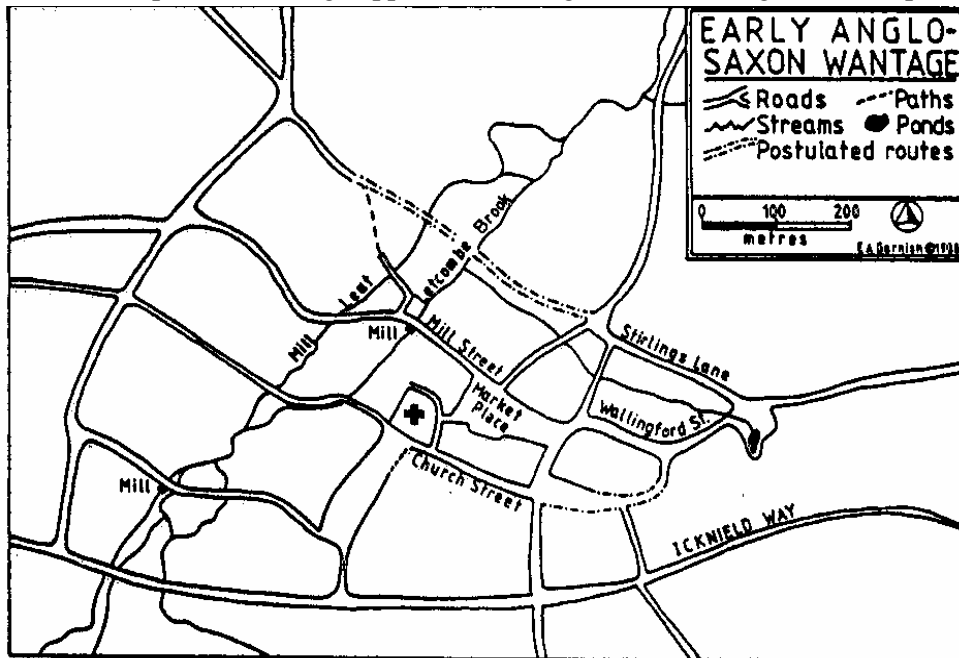


## Alfred's Palace

By Lis Garnish

A number of visitors come to Wantage each year in search of Alfred the Great . Having viewed his statue in the Market Place, looked at the church and toured the Museum the next question is 'Yes, but where was Alfred's palace?'. This question is impossible for the Keepers to answer, but one can suggest some sites and leave it to the visitors to decide for themselves. There are six possible sites in Wantage, some indicated by tradition and some suggested by the topography of the town.

The present street plan of Wantage appears to be Anglo-Saxon in origin, with a spinal road



(Wallingford Street/ Market Place/ Mill Street), back lanes (Stirling's Lane and Church Street), an ecclesiastical enclosure round the church and an open 'marketing' space nearby. The spinal road leads to a crossing point of the brook, and intersects a north/south route. It is possible that the initial settlement was along this spinal road, mainly on the hill down to the mill and around the crossing point of the brook. There was probably a later enlargement of this settlement area , with a planned extension forming the market area and with a back lane giving access to the rear of the "burgage" plots. There is some evidence that Church Street, Priory Road and Grove Street may have been laid out with respect to existing arable strips, as each road shows a "reverse S" curve typical of the long plough lands in a strip field system. If this interpretation of the town plan is correct then Wantage shares many common features with Anglo-Saxon settlements in Wiltshire, Somerset and Dorset (1).

However, what is absent in Wantage is the "royal" enclosure, which can be detected in the plans of the royal manors of Calne, Chippenham and Wilton (2). Such a royal enclosure would have contained the living accommodation and service buildings for the king and his entourage, and may have been defensible. It would probably have been near to the 'ecclesiastical' enclosure and would most likely have been the site of Alfred's birth.

The first site which can be suggested is the Belmont area. This is sometimes extended to include the area of the Convent as well. The reasons for this suggestion seem to be three.

Firstly because this is the probable area of the Roman settlement, secondly that a "manor" house was erected there in the eighteenth century, and thirdly it may be based on a misreading of Mr Wise's letter of 1738 (see below) (3) Roman sites very rarely produce any Saxon finds; in fact the Anglo-Saxons seem to have deliberately avoided Roman settlements possibly because they were still partially occupied, or because of a dread of their association with disease arising from a pandemic of plague in the late sixth and early seventh centuries (4). At Wantage, only chance finds of Saxon coins occur in the Belmont area. The manor house which was built near there in the late eighteenth century was on a new site on the edge of the Old Inclosures shown on the Inclosure Map. Mr Giles, who bought the Lordship of Wantage Manor in 1763, probably built there because there was no 'big house' and he wished to have a residence suitable for his status. The house only lasted for about fifty years and was then demolished and the building materials sold (5). The third reason, Mr Wise's letter, does not indicate the western side of Letcombe Brook but the eastern side, as is discussed below, but this error was still repeated as recently as 1968 (6) and 1975 (7).

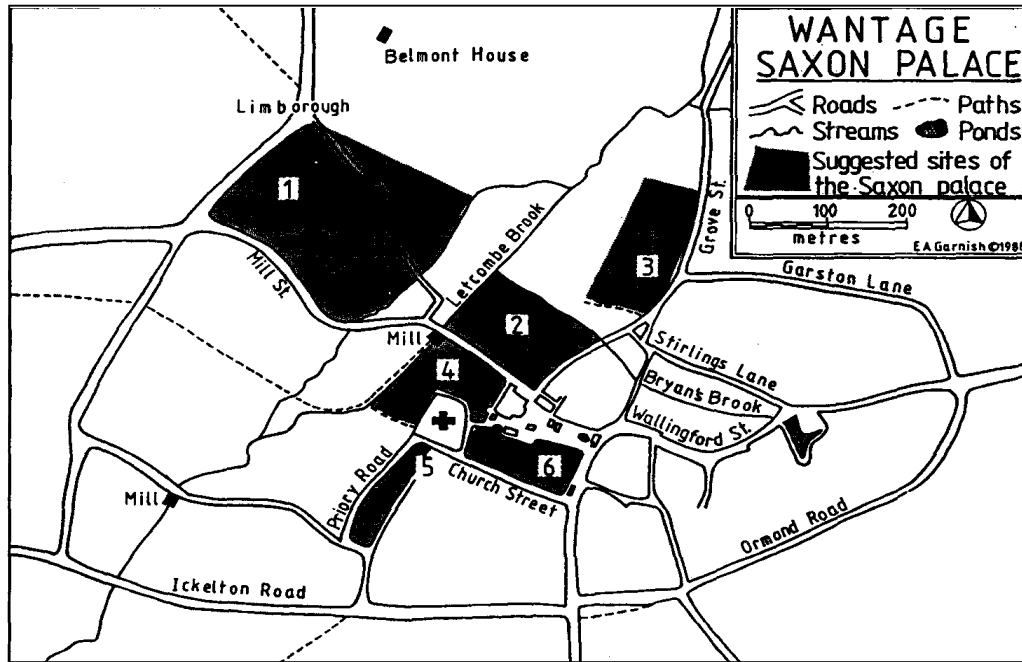
The second possible site is that actually suggested by Mr Wise in 1738, supposedly writing to a Dr Mead in Oxford. The text is as follows:- *"...to an antiquary I believe it will appear that all footsteps of the Roman majesty are not quite lost: the castrum or fortification discovering itself to me pretty plainly on the south side of the brook inclosing a place called High Garden. The hollow way into the town from Faringdon, with Grove Street, (which was within the memory of persons now living a hollow way too,) and a little running water, now a morass, dividing the High Garden from the lower, make three sides of an oblong square, and the river the fourth. The ground inclosed may contain about six acres. And here stood the Saxon palace where Alfred was born. On the north side of the brook is an inclosure called Limborough ... In Limborough, Roman coins are commonly found ... On the outside of the fortification, between Limborough and the river. was discovered many years since, the remains of a building, which the inhabitants called the cellar, and King Alfred's cellar; it was paved at bottom with brick, and by the description of it. should seem to be a bath. Of Saxon remains here, the High Garden may be reckoned one, as containing the king's palace, though originally Roman. Between Limborough and the brook, is a close called Court Close; and another little piece of ground, in some modern writings which I have seen, called Paddocks's more, alias Pallet's more, which I suspect to be a corruption of Palace more.'*(3)

Mr Francis Wise was a well known Oxford scholar and, having edited an edition of Asser's *"Life of King Alfred"*, he *"spent a few days on the site of the battle of Ashdown, on White Horse Hill (and at) Wayland's Smithy"* He supplemented this with information on Wantage from Mr Edward Towsey, Apothecary in Wantage, and, in the convention of the day, published as a 58 page quarto pamphlet the *"Letter"* addressed to *"Dr Richard Mead, a successful London Physician and patron of the arts"* (8)

Hence, Wise was relying for his geographical information on Edward Towsey, whose sense of direction seems to have been a little shaky. The Letcombe Brook flows from south-west to north-east, so the description would have been clearer if he had spoken of "east of the brook" and "west of the brook". Towsey suggested to Wise that the "Roman fort" was defined by *"the hollow way into the town from Faringdon"* (Mill Street), Grove Street, *"the river"* (Letcombe Brook) and *"a little running water"*. This last stream no longer exists above ground, but its course can be traced. It started from a pond where Broadway Motors now stands. The area behind here is steeply banked and is shown thus on maps from 1754 onwards (9), so there may have been springs at the base of the bank. The water flowed across Wallingford Street where, until recently, the cottages there would flood after heavy rain. Its further course is probably marked by the back boundaries of the properties on the north side of Wallingford Street. The culvert is then marked by a line of drains across the lowest part of Waitrose's car park. It continued past the side of the Clock House (10), across Grove Street and down to the Letcombe Brook, where the culvert

emerges from the bank below the small extension car park to the west of Limborough Road. This last part of the stream is still shown on early maps. The stream was called Bryan's Brook, from the manor in which it started.

The area which Mr Towsey defined is approximately six acres and was called "Little High Garden". He called this the Roman "castrum" and assumed that the Saxon "palace" stood within it, which seems dubious. Wise then writes of Roman remains west of the Letcombe Brook in Lower Limborough, and mentions further Roman finds outside the limits of the suggested fortification. It seems to be these last two points which have misled some earlier writers. The site which he suggests is plausible, though not for the reasons which he gives. The site would lie fairly close to the church, would command two entry roads into the town and the crossing point of the Letcombe Brook. It would also be within the settlement area suggested above. It is extremely doubtful however that it was ever a Roman "castrum".



The third possible site is the one chosen by the Ordnance Survey (11). This is the area to the north-east of that suggested by Mr Towsey. The Ordnance Survey seem to have followed his mention of High Garden and marked the area of Great High Garden as "*site of Palace*". It does not fit Mr Towsey's suggested bounds but it is plausible for similar reasons. It would control the north/south route, but not the crossing of the brook. It is rather removed from the parish church and would lie well outside the suggested original settlement area and even outside the suggested extended settlement. However it does have one 'plus' point as it probably contained the site of a later manor house and the demesne lands of the manor lay close around it (12).

The remaining three suggested sites are based on the topography of the town. Site number four is the area to the north and west of the church. Here a 'royal' complex would have been immediately next to the church and occupying the high spur of land which overlooks the crossing point of the brook. The land to the north and west drops steeply to the stream and the road, but the area is not clearly defined by streets or lanes as a discrete block in the way that the Wiltshire examples are. However the edge of the higher land is delineated on the north by a manorial boundary. Archaeologically the site is unpromising, having been disturbed frequently for building, but a Saxon ditch was found during small scale investigations in the vicarage garden.

The fifth site, to the south of the church, is perhaps more satisfactory as it offers a discrete block with later manorial connections. The house called 'The Priory', standing at the corner of Church Street and Priory Road, was the manor house of Priorshold Manor in the

late 1500s. South of the house is a block of land outlined by Priory Road, a footpath and property boundaries. The footpath is shown on the earliest maps from 1754 (8), and seems to have been a semi-public right of way. At the point where it joins Priory Road the Priorsfold Manor pound stood in 1754. It is possible that it once continued and joined Church Street at the north end. The area enclosed could be either a 'manorial' precinct or a 'village green', which was encroached on by later buildings. On the other hand it lies outside the main settlement area and is a long narrow site rather than a compact block.

The sixth and last possible site is to the east of the present church. Here was the open 'marketing' area, which has been encroached on at both the east and west ends. The block of properties between the Market Place and Church Street may also be encroachment, but this rectangular area might also be the 'royal' precinct, later filled with 'burgage' plots. More specifically, the western end is separated from the rest of the block by a manorial boundary between the present Post Office and the Bear Inn. This gives a sub-rectangular area, comparable in size to the 'ecclesiastical' precinct, and overlooking the large 'market' area.

Of the six possible sites of the Saxon 'palace' the first can probably be discounted. From the five remaining the third is perhaps less likely, being too far north, but was probably an early medieval development. The second is probably too far north and may have been associated with the development of a second "planned" area, perhaps developed when the Fitzwarins acquired the manor. My personal preferences are the fourth and sixth, to the north or east of the church, but only excavation could prove the matter.

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This article was reproduced from "The Blowing Stone" Summer 1989 (revised November 2000).

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