

Brislington Community Museum News

2023 June

(Issue 4)

ISSN 2753-7773

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Homes England sign by public footpath into southwest corner of Brislington Meadows (May 2023)

News & events

In each of our three previous issues we've found occasion to describe artefacts found at Brislington Meadows - these ranged from Stone Age flints to Roman glass and pottery. Now, with the commercial development of the land for hundreds of houses set to go ahead, this time we'll look at some of the other research topics that contributed both to the public debate and indeed to the public enquiry.

I had the privilege of addressing that public enquiry regarding some narrow points of the archaeology and history of Brislington Meadows. That was in the Bordeaux Room, City Hall, Bristol, on the morning of Friday 3 Feb 2023.

It's often surprising how much of interest can be found when looking into a site, no matter its size, and Brislington Meadows has proved to be no exception to that unwritten rule.

In fact, there's so much more research that could be done (and who knows what further investigations that data would prompt?) but, with public access to the site severely restricted, the opportunity to record its heritage seems already past.

We'll return to cover more of the known vanishing heritage at Brislington Meadows in future issues.

Ken Taylor, chair

Excavations at Brislington Meadows

As part of their application for a housing development at Brislington Meadows, the landowner - Homes England - commissioned an archaeological evaluation of the site. Following a desk-based survey and a geophysical survey, in November 2021 Cotswold Archaeology opened 26 trenches that were positioned both to investigate geophysical anomalies and also to provide a random view of conditions elsewhere at the site (their report was published in 2022).



Google maps happened to capture Brislington Meadows soon after the excavation trenches were backfilled.

Imagery ©2023 Getmapping plc, Infoterra Ltd & Bluesky, Maxar Technologies, The GeoInformation Group, Map data ©2023.

Excavations in the southwest of the site unearthed a network of enclosure ditches up to 1.8m wide and 0.52m deep. These contained Roman pottery (some of a distinctly domestic type) dating from the 1st to the 4th centuries, as well as metalworking debris (ironworking, and non-ferrous casting) including part of a crucible. Another ditch, 4.4m wide and 1m deep was unearthed inside the area criss-crossed by those interconnected ditches, but the relationship between it and them (if any) wasn't determined.

Other excavated features included two circular pits, the largest of which was 0.84m in diameter and 0.41m deep; and one - more egg-shaped in cross-section - which measured 1.08m by 0.88m and 0.14m deep. Two postholes were also found, the larger of which measured 0.42m in diameter and 0.2m deep and contained 3rd to 4th century Roman pottery, four iron nails, and waste fragments of various types of glass, as well as a hoard of 72 small glass beads (many of which were broken). The various dates of the different types of blue, black and green beads converge to suggest the cache was deposited in the late 4th century. It seems likely this collection of glass was brought together with a view to recycling.

Forty five sherds of pottery were catalogued, one of which was a 2nd century sherd of decorated samian from central Gaul (France), probably from an item of fine tableware. Other fragments represent more modest pottery types and were mainly (18 sherds) black burnished ware from Southeast Dorset, and a couple of fragments of Severn Valley ware. Ten sherds with fabric tempered by grog and quartz date to the 1st or 2nd centuries (grog is fired clay that has been ground into small chips or even

powder, and is added to the clay of new vessels to improve their strength and enhance resistance to cracking in the kiln). Other types include micaceous greyware and coarsewares.

The mixture of domestic and industrial remains in this small area of Brislington Meadows, along with the associated ditches, pits and postholes, isn't easy to categorise as a single type of site. It's notable that much of the pottery predates the building of Brislington's Roman villa (late 3rd century), giving us a glimpse into the lives of local Iron Age Britons in the 1st century as they adapted to the encroaching cultural influence of the Roman Empire. It may be no coincidence that this site apparently fell out of use in the late 4th century, as Brislington villa itself is thought to have been destroyed at that time - around 370AD.

These remains surely represent a small part of an extensive - and as-yet undetermined - complex of Late Iron Age / Roman activity in that area. More clues to help unravel its mysteries remain in the ground nearby, and it can be expected that further excavation will take place before the proposed housing development destroys this local heritage forever.



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Iron Age / Roman rimsherd



Identification of the age of this pottery fragment would have been based largely on the fabric - the clay with its inclusions - and the style of rim. It was reckoned to be late Iron Age or early Roman by one of the archaeologists excavating Brislington Meadows in November 2021.

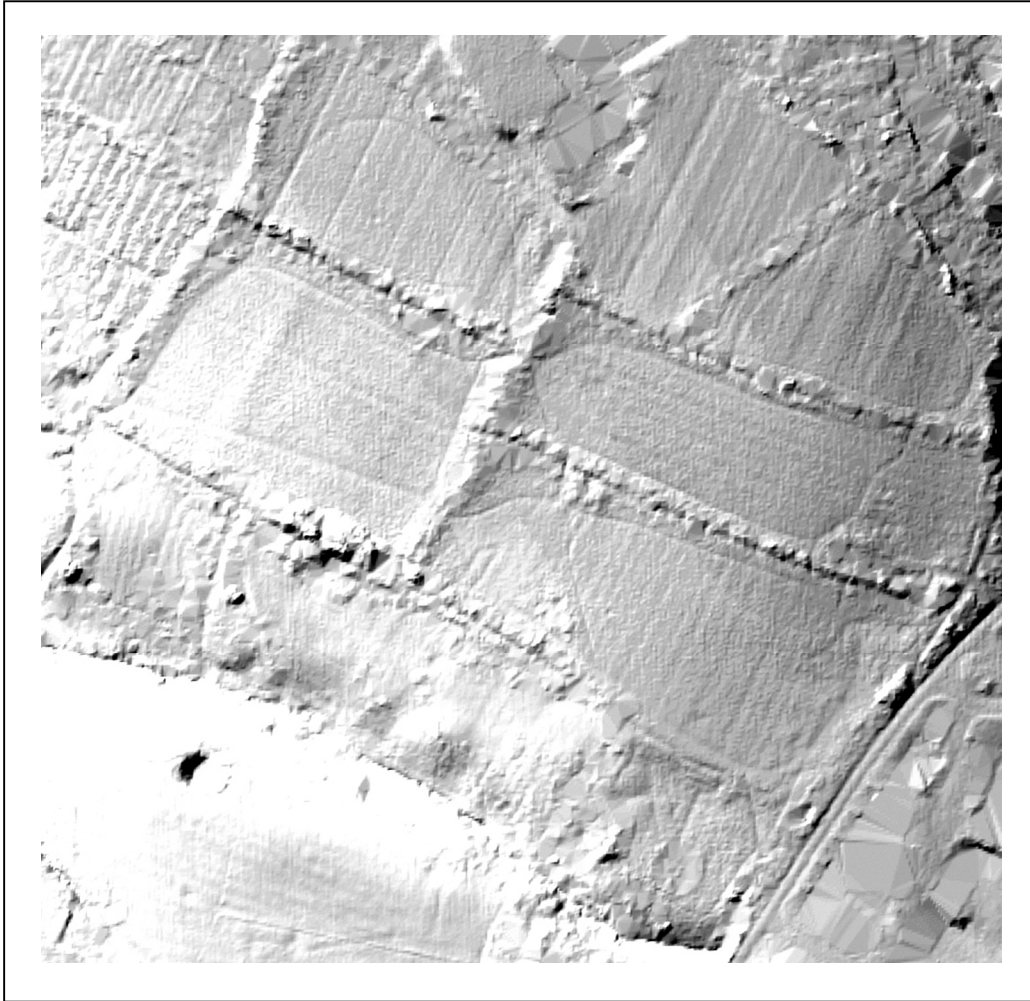
This 48mm wide sherd was found on the surface of the ground where the public footpath crossed a backfilled trench. It was cleaned up and photographed, and returned to the site where it was handed over to the excavators. Because it wasn't found in an archaeological context it wasn't included in the written report but it will have been preserved in the archive stored at Bristol Museum & Art Gallery.

Find spot: ST62557106 (field 516 in 1846 tithe map).
Exhibit contributed by Dawn Witherspoon
Photographer: Dawn Witherspoon (2021)
Acquisition number: 230506a1

The published Archaeological Evaluation report does record sherds excavated from Trench 7 (where this rimsherd was found), whose fabric was tempered with grog-and-quartz and dated to the 1st or 2nd century CE. From the similarity of the fabric, a layperson might suppose the description of the excavated finds matches the surface find, but these matters are subtle, so we can't claim a positive identification. A visit to the museum by an expert should settle the matter, but for now the question of whether this is the first known evidence of Iron Age people in Brislington, remains moot.

Medieval ridge and furrow ploughing

A recent LiDAR survey shows a variety of parallel linear features distributed among the five large open fields at the heart of the proposed Brislington Meadows housing development. Of particular historical interest in the image below is the long narrow rectangular field in the middle of the right-hand side (in the 1846 tithe map illustrated below, it's numbered 504). This field currently encloses Ordnance Survey reference ST 62727107.



Screenshot from LiDARFinder <https://lidarfinder.com>.

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These features run approximately along contour lines (so can't be drains, which do exist in other fields), and the banks and troughs have the appearance of ridge and furrow ploughing.

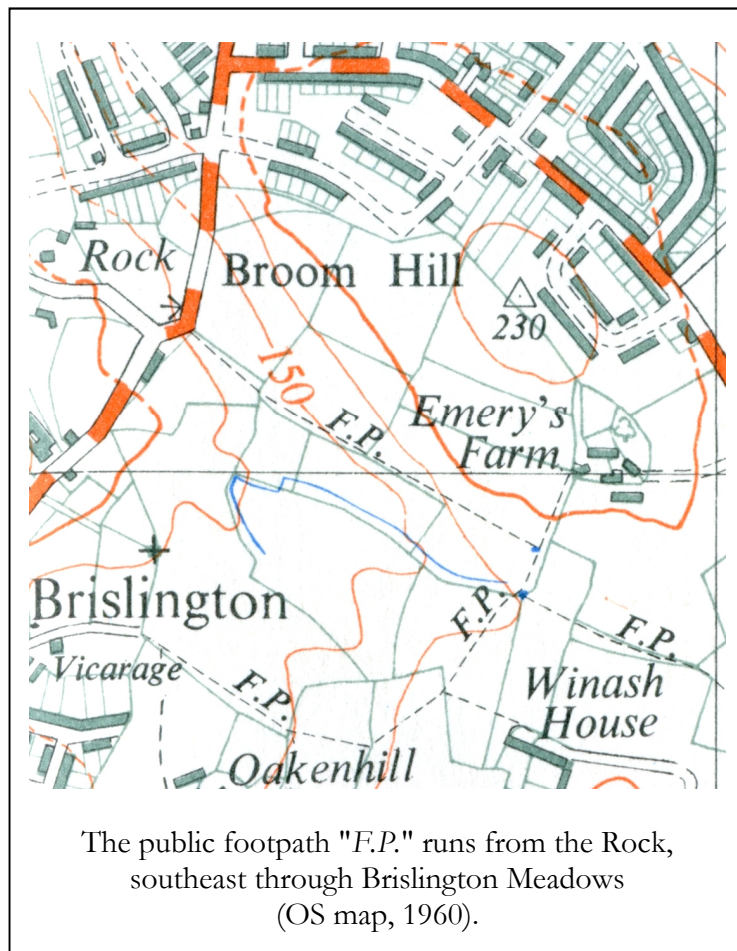
Allowing for some spread of soil at both the higher and lower boundary of this field, which is bounded at top and bottom by lynchets, the LiDAR image shows eight linear features - each composed of a light and dark strip.

These features are roughly parallel and slightly curved (bending in approximate conformity with the contours of the hill).

The width of this narrow rectangular field has been estimated using aerial photographs of 1946 before the hedgerows were allowed to sprawl (<https://maps.bristol.gov.uk/kyp>), to be around 64m, making each linear feature approximately 8m (26 feet) wide.

Notes on a likely medieval Priest's Path through Brislington Meadows

Modern Ordnance Survey (OS) maps show a footpath with a public right of way that runs along the north side of a hedgerow at the southern boundary of Brislington Meadows. It continues to the southeast all the way to Keynsham.



This footpath connects the presumed medieval hamlet of Rock with its local market town of Keynsham - a Thursday market and a three-day fair every August, were granted to the town by royal licence as early as 1308 (Lowe 2006, 63). It may also be that another purpose was served by this route - a Priest's Path - connecting two ecclesiastical centres such as between a 'mother' church and its 'daughter' chapel.

These paths were notably used by clergy, and are often several miles in length because a popular reason for building a chapel was the hardship endured by the local congregation in travelling a

long distance - in all weathers - to and from the original church. The path considered here is between the mother church in Keynsham, and the supposed dwelling of the chaplain of the Chapel of St Anne in the Wood (originally the Oratory of Nyuwewike - New Wick), which was operational by 1304 (Taylor 2014, 81).

The location of the chaplain's residence has not yet been determined satisfactorily, but a tradition has circulated for more than a century (WDP 1888) that it was at or near the site of Wick House, Brislington. The present estate house dates to the late 18th century, but its name, and

that of Wick Road on which it stands, ultimately derive their name from the site of the chapel: New Wick, toward which this road leads. The demolition of another 18th estate house nearby on Wick Road, Broomwell House, unearthed medieval walls (BRAS 2004, 4 and Plates 18, 19).

The chaplains of the Chapel of St Anne's in the Wood were fully accredited priests from Keynsham Abbey and were known as Black Canons due to the colour of their monastic cassocks. The proposed Priest's Path is some 4.5km (2.8 miles) long as the crow flies, and contains some remarkably straight sections.

The path of the public right of way through Brislington Meadows (from School Road to Bonville Road) shown on modern OS maps (Streetmap 2023) is significantly different to the path popularly used by people walking through the fields, which is also recognised as a public path. The older course closely follows the line of old hedges that run most of that distance (and which used to go further), on their north side. This old path through Brislington Meadows can be traced back through earlier editions to almost 140 years ago (OS 1884).

The path in 1884 matches the modern route exactly except for a minor divergence at its western end near School Road, which was straightened slightly in the mid-20th century.

This section of footpath, between two kissing gates, leads past what appears to be a stock pond (OS grid reference: ST6245671107), situated to the north of the path. The part of the path beside the pond remained substantially undisturbed by that alteration. This path is of modern construction and runs between metal railings with a row of conifers on the south and allotments to the north,

The 1846 tithe map, incidentally, shows a field boundary where the conifers now stand, but it doesn't show the footpath. However, the tithe map fails to show most of the footpaths in the parish, and often depicts bridges over Brislington Brook as if they existed in isolation. In contrast, the early OS maps reveal the dense network of paths that connected the community - often with more than one converging to cross

those same bridges. So, while it's a shame the tithe map ignores our subject path, it's not detrimental. An earlier estate plan shows the path starting at School Road and following the familiar hedgerows of the first two fields, but on their south side (Pryce 1791).

As we pass through the (2nd) kissing gate by the pond, we enter the field known as Four Acres. The tithe map shows this area as the corner of five fields with hedges making a complex system of junctions that no doubt accommodated a set of field gates. The slightly later OS maps show a simpler system serving only four fields (the tithe map's field boundary south of the path was removed, combining those two fields). These maps can be found online (Bristol City Council 2023) and by superimposing them and adjusting their opacity, it becomes evident that the route of the path through this changing landscape remained essentially the same (their alignment on the website isn't optimal at this precise location so, if possible, it's best to download both and perform the superimposition offline).

The modern, well-trodden track then abruptly turns a sharp left, and climbs the riser of a lynchet into the open field previously known as Four Acres, while the old footpath remains on a straight course to the southeast, and closely follows the line of the hedge. The lynchet riser formed as earth moved gradually downhill by ploughing over a long period of time, and has accumulated around 1m depth of soil here. It's notable that such ploughing, prolonged enough to displace that amount of earth, sufficiently respected the sanctity of the path to preserve its course on what appears to be its original surface.

The hedgerow alongside which the old footpath runs is a rich wildlife habitat and contains many trees of interest, not least is a large oak - the first encountered in this hedge after entering Four Acres from the kissing gate. This pedunculate oak, like many trees in Brislington Meadows, was examined by Julian Forbes-Laird as part of the expert evidence he presented to the public enquiry. He found this veteran tree (reference number T6) to have been pollarded (its canopy removed, to promote new growth) and, with a girth measured at 1.45m, he estimated its acorn sprouted in or around the year 1718.



Looking southeast from School Road toward the 1st kissing gate at the entrance of the footpath (Nov 2022).



Looking southeast toward the stock pond (on the left) and the 2nd kissing gate leading to Brislington Meadows (Sept 2022).



Looking southeast, just past the 2nd kissing gate where the modern path strikes up to the left, while the older path carries straight on beside the old hedgerow (Nov 2022).



A pollarded oak tree (T6) in the hedgerow on the southern boundary of Four Acres field, looking southeast (Nov 2022).

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