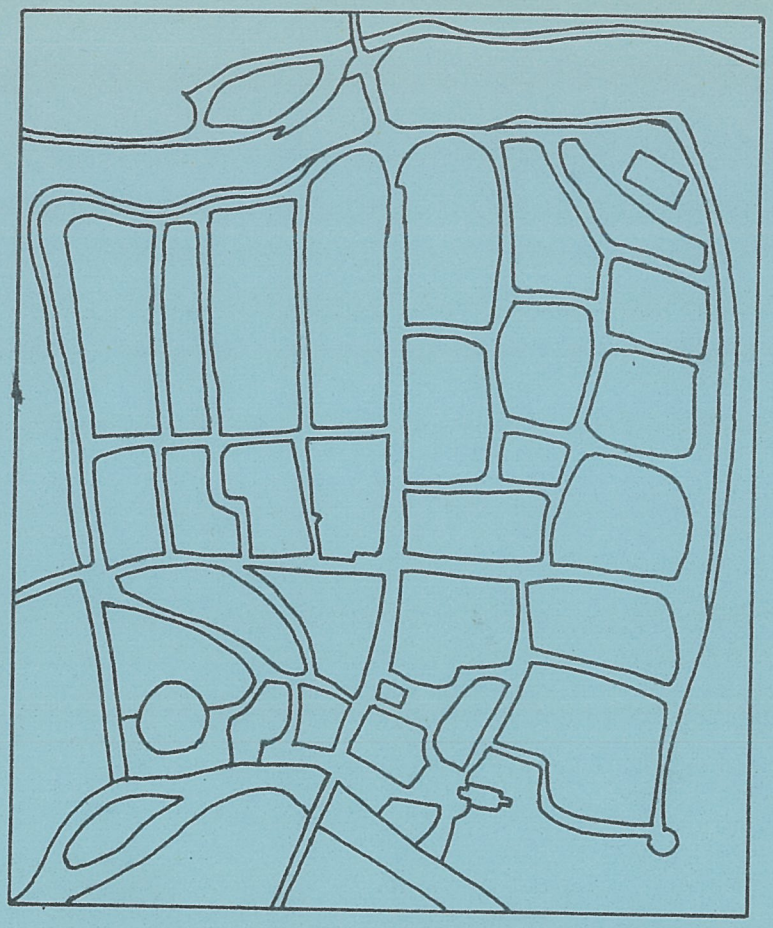
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THE ARCHAEOLOGY AND EARLY HISTORY OF



WAREHAM

An outline guide to the development of the town, written to co-incide with the excavations at St. Martin's House, North Street, March - April 1974.

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THE ARCHAEOLOGY AND EARLY HISTORY OF WAREHAM

No town in England has a history quite like that of Wareham. Many modern towns were still country villages in the 12th century: many began to take shape in the 10th and 11th centuries: but very few have any known history or archaeology that takes them back into the 8th century. Wareham is unusual because it has both documentary sources and archaeological remains for the 7th and 8th centuries. On the other hand, many modern towns were towns in the Roman period: Wareham is unusual because it was not a Roman town.

WRITTEN SOURCES

Strictly speaking, the earliest mention of Wareham is in the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle", which says that in 802 King Brihtric was buried there, presumably at the Church of Lady St. Mary. But a 12th century life of the great St. Aldhelm, bishop of Sherborne, who died in 709, records that the saint consecrated a church near Wareham while he was waiting to take a ship on the first stage of a journey to Rome. Although written long afterwards, this record is probably reliable, and shows that Wareham was already by the 8th century a port with a well-established cross-channel trade. In 876, a Viking army seized the port, an acknowledged strong-hold of the kingdom of Wessex, but it quickly moved on to Exeter. During its occupation, it would have caused havoc to the life of the town.

Soon afterwards, King Alfred began the construction of the 'burhs', a series of fortresses around the borders of his kingdom that would provide refuge points for his people when Viking raiding parties threatened them. He chose Wareham as one of these 'burhs', to guard the south-east of Dorset, and prevent the Vikings sailing up the River Frome to reach Dorchester. An early 10th century document records that "to Wareham belong 1600 hides;" which means that it was supposed to have a rampart circuit of 2,200 yards - a figure that is very close to the actual circuit of the "town walls" on the three sides of the town, and so is a striking testimony of the accuracy of Saxon surveying.

Unlike some of the 'burhs' set up by King Alfred, Wareham became a thriving town, presumably because of its harbour.

Coins were minted from at least the 930's onwards, and there was an abbey, as the "Chronicle" records the death of an abbess in 982. It seems to have lost some of its earlier prestige, however, for when the young King Edward was murdered at Corfe Castle in 979, his body was hastily buried at Wareham, but soon afterwards it was taken to Shaftesbury. The implication is that the church at Wareham was no longer considered good enough for a royal burial-place. If that is true, it is appropriate that the first hint of a decline of Wareham's importance also gives the first historical mention of Corfe, for the presence of the castle there was to reduce the strategic value of Wareham in controlling access to the Purbeck Hills.

When Domesday Book was written in 1086, Wareham was in a sorry state. Where there had been 285 houses in King Edward the Confessor's reign, there were now only 135, and 150 had been destroyed or stood empty. Some of these had probably been on the site of the new castle that the king built in the south-west corner of the town. The abbey had virtually ceased to exist, for its property had been transferred to the ownership of the Norman abbey of St. Wandrille. Many other English towns recovered from similar situations, however, and Wareham probably made good some of its losses. Its castle made it a focuss in the civil wars of the mid 12th century, and this may have caused much damage to the town. More serious was the problem of the shifting sands of the River Frome. The navigation channel was silting up, and boats were getting bigger. Wareham was overtaken by Poole, with its better access and anchorage. Nor was the agricultural area around it wealthy enough to compensate for the loss of its sea-borne trade, so that Wareham could not become a large and prosperous market town.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

There are three sorts of archaeological evidence for Wareham. There are the churches and the stones in them; there are chance finds of pottery and other objects from people's gardens, or similar sources; and there is the information from planned excavations. From the last comes our first positive information about Wareham, for two Iron Age pits were revealed under the West Walls in 1952. These, and Iron Age pottery, show that

there was some activity in the area by perhaps the 7th century B.C. So far, there is nothing earlier than this, nor is there anything to suggest that the place was of any importance. The pits can be taken as evidence that there was a farm-stead somewhere in the neighbourhood, nothing more.

There is a lot more Roman pottery from the area within the town walls, and a few coins also, but again there is nothing to suggest that the place had any importance. There are no Roman walls and there is no trace of any Roman structures. The quantity of finds again suggests an agricultural settlement in the immediate vicinity, but not more than that. Two of the grave-stones in the church are re-used Roman pillars, but they could have been brought from some distance away.

Wareham probably became an important place for the first time during the period when the British, abandoned by Rome, were resisting the invading Saxons. Dorset does not seem to have fallen to the Saxon kingdom of Wessex until well into the 7th century, and it has been suggested that one of the last areas to hold out was the Wareham neighbourhood, with the British digging the Battery Banks as a last-ditch defensive line. Eventually we may learn more about this very difficult period through systematic excavation.

Did Wareham first take shape in this final British defence? Were their compatriots in Devon and Cornwall sending supplies by sea, so that the landing-place on the Frome first became important because the Saxons had blocked land communications? We can only speculate, but it would provide a reason for the port here to develop, so that St. Aldhelm could catch his boat from it in the following century.

That there was a British population in Wareham is proved by the grave-stones in the church, a remarkable set of five inscriptions which range in date from the 7th century to the early 9th century. These are certainly British, for the Saxons did not make use of this sort of inscribed memorial, and the names on them are British names. Yet the later ones, and perhaps all of them, belong to the period after the Saxons had gained control of Wareham. They must show that the British, although defeated, continued to live in the district: the Saxon conquest was a military and political one, which did not necessarily involve a major change

in the population balance. The political conquest brought some changes, however. Chance finds of pottery, much of it from the digging of graves in the late 19th century, seem to show a trade pattern that tended to look eastward to the Saxon world, not westward to the British world.

Excavations through the West Walls in 1952 showed that the bank is certainly post-Roman, and is probably therefore part of the burghal defences set up by King Alfred in the late 9th century. Renewed Viking threats in the late 10th century led to the banks being strengthened, a stone wall being built on the top. This sequence has been found at other 'burhs' also. If the walls are Alfredian, is the lay-out of the streets within them a direct result of their construction? Obviously the main roads are dictated by the positions of the gates, and a road around the inside circuit of the walls would be necessary for access. The side streets of Wareham run back at right angles from the main streets, and it is possible that they were deliberately established in this grid pattern. Significantly, the only part of the town where there is no grid is the area round the castle, which was forcibly inserted into the south-east corner in the late 11th century. It was built over the existing streets, which were diverted round it.

The town was not instantly filled with houses by the provision of this street lay-out. Large areas would have been left open, as grazing land, orchards and gardens. Probably the most densely built-up areas would have been down by the water-front, the best commercial district. A steady expansion north-wards might be expected, an expansion perhaps reflected in the building of the church of St. Martin, to meet the requirements of a larger population.

In its churches, Wareham is as unusual as in so many other ways. It is tragic that Lady St. Mary was pulled down in the 1840's, but at least we have some idea of what it was like. It was as big as any known Saxon minster. The three which are most similar to it are all 8th or 9th century in date. If Lady St. Mary was on that scale, it was the biggest known church in pre-Viking Wessex, much bigger than Winchester at that period. St. Martin's is on a much smaller scale, and is a good example of a late Saxon 'parish' church. Its position by the north gate is not accidental, but it can hardly have been meant as part of the

actual defences of the town.

THE ST. MARTINS HOUSE EXCAVATION

Wareham was one of the most important towns in England, and the more we can understand of it, the more we shall understand the history of English towns generally, and of the development of our society. Because it ceased to be an important place during the Middle Ages, the traces left in the ground by its first inhabitants may be more recognizable than in most towns, where the digging of deep cellars and foundations has destroyed much of the archaeology.

In January, 1974, a trial excavation showed that under the front garden of the former St. Martin's House in North Street are pits and ditches that contain pottery from the period after the town became one of Alfred's 'burhs'. By kind permission of the owners of the site, Messrs. Cummings and Morrish, a full excavation of the most promising areas is to be undertaken. From this we may learn more about the history of Wareham during the early Middle Ages. It is unlikely that we shall get any information about the period when the town was first growing up, because the first settlers almost certainly occupied the ground round the quay to the south. We hope to learn more about the planning and lay-out of the 'Alfredian burh', and how the town developed. Wareham may perhaps be used as a test case for many other English towns, in which similar evidence has been totally destroyed.

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