

YCCCART 2021/Y7

A Second Woodspring Miscellany

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

General Editor: Vince Russett



A sheepwash in use at Clevedon, mid-1960s (photo by Derek Lilly)

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Abstract

Some basic facts about the archaeology and history of Woodspring Priory continue to emerge (hence the necessity for this report). With the greatest of respect to Tomalin & Crook, far less attention has been paid to the history and archaeology of the farm and the hospital that succeeded the Dissolution. The priory buildings (and the infirmary in particular) have undergone many changes since the 16th century, and these need to be reflected in any full story of the site.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks must go Chris Short, and especially Dave Long, who started the whole post cards thing rolling. More thanks to the late Derek Lilly, for his photo of sheep washing, and to Les Candal for selflessly sharing her work on Kewstoke and Woodspring.

Introduction

Yatton, Congresbury, Claverham and Cleeve Archaeological Research Team (YCCART) is a Community Archaeology team from 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.

Site location

Land use and geology

These have been covered comprehensively in earlier reports: a thorough update will be included in YCCCART, forthcoming.

Results

Estates at Woodspring, Collum and Norton: Tithe-free areas

Occasionally, former lands of monastic communities remain tithe-free long after the lands have passed into other hands.

The Kewstoke Tithe map of 1840 regards a number of lands as subject to a 'modus of x s(hillings) payable to the Vicar in lieu of all Tithes' (amounting to much the same thing).

There are two major groups around Woodspring and Collum, to its south-east.

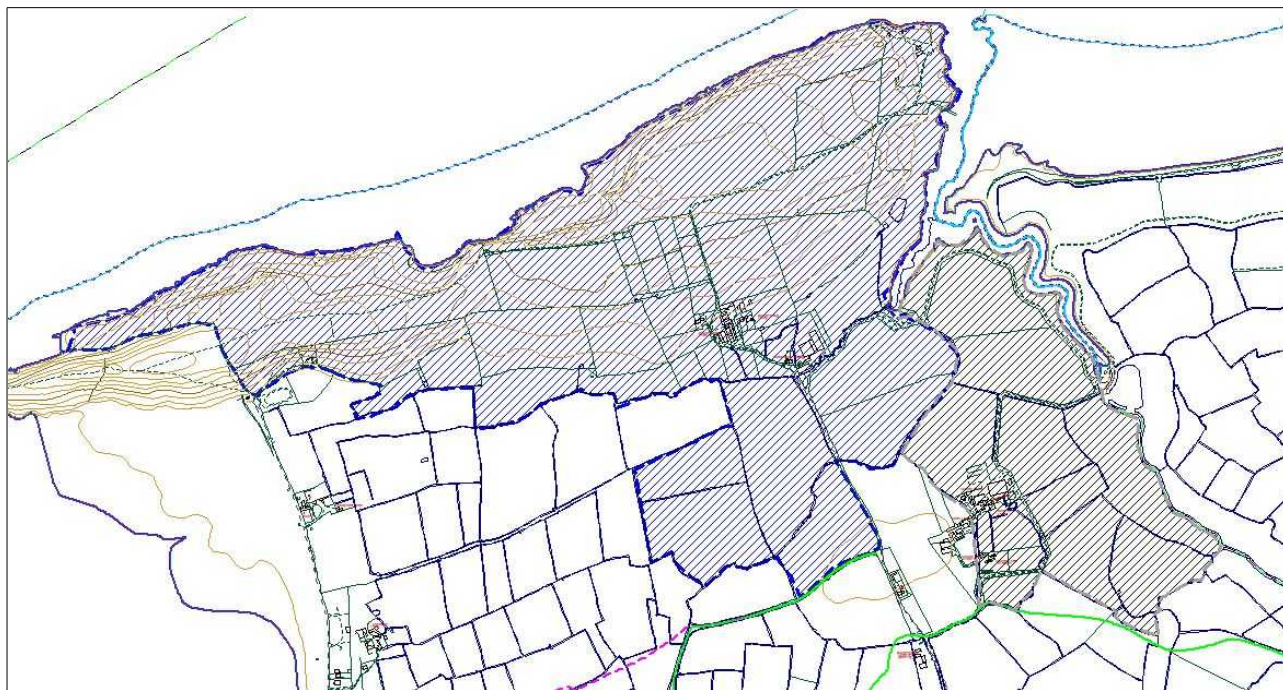


Fig 1: Tithe-free lands at Woodspring and Collum (hatched areas) on 1840 Kewstoke Tithe apportionment

These form a coherent block of land, mostly with 'natural' boundaries (the coast, Sand Rhyne, Banwell river, Northfield Rhyne and so on).

The northern block (hatched in blue) exactly corresponds to the Pigott holding on the first map of 1768, even to the extent of the furthest west field on Woodspring Hill not being tithe-free, and not belonging to Pigott in 1768.

This can be seen in Fig 2 (below), where all Pigott's lands at Collum are marked in red hatching.

A few other, slightly puzzling, tithe-free entries are also listed and figured below.

Traditional explanations for these tithe-free areas are that they were once the land of Woodspring Priory (which seems reasonable).

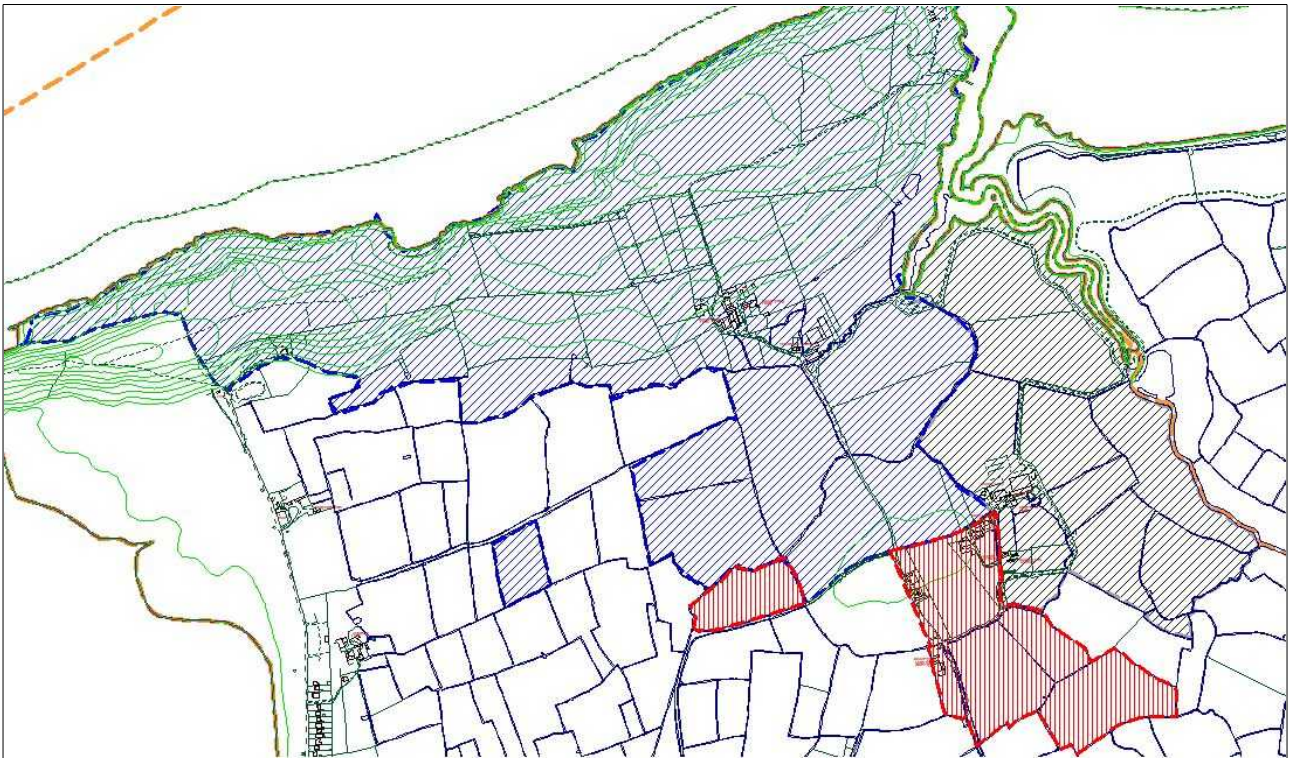


Fig 2: Tithe-free lands at Woodspring and Collum, and Pigott's 1768 land at Collum (red)

This doesn't seem to be a large enough block of land to constitute the whole Domesday manor of Worspring, but it may very well be the *'all his land at Worspring..to the said religious men, to God and the Blessed Mary and the Blessed Martyr Thomas'* which William de Courtenay gave to the new priory in the second decade of the 13th century (Tomalin & Crook 2007: 9).

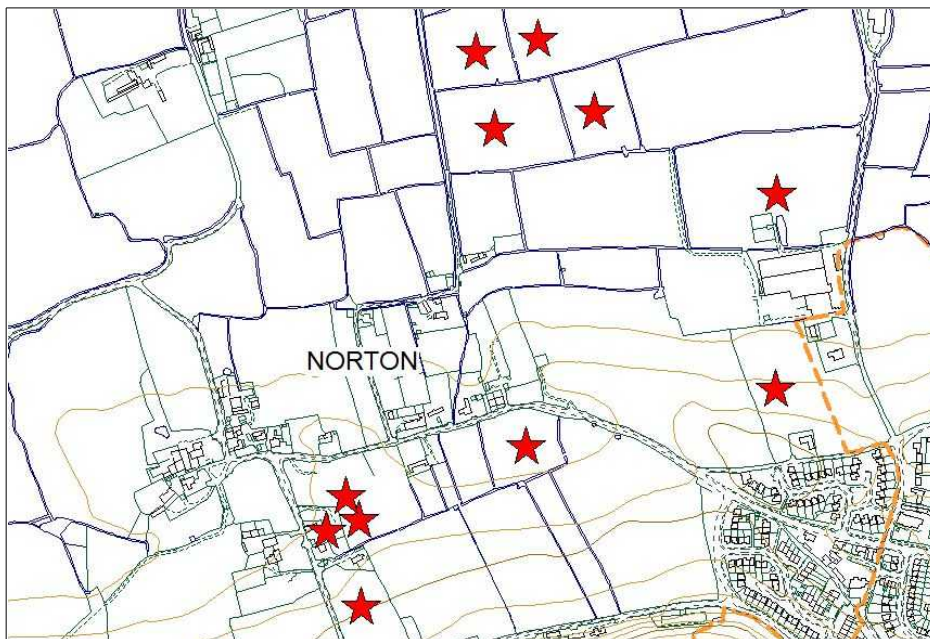


Fig 3: Tithe-free lands at Norton, Kewstoke

Norton is a small hamlet in Kewstoke, centred on ST345638.

It is known that Woodspring possessed some lands here, but if they are represented by the tithe-free fields (starred), they were clearly quite scattered.

Obviously, the scale of this figure is very different to the above.

Further areas of tithe-free land also occur in the curious exclave (detached portion of parish) of Kewstoke in Worle, where the Madam Rhyne reaches the Bristol Road, at ST359628.

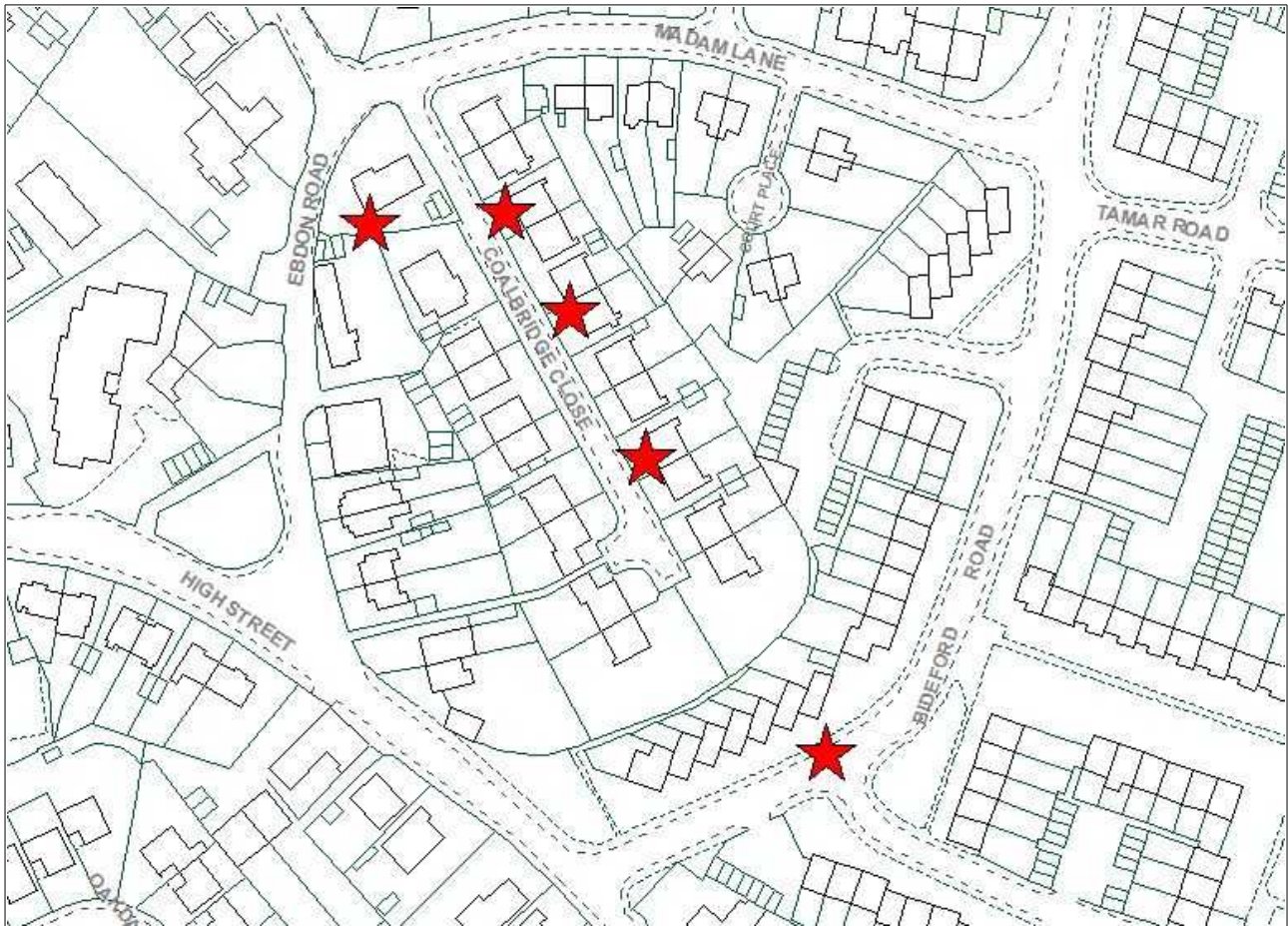


Fig 4: Tithe-free land in Kewstoke exclave, in Worle

If this really is an expression of former ownership by Woodspring, then has some interesting implications. Is this an area where Woodspring was controlling water transport into and from Worle?

I have discussed this elsewhere, but using small boats and punts would probably been possible on the Madam Rhyne / Banwell river from the sea, perhaps transferring from sea going vessels to riverine ones at Woodspring Pill. Rooksbridge (then Rookysmylle) performed the same function for the Pill Row cut (Mark, Somerset), where goods were transhipped for taking up to Glastonbury itself (Russett 1989).

The final group is quite an odd one, and at the moment I can only make a guess at their meaning.

Ostensibly, the fields appear to be the site of late post-medieval enclosure from Milton Hill to construct 'Hill Gardens' with attached houses.

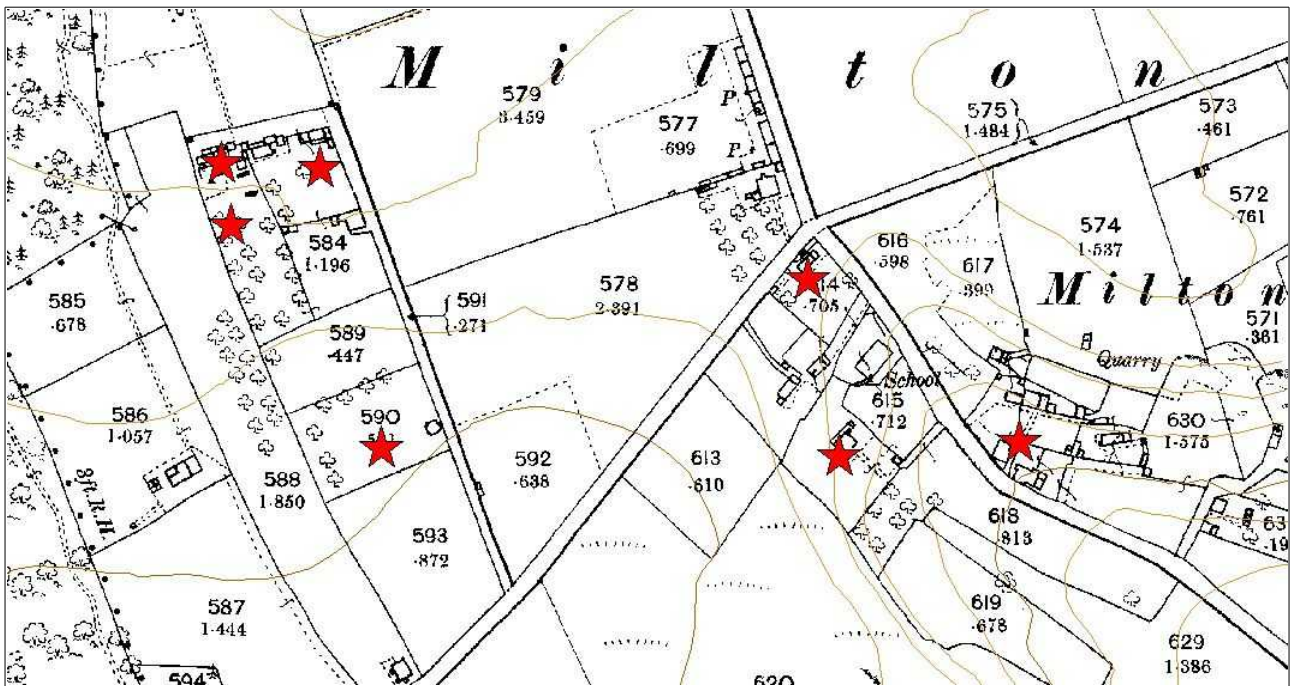


Fig 5: Tithe-free fields on Milton Hill (background map 1885 OS plan) (cross roads at ST33806298)

The properties are all described as 'House and Garden' on the Tithe Apportionment, but how would such acquire tithe-free status?

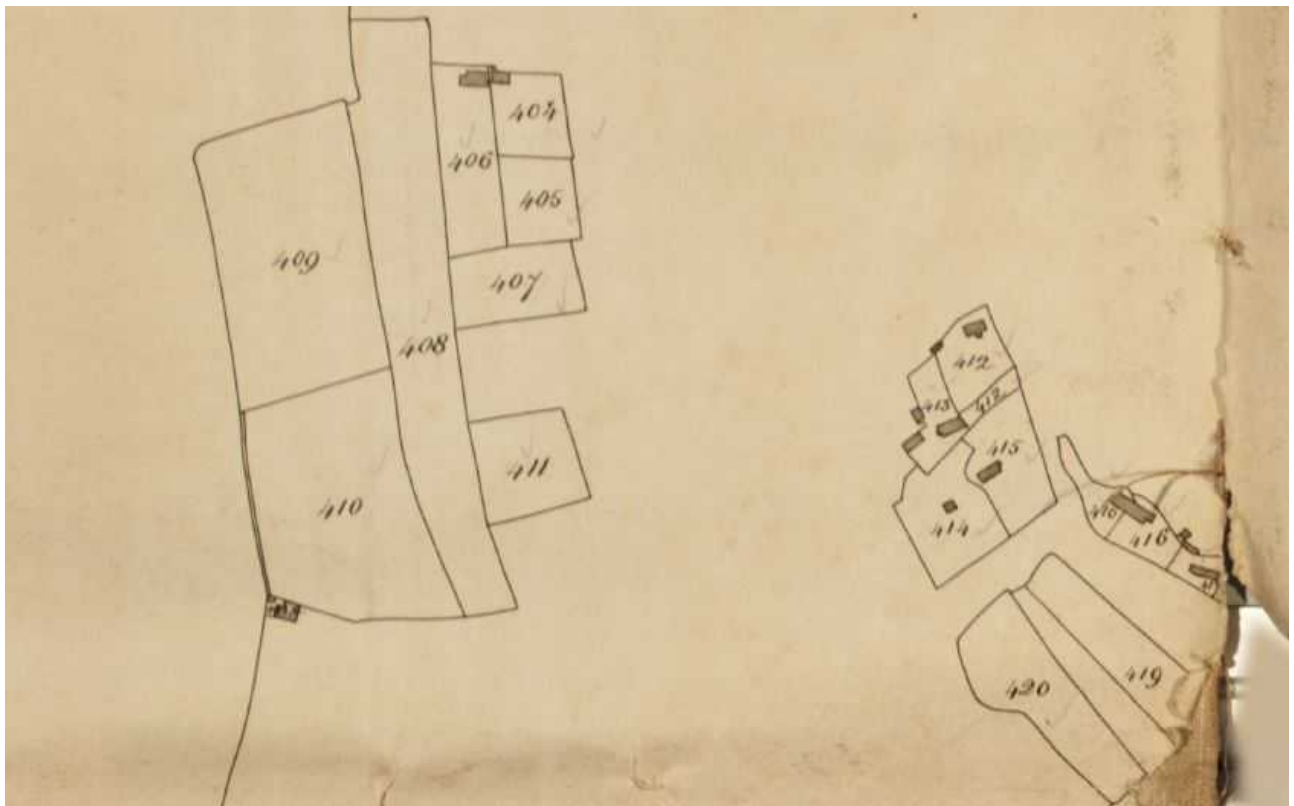


Fig 6: The fields on Milton Hill from 1840 Kewstoke Tithe Map

The tithe-free status again implies ownership by Woodspring before the Reformation. Although such tithe-free status does not *necessarily* imply this, it seems the most likely explanation.

Could this status be associated with late medieval mining on Milton Hill? It has been speculated that the late flowering of the priory was due to better management of the lead mines on Worlebury (eg Corcos 1988) The Carboniferous Limestone on Worlebury is frequently metalliferous (although the geology map shows 'basaltic lava' at the site).

The Sheepwash

Hardly noticeable now, the sheepwash by the bridge over Sand Rhyne, at the entrance to the priory, was an important part of sheep farming at the site, possibly for a century or longer.

As well as meat (generations were raised on mutton - mature sheep meat, which is today ignored in Britain since it can't be just flash fried and dumped on a plate, but needs long cooking: it is absolutely delicious), sheep produced milk (much used for cheese in earlier times) and above all, wool. While currently, English sheep wool is almost worthless, in past times, occasionally encouraged by government, it was an important part of the national economy.

The Burying in Woollen Acts of 1666 and 1680, mandated that bodies (save those of infectious corpses, such as plague victims) should be buried in pure English woollen shrouds. This was an act to protect the English wool industry, which since its high point in the medieval period, had come increasingly under pressure from imported cloths.

An integral part of preparing the sheep for shearing was the initial cleansing of as much dirt and detritus from the fleece as could be, by passing the sheep through a sheepwash.



Fig 7: A sheepwash in action

A stream or small river would be temporarily dammed to increase the depth of water, and the sheep basically pushed in.

There they would be kept for a few minutes, occasionally being pushed completely under the water with a special long-handled instrument (see Fig 7 above). This was also an opportunity, when the shell-shocked sheep clambered out, to examine them closely for injuries or flystrike (don't ask), and to deal with it: this is what the lad with the sheep squatting on its haunches is doing in the above illustration.

Today, portable structures are usually used, and sometimes, chemicals introduced, for anti-parasitic reasons.

The Sand Rhyne at Woodspring was perfectly usable for this purpose, and elements of the sheepwash survive.

While nothing is shown at the site on the 1768 Pigott map or the 1840 Tithe Map, this does not mean the structures were not there. The bridge over the Sand Rhyne looks, by comparison with Inclosure period bridges elsewhere (such as Tickenham, Cheddar and Kenn) to be of the first quarter of the 19th century, and this is possibly when the sheepwash was also constructed (although its structure is butted up against the cheek wall of the bridge, which implies that is probably slightly later).

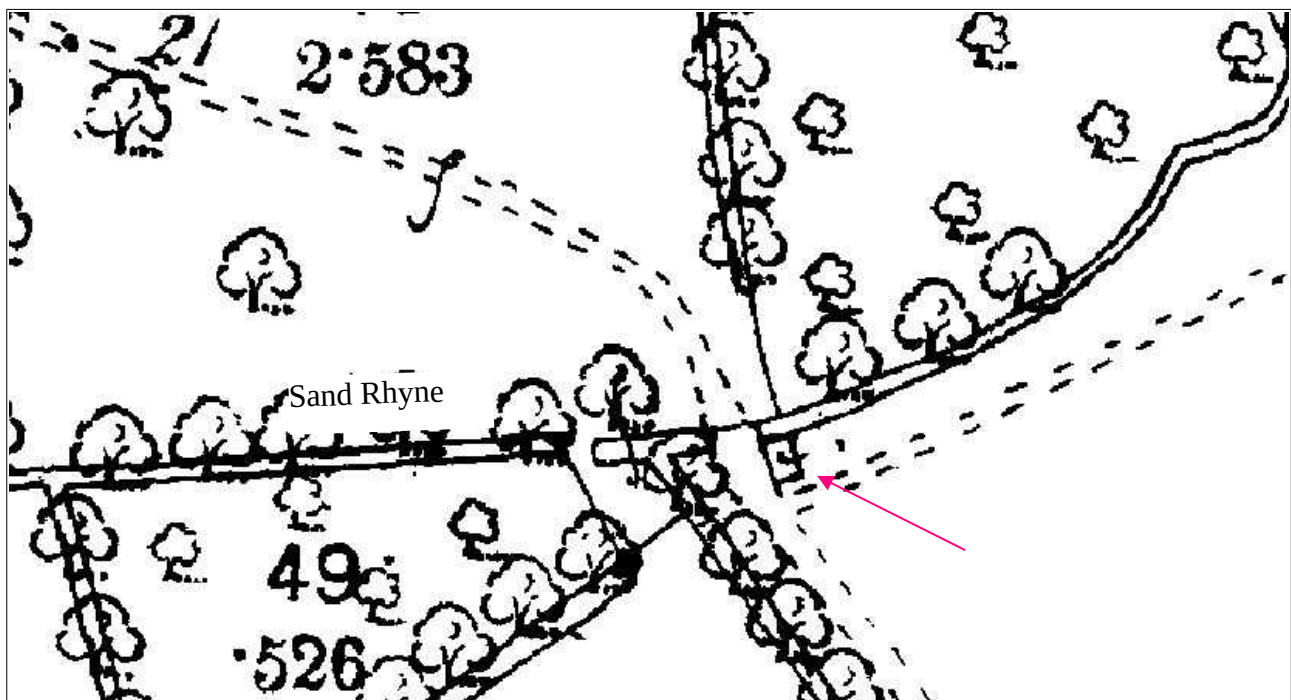


Fig 8: Note the tiny enclosure (arrowed) next to the road (OS plan 1885)

This enclosure (which still exists today as a fenced structure) is now part of the public car park for the priory.

The sheep would be brought to the enclosure in small batches (more than one or two in the water at a time are impossible to handle), and pushed into the water from a platform on the south side of the rhyne (see Fig 9 below).



Fig 9: Structures of the sheepwash

In the above figure, the round-headed arch of the bridge can be seen (R), and adjacent to its wall, the platform from which the sheep would be pushed into the dammed stream.

On the other side of the sheepwash (L) can be seen a (later) socket for a sliding hatch or board to temporarily increase the depth of the water: this could be raised from time to time to flush out the dirty water and start again.

The structures do not survive on the north side of the rhyne, although almost certainly, this would be where the sheep clambered out of the water.

Although no structures survive to illustrate this, they would be kept penned for a few minutes to calm down and then taken either back to the field to dry out, or into an enclosure to await shearing.

The literature on farming structures of this kind is thin on the ground. Most sheepwashes (for obvious reasons) tend to be sited on medium sized streams, and occasionally, feature in field names. Other structures, such as temporary lambing shelters (as found on the Black Mountain in Wales or on Mendip) are almost never mentioned at all in the archaeological literature.



Fig 10: Sheep needing to be washed and sheared!

The above figure shows how dirty fleeces can be.

And a word of warning from personal experience: if you have to rescue a sheep from brambles, do not go back to a warm office without changing and a shower: the lanolin in the fleeces stinks!

Old photographs and postcards of Woodspring Priory

Evidence from post cards is strangely ignored in historical and/or archaeological studies. Although the Francis Frith collections are best known (and published), lesser known publishers, such as Henry Hole in West Somerset in the mid-late 19th century, or Norman Heal, in Cheddar in the mid-20th century, often produced 'real photograph' cards that are now of enormous historical significance.

For example, Hole's photograph (below) of Nether Stowey market cross is the only photograph of it which I know:



Fig 11: Nether Stowey market cross, taken before demolition in the 1860s

Needless to say, historic sites like Woodspring Priory have attracted the attention of postcard makers, especially in the 'golden age' of postcards in the years before WW1.

This is a period of history for which significant documents are difficult to find (or at least, have not yet reached public Record Offices).

The postcards of Woodspring record periods when it was private accommodation, and (usually) a farm, or for a while, a private golf club.

Elements then present have often since been removed, and the work of the Landmark Trust (which undoubtedly has saved the buildings) has also made startling alterations in some cases.

This includes structures which today have completely disappeared, like the 'cartwash'. a rectangular walled pool with a sloping floor, situated immediately south of the barn, and which is only shown as a puzzling 3 straight lines on OS plans.

It was shown on the 1885 and 1903 OS plans, but had gone by the time of the 1931 edition. It is sometimes difficult to remember that Woodspring Priory was a working farm for considerably longer than it was a priory (about 420 years against about 320 years, so we should not be surprised by some of the archaeology relating directly to the farm, nor to dismiss this significant archaeology).

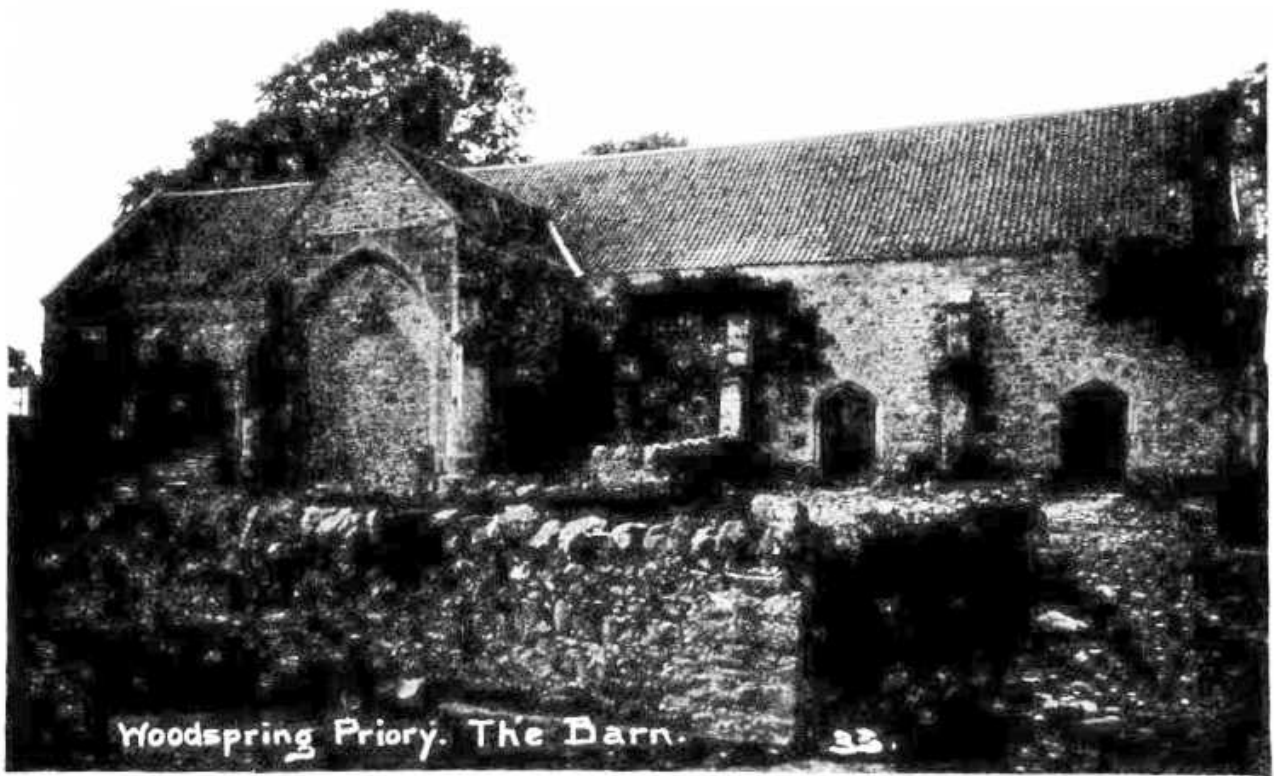


Fig 12: The cartwash (foreground). Note that at this date (c WW1) the main entrance to the barn was walled up

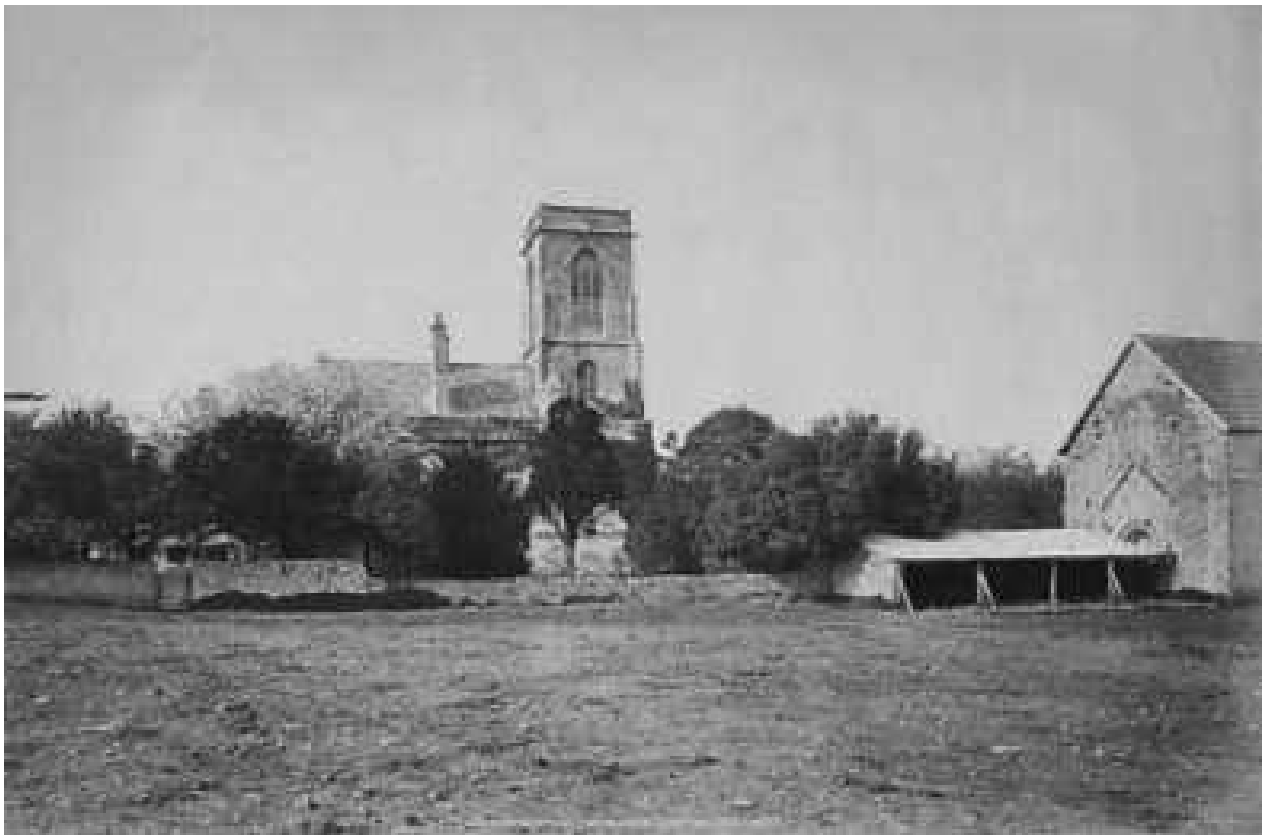


Fig 13: The paddock south of the cloister, cWW1

Some postcards and photographs can illustrate issues connected with surveys at the Priory. Fig 13 (above) clearly shows the paddock was used for keeping pigs at the time (no other animal rotovates and leaves the soil in such condition) and this probably explains the 'blurriness' of the resistivity results in the paddock.

Note also the shelter building against the west end of the infirmary. This is very obviously not reusing one of the earlier buildings, but it does have a solid west wall (see below).



Fig 14: At a slightly later date, the earlier shelter building has been removed, leaving a stub of wall.

On oblique air photographs of 1949, the remains of a concrete floor can be seen in this position.

The construction (and subsequent demolition) of these structures leaves its mark in the surveys, just as the much older priory structures do.

Some other aspects and views of Woodspring are shown in guide books.

This 1929 view (Fig 15 below) (from Winbolt & Ward 1929) shows the rear of both the barn (which has architectural features never normally remarked on) and the rear outshot on the farmhouse removed by Landmark during renovations in the 1970s and 1980s.

(Incidentally, the guide book's description of the priory is bizarre, calling the Infirmary 'The Chapter House', and saying it 'has a stone seat all round', which as far as I can make out is simply wrong).



Fig 15: View of Woodspring from the hill, 1929



Fig 16: The farmhouse range about the time of WW1

Fig 16 shows the farmhouse, with its Victorian verandah. Significant alterations were made during the conversion of the farmhouse to a holiday let. To be honest, I personally regret the loss of the verandah (but the decision wasn't mine to make).

Finally, old photographs and post cards can say a lot about the developments of even the priory structures.



Fig 17: The infirmary (1948)

We know from 19th century accounts that a large hole, topped by a massive wooden lintel, had been made in the east wall for the infirmary to be used as a wagon shed. I had always assumed that the breach had been rebuilt by Landmark, as part of the renovations in the 1970s.

Then Chris Short came across this photo, which is clearly labelled 'Miss Sully/1948'.

The infill includes what appears to be a genuine medieval stone doorway (there is no figure standing inside the doorway: it's just a pattern of plaster on the interior wall). Further work by Landmark replaced this and the lintel in stone, and the current whereabouts of the door way is unknown. The rectangular opening in the south wall is a 'pitching eye' designed to make loading goods into and out of carts easier. Its outline can

still be traced in the wall.

Earlier drawings by George Bennett (Fig 18 below) show the pitching eye was not present in 1807, but there was a late medieval doorway in its place:

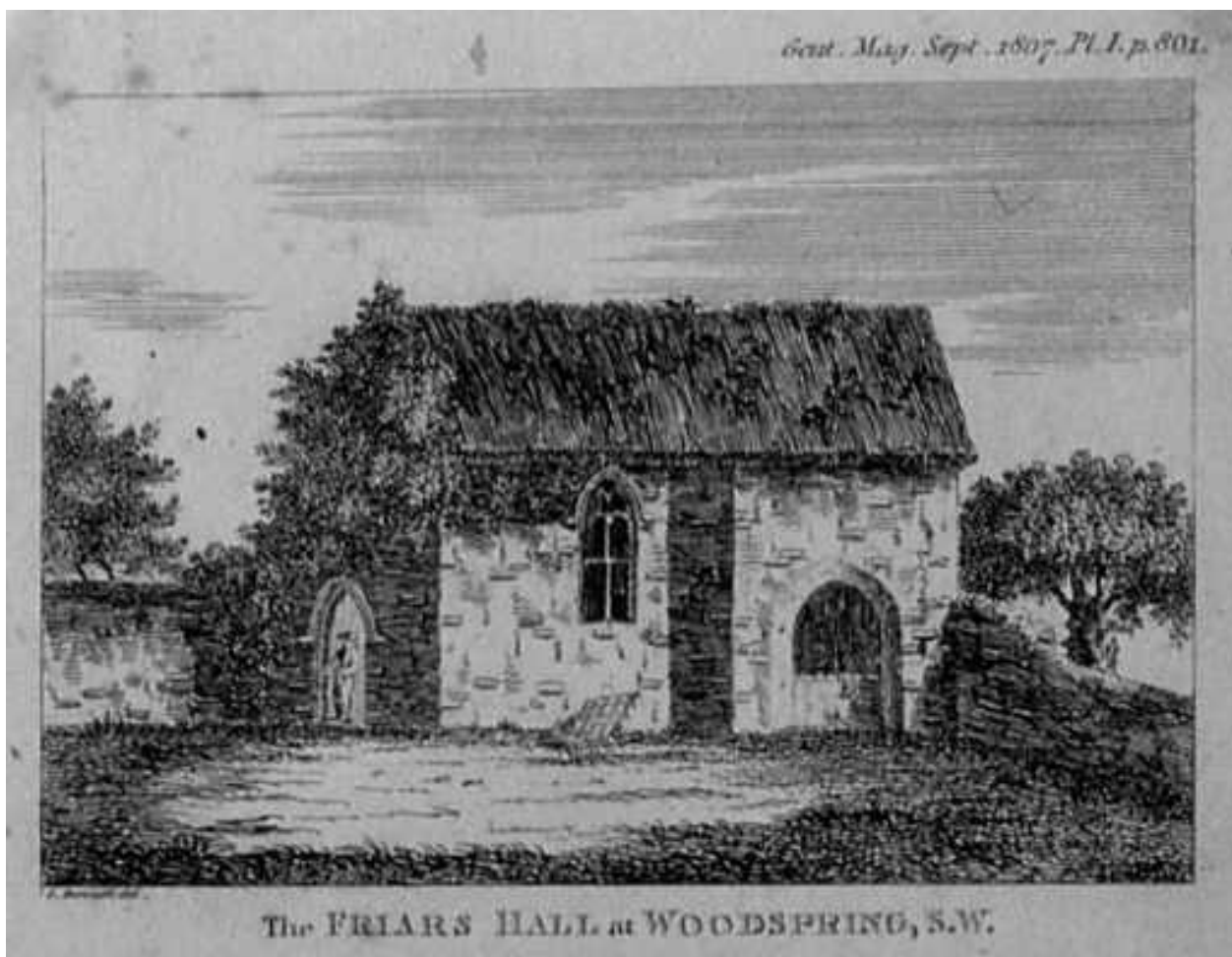


Fig 18: The infirmary in 1807

Note that the line of the field wall has also moved: it now terminates under the left hand window.

The former presence of this door is confirmed by a drawing of 1818 in the Somerset Archaeological Society's collections (Fig 19) below.

Although this is drawn with typical Georgian misunderstanding of Gothic architecture, it does confirm the main features of the infirmary (oddly, it omits the scar of the spiral stair in the centre of the south wall).

Unfortunately, the artist's name does not appear to be known, but this does help to show the relevance of old drawing, photographs and postcards to the study of Woodspring's buildings.



Fig 19: The infirmary and tower in 1818

A study to follow the post-Dissolution histories of the buildings is long overdue.

The 1768 maps of Woodspring Priory

The Pigott family, like most landed families of the time, commissioned maps of their properties at Weston, Woodspring, Brockley and elsewhere.

One map of Woodspring is in a bound book of maps of that date (which includes, incidentally, the earliest known maps of Weston-super-Mare) in private hands in North Somerset.

A second, rather poor copy of another, hangs on the wall in the museum at Woodspring Priory. This one (but not the first) contains a sketch of the buildings at the priory.



Fig 20: 1768 map of Woodspring (in private hands)

This map is of extraordinary interest. It records the Pigott ownership at the time (which is in almost perfect agreement with the 'lands subject to a modus in lieu of all tithes' discussed above).

It also shows a distinct interest in the maritime environment, with the depiction of several vessels to the north of Sand Hill, and even two rowed pilot boats, presumably from the legendary group at Pill, near Bristol.

This should be hardly surprising, given that 'the creek of Worspring' was shown as part of the Port of Bristow in 1689 (Smith 1989: 93), and being some seven miles from the Revenue officer stationed at Uphill, was almost certainly used for smuggling goods in the 18th and 19th century. Four cases were recorded between 1783 and 1823: no doubt with the remoteness of Woodspring Pill, many more went undetected (Smith 1989: 93-96).

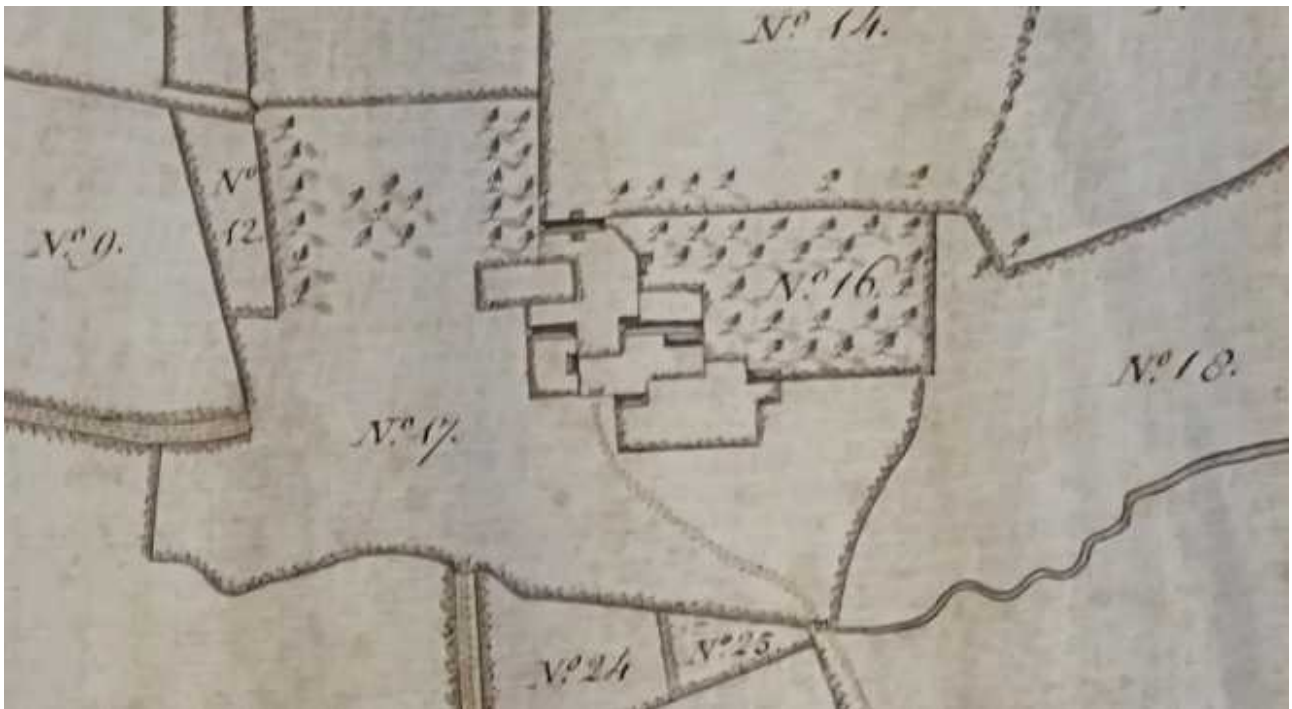


Fig 21: Woodspring Priory plan from above map

The second map is a copy of an unknown original that hangs on the wall of the museum at Woodspring (see below: apologies in advance for the poor quality of these images).

While these maps are in broad agreement, there are some big differences.

The map displayed at Woodspring has a sketch plan of the buildings at that time, including the 'missing' gatehouse. It shows less interest in the maritime environment - only two vessels are (poorly) illustrated: it has a cartouche on its lower right hand side and a scale bar. The labels 'Sand Hill' and 'Sand Bay' are in lower case.

Several other small differences imply that the maps are probably not by the same hand: is the 'museum' map a copy of the 'private' map?

While the buildings are not individually labelled on the 'museum' map (the text under the buildings is 'The Chappel of St Mary and St Thomas the Martyr founded and endowed by Wm Courtenay AD 1212'), they are recognisable (R to L) as the infirmary, the priory church, the farmhouse, and a building now disappeared (although its foundations have been identified in the paddock south of the cloister - YCCART, forthcoming). This is usually taken to be a gatehouse or guesthouse, but details on the map are not able to distinguish these.



Fig 22: 'Museum' map at Woodspring Priory



Fig 23: The depiction of the buildings on the 'museum' map

It has been suggested that features from this building were used to make the (slightly clumsy) current gateway into the property. This not possible, since the 'gatehouse' was recorded on the Tithe Map of 1840 (below).

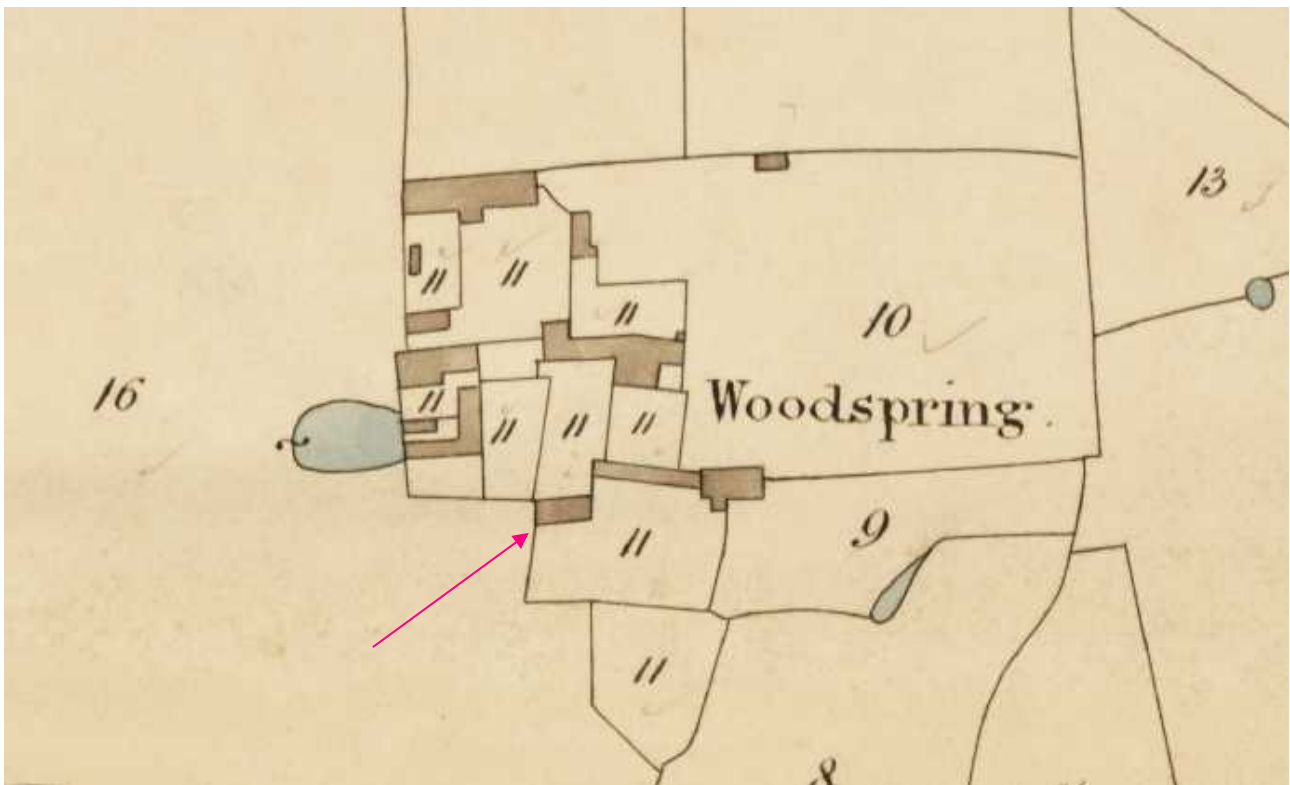


Fig 24: Woodspring Priory from the Kewstoke Tithe Map (1840) ('gatehouse' arrowed)



Fig 25: Woodspring gatehouse drawn by J Buckler in 1829

Buckler's drawing of 1829, however, shows the current gatehouse already in place.

The existence of two such maps, with some fairly significant differences, and the same

date, is a little odd.

Was one (the 'private' map in the book) kept at Brockley (Pigott's main residence) and perhaps a copy made for display at Woodspring?

Unfortunately, the detail on the drawings of the buildings on the 'museum' map is not particularly helpful in identifying features beyond the simple existence of the buildings in 1768.

Further work on these and other buildings will follow.

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YCCCART forthcoming (2021)	<i>Further geophysical surveys at Woodspring Priory</i>

Authors

Vince Russett

Date

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