

1877 a new cemetery made and roman remains found

Alan Jenner Assistant Town Clerk

Keynsham Town Council

19th September 2026

Keynsham Baptist Church 1900



December 1876

- Any further burials banned by Parliament in St John's Churchyard, Keynsham Baptist and Methodist Church
- Two possible new burial grounds rejected as unsuitable by residents.
- Burial Board reconstituted after mass retirements for one last attempt to secure a new graveyard

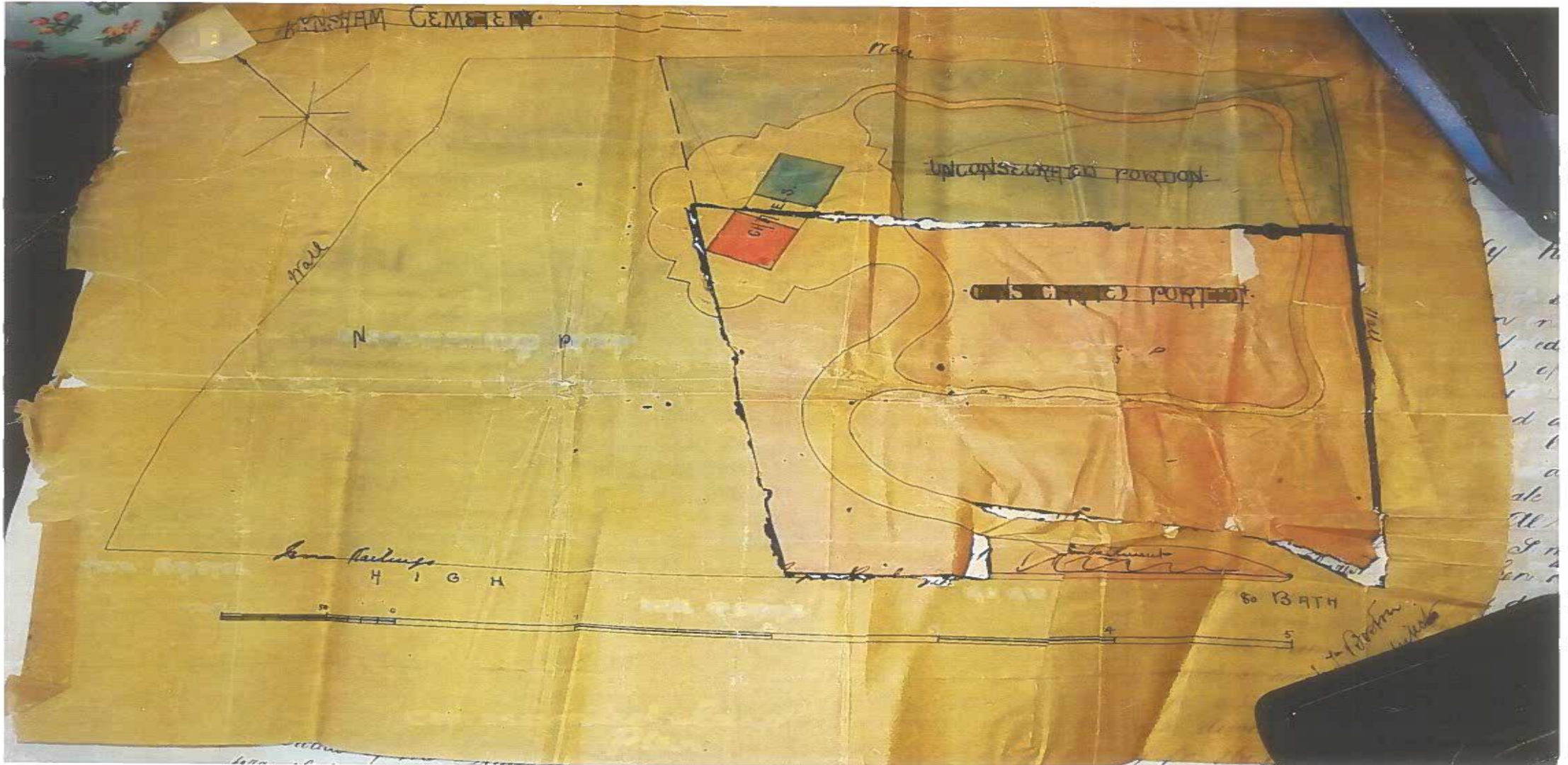
February 1877

- Land at Durley Field available to buy from a Robert Comer
- Upper part of land not available for burials due to neighbour objections- 1853 Act
- Survey by Henry Sheppard and Sir James Holland Government Inspector - land suitable for burials
- Secretary of State gives an extension of time to continue burials in St John's Churchyard until 31.12.1877

March to May 1877

- A Professional Team appointed in the purchase
 - Whittuck and Fox Solicitors
 - London Brokers for a Public Works Loan
- April
 - Edward T Boston Architect to design the Chapels, layout the cemetery for approval and supervise a builder to construct Chapels and walls
- May 1877
 - Henry Sheppard to build the Chapels and construct the cemetery

Only work of Boston design known- March 1878



Entrance Gate off main road



Steep sloping drive



Curve of drive to the Chapels



The Chapels



West Chapel inside and a bier of 1912



June 1877 (six months of extension left)

- **By end of first week of June**
 - Conditional Contract to purchase negotiated
 - Brokers secure offer on loan in principle
 - Henry Sheppard begins foundation work

By the end of the second week June 1877

- Work stopped 10th June as Tenant demanded higher price
- Emergency meeting of Burial Board reject the ransom demand
- Dispute resolved 22nd June by Comer agreeing to pay the tenant ransom figure from his share of the sale proceeds.

By the end of the third week of June 1877

- Sheppard resumes digging the foundations
- His workers find substantial material where the Chapel foundations are being dug of the remains of an earlier building in the land

What happened then?

The official story from a 1925 report

- Henry Sheppard dug out and disposed of the material.
- Cemetery Land purchased and burials began from April 1878.
- For 42 years the gravediggers destroyed all archaeology found comprising two corridors of a Villa, 18 rooms, mosaics, plaster, walls and artifacts

1921

- In 1921 concerned archaeologists persuade a pause in destruction to recover what is left.
- After 1924 the remains of the Villa was left to its fate and was destroyed by further burials

But there was a fourth week in June 1877.....

- Henry Sheppard did not destroy the archaeology
- he summoned the supervising architect to inspect what was found and advise what should be done
- Boston's opinion was reported in the Press including the Building News (29th June), Bristol Mercury, Western and County Gazette

Boston's opinion changes the story- he assessed the material and advised:

- The remains are floor layers and walls of a Roman Ecclesiastical building
- The building may have been a predecessor to Keynsham Abbey
- The area found has narrow rooms which could be cells for sleeping
- He identified material that could be part of a Roman Arch

July and August 1877

- Boston ordered a considerable search for the archaeology in the land
- A Colonel James Roger Bramble inspected the site and interviewed workman and made a sketch. His observations were that the floor layers and walls were of a Roman building.

Colonel James Roger Bramble in 1877

- A National Council Leader of the British Archaeology Association
- Assessed a monastic floor layer at Old Cleeve Abbey in April 1877
- As a person: “he was a man of many parts and strong personality: remarkably well-read he could instantly give an opinion on most subjects submitted to him” (John Pritchard FSA when giving an obituary in 1908)

Colonel James Roger Bramble



LIEUT.-COLONEL JAMES ROGER BRAMBLE, F.S.A.,
Hon. Genl. Secretary of the Som. Archaeol. and Nat. Hist. Society, 1891-1905;
President of the Weston-super-Mare Meeting, 1905; V.P., 1906-8; Trustee, 1897-1908.

From a Photograph by L. R. Protheroe, Bristol.

29th August 1877 an illustration of good archaeological practice

- Colonel Bramble as Treasurer of the Bristol and Gloucester Archaeological Association led an outing to Chedworth Roman Villa and “its protected buildings”

Protecting buildings



Hunting Lodge (over the spoil heap)



To save or destroy what was found in 1877

- To destroy the remains of one church when building a new one?

Or

- a Chedworth Villa solution to seal in archaeology close to the surface that could not otherwise be protected from the modern use of the land

If the Chapels were to protect the Roman remains was the solution successful?

- AAU 1998 report and recommendations
 - Followed in 2004
 - Followed in 2026

Was there a second method adopted to protect the archaeology in 1877?

- By silence over what was found to avoid antiquarian interest in other areas that could not be protected by the Chapels especially the area with adjoining owner objections?
 - No further press reports after June 1877
 - Colonel Bramble made no reports on his inspection at the time and only informed a fellow antiquarian in a letter of 28th December 1899
 - Burial Board and other professionals made no further comment on the considerable search and what it might have found

A last thought to ponder

- Was Boston's assessment of the nature of the building correct?
 - the ARA opinion of 2012-2016?