

THE BURGHAL HIDAGE — AXBRIDGE

BY MICHAEL BATT



The *burhs* of Langport (V.C.H. Somerset, iii, pp. 14, 16, 22-23), Lyng (Hill, 1967) and Watchet (Grinsell, 1965; Hill, verbal at Glastonbury conference, Spring 1972) have already been subject to recent research towards identifying their early defences. This has left Axbridge as the only remaining Burghal Hidage town in Somerset where the line of the defences has not been identified. There are no contemporary documents of value that will identify their position; therefore they will only be located by archaeological methods. The following hypothesis, conceived from map and fieldwork evidence in 1973, is put forward as a suggestion.

Axbridge, a former Royal Borough, is listed as a defended Saxon town (*burh*) in the early 10th century (Hill, 1969, p. 87). Early references to Axbridge are *Axanbrycg* c. 910 (Burghal Hidage), *Axebrage* c. 1084 (Geld Rolls), c. 1168 (Pipe Rolls) [Ekwall, 1960]. The name is generally considered to mean 'the Burh by the Axe'. The River Axe is one mile away to the south. Although aerial photographs show old river courses close to the present town, it is unlikely that the main course of the River Axe ever ran through the town.

The 15th century Axbridge Chronicle (Axbridge Borough Records I.35) describes how 'in the times of Adelstan, Edmund, Edred and Edgar and St. Edward' *burhs* were established on the royal estates. Axbridge, like examples already identified in Somerset, Devon and Wiltshire, is likely to have been surrounded by some form of defence (Brooks, 1964; Hill, 1967; Biddle and Hill, 1971; Heighway, 1973). The size of the defended area can be calculated from the Burghal Hidage text. This does not, however, give us its location. It contained a mint (five coins in the British Museum, nine in Stockholm, three in Copenhagen and two in private hands) and probably a market. In the Domesday Survey of 1086 Axbridge is recorded as having '32 Burgesses [who] pay 20 shillings'. It was an intrinsic part of the royal manor of Cheddar, and its defences may have served as a refuge for the people of the royal estate during times of insecurity.

All versions of the Burghal Hidage text (Hill, 1969, p. 87) state that to the town of Axbridge belonged 400 hides. As the ending of one of the Burghal Hidage texts sets out, one hide supplied one man to maintain the *burh* wall. Every pole (5½ yards) of wall was to be manned by four men. The 400 men belonging to the Hides of Axbridge would therefore have been sufficient to cover 550 yards (500 metres) of *burh* wall. General opinion has hitherto placed the *burh* around the present Square with the church standing approximately on the north east corner. Although excellent for the supply of water, this site would prove totally unsuitable as a defensive position. An alternative hypothesis, suggested by Shaftesbury, Dorset (R.C.H.M., 1972), is that during the early medieval period, the Square developed as a market place outside the original defences. If such was the case, where was the Axbridge *burh* situated?

It is suggested that the *burh* lay immediately to the south of the Square on flatter ground. This area, between the moorland to the south and the steep slopes of Axbridge Hill to the north, is better suited for a defence site. It would overlook the narrowest part of the Axe Valley before it widens out into the coastal levels, and commands access up-river to the royal headquarters at Cheddar. Such a position for the *burh*, based on the evidence below, is reflected in the alignment of lanes and walls, with Moorland Street as the earlier main street (Fig. A). The outline of the *burh* is defined on the north between points A-B by buildings fronting on to the south side of the Square and Meadow Street, with a north gate at the end of Moorland Street; on the east, by the rear wall-line of burge plots fronting on to the east side of Moorland Street between points B-C; the southern limit is defined between points C-D by Moor Green which probably extended to point C with a postulated south gate where Moorland Street crosses the boundary line. The gap between

Axbridge. The area of the Burh:  Pook Lane 

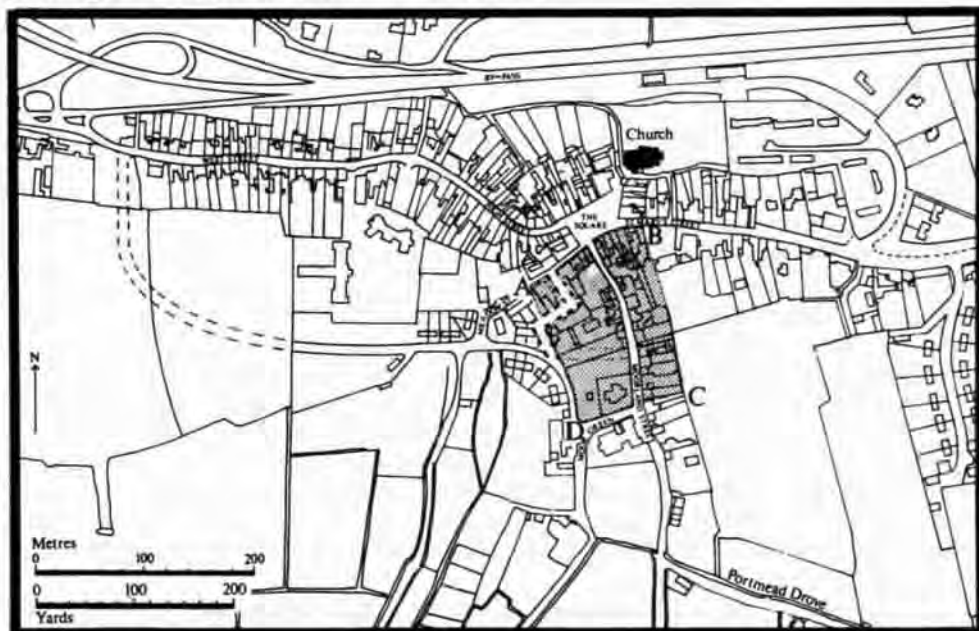


Fig. A

 Areas liable to winter flooding.  Road shown on Dav & Masters map of 1782.  Old river courses

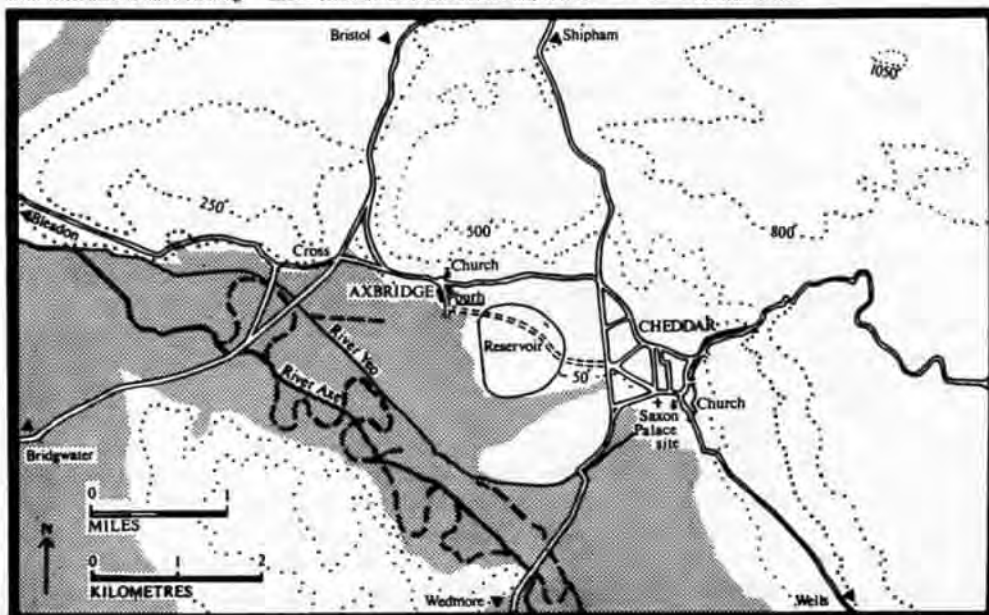


Fig. B

a row of cottages is now blocked by a 19th century building. Between points D-A the west side is defined by Pook Lane which, at its junction with Moor Green, runs in a slight hollow, possibly marking an earlier ditch. Pook Lane formerly made an unexplained dog-leg before joining Meadow Street; it is likely that this was to avoid a badly drained area called the Portlake (Gough, 1931, p. 179, 185 and *passim*). Pook Lane disappeared during the council house development in the 1950s.

The outline of the *burh* defined by points A, B, C and D, measures 550 yards (500 metres) on the ground. This figure coincides with the measurement calculated from the Burghal Hidage text (Hill, 1969, p. 87).

Evidence for the above hypothesis was obtained from maps followed by fieldwork. Moorland Street, suggested above as the early main street, is now only a narrow lane running south from the Square; but burgage plots aligned on existing street frontages are clearly evident on both sides (O.S. 25-inch, 2nd edition 1903). At its northern end they have been obliterated by the later insertion of buildings with frontages now facing on to the present Square. On the Day and Masters Map of 1782, Moorland Street appears to be the road leaving Axbridge by the south (Fig. B). It headed eastwards along the edge of the moor and finally to Cheddar. The first edition (1811) one-inch Ordnance map shows two roads leaving Cheddar and heading as if to pass south of Axbridge. Neither joined Portmead Drove, the extension of Moorland Street. Probably the 1782 route had fallen into disuse by the early 19th century. Nonetheless, its former existence implies that Moorland Street once had greater importance as part of a through-route than the present topography alone would suggest.

Similarly, the road from Cross, which becomes West Street and High Street, had changed its course. Instead of swinging eastwards into the Square as it does now, it would have headed straight towards the suggested north gate of the *burh*. The curious kink that deflects the present street into the Square is perhaps the result of 15th/16th century building obliterating the earlier street plan. Originally, West Street, High Street and Moorland Street formed one through-road. The Tithe Apportionment map, 1840, shows no significant change compared to its layout as shown on the 25-inch Ordnance map of 1903.

Why should medieval development occur outside the *burh*? Several factors probably influenced such a growth. Defence no longer being a primary concern, the commercial and domestic convenience of being close to the springs stimulated an east-west 'ribbon development' additional to the north-south axis of the *burh*. In consequence, during the post-Conquest period, settlement expanded on the east-west line of the present road. Traffic from Cheddar took a more convenient route higher up the slope of Mendip, and now entered the town via St. Mary's Street. The southern route fell into disuse sometime after the end of the 18th century.

Further evidence for movement of the urban core comes from the siting of the church. It is just outside the north-east corner of the Square, hidden behind buildings and set into the hillside. It is strange that the church did not take up a more dominant position in relation to the Square. It seems that the siting of the church is secondary to the development of the market.

A possible arrangement for Saxon Axbridge is therefore that the town defences were sited on the most suitable piece of flat and narrow ground available. The road from Cross was deliberately routed through this Axbridge *burh*, via north and south gates, along the edge of the moor east towards Cheddar. In effect, the road forced its commercial traffic through the *burh*. Commercial expansion and a desire to be closer to a good supply of water are likely to have been factors that led to the present street pattern having developed by the 12th century, with the existing Church being added *c.* 13th century and thoroughly reconstructed in the 14th-15th century (Knight, 1915, p. 386).

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