

Priston – The Search Continues

**Lots of
archaeology
but it is mainly
under the
crossroads**

John Oswin

The Bath and Camerton Archaeological Society has a long history of archaeological intervention at Priston. Back in the 1950s, Bill Wedlake, one of our founders, investigated a field called Great Croft looking for signs of a Roman villa. He did not get lucky. Great Croft is a large, gently sloping south-east facing field which overlooks the defile in which the village sits. In 2007 the society was invited back to do a geophysical survey of the field using techniques not generally available in Bill Wedlake's era, but - we still did not find a villa. There were trackways across the field, field systems and a lot of activity in the centre and on the western edge of the field, but no obvious villa.

There matters rested awhile, but in 2014 we were invited back to look at a field just to the west of Great Croft called Town Hill. The name was promising, but still no villa. There was however, a lot of activity at the top of the field by the bungalow on the road junction. Metal detectorists had found Roman material in the field below, called Goose Mead, so that was targeted next. We made a start in Spring 2015, but on the second day, the magnetometer broke down and had to be sent off for repairs and the magnetometer had been the most productive with results. By the time it was back in action the field was sown and growing, so any further work had to be postponed until Spring 2016.

When we returned to resume the survey, we found that the field had already been ploughed ready for sowing, so was beyond survey. We went to go home, but at the last minute, we were given access to a paddock called Inland, just to the south-west of Town Hill. This field is regularly used as a car park for village events and is normally home to horses, but for just a couple of weeks it was empty and available. This revealed a number of features, interpreted as dating from Roman to modern, but the greatest concentration of activity was in the eastern corner, next to the lane down towards Marksbury and Priston Mill and the bungalow mentioned above (*See Figure 1*).

Ignoring Goose Mead, the three fields showed a fair number of features, but it is much better to see these in all the fields together rather than individually, and as the magnetometer proved the more successful, only these plots will be discussed.

In Figure 1, Inland is the small triangular field on the left, Town Hill is top centre and Great Croft is to the right. The junction of the lanes and the bungalow can be seen bottom centre. Great Croft on the right slopes away to the east. Town Hill and Inland slope away to the north. From the road junction west, the lane follows a ridge heading east-west. There seems to be a mismatch between geophysics features in Town Hill and Inland, but the ground level in Town Hill is about 1m lower across the lane.

The geophysics of Great Croft is dominated by a pair of iron water pipes striping across the field in two directions, but there are field systems and a trackway leading up from the east to an area of great activity near the gate in the south-west corner of the field. This is matched by activity in Inland just beyond the road junction. Further west in Inland are rectangular enclosures and half a circular enclosure, which disappears under the modern farmhouse.

Right down the hill in the north-eastern corner of Town Hill was an interesting small structure surrounded by a sub-circular feature. We were hoping to find more in Goose Mead, but there was nothing showing in the small portion we were able to survey before the magnetometer failed.

There are not many other areas flat enough around the village that would provide space for a villa structure. There is a Roman coffin in the church, and it is possible that there is something now beyond reach underneath it. Otherwise, the junction of the lanes, where the three fields meet, would be the most likely site, and there are no reports of finds there. Even back in the 1780s, Edmund Rack on his travels to prepare for 'Collinson's History of Somerset' called it a 'village without antiquities'. It may be that he was right!

Figure 1
The geophysics of the three fields overlaid on aerial photography, with acknowledgements to Google Earth. On the left (west) is Inland, centre is Town Hill and on the right (east) is Great Croft.

