

YCCCART 2021/Y9

**Excavations at Winthill, Banwell, North Somerset by Axbridge  
Caving Group and Archaeological Society 1954-6  
1: The structures and burials**

**YATTON, CONGRESBURY, CLAVERHAM AND CLEEVE ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
RESEARCH TEAM (YCCCART)**

*General Editor: Vince Russett*



*Human remains 25-29 and end wall of Trial Trench, 1955*

*Banwell, Trial excavation, Winthill, 2021, Y9, v.1*

**For** (in no particular order):

John Chapman, Jim Hunt, Percy Baker, Dick Neads, Ian Tabrett, Jim Emmerson, Jack Weare, G Ellis, Derek Crocker, E Tabrett, D Payne, D Weare, H. Dean, B Copley Jones, N. Copley Jones, Mr H. Ashworth, Sgt. Rogers, Miss Moore, Miss Chubb, Roger Beamont, H Copley Jones, I Pebble, K Middleton, J Dartnell, Mr Mothersill, Miss Butter (and friend), B Evans, M Durston, Barry Pruen, I Kemmish (and his brother), I Cook, Munro Chick, Mr Wilson, D. Reasons, Mr Green, Master Green, Mr B. J. Butter, Master T. Raines, Rev. Tongue, J. Cook, Mr G. Whittle, Mrs. Honey, B. Start, Miss Fraser, PC Ridley, Master Cousins, R. Ferguson, J. Lee, D. Lee, Mr Hagan, M. Walsh who all worked at Winthill in 1954-6.

*'The deeds we do in life, echo in eternity'*

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## **Abstract**

*Excavation by Axbridge Caving Group and Archaeological Society in 1954-6, revealed evidence of Roman occupation, with stone walls and some evidence of flooring. The extensive evidence for post-Roman burial was not previously expected, but unfortunately, few bones remain for study. Two that have been radiocarbon dated yielded dates of 430-610 and 660-810. The finds will be dealt with in a second study.*

*Later phases of activity included post-medieval mining activity.*

## **Acknowledgements**

This survey would also not have been carried out without the willing permission of the landowner, the late Mr Harding, then of Winthill Farm, Banwell.

Special thanks must go to John Chapman and the late Jim Hunt for preserving the site records from this campaign. Bobby Hunt and Joan Goddard did splendid work in transcribing some of the records.

## **Introduction**

It is perhaps not recognised today how much excavation work was carried out by local archaeological societies in the past (such as the groups at Axbridge, Banwell, Bridgwater or North Somerset Archaeological Research Group for example).

Much remains unpublished, and in the passage of time many records lost. Axbridge's work at Winthill in 1954-6 has fallen into this category until now. Through the foresight of John Chapman, sufficient records have survived to bring this work to some form of publication.

Current working archaeologists will find much they would expect to be included in this report missing. The excavators of the 1950s should not be condemned for this: such practices now all-pervading such as single-context recording and environmental sampling were more or less unheard of in the 1950s, but sufficient survives in the archive to understand the gist of the site.

Inevitably, this site will always be associated with the finding of the Winthill inscribed glass bowl: while this was an exceedingly rare find, the glamour of the bowl has completely overwhelmed other aspects, such as the unearthing of at least 51 (probably) post-Roman burials, extending through all excavations.

The ultimate fate of the bones is not clear (except for the skeleton now in Axbridge Museum, variously known as Charlie, George, and then through the correct assignment of gender by Jackie McKinley, Georgina!). It is overwhelmingly likely that more burials survive in the vicinity: it is a great pity that the current landowner will not allow a geophysical survey in the area. While mentioning the human burials, it should be

remembered that attitudes to human remains were quite different in a generation that had only recently witnessed the horrors of World War Two.

## **This study**

This study was carried out between January and November 2020.

A few summaries of the works were published in the 1950s and 1960s (Chapman 1955; Hunt 1955; Hunt 1964, for example), but as seems to be traditional in Somerset, no final report was ever published.

Fortunately, one of the participants in the excavation (JWH) attempted several times to write the site up, and made copious notes on various aspects of the excavation, and another (EJC) made certain that photographs and notes were kept and protected, and it was in discussion with myself that a plan to provide at least some sort of publication was necessary. Around 640 photographs of that archive were made, including sketches, site photographs, plans and other material.

The first two months of this study were spent simply in the accumulation of primary material (mainly from John Chapman), and secondary, from publications as different as the Newsletter of the Axbridge Caving Group and Archaeological Society to the Historic England publication of the heritage of Mendip (Jamieson 2015).

The next six months were taken up with unravelling the notes and locating where in the excavations the various features lay. Since very few were adequately labelled, this somewhat Herculean task did enliven the pandemic lockdown of early 2020. The photographs were mostly unlabelled, but by comparison with each other and by using site notes and what has actually been published, it was possible to find references to around 120 stratigraphic units, and put together a rough picture of the development and use of the site.

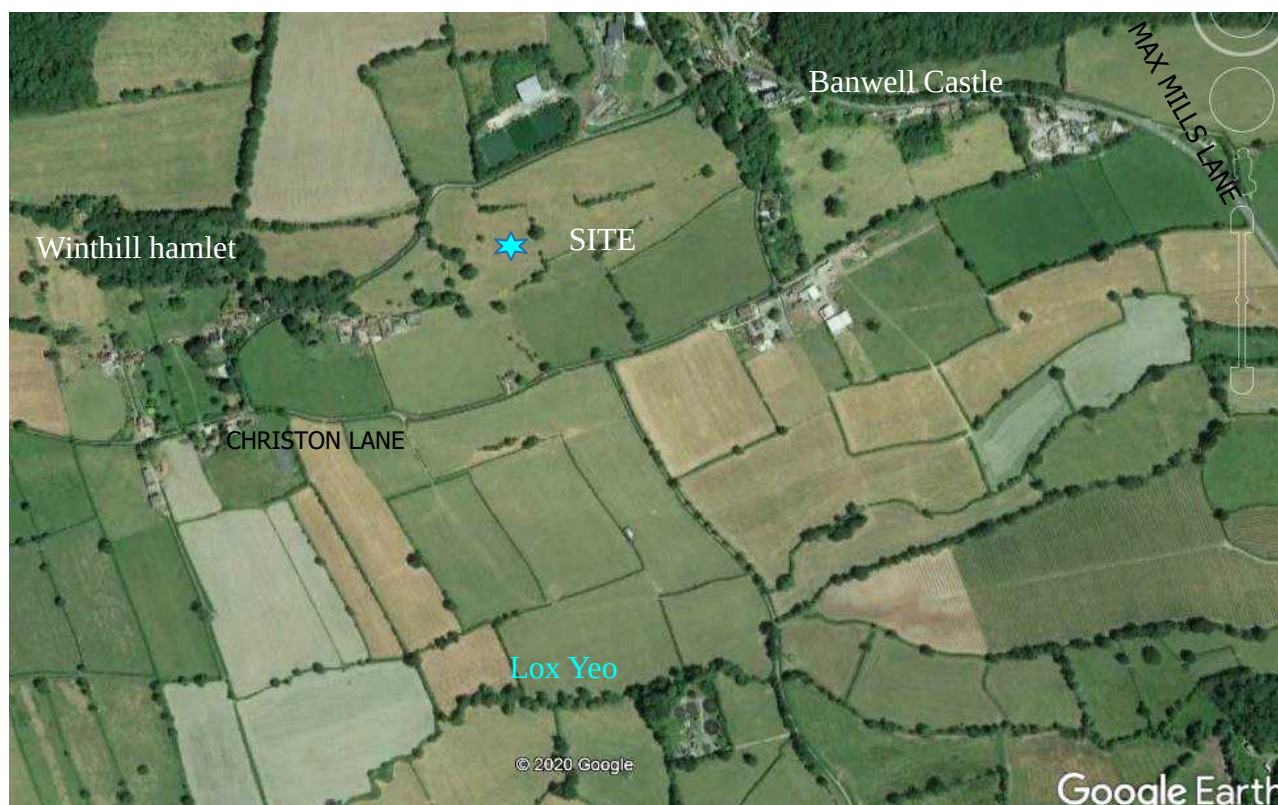
Around 30 of these photographs proved impossible to identify and some 30 others turned out to be of different sites. Few site plans and sections appear to have survived, but a critical pair of the section and plan of the 1954-55 trench was published, and enough photographs of the 1956 campaign survived to make some sense of the structures and burials revealed.

Such stratigraphic information as could be gathered from texts and photographs (around 120 units) have been assembled and sorted into matrices where possible.

A listing of the digital archive is included in Appendix 3.

Clearly, there is far more information in the digital archive than can be usefully included in this report, and a copy of the digital information will in due course be freely available at the Somerset Heritage Centre.

## Site location



*Fig 1: Location of the 1954-56 excavations*

The excavations of 1954-5 and 1956 took place on the south-facing slope of Banwell Hill, in the parish of Banwell in what is now North Somerset, centring on ST39815847. It lies around 70m south of the minor road leading from Banwell to Winthill hamlet.

## Land use and geology

The excavation site is currently used as pasture. It lies at, or close to, the junction of the Oxwich (Carboniferous) Limestone and the Dolomitic Conglomerate, although the photographic and documentary evidence is that the base of the trenches was entirely on the Limestone.

The site lies within Scheduled Monument 22814 'Roman settlement and associated industrial remains and field system north-east of Winthill Farm' designated 02 October 1967 (see Appendix 2 below). The site was also designated locally as a Priority Wildlife Conservation Area (North Somerset 3) and Priority Landscape Conservation Area (North Somerset 1). It is also within the Mendip Hills AONB.

The site can be seen from the public footpath running down the middle of the field. It is not Public Access land. The earthworks at the site were surveyed by Historic England as part of the Mendip Hills Project (Jamieson 2015: 120, 172).

## Historical & archaeological context

As the Historic England description in the national List shows (see Appendix 2), much of the impetus for the protection of this area by addition to the Schedule was based on the results of excavations in 1950, as reported at second hand in 1957.

This emphasised the industrial nature of the site, and suggested an economy based on lead mining and smelting. While this may well be true, there appears to be almost no evidence of Roman industrial activity in the Axbridge excavations of 1954-6.

The earliest known reference to the importance of the Winthill site was in Collinson (1793):

*'...It [Winterstoke Hundred] had its name from the ancient but now depopulated village of Winterstoke; as that had from a remarkable spot called Winthill in the parish of Banwell, where, according to tradition, a bloody battle was fought between the Saxons and the Danes the memory whereof is retained in the appellation of the place, Win in the Saxon language signifying a battle, and Winterstoke, the place of the tower of battle...'*

While it is easy to have a cheap laugh at Collinson's etymology, the association of Winthill with human remains perhaps implies some awareness of the burials at this site prior to the late 18th century. Collinson does not even mention Winthill in his summary of the history of the manor of Banwell.

In 1829, Rutter's 'Delineations' states:

*The monastery [Banwell] was destroyed by the Danes, who overran the whole of this part of the country, contiguous to the Channel; it was afterwards re-established, but never recovered its former magnificence; and had fallen into ruin, some centuries previous to the general dissolution of monasteries.*

*The original establishment is supposed to have been situated in the hamlet of Winthill on the southern side of the hill; where is a piece of ground, from time immemorial called Chapel Leaze, in which have been discovered numerous skeletons, lying regularly east and west; and in an adjoining field are the foundations of extensive buildings, supposed to have been the site of the monastery and chapel. Several coins have been dug up on this spot; two of which, the most remarkable, are now in the possession of Mr. George Bennett, solicitor of Rolston; one of silver, representing Julian the apostate, the other copper, of the Emperor Alexander. It is supposed that this monastery was the one destroyed by the Danes; and that on its re-establishment, it was built within the village; probably on the site of the bishop's palace, on which now stands the Court House.*

So it is plain that even by 1829, the site at Winthill was associated with east-west burials, Roman coins, and the place-name Chapel Leaze.

When Jim Hunt was writing in the 1950s (Hunt 1955; Chapman 1955), the folklore about a battle between Saxons and Danes was still well-known: it should be pointed out that

similar stories are known from Bleadon, Battleborough (Brent Knoll) and Wedmore locally: the story is known at other sites in Somerset as well.

Knight (1915) expands further:

*Various origins have been suggested for the word Winthill. Some authorities have it 'The Hill of Battle.' Others think that the first syllable means 'fair,' or 'open,' or 'level,' and see in the name an allusion to the flat country which here, as in Winter-head and Winscombe, and indeed throughout the whole Hundred of Winterstoke, in all of which the same root appears, stretches away from the foot of the hills. Rhodyate, or Roddy, as it is more commonly called, means 'The Road at the Gate,' or the entrance road. Mr. Bennett says that, about the year 1800, two skeletons were found at the top of Banwell Roddy. And he adds that it was the belief of the time that these were the remains of a man and his wife, who, having murdered their mistress at Hutton, and having afterwards set fire to the house, were convicted on the dying evidence of their victim, and were executed and buried at this spot. In 1813 another human skeleton was found near the same place, lying buried in the middle of the road, and with its feet to the east.*

*Although there has never been any systematic exploration of the spot, there is some ground for thinking that there was a Roman settlement near the hamlet of Winthill. The second large field on the left hand, after passing the Castle on the way to Winthill, on the old Roman road, is called Chapel Leaze, and the field adjoining it to the west is called Chapel Close—names that in themselves suggest human occupation. At the top of Chapel Leaze close to the road, is a large level space, to which tradition points as the site of a building. It appears from Mr. Bennett's notes, that remains of buildings were still visible in this field in 1815.*

*In a hollow in the Chapel Close, lower down the slope are well-marked lines which appear to be traces of old foundations. Fragments of dressed freestone may still be seen here; and there are persons still living who can remember a ruined cottage which had evidently been constructed from the remains of a much more ancient and important building. In both fields there have, at various times, been found skeletons, Roman coins, and other relics. A stone coffin dug up many years ago in Chapel Leaze was long used at a neighbouring farm as a pig-trough, but it has now disappeared. There is a tradition that this was the original site of Asser's Monastery, that the house was burnt by the Danes, and that it was afterwards rebuilt in the village of Banwell. Of this, however, there is no real evidence. And when we consider the sheltered character of the spot, the proximity of the Roman road, and the nature of the remains which have been found here, it seems more probable that in these fields there once stood a Roman villa.*

*Many Roman coins have at various times been found both in Chapel Leaze and Chapel Close. Of these about eighty are still preserved in two small collections, one made by the late Mr. George Bennett, and the other by Mr. Thomas Castle of Winthill. Mr. Bennett's collection includes about forty of the small coins known as Third Brass, many of which are much worn, and bear no legible inscription, and two silver denarii, one of them of Julian, often called the Apostate, who was Emperor of Rome from 361 to 363. Mr. Castle has also about forty Third Brass coins, one First and one Second Brass, and one denarius, all of*



*which have been found during the last forty years in the Chapel Leaze and the Chapel Close. A brass signet-ring, bearing a shield, charged with what look like three casks and two staves, and probably mediaeval, was also picked up in the former field about forty years ago...'*

The first recorded excavation was that of 1950, on the results of which the Scheduling document seems to have been drawn up, although the Winthill glass bowl is also therein mentioned.

This recorded '*. A coin hoard dating to the middle of the fourth century AD was recovered from beneath the stone floor slabs of the structure during partial excavation in 1950, confirming a Roman date..*' (Historic England 2020: see Appendix 2).

Hunt (1955) adds:

*The second field on the right hand [actually, left] past Banwell Castle, on the road to Winthill, is called ('from time immemorial'), 'Chapel Leaze' and the next, having a large gully running up it, 'Chapel Close'...The fields between Chapel Close and the castle are deeply terraced, especially Chapel Close itself which has never been ploughed because of the extraordinary number of terraces in it composed almost entirely of building rubble...numerous skeletons have been found in both fields at various times, lying regularly east and west, Christian style, also Roman coins, pottery and other relics.*

*A stone coffin, discovered in Chapel Leaze in the late years of the last century [i.e. late 19th century] was long used at the neighbouring farm as a pig trough but no longer exists...built into the interior of the farmhouse is a carved stone, now illegible. The remains of buildings in Chapel Close etc., date from Roman to modern times. It appears from Mr Bennett's notes that on the upper (level) part of Chapel Leaze foundations were still visible as late as 1815. Because of the Roman pottery, coins, dressed freestone etc., the site is marked on the Ordnance Survey maps as 'Roman villa', although we may logically assume that the stones of the original structures have been used over and over again in subsequent buildings.*

*The fields below these, as far as Max Mill (another Roman site) have yielded like relics. Mr J. Tabrett of Winthill has made a collection of these..in it are flint tools, many ox cues, part of a quern, Roman coins and one 18th century, a large piece of bronze casting and parts of bracelets etc. There are also mediaeval and Roman glass and 'terra sigillata'.*

## Survey objectives

The excavations in 1954-6 were not carried out with a previously agreed research agenda, an idea that would have been unheard of in the 1950s world of amateur archaeology. The documentation largely focuses on finds, and the date on which they were found. While this affords a 'soft stratigraphy' (finds made later are likely to be lower in the sequence), this is not reliable enough to use in the interpretation of the site.

Neither were the human remains accorded the same curation that would be routine today:

*N.B. It is to be regretted that more attention was not paid to the skeletons during the excavation, instead of too often regarding them as enemies of the archaeologist, in their burial resulting in destruction of the Roman buildings. Failure to preserve all the complete skulls and bones relating to stature has been an irreparable loss. (Hunt 1955)*

## Methodology

The excavations were carried out entirely by hand by members of the Axbridge Caving Group and Archaeological Society during 1954-55 and 1956. Backfilling was by bulldozer.

The original archive materials remain with John Chapman: the archive for this report will be offered to the Somerset Heritage Centre in due course.

It should be understood that this is an interim report, and that study of finds and the burials that survive may well cause future versions to adapt.

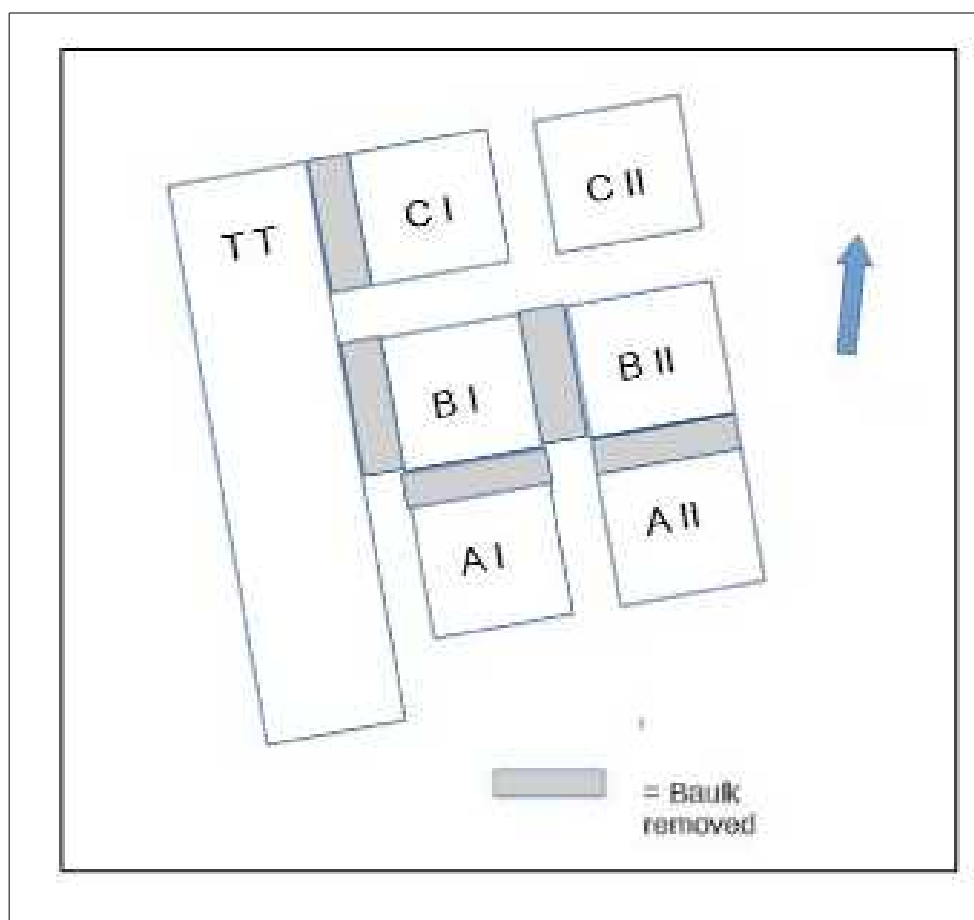
Further interventions (by Banwell Archaeological Society in the 1960s, and on behalf of Bristol Water in the 1990s) have occurred, and at the time of writing a large excavation is under way at the bottom of the hill opposite Max Mills.

The report was written in Libre Office 5 Writer.

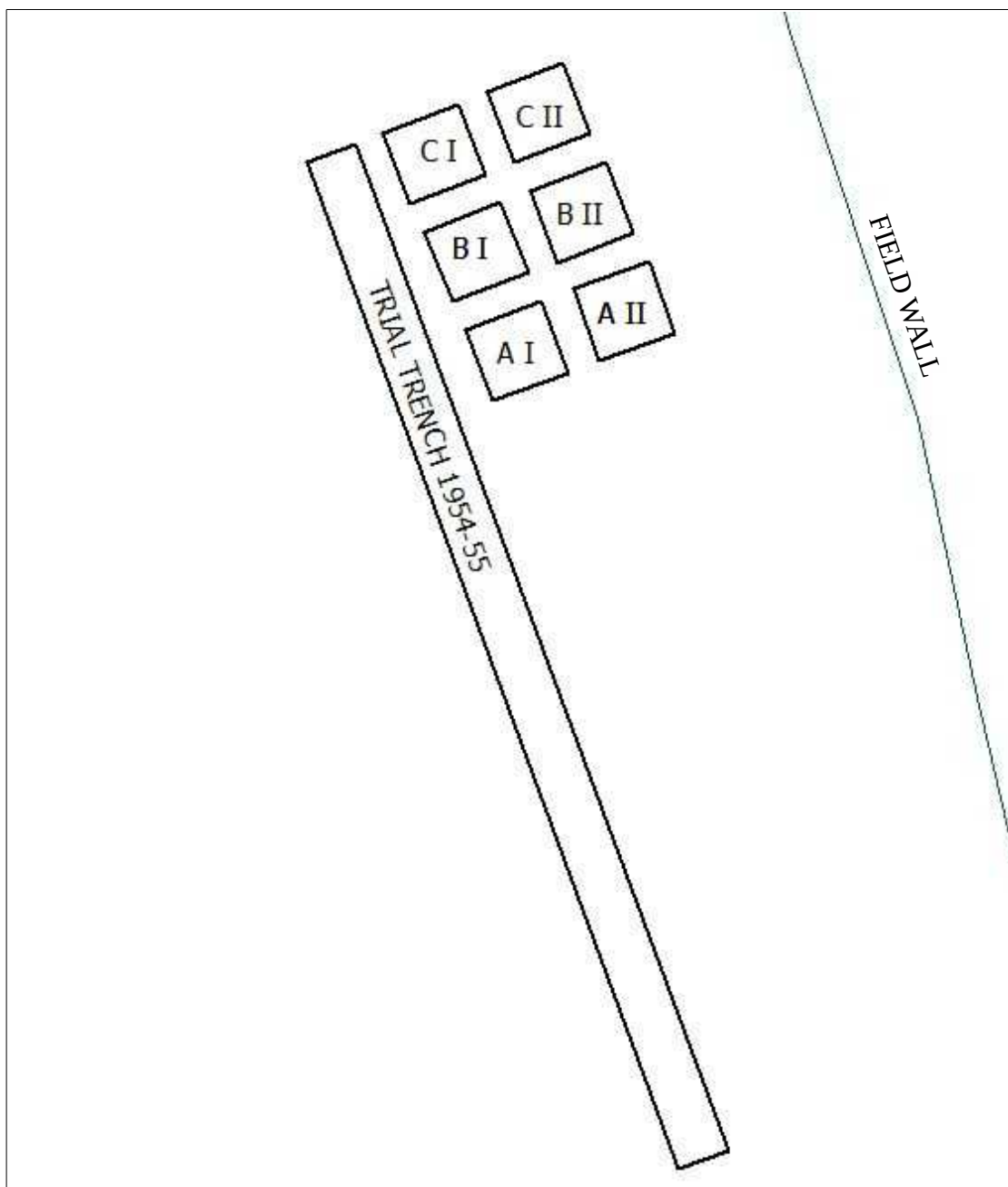
## Results

The excavations of 1954-5 initially comprised a 3 feet (0.91m) wide shorter trench, but when it was realised how deep the stratigraphy was, and on the advice of Philip Rahtz and Ernest Greenfield, the trench eventually became 5 feet (1.52m) wide and 100 feet (30.5m) long, all dug to bedrock (although Roman structures were not removed).

In the campaign of 1956, six areas of 10 feet (3.05m) were laid out adjacent to the uphill end of the 1954-5 trench, with the central 7 feet (2.13m) by 7 feet square being excavated, and the grids being assigned letters AI, AII, BI, BII, CI and CII. Subsequently the baulks between Grids AI and BI, AII and BII (partially), BI and BII, and CI and the 1954-5 trench were excavated, the last being the occasion of the finding of the Winthill glass bowl.



*Fig 2: 1956 grids and upper end of 1954-55 trench as re-excavated in 1956*



*Fig 3: Labels of the Winthill trenches: the 6 smaller trenches were dug in 1956*

Absolute dates for features are hard to come by, in the absence of traditional field stratigraphic evidence. One of the worst effects of this is that the rubble layer 631, which covers most of the excavated areas, can at best only be subdivided into 631a (cut by post-Roman burials) and 631b (covering post-Roman grave fills). The grave cuts above the bedrock were not recognised in the field, but in some cases can be clearly seen in the photographs.

The date range of coins from the 1954-6 excavations is a normal one for West Country Roman rural sites, with peaks around 259-275, and then again in the long 4th century.

## Roman structures

Strictly, the walls recovered in the excavation cannot be dated securely as Roman, but in the event that much Roman material was found during excavation, and little or none later, and that the walls are occasionally damaged by the (assumed) post-Roman burials, it seems a reasonable assumption that they are.

The stratigraphically earliest Roman feature seems to be the unmortared wall, (203 (CI) = 904 (CI-TT baulk) = 644 (TT)), of which clear photographs only survive from the recording of the finding of the Winthill bowl (Fig 4).



*Fig 4: Wall 203/904/644 with the glass bowl*

The wall is largely comprised of coursed worked blocks of Liassic Limestone, surviving in places up to 5 courses high. While the excavations did not cross the wall, its southern face forming the edge of both the 1954-55 trial trench and 1956 Grid CI, it seems likely that this was a retaining wall, at the back edge of a quarried platform.

Approximately 4.6m of the wall were uncovered, and it seems to have survived to a height of about 1m.

The wall (645) at the western edge of the trial trench butts against 644, so is clearly later. Unfortunately, there is little evidence for the relationships of 644 or 645 to other stone walls uncovered in any of the excavations. There has been a tacit assumption that the

walls constitute a 'room', but this cannot be proved. Presumably both were standing (or at least, visible) when human remains 25-29 were inserted, since these seem to have avoided either wall (except just possibly for human remains 27, in which the skull is tipped forward and appears to rest against wall 645) (Fig 5 below).



*Fig 5: Skull of human remains 27 (labelled) appears to lean against wall 645*



There is no record of whether wall 645 was mortared.

Figure 7 (below) shows all the Roman walls excavated in 1954-6 (with one exception from 1954-5).

It should be stressed that while the walls do seem to be at right angles, and are (probably) all Roman, it cannot on present evidence be proved that they form a building. The only recorded floor ('of Liassic slabs') was laid out over the foundations of a Roman period wall, and although recorded at the time, the records do not seem to still exist.



*Fig 6: Wall 645 clearly butts against wall 644, so is later. Human remains 29 and associated stratigraphy also included*

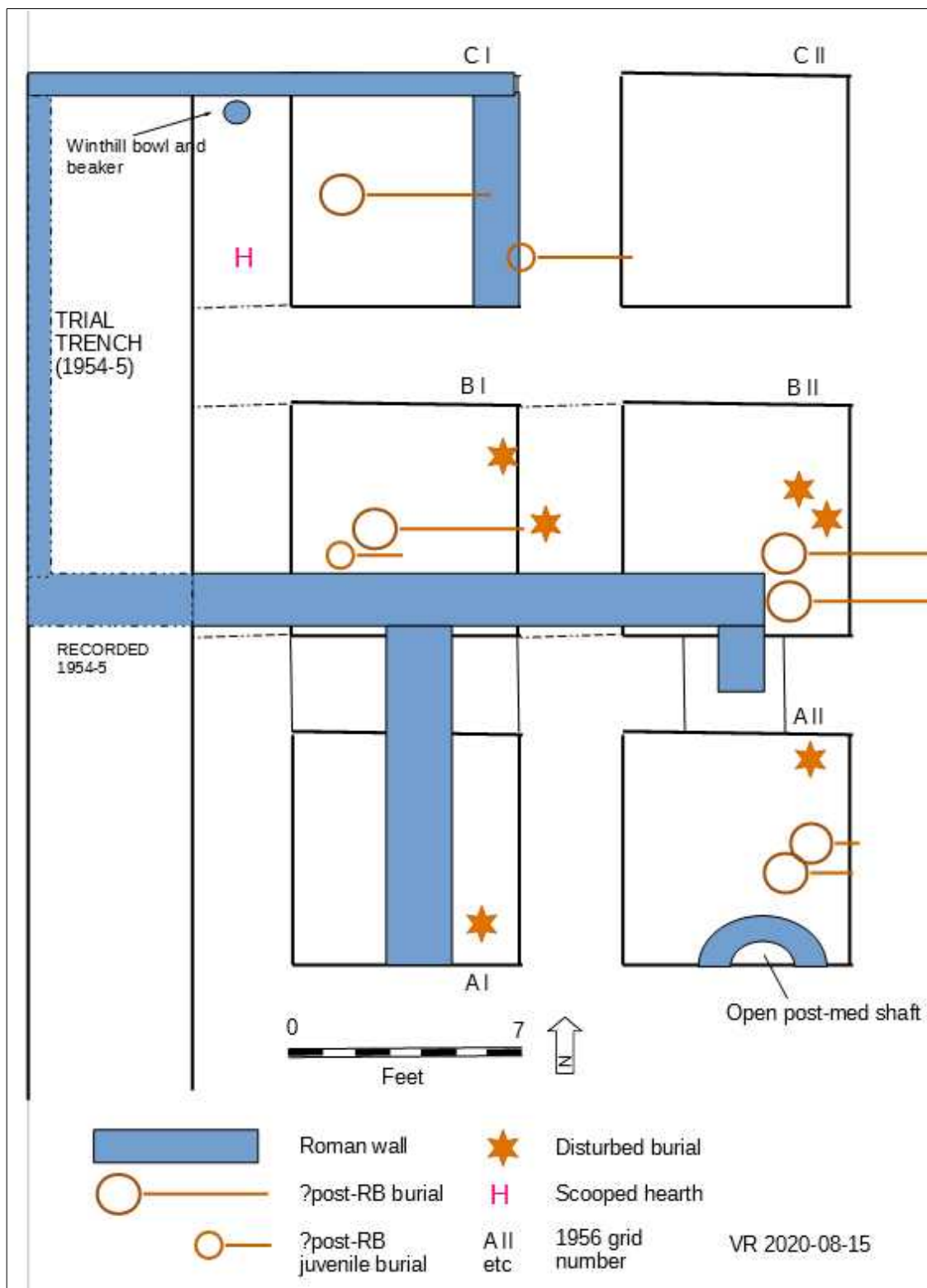


Fig 7: Structures and burials as recorded 1956 at northern end of site



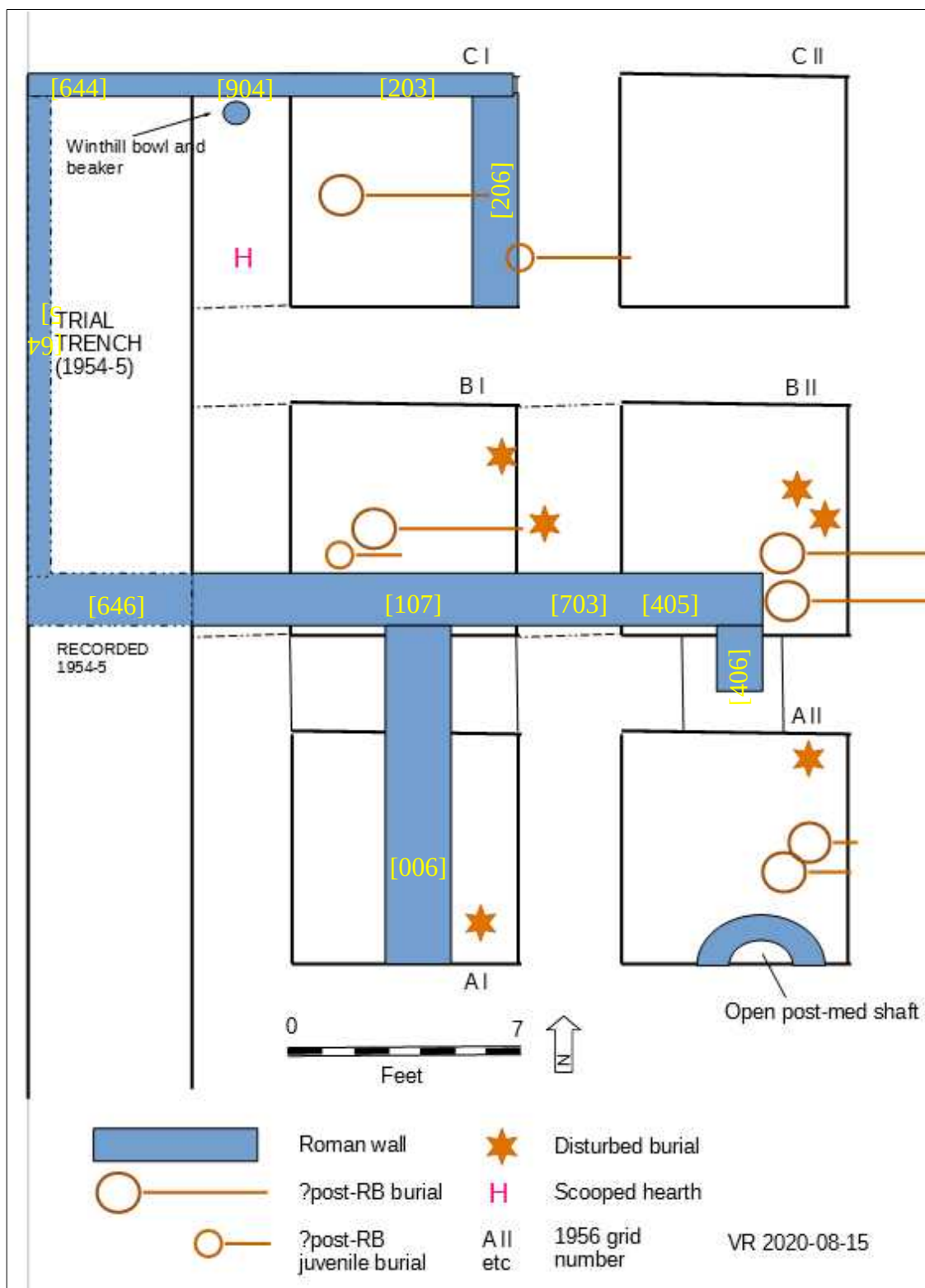


Fig 8: Structures and burials as recorded 1956 at northern end of site with context numbers as in text

The floor can, however, be seen in section in the 1956 photograph of Grid AI (Fig 9 below).



*Fig 9: The laid floor in section in trial pit A1 (1956) (context 004) (see Fig 10 below)*

This grid A1 illustrates neatly the problems of interpretation of the structures at the site.

[006], described as a 'Roman wall', from its random nature is clearly a foundation, and its absence from the annotated section means it may never have been more than a sleeper foundation for the Lias floor [004]. The site has been excavated by removing the earth on either side [008]/[009], through which the RB foundation has clearly been cut, and over which, the Lias floor [004] was laid. While [006] is described in notes as 'part of mortared

wall' ([107]), evidence from the photograph is that there is a ridge of natural rock between the two, meaning the stratigraphical relationship cannot be established on currently available evidence.

A fourth wall was recorded (1956) in Grid CI. The wall, [206], is not described other than as 'the unmortared east-west wall made a turn southward'. It is not clear what the stratigraphical relationship between the two is, but the phrase seems to imply that they are continuous.



*Fig 10: A rare example (Grid A1, 1956) of the ability to establish stratigraphic relationships from the photographs*

This leaves a final wall in the northern (1956) area of the site, recorded in Trial pits BI and BII, and in the baulk between them when removed.





*Fig 11: Mortared wall [646] [107] [703] [405] (1956)*



*Fig 12: Wall with contexts (context [646] not definitely in photo)*

This mortared wall initially appears to be quite a simple feature. However, close examination of the photograph shows this is not the case. In the centre of the picture, one small square section of the wall [108] (arrowed above) (scaled from photograph, approximately 50cm x 50cm) is slightly out of line with the wall to its east (left), which appears from the photograph to abut [108], making it later in the sequence. The pile of rubble to the west (right) of [108] appears to be uncleared rubble rather than a section of a wall.

The different appearance of [646] and [803], which both appear to be at the same level, also give some cause for concern, and perhaps a hint at an earlier phase of the wall.

The presence of square structures within a wall is not uncommon (see 1991 example from Hanham RB dwelling below - Fig 13).



*Fig 13: Putative column bases at Hanham, 1991 (Russett 1993)*

These are usually explained as column bases, although they could just as easily be supporting stone door (or even gate) frames.

A second photograph of the trial pits BI, BII, CI, CII, and the top end of the 1954-5 trial trench (Fig 14 below), adds a little to the picture.

This photograph (taking looking west) shows more clearly that the material next to [108] is remaining uncleared rubble. The top of (retaining) wall [644] can be seen in position at the top of the 1954-5 trench, and a short standing section of north-south wall, with a short standing section of (retaining) wall 645 at right angles to it.

The apparent return of wall [644] to turn south at the eastern edge of grid CI is complicated by the fact that it nowhere appears in Grid BI, where it would be expected if forming a group with wall [107]/[703] to its south.

The critical difference between the [646]/[107]/[108]/[703]/[405]/[803] walls (the southern walls, for short) is that they appear to be mortared and faced, whereas the walls to the north group appear to be of drystone connection, and thinner.





*Fig 14: Wall complex in the 1956 grids, looking west*

From photographic evidence, the southern group of walls are built on foundations cut into the rock, whereas the rest are built directly off the rock surface, surely implying two different purposes, or even phases. Apart from a short record in one note that 'the mortared wall is... later than the north-south wall', there appears to be no surviving photograph illustrating this.

Even in the area of mortared wall, there seems to be no mention of wall plaster or roofing tiles (discounting those found just below the topsoil in 1956, which are post-medieval).

The only other substantive set of stone walls were a group recorded towards the southern

end of the 1954-5 trial trench.



*Fig 15: 'Foundations' [621] during excavation, 1954-5*

It is not mentioned in the notes, but these foundations are approximately 3m long, but only protrude at maximum 0.5m into the trench, at the walls northern end.

From the photographs, they appear to be mortared, and excavators called the tiny space between the wall and the edge of the trench 'Room 1'. According to the site notes, human remains 6 and 7 were found on the surface of the remaining foundation (no photographs are known: see Appendix 1 below).

The wall was later severed for the insertion of four further burials, the earliest seeming to be human remains 22 and 23 (see Appendix 1).



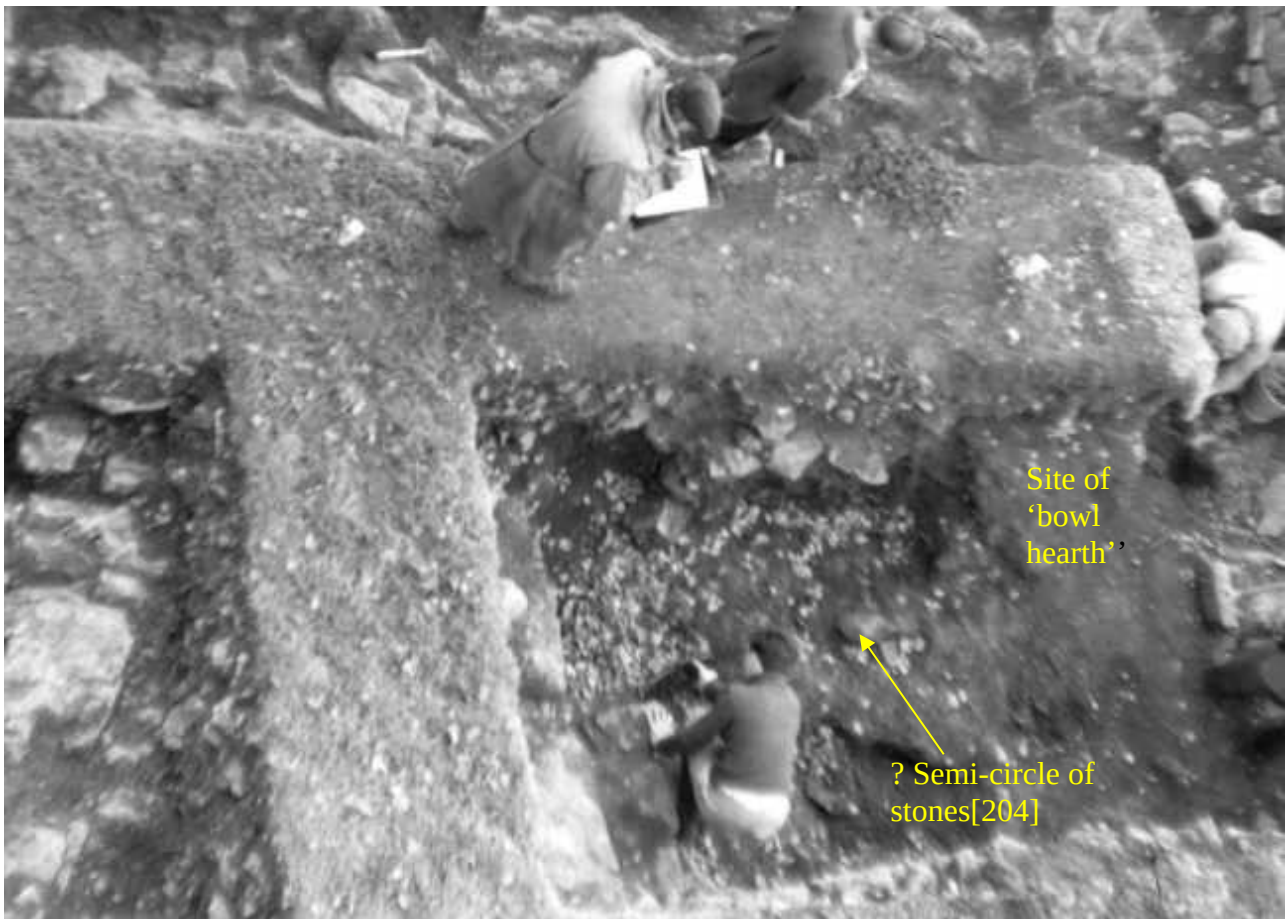
*Fig 16: Human remains 22 (top) and 23 (below) in a cut [636] made through wall [621]/[625]: [625] on right*

Wall [621]/[625] appears to be faced, but again, no mention is made of wall plaster or similar.

Other potential Roman structures are 'a semi-circle of stones on the south side' [204] of grid CI in 1956 (see Fig 18 below). The presence of a 'bowl hearth' nearby, and the placing of context [204] against the south east corner of grid CI, together with the marks of fire on 'the wall' and a potential thin layer of charcoal may indicate industrial activities in a ruined or semi-ruined building, not at all uncommon in very late Roman structures.

While it is not possible to be certain, this activity may be as in Fig 17 (below).





*Fig 17: Potential industrial features in grid CI, 1956*

## **Roman structures: discussions and conclusions**

It will be immediately obvious that any conclusions reached here will be tentative at best, due to the nature of the data available.

The Ordnance Survey's description of the site as a 'Roman villa' is a wild exaggeration: the site has no evidence of mosaics, wall plaster, painted or otherwise, or underfloor heating) to name but a few of the accoutrements one might expect in a villa.

In the area of North Somerset, really only the complexes at Wemberham, Yatton (HER 285) and Banwell (HER 97) are sumptuous enough to compare with the villas of central Somerset or the Cotswolds: Locking 'Roman villa' (HER 206) remains too poorly published to be sure of its status, and Woodlands 'Roman villa' at Congresbury (HER 391) appears to have basically been a stone-built shed. The Roman settlement at Gatcombe in Long Ashton has been described as a villa, but it is clearly a much more substantial industrial settlement, probably a town (HER 593). In adjacent Somerset, Star Roman villa (Somerset HER 10757) has the markers of a villa: there appears to be no further examples until Priddy or Cheddar are reached.

A 13-room stone building at an undisclosed site near Wraxall discovered by an YCCCART geophysical survey, apparently associated with extensive Roman remains, remains embargoed at the land owner's request.

The glamour of the 4th century Winthill glass bowl has cast the site as far higher status than it might be - excavations now underway at the foot of the hill may cast a clearer light over the whole Winthill settlement.

Two of the walls at the north end of the site, [644] and [645] (see Fig 8 above) are of narrow drystone construction, and are more likely than not, retaining walls for a rock-cut building platform. They are physically higher in the stratigraphy than any of the potential 'dwelling' walls, appearing just below the turf, and remain to a greater height. They are constructed directly onto the rock, and have (apparently) no construction trenches.

A small structure [621] and [625] towards the southern end of the 1954-5 trial trench is a more likely candidate for a Romano-British building, but so little of the possible 'interior' was seen in the trench that this cannot be certain. It's dismemberment by human remains' 22 and 23 (and others) inhumation trenches implies that it was ruinous or demolished by the time of the burials: others (human remains 6 and 7) seem to have rested on the remains of the wall, in effect, confirming this.

More difficult is the complex of walls and wall-stubs in the centre of the 1956 excavations. These are mortared and constructed in trenches into the bedrock, both characteristics that would be expected of a building or dwelling. As described in the text above, 'wall' [006] with its associated Lias floor [004] cannot be demonstrated to be part of this complex: it remains undated and unassociated with other structures at the site. The possibility of association cannot be completely ruled out, however: the evidence does not make this judgement possible.

This leaves the 'east-west mortared wall' at the centre of the site. This probably the strongest candidate for being part of a Roman dwelling, although one wall and a slight return 'do not a dwelling make'.

Suffice it to say that all the evidence points to a fairly low status Roman site, where possibly, after the buildings were abandoned and/or demolished, some modest industrial activity may have taken place, abandoned before burials began at the site (see below).

This is not of course to say that this site is unimportant: its existence, and that of the other Roman structures found in other trial trenches in Chapel Leaze and Chapel Close, along with the evidence from the water pipe from 1994 and the current excavations imply the probable existence of a small town here, with the buildings uncovered in 1954-6 being on the urban fringe, and almost certainly agricultural in nature.

## **The human remains (HR)**

The most controversial (and probably, most important nationally) impact of the excavated area is the number of post-Roman burials at the site.

Some 51 sets of human remains were recorded at the site, although many are simple terse mentions in site notes and were not sketched or photographed.

The most obvious evidence for the date of some of these burials is that the cuts for them have removed parts of the Roman structures: others seem to have been buried on top of the already collapsed or demolished Roman buildings, indicating their burial some time after occupation ceased. One burial at least had been dug through late or post-Roman activity that seems to post date occupation.

The two published C14 dates from human remains at the site add to this (Aston et al 2011):

SUERC 30967 (GU 22223) 430-610 AD at 95.4% probability

SUERC 30966 (GU 22222) 660-810 AD at 95.4% probability

Where evidence is available (see Appendix 1 for burials where it is not), a number of details about the burials may be noted.

- They are buried supine, with head to the west
- They are in orderly rows
- There are no grave goods
- Many have a 'lining' of small stones around the body and within the grave cut
- There is no mention of coffin nails or hobnails, implying shroud burial

This was most clearly recorded in the case of HR36, the skeleton now on display in Axbridge Museum (closed at the time of writing due to the coronavirus pandemic). This skeleton was largely complete. It was recovered during the 1956 campaign (Fig 19 below), when photographed by H. E. Balch on a site visit.

This has been taken to imply that these burials are Christian. They need not be: orientation by itself does not prove this. Although some post-Roman burials continued to include grave goods, these were largely forbidden during the archiepiscopate of Theodore of Tarsus around the third quarter of the 7th century.

Burial sites of this post-Roman date range are not uncommon in Somerset: from the single grave at Brean Down Roman Temple (ApSimon 1965), to small groups such as Lamyatt Beacon (Leech 1986), to larger groups such as Henley Wood, Yatton (Watts and Leach 1996) to the immense site of Cannington, north of Bridgwater (Rahtz et al 2000).

Unfortunately, lack of evidence prevents the use of current techniques for the study of post-Roman burials, such as orientation studies (although the few that are photographed appear to be oriented exactly at right angles to the 1954-5 trench, hence probably close to

true east-west).



*Fig 18: Skeleton HR36 ('Georgina') in situ (photograph by H E Balch)*

The stone 'lining' to the graves is unusual, or at least, not usually commented on in cemetery reports. There is a reference to 'rough linings reminiscent of cist burials' in Watts and Leach 1996: 75, but the custom is otherwise not well known.

The phenomenon can be clearly seen in Fig 18 (above), as can the compression of the body from shroud burial. Fig 16 (above) shows two further examples.

The burials certainly continued over a long period of time. An example of 4 'pairs of human femurs (*sic*)' was recorded (Human remains 38-41), taken by the excavators to imply they had been disturbed by later burials (which seems likely).

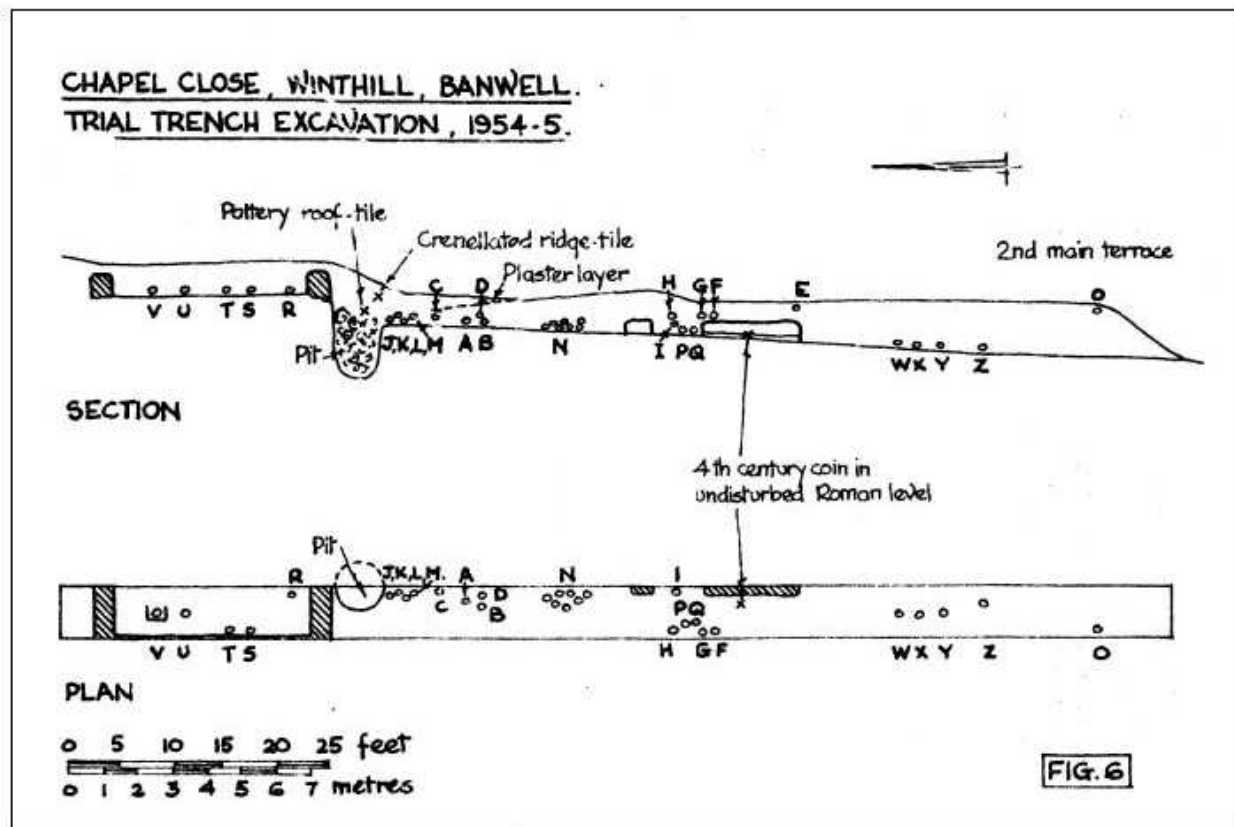


Fig 19: Human remains in 1954-5 trial trench (after Hunt 1964). Original labelling of human remains retained: see Appendix 1 for concordance with report labels

The origins and development of the burial ground cannot be known in current circumstances. The antiquarian suggestion that it represents either the remains of a Saxon and Viking battle, or of an early monastery should perhaps be taken with a large lump of salt.

Further work at the site might well illuminate this, but this seems unlikely in the near future.

## Recommendations for further work

This area constitutes a Scheduled Monument, and so any further work in the future would need approval from Historic England (or any successor bodies), as well as the consent of the landowners.

Research questions would almost certainly focus on the post-Roman burials, perhaps their recovery from the mineshaft and laboratory study. The Roman structures are hardly well-preserved enough to be even certain if they are dwellings. Certainly, the 'Villa' naming on OS plans is simply wrong.

A project to recover the human remains dumped in the post-medieval mineshaft might usefully be attempted, since they represent an untapped source of information about this Roman site and putative post-Roman cemetery.

## References

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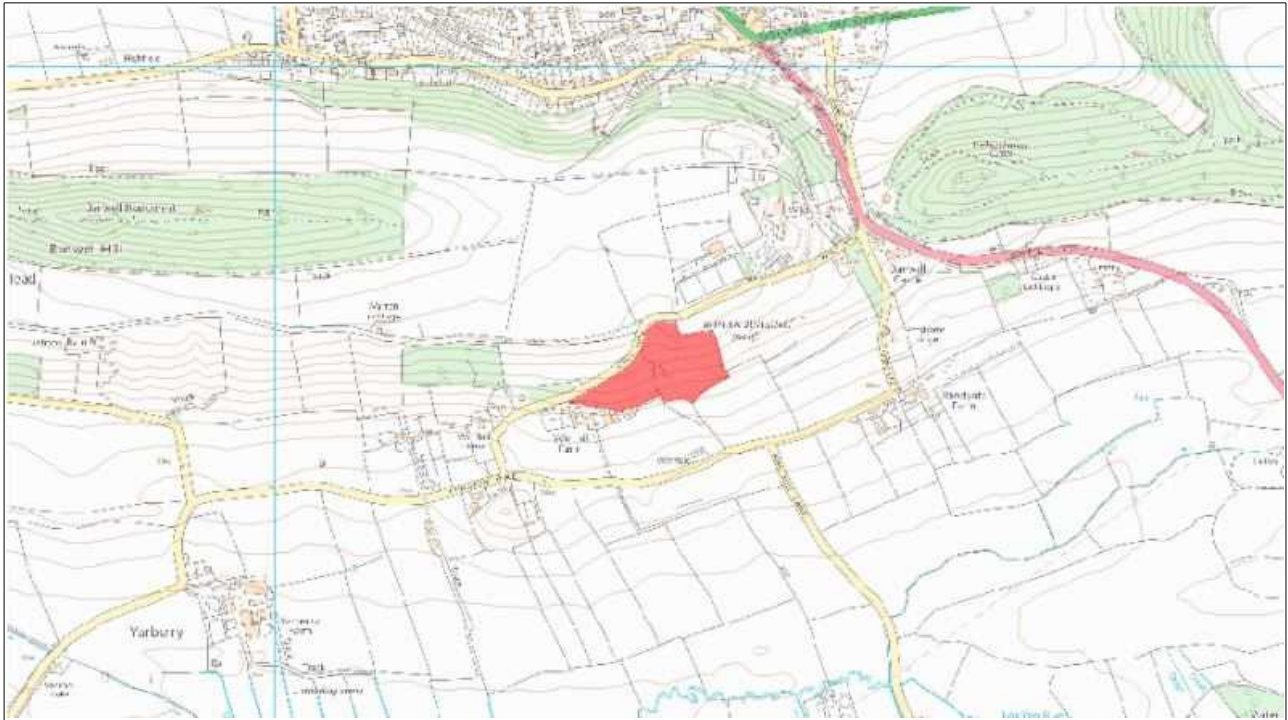
## Authors

Vince Russett, with contributions from John Chapman, and the late Percy Baker, Jim Emmerson & Jim Hunt. Thanks to Bobby Hunt and Joan Goddard for sterling work on transcriptions and bibliography.

**Date** 2020-11-04



## Appendix 2: Scheduling document for Winthill site



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Roman settlement and associated industrial remains and field system north-east of Winthill Farm

Overview

Heritage Category:

Scheduled Monument

List Entry Number:

1008296

Date first listed:

02-Oct-1967

Date of most recent amendment:

20-Jun-1994

This copy shows the entry on 29-Sep-2020 at 11:18:45.

**Location**

The building or site itself may lie within the boundary of more than one authority.

**District:**

North Somerset (Unitary Authority)

**Parish:**

Banwell

**National Grid Reference:**

ST 39693 58445

**Reasons for Designation**

The site at Winthill Farm is an example of a small Roman lead mining settlement with associated agricultural remains. Such sites are a rare occurrence nationally though several are known to exist in the area in and immediately surrounding the Mendip Hills. Lead mining was an important aspect of the Roman economy: lead and tin were alloyed with copper to make bronze, or with each other for pewter or solder. Lead on its own was invaluable for sealing roofs or water tanks, and for making pipes for use in the construction of water supply systems and baths. The area in and around the Mendip Hills is important for understanding the role of industrial processes in the Roman economy. Sites such as that at Winthill Farm are particularly valuable as they survive in the form of earthwork remains and are known from previous partial excavation to contain archaeological evidence relating to the site's occupation and use.

**Details**

The monument includes a series of well-defined earthworks and building platforms which represent a Roman settlement comprising a centrally placed structure 10m square, its associated industrial remains, and a field system, situated on a steep south-facing slope overlooking the Lox Yeo River. A coin hoard dating to the middle of the fourth century AD was recovered from beneath the stone floor slabs of the structure during partial excavation in 1950, confirming a Roman date. A large quantity of Roman pottery and further coins dating from the mid fourth century have also been recovered from the area of the site in addition to a rare inscribed Rhenish glass bowl and evidence for industrial and agricultural activity. Earthworks surrounding the settlement include a series of terraces cut into the hillside, providing levelled areas used for building platforms. Also surrounding the settlement is a series of clearly defined field boundaries and lynchets, some of the lynchets standing to a height of c.0.5m. The modern field boundaries in the south and east of the monument are likely to follow the courses of earlier Roman boundaries, as pottery dating from AD 40-80 has been recovered from one of the lynchets, demonstrating its early origins. A large linear quarry or lead rake running north-south through the centre of the monument immediately west of the settlement, together

with excavated evidence for metal smelting, suggests that industrial activity was important here and may have been the main function of the settlement. Burials from the site have been variously described as Roman and medieval. In view of the strong Roman connection for the settlement, a Roman date for these features is believed most likely. The free standing wall is excluded from the scheduling although the ground beneath it is included.

MAP EXTRACT The site of the monument is shown on the attached map extract.

## Legacy

The contents of this record have been generated from a legacy data system.

### Legacy System number:

22814

### Legacy System:

RSM

## Sources

### Books and journals

Hunt, J W, 'Journal of the Axbridge Caving Gp Archaeol Soc' in Excavations at Winthill, Somerset, , Vol. 3(ii), (1957), 5

## Other

Details of results of excavations, Details of results of excavations,  
Results of excavations, Results of excavations,

## Legal

This monument is scheduled under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979 as amended as it appears to the Secretary of State to be of national importance. This entry is a copy, the original is held by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

End of official listing

### **Appendix 3: Digital archive of the site, 2020**

Digital photographs (duplicated) were taken of all material curated by John Chapman in January to February 2020. Where negatives survived, these were favoured over prints, since 1950s photographic techniques often badly degraded images when printing. Prints were usually enhanced using Photoshop, and stored digitally.

No colour photographs or transparencies were available.

A number of previous publications were scanned and rendered to text using online OCR resources.

The archive currently (3 November 2020) consists of 4141 files in 419 folders, total 15.5Gb. One copy exists on private PC unconnected to the Internet (for safety reasons) as well as two back-up copies stored on and off site. The study used Windows 10.1, Libre Office Write, Draw and Calc, Photoshop Elements 12, the free service onlineocr.net, Zoom H1n recording for sound files of conversation between VR and JC while copying materials, a Sony DSC HS60V camera for both copying and field use.

When circumstances allow, a digital copy of these files will be deposited with the Somerset Heritage Centre and Axbridge Museum.