

**EXTENSIVE URBAN SURVEY  
FOR  
BEDFORDSHIRE  
BIGGLESWADE ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT**

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## Contents

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List of Tables.....	3
List of Figures .....	3
Preface .....	4
<b>1. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1 Background to the Project.....	5
1.2 Structure of this Document.....	5
<b>2. LOCATION AND TOPOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3. THE NATURE OF THE EVIDENCE.....</b>	<b>7</b>
3.1 Previous Archaeological Investigations.....	7
3.2 Historical Evidence.....	8
<b>4. HISTORICAL SUMMARY.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>5. ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT .....</b>	<b>11</b>
5.1 The Prehistoric Period (c10,000BC - AD43) .....	11
5.2 The Roman Period (AD43 - AD410) .....	11
5.3 The Anglo-Saxon Period (AD410 - AD1066).....	11
5.4 The Medieval Period (AD1066 - AD1550).....	12
5.5 The Post-Medieval Period (AD1550 - AD1850) .....	15
5.6 The Industrial Period (AD1850 - AD1914) .....	20
<b>6. ASSESSMENT OF BIGGLESWADE'S CHARACTER, IMPORTANCE AND POTENTIAL.....</b>	<b>23</b>
6.1 Character of the Present Town .....	23
6.2 Archaeological Potential .....	23
6.3 Archaeological Components .....	24
<b>7. REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>26</b>



## **List of Tables**

1. 17<sup>th</sup> century buildings in Biggleswade
2. 18<sup>th</sup> century buildings in Biggleswade
3. Late 18<sup>th</sup>/early 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings in Biggleswade
4. Late 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings in Biggleswade

## **List of Figures**

1. Location map
2. Medieval settlements of Biggleswade, Stratton and Holme
3. Previous archaeological recording in Biggleswade
4. Historic buildings
5. Extent of early 19<sup>th</sup> century development based on the 1838 Tithe Map
6. Extent of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century development, based on the 1st edition OS map, 1882
7. Extent of late 19<sup>th</sup> century development based on the 2nd edition OS map, 1900
8. Schematic development of Biggleswade
9. Conservation Area
10. Biggleswade's main streets
11. Archaeological components



## **Preface**

*All statements and opinions in this document are offered in good faith. Albion Archaeology cannot accept responsibility for errors of fact or opinion resulting from data supplied by a third party, or for any loss or other consequence arising from decisions or actions made upon the basis of facts or opinions expressed in this document.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

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### 1.1 *Background to the Project*

English Heritage has initiated a national series of Extensive Urban Surveys. This report is an archaeological assessment of Biggleswade and forms part of the Extensive Urban Survey (EUS) for Bedfordshire. The survey of the 12 historic towns of Bedfordshire is funded by English Heritage (EH) and managed by the County Archaeological Officer (CAO) of Bedfordshire County Council (BCC). It is being jointly undertaken by staff of Albion Archaeology and the Heritage and Environment Group of BCC.

The EUS comprises three stages: Data Compilation, Assessment and Strategy. The first stage, Data Compilation, draws together the accessible history of the town, known archaeological sites and historic buildings data. The Assessment presents this evidence in the form of a report which provides a history of the town, an account of its buried and standing archaeology, together with an assessment of archaeological potential. The Strategy stage will draw on the Assessment to develop a strategic framework for the management of the archaeological resource for each town.

The chronological framework used in the Assessment reports to describe each town's development (normally section 5) reflects the periodisation used in the Bedfordshire Historic Environment Record (HER). Any broad dating system of this kind has limitations in the face of the mass of detailed evidence that exists for each town. It has, therefore, occasionally (*e.g.* Bedford in the Saxon and Saxo-Norman periods, or Luton in the early industrial period) been necessary to use slightly different chronological divisions. In addition, the town of Sandy is exceptional in its own right because only the Roman town has been included in the Bedfordshire EUS.

### 1.2 *Structure of this Document*

This report has been compiled using a number of sources including the Bedfordshire Historic Environment Record (HER), the Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Records Service (BLARS) and the Albion Archaeology (formerly BCAS) Project Database.

The location and topography of Biggleswade is described in Section 2. The nature of the evidence is discussed in Section 3 and a historical summary of the town is presented in Section 4. The archaeological and historical development of the town is described by chronological period in Section 5. Section 6 comprises an assessment of Biggleswade's character, importance and potential. Phases of historical development of the town and areas of archaeological potential are illustrated in plan form at the end of this report.



## 2. LOCATION AND TOPOGRAPHY

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Biggleswade is in Mid Bedfordshire District. It is located c.15km to the south-east of Bedford at TL18974457. The historic towns of Sandy and Potton are located to the north-west and north-east, respectively. The historic town of Shefford is located to the south-west and Stotfold is located to the south-east (Fig 1).

The town is located in the Ivel Valley at c. 30m above Ordnance Datum. The River Ivel forms the western boundary of the current extent of the town. It lies approximately 300m from the historic core, which is dominated by the trapezoidal market place. The Roman Road between London and Sandy, the A1, approaches the town from the south-east, and bypasses the southern and western edge of the town. London Road, the A6001, continues the line of the Roman Road from the south-east corner of the market place. Shortmead Street heads north from the north-west corner of the market place and Hitchin Street leads south. The Potton Road approaches the town from the north-east.

The underlying drift geology comprises glacial clays and gravels above river gravels.

The Agricultural Land Classification of England and Wales, Sheet 147, shows the area of the town to be predominantly in urban use with pockets of land to the south and east primarily in non-agricultural use. The agricultural land surrounding the town is predominantly classed as Grade II land. South of the town, there is a broad band classed Grade I extending to Langford while the land along the banks of the River Ivel to the west of the town is classified as Grade III.



### 3. THE NATURE OF THE EVIDENCE

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#### 3.1 *Previous Archaeological Investigations*

There have been few opportunities for archaeological activity within the town. Bedfordshire County Archaeology Service (now Albion Archaeology) has carried out three evaluations and four watching briefs within the town (Fig 3). In addition, an evaluation (BW92) was carried out along the route of a gas pipeline to the west of the town (Dawson, 1994) and the deserted medieval settlement of Stratton (SV372), to the east, has been extensively excavated.

A watching brief (WB46) during construction of a French drain around St Andrew's Church revealed undated foundation features and some undated human remains. To the south of the market place, three trial trenches (BTC415) revealed nothing of archaeological interest. An earlier watching brief (WB131) during demolition of the engineering works immediately to the south also uncovered no evidence of surviving archaeological deposits. A watching brief on the north side of the marketplace (WB54) uncovered undated features and evidence of Victorian cellarage. An evaluation on the site of the former Greene King brewery (GKB536) uncovered evidence that the site may have been terraced, and archaeological levels cleared prior to construction of the brewery in 1764. An evaluation on the west side of Shortmead Street (SMS525) uncovered no major archaeological finds.

Further to the north, a watching brief in Sun Street (WB75) did not uncover any surviving archaeological deposits.

More recently, an evaluation to the rear of 24-39 Shortmead Street by Hertfordshire Archaeological Trust (HAT 424) recovered two struck flints from the surface of the natural subsoil. No medieval material was recovered from any of the trenches leading the excavator to suggest that the site was cleared prior to 19<sup>th</sup> century development (Hertfordshire Archaeological Trust, 2000). Similarly, no trace of the limekiln (HER13940) shown on the 1838 Tithe Map survived. Another evaluation, between Shortmead Street and the river but slightly further north, took place at the Drill Hall Industrial Estate (HAT 663). Again, no archaeological deposits were found, although there were extensive layers of made ground from 1-3m deep directly above natural sand – showing that the river has been embanked in fairly recent times. Neither of these excavations encountered remains of post-medieval wharves known to have existed on this stretch of river.

To the west of the river an archaeological evaluation was carried out in 1992 along the line of the Biggleswade West sewage pipeline (BW 312). Trial trenches found some Iron Age or Roman ditches and postholes, wooden stakes of indeterminate date and a former river course which may have been open in medieval times (Dawson 1994)



An archaeological evaluation of the cropmark ringwork (HER468) to the west of the town established that it was of 12<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> century date, and probably represents an earthwork castle (Addyman 1966).

Recent investigations by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit on land to the north of Broom have revealed extensive landscape features dating from the Bronze Age onwards. These include the probable former course of a broad droveway running east-west past the ringwork and crossing the river by Ivel Mill (Mortimer and McFaddean 1999). The droveway, ‘fossilised’ in surviving field boundaries, is thought to date from Saxon times and to have been a major route for herding animals in the medieval period. If the dating of this feature could be confirmed by excavation, it would have important implications for the interpretation of the early development of the town. It not only indicates the location of the ford or ‘wade’ but also ties together several elements of the development of the town (ford, east-west route, ringwork, High Street, marketplace), placing them all on the same alignment or route. However, more work needs to be done on evaluating this evidence.

### **3.2 Historical Evidence**

Volume II of the VCH, published in 1908, includes a brief history of Biggleswade Hundred. There is a short book, “Biggleswade The History of a Small Market Town” (Peck 1977), which summarises the available history of the town. Annette Edwards produced a Town Survey for Bedfordshire County Council in 1974 and Rob White carried out a Parish Survey for Biggleswade in 1979. Joyce Godber’s ‘History of Bedfordshire’ (Godber 1984) also provides useful background.

There are no early representations of the town centre. The earliest map of the town, the Tithe Map (CRO MAT 5/1) is dated 1838. The accompanying schedule (CRO X440/707) provides details of owners and tenants and also some indications of use. A number of buildings or sites indicated on the map but now lost have been entered into the HER.

The Historic Environment Record maintained by Bedfordshire County Council’s Historic Environment Section lists over 100 historic buildings ranging in date from the 14<sup>th</sup> century church (HER1018) to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Biggleswade History Society produces a regular Newsletter which contains articles on the history of the town. These have been consulted for possible references.





#### 4. HISTORICAL SUMMARY

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Biggleswade is mentioned in Domesday Book and is therefore likely to be of at least late Saxon origin. The original place-name *Bichelsuade* means 'Bichel's ford', Old English *waed* (Mawer and Stenton, 1926, 101). Prior to the Conquest Biggleswade was within Biggleswade Hundred, and was held by Archbishop Stigand. At the time of the Domesday survey Ralph de Lisle held the town from the King (Page 1908). Its value at the time of Domesday was £17 but before the Conquest it was only worth £10 (Morris 1977).

The settlements of Stratton to the east and Holme to the south are located surprisingly close to Biggleswade, less than one mile between the three settlements (Fig 2). The deserted medieval village of Stratton was a substantial settlement between the 10<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries. At Domesday, it was in fact larger than Biggleswade and may have incorporated more urban characteristics but by the early 14<sup>th</sup> century Biggleswade had grown larger. Holme was always the smallest of the three settlements and is now largely deserted.

In 1132 Henry I granted the manor of Biggleswade to the Bishop of Lincoln, Alexander, as an endowment for Lincoln cathedral. Biggleswade never attained Borough status, possibly on account of its ecclesiastical connections. The town never received the Charter of Incorporation and did not return members to Parliament (Edwards 1974). In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, King John granted the right to a weekly market which was later confirmed to Bishop Hugh by Henry III in 1227, and in 1228 the date of the annual fair was moved from the Feast of the Assumption, 15th August, to Holy Cross Day, 14th September (Page 1908).

There is evidence of town planning in the late 12<sup>th</sup> or early 13<sup>th</sup> century. The road system within the parish was altered, possibly due to an increased danger of flooding at the north end of the parish, and traffic was redirected along an east-west axis. A market place was laid out to the east of St Andrew's Church, with tenements under ecclesiastical control laid out along either side. It is not known if this redevelopment was appended to, or replaced, an existing street plan (Dawson 1994). It seems likely however that these developments were only small scale. Biggleswade was assessed along with the hundred in 1247 and in 1297 was assessed as a rural manor. In 1309 there were 37 taxpayers in the town paying £6 but by 1332 this number had fallen to 19 taxpayers paying £5 (Godber 1984, 122). In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Bishops of Lincoln claimed the right to a Monday market which was confirmed by Henry VIII in 1528. The right to the annual fair and additional fairs on the Feast of Mary Magdalene, 22nd July, and Saints Simon and Jude, 28th October, were also granted at that time.

In 1547, Henry Holbeche, Bishop of Lincoln, returned Biggleswade to the Crown in exchange for other properties. In 1548 a return of Chantry property records 440 "houceling people" which might suggest a total population of c.550 (Peck, 1977, 10). In 1631, Edward Litchfield, the Lessee of the Manor was granted the right to hold fairs on the Feast of the Purification, 2nd



February, and also on Whit Monday. Following the Civil War Biggleswade was confiscated by Parliament in 1649 and leased to James Margetts who petitioned successfully for the market to be moved from Monday to Wednesday in 1662. At the Restoration the Manor returned to the Crown and from 1674 it was leased to the Carteret family.

The Hearth Tax return of 1671 records the population of Biggleswade with Stratton and Holme, at 773, but by 1773 the town's population is estimated at "rather more than 1000" (Godber 1984, 328). In 1785 over 100 houses were destroyed by a fire in the town. Nevertheless, Biggleswade continued to prosper, mainly on account of the town's position on the Great North Road and the establishment of the turnpike trusts in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1824 there were 15 coaches leaving Biggleswade daily. The Ivel Navigation, established in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, also added to the town's prosperity with several wharves established on the west side of the town. This transport system went into rapid decline with the introduction of the railways in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Biggleswade became an Urban District in 1891.



## 5. ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

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### 5.1 *The Prehistoric Period (c10,000BC - AD43)*

There are no known prehistoric sites within the town itself although struck flints were recovered during a recent evaluation close to the river (Hertfordshire Archaeological Trust 2000). Extensive prehistoric settlement in the general vicinity is known from aerial photographs, and several cropmark sites have been identified along the Ivel Valley to the west of the town. These include a ring ditch and associated trackways (HER643) and a complex of conjoined rectilinear cropmarks (HER645). It would perhaps be surprising if the medieval town and post-medieval development of Biggleswade had not taken place on the site of some prehistoric activity. The existence of prehistoric remains should therefore not be ruled out.

### 5.2 *The Roman Period (AD43 - AD410)*

There are no known Roman sites within the town itself, although Romano-British objects have been discovered within the town. A Romano-British eagle (?) was reported to have been found at 61 London Road (Page 1908). A bronze *patera* (HER916) dated to c.AD60 is believed to have been discovered to the south-east of the town (Kennet, 1969, 82). Pigot & Co's London and Provincial Directory for 1823-4 (BLARS 100) mentions that workmen discovered numerous Roman urns, ashes and human bones whilst digging for gravel approximately 150 yards to the east of the Sun Hotel in 1815. Confusingly however, the account goes on to state that "many of the coins" are now in the hands of a Biggleswade gentleman.

The Romano-British small town of Sandy is located to the north-west. The Roman road from Baldock to Sandy (and from there on to Godmanchester), Viatores No. 22, approaches the town from the south-east and is preserved as London Road and Drove Road in the south of the town. Recent work indicates that part of the route to the north of the town would have been subject to seasonal flooding from at least the mid-late Roman period onwards and would ultimately have become impassable (Dawson 1994). A hypothetical road, Viatores 224, leads west from a point immediately to the north of the town. The eastern continuation of this road, Viatores 222, has been questioned by Simco (Simco 1984, 79, fig 68).

### 5.3 *The Anglo-Saxon Period (AD410 - AD1066)*

There are no known Saxon sites within the town. However, the nearby village of Stratton has been extensively excavated by Albion Archaeology and had its origins in the middle Saxon period. Much of the settlement area is now being absorbed into an expanding modern Biggleswade.

It has been suggested that the lack of a suitable route across Biggleswade Common, following the abandonment of the northern section of the Roman road between Baldock and Sandy, led to the establishment of an alternative route on the west side of the river. This would, therefore, have provided the impetus for the establishment of a bridging point to the north of the present



town (Dawson 1994). The late Saxon mills mentioned in Domesday probably occupied the site of the Ivel Mill and were probably associated with a bridge across the narrowest part of the river. Whether this can be equated to the wade, or ford, of Biggleswade is open to question. However, it is clear that the crossing point was sufficiently important to provide the name for the Saxon settlement and the administrative unit, the Hundred. It is possible that this was the location for the Hundred's meeting place, or Moot (Dawson 1994).

The value of the Manor prior to the Conquest, £10, is on a par with Sandy to the north but less than Potton to the east, £13, or Stotfold to the south, £20.

#### **5.4 The Medieval Period (AD1066 - AD1550)**

At the time of the Domesday survey Biggleswade, or 'Pichelswade', was within Biggleswade Hundred. Prior to the Conquest, Biggleswade was held by Archbishop Stigand and two 'sokemen' and was valued at £10. In 1086, there were seven villeins with seven ploughs, ten bordars, three serfs and two mills. The value of Biggleswade had risen by this time to £17 (Morris 1977).

With the exception of the church (see below), there are no known early medieval sites within the town itself.

##### **5.4.1 Ringwork and Bailey Castle**

Cropmarks of a possible castle site (HER468) were first identified from aerial photographs in 1954. An evaluation of the site in 1962 determined that it was in fact the site of a ringwork and bailey. Finds from the evaluation dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. The castle is likely to have been sited to control the river crossing (Addyman, 1966). Although it is on the other side of the river in Old Warden parish, it is likely to have been linked to Biggleswade by the east-west droveway route and ford already mentioned. There is just a single known documentary reference to the castle, dating to 1423, after it had gone out of use (Dawson 1994).

##### **5.4.2 St Andrew's Church (HER1018)**

Following the Conquest, Ralph de Lisle held Biggleswade from the King but in 1132 Henry I granted the manor to Alexander, Bishop of Lincoln. In 1276, Bishop Gravesend endowed the vicarage in Biggleswade and appointed Walter Justice to the living (Peck 1977, 5). The earliest surviving fabric of the church, the west end of the nave and the eastern arch of the tower, dates to around 1300. The arcades of the nave date to the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century but traces of the earlier fabric of the nave dating to the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century are preserved. The south aisle and possibly also the north aisle probably date to this period. The chancel was rebuilt between 1467 and 1481 and the south porch was added at about this time. The clerestory dates to around 1500 (Page 1908). No evidence survives for the Norman Church although it has been suggested that the present church occupies an ancient site (Dawson 1994).

##### **5.4.3 The Bishop's Palace**

It has been conjectured that the Bishops of Lincoln had a palace in the vicinity of the church. This is largely based on the existence of the fieldname "palace



ground” on the 1838 Tithe Map (BLARS MAT 5/1). Although there are several references to the Bishops of Lincoln visiting Biggleswade there is no record of a palace. Hill suggests that Palace Street, located some distance to the south-east is a corruption of the Old English *plaish*, meaning marshy place (Hill 1992). This could also explain the palace ground field-name adjacent to the river.

#### 5.4.4 The Fraternity

In 1475 Edward IV granted a licence to the Bishop of Lincoln, the Archdeacon of Northampton and eight other individuals to found the Fraternity of the Holy Trinity. Several deeds record bequests of property to the fraternity. At the Reformation, the fraternity was suppressed and all property seized by the Crown.

#### 5.4.5 Market

The Bishop of Lincoln was granted the right to hold a market by King John. This grant was subsequently confirmed by Henry III in 1227. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century the Bishop of Lincoln claimed the right to hold a Monday market. This right was confirmed by Henry VIII in 1528 (Page 1908). The oblong marketplace was laid out in front of St Andrew’s Church at right angles to the existing road system. Dawson suggests that this was a deliberate strategy to re-route traffic travelling between Baldock and Sandy via the marketplace (Dawson 1994). The outline of the marketplace largely survives although it has been encroached on by post-medieval and modern developments. The buildings fronting on to High Street define the northern boundary of the Market Place. It is possible that originally the market extended eastwards to the junction of High Street and London Road. The southern boundary would have been defined by the east-west section of Bonds Lane and the unmarked fork of Back Street. Property boundaries shown on the 1838 Tithe Map (BLARS MAT 5/1) partially preserve this line. Back Street would have formed the rear boundary of burgage tenements laid out on the south side of the Market Place. St Andrew’s Street or possibly Hitchin Street probably formed the western limit of the Market Place.

#### 5.4.6 Burgage Plots

The laying out of the market place was probably accompanied by some reorganisation of landholdings with burgage plots laid out fronting onto the marketplace. The earliest reference to burgage tenure dates to 1247 although a 13<sup>th</sup> century survey of the Manor which possibly dates to 1220-1240 records 54 burgage tenements (Dawson 1994). The rent for a burgage tenement was 1 shilling per annum (Peck 1977, 3). In 1293 the burgesses of Biggleswade claimed the right to bequeath their burgage tenements in their wills. An enquiry was ordered by Bishop Sutton but the result of this enquiry is not recorded (Page 1908). The Bishop of Lincoln’s Estate Account for 1509 records 123 burgages. Several properties fronting onto the marketplace with boundaries aligned roughly north-south may preserve the outline of original burgage plots. Similar properties may be preserved on the east side of the southern end of Shortmead Street. Most of the burgage plots on the south side



of the marketplace have been lost although a small area may be preserved adjacent to the eastern side of the railway line.

#### 5.4.7 Bridges

The development of Biggleswade is inexorably tied to the river crossings. It is generally agreed that the earliest crossing of the river probably occurred in the late Roman or early post-Roman period. Certainly it must have been established by the late Saxon period by which time the hundred and manor would have acquired the name. The most suitable place appears to be the site of the Ivel Mill (HER 6019) which coincides with the 30m contour and the narrowest point on the floodplain (Edwards 1974, Dawson 1994). Although it has been suggested that a bridge may have accompanied the mill, no trace of any such medieval bridge survives.

The route past the mill required the crossing of two river channels. An easier crossing was provided via a stone bridge established to the north of the town in the vicinity of Hill Lane. The date of this bridge is not known although it is likely to predate the laying out of the marketplace and burgage plots in the 12<sup>th</sup> or early 13<sup>th</sup> century. The necessity for all traffic crossing the Ivel to pass through Biggleswade would have provided the economic impetus for the development of the town. In 1302, Bishop Dalderby offered indulgences in return for contributions for the repair of the bridge at Biggleswade, although it is not clear which bridge (Page, 1908, Edwards, 1974). If this refers to the northern bridge, then it must have been in place during the previous century. In 1375 Biggleswade was granted the right to collect tolls towards the upkeep of the bridge, *pontage*, for three years (Simco and McKeague, 1997, 10).

#### 5.4.8 Streets

Although it is generally accepted that the laying out of the marketplace and burgage plots in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century was a planned imposition, it is not known what form the earliest settlement would have taken. The marketplace is the dominant feature of the town. High Street, running east - west, defines the northern side of the Market Place. It seems safe to assume that this street is at least as early as the laying out of the market and burgage plots. Church Street, running parallel to High Street, defines the rear of the burgage plots on the north side of the marketplace. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was known as Brewery Lane and prior to that it was known as Backway or Backside (Hill, 1992). It is likely to be contemporary with the laying out of the burgage tenements.

Shortmead Street runs parallel to the river from the north-west corner of the market place. A 15<sup>th</sup> century document refers to a 'messuage (dwelling house) and land in Shortmede'. Earlier documents indicate that there was an area of meadow known as "Schortmade" and it has been suggested that this street was another planned feature of the town, laid out over an area of former meadow (Dawson 1994).

If the Ivel Mill is the site of the earliest river crossing then Mill Lane is also likely to be early. It has been suggested that the earliest settlement may have been around the Church at the southern end of Shortmead Street, but this is



perhaps unlikely if Shortmead Street is a planned imposition on the settlement layout. The area adjacent to the river between the church and the mill is perhaps a more likely location.

The route linking the former Roman Road, London Road, and Mill Lane has been altered. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Tithe Map (BLARS MAT 5/1) and the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey show a street leading west from the northern end of London Road before heading south-west in the direction of Mill Lane. This street is shown as Back Street on the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey. Properties laid out on the east side of Hitchin Street, which leads south from the south-west corner of the market place, have encroached on the line of this route, but its alignment suggests it may be at least medieval in origin.

#### **5.4.9 Mill**

Two mills are mentioned in Domesday. Dawson suggests that this indicates two mills under one roof, as referred to in later documentary references of 1546/7 (Dawson 1994). The medieval mill is likely to have occupied the present site of the later Ivel Mill, also known as Franklin's Mill (HER1690). In 1538 there is a reference to Henry Lawson, "mylner of Bykellswade" (Page 1985).

#### **5.4.10 Buildings**

With the exception of St Andrew's Church (HER 1018) there are no surviving medieval buildings within the town.

There is a mid-16<sup>th</sup> century reference to a house in the market place, with a hall or chamber 60 feet long and 24 feet wide, reserved for Officers of the Crown to hold court when they visit the town, and a stockhouse for malefactors (Peck 1977, 9). The house was described as being "in great ruin" which suggests it had stood on the site for a considerable time.

#### **5.4.11 Trades**

Despite the laying out of the market place and burgage plots, Biggleswade continued to be relatively small. In the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, it was assessed as part of the hundred not as a separate town and at the end of the century tax assessors treated Biggleswade as a rural manor (Godber 1984). It seems likely therefore that the majority of the town's inhabitants earned their living through agriculture (Peck 1977, 10). In the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, Biggleswade was assessed as a town, although between 1309 and 1332 the number of taxpayers declined from 37 paying £6 to 19 taxpayers paying £5 (Godber 1984, 122). By the 14<sup>th</sup> century, there are records of fullers and tanners at Biggleswade and in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century there is a reference to a tailor, Thomas Adcocks (Godber 1984).

### **5.5 The Post-Medieval Period (AD1550 - AD1850)**

Biggleswade probably continued to expand slowly at the beginning of the post-medieval period. A mid-16<sup>th</sup> century Chantry Return lists 440 "houseling people", possibly indicating a population of about 550. The Hearth Tax return of 1671 lists a population of 773, although that includes the hamlets of



Stratton and Holme (Peck 1977, 10). During the 18<sup>th</sup> century the town prospered. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the town's population increased by 80% compared to an average increase for towns in the county of 50% (Godber 1985, 446).

### **5.5.1 St Andrew's Church (HER1018)**

The tower was rebuilt in 1720 and the church restored in 1832.

### **5.5.2 Market**

In 1576 William Fyshe leased all shops and "lez stalles" in the market place. Encroachment onto the market place must have been occurring from at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards and possibly earlier. The Market House (HER2065) and at least three buildings on the south side of the market place (HER7408, 7391 and 75356) date to the 17<sup>th</sup> century or earlier. By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Tithe Map of 1838 (BLARS MAT 5/1) shows the market place reduced to roughly its current size with a row of buildings encroaching onto the southern side and properties laid out at the west end. In addition to the Market House (HER2065) two early 19<sup>th</sup> century properties (HER 7390 and 12681) have been built in the market place by this time. The eastern end of the market place is also laid out with properties by this time.

### **5.5.3 Streets**

From the early 17<sup>th</sup> century proposals to impose tolls for the upkeep of "The Great North Road" were debated, and rejected, in Parliament (Peck 1977, 15). It was not until the early 18<sup>th</sup> century that the first Turnpike Trusts were established. Peck states that the Stevenage to Biggleswade Turnpike Trust was established in 1720 and extended from the southern end of the town to the bridge in 1755 (Peck 1977, 15.). The Biggleswade to Alconbury Hill Turnpike was established in 1725 and the Biggleswade to St Ives road was turnpiked in 1755 (Godber 1985, 320).

The earliest representation of the town, the 1838 Tithe Map (BLARS MAT 5/1), shows the main streets and some smaller lanes, although none are marked. In addition to the medieval street plan discussed above, there is now a street linking London Road and the northern end of Shortmead Street. This street, now known as Crab Lane, heads north from the junction of London Road and High Street respecting the eastern boundary of properties fronting onto High Street. Some way to the rear of High Street the road turns to follow a slightly meandering SE-NW route towards the northern end of Shortmead Street. This section of the road is now known as Sun Street after the Sun Inn, formerly the principal inn of the town (Page 1908). It is unlikely that this route, bypassing the market place, could have existed in the medieval period. How long it had been existence prior to being turnpiked in 1755 is unclear. Rose Lane links High Street and Sun Street. An unmarked road extends westward from Rose Lane parallel to High Street and Church Street. Brunts Lane extends east from Shortmead Street. A track running parallel to Shortmead Street links the eastern end of Brunts Lane and Church Street. The start of Potton Road is shown extending east from Sun Street.





In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Hitchin Street was known variously as Holme Street and Langford Lane or Langford Street (Page and Skinner, 1985).

A lane, known as Dark Lane, leads to a limekiln and close (HER13940) adjacent to the river. An opening on the west side of Shortmead Street goes to a house and wharf (HER13944) but there is no obvious access to a second house and wharf (HER13941) to the north. Bonds Lane to the south of the market place extends east from Hitchin Street before turning sharply south and then east again to abut Back Street. The northern end of Station Road, presumably called something else at that time, extends south from the market place to the junction of Back Street and Bonds Lane. Several lanes, including the current Foundry Lane and Palace Street are shown heading south from Bonds Lane and Back Street.

#### 5.5.4 Bridges

The northern bridge was replaced in 1796 with stone from Sandy. The work was carried out by the local masons, Rivetts, working under the supervision of Sir Phillip Monoux (Simco and McKeague 1997).

#### 5.5.5 Buildings

A fire in 1604 is reported to have destroyed a great many dwellings (Peck 1977, 10). There are a number of surviving 17<sup>th</sup> century buildings in the town, a number of which may be even earlier (see Table 1). The White Horse Inn (HER2057), Cross Keys and The Bell are all recorded before 1600. The White Hart (HER2068) Crown, Kings Arms, Red Lion, Royal Oak and Wrestler's are all recorded in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Peck, 1977, 10). The buildings are evenly distributed throughout the town (Fig 4).

HER No.	Address	Comments
2054	59-61 High Street	18 <sup>th</sup> /19 <sup>th</sup> century alterations
2057	White Horse Inn, 1 High Street	18 <sup>th</sup> century alterations
2058	2-10 High Street	17 <sup>th</sup> century or earlier
2065	1-4 Market House, Market Place	17 <sup>th</sup> century or earlier
2068	White Hart Public House, 24 Market Place	17 <sup>th</sup> century or earlier
7389	95b-101 High Street	17 <sup>th</sup> century or earlier
7391	Rear of 38 High Street	17 <sup>th</sup> century or earlier
7393	Doctor's Surgery, Hitchin Street	17 <sup>th</sup> century
7408	15a Market Place	17 <sup>th</sup> century
7419	Coach and Horses, 49-51 Shortmead Street	18 <sup>th</sup> century alterations
7420	55 Shortmead Street	18 <sup>th</sup> century alterations
7427	38-40 Shortmead Street	17 <sup>th</sup> century
7428	46-50 Shortmead Street	18 <sup>th</sup> /19 <sup>th</sup> century alterations

**Table 1. 17<sup>th</sup> century buildings in Biggleswade**

Several historic buildings in the town date to the 18<sup>th</sup> century although a fire in 1785 destroyed 120 houses, as well as warehouses, barns granaries, stables and the Baptist Meeting House in Back Lane (Peck 1977, 18).

HER No.	Address	Comments
7432	Post Office, 64 Shortmead Street	18 <sup>th</sup> century
7321	The Malting, Church Street	18 <sup>th</sup> century
7385	79-81 High Street	18 <sup>th</sup> century



2055	The Crown Hotel, 23 -25 High Street	18 <sup>th</sup> century
7400	4 London Road	18 <sup>th</sup> century
7434	92 Shortmead Street	18 <sup>th</sup> century
2060	100 Shortmead Street	early 18 <sup>th</sup> century

**Table 2. 18<sup>th</sup> century buildings in Biggleswade**

There are a number of buildings in the town dating to the late 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Table 2). The former Town Hall (HER4281) at the east end of the market place was designed by JT Wing. The VCH describes it as “an unattractive building” and dates it to 1814 (Page 1908) although the HER dates it to 1844.

HER No.	Address	Comments
2050	77 Shortmead Street	
7436	134-136 Shortmead Street	19 <sup>th</sup> century refacing earlier building
2061	45-47 Shortmead Street	early 19 <sup>th</sup> century
2063	Conservative Club, St Andrew's Street	
2070	The Limes, former Union Workhouse, London Road.	1835-6
4281	Former Town Hall, 36 High Street	1844
7371	Providence Chapel, Back Street	1843
7380	15 High Street	19 <sup>th</sup> century refacing earlier building
7381	35-39 High Street	early 19 <sup>th</sup> century
7382	41-45 High Street	19 <sup>th</sup> century refacing earlier building
7384	Golden Pheasant Public House, 71 High Street	
7388	Brighton House, 93 High Street	early 19 <sup>th</sup> century
7390	29 Market Place and 24-26 High Street	early 19 <sup>th</sup> century
7392	52 High Street	19 <sup>th</sup> century refacing earlier building
7404	49 London Road	early 19 <sup>th</sup> century
7405	Boddington Lodge, 57 London Road	early 19 <sup>th</sup> century
7406	59 London Road	early 19 <sup>th</sup> century
7409	19-21 Market Place	early 19 <sup>th</sup> century
7439	4 Station Road	early 19 <sup>th</sup> century
7171	St Andrew's VP School, Rose Lane	1815
8345	Wesleyan Chapel, Shortmead Street	1834-5
12681	22 High Street	on 1838 Tithe Map

**Table 3. Late 18<sup>th</sup>/early 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings in Biggleswade**

#### 5.5.6 Baptist Chapel

Nonconformists were meeting in Biggleswade from about 1715. The Biggleswade Baptist Church was formed in 1771 and a chapel was built in Back Street. It was destroyed in the fire of 1785. The Particular Baptist Providence Chapel (HER7371) was built in Back Street in 1843.

#### 5.5.7 Methodist Chapel

Wesleyan evangelists from St Neots were active in the town during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A barn was licensed for services in 1794 and a chapel built in Shortmead Street the following year (Peck 1977, 19). The HER dates the Wesleyan Chapel (HER8345) in Shortmead Street to 1834-5.

#### 5.5.8 Union Workhouse

The early 19<sup>th</sup> century Tithe Map (BLARS MAT 5/1) shows the old workhouse garden (HER13952) situated at the east end of the High Street adjacent to Crab Lane. The Poor Law Act of 1834 set up Unions of parishes to



administer the Poor Law and in 1835 the new Union Workhouse, or Poor Law Institution (HER2070) was built in London Road.

### 5.5.9 Trades

The earliest Parish Registers for Biggleswade are lost, the earliest surviving being 1697, although Bishop's Transcripts survive for 1604, 1637, 1640 and 1692 (Emmison 1944). Among the occupational names for the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, Carter, Draper and Smyth are recorded. For the late 17<sup>th</sup> century wheelwright, bricklayer, carpenter, butcher, glazier, innkeeper, gardener, horse-courser, exciseman, tailor, joiner, carter, baker, attorney and blacksmith are all listed.

Records for the 18<sup>th</sup> century indicate that most people still earned their living from the land. Labourer is the most common occupation listed and there are numerous gardeners, farmers and a shepherd. As well as the usual retail trades one would expect in a town, records of trades reflect the increasing importance of coaching and innkeeping. In addition, occupations like coal merchant, coal heaver, corn factor and waterman no doubt relate to the increasing importance of the Ivel Navigation. The trades of miller, tanner, weaver, brickmaker, cooper and maltster are all recorded. The Malting (HER7321) adjacent to the former brewery on Church Street dates to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In addition a currier or dyer of leather, a cordmaker, fellmonger and hempdresser are all listed. Curiously, at least seven shoemakers and a patten maker are also listed, many of whom seem to have been active at the same time.

Lace manufacture grew in importance alongside straw plaiting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century although both trades had died out by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Page 1908). A limekiln (HER13940) is shown adjacent to the river on the 1938 Tithe Map (BLARS MAT 5/1) and four separate maltings (HER13943, 13948, 13949, 13950 and 13951) are shown on the west side of Shortmead Street and to the south of the market place. A fifth malting yard (HER13948) is shown in the vicinity of the former brewery.

### 5.5.10 Biggleswade Brewery

Brewing began on the site of the former Greene King brewery in Church Street (HER 7322) in 1764. Documentary sources were examined previously as part of a desk-based assessment in advance of trial trenching (GKB536). In addition to the Tithe Apportionment there are a large number of records regarding the Brewery held under the reference GK. The first reference to Samuel Wells, the brewer, appears in the Parish Records for 1749. For location of the brewery site, see Fig 11.

### 5.5.11 The Ivel Navigation

Work began on the River Ivel Navigation in 1757 and a channel was cut to bypass Franklin's (now Ivel) mill. An extension of the waterway was cut to Shefford, and Biggleswade became a distribution centre for coal, timber and iron. Several wharves, coalyards and maltings were located along the eastern bank of the river in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, until the river trade was superseded by the railways.



### 5.5.12 Franklin's Bridge

A typical Ivel Navigation bridge was built at Franklin's mill in 1823. The Moreton and Kinman bridge featured lattice work iron railings and sandstone wing walls. It was replaced in 1973 (Simco and McKeague 1997).

## 5.6 The Industrial Period (AD1850 - AD1914)

The advent of the railway in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century had a marked effect on the town which continued to expand to the south and east of the earlier settlement core.

### 5.6.1 Streets

The 1st Edition Ordnance Survey of 1881 (BLARS Sheet 175 and 190) shows an expansion of the town to the east of the railway along Potton Road, an area marked as "New Town". There is also infill housing on either side of the railway between Crab Lane and High Street. The gas works is shown on the north side of St John's Street (between Potton Road and Rose Lane) and there is further development on this northern side of town. A new street, Cemetery Street, extends east from the 'elbow' of Crab Lane with buildings along its northern side. Drove Lane extends north from London Road, continuing the former line of the Roman road before turning north-east to meet the Potton Road. The cemetery is on the east side of Drove Lane. Most of the area bounded by Stratton Street (the east end of High Street) to the north, London Road to the south and Drove Lane to the east has been infilled with buildings by this time. Station Road extends south-east from Back Street towards the newly constructed station. Saffron Road links Station Road and Hitchin Street to the east. The area between Back Street and Saffron Road has been developed by this time and there are buildings along either side of Hitchin Street. Palace Street runs between Bonds Lane and the junction of Station Road/Saffron Road. It has been suggested that this may refer to a former field name, a corruption of the Old English *plaish*, meaning marshy place (Hill 1992).

By 1900, there appears to have been very little additional development. Houses are shown along the west side of Fairfield which extends north from Rose Lane.

### 5.6.2 The Railway

The construction of the Great Northern Railway in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century effectively cut the town in half. It also greatly affected the river trade. The Ivel Navigation Commission was wound up in 1876. The Turnpike Trusts were gradually dissolved between 1868 and 1877, with a new Highways Board established to administer the roads.

### 5.6.3 Buildings

There are a number of surviving mid- to late 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings in the town (see Table 4). The buildings are evenly distributed throughout the town (Fig 4).

HER No.	Address	Comments
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8363	86 Shortmead Street	19 <sup>th</sup> century
2051	Black Bear Public House, Hitchin Street	19 <sup>th</sup> century
2053	63 High Street	19 <sup>th</sup> century
7383	Liberal Club, 65-69 High Street	late 19 <sup>th</sup> century
7386	83 High Street	19 <sup>th</sup> century
7387	Old Court House, 91 High Street	1870s
7394	45 Hitchin Street	19 <sup>th</sup> century
7395	67-69 Hitchin Street	19 <sup>th</sup> century
7396	77 Hitchin Street	19 <sup>th</sup> century
7398	65 Lawrence Road	19 <sup>th</sup> century
7399	2 London Road	19 <sup>th</sup> century
7403	47 London Road	19 <sup>th</sup> century
7413	Stable block to Conservative Club, St Andrew's Street	19 <sup>th</sup> century
7414	7 Shortmead Street	19 <sup>th</sup> century
7415	11 Shortmead Street	19 <sup>th</sup> century
7416	The Close, Shortmead Street	19 <sup>th</sup> century
7417	23 Shortmead Street	
7424	121 Shortmead Street	
7425	34 Shortmead Street	19 <sup>th</sup> century
7426	36 Shortmead Street	19 <sup>th</sup> century
7429	54-56 Shortmead Street	19 <sup>th</sup> century
7430	58 Shortmead Street	19 <sup>th</sup> century
7431	60-62 Shortmead Street	19 <sup>th</sup> century
7435	Former Non-Conformist Chapel, Shortmead Street	
7437	178 Shortmead Street	
7438	Biggleswade Station, Station Road	19 <sup>th</sup> century
7440	6 Station Road	19 <sup>th</sup> century
7441	8-12 Station Road	19 <sup>th</sup> century
7442	14-16 Station Road	19 <sup>th</sup> century
7443	18 Station Road	19 <sup>th</sup> century
7445	28 Sun Street	19 <sup>th</sup> century
7446	34-36 Sun Street	19 <sup>th</sup> century

**Table 4. Late 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings in Biggleswade**

#### 5.6.4 The Cemetery

The cemetery on the east side of Drove Lane features twin chapels, one Church of England and one Nonconformist (HER7375), designed by Hooker and Ladds of London in 1867.

#### 5.6.5 Trades

In the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, agricultural labourer was still the most common occupation amongst the inhabitants of Biggleswade, with straw plaiting and to a lesser extent lace making being common occupations for women and children, although straw plaiting had largely died out by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As well as occupations associated with innkeeping, brewing, coaching and the river a number of occupations associated with the railway are now listed. There do not appear to be any tanners, fullers, curriers, weavers or dyers listed although shoemaker continued to be a common profession. Freeman, Hardy and Willis boot manufacturers is listed in the Kelly's Trades Directory for 1898.

#### 5.6.6 Ivel Cycle Works

A cycle factory was established adjacent to the Ongley Arms at the northern end of Shortmead Street by Dan Albone in 1887. Albone went on to produce



motor cars and founded Ivel Agricultural Motors which produced one of the first tractors. The business ran into difficulties at the time of the Great War and when the factory was taken over by R R and A R W Jordan in 1921 no trace of the engineering works was found on the site. R A Jordan, the commercial garage which subsequently occupied the site, was demolished and the site has since been re-developed.

#### **5.6.7 Gas Works**

The original gas works was built on the east side of Hitchin Street, at the corner of Onham Road, in 1837. The Biggleswade Gas Company (HER6801) was established adjacent to the west side of the railway on the north side of St John's Street in 1877. The company passed through various owners until it was wound up in 1936. Of the two gas holders one is dated 1913.

#### **5.6.8 Foundry**

An Iron and Brass Foundry (HER2503) is shown on the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey to the west of Station Road.

#### **5.6.9 Delaney Galley Engineering Works**

A factory is shown on the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey on the south side of the market place.



## 6. ASSESSMENT OF BIGGLESWADE'S CHARACTER, IMPORTANCE AND POTENTIAL

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### 6.1 *Character of the Present Town*

Biggleswade still has the character of small market town even though it has been subject to great expansion in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Now the principal town of mid-Bedfordshire, its town centre was designated a Conservation Area in 1989. The Conservation Area contains over 50 listed buildings, concentrated in the Market Square, High Street, Shortmead Street, St Andrew's Street, London Road, Rose Lane and Station Road (Fig 9). Most of the present buildings date from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries although the layout of the main streets is considerably older.

Biggleswade probably enjoyed its main period of prosperity during the coaching age and the most striking buildings on the Market Place are the public houses. Other notable buildings include The Maltings on Church Street and Ivel Mill which has now been converted to residential flats and the adjacent Ivel House. The 17<sup>th</sup> century Market House retains its timber framing at second floor level but has been fitted out as modern shops at ground level. The Market Place has recently been the subject of an enhancement scheme. Modern developments front on to the Market Place and, with the exception of the public houses, most of the historic buildings have modern shop fronts at lower level.

Prior to 1850 the town was mainly confined to the areas adjacent to the Market Place and Shortmead Street. The advent of the railway in the 1850s led to new developments to the east and also to the south of the market square. The River Ivel prevented expansion westwards, although much of the area between the river and Shortmead Street has now been infilled. Biggleswade Common delimits expansion to the north. The new bypass effectively defined the southern expansion of the town. Development continues on the Stratton Residential Development Area to the east.

With the exception of the medieval church there are no known medieval buildings within the town. The White Hart is considered the oldest building in Biggleswade (Hill, 1985). Closer investigation of some of the 17<sup>th</sup> century buildings may reveal medieval elements. The 18<sup>th</sup> century fashion for re-facing earlier houses in the Georgian style could hide a number of previously unknown earlier buildings.

### 6.2 *Archaeological Potential*

There have been only few opportunities for archaeological investigation within the town of Biggleswade itself. Most of the significant archaeological work in the locality has been associated with mineral extraction and housing development, well beyond the limits of the historic town. The small scale work that has been undertaken has not produced significant results (see above, section 3.1), so that the archaeological potential of the town remains largely untapped.



There is some cellarage associated with buildings around the Market Place. In addition, some relatively modern developments (e.g. the former Greene King brewery on Church Street and the railway) have impinged on elements of the medieval town. Nonetheless, there is high potential for the preservation of deposits relating to the town's Saxon and medieval origins and its expansion along the Ivel frontage in the post-medieval period.

### 6.3 Archaeological Components

The main components of the town's development identified in this survey are described below and illustrated in Fig 11.

- **Component 1. Ford (*Bicca's wade*)**  
Although the location of the original crossing which gave the settlement its name remains uncertain, the area of the mill is accepted as the most suitable position. Recent discoveries by Cambridge Archaeological Unit suggest that a broad droveway coming down from the Greensand Ridge headed towards this point from the west in medieval times. A ford here would have effectively linked the town with the ringwork (on the gravel island between courses of the Ivel) in the 12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries.
- **Component 2. Saxon settlement of Biggleswade**  
The location of Saxon Biggleswade is uncertain. Domesday Book makes it clear that Biggleswade was a small settlement, more a village than a town. The most likely location of this early settlement is in the vicinity of the parish church, the mill, and the ford from which it takes its name.
- **Component 3. Church and churchyard (and possible Bishop's Palace?)**  
The development of the present St Andrew's church is well documented, although there has been little opportunity for archaeological investigation to supplement this. The church is likely to occupy an ancient site but this remains to be proved. The church sits within an open, wooded churchyard, which may have originally been larger than it is now. It is conjectured that a Bishop's Palace was located nearby in the 12<sup>th</sup> - 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, possibly in the field next to the river (called Palace Ground in the 19<sup>th</sup> century). The component area has been extended slightly to take this possibility into account.
- **Component 4. Medieval town (including street layout and burgage plots)**  
The medieval town clearly developed around the planned layout of the market place in the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Medieval burgage plots may be preserved beneath properties facing the Market Place and the lower end of Shortmead Street. The medieval streets of Biggleswade are likely to represent at least one phase of planned redevelopment, superimposed onto a pre-existing system of routeways.





- **Component 5. *Market Place***

The market place, aligned east-west and now much reduced from its original size, is a central feature of town and was the key to its economic development. It may represent part of a re-planning of the streets in the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Traces of a large market house and other market structures dating from the medieval and post-medieval period could survive below ground. Medieval burgage plots are likely to have faced on to the market.

- **Component 6. *Medieval bridge***

The medieval bridge to the north of town was replaced in 1796 and two modern bridges were constructed in the 1940s. Traces of the medieval bridge may have survived the recent re-development, however. The development of this crossing point / bridge is clearly connected with that of Shortmead Street, which links it to the town.

- **Component 7. *Post-medieval wharves***

The opening of the Ivel Navigation in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, and the subsequent extension of the waterway to Shefford, led to the establishment of a flourishing river trade. Properties on the eastern side of a straightened length of river between the bridge at the top of Shortmead Street and a bend in the river halfway to the mill included several wharves, coalyards and maltings. Another wharf was located just to the north of the mill. Traces of earlier wharfage are likely to have been badly disturbed by these developments, which must have involved considerable making up of ground to embank the river.



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