Archaeological test pit excavations in Althorne, Essex in 2018

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2019

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1 Introduction

A total of seven 1m² archaeological test pits were excavated over a one-year period in 2018 in the village of Althorne in southeast Essex, as part of the Independent Learning Archaeology Field School (ILAFS, run by Access Cambridge Archaeology (ACA) out of the University of Cambridge and funded by the Cambridge Admissions Office.

Althorne is a small village, 22km southeast of Chelmsford and 4.5km northwest of Burnham-on-Crouch overlooking the River Crouch to the south. It is on a peninsula of land in southeast Essex known as the Dengie Hundred. Althorne was not recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086, although some of the parish was potentially included in the record for Southminster. The name Althorne derives from Old English and was recorded as Aledhorn to mean ‘(place at) the burnt thorn-tree’ in 1198. The church of St Andrew dates from the late 14th century and is set back from the main road to the west of the linear ribbon of development.

1.1 Access Cambridge Archaeology

Access Cambridge Archaeology (ACA) (http://www.access.arch.cam.ac.uk/) is an archaeological outreach organisation based in the Department of Archaeology in the University of Cambridge, which aims to enhance economic, social and personal well-being through active engagement with archaeology. It was set up in 2004 and specialises in providing opportunities for members of the public to take part in purposeful, research-orientated archaeological investigations including excavation. Educational events and courses range in length from a few hours to a week or more and involve members of the public of all ages.

Since 2015, ACA has been managed by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) and thus have been able to work more closely with the unit to deliver outreach programmes such as the community excavations at Peterborough Cathedral in 2016, community test pitting activities in Suffolk and Cambridgeshire. The ACA and CAU collaboration has also enabled the continuation of the education outreach projects that involve work with both primary and secondary school pupils.

1.2 The Independent Learning Archaeology Field School (ILAFS)

The Independent Learning Archaeology Field School (ILAFS) programme, formerly known as the Higher Education Field Academy (HEFA) programme, aims to raise the aspirations, enthusiasm and attainment of 14-17 year-olds with regard to higher education by making a valuable contribution to current academic research at the University of Cambridge. The three-day learning-extension course has been run by Access Cambridge Archaeology (ACA) since 2005, aimed at UK students in state schools years 9, 10 and 12.

On ILAFS, participants spend two days running their own small (1m²) archaeological excavation within living villages, with the aim of applying and developing a wide range of learning skills, boosting their academic confidence and giving them a taste of life and learning at university level. They make new discoveries for and about themselves, and, in the process, contribute to the university’s currently occupied rural settlement (CORS) research into the development of rural communities and settlements in the past. The third day is spent in the University of Cambridge analysing the excavation results in discursive learning sessions which aim to engage and challenge participants, prepare them to produce a written analysis for assessment as well as provide an inspirational and positive experience of higher education.
After the field school, learners receive detailed individual feedback on their data collection, personal, learning and thinking skills developed during the fieldwork as well as their reporting and research skills exhibited in the written assignment, which will support applications to further and higher education.
2 Methodology

The one year of test pitting in Althorne was organised by ACA in conjunction with local residents. The excavation and records followed the Independent Learning Archaeology Field School (ILAFS), instruction handbook and recording booklet.

The test pit digging takes place over two days, which begins with an initial talk explaining the aims of the excavation, the procedures used in digging and recording the test pit and the correct and safe use of equipment. Participants are then divided into teams of three or four individuals, and each team is provided with a complete set of test pit excavation equipment, copies of the instruction handbook and a record booklet to enter excavation data into.

The test pits were all 1m² and the turf, if present, was removed in neat squares by hand. Each test pit was excavated in a series of 10cm spits or contexts, to a maximum depth of 1.2m. The horizontal surface of each context/spit was then drawn at 1:10 scale before excavation, a photograph taken and the colour of the soil recorded with reference to a standardised colour chart. A pro-forma recording system was used by participants to record their test pit excavation. This comprised a 16-page Test Pit Record booklet which was developed by ACA for use by people with no previous archaeological experience. Each pit and context is described and noted using the site code ALT/18.

During the excavation, 100% of the spoil is sieved through a 10mm mesh (with the occasional exception of very heavy clay soils which have to be hand-searched). All artefacts are retained, cleaned and bagged by context. Cut and built features are planned at 1:10 and excavated sequentially with latest deposits removed first. Pottery and most other finds are identified promptly by archaeological experts on site who visit the test pits regularly providing advice and checking that the excavation is being carried out and recorded to the required standard. Test pits are excavated down to natural or the maximum safe depth of 1.2m, whichever is encountered first. A minority of test pits will stop on encountering a feature, (ancient or modern) which archaeological staff deem inadvisable or impossible to remove, and occasionally excavation may cease at a level above natural due to time constraints. On completion of each test pit excavation, all four sections are drawn at 1:10 along with the unexcavated base of the test pit prior to backfilling by hand and the turf replaced neatly to restore the site.

After the two days of excavation are completed, the archaeological records and finds (all of which are kept and cleaned on site) are retained by ACA at the University of Cambridge for analysis, reporting, archiving and submission to HER’s, publication and ongoing research into the origins and development of rural settlement. Ownership of objects rests in the first instance with the landowner, except where other law overrides this (e.g. Treasure Act 1996, 2006, Burials Act 1857). ACA retain all finds in the short term for analysis and ideally also in the longer term in order that the excavation archives will be as complete as possible, but any requests to return finds to owners will be agreed.
3 Results from the test pitting in Althorne

The approximate locations of the seven test pits excavated in Althorne can be seen in figure 1 below (please note that the test pits are not to scale). The excavations were undertaken over 25th and 26th of April when a total of seven 1m² archaeological test pits were excavated by 26 Year 9 pupils from William de Ferrers School and The Plume Academy (school names correct at time of participation).

The test pits were excavated as part of the Independent Learning Archaeology Field School (ILAFS), run by ACA and funded by Cambridge Admissions Office out of the University of Cambridge. The excavations were directed by Catherine Collins, with onsite supervision provided by Emily Ryley and John Newman. Paul Blinkhorn analysed the pottery. The test pits were mainly sited around the playing field and Lowe Chase in the north and along Fambridge Road in the south. The test pit sites were found by local resident, Peter Ingram.

The data from each test pit is discussed in this section and set out in numerical order and by year. Most excavation was in spits measuring 10cm in depth, but in cases when a change in the character of deposits indicated a change in context, a new spit was started before 10cm.

Figure 1: Location map of the 2018 Althorne test pits. (NB test pits not to scale) © Crown Copyright/database right 2019. An Ordnance Survey/EDINA supplied service 1: 10,000
Test Pit 1 (ALT/18/1)

Test pit one was excavated in the southern corner of a grassed field behind Althorne nursery. It was also the southern of two pits excavated here, see also ALT/18/2 (Back Field (south), Althorne Nursery, Lower Chase, Althorne. TQ 90812 99484).

Test pit one was excavated to a depth of between 0.51m and 0.6m, at which natural was found. Excavations were halted at this level and the test pit was recorded and backfilled.

The vast majority of the pottery excavated from ALT/18/1 dates as 19th century ‘Victorian’ wares, although a single sherd of Romano-British pottery was also recorded from context two.

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</table>

Table 1: The pottery excavated from ALT/18/1

The results from ALT/18/1 suggest that this land has likely always been fields with little in the way of settlement until the current buildings were constructed during the 20th century. The finds also show a lot of modern disturbances through the depth of the test pit with pieces of concrete and cement recorded with modern ceramic building material (CBM), orange twine, slate, glass, fragments of plastic, pieces of scrap metal and CBM. Also recorded were nine pieces of burnt stone and two large pieces of worked flint that may indicate the presence of later prehistoric activity, overlooking the River Crouch to the south (and even perhaps the River Blackwater to the north) that was also evident into the Roman period, although the land then may have just been open fields, marginal to a farmstead.
Test Pit 2 (ALT/18/2)

Test pit two was excavated in the norther corner of a grassed field behind Althorne nursery. It was also the northern of two pits excavated here, see also ALT/18/1 (Back Field (north), Althorne Nursery, Lower Chase, Althorne. TQ 90808 99505).

Test pit two was excavated to a depth of 0.5m. Natural was not found, but due to time constraints, excavations were halted at this level and the test pit was recorded and backfilled.

All the pottery excavated from ALT/18/2 dates as 19th century ‘Victorian’ wares.

Table 2: The pottery excavated from ALT/18/2

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Much like the results from ALT/18/1, the finds recorded from ALT/18/2 and the 19th century OS map of the village, suggest that this land has remained largely agricultural until the current nursery was built. The land has seen a lot of modern disturbances too with a mix of finds recorded through the depth of the test pit. These consist of pieces of tarmac, glass, a metal nut, CBM, tile, a metal hook, wire, slate, coal, slag, iron nails and fragments of modern CBM. A large amount of both burnt stone and worked flint were also recorded that hint with the lithics also recorded from ALT/18/1, suggest that there was likely later prehistoric activity on site, although analysis of the lithics are needed to confirm this.
Test Pit three (ALT/18/3)

Test pit three was excavated along the western edge of the grassed recreation ground in the north of the village and directly behind the sports pavilion. It was also the northern of two pits excavated here; see also ALT/18/4 (Althorne Recreation Ground, Burnham Road (Summerhill), Althorne. TQ 90930 99557).

Test pit three was excavated to a depth of 0.5m, at which natural was found. Excavations were halted at this level and the test pit was recorded and backfilled.

Only two sherds of pottery were excavated from ALT/18/3, to include a sherd of medieval Essex Grey Ware and a small sherd of 19th century ‘Victorian’ ware.

Table 3: The pottery excavated from ALT/18/3

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It is likely that the land here has always been open fields, with varying period of use. This land was utilised during the high medieval period and then again during the 19th century, and a lot of the finds are from the more recent disturbances of the land, including the construction of the sports pavilion. These have been recorded as glass, CBM (some of which is possibly burnt), aluminium can fragments, concrete, pieces of plastic, fragments of field drain, nails, coal, animal bone and pieces of scrap metal. Two pieces of burnt stone and two possible worked flints were also recorded from the lower half of the test pit and may indicate the presence of later prehistoric activity on site, although analysis of the lithics would be needed to prove this.
Test Pit four (ALT/18/4)

Test pit four was excavated in the south western corner of the grassed recreation ground in the north of the village and to the south of the car park. It was also the southern of two pits excavated here; see also ALT/18/3 (Althorne Recreation Ground, Burnham Road (Summerhill), Althorne. TQ 90948 99489).

Test pit four was excavated to a depth of 0.3m, at which natural was found. Excavations were halted at this level and the test pit was recorded and backfilled.

A single sherd of medieval Mill Green Ware was excavated from ALT/18/4, although the majority of the rest of the pottery dates as 19th century ‘Victorian’ wares.

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Table 4: Pottery excavated from ALT/18/4

The results from ALT/18/4 are very similar to those recorded in ALT/18/3 just to the north, although there was slightly less modern disturbances noted in this test pit, likely due to its position in the far corner of the recreation ground. Prior to the construction of the pavilion and sports areas the land has remained as open fields with sporadic use noted during the high medieval and 19th century. The few finds also recorded consist of bottle glass, central battery cores, a one new penny coin dated to 1981, fragments of modern wood and coal.
Test Pit five (ALT/18/5)

Test pit five was excavated in the enclosed rear garden of a probable early 20th century house set along the main road in the south of the village (Taiping, Burnham Road. TQ 91170 98747).

Test pit five was excavated to a depth of between 0.4m and 0.49m. Natural was not found, but due to time constraints, excavations were halted at this level and the test pit was recorded and backfilled.

All the pottery excavated from ALT/18/5 dates as 19th century ‘Victorian’ wares and were found through the depth of the test pit.

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Table 5: The pottery excavated from ALT/18/5

On the first 19th century OS map of Althorne, the land here was open fields and so the majority of the finds excavated likely either derived from manuring or from the construction of the current house. The finds consist of modern glazed tile, modern CBM, melted glass, slate, a possible piece of tarmac, bottle glass, CBM (one of which was burnt) and tile with animal bone, cockle and oyster shell. The presence of 12 pieces of burnt stone and a single worked flint also suggest that there was likely activity here during the later prehistoric period, particularly utilising the advantageous views over the River Crouch to the south, although analysis of the lithics would be needed to prove this.
Test Pit six (ALT/18/6)

Test pit six was excavated in the enclosed rear garden of a modern bungalow set back from the main road in the southwest of the village (Charlesland, Chestnut Farm Drove, Althorne. TQ 90489 /98857).

Test pit six was excavated to a depth of 0.6m. Natural was not found, but due to time constraints, excavations were halted at this level and the test pit was recorded and backfilled.

A range of pottery types were excavated from ALT/18/6, although the majority of which were identified as 19th century 'Victorian' wares that were found through the upper four contexts of the test pit. Post medieval Delft Ware and Staffordshire White Salt-Glazed Stoneware were also recorded with two sherds of Romano-British pottery and one large sherd of Late Bronze Age pot from context six.

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Table 6: The pottery excavated from ALT/18/6

The presence of Late Bronze Age pottery recorded from the lower contexts of ALT/18/6 with both burnt stones and a worked flint suggest that there was later prehistoric activity on site, perhaps as a wider spread of later prehistoric settlement along the ridge here overlooking the River Crouch to the south. A layer of grey silty clay was found also towards the base of test pit six and contained the Roman pottery as well as a lot of charcoal. In the upper layers of the test pit, fragments of chalk were found mixed in with the clay, which is likely due to the dressing of the fields for agriculture and ploughing, particularly as the first OS map in the 19th century shows that the land here was once fields, part of Althorne Barns on the 19th century map and was probably utilised the same way through the post medieval as well. The finds excavated from ALT/18/6 consist of CBM, tile, modern glazed tile fragments, coal, slate, cement, pieces of plastic, including a small bead, concrete, mortar, glass, animal bone and clay pipe.
Test Pit seven (ALT/18/7)

Test pit seven was excavated in the enclosed front garden of a modern house set back from the main road in the far southwest of the village (Sunningdale, Sunningdale Road, Althorne. TQ 90275 98750).

Test pit seven was excavated to a depth of 0.6m. Natural was not found, but due to time constraints, excavations were halted at this level and the test pit was recorded and backfilled.

Single sherds of both Romano-British pot and medieval Hedingham Ware were both excavated from the lower levels of ALT/18/7. An additional three sherds of 19th century ‘Victorian’ ware pot were also recorded.

Table 7: Pottery excavated from ALT/18/7

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The same layer of a grey silty clay with charcoal (as recorded in ALT/18/6) was also found towards the base of ALT/18/7, so could be related to how Althorne got its name and meaning of ‘the place at the burnt thorn tree’. Roman pottery was also found in this test pit as well as a single sherd dating the high medieval period, suggesting the land was in use at these times, but perhaps marginal to the main area of settlement. Activity increased through the 19th century, although likely still as agricultural land until the current house was built during the 20th century. Very few finds were recorded with the pottery, suggesting that there hasn’t been much in the way of disturbances here; the finds consisting of tile and CBM with a single piece of burnt stone that may be later prehistoric in date, although of course analysis of the lithics would be needed to prove this.
4 Conclusions

The seven archaeological test pits that were excavated in Althorne in 2018 have yielded archaeological evidence for settlement in the parish dating from the Late Bronze Age through to the modern day. All the test pit results have also added to the ‘bigger picture’ of the development of Althorne and the Dengie Hundred, as well as providing new insight into the level of archaeological remains that are still present under the village.

One test pit, ALT/18/6, yielded a single large sherd of Late Bronze Age pottery and all the test pits apart from ALT/18/4 found either worked flints or burnt stone or both. The high ground that Althorne sits on would have provided commanding views over both the River Crouch to the south and the River Blackwater to the north as well as further out to the North Sea in the east and would have likely long attracted settlement to the area through prehistory. The prehistoric material identified during the test pitting may be contemporary with the Late Bronze Age structure that was found in alongside the estuary, and just east of Bridgemarsh Island during the 1980’s Hullbridge Basin Survey (SMR No. 13681), and hints that the inland landscape may have been more intensively utilised than previously thought.

Three test pits produced four sherds of Romano-British pottery (ALT/18/1, ALT/18/6 and ALT/18/7) that showed a definite concentration of Roman activity in the western half of the parish, although given the small amount of pottery found, these finds likely derive from agricultural activities, such as manuring rather than settlement. As a large number of field boundaries have been recorded on the Essex Historic Environment Record (HER) over the Dengie Hundred (SMR No. 19906), some of these likely date from at least the Anglo-Saxon period, but some could also be earlier in date.

No evidence for Anglo-Saxon activity was noted through the test pitting although there was likely to have been a highly dispersed settlement here, consisting of isolated farmsteads by the Late Anglo-Saxon period at least, as it is widely believed that Althorne was included in the record of Southminster at the time of the Domesday Survey in 1086. Three small sherds of high medieval pot were only found from three test pits; ALT/18/3, ALT/18/4 and ALT/18/7 and are unlikely to represent the core of the medieval settlement, which was likely to have been sited close to the 14th century St Andrew’s church (SMR No. 11238) as a possible area of deserted medieval settlement has been identified on the HER (SMR No. 11240).

No later medieval pottery was found from the Althorne test pits and although only a small number of pits were able to be excavated in 2018, it is possible that the settlement was affected by the various socio-economic factors of the 14th century, including the Black Death. The lack of any later medieval pottery may also be due to the nature of the likely highly dispersed settlement at this time, the locations of the test pits were sited within the confines of the modern village and the sporadic nature of the test pitting strategy could have easily missed the later medieval settlement.

A single test pit, ALT/18/6, sited along Fambridge Road, yielded only three sherds of post medieval pottery, hinting that there may have been a farmstead here at that time and the village remained largely agricultural, with isolated areas of settlement off the main roads running across the top of the ridge across the Dengie Hundred and along the river estuaries, where a number of 18th century oyster beds are known to have thrived at this time (SMR No. 16107 and 16106). When the Southminster Branch railway line (SMR No. 40543) was built during the late 19th century, the settlement was still sparse, as seen on the earliest OS Maps of that time, but the railway likely contributed to an increase of settlement into the 19th century and later although the vast majority of Althorne today is modern infilling.
5 Maps

Much of the value of the test pit data from currently occupied rural settlements are derived from a holistic consideration across the entire settlement. Maps showing a range of the data from the test pit excavations in Althorne in 2018 are included below.
Figure 9: Distribution of the Late Bronze Age pottery excavated from the Althorne test pits
2018
Test pits containing pottery dating to the Late Bronze Age (1200-700 BC)
Figure 10: Distribution of the Roman pottery excavated from the Althorne test pits

Althorne
2018

Test pits containing pottery dating to the Romano-British (AD 43-410)

Disturbed levels
- 1 sherd 4g or less
- 1 sherd 5g or more
- 2-4 sherds
- 5 sherds or more

Undisturbed levels
- 1 sherd 4g or less
- 1 sherd 5g or more
- 2-4 sherds
- 5 sherds or more

Test Pit with no pottery of this date
Figure 11: Distribution of the High Medieval pottery excavated from the Althorne test pits

Test pits containing pottery dating to the High Medieval (AD 1066-1399)
Figure 12: Distribution of the Post Medieval pottery excavated from the Althorne test pits

Test pits containing pottery dating to the Post Medieval (AD 1540-1799)
Figure 13: Distribution of the 19th century pottery excavated from the Althorne test pits © Crown Copyright/database right 2019. An Ordnance Survey/EDINA supplied service 1: 10,000