

5.3 Post-medieval Abbotsbury (1540-1849)

5.3.1 Historical Summary

Abbotsbury had held a successful market during the medieval period, partly stimulated by the association with and proximity to a wealthy abbey. Abbotsbury Abbey was well endowed with an annual income assessed at £390, and yet its dissolution in 1539 does not seem to have particularly adversely affected the economy of the town. The hearth tax of 1662-4 records 121 tax payers in the tithing (Penn 1980, 14), double the number recorded in the 1332 Lay Subsidy. This can be compared with Bridport, which had 103 taxpayers listed in the hearth tax assessment. Sir Giles Strangways purchased a 40 year lease on the abbey site and the freehold of Abbotsbury in 1541 and was required to pull down the abbey claustral buildings as part of the deal. The Fox Strangways family continue to hold the Abbotsbury estate to this day. Sir Giles also built a mansion house next to St Nicholas church, for which the gate arch south of the church yard is likely to have been the entrance (Figure 20).

During the civil war Colonel James Strangways held Abbotsbury for the king, turning his house into a stronghold, armoury and barracks. In November 1644 the church was taken by Parliamentary forces and the house besieged. After intense fighting the house was set ablaze and then destroyed through the explosion of gunpowder being stored there. The destruction of their house may have led to the Strangways family neglecting Abbotsbury during the late 17th and early 18th centuries. The situation was exacerbated by a series of destructive fires over the same period which destroyed nearly all trace of medieval structures. The majority of the surviving secular buildings in Abbotsbury are built in stone and date from the 17th and 18th centuries. Abbotsbury passed into the

hands of the Ilchester Estate in 1735 through marriage, which heralded a period of closer involvement with the town (Keevill *et al.* 2003, 16-18).

Giles Strangways received the profit from the annual fairs when he gained the freehold of Abbotsbury and in 1610-11 the family were granted a weekly market. Hutchins described the market hall in the centre of the town as ‘... *very ancient but mean...*’. It was removed in the early 19th century. Hutchins also described the buildings of the town as ‘... *mean and low but of stone...*’ and remarked that ‘... *its little trade is mostly fishing...*’ (Hutchins 1815, 714). The maritime component of the town’s economy is further attested in the track known as *Rope Walk* along the west side of the former abbey precinct (Figure 21). This is likely to represent a site where rope was manufactured for seafaring vessels. Hutchins (1863) states that the women and children were chiefly employed in braiding nets in the 19th century. The soils of Abbotsbury are suitable for growing hemp and flax and *hemplands* are recorded in Abbotsbury from the mid 17th to the early 19th century. In 1817 Abbotsbury was one of 13 parishes in Dorset where hemp was grown.

Seventeenth century estate documents mention the presence of ale houses, a malting house, tucking mill, smithy, bakery and other shops (Morris 2002). These suggest that industries derived from the agrarian economic base of Abbotsbury were still important to the town’s economy in the 17th century. The smithy, bakery and shops indicate that local services were also still important.

18th century documents, such as Dorset militia ballot lists, reveal that the most common trades among men aged 18-50 at that time in Abbotsbury were husbandry and fishing. Abbotsbury also had two cordwainers, three weavers, a



Figure 18: View south east along Market Street.



Figure 19: Numbers 35 and 35a West Street.

barber, a sailor, a constable and an excise officer, as well as the usual local service trades such as smiths, bakers, thatchers, millers, carpenters, butchers etc. The mention of withy beds in a 1758 survey, together with the three weavers listed above, suggests that basketry was an important trade during the 18th century. Abbotsbury was also well-known for its cotton stocking manufacture at this date. In the early 19th century it was producing plain and striped cottons (Crick 1908, 362).

Census returns indicate that Abbotsbury continued to thrive during the early 19th century; its population steadily rose from approximately 800 during 1801, reaching a peak of nearly 1,100 inhabitants by 1861.

A school was first mentioned at Abbotsbury in the will of Thomas Strangways in 1726 and was endowed in 1748 by the donation of a house for the school and its master. This may have been located at 19 Rodden Row. The school moved to the purpose-built house on the Market Square in 1858; this building is now known as Strangways Hall (Melville 2006).

Turnpike roads do not seem to have affected Abbotsbury. The Abbotsbury and Bridport Turnpike Trust was established in 1777 but only lasted for 20 years. None of the roads within the study area seem to have been altered during that time, although provision was made for closing side lanes including Blind Lane, Red Lane and Cowards Lane (Good 1966, 141-2). The notice of public carriage roads c. 1810, during the enclosure of the commons reveals that at that time the main road to Burton Bradstock was along Buller's Way to the coast and then along Chesil Beach to Burton. The current Bridport Road was said to branch off of the Burton Road. The Dorchester Road, north east from Hands Lane across the downs, was also enclosed at this time. Each of the above roads was allocated a width of 30 feet (Morris 2002).



Figure 20: The Manor gate arch with view of The Pinion End beyond.

5.3.2 Town Layout

The most dramatic change to the town during the post-medieval period was the dissolution of the Abbey. The church and claustral buildings were destroyed and the precinct converted to a manor house and farm (Figure 23). Nevertheless, the post-medieval town layout of secular Abbotsbury was very similar to that of the late medieval period. The market and Church continued to provide the focus. There is likely to have been further expansion along West Street and Back Street/Hands Lane. A mill was established to the south of the former abbey precinct during the 16th century. Farmsteads around the edge of the settlement may also have been established following enclosure of the common fields at the start of the 19th century. These include East Farm, West Farm, Cowards Lake Farm (just outside the study area) and Furlongs Homestead (Figure 24).

5.3.3 Post Medieval Town Plan Components

The main plan components of the late sixteenth-early nineteenth century town are shown on Figure 22 and are listed below.

1. *Abbotsbury Farm and Manor*. The loss of the core buildings of St Peter's Church and cloisters following the dissolution greatly affected the layout of the former precinct area. The result was three surviving groups of buildings: Abbey House (Figure 23), Great Barn (Figure 12) and the Old Gatehouse (Figure 17), separated by isolating spaces enclosed with stone walls. The Manor House (Figure 25) at the north end of Church Street is a 16th century building west of the parish church and may have been built as part of the Strangways mansion complex to the east of the church. The vicarage wasn't added until the early 19th century. The Abbey Barn became the focus for a new farm with numerous ancillary structures built around it. The farmhouse, *Abbey House*,



Figure 21: View south along Rope Walk.

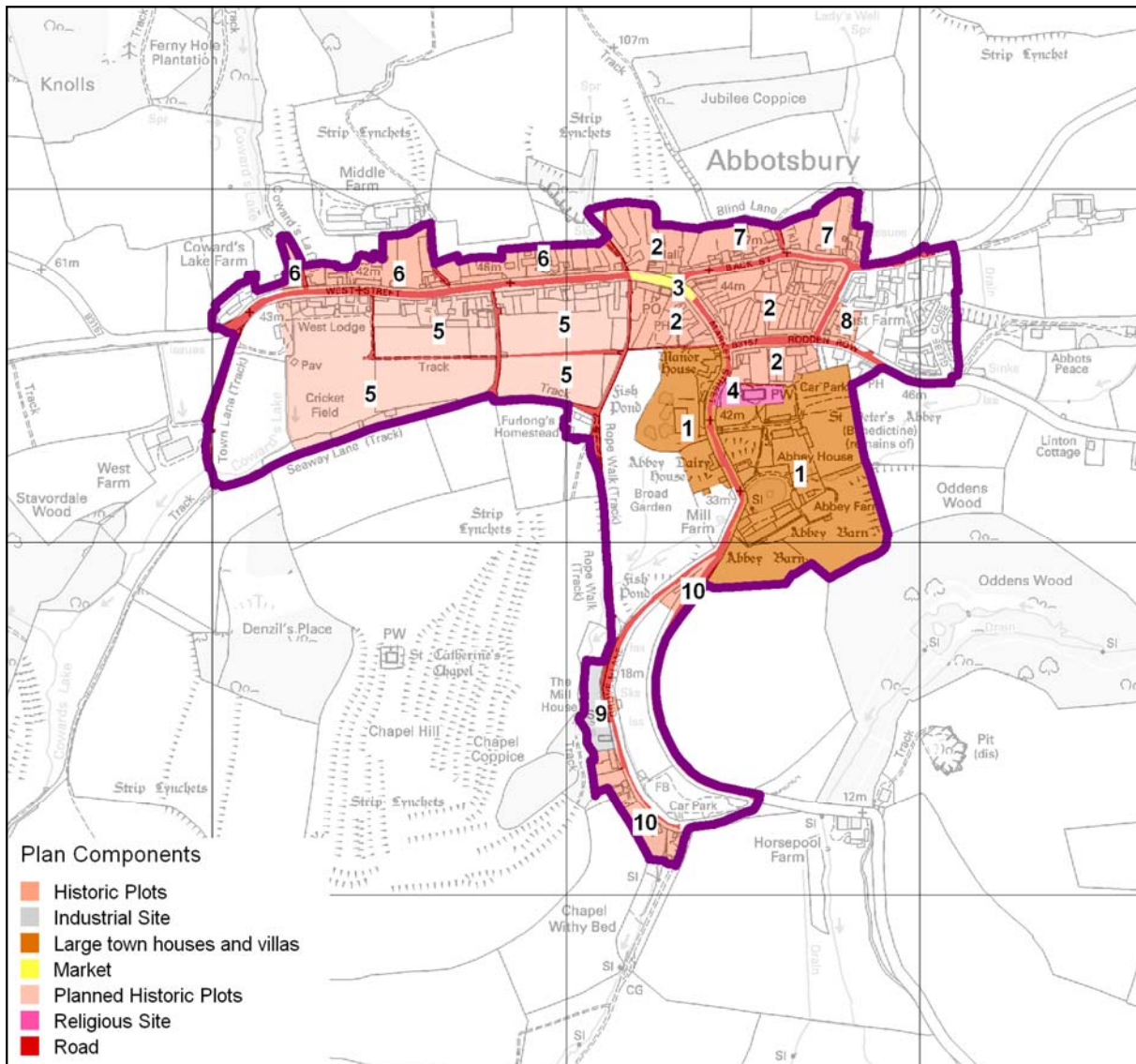


Figure 22: Abbotsbury Post-Medieval Town Plan Components.

was built in the 17th-18th century with stone from the former abbey buildings (Keevill *et al.* 2003, 17-18).

2. *Rodden Row and Market Street.* There has probably been very little change to the layout of this area since the late medieval period, although the SW quarter may have been demolished to make way for the 16th century manor house. The majority of the buildings in the area date from the 17th and 18th centuries. A Methodist chapel was built at the rear of the town hall in 1799.

3. *Market Place.* The layout of the market place has probably changed little since the medieval period. A shambles is recorded in the 1598 survey of the Strangways estate and was likely to have been in the market area. There was also a small market house described as “very ancient” in the 18th century (Hutchins 1815, 714).

4. *St Nicholas’ Parish Church.* Apart from minor alterations to the church fabric there was no change to the layout during the post-medieval period.

5. *West Town Suburb.* The burgage plots remained intact throughout the post-medieval period.

6. *West Street (Figure 26).* The 1814 enclosure award map shows that burgage style plots already existed on the north east side of West Street, between Red Lane and Middle Farm. It is difficult to know when the far western extension of West Street was laid out, although the lack of any evidence for surviving medieval structures may suggest post-medieval expansion.

7. *Back Street (Figure 27).* The settlement along Back Street appears to have continued to expand gradually during the post-medieval

period.

8. *East Farm (Figure 28)*. The East Farm farmhouse is shown fronting on to Rosemary Lane on the enclosure award map of 1814. However, the farm may have only been established a few years earlier, following the enclosure of the common fields.

9. *Abbotsbury Mill*. Documentary evidence suggests that the Abbotsbury Mill was not founded until the late 16th century, when two mills, one corn and one fulling mill were built next to each other on the site of the current Abbotsbury Mill. The current mill building dates from the 17th century (Figure 29).

10. *Abbotsbury Mill cottages*. The dates of these cottages, adjacent to the mill, are not known, although they seem to be depicted on the 1814 enclosure award map. Some are certainly estate workers cottages and others may represent industrial cottages associated with the mill.



Figure 25: The Manor House (east front).



Figure 26: View east along West Street.



Figure 23: Abbey Farm piggery with Abbey House in the background.



Figure 27: View east along Back Street.



Figure 24: View of Furlong's Homestead with St Catherine's Hill behind.



Figure 28: East Farmhouse, Rosemary Lane.

5.4 Later Nineteenth–Twentieth Century Abbotsbury (1850-present day)

5.4.1 Historical Summary

Like many Dorset towns, the later 19th and early 20th century was a period of decline for Abbotsbury, with the dwindling of its industries and the general agricultural depression in the later 19th century. Census returns indicate that there was a dramatic fall in population from a high of nearly 1,100 in 1861 to less than 700 in 1901. Population continued to decline gradually throughout the 20th century so that the population of the entire parish numbered just over 400 in 1971. The construction of a few small modern housing developments during the late 20th century means that the population has risen slightly to stand at 505 in 2001.

The market is said to have ceased a long time before 1867 (Hutchins 1867), and the market house was removed in the early 19th century (Penn 1980, 14). The Abbotsbury branch line opened in 1885 and closed in 1952. Its lifespan coincided with a period of steep decline in the town and the line was never really profitable (Jackson 1989). The site of the former station lies just outside the study area to the east. Abbotsbury seems to have returned to the status of a rural village with associated rural crafts and trades. The rise of the tourist industry in the late 20th century has led to a resurgence in the town's economic performance, including local rural crafts (pottery, smithing and basketry).

A school was established in Abbotsbury in 1858 possibly on the site of the old town hall on the north side of the market. A schoolmaster's house was also built next door. The school closed in 1960. The building is now the village hall, called Strangways Hall (Figure 30), although a nursery school still operates from



Figure 29: Abbotsbury Mill, Grove Lane.

the building. A Congregational chapel was built on Back Street in 1870 but closed in about 1977. It is now an artist's studio (Figure 32). A new Methodist chapel was built between numbers 3 and 4 West Street in 1925, to replace the one behind the then Abbotsbury School. It too went out of use in 1984 and was subsequently demolished.

5.4.2 Town Layout

The historic core of the town remained largely as it had done in the eighteenth and earlier nineteenth century. The major change has been the construction of modern housing to the north and east of East Farm. There has also been some infilling of vacant plots along West Street.

5.4.3 Later Nineteenth and Twentieth century Town Plan Components

The main plan components of the later nineteenth and twentieth century town are shown on Figure 31 and are listed below.

1. *Abbotsbury Farm and Manor.* The site has been developed in the late 20th century with the tourist trade in mind. The Abbey Farm in the area of the Great Barn has been converted into a children's farm and Abbey House is now a restaurant and function suite.

2. *Rodden Row and Market Street.* This area has changed little since the mid 19th century. The school (now Strangways Hall) was built on the north side of the market in 1858. The NE quarter of the Saxon town remained undeveloped until the late 20th century when modern houses were built here, fronting on to the south side of Back Street (Figure 33).



Figure 30: Former School, now Strangways Hall.

3.

of

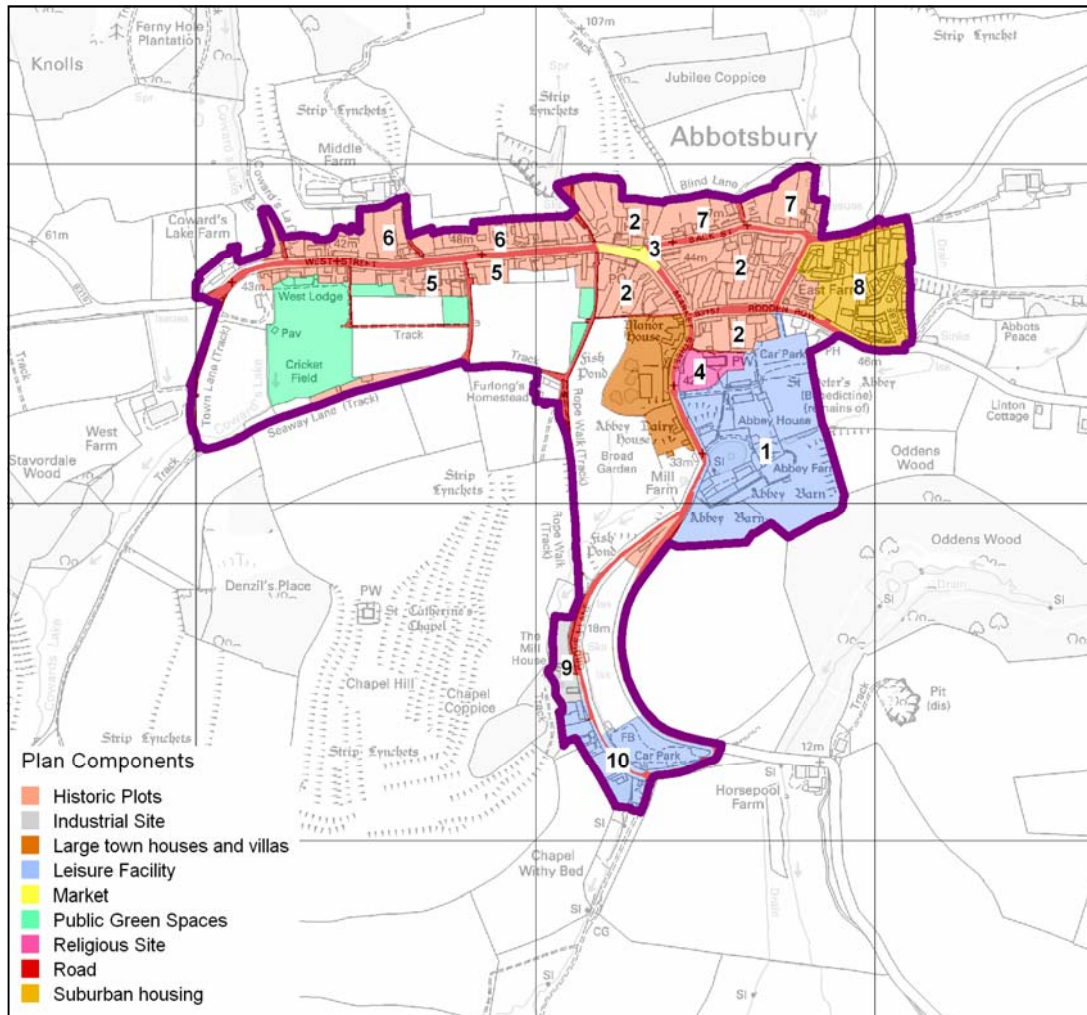


Figure 31: Abbotsbury late 19th and 20th century Town Plan Components.

Market Place. The market may have ceased around the middle of the 19th century and the town hall was demolished. The annual fair, held on July 10th, seems to have continued a little longer (Wilson 1872).

4. **St Nicholas' Parish Church.** The church yard was extended to the south in the late 19th-early 20th century to incorporate some of the site of the former Abbey Church of St Peter.

5. **Furlongs.** The burgage plots were detached from the houses and given over to allotment gardens by the end of the 19th century. It is not clear if this was connected with the process of enclosure at the start of the 19th century. The area occupied by allotments has shrunk over the course of the 20th century so that only a very small area now remains. The west end of the furlongs area is now a cricket ground and the remainder has been enclosed as fields (Figure 34).

6. **West Street.** The strip plots on the north side

West Street were also enclosed prior to the 1st edition OS map and parts of the street frontage were incorporated into the large paddocks created at this time. One of the resulting gaps in the street frontage at Chapel Cottages was filled with suburban villas in the late 19th-early 20th century and modern houses at the end of the 20th century (Figure 35).

7. **Back Street.** This area has changed little since the post-medieval period, although some of the plot boundaries at the rear of the houses have been altered.

8. **East Farm.** The area of the farm buildings retains much of its 19th century character.

9. **Abbotsbury Mill.** The mill declined and finally closed in 1921, although the building was restored with wheels intact in 1971.

10. **Abbotsbury Mill Kennels and cottages.** Kennels associated with the Ilchester Estate's pheasantry were constructed to the south of the mill in the mid-late 19th century. It now func-

tions as a tea room at the entrance of Abbotsbury Swannery (Figure 36).

11. *East Farm housing estate (Figure 37)*. This area contains the vast majority of modern development in Abbotsbury. Initially a row of semi-detached houses were built fronting on to the south side of Hands Lane in the mid-late 20th century. Further development in the form of culs-de-sac occurred in the late 20th century.



Figure 32: The Old Chapel, Back Street.



Figure 35: Modern housing development, Chapel View, West Street.



Figure 33: Modern houses on Back Street .



Figure 36: The Old Pheasantry Kennels, Grove Lane.



Figure 34: The Furlongs, West Street.



Figure 37: Modern housing along Hands Lane .