

Life above the swamp beyond the bridge. Speaker: Dr P E Cattermole

If you were the heraldic leopard, keeper of the Watergate, looking out from Bridgwater Castle to beyond the timber quay, what might you see? A Cottonian manuscript ca. 1545¹ suggests that the area beyond the bridge is totally devoid of features. Even the modern Environment Agency plan shows the area in blue, representing Flood Risk Zone 3². It was certainly a swampy, unhygienic area. A memorial in St John's Churchyard commemorates the 88 persons who died from Cholera in 1849.

A long-inhabited causeway exists outward from the bridge towards the Eastgate and St John's Hospital. Maps and documents³ show that burgage plots developed along the causeway during medieval time.

Very little excavation has taken place in the area. There is only one page of records in the Somerset HER⁴. Much remains to be discovered, particularly in the area covered by the Hospital of St John the Baptist, founded 1219.

The 50 inch OS sheet 1887 show the findspots for a Font and, nearby, a Stone Coffin recorded in 1850 on the south side of Eastover near the East Gate. [Associated records and notebooks have not survived.] A broken early English font and a stone coffin are present in St Mary's church, which was undergoing significant re-ordering and refurbishment in 1850, and it is likely that these two artefacts may be those found in Eastover.

William Stradling⁵ recorded in 1839 that his museum at Chilton-super-Polden contained medieval inlaid tiles from St John's Hospital Chapel and the "lower part of a figure clad in Priestly robes, the toes of the shoes sharp pointed and resting on a dead lion" found in the ruins of St John's Chapel and presented by Mr Joseph Francis. A recent visit to Chilton Priory established that these items were no longer present. A tile⁶ found during the construction of the Broadway is in the Blake Museum. Some pieces of masonry formerly in Monmouth Street outside Hamlin & Co are also in the Blake Museum. A corbel head is mounted on an adjacent property; it looks medieval. Two further heads are mounted on either side of a hood-mould in St John's Street which may be medieval and from the Hospital. All share some characteristics of the angel corbel ca. 1420 carrying the Agnus Dei shield (symbol of the Hospital) in the North Aisle of St Mary's Church. In the chancel of St Mary's is a roof boss to Fr William Patehull, Master of the Hospital of St John, 1393 - 1422.

Development sites are being created in Eastover which provide rich opportunities for archaeological investigations and to which the Bridgwater & District Archaeological Society can contribute.

Web references:

<http://www.friarn.co.uk/StJohn/index.htm>

<http://www.bridgwaterheritage.org.uk/eastover/index.htm>

1 Gresswell Rev W H P, Proc SANHS 1920 LXVI p 67

2 <http://maps.environment-agency.gov.uk/wiyby/wiybyController?x=330500.0&y=137500.0&topic=floodmap&ep=map&scale=9&location=Bridgwater,Somerset&lang=e&layerGroups=default&distance=&textonly=off> [accessed 10 June 13]

3 e.g. in Dilks T B, Bridgwater Borough Archives SRS Nos 420 (1386) and 1036 (?1480)

4 <http://www1.somerset.gov.uk/her> [accessed 10 June 13]

5 Stradling W, A Description of The Priory of Chilton-super-Polden and its contents 1839 pp 5&6

6 BWRAB : 1959/32