

## Clayland colonisation: recent work on Romano-British and medieval reclamation in the Somerset Levels

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Somerset has a remarkably diverse landscape at the very heart of which lie the extensive reclaimed wetlands of the Levels and Moors. In the very first Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological Society, William Stradling (1849) published a paper reporting some recent archaeological discoveries there, and since then scarcely a decade has gone by without further research into Somerset's wetland heritage.

Three pieces of archaeological work in particular can be singled out as being of international importance: the excavation of Glastonbury and Meare Lake Villages by Arthur Bulleid and Harold St George Gray, the pioneering palaeoenvironmental analysis of Harry Godwin (eg 1941), and the major programme of work carried out in advance of commercial peat cutting by John and Bryony Coles (1986). Michael Williams' (1970) use of the area's rich documentary archives in his historical study of *The Draining of the Somerset Levels* also represents a seminal piece of historical geography. By the 1980s, the Somerset peatlands had become one of the more thoroughly investigated landscapes in Britain, and the on-going programme of work by Somerset County Council continues to make important new discoveries (Brunning 1997b). However, much remained to be done, most particularly on the remarkably well-preserved, yet previously neglected, Romano-British and medieval landscapes of the coastal claylands.

The potential of the coastal area should have been recognised earlier, notably through the diligent recording of sites around Burnham-on-Sea by Samuel Nash (1973), and on the North Somerset Levels by Marie Clarke (eg 1980), and the North Somerset Archaeological Research Group (Lilly and Usher 1972). In reading these reports (and in particular the correspondence of Nash: see Rippon 1995), one senses a feeling of surprise at the amount of material being found on the coastal claylands which had long been thought of as one of the less favourable environments in Somerset in which to live, even though less than a hundred years earlier a well-appointed villa was excavated at Wemberham, at the very centre of the North Somerset Levels (Reade 1885). Though a handful of Romano-British villas appear to have had a significant industrial element to their economy, most were essentially the centres of agricultural estates, and as such Wemberham is testimony to just how productive the Levels were 1,700 years ago. However, the actual character of those landscapes remained illusive, for although the earthworks of a number of potentially Romano-British field systems were recognised during the 1970s, no systematic fieldwork or palaeoenvironmental work was carried out (Leech 1981; McDonnell 1979).

A series of historical studies had also shown how productive the Levels were during the medieval

period, though work had focused on the well-documented ecclesiastical estates most notably of Glastonbury Abbey (Keil 1964; Stacey 1972; Williams 1970). Very limited archaeological work had been carried out on a number of medieval settlements, most notably by Nash, though most remained unpublished (Rippon 1994, fig. 12.5; 1995). As with so many areas typified by dispersed settlement patterns, the lack of deserted medieval villages has led to the area's neglect by medieval archaeology.

The 1990s have seen important advances in our understanding of four areas, the last of which was dealt with in David Musgrove's paper at the conference (unfortunately not available for the present volume):

1. the methodologies used for understanding wetland landscapes, notably the range of survey techniques employed, the integration of palaeoenvironmental evidence, and the combination of this with archaeological and documentary material and evidence contained within the present, or "historic", landscape
2. the character of the Romano-British landscape, and in particular the extent of reclamation
3. the process of medieval reclamation on the coastal marshes, especially its earliest (undocumented) stages
4. the nature of medieval wetland exploitation in the lower-lying inland freshwater backfens

## Understanding wetland landscapes

The careful integration of survey and excavation, and in particular strategies for collecting palaeoenvironmental data, is now common-place in landscape archaeology (eg Gerrard, Tabor, this volume) though wetlands present particular problems. In certain circumstances, the full range of earthwork survey, fieldwalking, metal-detecting, geophysics, and soil chemistry can be applied not just to individual sites but to whole landscapes, as was the case at Banwell Moor and Kenn Moor on the North Somerset Levels (Figure 14.1 on the next page; Rippon 1997a; forthcoming a). However, whereas until fairly recently, the Levels were thought to comprise alternating layers of peat and clay, it is increasingly recognised that there are also a series

of more ephemeral buried ground surfaces within at least the upper part of the alluvial sequence, and these are more difficult to investigate (Rippon forthcoming a; and see Locock *et al.* 1998; Locock and Walker 1998 for other examples elsewhere around the Severn Estuary); the emphasis placed upon boreholes in archaeological evaluations may well have led to a failure to locate similar buried landscapes, as they only become clearly visible in carefully cleaned long sections.

When located, the preservation of both archaeological and palaeoenvironmental material in the coastal claylands can be excellent, and allows for detailed reconstruction of the character of these early landscapes (eg Jones *et al.* forthcoming). Another important source of information is the present landscape itself – the patterns of fields, roads and settlements – from which the processes whereby tidal saltmarshes were embanked and drained during the medieval period can be postulated (Rippon 1997b, fig. 7). However, while morphological analysis of this type can sometimes suggest the relative sequence in which different parts of the landscape may have come into being, the careful integration of archaeological and documentary sources is required before these landscapes can really be understood (Figures 14.2 on page 88 and 14.3 on page 89). For both the Roman and medieval periods, there are three key questions: when did reclamation occur, why was there such an enormous investment of resources in these physically "marginal" landscapes which remained vulnerable to flooding, and who was responsible for making those decisions.

## The Romano-British period

By the 1970s, there were numerous findspots of Romano-British material from the alluvial areas of the Somerset Levels, though the character of the landscape that they came from was ill-understood. However, a re-assessment of the available data led to a generalised model of what that landscape must have looked like (Rippon 1995; 1997a, 65–80). In the Brue Valley, the archaeological record is dominated by salt production, though the seasonal grazing of sheep and cattle was also probably important. However, to the north of a now extinct river, the "Siger", the landscape around Brent Knoll was very different. The presence of several substantial stone buildings, including the "villa" at Lakehouse Farm,

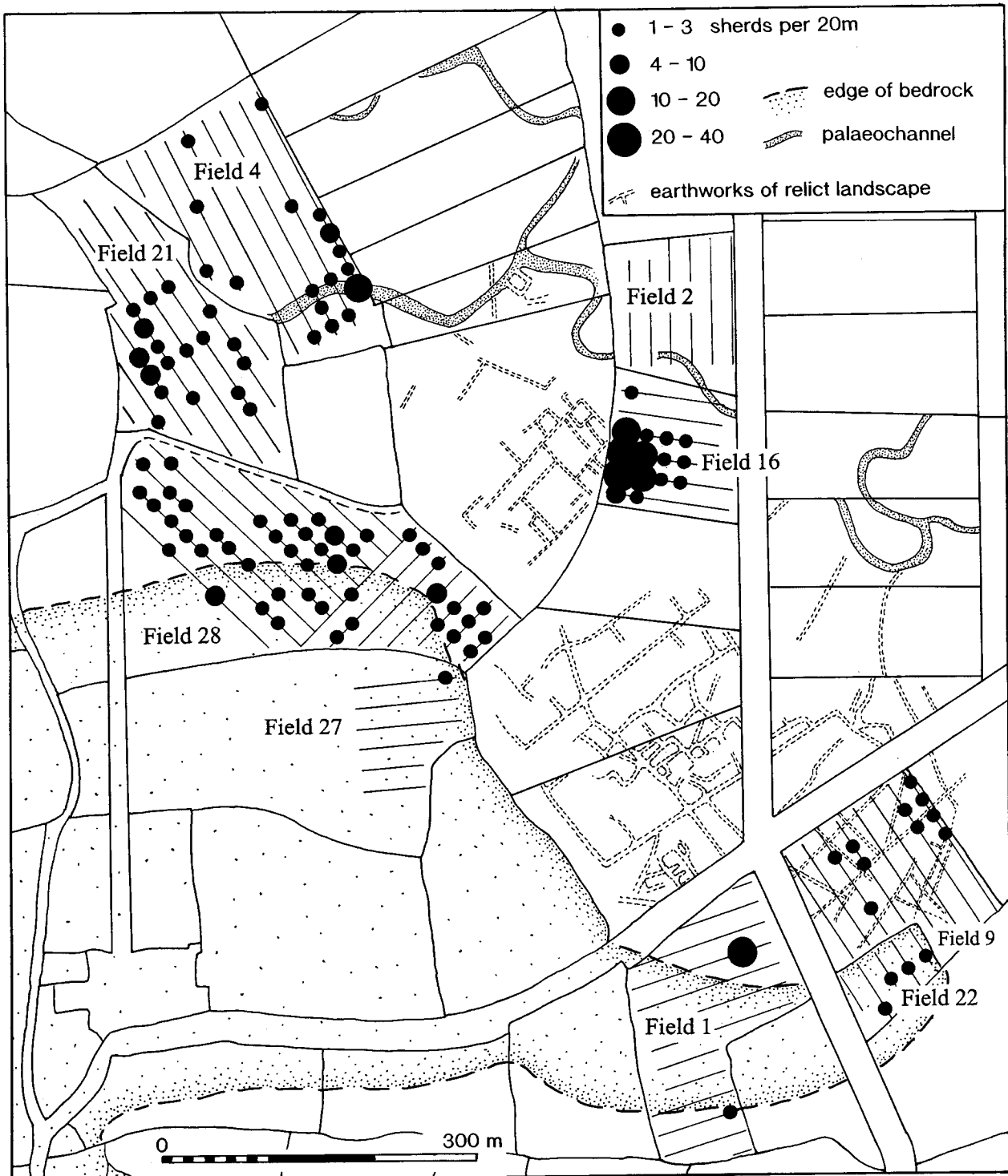


Figure 14.1: *The 3rd–4th century Romano-British ditched drainage system at Kenn Moor on the North Somerset Levels. The greatest concentration of pottery was recovered from fieldwalking in the western part of field 16 which corresponded to the eastern corner of the main settlement. Lesser amounts of material in fields 4, 21, 28 and 9 are indicative of fairly intensive manuring of an arable infield; the smaller amounts of material in the northern parts of fields 4 and 21 might indicate a less intensively manured outfield area.*

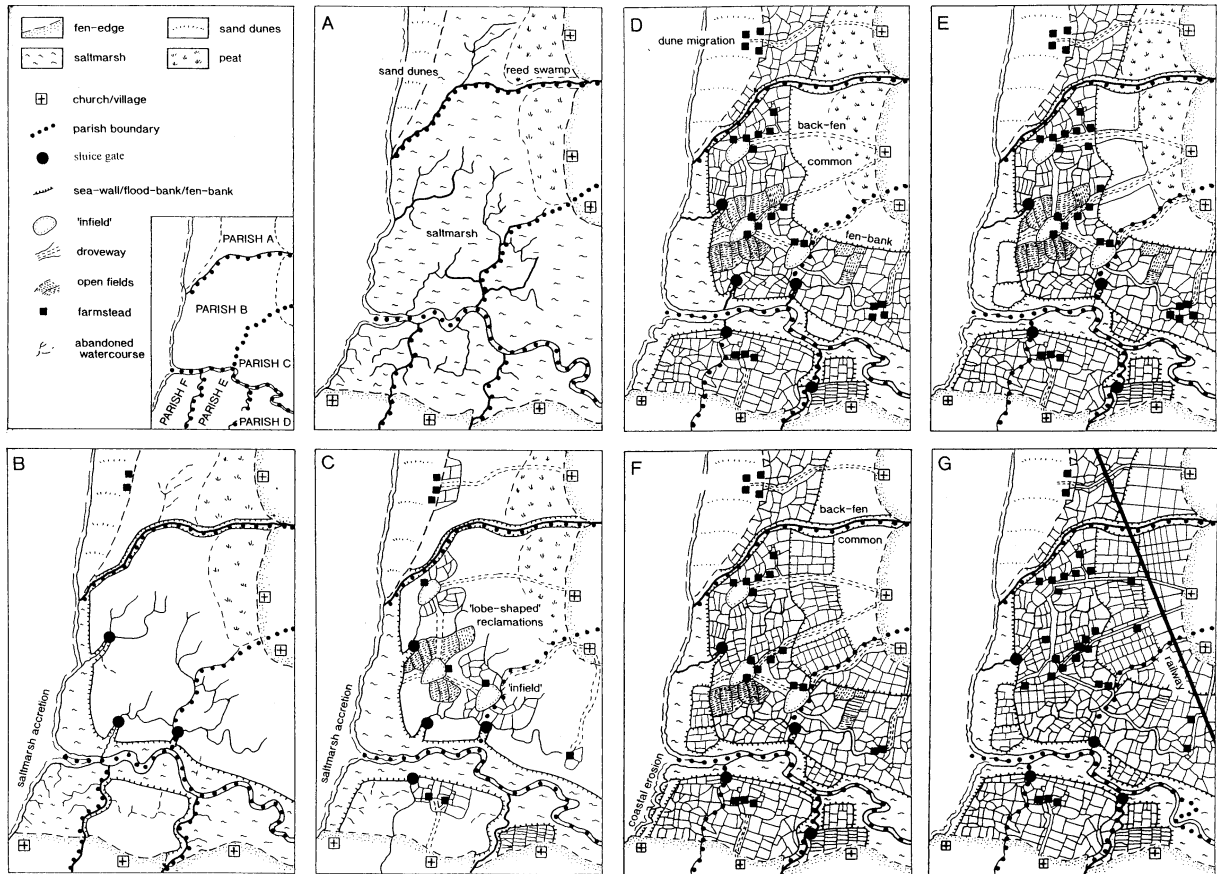


Figure 14.2: A–G: A schematic model for the reclamation of an area of coastal wetland such as the Somerset Levels, where the initial act was the construction of a sea wall along the coast. See also Figure 14.3 on the next page

along with the existence of buried soils recorded along the line of the M5 motorway and a pipeline south of Lympsham, indicate a landscape that was free from tidal flooding: the rivers “Siger” and Axe must have been embanked, and the landscape drained by a system of ditches (also recorded during the construction of the M5 and Lympsham pipeline).

The problem with the Romano-British landscape south of Mendip is that subsequent tidal flooding has buried it under c.0.7m of alluvium: it is only visible on the surface in the Axe Valley south of Cheddar (which lay beyond the limits of the post-Roman flooding). On the North Somerset Levels, however, a number of undated earthwork complexes have now been dated to the Roman period, and represent ditched drainage systems that were contemporary with the villa at Wemberham (Figure 14.1 on the

preceding page; Rippon forthcoming a). Palaeoenvironmental analysis has shown how the pre-Roman saltmarsh, associated with salt production sites at Banwell Moor and Puxton Dolmoors, was replaced around the 3rd century AD by a wholly freshwater environment used for mixed agriculture, including the cultivation of oats and barley. The location of the sea walls is not known, though they probably lay some way out into the Estuary: post-Roman coastal erosion on the Welsh side has removed at least eight hundred metres of reclaimed land (Allen and Rippon 1997, 356; Fulford *et al.* 1994).

Reclamation appears to have taken place to improve agricultural productivity, though the impoverished material culture from the three settlements excavated indicate that they were tenant farms, perhaps of Wemberham, or the numerous other villas that ring the North Somerset Levels. Indeed, this

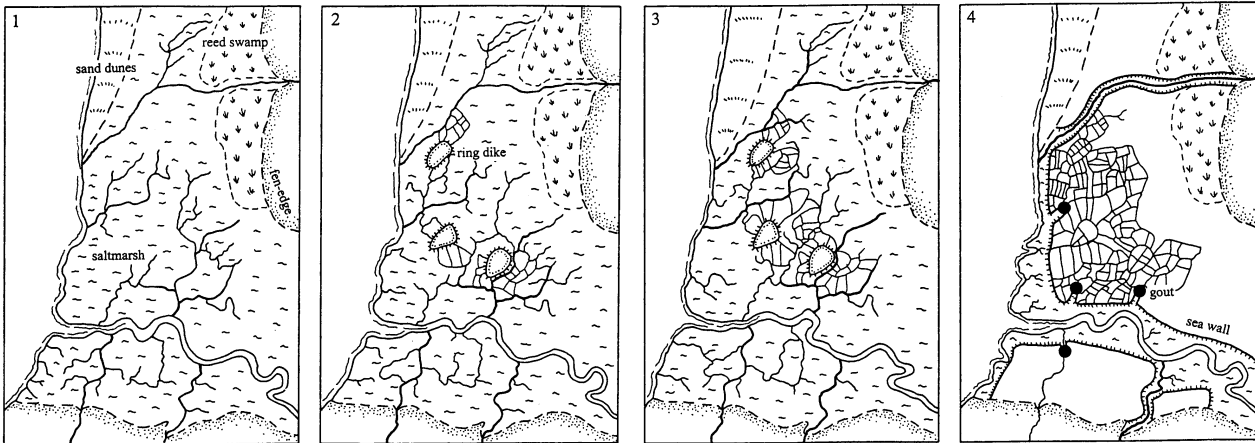


Figure 14.3: 1–4: An alternative schematic model, to that in Figure 14.2 on the facing page, for the reclamation of an area of coastal wetland such as the Somerset Levels, where the initial act was the enclosure of small areas of marsh with a ring dike: is this the origin of the “infield” enclosures seen throughout the coastal parts of the Somerset Levels (eg Figure 14.4 on the next page)? The answer to this question must await the current programme of excavation and palaeoenvironmental analysis.

investment of resources in reclamation forms part of a far wider pattern of late Roman agricultural wealth and innovation seen through much of the region (Rippon 1999; forthcoming b). Even so, part of the Somerset Levels – the Brue Valley – was left as a tidal marsh and exploited for its natural resources, notably salt production: clearly, a conscious decision was made to divide this landscape and use certain areas in very different ways.

## The medieval period

Recent work has confirmed that all of the coastal wetlands around the Severn Estuary were affected by a period of post-Roman inundation first postulated by Godwin (1943; Rippon 1997b, 124–7; forthcoming a; forthcoming b). Domesday shows that the coastal marshes were extensively re-occupied by the late 11th century, and the extent of settlement, size of populations and numbers of plough-teams recorded, strongly suggest that these areas were protected from tidal inundation by one or more sea walls (experiments on the continent have shown that cultivation is possible on a high tidal marsh, and that this was often associated with settlements located on artificially raised platforms, though no such sites are known in Somerset). However, many questions remain unanswered, notably the date when this reclamation occurred, and the way in which it

was undertaken, though current research at Puxton, on the North Somerset Levels is starting to shed new light on these important issues. Attention is focused on an oval-shaped enclosure, or “infield”, one of a series of such features that appear to be the earliest features in the historic landscape (Figures 14.2 and 14.3; Gilbert 1996a; Rippon 1994, 144–7; 1997b, 172–3). Excavations have confirmed the impression given by earthwork survey, fieldwalking and soil chemistry that a farmstead-sized settlement, established by the 10th century, occupied the north eastern part of the enclosure, south of the church, and that the rest of the “infield” was used for agricultural purposes (Figure 14.4 on the next page). The “infield” was surrounded by a ditch and bank, and it is hoped that subsequent palaeoenvironmental analysis will establish whether this was constructed directly on the surface of an active saltmarsh and may even have acted as a sea wall.

By the 11th/12th century Puxton had expanded from its original core in the northern part of the “infield”, but although a substantial hamlet-sized settlement emerged, this area was typical of most of the Somerset Levels in having a highly dispersed settlement pattern (eg Rippon 1994). At some stage a continuous sea wall was built along the coast, though the location of this sea wall is not known: on the Welsh side of the estuary coastal erosion during the 15th century led to the sea wall being set

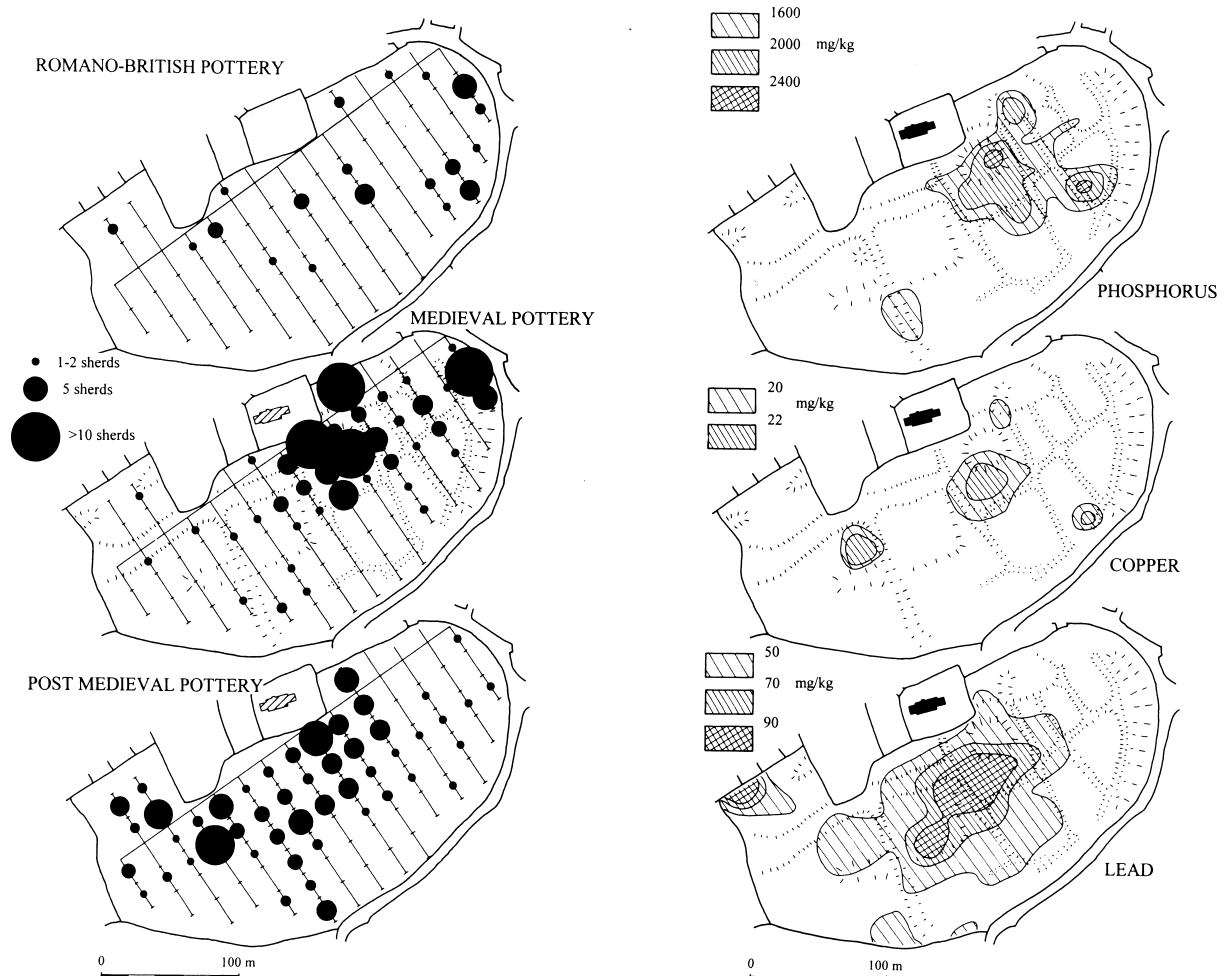


Figure 14.4: *The results of earthwork, fieldwalking and soil chemistry survey in the Puxton "infield". The main scatter of medieval pottery (and other domestic debris) corresponds to a concentration of settlement-indicative elements in the soil (including phosphate, copper and lead), suggesting a farmstead complex. The rest of the enclosure was presumably used for agriculture.*

back several hundred metres (Allen 1988; Allen and Rippon 1997; Rippon 1996) and the same may have been true in Somerset.

From around the 13th century, the amount of documentary material available increases, most notably for Glastonbury Abbey's estate at Brent which has recently been the subject of intensive study (Harrison 1997); these same records have been used by David Musgrove to shed new light on the use to which the inland peat moors were put during this period. Fishing was clearly an important activity, as was the case on the coast, where Hilditch (1997) has recently recorded a number of fish weirs. The overall impression these records give is of a landscape that was being used with increasing

intensity: its wealth and population were amongst the highest in Somerset, with the natural fertility of the clayland soils giving high crop yields and lush pasture/meadow. Despite the constant threat of flooding, this was a successful landscape, and by the 13th century almost all of the higher coastal claylands were embanked, drained and settled.

Although much attention has focused on the work of the great monastic landlords, their impact on these coastal landscapes may not have been as significant as once appeared. Glastonbury's holdings on the Levels south of Mendip were concentrated around Brent Knoll, and though the small detached part of the Shapwick estate at Withy may have been the remnant of a more extensive pre-Conquest estate the

abbey held at Huntspill, the rest of the coastal clayland appear to have been held by a multiplicity of minor thanes and lords for most if not all of the medieval period. North of Mendip, monasteries played an even more limited role in reclamation though a range of charter and place-name evidence suggests the existence of an extensive royal estate, focused on Congresbury but extending all the way to the coast (Rippon 1997b, 133–8).

Until recently, it was assumed that it was in the context of such great estates that reclamation must have taken place; the construction of a sea wall along the coast, and the subsequent digging of an extensive system of ditches was a major undertaking. However, an alternative scenario raises the possibility that the early phases of reclamation were a more piecemeal affair. Were the “infields” the earliest areas of marsh to be embanked and drained, with the construction of a continuous sea wall all along the coast occurring some time after? (cf Figure 14.3 on page 89). If so, this would explain the highly piecemeal way that the drainage pattern in these coastal areas appears to have evolved.

Whatever is the case, the reclamation of the Somerset Levels was part of a wider trend towards agricultural intensification seen throughout north west Europe at the end of the first millennium, which in Somerset and the Midland zone of England appears to have seen the fragmentation of estates, nucleation of settlements, and replanning of field systems (Gerrard this volume; Rippon forthcoming b).

## Conclusions: the next 150 years

After a slow start, our understanding of the coastal claylands of the Somerset Levels has been transformed in recent decades through a combination of survey, excavation, palaeoenvironmental analysis and the integration of this data with documentary material and information contained within the historic landscape. Two distinct phases of reclamation can be identified, in the Roman and early medieval periods, separated by an episode of extensive marine inundation. On both occasions, the newly reclaimed land appears to have been put down to agricultural use, with cereal cultivation and the raising of livestock. During the Roman period, reclamation appears to have been carried out in the context of individual wealthy villa-estates during a

period of economic prosperity and agricultural innovation, though the lack of comparable evidence for reclamation elsewhere in Roman Britain must point to the vibrancy of this region. Early reclamation in the medieval period also appears to have occurred at a time of general economic expansion, but this time one that affected not just parts of Britain but north west Europe as a whole.

Though much has been achieved in the Somerset Levels over the past 150 years, there remains a number of important issues that are yet to be addressed. The “villa” at Lakehouse Farm is known only from a scatter of unstratified debris and a single section recorded along the line of the M5. Along with several other substantial stone structures in the area north of the “Siger”, they remain ill-understood and without any landscape context. The Axe Valley has the most extensive earthworks of a Romano-British drainage system in Somerset, but has seen very little systematic survey and no excavation or palaeoenvironmental analysis. Natural resource exploitation has also been much neglected: most of the once numerous saltern mounds south of the “Siger” have been destroyed by modern agriculture yet their function remaining ill-understood, not least their involvement in pottery production and seasonal grazing. The early stages of medieval settlement expansion are also still shrouded in mist, not least because of the lack of datable pottery before the 10th century. More of the potentially early “infield” sites need to be investigated, and their earliest contexts radiocarbon dated. Above all this remarkable archaeological and palaeoenvironmental resource in both the coastal claylands and inland peat bogs must be protected from the deprivations of urban sprawl and agricultural “improvement” so that it can be studied over the next 150 years.