Part 6: Historic Urban Character Appraisal
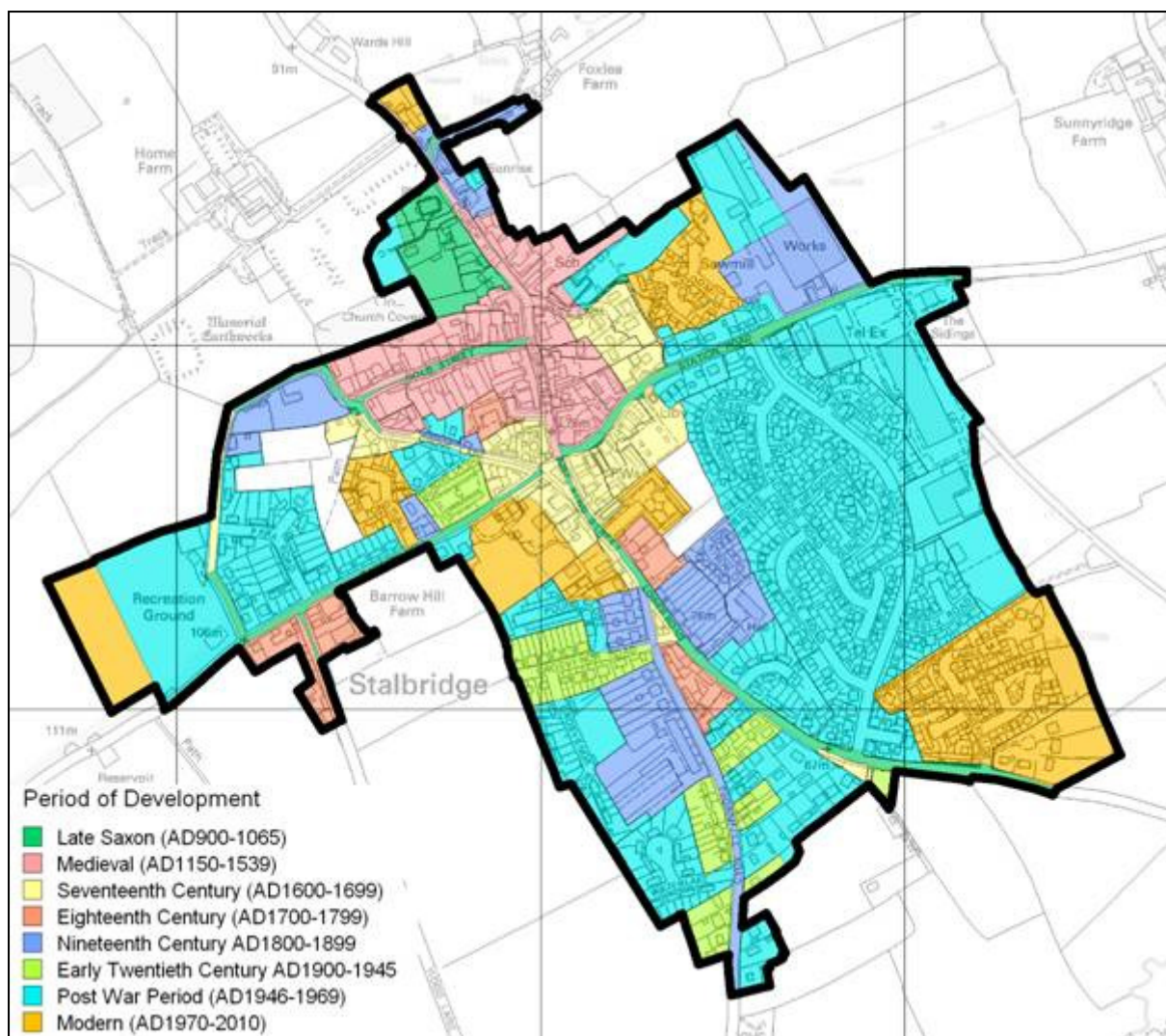
Figure 35: Map showing the major periods of development of Stalbridge.

6.1 The historic urban character of Stalbridge

The urban character of Stalbridge, 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 Stalbridge, on the western slopes of a Jurassic limestone ridge above an Oxford Clay vale, has a profound effect on the location, form, economy and character of the town. The pattern of streets, running parallel with and cutting across the topographical grain, reflects the underlying pattern of the prevailing geology. The position of a dependable spring has determined the location of the medieval church and manor, the original settlement component of Stalbridge. The position of the church is prominent in the town on a raised knoll above the High Street.

The plan layout of the medieval settlement was fitted into a pre-existing grid pattern of lanes and tracks. The most important of these roads was likely to have been the N-S route which ran along the western side of the ridge and thence along the Stour Valley towards Sturminster and beyond. A series of other roads ran perpendicular to the N-S route and the topographical grain. The Church and Manor lay on the main road (Church Hill/ High Street) and the medieval plots were arranged around a cross roads to the south formed by the junction of High Street and Gold Street. The market place was established at this junction, the site marked by the 15th century market cross. Another cross roads to the south, formed at the junction of High Street and Guggleton Street (Station Road) marked the limit of later medieval expansion.

Post-medieval expansion was concentrated to the south of the medieval town around the wide Ring Street which marked the continuation of the main N-S route south of the town. This was the site of the post-medieval fairs and possibly medieval fairs also. The post-medieval market is also likely to have extended into this area. The wide street gradually became filled in with houses and was largely enclosed by the 19th century. Many of the houses in the historic core of Stalbridge date from the 17th century expansion of the town. Stalbridge became the site of a very successful cattle market in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and the character of the town centre is still very much of that era. The modern road pattern was essentially in place by the early 19th century with the construction of Thornhill Road (the modern A357)

to the south of the town. In the later 19th century suburban villas were constructed at the southern end of Ring Street and Thornhill Road. These phases of development have defined the extent of the post-medieval town and the street frontages remain intact imparting significant historical character.

Modern development was heralded by the arrival of the railway outside of the historic core to the east. Subsequent suburban housing development has been concentrated on the fringes of the post-medieval town, hidden behind the historic street frontages. The historic buildings are mainly constructed in local Forest Marble, a grey limestone which also lends itself to the production of stone roofing slates. The fortunate avoidance of devastating fires in the past has led to many buildings retaining their original roofs and other details. This provides coherence to the historic character of Stalbridge and a great sense of time depth. Although the vernacular architecture of Stalbridge is considered unremarkable to architectural historians, 49 buildings are listed and well over 200 date from the 19th century or earlier. The historic focus remains the medieval market cross and church, although the commercial focus is now at the junction of Station Road and Ring Street (Figure 35).

Green spaces are limited to the periphery, apart from Ringtree Green which retains a 19th cast iron pump and the character of a village green. Views to the east over the clay vale to the Stour valley are also important.

6.2 Historic Urban Character Areas of Stalbridge

Four Historic Urban Character Areas have been defined for Stalbridge as shown on Figure 36 and listed below. They comprise the historic core (Character Area 1), post-medieval expansion at The Ring (Area 2), the historic rural settlement at Barrow Hill to the west of the town together with modern housing developments (Area 3), and modern housing and industrial estates to the east of Stalbridge (Area 4).

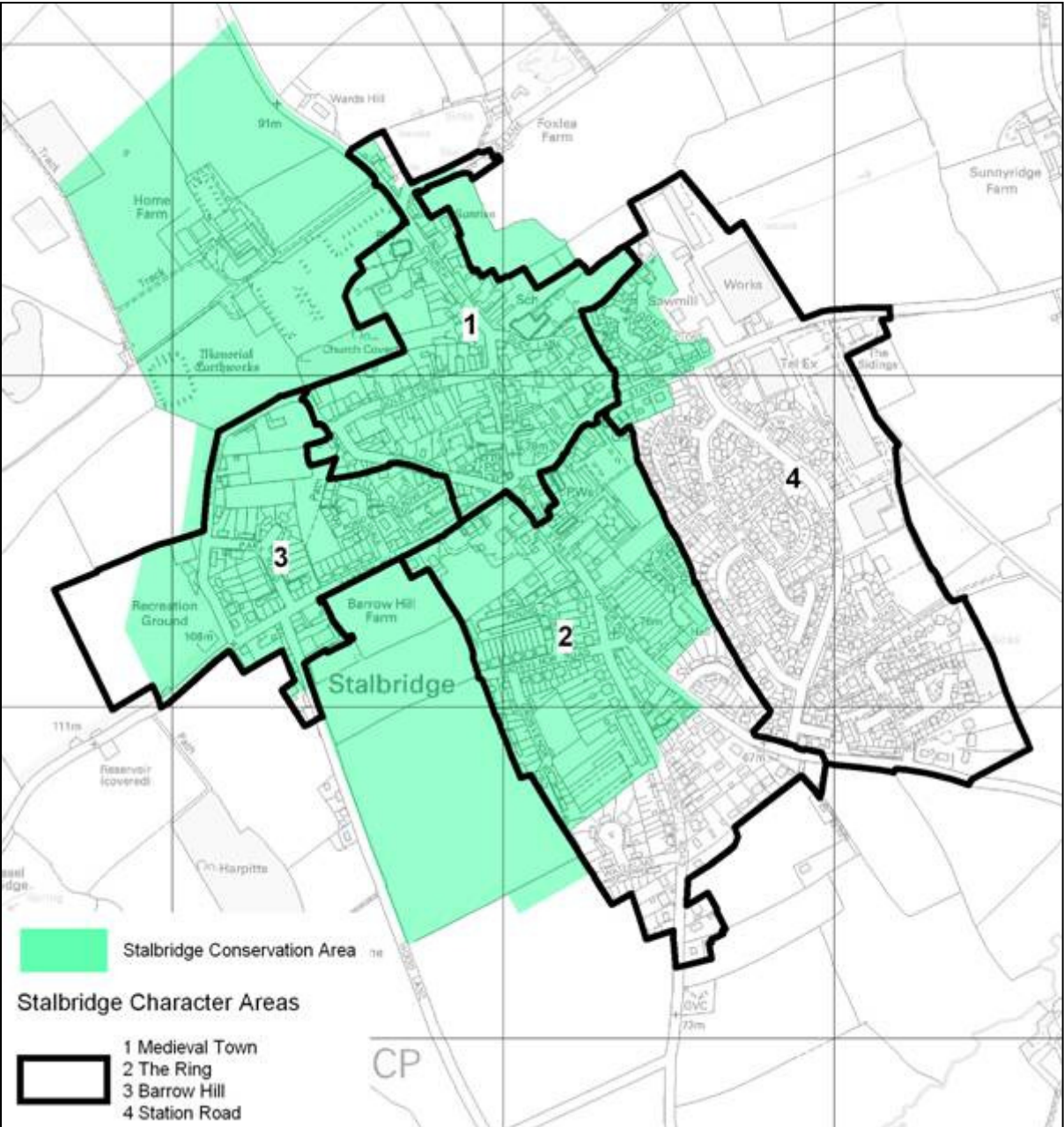1 Historic Core
2 The Ring
3 Barrow Hill
4 Station Road

Figure 36: Stalbridge Historic Urban Character Areas.

Figure 37: View south along High Street.

Figure 38: View of St Mary's Church from Church Hill.