

ROMANO-BRITISH SITES ON THE NORTH SOMERSET LEVELS

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This survey is concerned only with lowland sites, approximately between 16 ft. (4.8 m.) and 22 ft. (6.7 m.) O.D. known locally as 'moors' in the Clevedon, Tickenham, Kenn, Yatton and Kingston Seymour areas.

To date (Spring 1971) eleven Romano-British sites have been located, represented by moderate to heavy pot-scatters and other evidence. There is also an area of Iron Age occupation and at least one medieval 'manor' site (Fig. 10).

This research has been carried out since 1960 with the active co-operation of farmers. Site location has been established by a constant watch for any earth-moving activities on the moors including ploughing and drainage operations, the digging of post holes for fences, the deepening and widening of field ditches and even the examination of soil displaced by the falling of trees in a gale. With regard to ploughing, it has been found rewarding to walk what appeared to be a pot-barren field after every cultivation, as a slight lowering of the plough depth can, and has, revealed an unsuspected pot-scatter.

Over the area as a whole the Roman occupation horizon lies within 6-22 ins. (0.15-0.6 m.) of the present surface. It therefore appears from the evidence found in North Somerset that the depth of the Roman occupation in this area is different from that reported by numerous authors in the levels south of the Mendip Hills. This causes some modification to be made to the accepted views on the Romano-British Transgression as proposed by Godwin, (1943 and 1955). A recent paper by Hawkins (1971) discusses this problem.

In at least one case the area of known occupation is extensive. This lies on Kenn/Yatton moor and contains evidence of industrial activity. A spread of iron slag was encountered to the south at a depth of 9 in. in association with two burials, occupation floors and a well-constructed cereal drying oven. To the north, and some distance from the oven, a further occupation site including evidence of 'industrial activity' in the form of coin moulds and drainage trenches was located. (Site 6).

The full extent of this and some other sites is hard to establish due to the fact that much of the area is devoted to grassland farming, hence opportunities of examining below the turf-line are exceptional. It is possible, if not probable, that the Kenn/Yatton moor site may extend nearly a mile north and south and with its many pot-scatters show evidence of a link with others located in the village of Kenn itself.

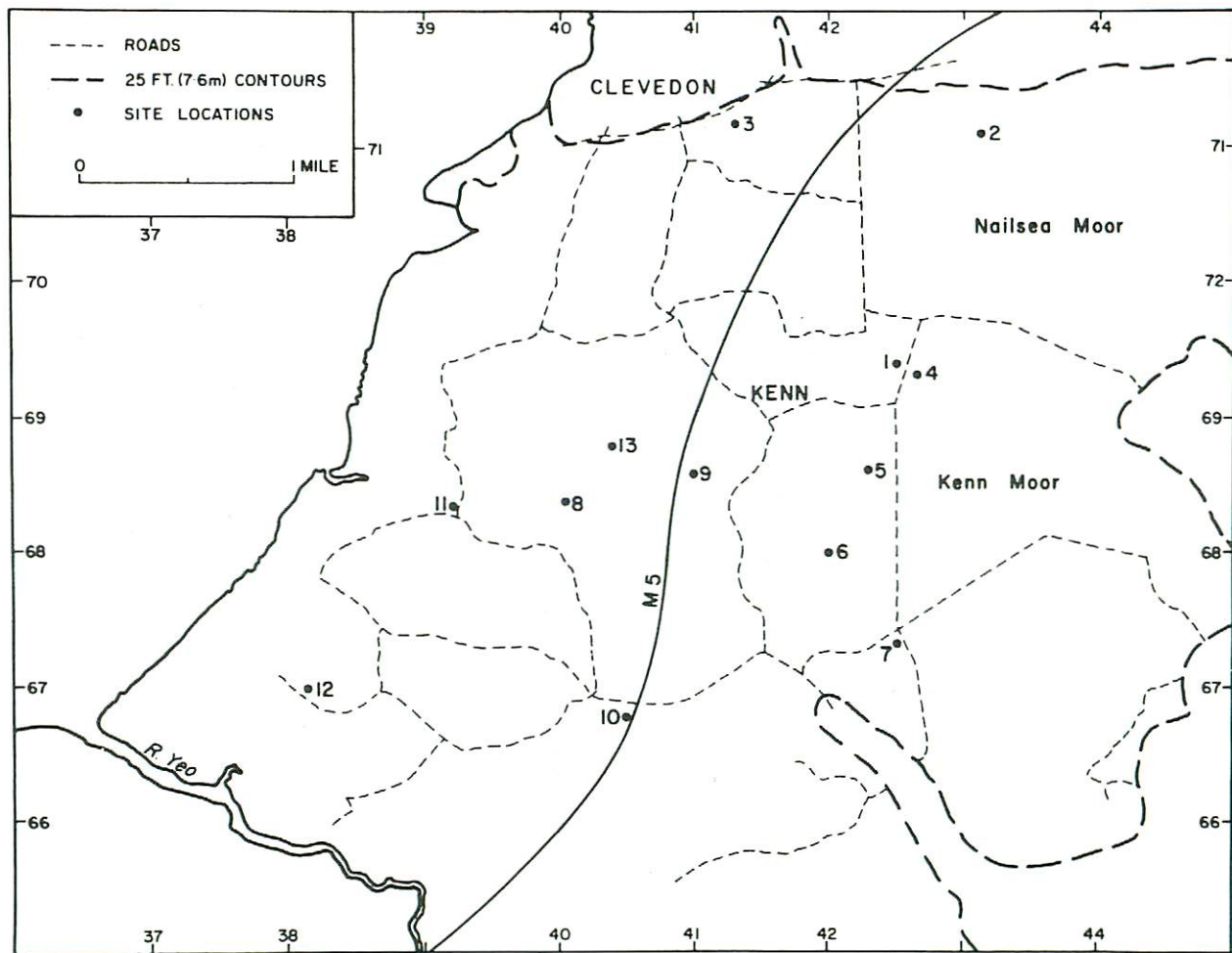


Fig. 10. Site locations. Based on Ordnance Survey. Copyright reserved.

Brief Review of Sites Number 1 to 13 on the Map

1. ST. 424694. Shards of Iron Age pot at a depth of 4 ft. (1.2m) during the cutting of a gas main. The shards lay in a clay filled gully in the Kenn Gravels. Approximately 20 ft. (6.1m) O.D.
2. ST. 431711. Romano-British; late 3rd/early 4th century. Well laid Pennant floor on slightly raised mound. Heavy pot-scatter in peaty field next to the N.W. (ST. 427713) at plough depth. Approximately 16 ft. 6 in. (5m) O.D.
3. ST. 413712. Extensive Romano-British pot-scatter in gas mains trench and building footings. Handle of spoon. In garden of Meadow Road to the N.W., brass forgery of gold coin of Carausius reported. Approximately 21 ft. (6.4m) O.D.
4. ST. 426693. Romano-British pot-scatter in garden of house and field opposite. Vanished river course runs 50 ft. (15.2m) to E. of house. Scatter revealed by normal garden digging. Approximately 20 ft. (6.1m) O.D.
5. ST. 423686. Romano-British pot-scatter at plough depth. Limited excavation revealed drainage trench and coin moulds, one for coin of Tetricus, late 3rd century. All moulds broken but one fragment in a state to allow identification. Also a coin of Constantius and one of Magnentius (forgery?), in the same sealed level suggests dating could be late 4th century? A follis of Constantine was found on the field surface after ploughing. Depth of deepest potshards 38½ ins. (0.34m) may indicate the draining of marshy pools. Vanished river course crosses the field diagonally at a distance of 25 ft. (7.6m) from excavation. Approximately 20 ft. (6.1m) O.D.
6. ST. 420680. and surrounding fields. Romano-British coins of early 4th century (forgeries?). This site may be of same date as 5? This is a very extensive site covering some 40 acres at the time of this survey and contains at least two burials, a grain drier, floors, rubbish pits and small finds including a spindle whorl and a deep scatter of iron slag. A suspected hut site has not been examined. Approximately 20 ft. (6.1m) O.D.
7. ST. 425673. Romano-British pot-scatter on slightly raised mound in field. Approximately 21 ft. (6.4m) O.D.
8. ST. 400684. Romano-British pot-scatter on ploughed field. Approximately 21 ft. (6.4m) O.D.
9. ST. 410686. Romano-British shards in pipe drainage trench 1 ft. 6 in. (0.5m). Approximately 19 ft. (4.0m) O.D.
10. ST. 405668. Extensive Romano-British pot-scatter in Motorway drainage ditches. Depth 1 ft. 6 in. to 2 ft. (0.5m to 0.6m). Approximately 19 ft. (5.8m) O.D.
11. ST. 392683. Romano-British pot-scatter on ploughed field. Approximately 19 ft. (5.8m) O.D.
12. ST. 381670. Romano-British pot-scatter in excavation at depth of 22 in. to 28 in. (0.18m to 0.24m). It is possible that this is on the line of an old river course. Approximately 20 ft. (6.1m) O.D.
13. ST. 403688. Medieval 'manor' house, 13th to definite middle 17th, possibly later, century. Court yard. Moated side adjacent field. Old river course meanders in same field. Approximately 21 ft. (6.4m) O.D.

SUMMARY

Taking into consideration the wide distribution of Romano-British occupation sites in the area under review, some of them very extensive, it would appear that these low levels were used at least on a seasonal basis by the inhabitants of the district in the Roman period.

The presence of the grain drier and the evidence of some industrial activity suggests that at least some form of farming (arable?) was practised on patches of lightly raised ground.

Smelting may have been carried on because of the availability of fuel in the form of easily cut brushwood from the marshy ground. The proximity of many of the sites to the course of old and vanished waterways may indicate their use for transport.

The periods of the year when the sites were in occupation is problematical, but would have been governed by the water-level of the 'moors' and some form of 'saeter farming' practised, in which the people and their farm stock occupied the high land on the fringes of the levels in winter and moved to the moors, at least the higher parts, when the land dried out in summer. A similar system is still practised in districts south of the Mendip where large acreages of the moors are practically abandoned for some months of the year but grazed heavily in the summer.

In conclusion, the North Somerset Archaeological Research Group would like to take this opportunity of thanking Dr. Brian Hawkins for his assistance in the compilation of this report and the farmers, builders, drainage contractors and others in the area without whose interest and co-operation the carrying out of the work of investigation would have been impossible.

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