Chapter Eight

THE TOWNS OF DEVON

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Introduction

THERE ARE FOUR PLACES IN DEVON which are generally accepted as being towns in the pre-Conquest period, namely Exeter, Barnstaple, Lydford, and Totnes. Exeter, considered elsewhere in this book, was by far the largest urban place in the south-west peninsula by the time of Domesday Book, and is not discussed further in this chapter. The other three are described in Domesday Book as burghi having burgesses, were witan centres in c. 1018 (Tait 1936, 42), and were mints in the 10th century. Only Lydford is mentioned in the Burghal Hidage of c. 919 (Hill 1969).1

It is probable, however, that these places, which owe their origin to specific historical causes in the late 9th or early 10th centuries, were by the time of the Norman Conquest not the only urban places in the county, despite the silence of Domesday Book. It is still often taken for granted that, since references in Domesday Book are in their own way a useful and fortunately early general survey of existing boroughs, they represent a complete list of towns existing in c. 1086. For Devon, the Domesday references to boroughs have always been regarded as being exclusive (e.g., Finberg 1947, 129; Hoskins 1954, 104–5), and the assumption that there were only five urban places (including Okehampton) in the county at that time has never been questioned. Yet Darby has pointed out, with regard to towns in general, that the information in Domesday ‘is as unsystematic as it is incomplete’ (1977, 289). There are therefore good reasons for enquiring whether there is any independent evidence which can be used to indicate the presence of other early urban centres, without being too concerned as to whether they are or are not described as such in Domesday Book.

With these reservations in mind, it will be argued in detail below that Plympton and Kingsbridge, and possibly also Kingsteignton, were (with Barnstaple and Totnes) new burhs of Edward the Elder, set up in all probability as both fortresses and urban places in the first decade of the 10th century. Plympton, as well as Okehampton, have hitherto been considered as being entirely new urban creations around a Norman castle (Hoskins 1954, 447; Beresford 1967, 425–6), and Kingsbridge has not even been considered to have existed before the early 13th century (Beresford 1967, 422). The general view of the creation of a new town on a new site, espoused, for instance, by Professors Beresford, Hoskins and Finberg, presupposes the assumption that there was no earlier settlement in the same locality or on the same site, with any urban characteristics. It is engendered by a reliance on the further premise that the granting of a market or borough charter marks, or is the prelude to, the beginnings of a place as an urban community. In some cases this may be so, but this view by its nature
excludes the possibility of a more gradual development of proto-urban or urban characteristics in certain places, which may be suggested by other evidence (topographical, geographical, or historical), or by the application of models attempting to describe and explain general historical developments.2

A further case besides Plympton, Kingsbridge and Kingsteignton where these arguments have been applied is Tavistock. The town there is suggested to have developed around a monastery founded probably in the 970s. Finberg's discussion of its origin and growth (1947, 131) assumes both that the town was founded at
one point in time by the monastery, and that this is a post-Conquest phenomenon, probably connected with the grant of a market in c. 1105 (ibid., Finberg 1950–51, 204). He thus gives no consideration to the possibility that it could in fact be pre-Conquest. The ‘rural economy’ of the abbot’s demesne is thus contrasted sharply with the specifically urban economy of the town from the 12th century onwards. This assumption—or series of assumptions—should in the writer’s view be examined very critically.3

There are other places which, as royal centres from an early date, as heads of hundreds and with minster churches, might well have shown proto-urban characteristics in the same way and for the same reasons as have been discussed in more detail in the chapters in this volume covering Wiltshire and Berkshire. The study of these places in Devon has hardly begun, but amongst them might be included Axminster, Plympton, Tavistock, Kingsteignton, and Lifton. Plympton and Kingsteignton are discussed in more detail below. Axminster is particularly interesting as it was sited very near the junctions of three Roman roads, one of which bridges a river near the town. It was the centre of a hundred which was ancient royal demesne, and was also the site of a minster church and a princely burial place in 757 (Whitelock 1979, 176). It seems likely, therefore, that its borough charter of c. 1209 (Finberg 1950–51, 205) marks the culmination rather than the beginning of a long process of proto-urban and urban development which must have begun well before the Norman Conquest. Tavistock could also be put forward as an example of these developments. It was the head place of its hundred, very probably being the site of an early minster church (Radford 1975, 7) and villa regalis, and was the centre of routeways (Finberg 1947, 130). It is thus likely to have developed proto-urban if not truly urban characteristics at an early date, its charter of 1105 merely reflecting a status acquired as a result of a long process of urban growth, which was probably not so much initiated but rather actively encouraged by the abbey from the later 10th century onwards. There is clearly a considerable need for a more detailed examination than has been attempted here both of the possibility of early proto-urban development at other similar sites, and of their relationship to Roman and later pre-Saxon developments.

Barnstaple

The town of Barnstaple cannot be considered without studying its topographical and historical relationship to Pilton (Fig. 85). This has been discussed in detail by H. and T. Miles (1975), though there are some aspects of the topography of the areas which require further analysis. Miles and Miles argue (ibid.) against the identification of the Burghal Hidage fortress of Pilletune with a fortress either at the present Pilton itself or at the nearby hill-fort of Burridge (or Roborough) camp, and see the fortified site of Barnstaple as the original Alfredian fortress. Arguments against this, and in support of the more traditional view of the secondary origin of Barnstaple (Tait 1996, 18, n. 7) are, however, set out below.

These arguments are certainly not contradicted by the relationship between the parishes of Barnstaple and Pilton. The former is very much the smaller of the two, and appears to have been divided off from a larger unit comprising both parishes. This would support Miles’s view (1975, 269–70) that Pilton was originally the
primary (village) settlement, with Barnstaple being added to it (at whatever date) as a new settlement.

That the latter was a new urban foundation is shown both by its siting and by the details of its topography, as well as by its name. Its site has clearly been chosen with a view to its defensive potential, its accessibility to both land and water transport and, not least, its position as probably the lowest possible crossing-point on the Taw estuary. Its defences utilise a low spur of dry land (roughly defined by the 25ft. [7.6m.] contour) which is surrounded on two sides by the tidal Rivers Yeo and Taw. The valley of the sharply meandering River Yeo would in the Saxon and medieval periods have been a wide tidal marsh (Miles and Miles 1975, 276).
The position of the defences is clearly shown in the surviving pattern of street and property boundary lines (Fig. 86). The core of the town is surrounded by two concentric streets, Boutport Street and Green Lane, both of which enclose the church and the main street of the town. The name Boutport derives from *Butan-port*, 'outside the town' (P-N.D. 1969, 26): on the supposition that Green Lane marks the line of an original intra-mural or wall street, the defences are likely to have occupied the strip between this lane on the inside and a nearly continuous line running in between and parallel to both streets, and formed by the rear boundaries of properties fronting on to Boutport Street. The core formed by these boundaries is consistently between 30m. and 35m. in width, and allows for defences consisting of a bank with probably multiple exterior ditches. The line of the defences runs between, and probably includes, both ends of the main street, where there were probably gates. It is uncertain whether the defences continued southwards along the bank of the River Yeo beyond the northern gate, though this is not improbable. It is unlikely that there would have been defences on the south-western side of the town, its location on the bank of the Taw estuary rather suggesting that it was a trading shore where boats could be either beached or moored. Subsequent alterations and additions to this area, in particular the building of the Norman castle on the western end of the town, and more recently the construction of the railway as well as the road (North Parade) along it, have altered its original topography beyond recognition. It is, however, reasonable to suggest that the defences of the town were laid out so as to include the maximum length of this shore line which was kept free for commercial use.  

There are various reasons for suggesting that there was also a gate in the centre of the defences. The excavation by the writer of an area on the eastern side of Joy Street in 1973 located part of the surface of this street, which consisted of small stones and gravel, smoothed on their upper surfaces, laid on to the natural subsoil. The edge of the street was defined by the frontages of the earliest structures on the site. If, as seems likely, this was the laid surface of the original street, it must have formed part of the primary lay-out of the town. Being so, its position both midway between the two gates at the ends of the High Street and opposite the access point of the straight road approaching the town from the east, would suggest the existence here of an original gateway.

It has also been suggested as a result of recent excavations (Miles 1977, 9) that Paiges Lane is only a more recent addition of the 15th century, a conclusion which could by inference be extended to Tuly Street to its west. The same excavations have shown the presence of properties laid out in the pre-Conquest period, defined by boundary ditches at right-angles to Holland Street. This suggests an early origin for the street itself, which is therefore a probable element in the earliest lay-out of the town. The original lay-out of the Saxon burh thus seems likely to have consisted of a single main spinal street with various streets or lanes at right-angles to it, the most important being Joy Street and Holland Street. All of these streets would have been connected at their extremities by an intra-mural or wall street. The main properties must have been those fronting on to the High Street, with probably smaller ones laid out to front on to the subsidiary side streets. The excavations at Joy Street showed that what must have been the original property boundaries remained unchanged until recent times. The regular boundaries of properties fronting on to the High Street,
86. Barnstaple
which can still be recognised along most of its length, must also, therefore, reflect
the original lay-out. This plan is identical in its essentials to those of Totnes and
probably Plympton and Kingsbridge (discussed below), as well as to other burhs in
southern England suggested (below) as being of early 10th-century date.

There is some evidence to suggest that the church of St Mary Magdalen, founded
in all likelihood as the church of the burh in the early 10th century, is not now
in its original position. Shortly after the Norman Conquest the existing minster church
was 'refounded' as a priory of the monastery of St Martin of Paris (Radford 1975, 8).
At this time the priory was described as being 'outside' the castle, being moved to
its present site at a later date (ibid., n. 30), presumably at some stage in the growth
of the castle. Archaeological evidence of this seems to be provided by the excavation
in 1973 by T. Miles of a cemetery sealed underneath the bank of the castle bailey
(see Fig. 95). It seems likely that this was part of the cemetery of the original
pre-Conquest minster church, and that the church itself lay to the south-west of this
(nearer the motte of the Norman castle) under what is now the Castle Green,
occupying an area distinct from the commercial area fronting the High Street.

The immediately extra-mural parts of the town are also of some importance in a
discussion of its origin and early development. If it is considered that a bridge was
built at the same time as the burh, its position outside the defended enceinte might
at first sight appear anomalous. It is placed, however, at the point on the river which
combines both proximity to the town and the shortest distance to the higher ground
on the south side of the river (see Fig. 85), a position which also, perhaps most
importantly, leaves free on its downstream side the whole length of trading shore
within the town. The presence of a chapel dedicated to St Thomas à Becket on its
northern end suggests that the bridge is at least as early as the later 12th century,
and there is no reason why its origin should not in fact be contemporary with the
burh itself, to function with the defended burh as a defence of the river against
inland penetration by Viking ships, and to provide access from the south and
south-west to the new trading centre on the north bank.

There are several other topographical features whose origin can possibly be placed
within the early years of the town's development. To the north of the town, the
north gate is joined by a long causeway associated with a bridge over the tidal
River Yeo leading to the higher ground around the village of Pilton to the north.
Miles and Miles (1975, 268) see this causeway as being only a secondary element in
the Barnstaple–Pilton geographical relationship, and suggest an origin in the medieval
period. However, as Fig. 85 shows, all the routeways to Barnstaple from the
north-west, north and north-east converge at Pilton (whose earlier existence has already
been postulated above) before leading to Barnstaple along this causeway and bridge.
Since it seems somewhat unlikely that the early trading centre at Barnstaple would
have remained unconnected to these routeways, this causeway is, like the bridge over
the Taw, very likely to be as early as the burh itself, and constructed for precisely the
same reasons. Without it there would have been little point in having the north gate
where it was clearly situated.

It is also clear that the intra-mural area of the town has been bypassed at some
time by Boutport Street which joins the southern end of this causeway over the
Yeo to the northern end of the Taw bridge. It is, furthermore, connected with an
open area outside (east of) the east gate and immediately north of the Taw bridge, which must at an early stage have been a large market area. This is also approached from the south-east by what must have been an important routeway. The lack of any concrete evidence makes it difficult to determine the date of development of this complex of features. However, the pattern of property boundaries to the east of Boutport Street already discussed suggest that these, with Boutport Street itself, were fixed while the early line of the defences was still visible. The relationship of this street to the Taw and Yeo crossings, which it is suggested were built with the burh, and the early, possibly pre-Conquest, origin of its name (P-N.D. 1969, 26) all suggest at least the possibility that both Boutport Street and the extra-mural market area were both of pre-Conquest origin, developing in response to the early success of Barnstaple as a town and port. The postulation of the pre-Conquest origin of this market area seems to be strengthened furthermore by the reference in the Domesday account to nine 'burgesses outside the borough'. As in the case of extra-mural burgesses at various other towns recorded in Domesday Book, these may merely have been working on the borough lands (Stephenson 1930, 179–80; 1933, 78–81; Tait 1936, 68–77, 83–4), but in view of the topographical evidence already discussed, as well as of the importance of Barnstaple as a coastal port, it seems more probable that they were rather the inhabitants of the area around the extra-mural market area. It is furthermore possible to see parallels to Boutport Street in the twicene or lanes at Winchester running around the outside of the defences, for which a pre-Conquest origin seems very likely (Biddle [ed.] 1976, 274, 303). These lanes were separated by a rectangular distance of about 45m. from the front of the wall (ibid., 274), a figure remarkably similar to the equivalent space at Barnstaple. As at Winchester, this space at Barnstaple could have been royal land in the same sense as the defences and streets of the town (ibid., 275).

The existence of the extra-mural market area provides a parallel to one outside the west gate at Totnes (discussed below), as well as providing yet one more example of a general phenomenon shown by the larger burhs in Midland England (Haslam 1980; Haslam forthcoming). Its presence, however, does raise questions about the developing role of the burh in the royal control of trading activities during the 10th century. On a purely physical level its growth can be seen either as an organic and uncontrolled development in response to the unsuitability of the narrow streets of the burh as market areas for rural produce such as livestock; or else conceivably as an original element in the lay-out of the burh itself, provided as a space (still presumably under royal control) in which these very needs could be met, thus leaving the defended area free for controlled settlement, for craft and industrial activities, and as a defended river port.

Lydford

The choice of the site of the fortress was clearly governed by the defensive potential of the marked interfluvial spur of land, which is defined on all sides except the north-west by precipitous gorges (Fig. 88). Its early topography has been considerably clarified by a series of excavations by P. Addyman, from which it appears that the defences of the fortress followed the edge of the spur on all sides, except where they
completed the enclosure over the crest of the promontory to the north-west. The original internal lay-out of what is inferred as being a new urban foundation of King Alfred (see below) took the form of side streets or paths and burgage plots laid out at right-angles to the single spinal street. As Biddle has pointed out (1976b, 131) the surviving pathways behind (south-west of) the cross-promontory rampart to the north-west are probably the remnants of an original intra-mural or wall street, though there is no evidence for its continuation around the inside of the rest of the defences. His further suggestion that an original back street, similar to those at Winchester, can be recognised to the north of the main street is less convincing.

87. Lydford parish and adjacent parishes  88. Lydford

It is clear that this street, whose alignment is in any case governed by the position of the Norman castle, carries on out of the burh to the north through the corner of the defences, which cannot have been an original gateway. Its course thus suggests a comparatively recent origin.

The plan of Lydford is similar to those other places defined by Biddle (1976b, 126) as promontory burhs, in particular Shaftesbury and Malmesbury. In many respects, however, the structure of the defences at Lydford offers a close parallel to those of Cricklade (Wilts.), described elsewhere in this volume. In particular the multiple ditch system at Cricklade is reflected in the arrangement of the two (?) external
ditches outside the north-east defences of Lydford (Biddle 1976b, 129 and n. 243) (though precise details of this are unfortunately not available) which must have occupied the space, about 50m. in width, between the gateway and the V-shaped division of the main street outside the defences. Similarly, stone walls were added to the front of the earth banks of both burhs, probably in the late 10th or early 11th centuries, replacing presumed earlier timber revetments. As with the more certain case of Cricklade, it is also possible that this wall has been deliberately slighted, possibly in the early 11th century by Cnut.18

The size of Lydford, together with the archaeological evidence for an early and regular lay-out of property boundaries and streets, all suggest that it was set up as a fortress which was probably from the beginning intended to be an urban place. It is not, however, sited on any pre-existing routeways, nor could it have had a very productive hinterland. One function it may well have had, which will be discussed further below, would have been as a market centre for tin from Dartmoor, and as a place set up by royal initiative to control both its production, refining and distribution. This would provide a context for the undoubted importance of Lydford as a Stannary town from the later 12th century onwards (Finberg 1949, 157; Saunders 1980, 127-133).

The origins of the burh at Lydford has posed some problems. The reference to *Hlidan* in the Burghal Hidage is generally thought to refer to Lydford, although the late date of any name-form resembling the modern name (*Lydanford* or *Hliðaforda*, 979-1016: P-N.D. 191) has suggested to Hill (1969, 90 n. 17) that the Burghal Hidage entry refers to a fortress near the neighbouring royal vill of Lifton. Lifton itself lay on a Roman road, and was the head of its hundred. It included the enormous parish of Lydford which covers most if not all of the royal forest of Dartmoor (Fig. 87). It was the site of a witan in 931, and its church is very probably of Saxon origin. It seems clear, therefore, that it was the administrative centre of the area in the time of Alfred and the site presumably of a *villa regalis*. The possibility has furthermore been suggested that a nearby small earthwork to the east of Lifton, between the Rivers Lyd/Lew and Thrushnell, could have been a small fortress created or re-used as a burh by Alfred, comparable in type and function to those at Pilton and Halwell. It has also been suggested that the regularities in the lay-out of Lifton itself are the result of rectilinear planning as an urban place.19

There are, however, difficulties with both of the last two suggestions. In the first place, although the fortress to the east of Lifton commands good views in almost every direction, as well as being placed near the end of a ridgeway road approaching from the east (now the modern A 30), it is only a few metres across and would seem far too small to act as a centrally-placed gathering point for the *fyrd* for the whole of central Devon. There is anyway some doubt in the writer’s mind that the surviving remains represent an embanked fortress—as was clearly the case with the fortress at Halwell. Secondly, the suggestion that the plan of Lifton reflects a lay-out associated with an episode of urban planning does not fit the evidence on the ground: although the church is built on the end of a narrow spur, the main part of the present village is situated in a shallow valley overlooked, especially on the north, by steep slopes. It is therefore quite unsuitable as the site of any fortress, let alone a relatively large fortified town.
It must be concluded, therefore, that for lack of any evidence of suitable fortifications at Lifton (whether urban or non-urban) which could be attributed to the time of Alfred, that Lydford itself is the Alfredian burh. This conclusion would be quite in accordance, firstly with the not infrequent siting of an Alfredian fortress near to but not at the estate centre or villa regalis, and, secondly, with the topography and siting of Lydford itself, in both aspects of which it bears a remarkable resemblance to the urban fortresses at Malmesbury and at Shaftesbury.

Totnes

The origins and early development of Totnes are clearly shown both in its siting and in the details of its topography, as well as in its name. The early defended nucleus of the town is sited, as its name implies, on a low promontory of land on the west side of the tidal River Dart, which forms an ideally defensible site (Fig. 90). Its peculiar importance to the Saxon town builder, however, lies in the physical association of this spur with a smaller more precipitous promontory on the opposite side of the river, jutting out into the flat valley to the edge of the river. The existence of this pair of promontories on either side of the river was clearly the primary reason for the choice of the site on the western bank as a defended settlement. This choice was not, however, governed solely by the convenience of the crossing-place. The precipitous nature of the eastern promontory (not adequately shown by the contour lines in Fig. 90) suggests that this crossing can only have been effected by a bridge, which must have been a permanent structure substantial enough both to withstand a strong tidal flow and to reach the lowest edge of the rocky eastern spur. The general configuration of the site thus suggests that the burh and the bridge, connected by a single spinal street, formed a single unit from their inception. The significance of this conclusion lies in the important role which such burh-bridge units played in blocking access to major rivers to Viking ships in the wars of Edward the Elder in the early 10th century in both the Midlands and in southern England, a consideration which in itself provides strong evidence for the date of the foundation of the town in the first decade of the 10th century, argued below.

Nor is this the only consideration. There is a possibility, suggested by the utilisation of double burhs associated with a bridge in Edward the Elder's Midland campaigns, that the eastern promontory was itself developed in this way, possibly being fortified by a bank and ditch across the neck of the spur. This could of course only be confirmed by archaeological means. A further indication of this could, however, be provided by the development of this area (Bridgetown Pomeroy) as an urban place in its own right in the 13th century (Finberg 1950-51, 205), which could reflect an earlier status as an urban foundation in the early 10th century, as a twin to the larger urban burh on the western bank.

There is every reason to believe that the present topography of the town reflects its original lay-out. Since the bridge must have been part of this lay-out, the single street running up the centre of the promontory was clearly the spine around which the other elements of the burh were built. The course of the defences can be inferred from the present topography (see Fig. 90), and must have formed an irregular oval enclosure divided internally by spaces occupied by the church and burgage plots, the
89. Totnes parish

90. Totnes and Bridgetown Pomeroy
latter presumably with houses fronting on to the street, their gardens backing on to the rear of the bank. It seems possible that the present lane running parallel to the north of the High Street is all that remains of an original intra-mural or wall street, its existence elsewhere as an element in the burh’s lay-out being inferred. The presence of a ditch or ditches may be indicated by the anomalous pattern of property boundaries on the eastern and south-eastern sides of the burh, which form a distinct strip some 20-25m. in width from the probable front of the bank. The topography of the western end of the burh has clearly been modified by the insertion of the early Norman castle. The south-eastern part of the outer ditch of the motte has made a considerable encroachment upon the western end of the High Street, possibly necessitating a wholesale re-alignment of its western end, and has also apparently modified the positions both of the road leading from the High Street to the north gate, as well of the north gate itself—if, as seems probable, they formed part of the original pre-Conquest lay-out. It is likely, however, that the west gate, immediately south of the castle, is in its original position. It is the meeting point of several presumably early routeways from the west and south-west, which as the contours show approach the town over the narrow neck of land joining the promontory to the higher ground to the south. There are, furthermore, indications of a former open area on the ridge where these roads meet, which could be interpreted as an early, possibly even pre-Conquest, extra-mural market area similar to that postulated for Barnstaple (above).

By analogy with Barnstaple, it may even be doubted whether the present church is in the same position as it was before the Conquest. A similar process of re-foundation of an earlier burh minster as a cell of a Continental monastery (in this case SS. Sergius and Bacchus at Angers) (Radford 1975, 8), and the similar construction of a Norman castle within the burh, might suggest that the old minster was moved at this time from the castle site to its new position near the east gate. A site for the original church at the highest point of the burh, occupying an area which would not have been a hindrance to the fullest use of the valuable area fronting on to the High Street nearest the river, would also seem more appropriate to the intentions of the burh’s founder.

From its position, it can be inferred that the burh was intended to function as an inland port from its inception. The west bank of the river forms a relatively flat area for the beaching or wharflage of boats, although the details of the original topography of this area must have been largely obscured by later developments. It is possible, however, that the western branch of the river, followed by the parish boundary, was its original channel, and that the eastern, wider, branch is a canalisation effected at the time of the building of the burh to provide a quiet harbour in the former. It is also likely that streams flowing from the north-west and west were canalised at this time to power a town mill.22

The regularity of the property boundaries along the present Fore Street, between the river and the eastern gate of the burh, suggest that there have been episodes of regular planning, though at what period is not clear. However, this extra-mural area is one which would be expected to have been developed at an early date, a process which could well have begun relatively soon after the burh was built. Some indication of this may be provided by the record in Domesday Book of the presence of 15 ‘burgenses extra burgum terram laborentes’ (Darby 1977, 364). Whether these were
agricultural labourers or not, it seems at least a possibility that they would have formed part of the population either of the Fore Street area, or of the extra-mural market area outside the west gate.

Discussion

The question of the origin of Barnstaple, Lydford and Totnes, all of them demonstrably new urban foundations in the later Saxon period, has given rise to a certain amount of discussion. One particularly important aspect of the main historical source for their origin, the Burghal Hidage document, lies not only in the fact that Barnstaple is mentioned in some versions as being in some way connected with a fortress at Pilton (Pilletune) (and is the only place to be so associated in the document), but also in the fact that a fortress at Halwell (Halganwille) is mentioned, while Totnes itself is not. It has commonly been assumed (e.g., Reichel 1906, 397; Tait 1936, 18, n. 7) that the fortified towns of Barnstaple and Totnes have replaced at some later date the temporary fortresses at Pilton and Halwell, because they were more favourably situated for land and sea trade. It is clear, however, that the Burghal Hidage references cannot by themselves provide a clear solution to the problem of when, or indeed whether, this process took place.

There have been two lines of argument, producing divergent results, which have been put forward to explain the origin of these places. The first is that of Dr. David Hill, who has argued that the creation of new urban places at Barnstaple and Totnes to replace fortresses set up by King Alfred must be attributed to King Athelstan. The establishment of these places is seen as part of a policy of the foundation of fortified market towns in southern England, a policy also reflected in his well-known law directing that mints should be systematically established in boroughs (Hill 1974, 217–21). It has been suggested that the same factors operated widely throughout southern England, embracing, for instance, both Guildford (as successor to Eashing), and Southampton (as successor to Clausentum) (Biddle and Hill 1971, 84; Hill 1978, 187), as well as Barnstaple and Totnes.

The second alternative explanation is that of Henrietta and Trevor Miles, who have suggested, in relation to Barnstaple alone, that the present town is the original Alfredian burh, acting both as the original defensive centre for its region and as a protected urban place (Miles and Miles 1975, 267–70).

There are in the writer’s view serious and ultimately insurmountable difficulties in both these hypotheses, and it is proposed here to put forward an alternative suggestion which overcomes many of these problems. This hypothesis both provides a scheme for the development of urban places in the whole of southern England, and elucidates the relationships between other pairs of fortresses and towns in this area. An extended treatment of all the relevant evidence must be reserved for another occasion; since, however, both Barnstaple and Totnes (and, as will be suggested below, Plympton and Kingsbridge) are in many ways type sites for this wider development, the main elements in this hypothesis at least must be discussed here.

It is suggested that shortly after his accession to the throne in 899, Edward the Elder created a series of fortresses or burhs, many connected with bridges, at strategic positions around the coastline of southern England and the Thames valley, which
was designed as a systematic attempt to block access to all the major rivers and estuaries by the Viking fleet. It is suggested further that these were not merely fortresses but also fortified towns, and were, in fact, new urban foundations which replaced a more skeletal system set up by Alfred, which consisted in the main of non-urban fortresses. There are various reasons for suggesting that the construction of this series of fortifications was begun in c. 904, and that it was essentially completed by the beginning of Edward’s extended campaign against the Danes in the Midlands from 911.

Apart from topographical and other evidence from the places themselves, there are four general historical considerations which can be called in support of this hypothesis:

(1) It is well known, because minutely documented in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, that probably the most important element in Edward’s military strategy during his highly successful Midlands campaign was the building of a succession of burhs, which functioned as instruments both of offence and defence. An analysis of their situation suggests that in most cases these places comprised either a single burh associated with a bridge across a river, or else the secondary element of a pair of burhs defending both sides of an already existing bridge. It has already been pointed out that this burh-bridge unit was the essential means whereby movement up (or down) a river was to be denied to the mobile Viking warships (Hassall and Hill 1969, 191-4; Biddle 1976b, 136; Haslam 1983; Haslam forthcoming). It is furthermore quite clear that these tactics were employed from the beginning of Edward’s Midlands campaign with the full knowledge both of their effectiveness and practicability; there are therefore good grounds for suggesting that the efficacy of this strategy had already been tested before 911 in a functioning system. The obvious context for this is in the ‘blank’ years of 899–911 in southern England.

(2) It seems unlikely that Edward would have conducted his Midland campaign without ensuring that his southern flank—the whole of the south of England and the Thames valley—was protected.

(3) The accounts in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle of the abortive Viking raids of 914 into the Bristol Channel not only suggests that the whole of the south coast was by this time adequately protected; it also explicitly states that the southern side of the Severn estuary (though not South Wales) was similarly protected, by inference with fortresses preventing passage up all the major rivers. The failure of the raid is in itself testimony to the effectiveness of the defensive system in at least the south-western part of England.

(4) Edward’s law codes themselves indicate that trading transactions should be limited to market towns (ports) and should have official witness there. This implies that such towns were widely distributed over southern England.

It should already be apparent that the situation and topography of the burhs at both Barnstaple and Totnes suggest that their primary military function was to block their respective estuaries to river-borne attack and subsequent inland penetration—considerations which would in the light of the arguments given above suggest that they were creations of Edward the Elder. With these considerations in mind, the two alternative explanations put forward for the origin of these places—as urban creations of King Alfred, or of King Athelstan—must be examined carefully.
There are two main arguments to set against an identification of Barnstaple with the initial Alfredian fort:

(1) It is clear, as Miles and Miles have pointed out, that one MS. of the Burghal Hidage document (the Nowell version: Hill 1969, 85-6) mentions Pilton alone, whereas the rest (Hill’s group B) include Barnstaple. That Barnstaple is a somewhat later addition inserted to explain Pilton (see Note 1) suggests that it is the latter which must be regarded as the primary fortress.

(2) Miles and Miles argue that since Barnstaple is the most suitable defensive site to control the Taw estuary, it must have been that initially chosen by Alfred. This of course assumes various premises: that the siting of Alfred’s fortifications does, in fact, show an appreciation of the strategy of blocking estuaries by means of urban burhs and bridges, and that his choice of fortifiable sites was governed by considerations as much of their accessibility to traffic as of their defensive potential. The purpose of the present discussion is, however, to suggest that the strategies of Alfred and Edward were different both in scale and in kind, and were carried out by the construction of quite dissimilar fortresses and fortress systems.

From a detailed analysis of the topography and siting of all the late Saxon fortresses and burhs it is clear that the key points in Alfred’s defensive system were places with strong natural defensive potential whose refortification required a minimum of work. These included various topographical types such as former Roman towns, with defences standing at least in part; strong hill-spur sites (e.g., Shaftesbury, Malmesbury, Lewes, and Lydford); already fortified hill-forts (e.g., Halwell, Chisbury, Old Sarum), or islands (e.g., Athelney, Sashes). The large-scale fortress-towns on flatter sites (Wallingford, Wareham, and Cricklade) which may be considered to be of Alfredian origin, merely emphasise the contrast with the largely non-urban fortresses. Few of these fortresses near coasts were specifically sited to block estuaries, their function being rather to act as regional defence centres. An Alfredian fortress at the hill-fort near Pilton (Burridge or Roborough camp) fits into this wider pattern very neatly.

On the other hand, those burhs for which an Edwardian origin is suggested were placed at points clearly chosen to block or control estuarine or river navigation, while at the same time being accessible both to inland and water-borne traffic. They are, compared say to Cricklade and the other Alfredian urban fortresses, generally conceived on a more modest scale, and usually occupy slightly elevated but accessible spur sites. They are, wherever the situation permits, always associated with bridges over the major rivers. Their topography suggests that they were always urban in character (i.e., they show regularly laid out patterns of streets, defences, burgage plots, and often church and market areas), and were the foci of routeways. They show, furthermore, a common characteristic in having been laid out along the length of a single axial street, with a few side streets of lesser importance, which usually followed the length of the spur on which they were built.

An examination of the relevant evidence relating to all the examples of this type of burh cannot be given here, but it is clear that both Barnstaple and Totnes (as well as Plympton and Kingsbridge, discussed below) fit into this topographical type, which contrasts in many fundamental ways with the characteristics shown by known Alfredian fort and towns. It is also clear that in a number of cases some of the Alfredian fortresses were replaced by new urban places, it is suggested here of
Edwardian origin, on more accessible (but still defensible) sites. Apart from the suggested move from Pilton to Barnstaple, the clearer examples of these include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Location</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Halwel</td>
<td>Totnes and Kingsbridge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Langport</td>
<td>Langport (valley)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bredy</td>
<td>Bridport</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clausentum</td>
<td>Southampton</td>
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<tr>
<td>Burpham</td>
<td>Arundel</td>
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<td>Eashing</td>
<td>Guildford</td>
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<td>Sashes</td>
<td>Cookham</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chisbury</td>
<td>Bedwyn/Marlborough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Sarum</td>
<td>Wilton</td>
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Some of these observations have been used in the alternative view of D. Hill, who has suggested that the origin of Barnstaple and Totnes must be sought in a programme of urban foundation by King Athelstan. The evidence for this assertion has at the time of writing not yet appeared in print, though it is stated as an established fact in four places (Addyman and Hill 1969, 89-90; Biddle and Hill 1971, 84; Hill 1978a, 187; Hill 1978b, 219). Hill's basic arguments, as set out in his unpublished Ph.D. thesis (1974, 217-21), are as follows:

1. The laws of Athelstan associate together for the first time those functional aspects of the Anglo-Saxon town of defence, minting place, and market. All burhs were to have at least one mint.

2. Since the small forts of the Burghal Hidage (such as Burpham, Eashing, Sashes, Chisbury, Halwell, and Pilton) were presumed to be in use in c. 919 (the presumed latest date of the document), and are not found as mints, or otherwise recorded as burhs, later than this, it is inferred that they were replaced in Athelstan's reign by a series of towns on new sites 'which were compact and mercantile in character'.

3. The similarity of the topography of Totnes and Guildford, neither places mentioned in the Burghal Hidage, yet both replacing small fortresses (Halwell and Eashing respectively) and both minting places by Edgar's reign, is argued as suggesting a similar date of foundation in the reign of Athelstan.

4. William of Malmesbury's account of the expulsion of the West Britons from Exeter by Athelstan records that he 'fortified it with towers and surrounded it with a wall of squared stone' (Whitelock 1979, 307-8), thus implying a process of urban creation.

There are several lines of reasoning which may be put forward against these arguments:

1. The inference that the reform of the coinage and the limitation of mints to burhs which is shown in Athelstan's laws necessitates the concurrent reform of urban institutions, cannot be sustained. These facts merely demonstrate that such burhs were in existence at that time, not that they were necessarily created by Athelstan for this purpose. Indeed, it could be rather more plausibly argued that a wide distribution of small towns must have been a feature of the landscape for some time for it to have been thought necessary to create a network of minting places. Although a mint could not have existed without a burh, there is nothing to demonstrate that a burh must, before the reign of Athelstan, always have had a mint. In other words, the presence of a mint may demonstrate that a place had urban functions, but its absence...
cannot demonstrate that a place was not urban, particularly in view of the minute sample of those coins actually produced in the earlier 10th century which the known coin finds must represent.

None of the evidence of the laws would therefore conflict with the assertion that in Athelstan’s reign mints were merely added to a system of urban burhs already in existence. That this is so seems to be implied by a law of Edward the Elder limiting trading to market towns already quoted—a regulation which was merely repeated by Athelstan (Whitelock 1979, 419, n. 5).

(2) The general argument that the Burghal Hidage document is a complete list of burhs in existence at one time (if only it were possible to establish the ‘original’ text, or to fix its production in time) is one which has been advanced by Hill himself (1969, 88–92). Yet there are a number of counter-arguments suggesting that it is not complete (implied by the construction of burhs built at Plympton and Kingsbridge, discussed below), and that its various surviving versions merely encapsulate stages in a rapidly-changing system of fortress and town formation. It is, therefore, not legitimate to argue that the fortress burhs (Burham, Eashing, etc.) were not abandoned before c. 919, the latest probable date of latest version of the document, and were, therefore, not replaced until Athelstan’s reign. Nor, by the same token, can it be concluded that the exclusion of a place from the so-called ‘list’ means that it was not in existence by c. 919. Indeed, no certain conclusion can be drawn from the document concerning the date either of the construction, use, or abandonment of any of the burhs listed, except insofar as it supplies a terminus ante quem for only those mentioned in it. Indeed, the writer would venture to suggest that the existence of the Burghal Hidage document (while having many obvious benefits) has up till now been the greatest single obstacle in establishing a complete list of burhs in use in southern England in the late 9th to early 10th centuries. In short, the exclusion from the list of the two similar topographical types of Totnes and Guildford (not to mention Plympton and Kingsbridge) is not a demonstration that their foundation must be put no earlier than the reign of Athelstan.

(3) The episode of urban foundation at Exeter by Athelstan is in reality only an inference from the fact that he restored the walls. His expulsion of the British from Exeter must, however, be seen in the context of the similar treatment given, firstly, by Edward the Elder to the British at Chester in c. 924 (for which there is positive evidence of an earlier episode of foundation or restoration in 904); secondly, by Athelstan himself to the Danes at York in 927; and, thirdly, to the British again by Athelstan at Hereford (Whitelock 1979, 307), which was already reckoned as a burh from 912 (Lobel 1969, 2). In the case of neither Chester, York nor Hereford can it be inferred that these incidents were followed by episodes of urban foundation.

There is, in conclusion, no positive evidence that Alfred was responsible for the creation of new urban burhs either sited in positions similar to that at Barnstaple, or laid out in a similar way, nor is there any evidence that Athelstan was responsible for the creation of any of the new urban places so far mentioned. The ascription of this series of new urban burhs to the early years of the reign of Edward the Elder is, however, quite in accordance with all the positive evidence so far considered, and is supported by the general historical considerations already outlined. The wider
topographical evidence of burhs outside Devon must though await a more extended discussion.

* * * * *

It remains to consider three further places which were also probably early urban centres: Plympton, Kingsbridge, and Kingsteignton. A combination of historical, geographical and topographical evidence suggests the hypothesis that Plympton and Kingsbridge, and possibly also Kingsteignton, were the sites of new burhs of Edward the Elder, founded as defended urban places for precisely the same reason as have already been adduced for the creation of Barnstaple and Totnes: namely to prevent penetration by Viking ships up major estuaries. The suggestions outlined below can only be substantiated (or refuted) by detailed fieldwork and archaeological excavation. However, the topographical and historical evidence alone amounts in the writer's view to an experimental verification of the general hypothesis put forward above.31

Plympton

The earliest documentary reference to Plympton comes from a charter of Edward the Elder, dated between 899 and 910, in which the king granted to Bishop Asser 23 hides in Somerset in exchange for the minster at Plymentune (Finberg 1953, 9, No. 17; Sawyer 1968, No. 380). It has already been suggested by Susan Pearce (1978, 118) that this transaction was one of several organised to 'secure and defend strategically important stretches of coastal areas'. The probable role of Barnstaple and Totnes as well as of other towns in southern England in this scheme indicates at least the possibility that this transaction was the preliminary to the building of a burh at Plympton.32 As will be shown, the hypothesis of the creation of a burh here does indeed make intelligible many aspects of its topography and earlier history, and also provides the context within which many of Plympton's later developments can only be fully understood.

The grant of Plympton minster demonstrates the earlier importance of the site. At Domesday (and presumably considerably earlier) it was the head place of its hundred, the whole of which was the parochia of the minster (Reichel 1928, 246). Reichel has, in fact, suggested (ibid., 281) that the estate or hundred was given by King Alfred to Asser. It was then, by the end of the 9th century, a place of central importance on the Tamar-Plym estuary.34 It is reasonable to infer therefore that the minster must have been associated with a settlement of some importance, and possibly also originally with a royal residence.

The geographical location of this settlement is equally remarkable. Its site must be presumed to have been centred on the church of St Mary.34 It thus lay on the edge of a low spur of land at a point in the Towy estuary which certainly in the medieval period was approximately the highest point to which tides came (Worth 1887, 372), and which was the lowest convenient crossing point of the whole estuary (Fig. 91). It lay, furthermore, at the end of a ridgeway running from the east, and was the focus of routeways from all directions except the west. Since the lowest crossing point of the River Plym (at Plym Bridge)—like that at Plympton on the 25ft. contour—is in a steeply sloping valley (Fig. 91), the site of the early settlement at Plympton is thus uniquely placed at what is in many ways an ideal geographical situation,
occupying a low-lying but dry site which was accessible to both land and water transport. These factors mark it out as being of potential importance as a trading site in the earlier Saxon—and possibly pre-Saxon—periods, as they provide at least part of the explanation for its demonstrable importance in later periods.

The significance of Plympton by the end of the 9th century provides both the context and the underlying cause of its choice as the site of the postulated Edwardian burh in c. 904. The topographical evidence suggests that the most likely site of this would have been along the road leading northwards from the ridgeway to the river crossing at Bridge (Fig. 92). The suggested defended area would have occupied the end of a pronounced spur of land, with steeply sloping sides to the north and more gentle slopes to the west and south, and would have consisted of houses fronting on to a single spinal street—plan characteristics similar to those shown, for instance, by Totnes, Barnstable, and Kingsbridge. Its suggested area would, furthermore, be very similar to that of Totnes. The central street would have continued to the north through a gateway leading to probably a combined bridge and causeway over the river and its valley.

These conclusions are supported by a number of significant aspects of the present topography. Firstly, the northern end of the suggested burh is placed at the narrowest crossing point of the river for some way upstream as well as all the way downstream (see Fig. 91). Secondly, the northern end of the bridge marks the termination point of routes leading both from the north and (in the evidence of field boundaries following a hollow-way) from the north-west. (The latter has been diverted southwards to a new bridge near St Mary’s church, probably in the 18th century when a new turnpike road system was constructed—Beresford 1967, 425). This road to the north-west leads to a crossing over the River Plym (at Plym Bridge) which there is every reason to suppose is of similar antiquity to that over the River Tavy at Plympton.

The likelihood of the existence of a defended enclosure, as shown in Figs. 92 and 95, is furthermore substantially confirmed by an inspection of the ground, in spite of the fact that the original topography around the site of the burh has been masked by substantial later infilling of the former estuary. The western edge of the enclosure appears to be preserved in a modern property boundary wall (Fig. 92), which lies at the crest of an appreciable slope to the west. Inside (to the east of) this wall is a low mound which could well be the remains of the defensive bank. The northern slope of the enclosure is particularly steep, its lower edge marked by the line of the mill leet. The road running down this slope through the (presumed) site of the north gate is a marked hollow-way which recalls that running through the north gate at Wareham. The defensive bank could have been at any position on this slope, though its steepness would have rendered any elaborate system of ditches unnecessary. The southern line of the defensive bank is probably shown by the appreciable build-up of ground against the rear of the properties fronting on to Ridgeway to the south, and there are slight indications of a possible bank on the southern part of the eastern side. Much of this circuit must already have been destroyed by recent development, but there would still be opportunities to test this hypothesis in a number of open places, particularly on the west side.

The suggested site of the early 10th-century burh thus commanded all routeways from the north and south, which met along its central street, in addition to controlling
traffic along the whole of the estuary of the Plym by a bridge over its lowest and most convenient crossing point. These considerations, however, do not by themselves demonstrate that this fortified centre was also an urban place, though it is suggested by the topographical and other parallels with Barnstaple and Totnes, by its potential as a trading site shown by its prime geographical location, and by its relatively large size. That it was so is, however, strengthened by two further observations. Firstly, a priory of Austin canons was founded by Bishop Warelawast at Plympton in 1121 in succession to the early minster. That such priories were founded often (though not exclusively) to serve urban communities (Dickinson 1950) goes some way towards strengthening the case for the existence of an urban community at Plympton in the early 12th century, with the inference that this community was the direct successor to one brought into being by the establishment of the burh in the early 10th century—the silence of Domesday Book notwithstanding. Secondly, the creation of the castle at Plympton Erle as the seat of the earls of Devon in 1107 must have reflected both the importance of the site and its central place in a network of communications.37

Kingsbridge

That the settlement at Kingsbridge originated in the Saxon period has never been seriously considered. Its development as an urban place is thought to be no earlier than the early 13th century (c. 1219), when it received its market charter and is described as a borough (Finberg 1950-51, 205; Beresford 1967, 422).38 It is perhaps, therefore, not surprising that the possibility of its origin as a planned urban burh of the 10th century has not so far been examined.

Kingsbridge is first mentioned in a charter of 962, in which it is given as the start and finish of a perambulation of the bounds of an area of land to its north (Rose-Troup 1929). Its name-form (to cinges brige, P-N.D., 305) demonstrates not only the existence of a bridge there, but also, perhaps more significantly, its royal associations. This may of course mean no more than that it was on a royal estate; however, the awkward site of the bridge in relation to the physical topography of the estuary head (described below), the fact that the estuary can have been no barrier to long-distance land traffic, and the fact that it would anyway have been crossed more conveniently just 300m. to 400m. to the north, all suggest that the bridge was built by one of the earlier 10th-century kings for more than mere geographical convenience. Given the arguments already set out in this chapter for the implementation by Edward the Elder of a systematic programme of construction of burhs associated with bridges, it must be asked whether the bridge at Kingsbridge was associated with a contemporary burh, the burh and bridge together forming a defensive unit of the kind argued for Barnstaple, Totnes and Plympton.

A detailed examination of both the site and the built topography of Kingsbridge (Fig. 94), as well as its relationship with surrounding parishes (Fig. 93), provides in the writer's view an unequivocal demonstration that this was indeed the case (although this hypothesis has yet to be tested archaeologically). The place is situated at the head of a large estuary, the bridge (underlying the present Mill Street) established at a point which is somewhat below the reach of normal tides (Davies 1913, 146–7). The later focus of the town (as shown on the O.S. map of 1886—see Fig. 94) appears
to have been in the valley immediately east of the bridge. The western part of the town, however, is built along a single street which runs the length of the crest of a pronounced—and, indeed, dramatically sited—spur of land, defined on its western and eastern sides by streams and on its southern side by the estuary itself. The considerable defensive potential of this spur in its relationship to the estuary, taken with the evidence already argued above for the existence of a defensive policy based on the construction of burhs on elevated by accessible sites at estuary heads, at once
mark out this site as a possible burh of similar lay-out to those at Totnes and Barnstaple.

There are indeed clear indications in its built topography of the former existence of such a burh. The southern end of the spur is divided into long properties whose boundaries lie at right-angles to the single street along its crest (Fore Street). These properties reach back to two common boundary lines at their rear ends, that on the west marked by a small lane which is joined to Fore Street at both its north and south ends, and that on the east by a line which is marked partly by a lane and partly by a single line on its southern end. The lay-out of the main street, property boundaries and back lanes, and the relationship of all these features to the physical topography, is so similar to the arrangement for instance at Totnes, that it must be inferred that these features have preserved the lines of a former bank and ditch(es) around the end of the spur. Its total pattern suggests the existence of a planned and defended urban place. The arguments already given above suggest that the origin of this burh should be placed within the period 904 to 911.

The postulation of the existence of an early 10th-century burh at Kingsbridge throws considerable light on the rest of the lay-out of the town, as well as on its historical and topographical relationships with surrounding settlements and parishes. Firstly, the position of the bridge has already been suggested by Davies (1915, 146–7) as being reflected in the line of (and possibly surviving underneath) the present Mill Street, a conclusion supported by other topographical considerations, in particular its relationship to the burh immediately to its north. The bridge was sited just below the position of highest tidal flow (ibid.), and must have been in effect a double structure, its two halves spanning the two tidal stream mouths to west and east of the central spur (their lower courses probably marked by the present parish boundaries—see Fig. 94), and supported at the centre on the very end of the spur. At this point it must have been joined on its northern side by the continuation of Fore Street just outside a gateway on the defences. Such an arrangement must, to the writer's knowledge, be unique. The clear association between the siting of the bridge and the lay-out of the burh is furthermore a strong argument for the origin of both bridge and burh as a single unit designed to implement a military strategy—to defend the estuary against seaborne attack.

Given the probable line of the defences around the sides and end of the spur of land, their course on the northern side across the spur is perhaps a little less certain. One possible position would be immediately to the north of the church, where the 75ft. (22.8m.) contour shows a marked constriction, thereby placing the church within the burh—a situation not contradicted by its dedication to St Edmund, king and martyr (d. 870). A more likely position, however, appears to be indicated by the behaviour of the property boundaries, and the existence of two small lanes on either side of Fore Street immediately to the south of the church. The most likely position for the defensive bank would have been immediately to the north of the western lane (which could thus be interpreted as a survivor of an original intra-mural or wall street) and to the south of the eastern lane. These conclusions are strengthened by the fact that it is at this point that the line of Fore Street makes an appreciable bend. This arrangement of the defences would thus enclose an irregular oval area, rather smaller than at Totnes, encircling the end of the spur of land and enclosing about 26 burgage
plots. The exact courses of the defences shown on Fig. 95, while open to modification by further work, are based on both observations made on the ground and deductions made from the large-scale first edition O.S. map. It is probable that the steepness of the slopes, particularly on the eastern side of the spur, would have made any elaborate system of ditches outside the bank unnecessary except on the northern side.

The exclusion in this arrangement of the church from the defended area does, in fact, fit in with what can be deduced about the wider relationships of the town. The parish of Kingsbridge (Fig. 93) is remarkably small, and includes merely the length of the spur, with its boundaries between the parishes of Dodbrooke on the east and Churchstow on the west following the course of the streams on either side. It is clear, however, from later medieval practices that the mother-church of Kingsbridge was always regarded as being Churchstow (Davies 1913, 147), and the town a part of the manor of Norton (ibid., 143) (see Fig. 93). Although King Edward was, as both Barnstaple and Totnes show, quite capable of modifying local parochial arrangements by the building of burh churches, the example of Plympton, where the burh inhabitants used a pre-existing minster church outside the burh, suggests that at Kingsbridge, too, the burh church with associated burial rights would have continued to be that at Churchstow. These relationships furthermore demonstrate that the town was a new settlement, artificially fitted into already existing parochial and tenurial arrangements, thus strengthening the arguments already made for its origin as an early planted town.\textsuperscript{39}

These observations suggest therefore that the church of St Edmund is an addition to the townscape after the first decade of the 10th century. A possible context for its foundation is the acquisition of the surrounding royal estate (which, of course, included Kingsbridge up to the boundary with Dodbrooke parish) by Buckfast abbey in the 960s or 970s.\textsuperscript{40} It is not unreasonable to suppose that the acquisition of the burh by the abbey encouraged further urban development (as has been suggested above for Tavistock), which must have been concentrated along the extra-mural part of Fore Street to the north of the defences, with the consequent acquisition by the community as a whole of its own chapel.

The peculiar relationship of Kingsbridge to Dodbrooke to its east is also revealing. The latter was granted a market charter in 1257 (Finberg 1950–51, 206). It probably, therefore, represents, in an economic sense, an extension around the eastern end of the bridge of the earlier pre-Conquest urban centre at Kingsbridge in the 15th century, although in a tenurial sense it constitutes a new urban foundation in a different parish. It must, therefore, have replaced an earlier village, the parish centre, around the present church of St Thomas on the hill to the north-east. There is every reason to suppose that this village was in existence (as was W. Alvington) rather earlier than the date of the foundation of the burh at Kingsbridge, and that it probably therefore supplied at least some of the latter's inhabitants.

Kingsteignton

There is a further possibility that Kingsteignton was the site of another burh of the early 10th century. Its site, adjacent to a bridge crossing a wide estuary at its lowest convenient crossing-place, at a point just below the highest point of tidal flow, as well as its position midway between the two burhs of Totnes and Exeter, all provide strong
reasons for suspecting the presence here of a further element in the system of burhs and bridges set up by Edward the Elder discussed above. It is described in Domesday Book as Taignbrige, and was the head place of a hundred which was ancient demesne of the king (Reichel 1897, 225). The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle also records its destruction by the Danes in 1001. It has furthermore been suggested by Rose-Troup (1929, 260) that its church, and, therefore, presumably an associated settlement, was in existence by 909. As at Plympton, it seems possible, therefore, that it was even before this the minster church of the whole of the hundred.

It is clear that the -brige element in its name at the time of Domesday indicates the presence of a bridge across the estuary in 1086. The archaeological evidence, while from a chronological point of view rather unspecific, certainly shows that it has had a long and eventful history (Taylor 1821). It has, however, been argued (Davidson 1884) that the existence of the name-form Teigntone in 1083–4 shows that the bridge was not then in existence, being constructed in 1085. This argument is, however, quite unconvincing.41

It would, therefore, be quite in accord with the historical and geographical evidence to postulate the existence at Kingsteignton of an early-10th-century burh associated with a bridge. The topographical evidence of the place itself is somewhat equivocal, but its position on the crest of a spur of land which must in the 10th century have been readily defensible does seem to strengthen this hypothesis. The church lies at the southern end of this spur, with the early villa regalis and associated settlement situated probably nearby to its north. Any further discussion must, however, await a closer examination of the evidence than is possible here.42

What is possible, however, is that Kingsteignton is likely to have been an early proto-urban settlement, associated with royal administrative functions, of a similar character to those proposed by the writer in Wiltshire (see Chapter IV). It is also not improbable that it could have acted as an early coastal trading centre, performing the same role as is suggested above for Plympton.

Conclusions

It has been the intention in this chapter to propose hypotheses or historical models to describe the long (and to us near-invisible) process of urban development in Devon up to the end of the 11th century. It is suggested that the development of towns in the Saxon period has been influenced by two general processes. The first of these is the gradual development before the 9th century of proto-urban settlements growing up around royal centres as a result of their administrative, ceremonial, economic, and redistributive functions, of very much the same character as been argued in more detail in this volume for both Berkshire and Wiltshire (Chapters III and IV). Instances of this development have been suggested at Tavistock, Plympton, Lifton, Kingsteignton, and Axminster. It has not, however, been possible either to examine this process systematically for the whole of the county, or to relate these developments to the wider pattern of royal estates, or even of Roman (or earlier) settlement or administrative foci. There is clearly a considerable scope for a more detailed consideration of all these aspects. Nor should the effects of pre-9th-century coastal and inland trade be minimised in this development. It is surely no accident that
two of the places so far mentioned—Plympton and Kingsteignton, which were heads of hundreds, the sites of early minster churches and *villae regales*—were situated at the heads of large estuaries at ideal meeting places of water and land traffic.

It is furthermore possible that a factor in the location and growth of some of these places, as of the towns from the later 9th century onwards, was their function as trading ports, distribution points and administrative and industrial centres for a Dartmoor tin industry. The evidence for tin mining in Devon before the 12th century has been reviewed by Hatcher (1973, 14-18) who has suggested that in the period from the 3rd to the 13th centuries the mines of the south-west peninsula were virtually the sole source of supply of tin for the civilised world. They must have produced tin throughout this period, though not necessarily continuously in any one place, with Devon, at least in the early medieval period, producing more than Cornwall (*ibid.*, 153). The pre-Saxon open trading site of Bantham on the south coast has already been suggested as a possible port from which tin was exported (Fox 1955, 64), and the close proximity of Plympton to sources of tin on Dartmoor raises the possibility of its role at an early date as an industrial and administrative centre for the industry. At the present time, however, the lack of relevant evidence does not enable these functions to be any more than speculative.

A similar function can also be postulated for Lydford, although again there is little direct evidence which can be called in its support. Its role as a fortress and an urban place, by no means the smallest of those built or utilised by King Alfred, must have been sustained by some economic activity. It clearly remained important enough to merit refortification with a stone wall, probably by Ethelred soon after A.D. 1000. Its situation at a high altitude in a poor agricultural district, yet near (if not actually on) Dartmoor, raises the possibility that it functioned both as an administrative centre from which royal control of the tin industry was to be exercised, as well as an industrial and market centre for the industry’s products—functions which were all certainly well developed there when detailed documentation becomes available in the 12th century.

The second observable factor in the general urban development was, it is suggested, the implementation of policies of King Alfred and his son, Edward the Elder, which, although they differed in both scale and conception, were designed to secure the defence of southern England against the Vikings by the building of burhs. In the former case this seems to have been carried out in Devon by the refortification and construction respectively of two non-urban hill-top fortresses—Pilton and Halwell—near to but not on the coast, with probably new urban foundations at Lydford and Exeter. This arrangement was augmented, it is suggested, by the construction by Edward the Elder, between c. 904 and 910, of a system of small burhs (Barnstaple, Totnes, Plympton, Kingsbridge, and possibly Kingsteignton) associated with bridges at the heads of estuaries, as part of a policy for the systematic defence of the whole of southern England against Viking seaborne attack and inland penetration via the larger estuaries and rivers. They can best be understood as forming a unified system which, with the exception of Exeter, essentially replaced the old Alfredian arrangement. Thus in Devon Pilton was replaced by Barnstaple, and Halwell by both Totnes and Kingsbridge.

The lay-out and siting of these new places, as well as their geographical, ecclesiastical and tenurial relationships to wider landscape and settlement patterns, suggest that
DEVON: early 10th century urban burhs – reconstructions

95. Early 10th-century urban burhs—reconstructed topography
these were all new urban foundations, set up by royal initiative as commercially
viable communities in order both to secure the physical upkeep of defences and
bridge and to ensure their effectiveness as garrisoned fortresses. They must be seen
as the prototypes of the usually larger burhs set up by Edward in the Midlands after
911, for which the same functions can be postulated. Some of these (such as Barnstaple
and Totnes) were clearly more successful as towns than others, their differences in
scale (shown in Fig. 95) possibly reflecting the original aspirations of their builders.

It is clear, however, that all these places were planned on the same pattern, with a
single street forming the axis of an elongated sub-rectangular or oval defended
enclosure, with properties set out at right-angles to this street and (in the case of
Barnstaple and Totnes) with space reserved for a presumably newly-created burh
curch. In all cases, the axial street was clearly laid out along the crest of a convenient
spur of land, the position of other features determined by, rather than imposed upon,
the immediate physical topography of the chosen site. It is doubtful if these places
could have (as must have, for instance, Cricklade, Wallingford and Wareham) provided
room for the protection of a large rural population. There can furthermore have been
no space in these places, except insofar as it was provided in the wide main street, for
large markets for livestock or other rural produce—a factor which, as has been
suggested for both Totnes and Barnstaple, may well have led to the growth of extra-
mural market areas.

As small and relatively early urban foundations, therefore, these places provided the
framework around which later Saxon and medieval urban developments were to
evolve. Given the contention of Professor Sawyer that England was as wealthy in the
11th century as it was in the 14th (Sawyer 1965), it need come as no surprise to realise
that by the beginning of the 11th century there were in all probability at least twice
as many urban places in Devon as have previously been thought.

POSTSCRIPT

Some of the arguments concerning the date and context of the Burghal Hidage document on pages
262-67 have been overtaken by the recent article by R. H. C. Davis ('Alfred and Guthrum's frontier',
English Historical Review xcii [1982], 803-810), which suggests that this document refers to a
situation existing in the later 9th century (just before 866)—a conclusion which strengthens many of
the arguments given here. If most of the burhs listed in the Burghal Hidage are of Alfredian origin
at the latest (though there are problems posed by the inclusion of Wilton and Portchester amongst
others), this provides both the context and the reason for the development of a new and arguably
superior system of burhs by Edward the Elder in the years 899-911. It clearly explains why many of
the burhs in this new system are not mentioned in the document (e.g., Barnstaple, Totnes, Kings-
bridge and Plympton), which up till now would have perhaps been the major argument against
the acceptance of a date for this new system of the first decade of the 10th century.

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I am grateful to Susan Pearce and Dr Nicholas Brooks for reading through and commenting on
an earlier draft of the text.
NOTES

1. The 'B' version of the Burghal Hidage, which is a late form of the document, explains Pilton by adding 'that is Barnstaple'. Later versions of the 'B' version corrupt this to 'with Barnstaple'. I am grateful to Dr. Nicholas Brooks for these observations.

2. A similar argument has been set out with regard to Cornish towns by M. Witherick (1967, 52-4).

3. A case can, in the writer's opinion, be made for suggesting that the eastern part of the town represents a planned urban lay-out by the new abbey in the later 10th century. It is hoped that this thesis will be developed at a later date.

4. The earliest name form is Beardastapul, Beardsa's staple or market (P.N.D., 25).

5. This is characteristic, for instance, of several other burhs of Edward the Elder in the Midlands and eastern England, such as at Bedford and Cambridge (Haslam 1983; Haslam forthcoming), and one which is suggested as having been built on the northern bank of the river at Thetford, none of which was apparently defended along the side facing the river. An excavation by K. Markuson on the line of the defences to the north of Joy Street in 1979, published after the above account was written (Markuson 1980), has provided evidence which would support the suggestion that the burh may originally have had a triple-ditch system outside a wall located immediately outside (east of) Green Lane, which would then have acted as an intra-mural or wall street (ibid., 78-9). This would parallel the triple-ditch systems outside the banks at both Lydford and Cricklade.

6. The completed report of the excavation was handed by the writer to the Barnstaple Excavation Committee in July 1977.

7. I am grateful to Susan Pearce for providing me with this reference. The results of these excavations are otherwise unavailable.

8. The present streets south of the 19th-century market, and south of the church (Paternoster Street), are probably later additions to the original street pattern.

9. As suggested by the inclusion of a chapel of St Thomas on the new stone bridge at London, started in 1176 (Brooke and Keir 1975, 110).

10. The view originally stated by T. M. Hall (1867-8, 94) was that Pilton and Barnstaple were until the 15th century separated by an 'almost impassable marsh' crossed only at low water by a 'dangerous ford'.

11. The bridge over the Yeo and road to the west over very low ground must be post-medieval creations.

12. Along it developed the quite sizeable medieval suburb of Newport, immediately to the south of the early parish boundary (Fig. 85).

13. Boutport Street is consistently about 48m. to 50m. outside Green Lane; allowing for a thickness of the bank of about 5m., the space between the front of the bank and Boutport Street would have been 43m. to 45m. in width.

14. Further examples of this process are discussed by Keene (1976, 73-5).

15. Some support for this interpretation could be cited in the inclusion of the western suburb of Winchester, much of it in royal ownership, within the urban area probably by the first half of the 10th century (Biddle [ed.] 1976, 265).

16. Brief details of these have been published in Medieval Archaeology 8 (1964, 292); 9(1965, 170-1); and 10 (1966, 165-9). Further details are included in Saunders (1980, 149-53).

17. It is argued below, however, that a number of these promontory burhs, such as Wilton, Bridport, Langport and Twynham (Christchurch) are probably foundations of Edward the Elder, and are not strictly comparable.

18. This suggestion, at the moment a hypothesis, also fits the known archaeological evidence from excavations on the defences at Cricklade (Wilts.), Christchurch (Hants.), South Cadbury (Somerset), and Wareham (Dorset), and will be discussed by the writer at a later date.

19. I am indebted to Susan Pearce for much of the information in this paragraph. The suggestion of a fortress to the east of Lifton derives from an observation by Bob Silvester.

20. Such as Old Sarum, near Wilton, Chisbury, near Bedwyn, Malmesbury, near Brockenborough (Wilts.), and Langport, near Somerton (Som.), discussed in the appropriate chapters in this volume.

21. Totanaes, c. 979—'Totta's naess', referring to the promontory of land on which the town stands (P.N.D., 334).
22. The writer has suggested similar episodes of canalisation to facilitate both river-borne trade and the construction of a mill for an Edwardian burh at Cambridge (Haslam, forthcoming). The provision of a mill for the town would have been a similar process as that described for Tavistock in the 12th century (Finberg 1947, 156).


24. 1 Edward I: 'And my will is that every man shall have a warrantor [to his transactions] and that no-one shall buy [and sell] except in a market town; but he shall have the witness of the port reeve or other men of credit, who can be trusted.

'And if anyone buys outside a market town, he shall forfeit the sum due for insubordination to the king...' (Attenborough 1922, 115).

25. This cannot be set out in detail here, but will be exhaustively treated elsewhere.

26. These have been examined by Biddle (1876b, 126–7), though this analysis does not take account of the differences suggested here between Alfredian and Edwardian burhs, or of the military strategies which these differing topographical types imply.

27. It is suggested in Chapter IV that Malmesbury was an earlier hill-fort with probably strong surviving defences. The re-use of Old Sarum is also discussed further in this chapter.

28. As will be argued below, the Burghal Hidage does not give a complete list of these places. A fuller description and discussion of these burhs must await another occasion.

29. Christchurch (Twyneham), Hants., has the strongest claim of all the burhs of this type to be considered an Alfredian foundation, but there are in the writer’s view several independent arguments which suggest that its foundation belongs to the period of burh formation suggested for the early years of Edward the Elder’s reign.

30. There is, of course, an element of circularity in these arguments; the postulation of the distinction between Alfredian and Edwardian burhs cannot by itself demonstrate the origin of any particular instance. But it does elucidate many of the historical and topographical peculiarities of these places (e.g., Old Sarum and Wilton, discussed in Chapter IV), and it is also supported by the occurrence of similar types in the known Edwardian burhs in the Midlands.

31. The preceding sections relating to the origins of Barnstaple and Totnes were written before the detailed evidence from Plympton, Kingsbridge, andKingsteignton was examined.

32. Earlier writers (e.g., Birch Cart. Sax. No. 610; Worth 1887, 364; Reichel 1928, 245) have suggested that this transaction can be dated to 904. This is significantly the same year as a similar transaction involving the acquisition by King Edward of the estate centred on the future burh of Portchester (Finberg 1964, 36, n. 39; Sawyer 1968, n. 372).

33. Thus obviating the necessity to employ tortuous arguments (Worth 1887, 368–9) to explain the fact that it is not situated on the modern River Plym. The river name is anyway regarded as a back-formation from the name Plympton (P.N.D., 252).

34. The Domesday church is that of St Peter, which was presumably the dedication of the original minster church. After the replacement of this by a priory of Austin canons in 1121 (see below) a new church was built and dedicated to St Mary in 1311 (Worth 1887, 372). The precise relationships of the sites of these three establishments are not entirely clear, but must have been close.

35. A similar function has already been suggested for the ‘Dark Age’ trading site at Bantham, 10 miles (16km.) to the south-east (Fox 1955), which is in a similar topographical situation to Plympton.

36. Figures are based on the 1:2500 O.S. map of 1866 (1st ed.), as well as on the results of fieldwork.

37. Beresford states (1967, 425) that in 1194 the fifth earl ‘made a borough here and gave the town a market and fair’. This episode can be dated so closely only on the questionable assumption that it happened at the same time as the granting of the charter in 1194 (Finberg 1950–51, 205). The laying-out of the town is likely to be earlier, though probably no earlier than 1170, the date of martyrdom of Thomas à Becket, the original patron saint of the church (Beresford, op. cit.).

38. Beresford, in fact, explicitly states that there was no settlement there until c. 1219, though, as argued below, is undoubtedly correct in suggesting an earlier origin for Dodbrooke, immediately to its east. Finberg, however, had already stated in 1952 that the town of Kingsbridge had been created by the abbot of Buckfast in the 15th century, at the same time as the creation of the church of Churchstow to its west (Finberg 1969, 27). These assertions are unsupported by any concrete evidence and are at variance in every respect from the course of settlement development proposed here.
39. That such arrangements were already in force in the early 10th century is suggested by the fact that the church at W. Alvington was already in existence by c. 909 (Reichel 1913, 170), and therefore presumably the settlement as well.

40. Frances Rose-Troup (1929, 257) has suggested that the area of the Hwiscæ, whose bounds in the charter of 962 include Kingsbridge, was made over to Buckfast abbey (? in 962) by the king as an endowment. The question is further discussed by Finberg (1969, 26-7), who, however, asserts that Buckfast abbey was founded in 1018.

41. It is based on the manifestly dubious premise that the absence of a reference to a phenomenon in documents demonstrates the absence of that phenomenon.

42. It is possible that these topographical indications of the former existence of a burh have failed to survive through its partial desertion in favour of the 'Nova Villa' of c. 1200 at Newton Abbot (Beresford 1967, 423), on the opposite side of the estuary. The parallel with Plympton, where the suggested 10th-century burh at Plympton St Mary was all but deserted for Plympton Erle in the later 12th century, is particularly relevant. A lane leading to the church from the north is named Berry Lane, which could preserve the memory of the existence of either the 10th-century burh or the smaller burh around the king’s residence and (presumably) the church.

43. A similar association in the early 9th century of a large-scale industry (iron smelting) with an early *villa regalis* has been argued in the case of Ramsbury, Wilts. (Haslam 1980).

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