

CHESHIRE HISTORIC TOWNS SURVEY

Alsager

Archaeological Assessment



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Environmental Planning
Cheshire County Council
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Front cover :

J Cowley, 1744 An Improved Map of Cheshire, Containing the Borough and Market
Towns, with those adjoining; also its Principal Roads and Rivers
Cheshire and Chester Archives and Local Studies, PM 2/20.

ALSAGER

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

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1. SUMMARY

In the medieval and post medieval periods Alsager was a small, dispersed rural township. However, this was set to change in the mid-19th century with the arrival of the railway, which sparked a new era of prosperity for the town. Alsager became an attractive residential area and as new houses were constructed a settlement core began to develop in the vicinity of the Sandbach Road South.

1.1 Topography and Geology

Alsager lies on the slope of a hill, c 76m AOD in the southwest of the town, rising to 107m AOD in the northeast. It is situated in south-west Cheshire, 8km to the east of Crewe and close to the Staffordshire border, in the undulating foothills of the Pennines. There is a small body of water located within the town called 'The Mere'.

The underlying solid geology is a mixture of Bollin Maidstone Formation and Northwich Halite Formation, above which are fluvio-glacial deposits (Geological Survey of Great Britain 1953). The soils of the surrounding area are of a mixed nature. To the north-west are sandy gleys, which are suited to mixed arable and grassland (graded classes 2-3). To the north-east are brown sands, which are also suited to mixed arable and grassland (graded classes 2-3), along with typical stagnogley soils, which are ideally suited to grassland (graded class 3). To the south are stagnogleyic argillic brown earths, which are ideal for permanent grassland (graded class 3) (Furness, 1978).

The A50 runs to the east of Alsager through Church Lawton, a major road that connects Knutsford and the Potteries and has been important from at least the 18th century. The B5077 runs through Alsager to Crewe, and the B5078 runs north through the town to connect with the A533. The Trent and Mersey Canal runs northwest-southeast 1.5km to the north of Alsager.

1.2 Administrative Unit

In the 13th century, the Hundred of Middlewich was reorganised and the focus was shifted from Middlewich to Northwich. As part of this reorganisation Alsager, which had previously been included in Middlewich Hundred was included in Nantwich Hundred (Dodgson 1971, 3). The township lay in the Deanery of Nantwich and the ancient parish of Alsager in Bartholomey until 1852 when Alsager became a separate parish (Dunn 1987, 10). The modern township is a Civil Parish in the Borough of Congleton.

1.3 Place Name

Alsager is first recorded in 1086 as *Eleacier*, meaning *Aelle's* plot of arable land. Other spelling variations include: Alsacher (1289), Alsecher (1360), Alsiger (1598) (Dodgson 1971, 2)

2 SOURCES

2.1 Historical

There are few sources available for the study of Alsager's history. Manorial and ecclesiastical histories are contained in Ormerod's *History of Cheshire* (1882), and useful information is contained in 19th-century trade directories (for example, Bagshaw 1850).

There are a number of primary sources in the County Record Office (CRO), including a grant of land from 1338 and a marriage settlement of 1572. There are also other documents which date from the 16th to the 19th centuries, however time has not allowed for their consultation.

2.2 Cartographic

Alsager is not depicted on Saxton's county map of 1577, but it is identified as *Alsacher* on Speed's map of 1610. Burdett's county map of 1777 provides the earliest available schematic plan of the settlement and the local road network. Detailed surveys of the town are provided by the tithe map of 1840 and Ordnance Survey (OS) First Edition 6": 1 mile map, surveyed 1873-4.

2.3 Archaeological

Before the present assessment there were five records within the settled area of Alsager in the County Sites and Monuments Record (CSMR), which are identified on Figure 1. This includes two prehistoric finds (CSMR 2710 and CSMR 135), an undated cropmark (CSMR 1137) and two Listed Buildings (CSMR 1168, CSMR 1169/1). Throughout this document the relevant reference is provided for any records that have been identified from the CSMR. The present survey has generated seven new records. No archaeological work has been carried out in Alsager.

3 HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SUMMARY

3.1 Prehistoric

Within the surrounding area, a handful of prehistoric sites and finds are known. Prehistoric flints were discovered 0.5km to the west of Alsager at White Moss (CSMR 213); directly south-east of Alsager a Bronze Age stone axe was discovered (CSMR 135), and immediately to the east of the town at Church Lawton are three Bronze Age burial mounds (CSMR 133/1/1, 133/1/2, 133/1/3). However, the only recorded prehistoric finds within Alsager itself are

Bronze Age flints which were discovered on the northern edge of the settlement, at a school on Woodside Avenue (CSMR 2710).

3.2 Roman

King Street Roman road (CSMR 436/1/10), runs 0.5km to the north-east of the modern town. However, no Roman sites or finds are recorded in Alsager.

3.3 Early Medieval

There are no recorded early medieval finds or sites in Alsager or within the surrounding area. However, a small settlement was recorded at Domesday, the location of which is unknown.

The Domesday Survey records that:

'The same earl holds ELEACIER [Alsager in Bartholomey]. Wulfric (Ulvric), a free man, held it. There [is] ½ hide that pays geld. The land is for 1 plough. It is waste. T.R.E. it was worth 3s.'

(Harris and Thacker 1987, 348).

3.4 Medieval

3.4.1 The Manor

Upon the division of the Barony of Nantwich, the manor appears to have been allotted to the Vernon family. In 1245-46 Sir Ralph Vernon granted two-thirds of the manor to Michael de Muneshall. The manor eventually passed to the Alsacher family, possibly in the reign of Henry III (1216-1272), who held the lordship until the modern period (Ormerod 1882, 320-1).

3.4.2 Settlement

There are numerous references to land transactions in Alsager during the medieval period including in the reign of Edward I (1272-1307) '...two messuages, two carucates, 80 acres of waste, [and] four of meadow' (Ormerod 1882, 321). In 1302-7 an assart (clearing of woodland) was recorded (ibid, 321). Unfortunately, these references do not provide information as to the location and extent of medieval Alsager.

3.4.3 Economy

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 (taxation) of 1405, Alsager paid 33s 4d, an average sum in the *Wicus Malbanus* hundred. For example, Church Coppenhall paid 26s 8d, Stapeley 33s 4d and Wybunbury 33s 4d (Booth 1985).

Agriculture was no doubt an important aspect of the town's economy and the tithe map of 1840 shows a small number of long, narrow fields with s-shaped

(aratra) boundaries that are typical of enclosed open fields. There are no recorded markets or fairs at Alsager and there are few references to suggest what economic activities took place at Alsager. However, it is likely that the Mere provided a useful source for fish and in 1316-17 Hugh Smith of Hatteshall was granted a Licence to get 'turves in the libertes of Alsager' (Ormerod 1882, 321).

3.4.4 Religion

Alsager did not have a church during the medieval period.

3.4.5 The Surrounding Area

There are a number of medieval sites and monuments in the surrounding area, including the site of the 14th century Rode water mill, 3km northeast of Alsager (CSMR 140) and in addition there are two moated sites: one at Hassall 2km north-west of Alsager (CSMR 1133), and the other near Oak Farm, 1.5km to the south of the town (CSMR 1108).

3.5 Post-Medieval

3.5.1 The Manor

The manor was held by the Alsagers of Alsager Hall throughout the post medieval period (Ormerod 1882, 323). In 1768, the manor and hall were inherited by John Alsager's three sisters and coheiresses (Bagshaw 1850, 363).

3.5.2 Settlement

In 1821 the census figures recorded 66 houses in the chapelry, a figure rising to 87 by 1841. This expansion was encouraged in the mid-19th century by the provision of a rail service by the North Staffordshire Railway Company, which linked Alsager with the Potteries. Indeed, it is recorded that after the 1860s Alsager became '...a favourite place of residence for gentlemen connected with the Staffordshire Potteries, and during the last few years numerous villa residences have been erected and occupied by them' (Morris and Co 1874, 101).

A school was also built by the Alsager sisters; on land that had been enclosed from waste, that could accommodate 275 children and included a master's house, both of which were designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott (Ormerod 1882, 324). The Central School was built in 1885 at the cost of £1, 514 (Kelly 1914, 31).

3.5.3 Economy

The 1821 census recorded that thirty five of the families in the Alsager Chapelry were primarily employed in agriculture, which was half of the total number of families in the Chapelry. By 1850 the number of farmers recorded

as resident in the township had reduced to just fifteen (Bagshaw 1850, 363). Other trades listed in the mid-19th century include a corn miller, a station master, two boot and shoe makers, and two blacksmiths (ibid). A comprehensive list of other trades and professions can be found in Morris and Company and Kelly's Directories. A number of Public Houses are documented in Alsager. For example, in 1765 the Holly Bush was recorded, and the Plough in 1787 (MacGregor 1992). In 1850, John Fox victualler of the Fox Inn and a Beerhouse were listed (Bagshaw 1850, 363), whilst in 1874 John Baddeley is recorded as running a 'Temperance Hotel' (Morris and Co 1874, 101).

3.5.3 Religion

In 1789 the Alsager sisters procured an Act of Parliament that enabled them to build a church and to hold the rights of advowson (Ormerod 1882, 324). Christ Church is a lavish Georgian structure built to the design of Thomas Stringer in 1789-90 (Pevsner and Hubbard 1971, 58-9). In 1852 the township of Alsager was assigned to Christ Church when it became an independent chapel (Dunn, 1987, 10).

A Wesleyan Methodist chapel was built on Lawton Road in 1834 (Bagshaw 1850, 363), and a Primitive Methodist chapel on the south side of Crewe Road is identified on the OS First Edition 6":1 mile map, surveyed 1873-4.

3.5.4 Transport and Communications

The Trent and Mersey Canal, built in 1766, runs 1.5km to the north-east of Alsager. The town was not located directly upon a turnpike road, although the nearby Congleton to Church Lawton road was turnpiked in 1781 (Harrison 1886, 80).

The North Staffordshire Railway's Crewe Branch Line, which was opened in 1848, passes to the south of Alsager, with a station built on Alsager Road. A second branch line to Sandbach was opened in 1852 and passed to the north-east of the town (Sylvester and Nulty 1958, 59).

3.5.5 Population

The population in 1664 has been estimated as 125 (MacGregor 1992). From 1801-1971 population data are available from the census returns (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	275	1901	2597
1811	349	1911	2743
1821	359	1921	2693
1831	446	1931	2852
1841	445	1951	5575
1851	473	1961	7806

1861	703	1971	10329
1871	1148	1981	11177
1881	1601	1991	11912
1891	1912		

3.5.6 The Surrounding Area

Within the surrounding area are a number of post medieval sites and standing buildings. These include the site of the 17th century Lawton Saltworks 1.5km north-east of Alsager (CSMR 2454), and the 17th-century manor house at Hassall, located 2km north-west of Alsager and Listed Grade II* (CSMR 1121/1).

4 PLAN COMPONENTS

The settlement has been divided into six components (prefixed by **COM**). These have been tentatively sub-divided by period, although there is need for a great deal of further work to define the date of these plan components more closely. 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.

The Domesday survey records that there was a small scale settlement at Alsager, however, the location and extent of this is unknown and it is therefore impossible to identify the medieval township. Plan components therefore commence with the post medieval period, which has been mapped as the extent of settlement c 1840 before the arrival of the railway and c 1873-4 after its arrival.

POST MEDIEVAL c 1840 (Figure 2: The Development of Alsager)

- COM 1** - Christ Church
- COM 2** - Flour Mill
- COM 3** - Alsager Hall
- COM 4** - Extent of Settlement

POST MEDIEVAL c 1873-4 (Figure 2: The Development of Alsager)

- COM 5** - Settlement
- COM 6** - Railway

MODERN c 2000 (Figure 2: The Development of Alsager)

- COM 7** - Settlement

4.1 Post Medieval (Figure 2)

The earliest detailed plan of the township is the tithe map of 1840. This, despite being just 30 years earlier than the OS First Edition 6":1 mile map, shows a marked difference in the size and extent of settlement at Alsager and

together the two plans provide valuable snapshots of the town's development. The tithe map shows the town as it had probably been for centuries, a small, rural and mainly dispersed settlement, while the OS map shows the small but prospering and expanding town, after the railway station had arrived and as it had become established as a desirable residential location.

The extent of settlement c 1840 is identified as **COM 4**, within which a few individual components have been identified. Christ Church, which was built in 1789-90 is identified as **COM 1** and Alsager Hall, which is probably the manor house inherited by the Alsager sisters in 1768 is identified as **COM 3**. Part of the Alsager Hall complex, which consists of a large house and a number of outbuildings, set in extensive grounds, is a flour mill with a large mill pond (**COM 2**). The date of construction of both Alsager Hall and the flour mill are unknown. On the tithe map of 1840, the focus of Alsager township is annotated on the survey in the Audley Road area just north of Bank Farm. At this time this was the densest settlement area in Alsager, despite the fact that it comprised what appears to have been just two farmsteads, located on either side of the Audley Road. This annotation may indicate an early settlement focus or more likely, it may just be a 19th century attempt to proscribe a centre in the dispersed township that did not exist.

By 1874, Alsager (**COM 5**) had undergone expansion and settlement had begun to cluster in the Lawton Road and Sandbach Road South area. The railway station, which is located to the south of this area, is identified as **COM 6** and was no doubt one of the chief factors in this development.

4.3 Modern (Figure 2)

Modern Alsager (**COM 6**) has expanded in all directions and the Mere now lies at the centre of the town. The railway has encouraged industrial development, with factories and warehouses closely aligning its route. Included within this modern development pattern are housing estates, sports grounds, factories, schools, college and various leisure facilities.

5 HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

5.1 Above-Ground Remains

There are just seven Listed buildings within Alsager. Of these, the Church of Christ is Listed Grade II*, while two early 17th-century farmhouses (CSMRs 1170/1 and 1169/1), the 18th-century school and school master's house to the north of Christ Church, are all Listed Grade II (Department of the Environment 1986). Also, there are numerous 19th-century buildings and in particular large houses, which are reminders of its prosperous past.

The area around the War Memorial, including the eastern section of Station Road, and the southern sections of Sandbach Road South, Ashmore Lane and Fields Road are included in a designated Conservation Area.

5.2 Below-Ground Remains

There has been no archaeological work undertaken in the town, and it is therefore not possible to ascertain the extent, preservation and survival of archaeological deposits in Alsager.

6 PRIORITIES FOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK

6.1 General

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

- PC 6 The late Saxon to medieval period
- PC 7 Transition from the medieval to post medieval traditions

6.2 Medieval settlement

- Establish the location of settlement areas in the early medieval and medieval periods.
- Examine any evidence for trade and industry.

6.3 Post-medieval settlement

- Establish the precise location of settlement areas and date their phases of expansion and contraction.
- Establish the nature of buildings on settlement plots.
- Examine any evidence for trade and industry.

7 SOURCES

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7.2 Maps

(CRO – Cheshire Record Office)

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Tithe Award 1840 (map: CRO EDT 12/2; apportionment EDT 12/1)

8 ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Alsager and the Surrounding Area

Figure 2: The Development of Alsager

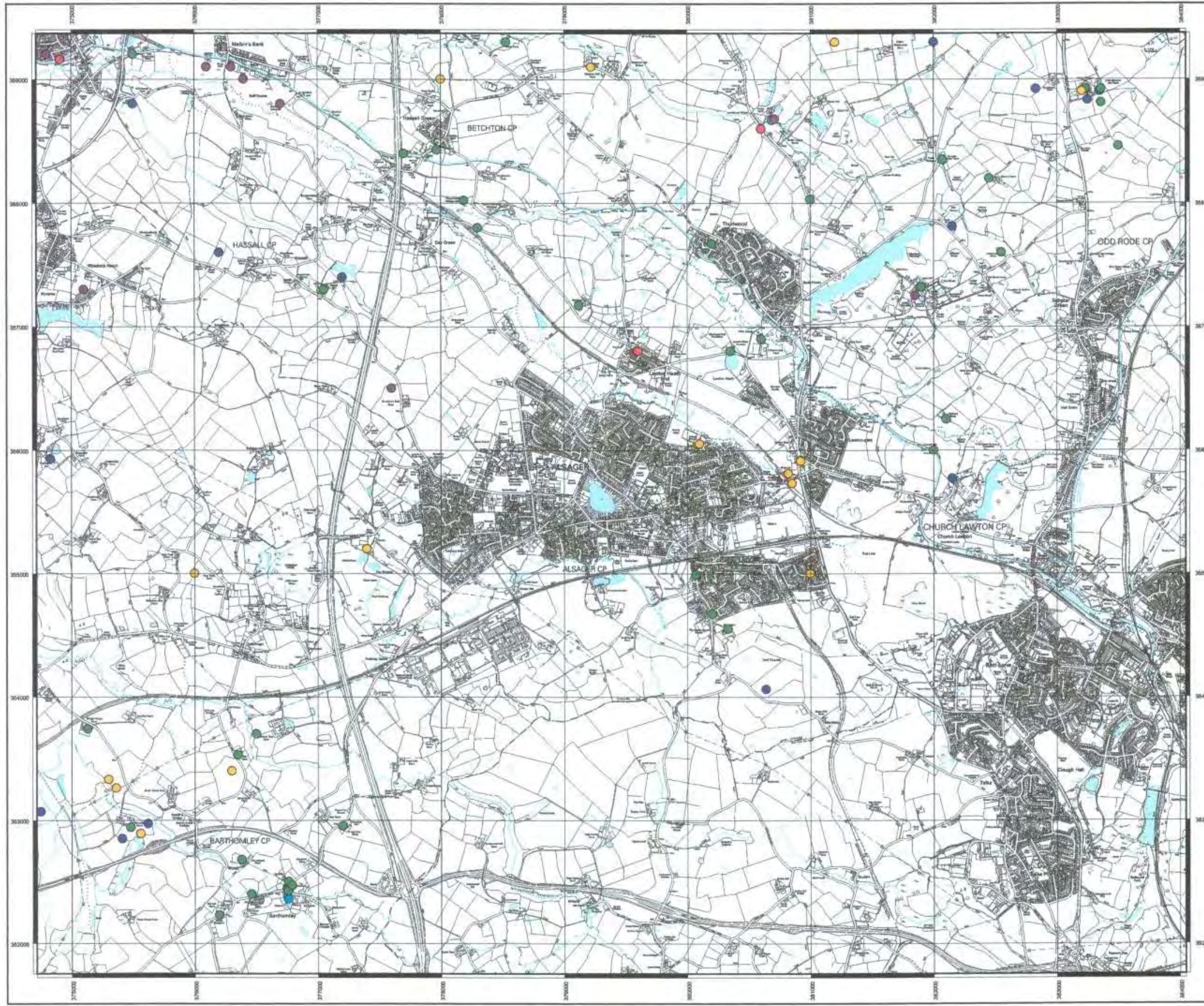


Figure 1
Alsager and
the Surrounding Area

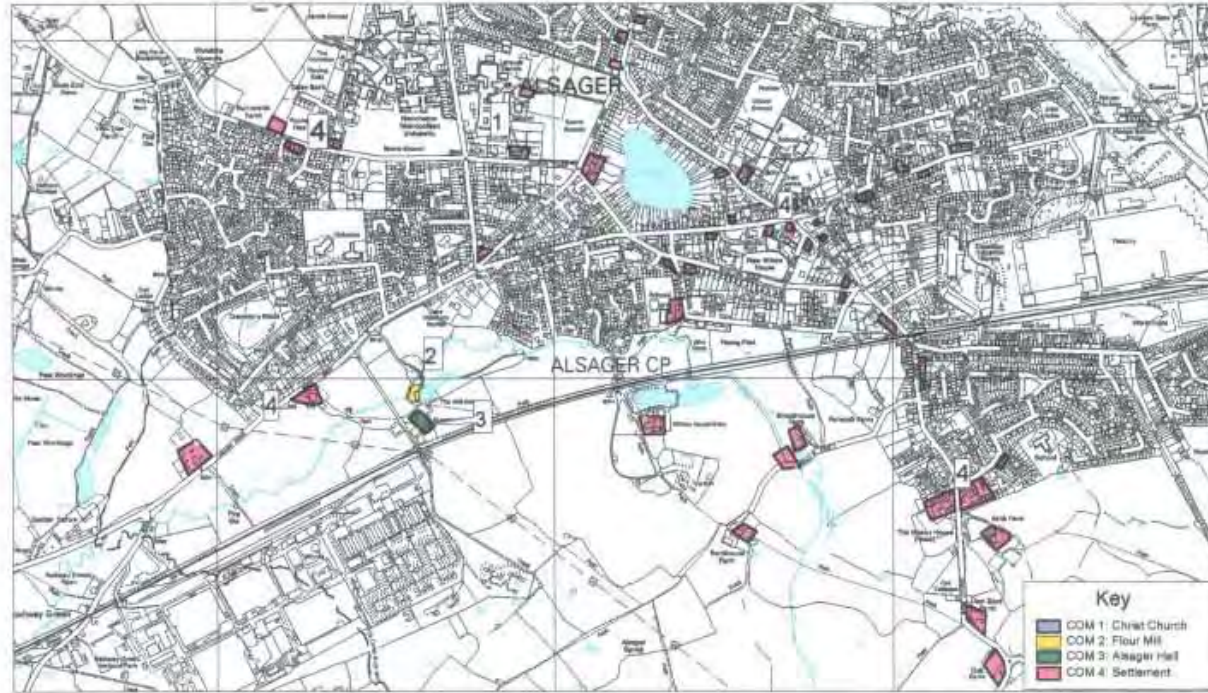
- Sites and Monuments**
- Prehistoric
 - Romano-British
 - Early Medieval
 - Medieval
 - Post Medieval
 - Modern

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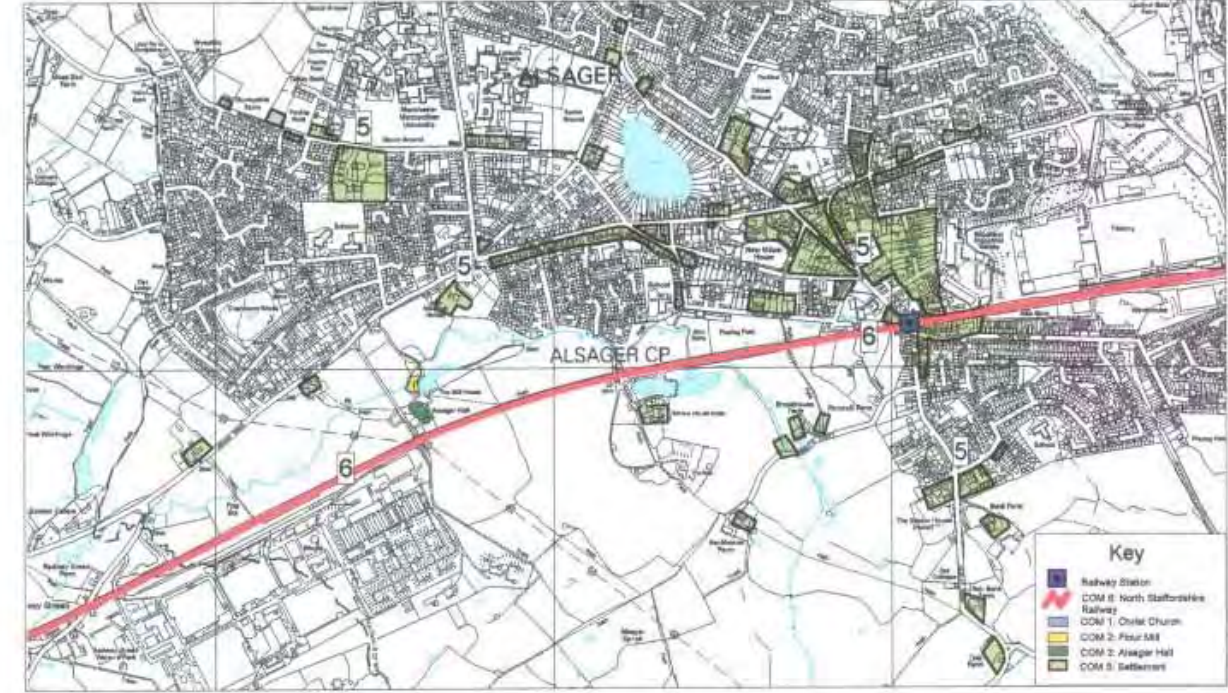
Figure 2: The Development of Alsager



Post Medieval c 1840

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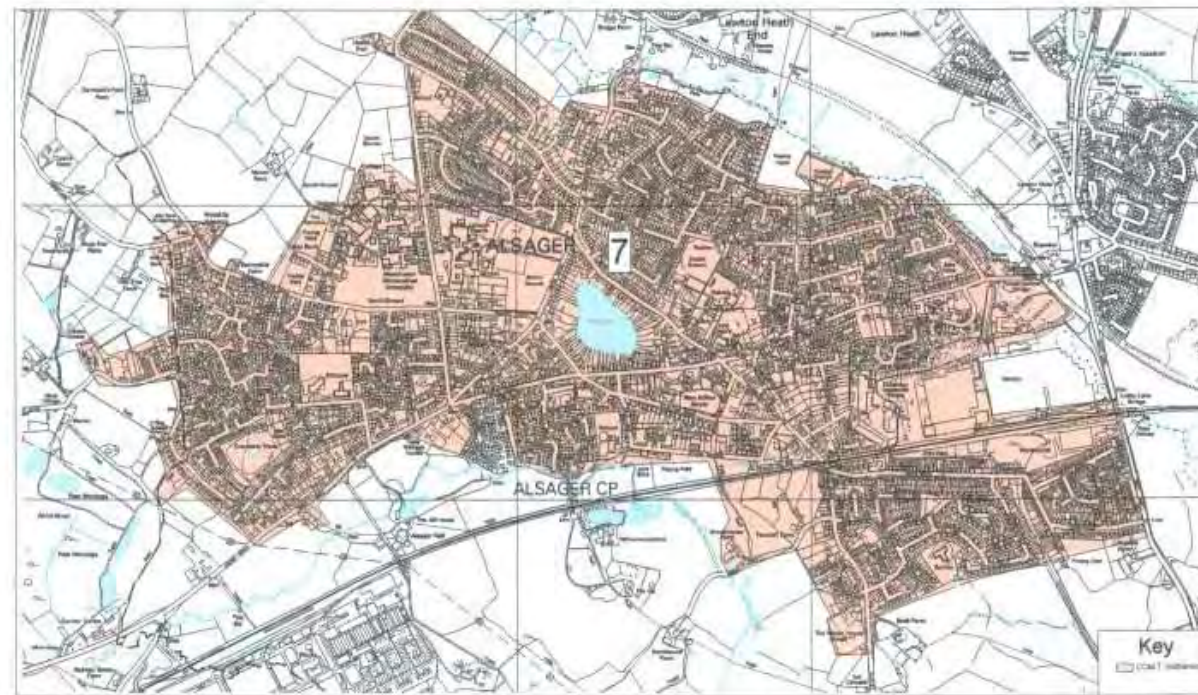
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Post Medieval c 1873-4

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1:20000



Modern c 2000

0 250 500 Metres

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