

Archaeological investigations at Pevensy and Westham CE School, High Street, Westham, East Sussex

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Excavation at Pevensy and Westham CE School, Westham revealed evidence for medieval activity, mainly of 11th–13th century date. Two phases of ditch systems were identified, probably related to drainage activity associated with a marshland-edge location. A handful of pits and a possible structure were also recorded, although associated finds were very limited. A small collection of residual Roman pottery was recovered, but no features of this date were identified.

INTRODUCTION

Archaeology South-East (UCL Institute of Archaeology) were commissioned by East Sussex County Council to carry out a programme of archaeological works in advance of a proposed extension to the Pevensy and Westham CE School, Westham, East Sussex (NGR 564150 104500: Fig. 1). The site lay within an area of playing fields and playground to the south and west of the existing school buildings. Geophysical survey, conducted by Stratascan (Taylor 2002), preceded two evaluation trenches in February 2002 (Stevens 2002) and subsequent area excavation in October 2002.

Pevensy and Westham CE School is situated in the village of Westham, a small settlement to the west of Pevensy, and separated from its larger neighbour by Pevensy Castle. The school is situated to the south of High Street, immediately west of St. Mary's Church, with residential properties to the north and west. The school grounds are bounded by the railway line to the south, with the reclaimed farmland of Mountney Level beyond.

Geologically, the site lies on Tunbridge Wells Sand, with extensive deposits of alluvium to the north, east and south reflecting the former position of the sea. Site levels ranged between 4.76m and 5.41m aOD. The archaeological features were located beneath a tarmac playground, the overburden comprising 0.4–0.5m of former ploughsoil overlain by a 0.2–0.3m thick deposit of tarmac and brick hardcore.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Westham, together with Pevensy, occupies a narrow ridge extending eastwards into what is now known as the Pevensy Levels, a vast area of reclaimed former saltmarsh. For much of its earlier history, the Levels formed a huge shallow lagoon, into which the Pevensy–Westham ridge extended as a peninsula. The development of shingle spits, formed by longshore drift, had a complex effect on the development of the coastline in the area, including detrimental effects on drainage resulting in the formation of a number of back-barrier environments such as the Willingdon Levels, where peat formation can be traced back to the Bronze Age, exploited by prehistoric communities such as those who constructed the Shinewater timber platforms (Greatorex 2003; Woodcock 2003). Evidence for prehistoric activity in the vicinity of the site is limited; The East Sussex Historic Environment Record (ESHER) records two sites within 250 metres: a possible Iron Age hearth found within an extension to the churchyard c. 1940 (ESHER MES5031), and a quantity of flints and Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age pottery found in a small hole dug in a garden near the High Street in 1943 (ESHER MES5032).

Roman activity on the peninsula is dominated by the dramatic Saxon Shore fort, constructed in what was then a strategic waterside location in c. AD 293 (Rudling 2003). According to Margary, a road left the West Gate of the fort and extended to the south-west along a hedgerow (described by Margary as a 'causeway') bordering the southern edge of the churchyard, before crossing the site and then turning through a right-angle to cross the High Street and join the southern end of

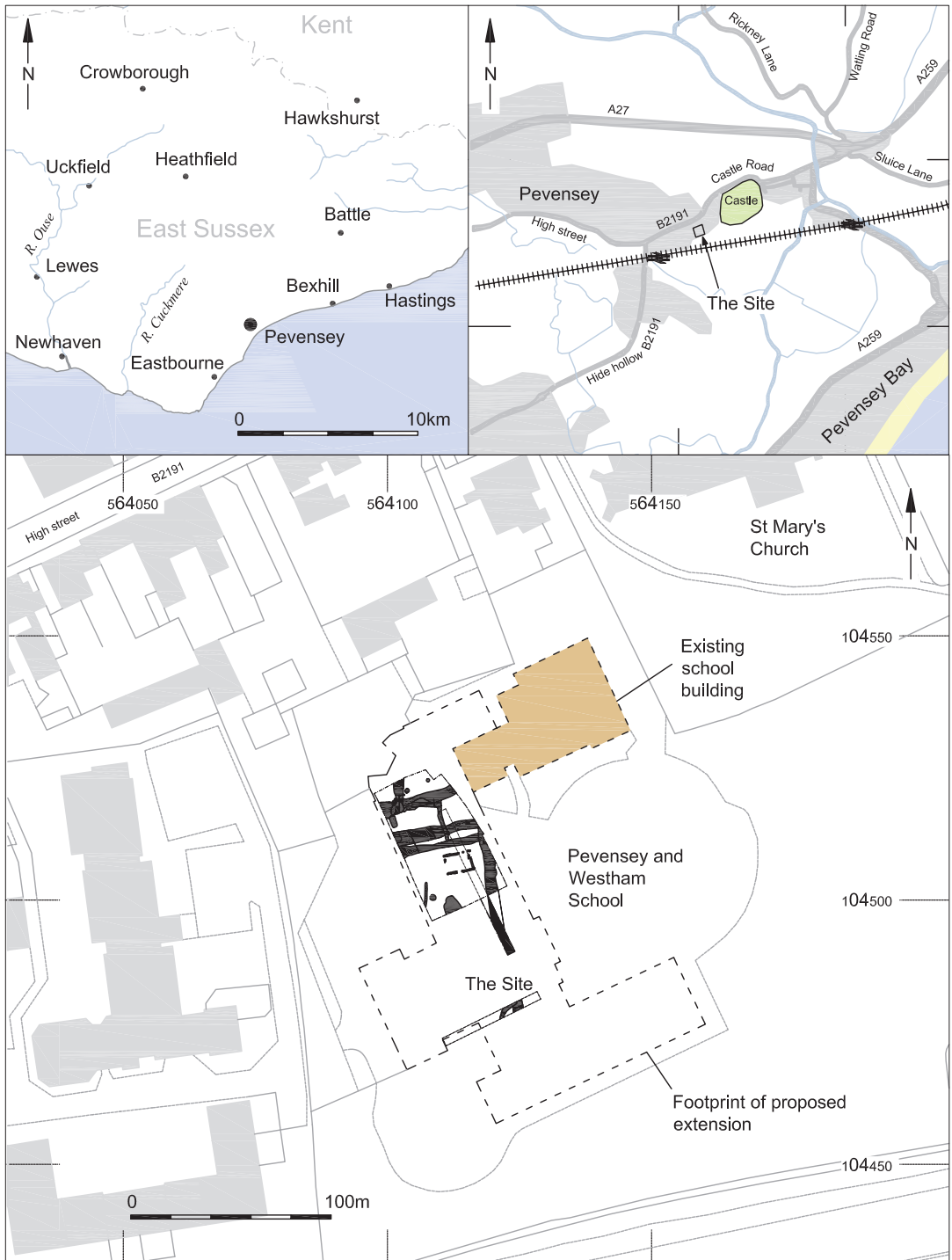


Fig. 1. Site location.

Peelings Lane (Margary 1965). An alternative route is suggested by evidence from the 1936 excavations outside the West Gate for a Roman-period road following the line of the existing High Street (Lyne 2009). Notwithstanding suggestions that a port and civilian settlement was located in Westham (Drewett *et al.* 1988, 198), little evidence has been discovered to indicate whether an extra-mural settlement existed outside the fort walls; the limited amount of Roman material known from Westham amounts to just a handful of pits and ditches (ESHER MES7592 and MES19496).

Westham developed as an extra-mural settlement outside the West Gate of the castle during the medieval period. The name is thought to derive from ‘west hamm’, meaning the meadowland west of Pevensey, and is first recorded in 1222 (Mawer and Stenton 1930), although earlier settlement is indicated by references in Domesday to six holdings held in Westham under Pevensey (Haselgrove 1978).

Reclamation (‘inning’) of the marshland around Pevensey appears to have begun after the Norman Conquest, apart from a small amount of inning recorded at Barnhorne, further to the east at Cooden (Salzman 1910, 35). A charter of 947 refers to considerable quantities of marsh in the vicinity, while Domesday records relatively little meadow (a valuable resource) in the locality, together with a scatter of salterns as far inland as Hailsham. Others are known to the south of Westham (ESHER MESS035), references continuing into the 13th century (Dulley 1966; Salzman 1910). This is a significant detail, because salt extraction normally took place at the marsh edge, and the relative location of salterns charted the pattern of reclamation. Inning began in earnest from the later 12th century, much of it driven by monastic landowners keen to exploit the resulting fertile pasture. Records from 1305 relating to the Battle Abbey estate at Barnhorne valued meadow at 18d per acre, in comparison with reclaimed arable at 12d and ‘upland’ arable at 6d (Brandon 1971). Mountney Level, the sector of Pevensey Level lying immediately south and southwest of Westham, bounded to the east by the Langney Sewer, certainly appears to have experienced some inning at this time. In a contemporary grant from Richard the Porter (of Pevensey) to Lewes Priory regarding their tide-mill at Langney, he states that the ‘sea water may have free entrance and passage...through my marsh...so long as the mill stands...’, implying some

doubt as to the long-term viability of the marsh (Salzman 1910, 38). Mountney Level appears to have been largely reclaimed by the mid-13th century, land-use being primarily devoted to sheep pasture and latterly some arable. In common with most of the Pevensey Levels, it is likely to have been reflooded during the Great Storm of 1287, when large acreages of rich pasture and arable were lost (Brandon and Short 1990). The later medieval period saw a constant cycle of repeated flooding and an associated struggle to maintain sea walls to keep floodwater at bay.

The later history of the site was entirely agricultural until it was taken over by the school for use as playing fields in the 20th century. Historic mapping shows it occupying a wedge-shaped field bounded to the west by the rear plots of properties lining the High Street, the other sides being formed by drainage ditches. The field was bisected by the construction of the railway, which opened in 1846. The school originated as a National School (Anglican foundations, often in direct rivalry with the non-sectarian British Schools) built in 1852 for 84 children (ESRO E/SC/275/1/1).

RESULTS OF FIELDWORK

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION AND EXCAVATION Roman

Despite the proximity to both the late Roman fort and Margary’s putative road, no features of Roman date were encountered, although 45 abraded Roman pottery sherds were retrieved from medieval contexts, as were several pieces of stone probably derived from the fort; most of the pottery dates from the 3rd–4th century. No evidence was found to support Margary’s projected road line, and the discovery of a bank sealing two medieval ditches (ditches 1 and 2) within the excavation site, and on the line of his causeway/hedgerow, suggests that his hypothesis was based on misinterpretation of a later landscape feature.

Medieval

The small assemblage of artefacts, combined with the observed stratigraphy, allowed three main periods of medieval activity to be identified (Fig. 2).

Period 1 (1100–1250)

Two large parallel ditches (ditches 1 and 2) running across the centre of the site represent the most

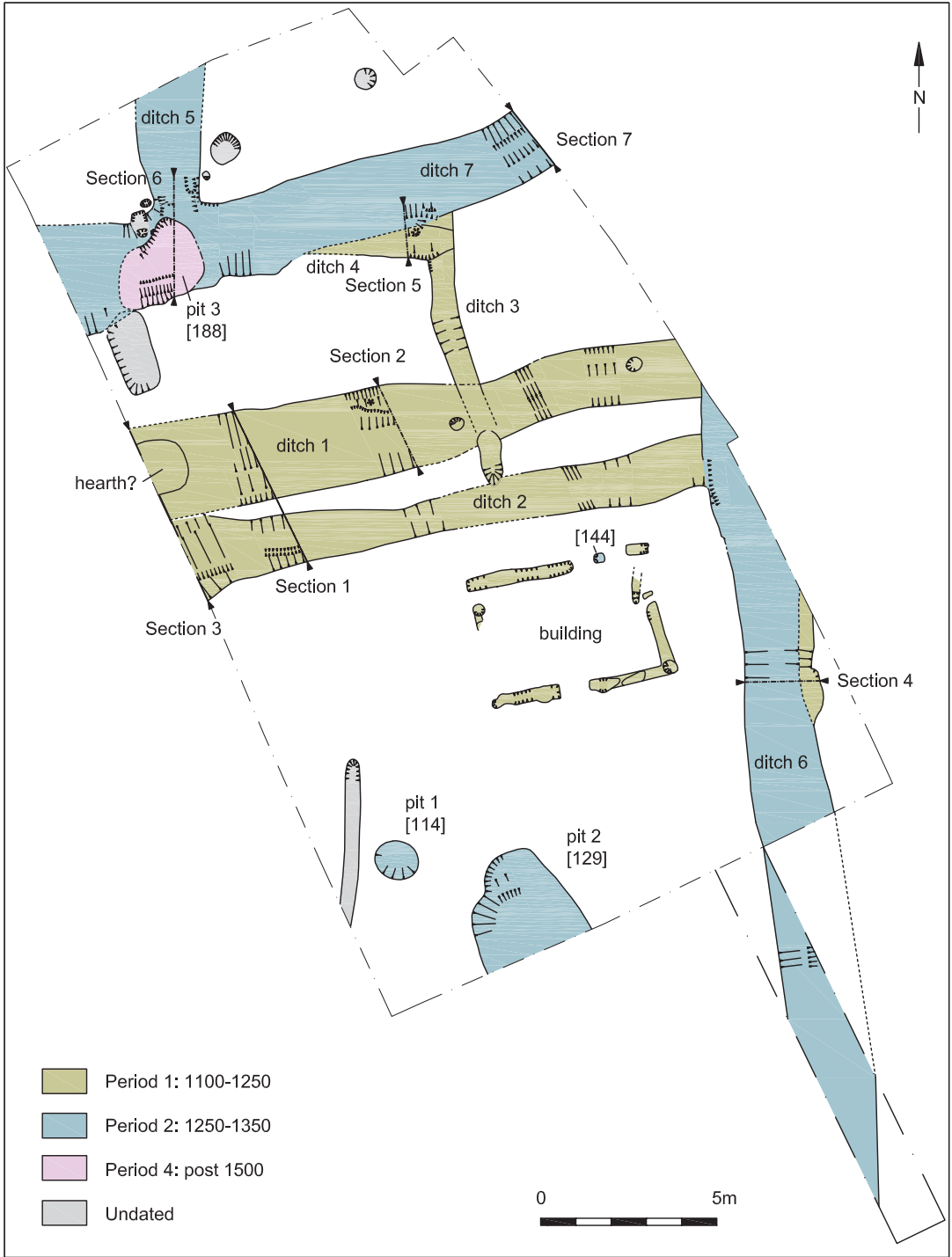


Fig. 2. Phased plan of excavated features.

prominent features (Fig. 2). They vary in width and depth across the site, but ditch 1 was the larger and more complex, containing evidence for a major recutting episode (Fig. 3, sections 1 and 2). The relationship between the two ditches is impossible to determine, as they both produced generally contemporary pottery spanning the period, precluding close-dating. The existence of two parallel ditches can perhaps be confirmed by their location, forming a major township boundary between the marshland (probably reclaimed by this date) to the south, and the settlement of Westham to the north.

Ditch 1 produced evidence for a possible fence-line, based on the existence of post-holes (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3, section 1). The fills of these ditches were heavily leached of colour, which made their exact extent difficult to establish in places. The western end was particularly difficult to resolve; although clearly visible as a cut feature in section, it proved very elusive in plan towards the trench edge. A curious shallow feature or spread of burnt clay and charcoal [120], containing 12 small sherds of pottery dating to the range 1100–1225 and extending beyond the trench edge to the west, was interpreted as a hearth of some kind, or at least an area where some kind of burning had taken place (Fig. 3, section 3). No clear trace of ditch 1 could be found beneath it, although this is probably an issue of visibility rather than real absence. The ditch fills were generally silty clays, and there was some evidence in places for gleying, suggesting open ditches containing water. The ditches had gone out of use before the end of this period, as they were overlain at the western end by a low bank of silty-clay [109] (Fig. 3, section 3). This feature is difficult to interpret, because only a small area of it was visible in plan, and no trace of it was found in the eastern half of the excavation area. However, it corresponds broadly to the projected line of the bank forming the southern boundary of the churchyard (Margary's Roman road), suggesting that the eastern extent might have been removed by the digging of ditch 6 in period 2, and was perhaps further affected by the laying of the tarmac playground. It may also have covered an otherwise undated, shallow, rectangular feature to the east of the ditches, although this could not be determined with any certainty.

Ditches 1 and 2 were cut at right angles by ditch 6 at the eastern edge of the excavated area. While ditch 6 was assigned to period 2, a section cut across

it (Fig. 3, section 4) revealed that the ditch was in fact a recut of an earlier feature. This part of the site was confused by intersecting land drains and modern intrusions, so there was little scope for further investigation of this undated earlier feature, but it is possible, given the alignment in relation to ditches 1 and 2, that an earlier or contemporary ditch was related to ditches 1 and 2 at this point, producing, in effect, the corner of an enclosure or field (with a further field outside the site area to the east, assuming that ditches 1 and 2 continued in that direction).

Immediately south of ditch 2, and aligned with it, was a rectangular arrangement of linear gullies and post-holes forming the outline of a small structure measuring 5m by 4m. Although it was significantly truncated, to the extent that no floor surfaces or other internal features survived, enough remained of the structure to indicate a short rectangular building, constructed of timber and comprising a mix of post-holes (some retaining packing stones) and sill-beam slots. The latter probably held the wattle and daub panels that are likely to have formed the walling, and the posts formed vertical supports. The northern, eastern and southern wall lines were reasonably complete, and appeared to incorporate gaps that suggested doorways or entrances. The western wall existed only as a post-hole and a short length of beam trench cut by a modern land-drain; no evidence for any wall-lines were found beyond the drain. This structure was dated by 14 sherds of pottery from four separate contexts, all period 1 in date. The only exception was post-hole [144], situated in the middle of a gap in the northern wall, which produced three sherds of 14th- to 15th-century pottery (period 2); although located in association with the structure, this post-hole could have been dug after the period 1 building was demolished. Alternatively, it may represent a later modification, perhaps the blocking of a doorway, and could indicate longevity of use, otherwise lacking through the truncation of occupation surfaces.

A complex ditch system at the northern end of the excavation area (ditches 3, 4, 5 and 7) also included some period 1 elements. Later modifications had destroyed some relationships, but it is probable that ditches 3 and 4 together formed part of a drainage system diverting water into the main drainage formed by ditch 1. It may also have been associated with a pond shown on

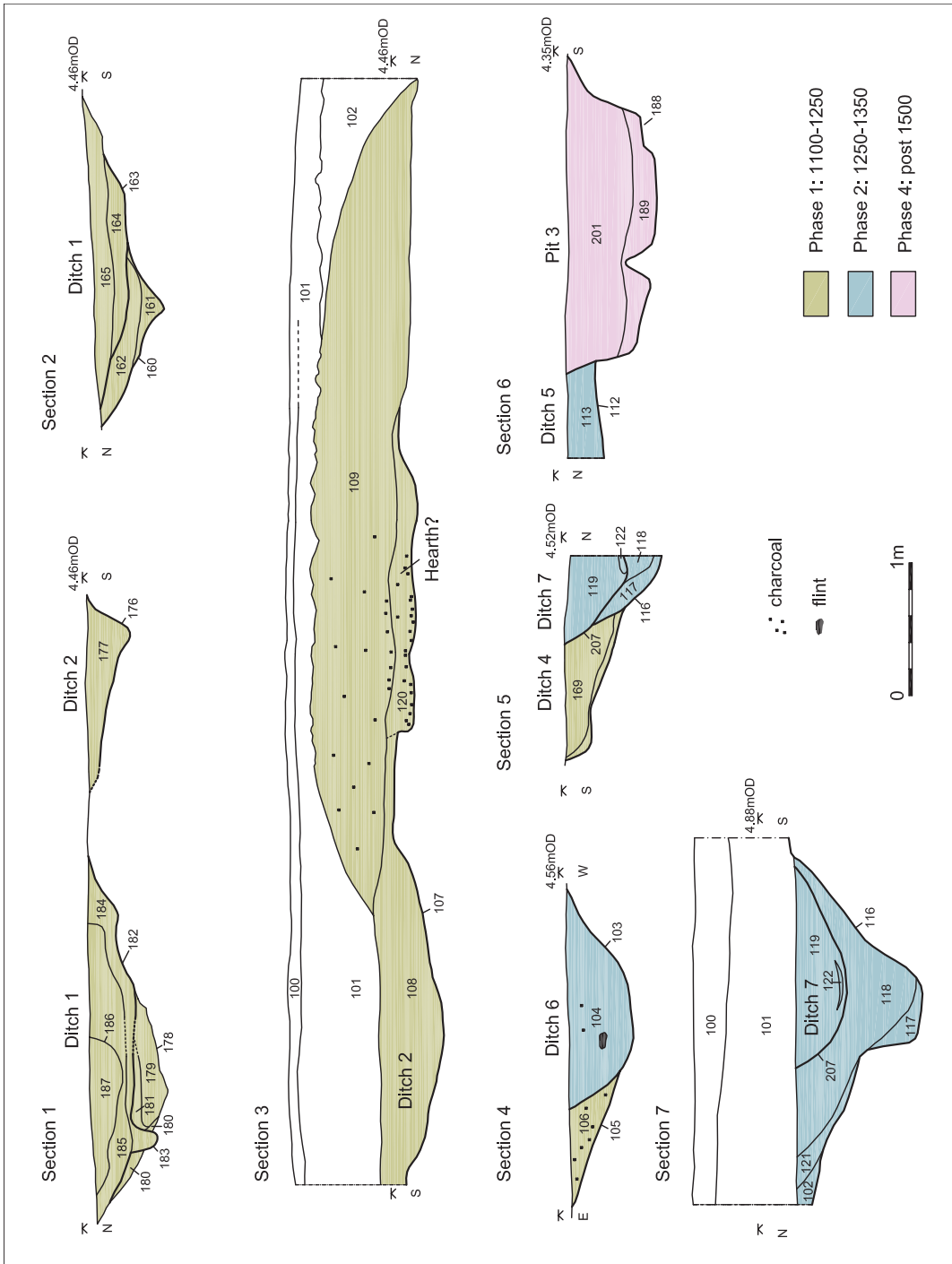


Fig. 3. Selected ditch sections.

historic maps to have existed on the southern edge of Westham (beyond the excavation area and now beneath the school buildings).

Period 2 (1250–1350)

This period post-dates the abandonment of ditches 1–4, and is represented by three new ditches and two pits. The rectangular building may have continued in use into the earlier part of this period. Ditch 6 ran along the eastern side of the excavation area (and was located in an evaluation trench just to the south), and produced 15 pottery sherds, the largest from the site. It contained a single homogeneous fill (Fig. 3, section 4) and a small assemblage of artefacts, including ceramic building material and animal bone. The stratigraphic relationship of ditch 6 to ditches 1 and 2 was clear: the former was seen to cut through the silted-up deposits within the earlier ditches.

The northern end of the excavation area was crossed by another large ditch (ditch 7), which cut through the earlier ditch 4 (Fig. 3, section 5), although the exact relationship further west was obscured by a modern intrusion, and continued across the trench. It was joined from the north by a shallower ditch (ditch 5), although the relationship between the two features was destroyed by the insertion of a deep pit (pit 3) in period 4 (Fig. 3, section 6). Ditch 7 was a complex feature, containing five fills, and appears to have been re-cut at some stage to form a narrower, shallower channel, although still within the same chronological period. The fills had a distinct organic appearance in places, suggesting that they had been used for rubbish disposal (Fig. 3, section 7).

The two remaining features were pits 1 [114] and pit 2 [129] in the southern part of the excavation area. Pit 1 was a shallow pit containing four sherds of pottery and some roof tile, charcoal and burnt clay. Pit 2 was much bigger, and contained pottery, fragments of iron and slag, and had been re-cut at a later unknown date as a wider but shallower feature. If the rectangular building remained in use in this period, there may be some association with these pits.

Period 3 (135–1500)

The only evidence for activity in this period is six small sherds of pottery dating to 1400–1525 found in a limited re-cut of ditch 7. Material of this date

is restricted to a localised area at the western end of Ditch 7, but does suggest that the ditch was re-cut and infilled during this period.

Period 4 (post-1500)

Once ditch 7 had gone out of use, a large pit, 0.7m deep, was dug at its western end, pit 3 [188]. This feature contained two fills. The primary fill was dark blue-grey clay containing a quantity of animal bone, possibly a fragmented skull, concentrated in its northern half. Nine sherds of pottery spanning the period 1450–1550 were recovered from the two fills, together with a single residual Period 1 sherd. This feature appears to have been associated with several post-holes clustered immediately to its north, and also spanning the southern end of ditch 5. These features were undated, and may be later than pit 3, although the stratigraphy was difficult to establish, particularly as the northern edge of pit 3 had slumped inwards to produce an undercut edge. This may indicate pressure from the activity associated with the post-holes and distortion of the deposits once the pit had silted up or been backfilled; an open feature edge would be more prone to collapse than distortion.

ARTEFACTS

The excavation produced a modest assemblage of pottery, almost all of it medieval. Most of it concentrates on the 12th and 13th centuries but, overall, four fairly distinct periods can be identified. The pottery was of little intrinsic interest, comprising mainly cooking pots and a handful of jugs, including sherds from a possible Saintonge vessel (period 2, ditch 6). No large groups were found, and very few feature sherds. Other artefact groups were relatively poor and uninformative. Animal bone was recovered from a number of features across the site, but generally consisted of small fragments of bone (cattle, pig, sheep, dog and horse), often poorly preserved; evidence for butchery was found on just one fragment of cattle longbone from a 13th–14th century context. Environmental evidence was also poor. There was little evidence of extensive waterlogging. Plant macrofossils were dominated by bread wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L.) and smaller quantities of barley (*Hordeum* spp.) and oats (*Avena* sp.), suggesting some degree of crop processing.

DISCUSSION

Despite their location on the southern flank of Westham, a historic settlement of medieval and possibly earlier origin, the archaeological features investigated during the excavation throw little direct light on the settlement or the castle. Rather, they are part of the wider story of the marshland hinterland. The reclamation of the marshlands was carried out piecemeal, anchored from the dry land and extending out into the marsh. Consequently, the marshlands immediately adjacent to the Westham–Pevensey peninsula are likely to be some of the earliest to be reclaimed in a process that commenced in the 12th century, if not earlier.

The most interesting feature is the small period 1 building. Measuring 5m by 4m, it represents the average size of a single bay in a medieval structure, as measured from standing buildings, although single-bay structures are uncommon (Dyer 1986). Its position and form suggest a small agricultural building of some kind. Its location on the edge of the reclaimed marshland pastures would imply some association with animal husbandry, probably sheep, although no specific evidence linking the structure to sheep farming was recovered. In the medieval period sheep were kept in buildings known as sheepcotes or *bercaria*, but all the known examples are long, narrow structures (for example, excavated examples in the Cotswolds varied between 23m and 65m in length: Dyer 1995). The nearest examples comparable with the current building may exist on Walland Marsh, where excavations revealed a small structure (Site B at Lydd 4 – Barber and Priestley-Bell 2008, 65) of broadly similar size, though surviving only as a sub-rectangular depression. This has been interpreted as a possible shepherd's hut, and compared with the 'lookers' huts' known from the Romney Marsh area in the 18th and 19th centuries:

brick-built structures of similar size to that of the Westham building (Reeves and Eve 1998). Wooden shepherds' huts of medieval date are known from the Essex marshes, used to keep tools, sheepskins and other items (Evans 1953, 145).

A possible problem with this interpretation is that most of the known examples were some distance from settlement centres, as would be expected of shepherds' shelters. However, this is not invariably the case. Essex examples were often centrally located within the farm, and associated with ponds and sheepcotes. In the case of Westham, the area of reclaimed marshland is restricted to the south and east by the presence of the Langney Sewer, which broadly follows, in part, the former line of Pevensey Haven, the main access to the medieval port. Evidence of salterns less than half a kilometer to the south of the site suggests that the marshland edge (where salterns were usually located) lay very close to the site until at least the early 12th century. There are extensive references in Domesday to saltworking around the Pevensey Levels, as well as contemporary evidence of limited meadowland (Dulley 1966). Given these spatial restrictions, it is not unreasonable to expect features associated with sheep husbandry to be located close to the settlement.

The ditches represent several phases of drainage activity associated with this marshland edge location, although the small size of the excavated area limits interpretation. The east–west aligned ditches represent at least two successive phases (represented by ditches 1 and 2, and ditch 7 respectively) of boundary ditches separating the settlement from the fields; the alignment between ditches 1 and 2 and the churchyard wall adds support. With the exception of ditches 1 and 2, none of the features on the site corresponds with any ditches or other boundary lines marked on 19th century historic mapping.

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