

David Ashby, *Stanford in the Vale: The Hidden Past Revealed*, Stanford in the Vale: Stanford Publishing Ltd for Stanford in the Vale & District Local History Society, 2024, xvi + 104 pp, 45 illustrations; available from [Stanford Publishing Ltd](https://www.stanfordpublishing.co.uk/), £10 + £2.50 p&p.

This attractively produced book, written in accessible style and filled with full-colour maps and other illustrations, summarises the findings of the Stanford in the Vale Archaeological Research Project, a community-based project started in 2008 by the book's author David Ashby. Since then no fewer than sixty test pits have been dug across the village (mostly in people's gardens), supplemented by geophysics, LiDAR, and some limited building recording. The aim was to uncover the story of Stanford through its archaeology, which (as the author points out) can often reveal aspects of a place's history which the documents cannot, even where they exist. Some of the findings were completely unexpected, and cast Stanford's history in a new light.

After an opening introduction explaining the background and approach, the book's structure is largely chronological. The first chapter looks at Stanford's geographical setting between the River Ock and its tributary Frogmore Brook, with the main Faringdon to Wantage road to the west and the Ridgeway some distance to the south. The next two chapters look at Stanford from the Mesolithic to the Roman periods, where the results of the test-pitting and trial trenching have already revealed a level of detail not previously suspected. The area around Stanford seems to have been a significant Mesolithic flint-working site, and Neolithic occupation evidence was found both near the Ock and near the modern village's northern edge. More spectacularly, a fortified Iron-Age settlement (surrounded by a ditch) has been identified also in the north, with a later ditched Roman settlement to its south-west along the line of modern High Street. One Roman building may have had a mosaic floor, and it is suggested that the settlement may have had a military function, with additional housing (on the basis of pottery finds) spread along what is now Chapel Lane. Both settlements are illustrated by 'bird's eye' reconstructions which are informative if inevitably slightly fanciful, along with maps of the pottery evidence.

The next chapter turns to the Anglo-Saxon period, where the most recent work (since 2012) has pushed the occupation evidence back to the eighth century and possibly earlier. Ground-penetrating radar suggests the existence of a small tenth-century stone church underlying the present building, and both the church and the adjacent manor house seem to have been surrounded by a substantial ditch of a type familiar on such sites. The author associates that with the Domesday Book description of Stanford, which in 1066 had been the most valuable of the numerous estates held by the prominent English thegn Siward Bairn, with a sizeable tenant population. Pottery finds suggest settlement across a wide area south-west and north-east of the church and manor house, including modern High Street and Chapel Lane. By then Stanford had also acquired its present-day place name, referencing an (unidentified) 'stony ford' across either the Ock or Frogmore Brook.

The following chapters, 'The Growth of an Urban Centre' and 'The Collapse of an Urban Centre', are probably the most contentious, arguing strongly that between the twelfth and the early fourteenth centuries Stanford developed not only into a large and thriving village and market centre but into a small town. Certainly there is a good deal of intriguing archaeological evidence assembled here, which points not only to the village's physical expansion and the existence of wide trade links, but also to the pursuit of a wide range of craft and industrial occupations including weaving and cloth production, leather-, metal-,

glass-, and bone-working, stone-masonry, brewing, and butchering. Church Green (around the church and the manor house) may have been surfaced, and is suggested as the probable site of the weekly market and annual fair, both granted in 1230. There may also have been some associated replanning, reflected in the remains of regular house-plots running back from street frontages north of Church Green and along modern High Street. These were not actually burgage plots (as the author misleadingly calls them), but may nevertheless indicate that Stanford's early thirteenth-century lords had urban aspirations, like their counterparts in many other rural settlements which obtained market grants around that time.

Stanford's subsequent decline (from the late fourteenth century) is explained in terms of plague, the decline in the international wool trade, and climate change, which on the archaeological evidence may have raised the water table and made some fringe areas wetter. The settlement's physical shrinkage is evident in the abandonment of houses on its edges and (apparently) in its centre – although the disappearance of the physically separate settlement of Stanford Wick, just south of the Ock, looks like a slightly different story, despite the author's attempts to include it in his putative 'urban area'. In this context the place name *wic* seems more likely to denote an outlying (dairy) farm rather than a 'town' (as claimed on p. 42), and almost certainly this was always an outlier to the main core at Stanford. Similarly, later references to Stanford as a 'town' (cited by the author) reflect standard seventeenth- and eighteenth-century usage, and have no relevance to Stanford's medieval urban status.

The remaining chapters look at the development of the present-day village in the post-medieval period, and here the archaeology inevitably has slightly less to say – although it continues to make an original contribution to the discussion of buildings (particularly the manor house, Cox's Hall, and the church), and pops up in the story of the nineteenth-century brickworks, while one test pit uncovered remains of a Nissen hut associated with Shellingford airfield. The story is brought fully up to date with discussion of Stanford during the World Wars, and of modern shops, crafts, transport, farming, and social life. Appendices show the locations of test pits and listed buildings, and list Stanford's wartime servicemen, followed by a short glossary and a useful index.

The book is not footnoted (save for a few scattered references to a fairly short bibliography), and more seriously for a book of this kind there is no indication of how to follow up on any of the archaeological data. Presumably there is a site archive, but a cursory check of the Archaeological Data Service website turns up only a couple of interim reports in *South Midlands Archaeology*. Perhaps this was thought unnecessary in a popular publication, although it does mean that much has to be taken on trust, and leaves people interested in a particular site or period unable to find out more (other than by directly contacting the author).

More generally, while the book amply justifies the author's claim that archaeological evidence can create new narratives, the obvious thing missing is a complementary documentary perspective, particularly regarding Stanford's medieval rise and fall. Whether Stanford ever really qualified as a 'small town' is partly a question of semantics, but what a documentary study might provide (using taxation records, manorial surveys, and debt cases) is more fine tuning on questions of population, chronology, and quantification of trades. The *Hidden Past Revealed* has certainly thrown up some fascinating new theories to test – and as the author himself concludes, 'what will further investigations reveal in the future?'

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