ROMAN AND MEDIEVAL SETTLEMENT ON THE NORTH SOMERSET LEVELS: THE SECOND SEASON OF SURVEY AND EXCAVATION AT BANWELL AND PUXTON, 1997

by Stephen Rippon

Following preliminary survey and excavation in 1996 on the Roman relict landscape at Banwell and the medieval settlement at Puxton (reported in Archaeology in the Severn Estuary *7), further work was carried out on both sites in 1997. At Banwell, parts of the Roman landscape were examined through aerial photography, earthwork and resistivity survey, fieldwalking and excavation. The latter revealed a Late Iron Age saltern, c.0.8 m below the present ground surface, which was buried by sterile alluvium. This was sealed by a second buried landscape associated with a late Roman ditched enclosure system that was also later inundated. At Puxton, the oval 'infield' enclosure examined last year was fieldwalked, which along with further earthwork survey and the results of soil chemistry analysis, suggests that actual settlement was restricted to a small area south of the church. To the north of the village a further area of shrunken settlement earthworks by Mays Lane were surveyed, while a series of test pits indicate medieval to post medieval occupation.*

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 (for a location map of sites referred to see *Archaeology in the Severn Estuary* 7, 39-52, fig. 1). Work started in 1993/4 on a well-preserved Romano-British landscape at Kenn Moor in the northern part of the Levels (see *Archaeology in the Severn Estuary* 1994-1995). A programme of survey, excavation and palaeo-environmental analysis established that this 3rd to 4th century settlement had a mixed agricultural economy including some metalworking, and was set within a largely freshwater landscape drained by a system of ditches and gullies. This, along with the presence of a substantial villa at Wemberham, implied that by the late Roman period that part of the North Somerset Levels to the north of a substantial tidal river, the Congresbury Yeo, had been protected from tidal inundation by a sea wall. In 1996 work started on a second Romano-British relict landscape, at Banwell Moor to the south of the river, to establish whether that part of the Levels was also reclaimed. A square enclosure was investigated through earthwork, resistivity and soil chemistry surveys, and finally small-scale excavation and palaeoenvironmental sampling, which suggests a freshwater, pastoral landscape (see *Archaeology in the Severn Estuary* 7, 1996). However, earthworks showing on early air photographs and further fieldwalking indicated that the main late Romano-British settlement focus lay further to the east (in 'Twenty Acres' Field) and the aim of the work in 1997 was to investigate this late Roman phase of activity.

Most of the Severn Estuary Levels (including Banwell Moor) were affected by a period of late or post-Roman flooding, which blanketed the earlier landscapes with a layer of saltmarsh-derived alluvium. By Domesday most areas had been recolonised, and a second aspect of the North Somerset Levels Project has been to investigate this second period of reclamation. Detailed analysis of the historic landscape (the present pattern of fields, roads and settlements) has led to the identification of a distinctive type of enclosure, termed 'infields', that appear to be amongst the earliest features to be created in the post-Roman recolonisation of the area (Gilbert 1996; Rippon 1996a; 1996b; 1997). In 1996, survey and excavations were carried out at one such infield, Puxton, which produced evidence for 10th to 13th century occupation (Rippon 1996b). In 1997, further surveys were carried out in order to determine the extent of that occupation, while work also started on a second area of shrunken settlement earthworks outside the infield to the north of the present village.

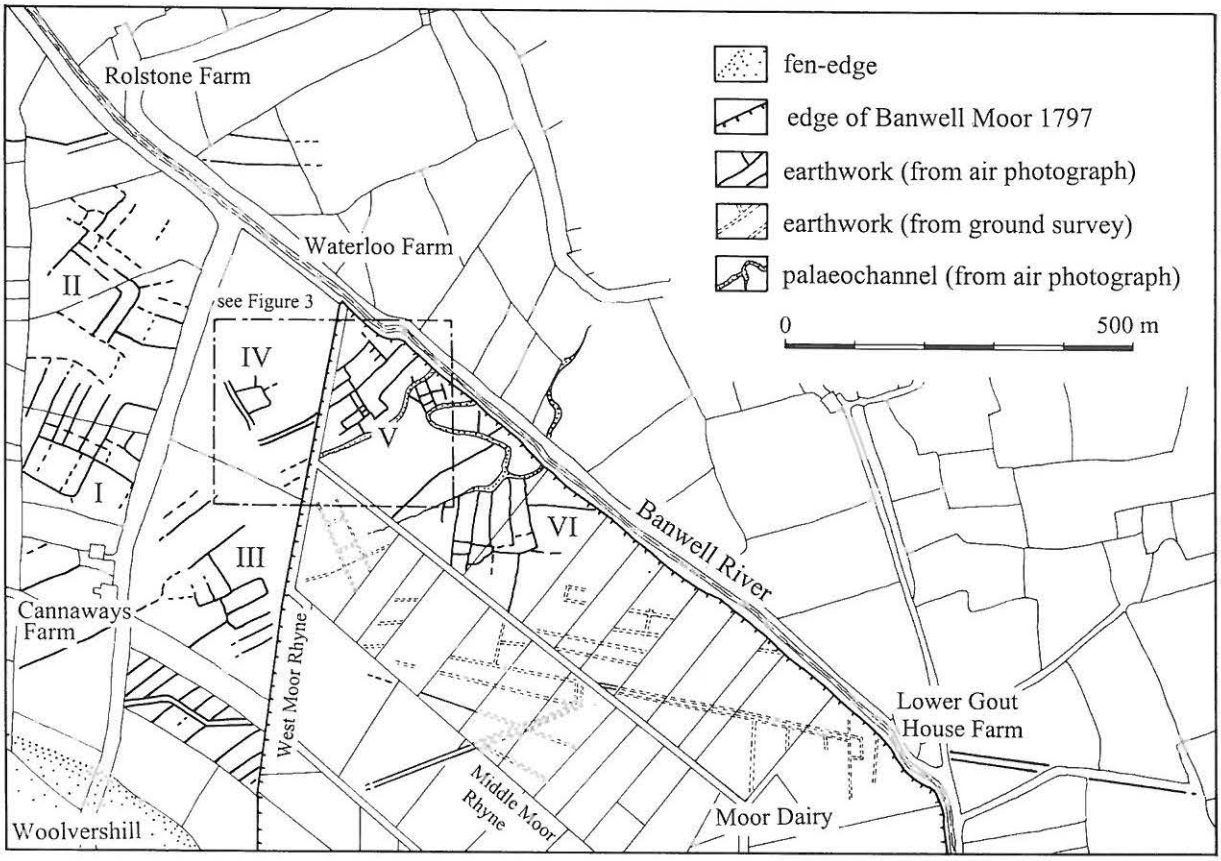

Figure 1: Plan of the Banwell Moor relict landscapes based upon air photographic evidence (RAF 3G/TUD/UK15/21 PART II/5095-8, January 1946; and photographs taken by the author in September 1995 and September 1997), resistivity and ground survey

Banwell Moor: Waterloo Farm

Survey and excavation at Waterloo Farm

In September 1997 the relict landscape on Banwell Moor was examined from the air and on the ground, revealing several areas of earthworks that had not previously been recorded. Two sets of ground conditions increased the visibility of these features: firstly, that many fields had just been cut for silage, and secondly, that in two areas poaching of the poorly drained field surface was greatest over a complex of ditches which did not show up as earthworks at all.

The plan of the relict landscape on Banwell Moor is now much clearer, and seems to have several phases (Figures 1-3). To the north and west there are several clusters of enclosures, slight platforms and small paddocks, set within larger rectilinear fields. Such probable farmsteads can be identified to the north and east of Cannaways Farm and south east of Waterloo Farm (in and around Fields 1, 2 and 7). The latter complex lies adjacent to a series of palaeochannels which were presumably active watercourses during the Roman period (as was the case at Kenn Moor: Rippon 1994, fig. 12). It seems that these probable farmstead complexes lie to the north of, and are possibly set within, a series of larger, long narrow parcels of land divided by a series of parallel ditches *c.*250 m to 400 m apart.

Between Cannaways and Waterloo Farm (in Field 4) lies a roughly square enclosure associated with a double ditched feature, both of which were excavated in 1996. The results of earthwork and resistivity surveys were reported in *Archaeology in the Severn Estuary* 7 (Rippon 1996b), and in 1997 the field was also subjected to field-walking and soil chemistry surveys. In keeping with the other parts of this relict landscape that have been fieldwalked, relatively little material was recovered though a small amount of pottery was detected over the enclosure itself (Figure 2; cf. Rippon 1995, fig. 16). A discrete concentration of material was also located at the eastern edge of the field (by West Moor Rhyne) which suggested that a settlement focus might lie in the

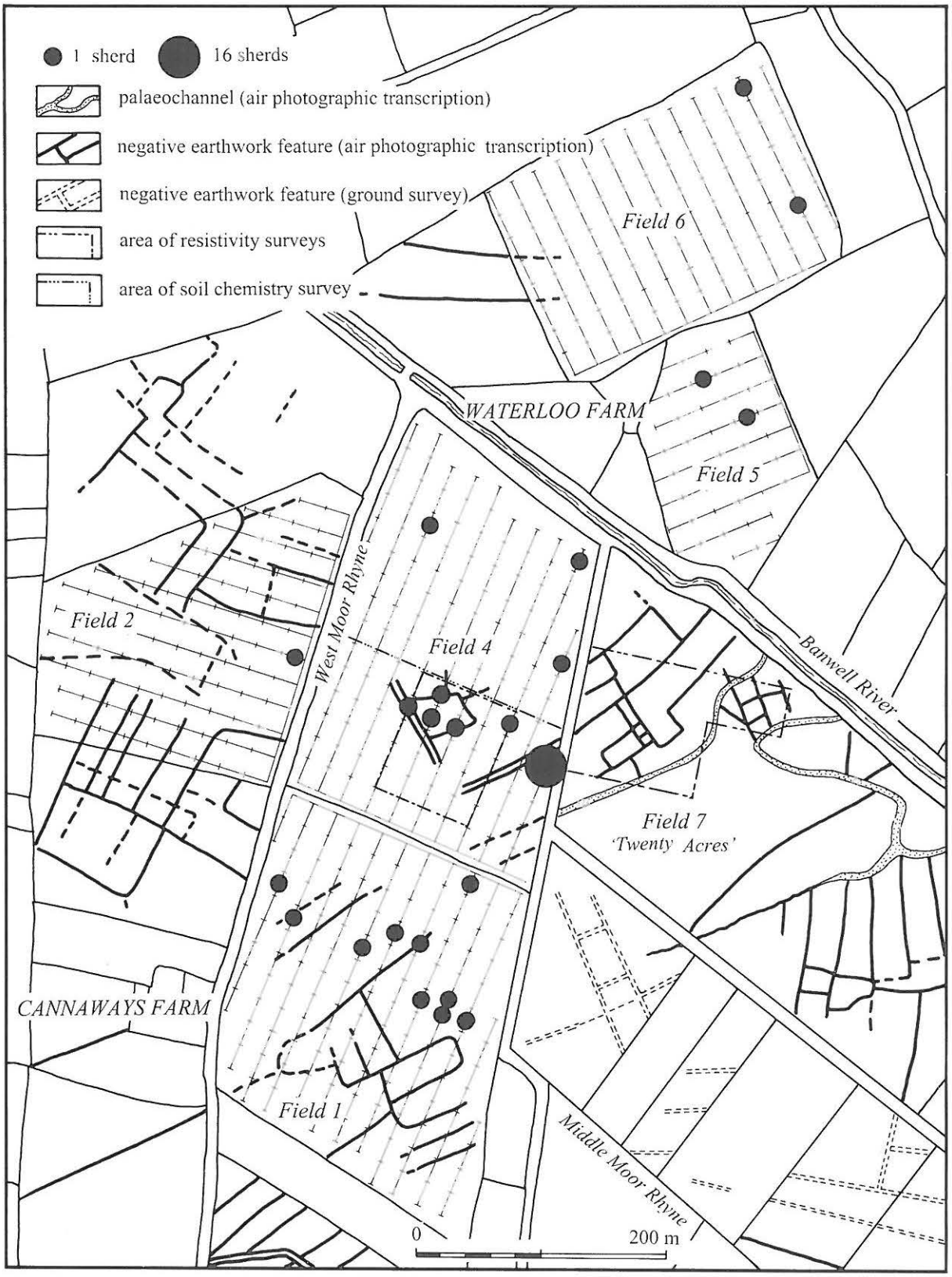

Figure 2: Detailed plan of features showing on early air photographs in the western part of the relict landscape on Banwell Moor including possible farmstead complexes in Fields 1, 2 and 7, and fieldwalking results in Fields 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6. The area of the resistivity surveys in Fields 4 and 7 is also marked

adjacent Field 7 ('Twenty Acres'). A scatter of late Roman pottery and stone was found in the western part of this field during the 1970s (Clarke 1974), and several piles of stone can still be seen around the modern field edges, including one adjacent to West Moor Rhyne. If this stone is that found during the 1970s associated with the late Roman pottery (rather than material related to some later activity such as a sluice structure or bridge), then it suggests a moderately substantial building. Several of the fragments appeared to have been very roughly dressed, and most were 0.2-0.3 m across.

The soil chemistry survey in Field 4 revealed slightly higher levels of copper, lead, and zinc over the enclosure ditches, with slight concentrations of chromium, cobalt, manganese and nickle in the general vicinity of the enclosure (Jackson 1997). Only organic carbon (revealed through loss on ignition tests) showed a correlation with the enclosure itself. However, all these concentrations are relatively low compared to those encountered over known settlements (eg Puxton: see below), and would support the hypothesis that the Field 4 enclosure saw a low intensity of activity.

This early phase of the relict landscape on Banwell Moor is overlain by a ditched trackway which can be traced for some 1.1 km running westwards from Lower Gout Farm at the north east corner of Banwell Moor (Figures 1 and 3). To the east of Lower Gout Farm this trackway partly survives as a still-functioning lane within the 'historic landscape'. It then continues as an

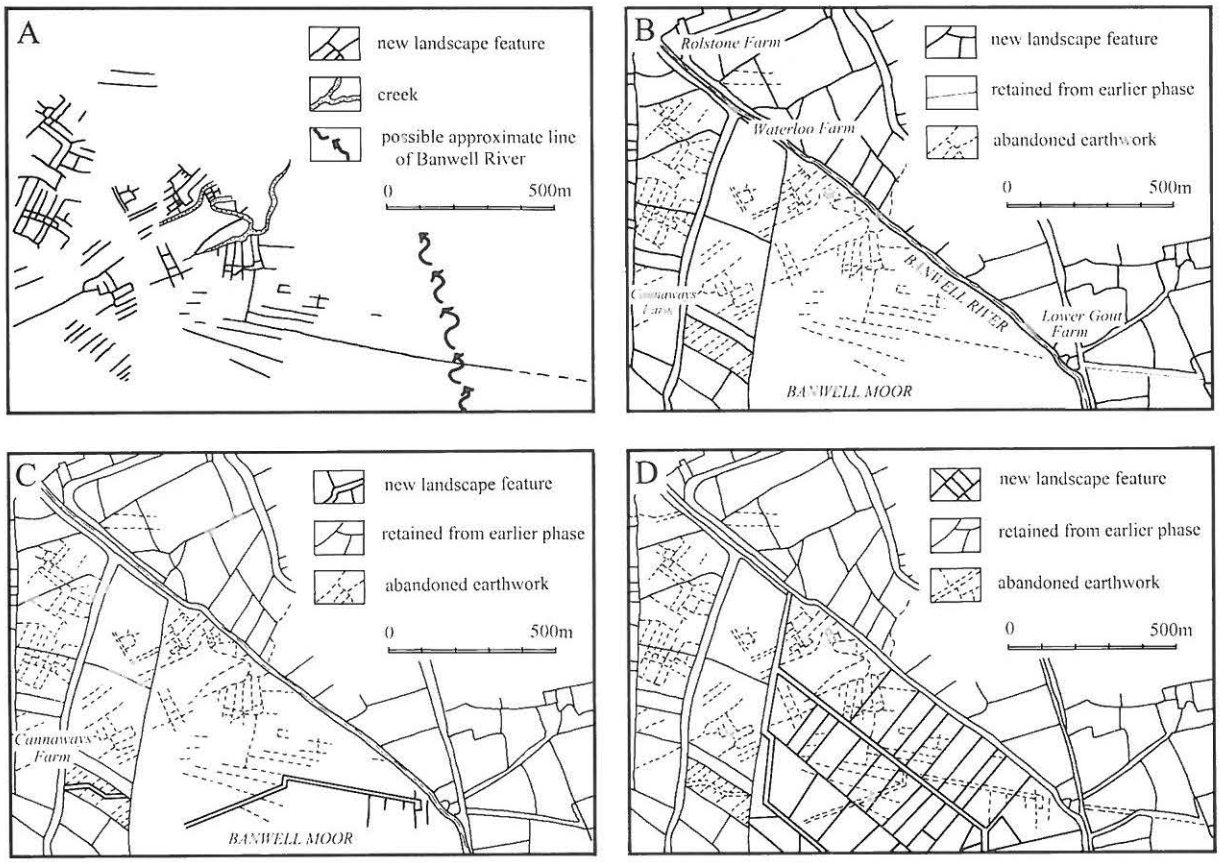

Figure 3: Development of the relict and historic landscapes on Banwell Moor

A: Late Romano-British settlements with associated ditched drainage systems and associated creeks. The line of the Banwell River is unknown

B: Following a period of post-Roman inundation the present, or 'historic', landscape was created. Banwell Moor itself was left as an open, common, pasture. The Banwell River was canalised

C: Trackway extended westwards from Lower Gout Farm along an element of the earlier relict landscape

D: Banwell Moor enclosed

Figure 4: Western part of the Banwell Moor relict landscape looking north west. Waterloo Farm top right; 'Twenty Acres' Field centre right

Figure 5: Relict landscape west of Lower Gout Farm, looking north west. Moor Dairy bottom left. The double ditched trackway, and its associated enclosure, could be medieval in date

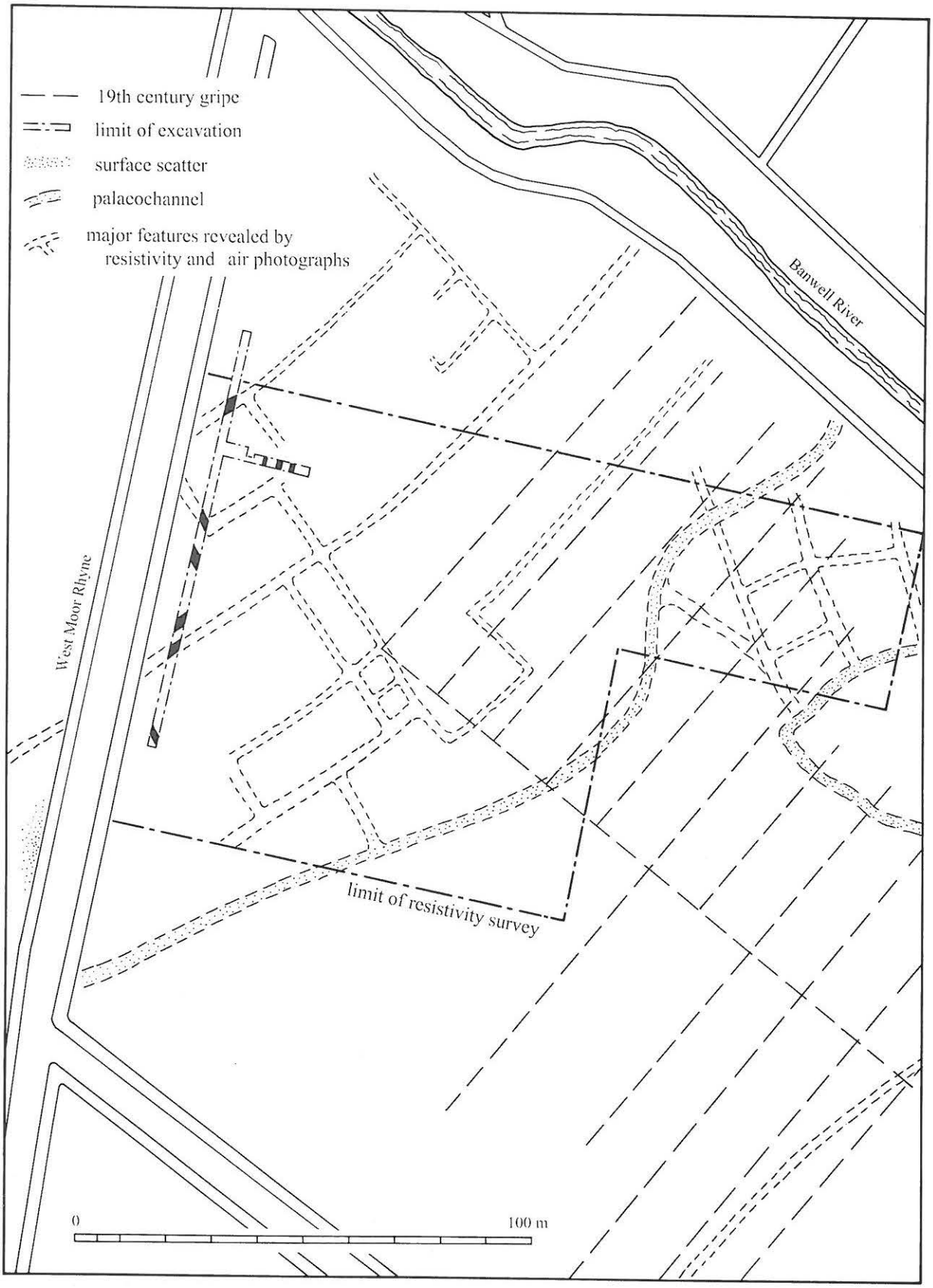

Figure 6: Plan of relict landscape and recent gripe system in western part of 'Twenty Acres' Field, from air photographic and resistivity results

earthwork which appears to follow one of the early relict landscape features westwards across Banwell Moor in the direction of Cannaways Farm before turning south and finally south west, cutting diagonally across the relict landscape. A second stretch of trackway cuts across the Roman relict landscape south of Cannaways Farm.

To the west of Lower Gout House Farm the trackway is associated with a small rectangular enclosure (at Moor Dairy: Figure 5). In 1997 both the trackway and the associated enclosure were subject to trial excavations. The ditches either side of the trackway proved to be 1.3 and 1.9 m wide but no trace of any surface was found between them. The enclosure ditch was 2.85 m wide. No dating evidence was recovered from either excavation though a single Roman grey ware sherd was recovered from the topsoil.

It would appear, therefore, that four phases of drainage and enclosure are evident on and around Banwell Moor (Figure 3). The system of long narrow fields and the enclosure complexes near Cannaways and Waterloo Farm can be dated to the Roman period (see below; Figure 3A). Though surviving in places as slight earthworks, this landscape is in fact partly buried under a thin layer of alluvium deposited during a period of tidal flooding which presumably accounts for the landscape's abandonment (see below). The modern pattern of generally irregular shaped fields surrounding Banwell Moor relates to the period of reclamation after this post-Roman flooding, and represents the second major phase of landscape development (and the first period in which the present, or 'historic', landscape came into being: Figure 3B). Part of the abandoned Roman landscape, that must have survived as earthworks, was incorporated into the medieval pattern to the east of Lower Gout House Farm, but the decision was taken to leave the lowest-lying ground in this part of the Levels as an unenclosed common pasture (Banwell Moor). At some stage a trackway appears to have been laid out westwards from Lower Gout House Farm, representing the third phase of landscape development (Figure 3C). Finally, Banwell Moor itself was enclosed in 1797, completing the creation of the historic landscape (Figure 3D).

Excavations at Waterloo Farm

In the spring of 1997 the western complex of paddocks and enclosures in 'Twenty Acres' was subjected to a resistivity survey, which along with the air photographic evidence allowed a more detailed plan of the major features to be established (Figure 6). A series of what appeared to be substantial ditches ran roughly south-west/ north-east across the site, with a possible enclosure to the north. These features were sectioned by a trench nearly 100 m long (Figures 6 and 8). In order to cause the least disruption to the farmer's grazing of the field, this trench had to be positioned beside the modern north/south oriented field boundary, and as a result the Romano-British features ran through the trench at roughly 45 degrees (eg Figure 8: ditch F.218 in foreground)

At a depth of *c.*0.8 m traces were uncovered of a buried land surface, which in places was associated with a *c.*0.1-0.2 m thick layer of the distinctive debris from salt production: briquetage, burnt clay, charcoal, stone rubble and fuel-ash slag (Figure 7 : contexts 240, 259, 279). The associated pottery is 1st century BC/1st century AD. A provisional assessment of the snail assemblage suggests (not surprisingly) that it lay in a saltmarsh environment.

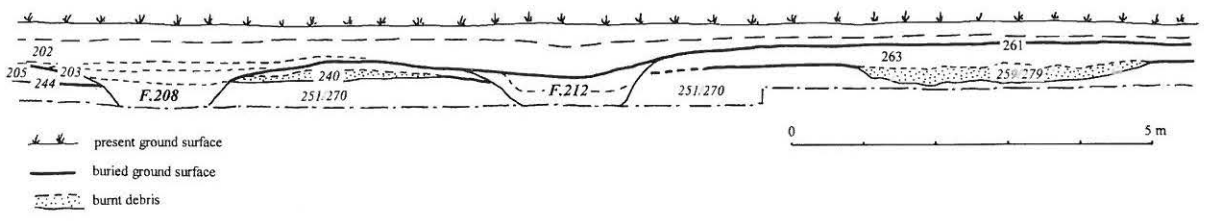

Figure 7: East facing section showing the late Roman buried landsurface (context 203/261), ditches F.208 and F.212, and the late prehistoric buried landsurface (240, 244, 259/279)

Figure 8: View of Banwell Moor 1997 trench looking north. One of the late Roman ditches (F.218) can be seen cutting diagonally across the Trench in the foreground

This late prehistoric landscape was buried by a *c.*0.2 m thick layer of sterile light brown alluvium (context 205) presumably representing the resumption of gradual sediment accretion in a high saltmarsh environment. This marsh was in turn sealed by a second buried landsurface. This was marked by a very dark blue/black layer (context 203) which at the northern end of the trench formed a fairly thin and ephemeral horizon gradually becoming thicker and darker towards the southern end of the site. Here it overlay a mid to dark blue/brown layer (context 204), representing the disturbed upper zone of the underlying natural alluvium (205). Both contexts were associated with small abraded fragments of stone, burnt clay, animal bone and later Roman pottery (mostly 3rd century). Along most of the trench the dark horizon formed a roughly horizontal layer, presumably representing a fairly stable ground surface, though in places it spread

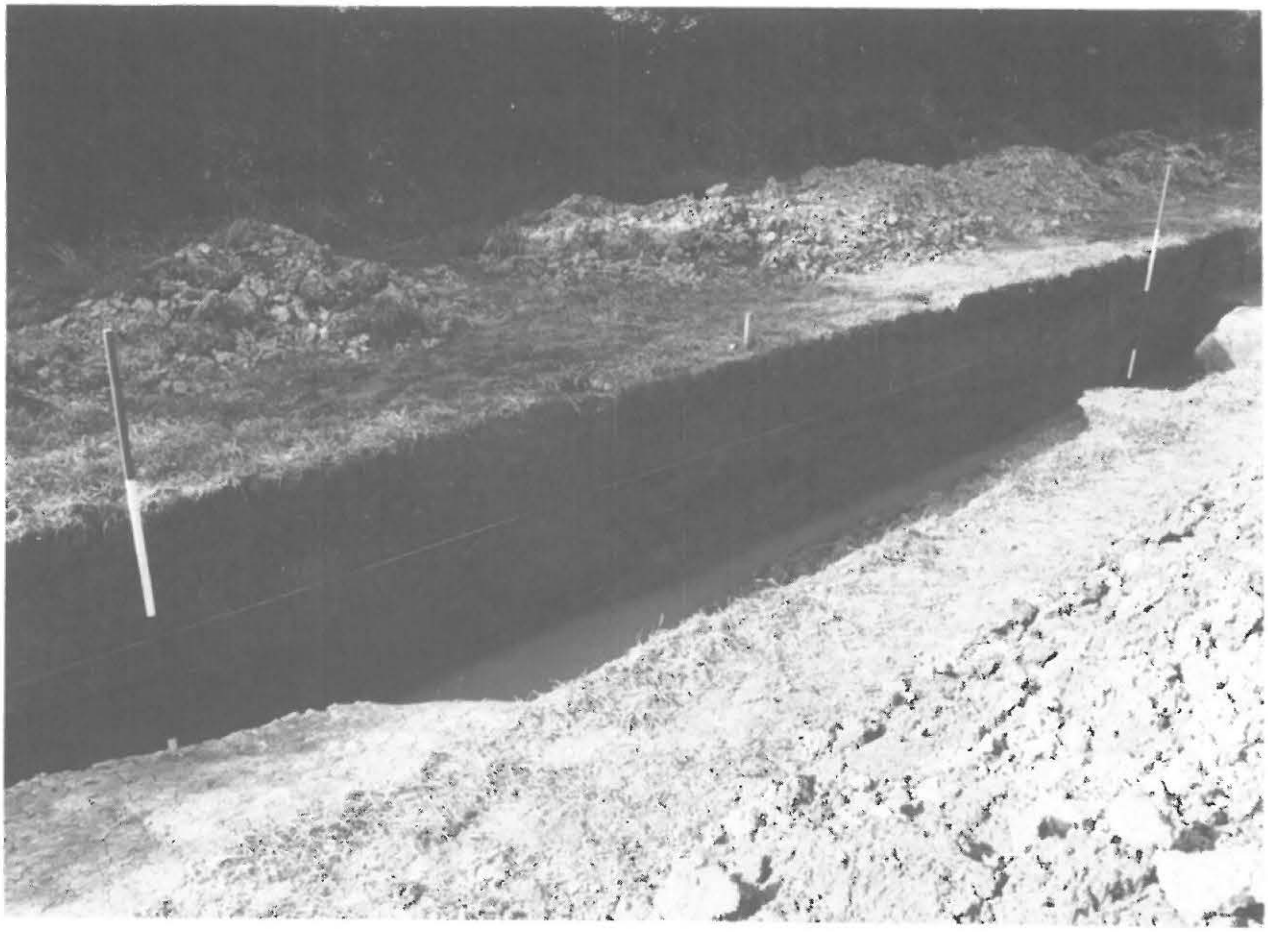

Figure 9: The late Roman buried landsurface (203/262), marked by a dark band just below the string line. Ditch F.208 lies on the left and ditch F.212 on the right. Looking north west

across the tops of largely silted up ditches: just one of the late Roman ditches (F.208) appears to have remained open while the dark horizon was forming (Figure 7). The nature of this buried landsurface will be better understood once the post-excavation analysis is complete.

Puxton: Church Field

Though further excavation was not possible within the infield enclosure at Puxton (see Rippon 1996b for last year's work), three further surveys have established the extent of occupation. In addition to the earthwork survey carried out last year (Rippon 1996b, fig. 9) a contour survey revealed that the raised platform immediately south west of the church is *c.*0.5 m higher than the rest of the field.

Provisional results from the soil chemistry survey shows a marked concentration of cadmium, copper, lead, phosphorus and possibly zinc corresponding to the raised platform south east of the church (Figure 11); all of these elements appear to be related to human occupation through faecal residues (Jackson 1997). There is no strong correlation with chromium, cobalt, manganese, or nickel.

A change from permanent pasture to arable also allowed the 'infield' to be fieldwalked. A light scatter of Roman material (including one fragment of comb-decorated box flue tile) was recovered from much of the field, with a slight concentration in the eastern part of the field (Figure 11A). Excavations here in 1996 revealed a number of late Roman features buried under the infield bank, and to the east there are the extensive earthworks of another relict landscape which is almost certain to be Roman in date (Rippon 1996b, fig. 7). The distribution of medieval material shows a markedly different pattern with most material concentrated on the raised area immediately south of the church (Figure 11B). As with the excavations there in 1996, most of the pottery appears to date to at least the 10th century through to the 13th century. A light scatter of post medieval and modern

material occurred throughout the field with a concentrations to the north which presumably reflects the dumping of material at the end of back gardens (Figure 11C).

Overall, therefore, it is possible to confirm that the 'infield' at Puxton saw occupation from at least the 10th century (this region is aceramic from the 5th to 9th centuries, so the absence of datable pottery from before the 10th century cannot be taken to show an absence of occupation). The main focus of occupation appears to have been in the northern part of the enclosure, an area which is slightly raised, divided into a series of small platforms and enclosures, and has a high concentration of settlement-indicative material culture, phosphate and other elements. In the southern part of the 'infield' the earthworks, soil chemistry and fieldwalking results all suggest an absence of buildings, in an area which was presumably used for small paddocks (perhaps for stalling livestock), horticulture or even arable cultivation.

Puxton: Mays Lane

In addition to Church Field, there is a second area of shrunken settlement earthworks in Puxton, to the north of the present village. Aerial reconnaissance suggested a complex of rectangular platforms and small paddocks, and these have now been surveyed in detail (Figures 10, 12 and 13). A series of twelve test pits were also excavated producing pottery ranging from the medieval through to the post medieval period.

The examination of aerial photographs has also revealled that Church Field may in fact be part of a far larger 'infield' enclosure, since a possible double ditched feature can be discerned by Briarwood Farm to the south west of the village (Figure 10). This becomes an extant field boundary to the south of Mays Lane but is then lost.

Discussion

Over the past four years work has been carried out on five sites on the North Somerset Levels (Kenn Moor; Moor Dairy and Waterloo Farm in Banwell; Church Field and Mays Lane in Puxton). In each case, a wide range of survey techniques have been applied (aerial photography, earthwork survey, resistivity, soil chemistry and fieldwalking), followed by carefully targeted excavations coupled with an extensive programme of palaeoenvironmental analysis (so far reports have been received on beetles, diatoms, foraminifera, plant macrofossils, pollen, small mammals and snails). Taken together, this work should allow a first attempt to be made at reconstructing how this landscape has evolved over the past 2,000 years, and how mankind changed from being a landscape exploiter, simply utilising the rich natural resources that a coastal wetland has to offer, to being a landscape modifier, transforming a saltmarsh into a freshwater agricultural landscape (see Rippon 1997).

Three Romano-British relict landscapes have now been investigated at Banwell (Rippon 1996b; and above), Kenn (Rippon 1994; 1995) and Puxton Moors (Rippon 1996b, 48). Morphologically, each is very similar with several nuclei of small platforms and enclosures, associated with slightly larger paddocks, and surrounded by more extensive fields. Each appears to be associated with natural creek systems. The date of all three landscapes also appears to be similar (3rd to 4th century), as does their environmental setting (freshwater). The excavations at all three sites were fairly small scale - this project was investigating the landscape as a whole rather than the character of individual settlements - but the work at Kenn Moor in particular suggests a relatively low-status agricultural settlement practising both arable and animal husbandry, with some economic diversity provided by metal working. Initially, the scarcity of Roman material from the fieldwalking at Banwell (especially compared to Kenn Moor and Puxton) appeared to suggest a pastoral as opposed to an arable landscape (Rippon 1996b, 44). However, this now appears to be due at least in part to the fact that modern ploughing has not always reached the Roman landscape because of the depth of overlying alluvium.

The sequence at Banwell excavated in 1997 confirms that the change from saltmarsh to freshwater conditions appears to be dated to the 3rd century AD, and that the environmental change was complete: the water flowing in the late Roman ditches during their active use appears to have been wholly freshwater. This absence of any tidal influence, along with the presence of a villa at Wemberham, suggests that human intervention in landscape (the construction of a sea wall) rather than natural factors (such as a

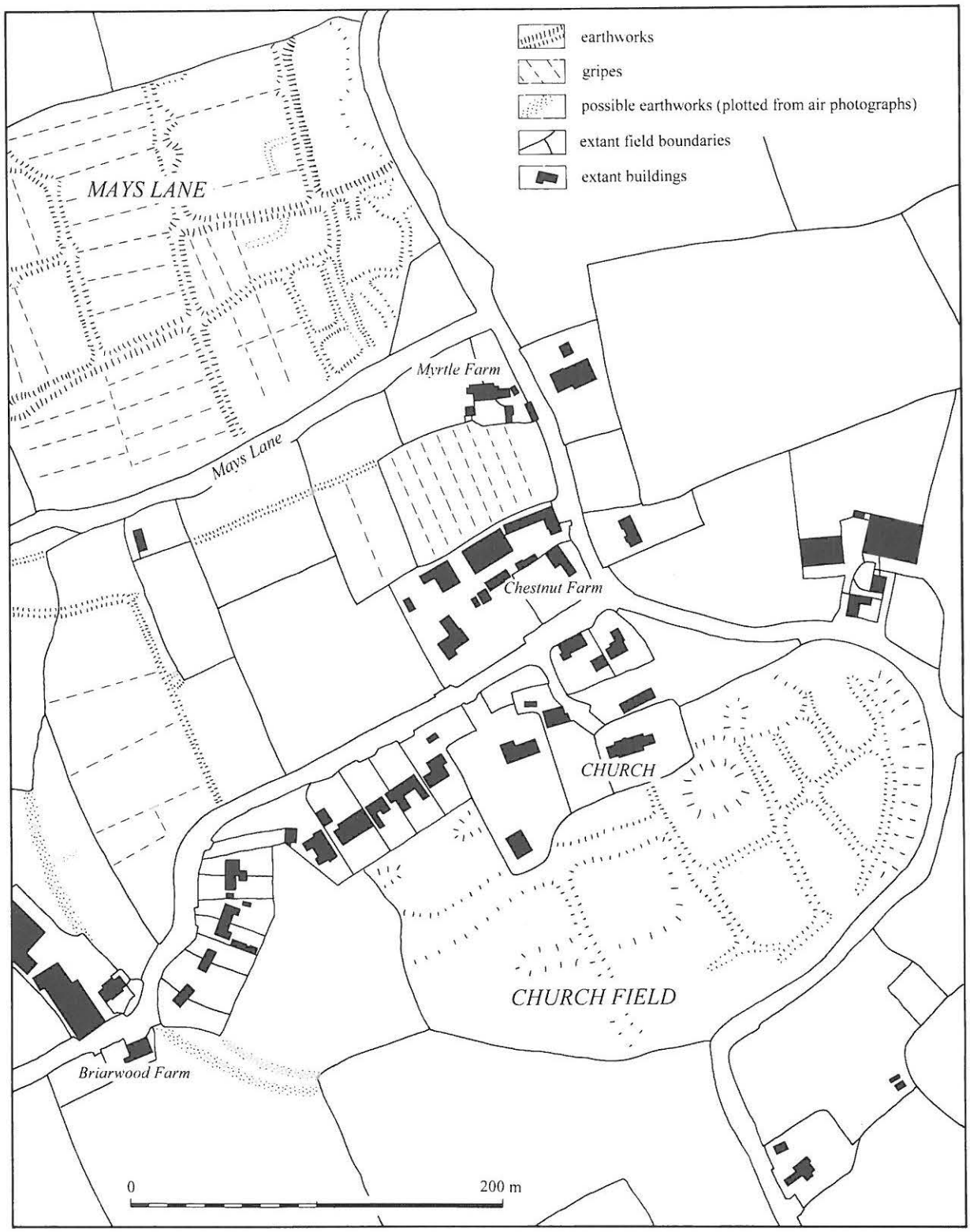

Figure 10: Plan of shrunken settlement earthworks in Puxton. Church Field has also been subject to resistivity, soil chemistry and fieldwalking surveys and trial excavation (see Figure 11 and Rippon 1996b, fig. 9) , while test pits at Mays Lane revealed medieval and post medieval material

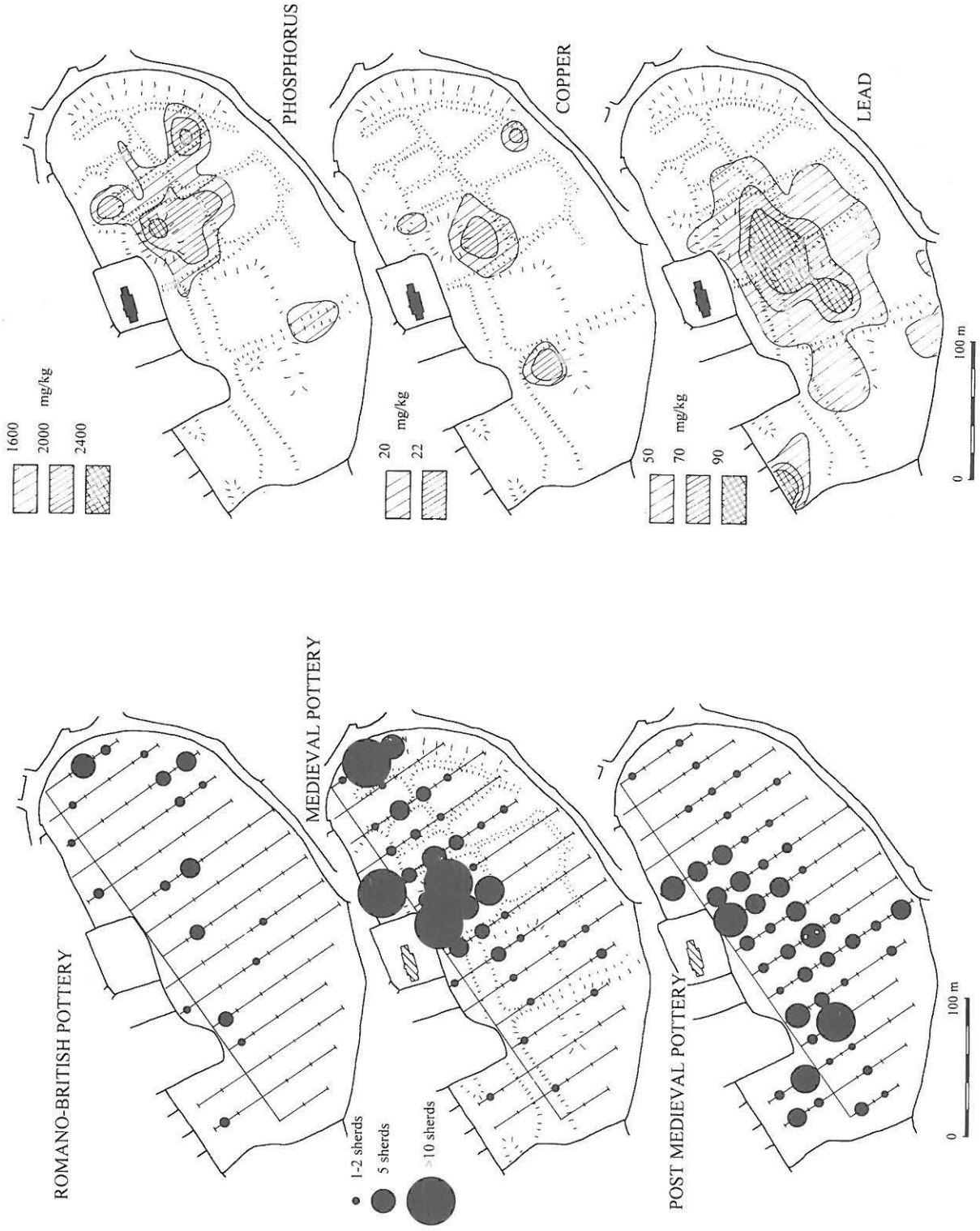

Figure 11: Results of soil chemistry (from Jackson 1997) and fieldwalking surveys in Church Field, Puxton

Figure 12: Puxton looking east towards Congresbury (top left). The oval-shaped 'infield' is the light coloured field centre right. The shrunken settlement earthworks north of Mays Lane lie bottom left

Figure 13: The shrunken settlement earthworks north of Mays Lane, looking north east

gradual fall in relative sea level) were the cause of this change from salt to freshwater ecologies: even if sea level had fallen slightly, without a sea wall, tidal waters would still have entered this landscape particularly during high winter tides and through occasional storms.

However, this leaves the question of who was responsible for this act of reclamation. Morphologically, the landscapes at Banwell, Kenn and Puxton are very similar, and though they all have a certain coherence in their layout (notably a general south west to north east orientation), there is no sign of any overall planning or co-ordination: the contrast with the carefully laid out landscape on the Wentlooge Level could not be greater (Fulford *et al.* 1994). There are strong reasons for believing that there was a military involvement in Wentlooge's reclamation (Fulford *et al.* 1994; Rippon 1996a, 25-35; 1997, 98-103), while the form of the North Somerset landscapes is suggestive of a more piecemeal approach to drainage. The settlements at both Banwell and Kenn appear to have been of relatively low status (judging by the small amount of non-local pottery), and so it is tempting to see them as tenant farms attached to an estate elsewhere: maybe the owners of villa at Wemberham or one of the many villas that have been recorded around the fen-edge (including at Banwell itself).

Research is still continuing on the evolution of the medieval landscape, though the work carried out at Puxton (along with further work on similar 'infield' sites: eg Gilbert 1996) is suggesting that occupation on the North Somerset Levels was widespread by the 11th century. The samples collected from the earliest contexts excavated at Puxton in 1996 should establish whether the settlement was a pioneering one, colonising a high tidal saltmarsh before its reclamation, or whether it was one of the earliest settlements to be established after the sea wall was built. The reason why the area south of the church was abandoned during the 13th century remains a mystery, though further work at the Mays Lane site should allow the story of Puxton's development to be continued into the later medieval period.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Michael Heal, Derek Mead, and David and Mary James for allowing us to carry out this year's programme of fieldwork on their land. I must also thank Keith Gardner who once again helped with the arrangements, Jean Dagnall who supervised the finds processing, Julie Jones for co-ordinating the palaeoenvironmental sampling, and the staff and students from Exeter University for all their hard work. The project is funded by the British Academy, Maltwood Fund, Roman Research Trust, Society of Antiquaries and the University of Exeter.

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