

Cropmarks, kilns and ditches: a critical assessment of an evaluation at Elmstead Market, Essex.

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¹ Lawrence, T. 2022. A view over site at Elmstead Market.

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Using a project design, preferably from a completed project with which you have had direct involvement, critically assess the how successfully the design delivered a contextualised **research design, appropriate methodology, effective project management and communication** within and beyond the project team, and a **suitable outcome in terms of publication and archive**. This task may well require you to talk with colleagues and access associated documentation such as monitoring / progress reports. (25%, 2000 words or equivalent).

Introduction

Between November to December 2022, I excavated on a site in Essex as one of a team of six to eight people on an evaluation of 59 trial-trenches. The site lay on a high area of land and was parallel to an excavation which had taken place previously in 2020/21. This excavation had uncovered a large quantity of archaeology, and it was a similar scenario in this new evaluation in 2022. The archaeology uncovered predicted cropmarks features and unknown archaeology like kilns with a substantial quantity of waster pottery. The following analysis will establish whether the site's project design delivered the site effectively. Different aspects like methodology, project management and communication will be critiqued.

Project Background

The Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) was approached in 2022 with a proposal for a heritage statement to "inform a planning application for commercial and residential development of the site" (Parmenter, 2022). This outlined the historic environment surrounding the proposed development site (PDS) within a 500m radius. As stated, its objectives were to determine what heritage assets were present and what impact the proposal would have on these.

A written scheme of investigation followed the heritage statement in November 2022, whilst the project was in its pre-application stage. The advice from the Essex County Council Historic Environment Advisor (ECCHEA) was a future condition which would ask for a programme of investigation via trial trenching (Holloway, 2022). This advice did not appear in the form of a ECCHEA brief but via advice which recommended a four percent trenching of the site with one percent held in reserve (Holloway, 2022). CAT's WSI proposed 59 linear trenches at 30m long and 1.8m wide, except for two trenches which would measure 45m long. This would cover an area of 3240m². Due to the high level of cropmarks as highlighted in the heritage statement, a number of these trenches were rotated or targeted areas where cropmarks were present.

Both the heritage statement and WSI were carried out in accordance with advice from ECCHEA, ClfA Professional standards (2014) and NPPF (MHCLG, 2021).

Analysis of the research design

The evaluation was to take place on an area of 8.1 hectares centred NGR TM 07300 23885 (Holloway, 2022). The WSI's research was aided by three direct sources of information; previous CAT reports produced on investigations in the area, a publication by M. Medlycott *Tendring District Historic Environment Characterisation Project* (2008) and the Essex Historic Environment Record accessible online via Heritage Gateway (Holloway, 2022). Many of these strands are identifiable in the work of Vander Linden and Webley (2012, figure 1).

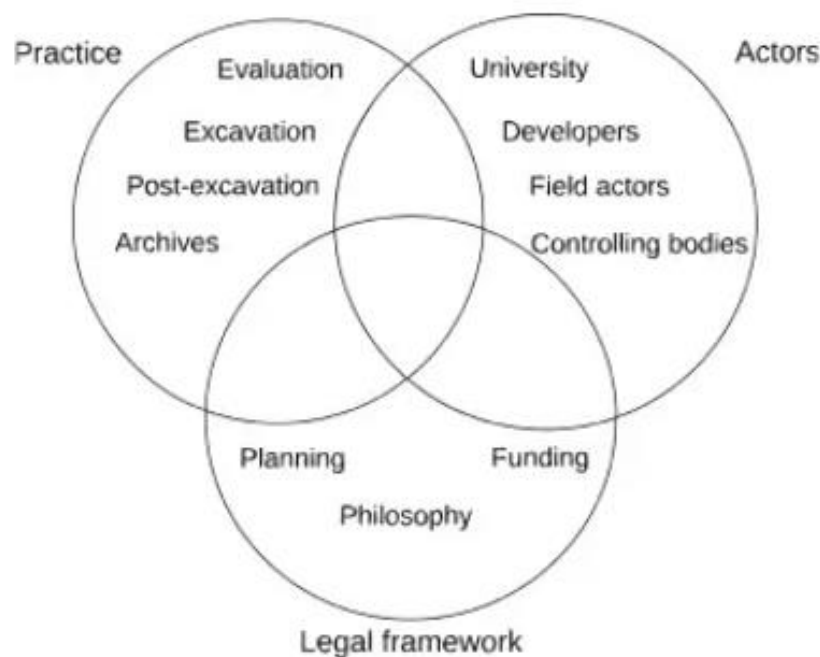


Figure 1: a Venn diagram of the factors involved with developer-led archaeology within the UK (Vander Linden and Webley, 2012, p.1).

The WSI was created and approved whilst the project was in pre-application stage, therefore there was “no brief for this project” as ECCHEA had been approached for advice prior to this (Holloway, 2022, p. 4). This advice strongly suggested the use of targeted trial-trenches given the number of cropmarks visible in the development area (Holloway, 2022). This was specifically named as a project aim alongside the main objective to “record the character, date and state of preservation of any archaeological remains on site” (Holloway, 2022 p.4).

The research design was informed significantly by investigations CAT had completed south of the site where the Lanswood Park site now stands. The evaluation and excavation uncovered with Bronze Age ceremonial activity included a ring ditch containing a cremation with further activity in the Late Iron Age/ early Roman period (Brooks, 2022, see figure two). This activity centred around a new enclosure, accessed by at least four trackways and over 100kg of Roman pottery, tile and brick suggestive of a nearby masonry structure (Brooks, 2022).

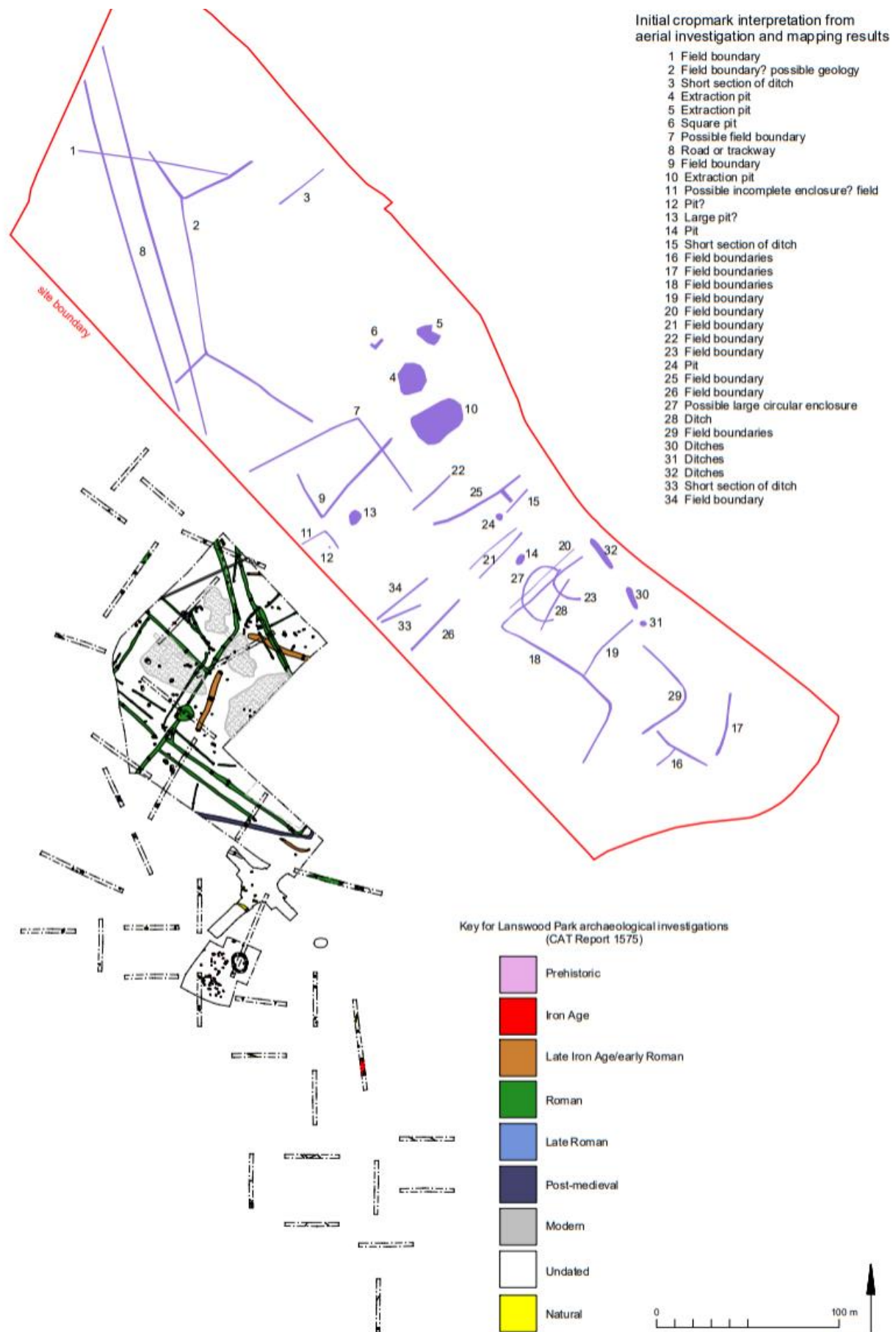


Figure 2: a comparison plan of the cropmarks present at the 2022 evaluation north of Clacton Road and the results of the excavation south of Clacton Road in 2021 (Hicks, 2023).

This evaluation in 2022 revealed continuing ditches and the presence of kiln activity. This evaluation combined with the excavation across the road formed a wider conclusion of a potential farmstead or country villa estate (Brooks, 2022, Hicks, 2023). Therefore, the research design accurately highlighted the archaeological potential on land north of Clacton Road, with 22 of the 28 cropmarks targeted uncovered to be legitimate.

Analysis of the methodology

CAT's methodology was driven by the WSI and ECCHEA advice with the trial-trenching to specifically target the cropmarks (Holloway, 2022, see figure three). The presence of cropmarks can often be accompanied by archaeological activity not visible as cropmarks like post holes (Historic England, website). During excavation, adjustments were made when the high level of activity was made clear. The site's timescale and budget were adjusted so that the square metre for each archaeologist to excavate per day was lowered (A. Wightman per comms). Additional spot dating of surface finds from post-medieval boundary ditches led to them not being excavated as agreed by ECCHEA (N. Rayner per comms).

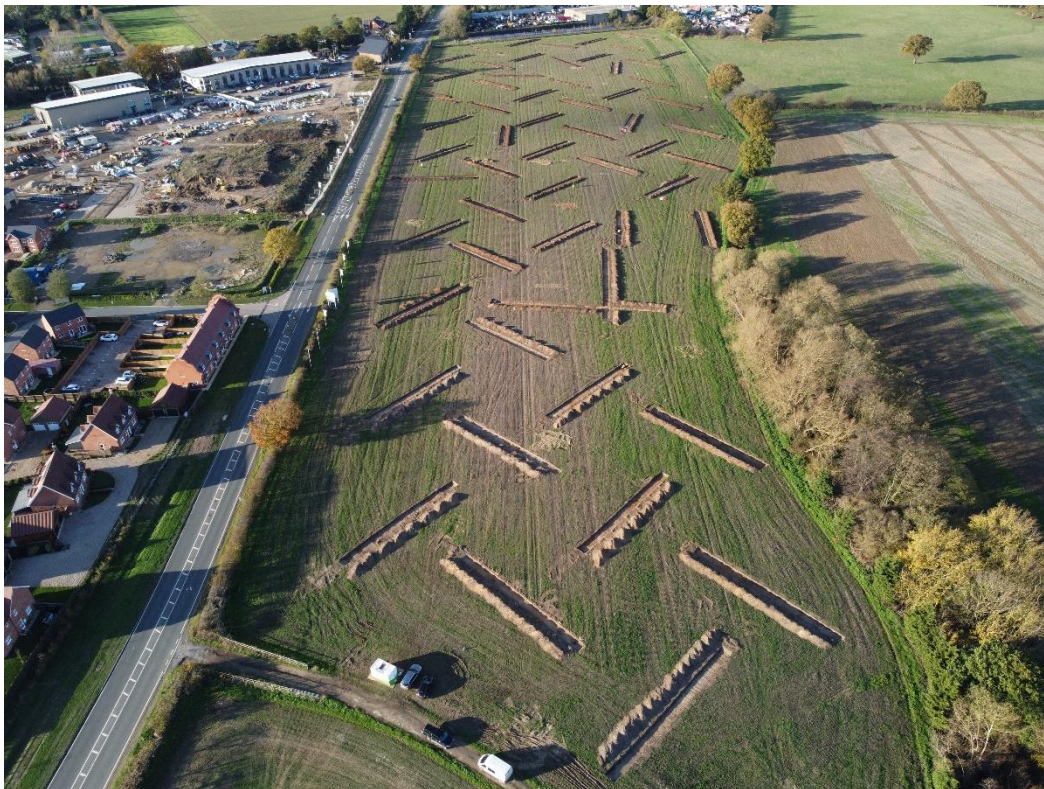


Figure 3: a drone shot of the evaluation site. The former 2021 excavation across the road is visible in the background to the left (Lunn, 2022).

The field team was experienced and had previously excavated several Tendring cropmark sites including those at Elmstead Market and Great Bentley (Brooks and Holloway, 2007, Pooley, 2017, Holloway, 2018). Nonetheless, the team could be described as 'top-heavy' with five senior archaeologists and four site assistants. This has been a common occurrence at CAT where overwhelming numbers of senior field staff has necessitated them to be on sites where they essentially revert to the role of site assistants. The kilns were cleaned

intricately and recorded but left unexcavated *in situ* for the mitigation stage as kilns are crucial to establishing dating chronologies (A. Wightman per comms, Hicks, 2023, see figure four). One improvement to on-site methodology would be the use of DSLR Lumix cameras. They have been in circulation as a cost-cutting initiative for many years however the photo quality is extremely poor (Carver, 2009). CAT does have access to higher quality cameras but sadly these were not taken to site to record the kilns.



Figure 4: a pit with abundant misfired waster pottery. This pit was located near a potential kiln which was left preserved *in situ* (Hicks, 2023).

The methodology was successful as it indicated both known and unknown archaeology. Out of 28 identified cropmarks, 22 were proved to be legitimate and the rest interpreted as geological variations (Hicks, 2023). Of the 59 linear trenches 56 trenches contained archaeological activity (Hicks, 2023). This was significant in establishing the level of preservation of activity in the area (Waddington, 2009, PLACE Services, 2019).

Analysis of the project management

Project management within archaeology has often been hotly debated. Locock (2012, p.7) noted that “change is normal, stability the problem”. However, I would argue in terms of CAT stability has been one of the core factors within the company’s work. The Project Officer was Nigel Rayner, who CAT describes on their website as “one of CAT’s most experienced field archaeologists” (CAT, 2023). Nigel began working as a site assistant in the late 1980s and progressed to his current role through a myriad of rural and urban sites. Discounting a few adjournments, Nigel has worked at CAT for his entire archaeological career. His management skills were borne out of these early years and are reminiscent of those described in existing literature (Locock 2012, Darvill 2019). Having worked on Nigel’s sites, his managerial style can be described as a ‘hands off approach’ with the expectation field staff carry out their tasks correctly.

It is common knowledge that Nigel’s opinion is incredibly trusted (A. Wightman per comms). Amongst the other archaeologists present there was a combined 28 years of experience across seven individuals. The site’s knowledge was bolstered by the fieldwork manager Adam Wightman with 18 years, the post-excavation manager Laura Pooley with 23 years and the contracts manager Chris Lister with 24 years. Whilst years of experience is not always an indicator of skilled project management, the interpersonal employment relationships built up in these years has produced a team which is both at ease with each other and the circumstances they are put into (Ellis, 2022). CAT is very much at odds with other units who frequently have a high turnover of staff and diminishing numbers of experienced staff (Aitchison, 2021).

Analysis of communication

Communication was aided by CAT’s longstanding reputation across East Anglia. The managers, project officers and archaeological monitors have all worked together for years, which has built up levels of trust and expectation. This allowed for more relaxed communication and no expected daily correspondence. Communication, if necessary, ran between the field team to Nigel and then the fieldwork manager. Communication with the client was carried out between management. Two site visits were made by the client, planning agent, Adam Wightman and ECCHEA representative.

However, communication with the media was lacking despite this site’s prominence within local publications. In November 2018 the site plans had been announced in the Colchester Gazette for short-and long-term accommodation and an educational centre for children with learning difficulties (Palmer, 2018). In January 2022, the concept was being pushed further with the appointed headmaster for the new centre quoted as saying he was “ready to start digging the foundations” (King, 2022). After the discovery of abundant archaeology at the site’s evaluation, the excavation has been delayed with cited factors including costs and securing final construction grants (A. Wightman per comms). In December 2023 that newspaper published the site’s approval, with no mention of any delays or even the significant archaeology present (Hensel, 2023). This is despite all CAT reports being accessible online and fully visible to the public or media via our library [Colchester](#)

[Archaeological Trust: all report titles \(essex.ac.uk\)](https://www.essex.ac.uk/archaeological-trust/all-report-titles) The headteacher is quoted once again saying that “building is planned to start in spring next year (2024) and we are hoping to be finished within 18 months” (Hensel, 2023, see figure five). At the time of this assignment’s completion in May 2024 no full excavation of the land has happened, let alone actual construction of the centre itself.

Elmstead Market headteacher's student farm dream approved

14th December 2023

EDUCATION

PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT



By Natalie Hensel
Reporter
@HenselNatalie

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5 Comments

A FORMER headteacher's lifelong dream is finally set to be realised after plans to build a farm to provide young people with learning disabilities were greenlit.

Figure 5: a screenshot from a *Colchester Gazette* article describing the future for the site (Hensel, 2023).

Communication with the media was non-existent, with CAT not being approached neither approaching the Gazette. Given the significant archaeology present and opportunities for public engagement and outreach, it seems a chance was missed. Although given the delays it may also be due to the client’s intervention.

Publication and archive

The site’s publication followed usual procedures as drawn up by our post-excavation manager and advised by current standards and guidance (ClfA, 2014). The evaluation occurred between November to December 2022 and the approved report was published three months later in March 2023. A further amendment was made in May 2023. This grey literature report was published on our online library and distributed to ECCHEA and the client. The publication took a usual amount of time given the number of trenches and

archaeology present, and three months early according to the WSI Deadline which typically gives six months maximum (Holloway, 2022).

The archive itself comprised of a digital and physical archive. The digital archive includes site records (recorded on CAT's digital recording system), WSIs and briefs in PDF format and entire photographic archive with accompanying metadata. This digital record is uploaded to the Archaeology Data Service as recommended by their instructions (ADS, 2022). It is an annual tradition that a summary of all fieldwork within Essex is published within the Essex Archaeology and History Journal of which our interim director Howard Brooks is the Society's Secretary (H. Brooks per comms).

It is entirely possible that once at mitigation stage, the site may be published into a monograph given the archaeological character of the area. The significant site across the road which produced a Roman timber well amongst other structural features and the kilns in this evaluation strongly suggest the presence of an industrial villa in the area (Hicks, 2023). In February 2024 CAT also completed an evaluation of 44 trenches further south, less than 400m away which revealed an abundance of cropmarks suggestive of land partitioning (Hicks, 2024). Overall, the landscape suggests a habitation epicentre with surrounding agricultural and industrial activity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evaluation at land north of Clacton Road in Elmstead Market was successful in several elements of the project design. The design's methodology led to the discovery of new archaeology and confirmation of existing cropmarks. It was conclusively recorded within a report which is available at an open access source, including a complete digital archive, photographs and site plans. The field staff were experienced and knowledgeable, allowing for the recording and excavation of a large volume of archaeology to a high standard.

However, upon reflection the site suffered partially with its project management and communication especially with the media. The project management was experienced and adept, but top-heavy on site leading to issues in hierarchy. As highlighted, managerial skills at CAT are gained through experience, leading to a hands-off approach not always suitable for the scale of a site. Furthermore, despite the interest of the local media in the site's future, there was no engagement with the site's present archaeology or heritage despite it being both significant and new within the area. An opportunity for engagement from both the public and media was not taken into consideration.

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