

# Summary

This report contains the results of a consideration of the historical, archaeological, architectural and map evidence relating to the development of Abbotsbury. It has focused on the understanding of the overall development of the town from its earliest beginnings to the present day, with a view to defining how this has influenced the modern townscape, identifying what historical features and structures survive within the modern town, and understanding the contribution of its historic dimension to the character of Abbotsbury today. This will enable an informed approach to the management of change and conservation of the urban environment to be undertaken.

## *Historical Background*

The origins of Abbotsbury are obscure; it may have functioned as a Minster in the 8<sup>th</sup> century or may even have had a pre-Saxon origin as a British monastery, although neither of these assertions can be substantiated. The Abbey certainly existed by the 10<sup>th</sup> century and a planned late Saxon settlement was established adjacent to it. It was granted a market in 1274; this was established outside the Saxon core of the town. The parish church was first recorded in 1291. The market flourished and the proximity of the wealthy Abbey promoted trade and local crafts and industries. The gradual growth of the town seems to have been unaffected by the Black Death in the 14<sup>th</sup> century or the dissolution of the Abbey in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and the population appears to have peaked at around 1,100 in the mid-late 19<sup>th</sup> century. From this point the town declined rapidly, despite the construction of a railway linking it to Weymouth. The population continued to fall into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and it is only in recent years that the tourist industry has provided the impetus for a slight recovery in the economic fortunes of what is now considered a picturesque village.

## *Town morphology*

Abbotsbury has a tightly packed town centre partly based on a grid plan of pre-existing tracks of which Rodden Row, Back Street, Church Street and Rosemary Lane are the main survivors. This late Saxon nucleus lay on the north side of a monastic precinct. The Abbey itself had been established on the north bank of the Mill Stream, although the precinct continued across to the south bank. Market Street was not established until the late 13<sup>th</sup> century linking the new market at the north western corner of the Late Saxon grid to the Abbey entrance. The parish church lies between the monastic pre-

inct and the secular town. A late medieval planned suburb was developed along West Street. Following the dissolution of the abbey the precinct was used as the manor farm and retains many medieval and post-medieval features. A new mill was established to the south of the abbey precinct in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. The proximity of the Rope Walk and beach suggests that this may have functioned as a small post-medieval maritime industrial area. Modern suburban development has been limited to the east of the town centre.

## *Built character*

Abbotsbury has a large number of historic buildings, most of which date to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as a result of the widespread destruction of the town by numerous late 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century fires. However, a small number of 17<sup>th</sup> century thatched cottages and terraces survive on the outskirts of the town. The buildings are largely constructed from the local pale golden Abbotsbury stone and many also contain some grey Portesham stone. Roofing material seems to have been stone slates originally, replaced by thatch and imported Welsh slate in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Most of the buildings are set directly on the street frontage and comprise mainly two-storeyed attached houses, short terraces and detached small cottages. A number of larger farmhouses with attached barns of 19<sup>th</sup> century date were built on the periphery of the town. Only a small number of historic industrial buildings have been identified in the town. They include the 17<sup>th</sup> century mill and associated buildings, the smithy and the basketry workshop. Medieval buildings only survive in the monastic precinct. The Great Barn is particularly significant, being one of the largest monastic barns in England. The most recent housing developments in Abbotsbury have been constructed in a style sympathetic to the historic character of the town.

## *Landscape Setting*

Abbotsbury has a distinctive topographic setting, lying within a rounded vale at the foot of the South Dorset Ridgeway. The town is dominated by the prominent Chapel Hill, topped by the 15<sup>th</sup> century St Catherine's Chapel. This topographic location provides a dramatic natural background and the surrounding countryside is visible from many parts of the town, providing a distinctive green backdrop to the urban views. The prevailing E-W alignments of the ridge and vale landscape have had a significant impact on the form of the town, notably the grid of pre-



Figure 1: Vertical aerial photographic view of Abbotsbury, 2005 (© Getmapping.com, 2005).

existing tracks that dictated the layout of the late Saxon town.

#### *Historic Urban Character*

There are perhaps three main components that contribute to the local distinctiveness of Abbotsbury: the layout of the historic town and former monastic precinct, the historic buildings, and the landscape setting. The medieval town plan survives virtually complete and elements of the late Saxon plan may also survive in the modern layout.

The good survival of the historic structure is complemented by the high quality and large quantity of historic buildings. The survival in the historic core of many unbroken groups of buildings, with little disruption from modern development, is a major factor which highlights the contribution made by historic elements to Abbotsbury's urban character. The large number of surviving medieval buildings in the former monastic precinct also sets Abbotsbury apart from other towns in the region. The harmonious use of a range of local building materials helps underscore its local setting and emphasises links

to the surrounding landscape.

The landscape and topographic setting of the town is fundamental to its character. In particular the visual impact of St Catherine's Hill and its associated late medieval chapel sets Abbotsbury apart.

#### *Further Research*

This report has highlighted many aspects of the historical development of Abbotsbury and how this has shaped the modern town. It has also indicated gaps in our knowledge and areas which would repay further research.

The main areas of suggested further research include:

- Research into the origins and form of the Saxon and Norman Abbey.
- Research into the nature of the secular settlement in the late Saxon period.
- Research into the medieval development of the town, its economy, industry and secular buildings.