CHESHIRE HISTORIC TOWNS SURVEY

Bunbury

Archaeological Assessment

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BUNBURY

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

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1. SUMMARY

Bunbury is divided into two distinct areas, Higher Bunbury to the north which is focussed around the church of St Boniface, and Lower Bunbury to the south-west. The two are separated by the River Gowy which flows west-east through the town. In the Middle Ages Lower Bunbury appears to have been the focus of a small market and settlement, while Higher Bunbury seems to have acted as an ecclesiastical centre. It was here that Sir Hugh Calveley established a College in 1386 and Sir Ralph Egerton built a new Chantry Chapel in 1527.

1.1 Topography and Geology

The town lies c 60m AOD, 13km north-west of Nantwich in the southern area of the gently undulating Cheshire Plain. The sandstone Mid-Cheshire Ridge, including the Peckforton Hills and Beeston Castle, is 3km to the west of Bunbury.

The underlying solid geology is Northwich Halite. Drift deposits comprise boulder clay, with pockets of glacial sand and gravel and alluvium along water courses (Geological Survey of England and Wales, 1965). The soil is typical brown sand which is used for mixed arable and grass and is graded class 2 (Furness 1978, 82)

The A49 runs 0.75km west of Bunbury linking Warrington to the north and Whitchurch to the south. A minor road runs 2km west from Lower Bunbury to Beeston Castle. Other minor roads connect Bunbury with the A51 at Alpraham, the A534 at Burland Upper Green and the road north from Higher Bunbury leads to Tilstone Bank.

1.2 Administrative Unit

At Domesday, Bunbury lay within Riseton Hundred, which by 1180-1200 was called Eddisbury Hundred (Dodgson 1971, 161). The township lay within the ecclesiastical parish of Bunbury, which was one of the largest parishes in Cheshire and included twelve townships in total (Dunn 1987, 25). Today Bunbury is a Civil Parish in the Borough of Crewe and Nantwich.

1.3 Place Name

Bunbury was first recorded in the Domesday Survey (1086) as Boleberie. Other variations include Bonebury (1135-54) and Buneburi (1180-1220). The place name means Buna’s stronghold, taken from the Old English personal name Buna and burh (Dodgson 1971, 305).
2. SOURCES

2.1 Historical

The few sources that are available include Ormerod's *History of Cheshire* (1882, 253-268), which provides a narrative of Bunbury's manorial and ecclesiastical histories, and the account of the history of Bunbury edited by Latham (1986). The County Record Office (CRO) contains a collection of primary documents including deeds and parish registers, which potentially contain valuable information but are unfortunately beyond the remit of the present survey.

2.2 Cartographic

The township of Bunbury is identified on Saxton's 1577 map of Cheshire and Speed's county map of 1610. The first available map to show Bunbury at greater detail, including the local road network, is Burdett's map of 1777. The earliest maps to provide an accurate and detailed plan of the town are the tithe map of 1839 and the Ordnance Survey (OS) First Edition 6": 1 mile map surveyed in 1874.

2.3 Archaeological

Before the present assessment there were fourteen entries for Bunbury listed in the County Sites and Monuments Record (CSMR), which are depicted in Figure 1. Where finds and sites have been identified from the CSMR, the relevant reference is provided throughout this report. This assessment has generated three new records.

The only archaeological excavation known to have taken place in Bunbury was carried out in St Boniface's churchyard in 1952, from which a post medieval coffin was recovered (RCHME 1997, 12). A geophysical survey was undertaken in 1982 on the site of the Aldersey Grammar School but unfortunately the results of this appear to be unpublished (CSMR 290/3; CAB 1982, 34).

3. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SUMMARY (Figure 1)

3.1 Prehistoric

The surrounding prehistoric landscape is dominated by the Mid-Cheshire Ridge, which lies approximately 3km west of Bunbury. Here the Iron Age hillforts of Maiden Castle (CSMR 341; SAM 25690) and Beeston Castle (CSMR 1740; SAM 23641) are located. There have also been a number of prehistoric finds discovered in this area; for example, flints were discovered at the foot of the ridge 2km west of Bunbury (CSMR 313), 1.5km south of Bunbury a late Neolithic/early Bronze Age flint tool was found (CSMR 302), and 1km south-west of Bunbury an Early Bronze Age axe was discovered (CSMR 2149). Bunbury is clearly surrounded by evidence of a wealth of prehistoric activity, however the only known find of this date from the town itself is a Bronze Age stone axe-hammer which was found in 1937 and is of uncertain provenance (Harris and Thacker 1987, 90; CSMR 291).
3.2 Roman

It has been suggested that the distinctive ‘playing card’ shape of the churchyard of St Boniface’s church might indicate the location of a Roman camp (CSMR 290/1/2), but this is highly unlikely, particularly since there are no known Romano-British finds recorded from either Bunbury or a surrounding 2km radius.

3.3 Early Medieval

In Cheshire there are a number of place names, with the same ‘bury’ or ‘burh’ element, and amongst these is an important group of settlements associated with significant ecclesiastical centres. These include the sites of the mother churches of a number of large ancient parishes: Astbury, Bromborough, Bunbury, Prestbury and Wybunbury, all of which were probably important ecclesiastical and administrative centres in the early medieval period (Harris and Thacker 1987, 246).

A priest is recorded in Bunbury at Domesday and the dedication of the church to St Boniface also indicates an early medieval foundation (ibid, 246 - 269; Higham 1993, 148-9).

The Domesday Survey records that:

‘The same Robert [Fitzhugh] holds BOLEBERIE [Bunbury]. Dedol held it and was a free man. There [is] 1 hide that pays geld. The land is for 2 ploughs. In demense is 1 [plough], and a priest with 2 villeins have 1 plough. Wood 1 league long and 1 acre wide. It was worth 4s., now 13s’.

(Harris and Thacker 1987, 350).

Bunbury’s assessment in 1086 is unusual in that its value has increased by over 300%. For many settlements in Cheshire, William’s harrying of the north had a detrimental affect and many were recorded at a reduced value and as waste. Bunbury it seems had prospered.

3.4 Medieval

3.4.1 The Manor

Upon the partition of the Fitz-hugh’s Barony of Malpas, Bunbury came into the possession of the Patrick family. During the reign of King Steven (1135 - 54) the manor was divided into two moieties, one of which was held by the St Pierre family (Ormerod 1882, 253). The Patricks continued to hold the other moiety; it is documented that between 1170-80 Humphrey Patric granted some 10-15 acres at Bunbury to Robert son of Baldwin (Latham 1981, 19). In 1389 the manor was reunited by Bunbury’s most famous son, Sir Hugh Calveley, whose titles included Prince of Aquitaine, Governor of Calais and Governor of Brest and the Channel Islands (Latham 1981, 21). Calveley bought the patronage of St Boniface from David de Bunbury with the intention of making it a collegiate foundation (Richards 1947, 75).
3.4.2 Settlement

Bunbury does not appear to have attained ‘borough’ status. Neither does it appear to have had a market charter, although Crosby (1996, 48) suggests that a market had been established before 1550, and Driver (1971, 109) suggests that a market was held during the 15th century. A ‘wake’, which is the celebration held on the eve of a festival, was recorded in 1635 and this indicates that a fair was also held at Bunbury, which may have had origins in the medieval period (Latham 1981, 87).

3.4.3 Economy

Agriculture no doubt dominated the local economy and this is indicated by the 1839 tithe map and the OS First Edition 6":1 mile map (1874), which show numerous long, narrow fields with distinctive reverse S-shaped (aratral) boundaries typical of enclosed open fields. A mill was first recorded at Bunbury in 1180 (Bott 1983, 53), and between 1289-90 the mill was included as part of the St Pierre family’s manorial moiety (Ormerod 1882, 254). It is known to have stood approximately 350m to the east of St Boniface’s church (CSMR 290/5).

There are no surviving references to indicate what other trades and industries were undertaken in Bunbury during the medieval period. 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. The local economy does not appear to have been particularly successful, as indicated by the Cheshire Mize of 1405, when Bunbury paid just 6s. 8d.- one of the smallest assessments recorded (Booth 1985).

3.4.4 Religion

The Domesday reference to a priest indicates that there was a church at Bunbury in 1086, and Latham states that Norman architecture was discovered under the floor of the present church (Latham 1981, 21). Other Norman fragments are also evident in the church (Pevsner and Hubbard 1971, 120). The fabric of the church (CSMR 290/1/1) was remodelled during the late 13th or early to mid-14th centuries in Decorated style (Pevsner and Hubbard 1971, 119). In 1386 Sir Hugh Calveley established a College or Chantry for one master and six chaplains to celebrate mass for the souls of the King, himself and their ancestors. He also commenced repairs to the church and probably its enlargement (Ormerod 1882, 256). A chapel was constructed in the south chancel c1527 by Sir Ralph Egerton, which completed the Perpendicular remodelling of the church (Pevsner and Hubbard 1971, 119). The church retains a number of monuments of the medieval period, including 13th century coffin lids, and a number of 13th to 15th century effigies, including that of Sir Hugh Calveley (Pevsner and Hubbard 1971, 120).

In the mid-19th century it was reported that a moat and building foundations were visible approximately 180m to the north-west of the church, which is the suggested location of Calveley’s College (Ormerod 1882, 259; CSMR 290/2/1). South of the church is the Chantry House, built in 1527 for two priests attached to the Ridley Chapel of Bunbury church (CAB 1982, 34). This was later used as a school and is now a private residence, listed Grade II* (CSMR 290/2/2).
3.4.5 The Surrounding Area

There are numerous medieval sites and monuments in the surrounding area. These include Beeston Castle to the west and a number of moated sites, for example Southley Manor moated manor house, 1km north-east of Bunbury (CSMR 300/1; SAM 30373). There is also the medieval shrunken or shifted settlement of Spurstow, 1.5km south-west of Bunbury (CSMR 301; SAM 30388).

3.5 Post Medieval

3.5.1 Civil War

On 23 December 1641 ‘A Treaty of Pacification’ was signed at Bunbury, designed to halt the Civil War in Cheshire, although, this was soon disregarded. Most of the military action in the area was centred upon Beeston Castle but one small skirmish took place at Bunbury, when in 1643 a party of Royalists ‘fired’ the church, and on another occasion a house in the town was attacked (Latham 1981, 31).

3.6.2 The Manor

The whole of the manor passed to the Earl of Dysart and in 1850 this was possessed by John Tollemache Esq MP, who was the principle landowner and lord of the manor (Bagshaw, 1850, 596).

3.6.3 Settlement

There are only a small number of topographical descriptions of Bunbury that pre-date the 19th century. These include a reference from 1659 when the Nantwich sessions ordered the churchwardens to construct a house on Bunbury Common, and Bishop Porteous, who visited Bunbury in 1779, recorded that there were 600 houses and 3000 inhabitants in the parish, although these figures are thought to be an exaggeration (Latham 1981, 33-8).

The rights to the revenues of the College were sold in 1575-6 to Thomas Aldersey, a London haberdasher. In 1593 Aldersey endowed a school with ‘£20 per annum, one house, and some land to be given to a schoolmaster’(Ormerod 1882, 258). The school was administered by the Guild of Haberdashers, and was located in the Egerton Chantry priests house. It was replaced c 1874 by Bunbury Aldersey School on School Lane (DoE 1984, 12) and in 1830 a National School for girls and infants was opened in College Lane (Kelly’s, 1892, 171).

In 1635 Edward Burghall recorded that the residents of Bunbury watched ‘bear baiting’ under the south side of the church wall ‘...at the time of their wakes’ (Latham 1981, 87); and Ormerod notes that the Bunbury wake was held on a large heath (presumably Bunbury Heath) and was one of the most noted in Cheshire. The delights on offer were unrecorded although ‘..riot and dissipation are always the order of the day’ (Ormerod 1882, 255).
3.6.4 Economy

In 1630 there were seven inns in Bunbury (MacGregor 1992, 38). This relatively high figure may have been a factor in the Court of Great Session’s requirement of 1638 for ‘the suppression of superfluous alehouses in Bunbury’ (Latham 1981, 80). In 1797 an innkeeper named Thomas Walker was recorded, as was the Nag’s Head public house. The Dysart Arms and the Cheese public houses were also recorded in 1822 (MacGregor 1992, 41).

In 1605 the Bunbury Register recorded the death of Elizabeth Rowlinson whilst she was ‘grinding at the mill’. A watermill is shown on Burdett’s map of 1775 (CSMR 290/5), but by 1839 only a millhouse, pond and meadow are recorded in a rental document. However, in 1850 the structure was rebuilt using local brick and in 1890 the mill was owned by the Peckforton Estate and continued in use until 1960 (Latham 1981, 70). By the mid-19th century the range of trades undertaken in Bunbury included five boot and shoe makers, twelve farmers, five grocers and drapers, two shopkeepers and three tailors (Bagshaw 1850, 596).

3.6.5 Religion

At the Dissolution, the College consisted of a Warden, six Chaplains and two Choristers, and the Egerton Chantry was served by two Priests. The value of the College was estimated at £49 10s 8d, and the Chantry’s value was estimated at £12 2s (Ormerod 1882, 257). In 1547-8 the College was dissolved, with its revenues passing to the Crown. The tithes were in lease until 1575, when Thomas Aldersley purchased the rectory and advowson, and c 1592 granted a lease of the same to his brother for 500 years at £130 yearly. The Aldersley lineage continued to hold the revenues of the church, the charity created by Thomas Aldersley in 1575 producing £86 13s 4d for the clergy in 1892. The patronage of this was granted to the Haberdasher’s Company of London (Kelly’s 1892, 171).

The church of St Boniface underwent remodelling at the beginning of the 16th century which was incomplete by the time of the Dissolution. The plan was unaltered, with work concentrated on the nave and the aisles (Richards, 1947, 76). Visitation articles recorded between 1554-7 show that the windows were in need of re-glazing, and that the churchyard was neglected and ‘overrun with swine and other animals’ (Latham 1981, 24). Further damage was experienced when in 1775 the east end of the Chancel was blown down in a great wind. In 1861 the church underwent restoration only to be severely damaged in 1940 when a landmine exploded to the north-east corner of the church, smashing the windows on the north and east sides and de-stabilising the roof. Until the bomb disaster, the churchyard was bordered on its northern side with neat cottages; unfortunately, these also suffered severe damage with a number reduced to a mass of rubble (Richards, 1947, 75, 78).

In 1590, 23 residents of Bunbury were Catholic recusants, a figure rising to 37 in 1593 but dwindling to approximately six by 1789 (Latham 1981, 38).

John Wesley was a frequent visitor to the town, worshipping in St Boniface’s church from 1749. In 1774 a group of nonconformists were preaching in the church but
chose to move to a house in Alpraham the following year. A Wesleyan Methodist chapel was built in Bunbury in 1806, behind the present Nook Cottage and Bryn Bank, whilst the smithy was the location for services held by the Primitive Methodists from 1807, before moving to their chapel on College Lane in 1876. The Trinity Methodist chapel was built on Bunbury Lane in 1869 (Latham 1981, 36).

3.6.6 Population

The population in 1664 has been estimated as 255 (MacGregor 1992, 38). From 1801 onwards population data is available from census returns printed 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.

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3.6.7 Transport and Communications

The road connecting Chester and Nantwich, which runs north of Bunbury, was turnpiked in 1743. The Beeston-Whitchurch road to the west of Bunbury was turnpiked in 1830 (Harrison 1886, 81).

The Chester Canal, which passes approximately 2km north of Bunbury, was the first section of the Shropshire Union Canal to be built, and this was constructed between 1772-1779, connecting Chester and Nantwich (Owen 1982, 15).

The Chester to Crewe railway line was opened in 1840 and passed to the north of Bunbury (Greville 1954, 135). The nearest railway station was located at Beeston Brook.

3.6.8 The Surrounding Area

There are a number of surviving 17th century cottages and farmhouses in the surrounding area including, for example, Brook Farmhouse 2km to the north-west (CSMR 294/1) and a terrace of three cottages to the north-east, close to Bunbury Locks (CSMR 293). To the north of Bunbury are sites associated with the Shropshire Union Canal, for example, the Bunbury Locks – a stair of two locks built in 1775-9 (CSMR 298/1/2; SAM 88).
4. PLAN COMPONENTS (Figure 2)

The town has been divided into 13 components (prefixed by COM). These have been tentatively sub-divided by period, although there is a need for a great deal of further work to define the date of these plan 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 these should be treated as a model against which future evidence should be tested.

Plan components commence with the early medieval period, for which insufficient evidence is available to produce a plan of the settlement at this time. However, the likely site of the early medieval church can be suggested. The suggestion that the churchyard has Roman origins because of its ‘playing card’ shape is misleading, particularly since there are no known Roman sites or finds within a 2km radius of Bunbury. Instead, the churchyard appears to be the product of medieval planning (see below).

EARLY MEDIEVAL AD 540-1066 (Figure 2)

COM 1 - Minster

MEDIEVAL c 1066-1540 (Figure 2)

COM 2 - St Boniface’s Church
COM 3 - College of Canons
COM 4 - Chantry Priests’ House
COM 5 - Tenements, west of St Boniface
COM 6 - Bunbury Mill
COM 7 - Market Place
COM 8 - Tenements, Bunbury Lane
COM 9 - Tenements, Vicarage Lane (east)
COM 10 - Tenements, Vicarage Lane (west)
COM 11 - ? Possible Tenements, Vicarage Lane

POST MEDIEVAL c 1540-1875 (Figure 2)

COM 12 - Settlement

MODERN c.2000 (Figure 2)

COM 13 - Settlement

4.1 Early Medieval (Figure 2)

COM 1 identifies the location of the early medieval church, the nature and extent of which is little understood. The place name evidence, the references made at Domesday and the dedication to St Boniface all indicate an important church or minster that administered to a large parish. Minsters were centres of population in their own right and their function as meeting places and centres for the collection of

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dues often stimulated local commercial activity (Blair 1988, 47-8). However, the nature and extent of any settlement at this time is unknown. It is likely that both early medieval and medieval settlement was of a dispersed nature.

### 4.2 Medieval (Figure 2)

Precisely when the churchyard of St Boniface (COM 2) was demarcated is unknown but it appears to overlie the former road pattern of Higher Bunbury. The alignment of the roads that apparently ran east-west through Higher Bunbury and north-south through Higher Bunbury, both appear to have been diverted around the edges of the churchyard rather than continuing along their former routes through it. It seems most likely that when Sir Hugh Calveley established a College in the late 14th century, the surrounding area also underwent change. For example, as well as the establishment of the College, St Boniface is known to have undergone renovations and possibly extension. Calveley, it seems, was creating an ecclesiastical centre and it seems logical that he should make St Boniface its focus.

COM 3 outlines the approximate area within which the residence of the College of Cannons may have been sited. Ormerod (1882, 259) suggests that the residence, which is described as a moated enclosure, lay 200 yards north-west of the church where the outline of the moat could be traced, as could the situation of buildings and walls by the 'inequalities of the surface'. However, St Boniface was no doubt the focus for secular as well as ecclesiastical activity and the surrounding roads may well have been lined by medieval tenements. Therefore, COM 3 and COM 5 may both include areas of medieval settlement; indeed a small number of buildings are identified alongside the road to the north and west of St Boniface’s churchyard on Burdett’s map of 1777 and this pattern may well pre-date the post medieval period. Settlement may have been cleared to make way for the medieval College and the extended churchyard.

To the south of the church of St Boniface is the Chantry House (COM 4), which was built in 1527 to house the two priests of Sir Ralph Egerton’s chapel. After the Dissolution of the Chantry in 1575-6, the rights to it were eventually acquired by Thomas Aldersey, who in 1593 endowed a Grammar School that used the Chantry House as the school house. Also included in this component are earthworks that have been identified to the east of the Chantry House, which may well be the foundations of buildings associated with the building's use as a Chantry House or as a school house.

A mill (COM 6) was recorded at Bunbury in 1180 (Bott 1983, 53). This appears to have stood on the same site as that of the modern mill, which was rebuilt in 1850 and used periodically until 1960 (Latham 1981, 70).

It appears that Bunbury comprised two discrete areas, an ecclesiastical area at Higher Bunbury, and a domestic settlement at Lower Bunbury. It is possible that this demarcation was intentional; indeed, the creation of the 14th century College may well have resulted in the shifting of secular settlement from Higher to Lower Bunbury, where most of the medieval settlement and the market place appear to have been located. Although there was no formal market recorded at Bunbury, COM 7 identifies a triangular area at Lower Bunbury which is the likely location of a market.
area at the junction of Vicarage Lane, Bunbury Lane and School Lane. The tithe map of 1839 identifies a ‘Lock Up House’ in this area and town lock ups were frequently located in the vicinity of the market cross or hall (Friar 1991, 238).

COM 8 outlines an area of potential medieval settlement west of Bunbury Lane where tenements have an irregular plan, while COM 9 identifies a more regular area of medieval tenements to the east of Bunbury Lane, as does COM 10 to the west of Vicarage Lane. Here a small number of property boundaries survive that appear to respect the pattern of narrow tenements, with buildings lining the street frontage and crofts located behind. However, this layout is better appreciated on the OS First Edition 6":1 mile map surveyed in 1874. The true extent of medieval settlement at Bunbury is unknown, indeed it is possible that COM 11 represents an area of shrunken medieval settlement. This is very much conjectural, based upon surviving boundaries which appear to delineate an area of former settlement that may have been an extension of COMs 9 and 10. However, the true extent of this, or even whether it was populated, is unknown and will have to be tested against future evidence.

4.3 Post Medieval (Figure 2)

COM 12 identifies the extent of Bunbury c 1875. In Lower Bunbury there is little evidence of settlement expansion. Post medieval development includes the construction of the Rectory, the Parsonage and the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel on Bunbury Lane. At Higher Bunbury settlement has spread south along Wyche Road and north along College Lane.

4.1 Modern (Figure 2)

Modern development (COM 13) has mainly occurred in the area of Lower Bunbury, spreading to the south along Bunbury Lane and west along School Lane. Development has also taken place to the north-east of St Boniface on Church Row. The OS First Edition map of 1875 depicts the road north of St Boniface running around the north-east corner of the churchyard. This was altered in the mid-20th century and an area of buildings removed to make way for a straighter section of Bowe’s Gate Road.

5. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

5.1 Above-Ground Remains

There are a number of buildings in the town that reflect the historic character of the settlement. There are sixteen listed buildings, including the church of St Boniface, which is Grade I and the Chantry House which is Grade II*, the remainder being Grade II. The cores of Lower and Higher Bunbury are designated as Conservation Areas, the extent of which are similar to that of the settlement c 1875. Also, much of the street pattern at Higher and Lower Bunbury probably dates back to the medieval period, if not earlier. Of particular interest is the street pattern surrounding St Boniface which, prior to the realignment of Bowe’s Gate Road, appears to have been a product of 14th century town planning.
5.2 Below-Ground Remains

The lack of archaeological work carried out in Bunbury means that the survival and extent of archaeological deposits have not been assessed. However, given that there has been little development in the historic cores, deposits will potentially be undisturbed.

6. PRIORITIES FOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK

6.1 General

The study of Bunbury 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 Bunbury would fit into a number of these national priorities, particularly the following processes of change:

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

6.2 Early Medieval

- Establish the nature and extent of settlement during the early medieval period.
- Establish whether there was a Saxon Minster, the location and extent of this and its relationship with any settlement.

6.3 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 foundation of the medieval church, examine phases of expansion and contraction.
- Examine evidence for medieval trade and industry.
- Establish the location, nature and extent of the College.
- Examine the Chantry House and the nature and extent of any associated buildings.

6.4 Post Medieval

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

*Cheshire Historic Towns Survey*  
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8 ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: - Bunbury and the Surrounding Area
Figure 2: - The Development of Bunbury