

5.10 TC Area 2 : Christchurch Town Centre

5.10.1 The main Town Centre forms a distinct neighbourhood with the historic Saxon 'burh' at its core. The outer boundaries of the neighbourhood are formed by the mainline railway and River Stour to the north and west, and the River Avon to the east. The central historic core is enclosed by smaller local neighbourhoods set around the focus of the main town. Areas of the older townscape have been lost to road schemes and modern development. It is possible to identify internal divisions within the neighbourhood between the old and new areas of townscape. These help define character areas within the neighbourhood for this assessment.

5.10.2 The strategic position of the town gives rise to a range of important views into the historic core. Several foreground areas such as the Avon Flood Plain and open harbour provide distinctive settings to the town. This is an overlap between sections of this study in that the significance of these settings is also identified within the consideration of the wider environment around the town. (See Section 4.0)

5.10.3 The combination of historic settlement, strong landscape and dynamic maritime settings give the town interest. The quality of the key areas and the continuity of some well preserved areas within the historic core help provide a sense of place within the town. The settings of water meadows (described in Section 4.0) and natural harbour (Section 6.0) creates a unique package of the town contained within the environment that determined and shaped its current form.

Geographic Features

5.10.4 The physical features that determined the strategic advantage of the original settlement still remain as key features of the modern townscape. The rivers Avon and Stour provide the division between the adjoining townscape and the neighbouring Borough of Bournemouth. The Priory occupies a commanding position in the town on a knoll on the ridgeline axis through the town. These natural elements are an essential ingredient in the overall structure of the town. (Figure 5.8 illustrates the physical boundaries of the town).

5.10.5 The castle motte stands out as a steep sided man-made landmark alongside the Priory Knoll. Next to this is the smaller scale feature of the Mill Stream. The stream flows along the eastern boundary of the built up area. As a small scale water course the stream is not a prominent element, but it is all the same a key part of the existing townscape.

Historic Development

5.10.6 The settlement has gradually expanded from the nucleus of the Norman Priory Church and Twynham Castle. The main expansion spreads out along the local ridge towards St. Catherine's Hill. Bridge crossings of the Avon provided a strategic route east to create the line of Bridge Street leading out to the medieval suburb of Purewell.

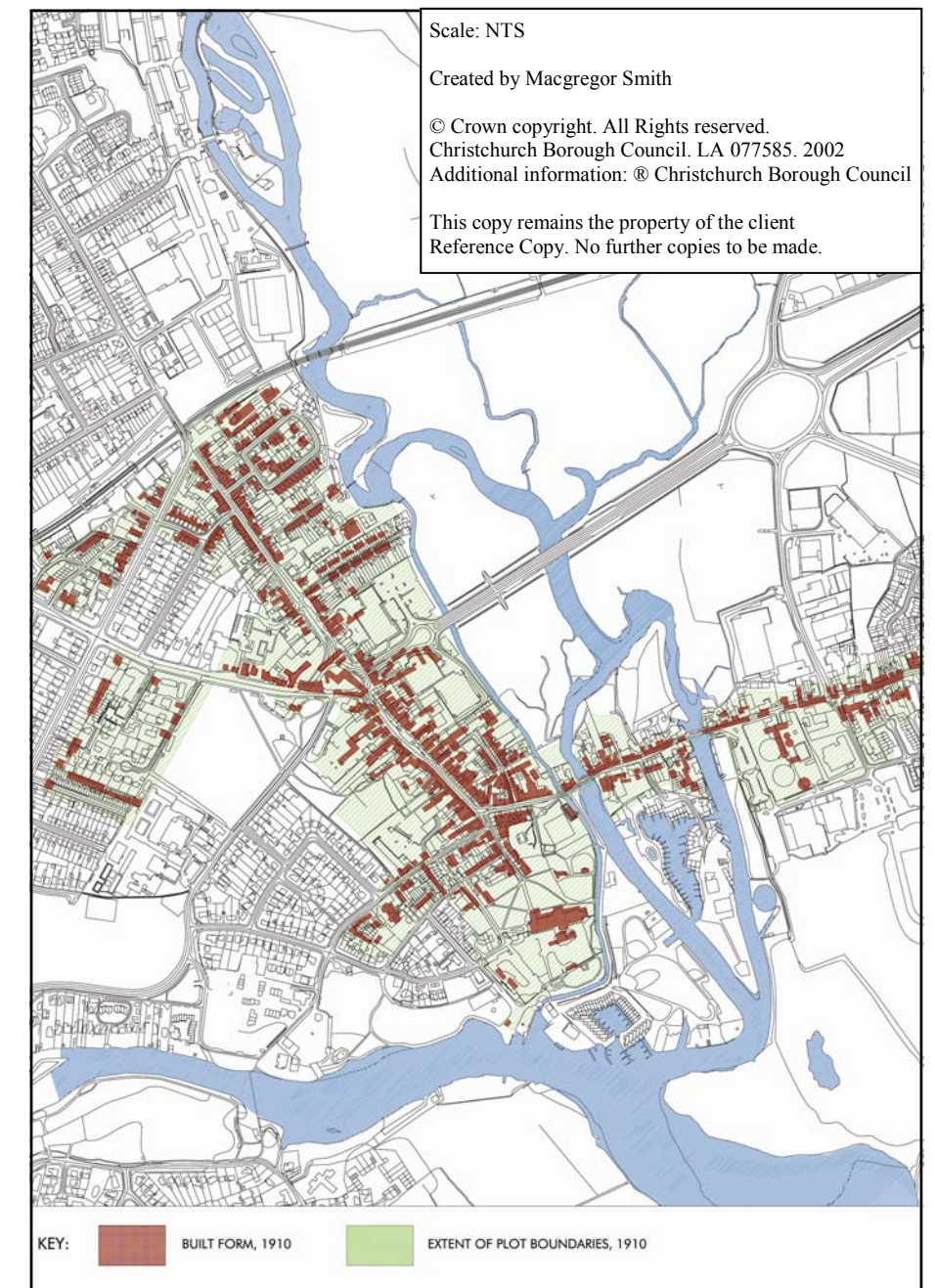


Figure 5.7 - Historic and modern mapping overlay



5.10.7 The medieval extent of the settlement extended up into the Bargates area. This modest footprint can be seen on the Christchurch tithe map of 1841. The arrival of the railways from Ringwood in 1862 and Bournemouth in 1864 unleashed the rapid expansion that led to the modern townscape. The open areas between the Town Centre and railway have been progressively filled with Victorian, inter-war and post-war developments. New building work is currently underway along the river frontage of the Stour.

Existing Townscape

5.10.8 Although the Town Centre is clearly defined as a geographic neighbourhood area by the railway and river boundaries, the area logically sub-divides into smaller 'sub neighbourhood' areas. A central spine of shopping/High Street frontage extends from the Priory out to the northern end of Bargates. This is split in two by the A35 Christchurch Bypass (Fountains Way); the southern half forming the main High Street, the northern end a more local neighbourhood shopping street (Bargate).



5.10.9 The historic core area is located to the south of the A35 and separated from the adjacent suburban development by the line of the Creedy (a tree-lined walkway on the southern side of the High Street). This area is designated as the Christchurch Central Conservation Area, the largest Conservation Area in the Borough. The complete areas of historic townscape are contained within the southern part of the designated area. The northern outer edge of the designated area contains significant areas where the historic buildings have been replaced by more modern development. The water meadows and part of the harbour are within the designated area. These provide key parts of the setting to important buildings, but should also be seen as part of the overall historic landscape of the town. The internal structure of these individual neighbourhoods is described in the character areas section of this chapter.



5.10.10 The broader structure of the overall neighbourhood is divided by main road routes passing generally east/west through the built up area. Smaller side roads sub-divide the general grain of the residential areas into a grid of medium-sized estate blocks. The historic core area has a more intimate scale and grain of side streets and pedestrian routes that link between the High Street and terraced streets off the main thoroughfare. There is a clear contrast in the basic development patterns of the suburban housing areas and terraced streets in the historic core (although both share similar scale).

5.10.11 The Town Centre is a distinctive part of the Borough in terms of the diversity of land uses and activity within the core area. The commercial High Street, historic open spaces, boat storage, formal park, and school grounds all help to create a more vibrant townscape than the surrounding suburbia. The densities and scales of buildings within the centre area again contrast with many surrounding areas.

5.10.12 The townscape is affected by the presence of the major through routes which spur off the A35. Bargate (A3073), Barrack Road (A35) and Stour Road are part of the limited network of routes linking the Borough with Bournemouth. These routes all connect with the intrusive junction arrangement set between the Town Centre and Bargates.

5.10.13 The historic Bridge Street approach to the Town Centre has been restricted in an attempt to limit the circulation of through traffic entering the historic core area of the town. There is, however, a significant flow of traffic into the centre, partly due to the location of visitor parking areas and poor signage. The Town Centre traffic also includes frequent bus movements along the main High Street.

5.10.14 The relatively small scale grain of the suburban development around the main Town Centre provides a reasonable degree of pedestrian access. Although, in common with other parts of the Borough, few links between cul-de-sac infill areas have been provided to enhance this circulation.

5.10.15 Within the historic core area the traditional pattern of small scale streets is complemented by alleyways and short cuts. However, a fundamental issue frustrating the appreciation of the core is connected to the exclusion of pedestrian access to key sections of the water frontage and boating facilities around the perimeter of the core area.

Landscape Setting, Spaces and Structure

5.10.16 With the natural limitation on building within the Flood Plain, the open landscape of water meadows extends right into the historic core of the Town Centre. The eastern boundary of development follows the line of the Mill Stream. Although cut in two by the A35, the water meadows clearly form an important open setting to the east of the town. (See Section 4.3).

5.10.17 The natural sheltered harbour created by the combined river estuary is a distinctive coastal environment in its own right. With low lying inter-tidal areas and marshlands, this area provides an open maritime setting to the town.

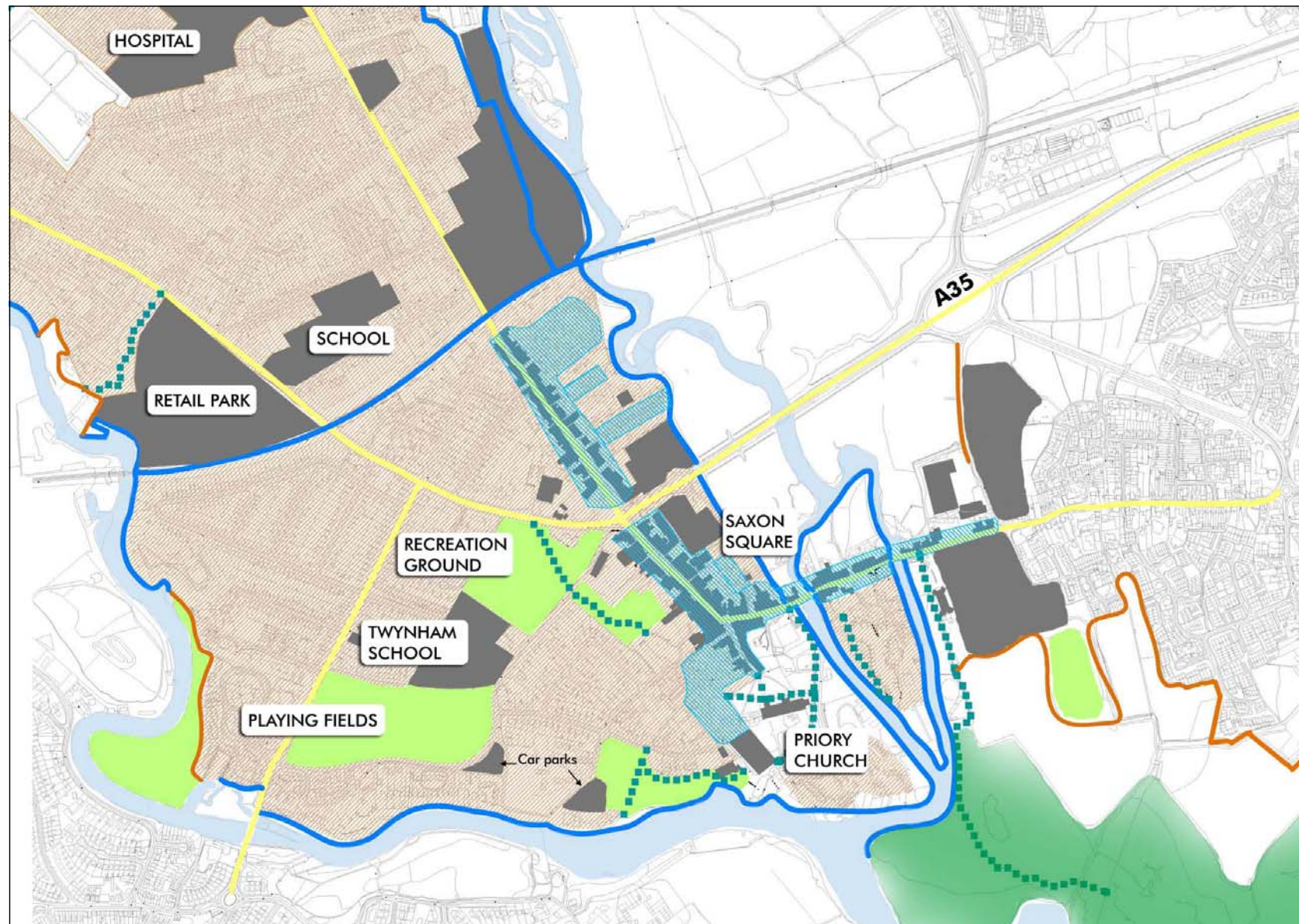
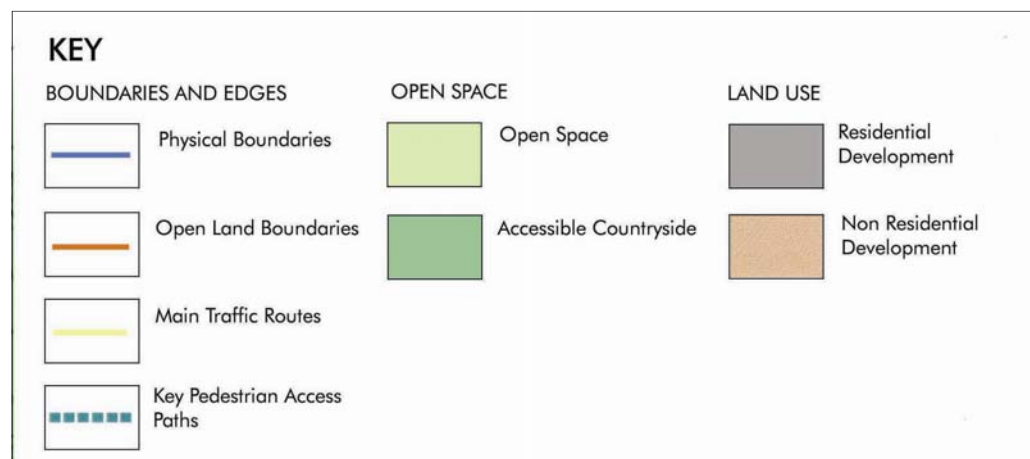


Figure 5.8 - Town Centre Physical Townscape



5.10.18 The Town Centre is one of the few areas that provide public civic spaces and open parklands. These are concentrated around the historic core area and serve both local residents and visitors to the Borough. There is a degree of inter-connection between areas, but often the links are not easily found or highlighted to the visitor. The small scale intimacy of the historic street pattern is part of the character of the town. The narrow streets often create glimpsed or framed views of the key buildings and landmarks.

5.10.19 The public open spaces also provide a loose framework of tree cover around the historic core. This extends around the Priory Quarter, along the Mill Stream and along the eastern boundary of the built up area. Other dominant tree cover is found within Barrack Road Recreation Ground and Druiitt Gardens down to the Quomps open space next to the Stour. Much of this tree cover provides a backdrop to historic buildings and enclosure to the town.

5.10.20 Other more localised tree groups are found alongside the railway and interspersed within the suburban housing areas. This framework of tree cover is an important part of the general perception of Christchurch as having a well vegetated urban area.

Landmarks and Legibility

5.10.21 Christchurch contains a fine selection of historic buildings and ancient monuments. These are of interest to visitors as features, but also reinforce the sense of place when seen as part of the wider townscape. The Priory and Millhams Street Church stand out as key buildings visible from outside the historic core. Glimpsed views of these from the A35 highlight the proximity of the through route to the core area. Other views to these landmarks from around and within the Town Centre help people understand the broad layout of the town. This helps create a legible and permeable townscape that is more friendly to pedestrians, visitors and residents. At a lower level other distinctive features within the streets and open spaces provide way markers and features of interest. The main historic core area is well provided with a range of features. These include historic paving, timber framing, thatch, street furniture, and the groups of more traditional shop fronts and other buildings. The wider suburban backdrop to the town is less legible and thereby less inviting to the visitor.

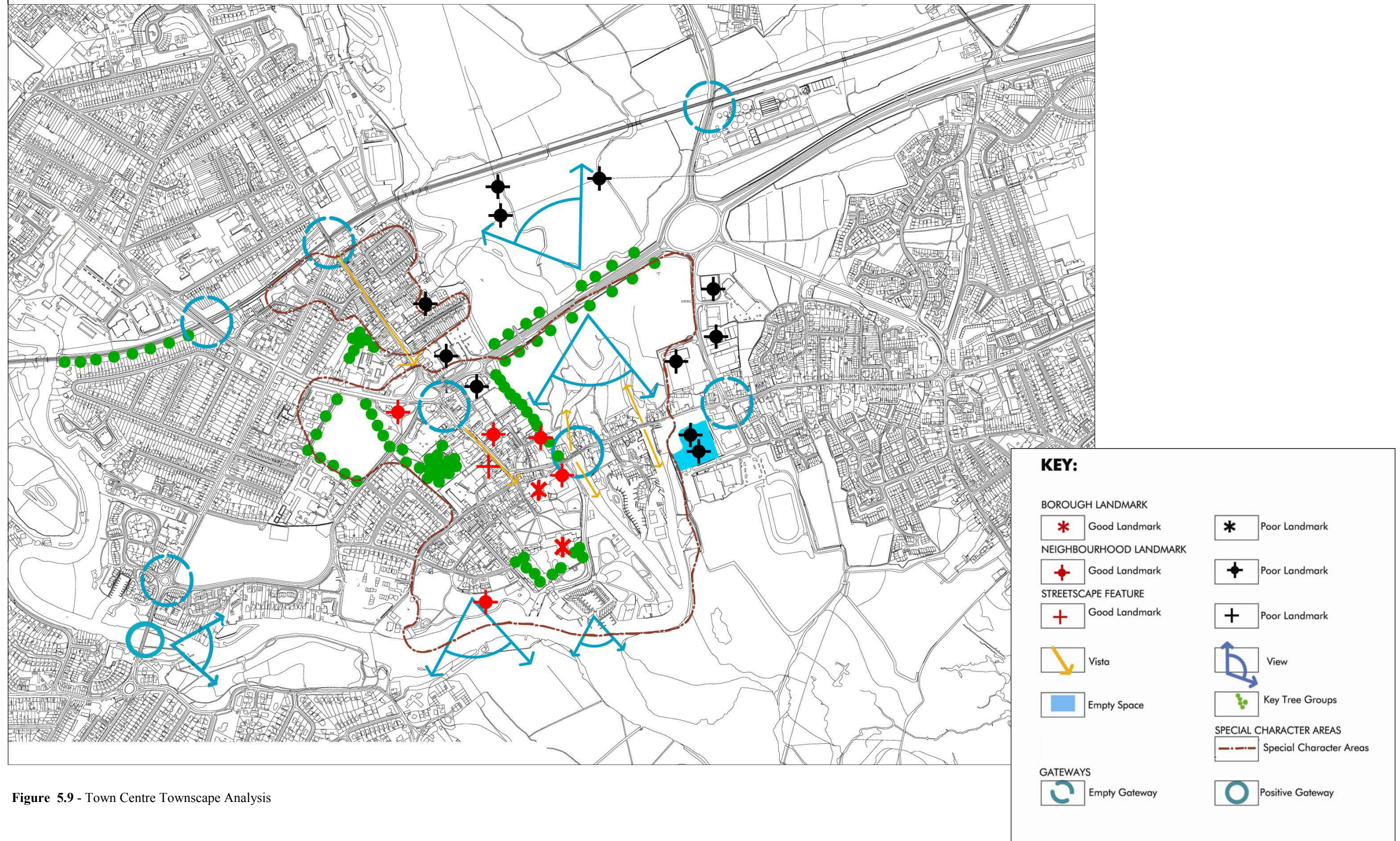


Figure 5.9 - Town Centre Townscape Analysis

Figure 5.9

Town Centre Character Areas

- a) The Priory Quarter and Twynham Castle
- b) The High Street, Church Street and Castle Street
- c) Millhams Street and Ducking Stool Lane
- d) Whitehall, Church Lane and Quay Road
- e) The Quomps, Priory Quay and Convent Meadows
- f) Saxon Square and Fountain Way
- g) Druitt Gardens, The Creedy and Barrack Road Gardens
- h) Bridge Street and Rossiters Quay
- i) Bridge Street - Stony Lane
- j) Bargates and Avon Buildings
- k) Wickfield Avenue and Stour Road
- l) The River Stour Frontage

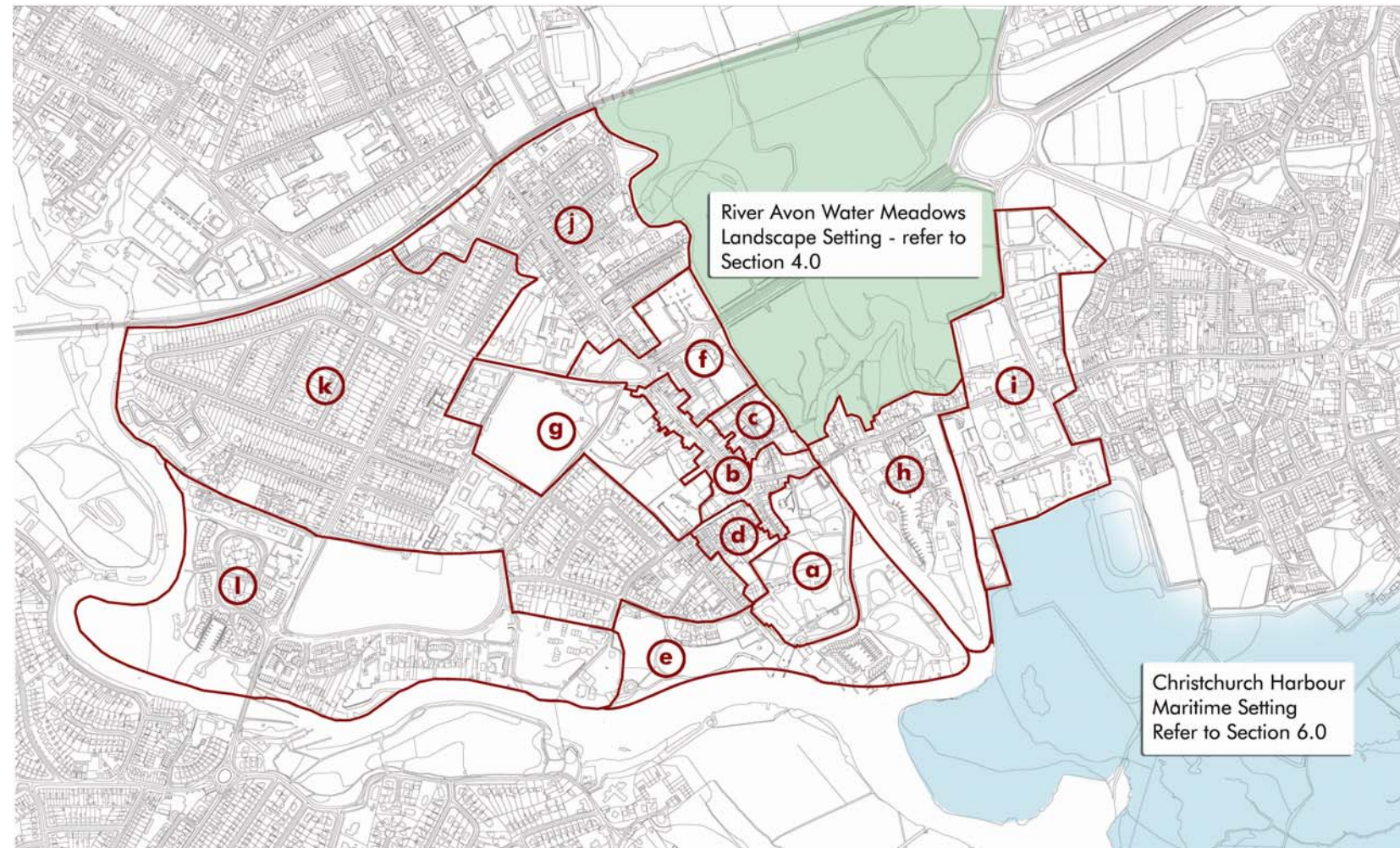
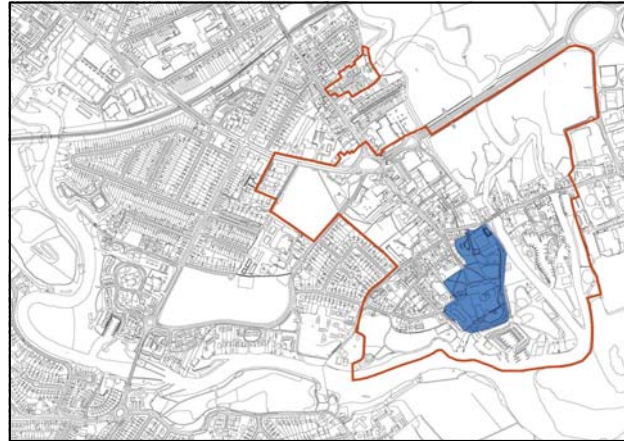


Figure 5.10 - Town Centre Character Areas



Aerial photograph of
Town Centre



— Conservation Areas



5.11 NC Area 2a : The Priory Quarter and Twynham Castle

5.11.1 This character area is comprised of two inter-related historical spaces. The Priory Church occupies the highest point of a knoll, the surrounding church grounds and monastery gardens form an open green space setting to the church. Adjoining this, the Motte and Bailey Castle sit with the 12th century Constable's House in their own green spaces separated by a Bowling Green. While these elements reflect different aspects of the town's history, they complement each other as clearly historic structures contained in semi-formal landscape settings.

5.11.2 The controlled open spaces within this area contrast with the tight pattern of medieval streetscape that encloses the space on the town side. This contrast is clearly important in helping to define the tranquil setting to the Priory. This tranquil setting extends beyond the immediate curtilage of the Priory grounds and includes the whole of the character area defined here, together with parts of the adjacent historic streets and open land of the adjoining character areas.

5.11.3 The Castle, the Constable House and the nearby Town Bridge are protected as ancient monuments. As a group these features are historically important, but they also help define the historic sense of place. The Priory is the longest parish church in England, the church standing out as a cathedral scale building against the nearby small scale streets. The dominating side of the building is evident from the Town Bridge/Bridge Street approach.

5.11.4 The area is enclosed by the route of the Mill Stream and adjacent path that encircles the eastern and southern boundaries of the open spaces. The spaces provide an open area accessible to visitors and form part of a wider trail around the town.

5.11.5 The interest of the historic structures, Mill Stream and views to other surrounding elements of the location, make these areas an inspiring place to discover and explore. The sheltered setting provided by the tree cover along the Mill Stream also provide a comfortable pleasant enclosure and protection to the open spaces.

5.11.6 As the point of communal focus within the town, the Priory is a fundamental part of the Borough-wide identity. The Priory also draws many visitors to Christchurch for both the spiritual experience and architectural interest. The combination of church, castle,

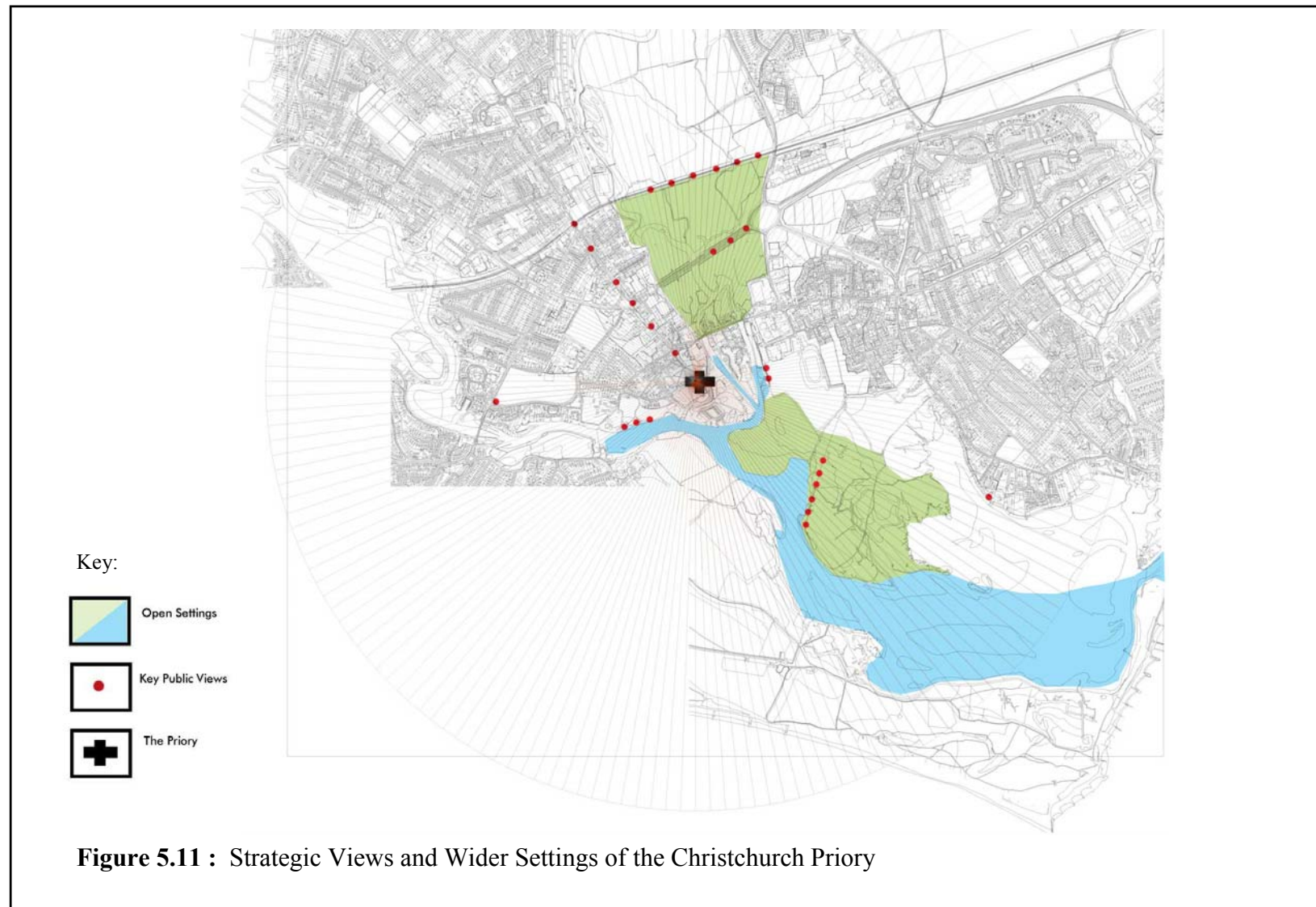
Constable's House and Mill Stream provide a very high quality historic environment that forms an area with a strong sense of place and obvious visitor interest within the heart of the Town Centre.

5.11.7 The Priory Quarter is the immediate 'internal' setting to the church. The adjacent areas of Church Street, Wick Lane, the Quomps and Convent Meadows provide areas of historic townscape and open space that also contribute to the setting and context of the church and wider Conservation Area. The church building sits above all other elements of the historic core as a landmark of Borough-wide significance.

5.11.8 The appreciation of the church as such a landmark is assisted and to some extent, dependent upon, the nature of a number of areas that provide a wider setting or foreground to a range of important views. The wide range of views into the Priory are illustrated by **Figure 5.11**. Areas such as the water meadows on the north east side of the town, the open landscape of Stanpit Marsh and the treescape around the Priory Knoll enhance these strategic views. The contribution and conditions of these wider settings to the church are described under the respective character area assessments.

5.11.9 Main Characteristics

- Pronounced topography of knoll and castle motte.
- Centre of historic core containing numerous listed buildings and ancient monuments with landscape setting.
- Dressed and rubble stone walling of the preserved ruins set within managed lawns or amenity grass.
- Cathedral scale church building and cluster of Priory buildings.
- Strong setting of trees encircle southern sides of character area, and provide settings to historic buildings.
- Semi formal gardens and green spaces.
- High levels of public accessibility around Priory Quarter and up into castle ruins.
- Enclosure and boundaries between spaces defined by a range of features including historic railings and the moat effect of the Mill Stream.
- High sense of enclosure and tranquil setting.



occur through works beyond the control of Conservation Area legislation. The area should be seen as highly sensitive to such change.

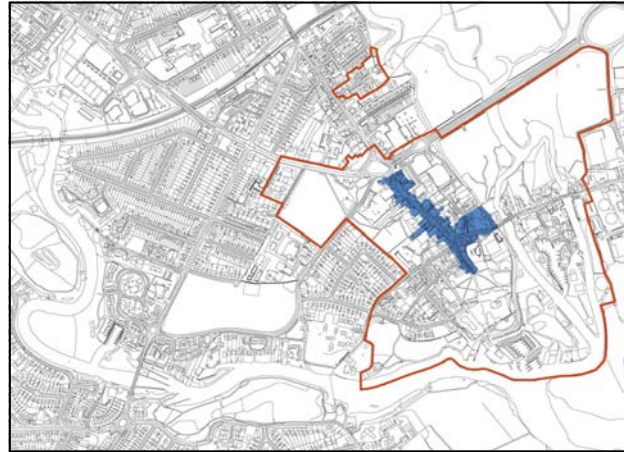
5.11.11 The significance of this part of Christchurch is further explored within the Town Centre strategy. The future management of this sensitive area may be best addressed by the development of a Conservation Plan along the lines of the English Heritage recommendations.

5.11.12 The value of this area is also encompassed within its role as the immediate tranquil setting to the Priory, and as the focal point to the wider views in towards the town. Both these spiritual and visual interests are highly sensitive to change well beyond the immediate location of the character area described here.

Sensitivity to Change



5.11.10 As a well preserved historic townscape, this area is protected from development pressure or change by the high level of Conservation Area status. New development is strictly controlled within the Conservation Area. Any new proposals should be considered in the context of the historic setting. The relationship of new buildings to their surroundings examined in great detail through an informed character appraisal of the context. In this area the continuity of historic buildings and the importance of the open space areas, suggest there is little scope for new built development and only carefully controlled change to the open spaces. More incremental changes to surfaces, enclosure, furniture and lighting can



The Town Centre Street Frontages

5.12 NC Area 2b : The High Street, Church Street, and Castle Street

5.12.1 This area is comprised of three subtly different sections of the Town Centre streetscapes. These areas do vary in terms of the fine detail of building arrangements, streetscape, modern building uses and the condition of individual premises. However, in considering the wider perception of the overall sense of place they are all inter-related.

5.12.2 The street frontage areas represent a rare commodity within the built-up area of the Borough as a whole. The main town streets are the most significant area of streetscape within the Borough.

5.12.3 In plan, the streets have maintained most of their pre-20th century form. The building lines of shop fronts and houses appear much unchanged from the late 19th century. As with most of the historic Town Centre area many individual buildings are listed. Unfortunately, only a few historic shop fronts remain. The original plot sizes of buildings remain intact with few buildings being amalgamated to create larger ground floor sales areas. In recent years a number of the shops have been restored to provide the setting for some specialist high quality shops/restaurants. In these, curved bay windows and tiles give a more interesting and attractive character to the street frontage. These premises are generally located within the more tightly packed southern end of the Church Street on the approach to the Priory.

5.12.4 The streets provide a range of activity and interest. The main High Street leads up to the Saxon Square shopping precinct. This is the widest section of roadway and provides the main range of typical high street shopping, library, Tourist Information and banking. The old Town Hall is a landmark building on the east side of the street. The Midland Bank forms one of the most striking buildings with a façade of dressed stone. No. 11, the High Street, is another important building with twin bays and Mathematical tiles which are rare in Christchurch. While the street contains a number of interesting buildings the historic character is diluted by a mix of modern shop fronts, standard paving materials, traffic and street furniture. Despite this, the area maintains a positive busy high street character.

5.12.5 The narrower Church Street section contains more of the

tourist and specialist shops. Part of the street is paved with pedestrian type surfacing and the road section is less heavily trafficked. This area provides the approach to the Priory and contains a more obvious range of historic buildings, including some fine houses. The street has a strong historic character and creates an effective link between the quiet formal setting of the church grounds and the more active main High Street. The transition between areas is reinforced by wrought iron railings at the end of the street.

5.12.6 Castle Street leads out to the Constable's House, the Castle and Town Bridge. There are fewer shops and more houses on this frontage. The car park to a small hotel breaks the street frontage and allows views into the back land space behind the building. The street leads out over the Rossiters Quay island. The general street character continues but the frontages become more residential further from the Town Centre.

5.12.7 As the junction of the streets come together the roadways widen to form the old Market Place. Alleyway links through to Millhams Street lead down into the quiet back streets to the north. Wick Lane leads off the space to the south. This is a busy hub of activity and acts as a key point for visitors wandering between the different sections of the Town Centre.

5.12.8 A 1950s precinct building fronts onto the old Market Place with significant impact on the more historic character of the setting. While an interesting example of 1950's architecture, the building has a brutal relationship with its setting. The main town Post Office is located in the rear half of the building, with the Sorting Office and service yard fronting onto the adjacent Wick Lane.

5.12.9 Other landmarks and features of interest are visible from within the three streets. The Priory, Castle, Millhams Street church and Town Hall all act as landmarks within these streets. Other distinctive buildings, such as Church House, the New Forest Perfumery, the Constable's House and the restored shop fronts act as attractive points of interest in the streetscapes.

5.12.10 Some improvement works have been undertaken to pedestrian surfaces within the area. These have provided a good quality material and finish to the areas. However, the materials used do not quite fit with the historical/local vernacular.

5.12.11 The three streets are generally a reasonably vibrant and active centre of the Borough. There appears to be a year round basic level of visitor activity drawn into at least the southern end of the



5.12 NC Area 2b : The High Street, Church Street, and Castle Street cont ..



Square and generally increases the number of pedestrians within the core area.

5.12.12 In terms of a pleasant shopping/visitor destination these streets provide a high quality, attractive and interesting environment. In terms of the preservation of historic character, this has been well maintained around the southern end of the areas (Church Street and Castle Street), but has been diminished to some extent by commercial pressures along the High Street.

5.12.13 While there is less of a 'pure' historic feel to the Upper High Street area, this whole character area should be seen as part of the overall context of the 'Old Town' area. The contrast these areas provide with the wider suburbs of the Borough give the whole area a critical role in the overall identity of the Borough.

5.12.14 Main Characteristics

- Street frontage development with clear front building lines, historic plot widths, consistent scale and unbroken roof-lines.
- Minor side roads and alleyways provide links to other areas.
- Traditional shops fronts still retained or restored in key sections of the street.
- Variations in shops types and activity between different sections of character area - adds interest to town centre.
- Landmark features of Priory, Millhams Street church and Town Hall.
- Some distinctive buildings and coherent building groups of particularly high quality.
- Hard built environment with views into green areas of adjoining Priory Quarter provide contrast.
- Traffic calmed but still part of the activity of the centre. Bus traffic brings significant flow through centre.
- Modern street furniture, and paving conflicts with historic character.



Additional detail on the physical condition of the three streets is illustrated in the boxes set out on the next page.

Sensitivity to Change

5.12.16 The Town Centre has already been affected by a degree of post-war modernisation, the introduction of some standard poor quality shop fronts, and shopping developments.

5.12.17 In many places historic building fabric may remain behind the modern frontages. The character of the Town Centre as a traditional High Street would be sensitive to further modernisation. Streetscape improvements should reflect and be sensitive to the remaining historic character.

5.12.18 The historic character of the area is protected by the Conservation Area status. This applies to areas that have already been modernised and some that may need to be redeveloped in the future. The designation identifies how changes to these areas need to be considered in terms of the wider character of the whole Town Centre.

5.12.19 With the exception of the Post Office precinct, the buildings within Castle Street and the southern end of the High Street are predominantly 19th century. The restoration of some of the existing shop frontages and the listed status of the other buildings within the street frontage areas, has ensured the area currently has a strong historic character. Further renovation or alteration of premises within this section of the Conservation Area will need to be to a high standard, if such work is to preserve or enhance this historic character.

5.12.20 Within the main High Street area the loss of historic shop fronts and individual buildings has left an area in which the historic buildings are interspersed by more recent buildings or frontages. Alterations to the remaining historic buildings needs to respect the importance of protecting the historic fabric and character of such buildings. With the range of more modern buildings within this area there is also considerable scope for alternations to be designed to enhance the character of the Conservation Area. To achieve this, such alterations need to respect the generally consistent scale, style, materials and building lines of the older development. Enhancement of character within the context of the existing post war development within the High Street, need not depend purely on a replica approach, but could include sensitive contemporary design.

5.12.21 Street Frontage Characteristics

High Street

Building Line/Layout

Main High Street has a strong but varied building line - occasional spaces created by buildings being set back - eg. Regents Art Centre. Historic plot widths. Saxons Square forms forum space off main axis.

Scale

Buildings on both sides of consistent scale and height, generally 2-2½ storey on east side with 2½ on west. West side has a few more civic buildings of slightly larger scale.

Elevations and Rooflines

Vast majority of shop fronts- standard post-war with unco-ordinated/corporate signage. Range of more interesting period detailing over shop front topped by irregular roofline. Roofs generally slope to a consistent eaves line and are unbroken by dormers and rooflights. General appearance above shop front level - interesting hints of historic character.

Materials

Mostly brick, painted white/cream, civic buildings with incised Ashlar rendering. Majority tiled, some slate (probably formally tiled).

Paving, Street Furniture and Landscape

Concrete block pavements and planters with typical ‘townscape’ type street furniture. Planting includes Cordyline palms and tulip trees Liriodendron, large Robina next to Library.



Castle Street

Building Line/Layout

Majority of buildings set to a common building line. Number of large buildings with long elevations so frontage not broken up as much as other street frontage. Key space next to High Street where frontage pulls back to provide gathering/spill out space by roundabout. Line breaks close to river with hotel car parks and bowling green lay-by. Street has a gentle curve which helps accentuate the views into the adjacent castle.

Scale

Buildings start as 2-2½ storey by High Street and grow to 3 storey as road drops towards river.

Elevations and Rooflines

Mixed elevations, long hotel frontage in buff brick. Other buildings include half timbered medieval building, brick and incised Ashlar render. Interesting raised roofline but flat topped modern dormers next to Market Place stand out as obviously 60’s/70’s design style. Signage controlled and generally consistent with historic setting. Gable of the perfumery: distinctive within the street with decorative barge boards.

Materials

Brick, incised Ashlar render, and half timbered.

Paving, Street Furniture and Landscape

Hard landscape paved with Blanc-de-Bierge.



Church Street/Market Place

Building Line/Layout

Street wider, former Market Place area with traffic islands and constant traffic! Street narrows in cul-de-sac section to intimate ‘pedestrian’ space.

Scale

Buildings frontage onto Market Place 2½-3 storey including buildings with relatively wide frontages. Reduces in Church approach to 2 storey and overall smaller scale tighter streetscape.

Elevations and Rooflines

Market Place dominated by 1950’s Post Office precinct. Other buildings have large windowed, more traditional shop fronts. Refurbished shops/restaurant in Church Street have faithfully restored tiled shop fronts. Signage generally sympathetic. 2nd storey generally of historic character—modern 80’s building slightly out of place. Inverted dormer details on newer frontages. Street includes residential cottages and large townhouse. Roof lines slope to consistent eaves line.

Materials

Original building in soft red or painted brick, or with ‘rough cast’ render. Timber windows and doors. Modern buildings with tile hanging and concrete panel. Terraced cottages with combined use of natural stone and clay tiles. Brick walls and wrought iron work.

Paving, Street Furniture and Landscape

Hard paved throughout—busy section of roadways, tarmac pavement and cul-de-sac section. Limestone kerbs, Blanc-de-Bierge—expensive beige coloured block paving—not quite in keeping with traditional street materials.

