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IRON AGE & ROMANO-BRITISH FEATURES AT WHITSTABLE COMMUNITY COLLEGE BELLEVUE ROAD, WHITSTABLE, KENT

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IRON AGE AND ROMANO-BRITISH FEATURES AT WHITSTABLE COMMUNITY COLLEGE, BELLEVUE ROAD, WHITSTABLE, KENT

By Leonora O'Brien.
With contributions by Nina Crummy, Andy Peachey & Peter Thompson

Abstract

In August 2004 Archaeological Solutions Ltd (AS) undertook an archaeological excavation on land at Whitstable Community College, Bellevue Road, Whitstable, Kent (NG TR 11680 65720). An earlier trial trench evaluation (Crank & Grassam 2004) revealed several pits and a ditch, which were either undated, or contained sparse middle Iron Age pottery. The excavation (Williamson 2004) revealed a sequence of late Iron Age and Romano-British coaxial ditches, probably part of an agricultural field system peripheral to settlement. Other features included dispersed rubbish pits and tree hollows. Post-medieval agricultural features were also recorded. Artefacts were sparse, and comprised struck and burnt flint, largely undiagnostic, and much abraded late Iron Age and Roman pottery sherds and ceramic building material.

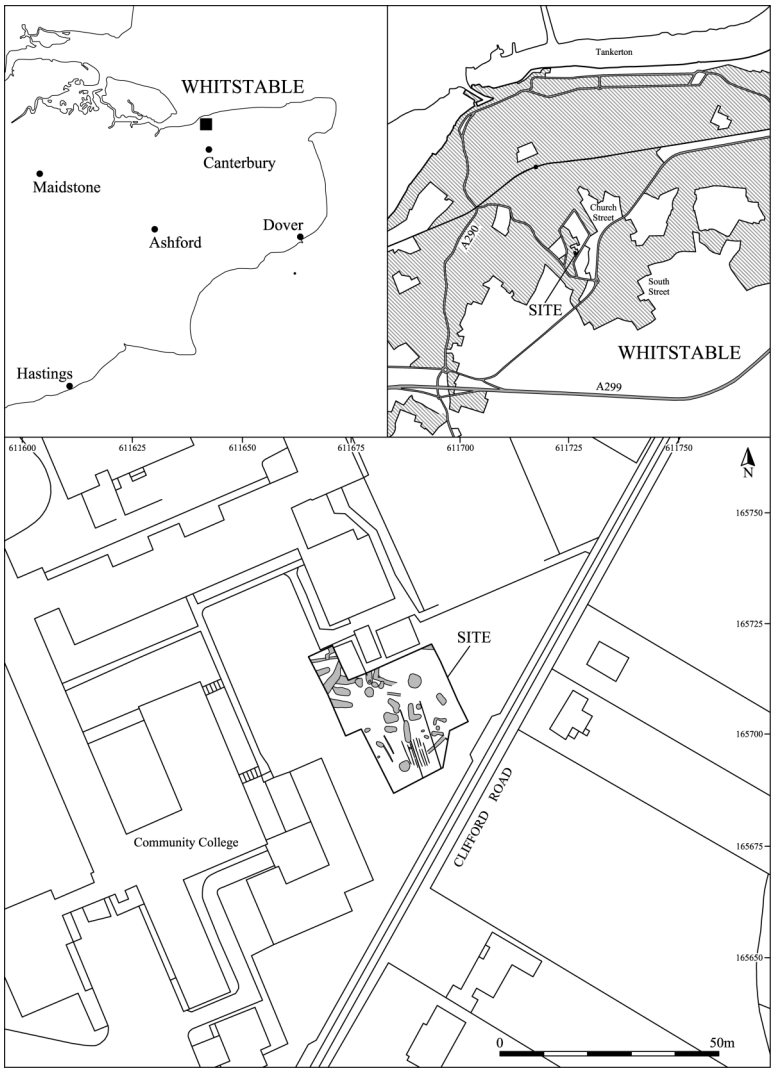

Fig. 1. Site location and detailed site location

Introduction

In August 2004, Archaeological Solutions Ltd (AS) carried out an archaeological excavation on land at Whitstable Community College, Bellevue Road, Whitstable, Kent (NGR TR 11680 65720) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Mouchel Parkman on behalf of the College in advance of proposals to construct a new college block. The site is located on high ground south of Whitstable town centre (c. 30m AOD) on firm London Clay (Holmes 1981) with occasional patches of fine or coarse flint gravel, below slowly permeable clayey soils subject to waterlogging.

Archaeological and historical background (Fig. 2)

Neolithic and Bronze Age coastal settlement and barrows

The Bronze Age sea level was lower than at present, as evidenced by traces of settlements, farming and trackways on the Thames floodplain. Archaeological investigations on the coastline, near Long Rock, Swalecliffe (Bennell 1996; RPS Clouston 2000a; Tyers 2001), revealed the remains of possible structural late Bronze Age to early Iron Age timbers. The area boasts several Neolithic or Bronze Age barrows, for example Thanet Way, Seasalter (Parfitt & Allen 1990). The Ordnance Survey map depicts another at Clowes Wood, located close to the meeting point of three parish boundaries (Chestfield, Whitstable and St Cosmus and St Damian in the Blean), c.2km south south-east of the site.

Iron Age hillforts, farming settlements and salterns

Early Iron Age structural pits and an enclosure ditch have been recorded at Swalecliffe (Bennell 1996; RPS Clouston 2000a; RPS Clouston 2000b), 3km to the north-east of the site. Extensive evidence of Iron Age occupation was revealed at the probable saltern site of Seasalter Level, 4.5km west of the site (CAT 1999).

Intermittent archaeological work over a 10 year period, in advance of the development of Thanet Way, Wraik Hill and Clapham Hill at Seasalter, c.2km south-west of the site, revealed extensive remains of a late Bronze Age to late Iron Age settlement (CAT 1991), comprising rubbish pits, post-holes, hearths, ditches, ovens, a trackway and abundant ceramic evidence (Cross 1997; Allen 1997a; Allen 1997b; Allen 1998; Allen 1999; Allen 2000). The settlement appears to have been located on the crest and slopes of the hill, overlooking Seasalter Level and Whitstable Bay, to the north-west. The settlement shifted slightly to the south during the later Iron Age.

Romano-British towns, villas and farmsteads

Several small Roman settlements developed along Watling Street, the road from London (Londinium) to Rochester (Durobrivae), Canterbury (Durovernum Cantiacorum) and Dover (Dubris) (Tatton-Brown 2001), which is located c.7km to the south of the site. Branching off, to the east, a side road ran from Watling Street to the port at Reculver (Regulbium), where metalling has been found (Goodburn (ed) 1976, 376). To the west, a further side road led to the coast at Seasalter. The Romans established a military base at Canterbury soon after the invasion. A new civitas was built in the early 2nd century which became the principal trading and administrative centre for the area (Blagg 1982; Andrews 2001).

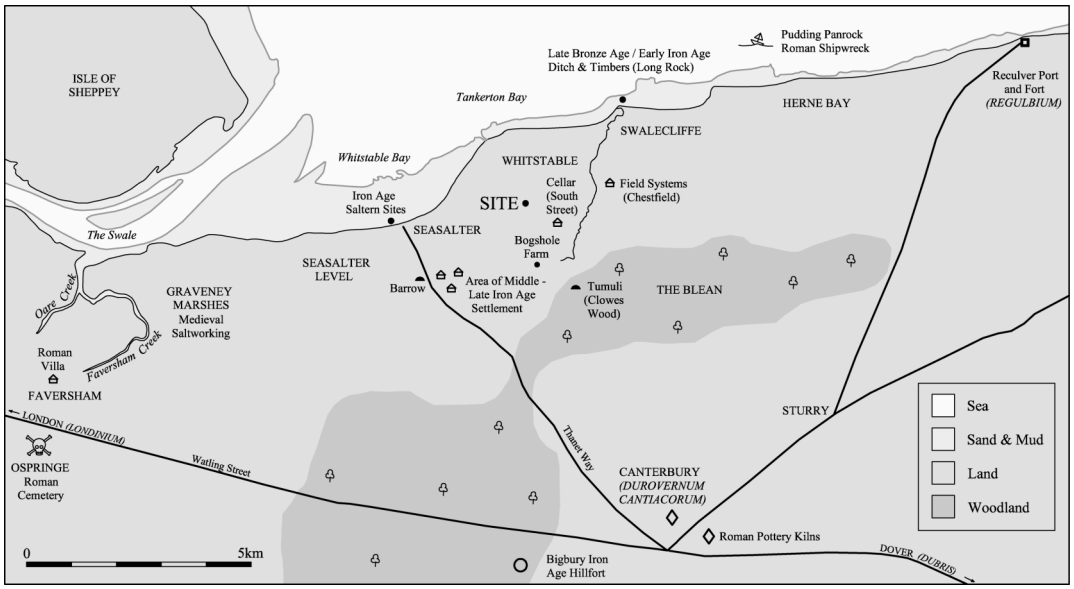

Fig. 2. The Whitstable area in the prehistoric and Romano-British periods

Several pottery workshops were established during the Roman period (Williams and Brown 1999), though the most common features of the estuary area remained salterns (Miles 1975). The Roman sea level was lower, and the coastline was further north, than at present, attested by finds of Roman pottery from the mudflats. The later Roman to Saxon shore fort of Reculver lies over 10km to the north-east. The fort at Reculver may have defended the entrance to the Wantsum channel, and/or acted as a trading and supply port and depot (Pearson 2002). A Roman trading vessel carrying a cargo of samian pottery to Britain was wrecked on the Pudding Pan Rock off Whitstable (Smith 1907; ibid 1909).

Wealthy villa estates are known close to the Thames in parts of north Kent (Detsicas 1983). A series of important villa estates were located in the fertile valleys of the Darent and the Medway, at Darenth (Philp 1984, 92), Lullingstone and Farningham, possibly producing wheat for London and further afield. Further estates were located in the north Kent plain around Faversham (Detsicas 1983). There were settlements at Springhead (Vagniacae) and between Crayford and Welling (Noviomagus).

Excavations in the area of the Iron Age settlement at Thanet Way, Seasalter revealed pottery and features indicative of continued activity into the Roman period (CAT 1991; Cross 1997; (Allen 1998). Traces of Iron Age and Roman occupation, with indications of a field system, were observed at Chestfield, c.1.7km north-east of the site (Frere (ed) 1987, 359; Frere (ed) 1988, 484).

A late 1st or early 2nd century rectangular underground cellar, with walls of coursed tegula and a clay floor, was found in 1961 in the side of a disused railway cutting at South Street, c.1km south-east of the site (Johnston 1972, 121). The cellar may have been associated with an as-yet undiscovered villa estate in the valley to the east of Bogshole Farm.

Sub-Roman and Anglo-Saxon settlement

The earliest evidence for Anglo-Saxon settlement was concentrated along the Thames and its tributaries. In some areas, such as the Darent valley, the early Anglo-Saxon settlement pattern can be directly related to the pre-existing system of Romano-British villa estates, suggesting that incomers chose to move into already settled areas (Tyler 1992, 71).

The ‘dark earth’ found at Canterbury suggests that an agrarian lifestyle was adopted after the end of the Roman occupation. Canterbury (Cantwaraburh) became the capital of the kingdom of Kent during the 6th century. Salt working and coastal trade continued into the later Saxon period and land used for settlement and farming was extended to the heathland at Borstal Hill (Borgsteall), to the south-west (Holmes & Wheaton (eds.) 2002, 50).

Previous archaeological work at the site

A small trial trench evaluation (Crank & Grassam 2004) revealed a small number of archaeological features. These comprised several linear ditches and two pits. Sparse pottery recovered from the features suggested a possible middle Iron Age date.

Excavation and recording

The excavation encompassed an area of c.630m^2 (Fig. 3). Topsoil and overburden were mechanically excavated under archaeological supervision, thereafter all further excavation was undertaken by hand. Excavated spoil was searched for archaeological finds and the site scanned by metal detector. Archaeological features were cut into natural deposits and sealed by recent made ground or topsoil.

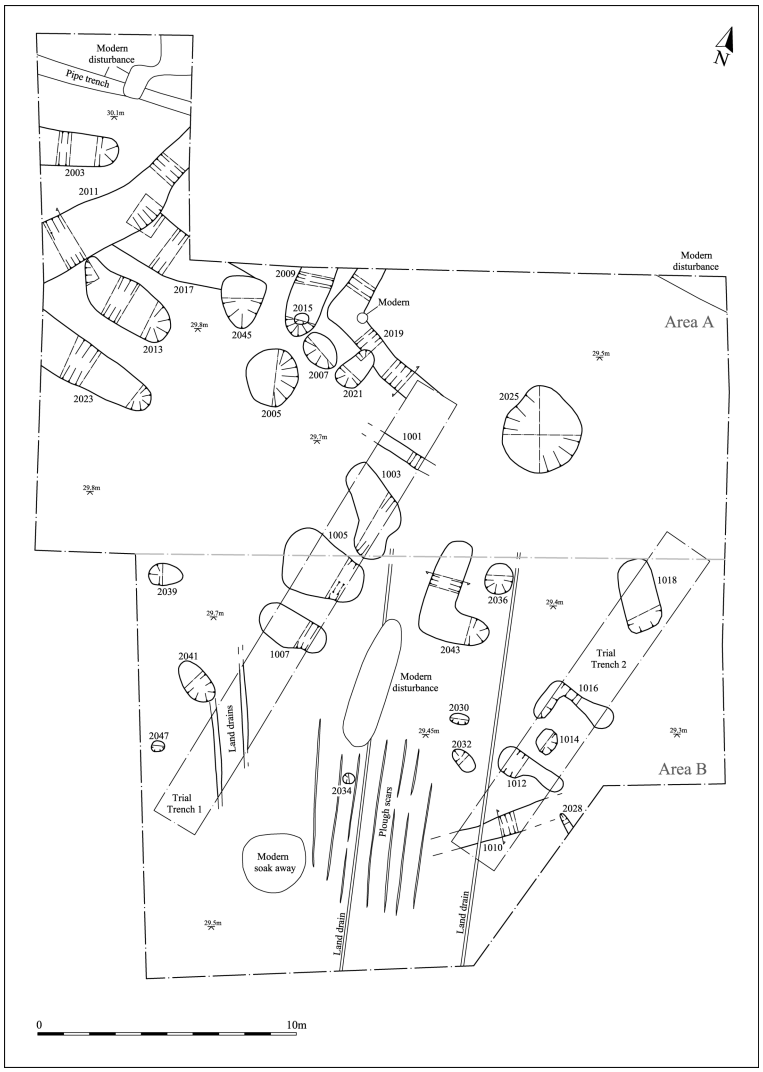

Fig. 3. Site plan

Stratigraphic phases (Fig. 4)

The results from the evaluation and excavation are detailed below.

Phase	Date	Features
1	Middle Iron Age	Three discrete pits and a ditch fragment in the south of the site
2	Late Iron Age/Romano-British	Parallel and 'L' shaped ditch fragments and discrete pits E/W and N/S axis in the centre and north-west of the site
3	Later or post-Romano-British features	Parallel and coaxial ditches on NE/SW and SE/NW axis in south-west and north-west of the site ? line of tree hollows
4	Post-medieval /modern	Land drains, plough scars and soak-away in south. Fence-lines on ENE/WSW axis in north and south . Pipe trench in north of site
U	Undated	Ditch terminal (ENE/WSW) and ditch fragment in north (E/W) . Discrete pits in centre-south of site

Table 1 Summary of site phasing

Phase 1 Middle Iron Age

The middle Iron Age (MIA) features were located in the south and centre of the site (all were excavated during the earlier evaluation). Three relatively large, irregularly-shaped pits [1003], [1007], [1012] with mottled grey/orange brown clay silt fills, yielded sparse MIA pottery and fired clay. A steep-sided and flat-based ditch [1010] was located on a north-east to south-west axis in the south-east of the site (Figs. 4-5). Its mottled fill contained very sparse MIA pottery and a fragment of burnt flint.

Phase 2 Late Iron Age and Romano-British

A series of coaxial Romano-British boundary ditches was present in the north-west of the site, set out on east to west and north to south axes ([2017], [2023], [2019] (Figs. 3-4), [1001], [2043] (Figs. 3-4)). Ditches [2017] and [2023], located c.6m apart, were parallel, relatively shallow (0.16 and 0.24m deep) and yielded moderate quantities of Roman pottery and fragments of ceramic building material. The 'L' shaped length of a narrower ditch [2019] was located east of these parallel ditches. [2019] yielded sparse Roman pottery and was truncated by a later tree hollow [2021] and a modern fence post-hole. An 'L' shaped linear feature with rounded terminals was located to the south-east and yielded sparse late Iron Age (LIA)/Romano-British pottery sherds and ceramic building materials [2043].

A LIA/Romano-British oval pit was present in the north-west of the site [2013]. Its compact silt clay fill contained sparse LIA/Romano-British pottery sherds and moderate ceramic building material fragments. Two shallow circular pits ([2005] and [2036]) and a shallow oval pit ([2039]) were located in the centre of the site. Their fills yielded sparse LIA/Romano-British and Roman pottery sherds and ceramic building materials.

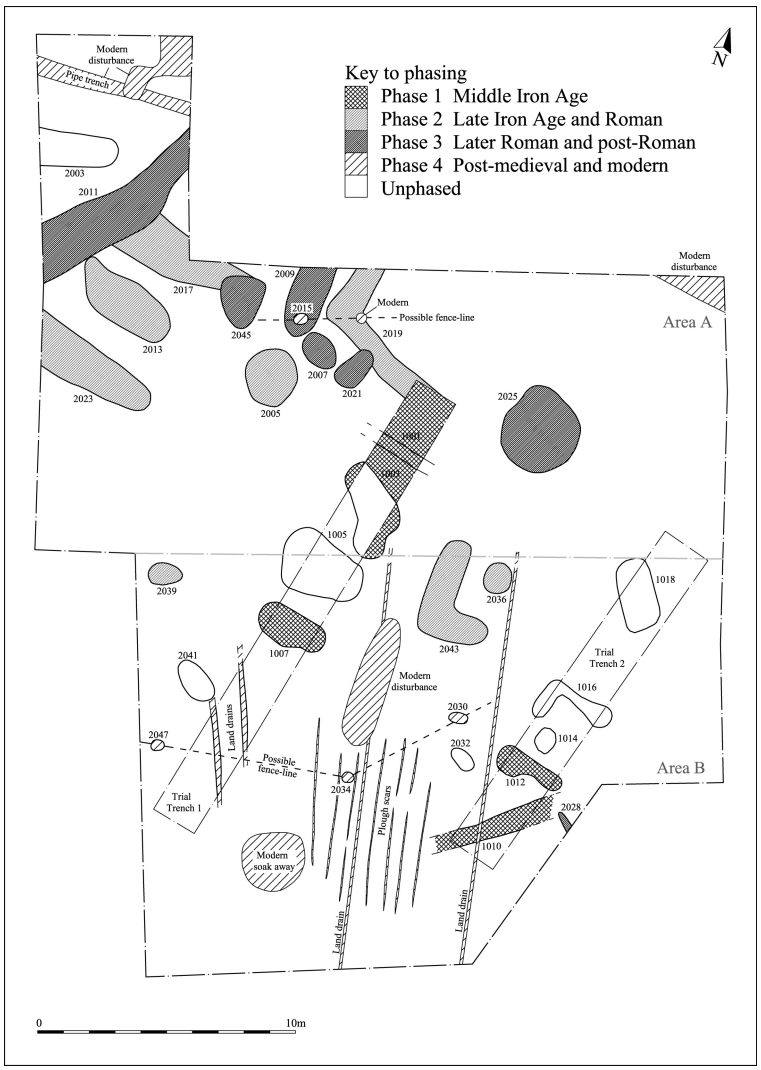

Fig. 4. Phase plan

Phase 3 Later Roman or post-Roman features

Several features post-dated Phase 2 features, either because they contained only Romano-British material, or cut earlier features containing prehistoric material. These included a large ditch [2011] (Figs. 4-5), a narrower coaxial ditch [2028] and a series of tree hollows.

Ditch [2011] lay on a north-east to south-west axis, and cut earlier parallel Phase 2 ditches [2017] and [2023]. Its mottled fill yielded moderate LIA/Romano-British pottery, ceramic building materials and a small undated copper alloy object (SF1). The terminus of Ditch [2009], on a north-west to south-east axis, was c.7m to the east. It was possibly coaxial to unphased terminus [2001]. Its clayey fill contained sparse burnt flint and ceramic building materials, very sparse late Iron Age pottery and a single, intrusive glazed medieval sherd.

The terminus of a narrow ditch on a north-west to south-east axis [2028] was excavated in the south-east of the site, and yielded sparse ceramic building materials. These ditches, as well as unphased linear features such as ditches [2003] and [1001], may also have formed part of a series of successive field systems in the area

A series of probable tree hollows was located in the north of the site, post-dating the Roman phase and truncating the ditches of the earlier field system. At the end of the row was tree hollow [2025], which yielded sparse residual LIA/Romano-British pottery sherds. Between

this final tree hollow and the oval pit were undated tree hollows [2045], [2007] and [2021], none containing finds. A further tree hollow was situated to the south-west [2041]. These may have represented a post-Roman tree-line, possibly marking a field or property boundary, especially as the line of tree hollows appeared to be parallel to the axis of a modern pipe trench and coaxial to the plough scars. No tree-lined boundary is noted on historic maps of the area.

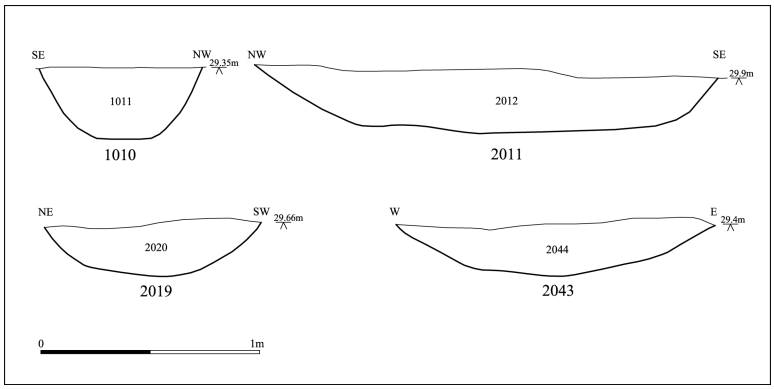

Figure 5. Sections F1010, F2019, F2043, F2011

Phase 4 Post-medieval and modern

Some earlier features were truncated by post-medieval and modern features, such as the north-north-west to south-south-east aligned plough scars, land drains, soak-away and curving fence-line [2047], [2034] and [2030] in the south of the site, and the east to west pipe trench and east-north-east to west-south-west ?fence line [2015] in the north. These features may have been associated with Downshouse Farm and the now-disused Canterbury and Whitstable Branch of the South Eastern Railway which ran past the site to the east, as noted on 19th century Ordnance Survey maps.

Unphased features

Several discrete features remain unphased and yielded no chronologically diagnostic finds. These comprised east-north-east to west-south-west aligned ditch terminal [2003] (possibly coaxial to Phase 3 terminal [2009]), linear east to west aligned narrow ditch fragment [1001], and pits [1005], [1018], [1016], [1014] and [2032].

SPECIALIST REPORTS

Roman Pottery
By Andy Peachey

21 sherds (89g) of Romano-British pottery were recovered during the excavations. The pottery assemblage has a low average sherd size (4.24g), and is in an abraded condition with no diagnostic sherds. Fabric groups, Sandy grey ware (GRS) and Sandy oxidised ware (OXS), are reduced and oxidised variants of one fabric that was probably produced locally, while Sandy oxidised ware (OXF) may have been produced within the region if not locally. The assemblage can be attributed to the Romano-British period but without more substantial or diagnostic material, it cannot be assigned a narrower date range.

Pottery
By Peter Thompson

The excavation produced 117 sherds weighing 0.459kg. The assemblage is generally in very poor condition, comprising mainly fragmented pieces of pot with heavily eroded surfaces. This, and the intermixing of sherds from different time periods, indicates that most are residual or contaminated by later activity. The sherds have been dated and are shown in Table 2 by number and weight, and average sherd size.

Period	**Sherd count**	**Sherd weight (grams)**	**Average weight per sherd (grams)**
Prehistoric	40	112	2.8
Medieval	67	330	4.9
Post-medieval	6	30	5
Early modern to modern	4	17	4.25

Table 2

The Fabrics

Approximately half of the prehistoric sherds contain grog tempering and are likely to be late Iron Age, though due to the poor condition with no survival of forms, an earlier period cannot be ruled out. The rest contain either very coarse flint or sandy fabrics.

Three of the medieval sherds show evidence of having been glazed and it is probable that this is also the case for others with the glaze now eroded. Thirteen sherds are sandy grey wares and at least three, probably from the same vessel are wheel-made.

The pottery is discussed by feature below outlining the diagnostic elements and latest datable sherds per feature

The Pits

Pit [2005] contained eight fragments of pottery (9g), comprising flint, grog or sand tempered sherds. These are probably later Iron Age, although the small size of the assemblage precludes definite identification. Pit [2013] contained two small sherds of post-medieval red earthenware with sand tempered medieval sherds, and a ?LIA grog-tempered sherd. Pit [2025] is potentially prehistoric in date as it contained only flint, grog and sand tempered sherds but there are no diagnostic forms. Pit [2036] contained a ribbed upright rim of a, probably originally glazed, red earthenware ?drinking vessel datable to the late medieval transitional to early post-medieval period. Pit [2039] contained a squared jar rim with a hollowed top approximately 24cm in diameter. The fill also yielded a modern sherd of red earthenware in very fine fabric with smooth and possibly slipped surfaces.

The Ditches

Ditch [2009] contained four flint tempered prehistoric sherds and a single sand tempered sherd (2g) with eroded green glaze, suggesting a date between the late 12th and 15th centuries.

Ditch [2011] contained a sagging base in Thetford-type ware and another sagging base sherd and fragments from two strap handles. The context also contained a simple upright rim sherd; 9cm in diameter. The oxidised fabric and good condition of the sherd relative to the rest indicate it is relatively modern.

Ditch [2017] contained prehistoric grog temper and medieval sandy sherds, including a handmade jar rim and two conjoining body sherds with internal green glaze. The latest sherd is of a similar type to the modern fine red earthenware from Pit [2039]. Ditches [2019], [2027] and [2043] contained mixes of prehistoric and medieval sherds. Ditch [2024] contained flint tempered sherds, medieval wares including part of a sagging base and thumb impressed strip and a sherd similar to the late medieval to early post-medieval, probably glazed, ribbed rim from Pit [2039].

The **copper-alloy object**
by Nina Crummy

SF 1. (2012) [2011]. Ditch fill. Medieval to early post-medieval. A severely corroded fragment of a disc with a slight rim around the remaining edge; possibly the base of a ferrule or cap. Diameter 28 mm, thickness at centre 2.5 mm.

DISCUSSION

This excavation offered an insight into the wider Iron Age and Romano-British local landscape, indicating small-scale pit and ditch construction in the middle Iron Age, followed by agricultural use in the late Iron Age and Romano-British period. Such field systems are often found in areas peripheral to the focus of settlement. This is comparable to the peripheral activity noted at the extensive late Bronze Age to late Iron Age settlement at Thanet Way, Seasalter (CAT 1991).

The main focus of activity in the late Iron Age and Romano-British periods was in the north-west of the site, where the remains of the ditches and right-angled corners of a sequence of possible coaxial field systems were located. This field system appeared to change orientation between its earlier (Phase 2) and later (Phase 3) stages, rotating slightly from a north to south and east to west axis, to a north-east to south-west and south-east to north-west axis. The evidence is too sparse to allow identification of a clear transition.

The site lay some distance north of the Roman road of Watling Street, but inland from Reculver port and the estuarine saltern and pottery industries. Similar remains of a field system have been noted at Chestfield to the north-east (Frere (ed) 1987, 359; Frere (ed) 1988, 484) and an early Roman cellared building, possibly associated with an undiscovered villa estate, was recorded at South Street (Johnston 1972, 121) (Fig. 2). It is likely that the field

system at Bellevue Road was part of a wider farming estate. This small excavation adds to the growing body of evidence for late Iron Age and Romano-British farming on the coastal plain of north Kent.

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