

The Romano-British Villa and Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Eccles, Kent

A summary of the excavations by
Alec Detsicas with a consideration of the
archaeological, historical
and linguistic context

Nick Stoodley and Stephen R. Cosh

with contributions by
Jillian Hawkins and Courtney Konshuh



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Cover: A reconstruction of the Eccles Roman villa by Stephen R. Cosh and a pair of shears from the Anglo-Saxon cemetery.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Nick Stoodley

Aylesford, Eccles and the Medway Valley

The village of Eccles, Kent, is situated in the lower Medway valley on the river's east bank. It lies on the edge of the North Downs, in the fertile strip of the Holmesdale. Eccles is part of the parish of Aylesford, lying 1.5km north of the village's centre and the same distance east of the river (Figure 1.1). The village is surrounded by arable farmland, and a reservoir is located a short distance to the north west. Burham parish is to the north of Eccles, and on the opposing bank of the Medway, are the parishes of Snodland and East Malling.

The earliest known mention of the place-name Eccles is in the regulations for the repair of the bridge at Rochester, AD c. 975, of *æclesse*. In Domesday Book it is given as *Aiglessa*, *Eclesse* from 1166 and from 1208 Eccles (Cameron 1977: 1) (see below pp204-205). Listed as a manor in 1086, Eccles declined in importance, but the name must have continued locally, as on the Fryars estate plan of 1700 (Figure 1.2) 'Eccles Field' and several other 'Eccles' places are marked. The modern village of Eccles dates to the mid-19th century when the famous Victorian builder Thomas Cubitt erected a brick and cement works at Burham (Hann 2009: 111). The owner of Rowe Place Farm, Thomas Abbott, established a small housing development (Eccles Row) a short distance to the north of his farm for Cubitt's workers (first shown on the Ordnance Survey County Series for Kent, 1868-1876). It was subsequently enlarged during the latter part of the century (Hann 2009: 111) (Ordnance Survey County Series for Kent, 1896), and the newly created village was called Eccles. Burham brick and cement works was responsible for supplying bricks to developments in London and elsewhere in southern England (Hann 2009: 111). However, the exploitation of the area's natural resources for construction projects was nothing new. In particular, the upper Medway valley had had an important role in supplying London with building material from the earliest Roman period onwards (Detsicas 1983: 169; Elliot 2017: 108-119).

The modern settlement of Eccles is situated over a varied geology. The north half of the village overlies chalk of the West Melbury Marly Formation, the southern half is over Mudstone (Gault Formation) (Geology of Britain viewer: <http://mapapps.bgs.ac.uk/geologyofbritain/home.html>). The village and much of the surrounding

area, especially to the east is covered with Head (clay, silt, sand and gravel) deposits, although to the south River Terrace deposits are found. Most of the soil cover is of a freely draining lime-rich loamy soil (Soilscape 5, see Soilscape viewer: <http://www.landis.org.uk/soilscape/>, and Table 4.9 for key), which is suitable for arable farming, especially the production of spring- and autumn-sown cereals and other crops, including grass. The western part of the village is closer to the river and consequently extends over a lower-lying area, one that is characterised by slightly acid, but base-rich loamy and clayey soils which are slowly permeable and seasonally wet. With impeded drainage and moderate fertility (Soilscape 18), it is more suited to supporting livestock, with grass and cereals cultivated for feed. The area, therefore, exploits a range of natural resources, and it is no surprise that before Eccles' development in the 19th century it was devoted to agriculture.

In earlier times the Medway would have run closer to Eccles, but the industrialisation of the valley resulted in changes to the landscape around the village, especially to the course of the river. In response to increased silting, embankments were created to the north of Aylesford to help prevent the flooding of riverside meadows (Hann 2009: 5). And at New Hythe, where the river straightens, the marshy inlets which can still be seen today resulted from excavations to improve the flow of the river channel (Hann 2009: 5).

Along with the Darent and Stour, the Medway is one of the major rivers of Kent, the source of which is found in the High Weald. It then flows northwards passing through Maidstone, Aylesford and Rochester before emptying into the Thames at Sheerness. Since prehistory it has afforded an important route into this part of Kent, not least because it linked the interior of Kent with the Thames coastline. The name of *Hadlow Stair* or '*hithe*', recorded for the first time in 1327, suggests that the Medway was originally navigable almost to Tonbridge (Everitt 1986: 72). The main crossing over the river is marked by the possible oppidum and later Roman town, at Rochester. As the place-name indicates, there was a ford at Aylesford; it has been suggested that the Norman castle was located here to defend the crossing (Kent HER, See TQ 75 NW 24), which was a short distance above the later bridge and paved with heavy stones (Kent HER: TQ 75 NW 26). The river could also be crossed at Snodland, Halling and Cuxton (Bright 2010).

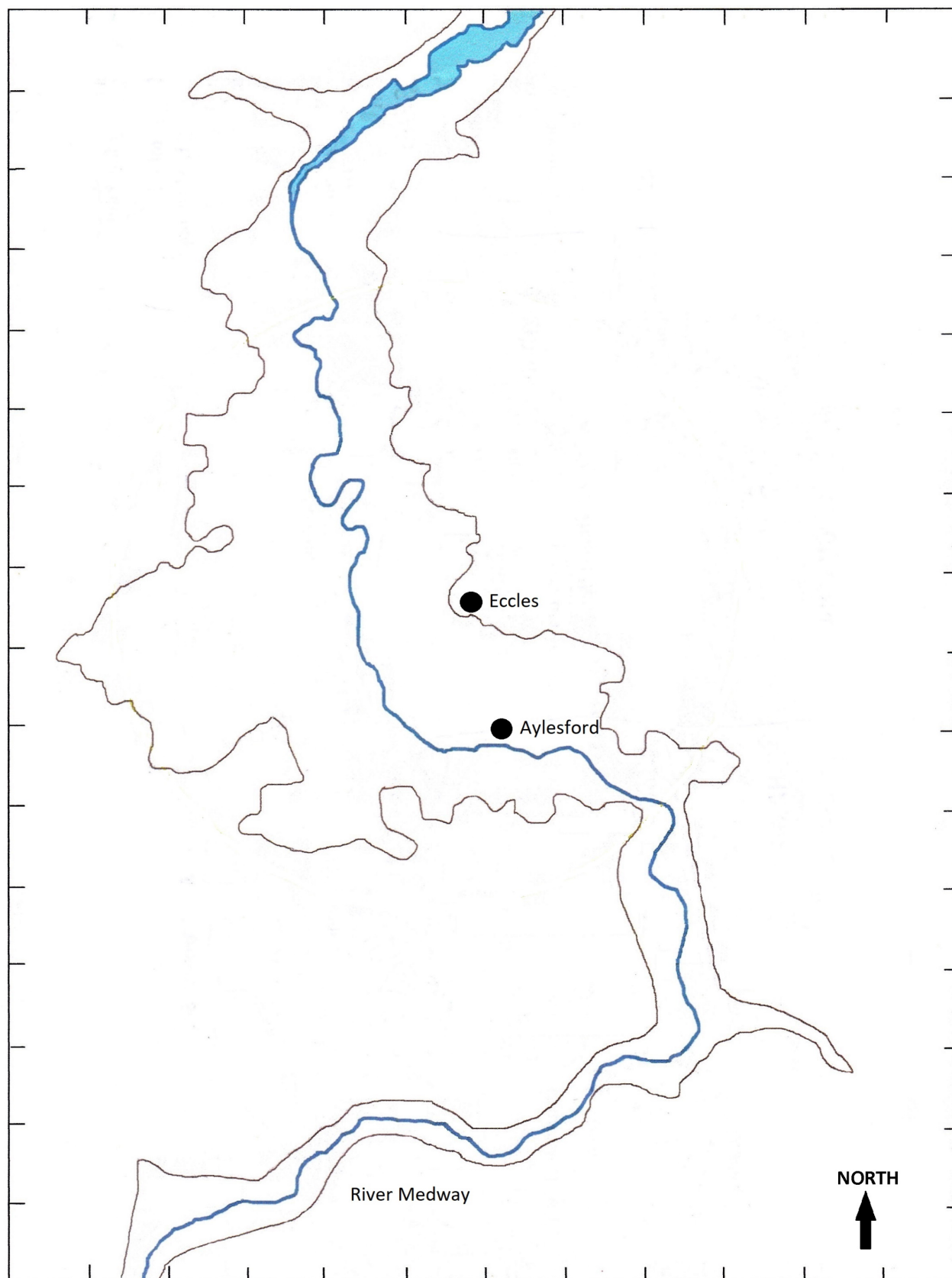


Figure 1.1. Location of Eccles in the Medway Valley (divisions are 1km).



Figure 1.2. Part of the Fryars estate plan as surveyed in 1700, showing Eccles field names: Field 17 'Eccles Wood'; 18 'Little Eccles Meadow'; 19 'Great Eccles Meadow'; 20 'Eccles Pond Meadow'; 21 'Eccles Field', the site of the Eccles Roman villa.

"An exact mapp of land belonging to the place called The Fryars in Aylesford in Kent being formerly the estate of Sir John Banks...with an account what land is now in occupation with the Fryars and what is now letten with Roe Place (alias Parkhouse) with a true designation." Reproduced by kind permission of Father Francis Kemsley, The Friars, Aylesford.

Undoubtedly the river was an important routeway permitting access along the valley and southwards to the Weald, but roads and tracks also facilitated the movement of people. Prior to the Romans, the valley could be reached by either the North Downs trackway or Pilgrim's Way, and a network of local trackways also criss-crossed the valley. Running almost parallel to the North Down trackway, but on the crest of the Downs, was an earlier ridgeway (Margary 1951); the choice of route probably dictated by the weather and conditions under foot (Bright 2010: 4-5). Two major Roman roads served the valley. Watling Street crossed the Medway at Rochester on a bridge, and about 2km to the east of the centre of Eccles is the modern A229, which follows the line of the Roman road (Margary 13) from Rochester to Hastings. Plus, there would have been minor roads and trackways linking estates and settlements with the wider transport network.

Given the fertile land and choice of communication routes, it is no surprise that the area around Eccles is rich in archaeological sites. About 1.5km east of the centre

of the village are the chambered long barrows known as Kit's Coty House and Little Kit's Coty House, which are part of a larger group of Neolithic monuments clustered within the Medway valley. In 1886 the famous La Tène Iron Age cemetery was discovered a short distance to the north west of Aylesford. By late prehistory, and certainly Roman times, the Medway valley contained numerous agricultural settlements, ranging from simple farmsteads to palatial villas. In addition to the large and important villa at Eccles, other Roman remains have been discovered at Snodland, Burham and at a location between Wouldham and Burham. They are nestled between the Roman road to the east and the Medway to the west. There is also an important group of villas in the Maidstone area. By early Anglo-Saxon times, Kent was split between the kingdoms of East and West Kent, with Eccles lying on the western extremity of the former. As a dividing line between the two territories, the Medway valley must have had political and military significance. The two kingdoms were joined, probably in the later 6th or earlier 7th century, uniting the once opposing frontier lands.

The Lower Medway Archaeological Research Group and the investigation of Eccles

The Lower Medway Archaeological Research Group was founded in 1961 to promote archaeological research and publication around the Medway valley and towns. The group was involved in a variety of projects, including area surveys, prehistoric field systems, medieval houses and other buildings, watching briefs and excavations of Romano-British sites, such as the rescue dig at Snodland and investigations at Rochester (Ocock 1965). The group commenced the excavation at Rowe Place Farm, Eccles in 1962 but responsibility was later passed to the independent Eccles Excavation Committee, ending in 1976. The work was carried out by volunteers and financed by grants and public donations. The Group was wound up in 2016.

The excavations

(Stephen R. Cosh and Nick Stoodley)

The Roman villa at Rowe Place Farm, Eccles, is located south west of the village, 0.75km east of the river Medway (TQ 722605). Roman artefacts and structures were encountered at the site at least twice during the 19th century. Yet it was not until 1961 that aerial photography by Michael Ocock (2006) revealed the cropmarks of what appeared to be a large villa. Later in that year, trial trenching by the Lower Medway Archaeological Research Group confirmed the presence of a Roman villa. Excavations took place over the next 15 years under the auspices of the Eccles Excavation committee, directed by Mr (later Dr) Alec Detsicas. The main house proved to be exceptionally large and included two detached wings, linked to the main building by corridors; between them lay a long pool, rectangular in plan. The archaeology was very complex to the north where three successive bath-houses were superimposed, each with multiple phases. The villa had a long history, having been established within a few years of the Claudian conquest; occupation continued to the late fourth century and perhaps beyond.

Right from the outset of the excavation, human burials were encountered within the villa. The remains of at least four inhumation burials, believed to post-date the main period of Roman occupation, were found to the north of the main house and in the baths. In 1970, two burials were found in the fill of a ditch to the north of Rooms 118 and 121, and several were also uncovered over the walls of these rooms. In the same year, excavation revealed further burials immediately south and east of Room 121, and it was clear that a large post-Roman cemetery had been discovered (Figure 1.3). Some interments were found at subsoil depth, but two lower layers of burials were also encountered (Detsicas 1971: 32-2, fig. 1). Over the following years the investigation of the cemetery continued, again revealing three

layers of burials, in addition to recovering numerous disarticulated bones (Detsicas 1972-74). Compared to the detail provided for the Roman phases, only brief summaries of the cemetery were included in Detsicas' interims. The most thorough account was published by Rachel Shaw, in 1994, which contains cemetery plans, a burial catalogue and a relatively detailed discussion of the burials from each area of the excavation.

The site was excavated using the box-grid system of eight-foot (2.44m) square trenches separated by two-foot (0.61m) baulks, which were sometimes removed allowing trenches to be extended. This was especially the case in the complex baths area, but the trenches were more spaced out over the house itself where unexcavated walling could be inferred more easily. Unfortunately, medieval disturbance led to much destruction of the site, and because the remains lie close to the surface ploughing has removed later Roman stratification, often to below floor level. Recording was by way of day books with the drawn record consisting of plans and sections, supported by photographs.

The box-grid method was also employed in the investigation of the cemetery. The trenches occasionally resulted in the partial excavation of burials, the foot or head end remaining unexcavated. Moreover, where the concentration of burials was particularly heavy, it often proved difficult to trace the remains of an individual through a baulk. The baulks were eventually removed, and the cemetery was treated as a single open area (Shaw 1994: 166). Other problems were caused by the aforementioned disturbance to the site. The uppermost layer of burials was particularly affected, and this made it very hard to discern grave outlines in the dark soil.

Post-excavation

Over 40 years have passed since the excavations at Eccles were brought to a close, but it has yet to benefit from full publication. Post-excavation work, aided by grants awarded by the Kent Archaeological Society, began in earnest after Detsicas' retirement in 1986. Many of the specialist reports were commissioned, in addition to the drawing of the small finds. At the time of writing, less than half the reports are complete, the remainder are recorded as 'not received' or 'partially finished' (copies of the completed reports are in the archive). Shortly before his death in 1999, Detsicas arranged for the finds to be taken to Canterbury Archaeological Trust where they were catalogued and their conservation requirements assessed (Ocock 2006: 3). This was only intended to be a temporary arrangement. Detsicas also approached John Williams (the then Kent County Archaeologist) and Peter Kendell (English Heritage) regarding the publication of the site (Ocock pers. comm.); along with Paul Bennett (Canterbury Archaeological Trust) they investigated funding

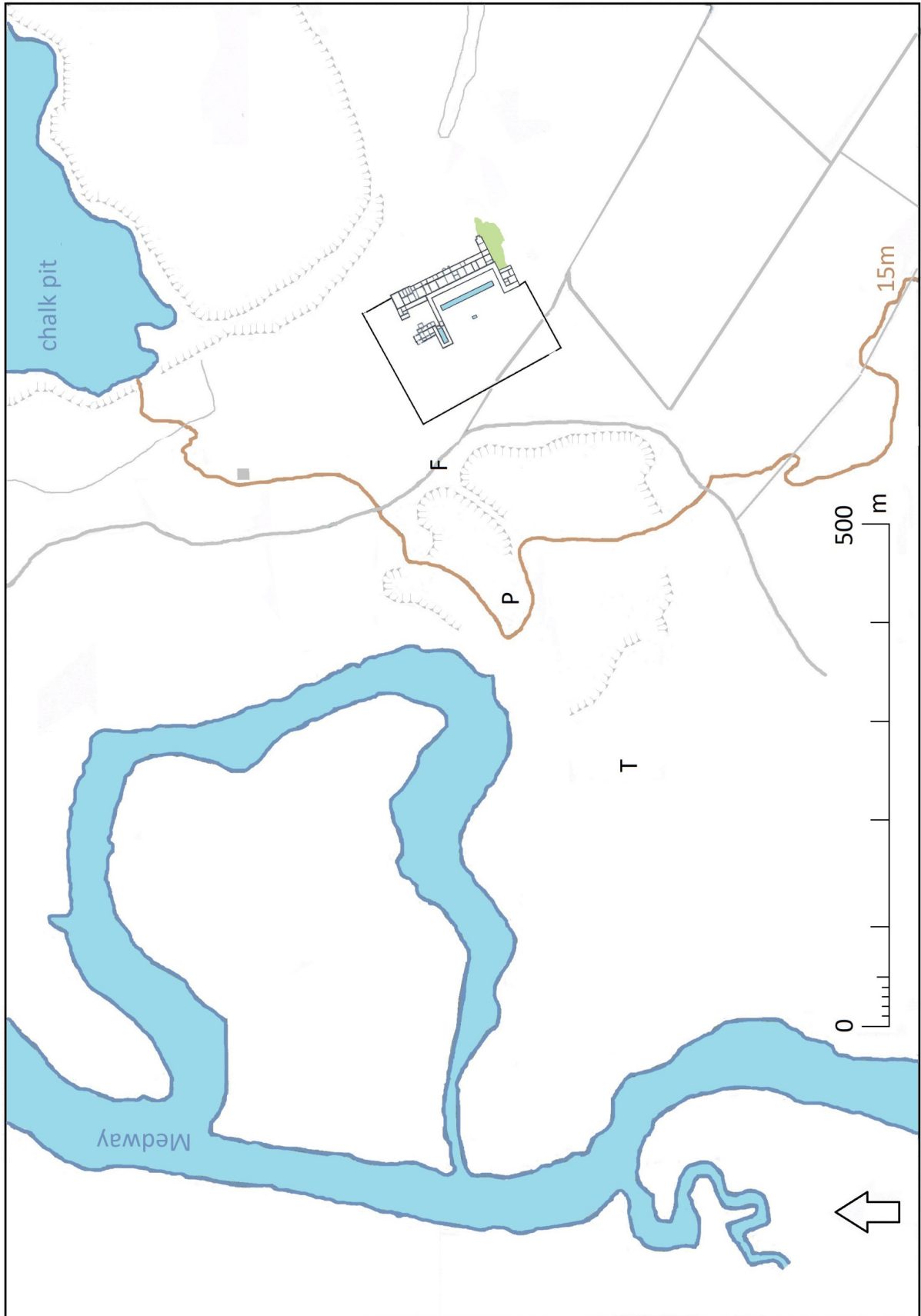


Figure 1.3. The location of the villa, pottery (P), tilerly (T), possible foundations noted in 2015 (F), and the area of the Anglo-Saxon cemetery (shaded in green) at Rowe Place Farm, Eccles.

opportunities. No grants were secured, and subsequently the large sums of money required to publish the work prevented its publication. Despite this setback, minor post-excavation tasks have been undertaken at the Trust, such as organising the photographic and paper archive, cataloguing the finds, and along with Rachel Shaw, the day books have been converted into context records. The Trust continues to curate the material archive and will do so until a permanent home can be found for it. The paper and photographic archive is held by Rachel Shaw. From an analysis of the records, she has produced a database of contexts and finds and has created a site-wide matrix (Shaw 1994: 167).

Recent fieldwork

In 1996 a geophysical survey was carried out at the site to explore its wider environs (Figure 2.3). One aim was to survey the area to the north of the villa, to try to trace the Iron Age site northwards. A series of ditch-like anomalies were detected and have been interpreted as belonging to the prehistoric site. Another aim was to discover whether any of the Anglo-Saxon cemetery remains unexcavated. This was less successful, but not altogether surprising given how difficult it is to detect graves using archaeological geophysics, coupled with the damage sustained to the uppermost burials. Fieldwork in the area north of the site by Wessex Archaeology in 2015 found a range of features: a Roman quarry pit, Roman field boundaries, wall footings of probable Roman date and other features that may relate to the wider environs of the villa (WA 2015).

The organisation of the monograph

This monograph mainly comprises an account of the excavation of the Romano-British villa (Chapter 3) and Anglo-Saxon cemetery (Chapter 4), with limited discussion of some fragmentary late Iron Age evidence (Chapter 2) and an Anglo-Saxon building and associated features (Chapter 5). The chapter on the villa is not intended to be a site report: much work remains to be done on the finds and the site archive. Rather, it aims to be an overall account of the development of the villa, based largely on Detsicas' published interim reports, with additional evidence provided by the excavation archive. The emphasis falls mainly upon the architectural details, which in places provides re-assessments of the evidence along with fresh interpretations. The excavated evidence is followed by a consideration of the site in the context of the Medway valley during the Roman period, as well as a comparison with other large and early country villas, both in Britain and on the continent. It is hoped that this account of the villa may promote the publication of the full report that the site deserves.

The chapter on the Anglo-Saxon cemetery is intended to serve as a site report. It is based on the catalogue and cemetery plans produced by Rachael Shaw (1994), which were compiled from site notebooks, field plans and the photographic archive. Shaw stated that her report was only a preliminary account, yet it has proved a solid foundation for this project and over the years has been a valuable resource for students of the site. For the purpose of this project, the cemetery archive was also studied; additional evidence for burial practice and the grave goods was identified, which has enabled the creation of a more detailed burial catalogue. The nature of the evidence is discussed and a chronological framework set out, supplemented by a radiocarbon date. The task was also aided by the fact that most of the specialist reports are complete. Furthermore, shortly after the material was sent to Bradford University a report on the human remains was prepared, and since then various aspects have been studied by post-graduate students. As with the villa, the cemetery is also considered in the context of the Medway valley, which affords an understanding of its type and the nature of the community that it served.

The two following chapters are devoted, respectively, to a study of the pre-English place-names of the Medway valley (Chapter 6) and the documentary evidence for the Aylesford region during the Anglo-Saxon period (Chapter 7). As a pre-English survival, the place-name Eccles is valuable to an understanding of the local area because it strongly suggests the continuation of a late Roman Christian community into the post-Roman period. The chapter also considers the survival of a group of pre-English names in the Rochester area, which may point to a sub-Roman native territory. Although Eccles is poorly served by historical sources, Aylesford is mentioned in a range of different documents, for example, Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the *Rochester Bridgework List* and the *Domesday Book*. These sources allow the territorial and administrative importance of the place to be examined and questions about the regional importance of Aylesford to be posed. A crucial issue regarding the origins of Aylesford, and by implication Eccles, is whether it formed the centre of an earlier *regio*, which pre-dates the conquest of the region by East Kent.

The volume is rounded off by a general discussion, which draws together all the strands of evidence and evaluates the importance of Eccles and the Aylesford area within the Medway valley. The chapter is organised chronologically. For each major period, the evidence is organised around several themes that reflect current scholarly interest, and which highlight the contribution that the area makes to national research priorities, especially the continuity between different periods.