Part 5: Historical Analysis

5.1 Saxon Sherborne (AD 705-1065)

5.1.1 Historical Summary

Sherborne holds a significant position in the history of Wessex. Although not mentioned by name, events relating to its foundation are recorded in both the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and Bede's *Historia*. It became a see for the diocese of Wessex west of Selwood in AD 705 and became the capital of Wessex for a short period from 860-878 while Winchester was exposed to Viking attacks. Thus the Kings Aethelbald and Aethelberht are thought to have been buried at Sherborne. It has even been suggested that King Alfred the Great was educated in Sherborne (Wildman, 1911, 3-4). The origins of Sherborne may go back even further into the Post-Roman period as a pre-existing British estate, see or monastery. This idea was first explored by Baring Gould and Fisher (1913, 107). It rests on the mention of the British place name *Lanprobus* in a forged foundation charter contained within a collection of Sherborne Charters written in the 14th and 15th centuries and held at the British Library. This charter is sometimes known as the *Cotton manuscript Faustina A. ii,* it states:

Kenewalc rex dedit lanprobi de c. hydis or King Cenwalh gave 100 hides at Lanprobus [to Sherborne].

Recording the granting of land by Cenwalh, king of Wessex (643-672) to the church at Sherborne in AD 671, this charter is clearly a forgery because one of the signatories, Archbishop Lawrence, died in AD 619 (Fowler, 1951, 30-32). Nevertheless, it is now widely thought that it may represent a tradition that the cathedral at Sherborne was founded in AD 705 on a pre-existing British monastic estate of 100 hides centred on a place called Lanprobus. Finberg (1953) went further and linked the 100 hides at Lanprobus with the chapel of St Probus mentioned in a papal bull dated AD 1163 which refers to the Church of St Mary Magdalene situated next to Sherborne Castle, with the chapels of St Michael and St Probus.

This document and a Papal Privilege dated 1146 which mentions *Propschirche* suggest that a chapel dedicated to Saint Probus was situated next to Sherborne Castle (O'Donovan, 1988, xliii). The *propeschirche* of the 1146 document was located near *Stocland,* leading Keen to suggest that the site of Lanprobus was in the vicinity of Sherborne Old Castle; meadowland called Stockland is recorded here alongside Pinford Lane. Moreover, early Christian burials and a ditch, which appear to predate the 12th century construction of the castle, have been recorded during excavations at the castle. Five grass-tempered pottery sherds were recovered from these excavations, in-residual contexts. This is the only type of indigenous pottery produced in SW Britain in the 5th-8th centuries AD. Keen concludes that Lanprobus, a pre-existing British church or monastery, was moved from the area of the Castle to the Abbey site c. 705 by Aldhelm (Keen, 1984, 210-12). Hall has also drawn attention to the fact that bishoprics on the continent were normally founded at important Roman administrative centres. In England, early sees were also created in former Roman towns such as Canterbury, Winchester and Dorchester-on-Thames. Hall discusses why Sherborne might have been chosen above Ilchester, which was a Roman town and a Saxon royal estate, or Dorchester. Sherborne may have had a Roman settlement at Pinford Lane, but it was never a town. It seems likely that Sherborne was chosen as see because of a pre-existing British Church on the site with a large estate already endowed for its support. In fact Lanprobus may already have had a British bishop prior to the creation of the West Saxon see at Sherborne (Hall, 2005, 135-9).

Figure 6: View along Marston Road looking north west

Figure 7: The west front of Sherborne Abbey Church with the former All Hallows Church

However, the exact location of the proposed British ecclesiastical centre of Lanprobus has not been demonstrated beyond doubt. It remains possible that its site is contiguous with that of the later Saxon cathedral. Limited archaeological evidence lends some support to this theory. There is debatable evidence for a Roman building beneath the Abbey Church of St Mary; a number of early Christian burials on the Abbey site have recently been carbon dated and the possibility remains that some of them may predate the 8th century foundation of the bishopric (Keen & Ellis, 2005, 9).

The earliest reliable mention of the name Sherborne appears in a charter dated AD 864 in which King Aethelberht grants liberties to the holy foundation at *Scirburnan* (Donovan, 1988, 18-22). This name is topographical and derives from the Old English *scir + burna* meaning clear or bright stream (Mills, 1991, 293). The name does not impart any information regarding the origin of the town other than the Saxon Cathedral seems to have been sited next to the eponymous stream. It is likely that the Coombe Brook represents the clear or bright stream because it flows over limestone whereas the Yeo flows over clay (Fowler, 1951, 13).

There is very little evidence for the precise nature of the Saxon town of Sherborne. The archaeological evidence comprises: the burials from the region of the Abbey (five of which have been dated to the 7th-11th centuries); a few structural fragments of the late Saxon cathedral surviving within the fabric of the present church or revealed during excavation; and similar structural fragments of the Benedictine monastery. Burials dating from before the 12th century have also been excavated from beneath the Old Castle (Bean, 1955a; Webster & Cherry, 1974) and a probably pagan Saxon crouched inhumation from south of Tinney's Lane (Mckinley, 1999). Although this does not add up to convincing evidence for an urban settlement at Sherborne, it remains highly likely that a town existed here, if not by AD 705, then shortly after and certainly by the 9th century when it is thought to have been the Capital of Wessex. Aldhelm was made the first Saxon bishop of Sherborne and he is thought to have built a church here. The exact location of this church is unknown; William of Malmesbury, writing in the early 12th century, claims to have seen Aldhelm's church, but this is more likely to have been the late Saxon church built by Wulfsin in the late 10th-early 11th century, fragments of which survive today within the fabric of the present Abbey church of St Mary. Bishop Roger of Caen, who built Sherborne Old Castle in the 12th century, described the whereabouts of the residence of the Saxon bishops as being near the site of the present vicarage, west of the west end of the Abbey Church. A town is likely to have developed around the cathedral, and its fortunes fluctuated accordingly. At the beginning of the 10th century the diocese of Sherborne was subdivided into Sherborne and Crediton, resulting in the loss of endowed lands in Devon and Cornwall to Crediton. In AD 998 the Benedictine monastery of Sherborne was founded and in 1075 the see of Sherborne was permanently removed to Old Sarum as part of a decree by a council in London that bishops' seats should be in more accessible places (Fowler, 1951, 19-30, 67). The implication is that Sherborne was a relatively inaccessible backwater in the late Saxon period. Sherborne would also have served as a Minster church at this time, with a Parochia comprising surrounding villages within an approximate radius of 5km.

Something of the character of Sherborne at the end of the late Saxon period can be gleaned from the Domesday entry for the town. It was clearly a large manor, the major part of which was held by the bishop of Salisbury, although the monks of Sherborne also held a separate manor within the town for their own support. Several large estates within the bishop's manor were held by named individuals and there were also a total of 86 smallholders within the bishops and the monks' manors. This suggests an intensive but dispersed settlement pattern in the manor as a whole. However, 111 villagers are also listed, indicating a sizeable nucleated settlement at the heart of the manor. Although Sherborne is not afforded the status of a borough in the late Saxon period, its size may be compared to that of the four Dorset boroughs of Dorchester (which comprised 172 houses), Bridport (120), Wareham (285) and Shaftesbury (257).

Fowler surmised from the Domesday entry that the manor occupied the Yeo valley for a distance of 5 miles long and 2-3 miles wide between Oborne and Bradford Abbas. He suggested that the land was broadly divided into woodland on the steep slopes of Fuller's Earth to the south of the River Yeo; meadow in the Yeo floodplain; arable and pasture on the inferior oolite dip slope to the north of the Yeo (Fowler, 1951, 3-6). The general impression is of a large, wealthy, industrious and populous manor on the eve of the Norman Conquest. It should be noted however, that William of Malmesbury, writing in the early 12th century described Sherborne as a very small village with a scanty population and little in the way of the amenities of life (Fowler, 1951, 105-6). He may have had a motive however, as a resident of Malmesbury, to denigrate the significance of the rival Abbey at Sherborne.

There appear to be eight mills listed in the manor

at Domesday (Thorn & Thorn, 1983), at least one of which is likely to have been situated on the site of the medieval Abbey mill on the Coombe Stream west of the Abbey church. Another may have been located south of the Abbey at the site of Forrester's Mill depicted on the Coombe Stream in J Ladd's map of 1733. At least three would have been located on the River Yeo: to the east of the town, near the later castle; on the site of St Andrews Mill (Middle Mill); and to the west near the site of Westbury Mill. Hutchins, or his editors, claimed that a vineyard was mentioned in Domesday (Hutchins, 1873, 211).

The earliest recorded road in the Sherborne region is the Marston Magna Road; the modern B3148 (Figure 6). This appears to have been designated a *herepath* as recorded in 10th century charters pertaining to the Somerset parish of Rimpton (Costen, 1985). *Herepaths* were important strategic routes maintained by the army. The road would have linked the late Saxon see of Sherborne with the Royal estate at Ilchester and beyond via the Fosse Way. It is likely that Saxon roads also linked Sherborne to Dorchester and Salisbury. The Marston Magna Road follows the dominant co-axial alignments in the area and the herepath may simply represent the designation of a pre-existing late prehistoric route.

The church of St Mary at Sherborne has had three distinct phases of use: the seat of a Saxon bishopric (AD 705-998); the church of a Benedictine monastery (998-1539); and parish church for the town of Sherborne (1539 to the present day). The Saxon bishopric was founded in AD 705, an event recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and by Bede, although neither mentions Sherborne by name. The new diocese was recorded as that of Wessex west of the wood and was held by Aldhelm, while Daniel remained bishop at Winchester.

Sherborne Abbey was unusual in that it differed from the prescribed layout of a Benedictine Abbey. The conventual buildings were laid out to the north of the church instead of the south. Fowler suggested that this may have facilitated the diversion of the Coombe Stream to better serve the needs of the monks (Fowler, 1951, 11). A simpler explanation may be that the position of the church was dictated by the construction of the Saxon Cathedral. The site may have been restricted by the time of the monastic foundation in AD 998 through secular or other development, with the only available location for the claustral range being to the north of the church.

Wulfsige III confirmed the conversion of the cathedral from an establishment of secular canons to a Benedictine monastery with the bishop as abbot in AD 998, and it was he who built the first cloister and conventual buildings. Bishop Aelfwold also conducted building works in 1045-58. Hutchins suggested a historical context for this rebuild in the early 11th century, noting that "… *Fabian and other historians…*" had asserted that Sherborne Abbey was burnt down in AD 1003 by Sweno and his Danish army who were on a march from Exeter to Old Sarum. The extent of evidence for this theory is not clear, except for conjecture that the Danish army may have passed Sherborne, and there is a corresponding gap in the lists of bishops and abbots (Hutchins, 1873, 208). In 1122 the monastery was raised to the status of an independent Abbey and a new phase of building work, attributed to Bishop Roger of Caen was begun. This 12th-century phase of work was substantial, destroying much of the original fabric of the Saxon church. Some of the fabric survives in the present church, notably, the west wall (Figure 7) and the west end of the north aisle wall (Keen & Ellis, 2005, 4-5).

5.1.2 Town Layout

Little is known of the Saxon town layout. It has already been mentioned that the residence of the Saxon bishops is thought to have been in the vicinity of the present vicarage (Fowler, 1951, 28). This residence was located within a pre-existing rectilinear pattern of land division and associated dispersed settlement. The place name and location of the Abbey mill suggests that the earliest Saxon settlement was clustered around the Coombe Stream. It is only with the foundation of the Benedictine monastery in the late Saxon period, however, that we have any physical evidence for the location of the Church and Abbey Precinct. In fact, the Abbey precinct appears to be the earliest surviving plan component and has influenced the development of the Norman and medieval town layout.

5.1.3 Saxon Urban plan components

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

1. The Abbey Precinct. The form of the Abbey precinct, possibly planned at the time of the establishment of the Benedictine monastery in AD 998, represents a departure from the pre-existing rectilinear field alignments in the Sherborne region. The rectangular precinct is aligned slightly more to the north and the difference in the two can be clearly seen in the route of Acreman Street. The southern part of this road has been altered following the insertion of the late Saxon precinct into the pre-existing landscape. Hall suggests that the rectilinear layout of Sherborne Abbey was of Saxon Christian design, emulating the
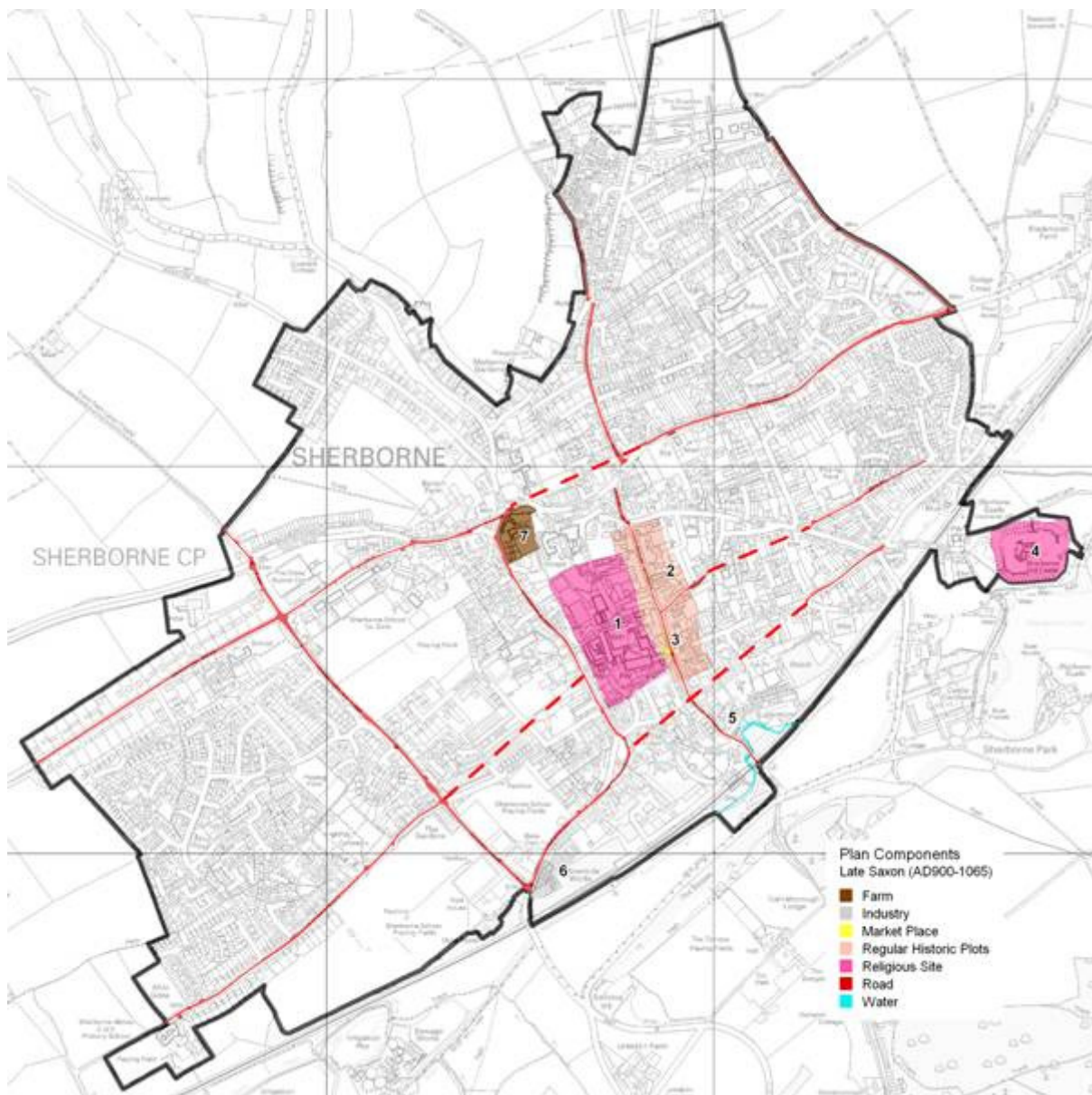
Figure 8: Saxon Plan Components

classic Roman form (Hall, 2005, 136-7). Aldhelm is thought to have built a magnificent cathedral in the 8th century of which no remains survive. The church was rebuilt in stone in the middle of the 11th century and the only parts of this later Saxon cathedral to survive within the present structure of St Mary's church are parts of the west wall, part of the west end of the north aisle wall and part of the north wall of the NE transept in which the outline of the gable for the east claustral range is preserved.

Below-ground remains of the Late Saxon church have been revealed on a number of occasions and provide clues as to its original layout. Restoration work between 1849 and 1877 unearthed the foundations of the Saxon tower outside the west end of the Abbey church. In 1849 during the

lowering of the perpendicular west window R C C Carpenter discovered a double row of small pillars and arches of early date opening from an upper floor of the tower to the nave, an arrangement peculiar to Saxon churches (Gibb, 1975). Sir Alfred Clapham conducted excavations for the RCHM immediately to the west of Sherborne Abbey Church during 1949 and discovered further sub-surface evidence for the previous existence of a west axial tower (Dufty, 1949). Further buried remains of the Saxon West Tower and the west wall of the NW transept or portacus were revealed by J H P Gibb during excavations for the Sherborne School Archaeological Society from 1964-1973. Evidence for the east wall of an earlier, possibly 11th century, west cloister range was excavated at the same time running N-S at the east side of the library (Gibb, 1971; 1975).

Part of the Saxon church was exposed within the present building during an excavation in June 1990 when the floor at the west end of the north aisle was lifted for repaving. The outer wall of the north aisle of the 11th century cathedral was revealed together with a surface to the north that may have been the floor of the south walk of the Saxon cloister. The Saxon aisle floor was also observed. (Keen & Ellis, 2005, 14-15).

Excavations by Gem and Keen in the area north of the Slype between 1972 and 1976 revealed fragments of early walls. These have been interpreted as part of the east range of the 11th century cloister because they align with the roof crease of the early cloister still visible on the current north wall of the north transept (ibid. 138-9). None of the excavations on the Abbey site have revealed any evidence for structures, other than graves, earlier than the 11th century.

The original site of the Saxon bishop's palace is recorded in two papal bulls, dated 1145 and 1163, as having been to the west of the Abbey Church of St Mary, near the site of the present vicarage (Penn, 1980, 94).

2. Cheap Street (Figure 9). The main street of Sherborne also followed the alignment of the monastic precinct. Although it is first recorded in the 12th century, there is a good chance that it actually originated in the late Saxon period. The rear of plots may have been marked by a back lane on the east side of the street. This side of Cheap Street probably formed a separate tithing named after Hound Street to distinguish it from the west side (Abbot's Fee) in the medieval period.

3. The Market (Figure 10). Cheap Street is also likely to have been the location of the original Sherborne market. The present market place is situated outside the eastern Abbey gate and, for that reason, can be considered to be the most likely location for a late Saxon market.

 4. The Castle Site. There may have been an early Christian site on the top of the knoll now occupied by Sherborne Old Castle. The chapel of St Probus is associated with this site and burials thought to date to the 9th century, possibly enclosed by a bank and ditch, have also been excavated here (Webster & Cherry, 1974, 195). These burials may be associated with a pre-existing settlement on or near the Castle site.

5. St Andrews Mill. This mill is recorded as being given to the monks of Sherborne Abbey in the 12th century by Bishop Roger as compensation for his acquisition of two other mills previously belonging to the monks. The location of this mill probably represents the original crossing point of the River Yeo at Sherborne. The late 18th century Old Cottage, South Street (Figure 11) is on the site of the earlier 18th century mill buildings and may also represent the site of the medieval or earlier mill.

6. West Mill. This represents the possible location of one of the Domesday Mills.

7. Abbey Barton. Settlement remains comprising pits, post holes and linear features dating from the 10th-14th centuries were identified during an archaeological evaluation on land at Newell House in 2003. These remains may represent a small settlement or farmstead, a possible precursor to the Abbey Barton (Valentin, 2003).

Figure 9: View along Cheap Street looking north

Figure 10: View across the Market Place looking south