

**An Archaeological Watching Brief at
Number 2 High Street,
Ilchester
I2HS 15**

Carried out for: Mr. & Mrs. C. David

Grid Reference: ST 520 227

South Somerset District Council Planning Reference: 15/01472/FUL

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Summary

An archaeological watching brief on minor constructions works in the back garden recorded a deep deposit of 18th century garden soil accumulated against the stone wall bounding the plot on the northern end. No medieval finds were recovered. A discussion about the lack of medieval finds in this area suggests the possibility that this part of Ilchester was not settled until the post-medieval period. Study of the map and the written sources suggests the possibility that the lands owned by the medieval hospital formerly extended throughout this area.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 A planning application (number **15/01472**) has been submitted to South Somerset District Council for enhancing the entrance facilities of a small business specializing in dog grooming business located at 2 High Street, Ilchester, Somerset (grid reference **ST 520 227**) (**Figure 1**).



Figure 1. Location of no. 2 High Street, Ilchester outlined in red. Priory Road lies to the west.

1.2 The proposed development consisted of several elements (see **Figure 7**):

- a timber outbuilding, and
- improved pedestrian access from Priory Road to the west.

The timber outbuilding ‘Summerhouse’ is a temporary wooden structure resting on a Premium RapidGrid Foundation System which requires that the turf and

up to 10cm depth of topsoil should be removed before installation. No subterranean services were linked to this building.

The pedestrian access from Priory Road was improved by widening the existing gateway and lowering the doorsill to the level of the roadside. About a metre of soil has built up against the wall on the east side. The ground around the enlarged entrance was lowered and steps were installed.

More details can be found further in this report.

1.3 Because the works lie within the scheduled area of Ilchester (see **HER 53052, Figure 2**), it was necessary to apply for Scheduled Monument Consent¹. This was granted to N. Hollinrake on 18 August 2015 in accordance with a method statement quoted below (see chapter 6).

1.4 Consultation with Hugh Beamish, Historic England Inspector, and Steve Membery, Planning Archaeologist for the South West Heritage Trust, produced the agreement that a watching brief was the most appropriate method of archaeological monitoring of this project. The watching brief during excavation of foundations was undertaken by Charles and Nancy Hollinrake on the 1st of October 2015.

2.0 BACKGROUND

2.1 Topography and Geology

Ilchester is located on a crossing point of the River Yeo, near the junction of the Fosse Way, the main Roman artery into the south-west, and the ancient highway connecting the South West with areas to the east, now known as the A303. Ilchester lies on the south bank of the river Yeo. The accumulation of occupation debris has led to the modern town sitting approximately 1-2m above the flood plain at approximately 13-14m above Ordnance Datum.

The development site, 2 High Street, is situated on the NW side of the Fosse Way where it passed through the Roman and medieval town (**Figure 1**).

2.2 Geology

Ilchester is situated within a narrow arm of the floodplain of the River Yeo (or Ivel). The town itself stands upon an island of undifferentiated deposits of gravelly head, and more extensive but similar deposits lie to the north with Northover church standing on the southern tip of a small extension of this head material. These head deposits consist of poorly stratified oolitic and flinty gravel mixed with Liassic material.²

¹ under Section 2 of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act of 1979

² Kellaway & Welch 1948, p.83.

3.0 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Much has been written about the Roman town of Ilchester, most of which has been synthesized in the Extensive Urban Survey of Ilchester by Miranda Richardson. The following is a brief outline of the main stages in the development of the town.

3.1 The settlement seems to have originated as a Roman military fort within the flood plain of the Yeo, guarding the point at which the Fosse Way crossed the river. The routes of several other roads, most notably the ancient long-range routeway now known as the A303, were attracted to this crossing point.

3.2 As the Roman conquest moved north and west, civil settlement around the fort developed until the early 2nd century, when a street grid was laid down. The town, called *Lindinis*, in the Roman period, became an important regional capital with a town wall by the late 2nd century with a river port, a focus for a wealthy region surrounded by plentiful Roman villas and farms.³ By the end of the Roman administration of Somerset in the late 4th century the walled town contained many stone buildings with high quality mosaics.⁴

3.3 In common with virtually all other Roman towns in Britain, Ilchester suffered a severe decline after the collapse of Roman rule. There is little known about Ilchester in the post-Roman era but it is known that the town hosted a mint and a minster church by the late Saxon period.⁵ The Domesday Book records 107 burgesses living in the town⁶. Excavation evidence suggests that the town wall was rebuilt in the medieval period just outside of the line of the Roman wall.⁷ The medieval town was laid out on the present street grid and contained 8 parish churches, a Dominican Priory, 2 hospitals and 4 mills.⁸ Ilchester was the county town in the 12th and 13th centuries.⁹

The county jail was in Ilchester from 1166 until it was moved to Somerton in the 1280s¹⁰, possibly into a different location in the town.

³ Richardson, p. 5.

⁴ Richardson, p. 2.

⁵ HER no. 53116.

⁶ The Domesday entry for Ilchester consists of two lines within the entry for Milbourne Port, which was also a royal estate.

⁷ Richardson, p. 13.

⁸ HER no. 53116.

⁹ Richardson, p. 12.

¹⁰ Dunning 1974:185

4.0 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND¹¹

4.1 The development site lies within a Scheduled Monument (Ilchester Roman Town, National Heritage List ref. 1006155) and an Area of High Archaeological Potential (see **Figure 2**).

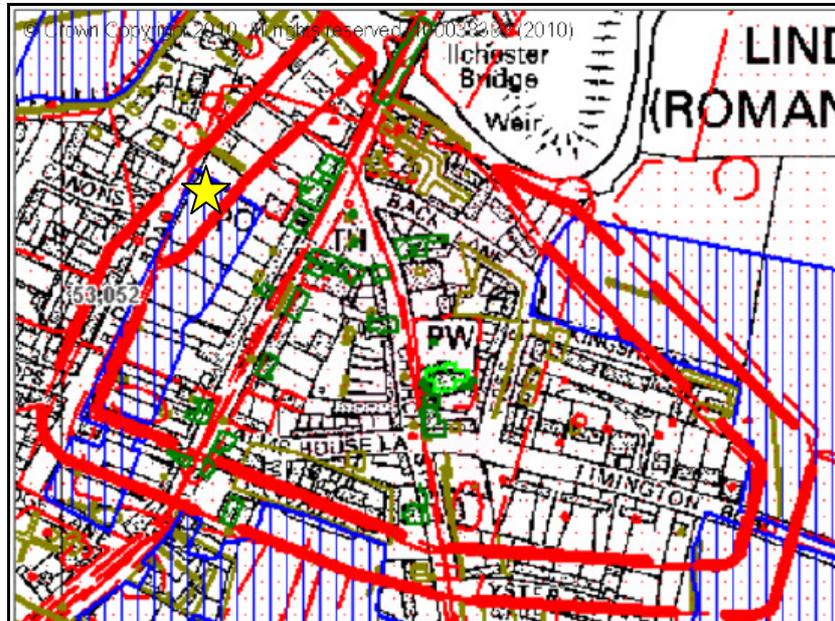


Figure 2. HER no. 53052 Line of the Roman town wall The lines of the Roman town wall are marked in red. The inner line passes through the development site. The blue hatching indicates the scheduled area. The gold star marks the development site. See below for HER entry.

No. 53116 Roman and medieval town, Ilchester

Scheduled Monument no 404; National Heritage List ref. 1006155

A prehistoric centre and also an important late Saxon and Medieval town but its main importance lies in it being the only major Roman town in Somerset.

By the mid C1 a fort was constructed enclosing c25acres with a clay bank and ditch with palisade. Contemporary native settlement with wattle and daub huts also discovered as well as timber buildings along each side of the Fosse way. Urban development began in C1-C2 and the fort defences were levelled and replaced by stone faced walls with bastions which enclosed c35acres. By late C3 the town of Lindinis was at its peak with large stone built town houses and mosaics and hypocausts. Some evidence of street patterns on a presumed grid system. Extensive suburbs along the Roman roads to the N and S with at least 10 cemeteries. It served as a market town for the rich hinterland of important villa estates with field systems and farmsteads. It also had a port with extensive trading connections. Small scale industry also seen - pottery and glass. Prosperity seen in the large number of coins, mosaics, brooches, pottery and buildings discovered.

¹¹ Taken from the Somerset County Council Historic Environment Records (**HER**).
<http://webapp1.somerset.gov.uk/her/sop.asp?flash=true>

The late Saxon town was also defended with a market, mint, minster church and castle and by Domesday had 108 burgesses. Medieval town laid out along present streets - walled with 4 gates, possibly a double wall. At least 8 parish churches, a Dominican (Blackfriar) friary, Augustine nunnery, 2 hospitals and 4 mills. Was the seat of the county jail [see 3.3 above] and still served as a market centre. After 1300 began to decline and is now only a village.

4.2 Roman

No. 53052 Roman town defences, Ilchester

First phase clay bank strengthened by massive stone revetment and bastions in early C4 after period of neglect.

Line of wall corresponds with break of slope around the town. Was a mortared lias limestone wall set on large pitched foundations enclosing c13ha. Bastion seen as reflecting increasing defensive role with an outer ditch of 10m width.

Semi-circular tower base found at S gate

No. 53022 Roman foundations, Priory Road, Ilchester

Roman foundations at four locations along Priory Road, to the south of the development site, were encountered by antiquarians at from 0.76m and 1.2m below the contemporary surface.

No. 55927 Watching brief (1984), 3 High Street, Ilchester

grid ref: ST 5214 2270

A watching brief recorded foundations immediately behind the house which eventually reached a depth of over 2m below a ground level of about 14mAOD. The sections were complex and difficult to interpret but showed three phases of Roman building. The dates of the earliest buildings is uncertain but the latest was probably C4. No medieval stratigraphy survived.

No. 44986 Watching brief (2000), 6 West Street, Ilchester

grid ref. ST 5206 2254

A watching brief was maintained on a small extension at the rear of the house. The foundations had to be extended to depth as no firm ground could be located and at 2.05m charcoal flecks were still observed. It seems apparent that this was part of the Roman and medieval town ditch (infilled in the late medieval period).

4.3 Medieval

No. 53016 Dominican friary, West Street, Ilchester

grid ref: ST 5204 2256

Founded between 1221-1260 with a grant of land near the west gate. Restored 1271 and enlarged in 1285 and 1349 to a 1.6ha site. Finally demolished early C19. By C15 it extended beyond the town walls to Pill Bridge Lane with a road behind. Position shown in deeds of 1424 and 1477. East gate located at ST52102259. Dissolved in 1538 but buildings continued in use as a silk mill and relief prison.



Figure 3. The HER map indicating the boundaries of the Dominican friary.

No. 53014 St Mary Minor church and churchyard

grid ref.: ST 5221 2279

Founded between 1227-28 and became the property of the hospital of Holy Trinity, or Whithall, in 1242 as the result of two grants. It was designed to give the hospital its own chapel and graveyard. The church had a tenement 'towards the North gate' by 1227-8 but the income was always small. Apart from Thomas, rector in 1241, the name of only one incumbent is known. The parish was united with St Mary Major and St John in 1502. The church stood on the east side of Cheap Street opposite Whithall, just inside the north entrance to the town [see **Figures 5 and 6**]. The building was still standing in Leland's time, but had evidently disappeared a century later. Now overlain by a car park.

No. 53018 Whitehall hospital

grid ref. ST 5218 2279

Founded between 1217-20 but was a nunnery by 1281. Foundations and skeletons found nearby.

No. 53101 Chapel, Whitehall hospital and nunnery, Ilchester

grid ref.: ST 521 229

Presumably soon after Whitehall hospital acquired the patronage of St. Mary the Less in 1242, a chapel was built on the premises. From about 1281 the character of the hospital foundation changed, becoming a nunnery. At some date between 1436 and 1463 the community ceased to exist and the foundation became a free chapel, at first in Crown patronage. In 1519 a chaplain or rector was appointed by a group of *feoffees* headed by the bishops of London and Salisbury at the request of Henry Stafford, the earl of Salisbury. In 1415 land was given to maintain a chantry at the high altar. It is not clear when the chapel was secularized but its sale by the Crown in 1600 indicates the completion of this process.

5.4 c. 1900 Ordnance Survey 1:10560 County Series 2nd edition (c.1900)
Sheet 73 Subsheet 15 (Figure 4)

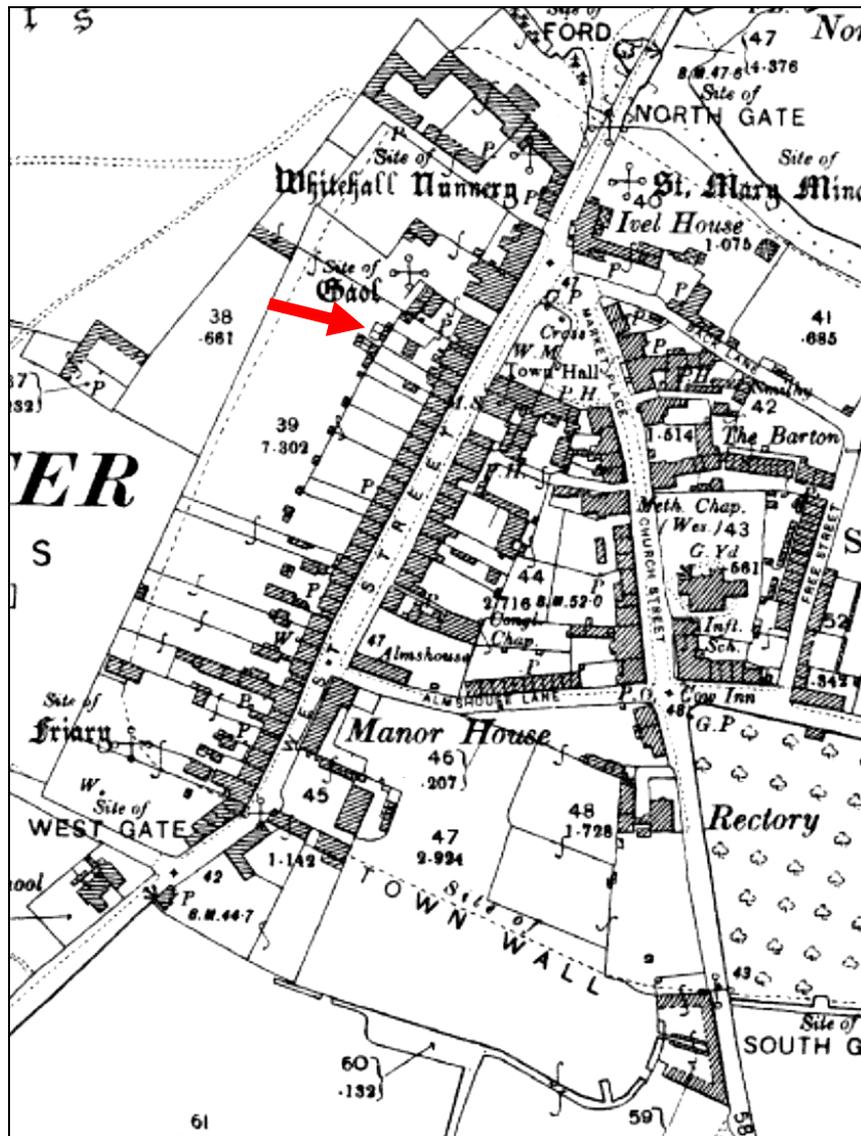


Figure 6: Ordnance Survey 1:10560 County Series 2nd edition (c.1903). A thin dashed line indicates the line of the town wall.

The 1903 map neglects to include the lower garden boundaries for the properties west of the High Street. The 1887 map appears to show the lower gardens separated by paths without any firm boundaries, and this was probably still the case in 1903. Small buildings may be seen at the upper end of these unenclosed gardens. Priory Road is not shown.

6.0 METHOD STATEMENT

6.1 This method statement is taken from the documents supporting the application for Scheduled Monument Consent. The methods used complied with the *Heritage Service Archaeological Handbook* published by Somerset County Council. Specific recording methods are detailed below:

- Any archaeological features or deposits exposed in the trench will be hand-cleaned, photographed, planned at a scale of 1:10 or 1:20 as appropriate.
- A single-context recording method will be employed during the excavation, with contexts recorded using pro-forma recording sheets.
- Sections will be drawn at 1:10.
- Masonry standing to more than one course high will not be disturbed without consultation with the English Heritage inspector.
- The works will be recorded photographically using a digital camera and black and white prints.
- Levels will be taken throughout of all archaeological deposits and features and related to Ordnance Datum.

6.2 All archaeological **finds** were bagged and identified either by context or as unstratified. A total collection strategy was employed. Arrangements were made to deposit the finds in the Somerset County Museum, marked with the accession number **TTNCM 56/2015**, but in the event no finds earlier than the 17th century were recovered so this number will not be used because there are no finds requiring museum storage.

6.3 The **primary records** of the evaluation - field plans, day books, photographic record etc. - will be prepared for deposition in the Somerset Records Office for curation and future research. .

6.4 The Ordnance Datum was taken from a TBM on the pavement in front of 11 West Street which had been brought in from a bench mark on the tower of St. Mary Major for recording a watching brief undertaken in 2013.¹⁶

¹⁶ Hollinrake and Hollinrake, 2013a.

7.0 RESULTS

7.1 Trench 1

Removal of the turf and topsoil below the wooden cabin was undertaken using a mini-excavator with a 4-foot ditching bucket under archaeological supervision.

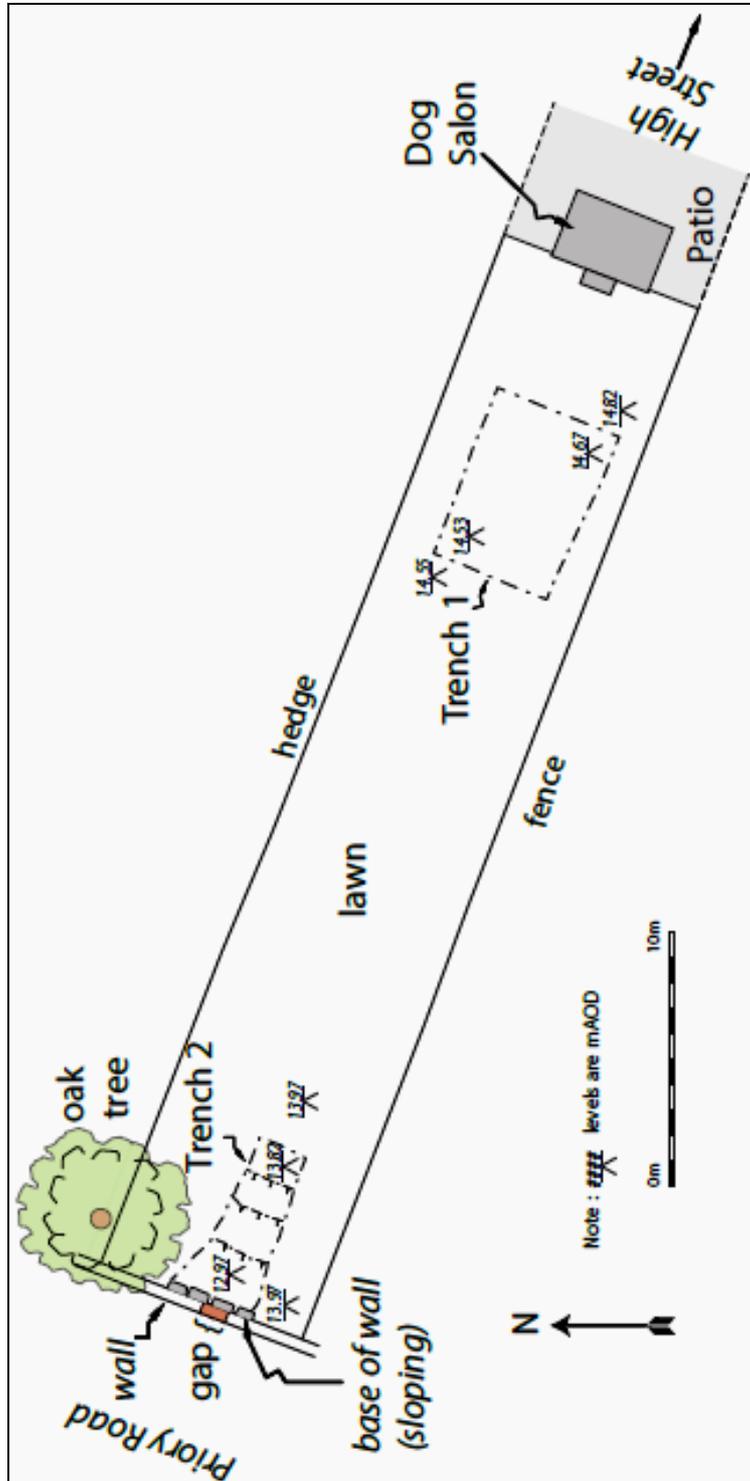


Figure 7. The site slopes from 14.82m OD at the east to 13.97m OD at the west, with the eastern area below the new log cabin being nearly flat.

Trench 1.

The excavations for the footing for the cabin was very shallow (c10-15cm below the turf) while the excavations against the wall achieved a maximum depth of 1m.

A new path linking the new cabin to the entrance from Priory Road is defined by two lines of railway sleepers containing a layer of gravel resting upon terram laid upon the turf.



Figure 8. A greenhouse formerly stood on the site of the new log cabin.



Figure 9. The levelling down for the foundation of the log cabin, with a chicken run in the background.



Figure 10. Looking west beyond the chicken run, a temporary wire wall protects the roots of the oak tree.

7.2 Trench 2



Figure 11. The wall at the western end of the plot retains a significant depth of made ground. The gap in the wall was built when this deposit reached just over 0.5 metres depth from the side of Priory Road, and concrete slabs were inserted into the gap as the deposit rose above the sill. The wall is built of roughly coursed Blue Lias slabs with only one piece of worked yellow limestone visible to the left of the gap.



Figure 12. All of the soil removed, even that built up against the stone wall, constituted a single context, consisting of a well-worked loamy deposit interpreted as garden soil. Eighteenth century pottery was recovered from the base of the cut.



Figure 13. Reducing the soil built up against the gap in the wall exposed the top of an offset course (see **Figure7**) presumed to be foundations. The gap in the wall is part of the original build so it gives an indication of the height of the made ground at the time the wall was built.



Figure 14. A view of the excavations through the gap in the wall shows the steps left to provide a base for paved steps.



Figure 15. The gap in the wall was enlarged to allow entrance into the garden at the ground level of Priory Road. This exposed the structure of the wall: two skins of unworked Blue Lias stones with a rubble core, all bonded with a mixture of clay and white lime mortar with frequent flecks and small lumps of charcoal. This type of construction is typical of post-medieval building.

8.0 DISCUSSION

8.1 Despite being situated in the heart of a major urban settlement dating from the Roman period to the present day, no finds or features of archaeological significance were recorded during the grading down operations associated with this planning consent. Recovery of some archaeological material was anticipated in the area adjacent to the western boundary wall, where excavations reached a depth of up to c1m, however again no finds or features of archaeological significance were recovered.

A watching brief undertaken in 1984 confirms that great depths of made ground has accumulated in this part of Ilchester (**HER no. 55927**); foundations for an extension to 3 High Street had to be excavated to over 2 metres depth before firm clay was encountered. Roman pottery was recovered towards the base of the excavations but no medieval finds or deposits were recorded.

Neighbour Mr. Graham Mottram was already resident in 3 High Street in 1984 when the watching brief took place. He was good enough to relate to us local information provided by his wife, a local historian, to the effect that buildings in Ilchester built before c1750 were, as a rule, constructed of Blue Lias stone, whereas the row of houses including numbers 2 and 3 High Street were faced with red brick at around 1800 when Ilchester was a rotten borough. It is thought that the houses were used in some way as bribes in exchange for votes.¹⁷

8.2 It would appear, therefore, that large quantities of dumping has taken place in this garden plot, presumably in a effort to raise the ground level and as part of ordinary gardening operations. But this still does not account for the lack of medieval finds from either this watching brief or from that undertaken in 1984 next door. Although the sample areas are small, it may be that the lack of medieval finds points to a genuine lack of medieval settlement on the west side of the High Street in Ilchester.

Exploring this possibility further, a look at the historic maps (**Figures 5 and 6**) shows that large blocks in this part of the town were occupied by ecclesiastic foundations. Numbers 2 and 3 High Street lie between the Dominican friary (**HER 53016**) to the south and the Whitehall nunnery to the north. The friary was founded 1221/1260, during the same period when grants were made to St. Mary Minor (**HER 53014**) adjacent to Whitehall hospital (**HER 53018**) and the church of St. John to the north.

8.3 Although written sources suggest substantial organization of the Whitehall hospital and the church of St. Mary Minor in the 13th century, there are several indications that these documents actually represent a re-organization of existing institutions:

1. The combination of minster church, multiple daughter chapels and medieval hospital is commonly seen, especially in important settlements. St. John the Baptist was the patron saint of pilgrims, who would be hosted by the pilgrim church in a *hospitium* where they would be given a meal, a bath, a bed and a mass

¹⁷ Mr. and Mrs. Graham Mottram, pers. comm..

before the final stage of their pilgrimage – worship in the minster church. Many pilgrims required medical attention, which is why the *hospitium* would also function as a hospital. The site of this church and hospital near the north gate would be appropriate to this function¹⁸.

2. Medieval *hospitia* were normally set up as small independent foundations with their own priest to serve mass at the hospital chapel. *Hospitia* would include a chapel, a hospital building (perhaps the Whitehall), a cemetery (for those unfortunates beyond the help of medical care), a kitchen, a wash house and an apothecary with a garden, all enclosed in its own plot. There was usually a grant of land for the provision of the establishment.¹⁹ (cf. Glastonbury St. John the Baptist).
3. The church of St. Mary Minor was united with St. Mary Major and St. John (**HER 53014**). Pre-Conquest minster churches were often accompanied by subsidiary churches and chapels within a formal boundary (cf. Glastonbury Abbey). The 1502 document citing this relationship may have been reiterating an already long-standing arrangement.
4. St. Mary Minor was a royal peculiar (owned directly by the Crown). The church of St. Mary Minor remained the property of the Crown, even after it was under the control of the earl of Salisbury and the bishops of London and Salisbury (**HER 53101**). Since Ilchester was a royal manor at Domesday, it would not be surprising to find that its churches included royal peculiars.
5. The nunnery attached to the Whitehall hospital belonged to the Augustinian order, which was founded to regularize church establishments set up as colleges of secular canons, usually an indication of foundation before the 10th century Benedictine reform.²⁰

For these reasons, there is scope for suspecting that the medieval documents apparently founding the church of St. Mary Minor, the hospital and the nunnery may actually represent the re-founding of an existing establishment with two purposes in mind: firstly, the regularization of a college of secular canons who may have followed a rule which appeared somewhat unorthodox by the 13th century, and secondly, the acquisition of the land holdings belonging to the medieval hospital. This situation has been argued for the Chantry at Kilve, where there is rather more documentation to support this interpretation²¹. In the case of Ilchester, the *hospitium* might have been so old that its original documents had become lost or unreadable by the 13th century.

8.4 The Dominican friary, an order founded in the early 13th century, was able to take on a large block of land in the southwest corner of the medieval walled town. It may well be that this area was unoccupied at that time, thus avoiding the need to relocate owners and tenants who had formerly been in residence.

The boundaries of the medieval hospital and house of Augustinian nuns have not been identified, but the location of the Dominican priory suggests the possibility that the western end of the walled town up to the Fosse Way could have formerly been their property.

¹⁸ Orme and Webster 1995.

¹⁹ Orme and Webster, 1995. p.20.

²⁰ Richard Morris, pers. comm..

²¹ Hollinrake and Hollinrake 2013b.

8.5 The result of this brief review of the evidence provides a theoretical plan of medieval Ilchester as lacking urban-style occupation in a discrete block of land defined by the western town wall and the Fosse Way/ High Street/ West Street. This interpretation is compatible with the evidence of archaeological fieldwork, as far as it goes, which, of course, is not very far. The test of the theory lies in the accumulation of further evidence from this part of the town until the point is reached where a consensus on the theory can be achieved – when this point is reached is itself always a matter for debate.

Critical analysis of the written sources hints that Saxon Ilchester may have had its origins as a royal manor incorporating a complex of ecclesiastical foundations as well as other high status functions, such as a mint and, presumably, a royal court. The size of the population required to satisfy these functions may not have fully occupied the entire interior of the Roman enclosure.

Thus, it is theoretically possible that the story relayed by Mr. Mottram – that the block of houses including 2 and 3 High Street were built in about 1800– is true and that this range of properties were not occupied before the post-medieval period.

Nancy Hollinrake
18th January 2016

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks go to the landowners Michelle and Colin David for asking us to undertake this work. The groundworks were undertaken by Mark Stevens and Colin Stevens, who were unfailingly helpful and supportive of our work. Thanks go to Graham Mottram for local information. Finally, many thanks to Historic England Inspector Hugh Beamish and South West Heritage Trust archaeologist Steve Membery for affording every help in easing the progress of the permissions to proceed.

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