Summary

This report contains the results of a consideration of the historical, archaeological, architectural and map evidence relating to the developmental history of Shaftesbury. 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 Shaftesbury. This will enable an informed approach to the management of change and conservation of the urban environment.

Historical Background

Shaftesbury originated as an Alfredian burh, probably in 878-880 on the highly defensible position on a Greensand spur. Alfred founded a nunnery, probably in the late 880s by the east gate and it became the largest house of Benedictine nuns in England. A town and market developed to the east of the abbey during the 10th and 11th centuries. The abbey became associated with the relics of King Edward the Martyr, murdered in 979 and became an important place of pilgrimage. Shaftesbury was one of only four Dorset boroughs at Domesday, although more than a third of the houses were destroyed between the Norman Conquest and 1086. The town was economically successful during the 13th and 14th centuries due to its location on the Great West Road and as a place of pilgrimage. The town had 12 parish churches and at the start of the 14th century it was the most populous town in Dorset. The abbey was dissolved in 1539, from which time Shaftesbury became no more than a regional market town. During the 18th and early 19th centuries it was the archetypal 'pocket borough'. The town never developed a significant industrial base, though it was a noted button making centre in the late 18th and early 19th century. The town stagnated somewhat during the 19th century but remained an important market town. During the 20th century the town saw increasing suburban expansion, particularly to the east.

Town morphology

The town can be divided into three main topographic areas, the Greensand spur, the plateau and the underhill areas. The spur has a single main street, Bimport, and a rather open settlement character. The main centre of the town is on the plateau area arranged around an irregular grid of three streets and linking lanes, with a dense series of plots which display remnants of earlier regular planning. High Street has a typical funnel-shaped market area. These streets run eastwards to meet Christy's Lane in the east, which forms a by-pass to the historic town centre. To the east of Christy's Lane are typical late 20th century industrial estates and suburban housing estates. Below the town to the south, St James comprises a single main street with back lane running around the lower slopes of the Greensand spur. Enmore Green lies on the northern slopes and comprises a semi-rural layout of irregular plots and cottages set around a triangle of roads with some small later 20th century suburban housing estates.

Built character

Shaftesbury has a large number of historic buildings within the area of the medieval and post-medieval town. There are very few architecturally important buildings, but the large number of vernacular houses built of local Greensand provide a strong group contribution to the character of the historic town. The majority date from the 17th to 19th centuries, but there are also three standing medieval structures: St Peter's Church, Edwardstowe and part of the Old School House on Abbey Walk. The ruins of the abbey church have been excavated and remain on display as a museum. Shaftesbury is perhaps best known on a national level for the collection of 18th century cottages along Gold Hill. Many of Shaftesbury's buildings were re-built during the 19th century, notably along the High Street where a number of three storey brick frontages were constructed, the Town Hall in the market place and three parish churches, rebuilt in the early English style. Behind the historic street frontages there has been significant modern development with large modern suburban estates on the fringes.

Landscape Setting

Shaftesbury is famous as a Saxon hill top town, lying on a prominent high Greensand promontory jutting westwards into the Blackmore Vale and spreading across the high Greensand plateau to the east. Spectacular views of the vale extend north, west and south from the town and the town itself is clearly visible atop the ridge from the south. There are no major water courses or springs within the town and traditionally water was carried up from springs at En-

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

more Green and St James until the mid 19th century.

Historic Urban Character

The historic urban character of Shaftesbury is closely bound up with its distinctive landscape setting and the quality of its historic fabric, as well as its significant early history. The dramatic hilltop setting and spectacular views from the town along Gold Hill, Park Walk and Castle Hill are major elements in the distinctiveness of Shaftesbury. The late Saxon and medieval town plan survives virtually complete, but the area of the Alfredian burh has largely lost its earlier settlement pattern. Most later suburban development has taken place outside the historic core to the east of the town.

The good survival of the historic town structure is complemented by the large quantity of historic buildings. The existence of many unbroken groups of historic buildings, with little disruption from modern development, is a major factor which highlights the contribution made by historic elements to Shaftesbury's urban character. The harmonious use of local building materials helps underscore its local setting and emphasises the linkage with the surrounding landscape.

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

Further Research

This report has highlighted many aspects of the historical development of Shaftesbury 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 layout of the late 9th century burh and abbey
- Research into the late Saxon and medieval development of the town, its economy, industry and secular buildings.
- Research into the potential pre-urban settlement.