

English Heritage Extensive Urban Survey

An archaeological assessment of

Newport, North Curry

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SOMERSET EXTENSIVE URBAN SURVEY

NEWPORT (North Curry)

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

by Clare Gathercole

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NEWPORT

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 are occasional references to Newport in the Wells Cathedral manuscripts, but no extensive documentation.

2. *Local histories*

There is very little information available regarding Newport, though Olivey's history of North Curry (1901) makes reference to the medieval borough. The area has not yet been covered by the Victoria County History.

3. *Maps*

The earliest available map of the site is dated 1787.

III. A BRIEF HISTORY OF NEWPORT

Newport is situated on a low promontory, rising just above flood level, at the edge of the Somerset Levels. The site formed part of one of the Saxon royal manors, but no settlement is mentioned in Domesday. It was part of the estate given to Wells in 1190 and the new market town (New-port) was probably established shortly after this gift, in the early 13th century. Market and fair grants are recorded in this period, and the existence of a borough is known indirectly from Wells Cathedral manuscripts which refer to privileges associated with free burgage tenure. Also mentioned is the Bailiff of Newport, the implication being that the town was considered to be a separate entity from the parish of North Curry in which it lay. There are 14th century references to burgages in Newport (though it is not recorded as a borough in the 1334 lay subsidy) and tenants are still recorded in the 15th century. However, the town never prospered, though the parent settlement, North Curry, flourished. Part of the reason for the town's lack of success may have been the existence of established towns at Taunton, Langport and Ilminster, though none of these was less than 10 km away.

Newport gradually became almost depopulated: though the manor and a few dwellings remained, there was little sign of the medieval town by the end of the 18th century. Nevertheless, the site was still called Newport Borough on the map of 1787. Collinson (1791) mentioned the settlement, saying: "Newport was anciently distinguished as

a borough having its privileges and peculiar officers; it now only retains its name." Little has changed since Collinson's time.

IV. THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF NEWPORT

GENERAL COMMENTS

0.1 Archaeological work in the town

There has been no archaeological work in Newport, though aerial photographic survey and limited topographic survey have both taken place.

0.2 Standing structures and visible remains

Some earthworks, remains of house platforms and enclosures, still survive on the site.

1. PREHISTORIC, ROMAN, SAXON

(No map)

Newport 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 the site lay by the edge of the marshland resources of the Levels, however, and as such may have been occasionally exploited.

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. Nevertheless, Newport is one of 26 of the 45 historic towns covered by this project at which there is no evidence of Roman settlement on the site of the later town.

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, Newport 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.

2. MEDIEVAL

(Map A)

2.1 Archaeological work in the town/ Archaeological knowledge

Despite the lack of archaeological work in Newport, it is clear from the history of the site and from the visible earthworks that there is considerable archaeological potential.

2.2 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 privileges. 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.

Newport 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 the Dean & Chapter of Wells, one of three foundations from Wells - and were subsequently abandoned, or semi-abandoned, with consequently good archaeological preservation.

2.3 *Standing structures and visible remains*

No standing buildings of this period survive, but there is earthwork evidence of former structures.

2.4 *Archaeological components, shown on Map A*

2.4.a *Communications: Roads, streets and routeways*

Not mapped The present road cuts diagonally across the rectangular area of the Borough, and may not be on the original line. The medieval street pattern may have been different: the details remain to be established, either through excavation or through non-destructive survey techniques.

2.4.b *The manor*

Newport manor house may have been at the southern tip of the Borough, on a site which is still occupied (see below, p6).

2.4.c *Burial sites and places of worship*

Not mapped There is documentary evidence of a medieval chapel of ease. The location of this is not known, though it may have been in the vicinity of the manor.

2.4.d *Settlement (Urban)*

NEW/401

The Medieval Borough

The Borough area (SMR 43337) has been approximated from field boundaries (some still in existence) shown on early maps, and aerial photographic evidence. It appears to have been a rectangular area orientated north-east to south-west, with internal subdivisions. The details of these have not been archaeologically established, though long, thin enclosures on the 1787 map may be the remains of burgage plots. These are not square to the road, suggesting that either the enclosures or the road (or both) may be unrelated to the medieval plan (Bond, c1990).

This area has seen little development since the medieval period, and the standing earthworks suggest that important remains of the failed medieval town will still survive: these may include houses, workshops, roads and boundaries, as well as the chapel and manor. However, it is suspected that the west of the site has been damaged by ploughing: the extent of damage is not known.

The market place may have lain at the south end of the town (Bond, c1990): the 1787 map shows an open, triangular area at the edge of the common of Sedgemoor.

This area has been defined from the SMR and the 1787 map.

2.4.e Industrial sites

The existence of a mill belonging to medieval Newport is not recorded. However, the site of the post-medieval mill (see below, p7) directly adjacent to the medieval Borough suggests that it may be of earlier origin.

2.4.f Agricultural sites

Not mapped The area to the north of the medieval Borough area is labelled "Muckleborough" on the 1787 map and may have been land attached to the Borough.

3. POST-MEDIEVAL

(Map B)

3.1 Archaeological work in the town/ Archaeological knowledge

There has been no archaeological work which would determine how the present road and settlement pattern at Newport relates to the medieval Borough.

3.2 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. Newport, 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.

3.3 Standing structures and visible remains

There are no Listed Buildings of this period at Newport.

3.4 Archaeological components, shown on Map B

3.4.a Redevelopment in earlier settlement components

The post-medieval road and settlement pattern may be different from the medieval. Therefore all occupied plots from 18th century and later maps have been defined on the GIS.

3.4.b Communications: Roads, streets and routeways

NEW/504

The post-medieval road pattern

On the 1787 map the road from North Curry appears as a wide drove, which narrows to cut diagonally across the medieval area. Interpretations of its alignment differ. Aston and Leech (1977) suggest that it may cut across the medieval street and plot pattern, whilst Bond (c1990) thinks it does not.

From the 1787 map.

3.4.c Manors and estates

NEW/501

Newport Manor

This site may have been a medieval manor site, and in any case lies within the probable area of the medieval Borough. Its regular shape was defined by 1787 and may represent an early boundary or a post-medieval enclosure (it lies on the 18th-century edge of Sedgemoor Common). Continuity between medieval and post-medieval occupation remains to be archaeologically established.

From the 1787 map.

3.4.d Settlement (Rural)

NEW/502 Post-medieval occupation

Other farms and unclassified plots which appear on the 1787 map are shown on Map B. Of these, some are apparently late enclosures on the edge of Sedgemoor (houses and gardens): some of these have subsequently been swallowed by the fields of Newport. Other occupation sites within the old Borough area may be medieval in origin: understanding of the history of these sites is important in establishing the character and layout of the earlier site.

From the 1787 map.

3.4.e Industrial sites

NEW/503 Newport Mill

The site of the post-medieval mill and mill leat (SMR 43335), directly adjacent to the medieval Borough, suggests that it may be of earlier origin. However, there is as yet no evidence of this. Very little is known of the early history of this mill, which expanded considerably in the 19th century (see below, p8).

From the 1787 map.

3.4.f Agricultural sites

NEW/505 Sedgemoor Common

The limits of Sedgemoor Common, as it is shown on the 1787 map.

4. INDUSTRIAL AND 20TH CENTURY

(Map C)

4.1 Archaeological knowledge

There has been no relevant archaeological work.

4.2 Context

Newport 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 historic towns covered by this project which is not classed as a town in the County Structure Plan.

4.3 Standing structures

There is one 18th century Listed Buildings in Newport. This is shown on Map C.

4.4 Settlement components, shown on Map C

4.4.a Redevelopment in earlier settlement components

Most developments at Newport were small and took the form of expansion of the post-medieval pattern. However, to the south of the medieval Borough area, the enclosure of Sedgemoor led to a minor settlement shift. Those elements described under the preceding period are shown more lightly shaded on Map C.

4.4.b Communications: Roads

NEW/605 19th century roads

Associated with the enclosure of Sedgemoor were several short lengths of new or realigned road to the south; the road to North Curry was also realigned and narrowed. Both of these alterations had been completed by the mid-19th century.

From the 1840 map.

4.4.c Settlement (Rural)

NEW/601 Newport Manor
Building expanded to fill the plot during the 19th century.

From the 1888 map.

NEW/604, NEW/703

19th and 20th century farms

Farms built within the medieval Borough area in the 19th and 20th centuries include Newport Farm and Brook Farm. Newport Farm was built on a previously abandoned, possibly medieval, site; Brook Farm is an extension of a site which was in occupation in the post-medieval period.

From the 1840, 1888 and 1995 maps.

NEW/602, NEW/701

19th and 20th century occupation (unclassified)

A number of small plots have been established along the road, some involving minor realignments of existing boundaries.

From the 1840, 1888 and 1995 maps.

4.4.d Industrial sites

NEW/603, NEW/702

19th and 20th century expansion of Newport Mill

The mill (SMR 43335) expanded considerably in the 19th and 20th centuries. It was an extensive corn mill, some remains of which (including parts of the machinery and leat) may still remain.

From the 1888 and 1995 maps.

V. THE POTENTIAL OF NEWPORT**1. Research interests**

The importance of Newport is as a single period site, specifically a small medieval town, perhaps little affected by later development. It therefore offers the potential for study of a planned (?) medieval site which has not been obscured by later development.

2. Areas of potentially exceptional preservation

Because most of the site has remained undeveloped since the failure of the town, a high level of preservation throughout is possible. Moreover, there may be some waterlogged deposits where the site lies adjacent to the Levels.

3. Limitations

There may have been some plough damage to the west of the site.

4. Extent of current protection

There are no Scheduled Monuments in Newport, nor has an AHAP been defined. However, the site is recognised as a Site of County Importance in the SMR, and there is one Listed Building, a late eighteenth century cottage, shown on Map C.

5. Management Proposals

See the Archaeological Guidance Document.

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3. Maps

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 1995 OS Digital Data

VII. COMPONENT INDEXES**1. Component to map**

<i>Component</i>	<i>Map</i>	<i>Component</i>	<i>Map</i>
NEW/401	A	NEW/602	C
NEW/501	B	NEW/603	C
NEW/502	B	NEW/604	C
NEW/503	B	NEW/605	C
NEW/504	B	NEW/701	C
NEW/505	B	NEW/702	C
NEW/601	C	NEW/703	C

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NEW/603	8, 11
NEW/604	7, 11
NEW/605	7, 11
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NEW/702	8, 11
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Maps

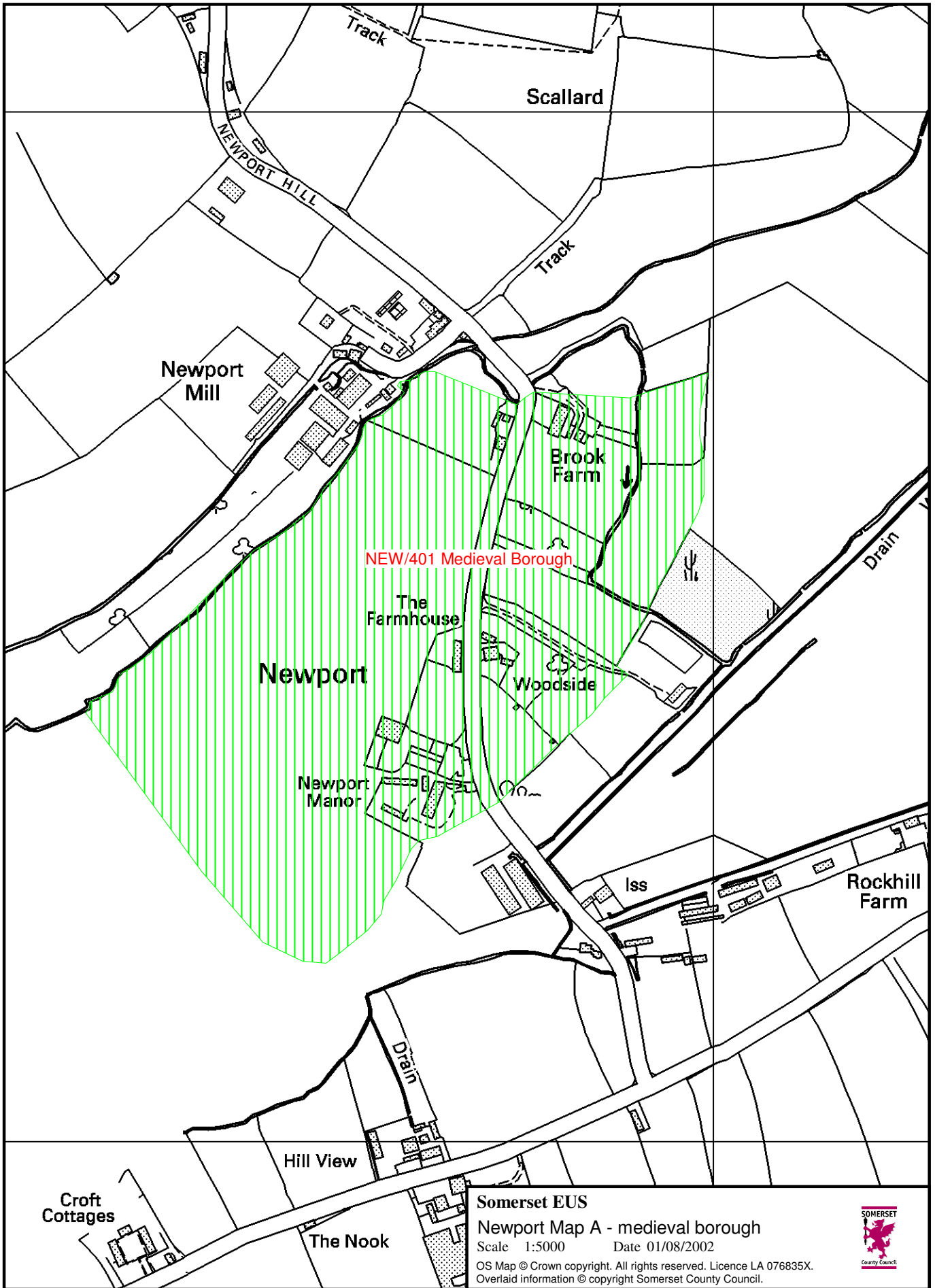
Map A – The medieval borough

Map B – Post medieval

Key: New/502 - blue cross-hatched.

Map C – 19th and 20th century

Key: New/602 - blue cross-hatched, New/701 - green spots.
Listed Building Grade II (dark green)



NEW/401 Medieval Borough

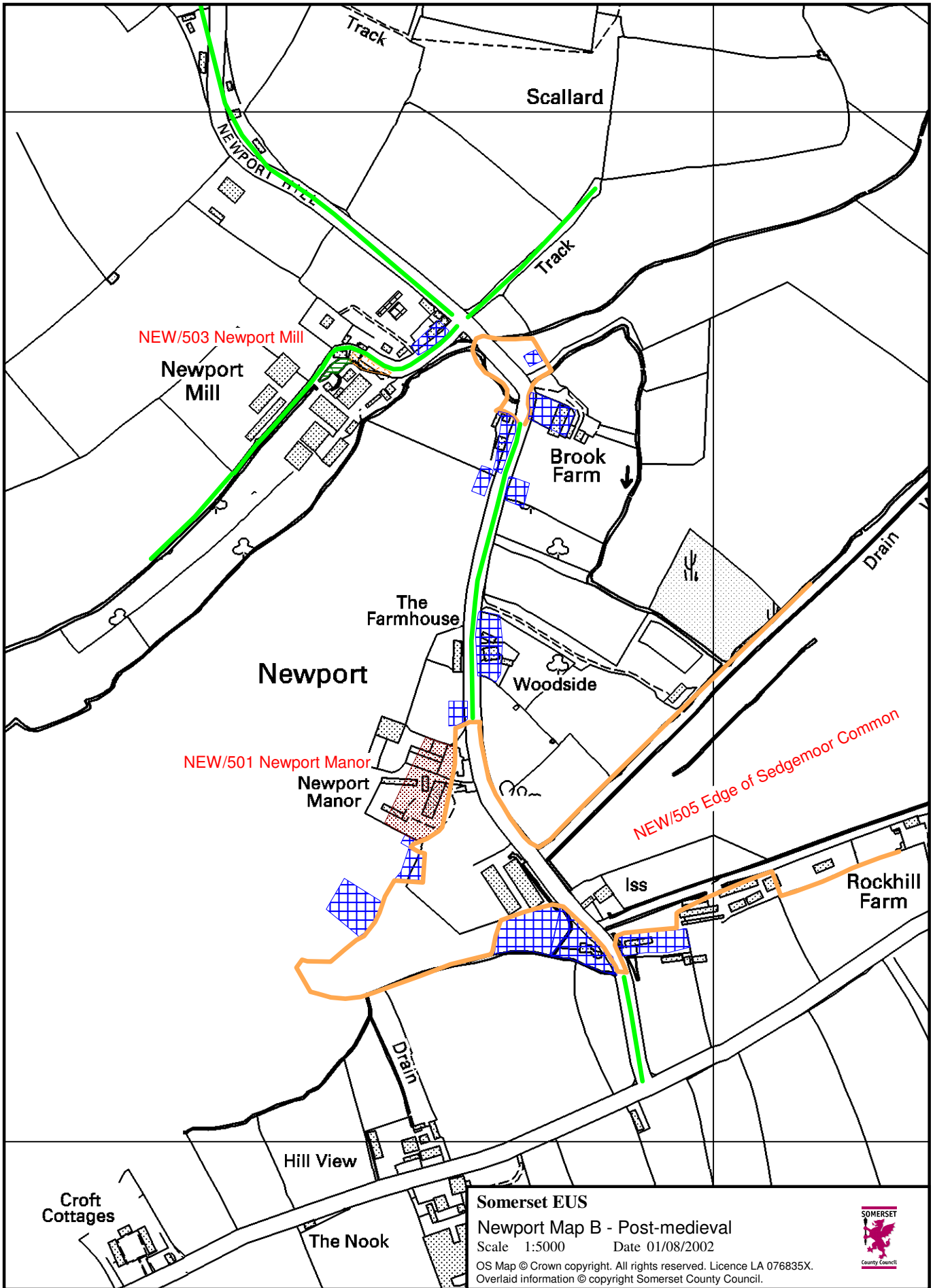
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Newport Map A - medieval borough

Scale 1:5000 Date 01/08/2002

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NEW/503 Newport Mill

Newport Mill

Scallard

Track

Brook Farm

The Farmhouse

Newport

Woodside

NEW/501 Newport Manor

Newport Manor

NEW/505 Edge of Sedgemoor Common

Rockhill Farm

Drain

Hill View

Croft Cottages

The Nook

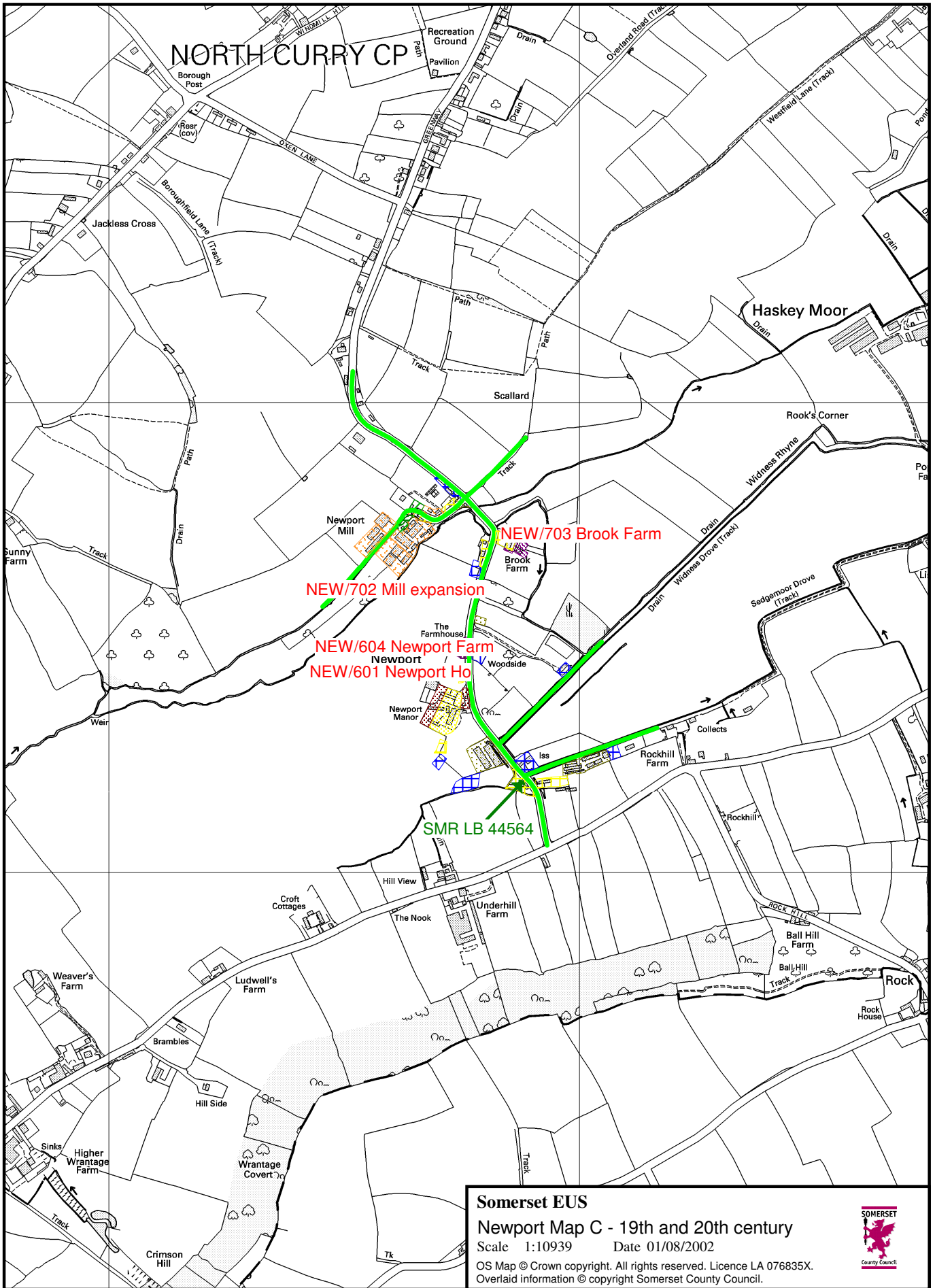
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Newport Map B - Post-medieval

Scale 1:5000 Date 01/08/2002

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 Newport Map C - 19th and 20th century
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