

Part 5: Historical Analysis



5.1 Medieval Stalbridge (AD1066-1539)

5.1.1 Historical Summary

It is difficult to describe Stalbridge as a town prior to the medieval period. It clearly existed as a manor in the late 9th century when 20 hides at Stalbridge were granted to the church at Sherborne by Aethelberht of Wessex (Finberg 1964, no 571). The boundaries of the historic Stalbridge parish follow early features such as the county boundary along Landshire Lane and major topographical features such as the Rivers Stour and Lydden. These combine to form a large D-shaped parish, suggestive of an early estate that included Stalbridge Weston. This late Saxon or earlier estate probably featured a dispersed settlement pattern, although Taylor argues that dispersed farmsteads on the clay vales were not established until the 13th and 14th centuries; being assarted from the Forest of Blackmore at that time (Taylor 1966, 252-3).

The site of the medieval parish church of St Mary, with a spring on its south side (Figure 6), is likely to have been the earliest focus for the medieval town. Leland recorded the spring in the early 16th century and the site of the medieval manor (Figure 7), which also lay on the south side of the church (RCHME 1970, 250). These two plan elements are likely to have formed the core of the late Saxon settlement, together with the houses of 19 villagers recorded in Domesday. There is no secure evidence that Stalbridge had any truly urban features or functions until 1290 when Edward I granted a market to the Abbot of Sherborne to be held at the manor of Stalbridge weekly on Tuesdays. This clearly suggests that the medieval market was held close to the site of the 15th century market cross (Figure 8). Edward I also granted the Abbot of Sherborne a three day fair over the feast of St Bartholomew (24

August) in 1290 to be held at the manor of Stalbridge. A further grant of a three day fair at the feast of the exaltation of the cross (14 September) was made in 1302.

Despite these fairs and markets, Stalbridge appears to have remained a relatively poor town. Only 34 taxpayers were recorded in the 1327 lay subsidy and 23 in 1332. The recorded names of the taxpayers provide a clue to the medieval economy of Stalbridge; a Miller, a Hayward, a Fowler (*Capon*), a Reeve, a Butcher, a Smith and a Carpenter. The surname *Purchas* suggests that there may have been a specialist messenger residing in the town, perhaps providing a service between the Abbey of Sherborne and Shaftesbury along the medieval route from London to Exeter. A further connection with the abbey might be revealed in the names *Persons* and *Sarmenir*. Another specialist is implied by the name *le Maistre*, suggesting either a schoolmaster or master craftsman (Rumble 1980 83-4; Penn 1980, 100-101). Leland records that the market had decayed by 1530, although the fair remained. 60 taxpayers were recorded in the Lay subsidy of 1524, suggesting a small town of perhaps 500 inhabitants.

The church (Figure 9) was first recorded in 1291 although completely rebuilt in the 14th century (Penn 1980, 100-101).

5.1.2 Town Layout

The only contemporary document which describes the layout of the medieval town is Leland's description of 1530: a '*pretty uplandish town of one street, meetly well built. Given a market place and fair by the Abbots of Sherborne. The market is decayed, the fair remains. The Abbot had a manor place on the south side of the church. There is a good spring on*



Figure 6: View of the spring on the south east side of St Mary's Church.



Figure 7: St Mary's Church and Church Hill House (site of the medieval manor).

the south side of the church, walled about' (quoted in Penn 1980, 101). Thus we know that the medieval town centred on the present church and site of the medieval manor to the south. Leland mentions just one street by which we must assume he meant High Street with its 15th century cross. However, there are hints in the curving course of High Street and Church Hill that the late Saxon layout may have been quite different. The medieval and current course of Church Hill runs along the east side of the church and manor site. If the road had followed a straight course from Henstridge to Ring Street, it would run along the west side of the church (Figure 10). This latter option might be considered a more logical course considering the location of the spring recorded by Leland to the south of the church; the western route would not run through wet ground below the spring, but rather stay above it. The later and current eastern deviation is probably the result of the later market applying an attractive force on through traffic. Furthermore, an examination of plot boundaries suggests that the plots fronting on to Gold Street may be earlier than some of those fronting on the High Street. The name *Gold Street* refers to a market and it is possible that one existed here at an early date. Gold Street also forms part of a potentially pre-urban track forming a cross roads with High Street at the site of the market cross. This cross roads would have been obscured in the early 16th century through the growth of the market place, possibly explaining why Leland only mentioned one street. The market place itself may have developed on an open area now occupied by the 17th century *Old Rectory*, but also extending along Gold Street and High Street. Although not granted borough status, burgage-style plots were established fronting on to both sides of Gold Street, High Street and Church Hill, opposite the medieval manor.

The layout of Stalbridge is perhaps slightly unusual in that the medieval church lies at the



Figure 8: View of the 15th century market cross on the site of the medieval market place.

extreme northern end of the town. One might normally expect a town to develop around a central church. It may be that medieval settlement did originally continue north of the church along Church Hill and potentially along Drew's Lane. There is also potential that earthworks to the north of the church, close to the junction with Church Hill and Drew's Lane, represent a hollow way and shrunken settlement earthworks rather than the remains of landscaped gardens associated with the 17th century manor and park (RCHME 1970, 251). However, it is recorded that the 17th century manor was constructed on former common land (Jones 1993, i). Another possibility is that Gold Street represents the primary plan component of Stalbridge and that the manor and church site were established to the north following the granting of the estate to the church at Sherborne in the 10th century. It might be argued that the presence of Romano-British burials and occupation debris at either end of Gold Street lends some support to this theory.

It is notable that the street pattern of medieval Stalbridge largely retained the pre-urban rectilinear grid pattern. The major exception was the main N-S through route which had deviated from its pre-urban course along Church Hill and High Street to accommodate the medieval market. Other early routes include the lane through Bibbern Farm, and Wood Lane connecting Barrow Hill and Poolestown (Good 1966, 92). The E-W routes were Guggleton Street (later known as Station Road) and Barrow Hill; Gold Street and part of Duck Lane; and Drew's Lane. The field Name *Harpits* to the west of Wood Lane may suggest the existence of a late Saxon *herepath* connecting with the Royal estate at Milborne Port 6km to the north west.

5.1.3 Medieval Urban plan components

The main plan components of the medieval



Figure 9: View of St Mary's Church from the west

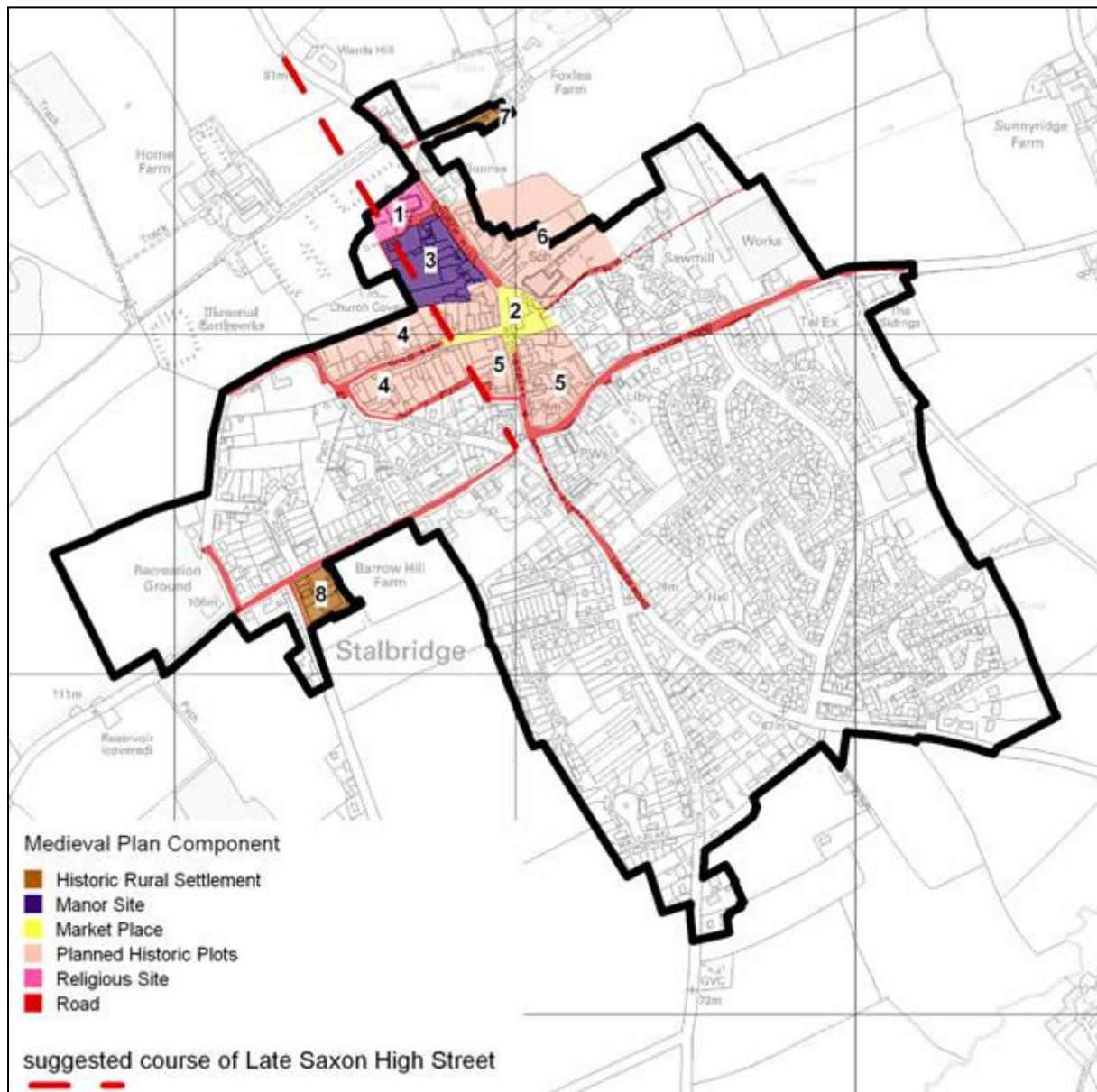


Figure 10: Stalbridge Medieval Town Plan Components

town are shown on Figure 10 and are listed below.

1. *St Mary's Parish Church*. The parish church of Stalbridge was first recorded in 1291, although it is potentially older. It occupies a prime settlement location, adjacent to a reliable spring, a potentially early road and on good arable land. The earliest surviving fabric dates from the 14th century, much altered in the 19th century. However, remains considered to pre-date the 14th century were observed beneath the floor of the vestry during 1978 (Keen 1978).

2. *Market Place*. The location of the medieval market is indicated by the position of the fine 15th century market cross at the junction of High Street and Gold Street. A market charter was granted in 1290, although this may represent

the confirmation of a previously established market. The 17th century *Old Rectory* may have been built in a triangular plot of land previously used as a market place. Leland records that the market had *decayed* during the early 16th century (Penn 1980, 101).

3. *Site of Medieval Manor*. The site of the early 16th century manor is recorded by Leland as being to the south of the church. This is also a prime settlement location, adjacent to a spring and church, and likely to be the site of the late Saxon manor.

4. *Gold Street* (Figure 11). The name *Gold Street* refers to the market. It is not clear whether it was the site of a market itself or if it was just a street that led to/from the market. The analysis of 19th century plot boundaries

suggests that plots fronting on to Gold Street were planned and may pre-date plots fronting on to High Street to the south of the manor. The High Street plots appear to have been fitted in to the space left by the Gold Street plots. The modern Grove Lane was known as Back lane during the 19th century. This may represent an altered course of an earlier medieval lane providing access to the rear of the burgage plots.

5. High Street. The extent of medieval plots fronting on to High Street is suggested by boundaries fossilised on 19th century maps and surviving to a great extent today. Those to the south of Gold Street are integrated with, and probably of the same date as, the Gold Street plots. Those to the south of the market place fit in to a unit delineated by High Street and Station Road on the west and south sides respectively.

6. Church Hill. A block of planned burgage plots also fronted on to Church Hill, opposite the medieval manor site. The plots extended for a distance of up to 170m behind the street frontage and may have been reckoned as furlongs. These furlongs substantially survived into the 19th century but have since been enclosed as paddocks and are mostly excluded from the study area. One of these plots survives into the present day to the rear of 31 High Street and is included within the study area.

7. Drew's Lane. Foxlea Farm on Drew's Lane may represent an early dispersed settlement site.

8. Barrow Hill. *Beorh leag* is mentioned in the Saxon charter of 933 for Stalbridge Weston (O'Donovan 1988, 29-33). The early incidence of the name does not necessarily mean that a dispersed settlement existed at Barrow Lea at that time. Nevertheless, the 1327 Lay Subsidy records two tax payers named *atte Bergh* and another named *Berleih* (Rumble 1980, 83-4) suggesting very strongly that Barrow Hill existed as a settlement by the 14th century. Roman oc-

cupation debris has been recorded in the fields called Barrow Lea, opposite Barrow Hill Farm to the north (Farrar 1965, 119).



Figure 11: View east along Gold Street .

5.2 Early post-medieval Stalbridge (1540-1699)

5.2.1 Historical Summary

Leland's observations seem to suggest that Stalbridge was in decline as a market town during the late medieval period. Sherborne Abbey was dissolved on the 18th March 1539 (Betty 2005, 190) and the manor of Stalbridge was sold into secular hands. In 1547 the manor came to the Duke of Somerset, whose family built the Jacobean manor house (demolished in 1822) in the park to the north of the church. Stalbridge may have experienced a minor economic renaissance around the middle of the 17th century, possibly coincident with the granting of a market charter in 1637 and a fair in 1613-14 (Hutchins 1774, 245). This fair seems to have replaced one of the 13th century fairs, lost by the 16th century. Penn has suggested that the new market may have been held on a triangular area to the south of the High Street-Barrow Hill junction (Penn 1980, 101). The centre of this triangle has been enclosed with buildings since at least 1782 (Figure 12). The part of Ring Street to the south of the triangle is known as *The Ring* and may indicate the position of a cattle market or fair. Although the location of the 17th century market is speculative, it is known that in the 18th and 19th centuries the cattle market was held along the full length of Stalbridge's main street, and the fairs were held on land adjacent to *The Ring* (Jones 1993, 17). Historic buildings dating from the 17th century were established along Station Road (known as Guggleton Road in the 18th century) and the north end of Ring Street. Despite this growth Stalbridge remained a modest market town, with only 51 taxpayers recorded on the Hearth Tax returns of 1662-4. The Stalbridge Protestation Returns of 1641 indicate that there were approximately 250 men over the age of 18 in the whole parish (Higgins 2009).



Figure 12: Sylcott, Barrow Hill: Possible site of the 17th century market place.

Robert Boyle, the noted physicist, was lord of Stalbridge manor from 1643-91 and conducted many of his scientific experiments at the Jacobean manor house (Jones 1989). Thornhill House, in the southern part of the parish, was the home of Sir James Thornhill painter of the dome of St Paul's Cathedral. Stalbridge was not involved in military action during the civil war, although in 1644 Charles I enjoyed the hospitality of Stalbridge House on his way to the battle of Newbury (Swayne 1889).

5.2.2 Town Layout

There are no buildings pre-dating the 17th century in the southern part of historic Stalbridge and it is possible that the town south of the Station Road/ Barrow Hill line dates from that period. The granting of the market charter in 1637 provides a socio-economic context for 17th century development south of the town. This development seems to have taken the form of a long market along the length of Ring Street with three potential foci: the northern triangular green at the junction with High Street; a central section known as *The Ring*; and a southern village green at the *Ringtree* (Figure 13). Irregular plots were established at the north end of Ring Street and along Guggleton Road (later known as Station Road). It may also have been at this time that the Back Lane (Grove Lane) associated with the southern Gold Street plots was diverted towards the new market place. The old medieval market place seems to have gone out of use during the 17th century when the *Old Rectory* was built on its site. The commercial focus of the town shifted south then, away from the medieval core. This may have been a deliberate ploy to move the commercial part of the town away from the newly created manor and park to the north west of the church.



Figure 13: View of Ringtree Green

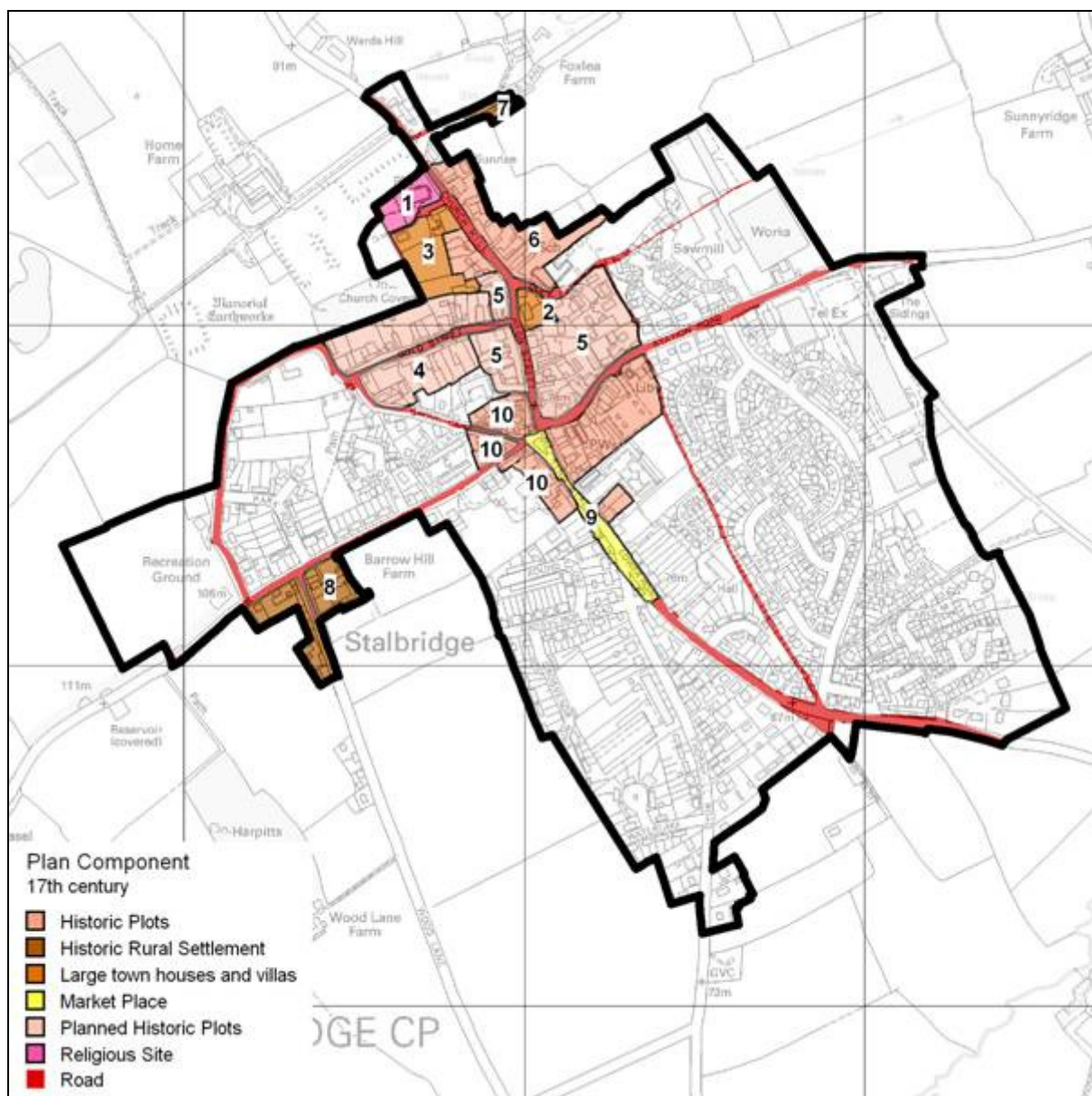


Figure 14: Stalbridge Early Post-medieval Town Plan Components.

5.2.3 Early Post-medieval Town Plan Components

The main plan components of the late sixteenth-seventeenth century town are shown on Figure 14 and are listed below.

1. *St Mary's Parish Church*. There were no known developments in the layout of the church between the 14th and 19th centuries.
2. *The Old Rectory* (Figure 15). This building was completed in 1699 on the site of the old medieval market. Following the creation of a new market at the south end of the town in 1637 the medieval market place fell into disuse and was eventually enclosed. This also led to the diversion of Duck Lane to the north of the *Old Rectory* and of High Street to the west.

3. *Site of Medieval Manor*. The medieval manor house described by Leland to the south of the church belonged to the Abbot of Sherborne and would have been sold along with the manor of Stalbridge following the dissolution of Sherborne Abbey in 1539. A new Jacobean manor house was built to the north west of the church c. 1600 rendering the medieval manor superfluous. The current buildings on the site, Church Hill House and Rose Cottage were not built until the late 18th century.

4. *Gold Street*. There appears to have been very little change to the Gold Street plots since the medieval period. This may be due, in part, to the removal of the market place to the south end of the town and the concomitant removal of development pressure from the Gold Street area. The Back Street on the south side of the

plots was probably diverted towards the new market, to form the current Grove Lane, during the 17th century.

5. *High Street*. The burgage plots remained intact throughout the post-medieval period. A new back lane appears to have been created between Duck Lane and Station Road. It is not clear if Home Farm and Guggleton Farm were newly created at this time or if they represent the site of early dispersed farmsteads.

6. *Church Hill*. The Church Hill burgage plots opposite the medieval manor site may have remained unchanged during the 17th century, although more isolated from the commercial core of the town.

7. *Drew's Lane*. If this represents the site of an early dispersed farmstead then there was no change during this period.

8. *Barrow Hill*. There is no available evidence relating to Barrow Hill for the 16th and 17th centuries.

9. *The Ring*. A new market was granted in 1637 and seems to have been established along the main road to the south of the medieval core of Stalbridge. The new market seems to comprise three separate components. The weekly market may have been held on a triangle of land closest to the old medieval core. 17th century plots were centred on, and roads were diverted towards, this area. Further south an area known as The Ring on 19th century maps may represent the site of a weekly cattle market or the twice-yearly fairs.

10. *The Ring Historic Plots*. Irregular plots developed in the 17th century at the southern end of the medieval town and associated with a new market area. Historic buildings in this area date from the 17th and 18th centuries (Figure 16).



Figure 15: *The Old Rectory, High Street.*



Figure 16: *Ring Street historic plots; from right to left: Runaways Cottage, The Thatched Cottage and Birdseye Cottage.*