

Part 5: Historical Analysis



5.1 Prehistoric to Early Saxon Christchurch (To AD 850)

5.1.1 Prehistoric

There is evidence for significant activity in the Christchurch region throughout the prehistoric period.

The Christchurch region has produced a large number of Palaeolithic flint implements, mostly hand axes, which generally derive from 19th and early 20th century gravel extraction pits. The most prolific of these, Latch Farm, produced a total of 96 palaeoliths. The Bournemouth region in general has produced the greatest quantity of hand axes found in Britain. Unfortunately '...little is understood about their place in the quaternary sequence or their contemporary environment except in the broadest terms' (Wymer, 1993, 141). This is because the implement bearing gravels are not contemporary with the implements themselves. The gravels have been redeposited through fluvial action and the hand axes frequently display signs of having been water worn. Furthermore there has been a distinct lack of geological recording at the find spots. The result is that we know little about when the tools were made and in what location or circumstances they were used.

By the Mesolithic period the large scale deposition of gravel terraces had ceased and the physical landscape of the region, with the exception of sea level, would have been similar to that of today. Scatters of Mesolithic flint tend to be located on or close to the gravel ridge, at the southern end of which lies the historic core of Christchurch. Crouch Hill, is a low mound on Stanpit Marsh which appears to be a Bronze Age barrow sealing earlier Mesolithic and Neolithic flint scatters (Palmer, 1970). Other Mesolithic flint scatters have been recorded at Douglas Avenue, Grove Farm and Latch Farm whilst several Mesolithic axes, cores and other implements have been found at various points around the study area. The evidence suggests a significant level of Mesolithic activity in the Christchurch region.

Archaeological evidence suggests that a Neolithic settlement may have existed in the northern part of the historic core of Christchurch. A large late Neolithic pit and a smaller truncated feature were revealed during excavation in 1978, prior to the construction of the Saxon Centre at Bargates (Waitrose car park). Significant quantities (172 items) of residual Neolithic - Bronze Age flints were also recovered from an excavation at The Staggs site, behind the High Street frontage, during 1976 (Jarvis 1983, 42 & 134-6). Gravel extraction at Latch Farm, Mill Plain and Grove Farm

has produced Neolithic flints and pottery. Stray finds of Neolithic flint have also been recovered from Stanpit Marsh, Friars Cliff housing estate and The Grove, Jumpers Common.

The Christchurch gravel ridge appears to have been an important focus for Bronze Age funerary activity. Early Bronze Age Round barrows can be found along the entire length of the ridge from Crouch Hill in the south to Sopley Common and St Catherine's Hill beyond the study area to the north. Barrows have been recorded in between at Fitzmaurice Road and Deverel Close prior to their destruction due to gravel extraction or the construction of houses (Piggott, 1938). The positions of two further barrows, surviving as ring ditches, were only discovered in the Bargates area in 1978 (Jarvis 1983, 134-6).

Evidence for Bronze Age settlement is elusive, although there is fragmentary evidence suggesting a domestic presence at Mill Plain, Latch Farm, Bargates and Purewell. Good evidence for Late Bronze Age-early Iron Age domestic structures has been excavated at Bargates and the Town Hall car park site. An Iron Age pit was also excavated at Druitt Gardens during 1972/3 containing 48 sherds of late Bronze Age- early Iron Age pottery (Jarvis 1983, 31-7; 99-100 & 136-8). Furthermore, an unspecified number of shallow pits containing late Iron Age- early Roman pottery were discovered during the construction of Redvers/Drapers Road [14], off Burton Road in 1947 (OS record card, SZ 19 SE 10). This scattered distribution of Iron Age pits probably represents the fragmentary remains of a dispersed settlement pattern in the area.

5.1.2 Late Iron Age and Roman

It may be significant that the early Iron Age dispersed settlements do not contain any pottery from the later Iron Age. Perhaps Hengistbury Head provided a magnet for settlement in the Christchurch region at this time. Here an early Iron Age peninsula fort developed into a late Iron Age and Roman settlement with a range of industrial activities and trade links with south west Britain, France and Spain (Cunliffe et al. 1987). There was no significant break in occupation at Hengistbury Head between the Late Iron Age and early Roman periods though by the 3rd-4th centuries the site was not extensively occupied. The end of settlement here may have come in the late Roman or sub Roman period (Cunliffe et al. 1987, 339-45).



Figure 6: Christchurch Pre urban plan components

There is slight evidence for small dispersed settlements in the Christchurch area at Burton Road, Purewell and Mill Plain. Significant quantities of Roman pottery have also been recovered during excavations within the Saxon burh at Christchurch. None of these finds have been from *in situ* Roman deposits, but may indicate the former presence of a Roman building (Jarvis, 1985a). 20kg of Roman tile were incorporated as lining for a mid-late Saxon oven or com dryer at the Town Hall car park. This certainly suggests the presence of a Roman building, still visible in the middle Saxon period, near to the historic town, (Jarvis 1983, 34-6).

5.1.3 Implications of the pre-urban archaeology

The distribution of prehistoric findspots shown on Map 4 suggests that the gravel ridge, the southern tip of which contains the Saxon and medieval core of Christchurch, has always been a focus for human activity. In the Mesolithic period this well drained ridge between two major river valleys provided a range of resources. In the Bronze Age the ridge became the focus for numerous funerary monuments and urn fields. Hengistbury Head was a centre of international trade during the Iron Age. Christchurch Harbour and the River Avon provided important communication links between Wessex and continental Europe. Although there is no secure evidence for a late prehistoric or Roman precursor to the Saxon town at Christchurch, there was certainly a late prehistoric settlement just outside the later burh at Bargates and indirect evidence for late Roman dispersed settlement in

the vicinity.

5.1.4 Early Saxon Christchurch

Christchurch is well known for being the location of the Saxon burh of Twynham, recorded in the burghal hideage in the early 10th century. However, further documentary and archaeological evidence suggests that Twynham was not newly created as a burh, but that the burh defences were constructed around a pre-existing settlement. This settlement probably originated in the middle Saxon period, if not before. The main archaeological evidence is the presence of a large middle Saxon cemetery at Bargates and a mid-late Saxon oven at the northern end of the town, immediately south of the subsequent line of the late Saxon defensive ditch (Jarvis 1983, 34-7; 104-134, suggesting that the early town was located further south in the vicinity of the Priory and Castle. The cemetery certainly suggests that the area of Christchurch was occupied by the late 6th to 7th century AD.

The first documented mention of a settlement at Christchurch comes in AD 900 when a residence at Tweoxneam (Christchurch) was seized by the aetheling Aethelwold (Jarvis 1983, 9). Hase has suggested that Christchurch may have been the site of an early Minster church administering to a large parochia, possibly as early as the mid-8th century. The marginal site at Christchurch may have resembled a low island rising from the surrounding marshes in the 8th century (figure 6), a situation favoured by other early monasteries in south west Britain (Muchelney and Glastonbury for example).

5.2 Late Saxon Christchurch (AD 900-1066)

5.2.1 Historical Summary

Twinham is listed in the Burghal hideage, an early 10th century document allocating resources to defended towns or burhs for the maintenance of their defences. The town appears to have comprised a royal residence and Minster church located at the southern tip of the gravel ridge at the confluence of the rivers Stour and Avon, where they flow into Christchurch harbour. Any lay settlement appears to have been concentrated immediately to the north of the Minster. The settlement was not only in a position to exploit the resources of the harbour area, but also the control and benefit economically from water borne traffic. In the 10th century, under threat from Viking raids and invasion, the defensive potential of the town became more important.

Although Christchurch appears to have had some strategic importance in controlling the harbour and two rivers, its economic development may have been hampered by the poor quality of the surrounding land and marshes, effectively isolating the town from its hinterland and reducing its effectiveness as a market and port. By the time of the Domesday survey *Twinham* had only 39 recorded messuages suggesting that it was a very minor town in comparison with the four Dorset burhs of Bridport (121), Wareham (292), Dorchester (189) and Shaftesbury (257) (Penn, 1980, 38).

The tracing of the burh defences has formed a significant research focus in Christchurch since 1970 when Hill first established the line of the late Saxon northern defensive bank and external ditch. Subsequent excavations demonstrated that this bank had been topped by a wall and the ditch re-cut during the Saxo-Norman period. Evidence for a wall and external ditch was also excavated to the rear of

properties on the west side of High Street. Unfortunately the ditch was not fully excavated and its precise form and origin remains unclear. The information held in the Burghal hideage suggests a dry defensive circuit measuring 578-590m in length and it has been generally accepted that the western and northern defences formed a single line from the Mill Stream around to Wick Lane (approximately 590m) forming a 'playing card' shaped burh (Jarvis 1983, 7-27). However, this interpretation can be called into question and the original late Saxon burh defence may have been little more than a linear bank and ditch initially, running E-W from the mill Stream to the Stour marshes, and cutting off the promontory containing the town.

Twynham held an important Minster Church during the late Saxon period. Many of the later parishes forming the post-conquest hundred of Christchurch were originally dependent chapels within a large late Saxon parochia. Ranulf Flambard, Bishop of Durham, was presented with the church and town of *Twynham* by William Rufus. Flambard began the construction of a new church circa 1094 and it had been believed that the old Saxon church was pulled down at this time (Penn, 1980, 39). A recent study, however, suggests that at least part of the original Saxon church was incorporated into the Norman fabric of the north transept and crypt (Cockain & Tullet, 2003).

5.2.2 Town Layout

Evidence for the layout of the late Saxon town comes from a number of disparate sources including archaeological excavations, documents and analysis of the town plan. Regardless of whether the late Saxon burh defences formed a 'playing card' shape or a promontory burh, the organisation of the late Saxon town is



Figure 7: The Priory Church which may incorporate the remains of the late Saxon Minster.



Figure 8: The area of the probable late Saxon settlement.

likely to have focussed on a central cross-road. This would have been formed by the modern High Street, running along the longitudinal axis of the ridge, from the Minster to a northern gate (Bargate) in the defensive circuit, and an east-west route approximating to the modern Castle Street and Wick Lane. Archaeological evidence for the interior of Late Saxon Twynham is restricted to a few poorly dated post-holes excavated in advance of the Dolphin development (X11). There is also debatable surviving Saxon fabric within the Priory Church.

5.2.3 Saxon Urban plan components

The main plan components of the late Saxon town are shown on figure 10 and are listed below.

1. Church

A Minster church is thought to have been located at the southern tip of the Christchurch promontory. This is supported by the possibility of surviving Saxon fabric in the north transept and crypt. Three cist burials were recorded beneath the foundations of the north choir aisle during archaeological watching briefs in 2006 and 2007 (Heaton, 2006a; 2007), and are thought to date from the 9th-12th centuries. Three further cist burials were found by Gustavus Brander, probably during clearance in advance of the construction of Priory House in the late 18th century (Pegge, 1779).

2. Secular settlement

There is little archaeological evidence for activity within the late Saxon burh. Two parallel ditches of uncertain function were excavated at site X10 (Town Hall car park) during 1974. They are aligned parallel to and east of High Street, possibly terminating at the defensive bank immediately to the north. These contained Saxo-Norman pottery within their silts suggesting that they went out of use at this time. They also cut a middle Saxon oven and might possibly have been constructed in the late Saxon period. Jar-



Figure 9: The Northern burh defences

vis considers that, despite the lack of secure evidence, the location of the late Saxon settlement was likely to have been immediately north of the Minster church and spread only slowly northwards along High Street during the medieval period.

3. Northern burh defences

The route of the burh defensive circuit is by no means certain, but is likely to have been, in its earliest form, a bank and ditch running from the Millstream to the Stour, effectively creating a defended promontory town. The only firm archaeological evidence for late Saxon defences has been recovered from the northern edge of the town, at Bargates. (Davies 1983, 25-7; Jarvis 1983, 37).

4. Western burh defences

The evidence for the western defences is much less clear cut. At the only places where a ditch predating the collapse of the medieval town wall has been observed (sites X5 and X7) full excavation has not been possible. This means that profiles and dimensions are unknown. The only dating evidence (from upper fills of the ditch) suggests an 11th-12th century date (Jarvis 1983, 31-4). With this in mind, the interpretation that the northern defence had a southerly return on its western side remains a possibility, but not a necessity.

5. Possible late Saxon Promontory defence

If the length of defence derived from the burghal hideage is extrapolated along the line of the northern defences, south of and parallel to Sopers Lane, then a perfectly acceptable promontory burh reveals itself. This extended northern defence cuts off the burh from the Avon to the Stour, with the 590m length ending at the edge of the Stour floodplain. It must be noted that there is no excavated evidence to support this cross-ridge ditch and bank. It has been suggested that a barely discernible low bank approximately 10m wide but only 0.2m high crossing the line of the Creedy Path west of the Bank Close car park, may relate to the defences. Local contacts, however, indicate that this is the remains of a relatively modern garden feature.

6. Eastern ditches

Two parallel late Saxon gullies (88 & 89) of late 9th or 10th century date have also been excavated on the eastern side of the town, parallel to the Millstream at site W10 (Davies 1983, 27-33). These are more likely to represent land divisions or drainage gullies than part of the late Saxon defensive circuit and their length would not have been included in the calculation of the burghal hideage. The River Avon, its flood plain

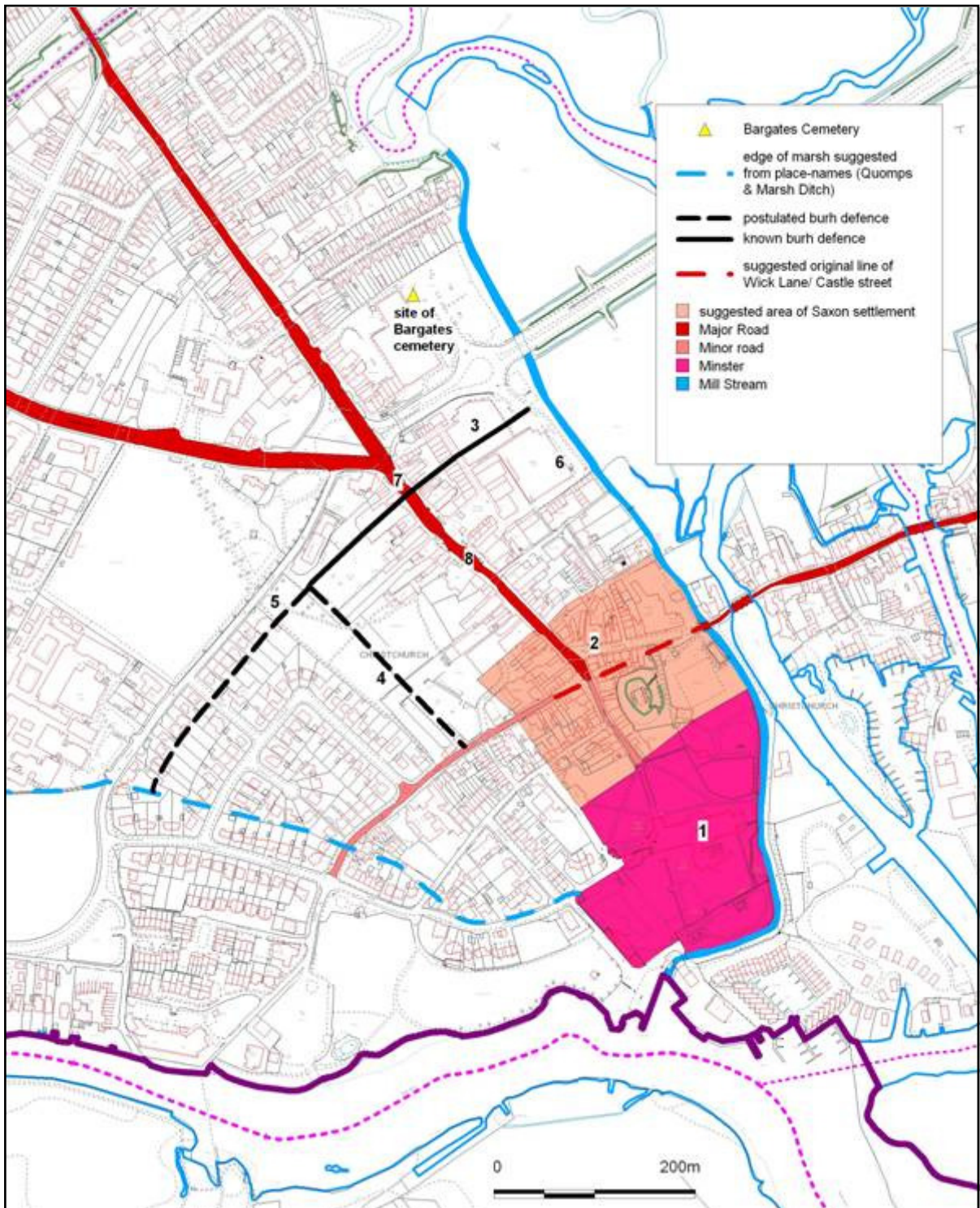


Figure 10: Christchurch Saxon plan components

and the millstream would have afforded enough protection for the burh on its eastern flank. Similarly, the western flank of the town would have been protected by the marshy ground around Quomps.

7. Bargate

The northern defensive line would have required a gate for access to the town. This gate

is mentioned in documents of the 12th century which refer to the Eggeite, possibly meaning a gap in the ridge (ecg) of the defensive bank (Jarvis 1983, 13-14). This is also the name of the Domesday hundred, suggesting that hundredal moots took place at or near this gate, later known as the Bargate.

8. High Street

A survey of the Tithe Map for Christchurch reveals the likely position of the Bargate from a constriction in the line of High Street which corresponds with the point at which the line of the excavated defences cross High Street. High Street then, represents the line of the central road along the spine of the late Saxon town.