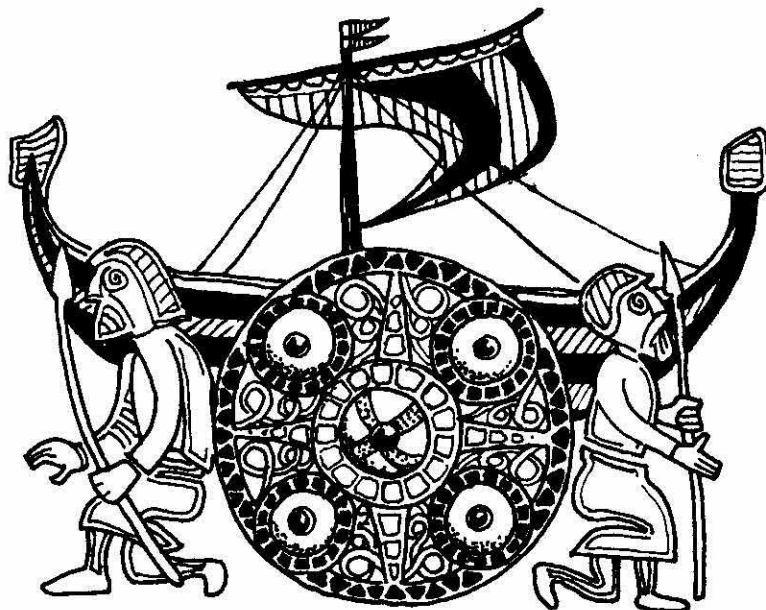


AN EVALUATION REPORT BY
THE TRUST FOR THANET
ARCHAEOLOGY



ARCHAEOLOGICAL REMAINS AT
EBBSFLEET FARM, EBBSFLEET,
RAMSGATE

1990

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CONTENTS

1.1 Introduction and Summary	Page No. 1
1.2 The Geography and Geology of Ebbsfleet	2
1.3 The History and Known Archaeology of Ebbsfleet	2
1.4 Survey by Field Walking, Metal Detector, and Trenching	3
1.5 Sites 1 to 5 and General Comments	4
1.6 Site 4: The Iron Age and Belgic Remains	5
1.7 Site 4: The Romano-British Building	6
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Discussion and Recommendations	7
Acknowledgements	8
Figure 1, a plan of Ebbsfleet Farm showing the Sites	9
Figure 2, Belgic and Romano-British remains exposed by transect trenches at Site 4	10

AN EVALUATION REPORT BY THE TRUST FOR THANET ARCHAEOLOGY

ARCHAEOLOGICAL REMAINS AT EBBSFLEET FARM, RAMSGATE

D. R. J. Perkins

1.1 Introduction and Summary

This archaeological evaluation was carried out by the Trust for Thanet Archaeology at the behest of the MI Group who propose development at Ebbsfleet Farm that will include construction of a sewage works and tannery. When this scheme was first mooted the Trust approached the developers and expressed concern, since the area was known as one of archaeological importance. To their great credit the developers agreed to allow and fund an evaluation survey and such rescue work as might be needed. In the event it has been found that while remains of great interest exist in one area, they can be protected by the cessation of, or modification of, the practice of agriculture. Caution should also be exercised in tree planting and landscaping within the most sensitive area, see recommendations.

The evaluation had to be carried out within a time window of 28 days during late July - August so as not to incur a loss of crop to the farmer who presently leases the land. In spite of this constraint, the whole development area was surveyed by field walking and metal detector.

The main discovery resulting from the evaluation was that of a large settlement site of the Late Iron Age - Belgic period, and the buried remains of a Romano-British building, probably a Roman villa. While no attempt was made to excavate the building, its location has now been recorded for posterity. Rubbish pits and ditches around the site were sampled, yielding pottery, coins, and a few artifacts. After study, this material should greatly advance our knowledge of the Belgic and Roman presence in Thanet, the latter being until recently thought of as negligible.

The results of this evaluation will be published fully and in detail in the near future, probably in the pages of *Archaeologia Cantiana*.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL REMAINS AT EBBSFLEET FARM, RAMSGATE

1.2 The Geography and Geology of Ebbsfleet

Ebbsfleet, Ramsgate, in the Isle of Thanet is an area bounded to the south-west by the River Stour and Minster Marshes (drained), to the east by the A256, and to the north by the rise of chalk downland at Cliffsend, Thorne, and Sevenscore. It consists of two hills, Cotington and Ebbsfleet, see Fig. 1. These are upfolds of the Thanet Beds, and in Roman times the long Ebbsfleet ridge would have been a marsh and sea-girt peninsular. The sub-soil consists of yellow-brown sand, this being the lower strata of the Thanet Beds eroded down almost to 'Dogger' bed level. Large sandstone boulders (Doggers), can be found at c. 50 cm below the land surface on the crown of Cotington Hill. These boulders are probably several metres above the Upper Chalk.

1.3 The History and Known Archaeology of Ebbsfleet

Ebbsfleet (Ypwinesfleet O.E.), enters history in the pages of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for AD 449. Here:...*'at that time came the Angles to this land, invited by King Vortigern, to help him overcome his enemies. They came to this land with three warships, and their leaders were Hengest and Horsa'*. St Augustine landed at Ebbsfleet in AD 595 *'with very many monks who preached God's word to the English nation'*. Cotington is an East Kent family name of great antiquity.

One of the most important Late Bronze Age hoards, the 'Ebbsfleet Hoard' came to light in 1893, its exact find-spot is now unknown. It consisted of over 190 separate items, these included axes, spearheads, sickles, and fragments of swords and daggers, the whole weighing over 160 lb. The hoard is now in the British Museum and can be dated to c. 500 BC.

The farmhouse at Ebbsfleet is a Victorian building. According to record, tradition, and human memory, Ebbsfleet Farm was pasture devoted to sheep and dairy cattle from time out of mind until the 1950s. Thereafter, with the commencement of ploughing, ancient artifacts and archaeological materials began to appear regularly on field surfaces.

AN EVALUATION REPORT BY THE TRUST FOR THANET ARCHAEOLOGY

Three archaeological sites at Ebbsfleet Farm were known to the Trust for Thanet Archaeology prior to this evaluation, see Fig. 1. They are recorded in the Thanet Sites and Monuments Register as:

TSMR 312(a) see Site 1 in Fig. 1

A high level vertical aerial photograph (c. 1950), in the keeping of Thanet District Council shows a complex linear crop-mark of interlocking rectangular form at this spot.

TSMR 312(b) and 311 see Sites 2 and 3 in Fig. 1

During the mid-1970s, the wife of the then farm foreman (resident in Ebbsfleet farmhouse), at various times brought quantities of Romano-British pot sherds to Thanet Archaeological Unit for identification. These had been gleaned from the hilltop ridge north and south of the farmhouse. The sherds included most of the common Romano-British fabrics all in weathered condition. We now know that at the same time, a farmworker who owned a metal detector had amassed a collection of *'over four hundred Roman coins, and nearly a hundred bronze brooches, keys, buckles and things'*. On his leaving the district, two colleagues took up the hobby, both forming collections.

1.4 Survey by Field Walking, Metal Detector, and Trenching

Ebbsfleet is one of a very few areas within Thanet that has not been subject to aerial survey by the Trust for Thanet Archaeology. Aerial photographs of Ebbsfleet may exist in the archives of English Heritage's Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission, but thus far the Trust has not obtained copies. Without help from crop-mark photographs, (other than Site 312(a)), the Trust was forced to rely on a field walking survey. This was carried out by the Trust's excavation team walking the hill 3 m apart, with one operative using a metal detector. As a check on this, randomly chosen areas of the hill were field walked and prospected at weekends by teams of volunteers from Thanet Archaeological Society and Thanet and Wantsum Relic Hunters Association. Observed phenomena such as concentrations of pot sherds were marked and subsequently investigated by trenching. Sites of interest discovered during the survey are dealt with below.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL REMAINS AT EBBSFLEET FARM, RAMSGATE

1.5 Sites 1 - 5 and General Comments

TSMR 312(a) Site 1:

Field walking and metal detecting over the plotted coordinates of the crop-mark was not very fruitful. A few pot sherds in Tylor Hill Sandy Ware were found, together with iron fragments. To investigate further, two trenches 25 m in length were cut. They revealed an horizon of sandy loam cut by what were interpreted as in-filled ditches. Finds consisted of tin-glazed Medieval pottery of the 13th - 14th centuries, tile, iron fragments, animal bone and shells. Interpretation: a ditch-enclosed Medieval farmstead. Heavy plough attrition was evident.

TSMR 312(b) Site 2:

Initial fieldwalking and metal detecting revealed little except worn sherds of Romano-British pottery (Upchurch Ware), a few used flint flakes, and a Neolithic flint scraper. A 60 m transect was then cut across the planned route of an access road. The exposed sub-soil was sectioned at 5 m intervals, nothing being found other than a few small sherds of beaker pottery. Heavy plough attrition was evident.

TSMR 311, Site 3:

This site had been prospected earlier in the year by a member of the Thanet and Wantsum Metal Detector Club. He found about 10 coins, two being Belgic, the rest Roman. A further investigation yielded nothing. Fieldwalking revealed a few items, all of them comparatively heavy, such as fragments of amphora, Roman tile and brick, and pieces of querns made from Folkstone Greensand.

Three 100 m transect trenches were then cut across the hilltop, see Fig. 1., and these were sectioned at 5 m intervals. All that was seen was a 'geological horizon' un-influenced by human activity. The whole hilltop seems to have been truncated by ploughing in the recent past.

Site 4 and 5:

Here were found extensive Iron Age and Roman settlement remains. They are dealt with in detail in Section 1.6.

AN EVALUATION REPORT BY THE TRUST FOR THANET ARCHAEOLOGY

General Comments:

In general it can be said that the sub-soil of Ebbsfleet Hill exhibits abundant evidence of modern plough attrition. With the exception of the area about Sites 4 and 5 (shaded in Fig. 1), where downhill drift has given some protection, the hill sub-soil with its ancient remains seems to have been truncated by erosion following the farm's change to arable agriculture. The exposure of pot sherds and coins mentioned in 1.3 above probably marks the commencement of this. In most of the transect trenches the exposed surface was a 'geological horizon', exhibiting no trace of human activity other than the deep grooves made by the 'sub-soiler'.

The proposed tannery and sewage works sites occupy an area of the alluvial plain dating from the 'inning' of the Wantsum Channel in Medieval days. Field walking and metal detecting yielded only post-Tudor artifacts. At the time of the evaluation, core samples were being taken across the sites by Southern Water. These gave no evidence of ancient horizons, and indicated that the water-table was such that inundated prehistoric levels could not practically be examined by transect.

1.6 Sites 4 and 5, Phase I, The Iron Age and Belgic Settlement Site:

Initial work in the area of Sites 4 and 5 took the following form:
Site 4: Transect trenches each of 25 m length were laid out in H form, see Fig. 2. They were positioned over the epicentre of a large scatter of Romano-British pot sherds, building materials, etc.

Site 5: A transect trench of 30 m length was cut parallel to Ebbsfleet Lane. This was designed to discover whether a known Beaker, Iron Age, and Roman Villa site situated just east of the lane extended into the development area, see 'An Archaeological Evaluation at Cottington Hill, Ebbsfleet', TFTA 1990.

It was discovered that for practical purposes, Sites 4 and 5 could be considered with the Cottington Hill remains as one entity, the whole being shown by the shaded area in Fig. 1. Throughout the shaded area the Phase I horizons were:

a) A plough disturbed topsoil yielding prehistoric pot sherds and artifacts. These range in date from the Middle Bronze Age, c. 1400 BC,

ARCHAEOLOGICAL REMAINS AT EBBSFLEET FARM, RAMSGATE

to the Late Iron Age and Belgic periods, c. 200 BC - AD 50. The Late Iron Age - Belgic sherds forming the great majority.

b) Below plough-soil at a depth of c. 45 cm, an ancient horizon survives exhibiting such features as pits, ditches, post settings of flint boulders, and hut floors of flint pebbles. Where sampled, the artifactual material from these features is predominantly Belgic, and includes pottery of many styles and fabrics, a clay spindle-whorl, and bone skewers. Midden material found consists of many hundreds of animal bones (*Bos*, *Sus*, *Ovis*), and thick layers of shells, including among them those of the Ormer (*Haliotis tuberculata*). Human skeletal material found consisted of bones from an adult and two infants (in ditch fill), and a skull fragment apparently detached by an edged weapon. For features related to Phase I see Fig. 3, Features 2, 3, 8, 13, and 15.

Interpretation:

As they exist at the moment, these are the well preserved remains of a large and flourishing Belgic settlement. This probably belongs in a historic sequence in which Ebbsfleet was entry port to Thanet from Neolithic times until the coming of St Augustine and the Saxons.

1.7 Sites 4 and 5, Phase II, The Romano-British Building

Throughout the shaded area shown in Fig. 1, the topsoil everywhere yielded pot sherds in fabrics of the Romano-British period, imported Samian Ware being the most common. Roman building materials were also present (brick and tegulae fragments), as were fragments of rotary querns, apparently of Folkstone Greensand. Over 50 Roman coins were found, along with fragmentary buckles, fibulae, etc. While the coins have a date-range of AD 10 - 450, the date-peak of both coins and pottery appears to be c. AD 160 - 200.

Site 4 made itself evident by a heavy scatter of Romano-British pot sherds. The approximate centre of the scatter was plotted, and used as a datum point to construct a system of transect trenches, see Fig. 2. The modern topsoil (depth 30 cm), was removed from the trenches by machine.

AN EVALUATION REPORT BY THE TRUST FOR THAMES ARCHAEOLOGY

In places throughout the H-shaped system of transect trenches there survived lengths of wall foundation and small areas of floor, these remains overlaying the Belgic horizons of Phase I. The foundations were of rammed chalk supporting courses of water-worn flint boulders (some retaining traces of mortar), also fragments of brick and amphora. The surviving patches of floor were made of smooth graded pebbles in a yellow sandy layer, the decayed remains of mortar. A number of Roman coins were found in the floor layers, and small pits beneath them yielded Romano-British domestic pottery.

Interpretation:

If all the foundations belong to the same building, it extends for at least 21 m on one angle. We are probably therefore looking at traces of a fairly substantial construction, most likely a Villa. All evidence points to its existing in the closing years of the second century, which makes it the contemporary of the building remains discovered 130 m to the north-east beyond Ebbsfleet Lane.

Discussion and Recommendations

With respect to the area of the planned Tannery and Sewage Works development, this appears to be archaeologically sterile. Sites 1 and 2 are in the planned path of the access road, but neither is a cause for concern, as they (with Site 3), have been denuded by ploughing. What remains, for the moment escaping the blade of the sub-soiler, are the Belgic and Roman horizons at Sites 4 and 5.

The Site 4 Villa foundations have been brought to the brink of destruction by plough attrition in the recent past, and if it continues, will disappear in a couple of seasons (photographic evidence from the Trust by request). Were they spared further damage, an area excavation at some future date might just reveal a plan of the building. Beneath them, the very interesting and important Belgic settlement site has at most four years respite from destruction.

There are three alternative courses which allow the preservation of the sites, or at least their recording before destruction, they are listed below in order of preference:

ARCHAEOLOGICAL REMAINS AT EBBSFLEET FARM, RAMSGATE

- a) Ideally, the land should be taken out of agriculture, and be devoted to some use that would be archaeologically innocuous, such as a golf course or similar amenity, or the land should revert to grazing, its original use for many centuries.
- b) If it continues as arable land, the use of the subsoiler should be forbidden, and only light ploughing allowed. This would however, only delay destruction.
- c) The sites should be excavated. This would require funding to a level that would allow an area excavation over Site 4, and sampling by transects and area excavations distributed throughout the shaded area shown in Fig. 1.

Finally, it should be remembered that any landscaping involving tree planting should exclude the area.

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Acknowledgements

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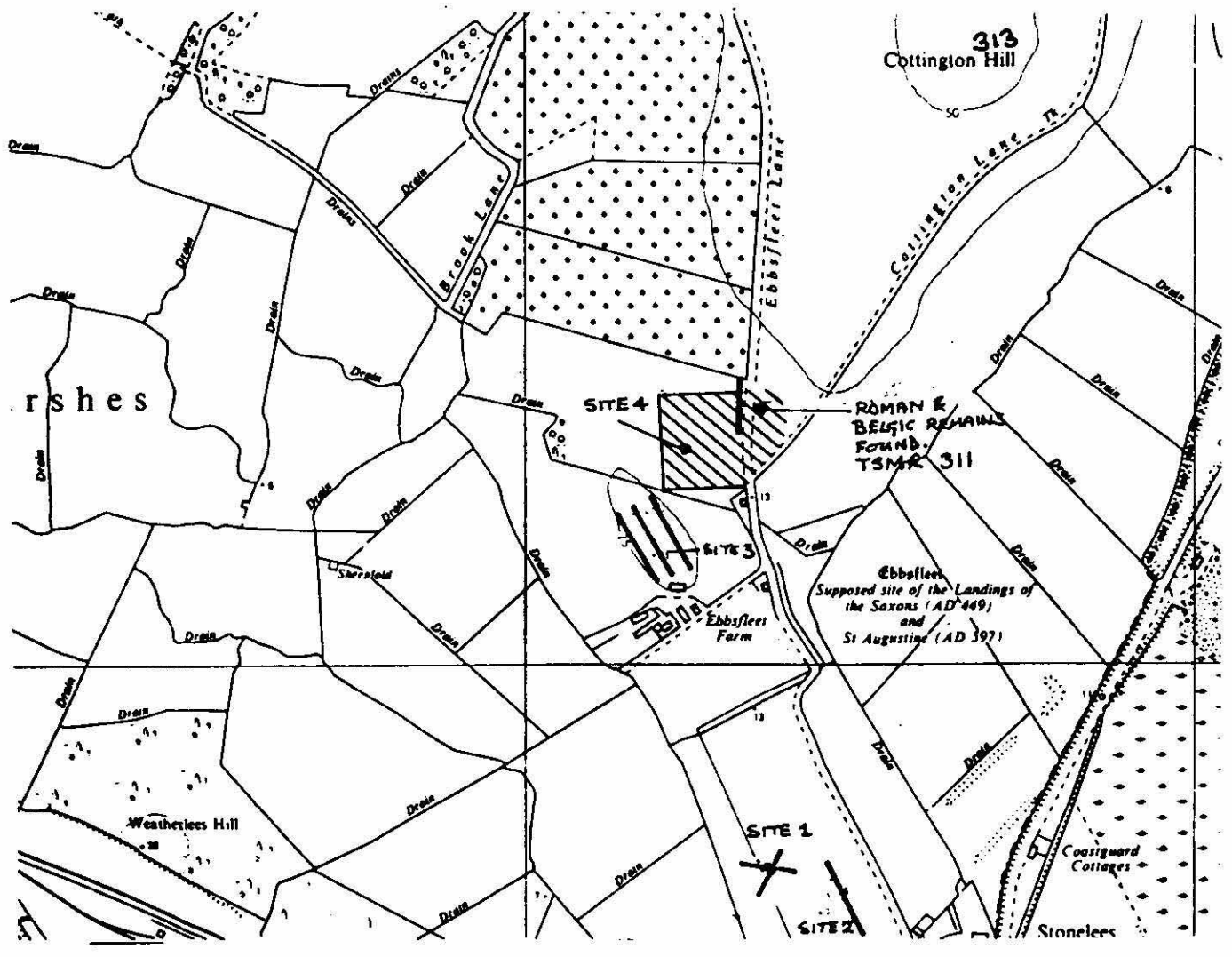


Fig. 1, SITES EXAMINED BY TRANSECT DURING THE EBBISFLEET EVALUATION

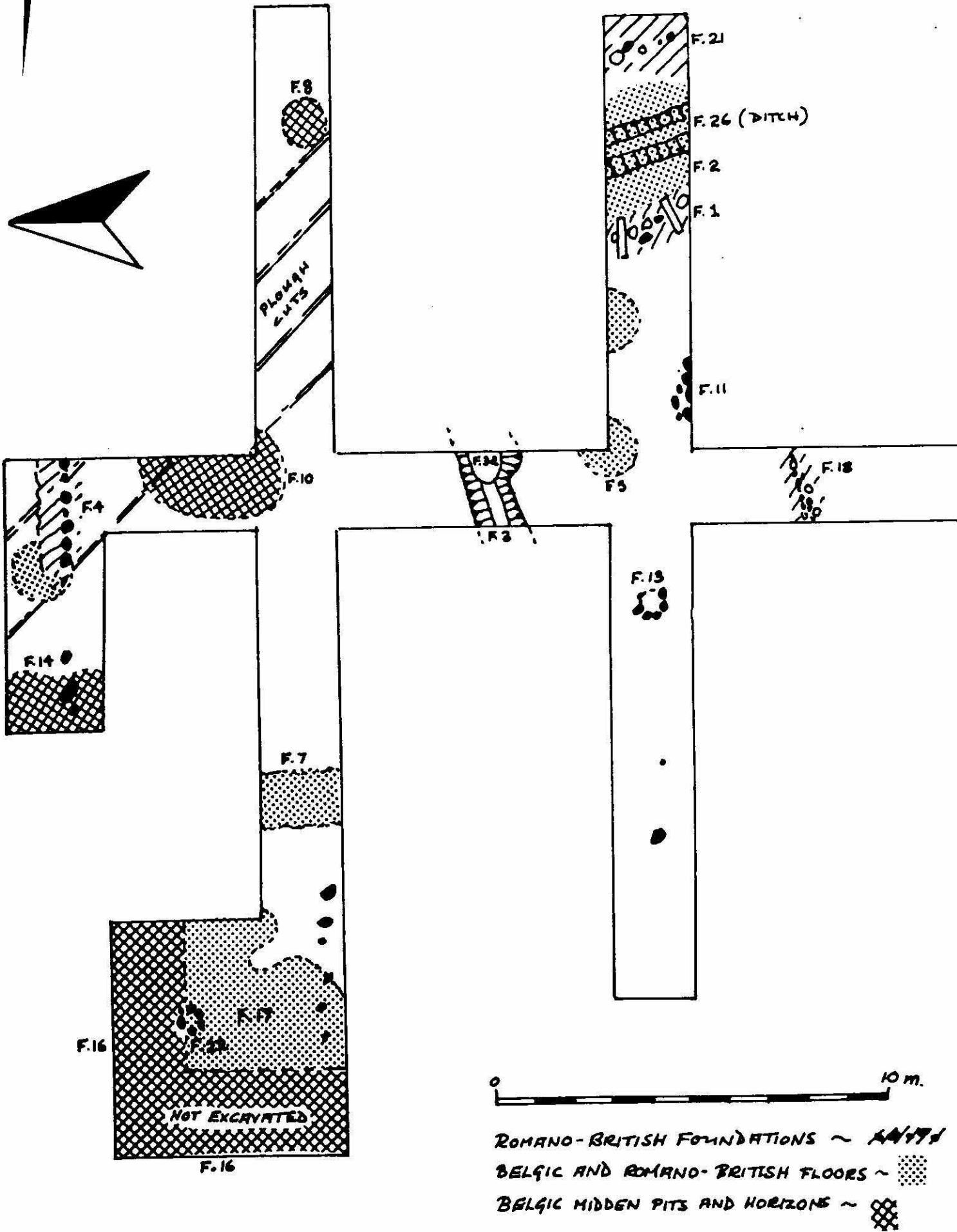


Fig. 2, SITE 4 AT EBBSFLEET FARM