

Part 5: Historical Analysis



5.1 Saxon Sturminster Newton (AD700-1066)

5.1.1 Historical Summary

The name *Sturminster* is generally accepted to mean 'Minster church on the River Stour' (Ekwall 1960, 451). Minster churches functioned as an ecclesiastical centre for an extended parish from the 8th century or earlier and are usually associated with a royal estate centre. Thus we might expect that Sturminster existed as a central place for a small region in the central Blackmore Vale from at least that time. Taylor has remarked upon the large size of Sturminster Parish, suggesting that it is indicative of an early *parochia* for the minster (Taylor 2004, 79). Although the present parish church of St Mary has revealed no physical evidence for a structure earlier than the 14th century, its location on a prominent bluff above the River Stour would be an excellent location for an early minster church (Figure 6). The church appears to be located within a small enclosure of curving boundaries (Figure 10). Such enclosures, associated with minsters or early British monasteries have often been recorded in the west of England and are sometimes taken as evidence for a pre-Saxon Christian foundation. There is evidence for early Christian activity in the region from the Late Roman villa or 'church' at Hinton St Mary. Here a mosaic floor, now in the British Museum, is thought to display one of the earliest representations of Christ in Britain. The Iron Age hill fort on the south side of the River Stour, facing the minster site, is suggestive of a late prehistoric regional centre, the site of which was re-used in the Saxon and medieval periods as the royal and monastic manorial centre of Sturminster Newton.

The earliest documented mention of Sturminster is in the will of Alfred, dated from 873-888, in which he gave his son Aethelweard his es-

tate at *Sturemynster*. Historians from Hutchins (1774) to Penn (1980) have conflated this with Sturminster Newton; however recent work suggests that the will may rather refer to land at Sturminster Marshall (Mountain 2006). Sturminster Newton had passed to Glastonbury Abbey by the late 10th century; King Edgar granted 30 hides at *Stoure* in AD968 (Grundy 1938). A further grant of 17 hides at *Newetone Kastel* to Glastonbury Abbey c. AD1016 demonstrates that the medieval settlement on the south side of the river had been established by the early 11th century (Penn 1980, 104). The settlement of Newton lies outside the study area but probably shared its name with Sturminster in order to distinguish it from Sturminster Marshall which lay further down the Stour. The conflation of the two settlements at Sturminster Newton, straddling the Stour, during the medieval period suggests that the river may have been the central focus for the town at that time, the settlement divided into two by the uninhabitable flood plain. The Domesday Book only names Newton, but probably refers to both parts of the settlement and the surrounding estate. 21 villagers, 18 small holders and 10 cottagers were recorded at this time, suggesting a sizeable village but a predominately dispersed settlement pattern in the region (Thorn and Thorn 1983).

5.1.2 Town Layout

As has been suggested above, the earliest plan element of the town is likely to have been the site of the minster church, probably that of the present parish church of St Mary, and set within a curved enclosure reminiscent of early British monastery sites in Wales and the SW of England. This enclosure is located close to the junction of two important early long distance routes. The first, in an approximately N-S direc-



Figure 6: View of St Mary's Church from the south, above the River Stour.



Figure 7: View from the north of Sturminster Castle Iron Age promontory fort.

tion, probably closely followed the line of the present B3092 through the town. It would originally have crossed the Stour slightly to the east of the late medieval town bridge via a ford and then continued south towards Whitmore Drove and the Dorset Gap. The section northwards between Sturminster and Hinton St Mary is first depicted on Philip Lea's edition of Saxton's 17th century map. Further north it formed part of a ridgeway along the Corallian ridge to Penselwood. This road is known as *Landshire Lane* in places and may be of very early origin, being followed by the county boundary between Dorset and Somerset along part of its course (Good 1966, 60-61; 93). The second major route ran in a NW-SE direction from Stalbridge, crossing the Stour near Colber and then continuing through Sturminster to Fiddleford. This road represents one of a number of parallel routes closely following the course of the Stour valley in the Sturminster area.

The two routes cross at the market place, although this probably represents a later medieval plan component. The original settlement of Sturminster seems to have lined the E-W route in the vicinity of what is now Penny Street (Figure 8). This settlement is now only represented by a series of curved or lobed enclosures fossilised in modern plot boundaries (Figure 10). These enclosures resemble infields enclosed from open land and potentially farmed as part of the ecclesiastical demesne. Similar infields have been postulated for early monastic sites at Padstow, St Mawgan and Mabe (Preston Jones 1992, 121).

The part of Sturminster where evidence for these enclosures survives is completely different in character from the commercial centre of the town. In the area of the market place, the boundaries and building frontages are much closer set. In fact there is evidence within the burgage boundaries here for a planned settlement of simple double row form developed on

the west side of the earlier minster site. This is likely to represent the second major phase of development at Sturminster, possibly in the late Saxon period. The situation has been greatly confused by the later insertion of the market place. Nevertheless, clues survive in the line of Church Lane, Church Street, the eastern side of the Market Place and the rear boundary of properties fronting on to the west side of the market place. When taken together, these elements make a rectangular unit (Figure 10). This unit may have been divided lengthways into two halves separated by a central street. Evidence for this street can be glimpsed in the line of Dovers Cottage (Figure 9) and Coach Road to the south. Burgage plot boundaries, formerly fronting onto this lost central street, can be discerned at the north west side of the market place and the south west side of Church Street. This planned unit is similar to other simple double row plans discernable in late Saxon ecclesiastical manors at Rodden Row, Abbotsbury and Gold Street, Stalbridge (Davey 2009a, b).

The developmental sequence outlined above is highly speculative and can only be proved through archaeological excavation. The problem is further confused by the insertion of the market place, possibly in the 13th or 14th century, and the realignment of roads and plot boundaries on to the new street frontages in the later medieval period.

5.1.3 Saxon Urban plan components

The main plan components of the late Saxon town are shown on Figure 10 and are listed below.

1. *The Minster*. It is suggested that the location of the parish church is likely to represent the site of the minster (recorded from the 9th century) and possibly an earlier British church. The only evidence for this assertion is the position-



Figure 8: View east along Penny Street .



Figure 9: View of Dovers Cottage (left) and the line of the potential late Saxon central street of Sturminster Newton .

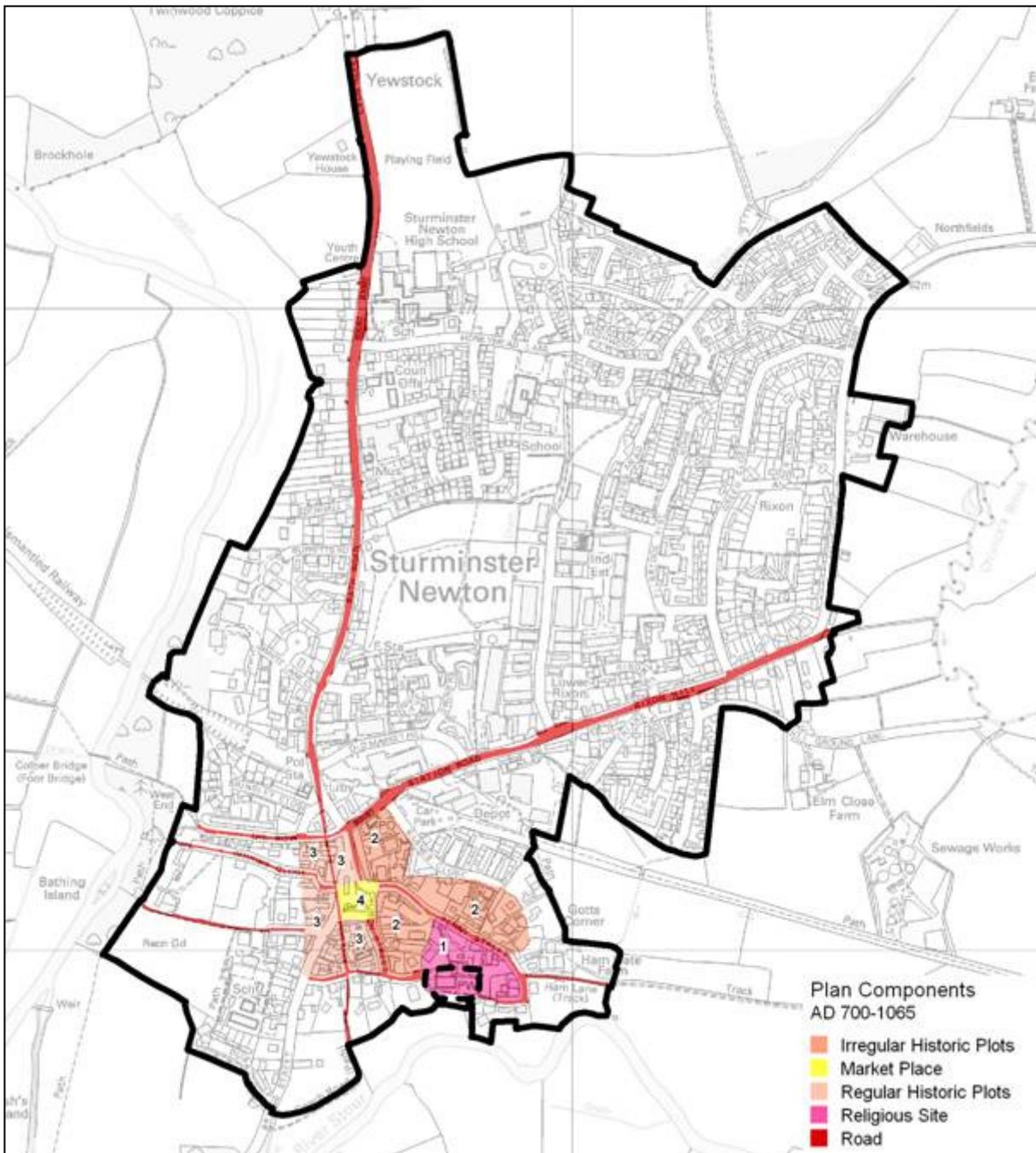


Figure 10: Sturminster Newton Saxon Town Plan Components

ing of the present parish church within a curved enclosure typical of early western British monastic sites. The parish church lies close to the SW corner of this enclosure, at the top of a bluff above the River Stour. The south and east sides of this enclosure are raised significantly above the level of the surrounding land (Figure 11) in a similar fashion to raised churchyards associated with many minster sites, examples of which include St Buryan, Cornwall and Beaminster, Dorset. The fact that the churchyard is not raised on the north and west sides

can be explained by the fact that the enclosure slopes gently down towards the south and east causing soil to accumulate on these sides. The 18th century churchyard was a simple rectangle with the parish church at the centre, perhaps reflecting the shape of the original Saxon churchyard, which represents a late Saxon modification of the earlier British enclosure.

2. *The infields*. The curving shape of a number of property boundaries suggest that at least one, but possibly three, infields with curved boundaries were arranged on either side of

Penny Street to the NW of St Mary's Church. It is the presence and enduring nature of these large enclosures which engenders an almost rural character to this, the oldest part of the town. The most obvious of the three sits on the north side of Penny Street and contains the 17th century Vine House (Figure 12). Another has functioned as a block of back plots to properties fronting onto the east side of Church Street since the late medieval period. The third had a similar function for properties on the north east side of the market place, although it has more recently been developed as a gas works, telephone exchange, medical centre and modern apartments.

3. *The Planned Town.* Fragmentary evidence for a planned settlement of simple double row form has been preserved in the line of Church Street, Church Lane and the rear boundary to properties fronting on to the west side of the market place. This block of plots is aligned approximately NNW-SSE and may have comprised two rows of houses fronting on to a central axial street. The only surviving evidence for this central street is in the line of Dover's Cottage (Figure 9) and Coach Road and this may represent an early course of the important N-S road running through the town. The two major routes through Sturminster crossed at the centre of the planned town. Very little evidence for the internal structure of this planned unit survives because of the probably later insertion of a market square into the central eastern part of it. This led to a realignment of the roads, which now focus on the market place, and the realignment of plot boundaries to front on to the newly aligned roads. This realignment is particularly noticeable in properties fronting on to the west side of the Market Place and both sides of Bridge Street. Bridge Street itself gained in importance as the major route to and from the market following the construction of Town Bridge about 1500.

4. *The Market Square.* The original market place appears to have been a square integrated within the late Saxon planned town. It is not clear whether this market square is late Saxon or medieval in origin (Figure 13).



Figure 11: View of the raised churchyard at Penny Street.



Figure 12: View of Vine House, Penny Street.



Figure 13: View of the Market Square looking west from Church Street.



Figure 14: View of St Mary's Church looking north.

5.2 Medieval Sturminster Newton (AD1066-1539)

5.2.1 Historical Summary

Remarkably little is known about medieval Sturminster Newton. It never became a borough, remaining a manor of Glastonbury Abbey throughout the period. In 1296 the abbey appropriated the living of the parish for itself at a time of financial difficulties. The tithes remained with the vicarage however. Glastonbury Abbey rebuilt the manor house on the site of the late Saxon manor, which was itself within the Iron Age hill fort of Sturminster Castle (Morshead 1971, 3). The Abbot of Glastonbury was granted a market in 1322-3 and a fair for three days over the feast of St Barnabas on 11th June. The number of fairs held by the Abbot in Sturminster had increased to two by the late 15th century (Penn 1980, 104). Only 13 taxpayers are recorded in the lay subsidy of 1327 and 20 in the lay subsidy of 1332 (Rumble 1980; Mills 1971, 64). This does not necessarily reflect the true size of the town, as much of the property belonged to the Abbey and did not appear in the subsidy returns. Those names that do appear suggest an economy based on the cloth, leather and other local craft industries. Cloth-making was probably the most important industry in the town.

The later medieval period seems to have been one of economic prosperity for Sturminster. A number of important works and improvements can be dated to that time. The market was established by the 14th century. The church entirely rebuilt in 1486 by the Abbot of Glastonbury John Selwood, although the present façade dates from a further 19th century rebuilding (Figure 14). The late 14th and 15th centuries are often seen as periods of decline or stagnation in English medieval towns and yet Sturminster's market Cross (Figure 15) was built during the 15th century and The Town Bridge

and the Old Market Cross House were both built about 1500. A later subsidy of 1525 recorded 64 taxpayers suggesting a modest town. Leland visited Sturminster in about 1540. He described the town as *...no greate thing, and the building of it is mene. There is a very good market...There is a very fair bridge of 6 archis at the towne end made of later times...* (Hutchins 1874, 337).

5.2.2 Town Layout

It is probably during the medieval period that the present plan of Sturminster town centre was established. The market was functioning by the 14th century and Town Bridge constructed at the end of the 15th century, replacing an earlier ford (Knott & Rogers 1973, 10). These two factors led to a realignment of the late Saxon planned town. Instead of a simple double row linear town, roads now radiated from the central market place which had become the commercial focus for the town. Bridge Street in particular cut across earlier plot boundaries to create a thoroughfare from the Town Bridge to the market. New plot boundaries were established fronting on to the new street. Furthermore, the market square expanded to the north with a triangular extension upon which new road alignments from the north and new plot boundaries were also established.

5.2.3 Medieval Urban plan components

The main plan components of the medieval town are shown on Figure 16 and are listed below.

1. *The Parish Church of St Mary.* The earliest surviving fabric of St Mary's Church (nave, north and south aisles) dates to the late 14th or



Figure 15: The 15th century Market Cross.



Figure 16: View north along Bridge Street towards the Market place.

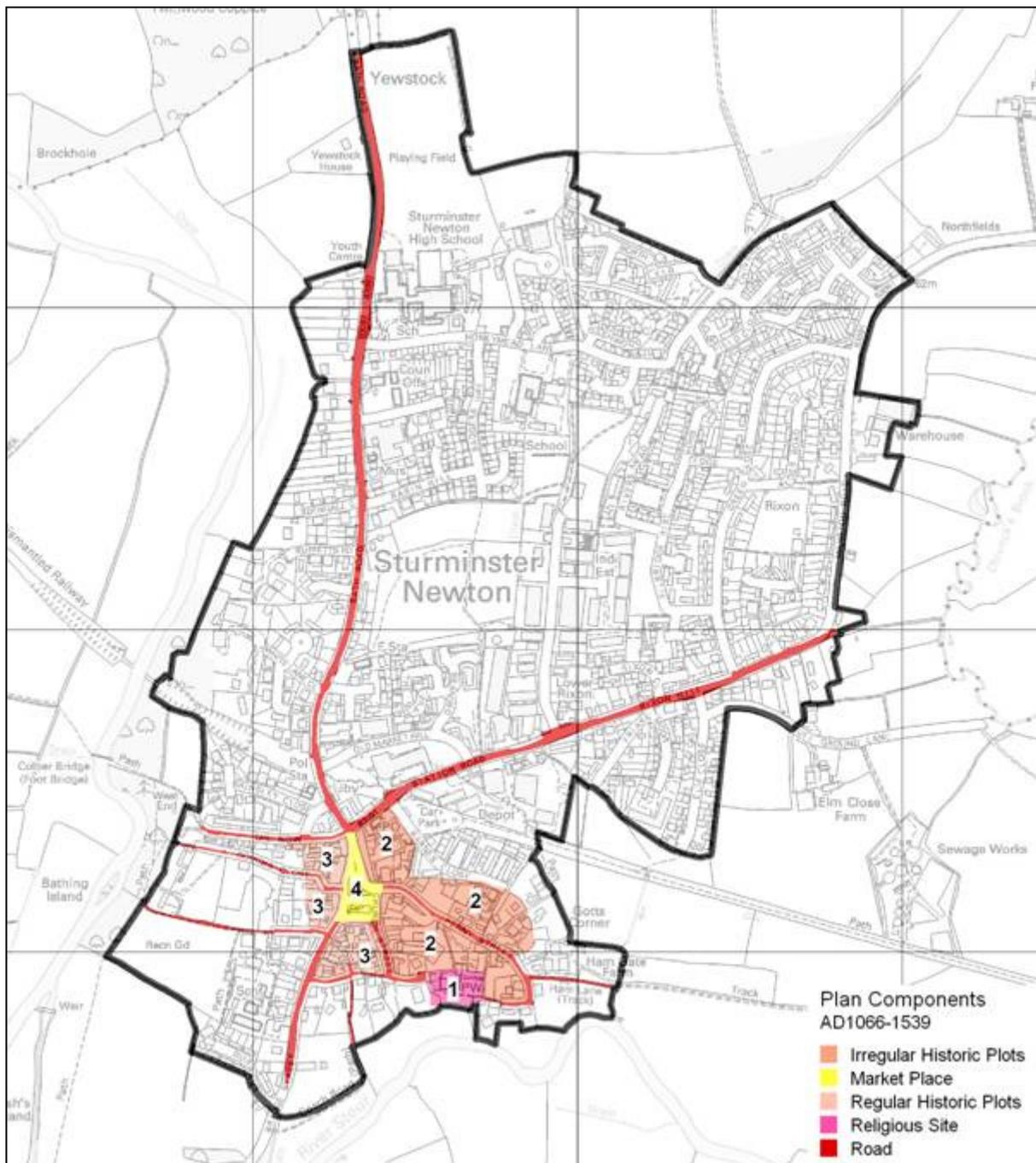


Figure 17: Sturminster Newton Medieval Town Plan Components.

early 15th century (RCHME 1970, 269). Abbot John Selwood of Glastonbury then rebuilt the church during 1486. Selwood’s tower was much lower than the present tower, which was extended in 1829 (Morshead 1971, 3).

2. *The infields.* The area of the infields close to the market place were developed in the late medieval period with a series of plots fronting on to Church Street and the market place. The curved enclosure within which the church was subdivided by the end of the medieval period and the 15th century house, now known as *Tanyard* constructed in its SE corner.

3. *The Planned Town.* The insertion of a market square in to the planned late Saxon town lead to a realignment of the roads. These roads now focus on the market place, and plot boundaries front on to the newly aligned roads. This realignment is particularly noticeable in properties fronting on to the west side of the Market Place and both sides of Bridge Street. Bridge Street (Figure 16) itself gained in importance as the major route to and from the market following the construction of Town Bridge about 1500.

4. *The Market Place.* Sturminster Newton is

recorded as having a market by 1322 (Penn 1980, 104). It may have been at this time or slightly earlier in the 13th century that the market place was established. The earliest surviving elements are the 15th century market cross and the adjacent Old Market Cross House part of which dates to about 1500 (Figure 18). These two structures lie in the centre of the southern part of the market, suggesting that this may have been the original market place and that it may have been square in plan. The triangular component of the market place may be a later, possibly post-medieval, addition to the north.



Figure 19: South end of Church Street with 16th and 17th century buildings in foreground; Carriage Cottage & The Nutshell (left) & Church Farmhouse (right).



Figure 18: View of the Market Cross with Old Market Cross House behind (right).



Figure 20: Carrann Cottage (left) and Ham Gate Farmhouse, Penny Street.