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Gouts in the landscape

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RESEARCH TEAM (YCCCART)**

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Excavated gout at Rose Farm, Claverham, 1986

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Abstract

This report looks at a class of somewhat unregarded, but practically ubiquitous, monument in the landscape. Often confused with bridges, and referred to in documents as 'tunnels', 'culverts' and other terms, these monuments are necessary in wet landscapes for moving over water ways between enclosed fields and the tracks / roads reaching them. The two represented in this report are only the 'tip of the iceberg'. Questions are raised regarding recording of such ubiquitous monuments.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Yatton Local History Society and Marian Barraclough for access to the Rose Farm excavation record, and the Collins family for access to the Iwood example.

The authors are grateful for the hard work by the members of YCCCART in performing the surveys and Vince Russett for editing.

Introduction

Yatton, Congresbury, Claverham and Cleeve Archaeological Research Team (YCCCART) is a Community Archaeology team working across northern Somerset.

Our objective is to undertake archaeological fieldwork to enable a better understanding and management of the heritage of the area while recording and publishing the activities and locations of the research carried out.

Site locations



Fig 1: Site of recorded gout at Rose Farm, Claverham (1986)



Fig 2: Location of gout at Iwood Farm, Iwood, Congresbury

The Rose Farm, Claverham gout is at ST443660, about 300m west of Claverham Free church, in Claverham Road, Yatton, in North Somerset.

The second, at Iwood Farm, Congresbury (ST45226328), is about 130m east of Iwood Farm, at Iwood, Congresbury, also in North Somerset.

Land use and geology

The Rose Farm gout is in an area of periglacial Head deposits, here lying on the Mercia Mudstones. It is in the centre of a large field, often ploughed. There is no public access to this site.

The Iwood Farm gout is on the Mercia Mudstones, close to the riverine alluvium around the Congresbury Yeo. A public footpath does cross the field in which it lies, but there is nothing to see at the site at present. The field is largely used for grazing.

Historical & archaeological context

The term 'gout' is still well-known in West Country dialect, although replaced in some other parts of the country in recent centuries by other alternative names.

It is best defined as 'A structure, built in mortared or dry stone, usually capped with clapper stones, and sometimes bearing a track above. Its purpose is to convey water along one drainage feature or ditch, or to another, while permitting access above'.

The word 'gout', with the above meaning ultimately derives from an *OE* original '*gutt*', cognate with 'gut' describing both the alimentary canal, and a strongly enclosed tidal feature. The *OE* '*gyte*', a flood or outpouring of water, is also related. The alternative 'culvert', usually now thought of as Standard English, is of medieval French derivation.

Gouts are relatively simple structures: in these two typical examples, they simply consist of a line of stones on each side of the waterway, their flat edges forming a parallel sided gully for water to pass, on top of which are then placed flat stones to span the gap formed. They may, or may not, be mortared. Their simplicity means that no special skills are required to construct them: they are probably one of the commonest agricultural monuments in the countryside, and yet are seldom noted in archaeological or landscape texts.

Obviously, the structures require a geology that is capable of producing flat bedded stones, and so are less common in alluvial areas, although they do still occur there. In these landscapes, the existence of the hard surface of the gout means that in wet weather, areas on each side become poached (churned up by animals feet), and so material is dumped to extend the solid surface, so many gouts develop a halo of dumped material on either side.

So, suiting the waterway to the means of crossing, and the traffic to cross it, we can develop a hierarchy of water crossings.

Firstly, a wide and shallow body of water can simply be waded. The number of fords that still exist in rural Somerset today attest to this. Some in north Somerset have even given their name to their settlement: Langford ('*The long ford*'), Blackford ('*The dark ford*') or even Sandford ('*The sandy ford*') are all examples, on the Hunters, Blackford and Towerhead Brooks respectively. It is obvious from even slight study of lidar data for the Northmarsh that many rivers and rhynes were once much wider and shallower than today, now narrowed and deepened by centuries of drainage works.

Fig 3 (below) shows this as lidar image of a feature of one of the old courses of the Banwell River, east of Worle. This is obviously an ancient river course, since it forms the parish boundary of Banwell, then St George, against Wick St Lawrence. It is clear that the course of the river was once wider and shallower (the blue colours), and therefore in a less precious age, wadeable, permanent namable ford or no. These may, of course, have been augmented with stepping stones, a modest (but unreliable, as many a Youtube video will testify) attempt to cross water dryshod.

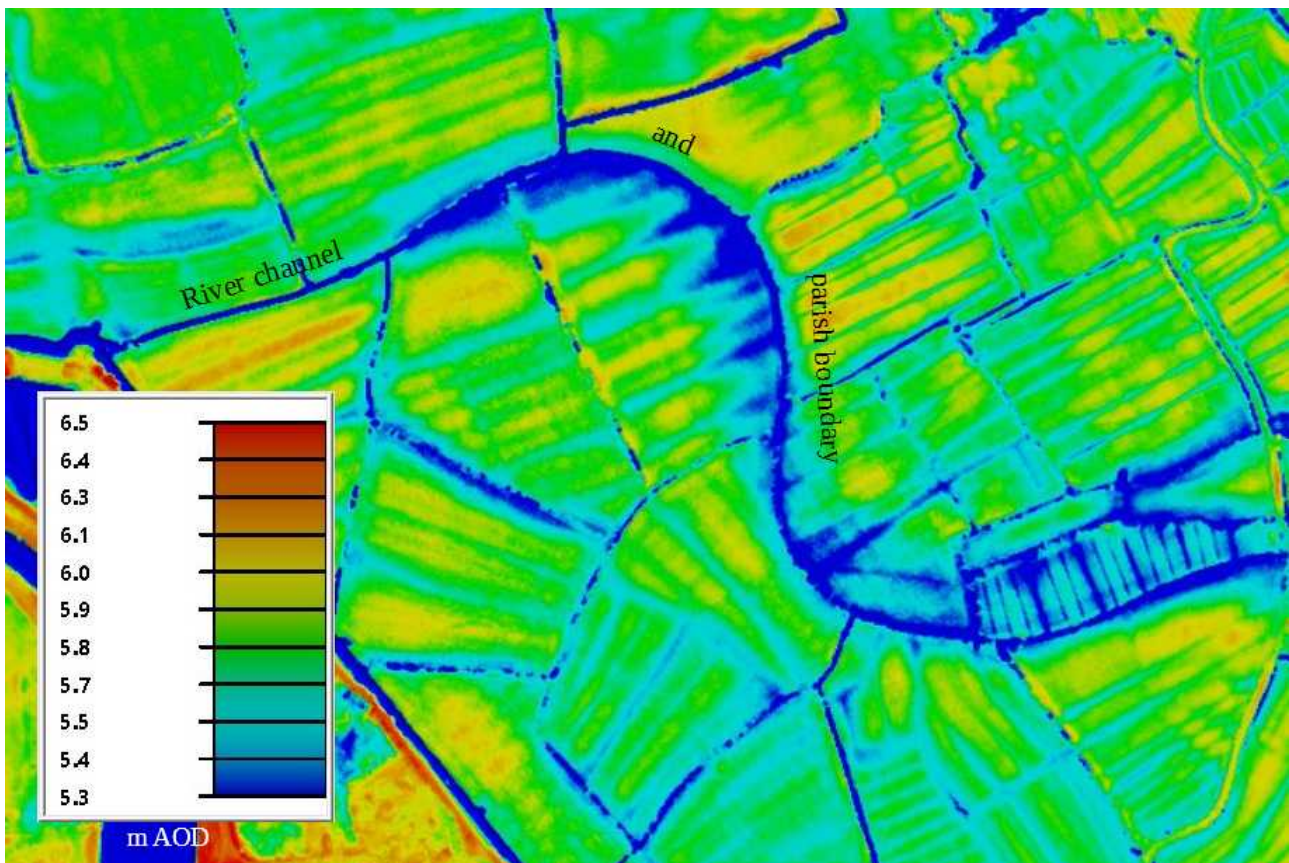


Fig 3: Shallow, easily waded channel of early Banwell River

Narrower channels could be spanned by planks or placed or even naturally fallen tree trunks (possibly generating 'tree-' place-names).

On larger streams, rivers and possibly estuaries, crossings require more formal arrangements.

Crossings by boat or other floating vessel are not relevant for this discussion, although otherwise critical for the understanding of the moving of persons and materials around watery landscapes, such as the Northmarsh and the Levels of Somerset.

Wooden structures evolved from simple planks or equivalent to wooden bridges, still fairly common in the modern countryside; complex mixed structures comprising stone abutments on each bank with plank crossings were probably the most common means of crossing rivers or rhynes until modern times (see, for example, costs for repairing such bridges around Congresbury in the archives of Queen Elizabeths Hospital. An example was the bridge at the end of Gang Wall over the Congresbury Yeo, (1642...*Pill Bridge...Wallis John...repairs...[£]0 03 08...& a great plank to lay on the bridge*).

The advent of heavy wheeled traffic, largely due to the agricultural and industrial revolutions, and subsequently the rise of the steam and internal combustion engine driven traffic, led to the necessity for more of the heavier stone-built bridge structures.

The other leg (so to speak) of water crossing structures, is the rural stone structure.

With the exception of structures intended for other uses and also purposed for water crossings (such as mill weirs), these are usually small and locally planned and made.

While there clearly were extensive numbers of stone bridges in Roman Britain, few seem to have survived the post-Roman political changes away from centralised control, exploitation and economy to local management: in the broadly subsistence economy of the immediate post-Roman centuries, large road bridges were an expensive and unnecessary luxury, and apart from a very few, such as the bridge supports at Rochester (Gardiner 2017), which are recorded as being repaired from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries, most disappeared (although there is an active search for any remaining structures being conducted by YCCCART in the West Country - Bev Knott, *pers comm*).

One of the problems in dealing with medieval records of bridges is, of course, that the Latin word for 'bridge' (*pons, pontem*) is also used for 'causeway', making clear identification of bridges from documentary sources very difficult.

So the gout, with its simple engineering, but need for numbers on an almost unimaginable scale, lies (after stepping stones) at the bottom of the hierarchy of constructed rural water crossings.

This uncomplicated picture is slightly marred by the extension of the word 'gout' in Somerset dialect to also refer to larger structures, called 'culverts' in Standard English, although the word tends to be mainly only applied to short structures, such as those from field ditches through banks to rivers.

The term has also given its name to some landscape features: A feature named in c1260 as '*Merethorne*' on the boundaries of the Forest of Mendip and Cheddar manor (Watkin 1944) (OE '*the boundary thorn*') had by 1550 become '*Martens Gowte*' (Longleat Seymour papers LL6205) and '*Martins gout*' by 1620 (SHC DD/X/RBN 1).

The name Gout House (Farm) is not uncommon (there is a modern example in Banwell at ST40116146, accompanied by Lower Gout Farm at ST39786115): other 'gout' field names are not uncommon (such as Ham Gout in Kingston Seymour).

Rose Farm gout

The excavation event here in 1986 appears to have arisen from a site observation, and the involvement of Marian Barraclough implies that YLHS were involved in the works, although there does not appear to be any reference in the YLHS archive indices, kindly provided for me by Jill Riddle, YLHS.

As can be seen in Fig 4, the site lies in the centre of a modern field, 'Bushy Close' in 1840 (Yatton TA).

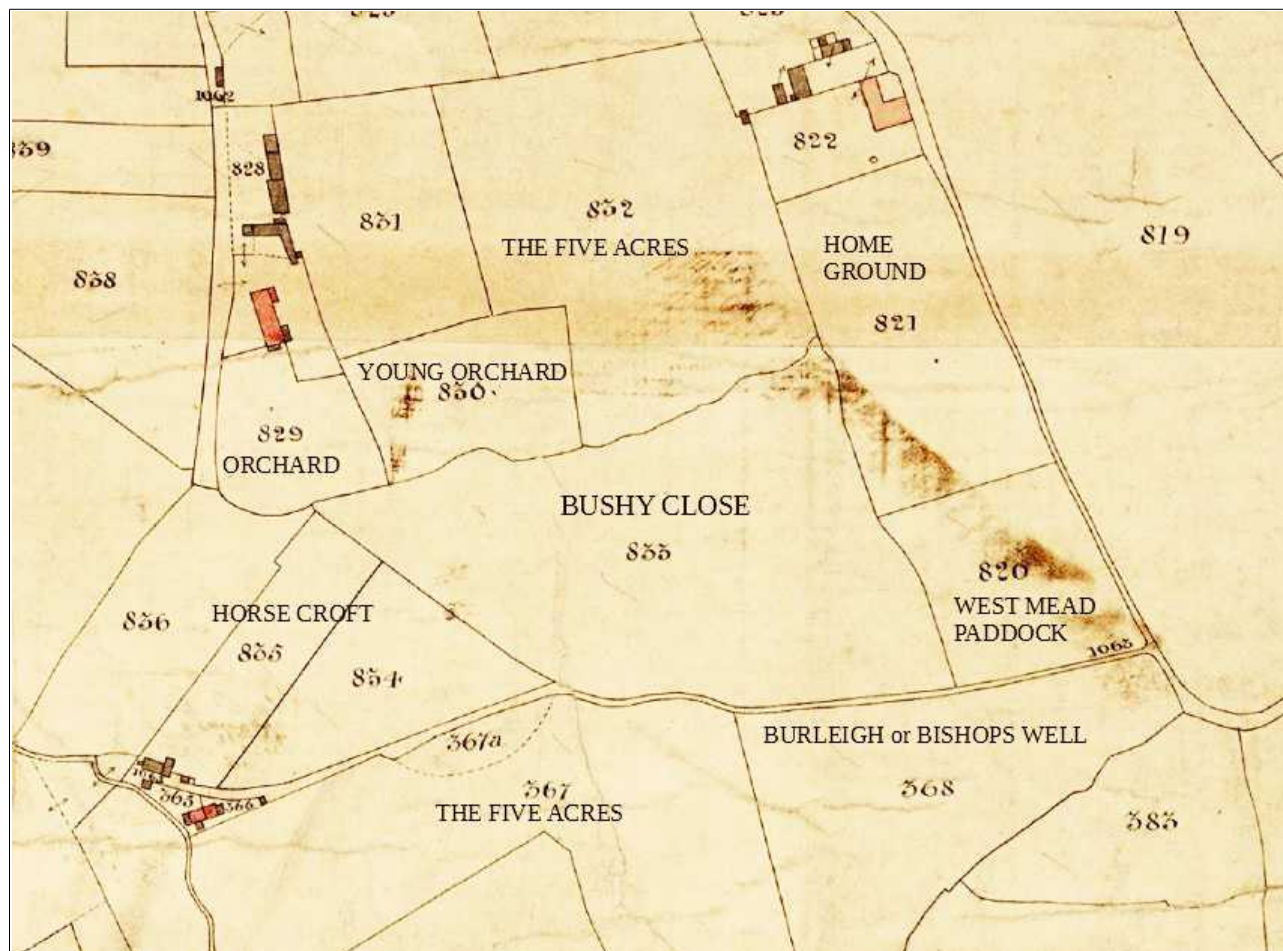


Fig 4: Field names in the vicinity of Rose Farm gout (in the centre of Bushy Close)

It should be clear from the 1840 map above that the field was one area in 1840, although it had been subdivided by 1885, with an intruding north-south ditch separating an orchard on its west and a remaining open field on the east.

The site of the gout as excavated, however (although only given to 6 figures as an OS NGR) is not on the line of this ditch, and is thus more or less bound to date from before 1840.

Fig 5 below shows the site in 1903, although it reverted to its former boundaries during the 20th century (between 1946 and 1971, probably during the period of government

support for orchard clearance).

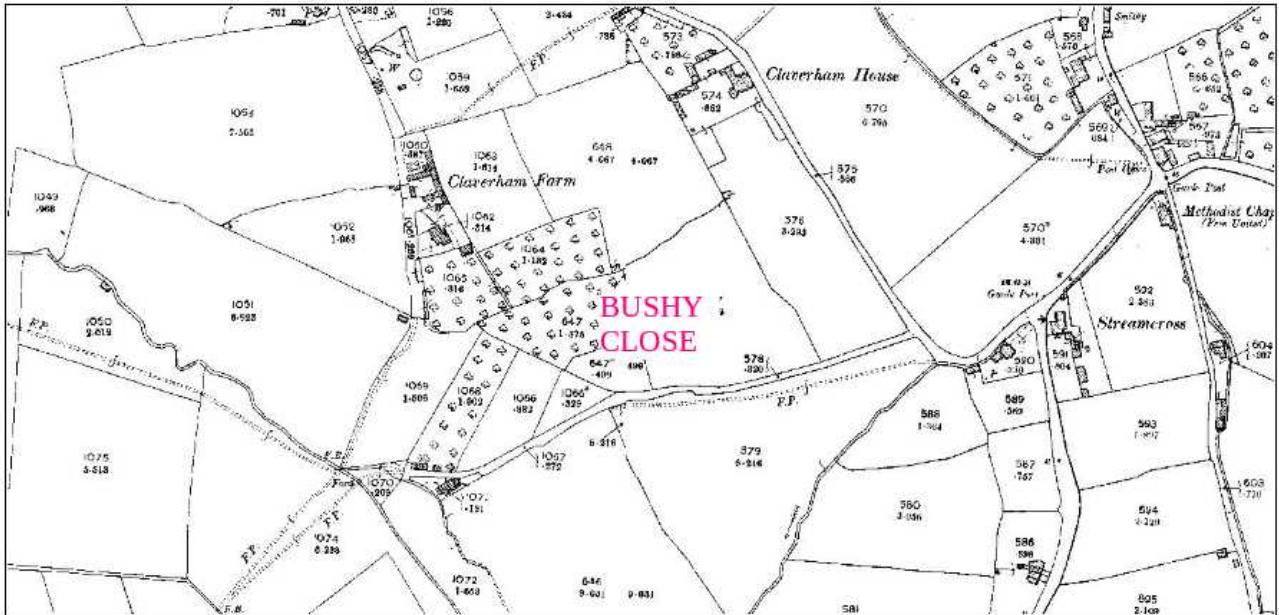


Fig 5: Bushy Close in 1903 (OS Epoch 2)

The gout seems to have appeared as a group of stones disturbed by ploughing. Photographic evidence is limited to a few colour enprints, but the site was photographed during the initial excavation:



Fig 6: Gout during excavations



Fig 7: Gout during recording, two capping stones still in situ

Unfortunately, the accompanying ditch was not photographed, but this is a small matter in the recording. It was, however, recorded in the final drawings and plans of the site (Fig 8 below).

The stones involved seem to be largely of local Liassic Limestone, which naturally splits into layers.

The capping stones are set in a mortar (described as 'light brown mortar with white flecks', obviously of local derivation), although the sides of the gout are described as 'drystone' in the accompanying notes. The depth of the gout is 0.5m, and the whole 2m long, with clay deposits in the bottom of the tunnel. The description of the mortar indicates a pre-industrial structure, since it does not include the black coal / clinker fragments that usually mark such mortars. The presence of the gout implies the existence of a ditch, although this is so ploughed out as to be not visible, even in lidar scans.

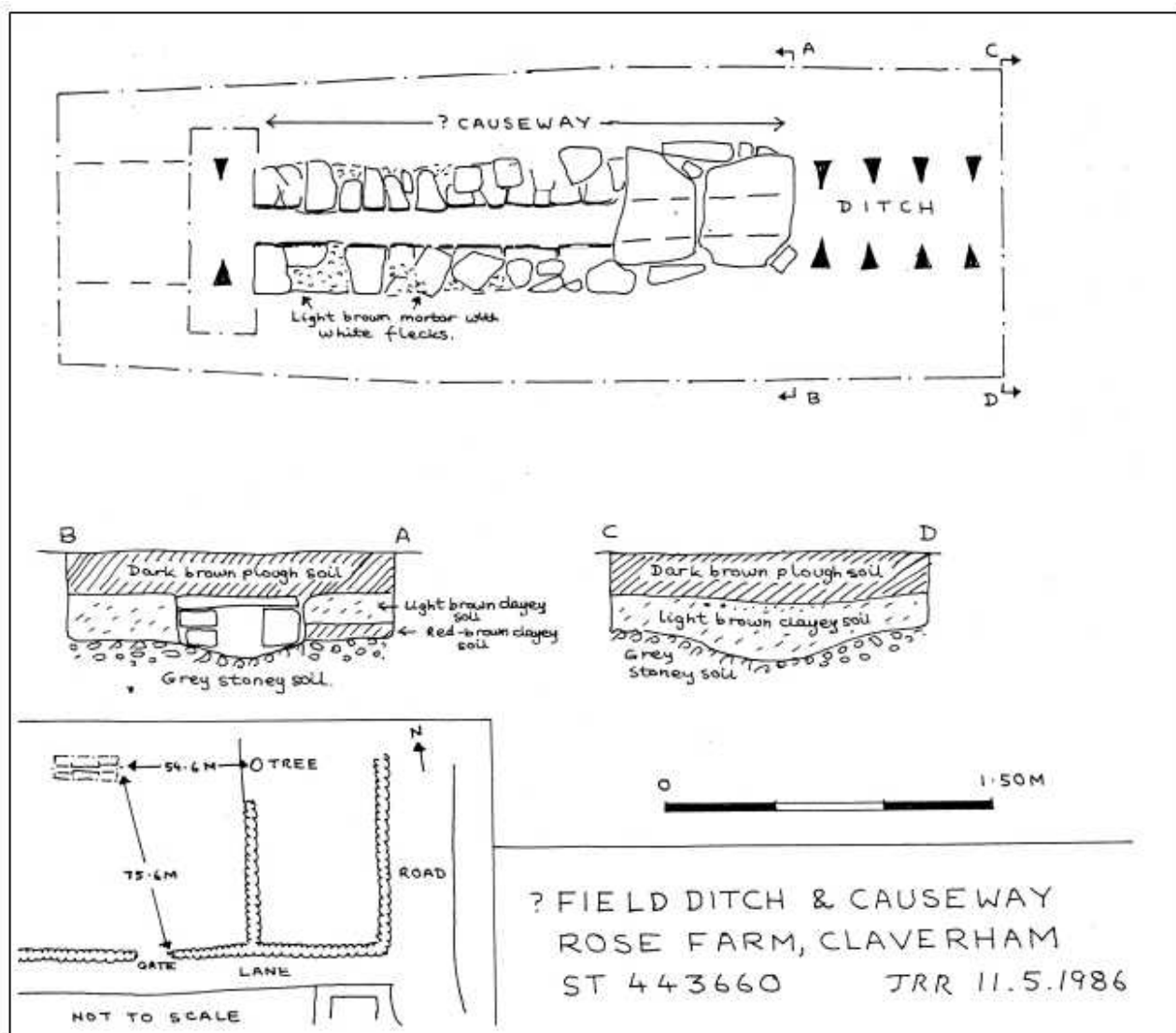


Fig 8: Detailed record of site, by the late James Russell

Iwood Farm gout

This gout was found during YCCCART geophysical and earthworks surveys at Iwood, largely as a scatter of large stones beside a relict ditch (now backfilled) in 2007.

The nature of the site was recognised, and the excavation amounted to only 'uncovering' to confirm the identification.

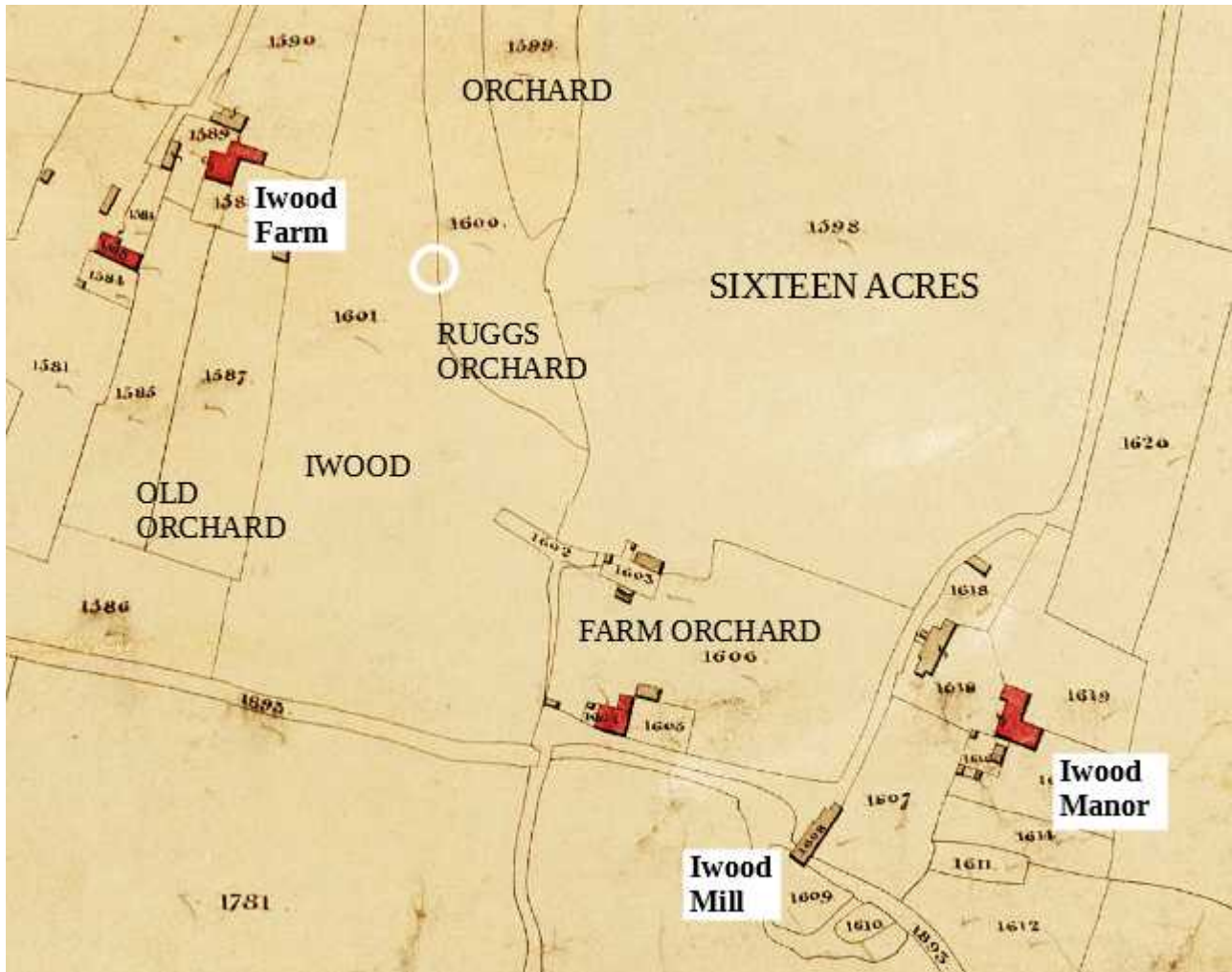


Fig 9: Site of gout at Iwood Farm, Congresbury, with Tithe field names (1840)

One possible reason for the presence of a gout (to provide stable crossing of a waterway for heavy loads) is illustrated here by the number of orchards: the processing equipment of cider press and trough was still in place at Iwood Farm in 2010: wagon loads of apples are of necessity far more dense than (say) hay, implying greater ground pressure from wheels and thus need for better support.

The site was originally recognised as a cluster of stones on the bank of the ditch, presumably cleared during ditching operations



Fig 10: Upstream view (with stones from gout) at Iwood

The gout at Iwood, while longer than that at Claverham at some 2.3m (uncovered: the gout was not completely uncovered during the works), and with a wider central channel (c0.8m v. 0.5m).

Of course, gouts will vary according to local needs: as can be seen in the photographs in Fig 10, the site at Iwood still carries running water in wet weather, whereas that at Claverham does not.

Interestingly, neither gout supports public rights of way: these are very much private features probably made using local farm labour, not requiring specialist knowledge or materials.

Presumably they were used in the case of waterways or ditches that are narrow enough not to require bridges or planks, but do require traffic movements.

Gouts are only very infrequently mentioned in documentation, then usually either as landscape markers (such as the case at Cheddar given above) or when requiring repair when cases are brought to the manorial courts. This, and the general lack of excavation and recording, makes the dating of the origins of these structures difficult.

In general, it is only possible to stress that the methods of construction (drystone or mortared walling, capping or clapper stones) have been known and used since at least the Neolithic period, and are still in use today.

No finds capable of dating the site at Iwood were made, and none seem to be recorded at Claverham. In the absence of such finds, we must always assume that the structures are relatively recent, probably all postmedieval, except when otherwise evidenced. There must have been some idea of such structures to have gained an Old English name, but their very simple, often fragile, construction means they are easily destroyed without record, especially since the rise of powered ditch clearance in the second half of the 20th century.

This also raises questions of how these structures are recorded: are they significant enough (for example) to be recorded on Historic Environment Records, when the very number of them is likely to be overwhelming?

Fig 11 below records the appearance of the Iwood gout when 'cleaned up'.



Fig 11: Iwood gout as revealed during works in 2007

Recommendations for further work

One of the important points about this work is how relevant the recognition of minor monuments such as gouts is to the understanding of the use and development of agricultural landscapes.

Questions of how such structures are dealt with in the archaeology archive remain to be addressed.

References

Gardiner, M. 2017	<i>Inland Waterways and Coastal transport: Landing Places, Canals and Bridges</i> : 152-166 in Hyer & Hooke 2017
Hyer, M. C. & Hooke, D. 2017	<i>Water and the Environment in the Anglo-Saxon World</i> Liverpool
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Date

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