

Part 6: Historic Urban Character Appraisal



6.1 The historic urban character of Abbotsbury

The urban character of Abbotsbury, like any town, is a product of many factors including topographic position, history of estate ownership and management, geographical relationship with other towns and resources and other historical events. The position of Abbotsbury, within a sheltered coombe running almost parallel with the shore, 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 course of the Mill Stream has determined the location of the Abbey precinct, probably the original settlement component of Abbotsbury.

The plan layout of the late Saxon settlement was of 'ladder' form and remarkably regular. This may represent an early example in which the layout of secular Abbotsbury was influenced by the planned control of the landowner

(the abbey). The form of the late Saxon abbey is unknown, though the medieval abbey had a regular rectangular precinct. It is not known if there was a late Saxon market, but by the time the Abbey was granted a market in the 13th century the town plan was already established and the market place had to be positioned at the NW corner of the town. This, coupled with the construction of the parish church, led to a change in focus and the establishment of Market Street and West Street as main thoroughfares. There was a concomitant rearrangement of plot boundaries at this time as they were realigned on the new market and street. Nevertheless, plots along Rodden Row may retain a semblance of their late Saxon counterparts. The position of the market influenced the location of late medieval expansion, which concentrated on two roads leading from the market place: West Street and Back Street. The expansion along West Street comprised planned and piecemeal development

The post-medieval character of Abbotsbury has certainly been influenced by the Strangways and Ilchester estates. This includes a sympathetic attitude to maintaining the charac-

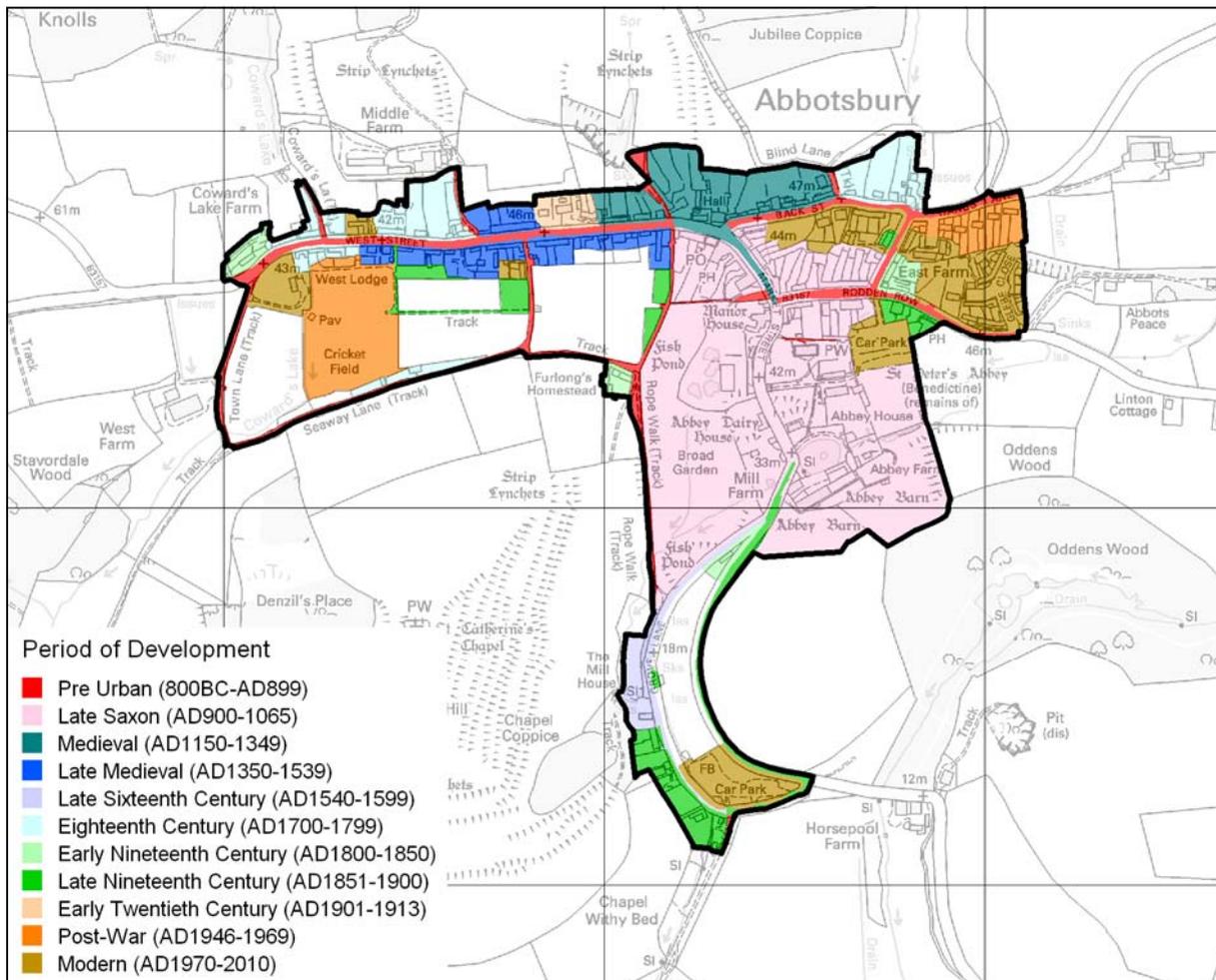


Figure 38: Map showing the major periods of development of Abbotsbury.

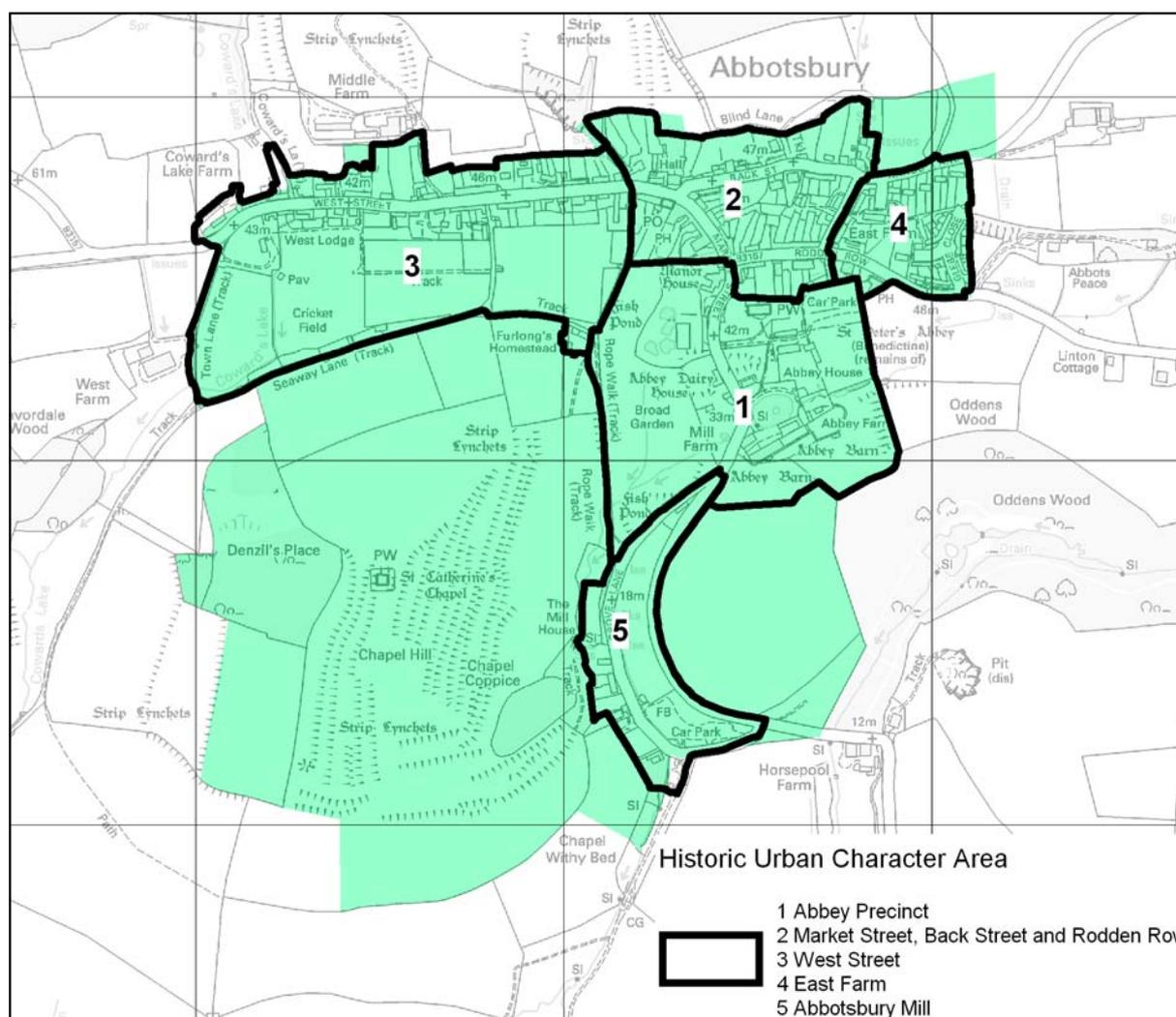


Figure 39: Abbotsbury Historic Urban Character Areas.

ter of the historic built environment, a vital factor in the uniqueness of the town. Historic buildings form a major element of the character of Abbotsbury. Approximately 80% of the buildings in the historic core date from the 18th and 19th centuries. The focus remains the market place around which a number of grander buildings serve to both contrast and complement the vernacular 18th and 19th century cottages and farmhouses along West Street, Back Street and Rodden Row. The current character of the abbey precinct is also largely a result of sympathetic post-medieval development in which monastic outbuildings were converted into use for farm and manor. Many details of the medieval precinct layout survive and the ruins promote a sense of time depth.

Green spaces are limited to the periphery and yet have a vital role in the character of the place. Particularly important are the former monastic gardens, St Catherine’s Hill, the furlongs and the valley of the Mill Stream to the south of the abbey. The undulating topography beyond

the town also gives important views of green spaces that serve to define Abbotsbury as a village of immense historic character nestled in a sheltered rural valley.

The fact that large scale modern development has been limited to one small area on the edge of the town, partially hidden by trees, also serves to define the historic character of Abbotsbury (Figure 38).

6.2 Historic Urban Character Areas of Abbotsbury

Five Historic Urban Character Areas have been defined for Abbotsbury as shown on Figure 39 and listed below. They comprise the former abbey precinct (Area 1), the historic core (Area 2) and later expansion (Areas 3-5).

- 1 Abbey Precinct
- 2 Market Street, Back Street & Rodden Row
- 3 West Street
- 4 East Farm
- 5 Abbotsbury Mill