

Report on an archaeological evaluation: CAT Report 436

Site address: Rails Farm, Watling Lane, Thaxted, Essex
Date of fieldwork: 17th September 2007
NGR: TL 6089 3100
Location plan attached?: Yes (Fig 1)
Museum accession code: SAFWM 2007.149
ECC site code: TX 15
CAT project code: 07/8b

Summary

An archaeological evaluation at Rails Farm, Thaxted, Essex uncovered the natural subsoil close to the modern ground-level and did not locate any significant archaeological deposits.

Introduction (Fig 1)

An archaeological evaluation was carried out on behalf of Mr J Stagg in advance of a proposed residential development. It was undertaken by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) on 17th September 2007.

The proposed development site lies in the grounds of Rails Farm on the western side of Watling Lane, Thaxted, Essex, and covers an area of some 1,220 sq m. It is proposed to divide the site into two plots and to build a house with a detached garage on each (Fig 1). Both house sites fall within the current Conservation Area.

The excavation and recording methods used were outlined in the Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) for the site, which was produced by CAT in September 2007, and followed a brief written by the Historic Environment Management (HEM) team officer, Essex County Council.

Archaeological background

The development site lies close to the centre of the medieval town of Thaxted, a short distance to the west of the church and Guild Hall. Thaxted was granted a market in 1205, although it probably had a market function before that date. It had become a major centre of the cutlery industry by the 14th century, although the industry appears to have died out by the 16th century.

Both medieval and post-medieval settlement extended along the Watling Lane and adjacent street frontages, although there has been no significant archaeological fieldwork in this area (Medlycott 1998).

Aims

The aim of the evaluation was to establish and record the depth, extent, date, condition and significance of any archaeological remains surviving on the site. This information could then be used to assess the likely impact of the proposed development on the archaeological remains.

Methods

The evaluation consisted of two machine-dug trial-trenches, each approximately 10m long and 1.6m wide (Fig 1). One was aligned north-east to south-west through the site of the proposed house in Plot 1 (Trench or T1). The other was aligned north-west to south-east and was sited slightly to the east of the site of the proposed house in Plot 2 (T2). This was done to minimise the damage to the foundations of the proposed house as most of the house site was still covered by a barn in the course of demolition. Both trenches were dug into the existing yard surface.

The two trenches were dug on 17th September 2007 by a JCB with a toothless ditching bucket. They were machine-dug down to the uppermost surviving levels of archaeological significance. Where no archaeologically significant deposits were exposed, machine excavation was continued until natural subsoil was reached. This was followed by cleaning up and limited excavation by hand. The excavation and recording methods used were outlined in the WSI, and further details can be found in the CAT document *Policies and procedures* (CAT 2006).

Results

The natural subsoil (L2) was a yellowish-brown clay with small inclusions of chalk. The existing yard surface (L1) consisted of abundant gravels with occasional fragments of brick and tile in a greyish-brown clayey matrix 0.2m thick. It lay at approximately 93m AOD. The detailed records of the individual trenches are in the site archive.

Trench 1 (Fig 1)

Natural subsoil (L2) was reached at a depth of 0.2-0.25m over the western and central parts of the trench, and 0.48m at the eastern end. The only archaeological deposits (excluding a modern service trench) were at the eastern end of the evaluation trench.

A quantity of large gravels was pressed into the surface of a shallow depression (F2) in the natural subsoil in the north-eastern part of the trench. The gravelled surface was sealed by a thin, dark grey, slightly sticky layer 80mm thick. F2 was backfilled with rubble-filled layers 0.2m thick. The latter included fragments of unfroged brick, which suggests that F2 dates to the 19th or 20th century.

The shallow depression F2 was clearly part of a large feature which extended to the north-east of T1, probably beneath the existing yard wall. Perhaps F2 was the edge of a pond within the farmyard, with the gravel prevent stock from sinking into the clay. The dark sticky layer could have resulted from the silting-up of the pond. Mr Stagg confirmed that there used to be a pond in this part of the yard.

The backfill of F2 was sealed by the modern yard surface (L1) resting on a sandy make-up layer 0.1m thick. The modern ground-level sloped by 0.2m from west to east.

Trench 2 (Fig 1)

Natural subsoil (L2) was reached at a depth of 0.2-0.25m over T2. A modern service trench extended obliquely down the trench.

A small irregularly-shaped pit (F1), 0.3m across and 0.23m deep, was half-sectioned at the southern end of the trench. It contained a small quantity of finds, including several fragments of peg-tile, a piece of unfroged brick, an iron nail fragment, a small undiagnostic potsherd, a small piece of slag and a small fragment of animal bone. These suggest that F1 was modern in date. Two undated shallow scoops were excavated a short distance to the north of F1.

The features and natural subsoil in T2 were sealed by the modern yard surface (L1). The modern ground-level sloped by 0.14m from south to north.

Conclusions

The natural subsoil (L2) lay close to the modern ground-level, usually at a depth of 0.2-0.25m. No significant archaeological deposits were uncovered during the evaluation, and it seems unlikely that the proposed development will damage any archaeological remains.

Archive deposition

The archive from the evaluation, including the site records, photographs and a small quantity of finds, will be permanently deposited with Saffron Walden Museum under accession code SAFWM 2007.149.

Acknowledgements

CAT is grateful to Mr J Stagg for commissioning and funding the evaluation. The project was monitored by Richard Havis, HEM team, Essex County Council.

References

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| CAT | 2006 | <i>Policies and procedures</i> , Colchester Archaeological Trust |
| Medlycott, M | 1998 | <i>Thaxted</i> , Historic Towns Project Assessment Report, Essex County Council |
| WSI | | Written Scheme of Investigation for archaeological trial trenching and excavation at Rails Farm, Watling Lane, Thaxted, Essex, September 2007, by Donald Shimmin |

Report author: Donald Shimmin

Report date: October 2007

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Distribution list:

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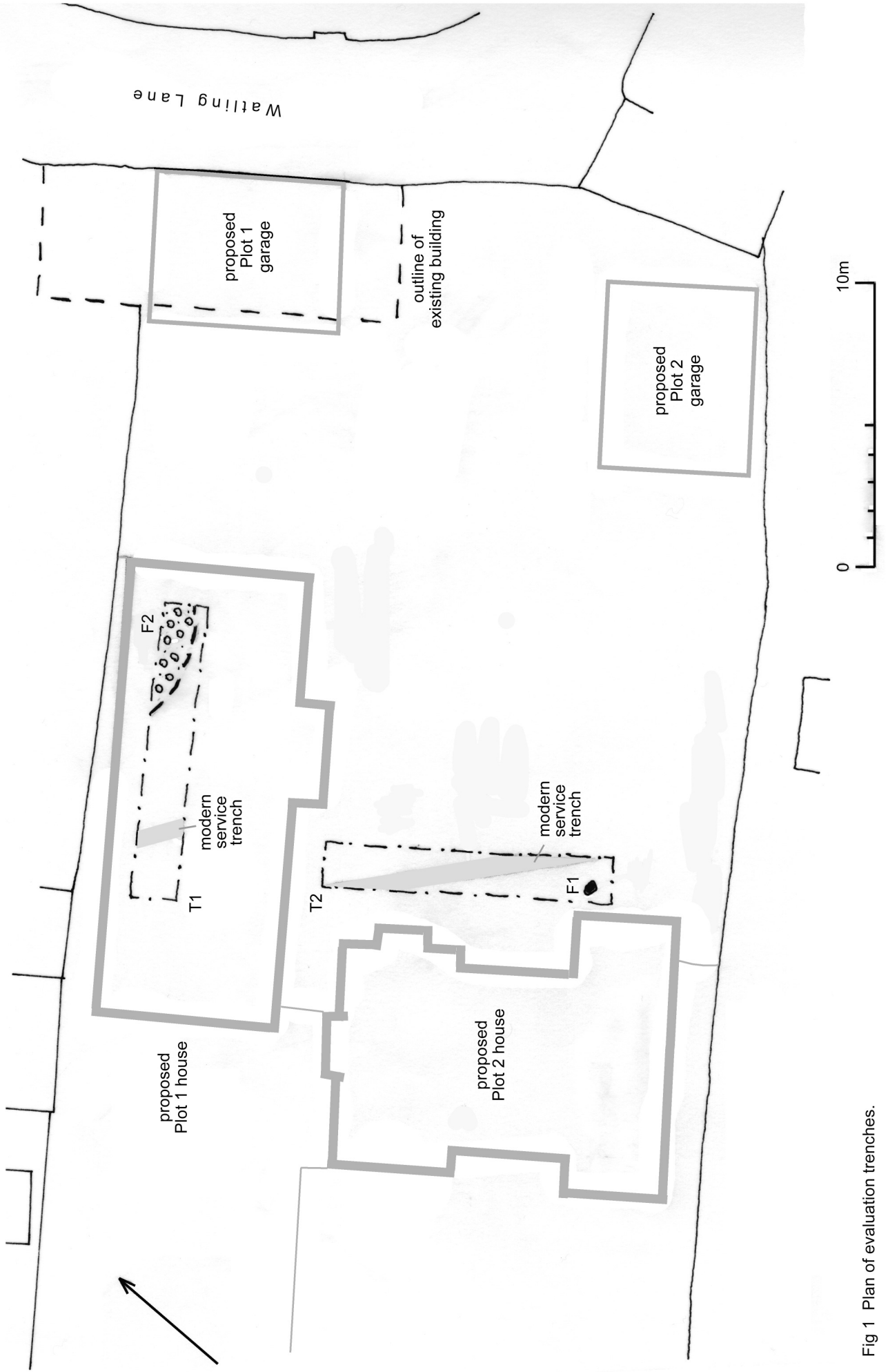


Fig 1 Plan of evaluation trenches.

**Essex Historic Environment Record/
Essex Archaeology and History**

Summary sheet

Site address: Rails Farm, Watling Lane, Thaxted, Essex	
Parish: Thaxted	District: Uttlesford
NGR: TL 6089 3100	Site codes: ECC code TX 15 Museum accession code SAFWM 2007.149
Type of work: Evaluation	Site director/group: Colchester Archaeological Trust
Date of work: 17th September 2007	Size of area investigated: 1,220 sq m
Location of finds/curating museum: Saffron Walden Museum	Funding source: Mr J Stagg
Further seasons anticipated? No	Related EHER and UAD nos:
Final report: CAT Report 436 and summary in <i>EAH</i>	
Periods represented: modern	
Summary of fieldwork results: <i>An archaeological evaluation at Rails Farm, Thaxted, Essex uncovered the natural subsoil close to the modern ground-level and did not locate any significant archaeological deposits.</i>	
Previous summaries/reports: None	
Author of summary: Donald Shimmin	Date of summary: October 2007