

Thanet Archaeological Landscape Mapping Project



Project Newsletter No. 6 - May 2026

Issue six of the Thanet Archaeological Landscape Mapping project newsletter

Welcome to the sixth edition of the Thanet Archaeological Landscape Mapping Project newsletter. In this issue, we're pleased to share the latest updates on the project's progress including a description of the characterisation phase, shine a spotlight on some fascinating archaeological excavations recently completed or currently underway across the district, and explain how you can get involved.

If you're new to the project, our first newsletter introduced the reasons behind this work and set out our main aims and objectives. You can read this — along with all previous editions which discuss earlier stages of the project — by visiting the project page on the Kent County Council website:

[Thanet Archaeological Landscape Mapping Project](#)

Archaeological Characterisation

With the data enhancement work on the Historic Environment Record (HER) now complete, the project has moved into its next key phase: archaeological characterisation.

So, what does archaeological characterisation mean? Historic England describes it as “an attempt to bring together as many aspects of a place as possible, in order to appreciate and understand it better.” In practice, this means looking at a wide range of evidence and asking how it all fits together to tell the story of a place.

In Thanet, this evidence is rich and varied. For the later prehistoric period for example, it includes funerary evidence alongside remains of settlement, as well as individual findspots. By contrast, for the post medieval period, the evidence may include things like buildings, streets, harbour installations, fortifications, leisure areas etc. All of these historic features also sit within a natural landscape shaped by valleys, hillslopes, The Wantsum channel, the coastline and the underlying geology of the district.

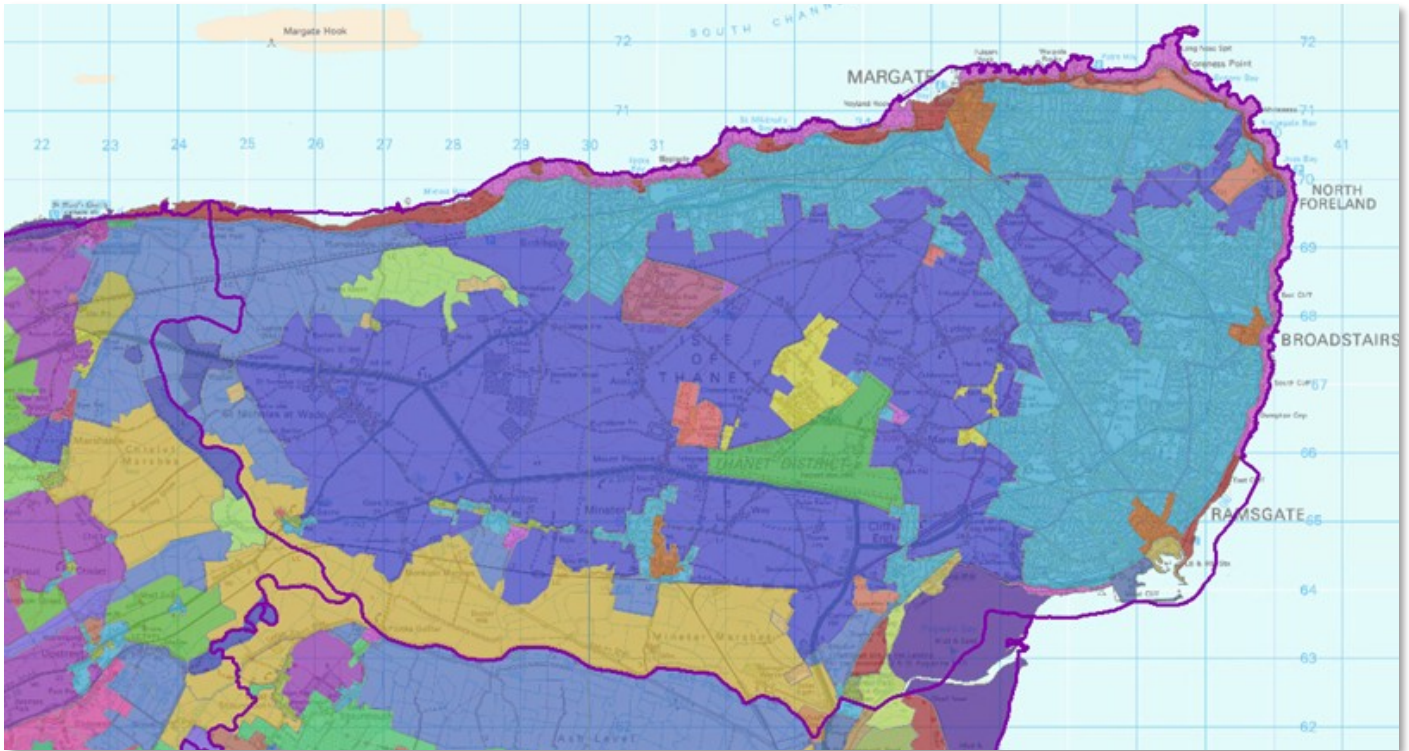
The aim of archaeological characterisation is to make sense of all this detail. By bringing different strands of evidence together, we can start to understand what the data reveals about Thanet's past: how the district functioned at different times, how people lived and worked here, and how the landscape and settlements have changed and developed over the centuries.

Characterisation has been widely applied within the historic environment in a range of different contexts. These include historic landscape characterisation, historic seascape characterisation, historic area assessments, and built environment and urban characterisation studies. Together, these approaches have been used to help understand the historic development of towns and places across England.



Example of urban characterisation – medieval Dover





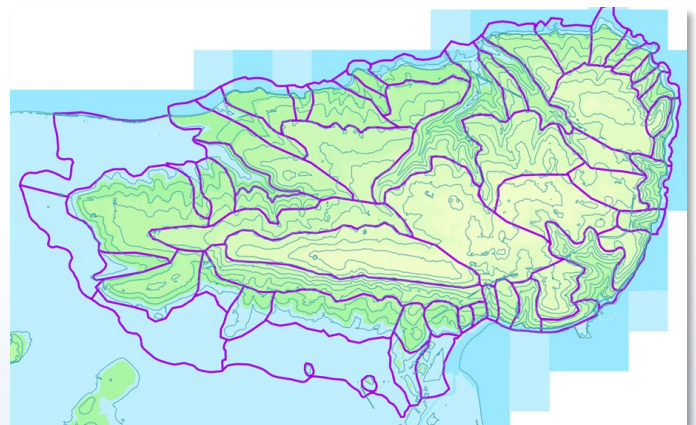
Mapping showing Historic Landscape Character polygons over Thanet

The archaeological characterisation being produced for Thanet, however, is distinct from all of these examples. It covers a much larger area than individual town or urban assessments, meaning it is not possible to explore every place in the same level of detail. At the same time, it is more focused and detailed than national-scale historic landscape characterisation. This approach therefore sits between these established methods, allowing us to understand Thanet as a whole while still exploring its archaeological complexity in meaningful detail

Characterisation: our methodology - introductory chapters

One of the key factors influencing how people have interacted with and used the landscape from the later prehistoric period onwards is topography. While the landscape has inevitably changed over the past 6,000 years, many major features — such as the former course of the Wantsum Channel, as well as areas of high ground and the valleys — are still visible in the landform today. For this reason, the topography was chosen as the starting point for our characterisation of Thanet.

To help manage the large scale of the study area, the landscape was divided into 63 *topographic zones*. Each zone was then assessed to understand the other factors that will influence the archaeology within it.

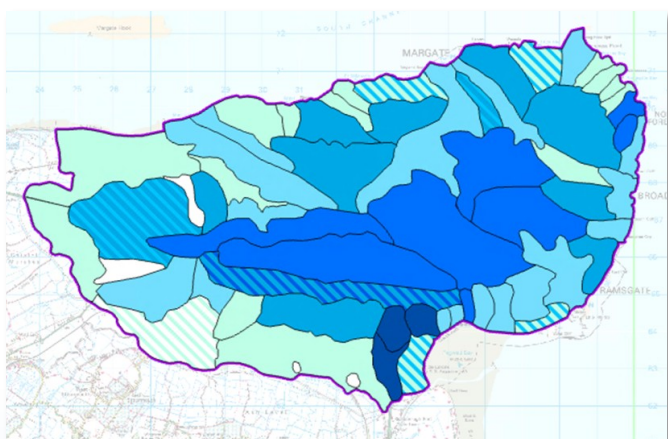


Map of the 63 topographic zones overlying topographic model and contours



These factors include geology, soil depth and the level and date of the development. In areas where soils have been heavily ploughed or eroded by wind, archaeological features may have been damaged or lost altogether. In contrast, deeper soils can reduce the visibility of archaeological remains, particularly cropmarks. Geology will also affect the visibility of cropmark features. The date and scale of modern development also plays a significant role: for example, Victorian and early 20th century development often took place before archaeological investigation was routinely carried out, so a lack of data may not be meaningful.

The single greatest influence on our understanding of the past use of a landscape, however, is the level of archaeological investigation that has taken place. This was assessed for every zone and given a score from 1 to 6. A score of 1 (shown as white in the image below) indicates little or no archaeological investigation, while a score of 6 (dark blue) represents multiple large scale investigations covering significant parts of the zone.

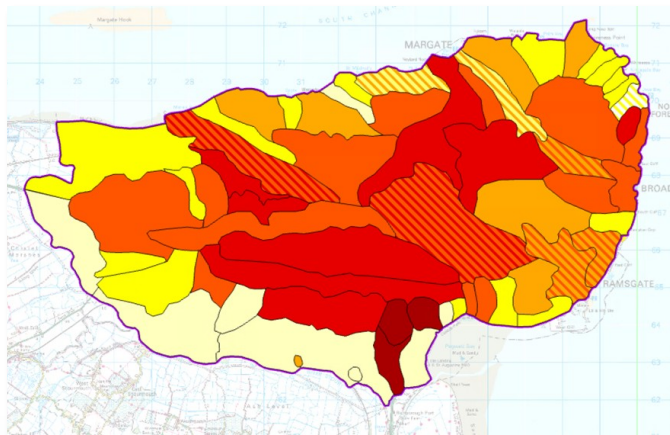


Mapping showing frequency of archaeological investigations

Period Chapters

Following the completion of the introductory section, work is now underway on producing archaeological characterisations for each individual period. To manage the large volume and complexity of data available for some periods, the evidence is divided into three main parts.

The first is a comprehensive resource assessment, which brings together and summarises the archaeological discoveries across the district. This information is organised under a series of broad themes, such as settlement, industry, and communications. The second part examines the evidence within each of the 63 topographic zones, placing it firmly within its landscape context. This section also assesses the quantity of evidence present in each zone. In the image below, lighter areas represent zones with no or only a limited number of, discoveries dating to that period, while darker areas indicate zones with multiple discoveries reflecting a range of different activities. The third and final part of each chapter focuses on areas where there is a particular concentration of evidence. These areas are explored in more detail through focused characterisation, allowing us to develop a richer understanding of how specific parts of Thanet were used and developed during each period.



Mapping showing density of Roman features and finds

The Roman Characterisation

The characterisation process was initially tested using the Roman period data. Work on the Anglo-Saxon period is now well advanced and nearing completion, and we expect to move on to the later pre-historic periods within the next few weeks.

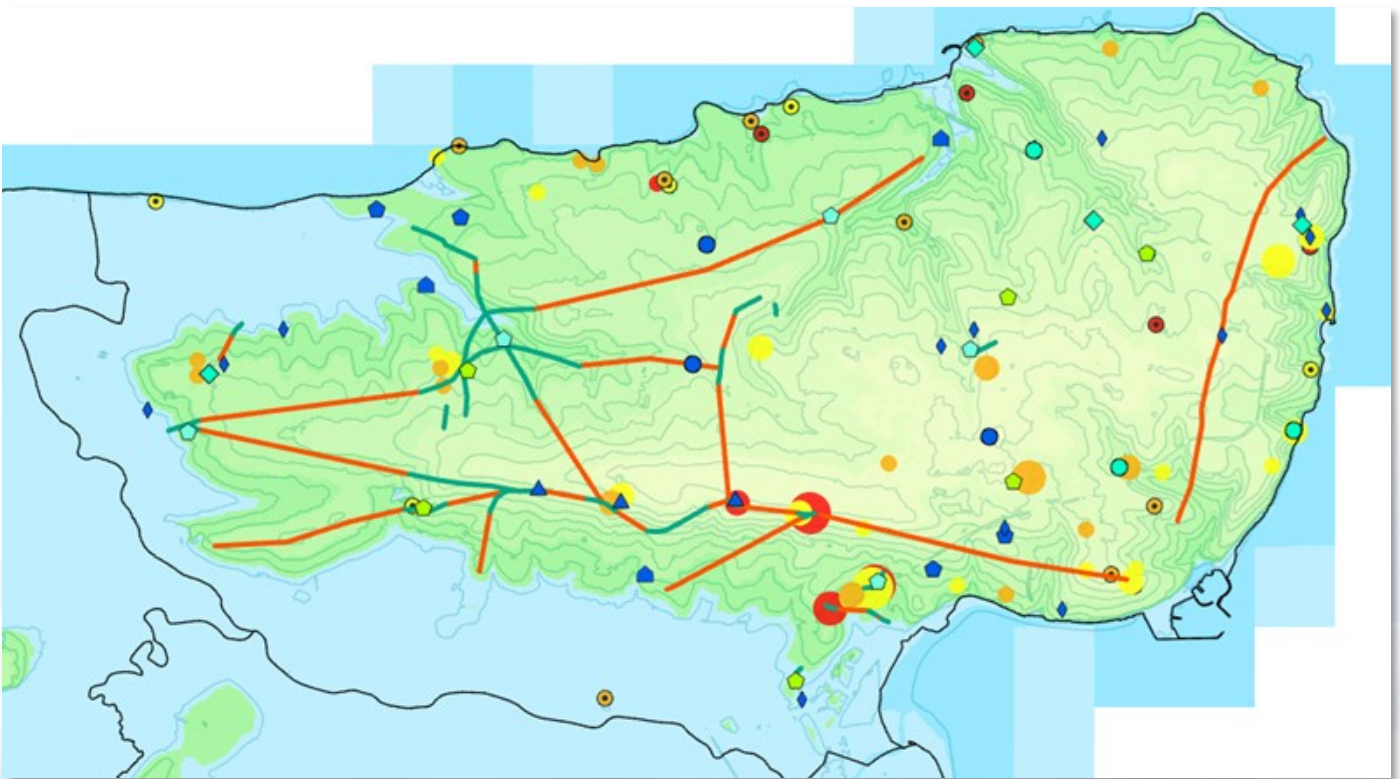


Overall, the evidence suggests that Roman period Thanet was predominantly rural in character. There were no major urban centres comparable to nearby Canterbury, and it is likely that many of the functions normally associated with a town were instead fulfilled by the civilian settlement at *Rutupiae* (Richborough). This settlement developed around the fort and port just beyond the district's western boundary.

The absence of a large town in Thanet once led to the assumption that the area was sparsely populated during the Roman period. However, recent archaeological research paints a different picture, indicating a relatively dense population spread across numerous smaller settlements and activity hubs. Many of these sites are associated with extensive and often complex field systems, suggesting a landscape that was heavily subdivided for agriculture and animal husbandry. It is therefore likely that Thanet played an important role in supplying produce to the population and trade networks centred on Richborough.

Several of these settlements appear to have developed directly from late Iron Age sites, with little evidence for a break in activity between the late Iron Age and early Roman periods. Criss-crossing the Thanet landscape was a network of Roman roads linking rural settlements and areas of activity. The most clearly defined route runs east–west along the central ridge of higher ground, connecting a possible crossing point of the Wantsum Channel at Sarre in the west with the rest of the district.

The mapping shown below brings together the available evidence and simplifies it to provide an overview of how the district may have functioned during the Roman period. Each of the blue/green coloured points represents a different settlement site, red/orange/yellow circles indicate burial sites, and lines show the known and conjectured routes of Roman roads. This information is displayed over a digital terrain model to highlight how the archaeological evidence relates to the underlying landscape.

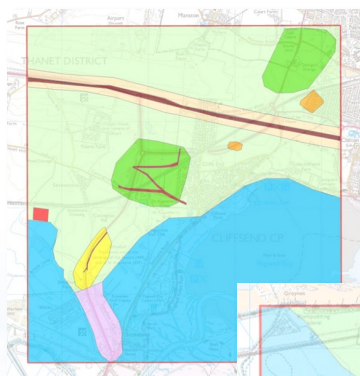


High level model of Roman Thanet

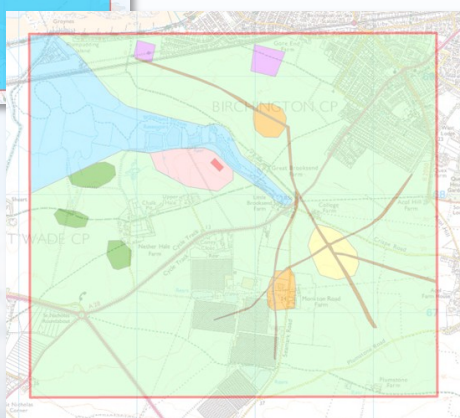


Two areas were selected for more detailed, focused characterisation. The first lies in the south-eastern corner of the district, around Ebbsfleet and Cliffsend, while the second is in the north-western part of Thanet, between Birchington and Sarre and around the Brooksend Stream. Much of the evidence identified around the Brooksend Stream is derived from cropmark features visible from aerial photography, whereas the characterisation around Ebbsfleet is based largely on excavated archaeological evidence.

As shown in the images below, these areas were divided into a series of differently coloured polygons. Each polygon represents a particular type of archaeological evidence or activity. Areas of possible settlement are shown alongside evidence for field systems, enclosures, routeways and cemeteries. This more focused and detailed form of characterisation is similar to that produced for Dover and other smaller study areas. This stage of the project demonstrates how archaeological characterisation can bring complex evidence together to reveal how Thanet's landscape was shaped and used over thousands of years. As work continues into additional periods, this approach will deepen our understanding of the district's past and support informed decision-making about its future.



Area of detailed characterisation around Ebbsfleet



Area of detailed characterisation around Birchington

Recent archaeological investigations in the district

Archaeologists have been active across many parts of Thanet in the early part of the year. These include large-scale excavations alongside geophysical surveys, trial trenching, and investigations of new sites. Ongoing work by archaeologists from the Swale and Thames Archaeological Survey Company at Manston Green near Ramsgate continues to reveal a rich and varied archaeological landscape, with evidence for activity spanning thousands of years. One of the most striking discoveries at this site has been a sloping passage leading down to a chamber with two carefully cut caves in the chalk bedrock. These features appear to have been created in the Late Iron Age or early Roman period, around 2,000 years ago. Finds from within the caves include pottery and fragments of a rotary quernstone made from volcanic rock imported from Germany, pointing to far-reaching trade connections. The exact purpose of the caves is still uncertain. They may have been used for extracting chalk, storing goods, or perhaps as a place of refuge or another specialised activity. Over time, the chamber collapsed and gradually filled in, with additional material accumulating during the medieval period. Alongside these caves, evidence for buildings, burials, and field systems has been uncovered across the site, offering a fascinating glimpse into how this landscape was shaped, used, and re-used over many centuries.



View of the ramp down towards the Iron Age/Roman caves





View from above of Iron Age/Roman caves



View of cave entrance

Elsewhere archaeological investigations at Westwood Village, located on land off Haine Road and Manston Court Road near Westwood Cross, are also continuing to uncover a complex and multi-period landscape. The work has revealed evidence of activity from the prehistoric period, including several ring ditches and a very substantial (50+) pit alignment, through to the medieval era. One of the most significant discoveries so far is a large Roman industrial area, including structures with internal kilns or hearths. This feature is particularly unusual in both its scale and complexity, and has been identified as being of high regional importance. Elsewhere on the site, archaeologists have identified the remains of a Late Iron Age to early Roman trackway, along with associated field systems and settlement features such as sunken buildings.

Some of these buildings appear to be of an unusual form with evidence of basements and first floors and one example contained evidence of possible plaster. In areas excavated to the north, medieval activity is also well represented, including an enclosure likely used for livestock, and several small structures. Together, these discoveries show how the area developed over time, from early farming landscapes and trackways through to Roman industrial use and later medieval settlement. The results are helping to build a much clearer picture of how this part of Thanet was used and adapted over many centuries.



One of the Roman Kilns/hearths at Westwood





View of the Westwood excavation area from above

Outreach events

We are continuing our programme of outreach for this project. Several talks are planned for the second half of 2026 which include both an introduction to the project as well as an update and extra detail on our progress so far. Presently talks are planned for:

- **16th of July with Birchington Heritage Trust**
- **19th of July at the Powell Cotton Museum**
- **7th of November with Westgate-on-Sea Heritage Centre**
- **11th of November with Canterbury Historical and Archaeological Society.**

We are also planning a series of guided walks for the summer of 2026. In these we will be able to talk about the wide variety of features and finds that have been recorded and the wider archaeological landscapes in which they lie. The first of these will coincide with the Festival of Archaeology (18th of July – 2nd of August 2026) with three provisional dates of:

- **25th of July**
- **29th of July**
- **2nd of August**

If you would like any further information about these upcoming talks, or if you would like to sign up to come along to one of the guided walks, do not hesitate to get in touch. The email address to use is :

victoria.hosegood@kent.gov.uk



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