

A DEEP WATER INLET AT HIGHBRIDGE

a précis of a paper

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SUMMARY

Exceptionally intense development in the Highbridge area of Somerset over the last fifteen years has allowed detailed recording of settlement patterns of Roman and Medieval dates; the scattered archaeological evidence, taken together with documentary and topographical information, suggests the former existence of a deep water inlet of the sea at Highbridge, in itself possibly part of an earlier course of the Parrett. This paper is a précis of a much longer and more detailed analysis of the evidence, which could not be published in full, and has been placed in the library of the Somerset Archaeological Society at Taunton Castle, where it may be consulted by those who wish to enquire further into this subject, and where the references are given in full.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE: (all references are to fig. 1)

Site A—A. In 1959, a section 150 ft. long and 17 ft. deep was exposed in the Apex Clay Pit; the section included a thin layer of peat, 11 ft. below the surface.

Site B. In 1967, a clay pit, 11 ft. deep, was pumped dry; a similar narrow layer of peat was found, also 11 ft. down. A borehole was sunk on the same site in 1968, by Prof. Kidson of University College, Aberystwyth; he found the same peat layer, just above a fresh water diatomite layer, which overlay the blue marine clay, thought to belong to the Romano-British marine transgression. The peat layer was dated by pollen analysis to 2500–2000 B.P.

Site C. Huish. In 1961, sewer trenches revealed Romano-British material between 3 ft. 9 ins. and 4 ft. 9 ins. below the surface, but a trial trench dug 20 ft. away was sterile of Romano-British material at 6 ft. deep. A similar excavation, closer to the sewer trench, in 1969, revealed Romano-British material stratified from 4 ft. 6 ins. down to at least 8 ft. below the surface.

Site D. Between 1967 and 1972, a large area, about 4 acres, was found to have a generous layer of Romano-British material, including dressed lias blocks, 2 ft. 6 ins. below the surface. Within the area were two possible pottery mounds, D3 and D4, both approximately 4 ft. below the land surface.

Site E. In 1969, two lias floors of Romano-British buildings were excavated, 2 ft. 6 ins. below the surface; in 1972, a similar deposit was found 150 ft. to the north-east, suggesting a large settlement, but development of the pasture to the south in 1973 proved sterile.

Site F. In 1961, large numbers of Romano-British sherds were found when the field was ploughed and levelled.

The evidence from these sites suggests that in Romano-British times there was an area of slightly higher ground along the line from north-west to south-east through sites E, D1 and D4 to sites F and Z. The evidence of the excavations at Huish suggests the slope into a channel, and further finds of Romano-British material at sites L and D3 suggest that Romano-British occupation continued north of the 'ridge' at a lower level. North of site L, there is no evidence of Romano-British occupation until one reaches the moor immediately south of Brent Knoll.

The archaeological evidence is supported by the geological depositions of blue clay, brown clay and silt, recorded in various clay pits, etc. This evidence is discussed in more detail in the original paper at Taunton Castle.

POST ROMAN AND EARLY MEDIEVAL EVIDENCE

Domesday Book shows that the area which is now the parishes of Burnham, Huntspill and Highbridge, was inhabited in 1086, so deposition of the Late Roman marine transgression clay must have ceased sometime before the 11th. century. Documents of 794 and 880 A.D., mentioning land in Huntspill and Burnham, suggest that deposition had already stopped in the 8th. century. Dunes were already present in 973 A.D., when Berrow is mentioned in a charter; its placename indicates their existence and the charter mentions that they were linked by pills with the River Axe.

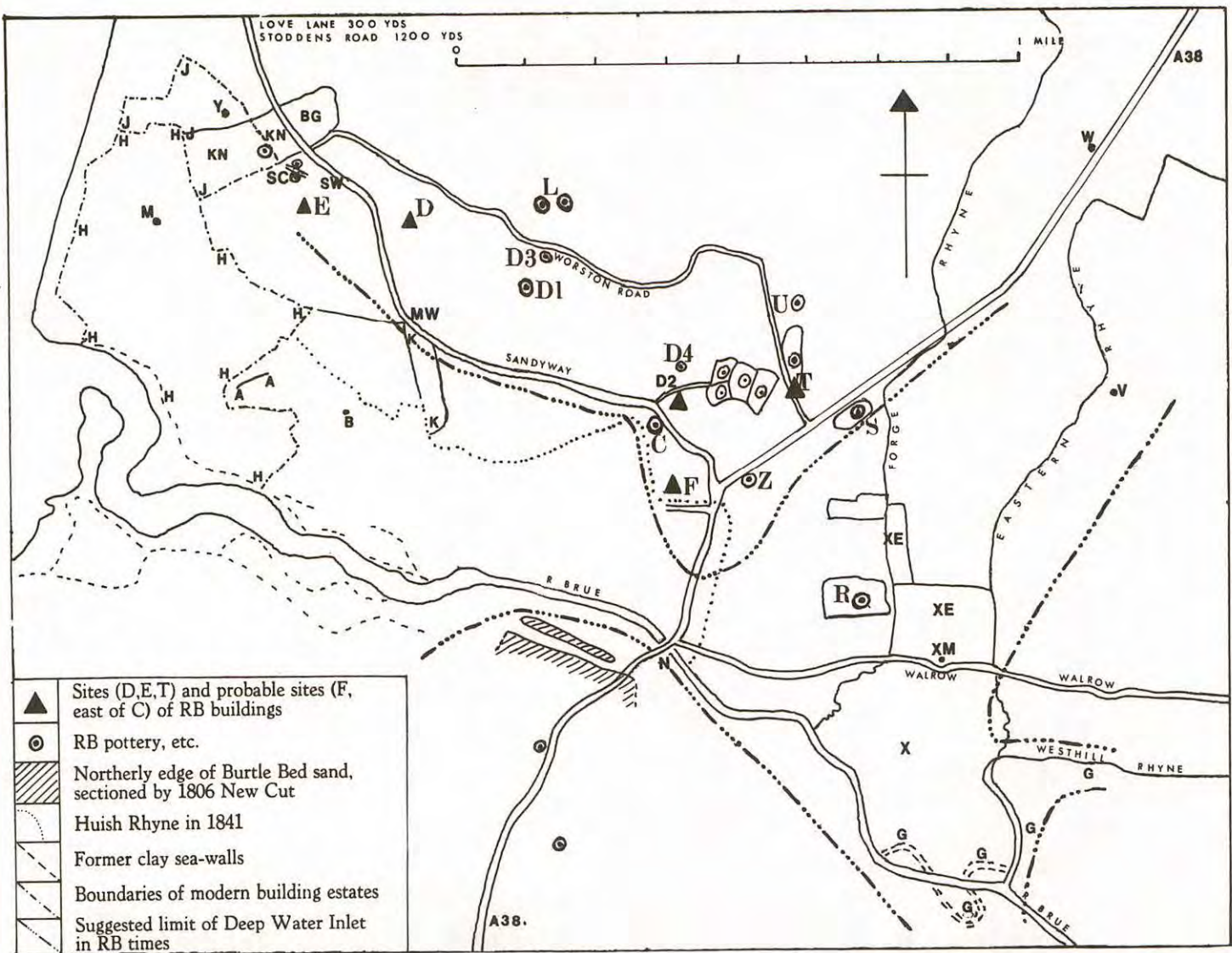


Fig. 1. Distribution Map of Romano-British evidence in Burnham-on-Sea and the adjoining parishes.

Key to Fig. 1.

Based on 6" O.S. Sheets xxv. S.E. and xxxviii. N.E.
(Note: Large Roman capitals on Figure indicate locations of Romano-British evidence)

- A. Apex Clay Pits – 150 ft section.
- B. Apex Clay Pits – pit pumped dry in 1967.
- C. Huish – site of 4 excavations
- d. Site of 4-acre spread of RB material at 30" depth.
- D1. RB sherds.
- D2. Sterile area.
- D3. RB sherds and briquetage.
- D4. RB sherds and briquetage at 3 ft. plus.
- E. RB floors at 30" depth.
- F. RB sherds near surface.
- G – G. Parish boundary and Westhill Rhyne.
- H – H – H. Pillsmouth Farm Estate (now Holimarine) and Housing Estates.
- J – J – J Estates.
- K – K. Housing Estate south-east of Palmer's Garage, Burnham Road.
- L. RB sherds.
- M. Pillsmouth Farmhouse.
- N. Site of the High Bridge prior to 1806.
- R. Pitts' Clay Pit.
- S. Bristol Bridge Clay Pit.
- T. RB structure in meadow called "Hastings".
- U. Meadow called "Clark's Two Acres".
- V. Isleport Farm.
- W. Southport Farm.
- X. Broad Warth.
- XE. Broad Warth extension.
- XM Broad Warth: site of mediaeval occupation.
- Y. Mediaeval building in field called "Parsonage".
- Z. RB coarse ware and Samian. (Springfield Road)
- KN. "Kingston".
- BG. "Barrow Ground".
- MW. "Midway House", Burnham Road.
- SC. Sand-filled channel.
- SW. "Sandway House", Burnham Road.

Key to Fig. 2.

- A. Brent Knoll. (1812 onwards)
- B. Bason Bridge. (1824)
- C. "Huish", Old Burnham Road, Highbridge. (1961 onwards)
- D. Burnham-on-Sea U.D.C. Playing Field. (1967)
- D1. Thrown rhyne between Plots 428 and 429 on 1841 Tithing Map. (1957)
- D4. "Sandyway" Housing Estate. (1971)
- E. Near "Lighthouse Inn", Burnham-on-Sea.
- E1. (1969)
- F. School Playing Field, Coronation Road, Highbridge. (1961)
- G. The Turbaries. (Ante 1839 onwards)
- H. Estlin's Clay Pit. (1856–1869)
- J. Huntspill Cut. (1940 onwards)
- L. Worston Road Clay Pit. (1957)
- M. South Bank of River Brue. (1957 onwards)
- N. Huntspill Churchyard. (1957)
- P. Huntspill Mill. (1958)
- Q. Thyers Garage, Huntspill. (1958)
- R. Pitts' Clay Pit. (1911)
- S. Bristol Bridge Clay Pit. (1957)
- T. Worston Lane, Highbridge. (1960)
- U. Worston Lane, Highbridge. (1969)
- W. Meadow east of Brent Knoll Church. (1958)
- Y. Alston Road, Huntspill. (1959)
- Z. Springfield Road, Highbridge. (1957)
- a. Field west of Ilex House, Huntspill. (1959)
- a1. Swell House, Huntspill. (1959)
- b. Poor House Lane. Huntspill. (1959)
- c. North of Bason Bridge. (1959)
- d. Mark Churchyard. (1959)
- e. Field 775 on O.S. Map, Brent Knoll. (1959)
- f. North of "The Crooked Chimney", Pawlett, (1959)
- g. Mound in field opposite "The Crooked Chimney", Pawlett. (1959)
- h. South end of Pawlett By-pass. (1959)
- j. South-west of "The Crooked Chimney", Pawlett. (1959)
- k. East side of the A38, meadow opposite "The Artillery Arms", Huntspill. (1960)
- l. Ringstone Estate, Huntspill. (1960)
- m. Meadow south-east of East Brent Church. (1960)
- n. Field 835 on O.S. Map, Brent Knoll. (1960)
- p. East of Battleborough. (1960)
- q. Silver Street, Huntspill. (1960)
- r. Meadow west of Brent Knoll School. (1961)
- s. North side of Fairford Road, Highbridge. (1962)
- t. New House Farm, Huntspill. (1962)
- u. New clyce at Newbridge, Huntspill. (1964)
- v. Berrow Road, Berrow. (1964)
- w. Huntspill Court. (1965)
- x. East Town Gutter, Brent Knoll. (1965)
- y. South side of Westfield Road, Burnham-on-Sea. (1967)
- z. 6 locations along route of M5 Motorway. (1970)
- 1. Burnham Moor Lane, Burnham-on-Sea. (1970)

Other locations

- 2. Ductile blue clay without brown clay/silt above, at ST 307488.
- 3. Ductile blue clay without brown clay/silt above, at ST 306490.
- 4. Ductile blue clay beneath sand at ST 307495.
- 5. Sand-filled channel at ST 302514.
- 6. Mediaeval site beside Pillrow, ST 374507.
- 7. "Five acres at the clyce".
- V. "Isleport". ("Esynport")

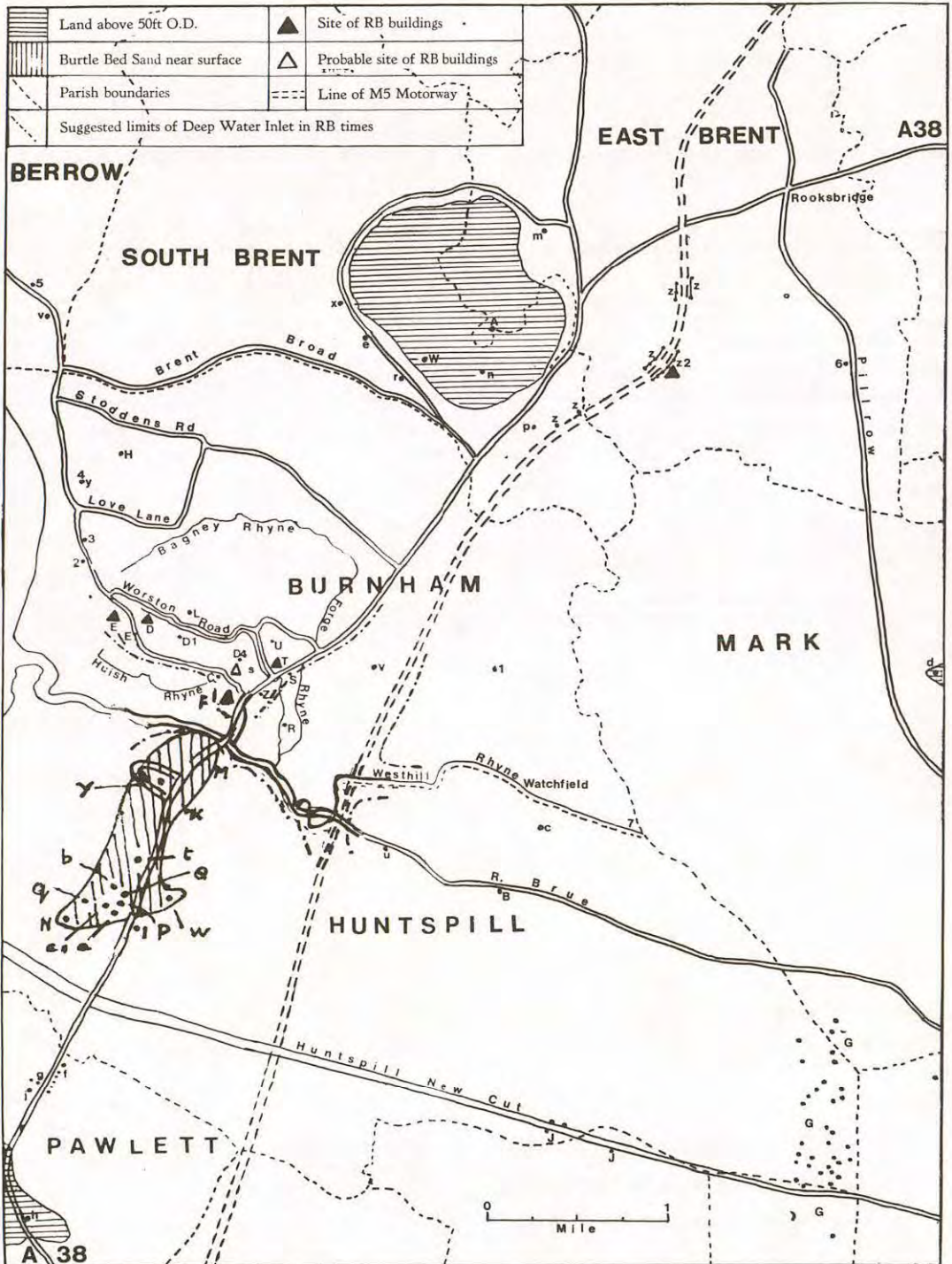


Fig. 2. Map of part of Burnham-on-Sea, Highbridge and Huntspill

Westhill Rhyne, today a minor watercourse, forms the boundary between the parishes of Burnham and Huntspill; as both these parishes were formed before the Conquest, and as major watercourses formed parish boundaries in the middle moor, it is likely that the Rhyne marks the line of an important watercourse, since superseded by the River Brue. Before the River Brue was straightened in 1806, its sinuosities west of the Westhill Rhyne were also part of the parish boundary. It is likely that the Westhill Rhyne marks a considerable watercourse that drained into the deep water inlet.

LATER MEDIEVAL EVIDENCE

Documentary evidence and archaeological indications suggest that the parishes of Burnham (including Highbridge) and Huntspill were densely populated in the Middle Ages; the scatter of medieval pottery in ploughed fields, etc., shows that the whole of Burnham parish was cultivated in the 14th. century, except the areas marked H-H-H and J-J on the location map (fig. 2). An Inquisition *post mortem* of 1301 contains a reference to 'pastura sablata', suggesting that sand dunes were stabilized in the area at this date. By analogy with evidence from the coast of South Wales, it is possible that the build-up of sand in the 14th. century was considerable, and that all watercourses to the sea were blocked, except the one at Highbridge. The build-up of sand on the north side of the deep water inlet, would encourage the deposition of silt behind it, and the eventual settlement of the area. The earliest building in the area of the inlet is one of the 14th. century, at site Y (fig. 2).

The High Bridge ('altum pontem') is first referred to in a document of 1280 A.D.; this implies that a considerable watercourse existed then, perhaps the 'Brue', or perhaps the Westhill Rhyne, which was the principal drain of Brent Marsh, until the drainage pattern was completely changed by the construction of the M5 Motorway. A dam beneath the bridge could have protected all the moors inland from seawater flooding, if this was the only sea entry along the coast; the land at Highbridge is 18 ft. O.D., but inland it falls as low as 9 ft. O.D. The Berrow charter of 973 A.D. proves there were a number of sea entries then, but these had all been blocked by the time the Highbridge dam was built. Richard Locke suggests that the cutting of the Pillrow led to the building of the Highbridge. The Pillrow, which had a sluice or dam at its sea-end by 1335, drained the moors to the north; a dam at Highbridge would be needed as well, if the Pillrow dam were not to be rendered useless.

In 1358, the Dean of Wells had two sluices in Mark to control the ebb and flow of the sea-water: these would have been on the Pillrow and the Westhill Rhyne, and may have been designed as extra precautions against sea-water accidentally leaking through the dam at Highbridge.

The choice of Highbridge for the site of the dam was probably dictated by the fact that the watercourse was narrower there than either east or west, as it had been in Roman times (fig. 1). A document of 1470 A.D. refers to 'warthes', lying immediately west of Highbridge. Warthes are areas of land reclaimed from coastal marshes, and are not referred to before about 1404. This suggests that the land west of Highbridge had been reclaimed from the sea not very long before 1470, and was probably part of the deep water inlet, that had gradually silted up, particularly after the building of the dam. The extension of occupation on both sides of the dam as late as the 18th. century suggests that the deposition of silt continued at a steady pace, except in the narrow channel between the dam and the sea.

THE INLET EAST OF HIGHBRIDGE

There is a little evidence that in Romano-British times, the deep water inlet widened and curved north on the east side of the present Highbridge. Roman material from Pitts Clay pit (fig. 1, R) and Bristol Bridge (fig. 1, S), and at sites T and U, suggests that a ridge of higher land, extending east from D2, here descended gently towards the east, first to the structure at site T, which was 4 ft. below the surface, then to waterchannels at site S, and finally dropping steeply into a watercourse 20 ft. deep, running north/south through site R. There is almost no Romano-British material north of this point as far as Brent, and field names, incorporating the element 'warth', etc., suggest that land along this line was reclaimed from marsh or the open water of the inlet, probably during the fifteenth century.