

Part 5: Historical Analysis



5.1 Medieval Gillingham (AD1066-1539)

5.1.1 Historical Summary

Gillingham is first mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the year 1016 when a battle with the Danes is recorded at Penselwood near Gillingham (Penn 1980, 68). There was a Romano-British settlement in the Cold Harbour area of town, close to Common Mead Lane (Moore and Ross 1989), although this does not necessarily relate to the late Saxon place of Gillingham.

It is difficult to describe Gillingham as a town prior to the medieval period. Nevertheless, the Domesday survey clearly shows it was a Royal estate by the late Saxon period, and possibly the site of a Minster church. Dependencies of Gillingham church are mentioned in the text in relation to its gift by the King to Shaftesbury Abbey. This was in exchange for one hide of land at Corfe Castle (Thorn & Thorn 1983). The Liberty of Gillingham comprised a large estate, which included Bourton, Milton, Motcombe and East and West Stour (Hutchins 1868, 615). This combination of a large Royal estate and a number of dependant churches suggests Gillingham was a reasonably important central place in the late Saxon period. Unfortunately there is very little evidence to suggest the layout or nature of the settlement itself. It may have been little more than a royal court, perhaps in the Kings Court area approximately 1km east of the town (Figure 6), surrounded by dispersed settlement. Alternatively, the grid pattern of lanes around the churchyard may represent the fossilised plan of a late Saxon planned settlement.

The existence of a pre-conquest church is further suggested by the discovery of two late Saxon carved stones, probably originally from a cross shaft and found in the vicarage. The church was largely rebuilt in the 19th and 20th

centuries and it may have been at this time that the late Saxon carved stones were removed to the vicarage.

The manor remained in royal hands following the Norman Conquest and it is likely that the royal residence at Kings Court, just outside the study area on the east bank of the Lodden, was established by the late 11th century. Archbishop Anselm visited William Rufus at Gillingham in 1094, two charters of Henry I were signed here and there was a keeper of the King's houses at Gillingham in 1160-61 (Penn 1980, 68). The King's Court earthworks probably represent the remains of a royal hunting residence situated on the edge of the Forest of Gillingham, close to the town. The forest was included as part of the town tithing and also formed part of the larger Selwood Forest. The men and tenants of the manor had rights of common in the forest, although not in the park, which was adjacent to the royal residence. Part of the park pale survives as an earthwork within the study area at Park Farm.

The Liberty of Gillingham, which always belonged to the lord of the manor of Gillingham and remained in royal hands until 1632, comprised the town tithing together with the tithings of Gillingham minor, Bourton, Milton and Preston, and Motcombe. The town tithing comprised the town of Gillingham together with the hamlets of Bugley, Langham and Huntleford, as well as the forest. Gillingham Minor comprised freehold estates in Ham, Madjeston and Wyke.

The town itself was never formally incorporated as a borough and there are no records pertaining to a medieval market, although two annual fairs are recorded, one on September 1st and the other on Trinity Monday (Hutchins 1868, 615 & 620-6).



Figure 6: View of Kings Court, earthwork remains of a medieval royal hunting lodge.



Figure 7: View of The Square, looking north.

St Mary's church, Gillingham had been a prebendal church to the Abbey of Shaftesbury since the reign of William I. The Abbey appropriated the income and properties of the church before 1319. At this time the vicarage was endowed with the tithes of the parish and a house near the church formerly belonging to the rector. Gillingham also seems to have had a community of Dominican Friars. On 8 December 1267, Henry III granted twelve oaks in Gillingham Forest to the Friars to repair their church at Gillingham. This is thought to have been a chapel connected with the royal palace. The Forest map of 1624 depicts the position of a *Frarve* in the location of the prebendal glebe land east of Peacemarsh and close to the west bank of the Shreen Water. Unfortunately no other reference to the house has yet been found (Page 1908, 92). There had also been a chapel dedicated to St Martin, presumably located at or near St Martin's Square. Nothing else is known of it but it had disappeared by 1586 (Shaw 1973, 12)

The economy of Gillingham was probably largely based on the agricultural products of the surrounding countryside. There was a woollen cloth industry in Gillingham in the post-medieval period and it is possible that cloth-making was carried out here in the medieval period and was probably connected with the much greater Wiltshire cloth industry.

A free school was established in the town in 1516 when a number of copyholders donated lands and tenements to provide for the free education of children in the parish, relieve the poor and maintain highways and bridges. The school was one of the first to be established in Dorset, separate from the abbeys (Shaw 1973, 12). It was housed in a building in the market place and represents the earliest mention of market in the town. It further suggests that the market place may have been partially infilled with buildings at or before the early 16th century.

5.1.2 Town Layout

The medieval town layout is not clearly known, although the surviving street pattern and plot boundaries are suggestive of a certain amount of medieval planning. The church of St Mary appears to be central and may have been established on its present site by the 9th century or earlier. The pattern of roads around it suggests that it may have originally been located within a rectangular enclosure, typical of late Saxon Minster churches. Penn suggests that the town may have been founded on a pre-existing Roman road running through the town and past the church (Penn 1980, 65). In fact there may have been more than one Roman road passing

through the later urban area. One is likely to have been that found at Barnaby Mead running east to west across the mead from Bay Farm to the sluice to the north of Town Mill (Valentin 2003b). This road may have continued straight, to the north of the church, towards Cold Harbour and Wyke. Alternatively it may have passed the church at an angle on its way towards the Roman settlement at Common Mead Lane. Either way, the current rectilinear plan layout around the church may date from the late Saxon period. Two squares on the north and south sides of the church may indicate the position of medieval market places. The one on the north is called St Martin's Square and may have been associated with a chapel of the same name. The one on the south is simply called The Square (Figure 7) and buildings close to it are recorded as being in the market in the early 16th century; the Free School was located here in 1516. A vicarage is recorded close to the church in 1319 and may have been on the site of the present vicarage to the east of the church. The Vicarage is actually at the southern end of a group of regular plots fronting on to the east side Queens Street and St Martin's Square. These are clearly depicted on the tithe map but were not continuous. This may represent a planned group of medieval burgage plots. A fair ground is recorded on the tithe map just beyond the northern limit of the medieval town at Lodbourne. This area is still known as Lodbourne Green, although it has been largely developed.

A second major road runs in an approximate E-W direction through the centre of the town from Shaftesbury in the east to Wyke and beyond in the west. This road crosses the Shreen at Town Bridge. The suburb of Newbury lies along this road on the east side of Town Bridge. This suburb is first mentioned in documents from the early 14th century (Penn 1980, 68).

The medieval settlement pattern surrounding the town during the medieval period seems to have comprised a series of small hamlets linked to the town by radial routes. These include Wyke, Peacemarsh, Bay and Ham Common.

5.1.3 Medieval Urban plan components

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

1. *St Mary's Parish Church*. The earliest surviving fabric of St Mary's Church is the 14th century chancel. However, there was certainly a church at Gillingham at the time of Domesday (Thorn &

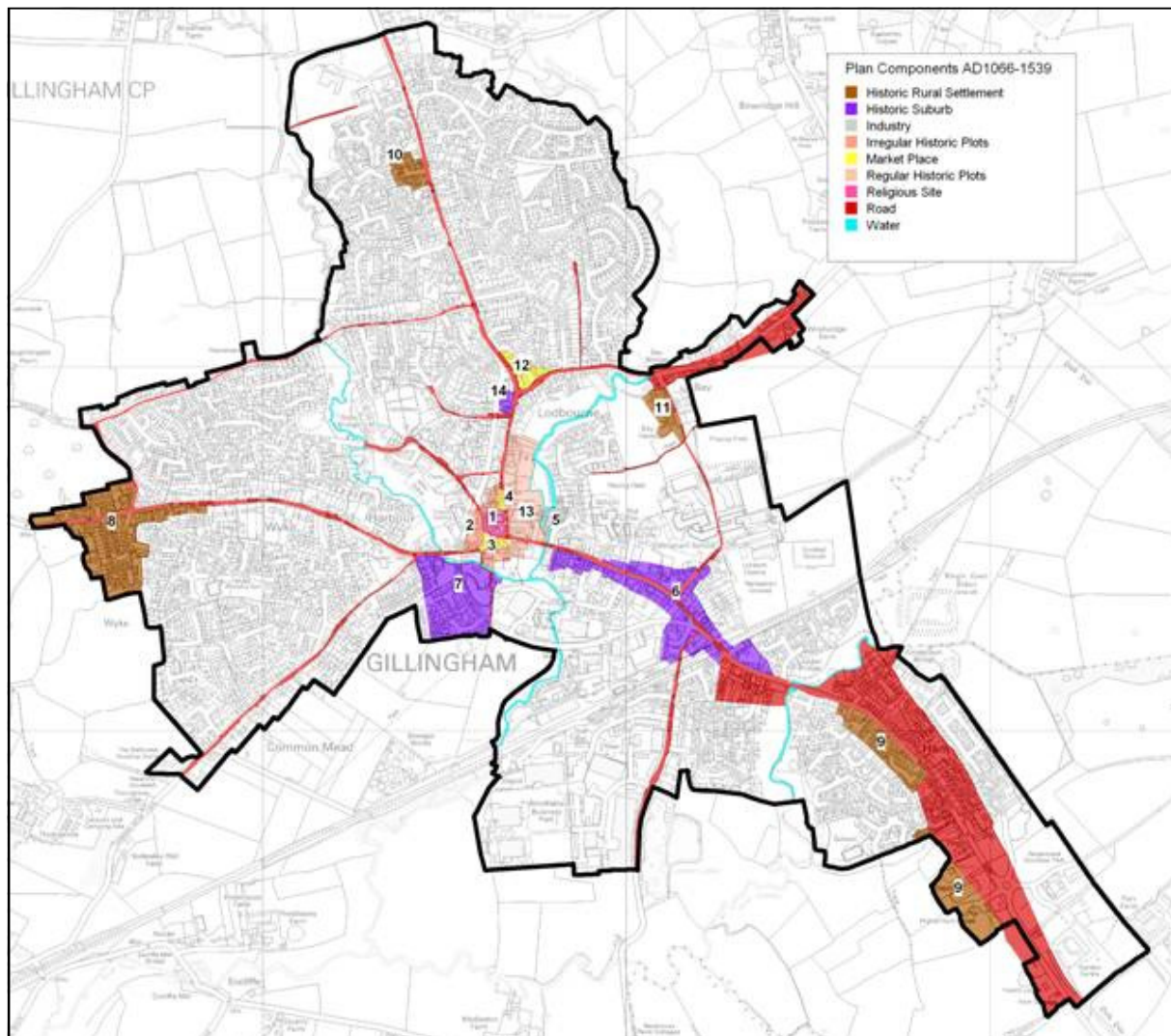


Figure 8: Gillingham Medieval Town Plan Components

Thorn 1983) and it is suggested that this church was a late Saxon Minster. The position of St Mary's Church, next to a possible Roman road and set within a large rectangular plot, both support the possibility that the putative Saxon Minster was on the same site as the current parish church of St Mary. It is suggested here that the original extent of the churchyard included the entire rectangular plot between the southern end of Queen Street and St Mary's Place. The original nave, prior to reconstruction in 1838, was only 12ft wide and was separated from the aisles by heavy Saxon or Norman arches only 11.5ft high supported by large masses of stone which shut out the aisles and rendering them of little use (RCHME 1972, 27).

2. *Town Plots.* There is little surviving evidence for the planning of burgage plots within the medieval town west of Queen Street/St Martin's Square. The location and extent of irregular historic plots of medieval date in the town centre is

a matter for speculation and based to a great extent on the tithe map of 1841. It is assumed that medieval plots would have been arranged around the squares to the north and south of St Mary's Church, as well as around the church itself.

3. *The Square.* It is suggested here that the original area of The Square extended along the full length of the southern side of the churchyard. The only evidence for this is the fact that the Free School was recorded as being located in the Market during the 16th century, suggesting that the plots to the north of south Street represent infill within a former open market place (Penn 1980, 68). No medieval market charters are recorded for Gillingham, although this can potentially be explained by the fact that the market would have been royally owned during the medieval period. However, it may be significant that complaints concerning the enclosure of the forest roads at Gillingham during the

17th century stated that this had detrimentally affected the important market of Shaftesbury. No mention is made of a market at Gillingham (Bettey 1976, 23-4).

4. *St Martin's Square* (Figure 9). Another potential market site lies to the north of the church and takes the form of a triangular plot at the junction of Queen Street and Church Walk. Nothing is known concerning the eponymous chapel of St Martin, except that it had disappeared prior to 1586 when the toft in which it had formerly stood was granted to Edward Read (Shaw 1973, 12).

5. *Town Mill*. No mills are specifically recorded for Gillingham in Domesday, although they almost certainly existed. Three were recorded in 1274 and a fourth had been destroyed by floods. One of these is likely to have been Town Mill, although it is first mentioned by name in the Hearth Tax Assessment of 1662-4 (Shaw 1973, 18).

6. *Newbury*. An early 14th century reference suggests that Newbury may have been created as a new suburb on land to the east of Town Bridge that had formerly lain within the forest of Gillingham. Furthermore, an extent dated 1274 mentions a Ralph of Newbury suggesting that this new suburb had been established in or before the late 13th century. Historic plots within the suburb are not typical burgages but are more akin to those in Ham Common or Bay in which a formerly wide, open street is enclosed and subdivided into plots.

7. *Chantry Fields and Farm*. Excavation and survey in advance of the construction of Le Neubourg Way, Waitrose supermarket car park and Chantry Fields housing estate, has revealed evidence for a medieval suburb south of Chantry Ford. This evidence comprised structures and plot boundaries that had survived as extensive earthworks before development in the 1990s. This activity seems to have fronted on to a N-S aligned lane of possibly Romano-British

origin and potentially the route upon which the late Saxon town of Gillingham was founded. This lane crosses Chantry Ford and enters the town at The Square. A pair of cottages, Chantry Ford and Chantry Cottage, lie either side of this lane on the south side of the ford marking the last vestiges of this suburb. Chantry Farm is now separated from these cottages by the construction of Le Neubourg Way, but may once have formed part of the same suburb. The Chantry after which the settlement is named is St Catherine's chapel in St Mary's Church. This chantry was established in 1331 and dissolved in 1547. It had been established by an endowment of a messuage of land and 58 acres of pasture for the provision of a priest to pray for the soul of John de Sandhull. This messuage was Chantry Farm. Following the dissolution the farm passed into the hands of Sherborne School.

8. *Wyke*. Wyke was anciently a manor (now extinguished) within the free tithing of Gillingham minor lying one mile NW of Gillingham town. It forms one of a series of historic rural settlements established on radial routes emanating from Gillingham (Hutchins 1868, 624-6), anciently separate from the town but recently subsumed by modern suburban developments. Members of the de Wyke family are recorded in both the town tithing and the free tithing in 1327 and 1332 (Rumble 1980; Mills 1971).

9. *Ham Common*. Ham was another ancient manor within the free tithing of Gillingham that has become extinguished. We are fortunate that it is depicted on the Forest Map of 1624. This clearly shows that the few early houses comprising the settlement of Ham lay on the edge of a wide unenclosed street or common leading to the forest of Gillingham. Thus the farm buildings at Lower and Higher Ham are all set back from the current street frontage by 70-80m. Later plots set on the modern street frontage can only date from 1627 or later, when the forest was enclosed.



Figure 9: *St Martin's Square with St Mary's Church behind.*



Figure 10: *Lodbourne Green looking northwest.*

10. *Peacemarsh*. This historic rural settlement does not appear to have been mentioned by name in medieval documents. It is marked on the Forest Map of 1624, although it is not clear whether it was a settlement or merely a marshy area subdivided into plots (pieces) at that time.

11. *Bay*. Bay is another historic rural settlement not mentioned in medieval documents by name but depicted on the 1624 Forest map. This again suggests that Bay comprised a couple of houses on the edge of a wide unenclosed road or common leading to the forest.

12. *Lodbourne Green (Figure 10)*. This green is at the north end of Queen Street, where the road forks to Milton on Stour and Boveridge. On the tithe map of 1841 a field within the fork of this junction is described as *allotment fair ground* and is likely to be the site of Gillingham's two annual fairs recorded by Hutchins as being held on September 1st and Trinity Monday (Hutchins 1774, 223).

13. *Town Burgages*. The arrangement of regular plot boundaries along the east side of Queen Street is suggestive of a block of planned burgage plots. The plot boundaries exhibit only partial survival, notably immediately north of the vicarage and at the northern end of Queen Street, opposite the Queen's Head. These plots run down to the river Shreen and the millstream. The Vicarage itself is recorded as early as 1319 as a house formerly belonging to the Rector. The vicarage schoolrooms (Figure 11) may have some surviving medieval elements to their structure (Newman & Pevsner 1972, 215). This may suggest that these regular plots date from the late 13th century or earlier.

14. *Lodbourne*. This area of Gillingham, at the northern end of the town, is certainly a suburb by the post-medieval period. However, one building at the northern end of Queen Street, Stour Motors, appears to date from the 16th century (Figure 12). It has a surviving roof of 5 bays and may be a late medieval hall house. It is possible then that further buildings existed in

this area at that time, although none are thought to survive.



Figure 11: The Vicarage Schoolrooms, Queen Street.



Figure 12: Stour Motors, Queen Street.