

INDEX DATA	RPS INFORMATION
Scheme Title Colchester Eastern approaches.	Details Stage 2: Arch Eval.
Road Number	Date
Contractor Colch Arch Trust.	
County Essex	
OS Reference TMO2.	
Single sided <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Double sided	
A3 <input type="checkbox"/> Colour <input type="checkbox"/>	



Colchester Eastern Approaches Road, Stage Two: Archaeological Evaluation Part One: Brook Street

Summary

A trial trench on land adjoining the site of a medieval hospital at Brook Street revealed a number of post-medieval features but found no evidence of earlier occupation. The results suggest that the area to be affected by this section of the road is unlikely to be of sufficient archaeological value to merit rescue excavation.

Background

The following locations have been selected for exploratory excavation as part of the brief for evaluation of the archaeological implications of the proposed route for the second stage of Colchester's Eastern Approaches Road:

- 1) Land north of St Mary Magdalen's Almshouses, Brook Street.
- 2) Land adjoining the former Essex Telegraph Press building, Magdalen Street.
- 3) Land adjacent to the British Rail depot at The Hythe.

The subject of this report is Brook Street, the first of the sites to become available.

The Site

The evaluation site lies to the west of Brook Street, immediately north of St Mary Magdalen's Almshouses. The area to the south is known to be of high archaeological value as it contains remains of St Mary Magdalen's Hospital, a religious institution founded in the 12th century for the reception of lepers. The hospital was destroyed in the 16th century, then re-established as an almshouse in 1610. The full extent of the hospital is not known: St Mary Magdalen's churchyard was extensively excavated in 1989, resulting in the discovery of the hospital chapel and a second medieval building to the east. In 1991, trial trenches in the almshouse gardens revealed two early wall foundations, also a possible north boundary ditch situated close to the line of the present boundary between the almshouses and land to be affected by road construction.

Currently owned by British Rail, the evaluation site is believed to be part of a package of property compulsorily purchased from the almshouse charity by the Great Eastern Railway in 1900.

The Excavation

The area examined represents a sample of approximately 5% of the land to be affected by a cutting for the proposed Brook Street road junction.

An 18 m x 1.65 m trench was excavated by machine at the location shown on the attached plan. The uppermost 0.8 m contained relatively modern deposits consisting of extensive spreads of compacted mortar, brick and concrete rubble, covered by a thick layer of dumped topsoil. The lowest of these, a 10-15 cm deep deposit of crushed red and yellow brick, was impressed directly into the surface of underlying natural sand with no intervening stratigraphy in evidence. At the eastern end of the trench the sand in the 8 m stretch closest to Brook Street was devoid of earlier features. In contrast, four pits were exposed and partially excavated in the area from 14.6 m to 21 m west of the Brook Street frontage, all sealed by the modern deposits. These are shown on the accompanying plan and are briefly described below.

- F1) A pit containing a fill of dark brown sandy loam with a low content of small stones and rare small fragments of peg-tile. The pit bottom lay at an overall depth of 1.85 m from the present ground surface.
- F2) A pit, filled with mid brown sandy loam with pale brown loamy sand mottles. Contents included a light scatter of oyster shell and rare fragments of 1 cm thick slates. Overall depth, 1.9 m.
- F3) A small oval pit with mid brown sandy loam fill. Not fully excavated for safety reasons, the overall depth of the feature is unknown.
- F4) Pit with dark brown sandy loam fill containing occasional pieces of peg-tile and many very small fragments of slate.

Interpretation and Conclusions

The exploratory trench contained no evidence pointing to the survival of structures associated with the hospital. The area examined appears to have been thoroughly stripped down to natural sand, then made up with hardcore and covered with a 0.6 m thick layer of topsoil. From the presence of stiff portland cement based concrete among the hardcore this seems likely to be 20th century activity carried out by the railway company, rather than associated with any of the 19th century building works known to have taken place in the immediate area. Without more widespread exploratory work it is difficult to gauge the depth of natural sand removed by the stripping operation; a comparison with known levels to the south suggests that the loss could be in the region of 0.5 m but this estimate is of limited value since the ground naturally slopes down in a northerly direction. The dumped topsoil contained rare fragments of mortared Roman tile and septaria, both materials used in the construction of the medieval hospital and which can be expected to be residually present as destruction debris in the local soil. This raises a possibility that early buildings might once have stood on the site but were later totally removed by deep soil stripping. Although this cannot be discounted, the destruction debris is equally likely to originate from nearby since medieval foundations are known to exist in an almshouse garden only 8 metres to the south of the trench.

The stratigraphic relationships of the four pits in the western part of the trench were

destroyed by the later surface stripping. Finds from their fills indicate that F1, F2 and F4 are post-medieval; F3 was not closely examined and is thus of uncertain origin.

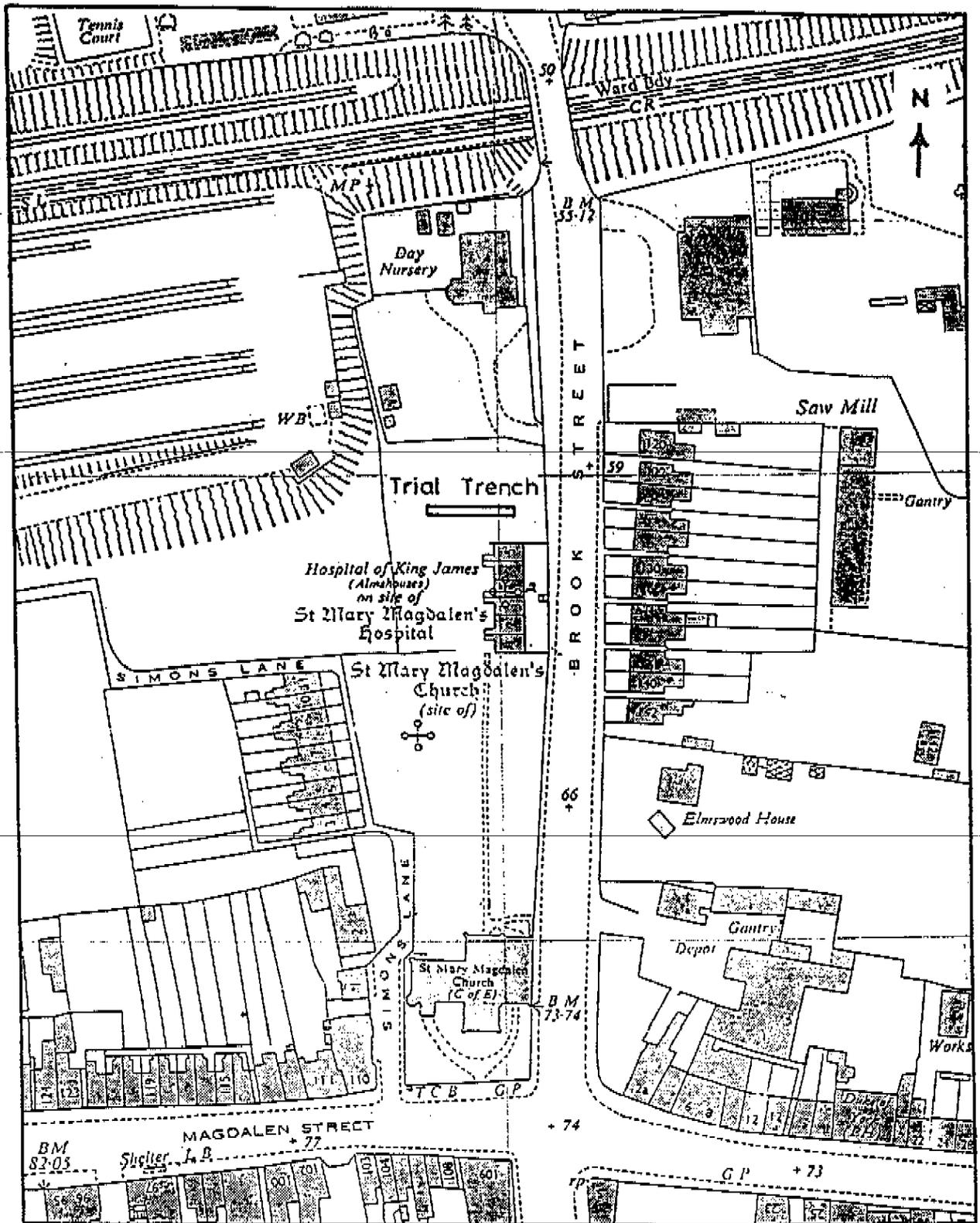
The complete absence of direct evidence for in-situ structures, combined with the results of excavations in the gardens to the south and post-medieval cartographic representations of the area suggest that the land affected by this stretch of the proposed road is probably a short distance beyond the main area occupied by hospital buildings. While the pits may well be associated with the later almshouse phase of the hospital's history, these alone would not be sufficiently informative to justify excavation of the site.

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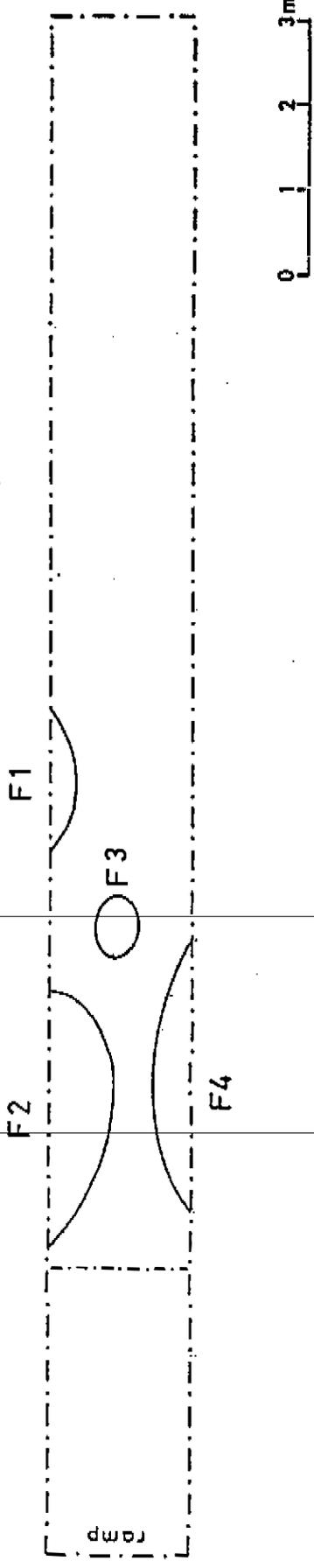
July, 1993.



BROOK STREET, COLCHESTER

Archaeological Trial Trench





BROOK STREET, COLCHESTER

Archaeological Trial Trench

**Colchester Eastern Approach Road,
Stage Two
Brook Street Section**
Recommended Archaeological Provisions

The proposed road cutting to the west of Brook Street will affect approximately 650 sq m of land adjoining an established medieval archaeological site. Although the results of evaluation work indicate that the land is peripheral and of low archaeological value, this conclusion is based on a sample of less than 5% of the threatened area. We therefore suggest that the following proposals be adopted to ensure satisfactory provision for the recording of any archaeological remains that may be uncovered in the course of the roadworks:

- 1) An accredited archaeological agency shall be commissioned to carry out a watching brief on the contractor's excavations for the road. The scope of the commission should include site observation, any necessary recording and subsequent preparation of an archaeological archive in accordance with nationally accepted standards of practice.
- 2) The excavation method to be employed by the road contractor shall be agreed in advance with the archaeological agency. The upper levels of deep excavations should be systematically removed in a series of spits to ensure conditions suitable for the observation of archaeological features.
- 3) The road excavation programme should include an archaeological contingency allowance of 3 days should circumstances arise where a significant find cannot be adequately recorded during the normal progress of works.

Colchester Archaeological Trust, July 1993.