

Summary

This report contains the results of a consideration of the historical, archaeological, architectural and map evidence relating to the developmental history of Cerne Abbas. It has focused on the understanding of the overall development of the town from its earliest beginnings to the present day. This work has been conducted in order to achieve a better understanding of how the historical dimension has influenced the modern townscape, identify what historical features and structures survive within the modern town, and understand the contribution this has made to the present character of Cerne Abbas. This will enable an informed approach to the management of change and conservation of the urban environment.

Historical Background

Cerne Abbas appears to have originated as a late Saxon settlement attached to the monastery founded by AD 987, adjacent to the spring of St Augustine's Well. The parish church of St Mary was established by 1291 adjacent to the market place, which was located on Long Street. The Abbot had been granted market rights in the vill of Cerne by Henry II (1154-1189). The town had an annual fair by 1356 and a further five day fair was granted to the Abbot John Vanne on the feast of St Augustine in 1459. By 1617 the town had three annual fairs. The Abbey was the wealthiest in Dorset at Domesday, although by the time of the dissolution in 1539 it had slipped behind Sherborne, Milton and Abbotsbury. The town suffered a downturn in economic fortunes after dissolution, but by the 18th century it was a thriving market town with substantial industries in brewing and leather-working. The population of the town reached a peak of over 1300 inhabitants during the mid 19th century, but the economy had already stalled. The town entered terminal decline with all its industries closing by the early 20th century. Cerne Abbas is now considered a large village and modern housing estates reflect its status as a dormitory settlement of Dorchester.

Town morphology

Cerne Abbas has a tightly-packed nucleated settlement centred on the T-shaped junction of Abbey and Long Streets. The former market place and parish church are both located close by. However, an earlier settlement pattern based on a grid of pre-urban streets can be discerned in the lines of Long Street, Piddle Lane and Duck Street. The late Saxon monastery was established on one of these lanes with a

secular settlement adjacent to it. The market and church may have been located on the edge of this early settlement. Only in the late medieval period, under the auspices of the Abbey, did the present street pattern arise. Regular medieval burgage plots survive along the south side of Long Street and along Abbey Street with back lanes at Back Lane and Mill Lane. The medieval Tithe Barn was established on the west side of the River Cerne, separate from the main medieval settlement, although earthworks to the south of it may indicate a failed medieval suburb here. Settlement seems to have spread along Duck Street in the post-medieval period. Regular plots on Acreman Street may represent a late medieval or early post-medieval planned suburb. The present town layout was established by the late 18th century and changed very little until the construction of modern housing estates in culs-de-sac and infilled plots behind the historic street frontages.

Built character

Cerne Abbas has a large number of historic buildings within the area of the medieval and post-medieval town. The majority date from the 17th to 19th centuries, and there are also at least nine standing medieval structures, including several monastic structures, the parish church of St Mary, the tithe barn, and two pairs of late medieval half-timbered and jettied tenements on Abbey Street. The historic buildings make an important contribution to the character of Cerne Abbas and are typified by their use of local flint and chalk block interspersed with brick and oolitic limestone for walling, thatched roofs, and survival of historic fabric such as windows, doors, chimneys, iron work, 19th century shop fronts and boundary walls. Cerne is also notable for the large number of 17th and 18th century buildings built during the town's economic heyday, providing coherence to the built character. Built elements of Cerne's industrial past still survive within the town, but are much altered and poorly understood.

Landscape Setting

Cerne Abbas sits astride the Cerne River in the upper reaches of the Cerne Valley, at a point where the valley opens up into a relatively wide plain due to the juxtaposition of the side valleys of Yelcombe and Cerne Park. The town was established along the spring line at the base of the valley slopes and may have always comprised a dual settlement on either side of the river. Nevertheless, the major part of the town



Figure 1: Vertical aerial photographic view of Cerne Abbas, 2005 (© Getmapping.com, 2005).

lies on the east side of the valley at the foot of Giant Hill.

Historic Urban Character

The character of Cerne Abbas is derived from its well-defined historic town layout and the number and quality of historic buildings. It is perhaps ironic that Cerne's economic failure in the 19th century and decline into a rural village has helped conserve its former market town layout. The nucleated medieval town plan survives virtually intact and exerts a strong influence on the character of the town in terms of street and plot layout, though the relative importance of the streets and the market place has changed. The relationship of the town to the surviving remains of the Abbey is a major contributing factor to its distinctiveness and reflects the importance of the ecclesiastical aspect in the history and development of the town.

Perhaps the greatest contributor to the character and local distinctiveness of Cerne Abbas are the historic buildings. It is not only the high quality and quantity of medieval buildings (which include former abbey buildings, the parish church, and some houses) but the large number of post-medieval buildings (many of 18th and early 19th century date), forming unbroken groups in the streetscape with little disruption from modern development, that give Cerne

Abbas its character. The consistent use of local flint and chalk block building materials and vernacular building details provides strong local character and emphasises the linkage with the surrounding landscape.

The fine landscape setting in the river valley framed by dramatic steep swooping chalk valley slopes adds a major positive visual component to the town and provides the context for the chalk hill figure of the Cerne Giant, which is arguably the most famous element of Cerne Abbas today.

Further Research

This report has highlighted many aspects of the historical development of Cerne Abbas and how this has shaped the modern town. It has also indicated gaps in our knowledge and areas which would repay further research.

The main areas of suggested further research include:

- Research into the origins and form of Cerne Abbey.
- Research into the origins and form of the late Saxon and early medieval town.
- Research into the medieval and post-medieval development of the town, its economy, industry and secular buildings.