

NEWTOWN, LUNDY : A LOST GEORGIAN SETTLEMENT

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Any physical remains of the settlement known as Newtown, recorded in numerous maps and early accounts of the island, have long since disappeared and its precise location remained in some doubt. This paper examines all known evidence and concludes that there were two distinct areas of Newtown, not just the one previously supposed.

HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

When Sir John Borlase Warren bought Lundy for £10 in 1775 he was rich, energetic and enthusiastic about his purchase. The island had been badly neglected for over twenty years, yet in his first year Warren improved the one dwelling (today's Old House), planted thousands of trees, commissioned architects to design a fort, a mansion and a harbour, commissioned a famous painter and a skilled engraver to depict his realm and also, among a stream of instructions to his agent, a Mr Birch, ordered Captain Wood, Master of his Cutter, to "go to Schetland to invite three or four families over to the island to live and each family to have a House and Acres of Land and to have the use of Sir John's boats for fishing . . ." (1).

Research by the author has failed to find evidence of an exodus from Shetland and the few names in contemporary accounts are not known there. Yet wherever they may have come from we do know that Warren, "employed 40 labourers or mechanics yearly" (1) and that by 1794 there were seven houses on the island and twenty-three permanent inhabitants. Warren is believed to have offered the newcomers a twenty-one year lease and created the new settlement of Newtown, comprising at least six dwellings, in which to house them.

Warren sold Lundy after only six years having been seduced by patriotism to fight in the War of American Independence. Following that he was appointed Ambassador to Russia and his interest in Lundy appears to have ended. His tenants in Newtown may also have drifted away so that, by the turn of the century, the settlement was in a bad state of repair. Indeed John Cleveland, the new owner, leased the island to farmers who would have concentrated their attentions on the farmhouse and, with the French was creating a demand for larger fields of arable crops, on the distribution and extent of fields and fieldwalls. A combination of these factors makes the search for the exact site of Newtown more difficult.

The North Devon Record Office in Barnstaple holds the letters sent and received by James Basleigh, the Barrack Master of the Cavalry Barracks at Barnstaple during the period 1794-1807. As part of the precautions against a possible French invasion Basleigh was ordered on 22nd July 1795 to, "immediately repair to the Isle of Lundy to see whether there are any buildings there that may be appropriate to the service of Government". Basleigh replied on the 2nd August 1795: "I have enclosed the plan and dimensions of all the buildings on the island of Lundy . . .". These were sent to the War Office and held in Whitehall until the War Office Library was transferred to the Public Record Office in 1904. The collection was considered to be so large and out of date that it was decided to destroy all materials over 100 years old; the present PRO file W078 therefore contains nothing earlier than 1805.

Sir Vere Hunt, the next owner of Lundy, was interested in the island mainly as an investment, having been given to understand that the Government was about to buy it as part of a scheme to defend the western approaches against a feared French invasion. Sir Vere Hunt and his son Sir Aubrey de Vere Hunt (who succeeded as owner in 1818) introduced labourers from the family's Irish estates (2). Their numbers were few and, although they may have utilised the Newtown cottages, it is known that several, if not all, were housed in and around the castle.

The Victorians continued the process of robbing walls to provide granite for their building (eg. Millcombe Villa) before the arrival of the Lundy Granite Company in 1863. This company leased the island farm and undertook a drastic reshaping of its roads and fields. The net result of this reorganisation was the obliteration of any physical remains of Newtown, leaving only the name and buried archaeological remains as clues to its location.

LITERARY EVIDENCE

Engravings dating to 1775 and reproduced in Grose (1794) show only the Castle, but the two paintings and a sketch for a third, all by Dominic de Serres, do show what appear to be buildings in the area of Newtown. Whether these really existed, were imagined, exaggerated or whether they were some other type of structure, for example haystacks, is unclear but may be supported by contemporary descriptions written by visitors to the island. Possible references to Newtown include, for example, a description by Professor Martyn who visited Lundy in 1776 and observed, "but one dwelling-house and the remains of an old castle . . . and that the said dwelling-house consisted of two stories . . .". Eighteen years later Grose (1794) described, "seven houses on the island and 23 inhabitants". Assuming both accounts are accurate, they suggest that in the eighteen years between 1776 and 1794 five new houses had been built, houses which the 1804 Ordnance Survey (OS) map (corrected in 1820 and shown in fig. 2) shows could only have been sited at Newtown. The "forty mechanics and labourers" employed by Warren, if not exaggerated and possibly including his "imported tenants", could have been housed at the new Newtown settlement as well as at the Castle and Farmhouse.

Chanter (1871,116), writing to the dictation of Rev. Hudson Heaven (who must have known Lundy since the 1830s) described, "traces of no less than seven or eight groups of cottages or villages in various parts of the island, some of which have traditional names attached to them, but no records remain of when they were abandoned and fell into ruin". These groups probably included Medieval longhouses (eg. Widows Tenement) and Civil War watchrooms as well as Newtown.

By 1851, the year of the first census, there are only five buildings recorded (two houses in the Castle, the Farmhouse, Lighthouse, and Millcombe Villa). There were no uninhabited houses and none in the process of construction. Newtown by this time must have survived only as ruins, if it survived at all.

CARTOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

There are five nineteenth century maps from which evidence for the existence or location of Newtown can be drawn:

a 1809 SURVEY (SCALE = 6 inches to 1 mile)

This was surveyed in 1804 by Thos. Compton of the Corps of Military Surveyors and is the earliest map to show any detail of field systems. The island is shown obliquely and in plan (fig. 1). The surveyors appear to have spent time on the island although their record of walls do not entirely agree with those on later maps. Five groups of buildings are shown on the map (the order of groups of buildings is adhered to throughout the map descriptions):

1. Farm: unnamed, but in the correct position for the Old House/Manor Farm Hotel.
2. Two small buildings, north of the Farm and west of the track. These are almost certainly the former pigsty and forge.
3. Northwards and to the east of the path is a small building in an enclosure, close to the site of the present Barton Cottages.
4. Opposite 3 (above) but slightly to the north and on the west side of the path is what appears to be a long roofless building in an enclosure.
5. Further north, in what is now Tillage Field and to the east of the T-junction of the path, is one building in an enclosure close to the cliff-edge and marked "New Town".



Figure 1: 1809 (Surveyed 1804)

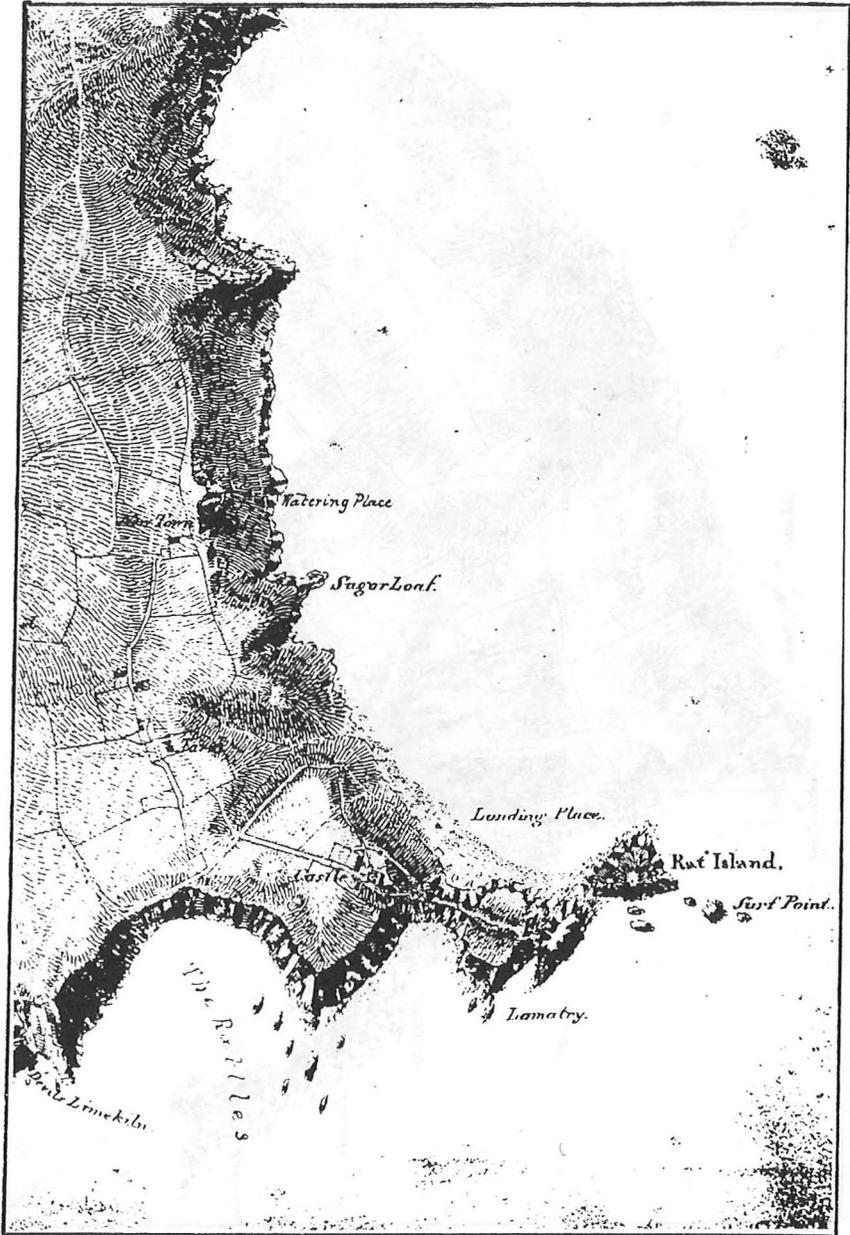


Figure 2: 1820 Ordnance Survey Map.

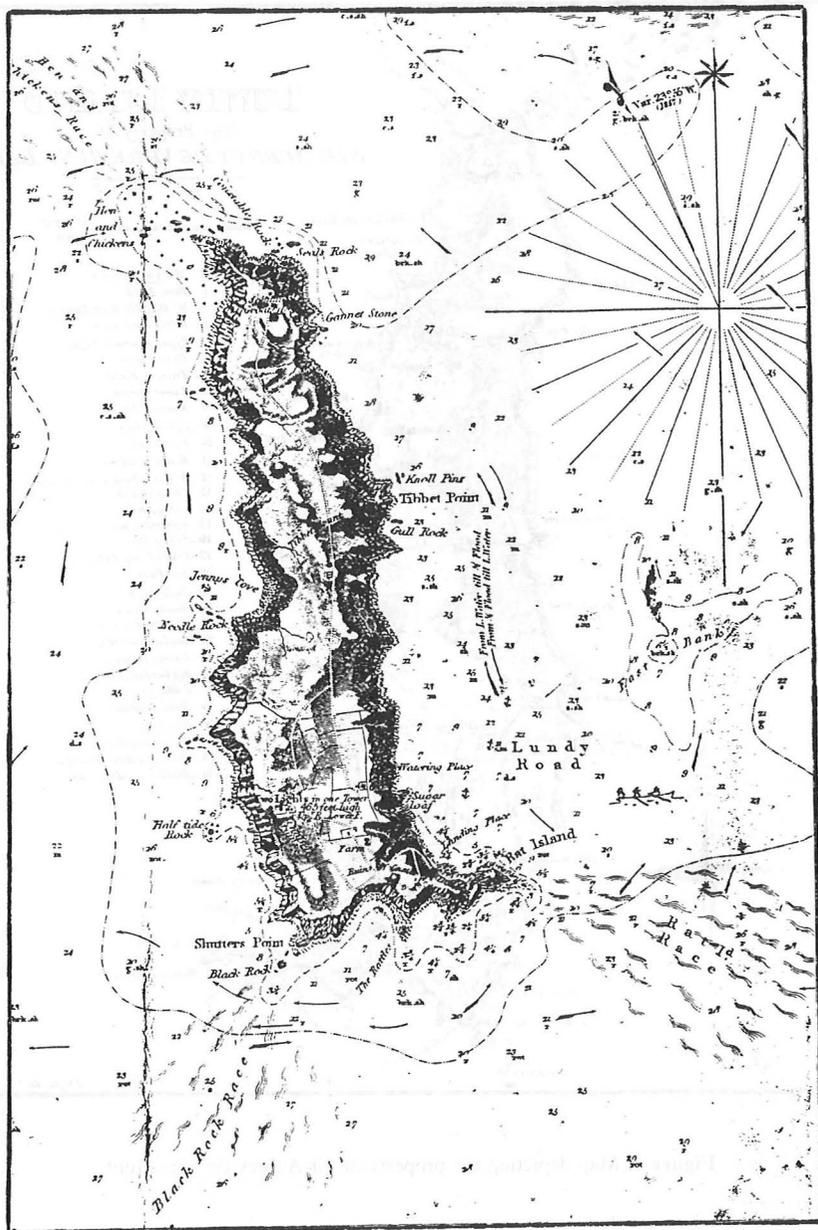


Figure 4: 1832 Survey by Lt. H.W. Denham RN.

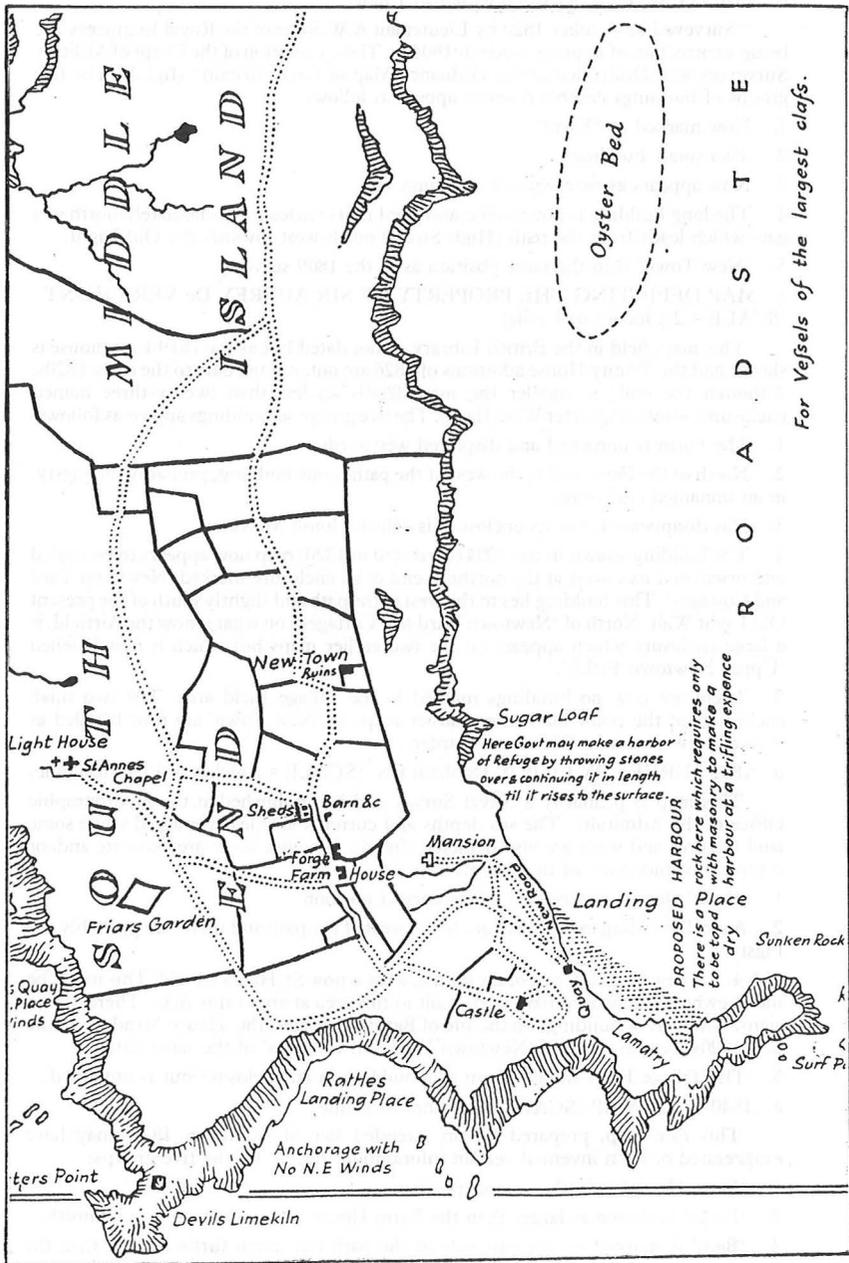


Figure 5: 1840 Sale Map

b 1820 OS MAP (SCALE = 6 inches to 1 mile)

“Surveyed in October 1820 by Lieutenant A.W.Robe of the Royal Engineers . . . being a correction of a survey made in 1804 by Thos. Compton of the Corps of Military Surveyors and Draftsmen of the Ordnance Map of Great Britain” (fig. 2). The five groups of buildings described above appear as follows:

1. Now marked as “Farm”.
2. Two small buildings.
3. Now appears as two adjacent buildings.
4. The long building is now roofed and sited in its enclosure immediately north of a gate which leads from the path (High Street) north-west towards the Old Light.
5. ‘New Town’ is in the same position as in the 1809 survey.

c MAP DEPICTING THE PROPERTY OF SIR AUBREY De VERE HUNT (SCALE = 2½ inches to 1 mile)

This map, held in the British Library, is not dated but as the 1819 Lighthouse is shown and the Trinity House additions of 1826 are not, it must date to the early 1820s. Although the scale is smaller the map details no less than twenty-three named enclosures south of Quarter Wall (fig. 3). The five groups of buildings appear as follows:

1. The Farm is unnamed and displaced westwards.
2. North of the Farm and to the west of the path is one building, probably the pigsty, in an unnamed enclosure.
3. Has disappeared, but its enclosure is called ‘House Meadow’.
4. The building shown in the 1804 (corrected in 1820) map now appears to be roofed and orientated east-west at the northern end of an enclosure marked ‘Newtown Yard and Cottages’. This building lies to the west of the path and slightly south of the present Old Light Wall. North of ‘Newtown Yard and Cottages’, on what is now the Airfield, is a large enclosure which appears on the two earlier maps but which is now labelled ‘Upper Newtown Fields’.
5. There are now no buildings marked in the Tillage Field area. The two small enclosures at the point marked on earlier maps as ‘New Town’ are now labelled as ‘Lower Newtown’ and ‘Newtown Garden’.

d 1832 SURVEY BY Lt. H.W.Denham RN. (SCALE = 2 inches to 1 nautical mile)

This map is primarily a Naval Survey and was published at the Hydrographic Office of the Admiralty. The sea depths and currents are clearly marked while some land features and walls are also depicted (fig. 4). Whether these are accurate and/or complete is uncertain. of the five groups:

1. ‘Farm’ clearly marked and in the correct position.
2. A small building in an enclosure to the west of the path and therefore probably the Pigsty.
3. & 4. A new building, east of the path in what is now St. Helen’s Field. This might be the Brewhouse known to have been built in this area at about this time. There are no signs, however, of buildings on the site of Barton Cottages (the ‘House Meadow’ of the mid 1820s) nor any sign of ‘Newtown Yard and Cottages’ of the same date.
5. The Tillage Field site is shown as a building in an enclosure but is unnamed.

e 1840 SALE MAP (SCALE = 6 inches to 1 mile)

This rare map, prepared for an intended sale of Lundy in 1840, may have exaggerated or even invented certain information (fig. 5). Of the five groups:

1. ‘Farm House’ is in the correct position.
2. ‘Forge’ is shown as larger than the Farm House and immediately to its north.
3. ‘Barn’ is marked on the east side of the path but much further north than the present building of that name (which almost certainly dates from the 1860s).

4. Two 'sheds', set in an enclosure and located on the west side of the path, close to the junction of a small path heading north-west towards the Old Light.
5. The Tillage Field site is marked 'New Town Ruins'.

From the above sources it is suggested that the name Newtown (or New Town) existed from just after 1776 until sometime between 1840 and 1851. It remains now to consider this in relation to the evidence from archaeological investigation.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Detailed archaeological work was first conducted on the island by Gardner, who excavated a site in Bull's Paradise (Gardner 1968). This concentrated on the area of the Marisco Stronghold in the south of the field, however, and not in the northeast corner, the area believed to include the site of Newtown Yard and Cottages. Perhaps more useful in this context are the recent investigations by Schofield whose work aims more at understanding, "the relationship between places and the space in which they occur" (Schofield and Webster 1989,34). Although not intended as site-discovery techniques, the method of test-pit excavation and geophysical survey did provide clues to the location of Newtown and the extent to which it survives below ground. Results in the area on the east side of Tillage Field, for example, produced a concentration of Developed White Earthenware, a type of pottery dating to between the later 19th and early 20th centuries. Magnetic susceptibility survey was also conducted in the area and produced high readings. This has been interpreted as being, "associated with the settlement itself and perhaps indicates an area of humic enrichment such as a garden or midden" (Schofield 1988,39).

Results of test-pit excavations adjacent to the area labelled 'Newtown Yard and Cottages' suggest some concentration of human activity. Pottery occurred in relatively high numbers while fragments of brick, glass and charred material were also recovered. Whether this represents settlement as opposed to dumping is difficult to say without further investigation.

DISCUSSION

It appears that there were two distinct areas of Newtown: First, the 'Newtown Yard and Cottages' of the 1820s map with the 'Upper Newtown Fields' to its north-west situated on the present Airfield. Second is the area to the east, in Tillage Field, marked as 'Lower Newtown' and 'Newtown Garden'.

From a comparison of maps it would appear that the 'Newtown Yard and Cottages' (which the author believes to be the principal site of the two) is on a direct line between the Beacon Hill Chapel and the Sugar Loaf, and to the west of a line from the Farm to the gate in Quarter Wall where the east side path continues northwards. These alignments, taken from fixed points, provide an accurate location for the site (NGR SS 13654432), placing it in the area of Bull's Paradise at the north end of the Fowl Run. The appeal of this location for the site of a settlement is that it is relatively flat and contains an enclosed well which today seems out of place but which once may have been a central feature of Newtown and its yard.

Thus by a combination of historical references, early maps and archaeological investigation, much of the confusion over the nature and location of Newtown has been clarified. Further archaeological investigations, both by the National Trust (Claris 1989) and by the Lundy Field Society (Schofield 1988; Schofield and Webster 1989; Schofield and Webster this volume) may add weight to the suggestions outlined above.

FOOTNOTE 1: Manuscript notes typed by William Warren Vernon (great grandson of Admiral Sir John Borlase Warren) taken from the Admiral's note books to his Agent. These notes were copied by the author when in the possession of the Harman family.

FOOTNOTE 2: The De Vere Papers. Researched for Sir John Smith 1987.

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