

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

Stalbridge lies on the east-facing slope at the southern tip of a NNW-SSE aligned ridge

(Figure 3). This ridge forms part of the north western flank of the wide Blackmore Vale which extends for 18km SW of Stalbridge and a further 9km to the north. The vale slopes gradually down from Stalbridge to the upper reaches of the River Stour two miles to the east. The medieval core of the town sits at approximately 85m above Ordnance Datum, 35m above the River Stour. There are no significant rivers or streams within the urban area of Stalbridge.

The topography has had a major influence on the town layout. Pre-urban tracks run parallel with and perpendicular to the line of the ridge. The late Saxon settlement of Stalbridge was founded upon one of these, possibly slightly west of the modern A357 road. These alignments have been recorded fossilised in field and parish boundaries and roads over extensive parts of Horethorne Hundred just over the

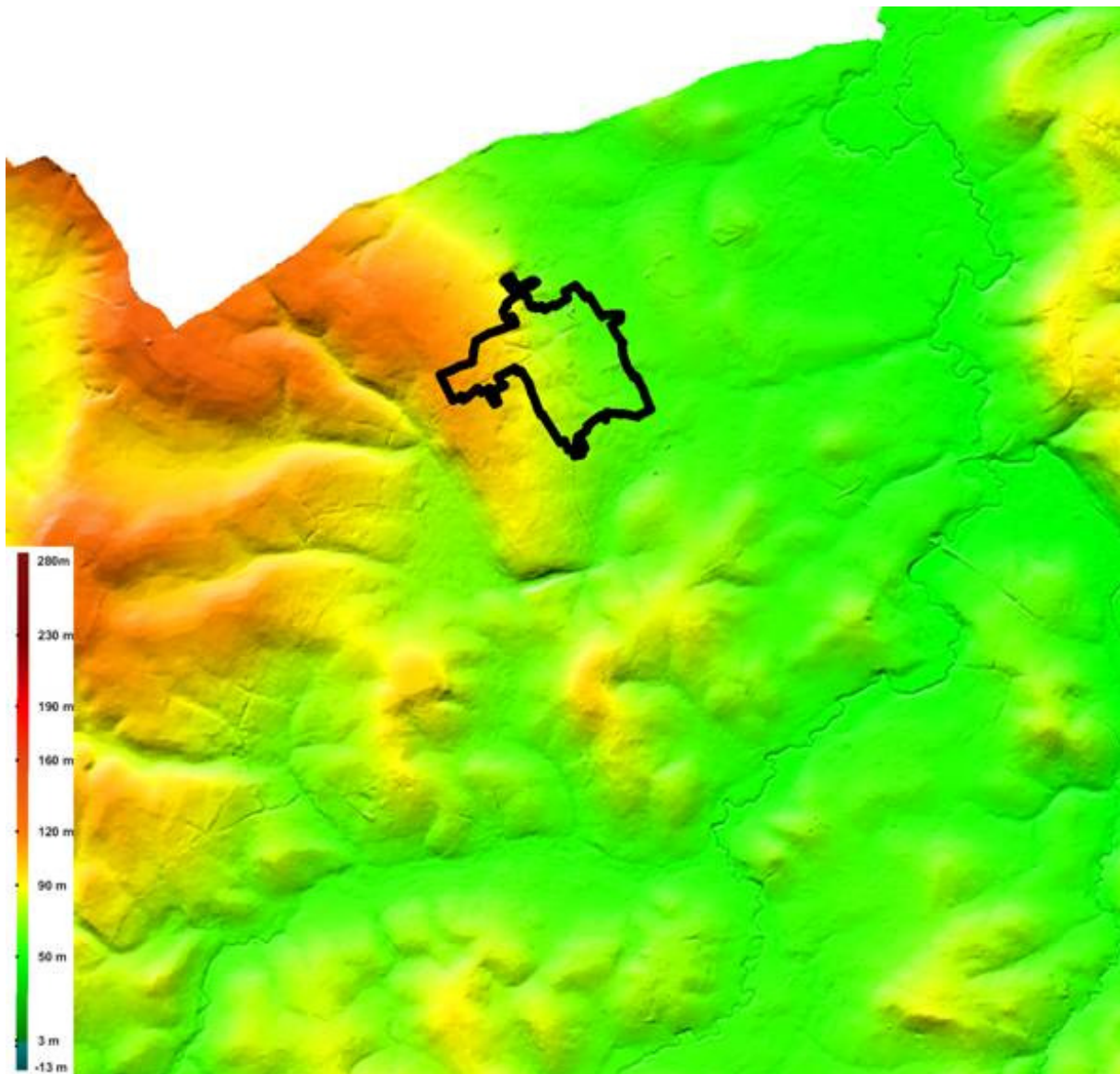


Figure 3: Stalbridge's topographic setting

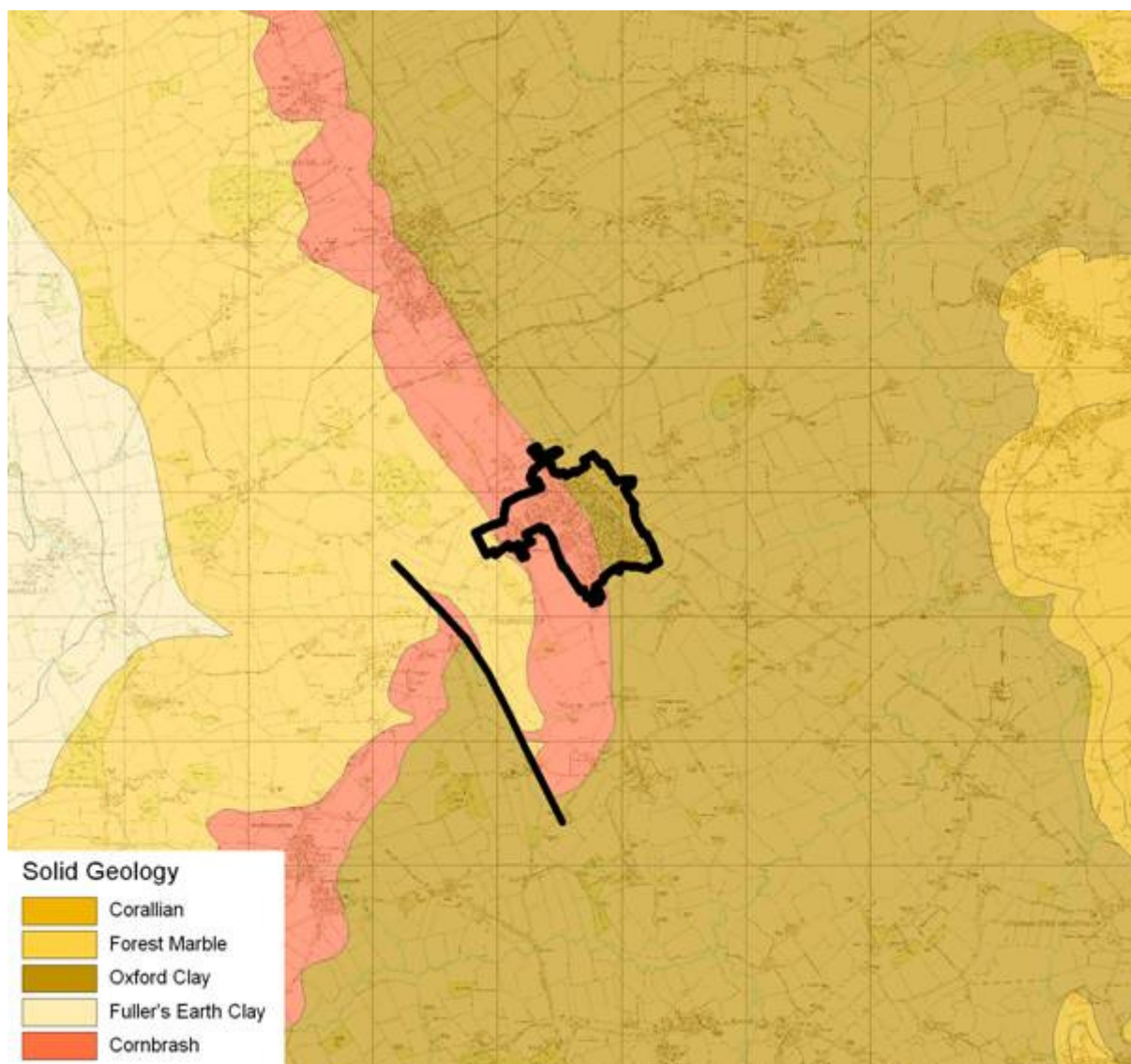


Figure 4: Geology of the Stalbridge Area.

parish and county boundary to the north in Somerset and in the Sherborne area where their origins have been attributed to the late Iron Age (Davey 2005; 2008). Although the modern A30 between Shaftesbury and Milborne Port runs through Henstridge, 2.5km to the north of Stalbridge, in the past there are likely to have been a number of alternative parallel courses for this route. One of these probably formed a central cross roads crossing the A357 at Stalbridge's 15th century market cross and continuing west up Gold Street. Another may have run immediately south of the medieval core along the modern Station Road and Barrow Hill.

3.3 Geology

In general terms the geology of the north Dorset region comprises a series of superimposed Jurassic and Cretaceous strata of varying

hardness dipping gently towards the NNE. This results in a series of scarp slopes facing to the SSW. Stalbridge lies at the junction of the Cornbrash and Oxford Clay beds, with the Barrow Hill recreation ground extending west onto Forest Marble. The town was founded upon a small ridge comprising a finger of the harder Cornbrash and Forest Marble, transverse faulted so as to project southwards into the softer Oxford Clay vale (Figure 4). At Stalbridge the Cornbrash can be subdivided into an Upper and Lower division. The Upper Cornbrash comprises sandy marl and limestone beds whilst the Lower Cornbrash comprises marly rubble and limestone beds. The Forest Marble is a hard flaggy limestone (Chatwin 1960, 17-20). Forest Marble provides the vast majority of building and roofing stone for the town of Stalbridge, although occasional blocks of Cornbrash limestone are incorporated into walls. Small quarries have been identified to

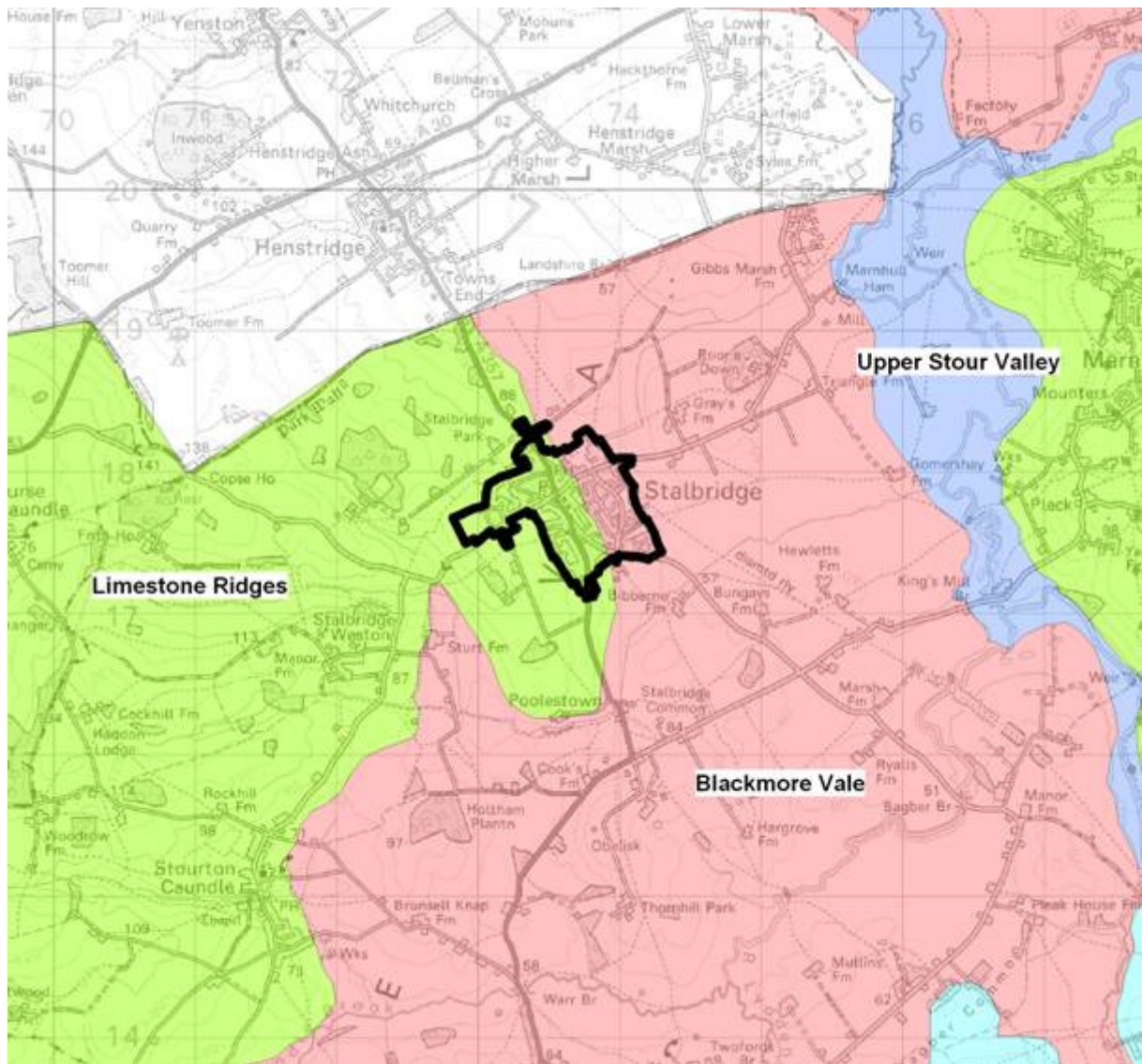


Figure 5: Stalbridge in its landscape character setting (NDCC Landscape Characterisation).

the west of the town on Barrow Lea (Butterworth 1995) and a major stone industry was established north of the town during the 18th and 19th centuries. The historic core of Stalbridge did not extend east on to the Oxford Clay beds. It is only since the construction of the railway station in the mid 19th century that development spread in this direction.

3.4 Landscape Character

Several landscape character assessments help place the town into its wider landscape context.

In the national assessment of countryside character, Stalbridge lies at the western edge of 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 hedgerow 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.

Stalbridge sits across two Landscape Character areas in the North Dorset District Landscape Character Assessment; the western part of the town lies within the North Dorset Limestone Ridges Landscape Character Area and the eastern Part lies within the Blackmore Vale Landscape Character Area (NDDC 2008). This document provides a detailed record of the features and landscape elements present (Figure 5).

The key characteristics of the North Dorset Limestone Ridges character 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 character 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 90° 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 Gay-

lard Deer Park (an SSSI) are both key locally important features.

The draft Historic Landscape Character mapping shows Stalbridge sitting within an area of largely piecemeal enclosed fields and planned enclosed fields, together with smaller areas of enclosed strip fields and other regular enclosed fields. There are only isolated patches of mixed woodland, coppice and plantations. To the east, alongside the River Stour, valley floor landscapes dominate.

3.5 The Present Town

The modern built-up area of Stalbridge lies entirely within the parish of Stalbridge and covers an area of about 81.5 ha. It lies on the A357 road from Wincanton to Blandford Forum. It has no rail links; the nearest station is at Templecombe, approximately 5.5 km away to the north. The population has risen significantly recently; by 13.2% from 2,280 in 1991 to 2,580 in 2001. The latest population figure (2005 mid year estimate) is 2,680. The 2001 Census records 987 dwellings in Stalbridge, and the town has one school; Stalbridge C of E Primary School.

The retail sector comprises sixteen shops, mainly local shops, and two trading estates, although only one, Stalbridge Trading Estate (7.1ha), lies within the urban area. 35% of the economically active population are employed within the service sector, 30% in manufacturing, 20% in public administration, education and health, 9% in banking and 8% in construction. Major employers are all relatively small but include Stalbridge Timber, Dorset County Council, Fudges-Dorset Village Bakery and William Hughes Ltd (Dorset County Council, 2007, 80-81).

Part 4: Sources



4.1 Previous research

The antiquarian John Leland visited Stalbridge c 1530 and recorded important information concerning the layout of the late medieval town. Hutchins discussed the town in the late 18th and 19th centuries and the third edition of his *History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset* included an engraving of the 17th century manor house to the north west of the church which now survives only as earthworks (Hutchins 1774: 1815; 1867, opp. p670). W S Swayne, a young curate in Stalbridge in the late 19th century, also wrote a *History and Antiquities of Stalbridge* (Swayne 1889).

A small number of local histories have been published during the later 20th century concerning specific aspects of Stalbridge's past. These include a biography of Robert Boyle, scientist and erstwhile lord of Stalbridge Manor (Jones 1989), a collection of childhood memoirs (Townsend 2007) and the Stalbridge Estate (Jones 1993).

4.2 Historic Maps

The earliest detailed map of the town is the estate survey of 1781-2 (King and Perks). The tithe map dates from 1839. 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 two Late Saxon charters recording the gift of 20 hides at Stalbridge by Aethelbehrt in 860-66 (Finberg, 1964 no.571) and 5 or 8 hides at Stalbridge Weston by Aethelstan in 933 (O'Donovan 1988) both to the church at Sherborne. Other primary documents consulted include the Domesday Survey of 1086 (Thorn & Thorn 1983); taxation records including the Lay Subsidy (Rumble 1980) and Hearth Tax Returns; as well as the 17th century Protestant Returns (Higgins 2009). These documents have been used to gain an insight into the size, wealth and economy of Stalbridge in comparison with neighbouring towns from the 10th to 17th centuries.

4.4 Archaeological Evidence

Archaeological investigation in Stalbridge has been on a limited scale and initially comprised chance discoveries, poorly recorded by modern standards. A Romano-British burial was

exposed during the extension of the buttery at Devonshire House during 1918 (Saunders *et al.* 1920, 47). A possible Romano-British occupation site was recorded during the construction of houses on Grove Lane Close prior to 1965 (Farrar 1965, 119). Structures thought to represent part of a pre 14th century church on the site of St Mary's parish church were recorded during the removal of the Vestry floor in 1978 (Keen 1978, 117).

Following the introduction of PPG 16 in 1991, three further investigations have been undertaken: an archaeological evaluation at Barrow Lea during 1995 in advance of construction of Pond Walk (Butterworth 1995); an archaeological watching brief during the construction of houses at the rear of Dorset House, Ring Street in 1998 (Brading 1998); and a desk based assessment of the Old Market Mews development site also during 1998 (Hawkes and Chandler 1998). These have produced some interesting detailed results but 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

Stalbridge is particularly notable for its survival of historic buildings, well over 200 structures in the urban area date from the late 19th century or earlier, 49 of which are listed. The buildings make a vital contribution to the historic urban character and are characterised themselves by their modest scale, use of local grey limestone for walling and stone slate roofs, and survival of historic fabric. In particular this fabric includes windows and roofs from the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with some fine examples of wrought iron casements with leaded lights, cast iron casements and traditional timber casements and vertical sliding sashes.

The 15th century market cross on the High Street, opposite the junction with Gold Street, occupies a prominent position at the heart of the medieval town. It is a scheduled monument and considered to be one of the finest of its type.

The market cross and St Mary's parish church are both grade II* listed. St Mary's dates from the 14th century, although it was extensively rebuilt during the 19th century. Evidence for an earlier church on the same site was revealed during the removal of the vestry floor in 1978 (Keen 1978, 117). The site of the medieval manor, to the south of the church is now occu-

ped by the grade II listed 18th century Church Hill House and April Cottage. Gold Street and High Street both contain significant numbers of 17th-19th century buildings, close knit and in a range of traditional styles and materials.

The southern end of the historic town is dominated by The Ring, the probable site of a 17th century market place and/or medieval fairs. Closely packed 17th-19th century buildings at the north end of Ring Street give way to more open historic suburban villas at the southern end. Anglesey Cottages are grade II listed and the 18th century Ringtree House may have formed part of the old workhouse. The green adjacent to Ringtree House contains a mid 19th century cast iron water pump.