

**A watching brief
on an electricity cable trench at
Ardleigh, Essex**

April 1999

for Eastern Electricity plc

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NGR: TM 0558 2825

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Summary

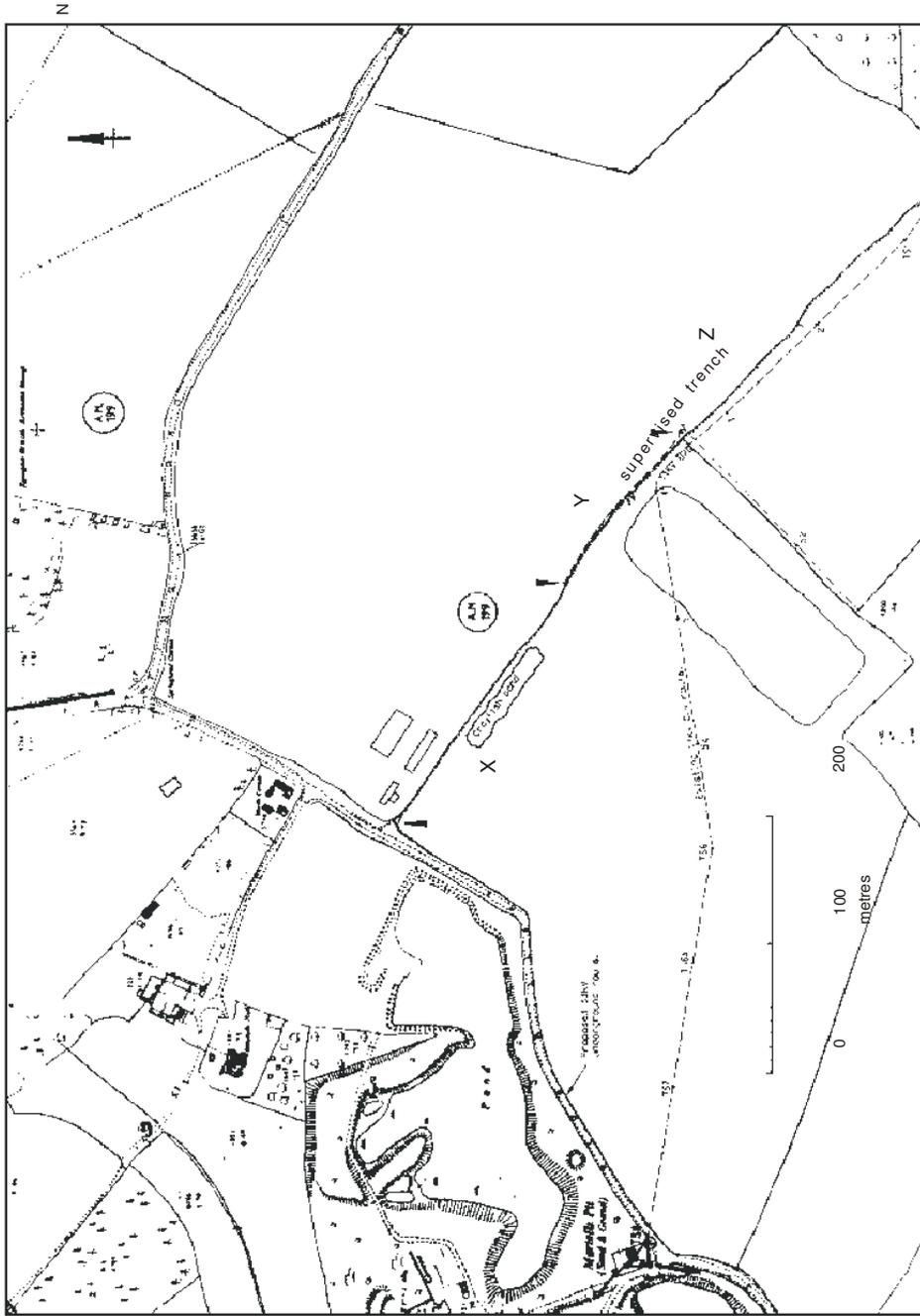
A 157-metre long trench for an electricity cable along the southern boundary of the Ardleigh Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM 199) was excavated under archaeological supervision. The trench was 60cm deep and 30cm wide. Six features were observed within the confines of the trench: one was post-medieval and three were ditches or pits of indeterminate but possibly early date. The remaining features were of questionable archaeological significance. A small quantity of Roman pottery was recovered from the subsoil.

Introduction

The region to the south of Ardleigh village is notable for its evidence of early activity spanning the Bronze Age, Iron Age, Roman and Saxon periods, a summary of which may be found in the appendix to this report. As a result of the archaeological pattern emerging from aerial surveys and excavations since the 1950s, a large area of land extending south as far as Martells sand and gravel pit was designated a Scheduled Ancient Monument in 1976.

The fieldwork was prompted by an Eastern Electricity diversion scheme involving the installation of an underground cable across land to the east of Slough Lane, Ardleigh (Fig.1). From the lane, the cable trench followed the route of a public footpath which initially runs along the south side of a hedge-line (Fig.1, points X to Y), then crosses through a gap in the hedge, continuing within the edge of the Scheduled Area (Fig. 1, points Y to Z). The fieldwork was limited to the 157-metre long Scheduled stretch between points Y and Z. Quarrying in recent decades has substantially lowered the ground from points X to Y, immediately south of the hedge.

Scheduled Monument Consent for the trench was issued to Eastern Electricity by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport on 30th March 1999 (ref. HSD9/2/3158pt8).



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Fig. 1 Ardleigh electricity cable: trench location

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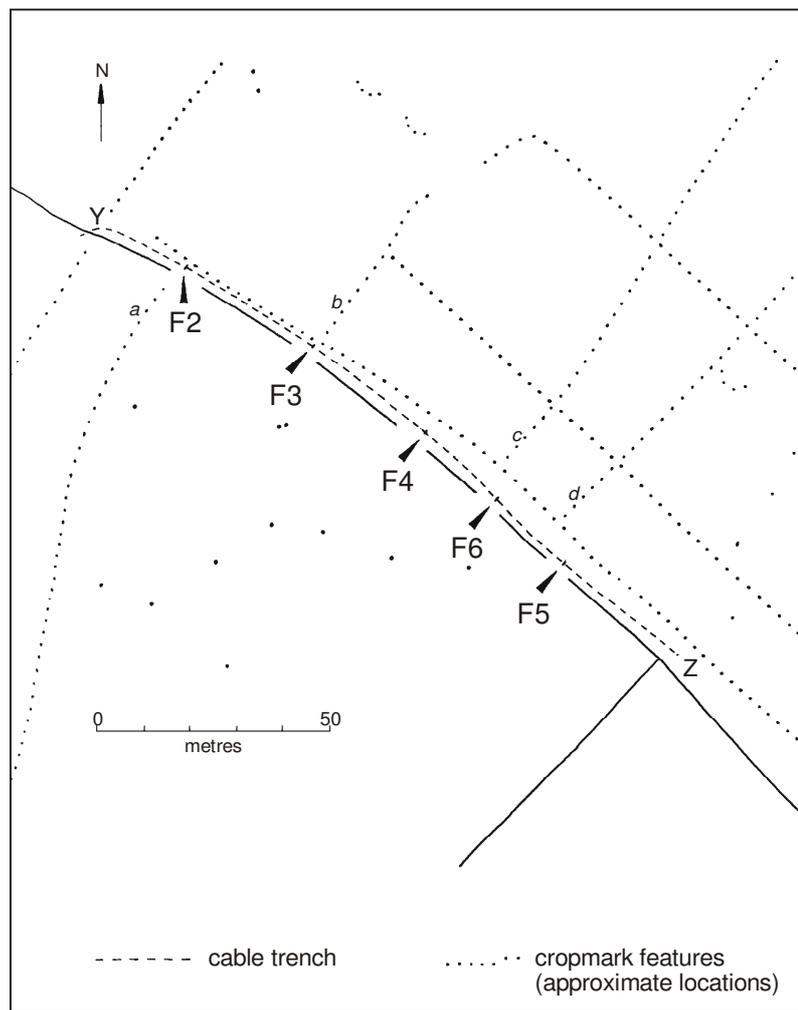


Fig. 2 Ardleigh electricity cable - April 1999

Methods

The trench was excavated by machine using a toothless 300mm-wide bucket. Soils underlying the modern overburden were progressively stripped in shallow spits combined with manual cleaning of the trench sides and bottom.

Features were plotted in relation to a zero point shown as “Y” in Figures 1 and 2. This was situated at the north-western side of the established gap in the hedge-line where the trench (and public footpath) enters the scheduled area.

Stratigraphy (Figs 3-7)

Overall, the sequence of soils was as follows:

- L1 Dark greyish brown sandy loam varying in thickness from 3cm to 20cm. Modern turf and topsoil.
- L4 Mixed brick rubble and clean gravelly sand. Underlying L1, this modern material was present intermittently in the easternmost 45 metres of the trench. It appears to have been laid to repair ruts in the track and was at its thickest (30cm) at the entrance to the field at point “Z” (Fig. 1).
- L2 Brown to greyish brown silt loam with occasional small stones.

Merging to:

- L3 Brown silt loam with rare small stones.

Layers L2 and L3 were practically identical and represent upper and lower levels of the same basic soil-type. At the extremes, L2 inclined toward greyish brown, and L3 was brown. For the greater part of the trench the change in colour was very gradual, although in places a change could be distinguished at an overall depth of 30-45cm, when viewed from a distance. Thus, the L2/L3 horizons shown by dashed lines in Figures 3-7 are approximate indications only and not sharp interfaces. The materials appear to be an earlier topsoil merging to subsoil with little colour and textural differentiation between the two.

- L5 Reddish brown sand with a varying but generally high content of gravel. Natural. Over much of its length the trench did not reach a sufficient depth to expose L5.

Features

Generally, it was only possible to discern intrusive features in the very lowest levels of the trench where natural sand and gravel (L5) were exposed and the contrast between the feature fills and L5 became apparent.

- F1 (not illustrated) A broad, probably post-medieval pit or cutting which occupied the westernmost 7 metres of the trench, extending down beyond the limit of excavation. This was the only feature to produce finds, which included fragments of peg-tile, oystershell and yellow brick.
- F2 (Fig. 3) Ditch or pit containing a brown silt loam fill with pale brown silt loam mottles.
- F3 (Fig. 4) Ditch or pit. The fill consisted of mixed pale brown silt loam and brown loamy sand.
- F4 (Fig. 5) Linear depression, possibly a ditch. The fill was almost identical to L3, but very slightly more greyish and with a fractionally higher stone content.
- F5 (Fig. 6) Ditch. The fill was a brown silt loam similar to L3, with occasional small lenses of slightly paler brown silt loam in the lowest 5cm examined.
- F6 (Fig. 7) Indeterminate - a possible ditch or pit? A tenuous feature represented by localised soil discoloration at the bottom of the trench. At this point L3, which extended beyond the depth of excavation, contained a 90cm-wide area which included patches of darker slightly greyish brown silt loam. The feature lay opposite an oak tree and roots up to 5cm thick were common in the lower 30cm of the trench, perhaps accounting for the soil variation. However, slight traces of a paler brown siltier loam of a type found in other feature fills were noted within the darker area outlined in Figure 7.

Finds

The following items were recovered from the trench:

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<i>Find no</i>	<i>Archaeological context</i>	<i>Description</i>
1	F1 fill. 10cm above the bottom of the trench	Peg-tile fragments, 12-13mm thick; whole yellow brick, 22 x 8 x 4cm; oyster shell
2	L3. 69.3m E.	Pottery, c 1st-2nd century
3	L3. Bottom of the trench at 66.5m E.	Pottery, c 2nd-4th century
4	L2. 114m E.	Flint blade, possibly retouched
5	L2. 53.7m E.	Volcanic stone, 1.5cm fragment
6	F1 fill. Embedded in bottom of trench	Yellow brick fragment, 2.5cm thick
7	L2. 80.5m E.	Pottery, c 19th century

Finds numbers 2, 3 and 4 have been retained in the museum finds archive. The other items were discarded after cleaning and recording.

Discussion

The very large cutting F1, at the north-western end of the trench, was clearly of no great antiquity. No firm conclusions can be made about the remaining five features since trench width and depth restrictions permitted only superficial examination of F2-F6. Provisionally, the most likely instances of early features were F2, F3 and F5, which on examination appeared to have satisfactory cuts and fills that could be differentiated from the surrounding soils. It is also worth noting that in the cases of F2 and F3, their locations coincide fairly closely with linear cropmarks, the approximate locations of which are indicated on Figure 2 as cropmarks “a” and “b”. F5 and F6 both lie a short distance from major linear cropmarks (Fig. 2, “c” and “d”) which extend to the north-west, and may be associated with them if allowance is made for the difficulty that can be encountered in plotting aerial observations, i.e. if the actual locations were offset a short distance to the south-east of where shown. Of the two, F5 was characteristically ditch-like: F6 however, was less so and may simply result from root action. Although more distinct than F6, some difficulty was found in establishing a satisfactory north-western edge for the linear feature F4, which perhaps represents an undulation in the surface of the natural sand, L5.

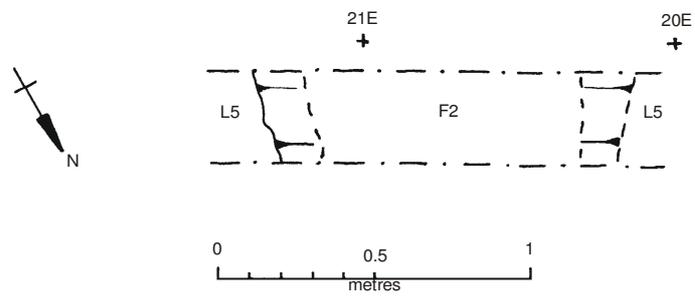
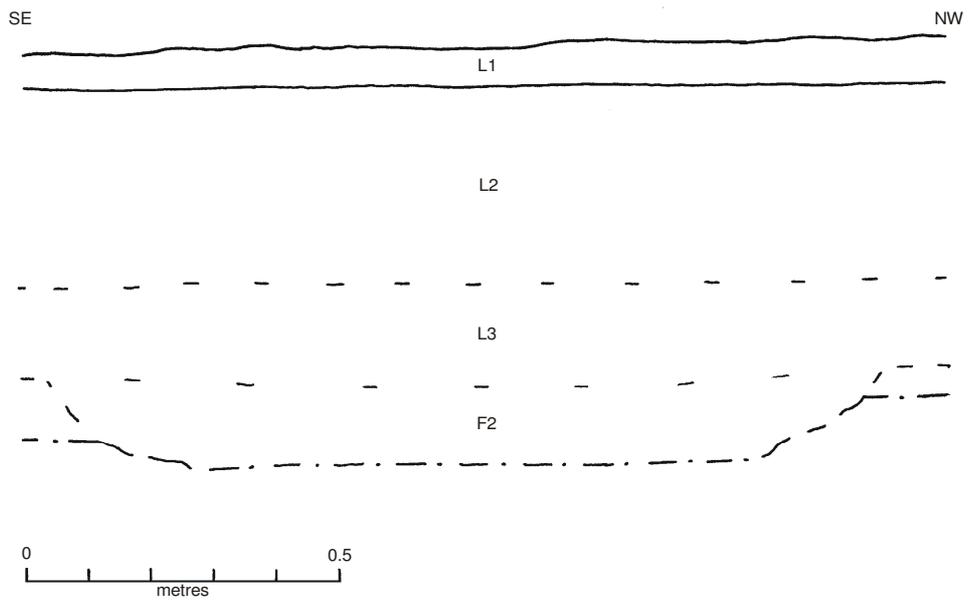


Fig. 3 Ardleigh electricity cable: Feature 2

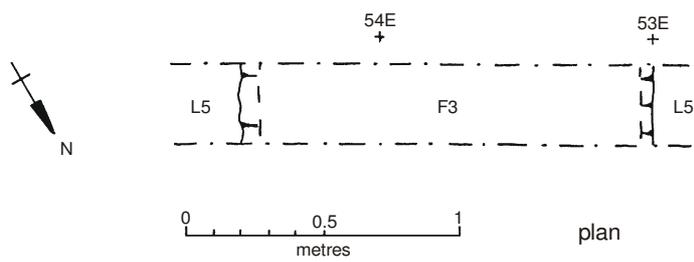
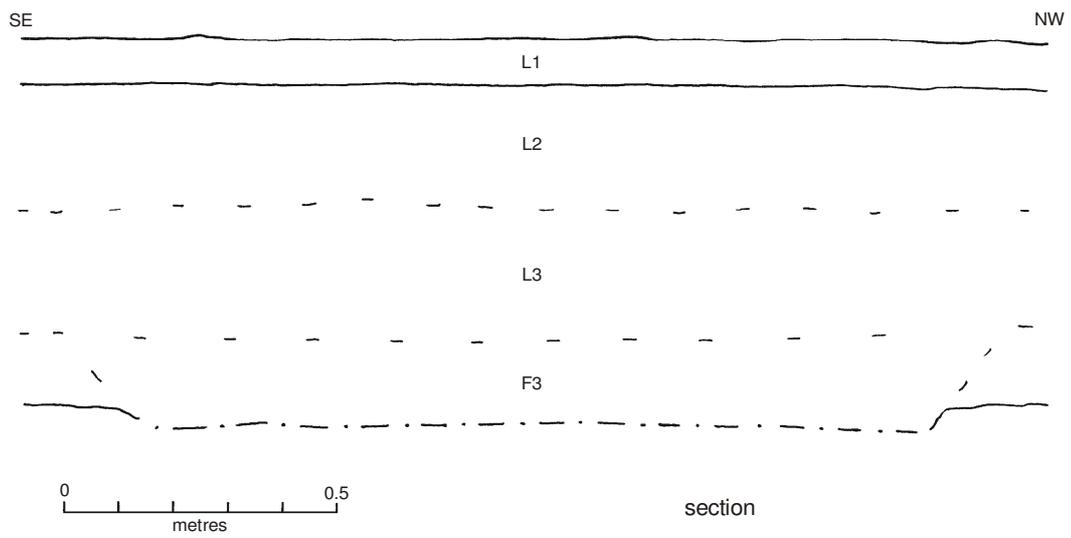


Fig. 4 Ardleigh electricity cable: Feature 3

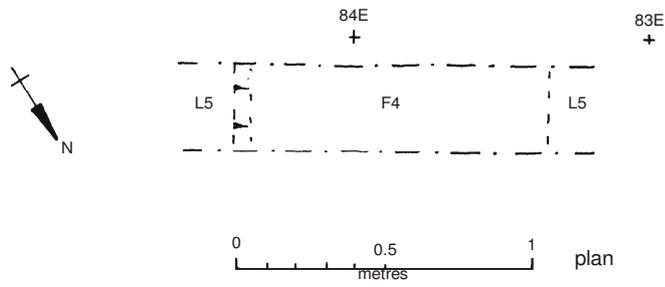
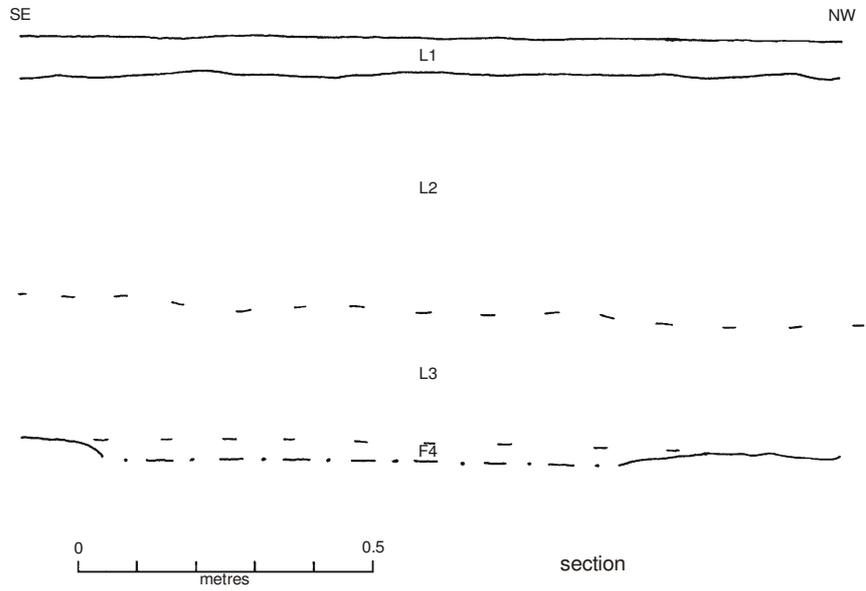


Fig. 5 Ardleigh electricity cable: Feature 4

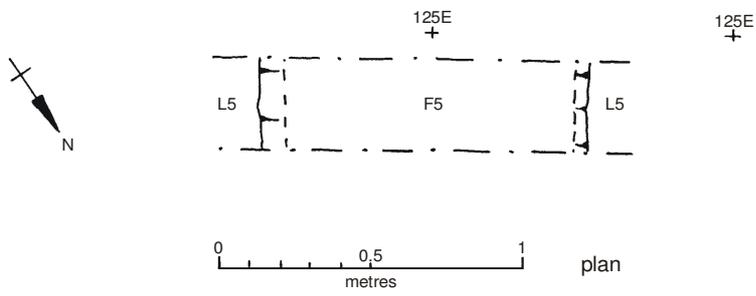
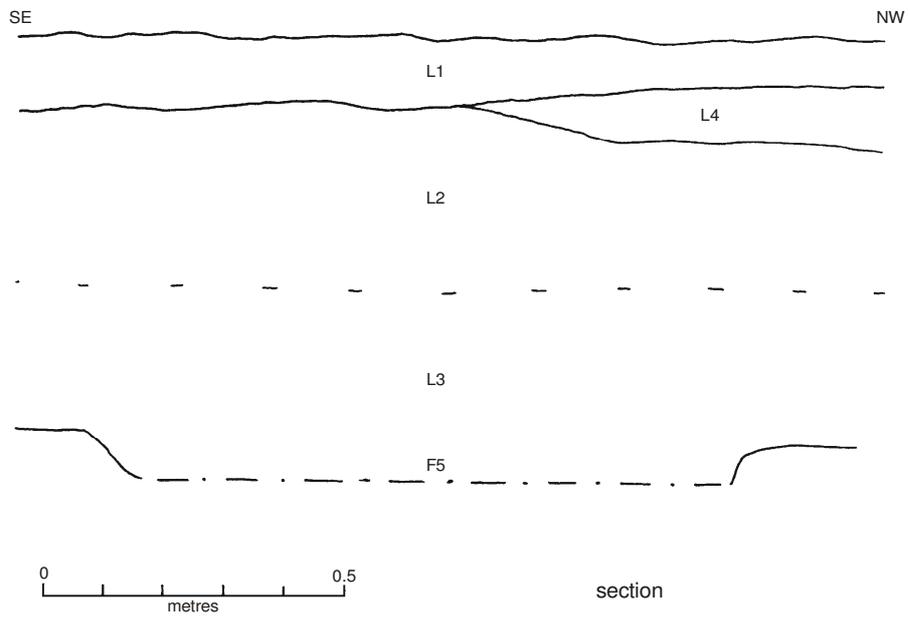


Fig. 6 Ardleigh electricity cable: Feature 5

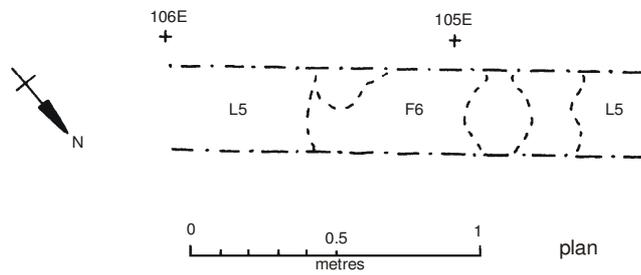
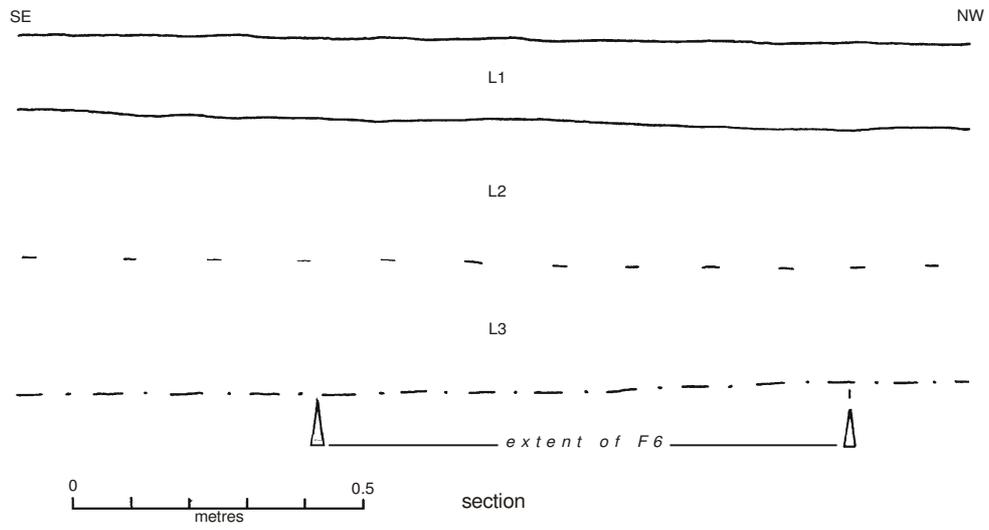


Fig. 7 Ardleigh electricity cable: Feature 6

Archive

The fieldwork records and finds will be lodged permanently with Colchester Museums under cover of their accession code number 1999-59.

Acknowledgements

The fieldwork was commissioned by Eastern Electricity (Mr M.A. Chisholm) and carried out with the co-operation of their contractor Breheny (Mr A. Fletcher) and their sub-contractors. The assistance of Essex County Council Archaeological Advisory Group (Mr P. Connell) and English Heritage (Ms D. Priddy) is gratefully acknowledged.

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Appendix

Archaeological background

*Extract from the Essex County Council Archaeological Advisory Group
brief for installation of an underground electricity cable at Ardleigh*

4. Archaeological Background

The following archaeological background utilises the Essex Sites and Monuments Record (ESMR) held at Essex County Council, County Hall, Chelmsford. Prospective contractors may consult the ESMR prior to the completion of any archaeological specification (to make an appointment contact Ms A. Bennett, 01245 437637).

Early History

The archaeology of Ardleigh just north of Colchester in north-east Essex came to prominence in British Archaeology, largely through the efforts of a local farmer, the late Felix Erith. When mechanical ploughing was introduced on his land at Vinces Farm in the mid-1950's, fragments of Bronze Age urns were brought to the surface. Wherever this occurred, Erith carefully excavated the immediate area. In this way over 100 cremation burials, the majority in highly decorated Deverel-Rimbury urns, were recovered. This clearly established the importance of the Ardleigh cemetery. Its pottery, flamboyantly decorated with finger impressions, applied cordons and 'horseshoe handles' and with clear affinities across the North Sea, became the classic Deverel-Rimbury ceramic of southern East Anglia (Brown 1995).

Following the discovery of the cemetery, cropmarks were observed at Ardleigh, first from the ground and later from the air. Eventually around 40 ringditches were recorded of which 11 were excavated by Erith and the Colchester Archaeological Group (CAG). Besides ringditches, air photography revealed an extensive complex of ditched trackways and enclosures. Within this cropmark landscape, the CAG conducted a number of small excavations. These included an enclosed Early/Middle Iron Age roundhouse, Belgic burials and Ritual Pit, Roman kilns and well.

The air photographic evidence was collated in the 1970's and a large part of the site was scheduled as an Ancient Monument in 1976. The Central Excavation Unit (CEU) of the Department of the Environment undertook excavations at Ardleigh during 1979 and 1980. Their work was designed to shed light on the nature and development of the cropmark complex and to place the CAG's relatively small scale excavations in a wider context. The CEU excavated 23 areas; these ranged from small trenches placed to examine the relationship between particular cropmarks, 10 by 10 sample boxes placed in 'blank' areas of the cropmark complex, to open area excavations. One of the latter, about 70m by 70m, was placed within the area of the urnfield originally investigated in the 1950's. This revealed the pits from which Erith's urns had been recovered, amongst a dense concentration of 18 ringditches. The majority of the ditched trackways and enclosures were shown to be of Late Iron Age and Roman date and to include a short lived phase dated to the mid-1st century AD. Three Saxon graves and elements of a field system also lay in the area of the main Bronze Age cemetery.

Summary of major results of the excavations 1955-1980

The Bronze Age evidence from Ardeleigh is outstanding both at a regional and national level. The investigations have revealed a cemetery or cemeteries, comprising at least 37 ringditches stretching across an area 500m long and up to 100m wide, 26 of the ring ditches have been excavated and they range from large 'cemetery barrows' containing many burials, and placed at some distance from neighbours, to densely clustered small ringditches, often as little as 1-2m apart, with numerous burials placed between, rather than within, the ringditches. Well over 200 urns have been recovered and the cemetery ranges in date from the Early Bronze Age, through the Middle Bronze Age and continues into the Late Bronze Age with rare evidence of burials within ringditches.

Two large linear boundaries of Middle Bronze Age date ran from the northern and southern edges of the cemetery. Such features are not well known in East Anglia and contrast with the slight ditches of the Mucking Middle Bronze Age field system. The Ardeleigh boundaries, together with the eastern side of the cemetery, appear to define a large plateau at about the 30m contour line and may be compared with the results of recent work on the landscape boundaries of Wessex.

The Late Iron Age and Roman period settlement at Ardeleigh comprised a complex system of ditched trackways and enclosures. The main sinuous trackway ran for at least 1.5km south west/north east across the centre of the cropmark complex. On the eastern side of this track another wide trackway branched off, toward the site of the Iron Age enclosed roundhouse. On the western side, the southern part of the central trackway, followed the eastern boundary of the Bronze Age cemeteries, north of this at least three further tracks branched off to the west. One of these led to a gap in one of the major Bronze Age linear boundaries, which appears to have marked the north-west side of the Late Iron Age/Roman ditched enclosures. A small cemetery of 'Belgic' cremation burials was placed at the edge of one of the ditched enclosures. Beyond the north-west boundary, a ritual deposit of burnt 'Belgic' pottery and other items was placed in a large pit. The material included large parts of at least three Strainer bowls, copies in pottery of Bronze vessels, together with an apparently unique pottery copy of a bronze cauldron. These finds are precise copies, in pottery, of Bronze vessels found in hoards elsewhere in East Anglia, as at Brandon, Suffolk and Crownthorpe, Norfolk.

During the Early Roman Period the north-eastern boundary of the enclosure complex was extended beyond the line of the Bronze Age ditch, with a defended phase comprising a deep V profiled ditch, backed by a palisade slot and provided with a small gate structure. A pottery industry consisting of scattered kilns, along the edges of trackways and enclosures was recorded.

The cropmark enclosures and trackways appear to have broadly continued in use throughout the Roman period. During the late 3rd-century AD a small cemetery of seven graves was established, re-using an Early Bronze Age ringditch about 700m north of the main Bronze Age cemetery. Two of the graves produced 29 beads of brown chalcedony apparently derived from Hungary.

A group of three inhumation graves of early/Mid-Saxon date were placed within the area of the major Bronze Age cemetery. One of these was placed within a ringditch which was incorporated into the corner of a field marked by shallow ditches.