

MEDIEVAL SETTLEMENT ON THE NORTH SOMERSET LEVELS: THE FOURTH SEASON OF SURVEY AND EXCAVATION AT PUXTON, 1999

by Stephen Rippon

During the fourth season of fieldwork in and around Puxton, near Weston-super-Mare, on the North Somerset Levels, progress was made in five areas. Work started on a contour survey to establish whether the present settlement lies on a slight island. A structural survey of eight historic farmhouses in the parish was also carried out which points to a major period of rebuilding during the 17th century. Three houses may contain traces of late medieval structures, while medieval pottery was also collected from several gardens.

There were also three excavations. Firstly, an early Romano-British (?) saltern and ditched enclosure system was investigated on the Dolmoors. Secondly, in a nearby field which on the Tithe Map was called 'Hardingworth', excavation established that a concentration of settlement-indicative heavy metals, located in a soil chemistry survey of 1998, was due to a dump of post-medieval domestic rubbish. However, a buried soil was also recorded which probably equates with that observed in 1998 at Mays Lane and dated to the Roman period.

Further work was also carried out in the oval-shaped 'infield' enclosure south of the church, including a trench across the bank that runs around that field. Excavation on the main building platform near the church revealed a sequence of features containing a large assemblage of 10th to 13th century domestic refuse, and a series of palaeoenvironmental samples was taken. These will provide excellent comparative material for the later medieval and early post-medieval assemblages recovered during excavations to the north of the village at Mays Lane, and indeed for the Romano-British material retrieved from the Dolmoors, and 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 two Romano-British landscapes at Banwell and Kenn Moors (see Rippon 1994; 1995; 1996b; 1997b; forthcoming). Occupation at both 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, leading to the replacement of an intertidal saltmarsh with an agricultural landscape. Both sites were subsequently flooded as the Levels reverted back to saltmarsh. Since 1996, work has also been carried out in and around Puxton, notably on a striking oval-shaped enclosure (or 'infield') which appears to pre-date the surrounding fields and roads and so may relate to the very early phases of the second, medieval, phase of reclamation on the North Somerset Levels (Figure 1; Gilbert 1997; Rippon 1996a, fig. 17). Earthwork, geophysical, soil-chemistry and fieldwalking surveys have already been carried out (see Rippon 1996b; 1997b; 1998), while in September 1996 three small trenches were excavated on two of the building platforms south of the church (Figure 1, Trenches 1-2), and across the internal ditch running around the enclosure (Figure 1, Trench 3; Rippon 1996b, 45-52).

In 1999, a further season of work in and around Puxton had five specific aims:

1. to investigate the topographical context of the Puxton 'infield' and in particular to determine whether it lay on an area of slightly raised ground.
2. to investigate a series of earthworks to the east, in an area known as the Dolmoors, that were morphologically similar to the Romano-British settlements/field-systems at Kenn Moor and Banwell Moor.
3. to investigate a curiously-shaped field, which at the time of the Tithe Survey in the 1840s was known as 'Hardingworth', a name possibly indicative of an abandoned settlement.
4. to excavate a section across the bank that runs around the 'infield', and carry out further work on the main platform that produced such well-preserved assemblages of material in 1996.
5. to extend the Project to include other aspects of Puxton's primarily dispersed settlement pattern, through a study of the standing buildings.

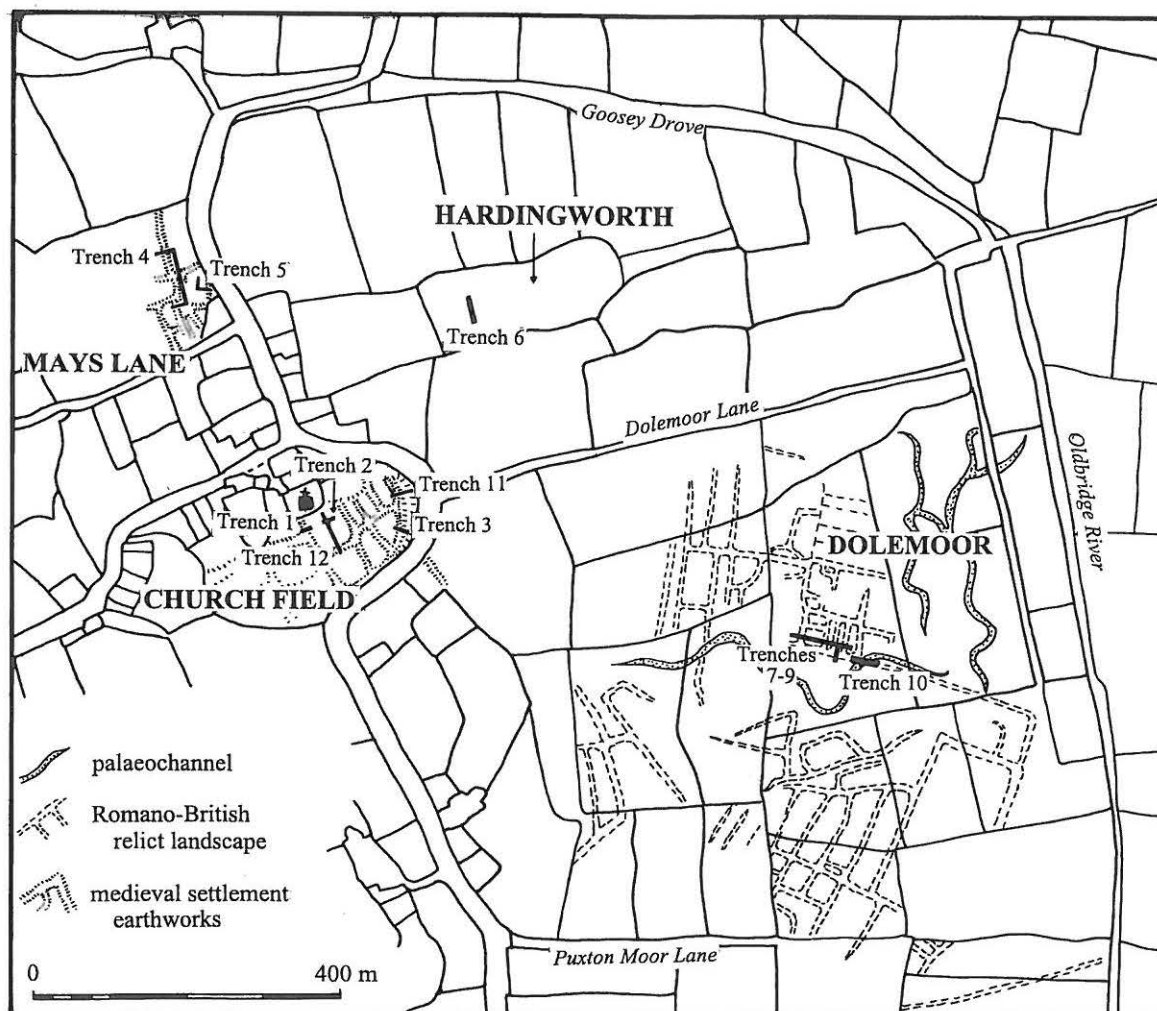


Figure 1: location of excavations at Puxton, 1996-1999

The contour survey

In apparently flat landscapes such as the Levels, relatively small differences in elevation can make a significant difference to daily life. By eye, it appeared that the church at Puxton may lie on a slightly raised area, though it was unclear whether this was the case with the village as a whole. In order to test whether this was the case, a contour survey was started in 1999 which will eventually cover a square kilometre centred on the church. The results so far indicate that, while the ground around the church is raised by c.0.5 m, the 'infield' enclosure is not on a slight island.

Early Romano-British Activity on the Dolmoors (Trenches 7-10)

The Puxton Dolmoors were an extensive area of common meadow that was only finally enclosed in 1811. In 1985, Keith Gardner noted that a series of earthworks on a roughly NNE-SSW orientation appeared to represent an earlier phase of drainage,

though this 'relict landscape' remained undated (Gardner 1985). Following the establishment of a late Romano-British date for relict landscapes of a very similar appearance on Kenn and Banwell Moors (Rippon 1994; 1995; 1996b; 1997b), a similar programme of survey and excavation was initiated in 1999 on the Puxton Dolmoors.

Four trenches were carefully targeted over very faint earthworks of certain key features in an enclosure complex lying to the north of an abandoned creek system (palaeochannel). The earliest activity was represented by a dump of charcoal, stone and burnt clay, which included fragments of several cylindrical clay pedestals, the largest of which had a diameter of 0.13 m, and a height of at least 0.35 m. A provisional early Roman date can be attributed to the associated pottery. The nature of this dump of waste debris is unclear, though it may be associated with salt production. Sea water, flowing up the tidal creek adjacent to the site, would have been collected in large tanks (where suspended sediment was allowed to settle out), and then transferred to pans



Figure 2: Puxton Dolmoors, general view of Trenches 7-10, looking east towards Congresbury. The darker fills of several early Romano-British features can be seen in the foreground.

that would have been placed on these pedestals inside an oven, within which the water was slowly heated and evaporated, leaving crystalline salt.

The possible saltern-dump was cut by a later ditch, which formed part of the relict landscape. A series of ditches forming part of that enclosure complex were sectioned, and most displayed a very similar two-phase history. The earliest phase of each ditch was represented by a relatively narrow but deep cut, filled with largely sterile clay, but with lenses of waterlogged plant remains towards their base. After they had largely silted up, the ditches were then re-cut with a shallower, broader profile. These later ditches contained a far more organically rich fill, suggesting that they silted up in very different conditions to their predecessors.

The pottery associated with the Dolmoor landscape is early Romano-British (later 1st to 2nd century AD). The best dating evidence was from the lower portion of a 2nd century bowl which after firing had a series of holes drilled into its base, and was later dropped into ditch F.303. Was this curious vessel some form of strainer or colander, perhaps associated with dairy production, or was this some form of ritual deposition? (I would like to thank David Smith for making this suggestion during a site visit). This early Romano-British date contrasts with the 3rd to 4th

Figure 3: Puxton Dolmoors, ditch F.307, showing the shallow profile of the later cut.





Figure 4: Puxton Dolmoors. A weekend of rain causes the suspension of work! The flood waters have picked out the very faint earthworks of two parallel Romano-British ditches.

century ditches excavated during 1996 in Church Field some 600 m to the west and the similarly dated enclosure systems at Kenn and Banwell Moors. Environmental evidence from these later Romano-British settlements and field systems all points to a freshwater, reclaimed, landscape so it will be interesting to see what the situation was like several centuries earlier on the early Romano-British Puxton Dolmoors.

Hardingworth (Trench 6)

Some 300 m north east of Puxton church lies a curiously-shaped field, which on the Tithe Map is named 'Hardingworth'. Such '-worth' field-names are thought to indicate the existence of a former enclosure or settlement (Costen 1992), and its sub-rectangular shape, in an area of otherwise rectilinear fields, certainly singled it out for further investigation. The field is under permanent pasture and the only earthworks are a gripe system for surface drainage. In 1998/99 Andrew Jackson carried out a soil chemistry survey of Hardingworth and the surrounding fields, which revealed a discrete concentration of several elements (phosphorus, lead, copper, cadmium and to a lesser extent zinc), along with a higher than average organic carbon content (loss on ignition), in the western end of Hardingworth. All these elements can become concentrated in soil where there has been disposal of human and animal waste over a period of time. These findings, along with the field-name, and its curious shape, hinted at the presence of an earlier settlement.

Upon removing the topsoil from the trench there were no archaeological features cut into the natural alluvium, other than two of the gripes which contained fragments of post-medieval brick, tile and pottery. However, between the gripes, a scatter of post-medieval debris corresponded to the concentration of settlement-indicative heavy metals, which probably resulted from a temporary dump of farmyard rubbish which was ploughed into the topsoil. What this confirms is that soil chemistry can be used to locate domestic refuse, but that at present it cannot be used to distinguish recent from medieval and older sites.

The Hardingworth trench lay c.300 m to the east of the Mays Lane site excavated in 1998, where two dark horizons were observed in the upper part of the natural alluvial sequence (Figure 1, Trench 4; Rippon 1998). The upper horizon was radiocarbon dated to 1910 \pm 45 BP (cal BC 15 - Cal AD 230). This same horizon was also observed in the Hardingworth trench. Once again, there was no associated pottery though in Hardingworth, the buried soil dipped down into a substantial hollow that extended below the modern watertable. It is to be hoped that these waterlogged conditions will have preserved plant macrofossils that were absent from the drier, Mays Lane site

Excavations in Church Field (Trenches 11-12)

Two further trenches were also excavated in Church Field during September 1999. Trench 11 sectioned

the bank that runs around the enclosure. The current earthwork is some 14 m wide, though this may in part result from material having been spread about through ploughing. The bank comprised several layers of dumped clay, the lowest of which (503) contained an assemblage of small, abraded sherds of Romano-British pottery. There was no medieval (11th/12th century and later) material from beneath the bank, even though it is present in the topsoil, suggesting that the bank was constructed sometime after the Roman period, but before the 11th/12th century.

There was no sign of a buried soil beneath the bank, which may indicate that it was constructed either on the surface of an active saltmarsh, or very shortly after the area had been reclaimed (but before there had been time for a soil to develop in this area). This hypothesis will need further investigation thorough soil micromorphology (the microscopic examination of a sample of the bank and underlying sediments).

Trench 12 was located on the main building platform towards the centre of the 'infield' enclosure, just south of the church (Figure 5). This platform was sectioned on a small scale in 1996, when a deep sequence of occupation deposits was uncovered dating from the 10th through to the 13th century. The work in 1999 uncovered further features, notably boundary/drainage ditches, from which closely dated, and well-preserved assemblages of pottery, metalwork, animal bones, burnt cereals and other domestic refuse were recovered. These will be compared with the later material from Mays Lane, to the north of the village, in order to see how patterns

of agriculture and the environment have changed over time.

The historic farmhouses of Puxton and Hewish

by Colin Humphreys

Excavations on the shrunken settlement earthworks at Mays Lane revealed a sequence of occupation that extended into the 17th century. It was readily apparent, however, that a number of local farmhouses that are still in use also dated from at least the 17th century, and so a programme of standing building recording was started with the aim of establishing the origins of the present farms, and subsequent periods of investment in the agricultural landscape.

The form this evidence takes varies enormously depending on the treatment a building has suffered during its life. Many houses have been completely rebuilt and only the plan may provide clues as to a more ancient lineage. Within others, structural and architectural details remain that not only indicate an approximate date of the first build, but also demonstrate later phases of development. The first approach to understanding the historic development of any standing building is to undertake an external and internal visual inspection. This usually gives a reasonable clue to the basic form of the structure but not always to the development phases. In these cases an accurate drawn survey is required from which, by showing features such as differences in wall thickness, the development of the structure can be analysed.

Figure 5: Trench 12 in Church Field, looking north west towards the church.



Doubleton Farm, Rolstone, provides a case study in how complex a building's history can be (Figure 6). When viewed from outside obvious changes in the roofline suggested that the building was of several phases. The initial impression was that the west facing range was the oldest part of the building, with the irregular layout of the doors and windows suggesting a three-cell cross-passage house. Attached to this, the south facing range, with a higher roofline and symmetrical layout of windows and doors, appeared to be a later addition.

However, an initial internal inspection showed a different story. The west range appeared to be a kitchen wing with a large chimney stack at the north end. This form of structure was often added to buildings in the late medieval period as a form of modernisation, though the ceiling beams in this example suggest a late 17th century date. If this was the case then the range to the south, to which the kitchen was attached, should be earlier even though its style of staircase, and internal doors and windows all suggest an early 19th century date. To add to the confusion the rooms that formed the 'east wing' appeared not to be related to either of the other major elements of the building. Therefore, in an attempt to understand the layout of the building, a measured survey of the ground floor was undertaken.

If the idea that the kitchen was an addition to an earlier building was correct then it was necessary to demonstrate that the apparently 19th century south facing range was in the position of, or represented the rebuilding of this earlier structure. Measurement of this range showed most of the walls to be of a consistent thickness, but in the area that adjoined the kitchen, the wall thickness was greater (suggesting that it incorporated an earlier build) and contained a small splayed window. Splayed windows are typical of earlier buildings and are constructed with the narrow part of the splay to the outside of the wall. The direction of the splay of this window showed that at one time it must have been an external window giving light into the south range. Therefore, the kitchen must have been an addition that, when built, made the window redundant: the south range did indeed contain the remnants of an earlier building.

Another area where the survey helped the understanding of the development of the building was the 'east wing'. Here the thickness and layout of the walls suggested that this area was not originally part of the domestic building and was probably an outhouse incorporated, at a later stage, into the current structure.

The results of the survey showed that the phases of this building were:

1. A long south facing range built prior to the 17th century.
2. The addition of a kitchen block in the 17th century.
3. The incorporation of outbuildings to form an 'east wing'.
4. The building of an extension to the north of the kitchen.

Giving precise dates to each phase is problematic and often relies on existing documentation or good dateable architectural details, both of which were not forthcoming for this building. However, the survey did allow us to be confident of the process by which the building developed and in which areas to look for further clues.

In all, eight houses in Puxton, Rolstone and Hewish were surveyed in detail, the results are summarised below:

Glebe Cottage, Puxton: two-celled house possibly dating from the 17th century (making it contemporary with the latest phase of occupation on the now deserted Mays Lane site just across the road).

Old Chestnut Farm, Puxton: 13th century and later pottery was collected from flower beds (making the occupation of this site contemporary with those in Church Field and Mays Lane), though the surviving building is much later. Two-celled house dating from the 17th century, extended to the north and south during the 18th century.

Puxton Moor Farm: the west wing survives of what was probably a substantial 17th century house; the rest was rebuilt in the early 20th century.

Mays Green Farm: two-celled 17th century house with central passage.

Chestnut Farm, Hewish: 13th century and later pottery was collected from flower beds, though the surviving building is later. The core may be a late medieval two or three-celled farmhouse, with a possible stair turret/chimney stack to the north. Extended to the east during the 17th century, with a northern wing added in the 17th/18th century when the central part of the farmhouse was re-roofed.

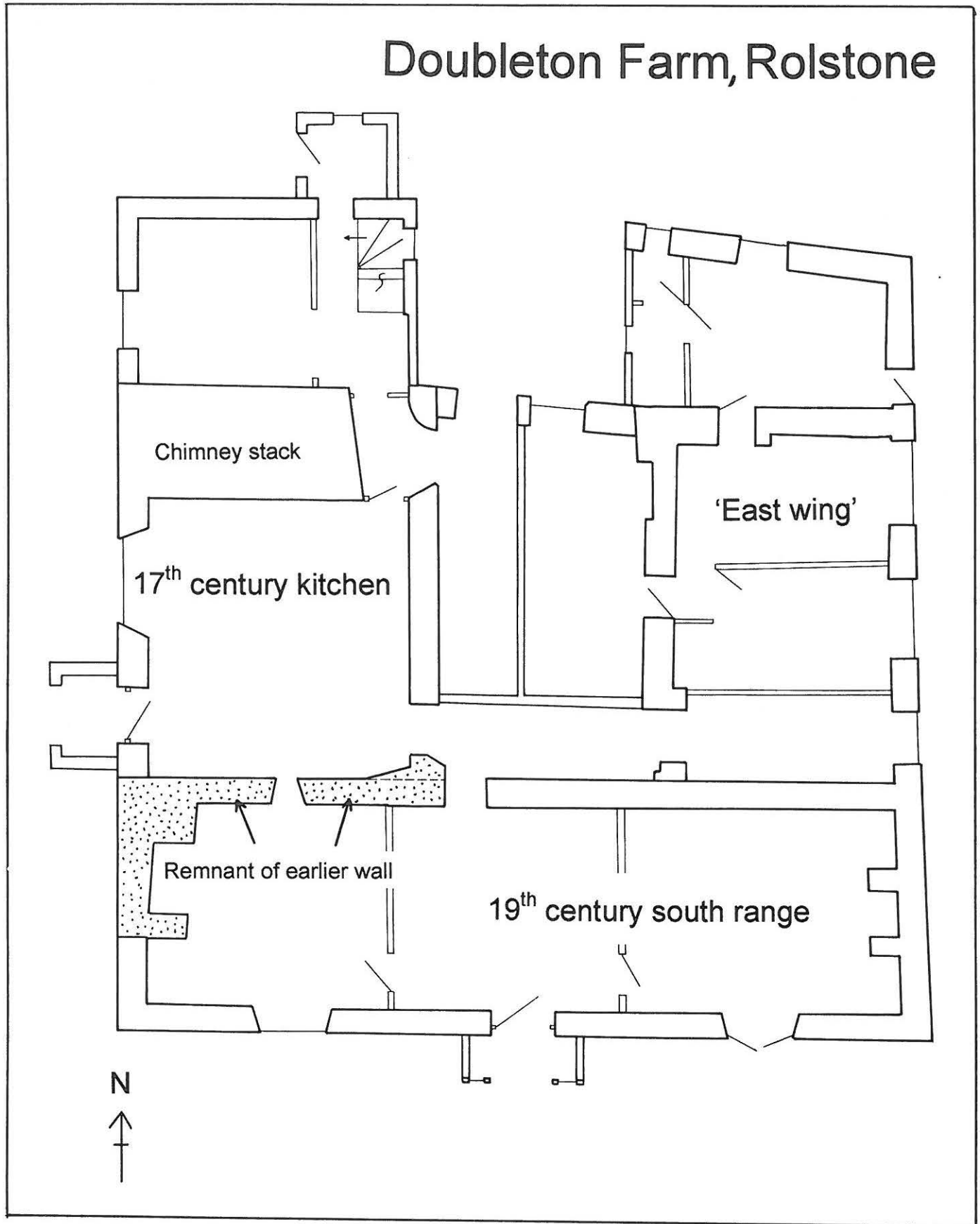


Figure 6: Plan of Doubleton Farm, Rolstone.

Stuntree Farm, Rolstone: the core of this two or three-celled farmhouse is difficult to date, though it is earlier than the external stair turret (a feature unlikely to be later than the 16th century). Possibly 17th century dairy added to rear side some time after the stair turret was built. A possibly 19th century kitchen added to west end.

The Grange, West Hewish: a substantial and well-appointed 17th century farmhouse with central range and two wings.

Doubleton Farm, Rolstone: the south facing range may include the remains of a late medieval (certainly pre-17th century) three-cell cross-passage house. Kitchen wing to the north west added during the 17th century. The main range of the present house rebuilt during the late 18th/19th century.

The survival of at least three possible late medieval houses is surprising as few, if any, such structures were thought to have survived on the Levels. All of the farms examined so far saw building/rebuilding during the 17th century, representing the investment of surplus agricultural wealth in what must have been a period of prosperity on the North Somerset Levels.

Puxton Church

The survey of Puxton church was reported in last year's interim (Rippon 1998). At that time it was not possible to gain access to the roof space, though this was inspected in 1999. The present roof dates to the 16th century, though traces of an earlier roof line on the side of the tower shows that the present structure is not the first. The style of the roof is very simplistic, almost domestic in character, suggesting a number of possibilities: that it was never intended to be visible, that it was re-used from another building, or that insufficient funds were available for a more sophisticated structure. Re-use from an earlier building is very unlikely, as none of the tell-tale signs were evident. The suggestion that the roof was never intended to be seen is also unlikely as several of the timbers have been whitewashed. It would appear, therefore, that we have an extremely simplistic 16th century construction. Three of the four windows on the southern side of the church are also 16th century, while a date stone above the porch gives 1557. The latter has been added rather crudely to a second stone containing the coat of arms of the St Loe family who held Puxton from the 15th century to 1563 (Knight 1902, 216). It is tempting, therefore, to suggest that Puxton church saw a major renovation during the mid 16th century.

Conclusions

The programme of survey and excavation is gradually unravelling Puxton's past. During the Iron Age we know that the North Somerset Levels were a vast saltmarsh (Rippon 2000), and the evidence from Puxton Dolmoors suggests that salt production may have continued into the early Roman period. Shortly after, the area was partly enclosed and drained through the digging of a series of ditches though this need not imply the presence of a sea wall. On the English Fenland, for example, similar ditched field systems lay on the surface of a very high intertidal saltmarsh, which although occasionally inundated, still provided excellent grazing and the potential for arable cultivation. We must await identification of the various palaeoenvironmental remains recovered from the ditches on Dolmoor, before we can say whether this was a freshwater (reclaimed) landscape or an intertidal saltmarsh during the early Roman period.

The snail assemblage from the late Roman ditches excavated in Church Field during 1996 was wholly freshwater (and identical to the species that still live in the drainage ditches today: Rippon 2000). This would indicate that reclamation had taken place by the 3rd century AD, which allowed the formation of a soil over much of the area. The sea walls must subsequently have failed as parts of Puxton reverted to an intertidal saltmarsh, and the late Roman soil was buried under later alluvium. In three places around Puxton (Church Field, Hardingworth and Mays Lane), this buried soil has been recorded as a dark stain in the clay some 0.5 m below the surface.

The second phase of reclamation that occurred on the North Somerset Levels may to have started with the construction of a low bank and ditch on the surface of that post-Roman saltmarsh, enclosing the 'infield' (this remains to be confirmed through palaeoenvironmental analysis). The occupation of the 'infield' enclosure was underway by the 10th century, and by the 12th century occupation had spread as far north as Mays Lane. As the population grew, further land was enclosed and drained resulting in the creation of a scatter of farmsteads throughout the higher, coastal, areas of what became Puxton, Rolstone and Hewish. Many of these farms still survive today, and it is their history that will form the focus of research in the coming years.

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Stephen Rippon,
 Department of Archaeology,
 School of Geography and Archaeology,
 University of Exeter,
 Laver Building,
 North Park Road,
 EXETER, EX4 4QE.

