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Postmedieval settlement development and change at Charterhouse-on-Mendip 2: Edith Coles' cottage and settlement in Velvet Bottom

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Edith Coles' cottage in 1919 (Evens collection, Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery)

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Abstract

In February and March 2002, the CHarterhouse Environs Research Team (CHERT) carried out its first tape and offset earthwork survey, on the remains of what had clearly once been a cottage in Velvet Bottom. While the survey revealed something of the structure, and previous and subsequent documentary work a little of its occupants and their activities, its relationship to the adjacent mining remains is still unclear, and awaits the assembling of the detailed earthwork survey of the mining remains in Velvet Bottom. The cottage may have medieval antecedents, and the last definite evidence of occupation seems to be in 1871. It was certainly in ruins by 1919 (see cover illustration), and today is an earthwork little more than 0.6m high. It had been one of a group of three small dwellings in the valley in 1761.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to the survey team from CHERT, and to the late Andy Littlejones for details from the census of 1851 and 1861. Thanks are also due to Somerset Wildlife Trust, for permission to survey the site.

Introduction

Yatton, Congresbury, Claverham and Cleeve Archaeological Research Team (YCCART) is one of a number of Community Archaeology teams across northern Somerset, formerly supported by the North Somerset Council Development Management Team. The objective of the Community Archaeology teams is to carry out archaeological fieldwork, for the purpose of recording, and better understanding of, the heritage of Northern Somerset.

References beginning SRO refer to documents in the Somerset Record Office, Taunton (now the Somerset Heritage Centre).

North to top of all maps unless otherwise indicated.

Location



Fig 1: Location

The site lies in Velvet Bottom (alternatively known as Minery Bottom*), in the parish of Priddy, in Somerset, at ST49885533.

The site lies on the south-eastern side of a rocky knoll protruding from the southern edge of the plateau between Manor Farm and the Charterhouse Centre, in Charterhouse-on-Mendip. The valley landscape around it has been transformed by mining and subsequent reworking of slags in the 19th century, such that the natural profile of Velvet Bottom does not appear to have survived anywhere. Currently, the site of the surveyed building is separated from a 4m deep hollow in Velvet Bottom by a trackway, although there is some evidence that this hollow pre-dates the 19th century activity in Velvet Bottom.

*This is not, you will be pleased to know, an industrial illness...

Geology and Land Use

The site lies on the Black Rock Limestone of the Carboniferous Limestone series, and is constructed largely from the same. Velvet Bottom is the property of the Somerset Wildlife Trust, who permit free access to any part of the area. It is maintained as a nature reserve.

Historical and archaeological context

The site has been mapped several times, initially in 1761, the map being subsequently modified at an unknown date, but preceding the 1842 map. Traditionally, these modifications have been dated c1809, the date of the re-survey of the map (SRO DD/STL 1 and 2 - Fig 2 and 3). The 1761 plan depicts two rectangular buildings in a long tapering enclosure, presumably walled, in Velvet Bottom. A zigzag wall separates the two buildings, possibly implying that the smaller building could even have originated as a tiny dwelling. No trace of these enclosure walls was seen on the survey. A third small building stands a few tens of metres to the west, in a polygonal enclosure. (The plan reproduced here as Figure 2 is from a photocopy of the original DD/STL1, the original not being available at the time of writing).

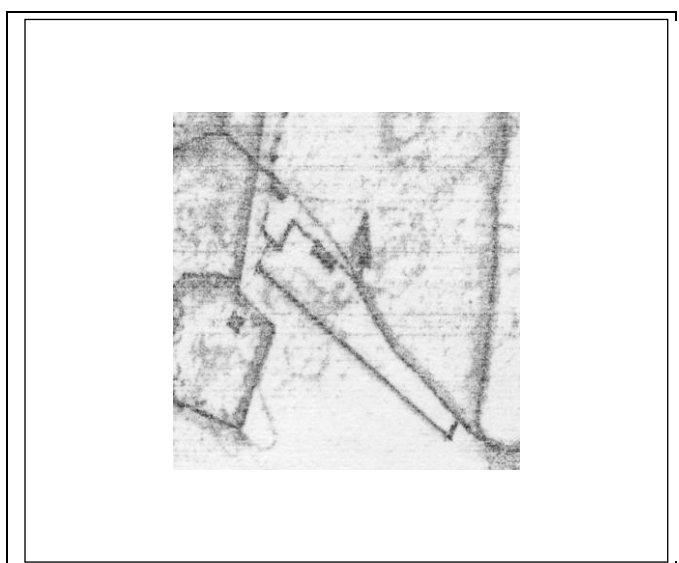


Fig 2: The site in 1761: note the three buildings planned. Map reproduced courtesy of the Somerset Record Office.

The modified plan of ?1809 shows a very different layout: only the central of the three buildings survives, now in a much reduced enclosure: the former buildings and enclosures can be seen to have been erased from the original map, but traces of red ink confirm all three were buildings in 1761.

The survey attached to the map gives the details of occupancy as *'Late Edey Coles Cottage and Garden'* and an area of 2 roods and 13 perches.



Fig 3: The site in ?1809: note the erasures on the map. Map reproduced courtesy of the Somerset Record Office.

The site was again mapped in 1842 (Fig 4). By this time, tiny extensions can be seen to each end of the surviving building. The slighter earthworks at the eastern end of the building may represent one extension, but no trace of the



Fig 4: The site in 1842. Map reproduced courtesy of the Somerset Record Office. Map rotated from true north about 45 degrees counter-clockwise.

second is visible in the survey. A smaller walled enclosure is shown (although according to the details on the map only 7 perches smaller (about 25m²) at 2

roods 6 perches, as against the 2 roods 13 perches of 1761). The shape of this enclosure cannot be seen on the ground, either.

The OS plan of 1885 (not included here) shows the enclosure walls as seen today, with the wall butting up to the central sycamore tree (which the 1842 map depicts in place).

It seems most likely that the tremendous changes in levels and layout of Velvet Bottom between 1844 and c1870 by the resmelting of ancient slag deposits by the Mendip Hills Mining Company were responsible for most of the changes to the site.

Little can be established certainly about the inhabitants of the surveyed building(s). The 1761 map calls the house 'Late Edey Coles', implying that the former inhabitant had died: an Edith Coles is recorded paying a rent of 2/6 (12.5p) in a Charterhouse document of 1743 (SRO DD/GB 141), but no earlier references are known.

The Charterhouse survey of 1675 (SRO DD/GB 114) does have two entries paying 2/6:

<i>Richard Malklin holds £2 being two cottages for 3 lives and pays</i>	<i>2/6</i>
<i>Widdow Radford holds £2/10/0 for 1 life and pays</i>	<i>2/6</i>

but there is no particular reason to identify either of these with our site.

There is, however, a possible reference to this site in SRO DD/BR Ich1:

9. Ezekiel Brock, by indenture 25 March 29 Chas II [1689]. Dame Phillippa Gore to Ezekiel Brock.

One messuage and garden, and 2a meadow adjoining the west end of the messuage.

One close of pasture (1a.) adjoining the west part of the 2a.

Common of pasture for 30 sheep and three other beasts at all times on Blackdown.

Lives: Ezekiel Brock, Peter (son), Grace (daughter). Rent: £5

The paddock immediately west of our site was known as 'Mead in minery bottom (Brocks paddock)' on the 1761 map apportionment, and given an area of roughly 2¾ acres, which may identify the above with our site. If that is the case, the common rights attached may well indicate an earlier, perhaps medieval origin for one of the buildings in Velvet Bottom. This cannot at present be finally resolved.

As far as later documents go, if the 1851 census reference to 'Velvet Bottom' refers to this house (and it is difficult to see where else it could refer to), then the inhabitants were: John Lease, aged 56, a miner, with wife Elizabeth aged 52, and their three sons, all miners (one of whom William, then aged 22 and a miner, went on to murder his wife in a case at Charterhouse that drew nationwide attention, and for which he was duly hanged). There were also two unmarried daughters, and one grandson. The whole family record their place of birth as Rowberrow: a crowded house indeed! The house was similarly occupied by 8 members of a different (Green) family in 1861.

Definite census references to the building seem to cease with that of 1871, so the building was presumably abandoned between that date and the next census in 1881: the end of the winning of old slags for resmelting in c1875 presumably meant there was no work in the area, and the house was no longer needed.



Fig 5: The site in 1919, from the Evens collection. Reproduced courtesy of Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery

The 1919 photograph (supplemented by a smaller photograph of 1914 from the Shovel collection in the Somerset Record Office) shows the building had clearly been in ruins for many years: the large sycamore currently growing at the site is already a mature tree at that date.

The photograph shows walls still standing to a height of about 1.5m, and the possibility of a door in the centre of the SW face of the building.

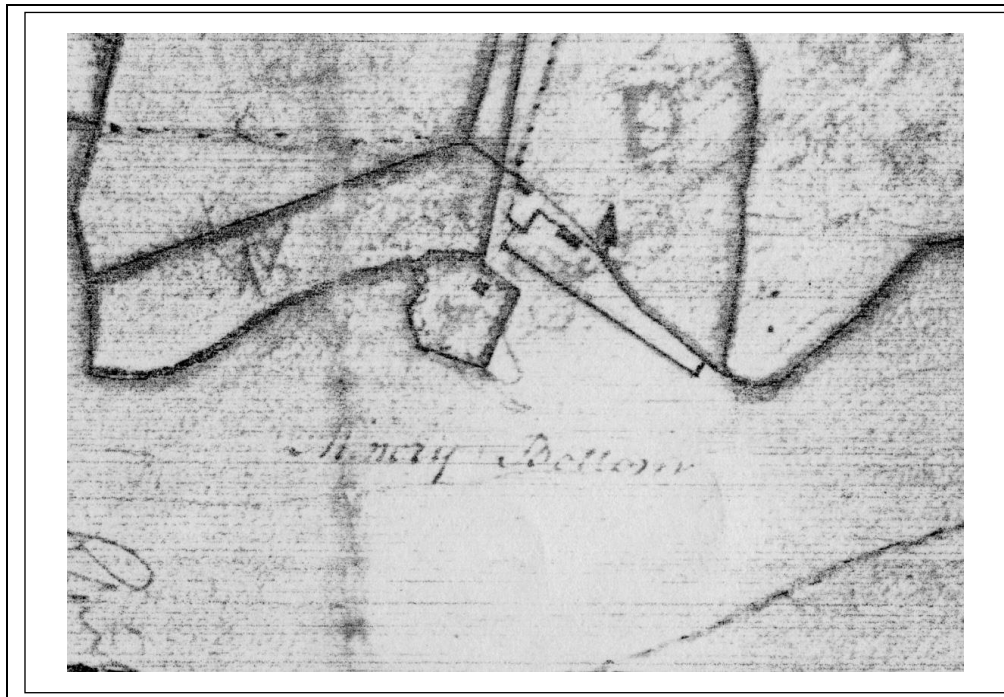


Fig 6: The wider area in 1761. Map reproduced courtesy of the Somerset Record Office.



Fig 7: The wider area in 1842. Map reproduced courtesy of the Somerset Record Office.

Barring spectacular new documentary finds, only excavation will tell us more about Edith Coles' cottage.

The history of the other two buildings in Velvet Bottom is even less clear, with their sole appearance being in the original of the 1761 map. Neither is referred to in the schedule on the map.

The wider changes between 1761 and 1842 (Figs 6 and 7 above) are plain, though. The original field called Brock's paddock seems to have lost its northern boundary (although this survives as an earthwork bank on the ground), and has expanded to a 5 acre site taking in a section of the whole of what is now Velvet Bottom. If the map can be believed, this paddock was being cultivated in 1842. Its southern edge seems to survive as the current wall of Velvet Bottom, putting the site of the third building in the field on the southern side of Velvet Bottom. No trace of this building or its small enclosure can now be seen on the ground. It has probably been completely dismantled as an easy source of walling stone for the new wall along the south side of Velvet Bottom.

It is not clear why these changes should have taken place, prior to the beginning of nineteenth century resmelting activity in the valley, unless it reflects the end of warrening activity to the south on Charterhouse Warren in about 1800, with the consequent lessening of the need to protect crops and gardens from rabbits.

Added at a later date to the 1842 map is the complex of new buildings and track and waterways to the smelting site: these will be included in a forthcoming report on the earthworks of Velvet Bottom (Smisson et al, forthcoming).

Survey objectives

The objectives for this survey were

To record the remaining earthworks of the cottage, which were under threat from the public lighting fires within them (this threat has been removed)

To examine the area for any further earthwork or other remains relating to pre Mendip Hills Mining Company activity in the valley

To use the opportunity to train members of CHERT in earthwork survey techniques

Methodology

The survey of the site was carried out by tape and offset methods, recorded in pencil on drawing film in the field, then subsequently transcribed to neat copy in the office. It was then scanned using an Epson 2450 photo scanner in 2008. This report was assembled using Libre Office 5.

Results: The survey

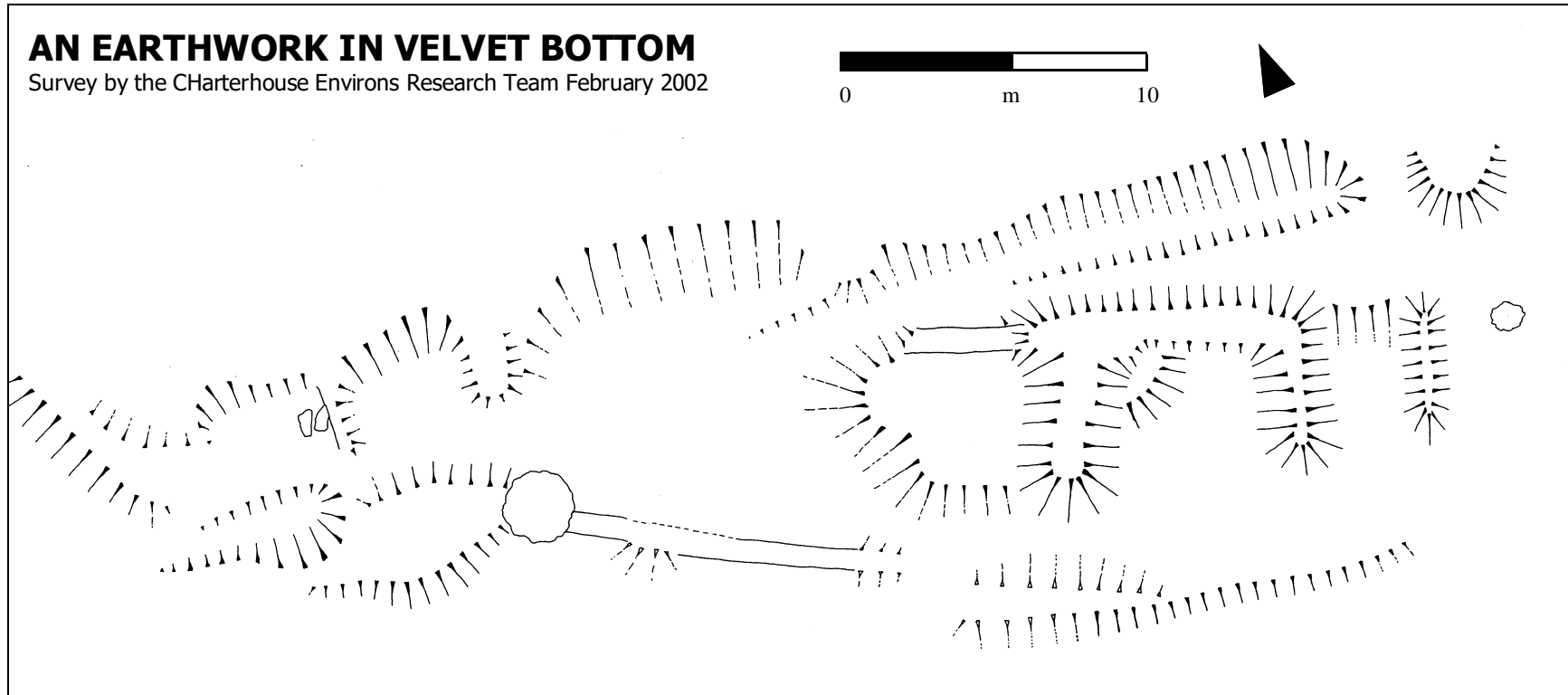


Fig 8: The earthwork survey February 2002

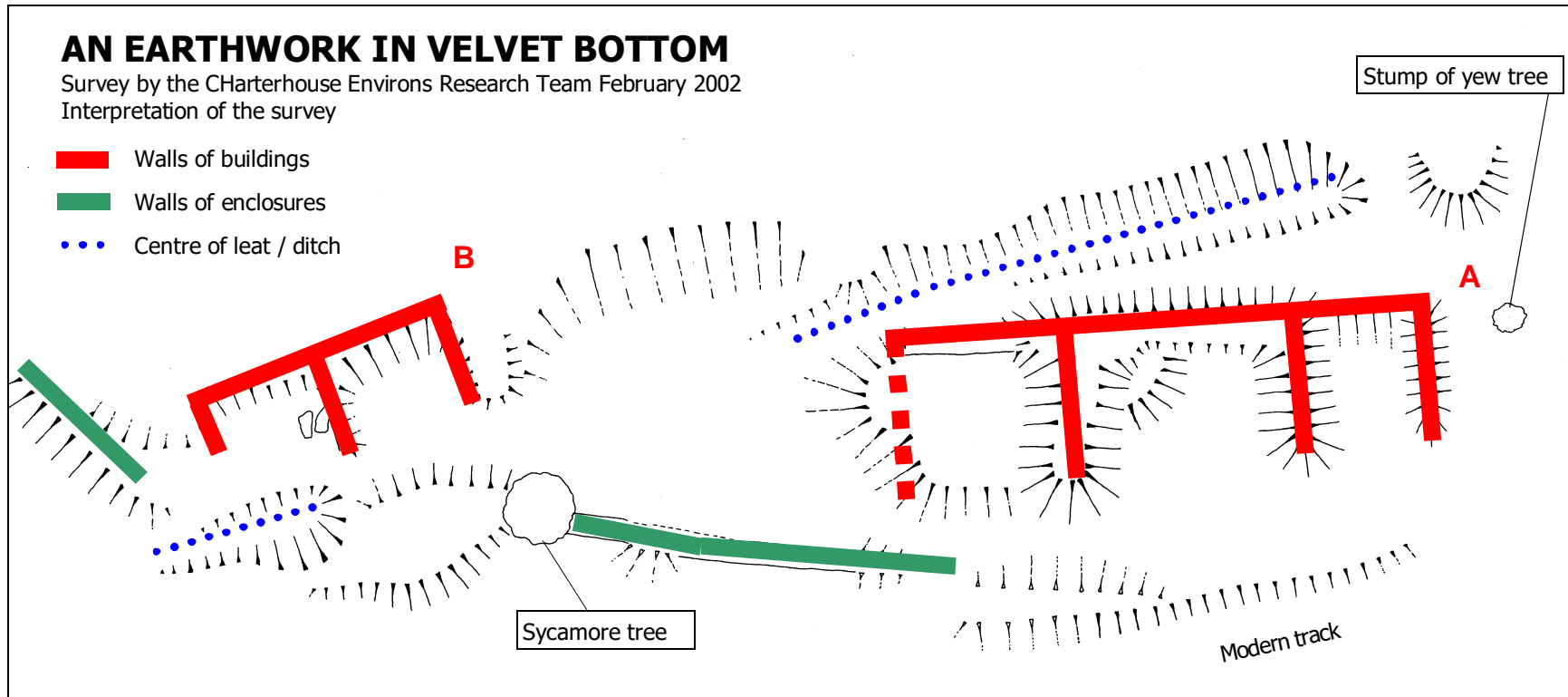


Fig 9: Interpretation

Interpretation of the earthwork survey

The interpretation of this site is fairly clear, and enhances and complements the evidence from maps and documents (which is very sparse).

As can be seen from the historic maps and photographs on the previous pages (Figs. 2-7), building A is the cottage shown on both historic maps. The survey shows a three-unit building, about 18m long, and more than 4m wide: a considerable building for its date (?17th century), although it seems likely that both ends are additions to a basic one-unit dwelling. The 1919 photograph seems to show a central door, and the extra rubble in the corner of the central room may be due to the collapse of a chimney stack.

The second building (B) is only depicted on the 1761 map, and is likely to be an outhouse or agricultural building, although it may have once been a small dwelling, if the 1675 reference (see above) is to this area. It consists of two stone-walled units, but only its length (c. 8.5m) can be determined from the survey.

The leat / ditch is interpreted as a run-off ditch to prevent water from the adjacent hillside flooding the cottage at times of heavy rain.

Both buildings seem to have lost their front walls, despite that of building A being clear in the 1919 photograph (Fig 5 above). This has presumably been lost during widening of the track for vehicles: little enough of building B survives at all, and that which does is probably because the building was constructed in a hollow into the hillside.

Any remains of the garden / curtilage of the building have almost certainly been destroyed by the construction of the road in Velvet Bottom, dating to 1844.

The site has suffered from fires being lit in the east end of structure A in the past by those using the 'Mendip Adventure Base' opposite, and by general wear and tear due to foot traffic. The closure of the Base has eliminated one problem.

Incidentally, both trees shown on the survey are ancient: the yew stump is depicted as a tree in 1761 (Fig 2 above), and the current huge sycamore at the site was depicted in 1842 (Fig 4).

Author: Vince Russett October 2010 (v2 February 2019)