

English Heritage Extensive Urban Survey

An archaeological assessment of

# Burnham on Sea and Highbridge

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# SOMERSET EXTENSIVE URBAN SURVEY

## BURNHAM & HIGHBRIDGE

### ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

by Clare Gathercole

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## **SOMERSET EXTENSIVE URBAN SURVEY**

# **BURNHAM & HIGHBRIDGE**

## **ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT**

*Somerset County Council would like to thank all the people who assisted in the compiling or editing of this report.*

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

This report forms one of a series commissioned by English Heritage and prepared by Somerset County Council with the aim of assessing urban archaeology as part of the Monuments Protection Programme. The work was carried out from 1994 to 1998 by Clare Gathercole and Miranda Richardson (from 1996), managed by Chris Webster. The reports are essentially as completed during that period but have been updated by Chris Webster with new archaeological information in early 2001.

English Heritage has funded two programmes assess the urban archaeological resource - intensive and extensive. The former is restricted to the major historic cities, characterised by a great depth of archaeological remains, a wealth of historical documentation and in many cases, by a great deal of archaeological investigation. The extensive urban surveys cover the smaller towns and are based on information in the local Sites and Monuments Record with limited amounts of new information collected during the project. Once the information has been collected and mapped, attention is focused on the analysis of the town plan and defining topographic units within the town. This will lead to the preparation of guidance for planners, developers and others involved in the management of the town.

### **II. MAJOR SOURCES**

#### ***1. Local histories***

There is a detailed local history by V J Wrigley (1986), which covers the 19th and 20th century growth of urban Burnham and Highbridge. For earlier periods, there is little relating specifically to the development of settlement in this area.

#### ***2. Maps***

On the other hand, there are several early maps showing the area around the turn of the 19th century. Some of these are estate maps and therefore fragmentary, including an 1819 volume of estates belonging to the Dean and Chapter of Wells: there is also an illustrated plan of Burnham at about 1800, showing the sea boundary of the Wells estate. However, the most useful maps are the 1797 Burnham enclosures map, the 1802 OS surveyors' drawings, and the 1806 Brue drainage plan. The 1841 Tithe Map shows the first phase of growth of the towns.

### **III. A BRIEF HISTORY OF BURNHAM AND HIGHBRIDGE**

For much of prehistory, this part of Somerset was under the sea and it is only in the last few thousand years that the land has been emerging: the area around Burnham and Highbridge has therefore been particularly vulnerable to the vagaries of sea and river. Not surprisingly, the history of settlement in the area has been partly conditioned by natural and artificial changes in the coastline and the drainage pattern. For at least a thousand years and perhaps longer there have been drainage cuts altering water flow from the Levels. There has also been a gradual process of land reclamation to the south of Burnham and west of Highbridge.

There is only the possible barrow in south Burnham to suggest prehistoric activity there, though an iron age lake settlement existed to the south of Highbridge, at Alstone. Occupation at Alstone continued into the Roman period and, indeed, there appears to have been a focus of Roman activity in what is now Highbridge and south Burnham. Settlement was concentrated on the slightly higher land inland of the dunes, north of a somewhat deeper, wider inlet (Nash, 1973), and south of a now vanished river (Leech, 1981). A number of sites in this area have produced evidence of dressed stone buildings and a possible warehouse. There may have been some kind of commercial activity here, since the postulated shape of the late Roman inlet (Nash, 1973) suggests that

there would have been natural harbour sites either at the neck or further up its northward arm.

However, there is no evidence of any such activity under the Saxons, perhaps partly because of receding waters and/or a breakdown of drainage control. The process of land reclamation was slow, but some of the places which, from archaeological evidence, must have been flooded in late Roman times (Nash, 1973) were settled by Domesday. The parishes of Burnham and Huntspill were certainly formed in this period, their common boundary running along what is now the Westhill Rhyne. The northern boundary of Burnham follows the course of the vanished river, named as the Siger in 663, which may have been the principal waterway in the Roman and early Saxon periods (Leech, 1981). Land at Burnham (though not necessarily a settlement) is mentioned in the late 9th century in King Alfred's will (Rippon, 1994) and the name of the old settlement of Huish, on which the Medieval manor covering north Highbridge centred, comes from the term *hiwisc*, which usually signifies a Saxon farmstead: this one is mentioned in a 10th century charter.

Burnham and most of Highbridge were in the same parish, but Burnham manor was separate from Huish. The church at Burnham, and surrounding land, was given to Gloucester Abbey in the 12th century and later became part of the Wells estates. Burnham then remained static throughout the Medieval and Post-Medieval period, a largely agricultural settlement in good grazing land, with a communal rabbit warren north of the church. Collinson says that there were 50 houses around the church (writing in 1791), but roughly contemporary maps suggest fewer. Other settlements were scattered through the parish, amounting to quite dense overall settlement.

There were changes in drainage and coastline in the Medieval and post-Medieval periods which perhaps affected Highbridge more than Burnham. There was a continuous process of sand deposition and silt build up at the inlet mouth. All the minor sea inlets referred to in the 10th century charter were blocked by early Medieval times (Nash, 1973), as was the River Siger. This process peaked in the 14th century, but continued until the 18th century, leading to a gradual expansion of settlement.

In the 13th century the Pillrow was cut and sea defences constructed. It may have been as part of the same schemes that the high bridge (first referred to in 1280) and the sea dam below it were built. The bridge was at the obvious, and probably the old, crossing point of the watercourse. It secured Highbridge's communications role. The early turnpike to Bristol came through Highbridge in the 18th century, although the route was liable to flooding.

Highbridge's wharves were also influential in its early development: the town's name may originally have been Hythe Bridge (Anon, 1903). The wharves shown on the 1797 enclosure map are extensive areas of bank east and west of the bridge and Locke describes Highbridge at the turn of the century as a "delightful seaport village" with 24 houses altogether and an inn.

At the end of the 18th century, the enclosures around Burnham and Highbridge signalled the onset of the first phase of growth of Burnham and Highbridge. Traders were already congregating in Highbridge and a cattle market was started in 1797, a direct result of the changes in farming practice. The enclosures were followed by drainage schemes. Some of these were injurious to Highbridge, leading to silting around its early quays. The Brue drainage cut (1806) dramatically altered the river and enabled the construction of new wharves. However, Highbridge remained a small harbour in the first three decades of the 19th century. The coming of the Glastonbury Canal in 1833 profited the town (initially) and from the 1820s onwards, the effects of improvements to the turnpike route were felt in the shape of increased traffic through Highbridge. These communications improvements laid the foundations for the second phase of 19th century growth.

Meanwhile in Burnham, a quite different path of growth was being pursued. The sale of his private lighthouse gave the vicar, Rev Davies, funds to "improve" the little settlement. Close to the church he built a spa complex and, although the spa was never nationally important, a steady trickle of visitors to Burnham led to the first real nucleated settlement at Burnham, with elegant housing to provide lodgings.

It was the coming of the railways that accelerated the growth of both towns. The Bristol and Exeter reached Highbridge in 1841, and opened its station in 1842. In the same year, the new Wells turnpike opened. Subsequently, the Somerset Central reused the line of the canal, and its line from Glastonbury was opened in 1854. When this became the Somerset and Dorset in 1862, Highbridge became a railway town with the opening of the works. This led to the building of railway housing in both Highbridge and south Burnham. There were also several brickworks in the area, and many clay pits.

The directories show the growth of trade and exports to Wales - mainly brick and tile, cheese and cattle - from Highbridge. An attempt was made at Burnham to emulate this growth. Although the main line bypassed the town, the Somerset Central was extended to Burnham by 1858 and ran onto a pier constructed for the purposes of trade, not leisure. Paddle steamers ran during the later 19th century, but the pier was not a commercial success. The rail connection, however, proved crucial to the 19th century expansion of Burnham as a holiday resort.

In the first decades of the 20th century, Burnham's growth continued, despite severe floods. Holiday camps, housing and municipal facilities formed the bulk of this growth. Highbridge, too, prospered as a dock and railway town. However, subsequent closures of the railway works, the creamery and the docks cast Highbridge into a trough from which it has only begun to emerge since the construction of the M5. Burnham, too, despite the passing of the heyday of English seaside towns, has profited from the improved communications, and is now a commuter town, linked to Highbridge by ribbon development along the old road.

#### **IV. THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF BURNHAM AND HIGHBRIDGE**

##### ***GENERAL COMMENTS***

###### ***1 Archaeological knowledge***

There have been a number of small excavations and watching briefs in Burnham and Highbridge as a result of modern developments. Building operations have produced many finds of Roman, Medieval and Post-Medieval pottery on which estimates of the extent of settlement can be based (though some of the material is probably water borne): not all of these sites are shown on the maps accompanying this report, and the SMR should be consulted for further details. Work preceding the construction of the M5 also included detailed contour surveys, which are of particular relevance to the area around Burnham and Highbridge since they can be of help in the plotting of old watercourses. Recent work has included a watching brief on work to stabilise the north bank of the New Cut at Highbridge (Broomhead 1993) and an evaluation at Isleport Business Park (Valentin 2000)..

###### ***2 Standing structures***

Very little remains of the earlier periods of Burnham's or Highbridge's history, although there are extensive survivals from their 19th century heyday.

##### **2. PREHISTORIC**

###### ***(Map A)***

###### ***1 Archaeological work/ state of knowledge***

Very little is known of the prehistoric archaeology of Burnham and Highbridge. Apart from the sites described below, two early bronze age flints were found during the 1993 New Cut work at Highbridge. Excavation has also taken place at Alstone, part of which site is now scheduled.

###### ***2 Context***

Burnham & Highbridge is one of 37 of the 45 historic towns covered by this project at which there is as yet no strong evidence of prehistoric settlement on the site of the later town - though it should be remembered that it is notoriously difficult for archaeologists to demonstrate a prehistoric presence in modern urban areas. Whilst 'towns' were not, generally speaking, a feature of prehistoric landscapes, many of the same factors which made the site desirable in later periods would already have been operative. In the case of Burnham & Highbridge, the area was coastal and river marsh for much of the prehistoric periods, before drainage began under the Romans. Such marginal environments were certainly exploited where possible. But though there is just south of Highbridge a lake settlement (Alstone) of a type comparable to the Meare village further up the Brue, and though an iron age hillfort (Brent Knoll) dominates the area from a site a little way inland, there is only a little evidence of activity on the slightly raised ground included within the later town site.

### **3 Archaeological features, shown on Map A**

#### *a Burial sites*

BUR/101

##### The barrow site

There is a possible barrow site in south Burnham (SMR 10261), located in the SMR from a plot of land called "Barrow Ground" on the Tithe Map. This site is on the northernmost limit of the area of known Roman activity in South Burnham.

*Mapped from the SMR.*

#### *b Settlement*

BUR/102

##### Alstone lake settlement

The Alstone lake settlement (SMR 10918, SM 10504) lies just outside the area covered by this report, but has been included for the sake of completeness. A number of trial trenches have been excavated in the area. The site has produced evidence of iron age occupation, including pottery (in the style of that recovered from Meare Lake Village), and a pit containing animal bones; a number of ditches are also associated with the settlement.

Occupation appears to have continued into the Roman period: the floor of a building possibly dating from the 1st century AD was discovered in one of the trenches, fragments of Samian ware were recovered. There was also considerable evidence of Medieval activity, which appears to have disturbed the prehistoric site. Part of the area has been built up, and it is expected that material remaining in this area will already be disturbed. However, part of the site is now protected as a Scheduled Monument.

*Mapped from the SMR.*

### **3. ROMAN**

#### **(Map A)**

##### **1 Archaeological knowledge**

There have been many finds of Roman pottery and briquetage (salt boiling debris) around Burnham and Highbridge. The SMR lists over 20 sites at which finds alone have been recovered, and further sites at which structural remains or occupational deposits have been found. Not all of these sites are shown on Map A, and the SMR should be consulted. The finds distribution can be used to give a rough idea of the area of Roman activity, although some of the material appears to have been water borne, and the site distribution is defined partly by modern development patterns. Archaeological investigations have also given some information on the changing topography in the Roman period, by enabling the study of sequences of marine, freshwater and wind blown sand, silt and clay deposition.

##### **2 Context**

The Roman period was one of deliberate, strategic urbanisation. The area which is now Somerset appears to have been less affected than some other areas by this, in that few really urban sites are known, and this probably reflects its marginal position. However, the widespread distribution of Roman or Romanised settlements shows that the county - particularly east of the Parrett - was heavily populated and exploited in this period.

Burnham & Highbridge is one of 12 of the 45 historic towns covered by this project at which there is evidence of Roman settlement, though not necessarily at the core of the later town. In this case, there is considerable evidence of activity, particularly on the raised ground and coastal marsh (of which the drainage began in this period) around Highbridge, where there may have been a Brue port comparable to other river ports such as Combwich on the Parrett. Though major topographical changes and settlement discontinuity between the late Roman and Medieval periods mean that this cannot be regarded as a direct predecessor of Highbridge, it is nevertheless of considerable importance to the Roman geography of the county.

### **3 Archaeological features, shown on Map A**

#### *a Water*

There is agreement that the topography and drainage of the land in late Roman times differed significantly from the present day, although there is considerable debate about the details of the difference (Nash, 1973; Leech, 1981; Broomhead, 1993). There was probably an area of higher ground, along which Burnham Road now runs, leading to a southward slope into a deep water inlet (so that the land which is now Holimarine at Burnham would have been under the sea at this time). The site of modern Highbridge would have been at the narrowest

point of the inlet. Beyond this bottleneck, the inlet may have widened and curved north, although this is a particularly contentious issue (Leech, 1981). Slightly inland of Burnham and Highbridge, buried river meanders and watercourses appear to have flanked Isleport (Leech, 1981, Fig 2). Further north, the River Siger probably flowed along the course of present-day Brent Broad (Leech, 1981).

BUR/202 The Roman inlet

These are the possible approximate inlet edges suggested by Nash (1973). These limits are disputed by Leech (1981), and need to be refined.

*The inlet is mapped from Nash, 1973.*

BUR/203 The River Siger

The River Siger, which is still a waterway though of less importance.

*The course of the river is taken from Leech, 1981.*

*b Settlement*

BUR/201 The main concentration of Roman finds

This area has been defined to include most of the finds spots contained in the SMR. It includes the postulated inlet, in which finds are of water-borne material. The area extends both north and south of the inlet and runs north-west along the high ground and north along the inlet. It is likely to contain further occupation sites, with possible structural remains. There may conceivably also be remains of waterfront areas along the old estuary, and these could include preserved wooden structures where deep and wet deposits coincide. Details of the Roman topography are not yet well enough understood to be specific about possible locations for these.

*This area is defined around the points recorded in the SMR, which should be consulted for further details.*

BUR/204 Roman occupation sites

Apart from the Alstone settlement (see above, p4), several other occupation sites (SMR10264, 10959, 10966, and 10968) are noted in the SMR. Very little is known of the layout of Roman occupation, since all structural information has so far been small scale and fragmentary. The several occupation sites are all contained within the northern part of the finds concentration, and have yielded dressed lias blocks, terra sigillata, cobbles, floor surfaces and possible pottery mounds. One of the sites (SMR 10968) may have been a warehouse, perhaps close to the inlet edge; possible drainage ditches were found nearby, close to Bristol Bridge (SMR 10961).

*The sites are mapped from the SMR.*

**4. SAXON**

*(Map C)*

**1 Archaeological knowledge**

Very little is known of the archaeology of this period, although early activity around Burnham Church and Huish is suspected.

**2 Context**

Though the Post-Roman and early Saxon periods were characterised by a return to non-urban lifestyles, the later Saxon period (from the 8th or 9th century onwards) saw the beginnings of a resurgence of first trading places and then towns, under the control of the Saxon royal families, in the context of a network of royal estate administration centres and subordinate settlements which was already established (in some cases long-established). Though only a relatively small number of places with any claim to be towns existed by the time of the Domesday Survey, many of the subordinate settlements recorded at that point were to become towns in the Medieval period. Burnham & Highbridge is one of ten of the 45 historic towns covered by this project which had no urban pretensions before the Conquest but were nevertheless in existence as agricultural settlements.



### **3 Archaeological features, shown on Map C**

#### *a Water*

Current evidence suggests a large scale desertion of settlement east of the Parrett, possibly because of a breakdown of drainage and sea defences. Again, any specific information on the silting process and drainage would be useful.

#### *b Burial sites and places of worship*

The church at Burnham is likely to have been founded during Saxon times, but the site of the first church is uncertain: it may have been on the same site as the modern church.

#### *c Settlement*

BUR/301

##### Huish

There was probably a Saxon farmstead at Huish, the centre of the Medieval manor in which Highbridge lay: its location is uncertain, but the possible location of the Medieval manor house is known (SMR LB 13246), and the Saxon buildings may have been on the same site. It is possible that occupation on this site predates the Saxon period: a thick Romano-British deposit is recorded in the SMR (SMR 10970) as having been discovered in the garden of the house.

*The site is taken from the SMR.*

## **5. MEDIEVAL AND POST-Medieval**

### **(Maps B, C, and D)**

Because so little development took place before the nineteenth century, and the archaeology is so fragmentary, Medieval and Post-Medieval evidence has been considered together.

#### **1 Archaeological knowledge**

As with Roman material, the archaeological investigations of this century have produced collections of pot. The SMR contains records of more than 20 sites containing only pot scatters. Most of the pot comes from the 13th century or later, but there is some earlier.

#### **2 Context**

Burnham & Highbridge is one of three of the 45 historic towns covered by this project which had not yet acquired urban functions by the end of the Medieval period, though it was one of eleven of the 45 which had a harbour or quays (at Highbridge) during the Medieval period. It was one of two of the 45 historic towns covered by this project which could still not be regarded as urban by the end of the Post-Medieval period.

#### **3 Standing structures**

The only standing Medieval remains are at Burnham church (SMR LB 13249), which is shown on Map D.

### **4 Archaeological features (Burnham centre), shown on Map B**

#### *a Communications: Roads*

BUR/407

##### Medieval and Post-Medieval roads

See below, p8, for main entry. At Burnham, modern Manor Rd was the lane down to the church, and the junction of Tag Tail End (Oxford Street) and Love Lane, which probably skirts the edge of a Medieval open field, was also in existence.

*From the 1802 OS surveyors' drawings.*

#### *b Water*

BUR/409

See below, p8.

#### *c Burial sites and places of worship*

BUR/401

##### Burnham church

Burnham church (SMR 10661, SMR LB 13249) existed at least by the 12th century, and almost certainly earlier. The earliest standing fabric of the present building is 14th century. The Medieval church was much smaller than the modern one. The graveyard (SMR 10275) has been in use since at least Medieval times. The church was extended across it in 1838, with

the addition of over 400 seats to accommodate visitors.

*The boundary of the churchyard is from the modern map.*

*d Settlement*

BUR/402

Medieval settlement at Burnham

The early maps show very little at Burnham. Round the church, and round the road junctions a few houses huddle. The marked area does not, therefore, represent intensive activity, but rather scattered occupation.

*The limits of this area are conjectural. The suggested limits are based on the pictorial Burnham sea boundary plan of c1800 and the 1802 OS surveyors' drawings.*

BUR/503

See below, p9.

**5 Archaeological features (Highbridge centre), shown on Map C**

*a Communications*

*(a) Roads*

BUR/407

Medieval and Post-Medieval roads

See also below, p8. The street plan of Highbridge by the end of the Post-Medieval period was defined by the main routeways - the turnpike route north and north-east, and the road to Burnham. There were two branching lanes, one along the river (Eastwharf way) and one just south of the junction (Hardridge's Way): modern Market Street and Coronation Rd follow the lines of these streets.

*From the 1802 OS surveyors' drawings.*

*(b) Bridges*

BUR/410

The Medieval bridge and sea dam

The Medieval bridge (SMR 10279) spanned the old river course, probably at an ancient crossing point. The bridge is first referred to in 1280. Little is known of the details of the early bridge(s). As with the wharves (see below), the extent of archaeological survival is unknown in this much altered area.

There was a sea dam (SMR 10280) immediately below the bridge. This may have been in place by 1299.

*The site of the bridge is from the SMR and the 1797 map. That of the sea dam is from the SMR.*

*(c) Harbour and quays*

BUR/403

Highbridge quays

The bridge and the sea dam (see above) lie between extensive areas marked as East and West Wharf on the 1797 map. No structures are marked on this map, but there is likely to have been some form of quay. Long stretches of the river bank are marked as wharves, but the area adjacent to the bridge must be of particular interest. The wharf areas have been affected by the changes in the Brue: first silted up, then isolated by the new cut, they have subsequently been built over. The extent of damage is unknown, but good preservation of wooden structures is a possibility in wet conditions.

*These areas are taken directly from the 1797 map.*

*b Water*

BUR/408

The Post-Medieval river course

This line represents the course of the river as it was before the straightening operations and the new cut of the 19th century.

*The river course is taken from the 1802 surveyors' drawings.*

*c Burial sites and places of worship*

Not mapped There may have been a dependent chapel at Highbridge, possibly on the same site as the 19th century church (Wrigley, 1986), but this is not known archaeologically.

*d Settlement*

BUR/404, BUR/501

Medieval and Post-Medieval settlement at Highbridge

There is limited concrete evidence for the extent of Medieval settlement around the High Bridge, although the situation around 1800 is recorded on the late 18th century enclosure map. Several areas in which there is a possibility of Medieval buildings and outhouses are marked. These are based both on the settlement pattern portrayed on the enclosure map, which shows scattered buildings just north of the High Bridge and around the junction of main roads, and on the pottery evidence. Much of this was collected by Nash, whose work suggests Medieval (or earlier) occupation at Worston (Rippon, 1994) and in Coronation Road (cf SMR 11818).

*The areas are somewhat conjectural, but are based on the 1797 map, and on Fig. 12.5 in Rippon (1994).*

BUR/506

The Highbridge Inn

This is the site of the inn, which was established in the Post-Medieval period.

*The area is taken from the 1802 surveyors' drawings.*

BUR/503

See below, p9.

BUR/406

Moated enclosure

Just to the east of Highbridge is a moated enclosure (SMR 10270) which was built deliberately in an abandoned watercourse marked by the course of Isleport Road. This site has produced material dating from the 14th century onwards, but has been extensively damaged by ploughing and the construction of a roundabout.

*This site is taken from the SMR.*

**6 Archaeological features (outlying area), shown on Map D**

*a Communications: Roads*

BUR/407

Medieval and Post-Medieval roads

The earliest maps postdate the turnpike roads, but they show a simple network of lanes around Burnham and Highbridge which are likely to be Medieval. The main road from Burnham to Highbridge was the same as today's, and there was another back route, the lane which runs alongside Worston Rhyne.

*The roads are mapped from the 1802 OS surveyors' drawings.*

*b Water*

Changes in drainage patterns and coastline affected the Medieval topography. There was a gradual reclamation of land around the river mouth and the watercourse of earlier periods continued to silt up. Moreover, from Burnham northwards, processes of dune migration were at work: a Medieval land surface (SMR 10259) was seen seaward of the sand dunes some way to the north. Analogy with similar changes in South Wales, which have been studied in more detail, suggest a peak to these processes in the 14th century; but evidence for these aspects of the Medieval topography is as yet scanty from Burnham and Highbridge.

BUR/409

The dunes

This line represents the inland edge of the dunes at the end of the Post-Medieval period.

*The line is taken from the 1802 OS surveyors drawings.*

*c Settlement (Rural)*

Much evidence for Medieval occupation on the site of the modern towns comes in the form of scattered rural

buildings, and occupation debris. Map D shows the overall settlement pattern in the Medieval and Post-Medieval periods. The gradual expansion of settlement onto reclaimed land at the river mouth is indicated by the presence of increasingly recent pottery from sites in these areas, as well as from documentary evidence. However, the date of the peak of land reclamation (14th century) is in part extrapolated from better dated sequences in South Wales, and more evidence is needed to be sure of the build up in this part of Somerset. Continued settlement expansion across reclaimed land well into the 18th century is documented, but the archaeological picture is incomplete.

*(a) Hamlets*

BUR/505

Middle Burnham

There was a hamlet at Middle Burnham by the end of this period.

*The plots are those on the 1802 surveyors' drawings.*

*(b) Farms*

BUR/504

Post-Medieval (or Medieval) farms

Several farms are shown on the 1802 OS surveyors' drawings. Some of these may be of Medieval origin; there have been occasional finds of Medieval pottery not far from several of them (eg SMR 10951, 10952).

*Mapped from the 1802 OS surveyors' drawings.*

BUR/405

Isleport

Isleport Farm (SMR 10278), itself Medieval though now containing a 19th century Listed Building (SMR LB 13245), is neighbour to another earthwork site of uncertain date (SMR 11169).

*These sites are mapped from the SMR.*

*(c) Other occupation*

BUR/411

Medieval occupation sites in the SMR

The SMR contains details of several Medieval occupation sites not clearly shown on the Post-Medieval maps. Remains of Medieval buildings, or other signs of occupation, have been recovered from these sites, which must be presumed to have been abandoned before the maps were drawn. The sites include: SMR 10267 (north-east of Pillsmouth Farm, 14th/15th century); SMR 10952 (on Love Lane, 13th to 15th century); SMR 10957 (south of Isleport, 14th century and later); SMR 10969 (the "Parsonage" plot, 13th century); and SMR 11151 (near Stoddens Farm, enclosures and possible house platforms). Further sites are noted from Nash's work in Rippon (1994), forming a small settlement group half way between Highbridge and Burnham.

*From the SMR, and Rippon (1994).*

BUR/503

Unclassified Medieval or Post-Medieval occupation

Other plots are marked from the 1802 maps. The SMR contains records of occasional finds of Medieval pottery from sites close to some of them (eg SMR 10950, 10953, 10963), suggesting that at least some of these plots are of Medieval origin.

*From the 1802 OS surveyors' drawings.*

*d Industrial sites*

The area was mainly agricultural and little evidence exists for industrial activity in these periods.

BUR/502

The mill

The site which became Allen's mill and brewery in the 19th century had a windmill there in the Post-Medieval period (SMR 10274).

*The site is mapped from the SMR and the 1802 surveyors' drawings.*

## **6. INDUSTRIAL (LATE 18TH/ 19TH CENTURY)**

### **(Maps E, F, and G)**

The two settlements were almost entirely redeveloped in the 19th century. Many new areas have therefore been defined across the Medieval and Post-Medieval ones.

#### **1 Context**

The late 18th and 19th centuries saw some changes to the urban pattern, with the beginning of the emergence of larger centres (often at the expense of smaller ones), linked by vastly improved communication lines (turnpikes, railways and canals). Somerset was not characterised by the kind of large scale industrialisation and urbanisation seen in other counties - indeed, the virtual collapse of its most important industry, which was cloth, affected nearly all of the Medieval and Post-Medieval towns - but some did take place. The changes were reflected in a series of alterations to town governance, which left the county with a total of only fifteen Municipal Boroughs and Urban Districts by the end of the 19th century.

Burnham & Highbridge was one of the two new 19th century towns amongst the late 19th century Municipal Boroughs and Urban Districts, both of which were amongst the seven towns which saw large scale expansion in this period. Whilst Burnham was one of a handful of tourist centres in the county by the end of the 19th century, one of the two most important coastal resorts (the other being Minehead), and the most developed spa, Highbridge is important for its industrial and infrastructure remains: it was one of only eight of the 45 towns (all eight of which were either Municipal Boroughs or Urban Districts) which were connected to both rail and canal networks during the 19th century.

#### **2 Standing structures**

Much remains of the 19th century fabric of Burnham and Highbridge, though there are very few Listed Buildings. Those in the centres are shown on Map E (Burnham centre) and Map F (Highbridge centre).

#### **3 Archaeological components (Burnham centre), shown on Map E**

##### *a Communications*

###### *(a) Streets*

Not mapped By the time the Tithe Map was made (1841), the "village centre" of Victoria Street (see below, BUR/601, p11) had developed in Burnham. The irregular block defined by this new street and the existing lanes formed the core of growth connected with the spa, the main complex being just north of this area. The sea wall was extended north as part of the spa development.

Between 1841 and 1886, a regular grid of streets was laid down to the south (see below, p11). This was superimposed on the southernmost part of the earlier irregular streets to the north, and Princess Street was cut through the block. The other sides of the grid were defined by the railway, the strengthened sea wall and the main Highbridge road.

###### *(b) Railways and quays*

BUR/609

###### The Burnham branch and the pier

The railway reached Burnham by 1858, initially as a freight line. It came in to the south of Burnham, well south of the main visitor area of the time. By 1870, however, a special platform had to be erected to cope with the passenger excursion trains and the lines of this are still visible.

The pier at Burnham was opened in 1858, once the railway had reached the town. There had to be a pool at the side of the pier to maintain the deep water connection, and the railway was at such a gradient that it could not be used for passengers. This pier was replaced in 1907.

*From the 1886 map.*

###### *b Water*

BUR/625

###### The inlet

The dunes still came a long way inland and there was a small inlet just to the north of the eventual spa area: this is said to be still visible sometimes (Wrigley, 1986).

*The position of the inlet is taken from the 1841 tithe map.*

Not mapped

The SMR contains records of possible early 19th century land reclamation works along the

shoreline.

*c Burial sites*

BUR/619 The cemetery at Burnham, from the 1904 map.

*d Settlement (Urban)*

*(a) Centre*

BUR/601 The spa development in Burnham

The vicarage at Burnham was the nucleus of early 19th century developments, and its grounds were extended at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The spa buildings, which included two wells and a pumphouse, were constructed in the early 19th century on the old rabbit warren. Contemporary housing, built on fields to the south-east, is concentrated in the block of streets described above, with a terrace of housing along Victoria Street and several detached houses in larger plots in the area around the "village". The finest of these are to the north west, in the spa complex (SMR LBs 13240 and 13241). The old lighthouse was in residential use at this time and the Royal Clarence Hotel may be contemporary with the first spa operation.

After the coming of the railway (initially a freight line) development of gracious housing in north Burnham continued and there are several Listed Buildings from the mid 19th century, again mainly adjacent to the spa.

*The mapped areas represent all the housing showing on the 1841 Tithe Map.*

*(b) Suburbs*

BUR/603 Working class housing

Terraces in Burnham's mid to late 19th century grid of streets catered for less affluent visitors and some railway workers working on the pier. The area included parks, and the cricket ground.

*The areas are from the 1886 and 1904 maps.*

BUR/606 Northern suburbs

The suburban development to the north of the spa area consisted of large, spacious plots spread out along the coast road. The golf course occupied the dunes northward from Burnham.

*The marked areas are from the 1886 and 1904 maps.*

BUR/618 Unclassified plots in Burnham, from the 19th century maps.

*e Industrial sites*

BUR/608 The gasworks, from the 1886 map.

**4 Archaeological components (Highbridge centre), shown on Map F**

*a Redevelopment in earlier settlement components*

The cattle market and produce markets were instituted late in High Bridge. The cattle market took place between the old river and the new cut, in part of the old inn grounds.

*b Communications*

*(a) Streets*

Not mapped The streets of Highbridge in 1841 had not changed since the turn of the century, north of the river. The new Wells turnpike came in along Market Street (old Eastwharf Way). The main line ran to the east of the town, but the canal and the branch railway cut through the early settlement and wharf area. New roads were constructed along the side of the railway and the New Cut: but even so, in 1886 the bulk of the town was still strung out along the turnpike road.

*(b) Railways and canals*

BUR/612, BUR/613

The Highbridge to Glastonbury Canal and Somerset Central Railway

The Highbridge to Glastonbury canal (SMR 11841, 23609) opened in 1833. It followed the route later reused by the Somerset Central Railway. This route passes through parts of the areas marked as east and west wharves in the 18th century.

The Glastonbury Canal was in trouble due to miscalculations in water flow when the Bristol and Exeter bought it (by 1848) with an obligation to keep it open. It was flooded by 1852, when it was sold to the Somerset Central Railway. It was kept open long enough to transport material for building the new line, which ran along the towpath. The Highbridge end of the canal continued in use until 1936: its sea lock and basin (BUR/613) then became a car park, but the mooring rings can still be seen.

The Somerset Central branch (SMR 11842) opened in 1854, and had a major impact on the town: a second station (again on the old east wharf), a new wharf along the Brue, a railway works to the south-east of the town (from 1862: see below, BUR/617, p13) and branches to several industrial installations on the west side of Highbridge and between it and Burnham.

*The line of the canal/ railway is from the 1886 OS map.*

BUR/616

Bristol - Exeter Railway

The main Bristol-Exeter line passed to the east of Highbridge and nowhere near Burnham. Its station was in east wharf. This railway line proved very influential in the later development of Highbridge, which grew almost entirely to the west of the line.

*The line is taken from the 1886 map.*

BUR/609

See p10.

*(c) Quays*

BUR/612

Highbridge Quays

The new quays at Highbridge were constructed after the Brue drainage and considerably expanded with the coming of the railways, these expansions taking place on the north bank of the old river channel (which was straightened). Vessels of 750 tons could use these quays. The area also included the saw mills (SMR 10282).

*The quays are taken from the 1886 map.*

*c Water*

BUR/626

The New Cut

The Brue was gradually silting up at Highbridge, because of new cuts taking a lot of water direct to the sea. The Brue drainage was improved by the construction of the New Cut, dug between 1802 and 1804, and opened in 1806. This cut off the meander of the River Brue on which the early quays had lain. The construction of the cut led to the raising of the ground level to the north, where material was dumped (Broomhead, 1993).

*The line of the New Cut is taken from the 1806 Brue Drainage Plan.*

BUR/623

The waterworks, from the 1904 map.

*d Burial sites and places of worship*

BUR/614

St John's church, established in 1859, and school: *from the 1886 map.*

BUR/621

The cemetery at Highbridge, *from the 1904 map.*

*e Settlement (Urban)*

BUR/615 Church Street west

The area between the main road and the main line at Highbridge was developed as a mixture of commercial properties and housing.

*From the 1886 and 1904 maps.*

BUR/602 Pre-railway housing in Highbridge

The Tithe Map shows settlement along the west side of the turnpike road and around the junction of routes. Highbridge's Listed Buildings cluster in this latter area.

*The area is taken from the 1841 tithe map.*

BUR/611 19th century suburbs in Highbridge

Many of Highbridge's terraced Victorian houses are to the west of the main street, in Newtown; and between the old river channel and the new drainage cut. There are also some south of the bridge, the first real southward expansion of Highbridge.

*The areas are taken from the 1886 and 1904 maps.*

BUR/613 Unclassified plots, Highbridge, from the 19th century maps.

*f Industrial sites*

BUR/608 The gasworks, from the 1886 map.

BUR/622 The bacon factory, from the 1904 map.

BUR/617 The railway works, from the 1886 map.

BUR/607 See below, p14.

BUR/624 See below, p14.

**5 Archaeological components (outlying areas), shown on Map G**

*a Communications*

*(a) Lighthouses*

BUR/627 Burnham lighthouses

Burnham was the site of the lighthouses which guided 19th century traffic into the safe channel. The earliest lighthouse (not marked) was erected in 1801 by the vicar, and still remains as part of a house on the west side of the churchyard. Rev Davies sold out to Trinity House in 1829, after which the High and Low Lighthouses (SMR LBs 13236 and 13243) were built, roughly one mile to the north of Burnham.

*The lighthouses are mapped from the 1886 map.*

*b Burial sites and places of worship*

Not mapped Being a long way from the parish church until 1859, there were many dissenters around Highbridge (Wrigley, 1986). At the end of the 18th century, there was a Quaker burial ground in the village of Watchfield opposite Magnolia House. There were several chapels by the end of the 19th century, in both centres, including Baptists and Wesleyan Methodists.

*c Settlement (Urban)*

BUR/606 See p11.

*d Settlement (Rural)*

Map G shows how development spread out from the two early 19th century foci of the spa and the bridge, and was influenced by the arrival of the railways. There was little development inland from Burnham and this area remained open field. Similarly, development was concentrated at Highbridge, though industrial areas increasingly affected the area between the two towns.



- BUR/604 Unclassified 19th century plots, from the 19th century maps.
- BUR/605 19th century farms, from the 19th century maps.
- BUR/620 19th century development at Middle Burnham, from the 19th century maps.

*e Industrial sites*

- BUR/610 The mill and brewery  
Allen's Mill or Sandyway Mill (SMR 10274) was on the same site as Burnham Brewery (SMR 10278) but also connected to the earlier mill (see above, p9). The mapped area also includes Sandyway House. In 1869 the mill machinery was sold, but the site is still a brewery.

*The marked site is from the 1886 map.*

- BUR/607 The brickworks  
Apart from the railway works, the main industry evident around Burnham and Highbridge was brick and tile making, which has left certain areas in which any earlier deposits will have been destroyed. There were five major brickworks (SMR 10261, 10262, 10276, 10283, 10284), four of which were directly connected to the railways, and there are other claypits in the area.

*The marked areas are from the 1886 and 1904 maps.*

- BUR/624 The saltings, from the 1886 map.

## **7. 20TH CENTURY** **(Map H)**

### **1 Context**

The 20th century has seen a vast physical expansion of some existing towns, and some expansion in most of the 45 historic towns covered by the project. However, there have only been limited alterations to the overall pattern of urban settlement. The County Structure Plan still contains fifteen settlements defined as Towns: this is almost identical to the late 19th century list of Municipal Boroughs and Urban Districts.

Burnham & Highbridge is one of 15 of the 45 historic towns covered by this project which is classed as a Town in the County Structure Plan. It is one of seven towns which has seen extremely high levels of expansion in the 20th century (the same seven as saw large scale expansion in the 19th century).

### **2 Settlement components, shown on Map H**

#### *a Redevelopment in earlier settlement components*

There has been considerable 20th century expansion of Burnham and Highbridge. The major redevelopment has been of the coastal brick pits, where leisure parks have been created.

*All mapped components area from the 1938 maps and 1995 digital maps, except where stated.*

#### *b Communications: Quays*

- BUR/704 Quay extension, Highbridge

#### *c Water*

- BUR/702 The sea defences

#### *d Settlement (Urban)*

##### *(a) Commercial*

- BUR/709 Isleport Business Park

##### *(b) Suburbs*

- BUR/701 20th century suburbs

BUR/706 Leisure parks, chiefly Holimarine

*e Settlement (Rural)*

BUR/705 20th century farms

BUR/708 Unclassified 20th century occupation

*f Industrial sites*

BUR/703 Brick works

Clay pits continued to be excavated this century, mostly as extensions to the 19th century brickworks.

The areas are taken from the 1938 map and the 1995 digital data. It is possible that other areas in the vicinity may have been dug and then swiftly reused in the intervening period.

BUR/707 20th century industry (general)

Other industrial development has been concentrated east of the railway, in the shape of a depot at Bristol Bridge and Walrow Industrial Estate.

From the 1938 maps and 1995 data.

## **V. THE POTENTIAL OF BURNHAM AND HIGHBRIDGE**

### ***1. Research interests***

The Roman activity at Highbridge, and the subsequent Medieval quays are both of interest in themselves, though Highbridge seems to have been only a minor port until the 19th century. The early topography of this part of the levels is also a matter of study and any information (including that from boreholes and surveys by non-archaeologists) of assistance in the charting of the history of the sea inlets and waterways will be important in locating areas of possibly deep deposits, and areas likely to be blank in early periods. The later development of the towns raises more conservation than archaeological issues, since Burnham and Highbridge are examples of, respectively, 19th century spa/resorts and railway towns.

### ***2. Areas of potentially exceptional preservation***

There are areas around the old watercourses and flood plains where deposits may be deeply buried: at Bristol Bridge, the Roman levels were some 3.5m down. Such deposits are liable to be well preserved and have good organic preservation. The fringes of the Roman inlet and river are therefore potentially valuable. The same applies to Medieval deposits in the gradually consolidating lands in the inlet, which were repeatedly flooded.

### ***3. Limitations***

On the higher ground, the archaeological deposits are shallower and therefore more vulnerable. Moreover, the amount of 19th century development, particularly at Highbridge, leads one to suspect major damage to even the deeper deposits along the old river channel. But the extent of damage is not known for certain.

### ***4. Extent of current protection***

*(partly shown on Map I)*

There are some Listed Buildings in Highbridge, and rather more in the spa area of Burnham. The sea front of Burnham is also covered by a Conservation Area.

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 1806 Brue drainage plan: SRO Q/RDe 121  
 1819 Burnha

1841	Burnham Tithe Map: fiche in SSL
1840	Huntspill Tithe Map: fiche in SSL
1886	OS maps at 1:2500: fiche in SSL
1938	OS maps at 1:10560
1961,2	OS maps at 1:10560 + SMR data
1974,77,78	OS maps at 1:10000 + SMR data
1974,78,85	OS maps at 1:2500

## VII. COMPONENT INDEXES

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BUR/505	D	BUR/702	H
BUR/506	C	BUR/703	H
BUR/601	E	BUR/704	H
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## Maps

### **Map A - Prehistoric and Roman**

### **Map B - Medieval and post-medieval Burnham**

### **Map C - Medieval and post-medieval Highbridge**

### **Map D - Medieval and post medieval Burnham and Highbridge area**

### **Map E - 19<sup>th</sup> century Burnham**

Key: Components shown on earlier maps are shown in yellow.

### **Map F - 19<sup>th</sup> century Highbridge**

Key: Components shown on earlier maps are shown in yellow.

### **Map G - 19<sup>th</sup> century Burnham and Highbridge area**

Key: Components shown on earlier maps are shown in yellow.

### **Map H - 20<sup>th</sup> century Burnham and Highbridge area**

### **Map I - Existing constraints**

Key: Scheduled Monuments (none),  
Listed Buildings                      Grade I (light blue)  
    Grade II\* (none)  
    Grade II (dark green)  
Conservation Area (light green)  
Area of High Archaeological Potential (none)