

# THE EXPLOITATION OF THE NORTH SOMERSET LEVELS IN THE ROMAN PERIOD

by Stephen Rippon

This contribution concerns post-graduate research on landscape evolution and wetland reclamation around the Severn Estuary. This has covered the period from the later Iron Age through to post-medieval times, and looked at the area between Aust and the River Parrett on the English side, and between the Rivers Wye and Rhymney on the Welsh side. A multi-disciplinary approach has been attempted, integrating as wide a range of evidence as possible, including documentary and cartographic material, field-boundary patterns, place- and field-names, palaeo-environmental data, archaeological material and air-photographic information on earthworks. Key themes have included the environment of the Roman settlement, the integration of upland and lowland economies, the Romano-medieval transition, and the extent of late Saxon reclamation.

A contribution to the last Annual Report described the different patterns of Roman occupation in the main Somerset Levels; reclamation around Brent Knoll and salt production along tidal creeks around Burnham (Rippon 1991). This paper examines the North Somerset Levels, between Weston-super-Mare and Clevedon (Figure 21), another area with extensive traces of Roman settlement.

The Roman occupation of the North Somerset levels has seen considerable passing comment (e.g. Allen and Fulford 1986, p.91; Boon 1980, Figure 3). This is primarily due to two pieces of fieldwork. Firstly, the excavation of a villa at Wemberham in the centre of the Levels (Reade 1885), and secondly, surveys and excavations by the North Somerset Archaeological Research Group around Kenn and Kingston

Seymour (Lilly and Usher 1972). However, there has never been a detailed synthesis of this data, or its integration with other unpublished fieldwork and the evidence of earthworks. Unlike most of the other Severn Estuary Levels, the Roman sites in north Somerset are not buried by a significant depth of alluvium. Pottery scatters appear on the surface of ploughed fields, and settlement remains are preserved as earthworks. Therefore, the modern ground surface must roughly equate with that in the Roman period. It is worth spending a little time considering variations in this modern/Roman ground surface.

Part of the North Somerset coast is currently protected by sand dunes (see Figure 21), for which there is no direct evidence as to when they formed. Those just down the coast at Berrow probably existed by the late tenth century; the place-name Berrow, derived from 'hills', is first recorded in A.D. 973 (Michael Costen pers. comm.). These dunes prevent marine inundation of the area between Uphill and Middlehope; this area is around 5 m O.D., 1 m below M.H.W.S.T. The height at which saltmarshes grow should increase up the Estuary with the height of spring tides. However, along the area of open coast between Middlehope and Clevedon, the ground surface is around 6 m O.D., just 0.4 m below M.H.W.S.T. Thus, the area behind the dunes has been deprived of sediment for longer than the area presently having an open coast. As the Roman ground surface in both areas equates with the modern surface, this difference must have occurred by the Roman period, so these dunes must have existed by then.

It seems certain that the coast

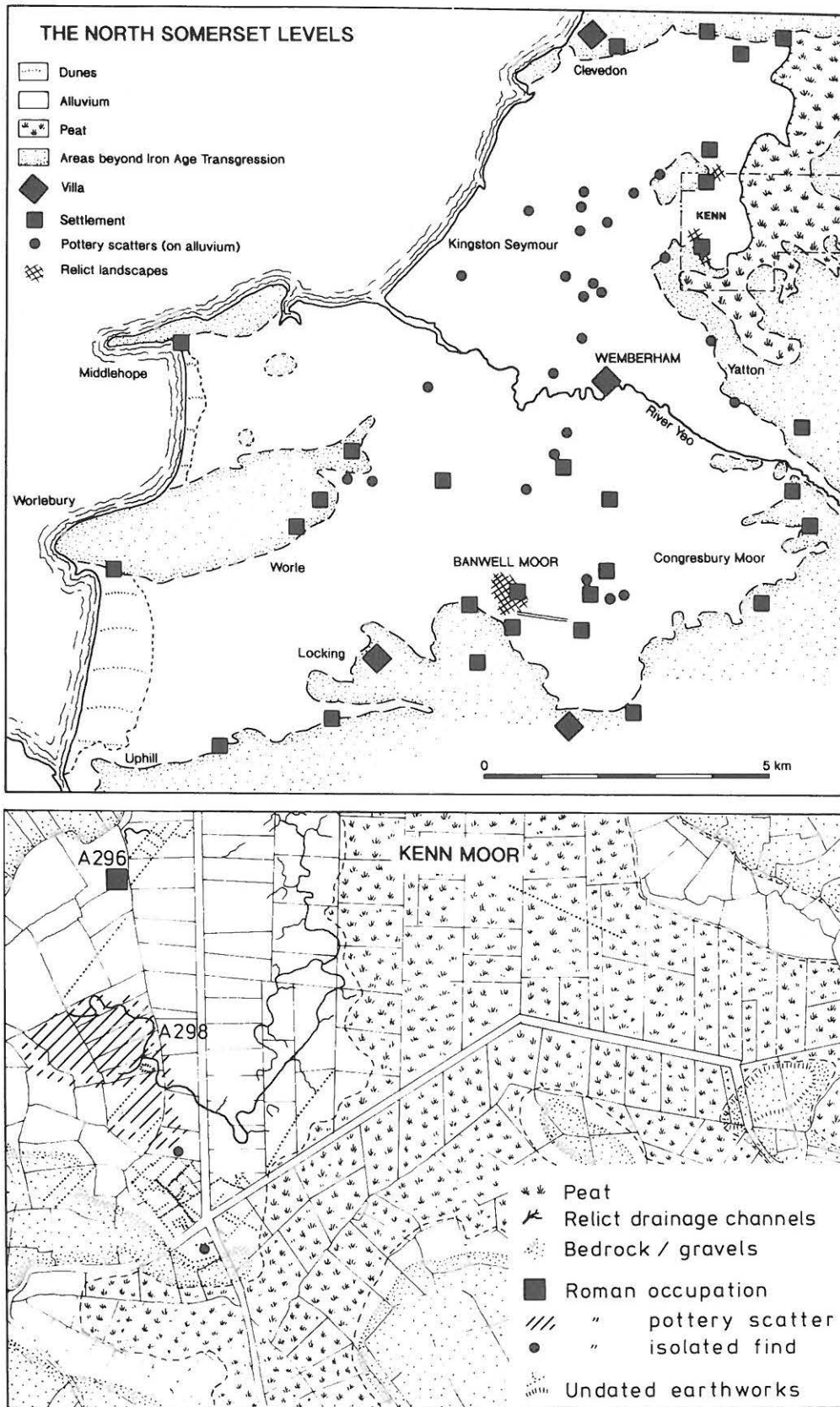


Figure 21. The north Somerset Levels showing sediment types and archaeology with below a detail of Kenn Moor.

between Middlehope and Clevedon was protected by a sea wall in Roman times; it is inconceivable that a villa would be constructed in an area liable to flood, and there are no known salt production sites, indicating a lack of tidal creeks. There is no evidence for there ever having been sand dunes along this coastline, though this possibility cannot be ruled out.

A substantial settlement existed south of Kenn (see Figure 21). This was first recognized as an extensive surface scatter of material, covering at least 40 acres; small scale excavations revealed floors, pits, ditches and a corn drier (Lilly and Usher 1972, p.39). Air photographs (Note 1) show there are also the earthworks of a 'relict landscape' similar to those in the Axe and Brue Valleys (McDonnell 1979; 1985), consisting of settlement enclosures, small paddocks, droveways and larger fields. It seems reasonable to relate these earthworks to the adjacent Roman occupation. A second relict landscape survives on Banwell Moor, and is also associated with Roman material (Figure 21; Avon S.M.R. 216). Elsewhere, such earthworks have probably been ploughed out, as on Banwell Moor, the relict landscape only survives in that area finally enclosed in A.D. 1797. These landscapes, along with the lack of post-Roman alluvium, illustrate that there has not been a significant marine inundation of this area since the Roman period.

In some areas, therefore, we can postulate a landscape largely free from flooding. The corn drier at Kenn may even indicate a certain amount of arable. However, there are hints that elsewhere, drainage may have been more of a problem. Many settlements appear to be located on slight islands. Several of the sites represented by surface scatters of pottery and occasionally stone, are noted as being located on slightly raised areas of alluvium. Some of the smaller mounds may be accumulations of occupation

debris, similar to the Dutch terps, or simply areas of more elevated alluvium. Examples include Bower House (Clarke 1976), Gout House Farm and South Mead (Clarke 1973) all in Banwell. At Eastend Farm in Clevedon, Roman pottery overlay a stone floor, within a 'ditched mound'; eight inches of peat formed over the floor, which, though obviously post-dating the period of occupation, does illustrate the very wet environment in which the settlement was located (Sykes *et al.* 1980).

Other islands are much larger. At Havage Drove/Rookery Farm in Banwell, the modern 1:25,000 map shows some field-boundaries in the area as dry ditches, not water filled rhyes, suggesting the land here is slightly higher than the surrounding area; this is confirmed by field observations, and has also produced Roman material (Clarke 1974). Other sites are located in areas where field boundaries form an oval pattern, suggesting areas of slightly higher ground. Examples include Middle Lane Farm, Elmleigh, Rodworth and Longworth in Kingston Seymour, and The Lawn in Banwell.

There are also quite large areas where settlements appear to have been absent. Along the line of the M5, there were just two occurrences of Roman pottery; Rust Bridge in Kenn and Phipp's Bridge on the Kingston Seymour/Puxton border (Fowler 1969, p.17). A far greater density of sites occur to the west in Kingston Seymour and to the east in Kenn; maybe the M5 runs through a low-lying backfen between the extensively settled Kenn-Yatton ridge, and the higher alluvial areas to the west. A similar low-lying area without evidence of Roman settlement is Congresbury Moor. This area has been fieldwalked by R. Broomhead, and no Roman material was found (information in Avon S.M.R.). A third area without significant Roman evidence is the very low-lying area between Locking and Worle; despite

extensive urban development and the construction of an air-field, the area has produced no evidence of Roman occupation. In all these low lying areas, it may well have been fresh water that caused drainage problems; though the coastal sand dunes would keep the tides out, they would also hinder freshwater discharge.

Therefore, the North Somerset Levels in the early first century A.D. probably consisted of a mixture of mature saltmarsh and brackish fen, with areas to the south only very infrequently inundated, via the major tidal rivers. At present there is no evidence for late Iron Age occupation, though this must simply await discovery, as it is now known from north of Brent Knoll (Broomhead 1991) and the Avonmouth Levels (Lawler *et al.* 1992; Russett 1990-1). In the Roman period, the open stretch of coastline was probably protected by a sea-wall, and the major tidal rivers embanked. Settlements then proliferated in a broad zone between Kingston Seymour and Banwell. In some areas, drainage was sufficiently good to allow field systems to be created, but elsewhere, occupation may have been restricted to slightly raised areas. Some areas appear to have been too wet for any settlement.

Many of these ideas are highly speculative, and are discussed more fully in a forthcoming thesis. This brief note may help to stimulate discussion of this much neglected area, and the author would appreciate any comments or observations. Finally, the author would like to take the opportunity of thanking all those individuals and institutions who have helped in his research, particularly in supplying unpublished material. In relation to the North Somerset Levels, M. Clarke, K. Gardner and D. Lilly have been particularly helpful.

**Note 1** R.C.H.M.E. CPE/UK 1869 3118; I would also like to thank Mr. D. Lilly for supplying copies of several obliques.

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