

# A Roman rural workshop in Cowleaze, Westbury-sub-Mendip



*Roman? sandstone whetstone  
(actual size)*

WSM 2008 / 1  
Westbury Society  
Barry Lane

## A ROMAN RURAL WORKSHOP IN COWLEAZE, WESTBURY-SUB-MENDIP WSM 2008/1

### Summary

Fieldwalking in Westbury-sub-Mendip produced a significant concentration of Roman pottery and other artefacts that suggest the presence of a rural workshop in a field called *Cowleaze*. This site is immediately to the north of a “Roman settlement” recorded as Somerset HER 12991, suggesting that the settlement extended to the north.

### Site location

*Cowleaze* is a 14 acre field about 1.4km west of the village church and now farmed from Croft Farm (wrongly named on the map) about 900m to the east. Its centre lies at about ST 485 486. See Fig.1 below.

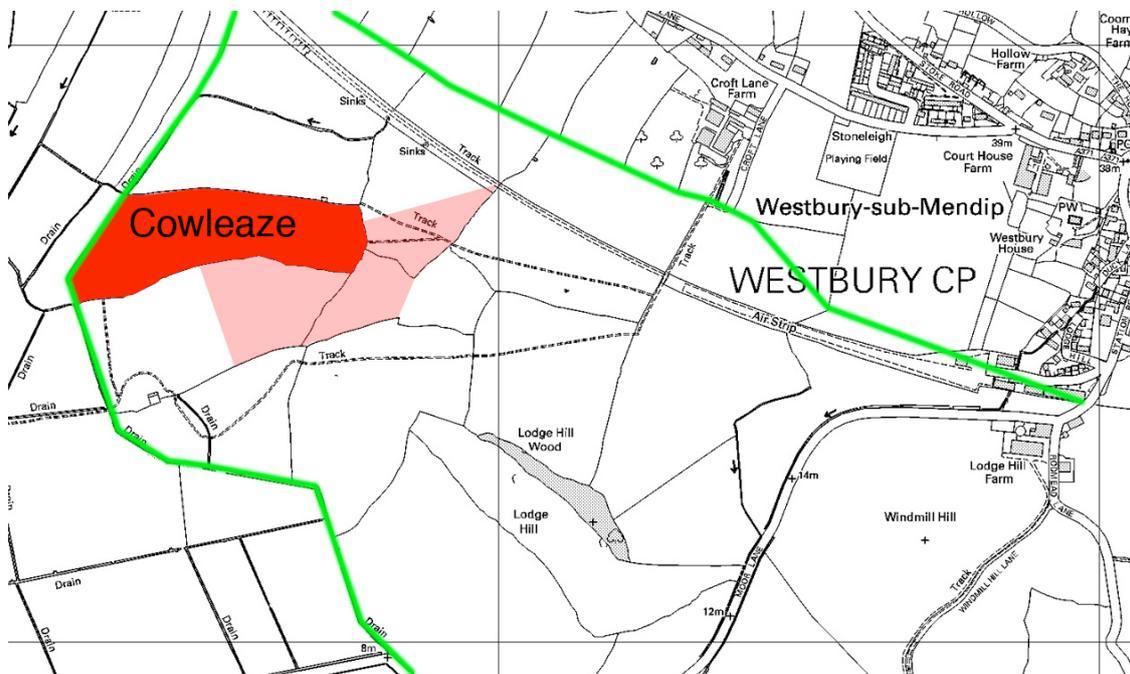


Fig.1 Location of the fieldwalked *Cowleaze* (dark red) to the west of Westbury village. Other fields with the name *Cowleaze* in 1759 are indicated in pink. The boundary of the medieval deer park boundary is shown in green.

### Site description, geology, soils & land use

*Cowleaze* lies close to Westbury Moor and generally at a height between 10-15m. OD. The underlying geology is Triassic Mercia Mudstone over the eastern half of the field and on the west Alluvium from the river Axe, which flows about 1.5km. to the south west (Farrant). Soils are mainly Compton Series with some of the Worcester Series at the eastern end (Findlay, Sheet 280). Generally these soils are mainly under permanent grass and can be highly productive. *Cowleaze* had been ploughed, rolled and sown with maize shortly before the field-walking and has been used for this purpose for many years.

### **Historical and archaeological context**

Richard McDonnell (1979) examined the evidence of aerial photographs and undertook some fieldwork in 36 square kilometres of the Upper Axe Valley concluding that there was substantial activity there during the Roman period. Unfortunately, although Westbury Moor was included, the rest of the parish of Westbury was outside his area. Subsequent Roman finds in the valley are noted in the Somerset HER (see Appendix 2 for details) including a “Roman settlement” west of Lodge Hill, Westbury (HER 12991). This lies in the field immediately to the south of *Cowleaze*.

*Cowleaze* lies in the far west within the boundary of a former medieval deer park (Fig.1). Historian Tony Nott has argued that the park was probably created by Bishop John of Tours in the early twelfth century (Nott 1996). Its boundary was first identified by local archaeologist Chris Hawkes in 1976 (Somerset HER 24861) and has been further explored and recorded by the Westbury Society (2007 and ongoing).

Tony Nott has shown that the deer park ceased to be used for the breeding and hunting of deer at the end of the 16C when it was leased to Sir John Rodney. It is likely that it soon became used for more conventional farming. A map of the so-called Park Manor dated 1759 indicates that the park had become sub-divided and enclosed with over 100 individual fields. These were all leased out to 30 different individuals.

*Cowleaze* was first mapped at this time when it was in two parts. In fact there were no less than five fields with ‘Cowleaze’ in their name in 1759, suggesting that one early large pasture field had been later subdivided. The extent of these fields is also shown on Fig.1 in red and pink.

Andrew Sealy, tenant farmer at Croft Farm, had collected numerous artefacts from *Cowleaze* over the years after ploughing (pers. comm) and it was decided to investigate the field in a more systematic manner. Fieldwalking, supplemented by some metal detecting, was chosen to begin the project.

### **Survey objectives and methodology**

The aim of field-walking was to collect all man-made objects from the surface of the ploughed field and to assess whether they might indicate previous land-use or occupation. Field-walking commenced in the south west corner and the direction of walking was north-south or the reverse on the return walk. Measured grid lines were not used to save time on this first investigation; traverses of about 20m. width were established by 20 paces. About 6-8 people walked each traverse side by side with about 2-3m between them. Each person was asked to mark the findspot of their first artefact on each traverse with a cane.

At the completion of the field-walking the position of 30 find spots defining an area within which all of the finds had been found was recorded using a hand-held GPS meter (Garmin Geko 201 with an accuracy of 6-12m.). In addition the position of the westerly posts of two field gates on the northern and southern boundaries was also recorded to enable the distribution of finds to be accurately plotted onto an Ordnance Survey map. All artefacts were collected together at the completion of the walking of the field, then washed and sorted.

### Description of results

Fieldwalking produced a collection of artefacts with a total weight of over 5kg. Almost 60% was Roman grey ware and black burnished ware. A breakdown of the finds by material and period is given in the Appendix 1 on page 6. While Roman pottery was found across the whole field, there was only a thin scatter over the eastern end of the field. Within the broad area of more concentrated finds in the west there were also two distinct areas of dark soil, one with numerous lumps of rough limestone, which produced a very significant density of finds. This distribution is shown in Fig.2 below.

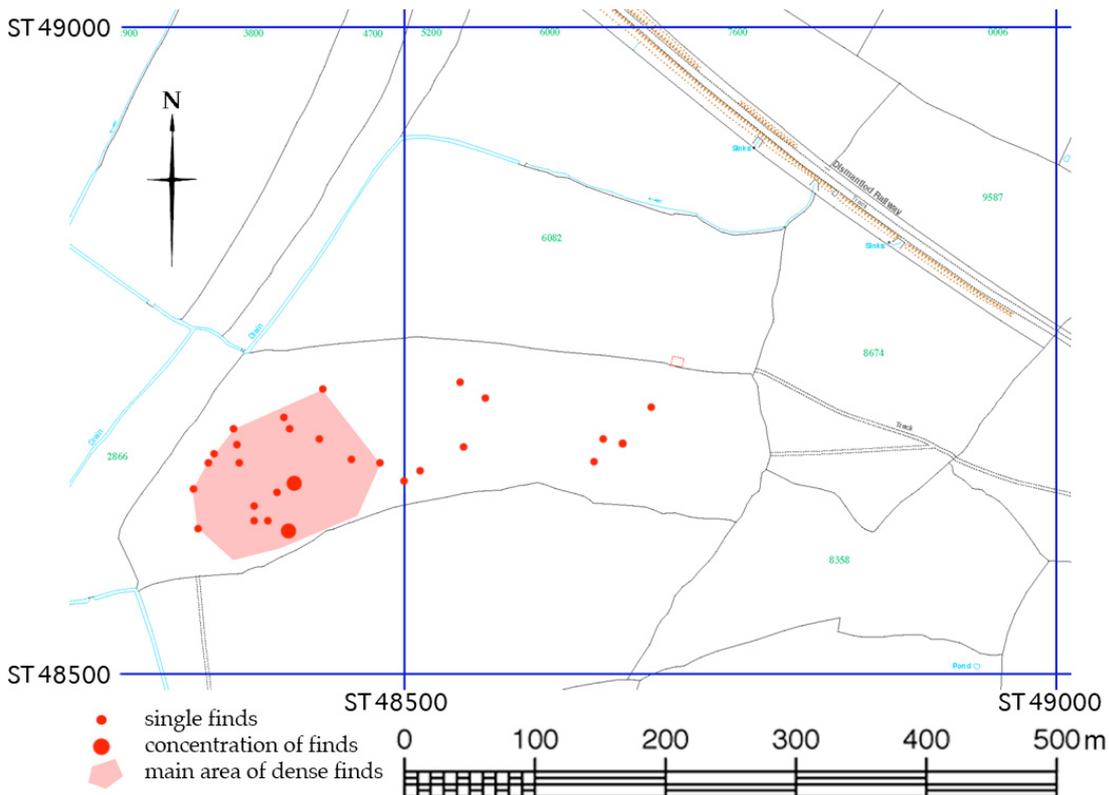


Fig.2 Distribution of finds collected during fieldwalking in Cowleaze.

### Flint

225gm. of flint was collected, most of which appeared to be derived from liming. Only four pieces showed a clear bulb of percussion and, of these, only two showed any evidence of further working. These two flint flakes are shown in Fig.3 over the page.

### Grey ware

A large quantity of both fine and coarse Roman grey ware was collected; almost 40% by weight consisted of fragments of rims or bases.

### Black burnished ware

14% of the total weight of artefacts collected consisted of sherds of Roman southern black burnished ware.

### **Assorted fabrics**

About 65gms of redware as well as one sherd of New Forest slipware (c.260-280AD), one sherd of a parchment ware mortaria from Oxford (240-410AD), and three sherds of crude Congresbury ware were collected.



Fig.3 Two flint flakes from *Cowleaze* with the bulb of percussion at the top on the side not shown.

### **Lead**

Metal detecting produced only pieces of lead waste, one of which may have been a portion of tightly rolled lead sheet. No other metal artefacts were found.

### **Stone**

Three fragments of sandstone whetstones were found; the finest of which is illustrated on the cover.

### **Glazed ware, glass and tile**

Almost 600 gms of Bristol ware, stoneware, blue & white china and bottle glass were collected; all post-medieval in date. About the same weight of red tile and land drain fragments were also collected probably of nineteenth or twentieth century date. All this material was found spread fairly evenly across the whole field.

### **Slag**

Much metal slag was seen but only two samples were collected. It is almost certainly derived from twentieth century 'manuring'.

### **Discussion**

The fieldwalking results strongly suggest a Roman site. The presence of lead waste, the absence of other metal items, the presence of three whetstones for sharpening tools and almost no pottery items of sophistication further suggest that the site is likely to be a workshop rather than a residence. The pottery may all be the result of bringing food and drink to the site.

Previous finds from the field immediately to the south have included more items that would be associated with a farm residence such as a quern stone, lead weights – one weighing 10 Roman ounces (269 gms), several spindle whorls and fishing net weights - and Samian ware. The workshop, with its need for considerable heat for smelting or

working with lead, may be associated with the residence but set apart from it to reduce the danger from the fires.

The very few flint items provide no more evidence than a brief prehistoric visit and the post-medieval artefacts are all consistent with common manuring practices introduced when the medieval park was converted to farming after 1600.

### **Conclusions**

Fieldwalking has clearly demonstrated that a Roman site lies within Cowleaze field; most probably a workshop associated with a site immediately to the south that has produced more domestic items.

### **Recommendations**

1. Investigate the field further using geophysical techniques to see if the location of any buildings may be found. The significant concentration of finds towards the western end of the field are a guide to where further investigation might begin.
2. Extend geophysical survey into Alders House, the field immediately to the south where other Roman finds have been made.
3. Seek further identification of all the finds that have been collected, particularly the pottery, to establish the likely period of occupation.

### **Archive deposits**

All the finds belong to the Church commissioners but are currently held by Barry Lane, pending further examination. Paper and digital copies of this report will be deposited with Andrew Sealy, the Somerset HER and the Wells & Mendip Museum.

### **Acknowledgements**

Thanks are due to farmer Andrew Sealy for permission to undertake the fieldwalking and exploration of his land and to Dr Naomi Payne, Portable Antiquities Officer for her preliminary identification of the finds.

### **References**

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- Nott, A.W.G. 1996 *The Park of the Bishop of Bath and Wells at Westbury Somerset* MA thesis, University of Bristol.

**Fieldwalking & metal detecting dates:** 1, 12 and 19 May 2008

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## Appendix 1

Finds by period and weight in grams

<b>Finds</b>	<b>Period</b>	<b>Weight in grams</b>
Flint	Prehistoric & modern?	225
Grey fabric pottery – body sherds	Roman	1370
Grey fabric pottery – rims & bases	Roman	855
Black burnished ware – body sherds	Roman	308
Black burnished ware – rims & bases	Roman	433
Redware	Roman	65
Assorted fabrics	Roman	225
Lead waste	Roman?	251
Worked stone (3 fragments)	Roman?	272
Glazed pottery	post-Roman	588
Tiles, red fabric	post-Roman	628
Slag	post-Roman	47
<b>Total finds</b>		<b>5267</b>

## Appendix 2

Roman sites and finds in the Upper Axe Valley (north side)

<b>Site</b>	<b>Somerset HER</b>
Upper Axe Valley	24094
Draycott	57176
Marchey	23003
Rodney Stoke	11224, 24283, 24297, 24298, 24308, 57174, 57175
St Cuthbert Out	21455
Wells	16135, 24806
Westbury	24836, 24872, 25648
Wookey	12992

**Date of report:**

6 June 2008