

YCCART 2023/Y4

**Marking the boundaries: The Yatton Little River
Part 2: Boarden Bow to Congresbury Yeo**

**YATTON, CONGRESBURY, CLAVERHAM AND CLEEVE ARCHAEOLOGICAL
RESEARCH TEAM (YCCART)**

General Editor: Vince Russett



A spring day on the water: Rust Rhyne (entering from the right) brings the boundary of Kingston Seymour to the Little River

Page	Contents
3	Abstract Acknowledgements Introduction
4	Site location Land use and geology
6	Historical & archaeological context
26	References

Abstract

As indicated in the previous report (YCCCART, forthcoming 2023), medieval documentary evidence for the Northmarsh is rare, and therefore the role of landscape archaeology must be more used to increase understanding of the history and development of this large wetland and its drainage systems. These first two reports should be understood as introductory statements on the history of the Little River, with further research and publication to follow.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the unsung heroes who have maintained these waterways in their present form for centuries, paid or unpaid, official or not.

Introduction

Yatton, Congresbury, Claverham and Cleeve Archaeological Research Team (YCCCART) is a Community Archaeology team working across northern Somerset.

Our objective is to undertake archaeological fieldwork to enable a better understanding and management of the heritage of the area while recording and publishing the activities and locations of the research carried out.

'So this is a river?

The River!', corrected the Rat.

'And you really live by the river? What a jolly life!' said the Mole.

'By it, and with it and on it and in it' said the Rat. 'It's brother and sister to me, and aunts and company, and food and drink...it's my world, and I don't want any other. What it hasn't got is not worth having, and what it doesn't know is not worth knowing'...

The mole could only hold up both forepaws and gasp 'Oh, my! Oh, my!'

Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows*

PS Remember what KG called the water rat, we today call the water vole, an altogether more likeable creature.

Site location



Fig 1: Location: North End to Wemberham (2018)



Fig 2: Location: Wemberham to Congresbury Yeo (2018)

This lower section of the Little River (the upper section from Sluice Stile to Boarden Bow is detailed in YCCART forthcoming, 2023) begins at the Boarden Bow (the road bridge over

the B3133 at North End, Yatton (ST4173267123) on an artificial cut through the Yatton peninsula that is probably medieval in origin.

The River then runs under Lampley Lane Bridge, and south-westerly across Yatton Moor to a meeting with the Rust Rhyne on the boundary of Kingston Seymour parish at ST4137766333.

The River then bifurcates into two straight lines, one running to the southern side of Wemberham, and the northern, the line called Little River today, forming the parish boundary with Kingston Seymour as far as northern Wemberham and the deserted Wemberham Cottage.

The northern course continues to run to the north of a patch of slightly higher ground in a palaeochannel that forms the parish boundary, with a straighter artificial course to its south forming the north boundary of Wemberham, the two meeting again at the site of David's Ear, a sluice that formerly marked the end of the River, at ST3948265224, now 100m from the southern edge of the M5. The last 600m of the River (the New Cut) was constructed 1841-6, presumably in an attempt to increase the flow rate in the river.

Most of this part of the River lies in the parish of Yatton, with the river running alongside and then through the adjacent parish of Kingston Seymour in its lowest stretch, the whole lying in the unitary authority of North Somerset.

Land use and geology

This is a non-dramatic (but please, not 'flat') landscape. The whole of this section of the Little River runs through the alluvial clays of the Northmarsh, except for the engineered section at North End (see below), where it is canalised through the Mercia Mudstones and superincumbent Head Deposits of Glacial or post-Glacial date of the Yatton peninsula.

One or two areas of the alluvium are distinguished by their height (up to 1m) above their surroundings (such as the area to the north of Wemberham, where the elevation supported the now-deserted Wemberham Cottage and the little hamlet at Phipps Bridge, finally destroyed by the construction of the M5 in 1969-71, and is skirted by the early course of the Little River).

Land use is very largely pastoral, although some fields on the Kingston side of the River are occasionally ploughed: relict ridge and furrow to the south of it, east of Wemberham, shows there was more arable once, probably in the high medieval warm period before c1300.

Unusually for rivers in the Northmarsh, pedestrian access is very good, the River being followed by public footpaths for all of its length, except the final 19th century-constructed 600m north of the M5.

A good view of the River and its associated winter swannery can be glimpsed (by road *passengers*) from the M5.

Historical & archaeological context

Section 1: Boarden Bow (ST4173267123) and the Yatton cut (Ham Lane Bridge to Lampley Lane Bridge ST4152066856)

Kenn Moor is an inland peat moor, overall some 1.5m or more below the level of the moors west of Yatton. This is due largely to the post-Roman alluviation, which was caused by prolonged marine incursions between (say) the 5th and tenth centuries AD (Rippon 2006; V. Straker *pers comm*). While this contributed a surface layer of alluvial clay, growing thicker towards the coast, it was prevented from reaching the inner moors of Yatton, Kenn and Tickenham by the presence of a now partially-buried ridge of Mudstones and Head running from Yatton through Kenn and close to the upland at eastern Clevedon.

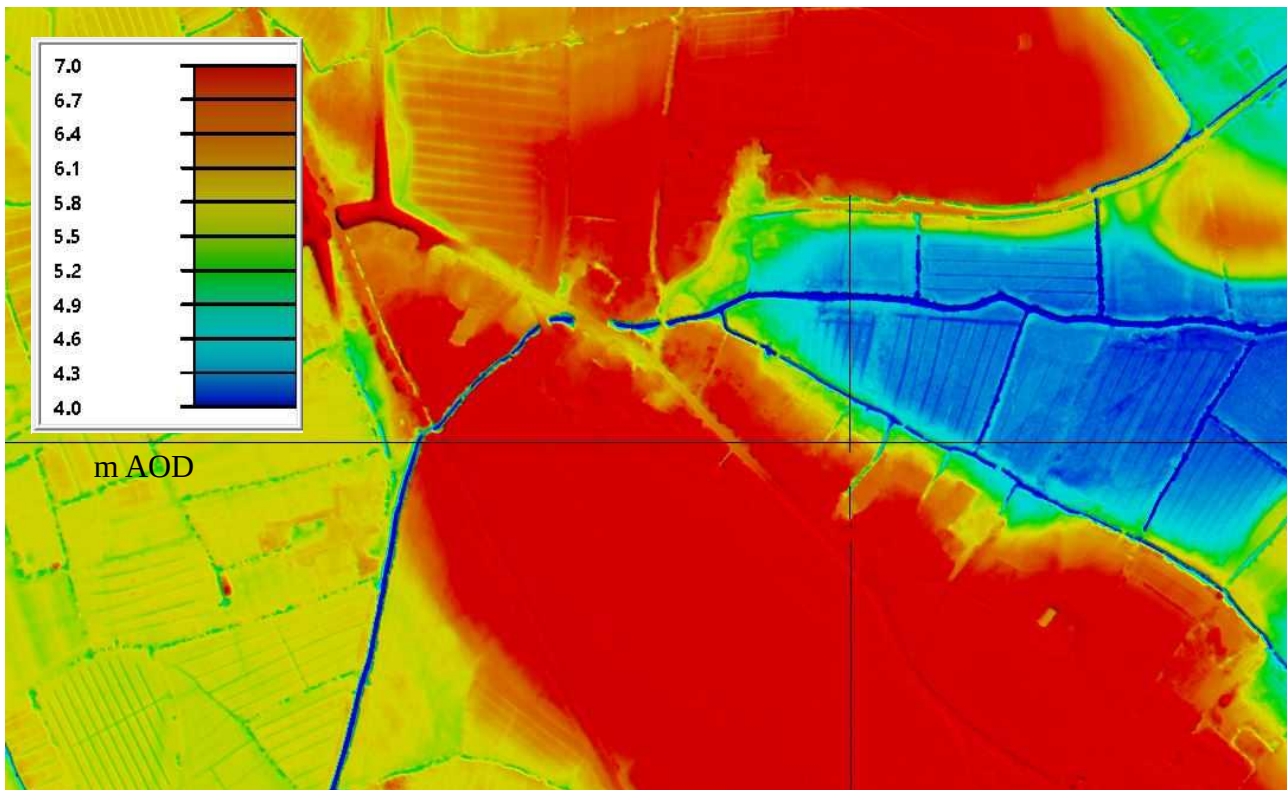


Fig 3: Kenn Moor, North End and Yatton Moor lidar

This is illustrated in the lidar plot (above Fig 3), clearly showing the height disparity between Yatton (left) and Kenn Moors.

The Little River now flows right to left (east to west): clearly a high degree of engineering planning must have gone into producing this River, since from North End, on the Kenn Moor side, any water's natural inclination would be to flow the other way. Creating this river course would need to take into account exact river levels at David's Ear sluice, some 3km away SW (3.2km if following the modern river).

The necessity for the maintenance of this waterway is clearly shown by the detailed (post-medieval) accounts for clearance and maintenance ('keeching') of the River.

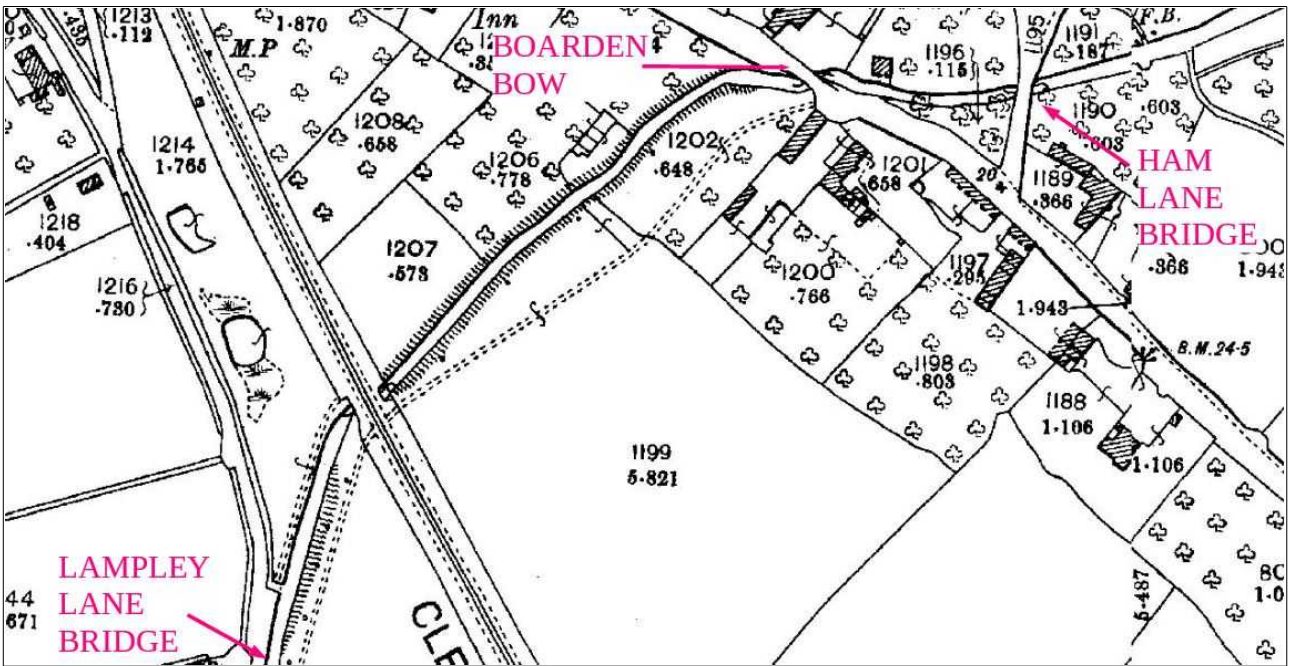


Fig 4: The North End cut (1903)

Pre-development maps (Fig 4 above, 1903) show at least 10 marker stones alongside the river, expressing this need. Only one of these appears to survive *in situ*.



Fig 5: The North End cut from old Clevedon branch line, 2017

The earliest detailed map of the area (Fig 6 below) shows much the same, (obviously

without the railway), although the depiction of the bridges is subtly different, probably reflecting replacements and rebuildings at various times.



Fig 6: North End and the North End Cut, 1799

The date and origins of this Cut (and indeed, the Little River itself) are still unclear. The river cuts through a pre-established field system of probable medieval date (see below), and perhaps rather surprisingly for an artificial waterway, forms the parish boundary between Kingston Seymour and Yatton parishes (and for a substantial period, Chewton and Winterstoke Hundreds). As always (and see below), the possession of Yatton by the bishop (of Bath and Wells) during the medieval period provides an obvious candidate for the commission of the works, although the succession of wealthy families holding Kingston in the medieval period (Malherbe; St Maur; Berkeley; Kenn - Collinson 1791) may also be plausible candidates, especially for works to this portion of the River.

The Cut is approximately 500m long (from the junction with the Stowey Rhyne to Lampley Lane Bridge, roughly the length cut into more solid geology). At its maximum depth around the B3133, the cut is up to 3m deep (top to water level March 2023) and the water being about 0.5m - 1.0m deep. After leaving Kenn Moor, it does not appear to follow any pre-existing water courses, and was thus created *ab initio* as part of the planning of the Little River.

At Lampley Lane Bridge (Fig 7 below), the height of the banks stabilises at about 1m, and only reduces very slightly in the rest of its course to the Yeo.



Fig 7: Lampley Lane Bridge SW of North End 2017 (yes, there is a bridge under all that ivy!)



Fig 8: Development at North End 2021

North End has been heavily developed in the past few years (2016-22), with many new

houses, obliterating the old branch line and radically altering the appearance of the North End Cut.



Fig 9: North End before commencement of development (2005)



Fig 10: North End 2023

Section 2: Oldfield and Rust Rhyne (Lampley Lane Bridge (ST4152066856) to Wemberham Cottage (ST4031165776))

Below Lampley Lane Bridge, the River runs a laser-straight course across an area of previously established fields to join the Rust Rhyne (the eastern boundary of Kingston Seymour parish) at ST4137766333.

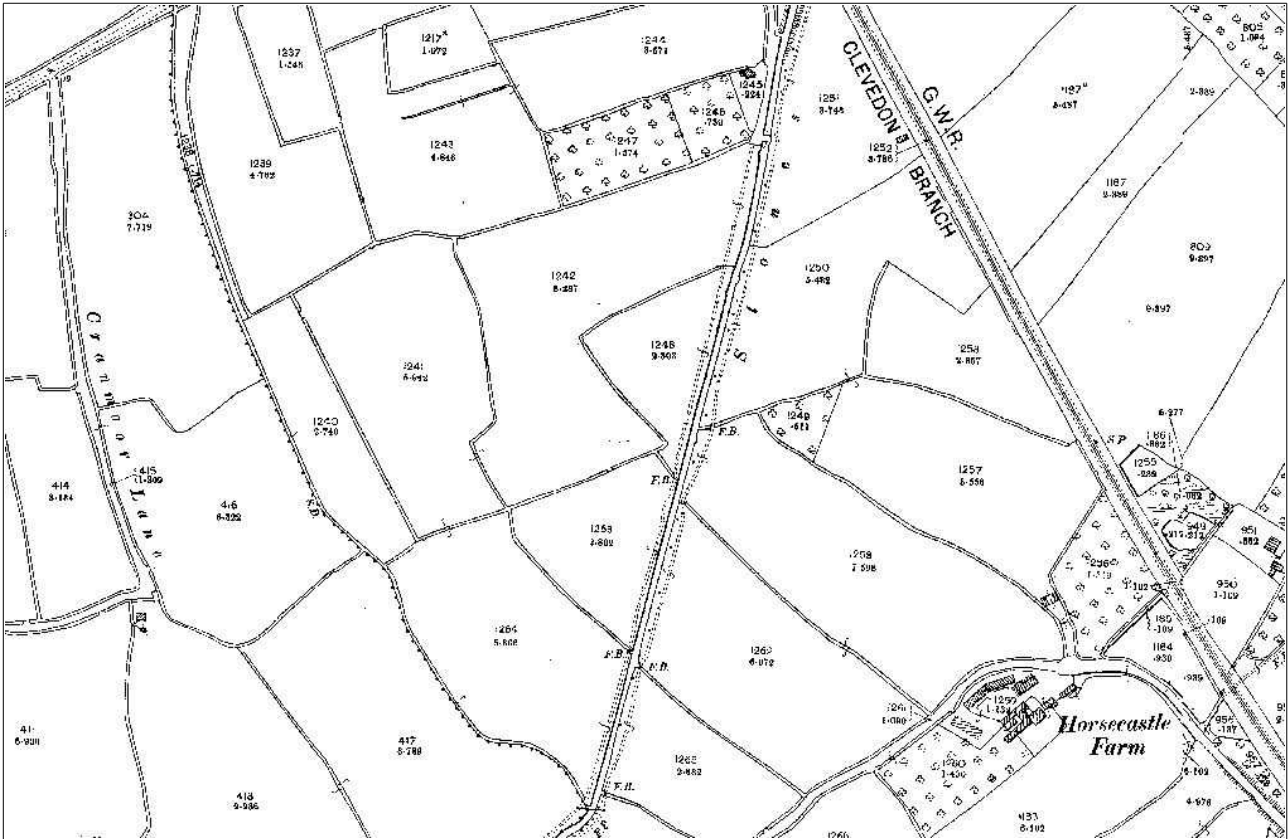


Fig 11: Section 2 of Little River from Lampley Lane Bridge to Rust Rhyne

This length of River is recorded as having 18-20 'Stones' along its south-eastern side, none of which appear to survive in situ.

It must be clear even to the untrained eye that the River does cut across earlier fields here: unfortunately, the field names do not help very much in clarifying this (Fig 12 below), as the names from the 1840 Tithe Map are relatively non-committal.

While it may seem like special pleading, it seems likely that the breach happened long enough ago for the fields to acquire new, probably more relevant names, especially where they relate to Horsecastle Farm (Beehive Farm in 1768 - map supplied by David Ridley).

It is just possible that the names 'Westfield' and 'Tynings/Tythings' once covered a larger area, but this remains for the moment, unconfirmed speculation.

The planning for the river to encounter the Rust Rhyne at the exact eastern corner of Kingston Seymour parish can hardly be coincidence.

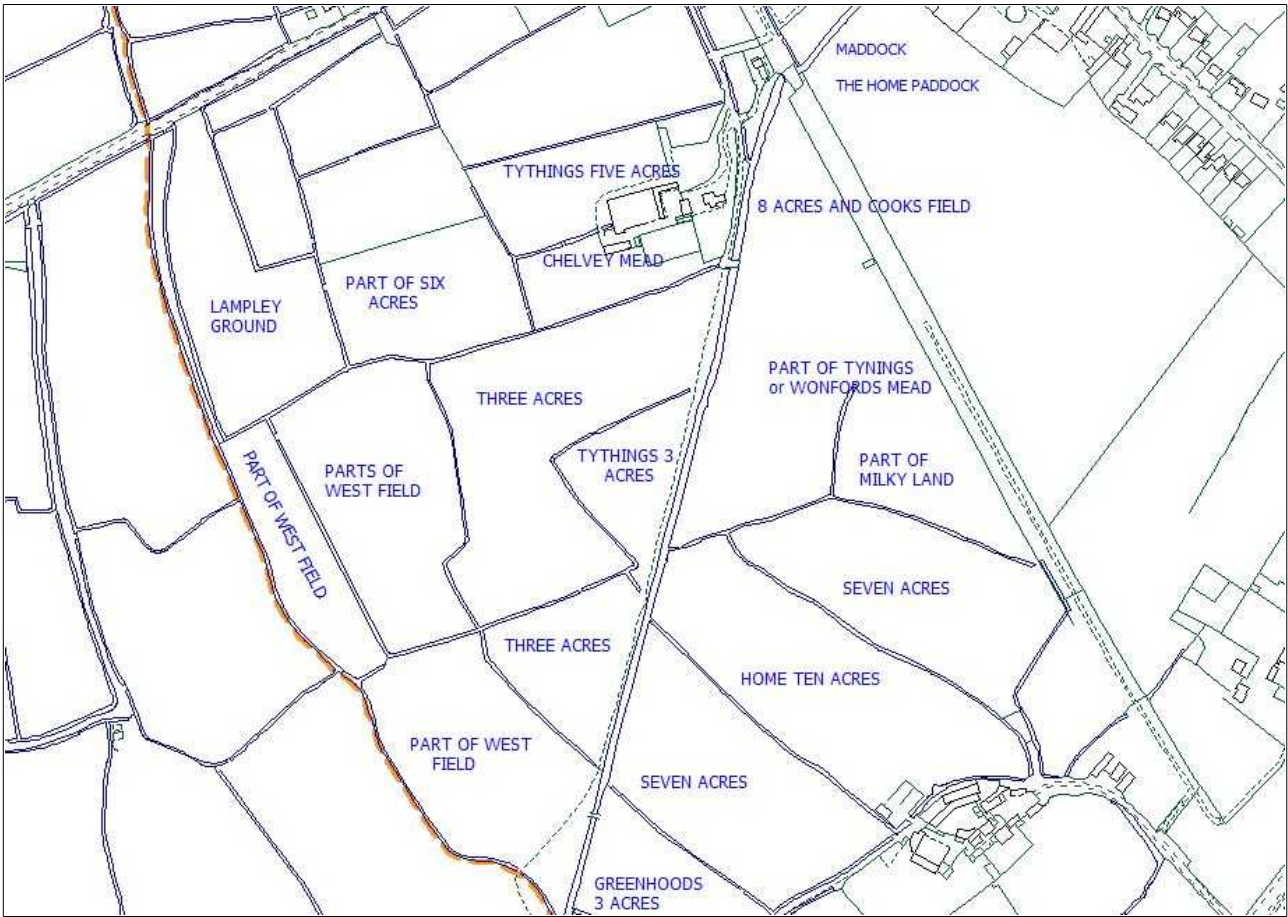


Fig 12: Section of Little River from Lampley Lane Bridge to Rust Rhyne: fieldnames from 1840 TA



Fig 13: Little River cuts through the hedge on the west side of Three Acres and Seven Acres

Nick Corcos has suggested (with some justice) that Kingston, along with Brockley and

Yatton/Kingston Seymour, Landscape study, Little River 2, 2023, Y4., v. 1

(initially) Yatton were gifted to Chewton Hundred in or soon after 909AD, when land from that Hundred on Dundry and Mendip had been gifted away to support the newly founded bishopric of Wells, and these three fairly remote lowland parishes were given to compensate for the subsequent lack of good pasture in the Hundred (Corcos 2000).

What is not clear is how soon the parishes and their boundaries were subsequently defined. Kingston is a fairly usual lowland parish, in that its boundaries are entirely marked by water: The Severn in the west, Kenn River in the north, Rust Rhyne in the east, and Little River and Congresbury Yeo in the south.

There is some evidence from 1946 air photos and lidar (see Fig 14 below) that the Rust Rhyne did not originate on the line of the Little River, but can be seen as a further palaeochannel to its south.

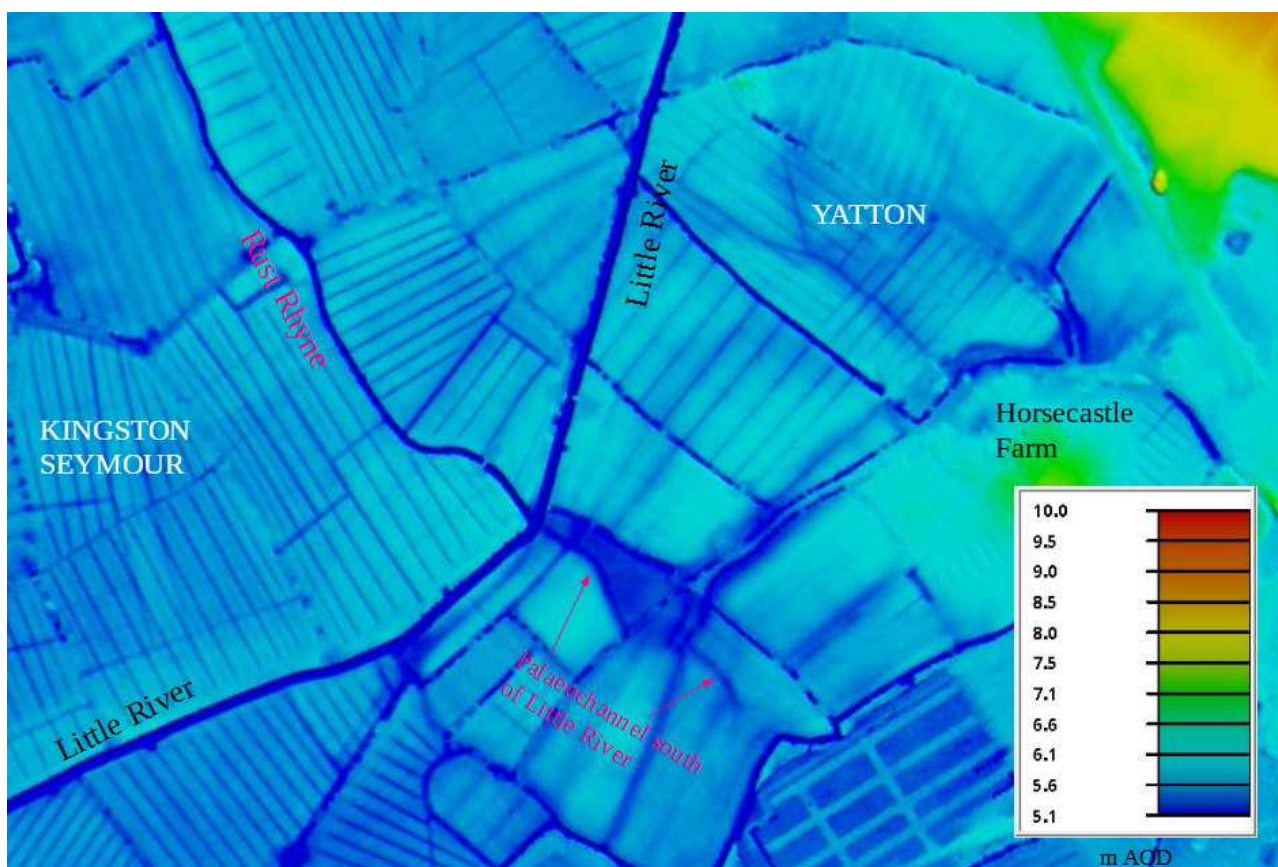


Fig 14: Lidar plot of Yatton headwaters of the Rust Rhyne

Presumably the construction of the Little River was the occasion of abandonment of the headwaters of the Rust Rhyne, although part survived until the 19th century as a field boundary. It might also explain why the Rust Rhyne today runs north, and not south into the Little River.

Beyond the meeting of the Rust Rhyne and the Little River, there is a large landscape conundrum.

Two arrow straight ditch / rhyne combinations fork at or just below the Rust Rhyne junction.

One runs across the moor to join Biddle Street Rhyne and Wemberham Lane at ST4083765547, by Wemberham House, and continues the straight line as Biddle Street Rhyne until it encounters the edge of Wemberham proper at ST4072165378, and turns to the NW to become Wemberham Lane Rhyne. No 'stones' are marked alongside this branch.

The second, more northerly runs to join that Rhyne at Wemberham Cottage, ST4037265780 (Fig 15 below). 11 'stones' mark the beginning of this.

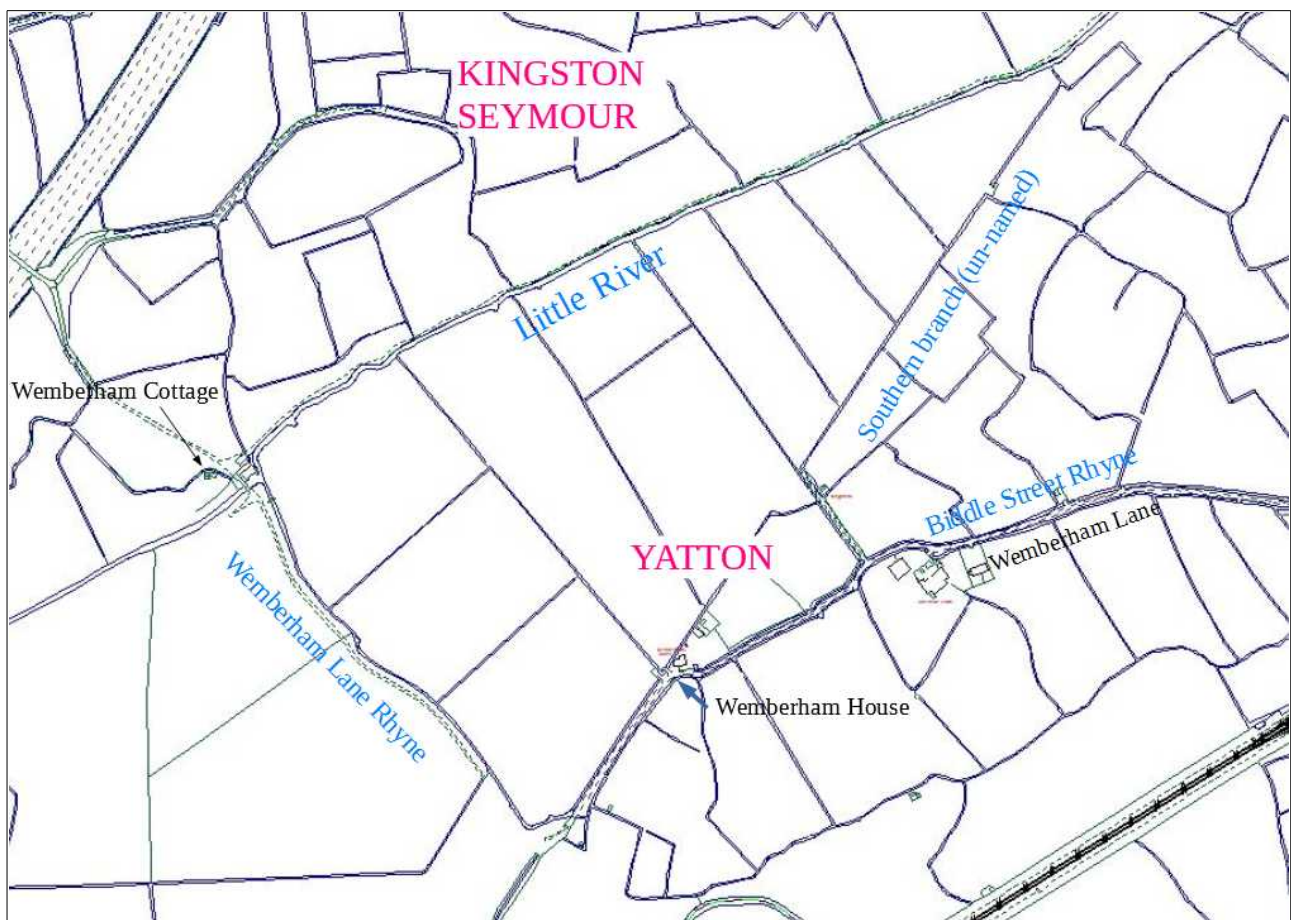


Fig 15: 'By water to Wemberham': two branches of the Little River

These two branches are significant landscape features.

The northern branch, today's Little River, forms the parish boundary. There seems no trace of a viable preceding palaeochannel in either lidar or air photographic evidence, so it must be assumed that this cut was created afresh. All field boundaries, whether the irregular ones in Kingston, or the clearly planned ones in Yatton, respect the line of, and terminate at, the River, meaning (as would be expected from its function as the parish and Hundred boundary) that it is the earliest feature in this part of the landscape.

Similarly, the southern branch (no longer continuous, but very obvious on maps, and shown as continuous on lidar mapping) is also one of the earliest features in the landscape, its line respected by both the irregular field boundaries in Yatton to the south, and in the geometric boundaries to its north.

There is no trace in lidar, field names (except possibly 'Oldfield' but that name has extra connotations) or air photographs that the southern branch cut through pre-existing fields (there are no traces of continuations of boundaries over the branch to the north).

Immediately to the south of Wemberham House, a fieldname of 'Millcroft Five Acres' was recorded in 1656 (Campbell 2002). leading to suggestions that the southern branch may have been a mill leat, but its primacy in the landscape, lack of appreciable fall (and thus kinetic energy), and the availability of other waters seems to make this idea unlikely.

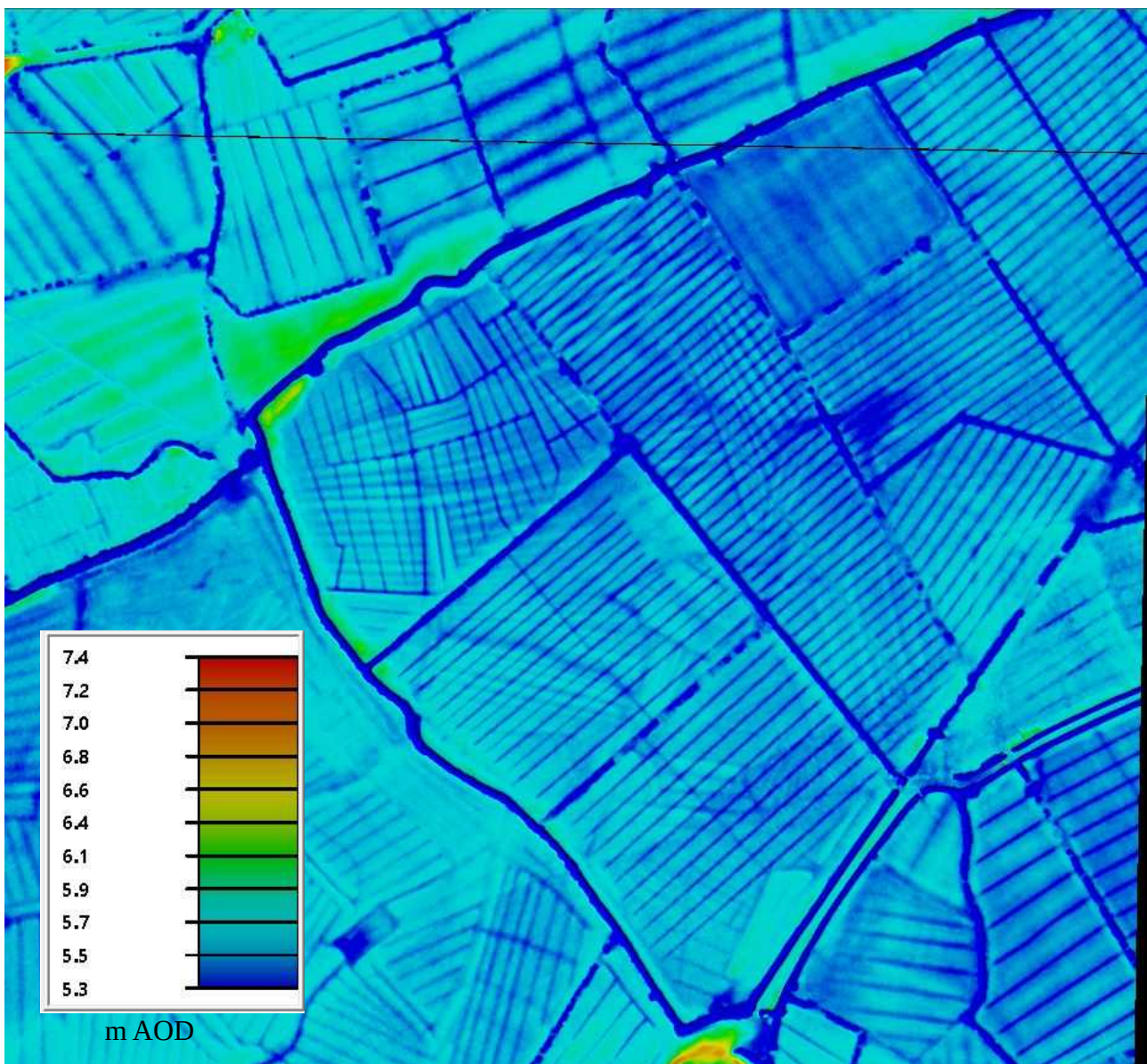


Fig 16: Lidar image of ridge and furrow underlying ditches and gripes at Oldfield/Wemberham

It is highly significant that the area between the two branches and Wemberham Lane Rhyne can be seen on lidar traces (Fig 16), to be full of ridge and furrow, of probable high medieval date (i.e dating to the medieval warmer period before c1300, when the moor would almost certainly have been drier). This ridge and furrow does not respect the internal straight ditches of the area, but does not cross northern or southern branch, implying strongly that the branches of the River were already there when the ridge and furrow was formed.

Indeed, the ridge and furrow forms, with associated palaeochannels, a whole set of irregular fields overlain by the later straight ditches. This implies the sequence in Fig 17:

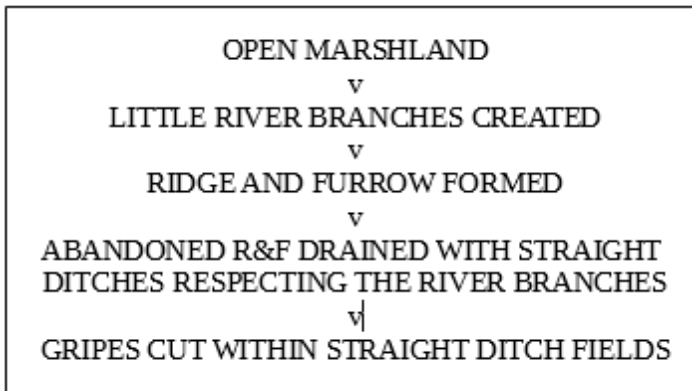


Fig 17: Stages of development 'between the rivers' at Wemberham

While we can only strictly say that the whole thing was performed before the 1799 map, technically, the ridge-and-furrow is highly likely to be pre-1300, with all the implications for the date of the Little River and its southern branch.

Potential overlap of features within the area imply further possible relative dating, but this awaits further research.



Fig 18: The overgrown remains of Wemberham Cottage Farm, beside the Wemberham Lane Rhyne

Section 3: Wemberham to the Congresbury Yeo (Wemberham Cottage to Yeo Sluice)

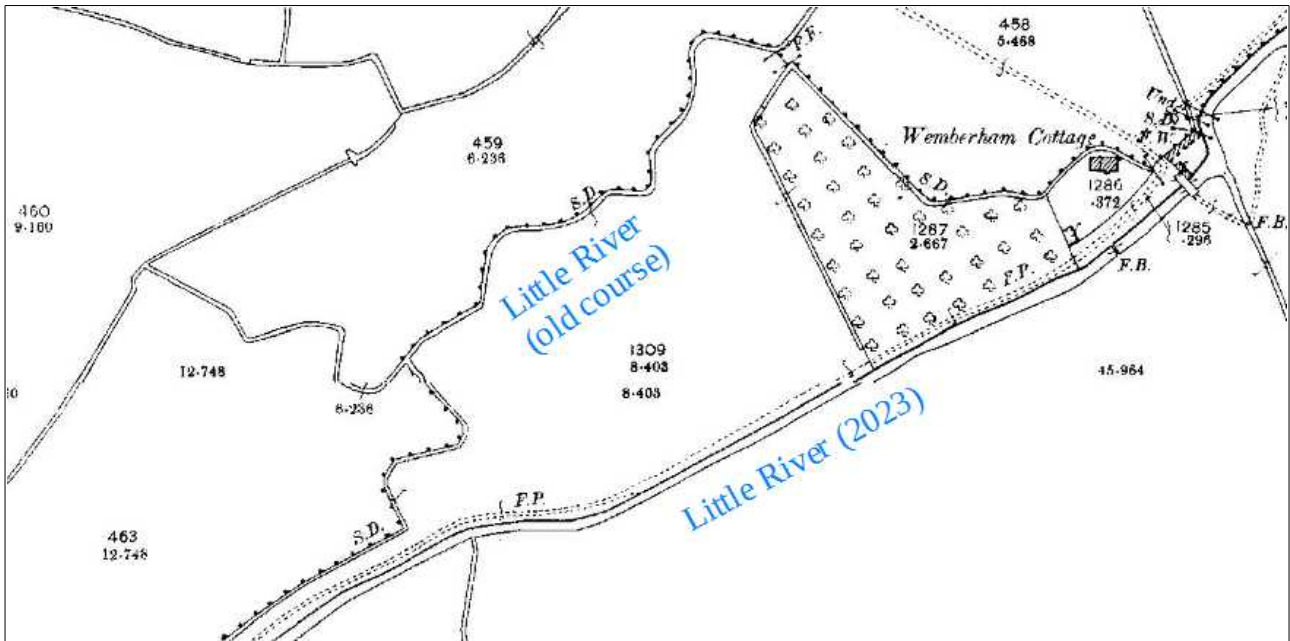


Fig 19a: Wemberham Cottage and Little River course (1903)

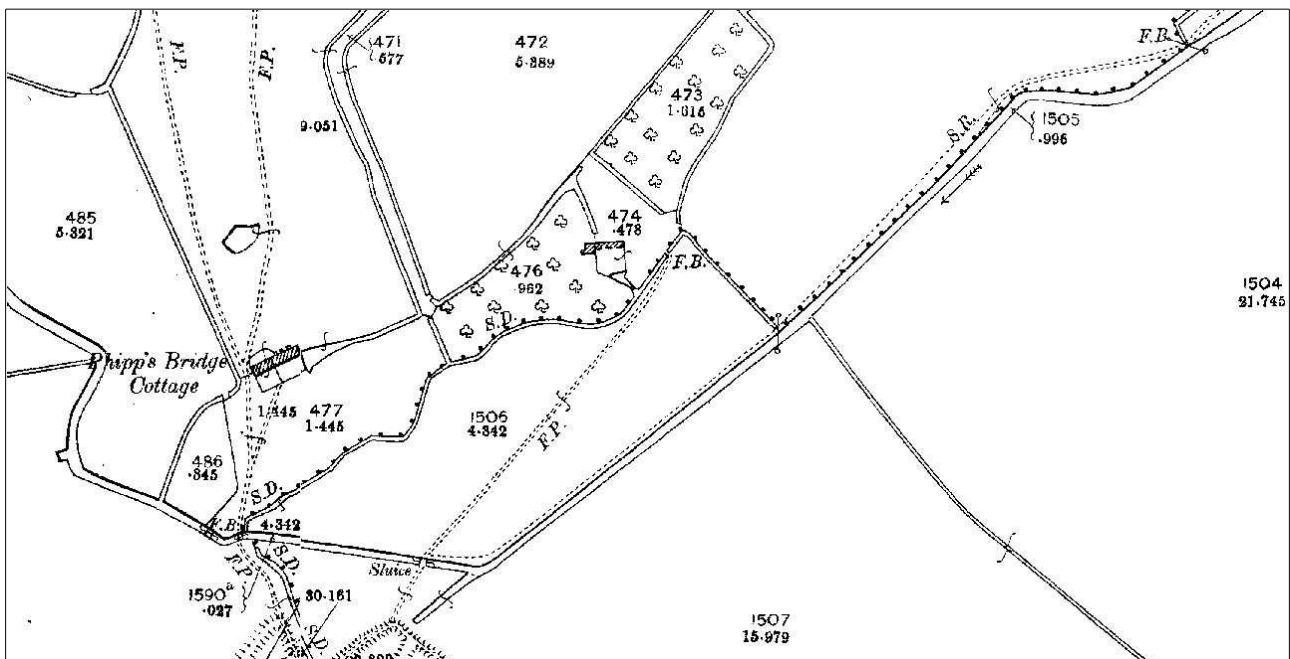


Fig 19b: Settlement at Phipps Bridge and Little River pre-M5 (1903) (continuation of 19a above)

In this section of the Little River, a small section of natural water course north of Wemberham led, until the mid-19th century, to where the River debouched into the Yeo at David's/Davy's Ear (Fig 19c below). Subsequently, an additional 600m of River were dug to an outfall lower on the Yeo (mostly along pre-existing field boundaries) between 1841 and 1846 (Barraclough 1991).

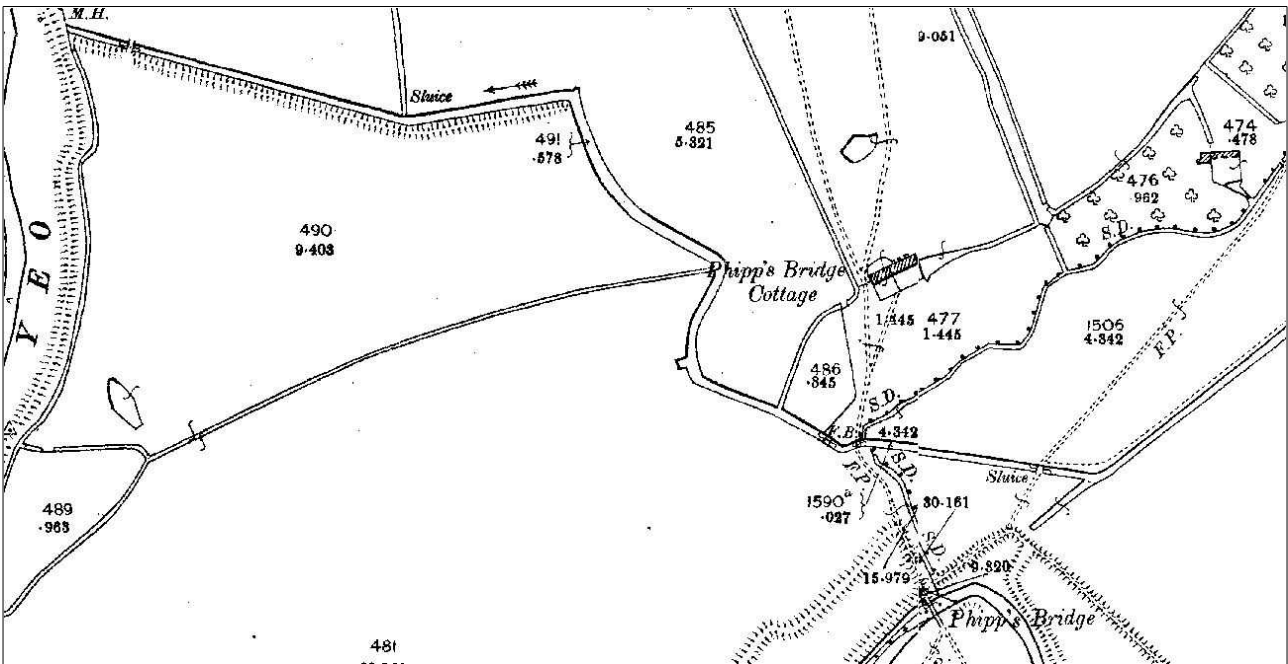


Fig 19c: Little River, Phipps Bridge and 1840s continuation (1903)

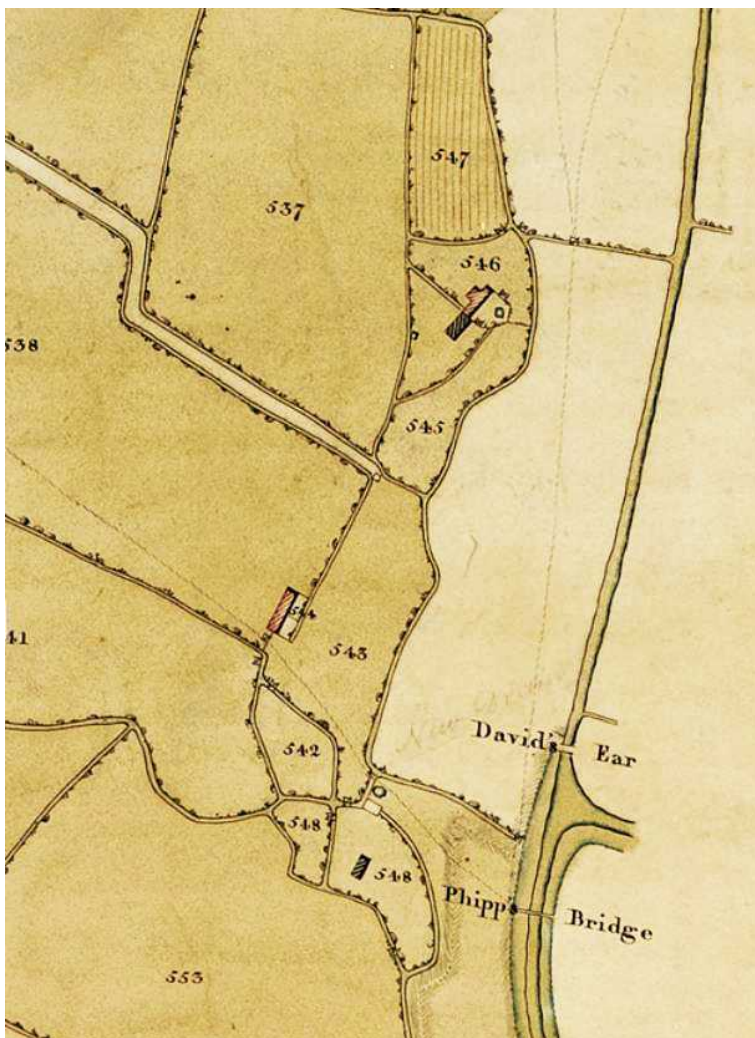


Fig 20: Phipps Bridge, Cottage and David's Ear sluice, from Kingston Seymour 1821 map (courtesy of Jane Bell)

(As an aside, the Roman villa at Wemberham is not considered in this report: details can be found at YCCART2013a; YCCART2013b; YCCART2014; YCCART 2016).

Wemberham Cottage (Fig 19a) was inhabited until the 1960s, but abandoned around that time (Janet Burdge, *in litt*).

The house itself is now a ruin, but the farm buildings appear to be maintained and in use, and the yard is cobbled against the mud of the Northmarsh, and it may be that some of the larger squared stones were 'recycled' from the Roman villa.



Fig 21: Ruins of Wemberham Cottage, 2017

The Little River and the parish boundary here follow what is clearly a paleochannel skirting to the north the slightly higher ground; a straighter, clearly early channel runs to its south, but significantly not accompanied by the parish boundary (Fig 19a).

One field (OS1309, Fig 19a) has a slightly debatable parish ownership, shown as entirely in Congresbury in 1903, entirely in Kingston Seymour in 1848, and half-and-half in 1821. This probably reflects no more than loosening of parish ties with agricultural needs right out on the parish boundary: parish edge settlements such as this tend to be regarded with some suspicion in their contemporary society, something not unknown even today.

The existence of recognisable parish-edge palaeochannel here, but not in previous sections running right back to North End, may be telling us something about the artificiality of the Little River, that it possibly consisted at its making of sections of artificial waterway connecting pre-existing 'natural' waterways, something certainly seen on the Kenn River (YCCCART2022, a and b).

Although much altered by engineering and dumping for the M5 construction, both courses of the Little River can be recognised until they reunited at the Yeo (Fig 19b).

As Davy's Year / David's Ear was the sluice requiring reconstruction in 1528 (YCCCART, forthcoming 2023), this puts the straightening of the river here back to a considerably earlier date.

Phipp's Bridge and David's ear

These two structures are strongly connected with the Little River, although both are no longer visible.

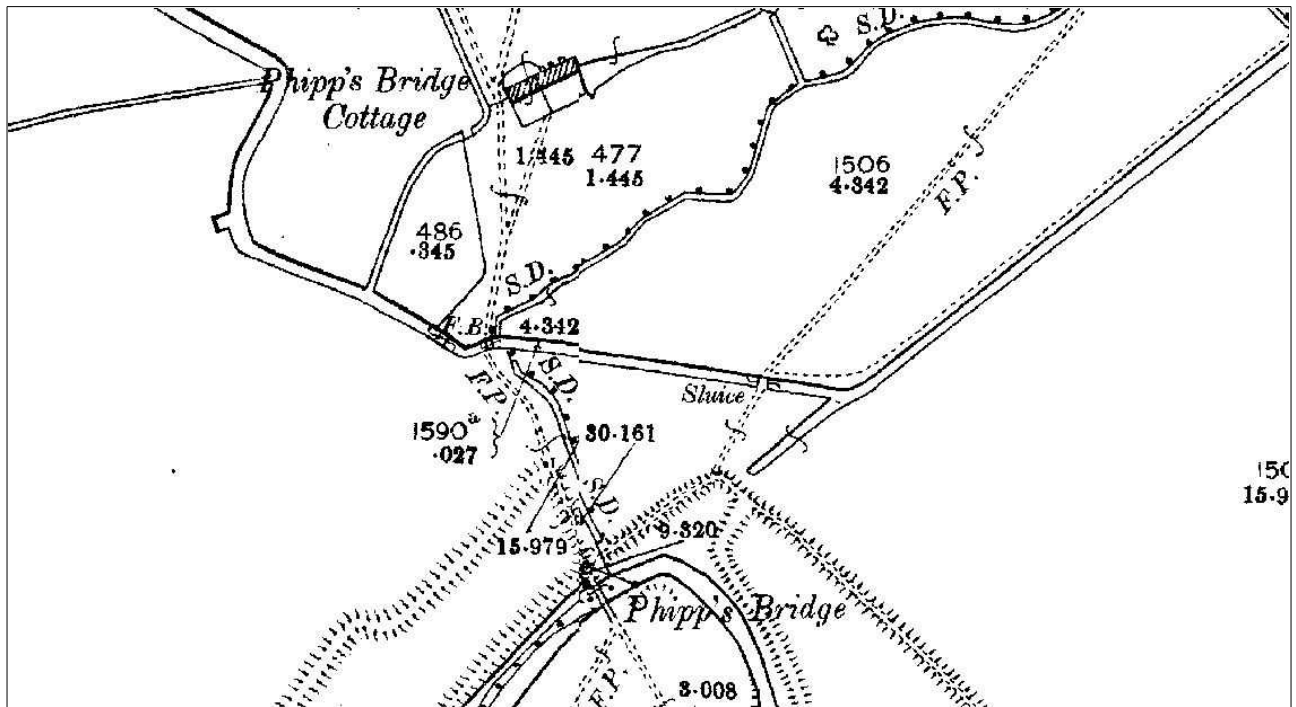


Fig 22: Phipp's bridge in 1903

Phipp's bridge (sometimes 'Fip's or 'Feep's) is on the line of a track from Kingston village to Hewish, and as such is first referred to in Queen Elizabeth's Hospital accounts for repairs in 1629 (BRO 33041/Sch/QEH/F/Ac/1) (8 shillings for 'spikes, nails, timber and wages'), although presumably there was a structure at the site earlier than this. Repairs are referred to at least nine further times before 1731: from the details, this was clearly a timber bridge, probably with stone abutments on either side of the river.

The bridge, appearing on air photographs to be a twin span structure, possibly now in stone, was still in situ in 1946 (Fig 23 below), but by 1956 had been replaced by a sluice structure, still named Phipps Sluice (Fig 24 below).

The route is still usable, but as a footpath Public Right of Way, and no longer for wheeled traffic.

No obvious trace of the former bridge has survived at the site.



Fig 23: Phipps Bridge, 1946 RAF air photograph



Fig 24: Phipps Sluice, dated to 1956 on metalwork at site

David's Ear was possibly an even older structure. Despite its first mention so far known being in 1528, the increasing evidence that the whole Little River complex is potentially medieval in date, possibly puts its date of origin much earlier.

An 'ear' or 'yere' is more commonly known in English as a sluice, although there may be some evidence that David's Ear was fitted with a one-way flap valve to keep out sea water and allow drainage of fresh at low tide, in which case, it would have been locally known as a 'clyce'.

The earliest mapping of both features so far known is of c1780 (SHC DD\PT/H452/42) (Fig 25 below).

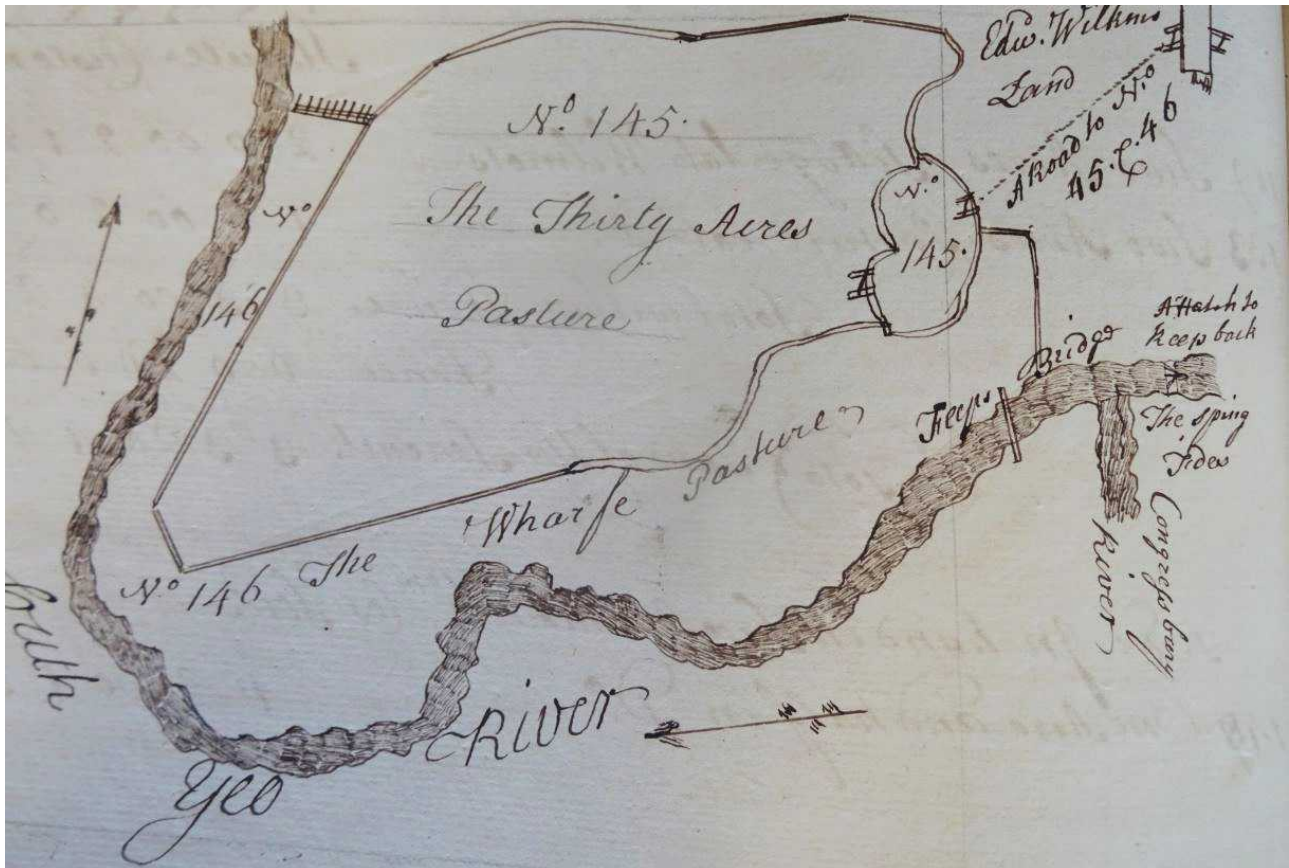


Fig 25: 'Feeps' bridge and Davids Ear, 1780

Although described as 'A Hatch to keep back the Spring Tides', this is clearly the site of David's Ear.

The Little River was, of course, diverted away from David's Ear in the 1840s, and today, the site is represented by earthworks (Fig 26 below). Judging by Fig 23, some exit from the Little River still existed there as late as 1946: possibly the engineering to remove this was contemporary with the construction of Phipp's Sluice in the 1950s.

The two dwellings and associated oxhouses etc to the north were listed in the Kingston Seymour Tithing Apportionment (1846-8) as two homesteads owned by Gorge E Wyndham and Frances and Mary Player: George Parsons occupied the Wyndham property, while

Simon Cox and Joseph Griffin occupied the others. It is not currently known how long these properties continued in use: one had gone out of use by 1903 (Fig 19c above); the others still appeared in use in 1946.



Fig 26: Surviving earthworks at the site of David's ear, 2017



Fig 27: 1840s extension towards what is now the M5

The final section of the river, mid 19th century in date, but straightened by M5 works, ran from this area to the Yeo.

This stretch, largely created by enlarging existing field ditches (see Fig 28 below) cuts off the huge bend of the Yeo to the west, and was presumably cut with the intention of finding a lower outfall and thus increasing the rate of flow in the rest of the River.

Judging by its current sluggishness, this was not a greatly successful engineering feat.

The River finally emerges from a modern sluice to join the Yeo (Fig 29).



Fig 28: Note the 1841-6 works (arrowed). Left 1821, right 1903.



Fig 29: Sluice at the end of the Little River 2021, from west

As Marian Barraclough pointed out:

'David's Ear was still in use in 1841 but between then and 1846 the Little River ceased to flow through it into the Yeo at Phipps Bridge. A Commissioners' survey of 1848 says that the Little River goes under the bow at Wemberham Farm (now demolished) to the River Yeo, but joins the New Cut there, between fields numbered 1788 and 1789 on the tithe map. It then goes due west along the New Cut in Kingston Seymour and terminates at an outlet in the river at Salt Warth.

The work must have been completed by 1846 because in that October a Mr. Gage was to be paid £3.3.0. a year for keeping the New Cut in proper repair and attending to the hatches'. (Barraclough 1991)

References

Barraclough, M. 1991	<i>A History of Yatton</i> Yatton Local History Society
Campbell, M. 2000	<i>A survey of the ancient parish of Yatton including Cleeve and East & West Hewish</i> Yatton Local History Society; republished as YCCART 2011/Y18
Collinson, J. 1791	<i>History and Antiquities of the County of Somerset,</i> Bath
Corcos, N. 2000	<i>The affinities and antecedents of medieval settlement: topographical perspectives from three of the Somerset Hundreds</i> PhD thesis, University of Bristol
Rippon, S. 2006	<i>Landscape, Community and Colonisation: the North Somerset Levels during the 1st to 2nd millennia AD</i> Council for British Archaeology, York
YCCART2013a	Gradiometry survey at Wemberham Roman villa http://www.yccart.co.uk/index_htm_files/Wemberham%20601%20Fin%20edited%20v2.pdf
YCCART2013b	Resistivity survey at Wemberham Roman villa http://www.yccart.co.uk/index_htm_files/Wemberham%20RM15%20Final%20edited.pdf
YCCART2014	Manual survey using an electronic hydrostatic level at Wemberham Roman villa http://www.yccart.co.uk/index_htm_files/Wemb%20FRED%20FINAL%20edited%20070415.pdf
YCCART 2016	Notes on Wemberham Roman villa from the Keith Gardner archive http://www.yccart.co.uk/index_htm_files/Yatton%20Recording%20&%20study%20Wemberham%202016-Y8%20v2.pdf
YCCART 2022a	Who made the Kenn River (Part 1 Backwell Common to Nailsea Wall) http://www.yccart.co.uk/index_htm_files/Multiple%20parishes%20Docuementary%20&%20photographic%20Kenn%20River%20Part%201%202022%20Y3%20v1%20.pdf
YCCART 2022b	Who made the Kenn River (Part 2 Nailsea Wall to Sutte Pill) http://www.yccart.co.uk/index_htm_files/Multiple%20parishes%20Docuementary%20&%20photographic%20Kenn%20River%20Part%202%202022%20Y10%20v1%20.pdf

YCCART, forthcoming 2023

Managing the waters: The Yatton Little River Part 1:
Sluice Stile to the Boarden Bow

Authors

Vince Russett

Date

2023-04-16