

EHER 9178 and EHER 9181

LOCATION: WORMINGFORD, ESSEX

Field (known as Metlands) to the south of the River Stour, east of Staunch Farm and west of Wormingford Mere and Lodge Hills, centred on NGR TL924328

Background

The 1838 Tithe Map shows that this land was once subdivided into smaller meadows as follows: 209 First Metland Meadow, 210 Long Meadow, 211 Second Metland Meadow, 208 Cow Pasture, 213 Metlands, 196 Commollions. In recent years these were made into one field which has been used for a succession of arable crops. The Stour Valley Path crosses it from east to west. The soil is a sandy loam with many flints.

The field is crossed by the Essex Water Company's pipeline, the ground was deep ploughed either side with a decompactor.

Previous Surveys

Although much has been written about Metlands very little in the way of field work has been carried out until recently.

The first references to an archaeological survey were the observations of the Rev Jenkins in 1836: "*a large mound – close to the Decoy and to the banks of the River Stour was removed and many hundreds of urns discovered placed in parallel rows like streets*" (Archaeologia, vol.29). *See concentric ring ditch.*

'Essex Archaeology and History' (Priddy 1983) says: "*A small collection of flint recovered from a footpath crossing the cropmark at Wormingford Mere included a scraper with concave working edge, a pierced borer, a sharpened flake and five waste flakes*".

Members of CAG under the guidance of Pauline Skippins walked the same footpath in Sept 2005 and undertook a survey of flints along its length. A total of 24 Neolithic and Bronze Age flints were collected and studied by Hazel Martingell (flint specialist). These included a neolithic scraper and flakes.

Prior to the works associated with the installation of the water pipeline Birmingham University undertook a preliminary archaeological survey along the route (Abberton to Wormingford Pipeline Route: Colchester Borough. Archaeological Evaluation Draft. Project 2018. August 2010). Seven pottery sherds were found in the northern ditch of the cursus type monument. The pottery is flint gritted so highly likely to be Bronze Age. Howard Brooks (CAT) feels this is convincing proof that the monument is of neolithic date and that the ditch continued to be an open feature into the Bronze Age.

After the Birmingham evaluation, Oxford Archaeology carried out excavations along the line of the pipeline 2011 (Prehistoric and Medieval activity along the route of the Wormingford to Abberton Pipeline. Excavation report. Oxford Archaeology East. May 2012). Two points arose from their report. They intercepted a number of ditches to the south of the cropmarks and generally aligned N – S or NE- SW which are the boundaries of agricultural fields, indicating an area of farmland in the Bronze and Iron Ages. One of the ditches

dated to the Iron Age appears to link with a substantial cropmark in the north of the field.

An area, a little over 8 hectares (centred on TL924328) and targeted on the ring ditches, has been fieldwalked twice: once in 2012 by students of a Practical Archaeology Course run by Essex University Department of History; and again 2013 as part of Amanda Findley's Wormingford Landmarks Project (Wormingford Landmarks & University of Essex: Walking the Cropmarks. Archaeological Fieldwalking Metlands 2012-13). The combined numbers of finds from the two surveys was 978 objects (weighing 16.5kg). Most of these were pieces of brick, roof tile or pottery dated to 16th – 19th centuries, and probably the result of 'manure scatter', ie they were carted out onto the field with manure from local farmyards and their presence is not significant. However there were some important finds of Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age struck flint (31% by weight), and burnt flints (24%) contemporary to the ring ditches and the cursus. There appears to be no particular connection between the distribution of the flints and the positions of the monuments. The burnt flints may indicate that there was a domestic living site here in the Bronze Age. There is a stronger correlation between the burnt flints and dots seen on aerial photographs which are interpreted as prehistoric pits. The most spectacular find was a complete axe of probable Neolithic date. This may have been lost by someone cutting down trees, but may have been a ritual offering as it was found close to a previous course of the Stour.

Analysis of the cropmarks

Two parallel cropmarks cross the southern half of the field in a NW – SE direction (EHER 9178). The marks are 20 metres apart and 375 metres in length. There is a slight curve throughout their length; the ends are open and not terminated. It is probably the oldest structure within the complex with no other feature beneath it. Its length and straight-sidedness would suggest the structure was built for ceremonial purposes rather than a utilitarian agricultural role. It may have had some connection to astronomical observations such as the winter and summer solstices (see interim report on 'Cursus Alignments in the Stour Valley' by Richard Marriot). Richard states that *'the Metlands monument has a good correlation with the midwinter sunrise. It marks a time of year when the sun begins to return with the promise of spring, sowing and harvest.'*

On 20th December 2013 (the weather forecast for the 21st was very poor) a small party of Sally Bartrum, Francis Nicholls and Andrew White gathered at the northwestern end of the cropmark to watch the sunrise over Lodge Hills. The elevation of the hill resulted in the first sighting of the sun approximately fifteen minutes after true sunrise (8.02am). The position of the sunrise appeared to be exactly in line with the first 150 metres of the parallel cropmarks which kink slightly SW at this point. When walking along the parallel marks heading towards the sun it disappeared after approximately 150 metres behind a slight rise on the horizon and reappeared again seemingly on the new alignment of the marks, supporting the suggestion that the structure may have been a processional way used at the winter solstice.

Careful examination reveals a small square cropmark, approximately 10 metres across within the parallel feature. There are however no causeways into the embanked area unlike the cursus at Springfield, Chelmsford. As Deborah Priddy says in Essex Archaeology and History Vol 14: *"There is an obvious danger in interpreting such cropmark features as possible cursus monuments particularly*

as there is an example on the opposite Suffolk bank of the Stour and an equally indeterminate feature south east of Bures Hall to the west of Wormingford. Three such monuments would seem unusual and a search for alternative interpretations advisable."

A parallel cropmark runs along the southern side of the purported river bed before swinging south as a narrow parallel feature.

There is a large barrow in the SW corner which is described as a bell barrow 25 metres across. On its western side is a trapezoid feature with six marks, possibly pits or post holes. The trapezoid feature appears to be of a later date as it overlays the six marks.

A large dual concentric ring ditch is very prominent to the west of the mere. It is in excess of 40 metres across and quite a large example of a rare type. The excavation of a mound in 1836 was observed by a local vicar, the Reverend Jenkins. He said that he observed hundreds of urns laid in parallel rows like streets. This seems an unlikely site as ring ditches were usually associated with single inhumations. However EHER 9181 identifies the concentric ring ditch as the site (NGR TL92353286). The area has produced large quantities of worked flints of the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age.

Clustered to the east are four smaller ring ditches approximately 8 metres in diameter. Further to the east is a semi elliptical large ring ditch, the open side of which faces NW. It does not appear to have arrived at this shape by ploughing as the ditch is very clearly defined. Its function is unclear. To the east is another cluster of ring ditches, at least five of different sizes. Crossing EHER 9181 and EHER 9178 are a series of ditch marks which appear later as they cut through a ring ditch east of the parallel feature.

The excavations associated with the Essex Water Company pipeline show three Bronze Age ditches aligned NE-SW and are 3.2 metres wide and 1.06 metres deep. They are spaced 700 metres apart and contained 5 sherds of beaker pottery which probably came from the monuments to the north. The monuments appear to respect the pattern of field boundaries which seems to suggest an earlier or contemporaneous date. Two Iron Age ditches were excavated and run NNE-SSW and appear to be part of a pattern of larger fields.

There is a view that ancient monuments were designed to be visible from one another. This intervisibility would have been possible throughout the lower valley and in particular the three parallel cropmarks. Additionally it should be noted that the area from Lodge Hills westward may have been as important, and played a role in a ceremonial landscape.

The cropmarks of Metlands raise a number of arguments as to their meaning. First of all the oldest recorded map we have showing field boundaries is the 1838 Tithe Map which shows Metlands divided into five fields. The dividing line between 209, 210 and 211 is clearly visible on the aerial photograph, as is the boundary of 213; but they may have been ancient in their own right. A ditch or water course runs along the southern boundary of 210 possibly a route of the river in former times. The southern boundary of 208 is hard to decipher.

The parallel cropmarks running NW-SE have been described as a cursus. The banks are twenty metres apart and very precise and defined, but the feature

does not have ends and is slightly curved. There is no evidence for a henge or funeral pyre at either of the ends.

Although a droveway has been suggested, the sides of a purely agricultural droveway would hardly have been as regular as those of the Metlands monument. However, feasting was very much a feature of Neolithic and Bronze Age societies and a ceremonial route for cattle being driven to a feasting site is a possibility. A change in the course of the river may well have played a major role as a terminus feature, or as a place of sacrifice. A further hypothesis has been advanced for a bank barrow or a long barrow. They form part of the ritual inhumation of the dead that took place in British society between 4000BC and 2500BC. Many long barrows started off as small mortuary chambers where human remains were disarticulated. Very often only the skulls and long bones were re-interred. There is normally only limited evidence of grave goods. No mention is made in The Archaeology of Constable Country of this feature despite its prominence.

The numerous ring ditches of different sizes and type form a substantial Bronze Age cemetery bordering what appears to be an earlier course of the Stour. The ring ditches appear in clusters along the sides of the river. Were they the last resting places of large tribal groups? Did the different sizes reflect the status of the occupants, or did they reflect changes in fashion? Where did the tribal groups live? Although there is no evidence of dwellings the materials of which their habitations were made were of such an impermanent nature that they would have left little evidence behind. The monuments to the dead were far more important than the dwellings of the living.

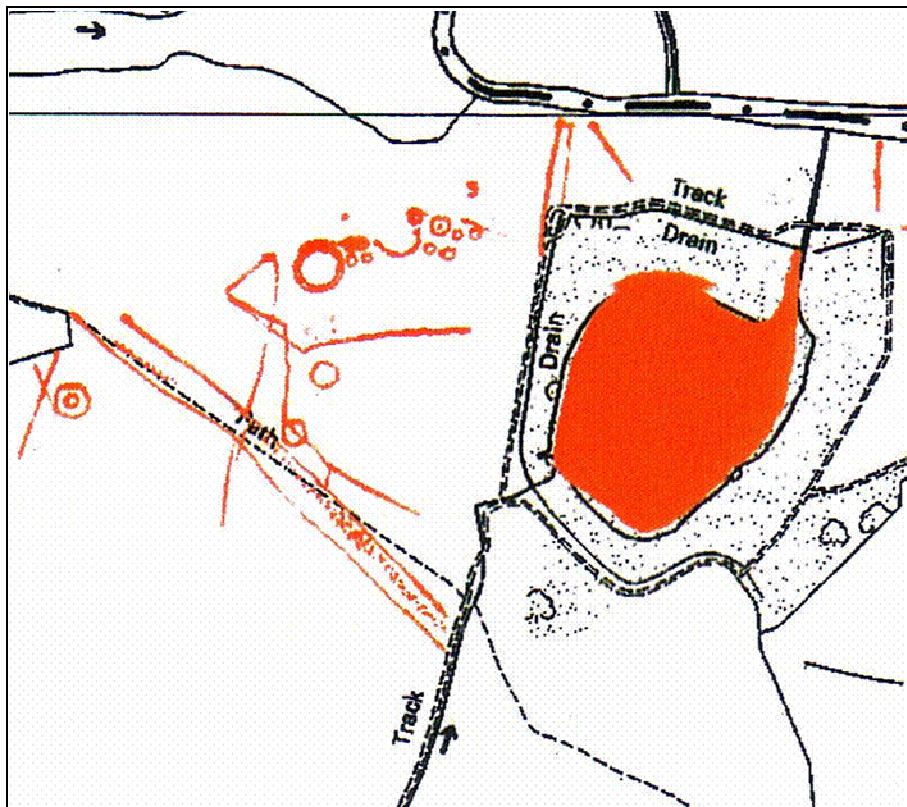


Fig 1. Metlands Cropmarks, showing The Mere. Copyright Essex County Council



Photograph: Ida McMaster CAGCAP TL923 327 Box01_Pres 2.24

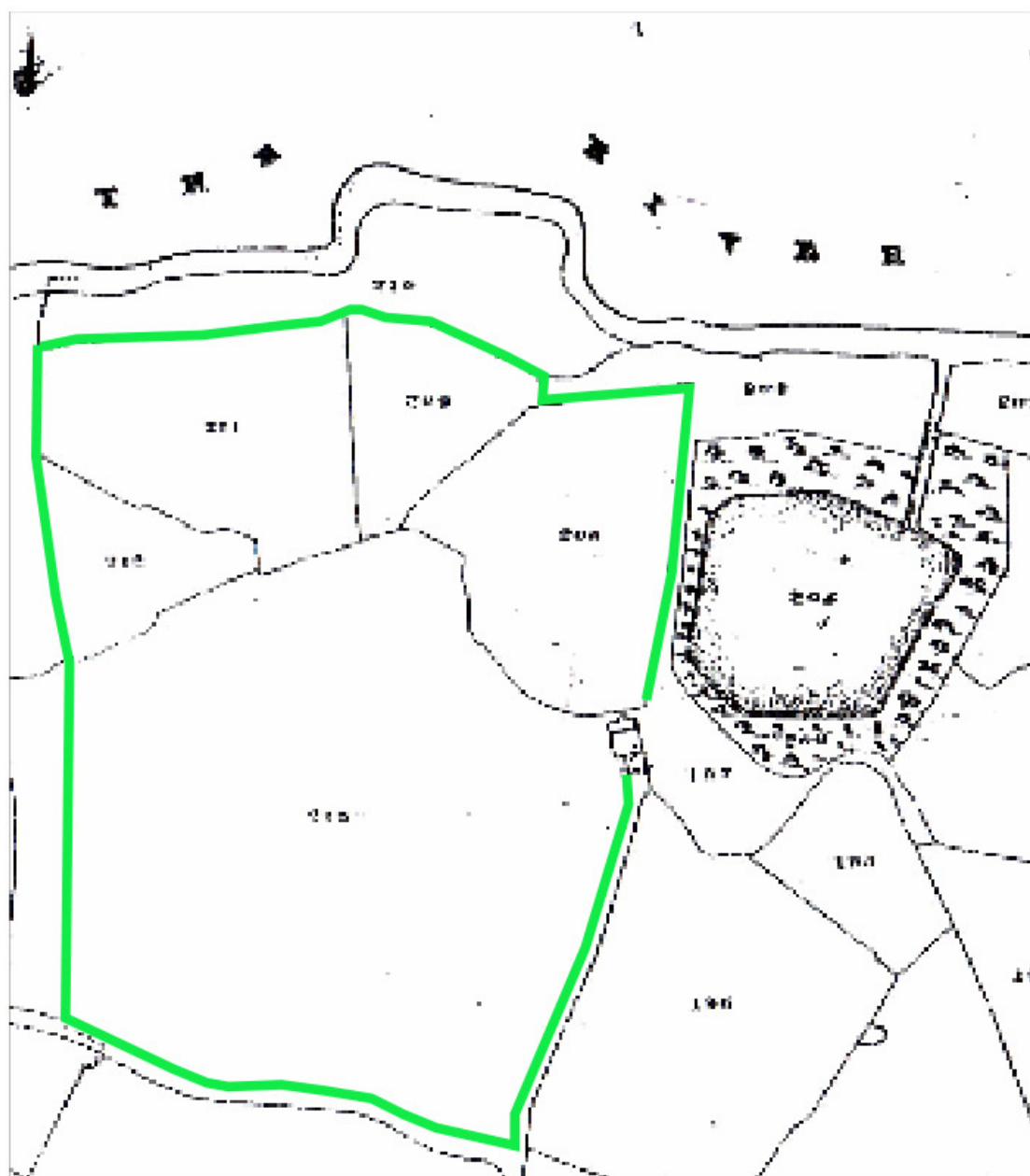


Fig 2. Tithe map 1838