

A MEDIEVAL CHESS PIECE FROM WATCH HOUSE GREEN, FELSTED

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Archaeological investigation within a site alongside Braintree Road at Watch House Green, Felsted, revealed a Roman ditch and medieval pits, ditches and possible structural remains. Most noteworthy, a medieval chess piece was recovered from a pit in the base of a ditch. A rare discovery in Essex, the significance of its occurrence here is considered.

Introduction and background

Archaeological evaluation and small-scale mitigation excavation work was carried out in 2015, within a 2.2ha greenfield site alongside Braintree Road on the north edge of Watch House Green, a hamlet north-west of Felsted (TL 6910021380; Fig. 1). The site was probably within the extensive estate of Leez (Leighs) Priory, 3km to the south-east, which was founded by Sir Ralph Gernon in 1220.

The Essex Historic Environment Record records the site to contain remains of a moat (HER 9562), although no firm evidence for this was discovered during the archaeological fieldwork.

The site

The archaeological trenching and excavation recorded remains of Roman, medieval and post-medieval activity comprising a number of ditches and pits largely concentrated in the north half of the site (ASE 2016). Medieval remains indicative of an occupation site, perhaps a farmstead, adjacent to Braintree Road, were largely concentrated in Trench 4 and a subsequent 366sq m excavation area further investigated its vicinity (Fig. 1).

The recovery of 10th/11th-century pottery, although residual in later features, is suggestive of a Late Saxon origin for medieval activity on site. A number of north-east to south-west orientated gullies and recut ditches, all parallel with Braintree Road, were of late 12th- to late 13th/early 14th-century date. These appear to have delineated several phases of enclosure system and possibly a trackway and were accompanied by a small number of contemporary pits. A moderate quantity of medieval pottery, together with fragments of roof tile, fired clay, animal bone and oyster shell, was retrieved from these features and is of domestic character. A number of undated post-holes and possible structural foundation trenches were also encountered, though these lacked any patterning that defined buildings. Gravel, cobble and tile spread deposits, suggestive of occupation surfaces and/or debris layers were also recorded. The latest medieval feature appeared to be a north-east to south-west aligned ditch that contained a small quantity of late 14th-century pottery. This probably constituted the final maintenance of an enclosure boundary before this episode of domestic occupation ceased, after which land use reverted to that of agriculture.

The most notable excavated feature was small, distinctive, pit [1019] that had evidently been cut into the base of an open medieval ditch (Fig. 1). Sub-rectangular in plan, it was essentially a 0.20m-wide vertical-sided shaft c.0.55m deep, containing a single dark grey silt fill. A single artefact, an antler chess piece, was recovered from it, being found approximately half way down the feature.

The Medieval Chess Piece by Trista Clifford

The recovered chess piece is a pawn, the simplest of the five chess characters in form, and the smallest. Manufactured from antler, it is oval in section with flat base and domed top measuring 23mm in height with the base measuring 23mm by 19.5mm (Fig. 2). The apex has been fitted with an oval plug of antler, which covers the cancellous material inside the piece, as is usual with chess pieces of this period. At some point this plug has been repaired with another small slither of antler inserted to one side. The oval plug does not continue through to the base of the piece, where the cancellous tissue is extant. The perimeter of the plug, which was fitted before decoration took place, has been incorporated into the incised design across the apex, which consists of a cross formed from two sets of parallel lines with a ring-and-dot motif at each end of the cross. The arms of the cross extend down to where the sides of the piece become straight. Two parallel circumferential lines encircle the base. The pawn has a smoothed, glossy patina on the upper surface, while the base is unfinished and exhibits saw tooth marks (Plate 1).

The manner of construction and decoration is very similar to a bone example excavated on the site of Prebendal Manor House, Nassington, Northamptonshire (Chapman 1999, 135–9), and to a pawn made from a cattle metacarpus from Swan Lane, London (Egan 1998, 294 no 960). Both are slightly larger than the Felsted piece. A plainer example, 21mm high, lacking the cross and ring-and-dot motif found at Luggershall Castle (MacGregor 1989, Fig.71.r) is comparable in size. The Nassington pawn was recovered from a pit which also contained 12th- to 13th-century pottery, while the London example is dated to the late 13th to first half of the 14th century. Chapman (2005, 5) notes that aside from large examples in cetacean bone from Witchampton, which are of comparable stature to the Lewis chessmen, chess pieces of the latter, stylised type are of a consistent yet smaller size. The repetition of motif across these examples of pawns suggests that there was some standardisation in the production of chess pieces during the 12th to 14th centuries; elsewhere, more complex designs are variations on the same theme of crossed lines across the top of the piece with ring-and-dot motifs on the shoulder/sides such as a recent find from Ketton, Rutland (Chapman pers. comm.) and another from Gloucester (Chapman 1999, 137).

The game of chess has its origins in India, and had arrived in the west by the 10th century (Stratford 1997), with western historical sources documenting the game by the 12th century (Egan 1998, 292). Chess sets in the west either took the form of anthropomorphic figures such as the Lewis chessmen (Stratford 1997) or highly stylised pieces based on traditional Islamic designs. Antler, bone, wood and jet were all used to produce chess pieces. Chapman (2005) records around 70 medieval

chess pieces from archaeological contexts so far recovered in Britain; however, this is the only example of a pawn recorded from Essex, although a 15th-century walrus ivory knight is recorded from the Almshouses in Thaxted (HER 1409). Although they would have been the most numerous, due to the larger numbers required for the game, the ratio of pawns represented in the literature is surprisingly low (Chapman 2005, 6).

Chess held an ambiguous position in medieval society; it was a staple pastime of the court and wealthy classes, viewed as ‘the pinnacle of all aristocratic pursuits’ (Hall 2018, 533), and therefore chess pieces are strongly associated with castles and other high status settlements (Hall 2018, 535). There are, however, a growing number from lower status, rural settlements as well, suggesting that the game was played at all levels of society. Excavations at the rural hamlet of Raunds, Northamptonshire recovered two pieces from a chess set made from crudely carved sheep bones (Chapman 1999, 138) within a building thought to have served as a community meeting house (Chapman 2010, 157–61). Chess was viewed in negative terms by the Church authorities: a letter dated 1281 from the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Peckham, to the local prior describes chess as a ‘clownish entertainment’ which will be ‘forbidden forever’ after witnessing the monks at Coxford monastery indulging in the game (Bubczyk 2015, 32). However, despite proscription by the church authorities, it continued to be played by some members of the clergy, as finds of chess pieces and gaming boards from religious sites, and contemporary records, attest. For example, the 1285 accounts of Bogo of Clare, the dean of Stafford, record him being sent a chess set worth two pence whilst he was staying at Thatcham (Guisseppi 1920, 10–11; Bubczyk 2015, 33).

Chess also had an association with the supernatural. Gilchrist (2012, 152) suggests that games such as cards chess and other board games were used as a means of fortune telling or divination and the image of the magical chess board appears in medieval literature (Hall 2018, 534). The use of gaming imagery in apotropaic graffiti (also referred to as ‘witch marks’), including chess board-like symbols, is recorded at Nerven Castle, Monmouthshire (Caple 2012).

In attempting to interpret the deposition of the piece at Watch House Green, it is worth considering how the complex meanings that surrounded the game of chess during the Middle Ages could have come to bear on its eventual location. Therefore, while more prosaic explanation may be possible, consideration of its use as an apotropaic object, personal amulet or even a buried proscribed object, should not be discounted.

Conclusions

As well as simply being notable as a rare discovery for Essex, the presence of this medieval chess piece at Watch House Green, Felsted, suggests that this was a settlement site of some status and perhaps wealth. Contemporary medieval literature certainly infers that the playing of chess was a favoured pastime of the nobility and merchant/gentry classes (*cf.* Murray 1913) and chess pieces have indeed been found at high status dwelling sites such as manor houses (e.g. Tempsford Park,

Bedfordshire; Prebendal Manor, Northamptonshire). Given the incidence of Late Saxon pottery and features of demonstrably late 12th- to late 13th/early 14th-century date, it is perhaps reasonable to infer the presence of a higher status rural occupation site, such as a manor complex at Watch House Green — albeit this not being unequivocally demonstrated by the archaeological investigations here.

Likely originally having been a personal possession of an owner of this property, and presumably part of a complete chess set actively used for gaming, the circumstance of the apparently deliberate discard of this piece, in a pit at the bottom of a ditch, is somewhat enigmatic. As has already been noted, it is possible that its burial had a magical significance.

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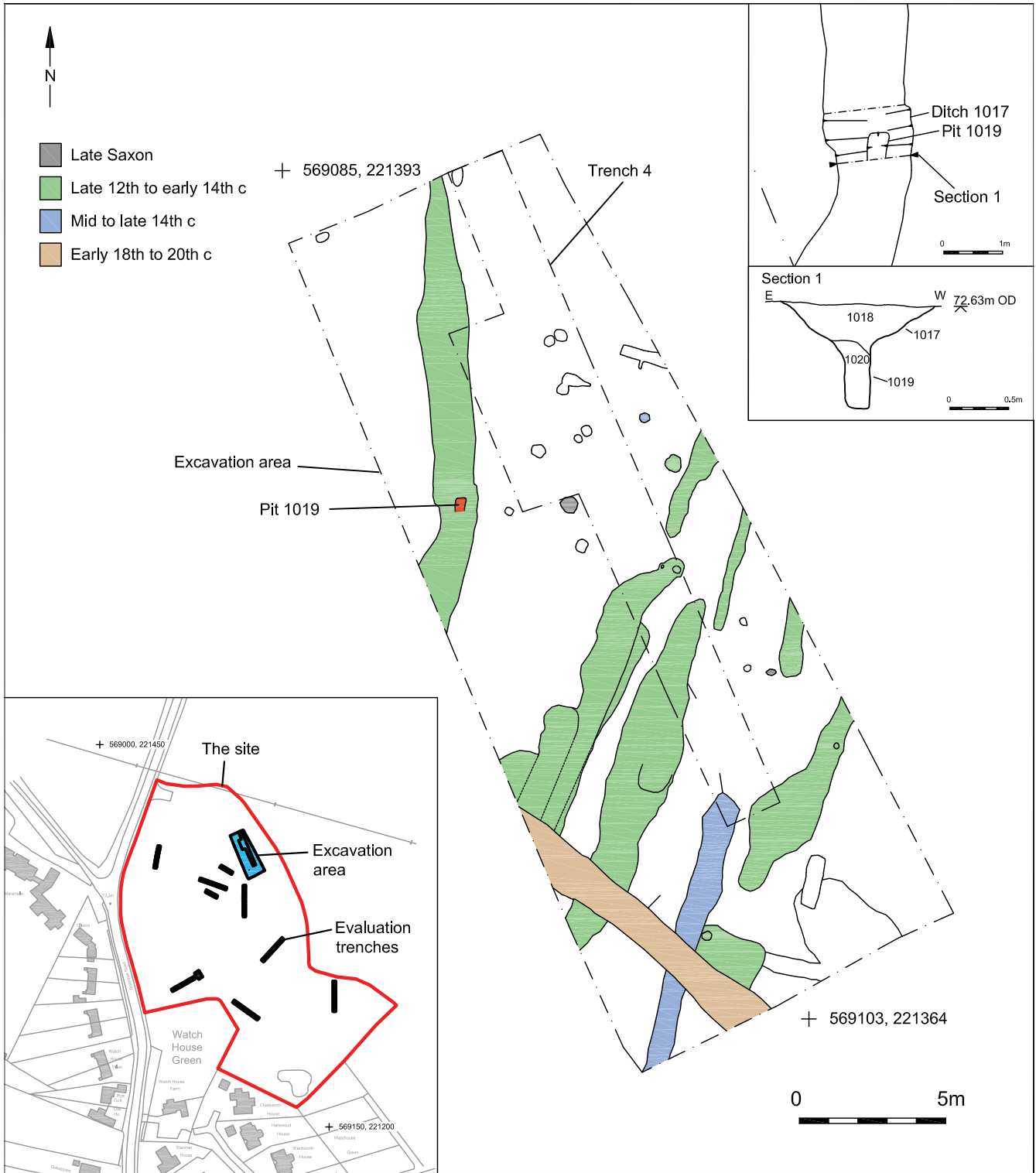
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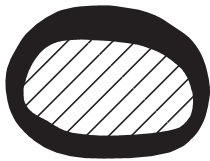
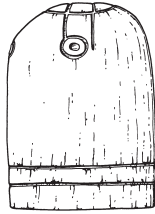
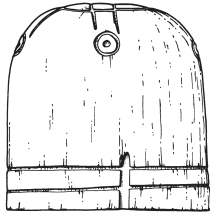
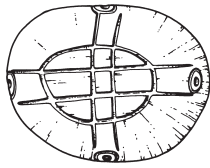
Figure captions

Figure 1: Location plan

Figure 2: The medieval chess piece

Plate 1: The medieval chess piece





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0 2cm