WHERE PEOPLE LIVED IN EARLY

STANSTEAD ABBOTTS

BY

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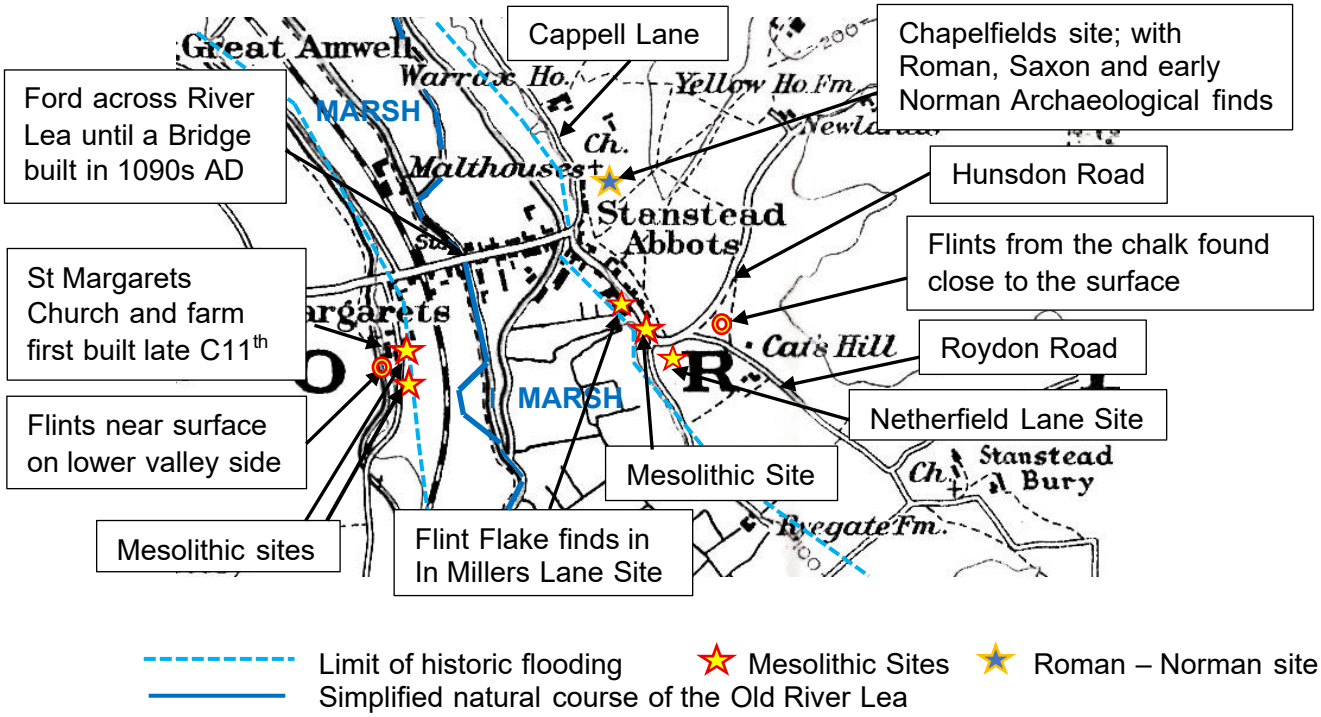
Today we tend to think of the High Street as the centre of Stanstead Abbotts, but was that always the case? Given that below the surface of the High Street is an extensive thick layer of peat indicating a marshy environment and that the valley floor experienced regular flooding, maybe it was not always a favoured location. This article will look at the changing natural environment, professionally gathered archaeological evidence and documented locations of early buildings to discover where people chose to live in the past. The focus in this article is the area around the High Street, the section of Cappell Lane closest to the High Street and Roydon Road between Cats Hill and the Red Lion Inn. Evidence from Roydon Road for human activity stretches as far back as 6,000 BC. A key time in human development as the big shift began from a hunter gatherer lifestyle to settled farmers. Assisted it should be mentioned by a warmer climate where average temperatures were to reach in time 2 degrees centigrade higher than today and world sea levels 3 m [10'] higher. Archaeological evidence in the Chapelfields area shows that human activity existed there into the Roman and Saxon periods and beyond. The core of Stanstead was to develop on the relatively limited flat land above the regular flood level along the base of the valley side. Leading to a small market town in the Doomsday Book of 1086 with its market on a plot of limited flat land at the end of the cross-valley road at its junction with the valley side routeway.

GENERAL LOCATION MAP OF EARLY ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS



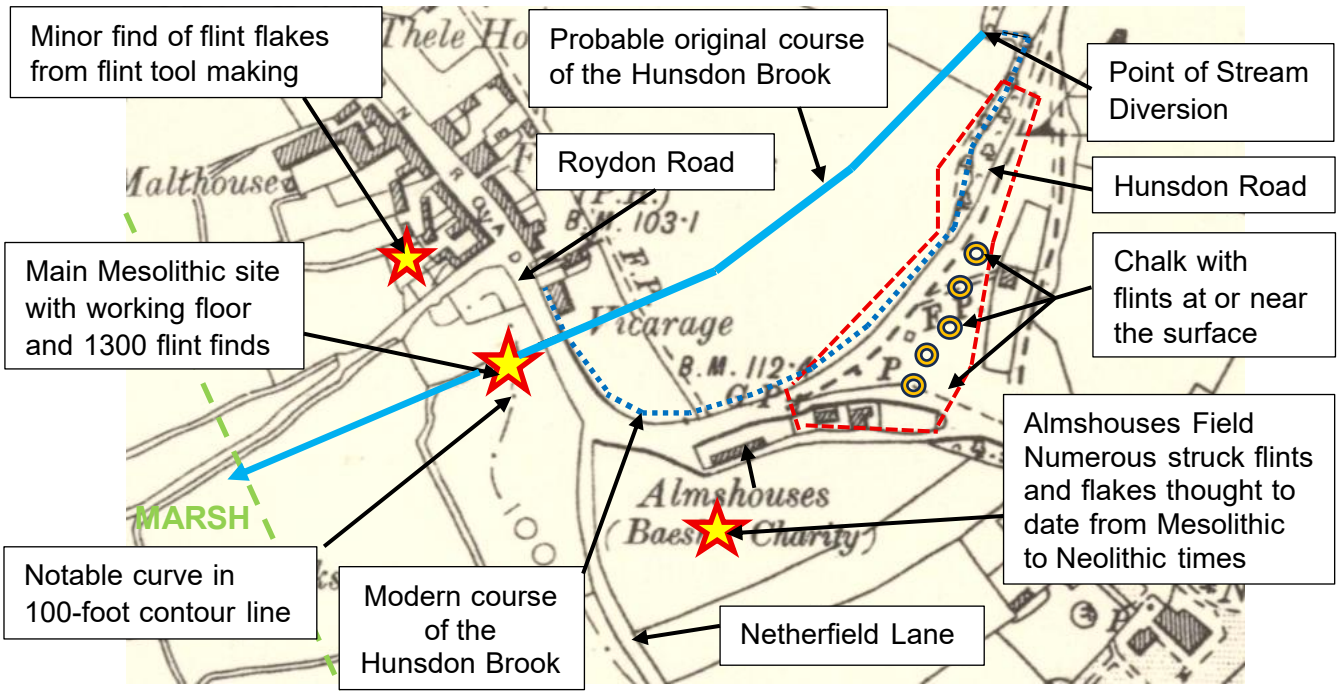
The limit of known moderate historic flooding also approximates to the maximum extent of peat formation in the bottom of the valley. The peat layer being formed by thousands of years of plant matter being compacted in totally saturated conditions. The constantly high-water table meant that the greater part of the floor of the Lea Valley was historically totally saturated with water, which aided the build-up of peat layers. The valley floor was for thousands of years mainly marshland with a high-water table especially in the winter months when much of the valley floor would be covered by standing water.

The evidence for the earliest human activity indicated on the map above is found on both sides of the valley, located on the thin strips of dryer flat land between the marshy valley floor and the wooded valley sides. The oldest archaeological evidence dates from the Mesolithic [middle stone age], with the Roydon Road site dated to about 8,000 **BP** [years ago / **B**efore **P**resent] equivalent to 6,000 BC.

It is worth looking back in time to see how the landscape of a marshy valley floor with wooded uplands and valley sides came to exist 8,000 years ago. We need to go back to the last major glacial period which occurred between 120,000 BP & 19,000 BP. It reached its maximum coldness between 26 & 21 thousand years ago with the polar ice sheet reaching the north coast of Norfolk. During those very cold years the local area was subjected to severely cold tundra conditions with permafrost, the surface layers only melting during the short summers. Considerable quantities of sands and gravels were laid down on the floor of the Lea Valley during those times. After 17,000 BP the climate warmed quickly and temperatures came close to current levels for a time. There was however a return to cold conditions between 12,900 and 11,700 BP, known as the Younger Dryas period. The start of this period saw a very abrupt drop in temperature over about 100 years and the local area was rapidly returned to cold tundra with permafrost. During this time the upper layers of the sands and gravels found below the present flood plain were deposited. This occurred during the annual spring thaws when the surface layers became an icy slushy mix easily eroded and moved around in the fast-flowing spring meltwater streams and rivers. These cold harsh conditions saw our human ancestors leave England, as they had in previous cold periods, heading south to warmer environments, not returning until the world warmed.

The Younger Dryas period came to an end almost as abruptly as it had begun. Subsequently temperatures rose and coniferous trees replaced the very cold tundra. By 8,000 BP [6,000 BC] the climate had warmed sufficiently for deciduous woodland with Elm, Oak., Elder and Lime trees to flourish. In the local area these woodlands covered the higher ground and down the valley sides until they met the limited strip of flat land at the bottom of the slope. The flood plain itself was dominated by marshland with a lazily meandering river flowing through it. Scattered across the marshland would have been small depressions which formed ponds and small lakes. These marshy areas were rich in resources for our human ancestors who could find an abundance of food among the vegetation as well as fish in the river, streams and pools. For these early nomadic hunter gatherers, the thinly wooded corridors of land between marsh and woodland near the bottom of the valley side were ideal routes for moving on foot across the landscape. The woodland itself provided wood for temporary shelters fuel for their fires to ward off the cold and to cook their food.

The Mesolithic site in Roydon Road



8,000 years ago, the level of the flood plain was some 6 to 10 feet [about 2-3 metres] below the current level, so the Mesolithic archaeological site was well above the area liable to flood at the time. The notable curve in the 100-foot contour line suggests it marks the ancient course of the Hunsdon Brook.

At the Mesolithic site in Roydon Road was found some 300 flint flakes and larger partially worked flints; These were associated with bones, remains of a wooden platform and the collapsed structure of what was interpreted as a windbreak structure. These were all found to have been on a gravel bank likely associated with a watercourse. The remains of these 8,000-year-old artefacts were beneath a thin peat layer which itself was overlain by a layer of silty clay topped off by modern soil. The peat layer above the artifacts would have been laid down under marshy conditions when the valley floor and the water table later rose up close to current levels. The layers of silty clay on top of the peat represent more recent times when that location was above the flood plain but still subject to repeated flooding of the River Lea and indeed deposition of fine material by the adjacent stream.

The Roydon Road site was probably a relatively short-lived site with hunter gatherers spending enough time there to produce the limited number of flint tools they needed before moving on. However, the Almshouses Field not that far away has revealed a much broader range of dates from the Mesolithic into the Neolithic. This may suggest a much more permanent site worked by folk who lived locally on a permanent basis. People during this time were making the shift from a nomadic lifestyle to settle in one place and farmed the land but still needed flint tools to aid them in their work. The flint working on this site would no doubt have commenced later than the 8,000-year-old site in Roydon Road and lasted for perhaps several thousand years.

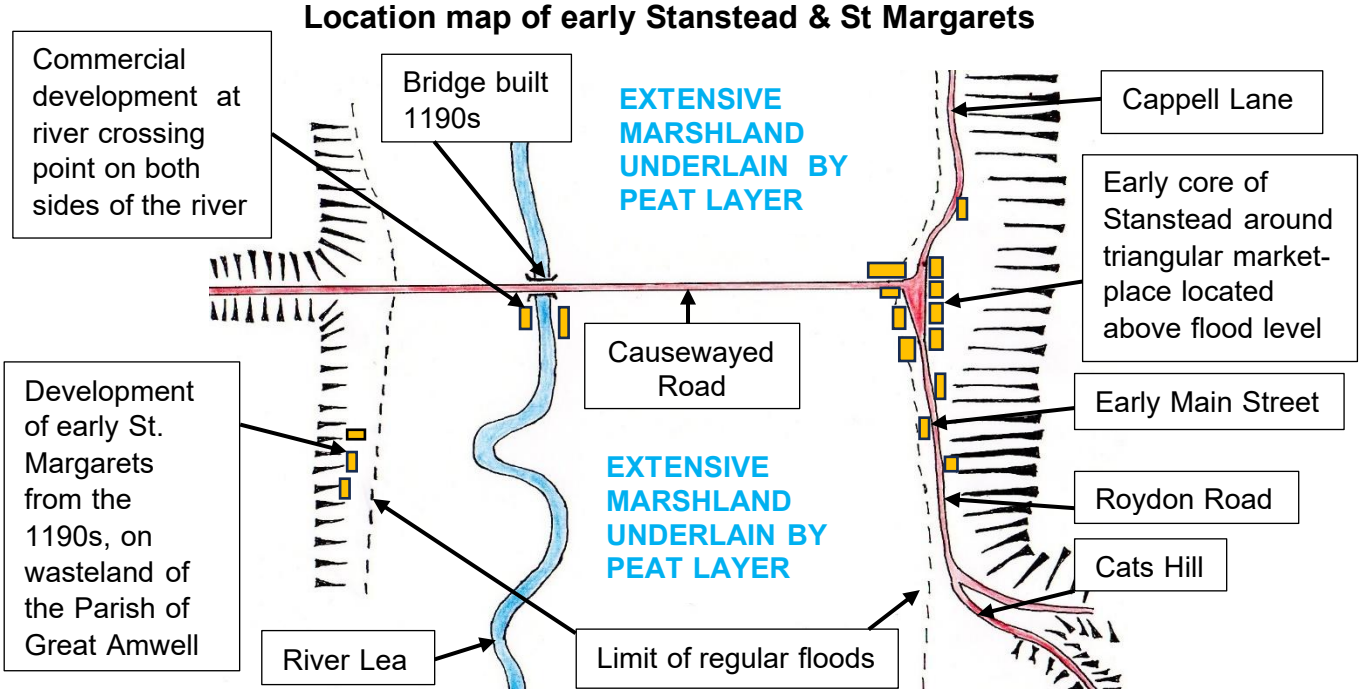
The question arises of course as to why we find these sites at this particular location. The landscape of the valley side in the vicinity of Catts Hill was very different then, than it is today. The area where the flints were dug from the chalk in the lower two thirds on the eastern side of the valley of the Hunsdon Brook where it met the valley of the Lea.[*See map above*]. The chalk on the valley side here was no doubt covered by a thin layer of overburden easily removed with the simple digging tools available. As can be seen on the map above a considerable area [encircled in red] was the site of a much later quarry for the extraction of chalk rather than flints. Today's main road up Cats Hill being on a climbing embankment at the southern end of the abandoned quarry. The present road to Hunsdon does in fact run along the old floor of the quarry before climbing up at the northeastern end of the quarry to join up with the pre-existing road from Hunsdon. It is unfortunate that the best flint knapping sites from the Mesolithic and Neolithic in that area were probably long since dug away by the later chalk quarrying activities. This is also true for the field on the opposite side of the modern Hunsdon Road which was subject to sand and gravel extraction and later relandscaping just prior to the building of the houses in Thele Avenue.

This view of Cats Hill taken about 1900 shows Hunsdon Road dipping down to the left and Roydon Road climbing up the embankment of Cats Hill to the right. To the left of the embankment and to the right along Hunsdon Road there is a flat area and then a steep almost cliff like face. That area is somewhat hidden by tree growth and even more so today as nature takes over the chalk quarry area. The diverted Hunsdon Brook can be seen along the edge of the road to the left. The Mesolithic site in Roydon Road is about 50 yards behind the camera.

Roman and Saxon Times

Archaeological evidence in the area covered in this article for the Roman period is limited to a Roman cremation site close to the church of St Andrews in Cappell Lane. It is usual to find such burials just outside Roman settlements. However, any such settlement of any size has yet to be found. Saxon and early Norman finds have been found in the Chapelfields area and suggest some occupation on the valley side occurred at that time. The line of freshwater springs high up on the valley side in Chapelfields was likely to have made this sunny slope attractive to early settlers during this time in history.

Location map of early Stanstead & St Margarets



DETAILS OF THE PEAT LAYERS BENEATH THE VALLEY FLOOR

In preparation for the Stanstead Abbotts bypass a survey of the underlying layers beneath the four feasible routes both north and south of the village was carried out. It revealed extensive peat deposits saturated with water beneath most of the flood plain. The peat layer varied in thickness from 1.5 m [5 feet 6 inches] to 3.5 m [11 feet 6 inches]. In those areas where the marshland persisted into the C19th the peat layer was founds about 18 inches [0.5 m] or so below the surface.

In 1992 five years after the bypass opened similar investigations took place under the High Street prior to the re vamping of the High Street as less traffic was using it. A peat layer was found under the entire length of the High Street. The top of the peat layer was consistently found to be approximately 1.2 metres [4 feet] below the road surface. However, it must be born in mind that the High Street runs along a causeway that is at least 3 feet 6 inches above the flood plain level. The peat layer itself is about 10 feet [3 metres] thick. It was noted that it thinned out at the Red Lion end.

Within the peat below the flood plain were places at various depths which were predominantly silt and clay particles with a small percentage of peat mixed in. These deposits having been laid down in the lakes, pools, side streams and channels of the main river. As these features silted up and then became covered in later peat they become included in the overall mass of the peat deposit

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Two examples of deposits close but not part of the marshland area give an insight into the layers close to the valley sides. This information concerning Netherfield Lane came from survey trenches dug in the late 1940's, carried out before the laying of a sewer pipe along Netherfield Lane.

At the Cats Hill end of Netherfield Lane, the underlying layers were recorded as 0 to 3 feet of top soil and alluvium, 3 to 7 feet below the surface sand and gravel, with 7 feet of coarse gravel below. **At the other end of Netherfield near Rye Gate Farm** the top 7 feet was alluvium, 7 to 33 feet sand and gravels and below 33 feet chalk rock.

Stanstead particularly developed where the cross-valley road met the valley side road. It was at this location that a rare flat space existed between the flood plain and the valley side. A triangular open space was created at the road junction, characteristic of the shape of a Saxon marketplace, that formed the focus of the settlement. Development also occurred on the road between the marketplace and Cats Hill, which was in time to become Stanstead Street, the main street of Stanstead Abbotts. The settlement is likely to have become important about the year 930 after Hertford became an important local commercial centre. The Doomsday Book of 1086 states that there were burgesses at Stanstead strongly suggesting a well-developed marketplace. A market trading in locally grown agricultural goods with the river playing an important part in moving those goods to the London market.

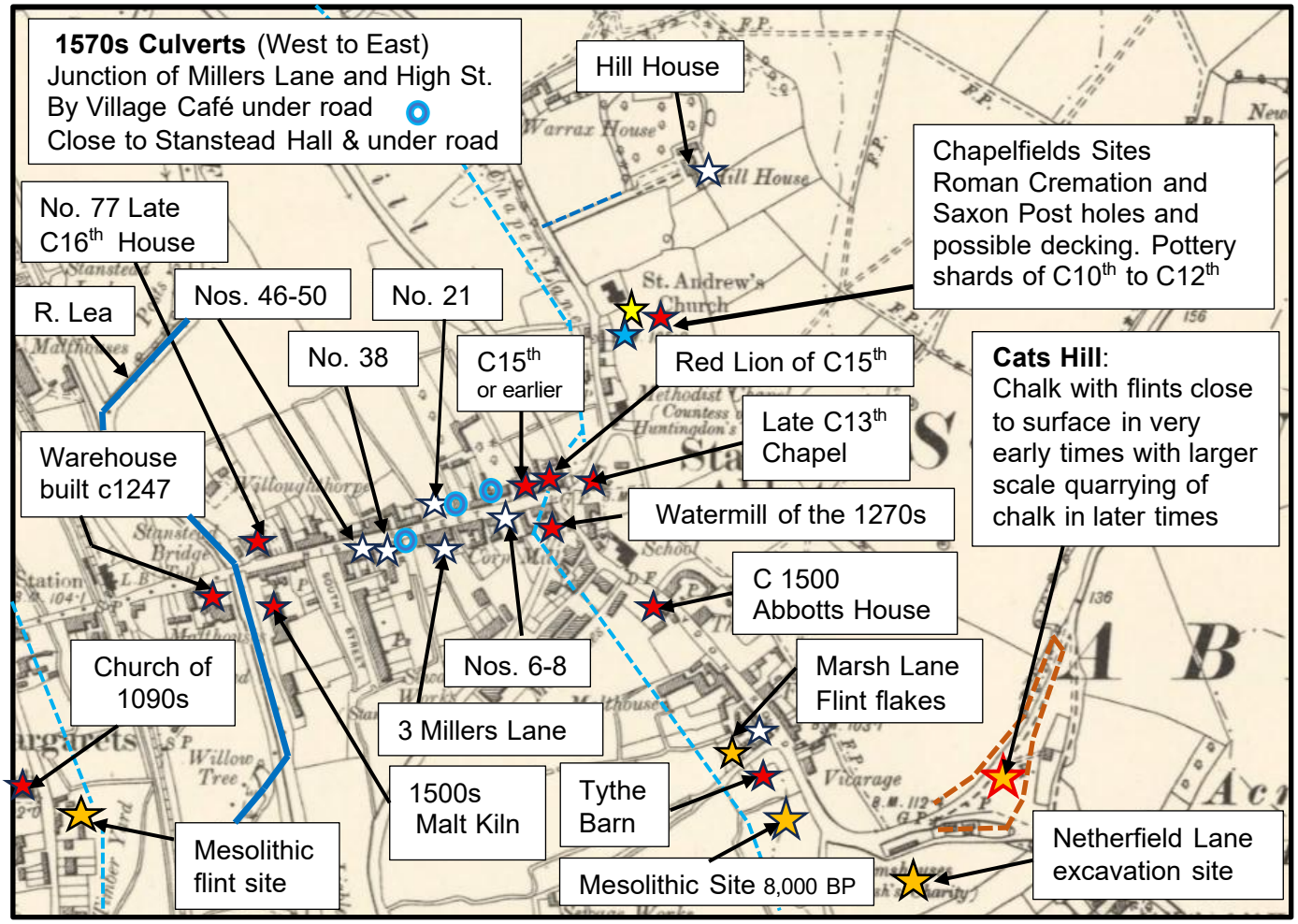
On the other side of the valley Roger De Burun. who became the Lord of The Manor of Hailey shortly after 1086, had begun to develop the wasteland down by the ford across the river Lea. By 1100 he had built a built a church, a farm and no doubt a few workers cottages. He had also built a bridge across the Lea replacing the ford and had begun to create a few simple drainage channels for the riverside marshes to make them useful for summer pastureland for about 6-7 months in the summer.

These two settlements formed the characteristics of paired valley side settlements both trying to gain economic advantage from the agricultural value of the land on their respective sides of the river. Stanstead had already created a commercial wharf and associated buildings by the ford for at least 170 years before Roger De Burun's new development and maybe longer. The De Burun family named the new settlement by the river as Thele [later St Margarets] and also constructed commercial premises and arranged facilities to load and unload boats for the shipment of goods. As frequent flooding took place in those times it is perhaps not surprising that the bulk of both settlements were sited on the land at the base of the valley sides at least four feet above the level of most of the flooding.

The photograph to the left was taken during the 1968 flood which was the last of the major floods before the 1970s flood relief scheme. Where the people are standing by the car and lamppost is about 3 feet above the level of the road in the middle of the High Street. The angle of the car indicates that the road dips down to the High Street quite sharply at this point. The level of the flood in 1968 had been about a foot deeper at its maximum than seen in this picture. The Red Lion pub to the right built many centuries ago was located at the edge of the reach of the deepest floods. Floods of this extent and depth would have been common [*two a decade*] back in the C11th to C16th which was a strong reason for locals not to build their homes on the flood plain along the road we call the High Street today.

The 1928 picture to the right shows that year's deep flood from the river bridge. Once again, this picture was taken some time after the flood had been at its maximum. The shop to the left and pub right are on the site of earlier buildings both in some way related with river trade businesses for many centuries. The risk and extra costs of frequently being flooded on the ground floor, being offset by the earning power that came with the riverside location

LOCATION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND OLDER BUILDINGS UPTO THE 1570s



KEY

- No Archaeological evidence of any real age found by professional archaeological surveys.
- 1066 to 1575
- Drainage culverts associated with the 1570s navigation scheme.
- 410 to 1066 Post Roman, Anglo Saxon & Viking period.
- Roman 43 to 410
- Mesolithic [Site in Roydon Road dated to 8,000 BP (years ago) = 6,000 BC]

Approximate limit of traditional large scale flooding every decade
Extent of later chalk quarrying at Cats Hill
Old course of River Lea

The map above brings together that part of history already covered up to the time of the Doomsday Book and also shows the known development between 1086 until the 1570s navigation scheme and the associated flood relief and land drainage attempts. The key points that the map shows us are as follows.

1. The red stars show the locations of archaeology & documented architectural evidence for the 1066 to 1575 period. Settlement occurring between the edge of the flood plain and the valley side in both St Margarets and Stanstead. The main settlement in Stanstead took place at the road junction at the end of the cross-valley road and along Roydon Road as far as Catts Hill. In addition, commercial activity saw limited development on the banks of the River Lea close to the bridging point of the main road that crosses the valley floor and was a main long distance routeway between Hertfordshire and Essex.

2. A lack of pre 1600 archaeological evidence [**see white stars**] found along the High Street, suggests that this once marshy area saw the High Street developed in more recent centuries, after drainage was improved and flood risk reduced.

The white stars on the map are labelled with the current street numbers. The following list gives a summary of the archaeological finds found at each of the numbered locations. The 1840 references indicate information derived from the tythe award in Stanstead Abbotts which took place that year.

HIGH STREET

6-8 **Amwell View School Charity Shop** No older archaeological evidence than the present building. Present building described as originally a single timber framed house of the late C16th to C17th
No older archaeology found on the site than the age of the current building.

14 Old Doctors surgery today **Estate Agents and Dry Cleaners.**
Doctor's surgery building dated to early 1800s ***with no earlier archaeology found***.
[Alluvium deposits exhibited fine layering indicative of repeated flooding.]

21 **Village Café.** ***No archaeology found that predated the 1700s.***
In *1840 building on the site was part of a homestead yard.*

38 **Toms' Sweet Shop,** abutting the Oak Public House
A series of building levelling deposits and a Victorian brick structure.
No pre 1600 archaeological evidence found

46-50 Extension of Co-op store. The plot of land in 1840 was part of an orchard.
No pre-Victorian archaeology found

MILLERS LANE [*close to High Street*]

3 Currently a fairly modern residential property
No archaeological evidence found. *In 1840 this plot was part of a field*

All of the above locations suggest no settlement on those sites in the time before the known history of the buildings on the site and certainly no settlement before 1570's in all locations.

The 1570s are a key decade in the development of the current High Street as it was then that a significant project to improve navigation on the River Lea took place. This was to lead to improved navigation on the Lea but also raised serious concerns about the higher risk of flooding particularly in the Middle Lea section between Chadwell and Wormley. The first Sir Edward Baesh was the Lord of the Manor at Stanstead Abbotts and took a key role in pushing through the legislation for the new navigation scheme despite much push back from the road lobby who did not want more effective river born competition. The navigation scheme was based on the idea of making a natural river into a navigation unhindered by locks, weirs or any other impediment. Unfortunately, this idea was never going to be successful, but this was not understood at the time. However, both Sir Edward Baesh at Stanstead Bury and William Frankland at Rye House understood that the scheme was likely to raise the flood risk considerably. They both started improving the drainage of their riverside meadows. Sir Edward Baesh also set about creating a rather intensive and ambitious plan to drain the land either side of the road across the valley [today's High Street]. It suggests that as a relatively new Lord of the Manor he was not only reducing the flood risk but looking to the future expansion of the main settlement in the parish.

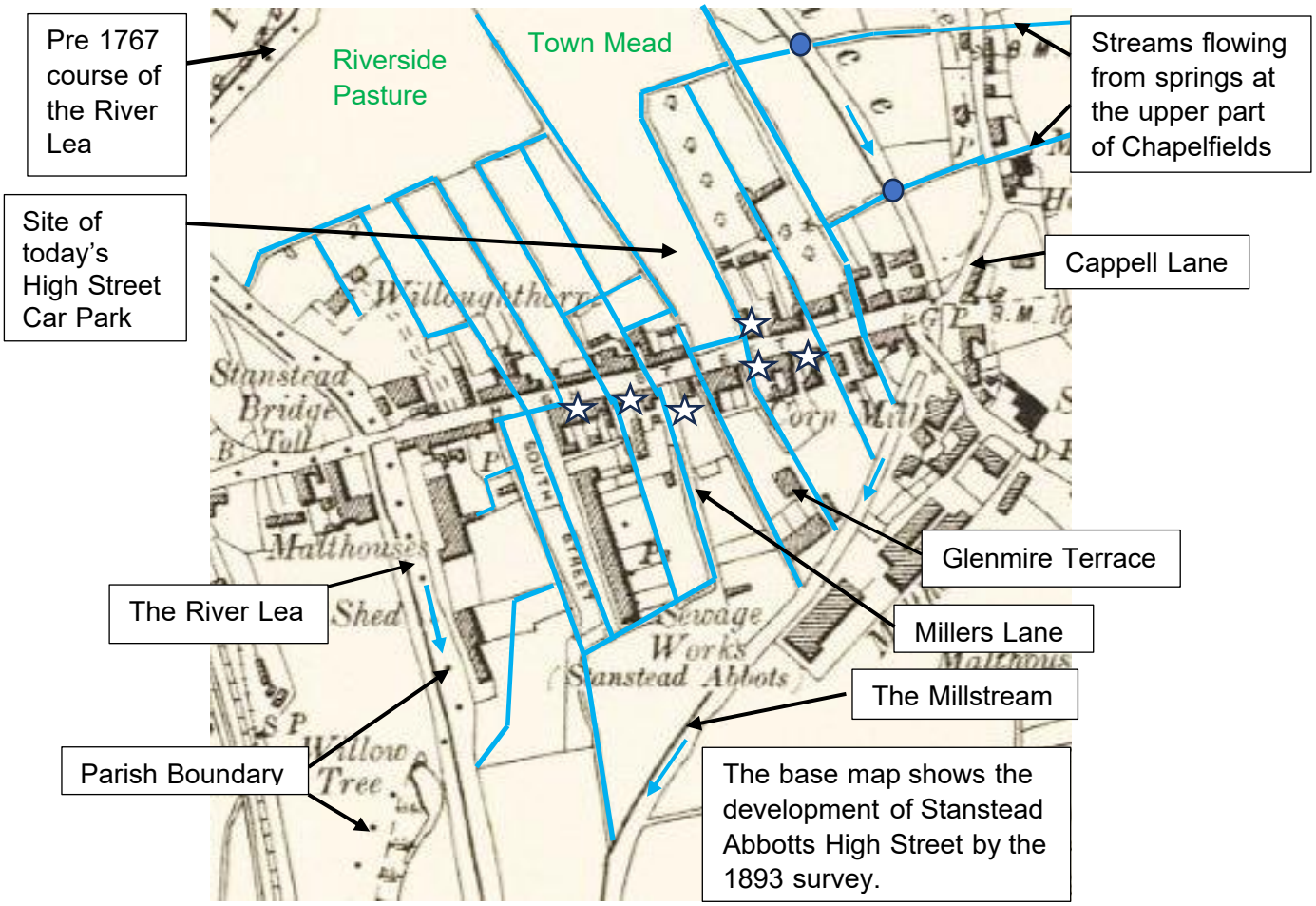
Part of the work of improving drainage included brick culverts being constructed under the road. An archaeological assessment of the culvert that runs beside Stanstead Hall before going under the High Street was carried out. The brick culvert was closely examined under the cottage to the rear of Stanstead Hall and was dated to as early as the late C16th based on the nature of the brickwork. The culvert was seen to run close to the boundary wall to the west of the property before going under the road. The internal dimensions of the tunnel like culvert were 4 foot wide by 3' 6" high with rounded top.

Iris Lyon a well-known village character mentioned this culvert as part of one of her 'Bygone Days' articles in the Stanstead Abbotts parish magazine of May 1997.

'One of the water culverts, channels or drainage tunnels (of which I am told there are 5 or 6 in the village) runs under the cottage behind Stanstead Hall . When work was being carried out in recent years, one workman said he was going to explore it and see where it went; but he soon returned because the noise from the ever-flowing vehicles in the High Street was so bad he changed his mind. What a shame, it could have been interesting'.

Two other culverts have been seen to contain similar bricks forming the same type of culverts. The first of these was visible when the top curved roof of a culvert was exposed during roadworks designed to improve the road surface in 1991/2 some 5 years after the opening of the bypass. The location of this discovery was at the junction of Millers Lane and the High Street close to the Oak Public House. The second conduit known to be explored in recent years allows water in the stream that flows beside the Village Café to pass under the High Street. This was explored using a mobile camera to locate the position of a blockage in the conduit which had caused flooding of the car park in March 2014.

MAP OF DRAINAGE SYSTEM EITHER SIDE OF THE HIGH STREET



Inverted syphons take side valley streams under the Millstream

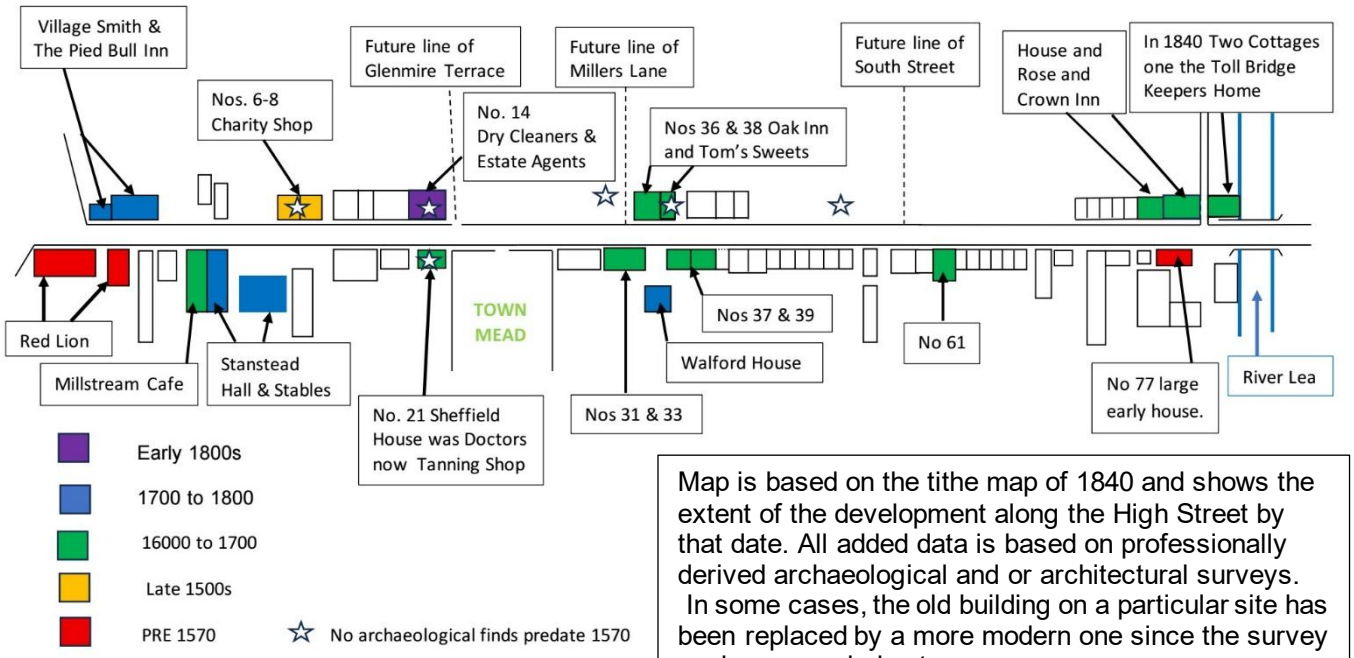
☆ Archaeological investigation found no evidence of pre 1570 occupation

The lack of archaeological evidence for pre 1570s settlement on the valley floor along the High Street tends to suggest that folk avoided the marshy land of the flood plain. That is until sufficient drainage had been provided to considerably reduce the frequent flood risk.

The map gives an impression of the dense drainage scheme that once existed either side of the High Street. It was Sir Edward Baeshe in the mid to late 1570s who made a substantial start to provide this dense drainage system, which included brick-built culverts to carry water under the road. It is likely that as subsequent new building took place additional drainage channels were provided by the new residents. At the same time some channels seem to have been abandoned, and modifications made to the pattern of the channels to compensate. The map above records those channels recorded on historical maps and gives an idea of how extensive the drainage scheme grew to be. Flood risk was steadily reduced over the centuries especially when navigation improvements took place in the 1760s and the 1850s. During the 1800s the New River Company began to increasingly use steam pumps to extract water from deep underground to supply London with even more fresh water. This reduced the height of the water table which in turn reduced the depth of flood water. In recent times, especially after the mid-1970s flood relief work on the river Lea most of the drainage channels have been either totally abandoned or not maintained. Those that still exist in diminished working order can be most easily seen today near the children's playground, by the High Street car park, alongside the Village Café and at the far end of South Street. The neglect of the drainage system has unfortunately left some of the homes in the High Street vulnerable to surface water flooding as was notably the case in March 2014.

Following the development of the drainage scheme either side of the High Street in the 1570s buildings began to appear alongside the causeway across the valley. The new growth of Stanstead Abbotts out along the High Street seems to have been hesitant at first, but accelerated development was seen in the 1600s. Every step to reduce the risk and depth of flooding encouraging more building along the High Street. The following map gives an indication of the professionally assessed building construction dates and archaeological information relevant to the period of the late 1500s to the early 1800s.

MAP SHOWING AGE OF SELECTED BUILDINGS IN THE HIGH STREET



Map is based on the tithe map of 1840 and shows the extent of the development along the High Street by that date. All added data is based on professionally derived archaeological and or architectural surveys. In some cases, the old building on a particular site has been replaced by a more modern one since the survey work was carried out.

The map above gives some indication of the centuries during which development took place in the High street. It is interesting to note that even by 1840 about 25% of the roadside in the High street remained undeveloped, with 11 of that 25% having a drainage ditch running alongside the road. *[The percentages stated above were calculated from the tithe map of 1840].*

It was not until the 1970s that buildings fully lined the sides of the High Street although much of the infill after 1840 did in fact occur during the 1800s rather than later. In addition, building took place on the flood plain away from the High Street notably in South Street commencing in the 1860s and Glenmire Terrace in the early 1900s. It was during the reign of Queen Victoria that the importance of Roydon Road as the Main Street of Stanstead Abbotts was to fade away; replaced by today's High Street.

A point of local interest

An interesting change that took place in the mid-1800s in the High Street was related to the site of the legendary shop of Burtons the Newsagent at No. 40. A shop fondly remembered by the older members of the village community. On the 1840 tithe map its location appears as a gap between adjacent buildings. That gap was just wide enough to allow access for horse drawn coaches/carts; with up to two horses abreast. This passageway allowed access to the rear of the buildings where a cottage existed with a garden and pasture beyond, belonging to and occupied by William Mason. In the mid-1800s the gap between the buildings saw the construction of a fairly small and decidedly narrow shop. At about the same time a service road was built along the back of the High Street Shops from South Street as far as No.40. Burton's shop was considerably extended in the C20th, by Mr Ken Burton to form a long thin shop. What was once Burtons Newsagents and Tobacconists is today occupied by La Pizzeria & Kebabs.

It was not until the C20th that expansion of the village began to encroach noticeably on the valley sides with the building of the Thele Estate on the eastern end of Chapelfields. The western end being subsequently developed towards the end of the C20th with building taking place right up to St Andrews Church. This later development being built over the site of the Roman, Saxon and Early Norman archaeological sites mentioned previously in the article.

It is worth returning to the other side of the valley to consider the growth of St Margarets from its small beginnings in the 1090s under Roger de Burun the Lord of The Manor of Hailey. Despite great plans to develop that part of his land down by the river his plans were beset by a series of setbacks. The small settlement around the church of St Mary grew only slowly and by 1798 only 74 people were living in the entire parish of St Margarets. There was an initial attempt in the late C11th to provide simple drainage of the flood plain in St Margarets, but this was designed to extend the summer grazing period and was never improved, merely maintained. Not surprisingly there was little development of the settlement for many centuries. What development there was took place on the thin ribbon of land between the base of the valley side and the edge of the area of frequent flooding. The arrival of the railway in 1843 eventually encouraged later C19th house building in a limited way in Station Road and Hoddesdon Road. It was not until the late C20th after the risk of flooding had been drastically reduced that considerable residential development took place on either side of the railway line.

A view of Stanstead Abbotts taken on the 7th June 1981 looking from Chapelfields along the length of the High Street. At the top of the picture can be seen a small part of St Margarets beyond the river bridge. By studying the picture carefully, the side roads of South Street, Millers Lane and Glenmire Terrace can be identified to the left of the High Street. At the bottom Roydon Road can be seen to the left and Cappell Lane to the right. A hint of the drainage channels can be seen in the rectangular pattern of the trees and bushes to the right of the High Street.

The growth of both Stanstead Abbotts and St. Margarets were both controlled by the physical geography of the Lea Valley as well as economic factors. The river Lea that provided the transport route for local agricultural products to be moved to London meandered its way through the marshy flood plain. The very marshes that restricted the growth of Stanstead Abbotts and St Margarets for so many centuries. The flooding did not however stop the construction of wharfage and associated warehouses on both side of the river by the bridge, the economic advantage outweighing the risk of being flooded at regular intervals. Sir Edward Baeshe, the first owner and resident Lord of the Manor of Stanstead Abbotts for many centuries, no doubt had the financial incentive to improve the value of his estate. This probably explains his strong involvement in the 1570s navigation improvements and his drainage schemes .The flood plain either side of the High Street no doubt looked an inviting area to drain for future development. In later centuries it was to see the main street of Stanstead Abbotts move from Roydon Road to today's cross valley High Street. Unfortunately, St Margarets on the other side of the valley was unable to turn its location to its economic advantage, never really flourishing as intended by the De Burun family, who started the development in the 1090s. It is worth a thought that what started as two valley side settlements separated by a marshy valley floor about 900 years ago, had effectively joined up as one continuously built-up area by the late C20th, with the River Lea running through it.

Stuart Moye April 2026