5.2 Norman and Medieval Shaftesbury (1066-1539)

5.2.1 Historical Summary

Shaftesbury was a large late Saxon town and became perhaps the most populous medieval Dorset town, but it was in decline by the end of the medieval period. The town and its economy were dominated by the Abbey and this period sees a decisive shift of settlement away from the burh and the defensive position to the west of the abbey into the area immediately east of it, which was more accessible and where the topography allowed greater potential for urban expansion.

Initially, the town appears to have suffered a reverse, as Domesday records the partial destruction of the late Saxon town of Shaftesbury, stating that approximately one third of the houses in the town were destroyed between 1066 and 1086. This level of destruction was slightly less than that suffered by Dorchester and Wareham which lost approximately half of their houses over the same period. The reason for this destruction is unclear but Hugh FitzGrip, Sheriff of Dorset, may have been responsible (Thorn and Thorn 1983). The economy of the town may have been detrimentally affected, as William of Malmesbury wrote in 1125 that Shaftesbury was now a village (*vicus*) and was formerly a town. This has been used to suggest that Shaftesbury did not fully recover its 11th century standing (Penn 1980, 85). It could also be that William was describing the area of the burh, which appears to have become much less densely settled during the medieval period, as the focus of the town shifted to the east, centred on the markets established along the High Street and The Commons. An earthen enclosure was built on Castle Hill at the northwestern extremity of the spur, perhaps constructed during the Anarchy of Stephen's reign in the early 12th century (Rigold 1949). The decline in importance of the

area of the burh and the royal manor is reflected in the gradual acquisition of the King's manor by the Abbess and the two manors were united by about 1500 (Penn 1980, 85). The Abbey church was rebuilt about 1080-1120 and it may have been this activity that stimulated the re-growth of the economy. Shaftesbury retained its mint, established in 924, until 1154.

The success and popularity of the Abbey meant that a large number of nuns entered the nunnery and the abbey became greatly over-subscribed in the 14th century (Page 1908, 103). It later suffered a decline, although there were still 55 nuns resident there at dissolution in 1539. The 13th century expansion of the abbey may have been in part due to the success of King Edward's shrine as a centre of pilgrimage. It may have stimulated a number of other religious foundations including the Hospital of St John the Baptist in East Street, which was in existence by 1223, a chantry house in East Street and the Maudlin Hospital (Dolhouse), which was in existence by 1386 (Penn 1980, 88). A school appears to have been established within the abbey some time before 1375.

Shaftesbury appears to have had some degree of economic success during the 13th and 14th centuries. Fourteenth century documents such as the Lay Subsidy (Mills 1971, 55-6) and the *Inquisitio Nonarum* show that Shaftesbury was the most populous Dorset town at that time (Penn 1980, 85). The Lay Subsidy of 1332 suggests that Shaftesbury was the wealthiest town in Dorset in the early 14th century, almost as wealthy as the next two biggest (Weymouth and Bridport) combined. It had a number of modestly wealthy inhabitants, but no very rich taxpayers. Shaftesbury was represented as a borough at the eyre of 1244 and sent members to parliament from 1295. Shaftesbury's weekly market is first recorded in 1269 when the charter was confirmed by Henry III during 1269

Figure 13: View of the High Street showing St Peters Church and the 19th century Town Hall .

Figure 14: View of the Commons, High Street.

(Letters 2007).

The Black Death affected Shaftesbury badly. At least four of the eight parish incumbents were replaced in 1348 and three rectors of St Peter's are recorded in that year. Nevertheless, it does not appear to have affected the economy for long.

Shaftesbury's economic success was based in no small part in its location on a major road and as a place of pilgrimage. This, together with the success of the market, attracted large numbers of visitors requiring accommodation, board and stabling. Shaftesbury was famous for its alehouses of which there were a large number (Innes 1992). The presence of a small Jewish community in the town in the 13th century implies some commercial activity and there are references to shops in the market place by 1343 (Penn 1980). The 1332 Lay Subsidy records a number of names of immigrant families from Somerset and Wiltshire, together with some from towns as far away as Bodmin, London and Hull, suggesting the town was relatively cosmopolitan in nature. A range of trades and industries were carried out in Shaftesbury, but the town does not appear to be dominated by any one industry. The Lay Subsidy of 1332 records a number of trade names in the town, such as le Deghere (dyer), Taillor, Draper, Souter (shoemaker), La Masones (mason), giving some indication of the range of occupations. Woollen cloth-making became one of the more important trades in Shaftesbury, though the town never became one of the major cloth-producing centres. Cloth may have been one of the few products made in the town designed for export rather than for the local populace and market (Innes 1992). Tanning and leather-working also appear to have been significant trades in medieval Shaftesbury. St James was the centre of the post-medieval tanning industry and undoubtedly the medieval tanneries were in this same area. St James may have developed as an 'industrial' suburb during the medieval period, thanks to

its position on the spring line providing copious amounts of water not readily available on the hilltop. Stone quarrying of the Greensand hill on which the town sits may have taken place throughout the medieval period.

The economy of Shaftesbury appears to have begun to decline by the late medieval period, in part as a result of pilgrimage becoming less popular. This decline occurred at a time when successful trading ports and cloth manufacturing towns were on the rise, overtaking traditional market centres. Successful cloth towns tended to be located on rivers, partly for ease of bulk transport, and partly for washing, dying and power for fulling mills (Chandler 2003, 102-4). By the first quarter of the 16th century, Shaftesbury was no longer the wealthiest town in Dorset, with both Poole and Dorchester having more wealth by 1524. The number of churches and chapels in the town was reduced from twelve recorded in about 1300 to only six recorded in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of 1535, suggesting the maintenance of such a high number of churches was no longer viable. It seems that Shaftesbury was already in decline prior to the Reformation and the dissolution of Shaftesbury abbey in 1539 and this decline continued into the early post-medieval period (Chandler 2003, 104-6).

5.2.2 Town Layout

The rise in importance of the abbey during the medieval period seems to have changed the focus of the medieval town. The former burh and market at Bimport (part of the royal manor) became less intensively occupied. The focus of the town was now in the area to the east of the abbey, which probably expanded and developed beyond the pre-Conquest extra-mural settlement. The central town plots may have been planned and arranged along the approximately parallel streets of Bleke Street, Bell Street and High Street. Side streets linking these three parallel streets include Parson's

Figure 15: Edwardstowe, Bimport.

Figure 16: The nave and chancel of the 11th-12th century abbey church .

Pool, Haimes Lane, Muston's Lane and Angel Lane.

This new town centre appears to have developed as two separate areas, each with its own market place. The High Street with a market along it from the top of Gold Hill (Figure 13) was in the parish of St Peter's. The market place (also known as Cornhill) was overlooked by the church and by the old guildhall or town hall. This area may have been the main commercial district of the medieval town and there are mentions of shops at Cornhill from the 1340s onwards. The second area comprised Bell Street (formerly St Laurence Street) and the market place at The Commons (Figure 14), within the parish of St Laurence. The existence of regular burgage plots suggests some degree of planning of both these areas, but it is unclear whether the property boundaries date from the Late Saxon or medieval periods.

Medieval suburban expansion may have occurred along Salisbury Street (formerly East Street), in St Martin's parish, extending along this street as far as St Rumbold's. The existence of a series of regular plots along this road implies some degree of planning, perhaps originating in the 13th century (Penn 1980). The earlier suburb of St James also expanded at this time both east along St James Street and north up the slopes of the Greensand ridge. It was only the presence of the walled Abbey Park that prevented further expansion east along this line.

Shaftesbury, probably as a consequence of its importance as a pilgrimage destination, has a large number of roads radiating from it, more than any other town in Dorset, and all appear to have existed in the medieval period (Good 1966, 38). The town lay on one of the most important medieval routes in England, running west from London to Exeter, approximately on the line of the modern A30. This road entered the town of Shaftesbury from Salisbury along Salisbury Street. It then ran along High Street through the market, exiting the town via Tout Hill. Another major route is likely to have run in a north-south direction along the Greensand ridge between Blandford in the south and Warminster in the north, approximately along the line of the modern A350. Other roads linked Shaftesbury with neighbouring settlements at Motcombe and Gillingham. Bell Street ran due east towards the Abbey's Home Farm at Barton. Further satellite medieval rural settlements existed at Cann and possibly at Enmore Green.

5.2.3 Medieval Urban plan components

The main plan components of the medieval town are shown on Figure 17 and are listed below.

1. The Burh. The area of the late Saxon burh seems to have been of declining importance during the medieval period following the removal of the market to the east of the Abbey. The extent of settlement within the burh during the medieval period is largely unknown. Only one late medieval building survives; Edwardstowe at the west end of Bimport (Figure 15). It is generally assumed that some settlement remained along the line of Bimport but in a much reduced state.

2. The Abbey. The abbey church was rebuilt in the late 11th – early 12th century. The Norman church was essentially a cruciform structure with an apsidal eastern end to the chancel and was flanked by chapels on its north and south sides, also with apsidal eastern ends. The transepts were of simple squared form and the chapter house lay south of the southern transept. The cloister lay to the south (RCHME 1972, 58). The Chapel of King Edward was added to the north of the chancel in the 13th century and the Lady Chapel was added on the south side during the late 14th century. The area of the precinct was expanded to include the Park by the late 14th century when the Park Wall along the west side of Gold Hill was constructed. The abbey thrived throughout the medieval period and was, at times, fully or over subscribed. The layout of the abbey precinct and the abbey buildings in the mid-sixteenth century has been reconstructed from surviving excavated remains and from a survey dated 1565 together with the town plans of 1615 and 1799 (Hopton 1993). The conventual buildings were ranged along Bimport and Magdalen Lane and the Broad Hall overlooked the market square on the High Street. The abbey laundry lay close to St James. The abbey fishponds were below the abbey in Layton.

3. St John's Church. The church of St John the Baptist was first recorded in 1272, although it is likely to represent a late Saxon foundation. Nothing of the building survives above ground, but its site may be marked by an uneven area of ground at the south end of its disused graveyard. St. John's parish was united with St. James's in 1446 and the church may already have been disused at that date (RCHME 1972, 76). Hutchins mentions the foundations of a little church and chancel, visible in the late 18th century (Hutchins 1774, 32).
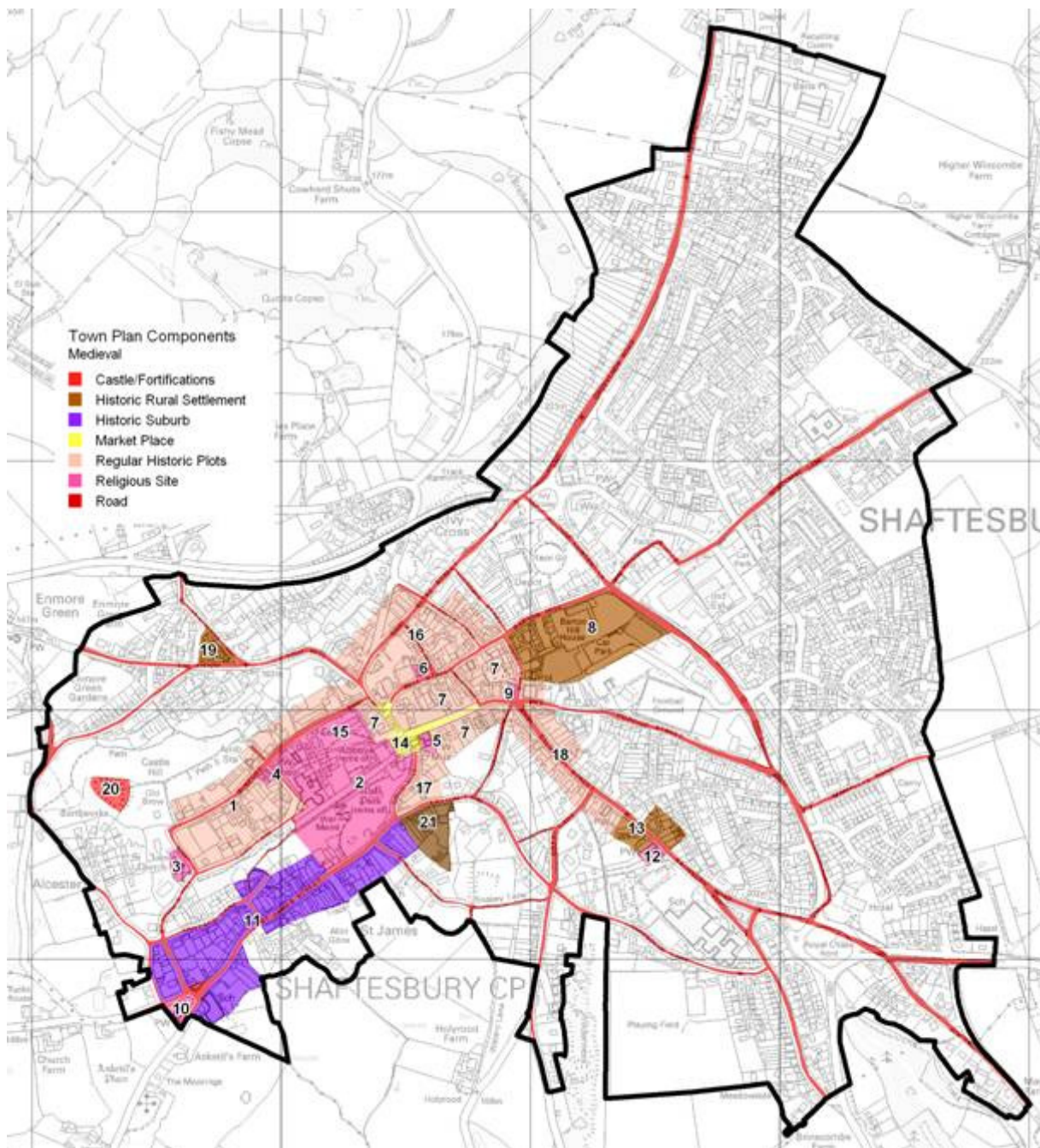
Figure 17: Shaftesbury Medieval Town Plan Components.

4. *St Mary's Church.* St Mary's was first recorded in 1302 but is also likely to have been established during the late Saxon period. The church was disused by the 15th century, although its approximate position is recorded on the town plan of 1615. Hutchins claims that the church had lain a little past St Mary's Lane (Magdalen Lane?) on the right. At this point a dwelling had existed with a doorway bearing a pointed stone arch (Hutchins 1868, 1 & 61). Unfortunately this building appears to have been demolished during the early 20th century. Figure 15 shows one of the possible positions.

5. *St Peter's Church.* This church is possibly first

mentioned in documents as early as 1302 (Penn 1980, 85), but it may have been a Saxon foundation. The earliest surviving parts of the structure (the arches of the west tower) date from the 14th century. The fabric was largely rebuilt during the 15th century including the rest of the tower, the nave, north aisle and west porch. The south aisle was enlarged and a crypt added during the 16th century (RCHME 1972, 61-2).

6. *St Laurence's Church.* This church was first documented in 1297, but may have been a late Saxon foundation.

7. *High Street.* Properties fronting on to the High

Street formed the core of St Peter's parish during the medieval period. These properties took the form of tightly-packed burgage plots fronting on to an open market place. St Andrew's Church, probably first recorded in 1302, possibly lay along the High Street but its precise location is not known (Penn 1980, 85).

8. *Barton Hill.* Barton manor was owned by Shaftesbury Abbey and farmed as their home farm. It is not mentioned in Domesday, but may have been included within the borough of Shaftesbury. It is recorded as a separate manor belonging to the abbess in 1364 and a survey of the manor in 1545, immediately following the dissolution suggests that the manor included much of the parish of Cann, the area of Heath Farm, and some lands in Wiltshire. The grange buildings may have been to the east of Christy's Lane, where there is a dog-leg in the original course of Wincombe Lane (Cox and Chandler 1996). Archaeological excavations on the site of the Tesco superstore and at Barton Hill House have revealed evidence for medieval agricultural activity in this area, including a possible barn and dovecote (Carew 2008; Whelan & Firth 2009).

9. *St Martin's Church.* This church is possibly first mentioned in documents dating to 1302, but may have been a late Saxon foundation. It lay at the junction of Angel Lane and High Street.

10. *St James Church.* The Chapel of St James was first recorded in AD 1140 when it was granted to the newly founded Alcester Abbey in Warwickshire, but may be a late Saxon foundation. The medieval church was located slightly east of the present church building, hard up against the road. This church was remarkable for its nave not being square with the chancel and the side walls being on the slant (Innes 1992, 79).

11. *St James Suburb.* The suburb of St James expanded during the medieval period. Industrial sites including tanneries and the abbey's laundry are recorded on the north side of the suburb on Tanyard Lane and Laundry Lane. The parish boundary ran along Tanyard Lane and east along the south side of the abbey park suggesting a northern and eastern limit to the suburb. Properties fronting on to St James' Street probably took the form of planned burgages.

12. *St Rumbold's Church.* St Rumbold's Church was the parish church of Cann and was first mentioned in documents dating to 1307, but the remains of an earlier church, probably dating to the 11th century have been found beneath the present church (SDAG 1990). It was part of the property of the abbey during the medieval period

13. *Cann.* This settlement was not mentioned in Domesday and seems to have formed part of the abbey manor of Barton during the medieval period. The extent of medieval settlement of Cann is not clear although the current village centre lies outside the study area to the south along the A350. The area around the parish church on the road to Salisbury was possibly a focus for settlement from at least the medieval period.

14. *The Market.* Shaftesbury's weekly market is first recorded in documents dated 1269 when Henry III examined and confirmed a pre-existing charter held by John de Burgo (Letters 2007). The market seems to have begun as two separate markets at The Commons and the High Street, which gradually appear to have merged. The late medieval market layout can be discerned from the town plan dated 1615 (Hutchins 1868). The Corn Market (or Corn Hill) was along the High Street, with the Fish Cross to the south of St Peter's Church. The Butter Cross lay to the north at The Commons. The market place at the east end of the High Street was larger than today and included the area south of Church Walk east of the Abbey precinct.

15. *Holy Trinity Church.* The Church of the Holy Trinity was first recorded in 1302 and lay within

Figure 18: Historic buildings on Bell Street with Holy Trinity tower in the background.

Figure 19:The substantial bank and ditch at Castle Hill.

the northeastern part of the Abbey precinct. The parish rights in the nave of the Abbey Church were transferred to Holy Trinity in 1364 (RCHME 1972, 59). The medieval church is depicted in a sketch of the abbey ruins made circa 1553, with a simple nave and chancel and a west tower topped by a spire (RCHME 1972, plate 58).

16. *Bell Street and Bleke Street.* During the medieval period there appears to have been a regular grid of burgages fronting on to both sides of Bell Street and Bleke Street. This area lay within St Laurence Parish and was separate from the adjacent High Street area. The market lay at The Commons. Bell Street was formerly known as St Laurence Street and Parson's Pool as Laurence Lane (first mentioned in 1416).

17. *Gold Hill.* The name Gold Hill is first recorded in 1352 and refers to a market site which may have spilled down the northern end of the street. The plots at the northern end of the street form a regular block and may represent medieval burgages.

18. *Salisbury Street.* Salisbury Street and the west end of Coppice Street were occupied with regular burgage plots by the late medieval period and probably represent medieval suburban expansion. The area as far as St Rumbold's Church, formed part of St Martin's parish which was still in existence in about 1600 (Penn 1980, 85).

19. *Enmore Green.* Enmore Green is the site of the springs from which water has been traditionally carried to the town of Shaftesbury. This tradition is documented as early as 1518 but is almost certainly of earlier origin. There is reference to festivities associated with a water ceremony disturbing the nuns of Shaftesbury as early as 1364. These springs and wells were located in waste and common ground in the tithing of Motcombe (Howarth & Young 1972, 7-10). The current buildings of Enmore Green village date from the 17th to 19th century and seem to occupy a former triangular area of common at the junction of the roads to Gillingham and Sherborne. Nevertheless, it is possible that some earlier medieval houses existed here around the edge of the common.

20. *Castle Hill.* Excavations at Castle Hill during the late 1940s have demonstrated that this earthwork represents a castle constructed during the 12th century during the civil war between Stephen and Matilda. The castle is in the form of a triangular promontory fort at the north west tip of the Greensand spur. A bank and deep ditch cuts the fort off from the town (Figure 19) and a smaller ditch surrounds the triangular 'bailey' of the castle itself, enclosing an area of nearly 200 square metres (Rigold 1949, 54).

21. *Layton.* Leighton (Layton) originated as a farm belonging to the abbey lying near *Shetewell Lane.* It was first recorded in 1461 (Hutchins 1868, 45). The Abbey fishponds lay close to Layton. The precise location of the medieval farm is not known, but is assumed to be in the area of the later Layton House.