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Before the beginning: Congresbury Great Moor before Inclosure

YATTON, CONGRESBURY, CLAVERHAM AND CLEEVE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH TEAM (YCCCART)

General Editor: Vince Russett

Waterworld: looking W along the beginnings of Rennie's New Rhyne from the Cheddar Valley Railway track 2017

Page	Contents

Abstract

Historians have been happy to concentrate on the reasons, methods and people responsible for Parliamentary Inclosure. The appearance and use of the moors (and especially lowland moors) before inclosure is seldom considered except in the most vague terms, yet the earthwork evidence is there to be seen and interpreted.

Most of these sites seem to have only been enclosed and subject to agricultural regimes for the last two centuries or so, but scant documentary information and the pioneering work of Richard MacDonnell in the Axe Valley (MacDonnell 1979) shows complex landscapes beneath the geometric planned landscapes of the Inclosures, and tell us these were (and always had been) part of the agricultural economy and livelihoods of lowland parishes.

Acknowledgements

For the memory of those displaced by the Inclosure Acts, and of John Clare, poet of the Inclosures.

The authors are grateful for the hard work by the members of YCCCART in performing the surveys and Vince Russett for editing.

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.

It is hoped to carry these pre-Inclosure studies to other areas of the Northmarsh, where a huge amount of material awaits study. Initially such study must be of superficial form such as the present, which it hoped will inspire and inform more detailed study, publication and dissemination of the important heritage of the wetland landscapes of the Northmarsh.

These acres are in their present state incapable of any considerable improvement...it would be very advantageous to the several persons interested...if the lands were divided...and specific parts assigned allocated and awarded to all who had rights and interests, and such allotments enclosed

Preamble to Congresbury and Puxton Inclosure Act, 1808

Site location

Fig 1: Location of Congresbury's Great Moor 2017

Fig 2: Detailed location of the Great Moor 2020

The area formerly Congresbury Great Moor is 50 hectares (213 acres) of very flat land in the river corridor of the Congresbury Yeo, bounded on the south by the Congresbury Yeo, on the west by a former lane leading from Congresbury towards Cadbury Farm, Yatton: on the north by the enclosed medieval fields of the hamlet of Land, and on the east by enclosures radiating out from Smallway as far as the great spring at Hurstpool (see below).

The area is bisected by the remains of the Cheddar Valley Railway, now the walk and cycle path of the Strawberry Line from Yatton to Cheddar, intended to eventually reach Wells.

The centre of the site lies at ST430644, towards the NW corner of the parish of Congresbury in the Local Authority area of North Somerset.

Land use and geology

The whole site lies on the Tidal Flood Deposits of the Northmarsh, although there are local deposits of periglacial Head (too small to feature on geology maps) close to the river, where seen in excavation in 1997 (see 'Benny's' in YCCCART2022), high and dry enough for occupation. A second deposit forms a small 'island' ('Binhay Batch') (YCCCART 2022), with deposits visible in ditch sides at the edges (VR *site obs.*).

A ?natural lake ('The Great Mere') can still be seen in air photographs, lidar and on the ground. It is shown on the 1736-9 map of Congresbury (see Fig 8 below).

Most of the area is down to pasture, with areas serving as wildlife reserve, and a small element of development in the central south part of the moor.

The old railway track is the only official public footpath through the area, although the north bank of the Congresbury Yeo appears to be a permissive path, and a good overview can be obtained from Land Lane to the north, and an 'aerial' view from the western viewing area on Cadbury Congresbury hill fort.

Historical & archaeological context

The Northmarsh seems to have been drained and enclosed in some way during the Roman period, although the evidence for most of this in the area is buried under metres of post-Roman alluvium, and only emerges in large-scale engineering projects, such as the construction of Somerset Avenue in Weston-super-Mare in the 1990s (Smith & Young 1995), where buried Roman ditch systems were seen in section, or Rippon's work at Banwell, where the post-Roman alluviation was absent (Rippon 2006) and fields of confirmed Roman date were at the surface.

Rippon's dating suggests that the Roman draining and enclosure of the Northmarsh was failing or abandoned by the mid-4th century, borne out by dates for the abandonment of Wemberham Roman villa in Yatton, for example (Reade 1885): to be fair, so little excavation of Roman lowland sites has been carried out in North Somerset, that it is currently difficult to be dogmatic. Further work is badly needed, although initial geophysical survey at Kingston Seymour by YCCCART appears to be revealing glimpses of a post-Roman pre-Norman landscape which may help to start to elucidate some of the questions about this period (e.g. YCCCART2023a; YCCCART2023b). The history of post-Roman Inclosure on the Northmarsh is long and complex, and lessons learned in understanding one area are frequently difficult to apply to others. There are all sorts of reasons for this: ownership is one. Large and wealthy landowners (in the medieval period, for example, great and wealthy ecclesiastical entities like Glastonbury Abbey or the Bishopric of Bath and Wells) had the resources, and could amass the manpower, to carry out large scale, often undocumented enclosures of lands, as could some wealthy and powerful individuals. The Northmarsh, however, with the exception of the bishopric, seems largely to have been the domain of smaller landowners, whose medieval documentation has not survived well.

By the 18th century, remaining Commons were beginning to be eyed with a view to Inclosure: agricultural 'authorities', like Billingsley in Somerset, were very dismissive of the use of Commons, as encouraging smallholders whose land ownership could not in itself support them and their families, and a series of rather vicious comments were brought out to back up their enthusiasm for Inclosure: a more cynical person might say that Inclosure was intended to maximise the land holdings and incomes of just such 'authority' persons.

The Congresbury Inclosure Act and its effects and results have been discussed at some length by Cran (1983). The related maps have been partially published by Know Your Place (kypwest.org.uk). The final drainage of the site with a campaign by Rennie is discussed by Cran, and in YCCCART 2017a. The Northmarsh was fairly late in the use of Parliamentary Inclosure (Tate 1948) (Fig 3 below) (Tate 1948; Williams 1970), for various reasons, including the conservatism of management of drainage. The very earliest seems to be at Claverham in 1751: many others were almost certainly responding to the agricultural pressures of the Napoleonic Wars of the earliest 19th century (the anomalously late Hutton Inclosures were of upland): such periods of 'land hunger' and large-scale ownership change do seem to trigger agricultural innovation, such as the early 14th century famines prior to the plague, and the mid-16th century land ownership changes due to the Reformation.

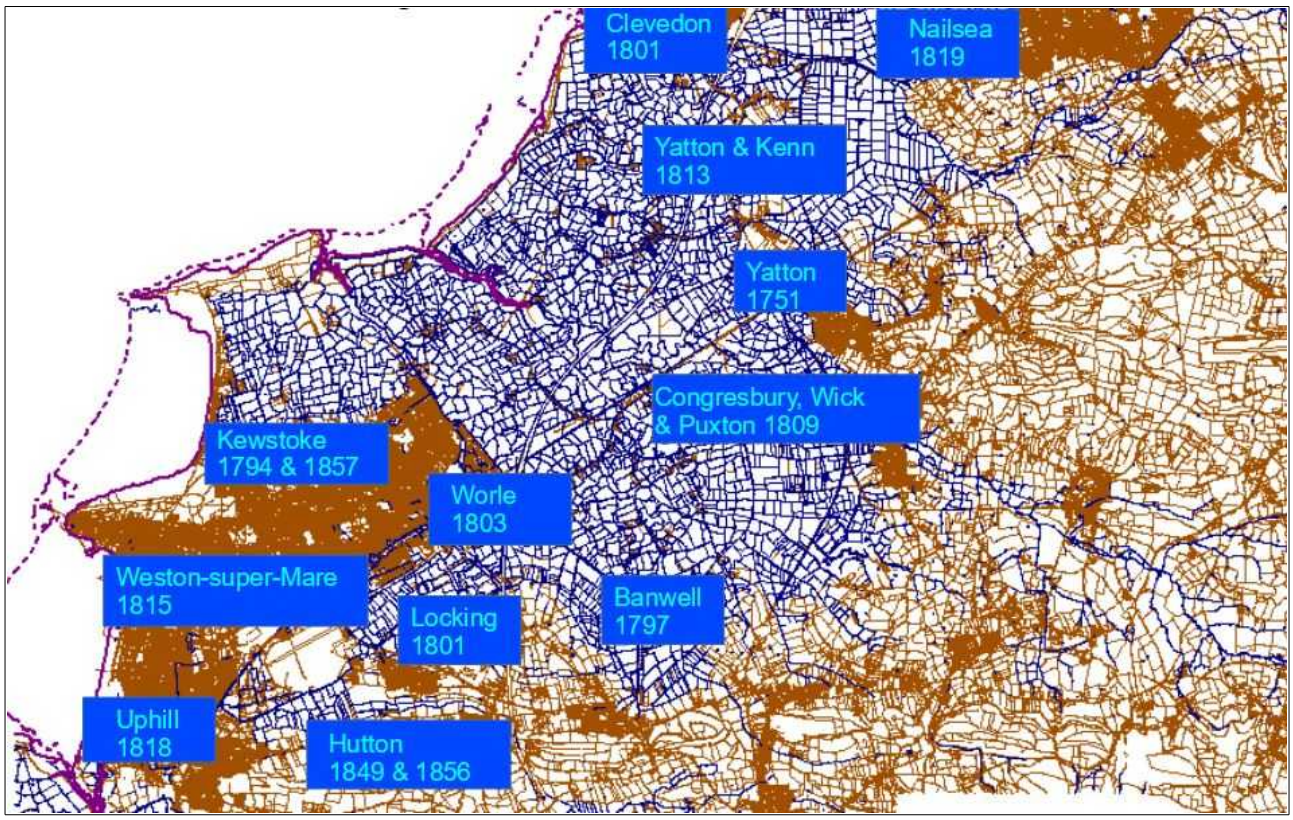

Fig 3: Dates of Parliamentary Inclosures in the Northmarsh

But such a large area of land would have presented huge opportunities for grazing (mainly sheep and cattle), and the large freshwater lake the possibility of raising (or at least, taking) of waterfowl (YCCCART2020).

Often, leases of properties expressed stints (numbers of grazing animals permitted on Commons in summer, which was traditionally judged to be the number that the home farm could support overwinter). Unfortunately, the survey documents available for Congresbury do not specify commoning, so this is a field of documentation waiting to be explored.

Summering in its traditional sense ('transhumance') is not really a major factor in the lowland commoning of the Northmarsh: certainly, there is no evidence of the folk movements of the type seen earlier in the Pyrenees, the mountains of Mourne in Ireland, or even the uplands of Dartmoor or Mendip (Fox 2012). Traditional slightly higher 'milking places' where animals were milked twice daily probably also served as floodtime refugia (YCCCART2017b)

Other minor uses of such lowland Commons were the collection of fallen wood or digging of peat for fuel, the collection of sedges for matting and other harsh fabric-making, and other minor uses.

Of more interest in the current context is the 'temporary' use of Common land as intakes for arable use, or even enclosed pastures.

This has been studied extensively in upland regions (Russett 1991; Hegarty 2014, for example) where extensive earthworks reflect short-term intakes of otherwise exclusively pasture land for temporary arable, usually marked by notable surrounding banks (to keep out grazing animals on the rest of the Common) and internal ploughing marks, often traditional ridge-and-furrow.

Other works include the construction of long, straight banks with accompanying side-ditches, often meeting at acute angles and clearly not representing fields in the traditional sense. These are not only difficult to date, but their purpose is as yet, unclear. Examples from Cutts in Cheddar Moor (Somerset) are shown in Figs 4 and 5 (MacDonnell 1979).

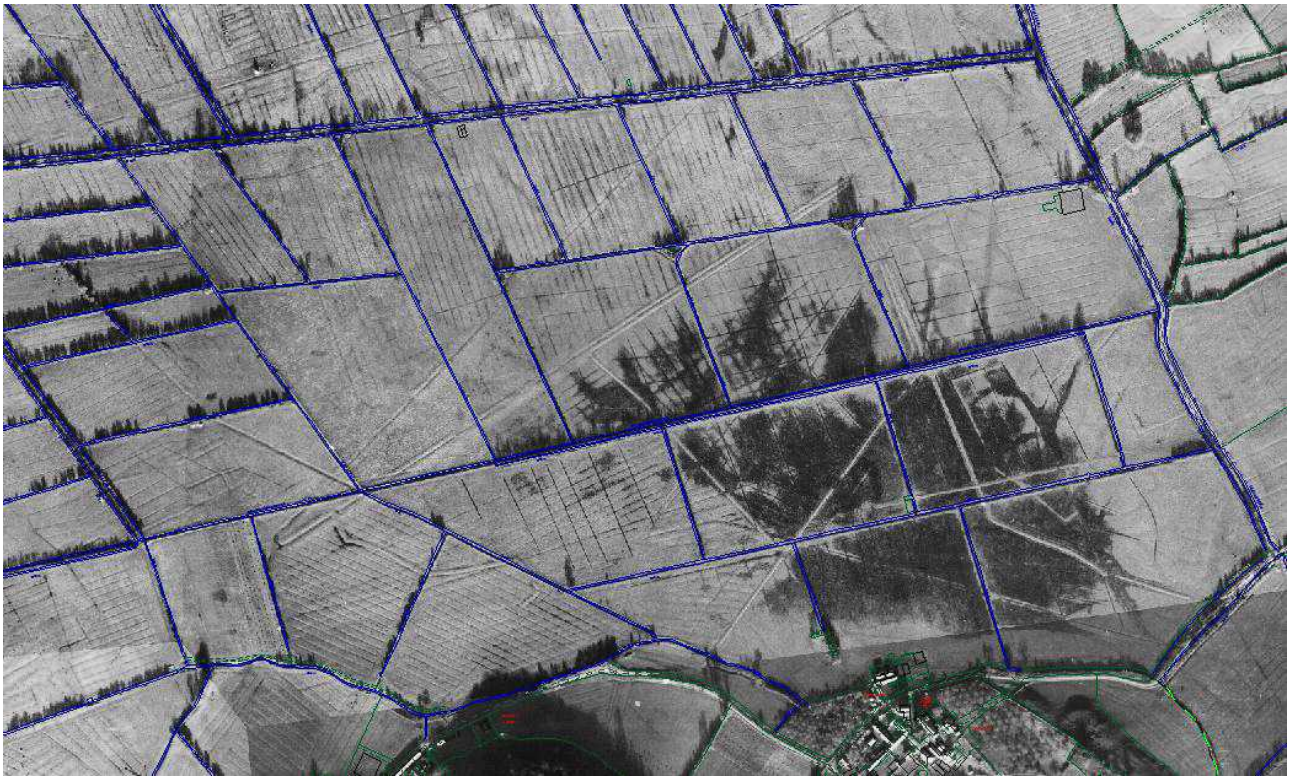

Fig 4: Linear and double linear banks on Cheddar Moor, 1946 RAF photographs

The linear banks on the south of Cheddar Moor, north of Nyland Hill, completely ignore the former parish and Hundredal boundary of Bounds Hedge Rhyne, so lying in the parish of Cheddar and the former parish of Nyland-cum-Batcombe. Although Bounds Hedge Rhyne is itself 19th century, the earlier boundary, which strayed north into what is now Cheddar, and is documented from the medieval period, is also completely ignored.

There is an initial suggestion in the Somerset HER that they represent warping drains (drains carrying water with suspended material that can then be deposited to build up the level of the surrounding land, much like the warths along the edge of the Severn). This cannot be the case here, as sources of water in the Mendips are universally crystal clear with no turbidity (except in times of overwhelmingly exceptional rainfall) hence their usefulness as paper mills, as at Wookey Hole. Neither is this explanation of use at Congresbury (see below).

Fig 5: Linear bank on Cheddar Moor 1988

The above Figures 4 and 5 represent the linear banks in unploughed form: those on the Great Moor have been slightly degraded at some point, but are still clearly visible.

The mapping of archaeological features on the Great Moor is aided by the availability of Environment Agency lidar data, and of high quality air photographs, both RAF photographs of 1946 (source ultimately Historic England, but widely available elsewhere), and the 'history' air photographs of Google Earth.

At least one pre-inclosure map and survey (de Wilstar's maps for Queen Elizabeth's Hospital Bristol of 1736-9: see Fig 8 below) is available.

While the Great Moor had, by the early 19th century, become wetland only seasonally available for grazing, the land hunger caused by the desperate Napoleonic Wars need for more home-grown food (every modern war seems to cause this problem, and every time it seems to surprise the UK government(s)!) was one of the drivers leading to a national atmosphere of drainage, improvement and Inclosure.

With regard to earlier agricultural works in the Moors, it should be borne in mind that the descriptions in the 19th century were those of lands that had been subject to the colder and wetter climate of the Little Ice Age for several centuries, since the medieval warm period with its concommitant population increase had made this earlier agricultural expansion into the wetlands both possible and indeed, necessary.

The Great Moor

As seen in Figs 1 and 2 above, the Moor has a distinctive pattern of rectilinear fields and droves betraying their origin in a planned Inclosure by Act: other areas of roughly similar height AOD around the site have the irregular boundaries (and occasional stepped edge-plans) that reveal their much earlier origin.

This includes the whole of the area between the Great Moor and the Yatton boundary, where all the fields are named a variant of 'Benny / Bean Hay' etc. The fields radiating from the bend in Smallway also appear to be early enclosures, terminating at the edge of the Moor and Hurst Pool. The complete flatness of the area is shown by lidar plots (see Fig 6).

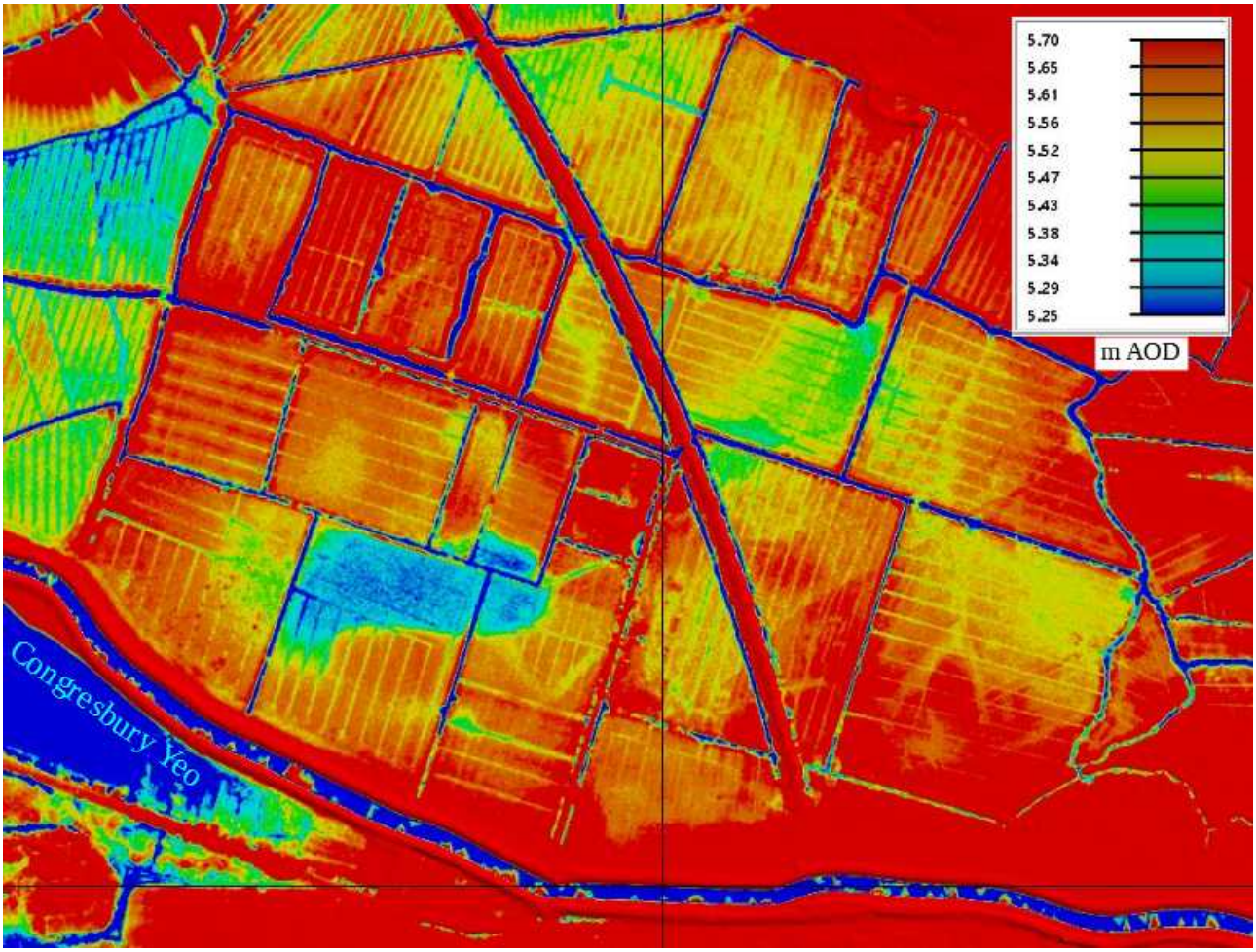

Fig 6: Extreme flatness of area shown by lidar (note height range is only 5.25-5.70 m AOD)

The only area significantly different is the site of the Great Mere (see Fig 8 below), which is markedly lower than the rest, apart from the raised area of the railway track, which is not on a significant embankment, but where there is a depth of rail ballast.

However, careful manipulation of the lidar data reveals large numbers of features predating the Inclosure. Confusion might be caused by the gripes within the fields, so these have been mapped separately for clarity (Fig 7).

The lidar data especially is of high enough resolution to indicate animal tracks in the fields (cattle and sheep tracks can both become semi-permanent due to their habits of following each other in linear fashion). It is sometimes a fine judgement as to whether a feature is a natural waterway or an animal track.

Fig 7: Gripes within the Great Moor (no gripes visible in four small central fields)

It is worth noting here that the railway not only cuts through the field groups, but that at least one set of gripes (in the field 5 /6 half-way down the northern side of the Moor: Fig 16) are clearly cut by the railway, meaning they cannot date outside of the 1815-1860 range. Other gripes may be this early, but the evidence is not clear.

The fact that the gripes in the two fields in the SW corner of the Moor run between the two implies that they may be earlier than the division into two fields, in which case they are earlier than the Tithe Map of 1840: the other consideration is that this site is the area of the Great Mere, which may have required different gripe groups to allow for the relative extra wetness of the area.

The Great Mere is depicted on the de Wilstar map (Fig 8 below) of 1736. Its depiction there shows not only a definite artificial leat running to the pool from near Hurstpool, but also a definite drain from it running to the west side of the Moor. This second is very straight and may have been re-used as a large gripe later.

Fig 8: The Great Moor from the 1736-9 de Wilstar map (south at top)

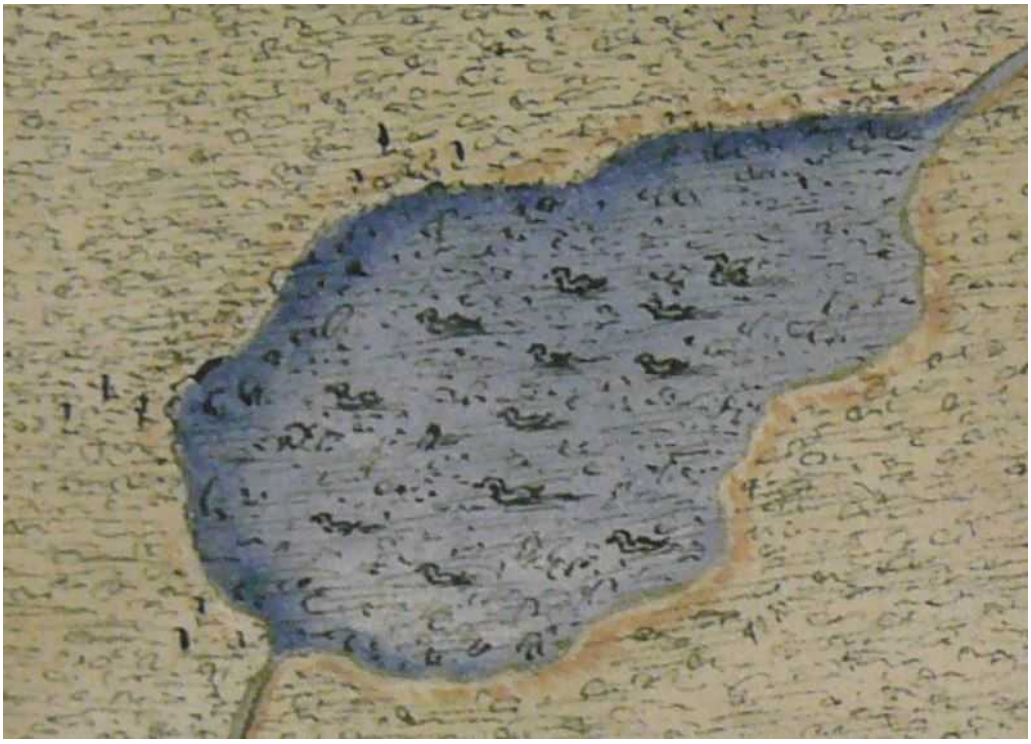

Fig 9: Close-up of the Great Mere from above Fig

Note that the pool is shown full of water birds, presumably ducks, and surrounded by a bank (the slightly darker band). This may imply some intention to regard this pool as a decoy. (YCCCART2020)

Fig 10: 2013 air photograph (Google Earth)

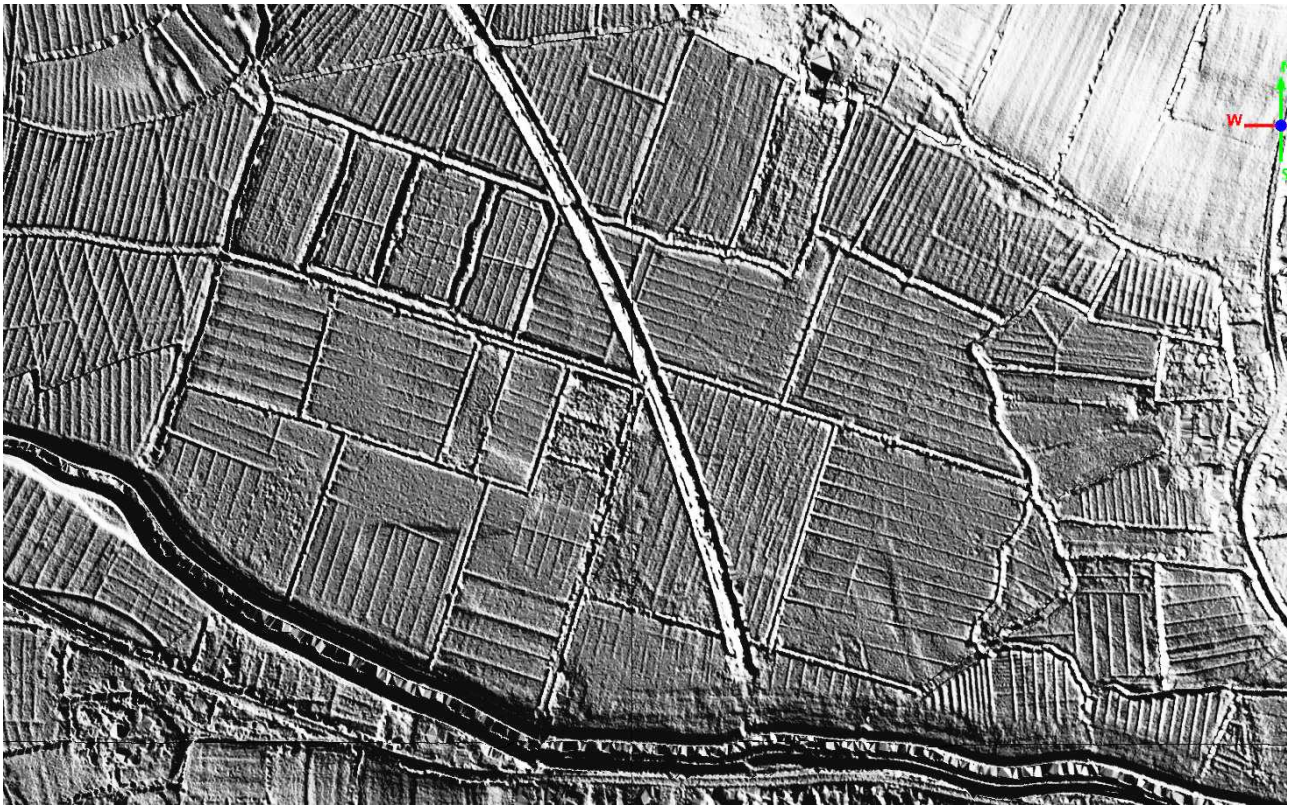

Fig 11: Lidar image (lit from SW; z-axis x 15)

Fig 12: Lidar image (lit from SE; z-axis x 15)

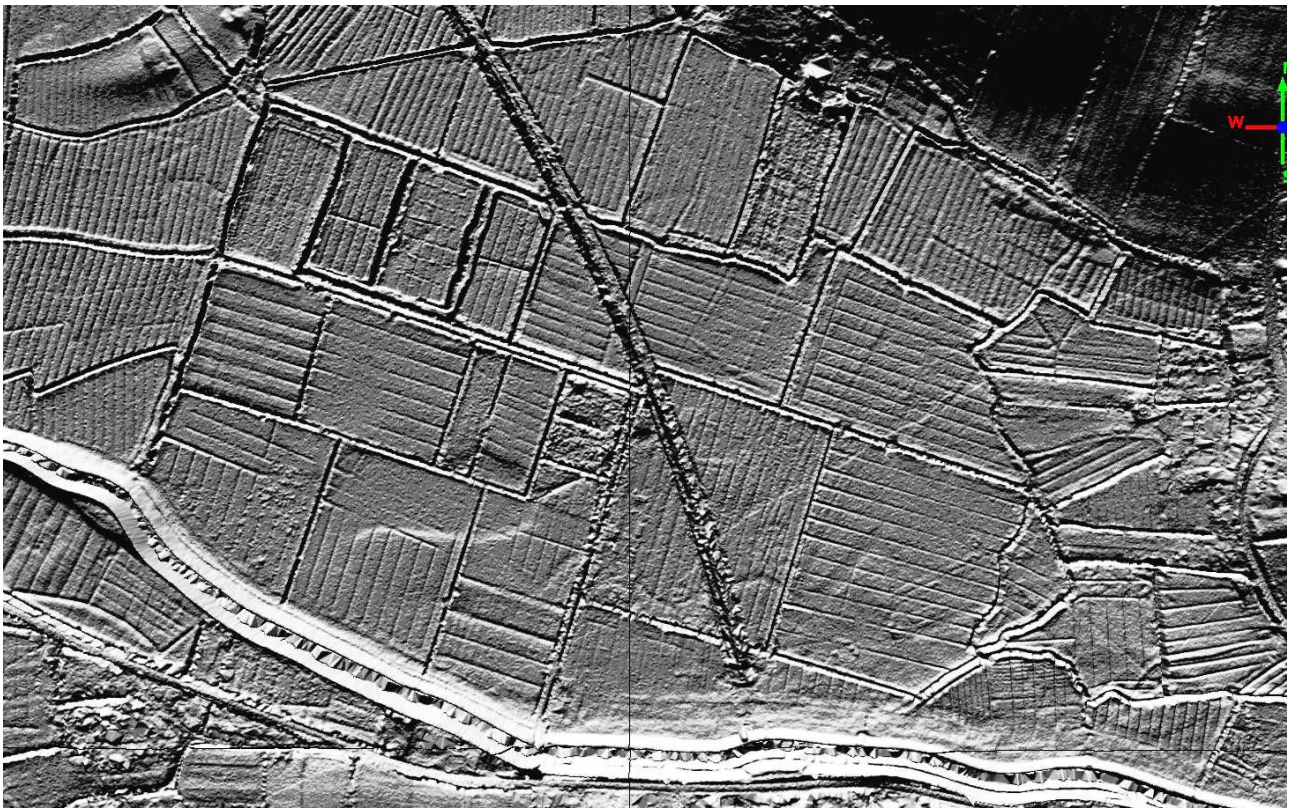

Fig 13: Lidar image (lit from N; z-axis x 15)

The images from these can be used to map the pre-Inclosure features on the Moor (in practical terms, using all four to inform mapping in individual fields). The 'lit from N' evidence in Fig 13 has to be used carefully since everyday experience is that light comes from the south ('holes-into-hills-into-holes' syndrome).

Fig 14: Overall plan of features within The Great Moor (red hatching marks new built up areas)

Positive anomalies

These anomalies (banks) are found only in the eastern end of the Moor, where presumably there was a move to push agriculture further from the enclosures around the village and Smallway into the very slightly higher ground of the eastern Moor. This would be a typical way of colonising common ground at times of great land hunger.

It is usually assumed that this occurred in the high medieval period between say 1150 and 1300, when mass changes in drainage are recorded in Somerset (Williams 1970), but also a period when it is clear that there was a necessity to increase food production in the face of apparently runaway population increase. It must be immediately said that there is no direct archaeological dating for this, and documentary evidence is very thin. Of course, crop failures in the 1320s and 30s and the demographic disaster of the Black Death in mid-century (and its returns several times in the rest of the 1300s) depressed the population level so much that marginal sites like these (or perhaps the well-known strip lynchets on Glastonbury Tor!) were probably abandoned after only a few decades.

Negative anomalies

These anomalies are largely the remains of natural waterways across the Moor that pre-date agricultural activity altogether.

There are, however, some straight ditches found alongside the linear banks, as well as very small exterior ditches to most of the banks which are borrow pits for construction of the field banks.

They also include the large depression that constitutes the Great Mere, and its filler and emptier waterways, which seem to be artificial replacements for an early version of the Hurstpool Rhyne.

Ridge and furrow

The area of ridge and furrow must, by its nature, be the remains of arable cultivation immediately north of the Yeo and between there and the southern edge of the Great Mere.

Bordering archaeology

It is also clear that at some point, banks have been erected against the edges of the Moor, presumably to prevent annual flooding (as recorded in various places, but detailed in Williams 1970) from spilling over from the Moor. On the east, this takes the forms of wide banks adjacent to, and outside of the traditional edge of the Moor.

Analysis

The Moor is neatly divided on the ground by the two accommodation droves (Fig 14).

The sections (Fig 15) are all slightly different in character.

Area 1, closest to the ?medieval enclosures to the south of the hamlet of Land, is slightly higher, and apart from the anomalous field 1, clearly a late enclosure from the Moor, is only really notable for the remnants of natural waterways.

Area 2 is dominated by the presence of the Great Mere and its associated waterways, and is generally very slightly lower and marshier than areas 1 or 3, except for an area close to the river which is slightly higher, and outside to the west is occupied by medieval occupation at Benny's tenement (YCCCART2022).

Area 3 is very slightly higher and crucially, closer to the centre of the village and the early enclosures at Smallway. This typical of the areas that might well be 'taken in' for arable at times of land hunger, although these may not have been intended to be permanent: they are almost a reflection of the infield / outfield systems of centuries earlier.

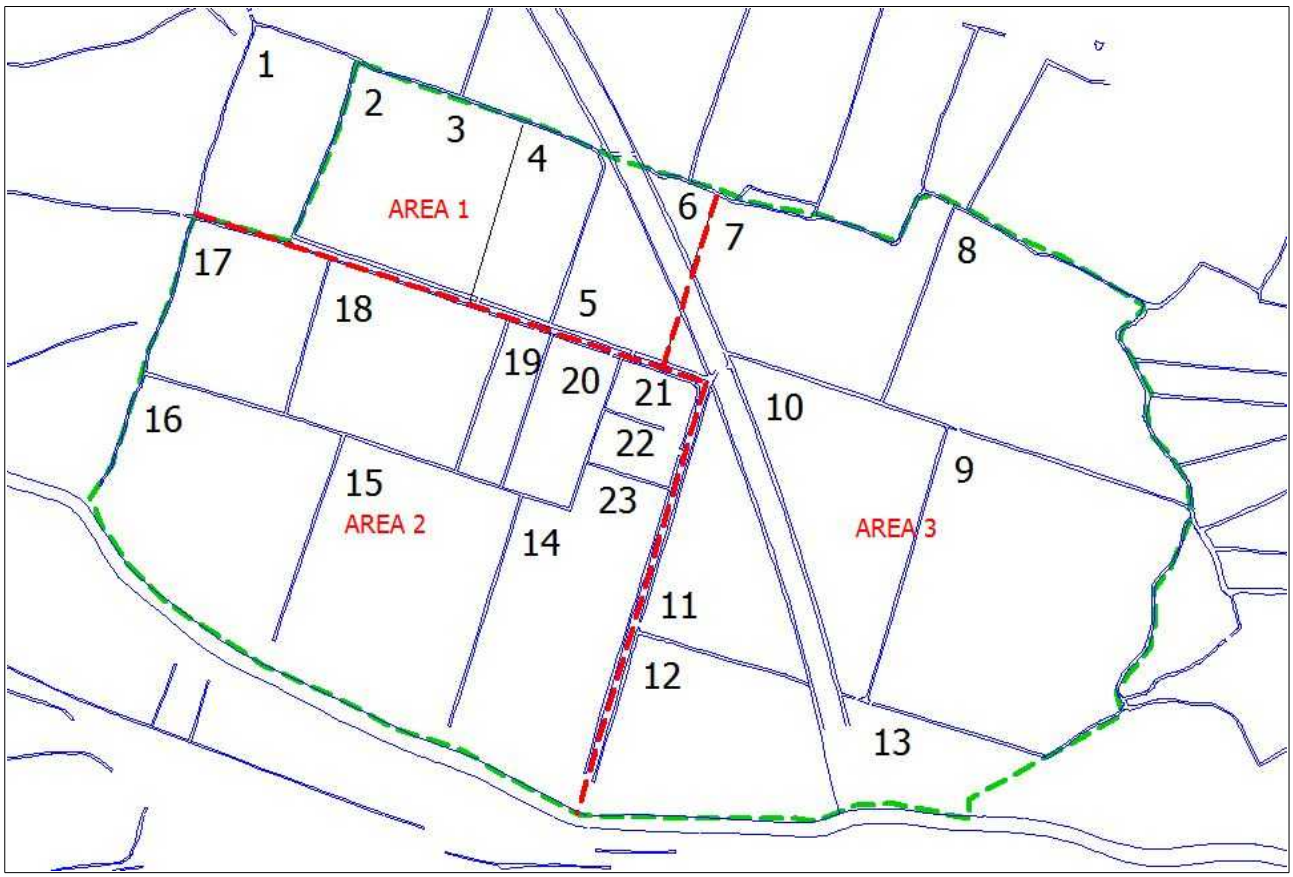

Fig 15: Analysis: Areas and field numbers within the Great Moor

Area 1 (fields 1-6)

As mentioned above, this area is bordered to the north by the canalised Hurstpool Rhyne forming the edge of the Great Moor, and on the south by the track leading to Rennie's New Rhyne, and crossed by the railway line at its eastern end.

As can be seen from Fig 14, the few recorded features in this area are the curvilinear remains of semi-natural watercourses, pre-dating all agricultural activity on the Moor. The remains in field one can be traced into the area outside of the Moor to the west.

Area 2 (fields 14-23)

This wetter area contains two significant areas of archaeology. The first is the Great Mere, and the complex of waterways and marshy areas that surround it. The simplified form this took by the time of the de Wilstar map of 1736-9 (Figs 8 and 9 above) implies that the other fossil channels were no longer significant by this date. In the discussion above, the ducks portrayed on the 1736 map implied the possibility that this site was seen as a perhaps informal decoy, although the obviously constructed supply and drain waterways on the 1736 map imply a certain amount of engineering involvement. The darker area marked on Fig 14 is clear on the lidar data: the paler green marshy area may contain the rest of the Mere, although subsequent activity has obscured this. There is at present, no known documentary evidence for this potential decoy.

The edges of the Great Mere from fields 14-16 lie over into the fields from the south, as does the pale green marshy area in field 18.

To the south of the Mere, the remains of ridge and furrow can be seen, apparently running out from the slightly higher (and presumably, drier) land by the river. These are undatable from current evidence (and such 'temporary' extensions of farming onto Commons are seldom well-recorded), but the very existence of curved ridge and furrow implies some substantial period of ploughing, presumably in the medieval period.

A third area, fields 20-22, show no features on either lidar or air photos: presumably these were small enough to drain without requiring gripes.

Area 3 (fields 7 - 13)

This by far the most complex area recorded. Natural palaeochannels, field enclosures and linear bank groups (see Figs 4-5 above), all occur, and large banks line the SE edges of the Moor just outside of the surrounding ditch.

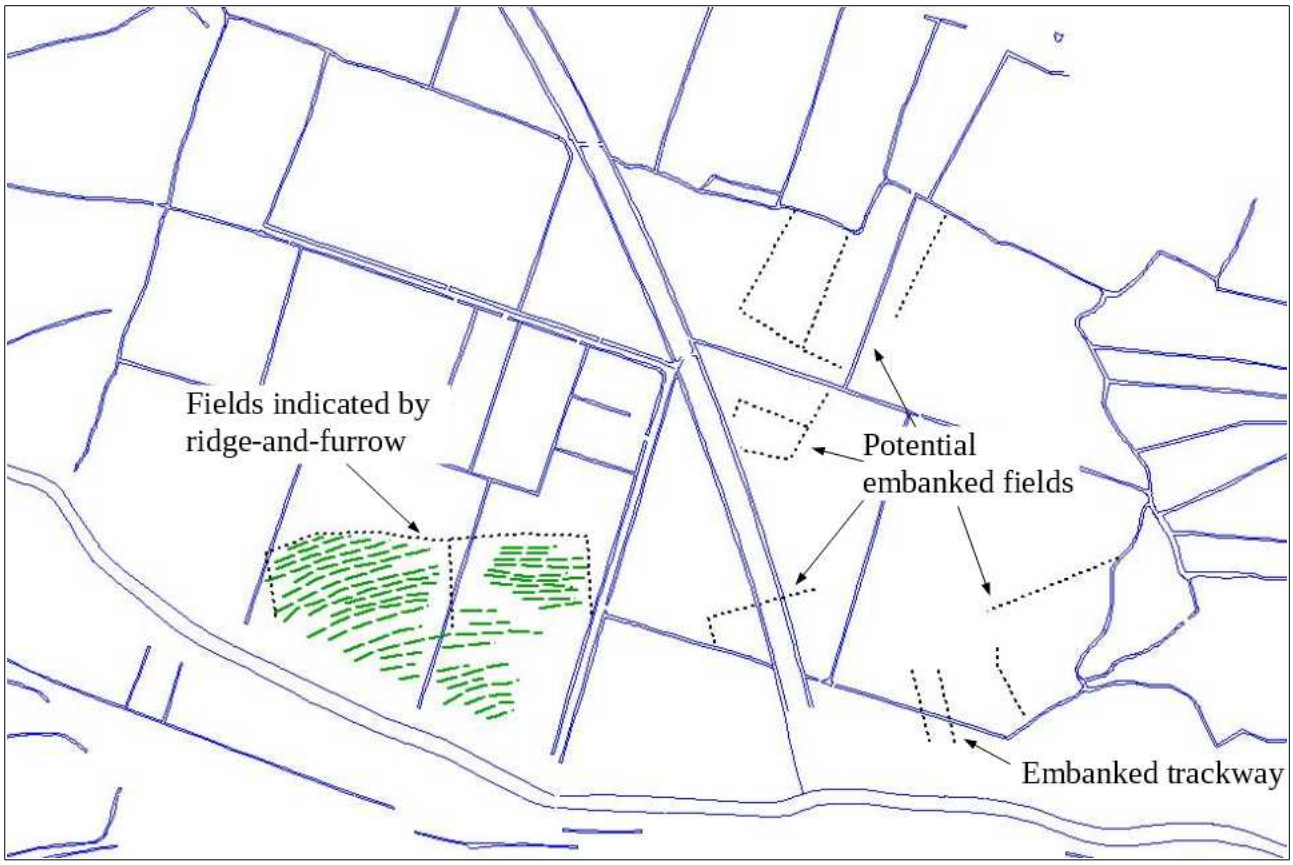

Fig 16: Potential fields within areas 2 and 3 of the Great Moor

The area of ridge-and-furrow in Area 2 appears to comprise 2 (or possibly 3, with a separate field closer to the river) fields ploughed long enough for the ridge-and furrow to survive as visible earthworks.

The other potential fields, however (depicted by broken black lines in Fig 16), which combined with the double-banked trackway now only surviving between fields 9 and 13, may indeed constitute the remains of a fully laid out field system, probably abandoned in the 14th century, but surviving in parts due to the lack of ploughing in this wetter area. No documentary evidence has yet been found for this, but this is not uncommon. For example, while the 1567 survey (available at ycccart.co.uk) refers to the 'Benny' area to the west of the Moor, it does not appear to refer to anything within the Moor.

Indeed, the field at the eastern end of the Moor ('Hurst' in 1840: 'Agnum' on 1736 map) may be the result of a similar procedure, its form seeming to be the result of spanning two arms of the former eastern boundary rhyne of the Moor.

Such fields are usually assumed to be arable in use, and presumably this was the purpose of the fields identified by ridge and furrow: confirmatory pollen analysis studies have not been done.

Two more or less parallel potential palaeochannels run NE-SW across the area, as well as a severely wavy-plan old river course in the south of the area, most notable in fields 9 and 14.

Fig 17: Field 12 and railway line from Congresbury Yeo bank 2017

Both of the northern channels may be entirely artificial: they seem to drain the area around Hurst Pool, and at least one runs directly to the Great Mere. The southern palaeochannel is much larger, and may even be an ancient course (or possibly braided course) of the Yeo. This palaeochannel is itself used as a terminal ditch by features running to it from the edge of the Moor to the east.

Linear feature groups also occur in Area 3. An obvious group can be seen running from field 7 to 10, out of the Land fields: a separate group run out into field 9 from the NE,

which themselves end at the large palaeochannel in field 9. These features on the Great Moor are not alone (see Fig 4 and 5), a similar pair of linear banks can be seen outside of the Moor in the Land fields to the north, despite erosion by ploughing (Fig 18 below).

Fig 18: Parallel features outside of the Moor at Land Farm, 2013

These features, then, seem to pre-date the settling of the boundary of the Great Moor, as well as the setting out of the field systems south of Land Farm, and may perhaps be seen as some form of preparation for intake of new land, successful at Land Farm, but not persevering as successful enclosures on Great Moor.

Conclusions

The widely-held concept of common lands being areas simply used for widescale grazing since time immemorial is still often held, especially for lowland commons, despite the widespread success in demonstrating the archaeological and agricultural history of many upland commons. Many of these features persevere in the modern landscape, since initial plans to use many lowland commons for arable rapidly ran out of steam because of environmental conditions. Having survived the mid-20th century industrial farming onslaught on the landscape of earlier agriculture, the fragile evidence contained in the lowland former Commons of Somerset should be regarded as important enough to be included in Historic Environment Records, and considered in agri-environment schemes. Its importance is greatly enhanced by the waterlogged nature of the landscapes, with their potential for the survival of environmental evidence, which at present is largely absent.

While it is recognised that widespread and detailed work has been carried out in Somerset, nothing similar has as yet been accomplished in North Somerset.

Recommendations for further work

Any report of this nature can only ever be interim, pending the arrival of new information. Digital terrain survey, especially (for example) of the enclosure in field 10 could be revealing: unfortunately, no environmental information is available for the area, but the investigation of the environs of Hurst Pool for its possibilities should be pursued: most of the Northmarsh with its constant waterlogging has at least some potential. Further work on documentary evidence could be useful.

Dick Broomhead's point about commutation of 'works' for cash around 1300 are potentially relevant here, as pastures leased on the Great Moor, and no longer part of demesne farming would be far more susceptible to the gross changes brought on by the mid-century demographic crises: could the quoted 'Pastura de Lakes' refer to the Great Moor, rather than Pillfield? (YCCCART2017c) There may be further information relevant to the Great Moor in the diocesan documents.

Work in the Somerset lowlands (e.g. Grove 1996; Brown and Brunning 2014) has far outstripped any in the North Somerset area: it is hoped current works on the Hinkley C Project may begin to address this imbalance.

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YCCCART2017c	Dick Broomhead's *Congresbury parish survey* *Available at ycccart.co.uk*
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