

**A test-pit survey on the
Balkerne Heights development
(the former St Mary's hospital site),
Colchester, Essex
September 2003**

**report prepared by
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**on behalf of
McCarthy & Stone**

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Fig 1 after p 7

EHCR summary sheet

1 Summary

A survey on series of 14 machine-excavated test-pits located on and around the area of the proposed southern sheltered housing block of the Balkerne Heights development demonstrated surviving Roman deposits across the whole of this area of the site. Most of the deposits consisted of Roman soil accumulation layers and fills of deeper features representing pits or graves. A substantial Roman feature in the south-east corner of the development probably represents the town ditch. Close to the town ditch, part of a stone and mortar Roman building foundation was observed, and on the central-west area of the site, part of a Roman street or lane was recorded. Except for the fill of the town ditch, which was not bottomed, the identified surviving Roman deposits, including fills of deeper features such as pits, averaged about 0.8 m in depth.

2 Introduction

- 2.1** The Balkerne Heights development (formerly St Mary's hospital and originally the 19th-century Colchester workhouse) lies just to the north-west of the walled part of the Roman town and on the west side of Balkerne Hill. The area has over the last two centuries produced significant Roman remains, including artefacts, burials and recordings of wall foundations (Hull 1958, 243, 254-5). However, due to the essentially ad hoc nature of these early records, there was no coherent view of the area in the Roman period other than its use as a cemetery late in that era (AD 3rd-4th centuries). More recent excavations (1973-1976) have been carried out by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) to the south and east of the area. During these excavations, the main Roman road from the walled area of the *colonia* (the Roman town) through the Balkerne Gate and heading to the south-west was recorded, with extramural buildings along its route, and buildings further back close to the town wall (CAR 3, 93-154). Close to the present development were the remains of two buildings between the Balkerne Gate and the Roman town ditch, one of which was a Romano-Celtic temple. The planning permission for redevelopment of the Balkerne Heights site for housing in 2001 prompted a programme of work by CAT (following trial excavation and some geophysical survey in 1997: unnumbered CAT Report), during which areas and levels of Roman deposits which would be destroyed or seriously damaged by the proposed building works were excavated.
- 2.2** During the excavations by CAT in 2001 and 2002/3 (carried out on behalf of Jaygate Homes PLC: report forthcoming), parts of an extramural suburb of the Roman town were recorded. A hitherto unknown major Roman road leading north-west from the Balkerne Gate towards the important Iron Age settlement and Roman industrial area at Sheepen (Hawkes & Hull 1947; Niblett 1988), and at least two side streets or lanes extended north from this road. These side streets presumably serviced Roman buildings, the partial remains of whose stone foundations were found on several areas of the development site. These buildings and side streets appear to belong to the mid Roman period (late 1st-3rd century AD). However, some Roman buildings had existed alongside the main road prior to the Boudican revolt, as one building within one of the excavation areas had been burnt down in the revolt of AD 60/61. In the late Roman period (AD 3rd-4th centuries), the area ceased to be an occupied suburb and was used as a burial ground, with around 80 Roman inhumation burials and part of a lead coffin being recovered from the excavations. Following the excavations of 2002/3, a watching brief has been maintained by CAT, and further Roman burials, fragments of walls and gravel surfaces have been recorded (report forthcoming).
- 2.3** During 2003, part of the site close to the Balkerne Gate, an area of development for a sheltered housing block (the southern sheltered housing block) was sold on by the construction developers (Barrett Eastern Counties Ltd) to McCarthy & Stone. This resulted in a new ground survey by contractors (Crossfield Consulting Ltd) consisting of pressure testing sites (PT) and the opening of 14 test-pits (TP) by machine. This work required archaeological monitoring and recording, which was undertaken by Stephen Benfield and Kate Orr of CAT on two consecutive days in September 2003. The archaeological results of this survey are presented in this short report.

3 Method and recording

- 3.1** Archaeological recording was carried out in all on 14 machine-dug TPs as one of the PT sites, PT 2, proved unsuitable for that technique and a machine-dug pit was substituted (Fig 1 and Appendix). The PT sites were unsuitable for significant archaeological recording, but essentially mirror the location of the TPs. The TPs were numbered consecutively by the contractors beginning at 101 (ie TP 101-TP 113, plus PT 2 which became TP 2), while the PT sites were numbered consecutively beginning at 1 to distinguish them (ie PT 1), and this numbering scheme has been retained here.
- 3.2** Each TP was excavated by machine using a 0.5 m-wide bucket, and the resulting holes could not be entered, so that all recording was done from the surface, by visually appraising the pit sections which could be smeared and by examining spoil. Measurements were taken by lowering a tape into the pits. Most of the TPs were dug as a single short trench about 2.0 m in length, though several required more than one trench and orientation as obstacles (mostly substantial modern concrete or brick foundations) were encountered. Of the small quantity of recorded finds, all were recovered from the machine spoil.

4 The archaeological findings

4.1 Introduction

The archaeological findings are summarised in detail in tabular form in the Appendix. All of the TPs except TP 102 and TP 105 contained Roman deposits which averaged between a maximum of 1.2 m and 0.8 m thick (excluding TP 2, TP 101 & TP 104 where the Roman deposits probably represent the Roman town ditch fill; see section 4.2 below). The figure of 1.2 m assumes that most of the upper dark soil deposits, common to many of the TP sections, are essentially Roman or partly disturbed Roman levels. Primarily the Roman deposits represent soil accumulation and pit or possibly grave fills, though TP 103 and TP 106 contained a Roman wall foundations and TP 107 part of a Roman street or lane (see section 4.3 below).

4.2 TP 2, TP 101 and TP 104 (Fig 1)

The nature and depth of Roman deposits in TP 2, TP 101 and TP 104 (occurring from about 0.5 m below the existing surface) are consistent with a large and deep feature extending over this part of the area. This feature was not bottomed in any of these TPs, and in TP 104 the Roman fill extended in excess of 2.0 m. The rising west edge (natural sand) of this feature was located in the west end of TP 104 at approximately 5.5 m from the east edge of the development site on Balkerne Hill. The location and scale of this feature are consistent with this probably being the Roman town ditch.

A slightly damaged though whole Roman pot (Cam 123, poppy-head beaker, dated late 1st-2nd/early 3rd century) was recovered from the machine spoil of the Roman fill (town ditch) in TP 104. A careful search of the surrounding spoil and soil adhering to it produced nothing other than a few fragments of soft white chalk or plaster. The pot has one hole through the body and a circular firing spall missing from one side. It is possible that this vessel is a displaced votive pot or from a grave.

4.3 TP 103, TP 106 and TP107 (Fig 1)

A few structural features were located in these test-pits. In TP 103 there was a Roman mortar and stone foundation at the east end (aligned approximately N-S) and which is located approximately 16.1 m from the east edge of the development site on Balkerne Hill. The remains of a second Roman stone and mortar foundation was located in TP 106 which is part of the foundation remaining in the excavation baulk from the 2002/3 excavations (Area E, feature EF15). TP 107 contained the west edge of a Roman gravel street or lane running approximately south-west to north-east. Though this TP was within the 2002/3 excavation Area E (feature EF89), the exposed section here was below the agreed final levels for the excavation (determined by the planned depth of the proposed construction ground-beams on that part of the site).

4.4 TP 102 and TP 105 (Fig 1)

The only TPs not found to contain any surviving Roman deposits were TP 102 and TP 105, which are located in the south central area of the test-pit survey area.

These contained modern backfill onto natural sand (TP 105 contained a modern sewer pipe) and it seems probable that they may represent part of a large modern backfilled trench recorded during the 2002/3 excavations on the east side of excavation Area E (feature EF26) which included part of one of the 1997 archaeological evaluation trenches (unnumbered CAT Report).

4.5 TP 108, TP 109, TP 110, TP 111, TP 112 and TP 113 (Fig 1)

The remaining TPs contained Roman deposits consisting of accumulated layers and feature fills, either pits or graves, with an average surviving deposit depth of about 0.8 m including the bases of the deeper features.

5 Abbreviations

PT pressure test site
TP test-pit
Cam Colchester Roman pottery type series numbers (Hawkes & Hull 1947; Hull 1958)

6 References

- CAR 3** *Colchester Archaeological Report 3: Excavations at Lion Walk, Balkerne Lane and Middleborough, Colchester, Essex*, by P Crummy, 1984
- CAR 10** *Colchester Archaeological Report 10: Roman pottery from excavations in Colchester, 1971-86*, by R P Symonds & S Wade, ed by P Bidwell and A Croom, 1999
- Hawkes, C F C, & Hull, M R, 1947 *Camulodunum, first report on the excavation at Colchester 1930-1939*, RRCSAL, **14**
- Hull, M R, 1958 *Roman Colchester*, RRCSAL, **20**
- Niblett, R, 1988 *Sheepen: an early Roman industrial site at Camulodunum*, CBA Res Rep, **57**
- unnumbered CAT Report An archaeological evaluation at St Mary's hospital, Colchester, Essex, by H Brooks, unpublished CAT archive report, 1997

7 Glossary

feature	an identifiable thing like a pit, a wall, a drain, a floor; can contain contexts
modern	period from the 19th century to the present
NGR	National Grid Reference
natural	geological deposit undisturbed by human activity
post-medieval	approximately AD 1500 to around the late 18th century
Roman	the period from AD 43 to around AD 410

8 Acknowledgements

CAT would like to thank McCarthy & Stone for commissioning the work.

9 Archive deposition

The finds and paper archive are held by the Colchester Archaeological Trust at 12 Lexden Road, Colchester, Essex CO3 3NF, but both will be permanently deposited with Colchester Museums under accession code 2001.64.

10 Appendix

St Mary's 2003 test-pit survey: tabulated results

For location of test-pits, see numbered test-pit plan (Fig 1).

The test-pits varied slightly in size and extent, but all were machine-excavated and were predominantly about 2.0 m in length and 0.5 m across.

Due to poor dating evidence of some deposits, values of heights and depths of Roman deposits are quoted in brackets (maximum values) and without brackets minimum values. In most cases, the larger (maximum value) should probably be considered the correct figure. ? indicates that date of deposits was uncertain; ?? indicates that date of deposits was very uncertain.

Abbreviations used in table:

PH pressure test site
TP test-pit
KO Kate Orr
OD Ordnance Datum (in metres)
SFB Stephen Benfield

intervention type/number / recorder	recorded observations/ descriptions and notes	recorded/ retained finds	surface OD m	top of Roman m OD	base of Roman m OD	depth of Roman deposits
(PH) TP 2 (SFB)	(originally a pressure test site but converted to an E-W machine test-pit) excavated to 1.4 m top of modern walls at approx 0.3 m modern soil and rubble to approx 0.5 m undated (?Roman) greenish-grey brown loam to approx 1.0 m loamy sand/sandy loam below to base of intervention		31.0	(30.5) 30.0	in excess of 29.6	in excess of: (0.9 m) 0.4 m
TP 101 (SFB)	aligned N-S excavated to 2.5 m max modern rubble to between 0.4 m and 0.5 m dark sandy loam to approx 1.0 m (oystershell lens below) sealing fill of Roman town ditch	small quantity of Roman pot sherds retained, sherds recorded (discarded)	30.99	(30.49) 29.99	in excess of 29.49	in excess of: (2.0 m) 1.5 m
TP 102 (SFB)	aligned N-S excavated to 2.3 m modern backfill to 2.3 m		29.81	-	-	-
TP 103 (SFB)	aligned E-W excavated to 3.1 m modern rubble to 0.5 m mixed dark soil to 0.7 m top of Roman mortared stone foundation at 0.8 m, running approx N-S, at east end of test-pit (Roman wall approx 16.1 m in from E side of development site on Balkerne Hill) mixed Roman deposits extending below base of test-pit (3.1 m+)		30.0	(29.5) 29.3	in excess of 26.9	in excess of: (2.6 m) 2.4 m
TP 104 (SFB)	(extensive test-pit as orientation and location altered from E-W to N-S and back to E-W due to presence of modern foundations) excavated to 0.3 m modern concrete footings at approx 0.3 m modern wall at approx 0.1 m mixed Roman deposits extending below base of test-pit (3.0 m+) though sand (natural) appearing at approx 2.0 m at W end of test-pit (?W edge of Roman town ditch, approx 5.5 m in from E side of development site on Balkerne Hill)	whole Roman pot (Cam 123, late 1st to mid-late 2nd century AD, CAR 10 Fabric GP - retained, find no W 272) small quantity of other retained Roman sherds recorded (discarded)	29.95	approx ?28.95	in excess of 26.95	in excess of: 2.0 m
TP 105 (SFB)	aligned N-S excavated to 1.5 m modern fill to 1.5 m (top of modern sewer pipe at approx 1.2 m)		29.16	-	-	-

	natural sand at 1.5 m		28.45	N/A	N/A	previous excavation area, predominantly deeper features only ie pit bases, etc
TP 106 (SFB)	(extensive test-pit as re-aligned from approx N-S to NE-SW due to modern foundations, baulk from 2002/3 CAT excavations (Area E) located in mid area of NE-SW test-pit length) TP excavation varies between approx 1.5 m (NE of archaeological baulk) and approx 1.3 m (SW of archaeological baulk) (TP predominantly modern backfill onto sand) natural sand at approx 0.9 m at NE end of TP remains of Roman pit extending to approx 1.5 m in centre of TP modern backfill onto natural sand at approx 1.2-1.3 m at SW end of TP		28.04	(27.24) 26.84	26.64	(0.6 m) 0.2 m
TP 107 (SFB)	aligned NW-SE excavated to 1.4 m modern backfill to approx 0.7 m-0.9 m dark Roman/post-Roman accumulation to 1.2 m mixed (predominantly gravel) surface of Roman street at 1.2 m at SE end of TP (west side of small (narrow) Roman street recorded in CAT excavations of 2002/3, Area E) natural sand at approx 1.4 m		20.04	(?19.49) 19.04	18.24	(1.25 m) 0.8 m
TP 108 (SFB)	aligned NW-SE excavated to ?approx 1.8 m modern rubble to approx 0.25 m post-medieval/modern soil accumulation to 0.55 m dark predominantly Roman soil accumulation to approx 1.0 m Roman light greenish-brown sandy loam to base of TP (1.8 m)		27.57	??26.47	?? in excess of 25.77	?? in excess of 0.7 m
TP 109 (SFB)	aligned E-W excavated to 1.8 m modern soil to approx. 1.0-1.2 m darker soil below to below base of TP 1.8 m+ (it was noted that it is possible that all of the excavated material in TP 109 is modern and may represent fill of a large workhouse rubbish-pit(s) as previously recorded during the CAT excavations 2002/3 (especially Area D))		27.79	?27.59 26.99	26.09	?1.5 m 0.9 m
TP 110 (SFB)	aligned E-W excavated to 1.7 m mixed modern rubble and soil to 0.2 m dark brown sandy loam, post-Roman/?Roman, to 0.8 m Roman accumulation, mixed yellowish-brown sandy loam/loamy sand with oyster shells to approx 1.7 m natural sand at approx 1.7 m		27.48	?26.98	pit bases up to 25.68	pit fills up to 1.3 m
TP 111 (KO)	(extensive TP alignment changed from NE-SW to E-W to avoid modern foundations) excavated to 2.1 m modern soil and rubble to approx 0.4 m-0.5 m top of modern wall at approx 0.6 m modern pipe trench fill at west side of E-W TP cutting Roman pit Roman pit/?grave fill to 1.25 m+ in E-W TP (some human bone loose in fill, with oystershell and Roman pottery sherds),	small quantity of human bone retained find no W 302 small quantity of Roman sherds retained, recorded (discarded)				

	presumed to be a pit during TP excavation natural sand at approx 1.8 m					
TP 112 (KO)	(note: TP moved from original location and new location planned by CAT (between CAT recorded watching brief features F113 and F114)) TP aligned NW-SE excavated to approx 0.8 m-0.9 m general layer/pit fills of Roman dark grey sandy loam to 0.3 m Roman pit bases extending into natural sand between approx. 0.3 m and 0.9 m highest point of recorded natural sand 0.3 m		25.13	approx 25.13	pit bases up to 24.23	pit fills up to 0.9 m
TP 113 (KO)	aligned NE-SW excavated to 2.1 m 0.4 m of redeposited modern spoil from construction works ?Roman dark brown sandy-silt to approx 1.2 m Roman light brown sandy loam with oyster shells to approx 2.0 m natural sand at 2.0 m		27.94	(27.54) 26.74	25.94	(1.6 m) 0.8 m

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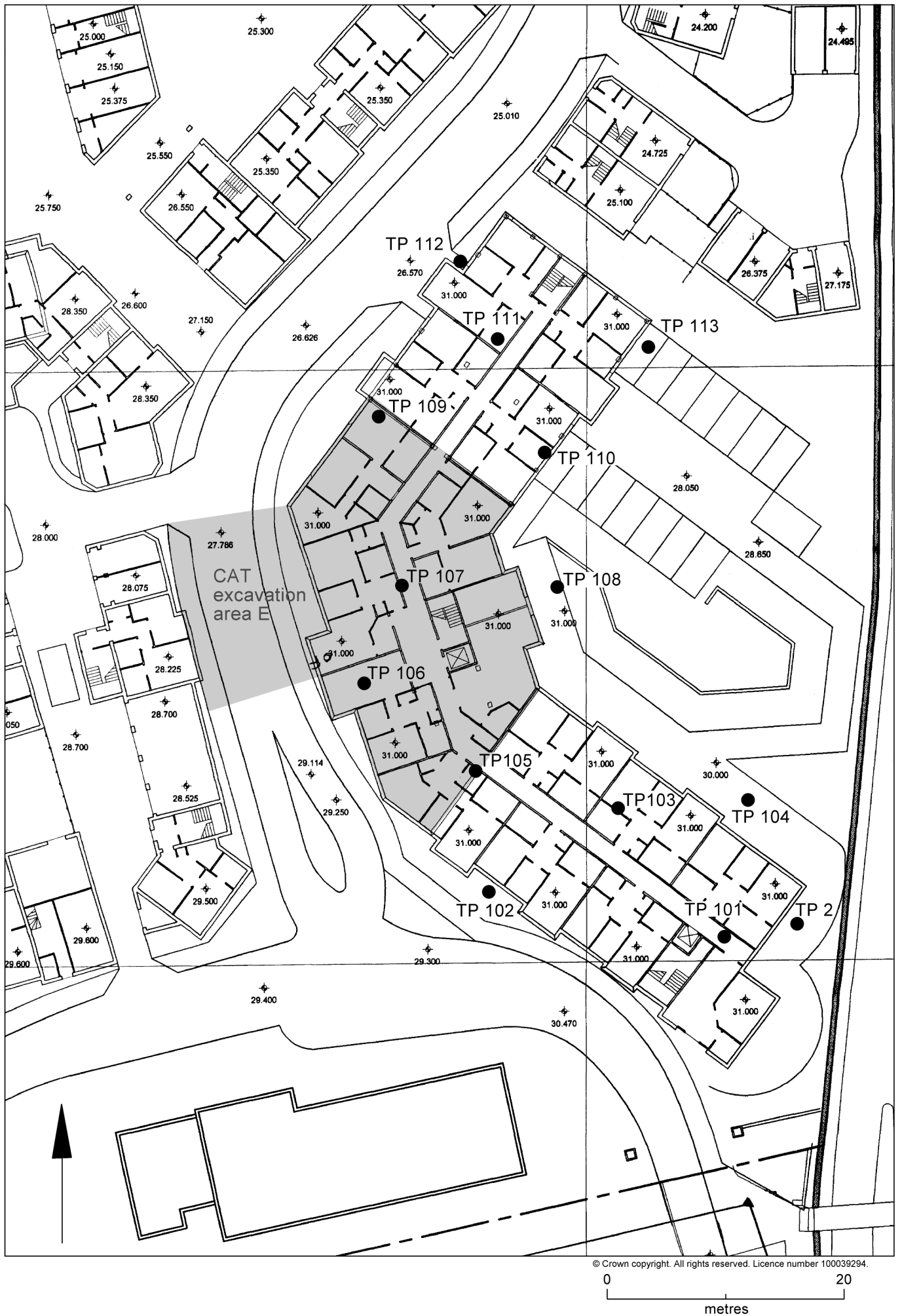


Fig 1 Location of numbered test pits: southern sheltered housing block, September 2003 (CAT excavation area E shaded).

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

Summary sheet

Site address: Balcerne Heights development (the former St Mary's hospital), Colchester, Essex	
Parish: Colchester	District: Colchester
NGR: TL 9917 2525	Site code: Museum accession code 2001.64
Type of work: Test-pit survey	Site director/group: Colchester Archaeological Trust
Date of work: September 2003	Size of area investigated: 14 test-pits
Location of finds/curating museum: Colchester Museums	Funding source: Developer
Further seasons anticipated? No	Related EHCR nos:
Final report: CAT Report 256 and summary in <i>EAH</i>	
Periods represented: Roman/modern	
<p>Summary of fieldwork results: A survey on a series of 14 machine-excavated test-pits located on and around the area of the proposed southern sheltered housing block of the Balcerne Heights development demonstrated surviving Roman deposits across the whole of this area of the site. Most of the deposits consisted of Roman soil accumulation layers and fills of deeper features representing pits or graves. A substantial Roman feature in the south-east corner of the development probably represents the town ditch. Close to the town ditch, part of a stone and mortar Roman building foundation was observed, and on the central-west area of the site part of a Roman street or lane was recorded. Except for the fill of the town ditch, which was not bottomed, the identified surviving Roman deposits, including fills of deeper features such as pits, averaged about 0.8 m in depth.</p>	
Previous summaries/reports: None	
Author of summary: Stephen Benfield	Date of summary: December 2003