

LOCAL GEOLOGICAL SITES

CHELMSFORD DISTRICT

ChG11 South Woodham Ferrers Foreshore

Site location: Foreshore on the north bank of the river Crouch.

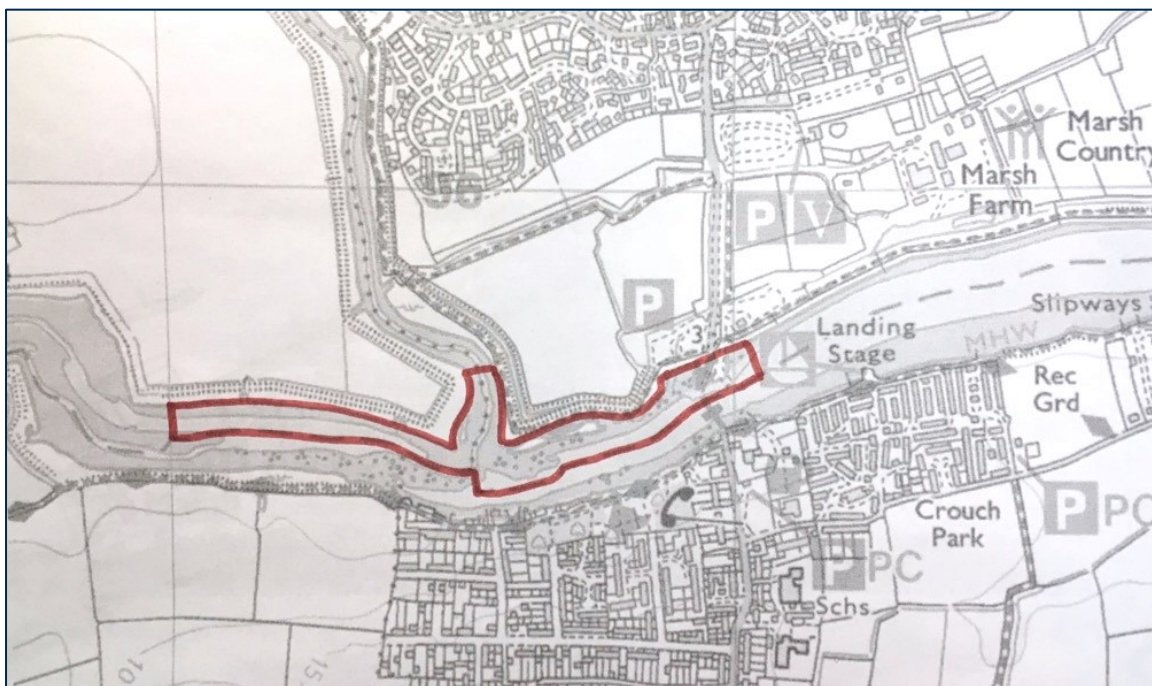
Grid reference: TQ 804 955

Status: Accessible at low tide

Summary of the geological interest:

River erosion at several places around the Essex coast has exposed evidence of human occupation dating from the Mesolithic Period. These settlements are now below high tide level and the most important of these is at Hullbridge/South Woodham Ferrers where a prehistoric land surface, possibly as much as 7,000 years old, is exposed on the foreshore of the River Crouch. The site then lay well inland and the abundance of flint flakes and blades suggests that this was a 'base camp' to exploit the wildlife of the then-existing North Sea lowlands.

The foreshore here is therefore an important site with many fine sections of recent alluvial deposits, resting on London Clay, beautifully exposed and constantly being eroded. The sites can only be examined at low tide and extreme care should be taken to avoid getting stuck in the intertidal mud.



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Site Assessment. Local Geological Sites (LoGS) in Essex are assessed using criteria based on DEFRA guidance. An assessment form is used which asks key questions under four value categories: scientific, educational, historical and aesthetic. This site has been assessed and qualifies under these criteria.

Scientific interest and site importance

About 10,000 years ago, at the end of the last glacial stage (the Devensian), large areas of the North Sea basin were dry land and human hunter-gatherers migrated to Britain as the climate improved. The ice sheets were rapidly melting around the world and raising sea level by as much as 2 metres (6 feet) per century, finally breaching the Straits of Dover and isolating Britain from the rest of the continent. The period from the end of the last glacial stage to about 5,000 years ago is called the Mesolithic or Middle Stone Age and during this time hunter-gatherers spread into Essex and occupied sites that are now well below present sea level.

River erosion at several places around the coast has exposed evidence of these settlements below high tide level and the most important of these is on the foreshore of the River Crouch at where a prehistoric land surface, possibly as much as 7,000 years old, is exposed. The site is on the north bank of the river near South Woodham Ferrers (Chelmsford District) and on the south bank near Hullbridge (Rochford District). The site then lay well inland, adjacent to a freshwater river, and the abundance of flint flakes and blades suggests that this was a 'base camp' to exploit the wildlife of the then-existing North Sea lowlands.

The main location for the flint working site on the north bank extends from the mouth of Fenn Creek eastwards for about 400 metres. Banks of gravel can sometimes be seen in the bed of the river either side of Fenn Creek, especially on the west side.

History of research

Mr. William Henry Rand apparently first explored this site in the early 1900s. Later collectors included F.N. Haward, A. Wright, and the famous Essex prehistorian S.H. Warren who, with F.W. Reader, published papers on the site in the *Essex Naturalist* in 1911.

In the late 1970s Stephen Vincent and Bill George collected from the site and published a short account of it in their pamphlet entitled *Some Mesolithic Sites along the Rivers Blackwater and Crouch, Essex* which appeared in 1980. This aroused considerable interest in the site which culminated in the publication, by the Essex County Council in 1995, of Messrs. Wilkinson and Murphy's *Archaeology of the Essex Coast, Volume 1: The Hullbridge Survey*. This fascinating work, which dated many of the deposits and examined the environmental evidence from the Holocene deposits, greatly influenced the appearance of *England's Coastal Heritage: A survey for English Heritage and the RCHME* in 1997.

References

GEORGE, W.H. and VINCENT, S. 1980. *Some Mesolithic Sites along the Rivers Blackwater and Crouch*, Essex. Privately published.

WILKINSON, T.J. and MURPHY, P.L. 1995. *The Archaeology of the Essex Coast, Volume 1: The Hullbridge Survey. East Anglian Archaeology Report No.71*. Essex County Council. Pages 90-100.



A photograph of the bed of the River Crouch at Hullbridge taken before the First World War (from Warren's 1911 paper in the 'Essex Naturalist').

Photo © Essex Field Club