Excavations in Rick Field, Bradford on Avon, 2014-2015

Background

This report is a summary of work carried in 2014 and 2015 by Bradford on Avon Museum. The purpose of the excavations was to provide an opportunity for members of the Museum Society and others to have experience of archaeological excavation, and the events were advertised under the title of 'Community Dig'. Although the site for excavation was some 70m from the Bradford tithe barn (fig 1), there was no specific archaeological objective, and indeed the likelihood of relatively few finds was regarded as an appropriate circumstance.

The locality

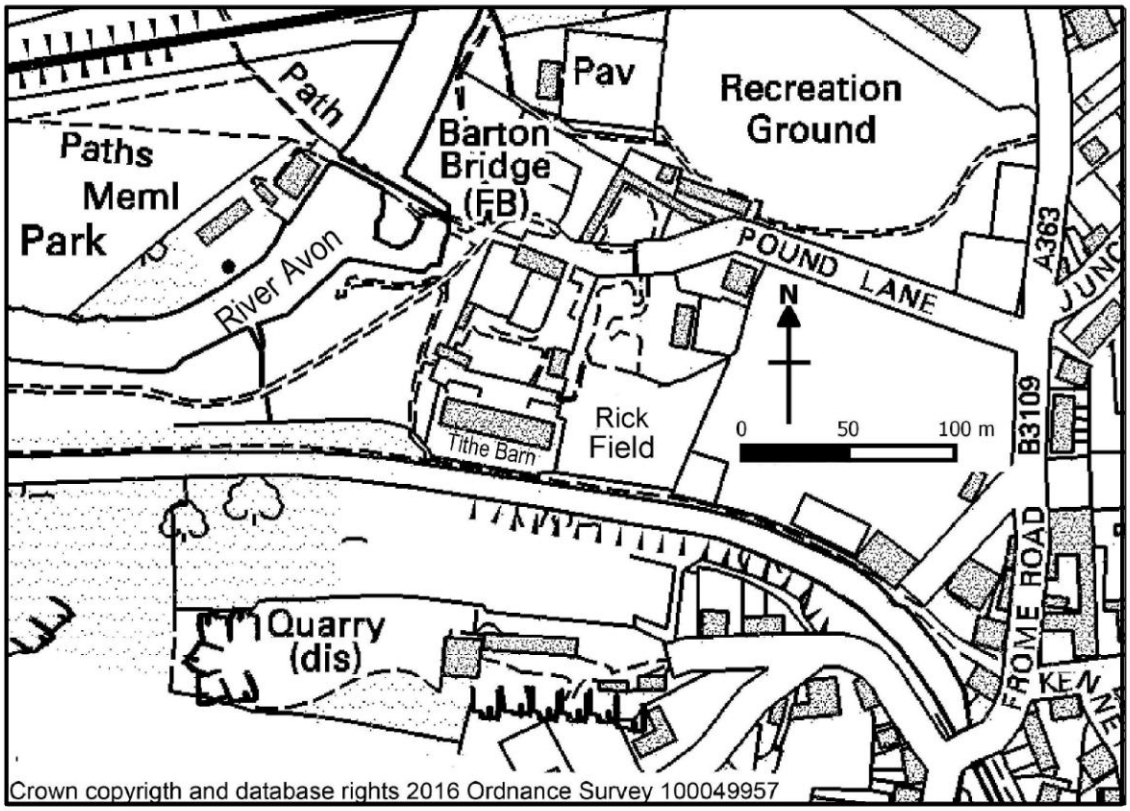

Fig 1

Rick Field is located 200m metres south-east of the River Avon, at an altitude of 34m, some 10m higher than the river. It is clearly above the active floodplain, situated according to the Geological Survey on Great Oolite Limestone. The mapping of deposits in the area suggests that Barton Farm including the tithe barn may be situated on an upper river terrace, slightly below the level of Rick Field. During excavation bedrock was found to be yellowish calcareous clay, probably largely derived as downwash from the limestone ridge to the south (Roger Clark, pers com). Excavations at Barton Farm in 1998-2003 encountered a similar deposit described as a 'brickearth subsoil' (Heaton and Moffat 2004).

The site is some distance from the historic core of the town, situated on the opposite river bank, but is close to Barton Farm, a grange farm of Shaftesbury Abbey, which may have been established soon after the estate was granted to the abbey in 1001, although surviving structures date from the 14th century.

The geophysical survey (fig 2).

The survey was carried out by Bath and Camerton Archaeological Society (BACAS) for Bradford on Avon Museum. The purpose was to add interest for the volunteers and also to ensure that no major archaeological feature would be unexpectedly impacted by the work. In particular, a north-south earthwork crossing the middle of the field was noted, on the same alignment as the Barton Farm complex. However, enquiries established that this was the edge of a spoil dump created when the adjacent carpark was constructed in the 1960's. The variegated plot forming the western half of this survey is caused by the dumping. Of more significance is the dark pattern flanking the eastern boundary of the field, which in part appears as two parallel entities, and the high resistance (black) indicates that this is a stone deposit. Inspection of the surface identified a low bank running parallel to the field wall coincident with this feature.

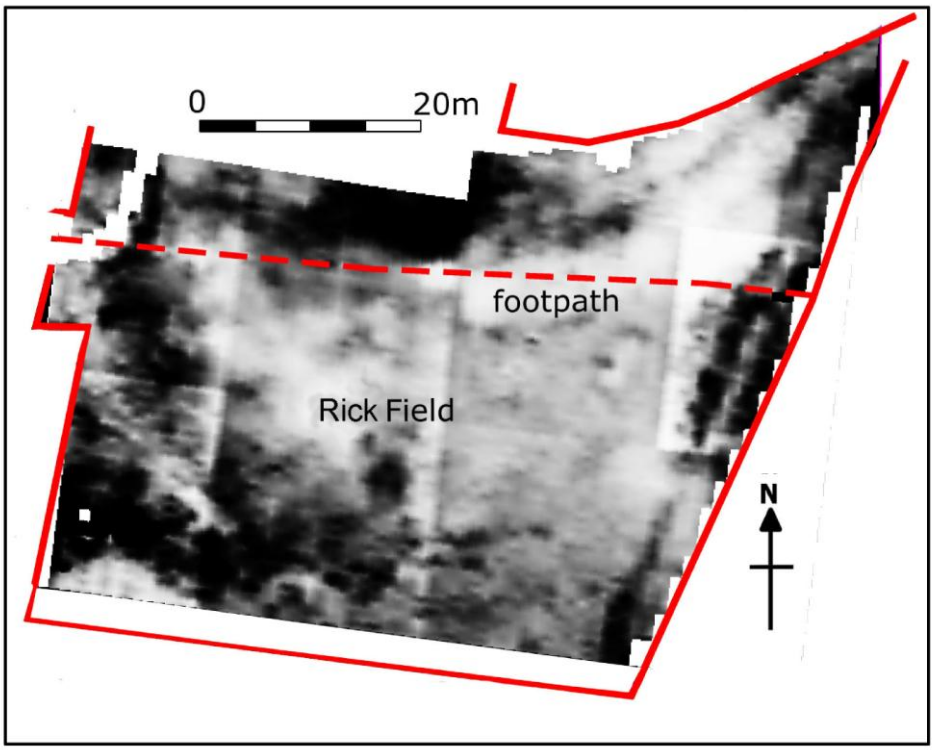

Fig 2

The excavations (fig 3).

A total of ten trenches were opened in Rick Field and two on the eastern side of the wall in Victory Field. A third trench in Victory Field was located further north adjacent to Pound Lane. This had the purpose of investigating another bank, flanking the lane, but the earthwork proved modern, probably created when Victory Field was set out in 1919. Trench 15.4 was an attempt to examine a stone bank visible in the hedge row running to the north of the field, but work was abandoned when much modern activity came to light.

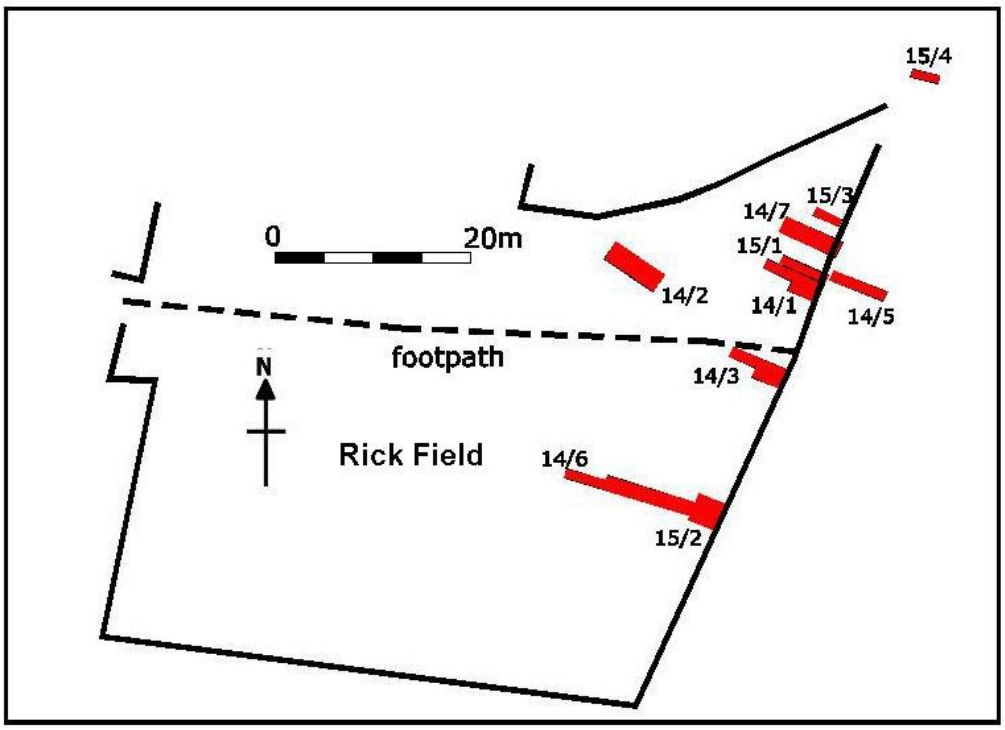

Fig 3

The bank

A number of trenches revealed details of the Rick Field bank, which had a width of around 5m. In all trenches it was found to consist of hard-packed dark, clayey loam with limestone rubble (see fig 4, trench 14/1, context 3). Where investigated in depth, it was found to have a base of re-deposited bedrock (context 4), the yellow clay as described above. The foundation trench for the field wall was clearly seen (context 2D), cutting the bank material.

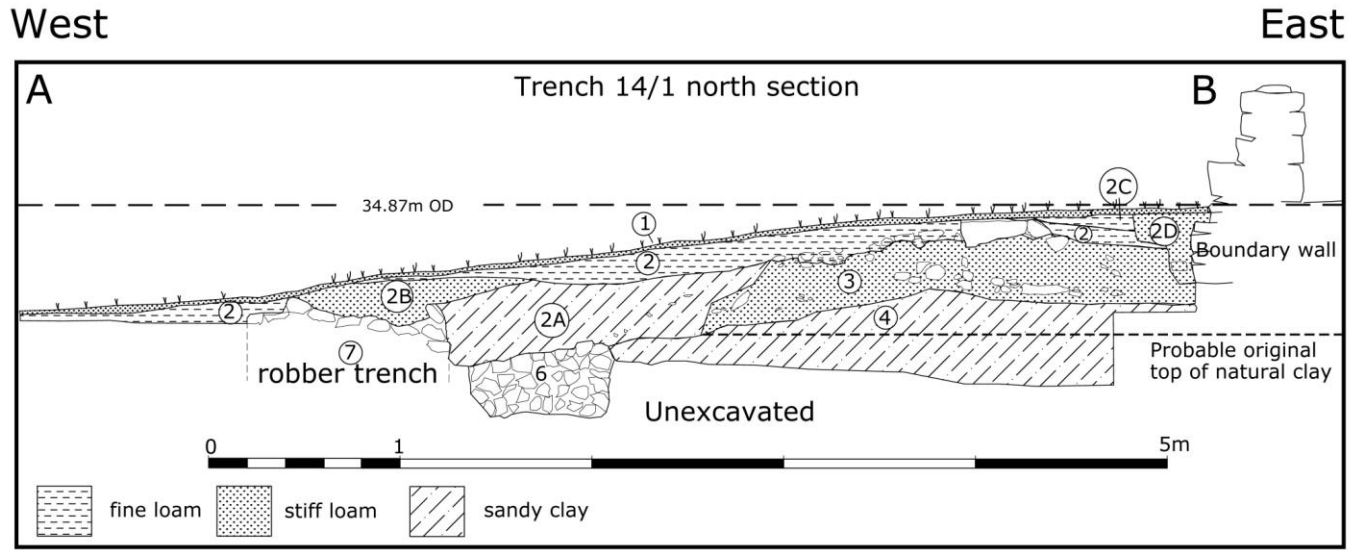

Fig 4

The upper bank material was best seen in trench 14/3 (fig 5).

Fig 5

Further evidence of the wall foundation trench was seen in trench 14/5 on the eastern side of the wall (fig 6, context 7). An attempt to expose evidence of the bank in this area was frustrated by modern disturbance, possibly in rebuilding the wall in this quarter which appears to have collapsed at some time. Contexts 5 and 6 are the only deposits which may belong to the bank, the upper apparently truncated by the modern activity. This layer consisted of very hard-packed limestone fragments, perhaps material rammed down to give a bank of some substance. The slight mound visible on the surface is therefore misleading and is likely to have a recent origin.

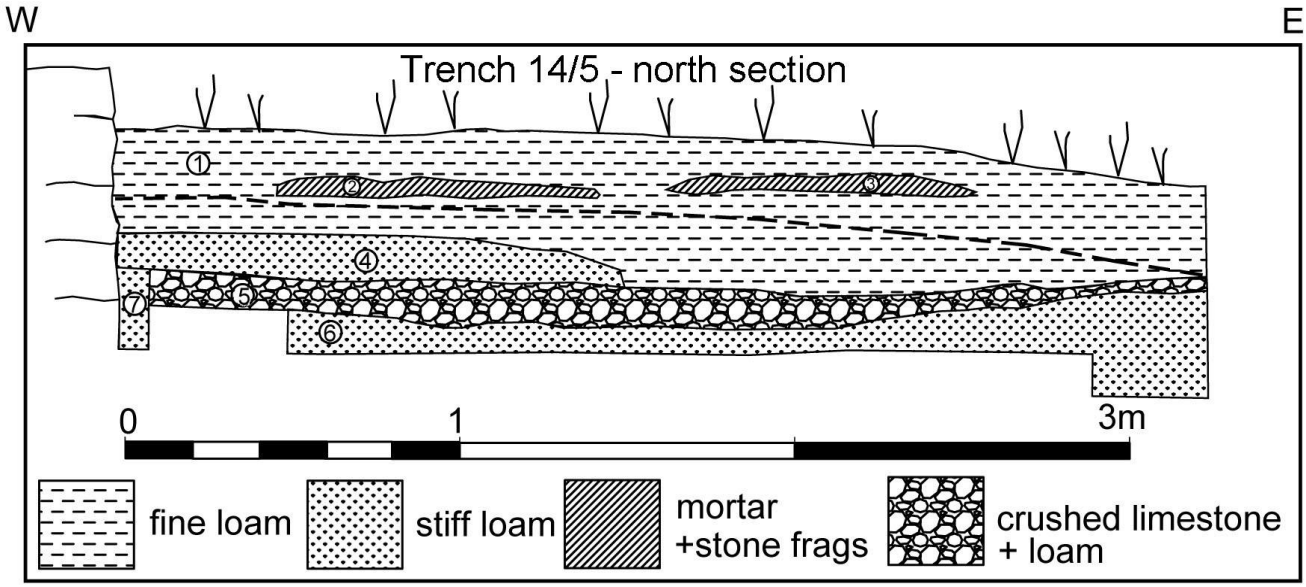

Fig 6

In trench 15/2, the same upper bank deposit was found (fig 9, context 2). Excavation went no further, but it was evident from the profile that this deposit rested on a rising shelf of the same yellow clay seen elsewhere. Overall therefore the bank has been examined over a distance of some 30m. Dating evidence was sparse. A test pit excavated into the bank clay deposit in trench 14/7 (fig7, context 7) produced a sherd dateable to the 13th or 14th centuries.

Evidence of structures

A number of down-cut structural features were uncovered (fig 8):

1 - Trench 14/1 revealed a foundation of limestone rubble (fig, context 6) sealed by the yellow clay deposit that formed part of the bank profile (context 4). It appeared as a rounded terminal in 15/1, but was located again 6m to the north in 15/3. It was not located in 14/3.

2- Trench 14/1 also contained a wider downcut feature (context 6). This was encountered again in trench 14/3, also in 14/7 and 15/1. It was fully excavated only in 14/7 (fig 7). The filling was found to be a mixture of limestone pieces, soil and clay, thus unlikely to be a foundation. This vertical-sided feature is believed to be a robber trench, and contained a sherd of green-glazed Medieval pottery of 13th or 14th century date.

3- Trenches 14/6 and 15/2 (figs 9 and 10) produced a cluster of three down cut features. The two in 14/6 had the appearance of stone-filled pits, one apparently cutting the other (fig 9, contexts 5 and 6). The subsequent trench 15/2 exposed a larger excavation (context 7) which appears to have cut one of the stone-filled pits.

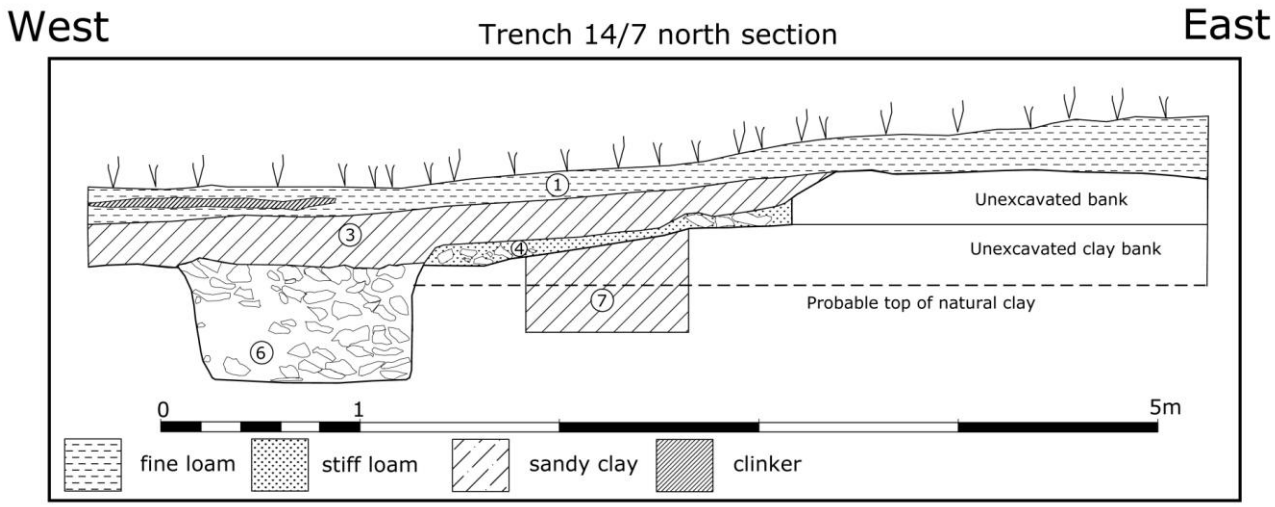

Fig 7

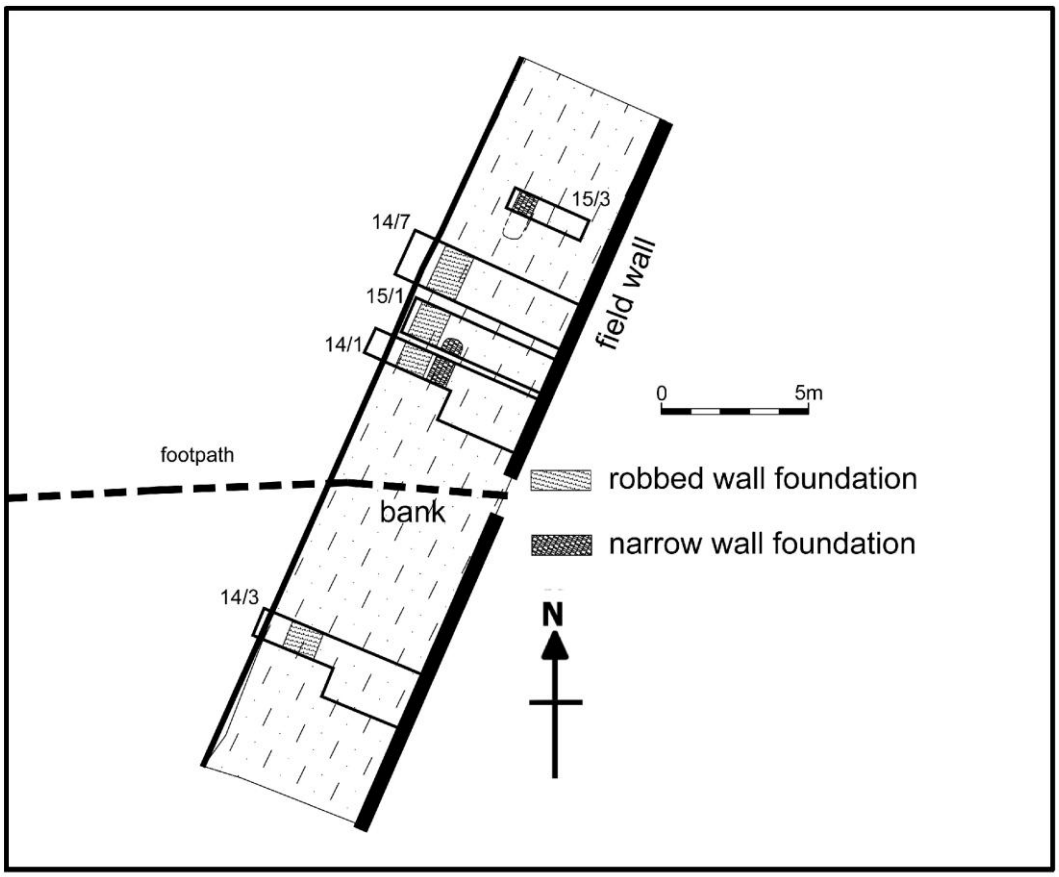
15/3
14/7
15/1
14/1
field wall
0
5m
footpath
bank
robbed wall foundation
narrow wall foundation
14/3
N

Fig 8

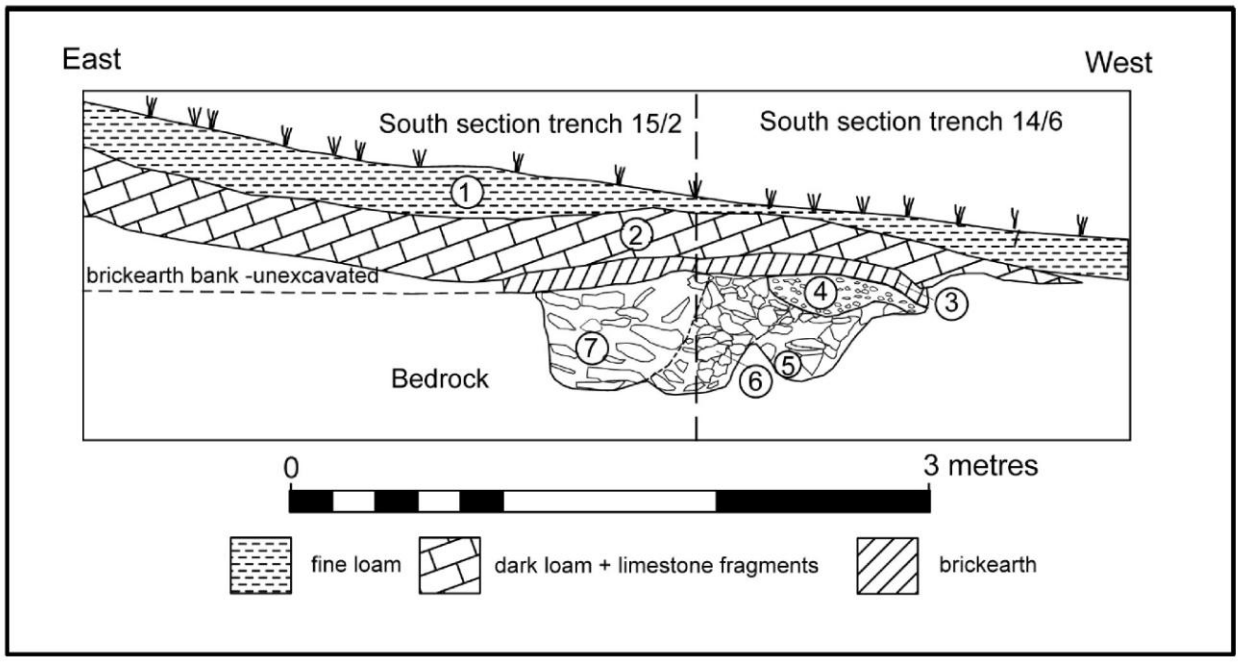
East
West
South section trench 15/2
South section trench 14/6
1
2
brickearth bank -unexcavated
4
3
7
Bedrock
6
5
0
3 metres
fine loam
dark loam + limestone fragments
brickearth

Fig 9

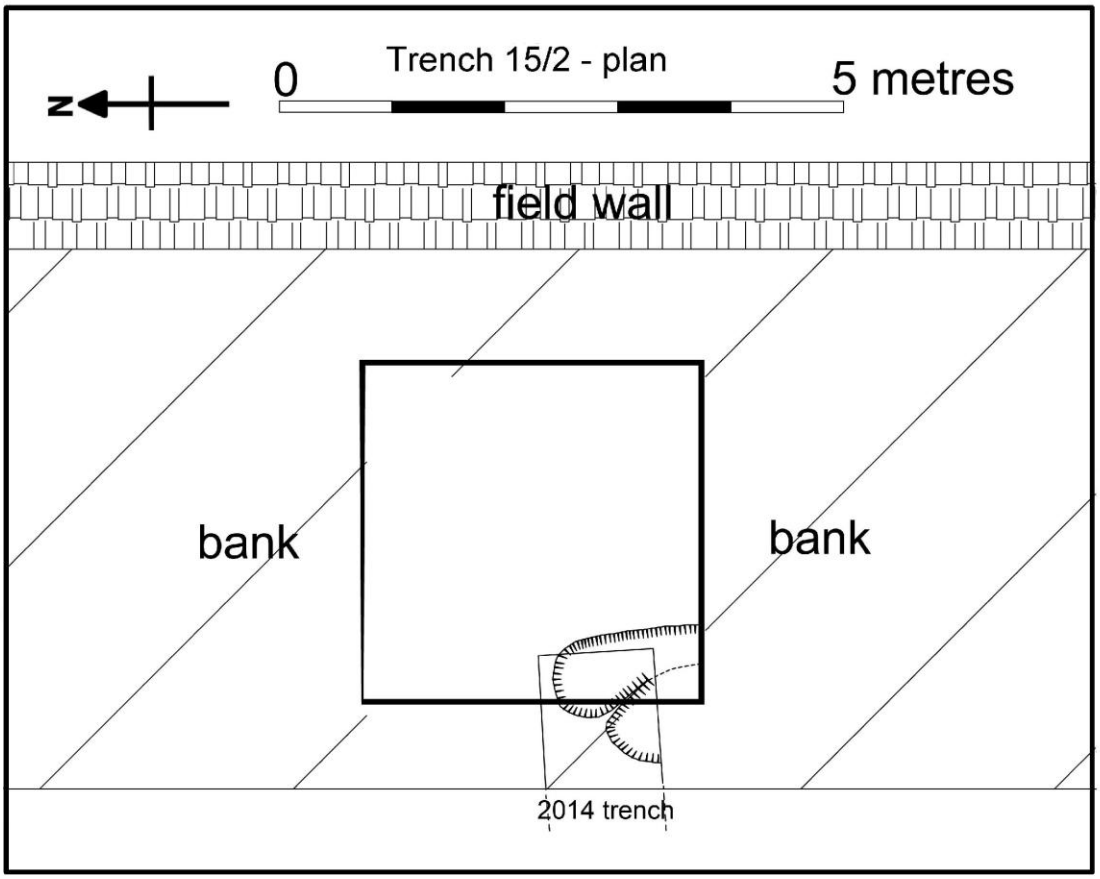

Fig 10

Interpretation

The bank

There is evidence that the bank predates the field wall. This wall is visible on a map of Bradford dated to 1767, where it forms part of the well-planned layout of Barton Farm. From this and its unusual build of square ashlar it seems likely that it dates from the time of Barton Farm and the tithe barn, ie the fourteenth century. There was little dating evidence from the upper portion of the bank. Two architectural fragments – portions of a column drum and also of a voussoir, both cut from their originals for re-use, perhaps as floor material - may derive from a Saxon or Roman structure in the area , but are clearly in time some distance from their original period of use. The sherd from the yellow clay in trench 14/7 indicates that the bank is of the same period as Barton Farm, and thus cannot pre-date the wall by a substantial interval. No evidence of a ditch was found within Rick Field and if such exists it must be situated to the east in Victory Field. If so, it suggests that the bank enclosed an area adjacent to the river, assuming it is part of an enclosure.

There is a surface impression of the bank on the east side of the wall, but the sequence in trench 14/5 suggests this is modern. There is however a truncated deposit in the same trench which is likely to be remains of the bank, thus giving an overall width of around 9m. In origin therefore it was a substantial feature in the landscape, its base formed from locally-dug yellow clay, capped with imported stoney material. At present the purpose of the bank can only be guessed at.

The stone structures

In trench 14/1 (fig 4) the narrow stone foundation either predates the bank or belongs to a first phase of the bank. However, this foundation has been found only in a short section of the bank, and also is discontinuous – there is a gap which may be interpreted as some sort of entrance (fig 8). The likelihood therefore is that the structure belongs to a phase of activity predating the bank.

The larger stone feature (trench 14/7, context 6) is taken to be a robber trench, but it is noted that no mortar was found in the filling, normally a regular characteristic of such features. A Medieval sherd in the filling suggests that the robbing may have been to provide material for the Barton Farm complex. In the section it is sealed by bank material. Both this feature, therefore, and the narrow foundation are likely to have a later Saxon or early Medieval date. It is noted that the current field-wall, at least in its original sectors was dry-built and perhaps the wider structure represented by the robber trench was an earlier version of this boundary wall.

The cluster of stone-filled pits in trenches 14/6 and 15/2 was also sealed by bank material and thus reinforce the view that there is a phase or phases of activity predating the bank and possibly predating Barton Farm. Interpretation is difficult – they may have acted as some sort of foundation, perhaps carrying a horizontal sleeper beam. The position of trench 15/2 has been checked with care against the geophysics survey (fig 11), and it is clear that the down-cut pits are not showing in the geophysics, presumably because of their depth. There may therefore be an horizon of evidence which is not visible at present and remains largely unexplored.

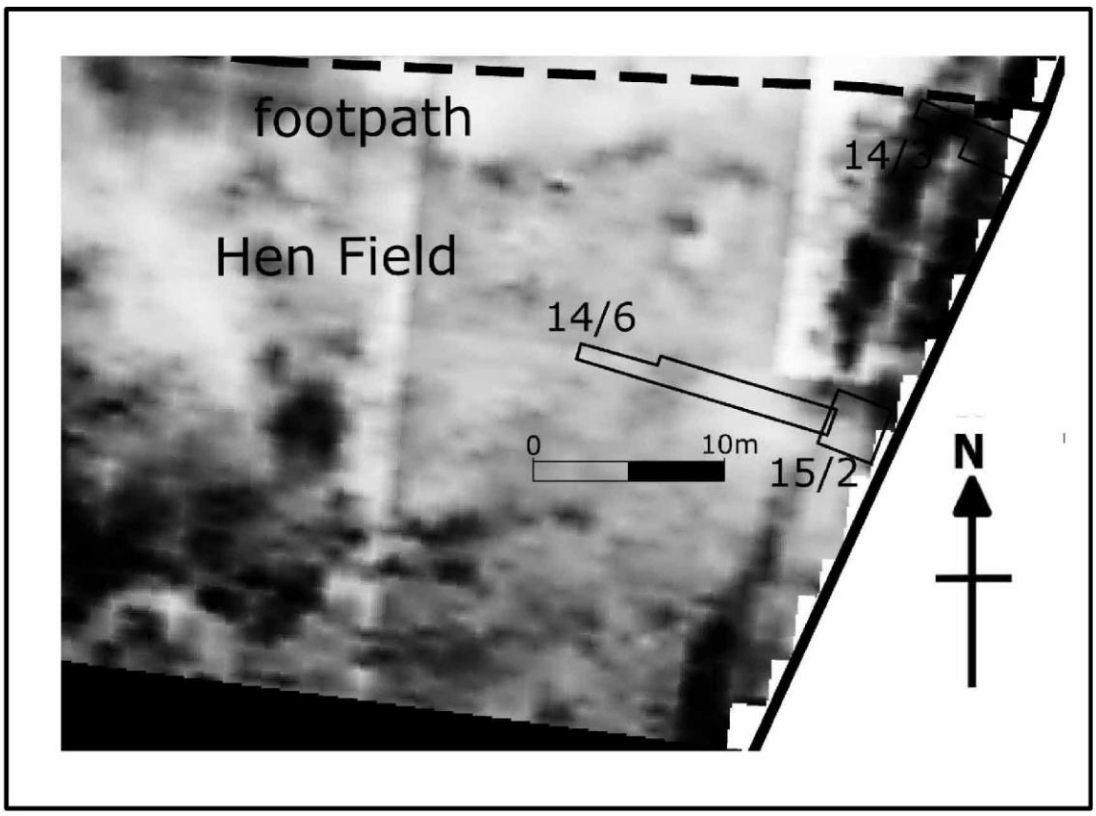

Fig 11

Taken together, these pre-bank structures suggest that Barton Farm was not constructed on virgin ground, but was sited on a pre-existing farm or hamlet. All the extant buildings at Barton Farm are likely to date from the 14th century, yet the estate came into the possession of Shaftesbury Abbey some three centuries earlier. The excavated features may reflect the original layout of the grange farm or a later Saxon farmstead.

Future work

Further investigation is limited by several factors:-

1 – Part of the field has been planted as a community orchard.
2 – Deposits of clinker adversely affect geophysical survey.
3 – In the western half of the field dumping of spoil from the carpark excavation also masks geophysical results.
4 – There is an indication from trenches 14/6 and 15/2 that some other factor, perhaps depth, is inhibiting geophysical results.

Possibly ground-penetrating radar might overcome some of these limitations.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Sophie Hawke and the BACAS team for the invaluable geophysical survey. Simon Relph, manager of the Community Orchard on behalf of the Preservation Trust, was helpful throughout the excavations, in spite of the potential risks to the new plantation. On the excavations I am indebted to Sophie Hawke for supervising various aspects of the work and to Clive Green for undertaking the difficult trench adjacent to Pound Lane, also to Julia Bird and Laura Mountford for drawing trench sections. Numerous volunteers contributed considerable effort to the dig, as also did those who acted as 'greeters' for our many visitors. Tony Hinchliffe and Gill Winfield provided substantial support in this task. Finally, my thanks to the stalwarts who turned out to help backfill the trenches.

Roy Canham April 2016

Bibliography

Heaton, Michael & Moffatt, William 2004. Recent work at Barton Farm, Bradford-on-Avon, Wiltshire, 1998-2003. *WAM* 97, pp. 211-217