

ROMAN AND MEDIEVAL SETTLEMENT ON THE NORTH SOMERSET LEVELS: SURVEY AND EXCAVATION AT BANWELL AND PUXTON, 1996

by Stephen Rippon

Introduction

The North Somerset Levels Project is investigating the Roman and medieval exploitation and management of an extensive area of coastal wetland beside the Severn Estuary, near Weston-super-Mare. Work started in 1993/4 at Kenn Moor in the northern part of the Levels (Figure 1), where an extensive programme of survey and excavation established the extent, chronology and nature of a well-preserved Roman landscape (Rippon 1995; 1996b). The site consists of a settlement focus, comprising one or possibly two nuclei of small platforms and paddocks, surrounded by slightly larger enclosures and fields. Fieldwalking showed that the latter were heavily manured during the Roman period, in contrast to areas beyond. Though a very small amount of early Roman pottery was recovered from excavations within the settlement, most activity dated to the 3rd and 4th centuries. Evidence of both arable farming and animal husbandry was recovered along with traces of iron, lead/tin and possibly copper working, suggesting a diverse economic base. A wide range of palaeoenvironmental indicators (diatoms, foraminifera, plant macrofossils, small mammals and snails) suggest a largely freshwater environment, indicating that this part of the North Somerset Levels, north of a major tidal river (the Congresbury Yeo), was a reclaimed landscape relatively free from tidal inundation.

The coastline south of the Congresbury Yeo, between outcrops of bedrock at Uphill and Worlebury, was protected by a belt of sand dunes during the Roman period, and there is no reason to believe that the modern dunes between Worlebury and Middlehope were not also in existence at that time (Figure 1; Rippon 1997, 34-5). However, there is no evidence that the

stretch of coastline between Middlehope and Clevedon has ever been protected by dunes: for the northern part of the North Somerset Levels to have been free from tidal inundation both the open coast and the tidal Congresbury Yeo river must have been protected by sea walls and flood banks. The presence of a late Roman villa at Wemberham (Figure 1), also to the north of the Yeo, would support the hypothesis that this area was fully reclaimed: such a wealthy structure would not be built in a landscape liable to flood.

In 1996 attention moved south of the Yeo, in order to establish whether that area was also reclaimed during the Roman period. To the south of the Mendips, in the Central Somerset Levels, a now silted-up tidal river, the 'Siger', divided a reclaimed Roman landscape to the north from open saltmarsh to the south (Rippon 1992; 1997, 64-77). A second aim of the 1996 programme was to start work on understanding the post-Roman exploitation of the Levels. It is known that coastal parts of the North Somerset Levels were flooded during the post-Roman period (Rippon 1997, 123-7). Recolonization of the area was certainly underway by Domesday, when several settlements and numerous ploughteams are recorded, indicating that the Levels had been re-reclaimed. Key questions are, firstly, the date of this recolonization, secondly, whether these early settlements initially lay on a seasonally exploited saltmarsh or in an environment already protected from inundation by sea walls, and thirdly, the extent to which they were agriculturally based as opposed to exploiting the rich natural wetland resources.

In order to address these questions, two sites were chosen. Near Waterloo Farm, on Banwell Moor, work began on a relict landscape of broadly similar type to that at Kenn Moor,

and so potentially of Roman date (Figures 1-6). Particular attention focused upon a small square enclosure which appeared to be set apart from the main field system (such a feature was not present at Kenn Moor). At Puxton, work started on a third relict landscape (also potentially Roman), as well as a large enclosure preserved within the 'historic landscape' (ie still in use as part of the present pattern of roads and field-boundaries; Figures 7-12). Such enclosures, or 'infields', are known throughout the higher coastal parts of the Severn Estuary Levels and may represent the settlements that first recolonized the post-Roman saltmarsh (Rippon 1994, 244-5; 1996a, 42-5; 1997 in press, 25-8, 172-3; Gilbert, this vol).

Waterloo Farm, Banwell Moor

(Figures 2-6)

The extensive relict landscape on Banwell Moor (Figure 2) is not dissimilar to that at Kenn Moor, though there is not such an obvious settlement focus. The earthwork preservation is now poor due to recent ploughing, though the 1946 air

photographic coverage for this area is good (NMR 3G/TUD/UK15/21 PART II/13 JAN 46/5095), indicating that the complexity of earthworks appears to be greatest to the south east of Waterloo Farm (ST 3900 6160). In 1974 tile drains were inserted into this field, which produced 26 Romano British grey ware sherds and a scatter of stone, all from the western part of the field (Clarke 1974).

Immediately to the west of this findspot, the relict landscape includes an isolated square enclosure to the north east of a double-ditched linear feature oriented north west-south east. This complex was the focus of the 1996 season of fieldwork which comprised fieldwalking, earthwork and resistivity survey, soil chemistry analysis and excavation/palaeoenvironmental sampling (Figures 4-6). Fields to the south, west and north of that containing the enclosure (and including other parts of the relict landscape) were walked under ideal conditions yet only a handful of Roman sherds were recovered (all undiagnostic grey wares) (Figure 2). Earthwork preservation is now poor, though parts of the enclosure do survive as both slight earthworks

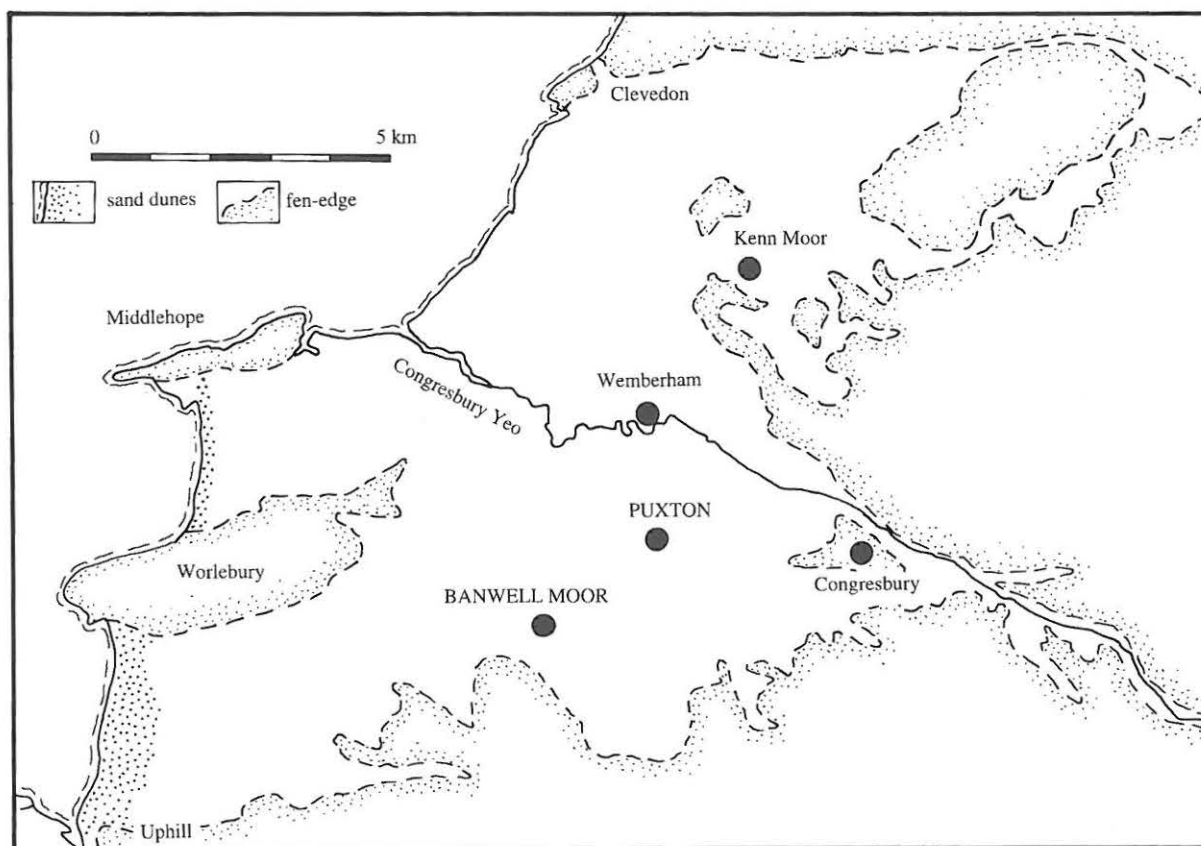


Figure 1: The North Somerset Levels, showing places mentioned in the text.

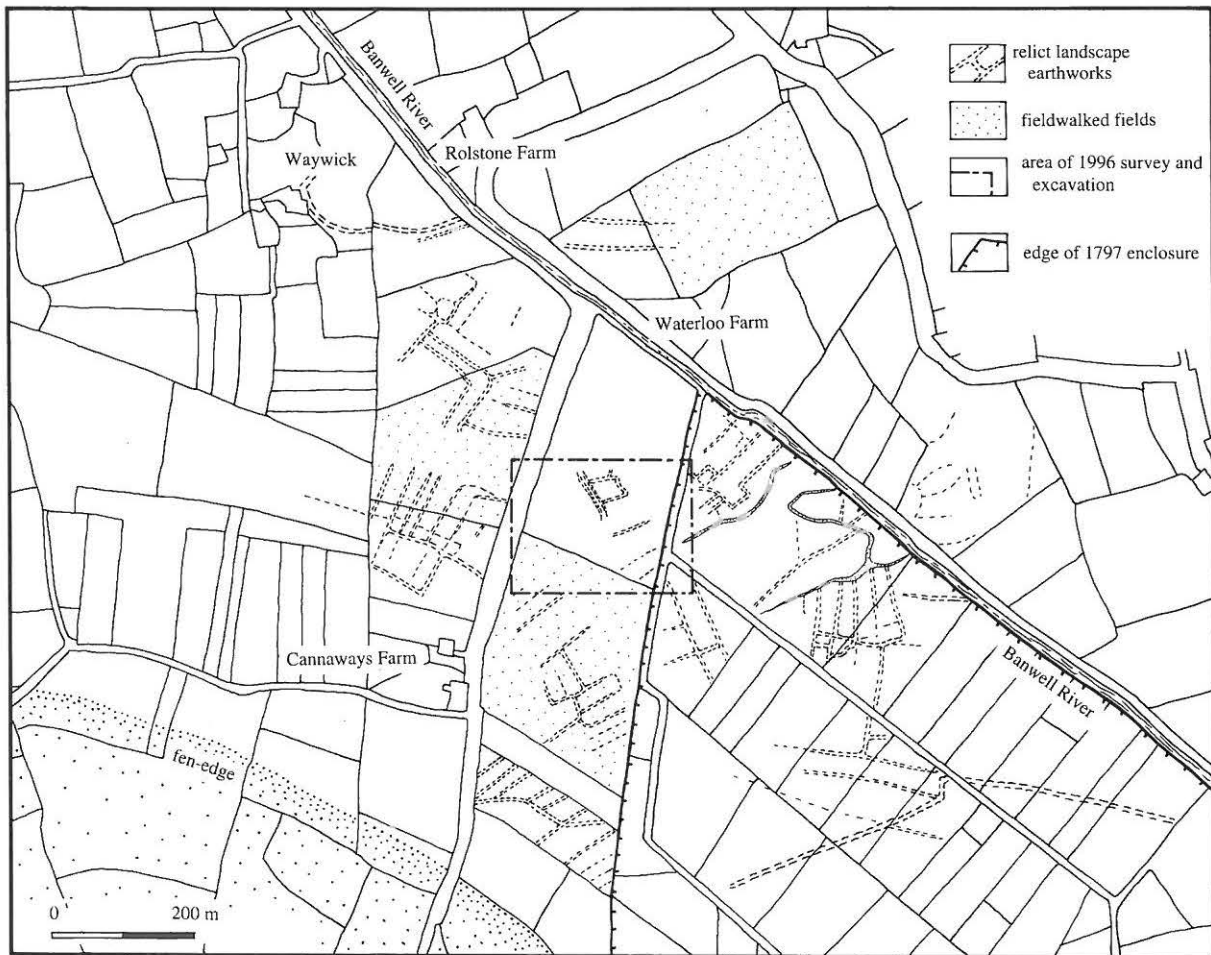


Figure 2: the Roman relict landscape on Banwell Moor.



Figure 3: View of Banwell Moor from the south east. The enclosure investigated in 1996 lies in the darker coloured field top left. Parts of the relict landscape are visible as vegetation marks in the field below (centre left).

and vegetation marks (Figure 4A). The resistivity survey worked well, revealing the enclosure and a double ditched feature that showed on the 1946 air photograph, along with an area of high resistance to the south east (Figure 4B).

This combination of air photographic, resistivity and earthwork evidence allowed a T-shaped trench to be accurately positioned over the enclosure and adjacent double ditched linear feature (Figures 4-5). The latter was sectioned where it formed the south west side of the enclosure. Both ditches (F.2 and F.4) were c3 m wide and at least 1 m deep (excavation could not be completed as the trenches flooded at this depth, though the ditch profiles suggest a maximum depth of c1.5 m). The function of these two ditches is unclear; they may have marked a trackway, though there was just 4 m between them.

The south eastern enclosure ditch (F.6) was also c3 m wide and at least 1 m deep (Figure 6). All three ditches were filled with a similar sequence of layers: mid to light blue-grey slightly silty clay, below a more heavily reduced mid to dark blue-grey slightly silty clay, sealed by a more oxidised mid blue-brown silty clay. There were few finds from the ditches: a handful of pottery sherds and fragments of animal bone, along with larger amounts of stone and burnt clay.

The interior of the enclosure was found to be relatively empty (though the very limited nature of the trenching must be acknowledged), apart from a shallow hollow (F.8) containing a large amount of stone and burnt clay. The only other feature was a post medieval drainage gully ('gripe'). The resistivity survey appears to have rather exaggerated its size, which was found to be just c0.5 m wide, with a recent land drain inserted down its centre (Figure 5).

The area of high resistance on the resistivity survey to the south east of F.6 was found to relate to an area of slightly raised, undisturbed, natural alluvium. To the south east of this, there was something of a surprise, in the form of a buried land surface and associated series of features (Figure 5). Five narrow, steep sided and flat bottomed gullies were all oriented north-east/south-west (ie on the same orientation as the enclosure and relict landscape). They were cut from what appeared to be a buried soil

horizon, c0.5-0.6 m below the present surface, which merged with a dark blue-grey layer above tentatively interpreted as a possible buried turf line. This was sealed by sterile natural alluvium very similar in character to the uppermost part of the Wentlooge Formation into which the gullies were cut. The buried soil was associated with flecks of charcoal, small and abraded pottery sherds, fragments of bone, and larger amounts of stone and burnt clay. The possible turf line was similar in character to the reduced horizon within the enclosure ditches (F.2, F.4, F.6), though no stratigraphic link could be made due to truncation by recent ploughing.

Pottery from the enclosure ditches and the buried soil is all of (?)late prehistoric/early Roman date with both native (1st century BC/1st century AD) and Romanized wares (late 1st century to mid 2nd century AD (I would like to thank Michael Fulford for commenting on this material). The date of the later inundation that affected parts of the site is unknown, as is the date of the rest of the relict landscape.

The relict landscape may represent a second phase of activity on the site, post-dating the inundation that sealed the buried soil and its associated gullies. Alternatively, the whole of this landscape may be of early Roman date, and it was only the very lowest-lying areas that were totally sealed by later alluvium, possibly in the late/post-Roman period (as seen at Kenn Moor: Rippon 1996a). There certainly appears to have been a period of abandonment before the episode of flooding, all the gullies had silted up and were sealed by the possible turf horizon.

There is some support for this hypothesis of a single date for all the features, notably the broadly similar orientation shared by the buried gullies, enclosure and relict landscape in this part of the site. The reason why parts of the relict landscape survive as earthworks may be due to their size, allowing them to protrude above the flood sediments, or that they lie in slightly more elevated areas. Support for this comes from the fact that no trace of a buried soil was found within the enclosure suggesting that it was originally slightly higher than the buried soil outside.

The Roman site on Banwell Moor is different to Kenn Moor in a number of ways. The date is far earlier, and there is much less material culture (notably pottery) from both the

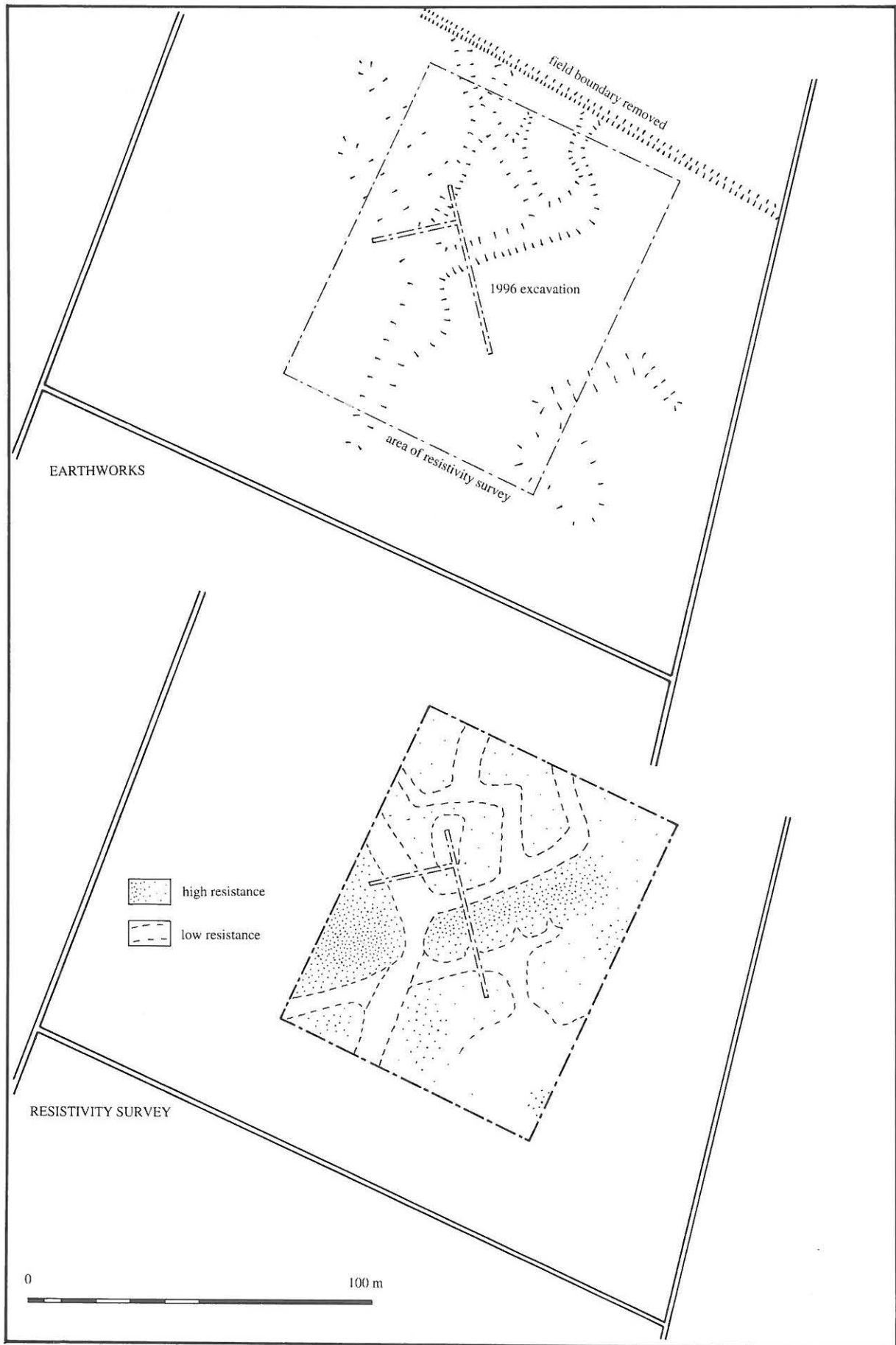


Figure 4: Banwell Moor: earthwork survey (top) and resistivity survey (bottom).

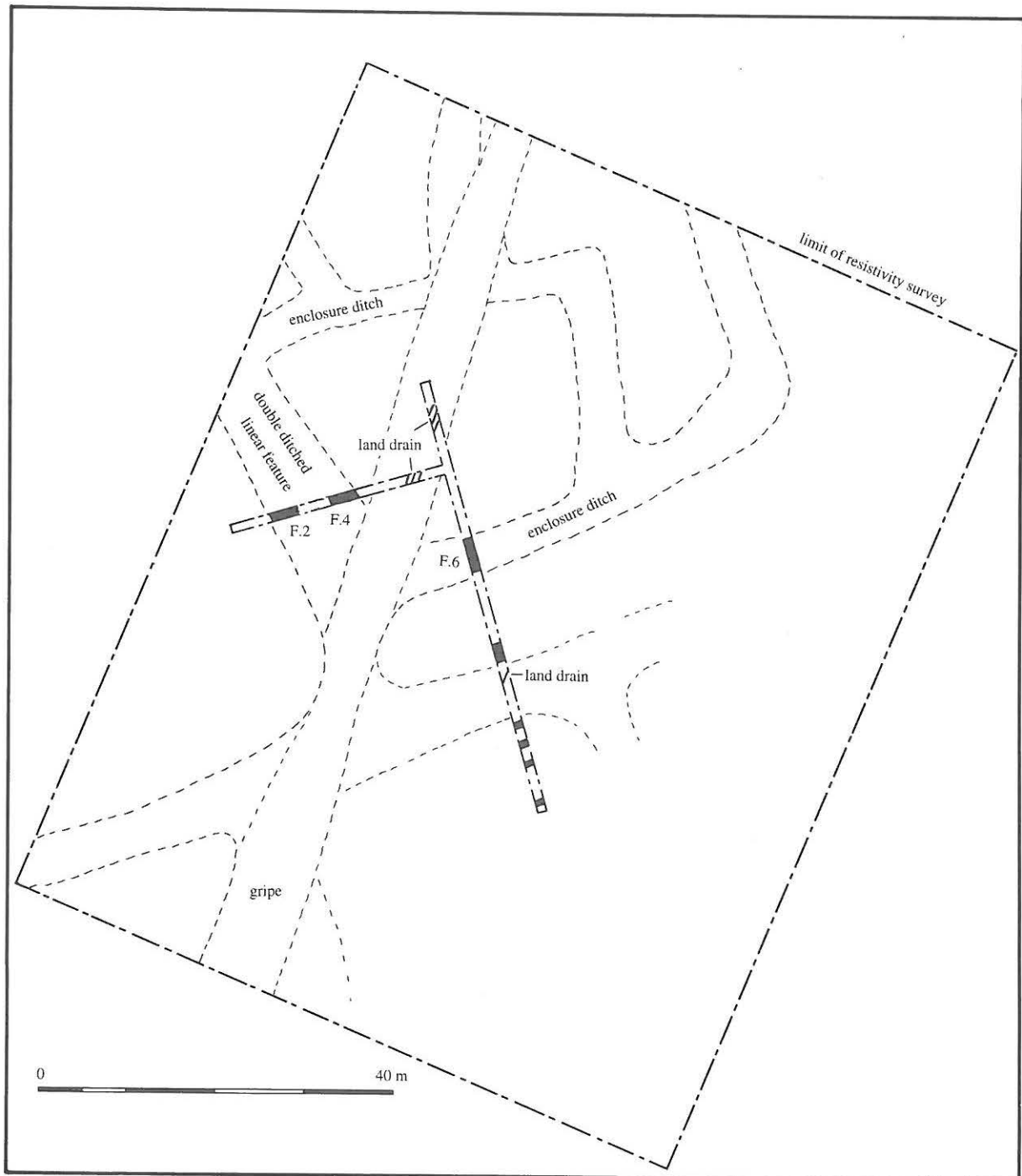


Figure 5: Banwell Moor: overall plan of major excavated features from air photographs, surviving earthworks and resistivity survey results, along with the excavated features. The resistivity survey had greatly exaggerated the width of the post medieval gripe, possibly due to the presence of a ceramic land drain.

excavations and fieldwalking. The relatively abundant stone and burnt clay suggest some form of structure, though the lack of other domestic refuse might indicate occasional/seasonal use, perhaps in a pastoral landscape (hence the lack of a manure scatter in the surrounding fields). Analysis of the wide range

of palaeoenvironmental material recovered (plant macrofossils, snails, and samples taken for diatoms, foraminifera and pollen) should show whether the site lay in a freshwater (reclaimed) or saltmarsh environment, and so help to establish the initial date of reclamation on the North Somerset Levels.

Church Field, Puxton

(Figures 7-12)

It is well known that there was an extensive period of post-Roman flooding that affected many of the Severn Estuary Levels (Rippon 1996a; 1997, 123-7). Most areas appear to have been recolonized by Domesday, though the exact date and nature of this settlement expansion back onto the Levels is unknown. The fieldwork at Puxton aims to shed new light on this critical period of landscape history.

An extensive relict landscape, similar to that at Kenn and Banwell, is spread over much of Puxton Moor, in the area later occupied by an extensive medieval common meadow known as the Dolmoors (Figure 7; Broomhead 1994; Gardner 1985). Several fields in this area are under plough and have produced a few abraded Romano-British sherds (Broomhead 1994, 14, fig 3; Keith Gardner pers comm), though the landscape itself is undated (but see below).

The church at Puxton lies on the northern edge of a large oval enclosure (Church Field: c 200 m by 100 m), marked by stretches of road, field boundary and earthworks (Figures 7-9). Such 'infields' are known throughout the Severn Estuary Levels, and many have two or more of the following characteristics: field-names indicative of late Saxon habitation (eg 'worth' and 'huish'), association with medieval churches or chapels, and surface finds of Roman and/or medieval pottery. Post-medieval settlement, and any churches, tend to be located towards one edge of the infield rather than at the centre (eg Rippon 1994, fig 12.4, 12.5; 1996a, 17, 27). The nature of these sites is unclear, though a hypothesis has been put forward that they represent the primary colonising settlements following the post-Roman flooding (Rippon 1996a, fig 4; 1997, fig 7). The oval shape may be the result of their having been enclosed from a relatively open landscape and so were unconstrained by existing landscape features; the same is seen with woodland assarts (eg in



Figure 6: Banwell Moor: enclosure ditch F.6, excavated as a box section. The organic rich lower fill can be seen just above the water level.

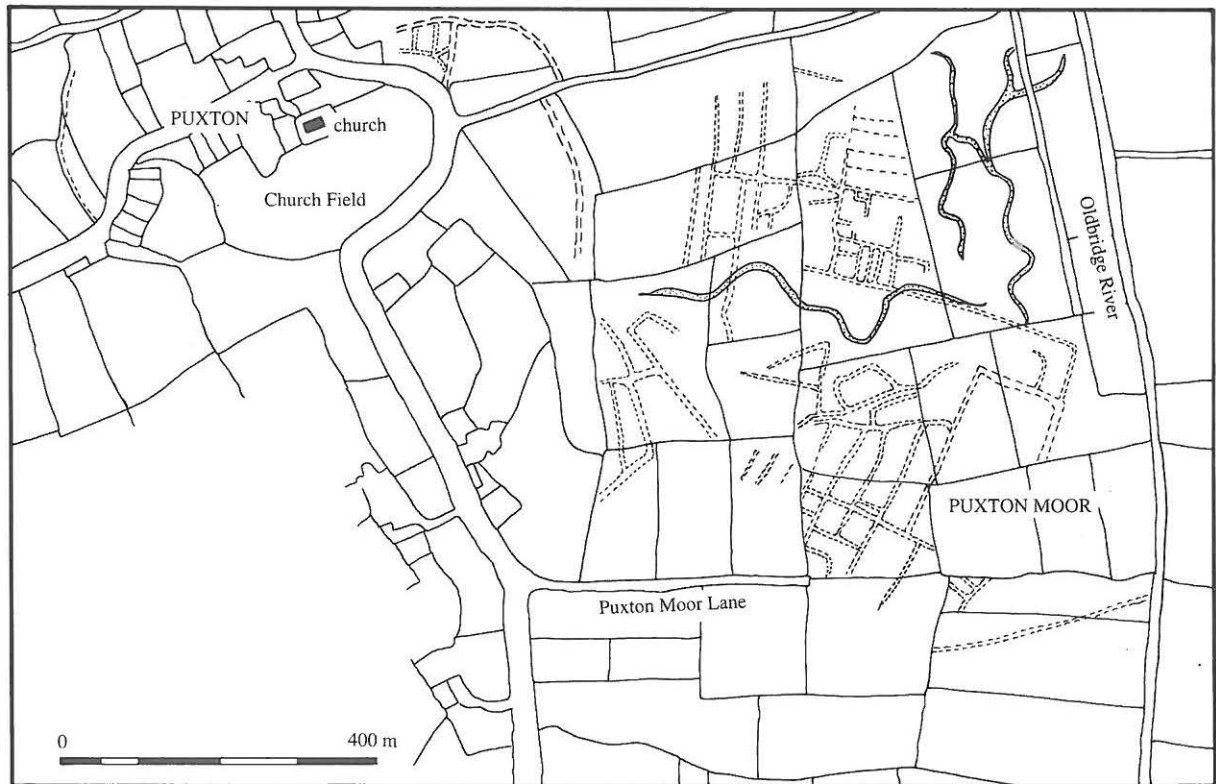


Figure 7: Puxton: the relict landscape and 'infield' south of the church.



Figure 8: Puxton: view from the south. The 'infield' and church can be seen at the centre.

nearby Wraxall parish: Rippon 1997, fig 49) and on upland moors (eg Dartmoor: Fleming and Ralph 1982).

Puxton has all but the first of these characteristics (the place-name is first recorded in the mid 12th century: Clarke 1980). In 1976 Church Field was ploughed and nearly 250 sherds of medieval and post medieval pottery were recovered by Marie Clarke, who dated it mostly to the '11th to 13th and possibly 14th centuries' (Clarke 1980, 3). Just under 70 Roman sherds were also found, and two sherds of 'Pre-Conquest type, circa 1020-1060(?) and one other Pre-Conquest type, similar to an Ilchester type' (*ibid.*). The field also contains a range of earthworks which, though affected

by ploughing, still appear to form a coherent pattern of rectilinear platforms and enclosures.

Therefore, Puxton provides a typical example of an 'infield' site. During 1996 earthwork, resistivity and soil chemistry surveys were carried out in Church Field, along with trial excavations. The aim was to record the extant earthworks, to establish their date, and to evaluate the preservation of archaeological deposits on the slightly raised (possible platform?) areas. The relationship of the Roman and Saxon/medieval settlements also needed to be established.

Trench 3 lay at the eastern edge of the infield, across the shallow earthworks of a ditch and bank concentric with the roadside field

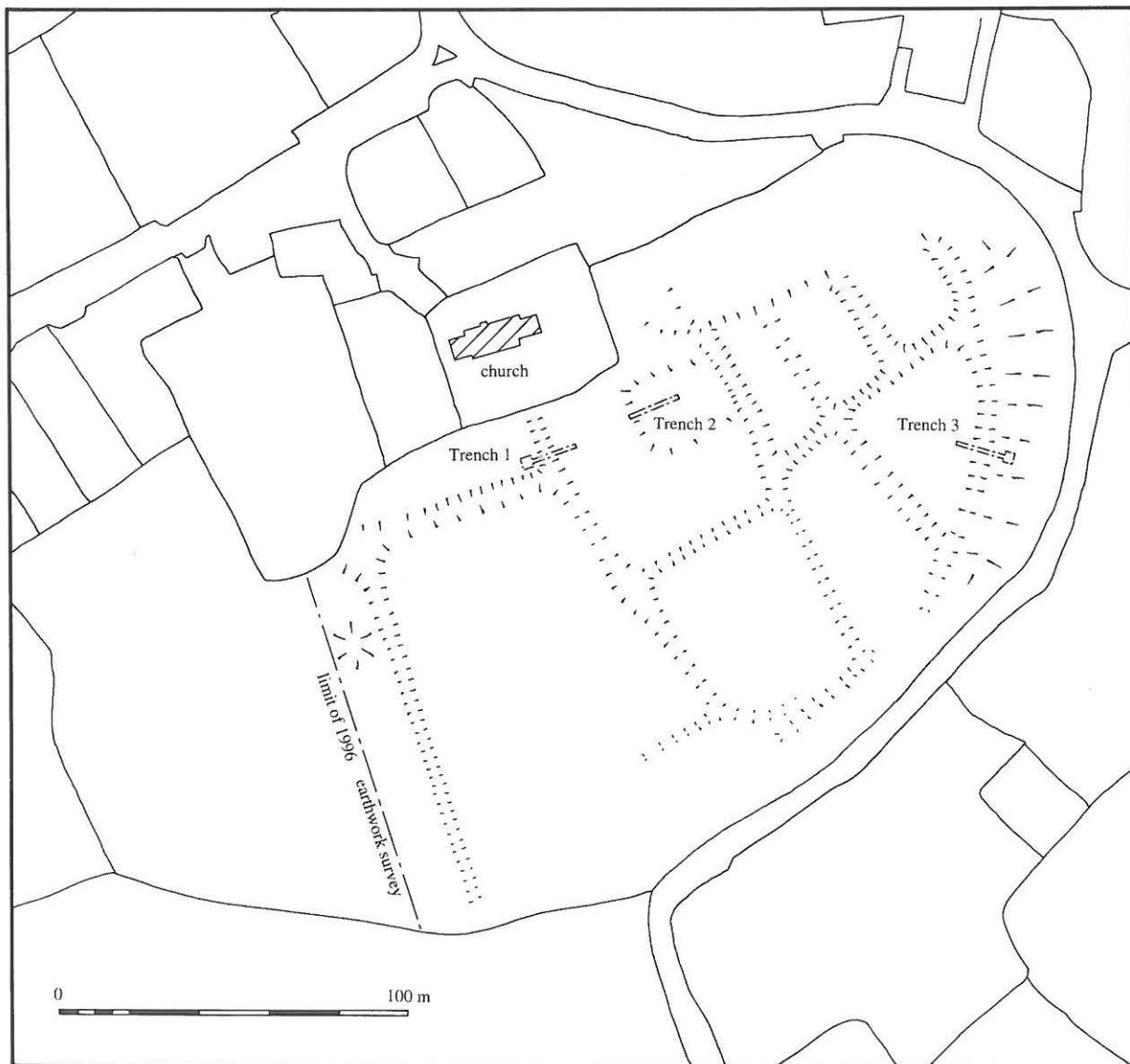


Figure 9: results of earthwork survey, and location of trenches in Church Field.

boundary (Figure 9). The bank appears to be too far away from the roadside ditch to simply be the result of casting (ditch cleaning), and so these earthworks may represent the very denuded remains of the original enclosure ditch and bank around which the present road (with its roadside drainage ditch) was forced to run.

Beneath the bank a number of features were recorded. The earliest was a gully 0.25 m wide and 0.15 m deep (F.158), oriented NE/SW. This was cut at right angles by a slightly larger gully, 0.2-0.45 m wide and 0.3 m deep (F.156), which merged with a small ditch, 0.8 m wide (F.160) oriented NE/SW. These features were

associated with a small assemblage of relatively large and unabraded late Roman sherds (including BB1 and Congresbury Ware, 3rd to 4th century AD), and were all filled with a uniform mid blue-grey silty clay. This gully/ditch system was on the same NE/SW-NW/SE orientation as the relict landscape further east (Figure 7), and is the first part of that landscape to be securely dated.

Upon excavation, the slight earthwork of the possible enclosure ditch proved to be 3 m wide and 1.3 m deep (F.103; Figure 10). Apart from some residual Roman pottery, the only datable material was a large unabraded Saxo-



Figure 10: Puxton: 'infield' enclosure ditch, F.103, being sampled for pollen. Sediment samples have already been taken for diatoms and foraminifera (to right of pollen tin).

Norman (11th/12th century) sherd from the very bottom of the ditch (I am grateful to Chris Gerrard for commenting on the Saxon/medieval pottery from Puxton). Other finds included large amounts of charcoal, stone and burnt clay.

Trenches 1-2 lay immediately to the south of the present parish church, the earliest surviving part of which appears to be 13th century, when it was held as part of the Bishop of Bath and Wells' manor of Banwell (Clarke 1980, 1). The excavations revealed a wide range of features, mostly on a north-south orientation, dating from the pre-Conquest period (c10th century) to the mid 13th century.

One of the earliest deposits lay at the eastern end of Trench 2, where a spread of occupation debris contained a large amount of domestic refuse (notably animal and bird bone) associated with four large and unabraded sherds of pre-Conquest (c10th century) pottery. This spread of material was cut by a shallow ditch, oriented north-south, 2 m wide and 1 m deep (F.135; Figure 11), which shows signs of having been recut several times: the lowest surviving fills once again contained just pre-Conquest material.

A second shallow ditch of similar dimensions and also containing c10th century pottery lay in Trench 1 (F.154). It was replaced by a second ditch, F.115, which was 1.3 m wide and 0.8 m deep (Figure 12). This marked the eastern limit of a 0.2 m thick deposit of occupation debris sealing F.154, and containing a large amount of stone rubble (Figure 12), burnt clay, pottery, animal/bird bone, and shellfish (limpets and periwinkles), along with several pieces of ironwork. The latest pottery from both F.115 and the occupation deposit was 12th century.

None of these early ditches appear as earthworks, and their shallow depths would suggest that they were purely boundary features rather than a significant part of the drainage system. This is in contrast to F.128 in Trench 2, which corresponded to one of the north-south oriented earthworks in Church Field (see Figure 8). Before excavation the antiquity of these features was unclear. The 1946 air photographs show a system of recent gries, but even allowing for subsequent plough damage, the surviving earthworks appeared to represent far more substantial features. Upon excavation, a

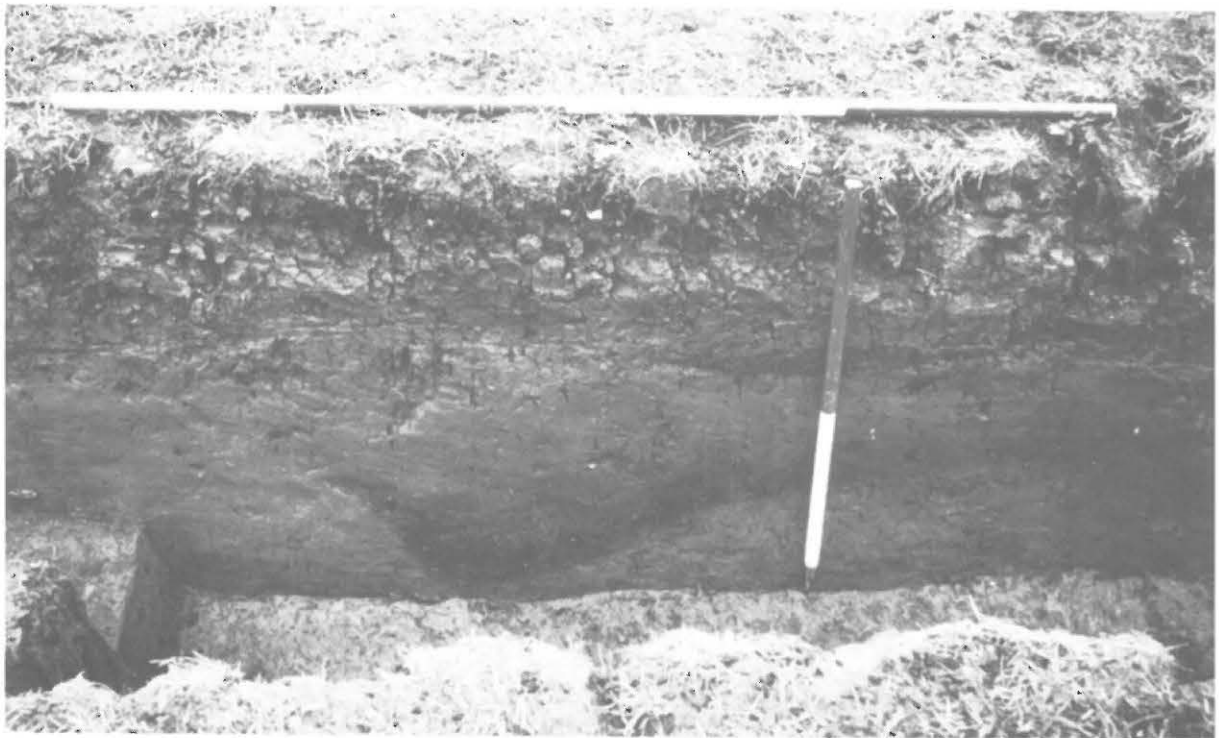


Figure 11: Puxton: boundary ditch F.135, which was partly filled with midden debris during the 10th century, recut, and backfilled again during the early to mid 13th century.

sizeable ditch with a number of recuts was revealed, the largest of which was at least 1.5 m deep (once again excavation could not be completed due to the watertable being reached; the full depth is likely to have been *c*2 m). The waterlogged conditions at the bottom of the ditch preserved a range of plant material, including twigs. The ditch appears to have largely silted up by the mid 13th century, but was then recut at least three times in the post-medieval period (including a 19th century gripe), with its final phase of use as a drainage feature being relatively recent when a tile land drain was inserted.

The size and depth of F.128 suggests that it served a drainage function (similar to modern rhynes), and was filled with water lain blue grey silty clay: it appears to have silted up naturally. This in contrast to the last phase of the boundary ditch F.135; Figure 11), and another shallow ditch F.122, which appear to have been deliberately backfilled in the early/mid 13th century. The western end of Trench 2 extended

onto one of the roughly rectangular platforms to the south of the church. The possible footings of a stone building were also located, associated with 13th century pottery (the largest concentration of Ham Green pottery from the site). The farmer responsible for ploughing this field in the 1970s remembered encountering a large amount of stone just to the west of the excavation.

Discussion

The three small trenches excavated at Puxton in 1996 could do little more than examine the nature of the earthworks, and evaluate the surviving archaeological deposits, though they revealed a site with great complexity and enormous potential. Part of the Roman relict landscape was examined, sealed beneath a later bank. The pottery recovered suggests a late Roman date, which is the same as for Kenn Moor, and several centuries later than Banwell Moor. The abandonment of settlements on the



Figure 12: Puxton: eastern end of Trench 1. Boundary ditch F.115 at the centre with part of the spread of rubble in the adjacent occupation deposit bottom right. The two rectangular features top left are box-sections of natural disturbances in the alluvium.

Severn Estuary Levels during the early Roman period is paralleled on the Avonmouth Levels, for example at Elmington Farm (Young 1992, 30-5), Northwick (Bellamy and Barnes 1993, 13-18) and Rookery Farm (Lawler *et al* 1992, 55; Young 1992, 18-20). This may be part of a wider trend towards early Roman estate reorganisation which is now being recognised in lowland Britain (Fulford 1992).

The orientation of the Roman drainage system at Puxton (and indeed Banwell and Kenn) is at variance to the medieval landscape (including the 'infield'). This suggests a period of complete abandonment before recolonization in the Saxon period.

The postulated enclosure ditch of the infield at Puxton proved to be a substantial feature, and the one 11th/12th century sherd from the bottom might suggest a later date than for the earliest occupation within (10th century or earlier). However, it must be born in mind that drainage ditches on the Levels have to be recut quite frequently, and it is possible that in the case of the enclosure ditch this recutting has removed all trace of any earlier feature.

The earthworks south of the church have been shown to relate to a deserted settlement of late Saxon origin. If F.128 in Trench 2 is typical, then many of the other slight linear earthworks in Church Field (Figure 9) relate to substantial ditches which would have served a drainage function as well as being property boundaries. The waterlogged conditions in the bottoms of these ditches are potentially of very great importance for artefact recovery. In addition, a wide range of other features, often filled with midden debris, were also uncovered of which no indication survived on the surface. Trench 1 also contained quite a depth of stratified occupation-related deposits, while there are indications of a stone structure on the platform in Trench 2.

The site appears to have been abandoned by the mid 13th century. The latest datable pottery is Ham Green Ware, while distinctive mid to late 13th century fabrics, such as Redcliffe Ware, are absent. Overall, the preservation of archaeological deposits is excellent, while the relatively early date for this occupation makes the site of even greater importance.

Acknowledgements

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