The Somerset Levels in the Roman Period

In this paper I intend to focus on just one aspect of my current doctoral research on landscape evolution and wetland reclamation around the Severn Estuary. The 'late Roman marine transgression' first identified by Godwin (1943) has been a major theme in the archaeological investigation of the Severn Estuary Levels. He observed that Roman material in the coastal area of the Somerset Levels was buried under a considerable depth of alluvium; he also noted some occurrences of Roman material as surface finds. He therefore postulated a dramatic but relatively short-lived episode of flooding during the Roman period.

This view gained widespread acceptance (e.g. Cunliffe 1966), until Hawkins' seminal paper in 1973. Hawkins argued that instances of Roman material from great depths were in fact atypical, and that the Roman ground surface was much closer to the present than Godwin had believed. Hawkins argued that most finds of Roman material are between 0.6 and 1.2 m below the surface, and that the Levels in Roman times were in a transitional stage between true-mud flats and grass saltings. He accounts for this metre or so of alluvium overlying Roman sites as having been deposited at high tides over a long period of time.

Leech (1981) identified a major silted-up channel to the south of Brent Knoll, documented in a charter of AD 693 as the River Siger. He briefly described how the archaeological evidence for Roman settlement to the north and south of this River is very different, with a villa and associated buried soil to the north, and salt-producing sites to the south. It is this contrast that I wish to expand upon, by returning to the original unpublished primary archives.

Much of the archaeological fieldwork in this area was carried out by a local archaeologist, Sam Nash, in the 1960s. He made observations at some 100 sites in the Burnham-on-Sea area, and around 300 sites in the Somerset Levels as a whole. From his records that survive, it appears that his fieldwork mostly consisted of collecting pottery from builders' trenches and ditch scrapings. In some cases, however, he also recorded the depth from which the material came, and he occasionally carried out small-scale excavations.

The most notable site Nash recorded is a probable villa at Lakehouse Farm (Figure 20). It was found during the construction of the M5, in the lowest part of the coastal claybelt, east of Brent Knoll and to the north of the Siger. The unstratified material included hypocaust and box-flue tiles, decorated wall plaster and window glass. Pottery is dated between the first and fourth centuries AD. The unpublished archives of Nash show that this site is associated with a buried soil horizon, around 0.7 m below the surface, described as "a black layer of (?) peat and/or old turf line and/or occupation debris". It fluctuates considerably in height, sometimes dipping below the current water-table. In places it merges with extensive spreads of stone and other Roman occupation debris.

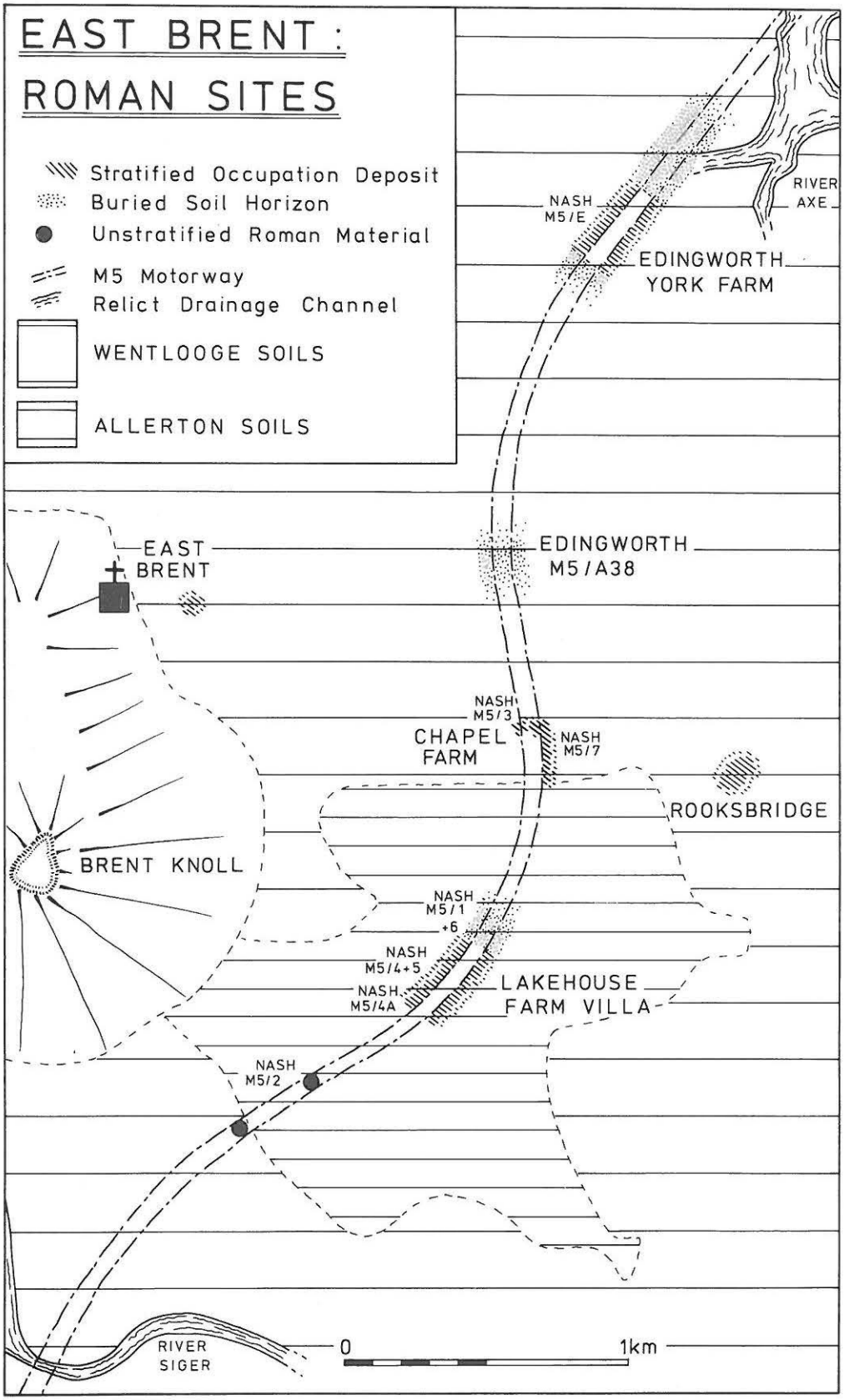

Figure 20 East Brent, Roman sites.

To the east of Lakehouse Farm, a second well-built masonry structure has recently been recorded at Rooksbridge, though curiously, no buried soil horizon was observed (Russett 1989). It lies under *c.* 0.5 m of alluvium.

To the north of Lakehouse Farm, two further sites are also associated with a buried soil horizon, described by Nash as a "very dark clayey soil that merges with occupation layers and stone structures". Clearly, this buried soil must be contemporary with the Roman occupation, and presumably represent a stabilisation of the soil profile, and a significant break in the gradual accumulation of alluvium.

Both Rooksbridge and Lakehouse Farm appear to have substantial structures, suggesting considerable investment in their construction. Thus, it is reasonable to suppose that they would not have been in danger of flooding. However, they both lie in very low lying parts of the claybelt, as demonstrated by the distribution of the modern Allerton type soils. Therefore, two possibilities exist as to what the landscape around Brent Knoll was like during the Roman period. Firstly, the settlements and buried soils may have occupied islands of alluvium above the flood level. At one point, south of Edingworth, Nash's section does show the buried soils fade out, but there is no sign of it having been restricted to higher ground.

Therefore, the more likely possibility is that this whole area was shielded from flooding. Though the coast is, and probably was, protected by natural sand-dunes, sea-walls would certainly be required along the Rivers Axe and Siger. Not only would these have protected the villa and other permanent settlements, but they would also have allowed the more intensive exploitation of the land, especially adjacent to settlements. Pottery sherds from the buried soil at Edingworth are described by Nash as "worn and battered down", suggesting a cultivation layer, though the reclaimed saltmarsh would also have provided rich meadow and pasture.

To the south of the Siger, the picture is very different. Once again, the work of Nash is crucial. He excavated a number of sites, in Highbridge, to the east of Burnham-on-Sea. Negative evidence, from sites which produced only Medieval material, show that locations occupied during the Roman period formed distinct clusters, suggesting that they may have been located on slight islands. Spreads of stone are recorded at several locations, but no well-built masonry structures are known. All sites appear to have been associated with the production of salt in its primary stages, illustrated by the occurrence of actual burnt clay mounds, and the range of briquetage artefacts found on all the sites. No burned soil horizons are recorded, and at one site occupation deposits were interleaved with alluvium, suggesting that the site was periodically flooded. Therefore, in this area, there is no reason to suppose any reclamation had taken place. Rather, the settlements were probably seasonal, exploiting natural resources.

Sites between the Siger and Axe are now buried under between 0.5 and 0.7 m of alluvium; to the south of the Siger the depth is up to *c.* 1.5 m. This can only have been the result of a major episode of flooding, which appears to have begun late in the Roman period. Most sites on the Levels were still occupied in the fourth century AD. However, several sites in the

Highbridge area were abandoned in the late third/early fourth century AD, suggesting that conditions started to deteriorate at about this time. The only possible evidence for when the flooding started to subside is the disappearance of the Siger. The phenomena suggest a major disruption of the hydrological regime which, on documentary evidence, took place between AD 693 and 973.

There is no need to regard this late and post-Roman inundation as anything exceptional. The Post-glacial stratigraphy in coastal areas, with numerous interleaved peats and alluviums, shows a long history of cyclical marine transgression and regression, against a general background trend of gradually rising sea-level. The peat stratigraphy from the inland moors similarly shows periodic floods throughout prehistory. The Roman period can be seen as one of these short-lived periods of stability, which people took advantage of and when, for the first time, in one area, they tried to hold back the sea artificially.

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Somerset Levels and Moors, Conservation Archaeologist

The Somerset Levels Project, run for many years by John and Bryony Coles, has handed over responsibility for the archaeology of the Levels and Moors to Somerset County Council. In response the County Council appointed Dr. Margaret Cox to the post of Conservation Archaeologist. The appointment was made in August and the post is co-funded by English Heritage.

Margaret Cox has been employed on the Christ Church Spitalfields Project since 1985 and seems to have moved from bodies to bogs! Her Ph.D. thesis (Institute of Archaeology, London) based on aspects of the Spitalfields Project, was examined in 1989.

The role of Conservation Archaeologist is wide ranging with emphasis firmly on the 'conservation' side. A major concern is to raise the profile of archaeology among agencies involved with water levels in the area, and to enhance their field officers' understanding and recognition of archaeology. Appropriate water level management is crucial, both to the preservation of known archaeological sites and the archaeology that exists within the Wetlands but has not been 'discovered'. Close liaison is underway with nature conservation groups whose interests and concerns are very similar to those of archaeology and a conference on Wetland Archaeology and Nature Conservation is being planned for late 1992/1993.

Site Management in the Wetlands is an important area of concern. An assessment of the success or otherwise of the existing management strategy of the Sweet Track is underway and English Heritage have invited participation from a wide range of experts. The Abbots Way site is to be evaluated via trial trenches early in 1992 and an appropriate management strategy devised. Interesting data should be obtained on, among other things, the effect of trees on the wetland sites.