English Heritage Extensive Urban Survey

An archaeological assessment of

Lower Weare

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SOMERSET EXTENSIVE URBAN SURVEY

LOWER WEARE

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

by Miranda Richardson

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SOMERSET EXTENSIVE URBAN SURVEY

LOWER WEARE

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

Somerset County Council would like to thank all the people who assisted in the compiling or editing of this report.

I. INTRODUCTION

This report forms one of a series commissioned by English Heritage and prepared by Somerset County Council with the aim of assessing urban archaeology as part of the Monuments Protection Programme. The work was carried out from 1994 to 1998 by Clare Gathercole and Miranda Richardson (from 1996), managed by Chris Webster. The reports are essentially as completed during that period but have been updated by Chris Webster with new archaeological information in early 2001.

English Heritage has funded two programmes assess the urban archaeological resource - intensive and extensive. The former is restricted to the major historic cities, characterised by a great depth of archaeological remains, a wealth of historical documentation and in many cases, by a great deal of archaeological investigation. The extensive urban surveys cover the smaller towns and are based on information in the local Sites and Monuments Record with limited amounts of new information collected during the project. Once the information has been collected and mapped, attention is focused on the analysis of the town plan and defining topographic units within the town. This will lead to the preparation of guidance for planners, developers and others involved in the management of the town.

II. MAJOR SOURCES

1. Primary documents

There is no record of Lower Weare (or Nether Weare as it is sometimes known) prior to the medieval period. Documents referring to the medieval town exist, including two referring to it as a borough in 1243 and 1265, a royal grant of 1280 and documents belonging to the hospital of St. Marks in Bristol who had been granted burgages in the town at about the same time. A charter of 1316-17 refers to watercourses, mills and sluices in Lower Weare. (Aston and Leach 1977:85)

2. Local histories

There are no local histories of Lower Weare or as yet coverage by the VCH. This report is based on Aston and Leech (1977:85-6).

3. Maps

Other than the 1815 parish map of Weare, the 1839 Tithe Map and the 1811 OS surveyor's drawings the OS series has been used for this report. No pre-nineteenth century maps have been located for Lower Weare.

III. A BRIEF HISTORY OF LOWER WEARE

Lower Weare is situated on a gentle bend in the river Axe as it flows through the Axe valley. It was one of a group of medieval river ports along this valley. There is no known evidence of settlement of the site prior to the medieval period although other areas of the Axe valley have extensive field systems thought to date from the Roman period (McDonnell 1985), and the Mendip hills to the north of the valley are rich in prehistoric remains. Therefore the possibility of earlier occupation in the area should not be excluded.

Weare was probably implanted as a market and trading centre with its own port on the river by the

Gournay family who held the manor of Weare and much other land in the Mendip area, in the late 12th or early 13th century. It was represented as a borough in 1243 and was described again as such in 1265. A charter of Edward I of 1280 granted to the burgesses of Nether Weare the same rights as those of Hereford and Breteuil and the right to a market. Private records of the Gournay family and those of St. Marks hospital in Bristol refer to the rents of individual burgage plots in the town. In 1334 the borough of Weare was taxed at one tenth in contrast to the rural part of the parish which was taxed at one fifteenth (Bond c1990:1).

At the height of river trade and the cloth industry Lower Weare was in competition with Rackley, Axbridge and probably wharves at Hythe linked to a market at Cheddar. However it has failed to expand following the demise of both and is now a small village.

IV. THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF LOWER WEARE

GENERAL COMMENTS

1 Archaeological work in the town

There has been no excavation at Lower Weare although artefacts have been recorded when found during ditch cleaning (Ellis 1979, Ellis 1985).

2 Standing structures and visible remains

There are some earthwork features relating to medieval house platforms and port scattered between the present buildings. A thorough field survey would be likely to produce further evidence of this sort. An earthwork platform has been identified to the south (SMR PRN 12818).

2. PREHISTORIC, ROMAN AND SAXON

(No map)

Lower Weare is one of 37 of the 45 historic towns covered by this project at which there is as yet no strong evidence of prehistoric settlement on the site of the later town - though it should be remembered that it is notoriously difficult for archaeologists to demonstrate a prehistoric presence in modern urban areas. Whilst 'towns' were not, generally speaking, a feature of prehistoric landscapes, many of the same factors which made the site desirable in later periods would already have been operative. The Mendip upland sites above Lower Weare - which include nationally important occupation and burial sites dating from the palaeolithic period onwards, and provide evidence of connections with dominant neolithic and bronzeage cultures to the east - are likely to represent but a partial survival of a wider landscape which included the fertile Mendip-foot shelf.

The Roman period was one of deliberate, strategic urbanisation. The area which is now Somerset appears to have been less affected than some other areas by this, in that few really urban sites are known, and this probably reflects its marginal position. However, the widespread distribution of Roman or Romanised settlements shows that the county - particularly east of the Parrett - was heavily populated and exploited in this period.

Lower Weare is one of 26 of the 45 historic towns covered by this project in which there is no evidence of Roman settlement in the area of the later town, though the site lay within a minor complex of settlements bordering the Axe Valley, on the fertile land at the foot of the Mendips, and below the mining areas at Charterhouse.

Though the Post-Roman and early Saxon periods were characterised by a return to non-urban lifestyles, the later Saxon period (from the 8th or 9th century onwards) saw the beginnings of a resurgence of first trading places and then towns, under the control of the Saxon royal families, in the context of a network of royal estate administration centres and subordinate settlements which was already established (in some cases long-established). Though only a relatively small number of places with any claim to be towns existed by the time of the Domesday Survey, many of the subordinate settlements recorded at that point were to become towns in the medieval period. In fact, Lower

Weare is one of only five of the 45 historic towns covered by this project at which there is no evidence of settlement before the medieval period.

3. MEDIEVAL (Map A)

1 Archaeological work in the town/Archaeological knowledge

There has been no excavation in the town. In 1978 Peter Ellis recorded a large number of 11th to 13th century ceramics found during ditch cleaning and apparently in association with an adjacent house platform (1979:93). This find suggests that the settlement may have been founded earlier than the 13th century date suggested by the documentary evidence. Similar material was found to the south in 1985 (Ellis 1985).

2 Context

Both in Britain and on the continent, the medieval period saw the growth of town foundation and, to an extent, urban living (though the bulk of the population continued to live in villages). The reasons for this growth were many and complex. In England they included both general factors - such as the growth of mercantile trade (especially the cloth trade) - and more specific ones - such as the post-Conquest establishment of a network of (theoretically) loyal magnates and prelates with large estates and commercial priveleges. The latter led to the increasing relaxation of the royal stranglehold on the profits of towns and chartered boroughs (where tenants paid cash rents and were free of feudal ties), which in turn enabled the establishment of new purpose-built commercial areas (the majority of places classed as towns in the medieval period have at least some planned elements). Of course, some boroughs were already in existence by the Conquest, and the existing pattern of Saxon urban or semi-urban centres was an important influence on the medieval one. This is evident in Somerset which, like many parts of the south and west (where the majority of the Saxon *burhs* and boroughs had been established), was peppered with small boroughs in the medieval period.

In archaeological terms, the medieval towns are characterised by evidence of partially planned, intensive occupation of restricted areas. Typical features which may occur include: regular, or semi-regular, street layouts; large market places (usually obscured by later encroachments); blocks of regular, long, narrow, plots end on to the commercial frontage; churchyards, either within the medieval layout or outside it - the latter often indicative of a deliberate shift of activity; regular or irregular suburbs or marginal areas occupied by quays, or industrial sites such as mills; and high status sites such as castles, manor sites and large religious precincts.

Lower Weare is one of six of the 45 historic towns identified by this project which were set up in the 12th and 13th centuries as completely new towns on greenfield sites, from an existing settlement or borough (this does not include planned extensions *within* existing boroughs, of which there were also a number). All of these new towns were given borough status by their founders - in this case one of the Norman lords - and were subsequently abandoned, or semi-abandoned, with consequently good archaeological preservation. Lower Weare was also one of eleven of the 45 towns which had a harbour or quays in the medieval period.

3 Standing structures and visible remains

Earthwork features of abandoned house platforms are visible in the village and to the south.

4 Archaeological components (centre), shown on Map A

- a Communications
- (a) Roads, streets and routeways

LOW/401 <u>Bridgwater to Bristol Road</u>

Until the 20th century this road, called 'Old Coach Road' on the 1981 OS, was the main route connecting Bridgwater and Bristol. Lower Weare was therefore well placed on a major crossing point of both river and land transport.

Taken from the 1839 Tithe map.

(b) Harbour and quays

LOW/403 Port

The parish boundary to the north of the village forms a meandering curve which was certainly an earlier course of the river Axe. A group of 'port' field names to the north east of the modern settlement in the bend of the parish boundary and the medieval river course are likely to indicate quays or wharves along the river in this area (Bond c1990:2).

Taken from SMR map.

- b Settlement (Urban)
- (a) Market place(s)

LOW/404

Market Place

A charter granting a market was issued by Edward I in 1280, although it is likely that a market had been operating prior to this grant. The 1825 parish map shows a step in building alignments on the south side of the road, forming a central isosceles triangle which may have been the market place. The construction of Eaglehurst, a building on the south side of the road (after 1825 and before 1886) has straightened the road which now only widens as it passes through the village centre.

Taken from 1825 Parish map.

(b) Burgage plots

LOW/405 Burgages

taken from the modern settlement and field forms. On the north side of the road, two buildings have retained long thin plots stretching back to a drain. Whilst the other plots are reasonably regular in width and form they appear to have given up their backlands which have been consolidated as an orchard. As the road turns towards Cross the drain continues running parallel to the road which may indicate that tenements continued along the road, perhaps as far as Cliff House. Cliff House occupies a long narrow plot similar to the plots in the village centre but approximately twice the width, possibly being formed by a two burgage plots. On the south side of the road the tenements are less obvious, perhaps having been slighted by cutting the present course of the Axe which cuts off the bend in the river still shown by the curving parish boundary. However, a drain on the south-east side of the road as it heads towards Cross is at the same distance as that on the north-

The extent of burgage tenure in the town is not known, although some clues can be

Change in the course of the river would have changed the focus of settlement and probably led to building around the junction of Weare Road and the main road on the west bank of the new river course.

west, added to which the drain along the road edge is called Middle Rhyne and may indicate that the road was built up on both sides. If the port field names noted above do represent medieval wharves on the old course of the Axe it makes sense that the

This area is conjectural after the 1981 OS.

town plots should have extended towards them.

- c Industrial sites
- (a) Mills

not mapped

Mills

Sluices and mills are recorded in a charter of 1316-17, but their locations are as yet unknown (Aston and Leech 1977:85-86)

4. POST-MEDIEVAL, INDUSTRIAL AND 20TH CENTURY (Map B)

1 Archaeological work in the town/ Archaeological knowledge None.

2 Context

The basic pattern of towns had been established by the end of the middle ages, and there were very few major changes in the post-medieval period, though the economic fortunes of particular towns rose and fell. Lower Weare, however, is one of nine of the 45 historic towns covered by this project which, though in some way urban in the medieval period, were not really so in the post-medieval period. It is one of eight places which were not towns in the 19th century, though they had previously been so, and one of 30 of the 45 towns which is not classed as a town in the County Structure Plan.

3 Standing structures and visible remains

There is one listed building in Lower Weare at Brickyard House.

4 Archaeological components (centre), shown on Map B

- a Communications
- (a) Roads, streets and routeways

LOW/601

Turnpike

The Bristol to Bridgwater route, managed by the Bristol Trust was turnpiked in 1749. The trust was disbanded in 1867. A milestone stands beside Tanyard farm. (Bentley and Murless 1985:20-21)

Taken from Bentley and Murless 1985, map 3

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LOW/701 Turnpike Street

The new road built post-1904, confusingly called Turnpike Street, takes traffic north to Bristol, avoiding the village of Cross.

Taken from 1981 OS.

(b) Bridges

LOW/602 <u>Lower Weare Bridge</u>

The date of the bridge over the river Axe is not known and may have replaced a medieval bridge or ford. The earliest crossing at this point would coincide with the cutting of the newer channel for the Axe on the south side of the town.

Taken from the 1825 parish map.

b Settlement (Rural)

(a) Farms

LOW/603

Tanyard Farm, Cypress Farm, Mendip View Farm

Tanyard farm may have medieval or post-medieval origins and is shown on the 1824 parish map and named on the 1886 OS, whilst Mendip View Farm is first shown on the 1825 Parish map and Cypress Farm not until the 1886 OS.

Taken from the 1825 parish map and 1886 OS.

(b) Unclassified

LOW/604 19th Century Building

Taken from 1904 OS.

LOW/703 20th Century Building

Taken from 1995 Digital OS.

c Industrial sites

(a) Other industrial sites

LOW/605 Brickyard (SMR 10870)

Brickworks were built on this site by 1886 and were still shown in 1904.

Taken from the 1886 and 1904 OS maps.

LOW/606 Smithy

A smithy is marked on the corner of Weare Road on both the 1886 and 1904 OS maps.

Taken from the 1886 and 1904 OS maps.

LOW/609 Tannery (Tanyard Farm) (SMR 10871)

Tanyard farm is shown on the 1825 map and is named on the 1886 OS. Its name suggests that the original use of this area was as a tannery, perhaps on the edge or outside of the medieval and post-medieval town.

Taken from the 1825 parish map.

d Other

LOW/704 Nurseries

Nurseries are shown beside Tanyard Farm on the 1981 OS.

Somerset Extensive Urban Survey - Lower Weare Archaeological Assessment Taken from 1981 OS.

LOW/608 Pound

A small square pound is shown on the 1886 OS.

Taken from the 1886 OS.

V. THE POTENTIAL OF LOWER WEARE

1. Research interests

Lower Weare is of particular interest as a failed 12th century planted market and port in competition with the Bishops' interests at Axbridge and Rackley. Good preservation of archaeological remains can be expected due to waterlogged conditions and the lack of expansion and rebuilding in later periods. Also a shift in focus in the settlement from the north to the south with the change in river course should mean some areas of the town and wharves survive. Although this precludes deep stratigraphy expected in an urban context, well preserved remains may survive from a single period, giving valuable information about medieval settlement.

2. Areas of potentially exceptional preservation

As the town was built on low lying land in the Axe river valley, the potential for waterlogged deposits is high.

3. Limitations

Archaeological potential is limited only by successive rebuilding which in most areas has been slight.

4. Extent of current protection

There are currently no scheduled monuments and no conservation area Lower Weare. There is one listed building and an AHAP has been defined as a result of this assessment.

5. Management Proposals

See the Archaeological Guidance Document.

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3. Maps

1811	OS Surveyor's Drawings	(fiche in SSL)
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1815 Parish Map of Weare (SRO D/P/WEA 13/1/5)

 1839
 TitheMap
 (fiche in SSL)

 1886
 1:2500 OS
 (fiche in SSL)

 1904
 6" 2nd Ed. OS
 (SRO)

1981 1:10 000 OS

1995 Digital OS

VII. COMPONENT INDEXES

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LOW/405	A	LOW/609	В	
		LOW/701	В	
LOW/601	В	LOW/703	В	
LOW/602	В	LOW/704	В	
LOW/603	В			

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Maps

Map A - Medieval settlement

Map B - Post-medieval to modern

Map C - Existing constraints

Key: Scheduled Monuments (none),

Listed Buildings Grade I (none)

Grade II* (none) Grade II (green)

Registered Park (none) Conservation Area (none)

Area of High Archaeological Potential (pink)





