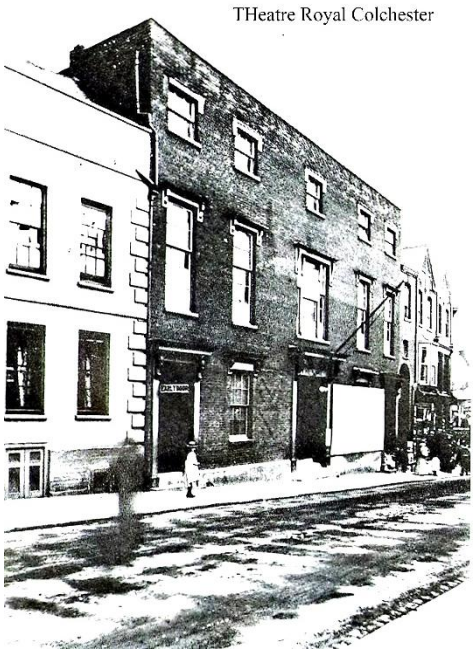
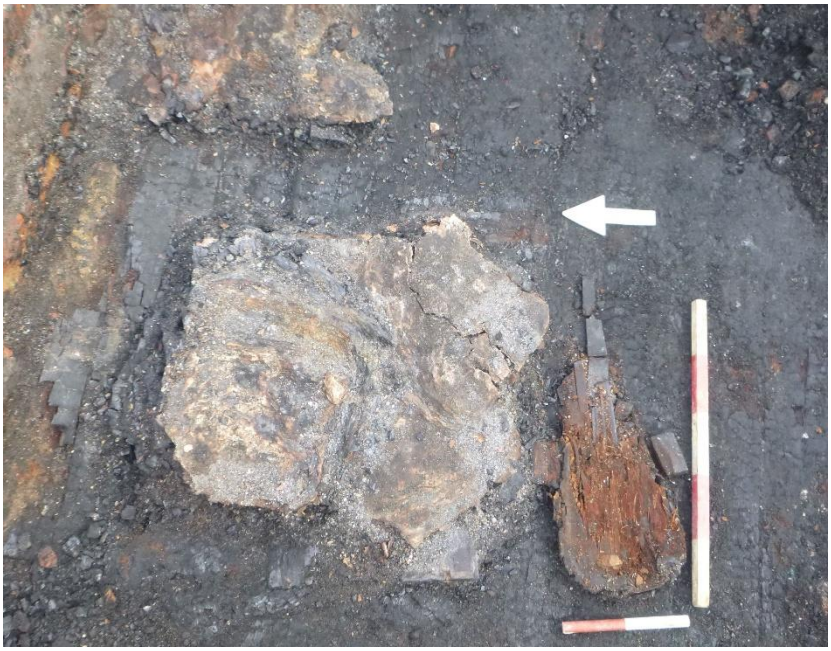
An excavation at the Queen Street Former Bus Depot in Colchester, Essex

By Tabitha Gulliver Lawrence 2214078[1]





[1] L-R Photographs of the excavation, one of the only known exterior photographs of the Theatre during its lifetime, a photograph of the aftermath of its burning, and a plan photograph of the violin beside fire-affected music books (CAT, 2024).

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Appendices

- An example of a social media schedule.
- A guest list for the evening event of the in-person dissemination.
- The Archaeological Brief authored by Dr Simon Wood (2021).
- Guidelines for contributors to the ESAH Transactions.
- A collection of personal photographs taken during the excavation (T. Lawrence 2023)

Drawing on relevant primary and secondary data and sources relating to archaeology, develop a publication and dissemination strategy for a case study (47%, 3500 words or equivalent)

Introduction

"Data is the basis for archaeological interpretation" (Huggett, 2022, p.267) and this cannot be a truer sentiment than for large-scale urban excavations. Within heavily stratified areas of the UK, namely towns and cities, the archaeology can not only present a huge amount of primary data but also secondary data. An archaeological investigation does not stand alone but within its own context not only archaeologically, but also historically within past investigations and research. An example of this was an excavation which took place in Queen Street at the former bus depot took place in Colchester. First starting in 2022, the excavation revealed archaeology dating from the Roman period to the 1920s, some of which had previously been explored but other parts which were unknown. Significantly and the basis of this discussion, the walls and under stage pit of the Theatre Royal were uncovered. The Theatre had a prestigious role within the social history of Colchester until it burnt down in 1918.

This discussion will examine briefly the site itself and the planning and legislative history of the development. It will then further discuss the archaeology of the Theatre Royal, and how both primary and secondary sources and data can contribute to two separate strategies. The first strategy to be explored will be the publication of the excavation and the archaeology relevant to the theatre. The second strategy will relate to the dissemination of the excavation and its findings, taking both an in-person and digital approach.

Case study overview

The excavation took place in 2022-23 in response to an Archaeological Brief issued by Dr Simon Wood of Colchester Borough Council (formerly) in August 2021. The Brief surmised the current archaeological understanding within the area, which included part of the Roman town wall (NHLE 1003772), English Civil war defences and the 19th and 20th century remains of the Theatre Royal (Wood, 2021). Much of this archaeology had been highlighted by CAT in five separate investigations, which ranged from trenches in 2003 as part of the local area regeneration to test-pits in 2017 (Holloway, 2003, Holloway and Brooks, 2015, Pooley, 2017, Wightman, 2018, Pooley, 2020). GPR survey had also been completed by Magnitude Surveys Ltd in 2020 (Rigby and Peel, 2020). The planned excavation was therefore the largest scale investigation completed within the vicinity.

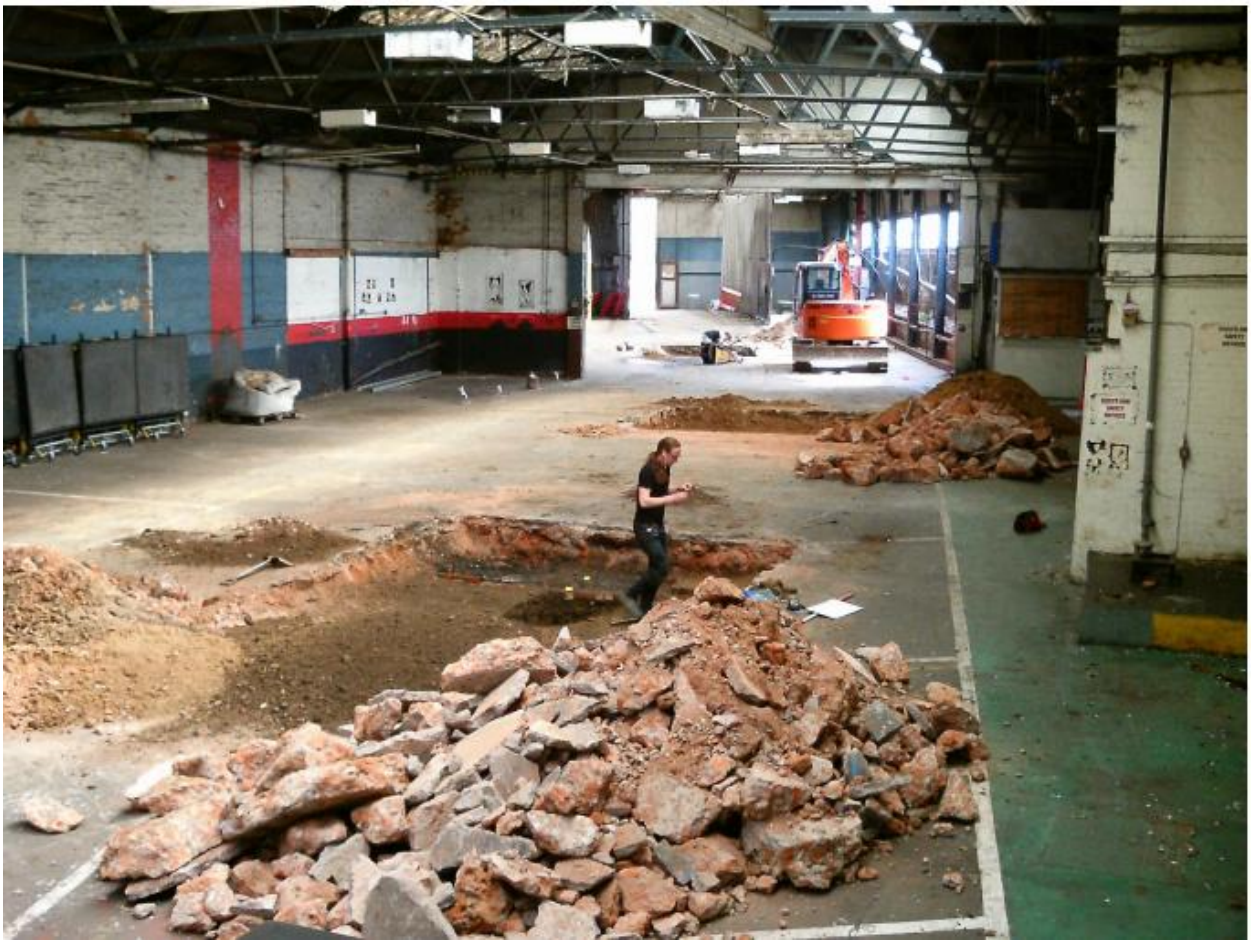

Figure one: A photograph from the 2017 test-pitting of the site. By the 2023 excavation all the remaining bus depot structure had been removed (CAT Report 1106).

The team consisted of a project manager, one project officer and five to six senior or junior site assistants. The team between themselves managed the excavation, recording and site survey including photogrammetry. The Theatre Royal archaeology presented a unique opportunity to CAT. The event of the theatre burning presented a 'snapshot' moment in time, as the fire allowed incredible preservation of the architecture and theatre structure. The excavation also presented a mix of artefacts which were highly personal and unseen before in the previous works within the over fifty-year history of CAT. These items included music books, gaming pieces, a violin, electrical equipment, upholstered furniture and even chandelier fragments which adorned the theatre's interior.

Figure two: A photograph of myself excavating an upholstered piece of furniture which sat on the (burnt) timber floorboards of the under-stage pit. Below me are two wooden cross which are presumed to be the bases of music stands or other equipment (Ronn, 2023).

The site attracted a lot of media attention and public interest. Firstly, it was a site with Colchester City Council (CCC) as the client, meaning that scrutiny of the development and budgets was extremely high (CCC, 2023, CCC, 2024). Secondly, the excavation was for the construction of a new digital hub in efforts to revitalise the area of Queen Street (see figure three) (Moffat, 2023, Rees, 2023,). This plan had been met with positive and negative reviews by local residents. And finally, the former bus depot itself held a lot of memories for the community, with former employees or residents remembering the area fondly and having a 'folklore' awareness of the previous theatre (Wightman 2024, Adams, 2023, Maynard, 2023).

The Old Bus Depot, Colchester

Creative Grow on Space – The Old Bus Depot, Colchester

New mixed-use office development

Appointment: RIBA stage 0-6

In partnership with Colchester Amphora Trading Ltd the Old Bus Depot Site, Queen Street, will become home to a New Creative, Digital, Work Space for AIXR - The Academy of International Extended Reality.

Through stages RIBA 0-3 Inkpen Downie have worked with Colchester Amphora and Colchester Borough Council to secure Planning Approval and Scheduled Monument Consent for this sensitive site in the City of Colchester's Conservation Area, adjacent Colchester's Roman Wall. Planning Approval was required to support the Council's business case bid to the South East Local Economic Partnership (SELEP)'s Local Growth Fund which was successful.

Following Planning Approval, pre-commencement planning conditions we're discharged and the Design Team have been working towards a site start in 2023.

Figure three: A graphic made available to the public of the new Digital Hub inspired by the former architecture of the Theatre Royal (InkPen Downie, 2022).

Overview of primary and secondary data and sources

Every archaeological investigation has the potential to produce data on a huge scale and can include both material and immaterial sources (Huggett, 2022). Kansa and Kansa (2021) highlight that this data, whilst extremely important, requires careful stewardship within a multifaceted sector. The primary data from this site is interpreted as data produced by the staff and volunteers of CAT during the excavation. Secondary data is viewed as external sources not produced by CAT and predominantly take the form of publications.

Primary data

The primary data and sources of this excavation are three main areas: photography (including site and drone shots), context sheets and drawings (including plans and sections), and the Archaeology Data Service (ADS) which provides primary reports related to the excavation as produced by CAT in the past. Photographs were taken on two types of digital camera and include at a minimum a plan and section shot for each feature, as well as working shots of the staff. We regularly used a pole-cam to achieve plan shots of the theatre remains (see figure four).

Figure four: A polecam photograph of the brick foundations of the under-stage pit of the Theatre Royal (CAT, 2023).

This excavation involved the excavation of 276 features and 132 layers. The features covered a range of time periods, with the earliest remains being Roman. They include ditches, pits, gullies, wells and foundation walls. The layers refer to geological deposits (like the natural geology), metalled surfaces, levelling layers or dumped material. The excavation followed a new set of feature numbers and did not use any of the previous evaluation numbers. The features and layers were recorded on our digital recording system which has been used by CAT for over ten years. The files can be downloaded and show context sheets including notes, stratigraphic matrices and soil descriptions.

The ADS provided reports of the site which CAT had completed previously. These reports are also available digitally on our own open access report library as well as printed versions held within our company archive. Having a quick and accessible method to get information for the site proved invaluable to the lead report writer.

Secondary data

A number of secondary data sources can also be employed in the publication and dissemination of this case study. The data mainly takes the form of external publications not produced by CAT, however, have provided useful background information for the completion of the grey literature report. In 1931 archaeologist Mark Reginald (Rex) Hull conducted the first investigation into the area and subsequent investigations in the 1950s. These results were published in a monograph Hull, M.R.. 1958. *Roman Colchester: Reports of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London*. No. XX. The investigations found Roman buildings with tessellated floors and hypocausts with an array of finds (Hull, 1958).

A book by Peter Sherry called *A Theatre in the Family* (1972, London: The Research Publishing Company) provided information about the owners of the theatre in the mid-1800s to early 1900s, who were part of the same local family. This book was provided to CAT by a living descendant who is local to our office. This book was useful for understanding the site's social history, and the theatre's business achievements before its burning. A second publication, *Theatres of Colchester* by Nicholas Butler (1981, Hewitt Photo-Lith Ltd: Colchester) also provides important information about the context of the Theatre Royal within the local area. It operated in competition with other venues, and this adds to the picture prior to its destruction.

Maps and plans of the theatre's architecture were provided as scanned copies from the Chelmsford Record Office. They provided acute detail of the theatre's layout, both real and planned, before its destruction. Very few photographs exist of the actual theatre itself and include at least three interior shots and a few exterior photos. A photo also exists of the theatre band and of the site after it burnt down. These were recovered from secondary sources like the aforementioned books.

In 2020 a report was produced by Magnitude Surveys of geophysical work on the development area. Results highlighted the Roman *intervallum* road, some of the Civil War defenses in the area, as well as the brick foundations of the Theatre Royal (Rigby and Peel, 2020). Paragraph 7.3.2.4 correlates the structural remains suggested by the geophysics with the theatre foundations found during our 2017 work (CAT Report 1106).

Information about the theatre was provided by local arts aficionado and an amateur historian called Dorian Kelly. At the beginning of the site Dorian was often contacting CAT regarding the site and potential work, as well as being extremely vocal on social media in

both positive and negative ways. He was able to provide knowledge of the theatre via real posters displaying shows and questions about stage equipment. It was decided early in the site methodology given his vocal nature it was better to have him aligned with CAT's position and values on the site.

Publication strategy

Grey literature report

As it stands in this discussion, the first draft report of the excavation, including the remains of the theatre, is due in January 2025. This report is produced using the internal and external specialists commissioned by CAT. This report is what is commonly referred to as the grey literature report. The lead report writer is Dr E Hicks, who is an experienced report writer, field archaeologist and CIfA member. Within many commercial units, time and budget constraints can mean report writers are not necessarily associated to the site itself, and may have had no information of the set up or progress of a site. However, it was a specific aim within this site's methodology that the report writer be a senior member who had excavated at the site.

The report will explain in detail the site's archaeology and a discussion of its significance and setting within the wider area of Colchester. It will also include specialist reports, stratigraphy matrices, and an overview of features. The matrices are produced using specialist software, and the specialist reports are produced in the main by CAT's internal specialists (for pottery, small finds, lithics, animal bone, and ceramic building material).

The audience of the report includes specialists within the heritage sector (such as field archaeologists and the HER monitors) and the client. In this case, the client is Colchester City Council and the HER monitor was formerly Dr Simon Wood who has since been replaced by Dr Richard Hoggett.

The report will follow the traditional format of CAT reports:

- Summary,
- Introduction,
- Archaeological and geological background,
- Aims,
- Results (may be split into areas or phases of work),
- Finds (individual specialist reports and associated tables. Additional information may be inserted into the appendices),
- Environmental assessment and charcoal identification,

- Discussion,
- Acknowledgements,
- References,
- Abbreviations and glossary,
- Contents of archive and archive deposition,
- Figures and appendices.

The report once finally approved by the CAT post-excavation manager and senior associate will be sent to Dr Hoggett for approval. Once approved, released to the client, and consequently paid for, the report will be made available via our open access CAT report library, OASIS and the Archaeology Data Service via our digital archivist.

Journal article

Publication is a cornerstone of archaeological publication, but remains affected by funding, opportunity and prestige (Beck et.al, 2021). Bell (2024) also highlights the issues with the academic publishing model and the climate of open access, leading to a surge in sources of information perceived as 'free' (e.g. social media).

Therefore, when deciding to publish it is crucial to factor in these effects and how these would affect the aim of publication. The chosen journal for publication is the Transactions of the Essex Archaeology and History Society. The aim of publication is to provide a legitimate academic discourse to the excavation, whilst using a local journal. Although a unique site, the archaeology of the theatre does not merit any international interest and would likely be of more interest to local people. Like many locations, Colchester has a close-knit community, and this is highlighted within the heritage sector with many people having multiple roles with this Society, local archaeology groups, commercial units or publications.

The Society was founded in 1852 and publishes one annual edition of the ESAH Transactions. The current Honorary Secretary is Howard Brooks, who is a senior associate of CAT having worked in archaeology since 1975. This close association would be an asset to the publication of the excavation within the journal and allow for increased communication.

The current editor of the Transactions is Paul Gilman, and a note for contributors of article guidelines is available online (see appendix). The guidelines are comprehensive and include points on formatting images and referencing. Contributors are encouraged to contact the editor with suggestions of articles.

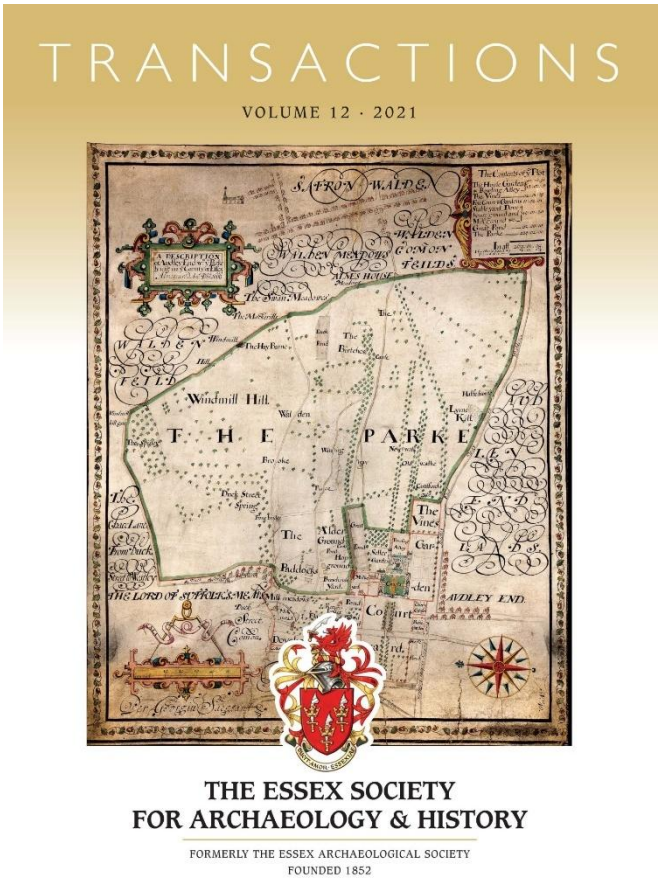

Figure five: the front cover of volume 12 of the ESAH Transactions (ESAH, 2024).

Current Archaeology magazine article

Alongside a journal article, it is important to target audiences who may not be working or volunteering in archaeology directly but may be avidly interested in it. Within the UK the publishing group *Current Publishing* has five magazine brands, in which *Current Archaeology* is its most popular with 45,000 readers annually. It aims to bridge the gap between 'amateur and professional' (Current Archaeology, 2024) and this aim is worthwhile reflecting in this publication strategy. Another aim of publication in a magazine is to highlight the city of Colchester on a national scale. The last article submitted by CAT to the magazine was in 2019 and consisted of an article about a Roman excavation for a new development of a theatre (Current Archaeology, 2019). A full-length article about recent research is therefore long overdue.

The magazine is printed monthly with a rolling deadline and therefore would ease pressures on the writer which would likely be a senior member of the team. The magazine clearly states their requirements for writing, formatting and editing on a dedicated

webpage of notes for contributors. The style of writing is led by the magazine and strongly encourages a human approach and away from the traditional style of report writing. The word limit of 400 words would be manageable, although require a concise choice of the site (for example which artefacts to feature, how long of a historical background).

A potential article structure could be:

- An introduction to the site and its reason for development,
- A historical background including cartography and images of the theatre from the 1900s,
- An overview of the artefacts uncovered, with a focus on the violin, music books and glasses,
- A section of the recent public outreach and where to find the final report on our online report library,
- A conclusion highlighting the excavation's uniqueness and role within Colchester's past and present.

50% of a typical article is illustrations, which could vary between working shots on site to professional photographs taken using photography equipment (Current Archaeology, 2024).

Dissemination strategy

Social media strategy

Social media is being increasingly used with commercial archaeology to build both a digital platform and audience (Bonacchi and Pett, 2012). The platform creates a spotlight away from 'academic' pathways or business formats and often involves a certain degree of informality and insight. The audience extends far beyond local or regional groups and attracts international audiences who can access the platform on a 24/7 basis, in the majority for free (Rocks-Macqueen, 2016). The rise of archaeology influencers, who either work independently or with their employer's knowledge, further increases this perceived accessibility between archaeology fans and those who work professionally within the archaeology sector. This online relationship can grow substantially through consistent engagement and communication (Caspari, 2022).

With these elements in mind, social media will be incorporated into publication strategy of this site. The social media strategy and schedule aims to increase relatability and togetherness, as though the audience are there for the journey. A social media campaign

of one month will be scheduled with final two weeks of publishing three assets a week. This campaign will culminate with an open day at the new Digital Hub.

It is key that just because social media is accessible, this does not equate it as consumable (Hill, 2024). Therefore, a multi-discipline approach towards the Theatre Royal archaeology will be employed. These will include:

- use of audio to describe the archaeology and emphasise the social and community element of the heritage. An example of this would be employing or recruiting local musical volunteers to play songs from the music books found during the excavation (see figure six).
- videos which include easy-to-read captions on accessible backgrounds (such as yellow) about archaeology. Videos could even extend into dramatic arts or local groups to act out scenes from the night the Theatre burnt down (see figure six).
- visual photos of the archaeological process including finds, environmental samples, field archaeology and the post-excavation such as CAD work (see figure seven).

Figure six: A mock-up of a X asset created via Canva of a video of local musicians playing music directly from the music books found during the excavation (T. Lawrence, 2025).

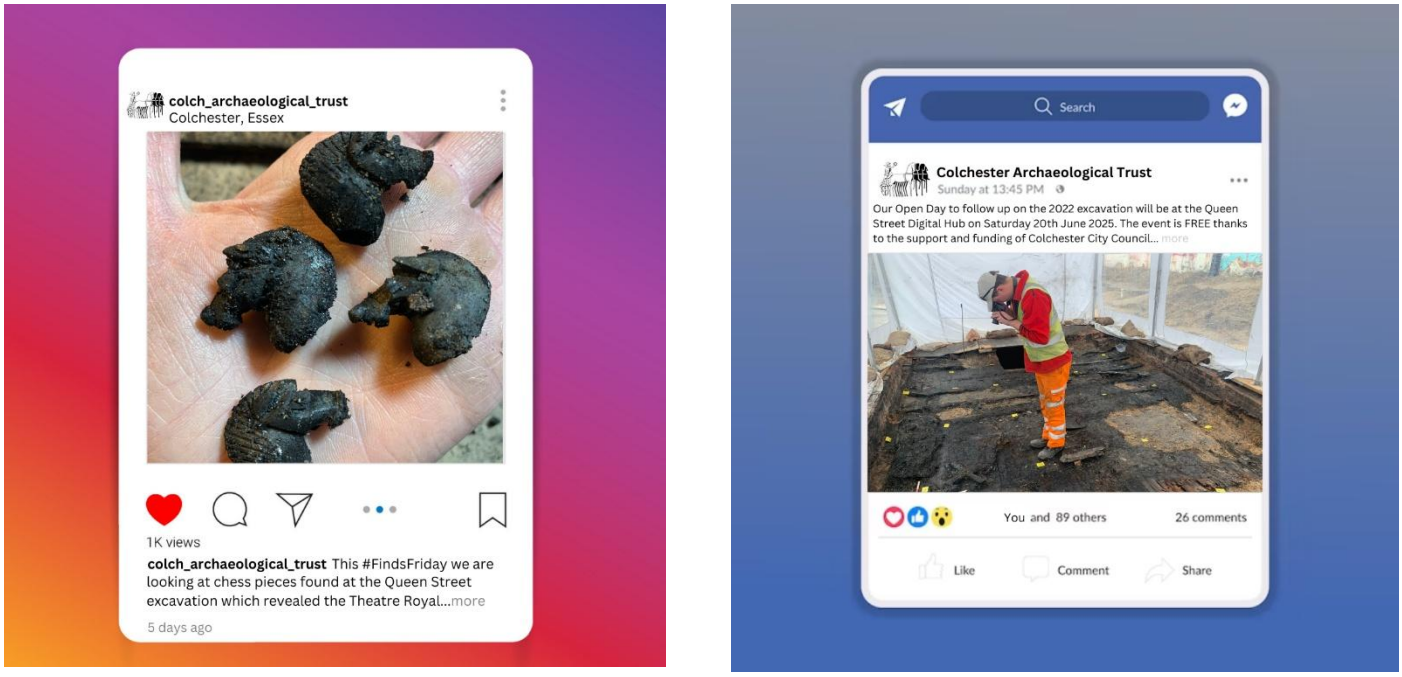

Figure seven: A mock-up of Instagram and Facebook assets created via Canva of finds or site shots from during the excavation (T. Lawrence, 2025).

'Dig Blog' channel

CAT has previously hosted a Dig Blog, which was an informal blog created by current employees. These blogs often included personal reflections and overview of recent sites. Once printed in our annual magazine *The Colchester Archaeologist*, it is now online although mostly just reshares of social media or work experience reviews. For this strategy, it would receive a revamp to become a modern account. These entries could include personal reflections from archaeologists, reflections from Council perspective, and potentially a blog from Dorian Kelly who is a local theatre expert. It would be an aim of the blog to keep the content varied and personal, to allow a 'behind the scenes' element to develop naturally within the formatting and writing. Photos from the staff would be encouraged, as would the inclusion of their names and personal backgrounds to allow a familiarity of the authors.

Although written informally, academic blogs have been noticed for providing a forum for discussion and feedback (Ahmed et.al, 2023). Whilst not a full report (like the final grey literature report), it would provide more ample detail than a social media post. The ability to add further resources and hyperlinks would be very useful, especially to younger audiences who may find the blog easier to digest.

In appeal to younger audiences and audiences with additional needs (such as dyslexia), cartoons of the theatre will be published alongside accessible captions (e.g. well-spaced

font with grey or yellow backgrounds). Cartoons have been growing in use within archaeology (Swogger, 2024) and allow for information to be passed on in a visual and relatable manner (see figures eight and nine). The cartoons use the archaeology in a playful manner and are inspired by the real artefacts found during the excavation like the glasses, beer bottle and gaming pieces. The posters featured are genuine posters from the early 1900s.

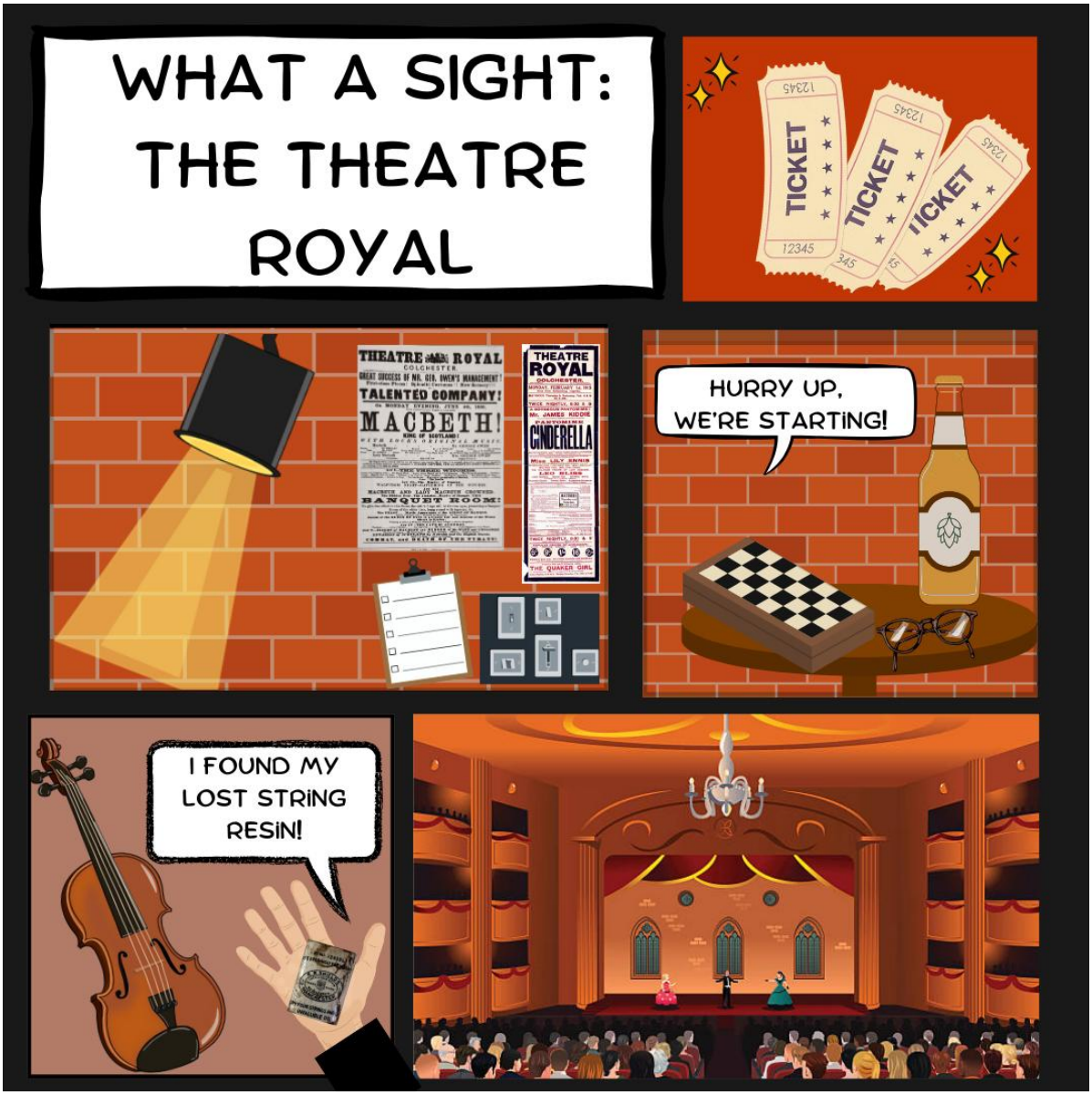

Figure eight: A cartoon created via Canva showing a night at the theatre. The cartoon references several of the real artefacts. The owner of the violin is seen also with a cropped photograph of a violin resin that was also uncovered during the excavation (T. Lawrence, 2025).

Figure nine: A cartoon created via Canva showing the night the theatre burnt down. It is recorded that the only two objects to be saved from the theatre were the key for the front door and a money safe (T. Lawrence, 2025).

In-person open days

It is noted that local open days within communities' help develop a sense of belonging and active community participation (UK Government Guidance, 2019). This is championed by events or groups like the Council for British Archaeology, the Festival of Archaeology and Heritage Open Days.

The open day will be two-fold and be held at a venue called Dice and Slice which is the former police station, and one of the adjoining buildings to the site itself. The first part of the open day will be an evening drinks reception. This event will be invite-only and held for local MPs, community leaders, Council members, Visit Colchester representatives, and CAT trustees. The second part of the open day is an event held at the same venue during the day (ideally a Saturday). Financially it will be supported by Colchester City Council but costs can be reduced by advertising on EventBrite and the internal production of signs and displays. As CAT is a charity, tickets for relevant time slots will be free but donations will be encouraged to the future of CAT's outreach. This event will highlight the theatre's finds as the archaeology would have been developed on by this stage of the outreach. Objects such as the music books will hopefully draw attention to the archaeology's personal nature. The day will follow previous CAT open days with a series of short talks at around 15 minutes long, focusing on different aspects of the theatre.

The impact of both days will hopefully heighten the audience's understanding of the archaeology and their local bond which is crucial to a community feeling (Willis, 2016). It is important to target multiple audiences at open days. The evening audience is political, to allow the site's reputation and presence to be recognised and for senior figures within Colchester to promote this. The day audience will allow for families, retirees and young people to attend. Given the site's proximity to the town centre, foot traffic may encourage an uptake in pre-bookings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a publication and dissemination strategy has been created for the excavation of the former Bus depot at Queen Street in Colchester. The excavation was a multi-period site however, this strategy has targeted the 20th century archaeology. The burning of the Theatre Royal in Colchester in 1918 was a significant event and speaks greatly to the area's local social history. After its redevelopment, no material evidence had been recovered from the theatre, and it is only now with a full excavation that a story can be told. Despite the archaeology being modern in the eyes of the archaeological sector, it is vital to recognise it as equally important in Colchester's history.

The strategy used both primary and secondary sources to highlight this importance, although the use of primary data was more abundant given the excavation's intrusive nature. The Theatre finds, from personal adornments to electrical and stage equipment, had not previously been encountered in CAT's nearly 60 years excavation therefore it presented a unique challenge for both field archaeologists and post-excavation staff.

Publication should go in tandem with dissemination. The status quo of publication within journals or monographs has been adjusted significantly with the introduction of an online blog and social media campaign. The site's dissemination does not solely rely on digital resources but encourages face-to-face interaction with the archaeology in a neutral environment close to the site itself. Archaeology is nearly always dynamic within politics and logistics, therefore utilizing an exclusive reception for those involved was key.

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