

IRON AGE AND ROMANO-BRITISH SETTLEMENT AT LOWER EASTON FARM, PYLLE, SOMERSET

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In 2014 Wessex Archaeology carried out an excavation in advance of construction of a solar energy farm, at Pylle, centred on NGR 362700 138650. (Fig. 1) The work was commissioned and funded by Pylle Solar Energy Ltd. The site lay approximately 5km south of Shepton Mallet and covered an area of approximately 25 hectares. It lay at a height of 65–72m above Ordnance Datum (OD) and is located in a wide, gently undulating floodplain. The site is crossed by a small watercourse, known as Whitelake, and the geology is mapped as Langport Member, Blue Lias Formation and Charmouth Mudstone Formation (British Geological Survey online viewer).

The site lies 0.5km east of the Fosse Way Roman road (currently the modern A37) linking Exeter and Lincoln. A possible villa site (Somerset Historic Environment Record 15053) lies approximately 0.5km south-west, as evidenced by a concentration of high-status Roman building material recovered during fieldwalking (Somerset Historic Environment Record 12222).

A geophysical survey of part of the site was carried out in 2013 (Pre-Construct Geophysics 2013). This covered the two fields on either side of Easton Lane, the northern field bounded to the north by the Whitelake watercourse. In this northern field the survey recorded geophysical anomalies indicating a widespread array of rectilinear enclosure ditches, some flanking a potential trackway in the middle of the site, and a small number of sub-circular enclosures, as well as possible pits (Fig. 1). Taken together, these results suggested settlement activity spread over a relatively wide area, increasing in density beyond the eastern limit of the site.

This geophysical survey highlighted the potential for remains of a field system possibly relating to the supposed Roman villa to the south-west of the site. The potential for prehistoric features was also highlighted. Given the size of the site, a staged programme of archaeological mitigation was proposed, with the aim of facilitating the

preservation by record of several sample areas with the highest archaeological potential, and the preservation *in situ* of the remaining identified archaeological resource. A total of seven excavation areas were stripped, totalling 0.39ha (Fig. 1). Areas 1–3 and 7 were targeted on specific concentrations of geophysical anomalies, whereas Areas 4, 5 and 6 acted as a control sample. Only Areas 1, 2 and 7 contained archaeological features.

A summary of the results is presented below; the full report may be found on the Wessex Archaeology website (<https://www.wessexarch.co.uk/our-work/lower-easton-farm-pylle>).

LATE PREHISTORIC SETTLEMENT

A limited number of features of late prehistoric, probably Middle Iron Age date were recorded in Area 1 and represent the earliest evidence for occupation of the site. These included a length of curvilinear gully, with a projected internal diameter of 11m. This had a probable SSE-facing entrance, matching the results of the geophysical survey for this area, and suggesting the ring-gully of a roundhouse. Late prehistoric pottery recovered from the single fill of this ditch, a total of 51 sherds, may be of Iron Age date, although the abraded nature of these sherds makes precise dating problematic.

Immediately south of the eastern terminal of this ring-gully, flanking the entrance, was a small feature which contained *in situ* burning and a single sherd of late prehistoric pottery. Stones in the centre of the pit had been heat-affected.

The first settlement probably dates to the Middle Iron Age. The evidence is limited, but suggests a small-scale farming community, perhaps consisting of a single family group. It is possible that further Iron Age activity has been obliterated by Romano-British features; much of the later prehistoric pottery comes from Romano-British ditches.

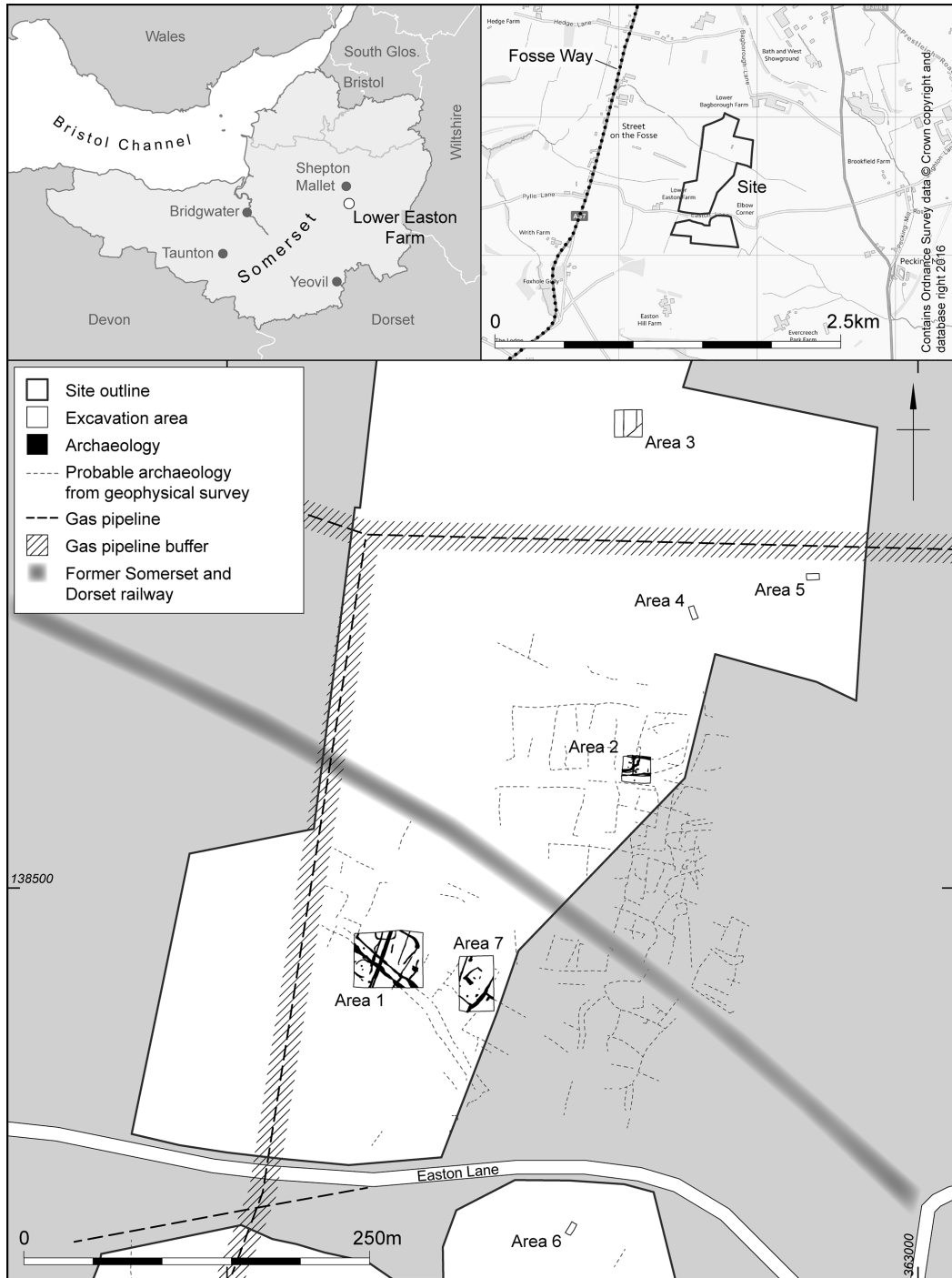


Fig. 1 Site location showing the excavated areas and the results of the geophysical survey

ROMANO-BRITISH LANDSCAPE ACTIVITY

Romano-British features, including ditches, pits and trackways, were recorded in Areas 1, 2 and 7, indicating widespread activity across the site. The pottery suggests a broad date range from the 2nd to the 4th centuries AD, which is confirmed by a number of coins. Almost all the Romano-British features in Area 1 were ditches, either for drainage and/or to mark boundaries. Most of these were orientated either north-west to south-east or north-east to south-west, which matched the general orientation of the enclosures recorded more widely across the site by the geophysical survey (Fig. 1).

The most substantial of these features were two parallel ditches which formed a 5m wide trackway aligned north-west to south-east across the area, which was shown on the geophysical survey as extending for over 40m. These ditches contained 3rd-century AD pottery and displayed a number of recuts, indicating their prolonged use. One section contained a length of Romano-British stone-filled drain along its centre, which is perhaps unsurprising given the location of the site in a floodplain. At its north-western end this ditch turned sharply to the north-east, which corresponds to the eastern side of an enclosure apparent on the geophysical survey; this enclosure appeared to span the trackway.

One ditch on the northern edge of Area 1 appears to represent the southern end of a small rectangular enclosure. This feature lies on a different orientation to the other Romano-British features in this area and is perhaps later, a possibility borne out by the pottery evidence, although this is not conclusive. It certainly contained finds suggestive of a late Romano-British date in its bottom fill. This ditch enclosed an area 13m east-west by at least 5m north-south. Only the southern end of the projected enclosure was visible, the remainder lying outside of the excavation area and being ill-defined in the geophysical survey.

The excavation of Area 2 revealed an arrangement of Romano-British ditches which corresponds closely to the anomalies recorded by the geophysical survey. These ditches indicate a number of phases of reorganisation of enclosures/field systems. The pottery suggests a broad date range from the 2nd–3rd century.

The stratigraphically earliest features were two short lengths of north-south ditch, with terminals 6.8m apart, possibly marking an entrance.

The excavation of Area 7 revealed an arrangement of ditches some of which correspond closely

to geophysical anomalies. These represent parts of two adjacent subrectangular enclosures, both of which appear to be part of the same arrangement of enclosures recorded in Area 1 (Fig. 1). Other ditches present were not detected by the geophysical survey.

Romano-British occupation of the site appears to have begun during the 2nd or 3rd century AD and continued into the 4th century, a fairly typical date range for such sites in southern England. However, the fact that the finds include two coins as well as several fragments of brooches dating to the 1st or 2nd centuries AD shows that there was activity in the vicinity during the early Romano-British period. These finds were all unstratified or residual in later features, so may relate to the possible villa nearby.

Perhaps during the early Romano-British period a villa was established approximately 0.5km south-west of the site, as evidenced by the large quantity of building materials recovered during fieldwalking (Somerset Historic Environment Record 12222). It is clear from geophysical surveys of the site that the features uncovered during the excavation formed part of a wider agricultural landscape probably related to this villa. Indeed, two fragments of Romano-British ceramic building material were found in Area 1. Based on its thickness, one of these fragments is probably from a brick, whilst the other may be from a box flue or *vousoir* tile. Most notably a probable track or droveway crossed the middle of Area 1 in a north-west to south-east direction, with field boundary/drainage ditches laid out at right angles to it. The field system continued and apparently became more focused to the east of the excavated areas.

The finds material mainly falls into two principal phases of activity; one dating to the later prehistoric period, the other of Roman (2nd–4th-century) date.

Roman pottery accounts for 91% (sherd count) of the assemblage and largely dates from the middle/late 2nd into the 4th century AD. It is overwhelmingly dominated by a diverse range of ‘local’ coarse wares. Continental imported wares are limited to 21 sherds of samian and a single burnt handle from a Baetican Dressel 20 amphora.

This suggests mid–late Romano-British occupation with a very limited repertoire of forms dominated by jars; higher status wares such as Gaulish samian (1% count) and other imported fine/specialist wares are almost absent from the assemblage. A few regional imports from the Oxfordshire and New Forest industries were

present, (1% and 1.2% respectively by count of the Roman assemblage), however, the assemblage is still dominated by local wares. This is perhaps likely to reflect a rural settlement of moderately low status. This is unsurprising at a rural site dating to this period and can be paralleled with similar, contemporary sites in the region, such as Shapwick (Timby 2007), Catsgore (Leech 1982) and Kenn Moor (Timby 2000).

Other than the pottery only animal bone occurs in moderate quantities, and there are very few other finds, with none clearly associated with any specialist crafts or industries. The evidence from the animal bone and charred plant remains indicates that the agricultural economy was mixed, with animal husbandry represented, in particular, by sheep/goat but also cattle, and arable farming dominated by spelt wheat.

The 44 coins recovered are all small denomination copper alloy issues of the Romano-British period, the majority being of late Roman date. As a result of their relatively poor condition, many of the coins could not be identified to period. However, of these, it was possible to date 16 to broad periods, with two belonging to the early Romano-British period (1st or 2nd century AD), and the remainder of late 3rd- or 4th-century AD date.

The further 14 copper alloy Roman items recovered include pieces from six bow brooches dating to the 1st to 2nd centuries AD.

Other items of personal adornment include two bracelet fragments, both likely to be of late Romano-British date. One is decorated with transverse grooves and a punched dot motif, while the other is plain. An unstratified finger-ring has an oval shaped bezel containing the degraded remains of an amber coloured stone, the condition is such that it is impossible to tell if this was an intaglio.

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The archive is currently held at Wessex Archaeology's offices in Salisbury, Wiltshire, and will be deposited in due course at Taunton Museum under accession code TTNCM:111/2014.

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