

## A ROMANO-BRITISH SITE AT HOLWELL, NEAR FROME, SOMERSET

by

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N.G.R. ST 71404515

### ABSTRACT

Field walking in the winter of 1986-87 located a disturbed localized concentration of 2nd-4th century Romano-British pottery sherds on ploughed ground near the eastern Mendip village of Holwell.

### Introduction

The village of Holwell (Fig. 1) is situated on the southern flank of eastern Mendip, 4 km south-west of the market town of Frome. The village itself lies on the left, west, bank of a small stream known as the Nunney Brook at the head of Nunney Coombe, a narrow gorge which has been cut down through both the Jurassic Upper Inferior Oolite and the older Carboniferous Limestone by super-imposed drainage (Barrington & Stanton, 1977, p. 220). The village is virtually surrounded by both active and abandoned quarries developed in the Carboniferous Limestone.

Immediately upstream of the village the Nunney Coombe opens out into a relatively broad valley developed upon a bedrock of Jurassic Forest Marble clay but retaining to the west a steep and much degraded Carboniferous Limestone valley side. At this abrupt change in valley profile a shallow valley commences in the field in which the Romano-British pottery was found and descends gently to meet the A361 Frome to Wells road. This road then leads down, probably following the downward continuation of the valley mentioned above, to cross the Nunney Brook on a new road bridge which was constructed in 1985 as part of the Nunney Catch road bypass scheme.

It was while investigating the alluvial sediments containing archaeological remains (Vranch, in prep.) which were exposed in the new bridge foundation excavations that the writer became interested in the archaeology of the area, and the resultant field work led to the discovery of the Romano-British finds briefly reported upon herein.

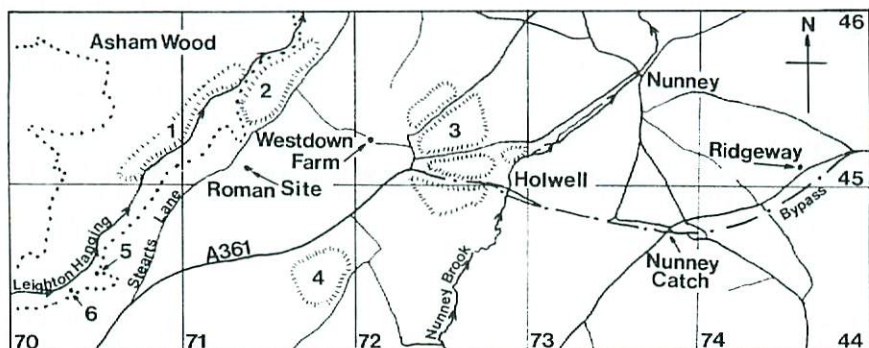


Fig. 1—SITE LOCATION MAP

1. ASHAM WOOD QUARRY
2. WESTDOWN QUARRY
3. HOLWELL QUARRIES
4. CLOFORD QUARRY

5. TOM TIVEY'S HOLE
  6. WHITE WOMAN'S HOLE
- THE GRID LINES ARE 1 KM APART

### *The Roman Site*

The area containing the 2nd-4th century Romano-British pottery forms part of a large field which is used for the production of a cereal crop. In the north the field has a relatively level surface upon a bedrock of Jurassic Upper Inferior Oolite which rests unconformably upon the Carboniferous Limestone. Only a thin soil cover is present in this area. To the south the land surface grades gently into the head of a shallow valley (previously mentioned), which trends east towards the village of Holwell and the Nunney Coombe. Beneath this valley the soil cover is thought to be thicker and overlies the Carboniferous Limestone.

The surface distribution of pottery at N.G.R. ST 71404515 was localized within the expanse of this large field. The initial finds were found close to the eastern field boundary. Further examination of the plough furrows to the west indicated that the site extended some 30 m in that direction. In order to ascertain more fully the area in which pottery sherds were to be found at the field surface, the writer walked the plough furrows in a north-south direction, using the eastern field boundary as a datum point, at about 3 m intervals. The area was then walked in an east-west direction at about 3 m intervals. The extremities of the area walked at which finds became scarce or absent were noted and from this information it was deduced that the spread of pottery sherds covered an area of approximately 900 square metres.

Ploughing of a field surface would tend, over many years, to distribute sub-surface concentrations of archaeological material over considerable distances from their source. Thus the method of field walking noted above cannot give an accurate impression of a site's true dimensions or boundaries. Beyond the eastern field boundary the adjoining fields are used for animal grazing and were not investigated.

### *The Finds*

In total some 350 weathered and much abraded pottery fragments were collected from the field surface during the course of four field trips. No excavation was undertaken. The following fabric types were represented: medium to coarse grey, black/black burnished, orange, colour coated, and (rare for this site) Samian/Oxfordshire ware, Samian being diagnostic of the 1st-2nd centuries and Oxfordshire indicating a 3rd-4th century date for the finds. Numerically the medium to coarse grey ware was by far the most common fabric type. Other material found includes one half of a small blue glass bead 5 mm in diameter, the end of a possible copper alloy bracelet, and also a horse snaffle bit fragment and a nail both of indeterminate age. Seven rock fragments were also collected. They are all fine-grained micaceous sandstones, pink/grey in colour, and one exhibits a smooth polished surface which may have been derived from its possible use as a whetstone. The sandstone fragments may have been brought to the site from local Devonian or Triassic outcrops. A single hand size lump of iron ore was also found.

### *Discussion*

The site was discovered by field walking. Only preliminary identification of the material found has been undertaken. An approximate age, 2nd-4th century Romano-British, has been determined for the surface finds. The relationship of the site to the local topography has been noted. Quite possibly the shallow eastward trending valley may have been a route in antiquity up onto the Mendip plateau.

The site lies very close to the quarrying concession (Somerset County Council, 1971, p. 293), held by Westdown Quarry, N.G.R. ST 717457, and may well extend into it, a point which should be borne in mind if stone extraction recommences at this quarry in the future.

Other evidence of Romano-British activity in the vicinity has been recorded from Tom Tivey's Hole, N.G.R. ST 70514447, (Barrett, 1966) and White Woman's Hole, N.G.R. ST 70334433, (Barrett & Boon, 1972). Barrett (1966, p. 18) notes the need for more comparative pottery material of Romano-British age from the Frome area. Excavation of the site reported here may well supply such material. A late Iron Age early Roman coin hoard (Croft, pers. comm.; Somerset County Council, 1971, p. 254) was found at Westdown Farm in 1860.

On rewalking the site in the winter of 1987-88 the writer found only one sherd of Romano-British ware as a yield for some two hours' fieldwork. It is highly unlikely that virtually all the material present was collected during the previous season's investigations. The reason for this apparent lack of surface finds is thought to be due to the limited extent of weathering of the plough furrows. One wonders how many similar sites may come to light from long-term investigation of areas where only a very few stray finds are known to date.

The writer does not intend to continue investigations at this site.

#### *Disposal of Finds*

All material from this site is deposited in the Frome Museum, collection reference number H1.

#### *Acknowledgements*

Many thanks are due to the farmer, Mr C. P. House, for allowing the writer to walk his land and to Mr R. A. Croft and Mr S. M. Minnett for provisionally identifying a selected group of finds from this site.

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