

The second burh of Nottingham

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In this year [920 A.D.], before midsummer, King Edward went with the army to Nottingham, and ordered to be built the borough on the south side of the river, opposite the other, and the bridge over the Trent between the two boroughs (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* – ed. D. Whitelock, 1979, p. 217.).

This is probably one of the fullest accounts of a topographical nature relating to *burh*-building in the Chronicle, and immediately poses the question as to where this second *burh* was located. It is clear from the topography of the area that this bridge would have been connected to the northern *burh* by a causeway built between the Trent and the cliffs on

which the original *burh* stood, as well as a second bridge across the river Leen (see Fig. 1). As Martin Biddle has pointed out (1976, p. 217), this arrangement can be regarded as a type example which demonstrates the primary defensive function of bridges associated with *burhs* at other places. The importance of the close functional (and therefore topographical) association of *burhs* with bridges in the ninth and early tenth centuries has also been brought out by Professor Nicholas Brooks, who has stated that 'Bridge and fortress were a single military unit; together they secured the river crossing for the armies of the kingdom and together they prevented

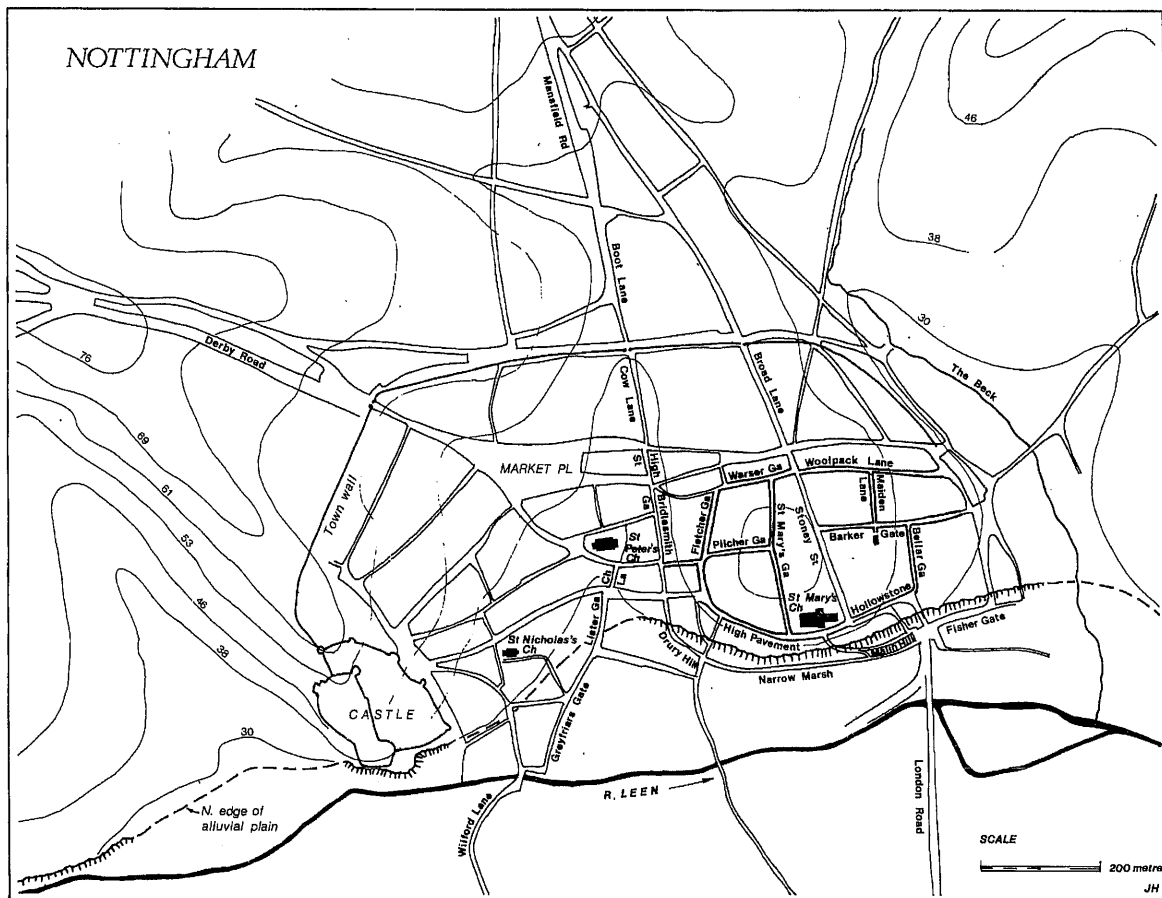


Fig. 1. Nottingham: the walled town and the site of the *burh*.

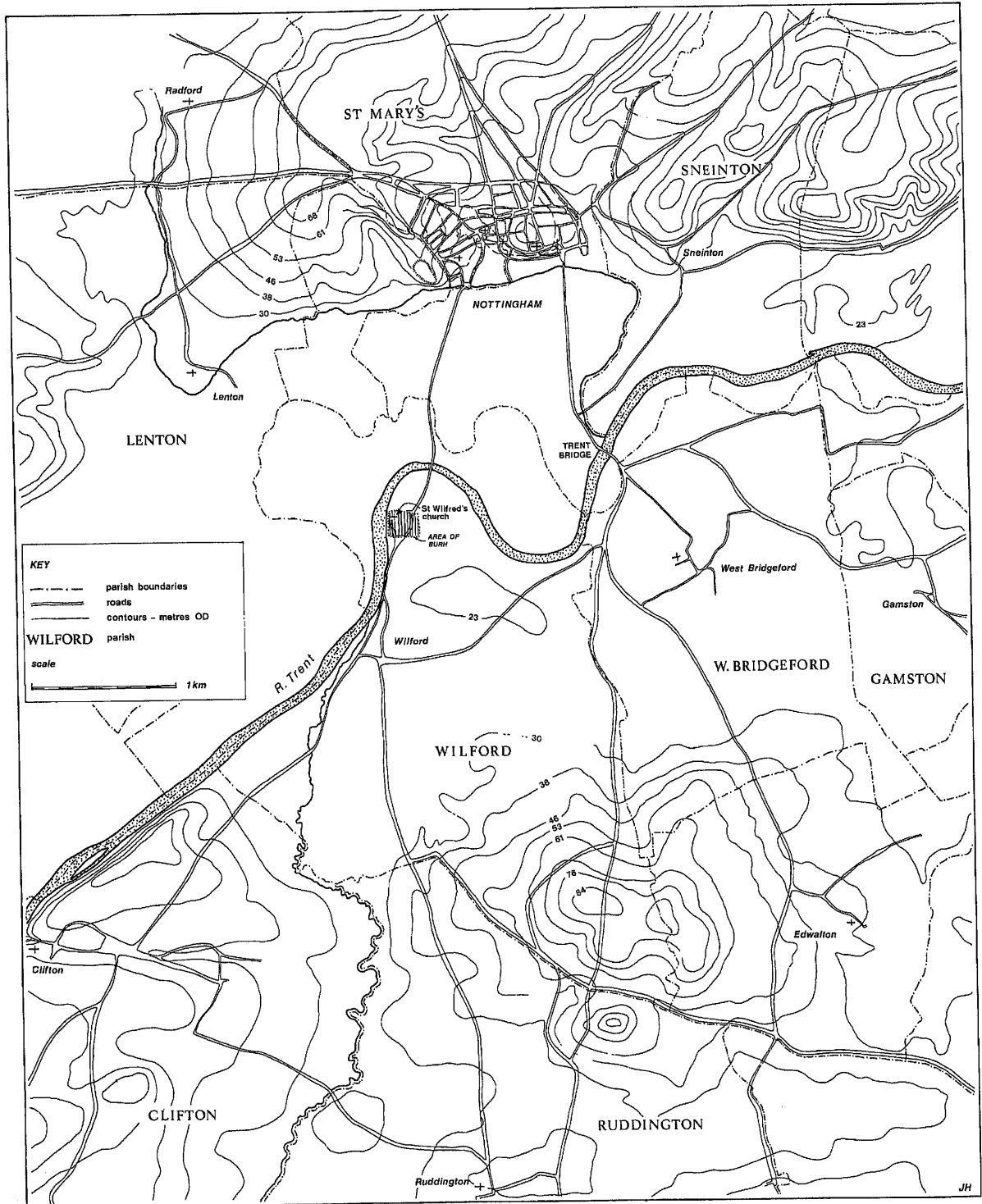


Fig. 2. The location of the second burh.

the movement of enemy troops either by land or by river. This feature of English defensive organization became of paramount importance in the English resistance to the Vikings' (1971, p. 72). This being so, it is clear that one of the most important defensive functions of such a *burh*-bridge unit at Nottinghamshire would have been to deny Viking warships access to their military base at Repton further upstream. Elsewhere, the military significance of such *burh*-bridge units has been well documented for Mercia as a whole (*ibid.* 1971), and finds parallels in southern England in the previous decade (c. A.D. 900-911) (Haslam 1984a), as well as on the Continent (Hassall & Hill 1970).

The location of this second *burh* on the ground is therefore a question which has more than local significance. The fact that the town marks the lowest effective crossing point of the Trent means that its strategic and economic significance has always to a large extent been the result of its position at the convergence of land and water routes (Barley & Straw 1969, p. 1; Edwards 1966, p. 363). The elucidation of the close topographical relationship implied by the evidence of the *Chronicle* between the northern *burh*, causeway, bridges and southern *burh*, and by inference the routeways leading to and from them, should throw light on the layout of the primary Mercian, Danish and Edwardian *burhs* on the north bank, as well as the nature both of such defensive complexes and of early urban layout in general. The following analysis is a further test, using a clearly defined case study, of the geographical or spatial validity of the largely historical model put forward by Brooks.

Where therefore was this *burh* and bridge located? Barley and Straw (1969, p. 2) assume that it was located at West Bridgeford, but the question is not further discussed, neither is West Bridgeford (or even the site of the associated bridge) shown on the accompanying plans. This view appears to have been first put forward by W. Stevenson (in an early example of the topographical analysis of a medieval town), who suggested (1918, p. 59) that the crossing at Trent Bridge was that mentioned in the *Chronicle*, and assumed that this was the only routeway leading southwards in the Saxon and medieval periods. The primacy of the present Trent Bridge is also assumed without question as a basis for the analysis of early trackways in the area in Straw's more detailed discussion (1967).

There are, however, considerable difficulties with this identification. These are posed, firstly, by the absence at West Bridgeford of any suitable site of a defensible nature which can be associated with the existing bridge over the Trent and the causeway on the north bank of the river. The present village lies on a slightly raised river terrace with no discernible features (except on the north towards the river) which would offer a suitable defensive position. There is nothing to suggest that the layout of the village has been affected by those spatial constraints which are implied by the existence there of a planted defended settlement of the tenth century. Secondly, it is clear from Fig. 2 that it is the southern end of the

bridge itself, rather than West Bridgeford or the supposed *burh* there, which is the focus of roads approaching from the south. The situation is not consistent with the function of such a *burh* of controlling both water and land traffic. Thirdly, the village is situated so far south of the river as to have severely limited the defensive potential of any fortress sited there. And fourthly, the dedication of the church of West Bridgeford is to St Giles, from which it can be inferred that the church, and probably therefore the settlement as well, is no earlier than the later eleventh or early twelfth century (Arnold-Forster 1899, ii pp. 46-51).¹

These observations are not by themselves a demonstration of the non-existence of a *burh* at West Bridgeford. Its defences need not have survived beyond the middle of the tenth century, and its place-name could certainly be taken to imply the existence of a crossing-place of the river which was replaced at some time by a bridge.² Its church could also conceivably have been rededicated in the post-Conquest period. However, there exists a rather better candidate, from both a historical, topographical and geographical point of view, at Wilford to its west (see Fig. 2). From both its name and the dedication of its church to St Wilfred it can be inferred that this was a settlement of possibly middle Saxon or even earlier origin which was associated with an early and customary crossing-place of the river.³ A likely reason for the dedication lies in the possibility that it commemorates a visit by Bishop Wilfred either on one of his journeys between the south and York and Northumbria, or while he was bishop of Leicester (A.D. 692-705). If, as is suggested by analogies with other places, Nottingham was already the site by then of a royal centre with possibly a minster church, this would have been a likely place for preaching activity (Arnold-Forster 1899; Brownhill 1902, p. 25).⁴ As will be argued below, the focusing of routeways onto this early ford from both north and south provides a context for the location of the *burh* there.

The site of the church, which it is suggested was the location of both the early settlement and the *burh*, is on the northern end of a naturally defensible spur of land. A *burh* in this position would have been well placed to defend a bridge over the river immediately to its north. This hypothesis is considerably strengthened by detailed inspection of the ground, which suggests the presence of what can be interpreted as a defended enclosure surrounding the church (see Fig. 2). The north-western side of this enclosure is marked by a bank some 1.5 metres in height which forms the northern limit of the churchyard, and is continued around the western side of the church on the crest of the steeply-sloping river bank.⁵ The southern edge of the enclosure must have been located at the crest of an appreciable dip in the modern ground surface to the south of the church. The position of the eastern side is less certain, the area today being covered by modern housing. These inferences, particularly the existence of the bank on the north and west sides, could be relatively easily tested by excavation.

These somewhat tentative lines define an area of some 4.5 hectares through which passes the road leading from the bridge. In both its size and its relationship to the physical as well as the built topography it conforms to the general pattern shown by other *burbs* of the period in the Midlands. The implication of the inclusion of the church within this enclosure is that the creation of the *burb* would, as elsewhere, have been accompanied by the creation or reorganisation of a settlement within its defences as a garrison whose responsibilities would have included the upkeep of the defences of the *burb* and bridge.

The hypothesis of the location of Edward's second *burb* at Wilford has certain implications for any analysis of the early history and topography of Nottingham as a whole. It seems to be generally accepted that the Trent crossing at Nottingham was the focus of an important north-south route, possibly of early post-Roman origin, running northwards from Northampton and Leicester to Nottingham, and thence to Blyth, Bawtry, Doncaster and York (Barley & Straw 1969, p. 1, map 1 and inset; Stenton 1906, pp. 238-9; Straw 1967, pp. 26-7). As Stenton has pointed out (*ibid.*), this was described as the '*via versus Eboracum*' in the Domesday survey. Earlier writers (especially Straw 1967 who follows to a large extent Stevenson 1918, and Barley & Straw 1969) have assumed without question the primacy of the route over the present Trent Bridge, nor has any consideration yet been given to the evidence relating to the routes on the south side of the river. It is argued here that the evidence of landscape features on both sides of the Trent supports the contrary hypothesis that the primary north-south routeway led across the ford at Wilford, rather than across the present Trent Bridge. The existence of this early routeway through Wilford provides the essential context for the siting of the *burb* there in the early tenth century.

Straw has argued (1967, pp. 24-8 and Figs. 2.4, 2.5) that this routeway (which he describes as a 'pre-Anglian trackway') ran northwards from the present Trent Bridge and London Road, passing up the cliff along Malin Hill (which is primary to Hollowstone), and through the heart of the early *burb* along Stoney Street, thence along Broad Street, York Street and Mansfield Road (see Fig. 1). There are however several inherent objections to the assumption that this represents the primary north-south routeway through Nottingham. In the first place, on the premise that this routeway is earlier than any settlement on the site of Nottingham (as Straw and others suggest), it is quite contrary to common sense to suppose that it should have developed 'naturally' up what was one of the most precipitous rock faces in the area (which rose steeply some 15 metres from the flood plain of the Trent/Leen rivers), when a far easier alternative lay up the more gentle slopes of either of the valleys immediately to the east or west.

In the second place, since the northern end of Malin Hill (suggested by Straw as being the primary way up the cliff face) does not in fact meet with the southern end of Stoney Street (see Fig. 1), it is

difficult to maintain the existence of a through routeway along this line. To counter this objection, Straw has postulated a 'former extension of Stoney Street to join with Malin Hill' (1967, Fig. 2.5), although he gives no supporting evidence for its existence.⁶ However, it must be said that unless hard evidence to the contrary can be produced, there is no reason to suppose that the course of Malin Hill and Stoney Street were any different in the medieval period or earlier to what they were in the eighteenth century (Barley & Straw 1969, maps; see also Fig. 1), or that they formed a continuous alignment at any period. From the evidence of this disjunction, and from the hindrance which the cliff face must have presented to free movement in a north-south direction, it must be concluded that the roads leading from the northern end of London Road to the top of the hill, as well probably as Stoney Street itself, can only have developed as relatively late additions to the urban landscape of Nottingham. The primary routeway and earliest river crossing must therefore be sought elsewhere.

As is clear from the contours (Fig. 1), probably the easiest way from the Trent/Leen valley up to the higher ground to the north was up a natural valley to the west of St Mary's. An early, if not primary, route in this position, leading from the ford at Wilford, would not only fit with the overall morphology of Nottingham, but can also be recognised as being an early element in the 'extra-mural' topography. This route is represented by the line of Wilford Lane which after crossing the Leen runs northwards along Greyfriars Lane, Lister Gate (following the course of the Rowell stream), and past the east end of St Peter's church into the market area (where its alignment is obscured for a short way by market infill), and thence along High Street, Cow Lane, Boot Lane and Mansfield Road. Another route leading westwards branches from it at St Peter's church to join the supposed early east-west routeway along Derby Road.

The antiquity of this route can be inferred from several features. Firstly, it is the easiest and most 'natural' way from south to north; nowhere is the slope of this route more than two degrees (Straw 1967, Fig. 2.6). Secondly, it leads from a ford at Wilford which is itself arguably of some antiquity. Thirdly, it joins the postulated east-west route running along the north bank of the Trent (Barley & Straw 1969, p. 2) at an open market area on relatively flat ground, which, whatever the date of the *burb* itself, can be considered as being a primary morphological feature of the urban landscape.⁷ Fourthly, these inferences are to a certain extent validated by the derivation of the name Lister Gate from the old Norse *lyta*, a dyer, and *gata*, street, (Barley & Straw 1969, p. 4) – the dyers presumably utilising the water of the Rowell – from which it can be inferred that the street was in existence in the Viking period.

There is, furthermore, evidence from which it can be inferred that roads originally approaching Wilford from the south have been diverted at some stage to meet at Trent Bridge further to the east (see Fig. 2). The long distance route from the south to

York, mentioned above, passed through Rempstone in the south of the county and approached Nottingham through Ruddington just south of the Trent (Stenton 1906, pp. 238-9). There are grounds for suggesting that a primary route leading northwards to Wilford past Ruddington church has been diverted to the east along a new course leading to Trent Bridge. This latter alignment is significantly not followed, except coincidentally, by the adjacent boundary of Wilford and West Bridgeford parishes, and takes what must be considered an unnatural course over or near the tops of the highest hills in the area. In contrast, this suggested primary road is joined by another leading from the south-east which is not only followed along most of its length by a parish boundary, but also take a more natural route along a watershed and the lower slopes of the same hill. From these observations it can be inferred that the road leading to Trent Bridge from Ruddington is a secondary feature within the historic landscape. It could also be argued that the road leading from Clifton north-eastwards to Wilford has been diverted from the former Wilford crossing to lead to Trent Bridge, a change which could explain the shift towards the south of the presumably original settlement centre of Wilford from around the church to the present village at the point of departure of this new road.

These considerations do not of course demonstrate that this causeway and double bridge leading from West Bridgeford were not in existence as early as the tenth century. The artificiality of an arrangement implied in the existence of a system of two *burbs* linked by bridges and a long causeway which performed new defensive functions means that the siting of these elements need not necessarily have conformed with an already existing pattern, and could well have altered them in fundamental ways. However, the absence of a suitable site for a *burh* at West Bridgeford, its isolation from the road network approaching the southern end of Trent Bridge, and the positive evidence for the presence of a *burh* at Wilford, combine to suggest that in this case the defensive arrangements of the early tenth century were grafted onto an existing north-south routeway, and that Edward the Elder's *burh* of A.D. 920 was built at Wilford in part to defend a river crossing which was by that time already well established.

Another important physical consequence of the relocation of the southern access into the town from the Wilford to the Trent Bridge crossing (argued below as occurring in the early twelfth century) would have been the construction of a new road around the base of the cliffs between the northern end of the bridge/causeway complex and the market place. This route, represented by Narrow Marsh, Drury Hill and Bridlesmith Gate, was, to judge from the later topography, of considerable importance as a through route within the medieval town. It could furthermore be argued that the other routes up the cliff face, represented by Malin Hill, Hollowstone, Short Hill and even Fisher Gate, are secondary in both date and importance to the Narrow Marsh

route. A logical corollary of this would be that Stoney Street itself developed no earlier than Hollowstone. This would explain its lack of alignment with any of the other streets within the early *burh* (St Mary's Gate, Maiden Lane, Bellar Gate in a north-south alignment, and Pilcher Gate, Barker Gate, Warser Gate and Woolpack Lane in an east-west alignment), all of which, including a southern extension of Maiden Lane possibly indicated by a line of property boundaries and a ward boundary (Barley & Straw 1969, map 6), can be inferred to have been part of the initial layout of the early tenth-century *burh* by analogy with planned street systems in other late Saxon *burbs*. The alignment of i) Wilford Lane - Lister Gate, ii) London Road - Narrow Marsh - Drury Hill, and iii) London Road - Hollowstone - Stoney Street - Broad Lane, can be seen as primary, secondary and tertiary routeways through the Saxon and medieval towns.

A further corollary of this model of the layout of the early tenth-century *burh* is that the gate at the northern end of Stoney Street, and the roads approaching it from the north, are all likely to be of post-Conquest origin. If this is so, the early tenth-century *burh* would have had only two gates, to the east and the west. The latter, on Byard Lane, would have led to an extra-mural market area to the west, at the point of junction with the suggested early approach road leading from the river crossing at Wilford. It is of some significance that also at this point was St Peter's church, hitherto considered to be of post-Conquest date (Barley & Straw 1969, p. 3), but fitting logically within a coherent topographical and functional complex which can be argued as arising directly from the foundation of the *burh* by Edward the Elder on the northern bank in A.D. 918.⁸

The date of the origin of the bridges and causeway on the present Trent Bridge alignment, and the development of the secondary and tertiary routes suggested above, must remain a matter for conjecture. The siting and growth of the Norman borough in the area between the castle and the Saxon *burh* could be seen as having been a consequence of its position around this early approach road from the south, as well as its proximity to the castle. This being so, the route over the present Trent Bridge is unlikely to have been established either before the date of the construction of the castle in 1068, or before the growth of the French borough in subsequent decades. On the other hand, both the bridges on their present positions over the Trent and the Leen were in existence in c. 1320, when the latter already required repair (Stevenson 1918, pp. 59, 61). That the repair of the Leen bridge was the responsibility of the hundreds of the shire (*ibid.*, pp. 59-60) suggests that it is rather earlier in origin.⁹ It can be suggested therefore that the construction of this complex of bridges and causeway can be assigned most easily to the twelfth century.

The scale of this operation must have been considerable. It seems likely to have involved the realignment of the course of the river—its original line marked by parish boundaries (see Fig. 1) to place the new bridge within St Mary's parish and

therefore within the old borough. Both this consideration, combined with the somewhat inconclusive dating evidence given above, suggests the hypothesis that the relocation of the river crossing was associated with a phase of widespread reorganisation and expansion of settlement in the few decades around the middle of the twelfth century, which is shown by archaeological evidence from several places in the English borough. This evidence includes the layout of new properties along St Mary's Gate (in the period c. 1150-80) (Halifax Place site), the establishment of settlement for the first time along the northern side of Goose Gate, as well as along a cobbled road between Bellar Gate and Carter Gate opposite Hollowstone, and the development of properties along the frontages of Bellar Gate and Carter Gate. This activity appears to post-date the construction of new earthen defences around the English boroughs, which can be placed in the first half of the twelfth century.

Although the archaeological dating of this activity is not yet precise, all these aspects (new defences, internal colonisation, and new access from the south) could be seen as part of an overall scheme for the redevelopment of the town in general and the English borough in particular, which took place over an extended period of time in the twelfth century. This phase of redevelopment can in turn be suggested as being related to the granting of a charter by the king to the inhabitants of the English borough in c. 1155, although the different aspects of this redevelopment may be either a cause or a consequence of the independence granted (or confirmed) in it. A possible motive for the radical

shift of river and valley crossings could have been the removal of this all-important routeway from its proximity to, and possible domination by, the castle. Whatever the date of the bridge, however, it seems likely that West Bridgeford developed as a settlement not as a result of its status and function as a *burh*, but rather as a secondary village made possible by the existence of the new bridge. It is perhaps of significance in this context that the early twelfth-century date suggested above for the construction of Trent Bridge is also the period in which the origin of most churches dedicated to St Giles can be placed (Arnold-Forster 1899, ii, pp. 50-1).

In conclusion, it is argued here that the hypothesis of the existence of Edward the Elder's second *burh* of A.D. 920 at Wilford rather than at West Bridgeford fits logically within an overall processual and spatial model which can be applied to the development of the historic landscape in the area around Nottingham. It provides the best explanation for several topographical and other observations relating to both Wilford (where it could be tested by excavation) and West Bridgeford. It is also to a large extent validated by the independent evidence of the geography of routeways on both the north and south sides of the river. Last, but not least, the model of the primacy of the river crossing at Wilford in its turn generates a subsidiary model, that of the development of a secondary and tertiary system of routes through the town, which provides a coherent explanation in terms of both function and process of several important features of the historic townscape of Nottingham itself.

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unpublished, relating to the archaeological evidence. The views expressed in this paper are however my own. Much of the research for this paper was made possible by a grant from the Leverhulme Trust in the period 1982-4.

FOOTNOTES

1. Churches dedicated to St Giles are found in several towns, including Cambridge, Colchester, Durham, London, Northampton, Norwich, Oxford, Reading and Shrewsbury. These churches are invariably sited in peripheral locations, and a number of them are documented as being founded in this period.
2. East Bridgeford was *Brugeford* in Domesday Book, having *inter alia* a priest and a church; West Bridgeford was *Brigeford* in D. Bk, with no church or priest mentioned (Parker & Wood 1977, para 9, 100-1, fo. 286b, and para. 10, 9 fo. 287b).
3. The place-name is *Wilesford* in D. Bk. This has been variously explained as meaning 'Willa's ford' (Gover, Mawer & Stenton 1940, p. 251), or 'Willow ford' (Ekwall 1960, p. 519).
4. See also the example of the dedication of a daughter church

of Warminster, Wiltshire, dedicated to St Aldhelm in commemoration of his supposed visit there (Haslam 1984b, p. 121). It is however possible that the church could have been rededicated in the late tenth or eleventh century, when Wilfred's cult was enjoying a revival. A view denying any link between the dedication of a church and the date of its foundation has however recently been stated with reference to Yorkshire churches, including several dedicated to St Wilfred (Faull & Moorhouse 1981, p. 211). However, the undoubted dedication of some later churches to earlier saints does not necessarily mean that no churches dedicated to early saints can be early. The historical value of early church dedications has recently been examined by Dr Butler (1986).

5. This bank must not be confused with a modern bank slightly to its north, which was constructed as part of flood

- prevention measures in 1947.
6. Straw states as established fact two rather vague and unevicenced suppositions of Stevenson (1918, p. 60), that Malin Hill 'may have' scaled the cliff further east opposite Stoney Street, and that it was joined by Stoney Street by 'a lost south extension' of the latter. In the absence of independent supporting evidence, these must be regarded merely as suggestions put forward to support an already formulated theory.
 7. See below, and note 8.
 8. The importance of extra-mural market areas, in many cases associated with churches, as primary structural elements within the single functional complex of the late Saxon *burh*, in both the Midlands and southern England, has been examined by the writer elsewhere (1983; 1984a, b & c; 1985, p. 23) and will be analysed in further detail in other publications (forthcoming, a & b). A strong case has however been made that both the churches of St Peter and St Nicholas were founded with the creation of the Norman borough (Rogers 1972, pp. 51-6), a view supported by the coincidence of the parishes of both churches with its area as a separate legal entity (Mastoris 1981). The question as a whole will be discussed further by the writer (forthcoming, b).
 9. Stevenson implies, without being specific, that this refers to the bridge at the northern end of London Road. The Leen was however also bridged at the northern end of Wilford Lane. Further research is required to verify which bridge was in fact the responsibility of the shire hundreds, or whether both bridges were.
 10. The statements in this and the preceding paragraphs are based on information kindly supplied by Charles Young, in advance of publication (see also Young 1982). The dating of the charter is based on research by David Roffe. Charles Young has also suggested to the writer that Bridlesmith Gate and Drury Hill could represent a major pre-Conquest routeway, a view which would imply the pre-Conquest date of the present Trent Bridge alignment. On the evidence relating to the topography on both sides of the river presented above, however, the writer would still see this north-south route as secondary to one which crossed the river at Wilford, although in the absence of any direct dating evidence the pre-Conquest date of the Trent Bridge crossing must still remain a possibility.

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