

YCCCART 2022/Y13

Four archaeological evaluations at Congresbury 1995-2020

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

General Editor: Vince Russett



Digging at 'Benny's' summer 1997

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Abstract

While these reports are, by their nature, small and incomplete, it was nevertheless thought useful to publish remaining records.

The excavation at 'Benny's', near the Congresbury Yeo in 1997, was undertaken as part of a larger enterprise involving a display of rural crafts. As steps were not taken to publish (internal photographic evidence suggests however that appropriate recording was undertaken at the time), records have been lost/misplaced, but the evidence remaining is illuminating.

The emergency recording of Roman features at Station Road, Congresbury faced similar difficulties, magnified by the forthcoming Local Government Reorganisation chaos which was happening at the time.

Two garden trial pits (at Rookery Farm and Stonewell farms, Congresbury in 2018 and 2019) were undertaken under the auspices of YCCCART and are here published for the first time.

Should further records emerge from the times, this report will be updated .

Acknowledgements

The excavations at 'Benny's' were undertaken by members of Bristol University Archaeology Department, directed by Paula Gardiner, along with volunteers and staff from Weston Museum, largely directed by Dick Broomhead.

The work at Station Road was a recording event during bad weather addressing the effect of building works, by Dick Broomhead.

The trial pitting was undertaken by members of YCCCART.

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.

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.

Benny's 1997

Site location



Fig 1: Location of investigations at 'Benny's' 1997 (2021)

The area of 'Benny's tenement' lies immediately north of the Congresbury Yeo, the investigated area lying at ST42186445, on a locally naturally slightly raised area of land (see report below). The site is 1.55km WNW of Congresbury parish church, in North Somerset.

Land use and geology

The area in 1997 and today is grazing ground, being too unpredictably wet for arable cultivation.

The whole area lies entirely on the estuarine alluvium of the Northmarsh: a small outcrop of periglacial Head occurs to the south of the river at Stepstones Farm (locally known as 'The Oar') and it is possible that a small elevated field to the north ('Binhay Batch') (see Fig 4 below) has a similar outcrop, although it is too small to appear on geological mapping.

The site can be seen from a permissive footpath running along the north bank of the Yeo from Congresbury to the foot of Gangwall.

Historical & archaeological context

Benny's tenement is undoubtedly medieval or earlier in origin: it is directly described as an Old Auster in 1567 (YCCCCART 2017):

'...[31 January 1557/8]... The said John [Champeneys]... Holdeth by the sayde Coppy the thirde parte of one yearde Lande of olde Aster Called Beneyes..[and other lands include] And XXV acre I pearche (10.2Ha) of Land Meade and pasture in severall That ys to saye

II acres I pearche (0.9Ha) of pasture in a Closse Called Beneyes haye...'

(Traditionally, the 'perch', normally 1/160 of an acre (1Ha = 2.47 acres), was used as a synonym for what is more usually termed a 'rood' (1/4 of an acre) in Congresbury).

Old Auster (in Somerset, at least) seems to be a term used at least from the early post-Conquest period to denote land holdings in areas where pre-Conquest (i.e. Saxon) forms of land tenure remained strong (Lane 2014: 52). They are thus a very strong indication of medieval origins of the said tenement.

Some medieval pottery was recovered from the excavations (personal recollection) but unfortunately, the finds can no longer be traced.

In 1739, the survey accompanying the deWilstar maps of Congresbury listed (BRO 3304/BMC/4/20: The Surveye Book of the Mannor of Congresbury)

'...[DC] Thomas Shirborne Holding granted by Lease 1709 the 19th June.. West from Congresbury moore and adjoining to ye River Side, a Close Pasture called the Binnys or Binny House (24.3.29, 10.06Ha).

and

[BI] Mr John Fords Holding which was granted to him ye 7th July 1728.. Hare Crofte or Benny House and Smith mead now in one ground (3.2.21, 1.56Ha)...'

Notably, the main Champeney holding in 1557, and that of Shirborne, 152 years later, only differ by 2% in stated area, and thus are likely the same holding.

These areas were mapped by deWilstar in 1739 (BRO 33041/BMC/12/PL/150) (see Fig 2 below).

At the time of the 1840 Congresbury Tithe Map, the Benny/Binhay field names were spread over a wide area of western Congresbury, although none occur in Yatton to the west (see Fig 3 below).

The field name in either form is usually derived from OE *'bēan'* (pronounced as a disyllable, which it still is in Somerset dialect) (meaning 'bean' in modern English, very likely an ancestor of the modern broad (fava) bean, used for human and animal consumption), + *'haga'* (= an enclosed field or area) or + *'eg'*, in this case likely meaning 'raised area in a marsh' (www.bosworthtoller.com; Gelling & Cole 2003; Cavill 2018).

'Batch' is a Somerset dialectical term meaning 'raised area of ground, steep track' ultimately derived from OE *'baec'* (the anatomical 'back') (Gelling & Cole 2003).

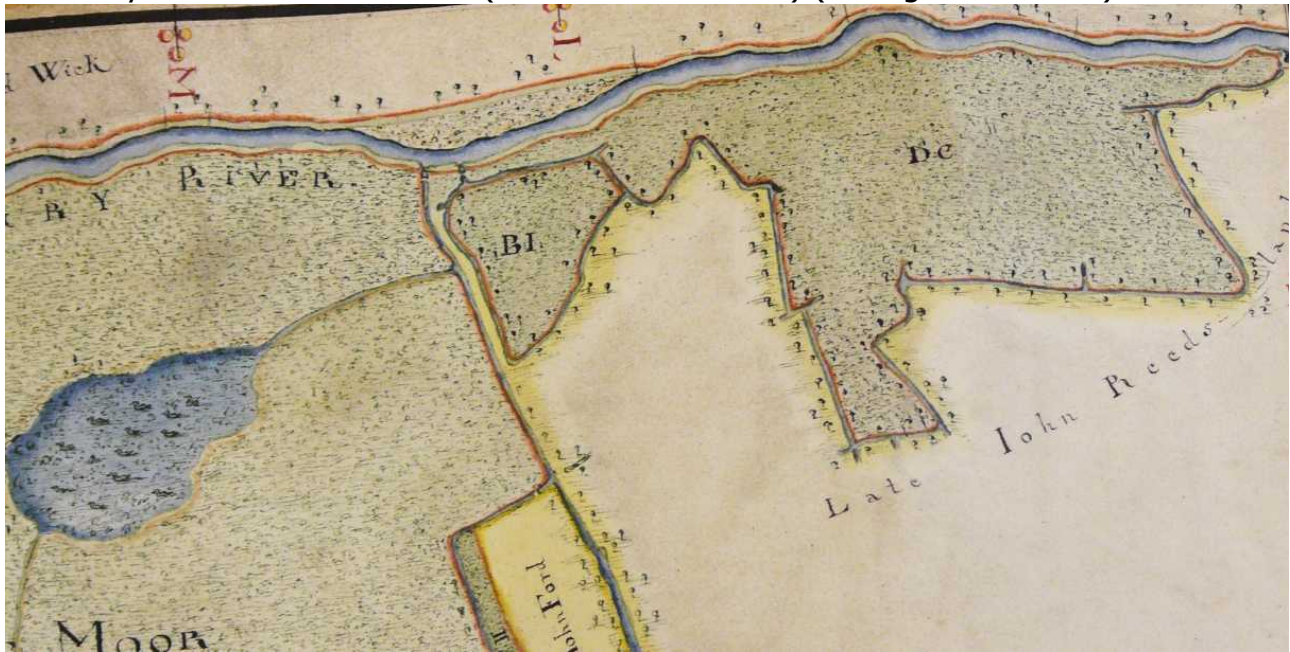


Fig 2: 'Benny' holdings as depicted by deWilstar, 1739 (south at top)

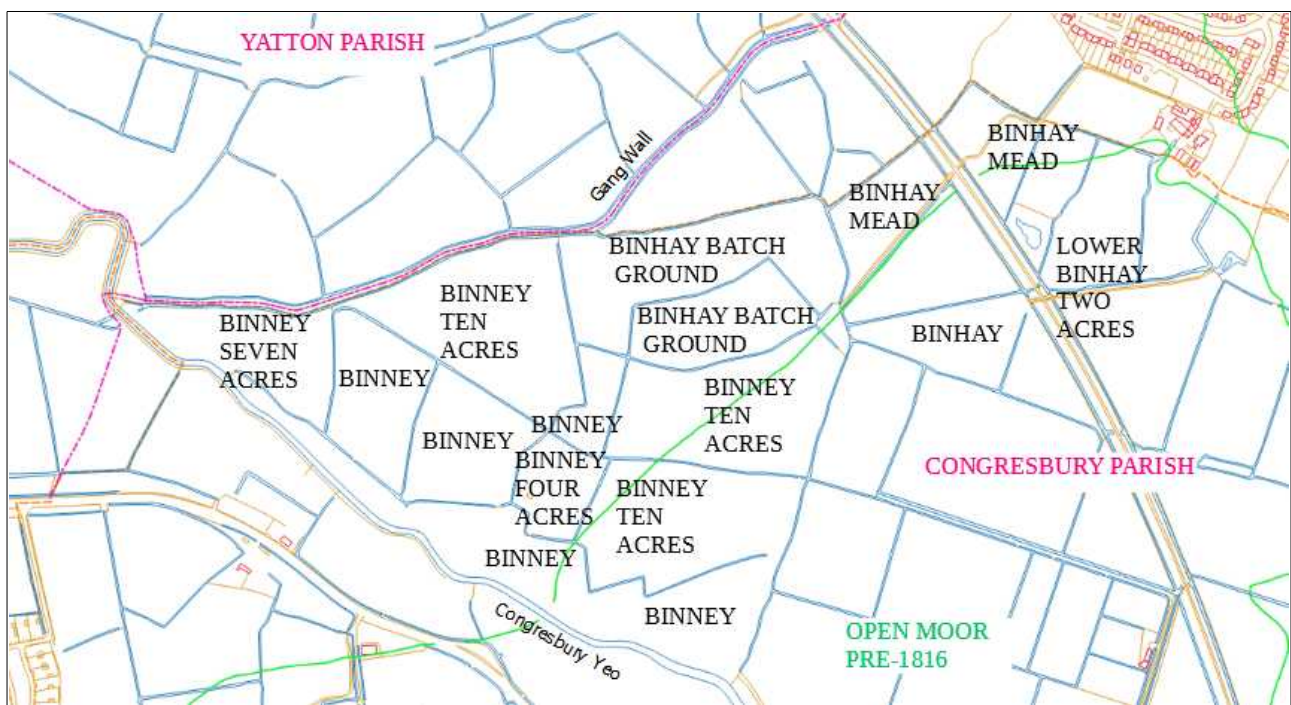


Fig 3: 'Binny / Binhay' field names from Congresbury Tithe Map (1840)

Both the 1739 map and the Tithe map show very irregular field boundaries, probably due to their origin in the medieval period: the fields were, presumably, not subject to inundation in quite the same way as those within what was 'The Great Moor' to the east, at the time, as can be seen from the (green) contour in Fig 3.

The existence of Benny's tenement (and dwelling) should be understood as part of this unfamiliar medieval landscape, examples of which are becoming more familiar as the Northmarsh is subject to more archaeological scrutiny (see Gilbert 1996; YCCCART 2017, for example).

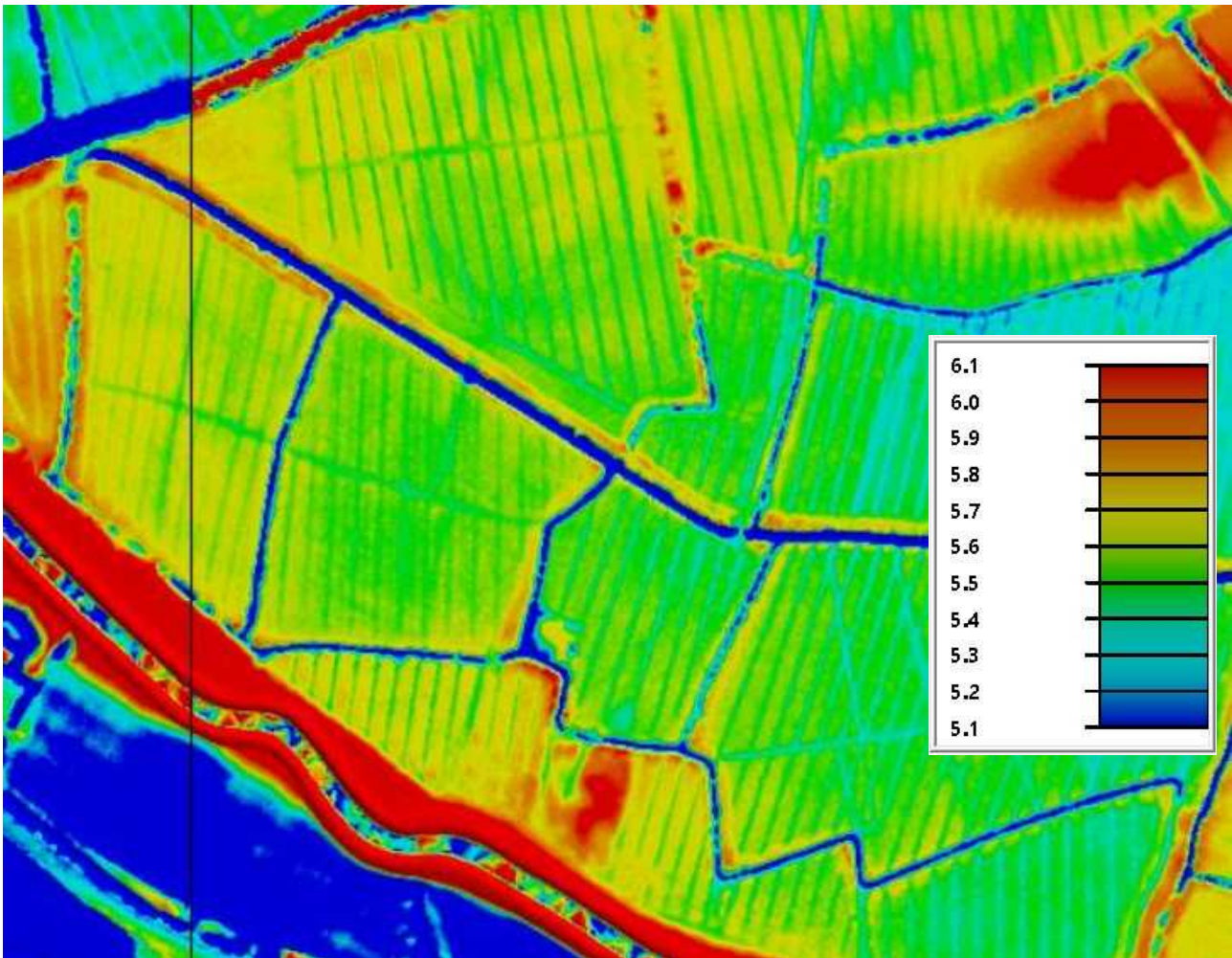


Fig 4: Lidar plot of the Benny/Binhay area of Congresbury (scale in m above AOD)

Subtle changes in topography can strongly influence areas chosen for habitation. In the lidar survey (Fig 4) of the west of Congresbury Moor, a raised area of ground about 0.5m above the surrounds, is the site chosen for the building of the dwelling at Benny's. With the eye of faith, a rectangular raised area close to the north field ditch, with flanking ditches, may be the house platform explored in 1997.

The larger raised area to top right, is Binhay Batch, also some 0.5m higher than its surrounds.

The 1997 investigations

Unfortunately, no plan survives (other than Fig 1) for either the placement of the resistivity survey, or of the trenches, of which five appear to have been opened, of which one was dug, back-filled, then cleared out and enlarged subsequently (Trenches 1 and 4).

Resistivity survey

The survey used a Geoscan meter, presumably using the traditional 20m grid (although this is nowhere explicitly stated). Presumably, an early version of Geoscan's proprietary software was used for plotting results.

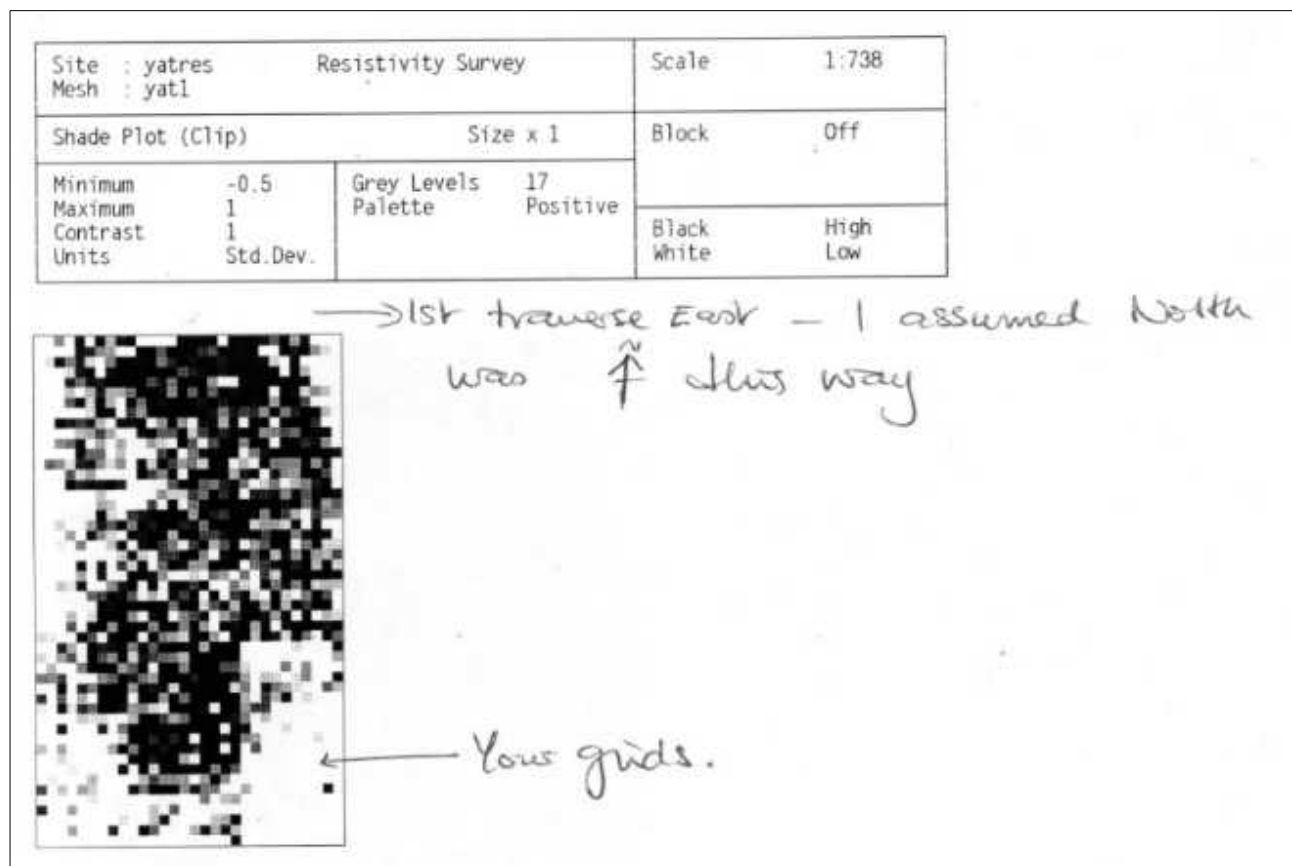


Fig 5: Resistivity plot from Benny's, 1997

The results (Fig 5 above) indicate that there is a substantial spread of high-resistance, probably rubble, at the site. This is an important result, since the site appears to lie entirely on the alluvium, so this alone proves human manipulation of the local environment. The reference to 'your grids' implies that at least one of the excavation trenches overlapped with the survey, but it is unclear which.

Without precise placement, the plot cannot be interpreted with any certainty.

Results below show there may be a small Head deposit in the area, confusing the geophysical survey.

Evaluations

It is not possible to plot the trenches from this work. They have been assigned numbers for the purposes of this report: Trench 3 is the only one where visible context cards give a number.

Trench 5 can be seen in the background of photos of Trench 1/4; a small unidentifiable trench can be seen in the background of photos of Trench 2; otherwise, little can be said other than that all the trenches seem to fall within the area shown on Fig 1.

Trench 1/4

Trench 1 seems to have been opened to investigate a slight parch mark, somewhere in the NE of the 'investigation area' in Fig 1.



Fig 6: Trench 1 location: Yatton church in right background

Although not remarked on in the surviving notes, the site is also towards the edge of a raised area of ground, possibly the 'house platform' visible in Fig 4.

The exploratory trench (which from photographs, appears to be c3.0m x 1.0m in size), uncovered a central coursed rubble stone wall, of which some four courses remained in situ.

The wall lies under some 10-12cm turf/topsoil, and appears to be largely of Carboniferous Limestone (with one or two Dolomitic Conglomerates) set in a clay/soil matrix, and with a very flat upper surface. The wall is c75-80cm thick ('two and a half feet'), and survives to about 40cm depth (so strictly should probably be described as 'foundations').

On each side of the wall, stone features survived.



Fig 7: Trench 1 (site north at top) during excavation

To the east (outside) a raft of rubble sloped gently down from the wall (presumably wall collapse, or just possibly, irregular yard surface) to the edge of the trench.

On the other, a slightly flatter rubble spread was topped by at least one large (<80cm long) Pennant Sandstone slab (?flooring), beneath a slightly rubbly subsoil. Nowhere was this rubble spread layer more than 20cm from the surface.



Fig 8: Trench 1: Full depth of excavation (orientation as Fig 7)

Figs 8 and 9 show that the wall is constructed within an existing dark-brown slightly stony soil, itself lying on what appears from the photograph to be a natural Head deposit.



Fig 9: Wall in Trench 1 from west

It is not clear whether the upright stones at the north end of the wall in Fig 9 constitute a structure within the wall, but this is perhaps implied by their different geology and orientation. From identification of the individual stones within the wall, it seems that Trench 4 represents an extension to the south of Trench 1.



Fig 10: Trench 1 (foreground) and 4 (far side of trench) from north

Trench 4 appears to continue the picture of the central wall with a rubble spread to the east and potential floor to the west seen in Trench 1.



Fig 11: Trench 1/4, with Trench 5 in background

Something of the potential length of the building can be seen by Fig 11, where the building corner in Trench 5 can be seen in the mid-ground (with figure). Vehicles on the A370 can be seen in the background.

Some of the wall between the two was detected by probing. This length of building can only be a very large dwelling or a stone-footed barn.

Trench 2

The location of this trench vis-a-vis the others is unknown.

The scale of the metre drawing grid shows this trench to be 3.0m x 3.0m.

The figures (12 and cover illustration) show a rubble spread, quite possibly a yard surface, with others structures, potentially drains or wall bases, within it.

Trench 3

Again, this trench is completely unlocated (and is given Trench 3 status, as the visible context label numbers begin in traditional fashion with '3'). It appears to be (Fig 13) an area outside of the rubble spreads seen in the other trenches: the sondage in one corner seems to be an attempt to characterise the lower, darker sub-soil seen in other trenches.

This trench seems to be a first attempt to establish the limits of the stone spread(s) - with the confusing potential Head deposits at the site, geophysical survey would have been of limited use in 1997.



Fig 12: Trench 2



Fig 13: Trench 3

Trench 5

This small (1.0m x 1.0m) trench was to expose the building corner. It can be seen in the

background of the figure of Trenches 1/4 (Fig 11 above).



Fig 14: Trench 5 showing building corner

While this clearly is the corner of a building, the odd persistent line of the near face of the wall away from a parallel with the farther face is difficult to explain without further excavation.

Trench 6



Fig 15: Dick Broomhead records a potential post-hole in Trench 6

Trench 6 is also not located. The layers within it appear to run slightly down from left to

right, implying that it is probably on the eastern side of the raised area of ground at Benny's.

Conclusion

This rather unpromising group of photographs is actually quite archaeologically revealing.

The site appears to lie on a small outcrop of Head deposits, probably too small to feature on geology mapping, raising awareness that this possibility will always need to be borne in mind when looking at archaeology in the Northmarsh but fairly close to 'solid' geology.

On top of this are spreads of rubble, presumably brought to the site, and functioning as yards, or even house floors. The trenches not yielding rubble reveal that this is of limited extent, which ought to be amenable to modern geophysical survey.

Clearly, a building existed at this site, probably that referred to in documentary evidence as 'Benny House' in 1739 (above) and strongly hinted at in earlier documentation and the Old Auster designation. The walls revealed are of clay-bonded limestone rubble. The tops of these walls are so level that consideration must be given as to whether they represent sleeper walls for a sill-beam and wooden superstructure building. While artefactual dating is completely absent, the status of the tenement implies medieval origins, even if the revealed archaeology fails to confirm this.

The existence of this dwelling in the Northmarsh (along with those recorded in Yatton Marsh to the west) shows clearly that areas of low flat alluvial land should not be dismissed as sites of potential occupation: after all, in the Roman period, Wemberham Roman villa is in a very similar situation.

If this site is the original 'Benny's tenement', it remains to be seen why the field-name extended through the whole of the western end of Congresbury Moor by 1840 (Fig 3 above).

Station Road, Congresbury 1995

Site location



Fig 16: Location of Station Road watching brief, 1995 (starred)

The site in question was a building area some 100 x 50m in size, at ST43076390, on the south side of Weston Road, Congresbury (now Station Close).

Geology and landuse

The site lies on the eastern end of a Head deposit lying along the south of Weston Road. It is surrounded by the estuarine alluvium of the Northmarsh. Prior to development, the site was used for grazing, although the aratral curved plan of the field boundaries along but perpendicular to the road point to use as arable in the past.

Subsequently, the site has become a housing estate of sixteen dwellings in five terraced groups, accessed by Station Close off Weston Road.

Historical & archaeological context

This part of Congresbury village (the 'tail' along Weston Road) has not been well characterised in archaeological terms.

A number of postmedieval buildings (Church Farmhouse - pre-1830; Prince of Wales pub (MEDITERRANEVM 2022) - 18th century in origin; Oak Farm - recorded as postmedieval but potentially earlier) are recorded along the road on the North Somerset HER: medieval pottery is recorded as being found close to the site described here (NSHER42883).

Otherwise, its relative proximity to the parish church (some 510m) may imply archaeological potential: work for the construction of the adjacent Congresbury station in the 19th century is not recorded to have revealed any archaeology.



Fig 17: Area developed on Weston Road in 1995 (Nos 403 'garden' and 391 'orchard') from Congresbury Tithe Map (1840)

Neither does the 1736 deWilstar map of Congresbury show any development at the site (Fig 18 below).

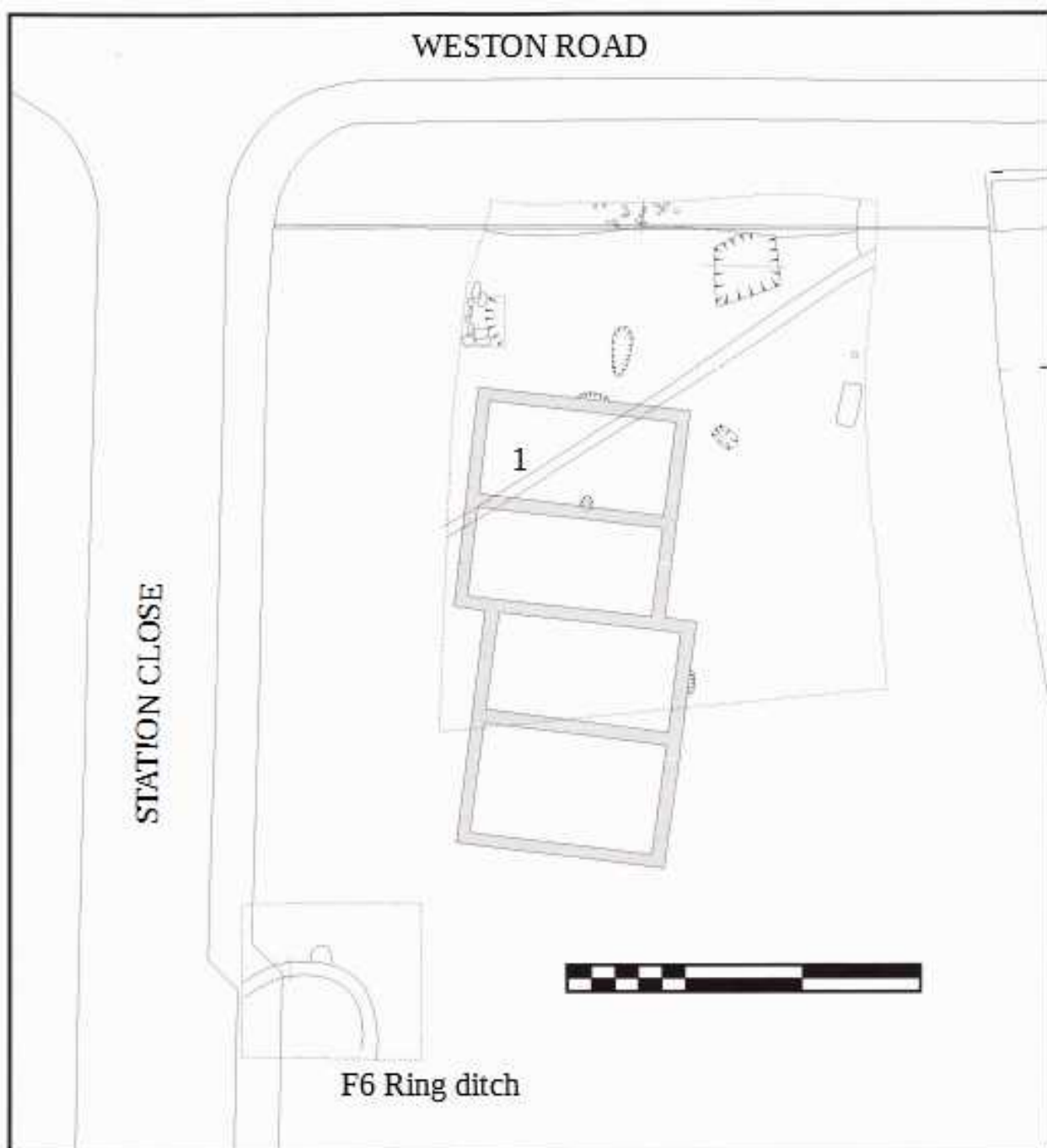


Fig 19: Site plan as drawn up in 1995 by Dick Broomhead

Appendix

Station Road Congresbury. Excavation by Richard Broomhead. March 1995

Context list

100 –Topsoil of dark reddish brown humus rich granular clay with prolific root activity. Depth of 100 to 150 mm on average

101 –Subsoil of dark reddish brown silty clay, infrequent small stone (local gravels 10-33mm , flecks of coal, ash [---] watery. Varying depth 100- 150 at south end of site, 250 to 320 at north.

102 - Dark brown /black fine sandy clay containing fragmentary bone, coal, pennant flakes, occasional red sticky inclusions 20-30mm. Some infrequent charcoal . [--] of RB pot, slag o? fill of (f2) . Depth 100 -150mm.

103 – Dark loam /black occasionally ? orange streaked sticky ? clay, with prominent charcoal and crusted fired clay streaking . Contains occasional pennant, some up to 75mm, quern fragments and much debris. – loom weights ?/ bone/frequent RB pot (Middle fill of f2).

104 –Sticky water retaining silty orange dark brown clay. Infrequent pennant fragments(up to 30mm) . Pottery (Incl [--]) (Lowest fill of f2)

105 – Cut of F2

106 - [---] of sticky clay cut by (f2) vertical.

(f2) – Rectangular dark brown/black feature adjacent to ditch.

107 - Dark brown/gray silty clay infrequent and slag of large mudstones 100-250mm. Fill of ditch (F1)

108 – Cut of F1

(F1) – Shallow east to west ? and north end of site.

109 - Hard sandy red ? clay with frequent pebbly gravels very compact. RB pot on surface. Cut by ditch f1- vertical.

110- Fill of (F5). Red/brown sandy clay on very shallow ??? 50mm. Not fully cut ??? coal?? RB pot

111 –Post tile fill

112 - Roof tile etc

113 –Cut

Straight line 6.239. F1

Straight line 6.366 F2

Tile 6.392. F3

F6 – Ring ditch

114 - Fill

115 –Cut

F7 – Pit cut (116) (117) fill

F8 –Wall –LST 300mm (118)

F9 – Iron feature

119 –Fill

120 - ?

121- Cut

F10

122

123

F11.

125 – Fill. Dark brown /black silty /stick clay, charcoal /bone fragments.?? stone.

126 - Cut

124 – Purple/red brown sticky clay. Much stone. 75-150mm. Large pot fragments. Charcoal flecks

Sketches from appendix

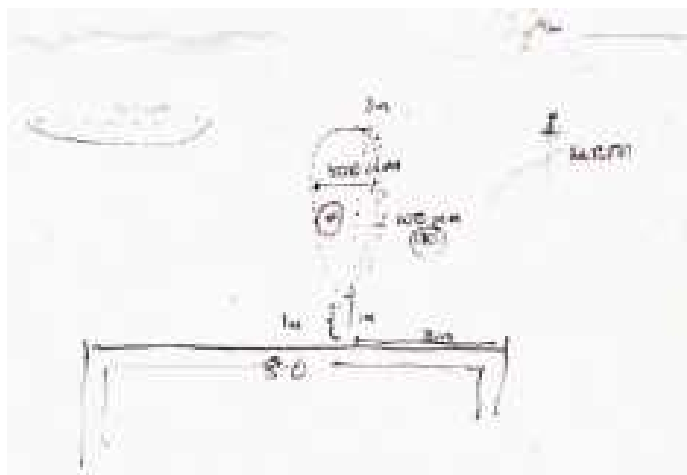


Fig 20: Sketch of oval pit immediately N of houses (see Fig 19)

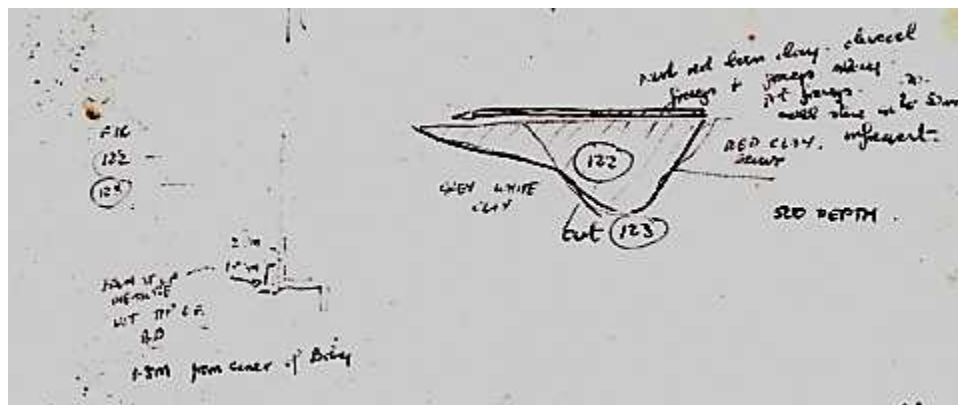


Fig 21: Sketch of Pit 123

Conclusion

The surviving records of the work at Station Road in 1995 clearly indicate a Roman presence on or within a short distance of the site. Significant amounts of pottery sherds, some described as 'large' were recovered from the site, so the conclusion must be drawn that there is a Roman site or occupation close by. Any proposals for development in the area should be carefully considered in the light of this information.

Two trial pits from Congresbury village: Rookery Farm 2018 and Stonewell Farm 2019)

Location



Fig 22: Congresbury village (2021) showing location of test pits

Rookery Farm lies at ST43726312, off Stonewell Lane, some 620m south of Congresbury parish church, in North Somerset.

Stonewell Farm lies at ST43896328, on Stonewell Lane, 550m SSE of Congresbury parish church, in North Somerset.

Geology and landuse

Both properties lie on the Higher Estuarine Alluvium, in this area, overlying Head deposits. Both sites are private dwellings and no longer function as agricultural units.

Rookery Farm 2018 (Test Pit 1)

Notes from Broomhead 1987 (YCCART 2017):

Rookery Farm, which has produced considerable quantities of medieval pottery, almost certainly represents the focus of two further half-yardlands, the holdings in 1567 of John Warde the younger and John Woodall. The single farm which remained on this site in the eighteenth century would seem to represent an amalgam of their combined holdings, possibly recreating an early virgate farmstead.

Rookery Farm [itself] is probably 17th century in date. The steep bank just north of the house actually represents a probable house platform overlooking a holloway that now forms Stonewell Lane. Over 80 sherds of 11th to 14th century pottery were recovered from the bank and stone foundations were visible when a pipeline was laid across the garden above it. [This] steep bank just north of Rookery Farm produced a number of local and non local Romano British pottery sherds.

This test pit was dug in scorching hot weather in August 2018. The site was on the back (south) lawn of Rookery Farm, and 1.0m x 1.0m square.

Only topsoil (20-25cm deep) was encountered down to the 'bedrock' (natural terrace alluvium), and no features were recorded.

Finds were largely tiny and fairly non-descript, not yielding any further information regarding the history of Rookery Farm.



Fig 23: Test pit at Rookery Farm

Finds from Rookery Farm garden

Pottery

it should be pointed out that the average recovered sherds were so tiny that large error bars should be imposed on the identities shown below

Type	No. sherds	Tot. wt.	Av. weight	Date	Notes
Congresbury Ware	1	2.3	2.3	Roman	
Miscellaneous 'medieval' wares	13	30.1	2.3	C13-C16	Minute sherds, mostly Somerset Wares, 1 possible Ham Green sherd
Miscellaneous post-medieval redwares	75	159.8	2.1	C16-C18	Identifiable sherds were East Somerset / Wanstrow
Rooftile	4	40.4	10.1	C19	

Glass

Post-medieval green	2	2.6	1.3	?C18	1 tiny bottle neck sherd
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Other

Clay pipe					Bowl stamped IA, probably John Abbot, Bristol, mid-17th C
Coal	1	1.2	1.2		
Bone/teeth	33	33.1	1		Food waste, 1 burned
Stone	c120				Minute fragments, various geologies

2 grams is about as small as finds will be recovered without access to wet seiving.

Stonewell Farm 2019 (Test Pit 2)

Notes from Broomhead 1987 (YCCCART 2017):

Half-yardlands held by John Horte the Butcher and John Horte of the Farm formed the basis for Silver Street Farm and Stonewell Farm, both of which probably lie on medieval sites. ...the latter lay within an enclosure known as 'Kennals'. Stephano Caynel is recorded in the Lay Subsidy of 1357 and may well have been the medieval occupant of this tenement.

...However, the topography of this area would suggest that individual virgates may have occupied a series of discrete enclosures. That which encompasses Stonewell Farm is clearly shown by the DeWilstar survey, defined to the north by The Causeway and to the south by the hollow way now occupied by Stonewell Lane. At its western end lay Broadstone Green, a name which may perhaps refer to the early origins of these enclosures, being derived from the Old English brad, a wide piece of land and tun, meaning enclosure.

This test pit was dug in warm muggy weather in July 2019 in the 'front' (east) garden.

The stratigraphy was simple, with 40-50cm of mixed topsoil lying on the 'bedrock', the natural terrace alluvium, and no features were recorded.



Fig 24: Completed test pit at Stonewell Farm

Finds from Stonewell farm garden

Pottery

Type	No. sherds	Tot. wt.	Av. weight	Date	Notes
Congresbury ware	1	1.8	1.8	Roman	
Misc glazed red wares	15	34.5	2.3	C18-C20	
Flower pot	10	28.1	2.81	C20	2 base sherds, 1 rim
Miscellaneous white glazed wares	13	22.4	1.72	C19-C20	
Wanstrow wares	15	92.2	5.15	C17-C18	1 chamber-pot rim, 1 other rim, 1 base, 1 sgraffito dec sherd / 2 frags black-glazed
Combed and trailed slipwares	9	24.8	2.76	1680-1780	3 sherds of hollow-vessels, inc 1 rim, 1 base/2 PMDs, 3 others
English salt-glazed stoneware	5	14.2	2.84	C18	2 small sherds Notts stoneware, including handle base / 2 white salt-glazed inc rim, 1 other
TGE	4	5.5	1.37	C18	4 line decorated hollow vessels, inc 1 rim
Transfer printed white ware	3	4.6	1.53	C19/20	1 plate base/ 2 small hollow forms
Fired clay	41	134.3	3.28	?	
Clay pipe	8	10.7	1.34	C18-C19	6 narrow bore stems, 1 slightly bigger, 1 C18 bowl frag

Glass

Window	15	13.9	0.93	C18-C19	
Vessel frags	4	9.6	2.4	C18-C20	1 drinking glass foot

Stone

	2	9.8	4.9		1 frag slate, 1 ?pistol shot
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Metal

Iron	5	28.6	5.72	Undatable	5 nails, all handmade, 2 poss horseshoe nails
Cu alloy	1	1.8	1.8	C19?	Picture hook frag

Bone

	35	97.8	2.8		Some butchery marks, most too small
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Clag

22 frags, 86.0g. Includes mortar frags and coke.

Unlike Rookery Farm, this pit produced a selection of finds of medium to small size, with recognisable fragments of Wanstrow (postmedieval East Somerset) wares, large enough (>5gm) to confidently identify.

The pottery formed a typical garden assemblage of a tenement occupied since at least the mid-16th century, although documentary indications of possible medieval origins were not confirmed by the finds.

Recommendations for further work

The Benny's site would definitely repay modern geophysical survey.

Station Road is built over, but garden test pits in the area might possibly yield some interesting results.

No further action is required in the sites subjected to test pitting.

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Date

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