

Part 6: Historic Urban Character Appraisal



6.1 The historic urban character of Blandford Forum

The urban character of Blandford, like any town, is a product of many factors including the topographic position, history of estate ownership and management, geographical relationship with other towns and resources and other historical events. The topographic position of Blandford, within a wide sweep of the River Stour as it passes through the Dorset chalk downs, has had a profound effect on the location, form, economy and character of the town.

The settlement originated as a planned borough at a pre-existing crossing point of the Stour. The medieval market flourished due to the proximity of a range of landscape resources and therefore agricultural products in its hinterland. The proximity of the river and its floodplain has limited the direction in which the town could expand. During the medieval period, as today, the suburb of Blandford St Mary was separated from the town by a wide undeveloped strip of land.

Blandford remained relatively unchanged from its medieval layout until the mid 17th century. The early post-medieval town was almost completely destroyed during a devastating fire in 1731. Thus an essential part of Blandford's urban character is the fact that it was reconstructed in its entirety during a short period between 1731 and 1760. The town is a very fine example of an intact Georgian brick built country town. Pevsner described it as '...one of the most satisfying Georgian ensembles anywhere in England' (Newman & Pevsner 1972, 95). The market square in particular has a fine collection of Georgian buildings in brick and stone including the parish church of Ss Peter and Paul, the town hall with its three bayed façade surmounted by a triangular pediment, and The Red Lion Inn opposite to the south. Other important collections of Georgian buildings surround Sheep Market Hill and The Plocks. Rare buildings that survived the fire include, Ryves almshouses, The Old House and Dale House. The ruined and partially restored St Leonard's Chapel is the only standing medieval structure in the town.

Georgian architecture does not fully define the historic character of Blandford however. The architects John and William Bastard, who largely directed the rebuilding of the town, created a town plan showing the extent and layout of the town prior to the fire and the properties destroyed. This plan reveals that the Georgian town was rebuilt within the pre-existing medie-

val plot boundaries. These medieval burghage plots survive largely intact today and greatly enhance the historic character of the place.

Blandford's fine history as an important regional market town is also a strong contributor to the historic character of the town. It held weekly livestock markets and numerous annual sheep fairs throughout the medieval, post-medieval and modern eras. This is reflected in important central open spaces such as the Market Place, The Plocks and Sheep Market Hill. Blandford also functioned as an important service centre on the Great Western Turnpike and has had a strong tradition in coach building, inn keeping and brewing since the 18th century as a result. The Hall and Woodhouse Brewery in Blandford St Mary provides an excellent example of late Victorian brewery architecture. Blandford also has a strong Victorian and Edwardian component to its historic character in the vicinity of the former railway station where a suburb developed within a gridded street plan (Figure 43). This suburb now forms part of the Conservation Area (Figure 44). Suburban expansion continued into the inter-war and post-war periods, although it was in the 1980s that Blandford's population exploded through the construction of extensive housing estates to the north and west of the historic town centre.

Large scale 19th and 20th century industry in Blandford has tended to be associated with agricultural produce and include gloving and brewing. During the late 20th century a large animal feed mill was built at Blandford Heights, the precursor to a large modern industrial estate in the NE part of the town.

Blandford is also characterised by extensive green spaces. The Hams between the town centre and Blandford St Mary is now an important public recreational site. The Stour flood plain to the west of town forms part of Bryanston Park and has the wooded slopes of Bryanston estate as a backdrop. The northern part of this former deer park is now taken up by Blandford School. Milldown comprises a further an important public space and chalk downland nature reserve on the northern edge of the town.

6.2 Historic Urban Character Areas of Blandford Forum

A total of six Historic Urban Character Areas have been defined for Blandford as shown on Figure 44 and listed below. They comprise the area of the medieval and post-medieval town (Character Areas 1 and 2); Victorian and early

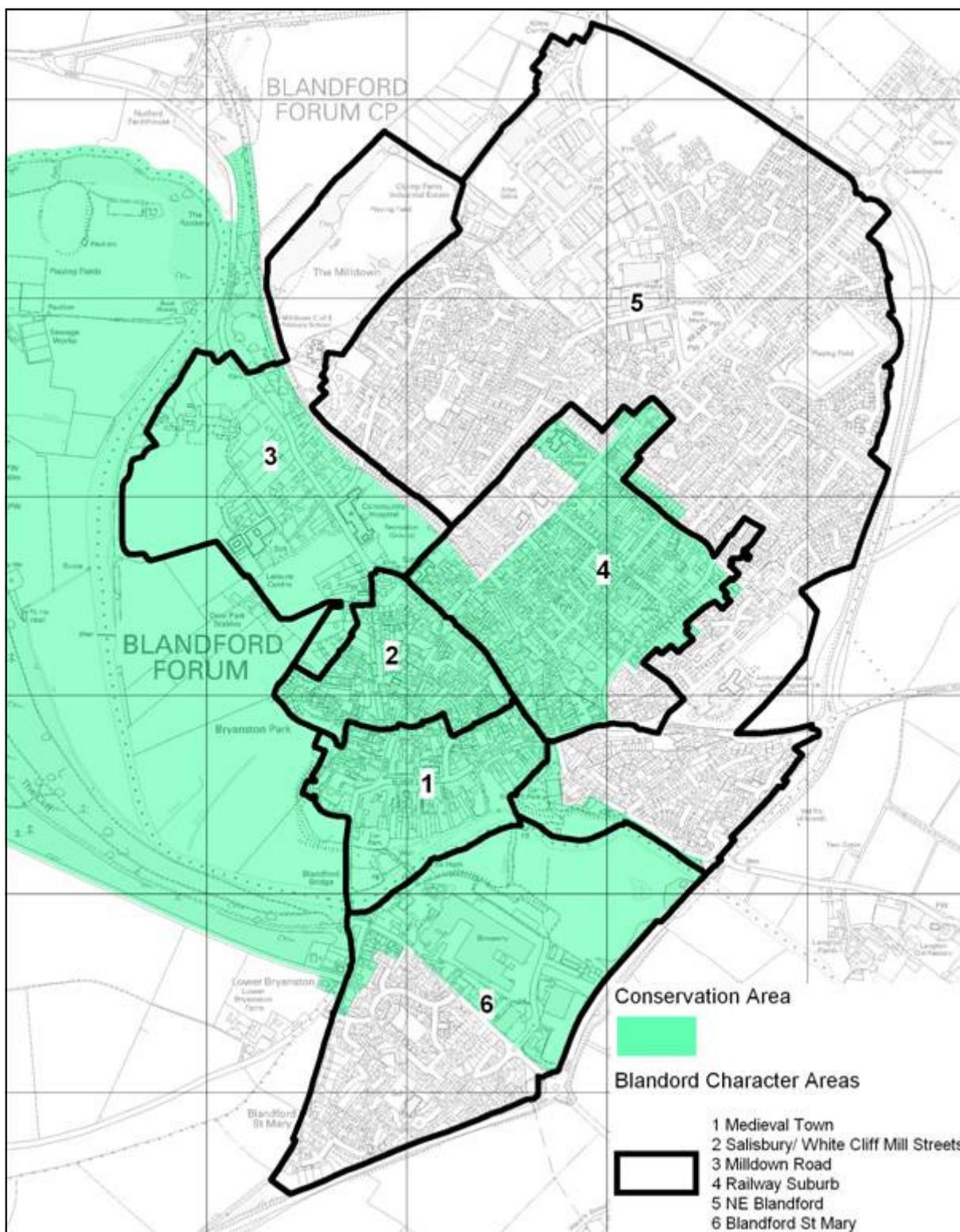


Figure 44: Blandford Historic Urban Character Areas in relationship to the Conservation Area

20th century suburbs on the north and north east sides of the town (Areas 3 and 4) a modern suburb (Area 5) and the historic suburb, together with its modern housing estates, of Blandford St Mary (Area 6).

- 1 The Medieval Town
- 2 Salisbury and White Cliff Mill Streets
- 3 Milldown Road
- 4 The Railway Suburb
- 5 North and East Blandford
- 6 Blandford St Mary