

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

Abbotsbury lies within a sheltered E-W aligned valley at the west end of the Portesham or Mill Stream (Figure 3), This stream rises in Porte-

sham, approximately 2.5km to the east and flows west to Abbotsbury. At the town the course of the stream deviates to the south for approximately 1km, between St Catherine's Hill and Oddens Hill, before emptying into the western extremity of The Fleet at Abbotsbury Swannery. The strike of the valley follows that of the underlying geology. The high ground to the north of the town comprises the chalk of the South Dorset Ridgeway with a steep scarp immediately north of the town. Bands of successively older Jurassic rocks with alternating hardness give rise to the ridge and vale topography to the south. The town itself lies on relatively level ground at a height of about 45m.

The topography has had a major influence on the town layout. Pre-urban tracks running parallel with and perpendicular to the topographical grain have determined the late Saxon town plan. The result is that the town has a 'ladder' form appended on to the north side of the Ab-

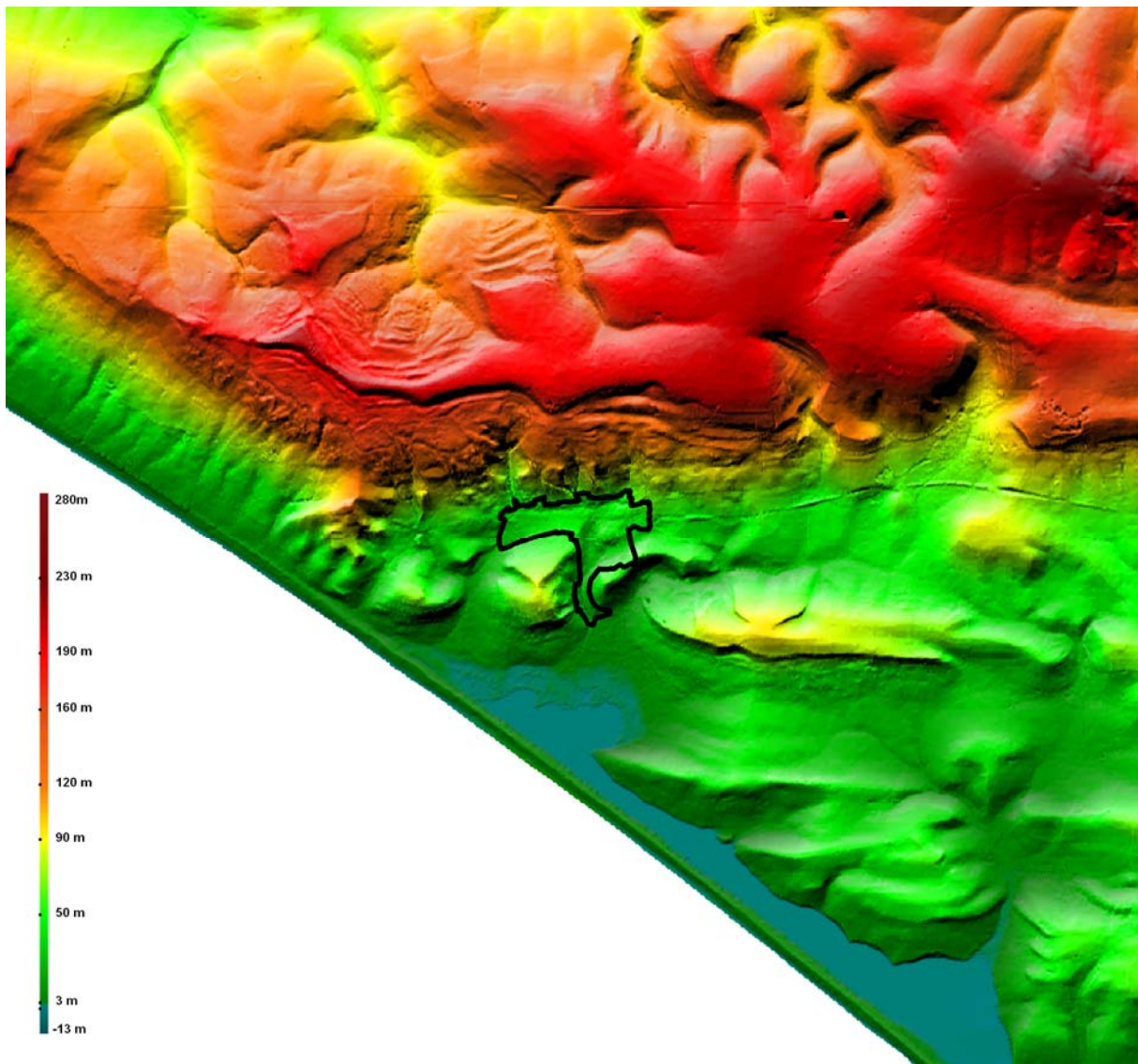


Figure 3: Abbotsbury's topographic setting

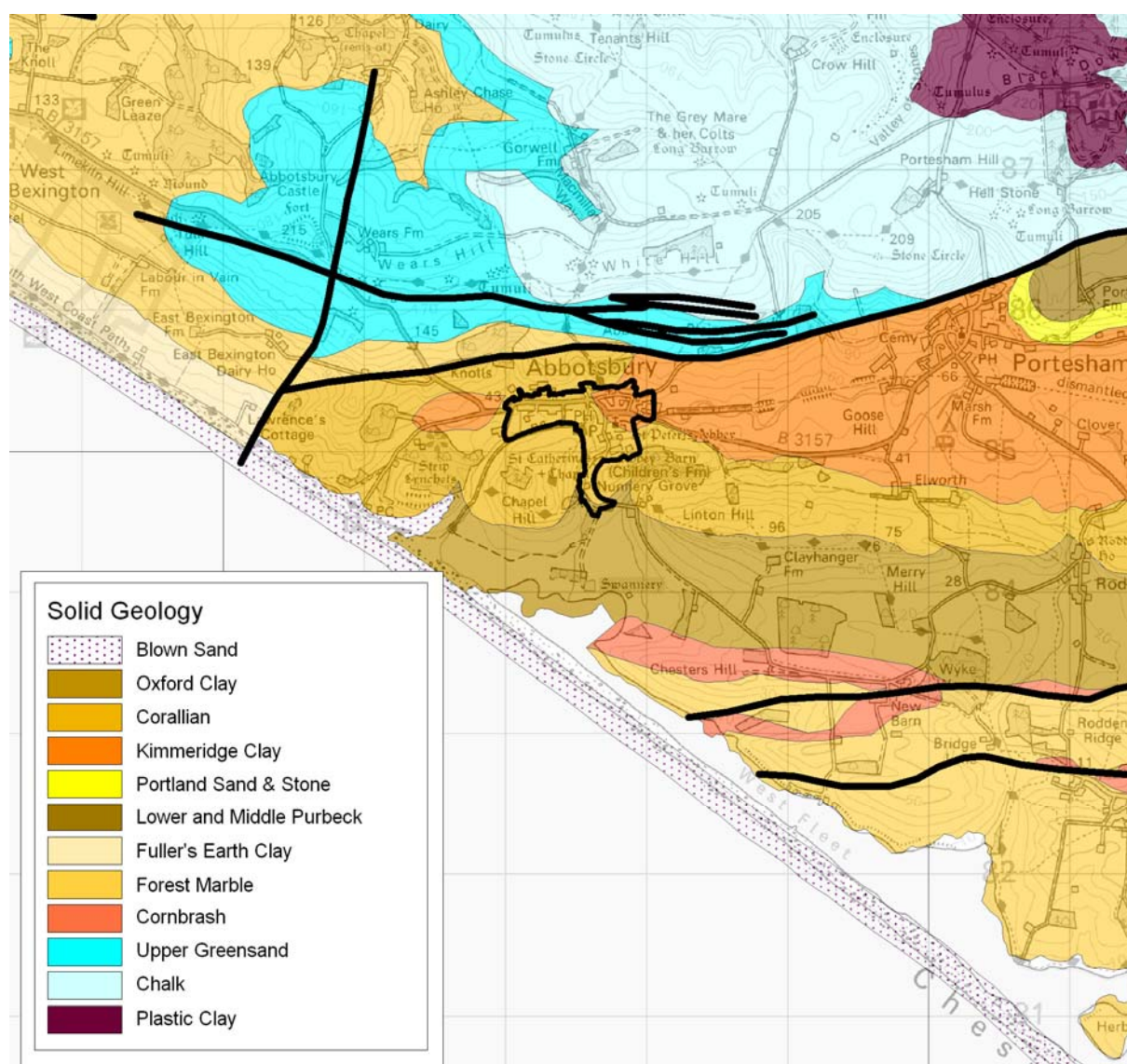


Figure 4: Geology of the Abbotsbury Area.

bey. The Abbey site itself straddles the Portesham or Mill stream and sheltered by Oddens Hill. Communication links are restricted by the topography: there is relatively easy access to the east towards Portesham and Weymouth along the river valley, but the routes northeast and west towards Dorchester and Bridport entail the negotiation of steep slopes up to the chalk ridge.

3.3 Geology

Abbotsbury lies within the northern limb of the Weymouth Anticline. This results in a series of steeply dipping Jurassic strata outcropping in parallel with the contours. The younger beds lie to the north, getting progressively older to the south. The north eastern part of the town lies in a vale of softer Kimmeridge Clay. The southern and eastern parts of the town lie on a complex series of Jurassic Limestone, clays and grits

which form the ridge of St Catherine's and Odden's Hills. At the extreme southern tip the study area encroaches on a further vale of Oxford Clay (Figure 4).

More recent drift geology is limited to a small amount of head at the foot of the chalk ridge and alluvium along the bed of the Mill Stream (British Geological Survey, 1974; Keevill *et al.* 2003, 9).

3.4 Landscape Character

Abbotsbury 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 surroundings.

In the national assessment of countryside character, Abbotsbury lies within National Charac-

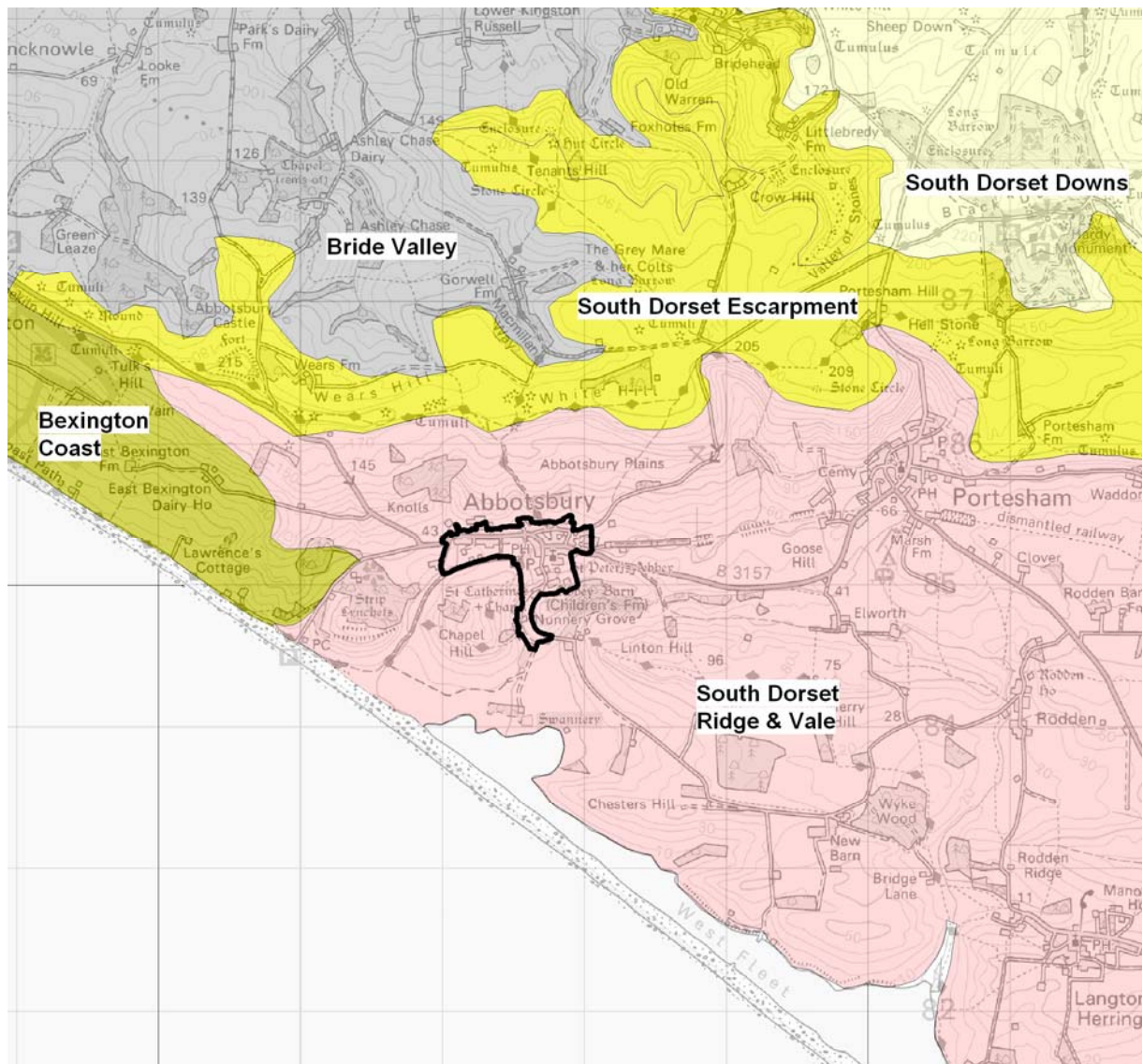


Figure 5: Abbotsbury in its landscape character setting (Dorset AONB Landscape Characterisation).

ter Area 138; Weymouth Lowlands (Countryside Agency 1999).

The key characteristics of National Character Area 138 are listed as:

- Varied area, united by underlying broad ridge and valley pattern and spectacular coastline.
- Open, largely treeless, ridge tops with large, commonly arable fields.
- Valleys with villages, mixed farming and valley-side woodlands.
- Exposed, windswept coastal grassland.
- Distinctive coastline of Chesil Beach enclosing the brackish lagoons of The Fleet.
- Extensive urban and urban fringe land use around Weymouth.

Abbotsbury sits mainly in the Ridge and Vale Landscape Type in *West Dorset 2000*, although the southern tip of the study area lies

on the northern edge of the Coastal Slope, Chesil and the Fleet Landscape Type (WDDC 2002). This document provided a detailed record of the features and landscape elements present, but 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, Abbotsbury lies at the western end of the South Dorset Ridge and Vale Character Area, part of the Ridge and Vale Landscape Type. It is bounded to the west and north by the South Dorset Escarpment and the Bexington Coast Character Areas (Figure 5).

The key characteristics of the South Dorset Ridge and Vale character area are:

- Broad pastoral clay vale landscape with small limestone ridges with rocky outcrops running east to west

- Exposed, rough coastal grazing marsh with scrub
- Continuous patchwork of planned enclosures of neutral and acid grasslands becoming larger and open towards the ridge tops
- Enclosed by chalk escarpment to the north
- Mixed boundaries of stone walls and stunted hedges and occasional hedgerow trees
- Smaller scale landscape towards the west
- Settlements of local limestone located along the chalk escarpment base
- Sweeping views towards smooth ridge tops, the Fleet and coast
- Small broadleaved woodlands of oak and ash along the lower slopes and vales with occasional hazel coppice
- Shingle bank and saline lagoon of the Fleet

The draft Historic Landscape Character mapping shows Abbotsbury sitting within an area of largely piecemeal enclosed fields and planned enclosed fields, with patches of mixed woodland and coppice. To the north, on the chalk downs, there are large tracts of open ground comprising rough ground and heath. To the south on the limestone ridge and coastal strip there is further open ground in the form of open fields.

3.5 The Present Town

The modern built-up area of Abbotsbury lies entirely within the parish of Abbotsbury and covers an area of about 39.5 ha. It lies on the B3157 road from Bridport to Weymouth. It has no rail links; the nearest station is at Upwey, approximately 10 km away. The 2001 population of Abbotsbury parish was 505 and it is currently considered a rural village rather than a small town. The population has been in decline from a peak of nearly 1,100 in 1871 to just over 400 in 1971, probably as a result of migration from rural centres towards larger urban areas at Bridport and Weymouth. The 2001 Census records 219 dwellings in Abbotsbury, a remarkable 47% of which are privately rented in comparison to the Dorset average of 13.5%. This is a reflection of the large proportion of the village owned by the Ilchester Estate.

The retail sector comprises ten shops, six of which are local craft shops and galleries serving the tourist trade. Other businesses service the tourist industry, including tea rooms, a hotel and local craft workshops. Ilchester Estates are probably the largest single employer, running major tourist attractions such as the Abbey

Farm and Abbotsbury Swannery as well as the estate itself.

West Yard Barn on West Street functions as a small business centre containing internet service providers and the Ilchester Estates Office. In 1991 the most significant employment sector was the service industry (62.5%), together with manufacturing industries (18.75%) and Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing (6.25%).

The data used in this section have been obtained from the parish census profiles on the www.dorsetforyou.com website accessed in December 2008.

Part 4: Sources



4.1 Previous research

The first historian to consider Abbotsbury appears to have been Thomas Gerard in his *General Description of the County of Dorset* written in 1621 (Legg 1980). Hutchins discussed the history of the town and abbey in the late 18th and 19th centuries (Hutchins 1774; 1815; 1867). The late 19th century landlord of the Ilchester Arms wrote on the history of the town, although largely as an advert for the Inn (Cooper, 1890). The Reverends Penny and Moule described the history of the abbey in the late 19th century and Penny it seems went as far as to sponsor excavations of the abbey church (Penny 1877; Moule 1886). W S Moule, vicar from 1925-42, also wrote concerning the history of the parish church of St Nicholas (Moule 1955).

These early works of history were probably not superseded until the early 21st century when the Ilchester Estate commissioned a landscape survey of Abbotsbury Abbey and its wider context (Morris, 2002 Keevill *et al.* 2003). These works of synthesis are comprehensive in their remit and include transcriptions and facsimiles of primary maps and documents in their appendices. In this respect they are an extremely important resource and have been used extensively in this report.

A number of local histories have also been published during the later 20th century concerning specific aspects of Abbotsbury's past. These include the Abbotsbury branch railway (Jackson, 1989); the Swannery (Fair and Moxom 1993); and the fishing industry (Toms 1994). The Abbotsbury Heritage Research Project was established in 2004 and has sponsored a number of research initiatives; archaeological and documentary in nature.

4.2 Historic Maps

The earliest detailed map of the town is the estate survey of 1758 (Donne). The enclosure award of 1814 has proved of particular use to this report, partly because it has been reproduced in full by Morris (2002) and is therefore easily accessible, but also because of the detail contained within it. The tithe map dates from 1845. The characterisation was largely based on the enclosure award and the 1:2500 scale Ordnance Survey maps dating from 1887 onwards.

4.3 Documentary Evidence

Primary documentary sources used in this re-

port include the Domesday Survey of 1086; taxation records including the Lay Subsidy and Hearth Tax Returns; and the Dorset Militia Ballot lists. These documents have been used to gain an insight into the size, wealth and economy of Abbotsbury in comparison with neighbouring towns from the 11th to 18th centuries. Another class of documents pertain directly to the estate of Abbotsbury and include surveys of tenants of the Strangways Estate and their lands from 1598 and 1650 (Morris 2002).

Only part of the Abbotsbury Cartulary seems to have survived the civil war and this part was deposited in the Dorset History Centre. The lost cartulary can be partially reconstructed using evidence from early 17th century authors who saw and wrote about it (Keynes 1989).

4.4 Archaeological Evidence

Archaeological investigation in Abbotsbury has been concentrated primarily on the area of the former abbey and a number of different excavations and surveys have been carried out since the late 19th century (Penny 1877; Moule 1886; Green and Green 1967; Keen 1983; Graham 1986; Gater and Gaffney, 1990; McMahon 1997; Heaton 2004; 2007). A small number of investigations have been conducted elsewhere in the town also. These include watching briefs at the Swannery car park (Cotton 1993); 8 West Street (Wessex Archaeology 1996); and Hannah's Lane (Brading 1999); as well as an evaluation at Rosemary Lane (Valentin 2000). 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 list of all archaeological investigations is presented in Appendix 3.

4.5 Historic Buildings

Abbotsbury has a large stock of surviving historic buildings. Just under 70% of the buildings in the present village date from the 19th century or earlier, though relatively few are earlier than 18th century. This may be the result of the catastrophic fires of the 17th century and suggests that the vast majority of 17th century or earlier secular buildings were constructed largely from wood. The exceptions lie within the former monastic precinct and include the Manor House (16th century) and Abbey House (18th century). All historic buildings are constructed from Abbotsbury and Portesham stone. Earlier buildings had local stone slate roofs, although some, such as the Abbey Barn

have since been thatched. Later post-medieval buildings dominate the commercial heart of the town, notably Strangways Hall and The Ilchester Arms.

There is also a large number of surviving or partially surviving medieval buildings in Abbotsbury; these are restricted to the area of the former monastic precinct and include the parish church of St Nicholas. Although none of the medieval buildings date to earlier than the 13th century, some 12th century architectural fragments have been incorporated into later structures and a small section of the Abbey Mill dates from that period. To date, no material remains relating to the late Saxon period have been recovered from anywhere in Abbotsbury.

In 1973 the Ilchester Estate commissioned a firm of architects to conduct a photographic survey of every building in the village in order to inform future development. The result was *An Appreciation of Abbotsbury* (Bertram and Fell 1973). In 2006 a further book was published *The Appreciation Revisited* (Melville 2006) in which the same buildings were photographed with an eye to assessing the amount of change during the intervening years. Both books have been very useful to this report in supplementing listed building descriptions.