

02 Context



Context

02.01

Geographical context

Sturminster Newton is situated in a broad undulating area of rich, quintessentially English countryside, loosely known as the Blackmore Vale. The eastern edge of the vale is clearly defined by the broad uplands of Cranborne Chase, the scarp of which overlooks the vale and which is a feature of regular reference from within the vale itself. Notable is the high broad summit of Hambleton Hill that rises quite dramatically above the gentle features of the Blackmore Vale near Child Okeford, and which features prominently in views from Sturminster Newton itself, some 6 kilometers distant. Continuing north towards Shaftesbury, the chalk scarp continues to dominate the vale to the west, offering extensive views over the rolling countryside.

About 10km to the west, just before Sherborne is reached, there is another minor wooded scarp that effectively defines the western geographical extremity of the vale.

The principal feature of the vale however is the River Stour that rises north of Gillingham and which flows southwards in a broad valley that is the Blackmore Vale proper. Between Shillingstone and Blandford Forum the river takes a more easterly course cutting through the chalk upland between Shillingstone and Blandford Forum and eventually reaching the sea at Christchurch east of Bournemouth.

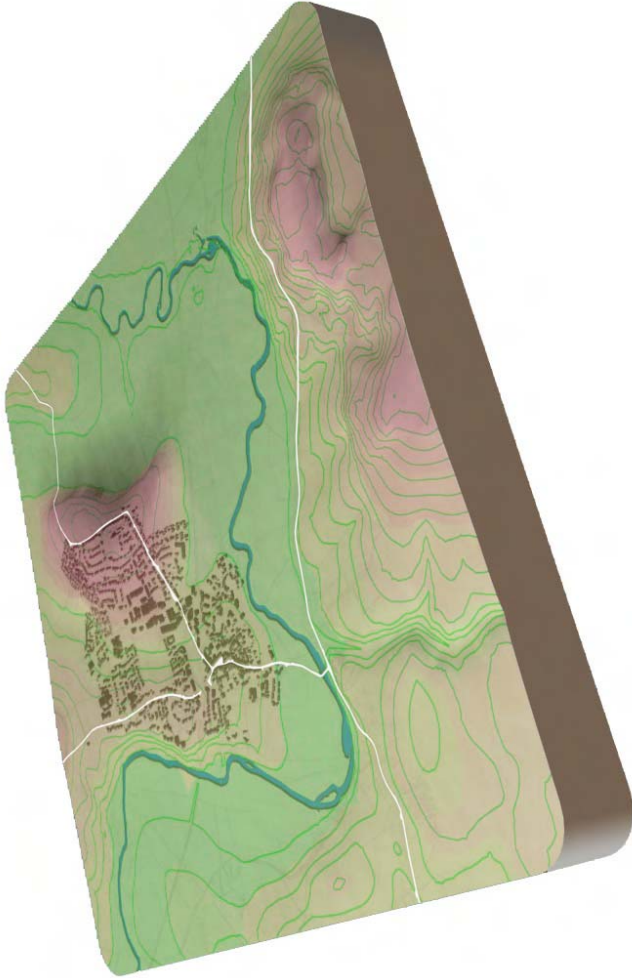
Although the Blackmore Vale appears quite flat in views from the chalk scarp, there are some quite pronounced undulations including a minor west-facing limestone scarp that runs north to south from east of Wincanton and which defines the immediate valley of the River Stour. This scarp is most pronounced towards the north, being about 80 metres high, but it gradually diminishes southwards. Several villages are situated along the scarp including Cucklington, Buckhorn Weston, and Marnhull. This scarp effectively restrains the River Stour on a southerly course, but where it eventually diminishes at Sturminster Newton the river turns suddenly west. It is at this point at the southern extremity of the ridge that Sturminster Newton is situated. To the south the land becomes more irregular and broken, but at Sturminster Newton there is an obvious crossing point of the river that gives rise to the town's historic location.

Immediately to the south, overlooking the crossing itself at Newton village, is an Iron Age hill fort but clearly the present location of the town offered more extensive flatter land for development.

The topographical model opposite provides a good understanding of the landform in and around Sturminster Newton today.

The southern extremity of the long, diminishing ridge, already referred to extends down the model to where it is breached by the river where it turns suddenly eastwards.

The old town is situated in the bend of the river where the land rises above the river floodplain, and the market place is situated immediately south of where the two principal roads divide. The town extends along the river to the north above a relatively small but steep rise in the land and north-eastwards along higher ground at Rixon Hill. It should be noted that the new part of the town is separated by a shallow depression (the Butts Pond Industrial Estate and Meadows area) that runs south towards the river and in which the former creamery site is also situated.



Context 02.01

Geographical context

Blackmore Vale Mendip Hills **Sturminster Newton**
(behind Piddles Wood) Okeford Fitzpaine Dunctiffe Hill Shaftesbury Melbury Hill Child Okeford Hambleton Hill



To the south of Okeford Fitzpaine on the Winterborne Whitechurch road, there are extensive views northwards towards Sturminster Newton and across the Blackmore Vale. Although Sturminster Newton itself is hidden behind intervening higher ground in this view, the panorama gives an excellent impression of the town in relationship to the wider topography as well as its delightful rural setting. Of particular note, is the long chalk scarp on the right of the picture that dominates the lower countryside to the west and which features prominently in many views from and around Sturminster Newton.



Context

02.02 Landscape setting

The location of Sturminster Newton within an arc of the River Stour at a natural crossing point gives the town a close relationship, both physical and visual, to its wider landscape setting. The close relationship to the river and various adjacent walks is certainly a great asset for local residents to enjoy.

In the North Dorset Landscape Character Assessment, the landscape character of the Stour valley at Sturminster Newton is defined as The Upper Stour Valley, Area Three. This sub-division of the wider landscape type identifies the point where the river flows into a confined valley which slopes up to the limestone ridge areas to the north. In places the valley slopes are well wooded and create a distinctive contained landscape. The riverside meadows are identified as being very distinctive, an important recreational resource for the town, and key features of an historic and culturally significant landscape.

To the west, there is a local and pronounced bluff where the river cuts in close to the town. This creates a fine outlook, as enjoyed from Thomas Hardy's villa near the recreation ground, and there are delightful riverside walks along the foot of the bluff as well as wider connection to north and south by the Stour Valley Way footpath and also across the river by the ancient and charming Colber footbridge. The riverside walks are readily accessed from the old town by three paths, and to the north there is an additional connection from the new part of the town to the river. This latter connection is important insofar that access to open country from the northern part of town is quite limited.

During the 20th Century houses have been built along the top of the bluff to enjoy views across the river, but their rather unprepossessing design and monotonous arrangement contributes little to the wider setting of the town, unlike the elegant Victorian villa in which Thomas Hardy resided that is such an attractive focus in local views.

To the south, there is a broad and open sweep of land that extends down to the river, and the ancient and renowned Town Bridge and mill. The setting, seen from the town is very attractive, with a fine backdrop beyond the river of generally wooded appearance and houses partly visible amongst the trees, including a somewhat controversial contemporary house near the mill.

Looking towards the town from the south, the restrained height of development results in rooflines being subservient to a generally higher skyline created by larger trees in and around the town. Houses are seen blending into a well-treed framework with no particular building appearing to be particularly prominent. The only marked exception to this is some glimpsed passing views from the A357 to the south-east where St Mary's Church is more prominently seen in relation to the rest of the town. Unfortunately there are no public footpaths in the area south of the river, so otherwise the view goes largely unappreciated.

To the east of the town, the land falls gently away towards the river and an extensive area of water meadows and hedges. Three footpaths give access east of the town including the Stour Valley Way close to the river, and the recently established North Dorset Trailway that follows the course of the former Somerset & Dorset Railway. Another footpath leaves the town on the corner of Rixon Hill and Manston Road giving access to the east, although the quality of the walk does not match those closer to the river.

To the north and north-east of the town, development ends abruptly along the B3091 Manston Road and directly against agricultural land to the north. The sensitivity of the town edge around this part of the town contrasts unfavourably with the rich and subtle manner of the old town. To the south, development blends gradually into the countryside through a gradual decrease in density, and a margin of small fields and generous countryside. In direct contrast, development to the north generally ends in a hard and artificial edge, either along a principal road or as an abrupt edge against open fields. The relatively high density of recent development in the Honeymead Lane area exacerbates the effect.

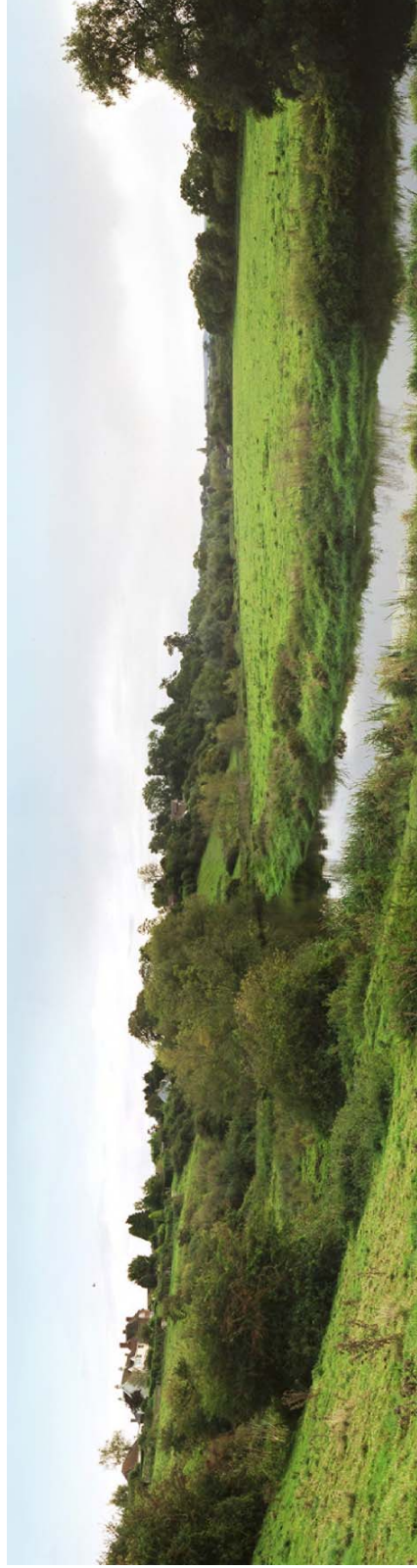
Context

02.02

Landscape setting



Sturminster Newton seen from the A357 south of the River Stour. Towards the left of the view, St. Mary's Church can be identified, but the most prominent feature is the large Wellingtonia in the churchyard that is some 112 ft. high. The small woodland on the skyline at centre left is Yewstock Plantation that dominates the northern exit of the town along Bath Road. It should be noted in this view how the old town on the left of the photograph is well assimilated into its setting, whilst more recent development, that generally lacks sensitive edge treatment, is rather more prominent, although fortunately not particularly intrusive when seen from this location.



This panorama of the western edge of Sturminster Newton demonstrates well the generally successful relationship between this part of the town and its surrounding countryside, including the river. Whilst houses are certainly apparent, and are even situated on the skyline, their form, scale, massing, density and materials, as well as their assimilation into adjacent vegetation, are all vital features in making this a generally appropriate edge.

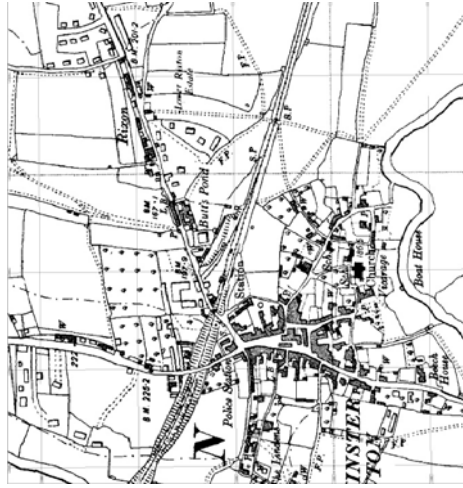
Context

02.03

Historic background



1891



1938



1982

The first identifiable, if oblique, reference to Sturminster Newton dates from 968 AD, when land was given by King Edgar to Glastonbury Abbey. Although little is known about the early history of the town, it is situated in a productive agricultural area and the town's market was clearly a vital factor in its growth, sheep and cattle being the basis for the area's prosperity. The mill was also an important feature that happily survives to this day in much rebuilt form.

By the 19th Century cloth spinning and weaving had become a major source of employment in the town although there was by this time considerable poverty exacerbated it seems by a significant growth in population. However a well-established trade, with Newfoundland that was based upon cod fishing had developed through the port of Poole, and many local men were engaged in this, with a proportion settling permanently in America.

Perhaps the greatest single influence on the development of Sturminster Newton was the arrival of the railway in 1863, and this led in particular to the rapid expansion of the livestock market which latterly moved out of the market square to a new site north of the railway that has been recently redeveloped. Whilst the cloth industry disappeared, no doubt as a result of competition from north of England weavers who were able to compete more successfully through the benefits of cheap railway transport, the cattle rearing and creamery businesses flourished.

The cattle market eventually closed in 1997, and this was a considerable commercial, social and emotional blow to the town, but the site has recently been redeveloped for social, retail, office and mostly residential uses. Similarly, another major employer in the town, the Milk and Cheese Factory, and from which the town derived much of its identity through its national and even international reputation, closed abruptly in 2000. This was another hard blow for the town that further weakened its sense of identity and connection with its surrounding rural community.

Even a brief summary of Sturminster Newton would be incomplete without a reference to Sturminster's strong literary connections. Robert Young (1811-1908), William Barnes (1801-1866) and Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) are all closely associated with the town. During his short sojourn in Sturminster, Hardy and his first wife lived in one of a pair of attractive Victorian villas on the south-west edge of the town that enjoy attractive views over the river and surrounding countryside.

The four maps are illustrated here show the progressive growth of the town from 1891, to the present.

1891 map

Looking at this map of the town, the tight frontage of buildings onto the principal roads and Market Place is immediately apparent, contrasting markedly with the lack of secondary development beyond. Behind the closely-packed frontages there is a rapid transition from market gardens, small fields and a number of orchards to open countryside, although there is some more scattered development along Penny Street. Some larger houses with quite extensive grounds can be identified at The Lindens, Beech House and the Vicarage.

Rather unusually, it will be noted that St Mary's Church is situated away from the main hub of activity in the town centre, and the rather reclusive nature of the church remains a feature of the town to this day.

It will also be noted that there is a good network of lanes and footpaths linking the town with the surrounding countryside.

It will also be seen that the railway defines the northern edge of the town beyond which there is a large orchard, and the dwellings that do exist along both Bath Road and Manston Road appears from their narrow linear plots tight against the roads to be squatters' cottages that remain quite a common feature in the Blackmore Vale, even today.

1938 map

A surprising feature of this map, compared with that of 1891 is how little the town has grown. The railway is known to have brought some significant changes to the town, but surprisingly there has been little increase in its overall extent. This is particularly notable when one considers how substantially many towns expanded with the coming of the railways.

The old town, south of the railway, remains remarkably unchanged, and such change that has occurred has taken place north of the railway. The cattle market, formerly held in the Market Place, has moved to its new permanent site immediately north of the station, and the Milk Factory has been established at Butt's Pond.

Context 02.03 Historic background

However the beginnings of new urban expansion are also to be seen in this area. In addition to the earlier intermittent roadside development, and in marked contrast to it, new development is seen emerging in new plots off both the Bath Road and off Manston Road at Flixton. Unlike the earlier development that fronts directly onto the main roads with linear plots running parallel to the road, the new development either faces onto the road with plots running back at right-angles to it, or it is largely situated within plots with their own access road in the manner of small housing estates. Development at Buffets Close in the top right corner of the plan is clearly orientated to enjoy views over the river to the west.

1982 map

Moving on 44 years, it is clear that there has been a sudden expansion of the town in the post-war period. Whilst the old town retains its original buildings and road network, much infilling has taken place, but within the existing framework. Although new development has been quite significant, it will be noticed from the later parts of this study how this additional development has not seriously eroded the essential features and character of the old town. In some ways it has supplemented and enriched it.

However most new development has been directed northwards, no doubt because of the constraints imposed by the river and its floodplain to the south and west of the town. To the north, new development has been extensive with much ribbon and estate development as well as an enlargement of the Cattle Market and the emergence of the Butti's Pond Industrial Estate. In addition to its size, the new development north of the railway contrasts markedly in form and pattern with the old town, and this underlies a marked change in townscape character, as will be seen from the subsequent studies in this report.

Although the railway had been closed for some years by 1982, its course is still a prominent feature, defined substantially by a deep cutting through the town. The course of the railway through the town is also significant because it broadly defines the boundary between the old and new parts of the town, and as such it has become a line of division, marking a significant break in townscape character, physically, psychologically (and even socially, according to some comments received at the public consultation) dividing the town in two.

Current map
Reference to the current map of the town shows the full extent of development north, with the latest estates extending away to the north-east at Honeymead Lane. Recent changes in policy on residential form and density show a marked change in the layout and massing of development, as well as the nature of urban/rural edges, which subjects are studied in more detail later in this Statement.

The current map shows the on-going redevelopment of the former Cattle market site, and whilst the course of the railway remains apparent, the filling in of the cutting to create a new park helps to reconnect the two parts of the town. Nonetheless, the scars remain apparent, and the redevelopment of the former creamery site and other adjacent land will have an additional importance in helping to stitch the two parts of the town together.

In discussing the issue of division within the town, it is appropriate to note here that the construction of the Exchange Building with its various social functions in this key location has the potential for having a most important role, both practical and symbolic, in reuniting the town.



Current town map

