

# Summary

This report contains the results of a consideration of the historical, archaeological, architectural and map evidence relating to the developmental history of Stalbridge. It has focused on the understanding of the overall development of the town from its earliest beginnings to the present day. This work has been conducted in order to; achieve a better understanding of how the historical dimension has influenced the modern townscape; identify what historical features and structures survive within the modern town and; comprehend the contribution made by this historic dimension to the present character of Stalbridge. This will enable an informed approach to the management of change and conservation of the urban environment.

## *Historical Background*

Stalbridge appears to have originated as a late Saxon royal manor, which was granted to the church at Sherborne in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. This is likely to have been located in the vicinity of St Mary's church at the north end of the present town or Gold Street a little further south. A market charter was granted in 1290, and the market was probably held near the 15<sup>th</sup> century market cross. Two fairs were also granted for Stalbridge in the late 13<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, the town seems to have remained relatively poor during the medieval period, with an economy based on local crafts and services. The town may have had around 500 inhabitants by the end of the medieval period, and the market had decayed by the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century Stalbridge experienced an economic renaissance and a new market was granted in 1637. The town held the most successful cattle market in the county of Dorset during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and exported dairy produce as far as Poole. Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a serious decline in the fortunes of the town, despite the arrival of the railway in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. The population fell from 2,100 to 1,200 between 1871 and 1921. Nevertheless a new saw mill was established in 1926. The population of the town increased to the current high of 2,680 following the development of suburban housing estates in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## *Town morphology*

Stalbridge has a tightly packed town centre partly based on a grid plan of pre-existing tracks. Gold Street, Church Lane, Station Road, Drew's Lane, Wood Lane, Ring Street and Barrow Hill are the main survivors of this grid. The

medieval nucleus lay on the south side of St Mary's Church. The layout is slightly unusual in that the church lies at the extreme northern end of the town, rather than in the centre. This is the result of southwards expansion in the post-medieval period and the shift of the commercial focus from the medieval market site to the north end of Ring Street, where the junction of High Street, Station Road, Barrow Hill and Ring Street may mark the site of the 17<sup>th</sup> century market. Ring Street was a wide street and was the site of post-medieval fairs. This street gradually became enclosed during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Suburban housing developed at the south end of Ring Street during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, following the construction of the new turnpike, Thornhill Road, south of the town. During the mid-late 20<sup>th</sup> century Stalbridge expanded beyond its post-medieval limits to the east and west through the development of modern housing estates at Jarvis Way and Barrow Hill.

## *Built character*

Stalbridge has a large number of historic buildings within the area of the medieval and post-medieval town. The majority date from the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, although there are also four standing medieval structures: the 15<sup>th</sup> century market cross, the parish church of St Mary and two 15<sup>th</sup> century domestic buildings. The historic buildings make an important contribution to the character of Stalbridge and are typified by their modest scale, use of local stone for walling and roofing, and survival of historic fabric such as windows, doors, chimneys and boundary walls. The majority of the town centre has been constructed from the local grey Forest Marble, including walls and stone tiles. However, brick and imported Welsh slate were increasingly used from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. There is also some limited use of imported Ham Hill stone, notably in the market cross and ashlar detailing on some buildings. Behind the historic street frontages there has been significant modern development with large modern suburban estates on the fringes.

## *Landscape Setting*

Stalbridge lies on an east-facing slope overlooking the wide expanse of the Blackmore Vale and the upper Stour valley, close to the border with Somerset. The town is positioned near the southern tip of a north-south aligned Jurassic limestone ridge which projects into the clay vale. There are no major water courses in Stalbridge, although a number of springs issue from



Figure 1: Vertical aerial photographic view of Stalbridge, 2005 (© Getmapping.com, 2005).

within the town. During the late 20<sup>th</sup> century the town expanded eastwards into the fringes of the clay vale itself.

#### *Historic Urban Character*

The historic urban character of Stalbridge is closely bound up with its landscape setting and the quality of its historic fabric. The medieval town plan survives virtually complete and the associated streetscapes are largely intact. The location of the church and market are also significant in terms of the medieval character. The surviving plan elements of Stalbridge's various markets reflect the importance of rural commerce to the history of the town, as well as the importance of Stalbridge as a cattle market during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The good survival of the historic structure is complemented by the large quantity of historic buildings, including many unbroken groups, with little disruption from modern development. This is a major factor which highlights the contribution made by historic elements to Stalbridge's urban character. The harmonious use of a range of local building materials helps under-

score its local setting and emphasises links with the surrounding landscape.

The landscape and topographic setting of the town is fundamental to its character. In particular, the visual impact of St Mary's Church above the town and the town above Blackmore Vale.

#### *Further Research*

This report has highlighted many aspects of the historical development of Stalbridge and how this has shaped the modern town. It has also indicated gaps in our knowledge and areas which would repay further research.

The main areas of suggested further research include:

- Research into the origins and form of the Saxon settlement and earlier Roman activity.
- Research into the medieval development of the town, its economy, industry and secular buildings.
- Research into the post-medieval market and fair site at The Ring.