

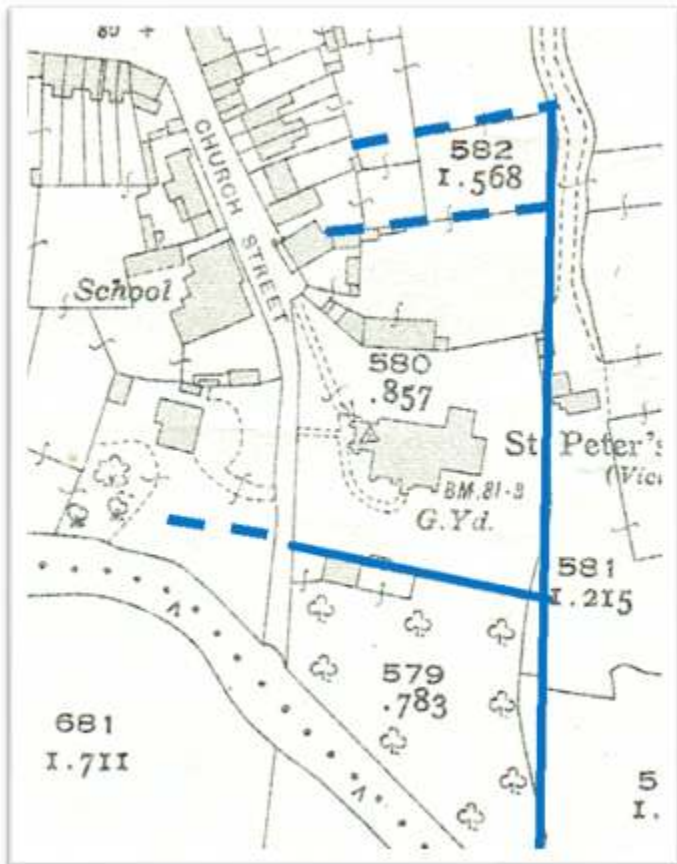
# WOKING MINSTER

The Mayford History Society in their work on Old Woking<sup>1</sup> noted that ‘the original settlement of Woking can be ascribed to a period around or shortly before 700AD’, whilst Robertson<sup>2</sup> noted in her survey of the village that ‘there is very little archaeological evidence for early Saxon activity in the area’. That may be true, but there is possibly more evidence for a Saxon monastery at Woking than there is for one at Chertsey.

In the excavations at Chertsey Abbey in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century there were some fragments of walling obviously earlier than the Norman monastery, but there were no definite finds from as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century, when the Abbey was claimed to have been originally founded. In the 1984-85 excavations only ‘one very small white-ware sherd’<sup>3</sup> of Saxo-Norman pottery was found – and that was presumed to be out of context!

In Old Woking, the preliminary report of test pits in the area of St Peter’s Church in March 2010<sup>4</sup> noted that ‘there appears there may be a deep filled-in ditch on the east side of the present churchyard’, and later another test pit in the garden of Wey Cottage contained deposits of pig and cattle bones, dated by radiocarbon to between 670 AD to 770 AD., ‘with a likelihood that it was deposited earlier in the period rather than later’<sup>5</sup>.

Analysis of the pig bones found that the animals were ‘between seven and fourteen months of age when killed’<sup>6</sup>. A report to the Surrey Archaeological Society Annual Symposium went on to note that ‘this may well be an Anglo-Saxon “placed deposit”’, such deposits found elsewhere in ditches surrounding ritual sites ‘including those later graced by a Christian church’.



Based on an illustration in Bulletin 458 of the Surrey Archaeological Society, the blue lines represent the boundaries of the Saxon minster estate as suggested by Dennis Turner (Savage and Savage, The development of Old Woking; an update, 2016), overlain on the Ordnance Survey 25" map of 1934.

The garden of Wey Cottage is on the line of one of the postulated northern boundary ditches to the original minster estate, although it should be noted that in other test-pits, a case could not be made to show the ditches to be of pre-Conquest date. It is now believed that the ‘eastern boundary was developed from a natural stream flowing down to the River Wey from the plateau on which Old Woking developed’ and that ‘it is possible that this was deepened in either Saxon or Norman times’<sup>7</sup>.

That said, ‘no sherds of pottery certainly attributable to the Early or Middle Saxon periods have been found in Old Woking;’ and ‘it appears that the area was aceramic until the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century’<sup>8</sup>.

So the site of St Peter’s Church is possibly (even probably) Anglo-Saxon in origin, but what of the village?

The Surrey County Archaeological Unit’s report for English Heritage in 2002<sup>9</sup> noted that ‘very little material of Saxon and medieval date has been recovered to date, but a few archaeological interventions in the historic core of the village have produced material of early and later post medieval date’, also later noting that ‘it is likely that there was settlement of some sort around the monastery at Old Woking in the late Saxon period, and around the later minster church’<sup>10</sup>.

In February 2012 Richard Savage gave an update on the test pits excavated to the east of the churchyard. Entitled ‘New Views on Old Woking’<sup>11</sup>, he challenged the ‘received’ view that Old Woking had been ‘a basically Saxon settlement, overlying a small Roman farmstead/settlement, with a Saxon Minster church established by 700 and the Saxon estate passing as a royal manor at the Norman Conquest’. He pointed out that test pitting had uncovered ‘virtually no prehistoric or Roman domestic pottery’ and ‘on the basis of current dating in Surrey, nothing had been recovered from the Middle Saxon period and only a very few sherds dated close to the end of the Saxon period’.

One of those was presumably the ‘single Late Saxon rim sherd’ found in one of the test pits at the White Hart public house in 2011<sup>12</sup>, with other items being found in the test pits at The Old

Vicarage and Lea Cottage in Church Street<sup>13</sup>. The latter included a ‘few small sherds of flint-and-ironstone-tempered pottery’ (recovered from above the late 7<sup>th</sup> century bone deposit) dated to the ‘Late Saxon period’, with other small ‘grog-tempered sherds found at and close to that location’ which could be ‘Late Iron Age, Late Roman or Late Saxon’<sup>14</sup>.

So the archaeological evidence for a secular settlement existing before the establishment of the monastery in this area is slim - and not that much better for a settlement developing whilst or soon after the monastery was founded. Indeed, there appears to be ‘no evidence of domestic Saxon occupation in the core of the settlement prior to c900 AD and no evidence of any ‘elite’ occupation in any Saxon period’<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> p7 (Members of the Woking History Society 2014)

<sup>2</sup> p4 (Robertson March 2002 (revised June 2003) – unfortunately she then went on to erroneously note that ‘Janaway has suggested that the site at Wokingpark Farm is the site of the original Saxon settlement of Woking on the banks of the river Wey, to the south-east of the present village location’ quoting page 184 of John Janaway’s 1994 book on Surrey - A County History. In fact all that Janaway said was that ‘the original Saxon settlement of Woking (Old Woking) is on the banks of the river Wey to the south-east of the present town’.

<sup>3</sup> p73 (Poulton 1988) – 1984-5 Excavations

<sup>4</sup> (R. Savage, Old Woking: Test-pitting and other work 2010)

<sup>5</sup> (Korndorffer 2016)

<sup>6</sup> (Savage and Savage, The development of Old Woking; an update 2016)

<sup>7</sup> (Savage and Savage 2021)

<sup>8</sup> (Savage and Savage 2021)

<sup>9</sup> p3, (Robertson March 2002 (revised June 2003)

<sup>10</sup> p11 (Robertson March 2002 (revised June 2003)

<sup>11</sup> (Surrey Archaeological Society Research Committee 2012)

<sup>12</sup> (Savage and Savage, The development of Old Woking; an update 2016)

<sup>13</sup> (Surrey Archaeological Society 2014)

<sup>14</sup> (Savage and Savage 2021)

<sup>15</sup> (Savage and Savage 2021)

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But by the end of the Anglo-Saxon period a sizable community had obviously been established at Woking, as recorded in the first real historic record of Woking – what became known as the Domesday Survey of 1086.

In 2002 the Surrey County Archaeological Unit<sup>16</sup>, noted of Old Woking that ‘the church and graveyard must have occupied their present sites by the time of Domesday Book’, whilst at the same time acknowledging that ‘there is no evidence to confirm whether or not they are located on the site of the 8<sup>th</sup> century monastery and later minster church’.

As far as the churchyard is concerned test-pits suggest that the southern boundary ‘was not a large ditch of flowing water but rather a low upcast bank thrown up from a shallow ditch along its northern side’ with the pottery discovered implying ‘a construction date between 1100 and 1240’ and ‘cobbles and large pieces of flint likely to have come from knapping of flint for one of the phases of rebuilding the church in stone, possibly in the early 12 century’<sup>17</sup>.

It should also be noted that there is evidence that within the later brick wall to the east of the churchyard is a 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century stone wall (discovered during restoration work in 2011-12<sup>18</sup>),

I do not intend to dwell too long on the history of St Peter’s Church, given the excellent booklet on the subject by Dr Anthony Morton<sup>19</sup>, but it is worth noting that he believes the probably wooden Saxon church mentioned in the Domesday Book was replaced by the Normans circa 1090.

That theory is supported by Phillip Arnold who in 2001<sup>20</sup> noted ‘the Normans built their church on the site of a wooden Saxon church’ adding that ‘an outstanding feature surviving from the original church is the large oak door circa 1080-90 opening onto the nave’.

In 2007, following dendrochronological analysis, Arnold revised his entry in the new booklet accompanying his earlier work when it was released in CD format<sup>21</sup>, noting that the analysis of ‘the Great Oak Door has disclosed that it was constructed at some time between 1106 and 1138 in the reign of Henry I’ – with Dr Morton in his booklet adding that the ‘the most likely felling date [was] 1115’<sup>22</sup>.

The Woking History Society favour a slightly tighter range for the wood between 1108 and 1135, but agree the felling date is ‘most probably to 1115’<sup>23</sup>

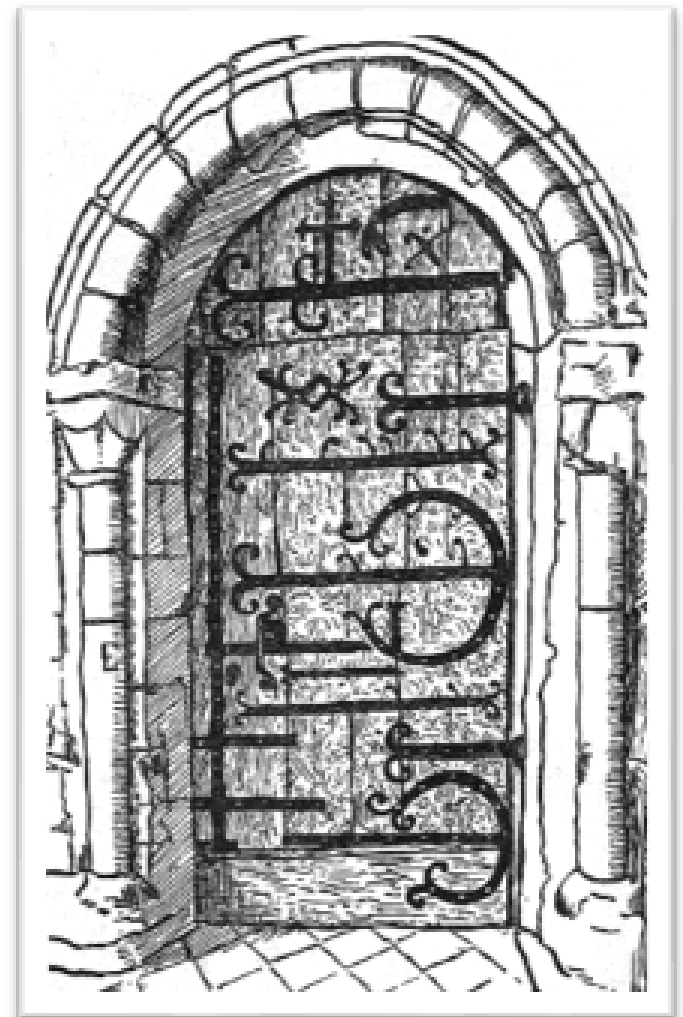
The door consists of four planks, cut from the same oak tree that was over 270 years old at the time of felling. It is held together with iron straps and other ornamental ironwork, including a cross, a devise like a sun with its rays, and dragon-headed ‘C-shaped’ straps that are ‘very similar to those found on Danish ‘picture doors’ and suggest Scandinavian influence’<sup>24</sup>. The Mayford History Society suggests the ironwork is of ‘Saxo-Norman inspiration’<sup>25</sup>, whilst Blatch suggested that ‘it would appear that the Norman smith was not above using Saxon motifs as, in addition to decorating it with instruments of the Passion, he added large horizontal bands penetrating the necks of inverted C-straps – a motif found on Saxon broaches’<sup>26</sup>.

But what if the ironwork is not Norman, but recycled from an earlier door – the door to a Saxon monastery perhaps, the 400 year old wood of which had by 1115 begun to rot away? Nice as it might be to imagine the ironwork (at least) to be a relic from that time, most historians now acknowledge that the iron straps are contemporary with the wood – which is still the oldest piece of timber construction in Surrey, and one of only five such doors in the whole country!

The door was open to the elements until sometime between 1200 and 1220 when the lower part of the tower was added (and the chancel rebuilt)<sup>27</sup>. Malden suggests that ‘the lower part of the existing tower was – added in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, about 1240, and may have had a timber upper stage until the present stone addition over it was built about 1340’<sup>28</sup> (although a later date for the upper stone part is now generally accepted).

Dr Morton<sup>29</sup> suggests that the tower ‘was built for defence but may also have been a watchtower’, speculating that Alan Bassett, ‘who supported King John against his barons over Magna Carta in 1215’ may have been responsible.

As stated above there must have been some kind of settlement in the Woking area by the time of Domesday, but the original view of Crosby that the nucleus of the village ‘has been, for over thirteen centuries, the area beside the ancient church’<sup>30</sup> - i.e. since the late 7<sup>th</sup> century - seems to have been quietly dropped. The more ambiguous statement that ‘the modern and medieval settlement of Old Woking can be shown, by archaeological and



<sup>16</sup> p6 (Robertson March 2002 (revised June 2003)

<sup>17</sup> (Savage and Savage 2021)

<sup>18</sup> (Surrey Archaeological Society 2014)

<sup>19</sup> p3 (Morton n.d.)

<sup>20</sup> p13 (Arnold, Early Woking Buildings and their occupants from 1841-91 and in previous years 2001)

<sup>21</sup> p3 (Arnold, Early Woking Buildings - Post release notes for CD-9 2007)

<sup>22</sup> p3 (Morton n.d.)

<sup>23</sup> p12 (Members of the Woking History Society 2014)

<sup>24</sup> p6 (Morton n.d.)

<sup>25</sup> p12 (Members of the Woking History Society 2014)

<sup>26</sup> p218 (Blatch 1997)

<sup>27</sup> p6 (Morton n.d.)

<sup>28</sup> p388 (Malden 1902)

<sup>29</sup> p8 (Morton n.d.)

<sup>30</sup> p4 (Crosby 1982)

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documentary evidence, to have its origins as a town in the early medieval period<sup>31</sup> now seems to prevail – with the proviso that ‘the precise location and extent of settlement in the area is not, however, clear until the post-medieval period’<sup>32</sup>.

There has been much speculation on whether Woking was first established at a crossing point of the river Wey, or as a landing stage beside it. Robertson notes that ‘the floodplain to the south of the village is c700m wide, the line of Broadmead Road may therefore have required causeways in order to maintain its use’<sup>33</sup>.

If so, when was the causeway across the meadows towards Send constructed, and did it (as some have suggested<sup>34</sup>) originally head to a ford at the end of Church Street, before later being diverted to a new bridge across the river further east (Broadmead Road)?

Robert Briggs<sup>35</sup> seems to favour a causeway being established after the late 10<sup>th</sup> century, but there appears to be little proof one way or the other, Robertson simply noting that ‘it seems probable that a settlement existed from an early date around the ancient church of St Peter, on the narrow terrace between the river Wey and the Hoe Stream, at a point which both would have been fordable’<sup>36</sup> – although she later goes on to speculate that if there was a ford at the end of Church Street it ‘raises the possibility that the first bridge across the Wey at Old Woking was also located here’<sup>37</sup>.

In 2016, Richard Savage tried to partially answer the question – at least as far as the possible ford at the end of Church Street was concerned. Three test pits dug immediately to the west of Church Street produced only a re-deposited Saxon sherd in the topsoil, and ‘the general absence of early material in lower spits in these three test pits suggest that Church Street was never a through road leading to the causeway to Send’<sup>38</sup>. It may have led to a landing stage, but that too remains untested.

Away from the centre of the village, aerial photographs taken in 1976 of the hill where the Hoe Bridge Golf Course is now, revealed extensive crop marks thought to be from a medieval field system (although excavations in the autumn of 1978 and 1979 could not come up with a definitive date<sup>39</sup>).

Pottery dating from 1150 to 1275 (at the latest), was discovered in the upper fill, and to either side of the top of a number of ditches and gullies on the site, including the sherds of a number of cooking pots or bowls and jugs. These were mainly ‘Sandy Ware’ (predominantly grey in colour), also found in a number of sites in Guildford from that period, but there was also a piece of ‘dark-surfaced sandy ware with a grey core’, that has been noted in Reigate, but up to the time of excavation, never this far west.

In the village centre, test pits excavated to the east of the churchyard in 2010 revealed some interesting results. According to one report<sup>40</sup> ‘one pit had significant quantities of stratified pottery from c1150 – 1250’, and although there was ‘no evidence of Saxon occupation’ there was ‘plenty of evidence for occupation in the centuries immediately following the Norman Conquest period and less pottery from 1350 to 1650 AD than would have been expected’.

Later reports note that ‘there is an explosion in the number of pottery sherds across most of the settlement area, with indications that this occurred mainly before 1240. Forms continue to include cooking pots and jars with occasional jugs’ adding that ‘further study of the relative proportions of the three fabric types may allow a refinement of dating’<sup>41</sup>

Indeed Richard Savage later concluded<sup>42</sup> that ‘there is little sign of the Saxon presence and that we should see the manor by 1100 as a wholly fee farmed ‘manorial estate’ consisting of largely dispersed settlement’ – ‘the Norman centre of the Old Woking settlement developed when the church was rebuilt (or built).’

The Surrey County Archaeological Unit, thought that ‘the Vicarage [presumably the property now known as the Old Vicarage] is likely to have occupied the same plot from the early medieval period<sup>43</sup>’, although later went on to acknowledge that ‘no archaeological evidence has so far been recovered to verify this’<sup>44</sup> Indeed three test-pits at the Old Vicarage site ‘were all heavily disturbed and produced almost no pottery before c1450’<sup>45</sup>.

They noted that ‘the early settlement of Old Woking was established along the eastern end of High Street and Church Lane (sic)<sup>46</sup>, adding ‘the evidence suggests that the medieval settlement of Old Woking was fairly tightly centred around High Street and Church Street, focussed on the 11<sup>th</sup> century parish church of St Peter’<sup>47</sup>. They acknowledged that ‘it is difficult to discern any specifically pre-medieval influence which helped influence the development of Old Woking’s town plan, beyond the broad constraints of its general location near to the river and the presence of the gravel peninsula upon which the town is situated’<sup>48</sup>, and went on to note ‘the precise antiquity of routeways is often very difficult to establish, but the main roads through the early settlement of Woking were presumably on a similar or identical alignment to the present High Street and Church Street’<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> p7 (Robertson March 2002 (revised June 2003)

<sup>32</sup> p5 (Robertson March 2002 (revised June 2003)

<sup>33</sup> p9 (Robertson March 2002 (revised June 2003)

<sup>34</sup> p8 (Robertson March 2002 (revised June 2003) ‘There is a possibility that the original ford across the river lay at the southern end of Church Road (sic). This also leads to a suggestion that Church Street may have been continued on the south side of the river by a road which connected with the present Broadmead Road on a slightly different alignment to the present one. The north-south line of Church Street is continued on the south side of the river by a field boundary which encloses the present Riverdale Farm. The boundary, which is also marked on the 25 inch map of 1870, turns to the west and connects with Broadmead Road’

<sup>35</sup> (Briggs 2012)

<sup>36</sup> p5 (Robertson March 2002 (revised June 2003)

<sup>37</sup> p9 (Robertson March 2002 (revised June 2003)

<sup>38</sup> (Savage and Savage, The development of Old Woking; an update 2016)

<sup>39</sup> (Hampton, and Hawkins and with a report on the pottery by Holling 1983)

<sup>40</sup> (Balmer 2011)

<sup>41</sup> (Savage and Savage 2021)

<sup>42</sup> (Surrey Archaeological Society Research Committee 2012)

<sup>43</sup> p6 (Robertson March 2002 (revised June 2003)

<sup>44</sup> p7 (Robertson March 2002 (revised June 2003)

<sup>45</sup> (Savage and Savage 2021)

<sup>46</sup> p6 (Robertson March 2002 (revised June 2003)

<sup>47</sup> p7 (Robertson March 2002 (revised June 2003)

<sup>48</sup> p7 (Robertson March 2002 (revised June 2003)

<sup>49</sup> p8 (Robertson March 2002 (revised June 2003)



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In 2012 Savage speculated that ‘contrary to the received view that the glory days of the settlement were from 1200 to 1600 to support the manorial centre on its new site, the archaeological evidence from test-pitting was that during these years the settlement was little more than a sleepy rural village<sup>50</sup>’.

It is perhaps significant that in January 1219 Alan Basset received the grant of a Friday Market for his Manor of Wootton in Wiltshire – his Manor of Woking being completely overlooked - whilst the following March the Prior of Newark obtained the right to an annual two-day fair at Ripley on the eve and feast of the Blessed Mary Magdalene<sup>51</sup>!

The extent of the village of Woking at that time still has to be determined. To the east, one test pit in the hypothesised Minster ditch contained at its lowest levels ‘large (often joining) sherds including a large vessel of shelly ware of the 12/13<sup>th</sup> century, a grey/brown gritty ware ‘fire cover’, and a unique vessel, also in grey/brown gritty ware, with no axis or plane of symmetry<sup>52</sup>. It was speculated that the two sherds of the last vessel could be ‘from either a ring-lamp or an extremely unusual costrel mimicking an original leather form’ – dated to 1080 to 1200 or possibly earlier<sup>53</sup>.

To the west, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century pottery was reported from test pits on the site of the White Hart in 2011<sup>54</sup>. These revealed ‘stratified 12<sup>th</sup> century layers’ close to the High Street<sup>55</sup>, a finding that was confirmed by a photographic record of the site by The Historic Environment Consultancy and Post-Construct Archaeology Ltd, who found ‘the presence of an undisturbed medieval soil horizon across the site<sup>56</sup>. Elsewhere on the site ‘later medieval pottery and peg tile fragments’ suggesting a building in the vicinity<sup>57</sup> were found, but when the public house closed, the three evaluation trenches excavated by the developer’s archaeologists<sup>58</sup> only confirmed the presence of medieval layers across the northern part of the site, and the density of medieval pottery recovered by them was much lower than that discovered by the test pitting<sup>59</sup> - I wonder why?

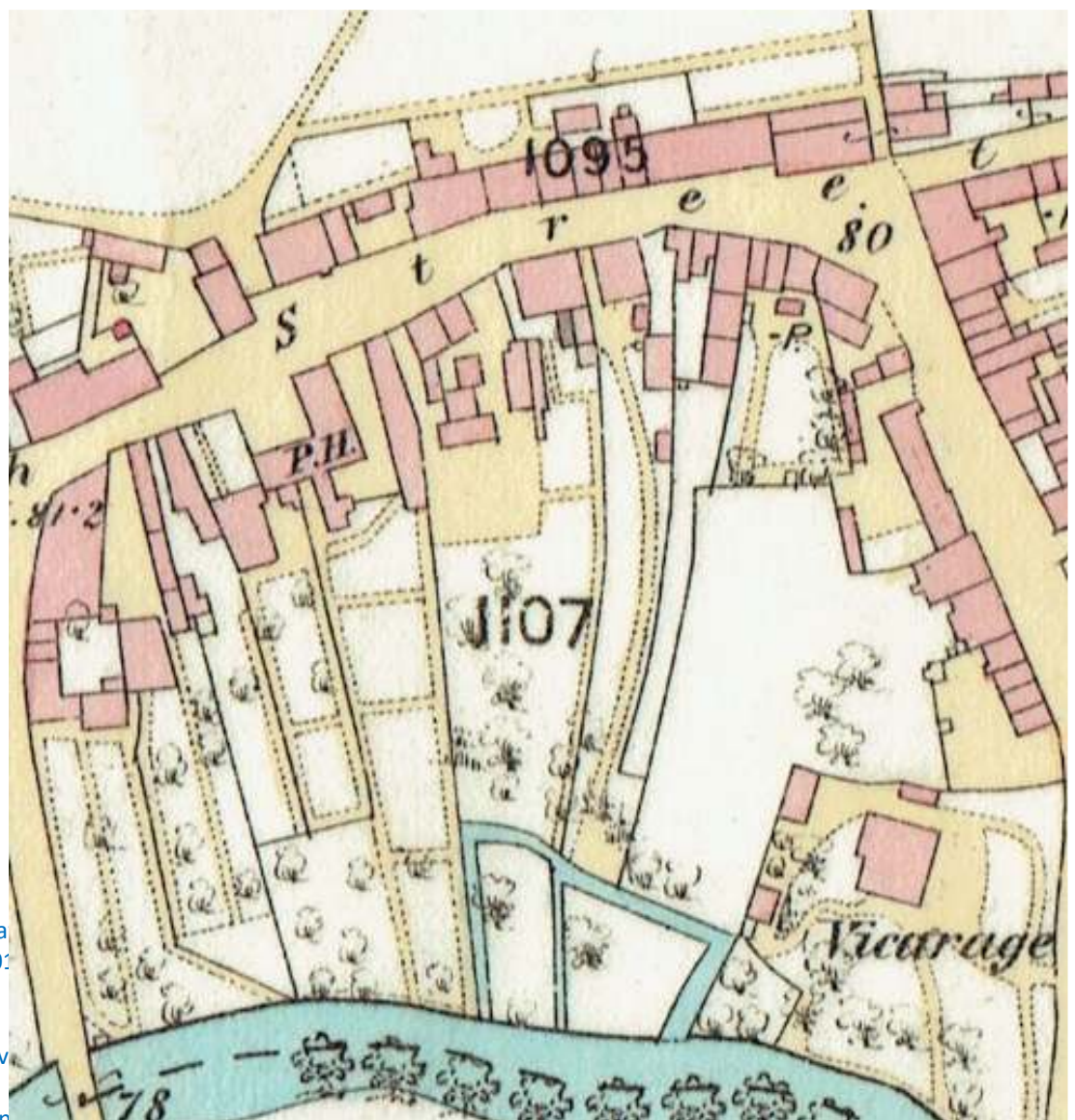
On the other side of Broadmead Road, an evaluation trench for the developers of 134 High Street in 2016 found ‘no evidence of occupation earlier than the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century<sup>60</sup> – possibly indicating that development on the western part of the High Street was later than that to the east. But in 2018 a report<sup>61</sup> on an excavation by J. Payne of the Surrey County Archaeological Unit (SCAU) in the rear garden of London House, noted that as well as post medieval wall foundations there were also ‘two probable postholes of medieval date’<sup>62</sup> – isn’t it funny how the County Archaeologists managed to find more than the developer’s archaeologists could!

Robertson noted that ‘the town plan with its irregular plots suggests an organic type of development as opposed to one which was planned. The precise plan of the medieval town is uncertain and needs to be more closely defined’.<sup>63</sup>

Richard & Pamela Savage concluded in 2016<sup>64</sup> that ‘after the Norman Conquest, settlement was established along High Street with the principal buildings on the south side of the road and one of the Open Fields to the north’ – Robertson noting ‘the plots along the northern side of the High Street were bounded by the common fields to the north which may have restricted their length; a track is seen on the 1st edition 25 inch OS map running along their rear’.<sup>65</sup>

The Savages went on to note that ‘properties on the south side of the High Street had back plots that led down to the river bank (before a meander there became filled with water-laid deposits) and it is possible that each had its own landing stage’.<sup>66</sup>

Finally, it should be noted that ‘the irregularity of the burgage plots at Old Woking is an indication that it evolved naturally along the High Street and Church Street, rather than being a planned settlement, and was centred on its original focus of the parish church.’<sup>67</sup>



<sup>50</sup> (Surrey Archaeological Society Research Committee 2012)

<sup>51</sup> Fine Roll, C60/12, 4 Henry III (1219-1220), membrane 6, the Prior paid 20s for the right to hold a fair on the eve and feast of the Blessed Mary Magdalene

The 1<sup>st</sup> edition of the 25" OS Map (1870), showing the track to the rear of properties to the north of the High Street (as noted by Robertson in 2003)

<sup>52</sup> (Surrey Archaeological Society 2016), SHER MSE22904 (Heritage Conservation Team n.d.), however, Pre-Construct Archaeology did find a ‘fragment of German lava stone, probably a quern-stone’ in ‘Trench 4, located towards the southern end of the site’ noted as ‘probably a residual object pre-dating this Post Medieval layer’. They note that such stones, mainly quarried in the Eifel region, were imported from the prehistoric to the Medieval periods, and that ;it is possible that the fragment is contemporary with the later medieval pottery and ceramic building material found in Trench 4 and the others on the site’.

<sup>58</sup> Pre-Construct Archaeology (Savage and Savage, The development of Old Woking; an update 2016). According to the Surrey Historic Environment Record (SHER MSE22907) (Heritage Conservation Team n.d.), however, Pre-Construct Archaeology did find a ‘fragment of German lava stone, probably a quern-stone’ in ‘Trench 4, located towards the southern end of the site’ noted as ‘probably a residual object pre-dating this Post Medieval layer’. They note that such stones, mainly quarried in the Eifel region, were imported from the prehistoric to the Medieval periods, and that ;it is possible that the fragment is contemporary with the later medieval pottery and ceramic building material found in Trench 4 and the others on the site’.

<sup>59</sup> (Savage and Savage, The development of Old Woking; an update 2016)

<sup>60</sup> (Savage and Savage, The development of Old Woking; an update 2016)

<sup>61</sup> (Surrey Archaeological Society 2018)

<sup>62</sup> (Savage and Savage 2019)

<sup>63</sup> p7 (Robertson March 2002 (revised June 2003)

<sup>64</sup> (Savage and Savage, The development of Old Woking; an update 2016)

<sup>65</sup> p8 (Robertson March 2002 (revised June 2003)

<sup>66</sup> (Savage and Savage, The development of Old Woking; an update 2016)

<sup>67</sup> p8 (Robertson March 2002 (revised June 2003)

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