

## **Part 3: Town Context**





### 3.1 The Setting of the Town

No town exists in isolation. All towns are shaped and influenced by their surrounding landscape. Topography and geology have a profound influence on the way a town develops; constraining development, shaping communication routes, and providing raw materials for building and other economic activity, amongst other things. In order to understand the character of a town, its surrounding landscape and natural context need to be understood. This section of the report briefly sets out the wider context of the town and the landscape character of its hinterland.

### 3.2 Topography

Cerne Abbas sits astride the River Cerne,

within the upper reaches of the Cerne Valley. The valley is steep-sided and narrow, although the town of Cerne Abbas is located at a point where the adjacent vales of Yelcombe Bottom and Cerne Park provide a more extensive area of flat ground (Figure 3). Four spurs or promontories surround and overlook the town, each with evidence for prehistoric settlement upon them. Giant's or Trendle Hill to the north east of the town, Black Hill to the south-east, Weam Common Hill to the north-west and Dickley Hill to the south-west. The medieval core of the town sits at approximately 115m-126m above Ordnance Datum.

The topography has had a major influence on the town layout. Pre-urban tracks run approximately parallel with and perpendicular to the strike of the valley. The late Saxon monastery of Cerne Abbey was founded upon one of

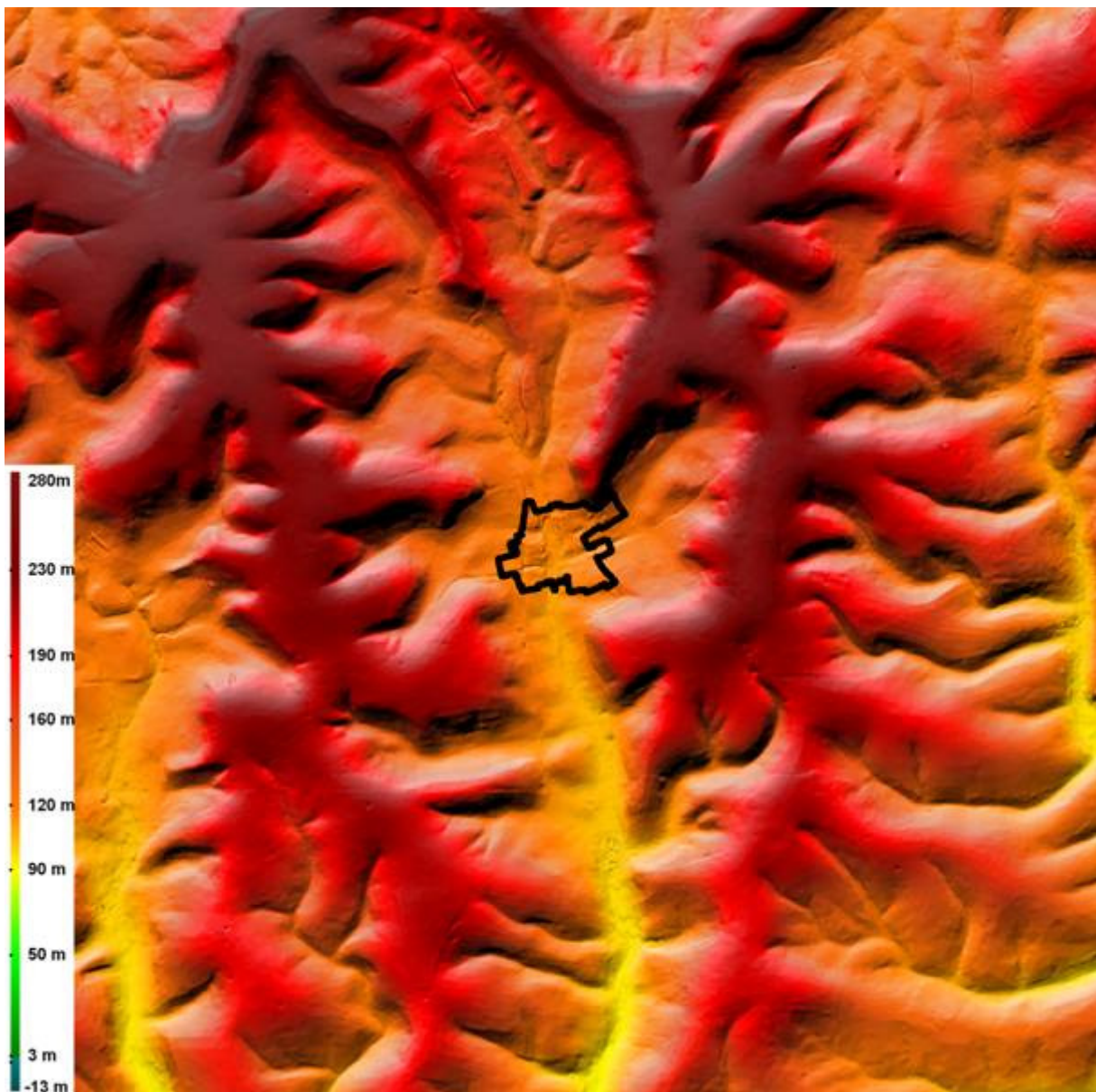


Figure 3: Cerne Abbas' topographic setting

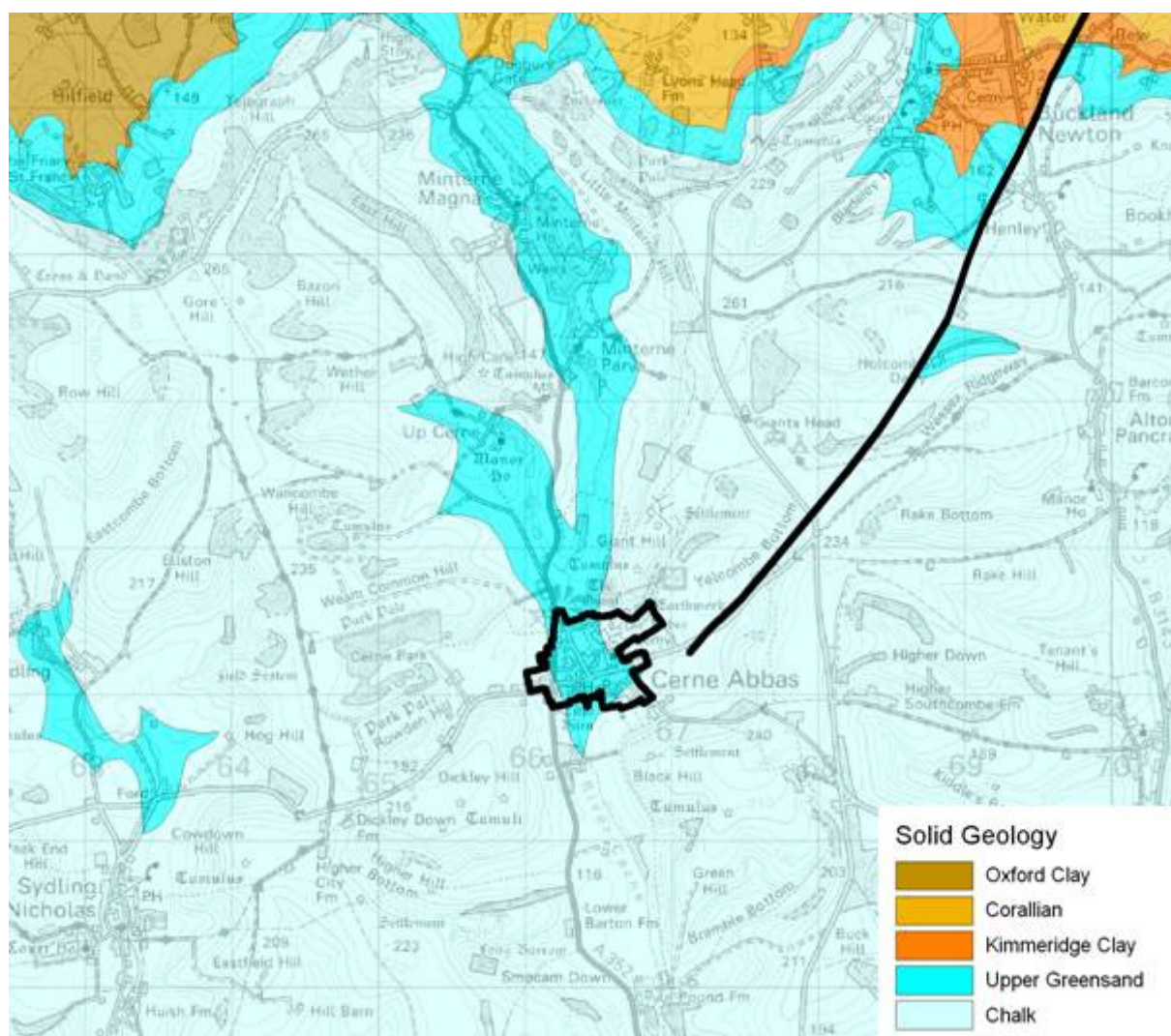


Figure 4: Geology of the Cerne Abbas Area.

these, now represented by the track through Abbey Farm and the line of Piddle Lane. The line of Duck Street is parallel and to the west of Piddle Lane and also continued north to Up Cerne and Telegraph Hill beyond. The Wessex Ridgeway, cutting across the Cerne valley along the line of Alton Lane, Long Street and Sydling Road, may also be prehistoric in origin. The monastery was founded at a spring at the foot of Trendle Hill, although the town itself may have had two foci, on either side of the river, just above the flood plain.

### 3.3 Geology

In general terms the geology of the Cerne Abbas region comprises Cretaceous chalk, overlying Upper Greensand, which is exposed along the chalk escarpment to the north of Cerne. However, the River Cerne, in its upper reaches, has cut through the chalk and exposed the Upper Greensand in its valley floor. The finger of exposed Upper Greensand thus

extends from the chalk escarpment in the north to the town of Cerne Abbas in the south (Figure 4).

### 3.4 Landscape Character

Cerne Abbas lies within the Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), recognised as a nationally important landscape. This area has been the subject of several landscape character assessments which help place the town into its wider landscape context.

In the national assessment of countryside character, Cerne Abbas lies within National Character Area 134; Dorset Downs and Cranborne Chase (Countryside Agency 1999).

The key characteristics of Joint Character Area 134 are listed as:

- A rolling, chalk landscape with dramatic scarps and steep-sided, sheltered valleys.
- Scarp slopes with species-rich grassland, complex combes and valleys, spectacular

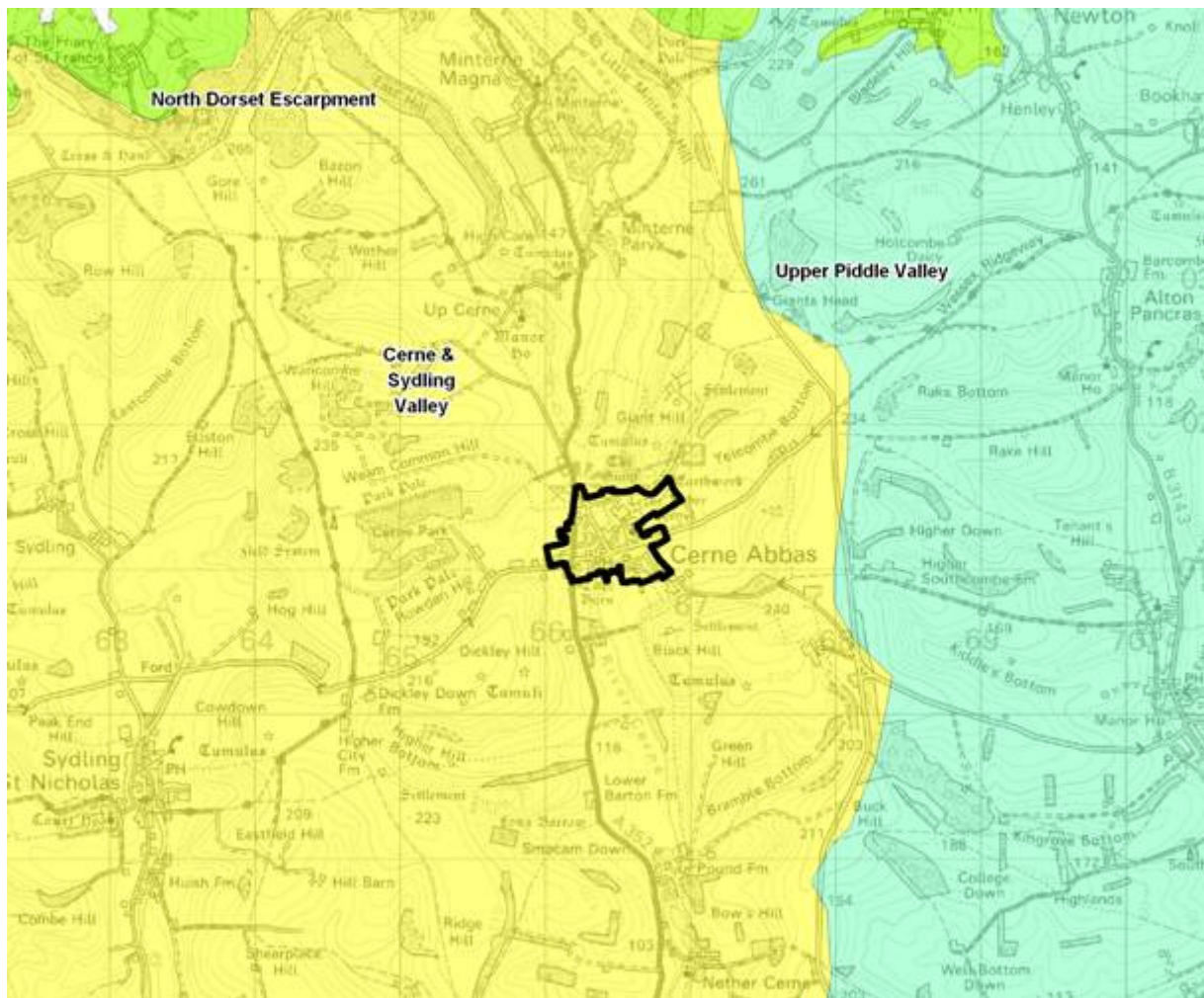


Figure 5: Cerne Abbas in its landscape character setting (Dorset AONB Landscape Characterisation).

views, prominent hillforts and other prehistoric features.

- Open, mainly arable, downland on the dip-slope with isolated farmsteads and few trees.
- Very varied valleys with woodlands, hedged fields, flood meadows and villages in flint and thatch.
- Distinctive woodlands and deer parks of Cranborne Chase.

Cerne Abbas was included in the Chalk Valley Floor landscape type in West Dorset 2000 (WDDC2002), which provided a detailed record of the features and landscape elements present. This has now been superseded by a new landscape character assessment of the Dorset AONB (Dorset AONB 2008) and a complementary West Dorset Landscape Character Assessment (WDDC 2008). In these latest assessments Cerne Abbas sits within the Cerne and Sydling Valley Landscape Character Area (Figure 5).

The key characteristics of the Cerne and Sydling Valley Landscape Character Area are:

- Enclosed, sweeping 'U' shaped chalk valleys with associated chalk streams and surrounding steep branching valleys, rounded hollows and open chalk downlands
- Thin calcareous soils with underlying geology of chalk with occasional outcrops of greensand
- Incised valley slopes with large patches of semi-natural chalk grassland, occasional oak and ash broadleaved woodlands and relic hazel coppice
- Clear chalk streams with floodplains supporting occasional watermeadows, wet woodlands, old cress beds and rough damp meadows
- Winding rural lanes along the valley floor with a series of small nucleated villages of brick and flint, Ham Hill stone, thatch and cob
- Parkland landscapes with veteran trees, railings, flint walls and country houses along the valley floors
- Occasional water meadow channels on the

valley floor, medieval field systems on the valley sides and barrows contribute to the visible archaeology

- Smaller scale pastures and fields patterns on valley floor with species rich dense hedgerows, small broadleaved woodlands and occasional hedgerow trees
- Large, straight-sided arable and pastoral fields of regular enclosures with hazel and thorn hedgerows, with post & wire on chalk downlands
- Secluded, intimate and tranquil character

The draft Historic Landscape Character mapping shows Cerne Abbas sitting within an area of largely piecemeal enclosed fields and other regular enclosed fields. There are only isolated patches of mixed woodland, coppice and plantations, largely on steep valley sides. These steep slopes also contain a significant amount of open downland and pasture. Water meadows dominate the valley floor of the River Cerne.

### **3.5 The Present Town**

The modern built-up area of Cerne Abbas lies entirely within the parish of Cerne Abbas and covers an area of about 40ha. It lies partially on, but largely to the east of, the A352 road from Sherborne to Dorchester. It has no rail links; the nearest station is at Maiden Newton, approximately 8.5km to the west. The population has risen significantly in the last 40 years; by 40% from just over 500 in 1971 to just over 700 today. However, this still represents a significant decline from its heyday in the 1840s when the population of the parish stood at over 1300. Today Cerne Abbas is considered to be a large village rather than a small town. The 2001 Census records a population of 732 and 379 dwellings in Cerne Abbas. 41% of the population were aged over 65.

The town has one school: Cerne Abbas CE VC First School on Duck Lane. The retail sector comprises a Post Office, a village stores, a local tourist information point, three pubs, tea-rooms and a small number of other tourist oriented shops as well as bed and breakfast accommodation. There is a small business centre on Piddle Lane at the southern fringe of the village. Only 1.1% of the economically active population were unemployed in 2001, with 27.9% having managerial or professional occupations and 15.7% being self employed or small employers. Cerne Abbas also functions as a dormitory town for workers in Dorchester.

## Part 4: Sources







## 4.1 Previous research

The antiquarian John Leland visited Cerne Abbas during the 16<sup>th</sup> century and recorded a lost chapel at St Augustine's well. John Hutchins also discussed the town in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Hutchins 1774: 1813; 1874).

A small number of local histories have been published during the later 20<sup>th</sup> century concerning specific aspects of Cerne's past. These include a survey of the Tithe Barn (Moule 1889), an examination of field names in the parish (Jones 1942), and the Cerne Giant (Betley 1981; Legg 1990; Darvill *et al.* 1999). There have also been a number of more general village histories published over the same period (Jones 1952; Gibbons 1962; Coffin 1987). Papers from a conference commemorating 1000 years since the foundation of Cerne Abbey were published in 1988 (Barker 1988). Cerne Abbas also has an active local history society.

## 4.2 Historic Maps

The earliest detailed map of the town is the estate survey of 1768 by Benjamin Pryce (DHC D/PIT P5-P6). There is also a survey book known as the Admeasurement Book (DHC D/PIT M55), dated 1798, which accompanies the Pryce map. The tithe map dates from 1844 (DHC T/CEA). The characterisation was largely based on the 1:2500 scale Ordnance Survey maps dating from 1887 onwards.

## 4.3 Documentary Evidence

Primary documentary sources used in this report include a Late Saxon charter recording the foundation of Cerne Abbey in AD 987 by Aethelmaer (Sawyer No. 1217). Other primary documents consulted include the Domesday Survey of 1086 (Thorn & Thorn 1983), taxation records including the Lay Subsidy (Rumble 1980; Mills 1971) and Hearth Tax Returns (Meekings 1951), as well as the 17<sup>th</sup> century Protestation Returns and the 18<sup>th</sup> century Dorset Militia Ballots (Dorset OPC 2009). These documents have been used to gain an insight into the size, wealth and economy of Cerne Abbas in comparison with neighbouring towns from the 10<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## 4.4 Archaeological Evidence

Archaeological investigation in Cerne Abbas has been on a limited scale and initially com-

prised chance discoveries, poorly recorded by modern standards. For example, in 1810 two stone effigies of abbots were found within a ditch close to the presumed site of the monastic church. They were poorly recorded at the time and one is now lost. The other survives in the Pitt Rivers Museum (Drury 1931, 257-8). The discovery of medieval tile pavements 'from time to time' in the vicinity of the monastic church are also mentioned but not referenced (RCHME 1952, 77; Hutchins 1874, 27). Similarly the discovery of Iron Age pottery is mentioned, possibly in the vicinity of St Mary's Church, but the circumstances unrecorded (PDNHAS 56, xxxi). Chance finds of medieval pottery and a Romano-British coin were made in back gardens during the 1950s and 1970s (Farrar 1956, 92; Keen 1976, 54).

Following the introduction of PPG16 in 1991, archaeological investigation has been more systematic. Three watching briefs, three evaluations and a desk-based assessment and field survey have been undertaken between 1995 and 2004. This work has revealed medieval ridge and furrow earthworks in Simsay Fields (Freeman 1998), a probable 18<sup>th</sup> century water meadow behind the village hall on Kettle Lane (Valentin 1998), a medieval pit and possible burgage plot boundary, as well as tanning pits at Abbey Street (Bellamy 2004). These have produced some interesting detailed results but are limited in the amount of information they can contribute to an overall understanding of the town. A table of all archaeological investigations is presented in **Appendix 3**.

## 4.5 Historic Buildings

Cerne Abbas is notable for the survival of historic buildings; over 125 structures in the urban area date from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century or earlier. The buildings make a vital contribution to the historic urban character and including the parish church, former Abbey buildings, Abbey Farm, several large gentry houses and farmhouses, and a strong underpinning of smaller cottages and public buildings. The built environment of the town is characterised by coherent groups of buildings, boundary walls and other structures, notably on The Folly, Long Street, Abbey Street and the Abbey Farm buildings. Some of the buildings also retain good historic details, including shop fronts, doorways, stone plaques and Abbey fragments and ironwork (WDDC 2007, 4).

Cerne Abbas is also notable for its high number of late medieval buildings. These nine buildings divide in to two main groups: surviving Abbey buildings on the Abbey Farm site

and buildings along Abbey Street. The former Abbey buildings cluster around the 18th century Abbey Farm house, which itself incorporates part of the late medieval Abbey gatehouse. The Abbot's Porch was built by Abbot Thomas Sam between 1497 and 1509 and the Abbey guest-house was built under Abbot John Vanne between 1458 and 1470. The only other surviving Abbey structure is the early 16th century North Barn or Silley's Barn. The 15th century preaching cross is also located within the former Abbey precinct but is unlikely to be *in situ*. It may have been moved to the churchyard during the 17th century or later.

The group of medieval buildings on Abbey Street include the 14th century church of St Mary and four early 16th century Abbey tenements; Abbey Cottage, The Pitchmarket, and numbers 7 and 9 Abbey Street. The distribution of these buildings suggests that a new Abbey entrance and approach was planned and built in the early 16th century.

The late 14th century Tithe Barn lies within a group of 18th and 19th century farm buildings at Barton Farm, separated from the main town centre on the west side of the River Cerne at Folly Lane.