CHESHIRE HISTORIC TOWNS SURVEY

Aldford

Archaeological Assessment

2003

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Environmental Planning
Cheshire County Council
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ALDFORD

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Mike Shaw and Jo Clark

1. SUMMARY

There has been a settlement at Aldford since at least the 11th century, and all that survives of this is the motte and bailey castle to the north of the village. Aldford was granted a market charter in the 13th century, the success of which was probably restricted by the town's close proximity to Chester. Today, the character of Aldford is that of a model estate village, which was created in the mid-19th century by the Eaton Estate.

1.1 Topography and Geology

Aldford lies in the south-west corner of the county, 7km south of Chester, close to the border with Wales. The town stands on the east bank of the River Dee c15m AOD. Aldford in its immediate context is surrounded by the low-lying Cheshire Plain; further afield are the foothills of the Welsh mountains 11km to the west and the Mid-Cheshire Ridge 7km to the east.

The underlying solid geology consists of pebble beds of the Sherwood Sandstone Group. The overlying deposits consist of river gravels in the area of the town and boulder clay in the surrounding area (British Geological Survey, 1965).

The soils developed on these deposits are brown sands, with alluvial gley soils by the river and stagnogleys on the surrounding boulder clay (Cheshire County Council 1992).

Aldford Brook, a tributary of the River Dee flows to the east of the town. It joins the Dee c 0.75km north of Aldford. The village lies immediately west of the Chester-Farndon road (B5130).

1.2 Administrative Unit

The township of Aldford lay within Aldford Parish, Broxton Hundred and the Deanery of Malpas (Dunn, 1987, 10). The parish was small, containing just four townships, and represents a division of the original manor of Farndon (Dodgson 1972, 76). Today Aldford is a Civil Parish in the District of Chester.

1.3 Place Name

Aldford translates literally as 'the old ford'. The *old* element doubtless stems from the fact that a new route, the line of the present B5130 which crosses Aldford Brook, replaced the earlier Watling Street crossing of the River Dee at *Ettoneford*, immediately north of Aldford (Dodgson 1972, 77).

2   SOURCES

2.1   Historical

The few sources that are available for Aldford include Ormerod's history of Cheshire (1882, 253 - 268), which provides a good narrative of Aldford's manorial and ecclesiastical histories and directories such as Bagshaw (1850).

A preliminary scan of the indices in the County Record Office (CRO) and the catalogue of Grosvenor manuscripts has identified records relevant to Aldford, although none pre-dating the 17th century has been located. These potentially contain valuable information but are beyond the remit of the present survey.

2.2   Cartographic

Aldford is recorded on Saxton's 1577 map of Cheshire, Speed's county map of 1610, and in more detail on Burdett's survey of 1777. Unusually for Cheshire, there are also estate plans dated 1738 and 1798, which show the settlement in detail and are an invaluable source for the early topography of the town. Subsequently there is the tithe map of 1837 and the Ordnance Survey (OS) First Edition 6":1 mile map surveyed in 1869-74.

2.3   Archaeological

Before the present survey there were nine sites recorded in the settlement of Aldford in the County Sites and Monuments Record (CSMR), which are identified in Figure 1. Where sites and monuments have been identified from the CSMR the relevant reference is provided throughout this report. The present survey has added a further two records.

Very little archaeological work has been carried out at Aldford, and what work has been done has focussed on the motte and bailey castle. In 1959 a small excavation carried out by two local schoolboys on the motte, was visited by F.H.Thompson, who discovered a wall which may have been part of a shell keep and a stone piscina of Norman date (Thompson 1960). In 1996, over thirty years later a geophysical survey was carried out at the castle. This detected several high resistance anomalies on the motte that were suggestive of building remains, with some evidence of an enclosing wall. However, no clearly defined anomalies of archaeological interest were detected within the bailey (Geophysical Surveys of Bradford 1996).

More recently, Chester Archaeology has been carrying out a research project into the foundation and siting of Norman earthwork castles. Part of this project has included a programme of excavation at Aldford Castle. In the summer of 2000, a trench on the north side of the bailey was examined, and a section was cut across the banks and ditch on the east side of the bailey. The first trench revealed a clay bank dated to the 13th century, below which the remains of a timber building and an extensive occupation layer were uncovered. Excavation of the east section of the bailey, revealed that the inner bank was probably constructed in the 13th century,

while the outer bank was much later. In 2002 trenches were excavated on the summit of the motte, revealing the remains of a D-shaped masonry tower or bastion. Parts of two courses of good quality ashlar masonry survived, the lowest being a chamfered plinth. The earliest pottery from the site is 13th century, despite documentary references that the castle at Aldford was already standing by this time (Ward 2001 & 2003).

3. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SUMMARY: FIGURE 1

3.1 Prehistoric

There are no recorded prehistoric sites and monuments within the settlement of Aldford. However, on the banks of the River Dee two Mesolithic flint scatters have been identified c 1km southwest of Aldford. They are in close proximity to each other and are therefore likely to be part of the same site.

3.2 Roman

There is no evidence to suggest that there was settlement at Aldford at this time, and therefore nothing to support the 19th century identification of a Roman fort at Aldford (CSMR 1835). Watling Street, the Roman road that linked Chester with London, Caerleon and the nearest centre of civil administration at Wroxeter (CSMR 1700; Harris and Thacker 1987, 216), passed through Aldford and crossed the River Dee immediately to the north. The approximate route of this road is plotted on Figure 1. An alternative route for the stretch of the road to the south of Aldford has been suggested but this relies upon topographical inference (CSMR 1838/1).

3.3 Early medieval

The Domesday Survey records that:

(233*) Bigot holds of (Earl interlined) Hugh Ferentone (Aldford). (Earl interlined) Edwin held it. There [are] 4 hides that pay geld. The land is for 8 ploughs. In demesne are two [ploughs] and 7 villeins and 3 bordars with 2 ploughs. There [is] a mill and a fishery with 2 fishermen, and 1 acre of meadow. T.R.E it was worth 40s, now £6. He found it waste.*

(Harris and Thacker 1987, 233)

There are two entries in the Domesday Survey for Farndon (*Ferentone*). One is for Farndon itself but the second possibly refers to Aldford (Harris and Thacker, 1987, 359). This would imply that Farndon and Aldford were originally part of a single large estate. Indeed, Higham has suggested that there was an early minster parish based on Farndon which encompassed the medieval parishes of Farndon, Aldford, Tilston and Coddington (Higham 1993, 133-4). As recorded at Domesday, before 1066 Farndon had belonged to the church while Aldford had belonged to Earl Edwin of Mercia. This suggests that the estate had been divided, perhaps in order to grant a large portion of it to the church when the monastery at Farndon was founded.

Bigot de Loges, who held Aldford in 1086, owned extensive estates in Cheshire, and Aldford was the richest of these (Harris and Thacker, 1987, 313). The settlement was presumably laid waste in the aftermath of the rebellion of 1069-70. However, by 1086 it had made a strong recovery, and its value of £6 was a considerable sum.

There is some suggestion that there was formerly a royal palace at 'Farndon'. Edward the Elder is said to have died there in AD 924 and there is a later tradition that King Edgar was rowed from Farndon to Chester by the kings of north and west Britain, in a gesture of submission (Crosby 1996, 32). Dodgson suggests that Edward the Elder may in fact have died at Aldford rather than Farndon (Dodgson, 1972, 75). Also, given that Farndon may have been primarily an ecclesiastical centre, it is possible that the royal palace was in fact located at Aldford.

3.4   Medieval

3.4.1 The Manor

The Lords of Aldford were probably descendants of Bigot de Loges who was the likely father of Robert FitzBigot (Harris and Thacker, 1987, 313). By the early 13th century the Aldford manor was in the hands of the Arderne family. It may, however, be that this was a change of name for the Aldford family rather than a change of succession. In the 15th century Aldford passed to the Stanley family, who held it until the mid-16th century when it was confiscated by the Crown (Ormerod 1882, 754-7).

3.4.2 Settlement

The motte and bailey castle at Aldford survives as an earthwork at the northern end of the village. The motte is large, c 40m in diameter (Sale and Turner, 1985). Its date of construction is uncertain, although scheduling information (SAM 22846) suggests that it was constructed in the mid-12th century. However, Husain (1973, 102) suggests that Aldford was one of a chain of castles built soon after the Norman Conquest, to protect Chester from the Welsh, and therefore a late 11th century date may be more plausible. The first documentary reference to the castle is not until 1276. In the 19th century the motte was known as *Blobb Hill* and the bailey was recorded as *Hall Croft* and *Hall Yard* (Dodgson 1972, 77-8). Badeslade's map of 1738, however, shows the castle as a single entity rather than marking the motte and bailey separately, and labels it *Blobb Hill alias Hall Yard*. The castle has been the subject of archaeological investigation, as discussed in section 2.3.

Little is known about the development of medieval settlement at Aldford but the castle would have attracted settlement and tenements may have been formally laid out to the south of this.

3.4.3 Economy

In 1254 Walkelyn de Arderne received royal grants to hold a market and fair at Aldford and (Nether) Alderley in Cheshire, as well as Elford (Staffs) and Normanby (Lincs). Walkelyn was active in the service of the crown and was presumably

anxious to maximise the profits from his estates. The market was held on a Tuesday while the fair was for three days, on the feast of the Exhaltation of the Cross (14 September) (Bagshaw 1850, 120 and Letters 2002).

Apart from the market and fair we can anticipate that the economy of Aldford was largely based on agriculture. Additionally, however, there is evidence of fishing on the River Dee in the 13th – 14th centuries (Hewitt 1967, 39). Data for Cheshire towns is rare because in the medieval period the shire was exempt from national taxation, having its own taxation system, the Mize. In the Cheshire mize of 1405 (Booth 1985) Aldford paid 49s, a relatively large amount. Within Broxton Hundred only Saighton (76s 10d) and Malpas (64s) were assessed at larger sums. Farndon paid a similar amount (48s).

3.4.4 Religion

The parish church of St John the Baptist has records of rectors dating back to the early 14th century (Ormerod 1882, 758). However, the present church was completely rebuilt in 1866 by the second Marquis of Westminster, immediately to the north of the medieval church - the north aisle is built over the fill of the bailey ditch (compare locations on the tithe map of 1837 and the Ordnance Survey First Edition map of 1873). Ormerod records that 'the church of Aldford stands on the verge of the castle moat, and consists of a nave without side aisles, a chancel, and steeple, very picturesque but now ruinous. The church has been repaired in various styles and ages' (Ormerod 1882, 758).

3.4.5 Communications

Formerly, the major Roman road of Watling Street passed directly southeast-northwest through the village area. Dodgson (1972, 77) suggests that by the end of the 12th century this had been replaced by a road marked by the present B5130. The new road crossed Aldford Brook immediately to the east of the village. Although the brook may originally have been forded, there was a bridge here by the 16th century (Dodgson 1972, 77).

3.4.6 The Surrounding Area

There are a number of significant medieval sites in the surrounding area. These include Poulton Abbey, the site of a Cistercian abbey which lies 1.5km south-west of Aldford (CSMR 1799) and two medieval moated sites - one at Bruera 2km to the north-east (CSMR 2951) and the other at Lea Hall 2km to the south-east (CSMR 1800).

3.5 Post-medieval

3.5.1 The Manor

The manor of Aldford passed through a number of hands in the early post-medieval period, until it was sold in the early 18th century to Sir Richard Grosvenor of Eaton.

It remained in the hands of the Grosvenor family, who later became the Earls and then the Dukes of Westminster (Ormerod 1882, 754-8).

3.5.2 Settlement

The village was largely rebuilt by the Eaton Estate in the second half of the 19th century. Pevsner and Hubbard (1971, 58) recognise two phases of building, the 1850s - 1860s (at the same time as the church was rebuilt) and the 1890s, although the listed building data suggests that there was also building activity in the 1870s and 1880s (Department of the Environment 1983). John Douglas was active in the village; as well as rebuilding the church of St John the Baptist, he also designed many houses and cottages between 1874 and 1897 (Pevsner and Hubbard 1971, 58).

Comparison of the earlier maps with the OS First Edition 6": 1 mile map surveyed 1869-74, indicates that alterations were also made to the roads. The most significant change that occurred between 1837 and 1874 was the straightening of Rushmere Lane.

By the mid-19th century there were schools in Aldford for both boys and girls that were supported by the Westminster family (Bagshaw 1850, 120).

3.5.3 Economy

Aldford continued to be a primarily agricultural settlement, with little sign of any industry. By 1850 the village had a wheelwright, a blacksmith, a mason, a joiner, a butcher, as well as two beerhouses, four shoemakers, two shopkeepers and two tailors (Bagshaw 1850, 121).

3.5.4 Religion

The parish church of St John the Baptist, which was described as ruinous in 1818, was rebuilt by John Douglas for the Eaton Estate in 1866 in Gothic style (Pevsner and Hubbard, 1971, 58). Methodist New Connexion Chapel was built in 1833 over Aldford Bridge on the road to Waverton (Bagshaw 1850, 120).

3.5.5 Population

Aldford's population in 1664 has been estimated as 200 (MacGregor [ed] 1992), an average figure for a Cheshire township at this time. From 1801-1971 onwards population data is available from the census returns published in the Victoria County History (Harris, 1979, 202-240), and for 1981 and 1991 census data has been reproduced under Class Licence Number C01W0000125 with the permission of the Controller of the HMSO.

1801	331	**1901**	409
1811	391	**1911**	431
1821	491	**1921**	374
1831	488	**1931**	347
1841	488	**1951**	322
1851	521	**1961**	280
1861	438	**1971**	274
1871	497	**1981**	216
1881	510	**1991**	212
1891	457		

Aldford is unusual in showing a decline in population between 1891 and 1991.

3.5.6 Transport and Communications

Aldford lay 3km west of what was once a major road from Chester to Whitchurch, and it is also a considerable distance from either a canal or rail link. The minor road to Farndon was turnpiked at a relatively late date in 1854 (Harrison 1886).

3.5.7 The Surrounding Area

A number of post medieval buildings survive in the surrounding area. Nearby there is Eaton Hall, a 20th century mansion with medieval antecedents and extensive gardens and parklands, located across the River Dee from Aldford (CSMR 1969).

4   PLAN COMPONENTS

The town has been divided into eight components (prefixed by **COM**). These have been tentatively sub-divided by period, although there is need for further work to define the extent and date of these components more closely. Many would have spanned more than one period but are discussed under their earliest likely date of occurrence. In some cases tightly defined plan components can be identified, in others only a general area can be delineated and a tighter definition can only be achieved by further fieldwork.

Although there is evidence of Roman activity in the surrounding area, there is no evidence of Roman settlement in Aldford itself. Therefore, there are no Roman plan components listed, although the route of Watling Street should be taken into consideration. There is evidence for early medieval settlement but since the location of this is unknown it is not possible to map this as a settlement component. Therefore, the settlement components commence with the medieval period.

Four maps are available for charting the growth of Aldford in the post-medieval period, those of 1738, 1798, 1837 and 1869-74. There were few changes in the village between 1738 and 1837, but there were greater changes between 1837 and 1869, with the rebuilding by the Eaton Estate. Accordingly for the post-medieval period, the extent of settlement has been plotted for 1837 and 1869-74, with each phase given a separate component number.

MEDIEVAL c1066 – 1540 (Figure 2)

COM 1 - Castle
COM 2 – St John's Church (and market place?)
COM 3 - Green
COM 4 - Settlement
COM 5 - Later Settlement
POST MEDIEVAL c 1837 (Figure 2)

COM 6 - Settlement

POST MEDIEVAL c 1869-74 (Figure 2)

COM 7 - Settlement

MODERN c 2000 (Figure 2)

COM 8 - Settlement

4.1   Medieval (Figure 2)

It is most likely that the motte and bailey castle (**COM 1**) was built in the late 11th century, as part of a system of castles along the River Dee, protecting Cheshire from incursions by the Welsh (Husain 1973, 102). Another possibility is a construction date in the mid-12th century during the troubled reigns of Stephen and Matilda, but the considerable increase in value of the manor by 1086 would suggest that it was already of sufficient importance by this time to warrant the construction of a castle. The castle would have protected the crossing point of the River Dee and would have lain alongside the Roman road.

The origins of the church at Aldford are yet to be established. There was certainly a church c 1300 when the first rector is recorded and possibly there was even a church in the late 11th to early 12th centuries, when a priest of Aldford (*clericus de Aldfordia*) witnessed a charter of Earl Hugh, the first Norman Earl of Chester (Ormerod 1882, 759). If the first church was a Norman creation it may have originated as a chapel within the castle bailey. However, by the time of the earliest available maps the church lay immediately outside the castle (**COM 2**) and when the church was rebuilt after 1865 it was constructed immediately to the north of the old one, partially overlying the infilled bailey ditch.

The settlement layout suggests that tenements (**COM 4)** were laid out around a green (**COM 3**), which was later infilled. The grant of a market and fair in the 13th century was presumably an attempt by Walkelyn de Arderne to encourage trading at the site (perhaps building on existing trading activity) and hence maximise his own profits. The fair was perhaps held on the green (**COM 3**). The market may have been held there also but it may also have been located in the churchyard, immediately to the south of the castle (**COM 2**). This would have been a prime location, from which the market could have been controlled. It is possible that the

cross in the churchyard may even have originated as a market cross. There are, however, no subsequent references to a market or fair at Aldford and they may never have been truly successful. Aldford perhaps lay too close to Chester (only 7km to the north), ever really to thrive as a market centre.

The establishment of a new road to Chester, with the construction of a ford or bridge at Aldford Bridge by the late 12th century, perhaps made it an attractive location for settlement. Indeed **COM 5** appears to be a later phase of medieval settlement at Aldford, running along the new road and focussing upon the crossing at Aldford Bridge.

4.2   Post-Medieval (Figure 2)

Aldford's post medieval history is that of an agricultural village on the edge of the Eaton Hall Estate.   Ormerod, writing before 1820, describes the village as '*a picturesque assemblage of farmhouses, cottages and orchards*'. **COM 6** outlines the area of the village around this time, before it was rebuilt by the Eaton Estate.

COM 7 shows the extent of the village c 1869-74 when it was in the middle of the rebuilding phase. The church had been rebuilt to the north of the medieval one by John Douglas in 1866 and many of the village dwellings had also been been replaced. The extent of the settlement remains much the same but there has been alterations to the road system with the straightening of Rushmere Lane and the bottom end of Middle Lane.

4.3   Modern (Figure 2)

Aldford saw little by way of development in the 20th century and the atmosphere of a quiet, estate village has been preserved. Indeed, its population actually declined between 1871 and 1971 from 497 to 274. **COM 8** outlines the extent of the modern settlement, which shows limited expansion north-east of Aldford bridge. Small scale rebuilding by John Douglas, who is described by Pevsner and Hubbard (1971, 35) as 'the best Cheshire architect', also occurred within the village towards the end of the 19th century*.*

5   HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

5.1   Above-Ground Remains

Aldford is a fascinating example of a surviving model village, with most buildings dating from the 19th century period of rebuilding by the Eaton Estate.   It is a designated Conservation Area. There are twenty seven listed buildings in Aldford, of which all are Grade II apart from the Iron Bridge across the River Dee into the Eaton Estate which is Grade I.   The only Listed buildings to pre-date the 18th century are the base of a cross in St John's churchyard, which is probably of medieval date, and a cottage on School Lane and a set of stocks, both of which are of 17th century date. A reminder of its medieval past survives in the earthworks of Aldford Castle, which is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM 22486). Also of interest in the wider area, are the park and gardens of Eaton Hall, which lie to the north and west of Aldford. They

are included on English Heritage's Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest, and are Grade II*.

5.2 Below Ground Remains

Archaeological work at Aldford village has been neglected in favour of concentrating upon the motte and bailey castle, which is a rich archaeological resource. Potentially the castle site has much more to yield, including perhaps the site of a royal palace and a church or chapel within the bailey. The survival and preservation of archaeological deposits within the village has therefore not been assessed. However, it is likely that archaeological deposits do survive in the village area despite the period of rebuilding, particularly since there has been little subsequent development. For example, earthworks in the area between School Lane and Middle Lane, perhaps indicate former property boundaries.

6. PRIORITIES FOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK

6.1 General

The study of Alford forms part of a national research priority to examine the origins and development of medieval small towns and rural markets (Priority H5; English Heritage 1997, 49). Work at Aldford would fit into a number of these national priorities, particularly:

- PC6 Late Saxon to medieval
- PC7 Transition from medieval to post medieval traditions (c1300-1700AD)

6.2 Roman

- Establish the route of the Roman road

6.3 Early Medieval

- Establish the nature and extent of settlement during the early medieval period.
- Establish whether there was a royal palace at Aldford.

6.4 Medieval

- Establish the precise location of settlement areas and date their phases of expansion and contraction.
- Establish the nature and extent of buildings on settlement plots.
- Establish the date of construction of the motte and bailey castle, examine the nature and extent of defences and buildings constructed within it. Establish the date of abandonment.
- Establish the date of foundation of the medieval church - did it originate as chapel in the castle bailey? Examine phases of expansion and contraction.
- Examine evidence of medieval trade and industry.
- Establish the site of the market place and green.

6.5   Post medieval

- Establish precise location of settlement areas and date their phases of expansion and contraction.
- Examine any evidence of post medieval trade and industry.

7.   SOURCES

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8.   ILLUSTRATIONS

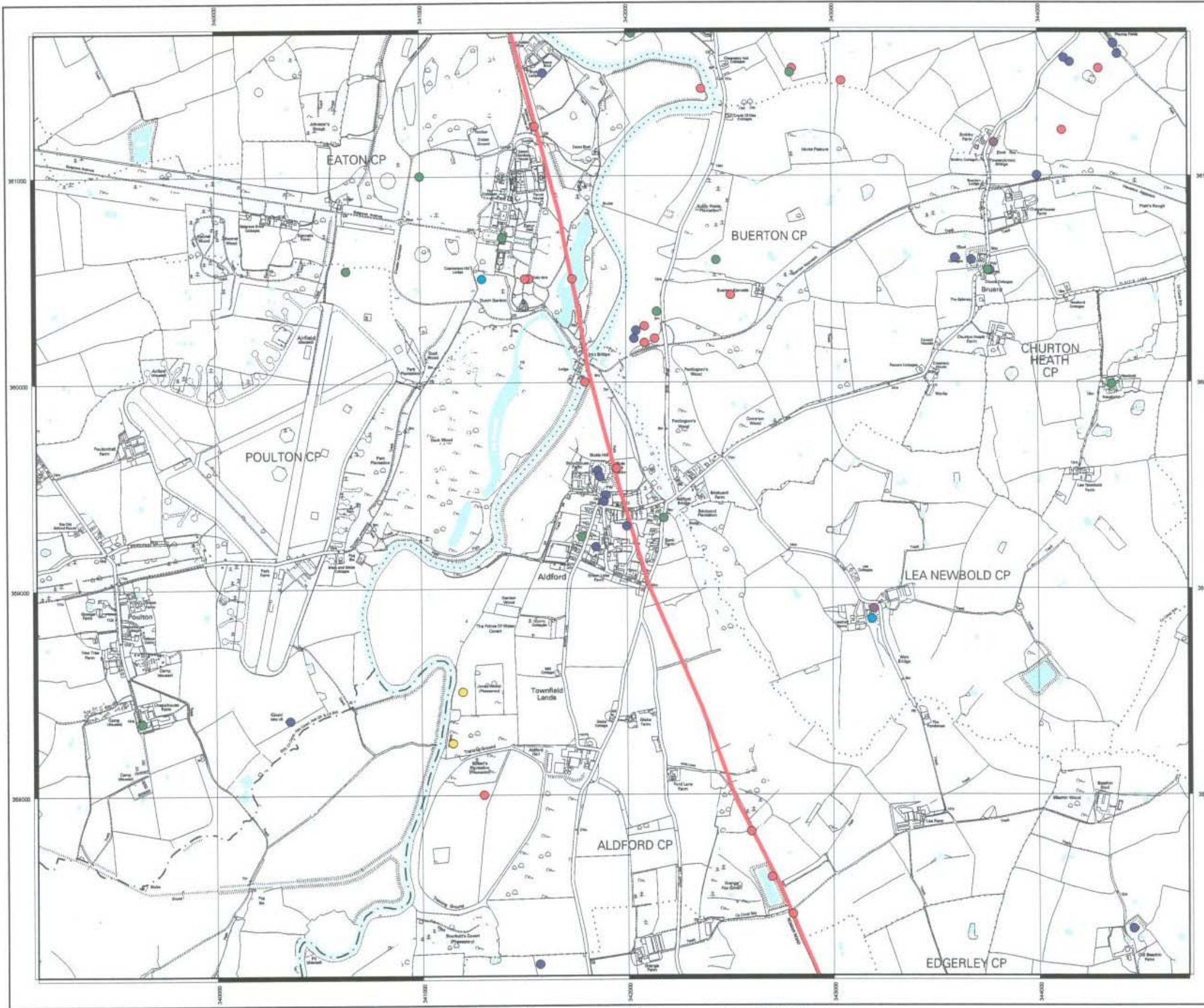Figure 1: Aldford and the Surrounding Area
Figure 2: The Development of Aldford

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Figure 1: Aldford and the Surrounding Area

Sites and Monuments Record
- ○ Prehistoric
- ● Romano-British
- ● Early Medieval
- ● Medieval
- ● Post Medieval
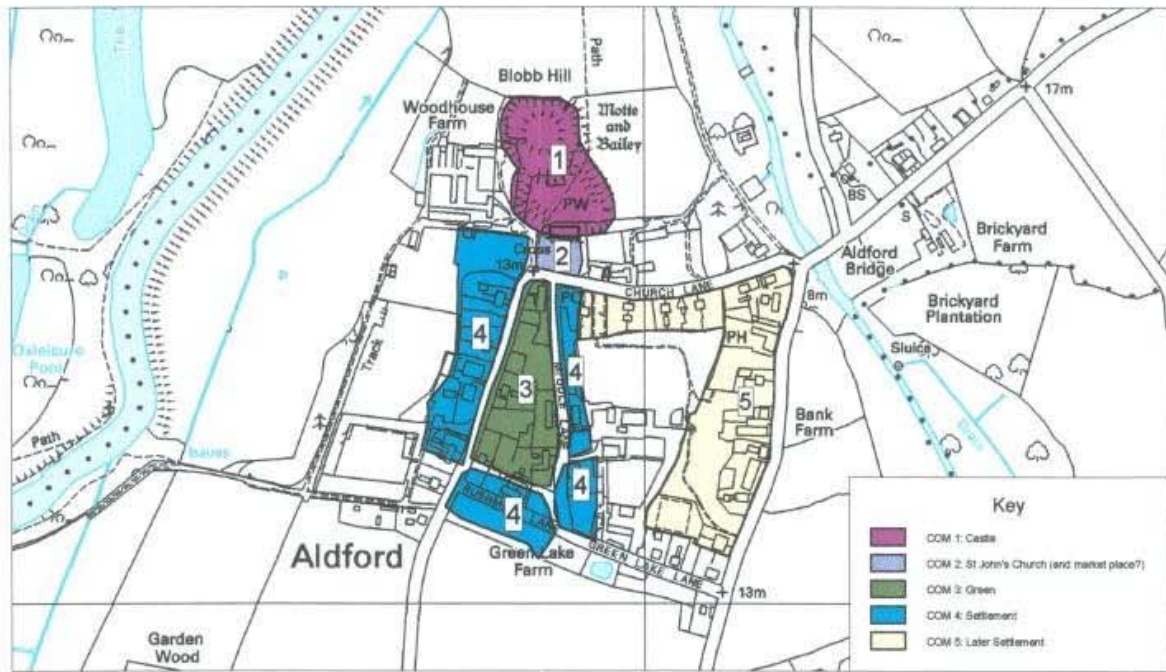- ● Modern
- Uncertain

∿ Roman Road

1:18000

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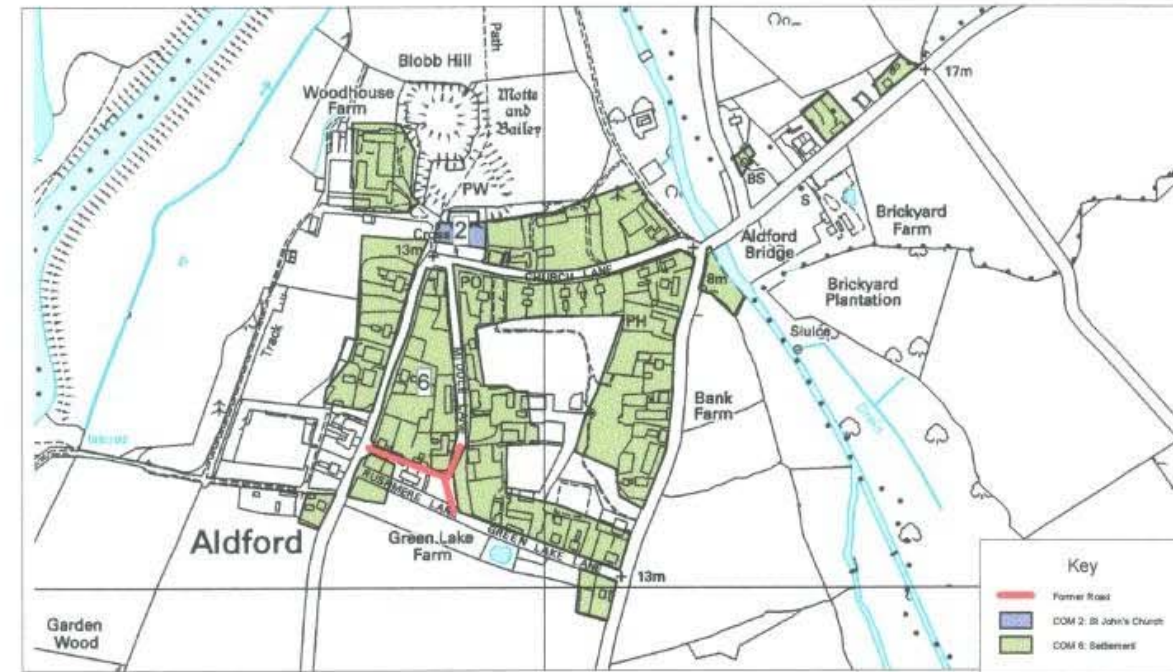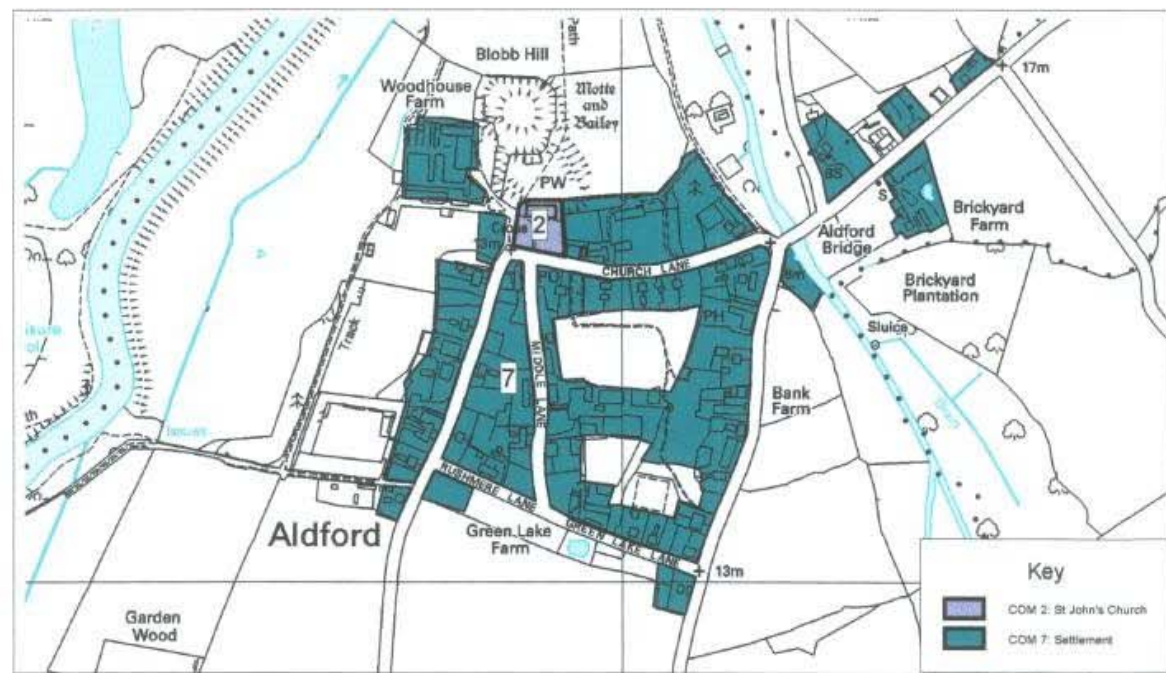
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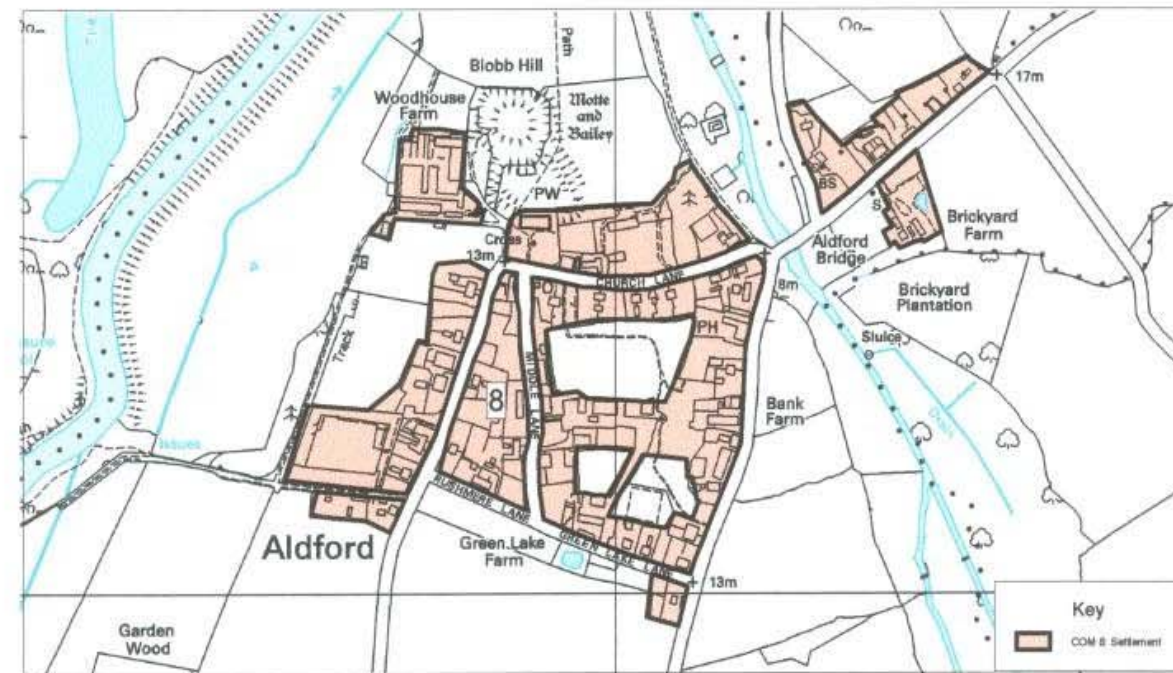
Figure 2: The Development of Aldford

Medieval

Key
- COM 1: Castle
- COM 2: St John's Church (and market place?)
- COM 3: Green
- COM 4: Settlement
- COM 5: Later Settlement

0 — 200 — 400 Meters 1:8000

c.1837

Key
- Former Road
- COM 2: St John's Church
- COM 6: Settlement

0 — 200 — 400 Meters 1:8000

c.1869-74

Key
- COM 2: St John's Church
- COM 7: Settlement

0 — 200 — 400 Meters 1:8000

Modern

Key
- COM 8: Settlement

0 — 200 — 400 Meters 1:8000