

STOCKPORT: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOWN

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The town of Stockport stands on a steep-sided promontary of red sandstone on the south bank of the River Mersey. A settlement first arose here for two main reasons. Firstly, this was an important fording-point of the Mersey: immediately upstream, it divides to form the rivers Goyt and Tame, and Stockport was thus the most easterly point at which the river could be conveniently crossed as a single ford. Secondly, the spur on which it stands formed a natural stronghold: to the north-east and north-west the Rivers Goyt and Mersey formed a natural barrier, as well as eroding the soft red sandstone sides of the spur into steep cliffs. Likewise, the Hemphshaw Brook cut a deep valley (which later became Little Underbank) along its south-western side. At either end of the Hemphshaw Valley was a 'carr', or marsh, which further enhanced the site's defensibility. Thus, the promontary was naturally defended by marsh, river or cliff on all but the south-eastern side, where a tongue of land connected it to the higher ground now occupied by the Rectory. In recent centuries, urban development has largely disguised the dramatic topography of this area, and lessened the appearance of impenetrability it must once have presented.

EARLY HISTORY

At what period a settlement first grew up here is not known, although it seems very likely that a lightly-wooded sandstone spur at a major ford would have proved as attractive to settlement in pre-historic as in later times. However, the only archaeological evidence of prehistoric settlement in the area consists of isolated discoveries along the river terraces. They include cremation burials found at Cheadle in 1872 (Jackson 1934-5, 98), and Portwood in 1896 (TLCAS 1896), a stone axe-hammer found at Brinnington in 1889 (Shone 1911, 41), and two bronze axe-heads or 'palstaves' found at Adswold in 1892 (TLCAS 1894) and 1932 (Jackson 1936, 115-6). All may be assigned to the Early-Middle Bronze Age, c2500-1200BC.

The evidence for Roman occupation in Stockport is again largely circumstantial. The Roman road from

Mamucium (Manchester) to Aquae Arnemetiae (Buxton) forded the Mersey at Stockport. The exact position of the ford has been a matter of some debate, but is generally believed to have been situated some distance upstream from the present Lancashire Bridge, around Tiviot Dale. Thus, a likely route for the Roman road would have been up modern Vernon Street, across the plateau of Market Place and thence either along Churchgate or down Mealhouse Brow, across the Hemphshaw Brook, and along Hillgate.

Its position on the Roman road and its undoubted strategic value have led to suggestions that a Roman military station may have existed at Stockport. The archaeological evidence however, is inconclusive. The 18th century antiquarian, William Stukeley, recorded that a coin of the Emperor Honorius (AD 393-423) was found in January 1751 during the levelling of the castle (Watkin 1886, 293-4). Other 18th century reports speak of the discovery of 'tesselated pavements' at Mile End and Castle Hill, and of 'coins, paterae and Roman implements' elsewhere in the town (Powlesland 1974). In 1896, tiles found near the Garrick's Head public house on Park Street (CNQ 1896-7) were interpreted as the remains of a bath-house, but there is no evidence that they were of Roman date.

With the exception of the coin, this evidence must be treated with some caution, especially since, even if a military station did exist at Stockport, there would be little reason to expect it to display such refinements as tessellated pavements or a bath-house. The confirmation, or otherwise, of Stockport's status as a Roman station is a matter of high archaeological priority.

MEDIEVAL STOCKPORT

Although it is not named in the Domesday Survey of 1086, the name 'Stockport' is Anglo-Saxon, and suggests that some form of pre-Conquest settlement existed here. The name first appears as 'Stokeport' - meaning 'the market-place at a hamlet' - in the late 12th century, although variations such as



Plate 1 Stockport Market Place, looking south

'Stopford' and 'Stoppard' continued in use until the 14th century (Dodgson 1970, 294-5).

At the time of the Domesday Survey much of the landscape surrounding Stockport would have been heavily wooded: most notably to the south and east, where the great Macclesfield Forest extended as far north as Romiley. At this time the manor of Stockport formed part of the Cheshire estates of the de Spencer family, but was held under them by the de Stokeports: a Norman family who had adopted the place-name as their own. In 1265, the de Spencer estates were confiscated by the Earls of Chester as a punishment for their support of the rebel Simon de Montfort, but by 1327 the lands had been returned to their former owners. Despite these political changes, the de Stokeport family continued to hold and administer the manor of Stockport until it passed by marriage to the de Etton family and thence, in 1381, to the de Warrens of Poynton. It was the de Warren family who first adopted the title 'Barons' of Stockport (Earwaker 1877, 331-43).

In his 'History of Henry II' Benedict, Abbot of Peterborough, records that, amongst those that rebelled against the king was his son, Geoffrey de Constantine, who held 'the castle of Stokeport' against his father in 1173 (Earwaker 1877, 330). The historian Leland likewise noted in his 'Collectanea' that, according to the testimony of Walter de Coventry, 'Geoffrey de Constantine held the castle of Stokeport'. Thus, there is documentary evidence that a castle existed at Stockport by 1173. Its exact form is unknown, but it probably consisted of a simple 'motte', or mound, surmounted by a timber tower which was later replaced in stone. Its site is marked by the modern 'Castle Yard'. As frequently happened to castles fortified

in the 12th century Stockport Castle was allowed to fall into disrepair during the 13th century, and a deed of 1336 refers to the site as 'Castle Hill' (Earwaker 1877, 330): perhaps suggesting that even by this early date it was no longer considered a functioning castle. Its demise was hastened when the estate passed to the de Warren family in the late 14th century, since they preferred to occupy their manor house at Poynton rather than the castle at Stockport.

Apart from a deed of 1537 (Earwaker 1877, 350), which demonstrates that the 'bastile room,' or dungeon, of the castle survived at that date, the later history of the castle is largely unknown. In 1642, the so-called 'Pacification' agreement proposed that "certain fortifications lately made at Chester, Nantwich, Stockport, Knutsford or any other town in Cheshire by either party" (Earwaker 1877, 331) be demolished. Although this may refer to a refurbishment of the castle, it seems more likely that it refers to the type of temporary earthworks widely constructed at the outbreak of the Civil War, and, according to one authority, located to the east of the parish church. In 1853, the castle area was partially levelled to accommodate a cattle market, and in 1775 it was totally levelled and a large circular building erected on its foundations by Sir George Warren, then Baron of Stockport (Powlesland 1974, 4).

The Parish Church of St Mary was almost certainly founded by the 12th century. A charter of c1190 was witnessed by one 'Matthew, Clericus de Stokeport', suggesting that a parish church already existed at this time, and from c1300 onwards, the rectors of the church are recorded by name (Earwaker 1877, 380). These would have been selected by the Barons

of Stockport, since the right of 'advowson', or patronage of the parish church, was included amongst the powers of the lords of the manor. The present red sandstone fabric of the church dates mainly from 1813, and of the 14th century fabric only the Decorated chancel survives (Richards 1947). Originally it consisted of a tower, a nave and aisles (each with its own chancel), and two private chancels, all constructed in the 14th century Decorated style.

During the medieval period, the development of Stockport from market-hamlet to town is reflected in two important documents. Around 1260, the town was made a free borough when Sir Robert de Stokeport granted its charter (Earwaker 1877, 334-5). This document set out the extensive powers and privileges of the lords of the manor, as well as laying the foundations of Stockport's municipal and judicial system, which survived into the 19th century. Also in 1260, the Earl of Chester granted the de Stokeports the right to hold a market every Friday, and an annual fair. This probably merely formalised existing practice, since the name 'Stokeport' implies the existence of a market since the Anglo-Saxon period.

The physical development of the town is less clearly understood. It is certain that, by the medieval period, the ford at Stockport had been superseded by a bridge some distance downstream. This is first recorded in 1377, but the family name 'de Ponte' occurred locally in the 13th century,

implying the existence of a bridge at that time (Dodgson 1970, 297).

The construction of the 'Lancashire Bridge' suggests the possibility that the earlier northern entrance to the town (via Vernon Street?) was superseded by a new entrance up modern Bridge Street Brow, although this hypothesis cannot be confirmed. The continued use of Mealhouse Brow as the southern entrance is clearly demonstrated by the very deeply-worn 'holloway' it represents today. Other entrances probably existed at Churchgate and Chestergate: the latter road connecting Stockport with the county town.

Apart from 'Castle Hill', mentioned previously, the earliest named thoroughfares and districts in the town (Dodgson 1970, 295-8) are 'The Park' (first recorded in 1345, although a 12th-century deed refers to the existence of a park near the river), Hillgate (1422-3), Underbank (1454), Millgate (1456-7), Turncroft Lane (1511) and Market Place or 'Sted' (1537-41).

A major problem in understanding the development of the medieval town, however, relates to the so-called 'town walls' of Stockport. Two stretches of this rough-dressed red sandstone wall still survive today. One fragment (behind nos 9-13, Mealhouse Brow) is indifferently preserved and of uncertain date, but the other (behind nos 11 and 13 Great Underbank) is over 7m long and incorporates a well-preserved buttress and gargoyle. No traces of

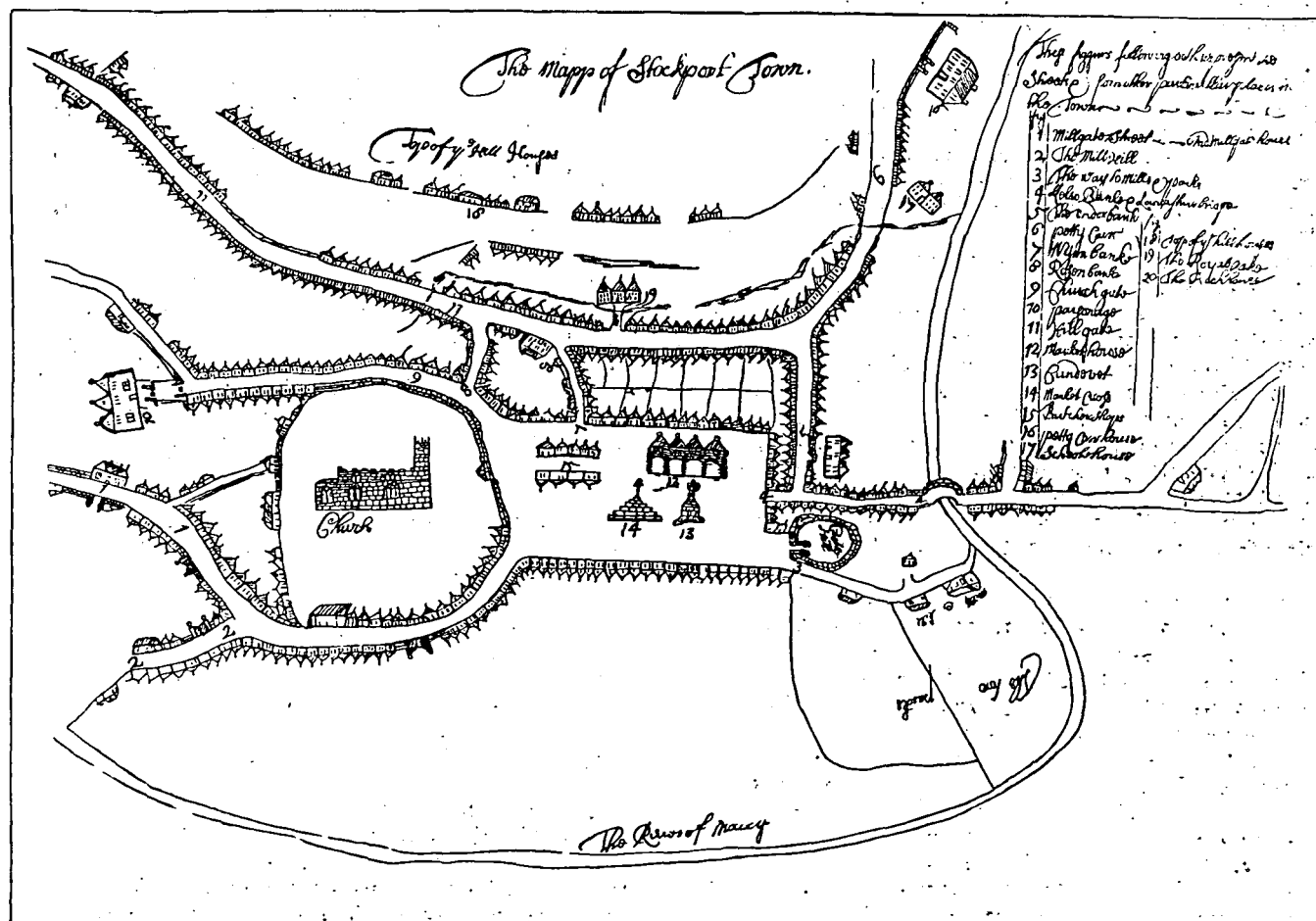


Fig 1 Map of Stockport, c1680

walling have been discovered elsewhere, and much has presumably been destroyed by the practice in recent centuries of cutting houses and cellars into the hillside.

The most common interpretation of the walls is that they were 'town walls', and that the medieval town of Stockport grew up entirely within their compass (Kay 1896). An 18th century local historian drew a plan of the walls before they were largely obliterated, showing them to have enclosed an irregular area of some 60m by 30m (Dent 1977,5). It has also been suggested that the walls were omitted to the north and east, where the presence of a vast natural fault in the red sandstone bedrock made further defences superfluous (Kay 1896).

In 1974, however, excavations were conducted on the site of 33 Market Place in an attempt to locate the walls, and to identify any medieval occupation within them (Dent 1977). This produced a quantity of 14th and 15th century pottery, but only one feature - a gully - of medieval date. The excavator concluded that this demonstrated only a sparse medieval occupation of the Market Place plateau, and that the town of Stockport developed outside the so-called 'town walls'. He further argued that the latter were in fact the bailey walls of a Norman 'motte-and-bailey' castle, and that the town of Stockport developed on the lower ground surrounding the bailey (ie in Hillgate, Underbank and Millgate: hence the early documentary references to these thoroughfares) until the 16th century, when it finally began to encroach upon the Market Place plateau.

However, exploratory excavations by GMAU of an adjoining area in late 1984 seem to contradict this theory. The excavations revealed post-holes, gulleys and a cobbled area, probably representing the boundary between adjacent burgage plots of the 13th century borough. The site produced a small group of medieval pottery, as well as semi-waterlogged deposits which may provide valuable environmental data. It appears, therefore, that settlement of the Market Place plateau had taken place by the medieval period, and this is supported by an examination of the First Edition 60" scale maps of the town, on which the boundaries of the medieval burgage plots may still be identified.

The development of the town in the post-medieval period is best illustrated in the well-known 'Map of Stockport Town', produced c1680. This shows the major features of the 17th century town: the market place, castle, parish church, rectory and surrounding network of streets. The Mersey and the Hemphshaw Brook are also shown. One street - 'The way to mills and parks' - approximates to the line of Vernon Street, and continues northwards to terminate at the bank of the Mersey. It is possible that this may mark the route of the early ford.

The 1680 map shows the market place to contain a four-gabled market hall, a row of butchers' shops, a pump or conduit, and a market cross, and to be surrounded on three sides by gabled shops or houses. At least one of these buildings survives today as 30a and 31 Market Place (Chapter 9). Another surviving building, Underbank Hall, is also shown.

In more general terms, the map of 1680 shows that not only was the town expanding rapidly along Millgate, Churchgate, Hillgate, Chestergate, High Street and High Bank Street, but also that 'over-spill' development was occurring north of the Mersey, beyond Lancashire Bridge. This, of course, marked a fundamental change in the nature of Stockport's development. It shows that the Mersey, despite remaining the administrative boundary between Cheshire and Lancashire, could no longer be considered a significant barrier to the town's northward expansion. Thus the northerly extent of modern Stockport, across the Mersey to merge with the neighbouring township of Heaton Norris, is merely the culmination of a process which began at least as early as the 17th century. This process was, of course, accelerated dramatically by the advent of the Industrial Revolution, when the existing textile and clothing cottage industries - cotton, silk and hat-making - became more mechanised and factory-based, while new industries such as ironworking and engineering arrived with the railway age. Population expanded in the industrial centres like Stockport, and this was accompanied by the provision of mass housing, increased urbanisation of the surrounding areas, and the rapid obliteration of those topographical and archaeological features which attested to the town's historic origins.

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