

6. BUILT CHARACTER

Settlement Character

Settlement character across England is related to the underlying landscape, particularly topography and proximity to water. The chalk areas to the south and west of Wiltshire fall within the East Wessex sub-province of England as described in the Atlas of Rural Settlement in England². This province is described as an area of overall low density settlement where the location of nucleated settlements is strongly affected by terrain – often falling in chains along the valleys where water supply was assured. The north west of the county falls within the Cotswold Scarp and Vale sub-province. In the area of the province within Wiltshire villages and hamlets appear at moderate densities. The atlas notes that this area is transitional between the Midlands with their large area of relatively homogeneous terrain with subtle variations and the broken heterogeneous terrains of the West Sussex sub province to the south (which includes the south western portion of Wiltshire). This area of the county has been heavily influenced by the woollen industry which has sustained its density of settlement.

Villages

The pattern of village across the county strongly reflects the geology, with the distribution of villages on the chalk lands of the south and east contrasting strongly with the clay vales and limestone to the west.

On the chalk, settlement has grown up along the springline, at the foot of the chalk scarps where villages can exploit the downland landscape above it. This is noticeable for instance in the Wylde Valley where villages such as Steeple Langford, Stockton, Wylde, Sherrington, Corton and the two Codfords (Codford St Peter and Codford St Mary) occur along the springline, at the foot of the chalk escarpment. This pattern of settlement is also visible along the Ebbel Valley where Bishopstone, Broadchalke and Ebbesbourne Wake occur at the spring line. A striking feature of settlement throughout the chalklands is the density of villages and hamlets found along these river valleys, and the contrast with the surrounding expanses of open downland where nucleated settlement is very rare.

Through the other areas of the county villages are generally more evenly distributed although there are variations – for instance there are a higher number of nucleated and linear villages in the sheltered Vales of Pewsey and Wardour than in the open clay vales of the Bristol Avon and the Thames. There are also some locally distinctive patterns of settlement reflecting both geology and the history of particular areas. The greensand areas to the south west of the county have distinctive linear villages strung along the roads leading from the vales below to the high chalk downs, examples are Swallowcliffe and Fovant. While to the far south east of Wiltshire on the edge of the New Forest and in the former royal hunting forest of Braydon, loosely bound linear villages run along roads or fringe commons.

Deserted Villages

A number of sites of deserted or shrunken villages of post-Roman origin exist in Wiltshire. Total desertion, such as at Yarnfield (Maiden Bradley) is rare, but there are many examples

² Roberts B & Wrathmell S (2000) An Atlas of Rural Settlement in England, English Heritage

of larger settlements reduced to a single farm or little more such as Shaw (West Overton) or Barbury (Ogbourne St Andrew). The clay lands of the Avon and Thames Vales were heavily occupied during medieval times and were under intense arable cultivation, their villages have since shrunk or been deserted leaving the present more dispersed settlement pattern in these areas. Although some villages had shrunk or been abandoned by the end of the medieval period, this is not the only period to include this sort of change. In many cases abandonment was gradual over centuries or, exceptionally, it was sudden such as at the village of Imber, depopulated due to military use during the 20th century.

Dispersed Farmsteads

Dispersed farmsteads is the dominant settlement pattern on much of the chalk downs and the high open limestone areas fringing the Cotswolds. Villages are concentrated in the more sheltered valleys or along spring lines leaving these relatively exposed and inhospitable areas sparsely settled.

Towns

Wiltshire is a county with a large number of small towns, many are which are long established settlements which gained stability and wealth through the wool trade. The towns are all sited in valleys; a string of settlements close to the Bristol Avon sit above the river on what were once raised dry areas in the marshland while the chalk valleys shelter the market town of Marlborough and the City of Salisbury with its ritual functions transferred from Old Sarum with the building of New Sarum in 1220. The coming of the railways in the mid 19th century lead to the transformation of Swindon from a minor hill top settlement to the largest town in Wiltshire. Large scale industrial development on the edges of Swindon is echoed on a smaller scale in some of the towns along the Bristol Avon such as Trowbridge and Chippenham.

Other settlement

Other forms of settlement influencing the Wiltshire Landscape are the grand houses such as Longleat, Bowood and Stourhead with their extensive parklands and estates and the military installations on the chalk uplands. The latter dominate Salisbury Plain in particular with the vast empty bombardment areas making a strong contrast with the intensive settlement of the camps.

Vernacular Building Styles

Traditionally buildings were constructed of local materials. The dramatic variations in geology across Wiltshire mean that a rich variety of different vernacular materials were used, often determining the building style and method of construction. The broad division of the county by geology means that most of the older buildings to the south and east are of a combination of materials such as flint, chalk, brick and stone, with stone on its own generally reserved for prestigious buildings. To the north west the underlying limestone is used for all sorts of buildings and for stone walls while in the clay vales to the north and centre of the county brick is prevalent.

The Jurassic limestones of the Cotswold belt were used to build the villages and towns at the north west of the county and to some extent further afield into the clay vales of the Thames and Bristol Avon. The very fine Box Ground, a variety of Bath stone, was used for prestigious buildings such as Malmesbury Abbey, Lacock Abbey and Longleat House. Poorer

quality limestones from the Great Oolite, Forest Marble and Cornbrash formations, known as ragstone, was used for cottages, farm buildings and walls while the thinly bedded, fissile, shelly limestones of the Forest Marble provides stone roof tiles.

The Corallian limestone is a durable building stone quarried around Lyneham and Calne, while the Portland stone, a pale grey limestone found in the Vale of Wardour and at Swindon has been quarried since the medieval times. The Chilmark stone in the Vale of Wardour is part of the Portland beds and was used to build Salisbury Cathedral in the 13th century.

The lower greensand yields a dark orange-brown sandstone used locally for cottages around Sandy Lane. Upper greensand is also not a common building stone although a greenish grey ragstone is used at Mere.

Sarsen stones, lumps of sandstone on the chalk, have long been used for building stone – the best known example forming the megalithic monuments such as at Avebury. They have also been used for domestic buildings and several villages, such as at West Overton, Lockeridge, Fyfield and West Kennet are constricted of roughly broken blocks of sarsen fitted together in a jigsaw pattern. A substantial stone cutting industry developed around the sarsen stones in the mid nineteenth century, with the stone being cut for tramways and paving kerbs, among other uses.

Chalk is normally too soft to build with but hard nodular bands within the rock have been used in the past for want of more suitable materials. This is known as clunch and is found in cottage and perimeter walls on the chalk, and even inside churches such as at Aldbourne and Wanborough. Often clunch was used in combination with other materials such as knapped flint, brick or stone as in the Wylde valley, where the shortage of building stone means that distinctive cottages, built from a chequer board pattern of knapped flint and clunch developed.

Chalk was also ground up and used to form cob walls which typically are broad village walls with rounded outlines. The porosity of the chalk meant that thatched or tiled roofs were necessary to cap off the walls, whilst substantial stone or brick footings prevented the ingress of water at their bases.

From the 18th century brick was an increasingly important building material in the county, with small brickworks and clay pits scattered throughout the county to exploit the Oxford, Kimmeridge, Gault and London Clays. In the chalk areas bricks were used to dress flint or clunch walls, and for the construction of chimney stacks and fireplaces. In some timber-framed cottages the brick walls have been laid in elaborate patterns. While in the clay areas brick was used alone with red clay roof tiles.