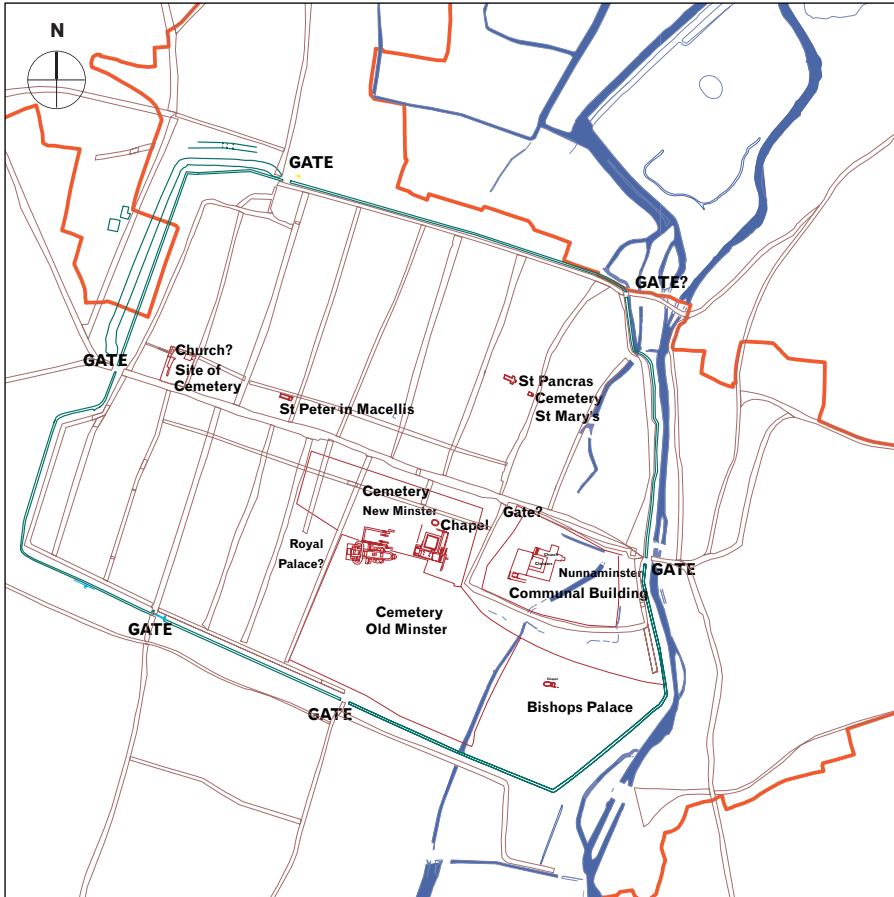
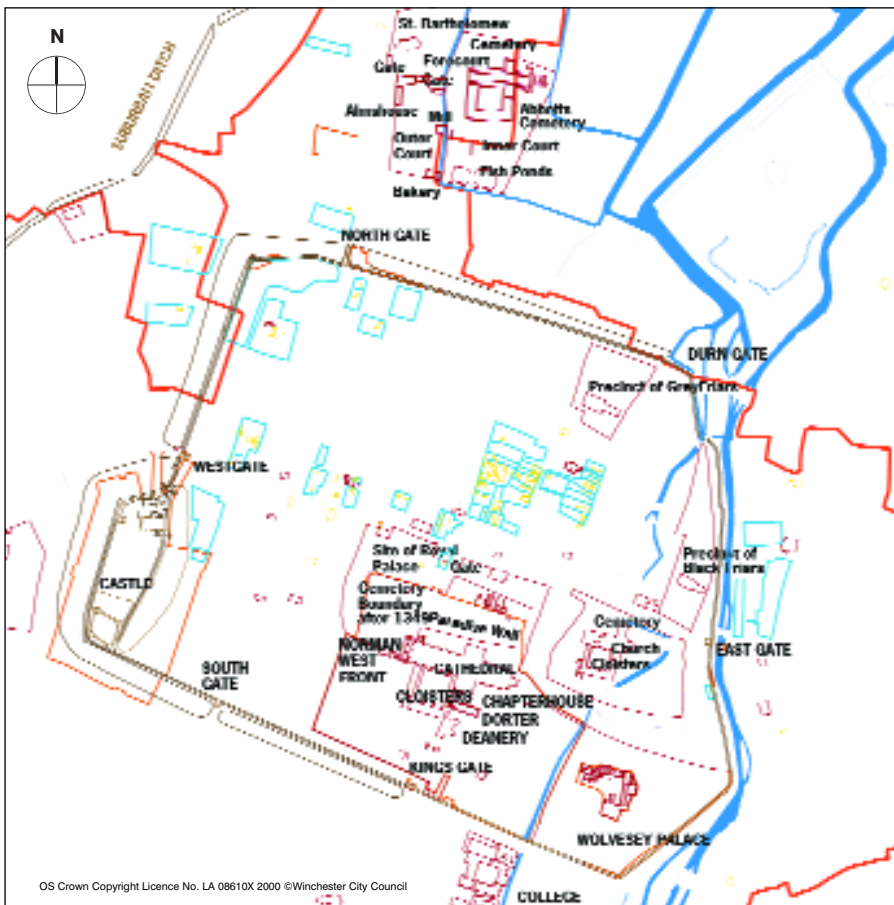


# 2 The Historical Development of Winchester



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**Top left:** Plan of Saxon Winchester  
**Top right:** Plan of the Roman Settlement of Venta Belgarum  
**Bottom:** Plan of medieval Winchester

Both plans show modern watercourses and the Conservation Area boundary for reference

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## 2.1 Original early development

In almost any city it is possible to speak of a period when its essential form and character came into being. For Winchester that period was the 9th-12th centuries, when it became recognised as a royal and ecclesiastical stronghold, second only in importance to London. Before then there had been a Roman city on the same site—the fifth largest in Britain—and the Romans had made Winchester the focus of the principal roads in the region. Even earlier there had been Iron Age settlements above the river Itchen, on St Catherine's Hill, around Oram's Arbour and at Oliver's Battery. But it was under the late Saxons, notably Alfred (871-899), that the long-term importance of Winchester was established.

The population of the City was at least 8,000 by the early 12th century, a figure which it did not reach again until the 1800s. The surviving evidence of that active and successful period is principally the layout of streets and properties within the walls: the High Street and its two parallel back streets, the side streets which run north-south from it, and the streets which follow the line of the walls. Within that pattern the outstanding monuments are the Cathedral (begun in its present form in 1079), portions of the medieval walls, the Great Hall of the Castle (1222-36), and the remains of Wolvesey Palace. Far outside the walls, Henry de Blois founded the Hospital of St Cross in 1136.

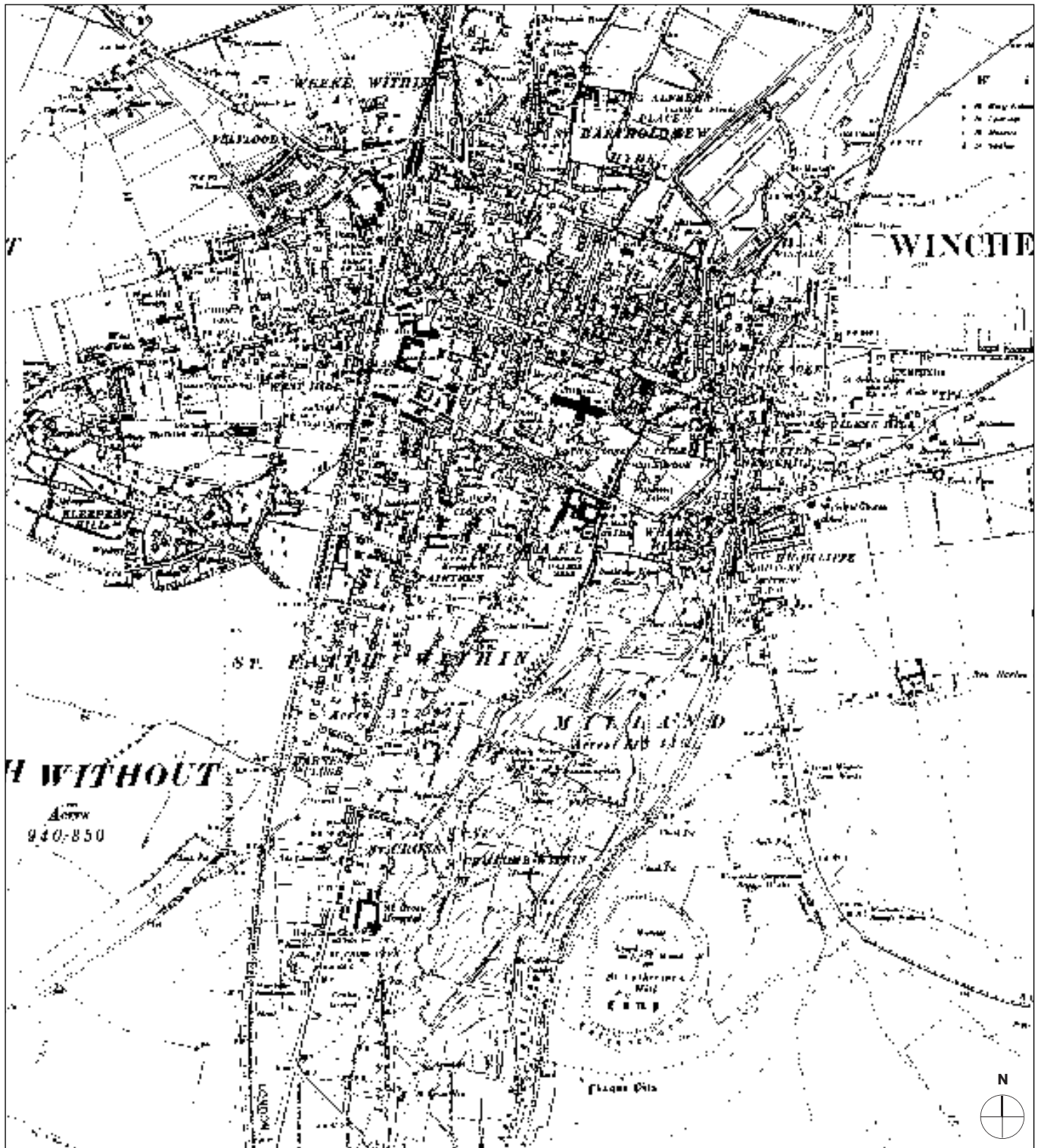
On the evidence of the surviving fabric, Winchester remained a thriving city after 1300. In particular William of Wykeham, Bishop from 1367, was able to finance the remodelling of the cathedral nave and the foundation of Winchester College. There was a successful textile industry. However, the City had begun to lose some of its former glory, above all because royal power and administration became increasingly concentrated in London. That fundamental change, plus the effects of the plague and the gradual decline of its cloth industry after 1500, led to a decline in the City's population and the abandonment of properties. There were 26 parish churches in 1500, but only 12 in 1600.

But Winchester has always had the advantage of being a market city and administrative centre for the region, so although it lost its main industry it experienced a gradual recovery, starting in the late 17th century, from which it has never looked back. Some historians have dated this recovery to Charles II's decision in 1683 to build a new royal palace at Winchester on the site of the medieval Castle. Though only partially completed, this project confirmed the City's status as a regional centre; a place of "good company" and "sociableness" as Defoe put it. The King's House survived until a fire in 1894.

Buildings such as Avebury House, St Peter's Street (1690) and Serles' House, Southgate Street (1715), testify to the revival in the City's fortunes. By 1704, there were 90 shops within the walls. The City became an important administrative and military centre, and it led the way nationally in its provision of medical facilities. The County Hospital was founded in Colebrook Street in 1736 and because of the demand generated by its reputation had to move to a new site in Parchment Street in 1758.



**Top:** The West Gate  
**Bottom:** The history of Winchester is visible in the layers of additions



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Above: Winchester in the 1890s

## 2.2 18th and 19th Century expansion

During the late 18th and 19th centuries Winchester expanded far beyond the walled area, mainly in the form of terraced and villa development infilling between the main roads. Institutions and functions—the prison and the county hospital—also moved to the suburbs. The military presence in Winchester became increasingly important not just the barracks on Castle Hill, but housing for officers. There was modest industrial growth, for instance in brewing, but the City attracted no large-scale industry in the 19th century as it had done in the Middle Ages and therefore escaped the potentially damaging effects of industrial development and pollution. Even when the railways came, they skirted the city centre. The main line to Southampton (1839-40) on the west side passed beyond the line of the medieval castle ditch (moat) and a less important line from Didcot and Newbury to Southampton (1885), now abandoned, on the east side of the river valley. In the post-war period, the City wisely did not pursue the sort of major redevelopment and civil engineering projects which have damaged other historic centres, although some central areas of dense housing and light industry were cleared away. Fortunately, the Conservation Area designation in 1967 curtailed insensitive, large-scale redevelopment.

Throughout these transformations, an underlying morphology has endured. The elements which gave rise to the early settlements: the crossing point traversing a waterlogged valley, plus the essential form of the man-made elements—the City's defences and street pattern—have been an enduring influence on the evolving shape of the City to the extent that they are still legible, both in the surviving fabric and in the form of subsequent changes and additions.

When people talk about historic Winchester they usually have in mind its surviving Saxon and medieval fabric. Yet what is equally important is that within the City's historic layout and street pattern most of the buildings are of the last three hundred years, made up of shops, terraces and industrial buildings erected to serve its role as a regional capital and social centre. It should be noted, however, that while some buildings may appear to date from the 18th or 19th centuries, their facades can conceal older timber-framed structures and sometimes have the remains of medieval cellars. Over the centuries the Saxon and medieval framework has determined the line and scale of almost every street, but within that framework change has gradually occurred. So it is not just one historic past which has survived, but layers of change. There are few other places in England where that sense of the historical shaping of a town can be so powerfully felt.



**Top:** Winchester lies between two hills—  
St Giles' Hill in the distance  
**Middle:** The railway  
**Bottom:** High quality modern development—  
The Textile Conservation Centre  
(outside Conservation Area)