



Outline of Westbury's Past

The earliest evidence of human activity in Westbury are stray finds from the Neolithic period (4,000 - 1,800 bce), in particular stone axes found at Matravers School, Station Road and the Ham. These suggest intermittent rather than permanent occupation, possibly for woodland clearance to create grazing for animals. Much of the north west of the parish was covered by Selwood Forest.

The location of the spring line on the greensand ridge below the chalk upland, the plentiful supply of timber for building and as a source of fuel together with the iron ore deposits at the Ham, are all contributory factors to the choice of this area for settlement. A number of finds from the Iron Age and Romano-British periods (600-410 bce) near to the town suggest occupation sites. Notably at Wellhead where the discovery of a Romano-British pottery kiln and finds from the Iron Age and Saxon periods suggest continuous occupation for 1000 years from about 500 bce. Villa sites at Chalcot and Storridge, and burials discovered when Bitham Brook School was being built, and numerous finds at the Ham provide further evidence of activity in the Romano-British era.

An important route at that time ran along the spring line linking sites at Chalcot, Short Street, Wellhead and Bratton. Another linked Wellhead with Storridge and the Ham along a line now represented by Green Lane, Eden Vale and Station Road. The way from Bratton Hill Fort down Beggar's Knoll into Newton, Alfred Street and ultimately the Ham date from the same period or slightly earlier. The sharp bend half way down Alfred Street accounts for the later siting of the town of Westbury. It caused it to deviate from the line which can still be seen beyond West End as a series of footpaths running parallel to the eastern side of Station Road.

The earliest documentary evidence is in the Domesday Book of 1086. The manor, previously held by Edith, wife of Edward the Confessor, but then by William the Conqueror, comprised about 5,000 acres and a population of about 600. There were 6 mills, 9 bee-keepers, 29 pigmen and an unspecified number of potters. The presence of woodland which provided the vegetation on which pigs were fed. Potters relied on a good supply of clay and wood for firing kilns.

Medieval features can still be identified at Brook Farm comprising the remains of a substantial manor house, a deserted settlement and a deer park. It can be traced on the Tithe map of 1842 which shows fields called Upper and Lower Parks. A moated site can be seen to the east of Penleigh Mill along with signs of retting ponds used in the production of flax.

Agriculture remained the primary source of income although during the later Middle Ages it was challenged by the Woollen Industry. To the east of the town lay the corn and sheep land, which was largely unenclosed until the early 19th century. To the west and north lay the clay lands, which was mainly forested but largely cleared in the Middle Ages and converted to pasture for dairy farming.

The excellent supply of water and good sheep farming land enabled Westbury to play a significant role in the Woollen Industry. The effects of its collapse in the 19th century was eased by the arrival of the railway which crossed land sufficiently rich in iron ore to make extraction and processing on the spot feasible.

Iron ore is represented in the field name Iron Mound in Ham field listed in a survey of 1798. The ore was mined in open cast pits, evidence of which still survives in the lakes locally known as the Mineholes.