

The intertidal archaeology of Monkey Beach  
Mersea Island, Essex  
Coastal and Intertidal Zone Archaeological Network Report  
September 2022



O.Hutchinson

Mersea Island  
Discovery Programme  
CITIZAN

The intertidal archaeology of Monkey Beach  
Mersea Island, Essex, TM 02631 12256  
Coastal and Intertidal Zone Archaeological Network (CITiZAN) Report

*Abstract*

*Between 2017 and 2020 the CITiZAN project has recorded and monitored the intertidal archaeology of the Monkey Beach at West Mersea, Essex. The shingle beach gives way to mudflats characterised by relatively soft, loose sediments in which several distinct areas contain pottery fragments from the Late Bronze Age, Roman, Saxon, Medieval and Post-Medieval periods. The fragments are all unstratified but there are examples of multiple sherds from the same vessels, particularly from the Roman period, which lack the abrasion or wear expected by exposure to tidal sea water, suggesting they are part of an in-situ but scattered assemblage. A raised area of firmer mud to the south of the site defines a concentration of Roman floor and hypocaust tile, with several fully intact examples of both. At the base of the shingle beach several small features comprising upright stakes, small brushwood scatters and rows of small posts were observed. To the east of the beach a fanned arrangement of square and rectangular pits extends to the south. No scientific dates have been obtained for the site.*

*A considerable amount of pottery and animal bone has been gathered by Mersea residents over the decades, some of which is housed in the Mersea Island Museum. Unfortunately, the context or location was not noted in detail and only rough estimations of its location can be provided. Expert analysis of sherds collected by CITiZAN volunteers was conducted by MOLA specialists Lynn Blackmore and Beth Richardson whose reports can be found in the appendices.*

*CITiZAN wishes to thank the volunteers who contributed to the ongoing survey of the Monkey Beach. Namely Mark and Jane Dixon, James Pullen, Carol Wyatt and John Pullen-Appleby. Thanks also to the Mersea Island Museum for access to their collections and supporting the CITiZAN project on Mersea Island.*

## Introduction

Mersea Island, Essex, is located at the mouth of the Blackwater and Colne estuaries (Fig. 1) 12 miles south of Colchester. The Monkey Beach site is located at TM 00822 12356 and accessed via a public beach, a five-minute walk from the nearby public car park. Access is possible year-round, but a low tide of at least 0.5mOD is helpful to observe all features described in this report.

The foreshore to the south and west of Mersea Island has been subject to significant coastal erosion since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with parts of the foreshore losing up to 1.5m depth of saltmarsh and sediment by the late 1950's (Frost 1979). Such dramatic loss is the main reason why so many archaeological features, sites and enigmas are visible on the great expanse of mudflats (c.8km<sup>2</sup>) revealed at low tide and stretching from Mersea Stone in the east all the way to the Monkey beach at the SW tip of Mersea Island.

The Monkey beach is located to the very western end of the island in a location subject to significant erosion and longshore drift over the last 70 years (Hutchinson et al. 2021). The features described

here were exposed pre 2016 but not knowingly recorded or surveyed until 2017 by CITiZAN volunteers.

The character of the foreshore is changeable throughout the year. When clear of storms the beach is made of softly sloping shingle giving way to a c.30m firm grey blue clay strip which then merges into a softer mud all the way to mean low water (MLW) line approximately 120m from the shore at the lowest tides. After storms or westerly winds, a layer of fine, silty mud is deposited across the site obscuring the view of the features described here.

The boundary of the site was defined by the extent of the pottery remains observed by volunteers. The site a boundary was established to encompass those areas with the greatest concentration of pottery. There are numerous archaeological features to the immediate east of the Monkey Beach site boundary that warrant further investigation but that were not prioritised by the project.

The site survey was produced using Leica Zeno Mobile and a GG04 antenna RTK survey kit. The aerial survey was conducted using a DJI Mavic II and the orthomosaic produced using Agisoft Photoscan.

## Background

The Monkey Beach site is well known locally for the pottery and animal bone sherds often exposed and embedded in the foreshore. The Mersea Island Museum has a collection of black burnished and Samian ware sherds that have been donated by local beach walkers over the years, but it is likely that private collections my house a significant amount of pottery from the site. The site has produced a considerable amount of pottery during the CITiZAN project between 2017 – 2021, much of it observed by locals and volunteers during regular trips to the site during that period.

The landscape of the Monkey Beach has changed considerably since antiquity. The Cobmarsh Island that lies opposite the beach was once connected to Mersea, likely creating a naturally protected harbour. Running directly up the beach from the modern channel is a relict channel (fig 3), identified on the ground by a considerably softer deposit into which a boot will sink up to 300mm. It is either side of this apparent relict watercourse that the majority of finds have been made. The proximity of the beach to a high-status complex of Roman buildings found directly beneath West Mersea church to the northeast is worthy of note. Although never excavated, tiled and mosaic floors were found to the east and west of the church tower some 150m from the Monkey Beach. Concentrations of Samian ware have also been found on the Cobmarsh island directly opposite the Monkey Beach and at similar elevations to those described in this report.

## Description of the features

The principle remains observed fall into four categories and are grouped thus; 1) a group of 20 pits in a fanned arrangement, 2) two sections of exposed wattle or brushwood 3) a timber structure comprising several upright timbers flanked to the north by a brushwood raft, possibly a walkway 4) assemblages of multi-period pottery and Ceramic Building Material (CBM). See fig 2 Site plan and fig 3 aerial survey for reference;

### 1. Group of pits

A group of 20 pits of various dimensions forming rectangles and squares with two alignments running north to south and a group of larger, less orderly arranged pits to the east. All are cut into blue grey clay. A small archaeological intervention in the corner of one of the western pits revealed an unstratified, soft mud and shingle fill to a depth of c.300mm before bottoming out on a firm clay base. The spaces between each pit north to south are regular at about 500mm. The feature disappears beneath the shingle beach to north.

### 2. Exposed stakes, wattle and brushwood

At the interface between the shingle beach and open foreshore, a linear alignment of 5 small upright roundwood stakes with wattle woven between was observed measuring 6m in length. Stakes c.30mm diameter. Wattle presumably hazel. The feature disappeared beneath the shingle beach to the north. To the south a brushwood feature was observed consisting of fine twigs and some larger poles interlaced running north to south. The scatter did not appear natural, rather a laid raft of brushwood.

### 3. Timber structure and wattle trackway

Two parallel rows of square section timber uprights (fig 4) on an east west alignment spaced 4m apart. The northern row contains seven vertically set piles average 120mm square, two set immediately adjacent to each other 2m from a row of five which are uniformly spaced 300mm apart. A brushwood raft abuts the row on the northern side. Large poles surround smaller brush forming n apparent track heading north towards the shingle beach 5m.

The southern row comprises nine piles, six in the round. Irregularly spaced and set at various angles. Three outlying, slightly larger piles were observed immediately to the south. The piles are set into grey clay to an unknown depth, but evidence of a worked tip was observed on a pile in the northern row. Both rows show signs of significant erosion and stand between 300mm and 1m in height.

### 4. Pottery and CBM assemblages

Three areas of concentrated pottery sherds were observed on the foreshore (fig. 3). A range of sherds, primarily Roman and Medieval were observed either laying unstratified on the foreshore or partially exposed and set into the surface in a blue grey clay. The assemblages are located along the edge of what appears to be a relict watercourse/channel leading from the modern channel and terminating at the southern edge of feature 3. Barnacle growth on sherds set into the foreshore

indicated relatively recent exposure, perhaps 12 months, and those recovered were relatively unabraded or water worn, suggesting they were found in situ.

The Roman pottery consisted of a mix of jars, bowls and dishes, primarily black burnished ware with a few sherds of Samian ware. The Medieval sherds were primarily from cooking vessels. A detailed assessment of the pottery can be found in the appendices of this report.

An area of scattered Roman floor and hypocaust tile, with some intact examples of both, was observed on a slightly raised patch of ground to the west of the proposed relict channel.

## Interpretation of features and discussion

On the basis of survey and select interventions, an assumed former geography of the area and without any scientific dating of features, the remains appear indicative of a possible quay or harbour protected in former a natural bay. Feature 3 could be the foundations of a quay front, albeit it a somewhat crude one, located as it is at the head of a former channel. The southern row of posts in feature 3 may represent a later (and repaired) quay front built to access a water line lower than that of the earlier (possibly Roman based on the significantly more precise alignment) northern row. The geography of the area, connected as it likely was to the Cobmarsh island, would have created a good natural, sheltered harbour in which to moor boats and unload cargo.

The presence of so many pottery sherds that appear to be unworn or unused may represent a cargo that was lost overboard at a quay or dock during unloading, sinking to the bottom of the channel and lost in the mud. The variety of sherds also hint at the import of fine and functional wares, both Roman and Medieval.

The slightly raised ground to the east and west of the channel may present banks along the channel on which a building may once have stood, now represented by the scatter of Roman CBM. Perhaps a small building to serve the harbour and located at its mouth, the presence of several hypocaust tiles with little sign of waterworn erosion so far from the modern shoreline suggests that this is not a redeposition. The fragments of CBM are scattered over a relatively confined area with several floor tiles and fragments of hypocaust tile set into the foreshore rather than resting above it, again hinting at a collapsed structure of some kind.

The proximity of the large complex of high-status Roman building beneath and adjacent to West Mersea church is likely significant. If the archaeological evidence on the Monkey beach represented the remnants of a harbour, then the raised ground to the northeast where the supposed villa was situated would make an ideal position to oversee such an operation. Logistically, Mersea may have made for an ideal landing point for larger cargo vessels from the continent on their way to Colchester where contemporary sea levels did not permit their sailing all the way up the Colne. Mersea Island Museum proudly displays an intact amphora that was hauled up in the nets of fishermen in the Blackwater off Mersea Island, perhaps from a wreck, but likely bound for Colchester via a suitable, deeper water harbour closer to the mouth of the estuary.

Feature group 1 stands alone from this interpretation. The varying sizes of the 20 (likely more) pits may be the remains of tanks for fresh or salt water in which to grow oysters or other shellfish. They may also be clay pits from which material was extracted for use locally. Similar sized and uniformly arranged pits have been observed by CITiZAN volunteers at other locations along the island's foreshore where it has been suggested that they provided material for early sea walls, another possible function of the pits at Monkey Beach. Further investigation and small scale excavation of the pits are recommended as a future course of action.

# Figures



Figure 1: Location of Mersea Island and Monkey Beach site

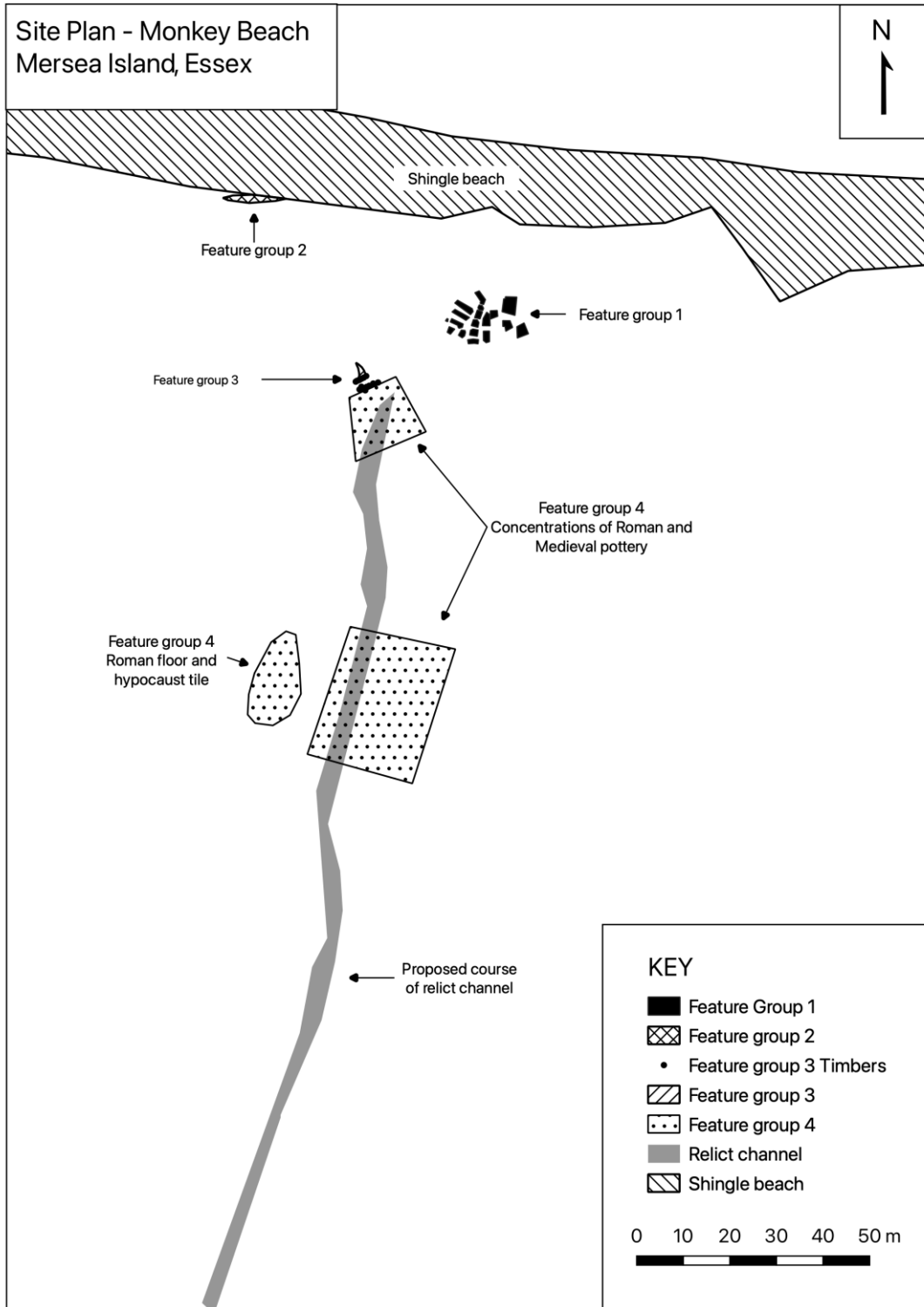


Figure 2: Site plan



Aerial Survey of Monkey Beach  
Mersea Island, Essex  
March 2017  
Courtesy James Pullen



Figure 3: Aerial survey of Monkey Beach site



# Appendix A

## The Roman pottery from Monkey Beach, Mersea (CMB-EX-17)

*Beth Richardson*

A quantity of Roman pottery was recovered from around the remains of a wooden structure on the Monkey Beach at Mersea Island, Essex. The assemblage totals 71 sherds from 37 vessels (weight 4060 gms). The sherds are in large and in fresh condition (generally unabraded or water-rolled) with joining pieces making up several profiles or near-profiles of jars, bowls and dishes. Although technically unstratified they are clearly part of a homogenous although scattered assemblage. The pottery is virtually all mid to 3rd-century in date, with one or two earlier 1st-2nd-century sherds.

The majority of vessels are locally-made Essex (Colchester) black-burnished ware 2 jars and bowls or Essex or North Kent reduced (grey) sand-tempered jars with high clearly defined shoulders and rounded or slightly squared rims (Camulodunum Type 267). Very similar jars of this type were made in similar sand-tempered fabrics of varying coarseness fabrics both in the Colchester area and on the easily accessible North Kent coastal sites such as Cooling and Upchurch in the 2nd-, 3rd- and 4th-centuries (eg Monaghan 1987, 94–100). These locally made vessels make up a very high percentage of the Monkey Beach assemblage (81% sherd count, 68% weight). The black-burnished 2 wares (BB2) are mainly from undecorated bowls with triangular rims (MOLA form 4H5, dated 160–300) or a similar form decorated with vertical burnished lines (4H), with jar sherds restricted to two everted BB2 rim sherds. One jar base, possibly (on fabric criteria) a BB2 product, has been pierced after its manufacture several times on the base and lower body, converting it into a sieve (cf Symonds and Wade 1999, 416–7, Fig 6.82, 806–9)

Other Romano-British wares consist of a large part of an East Dorset black-burnished ware 1 (BB1) dish decorated with burnished intersecting arcs (a form/fabric combination conventionally dated later than AD 250), the upper part of a BB1 jar (lacking its rim) and a body sherd from an Oxford white ware mortarium (dated AD 240+). Imports (5.6% sherd count, 8.5% weight) include a large part of a central Gaulish Dragendorff 38 flanged bowl (AD 150–250), an unsourced but imported (probably East Gaulish) short-necked globular beaker with a small area of barbotine decoration (AD 200–400) and the rim/shoulder from a 3rd-century North Gaulish grey ware beaker decorated with *bandes lustrées* (burnished line decoration). The North Gaulish beaker is a rare import, recorded in some quantity with other North Gaulish wares for example in a large London wharf assemblage (Richardson in Miller, Scofield and Rhodes 1986, 106–7, 1.31–42).

Most vessels in this assemblage appear un-sooted and un-worn from use with only the mortarium obviously worn, although the jar/sieve was probably adapted with pierced holes by its owner rather than its manufacturer. This and the fact that they are broken into large pieces with many joining sherds suggest that most may be in situ, possibly broken on in transit and from a landing stage or small jetty. It is however also possible – if there has been recent erosion - that they are from an inland site, such as a villa.

## Bibliography

Monaghan, J 1987 Upchurch and Thameside Roman Pottery, BAR British Series 173

Miller, L, Schofield, J& Rhodes, M 1986, The Roman Quay at St Magnus House, London, LAMAS Special Paper No. 8

Symonds, R P & Wade, S Colchester Archaeological Report 10 Roman Pottery from Excavations in Colchester 197–86, Colchester Archaeological Trust and English Heritage

## Appendix B

# The prehistoric, Saxon and medieval pottery from Monkey Beach, Mersea Island, Essex (CMB-EX-17)

Lyn Blackmore

## Introduction

A small mixed assemblage of unstratified pottery was recovered from field walking on this site. Most sherds are of medium size (max 16 x 10mm and 15 x 15mm); condition is relatively fresh but most sherds have barnacles showing immersion under sea water. The sherds were examined macroscopically and using a binocular microscope (x 20) where appropriate, and recorded on the MOLA Oracle database using standard MOLA codes for fabrics, forms and decoration; the numerical data comprises sherd count, estimated number of vessels and weight. Equivalent Essex codes are suggested for the medieval wares, based on the descriptions by Cotter (2000).

## Prehistoric

The one prehistoric (2 ENV, 4g) has a fine silty matrix with sparse fine quartz sand, abundant fine flint inclusions (c 0.1mm to 0.3m) with scattered larger inclusions up to 3mm across. The sherd is from the upper body of a Late Bronze Age shouldered jar with finger impressions around the shoulder, and inverted neck/rim (Gibson 2002, 112–5, figs 54.2, 55.3). Insufficient of the rim survives to tell if it too was decorated. This vessel probably dates to the period 1000–800 BC.

## Saxon

One sherd is from a large jar or spouted pitcher with stamped decoration made in the fine variant of Ipswich ware (IPSF). The industry is thought to have started in the 8th century AD, probably c AD 725–30 and continued into the mid 9th century AD (Blackmore 2003, 234; 2012, 237; Blinkhorn 2012, 3–8). It was the first in England to use a turntable or wheel, and to fire in permanent kilns. The decoration on this sherd comprises two rows of gridded rectangles, probably made with a wooden die, angled obliquely to form elongated lozenges. Each has four along the short axis and five along the long one, although the fifth tapers from a rectangle at the bottom to a triangle at the top. The closest parallels in the Ipswich corpus is SG11, but SG4 is also similar (ibid, 56–64); the possible symbolism or social meaning of such stamps is discussed by Blinkhorn (ibid, 64–8).

## The medieval pottery

Thirteen sherds of medieval pottery were recovered, which are from nine vessels (749g). The earliest comprise two handmade cooking with long-necked beaded in a coarse sandy ware provisionally recorded as EMS (Essex fabric 13; Cotter 2000, 39–40); the rims forms equate with Essex type A4 and suggest a later 11th- to mid/late 12th-century date for these vessels (ibid, 50, fig 29). Another cooking pot with flat-topped rim (ibid, type B2) in the same fabric probably dates to the 12th century, possibly after 1140. Of similar date is a base/body sherd in a fine sand-and-shell-tempered

ware, recorded as SSW (Essex fabric 12c; *ibid*, 36). The other fabric include two sherds, one oxidised, the other reduced, which have been recorded as medieval Harlow ware to distinguish them from the other fabrics; as this ware does not seem to occur in Colchester, however, they probably belong to fabric group 13.

The other sherds are from wheel-thrown jugs. Of these, a jug base with single thumb impressions at intervals around the angle and a decorated body sherd have been recorded as EXCS, an umbrella code which equates with the Essex group of medieval sandy greywares (fabric 20; Cotter 2000, 91–107). These jugs are, however, not fully reduced and both have quite fine sandy bodies. The body sherd could in fact be a sandy variant of Heddingham ware (Essex fabric 22; *ibid*, 76) as the decoration, a sgraffito band of three combed wavy lines on band of white slip, flanked by grouped horizontal lines, is more similar to the 12th- to 11th-century products of that industry than the plainer jugs made in fabric 20. Also present is a jug base which could be from an early rounded jug made in London (LOND EAS) and dating to 1140–1200 (Essex fabric 36; Cotter 002, 72–4);

### The post-medieval pottery

Two sherds are of probably of 19th-century date. One is from a teapot with a long spout in black-glazed ware, while the other is from the base of a bowl or dish in yellow ware, which dates to after 1820.

### Bibliography

Blackmore, L, 2003a The pottery, in Malcolm and Bowsher 2003, 225–41

Blackmore, L, 2012d The pottery, in Cowie and Blackmore 2012, 226–56

Blinkhorn, P, 2012 *The Ipswich ware project. Ceramics, trade and society in Middle Saxon England*, Medieval pottery Research Group Occ Pap 7, Dorchester

Cotter, J, 2000 *Post-Roman pottery from excavations in Colchester, 1971–85*, Colchester Archaeol Rep 7, Colchester

Cowie, R, and Blackmore, L, with Davis, A, Keily, J, and Rielly, K, 2012, *Lundenwic: excavations in Middle Saxon London, 1987–2000*, MOLA Monogr Ser 63, London

Gibson, A, 2002 *Prehistoric Pottery in Britain and Ireland*, Stroud

Malcolm, G, and Bowsher, D, with Cowie, R, 2003 *Middle Saxon London: excavations at the Royal Opera House 1989–99*, MoLAS Monogr Ser 15, London

## References

Frost, M. 1974: *Boadicea CK 213*, Troubador Publishing

Heppell, EM (2011) Saxon fishtraps in the Blackwater Estuary, Essex: monitoring survey at Collins Creek, Pewet Island and the Nass, 2003-2007. *Essex Archaeology and History (Fourth Series)* 2:76-97

Hutchinson, O. Newman, D & Northall, N. 2021 *Changing Minds, Changing Coasts: 100 years of coastal change on Mersea Island, Essex*

[https://citizan.org.uk/media/medialibrary/2021/11/CMCC\\_NERC\\_Paper\\_V3.pdf](https://citizan.org.uk/media/medialibrary/2021/11/CMCC_NERC_Paper_V3.pdf)