

An archaeological excavation at
Fingringhoe Ranges within the context
of *'Research and Archaeology Revisited:
a revised framework for the East of
England'* edited by Maria Medlycott
(2011)

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¹ Massey-Ryan, R. (2018) Historic England Pre-industrial Salterns: Introductions to Heritage Assets. Historic England. Swindon. p.1

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Using a current archaeological research framework (regional or thematic), contextualise and synthesise data and results from an agreed archaeological project.

Site introduction

From March to September 2022 an archaeological excavation took place at Fingringhoe Ranges near Colchester in Essex. The excavation was led and directed by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT), which is based primarily in Colchester but works across the whole of Essex and bordering into the counties of Suffolk, Cambridgeshire and Norfolk. This excavation was in advance of the construction of a new firing range near the coast, with the principal client being that of the Defence Infrastructure Organisation, the lead consultant being TetraTech Ltd and the groundworks lead Tillbury Douglas. The excavation encompassed an area of 18.3 hectares which was divided into five areas hereafter called Areas A to E.

The excavation went onto find a multiperiod landscape with evidence dating back to the Mesolithic period and up to the site's present day military use. Unknown archaeology, such as a Roman military structure, was excavated but the dominant feature within the excavation was the discovery of four unknown red hills (Pooley, 2023). These red hills will be explored further in the context of a revised regional framework for the East of England by Maria Medlycott (2011). This discussion within the context of this specific excavation highlights a development of our knowledge and understanding of the East of England.

Research framework overview

Research frameworks are integral documents to the HER sector and now have a firm footing within the heritage landscape. Research Frameworks, including the document which will be used throughout this research, were born out of a need for "clear research priorities at national, regional and local level" (Buckley, 1997, p.1). The catalyst according to Bedford (2020) was the application of archaeological investigation spurred on by the legalisation of PP16 in 1990 and subsequently PPG15 in 1994. This consequently led to more archaeology being completed in more diverse settings than ever before (Bedford, 2020). This catalyst has led many to define these two decades after PPG16 as "the PPG16 Era" (Darvill et al, 2019, p. 1) as at the time of Darvill's publication 82,000 archaeological investigations, ranging from watching briefs to excavations, were conducted in these decades in England alone.

The research frameworks are divided by four different themes. These themes are as follows: geographical (e.g. Southeast England), by period (e.g. Roman), by specific topics (e.g. archaeometallurgy), or by World Heritage Site (e.g. Hadrian's Wall) (Historic England, 2023). These themes can overlap county jurisdictions, with one example of the Solent Thames Research Framework covered by eleven different councils or national park authorities (Historic England, 2023). They can also be duplicated in aims and objectives, with frameworks for Avebury World Heritage Site released in 2001 and a revised framework in 2016 covering both Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Sites (Southport Report 2011, Historic England 2023). With 62 frameworks now in existence across England the opportunities provided by developer-led systems allows these frameworks to exist and be utilised (Pye Tait Consulting 2014, Darvill et al 2019).

East of England research framework

With the beginning of PPG16 archaeology within the East of England was drawn into focus.

Publications such as Wade's *Guidelines for the publication of archaeological research in East Anglia* (1993) and the *Archaeology of Essex* edited by Owen Bedwin (1997) helped set in motion five county archaeologists (Essex, Cambridgeshire, Suffolk, Hertfordshire and Norfolk) to initiate the publication of *Research and Archaeology: a Framework for the Eastern Counties (Resource Assessment)* edited by Jenny Glazebrook (1997).

The work was also heavily influenced by a publication the year before produced by English Heritage (now referred to as Historic England) titled *Frameworks for Our Past* (1996). Three necessities were called for within this English Heritage publication: that of a resource assessment, a research agenda and a resource strategy (ALGAO). This was therefore reflected within the 1997 Research framework, with the assessment was released first and produced by East Anglian Archaeology (EAA) as an occasional paper. It set out seven chapters with each related to an archaeological period (Glazebrook, 1997), with the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic period being the shortest chapter and the archaeology of the Post-medieval and later years being the largest chapter. The research agenda and strategy followed up the 1997 assessment, with both being published by the EAA in 2000 (Brown and Glazebrook, 2000). Both parts were eventually culminated in a revision in 2011, edited by Maria Medlycott and produced once again by the EAA. The latest edition of the framework is found digitally on a website which launched in 2021 (EAA 2021) but is not found in a printed published edition. The website is extremely scarce on red hills and no additional information was provided bar one new red hill site briefly explored in Bradwell-on-sea (Ennis 2014, EAA 2021).

The 2011 revision was extensive and included several changes from the founding document. The revision divided the chapters with infinitely more detail, with no two time periods being merged to produce one chapter (see figure 1). The document used specific themes within each chapter, and each comprised of two subheadings; an assessment of key projects followed by future research topics. This separation allows a great clarity within the document and greater cohesion between periods themselves in times of transition. In a poll conducted by Pye Tait Consultancy in 2014 (p.98) the East of England frameworks were viewed as popular and praised for their publication and revision.

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The Fingringhoe excavation in a wider context

The presence of red hills had been established in Essex in previous works, most of which had been conducted by local history or archaeology groups (Biddulph, 2017). The first known exploration of red hills within Essex took place opposite Mersea Island in 1879 led by Henry Stopes. His report did not provide any further dating evidence or purpose for them but did note their position close to the coast (Fawn et al., 1990). However, a colleague Reverend J.C Atkinson did and firmly established them as places of the salt industry. In 1906 a committee formed from the Essex Archaeological Society, with the unique role of exploring the mysterious red hills of Langenhoe, in the very landscape of which our 2022 excavation took place (Fawn et al., 1990). In the 1960s and 1970s the work of de Brisay and Evans on the Essex red hills even inspired a weekend conference in 1974 at the University of Essex exclusively on salt and its role within our past (Coles, 1977). Wilkinson and Murphy highlighted sternly that “the archaeology of the Essex coast has not received the attention it deserves”, a call to action within their work *Archaeology of the Essex Coast Volume 1* (1995). Coastal red hills featured once again within the *Proceedings of the Writtle Conference* and is noted by Sealey (1996) that their deterioration from destructive processes (farming, local tides and bioturbations) was not matched by a comprehensive fieldwork programme. Overall, despite work in the 20th century on the features it was a recommendation of the Essex County Council within these proceedings that this required rectification – the red hills required immediate professional fieldwork (Sealey, 1996, p. 64).

It can be argued then even before the application of a research framework in 2011, regional publications had set in motion an excavation necessity of these features. The evaluation in 2018 had established the presence of one red hill within the development area (Pooley, 2018). It was in trench six with further Roman activity in the form of ditches and pits. The following excavation in 2022 at Fingringhoe by the Colchester Archaeological Trust took place in an area just over 18 hectares in size. As a welcome consequence the excavation went onto uncover three additional red hills, of which dating was scarce but a late Iron Age or early Roman date was theorised (Pooley, 2023). All of which had been badly damaged by Army ordnance prior to the archaeological works but nonetheless stood clear and red against the soil and vegetation (figure 2, Pooley 2023).



Figure 2: The excavated remains of a red hill at Fingringhoe, highlighting its shallow nature and size. Scale: 2.5m (Pooley, 2023, p.19).

Synthesis of the Fingringhoe excavation within the research framework

An objective look at the site within the 2011 framework will now be discussed below. The first and only reference within the Iron Age chapter is the excavation of a Middle Iron Age red hill in Tollesbury Creek (Germany, 2004). The author notes that the dating for this red hill is unusual and questions how many other known red hills are also of this date versus a later Roman date (Medlycott, 2011). It is highlighted that coastal surveys have recorded many red hills across the Essex coastline that may be Iron Age, but not enough archaeological exploration had happened yet (Medlycott, 2011). Therefore, it is unsurprising that Iron Age red hills are firmly suggested as a future research topic with Medlycott writing “none have been systematically or professionally excavated in recent times” (Medlycott, 2011, p. 31).

Red hills make their most prominent appearance in the framework’s Roman chapter. Their presence signifies salt production on an industrial scale within the Essex coastline (Medlycott, 2011). This in turn not only allows salt for trade and exchange but could suggest use within other food production such as salting of meat (Morris 2007, Medlycott 2011). However, despite the reference to their existence no red hill sites are described in detail within the Roman chapter. Only three sites are described as having any salt working evidence (noting no red hill) and all three of these sites are within Cambridgeshire. These are as follows: a Roman fen farmstead at Wimblington Marsh, an early Roman site in Longhill Road in March and a settlement area at Parson Drove (Medlycott, 2011). The author (Medlycott, 2011) argues that little excavation or sampling has been conducted on the red hill sites, however as discussed previously work has been conducted but admittedly not by any developer-led archaeological unit. Until interventions by developer-led archaeological units, such as the 2018 evaluation, the exploration of the individual red hills around Langenhoe and Mersea had been conducted by groups and organisations who were not at the same standard as a modern ClfA registered organisation. Likewise, all the work conducted on red hills occurred before 2000 which is what this document is revising. Therefore, it is plausible why previous works were not included.

The 2011 framework is a revision of the previous 1997 and 2000 works and as neither describe red hills in specific detail it is understandable why the revision should follow suit. The assessment of research topics proposed in 2000 is explored in both Iron Age and Roman chapters and as the author describes red hill locations had been agreed but accompanying archaeological work had not followed (Medlycott, 2011). Regarding research aims the author suggests a more comprehensive look into the Norfolk Broads and the evidence for salt industry there (Medlycott, 2011).

Nonetheless, the Essex red hill presence is hard to ignore, and via the Colchester Heritage Map² you can observe the monument indicators when ‘red hills’ are searched and the development area is focused (figures 3 and 4).

Although the framework provides specifics, I believe it key to not view sites within isolation. With the theme of industry core to the presence of red hills, it is also worth considering alternative themes such as the military with the watch tower presence, and settlement as suggested by the domestic waste at Fingringhoe.

² [Map - Colchester Heritage Explorer](#)

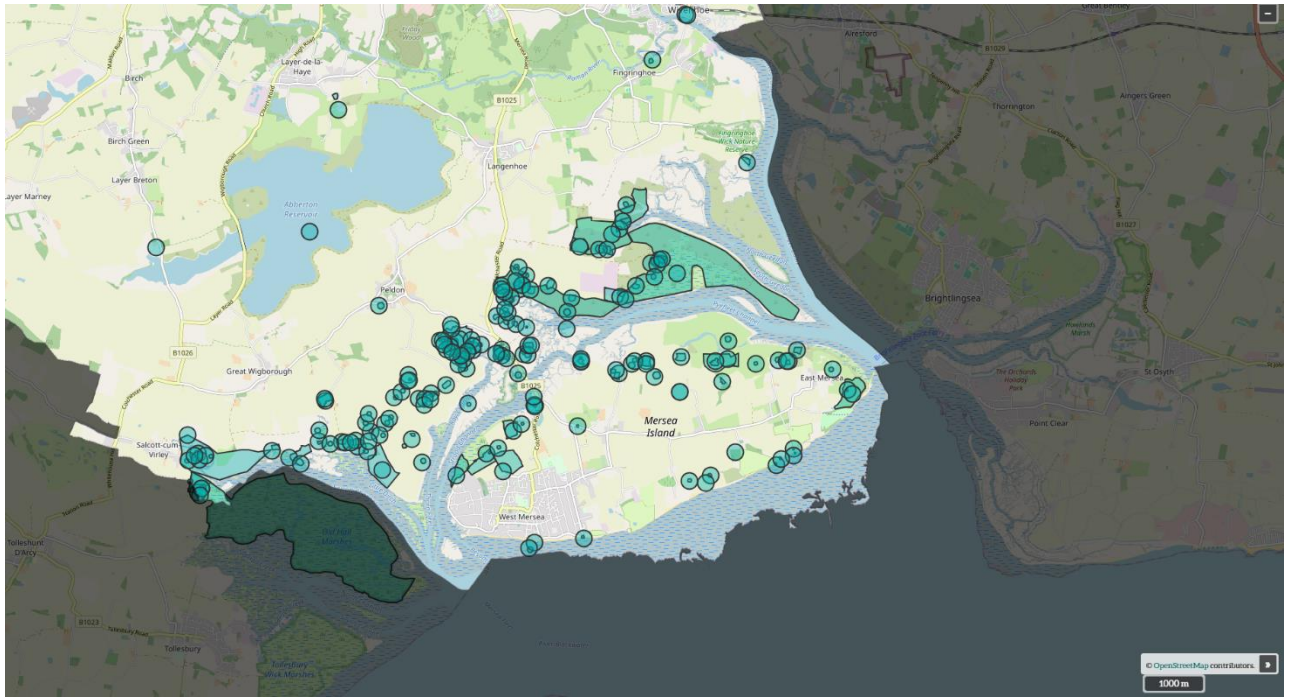


Figure 3: An expanded view of Langenhoe and the surrounding landscape, with each blue circle indicating the presence of a red hill or associated finds, excavations or surveys (Colchester Heritage Map, 2023).

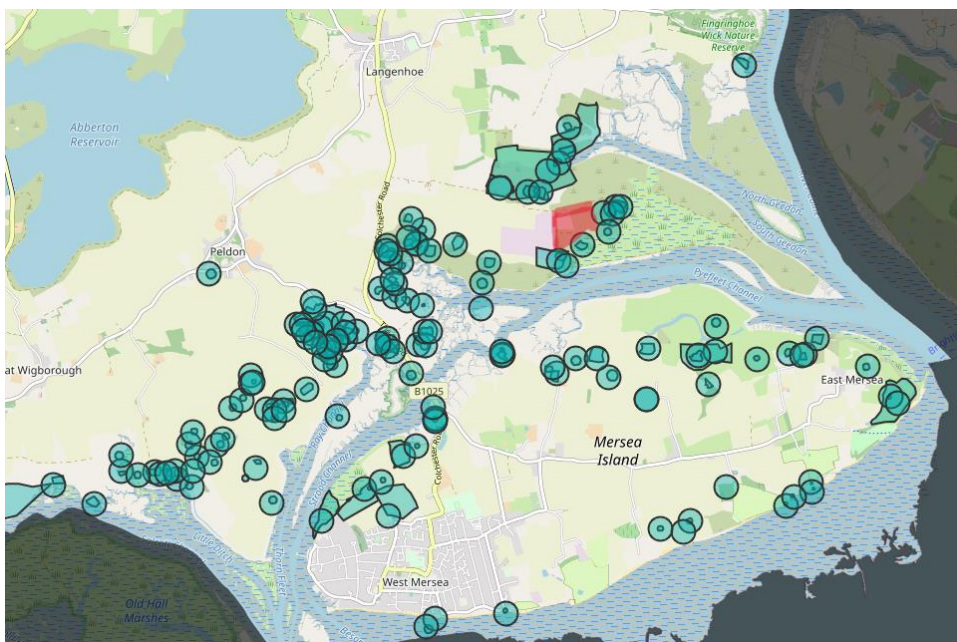


Figure 4: A closer view of Langenhoe surrounded by blue red hill monument indicators. The excavation area of 2022 is highlighted in red (Colchester Heritage Map, 2023).

Conclusion

Overall, the framework's exclusion of the Essex red hills is understandable but dismisses to a certain extent a wealth of knowledge built on them since at least the late 1800s. The revised framework objectively explored work completed from 2000 to 2011 so the scarce mention of them is logical given its layout. The 2021 website makes little effort to include them at all. The framework deserves credit for its revision since its initial publication in 1997. However, with the expansion of commercial units within the East of England it may be time to once again revise the framework thoroughly to allow sites at risk of being lost (for example coastal sites) to be explored further. As indicated by the author within the Iron Age and Roman chapters the red hills in Essex are numerous (Medlycott, 2011). The new discovery and excavation of four at Fingringhoe in 2022 was hampered by ordnance disturbances however their presence is there (Pooley, 2023). They did not operate in isolation but in military, territorial and trade contexts. Without having them pinpointed as an area of future analysis within Essex allows them to go noticed but not necessarily explored with a research objective in mind.

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