

**An archaeological evaluation at
the rear of 17-18 Osborne Street,
Colchester, Essex
April 2004**

**report prepared
by Carl Crossan**

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An archaeological evaluation at the rear of 17-18 Osborne Street, Colchester, Essex

Results summary

Two evaluation trenches were excavated at the rear of 17-18 Osborne Street. Intact Roman levels were found to survive at depths of 1.0m-1.35m below the modern ground surface. These included a sequence of gravel layers and structural features in the form of a clay floor with an associated beam-slot and post-holes. The available dating evidence suggests that most of the intact Roman features are early, probably belonging to the 1st century AD. The medieval and post-medieval periods were represented by pits and dumped material. The absence of structures belonging to these later periods is unlikely to be significant here, since the trenches lie at some distance behind the frontages of any known streets of the time.

Introduction

This report is one of a series describing the results from archaeological evaluation trenches excavated in the Vineyard Gate area of Colchester between January and May 2004.

In total, 19 locations were investigated within the area bounded to the north by the Vineyard Street stretch of the town wall and to the south by Osborne Street. The focus of this report is a pair of trenches (Trenches 4-1 and 4-2) excavated in the car-park at the rear of 17-18 Osborne Street (Fig 1) which lies at the foot of a terrace 40m beyond the town wall.

Historical background

Colchester's status as England's oldest recorded town owes its origins to events 2000 years ago, when the regional tribal stronghold of Camulodunum became the prime target for the Roman invasion of AD 43. The victorious Roman army established Britain's first military fortress in the western part of the area now occupied by the town centre. In the years that followed, the fortress developed into a major town which was destroyed during the Boudican revolt of AD 60/61. After the suppression of the uprising, Camulodunum was rebuilt and the town wall that we know today was eventually constructed. Roman settlement spread well beyond the limits of the walled town: suburbs developed outside the north and west gates, and, from its earliest days, cemeteries along the main approach roads. The Roman town was to survive for almost 400 years until finally abandoned to the Saxons in the 5th century. In the following centuries the town was sparsely occupied and its Roman buildings were left to decay and collapse.

Colchester re-established itself as a major provincial town and trading centre in the medieval period. The century following the Norman conquest saw the construction of the castle, an ambitious undertaking with the largest Norman keep in Europe, together with the monastic houses of St John's abbey and St Botolph's priory which dominated the area beyond the south-eastern stretch of the town wall. The main gateway in this region of the town was the south gate, which stood at the junction of the modern St Botolph's Street and Short Wyre Street. This was the closest gateway to Hythe Quay and would have served as a main entry and exit point for goods traffic on the one-mile route between the walled town centre and the medieval quayside. Medieval and later activities in the locality are reflected in the earlier street names, which often related to local drinking houses and trade. Vineyard Street, known in the 14th century as Beres Lane, later became Blackboy Lane (1678) and then Brickyard Street (19th century). Arthur Street and Osborne Street are named after Arthur Osborne, a local mid 19th-century brewery owner.

Archaeological background

Archaeologically, this region of Colchester is of interest because it adjoins the town's southern defences and lies close to the site of a major gateway. A recent study divided the area broadly into three zones (Johnson *et al* 2003). The high ground in front of the town wall can be seen as a defensive zone containing the Roman and medieval town ditches. Beyond the defences are two zones subject to settlement: one on higher ground in Vineyard Street and one on the lower slopes to the south where relatively wet ground conditions may have influenced the nature of past development activity. The only substantial archaeological excavation to have previously been undertaken within the area was prompted by the 1970s' breach of the town wall to form the Vineyard Gate service entrance to the Lion Walk precinct. A section dug through the town defences encountered a series of Roman and medieval ditches up to 5m deep, with a possible medieval street to the south and remains of post-medieval and later buildings over the backfilled ditch (CAR 3, sheet 6a, sx 55). In Osborne Street, systematic investigation has previously been undertaken only on the south side of the street, where, during an excavation in advance of the construction of the NCP multi-storey car-park, floors deriving from a Roman building were recorded at the eastern end of the site (Shimmin 1994). These lay at about 3m depth, below the well-preserved remains of medieval wicker-lined drains which were followed by a series of later medieval and post-medieval buildings belonging to a plot extending back from the St Botolph's Street frontage. At the Stanwell Street end of the site, the excavations exposed the floors of a 16th- to 17th-century timber-framed building which had been destroyed by fire, probably during the Civil War siege of Colchester in 1648. References to Roman tessellated floors and cremation burials appear among records of chance finds made in the Osborne Street area in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Since these discoveries were recorded with varying degrees of precision, their exact locations are in the main uncertain.

Results

Annotated plans and section drawings of the trenches are included in the figures at the end of this report. Numbers preceded by 'L' or 'F' are layers and features which were individually identified, investigated and recorded. A guide to terms can be found in the glossary.

Trench 4-1 (Figs 2-3)

NGR: TL 99766 24974

Trench dimensions: 2.6m x 1.5m

Surface level: 19.25m AOD

Immediately beneath modern concrete yard surfacing (L132) was a c 18th-century pit (F102) which cut a dark post-medieval topsoil (L133). The post-medieval soil extended to an overall depth of 35cm, beneath which lay a post-Roman to medieval accumulation (L134) with inclusions of residual Roman pottery, roof tile and wall-plaster. F100, a large 13th-century or later pit cut from within the lower part of L134, also contained much residual Roman material probably redeposited from an underlying late Roman/post-Roman layer of destruction debris (L135). The uppermost intact Roman feature was a clay floor (L144) which was found beneath the destruction debris (L135) at a depth of 95cm. The floor was cut by two tile- and stone-lined post-holes (F112, F113) and contained a north-south beam-slot (F108). The floor and its underlying levelling (L146) had been laid on a thick deposit of demolition debris (L155) which included a large, apparently displaced fragment of mortared septaria masonry (F114). Both L146 and L155 were characterised by common charcoal flecks and burnt daub inclusions. Beneath L155 was a spread of compacted gravel which extended over the entire southern half of the excavated area (F116) but was present only in patches in the northern half (F117). The gravels lay on a clay layer (F118/F119) which exhibited thin black surface indications of occupation in places (L157). Removal of the clay (F118/F119) revealed an east-west orientated gully or shallow ditch (F121) in the northern half of the trench. Along the course of the gully, the overlying deposits F118/F199, F117, L155 and L146 had all been subject to subsidence into the fill of this feature. The gully F121 cut a dense mix of gravel and clay (F120) which was possibly a surface laid on gravelly sand (L158). Beneath this was an area of disturbed natural sand containing occasional small

charcoal fragments (L159) which merged with the underlying natural sand at an overall depth of 2.2m.

Trench 4-2 (Figs 4-6)

NGR: TL 99784 24975

Trench dimensions: 3m x 1.6m

Surface level: 19.19m AOD

This trench was located 15m to the east of Trench 4-1 in Area 4. Removal of concrete yard surfacing (L161) exposed modern outbuilding foundations including a 50cm-deep east-west foundation (F124) which occupied the full length of the northern side of the trench. The foundations were set into a 19th-/20th-century topsoil (L162) which sealed c 19th-century pits (F123, F127) and a 17th-century or later pit (F125). The pits were cut into a 50cm-thick rubbish-laden soil (L163) which appeared to have been deposited over a lengthy period of time, possibly originating in the medieval and certainly extending into the post-medieval period. The uppermost layer found to be free from post-medieval inclusions was L164, a 13th-century or later dumped soil which lay below L163 at an overall depth of 1m. This layer, which was cut by pits F126 and F131, had a high content of small and medium stones, although these were not compacted in the manner of a laid surface. In the western half of the trench, a deep post-medieval pit (F130), cut from an indeterminate point within L163, was sectioned and found to have removed a large proportion of the underlying stratigraphy. Excavation beyond L164 was therefore limited to the less disturbed area to the east. The uppermost surviving Roman level here is probably F128, a small area of compacted gravel which lay beneath L164 at a depth of 1.35m. F128 was the highest layer in an alternating series of gravels and make-up, the earliest of which (gravel F133) lay on natural sand at an overall depth of 1.8m. Up to three gravel surfaces may be represented by F133/F132/F128. The datable finds from these and the intermediate make-up deposits L166 and L165 all lie within a broad 1st- to 2nd-century range but, more narrowly, would be also consistent with a 1st-century origin for all the extant Roman contexts from F133 to F128.

Finds

The main categories of finds from these trenches were pottery, animal bone and building materials, all of which are currently undergoing specialist analysis. Among the building materials were *tesserae* from Roman floors and Roman decorated wall-plaster fragments painted in a variety of colours including red, white, yellow, black and blue/green. In Trench 4-2, the pit F123 contained an eroded coin or token of mid 17th-century date together with quantities of medieval, post-medieval and modern wares, and also a residual burnt bone fitting, possibly from a couch and probably of Roman date.

Acknowledgements

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Glossary and abbreviations

AOD	above Ordnance Survey datum point based on mean sea level at Newlyn, Cornwall
Boudican	relating to the revolt led by Boudica against the Roman occupation in AD 60/61
CBC	Colchester Borough Council
context	specific location on an excavation, usually relates to finds
cut	an excavation of unspecified purpose

make-up	material dumped to raise ground-level
medieval	the period from AD 1066 to Henry VIII
modern	19th century to the present
NGR	National Grid Reference
OAA	Oxford Archaeological Associates Ltd
post-medieval	after Henry VIII and up to Queen Victoria
residual	something out of its original period context (eg a Roman coin in a modern pit)
Roman	the period from AD 43 to c AD 430
Saxon	the period from c AD 430 to AD 1066
septaria	a local stone first used for building in the Roman period, frequently salvaged and re-used in later periods
tesserae	small cubes, used to form a plain or patterned floor

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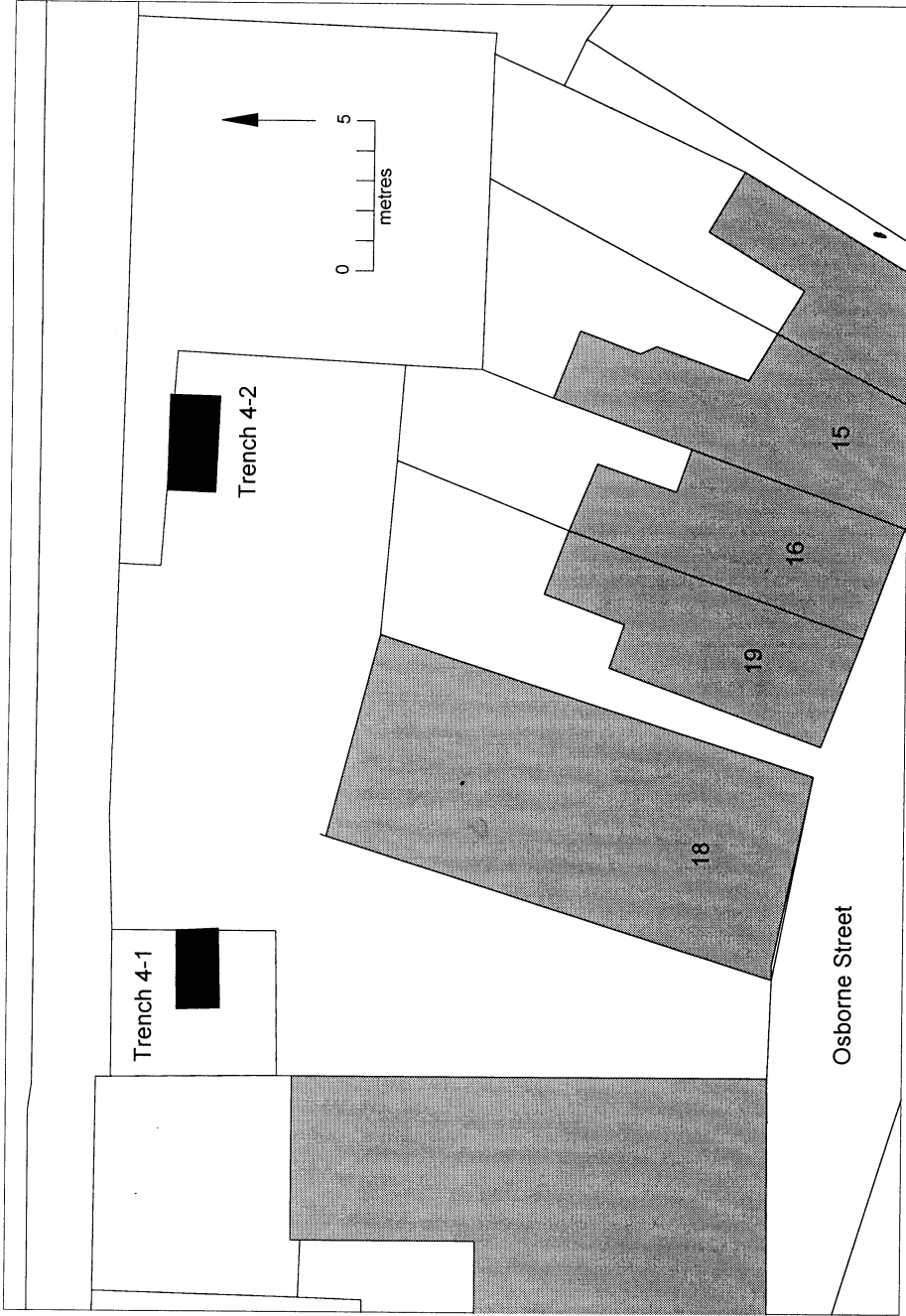
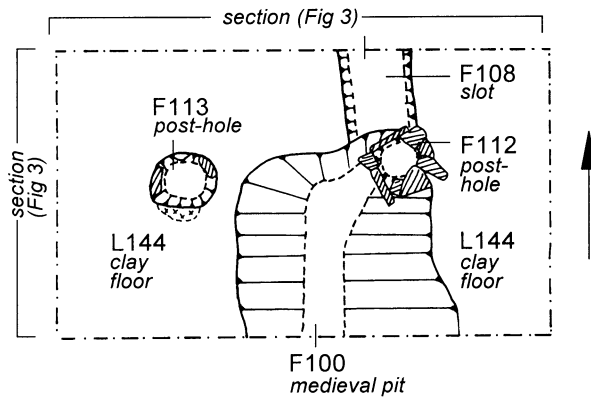


Fig 1 Trench location plan.

Plan 1 Roman clay floor, post-holes and slot



Plan 2 Early Roman clay surfaces

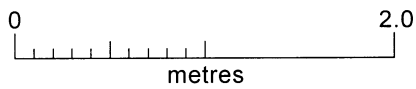
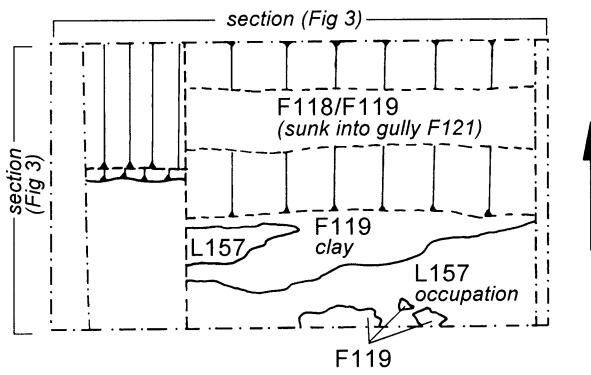


Fig 2 Trench 4-1: plans.

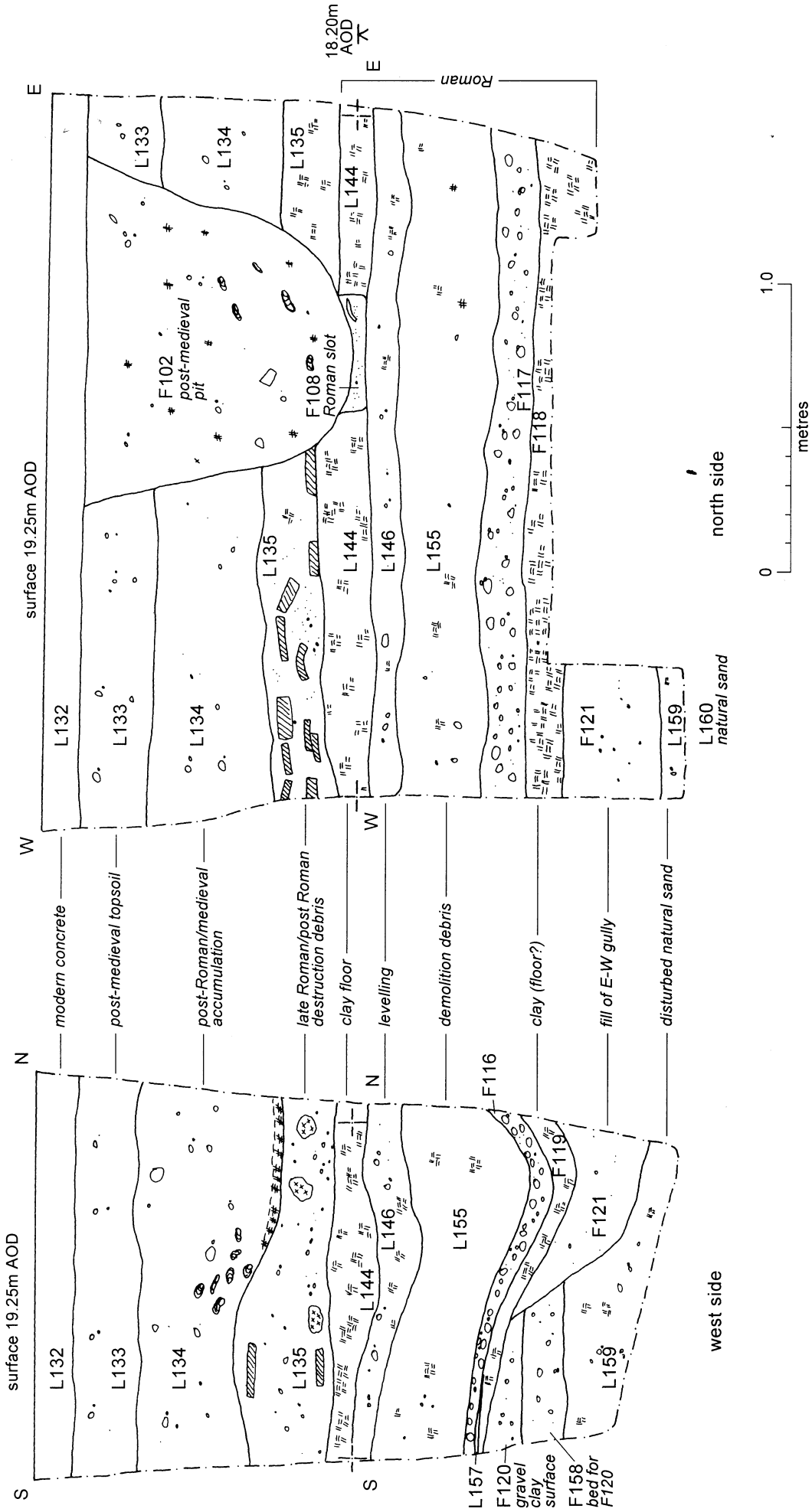
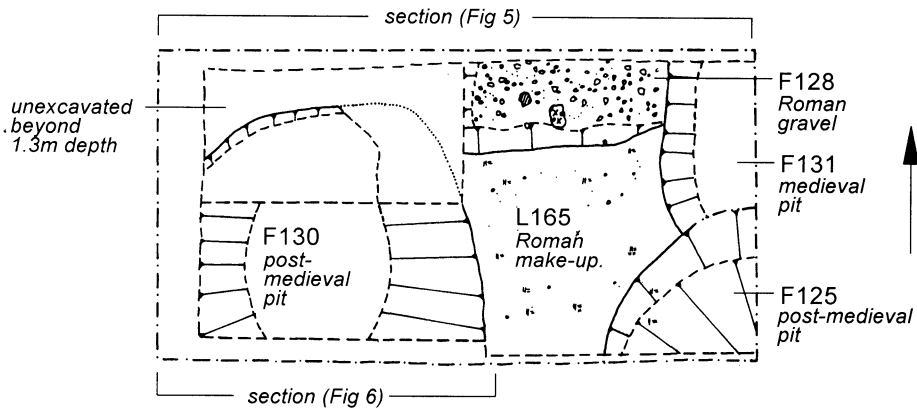
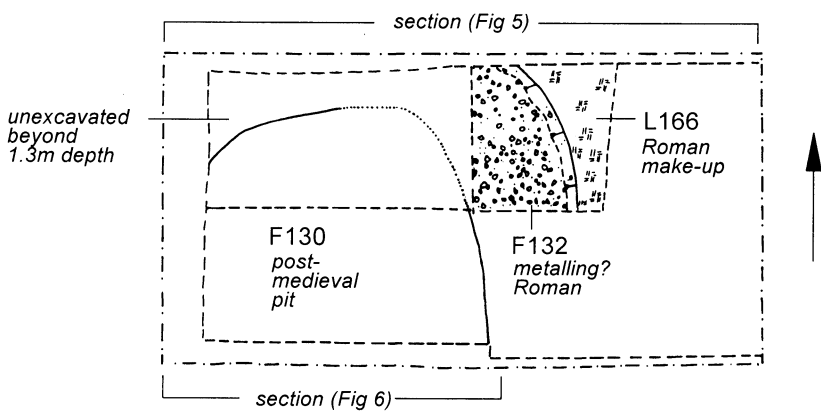


Fig 3 Trench 4-1: sections.

Plan 1 1.3-1.4m depth



Plan 2 1.5m depth



Plan 3 1.7m depth.

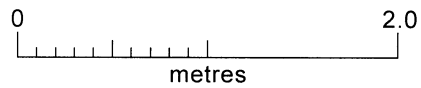
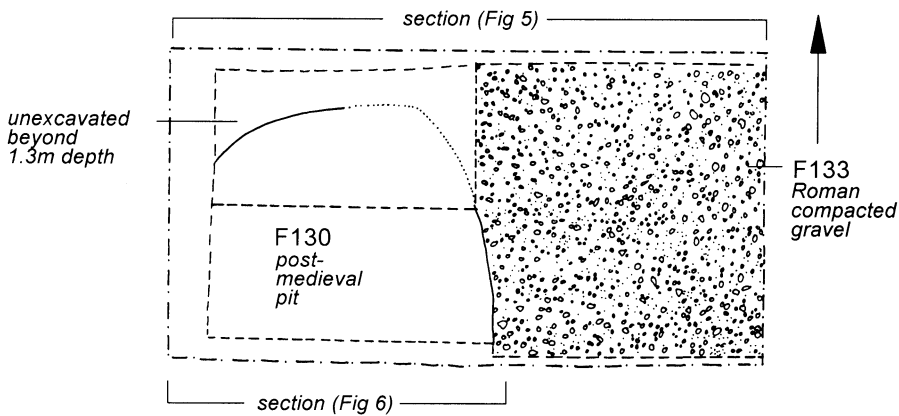


Fig 4 Trench 4-2: plans.

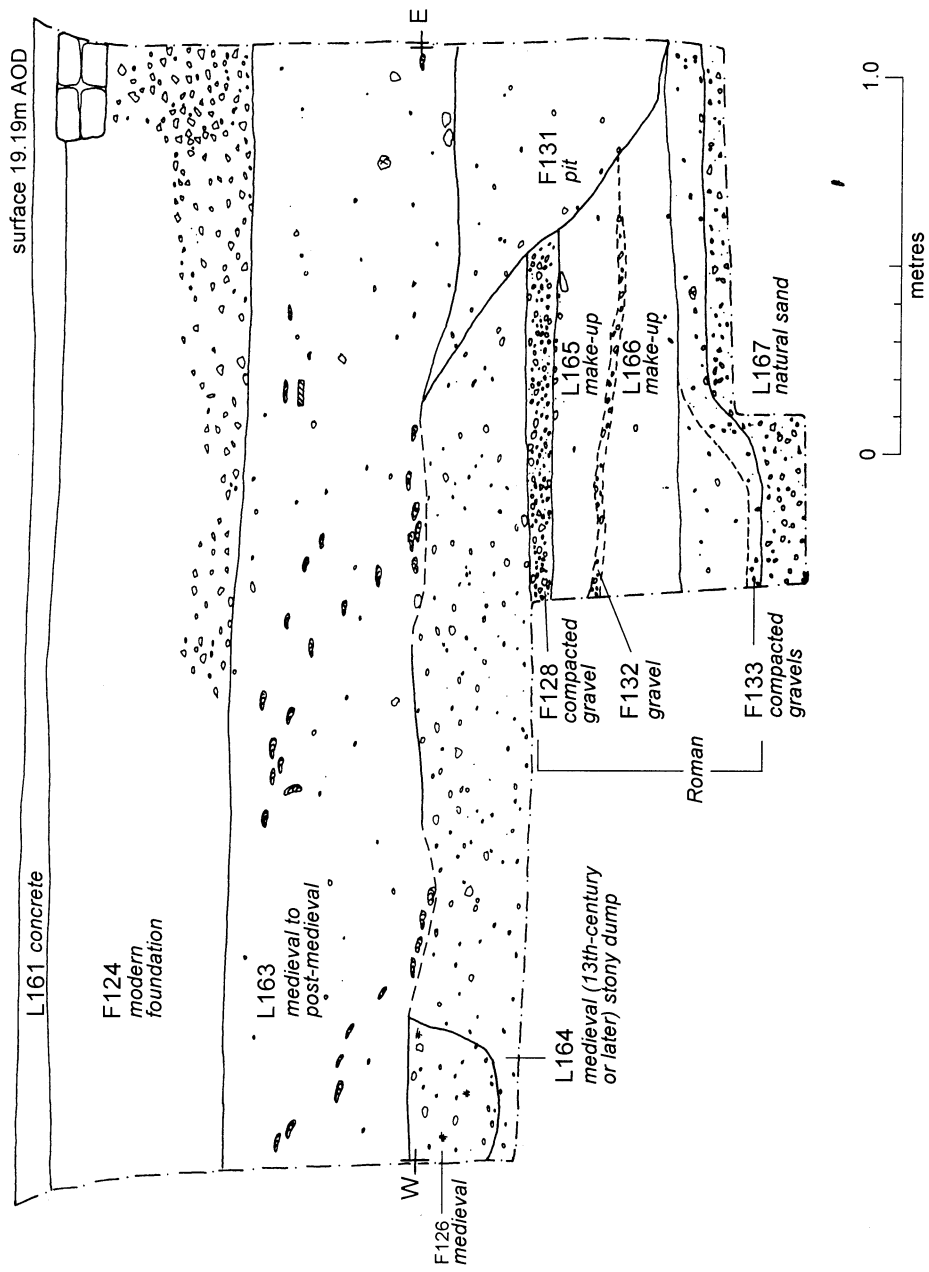


Fig 5 Trench 4-2: section of north side.

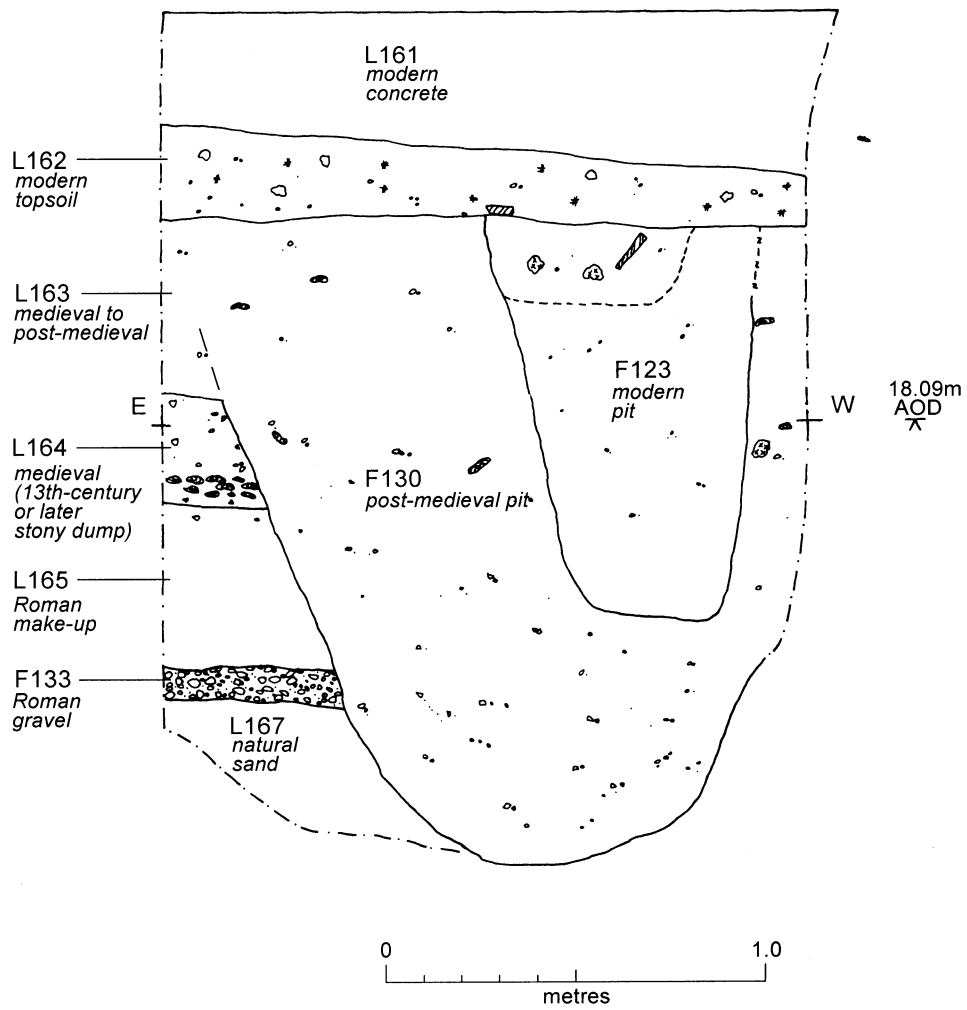


Fig 6 Trench 4-2: section of south side.