

Evidence for Roman occupation at the Royal Liberty School, Havering

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Excavations at the Royal Liberty School

During 2019, AOC Archaeology undertook a series of archaeological investigations at the Royal Liberty School, Hornchurch, London Borough of Havering, commissioned by RPS on behalf of Wilmot Dixon Construction Limited. The site occupies a mainly flat, irregularly-shaped area of land, with a slight gradient from 34.60m OD in the north of the site to 33.80m OD in the south (Fig 1).¹ It is home to Hare Hall,

a Palladian mansion first built on the site for John A Wallinger in 1769–70, which has housed the Royal Liberty School since 1921, and the site was previously used as the training ground for the Artists Rifles regiment during World War I. During May 2019, an archaeological evaluation took place at the site,² followed by an excavation, watching brief and programme of historic building recording in August 2019.

The excavations targeted two areas,

which covered the footprints for a new Sports Hall and Teaching Block (Fig 2; Trenches 8 and 9). The archaeological watching brief targeted the intrusive groundworks associated with the excavation of new service trenches. These investigations identified a number of post-medieval features and finds relating to the parklands and gardens of Hare Hall. They also uncovered a zig-zag shaped practice trench, dug during the site's use as a training camp during World War I

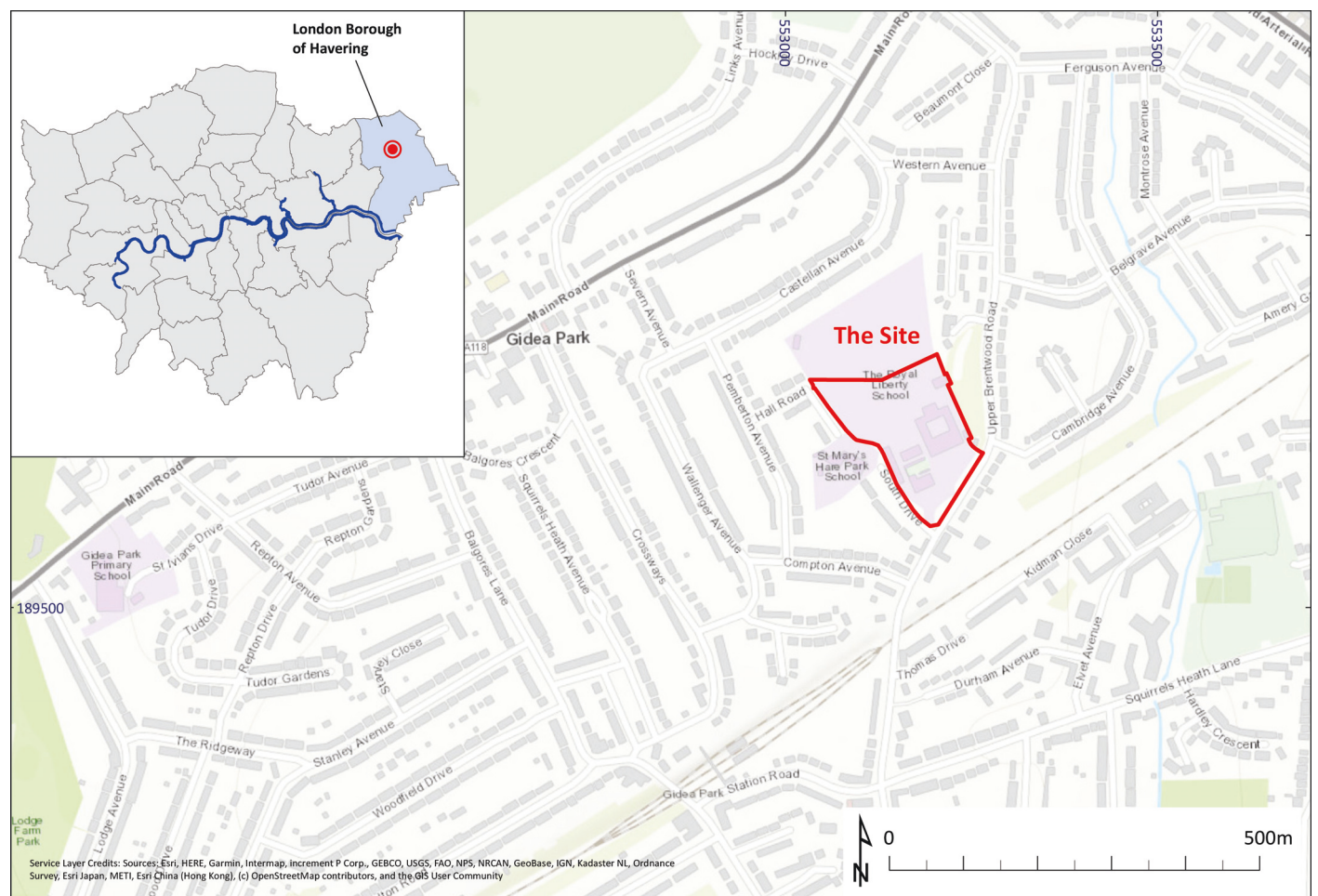


Fig 1: site location



Fig 2: the excavated areas with trench locations

(Fig 3; Trench 9). The Historic Building Recording targeted three buildings of World War II date, two of which were civilian air raid shelters, with the other probably representing a minor defensive fortification (Fig 2; Buildings A–C).³

This article focuses on the site's Roman occupation, with the wartime activity at the site provided as an online publication.⁴ The Roman evidence from the site implies the presence of a potential settlement in its vicinity during the later Roman period between c. AD 200 and 400, with ceramic building material

suggesting that Roman masonry buildings may have been present. When considered in its geographical context close to the London to Colchester Roman road, the evidence adds new detail to an area of *Londinium's* hinterland that is currently comparatively empty.

Evidence of Roman activity

The site was situated on London Clay Formation,⁵ and the natural deposits encountered comprised a series of alluvial clays, silts and sands with gravel, varying in colour from dark

brownish-red to greys and blues, lying at 33.20–33.53m OD across the site. Excavations revealed Roman ditches and a pit, which cut into these natural deposits. A series of narrow ditches in Trench 8 probably represent minor agricultural land divisions, while a larger ditch in Trench 9 may be a more established boundary (Figs 3 & 4). In the following paragraphs, feature numbers are given in square brackets [000] and fill numbers in round brackets (000).

A curvilinear ditch [805] was located in the northern part of Trench 8.

It had a rounded terminal and its profile shape was varied, with a flat base at the terminal and a rounded base further along its length (Fig 3; Fig 4: Sections 24.1 and 24.6). It was filled by soft light to mid-grey to greyish-brown silty and sandy clay (804)), which contained abundant charcoal, ceramic building material (CBM) fragments and an assemblage of 64 sherds of Roman pottery dating to c. AD 250–350.

This pottery assemblage included a sherd from a large, late Roman pedestal-based vessel in an unsourced coarse greyware, and sherds from a possible storage vessel in a coarse fabric. This fill also contained fired-clay

fragments with flat surfaces and wattle impressions, suggesting they were from a structure.⁶ Environmental evidence from the ditch fill (804) consisted of a single seed of orache (*Atriplex sp.*).⁷

A second ditch [817] was oriented north-east/south-west, directly south of the ditch terminal [805] (Fig 3; Fig 4: Section 24.7). The ditch was filled by lightly compacted light greyish-brown clayey sand with light grey patches and yellow mottling (816). Roman brick, tile and fired clay were recovered, along with 256 sherds of Roman pottery dating to c. AD 250–350. The pottery included sherds made from a range of coarse fabrics, in addition to Central or

East Gaulish samian ware, Alice Holt/Farnham ware and black burnished style ware. Forms included jars, bowls and a lid. A single residual sherd of early Roman lid-seated bead rim jar in a 1st-century AD south Essex shelly ware fabric was also identified, hinting at earlier occupation.⁸ An assemblage of fired-clay fragments was also recovered.⁹

A third ditch [809] was located in the north-west of Trench 8 on a north-west/south-east orientation (Fig 3; Fig 4: Sections 24.3 and 24.8). It was filled by lightly compacted pale grey silty sand with mottled grey-orange clayey patches, and backfilled mortar

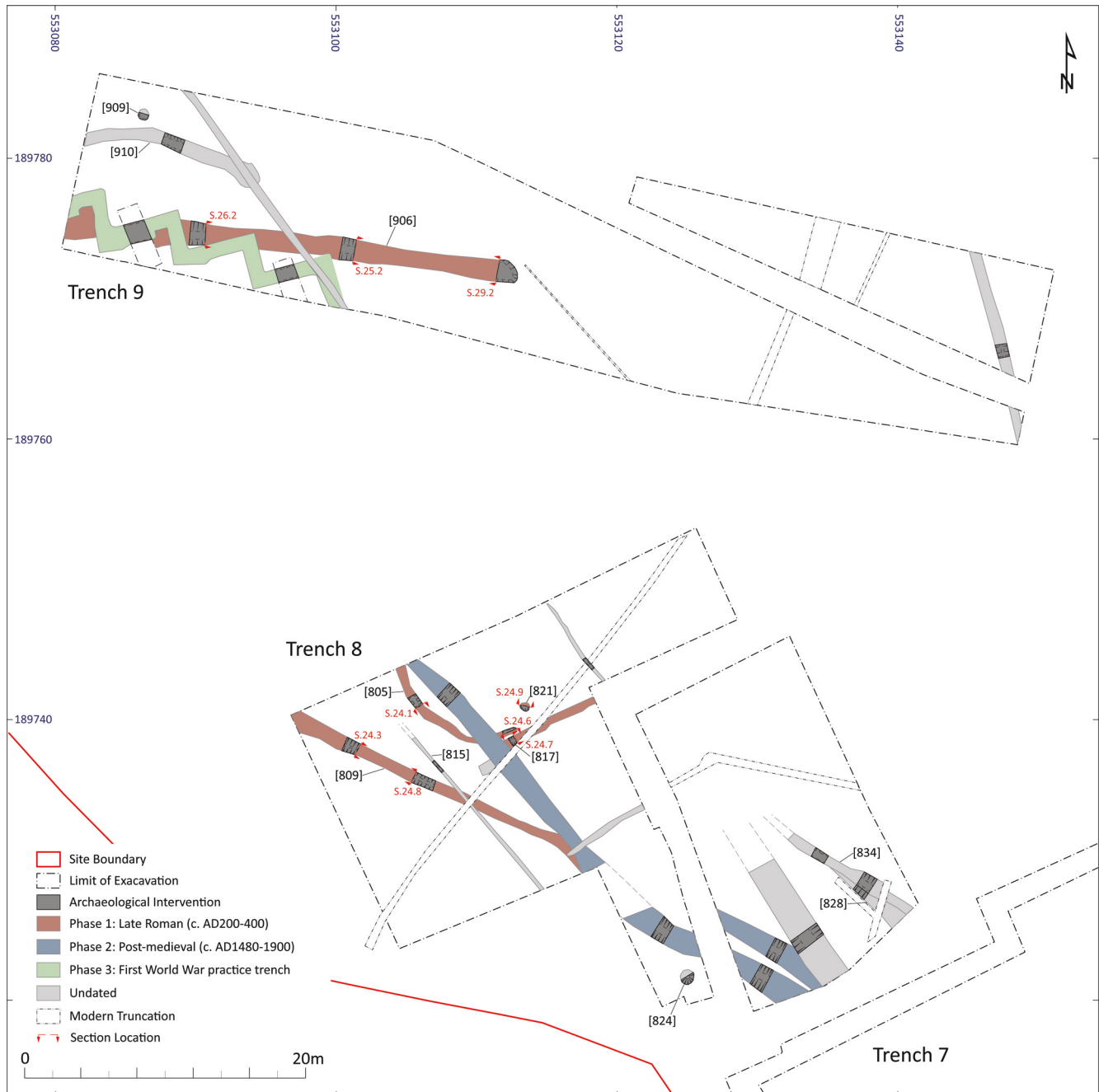


Fig 3: features in Trenches 8 and 9

(808). This deposit included an assemblage of 47 sherds of Roman pottery dating to c. AD 200–350. The sherds comprised coarse fabrics and Central or East Gaulish samian ware, including quite a large portion of the base and lower wall of a samian mortarium (Drag 43).¹⁰ The fill also contained fragments of three heavily corroded iron nails, a moderately robust iron rod or shaft and a smaller tapering iron rod interpreted as fragments of tools or fittings.¹¹

Fragments of Roman tile and brick were also present in (808), including a piece of flue tile with combed keying. This tile will have formed part of a hypocaust system and, while the majority of the Roman tile from the site was undiagnostic in terms of form, a large proportion bore evidence for post-firing heat exposure, which may indicate that they were also flue-tile fragments without keying present.¹² Fragments of fired clay were also present. Environmental evidence from (808) consisted of a cereal grain (*Cerealia sp*) and a small grass seed (*Poaceae sp*).¹³

A circular pit [821] was located c. 1.50m north-east of the terminal of ditch [805], and the two features were

broadly contemporary (Fig 3 & Fig 4: Section 24.9). The pit [821] was filled with loose mid-brown sandy silt (820). Forty-one sherds of Roman pottery, 40 of which were made from unsourced coarse greyware, were present in this deposit, including a sherd from a large, late Roman pedestal-based vessel and a partial rim from a wide-mouthed jar (c. AD 250–350).¹⁴ A piece of Roman brick was also recovered, along with fired clay fragments that may have derived from a hearth lining.¹⁵

The largest ditch [906] found on the site was located in the northern area of the site in Trench 9. It was orientated roughly east–west, cutting into the natural deposit, with a rounded terminal at its eastern end (Fig 3; Fig 4: Sections 25.2, 26.2 and 29.2). This is a wider ditch than the examples in Trench 8, perhaps representing more of a substantial boundary. It was filled by lightly compacted pale-grey to light yellowish-brown grey silty sand/sandy silt mortar and frequent rounded to subrounded stones, mottled with reddish-brown (907). Two sherds of Roman pottery dating to c. AD 270–400 were present, along with fragments of Roman *tegula* and brick.¹⁶ At the

terminal of the feature, there were frequent oxidised iron nodules and occasional charcoal.

Several features at the site were undated. Stratigraphically, some of these may have been of Roman date. A ditch [910] and pit [909] were located to the north of the large possible boundary ditch [906] (Fig 3). Ditch [910] was on a similar orientation to ditch [906] and it is possible that it formed part of the same boundary. A series of undated narrow ditches or gullies were present in Trenches 8 and 9 on varied north–south and north-west/south-east orientations (Fig 3). These are interpreted as drainage or irrigation gullies. It is possible some of these gullies were Roman in date, but others were stratigraphically later. Two intercutting ditches, [828] and [834], were located in the south of Trench 8, and were also both undated.

The Roman evidence in its local and regional context

The features and finds from the site at the Royal Liberty School are suggestive of Roman occupation in the vicinity. The ditches are interpreted as representing minor agricultural divisions

or drainage, as well as one more substantial boundary. The pottery assemblage from the site has been interpreted as typical of a low-status rural site from the London and south-Essex area, with the area’s pottery generally sharing more traits with assemblages from Essex than from London.¹⁷ The keyed flue tile and the post-firing heat-affected tile, in addition to the other Roman CBM, derive from a masonry building or buildings with probable hypocaust systems. The fired-clay assemblage, including fragments with wattle impressions,¹⁸ is also suggestive of other types of structure.

The Roman pottery assemblage from the site was abraded. This may indicate successive

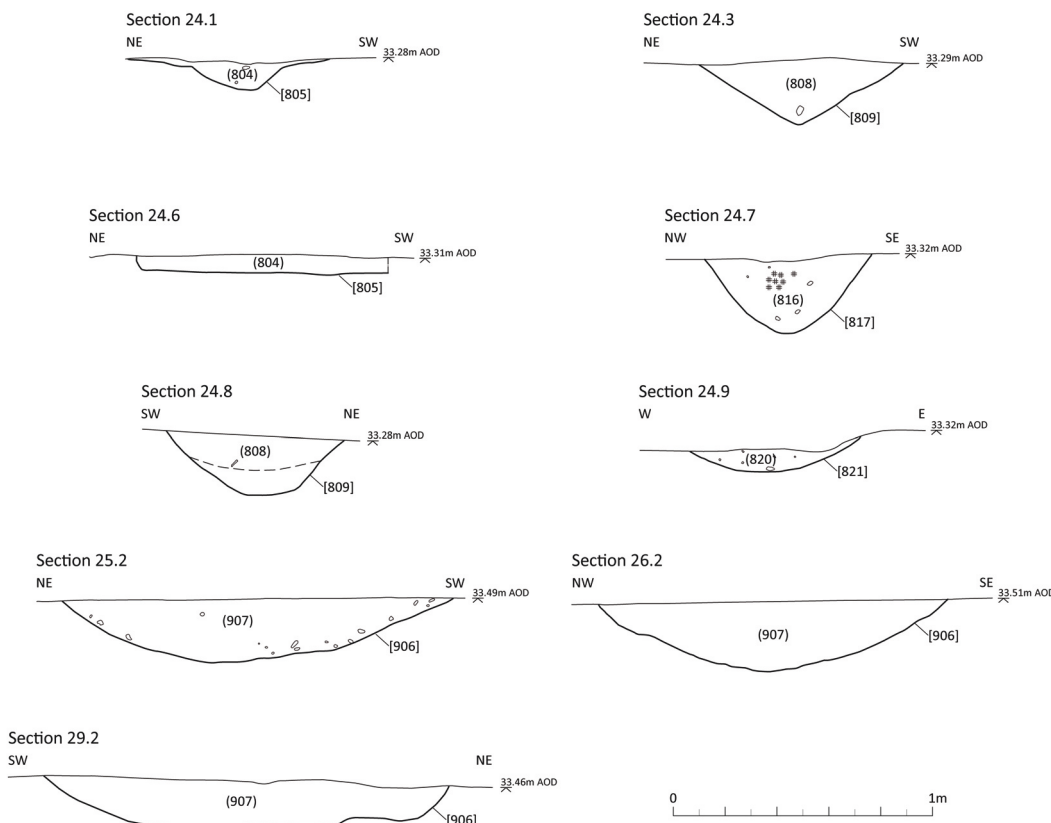


Fig 4: sections of Roman features

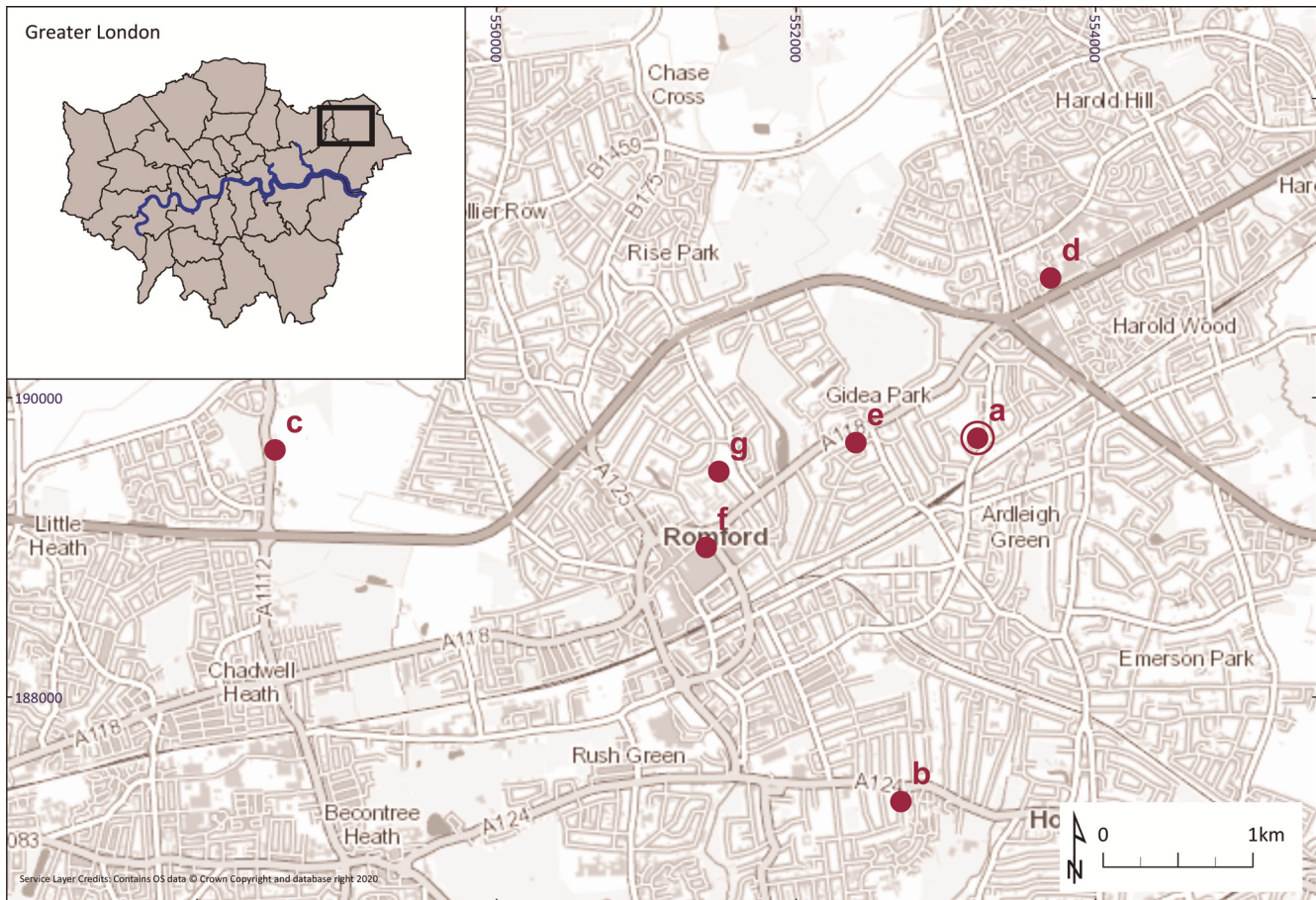


Fig 5: a map of the area, showing approximate locations of other Roman sites mentioned in the text:
a) Royal Liberty School; b) Hornchurch former bus garage³⁰; c) Marks Warren Quarry³¹; d) Roman cremations recorded³²;
e) Roman cremations recorded³³; f) Roman cremations recorded; g) the approximate suggested location of Durolitum³⁴

episodes of redeposition, but is more likely to relate to the soil conditions on site.¹⁹ While no evidence was found at the site for the buildings from which this material came, they are likely to have been fairly close by.

Examination of the Rural Settlement of Roman Britain database²⁰ shows that few Roman masonry buildings have been recorded in the area of east London and south Essex,²¹ making the Roman CBM evidence from the Royal Liberty School significant, and raises a question as to from where in the site’s vicinity this material may have derived.

Relationships between town and country in Roman Britain were variable and dynamic,²² and much effort has been given to studying the complex patterns of settlement.²³ Settlements within *Londinium’s* hinterland have been described as having a symbiotic relationship with the city,²⁴ with small, nucleated settlements found along the major roads leading out of *Londinium*, situated in a ring 15 to 20km from the city.²⁵ The site at the Royal Liberty

School sits just beyond this range, being around 21km from the city walls (see Fig 5, a). The Roman road from *Londinium* to *Camulodunum* (Colchester), via *Caesaromagus* (Chelmsford) is thought to have passed close to the location of the Royal Liberty School.

A potential section of the road was identified on Gidea Park golf course, c. 0.50km to the north-west of the site on the same alignment as the straight stretch of the A12 to the north-east. However, re-examination of this feature suggests it probably represents a more recent gravel pathway associated with the former Gidea Hall, which dates to the 16th century.²⁶

Clear archaeological evidence for the London to Colchester road, along with associated settlements, has been found in the area of Bow and Old Ford, around 17.50km south-west of the site.²⁷ This stretch of road was constructed during the mid-1st century AD and had two phases of major reconstruction, post early 2nd century and 4th century AD, and it was still in

use at the end of the 4th century AD.²⁸

Allen’s analysis of the distances between Roman settlements and major roads²⁹ shows that all settlement types are likely to be closer to roads, but that this was particularly true of villas and enclosed farmsteads. However, the Rural Settlement of Roman Britain database records no later Roman settlements within several kilometres of the site, the nearest potential settlement features of this date being a large mid-late Roman boundary ditch at Hornchurch former bus garage,³⁰ c. 2.50km south of the site (Fig 5, b); and 2nd- to 3rd- century pits and ditches at Marks Warren Quarry, c. 4.30km west of the site (Fig 5, c).³¹

A number of Roman findspots have been recorded in the area of the Royal Liberty School, clustered along the potential route of the London to Colchester road and including three small groups of cremation burials representing possible cemeteries: one on the northern side of the A12 road c. 1.15km to the north-east of the site (Fig 5, d);³² one on Main Road (the

A118), c. 0.75km west of the site (Fig 5, e);³³ and another at Romford Dolphin Centre,³⁴ c. 1.80km to the south-east (Fig 5, f). The course of the River Ravensbourne also passes the site 0.30km to the east.

It has been argued by some that Romford, c. 2.20km south-east of the Royal Liberty School, is the location of *Durolitum*, a settlement between London and Chelmsford named in the Antonine Itinerary. Two possible locations for this settlement have been identified at Romford³⁵ and at Little London, Chigwell,³⁶ which is situated on the route of the London to Great Dunmow Road. Structural elements of a Roman settlement in Romford have yet to be found, but a likely location has been suggested within the area's topography, supported by Roman findspots nearby (Fig 5, g).³⁷ Any buildings in the vicinity of the Royal Liberty School would have been fairly close to this potential settlement.

The site at the Royal Liberty School has provided tantalising evidence of a Roman masonry building or buildings, very possibly with hypocaust systems,

in its vicinity, in addition to an assemblage of pottery and several other finds. Although structural evidence was not present, the site's location in an area of *Londinium's* hinterland with little evidence for Roman masonry buildings makes the CBM evidence intriguing, especially when placed into its local context close to the likely course of the London to Colchester Road and close to one possible site of *Durolitum*.

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