

**YCCCART 2016/Y8
North Somerset HER 2016-016**

Notes on Wemberham Roman villa from the Keith Gardner archive

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



Summer capers at Wemberham, 1985. Anne Everton on spoilheap taking photograph, Mick Aston walking away

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Page	Contents
3	Abstract Acknowledgements Introduction
4	Site location Land use and geology
5	Historical & archaeological context
8	The archaeology
8	The stone spread 1975
10	The exposed wall 2007
12	The trial excavation 1985
16	A lost meander at Wemberham 2016
18	References Archive Further work

Abstract

Some useful information about trial excavation and other unpublished records were discovered in the Keith Gardner archive, adding a little to what we know of the villa site.

Acknowledgements

YCCCART are most grateful to the late Keith Gardner, Mick Aston and Anne Everton for carrying out this work and preserving the field notes, making this somewhat late publication possible.

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 fieldwork for this report was largely carried out in 1972, 1975 1985 and 2007.

Site location

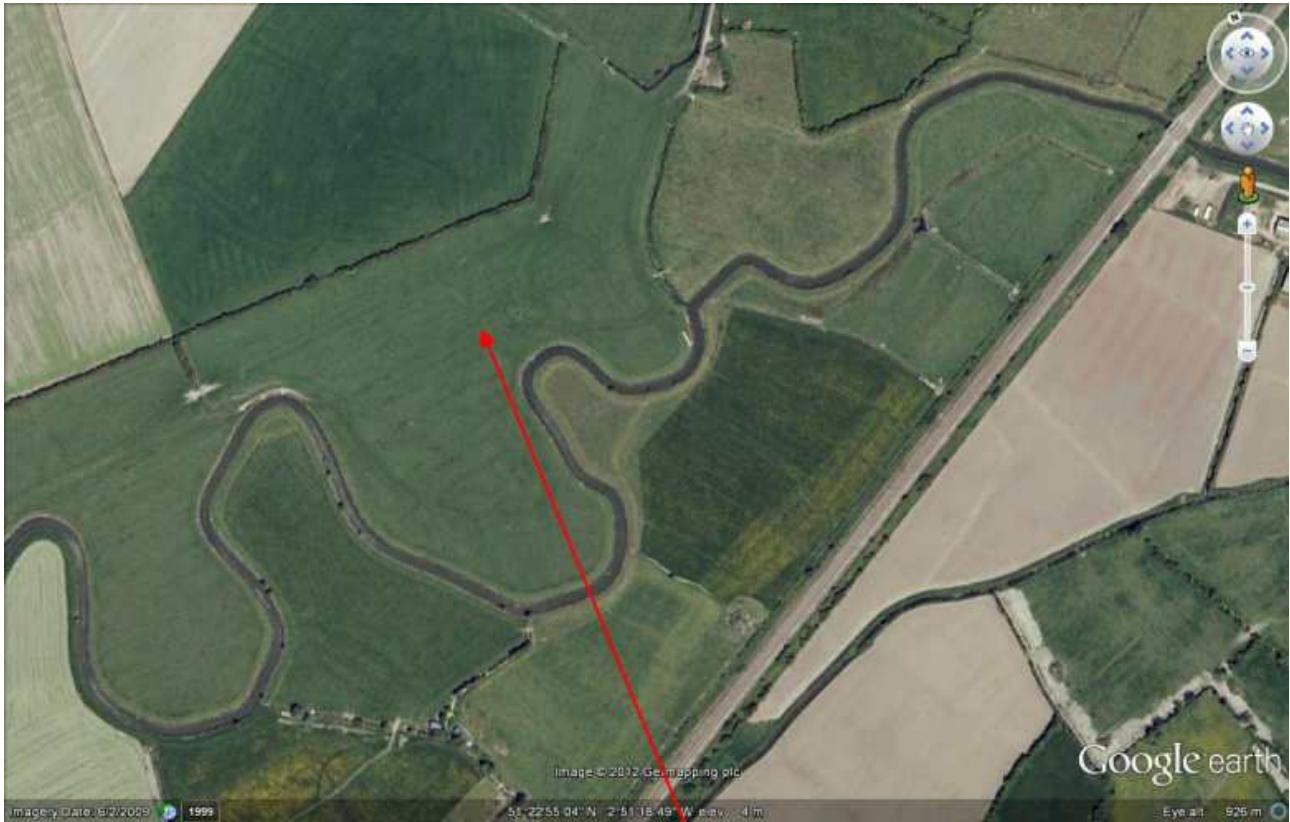


Fig 1: Location of Wemberham Roman villa, Yatton

Wemberham Roman villa lies at the end of Wemberham Lane in Yatton, at ST40516521. It is privately owned, but the site can be seen from the footpath running along the inner flood banks of the adjacent Congresbury Yeo.

Land use and geology

The site is used for grazing. The geology is the estuarine blue-grey clays of the Wentlloog formation, with Mercia mudstones at depth. The site lies below the level of the water in the river much of the time.

Historical and archaeological context

This has been covered to a large extent in previous work by YCCCART. This has included a gradiometer survey (http://www.ycccart.co.uk/index_html_files/Wemberham%20601%20Fin%20edited%20v2.pdf) a resistivity survey (http://www.ycccart.co.uk/index_html_files/Wemberham%20RM15%20Final%20edited.pdf) and selective digital terrain modelling by Nicomp electronic hydrostatic level (http://www.ycccart.co.uk/index_html_files/Wemb%20FRED%20FINAL%20edited%20070415.pdf)

Domesday

In Yatton's entry in the Exchequer Domesday the Bishop tenant Hildebert is shown as holding "a pasture called Wemberham which before 1066 belonged to Congresbury". The Exeter copy of Domesday states "of these 4 hides which Hildebert holds (of the Bishop) a woman, Aethelrun had 1 Hide jointly in 1066. With this Hide which Aethelrun held lies a pasture called Wemberham. (Gardner KS, 2000)

Great Wemberham Coffin

In 1828 in the field of Great Wemberham in 1928, about a foot below the surface a freestone coffin with a lid, "shaped to the body," was discovered, "excavated from a solid block", It was very thick and contained fragments of a lead coffin and most of a human skeleton "of medium stature." The head of the coffin pointed to the north - west. (Rutter, 1825)

Villa Excavation

The Roman villa at Wemberham, was discovered in March 1884 in the course of draining the field. Drain pipes were being laid at a depth of 2 feet 6 inches (0.76 metres) and in the course of this work the men cut into a tessellated pavement. A subsequent excavation established that the villa was very close to the north bank of the river and without defence banks would surely have flooded at some high tides.

The report of the excavation (Somerset Archaeological & Natural History Society, 1886) indicates that the villa covered an area of 65 by 150 feet (19.81 by 45.72 metres).

The plans produced in Fig 2 are from the excavation report which includes the following supposed layout.

An entrance on the north side seems to lead to an inner and outer hall and bathing apartments at the back. There is also a possible trace of a staircase leading to lofts or an upper story.

On the right or west of the entrance are the best rooms of the villa. The room indicated by the red arrow (in Fig 2 above) contained an elaborate mosaic of foliated geometrical pattern in red, white and blue as per Fig below.

Below it a room described as an office contained a mosaic with a red, white and blue design.

Two thick walls on the left of the plan run towards the river and are thought to have formed a dock and landing stage.

Finds included 21 coins dating from AD. 250 to 305 (or 360).

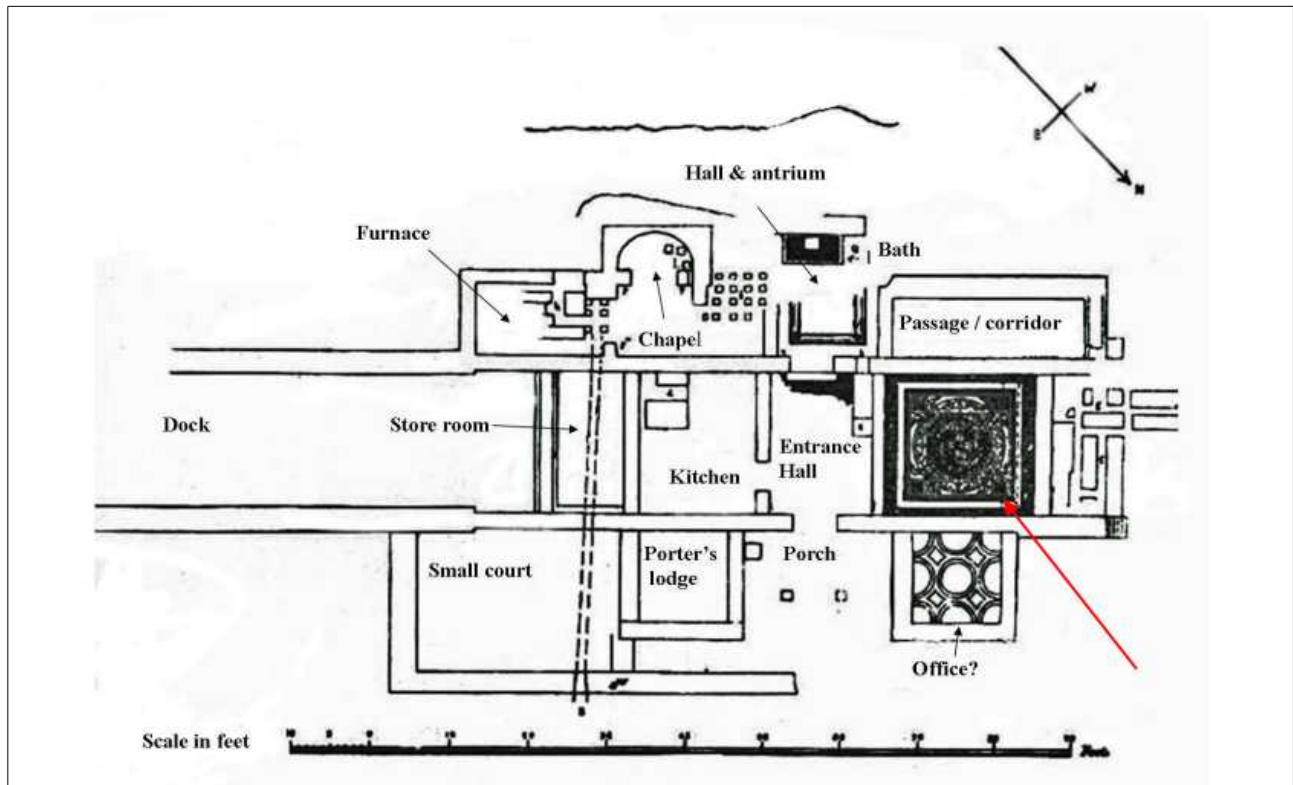


Fig 2: The plan of the villa by measured and drawn by R C Reade M.A Archt.

Briefly, the previous studies by YCCCART showed a second wing of the villa at right angles, plus evidence of a possible formal garden and canal to a dock at the rear of the building.

From all the evidence of the opulent mosaics recorded in the 19th century, the garden remains and especially the apparent private dock, it has been assumed that this villa was in a optimum place to control traffic on the (then) tidal Congresbury Yeo.

It has a fairly short existence, and from coin evidence, seems to have gone out of use in the 4th century, when the drainage of the Northmarsh failed (Rippon 2006).

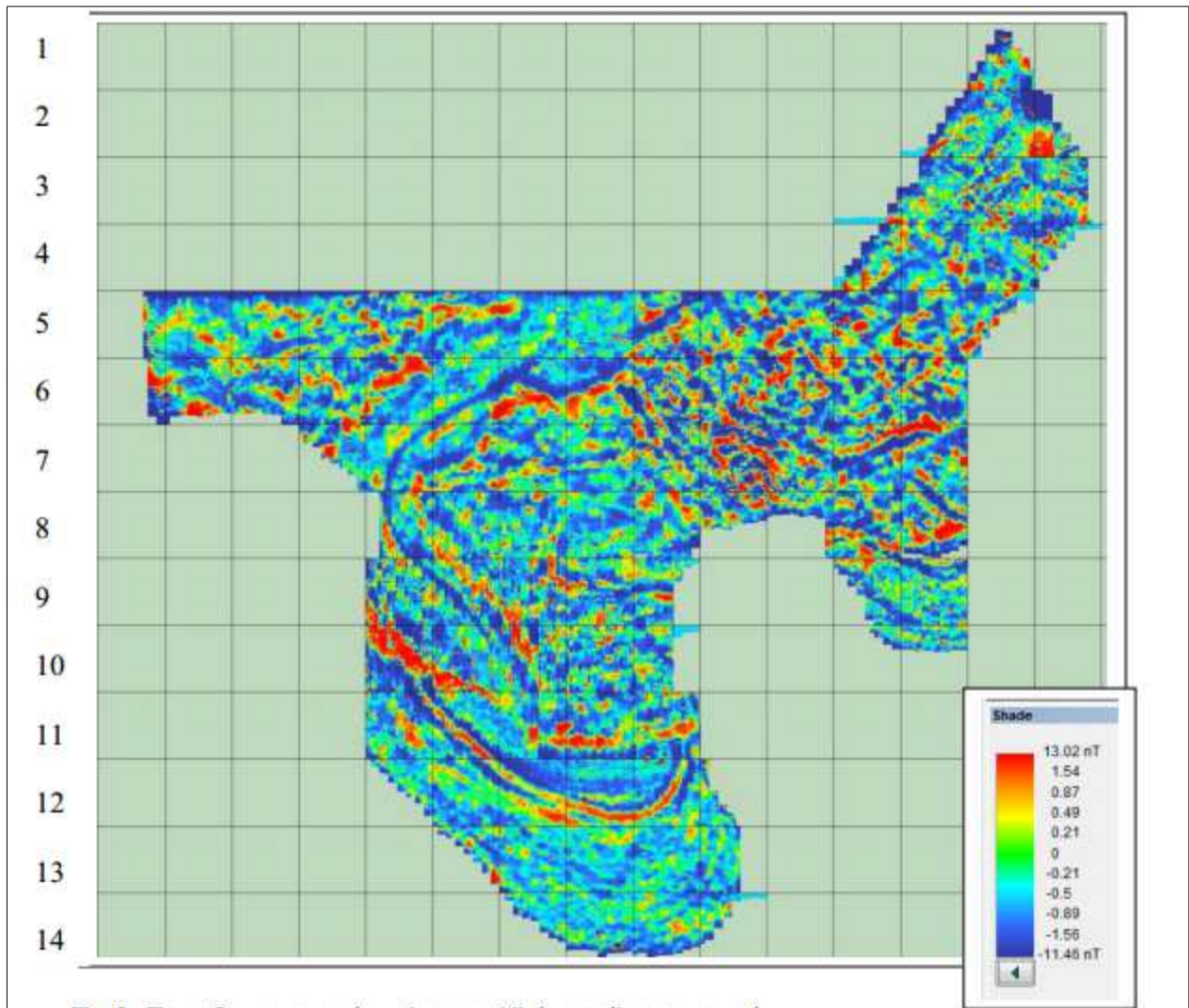


Fig 3: Gradiometer results from Wemberham (see above for detailed discussion)

Further discussion of these gradiometer results can be seen in the reference above (p5).

The stone spread 1975

These photographs were taken in March 1975, after what must have been a very energetic clearance of the bank of the river.



Fig 4: Looking west



Fig 5: Looking east



Fig 6: Close-up

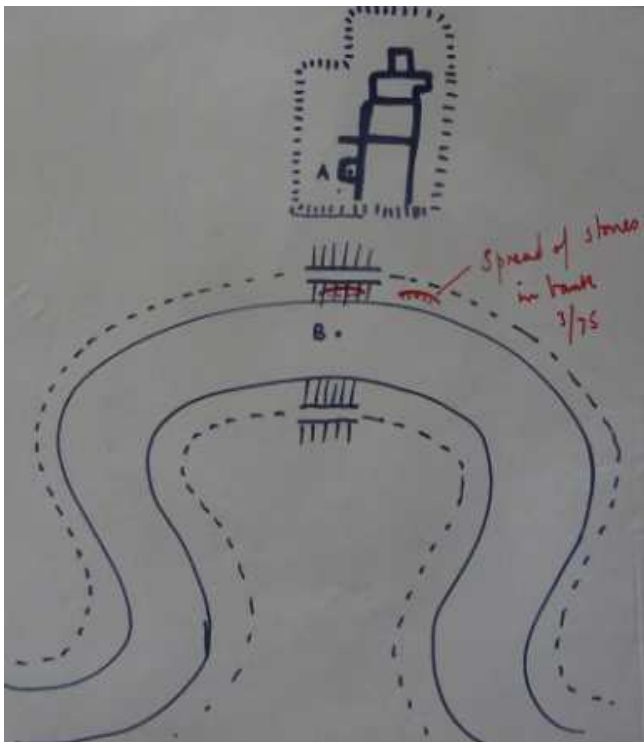


Fig 7: KSG sketch from December 1972, with 1975 note of location of stone spread

The exact location of the stone spread is difficult to plot, but KSG's sketch (Fig 7) shows he located it exactly opposite the known villa structures. Although the text does not say so, the two objects on the river bank (a walking stick and a ?vacuum flask) probably mark the points opposite where the end of the villa would be projected into the river bank.

If so, the significance of these is that a thick and level layer of stones can be seen to run along the river bank to the west of the long 'dock' room, in the area where YCCCART have revealed a potential formal garden.

Assuming the figure is 1.9m tall, the stone spread is c1.0m below the current bank top, which would make it slightly higher, by a few cm, than the building remains. It seems likely that, in the absence of any obvious walls in the spread, this may be the remains of a hardstanding or path in the area west of the buildings.

The exposed wall 2007



Fig 8: The wall exposed January 2007

During an YCCCART visit to the site on 16 January 2007, a wall of the villa was seen to have been exposed by sheep using a nearby feeder.

Unfortunately, no detailed records was made at the time, and happily, it has turfed over again.

The wall is a cross-wall within the villa excavated in 1884. It has two worked coursed faces, but little rubble interior, and is quite narrow for a villa that has been conjectured to be on two floors. The stone is mainly Liassic Limestone, with a few Pennant Sandstone blocks.

By comparison with the surrounding earthworks, this appears to be the SE wall of the room that contained the great Mosaic.



Fig 9: The wall exposed January 2007

The trial excavation 1985

KSG had wanted for many years to put down a 'sondage' (trial pit) at Wemberham, largely to answer his queries as to the underlying geology of Wemberham villa: was it simply erected on the grey alluvium of the Northmarsh, or was there a subsurface bed of gravel, similar to that at Kenn? (the answer turned out to be the former).

KSG arranged as early as 1982 to apply for Scheduled Monument Consent to carry out the excavation, helped by Jane Evans (then of Weston Museum), and at one point, the Department of the Environment, who were then responsible for SMC, said they registered it as a museum excavation.

The applications saga ran on for more than three years, with an increasingly exasperated KSG exchanging terse letters with the Department of the Environment, and later, English Heritage.

In the end, he seems to have largely gone his own way, with helpers Anne Everton and Mick Aston.

The records that survive are fragmentary, but adequate for publication.

The site chosen was adjacent to the 'dock wall' of the south-east building of the monument.

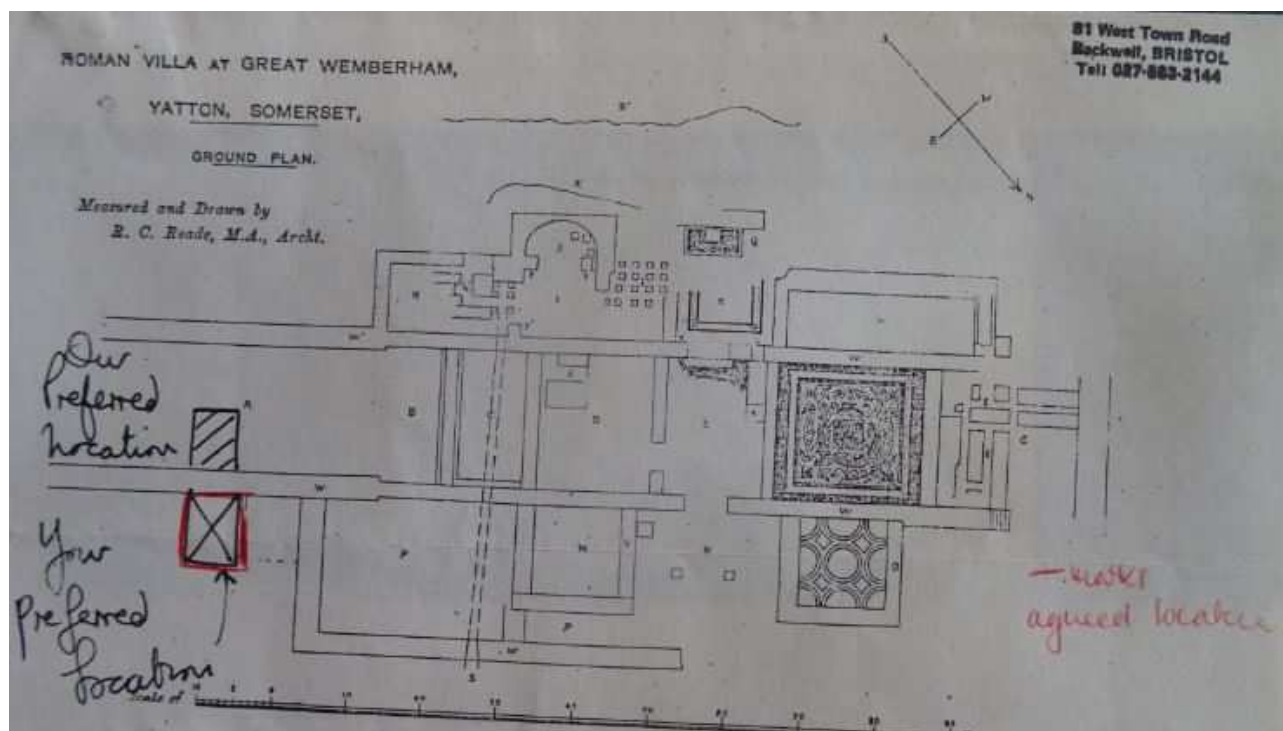


Fig 10: KSG's trench plan

The writing is KSG's, and the trench outside the wall was agreed in October 1983.



PLAN WALL TRENCH
Wemberham villa 1985
KSG, AE, MA Del. VJR 2016

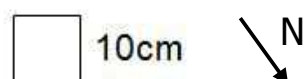


Fig 11: Wall trench (inside building on left, arbitrary level on right)



Fig 12: Wall trench from NE (scale in feet)

It is noticeable from the photograph that the area of the trench inside the building has a flat stoney layer, which from this meagre evidence, looks like a floor. This is a little difficult to explain on the original model that this area was a dock: however, YCCART's resistivity survey found what was clearly an end wall to this building, by the river, so this room calls for re-interpretation.

The sondage was then continued down outside of the wall, resulting in Section 1 (Fig 13).

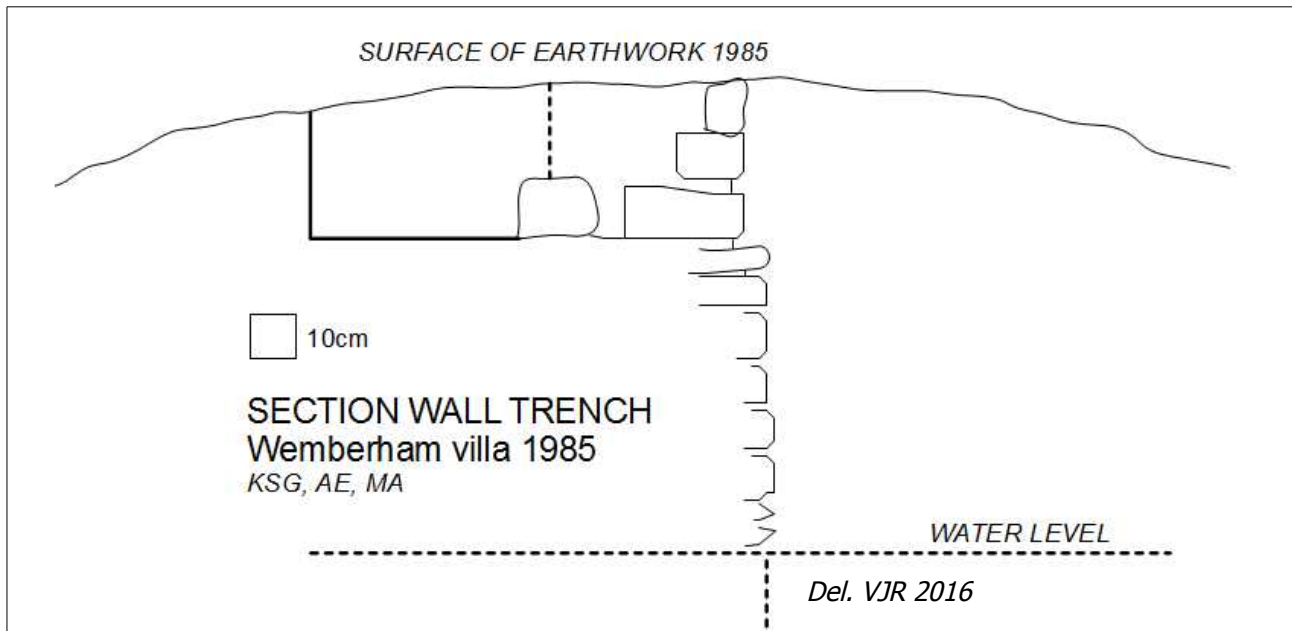


Fig 13: Section of wall (looking NE)

Notes in AE handwriting on the original section drawing specify that below the wall level (i.e. in the construction trench for the wall) the structure was 'rough walling has quarry chippings in it mixed with grey clay'. It also makes the point that the water level prevented the bottom of the wall being reached.

This trench in clay, intended as the foundation for an external wall of the building, would probably need to be at least 1.0m deep: the excavation reached 0.78m. From the photograph, there appears to be a layer of wall beneath the illustrated structure. Below this are about 0.30m of random rubble, and the bottom, there appear to be layers of laid Pennant Sandstone fragments, which would probably be the lowest layer of the foundation.

The other thing this trench proved is that there were no rooms or other structures immediately to the east of the 'dock' room. This pretty much coincides with YCCART's resistivity results (see above)

The area between the stones of the wall is depicted with stipple in the drawings, but there is no clue as to whether this was a mortar or clay bonding. Unfortunately, the photographs are not high enough quality to tell certainly, but on the Fig 14, it certainly looks as though the stones are bonded with 'clay-with-chippings' (as AE describes it on the section drawing for the foundation trench). Mortar does not survive well in Northmarsh sites, and it would

be wrong to draw conclusions without an examination of the interior of a wall there.

Fig 14: View of the outside of the wall , showing the structures of the foundation.

The original excavation reports do not record this either.



A lost meander at Wemberham 2016

The Congresbury Yeo is unusual in Somerset lowland rivers, in that its course appears to be largely natural, and not engineered like the Cheddar Yeo or the rivers of the Somerset Levels.

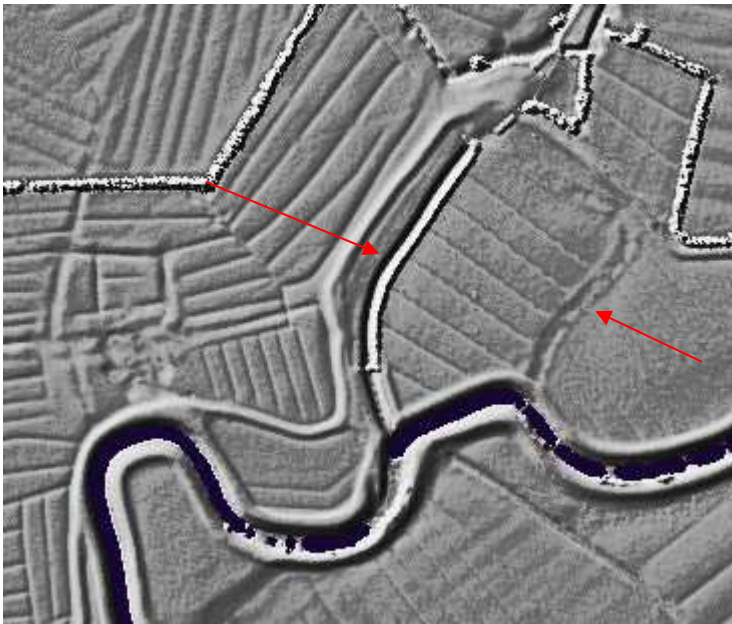


Fig 15: Meander of Congresbury Yeo cut off from river (from OpenGov lidar sources on <https://houseprices.io/lab/lidar/map>)

This meander formed a separate field until some time between the epoch 5 OS map (c1975) and the 1991 air photos of North Somerset.

It is shown on the 1821 map of Yatton as field 14 'Castle 3 acres', owned and occupied by William Atherton. This is presumably a humorous name relating to the fact that it is surrounded by a 'moat', although the 'Castle' name often implies stoney soil.

That this a former meander is clearly shown by the fact that the inner flood bank runs behind this and the adjacent field ('Lower Warth' in 1821). This would account for the otherwise inexplicable fact that the last 200m or so of Wemberham Rhyme have a flood bank alongside, while its earlier course does not.

Pace Rippon (2006), who suggests that the Congresbury Yeo once ran around and to the north of the Wemberham villa, this suggests that it never did, since there is no evidence in the lidar images for this; that the gradiometry carried out at the villa in 2013 uncovered a connection to the current river line, and that this meander clearly rejoins the current river.



Fig 16: The meander on the 1821 map of Yatton (around field 14)

The naming of field 15 on the 1821 map as a 'warth' implies that it is a piece of land between the inner and outer flood banks.

It is unclear at what date this meander was cut off. Apart from one possible small area at Kingston Seymour the river does not appear to have any similar engineering west of Gang Wall on the borders of Congresbury and Yatton.

It is noticeable that the modern public footpath follows this inner flood bank (as it does elsewhere).



Fig 17: The meander in 1946 (pink line is the public footpath)

Since the Congresbury Yeo was used for water traffic between the sea and Congrebury until the 20th century, this loop must have proved a problem to navigation and been removed.

The current Congresbury / Yatton boundary runs along the river, but this should not be taken as an indicator of very early date for this piece of river engineering, since according to the Yatton parish maps, the fields on both sides were in Yatton until 1821 x 1840.

References

Gardner K.S. 2000	<i>Boggy Meares & Queachy Fennes.</i> Nailsea & District Local History Society.
Rippon, S. 2006	<i>Landscape, community and colonisation: The North Somerset Levels during the 1st and 2nd millennia AD</i> CBA, York
Rutter, J. 1825	<i>Delineations of the north western division of the county of Somerset, Shaftesbury</i>

Archive

The archive for this project is entirely digital and will be found in the YCCCART archive. The original materials are in the Keith Gardner archive, and will be deposited at the Somerset heritage Centre.

Further work

If it should prove possible, a GPR survey of this site would be useful in further characterising the structures discovered by YCCCART in 2013.

General author

Vince Russett September 2016.

