

ILCHESTER: A STUDY IN CONTINUITY

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One of the problems at present exercising archaeologists and historians in this country is that of urban origins, more especially where it has so far proved impossible satisfactorily to bridge the period which separates a Roman from a Saxon town. Somerset is potentially of considerable importance in the whole question of continuity after the withdrawal of the Roman military presence, but the material evidence has so far proved difficult to interpret with precision. The archaeologist is attempting to lengthen the life of Romano-British culture by re-assessment of pottery forms and by close examination of urban and other sites; it is possible that the historian may be able to suggest earlier origins for urban features which first appear in written records in the 10th and 11th centuries. The two lines of enquiry may never meet with anything like the precision normally accepted, but there may, in fortunate cases, come a conjunction which illumines the Dark Ages even in a small area, paving the way for understanding on a wider front.

The attention focussed on Ilchester¹ provides a peculiarly apt field for a study of this kind. Research for the writing of its history in conventional form has gathered together the few surviving written sources for its early development, and excavation under modern conditions in advance of roads and housing has already displayed a wealth of material evidence which will be published in due course.² This paper is offered as an attempt to bring the work of the historian and the archaeologist closer together in one Somerset town. It clearly raises more problems than it solves, but its methods may assist other workers in urban contexts towards a better understanding of a crucial period in our history.

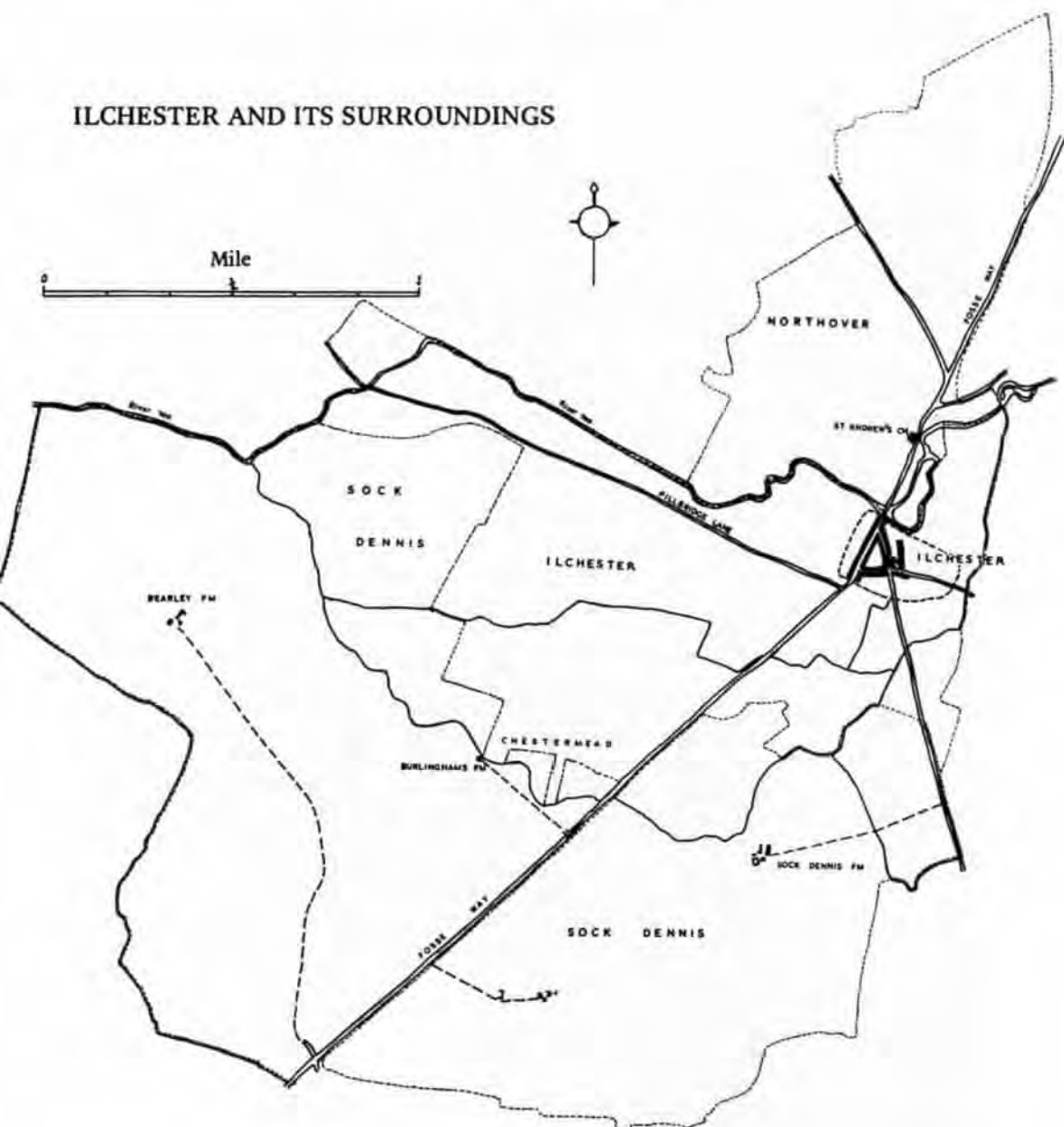
There are five references to Ilchester in Domesday Book. In the first it is grouped with Milborne Port among the king's land, the ancient demesne of the Crown. Among that same group is Somerton, owned by the kings of Wessex before 733³, Carhampton, which Alfred left in his will (dated between 873 and 888) to his son Edward the Elder,⁴ and Cheddar, whose royal palace site dating from the 9th century has been revealed by excavation.⁵ This grouping does not prove royal West Saxon ownership for Ilchester for an early period, but the later claim that the town was part of the great manor of Somerton⁶ makes it at least very likely. By 1086 Ilchester was the home of 107 people described as burgesses, paying 20 s., and there was a market with attached members worth £11.

The second entry records that William de Moion paid the third penny from Ilchester worth £6. In two further entries occurs the fact that Maurice, bishop of London, held the church of St. Andrew there with three hides of land and a mill, worth 100 s., a property which one Brictric held in the Confessor's time. All this evidence together is the documentary foundation for our knowledge of 11th-century Ilchester.^{6a}

We begin with St. Andrew. There was no church with such a dedication among the parishes later found in the medieval town, but there was and is one at Northover, the settlement immediately north of Ilchester across the Yeo, a manor not otherwise recorded in Domesday. The size of the estate attached to the church in 1086 is strikingly similar in size to that of the ancient parish of Northover, its three hides corresponding closely to the 438 acres of the titheable area in the 19th century less the 75 acres of common reclaimed under enclosure.⁷

A church with an estate of this size in the 11th century may well have possessed it for the support of a community of priests rather than for a single pastor. Northover's church almost certainly was one of those centres usually described as minsters, from which Christianity was spread into a pagan countryside probably from the turn of the 8th century. The earliest documented minster in Somerset was at Wells, founded by 774,⁸ which in 909 became the cathedral of the first bishop of Somerset. The two churches, incidentally, share the same dedication. Minsters are often recognised if not by their estates then by

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connections with other churches in their vicinity, links which persisted for centuries revealing the way daughters were founded from a mother church. No such links have been established with Northover, perhaps because its status as a minster did not survive the Conquest. In the Confessor's time if not before it had become the property of Glastonbury Abbey, and any secular community there would then probably have disappeared. Subsequent occupation under the abbey by the great Saxon landowner Brictric and then ownership by

the former royal chancellor Maurice, bishop of London, could have meant the exploitation of the estate to the detriment of its function as support to a mother church.

Whether or not it was a minster, St. Andrew's church was certainly rich. Its origins, however, are a matter for speculation; though it is perhaps worth noting that Glastonbury acquired its estates in the surrounding area in the mid-10th century.⁹ The elevated site of the church is reminiscent of several deliberately planted where a pagan shrine had formerly stood, though as yet little is known of the archaeology of its immediate vicinity beyond the discovery of many burials to the west of Northover village. It is at least possible that this ancient ecclesiastical site was once a Roman shrine, perhaps associated with a Roman cemetery; and that here should be sought the signs of early Christianity, in an extra-mural development away from the confined military and administrative quarters of the town, forming a separate ecclesiastical and residential settlement beyond the river.

We may consider now the southern boundary of Ilchester, where lay the two parts of the ancient parish of Sock Dennis, divided from each other by the Fosse and by some rich meadow land, shared until the 18th century by a number of neighbouring parishes. At Domesday there were two estates called *Soche*, one now identified as Mudford Sock, some miles to the east; and the other as the later parish of Sock Dennis.¹⁰ This latter was held in 1086 by Robert son of Ivo, Robert the Constable, as tenant of the great fief of the Count of Mortain centred on Montacute. In King Edward's time it had been held by seven thegns. The estate, with 3½ hides of arable, had as much as 70 acres of meadow. There is nothing in the Domesday entry which marks *Soche* as significantly different from any other rural estate, and there were no recorded links with its neighbour Ilchester.

There are, however, small pieces of later evidence which suggest that links may have existed. In the early part of the 14th century Sock was considered the 'foreign' of the borough of Ilchester.¹¹ Its economic ties were by that time very close (as no doubt they were in the 11th century), and its population was then and in 1377 linked with the town and with Northover.¹² At the same time land in Ilchester parish was held *de tenura de Sooke Denys*.¹³ More suggestive still is the description of the dower lands of Margaret Courtenay, countess of Devon, which in the late 14th century included a carucate of arable and 20 acres of meadow in Ilchester 'and the soke', together with the advowson of Ilchester.¹⁴ This phrase 'and the soke' may simply be a government clerk's misunderstanding of the place-name Sock, since the same property was not so described when Margaret's husband died, but it may mask an earlier and significant origin.

The advowson owned by the Courtenays was that of the church of St. Michael.¹⁵ The origin of that church is not certainly known, but its site was over the south gate of the town, the gate over the old road to Yeovil and Dorchester; and its parish may thus have included not only part of the walled town but also an area outside it. The Courtenays had certainly acquired the land and the church by 1311, probably from the once powerful Cirencester family.¹⁶ We may here have an example of a proprietary church, common enough in larger towns, founded by one of Ilchester's most influential inhabitants in the 13th century and endowed with land outside the walls which became part of its parish. Could such a link, such a jurisdiction, either be confused with a soke or indeed be the surviving remnant of one?

Shortly before the Courtenays are known to have held this land at Sock there died in 1294 Nicholas Bonville, owner of the manor of Sock Dennis. At the inquisition held after his death it was found that he held with the manor a 'haywardwyk' in Ilchester which the king had given to his ancestors.¹⁷ This gift, or rather exchange, for land at North Petherton, was evidently made between King John and William Dacus. Thomas Gerard, the 17th-century antiquary, knew of this transaction, and described Dacus' estate as 'now called Socke and Bealy'.¹⁸ The jury answering questions about local government in 1275 described the same property as the *haywardria de Sok*.¹⁹ A century earlier, however, when first entered in the Pipe Rolls, it was called *beiwarderia et bechinga*, and occurs in the

rolls for several years thereafter as William Dacus paid for it his rent of £6 10s.²⁰ Some of this land can roughly be located. A messuage and 18 acres called *beychyng* and 7 acres *de baywarderia*, the former evidently a compact unit, the latter scattered between the leper house near the Fosse and the road to Pillbridge, were given by Dacus before 1220 as part of his endowment for the religious house known as Whitehall.²¹

Haywarderia and *beychyng* were terms which clearly had some significance in 1200, terms which seem to have included specified areas of land. The word *becbinga* is interpreted linguistically as meaning hedging, and Dacus' grant seems to imply an inclosure. But *baywarderia* or haywardwyk seem to imply something more, perhaps a jurisdiction exercised by the forbears of the Ailward Haiward otherwise Aylward Lagga, Aylward the lawman, who was a Crown tenant of land outside the walls of Ilchester in 1200 and who was subsequently a tenant of William Dacus.²²

These extra-mural estates are themselves of some topographical and archaeological interest. For his service to Queen Eleanor, Nicholas son of Richard de Wiltshire was in 1200 granted five messuages outside the walls of Ilchester, together with a mill. William Dacus, one of his tenants, held a messuage, an acre of arable in the fields, and an acre called Stat Aker, presumably inclosed. Another tenant, Richard Liche, held a messuage 'by the water on the right side of the exit from the west gate'.²³ Is this the gate over the Fosse, for the area certainly concerned land south-west of the town; and if so, does not the presence of a mill imply a flow of water as part of the town's defences?

But *baywarderia* and *beychyng* and perhaps the very name Sock imply something more significant than 12th-century extra-mural expansion. May they not at the very least suggest something pre-Conquest, involving as they do an Englishman, Ailward Lagga, and William Dacus, William the Dane? Have we not here traces of Ilchester in the 10th century when it first became the site of a mint, and echoes of those equally hazy jurisdictions of a greater-city, the *sokes* of contemporary London?²⁴

Two other features of the southern and south-western areas may help to take the story further. Parish and manorial boundaries dividing Sock from Ilchester between the Fosse and the Yeo still in the 19th century interlocked in such a way as to suggest early intercommoning of the meadow by the Fosse known as Chestermead, though the boundary further east, between the Fosse and the Dorchester road was more rationally defined by an ancient watercourse. In this southern section there seems to have been a clear demarcation between the two jurisdictions. This part of Ilchester was divided into crofts by ditches and in the early 14th century was cut by the lane to Chilthorne, the status of the former Roman Dorchester road.²⁵ The corresponding part of Sock had strong ties southwards, for its church was a daughter of Yeovil and it lay in the hundred of Stone. The hundred had once belonged to the borough of Ilchester until taken away by King John, and the Domesday burgesses may have attended its court, presumably at the hundred stone near Yeovil.²⁶ This is admittedly speculation, and seems to run counter to the links with Somerton described earlier unless the Yeovil link was of fairly recent origin in the 11th century. The link between Sock church and Yeovil was, however, real enough, the rector of Sock paying a pension to Yeovil at least until 1428.²⁷

There was no such clear definition between Ilchester and the detached portion of Sock further west, illustrated well by the grant by John Herwarde to Robert Veele in 1387 of arable and meadow in Ilchester field *de tenura de Sooke Denys*.²⁸ The fragmentation of tenures in Ilchester Mead before enclosure in 1810, with small strips of land in the south largely in Tintinhull parish and larger inclosures with small subdivisions further north along the Fosse, can be traced back at least to the 13th century if not earlier, to a time when the meadow land was divided into sesters, reckoned as sixths of an acre, and to a proliferation of tenants including before 1300 St. John's Hospital at Bath, Montacute Priory and Bermondsey Priory, and the Beauchamps of Stoke (hence the piece later in Stoke parish),²⁹ as well as some of the leading families of Ilchester. At the same time at least

part of the area was occupied by buildings: Stukeley commented that there were fragments of houses west of the town in the Mead, perhaps referring to the remains of the leper hospital at Sockford, still apparently visible in the 16th century, and itself near land called Casteler or Chastell which may have denoted an earlier building.

The recent discovery of what appear to be ancient boundary ditches to the west of the Fosse, together with evidence of Roman occupation both in Sock, Bearley and Ilchester Mead, may suggest a greater intensity of occupation in this area than hitherto suspected, and may perhaps point to continuity represented at least by some surviving estate boundaries. Such continuity may be suggested best at Bearley, that part of the parish of Tintinhull lying west of the Fosse and adjoining Sock. Bounded on two sides by watercourses and on the third by the Fosse itself and by a small meadow called Berligeam in the 13th century and now Burlinghams, its core was clearly a consolidated holding in the 16th century.³⁰ In its turn this holding can with some certainty be traced back to a 5-hide unit given before 946 by King Edmund to a thegn called Wilfric. And although no systematic excavation has taken place at Bearley Farm there is evidence of Roman occupation near the site of the farm buildings. It seems thus a distinct possibility, to put it no higher, that at least some of the parishes near Ilchester whose boundaries are governed by the Fosse, owe something directly to the boundaries chosen by Romano-British farmers; and that Bearley, the two parts of Sock and probably Northover, surrounding Romano-British farm complexes or suburbs found or only suspected, are contributions to the growing body of evidence for the continuity of landscape features over two thousand years.

The town area itself presents a different type of problem. By the accident of survival the surroundings of Ilchester are better documented than the town in the early medieval period. The evidence of coins, however, reveals that the town was suitable for the site of a mint from 973, though how far this proves defensive strength or economic significance is open to argument. The town was certainly defended by iron-bound gates until John's reign and was successfully held against attack by Robert Mowbray in 1087-8. The possible removal of its mint in the military emergency of Ethelred's reign in the 10th century to South Cadbury suggests that adequate defences were then lacking, and that the gates and walls, raised on more ancient foundations, belonged to the period of the Conquest or the half-century before.

Within the limited confines of the town there was little scope for the medieval street pattern to deviate significantly from the Roman. The Fosse in the 13th century was a public highway, a *regalem viam*,³¹ and as such its line was likely to be less unstable than that of the Dorchester road whose deviation from the line of the Roman south gate was probably the result of its demotion to the status of a country lane.³²

The most remarkable feature of early medieval Ilchester, however, was the proliferation of churches within the town, though obviously not on the scale of Exeter or Winchester, Lincoln or London. A study of the dedications of these churches, with one exception, will not reveal results like those from London: St. Mary Major and St. Mary Minor, St. John, St. Peter, St. Michael and St. Leonard belong to almost any period. But the one exception, which Ilchester has in common with London, York and Exeter among other towns, is a church dedicated to St. Olaf of Norway. Both in London and York his churches are certainly pre-Conquest in origin and represent the presence of a group of Viking settlers.³³ And, like Exeter,³⁴ Ilchester had a Dacus family in the 12th century whose immediate ancestors would seem to have been Scandinavian immigrants.

If the dedications are otherwise of little precise significance, the appearance of so many churches in such a small area is an important fact. The foundation of such churches is normally attributed to rich landholders or groups of citizens and belongs to the 11th and early 12th centuries.³⁵ Documentary evidence for Ilchester's ecclesiastical history is not available until the end of the 12th century, by which time it is clear that ownership was in the hands of religious houses: Montacute owned St. Olave's by 1180, Glastonbury

held St. Peter's by about 1191, Muchelney was patron of St. Mary Major until 1239, and Cerne in Dorset had yielded its rights over St. Mary Minor by 1242. Only Muchelney seems to have held any other property in the town, and that but small; so the idea that these churches were founded for monastic tenants is unlikely. The alternative of lay foundation and subsequent purchase by the religious during the course of the 12th century must be preferred if the theory of *eigenkirchen*, the proprietary church founded for a small urban estate, is to be applied to Ilchester.

But why if the religious were thus interested in the town was it not the site of an important religious house? The monastic holdings in the 13th century may indeed have originated out of necessity, the founders of these small churches or their successors turning to the religious orders when the slender resources of tiny parishes could no longer give adequate support. Ilchester was surely secure enough in an economic sense in the 11th century and remained so long enough to attract the friars two hundred years later. The answer is partly one of chronology. Of the early Saxon monasteries founded in the county, only Bath was in any sense urban, and all belonged to the earliest phase of Christianisation, ending with Alfred's foundation of Athelney. Thereafter the Faith was spread through the minster-based secular communities, some like Wells contemporary with the monasteries, others perhaps belonging to the revival of religious life after the Viking invasions. That Ilchester was not the site of one of the early monasteries suggests no more than that it was not remote like Muchelney or Athelney; that it was the site of a minster has already been strongly suggested. That this minster did not survive to become a house of canons regular like the minsters at Taunton or Bruton may well have been due to the monks of Glastonbury who in the mid-10th century acquired estates in the immediate vicinity at Podimore, Bearley and Tintinhull,³⁶ and possessed the minster itself by the Confessor's time. So, when John de Villula moved his seat from Wells as part of Norman policy to base bishoprics on populous towns and not country villages, he did not look to the town soon to become Somerset's capital, but to one which, despite its inconvenient position, at least had a religious establishment to give him a home.

Thus unlike most of the medieval towns in Somerset, and indeed unlike most of the principal medieval towns of the whole country in the 11th century, Ilchester was not a religious but a secular and commercial town, with a thriving market and a mint. In 1166-7, in addition, it became the chosen site for the county gaol, and thenceforward for two centuries the administrative centre of the county. In or before 1180 its burgesses formed themselves into a guild and shortly afterwards acquired a charter of liberties from the Crown giving them rights like their fellows in Winchester. It was a town of importance, a town which reached a peak of prosperity in the mid-13th century after three hundred years of known development since the foundation of its mint in Edgar's reign. Its minster may take us back another century or more, but only archaeology can take us further. Will excavation be able to prove continuity of settlement from Roman times?

The visitor to Ilchester in the 20th century sees little evidence of all this medieval prosperity. Apart from the church there is scarcely a building earlier than the 18th century and much which bears the stamp of the battles for control of the electorate in the early 19th century. It has not been an urban centre in any real sense since the 16th century, though it clung to many of the trappings with remarkable tenacity. Should it now become the site of a new town, ready to take advantage of the excellent communications, would not history be repeating itself? The poor relics of a meagre past would be swept away, leaving to view the more solid evidence of an earlier prosperity. It is surely inconceivable that the site was actually abandoned after the 5th century even with the collapse of local administration which was probably its *raison d'être*, though there may have been nothing which could claim to be urban. Much evidence of the town's past was swept away, without the benefit of scientific investigation, in the medieval expansion; much may still remain to be revealed by archaeological investigation, at least in those areas outside the walls

where medieval occupation was sparse and where the modern developer has yet to dig his foundations.

1. Summarised in the *Victoria County History of Somerset*, iii (1974), 179-302, which drew heavily on the work of J. Stevens Cox in his *A History of Ilchester* (1947-58), his *Ilchester and District Occasional Papers* (1972-) and on his unpublished excavation material. Statements in this paper are based on references given in the *V.C.H.* article under 'Ilchester' unless otherwise indicated.
2. Excavation by the Committee for Rescue Archaeology in Avon, Gloucestershire and Somerset.
3. *V.C.H. Somerset*, iii, 134.
4. *English Historical Documents*, i, ed. D. Whitelock, 493.
5. P. A. Rahtz, 'The Saxon and Medieval Palaces at Cheddar', *Medieval Archaeology*, vi-viii (1962-3), 53-66, reprinted in *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.* 108, 99-112.
6. *Rotuli Hundredorum* (Record Commission), ii, 128.
- 6a. The fifth entry refers to Ilchester's link with Castle Cary.
7. *V.C.H. Somerset*, iii, 224, 227.
8. *Early Charters of Wessex*, ed. H. P. R. Finberg, 117.
9. *Ibid.*, 134, 142-3.
10. *V.C.H. Somerset*, iii, 230-5.
11. *Ibid.*, 234.
12. *Som. & Dors. Notes & Queries*, 29, 12.
13. *Ilchester Almsbouse Deeds*, ed. W. Buckler (1866), no. 74.
14. *Calendar of Close Rolls*, 1377-81, 10; *ibid.* 1389-92, 441.
15. *V.C.H. Somerset*, iii, 197-8.
16. Thomas de Cirencester, son of the former under-sheriff, retained a life interest when Courtenay purchased the property: *ibid.* 197.
17. *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem*, iii, p. 160.
18. *Particular Description of Somerset* (Som. Rec. Soc., xv), 207.
19. *Rotuli Hundredorum*, ii, 139.
20. *Pipe Roll 1204* (Pipe Roll Soc. new series 18), 184.
21. T. Hugo, *White Hall in Ilchester*, 71-2.
22. *Rotuli Chartarum* (Record Commission), 71; *White Hall in Ilchester*, 71-2.
23. *Rotuli Chartarum*, 71.
24. C.N.L. Brooke, *London 800-1216: the shaping of a city*, 155-7.
25. British Library, Harleian Charter 46 F 16.
26. J. Tait, *Medieval English Boroughs*, 54-5.
27. *V.C.H. Somerset*, iii, 234.
28. *Ilchester Almsbouse Deeds*, no. 74.
29. *Ibid.* p. 23; *Som. Rec. Soc.* viii, 147; xxxv, 12; lxxiii, 50-1.
30. *V.C.H. Somerset*, iii, 258.
31. *Rotuli Hundredorum*, ii, 126.
32. The slight deviation was revealed in excavations of the south gate in the rectory garden.
33. Brooke, *London 800-1216*, 141; *V.C.H. Yorks., City of York*, 397.
34. Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Various Collections*, iv, 58, 60.
35. Brooke, *London 800-1216*, 143.
36. *Early Charters of Wessex*, 134, 142-3.