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BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITY
FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT

The Chessels, West Coker,
Somerset

An Archaeological Evaluation 1988

B.U.F.A.U.



Intro-

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Introduction

In response to proposals to extend the premises of No.1 The Villas, West Coker, involving a portion of the Scheduled Ancient Monument SAM 280, an archaeological appraisal of the site was commissioned by HBMC (England). This work was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit at the request of Somerset County Council in February 1988. The fieldwork upon which this report is based was undertaken by the author, with the assistance of Peter Ellis, on 22nd and 23rd February. I am also grateful to Mr. H. Denning, presently the owner, for access; Mr. and Mrs. B. Paulley at No.1 The Villas for assistance and hospitality; and to Trevor Pearson for preparing the drawings.

The Site

The area concerned comprises a narrow strip of cultivated land, parallel and adjacent to the eastern boundary of No.1 The Villas, measuring approximately 50 x 6 metres. This formed part of a field known as The Chessels (NGR ST 527138) fronting onto the main A30 road linking Yeovil and West Coker (Figure 1B). Discoveries made here in the 19th century, including decorated mosaic pavements and stone building foundations, suggest the presence of a substantial Roman villa in this field; the field name 'Chessels' being a direct allusion to its remains. No reputable excavations have taken place here and the precise layout of buildings and their environs in the Roman period are unknown. West Coker evidently belongs to a group of villas in this region, flourishing particularly by the 4th century AD, while closer

at hand have been found ample traces of Romano-British settlement (Figs. 1A and 1B).

By their nature, the discoveries made in 'The Chessels' suggest an establishment of some importance, and this has led to its statutory protection as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (Somerset AM 280) as designated by the Secretary of State for the Environment. This protection has embraced an area somewhat larger than the villa site to include its environs, and hence the site for which an application for development is proposed. As stated, the site lies adjacent to a modern main road (A30), approximately on the crest of a low hill, which is itself an outslope of somewhat higher ground to the north. The aspect is southerly at c.80m AOD, and the underlying solid geology comprises the Upper Jurassic formation of the Yeovil Sands. The latter is well drained, and supports a relatively deep and fertile neutral or slightly calcareous soil.

The Evaluation

An archaeological assessment of the site was undertaken primarily through excavation. Initially this involved a mechanically-excavated transect along the axis of the plot for virtually its entire length, removing up to 0.30m of ploughsoil over an area c.40 x 2m. An arbitrarily defined, sub-ploughsoil horizon was thus exposed and subjected to further definition by means of hand excavation. Removal of another c.0.05m of subsoil by this method achieved a cleaned surface below the level of plough disturbance which could then be examined for archaeological evidence. In addition to this procedure an additional evaluation of underlying deposits was achieved through hand excavation of three test pits into natural stratigraphy (Fig. 2). A brief examination of the adjacent ploughed field, including the

area considered to have been occupied by the villa complex, was also made for comparative purposes.

Examination of the humic topsoil, although removed mechanically, revealed a thoroughly intermixed sandy ploughsoil, and a notable paucity of solid natural or artefactual components. Local conditions throughout were not favourable to good visual separation of soil strata, and thus the clear definition of soil-infilled archaeological features was also difficult. Nevertheless, the Yeovil Sand-derived subsoil was capable of fine cleaning and was carefully examined for such traces. In the event it was in fact possible to record such evidence at this horizon, the authenticity of which was supported by artefactual associations and minimal trial trenching.

Within the excavated subsoil, and in particular from that portion removed by hand, the very sparse scatter of human artefacts included abraded sherds of Romano-British, medieval and early post-medieval pottery, flaked flint, daub and some slag. Less than 20 pieces were recovered from the 40 x 2m area examined. At two locations a somewhat greater density of artefacts coincided with rather indistinct definitions of subsoil variation. Of these, F1 to the north was partially excavated and sherds of local prehistoric Iron Age pottery were found in association with burnt clay daub, stone fragments and a little charcoal. Further south a linear feature (F2) was indistinctly defined within the subsoil, aligned approximately SE-NW. A narrow segment excavated at right angles to this line revealed a relatively shallow, concave-profiled ditch, c.1.20m wide x 0.40m deep. A few abraded sherds of Romano-British pottery were recovered from its otherwise featureless fill (Fig.2).

Towards the base of the ditch cut and in the course of excavating the three deeper sondages to natural and beyond, a

zone of weathered Yeovil Sand was recorded averaging 0.30m deep above the cleaner yellow sand of the undisturbed strata beneath. At this level it was possible to observe most distinctly the degree of root and earthworm penetration, and animal burrowing, accounting in part for the difficulties in soil or archaeological feature-horizon definition. There was no other indication, in deeper excavation or at the more extensively exposed subsoil level, of further archaeological evidence here.

Summary

Briefly, the archaeological implications of this evaluation can be summarised as follows. Removal of a substantial sample of the overlying ploughsoil, combined with a limited fieldwalking exercise involving adjacent areas to the south and east of the site, gave few clues to previous human activity in the area, beyond those indicative of agricultural exploitation. This picture is largely supported by evidence surviving at lower, sub-plough levels. The single, Iron Age ?post-hole is the strongest evidence for earlier settlement, although there was little other supporting evidence and any further remains may have been truncated by subsequent agriculture. Earlier discoveries of ?prehistoric pottery from the villa site provide some context for this newly-discovered feature and its pottery, suggesting pre-Roman exploitation of the area and the possibility that the villa or its estate originated as a native Iron Age farm.

Broadly contemporary with the Romano-British settlement appears to be the ditch also encountered in this evaluation. The only dateable material (fragments of 4th-century pottery) was recovered from the upper levels of excavated fill, and thus the origin of this ditch is uncertain. Its original function as a boundary ditch, defining one side of a field

belonging either to the Romano-British estate or its predecessor, is the most likely explanation for its presence here. There was no other indicator of settlement in this locality prior to the adjacent modern premises of Nos. 1 and 2 The Villas. The sparse distribution of weathered pottery fragments within the modern ploughsoil and subsoil beneath suggests no more than episodes of manuring and cultivation over a long period. The contrast between this area of 'The Chessels' and the vicinity of the Romano-British villa site to the south was apparent in a cursory examination of the modern ploughed field surface. A relative abundance of abraded Romano-British ceramics and potential building material was noted in association with the latter.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Evidence of archaeologically-defined human activity or its preservation is extremely sparse in this area of 'The Chessels'. Agricultural exploitation apart, the most likely phase of occupation was during the prehistoric Iron Age, although even here evidence is slight and may be heavily eroded. By virtue of the area evaluated, considerably in excess of that for which development is proposed, it is possible to make a confident assessment of the archaeological implications.

- 1) The paucity of archaeological material in upper horizons of plough-disturbed strata, and its virtual absence in situ at lower levels, suggests no justifiable requirement for more intensive archaeological recovery and recording in this area prior to development.
- 2) Proposed development which involves the excavation of foundations or service trenches is unlikely to encounter significant archaeological remains, although in view of

its Scheduled Ancient Monument status and what limited evidence was present, an expert watching brief on any necessary excavation should be maintained.

- 3) It is apparent, from surface indications and sub-surface excavation, that the area concerned is peripheral to any significant surviving archaeological remains. Elsewhere within the designated area, archaeological deposits are evidenced by surface indications and material, and may thus continue to be vulnerable to the prolonged effects of modern agricultural practice.

Peter Leach

BUFAU

March 1988

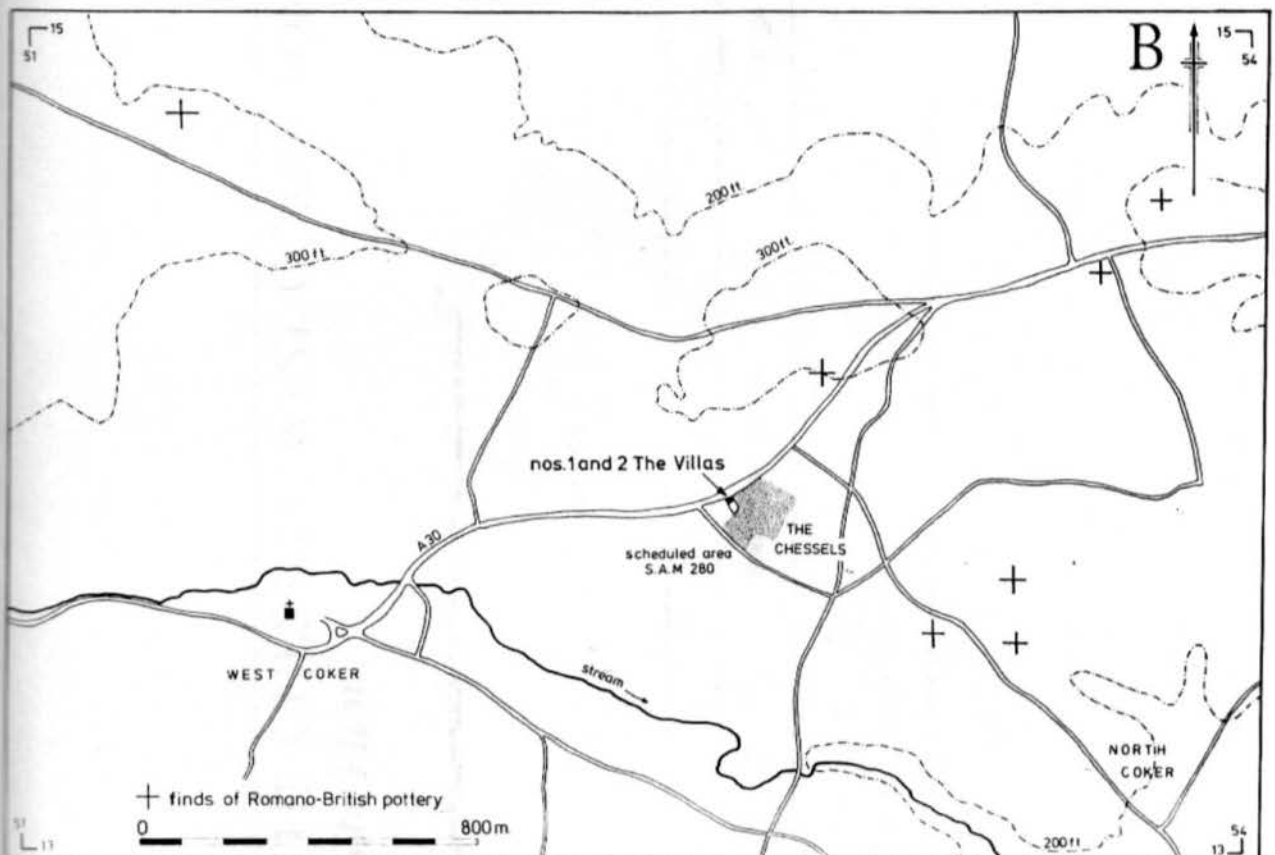
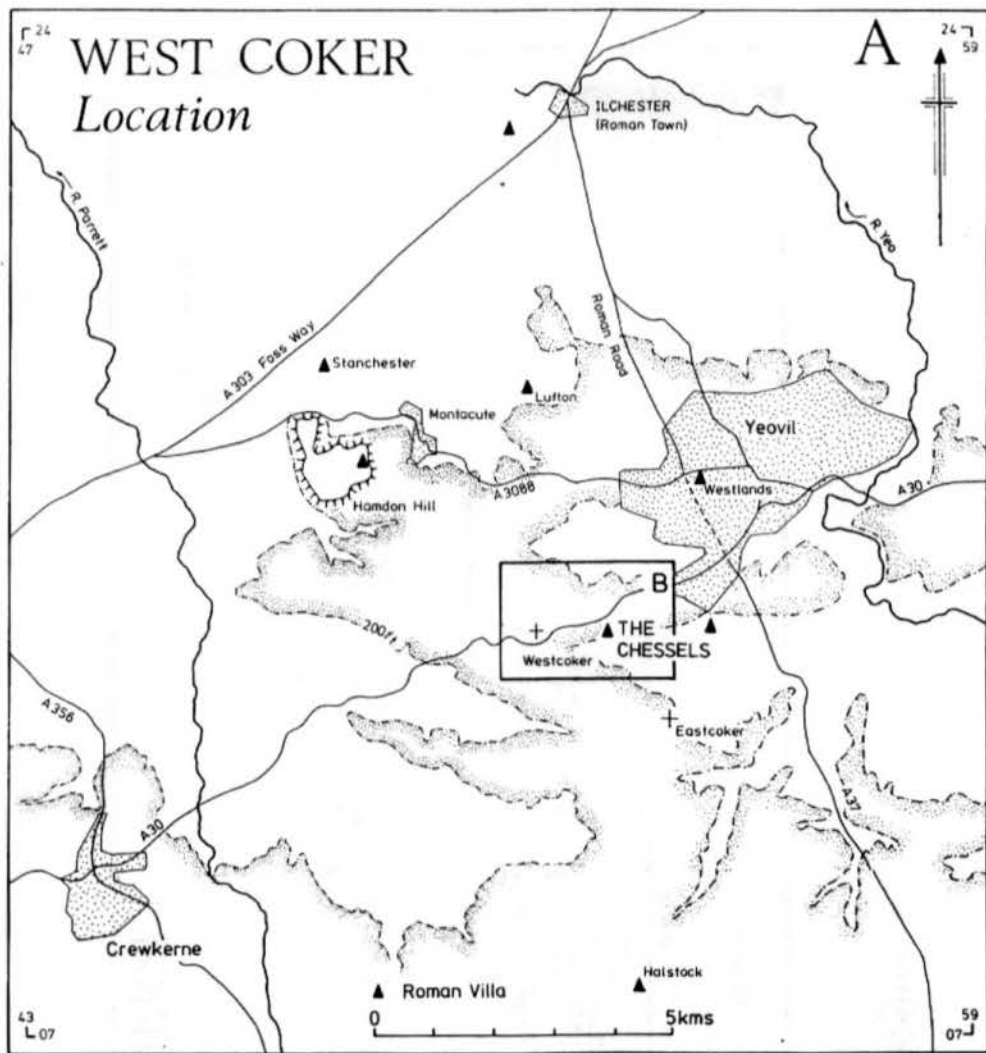


Figure 1

THE CHESSELS, WEST COKER, SOMERSET

Site Plan

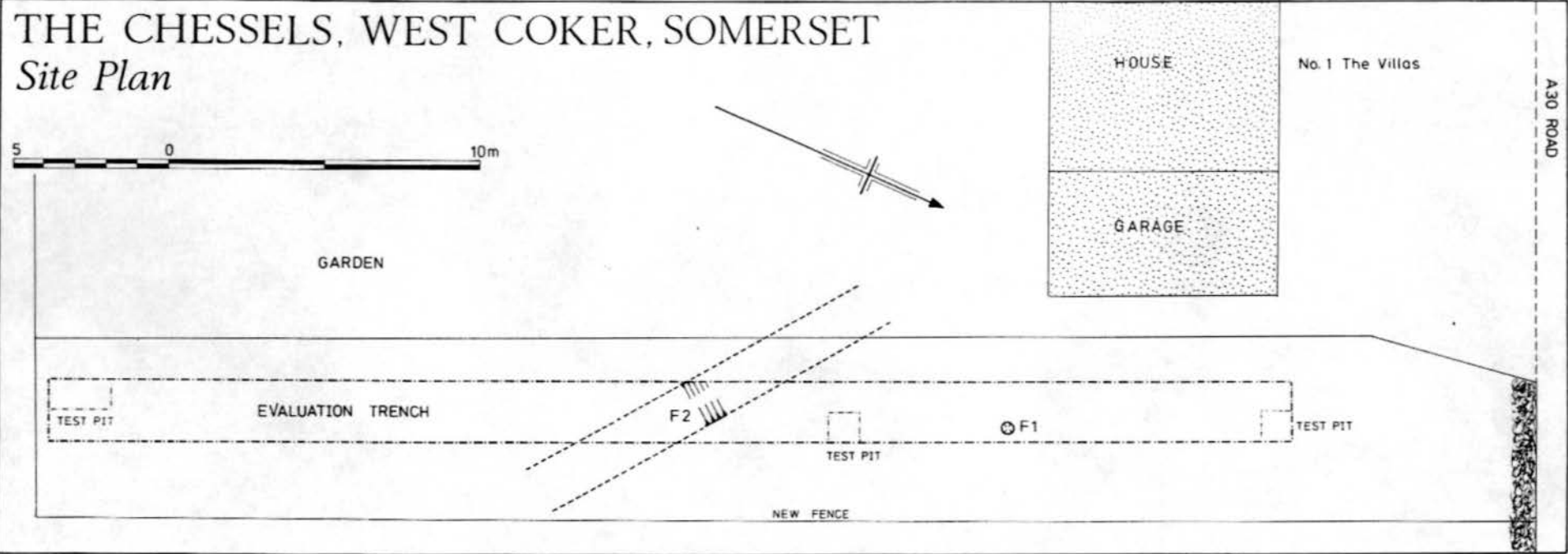


Figure 2