

# Archaeological monitoring during the installation of floodlights at the Colchester Garrison Officers' Club, St John's Green, Colchester, Essex.

October 2013



report prepared by  
Adam Wightman

on behalf of The Colchester Garrison Officers' Club

Scheduled Ancient Monument: 26307  
CAT project ref.: 13/10d  
Colchester & Ipswich Museums accession code: COLEM 2011.20  
NGR: TL 9987 2476



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**CAT Report 737**  
November 2013

## 1 Summary

Archaeological monitoring took place at the Colchester Garrison Officers' Club during the excavation of foundation-pits for floodlights around the perimeter of the new tennis courts. The tennis courts are situated within the Abbey of St John (SAM no 26307) on the site of the abbey church, which was discovered during an archaeological evaluation in February 2011.

The robbed-out remains of the southern-most foundation of the abbey church were uncovered in one of the foundation-pits. Combined with the absence of similar remains in the adjacent foundation-pit, this discovery has significant ramifications for the reconstructed plan of the abbey church.

A deep deposit of dark soil was encountered in the two foundation-pits to the south-east of the abbey church. The presence of a human skull in one of the pits indicates that, at some time during the life of the church, this area was used for human burial.

To the north of the abbey church, human remains were identified immediately south of a mortared rubble-wall. The rubble-wall is probably the northern edge of an early medieval rubble-lined grave, fifteen more of which were uncovered in 1972 to the north of the tennis court. The adjacent foundation-pit contained part of a demolished sandy-clay wall. This could be the remains of a building destroyed during the fire of 1133.

The medieval remains uncovered to the north of the abbey church were overlaid by a deep layer of dark soil which may have been deposited here during the large-scale earth-moving which followed the 1133 fire.

Two pieces of architectural worked stone which may have come from the abbey church were also recovered during the monitoring.

## 2 Introduction (Fig 1)

- 2.1 This report describes the archaeological work carried out by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) on behalf of the Colchester Garrison Officers' Club, St John's Green, Colchester, Essex. Archaeological monitoring was undertaken during the installation of eight floodlights around the perimeter of the new hard-surface tennis courts between the 21st and 23rd of October 2013.
- 2.2 The site is located within the former Benedictine Abbey of St John (Scheduled Ancient Monument no 26307) south of Colchester town centre (NGR TL 9981 2477). The tennis courts are situated next to the eastern wall of the abbey precinct, to the east of the surviving gatehouse (Fig 1).
- 2.3 An archaeological evaluation was carried out on the site of the new clubhouse in 2011 following the destruction of the previous building by fire. During this evaluation, the site of the abbey church was discovered (Fig 2). In 2012, the remains of the west end of the abbey church and an associated burial area were recorded during the construction of the new clubhouse. The following year the east end of the church was exposed prior to the construction of the new hard-surface tennis courts (Fig 2). These phases of work will be reported on in a revised version of CAT Report 601 which is forthcoming (CAT Report 718).
- 2.4 All fieldwork and reporting was done in accordance with Colchester Borough Council's *Guidelines on standards and practices for archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester* (CIMS 2008a) and *Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester and Ipswich Museums* (CIMS 2008b), and the Institute for Archaeologists' *Standard and guidance for archaeological watching briefs* (IfA 2008a) and *Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials* (IfA 2008b). The guidance contained in the documents *Management of Research Projects in the Historic Environment* by English Heritage (MoRPHE), and *Standards for field archaeology in the East of England (EAA 14)* was also followed.

### **3 Archaeological and historical background** (Figs 1&2)

The site is located at the northern edge of the extensive precinct of St John's Abbey (Fig 1). The precinct, the precinct wall and Abbey Gatehouse are all Scheduled Ancient Monuments (SAM 26307).

The abbey of St John at Colchester was one of the last of the monastic houses to be seized by Henry VIII as part of his plan to crush the power of the catholic church in England and Wales. Its last abbot, John Beche, was imprisoned in the Tower of London, discharged, rearrested and then tried in Colchester where, in 1539, he was found guilty and hanged.

The abbey church was laid out in 1095 and completed in 1115. In 1133 the abbey was burnt down, and documentary evidence from this time states that the cloister and other buildings were then relocated to the south of the church (*CAR 1*, 40-41. *VCH 9*, 303). The church along with the rest of the abbey was demolished during the century following the Dissolution of the Monasteries by Henry VIII.

Following the dissolution of the Abbey in 1539, the site passed to various individuals and was eventually acquired by the Lucas family who constructed a mansion and resided there until the mid 17th century. During the siege of Colchester in 1648, the former abbey was used as a royalist stronghold and sustained considerable damage in the fighting. With the exception of the extant, but restored gatehouse, the remaining abbey buildings seem to have been demolished in the 1660s. The abbey site was bought by the War Office in 1860 from the Baring family and stayed in military ownership until very recently (*VCH 9*).

No plan of the monastery has survived, the nearest being what was shown on John Speed's map of Colchester published in 1611-12. This shows a number of buildings huddled together inside the abbey's defensive wall labelled 'St John's Abbey' and what appears to be the church's central tower still standing in isolation.

In 1988, CAT excavations during an extension to the east side of the clubhouse revealed a stone wall foundation believed to have been part of the abbey church (UAD EVT 3380). An evaluation carried out by CAT in 2007 to the west of the Garrison Officers' Club uncovered a few sections of monastic foundations, as well as Roman, medieval and post-medieval deposits buried beneath deep soil deposits (CAT Report 405). This was an important advance but the exposures were limited and inconclusive because the investigation was modest in scale. Nothing was seen of the abbey church itself until an archaeological evaluation undertaken by CAT in 2011 (CAT Report 601) (Fig 2). The evaluation was followed by archaeological monitoring in 2012/2013 during the construction of a new clubhouse and tennis courts (CAT Report 718 forthcoming).

### **4 Aim**

The aim of the archaeological monitoring was to record the character, extent, date, significance and condition of any archaeological remains and deposits affected by the groundworks.

### **5 Results** (Figs 2-6)

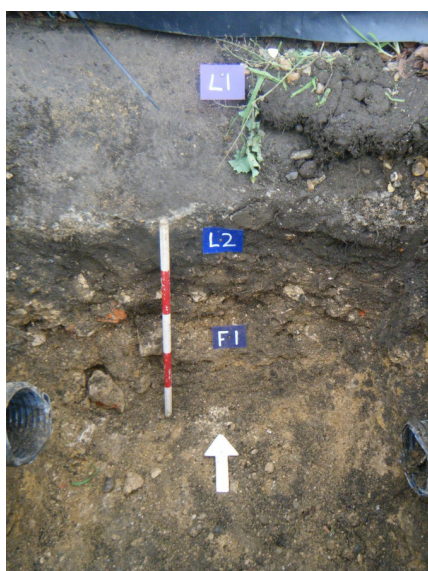
Eight floodlights were installed around the perimeter of the new tennis courts to the east of the clubhouse (Fig 2). Each floodlight had a concrete foundation c 1m x 1m in plan and between 1m and 1.2m in depth. The pits for the foundations were excavated using a tracked excavator under archaeological supervision. In addition, a foundation trench for an electrical feeder pillar was hand-excavated by the contractors on the western side of the tennis court.

An archaeological summary follows below for each foundation-pit (FP1-FP8). In the identification of archaeological contexts, the context number is prefixed by either 'F' indicating a feature or 'L' indicating a layer.

### Foundation-pit 1 (FP1)

FP1 was located at the south-western corner of the tennis courts on the projected alignment of the southern-most wall of the abbey church (Figs 2 and 3).

The robbed-out foundation of the abbey church (F1) was located beneath 450mm of post-medieval/modern sandy-silt topsoil (L2) (Fig 6). No solid masonry survived in this location as the larger pieces of building materials had been robbed-out for use in structures elsewhere in the town. The edges of the robber trench were not visible in the foundation-pit which indicates that it extended beyond the limit of excavation in all directions. The machine-excavation of the foundation-pit ceased once the robber trench had been identified. Following consultation with the English Heritage Inspector of Ancient Monuments, the rest of the foundation-pit was hand-excavated by CAT archaeologists down to the required depth. The base of the robber trench was identified at a depth of 1.15m below modern ground level where it cut the pale yellow natural sand (L4) (Fig 6). The fill was a mixture of mortar and sand with numerous small to medium sized pieces of greensand, septaria, flint, Roman mortar (including *opus signinum*) and Roman brick/tile (including box flue tile). The fill and depth of F1 in TP7 were comparable to the corresponding robber trench for the southern wall identified to the west during the 2011 evaluation (Fig 2).



**Plate 1 The robbed-out foundation of the abbey church (F1), facing north.**

### Foundation-pit 2 (FP2)

In FP2, the topsoil (L2) overlaid an earlier soil accumulation (L3) (Fig 6). L3 was lighter in colour than L2 and contained oyster shell and Roman brick inclusions. L3 overlaid the natural sand (L4) at a depth of 640mm below modern ground level. As with FP1, FP2 was located on the projected alignment of the southern wall of the abbey church (Fig 3). However, no evidence of the church robber trench was identified in this foundation-pit.

### Foundation-pit 3 (FP3)

Two post-medieval pits (F2 and F4) were identified beneath the topsoil (L2) in FP3 (Fig 3). F2 had a grey/brown sandy-silt fill which contained mortar, greensand, peg-tile and many oyster shell fragments (Fig 6). F4 had a similar fill to F2, but only contained greensand and Roman tile fragments (Fig 6). Both pits cut a mid-brown sandy-silt (L7) which was similar in composition to L3. However, the thickness of this soil deposit, the variable depth of the natural sand (L4) and the identification of the top of a human skull (F3), indicates that L7 is actually the fill of one or more discrete features. The human skull (F3) was located just above the natural sand at

a depth of 1m below modern ground level (Plate 2) and was not located within a discernable grave cut (Fig 6). It is probable that the skull is medieval in date due to the high level of bone preservation and its proximity to the abbey church.

#### **Foundation-pit 4 (FP4)**

The same mid-brown sandy-silt was identified beneath the topsoil (L2) in FP4 (L7) (Fig 6). L7 was homogenous and contained no distinguishable layers or cut features. Five animal bones from medium-sized mammals (ie sheep, pig, dog) were recovered from L7 (two rib fragments (5.5g), one pelvis fragment (12g) and one 1st phalanx (1g)). Small Roman tile fragments and oyster shells were also observed in L7.

#### **Foundation-pits 5 and 6 (FP5 and FP6)**

In both FP5 and FP6, a modern topsoil c 400mm thick (L5) overlaid redeposited natural sand mixed with a sandy-silt soil (L6) (Fig 6). L6 continued below the limit of excavation and contained modern brick fragments and pieces of concrete (Fig 6). It is possible that the ground in this area was disturbed when the boundary wall to the north was constructed (Fig 3). Alternatively, an inspection chamber cover identified to the east of FP5 may indicate that a deep drain is located alongside the tennis courts in this area.

#### **Foundation-pit 7 (FP7)**

A rubble-wall constructed from septaria, greensand and Roman brick/tile bonded in a pale yellow mortar (F5) was encountered at a depth of 1m below modern ground level in FP7 (Figs 3 and 6). Some of the stone and brick/tile pieces had mortar on their upper surfaces (Fig 4). However, the top of the rubble-wall was flat and it is unlikely that there had been any further courses above this point. This would indicate that the building materials were re-used and probably originated from a nearby Roman building. The rubble-wall continued beyond the limit of excavation to the north, east and west (Fig 4). It was overlain by a thick layer of dark sandy-silt (L8) which, in turn, was overlaid by the post-medieval/modern topsoil L2 (Fig 6).

To the south of F5, the foundation-pit was hand-excavated down to the required depth of 1.1m below modern ground level (Fig 6). This exposed the southern face of the rubble-wall which was relatively smooth and even. Two sherds of Roman greyware (Fabric GX, 31g) and one fragment of Roman tile (85g) were recovered during the reduction of the southern half of the pit. A small sondage was hand-excavated against the southern face of the rubble-wall to try to ascertain its depth (Fig 4). However, excavation of the sondage ceased when the distal end of a human femur and part of a pelvis were encountered c 75mm below the base of the pit. The human bone was covered over with soil and the rubble-wall was protected with plastic sheeting and a layer of soil before the pit was infilled with concrete.



**Plate 2** The human skull (F3) in FP3, facing south-east.



**Plate 3** The rubble-wall F5 in FP7, facing west.

### **Foundation-pit 8 (FP8)**

A pit containing mortar and small greensand chippings (F6) was identified in the north-western corner of FP8 (Fig 3). The pit was overlain by topsoil (L2) and cut the same mid grey-brown soil deposit identified in FP7 (L8). An abraded rim sherd from a Roman storage jar (Fabric HX, 207g) dated to the mid 1st to 2nd century AD was recovered from L8. At a depth of c 700mm below modern ground level, small patches of clay and charcoal were observed in L8 (Fig 6). In the north-eastern corner of the pit, a larger deposit of clay and charcoal may have been the remains of a demolished wall made from sandy-clay (Fig 6).

### **The foundation trench for the feeder pillar**

To the west of the tennis courts, an area 2m x 0.7m in size was hand-reduced by 300mm-400mm for the installation of an electrical feeder pillar (Fig 3). All of the electrical ducting which connected the feeder pillar to the floodlights had been installed during the construction of the tennis courts. The topsoil (L2) contained unusually high quantities of mortar, stone and Roman brick/tile fragments. Two pieces of architectural stone were recovered from L2 (Finds numbers 4 & 5).

#### **Architectural stone by Stephen Benfield**

##### *Finds number 4 (Plate 4)*

White limestone. Complete semi-circular piece presumed to be from a column or attached column. Stone saw marks across back, upper and lower faces. Even curvature to front face which has slightly coarse tooled finish. There is a 20mm un-tooled vertical strip at one end of the face which is slightly raised in relation to the tooled surface. Areas of white lime mortar adhering to upper and lower surfaces. Height 170mm, radius (maximum depth of stone) 160mm, width at back 310mm.

##### *Finds number 5 (Plate 5)*

White limestone. Roughly triangular stone piece with saw cut upper and lower surfaces and curved face. The sides and back of the stone are rough and although there is some recent damage these were clearly broken away in antiquity. This could suggest that the stone has been reused. The face is of similar, although possibly slightly broader curvature to that of the other stone (5). However, the stone itself is of greater depth and the height slightly less. It appears that the face had originally been cut, as one half is relatively smooth with vertical saw marks and is slightly raised in relation to the other half which appears to have been finished with slightly coarse tooling similar to the other stone (5). There are two parallel, thin, shallow tooled grooves 5mm apart running from the area of the sawn part of the face to the surviving back end of the stone on one (upper/lower) surface. The same surface has



a surviving patch of sandy, yellow-brown lime mortar. Height 160mm, maximum depth of stone 270mm, maximum width (behind face) 210mm.



**Plate 4 Architectural worked stone (no 4).**



**Plate 5 Architectural worked stone (no 5).**

## **6 Discussion and conclusions**

Based on the existing reconstruction of the abbey church plan (Fig 2), the robbed-out remains uncovered in FP1 could be from a wide foundation beneath the eastern wall of the transept. Alternatively, the transept could be located further west than was previously thought. Of greater significance is the absence of church remains in FP2, which suggests that the southern-most wall of the sanctuary may not have been on the same line as the southern-most wall of the nave (Fig 2). Moreover, a comparison of the depth of the natural sand in FP2 with the deep soil deposits in the adjacent pits (FP3 and FP4) suggests that FP2 was probably located within the footprint of the church whilst FP3 and FP4 were located within a burial area south of the church. The results of this archaeological watching brief have significant implications for the reconstructed plan of the abbey church. These will be considered in detail in the forthcoming CAT Report 718 which covers the findings from the 2011 evaluation and the 2012-2013 watching brief.

The rubble-wall identified in FP7 is most likely to be the northern edge of an early medieval rubble-lined grave. Fifteen lined graves were uncovered during excavations in 1972 on the site of the Anglo-Saxon or early Norman church of St John to the north of FP7 (Fig 5) (CAR 1, 44). As with the wall identified in FP7, the materials used to line the graves were obtained from Roman buildings and some were set in mortar so that the inner faces were smooth and even (CAR 9, 215).

Further evidence for the association of the wall with a grave comes from its significant depth (0.7m-1m below the top of the abbey church foundation trenches to the south) and the presence of human remains directly to the south. The southern side of the grave is presumably just outside the southern limit of excavation. This would make this rubble-lined grave comparable with the larger graves excavated in 1972 (CAR 9, 216).

The deposit of clay and charcoal identified in TP8 may have been the remains of a demolished sandy-clay wall, possibly from a building destroyed during the fire of 1133. The dark soil which overlaid the medieval remains in TP7 and TP8 may have been deposited here during the large-scale earth-moving which followed the 1133 fire (CAR 1, 44).

The two large pieces of architectural worked stone can be assumed to have come from the abbey church.

## 7 Archive deposition

The finds and paper archive are currently at CAT headquarters at Roman Circus House, off Circular Road North, Colchester, Essex, but will be permanently deposited with Colchester and Ipswich Museums under accession code COLEM 2011.20.

## 8 Acknowledgements

CAT would like to thank the Colchester Garrison Officers' Club for commissioning and funding the project. The site work was managed and undertaken by A Wightman assisted by B Holloway. The pottery and worked stone identifications in this report are by Stephen Benfield and the section drawings are by Emma Holloway.

The project was monitored by Deborah Priddy for English Heritage.

## 9 References

Note: all CAT reports, except for DBAs, are now available online in .pdf format at <http://cat.essex.ac.uk>

CAR 1	1981	Colchester Archaeological Report 1: <i>Aspects of Anglo-Saxon and Norman Colchester</i> , by P Crummy.
CAR 9	1993	Colchester Archaeological Report 9: <i>Excavations of Roman and later cemeteries, churches and monastic sites in Colchester, 1971-88</i> , by N Crummy, P Crummy, and C Crossan.
CAT Report 405	2007	<i>Stage 1b archaeological evaluation, Alienated Land Area B1a, Colchester Garrison, Colchester, Essex January 2007</i> . Unpublished CAT client report prepared by Laura Pooley, Howard Brooks and Ben Holloway, January 2007
CAT Report 601	2011	<i>St John's Abbey church: An evaluation at the Garrison Officers' Club, St John's Green, Colchester, Essex: February -March 2011</i> . Unpublished CAT client report prepared by Adam Wightman
CAT Report 718	forthcoming	<i>St John's Abbey church: An evaluation and watching brief at the Garrison Officers' Club, St John's Green, Colchester, Essex: February 2011-June 2013</i> . Unpublished CAT client report prepared by Adam Wightman
CIMS	2008a	<i>Guidelines on standards and practices for archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester (CBC)</i>
CIMS	2008b	<i>Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester and Ipswich Museums (CBC)</i>



EAA 14	2003	<i>Standards for field archaeology in the East of England</i> , East Anglian Archaeology, Occasional Papers, 14, ed by D Gurney
IfA	2008a	<i>Standard and guidance for archaeological watching briefs</i>
IfA	2008b	<i>Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials</i>
MoRPHE	2006	<i>Management of Research Projects in the Historic Environment</i> (English Heritage)
VCH 9	1990	<i>Victoria County History of Essex: Vol 9, the Borough of Colchester.</i>

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Checked by: Philip Crummy  
Date: 12th November 2013

## **Appendix 1: contents of archive**

One A4 document wallet containing:

### **1 Introduction**

- 1.1 Copy of the WSI produced by CAT
- 1.2 Risk assessment

### **2 Site archive**

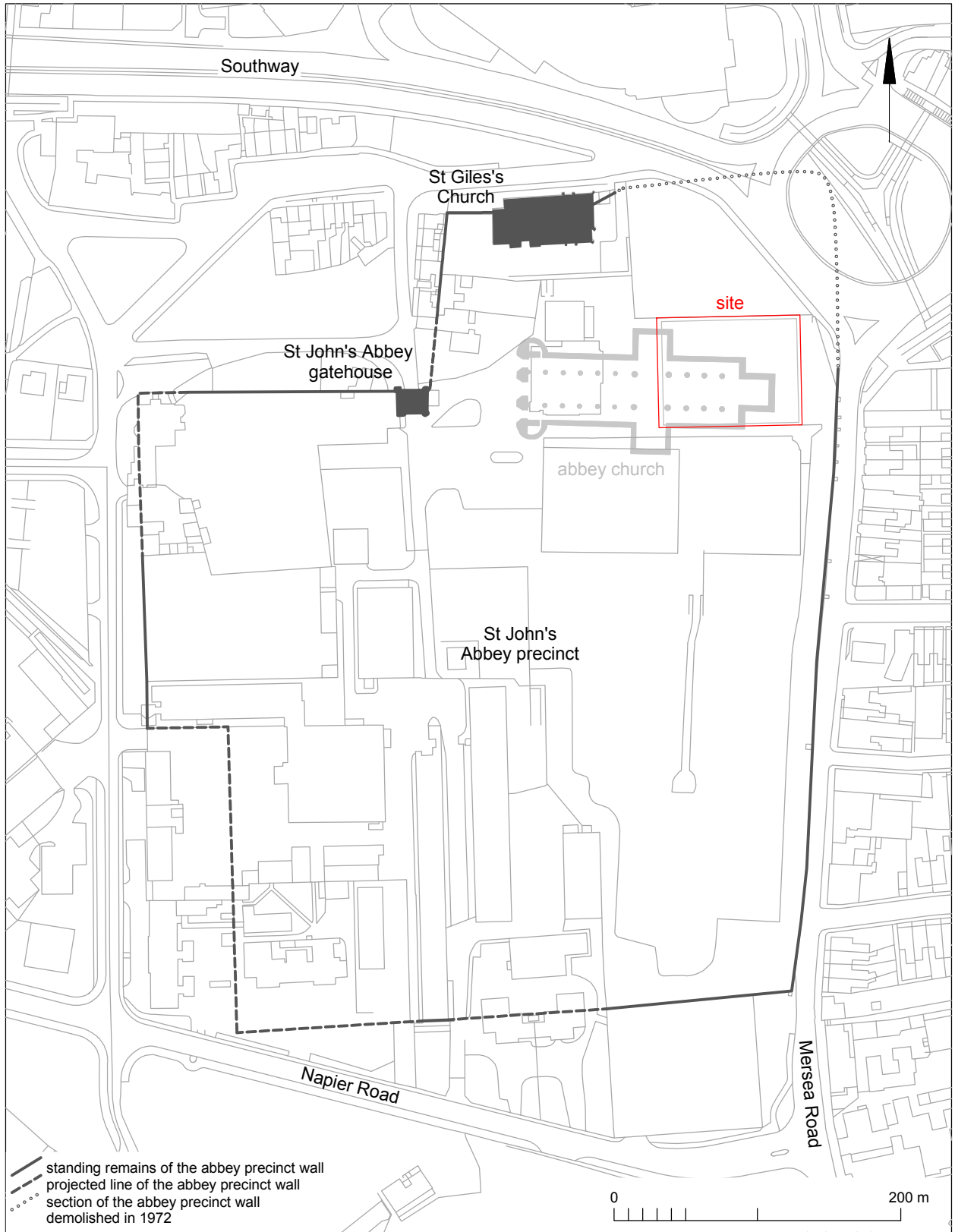
- 2.1 Site digital photographic record
- 2.2 Attendance register
- 2.3 Context sheets (F1-F6, L1-L8)
- 2.4 Finds register
- 2.5 Site photographic record on CD
- 2.6 3x section drawing sheets

### **3 Research archive**

- 3.1 Monitoring (client) report

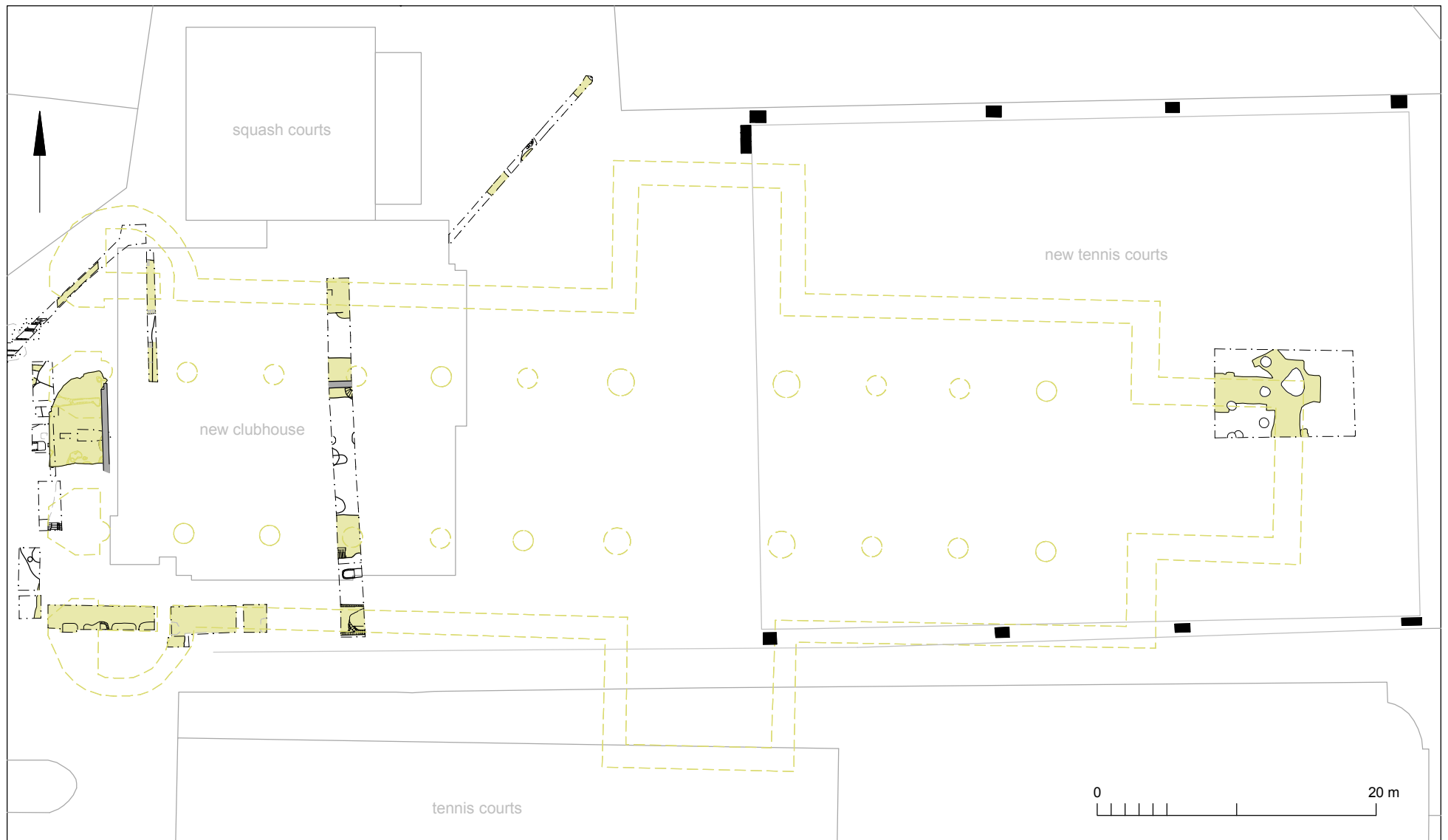
### **Not in wallet**

The finds (1 small bag)  
A3 Sx sheets



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Fig 1 Site location.



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Fig 2 The location of the floodlight foundation-pits (shaded black) in relation to the results of the 2011 evaluation and 2012-2013 watching brief (CAT Report 718 forthcoming) and the reconstructed plan of the abbey church (shown in yellow).

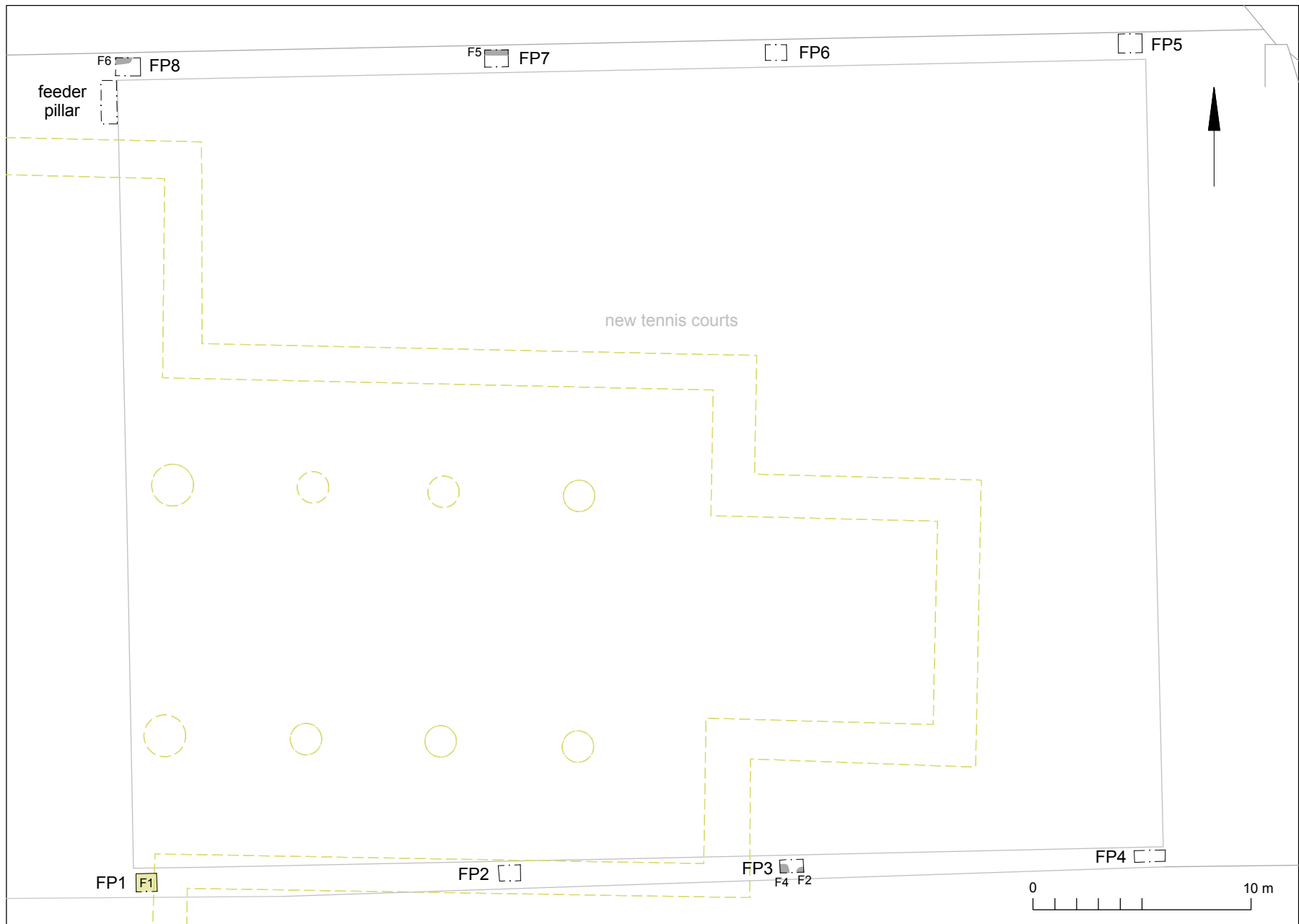


Fig 3 Location of the floodlight foundation-pits in relation to the reconstructed plan of the abbey church (shown in yellow).

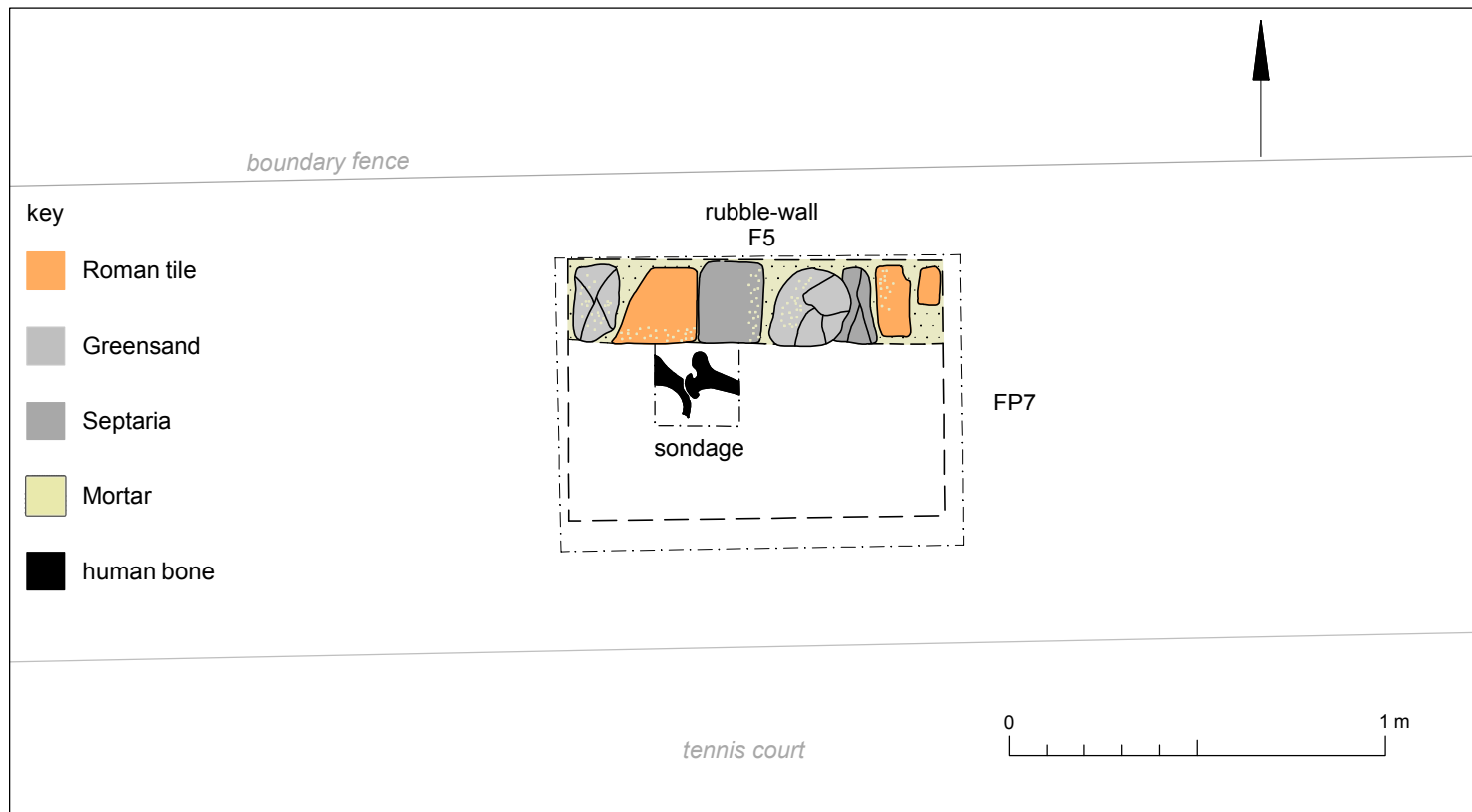
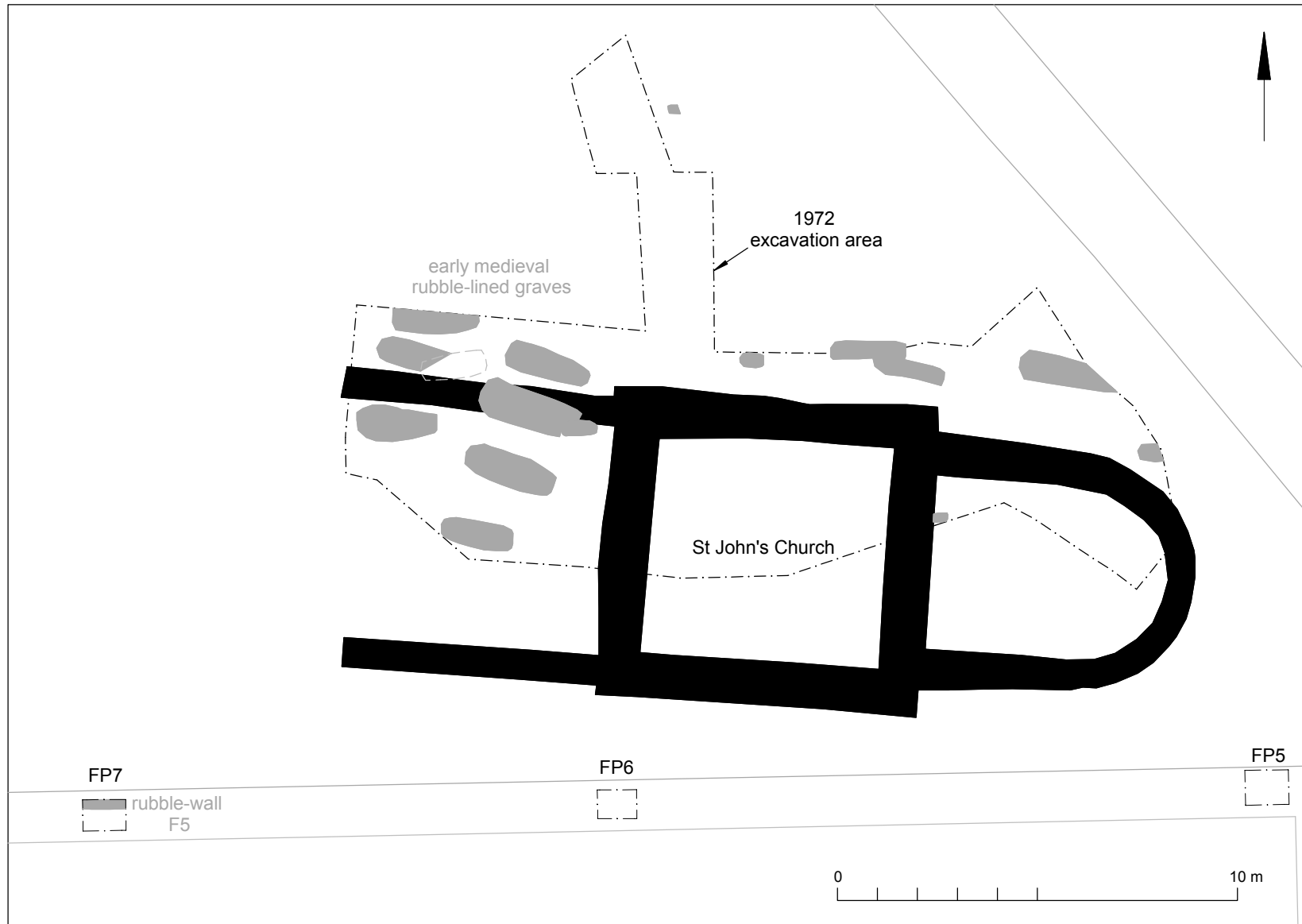


Fig 4 Plan of the rubble-wall (F5) uncovered in Foundation-pit 7.





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Fig 5 Plan showing the location of the rubble-wall (F5) in relation to the Anglo-Saxon or early Norman church of St John and the early medieval rubble-lined graves (shaded grey).

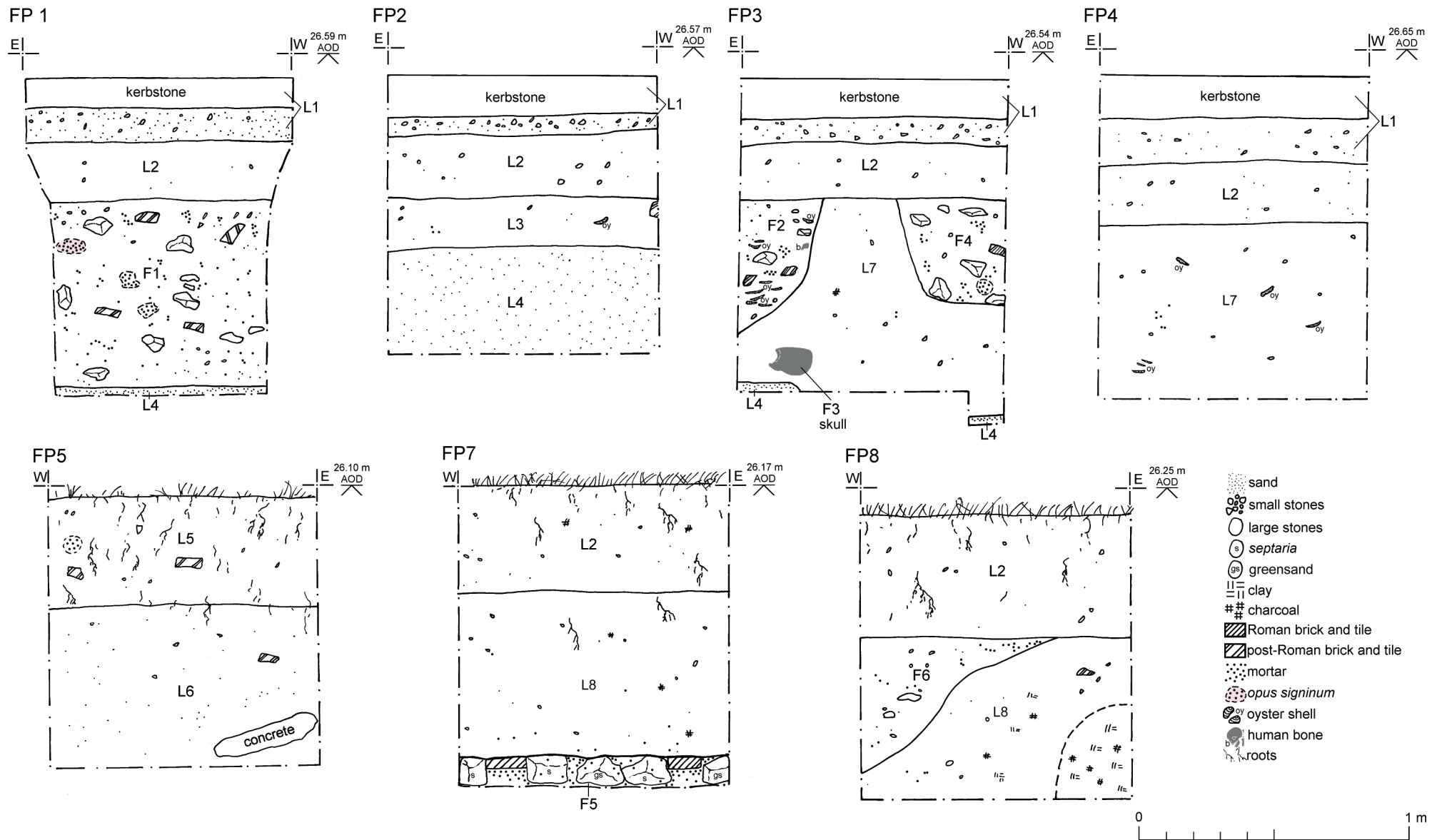


Fig 6 FP1-5 and FP7-8: Foundation-pit sections.

# Essex Historic Environment Record/ Essex Archaeology and History

## Summary sheet

<b>Site address:</b> Colchester Garrison Officers' Club, St John's Green, Colchester, Essex	
<b>Parish:</b> Colchester	<b>District:</b> Colchester
<b>NGR:</b> TL 9987 2476 (c)	<b>Site codes:</b> CAT Project - 13/10d SAM - 26307 Museum accession - 2011.20
<b>Type of work:</b> Archaeological monitoring	<b>Site director/group:</b> Colchester Archaeological Trust
<b>Date of work:</b> October 2013	<b>Size of area investigated:</b> c 0.2ha
<b>Location of curating museum:</b> Colchester & Ipswich Museums	<b>Funding source:</b> Developer
<b>Further seasons anticipated?</b> No	<b>Related UAD/ EHER nos:</b> UAD event nos 935, 1073, 1080, 1099, EHER nos 11893-11894
<b>Final report:</b> CAT Report 737	
<b>Periods represented:</b> medieval, post-medieval	
<p><b>Summary of fieldwork results:</b>  <i>Archaeological monitoring took place at the Colchester Garrison Officers' Club during the excavation of foundation-pits for floodlights around the perimeter of the new tennis courts. The tennis courts are situated within the Abbey of St John (SAM no 26307) on the site of the abbey church, which was discovered during an archaeological evaluation in February 2011.</i></p> <p><i>The robbed-out remains of the southern-most foundation of the abbey church were uncovered in one of the foundation-pits. Combined with the absence of similar remains in the adjacent foundation-pit, this discovery has significant ramifications for the reconstructed plan of the abbey church.</i></p> <p><i>A deep deposit of dark soil was encountered in the two foundation-pits to the south-east of the abbey church. The presence of a human skull in one of the pits indicates that, at some time during the life of the church, this area was used for human burial.</i></p> <p><i>To the north of the abbey church, human remains were identified immediately south of a mortared rubble-wall. The rubble-wall is probably the northern edge of an early medieval rubble-lined grave, fifteen more of which were uncovered in 1972 to the north of the tennis court. The adjacent foundation-pit contained part of a demolished sandy-clay wall. This could be the remains of a building destroyed during the fire of 1133.</i></p> <p><i>The medieval remains uncovered to the north of the abbey church were overlaid by a deep layer of dark soil which may have been deposited here during the large-scale earth-moving which followed the 1133 fire.</i></p> <p><i>Two pieces of architectural worked stone which may have come from the abbey church were also recovered during the monitoring.</i></p>	
<b>Previous summaries/reports:</b> CAT Report 601. CAT Report 718 (revised & expanded version of CAT Report 601) and a summary in EAH are both forthcoming	
<b>Author of summary:</b> Adam Wightman	<b>Date of summary:</b> October 2013