

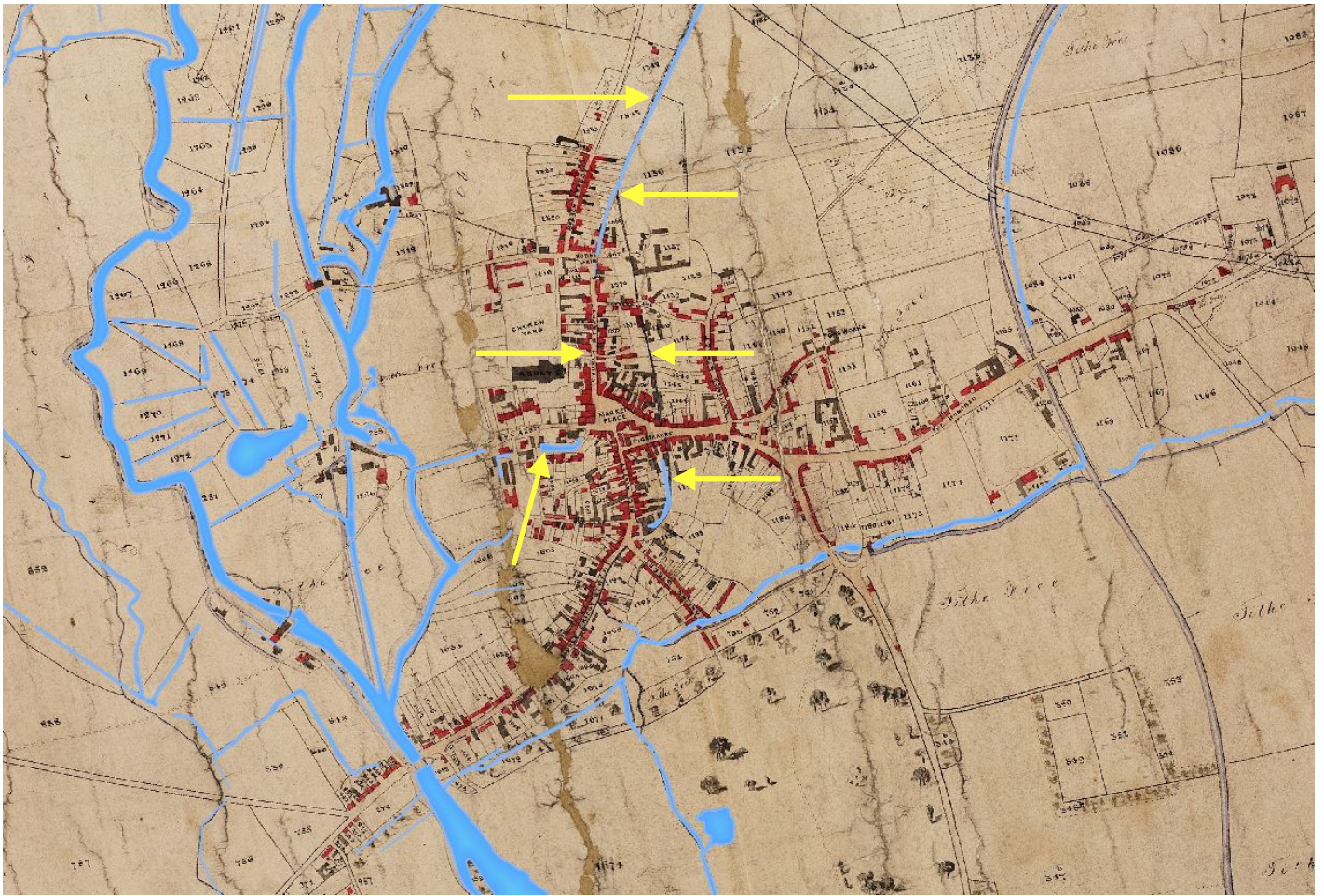
## Romsey's Origins and Development



Romsey in the landscape, a 3D aerial view. The abbey is circled.

The aerial view of Romsey above shows the town and the surrounding countryside in shades of grey and green. The floodplain of the Test west of the town retains a natural appearance. To the north, in a bend of the river, the floodplain has been managed for many centuries, including the area now designated as a nature reserve. The human impact on the landscape reflects the development of the town. The industrial estates stand out with their large, flat-roofed buildings and adjacent roads and car parks. These estates extend onto the floodplain and along the north side of the railway line. The railway was a development of the previous century. The tithe map of 1845 marks out the land on which it was to be built. The railway shows up clearly on its embankment, running in a curve from the north to a junction with a line to Southampton and east along the valley of the Tadburn. West of this junction the railway crosses over the Andover to Redbridge canal which had been constructed in the late 18th century. Water still flows along the canal as far as the Tadburn where the water is diverted into the stream. A feature that looks similar to the canal runs roughly parallel to it to the west. This is the Fishlake heading on a course towards the Abbey, circled on the aerial view.

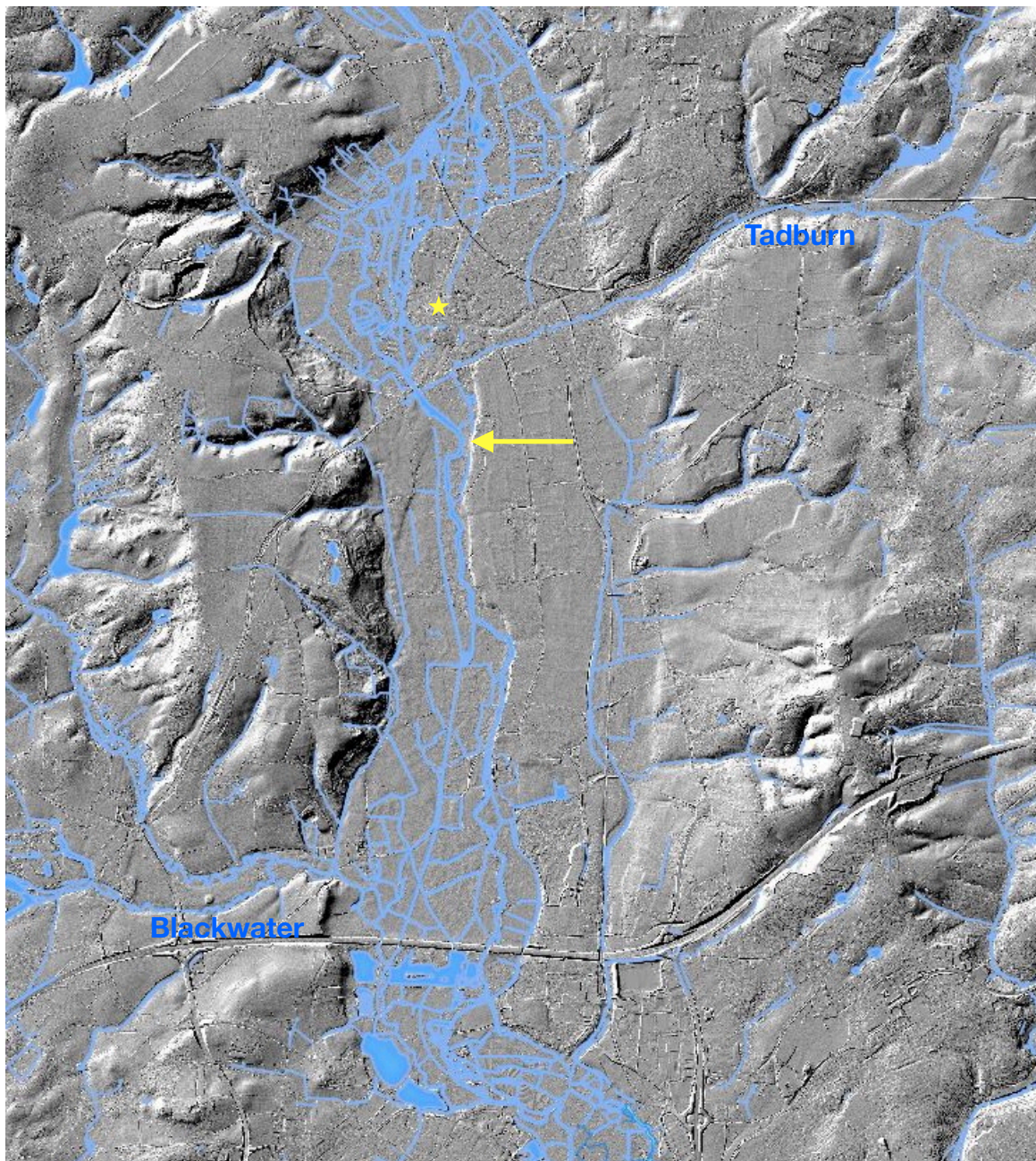
The canal and railway were transport links that encouraged the growth of the town. Both were infrastructure investments that tied Romsey into a wider network as the country was transformed from an agricultural to an industrial economy with an increasingly urban population. The pattern of the development of Romsey from the 17th through to the 21st century parallels that of many similar small market towns. However, one aspect of its early history is exceptional. A major engineering project was carried out in the 10th century to provide the Anglo-Saxon abbey and the town with running water. The Fishlake, like the canal, is an artificial watercourse. It was constructed to supply water to power mills and to remove waste. It continued to serve these purposes into the 20th century and still flows through the town.



1845 Romsey tithe map with modern surface water. Buildings depicted in red are, at least partially, residential. Industrial buildings and outbuildings are black. The Fishlake, arrowed, splits into an east and west branch on the northern edge of the town. The west branch runs through a culvert in Church Street.

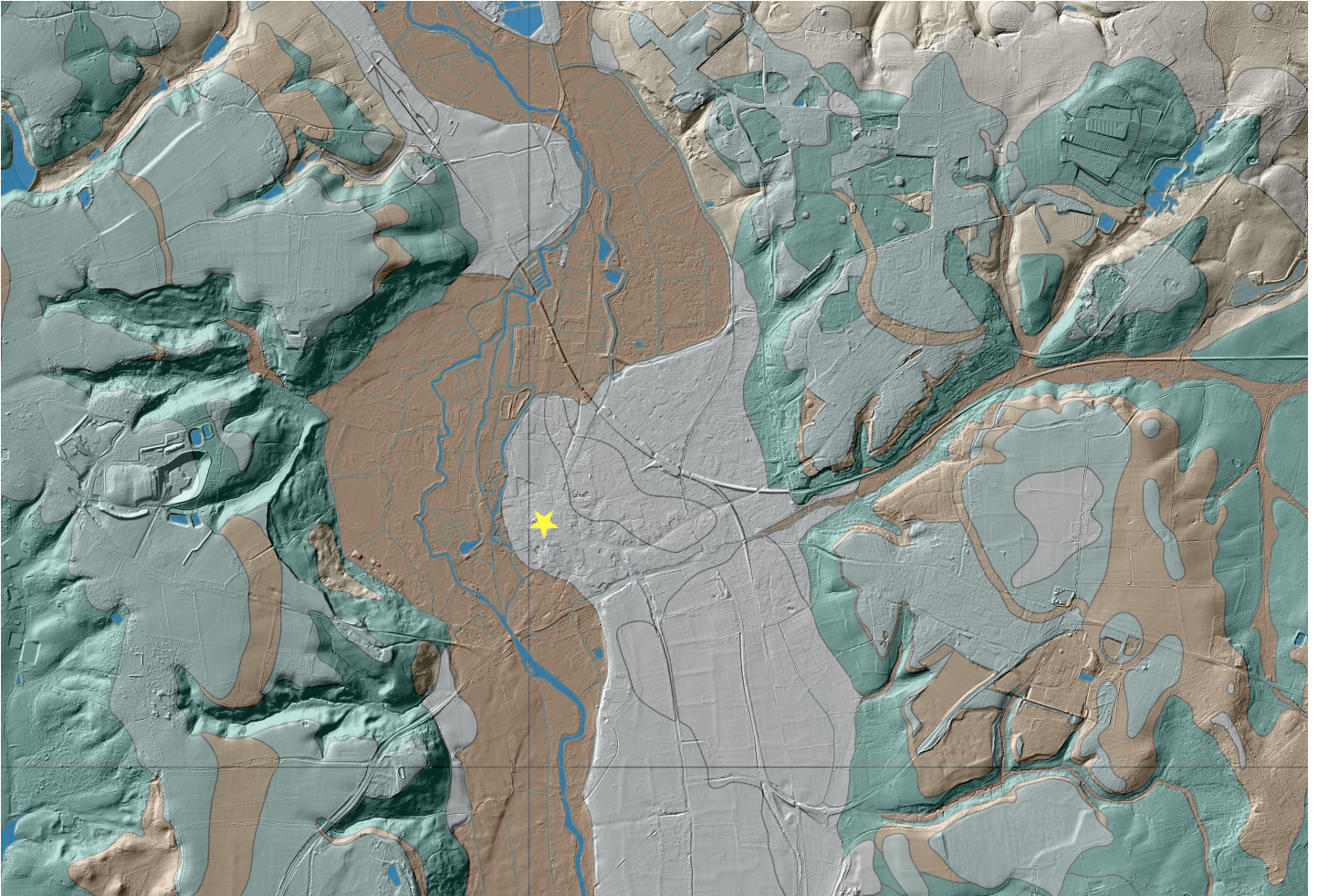
The tithe map of 1845 depicts a compact town, centred on the market place near the abbey. Tightly packed buildings face onto the Market Place and line the roads leading to it. Further development has taken place along the roads heading north and east out of town and south along Middlebridge Street to the crossing of the Test. The minor side roads appear to have started life as trackways leading to agricultural land. The line of the future railway cuts through the fields to the northeast. Within a few years new streets of houses would extend to meet it.

The layout of the town is very irregular with little indication of planning. The Fishlake, Romsey's man-made watercourse, bisects the centre. The east branch formed the boundary of Romsey Infra, the part of the town that was under the judicial control of the Abbess. The road east from the market place crossed Broadbridge into Romsey Extra. Why did Romsey need an artificial supply of water? The map above shows an abundance of water in the multiple channels of the Test, but the town has kept well clear of them. The explanation for the choice of location for the early settlement and its growth into a town depends on an understanding of the geology and topography of the Test valley.



3D LiDAR map with surface water. A star marks the location of Romsey Abbey. The arrow points to the edge of the river terrace.

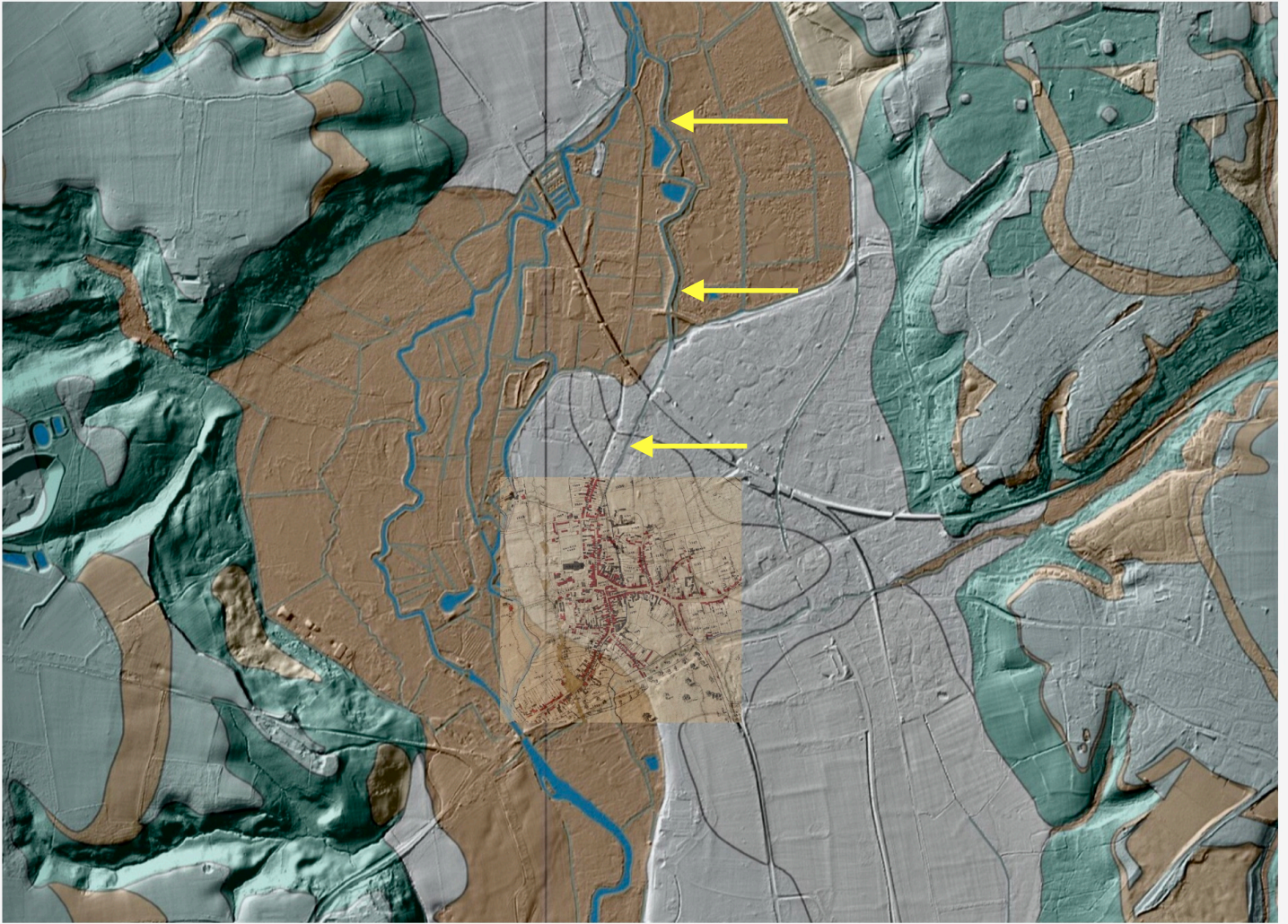
LiDAR data can be used to create a three-dimensional image of the surface of the land. Lit by a virtual light source in the northwest the hills and valleys appear as highlights and shadows. The map above depicts the lower Test valley from Romsey to Nursling. The broad valley is flanked on either side by higher ground, cut through by two tributaries of the Test, the Tadburn flowing from the east and the Blackwater from the west further south. The relatively flat floor of the valley is made up of two topographical features, the active floodplain of the Test and a river terrace, part of an earlier floodplain. A highlight on the LiDAR image discloses the edge of the terrace. As the name suggests, a floodplain is liable to flood and is, therefore, not a suitable location for a settlement. A river terrace, in contrast, is ideal.



3D geology. A star marks the location of Romsey Abbey.

The topography of the valley floor can be seen clearly on a geological map. Brown represents alluvium, the material deposited by the river on its current floodplain. Adjacent to it is the river terrace in pale grey. Specifically, this is the first terrace, the youngest of a series of step-like terraces flanking the river valley. It began to form at the end of the last Ice Age, about 11,500 years ago. Romsey lies south of the area covered by ice sheets, but would have had a tundra environment with permafrost and scant vegetation. As the climate warmed surface material broken up by seasonal freezing and thawing would have been washed into the valley by melt water. Initially the valley would have been choked with gravel and the river would have been divided into multiple small channels. Gradually the channels would have combined as the river cut down to a lower level and formed a new floodplain. The abandoned part of the old floodplain became a river terrace. Winds picked up silt from the melting ice sheets and deposited it on top of the terrace. Black lines on the geology map outline the deposits of wind-blown brickearth, so called because of its suitability for making bricks, overlying parts of the first terrace. This provided a fertile soil ideal for arable agriculture, attracting early farmers.

Excavations in Romsey have uncovered Bronze Age and Iron Age pottery along with the bones of domestic livestock. The nearby floodplain provided meadow for grazing as well as water. Fishing and fowling supplemented the agricultural produce. Farming continued through the Roman period as the terrace was occupied by small farmsteads. There is no evidence of a villa here. Romsey was not on a Roman road and it was not a Roman town. The origin of the town dates to a later time and to a new group of people with a different political and economic organisation. Anglo-Saxon Romsey developed from a 7th-century ecclesiastical settlement, its growth fuelled by an iron smelting industry.



3D geology with a section of the 1845 Romsey tithe map superimposed. The arrows point to the Fishlake, the artificial watercourse carrying water from the Test across the floodplain and onto the terrace towards Romsey.

Geology provides an explanation for the location of the town and helps to explain the layout of its streets. The abbey was rebuilt by the Normans on the site of the Anglo-Saxon abbey which itself replaced an earlier timber church. The 7th-century church was probably a minster with a community of monks and nuns providing pastoral care the local population. Christianity was reintroduced to England with the mission of St Augustine to Kent in 593 and was spread with royal support as the various kingdoms were converted to the new religion. Land was granted for the foundation of minster churches, often sited on a river terrace overlooking the river. A minster was usually enclosed within a ditch or wall surrounding its precinct, the area set aside for the exclusive use of the religious community. The rectangular outline of the Romsey precinct can be traced on the 1845 tithe map. The edge of the river terrace formed the west side of the precinct, a natural barrier. Mill Lane runs along the northern boundary and Church Street on the east. It is possible that the west branch of the Fishlake incorporated the eastern precinct ditch. The southern extent of the precinct is uncertain, possibly ending along the line of Abbey Water.

Iron smelting took place in the corner of the terrace south of the abbey. Deep deposits of smelting debris were excavated along Narrow Lane. A stylus dated to the 8th or 9th century was found within the layers of slag. Saxon styli are found almost exclusively on ecclesiastical sites. This is firm evidence for an early minster and suggests that the smelting was controlled by the Church. Smelting deposits on the south side of the Market Place have recently been radiocarbon dated to the early/mid-7th to 8th century. These dates relate to an earlier phase of smelting on the site, from layers cut by the original Fishlake channel. Slag, ore and furnace debris infilling the channel show that smelting continued into the late Saxon period.



Saxon stylus from Narrow Lane.

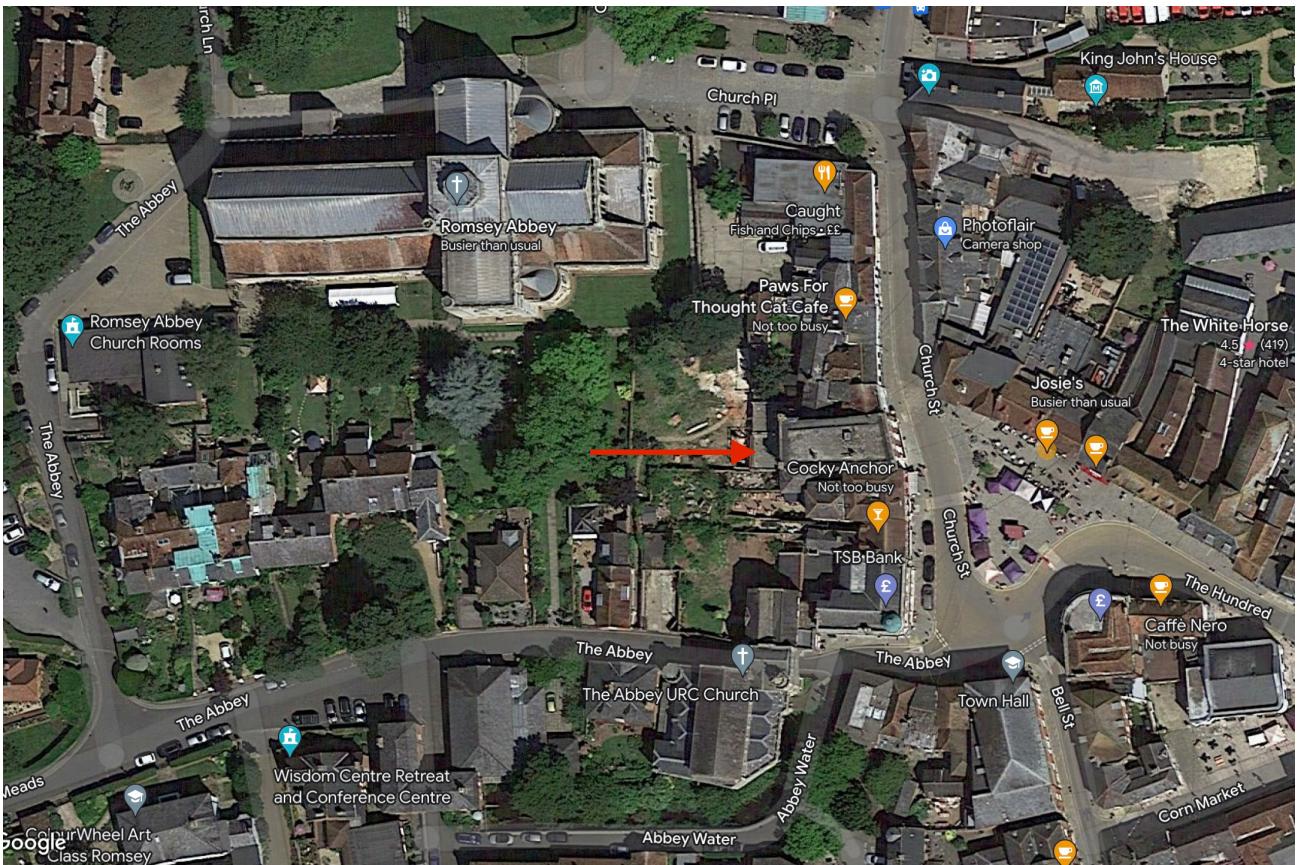
Extracting a charcoal sample for radiocarbon dating from iron slag excavated behind 4, Market Place.



The early religious community was ideally located to take advantage of the natural resources available in the Test valley, with fertile soil on the terrace for arable farming and meadowland on the floodplain for grazing stock. The source of the iron ore has not been identified, but must have been nearby. Smelting had also been carried out during the Iron Age in Michelmersh, a few miles to the north. Local woodland would have been managed to ensure a sustainable supply of charcoal for fuel. There is little archaeological evidence for smithing in Romsey. The iron was probably taken to Hamwic, the major trading and craft-working centre that preceded Southampton. Romsey must have benefited in return, exchanging iron for the tools essential for everyday life. There is evidence that individuals living within the monastic precinct enjoyed a high-status diet. Animal bones found during an excavation to the rear of Abbotsford House, on the west side of Church Street, included cattle, pig, and sheep/ goat along with deer and fish. The bones were dated to the mid-Saxon period. Overlying this kitchen waste were layers of smelting debris demonstrating that smelting was taking place within the precinct. Later the site appears to have been used for the dressing of building stone, associated with the construction of the Norman Abbey or an earlier Saxon stone church.

Iron smelting slag excavated at the rear of Abbotsford House, formerly Midland Bank, in 1988.





View from Google Maps. An arrow points to the location of the Abbotsford House/ Midland Bank excavation. The west branch of the Fishlake originally ran along the line of Church Street, on the east side of the monastic precinct. It now runs through a culvert beneath the houses and surfaces at Abbey Water. This might mark the southern boundary of the precinct.

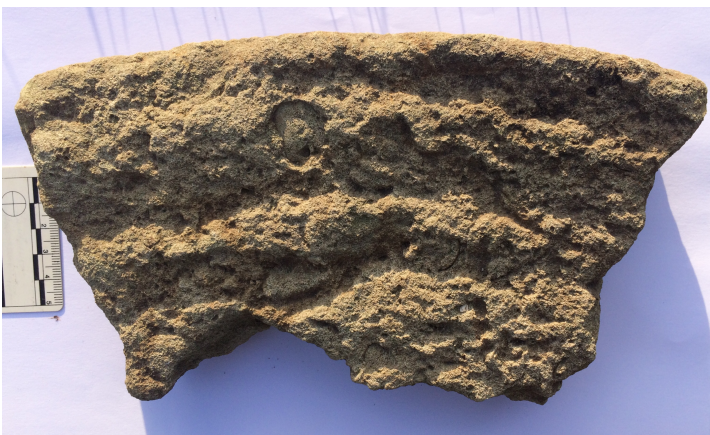
King Alfred's son Edward the Elder (899-924) was recorded as the founder of a nunnery at Romsey, an event traditionally dated to 907. At this time there was already an established monastic community in Romsey, possibly centuries old, which might have been served by both monks and nuns. This connection of the Wessex royal family to the abbey in Romsey fits in well with the developments later in the 10th century. The construction of the Fishlake, to provide Romsey with running water, was a major engineering project which must have had royal support in the provision of materials and manpower. The success of the project depended on the surveying and planning skills of an experienced water management expert. Two men can be credited with its creation: King Edgar (959-975), Edward the Elder's grandson, and Æthelwold, Bishop of Winchester (963-984) and later Saint Æthelwold. Canonised for the miracles he was said to have performed after his death, in life he had been one of the leaders of the Monastic Reform Movement that not only changed the spiritual life of monks and nuns, but also their physical environment. Building projects initiated by Æthelwold in Winchester, and earlier in Abingdon when he was abbot, included the provision of a water supply for sanitation and for powering mills.



Stained glass window commemorating St Æthelwold in St Swithun-Upon-Kingsgate church, Winchester.

The Fishlake takes water from the Test and carries it across the floodplain to the river terrace and then into Romsey. The waterway zigzags as it crosses the floodplain, contained within chalk banks. Its course was calculated to maintain a shallow gradient and reduce the rate of flow, protecting the banks from erosion. Once it reaches the edge of the terrace it heads in a straight line through a cutting towards the abbey, dividing into two branches just north of the town. The particular topography of the Test valley made it possible to construct the Fishlake. Only a very experienced surveyor would have recognised the potential the bend in the river provided to divert water from the Test at a sufficiently high elevation that it could be channeled through a cutting on the terrace. Water management engineers must have been engaged to find a way of bringing water into Romsey. A charter written in c. 972 recorded the grant of land by King Edgar to the nuns of Romsey abbey. The extent of the land was defined by a description of landmarks lying along the boundary. Identifying those landmarks in the modern landscape involves the translation of this boundary clause written in Old English. It begins by heading up the street to where the Test *scit*. The street is Greatbridge Causeway. *Scit* means to run at a right angle and only makes sense in this context if it was referring to the Fishlake. The causeway and the Fishlake were probably built at the same time. They would have been very recent additions to the landscape when the charter was written, constructed after Æthelwold's appointment as Bishop of Winchester in 963. Improvements to the nuns' estate might have included the rebuilding or refurbishment of their church as it was chosen for a royal burial. A note at the end of the charter mentioned that Prince Edmund, who died in 971, was buried in the minster at Romsey. Aged only 4 or 5, this son of his second wife, Ælfthryth, had been intended as Edgar's successor.

By the time of the Norman Conquest Romsey was the third richest nunnery in England. Part of its wealth was derived from its mills, powered by the water of the Fishlake. Town Mill on the east branch, probably on the site of a Domesday mill, continued in operation into the 20th century. Saxon millstones were found during an excavation at the top of Bell Street, 20m away from the excavation on the original line of the west branch at 4, Market Place. The later mills on the west branch were located at the end of Abbey Water which formed the mill pond. Some water was diverted from the Fishlake to provide for sanitation. A late 19th century map shows a channel running from Church Street to the abbey. The waste water was probably diverted into fishponds within the precinct.



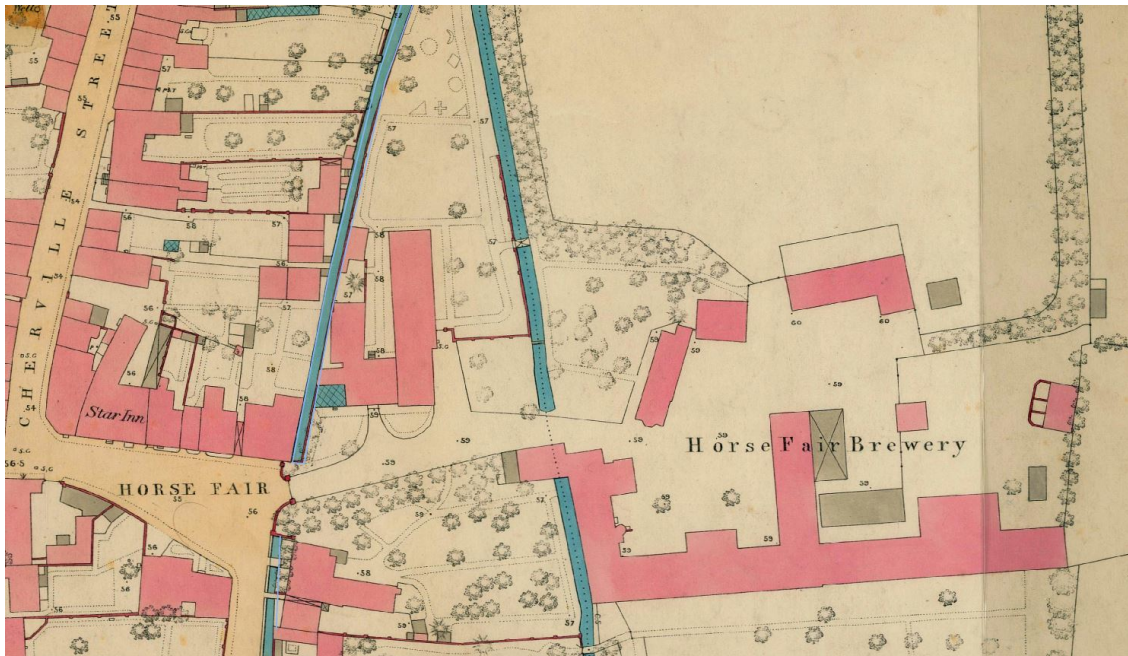
Saxon millstone fragment from Bell Street.

Abbey Water on the west branch of the Fishlake, the millpond for Abbey Mill.

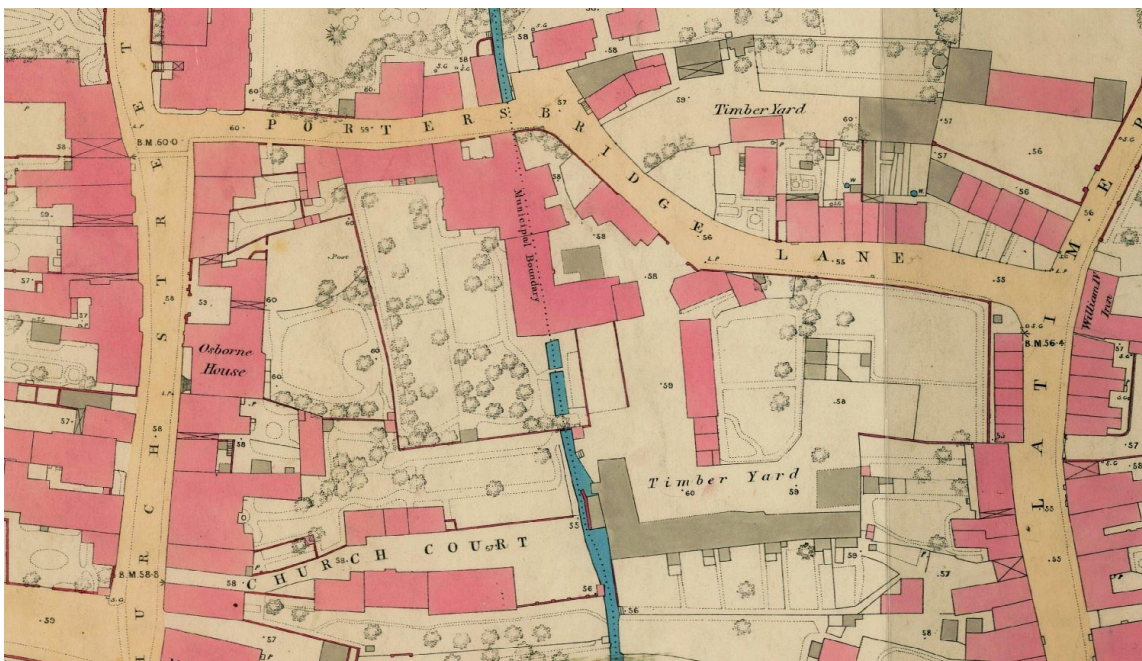




The layout of the town would have been influenced by the presence of the waterway. The Fishlake formed the eastern boundary of *Romsey infra pontem*, Romsey within the bridge. This referred to Broad Bridge which carried the road between the Market Place and The Hundred over the east branch of the Fishlake, known as the Holbrook. The Hundred was and is the main east-west road in the town. Bridges would have been required for road traffic and pedestrians at other crossing points of the water channels. Building bridges would have been a minor inconvenience compared to the benefits of having water running through the town. The minutely detailed 1867 OS map, drawn at a scale of 1:500, shows how the waterways were being used 900 years after the Fishlake was created. The west branch had disappeared into a culvert to the west of Church Street, surfacing as Abbey Water leading to Abbey Mill. A small channel, known as the Shitlake, served the sanitation requirements of the properties on the west side of Bell Street. Various businesses made use of the east branch. The Horse Fair brewery could have taken water from the stream as it would have been unpolluted before it entered the town. The timber yard south of Portersbridge Street was probably using the water to power its machinery - the map shows a building extending over a widened channel. Further south, the channel was divided to turn two undershot water wheels as it passed through Town Mill. Tanneries required large amounts of water and the removal of equal quantities of waste liquids. They were located downstream in Middlebridge Street, beyond which the water returned to the Test.



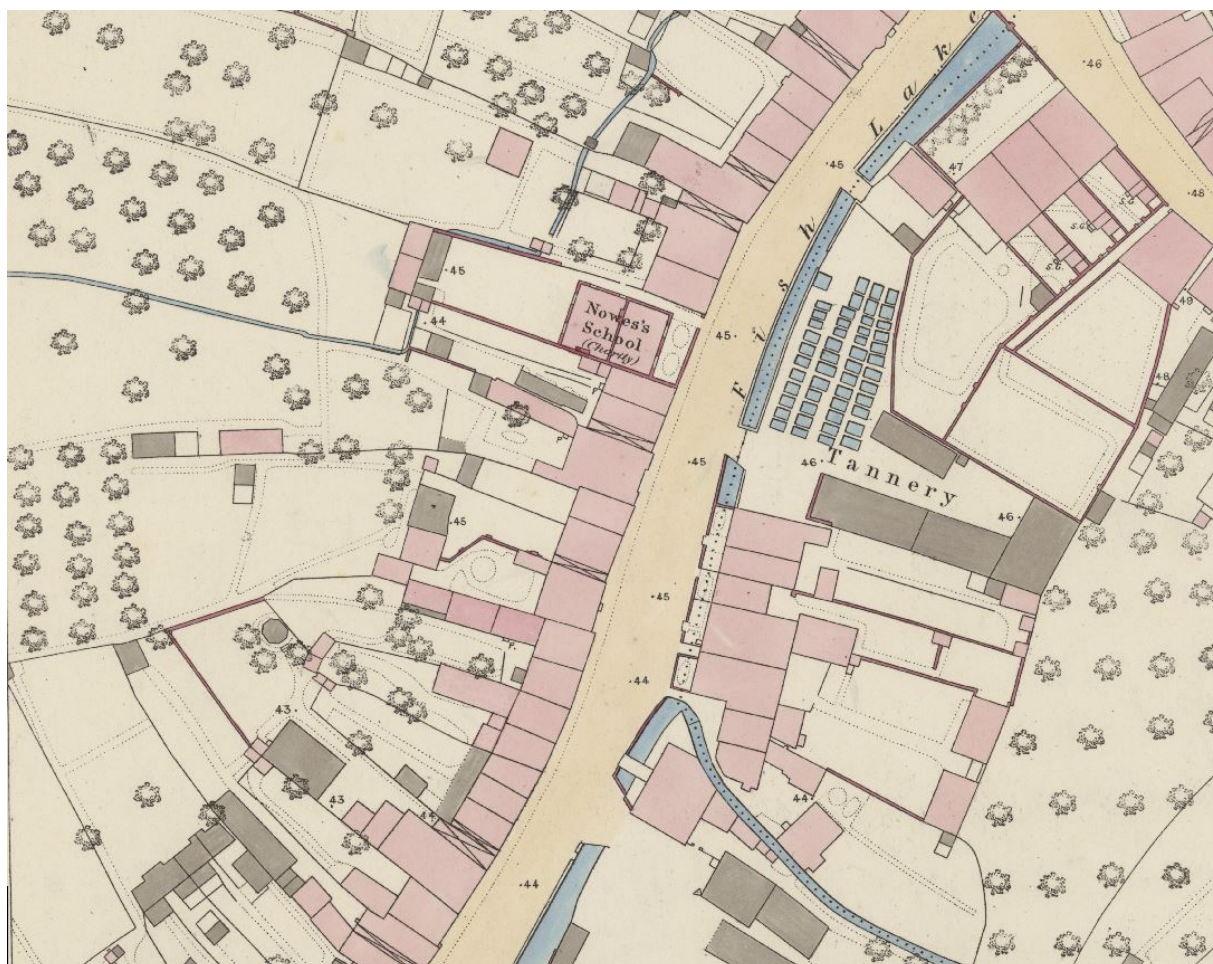
Detail of 1867 OS map showing the two branches of the Fishlake south of the bifurcation. The Horse Fair brewery had been established about 1778 and was purchased in 1883 by Thomas Strong.



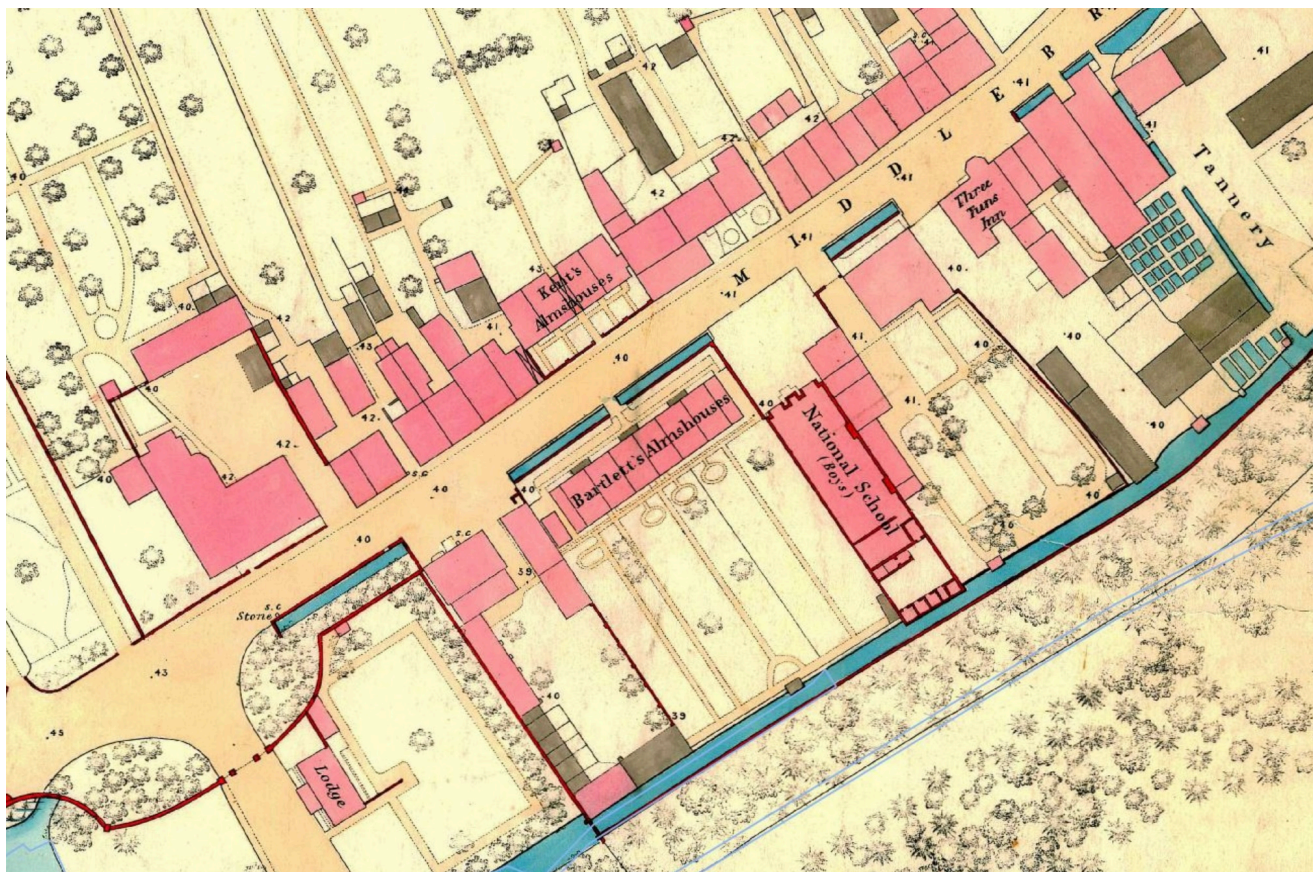
Continuing south from the Horsefair, the west branch of the Fishlake has disappeared from the map into a culvert along Church Street.



This section of the 1867 OS map is depicted in paler shades. The east branch of the Fishlake powered Town Mill. Water diverted from the west branch runs in a narrow channel, the Shitlake, behind properties on Bell Street.



Beyond Town Mill the Fishlake runs along Middlebridge Street. The municipal boundary, shown as a dotted line, turns east along Chavy Water south of the tannery.



Romsey's residents are reminded of the town's history every time they glance at the clock on the tower of the Abbey. Built in the 1100s on the site of the Saxon church, the Norman abbey is visible wherever there is a clear line-of-sight within the town, a dominating presence. Older than any of the buildings on the surrounding streets, it has taken over the space that was occupied centuries earlier by a community of Christian converts who settled here to practice and preach their new religion. Archaeological investigations have revealed their success in utilising the land for arable farming and the rearing of livestock, and managing woodland to provide fuel for iron smelting on an industrial scale. However, the most important aspect of Romsey's Anglo-Saxon legacy is the water management undertaken to create an artificial supply of running water. The construction of the Fishlake required the control of the Test within its floodplain north of Romsey, making it practical to invest in a new road raised on a causeway. Beyond Greatbridge Causeway one road continued upstream along the valley and another headed northwest towards Salisbury. With water to power the mills and road links to encourage trade the foundations had been laid for the development of a successful market town.

1867 OS map. The Fishlake flows along Middlebridge Street towards the bridge. The channel to rear of the properties carries water from the Tadburn. The road to Broadlands is secured by an entrance gate and lodge.



Market Place looking west towards the Abbey.