

# Excavations at Charterhouse 2009

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**A report  
on more  
unexpected  
archaeology  
at Cowleaze,  
Charterhouse  
on Mendip**

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**C**owleaze, Charterhouse, lies below Blackdown on top of Mendip. It has seen little or no ploughing and so has many earthworks. Water rising through the sandstone of Blackdown issues in many springs where limestone shale covers the ground.

Excavations in 2007 demonstrated an extensive system of drains and conduits that harvested water from these springs, and also disclosed a previously unrecorded cottage dating to about AD1700 (Tofts, 2008, 2009).

## **Steve Tofts**

In the autumn of 2009 a team assembled from CHERT, BACAS and the Mendip Society returned to its enigmatic lumps and bumps. To the west of the field lies a subrectangular enclosure about 75m across with a prominent hump at its south-eastern corner, the target for the excavations.

English Heritage conducted a remarkably detailed GPS earthwork survey of the area in 2008 (Fradley, 2009) (*see Figure 1*). They interpreted the enclosure as a post-medieval industrial complex and the prominent hump as a collapsed chimney. However, site reconnaissance did not reveal any black soil in the local molehills or any other sign of industrial activity.

The stony hump shows well in the magnetometry survey that used the BACAS Geoscan FM256 (thanks are due to John Oswin) suggesting burning (Tofts, 2009). It was excavated in Trench 2. (A similar feature targeted for excavation in Trench 1, was never dug).

The turf and topsoil carried a background scattering of flint, Roman pot sherds (the Roman lead mining settlement is nearby), Medieval and post-Medieval pottery and broken pipe stems.

Trench 3 across the enclosure bank showed it to be built of earth, capped with stone. The earth contained Medieval pottery (from the 12th to the 15th Centuries), so a late Medieval date of construction is likely.

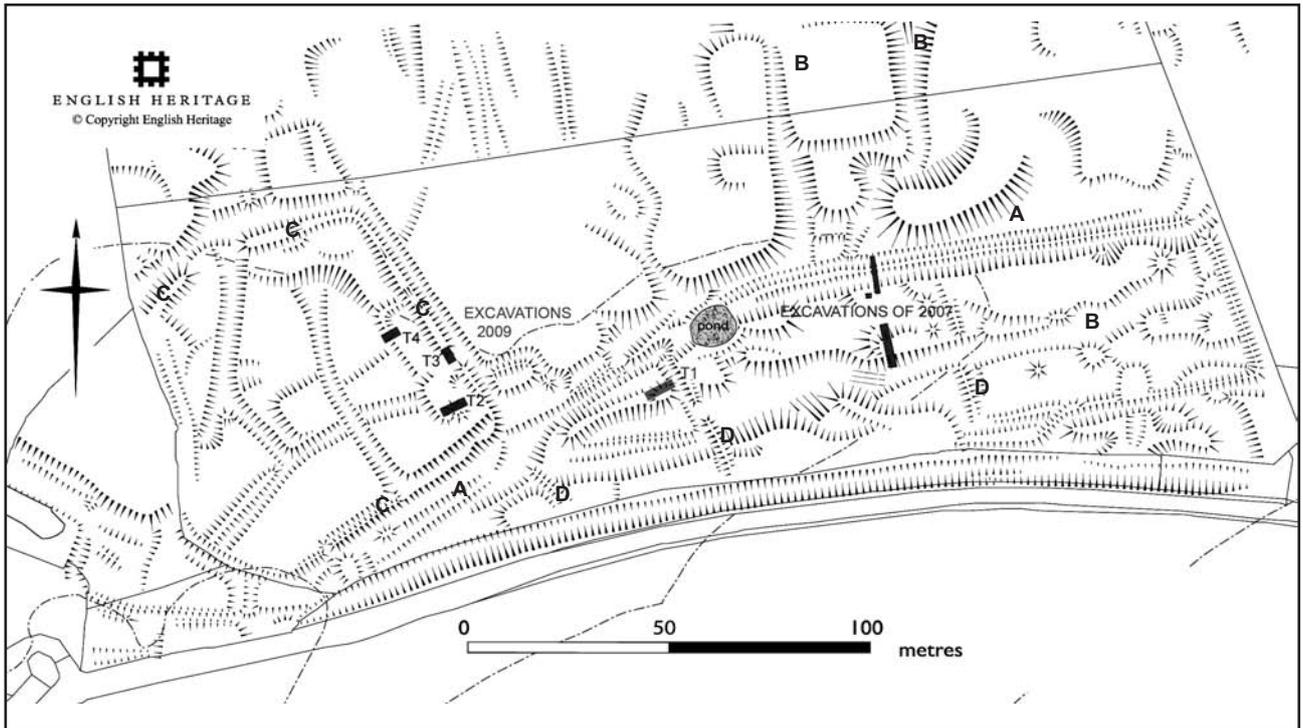
A building uncovered in Trench 4, within the enclosure, had a sturdy earth mortared wall approximately 65cm thick, probably supporting an upper storey. Within the building, finds included a mule shoe, a possible spur and a trowel. Had a medieval archaeologist been digging here before us??! Medieval pot sherds were again found mixed in with more recent artefacts. Against the outside of the wall was a dump of calcite crystals, function unknown.

Interpreting the structure found in Trench 2, over the hump, was problematic. It had been made using several different kinds of stone; dark grey limestone, red dolomitic conglomerate, black mud-stone and even pure white blocks of calcite, suggesting some ancient burial mound from the Neolithic or Bronze Age.

It was, however, also Medieval, with pottery dating back to the 12th Century found amongst the stone tumble. Once this had been cleared, a semi-circular platform was revealed, about 3m in diameter, built onto the gable end of a rectangular building some 6m wide. Circular walls may have continued higher above this platform like a tower (*see Figures 2 and 3*).

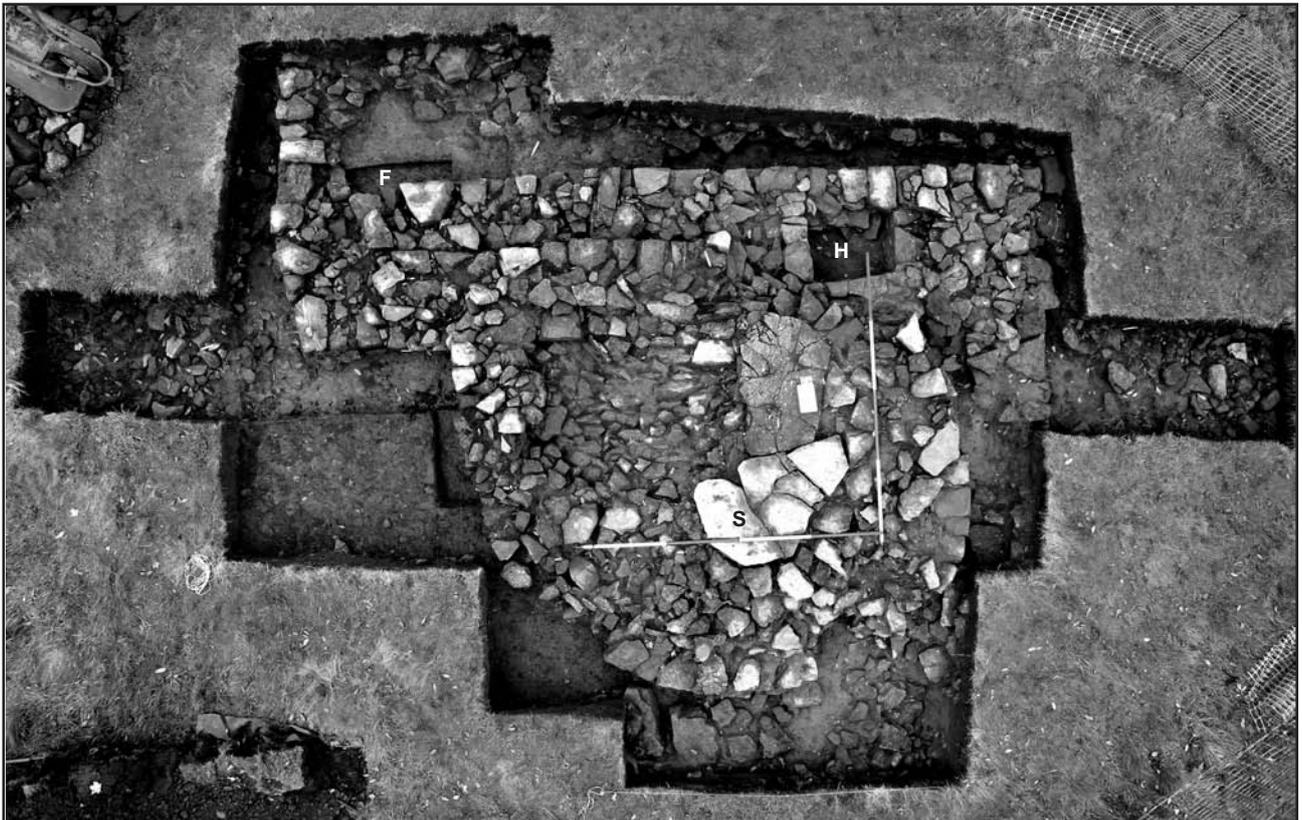
The platform was surfaced in large stone slabs laid onto a pitched stone base. It was earth-mortared with several artefacts from earlier ages within the earth fill (Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age flints as well as Roman pot sherds).

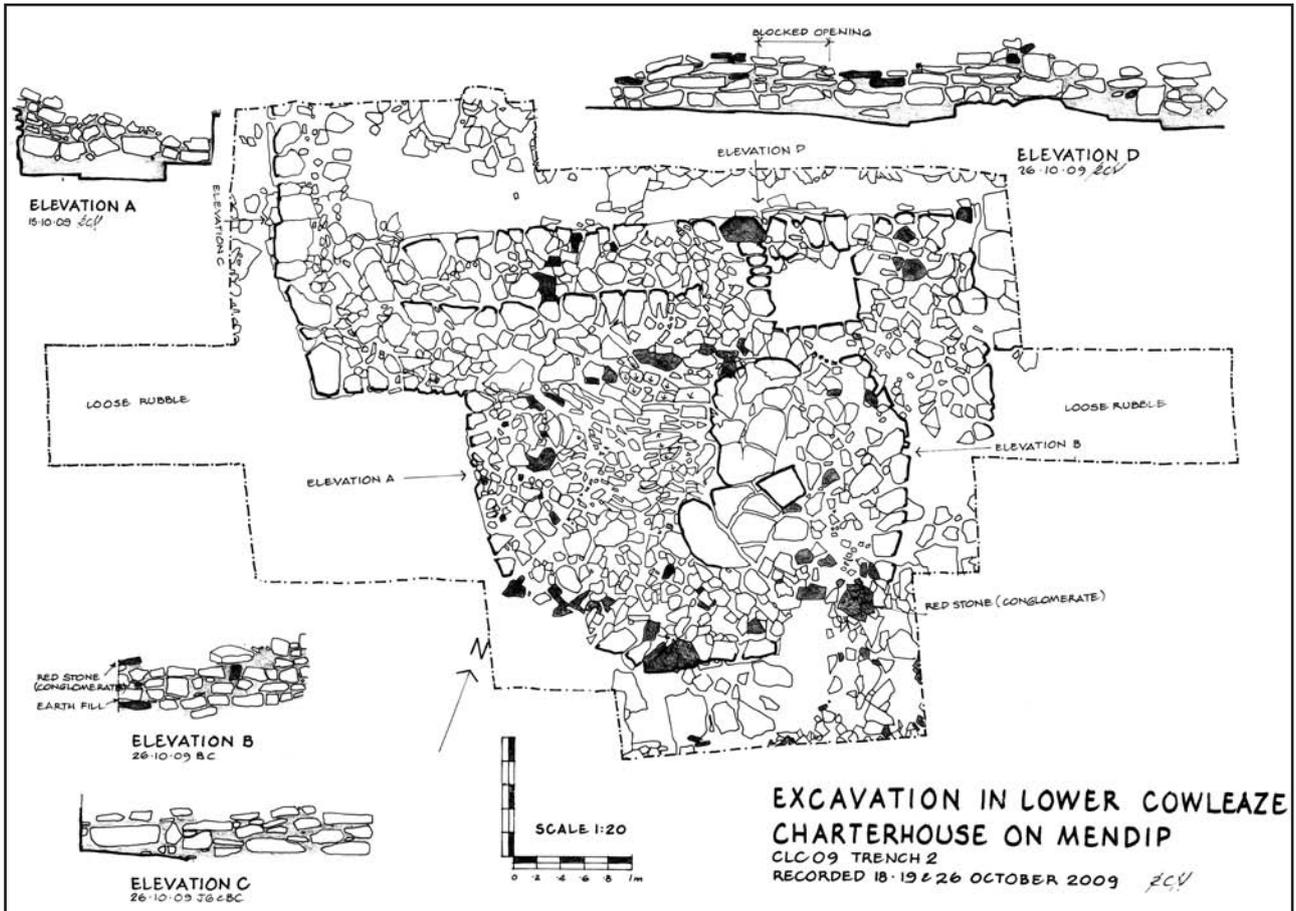
Inside the building, to one side against the platform, was a blocked-up fireplace. The stone beside it had been burnt and discoloured in the heat. It was a small fireplace, certainly not big enough to warm a building as large as this. The flue from the fire appeared to be directed off-centre to the left side of the semi-circular platform.



**Figure 1**  
Trench plan, 2007 AND 2009. Earthwork survey © English heritage. A - Stone lined conduit, B - Springs, C - Enclosure banks, D - Dams of possible fish ponds

**Figure 2**  
Trench 2. Overhead photograph of the corn dryer. Adam Stanford © Aerial-Cam 2009. H - Hearth with charcoal and burnt stone, S - Stone slabs set onto pitched stones, F - Rammed earth floor of the building

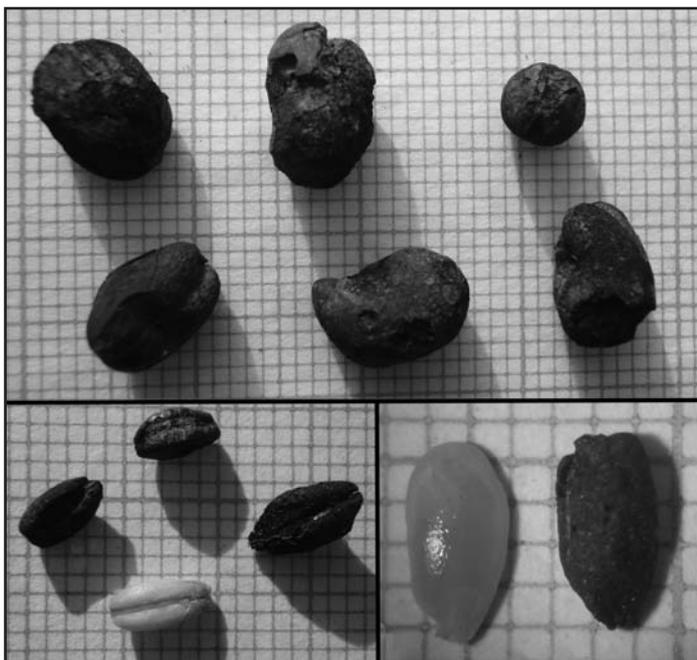




**Figure 3**  
**Trench 2. Drawing (courtesy of R Marley)**

Soil samples from between the stone slabs were suspended in water and the agitated water sieved to collect the less dense material. Charred seeds were identified: beans, peas and oats, indicating the structure was a corn dryer (see Figure 4).

Also found was seed from flax (linseed). Flax stalks would normally be soaked to loosen the linen fibres so flax would appear to be out of place in a corn dryer. It is possible that the crops were placed on an open framework of wood and flax stalks, to be gently dried by the heat of the fire.



The excavations at Upper Row conducted by BACAS in the summer of 2010 uncovered a possible (probably earlier) corn dryer with its flue again directed off centre to the left.

This sort of building is infrequently found in the south of England, but more common in the wetter climate of the Scottish islands and known as a kiln barn. Examples were recently working in the Shetlands. These Scottish (rather later) examples have a dished platform (the Charterhouse example was flat) but again the flue-ways are directed off-centre to the left. It is interesting to speculate why this is a common feature.

**Figure 4**  
**Seeds recovered from the corn drier with some modern examples. Clockwise from top: Beans and a Pea, Linseed, Oat seed. (1mm grid)**

It is worth noting the climatic variability at this time. The Medieval warm period was ending in the mid 13th Century, to be followed by severe winters, wet autumn weather, failed harvests and famine. A corn drier could save lives.

This excavation uncovered a previously unknown enclosed Medieval farmstead with barns and a corn drier (see Figure 5). Archival research has linked the Knights Templar to the area (Lane, 2008) and it is probable that this farmstead was in their ownership, immediate neighbours to the Carthusians of Charterhouse.

### **Acknowledgements**

- Adam Stanford and Aerial-Cam
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### **Bibliography**

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### **Figure 5**

**Author's interpretation of the farmstead 600 years ago. The corn drier is in the background**

