

Conservation Area Comments.

Section 2.3 Revisions to the Boundary

1) Ashwell Street between Bear Lane and Partridge Hill

The report contains the following paragraph:

The inclusion of the unpaved parts of Ashwell Street along with some of its late-twentieth century houses, which are set back from the road with large gardens, has also been considered. In addition, the allotments, a late twentieth century works building and modern houses have been assessed. Views from here out of the village to open fields and the strong connection to the countryside are important attributes but these areas do not contribute to the architectural or historic special interest of the Conservation Area.

Further consideration should be given to including this section of Ashwell in the Conservation Area.

Although there is only one listed building in the area it does have historical value.

- 1 The origins of Icknield Way and Ashwell Street are being reconsidered by academics. It was claimed by The Viatores in *Roman Roads in the South-East Midlands*, London 1964, that Ashwell Street was a Roman road stretching from the present A1 into Cambridgeshire and beyond. The methodology of The Viatores is being questioned as many of the roads they identified archaeology has shown were not in fact Roman. The research of Valory Hurst, a well-respected local historian living in Bassingbourn, has strongly suggested that there was a Roman road through what is now Ashwell but that it went from Gatley End in Steeple Morden parish, along the present track but carried on straight when the present track veers to the south-west 400/500m to the east of the junction of Ashwell Street and the Shire Balk. The Roman road carried straight on, south of the Ruddery Spring to the junction of Station Road and Lucas Lane in Ashwell, along what is roughly High Street to West End where it did not turning to the south-west at Chantry House but carried straight on south of the Westbury springs, across Hinxworth Road, joined Caldecote Way and then on to the present A1. This means that Ashwell Street in Ashwell was not a Roman Road but is probably Anglo-Saxon.

Valory Hurst has not published her thoughts but she and I have discussed them at length. She has been studying the ancient roads and tracks of South Cams and North Herts for some years.

- 2 Prof Susan Oosthuizen in her book *The Emergence of the English*, Leeds 2019, argues that landscape that has been traditionally thought to have been Anglo-Saxon is most likely to be pre-Roman. This means that some of the roads and boundaries between open field will be pre-historic. One of the ancient open fields of Ashwell was Quarry Field the boundary of which consisted of the western parish boundary (parish balk and Cat ditch), Claybush Road from Cat Ditch to opposite the Knoll, the track over Partridge Hill down to Newnham Way and then along Hinxworth Road to the parish boundary. This includes the section of Partridge Hill from Newnham Way to Ashwell Street which would be pre-historic.
- 3 I have argued in my Chapter, 'Ashwell: an example of Anglo-Saxon town planning' in Slater, T & Goose, N, eds., *A County of Small Towns*, Hatfield 2008, that the town of Ashwell was created by Edward the Elder c.920 as a borough, a market town, as part of his process of spreading the influence of Wessex north of the River Lea into Danelaw. From early Christian times there would have been a minster church, most likely on the site of St Mary's, and a main house, probably near where the present Ashwell Bury is, where the lord of the estate lived. St Mary's being a minster church

is argued by Prof Mary Whitelock in *The Will of Aethelgifu, A Tenth-Century Anglo-Saxon Manuscript*, Roxburghe Club, 1968. This meant it was an important collegiate church covering an Anglo-Saxon estate based on Ashwell.

- 3 The king kept control of Ashwell until the manor and church were granted to Westminster Abbey by Edward the Confessor in 1065. I have argued that the town consisted of three main streets, High/Front/Main Street, Back Street and Mill Street. Back Street was not the present road which was inserted into the street pattern, with Silver Street, Kingsland Way, Bear Lane and Wilsons Lane, in the medieval period. Back Street in 920 would have been what we now refer to as Ashwell Street. The name Back Street, wherever it is used, refers to the road on the backside of the plots facing the main street. This means that the burgage plots went, uninterrupted, from High Street to Ashwell Street. See Fig 1.

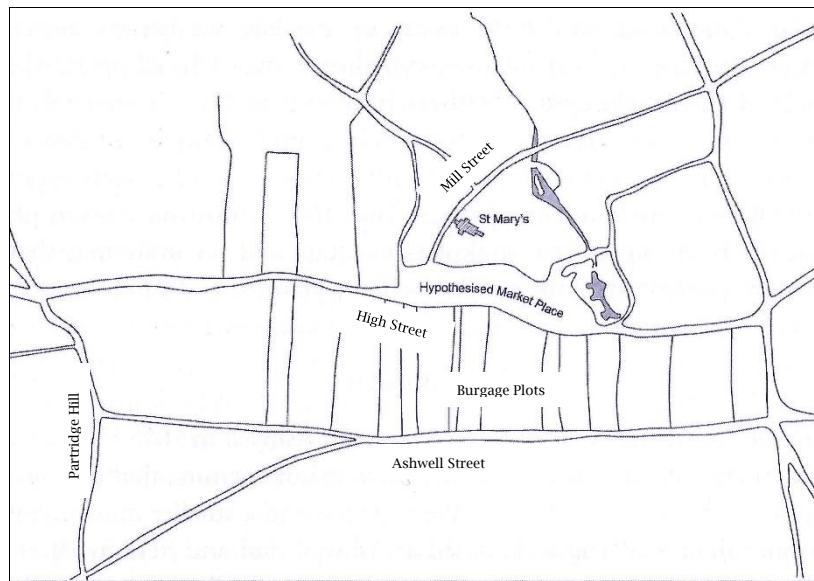


Fig 1. Anglo-Saxon Ashwell

- 4 Until the road going from the Great North Road, i.e. A1, was made up there was a minor road from Ashwell to Newnham. Prior to the road being macadamised the road that went from the Great North Road, and as such from Radwell and Stotfold and even Baldock, to Ashwell went to what were known as the potato sheds, straight on to Cat Ditch, up Ashwell Hill, around the south of Arbury Banks, to Ashwell Street and then to the junction with Bear Lane. Newnham was avoided. When made up the road it was decided that it was best to take the made up road through Newnham and then to Ashwell.

Conclusion

This area of Ashwell, although it only has one listed building in it, is still part of the history of the present settlement. Partridge Hill track is most likely a prehistoric field boundary and Ashwell Street part of the borough created c.920.

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