Part of a 1749 map of the Manor of Keevil, showing "Coople Church Field"

Land Surveyor James Sartain produced this map of the Estate of Thomas Beach Esq. in 1749. The tradition that an ancient church once stood between Keevil and Steeple Ashton, within the parish of Keevil, is reflected in the original ‘open field’ name (shown sub-divided into smaller tenancies). One hundred and sixty four years after the map’s creation, somewhere in the "Coople Church Field" area, a farmer's plough unearthed an encaustic (inlaid) tile, and struck the foundations of a building.

Bryan writes more about the front-cover photo…

The images of the 1749 map of the Manor of Keevil, & the 1863 Tithe Map image in this article, are reproduced by kind permission of ‘The Wiltshire & Swindon History Centre’, Chippenham – who hold the copyright. Rev. Richardson's 1914 map drawing, plus Alan Thomsett’s 1990 map drawing, are reproduced by kind permission of ‘The Keevil Society’ – who hold the copyright. In this instance, their use is restricted to this article only.

‘Coople Church Field’ was the name given to the most southerly of Keevil's three, old, open fields – the others being 'Wick Field' to the east of the village, and 'North Field' to the north. The March 1913 discovery site in ‘Coople Church Field’ was excavated by Lieut. W H Chamberlaine – with two skeletons being uncovered in the process (later reinterred). The following year, Keevil’s Vicar – the Rev. A T Richardson – recorded Lieut. Chamberlaine’s findings. The Vicar’s maps clearly show the building as laying east to west, 56ft long by 18ft 6 inches wide, near the north-eastern corner of a field: it was believed that the location of the long-rumoured Anglo-Saxon church had finally been identified.

My own interest in the history of 'Coople Church' was first stimulated as a child in the 1950s by listening to my grandfather, Herbert James Berrett, who died in 1956. As I recall, he said how, whilst digging some form of drainage to the east of St. Mary’s Church around 1930, he had come across the foundations of a corner of a building – which he assumed to be 'the Saxon church’. His find was not officially recorded. I also have a recollection of my father mentioning an attempt by a team of people to find the church in the 1950s, but the attempt proved unsuccessful.
By the late-20th century, it was commonly assumed that the field boundaries of the general discovery area had been lost to history – due to the construction of Keevil Airfield in 1942. The 1749 map of the Manor of Keevil shows "Coople Church Field" as covering a sizeable amount of land; consequently, this map has left researchers with only the most vague of indications as to where the church lies buried. With its location seemingly unclear, over the past few decades, various interested individuals and groups have researched the Coople Church history, and offered up probable sites for its likely whereabouts.

The foundations are believed by some to lie beneath an area now covered by the active part of Keevil Airfield – and with a new, 5000ft-long 'Tactical Landing Zone' (TLZ) currently planned for construction by the MOD to the south of the main runway, possible further disturbance of the church site has recently been raised as a concern at a public meeting in Keevil. However, there is a strong possibility that these beliefs could be misplaced; substantial evidence exists which suggests that the remains of Coople Church in fact lie outside the active area, and well clear of the proposed new TLZ.

The last organised, amateur effort by Steeple Ashton residents to search for the remains occurred in the late-1970s. During 1976, I had recounted my grandfather’s digging tale to Dennis Hobson, then-Editor of the Steeple Ashton Newsletter, who was reproducing an existing short chronological history of the village for the November issue. At the time, apart from my childhood recollections, my knowledge of the Coople Church history was limited – and I was unaware of Rev. Richardson’s work and the details of the 1913 discovery.

On arrival of the November Newsletter, included within the chronology entitled: "A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE VILAGE" was:

13th Century: First church on present site, replacing original Saxon church a few hundred yards to the east.

At the end of the piece, Dennis had then added a short version of my grandfather’s story. He finished by asking if any readers could remember the incident, and where the site of the church could be found.

For the December edition, he wrote the following article:

SAXON CHURCH AND ANCIENT BIER [“ANCIENT BIER” referred to an unrelated Newsletter item]

Mr. Ed Brown, of Dark Lane, one of our village worthies and a familiar figure in our central streets, has been good enough to volunteer the following:

The Saxon Church: He remembers the occasion when the site was thought to have been discovered in the thirties during some agricultural digging. He says that the site of digging was in the ‘field’ beyond the second stile down the path leading past the garden of the Twiney cottage [cruck-framed, renovated after 1974 fire] in that leg of Dark Lane at the end of which is The Sanctuary. This path – a public right of way – goes east towards the airfield. The ‘site’ is said by Mr. Brown to be within the airfield perimeter (the airfield was built about 1942). My wife and I decided to walk along this path and see whether there was any evidence in the way of stones of an ancient building.

Perhaps Mr. Brown has not walked this path for many years. For about a hundred yards it is grassy, then abruptly it is choked with blackberry shoots, making it walkable only in a bullet-proof vest. We returned to Dark Lane and went into the field which lies alongside the
so-called path. We found that the tangle of blackberries across the path ended but that the
position became worse: the path degenerated into a ditchful of water, the ditch ending at a
strip of waste ground (what a lot of pieces of derelict land one sees in this parish – could not
some be hived off as allotments in these times of dear vegetables?). We did not see any stiles
and we did not, at dusk on this miserable November day, try to find an alternative way to the
supposed site.

Addendum – Saxon Church: The Vicar says that someone proposes to go over the ground
where this church might have been with a detector. If such a tool detects only metal, the
chance of finding the site by this means looks to be slim.

D. W. Hobson

Despite Mr Hobson's report on his attempt to visit the elusive site with his wife (Joan),
interest in the church gathered apace: the Editor's November request had 'started the ball
rolling', generating interest throughout Steeple Ashton. Then, in the January 1977 Newsletter,
a lengthy piece of correspondence on the subject by Mr Brian Goddard of 23 Acresshort Lane
was published. Brian expressed a great attraction to the church story, and put forward ideas
on how its location could be determined. He began by writing:

Dear Editor,

I have read with considerable interest the correspondence relating to the position of the old
Saxon church and would like to add a few ideas and some pointers to would-be investigators;
and I would suggest this topic could be of sufficient interest within the village to justify a
group such as The Friends of Steeple Ashton taking this up as a worthwhile project. While,
when finished, there would be no tangible prizes but one of a job well done; on the other
hand, the costs of the project would be virtually nil.

Given the interest generated by Dennis Hobson's November article, following Mr
Goddard’s letter, 'The Friends of Steeple Ashton' suggested that I ‘take up the challenge’ –
and carry out preliminary research to try to identify the site. I gladly accepted; yet on
reflection, my 1977 approach to the task was somewhat lacking in scope.

At that time, there were still one or two Steeple Ashton residents who claimed to know
where the general area of the 1930 discovery was. One of these old villagers was Oswald
Burbidge. 'Ozzy' happened to be a ‘dowsor’; and I had also met a man with a set of 'state of
the art’ dowsing rods who claimed to be able to detect any form of metal, ceramics or even
'ley-lines'! As more people became involved, and plans developed, it was also decided to
include the village Youth Club, combining the search as a project for them. During the
summer of 1977, permission to proceed was sought and granted.

Unbeknown to our group in 1977, around the early 1870s, a plough had unearthed what was
thought to be an ancient font or ‘stoup’, in the same area as the 1913 discovery (the stoup is
now in St. Leonard's Church). Several broken tiles and coffin plates were unearthed at the
same time, but have since been lost. We were also unaware of the rumour that earlier still, a
lead coffin had been found in a ditch in the vicinity.

So, armed with my limited research, accompanied by Ozzy with his hazel dowsing fork, my
acquaintance with his hi-tech dowsing rods, plus Youth Club organiser Terry Randall, other
adults and a group of enthusiastic youngsters, we set out for the airfield. Ozzy led us to an
area which he believed to be in the right location – and the two dowsers set to work. They
soon found a spot where their readings correlated; and, in the event, my acquaintance with
the hi-tech dowsing rods said that he had detected lead, while Ozzy believed he could sense some stonework.

While these results were interesting, they were, of course, inconclusive. The site was left unidentified, permission to investigate further was not forthcoming, and interest then waned.

Thirteen years later, in 1990, ‘The Keevil Society’ produced the first of four volumes of ‘A Book of Keevil’ – detailing the village history and recollections of its residents, including articles on Coople Church. In 1998, in volume 2 of the series, the Society stated that it had gained permission from the RAF and MOD to search for the probable church location – under strict supervision of the RAF. As far as I am aware, to date (May 2014), this permission has not been used.

In August 2013, Keevil Parish Council hosted a Public Meeting about the proposed TLZ, which was attended by over 80 people. A request for reassurance from the ‘Defence Infrastructure Organisation’ was sought – that during the construction of the TLZ, the DIO’s archaeological survey would include awareness of the possible rediscovery of the Coople Church site; yet, as I shall now detail, a close review of the available evidence suggests that these fears are unfounded.

In volume 1 of ‘A Book of Keevil’, the late Alan Thomsett of The Strand, Steeple Ashton – who previously lived at ‘Talboys’, Keevil – discusses some of the history and speculation on Coople Church. Alan’s article includes information on the March 1913 archaeological unearthing, and the subsequent excavation, recording and mapping. Regarding the building's position, Mr Thomsett says how:

... it is clear that the site was covered by the airfield when it was constructed in 1943. In all probability the remains were destroyed in levelling the ground and aerial photographs taken then and subsequently reveal nothing.

He later concludes:

... We must regrettably accept that it is extremely unlikely that the building will ever again be revealed... The ground has been so disturbed that outlines of foundations have probably gone forever.

Mr Thomsett reproduces Rev. Richardson’s 1914 drawings, including a dimensioned plan of the excavated foundations, and a detailed site location – reproduced here. Richardson's site location drawing uses field numbers taken from the 1863 Tithe Map of Keevil, and clearly indicates that the building lies within “Upper Ashton Field No. 301”.

...
Reproduction of Rev. Richardson’s detailed site location

Alan also shows a location drawing made up of the 1863 Tithe Map, with the runways superimposed over, and an arrow indicating the position of “Field 301”: under the active part of the airfield. However, during my research for this article, I had become convinced that the field indicated by the arrow is not “Upper Ashton Field No 301”.

This led to me checking the 1863 Tithe Map for myself at the ‘Wiltshire & Swindon History Centre’ in Chippenham. Sure enough, I found that the field indicated by the arrow in Alan’s location drawing is in fact No. 308; and that, as I had suspected, No. 301 – with its distinct north-eastern corner angle of 70 degrees – lies to the west of the active part of the airfield, a comfortable distance away from the planned TLZ.
Part of 1863 Tithe Map, showing field numbers (with my own “301” under the original “301”)

Part of Alan Thomsett’s 1990 location drawing, with correct “301” identification added by me
This Field 301 location is where the church foundations were recorded as lying in 1914 – approximately half a mile to the east of St. Mary’s Church, in the north-eastern corner of the field. As far as I can recall, this was also the general area to which Ozzy Burbage led us in the 1977 field trip. Further still; when studying a black and white aerial photo I have from World War II, then comparing with a modern ‘Google Map’ of the airfield, along with the 1863 Tithe Map, a modern OS map, an online OS map from 1899, plus a 1930 map from the Rood Ashton Estate sale catalogue – a significant fact is revealed: most of Field 301’s boundaries still exist.

In the World War II photo, what remained of the northern boundary is distinguishable as a dark feature, running parallel above a strip of concrete track. Today, on the ‘Google Map’, it is a line of trees and bushes plus a faint colouration in the ground – indicated by a line on the modern OS map. This boundary is in the same position as the Field 301 northern boundary on the earlier maps – which Rev. Richardson used as a reference point. The western boundary, plus almost the entire southern boundary, is also still in place today; in fact, the only boundary that cannot be seen today is the eastern one – Richardson’s other reference point. Ed Brown was correct when instructing Mr Hobson on the route towards the church site in 1976: the footpath he referred to had once entered Field 301 in its south-western corner, via Field 300 – the "... strip of waste ground...” encountered by Dennis on his trek – and had continued east following the southern boundary.

When comparing all this evidence with the 1749 map of the Manor of Keevil, there is one final revelation: the area that would later become ‘Field 301’ unveils itself:

One hundred years on from the Rev. A T Richardson’s work of 1914, I believe that it is now possible to accurately determine the whereabouts of the site of ‘Coople Church’ as drawn by him – and that this site should be unaffected by the new airfield Landing Zone. However, there is a substantial caveat to this conclusion: although clear of the runways and perimeter
track, the apparent location of the foundations is very close to some small concrete ‘dispersal pans’ – built to park aircraft during World War II. There is no guarantee that the site was not disturbed, or worse still, destroyed during the airfield's construction in the 1940s. In addition, there remains a note of caution: this is both MOD property and farmland. Strictly no further investigations can be carried out without first contacting both the MOD and the tenant farmer for permission.

Lastly, I must mention how I could not have written this article without the extensive and diligent research carried out by Alan Thomsett and other members of The Keevil Society throughout the 1990s and early-2000s. Their efforts are much appreciated.

Bryan Berrett

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Pete Thomsett for her support, & to Terry Randall for additional information. Also, thanks to Suzanne Wickham & the committee of ‘The Keevil Society’ for copyright permission to use the Society’s images of Alan Thomsett’s & Rev. Richardson’s maps; & to ‘The Wiltshire & Swindon History Centre’, Chippenham, for copyright permission to use the images of the 1749 map of the Manor of Keevil & 1863 Tithe Map.

Sources

Air Ministry World War II black & white aerial photograph of Steeple Ashton, showing part of Keevil Airfield, "A M CROWN COPYRIGHT RESERVED" stamped on reverse. Date unknown. Obtained some years ago.


Keevil Airfield Tactical Landing Zone page, (2013), on Keevil Village website, at: http://www.keevilvillage.btck.co.uk/ParishCouncil/KeevilAirfieldTacticalLandingZone
Keevil Airfield, Wiltshire page, on Google Maps website, at:
https://www.maps.google.co.uk/maps/ms?ie=UTF8&t=h&oe=UTF8&msa=0&msid=112145362946316298011.000439fcede4cfa6af2452&dg=feature


Ordnance Survey map of Keevil, (1899), on Old maps of Keevil. Historic Ordnance Survey map of Keevil, Wiltshire page, on FRANCIS FRITH. Nostalgic photos, maps, books & memories of Britain website, at:
http://www.francisfrith.com/keevil/maps/#utmcsr=google.co.uk&utmcmd=referral&utmccn=google.co.uk


Wickham, J. (Chair, Keevil Parish Council), (2013), Public Meeting, on Keevil Airfield Tactical Landing Zone page, on Keevil Village website, at:
http://www.keevilvillage.btck.co.uk/ParishCouncil/KeevilAirfieldTacticalLandingZone

Documents held & accessed at ‘Wiltshire & Swindon History Centre’, Chippenham

Keevil Enclosures:

Map of the manor of Keevil belonging to Thomas Beach. Surveyor: James Sartain. Whole parish surveyed together with an estate at Semington. Fields (inc. open fields) & adjoining landowners named. Ref: 1908/1 1749.