

Part 6: Historic Urban Character Appraisal



6.1 The historic urban character of Gillingham

The urban character of Gillingham, like any town, is a product of many factors including topographic position, history of estate ownership and management, geographical relationship with other towns and resources and other historical events. The topographic position of Gillingham, at the centre of a geological bowl drained in a dendritic pattern of streams and rivers, has had a profound effect on the location, form, economy and character of the town.

The plan layout of the medieval settlement is a typical nucleated form, centred on the rectangular church enclosure, with a radial pattern of streets and a series of satellite settlements or suburbs. This radial pattern of streets, particularly the three historic main streets, follows the drainage pattern with the roads running along the ridges between the tributary streams of the

Upper Stour. The Saxon and medieval core of the town was founded on a slight ridge in the angle above the confluence of the rivers Stour and Shreen, a typical site for a Saxon Minster. The town developed around the church and possible adjacent market place(s), with the medieval borough of Newbury and the post-medieval settlements of Ham Common, Cold Harbour, Peacemarsch and Bay apparently developing through the enclosure of plots along the wide historic routes through the adjacent royal forest.

The railway line cuts through the southern part of the town and it promoted a second industrial and commercial focus in the town in the late 19th century, reflected in the modern town by the extensive industrial estates around the station. The historic form of the town has been significantly altered by the construction of a new by-pass, Le Neubourg Way, which has truncated many of the historic plots and altered the course and importance of many of the ear-

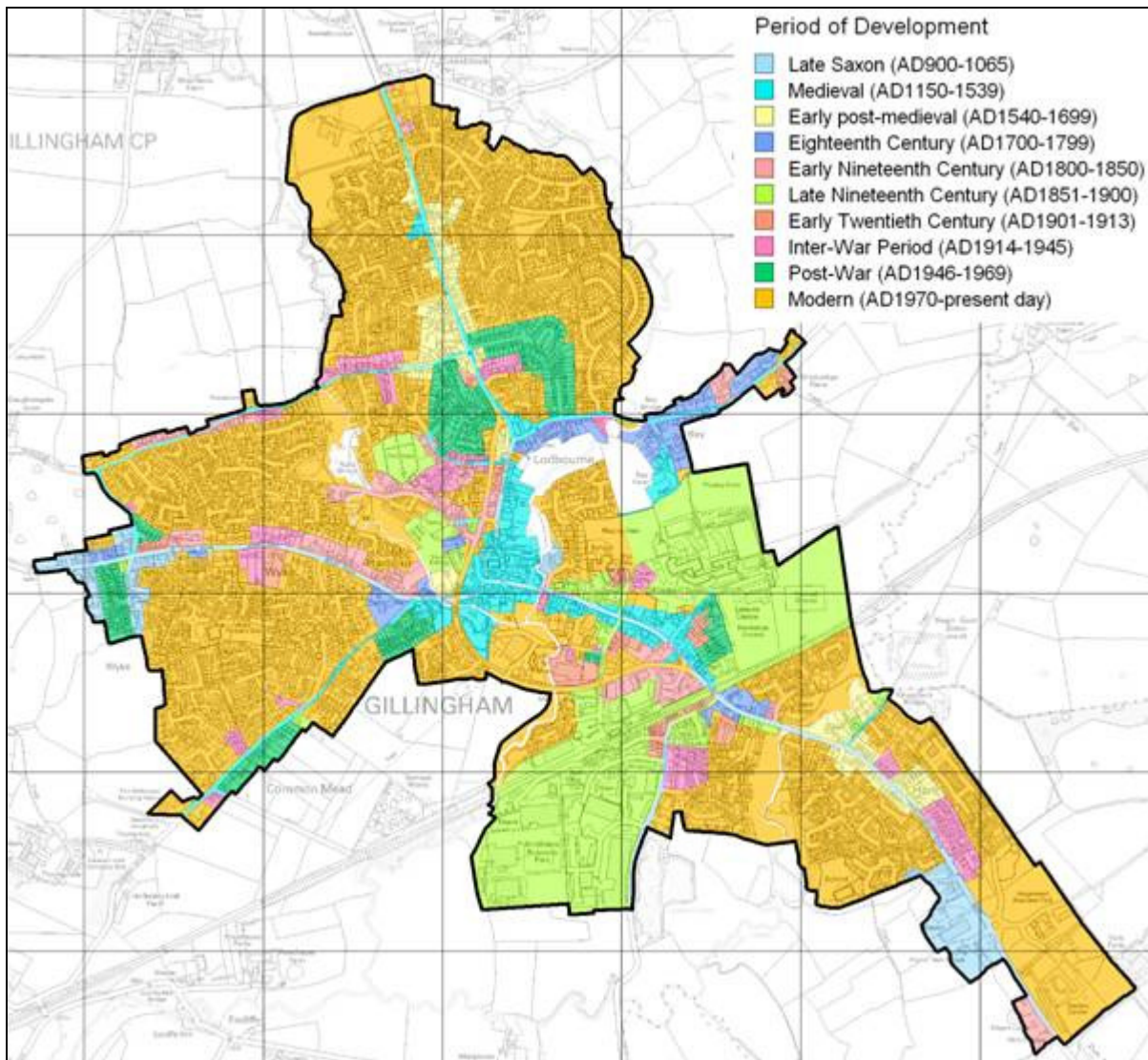


Figure 38: Map showing the major periods of development of Gillingham.

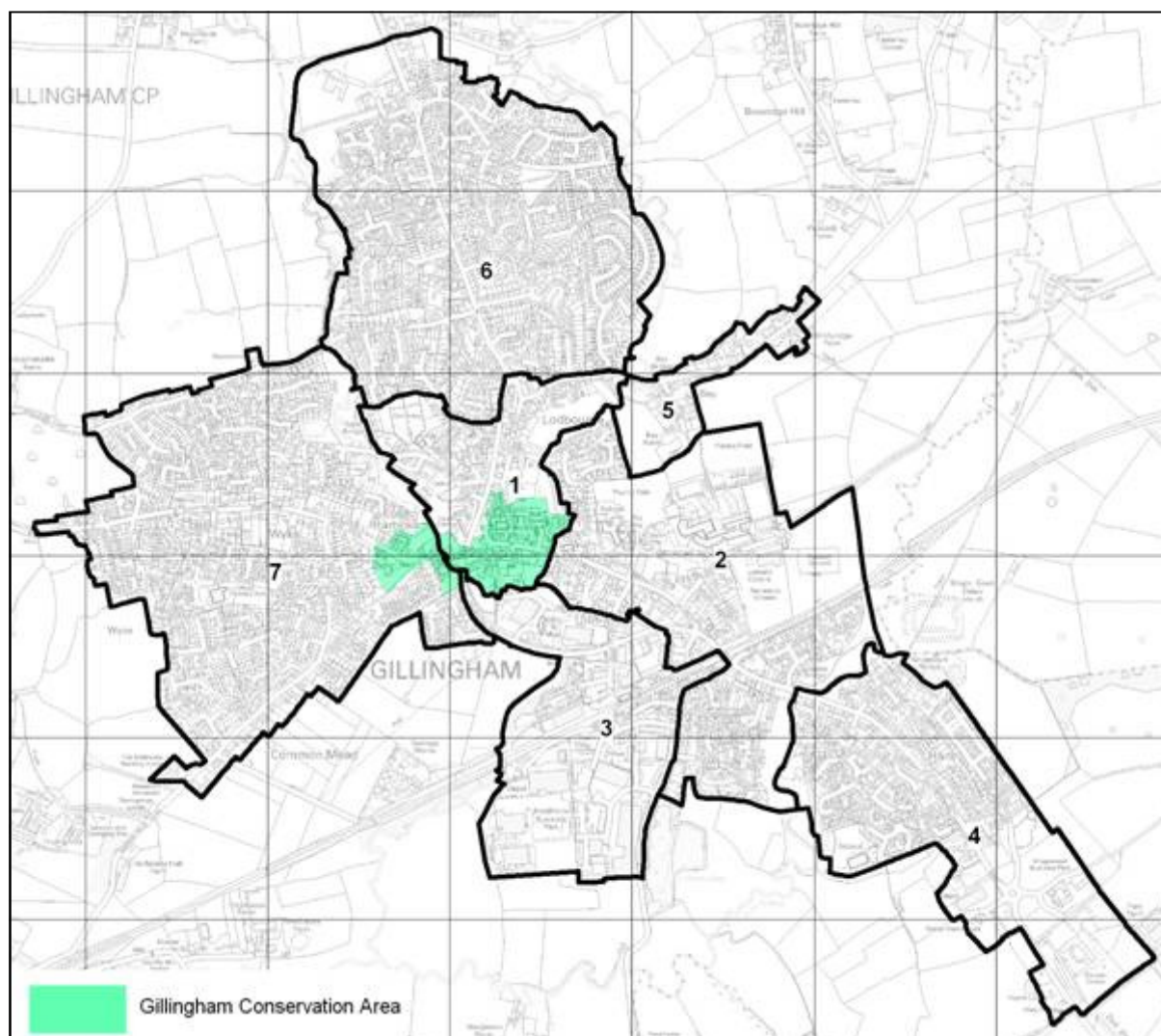


Figure 39: Gillingham Historic Urban Character Areas and Conservation Area.

lier streets and roads, reducing the 'readability' of the historic town layout, not least by the modern commercial and retail parks built along it. The historic focus of the Church of St Mary and the surrounding streets is now of diminished importance, tucked away behind the modern commercial developments.

There are comparatively few historic buildings dated earlier than the 18th century, thanks to a number of serious fires in the 17th and 18th centuries which destroyed much of the town. The built character of Gillingham is typified by 19th century houses with little architectural pretension built from local brick. Extensive suburban housing development, largely from the 1970s onwards, is concentrated around the post-medieval rural settlements on the fringes of the town, diluting the town's surviving historic fabric between areas of modern development with little local distinctiveness.

Green spaces run through the town like arteries in the form of undeveloped meadows with open

access along the Stour, Shreen and Lodden.

6.2 Historic Urban Character Areas of Gillingham

A total of seven Historic Urban Character Areas have been defined for Gillingham as shown on Figure 39 and listed below. They comprise the historic core (Character Area 1), the medieval suburb of Newbury (Area 2), 19th century industrial expansion at Station Road and Brickfields (Area 3), and suburban housing estates centred on historic rural satellite settlements at Ham, Bay, Peacemarth and Wyke (Areas 4-7).

- 1 Historic Town Centre
- 2 Newbury
- 3 Station Road and Brickfields
- 4 Ham Common
- 5 Bay
- 6 Peacemarth
- 7 Wyke