

MEDIEVAL SETTLEMENT ON THE NORTH SOMERSET LEVELS: THE THIRD SEASON OF SURVEY AND EXCAVATION AT PUXTON, 1998

by Stephen Rippon

Following preliminary survey work in 1997, small-scale excavations were carried out on an area of shrunken-settlement earthworks to the north of Puxton village, near Weston-super-Mare, on the North Somerset Levels. Two slightly raised platforms were sectioned which yielded evidence for occupation between the 11th and 17th centuries, including a cesspit, various drainage gullies, and the stone footings of a possible building. Several substantial ditches were also excavated that yielded organically-rich midden deposits. These contexts should provide excellent comparative material for the early medieval assemblages recovered during excavations to the south of Puxton church in 1996, and indeed for the Romano-British material retrieved from the sites at Banwell Moor and Kenn Moor.

Introduction

The North Somerset Levels Project started in 1993 with the aim of investigating the exploitation and management of this extensive area of reclaimed coastal marsh during the Romano-British and medieval periods. Initially, attention focused on the well-preserved earthworks of three Romano-British landscapes at Banwell, Kenn and Puxton Moors (see Rippon 1994; 1995; 1996b; 1997b). Occupation at all three sites appears to have been restricted to the later Roman period (mid 3rd to mid 4th century), when almost wholly freshwater conditions prevailed indicating that reclamation had taken place. However, sites at both Banwell and Kenn show signs of post-Roman inundation and the excellent palaeo-environmental sequence at Banwell indicates an estuarine source for this flooding.

The early medieval period in Somerset is a difficult one to study, such is the lack of documentary evidence and datable archaeological material, and the coastal wetlands are no exception. However, the 11th century Domesday Book allows some light to be shed on this landscape. Only one community located wholly on the Levels is recorded, Kingston Seymour, though its substantial population and 24 ploughteams appear to suggest a reclaimed landscape. The Domesday entries for several substantial estates whose centres lay on the fen-edge, such as Banwell and Congresbury, also include a

number of un-named subsidiary holdings, some of which may have lain on the Levels. These include Puxton, which was later a chapelry of Banwell, though originally may have been a sub-tenancy of Congresbury (Rippon 1997a, 137), and Wick St Lawrence (which was later a chapelry of Congresbury). In addition, a number of place-names, such as 'hewish', may have early medieval origins, as might certain field-names which contain habitative elements such as 'worth/worthy' (eg Hardingworth in Puxton parish). Overall, it appears that the higher, coastal, parts of the North Somerset Levels were extensively settled and cultivated by the 11th century.

In order to understand the process of medieval reclamation, the historic landscape - the present pattern of roads, fields and settlements - has been deconstructed into a series of potential stages through which reclamation took place (Rippon 1997a, fig. 7). A notable feature of all the Severn Levels is that the higher, coastal, areas of marshland have an irregular pattern of fields, in contrast to the lower-lying backfen areas which have a more rectilinear layout. Within the irregular landscapes on both sides of the Estuary there are a number of striking oval-shaped enclosures (given the name 'infields') which appear to pre-date the surrounding fields and roads, suggesting that they represent the earliest phase of settlement (eg Gilbert 1997; Rippon 1996a, fig. 17). The programme of fieldwork at Puxton is examining the origins and development of one such site.

In 1996-97, the oval-shaped 'infield' enclosure to the south of Puxton church (ST 407 633) was investigated through a series of surveys and small-scale excavations (Figures 1-2). The main area of occupation was concentrated immediately to the south east of the church, with the rest of the enclosure being divided into small fields and paddocks. The main phase of settlement appeared to date from at least the 10th century through to the 13th century: as Somerset is aceramic until the 10th century the actual date when occupation started cannot at present be determined. These excavations south of the

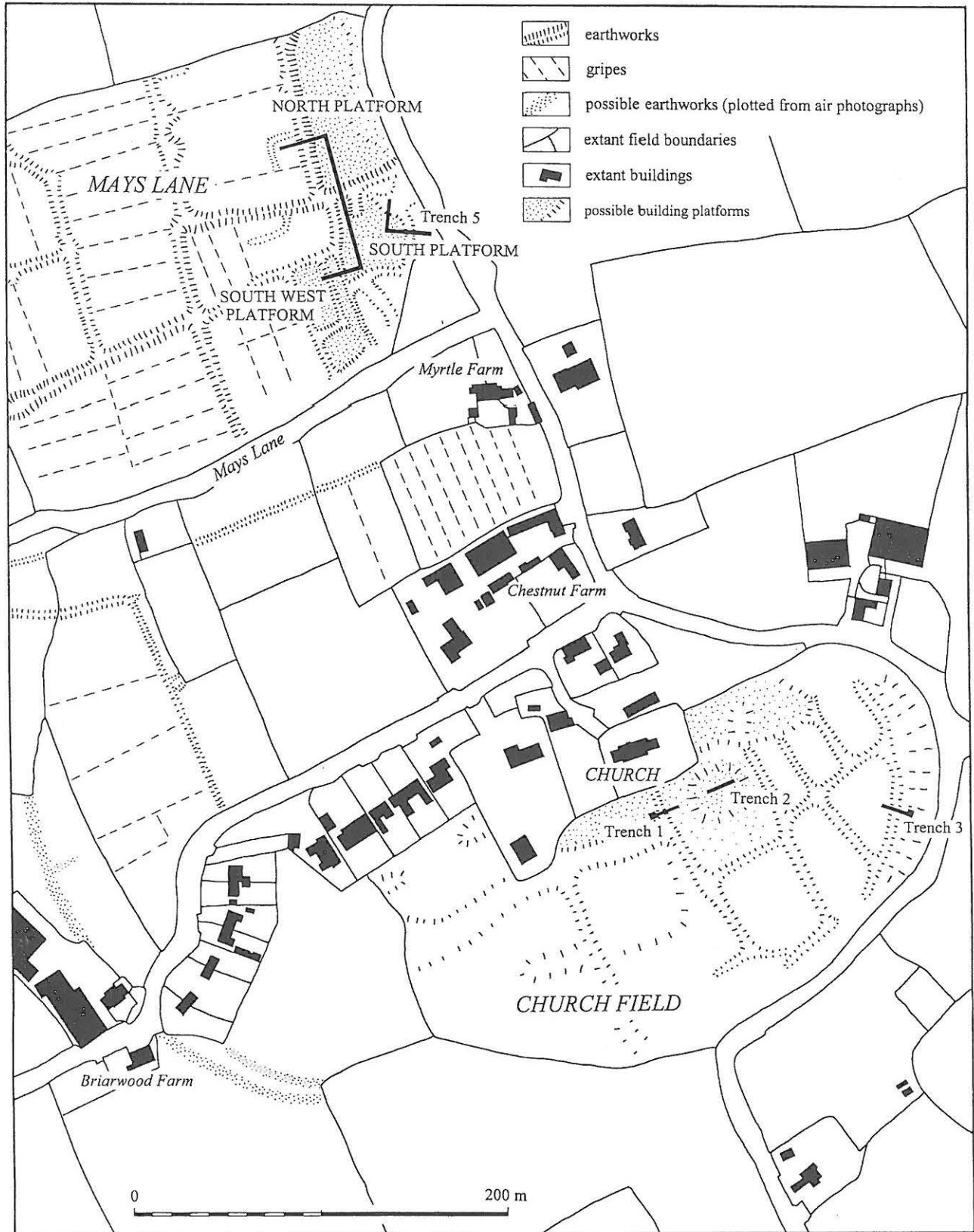


Figure 1: Plan of the shrunken settlement at Puxton, showing earthworks in Church Field and Mays Lane. Trenches 4 and 5 were excavated in 1998



Figure 2: Aerial view of Puxton, with the 'infield' enclosure (Church Field) in the foreground, looking north towards Clevedon and the Severn Estuary

church yielded a number of excellently-preserved palaeoenvironmental assemblages which should allow for a detailed study of the local landscape, while the animal bones and material culture recovered will lead to a better understanding of the socio-economic status of this marshland community. However, the North Somerset Levels Project is attempting to study landscape change over a long time span, and the curiously premature cessation of occupation south of the church meant that another site was required in order to provide comparative material for the later medieval period.

In 1997 a second area of potentially settlement-related earthworks to the north of the present village, by Mays Lane (ST 405 635), was surveyed while a series of test pits produced medieval and post-medieval pottery (Rippon 1997b, fig. 10). In 1998, small-scale excavations sampled most of the major features in this earthwork complex, including three platforms and a number of substantial ditches (Figure 1).

The alluvial sequence (Figure 3)

The alluvial sequence has been cored at Puxton Mays Lane to a depth of *c.*6 m, revealing three main

sedimentological units: a lower clay, an organic rich mud and peat, and an upper clay. The lower unit comprised a grey clay with a distinctly salty taste and occasional plant remains, suggestive of a quiet saltmarsh environment (the maximum depth of the core was -1.08 m OD). At -0.86 m OD there was a transition to a dark grey, organic rich clay representing a marked change in environment towards freshwater fen with a high watertable. *Cladium* and *Phragmites* dominated the vegetation, and the hydrosere succession to drier conditions (carr woodland) never took place. Between +0.27 m and +0.35 m there was a thin sedge peat. At +0.77 m OD there was a sharp, probably erosive surface, which was sealed by grey clay with some organic material (including *Phragmites*), and occasional saltmarsh snails pointing to a return to saltmarsh conditions very similar to those below the peat layer. The present ground surface lies at *c.*5 m OD.

The upper part of this alluvial sequence was investigated more thoroughly through excavation and in particular the cleaning of long sections. These revealed two buried ground surfaces, marked by a dark colouration within the clay. The lower horizon (layer 251/326) comprised an organically rich silty clay, 0.03-0.04 m thick, occurring between +3.7 and

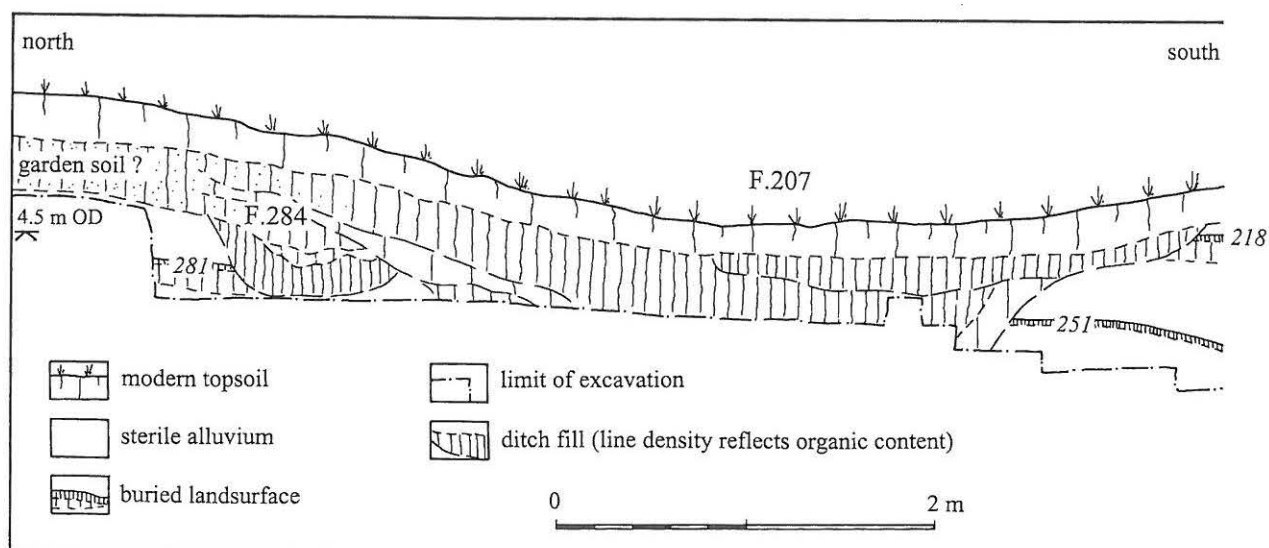


Figure 3: West facing section along Trench 4, showing the multiple recuts of southern boundary ditch F.207 and ditch F.296, and the two buried land surfaces 218 and 251/326



Figure 4: West facing section of Trench 4, showing the Romano-British buried soil (just below the upper range pole), and the Iron Age buried ground surface as it sinks into a ditch or palaeochannel

+3.9 m OD. It has an AMS radiocarbon date of 2585 \pm 50 BP (cal BC 828-544) (AA-32358). The upper horizon (layer 218/281) was a more mottled and darker staining of the silty clay, undulating between +4.2 and +4.5 m OD. This has an AMS radiocarbon date of 1910 \pm 45 BP (cal BC 15 - cal AD 230) (AA-32359). The upper horizon appeared

superficially very similar to what soil micromorphology has confirmed as a buried soil horizon at Banwell Moor (see Rippon 1997b, fig. 7; Heathcote in Rippon forthcoming). The results of palaeoenvironmental analysis and radiocarbon dating are awaited with great interest.

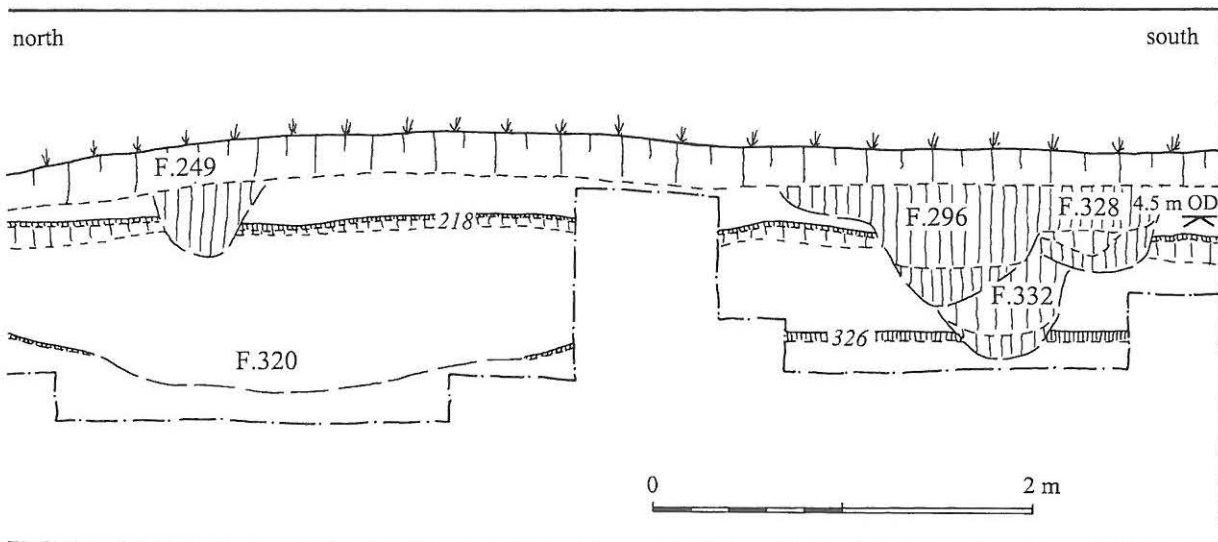


Figure 3 continued

The medieval settlement at Mays Lane

The earthwork survey revealed that the site at Mays Lane comprised a series of enclosures, several with areas suggestive of building platforms, alongside the main road (Puxton Lane) running north from Puxton church (Rippon 1997b, figs. 12-13). There is no evidence, either on the ground or on earlier air photographs, for settlement-related earthworks in the fields to the north or east suggesting that the Mays Lane site represents the northernmost expansion of the settlement. Though a small amount of residual Romano-British material was recovered from later contexts (mostly in Trench 5), the earliest evidence for occupation dates to around the 11th century (at least a century later than in the area of deserted settlement to the south of the church: Rippon 1997b, 49-54).

The most clearly defined platform lay alongside Puxton Lane and measured 80 by 35 m. This Northern Platform was bounded by substantial earthwork ditches to the west (F.209) and south (F.207: Figure 3) and an extant field boundary to the north. The highest part of the platform lay in its southern half and when a water-pipe trench was dug through this area in the summer of 1998 (unfortunately without archaeological observation) a large amount of building stone was unearthed. A second, more irregularly-shaped and lower-lying platform lay to the south, measuring 45 by 35 m. The highest area within this Southern Platform adjoined a small triangular-shaped area of former roadside common that was enclosed in 1816, the western boundary of which still survives as an earthwork. A third possible settlement-related

platform lay to the south west, and adjacent to Mays Lane itself. This South Western Platform covered 25 by 60 m, and was divided unequally in two by a north-south oriented ditch, creating an elongated mound c.6 m wide down its eastern side. To the west of these three platforms lay a series of larger ditched enclosures, suggestive of the small paddocks and yards that can still be seen clustering around traditional farmsteads today (eg Myrtle and Chestnut Farm, to the south of Mays Lane). Though drained by regularly laid out gripes, these paddocks do not appear to have been ploughed. Further west a series of small fields do show traces of very narrow ridge and furrow suggestive of post medieval farming.

Two trenches were laid out across the major elements of this earthwork complex. Trench 4 (Trenches 1-3 were excavated in Church Field during 1996) sectioned the Northern Platform with its boundary ditches to the west and south, the western part of the Southern Platform with its boundary ditch to the west, and the elongated mound on the eastern side of the South Western Platform. Trench 5 sectioned the more elevated, eastern, part of the Southern Platform and its boundary ditch to the east.

Trench 5 produced the only evidence for a medieval structure, in the form of two well-built rectangular stone settings (Figures 5-6), the complete example measuring 0.95 x 0.70 m (Figure 4). They lay 5.9 m apart, and may have been to support the substantial wooden posts or beams of a timber building. The associated pottery dates to the 12th/13th centuries. The position of the two pad-stone settings that were excavated, and the topography of the earthwork platform on which they were located, suggests that the building had its long axis parallel

Figure 5: Two stone settings in Trench 5, including 351 by in background, possibly used to support part of a timber building



to the edge of the enclosure. The lower, western, part of the South Platform was sectioned by Trench 4, revealing a number of shallow gullies (F.249: Figure 4; F.298; F.300; F.302); F.304) very similar to modern drainage gripes, and a more substantial ditch which was recut a number of times (F. 296: Figure 4), all of which contained medieval pottery. A later ditch, F.308, contained a particularly rich dump of midden material dating to the later 17th century.

The distribution of medieval material within the Northern Platform suggests that the main focus of activity (or at least the dumping of rubbish) lay in the higher, southern area. Though no evidence for medieval buildings was uncovered, parts of a north-south oriented boundary ditch (F.243), a more substantial east-west oriented drainage ditch (F.267) and a square (?) cesspit (F. 265) were excavated, all of which contained dumps of midden-type material dating to between the 11th and 13th centuries. A large number of bulk samples were taken and it is hoped that the on-going programme of wet-sieving will produce good palaeoenvironmental assemblages.

The Northern Platform appears to have been largely deserted during the later medieval period, though two ditches (F.269 and F.271) containing early post medieval pottery divided up the platform

Figure 6: Stone setting 351 (scale = 0.5 m)





Figure 7: General view of south platform and Trench 5, looking south east

into smaller plots. The enclosure was sealed by a garden-like soil and was now presumably part of the farm or cottage that continued to occupy the Southern Platform: a substantial spread of stone rubble in Trench 5, associated with some brick and mortar, appears to represent the remains of the last structure to have occupied the Mays Lane site, demolished in the late 17th/early 18th century.

Puxton Church (Figures 8 and 9)

A detailed survey of Puxton Church has revealed a complex history. It consists of a simple nave, chancel, tower and porch (Figure 8). The earliest datable feature is the possibly 12th century font, though since Puxton was only a chapelry of Banwell during the medieval period, this may have been brought to the church in the 16th century when it achieved parish status. The nave contains four windows, those on the northern side dating to around the late 13th/early 14th century or later (Figures 8 and 9: A and B), with those on the southern side being 16th century (Figure 8: G&H). However, none of these windows are in a primary context, three having been very poorly reset at an unknown date (B, G & H), while the fourth (A) is reused from a

domestic context (it contains the fittings for wooden shutters which are found in domestic not ecclesiastical structures). The chancel was rebuilt and extended during the 19th century though some of the original windows may have been re-used: the east end window (D) dates to around the later 14th/15th century, while the two southern windows are 16th century (E&F). The chancel arch, however, appears original and dates to the 13th century or later. The tower appears to be much better preserved with a number of late 13th/early 14th century features (including the upper-storey windows), and modifications in the late 14th/15th century (including the west-end window and parapet). It would appear, therefore, that the present structure either dates to the later 13th/early 14th century or later, or saw major rebuilding at that time.

Discussion: a tentative model for the origins and development of Puxton

The programme of fieldwork, excavation, palaeoenvironmental research and other post-excavation analysis is still continuing, and so at present any conclusions with regards to the origins

St. SAVIOUR'S CHURCH
PUXTON, SOMERSET

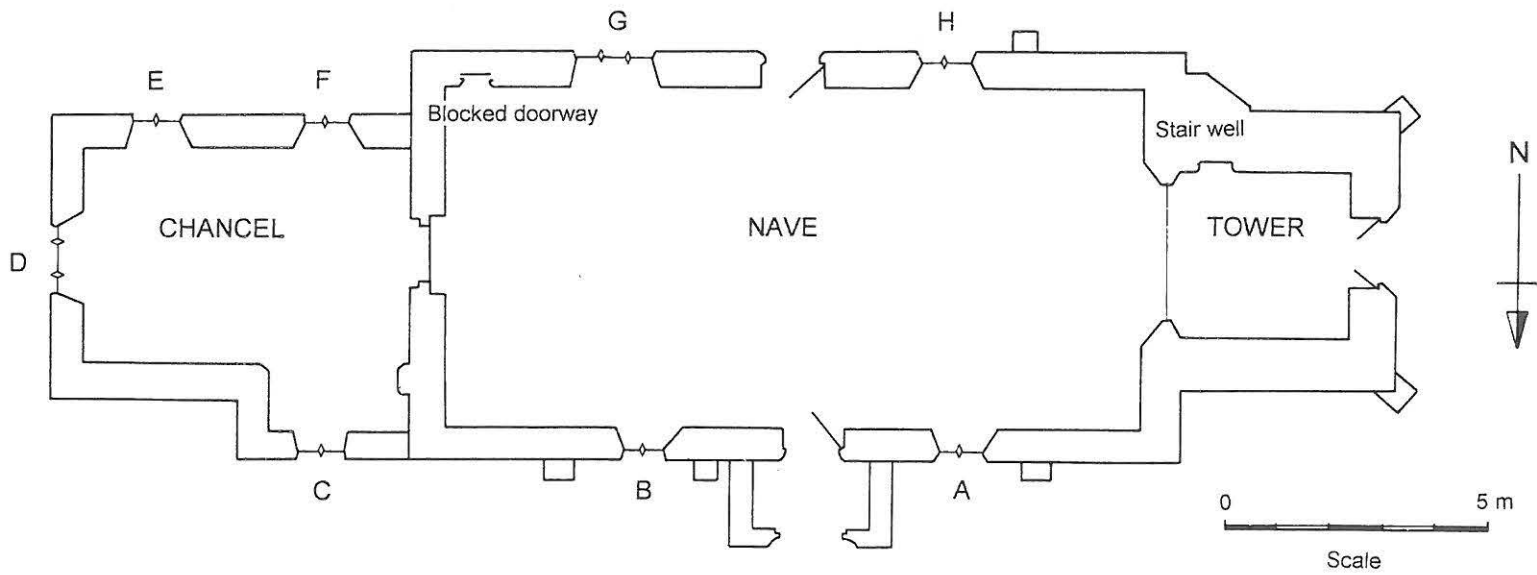
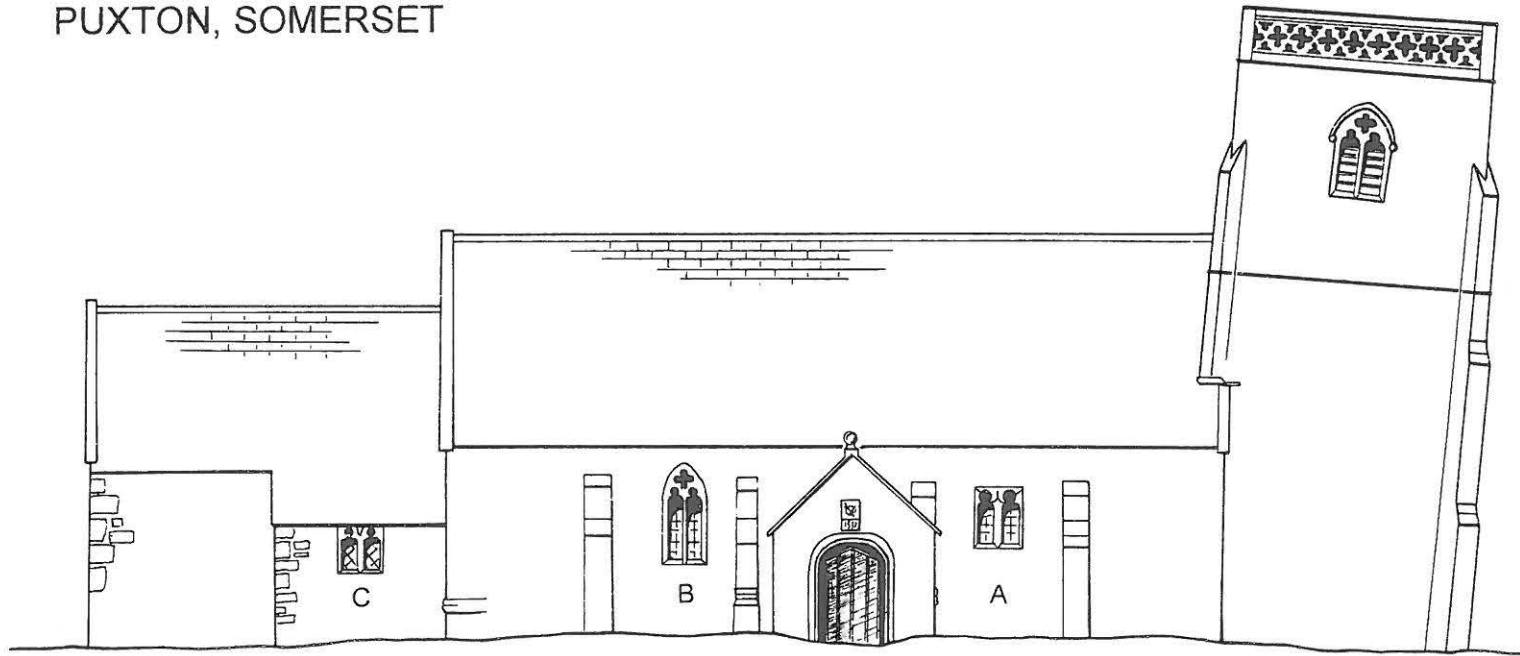


Figure 8: Plan of Puxton church

INTERIOR VIEW OF THE WINDOWS IN THE
NORTH WALL OF THE NAVE
St. SAVIOURS CHURCH
PUXTON, SOMERSET

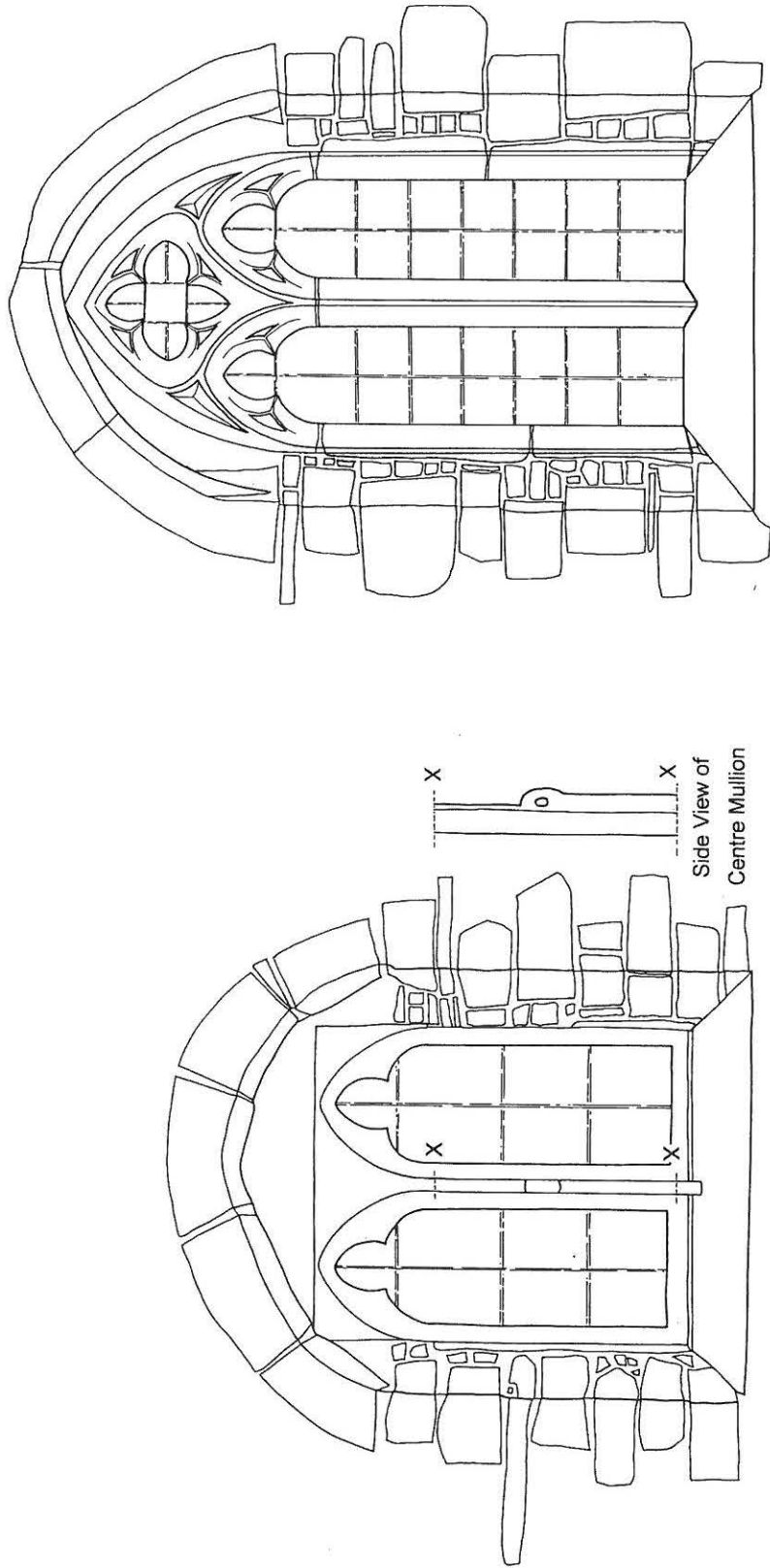


Figure 9: Interior view of windows A and B, showing re-set arches and fittings for sutter on window A suggesting that it is re-used from a domestic context

and development of Puxton must be tentative. However, the following model can be proposed. There was certainly Romano-British occupation in the area as a few residual sherds were recovered from Mays Lane. The fieldwalking and metal detecting of Church Field also yielded moderate amounts of material, while Trench 3 revealed a number of 3rd century ditches and gullies with a freshwater snail assemblage (Davies, in Rippon forthcoming). However, the focus of the Romano-British settlement is likely to lie some 500 m to the east where there are the well-preserved earthworks of a substantial settlement and its associated field system (Rippon 1996b, fig. 7).

The fieldwork at Banwell Moor and Kenn Moor established that there was a period of tidal flooding during the post-Roman period, and the alluvial sequence revealed at Puxton Mays Lane suggests that this was also the case there. It was during the area's subsequent recolonisation during the early medieval period that the present, 'historic', landscape was created. The earliest occupation at Puxton, dating back to at least the 10th century, appears to have lain around the northern edge of the 'infield' enclosure, from where the settlement expanded up Puxton Lane as far north as the Mays Lane site during the 11th and 12th centuries. During the 13th century the area of occupation south of the present church was abandoned.

Occupation of the Northern Platform at Mays Lane appears to have ceased towards the end of the medieval period, though the Southern Platform and other farmsteads in the settlement continued to be occupied: at least three of the historic farmsteads in the present hamlet appear to have been rebuilt in the 16th or 17th centuries. The Southern Platform at Mays Lane appears to have been abandoned around the late 17th century, which is in keeping with other evidence from North West Somerset for a phase of population decline during the 17th and 18th centuries (Rippon 1997a, 250-3).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank David, Mary and Pete James, Michael Heal, Andrew Hubbard, and Janet and Graham Rogers for all their assistance with this year's programme of work. I must also thank Keith Gardner who once again helped with the arrangements, Jean Dagnall who supervised the finds processing, and Mike Rouillard and students from Exeter University for all their hard work.

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