

Part 3: Town Context



3.1 The Setting of the Town

No town exists in isolation. All towns are shaped and influenced by their surrounding landscape. Topography and geology have a profound influence on the way a town develops; constraining development, shaping communication routes, and providing raw materials for building and other economic activity, amongst other things. In order to understand the character of a town, its surrounding landscape and natural context need to be understood. This section of the report briefly sets out the wider context of the town and the landscape character of its hinterland.

3.2 Topography

Gillingham sits on the River Stour, approximately 5.5 miles south east of its source at Stourhead and close to the confluence of two

of its major header streams, the Shreen Water and the Lodden. The town lies at 70-90m above sea level at the centre of a broad bowl which contains a typical dendritic drainage pattern emptying in a south westerly direction into the River Stour (Figure 3). This bowl comprises the northeastern end of the Blackmore Vale and is approximately 4.5 miles in diameter, varying in height from around 80m in the centre to 160m on the western rim and 220-240m around the northern and eastern rims. The medieval core of the town lies on a slight ridge between the Stour and the Shreen Water, close to their confluence. This ridge, enclosed by water on three sides, may represent the *ham* after which the town is named.

The topography has had a major influence on the town layout. The radial pattern of roads in the town follows the ridges between the streams, upon which a number of medieval rural settlements have arisen. These include

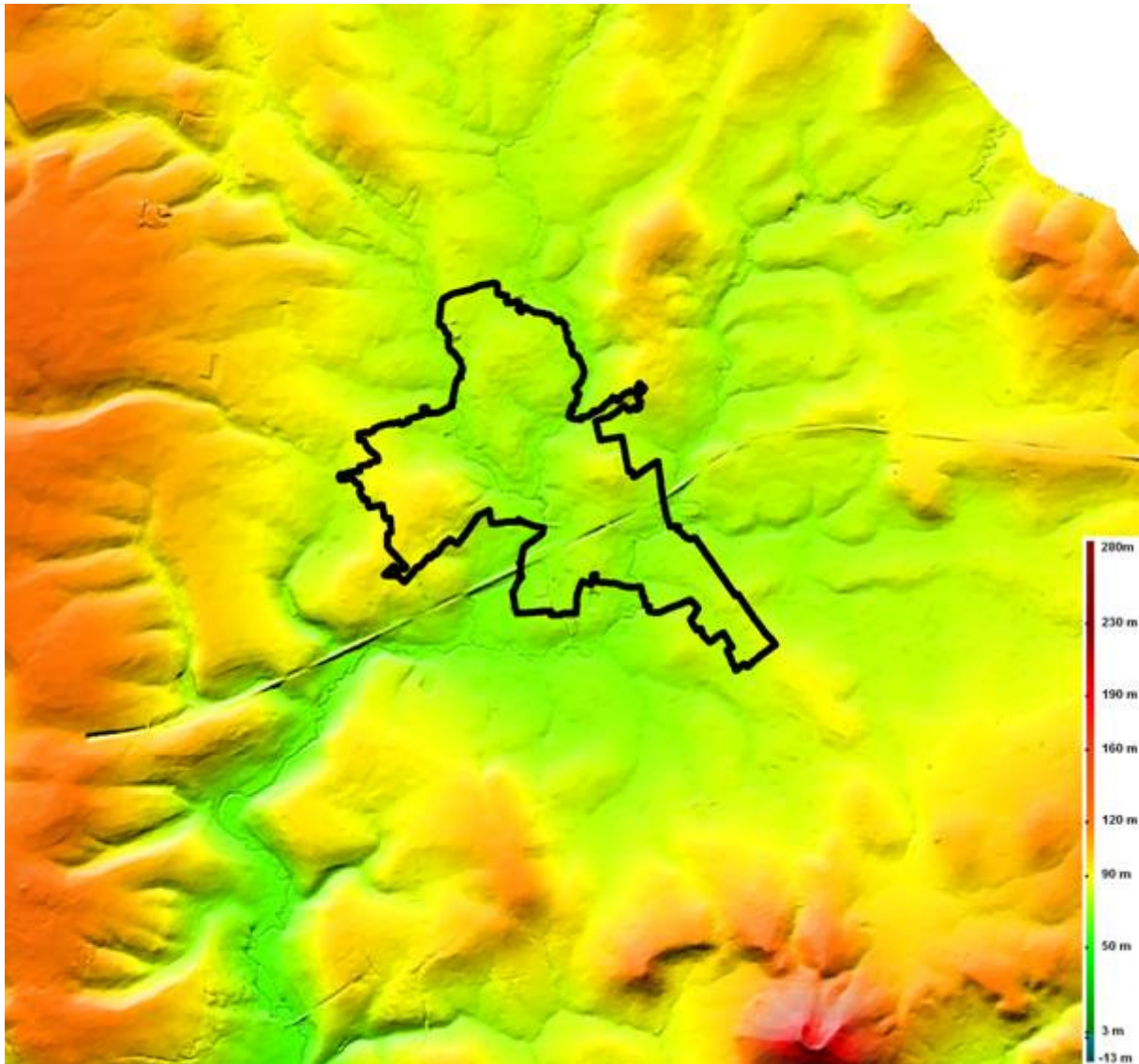


Figure 3: Gillingham's topographic setting

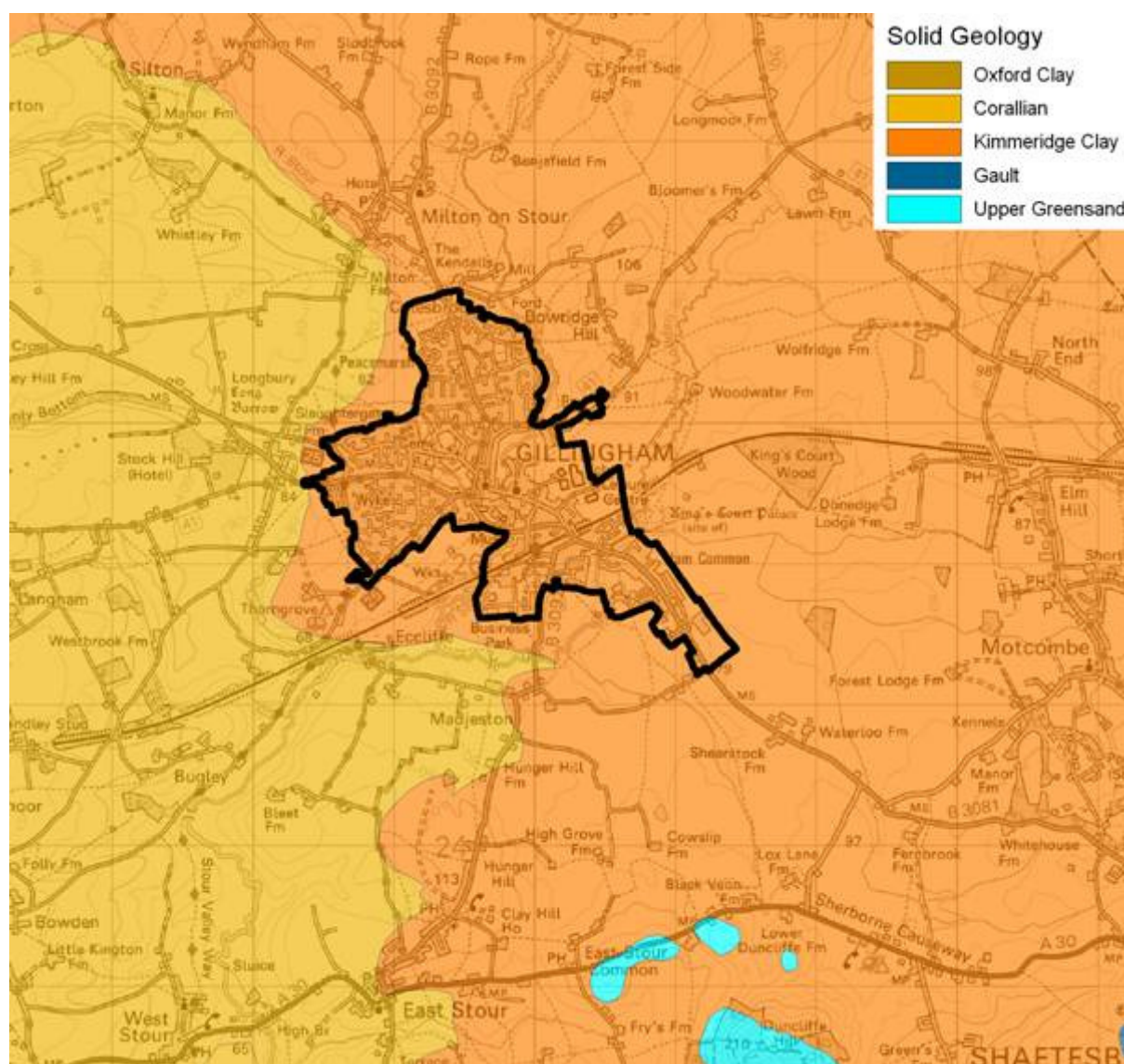


Figure 4: Geology of the Gillingham Area.

Peacemars, Wyke, Ham and Bay, all of which have now become incorporated into the urban area.

3.3 Geology

The urban area of Gillingham sits entirely upon Kimmeridge Clay. The higher ground to the east and the north comprises Upper Greensand and Gault Clay, with a Chalk ridge beyond. Duncliffe Hill to the south of the town represents an outlier of Upper Greensand within the Kimmeridge Clay vale. To the west of Gillingham the ground slopes gradually up via undulating ground towards a ridge of Jurassic Corallian Limestone (Figure 4).

The nature of the underlying geology has influenced the appearance and economic development of the town. The larger settlements in the area tend to lie close to spring lines at geologi-

cal boundaries. During the post-medieval period Corallian limestone and Upper Greensand were both used for rubble walls, although only the Upper Greensand lends itself to use as ashlar. Roofing materials include locally produced tile and Corallian Limestone slates, also known as coral rag. The availability of Kimmeridge Clay has led to a variety of ceramic industries in the town, most notably the development of the large Gillingham brickworks to the south of the station during the 19th and 20th centuries.

3.4 Landscape Character

The wider landscape area surrounding the town has been assessed in several landscape character assessments help to place the town into its wider landscape context.

In the national assessment of countryside char-

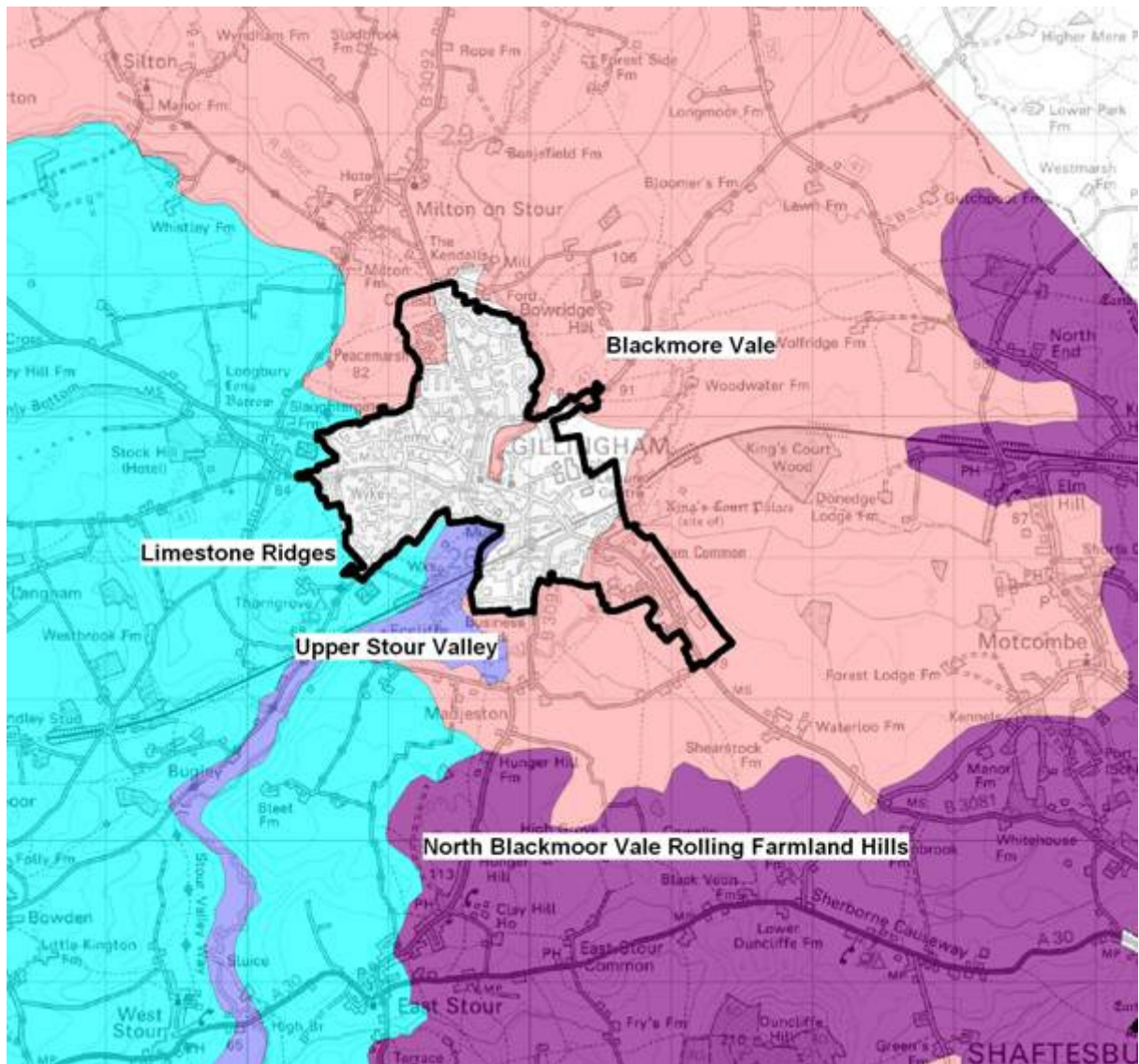


Figure 5: Gillingham in its landscape character setting (NDDC Landscape Character Assessment).

acter, Gillingham lies within the National Character Area 133; Blackmore Vale and the Vale of Wardour (Countryside Agency 1999).

The key characteristics of National Character Area 133 are listed as:

- A complex mosaic of mixed farming: undulating, lush, clay vales fringed by Upper Greensand hills and scarps.
- Small, rectilinear pasture fields with hedge-row oak trees and many scattered small broadleaved woodlands.
- Many streams and waterside trees.
- Broken, low, limestone ridges with shallow valleys crossing the clayey Blackmore Vale and steeper valleys around the margins of the area.
- Small villages and hamlets form nuclei within a patchwork of fields, hedges, woods and trees.

- Many villages at scarp foot, river crossing points and strategic sites.
- A wide variety of local building materials, including local stone and half timbering.

The North Dorset District Landscape Character Assessment provides a detailed assessment of the features and landscape elements present in the wider Gillingham area (NDDC 2008).

The town is bordered by the Blackmore Vale Character Area to the east. Ham Common and part of Peacemash are included within this area. The Upper Stour Valley Character area borders the town on the southern side and the Limestone Ridges Character Area borders the western part of the town (Figure 5).

The key characteristics of the North Dorset Limestone Ridges area are:

- Elevated open plateau areas of undulating farmland landscape with distinctive sloping

edges in places.

- Thick dense hedgerows and frequent small copses and plantations.
- Open views from higher areas across the Vale to the chalk escarpment.
- Many scattered villages and farmsteads and a distinctive settlement pattern along the ridges or on the side slopes to the ridges.
- The traditional use of locally available and distinctive limestone in the villages and in other buildings and structures.
- Numerous twisting hedge lined lanes, straighter ridge top roads and many public Rights of Way.
- Stalbridge Park is a key local feature of interest.
- Twinwood Coppice is a key local feature of interest.

The key characteristics of the Blackmore Vale area are:

- A broad expansive clay Vale which is tranquil and unified.
- A unique mosaic of woods, straight hedgerows and grassland fields 'dotted' with distinctive mature hedgerow Oaks.
- Open views across the undulating to flat pastoral landscape to the chalk escarpment backdrop.
- Dense network of twisting lanes often with grass verges and sharp double 90o bends.
- Small hump backed bridges with low stone or brick parapets
- Many very small villages and hamlets built with locally distinctive materials.
- A network of ditches, streams and brooks which drain into the tributaries of the Stour.
- Lydlinch Common (an SSSI) and Stock Gaylard Deer Park (an SNCI) are both key locally important features

The key characteristics of the Upper Stour Valley area are:

- Elevated open plateau areas of undulating A varied but generally flat, pastoral river valley landscape as it flows through the Limestone and Blackmoor Vale character areas
- Often a narrow river channel intensively farmed up to its edges with few marginal areas.
- Similar characteristics in places as the Blackmore Vale but less trees.
- Important associated groups and ribbons of trees following the course of the river in places to include visually important mature Willows and Alders.

- The meandering channel of the river itself is a key feature
- Steeper wooded side slopes in places are key features.
- Old derelict mills, mill ponds, areas of reed and marginal vegetation and old bridges crossing the river are all key features of interest.
- The riverside meadows at Sturminster Newton are key features of historic and cultural importance.
- Small bridges crossing brooks on rural lanes are key features.
- Locally distinctive architecture and a few settlements are key features of interest.

The draft Historic Landscape Character mapping shows Gillingham sitting within an area of largely regular enclosed fields, including Parliamentary enclosures, planned enclosures and other regular enclosures. There are smaller areas of piecemeal enclosed fields with only isolated patches of mixed woodland and coppice. Alongside the Rivers Stour, Shreen and Lodden valley floor landscapes dominate.

3.5 The Present Town

The modern built-up area of Gillingham lies entirely within the parish of Gillingham and covers an area of about 315 ha. It lies at the junction of the B3081 between Shaftesbury and Bruton and the B3092 between Sturminster Newton and Mere. It has a railway station on the West of England main line between London and Exeter. Gillingham is one of the fastest growing towns in Dorset and the population has now grown to over 11,000. Gillingham has been successful in attracting a variety of new industries and is important as a service and shopping centre for the surrounding villages.

Gillingham has one secondary school and two primary schools. The retail sector comprises 61 shops, mainly local shops, but including some national superstore chains. Gillingham also has four industrial estates at Brickfields Industrial Estate (2.92ha), Brickfields Business Park (14.96ha), Station Road Industrial Estate (1.77ha), Tomlins Lane Industrial Estate (0.15ha).

38% of the economically active population are employed in the service sector; 21% in public administration, education and health; 20% in manufacturing; 12% in banking, finance and insurance; and 5% in construction.

The data used in this section have been obtained from the Dorset County Council's *The Dorset Data Book 2008* (DCC 2008).

Part 4: Sources



4.1 Previous research

The first history of the town was that published in Hutchins in the late 18th and 19th centuries (Hutchins 1774: 1813; 1868). A small number of local histories have been published during the 20th century concerning aspects of Gillingham's past. A F V H Wagner, a local historian, wrote histories of St Mary's Church and Gillingham Grammar School during the 1950s (Wagner 1956; 1958). Shaw wrote an account of the history of the post-medieval town, drawing much from the earlier work of Wagner (Shaw 1973). Another colloquial history of Gillingham was published in 1983 (Howe 1983). Historical accounts of the Gillingham Fire Service (Anon 1992) and the Gillingham Methodist Church (Anon 1977) have also been published, as well as two books of historic photographs (Crocker 1992, Lloyd 1998).

4.2 Historic Maps

The earliest detailed map depicting part of the town is the 1624 survey of Gillingham Forest made prior to disafforestation and enclosure (DHC D1/11, 015). This map only depicts the part of the town which lies east of the Shreen Water, including Ham, Newbury and Bay. It has been published in the 20th century by the Royal Commission (RCHME 1972, plate 56). The Tithe Map dates from 1841. The characterisation was largely based on the 1:2500 scale Ordnance Survey maps dating from 1887 onwards.

4.3 Documentary Evidence

Primary documentary sources used in this report include the Domesday Survey of 1086 (Thorn & Thorn 1983), and taxation records including the Lay Subsidy (Rumble 1980) as well as Tudor subsidies and Muster Rolls (Stoate 1978; 1982). These documents have been used to gain an insight into the size, wealth and economy of Gillingham in comparison with neighbouring towns from the 10th to 17th centuries.

4.4 Archaeological Evidence

There has been a relatively large number of archaeological discoveries and investigations in and around Gillingham. There have been two main areas of archaeological investigation. The first area is around Common Mead Lane where the remains of a Roman settlement have been revealed over a long period of time. The earliest recorded discovery of Roman occupation material in this area was found in a field called Morel Leas about half a mile west of Gillingham Church during drainage works in

1869 (Hutchins 1868, 462). Further discoveries were made during the laying of a water main in 1951 and the site was subsequently the subject of a rescue excavation in advance of development for a housing estate during 1975-6. Evidence for stone buildings spread over a 6 ha area was recovered, as well as a large variety of Romano-British pottery, other material, and burials (Moore and Ross 1989).

The second focus of archaeological activity has been at the site of Chantry Fields. Here, a formerly extensive area of earthworks on the west side of Chantry Fields has been shown by a number of excavations to represent a medieval suburb or settlement associated with Gillingham. The earthworks have now largely been built over by housing, the Gillingham by-pass and Waitrose Supermarket car park (Heaton 1995; Valentin & Robinson 2001).

There have also been a number of significant archaeological investigations within the town, largely in response to new development. These include an archaeological evaluation at Rolls Bridge Way during 1991 in advance of housing development (Hawkes 1991); an archaeological evaluation during 1999 in advance of housing development at Lodden Bridge Farm (Robinson & Valentin 1999); a further evaluation in 1999 in advance of the development of the Park Farm site (Valentin 1999c); an evaluation at Barnaby Mead during 2001 in advance of housing development there (Valentin 2003b); and an evaluation during 2005 in advance of the extension of Gillingham School car park (Robinson & Valentin 2005). These have produced some interesting and detailed results in terms of identifying Roman track ways, medieval settlement and field boundaries. Nevertheless, they are limited in the amount of information they can contribute to an overall understanding of the town. A table of all archaeological investigations is presented in **Appendix 3**.

4.5 Historic Buildings

Gillingham is not particularly noted for its survival of historic buildings. Nevertheless, well over 340 structures in the urban area date from the late 19th century or earlier. However, large swathes of the town are dominated by modern commercial and suburban developments. For this reason, the surprisingly well preserved town centre can provide an unexpected delight to the visitor. Thus the historic buildings make a vital contribution to the character of the urban core and are characterised themselves by their modest scale, use of local brick for walling (with some Corallian limestone and Upper

Greensand dressings) and tile, slate, or thatch roofs.

A large proportion of the historic buildings within the town centre date from the late 18th or 19th centuries. This is because devastating fires destroyed much of the town centre during the late 17th and 18th centuries. There are only two recorded medieval buildings; one at Stour Motors at the top of Queen Street dates from the 16th century and has a 5-bayed roof. St Mary's church has a 14th century chancel, although the majority of the fabric was re-built during the late 19th-early 20th centuries. The Vicarage School-rooms running alongside Queen Street to the north of the Vicarage, possibly have some surviving medieval fabric (Newman & Pevsner 1972, 215).