CHESHIRE HISTORIC TOWNS SURVEY

Wybunbury

Archaeological Assessment

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Mike Shaw & Jo Clark

1. SUMMARY

The small township of Wybunbury dates back to the early medieval period when it was the site of a Saxon church, potentially even a Minster. The Church of St Chad's continued to be an important centre for worship during the medieval period, but unfortunately due to unstable foundations only the tower of the church still stands. Wybunbury was never a commercial success, it is likely that there was a small market held there in the medieval period, but the close proximity to Nantwich no doubt stifled the its prosperity.

1.1 Topography and Geology

Wybunbury lies at around 60m AOD, 5km south-east of Nantwich, close to the Staffordshire border. It is surrounded by gently undulating pastoral land. The underlying solid geology comprises Wilksley Halite Formation Mercian Mudstone, above which are glaciofluvial deposits (British Geological Survey, 1994). The soils developed on these deposits are largely brown sands and brown earths (Furness 1979, 73-82), which are easily worked, fertile if nutrient and organic matter levels are maintained and can grow a wide range of crops. They are graded as Class 2 – 3 (ibid).

Wybunbury Moss and Wybunbury Mere are located to the north and east of the town respectively. They both form part of the county's surviving wetlands, and were studied as part of the Cheshire Wetlands Survey (Leah et al 1997). Wybunbury Moss is a National Nature Reserve.

Wybunbury is situated on a minor road between Nantwich and Newcastle-under-Lyme, which was potentially once of importance as a major route between Chester and London. The B5071 runs along the Main Road in Wybunbury and then north to Crewe. The A52 runs 1km to the north of Wybunbury and the A51 1km to the south. Wybunbury Brook runs to the south of the town.

1.2 Administrative Unit

The township of Wybunbury lay within Nantwich Hundred, the Deanery of Nantwich and the large ecclesiastical parish of Wybunbury, which included all or part of seventeen other townships. The ancient parish of Wybunbury was even more extensive, and included the parishes of Audlem, Coppenhall, Wistaston and possibly Baddiley (Dunn 1987, 34). Today, Wybunbury is a Civil Parish in the Borough of Crewe and Nantwich.

1.3 Place Name

Wybunbury is first recorded at Domesday as *Wimeberie*; it also occurs as *Wybbunberi* (1199-1216), *Webbenburi* (1358) and *Winbury* (1646). The place name translates as Wigbeorn's stronghold or manor house from '*Wigbeorn*' and '*burh*' (Dodgson, 1971, 81).

2   SOURCES

2.1   Historical

The few available secondary sources include a number of articles written by Dorothy Sylvester about the township's field system (Sylvester, 1949, 1956, 1958) and Ormerod's *History of Cheshire* (1882, 253 - 268) which provides details of Wybunbury's manorial and ecclesiastical histories. Other useful sources include the Cheshire Place Names survey (Dodgson 1971) and 19th-century directories.

There are few primary sources relating to Wybunbury available in the County Record Office (CRO). These are predominantly 17th-century in date, although there is one reference to a grant made in 1464. The village was a possession of the Bishops of Coventry and Lichfield, for much of its history and it is clear that there are documents relating to Wybunbury amongst the diocesan records. The *Great Register of Lichfield Cathedral* (Savage ed 1924) and a late 13th-century survey in the Anglesey Papers (William Salt Library, Stafford) may be of particular value, but time has not allowed consultation of either document. However, there is a transcription of a survey of Wybunbury dated 1621, along with extracts of court rolls, which have been transcribed by Mr Sam Wood and these have provided valuable information (CSMR 183).

2.2   Cartographic

Wybunbury is marked on Saxton's map of 1577 and Speed's map of 1611. The town also appears on Ogilby's 1675 map of the road from London to Holyhead, although the main road passes to the south of the town rather than running through it. Burdett's county map of 1777 is the first to show an outline plan of the village but the only plan to show the township in detail prior to the Ordnance Survey (OS) First Edition 6":1 mile map (surveyed 1875-6) is the tithe map of 1846.

2.3   Archaeological

Before the present assessment there were nine entries recorded within the settlement of Wybunbury in the County Sites and Monuments Record (CSMR), including two moated sites and two listed buildings (see Figure 1). Where sites and finds have been identified from the CSMR, the relevant reference is provided throughout this report. The present assessment has identified three new sites.

Just two watching briefs are known to have taken place in Wybunbury. Small scale work in the centre of the village, on a site on the south side of Main Road failed to reveal any features dating earlier than the 19th century (CSMR 183; Gifford and Partners, 1994). There are two moated sites to the east of Wybunbury and a pipeline was the subject of a watching brief as it skirted the southerly of the two. This revealed a possible bank outside the moat, a channel through the bank and a

possible earlier soil horizon and later flood deposits (CSMR 183/2; Gifford and Partners, 1993).

3. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SUMMARY

3.1 Prehistoric

There are no known prehistoric sites or finds in Wybunbury and just one find is known from the immediately surrounding area. A Mesolithic black chert flake blade, was discovered 0.5km north of the town near Wybunbury Moss (CSMR 2690).

3.2 Roman

There are no known sites or finds of this period recorded within the town. However, there is evidence of Roman activity in the surrounding landscape. This was dominated by Nantwich, which lies 5km to the north-west and was an important salt-making centre from the Roman period onwards. By the medieval period Nantwich was the second most important town in Cheshire after Chester. Lead salt pans, dating to the Roman period, have also been recovered from Shavington, 2km north of Wybunbury (CSMR 2400). A number of Roman finds have been discovered immediately to the west of Wybunbury, including a bronze *dupondius* coin of Trajan minted in AD 116, a 2nd century trumpet brooch, a bronze pin and a silver coated iron fitting (CSMR 2635/0/1-4). Also 0.5km east of Wybunbury a hoard of *denarii* of Faustina II, dated to AD 176 was discovered, along with two unidentified Roman bronze coins and a bronze dolphin-type fibula datable to the 1st/2nd century AD (CSMR 182).

3.3 Early Medieval

Wybunbury's large parish, the recording of a priest in the Domesday Survey, the *bury* element in the place name (suggesting a possible fortified site), and the dedication of the church to St Chad are all indicators of a special status for Wybunbury in the early medieval period. Higham has suggested that the reference to fortifications in the place name may stem from an ancient grant of royal renders, and the enclosed court to which they were paid (1993, 133).

The Domesday Survey records that:

The same bishop holds Wimeberie and held it T.R.E. and now William holds it of him. There [is] ½ hide that pays geld. The land is for 2 ploughs. There [are] 1 priest and 2 villeins and 2 bordars with 1 plough. There [is] wood ½ league long and as much wide and there [are] 2 hays. T.R.E. it was worth 64d, now 4s. It was waste. (Harris and Thacker 1987, 344).

3.4 Medieval

3.4.1 The Manor

The Bishop of Lichfield held Wybunbury at Domesday, and Ormerod suggests that the William who held the manor of the Bishop was William Malbank (1882, 482), one

of the greatest of Cheshire's tenants at Domesday (VCH, 1987, 306). In the early 13th century, deeds record that Robert de Praers gave the village of Wybunbury to his son Richard the Clerk, and it is about this time that a family assumed the local name of Wybunbury, probably under-tenants of the Praers family. Whatever rights the Praers had over the church of St Chad's were terminated in 1276-7, when Robert de Praers remitted his right to the manor and church of Wybunbury to the Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield (Ormerod, 1882,483). The church became prebendal (a share of the church revenues were allowed to the officiating clergymen), and the patronage remained in the possession of the Diocese of Lichfield until the first part of the 19th century, when it was transferred to the Diocese of Chester (Richards 1947, 373).

The Bishop of Lichfield had retained an interest in the township, and in 1240 Pope Gregory authorised him to retain the church of Wybunbury for his own use, as the Bishop had to pass that way in the performance of his diocesan duties and 'around Stafford and Chester there are woody tracts infested by sons of perdition who without the fear of God molest travellers'(Sylvester 1956, 9-10). Around the same time the Bishop bought land said to be in the neighbouring vill of Hough, but perhaps in Wybunbury, including a meadow 'either to leave it throughout the year or to make messuages thereon…' and a '...site for building a mill' (ibid).

3.4.2 Settlement

Two moated sites lie on the periphery of the village. One to the east (CSMR 183/3; SAM 13438) is named 'Hall Bank' on the 1846 tithe award and accordingly may be the site of the medieval manor house. The other (CSMR 183/2; SAM 13439), to the south-east of the village, is recorded as glebe land in 1846 and may have been the site of the medieval rectory.

Tomwall well, recorded as tam wall in the 1846 tithe award, to the west of the village may have supplied the settlement's water. Dodgson suggests that Tamwall means Town well (Dodgson 1971, 81).

3.4.3 Economy

The Tithe map of 1846 shows fields with a distinctive reverse S-shape curve, typical of former open fields and records a number of fields with the element Townfield immediately north-west of Wybunbury moss. Townfield is a name widely used in Cheshire for the community's principal shared field (White 1995, 19).

A survey of the estates of the Bishop of Lichfield in 1298 records a water mill in the township (Colbert 1994,9). By 1621 the lord's mill was said to be in decay (Survey of 1621, CSMR 183). The location of the mill is unknown, although the meadows by the river to the south of the village are named 'Mill Meadow' in 1846 in the tithe award. A water mill is known to have been constructed in 1241 at Hough Mill, 0.5km south-east of Wybunbury (CSMR 183/6; Bott 1983,55).

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 Wybunbury paid 33s 4d (Booth 1985), more than the

immediately surrounding townships of Walgherton (26s 6d) and The Hough (20s), and equal to that paid by Stapleton, but only a fraction of the amount paid by Nantwich (£7 3s) or even the small market town of Audlem (66s 8d).

3.4.4 Religion

There was a priest and doubtless a church at Wybunbury at the time of Domesday. The church of St Chad's is known to have been built upon the site of an earlier one, as demonstrated in 1893 during a period of rebuilding, when a Norman architectural fragment was discovered (Richards 1947, 373).

The church of St Chad's sits on a low, unstable sandy ridge and because of this the church was rebuilt five times before being finally demolished in 1977 (Colbert 1994, 3). It was substantially altered in 1595 and again in 1790, then in 1836 the body of the church was rebuilt, only to be demolished and rebuilt again in 1893. Problems persisted, and it was decided to shorten the nave and rebuild the chancel, which was done in the first half of the 20th century (Richards 1947, 374). Unfortunately, this proved to be another short term measure. All that now survives is the 15th-century tower, which itself has a history of leaning and being straightened, the last correction being made in 1989 (Colbert 1994, 3). The tower is listed Grade II* (DoE 1986, 10). It is believed that the church's problem stems from a combination of inadequate foundations and disturbance caused by active springs (Richards 1947, 374). The springs may however, have been an important factor in the siting of the early medieval church.

A hospital of the Holy Cross and St George is recorded at Wybunbury in 1464. It was dissolved in the 16th century (CSMR 183/4; Knowles and Hadcock 1971, 336, 406). The graveyard of St Chads is identified as 'Hospital Bank' in the tithe award of 1846 and the OS First Edition 6 inch:1 mile map (surveyed 1875-6), and this may well indicate the location of the Hospital.

Reference is made to a Hermitage at Wybunbury in a lease of the Bishop of Lichfield in 1424, when two gardens were transferred to Nicholas Baker the hermit for ninety years, on condition that they are held by 'fit priests or honest hermits' (Bagshaw 1850, 397;CSMR 183/5). The location of the hermitage is unknown.

3.4.5 The Surrounding Landscape

There are a number of medieval moated sites in the surrounding area, including Stapeley Hall, moated manor house (CSMR 193) which lies 2km to the west of Wynbunbury.

3.5   Post Medieval

3.5.1 The Manor

The manor of Wybunbury remained in the hands of the Bishops of Coventry and Lichfield until the 19th century, when it was transferred to the newly-formed see of Chester (Richards 1947, 373).

3.5.2 Settlement

Squatting is referred to in the survey of 1621, 'Thomas Sproston...hath inclosed a part of the commones in Wybunbury to the value of one acre and more and hath a house built upon the same' (CSMR 183).

There were five inns in Wybunbury in the mid-18th century, a relatively large number, which suggests that the town had a commercial function, perhaps as a stopover point on the coaching route between London and Chester (MacGregor 1992).

Unusually, by 1850 there were four schools in the village, a Free School built in the 18th century in the churchyard, Delves Charity School opened in 1822 and separate Boy's and Girl's Endowed Schools (Bagshaw 1850, 397).

3.5.3 Economy

A survey of 1621 records two shops and a mill, and 'Sir Thomas Smych hath erected a mill of his own and so by the decay of the Lord's mill hath drawn all the grist to his own mill' (CSMR 183). By 1850 there were a small number of trades and professions present in Wybunbury including three inns, five shopkeepers, a woollen draper, a tailor, a shoemaker and three butchers (Bagshaw 1850, 397). A property at the southern end of the village adjacent to the Red Lion Inn is recorded as a shop in the 1846 Tithe Award, which also records a Brick Field and a Brick Kiln Field in the parish.

3.5.4 Religion

A Wesleyan Methodist Chapel is located midway along the northern side of the Main Road. It is a fine brick building with a datestone of 1864. However, this must be a rebuilding, as a chapel is shown here on the tithe map of 1846, and Bagshaw's Directory records a chapel of 1817.

3.5.5 Population

The population in 1664 has been estimated as 250 (MacGregor 1992). From 1801 population data is 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	278	**1901**	516
1811	351	**1911**	599
1821	429	**1921**	671
1831	445	**1931**	644
1841	529	**1951**	752
1851	530	**1961**	747
1861	567	**1971**	794
1871	616	**1981**	1200
1881	595	**1991**	1280
1891	554		

3.5.6 Transport and communications

The major Chester-London Road (A51) passes through Walgherton, 1km south of Wybunbury. Given the number of inns in Wybunbury and the anxiety of the Bishops to retain a resting place here, it may be suspected that the route originally passed through Wybunbury rather than Walgherton. Perhaps the turnpiking of the route through Walgherton in 1728 (Harrison 1886) led to the diversion of the route. Nevertheless, some traffic continued to pass through Wybunbury, as recorded by Thomas Pennant who travelled through the town in 1790 (Pennant 1811).

3.5.7 The Surrounding Area

There are a number of surviving 17th-century cottages and farmhouses in the area. These include Haymoorgreen Farmhouse 2km northwest which is a Grade II listed building (CSMR 193/3), Yewtree Farmhouse at Stapeley 1.5km west, also a Grade II listed building (CSMR 193/2), and Hough Hall 1.5km northeast (CSMR 206/1), which is listed Grade II*.

4   PLAN COMPONENTS (Figure 2)

The settlement has been divided into 15 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. The primary documentation for Wybunbury has been little studied and there has been little archaeological work in the settled area. Hence any analysis of its likely history relies largely on map evidence and topographical inference. So whilst 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.

Find spots indicate that there was Roman activity in the surrounding area but none has been discovered in the town itself. However, it might be speculated that there may have been a small Roman settlement within the immediate vicinity of Wybunbury, perhaps lying on a minor Roman road that connected Nantwich and Newcastle-under-Lyme. This theory remains to be tested against further evidence and the list of components therefore commences with the early medieval Period.

Early Medieval c 540AD-1066 (Figure 2)

COM 1   - Minster?

Medieval c 1066-1540 (Figure 2)

COM 2   - St Chad's Church
COM 3   - Hospital of Holy Cross and St George?
COM 4   - Market Place?
COM 5   - Moated Manor House?

COM 6 - Moated Rectory?
COM 7 - Tenements, north of Main Road
COM 8 - Tenements, north of Main Road
COM 9 - ?Tenements, north of Main Road
COM 10 - Tenements, south of Main Road
COM 11 - Tenements, south of Main Road
COM 12 - Tenements, south of Main Road

Post Medieval c 1875 (Figure 2)

COM 13 - Settlement

Modern c 2000 (Figure 2)

COM 14 - Settlement

4.1   Early Medieval (Figure 2)

St Chad's church stands on a prominent mound (**COM 1**) which is likely to have been the original core of the settlement. Field inspection suggests that the mound, which measures c1.5ha continues west under the Swan Inn. At its most prominent the mound stands approximately 4m higher than the surrounding area. It is likely that St Chad's church originated as a Minster church for the surrounding area while, the later parochial structure, with Wybunbury head of a large parish, suggests that the town was a place of some importance in the early medieval period; perhaps, as Higham suggests (1993,133), a royal estate centre later granted to the Bishop of Lichfield.

The Main Road through Wybunbury bends a number of times as it runs through the settlement. It is possible, however, that there was originally a straighter route that ran along the same route as the Back Lane to the north of the village, passing by the town well and entering the settlement from the north. The Main Road may therefore, have been the product of medieval town planning, so that as new tenements were laid out, a route to them was created. The present route may have been created when the bridge over Wybunbury Brook was established, which would have realigned an earlier route. This realignment may have taken place after the construction of the moated site at Hall Bank **COM 5,** thereby moving traffic away from its entrance. There is some evidence that around the middle of the 13th century the Bishops of Coventry and Lichfield encouraged growth in Wybunbury and/or neighbouring Hough (see 3.5.2 above) and this may have provided a suitable context for the building of a crossing and the realignment of the street. Alternatively a more simple explanation might be that this was just a back lane of medieval date, which allowed access from the tenement plots on Main Road to the open fields that lay beyond.

4.2   Medieval (Figure 2)

The site of the medieval church ((CSMR 183/1; SAM 32564) and churchyard of St Chad's is identified as **COM 2,** although all that remains of the church is the 15th century tower. Directly south of the churchyard is an area identified as 'Hospital

Bank' (**COM 3**) in the tithe award of 1846, and is presumably the site of the medieval hospital. Its location adjacent to the churchyard is not unusual and it was perhaps built originally on church land.

Although no formal market is recorded for Wybunbury, a small area by the Swan Inn and in front of the church (**COM 4**) has been identified, which may have been used as a market place, perhaps in conjunction with the churchyard. The relatively large area of the settlement, the presence of a hospital, and the dense nature of settlement around the church supports this idea of low level marketing, which may have been based on its role as an ecclesiastical centre for the surrounding area and as a stopover point from Chester to London.

The moated site known as Hall Bank (**COM 5**) has been identified as the possible location of the medieval manor house and the moated site to the south of this (**COM 6**) has been identified as the possible location of the medieval rectory.

A densely settled area (**COM 7**) is located west of the church and north of the suggested market place **COM 4**. Here properties run north from the Main Road to a back lane, which also runs behind **COMs 8** and **9**. Plots are around 50m in length. **COM 8** which lies west of **COM 7** portrays similar characteristics. Here settlement plots are also densely packed running north from the Main Road to a back lane. Property boundaries on the north side of Main Road continue beyond the back lane, north towards Wybunbury Moss. Presumably the small fields formed by these boundaries are paddocks or 'tofts' associated with individual properties and their associated turbary rights.

In 1846 **COM 9**, which is located at the west end of the town, was only sparsely occupied. However, its location between the Main Road and the back lane, and the distance between the two, suggest that it was laid out for settlement in the medieval period, and that this settled area had subsequently shrunk. There is some suggestion of curved reverse S-shaped boundaries, which indicate that this area was once part of the town's open fields. Plots measure up to 100m in length.

COM 10 is a densely settled area at the centre of village, south of the Main Road and due west of St Chad's. The narrow plots are longer than those to the north of Main Road, and extend c100m to a back lane which runs west.

Both **COM 11** and **COM 12** were partially settled by the mid-19th century, although they were potentially more densely settled in the medieval period. Like **COM 9,** both **COMs 11** and **12** may also have undergone shrinkage. However, the presence of curved reverse S-shaped boundaries indicate that they were originally part of the town's open fields. **COM 11** contains a mixture of plot size, including some long and narrow plots, while **COM 12's** boundaries are more irregularly laid out.

4.3   Post Medieval (Figure 2)

Post medieval Wybunbury (**COM 13**) underwent small scale development. This includes the Delve's Charity School, which was erected in 1822, the Vicarage east of St Chad's, and houses and gardens such as those constructed at the west end of the settlement. However, the number of inns in Wybunbury suggest that the road

through the settlement was formerly of greater importance, and that the village was a stopover point for coaches eg the Red Lion Inn and the Swan Inn.

4.4   Modern (Figure 2)

The modern settlement of Wybunbury (**COM 14**) has expanded to the north and south of Main Road at the west end of the town, and along Bridge Street.

5   ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

5.1   Above-Ground Remains

The platform of the former nave of St Chad's Church and the two moated sites to the east of the town, are all scheduled ancient monuments (SAMs 32564, 13438 and 13439), and the extent of the medieval and post medieval settlement is designated a Conservation area. There are four listed buildings within Wybunbury. One of these, the tower of St Chad's church, is Grade II*, the remainder are Grade II. They comprise the Swan Inn, Delves Church of England School and the late 17th century Rose Cottage. There are, however a number of buildings of a high standard within the village which are not listed, for example the Wesleyan Methodist Church north of Main Road. As discussed above, the street pattern dates back to the medieval period and is potentially the product of medieval town planning, while part of what seems to be the old road, is fossilised in the landscape as a footpath. There has been little development within the town, so there are also property boundaries and plots that have been preserved in the town layout.

5.2   Below-Ground Remains

The limited amount of archaeological work undertaken in the settlement has confirmed that there are surviving archaeological deposits at Wybunbury. However, given the small scale nature of the work, which was carried out on the periphery of the settlement, this is insufficient information upon which to base an assessment of the preservation of the town's archaeology. Yet, given that there has been little development in the settlement's historic core, any surviving deposits potentially lie undisturbed. The scheduled moated sites possess considerable archaeological potential, particularly for the recovery of evidence of structural foundations of the buildings that originally occupied them.

6   PRIORITIES FOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK

6.1   General

The study of Wybunbury 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 Wybunbury would fit into a number of these national priorities, particularly:

- PC6 Late Saxon to medieval – For example, the emergence of a medieval church and settlement from a Saxon Minster and associated settlement.
- PC7 Transition from medieval to post medieval traditions (c1300-1700AD).

6.2   Roman

- Examine the nature and extent of any Romano-British activity at Wybunbury and the surrounding area.

6.3   Early Medieval

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

6.4   Medieval

- Establish the precise location of settlement areas and date their phases of expansion and contraction.
- Establish the nature of buildings on settlement plots.
- Examine the location of the market place.
- Establish the foundation date of the medieval church and date phases of expansion.
- Establish the location of the medieval hospital, examine the nature and extent of this.
- Examine the road pattern and establish whether there was a former road to the north of the Main Road.
- Examine evidence for medieval trade and industry.
- Establish whether the moated sites are the location of the medieval manor house and rectory.

6.5   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.

7   SOURCES

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7.2   Maps

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8   ILLUSTRATIONS

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

Figure 1
Wynbunbury and the
Surrounding Area

Sites and Monuments

- Prehistoric
- Romano-British
- Early Medieval
- Medieval
- Post Medieval
- Modern

1:15000

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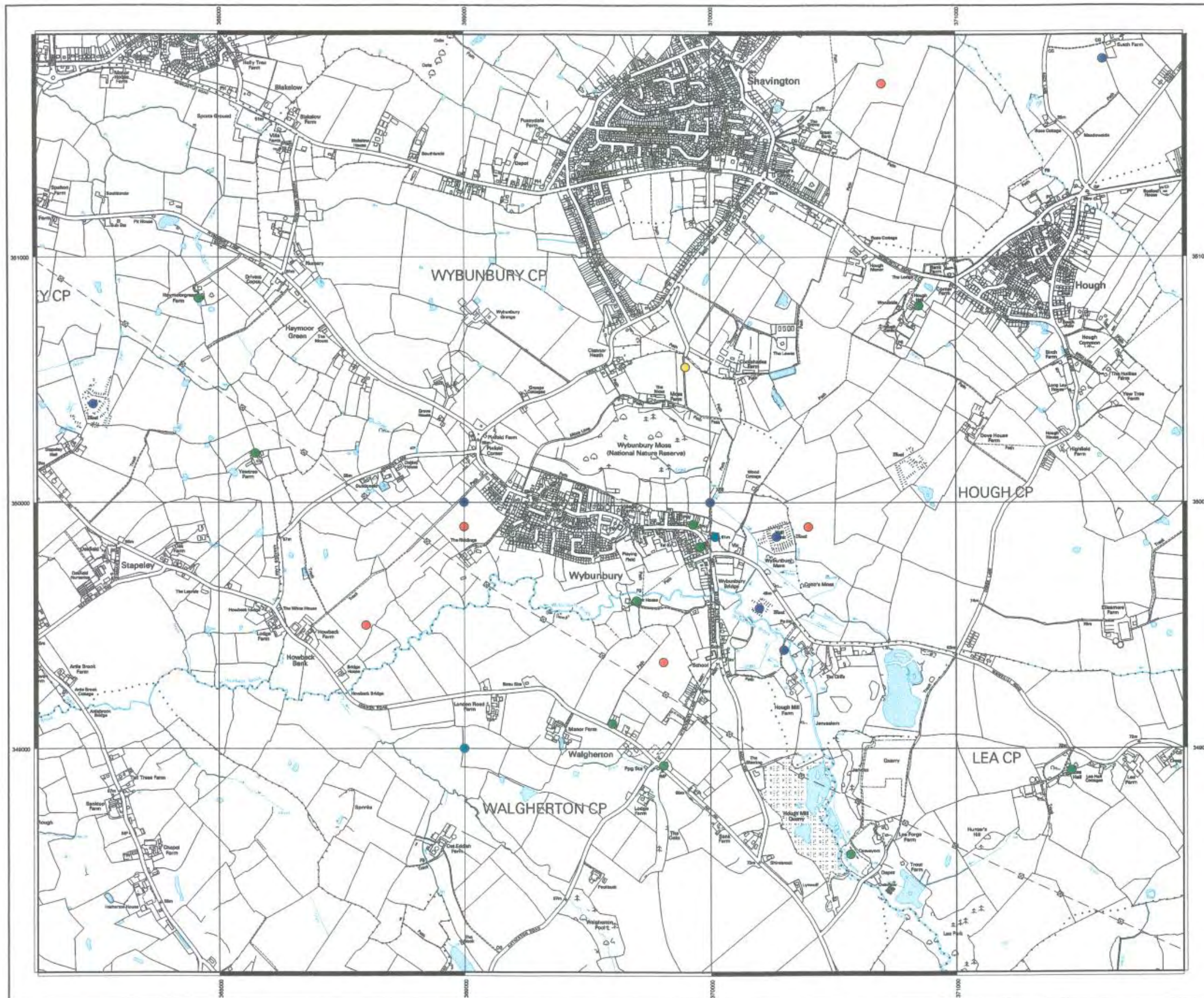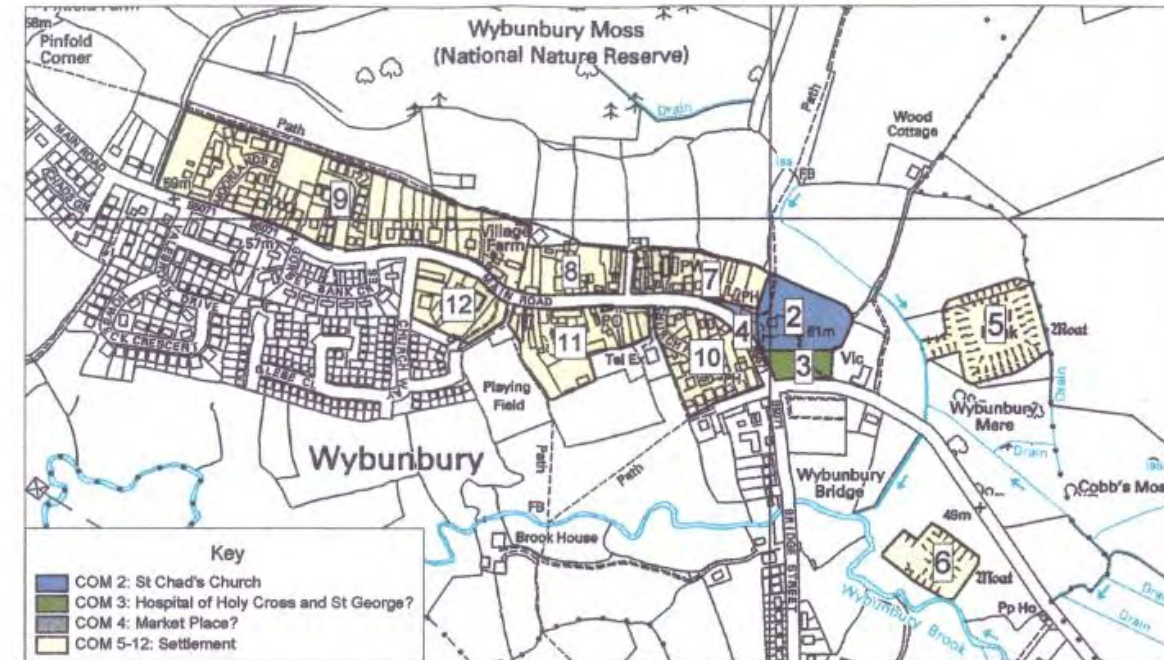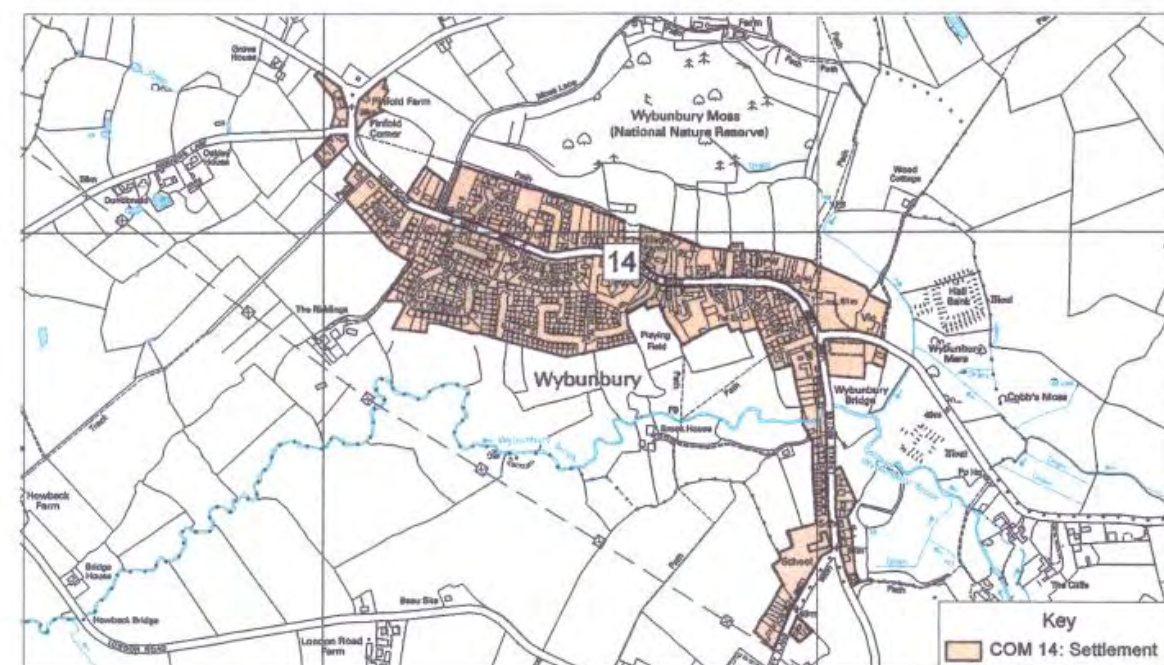Environmental Planning LA076503. 2002

0   0.5   1 Kilometres

ENGLISH HERITAGE

CHESHIRE
COUNTY COUNCIL
Environmental Planning

Early Medieval

Key
Former Road?
COM 1: Minster?

0   100   200   Metres

1:8000

Medieval

Key
COM 2: St Chad's Church
COM 3: Hospital of Holy Cross and St George?
COM 4: Market Place?
COM 5-12: Settlement

0   200   400   Metres

1:8000

Post Medieval c 1875

Key
COM 13: Settlement

0   200   400   Metres

1:9000

Modern c 2000

Key
COM 14: Settlement

0   200   400   Metres

1:13000

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