

A critical assessment of an archaeological excavation at Fingringhoe Ranges, Lodge Lane, Langenhoe, Colchester, Essex (March to September 2022)

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With reference to a specific archaeological project, critically assess the methods of archaeological investigation employed, and the nature of the archaeological materials/ data recovered.

Introduction

From March to September 2022 an excavation was carried out at Fingringhoe Ranges, near Colchester, Essex. The archaeological works were in advance of a new firing range being completed on the site, in a project involving several stakeholders including the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO). The land at Fingringhoe had previously been purchased by the army between 1889 and 1899 and subsequently used for live firing (Pooley, 2023). After a period of consultation Fingringhoe was chosen to be the home of a new firing range, with the decision to “dispose... and cease being a military facility” of the previous range at Middlewick (GL Hearn, 2020).

Previous work had been carried out in the area by Wessex Archaeology (WA) in 2008 and the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) in 2018 and 2021. These works included a desk-based assessment (DBA), a monument condition survey and an evaluation. The 2022 excavation of approximately 18.3 hectares went onto find a multiperiod landscape with evidence from the Mesolithic and up to the site’s present-day use. Unknown archaeology, such as a Roman military structure, was excavated with assemblages of pottery, lithics, and small finds also recovered from across the site (Pooley, 2023).

Archaeological background

The site was somewhat of an enigma within local archaeological records. Prior to work by commercial units, the landscape had little intervention from those working within a heritage remit. In 2008 WA carried out a desk-based assessment and monument survey of the landscape, which totalled 1,521 hectares (Orr and White, 2008). This work found 82 known archaeological sites which ranged from individual find spots to buildings. 25 additional known sites were also referenced due to their proximity to the research area. In total the DBA provided 115 known archaeological sites and 66 monuments for examination (Orr and White, 2008).

In advance of the firing range alterations CAT completed an evaluation of the site in 2018 (Pooley, 2018). In this evaluation of twenty-two trenches, twelve trenches were archaeologically sterile. However, Roman activity was highlighted in two trenches in the form of a red hill alongside ditches and pits (Pooley, 2018). Our understanding was enhanced by various Roman small finds present including copper-alloy coins and a spearhead. Additionally Bronze Age and Medieval activity was also encountered during the works (Pooley, 2018).

In October 2021, CAT returned to the site to carry out a small excavation on land which was to be repurposed as a car park for future groundworks. Therefore, this excavation had the aim of investigating all archaeological horizons within the specified area before destruction caused by the car park’s development (Hicks and Veasey, 2021). Measuring 867.5 square meters, the excavation produced twenty-one features of which eleven were undated (Hicks and Veasey, 2021). Four pits were dated as modern by their finds of slate and brick. Six additional features belonged to the

Prehistoric and Roman periods respectively although their age could not be discerned any further due to a lack of diagnostic material (Loughton, 2021, p. 6.)

Methodology of investigation

As per the evaluation results an Archaeological Brief was issued by Dr Richard Hoggett of Colchester Borough Council (February 2021). The Brief highlighted the proposed development's scale, including two 600m firing ranges, associated groundworks and services (Hoggett, 2021). The site's known archaeology necessitated an excavation to take place as the proposal had "potential to damage any archaeological deposits that exist" (Hoggett, 2021, p. 2). As set by Standards and Guidance set by the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (CIfA, 2023), the excavation was subject to requirements within the Brief. A strip, map and record excavation was to be conducted within five targeted areas with the exception of the known red hill which was to be excavated to its full extent (Hoggett, 2021). Potentially foreshadowing later events, point 3.12 asserted immediate communication with the CBC Advisor if unknown remains were found to allow amendments to both the Brief and Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) (Hoggett, 2021).

A WSI was produced by Emma Holloway (CAT) in March 2022. The WSI included within it the specific requirements set prior by Dr Hoggett (see figure one, Holloway, 2022). These targeted excavation areas were machine-stripped under the observation of a CAT archaeologist and found two layers of stratigraphy (Pooley, 2023) with archaeology cut into the natural geology.

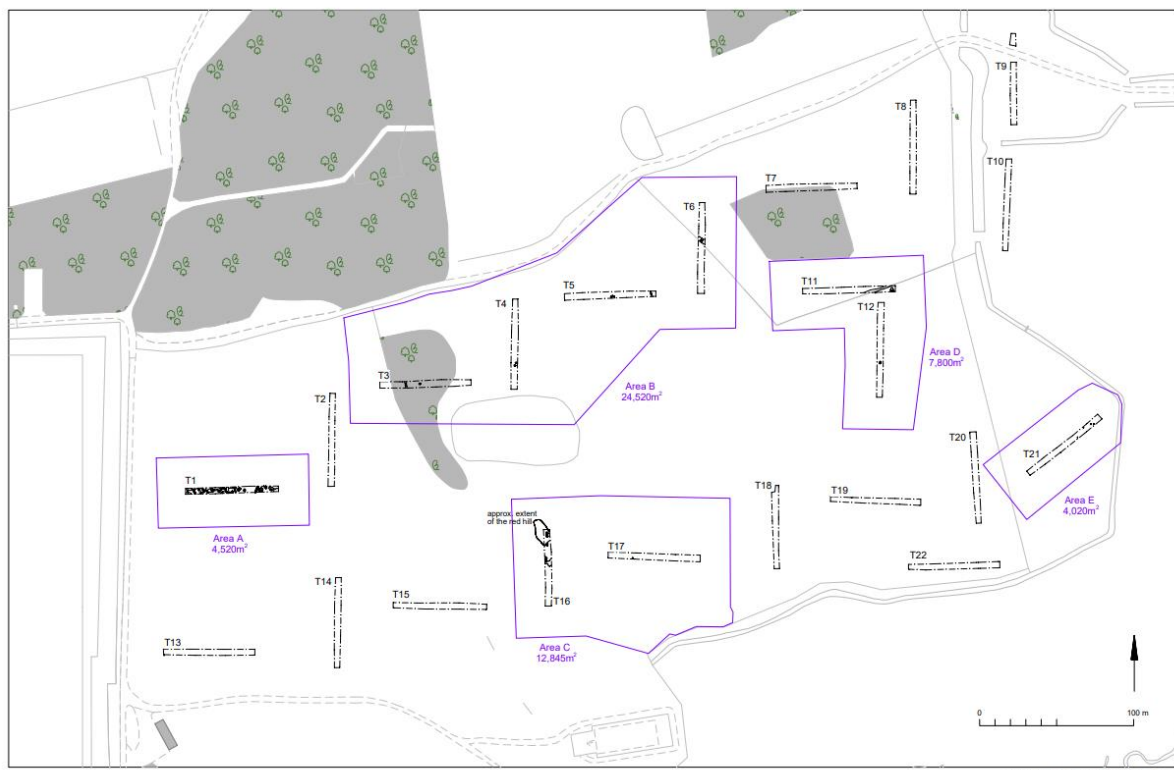


Fig 2 Excavation areas in relation to trial trenching results

Figure 1: A site plan from the WSI produced in 2022 showing the five planned excavation areas (CAT, 2022, p.12)

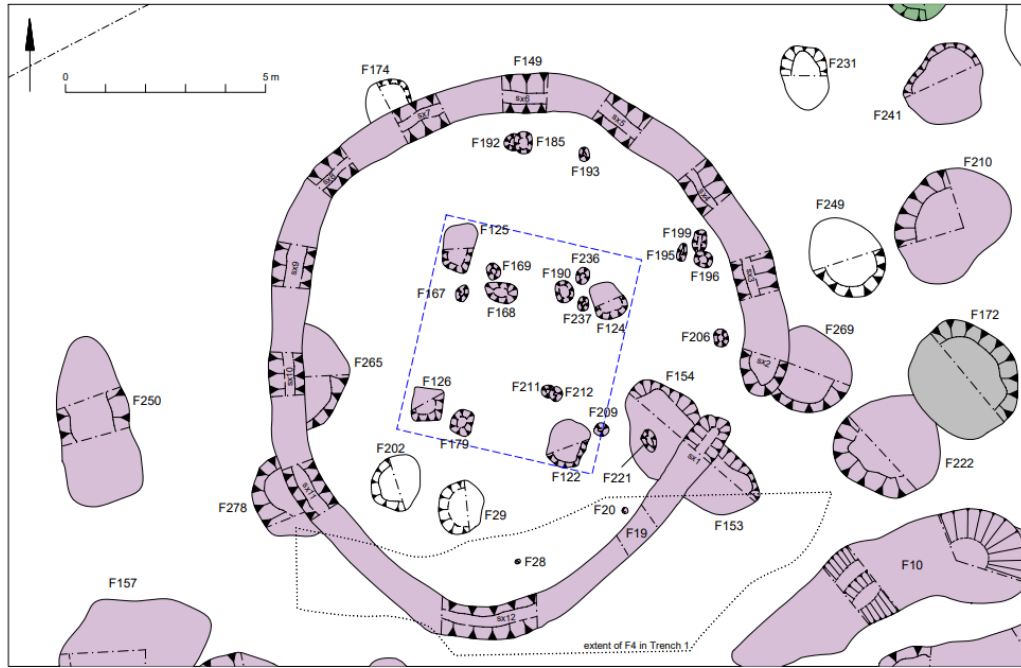


Fig 4 Close up of the Roman ring-ditch and associated features.
(see Fig 3 for phasing key).

dashed blue line - possible extent of the watch tower or raised platform.

Figure 2: A site plan from the excavation of Area A with a close-up view of the Roman ring ditch and associated foundation pads (CAT, 2023, p.127)

The archaeological material and data recovered

Overall, 553 features were excavated, including those excavated previously at the 2018 evaluation and the 2021 excavation. The features spanned at least five thousand years of history, with evidence from the Mesolithic to Post-medieval. Many features constituted 'tree-throws or scrub clearance pits,' with little or no dating evidence present (Pooley, 2023). Prehistoric finds included this barbed-and-tanged arrowhead recovered from Area B as seen in figure three (Pooley, 2023). One Bronze Age cremation was found, being the only feature of a funerary function on site (Pooley, 2023).



Figure 3: A Bronze Age barbed-and-tanged flint arrowhead found at Fingringhoe excavation (personal collection, 2022).

Roman activity was more substantial, with the largest group of features being a ring ditch with accompanying stone lined foundation pads located in Area A (figure two, Pooley, 2023). Many finds were recovered such as late Iron Age to Roman pottery and iron bolt-heads. Within the ring ditch were a further twenty smaller features, in which burnt and unburnt animal bone was frequently present, raising questions over their relationship to the stone foundation pads (see figure four). The small finds and placement of foundation pads within a ring ditch have suggested the area as a Roman watch tower or an artillery placement for equipment such as a scorpion or ballista (Sim, 2011, Pooley, 2023). A total of four red hills were discovered and excavated at the site, but all had suffered extreme contamination (Pooley, 2023). This contamination, such as barbed wire, ordnance and an entire tank hull, were encountered consistently during excavation. To the south a medieval enclosure was found in Area D, with a number of Post-medieval boundary ditches also excavated across site (Pooley, 2023).



Figure 4: A drone shot of Area A, featuring the ring ditch and four stone-lined foundation pads. Sampling buckets for the twenty additional charcoal features can be seen in the background (CAT, 2023).

Evaluation

1.1 The project's methodology

The project's methodology was stipulated by the WSI produced in March 2022. The strip, map and record excavation was likely to uncover archaeology including ditches and pits as first encountered in the evaluation (Pooley, 2018, Holloway, 2022). 10% of each linear's length was to be excavated in one metre slots, with any discrete features excavated by 50% (Holloway, 2022). Although this was duly followed, with the occurrence of 200 plus scrub-clearance pits and tree-throws it could be suggested whether the 50% excavation was necessary given the identical nature of these features. It may have been sufficient to dig a sample of these within each of the five areas. Five ditches were excavated at 10% and subsequently undated. It can be argued further slots should have been completed for finds recovery, but the impact on the budget and time would have been significant especially with the discovery of three additional red hills. Environmental sampling was hampered by the ordnance contamination, hence why radiocarbon dating from the red hills produced modern dates (Fryer and Grey, 2023). Metal detecting as specified in the WSI was forbidden due to the ordnance threat. Given the large quantity of metal small finds uncovered, it is possible additional small finds were missed due to this. Nonetheless, the excavation methodology did do justice given the interpretation subsequently provided. The targeted areas produced both known and unknown archaeology despite hindrances of ordnance, time and budget constraints.

1.2 Local understanding of the area

Previous knowledge of the site's heritage had been affected by a lack of full-scale investigation. The area's continual use for military purposes had prohibited any public access and furthermore impacted what archaeology there could be (MOD, 2022). This issue was encountered within the excavation when a 1,635 square metre exclusion zone had to be implemented in Area C due to the abundant ordnance (Pooley, 2023).

However, despite logistical and ordnance setbacks the excavation did widen our understanding of the local area significantly. The sporadic prehistoric evidence was composed of discretely with both pottery and flint dating (Pooley, 2023). Continued activity into the Roman and Medieval periods emphasized the site as a multi-period landscape. Overall, the excavation revealed evidence of settlement in either seasonal or fixed capacity (Pooley, 2023).

One known and three unknown red hills were excavated during the work (Pooley, 2023). All four red hills were subject to extreme damage, and they produced none of the expected flues or associated kiln furniture (Brown, 2013, Pooley, 2023). Despite their poor condition, their presence provides compelling evidence of salt-working practises at Fingringhoe, which correlates to the known red hill locations in the vicinity (Pooley, 2023).

Understanding of the site's military function was also expanded. The ordnance recovery, including unknown equipment such as egg hand grenades, resulted in a clearer picture of the site's use historically. Since its acquisition in the 1890s, the Army exploited the landscape for various functions including mortar and grenade ranges (B. Holloway per comms). Without the archaeological excavation and thus the need for UXO clearance, it can be argued the ordnance history of Fingringhoe would not have been explored.

1.3 Local significance of the area

The four newly discovered red hills heightened the area's significance as it provided an industrial use of the site where little had been known before. Prior to the initial archaeological works, no red hills had been studied in the development area but following the excavation four were discovered (Pooley, 2023). Domestic evidence including animal bone, pottery and small finds suggested people were living within the vicinity and therefore likely working at the red hills seasonally (Pooley, 2023). Biddulph (2017) asserts the key role of salt-production within a local rural economy, and the presence of now 15 red hill examples around Fingringhoe could support this.

One unanticipated fieldwork result was the location of a Roman watch tower or artillery placement within Area A. Comprising of a subcircular ring ditch with four central foundation pads lined with septaria, the archaeology presents questions over its role and appearance in this area. As noted by Pooley (2023) additional features, such as the smaller pits filled with burnt animal bone, cannot be explained easily and its projected structure differs slightly to other frontier examples from Gask Ridge (Lewis, 2020). However domestic and military artefacts were uncovered, including twenty-five ballista bolts and late third to fourth century pottery and the placement is positioned nine kilometres from the nearest fort at Othona (Pitts and Perring, 2006, Pooley 2023). Whether a watch tower or an artillery placement, Pooley (2023, p. 108) noted that "it is a nice coincidence that the modern army firing range is located on a site where, 2000 years previously, the Roman army also used artillery weapons."

1.4 Public engagement and outreach

The site's progression was aided by on-site engagement. This interest was throughout the site hierarchy, including ordnance technicians and external experts like drone teams and ecologists. The archaeology allowed those present to see the landscape within a broader context than that of their own specific roles. At the excavation's completion a barbecue was hosted with the stakeholders, where we displayed finds recovered from the site. The archaeological outreach will continue as at the time of the project's finish the DIO were intending to create a small archaeological display within one of the new Range buildings. This display, with photographs and maps, will allow those present to engage with the site's past and the changes of technology, structure and landscape use (P. Chamberlain per comms).

Conclusion

In summary, the 2022 excavation at Fingringhoe Ranges has created an insightful look into our local coastal heritage. The landscape whilst in possession of the military had sustained continual bombardment since the 1890s, and therefore the existing archaeology was likely to have been affected. Despite this, an excavation was carried out in a professional manner alongside UXO technicians and archaeologists and produced archaeological evidence from the Mesolithic to 20th Century. This project was the first comprehensive work into this area's heritage to provide enough evidence to form a coherent image of its use. Prehistoric evidence and finds were widespread across the excavation areas, with later Roman activity followed by Medieval agriculture and herding practises. The archaeological evidence strengthens the idea of a multiperiod landscape, with changing technologies and groups exploiting its natural resources and positioning. Our knowledge and understanding of the landscape have been developed by the industrial presence of red hills for salt-production and a conceivable new Roman military site on the Essex coastline. These new understandings can be developed in future studies, especially regarding a Roman coastal artillery post.

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Appendix

Holloway, E. (2022). *Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) for an archaeological excavation at Fingringhoe Wick, Lodge Lane, Langenhoe, Colchester, Essex, CO5 7LX.*