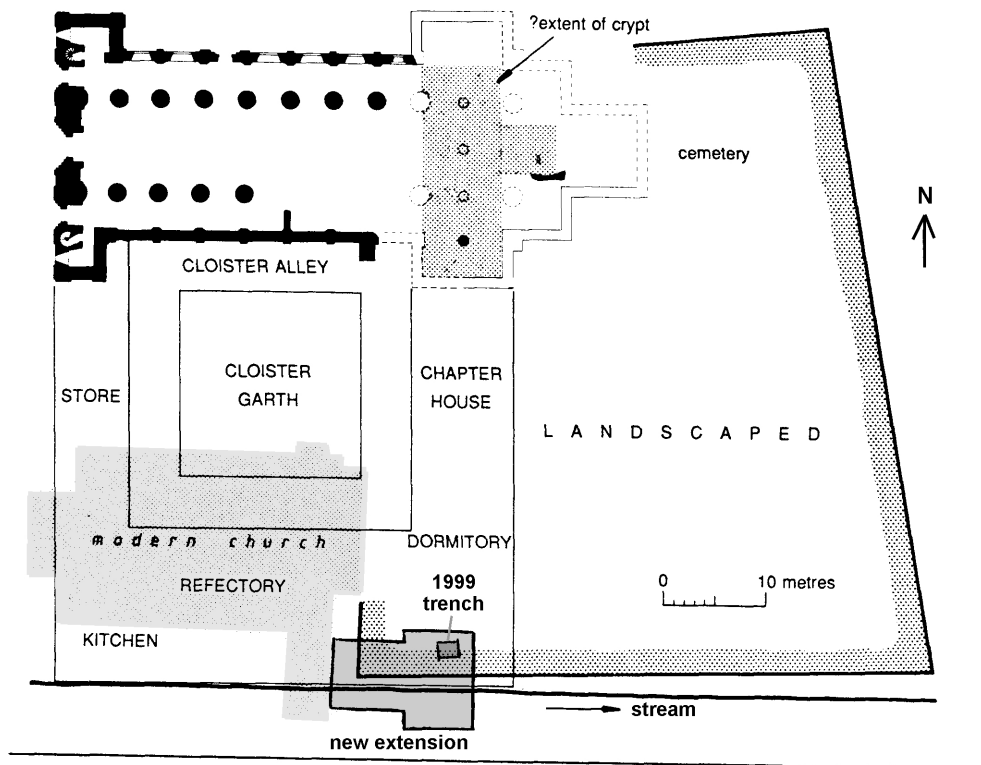


Fig 2 Outline of the priory church with the modern church, showing 1999 evaluation trench and the outline of the church extension, scale 1:750.

**Essex Heritage Conservation Record/  
Essex Archaeology and History**

**Summary sheet**

<b>Site name/address:</b> St Botolph's Church, Colchester, Essex	
<b>Parish:</b> Colchester	<b>District:</b> Colchester Borough
<b>NGR:</b> TL 9999 2492	<b>Site code:</b> 2001.62
<b>Type of work:</b> Watching brief	<b>Site director/group:</b> Colchester Archaeological Trust
<b>Date of work:</b> April-June 2001	<b>Size of area investigated:</b> approx 14m x 11.5m
<b>Location of finds/curating museum:</b> Colchester Museum	<b>Funding source:</b> St Botolph's Parochial Church Council
<b>Further seasons anticipated?</b> No	<b>Related EHCR nos:</b>
<b>Final report:</b> CAT Report 143 and note in <i>Essex Archaeology and History</i>	
<b>Periods represented:</b> Modern and possibly post-medieval, medieval and Roman.	
<p><b>Summary of fieldwork results:</b>            Observations were made during groundworks for an extension to St Botolph's Church. Disturbance due to the Britannia Engineering Works and other works was recorded down to a depth of at least 1m. Apart from a small amount of residual Roman pottery which was retrieved from the spoil heaps, nothing of archaeological significance was recorded. This investigation and the previous evaluation and watching brief suggest that archaeological remains may be deeply buried on the site, at over 1m below ground-level.</p>	
<b>Previous summaries/reports:</b> CAT Report 39, CAT Report 71	
<b>Author of summary:</b> Kate Orr	<b>Date of summary:</b> June 2001