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**Ox-house and associated features at Whitegates Common, Claverham Court Farm:
Earthwork and building survey and excavation 2005**

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The ox house at White Gates Common

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Abstract

An ox-house was noted at Claverham Court Farm, Lower Claverham, during fieldwork in 2005. The team recorded the ox-house and its surrounding earthworks, but the report has been delayed until now. The re-use of a post-medieval roof, and the extraordinary details of the sett floor at the ox-house, with its occasional use of massive 2m long 'Claverham stones' made this an agricultural building of more than ordinary interest.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to our old friends John and Betty Atwell, of Claverham Court Farm, who were a great support to YCCCART in the early days. Although John is no longer with us, we remember his good humour and personal warmth.

Introduction

Yatton, Congresbury, Claverham and Cleeve Archaeological Research Team (YCCCART) is one of a number of Community Archaeology teams across northern Somerset, formerly supported by the North Somerset Council Development Management Team.

Site location



Fig 1: Location of the Oxhouse

The ox house and accompanying earthworks are at ST44026757, 530m north-west of Claverham Court Farm, in the village of Lower Claverham, North Somerset.

Land use and Geology

The site lies at the junction of the Mercia Mudstones and the peat of Claverham and Kenn Moors. It lies at 5.1m AOD. The fields in the vicinity are currently used for grazing. It was served with water by an artificial leat running some 1100m from a weir on the (un-named) stream in Lower Claverham, which leat also served a sheepwash (at ST44586691), the village pound (ST44606704) and a decoy pool (ST43646777; YCCCART 2010/Y19). Its date is unknown (but see below). There is no public access to this site.

Historical and archaeological context

An ox is a male bovid, usually castrated to make him more docile, over four years old, used as a beast of burden and traction. Until one year, they are known as ox calves, and to three years, steers (Collins 2009). Oxen were (and in many places, still are) used this way all over the world. They are known for their strength and steadiness, and before the development of the horse collar, were the only animal that could use its full strength in ploughing (with the yoke). This meant that oxen were more likely to be used in breaking new arable, or in heavy clay soils. They are usually shod, but as cloven-hoofed animals require two shoes for each foot (one on each claw). The foot cannot be shod with one shoe, since the inside of the foot can be easily infected if not open to the air, causing an inflammation, known in Somerset as 'the lewer'.

Specific buildings (oxhouses) were made for sheltering the animals, often out in the fields away from the main farm buildings, as is the subject of this study, found on the edge of newly-enclosed land (1749) in Claverham Common, along with the poor house and the decoy pool.

The earliest known record of this site is on the Claverham Moor Inclosure map of 1749 (SHC Q/RDE/3).

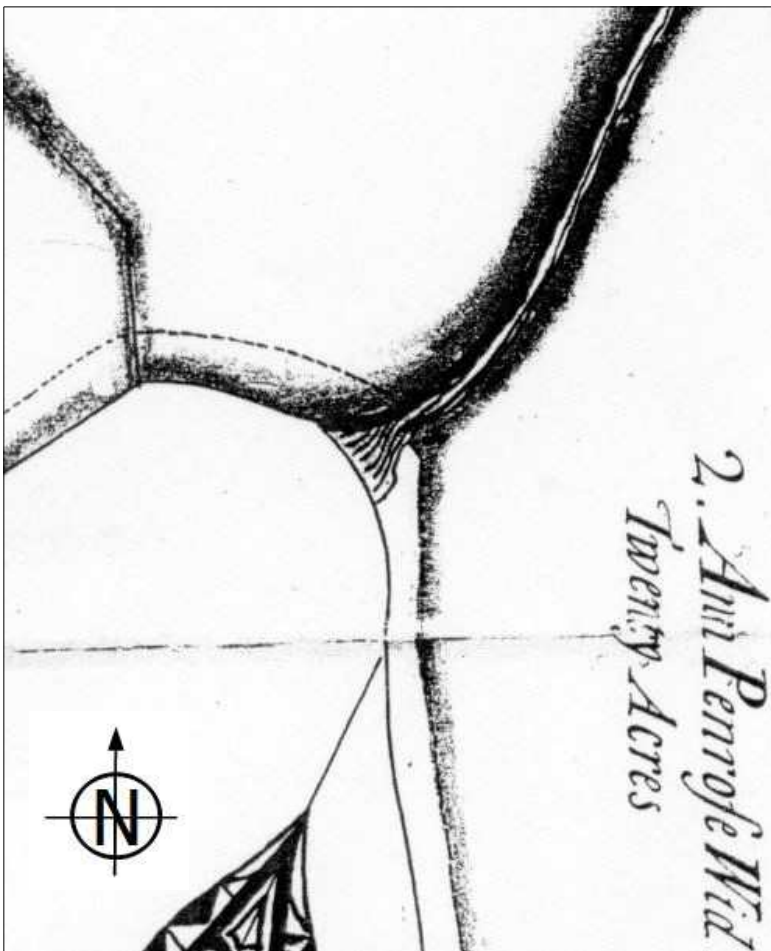


Fig 2: Site from the Claverham Inclosure map of 1749

While no building is shown on this map (it would be in the centre of this map extract), there is nonetheless a feature depicted which seems to be water pouring over a dam or other feature and away to the north-east.

This implies that the leat that later served the ox house was already in place. It (and the pound) are both depicted on the map.

The leat is around 1100m long, beginning at a now-demolished stone weir in the stream at Lower Claverham at ST44596678. It cuts through a tongue of land, and along the slope of the higher ground to the ox-house.

Nothing is known of the age of this system (see Fig 3).

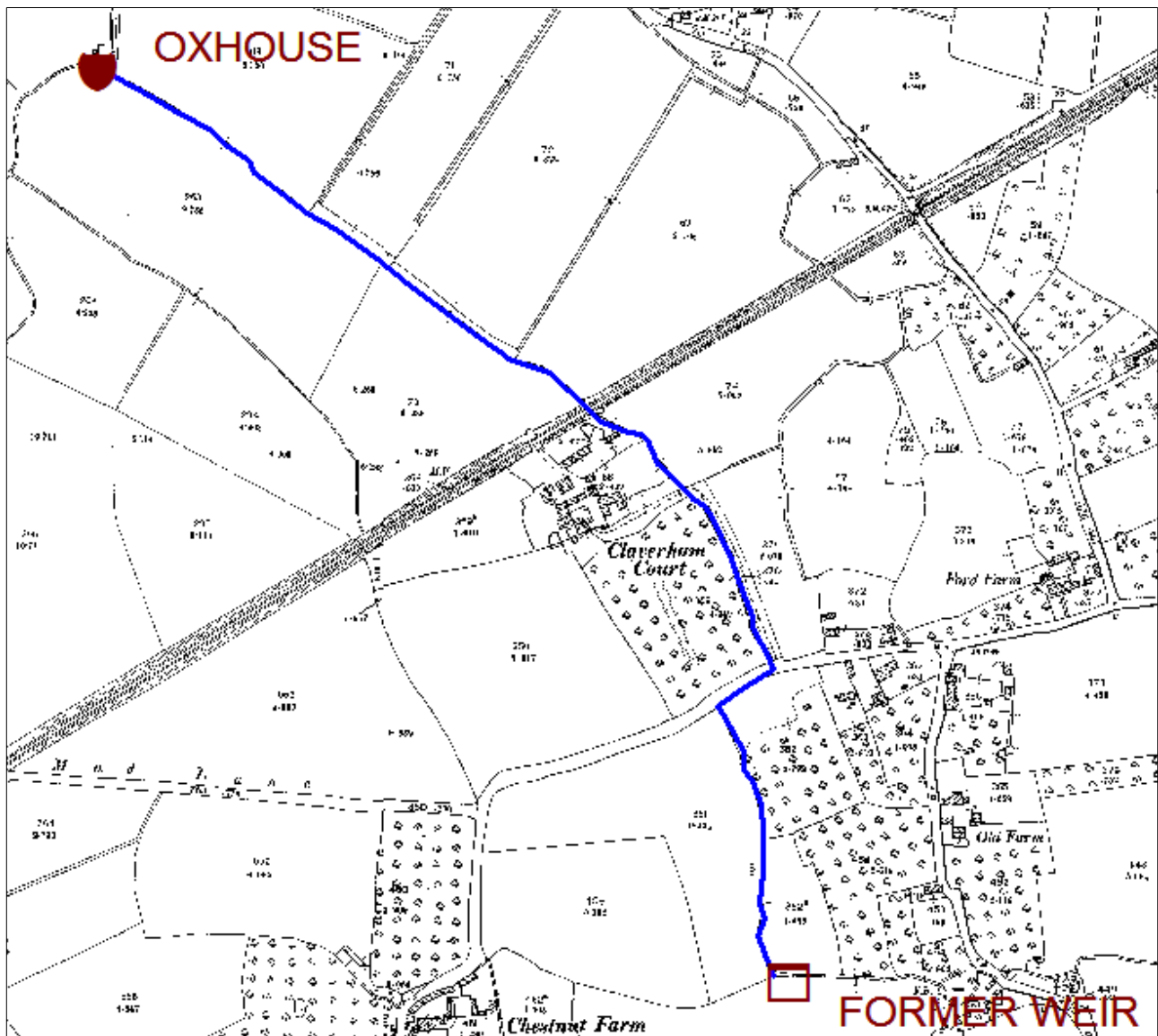


Fig 3: The course of the leat from Lower Claverham to the ox house (OS Crown copyright 1903)

Neither is its original purpose understood. It would be normal to expect a mill at the end of such a large feat of engineering, but the site seems too remote a location for such.



Fig 4: The stone gout

Close to the site of the oxhouse today, a stone built gout which would convey water from the leat still exists, but with the removal of the weir in Claverham, the leat is now dry.

The first building recorded at the site is on the 1799 map of Yatton. This is on the site of the larger (eastern) building currently at the site.

Unfortunately, the map is damaged.

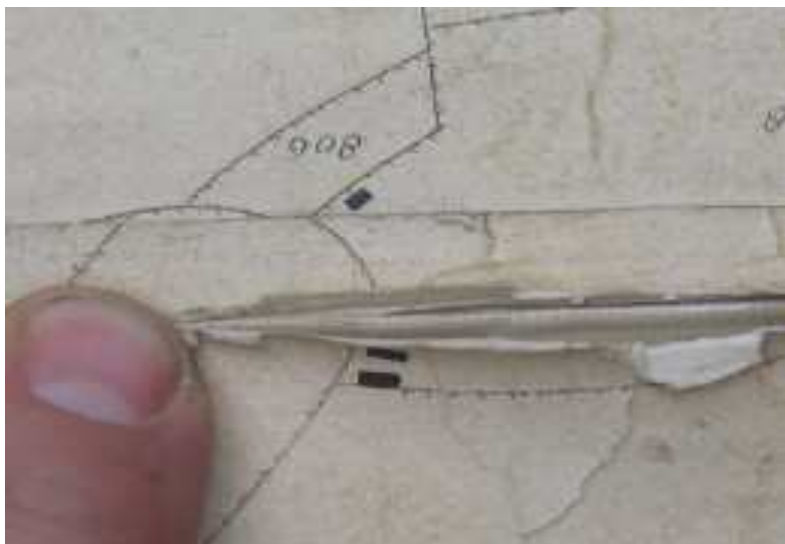


Fig 5: Digital enhancement of the 1799 map shows two buildings at the site

This map shows two buildings at the site, on the sites of the two currently existing. This would be consistent with the mortar of the western building, which appears pre-19th century.

The 1821 map, however, also shows the site (Fig 6).

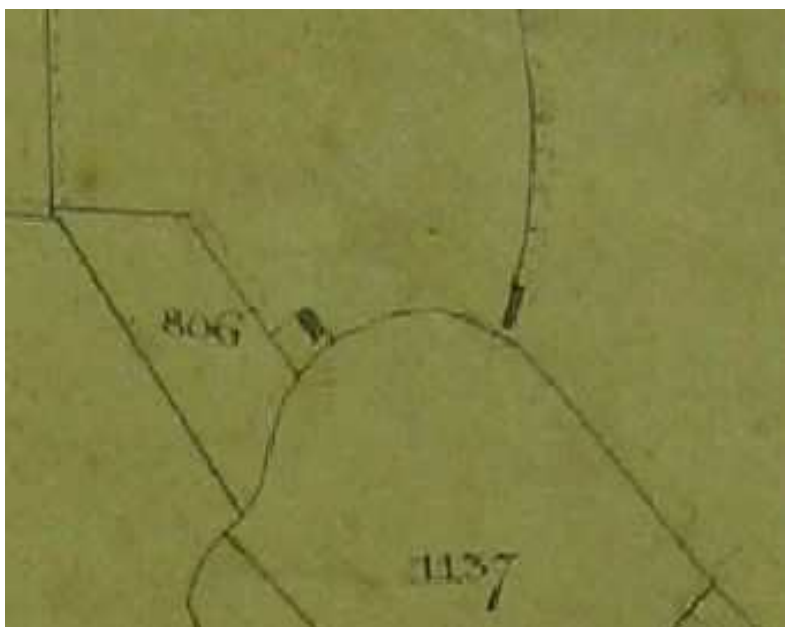


Fig 6: The oxhouse from the 1821 map of Yatton (SHC D\|P\yat\13\1\3)

This map shows only one building at the site, on the site of the current eastern. The second building opposite in a small square enclosure was owned by Yatton Poor (see http://www.ycccart.co.uk/index.htm_files/Poors%20Common%20Y27%20v2.pdf).

By the time of the 1840 Tithe Map (Fig 7), the Poor House was no longer there, but a second building and an enclosure between the two buildings was present.



The ditch running away to the north is shown as a double feature, like a trackway, running down to the Little River, meeting a second running parallel to the river. Several ditches in the Claverham Moor seem to have been doubled, something not seen elsewhere.

Fig 7: The site from the 1840 Yatton Tithe Map

This is a fairly substantial feature, and the effort put into the construction and the flooring (see below) of the complex shows its importance in the economy of the farm.

In view of the nature of the buildings (see below), it is not inconceivable that some elements of the poors house were re-used in the new ox-house building.

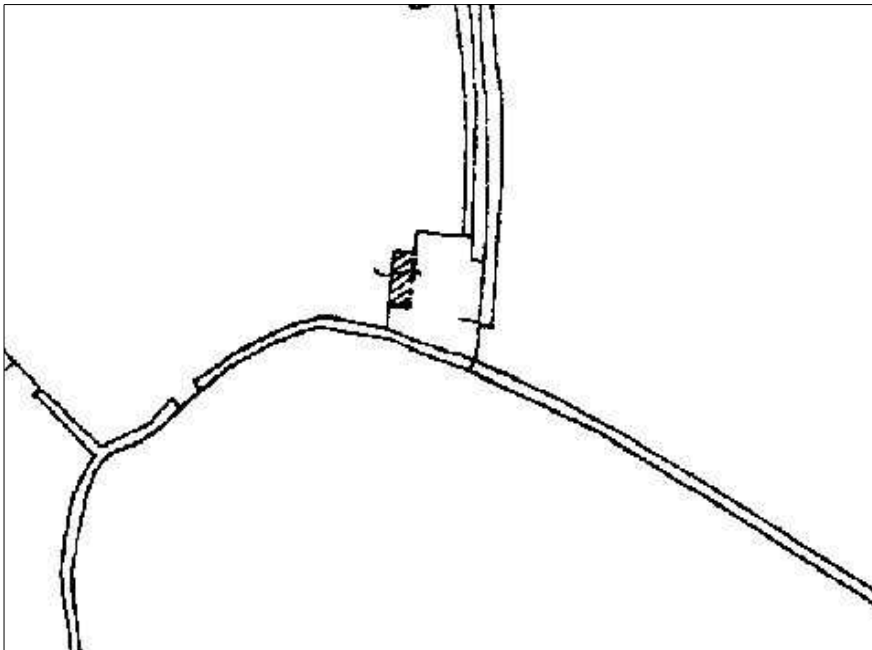


Fig 8: The oxhouse on the 1903 OS plan (OS Crown copyright 1903)

The 1903 OS plan shows the western building in use, but the eastern now appears unroofed (Fig 8).

Interestingly, the eastern is not shown as roofed on the Epoch5 (1950s-1970s) OS plan, with its roof only appearing between the 1975 and 1991 air photographs.

The confusion over the existence (or not) of the western building in the early maps is puzzling, since as remarked above, the construction of this structure, and especially its mortar, imply a pre-19th century date. It thus seems that the 1821 map is the odd one out, since both buildings are shown on the maps before and after it.

Earthwork survey (directed and drawn up by Shirley Everden)

To clarify the nature of the site, and whether there had been other buildings there, an earthwork survey of part of Whitegates Common, to the west of the oxhouse was carried out in 2005.

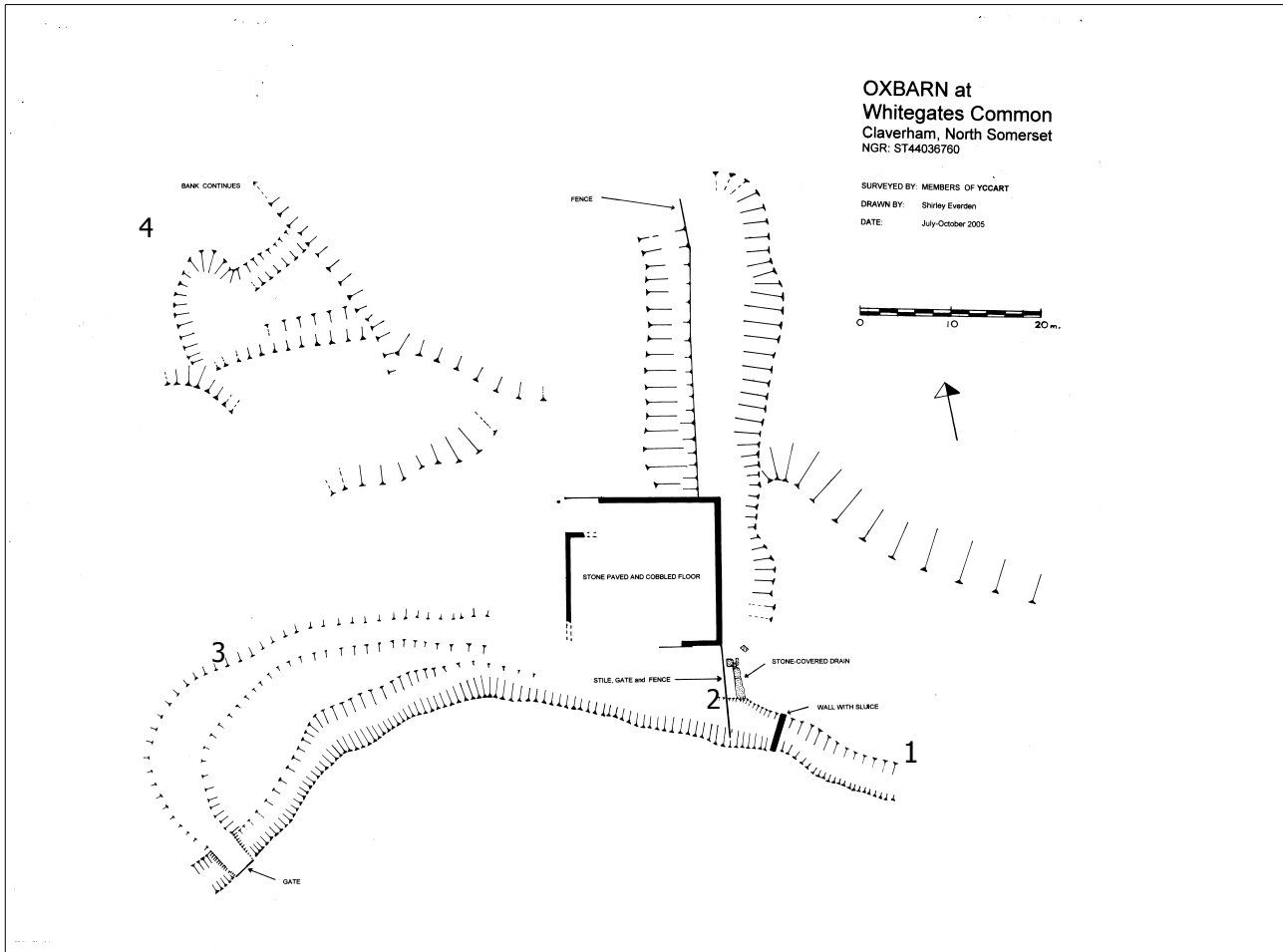


Fig 9: Earthwork survey at the oxhouse

This showed the leat (1), with a later wall set into it, running to and past the oxhouse, with a gout (2) connecting it to the double ditch to the north-east. A built-up modern track (3) runs from the gate to the entrance of the oxhouse. A small area of ditches (4), not respecting the regular lines of the grypes in the field, are also visible on lidar, not available at the time (Fig 10). It is still not clear what the purpose of these ditches was, although the lidar also shows some other extremely faint features, which may be pre-Inclosure palaeochannels.

Also from the lidar, the bank that appears to be for the construction of the leat (and alarmingly wide!) is clearly the tailing away of the solid geology into the peat of Claverham Moor.

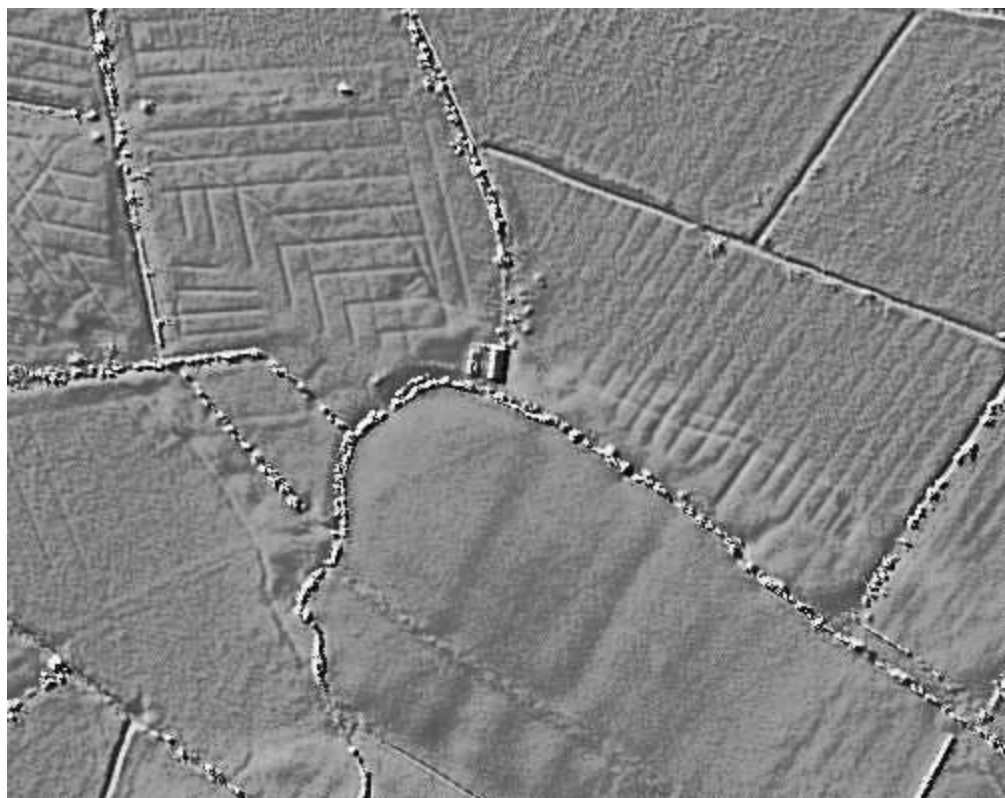


Fig 10: Lidar (1m resolution) of the area (oxhouse complex at the centre)

Buildings: Photographic survey

A full photographic survey of the two buildings and their enclosure was carried at the time (summer-autumn 2005) and is in the YCCCART archive.

The western building is c11.1m x 4.0m in size. It is of coursed Pennant Sandstone and Carboniferous Limestone blocks, set in an off-pink sandy mortar. Part of the western walls was (2005) in the process of collapsing and propped with metal cylinders. The northern end wall still stood, although any gable was missing; little remained of the south wall. The building was open to the yard, with a continuous wooden lintel of bolted half-scarf joints in railway sleepers, with similar uprights. The original roof (to judge from the numerous fragments found) was of pantiles (one found was of GEO KEEN / CLEVEDON), but had been replaced with galvanised iron.

The roof structure was of cut-down and re-used wooden trusses from another building. These were originally sawn, and had half-lap joints for purlins in them, one of which survived with a tusk-tenon still in place (Fig 13). At the apex these were nailed together with re-used older bevelled ridge-pole supports. The cross member of each truss had been extended by the addition of bolted members, which themselves rested on the cross-lintel at the front of the building.



Fig 11: Collapsing roof structure of western building, August 2005. Note the re-used elements



Fig 12: Sawn-off foot of re-used truss



Fig 13: Surviving tusk-tenon in purlin end

Speculation on the origins of the re-used roof are pointless, but the basic techniques of the original roof could date it from any time between (say) 1650 and 1820: tusk tenons were uncommon in buildings after that date. It came, however, from a building of higher status than an ox-house, probably a domestic dwelling.

The building was too dangerous to enter to examine the floor arrangements.

The eastern building was possibly the site of the earliest structure in the complex. The earliest reliable map of the building (the 1840 Tithe Map) shows it around the same length as the western, although the building roofed over today is much larger.

The structure as it stands is of a single build with the north wall of the enclosure, although the bottom c 1.0m of the eastern building appears different, and may be the remains of an earlier structure. Unfortunately, the end walls of this potential earlier phase do not survive.

The current structure is c 17m x 7m. The north wall of the enclosure is some 18m long. It does not turn to join the western building at its western end – this gap is closed by a

wood and galvanised iron fence.

The wall and larger part of the barn are in a quarried, coursed Carboniferous Limestone, in a uniform mid-grey 'industrial' mortar. There is no Pennant Sandstone or Liassic Limestone.

The lower part of the east wall of the building is a much more varied coursed rubble (although still dominated by Carboniferous Limestone) set in a grey ashy coal-flecked mortar. There are no blocked features (doorways or windows), and the south wall has been repointed with concrete.

Whatever the original roof, today it (and the forward parts of the endwalls) are of galvanised iron on (modern) timber frames.



Fig 14: Cylinder holding up the roof structure of the eastern building

The front is held up by four cylindrical hollow galvanised iron cylinders, of unknown origin, concreted into the traditional floor.

The interior has a sett floor similar to that in the yard outside (see below).

The new roof appeared on air photographs between 1975 and 1991.

The excavation

The floor of the buildings and the yard between them was noticeably higher than the area around (30-35cm), and completely surfaced with stone setts, including numbers of the large natural flat boulders known locally as 'Claverham stones', which occur in a layer around 1m below the surface over large areas of Claverham (pers comm John Atwell). The exception was a rectangular area in the centre of the yard, who's purpose was not established during the clearance.

The whole of the yard area, and an evaluation strip of the floor of the eastern building were uncovered and recorded.



Fig 15: Entrance step and floor of ox-house before excavation

The stone all appears to be of local origin, mostly of the Claverham stones, with Carboniferous limestone (including a few recognisable yellow stones with limonite, probably from Broadfield Down) and of Pennant Sandstone. There were no reused worked stones in the floor: the right-angled edges on the Claverham stones are a natural phenomenon.

The layout of the stones was recorded by rectified photography, and is in the YCCART archive.



Fig 16: Clearing the floor surface in front of the western building (looking S)

There was no obvious reason for the spacing or selection of the stones: the whole was buried under several centimetres of very well-rotted manure when first encountered, and was probably so from very soon after it was first laid down.

Some straight lines of thin Pennant stones at a slightly lower elevation would have acted as drains for the surface.

It was traditional that such surfaces would have a spring clear-out, with the resulting material being spread on the fields surrounding.



Fig 15: Recording the same area: note the 'edge' of the Claverham stones at the drain to the upper right. Scale in half-metres

In normal use the gaps between the stones would not have been noticeable, since clean stones with gaps between would present slip and trap hazards for the animals using the site.

Some of the larger stones must have required extraordinary handling: Fig 17 shows one of the largest at the site.



Fig 17: A Claverham stone in the western building frontage (scale in half-metres)

The eastern building had a sill on its open side of upright Pennant slabs, with a Claverham stone floor, seen in Fig 18.

This presumably indicates the former extent of the eastern building.

The skilful cambering of the surfaces and provisioning with drains and kerbs seems rare, but few ox-houses have been recorded in such detail.

In such a low-lying area, with clay and peat soils, such engineering would be necessary to prevent the erosion of the soil where animals were housed.

Fig 18: The cambered threshold and sill of the eastern building



References

Collins, E. J. T. 2009	<i>The latter-day history of the draught-ox in England 1770-1964</i> Agricultural History Review 58 (II) 192-216
Langdon, J. 1982	<i>The economics of horses and oxen in medieval England</i> Agricultural History Review 30 31- 40

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