

# English Heritage Extensive Urban Survey

An archaeological assessment of

# Somerton

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# SOMERSET EXTENSIVE URBAN SURVEY

## SOMERTON

### ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

by Miranda Richardson

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**SOMERSET EXTENSIVE URBAN SURVEY**

**SOMERTON**

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT**

*Somerset County Council would like to thank all the people who assisted in the compiling or editing of this report.*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

This report forms one of a series commissioned by English Heritage and prepared by Somerset County Council with the aim of assessing urban archaeology as part of the Monuments Protection Programme. The work was carried out from 1994 to 1998 by Clare Gathercole and Miranda Richardson (from 1996), managed by Chris Webster. The reports are essentially as completed during that period but have been updated by Chris Webster with new archaeological information in 2003.

English Heritage has funded two programmes assess the urban archaeological resource - intensive and extensive. The former is restricted to the major historic cities, characterised by a great depth of archaeological remains, a wealth of historical documentation and in many cases, by a great deal of archaeological investigation. The extensive urban surveys cover the smaller towns and are based on information in the local Sites and Monuments Record with limited amounts of new information collected during the project. Once the information has been collected and mapped, attention is focused on the analysis of the town plan and defining topographic units within the town. This will lead to the preparation of guidance for planners, developers and others involved in the management of the town.

## **II. MAJOR SOURCES**

### **1. Primary documents**

No primary documents have been used for this report. Somerton is mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in 733 and is recorded in the Domesday Book. Other sources are referred to in the VCH chapter on Somerton.

### **2. Local histories**

There is a VCH chapter about Somerton (Dunning 1974) and two local histories; Hall (1925), *A brief History of Somerton* and Taylor (1953) *The Story of Somerton*.

### **3. Maps**

There are no pre-19th century maps of Somerton, the earliest rendition being the 1811 OS Surveyor's Drawings. The rest of the OS sequence of maps is supplemented by the 1843 Tithe map.

## **III. A BRIEF HISTORY OF SOMERTON**

Somerton is situated on a low ridge between the Yeo and Cary rivers, overlooking a crossing of the latter. It is an area densely populated in the prehistoric and particularly the Roman periods. Nine Romano-British farmsteads or villas have been located in the area around Somerton which was a rich agricultural hinterland to the Roman town at Ilchester.

The town is first referred to in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle of 733, when Aethelbald, King of Mercia occupied Somerton, a royal possession of the West Saxon kings. The kings of Wessex re-established their control of the town in the early 9th century. In 860 Ethelred is thought to have visited and in 949 it was the site of a meeting of the *witan*. At Domesday the Somerton estate is listed first of the land in the Kings possession, but the entry refers to an agricultural holding with land for 50 ploughs, 100 acres of meadow and a league each of pasture and woodland, but no mention of a market or burgages which might indicate a town. At this time Somerton was clearly the central place of a large royal estate but may not have been urban in character. The extent of the estate was not known, neither was tax paid for it. As an estate centre a royal residence might be expected around which a settlement may have grown up and perhaps formed a short lived burh evidenced by the placename 'Bury' in a court roll of 1349.

However, this might as easily refer to the medieval borough which by 1275 was worth, along with rent from ovens and a windmill, £42. A market had been granted in 1255 and Somerton was chosen as the county town in the later 13th century, perhaps due to the erroneous tradition that the town had been the Saxon capital of Wessex. The shire courts and gaol were transferred to Somerton from Ilchester in 1278 and 1280 respectively, which has been cited as the main cause for Ilchester's waning economy in the late 13th and 14th century. By 1290 a 'new borough' had been added, increasing the number of burgages, which by 1331 was worth £6 14s in rents by itself. The position as county town was short lived with the gaol out of use by 1371 and the last visit of the circuit judges in 1530. General decline is also shown by the market ceasing in the late 16th century. However, a new grant was made in 1606 and the economy of the town seems to have picked up as the market increased in importance, reflected in the growing number of inns situated around the market square, from 6 in 1620 to 17 in 1760, and the number of fine quality buildings put up in this period. Despite the successful market and some cloth industry up to the mid 18th century the economy of the town remained essentially agricultural. Following a further slump in the 18th century some recovery was felt in the 19th with new industries in the town; Somerton brewery on West Street, a collar factory on Broad Street, a gloving and shoe bindings factory, a cardboard box factory and quarrying for building stone. However, the town suffered from the lack of a railway, particularly with the line passing through nearby Langport. When a new railway was eventually built through Somerton in 1906, the station was maintained for less than sixty years. The town is now little more than a village despite large modern housing developments, particularly around the west end of the town, in the 20th century.

#### IV. THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF SOMERTON

##### *GENERAL COMMENTS*

###### *0.1 Archaeological work in the town*

Although the surrounding area has attracted archaeological investigation, particularly of the Roman villa and farmstead sites of Ilchester's rich hinterland, very little excavation has been done in the town itself. Our present knowledge of the buried archaeology in the town is restricted to occasional chance discoveries and recently a handful of small scale evaluation trenches and watching briefs (see section V).

###### *0.2 Standing structures and visible remains*

There is a large number of 17th century and some earlier buildings surviving in the town centre, particularly on West Street, Broad Street and North Street.

##### **1. PREHISTORIC** (Map A)

###### *1.1 Archaeological work in the town/ Archaeological knowledge*

Although there has only been one evaluation excavation of a prehistoric site in or around Somerton, many crop mark and earthwork features, which may be of prehistoric date, have been located through aerial photography. The parish of Somerton is particularly rich in these features. Those near the town have been mapped here whether dated to the prehistoric period or as yet undated.

###### *1.2 Context*

Somerton is one of 37 of the 45 historic towns covered by this project at which there is as yet no strong evidence of prehistoric settlement on the site of the later town - though there was certainly abundant activity in the area and it should be remembered that it is notoriously difficult for archaeologists to demonstrate a prehistoric presence in areas subsequently built up. Whilst 'towns' were not, generally speaking, a feature of prehistoric landscapes, many of the same factors which made the site desirable in later periods would already have been operative.

###### *1.3 Archaeological features (centre), shown on Map A*

###### *1.3.a Burial sites, religious houses and places of worship*

###### SOM/101 Bronze Age Ring Ditch (SMR 54488)

A single ring ditch was recognised as a cropmark in 1949. A trial excavation through part of the mark showed a ditch over 1.1m in depth cut into the lias rock. A leaf-shaped arrowhead was also

found in the area. Recent aerial photographs have shown another ring ditch besides this one and other enclosure-features to the North-East. Ring ditches of this sort are generally interpreted as the ploughed out or eroded remains of barrows which were used for burial from the bronze age and after.

*Taken from SMR map.*

### 1.3.b Settlement (Rural)

#### SOM/102 Possible Settlement Sites (SMR 54493, 54487)

It has been suggested that two sites recognised through aerial photographs and cropmark features may have been prehistoric settlement sites as possible hut-circles have been identified amongst other enclosure and field boundary features. There has as yet been no further assessment of these sites

*Taken from SMR map.*

#### (a) Unclassified

#### SOM/103 Enclosures and Field Boundaries (SMR 54494, 54529, 54530, 54528, 55429)

Each of these sites has been recognised from aerial features, most are undated and require further archaeological evaluation before dates and character can be ascribed. They show that the area around Somerton has been densely occupied over a long period, as several phases of earth-bound features have been noted on the same sites.

*Taken from SMR map.*

## 2. ROMAN (Map B)

### 2.1 Archaeological work in the town/ Archaeological knowledge

It has been shown through aerial survey, field survey and excavation that this area, forming part of the Ilchester hinterland, was densely occupied in the Roman period. At least nine settlement sites have been recognised in Somerton parish. There are several Roman sites around the town of Somerton, and the discovery of supposed Roman burials in the town centre makes Roman settlement of the site likely, should their dating be proved correct.

### 2.2 Context

The Roman period was one of deliberate, strategic urbanisation. The area which is now Somerset appears to have been less affected than some other areas by this, in that few really urban sites are known, and this probably reflects its marginal position. However, the widespread distribution of Roman or Romanised settlements shows that the county - particularly east of the Parrett - was heavily populated and exploited in this period.

Somerton is one of 12 of the 45 historic towns covered by this project at which there is evidence of Roman settlement on part of the site of the later town, though not necessarily at its core. It lies in an area rich in evidence of Roman activity, being situated within the belt of villas and estate centres surrounding Ilchester.

### 2.3 Archaeological features (centre), shown on Map B

#### 2.3.a Communications

##### (a) Roads, streets and routeways

#### SOM/206 Roman Road

A Roman road linking the area to Ilchester, skirts the east side of Somerton, probably crossing the river Cary at or adjacent to Cary Bridge.

*Taken from 1886 OS*

### 2.3.b Burial sites, religious houses and places of worship

#### SOM/201 Roman Burial Sites (SMR 54532, 54533)

Two sites have produced probable Roman burials. Two burials, to the north of, and below the north wall of the of the churchyard, in the vicarage garden were found in 1951, at a depth of up to 1.3m. They are interpreted as Roman and listed as such in the SMR, largely due to their orientation (W-E), but have not been included by Leech (1977) in his gazetteer of Roman burials.

Six skeletons which were thought to have been of Roman date were found in 1889, south of Somerton Erleigh. Col. William Pinney arranged to have marker stones set up on a large mound where they were found.

The presence of burials at these sites suggests that there were also Roman settlements in their vicinities.

*Taken from SMR maps.*

### 2.3.c Settlement (Rural)

#### SOM/202 Villa Sites (SMR 54489, SM Somerset 232, SMR 54485)

The site of a Roman villa was noted at Melbury in 1949 and a series of test trenches excavated in that year (Dewar 1949:239). A dipping well, called 'Roman Well' was recorded near to the site. The site has since been scheduled.

A second villa has been noted to the north-east of the town. It was mentioned by Colt Hoare in 1833 and excavated to some extent by Hasell. A wall was visible in the river bank and traced across the field in 1975.

*Taken from SMR maps and after SMR description.*

#### SOM/203 Settlement (SMR 54921, 56916, 54514, 56917)

A series of cropmark and earthwork features have been noted to the north-east of Somerton, on both sides of the road to Cary Bridge. These have been interpreted as rectangular buildings, trackways and small rectangular enclosures. These features have not been dated.

*Taken from SMR maps.*

### 2.3.d Artefact scatters

#### SOM/204 Artefacts (SMR 54535, 54538)

A bronze coin of Constantine II was dug up at Brockle Hill in 1960. A Roman fibula was dug up by J.W. Searle in his garden at Lawnside, on Langport Road in 1948.

*Taken from SMR maps.*

### 2.3.e Other

#### SOM/205 Enclosures (SMR 54493)

Cropmarks of a rectangular enclosure and other linear features have been noted and Romano-British pottery collected when field walking the same site.

*Taken from SMR maps.*

### 3. SAXON (Map C)

#### 3.1 *Archaeological work in the town/ Archaeological knowledge*

There has been no excavation of Saxon features in the town.

#### 3.2 *Context*

Though the Post-Roman and early Saxon periods were characterised by a return to non-urban lifestyles, the later Saxon period (from the 9th century onwards) saw the beginnings of a resurgence of trading places and towns. This was controlled, in England, by the Saxon royal families (though it was part of a wider trend), and took place in the context of a network of royal estate administration centres which was already established (in some cases long-established). The reasons for the changes were many and complex, combining defensive, administrative and ecclesiastical considerations with, increasingly, purely commercial aspirations.

As one of the heartlands of the kings of Wessex, Somerset played an important part in the early re-urbanisation of the south, and there are a number of places amongst those studied for this project which can claim to have been towns before the Norman Conquest. However, there are also a number which can claim to have been 'central places' performing more limited, and non-commercial, functions: not all such places developed into towns, but many towns originated in such specialised settlements.

Somerton is one of five of the 45 historic towns covered by this project which, whilst it had not developed any really urban functions by the end of the Saxon period, was probably the administrative centre for a royal estate. In fact, it was the most important of these five, one of only four of the historic towns appearing on the pre-Conquest royal itineraries of Wessex. There were eleven other administration centres in the survey which had developed urban functions by the Conquest (and another six which also had minsters).

#### 3.3 *Standing structures and visible remains*

There are no standing structures or visible remains of Saxon origin in Somerton.

#### 3.4 *Archaeological components, shown on Map C*

##### 3.4.a *Defended sites*

SOM/301

##### Possible Saxon Burh

There is the possibility that there was a short lived Saxon burh in Somerton although evidence for this is slight. An area of the town, north of the present church was called Bury in a court roll of 1349 and the size of the royal estate might lead one to suspect an important settlement on the site. However the Saxon settlement is not listed in the 10th century Burghal Hideage, has no mint recorded and no market mentioned at Domesday. It has been suggested that whilst Somerton was the site of the Saxon Royal residence its neighbour Langport was the commercial trading centre. A similar relationship has been suggested between Cheddar and Axbridge in the north of the county (Aston 1984:186, 198-199).

*After Dunning 1974:130 and Aston and Leech 1977:123*

SOM/302

##### Possible Saxon Burh

Aston and Leech (1977:133) suggest an alternative area for a Saxon burh based on the topography of the site rather than the place-name evidence cited above. This area covers the more easily defensible eastern end of the ridge, above the crossing of the river Cary.

Aston (1984:186) also suggests this position, on a wide projecting spur above a steep sided valley, is similar to that of other Saxon sites in the region. Trial trenches excavated at Belvedere Grange in 1994 (SMR 90032) on the south-west edge of this area did not show Saxon remains, but the site had been quarried at a later date, which may have destroyed earlier archaeological deposits (Hollinrake 1994).

*Aston and Leech 1977:123*



### 3.4.b *Manors and estates*

SOM/303 St Cleers (SMR 54515)

By tradition this is the site of the Saxon royal manor. Ruins were apparently visible on the site in 1579 (Dunning 1974:138). Stone foundations were apparently found on the site called 'wall close'. Field boundaries and a substantial ditch have been noted from aerial photographs to the south and west of the site. Should it be shown that this is indeed the site of the Saxon manorial buildings it would be of very great archaeological importance. In the absence of a Saxon burh an early settlement may have grown up in this area to serve the needs of the royal residence. Clearly further research is required to establish both the presence and the degree of preservation of any early remains.

*Taken from the SMR map*

### 3.4.c *Burial sites, religious houses and places of worship not mapped*

Chapel at Somerton Erleigh (SMR 54513)

It has been suggested (Dunning 1974:147,150) that a chapel existed at Somerton Erleigh as tithes were given by King Ethelred to the monks of Athelney in 894. The payment of tithes also suggests a population or settlement, perhaps at Somerton Erleigh, perhaps from a wider area. In 1319 a 'violent scene' took place there between the Bishop and the Proctor of the Chapter of Wells. The last reference to the chapel is in 1371. The location of the proposed Saxon chapel has not been established but the rectorial estate centred on the medieval Parsonage and Tithe barn gives the location of church land in the area.

## 4. **MEDIEVAL** (Map D and E)

### 4.1 *Archaeological work in the town/ Archaeological knowledge*

An evaluation excavation on the site of the new Somerton Library (Hollinrake 1995) produced sherds and features dating from the 12th to 16th century. Features noted in the later watching brief attached to the construction of the library were not dated (Adkins 1997).

### 4.2 *Context*

Both in Britain and on the continent, the medieval period saw the growth of town foundation and, to an extent, urban living (though the bulk of the population continued to live in villages). The reasons for this growth were many and complex. In England they included both general factors - such as the growth of mercantile trade (especially the cloth trade) - and more specific ones - such as the post-Conquest establishment of a network of (theoretically) loyal magnates and prelates with large estates and commercial privileges. The latter led to the increasing relaxation of the royal stranglehold on the profits of towns and chartered boroughs (where tenants paid cash rents and were free of feudal ties), which in turn enabled the establishment of new purpose-built commercial areas (the majority of places classed as towns in the medieval period have at least some planned elements). Of course, some boroughs were already in existence by the Conquest, and the existing pattern of Saxon urban or semi-urban centres was an important influence on the medieval one. This is evident in Somerset which, like many parts of the south and west (where the majority of the Saxon *burhs* and boroughs had been established), was peppered with small boroughs in the medieval period.

In archaeological terms, the medieval towns are characterised by evidence of partially planned, intensive occupation of restricted areas. Typical features which may occur include: regular, or semi-regular, street layouts; large market places (usually obscured by later encroachments); blocks of regular, long, narrow, plots end on to the commercial frontage; churchyards, either within the medieval layout or outside it - the latter often indicative of a deliberate shift of activity; regular or irregular suburbs or marginal areas occupied by quays, or industrial sites such as mills; and high status sites such as castles, manor sites and large religious precincts.

Somerton is one of 20 of the 45 historic towns covered by this project which first acquired urban status in the medieval period, and one of the ten of these 20 which acquired full borough status. Indeed, it was in the late 13th

century and 14th century the county town, though it subsequently lost that position to Taunton and declined in importance. It was one of 19 of the 45 towns at which a planned area was laid out in the medieval period partially across or - more commonly - immediately adjacent to an established settlement.

#### 4.3 *Standing structures and visible remains*

There are ten listed buildings dated to this period including the grade I church and three buildings graded II\*.

#### 4.4 *Archaeological components (Earlier medieval), shown on Map D*

##### 4.4.a *Communications*

###### (a) *Roads, streets and routeways*

###### SOM/401 St. Cleers, East Street, New Street

The Tithe map of 1843 clearly shows the line of an earlier road linking The Triangle to New Street, fossilised in the pattern of property boundaries. The northern boundary of the churchyard and the line of the back of the tenement properties on the north side of West Street form a single diagonal line between these points. New Street, probably under a different name, linked this road to Cary Bridge, below the town to the north-east. The road from Cow Square was known as East Street in the 17th century (Dunning 1974:130) suggesting that the main focus of settlement was somewhere to the west of the church. It is possible that the road could have extended as far as the probable Saxon settlement at St Cleers, forming a continuous SW-NE axes through the medieval settlement.

*After Tithe map 1843.*

###### SOM/401 Langport Road/Bancombe Road, Pestors Lane

This road provides another east-west axis, linking the town to Langport on the west and eventually Ilchester, via Catsgore to the south-east.

*After Tithe map 1843.*

###### SOM/401 Behind Berry

Behind Berry may have provided the 'back lane' to tenements set out along the north side of the proposed East Street in the earlier medieval period.

*After Tithe map 1843.*

##### 4.4.b *Burial sites, religious houses and places of worship*

###### SOM/402 Somerton Chapel/Church (SMR 54478)

A chapel stood at Somerton in the early 12th century, daughter to the church at Queen Camel. In c. 1140 Empress Maud granted the chapel to Muchelney Abbey and gave it burial rights. From then on it took on many of the aspects of a mother church itself and by the 13th century is likely to have had chapels at Hurcot, Somerton Erleigh and Melbury, none of which now survive. In 1205 a vicarage was ordained, probably on or close to the site of the present vicarage, opposite the church, on the north side of East Street. The present church building dates to the 13th, 14th and 19th centuries. (Dunning 1974:147-148)

*After Tithe map 1843.*

###### SOM/404 Church Hill (SMR 55433)

To the south of the town the place name 'Church Hill' suggests the location of a church, perhaps that associated with the settlement at Melbury which was recorded in 1572 as 'Maide Milboroughes' Chapel' (Dunning 1974:150), or with the deserted settlement of Lower Somerton.

*Taken from SMR map.*

#### 4.4.c Settlement (Urban)

##### (a) Market place(s)

###### SOM/405 Market Place/The Triangle

At the crossing of the proposed east-west roads is an area now known as The Triangle, which may have served as an early market place and focus of medieval settlement in the town. A grant of a market is first recorded in 1255.

*After Tithe map 1843.*

##### (b) Tenement plots

###### SOM/406 Tenements

The Tithe map shows long regular plots on the north side of the proposed East Street. 'Ancient burgages' were known to have existed north of the churchyard in the 17th century which probably fronted onto East Street (Dunning 1974:130). The original form of plots on the south side of East Street have been obliterated by later alteration to the town plan. There are also likely to have been tenement plots around The Triangle.

*After Tithe map 1843.*

#### 4.4.d Settlement (Rural)

###### SOM/407 Melbury (SMR 54509)

Melbury apparently grew up around a green in this area. 12th and 13th century pottery has been found here. The site was abandoned by the 18th century.

*Taken from SMR map.*

###### SOM/408 Lower Somerton (SMR 55432)

Cropmarks of linear features have been noted on aerial photographs and interpreted as the lanes of a deserted settlement.

*Taken from SMR map.*

###### SOM/409 Somerton Erleigh (SMR 54512)

The settlement at Somerton Erleigh may date to the 9th century when a chapel is thought to have been established here. In 1337 the estate was described as a manor. In the 17th century it was operating a three or four field system (Dunning 1974:129, 135-136). Enclosures and holloways have been noted on aerial photographs in this area which is now sparsely built upon.

*Taken from SMR map.*

### 4.5 Archaeological components (later medieval), shown on Map E

#### 4.5.a Communications

##### (a) Roads, streets and routeways

###### SOM/410 West Street, Broad Street

In 1290 an area of the town was described as New Town or New Borough (Dunning 1974:130). The laying out of this area included the creation of Broad Street (previously Pig Street) and West Street. The street name West Street suggests a general shift in the focus of the town to the east, as it lies directly south of East Street which it superseded.

*Taken from 1943 Tithe map.*

*(b) Bridges*

SOM/411

Cary Bridge (SMR 54536)

Cary bridge was in existence by 1258, although it may have replaced an earlier structure. The present bridge dates to the 19th century. (Dunning 1974:130)

*Taken from SMR map.*

*4.5.b Water**not mapped*Fisheries (SMR 54537)

A fish house and fish weir stood on the river Cary between Cary Bridge and Pitney Steart in the 15th century (Dunning 1974:130).

*4.5.c Burial sites, religious houses and places of worship*

SOM/412

Cemetery, Church and Vicarage (SMR 54478)

With the abandon of East Street the cemetery expanded over the line of the road, although the North side of the church retained an important facade when rebuilt in the 13th and 14th centuries. Parch marks behind 'Old Hall' show further burials outside the area of the present cemetery. In the 17th century the vicarage was apparently only accessible through the cemetery having lost its street frontage.

*After SMR description.*

*Not mapped*Pesters Lane

It has been suggested that place name 'Pesters' may refer to a plague or leper hospital in this area (Hollinrake 1994). An alternative is that it may refer to the site of plague burials or pits dating to either the 1348, 1361 or 1665-7 outbreaks of the disease.

*4.5.d Settlement (Urban)**(a) Market place(s)*

SOM/413

Market Place

The rectangular market place between Broad Street and West Street was apparently part of the New Borough laid out by 1290. In 1331 the fairs and markets combined were valued at 30s. In the 15th century it was let for £5. In 1688 lease of the markets included shambles, a tolsey house and a shed to store sheep hurdles. There has been a market cross in the square since 1390 which was rebuilt in 1673. The cross is a octagonal roofed structure and is a scheduled ancient monument (SM 32181, SMR 54838, LB 51630).

*After Tithe map 1843.*

*(b) Burgage plots*

SOM/414

New Borough

New burgage plots were laid out along Broad Street and West Street as part of the New Borough described in 1290. This probably involved the reorganisation of tenements on the north side of West Street which previously fronted onto the south side of East Street, and encroachment onto church land on the north side of the market place and west side of Broad Street. Regular shaped plots can be seen on the 1843 tithe map, particularly on the east side of Broad Street and the south side of West Street. In 1331 the New Borough alone produced rents of £6 14s. (Dunning 1974:142).

*After 1843 Tithe Map.*

SOM/415 New Street Tenements

New Street is probably one of the earliest roads in the settlement but may have gained this name when the town expanded and new tenements were laid out along it prior to 1349 (Dunning 1974:142). Regular shaped plots are visible on both side of this road on the 1843 Tithe Map.

*After 1843 Tithe Map.*

(c) *Other town plots*SOM/420 Possible Site of Gaol and Court

The Old Hall, on the west side of Cow Square is thought to stand on the site of the medieval gaol and court of pleas. The court and gaol were transferred to Somerton from Ilchester in 1278 and 1280 respectively and were maintained into the mid-14th century. Remains of the gaol building were apparently still visible in 1579 (Dunning 1974:139).

*Taken from 1995 digital OS maps.*

4.5.e *Industrial sites*(a) *Mills*SOM/416 Melbury Windmill (SMR 54522)

By 1330 a windmill stood at Melbury. It had gone out of use by 1484 but was probably back in use by 1575 when a grain mill was sold by a James Hodges. This was probably the mill which in 1619 stood in South field. In 1715 it was described as '*the old mill near to St. Cleers Pitts*' in a field called Mill Close. It may have been called Applin's mill in 1721 and is shown on Strachey's map of 1736 and Bowen's map of 1760. It was out of use by 1802. (Dunning 1974:144) The site has been destroyed by the construction of the railway.

*Taken from SMR map.*

SOM/417 Millands Windmill (SMR 54523)

A windmill is recorded at Somerton in 1275-6 and 1330 (Dunning 1974:144). Foundations were apparently seen adjacent to a mill mound (now destroyed) in this area.

*Taken from SMR map.*

SOM/418 Somerton Watermill (SMR 54511, LB 51627)

Somerton watermill is first referred to in 1513 . By the mid-17th century it was known as Tankers Mill. It is mentioned in 1732, 1778, 1885, 1810 and 1814. In the 19th century it was used as a flour mill and a steam engine was installed there in 1910. It was used until shortly after 1935. The mill stream and sluices as well as a mill building still survive and are marked on the 1980 1:10 000 OS map.

*Taken from 1:10 000 OS map.*

SOM/419 Somerton Horse Mill (SMR 54521)

A horse mill stood on the corner of North Street and Horse Mill Lane (named after it) in 1330. It had fallen into disrepair by 1530 but by 1701 was being used as a malt mill which was used at least until 1766 (Dunning 1974:145).

*Taken from SMR map.*

## 5. POST-MEDIEVAL (Map F)

### 5.1 Archaeological work in the town/ Archaeological knowledge

Post-medieval finds and features were noted on the New Library excavations (Hollinrake 1995), the Methodist Church site (Hollinrake 1997), Churchside Cottage (Adkins 1997) and the site of Tudor Cottage (Minnitt 1979).

### 5.2 Context

The basic pattern of towns had been established by the end of the middle ages, and there were very few major changes in the post-medieval period, though the economic fortunes of particular towns rose and fell. Nearly all the Somerset towns depended on either cloth manufacture or cloth trade to some extent. Somerton was no exception, and was one of many of the 45 historic towns covered by this project which held its own economically for much of this period.

### 5.3 Standing structures and visible remains

There are 25 listed buildings from this period of which five have been graded II\*.

### 5.4 Archaeological components (centre), shown on Map F

#### 5.4.a Redevelopment in earlier settlement components

The mid-17th century was apparently a period of prosperity in Somerton, despite only small scale cloth industry, largely due to the division of King's Sedgemoor whereby the landowners of Somerton acquired an additional 1,505 acres of rich pasture (Dunning 1974:132). This improvement is shown by the re-development of buildings around the market square and main road axes. In particular, John Strangways, owner of the St. Cleer estate, built the Great House on the west side of the market in 1660, covering six burgage plots (LB 51687, 51656)(Dunning 1974:132). The market square was rearranged in this period with the construction of the scheduled market cross (SMR 54838, SM 32181), the Council House (LB 51631) and some further in-filling of the 'island'.

#### 5.4.b Manors and estates

##### SOM/501 Somerton Court (LB 51688, SMR 54531)

Somerton Court is the manor house attached to the estate of Somerton Erleigh or Lower Somerton. The estate was formed from land owned by William de Erleigh in 1176 which was known as a manor by 1337. The manor house itself was built in 1641 by James Fisher who had acquired the estate in 1597. To the south of the building, earthworks have been interpreted as either a moat or as garden features connected to the manor house.

*Taken from SMR map.*

#### 5.4.c Burial sites, religious houses and places of worship

##### SOM/505 Somerton Parsonage and Tithe Barn (LB 51685, 51686)

The tithe barn at Somerton dates to the 16th century and the Parsonage house was either built or rebuilt c.1619. Evaluation trenches to the east of the tithe barn, excavated in 1994, were interpreted as showing only agricultural use of the land (Hollinrake 1994).

*Taken from 1886 OS.*

#### 5.4.d Settlement (Urban)

##### (a) Town plots

##### SOM/502 Expansion on Langport Road

No maps exist for this period but expansion along Langport Road is shown by a number of buildings of this period which survive to the present day.

*Conjecture after listed buildings maps.*

SOM/507 Hext's Almshouses (LB 51728)  
Almshouses were built on the south side of West Street in 1626, funded by Sir Edward Hext. They were remodelled in 1883.

*Taken from Listed Building map.*

(b) *Suburbs*

SOM/503 West End  
In the 17th century Somerton housed a large number of poor. Small cottages had sprung up on the unplanned, meandering lanes of West End and in 1605 there were only 348 rated inhabitants. In 1616 there were about 360 paupers but 15 years later this number had trebled and Somerton was obliged to ask for financial help from its neighbouring parishes. The number of small cottages at West End was blamed for the poor moving there from the large rural parish. (Dunning 1974:129)

*Conjecture after 1843 Tithe Map.*

5.4.e *Industrial sites: mills*

SOM/504 Crane's Farm (LB 51691, 51692, 51693)  
The Crane's farm holding was added to the Randall estate at the turn of the 17th century. The farm holding included a windmill on Mill Lane on Perry Hill by 1616 which survived until 1802 (SMR 54490). The position of the farm on the mill stream, immediately downstream of a pond and with a building spanning the stream is highly suggestive that there was also a water mill on the farm. Further research is required to ascertain if there are surviving documentary records referring to this mill.

*After SMR map and 1886 OS.*

5.4.f *Other*

SOM/506 Pound (SMR 54520)  
A pound was mentioned in 1572, situated at the end of West Street in the area of the Triangle. It was built over with three houses by 1661.

*Taken from SMR map.*

## 6. INDUSTRIAL (LATE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURY) (Map G)

### 6.1 *Archaeological work in the town/ Archaeological knowledge* None.

### 6.2 *Context*

The late 18th and 19th centuries saw some changes to the urban pattern, with the beginning of the emergence of larger centres (often at the expense of smaller ones), linked by vastly improved communication lines (turnpikes, railways and canals). Somerset was not characterised by the kind of large scale industrialisation and urbanisation seen in other counties - indeed, the virtual collapse of its most important industry, which was cloth, affected nearly all of the medieval and post-medieval towns - but some did take place. The changes were reflected in a series of alterations to town governance, which left the county with a total of only fifteen Municipal Boroughs and Urban Districts by the end of the 19th century.

Somerton is one of the 22 or so places which though they did not merit Borough or Urban District status at the end of the 19th century, remained market centres and can probably still be regarded as towns (though several of them had sunk towards village status during the course of the century).

### 6.3 Standing structures and visible remains

There are 95 listed buildings of this period.

### 6.4 Archaeological components (centre), shown on Map G

#### 6.4.a Communications: roads, streets and routeways

##### SOM/601 Huish Road/Lodge Hill

The roads around Somerton Randle manor house were diverted in the first half of the 19th century in order to improve the property with the creation of park land covering all the land between the river and these roads.

*Taken from 1903 OS.*

##### SOM/611 Turnpiked Roads

The mains routes west, north and east of the town were turnpiked by the Langport and Castle Cary Trust in 1753. Added to these were the Cary Bridge to Kingsdon road in 1777 and the road south to Catsgore in 1856-7. (Dunning 1974:130)

#### 6.4.b Manors and estates

##### SOM/602 Somerton Erleigh House and Park (LB 51624, 51625)

The Somerton Erleigh Manor House was built in the late 18th century and was extensively reworked in 1846. The park was laid out over the same period. Although the park survives it is not currently listed in the parks and gardens register. In the grounds is a surviving wooden icehouse (Anon 1984, Radford 1951).

*Taken from 1903 OS.*

#### 6.4.c Burial sites, religious houses and places of worship

##### SOM/603 Cemetery

A cemetery was established on the north side of Behind Berry prior to 1886.

*Taken from 1886 OS.*

##### SOM/609 Chapels

Three chapels were established in Somerton in the 19th century. The Congregational chapel, situated on the south side of Sutton Road was first built in 1803, enlarged in 1822 and 1865 with a lecture hall added in 1873. A licence for the Methodist chapel was first granted in 1810 and the present building was constructed in 1845. A Zion chapel (site unknown) was built in 1841 and licensed in 1844. (Dunning 1974:150-1)

*Taken from 1903 OS.*

#### 6.4.d Settlement (Suburban)

##### SOM/604 Suburban Building

Very little suburban expansion took place around Somerton in this period evidenced by the 1843 Tithe Map and 1903 OS 1:2500 maps. Some new building can be seen at Northfield, The Lynch and on Kirkham Street.

*Taken from 1903 OS.*

##### SOM/605 Lower Somerton

The extent of settlement at Lower Somerton is not known precisely for earlier periods. The area mapped here is taken from the 1903 OS map.

*Taken from 1903 OS.*



**6.4.e Settlement (Rural)**

SOM/606 Melbury, Somerton Court Farm, Bower's Hill, Wasps Nest, Dairy House  
Each of these farms is shown beyond the edge of the town on the 1903 OS, although some are likely to have earlier antecedents.

*Taken from 1903 OS*

Mowrie's Farm, Sunhouse Farm, Home Farm

Each of these farms is shown on the 1886 OS within the area of the town, showing the essentially rural character of this small market town.

*Taken from 1903 OS, 1886 OS.*

**6.4.f Industrial sites**

SOM/608 Gasworks  
The Gas and sewage works were situated on the north side of Horse Mill Lane. Several of the features of the gas works survive (D. Warren 1996:38) including a distinctive retort house. The whole area was converted to a milk depot and factory from 1926.

*Taken from 1903 OS*

SOM/610 Brewery (LB 51714)  
Somerton brewery on the north side of West Street was in existence by 1840 and survived until the end of the first world war. (Dunning 1974:142). The brewery house with some of the workshops behind the street frontage survive as a listed grade II building.

*Taken from listed buildings maps.*

*not mapped* Linen Collar Factory  
A linen collar factory was established on Broad Street in 1866 by Welsh and Clark. It was closed in 1935 (Dunning 1974:143).

*not mapped* Other Industries  
A rope twine making and bonnet making enterprise, a gloving and shoe binding factory and a cardboard box factory were established in the 19th century. The precise locations of these industries have not been established.

## **7. 20TH CENTURY** **(Map H)**

**7.1 Context**

The 20th century has seen a vast physical expansion of some existing towns, and some expansion in most of the 45 historic towns covered by the project. However, there have only been limited alterations to the overall pattern of urban settlement. The County Structure Plan still contains fifteen settlements defined as Towns: this is almost identical to the late 19th century list of Municipal Boroughs and Urban Districts. Somerton is one of 30 of the 45 historic towns covered by this project which is not classed as a town in the County Structure Plan.

**7.2 Standing structures and visible remains**

There is (probably) one, twentieth century listed structure in Somerton (LB 51614). An ornamental water trough, drinking fountain and standard lamp was erected in Cow Square either in 1887 to commemorate Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee (Warren 1996:35) or in 1902 to commemorate the coronation of King Edward VII (listed building register).

### 7.3 Settlement components, shown on **Map H**

#### 7.3.a Communications: railways

##### SOM/701 Railway

This branch of the Great Western Railway was opened in 1906. Somerton had suffered commercially from the lack of a railway from an earlier date but the station only lasted until 1964 (Dunning 1974:130). The line runs through the centre of the town in a deep cutting, obliterating the last remnant of the redundant East Street (see above). This stretch of line includes a particularly fine viaduct of five brick arches to the north-east of the town and is still in use (Warren 1996:38).

*Taken from 1995 digital OS maps.*

#### 7.3.b Burial sites, religious houses and places of worship

##### SOM/702 Catholic Church

A wooden Catholic Church was opened in 1927, dedicated to St. Dunstan. It was replaced by the present building in 1965.

*Taken from 1995 digital OS maps.*

##### SOM/703 St. Cleers Chapel

A Brethren chapel was opened in 1946, off Sutton Road.

*Taken from 1995 digital OS maps.*

#### 7.3.c Settlement (Suburban)

##### SOM/704 20th Century Housing

Somerton has expanded rapidly in the 20th century as a pleasant rural dormitory town for both Taunton and Yeovil. New housing has filled in the West End, and new estates can be seen on both sides of Behind Berry and on part of the Millands.

*Taken from 1995 digital OS maps.*

#### 7.3.d Industrial sites

##### SOM/705 Industrial Zone

A trading estate has been built on the north side of Bancombe Hill on the outskirts of the town.

*Taken from 1995 digital OS maps.*

##### SOM/706 Milk Depot

The site previously used for gas and sewage works was converted to use as a milk depot and factory in 1926.

*Taken from 1980 1:10 000 OS.*

#### 7.3.e Agricultural sites

##### SOM/707 Fishery

A large fishery is shown on the 1995 digital OS on the north side of Bradley Hill.

*Taken from 1995 digital OS maps.*

## V. THE POTENTIAL OF SOMERTON

### 1. Research interests

Somerton is of particular interest as an important Saxon royal estate centre, although the precise location of the earliest settlement is still to be ascertained. The location of any surviving Saxon remains is clearly of great interest,

and may include remains of rich manorial structures. There is also the intriguing suggestion of continuity of occupation if the burials seen near to the north wall of the churchyard are shown to be Roman in date. Somerton was an important place in the medieval period, the form of the earlier medieval town suggested here requires further investigation, evaluation of plots around the Triangle and along the line of the proposed East Street would be of particular interest in that respect. The layout of the later medieval town is reasonably well preserved although the railway and later building have eroded the form of the burgage plots. Those on North Street, Broad Street and New Street appear to have survived most completely and efforts should be made to preserve the character of these areas of the town. The amount of rebuilding in the town centre in the 17th century attest the prosperity of town at this time and as much of the centre has escaped redevelopment since, the archaeological record for this period is likely to be well preserved.

Outside of the town centre Somerton Erleigh and St Cleers are both likely to have had Saxon settlement, including at Somerton Erleigh a 9th century church. The extent, precise dates and character of the early settlement is, in both cases, still to be established.

## **2. Areas of potentially exceptional preservation**

There are, as yet, no obvious areas of exceptional preservation.

## **3. Limitations**

The preservation of archaeological remains is likely to be limited by subsequent phases of rebuilding in the town centre.

## **4. Extent of current protection**

The market cross is a scheduled monument (SM 32181), as is the site of the Roman villa and medieval settlement at Melbury (SM Somerset 232). There is a Conservation Area and an Area of High Archaeological Potential (AHAP) has been designated based on this report.

## **5. Management Proposals**

See the Archaeological Guidance Document.

# **VI. SOURCES**

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## 3. Maps

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- 1843 Tithe Map
- 1886 OS 1:2500 1st Edition
- 1903 OS 6" second Edition
- 1980 OS 1:10 000
- 1995 OS Digital Maps

## 4. Archaeological Interventions

Year	Site	Grid Refs	SMR	Report
1949	Eval., Melbury	4717 2897	54489	Dewar (1949)
1949	Eval., barrow circle	479 275	54488	no report found
1978	WB Tudor Cottage	490 284	56933	Minnitt (1979)
1994	Eval., Somerton Old Parsonage	494 285	90032	Hollinrake, archive report in SMR
1995	Eval., Easton House	4888 2855	55852	Hollinrake, archive report in SMR
1997	WB, Churchside Cottage	4905 2857	56918	Adkins, archive report in SMR

1997	WB, New Library	4888 2855	55984	Adkins, archive report in SMR
1997	WB, Methodist Church	4896 2858	55985	Hollinrake, archive report in SMR
1998	WB, water main renewal	495 283	44888	Hollinrale, archive reporet in SMR
1998	WB, Stationery House	4900 2851	56976	Graham, archive report in SMR
2001	Eval., St Michael's church	4906 2862	11698	Graham, archive report in SMR
2001	Eval., St Cleer's Lodge	4804 2824	11292	Adam, archive report in SMR

## VII. COMPONENT INDEXES

### 1. Component to map

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		SOM/419	E
SOM/201	B		
SOM/202	B	SOM/501	F
SOM/203	B	SOM/502	F
SOM/204	B	SOM/503	F
SOM/205	B	SOM/504	F
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		SOM/506	F
SOM/301	C	SOM/506	F
SOM/302	C		
SOM/303	C	SOM/601	G
		SOM/602	G
SOM/401	D	SOM/603	G
SOM/402	D	SOM/604	G
SOM/403	D	SOM/605	G
SOM/404	D	SOM/606	G
SOM/405	D	SOM/608	G
SOM/406	D	SOM/609	G
SOM/407	D	SOM/610	G
SOM/408	D	SOM/611	G
SOM/409	D		
		SOM/701	H
SOM/410	E	SOM/702	H
SOM/411	E	SOM/703	H
SOM/412	E	SOM/704	H
SOM/413	E	SOM/705	H
SOM/414	E	SOM/706	H
SOM/415	E	SOM/707	H
SOM/420	E		

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SOM/303	8, 21
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## Maps

### **Map A - prehistoric**

### **Map B - Roman**

### **Map C -Saxon**

### **Map D - earlier medieval**

Earlier components shown in yellow.

### **Map E - later medieval**

Earlier components shown in yellow.

### **Map F - post-medieval**

Earlier components shown in yellow.

### **Map G - industrial**

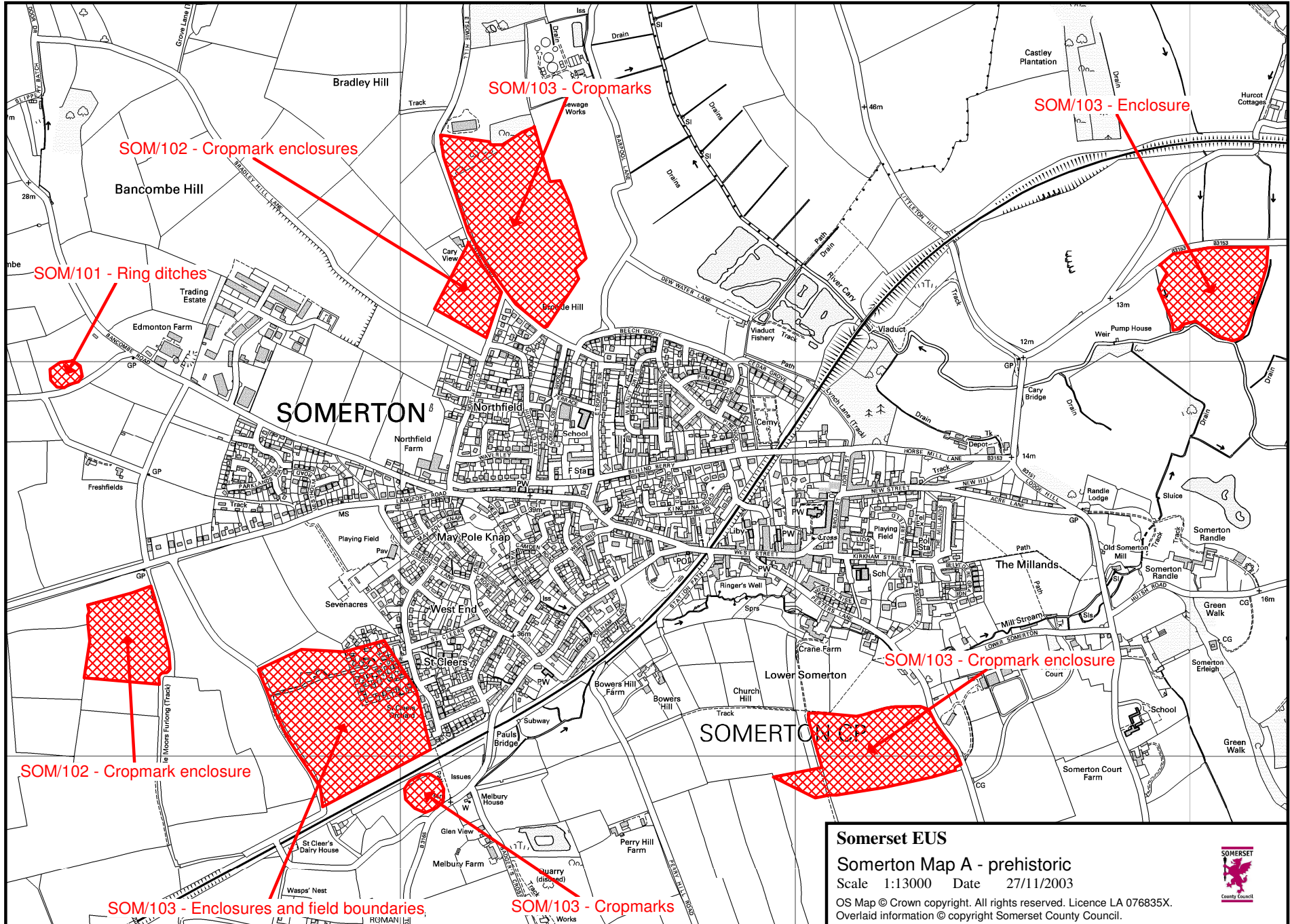
Earlier components shown in yellow.

### **Map H - 20<sup>th</sup> century**

Earlier components shown in yellow.

### **Map D - Existing designations**

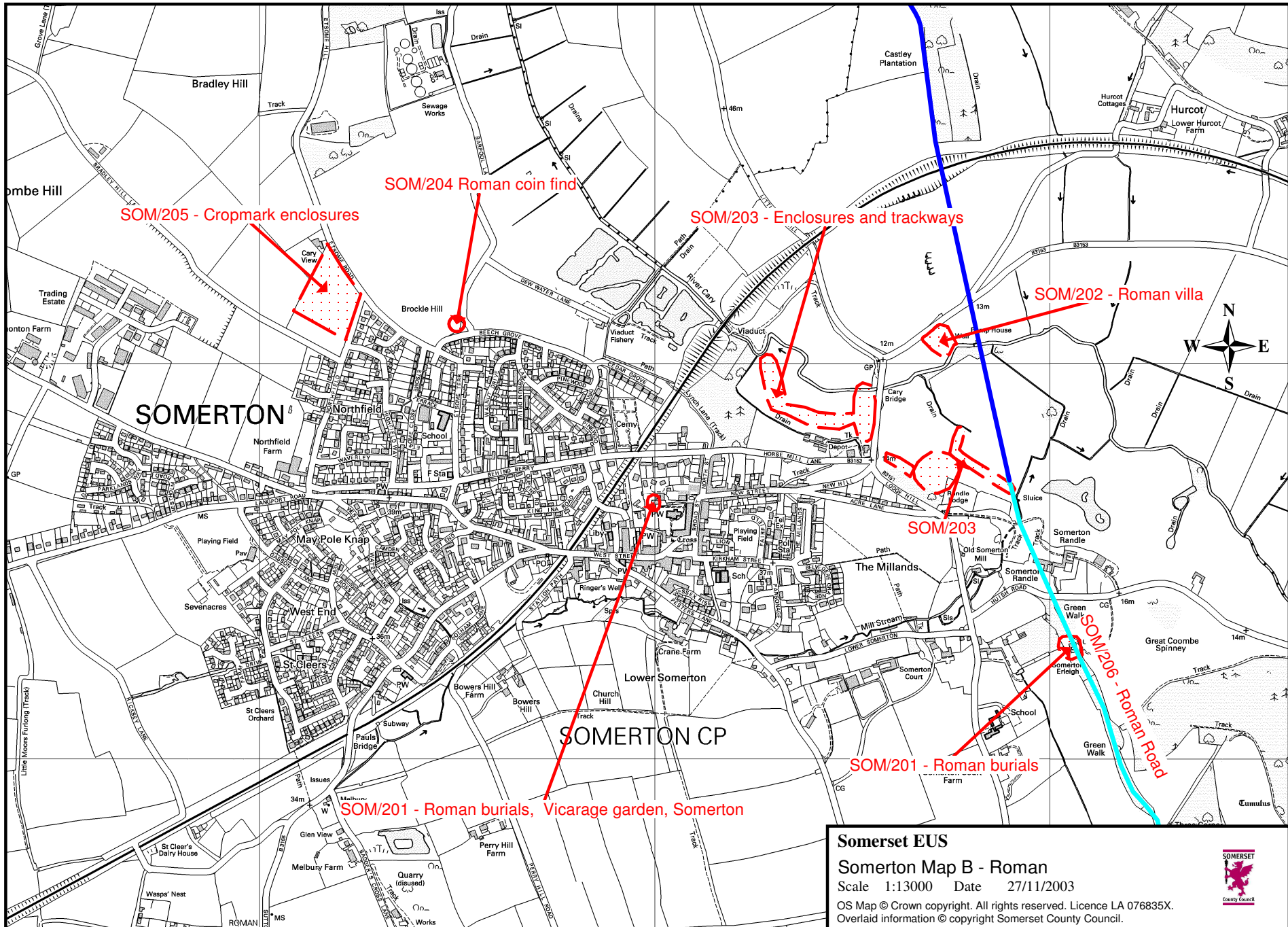
Key: Scheduled Monuments (dark blue),  
Listed Buildings Grade I (light blue)  
Grade II\* (light green)  
Grade II (green)  
Registered Park (brown, none)  
Conservation Area (green)  
Area of High Archaeological Potential (pink)

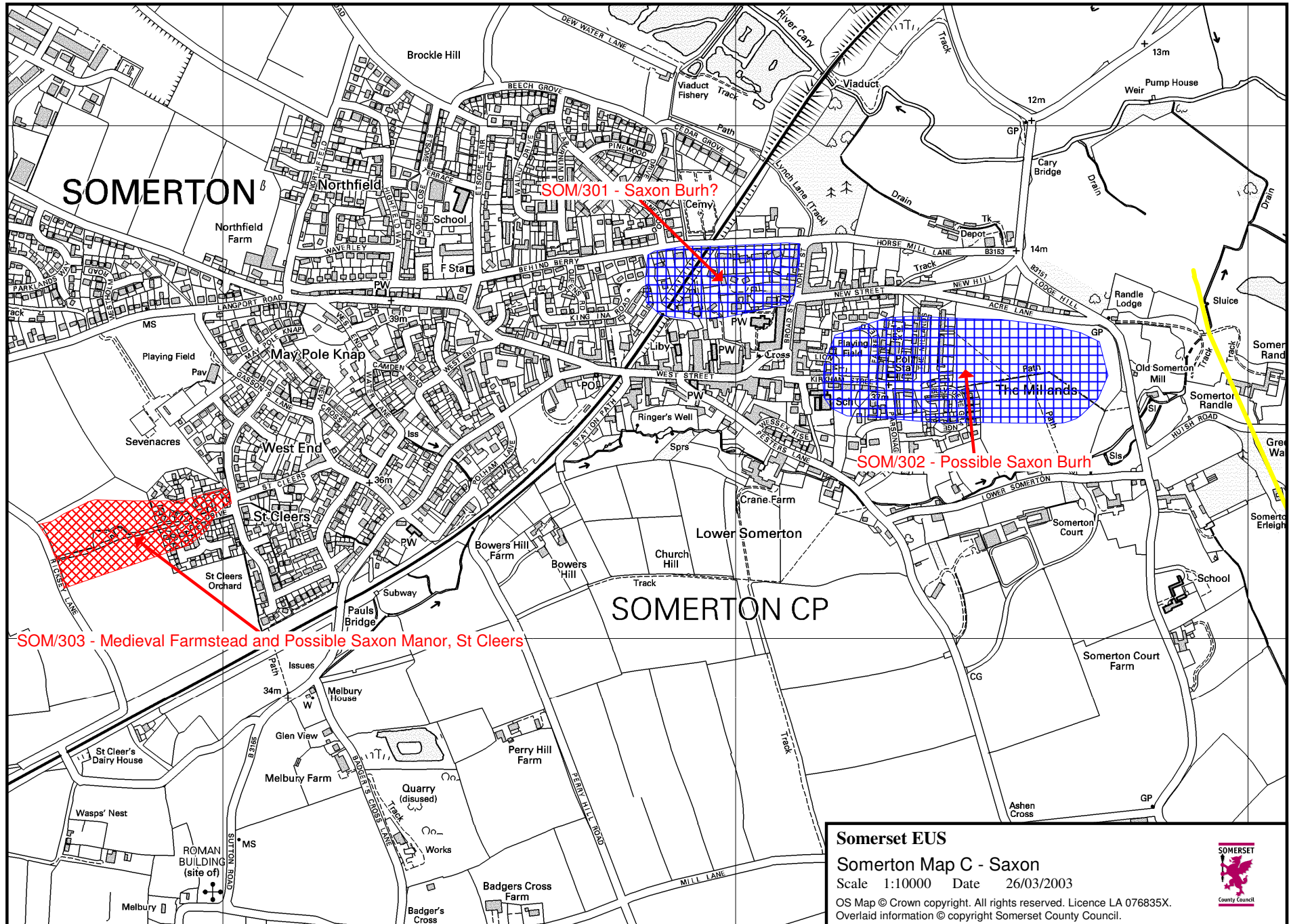


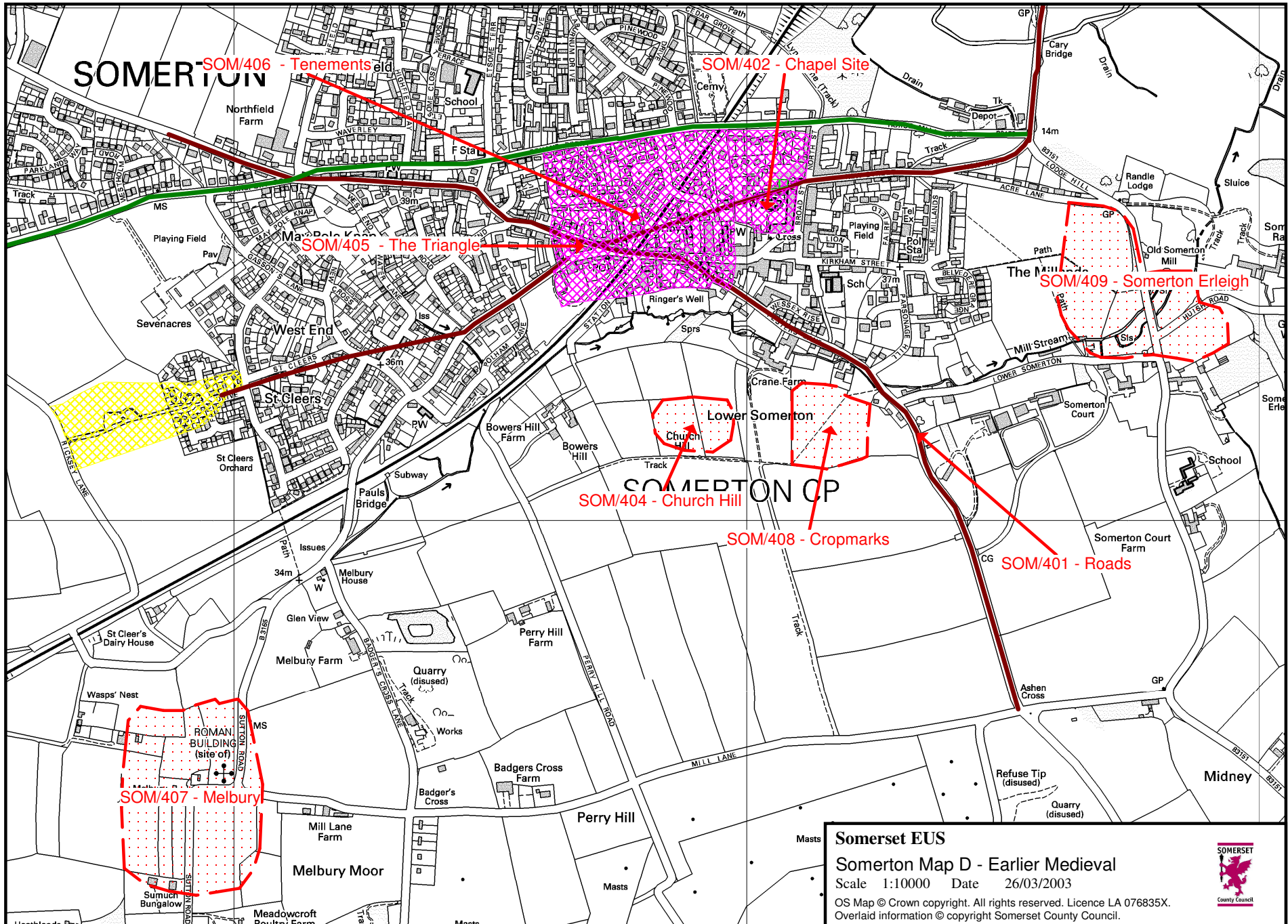
**Somerset EUS**  
**Somerton Map A - prehistoric**  
 Scale 1:13000 Date 27/11/2003

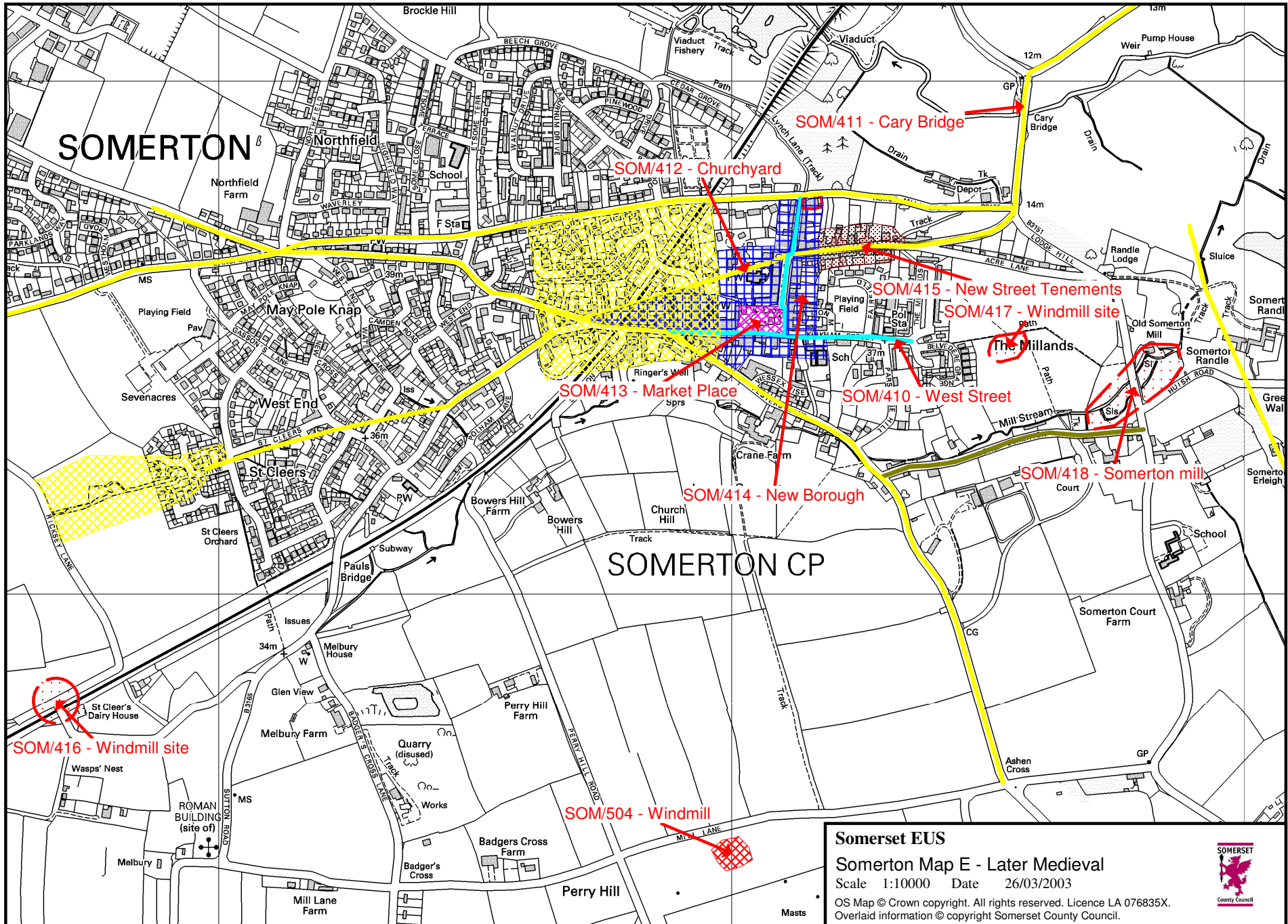
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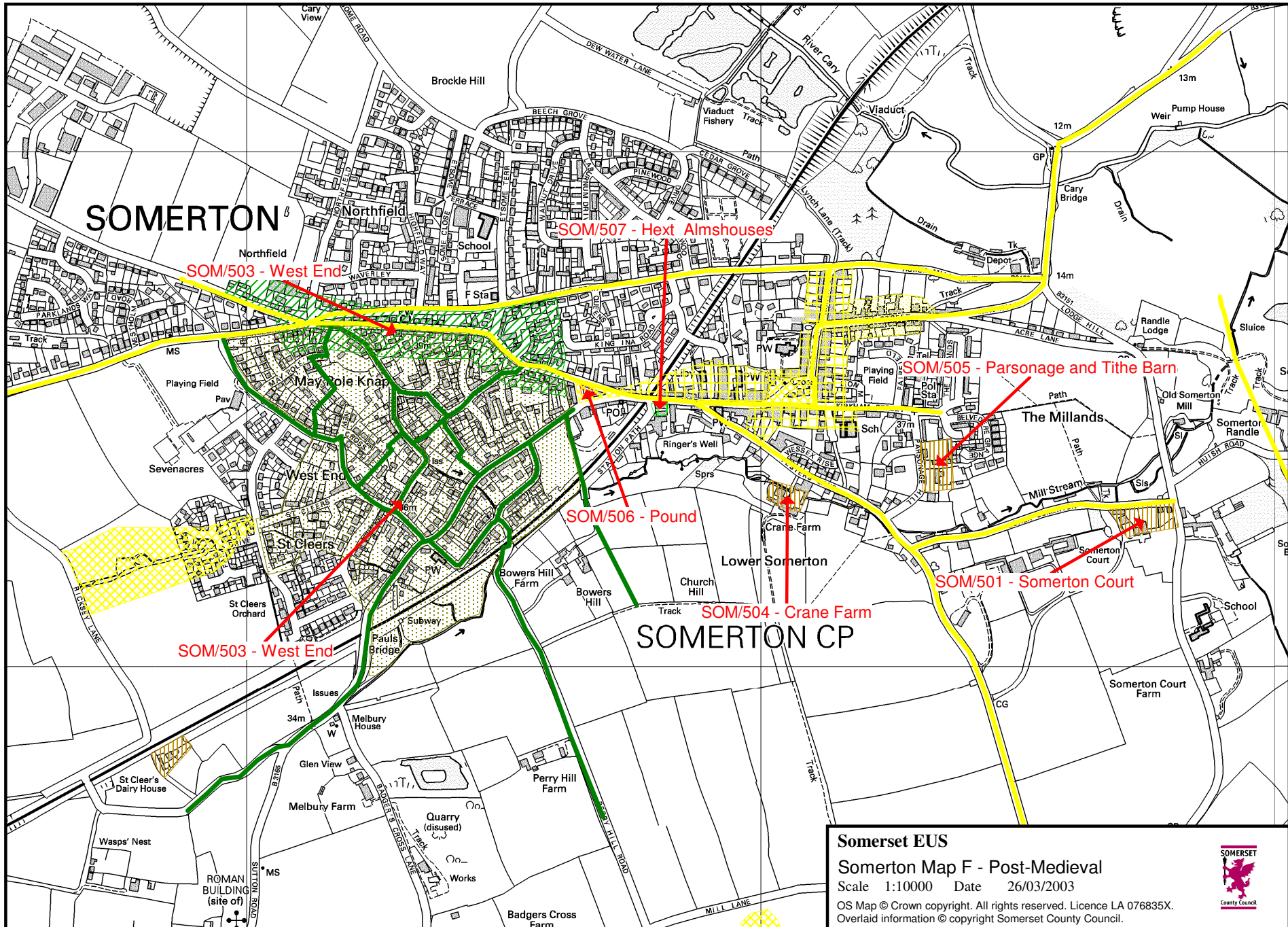


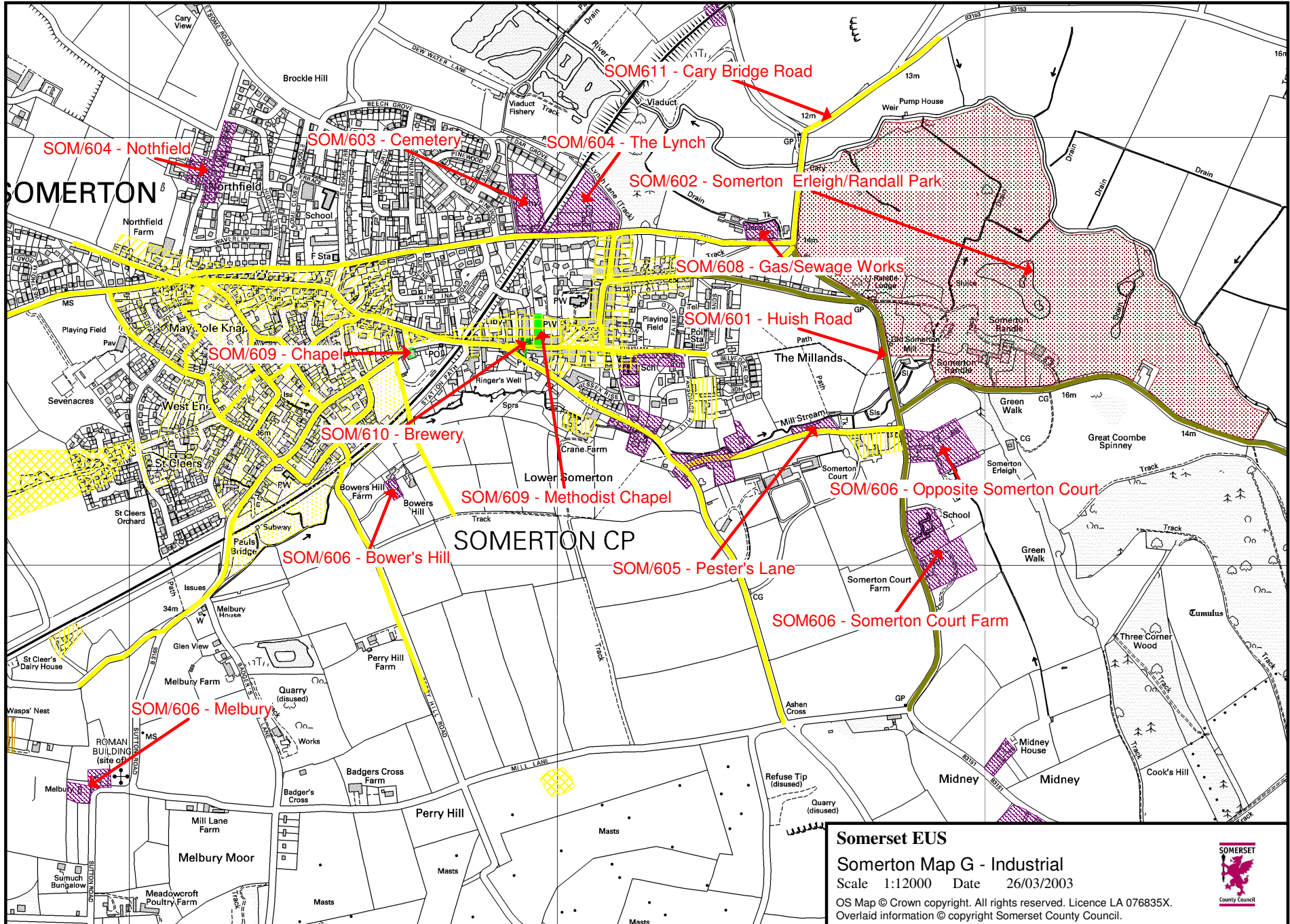












**Somerset EUS**

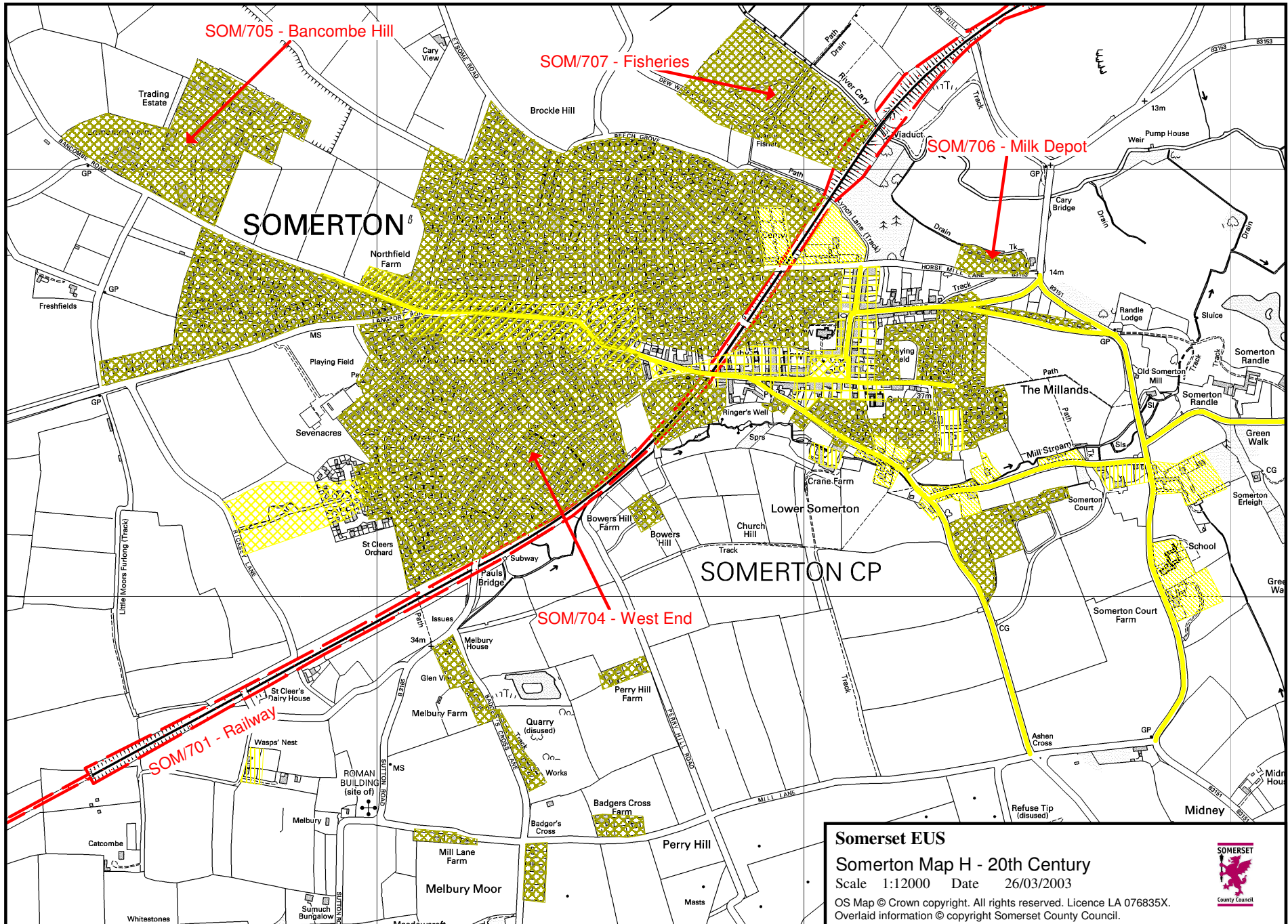
**Somerton Map G - Industrial**

Scale 1:12000 Date 26/03/2003

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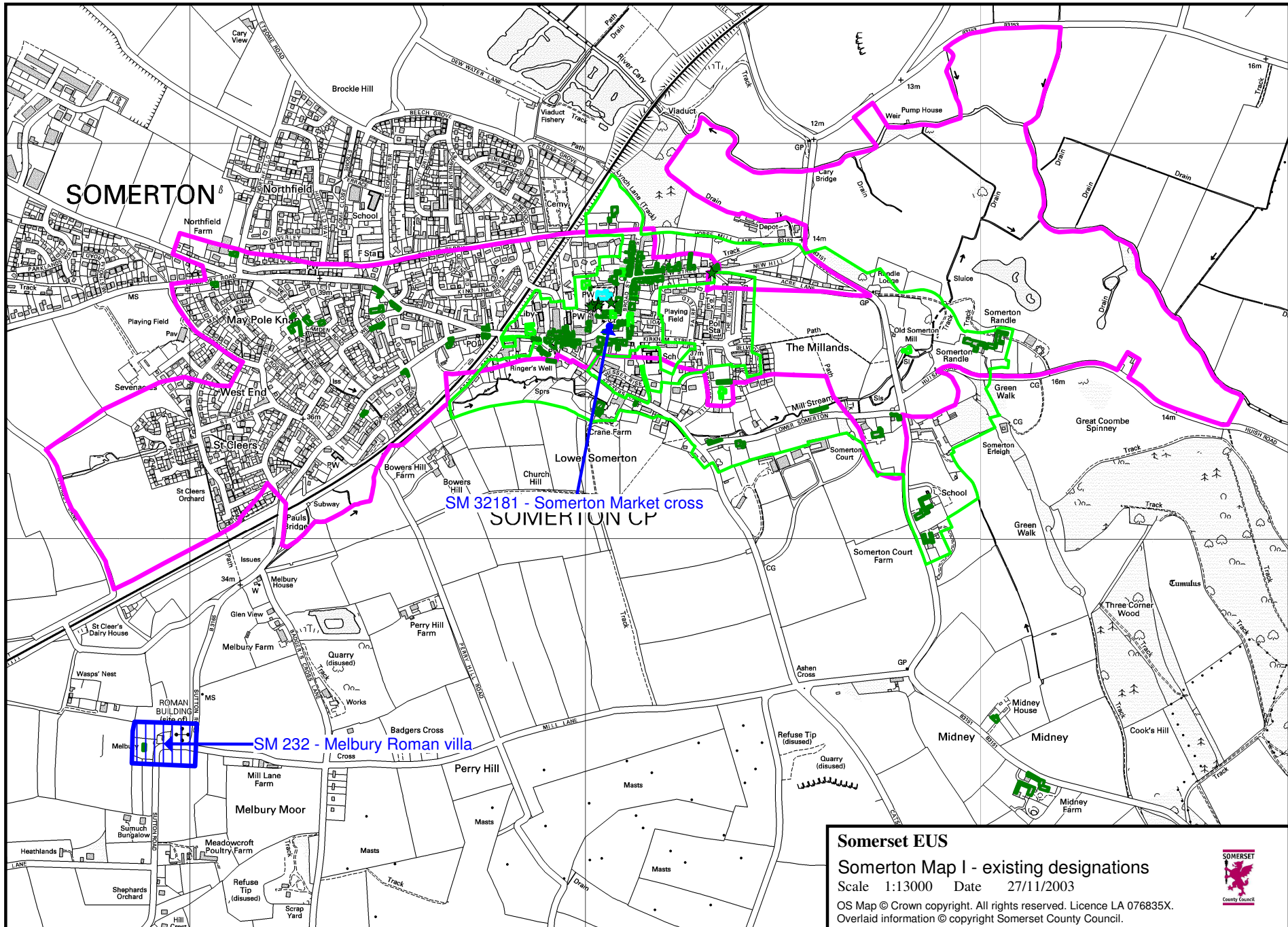




**Somerset EUS**  
**Somerton Map H - 20th Century**  
 Scale 1:12000 Date 26/03/2003

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**Somerset EUS**  
**Somerton Map I - existing designations**  
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