

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF
THE SOMERSET CLAYLANDS

Report on Survey Work
in 1985-86

Part II

Summary report on the area
south of the Polden Hills

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1.00 SUMMARY

- 1.01 This report summarises the results of the second phase of an examination of the Somerset Levels and Moors.
- 1.02 These areas contain many archaeological features whose importance has been identified in the Somerset County Council Levels and Moors Plan. Policy Arch.6 (part 2) in the Plan requires the County Council to undertake survey in the area in order to define precisely the types of features, their location and importance.
- 1.03 The survey has identified a new area of major archaeological interest, which extends for some 40 square kilometres to the east of Bridgwater. It is of national importance.
- 1.04 Other new sites of national and county importance were located and many known sites were recorded at 1:10000 for the first time.
- 1.05 A high percentage of sites recorded in the survey were new ones. 27% were known sites and 73% were new sites added to the record.
- 1.06 The principal recommendation arising from this survey is that further field survey should be undertaken in order to formulate management policies for the expanded resource.

2.00 INTRODUCTION

- 2.01 This survey is the second part of an extensive examination of ~~the whole~~ of the Somerset Levels. The results of part I of this work, which dealt with the area N of the Polden Hills, has been published (McDonnell 1985a). This second part of the survey deals with the area S of the Polden Hills.

The work was undertaken on behalf of the Somerset County Council and was supported by the HBMC (English Heritage). It was carried out over a six month period during 1985.

Acknowledgement is made to Dr Ian Burrow of the Somerset County Planning Department (SCPD) and Paul Gosling of the HBMC for their assistance and discussion prior to and during the survey.

2.02 SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS

The proposals for the second part of the survey remain the same as those in the first part and are:-

- Stage 1 Examination and sketch plotting of the aerial photographic evidence.
- Stage 2 Sample field assessment of aerial photographic data.
- Stage 3 Incorporation of all survey data on to the SCPD Sites and Structures Record (SSR).
- Stage 4 Summary report of survey.

2.03 AREA OF SURVEY

The area surveyed comprised all the low-lying land within the Plan Area of the Somerset Levels and Moors as defined by the SCC south of the Polden ridge (SCC 1983).

Approximately 46000 ha were examined and were covered by 37 OS 1:10000 sheets.

3.00 METHODOLOGY

3.01 Examination and plotting of the aerial photographic evidence

The first stage of this survey comprised the examination and sketch plotting of the aerial photographic evidence at 1:10000. A gazetteer was made recording grid square, location, parish, height OD, a short description of the site and a list of the aerial photographs from which the features were recorded.

The recording of natural features from previous landscapes was confined to abandoned river beds, roddens and creek systems in an attempt to relate them to archaeological and historic landscape features. These natural elements recorded in the survey were not plotted on the archaeological record overlays but separately on the base maps.

Approximately 900 aerial photographs were consulted and came from the following sources:-

Verticals:

- (i) RAF, 1946. Scale approx 1:10000, held by the Local History Library, Taunton.
- (ii) Hunting Surveys Ltd, 1971. Scale approx 1:12000, held by the SCPD.
- (iii) Hunting Surveys Ltd, 1981. Scale approx 1:12000, held by the SCPD.
- (iv) M5 Construction Survey photographs, 1968. Various scales, held by SCPD.

Obliques:

- (i) National Monuments Record, various scales, mid 1970s.
- (ii) Anonymous sources, undated, various scales.
- (iii) John White, Westair Photography.

3.02 Field assessment of the aerial photographic evidence

The transfer of the survey data on to the SCPD SSR from both areas, north and south of the Polden Hills, took longer than anticipated and only limited field assessment of the aerial photographic evidence was undertaken south of the Polden ridge. No structured approach to the field work was therefore made.

4.00 RESULTS

4.01 The total number of sites recorded from the aerial photographic evidence and placed on the SCPD SSR was 214. Of this figure 58 (27.1%) were sites already known to the record and 156 (72.9%) were new sites additional to the SSR. The sites comprised 24 specific site types and are listed below.

4.02 <u>Site type</u>	<u>On record</u>	<u>New to record</u>	<u>Total</u>
Agricultural	-	18	18
Artifacts	-	1	1
Barrows	1	-	1
Boundaries	-	8	8
Buildings	-	1	1
Churches	1	-	1
Communication feature	2	15	17
Deserted farm sites	-	16	16
Duck decoys	10	1	11
Enclosures, circular	-	2	2
Enclosures, rectangular	1	24	25
Field systems	3	6	9
Fish ponds	2	-	2
Landscape remains	1	12	13
Military sites	3	3	6
Mill mounds	5	1	6
Non antiquity	-	1	1
Religious houses	2	-	2
Ritual sites	1	1	2
Settlement	3	7	10
Unclassified sites	1	19	20
Villa	5	-	5
Villages, deserted and shrunken	14	7	21
Water control sites	3	13	16
	58	156	214
	(27.1%)	(72.9%)	(100%)

4.03 Agricultural sites

All sites in this category were new to the record and 12 (33%) were parishes where ridge and furrow cultivation was recorded. Notably extensive areas of this feature lay in the parishes of Ash, Ilchester, Limington, Long Load, Martock and Tintinhull.

Other types of feature in this group included miscellaneous banks and soil marks where they were interpreted as evidence of previous cultivation.

4.04 Artifacts

The only artifact recorded was a crashed but apparently intact aircraft on the moors in the parish of Long Load. It was a single-engined, low-winged monoplane of indeterminate type and was recorded from the 1947 aerial photographic coverage.

4.05 Barrows

The only barrow recorded was the known site on top of Barrow Hill in Kingsbury Episcopi.

4.06 Boundaries

All of the 8 linear boundary features recorded were new to the record. Half of these probably represented field boundary remains whilst the other 4 sites were generally longer (380m-500m) and may represent vestigial landscape features of more extensive land division.

4.07 Buildings

A new site, comprising two buildings of unclassified purpose, was recorded as sub surface features south of Conygar Lane, Ilchester.

4.08 Churches

The ruined church of St Michael on Burrow Mump was recorded with no additional information.

4.09 Communication features

Of the 17 features in this group, 2 were the known sites of the Westport canal and an additional section of the Roman Road running along the Polden ridge. The remaining 15 sites comprised miscellaneous lengths of 18th to 19th century drove roads, trackways and causeways.

The most notable causeway was located west of Beckery where some 220m of substantial earthwork was recorded orientated directly towards the medieval site of Beckery Chapel.

4.10 Deserted Farm Sites

All of the 16 deserted farm sites located were new to the record. More than half of these were sited actually on the levels or moors, the remainder being on the edge of higher land, on higher land or on islands of higher land within the levels. The sites were defined principally by earthworks forming complexes of rectangular enclosures with trackways, building platforms or building remains. The average size was 0.8 ha, the largest being 2 ha and the smallest 0.2 ha.

Good examples include the site west of Thorngrove in Middlezoy parish, at Lower Swell in Fivehead and a site south of Othery in Aller parish.

4.11 Duck Decoys

Recent survey work on Somerset Decoys has already accounted for most of these sites which are recorded on the aerial photographic cover (McDonnell 1985b). Consequently of the 11 sites recorded during this survey only one was an unknown decoy.

This new site lay to the NE of Dunwear and was a small square-ponded, four-pipe decoy which has been filled in and was indicated only by differential vegetation.

4.12 Enclosures, circular

Both of the 2 circular enclosures recorded were new sites. The very small vegetational marked site on West Sedge Moor may be a natural or recent feature. The second site lying north west of Standards Barton in North Petherton parish is a large soil marked circular enclosure of approximately 2.5 ha. It contained two other smaller circular marks and may represent a prehistoric settlement site.

4.13 Enclosures, rectangular

Of the 25 rectangular enclosures recorded 24 were new sites, the known one being the earthwork enclosure south east of Bineham City Farm in Kingsdon Parish.

The 24 new sites include only 6 which might be considered as separate single enclosures, the remaining sites are likely to represent elements of deserted farms, settlements and the remains of more extensive field systems. The 6 probably independent enclosures are all small averaging 0.15 ha but the largest at 0.5 ha is a square earthwork enclosure with well defined entrance and situated immediately east of Hinkley Point Nuclear Power Station.

4.14 Field systems

One third of the 9 field systems recorded were sites already known but not previously plotted.

Of the six sites new to the record the most notable lay south west of Ilchester where over 100 ha of accreted enclosures were recorded in the area of the Villa of Ilchester Mead (Fig 1). During the excavation of the villa in the 1950s field boundary ditches, which were visible on aerial photographs, were thought to belong to the R.B. period (Hayward 1982).

Another area north west of Ilchester contained 28 ha of regular narrow fields underlying the existing system of enclosure (Fig 1).

4.15 Fish ponds

the only fish ponds recorded were the known sites at Muchelney and Stockland Bristol. The latter site however was considerably extended and plotted at 1:10000 for the first time.

4.16 Landscape remains

All but one of the 13 areas of landscape features were new sites. The existing record was for the garden remains at Low Ham.

In only one area east of Bridgwater were extensive and coherent landscape remains recorded to the same extent as those plotted to

the north of the Polden Hills in part I of this survey (McDonnell 1985a). Fragmentary and tenuous evidence suggesting other areas of extensive landscape remains were located on West Sedge Moor, Weston Level, west of Kingsbury Episcopi, Witcombe Bottom and Street Moor. In all of these areas, however, the evidence is extremely fragmentary consisting generally of short lengths of linear features showing a similar orientation and scattered over wide areas.

East of Bridgwater the earthwork remains of fields, trackways and settlement are spread over approximately 4000 ha and linear features extend even further to the east and south east where they tend to fade into the general, fragmentary background noise of the possible landscapes listed above (Fig 1). The western boundary appears to be the long linear feature described below under 4.26, its precise relationship with the landscape features to the east is not clear at present.

The incidence of R.B. material from this area of fields and trackways in addition to their similarity to the features in the Axe Valley (McDonnell 1979) suggest that they may date from that period.

4.17 Military sites

Of the 6 sites in this group 3 were known to the record and 3 were new sites. The known sites included part of the fort ramparts at Athelney, various earthworks associated with Fenny Castle and probable outworks to Compton Dundon Hill Fort.

The sites new to the record included the plotting at 1:10000 of Westonzoyland Airfield, a rifle range in the parish of Huish Episcopi and part of a bombing range in Bridgwater Bay. Part of this latter site was recorded in the first part of this survey.

4.18 Mill mounds

Only one site of the 6 recorded was new to the record and this was in the parish of Stoke St Gregory.

4.19 Non Antiquity

The single new site in this group was the Fisons advertisement on the south west slopes of Collard's Hill where the name FISONS, in large letters, has been marked into the grassland by chemical application.

4.20 Religious houses

Two known sites were plotted at Muchelney and at Athelney. The latter site being recorded as low earthworks defining three sides of a large rectangular building with fragments of other earthwork enclosures or building remains to the east.

4.21 Ritual sites

Two ring ditches were recorded in this group, a known site at Bradney and a new one north of Crow's Lane, Bridgwater Without.

4.22 Settlement

The 10 sites in this group are primarily residual sites which cannot be confidently identified as either deserted farm sites or deserted villages.

Of these sites 7 were new to the register and generally comprised evidence of at least two or more buildings with associated enclosure banks. At least 3 of these may represent deserted farms.

4.23 Unclassified sites

This group accounts for the unidentified miscellaneous earthworks and vegetational marks encountered in systematic survey of aerial photographic evidence. Of the 20 sites plotted only one was previously on record.

4.24 Villas

All of the 5 villas recorded were previously known sites. All but one were sub-surface features located by vegetational indicators, the earthwork site was at Bearly Farm, where miscellaneous features added nothing substantially new to the record. Two sites, however, at Low Ham and Bradley Hill were recorded as courtyard villas with ranges of buildings on three sides of a rectangle. The remaining two sites were at Roman Farm, Pitney and Wiltown in Curry Rivel parish.

4.25 Villages, deserted and shrunken

There were 21 sites recorded in this group of which 7 were new to the record. Of these 7 new sites, 3 were deserted villages and 4 were shrunken villages. The new shrunken sites were at Stockland Bristol, Higher Barrow, Littleton and Draycott in Limington parish.

The new deserted villages were in the following parishes:-

Bridgwater Without. 1.5 ha of earthworks defining trackways, house platforms and enclosures west of Crow's Lane.

Muchelney. 2.4 ha of earthworks forming rectangular enclosures with possibly building platforms and 300m of trackway. Cartographic evidence suggests this village may have been called Case.

Martock. 8.5 ha of earthworks, east by south of Kingsbury Episcopi, defining rectangular enclosures with house platforms, trackways and extensive ridge and furrow cultivation.

4.26 Water control sites

There were 3 known and 13 new features or groups of features under this heading. Of the new sites 9 were flood banks associated with former or existing natural water courses, 2 at Langport and Ilchester were constructed channels and one near Woolston Farm, Stogursey was a dam which may be associated with fish farming.

The 3 previously recorded sites included the moat at Sock Dennis, 2 ponds at Knole Knap and the linear earthwork east of Bridgwater.

The latter site is particularly interesting and may have functioned as a canal, used either for navigation or for controlling water levels on the low lying land. This survey has increased its length from 1.8 km to 4.7 km. It is defined variously by parallel banks, vegetational indicators and, within the existing landscape, by a combination of droves, hedges and parish boundaries. It appears to be associated with and form the western boundary of the extensive landscape remains east of Bridgwater.

5.00 CONCLUSION

- 5.01 The incorporation of the data from both parts I and II of the survey into the SCPD SSR during this year has meant that there was no time available for the field assessment of the aerial photographic evidence. It was considered that a higher priority should be given to transferring the existing data on to the computerised county record.

A programme of sample field assessment is therefore required in order that the area south of the Polden ridge is brought up to a similar level of survey with part I, north of Polden. Until the field work element has begun it is difficult to make more detailed recommendations with regard to future work in the area although it is likely that they will closely follow those already made in part I.

- 5.02 North of the Polden ridge no quantification of new sites from the survey of the aerial photographic evidence was made. Where this has been done in part II, however, the high percentage of new sites (73%) justifies the application of such remote sensing techniques on the alluvial clays of the Somerset Levels.

On the basis of part I of this survey (McDonnell, 1985a) and also similar work in the Exmoor National Park (McDonnell, 1980) we might expect a higher incidence of new sites and certainly considerably better resolution to result from the field assessment of the aerial photographic data. In view of this and particularly the results of part I, it is likely that the archaeological resource in this southern area of the Somerset Levels is far greater in quantity and academic significance than had previously been thought.

The scattered and fragmented nature of the landscape features in part II of the survey make it difficult to determine precisely the new major areas of archaeological significance. The most notable area lies east of Bridgwater where there is some 40 square kilometres of landscape features which are of national importance (Fig 1). The features include field systems, settlement, trackways, a possible canal, and major land divisional features. They are morphologically similar to the Romano British landscape remains in the Upper Axe Valley (McDonnell, 1979).

- 5.03 The management of the resource, particularly earthwork sites and those likely to contain organic cultural and environmental evidence will require more detailed field work before specific recommendations can be made.

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Multi-Period Landscape Features

Plotted from the aerial photographic evidence

