



**Land adjacent to Steart Village
Steart Point, Somerset, TA5 2PX**

Summary Report

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Summary Report

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1.1 The Environment Agency, in partnership with the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (who will manage the scheme on completion), have initiated the Steart Peninsula Project, a 477ha habitat creation scheme at Steart near Bridgwater in Somerset. The scheme will create one of the UK's largest areas of new intertidal and freshwater wildlife habitat, whilst in the process improving both flood defences and the access track network around the peninsula, for the benefit of both residents of, and visitors to, Steart Peninsula. Team Van Oord, a Joint Venture between Van Oord, May Gurney, Mackley Construction and Royal HaskoningDHV, has been appointed to co-ordinate the design and construction of the scheme.
- 1.1.2 Early consultation and planning between the Environment Agency's NEAS Archaeologist and external partners ensured that the project was designed to take full account of archaeological issues rather than having to react to discoveries during the construction phase. This early planning also allowed community outreach events to be built into the project. Early NEAS involvement also ensured that English Heritage and the Somerset County Archaeologist understood the drivers behind the scheme and had confidence in the archaeological approach being developed.
- 1.1.3 Thus, in 2011 Wessex Archaeology was commissioned by Team Van Oord (via May Gurney) to carry out the archaeological works in advance of the construction of the Steart Peninsula habitat creation scheme. This appointment follows on from Wessex Archaeology's successful delivery of archaeological design and mitigation works associated with the associated Bristol Port Company habitat creation scheme on the Severn Channel side of the Steart Peninsula.
- 1.1.4 The main phase of fieldwork, comprising fieldwalking, geophysical survey, geoarchaeological assessment, trial trench evaluation and detailed excavation, was undertaken between December 2011 and August 2012, with a few short breaks in fieldwork due to weather conditions or ecological constraints. The main construction watching brief is currently ongoing.

2 CONTEXT

- 2.1.1 The staged and iterative approach to the archaeological investigation of the Steart Point peninsula, culminating in the recent phase of various fieldwork interventions, has been very successful. The results overall fit broad regional patterns of wetland environments in Southern Britain, where phases of land reclamation and climatic amelioration have been key factors in the successful exploitation, occupation and development of these landscapes. These phases of reclamation are strongly linked to the prevailing patterns of associated sea level increases (marine transgressions) which periodically made coastal wetland landscapes less favourable habitats, the most recent examples occurring in the

late Roman to early medieval (4th–10th centuries AD) and late medieval to early post-medieval periods (14th–16th centuries).

3 RESULTS

3.1 Summary

3.1.1 This previously relatively unexplored wetland landscape has been shown to contain only a small assemblage of finds of earlier prehistoric date (4000 BC – 400 BC) which are probably indicative of small-scale opportunistic exploitation of the landscape. However, a number of significant sites and areas of past human activity and inhabitation from the Middle/Late Iron Age (400 BC – AD 43), the Romano-British period (1st–4th centuries AD), the medieval (11th–15th centuries) and early post-medieval periods (16th–17th centuries) have been recorded during the current fieldwork. The results follow broad regional patterns seen in the Severn Estuary Levels, with the more regularly planned farming landscapes and permanent settlement evidence from the Romano-British period onwards, developing from seasonal, episodic exploitation of this resources-rich salt-marsh landscape. It has also highlighted extensive continuities within the Steart Point landscape of land divisions and drainage patterns which have their inception at least as far back as the early medieval period (11th–13th centuries) and possibly the Romano-British period.

3.2 Prehistoric

3.2.1 Apart from a few pieces of prehistoric worked flint and stone, the first phase of significant activity on Steart Point occurred in two areas in the Middle/Late Iron Age. Occupation evidence was recorded in Area D (Pond 3; archaeological Area 500) and residual Middle/Late Iron Age material was recorded from the south of Area E (Pond 8 and New South Drain), an area of extensive later, Romano-British activity.

3.2.2 The evidence for Middle/Late Iron exploitation of the Steart peninsula is relatively sparse but does suggest sporadic occupation and salt-making, a pattern which coincides with evidence from Britain and the Continent of a climatic amelioration in the late 1st millennium BC (Lamb 1981; 1982). Evidence from Steart Point will enhance local knowledge of activity in this period and can be compared with much more extensive sites in the county (see for example, Minnitt 2007).

3.2.3 The Area 500 activity was conveniently located on the margins of a large palaeochannel that extended far across the peninsula from the River Parrett. Undoubtedly at this early stage of occupation, in this wetland environment, the creek system would have offered an efficient manner of negotiating the resource-rich landscape for wildfowling, fishing, fuel (peat, reeds, rushes), building/fencing material and possibly salt production as seen in the Somerset Levels at this time (Rippon 1997, 6).

3.2.4 The occupation evidence comprised a series of spreads of charcoal-rich waste material (pottery, animal bone) suggestive of domestic activities. These had been eroded and interdigitated by fluvial processes associated with overbank flooding of the adjacent river channel. Charred plant remains included cereal grains, but only enough to suggest small-scale settlement activity, possibly short-lived. Overall, the evidence would indicate episodic (seasonal?) visits to the same convenient channel-side location between flooding events, to exploit the resources of the peninsula wetland. The only significant contemporary Iron Age evidence in the vicinity is the hillfort at Cannington, c. 4km to the south, which would have been close enough to exploit the available wild resources of the peninsula as well as salt marsh for grazing.

3.2.5 In the late 1st millennium BC the climate in Britain and the Continent showed a marked improvement (Rippon 1997, 44). In the Somerset Levels there was a possible lessening of the Upper Wentlooge alluvial formation, suggesting the possible construction of sea walls in the Romano-British period as for instance on the Caldicot Levels (Rippon 1997, 110). The increased exploitation of the Somerset Levels in the Romano-British period also includes industrial as well as domestic occupation, including salt-making and pottery manufacture.

3.3 Romano-British

3.3.1 The evidence indicates that the first widespread and systematic reclamation of the Somerset Levels occurred in the Romano-British period, and the evidence from the current Steart Point fieldwork supports this. This pattern is reflected in the local area at the rural settlement of Combwich, a possible ferry crossing point, and possible Roman field systems at Pawlett, as well as upstream at Crandon Bridge, where riverside stone structures may represent Romano-British warehouses for riverborne trade (Rippon 1997, 54; 2008).

3.3.2 No definitively dated pre-2nd century AD (early Roman) material was recorded from the two areas of Romano-British activity (scheme Area E and archaeological Area 501) in the current fieldwork. The Steart Point evidence follows a wider pattern of increased and more regularised exploitation of a planned landscape through the 2nd to 4th centuries AD. Archaeological evidence from Area 501 and Area E (Pond 8 and new South Drain) suggests permanent settlement, with stone and wooden structures (farmsteads) and associated field systems as well as indirect evidence of inhumations (Area 501). The local pastoral economy was based on sheep, with cattle secondary, and wheat was cultivated.

3.3.3 The evidence from the late Roman occupation at Area 501 clearly shows the archaeological deposits and features of the 3rd and 4th centuries AD date becoming truncated by the adjacent channels and subsequently overlain by overbank flood deposits represented by alluvial clays. Whilst a direct causal link cannot be made between the abandonment of this site and its inundation, the circumstantial evidence is compelling, and fits with the local evidence for discontinuity of late Roman occupation (in the south of Area E) as well as the wider Somerset Levels. The small quantity of 2nd to 4th century AD pottery recovered from Tr 600 may indicate activity associated with the site at Area 501 c. 400m to the south-east, or indicate late Romano-British activity on the ridge of higher ground on which Steart village is situated.

3.4 Anglo-Saxon

3.4.1 The post-Roman environmental evidence of the early 5th to 9th centuries for the Somerset Levels shows widespread flooding due to increased sea levels. This is reflected in Romano-British period ground levels becoming sealed below c. 0.70m of alluvium and a general decline in the number of settlement sites during the 4th century, though whether the general abandonment of the Somerset Levels wetlands is due to flooding alone, or in conjunction with other social or economic factors is uncertain (Rippon 1997, 126; 2000, 88-9).

3.5 Medieval

3.5.1 The evidence from the fieldwork of recolonisation of the Steart Point landscape is absent until around the 11th century and, again, this fits well with regional patterns of wetland exploitation (Rippon 1997, 12); the concerted attempts at recolonisation reflected in sea walls, river flood barriers and drainage ditches becoming more evident from this period onwards. The early medieval period (11th to 13th centuries) is the first to have widespread

aspects of the reclamation (moated sites, drainage ditches, field boundary patterns, infilling or ditching of natural/irregular creek channels) still visible and retained as functional elements of a planned landscape of drainage features.

- 3.5.2 This recolonisation and extensive reorganisation and reclamation of the Steart Point landscape correlated with a climatic amelioration including relatively warm and dry weather with less storms, that lasted from around the 10th century to at least c. 1300 (Lamb 1981, 60). Not only were the Somerset Levels used for grazing sheep and cattle, but farming and fishing became more important. By the 13th century, 'almost all of the higher coastal clay-lands were embanked, drained and settled' (Rippon 2000, 90).
- 3.5.3 As expected, the known moated sites that were investigated provided nearly all the evidence of both medieval and post-medieval activity on Steart Point, but particularly from excavation Areas 502 and 503. Consistent with earlier patterns of landscape exploitation, settlement evidence was located close to palaeochannels, and in many cases these palaeochannels were regularised and incorporated into the drainage/field system pattern of reclamation (Wessex Archaeology 2008; 2009). The continuing occupation and improvement at Steart Point is reflected in the 13th/14th century pottery recorded mixed within the late Roman rubble layers of Area 501. This evidence may indicate the date for the robbing of the building material and/or the construction of the field boundary ditch that cut through the site.
- 3.5.4 The moated sites were functionally linked to the requirement not only for drainage but the management of fields for mixed arable and pastoral farming regimes; waterlogged seeds of stinking mayweed from Areas 502 and 503 reflect the increasing cultivation of heavier, marginal soils at this period. The evidence from the current fieldwork suggests that most of the moated sites were occupied from the 11th to 14th centuries, although the moated site of Area 502 contained possible evidence of 14th/15th century activity.
- 3.5.5 As with many other wetland landscapes, there seems to have been a relatively dramatic decline in activity in the 14th century, associated with falling temperatures, increased levels of rainfall and storminess (Rippon 1997, 6) as well as the dramatic population decline of the Black Death from the mid-14th century onwards. This pattern is also evident at Steart Point, the latest occupation being of possible 14th/15th century date at the Area 502 moated site.

3.6 Post-medieval

- 3.6.1 There is no definite evidence of continuity into the immediate post-medieval periods except for the latest (Phase 3) activity at the Area 503 moated site, which was reorganised during the 16th to 17th centuries.
- 3.6.2 More widely, the 16th century does not seem to have been a period of large-scale investment in land drainage maintenance and development and up until c. 1770 there was near stagnation in the improvement of the Somerset Levels (Williams 1970, 110). The evidence from the latest phase of Area 503 occupation, along with 17th/18th century material from the west of Area 500 and a moated site (SHER 2038) might suggest localised or more widespread landscape reorganisation at Steart Point, with the construction date of ridge-and-vurrow drainage.
- 3.6.3 Evidence from all the occupation sites originally containing structures partially or wholly of masonry, or cobbled surfaces (Areas 501–502) all show evidence of extensive robbing, either as a part of a concerted programme of demolition or of robbing conveniently located building material in the landscape following structural disuse.

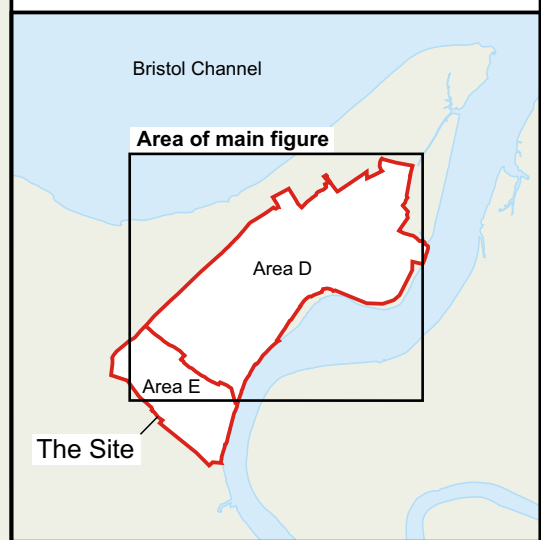
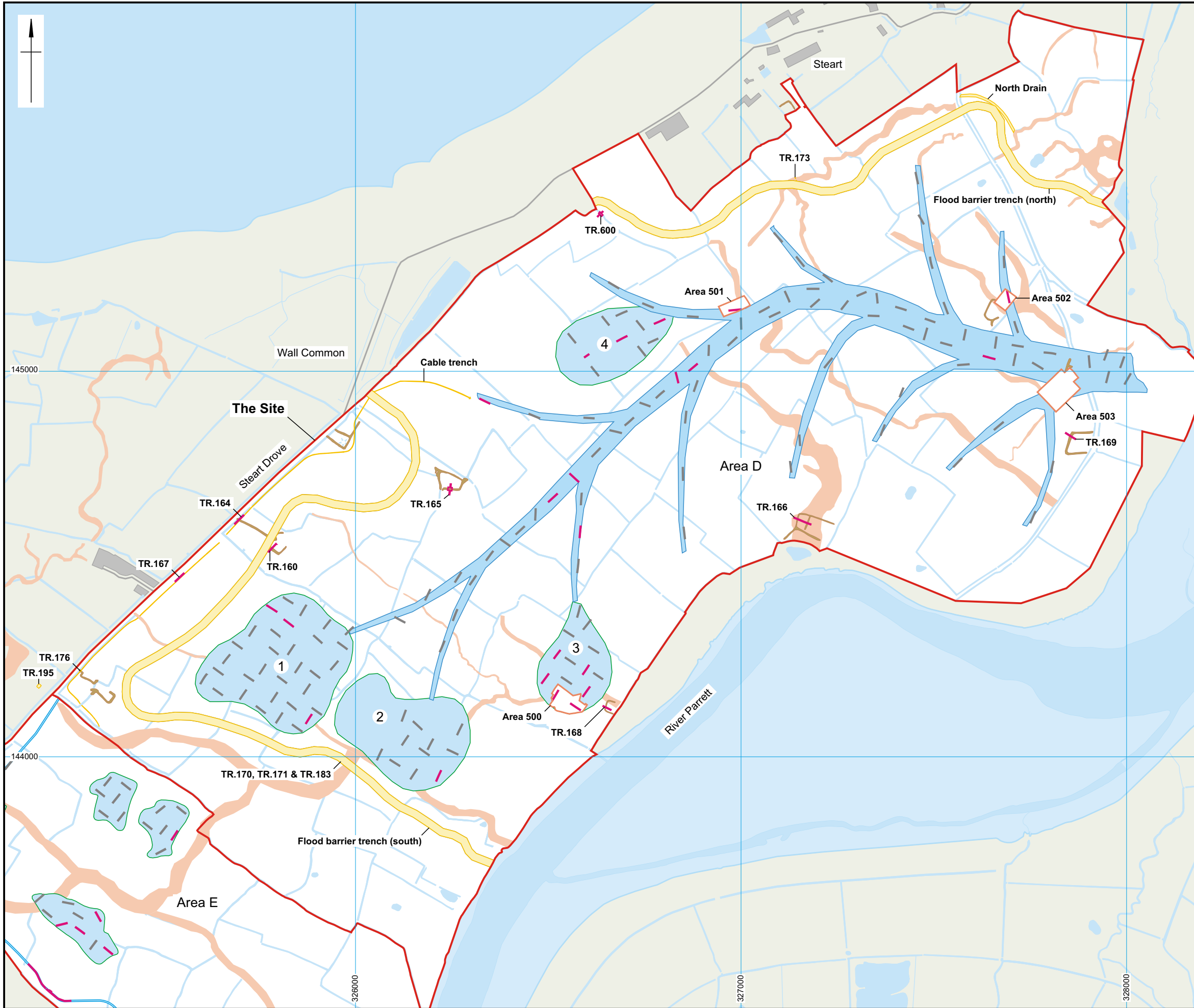


4 NEXT STEPS

- 4.1.1 Proposals have been made for a programme of further analysis of the results of the current fieldwork, culminating in their publication in monograph form. In the meantime, the construction watching brief continues.

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- Excavation area
 - Trench with archaeological features
 - Trench with no archaeological features
 - Area of watching brief
 - Moated sites
 - Palaeochannel (interpreted from LiDAR data WA 2009)
- © Environment Agency copyright 2011. All rights reserved
- Habitat Creation Scheme:**
- Creeks
 - Ponds
 - New South Drain



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Area D plan

Figure 2