A NEW THEORY OF THE ORIGINS AND EARLY GROWTH OF NORTHAMPTON

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This study in local topography began with a casual question, provoked by town-planning problems, namely : Why is Northampton's Town Centre located at All Saints' church ?

The Four-Point Formula

Despite extensive enquiry, no information was found in published or ms. sources, nor any obvious lines of research. By treating the question as an exercise in logic, however, several answers emerged one by one, and eventually they were tentatively assembled in a formula : that is to say, the location of the Town Centre is explained by the combined weight of the following four points :—[2]

1. By the siting of the crossing-places over the River Nene, i.e. the two historic bridges, South Bridge and West Bridge ;
2. By the junction formed where the two roads from the river bridges meet, at the top of Bridge Street and Gold Street ;
3. By the attraction of all other main roads to this junction, which thus became the focal point of the road pattern ; and
4. By complementary influences, such as the proximity of the Market Square and the congregation of important buildings, e.g. All Saints' church and the second Guildhall.[3]

The merit of this analysis lies in the establishment of a logical connection between the site of the Town Centre and the sites of the two historic bridges. In other words, the river crossings are the king pins of Northampton's organic structure (figs. 1 and 2).

The formula soon led to a new assessment of Northampton's third bridge, Spencer Bridge, built in the last quarter of the 19th century. Its significance is twofold :—

(a) The two historic bridges served different routes and were thus complementary, but Spencer Bridge is competitive with West Bridge. This competitive element changed the town's design, thus ending an epoch which had lasted seven and a half centuries or more.

(b) Spencer Bridge also changed the status of Regent Square, on the site of the medieval North Gate. Instead of being merely a place on the Leicester highway, Regent Square now emerged

[1] The diagrams are the copyright of the author.

[2] Vide 'Northampton's Town Centre' in Northants. *N.H.Soc.* and *F.C. Journal*, Dec., 1942, vol. xxx, no. 226, pp.41–53.

[3] The earliest dates usually given are All Saints 1100, the second Guildhall 1300. Before 1300 the site of the Market Square was an open space used for fairs.

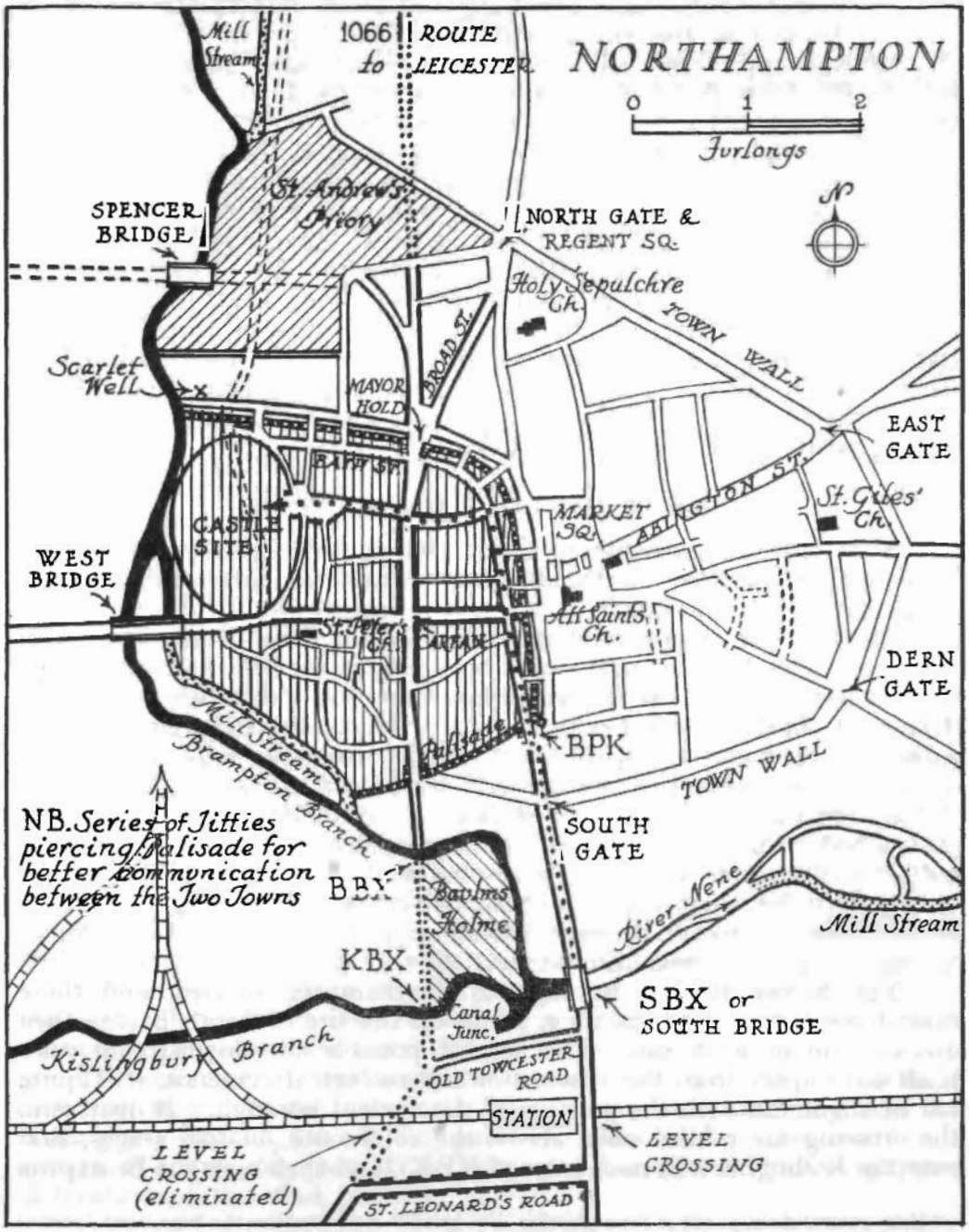
NORTHAMPTON
0 1 2
Furlongs
Mill Stream
1066 ROUTE to LEICESTER
St. Andrew's Priory
SPENCER BRIDGE
NORTH GATE & REGENT SQ.
Holy Sepulchre Ch.
TOWN WALL
Scarlet Well
MAYOR HOLD
BROAD ST.
EAST GATE
CASTLE SITE
MARKET SQ.
ABINGTON ST.
St. Giles' Ch.
WEST BRIDGE
All Saints Ch.
DERN GATE
BPK
Mill Stream
Brampton Branch
TOWN WALL
NB. Series of Jitties piercing Palisade for better communication between the Two Towns
BBX
SOUTH GATE
Bavins Holme
River Nene
Mill Stream
KBX
SBX or SOUTH BRIDGE
Canal Junc.
Kislingbury Branch
OLD TOWCESTER ROAD
STATION
LEVEL CROSSING
LEVEL CROSSING (eliminated)
ST. LEONARD'S ROAD

Fig. 1.

as the junction of roads from two bridges, Spencer Bridge and South Bridge, thus acquiring a strategic importance analogous to that of the Town Centre itself.[1]

In this and other ways (some irrelevant here, some elaborated below), the Four-Point Formula won respect, both as a clue in town-planning policy and a tool in historical research.[2]

For example, it had become clear that each of the Four Points has a dual aspect : a constant principle and a variable application of it. In Point One the constant principle is the necessity of at least two river crossings to get into and out of the medieval town, while the variable factor is a range of choice, within limits, for the site of each crossing. Why, for instance, in the original design was West Bridge not built on the site of Spencer Bridge ? In Point Two there must be a road junction, but its precise location is theoretically variable ; the two roads might meet at right angles, or an obtuse or acute angle. Thus, under Point Three, the focal point of the road pattern might have been anywhere within, so to speak, a magnetic field.

Site of Original Crossing Place

A detailed examination of Point One seemed most profitable : in particular, why is the South Bridge crossing (hereinafter SBX) where it is, instead of elsewhere ?

On reflection it appeared that SBX is not the site of the original crossing. This had not previously been conjectured, but the argument is very weighty. South Bridge is less than 100 yards below the confluence of the two Branches of the River Nene, the Brampton Branch from the north and the Kislingbury Branch from the west. From the confluence the Nene is a mature and broad river, draining an area of 218 square miles. There is no evidence or tradition of a ford, and no gravel bed. To build a bridge here must always have been a major public works, quite beyond the resources of a small community, and unnecessary for their needs. The construction of the first version of South Bridge, therefore, becomes feasible only after Northampton becomes important, that is, with the Norman Conquest.

Yet, before 1066, a borough of Northampton existed, and there must have been a river crossing, if not on the site of South Bridge then downstream or upstream. The nearest possible site downstream rules itself out ; apart from the absence of archaeological evidence, it is quite out of alignment with the position of the ancient borough. If upstream, the crossing must have been above the confluence, in two stages, first over the Kislingbury Branch (say, at KBX), and then over the Brampton

[1] If, by natural development or town-planning policy, Spencer Bridge attracts more traffic than West Bridge the importance of Regent Square will be further enhanced.

[2] At this stage, however, one problem sorely puzzled me : why was the Four-Point Formula inapplicable to the Mayorhold, the old Town Centre ? In particular, why no direct routes from the Mayorhold to the river bridges ? The solution comes later.

Branch (at BBX). This assumption of dual crossings *somewhere* above the confluence now became the basis of the argument, and the next step plainly was to locate them geographically.

After some casting about, it seemed that a clue to the identification of KBX might be obtained from a detailed study of the road pattern of the southern approaches by the following analysis.

Identification of KBX

Wherever the original crossing-place (OCP) was in the pre-1066 period the contemporary roads must have led there. Their final stretches were presumably straight, because the traveller would make a bee-line for the crossing as soon as it came into sight from the hill crest. Thus, if there were three roads, they would be like three straight lines converging on a common point, namely, OCP, forming a simple road pattern easily recognisable (fig. 3, page 168). With this in mind, alternative assumptions were made :

1. Assuming OCP = SBX, the original road pattern would presumably have persisted in its simplicity and be evident on the modern map ; as nothing of the kind is visible, this alternative fell to the ground.
2. Assuming OCP=KBX, the expectations are quite different, because at a subsequent date there was the transfer from KBX to SBX which would inevitably dislocate the road pattern ; for such dislocation the modern map, at a glance, provides *prima facie* support.

There are to-day three chief highways in the southern approaches. The Banbury Lane is prehistoric, authenticated by a series of camps and tumuli. The Towcester Road, if not Roman, is probably Romano-British ; pre-1066 references in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle indicate troop movements between Northampton and Towcester, suggesting a military route. The London Road presumably existed before Queen Eleanor's Cross was erected on the roadside soon after her death in 1290, but whether it existed as early as 1066 ' doth not appear '.[1]

The Towcester Road, for reasons which need not be recited here, offered the best guidance. From near the hill crest it runs straight in a north-easterly direction for 6 furlongs but then swings abruptly to the east, along St. Leonard's Road for 2 furlongs, and then swings abruptly to the north for South Bridge 1½ furlongs away.

The outcome of this analysis was a hypothesis : If the straight 6 furlong stretch of the Towcester Road is projected until it strikes the Kislingbury Branch, the striking point identifies KBX. The two abrupt swings, of course, are part of the *prima facie* support for the subsequent dislocation of the road pattern.[2]

[1] The excellent phrase of Bridges, the county historian, whenever he found that despite his researches he had no evidence.

[2] St. Leonard's Road is modern, but in principle it duplicates the effect of the road now called Old Towcester Road : see below for further comment.

Having thus provisionally identified KBX, it was an easy and obvious step to fix the position of BBX, by alignment and shortest distance : namely, $1\frac{1}{2}$ furlongs due north of KBX (figs. 4 and 3).

Continuing due north, the original main approach into Northampton before 1066 was, therefore, via the streets now called Gas Street and Horse Shoe Street : thus arriving at the important cross-roads (where the traffic lights now are), formed by Horse Shoe Street-Horsemarket and Marefair-Gold Street, hereinafter for brevity called ' the Carfax ' (fig. 3).

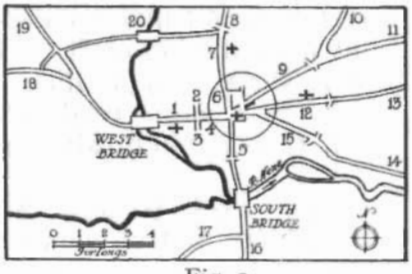

Fig. 2.

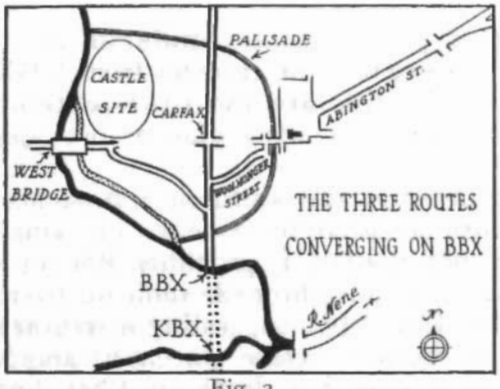

Fig. 3.

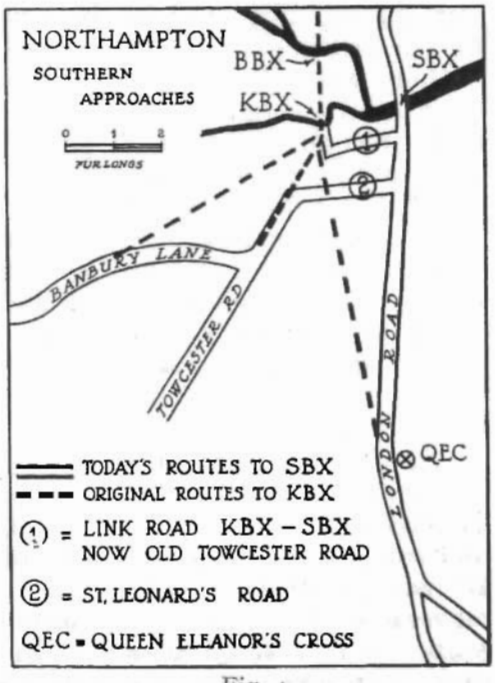

Fig. 4.

Key to Fig. 2.

1. Marefair and St. Peter's Church. 2. Horsemarket. 3. Horse Shoe Street. 4. Gold Street. 5. Bridge Street. 6. The Drapery. 7. Sheep Street and Church of Holy Sepulchre. 8. Regent Square. 9. Abington Street. 10. To Kettering. 11. To Wellingborough. 12. St. Giles Street and St. Giles Church. 13. Billing Road. 14. To Bedford. 15. Derngate. 16. To London. 17. St. Leonard's Road and to Towcester. 18. To Weedon. 19. To Rugby. 20. Spencer Bridge. Inside the circle, denoting the area of the Town Centre, the Church is All Saints, and the open space to the north of it is the Market Square. The second Guildhall (*circa* 1300 to 1864) was the corner property at the end of Abington Street (south side).

This approach route introduced an entirely new conception into the study of Northampton topography, and it worked like magic. The entry in Domesday Book relating to Northampton includes the phrase ' in the new borough ' (' in novo burgo '), which indicates that the Normans enlarged Northampton, between 1066 and 1086, by the addition of a New Town to the Old Town, alternatively known, it seems, as the French

Town and the English Town. Their boundaries, however, subsequently disappeared from record and tradition and seemed lost beyond recall. But here, suddenly and unexpectedly, was the 'open sesame': a panorama of 11th century Northampton rapidly unfolded itself.

Under this new conception a special status is bestowed on the Carfax because Marefair and Horse Shoe Street formed, during this early period, a junction of roads from river bridges, West Bridge and BBX respectively. The Carfax in consequence enjoyed, as long as these conditions lasted, the same kind of strategic importance which nowadays appertains, as previously explained, to the Town Centre at All Saints and to Regent Square.

The Carfax, it was therefore assumed, was the Town Centre of the pre-1066 borough : an assumption which gave the map 'a new look'.

Northampton in 1066

If the Carfax was the Town Centre what were the limits and area of the pre-1066 borough? The natural assumption is that the extent of the town is indicated by the length of the four principal streets—Marefair, Horsemarket, Gold Street and Horse Shoe Street—about 75 acres, i.e. the vertically hatched area in fig. 1.

At this juncture a re-examination of a historical map and an air-photograph of the old part of the town suddenly revealed something which previously had escaped notice : namely, apparent evidence of the line of a palisade surviving in the street pattern.

Starting in the north-west, the curved alignment of Bath Street, Silver Street, College Street and Kingswell Street is inside the palisade; and the curved alignment of Scarletwell Street, Bearward Street, the Drapery and Bridge Street is outside the palisade. Lying between them the palisade thus seems to have run from one point to another point on the Brampton Branch : i.e. from about 2 furlongs upstream of West Bridge to the downstream junction of the mill stream and main channel (figs. 1 and 3).

To what period should such a palisade be attributed? As it cannot be Norman, it must be pre-1066. During the Danish régime (877–912), or at least the final part of it, Northampton was a military and administrative centre and had a Jarl and a regional army dependent on it. Probably it was the Danes who fortified the town by palisading it, thereby also elevating it to the status of a burg or borough.[1]

Accepting the palisade as a fact, it follows that there must have been Gateways, probably four main gateways at the ends of the four principal streets.[2]

[1] The possibility of Anglo-Saxon fortification, it has been suggested, should be left open.

[2] The term Gateways is used for the Palisade to avoid confusion with the later Gates in the medieval Town Walls, also named by the points of the compass, but occupying quite different sites, except the West Gate.

The site of All Saints' church (the modern Town Centre) is thus just outside the East Gateway, and the site of the Mayorhold (which, see below, became the Norman Town Centre) is just outside the North Gateway.

The South Gateway down Horse Shoe Street must have been further down than the junction of Woolmonger Street, because this street was inside the palisade; but not much further, for it was doubtless above flood level. As for the West Gateway, if one existed, it was presumably linked structurally with the West Bridge and probably with a stronghold or fort on the site of the future Norman castle.

The Domesday Book description of Northampton, at 1066 and 1086, is tantalising. Even the statistics of houses, by which the sizes of the old and new towns might have been judged are unsatisfactory. In King Edward's time, it says, there had been 60 burgesses with as many mansions or houses in the King's demesne, though 14 were waste or in ruins at 1086; besides these, it continues, there are 'in novo burgo' 40 burgesses in King William's demesne, who presumably had newly-built houses. In addition, at 1086, there were 230½ houses belonging to clerical dignitaries, nobles and laymen, but it is not stated: (a) how many of these were in the old and new boroughs respectively; (b) whether any of them existed in 1066. As 21½. or nearly 10%, are described as waste or in ruins, it seems likely that a substantial percentage of the 230½ were pre-1066 and therefore in the old borough. Accordingly the proper conclusion (contrary to certain earlier opinions) seems to be that in the old borough at 1066 there were definitely more than 60 houses, as one would expect in a palisaded borough of 75 acres and with four principal streets; but just how many more than 60 is unfortunately not calculable.

In Domesday Book, 1066 or 1086, there is no mention of any church, mill or mint in the borough; nor any castle, town walls, palisade or fortifications of any kind; nor the River Nene or any river crossings by bridge or ford; nor the area or extent or boundaries of the borough, or the open fields later known as Northampton Fields; nor an Earl of Northampton.

Archaeological evidence, however, seems to prove the existence of a church before 1066 on the site of St. Peter's, presumably the chief church, and apparently the only one within the palisade. It has been argued that pre-1066 churches stood on the sites of All Saints' and the Holy Sepulchre; if so, being outside the palisade, they must have been of minor importance.[1] Possibly there was a mint. If there was no Town Mill, which seems incredible, the borough must have depended on the South Mill of Kingsthorpe and the Nunn Mill of Hardingstone, both mentioned in Domesday Book, the former 3 furlongs from the North Gateway and the latter 4 furlongs from the East Gateway.

[1] The site of the Holy Sepulchre, 1½ furlongs from the palisade, is thus well in the open fields of pre-1066.

The northern exit has a special interest. KBX and BBX, the Carfax and the North Gateway were all in a straight line, leading due north. On leaving the North Gateway, how did the traveller get on to the highway for Leicester? Looking at the modern map, it seems he used the diagonal route, now called Broad Street, which links the Mayorhold with Regent Square. Another and better answer, however, is that the traveller at the North Gateway in 1066 was already on the Leicester highway: he continued due north, along what was then a continuous route, via Semilong Road to Kingsthorpe Hollow, whereabouts the ancient and modern highways to Leicester become identical.[1]

The New Town of the Normans

In view of the Domesday Book reference 'in novo burgo', it is certain that the Normans enlarged Northampton between 1066 and 1086, and it may be accepted that the boundaries of the enlarged Northampton tally with the line of the medieval Town Walls (fig. 1).

Apparently as part of this general design, the Normans transferred the Town Centre from the Carfax to the Mayorhold, probably before 1086.

The reasons for this choice of site and the date of the transfer are worthwhile speculations. Like the Carfax, the new Town Centre was on the principal thoroughfare, London to Leicester, but an improvement on it, being a flat site and a bigger area. It was also, perhaps, a tactful political choice, for the replacement of the North Gateway by the Mayorhold provided a Town Centre which was a physical linking of the New or French Town with the Old or English Town. The Mayorhold was also midway between the Castle and St. Andrew's Priory, the two powerful influences of State and Church; and a site to the west of the Mayorhold, down Scarletwell Street, was chosen for the first Guildhall.[2]

This physical linking, however, would likewise have been secured if the Normans had chosen the site near the East Gateway which has on its merits become the modern Town Centre. Why did they ignore or reject it? The best explanation is that, at the date when the Town Centre was transferred, the construction of South Bridge had not been planned nor even envisaged. With no South Bridge and therefore no Bridge Street, there was no route to the East Gateway from KBX which would have been attractive to Norman eyes as the main approach to a new Town Centre.

According to tradition, South Bridge was first built by Simon de Senlis (or St. Liz), the first Norman Earl of Northampton, who acquired

[1] The dead straightness of this route, from KBX northwards for over two miles, is very impressive. There are good grounds for regarding it as an ancient trackway in existence most likely before even the first town or settlement appeared. The original nucleus of Northampton is doubtless near BBX, perhaps at St. Peter's Green.

[2] For the Castle there was no alternative site. Provision of the large area of land for the new Priory may have been an integral part of the general design. The Priory walls formed a part of the Town Walls; if this was planned as an economy arrangement it restricted the choice of site.

the earldom by his marriage with the Conqueror's great-niece, usually dated 1089. His replacement of the dual crossings by one large bridge would be regarded as an ' improvement scheme ', especially if the route between KBX and BBX was sometimes impassable, when the Kislingbury Branch would have to be crossed further upstream, involving a circuitous journey. All this fits into the tradition: it affords Simon de Senlis his chance to play the benefactor. Consequently it is here assumed that South Bridge was built *circa* 1100.

Consequences of South Bridge

Obviously, South Bridge caused a major dislocation of the road pattern which, by adaptations, became a new pattern. These adaptations were presumably made in accordance with the basic principles of simplicity of design and minimum of effort. Thus, to connect South Bridge with the old road pattern involved the construction of two link roads, one from each end of the bridge. This was achieved, it is suggested, as follows :—

1. A link road, KBX to SBX, which survives in the road now called Old Towcester Road ; and
2. A link road, SBX to BPK, the latter designating a Breach made in the palisade at the foot of Kingswell Street (fig. 1).

As for the first of these link roads, it was a completely satisfactory arrangement for both Banbury Lane and Towcester Road, and so remained until railway problems led to the diversion of Towcester Road into St. Leonard's Road. From the start, however, it was unsuitable for London Road, assuming the latter existed; if so, a diversion from about Queen Eleanor's Cross (QEC) had soon to be made, i.e. QEC to KBX was abandoned and replaced by QEC to SBX (fig. 4). A road bend near the Cross lends support to this supposition.

As for the second link road, the palisade had to be breached somewhere in order to make a connection with the road pattern inside the old borough. The selected point, BPK, is the shortest distance from SBX, and thus conforms with the basic principles given above. This arrangement also conforms with the tradition that the medieval royal route from South Bridge to the Castle was via Kingswell Street, College Street, King Street and Castle Street; and, even more significant, that the route to the Mayorhold was via Kingswell Street, College Street and Silver Street.

SBX to BPK is, of course, now the lower part of Bridge Street, and it thus forms part of to-day's so-called ' through route ' south to north, London to Leicester—from South Bridge, up Bridge Street, the Drapery and Sheep Street, through Regent Square and along Barrack Road, and down Primrose Hill into Kingsthorpe Hollow. Contrary to common assumption, this route was definitely not designed as one entity, but was made in separate and disjointed stretches at very different

periods, not being really completed until after the Dreadful Fire of Northampton of 1675, when a ' bottle neck ' near All Saints' church was removed. The existence of the ' bottle-neck ' helps to explain why the vehicular route in the medieval period from South Bridge to the Castle and to the Mayorhold was not via Bridge Street and the Drapery.

Miscellaneous Features

As Norman Northampton developed and flourished, the old palisade must have become, in the 12th century, a nuisance and a problem. Thus a special interest attaches to certain narrow passage-ways, or ' jitties ' as they are called locally, like Francis Jitty connecting Bridge Street and Kingswell Street, Jeyes Jitty (the Drapery and College Street), and the unnamed jitty (Bearward Street and Silver Street), as well as others, now either widened into streets, like Bradshaw Street, or obliterated by building encroachments. These jitties originated, so it seems to me, as piercings of the palisade to facilitate communication between the New Town and the Old Town. They have survived long after the palisade itself, probably crumbling, was bit by bit dug up and carted away, one imagines, by property owners who wanted to add space to their backyards.

The palisade, of course, lost its utility when the medieval town walls were built.[1] In their turn they were demolished in the 1660's, ostensibly as a mark of royal disfavour, though in fact they were ruinous. Like the palisade, however, they have left their mark on the modern street pattern, plainly visible on map and air-photograph alike. This is most conspicuous in the continuous series of roads from the North Gate via the East Gate to the South Gate, which are known to have begun as footpaths skirting the walls. Presumably the streets flanking the palisade began in a similar way.

A stretch of the pre-1066 route, from KBX via BBX to the foot of Gas Street, also seems to have left some slight testimony to its ancient importance. It survives as a property boundary running between the gasworks on the west and an open space called Baulmsholme on the east. At BBX there is still a footbridge over the Brampton Branch, but at KBX the bridge over the Kislingbury Branch has gone, though immediately opposite KBX there is an old swing-bridge over the canal, now serving no clear purpose. This footpath, which must have been a convenient short-cut between the Carfax and Far Cotton, was presumably closed in consequence of railway developments.

Postscript

Long after these researches were considered completed a new feature cropped up. It concerned the analysis of the road pattern in the

[1] Date of erection is unknown.

pre-1066 period. Just as all the roads from the south were assumed to have converged on KBX, so it logically follows that all the roads from the north must be assumed to have converged on BBX. The theory, if sound, must apply equally both ways. On examination of the map it will be found such proves to be the case. (fig. 3.)

Once again there are three routes to consider: first, the road from West Bridge to BBX; second, the ancient trackway from the north running straight to BBX; third, looking at the approach to BBX from the north-east, it is obvious when sought that Abington Street and Woolmonger Street are in the same alignment and must originally have formed parts of the same continuous highway. All three routes thus led direct to the original river crossing-place.

To conclude, this New Theory really consists of a series of hypotheses, in point of fact no less than twenty-five, but the striking feature is that they all hang together and thus satisfy the coherence-test of truth. Nevertheless it seems best to leave them with this status until fuller proof is forthcoming.