

Chewton Mendip Precinct Field Excavation

PHASE TWO

PART 1

July 2011



Trench 4: Photo by John Croxford

Interim Report No. 2

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Community Archaeology on the Mendip Plateau

Table of Contents

1.0 Background	3
2.0 Research Questions	4
3.0 Methodology	4
4.0 Evaluation of excavation	8
5.0 Finds	9
6.0 Conclusion and acknowledgements	9

Illustrations

Figure 1	Map of precinct field	3
Figure 2	Resistivity with trench positions	4
Figure 3	Plan of trench 4	5
Figure 4	Aerial photo trench 4	6
Figure 5	Plan of trench 2	7
Figure 6	Aerial photo trench 2	7
Figure 7	Plan of trench 3	7
Figure 8	Aerial photo of trench 3	8

NB All ranging poles in photos are 1m divisions

1.0 BACKGROUND

Phase 2 of the excavation at Chewton Mendip represents further research in the field to the immediate north of the parish church, which was begun in April 2011. For information on the historical and archaeological background to this site please refer to the Interim Report No. 1 (Somerset HER no 31662, HER digital source: 36756, www.camplab.btck.co.uk/publications).

Phase 2 of the research excavation at Chewton Mendip commenced on Monday July 11th and lasted for 5 days. The weather conditions were dry with a mixture of sun and cloud cover. The soil was damper than in April, having had a recent period of sustained rainfall. The grass throughout the field was up to 1.25m high in places and made the placing of the tapes and the siting of the trenches extremely difficult. Areas under excavation were mown with paths linking them. Prior to excavation and when the grass was shorter, three stopcock covers were permanently set in the soil at ground level on which a grid could in future be secured. These were set at 40m on the base line, 97.7m on the base line and at 40m offset north from the 40m marker (fig.1)

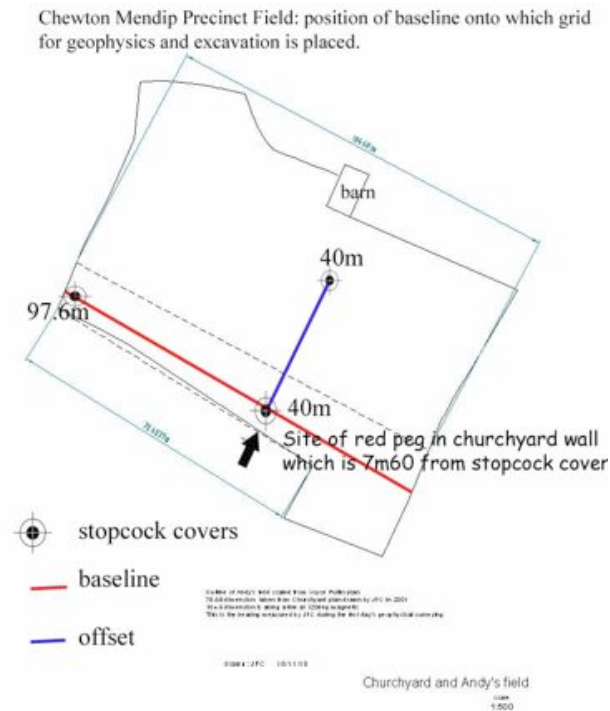


Figure 1. Map of Precinct Field showing location of baseline.

2.0 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on analysis from Phase One of the excavation Phase Two set out to answer the following questions:

- i. What are the dimensions of the building?
- ii. Is it a simple rectangular building?
- iii. What is the nature of the linear anomalies showing on the resistivity immediately to the west of Trench 1?
- iv. Is the area of high resistivity to the east of the pipeline, which cuts the north and south walls of the building, an accumulation of dense rubble or geology?
- v. Does the above feature on the resistivity hide a second building or is it part of the original east section of the building?

3.0 METHODOLOGY FOR PHASE TWO

It was proposed to use a series of trial trenches and only dig to sufficient depth to ascertain the extent of the walls and nature of the overburden. It was not proposed to remove any of the walling, and disturbance to the archaeology was to be kept to a minimum.

As the rectilinear building's north and south wall positions at the west end were now known, a projected line was set out in an easterly direction along the south wall and north walls.

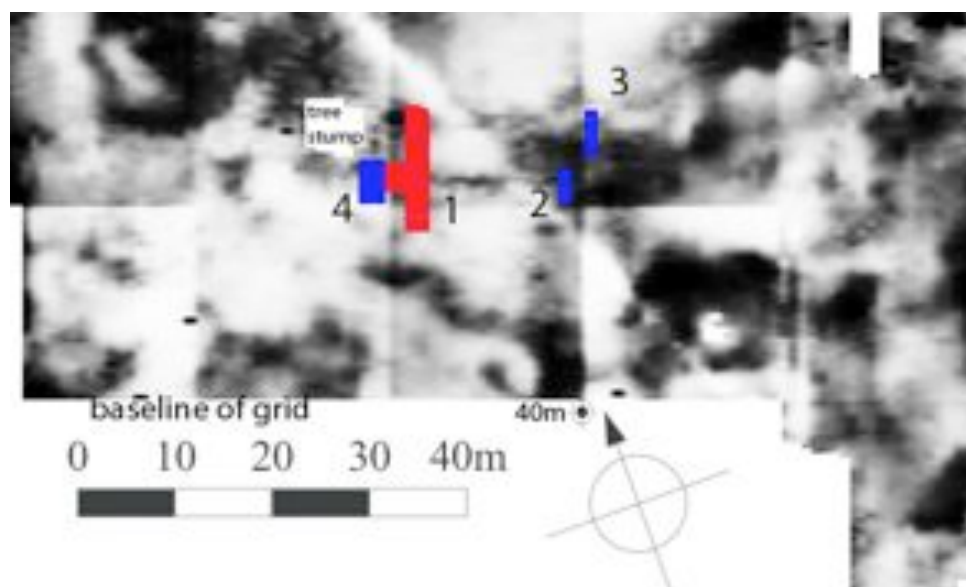


Figure 2 showing siting of the three trenches in Phase 2, part 1

3.1 Trench 4 (an extension of trench 1)

An area of 3.5 x 3 metres was opened immediately to the west of the west extension of Trench 1 in Phase 1. A slight overlap allowed photographs to be merged together from the two phases.

The purpose of this extension was to ascertain whether this was the site of the SW corner of the rectilinear building. A complicated picture emerged. Whereas there was evidence of a west wall heading north, there was a 1.5m. absence of south wall foundations linking this wall with the known south wall in Trench 1. Instead, a large stone lay offset across the proposed line of the foundations at 149.74mOD. Its purpose is not clear. Outside this area there is evidence of limestone slabs having being laid abutting the line of the south wall. On the west side of this corner an area of cobble at 149.80mOD is laid at an angle butting up to the west wall. However, one cobblestone was clearly already in place when the wall foundations were laid over it, suggesting an earlier date for the cobble. Again, this is an area to be investigated further.

Inside the SW corner a sondage was sunk into the rubble deposit to reveal several limestone slabs suggesting the floor level at 149.37mOD. Some slabs showed signs of disturbance due to tree root intrusion. Levels taken in Trench 2 and Trench 4 of this internal floor show a drop east of 0.5m over some 21 metres (fig 3).

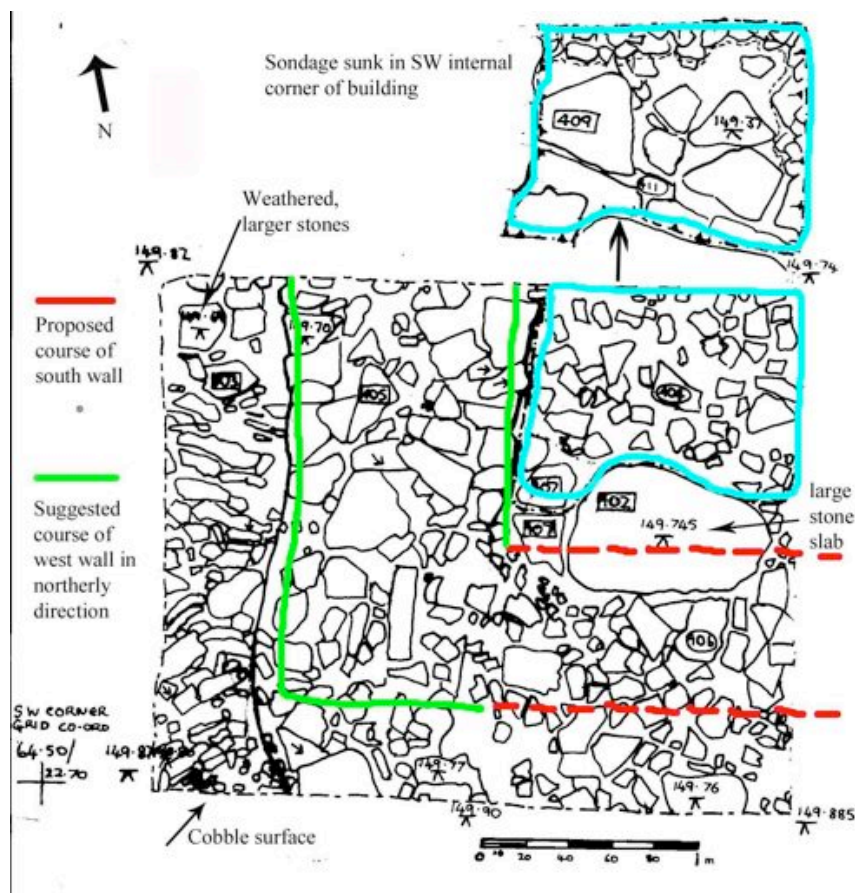


Figure 3 Plan of Trench 4



Figure 4 Aerial photo of Trench 4 (photo John Croxford)

3.2 Trench 2

A small 3 x 1 metre trench was placed at right angles across the projected south wall line at a point just east of where it was visible on the resistivity. As the archaeology is known to be close to the surface the turf and topsoil, and just enough of the tumble, was removed in order to locate the wall foundations. In the event, the south edge of the wall was well defined and reached at 149.55mOD. The north edge had suffered some considerable disturbance and in order to ascertain that this was indeed a wall it was necessary to remove some of the disturbed rubble. Having done this it was then decided to take the opportunity to see how many courses the wall had at this point and to find the floor level. This could then be compared with the level in Trench 1. Broken flags of an internal floor level were located at 148.87mOD.

It was noted that within this 3 metre length of trench a similar worn, cobble surface was present to the south of the wall at 149.55mOD as in Trench 1, but this time abutting it. A small sondage was also dug on the south face of the wall to try and locate a soil level beneath the cobble. This was reached at 149.15 OD.

The south wall in this trench proved to be constructed of 8 courses, to a very high standard on the north face, but a lesser degree on the south face.

Trench 2 was planned, levels taken, sections and faces of the wall drawn and photographed and then backfilled with a membrane to protect the archaeology.

There were remarkably few finds, probably on account of the minimal excavation.

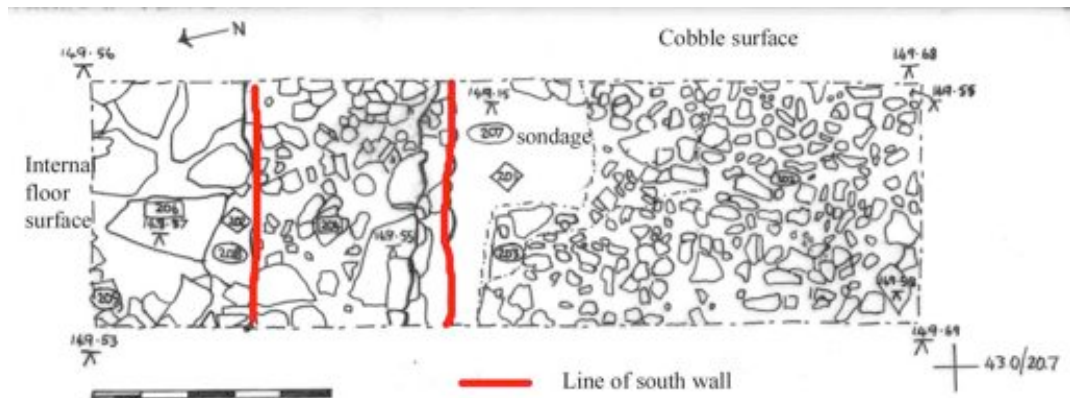


Fig. 5 Plan of Trench 2



Fig. 6 Aerial photo of Trench 2

3.3 Trench 3

This 1 x 3.5 metre trench was placed over a dense area of high resistivity in order to gauge whether this was due to rubble deposit or geology. It was also decided to try and locate the north wall. It was immediately apparent that there was much rubble dump in this trench with a suggestion that a further wall may run through the trench, but not on the line of the rectilinear building. It is not clear whether the two are related at this stage. At the north of the trench an area of crushed limestone and rubbish appears to have been dumped in a ditch. Worn cobble edges this ditch. This is an area which needs further investigation. It was therefore decided to backfill this trench with a membrane cover and open again at a later date.

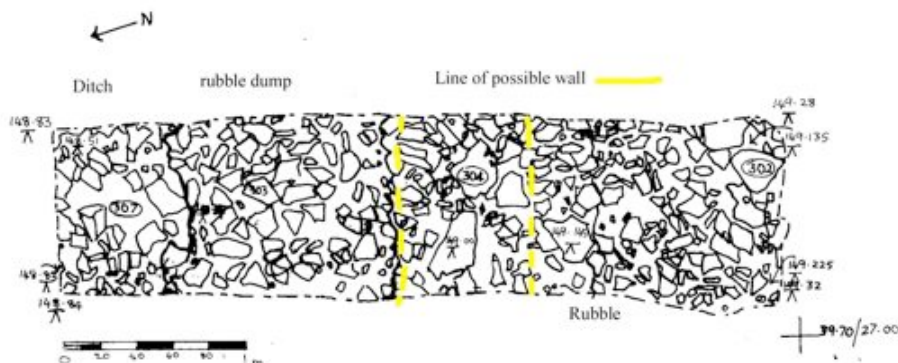


Fig.7 Plan of trench 3



Fig. 8. Aerial photo Trench 3

4.0 EVALUATION OF THE EXCAVATION

Time and resources did not allow for all the proposed trenches to be dug, but it was felt that the three trenches were strategically placed in order to gain the maximum information with the minimum disturbance to the archaeology.

To address the questions asked:

Q 1. What are the dimensions of the building?

With the known external width of the building at 7.80 metres and the internal width of 6.05m it was possible to project two parallel wall lines eastwards and place trenches accordingly to catch the wall foundations.

Trench 2 was successful in this respect and located the south wall. Trench 3 did not produce evidence of the north wall and it is therefore fair to assume that the east end of the building passes between the two trenches. It was calculated that the external building length is 23.37 metres +/- 25cm. These dimensions equate to approximately 8.5 x 1.5 perches external measurements.

Q2. Is it a rectilinear building?

It cannot be assumed that the wall in trenches 1 and 4 is a continuation of the one in 2 although it does run on the same alignment and appears to be so on the geophysics.

Until the NE corner is located this question cannot be fully answered.

Q3. What is the nature of the anomalies on the resistivity to the west of Trench 4?

This was not addressed.

Q4. What is the nature of the area of high resistivity to the east of the pipeline?

From preliminary excavation in Trench 3 it would appear that this is rubble dump and not geology.

Q5. Is the high resistivity a building either connected with or in addition to the rectilinear building?

Whilst part of the rubble is now thought to obscure the line of the east end of the building, this rubble may also overlay more archaeology which may or may not be directly related to the rectilinear building.

5.0 FINDS

As with Phase 1, the finds were unremarkable. They point more to agricultural use than to domestic at this stage.

Metal

The predominant metal finds are nails with a selection of horseshoe nails. The styli found in Trench 3 are believed to be associated with a school which occupied the Miles's house in the last century, as is some of the slate found.

Pottery

As to be expected, a variety of post medieval pottery sherds were found in the topsoil and uppermost levels of the archaeology. Some medieval sherds (in particular the so-called Chewton ware) were also found in the upper levels as well as the lower levels. This can be explained by the closeness of the archaeology to the surface and by livestock grazing in the past. No high status ware was found in any of the layers.

No complete pots or even sizeable sherds have been found.

Clay pipes

A number of stems and bowls, one with stamp of maker, were found in the upper layers.

Slag and clinker

Trench 3 appeared to have been an area where rubbish was dumped perhaps accounting for this debris in the upper levels.

Building materials

One piece of pennant sandstone found in trench 2 is interesting but is not sufficient to suggest a roofing fabric as yet.

Glass

Various post medieval glass, both window and bottle again may suggest dumping over the centuries.

Bone

Bovine, pig, sheep and/or goat and occasionally horse were identified. There were a larger number of unidentified fragments especially of longbones. Some bones showed signs of gnawing by animals and of butchery. A few were noted as being from immature animals.

A table of all finds from Trenches 2,3,4 and 5 can be found in Appendix 1 in Interim Report No.3

6.0 CONCLUSION

The trenches were well placed to give vital information and answer at least some of the questions posed. The original objectives of Phase 2 proved too ambitious for the time-scale. These will be addressed in Phase 2 part 2 in August 2011.

Although the width of the walls and the fine craftsmanship of the wall construction in places, suggests a high status building, there is nothing as yet, to substantiate this. Finds of animal remains and low status pottery still point to use as either an agricultural building or a more lowly residence. An early chapel or church has not been ruled out either. It is vital that the extent of the footprint of the building is established to make a better judgement on this question.

Acknowledgements

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