

THE ROMAN SETTLEMENT AND LANDSCAPE AT KENN MOOR, AVON : SECOND INTERIM REPORT ON SURVEY AND EXCAVATION, 1994/5

by Stephen Rippon

Introduction

The Kenn Moor Project aims to investigate the Roman landscape and environment of the North Somerset Levels, and how that distinctive topographic region was exploited from the first to fifth centuries AD. While there has been a considerable amount of excavation on Romano-British rural settlements generally, this work has concentrated in a limited number of topographical areas such as chalk downland and river-valley gravels. This project is concerned with the Roman exploitation of a different, previously neglected, landscape type: coastal alluvial wetlands.

Earlier field work on the North Somerset Levels had revealed the considerable extent of Roman settlement in this area. Although there are plenty of 'dots on maps' (eg Lilly and Usher 1972), a lack of excavation and palaeoenvironmental analysis means that we know little of their nature, environmental setting or chronological development. A critical question was the condition of the Levels in the Roman period, and in particular, whether they were open saltmarshes or reclaimed pastures and arable fields (Rippon 1992b; 1993, 219-26; 1995a).

In 1993 work started on a Roman settlement partially preserved as earthworks at Kenn Moor north east of Ham Farm in Yatton, near Weston-Super-Mare (Figures 1 and 15; the reasons for selecting this site are described in Rippon 1995a). The broad aims of the project were to determine the site's extent, chronology, nature, and most importantly, its environmental setting. During the 1993/4 season information was gathered on the

previous work carried out in 1959/60 (largely through the assistance of Mr D. Lilly). The Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (R.C.H.M.E.) plotted all the air photographic evidence for the earthworks of an extensive 'relict landscape', while a detailed survey of the four fields in which earthworks still survive was also carried out (see Wilson-North in Rippon 1995a). A programme of fieldwalking was also initiated, taking advantage of the relatively high proportion of fields on this part of the Levels that are under arable. The final component of that season's work was a limited excavation undertaken in September 1994, sectioning several elements of the relict landscape, with more extensive excavations on a well preserved corn-drier (see Rippon 1995a).

Field Survey 1994/5

Pollen Analysis

A programme of augering was designed to examine the upper part of the alluvial sequence in this part of the North Somerset Levels. The main transect, 1.4 km long, ran east from the Roman settlement to the centre of the peat-filled basin under Kenn Moor itself. Here a core 4.5 m deep was taken and sampled for pollen analysis (Stockley 1995). No radiocarbon dates have been obtained yet, though a general chronology can be established through comparison with a sequence 1.7 km to the north at Kenn Pier (Butler 1987), and south of the Mendips in the Brue Valley (Beckett and Hibbert 1979).

The base of the peat sequence was not reached, but at Kenn Pier this was located at a depth of 6.2 m and dated to

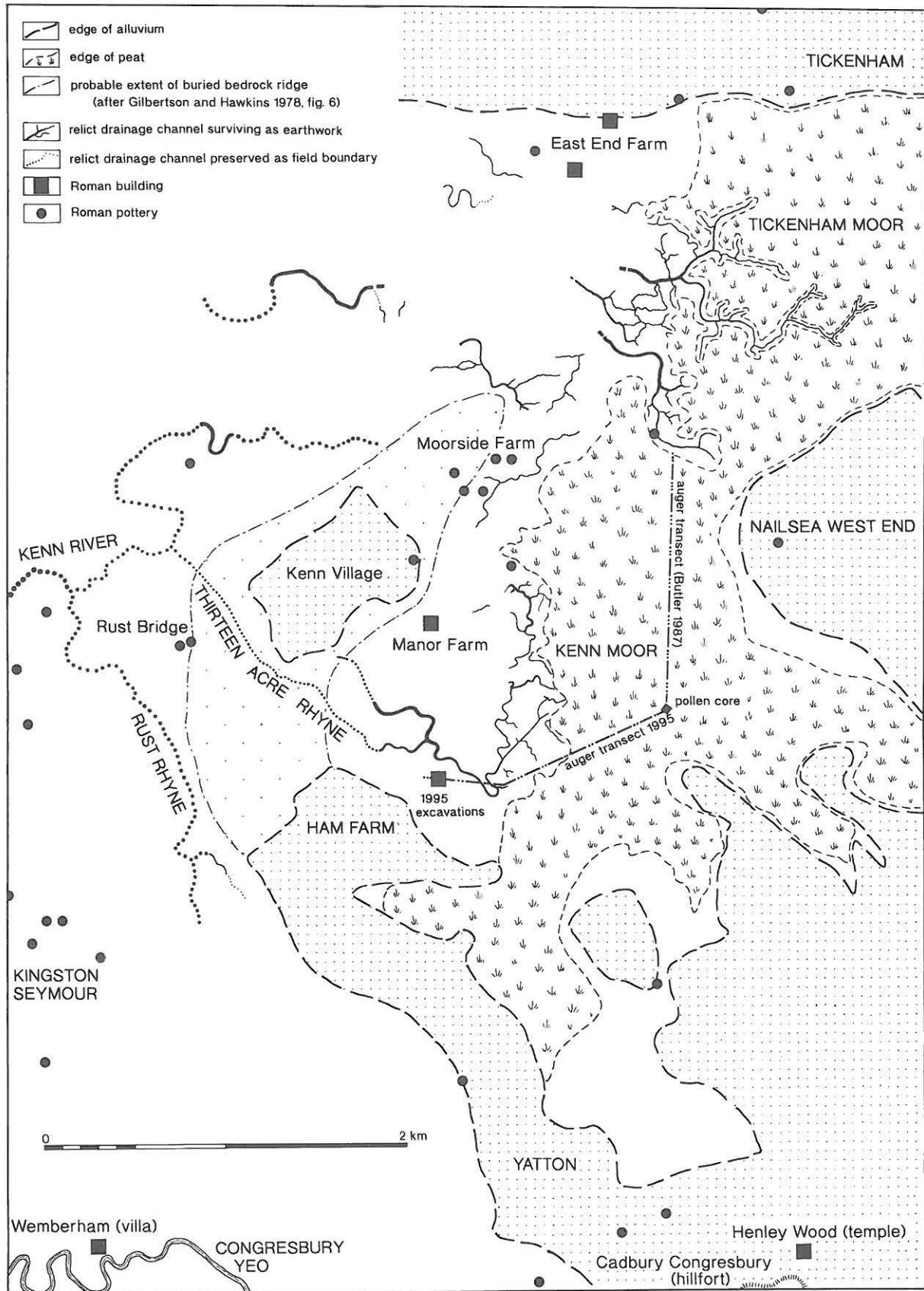


Figure 15. Kenn Moor: Roman settlement and landscape, including the submerged bedrock ridge between Ham Farm and Kenn village.

6200±100 BP (Butler 1987, 4). This date is somewhat earlier than on the main Somerset Levels, where the peat / clay interface has been dated to c. 5600-5400 BP (Beckett and Hibbert 1979, 591). The Kenn Moor core reached a maximum depth of 4.5 m. Dense alder carr dominated the area, with some *Betula* (birch). At a depth of 4.1 m there was a major decrease in *Alnus* (alder) pollen, with charcoal suggesting burning. Ostracod shells, *Chara* oospores, *Sparganium* (bur reed) and *Thelypteris* (marsh fern) pollen suggests increased wetness and fresh standing water. Between depths of 4.0 m and 3.1 m, *Alnus* regenerated and aquatic species declined.

At 3.1 m there was a marked decline in *Ulmus* (elm) on the surrounding dryland areas. The elm decline has been dated elsewhere on the Somerset Levels to c. 5000BP: Abbot's Way c. 4700 BP (Beckett and Hibbert 1979, 586); Gordano Valley c. 5260-5050 BP (Gilbertson *et al.* 1990, 282-3); Sweet Track Factory Site c. 4600 BP (Beckett and Hibbert 1979, 586). While there was a small amount of *Sphagnum* present at this depth, unlike the main Somerset Levels a widespread raised bog never appears to have developed here. The local vegetation remained an alder carr with fresh standing water up to a depth of 2.5 m when alder declined.

The *Tilia* (lime) decline occurred at a depth of 2.25 m. The lime decline has been dated elsewhere on the Somerset Levels to c. 3400BP (Abbot's Way: Beckett and Hibbert 1979, 589-90). At the same time *Corylus* (hazel), Gramineae (grasses), Chenopodiaceae (goosefoots), *Artemisia* (wormwood), *Plantago lanceolata* (ribwort plantain) and *Rumex* (dock) all increased. This widespread clearance of the surrounding uplands may have led to a calcareous deposit seen in many of the auger holes at depths between 2.0 and 2.4 m. At the same time there was a sharp decline in *Alnus* (alder) and increase in Cyperaceae (sedges). In

the main Somerset Levels two periods of flooding from calcareous run-off have been dated to c. 2600 and c. 2100 BP (Beckett and Hibbert 1979, 593).

On Kenn Moor peat formation then resumed. *Corylus* (hazel) decreased, while herb pollen and the weeds of disturbed ground and agriculture, presumably derived from the adjacent dryland areas, all increased. These plants include: *Daucus* (wild carrot), *Solanum* (nightshade); Rubiaceae (bedstraws); *Plantago lanceolata* (ribwort plantain); *Aster* type (daises); Compositae (dandelion); and *Artemisia* (wormwood). At a depth of 1.4 m, freshwater peat was replaced by marine alluvium (a blue/grey slightly silty clay) and Chenopodiaceae (goosefoots) pollen shows a marked increase. This presumably equates with the marine transgression seen widely around the Severn Estuary, and which reached as far inland as Glastonbury c. 2500 BP (Housley 1988, 79). Several thin organic rich and peaty layers may represent brief periods of vegetation recolonization during periods of marine regression.

At a depth of 0.6 m, saltmarsh conditions (represented by the blue/grey clay) were replaced by freshwater peat formed from a sedge-fen community. Cyperaceae (sedges) showed a marked increase, along with *Filipendula* (meadowsweet), *Apium* type (wild celery), *Aster* type (daises), *Artemisia* (wormwood) and *Plantago lanceolata* (ribwort plantain); *Alnus* (alder), Chenopodiaceae (goosefoots) and aquatic species decreased. At a depth of 0.3 m, aquatic species show a further marked decrease while Gramineae (grasses) increased, probably representing drainage. Without radiocarbon dating neither of these critical transitions can be dated. It is not known whether the peat sequence on Kenn Moor has been truncated by peat cutting, though turbaries are recorded at nearby Tickenham (Ross 1959, 262-3).

Auger Survey (Figure 15)

A series of 20 augerings in a transect 1.4 km long linked the Kenn Moor core with the Roman settlement. Of particular interest was the upper part of the alluvial sequence (the Iron Age transgression and subsequent peat growth), and so in most cases cores were only taken to a depth of 2 m; one in three cores went 3m deep.

The results showed that the calcareous horizon occurs throughout the area at a depth of 2.0 to 2.4 m. It is succeeded by c.0.1 to 0.6 m of peat (increasing in thickness from west to east), and then a considerable depth of blue/grey slightly silty clay. The thickness of this clay increases to the west, while the earlier work of Butler (1987) shows that this clay also increases in thickness to the north. This suggests that the sources of flooding were from both the north and west, indicating that the bedrock ridge between Yatton/Ham Farm and Kenn village had finally been submerged.

Contour Survey

The focus of the Roman occupation lies c.200 m north east of an outcrop of bedrock at Ham Farm, which forms the northern end of a long bedrock ridge stretching north west from Congresbury, and upon which the village of Yatton lies (Figure 15). This ridge continues below the surface of the alluvium to reappear at Kenn village, where it is capped by glacial deposits (Gilbertson and Hawkins 1978). Between Ham Farm and Kenn village the bedrock is no more than 5 m (c.0 m O.D.), and possibly less than 2 m, below the surface (Gilbertson and Hawkins 1978, 3-5, 36, Figure 36).

A key question to be addressed by this project was why the Roman settlement lay on the Levels as opposed to the adjacent bedrock. One possibility is that there was a slightly raised area upon which the occupation lay. Therefore a contour survey was

carried out to accurately plot the bedrock margin, and to determine the topography of the Roman settlement. A total of 19 fields were surveyed (c.50 ha), with readings taken on average at every 30 m (but more frequently over visible breaks of slope). The results show that the focus of the Roman settlement is indeed slightly raised.

Fieldwalking (Figure 16)

The 1994/5 season saw the programme of fieldwalking completed, with all the arable fields adjacent to the Roman settlement examined. A total of nine fields were walked, an area totalling 21.6 ha. There was a very short 'window of opportunity' for fieldwalking since ploughing was carried out so late (April) and the fields sown almost immediately.

When systematically walked, each field was laid out in collecting units 20 m apart and 20 m long with material collected from 1 m either side of the line. Traces of earthworks and changes in soil type were also plotted. All pottery, metalwork and worked stone was collected, but unworked stone was not recorded. Although all stone has been brought to the Levels through human action, most of it has been spread over the fields fairly recently through manuring (notably small limestone chippings). However, two concentrations of large sandstone slabs were noted, both corresponding to high densities of Roman pottery (in Fields 1 and 16; see below).

To the west, south and north-east, all the fields walked lay just beyond the main settlement focus. Three fields (1, 2, 27) produced virtually no material. Five fields (4, 9, 21, 22, 28) produced a light manure scatter with between 0.64 and 0.25 sherds per 20 m collection unit (an average of 0.47). Two fields produced higher densities. A slight mound in Field 1 produced a very discrete concentration of pottery (10 sherds per 20 m collection unit) and large slabs of sandstone; the rest of

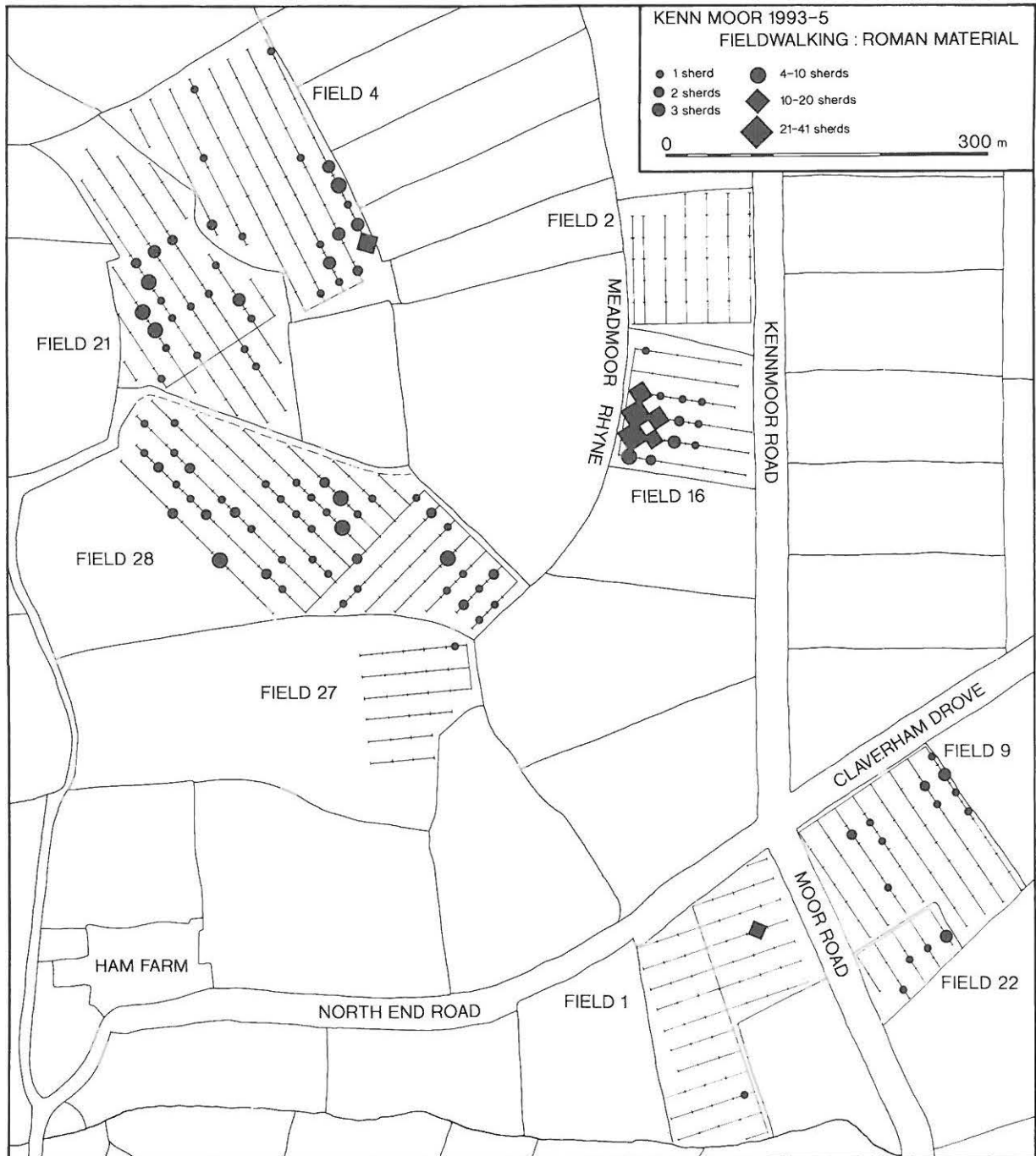


Figure 16. Kenn Moor: Roman material from fieldwalking 1993-5.

the field yielded just one sherd. The south east corner of Field 4 produced 17 sherds per 20 m collection unit, probably indicative of its proximity to the north western corner of the settlement area.

Of greatest interest was Field 16, which was ploughed for the first time in

several years during the winter of 1994/5. An area on its western side c.60 m by c.40 m produced a considerable amount of pottery (including large fresh unabraded sherds), large slabs of sandstone and one fragment of quern (subsequent excavations in this field are described

below). Curiously, the rest of the field was largely devoid of Roman pottery.

Excavations (Figure 17 and 18)

Relatively little material culture was obtained from the 1994 excavations around the corn drier complex, suggesting the areas investigated lay on the periphery of the main settlement focus (Figure 18, trenches A, B, C, and F); more material was recovered from trenches D and E c.350 m to the south. The 1995 excavations aimed to sample the relict landscape more widely, and in particular to locate the settlement focus in order to provide further dating evidence, as well as a greater range of artefacts from which to determine the nature and economy of the settlement.

Initially four trenches were opened in Field 5, where the R.C.H.M.E.'s plot of earthworks (now virtually ploughed out) indicated a system of small enclosures and paddocks. Due to the very dry summer, many of the former earthworks showed as vegetation marks, supporting slightly lush grass. A plan was quickly made of these already fading marks, which, along with the air photographic plot, allowed each trench to be accurately positioned over features in the former relict landscape. In addition, a fifth trench was excavated to the east in Field 16, which had produced a concentration of Roman material when walked the previous spring.

Trench G

Trench G was designed to investigate what appeared to be a small, slightly raised, ditched enclosure. The earliest context proved to be a spread of stone (108; Figure 19) at the western end of the trench, associated with a scatter of pottery and animal bone. This was 0.1 m below the slightly raised area to the east, which comprised a light brown alluvium (137, 141). The edges of this slightly raised area were marked by U-shaped ditches to the north west (143)

and north east (105). The fill of the two ditches was very similar; a lower layer of light-mid blue/grey silty clay, buried by a rather darker horizon, in turn sealed by lighter blue/brown alluvium. The darker blue/grey alluvium in ditch 143 (layer 136) also sealed the spread of stone 108 (as layer 109, c.0.1 m thick), but did not extend over the slightly higher ground to the east (137/141).

Neither the ditches, nor cleaning of the enclosed area, produced more than a handful of finds, though two discrete concentrations of stone were uncovered when removing the ploughsoil above 137/141. Just two features were uncovered within the enclosed area, both shallow linear hollows oriented north-west / south-east, one of which contained a considerable amount of charcoal and burnt clay. Air photographs and vegetation marks appeared to show a number of other features on this orientation.

Trench I

Trench I produced a similar range of evidence to Trench G. In the eastern arm, ditch 130 contained the same broad division of fills, but had a substantial dump of sandstone slabs in the bottom and rather more pottery and bone. In the southern arm of the trench, ditch 147 was oriented north-west / south-east, at right angles to ditch 130. This contained a rather more complex sequence of fills, with a lower layer of light-mid blue/grey silty clay, sealed by a series of lenses of organic rich clays with charcoal, burnt clay and a dump of sandstone slabs. These were in turn covered by a rather darker blue/grey alluvium (layer 135) very similar to 136 in Trench G.

This darker horizon (135) also spread beyond ditch 147, sealing a spread of stone and a U-shaped gully to the south west; layer 135 extended 11 m north east of ditch 147, but elsewhere in Trench I was just



Figure 17. Kenn Moor: Aerial view of Roman settlement in September 1995, from the south east. The excavations are visible in Fields 5 and 16 (centre), and faint vegetation marks of the relict landscape can be seen in Field 6 (bottom left).

confined to the top of ditch 130. The only other feature in Trench I was a second U-shaped gully (133) which was on a slightly different orientation to the rest of the Roman landscape. The volume of finds from this trench, both in the topsoil and the ditches/gullies was noticeably greater than in Trench G. Along with the dumps of stone, charcoal and burnt clay this suggests proximity to the focus of settlement.

Trench J

In both the air photographic plot of Field 5 (Rippon 1995a, Figure 15), and the detailed earthwork survey in Fields 6 and 7 to the south (Rippon 1995a, Figure 12), a number of features are revealed on a different orientation to the rest of the Roman landscape. In Fields 6 and 7 these features appear to pre-date the main pattern of earthworks

(Wilson-North in Rippon 1995a). A ditch (159) in Trench J was also at variance to the rest, though on a different orientation to the earliest phase of earthworks in Fields 6 and 7. The profile (steep sided and flat bottomed) and shallow depth of 159 also distinguish it from excavated ditches on the main north-west / south-east and north-east / south-west orientation.

Ditch 112 in the northern arm of Trench J was part of this main landscape (Figure 20). Two distinct phases were represented; an earlier broad, deep ditch with a very uniform fill of light-mid blue/grey silty clay, recut when largely silted up by a narrower, shallower ditch. At the base of the latter was a rather darker alluvium, with some charcoal. A second feature (110) in Trench J also on the same orientation as the rest of the Roman landscape was

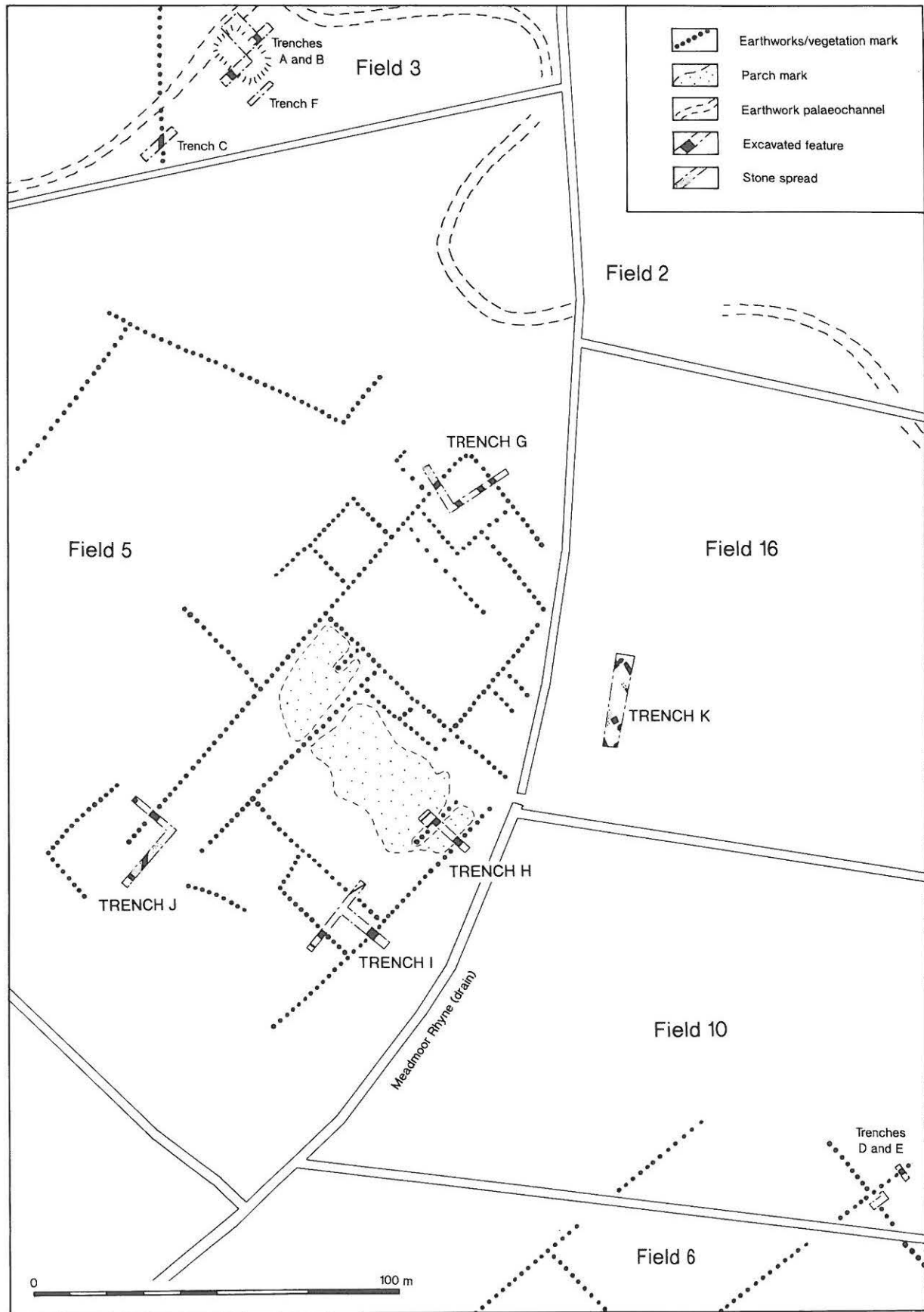


Figure 18. Kenn Moor: Excavations in 1994-5, with a plan of the relict landscape from earthworks and vegetation marks (including now ploughed out features plotted by the R.C.H.M.E.).



Figure 19. Kenn Moor: Spread of stone rubble (108) in Trench G, which was sealed by c. 0.1m of alluvium (from the east).

a shallow, linear hollow sealed by a spread of stone rubble; this lay just to the south of 159. A handful of pottery sherds and animal bones was recovered from all of these features, but insufficient to suggest that this Trench lay adjacent to the focus of occupation.

The only other feature in Trench J was an oval pit 114 (or the rounded butt end of a ditch), the edges of which were difficult to determine due to the similarity of the fill and the material into which it was cut (which might suggest its rapid backfilling?). Apart from several tiny scraps of bone, the only finds were a large possibly shaped stone (0.65 by 0.5 m) inclined at 45° which overlay a large, fragment of (?)sheep scapula.

Trench H

During the very dry summer, a remarkable parch mark developed in Field 5, 70 m east-west and 25 m north-south (Figure 18). Trench H was laid out in order to investigate this mark, and its relationship to the north-east / south-west oriented ditch also sectioned in Trench I (Ditch 130). Once the ploughsoil was removed it was somewhat of a surprise to discover the Triassic bedrock comprising red-brown sandy clays of the 'Mercian Mudstone Group,' formerly called 'Keuper Red Marls' (Whittaker and Green 1983, 37-8). The bedrock surface was heavily disturbed by periglacial processes (involutions) caused by discontinuous permafrost, as has been recorded elsewhere in the region (eg Gilbertson and Hawkins 1978, 5, 16).

Three features were cut into the bedrock in Trench H, all having the north-east /south-west orientation. Ditch 117 was the same feature as Ditch 130 in Trench I, while Ditch 119 lay 8 m to the west. Both had relatively smooth, shallow sides and flat bottoms, presumably reflecting the more stable nature of the material into which they were cut (several of the ditches cut into alluvium showed evidence of their sides having slumped). Feature 163 was a shallow gully with mainly steep sides and a flat bottom, 3 m west of Ditch 119. This appears to have been too small to have acted as a drain, and its profile suggests it may have held a sill beam, or perhaps it acted as an eaves drip gully. Against this structural interpretation, Trench H produced very few finds, which is rather surprising since it might be expected that this small 'island' of bedrock would have provided the focus for settlement.

Trench K

Field 16 was walked in the Spring of 1995, revealing a distinct concentration of stone and pottery towards its south west corner (Figure 16). In recent years

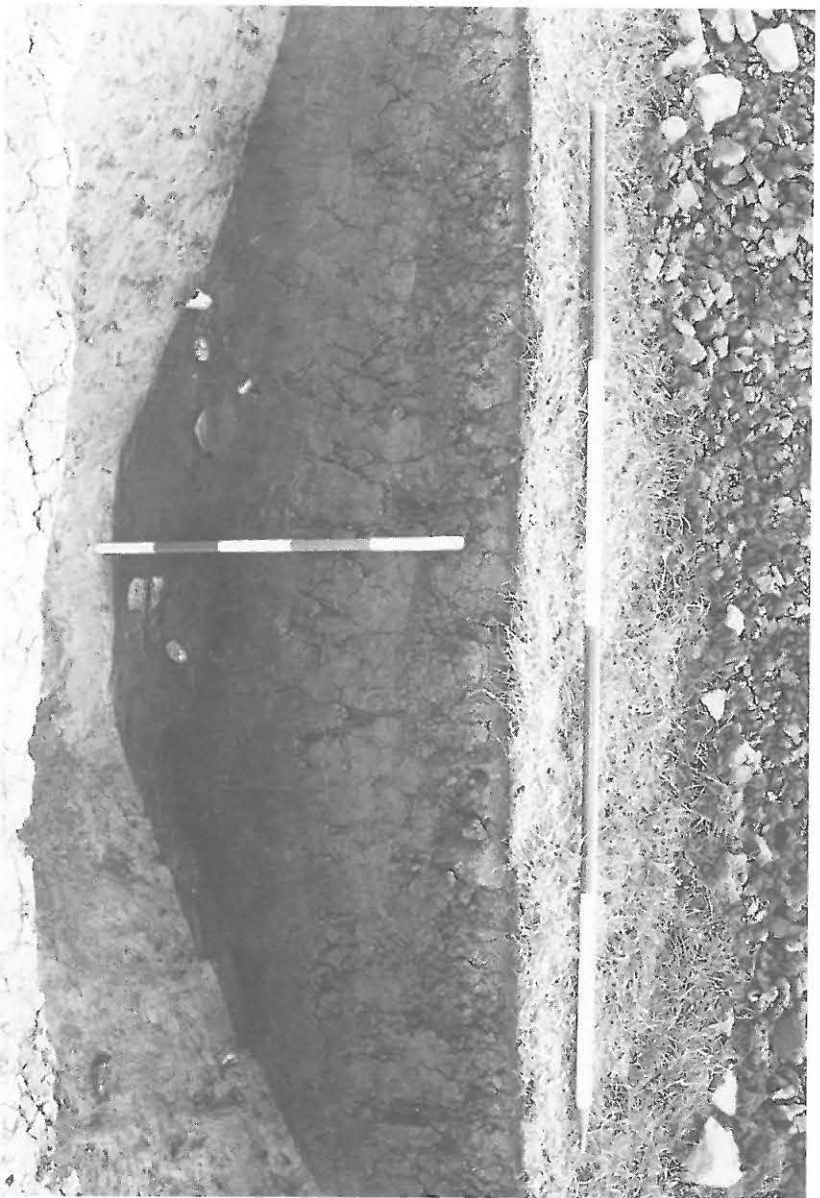


Figure 20. Kenn Moor: Ditch 112 in Trench J (from the north).



Figure 21. Kenn Moor: Pit 205 in Trench K (from the north west).

all the arable land in this area has been sown for maize, which has not been harvested until October. Thus, while the relatively high proportion of arable land around the Kenn Moor site allowed a large area to be walked, it also meant that equally large areas were unavailable for excavation (the season being confined to the University vacation which ends in September). However, because of the very dry summer this year, the crop was taken out unusually early, allowing one week at the end of this year's excavation season in which to investigate the pottery/stone scatter.

An area 5 by 25 m was cleared in that part of the field with the greatest concentration of material in the ploughsoil. The whole trench was rapidly cleaned in order to identify the major features; a smaller sample area was trowelled more carefully several times in order to investigate a range of more ephemeral traces of occupation.

Two ditches (201, 208) were excavated which conformed to the north-west / south-east and north-east / south-west orientation of the main Roman landscape. On the same alignment were two-steep sided and flat-bottomed pits (205, 210), c. 2 m square and 0.4 m deep. The bottom of pit 205 (Figure 21) contained a thin layer of yellow/olive green crumbly silty clay, sealed by dumps of alluvium and midden material. This bore a striking resemblance to cess, and the subsequent dumping of material might support the hypothesis that this feature was briefly used as a cesspit. However, considering its shallow depth, and the lack of cess from the other square pit, this may not have been their original function. Like ditch 208, both the pits were backfilled with midden material containing a large amount of fresh unabraded pottery, animal bone, charcoal, burnt clay and daub. A number of more ephemeral features were also excavated, including three pits/hollows, a shallow gully, and several alignments of possible stake

holes.

Discussion and conclusions

Local Topography

One curious aspect of the Roman settlement at Kenn Moor is why it was located down on the Levels when an outcrop of bedrock lay so close. The contour survey indicates that the focus of the Roman settlement is in fact slightly raised above the surrounding area, and excavation and augering has shown that, while most of the Roman settlement lies on at least 2 m of alluvium, there is a very small previously unrecorded outcrop of Triassic bedrock just below the surface under part of the site. This may account for the slightly raised nature of the general area, since even where buried, the overlying alluvium is thinner than elsewhere on the Levels and so would have consolidated less. However, it is worth stressing that this area of bedrock does not appear to have been a focus for occupation, unless it was kept very clean; the features in Trench H produced the fewest finds of any in this year's excavation.

Palaeochannel Systems

Until the first millennium BC, Kenn Moor was surrounded on three sides by bedrock, with a continuous ridge running north from Congresbury, through Yatton to Kenn village (Figure 15). Therefore, during the earlier prehistoric period (into the Bronze Age), Kenn Moor was a fairly sheltered embayment with the only source of marine inundation being from the north. However, during the later prehistoric period the central part of this ridge (between Ham Farm and Kenn village) was finally submerged by at least 2 m of alluvium. Thenceforth, Kenn Moor was now subject to a second source of inundation, from the west.

These alluvial sediments were laid down in a saltmarsh environment, and

the landscape would have been traversed by a network of creeks. Once the flood waters had receded, the creeks gradually silted up, and peat growth resumed in the lowest lying parts of Kenn Moor, sealing the Iron Age alluvium and its relict drainage channels. However, in areas not sealed by peat these palaeochannels remained as features in the landscape into the Roman and medieval period. For example, the earthwork mound upon which the Roman corn drier lay (excavated in 1994), was built adjacent to one of these palaeochannels (Rippon 1995a, Figures 13-14), and further west this same palaeochannel was used in the medieval period as a field boundary (Thirteen Acre Rhyne; Figure 15). Indeed, many of the former saltmarsh creeks have become fossilised in the post-reclamation field boundary pattern (see Rippon 1995b for another example of this process).

The widespread occurrence of Roman pottery scatters on the surface of the North Somerset Levels, and several areas of earthwork relict landscape, have suggested that there was no large scale marine inundation during the post-Roman period, as for example was seen south of the Mendips (Rippon 1992; forthcoming) and on the Caldicot Level in Gwent (Bell 1995b, 136-42). However, the results of this season's excavations at Kenn Moor suggest that there was indeed a very limited period of flooding in the late or post-Roman period, sealing features and stone spreads in the lowest lying parts of the site by c. 0.1 m of alluvium. This receives some support from unpublished work at Rust Bridge 1.5 km to the north west, where a Roman ground surface lay buried under c.0.5 m of alluvium (Hume 1993).

The pattern of palaeochannels to the north of Kenn village (on Tickenham Moor) also suggests a different sequence to the area further south (Kenn Moor). At the latter, peat appears to overlie the relict palaeochannels, whereas further north a system of

creeks appears to overlie the peat. It seems, therefore, as if there was a limited marine transgression on the North Somerset Levels in the late or post-Roman period, but which was concentrated to the north of Kenn village, with only a little flood water reaching the Roman settlement near Ham Farm, possibly penetrating along the Thirteen Acre Rhyne palaeochannel.

The Roman Settlement

The work of the past two years has for the first time clearly established a Roman date for the relict landscape on Kenn Moor. A combination of earthwork survey and fieldwaking suggests that the complex covers an area roughly 600 m north to south and 200 m east to west (c.12 ha). Occupation appears to have begun during the second century, with most of the complex being used during the third century. However, by the fourth century the area occupied was largely restricted to Field 16.

Provisional results from the palaeoenvironmental analysis indicate a freshwater, reclaimed, landscape where the North Somerset Levels were protected from marine inundation by sea walls and floodbanks along the tidal rivers. The settlement appears to have been wholly agricultural in its nature. Not surprisingly, considering its location in a reclaimed landscape, no evidence of briquetage (suggesting salt production) was found.

The relative balance of arable and pastoralism in the economy of this settlement is yet to be determined; weed seeds from the burnt grain assemblage excavated last year might indicate whether the cereals were grown down on the Levels or on areas of bedrock elsewhere. The plan of the relict landscape complex suggests a strong involvement in livestock management with numerous small paddocks and enclosures close to the settlement focus. The amount of stone

rubble suggests that buildings lay close by, though none was actually located.

Trench K appears to have lain at the focus of the fourth century settlement. Most features contained frequent flecks of charcoal, burnt clay, and greater quantities of fresh unabraded pottery and animal bone compared to the ditches in Trenches G-J. Despite the careful hand-digging of these features, no coins were found and the only piece of metalwork was one nail head. The only personal items recovered were two small glass beads, though layer 108 (Trench G) produced a fragment of shale bracelet. This lack of small finds supports the impression drawn from a rapid assessment of the pottery, which reveals few fine wares, that this was not a wealthy settlement.

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