

THE JEWS CHURCHYARD, BRIDGWATER

Background

In 1540 'Euyn Churchyard' was noted lying between the town of Bridgwater and the small settlement of Kidsbury.¹ In the 19th century there are various references in property deeds to a 'Jews Churchyard' in Wembdon.² This paper seeks to explore the implications of this.

Kidsbury belongs to the parish of Wembdon, and is located between the parish church and the location of the former west gate of the town of Bridgwater. Kidsbury lies on one side of a marshy valley, to the north-west of Bridgwater, with the village of Wembdon occupying the other side. The name first appears in 1302 as Keordesbury, developing into Kerdesbury/Kerdesburi by the 15th century, Caundysbury/Cardysbury in the 16th century, finally settling as Kidsbury by the 18th century.³

The name probably means the fortification (bury from the Old English *burg*, as in Congesbury) belonging to Kerde (possibly a corruption of the Old English personal name *Cydd*/*Cyddi*, as found in Kidland or Kidsley, or the Brittonic *Cadwal*, as found in Kidwelly).⁴ No archaeology has taken place in the vicinity, although several Roman coins have been discovered; in fact five out of the eight Roman coin HER entries for Bridgwater were found in the Kidsbury area.⁵ There is no mention of Kidsbury in Domesday, although there appears to have been a small settlement by the 13th century.⁶

In 1725 a lease of Bushell's Barn mentions three acres of meadow to the east, six acres to the south,

one acre to the north and one acre called Jews Churchyard, to the west.⁷ In 1813 a lease of two closes of ground were bounded on the south side by the Jews Church Yard and on the west side by the Drove.⁸ A deed dating to 1819 mentions a meadow, presumably the same mentioned in 1813, bounded on the south by land called the Jews Churchyard.⁹ The Tithe Appointment for Wembdon records the Jew Churchyard, meadow land, belonging to Austen Roberts, as 384 on the Tithe map.¹⁰

At present the site is occupied by the Victoria Community Centre and part of Victoria Park.

Discussion

The name could lend itself to several different theories. If the 19th-century name is taken at face value then the land could have once been a Jews Churchyard. Jews were expelled from England in 1290 and were not allowed to return until the mid 17th century, during the reign of Cromwell. There is a very slim possibility that the site was a Jew's graveyard, from before 1290, although this is highly unlikely. There were three Jews recorded in Bridgwater in 1256–7, although they were only licensed to live in the town for very short intervals.¹¹ It is perhaps unlikely that such a miniscule population would merit or require a place of burial. Additionally, the oldest name, Euyn of 1540, does not fit etymologically with the emergence of the word Jew, roughly at the same time, or the Old English *Iude*.

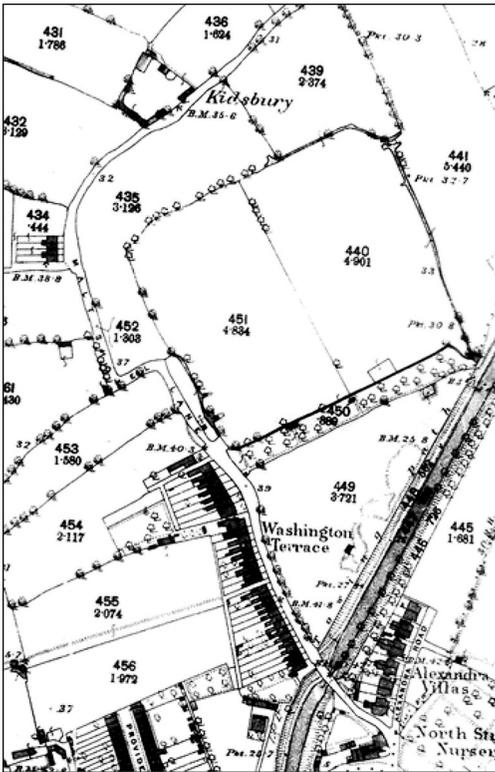


Fig. 1 A section of the 1886 OS map showing Kidsbury. The Jew's Churchyard is plot 450, plots 440 and 451 are today Victoria Park, and Kidsbury Farm, with its unusual surrounding earthworks which can be seen at the top

At face value the name Euyñ bears a slight similarity to the Brittonic rendering of the name John, namely Ewan or Ian. Therefore it might be put forward that Euyñ Churchyard could be some sort of saint's dedication for a church, St Euyñ's Churchyard, possibly even linked to the elusive Cornish Saint Euny. Likewise it might refer to Saint Ouen, 7th-century Bishop of Rouen, who has a dedication in Bristol in the church of St Ewen.¹² However this seems somewhat unlikely given the lack of the St prefix or the lack of a possessive in the recorded name. The name Euyñ might instead have a topographical explanation and may have an association with Yew Trees. Eudon in Shropshire, for example, means the Hill (down) of Yews (Eu).¹³ If Euyñ does refer to Yews then the corruption to Jews seems fairly obvious.

The indicator that the land is thought of as a churchyard is difficult to understand. This throws up various possibilities. The land might once have been a church for Kidsbury. Robert Dunning suggests that Kidsbury was a settlement in its own right before declining to nothing by the 18th century.¹⁴ Certainly, in the 14th century and for a number of centuries thereafter, what is now Bridgwater's North Street was called 'the way to Kidsbury', notable for not being thought of as the way to the more prominent Wembdon or Cannington. A prosperous settlement might thus require a chapel of ease, an outreach of Wembdon Church to service the congregation. However the location of the land, far away from Kidsbury farm, presumable location of the centre of the settlement and Kydda/Cadwal's fortification, and the proximity to Bridgwater, would count against this theory. Another possibility is that the land was the site of a Chantry chapel or Collegiate church, and the name churchyard refers to its location, not a burial ground. A possible comparison could be made with regard to St Saviour's Chapel which was without the South Gate of Bridgwater. St Saviour's is only known about from a few scattered references; the same could be possible with the Euyñ Churchyard.

It is also feasible that there was never any structure built upon the plot of land and the name churchyard has other explanations. It is possible that the land was simply owned by a church and at some point the name churchyard stuck. However to call it a churchyard and not a church's land would be quite unusual. Churchyard could be a reference to the site being consecrated ground for the purposes of burial, perhaps as an out of town emergency burial place for Bridgwater, which was severely affected by the Black Death in 1349. The name Euyñ might support this idea, as a churchyard without a standing structure might mean that the only remarkable feature of the site would be the surrounding yew trees. Finally the name Euyñ churchyard might simply be a topographical pun of some sort. The name might mean a Yew's Churchyard, a plot of ground with various dead Yew trees for example.

Conclusion

There is a high probability that the Jew's Churchyard of Bridgwater has nothing to do with Jews. The name Jews, corrupted from Euyñ, is likely to be a reference to yew trees. The churchyard element of

the name is most likely to represent an emergency burial ground, such as a plague pit, or possibly the site of some sort of chapel. The former might be more likely given the long shape of the plot of ground.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted for the help and comments of Dr P.E. Cattermole.

Endnotes

- ¹ VCH Vol VI, 323–5.
- ² Somerset Record Office: DD\BW/2/541-2, DD/OS/7, DD/X/RS/1, D\D/RT/A/418.
- ³ National Archives: E 199/40/20, E 326/5686, E 326/6768, DL 25/898; Dilks, T., 1933. *Bridgwater Borough Archives 1200-1377*, Somerset Record Society, nos. 52, 83, 85, 95, 108, 124, 159, 195.

- ⁴ Ekwall, E., 1960. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place Names*, Oxford, 120, 275; Owen, H., and Morgan, R., 2007. *Dictionary of the Place Names of Wales*, Ceredigion, 206.
- ⁵ Somerset HER sites 12425, 12426, 12427, 12429, 26993.
- ⁶ VCH Vol 6, 323–5.
- ⁷ SRO: DD\BW/2/541-2
- ⁸ SRO: DD/OS/7
- ⁹ SRO: DD/X/RS/1
- ¹⁰ SRO: D\D/RT/A/418
- ¹¹ VCH Vol 6, 220.
- ¹² Farmer, D., (2003) ‘Ouen’, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t100.e1250>, (viewed on 11.05.12)
- ¹³ Ekwall note 4, 169
- ¹⁴ VCH Vol 6, 323–5.

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