

**ELMS FARM,
HEYBRIDGE, ESSEX**

(MAL/703/92)

DESK TOP STUDY

AUGUST 1993



**Essex County Council
Planning**

Field Archaeology Group

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by

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CONTENTS

| | page |
|--|------|
| SUMMARY | 1 |
| 1. INTRODUCTION | 3 |
| 2. TOPOGRAPHY & GEOLOGY | 4 |
| 3. RESULTS | 5 |
| 3.1 Sites & Monuments Record | 5 |
| 3.2 Aerial Photography | 9 |
| 3.3 Archaeological Investigation | 11 |
| 3.4 Cartographic & Documentary Sources | 13 |
| 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS | 15 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 18 |

ILLUSTRATIONS

| | |
|--|----|
| FIGURE 1. SITE LOCATION | 2 |
| FIGURE 2. SMR REFERENCES LOCATION PLAN | 8 |
| FIGURE 3. SITE PLAN | 10 |

SUMMARY

This desk top study, of a 30 ha area of land at Elms Farm, Heybridge, Essex (TL847082), has been prompted by the prospect of its archaeological investigation in the face of destruction by a housing development to be undertaken by Bovis Homes Limited.

Antiquarian and archaeological interest in this area north of Maldon has resulted in the extensive collection and recording of finds and features, mainly of Roman date, since the 1880s.

The site is believed to encompass the larger part of a Romano-British small town with antecedent Iron Age occupation. There is also evidence suggesting Early Saxon occupation within the development area. The site is not known to have been occupied since the Saxon period. The development of Elms Farm therefore affords a rare opportunity to investigate the greater part of an undisturbed Romano-British and Saxon settlement prior to its destruction.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Elms Farm site (TL847082) is located on the western edge of Heybridge, to the north-west of Maldon, in Essex (Fig.1). It covers an area of c.30 ha (74 acres) which extends northward from the Chelmer and Blackwater navigation as far, in places, as Langford Road.

Development was first proposed in 1988, when Bovis Homes Ltd approached Essex County Council with a view to discussing the archaeological implications. The importance of this area as a major Roman site had long been known. The ECC Archaeology Section produced an overview of its importance, entitled *Elms Farm, Heybridge; Archaeological Implications*, in that year (ECC 1988).

This document was produced only to provide an outline of the character and importance of the site. It is the intention of this desk top study to provide a more comprehensive statement, drawing together information from a range of sources, including archaeological investigations conducted in the vicinity since 1988.

The site is divided into three areas, corresponding to the proposed stages of development (Fig.1):

- **Stage I.** c.9 ha at the northern end of the site and including the line of the new bypass and service road alongside the dismantled railway line. Conventional strip footings to be used.
- **Stage II.** c.8 ha to the west of the dismantled railway. Only part is to be quarried to provide gravel to raise the level of Stage III, the remainder is to be recreational space.
- **Stage III.** c.13 ha area to south of Crescent Road. Level to be raised 1.0 m, then piled foundations to be used.

2. TOPOGRAPHY & GEOLOGY

The site lies in a large meander of the River Blackwater on a gravel terrace, which slopes gently down to the river, below the 5 m contour. To some extent, the topography has been altered and obscured by the construction of the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation, built in 1797, the now disused railway and, most recently, the Maldon Bypass which has cut the site off from the river.

The geology of the site, known from excavation toward its east end, is a gravel subsoil overlain by patchy brickearth. This is covered by approximately 0.20 - 0.25 m of pebbly loam topsoil.

However, visual inspection in 1993 of the field drainage ditches which run across the eastern part of the development area (Stage III), has shown that the geology, at least of the southern half of the site, is an alluvial deposit of mixed gravel and silt-brickearth subsoil which grades into a pebble-free silty brickearth to a depth in excess of 1.00 m. This alluvium overlies gravel.

The northern part of the development area (Stages I and II) is firm gravel. Aerial photographs reveal apparent geological features, probably pockets of brickearth.

3. RESULTS

The following sources were examined for information relating to the site and its immediate environs:

- (1) Essex Sites and Monuments Record
- (2) Aerial photographs
- (3) Archive and publications of earlier archaeological investigations
- (4) Cartographic and documentary sources

This information is presented below.

3.1 Sites & Monuments Record

The Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) for the county of Essex contains some 38 references of relevance to this study. These are reproduced below and their locations indicated on Figure 2:

| SMR No | NGR (TL) | Description |
|--------------|----------|---|
| 7705 7706 | 8506 | "Saxon urns and sceattas, found in several locations, but most commonly at Heybridge" |
| 7786 7787 | 848079 | Roman remains found in 1888 in ballast pit for railway (now the pond in triangle of Langford Junction). Belgic to late Roman pot.100s of coins. Later Roman cemetery in vicinity. |
| 7788 | 854081 | Roman coins and urns in enclosure. ?burials. |
| 7789 | 853080 | Urns and coins found in field. |
| 7790 | " | Post-med Watermill on 1777 map. |

| | | |
|---------------|----------|--|
| 7791- 7798 | 85020823 | 1972 excavation: Residual Mesolithic, Neolithic, LBA and EIA material. One LBA post-hole. LIA and Roman ditches, pits and structures. Five grubenhäuser and one post-built structure. Mid-late Saxon ditches. Post-med pits ditches and gravel quarry. |
| 7799 | 850083 | Crescent Rd. Late 1st cent burial group. 3 vessels found in garden in 1913. |
| 7800 | 84460851 | Cooking pot rim found near Langford Place in 1913. |
| 7801 | 846084 | Aerial photography cropmarks. Possible field system. Possible grubenhäuser. |
| 7802 | 85220843 | Pot given to Colchester Museum in 1875. Found in gravel pit opposite Boucherne. |
| 7803- 7809 | 85250832 | 1983-4 excavation/watching brief. A few ditches, LIA and Roman pot, some medieval and post-med material. |
| 7810 | 848084 | Crescent Rd. Roman jar found during housing construction in 1965. |
| 7811 | 85810815 | Homestead moat. Now filled in. |
| 7812 | 85810815 | Watching brief near moat. Nothing found. |
| 7813 | 859081 | The Towers. 5 Roman coffins found 1873-4; 4th cent, 1 lead and 4 stone. Also a large Saxon urn. |
| 7814 | 86020820 | The Towers. 2 bronze vessels & an amphora. ?Late Iron Age imports. |

| | | |
|---------------|----------|--|
| 7815 | 86020820 | Saxon urn (the same as 7813?). |
| 7816 | 86020820 | 3 'British' urns (Bronze Age?). |
| 7827- 7829 | 855081 | St Andrews church. Contains Roman material. 12th cent church with 15th cent + additions. |
| 7830 | 855081 | Anglian type urn. Found pre-1903. ?Cremation. |
| 7988 | 840086 | Aerial photography cropmarks. Trackways and an old stream bed? |
| 8019 | 852083 | Bouchernes Farm. Medieval hand mirror. ?13th century. Metal detected? |

3.2 Aerial Photography

Two areas of cropmarks (SMR Nos. 7801 and 7988) have been identified from the examination of aerial photographs (Fig.3).

The NMR reference numbers of the photographs are as follows: TL8408/1/196, TL8408/3/413 and TL8408/4/425.

Only SMR No. 7801 is within the site. It comprises a series of linear and discrete cropmarks covering approximately 8 ha, the majority of which fall within the confines of the northern part of the development area (TL 84600834), to the west of Beeches Road (Stage I). The linear cropmarks have been interpreted as probable Late Iron Age and Roman field systems. A large number of pit-like cropmarks are clustered in the south-eastern corner of this area. They appear to be roughly rectangular and are possibly similarly aligned on one another. Some apparently overlies the linear features. It is tentatively suggested that they are Early Saxon *Grubenhäuser*. Such features have been found through excavation on Elizabeth Way, located on the perimeter of the development area. This site is discussed further below.

A Roman Road is thought to be fossilised in the alignment of Maypole Road which runs northward out of Heybridge and south across the middle of the development area (Stage III). There is a suggestion of a major linear feature on the aerial photographs which may coincide with its projected line. An eastern branch identified by excavation is not in evidence.

The second area of cropmarks, SMR No.7988, is located to the north-west of the development area and comprises a less extensive complex of possible trackways and what has been interpreted as an old stream bed.

3.3 Archaeological Investigation

The development area presently contains both arable (Stage I) and pasture (Stages II and III) and therefore is not subject to significant disturbance, apart from that of ploughing. As a result, relatively little controlled excavation has been undertaken. As the Sites and Monuments Record shows, many casual finds of archaeological material have been made during the course of gravel extraction and small-scale development since the late 19th century. However, little recording was undertaken, other than that of the type, date and general location of the artefacts recovered.

Only since the 1970s has any formal archaeological excavation taken place. This has still been restricted to the investigation, under 'rescue' conditions, of sites threatened by development.

The most significant investigation of relevance to the development area is that undertaken on the site of housing construction along Elizabeth Way (TL 85020823) in 1971-2 (Drury & Wickenden 1982; Wickenden 1986). The excavation of this site resulted in the discovery of features spanning the Late Bronze Age to Early Saxon periods which comprised numerous post-holes, pits, ditches and gravel surfaces. Evidence of Roman occupation spans the whole of the 1st to 4th centuries AD and elements of this have been interpreted as a street frontage. The Early Saxon occupation took the form of five *Grubenhäuser* and a postulated post-built structure, all dated to the early 5th century AD. 19th century gravel quarrying was found to have destroyed all earlier remains in the eastern area of the site. It is possible that remains of such activity may be present elsewhere across the site.

Small-scale excavation and a watching brief (SMR No.7803-7809) to the north of Holloway Road, further to the north-east of the Elizabeth Road site, produced evidence of both Late Iron Age and Romano-British occupation in the form of boundary ditches and a concentration of unstratified pottery.

A series of test pits, excavated on behalf of the developer, were observed by the ECC Archaeology Section in September 1988. These comprised a total of six 0.8 m square holes dug by hand across Stage III. They confirmed a topsoil cover of approximately 0.25 m and yielded fragments of Roman tile, pottery and animal bone. Test Pit 2 also contained a sherd of Late Iron Age pottery and Test Pit 4 exposed the top of a ditch or pit

which was not further excavated. Below the topsoil, Test Pit 6 contained a 0.2-0.25 m deposit of clean blue-grey clay overlying gravel. Examination of field drainage ditches across the pasture, especially where cows have caused their degradation, also produced both Late Iron Age and Roman material in significant quantities.

Most recently an evaluation of an area of land to the south of Holloway Road, on the perimeter of the development area was undertaken by the Cotswold Archaeological Trust Ltd in March 1993 (Timby 1993). The evaluation, by means of trial trenching, exposed a number of Middle Iron Age pits, sealed by a deposit of gravel thought to be of Roman date, and Roman ditches. It was concluded that the vicinity had not been significantly disturbed since the Roman period.

The only significant archaeological investigation to be conducted within the confines of the development area is a geophysical survey feasibility study undertaken by Geophysical Surveys of Bradford early in June 1993. Their report, *Report on Geophysical Survey: Elms Farm*, details the results of a limited survey which comprised a detailed gradiometry survey of an 80 X 80 m area over the projected line of the Roman road, the rapid scanning away from this sample area and the scanning of the vicinity south of the Elizabeth Road site. Soil samples were also taken along an east west traverse across Stage III for magnetic susceptibility testing.

The feasibility study confirmed the suitability of the site for further geophysical investigation, detecting ditch and pit-like responses including two linear responses coinciding with the postulated road line. Scanning indicated that archaeological features continued away from this, though in decreasing intensity. No obvious activity was detected alongside the Elizabeth Road site.

3.4 Cartographic And Documentary Sources

A number of mainly cartographic sources, supported by documents, were examined with the intention of gaining an insight into the development and usage of the landscape.

Both the 1st and 2nd edition 25-inch Ordnance Survey maps (1874 and 1897) illustrate that little change has taken place regarding the field boundaries within the development area, apart from disruption by road and railway.

The tithe maps for both Heybridge and Langford parishes were consulted as a source of land utilisation information as well as evidence of field boundaries *c.*1840. However, damage to the Heybridge tithe map has obscured the area relating to the northern part of the study area (Stage I). These cartographic sources again showed little change with all of the major field divisions continuing to the present day. Only one feature, a building and associated ditches, in the corner of a surviving field in Stage II, is now missing from the landscape. The apportionments relating to these tithe maps were also examined as they include the contemporary land use. Again, this was found to be very similar to that of today, with the decipherable areas of the study area recorded as being 'pasture' or 'grass' (Stages II and III) and land to the north being 'arable'. This no doubt reflects the topography and geology, with crops being grown on the higher, better drained gravel and the poorly drained alluvium of the southern area of the study area being suitable only for grazing.

An earlier tithe map of *c.*1815 did, however, indicate field boundaries which were not present by 1840. In general, the field system across the survey area was very similar to that of today, apart from some subdivision into allotments in the ownership of The Dean and Chapter of St. Pauls. These allotments collectively defined the relatively narrow fields which survive along eastern edge of Stage I and the northern edge of Stage III. Undulations defining slightly raised rectilinear areas have been observed in these areas during recent field visits by the author. It is likely that they are the remains of the allotment plots and indicate that little surface disturbance has taken place since they were allowed to revert to pasture.

These cartographic sources were also examined with a view to identifying any late features within the area of cropmarks across Stage I (Fig.3). Only one feature on the aerial photograph plot could be related to one on the 1815 map. This was a ditch running

roughly east-west, differing in alignment to those features identified as a probable Romano-British field system.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

From the data described above, it is possible to postulate a Roman settlement which extends across *c.*40 ha (100 acres), of which an estimated two thirds to three quarters lies within the development area. This relatively large extent suggests that the settlement was a significant one. Though little can be said of its layout, both the topographical and aerial photographic evidence indicate that a north-south aligned road runs through the centre of the postulated settlement area. It is likely that this road connected with Colchester to the north and crossed the River Chelmer just to the south of the settlement, presumably at a convenient fording point. The roughly oval nature of the town's extent is a reflection of its development along this thoroughfare and along probable minor east-west roads off it.

The apparent field systems distinguished from the aerial photographs attest to the agrarian basis of the town's economy. However, significant quantities of imported pottery and other artefacts are known from the Langford Junction quarrying (SMR Nos.7786-7) and from the more recent area excavations. Some of these came from as far afield as Italy and Spain and may possibly indicate that the settlement was also involved in cross-channel trade due to its good communications by both road and river. However, such trade may not be direct. It has been argued that these imports might be obtained through normal market networks.

A waterfront associated with this trade has been postulated to be present to the south of Langford Junction, in the vicinity of the river crossing. However, as present development plans extend only as far south as the Junction itself, this lies beyond the limits of this study.

Though none have been found within the development area, a significant number of Roman burials have been found in the surrounding area. As the SMR list shows, these range from small cremation groups to relatively elaborate inhumations in stone and lead coffins. On examination of their distribution, it would appear that they define a roadside cemetery, outside the settlement, extending eastward. A cremation group has also been found to the north of the development area, in a garden along Crescent Road, which indicates that further areas of cemetery may impinge upon the study area.

The Roman 'small town' appears to have had a precursor. There is substantial artefactual evidence, within and surrounding the development area, of a Late Iron Age settlement of undefined extent, itself predated by more scattered Middle Iron Age and earlier finds and features. It is likely that the Roman settlement developed out of the Iron Age. There are parallels, such as the incidence of imported wares, which indicate that the earlier settlement may well have had a similar economic role based upon its location at this river crossing.

The Roman 'small town' was also succeeded by a brief period of Early Saxon settlement. While Roman occupation extended into the 4th century and that of the known Saxon was apparently confined to the 5th century AD, the inevitable question of the likelihood of continuity between the two periods remains unanswered. It is possible that the Saxon settlement is extensive. If the proposition that the aerial photographs show *Grubenhäuser* is correct, then occupation could extend as much as 400 metres east-west across the development area, perhaps the archaeological palimpsest of settlement over a large area as has been identified at Mucking (Hamerow 1993).

An investigation of the Elms Farm site falls within the scope of a number of academic research objectives identified by English Heritage in *Exploring Our Past* (HBMC 1991). It is central to Processes of Change, including Briton into Roman and The Early Medieval Period, the latter for which few examples of settlement have been extensively excavated, either in Essex or in England as a whole, as *Exploring Our Past* concedes (HBMC 1991, 17). The investigation of the site is also relevant to Landscapes, with features such as relict field systems and the relationship between towns and their hinterlands being important aspects to be addressed. The fact that it encompasses the greater part of a Roman 'small town' is itself important to the theme of Towns. The discovery of *sceattas* at Heybridge, frequently associated with monasteries and trading settlements, and the close proximity of the Elms Farm site to Maldon with its late Saxon burgh also indicate the possibility of Saxon settlement extending beyond the 5th century AD. There is also great scope for the investigation of its economic base under the heading of Patterns of Industry and Craftsmanship.

In summary, the evidence indicates that the development area contains significant settlement remains which span the Iron Age, Roman and Early Saxon periods. The threat posed by the proposed development is severe, but should also afford the opportunity to

examine a Romano-British small town, and its predecessor and successor settlements, on an unparalleled scale.

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