

**An archaeological watching brief
during enhancements to
the water control system
at the RSPB nature reserve,
Old Hall Marshes, Tollesbury, Essex
October 2003**

**report prepared by
Kate Orr**

**on behalf of
the RSPB**

NGR: TL 9625 1282 (c)
CAT project ref.: 03/10b
ECC HAMP site code: TOOH 03
Colchester Museums accession code: 2003.263



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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	Discussion	2
8	Acknowledgements	2
9	References	3
10	Glossary	3
11	Archive deposition	3

Figures after p 4

EHCR summary sheet

List of plates and figures

Plate 1 New ditch 0313 looking south-east.

Fig 1 Site location.

Fig 2 Site plan, showing location of new ditch 0313.

Fig 3 New ditch 0313: south-east-facing section.

1 Summary

A watching brief was carried out during the excavation of a 100m-long ditch at the RSPB nature reserve, Old Hall Marshes, Tollesbury, Essex. No features or finds of archaeological significance were recorded during the works. There were no linear features crossing the trench, and no evidence of salt-making. The ground appeared to be undisturbed except for the previous removal of the topsoil.

2 Introduction

- 2.1 This is the archive report on an archaeological watching brief carried out by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) during enhancements to the water control system at the RSPB nature reserve, Old Hall Marshes, Tollesbury, Essex. The watching brief was carried out on the 13th October 2003.
- 2.2 A planning application was submitted to Essex County Council (ECC) in January 2003 for improvement to the water control system at the RSPB nature reserve at Old Hall Marshes. The proposals include the excavation of a 100m length of ditch (ditch 0313). The ECC Heritage Advice Management and Promotion (HAMP) group recommended to the RSPB that an intensive watching brief be undertaken during the creation of the ditch.
- 2.3 Tollesbury is 10km north-east of Maldon. Old Hall Marshes are situated north-east of Tollesbury, between Salcott Channel and Tollesbury Fleet. The site is located next to a former creek, in grazed pasture to the south of the present sea wall, centred at NGR TL 9625 1282 (Figs 1-2).
- 2.4 All fieldwork was done in accordance with a Written Scheme of Investigation agreed with the HAMP group officer, which in turn followed their brief.
- 2.5 This report follows 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 are sites where salt was extracted by evaporation from sea water, using clay pans over hearths. Red hills have been recorded in Tollesbury parish (Essex Heritage Conservation Record or EHCR nos 1156 and 16192), Salcott parish (EHCR 11461 and 11463-11470) and also in the eastern part of Great and Little Wigborough parish (EHCR 11448-11460 and 16706). A red hill has recently been recorded just to the north of Salcott Creek at Abbots Hall Farm (CAT Report 213).
As the site is near a creek, it was thought possible that other unidentified salt-making sites might lie along the proposed ditch line. Although numerous red hills have been flattened by ploughing, their sites are still identifiable by areas of red or burnt earth and by 'briquetage', 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). Recent work by the National Monuments Record using aerial photography has added to the list of sites known along the Essex coast.
- 3.2 Linear features identifiable from aerial photography (EHCR 16707) are situated to the west of the site. These are thought to represent the remains of counter walls constructed to stop flooding of reclaimed land, although it is also suggested that they may have been associated with salt production.

4 Aim

The aim of the archaeological monitoring was to identify and record any surviving archaeological deposits or features that were exposed during groundworks for the new ditch.

5 Methods

- 5.1** The excavation of the ditch was carried out using a mechanical excavator with a toothless ditching bucket under archaeological supervision. The ditch (ditch 0313 on Fig 2) was cut through a reed bed located between a grass field to the west and Salcottstone Brook to the east.
- 5.2** Sections were examined for features and spoil heaps were checked for finds.
- 5.3** A section drawing was made of layers at the north western end of the trench at a scale of 1:10.
- 5.4** Colour photographs of the site were taken with a digital camera.

6 Results

The ditch was excavated to a depth of between 550mm and 600mm and the width at the top was 2m. Two layers were exposed:

Layer 1 (L1) – reeds and compact grey brown and orange silty clay subsoil. In places, the subsoil had a metallic look to it. At the south-eastern end of the trench, L1 became almost peat-like and contained very fibrous reed roots. The orange colour may be due to the rotting of some of these reed roots.

L2 – at the base of the trench, sealed by L1, was the natural London Clay or ‘Marsh Mud’ which consisted of soft grey blue clay. A greater depth of clay was encountered at the south-eastern end of the trench, which was dug deeper than the north-western end. The lack of topsoil may have been due to stripping for the creation of the reed bed which the trench was dug through. The level of the reed bed was slightly lower than the adjoining field to the north-west, which would seem to support this suggestion.

No features or finds of archaeological significance were encountered during the works. There were no linear features crossing the trench, and no evidence of salt-making. No finds were retrieved. In fact, except for the removal of the topsoil, the site was undisturbed.

7 Discussion

The results of the watching brief were negative. Natural ground was reached, therefore any archaeological features present would have been exposed during the groundwork. Topsoil had previously been stripped off, perhaps prior to the creation of the reed bed. It is unlikely that a salt-making site would have been completely removed by this activity without leaving any pottery or briquetage.

8 Acknowledgements

The site work was carried out by the author. The project was monitored by Adrian Gascoyne, the HAMP group officer. CAT would like to thank the RSPB for funding the work and Paul Charlton for commissioning the work and arranging access.

9 References

- | | | |
|---|------|--|
| English Heritage | 2000 | Old Hall Marshes, Essex Survey Report |
| CAT Report 213 | | An archaeological watching brief on new creeks and the breaching of the sea wall at Abbots Hall Farm, Great Wigborough, Essex, unpublished CAT archive report, by Kate Orr, 2003 |
| Fawn, A J, Evans, K, McMaster, I, & Davies, G M R | 1990 | <i>The red hills of Essex: salt-making in antiquity</i> , Colchester Archaeological Group |
| Lane, T, & Morris, E | 2001 | <i>A millennium of salt-making: prehistoric and Romano-British salt production in the Fenland</i> , Lincolnshire Archaeology and Heritage Report Series, 4 |

10 Glossary

context	specific location on an archaeological site, especially one where finds are made
cropmarks	ancient features which show as lines and other marks in crops due to differential growth of plants according to presence or absence of archaeological features
EHCR feature	Essex Heritage Conservation Record, Essex County Council an identifiable thing like a pit, a wall, a drain, a floor; can contain 'contexts'
Late Iron Age	the period from c 50 BC-AD 43
NGR	National Grid Reference
natural	geological deposit undisturbed by human activity
Roman	the period from AD 43-AD 410

11 Archive deposition

The archive is held by the Colchester Archaeological Trust at 12 Lexden Road, Colchester, Essex CO3 3NF, but it will be permanently deposited with Colchester Museums under accession code 2003.263.



Plate 1 New ditch 0313 looking south-east.

Distribution list:

Paul Charlton of the RSPB
Adrian Gascoyne of the ECC HAMP group
Essex Heritage Conservation Record, Essex County Council

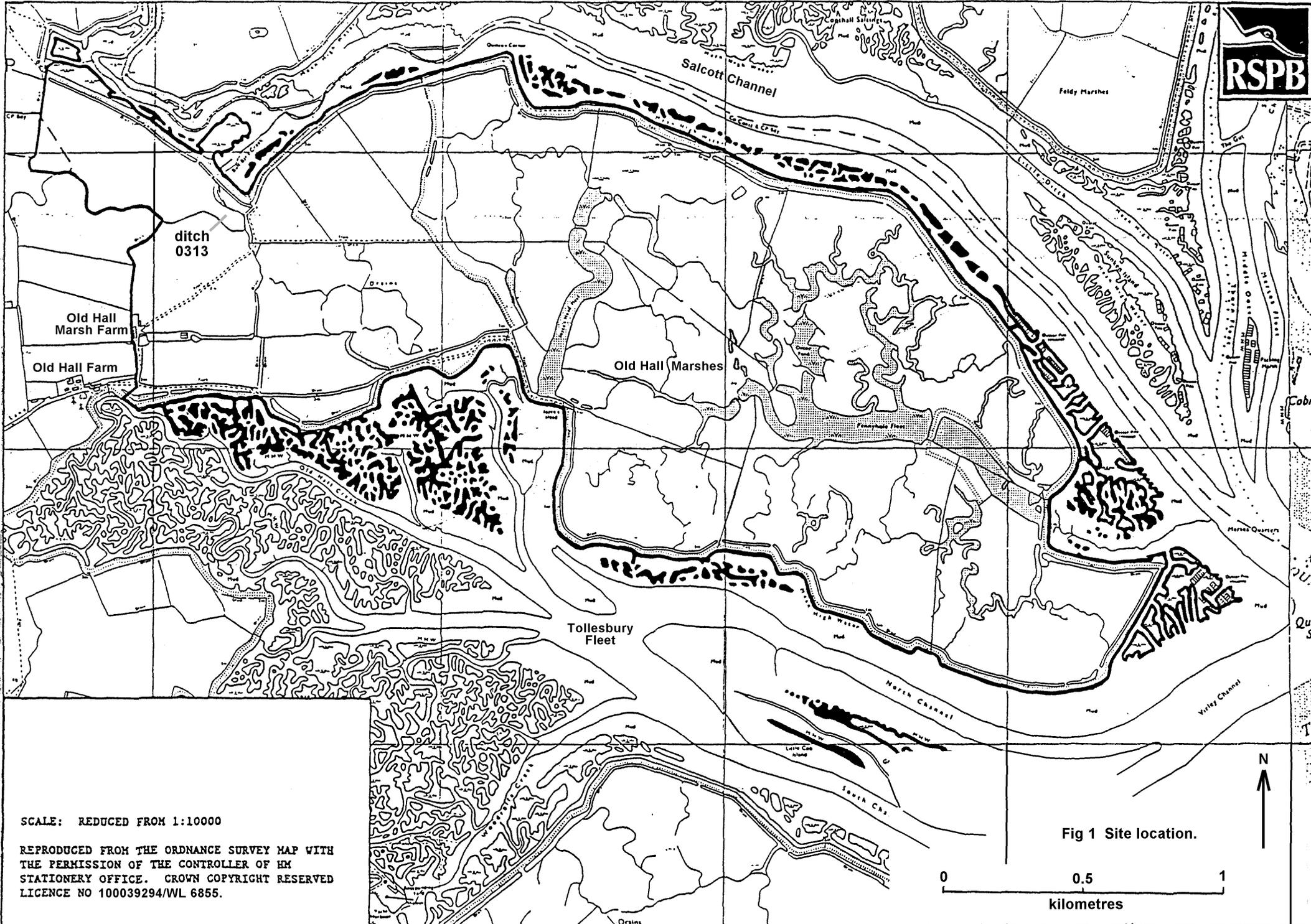


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Date: 15.12.03



ditch 0313

Old Hall Marsh Farm

Old Hall Farm

Old Hall Marshes

Tollesbury Fleet

Salcott Channel

Felby Marshes

North Channel

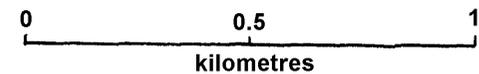
South Channel

Verley Channel

SCALE: REDUCED FROM 1:10000

REPRODUCED FROM THE ORDNANCE SURVEY MAP WITH THE PERMISSION OF THE CONTROLLER OF HM STATIONERY OFFICE. CROWN COPYRIGHT RESERVED LICENCE NO 100039294/WL 6855.

Fig 1 Site location.



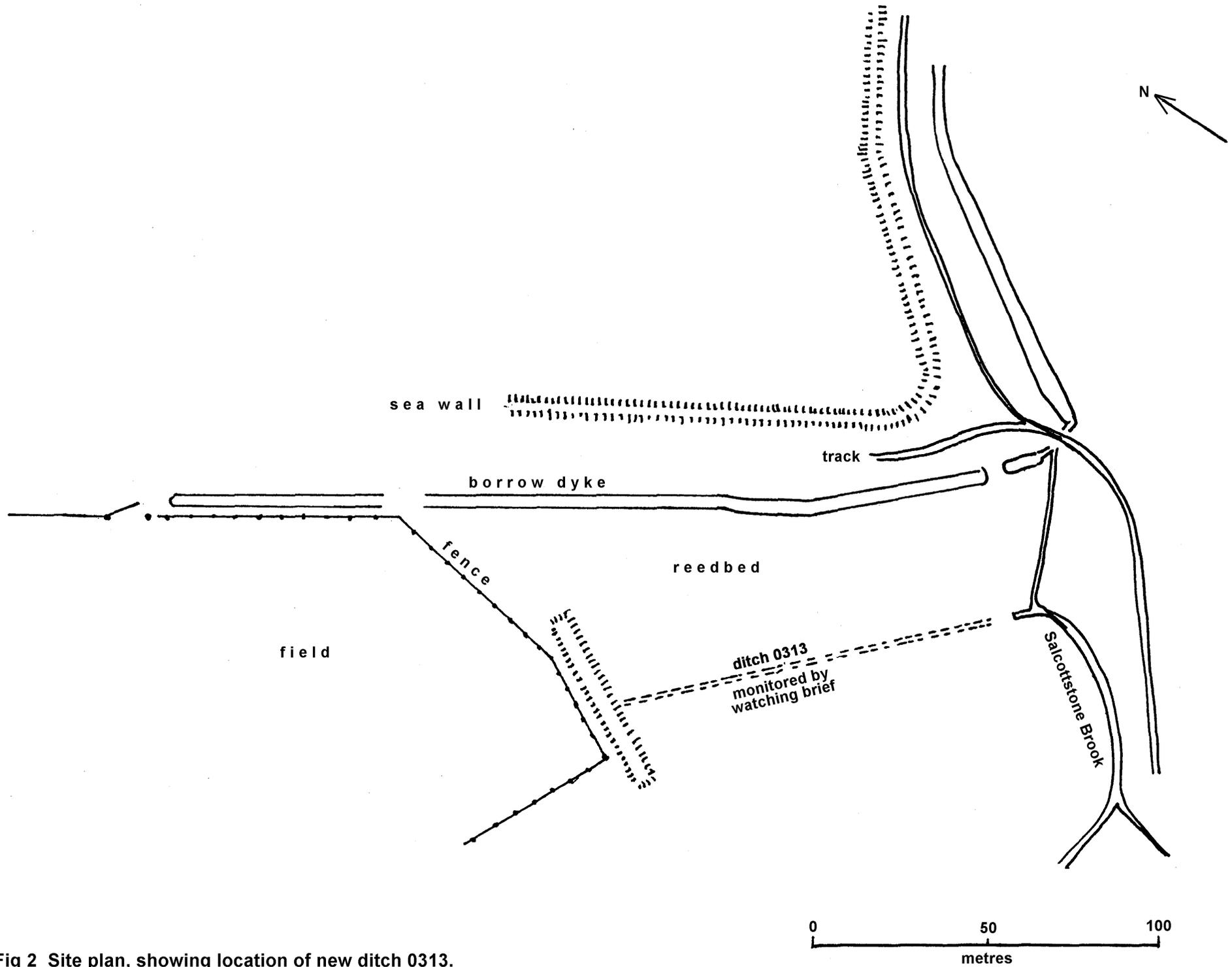
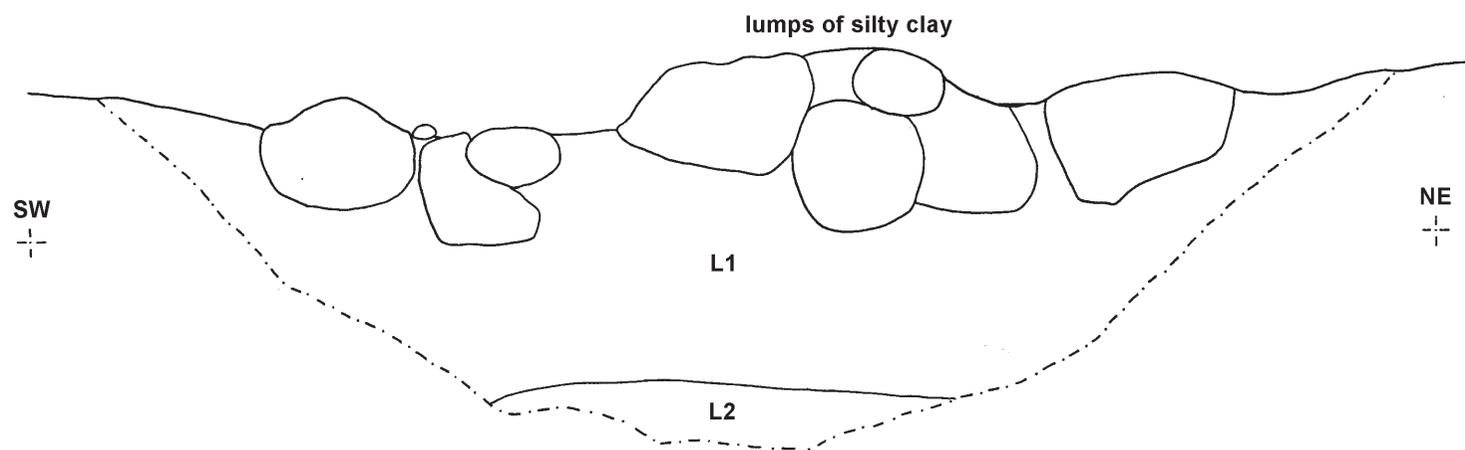


Fig 2 Site plan, showing location of new ditch 0313.



L1 compact grey brown and orange
silty clay subsoil
L2 soft grey blue clay natural

0 500
mm

Fig 3 New ditch 0313: south-east-facing section.

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

Summary sheet

Site name/address: An archaeological watching brief during enhancements to the water control system at the RSPB nature reserve, Old Hall Marshes, Tollesbury, Essex	
Parish: Tollesbury	District: Maldon
NGR: TL 9625 1282 (c)	ECC HAMP site code: TOOH 03
Type of work: Watching brief	Site director/group: Colchester Archaeological Trust
Date of work: 13th October 2003	Size of area investigated: 100m trench
Location of finds/curating museum: Colchester Museums	Funding source: RSPB
Further seasons anticipated? No	Related EHCR nos: 11448-11460, 11461, 11463-11470, 16706, 16707, 1156, 16192
Final report: CAT Report 249	
Periods represented: None	
Summary of fieldwork results: <i>A watching brief was carried out during the excavation of a 100m-long ditch at the RSPB nature reserve, Old Hall Marshes, Tollesbury, Essex. No features or finds of archaeological significance were recorded during the works. There were no linear features crossing the trench, and no evidence of salt-making. The ground appeared to be undisturbed except for the previous removal of the topsoil.</i>	
Previous summaries/reports: None	
Author of summary: K Orr	Date of summary: December 2003