Part 5: Historical Analysis

5.1 Saxon Abbotsbury (AD900-1065)

5.1.1 Historical Summary

There is a tradition that Abbotsbury was the site of an early Christian monastery. Such ancient foundation myths are common, controversial and difficult to substantiate. There is no reliable evidence that Abbotsbury existed, either as a town, minster or monastery prior to the 10th century AD. Although it is difficult to describe Abbotsbury as a town at this date (as there is no secure evidence that it had any truly urban features or functions and it was administered as a manor), this period sees the laying out of many features which have had a profound influence on the form and development of the town.

The earliest documentary evidence for Abbotsbury is a later copy of a charter originally thought to date from AD 939-46, recording the grant of land at Abbotsbury by King Edmund to Sigewulf. A slightly later charter records the gift of Abbotsbury, Portesham and Helton to Orc or Ore by King Cnut. Upon their death they appear to have granted their estate to a religious establishment, possibly a refounding of an earlier monastic establishment. The Benedictine monastery at Abbotsbury may have been founded by Orc in 1026 and then rebuilt by Benedictine monks from Cerne in 1044. Unfortunately no physical remains of the Saxon monastery have yet been recovered (Keevill *et al.* 2003).

The early documents refer to Abbotsbury as a minster and it may have served a wide area, possibly equivalent in extent to the Domesday hundred of Uggescombe which had Abbotsbury at its centre.

The Domesday survey records that the Abbey not only held Abbotsbury itself but also Tolpuddle, Portesham, Hilton and Shilvinghampton.

Sixty two inhabitants of Abbotsbury are recorded, 32 of which are described as villagers and 16 as smallholders (possibly inhabiting dispersed farms outside the village centre). Two mills are also mentioned, both of which may have been within the abbey precinct (Thorn and Thorn 1983). The current Abbotsbury Mill to the south of the precinct does not appear to have been established until 1562-93 (Graham 1986).

5.1.2 Town Layout

There are no contemporary documents or dateable archaeological remains that can help describe the Saxon town layout. However, it is assumed that the Saxon monastery was on the site of the medieval monastic precinct (Figure 6) and that the town lay adjacent to it on the north side. Furthermore, the topography of the modern village suggests that there was a pre-existing grid of lanes and fields running E-W and N-S and that the Saxon town was fitted into this pattern. Morris has identified a rectilinear field system to the east of Abbotsbury of potentially Roman or Saxon origin (Morris 2002, 88) and the Abbotsbury alignments may represent a westward extension of this system. The Saxon settlement thus fitted into the pre-existing rectilinear pattern of lanes has a 'ladder' form of a type identified at other late Saxon towns and villages such as Cheddar, Shapwick and North Cadbury (all in Somerset). Saxon Abbotsbury then, is likely to have comprised a double row of houses fronting on to both sides of Rodden Row (Figure 8). This road probably continued westwards along the line of the lane behind the Ilchester Arms. These properties are likely to have backed on to Back Street and another lane along the line of the current church path, which also marked the northern boundary of the Abbey precinct.

Figure 6: View of the Monastic Precinct from St Catherine's Hill
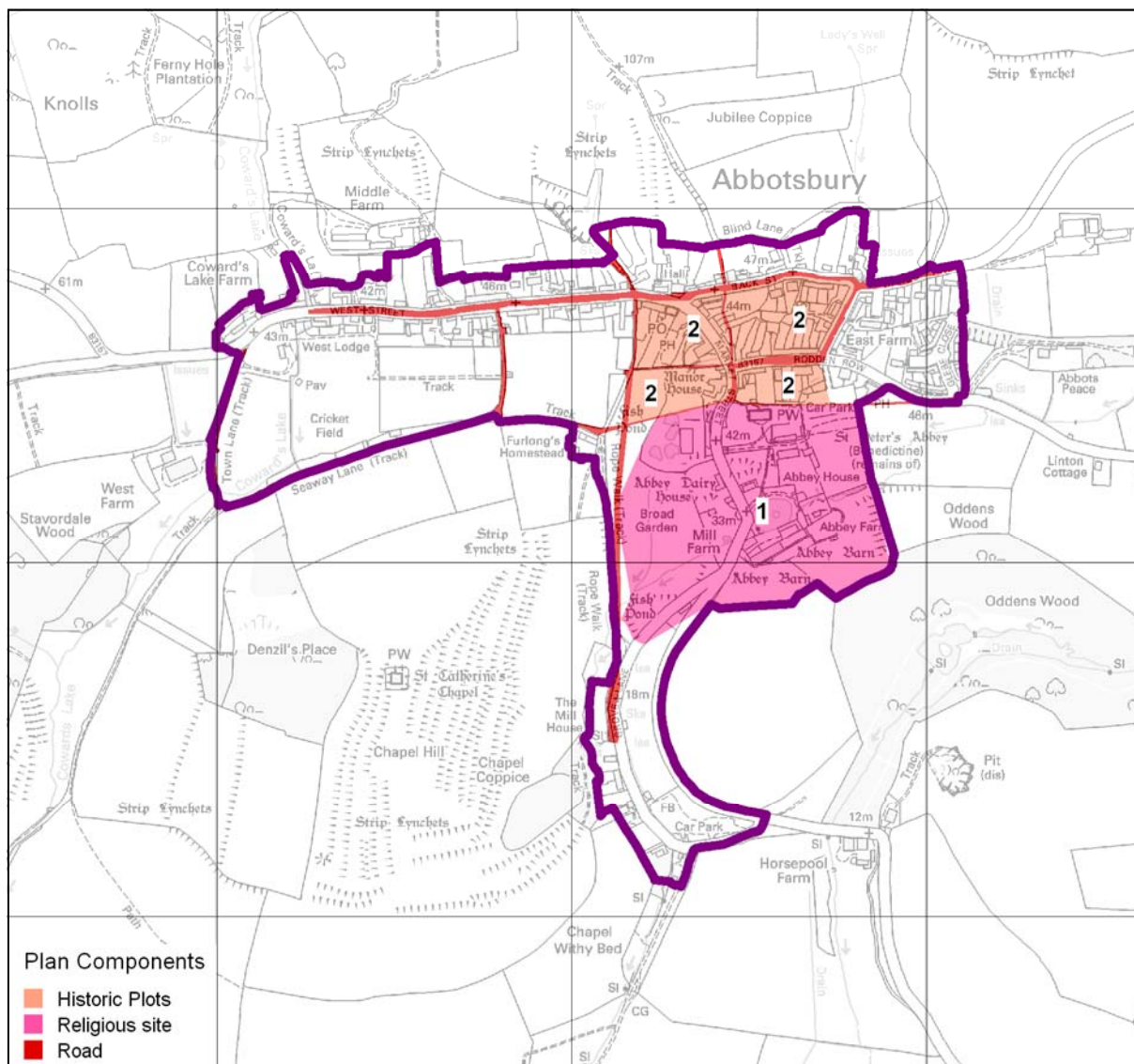

Figure 7: View east along Rodden Row .

Figure 8: Abbotsbury Late Saxon Town Plan Components.

The existence of this pre-medieval town can be taken to explain the location of the later medieval market, some distance from the entrance to the Abbey. It seems likely that Market Street is also a later medieval creation cutting diagonally from the Abbey gate to the new market. Furthermore, the rectilinear grid of lanes and fields may also have dictated that the Abbey precinct had a broadly rectangular shape from its inception.

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. Abbey precinct (Figure 6). No archaeological evidence dating from the Saxon period has been recovered from Abbotsbury Abbey. It is likely, however, that one or both of the mills recorded in Domesday were within the abbey precinct along the line of the Mill Stream, probably on the site of the medieval Mill House. The bounds of the late Saxon precinct are unknown, although the line of the pre-existing N-S lane marked by Chapel Lane and Rope Walk is likely to provide a western limit for its extent. Similarly the plots on Rodden Row would suggest a northern limit.

2. Saxon secular settlement. There is no archaeological evidence for the layout of the late Saxon settlement other than can be surmised from the topography of the modern village. If the 32 villagers recorded in Domesday represented 32 households then a large degree of symmetry within the Saxon town, in terms of four quarters along Rodden Row, can be suggested. Although no Saxon structures survive in Abbotsbury, it is possible that the plot boundaries at the rear of Rodden Row are essentially Saxon in origin.

5.2 Medieval Abbotsbury (1066-1539)

5.2.1 Historical Summary

The privileges and lands of the abbey were confirmed by William the Conqueror in 1066 and 1078, although none of the standing remains date from that period. The parish church of St Nicholas (Figure 9) was built some time prior to 1291.

Abbotsbury never achieved the status of borough, being administered as a manor, of which the Abbot was lord. The Abbot was granted a weekly market at Abbotsbury in 1274, which seemed to flourish. By 1308-9 the market was reported to be damaging that held at Bridport (Penn 1980, 11). The Lay Subsidy of 1332 records 61 taxpayers, suggesting that the town was on a par with Cerne, Wimborne and Dorchester. Nevertheless the town remained relatively poor and predominantly agricultural. Recorded names reveal the trades of the inhabitants at that time: a tucker, a carpenter, a baker, three tailors and a thatcher. The town's economy seems to have been dominated by local trades, crafts and services (Mills 1971; Penn 1980, 11). However, an agreement between the Abbot and the fishermen of Abbotsbury dated 1427 attests to the importance of fish in the medieval economy of the town (Morris 2002). Two annual fairs had also existed prior to 1401, although only one remained after that date.

Abbotsbury did not maintain continuous economic growth during the medieval period. The Black Death entered England at Weymouth, only 12km down the coast from Abbotsbury, during 1348 and was particularly devastating in coastal areas. It is not clear exactly how badly Abbotsbury was affected but the Abbot of Abbotsbury fell victim relatively early in the progression of the disease and the vicar also perished before a successor could be appointed (Fletcher 1923, 9). Furthermore, an inquisition on the Abbot dated 1469 stated that a fire had destroyed many tenements in the town (Penn, 1980 11).

The later 14th and 15th centuries seem to have been relatively prosperous for the Abbey, however, with St Catherine's chapel being built in the late 15th century (Figure 10) and the great Abbey barn around 1400 (Figure 12). At the time of the dissolution the Abbey held over 22 manors and had an annual income in excess of £390.

5.2.2 Town Layout

The current layout of the town was established during the medieval period. The most important aspect affecting the layout was the establishment of the market in 1274 in the north west corner of the then town (Figure 13). This encouraged the alteration of the main E-W through route, which had previously been along a linear continuation of Rodden Row. Thus the main through route of West Street – Market Street – Rodden Row was established at this time. The construction of the parish church just outside the north gate of the abbey also served to reinforce the importance of the new Market Street. The town certainly expanded during the medieval period and this is reflected in the creation of a new planned suburb on the south side of West Street and more piecemeal development along the north side of West and Back Streets.

5.2.3 Medieval Town Plan Components

The main plan components of the early post-medieval town are shown on Figure 11 and are listed below.

Figure 9: St Nicholas' Parish Church, Abbotsbury (south front).

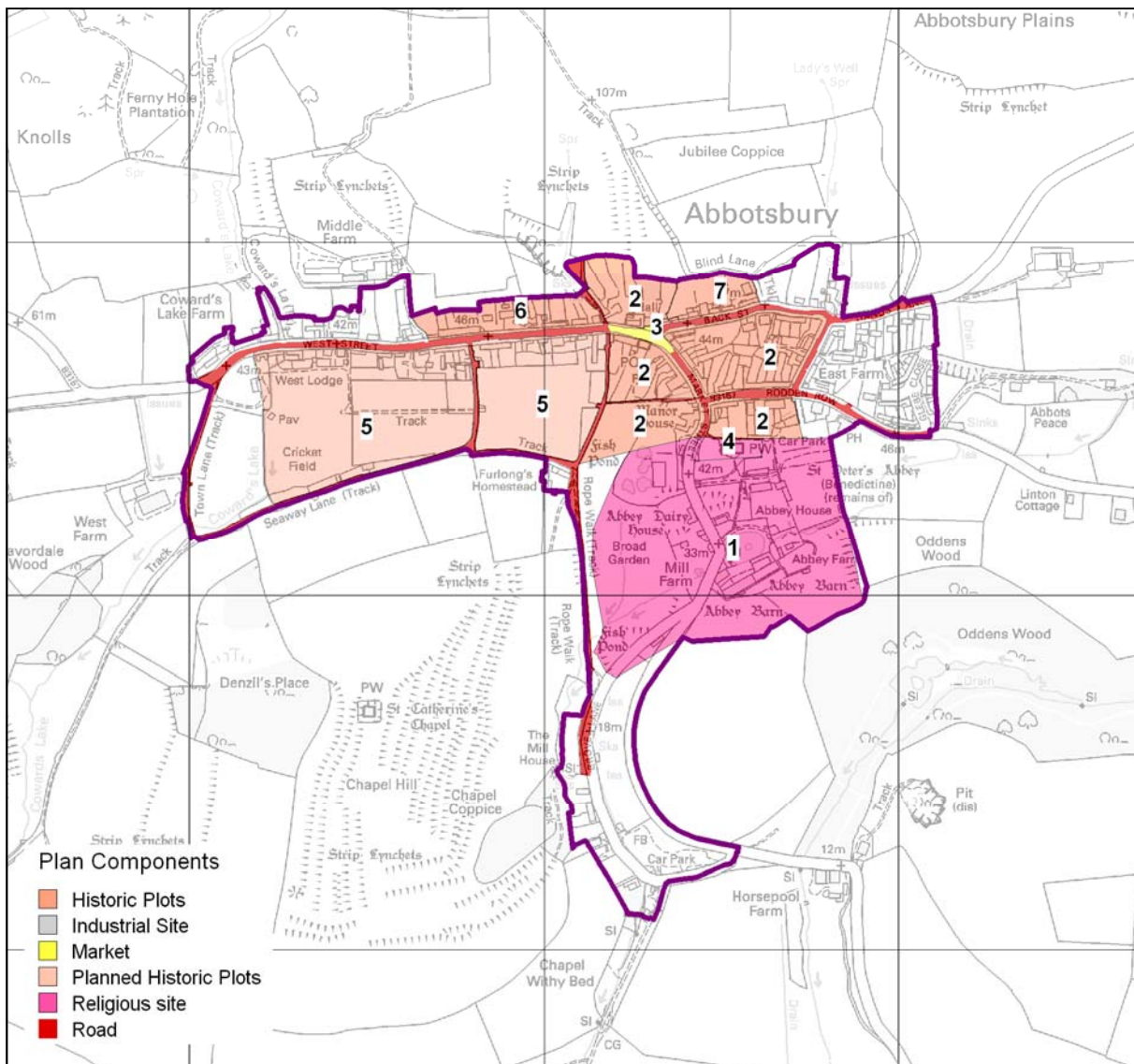*Figure 10: St Catherine's Chapel (south front).*

Figure 11: Abbotsbury Medieval Town Plan Components.

1. *Abbey Precinct (Figure 14).* An early monastic church and cloisters are thought to have been built *c.* 1070, although no evidence for these structures has been identified. Bishop Roger of Salisbury is thought to have demolished and rebuilt the early monastery during the 12th century. Most of the recorded remains of the abbey church of St Peter and the claustral buildings date from the 14th century. An inquisition on the Abbot dated 1401 records something of the layout of the abbey precinct at that time; it lists a dovecot, a garden and a watermill, which ran only in winter. The great barn was also built at this time (Penn, 1980, 11). The location of monastic fishponds is known through extant earthworks in gardens to the west of Church Street. The east, west and part of the south precinct boundary is marked by extant earthworks and surviving walls.

2. *Rodden Row and Market Street.* The main E-W route through Abbotsbury was altered

from the simple linear Rodden Row during the 13th century in order to incorporate the new market place established at the NW corner of the Saxon town. This led to the creation of Market Street (Figure 18), cutting diagonally across the former NW quarter of the Saxon settlement. Plots were re-oriented to front on to Market Street and, although no medieval buildings survive in this area due to post-medieval fires, the property boundaries on Market Street essentially date from the 13th century. These boundaries respect the lane that marks the former westward extension of Rodden Row. The plots to the north of the market place are very likely to have been established shortly after the instigation of the market.

3. *Market Place (Figure 13).* This typical triangular medieval market place is highly likely to mark the site of the weekly market granted to the Abbot in 1274.

4. *St Nicholas' Parish Church (Figure 9).* This church is first mentioned in 1291. The earliest parts of the current building (north aisle north wall, north porch and west tower) date from the 14th century. The church was extensively re-modelled in the 15th and 16th centuries.

5. *West Town suburb.* A mid 18th century estate map reveals that houses on the south side of West Street were located within burgage-style plots called Furlongs. This suggests that the area known as West Town was a late medieval planned suburb of Abbotsbury (Penn 1980, 13-14).

6. *West Street.* The north side of West Street was less regular in plan and probably repre-sents a more piecemeal expansion of the me-dieval town during the late medieval period. No medieval buildings survive along either side of West Street, although numbers 35 and 35a are thought to have been constructed around a 16th century core (Figure 19).

7. *Back Street.* Although no medieval buildings survive here, it is likely that this part of Abbots-bury was colonised in a piecemeal fashion dur-ing the late medieval expansion of the town. It lies adjacent to and east of the market place.

Figure 14: View of the southern part of the monastic precinct from Chapel Lane.

Figure 15: View of The Pinion End and Abbey House.

Figure 12: View of Abbotsbury Abbey's Great Barn.

Figure 16: The exposed part of the north aisle north wall of St Peter's Abbey church.

Figure 13: View of the Market Place.

Figure 17: The Old Gate House.