Part 5: Historical Analysis

5.1 Saxon Shaftesbury (AD870-1066)

5.1.1 Historical Summary

The town of Shaftesbury probably begins with the decision of King Alfred to construct a burh on the limestone spur, probably in the late 870s. Alfred also founded a nunnery here in the late 880s, which probably helped stimulate the growth of Shaftesbury. By the early 11th century, Shaftesbury had become a significant town.

Although this account starts with the establishment of the Alfredian burh, there is some evidence for settlement and other activity pre-dating its construction. Previously, historians have focussed on the possibility that the burh was preceded by an Iron Age or Roman hilltop settlement, largely on account of its dramatic topographic position, but evidence is clearly lacking to substantiate this (Keen 1984). Two possible Early Iron Age pits were found on the north side of Bimport within the probable area of the Saxon burh (ASI 1999), but otherwise there have been very few finds of prehistoric and Roman material from this area. It has also been previously suggested that there was an earlier religious community at Shaftesbury before the burh and nunnery (see Penn 1980, 84), but this has now been discounted (Murphy 1991).

There is rather more evidence for a possible pre-urban settlement to the east of the spur at Barton Hill. Recent archaeological work here has revealed evidence of prehistoric, Roman and Saxon activity (Carew 2008; Whelan & Firth 2009). The earliest evidence for activity in this area is a rather enigmatic Early Bronze Age timber circle, probably a ceremonial monument, rather than a settlement site (Carew 2008). There is rather more evidence for a possible Roman settlement as a number of Roman finds and features have been made in this area, including part of a possible rectilinear enclosure in the grounds of Barton Hill House (Peter Cox, pers. comm.). This stands in contrast to the rest of the area of the town where there have been relatively few finds of Iron Age and Roman material. There is also some evidence for Early and Middle Saxon activity in the form of scattered pottery sherds of 5th-6th century date and a Middle Saxon pottery kiln of 8th or 9th century date (Carew 2008). The size and character of this Early and Middle Saxon activity is not clear, but the evidence may represent a settlement pre-dating the development of the town of Shaftesbury, perhaps established on an earlier, Roman, site. Settlement continued in this area into the Late Saxon period; the remains of a late 10th and early 11th century domestic settlement, set within a regular series of rectangular enclosures or fields arranged in a NNW-SSE alignment, have been revealed by excavation (Carew 2008). It is tempting to see Barton Hill as representing the original settlement at Shaftesbury, perhaps a Royal manor pre-dating the foundation of the burh. Barton became the Abbey's manorial grange during the medieval period.

Shaftesbury is listed in the Burghal Hidage and is likely to have been one of the new fortified places created by Alfred in the period 878-879 (Haslam 2005). Shaftesbury is listed as having 700 hides, which translates as a wall length of 2887 ft (880m) or 700 men required to defend the fortification. William of Malmesbury writing in about 1125 mentions the discovery of an inscribed stone from Shaftesbury which states that Shaftesbury was founded in AD880, the eighth year of the reign of King Alfred (RCHME 1972, 57). The stone may not be contemporary but it does attest to a belief locally that the burh was founded in AD880 (Keynes 1999, 38), which accords well with the date proposed by Haslam (2005).

Figure 6: View of the Saxon hilltop town.

Figure 7: The northern side of the Saxon burh.

King Alfred founded the nunnery at Shaftesbury together with the monastery at Athelney as an act of thanksgiving for victory over the Danes at the Battle of Edington in 878, according to Asser in his life of the king written in about 893. Asser states that Alfred's own daughter Aethelgifu was abbess and the community contained several noble nuns (Keynes 1999). The date of foundation is not known but it is likely to have been in the late 880s (Keynes 1999). The abbey appears to have prospered during the 10th century and retained its Alfredian identity as a place particularly associated with the royal family: Queen Aelfgifu was buried in the abbey in 946. It continued to attract women from the upper levels of West Saxon society during the 10th century (Keynes 1999). By the end of the Saxon period, it had become the richest Benedictine nunnery in England. This was helped in no small part by the association of Shaftesbury with the relics of King Edward the Martyr, who was murdered by his stepmother near Corfe Castle in 979. Originally buried at Wareham, his remains were dug up and transported to Shaftesbury as relics. This raised the profile of the abbey, which became an important place of pilgrimage. Eventually the dedication of the abbey was changed from St Mary to SS Mary and Edward. The town was known as 'the town of Saint Edward' or sometimes 'Edwardistowe' from the 11th century and most particularly during the 12th and 13th centuries (Mills 1989, 111).

The town of Shaftesbury seems to have flourished. This is partly due to its location at the point where the main road from Wiltshire and Hampshire crosses into Dorset on its way to Sherborne and the west. It is also on a main route to Dorchester in the south and Bath and Somerset in the north. Shaftesbury lies between the downland of Salisbury Plain and the pasture of the Blackmore Vale, in a good position to exploit exchange between the two different agricultural areas. The town also benefited from the patronage of the abbey, one of the richest in England. In Athelstan's reign (925-939) Shaftesbury is referred to as a 'port' with two moneyers (Penn 1980, 84). A hoard of 92 coins of Aethelred II was deposited in 1102-3 just outside the Saxon town (in the Bleke Street area). It contained coins from 21 different mints, with over half the coins coming from York, Chester and Lincoln and only one coin from Shaftesbury (Dolley 1956). This suggests that Shaftesbury formed part of an extensive trade network by the 11th century. It was listed as one of only four Dorset boroughs in Domesday and was clearly a town of some importance, second in size only to Wareham in Dorset, with 256 houses compared to 285 in Wareham (Thorn and Thorn

1983). The borough comprised two manors belonging to the King and to the Abbess, with 104 houses in the King's manor and 153 in the Abbess's manor by 1066 (Thorn and Thorn 1983). The survey also lists three moneyers in the King's manor.

The town may have expanded to the east and south of the Abbey during the 10th-11th centuries. The evidence for this is circumstantial and the form and extent of this settlement is not known. However, the positions of some of Shaftesbury's twelve medieval churches may provide a clue and, while none of them can be definitely traced back into the Saxon period, it has been noted that towns founded in the Saxon period generally have a large number of churches within small parishes. This is in contrast to towns founded after the Norman Conquest, which tend to have only one or two parish churches (Morris 1989 168-226; Schofield and Vince 1994, 147). The area of Shaftesbury outside the burh and abbey would certainly fit the Saxon pattern and the locations of the churches could indicate areas of late Saxon extra-mural settlement. St Peter's and St Andrew's churches along High Street and St Laurence's Church on Bell Street (formerly St Laurence Street) suggest the expansion of settlement along these streets. There has also been a small number of finds of Saxo-Norman pottery from the High Street area (Bellamy 2003b, Keen 1977) and 10th-11th century features have been excavated at the Crown Public House (Heaton 2003). St Martin's Church on the corner of High Street and Salisbury Street may indicate the extent of settlement along High Street to the east. The Saxon settlement at Barton, perhaps on the edge of the late Saxon extra-mural settlement, has been described above.

St James may have its origins as a late Saxon suburban settlement below the hilltop to the south of the burh on the road to Sturminster Newton. There are three churches recorded here in the medieval period.

St Rumbold's Church lay on the road to Salisbury outside Shaftesbury in the tithing of the manor of Barton and Cann in Melbury Abbas parish, which had been acquired by the Abbey in 975. It was probably founded as a dependent church or chapel of the abbey in the 11th century (SDAG 1990). This may have stimulated some suburban growth along the road and focussed on the church, though there is no evidence for the date, form and extent of this settlement.
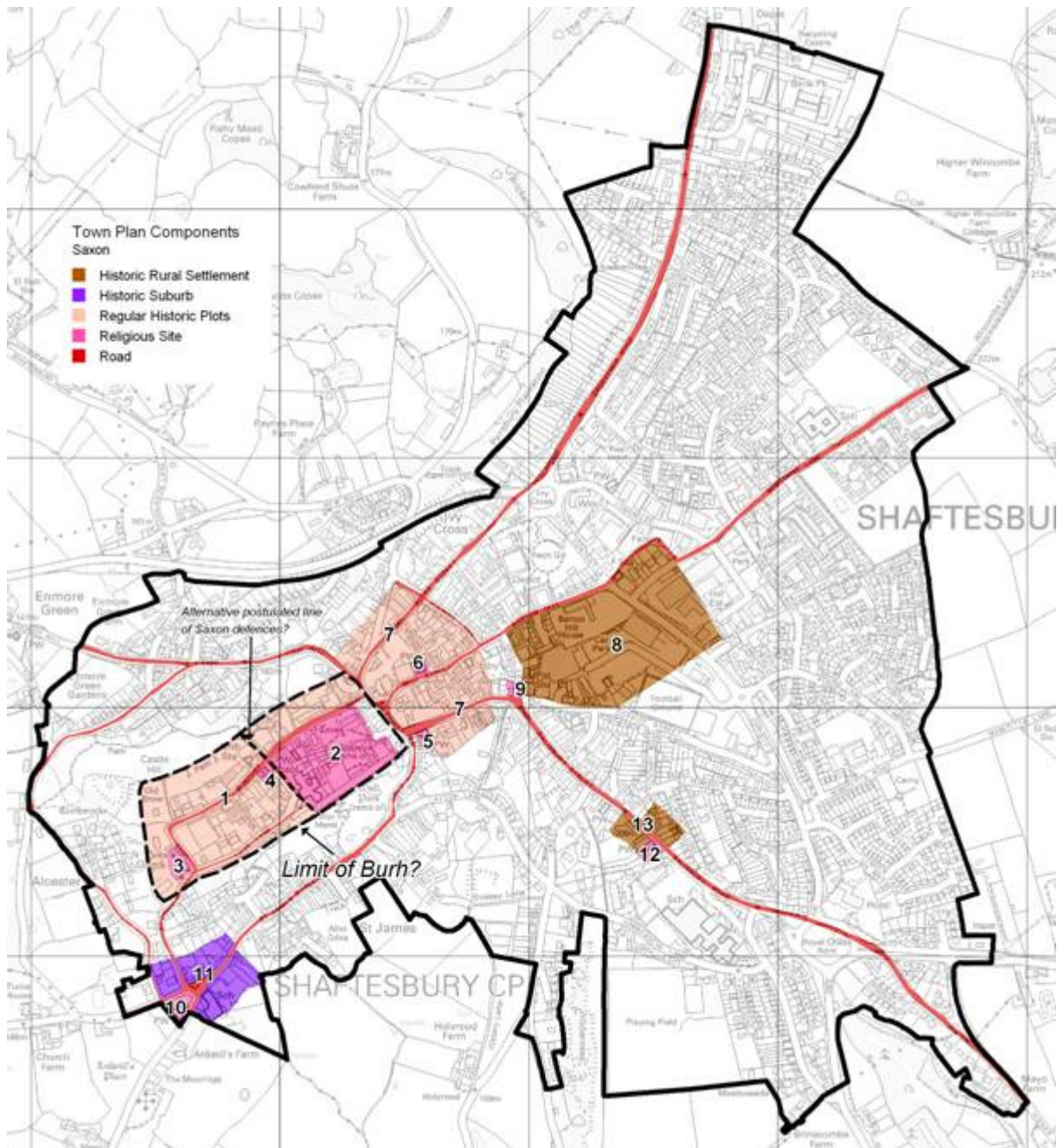
Figure 8: Shaftesbury Saxon Town Plan Components

5.1.2 Town Layout

The burh lay along the hilltop spur, but the precise line of the defences is unknown. A number of theories have been proposed based on the calculated wall length of 880m derived from the Burghal Hidage and Asser's description of the abbey as being next to the east gate of the burh. Three suggested possible lines of defences were mapped by Penn (1980), along Magdalen Lane, along Abbey Walk and along Lyon's Walk. The westernmost course along Magdalen Lane across the middle of the spur was suggested because the line of the defences would most closely fit with the calculated wall length of the Burghal Hi-

dage. Also, there is a surviving earthwork along the line of the lane, which has been suggested as the remains of the burh defences (RCHME 1972, 75). However, this circuit would leave the abbey outside the defences and it seems unlikely that an important nunnery founded by King Alfred with his daughter as abbess would be left unprotected outside the town walls, given the uncertain political and military situation at that time. It seems more probable that the nunnery was placed inside the defences, which would then most likely run along either the line of the later parish boundary along Lyons Walk or perhaps a little further east on the western edge of the High Street along the arc formed by Tout Hill and Gold Hill running

up each side of the spur. The third proposed line along Abbey Walk also places the Abbey outside the defences. A large deep feature found at the northern end of this line on the site of the former Savoy Cinema has been suggested as part of the burh defences (Fletcher and Cox 1986), but the nature and date of this feature is far from certain.

The burh appears to have had a single main street, Bimport, running axially along the ridge. The name *Bimport* means 'within the port' and may have been the site of the original market. The form of the properties along the street is not known but it is likely that there were burgages along both sides extending back to the burh defences. Two churches, St John's and St Mary's, may have served the burh. Both churches have now gone, St John's was at the west end of the spur and St Mary's was adjacent to the Abbey precinct (Figure 7).

The site of the original Alfredian nunnery is assumed to be on the same site as the Norman abbey, as the Normans usually rebuilt churches on or alongside existing sanctified sites. The Saxon nunnery, the largest house of Benedictine nuns in England, is thought to have comprised a series of impressive stone buildings. The only evidence is fragments of Saxon carved stonework recovered during excavations of the abbey site. No Saxon foundations have been found to indicate the form of the buildings. The precinct of the later abbey extended from Bimport in the north to Park Walk in the south and from Magdalen Lane in the west to Lyons Walk in the east (Hopton 1993). It included the site of Holy Trinity church, probably originally an intramural chapel of the abbey (Figure 12).

Archaeological evidence suggests that that town was already expanding east of the abbey in the 10th–11th centuries (Bellamy 2003b; Heaton 2003; Keen 1977). The form and extent of this extra-mural settlement is not known but perhaps is suggested by the locations of the medieval churches along the High Street and

Bell Street. It is possible that the grid of streets represented by High Street, Bell Street and Bleke Street, together with their interconnecting lanes, may have their origins in the Saxon rather than the medieval period and represent part of a late Saxon planned town outside the east gate of the abbey. In this regard, it is interesting to note the regular rectilinear late Saxon plots of the settlement at Barton are arranged in a NNW-SSE direction similar to the grid of streets mentioned above, though the broader form of this settlement layout and its relationship with the Saxon town is unknown.

The settlement at St James may have its origins in the Saxon period, though the date of origin is not known. St James' Church is first recorded in the first half of the 12th century, but may have been a pre-Conquest foundation. The layout of the associated settlement is unknown, but was probably focussed around St James' Church and green, a site which lies close to a spring.

The pattern of roads emanating from Shaftesbury is not clearly understood for the Saxon period. However, it must have been linked with neighbouring and contemporary ecclesiastical centres at Sherborne and Tisbury, probably along Tout Hill and Bleke Street respectively. Good suggests that prehistoric routes existed along the top of the chalk escarpments to the east and south of Shaftesbury along Ox Drove (Good 1966, 13) and the top road to Blandford. Coppice or Shaftesbury Streets may have linked the town with these.

5.1.3 Saxon Urban plan components

The main plan components of the Saxon town are shown on Figure 8 and are listed below.

1. The Burh. The late 9th century burh lies along the Greensand ridge upon which the Saxon town and abbey were founded. It comprises a central axial street, Bimport, probably with regular burgage plots arranged along either side of it to the north and south. Bimport may have been

Figure 9: The eastern end of Bimport, possible site of the Late Saxon market.

Figure 10: The entrance to the Abbey Museum.

the original site of the Saxon market (Figure 9). The course and form of the defensive circuit are unknown. The defences were probably earth and timber, though it is possible they were partly rebuilt in stone in the early 11th century (RCHME 1972, 57).

2. *The Abbey.* The late 9th century nunnery founded at Shaftesbury lay close to the east gate of the burh. The site of the abbey was excavated in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and fragments of carved Saxon masonry were recovered. However, no foundations revealing the layout of the late Saxon abbey were revealed. The extent of the precinct is uncertain, but with reference to the medieval abbey precinct, it is likely to have extended from Bimport in the north to Park Walk in the south and from Magdalen Street in the west to Lyons Walk in the east. The precinct is likely to have contained a number of important stone buildings.

3. *St John's Church.* The Church of St John the Baptist was not recorded until 1272, although it is likely to represent a late Saxon foundation within the burh. The site of the church is only known from its graveyard, which remained in use until the 19th century (Figure 11).

4. *St Mary's Church.* St Mary's lay within the burh on Bimport just to the west of the abbey precinct. Its approximate position is recorded on the town plan of 1615 (Hutchins 1868). It was first recorded in 1302 but is also likely to have been established during the late Saxon period.

5. *St Peter's Church.* This church appears to have first been recorded in 1302 (Penn 1980, 85). However, it may be a late Saxon foundation, built to serve the extra-mural settlement. Some 10th-11th century pottery was recovered from beneath the church (Keen 1977). Another church, St Andrew's also probably first recorded in 1302, lay nearby but its precise location is not known (Penn 1980, 85). This may have been a late Saxon church also.

6. *St Laurence's Church.* This church was first

documented in 1297 (Penn 1980, 85), but may be a late Saxon foundation.

7. *High Street.* Late Saxon expansion of the town to the east of the burh appears to have taken place during the 10th-11th centuries, suggested by a small number of finds of late Saxon coins and pottery and archaeological features. The form and extent of this settlement is not known. The grid pattern of streets including High Street, Bell Street and Bleke Street is consistent with that of a late Saxon planned town and possibly extended as far east as the line formed by The Beeches, Haimes Lane and Shooters Hill.

8. *Barton.* Excavation has shown that activity at Barton Hill dates from at least the Middle Saxon period. A pottery kiln has been radiocarbon dated to between AD660 and AD870 (Carew 2008). A large number of late Saxon pits, ditches and post-holes have also been excavated on the same site. Eleventh century architectural fragments have been recovered from a rockery in the grounds of Barton Hill House. This suggests that the medieval manor of Barton may have had its origins in the Middle Saxon period and seems to pre-date the foundation of the 9th century burh and abbey.

9. *St Martin's Church.* This church may have been mentioned in documents dating to 1302 (Penn 1980, 85), but is possibly a late Saxon foundation.

10. *St James Church.* The Chapel of St James was first recorded in about AD1138 when it was granted to the newly founded Alcester Abbey in Warwickshire. It is likely to have already been in existence prior to Domesday, although it was probably counted with the borough of Shaftesbury at that time. There were also two more churches (All Saints and St Edward the Martyr) in St James Street, but their locations are unknown. Both were first mentioned in the late 13th century, but could have a pre-Conquest origin.

11. *St James Suburb.* The suburb of St James

Figure 11: St John's Churchyard .

Figure 12: Holy Trinity Church with the ruins of the 12th century abbey church in the foreground .

lies on the road from Sturminster and may have its origins as a late Saxon suburb.

12*. St Rumbold's Church.* St Rumbold's Church was first recorded in 1280, but was clearly much older. Excavations beneath the present church revealed traces of an earlier church, probably dating to the 11th century (SDAG 1990). St Rumbold's lay within the Manor of Barton and Cann, a tithing in the parish of Melbury Abbas, which was acquired by Shaftesbury Abbey in 956. The church was probably founded as a dependent church or chapel of the Abbey (SDAG 1990).

13*. Cann.* This settlement formed part of the abbey manor of Barton and was not mentioned in Domesday. The parish church, St Rumbold's, may be 11th century in date and it probably acted as a focus of settlement along the road to Salisbury. The form and extent of this settlement is not known, but may have a late Saxon origin.