

place of refuge where the women and children could live in safety while their men added to the number of the town's defenders. When the Vikings had moved on, they returned home.

## THE GRID OF STREETS

It was not uncommon for burhs to have an interlocking grid of streets that enabled defenders to get quickly to the site of an attack. Here at Midhurst the central thoroughfare (now Church Hill) runs north-south. Parallel to it are Duck Lane, Sheep Lane and another lane, now lost, behind Sheep Lane. These three extended further south than they do now. Cutting across them were four east-west routes that connected the lost lane to Duck Lane. The northernmost remains only as that part of Sheep Lane beside Lloyds Bank; it once extended into Duck Lane. (A later development joined it to Rumbolds Hill: that still exists but the middle part has been built over.) The next cross-lane went through the burial ground (an 18th century development), across the north side of the church (then much smaller), via the land now occupied by Lyndale/Birdcage House into Duck Lane. The third, still remaining, links St Ann's Hill with West Street, albeit interrupted by the 1551 Market House. The fourth is partly visible as the spur from Edinburgh Square to South Street.

The grid may have been a deliberate construction or was perhaps the result of the Saxon tendency to build groups of houses. It survived repeated medieval reconstructions of individual properties. Even the late 16th century infilling of Church Hill with a line of

houses (now almost gone) left gaps for the through-lanes. It was not until the 18th century that these gaps were blocked. The spur from Edinburgh Square was closed by the Spread Eagle Hotel (1700-10). The route north of the church was closed by Lyndale/Birdcage House, while the Lloyds Bank lane was terminated on the east by St Ann's House, was narrowed by St Ann's and Russett House and was separated from Duck Lane by three lesser Georgian properties.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Many of the burhs that were not already towns developed into urban centres. It is not known whether Midhurst pre-existed, but its market is likely to have resulted from the three-weekly assembly near St Ann's Hill of the court of the local administrative area, the Easebourne Hundred. Craftsmen from the villages were attracted by the offer of inheritable plots of land on which to build houses and shops, held on 'burgage tenure' at minimal rents. Such traders became the burgesses of the new town, electing their own officials. Gradually, Midhurst developed from burh to borough.



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Text by Bridget Howard  
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Printed by KerryType, Midhurst, 2018



A Midhurst Society Publication

# SAXON MIDHURST



From the Bayeux Tapestry

**R**ecent research suggests that Saxon Midhurst was protected against Viking attack by a massive ditch with an earth-work bank. This surrounded the town. Within its perimeters the streets were laid out in a criss-cross pattern to form an interlocking grid.

Over the years the ditch and the grid pattern have disappeared. The ditch was back-filled. The grid eroded as Midhurst expanded and was finally lost in Georgian developments.

Both features have been rediscovered. The ditch was found by archaeologists in 1997 and the street plan was confirmed from old maps and documents, allied to a study of property boundaries and architecture.

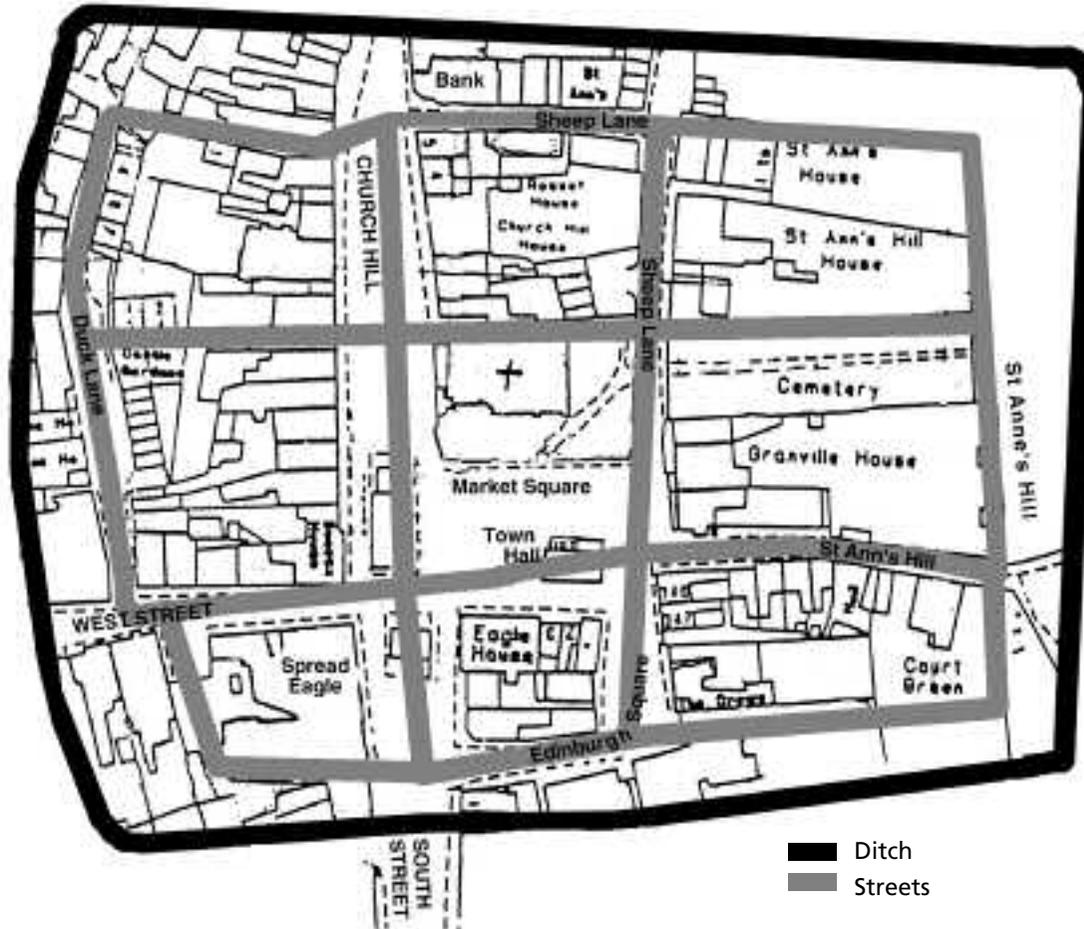
## THE SAXON TOWN

By the 780s, Norse Vikings controlled the north of England and East Anglia. At the same time, Danish Vikings were invading the southern counties from seaborne landings along the Channel shore, pillaging and killing as they went. In 787 these attacks were temporarily halted when King Alfred of Wessex won a great battle at Edington, near Salisbury Plain. Following this, he devised a new strategy to limit their incursions. He set up a standing army and established a chain of fortified sites, known as burhs, stretching from Devon to the Kentish border, each about 20 miles from the next (a day's march). Some, like Winchester and Bath, had existing Roman walls, others, such as Wallingford, Wareham and Cricklade, were defended by newly dug ditches and banks. The burhs had two main functions: as military sites and as a refuge for nearby villagers.

The nearest burh to Midhurst was Chichester, convenient for the coastal plain but not for people north of the Downs who were vulnerable to Vikings landing at its many sea inlets, bypassing Chichester and invading northwards. Midhurst was strategically significant. Just outside the town, an ancient track through the Downs and Weald led into Surrey and, a few miles further west, the Roman road through Iping headed into Berkshire. Furthermore, the location had oversight of the Rother valley. It is likely that Midhurst was designated as one of King Alfred's subsidiary burhs, defended by a ditch, inside whose perimeter the streets formed a grid pattern.

## THE DITCH

Midhurst was then only the area known today as the Old Town; beyond it was almost uninhabited heathland. The ditch surrounded the town in a rectangular shape. It ran along



the foot of St Ann's Hill; at the south-west corner it turned behind Edinburgh Square and crossed South Street. It continued at the rear of West Street until it veered north between Duck Lane and Wool Lane. At the top it turned eastward until it met the stretch behind St Ann's Hill.

It was perhaps as much as 10m wide by 4.3m deep cut into bedrock. This would have taken many men, using primitive tools, months to complete. The excavated earth was piled into an outward-facing rampart, topped with sharpened stakes and brushwood. It was defended by the men of the town, together with those from the villages who had sought safety there. At times of attack, the area would be garrisoned – as in 1001 when 80 Saxons and many more Danes were killed in a battle at Ellingsdean (West Dean), four miles from Midhurst.

Evidence of the western line of the ditch comes from the former names of Duck and Wool Lanes. 'Duck' was originally *dic* meaning a dyke or ditch. This was on the town side of the earthworks. Beyond them, when Midhurst expanded, was Fore Street, so called because it was *before* – i.e. outside – the Saxon town. (The name Wool Lane is a Victorian invention.)

The area enclosed by the ditch was greater than the land occupied by the population. This was deliberate. Space was left for the country people who came into Midhurst when danger threatened. For them it was a