

Summary

This report contains the results of a consideration of the historical, archaeological, architectural and map evidence relating to the development of Milton Abbas. It has focused on the understanding of the overall development of the town from its earliest beginnings to its abandonment and the creation of the present village and landscaped park. It attempts to identify what historical features and structures survive within the present landscape, and comprehend what is the contribution of its historic dimension to the character of Milton Abbas today. This will enable an informed approach to the management of change and conservation of the urban environment to be undertaken.

Historical Background

The origins of Milton Abbas are as a settlement that grew up outside the 10th century abbey of Milton, founded by King Athelstan, probably in the 930s. Milton Abbey was a wealthy abbey and attracted settlement at its gates. The date of origin of the settlement is not known but there appears to have been a well-established town by the mid-13th century. A market and a yearly fair were granted to the abbot in 1252. The town of Middleton remained dependent on the abbey and did not become a borough. The abbey suffered a serious fire in 1309 and its fortunes were much reduced.

The town appears to have grown fairly large by the mid-14th century, but was probably still only a relatively modest agricultural market town. Little is known of the fortunes of the town after the dissolution of the abbey in 1539 and the purchase of the site by Sir John Tregonwell, but by the time the estate was bought by Joseph Damer (Lord Milton) in 1752, it appears to have been in decline. The town was gradually removed by Lord Milton in the 1770s, as part of the creation of a new extensive landscaped park designed by Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, and the inhabitants rehoused in a new picturesque model village. This effectively saw the end of the urban history of Milton Abbas. There was a small amount of development during the 19th century and a new council house estate was built to the north of the village in the 1950s.

Morphology of the old town of Middleton and the present settlement of Milton Abbas

The old town lay immediately to the south of the Abbey with the triangular Market Street at the north end. The High Street ran south from the east end of the market, with a back lane to the west and was continued by Broad Street with

Back Street on its east side. At the junction of High Street and Broad Street was another street running to the west called Newport Street. This plan of the town hints at several phases of development. The earliest phase may be represented by the market place and High Street. Broad Street with its back lane (Back Street) may represent a second phase of development. The settlement along the east side of Back Street may represent a third phase. The plots are larger and more regular and hint at some element of a planned layout.

The site of the town was landscaped and incorporated into Milton Abbey landscaped park in the late 18th century. The settlement of Milton Abbas was moved to a new location away from Milton Abbey house in a side valley. It is a completely planned settlement and comprises a single street running along the base of the valley, with largely identical houses set regularly on both sides, set back behind wide grass verges. It remains perhaps the best-known improved Georgian village in Britain.

Built character

The built character of Milton Abbas comprises two separate elements, the high status buildings of the abbey and Milton Abbey House and the largely late 18th century buildings of the present village of Milton Abbas. The magnificent 14th century abbey church and abbot's great hall and the mainly late 18th century Milton Abbey House are important buildings in the county, but are not significant buildings in the context of the urban history of Dorset.

A single house survives *in situ* from the former town of Middleton, an 18th century cottage. The 17th century Tregonwell Almshouses were also from the old town but were moved to the present village in the late 18th century. The most distinctive element of the built character is the late 18th paired thatched cottages in the present village of Milton Abbas. These are complemented by other late 18th century buildings, including the thatched former brewery, the thatched Hambro Arms, and the vicarage. There are also a small number of 19th century buildings, including the school and cottage hospital, but these are a minor element in the architectural make-up of the village. The small amount of modern housing is largely hidden from the historic village and is typical of the period with no remarkable local characteristics.

Landscape Setting

Milton Abbas lies within the Milborne Brook val-



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

ley, surrounded by chalk downland, which has been incorporated into a Brownian landscaped park. The present village, set in a narrow side valley, is an integral designed part of this park.

Historic Urban Character

The present-day Milton Abbas is essentially a non-urban environment. The urban component was swept away by the creation of the 18th century landscape.

The current village has no physical connection with the former town. Its character is one of a planned picturesque village with a regular layout along a single sinuous main street. Most of the original village layout and buildings survive intact. The later developments are not intrusive and the whole retains its original planned coherence and relationship to the surrounding landscape park. It is the combination of the good survival of the distinctive paired cottages, the intact original plan of the settlement and its rela-

tionship to the surrounding landscaped park that give Milton Abbas its distinctiveness and make it justly famous as a very good example of a late 18th century model village.

Further Research

This report has highlighted many aspects of the historical development of Milton Abbas. It has also indicated gaps in our knowledge and areas which would repay further research.

The main areas of suggested further research include:

- The layout of the abbey precinct and the date of origin of the settlement at its gates.
- Research into the medieval development of the town, its economy and industry.
- Research into the post-medieval development of the town, its economy, industry and demise.