Part 5: Historical Analysis

5.1 Saxon Wimborne Minster (AD 700-1066)

5.1.1 Historical Summary

The early antiquarians equated Wimborne Minster with the Roman settlement of Vindocladia, which is mentioned in the Antonine itinerary, though more recent work has suggested that this name should be applied to the Roman settlement beside Badbury Rings. Roman material recovered from the study area is relatively sparse but includes Early Romano-British ditches and a pit excavated at The Leaze during 2004 (Whelan 2004). It had been thought that a fragment of tessellated pavement revealed beneath the Minster floor in 1857 represented the floor of a Roman building upon which the Minster was built (Farrar 1962, 106-9). However, recent thought suggests that it may rather be the floor of the original Saxon church (Woodward 1983, 57). Thus the evidence suggests that there was no pre-existing Roman town at Wimborne Minster.

The recorded history of the town at Wimborne Minster begins with the Saxon Nunnery, which was one of the earliest religious foundations in Dorset. It was established by King Ine by AD 705 when Bishop Aldhelm mentions '…the nuns in the monastery by the river which is called Wimburnia presided over by the abbess Cuthburga' (Page 1908, 107-113). Cuthburga was the sister of Ine. In addition to the nunnery there was also a male monastery in Wimborne Minster. The two houses were kept strictly apart as described in the life of St Leofgyth, composed in AD 836. This describes not only the strict separation of the two houses but also their situation '…surrounded by high and stout walls…' suggesting that the Saxon town or monastery was walled (RCHME V 1975, 78). Corroborating evidence for this comes from the Anglo-Saxon chronicle for the year 899 in which the rebel aetheling Aethelwold seized the royal residence at Wimborne Minster and barred all the gates against his cousin King Edward. This suggests that Wimborne Minster was a defended town at that time (Taylor 1968, 170). Wimborne Minster certainly seems to have been an important place for the House of Wessex by the 9th century when Alfred made it the burial place of his brother King Aethelred in 871. A further entry in the Anglo-Saxon chronicle for 962 records that King Sigeferth killed himself and his body was buried at Wimborne Minster. The suggestion is that Sigeferth was a Scandinavian King imprisoned at Wimborne Minster and that a royal residence accompanied the monastery within the town walls into the 10th century (Penn 1980, 121). The double monastery appears to have been destroyed during Danish raids, possibly in the 10th century. Leland records that the town was rebuilt by Edward the Confessor and a house of secular Canons established in the place of the former monastery (Page 1908, 107-113). The current Minster church retains elements of this late Saxon church within its fabric, notably parts of the crossing and the circular turret in the north transept (Figure 6).

Wimborne Minster was not recorded as one of the four Dorset boroughs at the time of Domesday. The tenure of the estate was spread across several holdings, although the main manor was held by King Edward in 1066 and passed to William following the Norman Conquest. This manor paid one night's revenue (together with three other manors at Shapwick, Moor Crichel and Wimborne St Giles). This large estate encompassed the whole of the lower Allen Valley and the north bank of the river Stour between Badbury and Hampreston. It was predominately a pastoral landscape and relatively sparsely populated with 63 villagers, 68 smallholders and 7 cottagers spread across

Figure 6:   The church of St Cuthberga, showing the Saxon circular turret in the north transept.

Figure 7:   Looking north along the line of Dean's Court Lane and High Street.
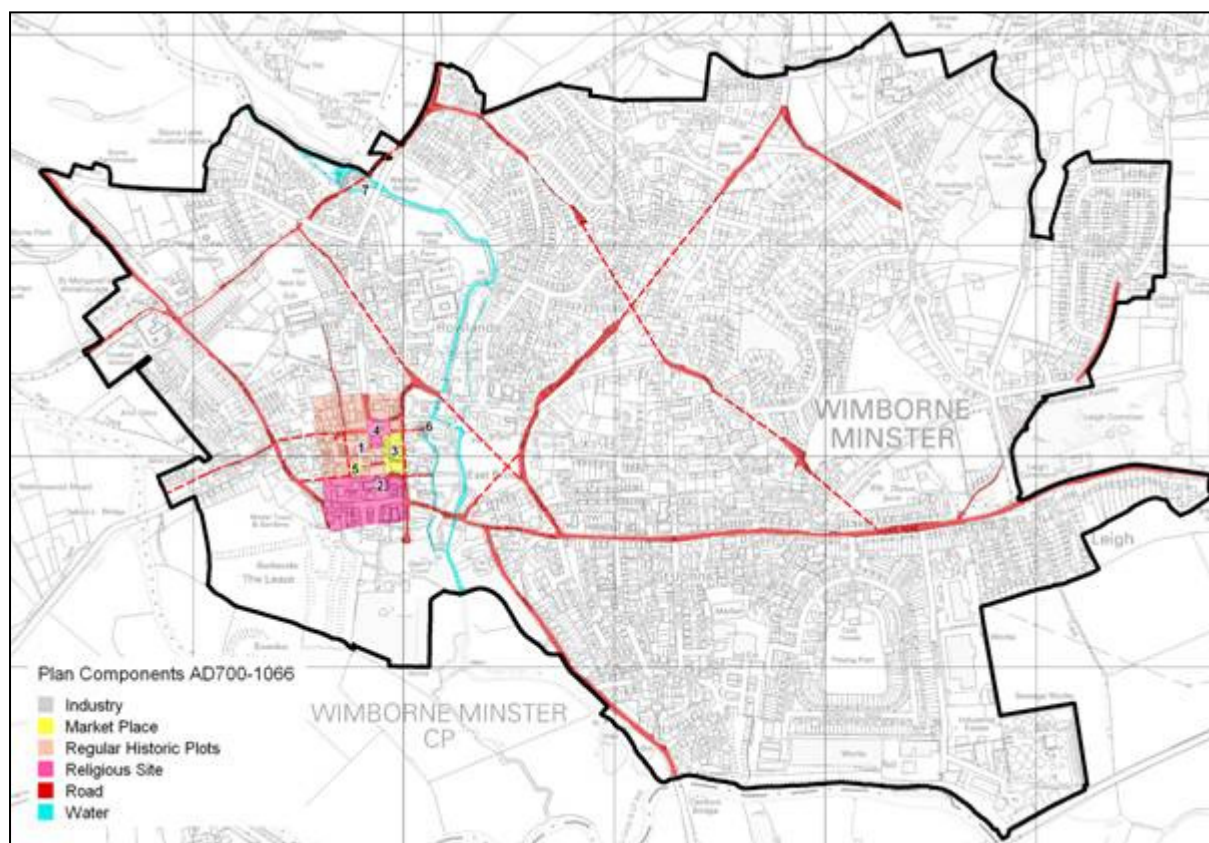
Figure 8:   Saxon Plan Components

the four manors. A further estate of half a hide at Wimborne Minster was held by Queen Matilda in 1086. This contained 4 villagers and seven smallholders. Eleven houses at Wimborne Minster were counted as part of Hinton Martell manor. A small church in Wimborne Minster and land for two houses was held by Horton Abbey and three smallholders and a house in Wimborne Minster were counted as part of Canford Magna manor (Thorn and Thorn 1983). Thus, although Wimborne Minster was not strictly counted as a borough, these complex tenurial arrangements are similar to those in boroughs where thegns from nearby manors also held a burgage seat within the local town. The presence of more than one church also suggests that Wimborne Minster was a busy and locally important place with good transport links to the boroughs of Christchurch, Wareham and Shaftesbury.

Town Layout

The earliest documented description of Wimborne Minster comes from the 9th century life of St Leofgyth and the AD 899 entry in the Anglo-Saxon chronicle which describes a walled town with more than one gate and containing a double monastery as well as a royal residence (RCHME V 1975, 78; Taylor 1968, 170). The documents also record that the inhabitants of

the two monasteries were kept strictly apart. This led Barker to suggest a physical separation of the two houses in the town plan. One house centred on The Square (later the site of St Peter's Chapel) and the other on the site of the current Minster church (Barker 1980, 109-11). It is possible that the medieval chapel of St Peter was on the site of an earlier Saxon chapel. Recent excavations by the East Dorset Archaeological Society may have revealed the east end of the chancel of the medieval chapel. This wall was associated with two tesserae and may suggest the presence of an earlier Saxon building on the site (D. Reeve, pers. comm.). The discovery of a tessellated floor beneath the Minster church also suggests that this was the site of the abbey church during the Saxon period. Unfortunately nothing else is known about the layout of the middle Saxon double monastery and its precinct. Property boundaries suggest that it may have occupied the entire southern third of the town and that King Street is a later addition. Alternatively King Street may have separated the monastery from the middle Saxon royal residence.

Taylor suggested a line for the town walls based on surviving property boundaries, forming a rectangular enclosure encompassing both the Square and the Minster site and bounded by the river Allen on its eastern side

(Taylor 1968, 170). Hall took this further and proposed a regular rectangular grid plan for the Saxon town based partly on surviving elements of the town layout and partly on excavated evidence. In this scheme the town was subdivided into blocks by two N-S south streets, the first continuing the line of Redcott's lane south through the walled town and the second on the line of Deans' Court Lane and the southern parts of High Street (Figure 7) and East Borough. This alignment was later disrupted by the creation of burgage plots fronting on to High Street. E-W streets completing the grid included King Street and sections of Cook Row and West Street (Hall 2000, 50-53). One problem with this scheme is that the River Allen is floodable almost as far west as the southern end of High Street. It may be that the line formed by the linking the south end of High Street with the south end of East Borough marked the eastern Saxon town wall.

This N-S aligned grid pattern is superimposed upon a pre-existing NW-SE aligned co-axial field system. The angular conjunction of the two systems can be seen where King Street meets Victoria Road and at a crooked section of East Borough immediately north of the proposed town walls.

5.1.3 Saxon Urban plan components

The main plan components of the medieval town are shown on Figure 8 and are listed below.

1. Town Plots. Surviving plot boundaries and elements of the current road layout suggest that the Saxon town was organised on a regular grid plan. There is documentary evidence for a royal residence in part of the town, although the exact location is unknown.

2. *The Monastery.* A nunnery was established by King Ine at Wimborne Minster before AD 705, with his sister Cuthberga as the first Abbess. Shortly afterwards the church was made a double monastery with separate houses of monks and nuns kept strictly apart. This early monastery appears to have been destroyed through Viking raids in the 10th or early 11th century and was re-founded by Edward the Confessor as a house of secular Canons. The site of a Saxon church is thought to underlie the current Minster church, as indicated by the discovery of a tessellated floor beneath the current church floor (Woodward 1983, 57). Fragments of the early 11th century church, probably the original house of secular cannons, survive within the current building. The extent of the monastic precinct remains unknown, although a possible

Figure 9: View SW across The Square. Recent excavations have shown that the east end of the chancel of St Peter's Chapel lay approximately in the position of the cycle racks in left centre of the photograph.

Figure 10: View west across the Corn Market, possible site of a late Saxon chapel of St Mary.

circuit can be suggested from excavated evidence and elements that may have become fossilised in the modern townscape (Figure 8). An excavation between the Minster Church and The Corn Market during 1979 revealed evidence for a large ditch with internal bank and stone revetment running approximately E-W on a line between the church and the graveyard on its north side. The ditch had been cleaned out and then backfilled during the 17th century, which suggests a significant boundary, prior to the 17th century, immediately north of the church (Woodward 1983, 61).

3. High Street. Hall proposed that the line of one of the N-S streets forming part of the planned Saxon grid layout might be represented by a line followed by the southern sections of East Borough and High Street. It seems likely than that High Street could mark the line of a road following the eastern town or monastery walls. The northern section of High Street may represent the site of a wide market street within the town walls during the late Saxon period, later encroached upon by medieval development

(Hall 2000, 50-53).

4. The Square. The Square was the site of St Peter's Chapel during the medieval period (Figure 9). A chapel of St Mary is also known to have existed within the town by the time of Domesday. Church Warden's accounts mention St Mary's house on the north side of The Square at the junction with West Borough, although Hutchins suggests that this was the site of a hospital or workhouse dedicated to St Mary (Popham 1983, 54). The recent excavation of trial pits by the East Dorset Archaeological Society did reveal what is thought to be the east wall of the chancel of the medieval St Peter's Chapel. Two potentially Roman or Saxon tesserae were found in association with this wall (D. Reeve, pers. comm.). It is conceivable therefore that a Saxon chapel existed on this site.

5. The Corn Market (Figure 10). Again it remains unknown as to what occupied the site of the later Corn Market during the Saxon period. Clegg noted that Horton Abbey held a chapel dedicated to St Mary in the Town of Wimborne Minster by the time of Domesday and considered this to have stood in Corn Market (Clegg 1960; Penn 1980, 124).

6. Town Mill. 8 mills were recorded at the time of Domesday for the combined manors of Wimborne Minster, Wimborne St Giles, Moor Crichel and Shapwick. The exact positions of these mills remain unknown, although it is likely that the River Allen was a more suitable fast flowing river for this purpose than the Stour. The position of the mill leats near Town Mill suggests the general location of one of them.

7. Walford Mill. Similarly the position of leats at Walford Mill suggests the general location of one of the Domesday mills. A note of caution however; Walford was recorded as a separate 1 hide manor at Domesday but no mill is mentioned in the text (Thorn and Thorn 1983).