

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION
BY TRIAL TRENCH**

**AUXILLIARY UNIT HIDEOUT
BEELEIGH MILL
ABBAY TURNING
MALDON**



Essex County Council
Field Archaeology Unit

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FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT
ESSEX COUNTY COUNCIL HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT BRANCH

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EHER No.: 20277

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1 INTRODUCTION

A small-scale archaeological evaluation was undertaken at Beeleigh Mill, Abbey Turning, Maldon, Essex. The evaluation was carried out to ascertain the presence/absence of an underground Second World War Auxiliary Unit hideout in an area of Beeleigh Mill that may be developed into a visitor centre. The presence of the hideout may affect this development and future planning. The fieldwork was undertaken by the Essex County Council Field Archaeology Unit (ECC FAU) on behalf of the ECC Historic Environment Branch.

2 BACKGROUND (Fig. 1)

2.1 Site Description

Beeleigh Mill is located on Essex and Suffolk Water land at the north end of Abbey Turning, off London Road, Maldon, Essex (TL 83969, 08183). The evaluation area comprised a square (c.120sq m) block of land between the steam mill and the barge docks. The area of the site has been incorporated into the garden of the neighbouring Beeleigh Falls House and is currently covered by gravel and crossed by a brick path.

2.2 Historic background

Beeleigh Mill (Essex Historic Environment Record 38244) dates to the early 19th century. The mill complex is comprised of a steam mill, a ruined water mill with two barge docks and a bridge. The water mill was destroyed in 1879. The steam mill is extant and contains a double-acting steam engine made by Wendworth in 1845.

During the Second World War an Auxiliary Unit underground hideout is believed to have been constructed between the steam mill and ruined water mill. A large hole, containing steps and a curved-roof chamber, perhaps 10 feet long, corresponding with the presumed position of the hideout, was reportedly backfilled in the 1980s (EHER 20277).

3 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

3.1 General Aims

The aim of the work was to identify and record the location, extent, condition and character of any surviving archaeological remains within the proposed development area. Specifically, the investigation aimed to establish the presence / absence of the underground hideout and, if present, its location, extent, condition and the nature of its construction.

3.2 Research Objectives

The research objectives for the project were undertaken with reference to those laid out in *Research and Archaeology: a Framework for the Eastern Counties, 2. research agenda and strategy* (Brown and Glazebrook 2000). This report highlighted the need for consistent information on the location, state of survival and significance of post-medieval and modern fortification and defensive structures. One relevant area of research is to compare how the construction of Second World War anti-invasion structures varied at a local level from the standard army designs (Gilman *et al* 2000, 33).

4 FIELDWORK RESULTS (Fig. 1)

The evaluation was undertaken using a tracked mechanical mini-digger, fitted with a toothless bucket, under archaeological supervision. Excavation commenced with the controlled removal of modern overburden deposits (gravel and brick on textile) from the centre of the evaluation area where there was noticeable dip in the ground surface. Beneath the textile, dark grey silt in-filled a slight hollow above a thick and extensive (4.4m+ long by 3m wide by 1.4m+ deep) deposit of fine yellow clay.

4.1 The hideout (Plate 1)

The yellow clay clearly indicated the position of the hideout and had been deliberately used to infill (at least) the top of it, either after the end of the Second World War or in the 1980s. The main chamber of the hideout was arranged at 90° to the steam mill wall and was constructed within a sub-rectangular cut approximately 6m long by 3m+ wide and in excess of 1.5m deep. Reddish grey ashy silt (not illustrated) observed around the top of the eastern edge of the hideout may be remnants of construction-cut backfill.

The sides of the main hideout chamber were constructed from curved lengths of corrugated Anderson Shelter sheets. The top of the arched roof was missing; these sheets presumably having been removed during the dismantling process. The surviving sheets were c.0.7m wide and each sheet overlapped with its neighbour. Small decayed fixing holes in the upper sheet matched with better preserved holes in the lower sheet. The presence of one *in-situ* nut and bolt suggested that some, if not all, of the sheets had originally been bolted together. Corrugated side-wall sheets, observed in a void to the north-west of the excavated section, appeared to be silver in colour and in apparent good condition.

The south end of the hideout was formed by a stack of large concrete bricks; each 0.48m long by 0.24m wide with two square holes. Two courses were clearly visible with the top of a probable third course protruding below. The top course comprised of one brick laid east-west. The position of a second brick to the east may have been marked by a vague rectangular outline in the underlying mortar. The second course was made up of three bricks aligned north-south. Fill was present on either side of the stack and there was no indication, at the excavation level, of any other end structure such as a brick wall or corrugated sheet. Traces of rusty corrugated iron to the west of the stack may have been the end of a sheet forming the western side of an escape tunnel located beyond the stack to the south.

It was not possible to fully excavate the hideout during this limited evaluation. It is anticipated that the base of the hideout may be about 2.5m below current ground level.

4.2 The escape tunnel (Plate 2)

The position of an escape tunnel was clearly evident to the south of the hideout. Its position was indicated by a dark grey silt fill that probably accumulated separately from the deliberate infilling of the main hideout. The full extent of the tunnel was not exposed but it was in excess of 2.1m long, approximately 0.8m wide and extended to a depth of more than 1.25m below the ground surface. Removal of the dark silt revealed a firm deposit of light brown mixed clay and a thin lump of concrete immediately south of the concrete brick stack. Beyond these, a

horizontal, north-south aligned, timber beam was exposed along with an accompanying area of flattened and badly corroded corrugated iron. A second horizontal timber, aligned east-west, and which may have been a collapsed upright, was recorded at the south end of the tunnel. The timber and corrugated iron appeared to represent the bent-over and collapsed western side of the escape tunnel. The eastern side of the tunnel appeared to be still *in-situ* and comprised at least two vertically standing and overlapping sheets held in place by two timber uprights.

4.3 Post-medieval deposits

To the east of the hideout was an irregular pile of bricks and mortar that were probably disturbed during its construction. The pile was not investigated, but appeared to rest on flat bricks and may have been the remnants of a collapsed wall. Stratigraphically earlier than the bricks, and truncated by the hideout, was a thick black charcoal deposit. A small exploratory sondage revealed this charcoal deposit to be 0.4m deep. Underlying it was a 0.10m-deep deposit of pale grey ash that sealed a possible heat-reddened mortar floor. The west side of the escape tunnel truncated part of an east-west aligned mortar-covered brick wall.

5.0 DISCUSSION

The trenching has successfully confirmed the position of the hideout and its escape tunnel. The distinct yellow clay represents a deliberate episode of backfilling using imported material. This fill most probably dates from the discovery of the underground chamber and its subsequent infilling in the 1980s. The account of this discovery, recorded in the Historic Environment Record (EHER 20277), mentions a curved-roof chamber, perhaps 10 feet long, and steps leading down. In the trial trench the top panel of the curved-roof was missing suggesting that it had been removed as part of the infilling operation. The observed steps leading down could easily equate to the overlapping concrete bricks.

Although partially dismantled, the hideout appears to have survived reasonably well and the Anderson Shelter sheets forming the sides seem intact. However, the escape tunnel is in poor condition; one side has collapsed and the thinner corrugated iron sides used in its construction are very badly corroded. It was not clear whether the escape tunnel had been deliberately destroyed or had infilled more naturally as a result of decay and collapse. In either case, the infilling occurred prior to the backfilling of the hideout with yellow clay.

The Beeleigh hideout appears to differ from the usual structural arrangement for other known underground chambers in Essex (pers comm. Fred Nash) in that it appears to have no solid end brick wall and has an escape tunnel at a high level. The high level of the escape tunnel

was a necessary local adaptation to allow access into the top of the tail-race channel that ran in a large covered brick culvert to the south of the hideout.

The evaluation also identified evidence of the early 19th-century mill structure in the form of a fragment of *in-situ* wall and a possible heat-reddened mortar floor. The heat-reddening and accumulated deposits of ash and charcoal are probably a result of the destruction of the mill by fire in the later 19th century. All can be regarded to be archaeologically significant, with the potential to supply further information on the historic mill.

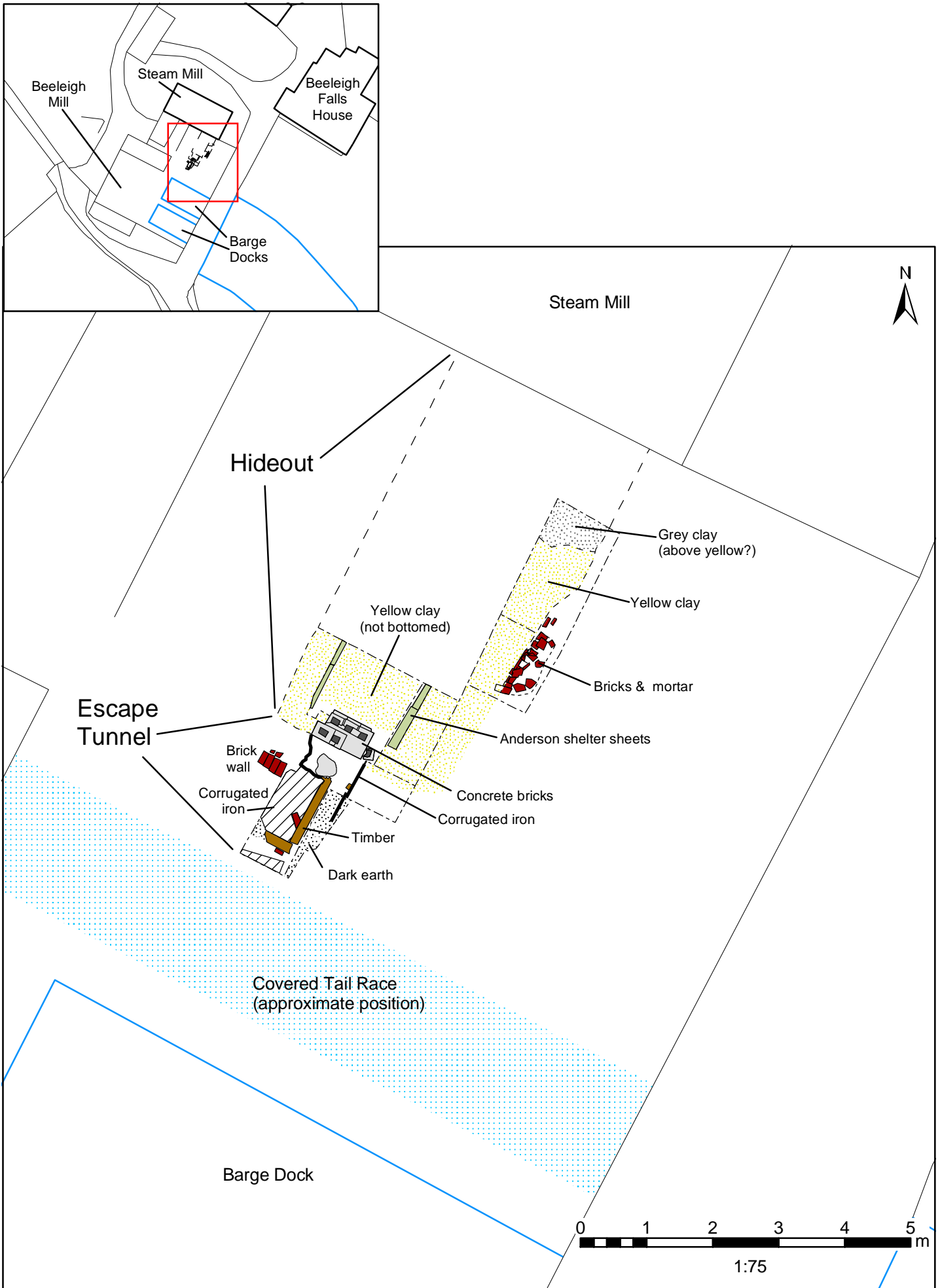
6.0 FURTHER WORK

At the end of the evaluation the hideout and escape tunnel were carefully back-filled. Any plans for future excavation of the entire hideout will have to carefully address what is to be done if and when the structure is fully exposed. Clearly, issues such as the conservation and possible long-term preservation of the structure will need to be addressed along with basic health and safety considerations and the importance of retaining the structural integrity of the existing standing building.

Any plan for future excavation of the hideout or for building works within the mill should also include appropriate mitigation strategies to adequately investigate and record all *in-situ* 19th-century mill deposits.

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Fig.1. Beeleigh Mill, WWII Auxillary Unit Hideout



Plate 1 Hideout looking south



Plate 2 Escape tunnel (after further excavation) looking south