

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

Shaftesbury is a Saxon hill top town. The original Saxon burh and abbey stand on a prominent flat-topped ridge of Upper Greensand,

which projects out into the upper slopes of the Blackmore Vale (Figure 3). This promontory is surrounded on three sides by steep escarpments of 30-40m in height. The highest point of the ridge at the abbey is 220m above sea level and the lowest point to the west is at 180 m. The only flat approach to the ancient town is on the northeast side of the ridge and this is the direction in which the town expanded during the medieval period. The topography has had a major influence on the town layout, with the principal streets of Bimport, Bleke Street, Bell Street, Cornhill and High Street all following the long alignment of the Greensand ridge. From the eastern end of the town, on the flatter ground, the main roads fan out in a radial pattern towards Blandford, Salisbury, Warminster and Gillingham.

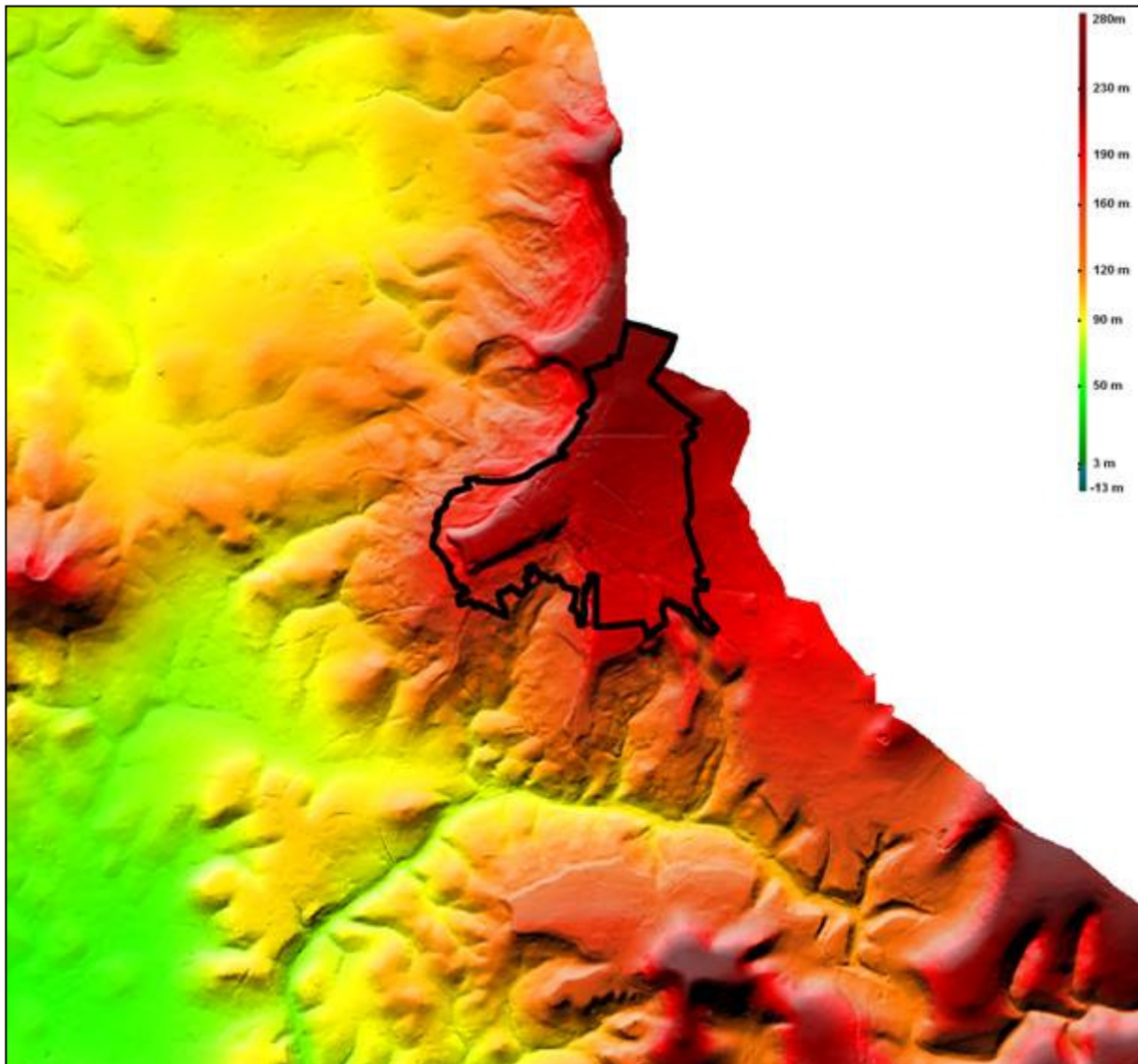


Figure 3: Shaftesbury's topographic setting

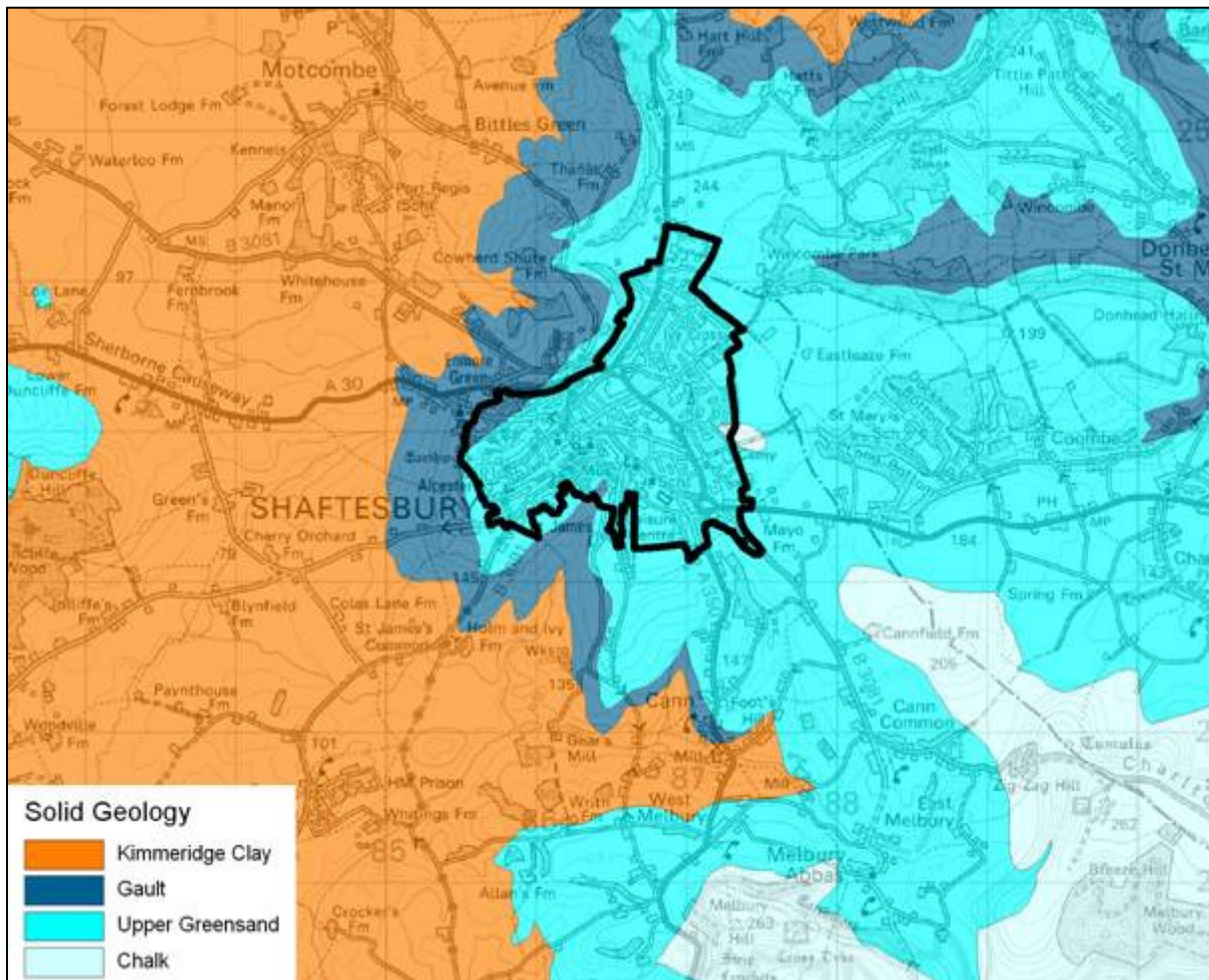


Figure 4: Geology of the Shaftesbury Area.

3.3 Geology

The Saxon town of Shaftesbury sits upon a ridge of Upper Greensand which projects westwards from the chalk scarp in the east into the Kimmeridge Clay vale of Blackmore to the west. The flatter ground to the east of the Saxon town also comprises Upper Greensand. The lower slopes of the escarpment around the north, west and south sides of the Saxon town comprise Gault clay (Figure 4).

The nature of the underlying geology has influenced the appearance and built environment of the town. Upper Greensand is the dominant local building material in the early 19th century and earlier. This is a stone which is used for rubble walling, as well as being used as ashlar, although not stone roofing slates. The proximity of the Kimmeridge Clay vale provided a local source of bricks during the later 19th and early 20th centuries, probably from the Gillingham Brickworks.

3.4 Landscape Character

The Shaftesbury area has been included in a number of landscape character assessments, which help place the town into its wider landscape context.

In the national assessment of countryside character, Shaftesbury lies within National Character Area 133; *Blackmore Vale and the Vale of Wardour* (Countryside Agency 1999).

The key characteristics of National Character Area 133 are listed as:

- A complex mosaic of mixed farming: undulating, lush, clay vales fringed by Upper Greensand hills and scarps.
- Small, rectilinear pasture fields with hedgerow oak trees and many scattered small broadleaved woodlands.
- Many streams and waterside trees.
- Broken, low, limestone ridges with shallow valleys crossing the clayey Blackmore Vale and steeper valleys around the margins of the area.
- Small villages and hamlets form nuclei

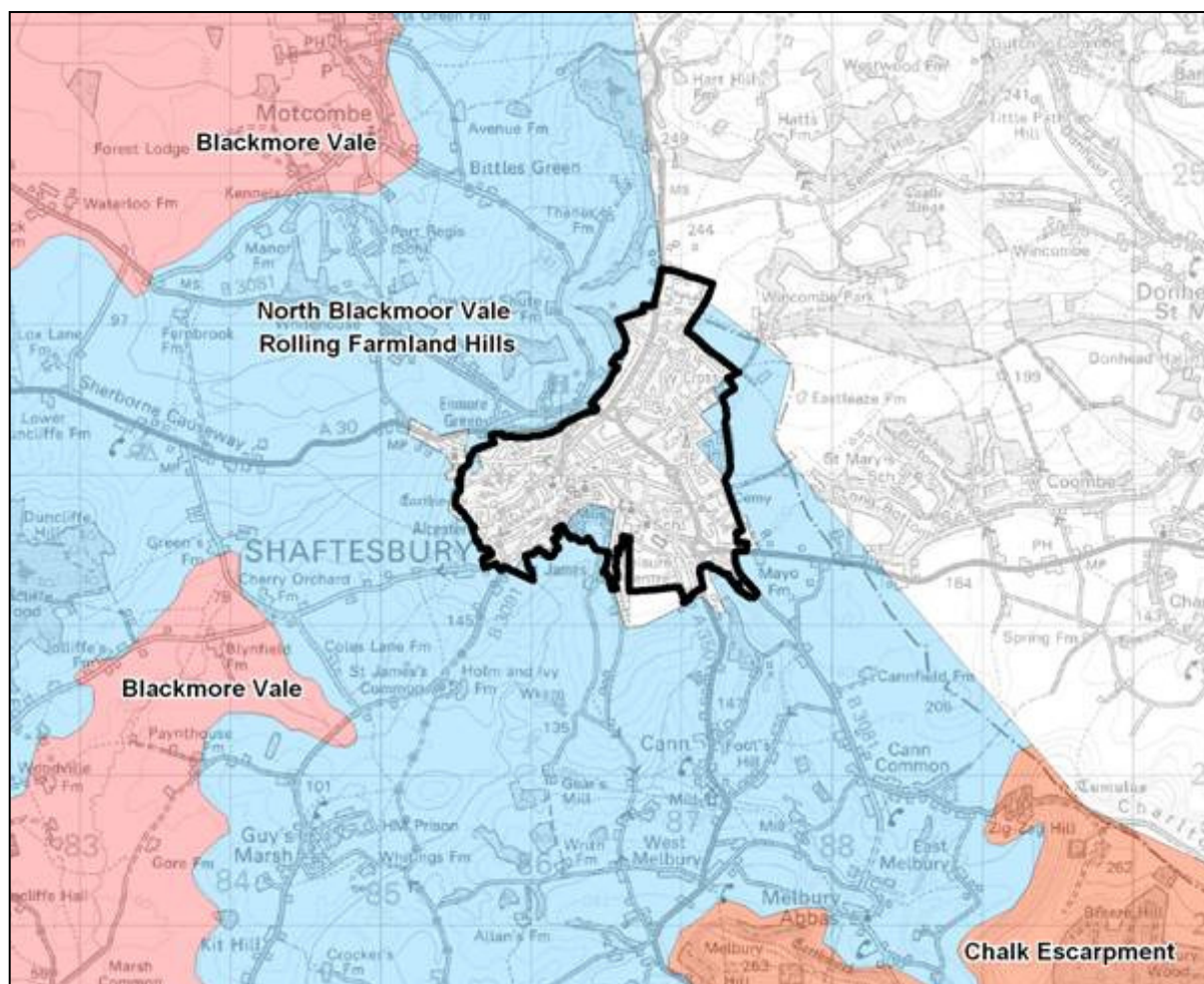


Figure 5: Shaftesbury in its landscape character setting (NDDC Landscape Character Assessment).

within a patchwork of fields, hedges, woods and trees.

- Many villages at scarp foot, river crossing points and strategic sites.
- A wide variety of local building materials, including local stone and half timbering.

The North Dorset District Landscape Character Assessment provides a detailed assessment of the features and landscape elements present in the wider Shaftesbury area (NDDC 2008). Shaftesbury lies within the North Blackmore Vale Rolling Farmland Hills Landscape Character Area (Figure 5).

The key characteristics of the Blackmore Vale Rolling Farmland Hills Landscape Character Area are:

- Undulating, rolling farmland hills forming a transition zone between the Vale and the chalk escarpment foothills.
- Divides the vale north and south of the area.
- Irregular pattern of farmland, fields, copses, streams, dense hedgerows and copses.
- Many dispersed and isolated hamlets and

farmsteads.

- Settlements are found towards the foothills at the foot of the chalk escarpment.
- A tranquil, peaceful landscape.
- Duncliffe Wood is a key feature and chalk outcrop with a distinctive wave-shaped profile.
- The escarpment to the east forms an important feature and backdrop to the area.
- There are some important views over the Vale from high places.
- Many small streams and brooks.
- The area provides a rural, important setting for Shaftesbury which overlooks the area.
- Kingswood, Handford Park Estate and the manor house and grounds at Child Okeford are all key features.

The draft Historic Landscape Character mapping shows Shaftesbury sitting within an area of largely piecemeal enclosed fields as well as other types of enclosure including planned and other regular enclosures. There are only isolated patches of mixed woodland, mixed plan-

tation and coppice, although mixed woodland is more common along the steep Greensand scarp.

3.5 The Present Town

The modern built-up area of Shaftesbury lies against the eastern county boundary in North Dorset District. In fact the extreme northern tip of the urban area at North Heath lies across the county boundary in Wiltshire. The modern urban area covers approximately 224 ha. It lies on the A30 half way between Sherborne and Salisbury at the junction with the A350 between Warminster and Blandford Forum. It also lies on the B3081 between Gillingham and Sixpenny Handley and at the northern end of the B3091 to Sturminster Newton. It is also seven miles south of the A303. Shaftesbury is the second most northerly town in Dorset, approximately four miles SE of Gillingham, ten miles north of Blandford Forum and seven miles NE of Sturminster Newton. The nearest railway station is 4 miles away at Gillingham. In the last twenty-five years the town has grown particularly rapidly, rising from a population of just under 4,000 in 1981 to approximately 7,000

today (Dorset County Council 2005, 2). Shaftesbury is important as a service and shopping centre for the surrounding villages.

Shaftesbury has one secondary school, Shaftesbury School and Sports College, and two primary schools. The retail sector comprises 75 shops, mainly small shops, but including national chains such as Body Shop, Boots, Somerfield, Superdrug, Tesco and W H Smith. Shaftesbury also has two industrial estates at Longmead Estate (7.7ha) and Wincombe Business Park (6.5ha).

52% of the economically active population are employed within the service sector; 18% in public administration, education and health; 11% in banking, finance and insurance; 10% in manufacturing and 7% in construction. Major employers include Blackmore Press, Dorset Chilled Foods, Dorset County Council, HMYOI Guys Marsh, Royal Mail, Somerfield, Stalbridge Linen Services Ltd, Tesco and Wessex Electricals.

The data used in this section have been obtained from the Dorset County Council's *The Dorset Data Book 2008* (DCC 2008).

Part 4: Sources



4.1 Previous research

Shaftesbury appears to have been founded by Alfred as a burh in about 878. Alfred also founded the largest house of Benedictine nuns in Britain there about AD890. For these reasons the town has attracted interest from chroniclers throughout its history. Asser in the 10th century, William of Malmesbury in the 12th century, John Leland and Camden in the 16th century, and Hutchins and Defoe in the 18th century all commented on aspects of Shaftesbury's layout, history or economy (Hutchins 1868, 2; Defoe 1727; Adams 1808, 6-7). Hutchins produced the first history of Shaftesbury and provided a springboard for 19th century local Shaftesbury historians such as Adams (1808) and John Rutter (1827a).

A number of local histories have been published during the 20th century concerning specific aspects of Shaftesbury's past. The Abbey has been a focus of much research with Wall (1900), Claridge (1935), Sydenham (1953; 1959), Keen (1999) and Chandler (2003) all writing on the history of Shaftesbury Abbey. Kelly (1996) has recently published a volume on the Shaftesbury Cartulary. Tapper and Philpott (1966) have written a pamphlet on the history of Methodism in Shaftesbury. Hopton (1975) has written a volume on corruption and the reform of the municipal government in Shaftesbury. This volume was published by the Shaftesbury and District Historical Society which has also published works by W F Rutter (1967) on local history and Howarth and Young (1972) on the history of the town's water supply. W F Rutter (1970) has also written a pamphlet on the history of Shaftesbury Grammar School and Long (1980) has written a pamphlet on local history and legends.

4.2 Historic Maps

The earliest detailed map depicting the town is a plan made by William Willis in 1615 published in Hutchins 3rd edition (Hutchins 1868, opposite p.1). This depicts the street pattern still recognisable today and four churches. William Upjohn, a local surveyor, produced a detailed plan of the borough in 1799 for the Earl of Shaftesbury. The tithe map of Shaftesbury St James dates from 1838 and that of Shaftesbury Holy Trinity and St Peter's dates from 1845. 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 the Domesday Survey of 1086 (Thorn & Thorn 1983); the Shaftesbury Abbey Cartulary (Kelly 1996) and taxation records including the Lay Subsidy (Rumble 1980) as well as Tudor subsidies and Muster Rolls (Stoate 1978; 1982). During the 19th century local Quaker John Rutter ran a printing press in the town and published a series of political and historical pamphlets (Rutter 1826; 1826-7; 1827b; 1830; Bowles 1828a; 1828b; Anon 1827; 1831). C H Mayo also published a collection of Shaftesbury municipal records in 1889. These documents have been used to gain an insight into the size, wealth and economy of Shaftesbury in comparison with neighbouring towns from the 11th to 19th centuries.

4.4 Archaeological Evidence

Sixty five archaeological investigations and observations have been recorded for Shaftesbury. This work has proved invaluable to our understanding of the development of the town. Excavation has suggested that the grid of streets around High Street may have been established as a Late Saxon planned town. Evidence for a late Neolithic ceremonial landscape and a Middle Saxon kiln has also been unearthed. Crucial questions remain unanswered, however, such as the course of the burh defensive circuit and plan of the Saxon abbey precinct.

Until the mid 20th century archaeological work was entirely focussed upon exposing the ruined foundations of the abbey church. From 1947 the active Shaftesbury Historical Society, and from 1971 the re-styled Shaftesbury and District Archaeological Group (SDAG), undertook a series of important and informative archaeological investigations around the town. These were sometimes research driven and sometimes rescue excavations in the face of unmitigated redevelopment of the town centre. They were able to establish that Shaftesbury Castle was built in the 12th century during the civil war between Stephen and Matilda (Rigold 1949). They demonstrated the potential for medieval remains within the town centre during an excavation at High Street during 1971 (SDAG 1976), and were the first to uncover evidence for Saxon occupation of the High Street area during excavations at St Peter's Church in 1977 (Keen 1977).

Since 1991, there have been a number of significant archaeological investigations under-

taken as part of the planning process. A number of these investigations were able to demonstrate that planned burgage plots had existed east of the abbey by the late Saxon period (Heaton 2003a; Bellamy & Montague 2001). They have also produced a wealth of evidence for the medieval and post-medieval development and economy of the town. Medieval sites have also been investigated outside the historic town centre at Barton Hill (Whelan & Firth 2009). Shaftesbury has always been a well documented town whose origins as a royal burh and abbey town were recorded during the late 9th century AD. However, our understanding of the development of the town plan was less well understood and has been greatly enhanced through the archaeological record. A table of all archaeological investigations is presented in **Appendix 3**.

4.5 Historic Buildings

Shaftesbury has a large number of historic buildings surviving within the town. Approximately 620 structures in the urban area date from the late 19th century or earlier. The majority of the historic buildings lie within the medieval town centre and its suburbs. Streets such as High Street, Gold Hill, Salisbury Street, Bell Street, Bleke Street, St James Street, Bimport and Enmore Green retain a large part of their

historic street frontage. However, only Edwardstowe, The Old School on Abbey Walk, Abbey House, The Abbey Ruins, St Peter's Church and The Old Rectory in St James, and are known to contain an element of medieval fabric. This is because the High Street area was fashionable in the 19th century and was largely redeveloped at that time. The well preserved historic fabric in the town centre is a major contributor to the outstanding historic character of Shaftesbury. The historic buildings are characterised by their almost universal use of local Upper Greensand and brick for walling, and tile, slate or thatch roofs.

The ruins of the 11th-12th century Abbey Church on Abbey Walk, occupy a prominent position on the Greensand ridge at the heart of the medieval town and now on display as a museum. Abbey House, Holy Trinity Church and the Westminster Memorial Hospital form a prominent group with the Abbey Church.

Another important group of buildings are centred on the medieval market place and include the 15th century St Peter's Church, the 19th century Town Hall and the Grosvenor Arms Hotel. This group lies at the top of Gold Street, whose cobbled hill, abbey precinct wall and row of 18th century cottages form one of the most iconic images of Dorset.