

# Summary

This report contains the results of a consideration of the historical, archaeological, architectural and map evidence relating to the developmental history of Sturminster Newton. It has focused on the understanding of the overall development of the town from its earliest beginnings to the present day. This work has been conducted with three objectives in mind: to achieve a better understanding of how the historical dimension has influenced the modern townscape; to identify what historical features and structures survive within the modern town; and to better comprehend the contribution made by this historic dimension to the present character of the town. This work will enable an informed approach to the management of change and conservation of the urban environment.

## *Historical Background*

Sturminster Newton appears to have originated as a Saxon royal manor and minster church; the first mention probably being the grant of 30 hides at *Stoure* by King Edgar to Glastonbury Abbey. The estate remained in the possession of the abbey until its dissolution in 1539. Unfortunately little is known about the medieval town. The Abbot of Glastonbury was granted a market and fair in 1323, increased to two fairs by the 15<sup>th</sup> century, but the town never became a borough. The later medieval period appears to have been prosperous; St Mary's church was rebuilt in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and Town Bridge built c. 1500. The manor was granted to Katherine Parr following the dissolution and became part of the Pitt Rivers estate in 1714. The market continued to prosper but in 1729 Sturminster suffered a devastating fire that destroyed much of the northern part. The arrival of the railway in 1863 led to the cattle market gaining a wide reputation and a new site was established to the north of the station. The railway closed in 1966 and the market had ceased by 1997. The town retains some industry and an administrative role in North Dorset and the central Blackmore Vale.

## *Town morphology*

The late Saxon and medieval manorial seat was located within the defences of an Iron Age promontory fort across the Stour at Sturminster Castle. The minster is generally thought to lie beneath St Mary's Church. The juxtaposition of church and royal residence, both on prominent sites on opposite sides of the River Stour has remained a significant feature of the town to this day. There is a contrast between the area of St Mary's Church and that of the historic town centre. This difference is partly the result of plot

shape. The church itself lies within a possible oval enclosure, and other similar enclosures may indicate infields associated with it. Conversely the narrow and tightly packed plot boundaries of the market area suggest that a late Saxon planned town developed to the west of the minster. The market square developed within this planned element, expanding later to include a triangular area to the north. Bridge Street and Market Cross Street represent a late medieval realignment of the town, which focused on the expanded market. The town centre layout seems to have changed remarkably little since the late medieval period. Later developments have tended to be suburban in nature, around the southern and western fringes of the town. Following the arrival of the railway the town expanded rapidly to the north, first along Bath Road and Manston Road, then filling in most of the area between the two.

## *Built character*

Sturminster Newton has a large number of historic buildings within the historic town centre. The majority date from the mid 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries following the fire of 1729, although there are also significant groups of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century buildings, notably on Church Street and Penny Street. Standing medieval structures include the 15<sup>th</sup> century market cross, the parish church of St Mary and Tanyard, possibly a 15<sup>th</sup> century industrial building. The 14<sup>th</sup> century manorial ruins on Sturminster Castle and Town Bridge (c. 1500) both lie outside the study area. The historic buildings make an important contribution to the character of Sturminster Newton and are typified by their use of a range of local stone and brick for walling; and thatch, plain tile, stone slates and Welsh slate for roofing. There is also significant survival of historic fabric such as windows, doors, chimneys and boundary walls. There has been surprisingly little in the way of modern infill in back plots behind the historic street frontages. Modern development here is on a small scale and in keeping with the character of the town centre. There has been large scale modern development to the north of the historic town centre on the site of the former railway and cattle market. Industrial and housing estates lie further to the north and east.

## *Landscape Setting*

Sturminster Newton lies at the southern tip of a limestone ridge within a wide meander of the River Stour at the approximate geographical centre of the Blackmore Vale. The river is both a unifying and dividing feature of the town.



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

#### *Historic Urban Character*

The historic urban character of Sturminster Newton is closely bound up with its distinctive landscape setting and the quality of its historic fabric. The medieval town plan survives virtually complete and the associated streetscapes are largely intact. The surviving plan elements of Sturminster's market reflect the importance of rural commerce to the town. Large scale modern development has been limited to the northern part of the historic town. The landscape setting of the town is fundamental to its character. In particular, its containment within a wide bend of the Stour and its relationship with Newton on the opposite bank.

#### *Further Research*

This report has highlighted many aspects of the historical development of Sturminster Newton 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 study include:

- Research into the origins and form of the Saxon minster site.
- Research into the medieval development of the town, its economy, industry and buildings.
- Research into the development and form of the town and market place.