

# SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORICAL JOURNAL

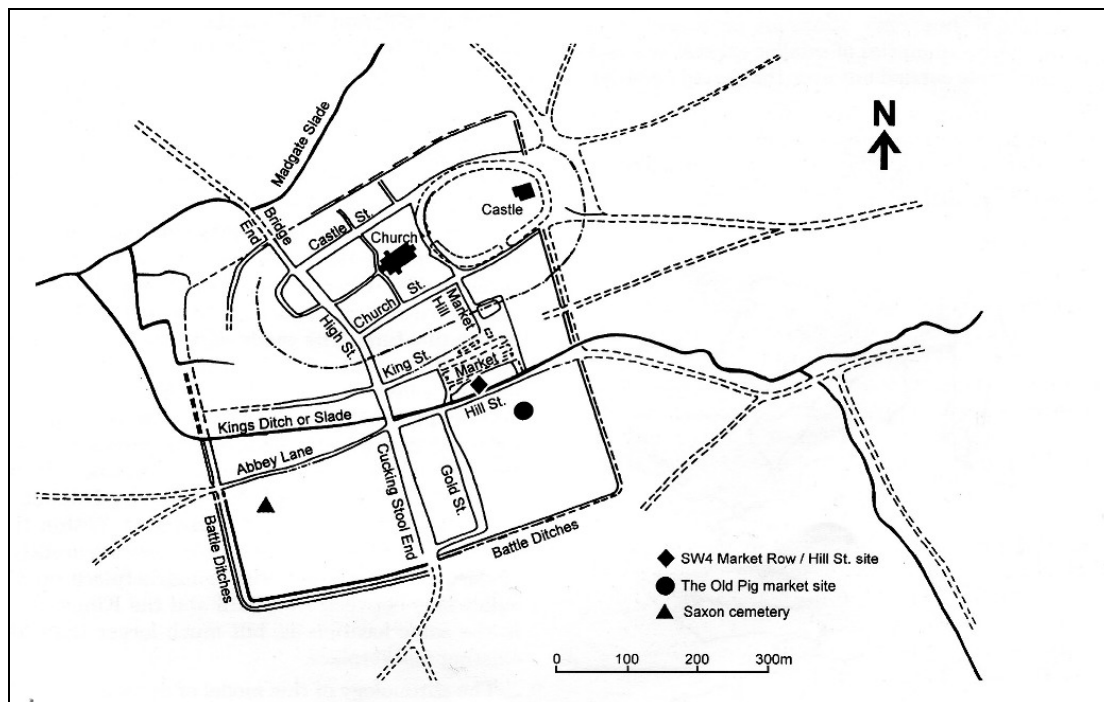
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## Recent Archaeology in Saffron Walden Town Centre

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**Saffron Walden town centre, showing sites discussed in text.  
*Illustration (c) Essex Archaeology & History 33 (2002).***

Saffron Walden has one of the best preserved historic centres in Essex. Two exceptionally large sites, the old Pig Market and adjoining land, and a block of properties between Hill Street and Market Row, were developed in 1984-5 and archaeological excavations were carried out on both beforehand. The findings prompt a reassessment of some aspects of the model of town development proposed in the past.

Following the work of Steve Bassett, the history of settlement in the town centre is as follows.<sup>1</sup> There could have been some Iron Age settlement at

Elm Grove. A Saxon cemetery of at least 200 burials was found in Abbey Lane, where there may have been a Roman fort, and a Roman village west of the present town. By the 12th century, the focus of settlement had shifted to Bury Hill. The settlement was enlarged through the construction of the Battle or Repell Ditches, no later than the early 13th century, within which was a gridded street system, with a market place on the valley side larger than it is today.

### **The Pig Market site**

The Pig Market was a rectangular plot of ground fronting Hill Street, approached through a neo-classical arch retained as a feature of the new development, now Waitrose. The earliest human activity here showed post settings, pits and two quarries, one of them measuring about nine metres square. A flint flake of possible Neolithic date was found in a depression in the chalk among deposits probably laid down by a larger predecessor of the Slade. The earliest pottery recovered was a late medieval sandy orange ware base, and the earliest datable pit was of the late 15th to mid-16th century. It contained a rim from a Raeren (i.e. German) stoneware squat bulbous drinking jug. The quarries and most of the other features all seemed to be post-medieval, mostly late 18th to 19th century. Various postholes for market pens were found.

### **The Choppens site**

This site lay on the southern slope of the Slade valley in the SW corner of the Pig Market development. This area in 1877 was continuous with what is now Jubilee Gardens and seems to have belonged to the gardens of Elm Grove. As it was being used as a temporary car park and office site for Choppens Ltd, only a limited area could be excavated. The first evidence of human activity was represented by a very small quantity of finds within the top 100 millimetres and a few cut features, the earliest 16th century. Finds were medieval pottery, including early medieval, coarse, sandy orange and Mill Green-type wares, with a date range from the 11th to 14th centuries. A striking feature was a circular hole which may have had an industrial or ornamental function, datable to the 18th century.

The lack of evidence of human habitation suggests there was low intensity of human activity on this side of the valley and this part of the town until the late 20th century. About 46 pieces of worked flint were recovered from the excavation including a large Neolithic scraper, and other flints dating from Neolithic to Late Bronze Age. But the prehistoric occupation observed on the Elm Grove site seems not to have extended to here.

### **The Market Row site**

The site included three properties between Hill Street and Market Row: a vacant plot where a pumping station had been demolished in 1934; a

shop (formerly Choppens) fronting on Market Row with a courtyard and outbuildings on Hill Street; and the swimming pool and adjoining public toilets. The entire area was to be redeveloped.

Five small trenches excavated on this site revealed archaeological deposits over 1.5 metres deep, preserved at the bottom of the valley side. The earliest layers included gravel surfaces datable to the 12th or 13th century which seem to represent the marketplace of that period. These surfaces then became occupied by small and relatively impermanent buildings, consistent with a pattern of market infill. The evidence is fragmented and complex, but it is possible to reconstruct a sequence of buildings, culminating in a 16th century long wall jetty house on the swimming pool site, and an 18th century and 19th century house (the latter the existing building, now the Nationwide Building Society) on the Choppens site.

The site produced good sequences of late and post-medieval pottery, a total of 1019 sherds weighing over 11 kilograms. Most of the medieval activity appears to date from the late 13th to 14th centuries. The medieval pottery found here differs from that found in central Essex or even from as far north as the A120. There is nothing in the pottery to indicate high status, and little evidence of specialised activity. Other finds included a whetstone, shoe fragments, a bone knife handle, two bone toothbrushes, Neolithic flints, glass, 122 clay pipe fragments and 218 pieces of animal bone.

The Slade runs in a brick culvert beneath the Hill Street frontage. Whereas today the Slade runs directly east-west in its culvert, in the Middle Ages it would have meandered through the valley bottom. The excavations showed that the bottom of the Slade valley was being reclaimed and colonised, which suggests that its course and flow were well regulated and that there was little risk of flooding. At the same time what had probably been an open area at the edge of the market place was being encroached upon and infilled with the construction of narrow rows of buildings which have survived fossilised in the existing ground plan of the town. The final stage in the encroachment on to the valley of the Slade, a process which had begun by c1200, took place in the second quarter of the 18th century, the stream being enclosed in a brick culvert with a low vault between the western edge of the Common and the High Street. The motives for the construction of the culvert may have been to conceal what functioned effectively as an open drain, or it may have been in response to pressure on land as the urban population grew or demanded more space.

### **Urban topography**

Evidence of prehistoric occupation on Bury Hill can be inferred from worked flints of likely Neolithic date found in Market Row, where they were probably derived from eroded soils or hillwash. Early Saxon sherds found in Market Row and the west side of the High Street are the only

known finds of this period from the medieval town centre. This is surprising, as the natural defences of the Bury Hill promontory ought to have attracted settlement in Anglo-Saxon times.

A high degree of disturbance had occurred on the Pig Market site through pits, quarries and the laying out of the market, so that this site was not very informative regarding settlement and occupation in the town. However, it is interesting that no pottery earlier than the end of the Middle Ages was collected, that the earliest identified dated pit was of the 15th-16th century, and that most of the pits and quarries seemed to be 18th and 19th century. The absence of any trace of occupation was yet more striking on the Choppens site, which until 1984 was a garden. The pottery finds were, however, somewhat different, with the presence of early medieval and medieval wares of the 11th and 12th centuries. The combined evidence of these two sites is that this southern half of the town was largely unoccupied until the end of the Middle Ages, or even the 16th and 17th centuries, despite lying within the town enclosure represented by the Battle Ditches.

Exceptions to this are Gold Street, documented from 1416,<sup>2</sup> and no doubt the southern part of the High Street, though in neither of these are there any listed buildings earlier than the 16th century. The pits and quarries on the Pig Market site reflect more intensive occupation in the post-medieval period, and Eyre's map shows that the Hill Street frontage here was almost completely built up by 1758.<sup>3</sup>

Within the Battle Ditch enclosure, Bassett postulated a grid layout, based on an examination of the existing street plan and ditches found on the Elm Grove excavation. If the Battle Ditches represent an act of town planning, then some form of regular layout within them is only to be expected. However, town plan analysis offers ample scope for speculation, and the archaeological evidence for Bassett's gridlines is slight, comprising two north-south ditches on the Elm Grove excavation.<sup>4</sup> Neither of the Pig Market sites can contribute to the case for this grid layout.

The 12th century (and earlier) pottery from the Choppens site, and also the earlier excavations in Elm Grove, is potentially significant, as it implies activity, even if no more than manuring or rubbish disposal, by the 12th century within the area enclosed by the Battle Ditches. The dating of this enclosure to 1236 as proposed by Bassett needs rethinking. The presence of this pottery could be taken as indicating that the Battle Ditches were excavated in the 12th century. The early 13th century date currently attributed to them rests on only two small glazed sherds amongst an assemblage of Saxo-Norman and early medieval wares excavated from beneath the bank preserved on the west side of the town.<sup>5</sup> These glazed sherds have been identified as Hedingham ware, which is now believed to have been in use in Colchester by c1140.<sup>6</sup> This dating would certainly provide a better historical context for the enclosure, as the most likely

time for this act of town planning to have occurred is when Geoffrey de Mandeville established the market at Walden in 1141. The anarchy of Stephen's reign created the circumstances which required a defensive enclosure. New towns or parts of towns continued to be established throughout the Middle Ages, but in England it was unusual for them to be defended in this way after the 12th century.

Further support for this proposition can be found in the small quantity of early medieval ware recovered from the ditch and metalled surfaces in the Market Row excavations. This not only implies 12th century activity within the Battle Ditches enclosure, but also the possibility of a market place by that time. If this was the site of the 1141 market, then it follows that there was never a market on the top of the spur to the west of the castle as Bassett suggested. The oval-shaped enclosure in that case would have originally been an outer bailey of the castle, providing direct control of the High Street, which was Geoffrey de Mandeville's new road to bring traffic from Newport through Walden, whilst the Battle Ditches represent the town enclosure.

The north-south ditch on the Market Row site, the general layout of the building units found in the excavations and indeed of the 'rows' that represent infill on market place, indicate that the market was laid out on a grid plan. The occupation of the market place with permanent structures was a process under way by the end of the 13th century.<sup>7</sup>

The general picture presented by the excavated sequence at Market Row is that of a straightforward trajectory of urban growth over a period of more than 800 years. In modern times the empty southern part of the town was built up. But there are hiccups in the town's economic growth which are not clearly reflected in the archaeological record, with the exception of the over-confident enclosing of a large area within the Battle Ditches, doubtless anticipating growth which did not occur. There also seems to be a halt in the process of market infilling in the 14th century, only resumed and completed c.1525-1620. This is suggested by an absence of 15th century pottery in the archaeological sequence. Yet the boundaries and building positions remained largely unchanged. The picture is not entirely clear, but a hiatus in the infill process would coincide with the Black Death and the economic crisis of the 14th century, as noted in other towns. The process of market infill that we see today may date mainly from the later 16th century, a period when towns were flourishing. Of the 324 listed buildings in Walden, 28 are 15th century, 71 are 16th century and 29 are 17th century.<sup>8</sup>

It is striking the way boundaries and wall lines became fossilised at an early stage and endured thereafter for centuries, the outshot (or rear lean-to) of the 14th century houses being preserved as a passageway in the 19th century house. This is a commonplace of urban morphology and must reflect, as well as the constraints of cramped town centre conditions,

an absence of capital investment on a sufficient scale to totally disregard the existing building layout. On this criterion, three moments stand out as times when the site was developed or redeveloped on a major scale: the 13th and early 14th centuries, when the process of market infill began; the early 19th century when the existing shop was built, replacing and remodelling older buildings; and the 1980s when everything was swept away apart from the lines of the street frontages and the listed buildings.

## Notes

1. Bassett, S.R., *Saffron Walden excavations and research 1972-1980* (1982).
2. Cromarty, D., 'Chepyng Walden 1381-1420: a study from the court rolls', *Essex Journal*, vol 2, (1967), p.130.
3. Eyre's Map of 1758 (ERO T/M 90).
4. Bassett (*op.cit.*), fig 8, D and E.
5. Ravetz, A. & Spencer, G., 'Excavations of the battle ditches, Saffron Walden, Essex 1959, *Transactions of the Essex Archaeological Society*, 3<sup>rd</sup> series, vol 1, p147 (1962).
6. Cotter, J.P. *Post-Roman pottery from excavations I Colchester 1971-85*, Colchester Archaeological Report 7, p84 (2000).
7. For a more detailed and very interesting discussion of this, see the original article in *EAH*, pp266-8.
8. The economic fortunes of Saffron Walden in the 15th century have been studied by Elizabeth Allen for her doctoral research. Her findings indicate that the situation was variable, but she suspects that after problems in the earlier part of the century, prosperity may have increased towards the end of the century, particularly in the saffron industry.

**Note: this is an edited extract from an article in *Essex Archaeology & History* 33 (2002) pp 221-273, used with permission.**

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