

YCCCART 2018/Y6

A Woodspring Priory miscellany

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RESEARCH TEAM (YCCCART)**

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A photograph of Woodspring Priory from the entrance, 1858

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Abstract

A number of minor discoveries and finds have been made at Woodspring Priory in the 21st century and since the geophysical studies were carried out in 2012. These merit publication, and so are included here.

Acknowledgements

These studies would not have been carried out without the willing permission of the landowner, the Landmark Trust.

Thanks to Les Candal for giving access to her research on Kewstoke and Woodspring Priory.

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

It should be noted that these reports are less formal than some, since they were originally written for the benefit of my colleagues at North Somerset at the time.

Introduction

Yatton, Congresbury, Claverham and Cleve 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.

Site location



Fig 1: Site location Woodspring Priory

Woodspring Priory is a former Victorine (Augustinian) priory beside the Severn Estuary about 3 miles (5 km) north-east of Weston-super-Mare, North Somerset.

Land use and geology

The site lies on the Blue Lias Formation – at this site, it consists of interbedded Mudstone and Limestone.

Much of the site is open to the public, and is used for grazing. Part of the site, including the farmhouse and its adjacent gardens is let by the Landmark Trust to private individuals and is only open by special arrangement.

Historical & archaeological context

For this information, see earlier reports at this site.

The report was written in Libre Office 5 Writer.

Photographs were taken by members of YCCCART, and remain the copyright of YCCCART.

A medieval graffito from Woodspring Priory

Woodspring (or more correctly, Worspring) Priory was a community of Victorine canons, established at the site above around 1214, when the manor of Locking was given to the canons.

Locally, the priory owned a fair amount of land in Worle, Locking, Kewstoke, Weston-super-Mare, Sandford Marsh and various other locations, and was probably instrumental in carrying out major drainage schemes in the moors around Weston, such as the construction of the Uphill Great Rhyne.

Unfortunately, almost all its medieval documents have been lost, so archaeological study is the only way to recover its history

While carrying out a watching brief at Woodspring Priory on 19th and 20th March 2002, the opportunity was taken to record and begin monitoring of badger activity in the grounds of the priory. This activity had begun to increase and was raising some cause for concern because of the proximity of the badgers to undisturbed archaeology on this Scheduled Monument.

After the Dissolution in 1534, some of the buildings which had been renewed only a few decades before (such as the chancel of the church) were demolished almost immediately.

Poorly recorded excavations in the late 19th century left a large waste tip around the chancel site, and it is this tip into which the badgers had been digging.

Among the artefacts recovered were several slate roof tiles (the roofing material of the late 15th / early 16th century chancel), fragments of two ceramic ridge tiles (one in a Bristol Redcliffe fabric, traditionally late 15th century, and one in a Malvernian fabric, traditionally of the same date).

One of the slates when cleaned, showed that before its use on the roof around 1500, a graffito had been scratched into the slate. It is clear that this happened before its use as a roof tile, because the mortar used to bond the tiles together runs over the drawing itself. The drawing is too fine to be a design made for keying the mortar, being less than 0.5 mm deep, and very fine line width.

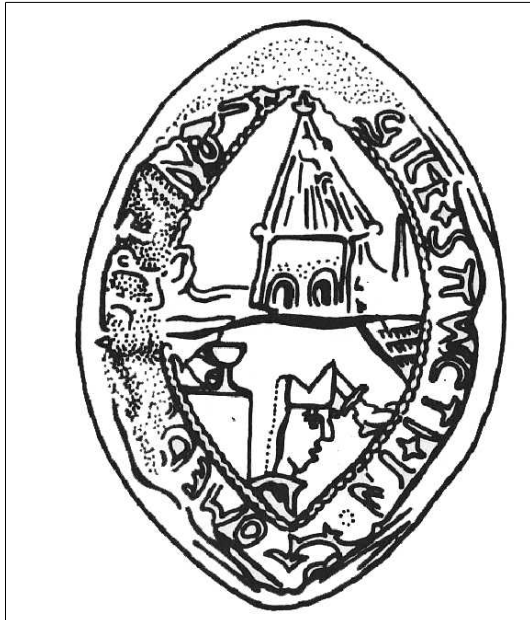
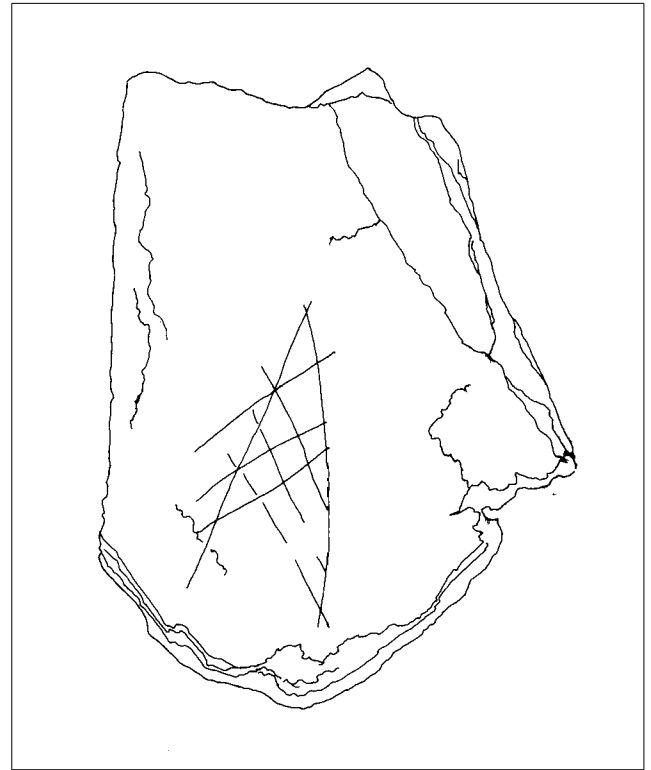
The graffito (Fig 2) is made by a fine, hard-tipped metal object, possibly a knife or scribing compass point. It shows a pair of converging lines, one slightly convex, the other straight, onto which has been cut a very rough cross-hatch pattern. As this appears to have been scratched onto a tile immediately before use on a roof, it seems possible that this is a masons or builders sketch, and could possibly be a rough depiction of a church spire or similar structure.

Such graffitos on slate tiles are more usually found on the sites of early schools, so this is another possible explanation for the drawing.



Fig 2: The slate tile with graffito

Fig 3: The graffito



The slate fragment was about 13cm across.

One of the interests of this find is that the seal of the Priory, depicting a church, shows a tower with a spire (Fig 4). Was this a reflection of the aspiration to build such a tower?

In view of the graffito, might it actually depict a feature of the archaeology and structure of Woodspring Priory at some point in the medieval period?

Fig 4: The seal of Woodspring Priory

In view of much of the seal depicting historic events (the martyrdom of Thomas Becket at the lowest part; the historic cup that contained his blood, probably representing the relic found in Kewstoke church in the 19th century) might this feature also depict something real?

The graffito was returned to Woodspring Priory, but now, sadly, seems to have disappeared.

Some 18th century finds from Woodspring Priory

Outside of the formal precinct of Woodspring Priory, and in the north-west corner of the approach field to the priory, is what appears to be a square moat, with low earthworks in its centre presumably representing buildings.

Visiting Woodspring Priory on Saturday 12th November 2011, it was noted that in the north-west corner of this structure (ST3448166149), badger activity had uncovered a group of ceramics and glass of 18th century date.

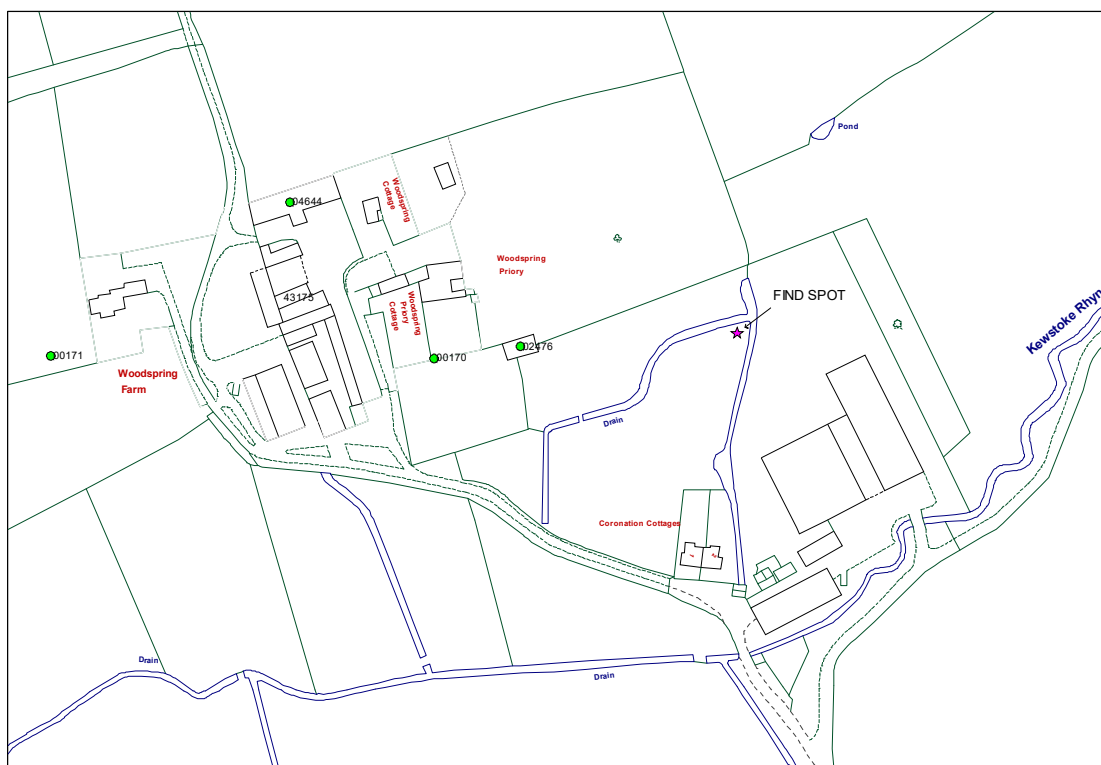


Fig 1: the find spot

It is not clear whether this represents the remains of contemporary settlement at the site, or whether it represents the remains of a dump of material from the priory, which at the time was a hospital for injured soldiers (Knight 1902).

The finds all fit comfortably within an 18th century date range: above they are (top row, left to right) a sherd of plain redware rooftile, a sherd of the neck of a Staffordshire yellow slipware jug, and the neck and shoulder of a shaft and globe glass bottle. (centre, left to right) A sherd of an unusual green glass vessel with a shoulder; a lump of wall plaster, a sherd of the handle of a yellow slipware vessel, and the centre of a decorated yellow slipware charger. Below are two fragments of roofing slate.



Fig 2: The finds

The charger fragment (Fig 3 below) is from a high-status richly decorated vessel, with two colour trailed slip on the pale slip background. Parallels are quite hard to find, but the central motif appears to be a stylised flower made up from heart-shapes, and the darker trails may well be the end of some initials: quite possible a betrothal gift in origin.

Now the finds have been recorded and published, they will be returned to the Priory.

References

Knight, F.A. 1902

The sea-board of Mendip. J.M. Dent, London



Fig 3: Enlarged view of charger fragment



Fig 4: Late 17th / early 18th century neck of 'shaft and globe' bottle

Some further finds from Woodspring Priory

From the same badger disturbances at ST3448166149 as previously reported (above) further finds were made in May 2012. These were recovered for the purpose of recording, but will shortly be returned to Woodspring Priory, with a copy of the two reports.



Fig 1: The object group from Woodspring Priory

The suite of objects consisted of

- Two fragments of roofing slates, both with worked edges. One has subsequently had three conical holes drilled in it, two still complete and a third only partly remaining in the edge
- Five ceramic fragments: One edge sherd of a Redcliffe ware rooftile (prob 13th/14th century), with mortar attached; One edge of a press-moulded yellow ware plate (18th century), probably made in Bristol; one large sherd of an internally glazed Devon gravel tempered ware jug ('pilchard pot'), late 17th century; I fragment of tin-glazed earthenware (late 18th century); one fragment hard-paste plain porcelain (c1800)
- Four fragments of post-medieval (prob 18th century) glass bottles, one a neck-base and three small body sherds

This group does not seem as homogeneous as the last reported, and supports the theory suggested elsewhere that material has been tipped into the edge of the ditch from time to time.



Fig 2: Objects of slate



Fig 3: Object 1 close-up



Fig 4: Sherd of Redcliffe ware rooftile

Update 2018:

1991 air photographs quite clearly show a line of tipped grey clay alongside the stream, including the finds area marked above. The same photograph shows areas of intense soil disturbance to the north of the stream as well. Unfortunately, there seems to be no surviving evidence for activities on the site at the time, so these finds may well have come from elsewhere on the Priory.

Badger activity at the site also seems to have stopped, or at least, lessened dramatically.

Woodspring Priory, Woodspring Pill and Sand Rhyne

Tomalin and Crook (2007) make a fairly convincing case that the presence of a sheltered harbour at Woodspring Pill was if not the *raison d'être* of the Priory, at least a source of income to it from the victualling of ships, initially for English military being shipped to south Wales to combat the advancing forces of Llewellyn ap Gryffydd, who was becoming a threat to the English-occupied south of Wales.

Certainly, the existence of the Pill would have made the importation of the yellow Triassic Clevedon stone (of which the earlier buildings were constructed) by water possible.

This may be born out by an undated charter of Hugo de Newton, recording his gift of Worspring to the priory:

'...the right to use freely and liberally the roads through the land of the said Hugo towards Wampullessen, and elsewhere and anywhere beyond the lands and meadows of the same Hugo, foot soldiers and horse soldiers, with his wagons, carts and animals, in summer, autumn and winter, and all times when desired and absolutely necessary...' (CPRolls 18 Edw (1325)) (Wright nd, post-2007)

It is usually assumed that the name *Wampullessen* lies at the mouth of the Banwell River, although obviously it cannot be the origin of the later name Worspringpill.

The creek at the mouth of the Banwell is still used by a few small boats, and was for a time in the 20th century used by an MoD installation with a 1950s pier, demolished in 2017.

The naive drawings of boats on the 1768 map of the Pigott lands at Woodspring indicate this interest in the sea continued, and there is a small wall painting of a boat in sail in one of the upstairs rooms in the farmhouse.

Access to the sea was guaranteed in the above quote, but there may have been closer docking facilities at one point. The current outlet of Sand Rhyne is at Huckers Bow, where a ?19th century structure acts as a sluice. A 1971 air photograph shows a southern bank against Sand Rhyne close to the current entrance to Woodspring Priory (Fig 1), while lidar data shows that at some point, Kewstoke Rhyne did not debouche under the sea wall (as today), but swung back inland to join the Sand Rhyne at ST34636613. These two observable notions raise the possibility that before Huckers Bow ('bow' in topographical terms usually means 'a humpbacked small bridge', although it may have had some form of water control such as a sluice or clyce under it) was constructed, there may have been sufficient water in the Sand Rhyne for boats to approach even closer to the Priory site, perhaps as far as the current car park at ST34496601.

At this point (Figs 3 and 4), there appear to be stone structures in the base of the Sand Rhyne, although it should be borne in mind that the Blue Lias has a capacity to create layers that look like structures, so this must remain only a suggestion until further work can be done.



Fig 1: 1971 air photograph (contrast enhanced) showing former river banks near Woodspring Priory

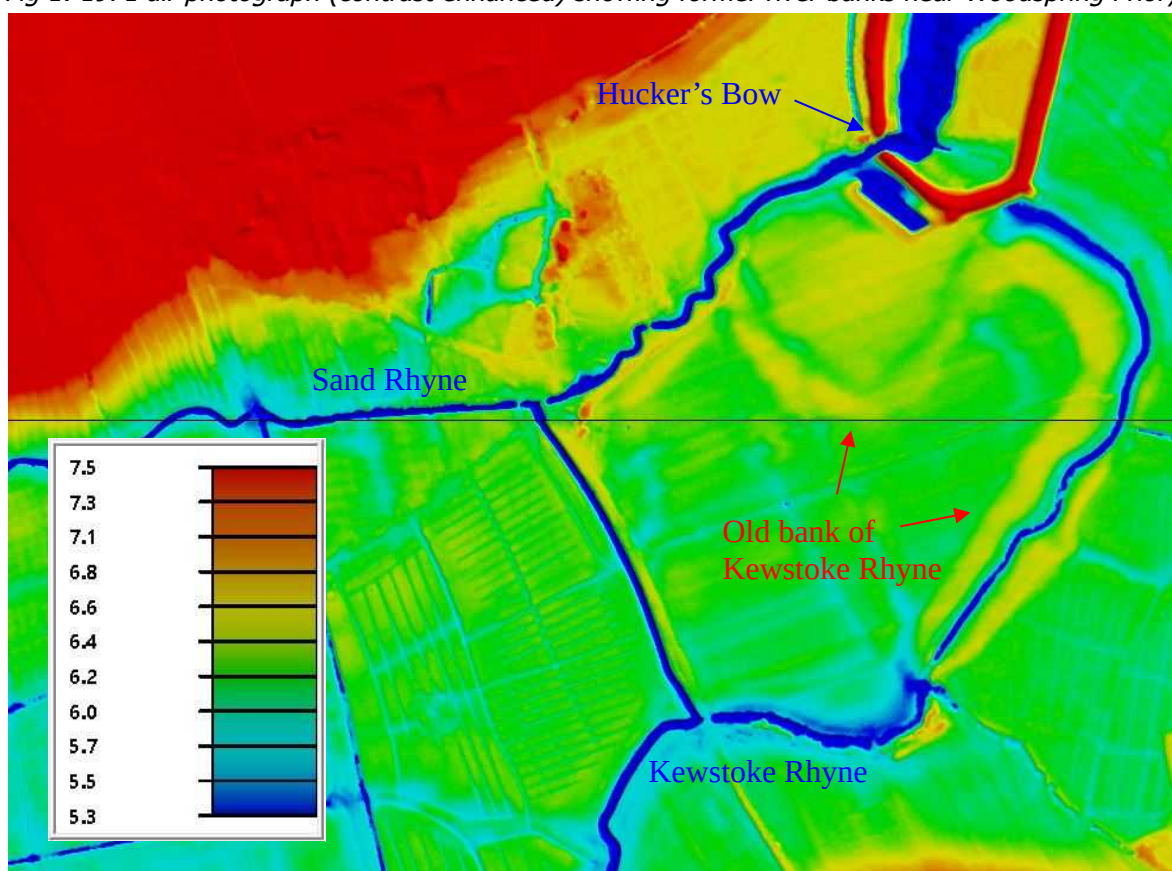


Fig 2: Lidar trace of river and sea banks SE of Woodspring Priory



Fig 3: Stone scatter in bed of Sand Rhyne from bridge at entrance to Woodspring Priory, looking east

These structures, however, could be the remains of docking facilities, such as a small hythe, at the gates of the Priory precinct.

This the only section of Sand Rhyne from the Priory to the sea that has such a stone scatter in the bottom of it.

Such facilities could have drastically reduced the distance materials had to be moved to and from water transport for the Priory.

Fig 4: (below) The apparent walling and slabs in the north bank of the Sand Rhyne at Woodspring, visible only at winter penning levels



Indeed, the course of the Sand Rhyne close to the Priory has clearly been engineered at some point (Fig 5).

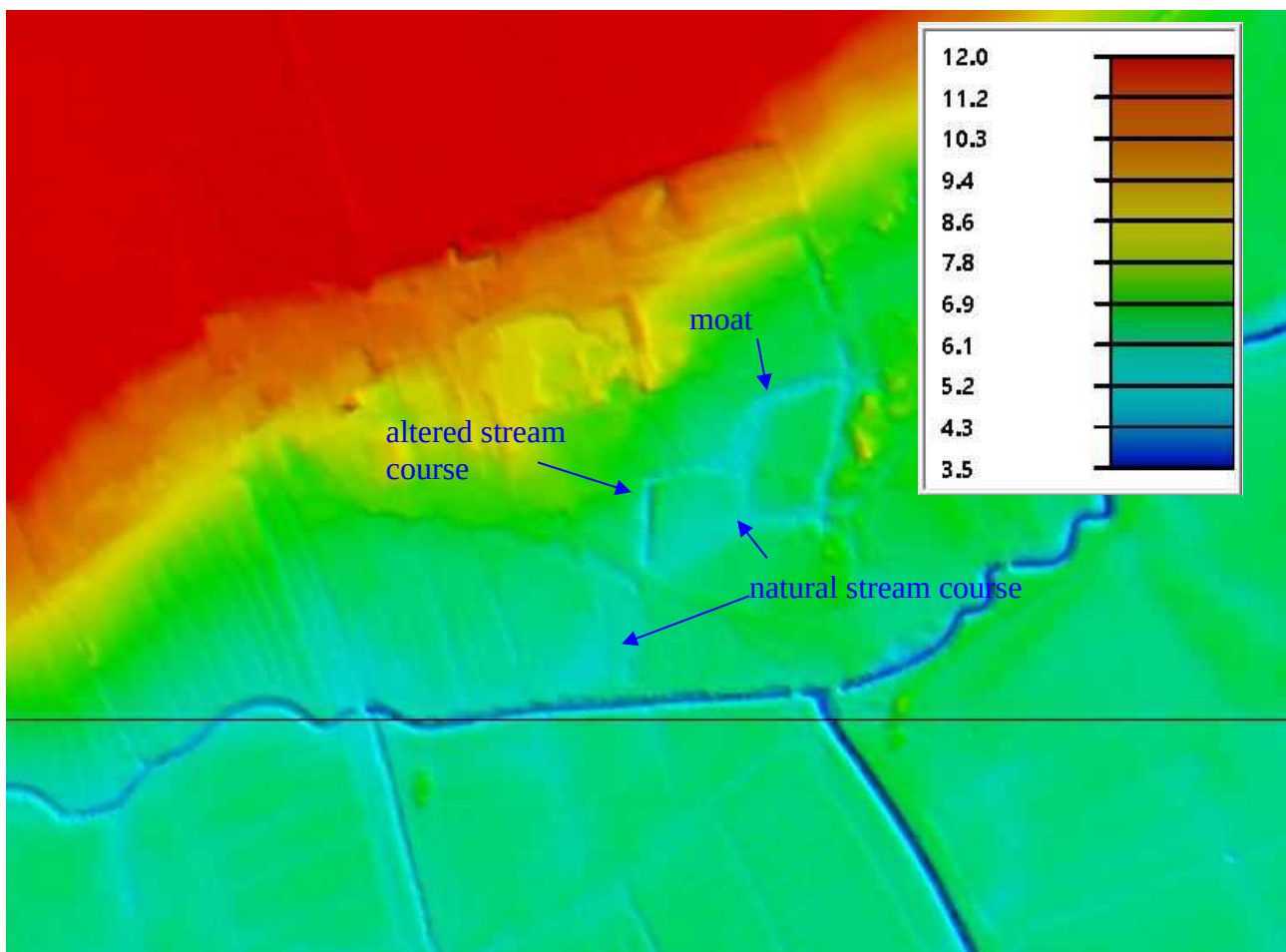


Fig 5: Lidar image of course of Sand Rhyne near Woodspring Priory

The two cyan structures inside the priory precinct (the moat and the artificial stream course) are clearly alterations of a natural stream running out of the precinct in a south-westerly direction, and are clearly as engineered as the ponds in the orchard at the Priory: the natural course still runs today in very wet weather (*pers comm Coun. R Cleland*). This course is also clear in the digital terrain survey of the SW corner of the moat (YCCCART 2014/Y15 Fig 5; this site).

The rest of the course of the Sand Rhyne, from the sand dunes in the west to the point where the water issuing from the Priory meets it, has a broad shallow, almost certainly natural channel on either side of it, but beyond that as far as Huckers Bow, it does not. The section of the rhyne immediately south of the Priory is also suspiciously straight, as far as the current entrance to the Priory (Fig 5). The work was certainly in place at the time of the 1768 map of Woodspring.

This leaves two possibilities:

- 1 That the original course of Sand Rhyne ran into the precinct and then out again, by

the ground now built over for Jubilee Cottages (and there is a hint of this continuation on the lidar data). This would, however imply that the water course within the precinct ran in the opposite direction to which it now does.

2. The medieval engineering by means of the straight section below the Priory reversed the flow of the Sand Rhyne, from an early east-west course, debouching into Sand Bay, now blocked, to a later west-east course draining into Woodspring Pill, which again would enhance the amount of water flowing into the Pill. This is hinted at by the direction of flow of the water from the Priory immediately south of the modern walls.

The area behind Sand Point Farm on the present coast line (the farm is at ST33156565) can be shown from the lidar data to be about 20cm lower than immediately south of the Priory, so Sand Rhyne's natural course would probably be in that direction: engineering work at the Priory would be fairly straightforward to lower the exit of the Rhyne, and change its direction of flow. I have suggested this elsewhere as the origin of the Little River in Yatton, but the case is perhaps stronger still at Woodspring.

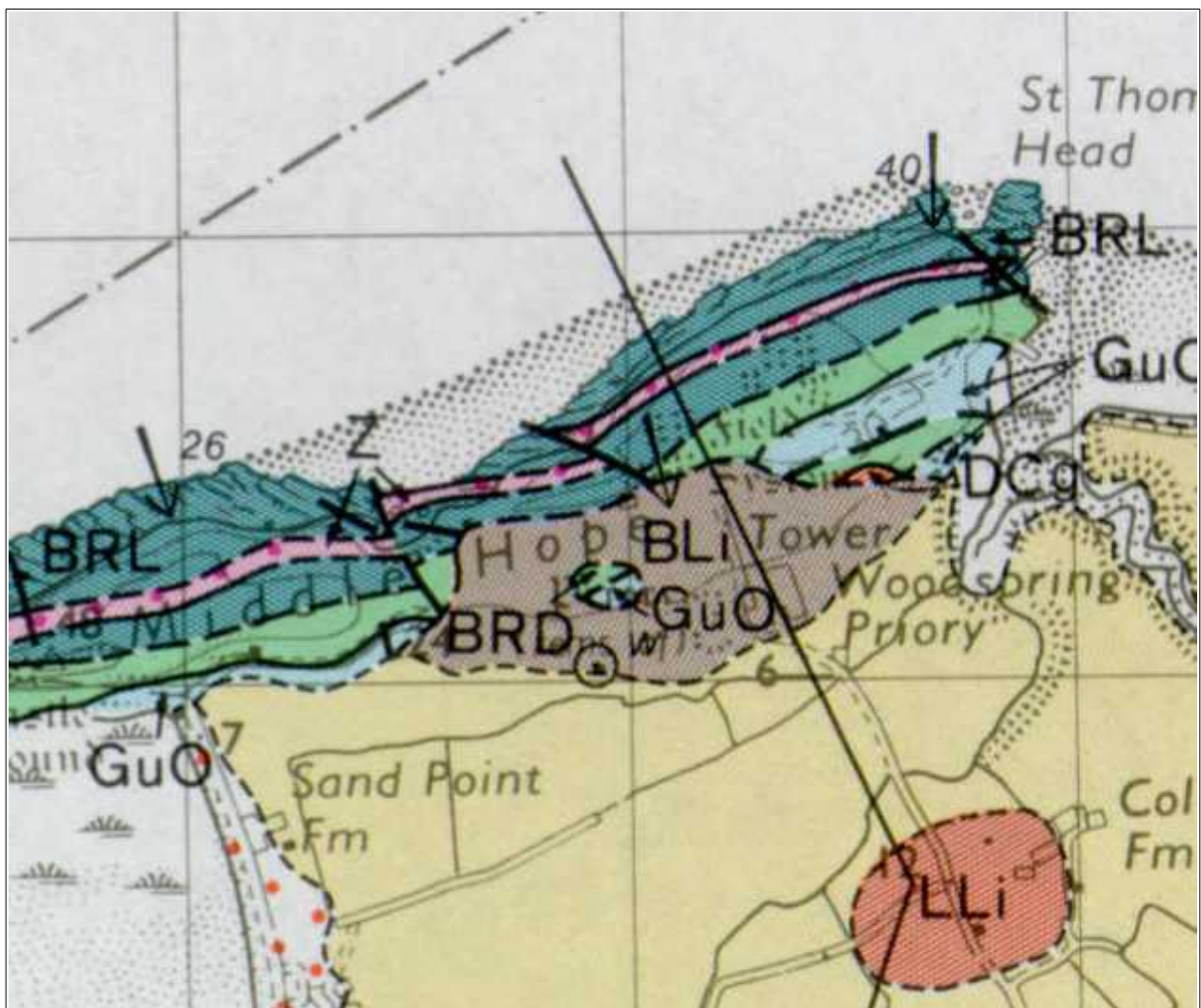


Fig 6: Geological map showing Blue Lias area at Woodspring: how accurate this is remains to be seen

Recommendations

The potential structures in the Sand Rhyne should be investigated when water level permits, to check their artificiality

References

Tomalin, D. & Crook, C. 2007	<i>Woodspring Priory: a guide (revised edition)</i> Landmark Trust
Wright, P. nd (post-2007)	<i>The early foundations of Woodspring Priory, North Somerset: A preliminary landscape archaeological survey</i> unpub MA course work, Bristol University

Author

Vince Russett, May 2018