

# A King John Era Town

**by Bob Smyth**

Emsworth is one of England's best examples of a post-Norman planned new town.

The Normans and their Plantagenet successors were energetic new town planners. In the lee of their castles, great lords laid out towns which grew into cities. Lesser lords of the manor laid out smaller townships to increase their income, adding markets to stimulate trade.

Chichester Harbour's original south-west settlement was at Warblington, active in Roman and Saxon times. The 1100s global fall in sea level (which created Calais across the channel) left the Warblington channel too shallow for boats. It also left a narrow gravel ridge between the previously inundated River Ems and Westbrook streams (the high tide limit then almost reaching Westbourne) suitable for building.

Settlement beginning in King John's reign (1199-1216) was confirmed by his son Henry III (1216-72) in a 1231 charter mentioning Emelesworth. A subsequent 1239 charter to lord of the manor Herbert Fitzherbert allowed the holding of a market every Wednesday. In these years, Fitzherbert laid out his township around a T-junction with South Street leading to the Quay, allowing a central triangle (The Square) for animal and produce trading.

Following the Normandy pattern, narrow, uniform building strips were demarcated on the street frontages. Known as burgage plots (from the burh(g) word for town), they allowed for a 13 ft shop frontage with integral side alley allowing access to a rear courtyard with stores and workshops. Most alleyways are today visible as front doors, but some survive as at Citrus Flowers and Heidi's Patisserie.

These 13-foot proportions are visible today even in 'modern' rebuilding such as the Damar Hairdresser's parade.



*Copy of 1838 Tithe Map of Emsworth hand drawn by Tony Yoward. Burgage plots are characterised, as can be seen here, by long narrow strips of land with shop fronts facing the street*

On the north parade, the former Hutchin's premises have reverted to the two original shops with their alleys merged to form the entrance. The corner with Queen Street preserves the layout, with a sequence of street-fronting properties running round to a covered alleyway.

Another vestige is in gable-end pitched roofs only one burgage plot wide, resembling what would have been the originals at lower levels. The most visible is the side building of the Rowans Hospice shop in South Street. Another peeps above the Georgian façade of The Crown Hotel to the (viewer's) right of the building.

A map in A J C Reger's book *A Short History of Emsworth and Warblington* shows the approximate extent of the planned layout. It runs along the High Street from the West Street junction with North Street round to the top of what used to be Dolphin Hill (now Queen Street). On the south it runs round The Square, past Tower Street and along Sw(e)are Lane (now King Street).

The large (for its time) settlement flourished, as it could hardly fail to do in such a beneficial location. Straddling the main South Coast road, its sea access provided fishing, import and export trading, and ship building.

With comparatively little redevelopment over the centuries, Emsworth demonstrates its growth through individual buildings and sequences. And the centre remains much older than it looks with ancient pitched roofs hiding behind Georgian facades and their cosmetic parapets, as with the Emsworth Hardware and Emsworth Travel blocks on one side of the High Street and the Crown Hotel on the other.

**The planned town's layout can be seen on maps viewable on the [historicengland.org.uk](http://historicengland.org.uk) website.**