

Thanet Archaeological Landscape Mapping Project



Issue five of the Thanet Archaeological Landscape Mapping project newsletter

Welcome to the fifth edition of the Thanet Archaeological Landscape Mapping Project newsletter! In this issue, we're excited to share updates on the progress of the project, highlight some interesting archaeological excavations that have been carried out and which are currently taking place across the district, and let you know how you can get involved.

If you're new to the project, our first newsletter provided an overview of why this work is being undertaken and outlined our key aims and objectives. You can catch up on all previous editions by visiting the project page on the Kent County Council website.

<https://www.kent.gov.uk/leisure-and-community/history-and-heritage/thanet-archaeological-landscape-mapping-project>

The improved GIS mapping for the Kent Historic Environment Record in Thanet

Data enhancement work

Since spring, we've been making steady progress on enhancing the Kent Historic Environment Record (HER). Early in the project, our focus was on adding data from recent archaeological excavation reports that had been waiting in the backlog. That phase is now complete, and we've moved on to enriching existing records—prioritising investigations that offer the most valuable insights into Thanet's past.

While previous newsletters have mainly highlighted modern investigations, we're now also revisiting earlier work. Many of the excavations carried out in the early days of modern, development led archaeology—since the introduction of PPG16 in 1990, and even before—have revealed important archaeological information that deserves renewed attention. Previously, the HER records representing these early discoveries were simple points on a map associated with a few lines of text. They have now been fleshed out with a much higher degree of detail and accurate polygon representation on the mapping.



A253 Road Improvements excavations

A very good example of an excavation in Thanet which occurred shortly after the introduction of development-led archaeology was that which occurred in association with plans to widen the line of the A253 road between Monkton and Mount Pleasant roundabouts. Here, excavation of a linear strip of land some 3km long and roughly 30m broad, was carried out by the Canterbury Archaeological Trust and the Trust for Thanet Archaeology between July 1994 and February 1995.

Large numbers of archaeological features were revealed along the entire route, dating from the prehistoric to the early Medieval period. The prehistoric remains included a number of Neolithic inhumations and pits, an extensive pit alignment, six well preserved beaker graves and ten substantial Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age ring ditches. There was a small Anglo-Saxon cemetery, consisting of 18 inhumations with a date around the 7th century AD at the eastern end of the excavation, while the western end contained a Medieval farmstead, with at least 5 buildings dated to around AD 1100-1250.



Results of the A253 excavations in the HER mapping

Perhaps the most important discoveries made at this site were a large number of sunken-floored buildings of varying form and layout. Some had evidence for hearths or scorched areas, post- and stake-holes, internal partitions or made-up rammed chalk floors. This type of feature is most commonly associated with Early Medieval settlements, though at this site they appear to have been established in

the Roman period – established in the 1st to mid-2nd century AD and in use until the mid - 3rd century AD. Though these sunken buildings are still unusual on Roman sites outside of Kent, at the time of their discovery they were a rare and important discovery. Other features including ditched enclosures, pits, post-built structures and a roadside shrine were discovered alongside the buildings, and together with the cropmark evidence in the adjacent fields, point to the presence of a fairly substantial Roman settlement and a large number of relatively small-scale but varied structures, bounded by ditches and fence lines. This suggests a community of independent smallholders and craftsmen. One important aspect is its association with the remains of a braided trackway which appeared to roughly predict the alignment of the A253. It is assumed that this route predates the Roman settlement and had origins in Prehistory. The track clearly influenced the layout and position of settlement in the Roman period and it is likely that the route survived into the Medieval period as ‘Dunstrete’ or the ‘street over the down’ beneath the line of the A253.

Multi-period remains at Minnis Bay

Prior to the integration of archaeology into the planning system, excavations were often undertaken by interested land owners and members of the public. Many of these early amateur investigations have also revealed important features and finds. A good example of this were the discoveries that were made at Minnis Bay near Birchington throughout the 20th century. The discoveries on the foreshore began in 1938, when a schoolboy named Jimmy Beck revealed pottery and bones in a pit on the foreshore. This prompted Major Percy Powell-Cotton and his family, including Antoinette, to begin investigations. Beck’s most significant find came later that year when he uncovered a Bronze Age hoard, including palstaves, swords, daggers, tools, pottery, and preserved timber. The site was brought to the attention of the British Museum, and a local team led by historian Frederick Worsfold continued excavations until war halted work in 1940.





Photograph of Antoinette Powell Cotton at Minnis Bay in 1955

Antoinette (Tony) Powell-Cotton resumed investigations in the 1950s and over the course of three decades, she excavated over 100 pits and meticulously recorded her findings in 25 field books, now held at the Powell-Cotton Museum (PCM) at Quex Park.

Among the most notable discoveries were Late Iron Age and Roman pits, including “Well 30,” a shaft base containing pottery, brooches, animal bones, a dog skeleton, and wooden artefacts. The waterlogged conditions preserved these finds exceptionally well. Bronze Age structures, including collapsed wattle panels and posts, and evidence of salt-making activity dated to around 1000–700 BC. There were also Early Iron Age pits, some containing human remains, and Medieval pits which yielded pottery, leather shoes, wood, and domestic debris. These finds suggest a thriving Medieval settlement in the vicinity. Neolithic finds, including flint tools, polished axes, and pottery sherds were uncovered during extreme low spring tides. Timber posts forming an assumed fish weir were also recorded, indicating early exploitation of the coastal environment.

Antoinette collaborated with experts, trained volunteers, and even enlisted help from curious passers-by. Her dentist X-rayed finds, and flying instructors from Manston aerodrome provided aerial photographs. She also worked with the Isle of Thanet Geographical Society and local architects to produce accurate site surveys.

Since her death, volunteers have also worked to record, catalogue and preserve her finds, photographs, and notes. Initially this included volunteers from the Isle of Thanet Archaeological Society under the guidance of Ges Moody, and latterly the work was completed by volunteers Trevor and Vera Gibbons (also volunteers from 1966 during the site surveys and excavations).



Late Iron Age ‘well 30’



Medieval Leather shoes



They transcribed Tony's field books, photographed and accessioned the artefacts with professional help from Nigel Macpherson Grant. They were approached by Kent Archaeological Society (KAS) to publish the discoveries in *Archaeologia Cantiana*. This effort is helping to make her legacy accessible to future researchers and to ensure that Minnis Bay's archaeological significance is fully recognised. This work at Minnis Bay reveals a landscape shaped by thousands of years of human activity and offers a vivid glimpse into the lives of those who lived, worked, and traded along this stretch of coastline.

Sarre Anglo Saxon cemetery

An especially early example of archaeological investigations on Thanet is the 19th-century excavation of the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Sarre. The first indication of a burial site came in 1843, when a grave was accidentally uncovered containing a bronze bowl and a gold-and-garnet brooch. A second chance discovery followed in 1860, when workmen unearthed another skeleton accompanied by high-status grave goods.

Prompted by these finds, the site was formally investigated in 1863 by John Brent, working under the auspices of the Kent Archaeological Society. Brent used systematic probing—rather than topsoil stripping—to locate and excavate graves, ultimately recording 274 burials. However, this represents only part of the cemetery, which is now estimated to contain up to 400 graves. His findings were published in several volumes of *Archaeologia Cantiana*, complete with beautifully detailed illustrations of the more significant artefacts.

Further small-scale investigations in 1982 and 1991 revealed additional Anglo-Saxon graves, as well as a shallow east-west aligned ditch interpreted as the cemetery's southern boundary. This ditch runs just north of the modern A253 road. Excavations also uncovered the remains of a sunken-floored Anglo-Saxon building and the flint footings of a Medieval structure—possibly the church of St Giles, which was known to exist by the 11th century.

Illustrations of Anglo Saxon beads from Sarre cemetery



Sarre is a key site in the corpus of 5th to 7th-century cemeteries that cluster in eastern Kent. These cemeteries are notable for their rich grave goods and continental, Jutish associations, reflecting the area's dense early Early Medieval settlement. The close proximity of the pagan cemetery to the later Medieval parish church of St Giles offers valuable insight into the still poorly understood relationship between early and later Medieval burial and settlement practices.

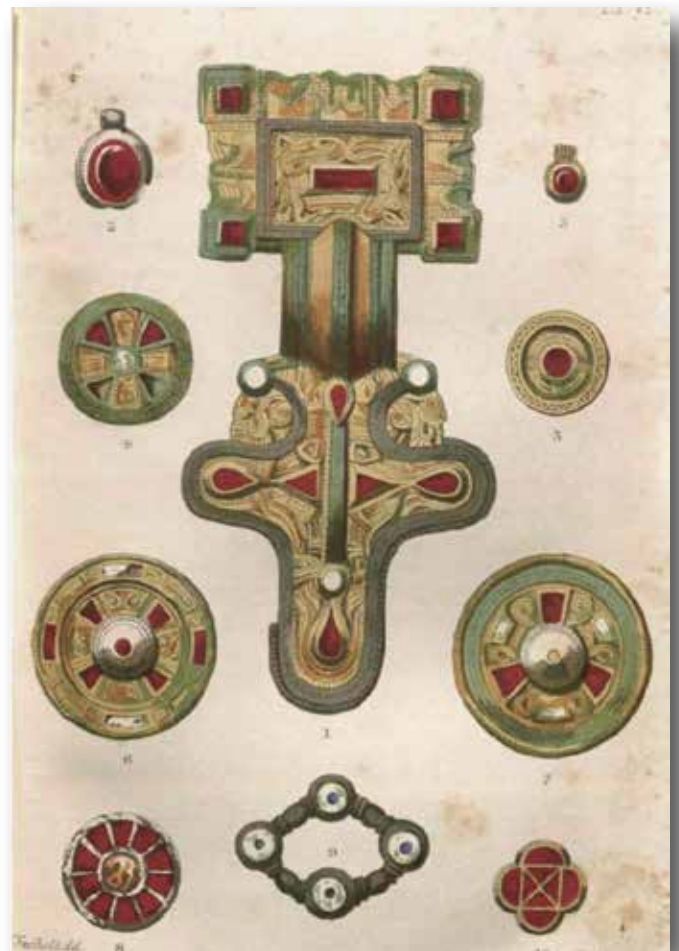


Illustrations of Anglo Saxon glass vessels from Sarre cemetery

AIM team work

The Improved HER data for Thanet now also includes the work conducted by Historic England's Aerial Investigation and Mapping (AIM) team. In summary, their work comprised a major new survey of the available aerial photography - both modern and historic, alongside LiDAR, to identify cropmarks, soil-marks, and earthworks that represent the locations of archaeological features across the district. The findings were mapped using GIS and added to the Kent HER. The results have significantly enhanced the database, with over 2,600 new or updated monument records now available.

In addition to adding this data to the HER the AIM team have also produced a detailed report of their findings which describes the methodology, as well

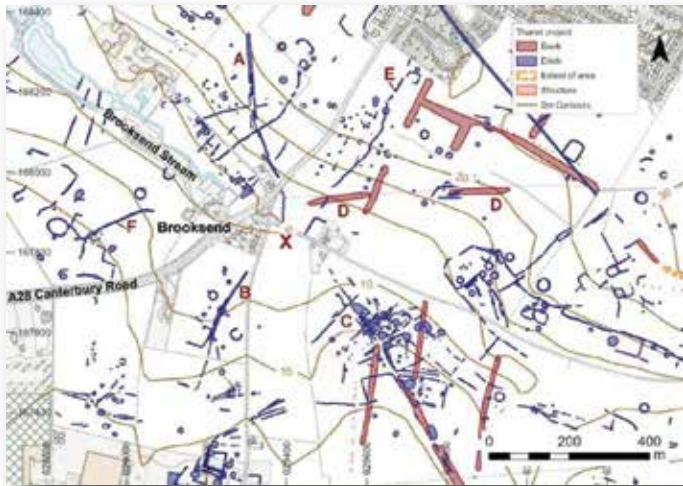


Illustrations of Anglo Saxon brooches and jewellery from Sarre cemetery

as some of the challenges that came with identifying and interpreting the features. The report notes that cropmarks were most commonly found on well-drained chalk soils but that the visibility of archaeological features from the air depends on many factors, including soil type, crop regime, and erosion. In some areas, features were invisible due to shallow depth, plough damage, or modern development. Examples of areas that illustrate these challenges include Haine, where cropmarks of Roman enclosures and trackways were clearly visible on one side of a field, while the other side showed few features—likely due to differences in crop type and soil conditions at the time of photography. Also at Thanet Earth, excavations revealed Iron Age and Roman features that were not visible in aerial imagery, highlighting the importance of combining aerial survey with ground investigation.



The survey and associated reporting revealed a remarkable density of archaeological features, spanning from the Neolithic period to the Cold War. Highlights include newly identified Neolithic mortuary enclosures and pit alignments, along with hundreds of Bronze Age round barrows (burial mounds), many forming large cemeteries on ridgelines and slopes. Numerous Medieval settlements were identified, often arranged in linear patterns along historic routeways. Extensive remains from both World Wars and the Cold War were documented, including trench systems, air raid shelters, radar stations, and anti-invasion defences. RAF Manston's wartime infrastructure was particularly well-represented.



Cropmarks and earthworks mapped in the area around Brooksend

Events and outreach

Our programme of public talks has continued, with the most recent event taking place in August as part of the festival for archaeology at the Powell Cotton Museum. We hope to return to the museum next year to update on the progress of the project and share some more of the results. The next talk is scheduled for the 22nd of November and forms part of the Kent Archaeological Society's annual research conference. The focus for this conference this year is Thanet, with a range of speakers talking about the history and archaeology of the district and various projects that have been carried out.

One of the most striking landscapes for cropmark density identified in the Historic England aerial mapping project is the area around Brooksend Stream, near Birchington and St Nicholas-at-Wade. What makes Brooksend particularly fascinating is the layering of features from different periods, all visible in the same fields. The aerial mapping shows how prehistoric burial sites, Roman roads, Medieval settlements, and wartime defences overlap and interact. This kind of multi-period visibility offers a unique opportunity to study continuity and change in land use over thousands of years without disturbing the remains.

Overall this work is an incredibly valuable contribution to the HER and will help enormously in the latter stages of the project.



cropmarks visible on Google Earth aerial imagery around Brooksend

here is a link to book this event:
<https://www.kentarchaeology.org.uk/events/thanet-north-east-kent>

If you would like any further information about the Thanet Landscape Mapping project, the sites which have been mentioned in this newsletter or any future outreach events, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

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