

# ◆ Fragmentary remains of a probable 13th- to 15th-century croft at Oldlands Farm, Bognor Regis, West Sussex

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*The ecclesiastical ‘grain factories’ of the Sussex Coastal Plain made the area one of the most valuable arable districts in all of medieval England. Despite this fact, study of the origins and adaptation of the area’s field systems has been relatively neglected. Excavations at Oldlands Farm, Bognor Regis allowed the archaeological exploration of a large portion of field system operated by the manor of Lidsey. What emerged was a distinctive model, unlike the nucleated open field communities of areas such as the Midlands. This study offers a rare analysis of a medieval field system on the Sussex Coastal Plain. It shows how furlongs were enclosed at an early date creating a settlement pattern of dispersed peasant crofts set within large and advanced areas of cultivated land.*

## INTRODUCTION

This short article presents the medieval findings encountered during an extensive programme of archaeological trenching, ‘strip, map and sample’ investigations and a geotechnical watching brief carried out by Archaeology South-East (UCL Institute of Archaeology) at Oldlands Farm, Bognor Regis, West Sussex (see Fig. 1).

The work was conducted prior to the creation of a Flood Compensation Area associated with the development of new Rolls Royce warehouses to the south. Archaeological remains dating from the mesolithic to the post-medieval period were encountered and the prehistoric results have been reported in a separate article (Margetts this volume pp 47–81).

Fieldwork at Oldlands Farm was situated on the interfluvium between the Aldingbourne and Lidsey Rifes, in close proximity to the medieval hamlet of Lidsey, which is located within the historic parish of Aldingbourne. The underlying geology of the wider development area comprised the heavily-weathered Cretaceous Chalk of the Culver Chalk Formation, overlain by cryoturbated, middle-late Pleistocene calcareous basin deposits. The drift sediments comprise loessic brickearth and raised marine deposits. The land was previously laid to arable, bounded by drainage ditches and mature hedgerows.

## THE HISTORIC LANDSCAPE CONTEXT

Occupying land between the South Downs and the sea, the West Sussex Coastal Plain is one of the more easily defined *pays* of south-east England (Gardiner 2012, 100–107). It was an area noted for its arable soils, largely comprising easily worked brickearths akin to continental loess (Brandon 1971, 114).

In the late 18th century it was judged by Marshall to be “the most valuable arable district of equal extent, in the island” (Marshall 1798, 239) and during the early fourteenth century only parts of Kent, among all the provinces of England, exceeded it in wealth (Glasscock 1965, 66–8). As well as the fecundity of its soils, this affluence was also derived from its method of sheep-corn husbandry, proximity to markets, coastal trade and advanced sowing and rotational techniques (Brandon 1971, 113).

The Coastal Plain, Sussex and the wider south-east of England lie outside Roberts and Wrathmell’s Central Province (2000), characterised by nucleated villages and the ‘Midlands system’ of regular open fields (Hall 2014, 1). Although it often had organised fields, coastal Sussex differed significantly from the Midlands region and was considerably influenced by the proximity of extensive grazing for sheep on the nearby South Downs.

It had large areas of demesne and bodies of dependant cultivators, grouped into extensive honours and ecclesiastical lordships (Brandon

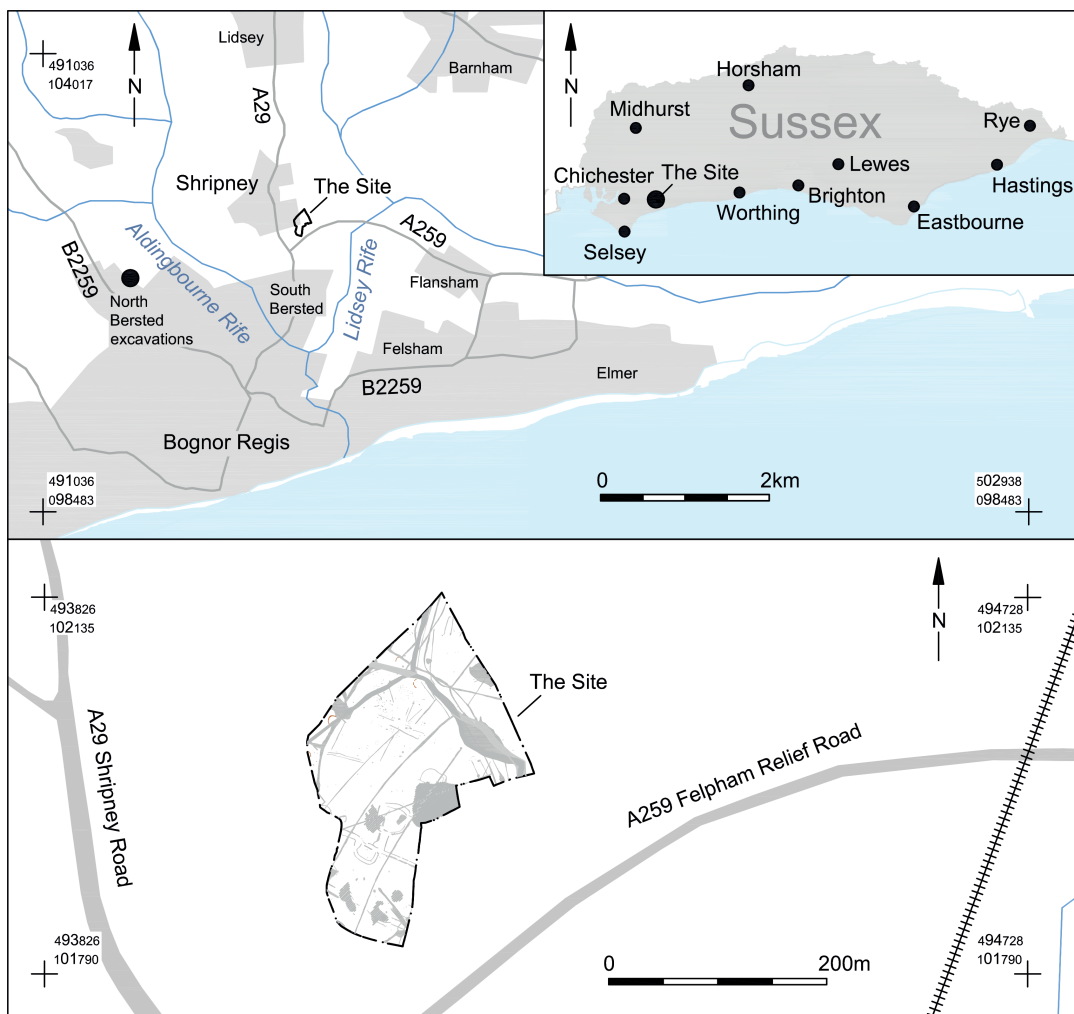


Fig. 1. Site location.

1971, 113). During the period of ‘high farming’ these estates, in essence, functioned as ‘federated grain factories’ and gave the tract both social and geographical coherence (*ibid.*). These were not the open field communities of the nucleated model but large populations of cottagers, dispersed in hamlets, with plots of land cultivated ‘rather like allotments’ (Brandon and Short 1990, 59).

#### TENURIAL HISTORY

According to a potentially corrupted 7th-century charter, *Nothhelm*, king of the South Saxons, gave

33 hides (*cassati*) of land at Lidsey, Aldingbourne, *Lenstedegate* (?Westergate) and (North) Mundham to *Nothgyth*, his sister, in order to found a minster (The Electronic Sawyer, S 45).

By the late 9th century the estate was likely back in royal possession, as in AD 899 King Alfred left the *ham at Ealdburnan* to his nephew *Ethelm* (Salzman 1953, 135). By the time of Edward the Confessor, the manor of Aldingbourne was in the hands of the Bishop of Selsey and descended with his successors, the Bishops of Chichester, until the 19th century (*ibid.*).

## RESULTS

### FIELD SYSTEM

A medieval 'field system' was encountered at the site and comprised four ditches orientated north-east-south-west (G113, G116, G117, G121), with broadly perpendicular evidence of furrows resulting from cultivation (G114, G115, G118, G119). The ditches ran up to, but did not extend beyond, a large drainage ditch (described below), which may mark the line of a pre-existing watercourse as well as Chapel Lane (*see* Fig. 2).

A further part of the same system was encountered in the north-eastern third of the site and comprised a roughly right-angled ditch relating to the corner of a field (named on the Aldingbourne tithe of 1847 as 10 acres Chapel Lane; G124). All ditches associated with this field system were filled by similar deposits of mid-grey/brown silt clay. Inclusions consisted of moderate, angular flint nodules, snail shells, occasional charcoal flecks and very occasional fire-cracked flint.

Ditches G113 and G121 were both decommissioned prior to the 1847 tithe and neither was shown on Yeakell and Gardner's map of Sussex (1798). Ditch G113 contained residual prehistoric flint and a tiny sherd of unidentifiable pot, whereas ditch G121 produced no datable finds.

Ditch G116 was shown as an unbounded feature at the time of the tithe but was certainly decommissioned prior to the OS 1st edition map of 1876. The longevity of the feature probably accounts for the post-medieval material encountered close to the bottom of the ditch (a green glass wine bottle body fragment broadly dating from AD 1750–1900) and a fragment of vitrified brick from the upper horizons. Other finds included residual Roman pottery, prehistoric flint and three worn sherds of the painted ware tradition. The latter probably relate to 15th-century activity.

Ditch G117 was shown on the tithe but was decommissioned prior to the OS 1st edition. It contained residual Roman and prehistoric material (including an abraded Bronze Age loomweight RF<23>), a piece of briquetage, a copper alloy, figure-of-eight spur terminal RF<15> (of late medieval-post-medieval date), an undecorated copper alloy 'dandy' button RF<18>, fashionable during the 18th century, five sherds of medieval pottery and an iron sickle RF<12>.

The sickle appeared to have been deliberately damaged, probably using a large flint beach cobble that was found directly above the implement. This enigmatic behaviour could simply represent the frustration of a reaper with his tool or a casual discard of a damaged implement; however, it also has the potential to reveal the practice of folklore perhaps associated with the need for bountiful harvests.

Sickles may be symbols of luck, for they incorporate the crescent shape thought to have been a preservative against danger, as well being made of iron which was thought to have protective powers (Daniels and Stevans 1903, 1291). In his 17th-century text *Hudibras*, Samuel Butler records that one could 'chase evil spirits away by dint Of Cickle, Horseshooe, Hollow-flint' (Waller 1905, 159).

Ditch G124 was shown on the tithe but decommissioned prior to OS 1st edition. It contained residual Roman and prehistoric material, as well as a sherd from a painted ware jar (AD 1400–1500) and an iron strap loop RF<21> of late post-medieval date.

The large drainage ditch (G127), mentioned above, measured up to seven metres in width and reached depths of around two metres (Fig. 3). All interventions were undertaken by tracked excavator. The earliest fill related to the interface between the drainage ditch and the underlying chalk. This was overlain by a dark peat, with moderate inclusions of charcoal and preserved organics; a fragment of Roman brick supplied the only datable find.

Above the peat was a sequence of post-medieval deposits related to disuse and decommissioning. Although this feature is likely to be connected to medieval activity, the occurrence of a fragment of Roman brick from the lower fill deposits perhaps points to earlier inception or the truncation of an earlier feature.

### OTHER FEATURES

A quarry pit (G125), probably for the extraction of marl, was encountered within '10 acres Chapel Lane'. Although it was not fully excavated, sherds of medieval pottery were recovered from the lowest fill encountered, which was overlain by a decommissioning deposit that contained post-medieval brick.

Two animal burials were also encountered (G122, G123) which related to adult cattle and a

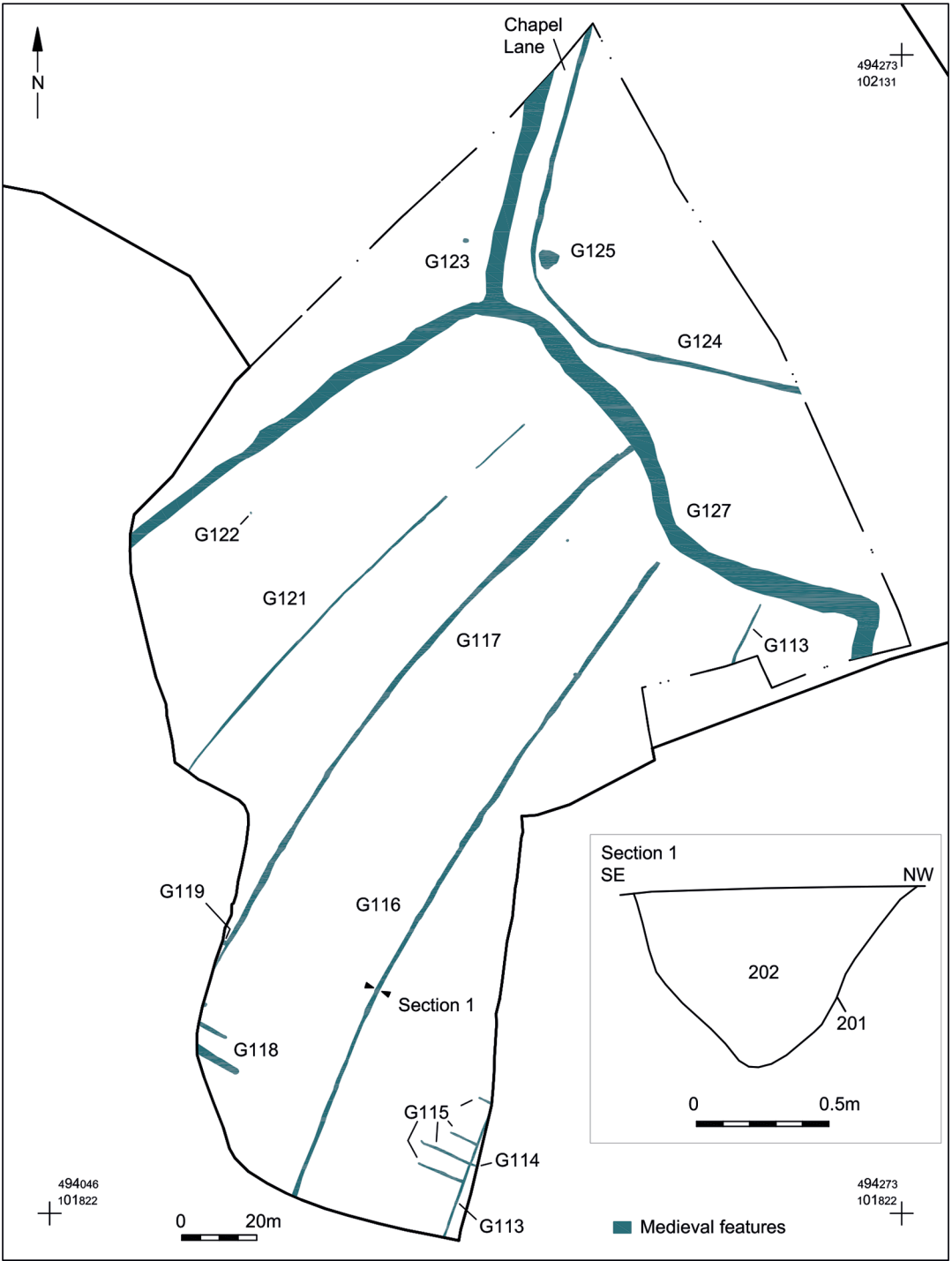


Fig. 2. Site plan and representative section through ditch [201], G116.



Fig. 3. Photograph showing ditch G127, looking north (1.0m scale bars).

juvenile sheep/goat respectively; although both were phased to the medieval period, this date was based solely on a single medieval sherd from G123.

#### THE CREATION AND ABANDONMENT OF MEDIEVAL CROFTS ON THE COASTAL PLAIN

The field system described above clearly contained a very mixed finds assemblage, a factor which always contributes to the difficulties in dating ditches, especially when they had enjoyed some longevity in the landscape (as was the case for G116 and G117). Nevertheless, the bounded areas are thought to be characteristic of enclosed strip-field land division, brought about by medieval or earlier post-medieval enclosure of 'open fields'.

Although the size of open-field strips appears to have been highly variable on the Coastal Plain (Nash 1985, table 1), measurement of the land parcels described above indicates a length commensurate with the furlong measurement (about 201m). The divisions are therefore believed to have been related to early, non-parliamentary enclosure of furlongs within former fields.

The origins of open-field systems are less well understood than their decommissioning, and evidence from Oldlands Farm was originally thought to suggest that a Romano-British heritage played at least some role in this example's creation

(Margetts 2015), a phenomenon postulated elsewhere in the country, such as the Bourn Valley, Cambridgeshire (Oosthuizen 2006).

Further analysis, however, showed that the majority of the fresher Roman sherds were recovered from interventions that had stratigraphic relations with earlier features, thus indicating the pottery's residual nature. While the influence of Romano-British and earlier land division within the vicinity cannot be dismissed (Margetts forthcoming), the field systems in the area of Lidsey are thought to have their origins more firmly within the medieval period.

As discussed, much of Aldingbourne belonged to the estate of the Bishops of Chichester during this time. The demesne farm comprised some 500 acres of arable, cultivated on the three-field system (Salzman 1953, 134).

The land was combined into three, roughly equal 'seasons' for cropping purposes: the first in four fields and crofts, the second in five fields and the third in three (Miller and Hatcher 1978, 92). It is not known whether this system extended to the manor of Lidsey, in which the Oldlands Farm site was surely a component, as the manor may have constituted a separate township.

In order to understand the settlement pattern of the local area, and the field system's place within it, an examination of the manor's tenorial history and cartographic evidence proved helpful. Overlordship



of Lidsey remained with the Bishop of Chichester until the post-medieval period, from the time of Domesday; however, numerous tenants and small landholders are mentioned in accounts.

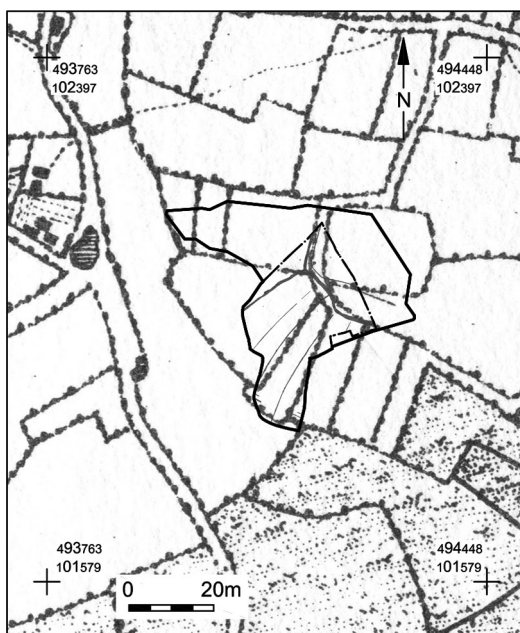
Part of Lidsey comprised the hide in Aldingbourne, held in 1086 by a man-at-arms, Ansfrid (Morris 1976; Salzman 1953, 135). Subsequent 12th- to 15th-century documentary records show that holdings on the manor tended to be small and composed of servile tenants, yardlanders and values of one or half a hide (*ibid.*).

Yeakell and Gardner's map of 1798 (Fig. 4) shows Lidsey as a hamlet surrounded by small enclosed fields (some of which are strip-like in form) and meadows, reclaimed from wetland associated with the Lidsey Rife. Between this record and that of the 1847 tithe (Fig. 5) there appears to have been some field amalgamation but also subdivision. By 1876, however, the OS 1st edition records overwhelming amalgamation into larger fields more suited to mechanical cultivation, as well as reflecting larger landholdings (Fig. 6).

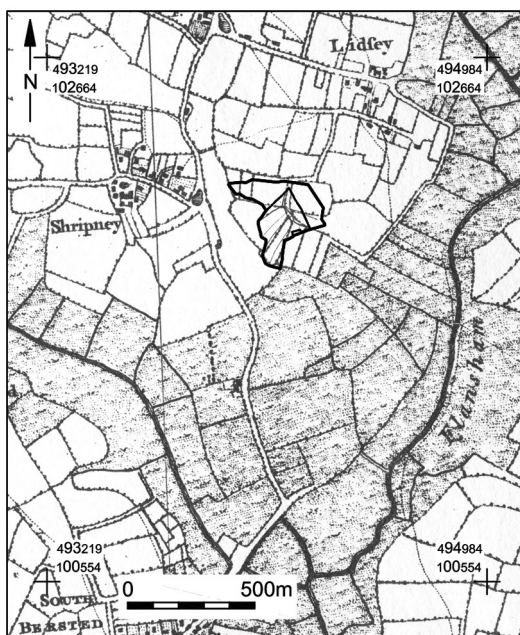
Ditches G116 and G117 both relate to parts of South Croft, recorded on the tithe apportionment (see Fig. 7). Ditches G113 and G121 are, by contrast, part of 14 acres Chapel Lane which clearly relates to post-medieval field amalgamation. It is probable that in the late medieval period these formed a small landholding of former furlongs enclosed from larger fields or areas of pasture/meadow.

The pottery assemblage derived from the ditches suggests relatively low levels of manuring in the 13th and particularly 14th centuries, with a rapid drop-off in the 15th century and nothing thereafter. 'Dead Breeches', field names to the north and north-west of the excavation area, may show that some land in the vicinity was newly broken from at least the High Middle Ages, breach relating to the ploughing of hitherto unused land (Field 1993, 80; Rippon 2012, 81). It was probably unproductive and of little value, hence the 'dead' prefix.

The most likely explanation for the strip-like arrangement of fields is, therefore, that at some point in the later medieval period (probably the late 13th century) a small landholding comprising a croft was established in the south of the manor of Lidsey. A croft is a purely agricultural enclosure situated to the rear of a toft which comprises the peasants dwelling, outbuildings and yard. This was likely won by enclosing former subdivisions of



Yeakell and Gardner close up



Yeakell and Gardner zoomed out

Fig. 4. Medieval features in relation to historic cartography (Yeakell and Gardner's map, 1798).

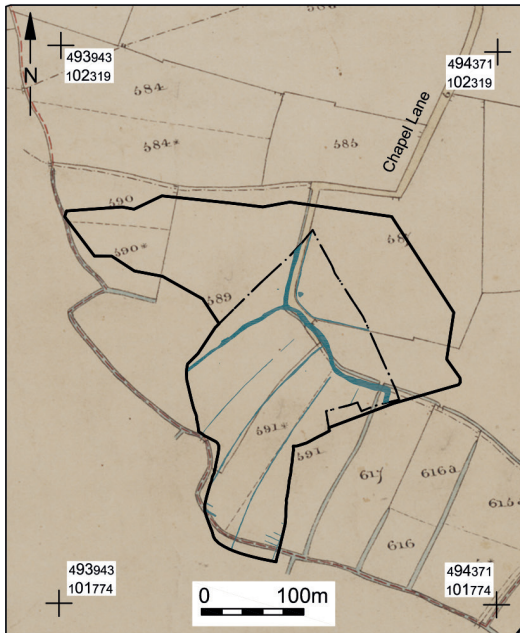


Fig. 5. Medieval features in relation to historic cartography (Aldingbourne tithe map, 1847).

larger fields with the better land being retained by the local demesne.

Although no structural remains relating to an associated toft were encountered this would have likely lain alongside Chapel Lane. The lack of such evidence may also be due to the heavy modern ploughing of the site, which would have truncated the remains to some degree.

The establishment of dispersed crofts is a particular feature of the Coastal Plain's later medieval organisation (Brandon and Short 1990, 59) and South Croft may not have been alone in the parish of Aldingbourne. Raydens Croft also lies away from associated hamlets. By contrast, the land parcel named Chapel Croft is the likely location of the lost 13th-century (or earlier) Chapel of Lidsey, which probably lay in the south of the block facing onto Chapel Lane.

## CONCLUSIONS

Study of the origins and adaptation of field systems on the Coastal Plain has been considered crucial to our understanding of the landscape and the medieval settlement pattern (Barber 2008, 107–

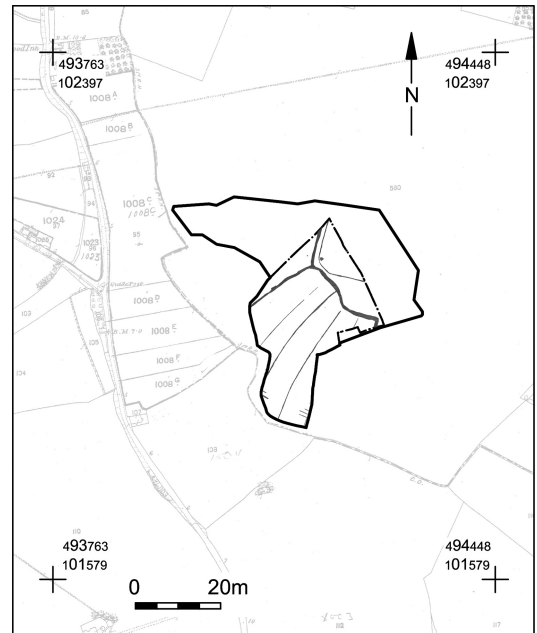


Fig. 6. Medieval features in relation to historic cartography (1876 OS map, 1st edition).





Fig. 7. The Aldingbourne tithe map showing the locations of South Croft, Raydens Croft and Chapel Croft.

109). The excavation of a medieval field system at Oldlands Farm, although poorly dated, has allowed a contribution to understanding of later medieval and post-medieval adaptation of earlier systems.

It provides a case study of the benefit of open-area excavation for understanding south-east England's complex settlement pattern, an area highlighted for further research in the South-East Research Framework (Weekes 2012). It is likely that



the enclosure in the 13th century of small parcels of land was related to population growth and the formation of peasant closes at an early date.

Abandonment of many, as is the case of South Croft, probably took place in the later 14th–15th centuries due to French raids and known demographic and climatic changes. Not least amongst the latter are the major floods that caused destruction of much arable land on the western Coastal Plain (Brandon 1974, 115–118). This was a time of shrinking settlement, when areas of dispersed peasant dwellings often dwindled to a single large farm (*ibid.*, 133).

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## UNPUBLISHED DOCUMENTS

The Electronic Sawyer ([www.esawyer.org.uk](http://www.esawyer.org.uk))  
S 45, Sawyer Charter 45: AD 692. Nothhelm (Nunna), king of Sussex, to Nothgyth, his sister; grant.

