

MEDIEVAL WHITCHURCH: THE ORIGINS OF A NEW TOWN

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ABSTRACT

Whitchurch, in north Hampshire, was a new town founded in the mid-13th century by St Swithun's Priory in Winchester. It was laid out as a planned settlement near a Late Saxon mother church, and a custumal gives the names of the first inhabitants and the rents they paid. It was only four miles distant from the Bishop of Winchester's new town at Overton, with which its market had to compete. Whitchurch's original function was as a roadside settlement on the route between Winchester and the Midlands.

INTRODUCTION

The foundation in England of a large number of new towns, and their inhabitants' contribution to the total urban population, were major factors in the commercialization of the country between 1000 and 1300 (Britnell & Campbell 1995, 9–12). Absolute numbers, in the case of small towns, will probably always elude us, but it has been estimated that the lowest tier of English towns, the five hundred or so 'local market centres', had populations of between five hundred and two thousand people in the late-14th century (Tiller 1992, 81–2). This implies that their populations would have been considerably larger in the period preceding the Black Death, and that their contribution to commercialization should not be dismissed lightly. Case-studies of individual small towns are frequently hampered by lack of documentary evidence, but Hampshire is fortunate in that the ownership of much of the county by the bishop and the prior of Winchester ensured the survival of a rich documentary record, including that for several small towns. It is hoped, in this and subsequent articles, to explore the develop-

ment of one of them, and eventually to consider its position in the English urban hierarchy. That Whitchurch ever claimed any such position may seem pretentious to the modern visitor, but many larger towns had similarly modest origins, and failure may be as illuminating as success.

HUNDRED, MANOR AND TITHINGS

The town of Whitchurch is only ten miles from the Berkshire border, but lying as it does within the Hampshire basin, belongs to that part of Wessex which looks naturally to the south (Betley 1986, 3). The surrounding medieval manor, from which it took its name, lay in Evingar, a large hundred almost divided in two by a detached part of the hundred of Hurstbourne, later called Pastrow (Fig. 1). Evingar had been divided between the Bishopric and the Priory of Winchester since at least the time of the Domesday Survey, although the Priory's manors were not finally confirmed to it until 1284 (*DB* Munby, fo.41a-b; *CC&R* ii, 288). Whitchurch and its neighbouring manor of Hurstbourne constituted the Priory's holding in Evingar. Hurstbourne (now divided into the parishes of Hurstbourne Priors and St Mary Bourne) was the larger manor, with seven principal tithings and some smaller hamlets within them. Whitchurch had six tithings, of which one, Baughurst, lay at some distance, to the north-east of Kingsclere hundred. Of the remaining Whitchurch tithings, one was Whitchurch manor itself, two were formed from a land unit called Freefolk adjoining the eastern boundary of the manor, and two others, Charlcot and Henley, lay within the bounds of the manor (Fig. 2). Medieval Freefolk was divided into

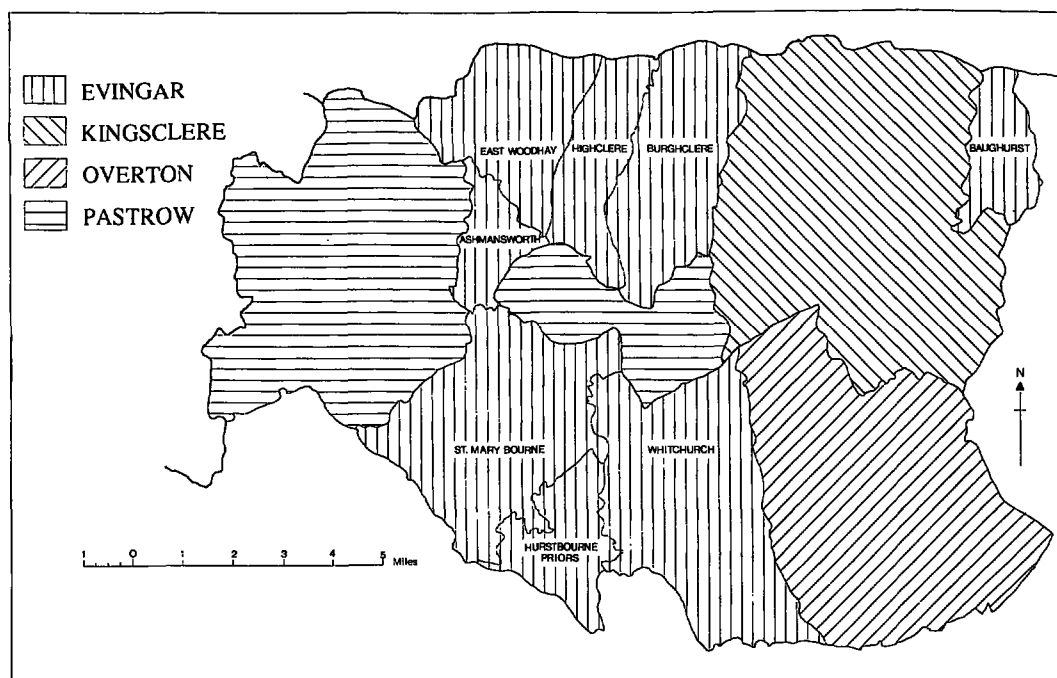


Fig. 1 The medieval hundreds of north Hampshire and the parishes of Evingar hundred

Freefolk Priors and Freefolk Manor, the former as its name implies in the possession of the Priory, the latter in secular hands with the bishop as overlord, as also was Henley (Deveson 1997). There was a small area called Bradley on the north-western edge of the manor which was held by the prioress of Kingston in Wiltshire in the 13th century (*VCH* iv, 301–2). Whitchurch and Freefolk Priors formed a single ecclesiastical parish with its external medieval boundaries relatively unchanged until the 20th century, so that, apart from the small pockets of foreign interest, there was a large degree of coincidence between manor and parish.

FROM SAXON SETTLEMENT TO PRIORY MANOR

Saxon settlement in the area is attested from documentary and place-name evidence. The name

'Whitchurch' is first recorded in a charter of Edward the Elder, a three-part document included in the Winchester Cathedral cartulary known as *Codex Wintoniensis* (Birch no. 624; Finberg no. 42; Sawyer no. 378). The first part, in Latin and dated 909, records the restitution by the king to the *familia* of St. Peter's, Winchester, of fifty *manentes* of land at *Hwitan cyrice*, originally granted to the monks by Hemele, *comes*, but later appropriated by the bishops. The second, in Old English and undated, gives the boundaries of Whitchurch, of its pastures at *Fiscesburnan* and *Felghyrste* and of its dependent settlement Ashmansworth. The third, also in Old English and dated (by implication) 909, provides for the reversion of the estate at Ashmansworth to the Winchester community after the death of King Edward. Doubts have been expressed about the authenticity of some *Codex Wintoniensis* charters, but detailed examination of the Whitchurch charter has confirmed that it is a genuine copy of a 10th-century original (Rumble



Fig. 2 Whitchurch and Hurstbourne: medieval manors and tithings

1985, 175; Deveson 1995, 25–6). The boundary clause is typical of the late-Saxon period in its complexity and amount of topographical detail (Hooke 1989, 14). The Whitchurch estate corresponded very closely with that described in Domesday, except that it included Tufton, a manor lost to Wherwell Abbey by the 11th century (Grundy 1927, 295–9). The boundary clause for the dependent settlement of Ashmansworth included its neighbour East Woodhay, on the

Berkshire border (Grundy 1927, 90–4), both of which were ceded to the Bishopric by the 13th century (*VCH* iv, 274). The pastures of *Felghyrste* were situated in distant Baughurst, as probably also were those of *Fiscesburnan*. The latter has yet to be traced, but the name *Felghyrste* and its variants occur frequently in the Priory records in connection with Baughurst property, and as a topographical surname there. Similar linkages between detached woodlands and head manors have been

noted in Hampshire and elsewhere (Thorn 1988, 32; Hooke 1989, 10).

Whitchurch, then, was an extensive late-Saxon estate. What can be surmised about the first 'white church'? Construction of stone, chalk, flint and chalk, or a rendering of whitewash are all possibilities (Ekwall 1960, 513; Coates 1989, 174). The earliest remaining features in the present parish church, the three western bays on the south side of the nave, are dated to the late-12th century, and are considered to have been part of an aisle added to an earlier building, but whether this was Norman or Saxon cannot now be determined (*VCH* iv, 302). It was probably one of the small mother churches which served the relatively small hundreds of north Hampshire in the 10th to 12th centuries, after the original system of royal minsters and vills in Wessex had broken up (Hase 1975, 334; Hase 1988, 48; Blair 1985, 115–19). It is possible, however, that the church predated its mother-church status. A Saxon tombstone found embedded in the church fabric has been ascribed to the 9th century (Tweddle 1983, 20–1), and the small Saxon graveyard (twelve skeletons with no associated grave-goods) excavated near the present church fits a suggested 8th–9th century phase of burial patterns (Anon 1883–4, 230; Morris 1983, 54). Together they point to the existence of a church here at least as early as the 9th century. Local lordship has been proposed as a major factor in the foundation of 'estate churches, those on ecclesiastical estates perhaps being the oldest (Morris 1983, 75; Yorke 1995, 230). If the 'white church' originated as the private foundation of Hemele or his predecessors, or was founded on his estate shortly after its acquisition by the Priory, it may even date back to the 8th century. Given the known conservatism in the choice of church sites, it is likely that the first church stood very close to, if not on, the site of the present building.

The church and its land (one hide in 1086) were among the foundation endowments of Henry de Blois to the Hospital of St Cross in Winchester in the 1130s, and the St Cross lands remained as an administrative unit, though physically scattered, within the manor of Whitchurch until the present century. The master and brethren of the hospital were the lay rectors, but the the bishop held the

advowson of the church with the prior deriving income from some of its spiritualities. The hospital retained the great tithes until commutation (*VCH* iv, 303–4; *HRO* W/H5/17). By the late-12th century there was also a chapel in Freefolk Manor, dependent on the church of Whitchurch, and for a time another small chapel at Henley, but these were essentially private chapels, which never attracted any substantial settlement (*VCH* iv, 284, 304; Deveson 1997).

By 1086 Whitchurch manor had land for thirty-three ploughs, with relatively small amounts of woodland and pasture, and Whitchurch and Freefolk were producing enough grain between them to justify four mills. But as pasture and sheep are largely unrecorded in Domesday Hampshire, it is probable that sheep were then, as later, the mainstay of the manor (Darby & Campbell 1962, 340). There were nearly a hundred villein and bordar households in Whitchurch, and nineteen in Freefolk, with fifteen slaves between the two. The population is likely to have been dispersed throughout the area, but since the church provided the place-name, it is probable that it also provided the physical focus for the first small settlement at Whitchurch. Indeed, a map dated 1730 shows clearly that the later planned town, with its regular burgage plots, was an extension of an existing village with much larger but less regularly-shaped plots, a pattern for which there are many parallels (Fig. 3; Bond 1990, 96). There is, however, no clear line of descent from the Saxon estate centre (apart from the church itself) to the large Elizabethan house which now stands opposite the church, except that this and the adjoining house were respectively rectory and vicarage until the 19th century, when they were exchanged by their ecclesiastical owners, and their functions reversed. The Priory's need for a permanent presence in Whitchurch would have been satisfied by the demesne farm *curia*, which was at some distance from the church and its associated houses (see below). The more usual medieval arrangement was close proximity between rectory and farm (Harvey 1965, 25–6), and the original *curia* may have been moved from a site near the church when this was appropriated to St Cross.

In accordance with the usual practice of the

Black Monks, Whitchurch and Hurstbourne were at farm for some periods between the late-12th century and 1238, but by 1248 were under direct management by the Priory (*CRR* xvi, 149B; Grea-trex 1972, App.1A). The Priory's usual policy in Hampshire was to run neighbouring manors in pairs, if possible. Hence Whitchurch and Hurstbourne Priors generally shared a bailiff or sergeant, who rendered the annual accounts jointly with the separate manorial reeves (Drew 1947, 22). The majority of judicial and administrative business of both manors was intermingled, and was usually conducted in conjunction with the twice-yearly tours by the Priory's steward. But from the 1280s (when court records began to be preserved) and for the first quarter of the 14th century, the business of the hundred was conducted almost entirely at Hurstbourne (Deveson 1995, 101-4).

There were manorial farms at both Hurstbourne and Whitchurch and each had a special room for the bailiff (*WCL* manor account rolls, Hurstbourne 1280, Whitchurch 1361). The Hurstbourne *curia*, a possible successor to one of the three Saxon halls in that manor, was a more substantial establishment, even qualifying for the title of 'prior's mansion' (*DB* Munby, fo.41a-b; Roberts 1992, 107). Stray references in the Priory rolls indicate that travelling monks and officials were usually accommodated at Hurstbourne, and a deer park was established there in 1332 (*CPatR EdwIII* ii, 263). The king himself came to hunt on at least two occasions (*WCL* Whitchurch manor account rolls 1362, 1371). Altogether it is clear that by the late-13th century, if not before, Hurstbourne had taken precedence over Whitchurch as the hundredal centre.

The Whitchurch manorial demesne was centred in Whitchurch tithing, where most of the best agricultural land lay (Deveson 1995, 32-3). It had three principal fields and several others, surrounded by large areas of downland, especially on the west. A three-course crop rotation was practised, with arable and fallow in the proportions of 2:1. Oats occupied the biggest sown acreage, followed by wheat and barley; the smallest acreage was for maslin or bere, with a small quantity of legumes. Apart from the amount retained for seed,

used for customary payments or fed to stock, most of the surplus grain was sent to the Priory and very little sold. Most of the Whitchurch tenants had rights of common for cows, horses and pigs, but only one, along with the holder of the rectorial glebe, had specific common rights for sheep (Hanna 1954, 262-3; *Chartulary* no. 327). Sheepwalks probably occupied most of the rest of its land, and peasant flocks were folded on demesne stubble and fallow.

Whitchurch in the 13th and 14th centuries was thus a typical downland manor, under close control by the Priory and no doubt also under the prior's own eye on his visits to his mansion and deer park at Hurstbourne. It retained its ancient church, but with a parish much reduced from the mother-church *parochia*, Baughurst being the only survivor from the detached pastoral areas. Unlike many other ancient estate centres, the small settlement associated with the church and demesne farm had not grown spontaneously into any recognizable kind of town. This was to require a deliberate act of foundation.

MARKET AND BOROUGH

The town first appeared as a legal entity in the mid-13th century. One of the constituent documents of the Winchester Cathedral Custumal is a Whitchurch borough rental dated 1251, which lists the tenants and the rents of their burgage plots (Hanna 1954, 256-60). In 1241 the Priory had obtained a royal grant of a weekly Monday market at Whitchurch, and issued a charter for a borough there during the priorate of John de Cauz, 1247-9 (*CChR* i, 256; *Chartulary* no.472). In doing so, it was joining in the movement for new town foundation, at its peak in the 12th and 13th centuries. In the past, much discussion about the early history of towns centred around 'borough status' and its distinguishing features, including burgage tenure. The association between boroughs and markets hardly needs stressing, but it has been noted that burgage tenure could exist in rural communities (Pollock & Maitland 1968, i, 640). This may have been the case at Whitchurch by the 1240s, since the 1248 manor account roll contains the record of an entry fine paid in the

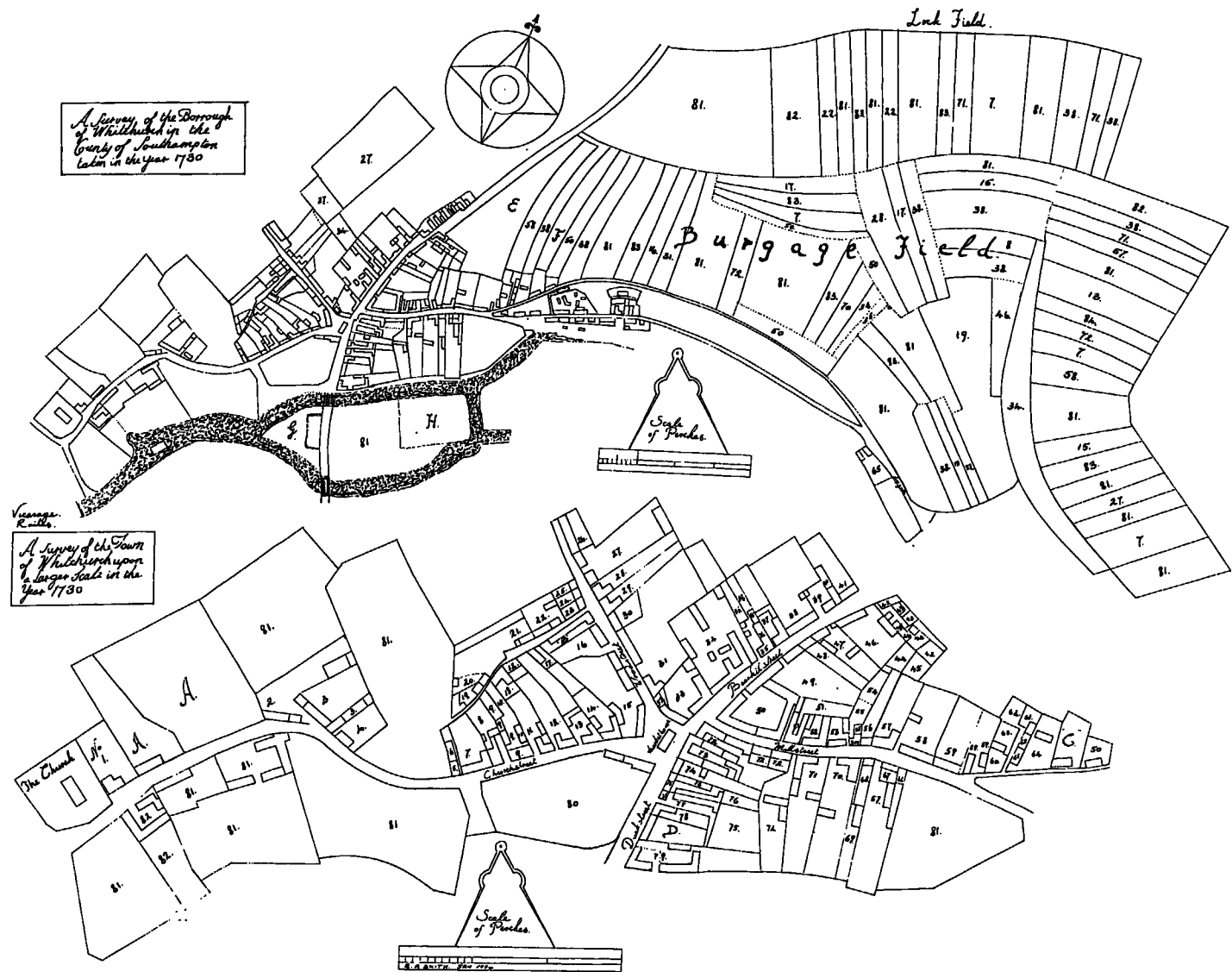


Fig. 3 T Lawrence: Survey of the Burrough of Whitchurch, 1730 (redrawn by Mr R Smith)

manorial court for a 'message held in free bur-gage', as if it was neither a new nor an unusual occurrence, although the account itself gives no indication of a borough's formal existence at that time.

The Priory's new town at Whitchurch was in close proximity to another, only four miles distant, the Bishopric's foundation at Overton. A market had been granted there in 1218 and a borough established not later than that year; there is no charter, but it is entered as a borough in the bishop's pipe roll for 1217-18 (*RLC* i, 363; Beresford 1959, 195-6). Overton's first market day was Tuesday, which was either changed or added to when a Monday market and fair were granted in 1246; it is not clear from the wording whether the 1246 market was a new grant or an alteration and confirmation of an existing one (*CC&R* i, 312). Monday markets at Whitchurch and Overton would thus have been in competition for two years until that at Whitchurch was changed to Thursday in 1248 (*CC&R* i, 331). Apart from the coincidence of day, the Monday markets would, by reason of proximity, have fallen within the contemporary definition of 'harmful markets'. The fact that the local sheriff, who was instrumental in market regulation, ever permitted Overton to hold one on Mondays is proof that the two markets were considered to have different trading areas and perhaps functions (Masschaele 1992, 78-9).

The borough of Whitchurch can now be dated slightly more precisely than its charter's attribution to the priorate of John de Cauz. The charter made provision for a separate borough court, and since the burgage entry fine referred to above would have normally have been paid there, the charter cannot be earlier than June 1248, when the latest court would have been held in that accounting year. This is confirmed by the charter, dated June 8, 1248, in which Whitchurch's market day was changed, which refers only to a manor there, and not to a borough which would have been the natural place for such an enterprise. The 1248 account, which would have been drawn up shortly after September 29, shows no separate income from a borough, which must therefore have been established during the second half of John's priorate, that is, between October 1248 and December

1249, when he was elected abbot of Peterborough (Le Neve ii, 89). Overton thus preceded Whitchurch as a borough by about thirty years, and Whitchurch, with its relatively recent market, was competing from its inception with a well-established foundation. The close proximity was evidently not seen as a disadvantage at the time, and the change of market day may have been the stimulus to further action at Whitchurch.

THE CHOICE OF SITE

In choosing to found a new town at Whitchurch, the Priory was not beginning from nothing. Whitchurch already had some of the characteristics of a 'central place' (Bond 1990, 86-93). It was an ancient estate centre, the ecclesiastical centre of a hundred and the possessor of a market, albeit of recent recognition. However, the 'central place' function was to some extent shared with Hurstbourne, itself the centre of a large pre- and post-Conquest manorial estate and the possessor of a church which may also have been a small late-Saxon mother church (*DB* Munby, fo.41b; Hase 1988, 63-4). Hurstbourne contained the prior's main residence in the area and was more centrally located between Overton and Andover. Whitchurch might not therefore have been the only candidate for development.

The success of a medieval new town depended to a large degree on its relation to trade routes, both local and regional (Platt 1976, 25-6; Hindle 1990, 18-19). In general, research into the routes and dates of roads has been hindered by lack of evidence, and there are gaps in our knowledge even of some major routes (Hindle 1982, 202-5). It is therefore not surprising that the exact lines of minor routes present even more problems. Published national and county maps, none of which are earlier than the 16th century, do not begin to show roads in any detail or with any degree of reliability until the 18th (Smith 1988, 113). At that time, the major routes through Hampshire lay in an east-west direction, from London via Basingstoke to Salisbury, and from London to the south coast at Portsmouth and Southampton (Margary 1976, nos. 6b1, 8-13). Road-books and itinerary maps, other sources of evidence from the 16th

century onwards, confirm the emphasis on the east-west routes and the late-16th-century post stages were also on this orientation (Box 1931, 223-4, Brayshay 1992, 133). Winchester was in decline as a manufacturing and trading centre from the 14th century onwards, and by the 17th century no major east-west route passed through it, although its existence was acknowledged by many side-turnings from major routes (Ogilby 1971). Neither did it feature on any north-south route through the county even when modern evidence for such a route begins to appear. In the 18th century the main route from the Midlands to the Hampshire coast was via Newbury, Kingsclere, Basingstoke and Alton to Portsmouth (Margary 1976, no. 6b1). Northbound roads through Whitchurch, Hurstbourne Priors and Overton were all equally minor and at times indistinct, (Margary 1976, nos. 8-9) and it was only from the late-18th century onwards that maps began to show clearly a northwards route from Winchester through Whitchurch and beyond. This road was turnpiked in 1762, the first indication of its modern emergence as a major route (Viner 1969, 161). The road from Winchester via Overton to Kingsclere was never turnpiked, although it was certainly an important local route (Cochrane 1969, 51-5). The case for this road is confirmed by the development of the Winchester-Kingsclere, rather than the London-Salisbury road, as the main axis for Overton, clearly shown on a map dated 1615 (*CCCO Langdon Plans* ii, 28). But its onward direction from Kingsclere is less clear; the oldest part of the town lies along the two streets which were to be turnpiked in a north-easterly direction towards Aldermaston and away from Newbury, although a post-medieval route from Kingsclere to Newbury certainly existed (Margary 1976, no. 6b1; Defoe 1742, i, 243). The road along the Bourne valley which connected Hurstbourne Priors with its tithings and, ultimately, Hungerford, never developed into a major route into Berkshire and beyond.

Royal itineraries are sometimes used as evidence for medieval routes, but none reveal the existence of a major road from Winchester to Newbury in the 13th and early-14th centuries (Hindle 1976, figs. 3-9). There is, however, other

evidence for the northwards movement of people and goods through this area. The king's wine was frequently carried from Southampton and Winchester to Sandleford Priory on the southern edge of Newbury, and to his residences in and near Oxford (*CLibR*, *passim*). A visit was made in 1282 from Winchester to Harwell via Whitchurch to have the prior's palfrey's teeth attended to, and a road certainly existed from Winchester to Newbury through Whitchurch in the mid-14th century (*WCL* Whitchurch manor account rolls 1282, 1338; *HRO* 19 M61/560). Additional evidence for late-medieval routes is provided by the Gough map of ca. 1360, the interpretation of which presents many problems, and on which many roads are shown, but many, both major and minor, omitted (Hindle 1980). The main east-west route through Hampshire runs from London to Salisbury via Winchester, with no north-south route through the county at all. However, the map shows many places with no indication of their road links, among them Basingstoke and Whitchurch; the former was probably among the settlements 'chosen at random from amongst the more important places in Britain', the latter probably among the minor places 'included solely because they were at significant points on the road network' (Hindle 1980, 48). Basingstoke and Andover, though not among the few Domesday boroughs in Hampshire, were prominent Saxon villas and show signs of their development into towns by the 12th century (*VCH* iv, 129, 346). They are therefore likely to have been linked by road for many years before they began to feature on the long-distance route from London to Salisbury indicated by the post-medieval evidence. Whitchurch and Andover were certainly connected by road in the mid-13th century, indeed by two roads, the more southerly of which was to become the turnpike road, along which Overton and Hurstbourne Priors also lay (Deveson 1995, 52-3). This road, however, was obviously of less importance than that through Winchester as a long-distance route through the county, and only developed as Winchester declined (Cochrane 1969, 33-4).

As for the north-south route, the evidence of maps and documents combines to reinforce Beresford's assumption of a route from Oxford to

Winchester, along which the bishop's new town of Newtown, on the Hampshire-Berkshire border, was laid out in the early-13th century (Beresford 1959, 197; Deveson 1995, 53). This road would have passed close to the bishop's residence and deer park at Highclere, which was also the administrative centre of his north-Hampshire group of manors (Roberts 1988, 69). The road led southwards through Whitchurch and northwards to the bishop's Berkshire manors, and would also have formed part of the long-distance route from the Midlands to Southampton associated with the rise of Oxford and the decline of Dorchester-on-Thames in the 9th century (Hinton 1977, 197). This is the most likely route for the transport of the king's wine to Sandleford.

Apart from good communications, the basic requirements of 13th-century new towns were a reasonably flat site and a water supply. Water was equally plentiful at Whitchurch and Hurstbourne, but whereas the potential site at Whitchurch involved the use of awkward slopes, that at Hurstbourne Priors was relatively flat. Hurstbourne was the larger manor, with more outlying settlements and a bigger population from which immigrants to a new town might be recruited. It consistently yielded a larger income from rents, the profits of agriculture and court perquisites. A town, even with the field strips with which it might be endowed, occupied comparatively little space, and Hurstbourne could easily have absorbed the loss of income involved in giving up agricultural land, which, in any case, should have been offset by urban income. By the early-medieval period there was no difference in status between the churches at Whitchurch and Hurstbourne Priors, both being parish churches each with one dependent chapel and a vicarage appropriated to the Hospital of St Cross. Although both standing on a road of local, if not yet national, importance, neither of the churches had acted as a magnet for substantial settlement. Mother churches often attracted unofficial markets to their gates, and the decision to seek a market grant for Whitchurch rather than for Hurstbourne Priors in 1241 is perhaps an indication that a market had begun to develop in the region of this mother church. But the new town was not to be situated beside the church, and local

topography does not suggest that road diversions were necessary in order to create a central market-place at Whitchurch (Deveson 1995, 55).

Several of the factors involved in the final choice of site for the new town would either have been neutral, or in favour of Hurstbourne Priors, and if the Priory had wished to take advantage of east-west traffic, Hurstbourne would have been ideally situated. The principal differences were the positions of the two manors *vis-a-vis* the long-distance road system, and the presence or absence of a market. The choice of Whitchurch, and the orientation of Overton, show that the main direction of trade and travel through mid-13th-century Hampshire was still between the south coast, Winchester and the Midlands. In choosing to found a town so close to Overton, the Priory must have had reason to think that the new town could succeed alongside the established one.

THE LAYOUT OF THE NEW TOWN

The long-distance road system provided the framework for the main streets of the new town, presently five in number but then four, listed in the custumal as *magnus vicus*, *Wodestret*, *Bynstret* and *Mulestret* (Fig. 4; Table 1; Deveson 1995, 56–8).

They contained fifty-eight plots, fifty-seven of which were described as *burgages* and one as a *message*. All but five had two acres of land each, the strips lying together in the *burgage field*. The 1730 map clearly shows the boundaries of the town and field, with a regular pattern of *burgages* grafted on to the larger, older plots, and spread along the five streets, meeting at the central market-place. As a Winchester writer was to observe in the early-17th century, 'the howses of the burrough are but in a small circuite', the entire area occupied by the new town being about fourteen acres (WCL T2A/3/1/154/1; Deveson 1995, 59). The large-scale part of the 1730 map shows that several typical *burgage* series were well preserved in Whitchurch at that time, although a certain amount of subdivision had obviously taken place. Modern Ordnance Survey maps indicate that many of the plot boundaries survived not only into the 19th century but to the present day, especially in Church Street, the east side of New-

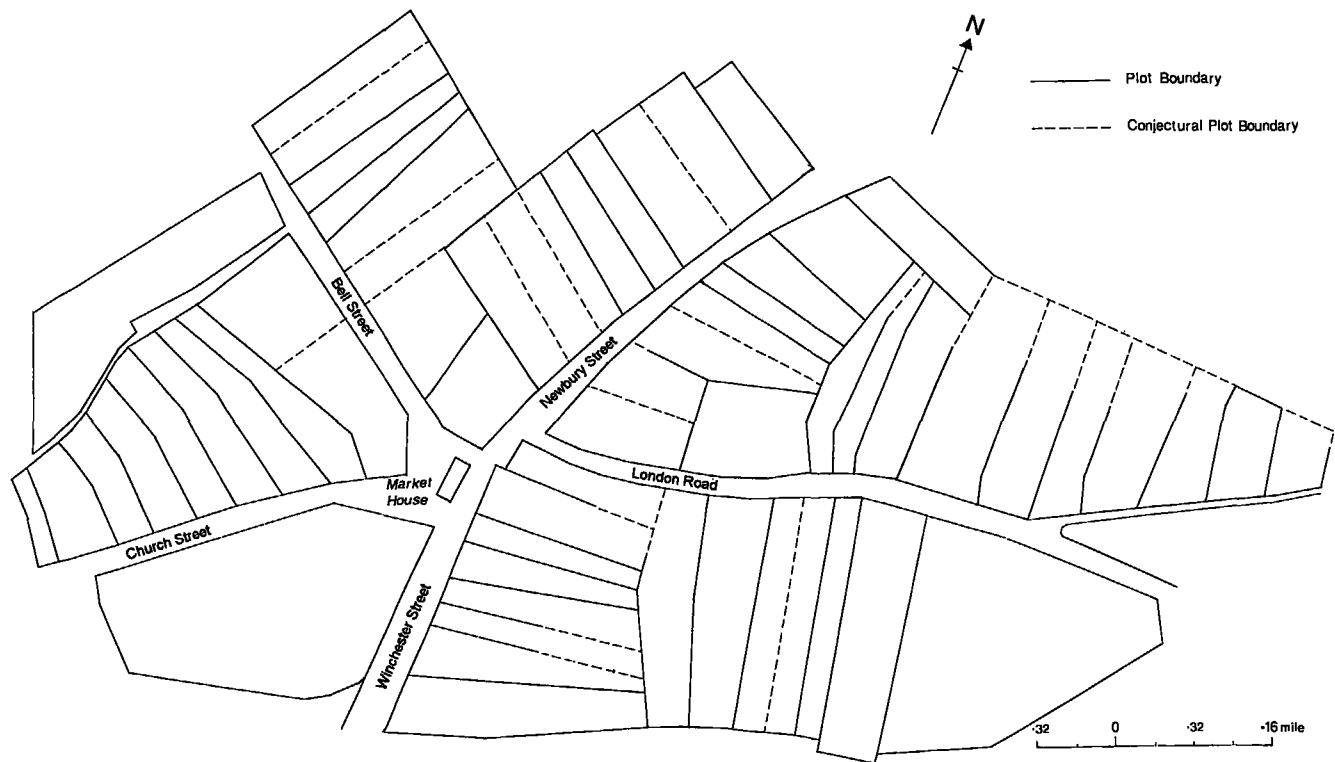


Fig. 4 Medieval Whitchurch: primary plot boundaries

Table 1 Whitchurch street names

<i>Custumal, 1252</i>	<i>Lawrence map, 1730</i>	<i>Modern</i>
Magnus vicus	Church Street	Church Street
Wodestret	Wood Street	Bell Street
Bynstret	Bearhill Street & Duck Street	Newbury Street & Winchester Street
Mulestret	Mill Street	London Street

bury Street and on both sides of London Street beyond the town centre. The accuracy of the 1730 surveying is difficult to assess, but the basic shapes of the medieval plots are clear. In Church Street, Winchester Street south of the market-place, and on the south side of London Street they are long and narrow, but there are also larger, squarer plots elsewhere, particularly in Newbury and Bell Streets, and on the north side of London Street. Fig. 4 is a reconstruction of the plot boundaries indicated on the 1730 map, modified to suggest the original units laid out by the medieval surveyor.

The sizes of medieval burgage plots, and the width of their street frontages in particular, have been the subject of investigation in many towns. Considerable regularity has been found, albeit with wide variation in different areas, ranging, for example, from around thirty feet at Alnwick to seventy feet at Burton-upon-Trent (Conzen 1960; 33; Platt 1976, 54). This regularity can generally be related to multiples and fractions of the linear perch, whether the standard sixteen-and-a-half feet or a local version. Measurement from a large-scale OS map and a simple statistical analysis of the plot widths at Whitchurch bear out the hypothesis that the original unit of measurement was the standard perch, though perhaps the standard of surveying was somewhat rough-and ready (Deveson 1995, 60–1, 166–8, 201–4).

The frontages most closely approximate to multiples of whole perches in Newbury Street, but there is little evidence that the multiples themselves were standard, ranging as they do from two to eight, with three sets of seven. Whole perches are also discernible in London Street, but again

with little regularity in the multiples, and the widths more commonly include fractions. In both these streets, the plot patterns suggest that some of the narrower plots resulted from subdivision of larger plots, and if the measurements from such adjacent plots are combined, multiples of whole- and half-perches emerge as the basis on which these streets were laid out. The most surprising result of measurement was in Church Street, an area where the 1730 map seems to show the least alteration from an original pattern, and where the property boundaries are known from deeds to have remained stable since the 17th century (M Smith, pers. comm.). Here, only half the plots appear to conform to units of whole and half-perches, and in general, the plots have narrower frontages than elsewhere in the town, although it looks as if Winchester Street south of the market-place might have given similar results if redevelopment had not precluded measurement there. The Church Street plots have the pronounced curve interpreted at Stratford as aratral, and these plots may reflect earlier field strips rather than an entirely new layout (Slater 1987, 195). Field patterns may also have influenced the shapes of the plots elsewhere, and particularly on the north side of London Street, where the small-scale part of the 1730 map shows the burgage field strips backing on to the gardens of the cottages at the edge of the town. It might be argued that in the land-hungry 13th century, arable land was unlikely to have been given up for housing. But this land was of relatively poor quality, and amounted to relatively few acres. There are good parallels for the establishment of burgage plots on arable fields, for

example at Sherborne and Thame (Fowler 1951, 153–4; Bond 1990, 94).

As for the plot tails, those in the triangle formed by Bell and Newbury Streets are cut off by straight lines. Elsewhere in the town they are less regular, and were dictated either by a water-course or pre-existing lanes, as were the boundaries of the town itself; hill contours may also have influenced the surveying in Newbury and London Streets. It is very difficult to detect anything resembling a standard plot area (Deveson 1995, 63). Given the wide variation in frontages it is not surprising to find similar variation in areas, but even when the smallest plots are discounted and the largest divided into their theoretical original constituents, the possible plot areas range from about twenty-five to forty square perches. These are not unusual sizes for medieval burgage plots, but it does seem to be unusual to find such a wide range in individual towns, especially towns as small as Whitchurch. If equality of plot area was the ideal in medieval town planning, as, for instance, at Lichfield and Ludlow, it was far from coinciding with reality here (Slater 1987, 198; 1990, 76).

The problem of laying out plots around the market-place was not solved neatly. The corner plot formed at the junction of London and Winchester Streets encroaches awkwardly on to Newbury Street, but seems to be part of the original plan. The five-way intersection did not lend itself to neat realignments of the burgage series in order to turn corners, as a grid system would have done. None of the corner plots, except that in the angle of Church Street and Bell Street, has a clear orientation and all could have had frontages on two streets. The plot on the corner of Bell Street and Newbury Street looks like the prime site, running as it does across the north side of the market-place and with a long frontage to Newbury Street. That on the corner of Church Street and Bell Street had a similar advantage with respect to the market-place, but was more clearly associated with the burgage series in Church Street than with the market-place. Plot orientation may have been used by the medieval surveyor 'to enhance the intended status of particular streets' (Slater 1987, 195), but the surveyors at Whitchurch seem to have had no clear idea about

which was, or ought to be, the principal street, and may have been trying to keep several options open. The designation of Church Street as *magnus vicus* and its initial position in the custumal signify the intention that this should be the principal street, and as the route from the town centre to the church, it must always have had local importance, but there was to be less development along this street throughout the medieval and modern periods, both inside and outside the town boundary, than along any other except perhaps Bell Street.

Differing burgage patterns have been taken to reflect different phases of development (Hindle 1990, 55; Slater 1981, 59–62). The custumal listing, however, shows that burgage plots in all the main streets of Whitchurch were occupied, at the latest, within three years of its charter. Even if the new settlement had begun by developing informally, the relative regularity of the burgage plots indicates a fresh start with a single plan. The wide variations in frontages and areas seem to have been dictated by local topography and established features – fields, roads and watercourses – rather than by pre-existing property boundaries. The widest plots in Newbury Street may derive from the several sets of multiple holdings listed in the custumal for *Bynstret*. Even so, many of the plots seem exceptionally wide in comparison with other medieval towns, and may be an indication of the relative lack of pressure on space when the town was laid out. By 1730, most of the plots had still not been extensively built on, and neither had two large riverside areas. The surviving early-modern houses in the town are arranged parallel with the streets rather than at right-angles to them, the more usual situation when towns were crowded. It is, of course, possible that the undeveloped areas had originally contained burgage plots, and should be taken as a sign of contraction rather than, as at Stratford, of 'an over-ambitious initial design' (Slater 1987, 196). However, any development in the meadow on the south side of Church Street, which also fronted on to Winchester Street, would have had a very prominent position in the town, and is the least likely candidate for abandonment. This land was still a meadow in the mid-19th century (*Release* 1839). The explanation cannot be that its proximity to the river made it

unsuitable for building, since similar land on the east side of Winchester Street was developed from the start. It must always have been more useful as meadow than as building-land, even after the 16th-century increase in traffic should have enhanced the status of Church Street as part of the long-distance east-west route.

The Whitchurch burgage field abutted the south side of Lock Field, one of the three open fields which survived until enclosure, and was probably carved out of it (Deveson 1995, 67). The burgesses' strips amounted to 104 acres, and the Priory also retained an interest in it (*WCL* Whitchurch manor account roll, 1261). If this was the same piece of burgage land as the Dean and Chapter held in 1730, it would have been a large strip immediately north of the town with a frontage on Newbury Street. This would have been a prime site for development at the entrance to the town, if expansion had proved desirable or necessary. The land on which the town was built was not so obviously taken out of the three principal fields and, lying close as it does to both river and hillside, must have been partly laid out on pasture and woodland, as well as on arable land. Several manorial holdings had already been taken into the demesne by 1248, but the Priory did not try to compensate itself for the land (about 120 acres, not including the earlier settlement or the extra fields) lost to the town and field by adding to the Whitchurch demesne thereafter. Instead it looked to borough rent and court income.

THE PRICE OF TENANCY

In 1251 the fifty-seven burgage plots were in the hands of thirty-seven burgesses, of whom two (John Durdent and Simon Clericus) had fourteen between them, and paid nearly one third of the total rents of the town. Seven others had two or three each, and the remaining twenty-eight had one each. The 'messuage' was an anomaly in that it was not included in the total number of burgages in the custumal but its rent was included in the total of burgage rents and it had the usual two acres in the burgage field. Of the five plots with no accompanying land, three were held by John Durdent, who had a considerable amount of

land elsewhere in the manor, and one by Simon Clericus, whose only other holding was woodland.

The rents varied widely. All were multiples of shillings and sixpences or marks, except in Newbury/Winchester Street, where less regular figures were paid. The highest was for a plot in Church Street, which was unusually high at one mark, and may have been for a double plot, since the custumal lists seven burgages in this street, while Fig. 4 suggests eight or nine. Otherwise the rents ranged from 3s. to 8s., with more than half between 4s. and 5s. 5d. Most of the plots within the latter range were in Newbury/Winchester Street and London Street – twenty-seven in all (twenty-eight if the messuage is included), constituting nearly half the total number in the town. The most expensive plots were in Church Street and London Street, the cheapest in Bell Street and Newbury/Winchester Street, but a broad spectrum of rents was spread over all the streets, and there is little indication of a strict segregation by price. It is possible that the variations in rents were caused by differing values of acres in the burgage field, but since four out of the five plots without land were at the upper end of the range of rents, and given the large measure of uniformity in Whitchurch manorial rents in general, it seems more likely that the variations stemmed from real differences in the values of plots. This may be tested by looking at their later history.

Borough quit-rents continued to be paid to the Dean and Chapter after the Dissolution and are recorded both in a series of rent-books from the 17th to the 19th centuries, and in 19th-century sale documents (Deveson 1995, 59, 70). Quit-rents were the equivalent of the burgage rents of assize, and were a legacy from the time when rents contained two elements – a fixed token, and a variable economic, rent (Hemmeon 1914, 61; Keene 1985, i, 185–7). Burgage rents of assize were often, though not always, a small uniform amount such as 1d. or 12d., and if such an element had been incorporated into the Whitchurch burgage rents, one would expect it to have been fossilized, and detectable in the quit-rents. Far from this being the case, the quit-rents show wide variations, and even if they are combined in various ways (to allow for subdivisions of plots and

therefore of rents), no uniformity appears. By the 17th century the quit-rents no longer bore a direct relationship to the original custumal rents; the individual rents must have been altered when a farm of ten pounds (one-third lower than the custumal rent total) was granted. The farm would also have been reapportioned at some time to include the older plots in Church Street, and further adjusted to include later additions to the town. But the wide variation among the quit-rents must be a reflection of the wide variation of the rents on which they were once based.

The custumal rent total, of £15 1s. 10d., agrees almost exactly with the £15 2s. 0d. to which the rents of assize amounted in 1261 (*WCL* Whitchurch borough account roll, 1261). The latter amount, with an increment of only another 2d., appears on the rest of the borough account rolls, and was perpetuated in the Dean and Chapter's collective memory long after the borough had been farmed (*WCL* T2A/3/1/154/1). Since the individual custumal rents were neither small nor uniform, it seems likely that they were the original economic rents for individual plots, which then (with the alterations suggested above) became a fixed rent payable to the Priory and independent of the local property market.

The grounds for charging differing amounts of rent are not clear. There may have been a relationship between burgage rents and plot frontages, but proving this, by tracing the descents of individual plots through their burgage rents and quit-rents, is impossible because there was no direct relationship between custumal burgage rents and individual quit-rents. The burgage rents (and hence the burgesses) of 1251 cannot be associated with specific plots on the basis of the later documentary evidence, and a suggested allocation of burgesses to specific plots, using the evidence of the custumal, is very tentative (Deveson 1995, 205–6). It has already been shown that the range of rents for individual plots gives little indication of social or economic segregation, and that the plots paying middling rents were scattered throughout the town. However, a rather different pattern emerges when one looks at the amounts which individual burgesses were willing to pay for groups of plots. One 8s. rent and all those above 8s. were for multiple holdings. Six of the ten

double and triple holdings were in Newbury/Winchester Street, a seventh occupied the first position in Church Street. The eighth, in Bell Street, would not have been in a particularly prominent position, but was held by John Durdent with another plot in the same street, giving him a large part of its frontage. It looks as if site, rather than size, was the over-riding factor in determining the level of rents paid, though on what grounds the Priory set such differing rents for single plots is an open question.

The highest rent of all was paid by Adam Faber for his double plot in London Street. Whether he was primarily a smith, as his name suggests, or a brewer, as his amercements in 1248 and 1261 suggest, a prime site, perhaps in the market-place, must have attracted him (Deveson 1995, 205). In laying out plots of such different shapes and sizes, and with such varying rents, the Priory was perhaps anticipating a demand for choice. Ale-selling may not have been an entirely domestic business in mid-13th-century Whitchurch, and the burgesses may have chosen plots according to the commercial possibilities (Deveson 1995, 116–7). It would not be surprising to find that Whitchurch's earliest urban function was to cater for travellers on the road between Winchester and the Midlands, but it remains to be seen whether the Priory's initiative was justified.

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