Shaftesbury Historic Urban Character Area 1
Bimport
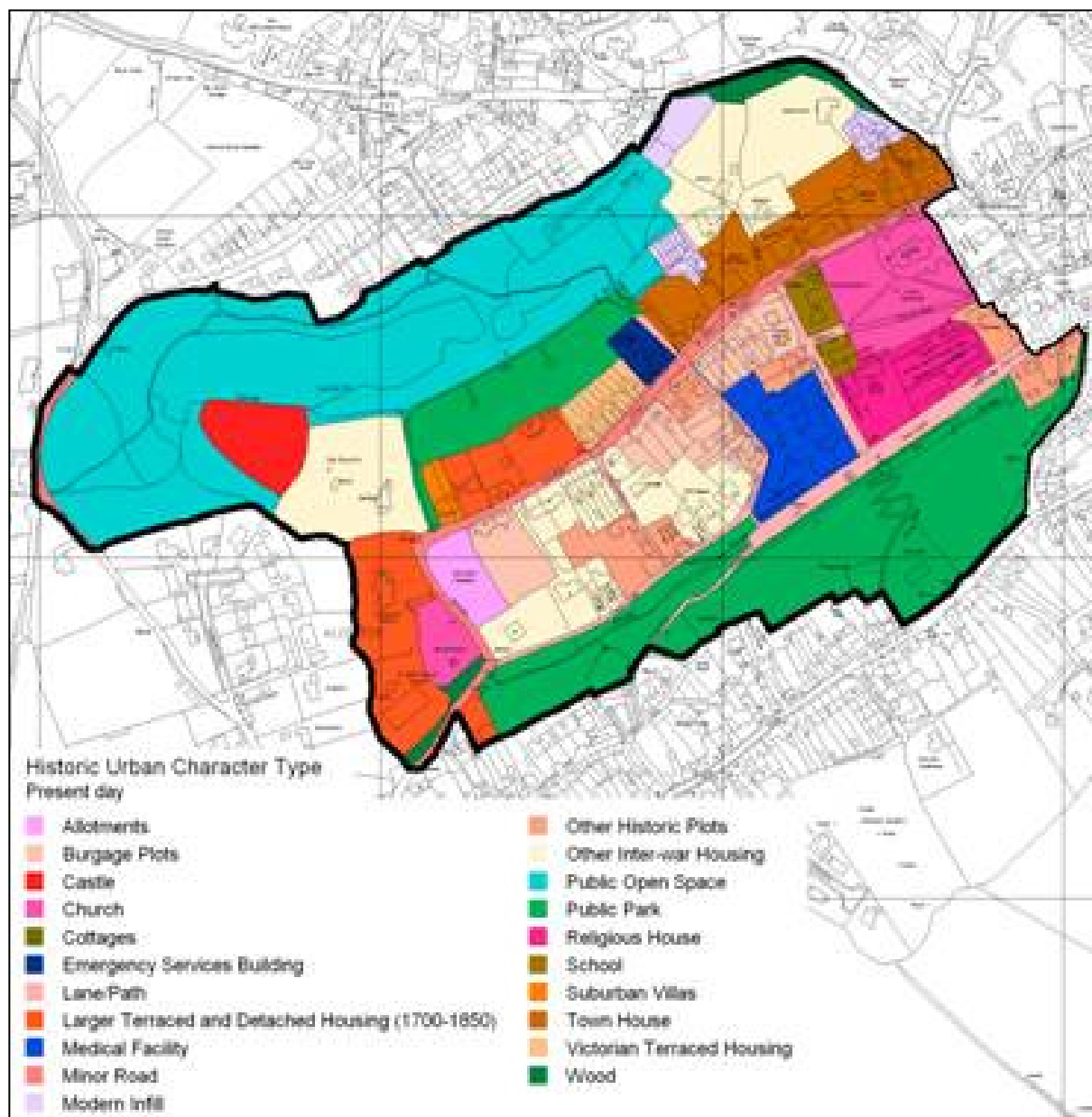

Figure 55: Map of Historic Urban Character Area 1, showing current historic urban character type.

Shaftesbury Historic Urban Character Area 1
Structure of Character Area

Overview

This area represents the presumed area of the Late Saxon burh on the Greensand promontory. It is defined by its topographic position, historic dimension and more open settlement pattern.

Topography and Geology

This area comprises a narrow promontory projecting westwards from the edge of Salisbury Plain into Blackmore Vale. The promontory is flat-topped with steep slopes to the north, south and west. It lies in an elevated position at about 215m above Ordnance Datum. The geology of the area consists entirely of Upper Greensand.

Urban Structure

The urban structure of this area broadly comprises a single main street running along the length of the promontory and a back lane running parallel along the southern edge. A number of lanes running across the spur connect the two and there is a road running down the southwestern side, which connects with St James. The plots are varied, but retain vestiges of an earlier more regular layout. The structure of much of this area remains relatively open, with large plots taken up by Holy Trinity Church, the abbey ruins and the hospital. The periphery of this area has a significantly open character, with open green spaces and parkland and a number of houses set in large grounds.

Present Character

Figure 55 shows the present day historic urban character types. The area is fairly hetero-geneous with small areas of amalgamated burgage plots and other historic plots, mixed together with Inter-war housing and a small area of Victorian Terraced Housing. In the eastern part are large blocks of Church, Religious House and Medical facility character types, representing the Holy Trinity churchyard, former abbey remains and the hospital. The northern and western margins of the promontory are filled with Larger Detached and Terraced Housing (1700-1850) and Other Inter-war Housing. The slopes of the promontory are Public Park and Public Open Space. Other minor character types include Castle, Suburban Villas and Modern Infill.

Time Depth

This area represents the primary historic components of the town. The foundation of the burh and abbey date from the late ninth century. The earthwork on Castle Hill dates from the 12th century. The street pattern probably dates to the late ninth century, though the date of St John's Hill is unclear and is probably later. The abbey, Holy Trinity Church and St John's churchyard, probably all date to the late Saxon period. Some of the property boundaries probably reflect Late Saxon and medieval burgage plots, though many boundaries and a significant proportion of the houses date from the early 1800s to the 1930s and reflect resettlement of a partially deserted part of the town. There has been some modern development and infill, particularly in the northeast part of the area. The park dates from the medieval period.

Settlement Pattern and Streetscape

The settlement pattern primarily consists of low density housing in a fairly irregular ribbon or perimeter block layout. The settlement is noticeably less dense in the western part of the area. The streetscape varies along the main thoroughfare of Bimport, with a range of types and scale of buildings. Very few of these buildings are set directly on the street frontage, some are set back slightly behind small front gardens and others are set well back from the road, within large garden plots. Where the buildings are set back, the street frontage is defined by stone walls, iron railings or hedges, though in places the road edge is poorly defined. There are significant gaps in the street frontages that have not been built up.

Open green spaces and trees form a very significant element of this character area. The slopes of the promontory are all publicly accessible open land or public parks, with areas of grass and mature trees. Large gardens with significant mature tree cover form one of the dominant elements of the streetscape at the western end of this area. The extensive views of the surrounding countryside from this high point in the landscape are also a major element of this area.

Figure 56: View looking east along Bimport.

Shaftesbury Historic Urban Character Area 1
Built Character

Building types

The area has a wide variety of historic buildings ranging from the ruins of the medieval abbey church to medieval and post-medieval houses and large villas. The eastern end of the promontory, on the site of the former abbey, contains many of the most prominent historic buildings in Shaftesbury. These include the Church of the Holy Trinity on Bimport which was rebuilt in 1841 and was one of the first churches to be designed by George Gilbert Scott in the 'Early English' style (Figure 57). The Westminster Memorial Hospital was built in 1871 and extended in a piecemeal fashion throughout the 20th century. The ruins of the abbey church are an important feature of the town, situated on Park Walk and exposed through archaeological excavation. Entry is via a modern museum building and provides an important asset for the town's tourist industry. Other medieval buildings are Edwardstowe (Figure 15) and part of the Old School House. The Park Wall, formerly the abbey precinct wall, along Gold Hill is one of the best preserved medieval structures in Shaftesbury.

A number of large villas and town houses were constructed on the north side of Bimport from the late 16th to the 19th centuries. The best preserved is the late 16th-early 17th century Ox House. The west end of Bimport also contains some Victorian semi-detached villas and terraces (Figure 31) interspersed with vernacular houses and cottages.

Industrial buildings are absent, except for a converted small workshop of possible early 19th century date at 14 Bimport.

Building Materials

Greensand is the dominant material used in the historic buildings, both as ashlar and rubble. Brick is used mainly for dressings. Inter-war and modern houses are frequently rendered or pebbledashed. Some modern buildings have reconstituted stone walls. Slate is the most common roofing material on the historic buildings. Tile is used more frequently on inter-war and modern houses.

Key Buildings

Public Buildings: Holy Trinity Church, Westminster Memorial Hospital, Old School House, Shaftesbury Abbey Ruins, Park Wall.

15th-16th century Domestic Buildings: Edwardstowe, Ox House.

18th-19th century Town Houses and Villas: Castle Hill House, St Edward's Chantry, 65 Bimport.

Figure 57: Holy Trinity Church.

Figure 58: Ox House, Bimport, — called after its name in Hardy's Jude the Obscure.

Figure 59: Castle Hill House, Bimport.

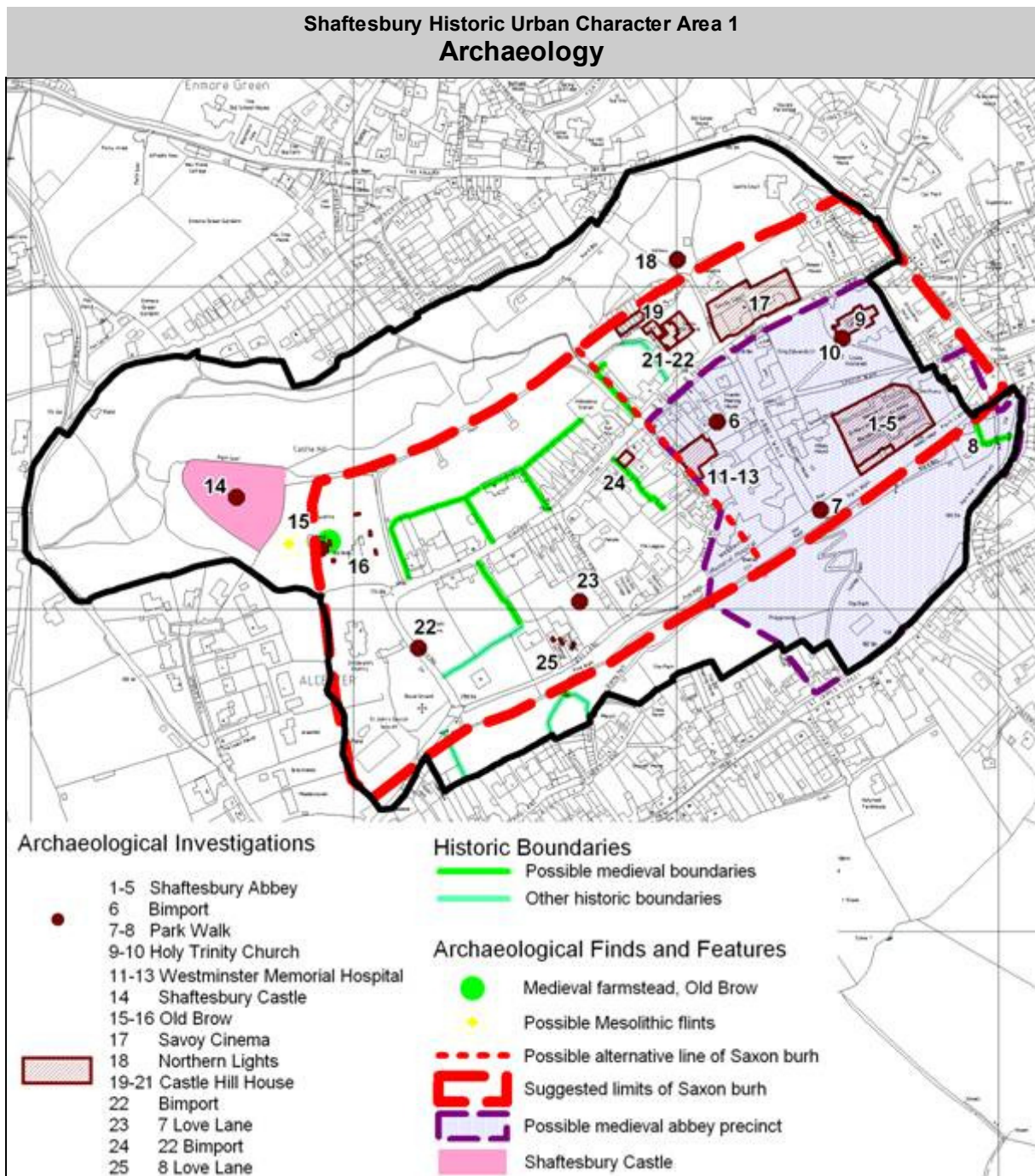*Figure 60: Former National School, Bimport.*

Shaftesbury Historic Urban Character Area 1
Archaeology

Archaeological Investigations

1-5 Shaftesbury Abbey
6 Bimport
7-8 Park Walk
9-10 Holy Trinity Church
11-13 Westminster Memorial Hospital
14 Shaftesbury Castle
15-16 Old Brow
17 Savoy Cinema
18 Northern Lights
19-21 Castle Hill House
22 Bimport
23 7 Love Lane
24 22 Bimport
25 8 Love Lane

Historic Boundaries

Possible medieval boundaries
Other historic boundaries

Archaeological Finds and Features

Medieval farmstead, Old Brow
Possible Mesolithic flints
Possible alternative line of Saxon burh
Suggested limits of Saxon burh
Possible medieval abbey precinct
Shaftesbury Castle

Figure 61: Archaeological Investigations, features and findspots in Historic Urban Character Area 1.

Archaeological Investigations

Twenty five archaeological investigations have been undertaken in this character area (Appendix 3, 1-25; Figure 61).

The abbey and precinct have formed a focus for archaeological investigation. The earliest excavations in Shaftesbury were conducted at the site of the abbey church (Appendix 3, 1-5) and originally were little more than antiquarian exercises in exposing the walls of the abbey. The plan of the church was revealed in sporadic episodes during 1861, 1902 and 1931. The

latter is perhaps the best known because the owner and excavator of the site, J. Wilson Claridge, claimed to have unearthed the remains of King Edward the Martyr in a crude leaden box (Anon 1931). There have also been a number of investigations within the former abbey precinct (Appendix 3, 6-10). Perhaps the most significant was work conducted in advance of the extension of Westminster Hospital car park during 1995-6 (Appendix 3, 11-13). This revealed the remains of medieval structures and gardens associated with the abbey (Cox and Tatler 1996).

Other significant investigations have taken place at Shaftesbury Castle and Old Brow House (Appendix 3,14-16) which, revealed that the castle probably dated from the 12th century.

Investigations on the north side of Bimport (Appendix 3, 17-18) have revealed traces of a possible substantial ditch of uncertain date aligned with Abbey Walk. Evidence for late prehistoric occupation of the hill top in the form of two Iron Age pits, was also revealed (Appendix 3,19). Elsewhere the investigations have exposed little archaeology. Medieval pits were found at 22 Bimport and near St John's churchyard (Appendix 3, 22 & 24).

Archaeological Character

Despite the number of investigations, the overall archaeological character of this area is not entirely certain. This area was within the Saxon burh, but evidence for settlement or other activity of this date is extremely limited and consists of some residual Late Saxon pottery at Westminster Hospital, a reputed pre-conquest curb chain from Castle Hill, and fragments of Saxon masonry recovered from the abbey site.

Evidence for medieval activity is more widespread, particularly at Old Brow, Bimport and the former abbey precinct. This comprises structures, pits, ditches and burials, but the results do not present a coherent picture of medieval activity. Figure 61 depicts some extant historic boundaries, some of which could represent Saxon or medieval burgage plot boundaries.

It has been suggested that the Greensand ridge upon which the Saxon burh was founded may have been the site of a prehistoric settlement or promontory fort. Evidence for this is limited, but a small number of prehistoric features and finds have been found including two Late Bronze Age/ Early Iron Age pits on the north side of Bimport, a small scatter of worked flint at Old Brow and some residual prehistoric pottery at Westminster Memorial Hospital (Heaton 1999; Farrar 1950; Fagan 1995).
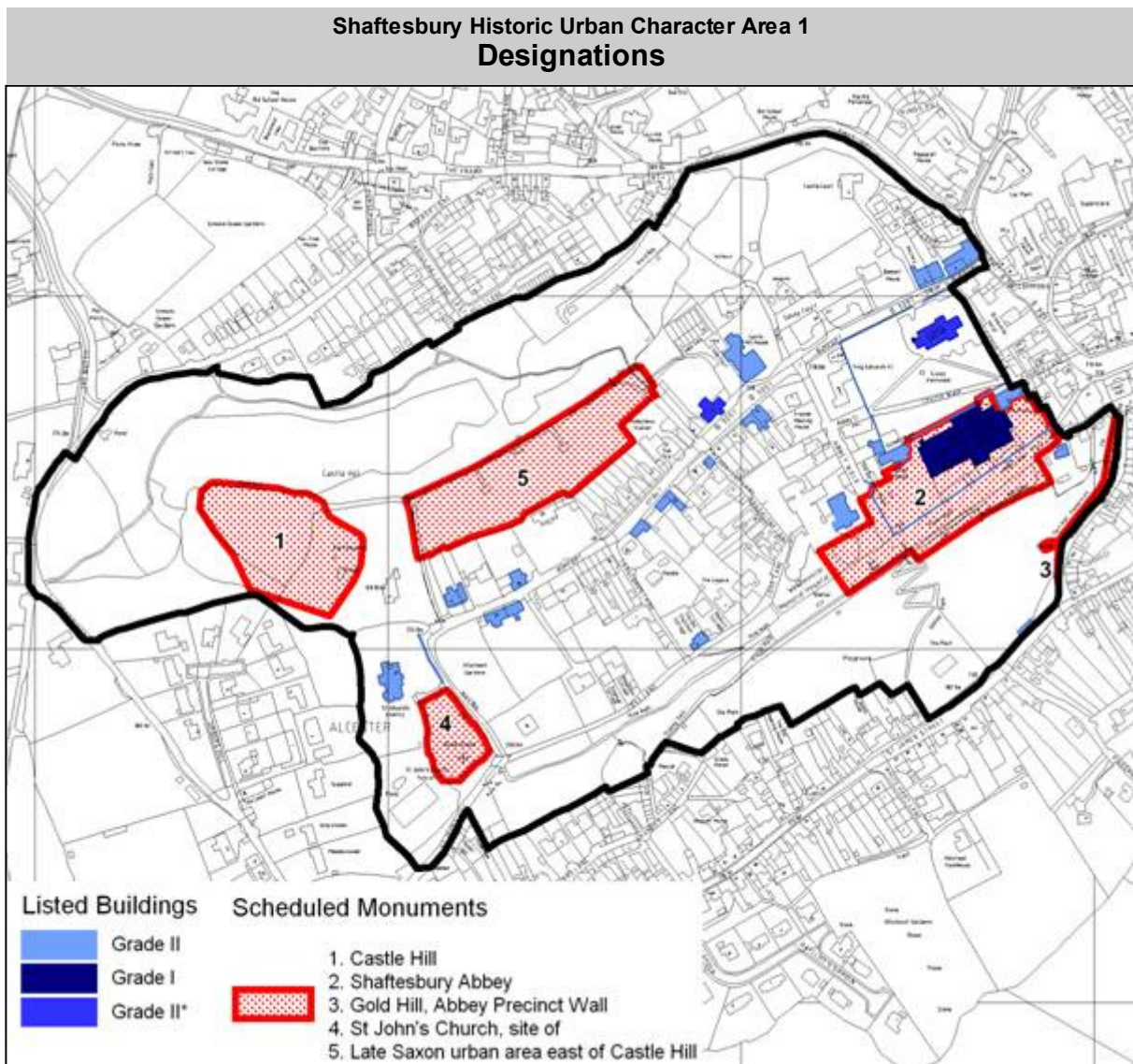
Shaftesbury Historic Urban Character Area 1
Designations

Figure 62: Listed Buildings and Scheduled Monuments in Historic Urban Character Area 1.

Listed Buildings

There are 28 Listed Building designations in the Character Area, two of which are Grade I (The former abbey precinct wall and the abbey church ruins). One is Grade II* listed (The Ox House, Bimport), one is Grade B (The Church of the Holy Trinity) and the remainder are Grade II (Figure 62).

Conservation Areas

The whole of this Character Area lies within the Shaftesbury Conservation Area (Figure 54).

Registered Historic Parks and Gardens

There are no Registered Parks and Gardens within the Character Area.

Scheduled Monuments

There are five Scheduled Monuments within the character area; Castle Hill (Dorset 149); Shaftesbury Abbey (Dorset 6a); Gold Hill, abbey precinct wall (Dorset 6b); St John's Church, site of (Dorset 840); Late Saxon urban area east of Castle Hill (Dorset 838).

Shaftesbury Historic Urban Character Area 1
Evaluation

Strength of Historic Character

The strength of character of this area is judged to be **strong**, being a combination of the positive contribution made by its historic buildings, its dramatic topographic location on a promontory above the Blackmore Vale, and the relatively rich archaeological and historical record. There is a diverse range of historic buildings, within what is now a fairly irregular settlement pattern. The relatively open settlement pattern and mature trees and gardens strongly contribute to the character of this area.

Sensitivity to Large Scale Development

The area has a **high** sensitivity to major change. This is the part of Shaftesbury that is most visible from the surrounding areas. Major development, either on the promontory itself, or on the surrounding slopes, would considerably alter the skyline, as well as the character of this part of the town.

Archaeological Potential

The archaeological potential of this area is judged to be **high**. It forms the primary settlement component of Shaftesbury. The relatively low level of modern development means that there is very high potential for important and informative remains of the late Saxon burh and medieval town remaining intact. These have the potential to reveal details of the Late Saxon town layout including the line of the burh defences, the layout and organisation of the abbey precinct and the layout of the burgage plots. There is also the potential for information on the organisation, crafts, industries, economy and diet of the inhabitants. Furthermore, little is known of the pre-Alfredian burh origins of Shaftesbury and there is high potential for survival of pre-urban features that may occur in this area.

This area has the potential to provide information which would contribute to Research Questions 1- 5, 7-11, 15, 19-22, 24 and 26-7 (Part 7).

Key Characteristics

- Distinctive topographic location on Greensand spur

- Former Saxon burh

- Late Saxon and medieval abbey and precinct

- Relatively open settlement pattern

- Park Walk and the Park with wooded slopes

- Public open space around Castle Hill

- Twelfth century 'castle' earthworks at Castle Hill

- Large gardens and mature trees

- Stone boundary walls

- Holy Trinity Church tower — a town landmark