

**An archaeological watching brief
on new creeks and the
breaching of the sea wall at
Abbotts Hall Farm,
Great Wigborough, Essex
August-October 2002**

**report prepared by
Kate Orr**

**on behalf of
the Essex Wildlife Trust,
Lincs Nature,
the World Wildlife Fund
and the Environment Agency**

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Contents

1	Summary	1
2	Introduction	1
3	Archaeological background	1
4	Aim	2
5	Methods	2
6	Results	2
7	Finds	3
8	Discussion and interpretation	4
9	Acknowledgements	5
10	References	5
11	Glossary	5
12	Archive deposition	5
Appendix A: Report on the Iron Age and Roman pottery and Roman pottery <i>by Paul R Sealey</i>		7
Appendix B: Report on the medieval pottery <i>by Howard Brooks</i>		7
Figures		after p 7
EHCR summary sheet		

List of figures

Fig 1 Site location, showing features, scale 1:10,000.

Fig 2 F4: plan, scale 1:500.

1 Summary

An archaeological watching brief was carried out during the digging of creeks and the breaching of the sea wall at Abbots Hall Farm, Great Wigborough, Essex, and one previously unrecorded red hill of possible Middle Iron Age date was observed. A probable medieval midden of oystershells was recorded near Salcott.

2 Introduction

- 2.1 This is the archive report on an archaeological watching brief at Abbots Hall Farm, Great Wigborough, Essex, carried out by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) between August and October 2002.
- 2.2 Abbots Hall Farm is a 280 hectare coastal farm in the ownership of the Essex Wildlife Trust. It is currently undergoing a programme of environmental works by the Environment Agency which includes flooding the land to create a nature reserve. The watching brief involved monitoring the digging out of new creeks behind the sea wall and the breaching of the sea wall. It is the fifth phase of archaeological work carried out by CAT on the farm (see section 3.2).
- 2.3 The farm is in the parish of Great and Little Wigborough and borders the Salcott Channel which feeds into the estuary of the River Colne and River Blackwater. The area monitored consisted mainly of arable fields as well as areas of rough land (former salt marsh). The land is just above sea-level and is centred on National Grid Reference or NGR TL 970 138 (Fig 1).
- 2.4 This report follows the standards set out in the Borough Council's *Guidelines on standards and practices for archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester* (1999, updated 2002) and *Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester Museums* (1996, updated 2002), and the IFA's *Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief* (1999).

3 Archaeological background

- 3.1 This area of the Essex coast is well known for its Late Iron Age and Roman salt-making sites known as 'red hills'. These were sites where salt was extracted by evaporation from sea water using clay pans over a hearth or in an oven. Many red hills have been recorded in Salcott parish (Essex Heritage Conservation Record or EHCR nos 11461 and 11463-11470) and also in the eastern part of Great and Little Wigborough parish (EHCR nos 11448-11460). Although numerous red hills have been flattened by ploughing, they are still recognisable by areas of red or burnt earth and by 'briquetage' or fragments of vessels and equipment used in the salt-making process. Up to 1990, some 300 red hills had been located on the Essex coast, some of which have been excavated (Fawn *et al* 1990, 6). The process of discovering new sites has been accelerated by coastal erosion.
- 3.2 CAT have carried out several other investigations in this area; fieldwalking of the proposed saltwater lake at TL 971 140 (October 2000; CAT Report 105); trial-trenching of the above site (November 2000; CAT Report 111); and a fieldwalking and trial-trenching evaluation on the 24 hectares of coastal land to be flooded by the breaching of the sea wall (November 2001; CAT Report 161). This last investigation included some of the land that was monitored during the current watching brief. Four significant clusters of Roman and medieval finds were identified by fieldwalking. The trial-trenching tested these areas and exposed one previously known and one previously unknown red hill. A watching brief on the lake and counter-wall trench at TL 9711 1399 was carried out in August 2001 (CAT Report 211). This revealed two rows of wooden posts of indeterminate date stretching across part of a former creek, sealed by thick clay deposits.
- 3.3 Recent work by the National Monuments Record using aerial photographs has recorded a mound, an enclosure and a linear feature of uncertain date in the field due south of Abbots Hall Farm and north of the sea wall (EHCR no 16706).
- 3.4 The Chapman and André map of 1777 records Abbots Hall Farm as 'Abbes Farm'.

4 Aim

The aim of the fieldwork was to record any finds, features or deposits disturbed by the groundworks.

5 Methods

- 5.1 Periodic visits (four in total) were made during and after the digging of the creeks and the breaching of the sea wall. The trenches for the creeks were dug by the contractors using a mechanical excavator with a toothed ditching bucket. The depths of the creeks varied from at least 1m deep around Breach B to less than 1m around Breach A. Spoil heaps were checked for artefacts.
- 5.2 Individual records of layers and features were entered on CAT pro-forma record sheets.
- 5.3 A plan of Feature 4 (F4) was made at a scale of 1:500 (Fig 2).
- 5.4 Finds were registered on CAT record sheets and assigned find numbers according to context. Finds were washed, marked and bagged according to context.
- 5.5 Colour photographs of features were taken with a digital camera and a 35mm transparency camera.
- 5.6 NGR co-ordinates were obtained using a Geographic Positioning System (GPS).

6 Results

6.1 Breach A (Fig 1)

The area to the north of the sea wall, 500m north-east of Salcott church, was monitored after the creeks had been dug out. The following soil profile and features were observed:

Layer or L5 – scrub and grey brown silty topsoil, seals F3.

L6 – light brown/yellow hard clayey alluvial mud with abundant small stones.

F3 (NGR TL 95736 13840) – a probable medieval midden of oystershells was recorded where new creeks had been dug, approximately 50m north of the sea wall. The feature consisted of a spread of densely packed oystershells, approximately 10m in diameter. This deposit, which also included some winkle shells, occurred between layers L5 and L6 at 500mm below ground-level. Medieval (13th- to 14th-century) pottery was abundant (find no 1; see Appendix B).

6.2 Breach B (Fig 1)

The area to the north of the sea wall was monitored during the digging of the new creeks. Around F1, the following soil profile was observed:

L1 – topsoil and grasses, seals L2.

L2 – dark brown clayey alluvial mud, deposited more recently than the London Clay during the encroachment of the sea, seals L3.

L3 – stiff grey London Clay natural, seals F1.

L4 – light brown London Clay natural, at the same level as and interchangeable with L3, seals F1.

F1 – approximately 100m to the north-west of Breach B, the excavation of a new creek exposed an extensive spread of red clay at its base, 1m below ground-level. F1 was sealed by topsoil, alluvial mud and grey and brown clay (L1-L4 respectively). Originally it was thought that this might represent a red hill. However, on closer inspection, the red clay could be seen to continue for a distance at the bottom of an old creek. The clay was very clean with no trace of briquetage or charcoal.

F2 – approximately 10m north of the sea wall and 75m north east of Breach B, a patch of rusty red clayey topsoil, possibly burnt, was observed on the surface. This deposit extended to 100mm below ground-level had been cut through by an existing creek. This may possibly be the remains of a red hill but there was no briquetage or

trace of a mound. It was not possible to see what this deposit overlaid as the creek had grassed over.

F4 (NGR TL 96444 13604) – to the north of Breach B, 60m south of the field boundary and the track to the farm, was the remains of a former red hill (Fig 2). This red hill was levelled in the 1950s or 1970s, probably by ploughing activity, and the red earth had been pushed into existing creeks at the time. Therefore, by the time of the watching brief, there was no trace of a mound and the red earth was mixed with ploughsoil. A new creek had already been dug through the former red hill by the time the visit was made. A spread of reddish brown clayey silt was observed on the surface, extending for approximately 58m east to west and 17m north to south. The red earth extended to between 500-600mm below ground-level and sealed L7, orangey brown clay mottled with grey clay. The red earth on the spoil heap was checked and abundant briquetage was collected plus one burnt flint. A small amount of Middle Iron Age pottery was collected and one sherd of Roman amphora. This material was mixed with more modern artefacts from the ploughsoil including a piece of clay pigeon. The earth appeared to be redder in the south eastern corner of the spread and it was here that most briquetage was found.

The breaching of the sea wall was also monitored. However, as this was only built in recent times, of river clay, there was nothing of archaeological interest to observe.

There was no trace of the mound, enclosure and linear feature recorded on the EHCR in this area (EHCR no 16706).

7 Finds

All finds were kept.

Table 1: List of finds by context.

find no	context	description	date	weight in g
1	F3	Oystershells	medieval	213
1	F3	Fragments of medieval cooking vessels of medieval sandy grey ware (Fabric 20); includes one fragment of a bowl with a hollow handle	late 13th-14th century	326
1	F3	Slag?	undated	89
2	F4 spoil heap	Briquetage inc fragments of firebar, pedestal and pans, some whitened by salt	Middle-Late Iron Age or Roman	2500
2	F4 spoil heap	Brick and piece of peg-tile	post-medieval	246
3	F4 spoil heap	Body sherds from a Middle Iron Age vessel	Middle Iron Age to 300-50 BC	43
3	F4 spoil heap	Sherd of a Dressel 20 amphora	Roman or possibly Late Iron Age	5
3	F4 spoil heap	Clay-pigeon fragment	modern	6
3	F4 spoil heap	Briquetage inc pedestals and pans, some pieces whitened by salt	Middle to Late Iron Age or Roman	2300
3	F4 spoil heap	Burnt flint	undated	21
3	F4 spoil heap	Animal bone	undated	2

The Roman and Iron Age pottery from the former red hill F4 and the medieval pottery from F3 are discussed further in Appendices A and B respectively. The

remnants of ceramic salt-making equipment or 'briquetage' was abundant in the spoil from F4. A proportion of the fragments probably represent flat-bottomed troughs for evaporating the salt water. There were also two rounded pieces which appear to be too large to be pedestals but may be from a curved trough. Fragments of pedestals found may have been originally T-shaped. It has been suggested that pedestals were used in the manufacture of the briquetage vessels rather than in the salt-making process (Fawn *et al* 1990, 26). A few thicker flat pieces of briquetage, with whitened surfaces, may possibly have been compartments for an oven but it is hard to say so with any certainty. A fragment of a firebar which would have been used to support the trough over the fire or in the oven was retrieved.

8 Discussion and interpretation

- 8.1** Several features or possible features were exposed and recorded during the watching brief:
- 8.1.1** F1 – an extensive patch of red clay near Breach B. The feature is thought to be natural and not to represent a red hill. A red hill would rest on the London Clay or the alluvium, not be sealed by it (Fawn *et al* 1990, 5). The clay was very clean with no trace of briquetage or charcoal and it was of a very different colour and texture to what would be expected of burnt earth.
- 8.1.2** F2 – a spread of rusty red-coloured topsoil near Breach B. This could possibly represent the remains of another red hill, although there was no briquetage or charcoal and no trace of a mound. The colour of the earth was very different to that of F4. Alternatively the colour could be the result of natural processes or it may be due to burning in recent times.
- 8.1.3** F3 – a seam of abundant oystershells with medieval pottery, found under the topsoil near Breach A. This spread is likely to be a midden of oystershells, dumped, perhaps by the residents of Salcott, at some time in the 13th or 14th century judging by the pottery found with it.
- 8.1.4** F4 – a previously unrecorded former red hill, north of Breach B. This was on the landward side of the sea wall, ie a 'dry site' (Fawn *et al* 1990, 5). This feature was not recorded during the fieldwalking evaluation of 2001 because the field was unploughed. However, the owners of the land and the Environment Agency appeared to know of its existence. The red hill had been levelled in the 1950s or 1970s, probably as a result of ploughing activity. Because of this activity, it is not possible to measure its original size. The hearth was most likely to have been in the south- eastern part of the red earth spread where the briquetage and red earth were concentrated; however, no trace of an actual hearth was observed and it is difficult to know what sort of heating system was used. The recently-published Fenland evidence suggests that direct heating systems using a hearth were common in the Middle-Late Iron Age and that these were usually replaced by indirect heating systems using an oven with compartments and flues (Lane & Morris 2001, 373).

The Middle Iron Age pottery was found in red earth, with briquetage which means it could be associated with the former red hill (F4). Pottery of this date is not commonly found on any sites in this area, and therefore its presence here is significant; it possibly dates the feature to the Middle Iron Age. However, the pottery was not stratified, being recovered from the spoil heap where there was also modern material and Roman pottery; therefore we cannot securely date the former red hill to the Middle Iron Age. Only three other Middle Iron Age red hills had been recorded north of the River Crouch in Essex up to 1990 (Fawn *et al* 1990, 39). The salt-making industry flourished just before the Roman conquest of AD 43 and in the early Roman period (Fawn *et al* 1990, 38 & 39). Therefore it is likely that this site was still in use then, and this conclusion is supported by the sherd of amphora which was retrieved during this watching brief.

9 Acknowledgements

- 9.1 The site work was carried out by Kate Orr. The project was monitored by Martin Winter, Archaeology Officer for Colchester Borough Council. The medieval pottery was identified by Howard Brooks of CAT and the Iron Age and Roman pottery by Paul R Sealey of Colchester Museums.
- 9.2 CAT would like to thank the Environment Agency who carried out the creek work and sea wall breaching; the Essex Wildlife Trust, Lincs Nature, the World Wildlife Fund and The Environment Agency, who commissioned and funded the work; and James Fawn for his information on salt-making and briquetage.

10 References

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11 Glossary

context	specific location on an archaeological site, especially one where finds are made, eg a feature or layer
EHCR	Essex Heritage Conservation Record, Essex County Council
feature	an identifiable thing like a pit, a wall, a drain, a floor; can contain 'contexts'
Late Iron Age	the period preceding the Roman invasion, c 50 BC to AD 43
medieval	the period between c AD 1066 and c 1500
Middle Iron Age	the period c 300-50 BC
NGR	National Grid Reference
natural	geological deposit undisturbed by human activity
Roman	the period from AD 43 to around AD 430

12 Archive deposition

The archive is held at Colchester Archaeological Trust, 12 Lexden Road, Colchester, Essex CO3 3NF, but it will be permanently deposited with Colchester Museums under accession code 2002.160.

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Appendix A: Report on the Middle Iron Age and Roman pottery

by Paul R Sealey

Finds bag 3, F4

The tiny quantity of pottery (48g) was exclusively Middle Iron Age, apart from one small flake of Dressel 20 amphora. These amphoras are ubiquitous in Britain from AD 43 until AD 260, with some few vessels arriving in the Late Iron Age, although pre-conquest importation here is unlikely. The Iron Age pottery consists of scraps of sand-tempered pottery, occasionally with some large black grog pellets and vegetable temper. It is hand-made reduced (black-grey) ware typical of the Middle Iron Age and hence datable to c 300 BC-50 BC. It is possible that the grog indicates a later date, rather than earlier in this time bracket.

Appendix B: Report on the medieval pottery

by Howard Brooks

Fabric codes are after Cotter 2000.

Finds bag 1, F3

Eighteen sherds (326g) of medieval sandy grey ware (Fabric 20, 13th-14th century) were retrieved. One sherd has internal lime scale, showing that at least one pot was used to boil water. Two sherds are from rims of cooking pots, so a domestic origin for this group seems a reasonable supposition.

The most interesting piece is a large rim sherd (183g) from a bowl with a hollow tubular handle. In profile, the bowl is quite similar to Cotter 2000, figure 62.37 and 62.39, except that a hollow tubular handle replaces the one-piece handle in the latter example. External sooting shows that it was heated over a fire. At face value, it would appear that the handle was used as a pouring spout. However, an obvious problem is that the rim of the vessel coincides with the bottom of the hollow handle, so tilting the bowl to pour the contents out through the handle would simply result in the contents slopping over the side of the bowl. Perhaps it was a throwback to an earlier way of forming a pouring spout, which by that time had gone beyond its functional life. There are no published examples in Cotter 2000 of any vessels in this form in Fabrics 20 (medieval sandy grey ware) or 21a (Colchester-type ware), so they were not common.

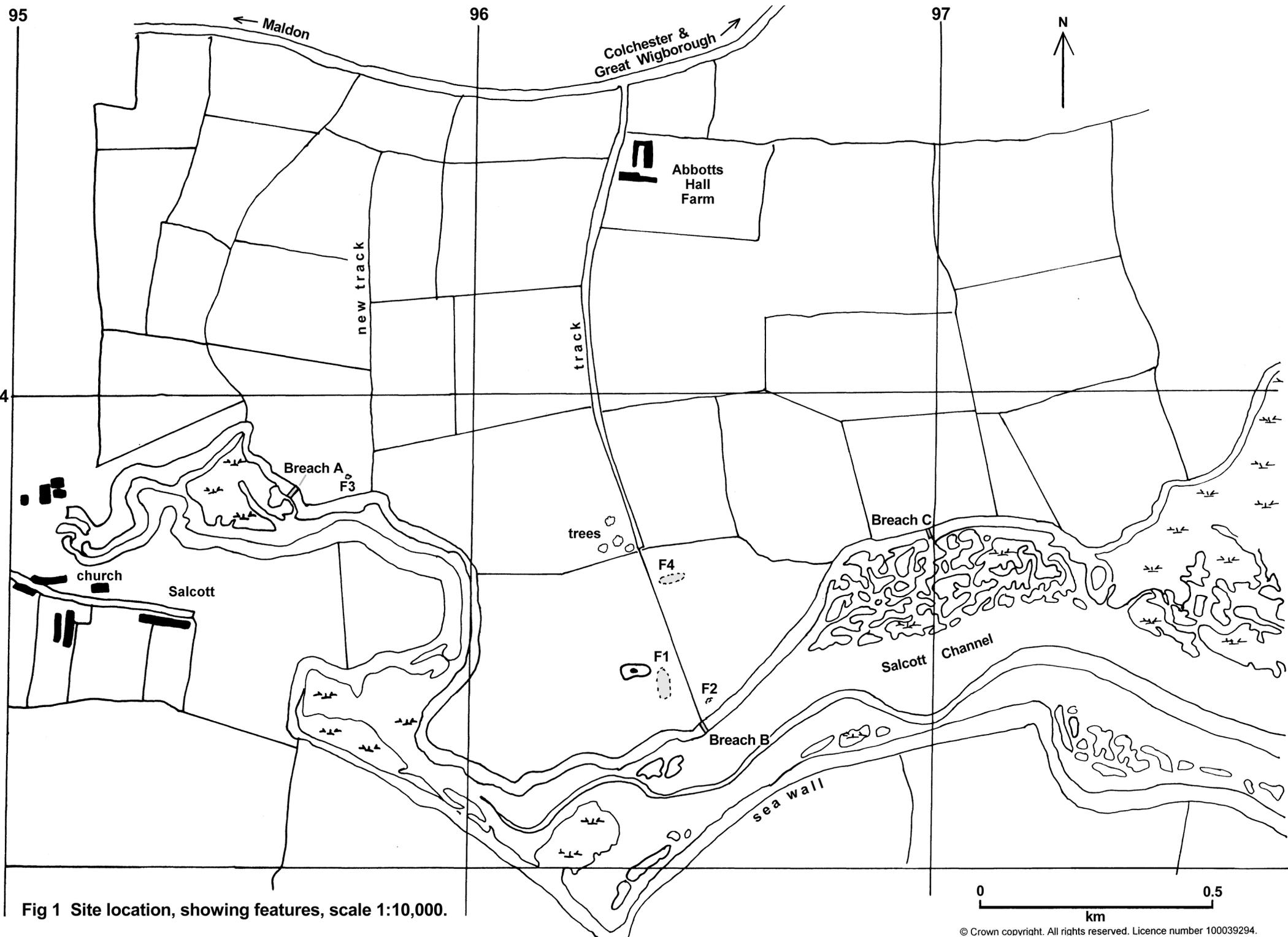


Fig 1 Site location, showing features, scale 1:10,000.



Fig 2 F4: plan, scale 1:500.

**Essex Heritage Conservation Record/
Essex Archaeology and History**

Summary sheet

Site address: Abbots Hall Farm, Great Wigborough, Essex	
Parish: Great and Little Wigborough	District: Colchester
NGR: TL 970 138 (c)	Site code: 2002.160
Type of work: Watching brief	Site director/group: Colchester Archaeological Trust
Date of work: August-October 2002	Size of area investigated:
Location of finds/curating museum: Colchester Museums	Funding source: the Essex Wildlife Trust, Lincs Nature, the World Wildlife Fund and the Environment Agency
Further seasons anticipated? No	Related EHCR nos: 1148-11460, 11461, 11463-11470, 16706
Final report: CAT Report 213 and summary in <i>EAH</i>	
Periods represented: Middle Iron Age, Roman, medieval	
Summary of fieldwork results: An archaeological watching brief was carried out during the digging of creeks and the breaching of the sea wall at Abbots Hall Farm, Great Wigborough, Essex, and one previously unrecorded red hill of possible Middle Iron Age date was observed. A probable medieval midden of oystershells was recorded near Salcott.	
Previous summaries/reports: CAT Reports 105, 111 and 161	
Author of summary: Kate Orr	Date of summary: November 2002