

Part 5: Historical Analysis



5.1 Late Saxon Cerne Abbas (AD 900-1065)

5.1.1 Historical Summary

The origins of Cerne are closely bound with the stream after which the town is named and the springs along the junction between the Chalk and Upper Greensand beds. At Cerne Abbas there are two main springs: St Augustine's Well, sometimes referred to as St Austin's Well (Figure 6), and the Pill Well on the east and west side of the valley respectively.

Cerne Abbey was established on the site of St Augustine's well, probably in AD 987, although Yorke argues for the possibility that the foundation charter of 987 records the re-founding of an earlier religious community (Yorke 1988, 22-3). William of Malmesbury put forward a foundation myth in which St Augustine himself caused the spring to gush forth at this place, which he named from the Latin *cerno ei* meaning *I perceive God*. Although this myth contains little reliable information, it does indicate that the true meaning of the name Cerne had already passed from memory by the 12th century. Another myth places Edwold, the brother of the East Anglian King Edmund, as a hermit at Augustine's well in the 9th century (Page 1908, 53-4). The foundation of the Abbey itself however, is recorded in a charter dated 987 in which Aethelmaer granted the estate at Cerne and others in Dorset to the Abbey (Sawyer no. 1217).

Leland suggests that the Abbey was plundered and the town wasted by Cnut in the early 11th century (Page, 1908, 54) and whilst there is no evidence to support this assertion, it is suggestive of a town existing at Cerne by that time.

The Domesday survey records that *Cerneli* comprised a 22 hide estate owned by St Peter's Abbey in Cerne. The occupants included 26 villagers and 32 smallholders suggesting there was a sizeable nucleated settlement



Figure 6: View of St Augustine's Well.

there as well as a surrounding dispersed settlement pattern. One mill was also recorded at Cerne (Thorn and Thorn 1983) probably situated on the river to the west of the abbey, where names recorded on the Tithe Apportionment include *Mill Mead* and *Mill Bank Orchard* (DRO T/CEA; Valentin 1998).

5.1.2 Town Layout

Unfortunately there is very little in the way of dating evidence for any of the specific components of the town plan at Cerne Abbas. It is possible to suggest that early road alignments existed, prior to the establishment of the town, at Duck Street, Long Street and Piddle Lane (Figure 7), although these have been altered by medieval and later developments. These alignments continue along the upper reaches of the Cerne and Sydling valleys and may indicate the presence of a late prehistoric or Roman field system. Good has suggested that the lane running along the ridge of Little Minterne Hill from the top of Yelcombe Bottom to Dogbury Iron Age fort was a prehistoric route. He further claims that a ridge way route running along the watershed between the upper Sydling and upper Cerne valleys is prehistoric in origin. Both of these lanes align parallel to those already mentioned in Cerne Abbas town (Good 1966, 15, 71). Furthermore, an Iron Age ditch was excavated at Simsay field immediately east of the town on a similar alignment (Robinson and Valentin 2004, fig 10). The precinct of Cerne Abbey was established on the same alignment, as indicated by the arrangement of earthworks on the site (Figure 8).

The location of the late Saxon town is less clear and may have been in the vicinity of Long Street, Abbey Court or Abbey Farm, along the pre-urban route, for which the southern portion survives as Piddle Lane. It may be significant



Figure 7: View SE along the deep Holloway of Piddle Lane from the junction with Back Lane.

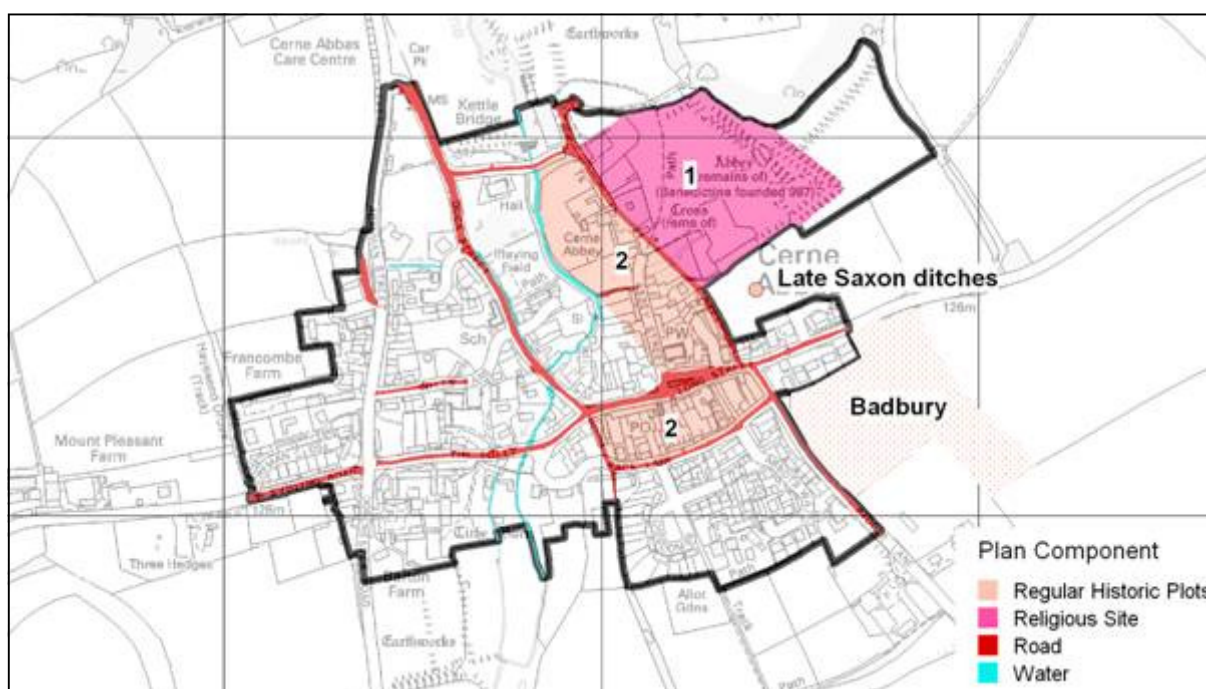


Figure 8: Cerne Abbas Late Saxon Town Plan Components

that field names of *Badbury* are recorded to the east of Piddle Lane in the Admeasurement Survey (DHC D/PIT M55) and the Tithe Apportionment (DHC T/CEA) (DRO T/CEA) and may indicate early settlement. Abbey Street seems to represent a later medieval planned realignment of the town. The parish church of St Mary dates from the late 13th century, although Leland suggests that an earlier church had existed on this site, perhaps a focus for early settlement (Page 1908, 53).

5.1.3 Saxon Urban plan components

The main plan components of the late Saxon town are shown on Figure 8 and are listed below.

1. *The Abbey.* Nothing is known of the late Saxon monastic layout, other than it was founded on the site of St Augustine's well. No Saxon remains have been recovered from anywhere within the Abbey precinct, but the medieval Abbey church is certainly believed to have lain to the north and east of the well. However, the alignment of earthworks in the field to the east of Abbey Farm suggests that the original monastic precinct was aligned on the early route running from Abbey Farm in a SSW direction to link up with Piddle Lane.

2. *The Town.* Again nothing certain is known about the location or form of the late Saxon secular settlement at Cerne Abbas. Late Saxon Monastic settlements tended to lie directly outside the precinct entrance (Abbotsbury and Sherborne for example). Figure 8 suggests that

the secular settlement lay on both sides of Long Street. Potentially early plot boundaries survive only on the south side of Long Street, however, those on the north were probably obliterated by the late medieval development of Abbey Street. There is likely to be significant archaeological remains in these areas that may elucidate the problem. In fact, a recent archaeological evaluation at Simsay field has revealed ditches containing significant quantities of Late Saxon pottery immediately south of the Abbey precinct and east of the suggested route upon which the Abbey was founded (Robinson & Valentin 2004). These ditches may represent the remains of plot boundaries associated with the Late Saxon town. Fields known as *Badbury* to the east of Piddle Lane may also indicate an early settlement site.

5.2 Medieval Cerne Abbas (AD1066-1539)

5.2.1 Historical Summary

This history of Cerne Abbey is relatively uneventful until just before its dissolution. The town was never a borough, but together with the parish of Nether Cerne, was a liberty of the Abbot of Cerne (Hutchins 1874, 1). The Abbot was granted market rights in the vill of Cerne by Henry II (1154-1189). It is likely that the growth of the town was promoted by the monastery from at least that time and the acquisition of five messuages in the town by the Abbot in 1317-18 may be a reflection of that. The market was confirmed by Henry III and a five day fair was granted to the Abbot John Vanne on the feast of St Augustine (26 May) in 1459. However, a fair is previously mentioned in 1356 in an extent of the manor, which also lists a watermill and deer park. The parish church of St Mary was in existence by 1291 and the original small church was considerably enlarged in the mid 15th century and enlarged again in the early 16th century with the addition of the west tower (Penn 1980, 30; Pitfield 1981).

The lay subsidy of 1332 lists 60 taxpayers in the parish suggesting a town of similar size to Abbotsbury. The names of the taxpayers suggest that the cloth and brewing industries were important in the town (Mills 1971, 22-3; Penn 1980, 30).

The magnificent Tithe Barn on Folly Lane is testament to the wealth of the Abbey and suggestive of continued urban development in the later medieval period (Figure 10). The 15th and early 16th centuries seem to have been particularly successful for the Abbey and town. A guest hall was built, along with Abbots Lodge, gateway and another barn on the north side of the precinct. Within the town a range of five buildings were constructed on Abbey Street.



Figure 9: View of St Mary's Parish Church from the south.

Penn suggests that this represents a speculative development by the abbot to emphasize the market function of the town, and that the market place was also being developed at this time (Penn 1980, 30). Nevertheless, the relative wealth of the Abbey in comparison to the other major Dorset institutions of Sherborne, Abbotsbury and Milton gradually decreased during the medieval period.

The last abbot, Thomas Corton, was charged in 1535 with gross immorality, mismanagement of Abbey lands and for bestowing church goods on his mistresses and children. As a result the monks and abbot were forbidden to leave the monastic precinct. The monastery was dissolved on March 15th 1539.

5.2.2 Town Layout

Two contemporary documents partially describe the layout of the medieval town: Leland's description of around 1530 states that the present church had been preceded by an earlier building on the same site, and an extent of the manor dated 1356 includes a watermill, deer park, fair and market. The mill is likely to be the one mentioned in Domesday, to the west of the Abbey precinct. The church and market were likely situated next to each other. The market place would probably have been larger and more open prior to 16th century infilling, and the fair may have been on the same site (Figure 11).

It seems likely that Abbey Street was not constructed until after the establishment of the market. The market may have been located on the edge of the late Saxon town and Abbey Street built as a later development enhancing the link between Abbey and market. The earliest surviving buildings along Abbey Street are a group of 16th century half-timbered and jettied tenements opposite the church (Figure 12).



Figure 10: View of the Tithe Barn from the east.

The Abbey precinct itself seems to have been expanded at the same time through the development of the guesthouse, gatehouse and abbot's lodgings. The 14th century Tithe Barn was located away from the main precinct on the west bank of the river Cerne. The barn is associated with shrunken settlement earthworks on its south side. These may mark the locale of a planned but failed medieval suburb. Further shrunken settlement earthworks to the north of the monastic precinct again suggest that the town may have been more substantial during the late medieval period.

Surviving plot boundaries also indicate areas of planned medieval settlement on the south side of Long Street. These burgage plots are typically medieval, with an associated back lane.

Isaac Taylor's 1765 map of Dorset indicates that the main north-south route through Cerne Abbas at that time ran along the east bank of the River Cerne from Charminster, through Nether Cerne and probably up Chescombe Drove, across Long Street and up Abbey Street, through Abbey Farm and beyond. This route may have originated in the medieval period. A secondary route ran along the west bank of the River Cerne, probably approximately along the route of the modern A352, and may also be medieval in origin. The Abbey was also linked to the neighbouring monasteries at Abbotsbury via Smacam Down, and Milton via Piddle Lane (Good 1966, 67-8, 99)

5.2.3 Medieval Urban plan components

The main plan components of the medieval town are shown on Figure 13 and are listed below.

1. *The Abbey.* There has been very little in the way of archaeological work on the site of Cerne Abbey. This means that the evidence for the layout of the precinct is fragmentary at

best. The position of the precinct boundaries can be surmised from existing field boundaries and substantial earthwork remains on the east side of the churchyard. Some of these earthworks clearly relate to the precinct boundary, whilst others seem to represent enclosures, possibly for the monks' kitchen gardens. The most enigmatic are a group of three circular mounds each set within its own rectangular enclosure. To date there is no generally-accepted interpretation for these features. Some of the conventual buildings may also survive as slight earthworks immediately north of the north churchyard wall, although their layout is poorly understood. More of the Abbey church, possibly the Lady Chapel at the eastern end, is assumed to be located under the NE corner of the churchyard, following reports of medieval tile pavements in this area (Hutchins, 1874, 27). St Augustine's well feeds a fishpond, which may also be of medieval origin. The surviving monastic buildings in the vicinity of Abbey farm are all late medieval in date and include the gatehouse, guesthouse, abbot's porch (Figure 15) and north barn.

2. *Medieval Burgages.* Surviving boundaries at the rear of properties fronting on to Long Street and Abbey Street suggest the position of medieval burgage plots. The boundaries as they stand are a reflection of the late medieval town layout and may mask earlier arrangements. This is particularly true on Abbey Street where the distribution of medieval buildings suggests that the plots were laid out in the 15th or early 16th centuries. The plots on the south side of Long Street may reflect a slightly earlier medieval arrangement.

3. *Abbey Farm Medieval Settlement.* There is no known physical evidence that a medieval settlement existed on the site of the post-medieval Abbey Farm to the west of the Abbey precinct. Nevertheless it is usual to find settlement in the areas closest to the Abbey entrance (Sherborne and Abbotsbury, for exam-



Figure 11: View of the Market Place from the east.



Figure 12: Late medieval half-timbered and jettied tenements, 3-9 Abbey Street.

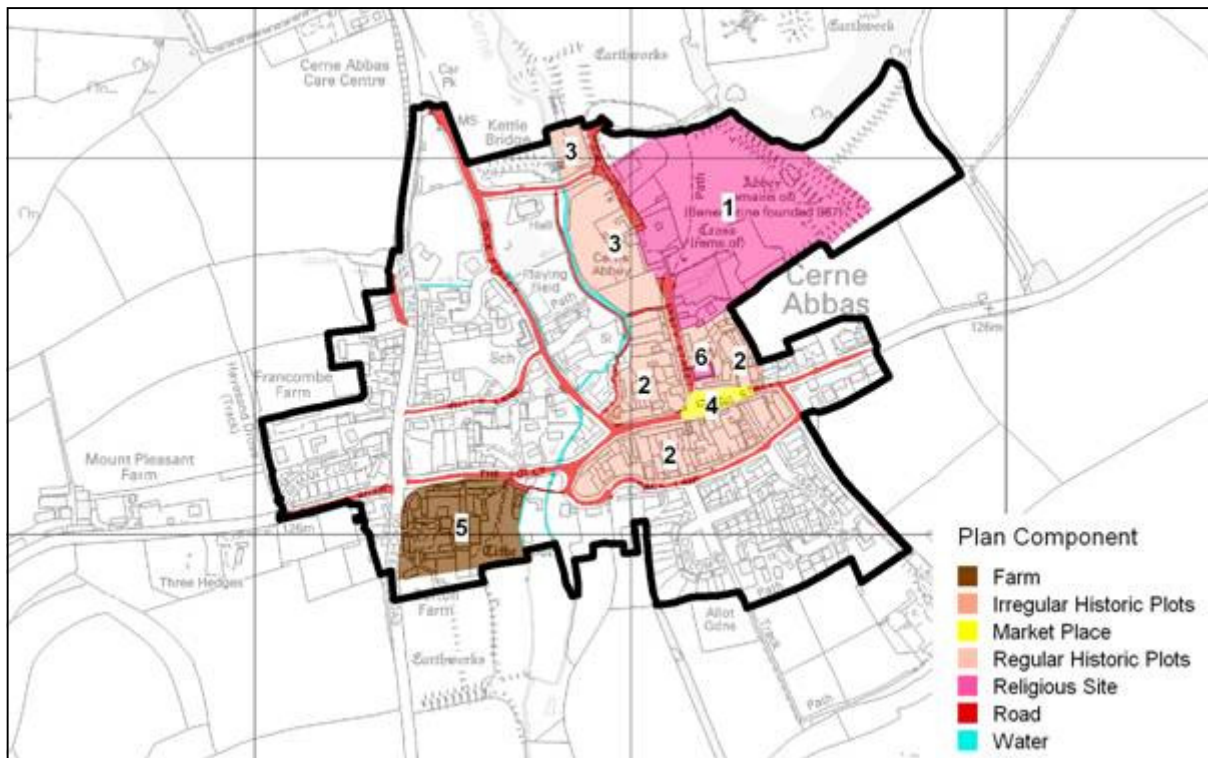


Figure 13: Cerne Abbas Medieval Town Plan Components.

ple); the ground was suitable (slightly raised above the flood plain of the River Cerne); the site is adjacent to an early through route; and earthworks just outside the study area to the north, interpreted as shrunken settlement earthworks, suggest that the settlement extended beyond the limits of the medieval town during the medieval period.

4. The Market Place. The position of the medieval market is indicated by a triangular road arrangement at the junction of Long Street and Abbey Street. This is likely to have been an open market in the earlier medieval period, although there are indications that it was becoming infilled with buildings by the early 16th century; the Royal Oak dates from that time (RCHME 1952, 81).

5. The Tithe Barn. The Tithe Barn was built in the mid 14th century and is of nine bays, although it was originally longer at the north end. The walls are of knapped flint with oolitic limestone and Ham Hill stone dressings. Windows in the southern part of the barn were knocked through during the partial conversion of the barn to a dwelling in the 18th century. It was originally of a considerable size and may have been for storing the arable crop derived from the home farm as well as that derived from tithes. Its position on the west side of the River Cerne may indicate a secondary settlement focus; a Roman coin was found to the north and medieval shrunken settlement earthworks lie to the south.

Thus medieval Cerne Abbas may have comprised two separate settlements on either side of the river.

6. St Mary's Parish Church. Documentary records indicate that the church was in existence by 1291 and William of Malmesbury claims that the relics of St Edwold were translated to the site of the 12th century parish church during the late Saxon period (Page 1908, 53). The original late 13th century church appears to have been small, comprising nave and chancel only. Part of the original chancel walls survive within the present church fabric (Pitfield 1981). The church was modified and enlarged in the middle of the 15th century with the addition of north and south aisles and the construction of a pierced stone rood screen. The west tower was built around 1500, extending as far as the Abbey Street frontage. The extended aisles were fitted between buildings on the street frontage.

7. Duck Lane. Duck Lane represents a pre-urban route along the upper Cerne Valley and as such may have been a focus for early settlement. There is no evidence for medieval settlement, however, except that the earliest maps from the 18th century show that both sides of Duck Lane had already been fully developed as far north as Wills Lane by that time.