REPORTS

Anglo-Saxon Bicester: the Minster and the Town

By JOHN BLAIR

SUMMARY

Recent excavations in Bicester, published below, are used as the basis of a first synthesis of evidence for the origins of the medieval town. The alluvial channel of the River Bure, dividing the area of the church from the area of the town, must always have been an important influence on settlement. Despite the ceaster *name there is still no sign of any substantial Roman building, though there was early Anglo-Saxon settlement on the east and probably the west bank. The parish church can be recognised, both from a series of late indications and from the enshrinement there of the obscure St. Eadburh, as an Anglo-Saxon minster; the recent excavations encountered a probable enclosure around the church, and a cemetery just outside this enclosure which may also have been mid to late Anglo-Saxon. The 11th-century halls found on the east bank seem likely to represent a 'proto-town', a satellite settlement to the nearby minster, which was overlain by the existing 12th- or 13th-century planned town.*

Despite their importance as centres of local activity from the mid-Saxon period onwards, small market towns were largely ignored by rescue archaeology through the later 20th century. In the order of priorities they were ranked far below burghal places, and in cluttered town centres it was rarely possible either to conduct large-scale excavations or to fund small-scale ones arising from piecemeal development. Thanks to current planning policy under PPG 16, which requires archaeology even on small sites, we are now seeing a slow but steady build-up of knowledge about places whose importance has been suspected on topographical or documentary grounds. It is, however, a problem of developer funding that sites tend to be recorded and published individually, with no allocation of time or money for comparison and synthesis. This paper and the next two are an exercise in surmounting this problem.

Bicester stands out as the main central place of east Oxfordshire, but its archaeology before the 12th-century priory has hitherto been invisible. Fortuitously, an area of Anglo-Saxon settlement (Chapel Street), a probable segment of a minster enclosure boundary (Proctor's Yard), and a cemetery of unknown but potentially mid to late Anglo-Saxon date (north of Church Street) were all excavated during 1999-2000. When correlated with the town plan and with observations of the underlying geology, these provide our first clear evidence for the layout of early Bicester, and especially for the relationship between the minster church on the west bank of the Bure and the lay settlement on its east bank (Fig. 1).

The case for publishing these three sites together was obvious. This paper provides an introduction to the first two (below, pp.141–98), and incorporates Steven Weaver's emergency recording of the third. It also takes the opportunity to synthesise other evidence for the origins of Bicester, and to suggest an agenda for future work.
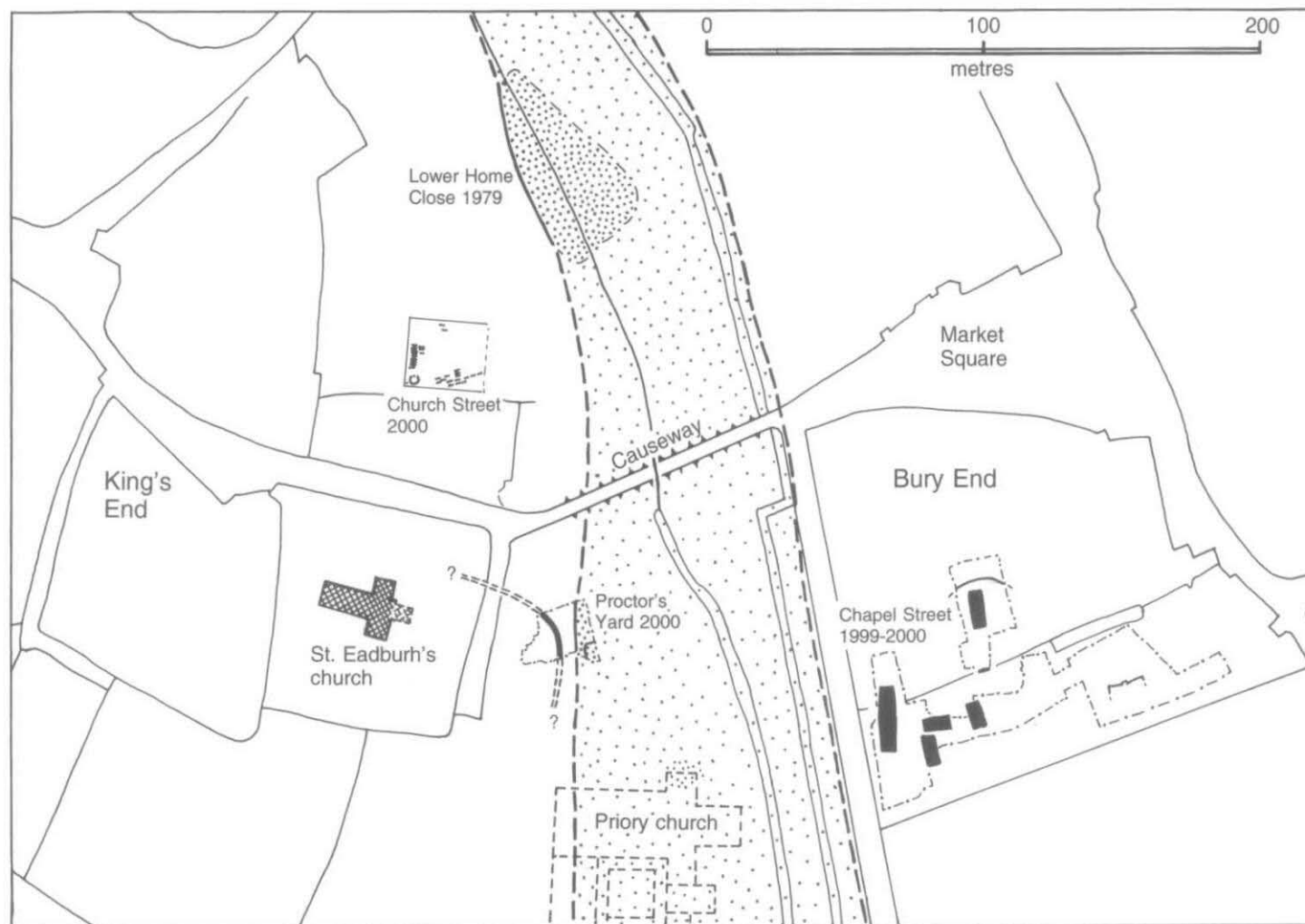
Fig. 1. Bicester in the 10th to 12th centuries: a preliminary reconstruction. Excavated features of the period are shown in relation to the alluviated river-channel, and to roads and selected boundaries as shown on the 1st edn. O.S. 25-inch map. Observations of alluvial clay are indicated by heavy stipple, its hypothetical extent by light stipple. The plan of the parish church is shown in its 12th-century phase.

Topography: the alluvial channel of the Bure

Bicester occupies a relatively flat expanse of limestone Cornbrash, bisected by the north-south course of the River Bure which separates the area around the parish church (King's End) to its west from the area of the town (Market End, formerly Bury End) to its east. Now little more than a drain, the Bure formerly flowed through a series of channels in a broader alluvial floodplain. In historic times it has been crossed by a causeway, leading west from the apex of the funnel-shaped Market Square to the north-east corner of the churchyard. The modern water-course follows the eastern edge of the floodplain, but in the late 18th century the causeway seems to have been breached mid-way by a ford.[1] John Dunkin wrote in 1816:

> The *Causeway* extends from the town brook to the churchyard, and was originally a raised baulk (as the name implies) for crossing the brook: the whole of the hollow way has been of late years filled up, and the brook arched over; but, in rainy seasons, the bank is frequently overflowed, and the houses inundated.[2]

The interface between the Cornbrash and the western edge of the palaeo-channel has been observed in two places: at Lower Home Close in 1979, where 'the edge of a channel for the River Bure' was observed as 'deep silts';[3] and on the Proctor's Yard site, where from west to east the Cornbrash 'changed abruptly to alluvial sandy clay' (below, p.181). In the light of this evidence, the possible maximum extent of the alluvial channel – subject of course to revision in the light of future work - is marked on Fig. 1.

At present there is no evidence for the chronology of alluvial deposition. The western part of the channel was sufficiently firm ground by *c.* 1180 for the priory church and cloister to be built over it,[4] and an 11th- to 12th-century feature on the Proctor's Yard site cuts into the alluvial clay (below, pp.184–5, gully 1001). Silting-up could well have begun in prehistory. Nonetheless, the normal Oxfordshire pattern of accelerating alluvial deposition from the 9th or 10th century onwards makes it highly likely that the river-channel, whether a single stream or several, was a good deal broader and deeper in the Roman and Anglo-Saxon periods than it would be by the 18th century. It follows that at all periods the settlements on the two banks must, unless they were totally separate from each other, have been linked by a ford, bridge or causeway. The relationship between the zone around the minster and the emergent town must always have been conditioned by the river-bed dividing them.

The Roman and early Anglo-Saxon background

Bicester lies immediately east of the Dorchester to Towcester Roman road, a mile north of its intersection with Akeman Street beside the walled town of Alchester. It is therefore not surprising that its environs are strewn with a light scatter of Romano-British material: what

[1] R. Davis, *Map of Oxfordshire* (1793); H. Wyndham, *A Backward Glance* [*c.* 1950?], 45-6.

[2] J. Dunkin, *The History and Antiquities of Bicester* (1816), 19. An excavation in 1981 against the edge of the causeway encountered cobbled surfaces, apparently the remains of late medieval widenings, overlying dark-grey silt: R. White, 'Bicester, the Causeway', *South Midlands Archaeology*, 11 (1981), 115.

[3] [R. Chambers], 'Bicester, Lower Home Close', *South Midlands Archaeology*, 10 (1980), 169-70.

[4] D.A. Hinton, 'Bicester Priory', *Oxoniensia*, xxxiii (1968), 22-52; D.A. Hinton, 'Excavation at Bicester Priory, 1968', *Oxoniensia*, xxxiv (1969), 21-8 (noting, p. 24, the subsoil under the north transept as 'solid clay').

is remarkable is that so little comes from Bicester itself. The town has produced no more than occasional sherds,[5] and the nearest significant structure identified is the probable villa at South Farm, about a mile north of the town.[6]

Herein lies a problem. It is certain that the second element of the place-name (Domesday *Bernecestre*, 'the warriors' chester' or 'Beorna's chester'[7]) is Old English *ceaster*, which almost invariably meant a place where Roman stone walls survived. While it seems that the term was used not exclusively for towns and forts, but also for minor structures such as villas or bath-houses,[8] there is no hint of any potentially surviving Roman masonry nearer than South Farm. The explanation could be that a Roman structure under the town centre remains unidentified: the paucity of Roman pottery on nearby sites probably rules out a villa, but something like a temple or mausoleum is possible. This puzzle could, however, have some connection with another: that the Anglo-Saxon minster was at Bicester, not in the nearby walled town of Alchester. Since minsters were so frequently sited in former Roman towns, and acted as stimuli for urban re-growth, it seems possible that Alchester's total abandonment is a consequence of the minster's failure – for reasons unknown – to utilise it.[9] This in turn prompts the speculation that Bicester could have been in some sense a successor to Alchester, transferring attributes of 'chesterness', so to speak, from the old site to the new.

Early Anglo-Saxon occupation is represented by the three sunken-featured buildings on the Chapel Street site (below, pp.147–57) and, west of the Bure, by residual sherds at Proctor's Yard (below, p.184) and Lower Home Close.[10] None of this amounts to much more than an indication that there was some settlement on the Cornbrash on both sides of the Bure during the 5th to 7th centuries. North-east Oxfordshire has produced very little trace of early Anglo-Saxon settlement, though a ditch with pottery of this period underlay the medieval manor-house at Chesterton, just over a mile to the south-west.[11]

There is no evidence for continuity of occupation through the 7th to 10th centuries, and Chapel Street provides fairly clear signs of a break. There has, however, been far too little excavation to demonstrate absence of activity through what may have been a largely aceramic period. This applies especially to the zone around the parish church, where there has been no controlled excavation apart from the small and peripheral Proctor's Yard site, but where historical sources point to the likely presence of a mid to late Anglo-Saxon minster.

The minster: historical and architectural evidence

There is no explicit and contemporary evidence that Bicester parish church was a minster. Many undoubted Anglo-Saxon minsters are, however, undocumented, and Bicester lies in a very poorly-documented zone, untouched by the sources which shed light on the minsters

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[5]   K. Rodwell (ed.), *Historic Towns in Oxfordshire* (1975), 61, 66; [Chambers] op. cit. note 3, p. 169; R.A. Chambers, 'Bicester, Littlebury Hotel', *South Midlands Archaeology*, 21 (1991), 107-9; below, pp. 152, 184.

[6]   R.A. Chambers, 'Bicester: South Farm Development', *South Midlands Archaeology*, 19 (1989), 49-50. The low-status rural settlement at Oxford Road, just south of the town, is unlikely to have left any standing remains: C. Mould et al., 'An Archaeological Excavation at Oxford Road, Bicester', *Oxoniensia*, lxi (1996), 65-108.

[7]   M. Gelling, *The Place-Names of Oxfordshire*, i (EPNS xxiii, 1953), pp. xvii, 198.

[8]   For the most recent discussion see T.W. Bell, 'The Religious Reuse of Roman Structures in Anglo-Saxon England' (unpubl. Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 2001), 14-18, including a list of other cases where no obvious Roman structure can be identified.

[9]   This was argued by J. Blair, 'Minster Churches in the Landscape', in D. Hooke (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon Settlements* (1988), 42, 47.

[10]   [Chambers] op. cit. note 3, p. 169.

[11]   J. Blair, unpublished excavation.

of the west midlands and upper Thames.[12] Instead, we must rely on a convergence of factors which can recurrently be shown to indicate relict minsters: focal topographical location (in this case near an intersection of Roman roads); status as the mother-church of chapels (Launton and Stratton Audley); evidence for a community of more than one priest; a large and elaborate church building; and conversion to a priory of Augustinian canons.[13] The early to mid 12th-century phase of the parish church, a large nave with transepts, points to more than ordinary parochial status. Its first documentary appearance seems to be in about 1152, when two witness-lists include people who look like a quasi-collegiate group of clergy: Master Gilbert of Bicester; William the Old, priest of Bicester; William his chaplain; Ralph the hermit.[14]

All this is evidence for a relatively important ecclesiastical establishment well before the foundation of the nearby Augustinian priory. But the most persuasive sign of an old-established minster is that Bicester church housed the relics of its own Anglo-Saxon saint. When, around 1180, the parish church was annexed to the newly-founded priory, it was described as the church of St. Eadburh, a dedication which the canons themselves adopted.[15] It must be assumed that the relics of this saint had hitherto been housed in the minster – in other words the present parish church – and were then transferred to the priory, where a sumptuous shrine-base was built for them around 1300-10, and where the feretory is explicitly mentioned in 1320.[16] The lady's identity is uncertain: Eadburh is one of the most common Old English female names, and there are no grounds for identifying her with the daughter of King Edward the Elder who became a nun at Winchester and died *c.* 960.[17] A more promising candidate is the 7th-century Eadburh who, in late tradition, was the mother of St. Osgyth of Aylesbury and supposedly gave her name to Adderbury ('Eadburh's *burh*').[18] If Eadburh of Bicester is barely more than a legendary figure, she is still helpful for present purposes, for she exemplifies the category of obscure, purely local cults which were so characteristic of 7th- to 9th-century minsters. It cannot be proved that Bicester minster existed so early, but models for the evolution of the town can take that as a reasonable working hypothesis.

Structures probably associated with the minster: the Proctor's Yard site and the Church Street cemetery

The only possible trace of the minster precinct so far recognised is the ditch, backfilled in the late 11th or 12th century, which was encountered on the Proctor's Yard site (below,

[12] J. Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire* (1994), 56-68 (Bicester p. 61).

[13] *V.C.H. Oxon.* vi, 40-5. For the general applicability of these criteria see J. Blair, 'Secular Minster Churches in Domesday Book', in P.H. Sawyer (ed.), *Domesday Book: a Reassessment* (1985), 104-42 (pp. 122, 136 for Bicester).

[14] *The Boarstall Cartulary*, ed. H.E. Salter (Oxford Hist. Soc. lxxxviii, 1930), 101, 103.

[15] *V.C.H. Oxon.* ii, 93-5, for the priory. The 'foundation charter' of Gilbert Basset in 1182-5 (W.T. Reedy (ed.), *Basset Charters c. 1120 to 1250* (Pipe Roll Soc. n.s. l, 1995), 121) seems in fact to be a confirmation of slightly earlier acquisitions. A papal privilege of Alexander III (d. 1181) confirms to the *priori ecclesie Sancte Edburge Berencestrie* property including the *ecclesiam Sancte Edburge Berencestrie* (later transcripts in P.R.O., E135/15/5 and Vatican, Lat. reg. LXXXV ff. 286v.-88). Private deeds in favour of the priory from the early 13th century regularly mention the patron saint.

[16] E.A. Greening Lamborn, 'The Shrine of St. Edburg', *Oxfordshire Archaeological Society Report*, 80 (1934), 49.

[17] Up to five different saints called Eadburh are suggested by J. Blair, 'A Handlist of Anglo-Saxon Saints', in A. Thacker and R. Sharpe (eds.), *Local Saints and Local Churches in the Early Medieval West* (2002), 525-7.

[18] C. Hohler, 'St. Osyth and Aylesbury', *Records of Buckinghamshire*, 18 (1966-70), 65-6; S.J. Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England* (1988), 134-9.

p.184, feature 1000). It was 1.65 – 2.12 m. wide, 0.50 – 0.65 m. deep, and defined the north-eastern segment of a curvilinear enclosure bordering the west edge of the alluvial channel. The size of this enclosure is unknown, but unless very small it would have contained the parish church; it bears no relationship to the present churchyard boundaries and surrounding roads, which probably therefore result from post-1100 replanning. Given the relatively slight scale of the ditch it seems likely that it was not the main monastic precinct boundary, but defined an inner enclosure around the church and its immediate environs.

Well outside this enclosure was the cemetery encountered in September 2000 to the north of Church Street (centred SP 5032 2236). The plan (Fig. 2) was recorded under salvage conditions by Steven Weaver, whose description forms the basis of the following account:
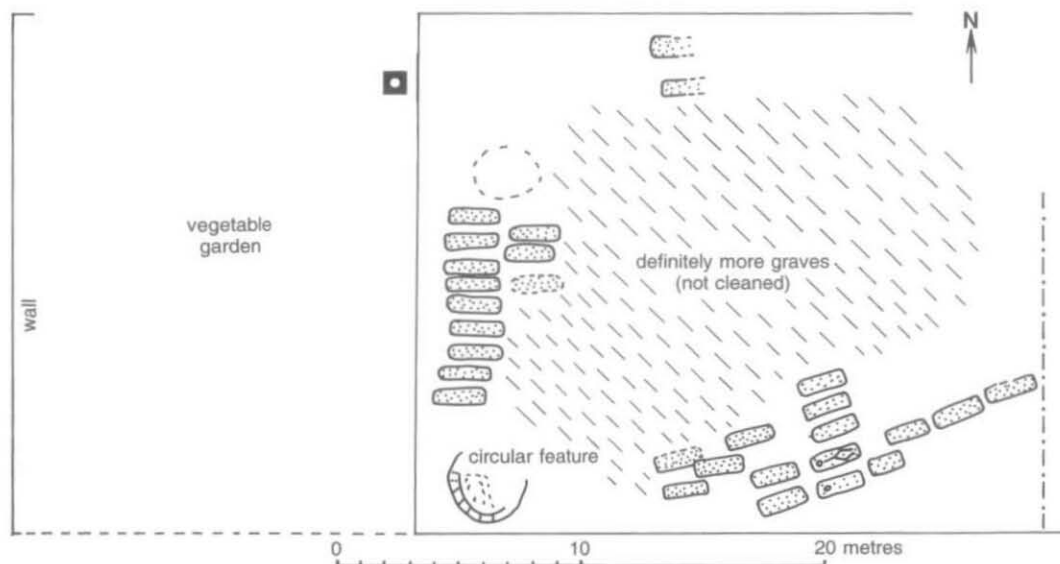

Fig. 2. Bicester, Church Street: Steven Weaver's sketch-plot of the graves and other features revealed in 2000. The square symbol marks the observation, in section, of a wall probably running on a roughly W.-E. alignment.

The cemetery was found to the west of the Catholic church of the Immaculate Conception, under the topsoil of a former vegetable garden, during groundworks for a new car-park; much of it is preserved below the tarmac. The 28 grave-cuts which could be identified with confidence are shown on Fig. 2, though it is likely that the area contained considerably more graves. All identified graves were aligned W.-E.; they were mostly not excavated, but the skulls could sometimes be seen at the west ends. At the north-west edge of the site, exposed only in section, were the foundation-trench and two courses of a limestone wall 0.50 m. wide, perhaps on a roughly W.-E. alignment; its dark silty loam fill produced a large unabraded Anglo-Saxon potsherd. In the south-west corner of the site was a circular structure some 4 m. in diameter: the peripheral wall of mortared rubble, 0.25 m. in width, survived as a single course, and rapid cleaning of part of the interior revealed a rough mortared floor-surface. There was no evidence that this feature cut, or was cut by, graves, which appeared to respect its location.

All that can be said about this cemetery is that it is compatible, given the orientation of the graves and the non-recognition of any grave-goods, with a post-650 date; and that a date

after the 11th century seems unlikely, since by then all burials would presumably have been in the churchyard. The wall and the circular feature are undated, and may be much later. It remains possible that the graves were part of a very large cemetery extending continuously from the church,[19] though the projected line of the ditch on the Proctor's Yard site does not seem easily compatible with this. Assuming that they date from the Christian Anglo-Saxon period, and formed part of the minster complex, they suggest that the precinct covered a substantial area.

The lay settlement on the east bank: the Chapel Street site and Market Square

The most important discovery in the Chapel Street excavation was a group of five impressive timber halls, in a sequence spanning a range from perhaps the late 10th to early 12th centuries (below, pp.157–74). It is suggested (p.172), very reasonably, that they formed part of a settlement extending in one or both directions along the east edge of the river-channel. This is important evidence that the later town, on the east bank of the Bure, was already starting to form by the late Anglo-Saxon period. It may also throw new light on the name Bury End (from Old English *burh*) which was applied to the area around Market Square through the later middle ages.[20] By the 11th century *burh* had a variety of meanings, including the later sense of 'borough' as well as the primary one of 'fortress': it therefore cannot be assumed that the east-bank settlement was defended. The possibility nonetheless remains, and there is clearly much still to be learnt about the form of this settlement as it had emerged by *c.* 1100.

Another problem is the correspondence or otherwise between this late Anglo-Saxon 'proto-town' and the characteristic planned layout – Sheep Street with its burgage plots, the triangular Market Square – of the modern town.[21] The Chapel Street sequence shows a shift of focus, probably in the decades around 1100, from buildings facing the river to a system of boundaries in conformity with the later burgage-plots (below, pp.174–8). Systematic re-planning in the early 12th century is therefore likely, though there is no means of knowing whether the configuration of Market Square (and presumably also of the causeway) dates from this phase or survives from the earlier one.

On the evidence now available, it seems possible to characterise late Anglo-Saxon Bicester as an emergent lay settlement linked, by a causeway or bridge, to an older monastic nucleus across the river. This conforms to a pattern which now, in the light of recent work, seems widespread: the generation of proto-towns thanks to the economic stimulus created by adjoining high-status ecclesiastical sites.[22] Perhaps the best example nationally is Steyning (Sussex), where 10th- and 11th-century settlement remains, including an enclosed residence with hall-type buildings, have been found on the periphery of a minster enclosure defined by two streams.[23] Much closer, at Bampton in west Oxfordshire, the southern approach to

[19] For an example of this, at a minster whose early history may have been closely associated with Bicester's, see D. Allen and C.H. Dalwood, 'Iron Age Occupation ... Aylesbury 1981', *Records of Buckinghamshire*, xxv (1983), 2, 6-8.

[20] *V.C.H. Oxon*. vi, 14-16.

[21] Rodwell, op. cit. note 5, pp. 61-8.

[22] For a recent survey see J. Blair, 'Small Towns 600-1270', in D.M. Palliser (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain: I, 600-1540* (2000), 250-8. The process will be more fully discussed in J. Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (forthcoming), chs. 5 and 6.

[23] M. Gardiner, 'The Excavation of a Late Anglo-Saxon Settlement at Market Field, Steyning, 1988-9', *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, cxxxi (1993), 21-67; J. Blair, 'St. Cuthman, Steyning and Bosham', *ibid.* cxxxv (1997), 182-6.

the large and strongly-enclosed minster precinct became the focus of 11th-century settlement including a small sunken-featured building.[24] Bicester also seems typical in that the layout of these formative stages has been largely obliterated by more formal town planning in the 12th or 13th century. While topographical analysis must still have a great deal to contribute to understanding the origins of 'minster-towns', solid evidence must largely come through excavation.

Questions for future research

It is to be expected that further development-led work will occur in Bicester, and to be hoped that research excavation may become possible. The following list of questions does not claim to be complete, but may help to inform and guide future archaeological planning policy in the town:

The river-channel: Can the alluvial channel of the Bure be more clearly defined? What was the chronology of its silting-up? When was the causeway built, and did it replace an older bridge or ford on either the present line or some different one?

Roman and early Anglo-Saxon settlement: Is there still an unrecognized Roman building, of a kind that might have been described as a *ceaster*, near the centre of the town? How extensive were the early Anglo-Saxon settlements on the two sides of the Bure? When did they end? What was happening here during the 7th to 10th centuries?

The minster: Did the 12th-century church replace an earlier one, whether on the same or on a slightly different site? What was the full extent of the ditched enclosure encountered at Proctor's Yard? Is there an outer boundary ditch defining a larger enclosure around the minster? What was the date of the Church Street cemetery, and was it within the minster precinct? Can other features (including burials) associated with the minster be found and dated?

The proto-town: How extensive was the settlement represented by the Chapel Street halls, and when did it start? In the light of the name 'Bury End', was it defended? Did it include elements (for instance sunken-featured buildings or industrial activity) suggesting something more important or specialised than an ordinary rural settlement of the period? How much continuity was there between this settlement and the slightly later planned town?

[24] J. Blair, 'Bampton Research Project', *South Midlands Archaeology*, xxviii (1998), 47-54; A. Mayes et al., 'The Excavation of Early Iron Age and Medieval Remains on Land to the West of Church View, Bampton, Oxon.', *Oxoniensia*, lxv (2000), 267-90.