

2 Historical Influences

Although the Celtic Harroway and the Roman Portway bypassed the area where the present town of Whitchurch is located, the pattern and growth of the town has been laid down over time by other trade and communications routes and influenced by the natural features of the countryside.

Early history

After the Romans left Britain, the Saxon settlers of the Wessex area founded their communities along the river valleys of southern England. The River Test (Map:1) was the centre of the economic life of the community, providing water for wool processing and power for weaving and grinding (A). Now the river gives enjoyment to walkers and fishermen and remains at the heart of the community.

By the end of the first millennium the Saxon town of Hwitancyrice, White Church, marked the junction of the trading routes (Map: yellow circles) used by travellers on foot and horse making their way from London to the west and from the midlands to the south coast.

The conquering Normans encouraged trade and commerce, and the town of Witcerce, recorded in the 1086 Great Book of England, had mills practically every half mile along the banks of the river Test. In the 13th century Whitchurch was given a charter and became a borough, its centre moved from around the parish church to the present Market

Square and burgage tenements were defined. From 1586 to 1832 Whitchurch sent two members to Parliament, and since the right to vote in parliamentary elections was held by these tenements, few of their boundaries were altered and can thus be traced today.

The original overland trading routes were reinforced by Charles I in 1635 with the introduction of the Royal Mail, followed soon after with the growth in stagecoach travel. Later, in 1644, Charles I stayed at the manor, now King's Lodge (B), prior to the second battle of Newbury.

The natural pattern of growth along the coaching routes (Map:2) continued until 1854, when the Victorians opened up the east-west route of the London and South West Railway (Map:3). The long deep cutting through the chalk downs to the north of Whitchurch created the first artificial boundary to the town. The historical trade route, crossing the railway, was reinforced with the construction of a brick bridge (C) at the crossover point.

The artificial boundaries doubled in 1885 with the construction of the north-south steep embankment carrying the Great Western Railway from Didcot through to Southampton (Map:4). The route lies just to the west of the town centre and runs transverse to the natural lie of the chalk downland. Brick bridges carried the railway over the earlier roads along the valley. The closure of this rail link

in 1964 left behind a man-made backbone that over time became a tree-lined boundary of the western edge of the town.

The inter-war period

The footprint of the town, shown on the 1919 Ordnance Survey map, is not difficult to see: south of Oakland Road, roofed predominantly with slate brought in on the railway from Wales, development was confined to the flood plain and lower foothills on the northern side of the river following the river from the parish church to the eastern edge of town.

Post World War 2

Subsequent residential growth follows the pattern imposed by the natural and man-made constraints.

The latest and loudest man-made physical barrier to westerly growth came in 1976 with the opening of the A34 bypass (Map:5). Like the disused north-south railway line, the A34 runs against the natural land form and therefore becomes elevated to the south west of the town (E). The prevailing winds remind the town of its noisy presence.



Lord Denning's birthplace, Newbury Street

Area south of the river Test (Map:6)

This area of the town (D) includes the town's schools. Residents feel it has limited scope for more housing because it is constrained by the river and its floodplain, agricultural and recreational land, and the restricted vehicular access to the centre of the town.

Area northeast of the disused railway and the B3400 (Map:7)

This zone is enclosed by the present and disbanded railway routes to the north and west, the older town to the south and the agricultural land and Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty to the east.

Area between the river and the B3400 from the town centre eastward (Map:8)

This ribbon strip is squeezed between the tree-lined ridge of the chalk to the north and the alluvial

river plain to the south. East of the town is Wells in the Field, and beyond that development is constrained by the designation of the adjacent land as part of the Laverstoke Conservation Area.

Area west of the disused railway (Map:9)

This zone is enclosed by the A34 to the west and the railway routes to the north and east, where large and small estates have been built. Potentially there may be scope for further development in this area without detriment to the distinctive character of Whitchurch.

Any further development in this zone should incorporate effective noise reduction and screening measures to counter the traffic noise pollution from the bypass that is becoming intolerable (see 4. *The Built Environment*).

Present-day Whitchurch

These historic influences have resulted in a settlement made up of disparate groups of buildings, dissimilar materials and unrelated land uses tied together by roads and footpaths.

This pattern has resulted in a town of comfortable size and intrinsic charm.



