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Gatcombe Farm, Flax Bourton,
North Somerset
An Archaeological Evaluation
on behalf of
Mr William Butler.



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RAB/08/06 SMR 47303 SAM22848

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Acknowledgements

Thanks are due Andrew Butler for supply and operation of the machine and to Mr William Butler and the staff of the Gatcombe Farm Shop for their cooperation. Keith Gardner provided much needed information and advice with regard the site.

1.0.0 Abstract

- 1.0.1** *A small scale archaeological evaluation was undertaken within the yard of Gatcombe Farm where it is proposed that an extension to an existing farm shop be constructed. The farm lies within the precincts of a substantial walled Roman Settlement and prior excavation has shown significant archaeological activity adjacent to and within the proposed development area. The evaluation demonstrated the presence of further Romano-British structures and that these structures are sealed by a minimal depth of overburden. As a consequence these are likely to be severely effected by any construction. Levels taken across the site would suggest that further structures, known to have existed within the proposed development area may in places have been substantially disturbed by later development. Despite this, here is however a high probability that further archaeology survives.*

2.0.0 Introduction

- 2.0.1** The following works were commissioned by Mr K. S. Gardner on behalf of Mr W. Butler, owner of Gatcombe Farm, who is seeking information regarding the possible impact upon known and potential archaeological structures which may occur should permission be granted for the construction of a new extension to an existing farm shop.
- 2.0.2** A field evaluation of the site was conducted by R. A. Broomhead and L. E. Berry in variable weather conditions between the 10th and 13th April 2006 following the granting of a Section 7 Agreement permitting excavation within the boundaries of a Scheduled Ancient Monument. This subsequent report details the results of that evaluation.

3.0.0 The Site

- 3.0.1** Gatcombe Farm lies at ST52656981 centrally located within the boundaries of an extensive Romano-British settlement defined by a defensive wall five metres thick and over 1000 metres in length. Following piecemeal investigation of the site in the 19th and early 20th centuries, detailed excavations, begun by the Clevedon Archaeological Society in the 1950's were finally concluded in the early 1970's by Keith Branigan revealing a complex industrial/agricultural settlement containing over 20 buildings potentially related to an as yet undefined villa. (Branigan K., 1977). The proposed development site lies to the east of the present farm within an area partially investigated by both Cunliffe and Branigan.
- 3.0.2** The proposed extension occupies an area of approximately 290m² and includes part of a building currently used as a butchery. The remainder of the site is sealed by tarmac or compacted soils and rubble upon which are stood several temporary buildings. The site is at its highest in the east where the evaluation trench was located but falls by over 1m to the west. Prior excavation has already established that two previously identified Romano-British buildings (Buildings 12 and 16) extend into that area to be developed but both were assumed to have been eroded away at their southern end (Branigan op. cit.. pp 17-19)

4.0.0 Evaluation Aims, Strategy and Methodology

4.1.0 Evaluation Aims

4.0.1 The aims of the evaluation were firstly to provide information with regard to the sub surface stratigraphy in the area of the proposed extension. In particular the depth at which archaeological remains, should they exist, be encountered. A secondary aim was to test hypotheses developed during prior excavation, that any building remains within this area may have been eroded away or alternatively did not extend further southwards than the limits of prior investigation. It was not proposed that any archaeological deposits would be significantly disturbed.

4.2.0 Evaluation Strategy

4.2.1 The strategy adopted for the evaluation was developed in discussion with the County Archaeologist for North Somerset and followed approval by English Heritage of a written scheme of works. The project design allowed for a single north – south trench 1.6m wide and 15m in length to be excavated across the proposed development site in order to provide a section through the sub surface stratigraphy and to test the potential for archaeological survival within the area. It was proposed that initial excavation would be by machine under archaeological supervision to enable the removal of the estimated 1m of overburden deposited above the natural land surface in recent years by the current owner. Subsequent excavation was to be conducted archaeologically by hand and by means of sondages within the machine excavated trench.

4.3.0 Evaluation Methodology

4.3.1 The final location of the trench was determined by taped measurements from the corners of the proposed new building previously set out by the owners architect. The presence of an active foul drain at the northern end of the site however necessitated the relocation of the trench slightly further south than had previously been designed. Initial excavation was conducted by machine utilising a 1.6m grading bucket in order to remove overlying tarmac and makeup. The trench was subsequently hand cleaned and a written contextual record was made using *pro-forma* context recording sheets under the site code RAB/08/06. The trench was planned at 1:20 and recorded photographically. A relevant section was drawn at a scale of 1:10 and levelled to a datum of 44.34m OD derived from a Bench Mark at ST52566969.

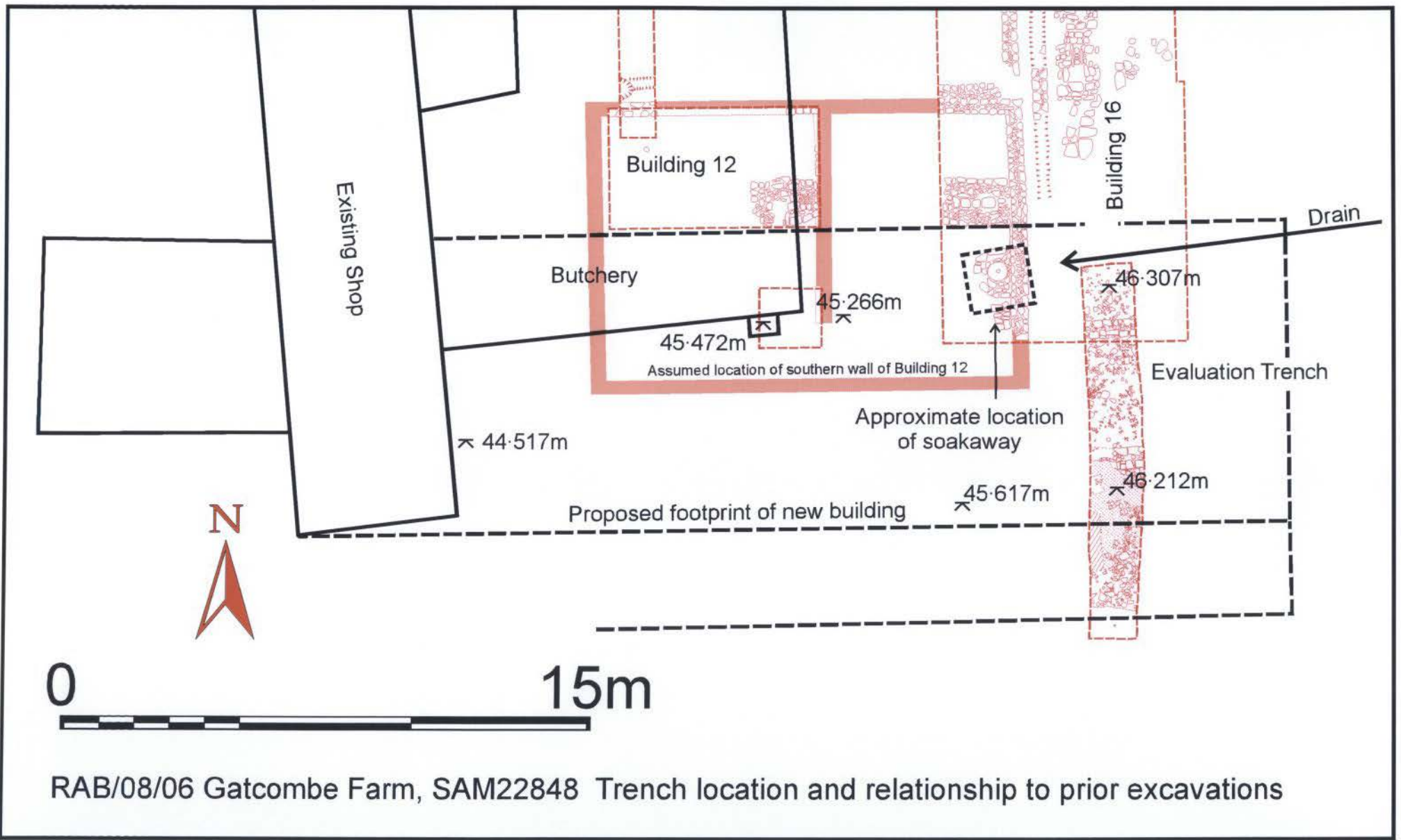
5.0.0 Results

5.0.1 Initial machining rapidly indicated a virtual absence of any overburden sealing reasonably well defined archaeological structures, in particular two east - west walls [F104] and [F106], the second of which had been partially robbed to the west. At the northern end of the site, maximum cover was less than 500mm whilst to the south up to 200mm of modern tarmac [100] both sealed and in places bonded the archaeology [109], here comprising a cobbled Romano-British floor or yard [108] which has been exposed upon the surface in the recent past (Butler W., pers comm.). The recovered archaeology was cleaned and recorded. Detailed contextual descriptions are included in Appendix 1

5.0.2 Levels taken across the site indicate a significant fall to the west. The average height of the exposed archaeology within the evaluation trench was 46.25m OD whilst a level of 44.517m was recorded at the eastern entrance to the farm shop, a fall of 1.7m.

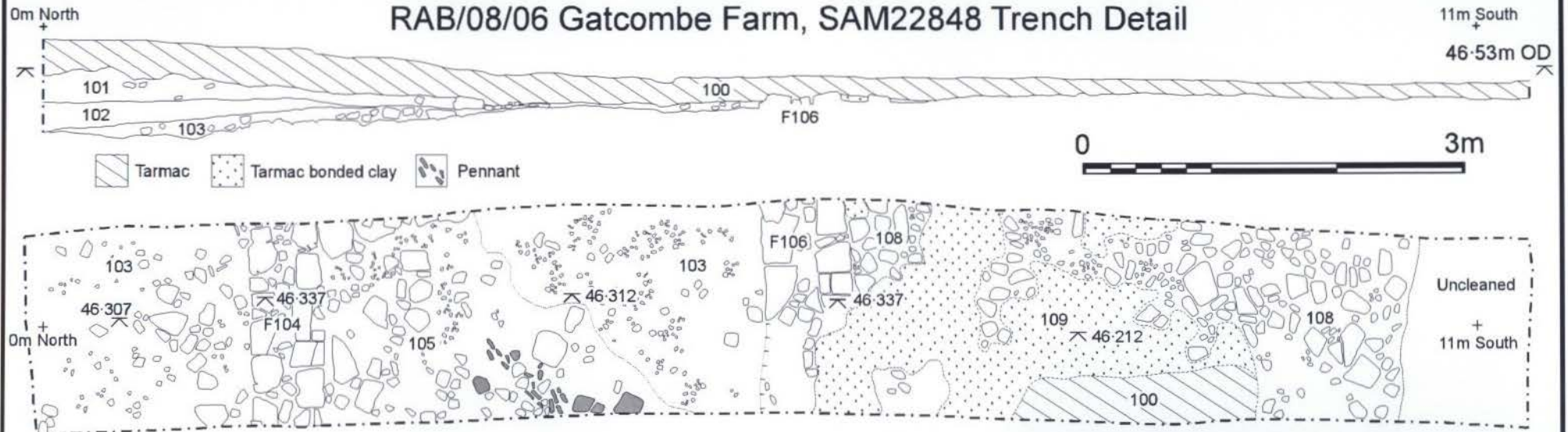
6.0.0 Finds

6.0.1 All finds are Romano-British and all are considered unstratified being derived from surface cleaning. A total of 24 sherds of pottery were recovered during the evaluation including 12 sherds of BB2 and 8 of Congresbury grey ware. Two sherds of Mortaria were noted both in a thin red fabric of unknown origin. Two sherds of imitation Samian were also located. Other finds included one hand forged nail, one strip of lead, one piece of slag and two small fragments of thin green or blue/green glass.



RAB/08/06 Gatcombe Farm, SAM22848 Trench location and relationship to prior excavations

RAB/08/06 Gatcombe Farm, SAM22848 Trench Detail



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Left: [F104] from the north showing [103] in the foreground and tumble [105] to the south. Scale 1m



Right: [F106] from the west showing robber cut [106], cobbling [108] and tarmac bonded clays [109]. Scale 1m

7.0.0 Discussion

7.1.0 The Recorded Archaeology

- 7.1.1** There is little doubt that all the recovered archaeology is Romano-British although virtually all vertical stratigraphy has been lost and there were no clearly stratified finds. Neither is the relationship between the previously excavated archaeology and that exposed by the evaluation totally clear although contexts [101] and [102] may be seen as material redeposited following prior excavation. Certainly the plotted location of the trench would suggest this and tends to support the hypothesis that the more northerly of the two exposed walls [F104], represents the previously unexcavated southern wall of Branigan's Building 16. The presence of tumble with frequent pennant roof tile [105] to the south of [F104] lends weight to the suggestion that this area is external to that building.
- 7.1.2** Wall [F105] survived for only a short length and would appear to have been robbed to the west. Discontinuous limestone cobbling [108] interspersed with tarmac hardened clay [109] suggests an internal floor similar to that described as the phase 2 floor in room 1 of building 12 (Branigan *op. cit.* p 20). [F105] may therefore be considered the northern wall of a previously unknown building, number 25 in sequence.

7.2.0 The Archaeological Potential

- 7.2.1** The evaluation has clearly demonstrated the survival of archaeological features at the eastern end of the proposed development at a depth whereby they would be subject to disturbance by any development. It has not however satisfactorily elucidated the archaeological potential at the western end of the site. The dramatic fall in levels between the evaluation trench and buildings to the west may indicate that any archaeology in this area has indeed been destroyed by erosion and subsequent development (but see 7.2.3 below). Certainly considerable damage to the archaeology should be expected if it survives. The drain established at the northern end of the evaluation trench is a recent addition and flows into a soakaway that would appear to have been established in the south east corner of Building 12 and the foundations of the butchery will also have had considerable impact on the same structure.
- 7.2.2** It is difficult to precisely relate the sections recorded in the prior excavations to the levels recorded by the current evaluation there being no definitive datum to work to. That being said, the descriptions of the recorded structures and the available photography provide some clues. The eastern wall of building 12 as recorded comprised lias blocks set upon a foundation of pitched limestone, a characteristic of most of the later buildings upon the site including Building 16. Branigan notes that the foundations of the (un-located) southern wall of the building were probably very close to the surface at this point. (Branigan, *op. cit.* p19). Plates 2a and 2c (p221) indicate the surviving wall at the lowest point recorded was probably only one course high leaving that and the pitched foundation unexcavated in situ, a suggested depth therefore of perhaps 3-400mm. at a point c2m south of that recorded. Building 16 by contrast would appear to have survived to approximately 3 courses at this point although this is not shown in the site plans. If it is assumed that walls [F104] and [F106] are constructed upon similar principles and survive to only one course then the

base of the Romano-British archaeology may be expected at c45.5 - 46m OD (although this precludes the presence of any pre-Roman features such as the post holes beneath the northern end of Building 16). However there was no indication in the evaluation of the characteristic slight step out of the lowest course of the wall immediately above a foundation trench suggesting the possibility that more than one course may survive and a safer estimate for the base of the Romano-British archaeology may be at c45 – 45.5m OD.

- 7.2.3 The evaluation did not indicate that the two exposed walls stood on any form of terrace as recorded elsewhere within the Gatcombe enclosure and noted by Branigan with regard to Building 12. Extrapolating the perceived levels westward it would seem unlikely that the south eastern wall of building 12 stood on any form of terrace however this may not be the case at its western end Here it is possible that the existing slope may represent a levelling up of the site to accommodate the building. If this is indeed the case then the current tarmac surface to the south of the butchery is, as with the evaluation trench lain either directly, or with minimal overburden, upon the Romano-British surface.

8.0.0 Conclusion

- 8.0.1 The evaluation has clearly demonstrated that archaeological features exist within the proposed development area and that any construction hereabouts is likely to have a significant effect on the surviving archaeology. It is uncertain to what extent a design option may be applicable with regard the preservation of the archaeology upon the site and it is expected that further archaeological input will be required should permission to develop be allowed.

References

All references and page numbers in this report refer to the following:

Branigan K., ‘*The Gatcombe Roman Villa*’ British Archaeological Reports
No. 44 (Sheffield 1977)

Appendix 1 – Recorded Contexts

- [100] Tarmac. Variable depth 200mm – 350mm. Overlies and seals [101], [F106], [108] and [109]
- [101] Modern makeup or redeposited material comprising rubble and brick hardcore mixed with sand and marl. Maximum depth 200mm. Sealed by [100]. Overlies [102] and [103].
- [102] Modern makeup or redeposited material. Coarse sands with brick and rubble. Sealed by [101]. Overlies [103].
- [103] Red brown clays with frequent fragments of lias, limestone and occasional pennant. Sealed by [100] and [102]. Overlies and butts against [F104]. Butts against [F106].
- [F104] Single course of walling orientated east west standing approximately 150mm and comprising faced lias blocks with core of clay bonded rubble. Sealed and abutted by [103] butted by [105]
- [105] Rubble spread comprising lias and limestone blocks 50mm – 300mm with significant quantities of pennant tile fragments. Sealed and abutted by [103]. Abuts [F104]
- [F106] Single course of walling orientated east west comprising faced lias blocks with core of clay bonded rubble. Robbed to west. Sealed by [100] abutted by [103] to the north and cobbling [108] to the south
- [107] shallow cut (<50mm) continuing line of northern face of wall [F106].
- [108] Limestone cobbling, irregular, well worn and partially eroded. Butts against [F106] to the north. Sealed by [100] and [109]
- [109] Hard clay fused with tarmac sealing much of [108]