

## CHAPTER 7: HISTORIC TOWNS IN SURREY SOME GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

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### Introduction

The purpose of this review is to consider some of the wider implications of the results of the various excavation reports in this volume. One aspect of these is considered in detail in the preceding chapter but there are a number of further issues of interest and importance. These are noted and addressed below, although in a relatively brief manner. A more detailed and wide-ranging treatment could undoubtedly be of considerable value, but has not been attempted because of a lack of time and resources. In particular a comparative study of the evidence from Surrey's towns and that from elsewhere in England would undoubtedly have been an illuminating exercise.

The starting point for all the excavations and for this discussion has been Martin O'Connell's volume *Historic Towns in Surrey* (1977: many of the general statements regarding Surrey's historic towns in the following text are based upon this volume, but, to avoid tedious repetition, are not normally referenced). In that work he set out, for each of the towns, a research agenda for future archaeological work. Almost none of the excavation carried out since has been undertaken as pure research. Inevitably the need to rescue evidence before its destruction by new development has meant the issues have been addressed in a very uneven fashion. Nevertheless, it is possible to define a number of broad underlying aims based on the discrete research strategies assembled by O'Connell, and to consider what contribution two decades of archaeological work has made to their elucidation, and, indeed, how far they continue to be relevant or realistic. These broad aims may be summarized as follows:

- 1 What was the character and location of pre-urban settlement?
- 2 What was the balance of planned and organic development?
- 3 What were the economic fortunes of the medieval town?
- 4 What was the intensity and character (industrial or otherwise) of backlands use?
- 5 In what ways does the archaeological evidence for the medieval towns differ from that for Surrey's medieval villages?

### Origins

The evidence from most of the excavations discussed in this volume includes vestiges of prehistoric material, but in no case does this point to a substantial occupation site. The relationship of such finds to the development of the medieval town must be regarded as no more than a casual one. Such a judgement may also be apt for the Roman finds, although the more consistent evidence for that period deserves further consideration. The work at Dorking produced confirmation of the existence of a Roman settlement on the site of the medieval town; at Farnham the recent excavations produced little new evidence, but earlier work has demonstrated the broad range of evidence for Roman occupation (O'Connell 1977, 19); and at both the Mint Street, Godalming, and Crown Hotel, Chertsey, sites there were strong pointers to Roman settlement in the immediate vicinity. This pattern probably reflects similar broad preferences for the location of settlement at the two periods. It does make the continuing absence of Roman evidence from Guildford, even within the numerous recent investigations by the Guildford Museum Volunteer Excavation Unit and SCAU, the more surprising. Such evidence might also be usefully borne in mind when considering the broader issue of whether the existence of major Roman towns beneath important medieval ones reflects a continuity of use.

The period from the 5th to the 8th century is hardly represented at all amongst the investigations reported on in the present volume or in work by others in Surrey's medieval towns. At Farnham evidence of this date has previously been identified on the opposite site of the Wey to the present town (Oakley *et al* 1939, 255–9), and, interestingly, similar relationships have been identified at Guildford and Leatherhead. The evidence is otherwise virtually non-existent, and, even more surprisingly, this is also largely true of the mid to late Saxon period and of the Saxo-Norman period.

The principal exception to this is the Co-operative site at Godalming. Interestingly, as suggested in chapter 5, this site probably represents a farmstead which went out of use when Godalming itself was developed or expanded. This pattern is one that is almost certainly repeated at the other sites and widely elsewhere; towns/villages are essentially a creation of the post-Norman period replacing an earlier pattern of dispersed settlement. There is, however, one difficulty with this interpretation in that Guildford, undoubtedly a late Saxon town (O'Connell & Poulton 1984) has also produced surprisingly little material of 9th–11th century date even from the as yet unpublished but more comprehensive fieldwork of recent years. The explanation of this is problematic but may, perhaps, lie in the fact that opportunities for investigation have largely been in the middle and far backlands of plots, with the relevant street frontage and near backlands levels generally either previously destroyed by post-Conquest activity or unavailable for investigation. It may be postulated that the pattern of deposition in late Saxon and Saxo-Norman towns did not lead to pit digging in the former areas. Such activity was, perhaps, confined to the near backlands, where, for example, the earliest features were produced in the London Street, Chertsey, excavations (fig 2.4). The only undoubtedly late Saxon group of pottery from Guildford was found in precisely such a location (Holling 1964; for the date see Poulton 1987, 221, note 30).

### **Town planning**

The shift to an economy in which nucleated settlements were of primary importance is a development of fundamental significance. It seems to occur over a relatively short period of time, and it is, therefore, surely necessary to assume that in most cases a town represents in origin a planned development brought into existence for a specific reason at a specific time.

Farnham, particularly in view of the definition of its original extent provided in chapter 4, is probably the clearest example in Surrey of a planned town; of particular note is the fact that the pre-existing settlement around the church was avoided in laying out the new town (fig 4.2). At Chertsey, also, the new town of the earlier 12th century seems to have been established on a virgin site, though the extent of any previous settlement, distinct from the abbey and manor, is uncertain. At Godalming, the situation is, perhaps, less definite, but there may be a close parallel with Farnham, with early settlement clustered around the minster, and a later planned unit based on the High Street and the market place at its west end (fig. 5.1).

At Dorking, archaeology has yet to provide aid to the rather uncertain historical and topographic evidence for its development. At each of the other historic towns in Surrey strong evidence can be advanced for their basic planned character. At Guildford this is of late Saxon date (O'Connell & Poulton 1984), while at Reigate (Poulton 1986; Williams 1983 and forthcoming), the historical and archaeological evidence for its planned development in the late 12th century is unequivocal. Little archaeological work has taken place in Bletchingley, Haslemere or Leatherhead, but the planned nature of their origins has been usefully clarified by Blair (1991, 56–8).

A recurring pattern can be seen. In the Saxo-Norman period there existed in the immediate locale of each of the towns a settlement of uncertain size and status. This was, generally, left outside, or at the edge of, the planned town that was established in the 12th or 13th century. One reason for this may well be that it would otherwise have constrained the imposition of a neat plan upon the landscape, but there may also have been more specific reasons, such as that noted for Farnham (Parks, p 114), where much of the old town was in the control of the archdeacon of Surrey rather than the bishop of Winchester who was establishing the new town.

Organic development, then, plays no part in the origins of the towns proper. It may be relevant to the development of their immediate precursors, although this is not certain; at Godalming, for example, the minster in the valley was obviously a planned replacement for that on the hilltop at Tuesley, and so, in all probability, was the associated settlement. Piecemeal expansion after their foundation is also possible, perhaps probable, but, again, the degree of medieval planning should not be underestimated; at Farnham, for example, the West Street area may be regarded as a medieval planned extension, and an area at the south end of Guildford Street, Chertsey, has clear signs of regular planning, and a recent (December 1996) excavation suggests a late 13th or early 14th century origin (Robertson 1997).

## **Economy**

There are fundamental difficulties in using archaeological evidence, as it stands, to further an understanding of the economy of Surrey's medieval towns. The evidence presented in this volume relates to no more than small parts of one or two burgrave plots, amongst which only London Street, Chertsey offered anything approaching a complete stratigraphic sequence. It is inconceivable that the pin-pricks of light shed by these investigations could be regarded as adequate to view the broader economic picture. At best such evidence can be interpreted in a negative fashion. Most obviously, it does not contradict the view that Surrey's towns, in the medieval period, were essentially components of a very locally based market system, and there is virtually no sign of exotic items or longer distance trade.

It is difficult to see how progress will be made, and it may simply be that understanding the economic fortunes of a medieval town by archaeological means alone is an unrealistic aspiration. Brooks (above, p 103) makes a very apt point with regard to assessing the Winchester pipe roll evidence: 'How easy it is to translate a simple phrase and how difficult, or even impossible, it is to understand what the scribe intended to convey by his words.' In a similar way the archaeological facts may often be readily stated and sometimes are of economic interest in themselves — the stone mould (fig 4.14, no 2) for producing pewter tokens from Farnham, for example — but their wider economic significance remains obscure. Progress, and this may be to state the obvious, can only come from the adoption of a multi-disciplinary approach, and the proof of this can be seen in the rounded picture of a medieval town, which the Farnham chapter offers.

## **Backlands use**

Some of the difficulties noted in the preceding section are also applicable to the interpretation of backlands use, especially the partiality of the evidence. A few points do, nevertheless, deserve comment, even if interpretation must, as yet, be tentative.

At several sites the pitting which is generally regarded as characteristic of backlands use was more or less absent. At Holloway Hill, Godalming, Mint Street, Godalming, and Dorking the more prominent feature was a layer, containing quite a lot of domestic debris, but definitely a turned agricultural soil rather than a midden deposit. This suggests that these areas were valued for food production, in relation to which pit-digging would have been rather an inconvenience. The evidence is generally less clear at the other sites discussed in this volume, but it is probably fair to say that pit-digging was everywhere non-intensive. In fact only at Guildford (for example in recent investigations by SCAU at 56, 80–2 and 149 High Street) has intensive pitting been identified in a Surrey town; this may suggest that it is primarily an activity of the large towns. A limited exception may exist for the earliest period at the London Street, Chertsey, site, where a few 12th/13th century pits were found in the immediate vicinity of the earliest buildings. This may reflect an early medieval pattern of activity, with any subsequent pitting being confined to the further backlands.

A more interesting variation may be noted at Farnham, where industrial activity seems to have been far more commonplace than at the other towns. Virtually every investigation in the town

yields some evidence of this, including especially tile and pottery kilns but also evidence for metal and leather working.

### **Towns and villages**

Archaeological investigation of Surrey's towns has, as already noted, been quite limited in scope, its piecemeal character reflecting essentially the rarity with which opportunities have been offered (or grasped) as a result of new development. Villages have been even less well served; as Williams (1991–2, 103) observed: 'The archaeological study of Surrey's villages has been a somewhat neglected subject'. The amount of new work since then has done little to alter his view.

In these circumstances comparisons are rather hard to draw. The evidence from the villages (eg Bagshot: Cole 1980, Cole 1986a and 1986b; Carshalton: Orton 1989; Betchworth: Williams 1991–2; Egham: unpublished SCAU excavation 1996; Ewell: unpublished SCAU excavation 1995), is consistent with that of the towns in suggesting that their development belongs to the period from the 12th/13th century onwards. In general terms, too, the medieval evidence has been quite thin, presumably reflecting the relatively low intensity of occupation and the disposal of rubbish primarily as part of manuring of the surrounding fields. Surrey's towns are not, generally, greatly different from the villages in the quantity of evidence they produce, as the foregoing discussion of backlands helps to show, and this is undoubtedly because they differ little in size. The town, with its market, had an economic status denied to the village, but in Surrey all the inhabitants of both lived in immediate proximity to their fields. Very many, perhaps most, of the burghers were also farmers, as the unusually thorough Farnham evidence shows (Brooks pp 102–113), and the distinction between town and village may not generally have been more obvious in the medieval period than in excavated evidence or plans (Blair 1991, fig 18) of today.