Amesbury, Wiltshire: archaeology and history (notes for visitors, prepared by the Royal Archaeological Institute, 2017)

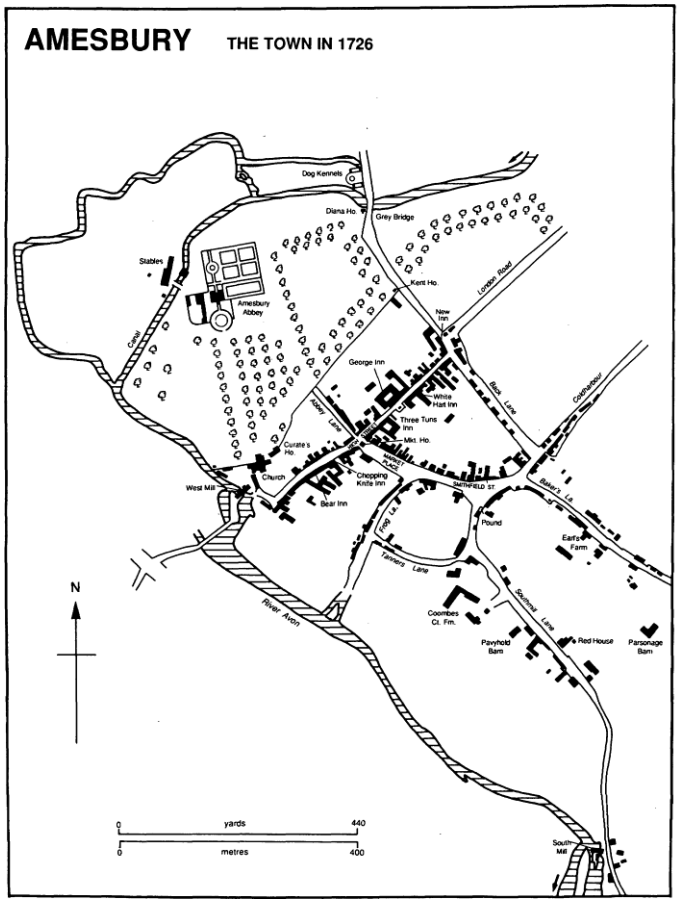
Amesbury is now a small town with many new housing estates; in the Middle Ages its parish included Stonehenge (see separate on-line entry), which for a long time belonged to the owners of Amesbury House. It is now outside the World Heritage Site, but the whole district has to be considered within the landscape context of Stonehenge, a point dramatically underlined when excavations in 2002 and 2003 found first the 'Amebury archer' and his 'companion' and then the 'Boscombe bowmen', important early Bronze Age burials contemporary with the earliest phases of the monument. Their graves contained Beaker pots, gold ornaments, flint arrowheads, boars' tusks, copper knives and metalworking equipment (in the Salisbury Museum; Fitzpatrick 2011). The archer was aged between 35 and 45 and came from the Alps; a genetic trait shows that his younger companion was a relation, although he had been brought up more locally (photograph by courtesy of Salisbury Museum). The Boscombe group of up to seven burials included a child or children, centred on an older man.

Also excavated near Amesbury recently is an Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Bulford, seemingly of the 'final phase', i.e. seventh/eighth century, when the country was being converted to Christianity.

Amesbury is first recorded in the ninth century, in King Alfrd's will, as *Ambresbyrig*, perhaps 'stronghold of a man named Ambre'; the *byrig* could be what has since the seventeenth century been called Vespasian's Camp, an Iron Age hillfort on the west bank of the Avon; some people have equated this with Aurelius Ambrosianus, a fifth-century British leader whose name crept into the Arthurian legends.

Royal councils met somewhere on the Amesbury estate in 932 and 995. The church was probably a 'minster', serving a wide area. One of the two late Saxon cross-heads now in

the parish church may be tenth-century, the other probably being eleventh-; the former is of Bath stone, the latter is the rather more local Chilmark (Cramp 2006, 199-200). A curious dedication to a St Melor could mark an association with a Breton cult (Diverres 1979). The present parish church may be on the site of the 'minster'.

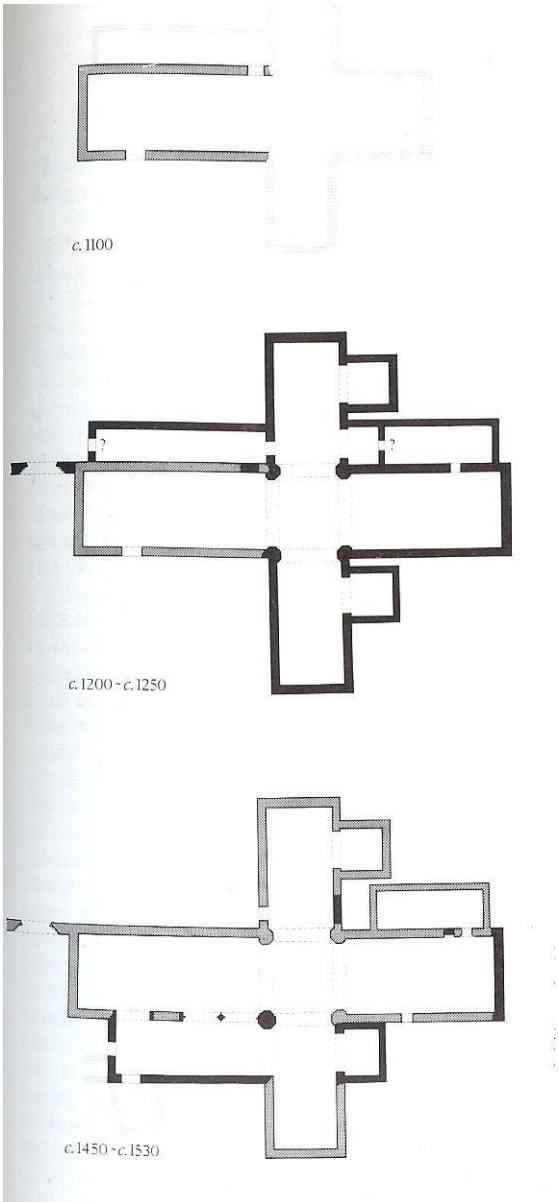


Map of Amesbury in 1726 redrawn from the eighteenth-century original for the *Victoria History of the County of Wiltshire Vol. 15* (1995), 21 and (reproduced by kind permission of the Editor; see also Chandler 2014), showing the formal gardens at Amesbury Abbey house before their removal in 1733 (private property). The church is at the end of the vista, close to what was then the main road to London, with the wide market street set out at right angles to it. The gate into the medieval abbey probably faced the market.

Amesbury Abbey was allegedly founded in 979, endowed by Queen Aelfthryth, possibly in expiation for the murder of Edward the Martyr; it was one of the six wealthy late Saxon nunneries established under royal patronage. No buildings survive; it may have incorporated the 'minster', as the parish church seems likely to have been on the edge of its precinct, represented by the London road. The nunnery was converted to a priory of the Order of Fontevrault, for male and female religious, in 1177 by Henry II (Chandler 1979). Traces of the cloister, tiled floors and other features were found in 1859-60 under the present Abbey House (private property), well away from the town, and it was the burial-place of Queen Eleanor of Provence. Nothing of the buildings survives above ground, however.

Amesbury Church

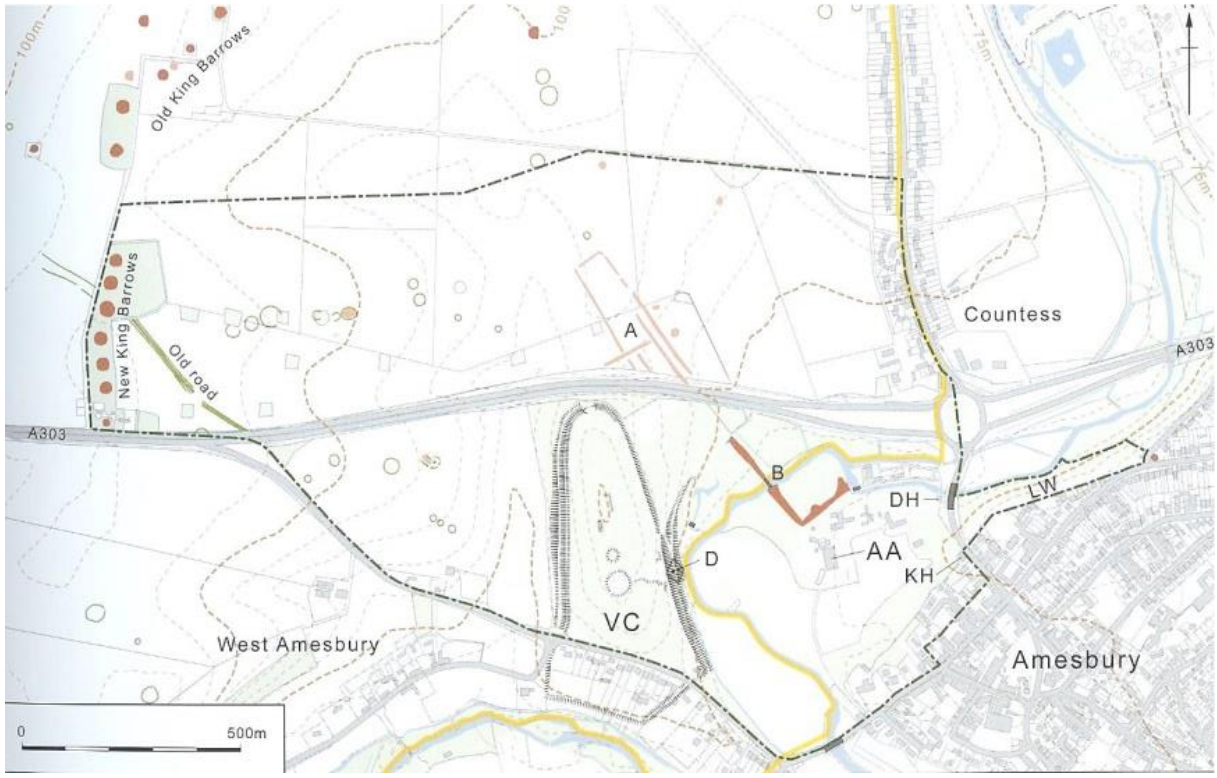
Amesbury parish church is a complex building, the twelfth-century nave being the earliest part (Cocke (ed.) 1987, 103-7 and 233-5; photograph of the church from the south by courtesy of Rod Allday, CC BY-SA 2.0, accessed from Wikimedia). The transepts and east end are thirteenth-century, as was the tower, though that was completely rebuilt in William Butterfield's restorations in 1852-3. Early twentieth-century work has also much affected the building, so that its sequence and the date of its individual features are hard to disentangle –for example, the north transept has an adjoining east chapel with an entrance arch roof attributed to *c.* 1250, but a window of *c.* 1300 in its east wall, for which the vaulted roof would have had to be adjusted. The north wall of the nave has windows at clerestory level, and responds at the east end which could be taken to indicate that there was a north aisle, but it is thought that there was just a single opening that led into an attached building along the outside of the north wall. Also outside, projecting westwards from the end of the nave, is a stub of masonry that seems to be one side of an elaborate doorway of *c.* 1200; those external features may indicate that this had indeed been the nunnery's church and that its cloister was on the north side, rebuilt for the male members of the new priory after 1177 (sequence plan from Cocke (ed.) 1987, 105: top: early Norman; centre: early thirteenth century; bottom: late medieval). The east end may have been enlarged for their use, with the parishioners using the nave.



The nave's south wall was pierced in the late fifteenth century for an aisle, but not with a complete arcade; the south door into the church therefore now leads directly to a narrow opening into the nave, with a short length of

blank walling left in place eastwards before the open arcade is reached. Other features in the church include corbels, a double piscina, an east chapel to the south transept, and a late twelfth-century Purbeck marble font with simple blank arcading, which, if it was always in this church, is evidence that it had the building a parochial function even if it was also used by the male members of the new priory.

The present Abbey House is an almost totally nineteenth-century replacement of a seventeenth-century mansion. The house's position close to the River Avon was potentially very picturesque, and the Duchess of Queensberry and her adviser Charles Bridgeman had



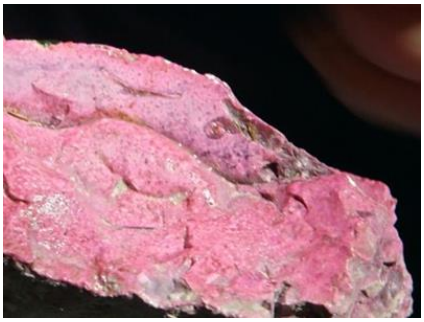
the formal gardens round the house removed in 1733 (private property). Large-scale tree planting followed, making Vespasian's Camp (VC on the plan) on the opposite side of the river more 'romantic', with walks inside it. Pavilions and statuary were erected, some prehistoric barrows were heightened to improve the views, and the river channel was altered, with bridges built across it. The King Barrow Ridge may have been modified to improve the view of Stonehenge, as the estate included the open common downland surrounding the monument. The 'henge' discovered in 2011 and perhaps constructed using the bluestones later taken up to Stonehenge, is a little further down the river, on the west bank at the end of the Avenue (plan from Bowden et al. 2015; see also Stonehenge on-line entry).

Until 1970, the road that is now the A 303 crossed the River Avon at Amesbury and went along the present Church and High Streets, with the market-place at right angles to it, probably opposite the priory gates. Excavation in 2005 showed that this may not have been the original plan, as tenth-/eleventh-century features indicated property boundaries in an area to its east (Powell et al. 2009). What was found was in keeping with the Domesday record, which indicates that Amesbury had no urban function before the Norman Conquest. It

became a medieval borough, however, and the present market may therefore date to a grant of 1219.

Blick Mead and Amesbury History Centre

Near the modern A 303 and at spring-heads feeding the Avon is the Mesolithic site Blick Mead, being investigated by the David Jacques of the University of Buckingham and local volunteers (on private property; Jacques and Phillips 2014). Radiocarbon dates indicate use of the site between 8000 and 4000 B.C., overlapping with the earliest evidence from Stonehenge Down. Strontium analysis of a canine's tooth found in 2016 indicates that it had come from somewhere well to the north of Wiltshire. People may have been drawn to the site for more than just the hunting, as the local flint has the curious property of turning bright pink when taken from the water. This is caused by algae, but may well have seemed magical to earlier societies. Although the site cannot be visited, a History Centre next door to the church displays many of the discoveries.



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These notes were originally prepared for the annual summer meeting of the Royal Archaeological Institute held in July 2016; see www.royalarchinst.org for further information. RAI members have access to the printed Report which contains syntheses of the significance of recent research to archaeological understanding of the county. The note on Amesbury was compiled by John Hare, David A. Hinton and Tim Tatton-Brown. Other on-line entries can be accessed through the RAI web-site.