

**YCCCART 2017/Y5**

**Was Mansbury the meeting place of the Hundred of Congresbury?**

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RESEARCH TEAM (YCCCART)**

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*The mound at Mansbury in high summer 2016*

<b>Page</b>	<b>Contents</b>
3	Abstract Acknowledgements Introduction
4	Site location Land use and geology
5	Historical & archaeological context
9	Landscape analysis
11	References Archive

## **Abstract**

*The case is made on topographic, documentary and toponymic grounds for the natural rock outcrop at Wrington Road, Congresbury being the feature responsible for the place-name 'Mansbury', known since 1567 at the latest, and potentially, the meeting place for the Hundred of Congresbury during the period between the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup>.*

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Introduction**

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

The objective of the teams is to carry out archaeological fieldwork, for the purpose of recording, and better understanding and management, of the heritage of northern Somerset.

The investigation for this report was largely carried out in mid-2016 and early 2017.

## Site location



*Fig 1: White arrow indicates the position of Mansbury*

Mansbury is located at ST44526415, 960m ENE of the parish church of St Andrew's, Congresbury, adjacent to the Bristol to Wrington Road. Congresbury is 14km south-west of Bristol in the unitary authority of North Somerset.

## Land use and geology

The mound itself is an outcrop of the Lower Carboniferous Limestone of the nearby Broadfield Down, emerging from the surrounding clay soils of the Mercia Mudstones. It is permanently pasture, with a significant quarry and other features cut into it. It can be seen from a local footpath. It is on private land currently used as pasture, but under application for housing development.

## Historical and archaeological context

In England a hundred was the division of a shire for military and judicial purposes under the common law, which could have varying extent of common feudal ownership, from complete suzerainty to minor royal or ecclesiastical prerogatives and rights of ownership. Until the introduction of districts by the Local Government Act 1894, hundreds were the only widely used assessment unit between the parish, with its various administrative functions and the county, with its formal, ceremonial functions, in size ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hundred\\_\(county\\_division\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hundred_(county_division))).

Their first documentation of the existence of hundreds as such an entity is in the laws of King Edmund (939-946). The slightly later laws of King Edgar (943-975) include the rule that the hundred court should meet every four weeks. Its role was to deal with minor judicial events and fines for such.

The origins of the hundred are not clear. As early as the works of Tacitus (1<sup>st</sup> century AD), he referred to organisations within the Germanic peoples as '*centenni*', whose literal meaning is 'the hundred ones' (Benario 1999)

This has led to speculation that the hundred is of Germanic origin, and brought to Britain by the predecessors of the kings of the West Saxons. A similar organisation of a supposed hundred heads of households is known in several countries in north-west Europe. Some support for this is found in the general understanding that a hundred should consist of 100 hides (a complex term, but broadly accepted as meaning 'land that can support a family'), and the fact that in Mercian areas of England, this is indeed the most usual size, but in Wessex, which later became the predominant power and eventually became England, it is not, implying that the hundreds in Mercia were imposed, whereas those that grew in Wessex were more 'naturally' formed. Unfortunately for certainty, such structures also existed in Wales (the *cantref*), where it is supposed they originated long before the English conquests in the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Davies et al 2008: 113).

Hundred courts were gradually superceded by more local manorial courts, and after a long drawn out history were abolished in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

They were also much more flexible in size and manors contained than the shires they served. Manors could switch between hundreds, or hundreds combine, both of which happened in Somerset.

One clear fact we know about the area of northern Somerset is that a Hundred of Congresbury was in existence by the time of the Geld Inquest in 1084 (Roffe 2000). The Congresbury Hundred seems to have consisted of the manors of Congresbury, Wick St Lawrence, Iwood, and perhaps more surprisingly, part of Badgworth and East Cranmore, near Shepton Mallet. Thorn (2010) puts forward a convincing argument that this strange chimaeric hundred was the work of Harold Godwinson (later King Harold II), who seized Congresbury in c1060 from the bishop of Wells. This may perhaps account for the otherwise inexplicable dedication of Badgworth parish church to St Congar, who's main cult centre was at Congresbury (Oates and Costen 2003). Once Congresbury had been returned to the bishop by King John (Cran 1983: 29), there was no need for a separate

Hundred of Congresbury, and like Cheddar, it was absorbed into the vast Hundred of Winterstoke, to the south.

One of the central facts about hundreds is that there was a traditional meeting place, where the courts and general meetings could be held in the open air. Some of the local hundreds have identifiable meeting places today. The Hundred of Bempstone, for example, centred on the royal vill of Wedmore, met at a standing stone on the hill at Stone Allerton (Collinson 1791: (1): 163); the Hundred of Portbury met at a stone within the ramparts of the minor hill fort at Portbury (Alexander 1996; 1996b; 1997); the short-lived Hundred of Cheddar, probably at a prominent tree in Hythe Lane, where the field name Spelthorne (a typical hundredal meeting place name) occurs (Cheddar Tithe Map and Apportionment 1837 – 1841 SHC D\D/Rt/A/245; D\D/Rt/M/245).

There are several features of such a hundredal meeting place that are clearly required in a largely pre-literate society. These are clearly laid out in (for example) the University College London on Historical Assembly Sites:

(<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/research/projects/assembly/ElectronicAnderson>)

1. It must be a recognisable 'stand out' site in the landscape. Such features as barrows, notably shaped hills, notable trees, standing stones, even prominent fords or stone crosses are all known to be meeting place of various Hundreds.
2. It must have good to excellent communication routes nearby, for obvious reasons.
3. It may be remembered in field or place names, such as the Spelthorn names at Cheddar, from OE '*spell*' (speech, discourse) + '*born*' (thorn tree). (The letter 'p' is no longer in use in modern English: it is roughly equivalent to the 'th-' sound in the word 'thorough') (Bosworth and Toller 1898). For a discussion on these features, see Baker and Brookes 2015.

The major large contenders for the hundred meeting place of Congresbury are Cadbury Congresbury hill fort, to the north on the border with the contemporary Yatton Hundred, or the enclosure in Congresbury village, based around the minster church of St Andrew.

The latter is unlikely, since early hundred meetings seldom, if ever, took place in the heart of a settlement. The hill fort is perhaps more likely. It has reasonable communications with local routes, with the ancient hollow-way between Cleeve and Yatton passing to its east. It even has a (natural) mound in the centre, called locally 'The citadel' or 'The Roman camp' (Gardner 1959). However, the hill fort and its surroundings are divided between the two contemporary Hundreds of Congresbury and Yatton, and while it was fairly common to hold meetings on the boundary of hundreds, there are no further clues in terms of place-names or any other indications that this was the meeting place.

Perhaps a stronger contender is the natural stone outcrop at ST44526415. This is an outcrop of mineralised Lower Carboniferous Limestone, in the centre of a gently sloping field to the north east of Congresbury village. The mound is very clear from all directions, round in plan, approximately 60m across, and almost 3m above the surrounding field on its southern side (see lidar image, Fig 3). Its centre has been quarried or mined, and other

cut features can be seen. In view of the known Roman iron smelting some 100m to the south at Cobthorn Way (North Somerset HER 2016), the gradiometer survey of the site (Stratascan 2016) and the nature of the rock, this may very well be the remains of Roman industrial activity. It does, however, give the mound a striking resemblance to a large bronze age barrow, even with what could be a robbing pit in its top. It is still a recognised element of the landscape today, known to generations of Congresbury children as 'The island' or 'Pirate's island'.

It is not clear exactly when the area around the mound was assarted from woodland (as the larger boundary hedges in the area have ancient woodland indicators in them), but the surrounding boundaries certainly have the aratral curves of medieval open fields, so the area may well have been under plough by the 1060s. As an uncultivable area, its grass would have made the mound even more conspicuous in an arable landscape.

This mound's name is 'Mansbury', attested on the 1736-9 manorial maps of Congresbury by deWilstar. The name is used in the 1567 survey of Congresbury to denote an area of arable ('*Mansborow*') (Bristol Record Office (BRO) 04235).



*Fig 2: The site labelled AV is Cleyel and Mansbury on this 1736-9 map. North at bottom. (BRO 04480)*

At the time, the land was held by a Mr James Jones as '*At Clayel or Clayhill a Close arrable with a Small patch in Watergripe together with a Close of the following Holding Called Mansbury*' (BRO 1050941).

No earlier versions of this name are currently known, since earlier documents for Congresbury have not been researched yet. However, in view of the mound's appearance, the second element of its name is almost certainly OE '*beorg*' = 'hill, artificial mound'. The first is more difficult, but Field (1972: 133) quotes several field names where the 'man-' element means '(land held in) common, of the community', and the name could be a breakdown of the OE '*gemaenscip*' (of the community, belonging to the community) (Bosworth and Toller 1898).

The element '*ge*'- in this word is lost in place-name formation, so the place-name means something like 'mound of the community'. It is this place-name, and the highly visible

nature of the mound that makes it a good candidate for the hundred meeting place.

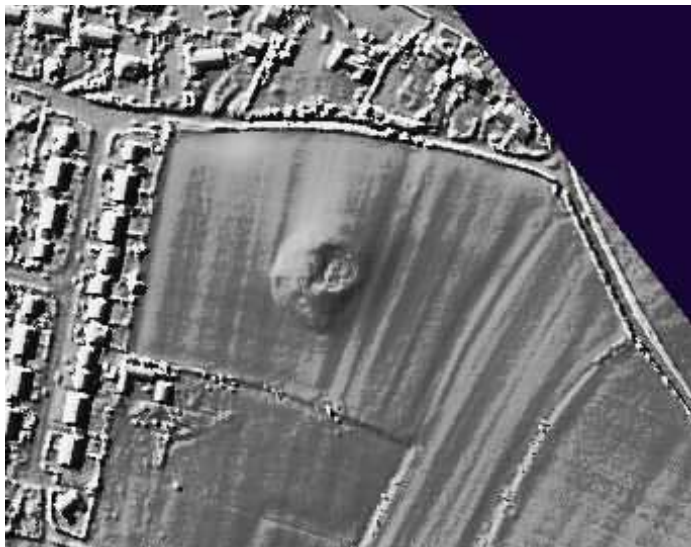


Fig 3: Lidar image of the mound  
(<https://houseprices.io/lab/lidar/map>;  
<https://data.gov.uk/dataset/lidar-composite-dsm-1m1>)

The mound's appearance on lidar images (Fig 3) emphasises this resemblance to a large, robbed, barrow.

It also has good road and water links: the main medieval roads to Wells, Wrington (an important medieval market town of the abbots of Glastonbury) and Bristol meet at a staggered cross roads only 100m from the mound, and 3 roads and two

footpaths converge on the road junction only 80m from the mound. The Congresbury Yeo was also navigable as far as the centre of the village in the medieval period, some 400m from the mound.



## Landscape analysis



Fig 4: Congresbury Hundred, c 1060 – c 1300 (from <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/research/projects/assembly/ElectronicAnderson>)

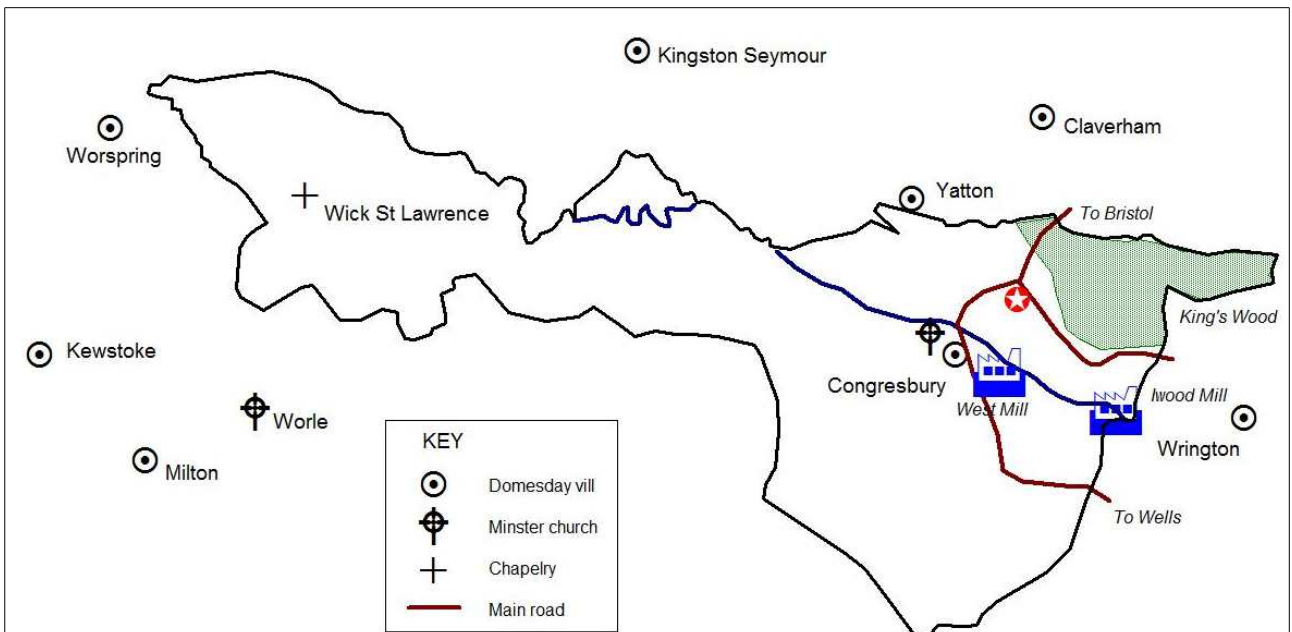


Fig 5: Congresbury Hundred: Local features (red star-in-circle' marks the position of Mansbury)

The Congresbury Hundred (Fig 5) lies on two main routes between Bristol, Wells and Wrington. In addition, its south-east boundary with the present parish of Churchill is almost certainly a Roman Road (Gardner, K. pers comm). The Congresbury Yeo (blue line in figure) was navigable in the medieval and later periods as far as the weir at West Mill,

although this would have been present in 1060.

Most of the land to the west of Congresbury village is below 8.0m AOD, and although excellent agricultural land, would not have been suitable for such a meeting place.

It is thus suggested that the natural quarried outcrop named Mansbury may well have been the meeting point for the Hundred of Congresbury. This leads to increased importance being stressed on its preservation *in situ*: undoubtedly ways can be found to incorporate the mound into any developments at the site.

For example, Secklow Hundred Mound in Milton Keynes was included within developments there (<https://historicensland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1007940>) and the stone the meeting place of the Hundred of Stone in Yeovil, Somerset, is preserved in open space (<https://www.yalhs.org.uk/yeovils-hundred-stone/>). Despite extensive Victoria County History studies of the Hundreds of Somerset, their meeting places are rarely distinguished in the works.

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## Archive

The archive for this project is in the general digital archive of YCCART, in a folder called 'Mansbury'

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