

2 Assessment and evaluation

2.1 Physical context

2.1.1 The assessment covered the site and its surroundings, Bicester and surrounding villages. This analysis contributes to the understanding of the nature of Bicester and surrounding villages aiming to inform the appropriate design and access of future development.

The Bicester context

2.1.2 Bicester is an attractive market town with a lively mixed-use centre located in the heart of Oxfordshire, close to the M40 motorway, midway between London and Birmingham. The town's development has mainly been focused along the

principal historic routes, which bisect at the town's market square. Along these main routes, the urban form has primarily consisted of terraced buildings, rich in detail and using a wide range of materials including render, brick and stone. The continuity of building form creates an intimate sense of enclosure along these main routes.

2.1.3 Bicester has a network of secondary routes radiating from the main routes. These develop into a complex and irregular pattern of narrow lanes, fronted by semi-detached buildings, which lead out to green open spaces. Outside of the core central area, are a series of suburbs with local centres that provide residents with a variety of services and facilities.



Church Lane in Bicester town centre

2.1.4 The history of Bicester goes back to Saxon times. Its origins are as a market town which grew up at the junction where the Banbury, London and Oxford roads met. For much of the last 300 years, Bicester remained a small market town with little change in its size or scale. However, the town has experienced rapid growth over the last 50 years, without the commensurate growth in services and facilities. The town centre is much the same size today as it was 300 years ago, yet the size of the settlement is much greater. This rapid growth is shown in the sequence of diagrams.

2.1.5 The proposed development at south west Bicester, while expanding the town further still, is an opportunity to redress this balance and provide a range of services to benefit the whole town.

2.1.6 The assessment of Bicester revealed the following positive features, primarily found in the older parts of town, that the master plan has drawn on for inspiration:

- An area rich in detail and character
- A diverse range of building types creating continuous frontage
- A clear distinction between public and private space
- A good definition of space generally
- A network of views and vistas
- Good visual mix comprising built-form, stone walls, parks, green open space
- Squares overlooked, good places to watch the world go by
- Different types of space – informal and green; formal, triangular and paved
- Clear gateways that create a sense of arrival
- An intimate sense of enclosure formed by narrow lanes
- Wider expanses of green space on the edge giving a feeling of open country

2.1.7 The assessment also revealed the following negative features, predominantly found in the more recent parts of town. The master plan strives to avoid these features in the design:

- Poor connections between the suburbs and the centre
- Poor internal connections within the suburban areas
- Indirect pedestrian routes that do not feel safe or secure
- Pockets of incidental or uncared for 'left-over' space
- Poor quality edges that 'turn their back' to open country
- Wide fast roads that are difficult for pedestrians to cross
- Housing which fails to face the street, instead leaving backs on display
- Lack of gateways to define entrances and arrival points
- A general visual monotony due to lack of variety in colour, texture and appearance
- Layouts that accommodate the car at the expense of other users
- Lack of visual landmarks and views to aid orientation

2.1.8 Analysis of the different forms of development in Bicester show that the more historic parts provide a better quality living environment.

2.1.9 Development in the last 30 years is mainly in the form of cul-de-sacs, while older parts of Bicester are made up of a series of connected streets and spaces.

2.1.10 This assessment of the town has assisted the master planning process by capturing the essence of different parts of town and providing an easily identifiable guide to the sort of place that should be created by the south-west urban extension.

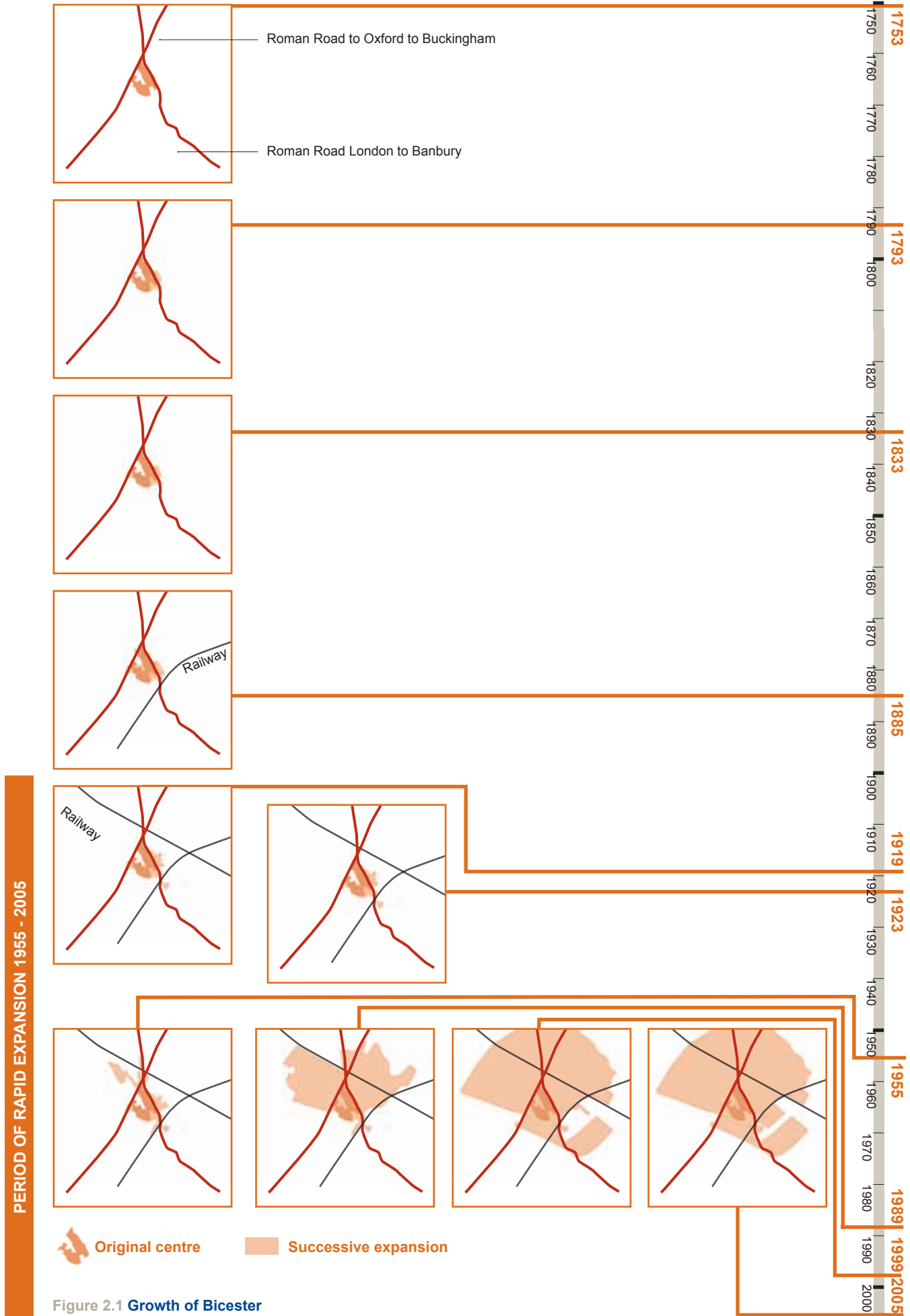


Figure 2.1 **Growth of Bicester**

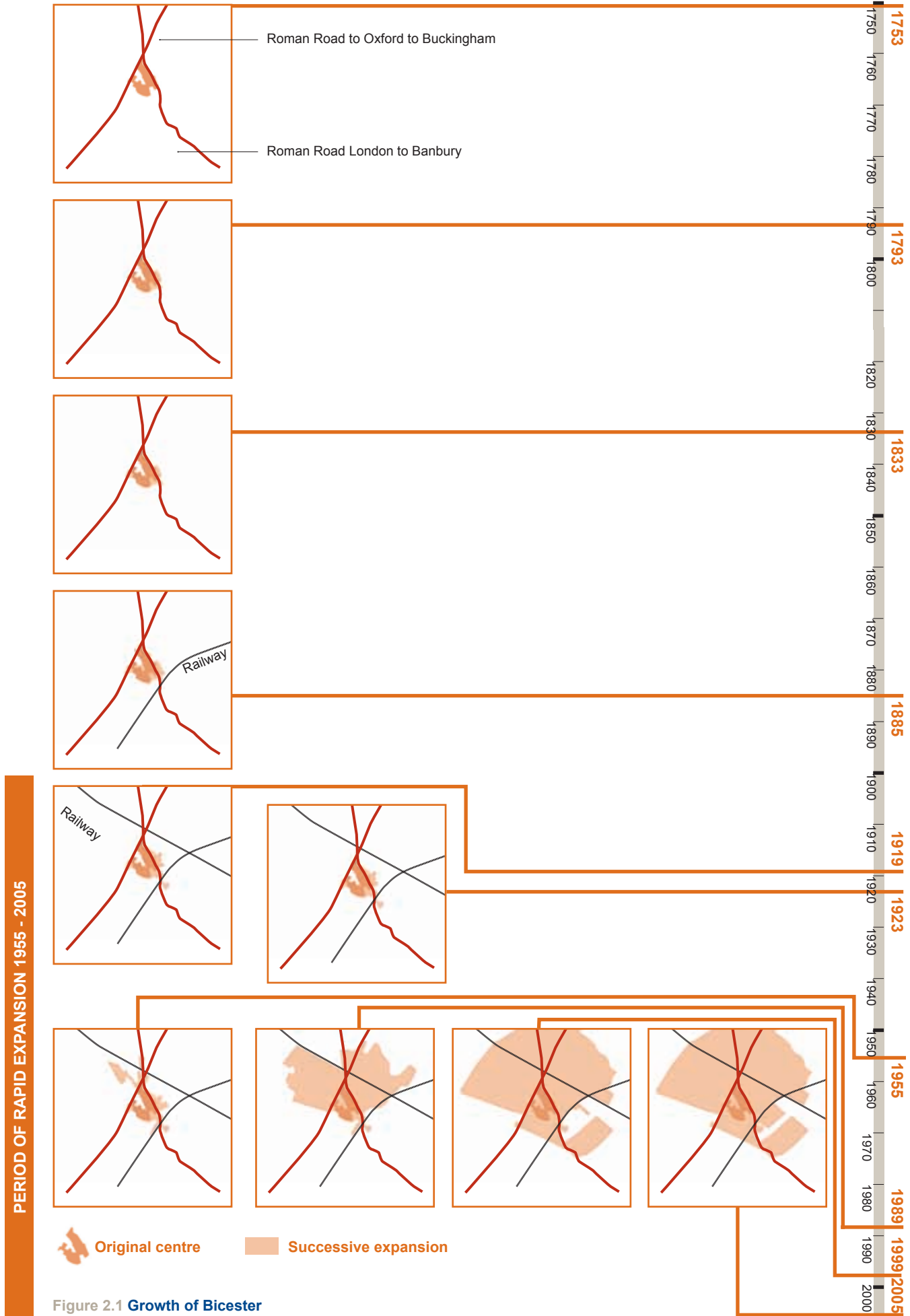
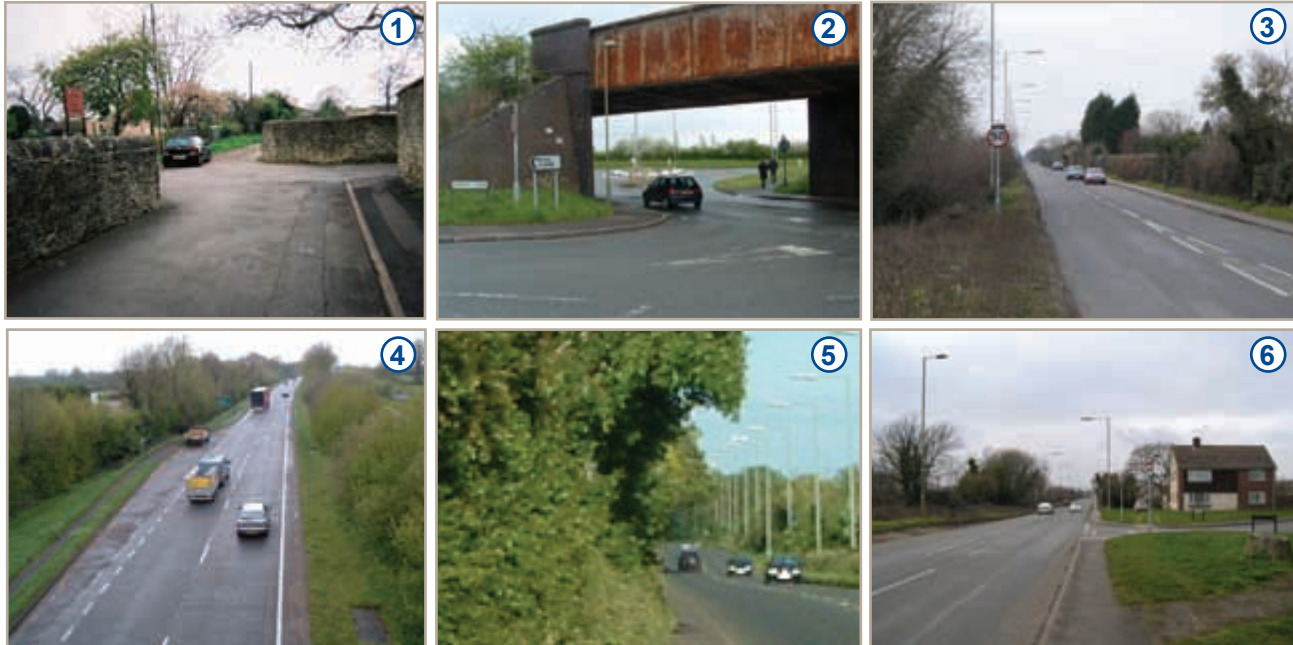


Figure 2.1 **Growth of Bicester**



The site is located adjacent to the A41 Oxford Road, the main route into town. Despite the proximity of the site to the town, there are limited opportunities to connect to the wider area and routes to the town centre (eg Piggy Lane) are often restricted. The two junctions on Middleton Stoney road are the only opportunity to connect to the residential areas to the north. New connections to the Oxford Road will provide the primary points of access.

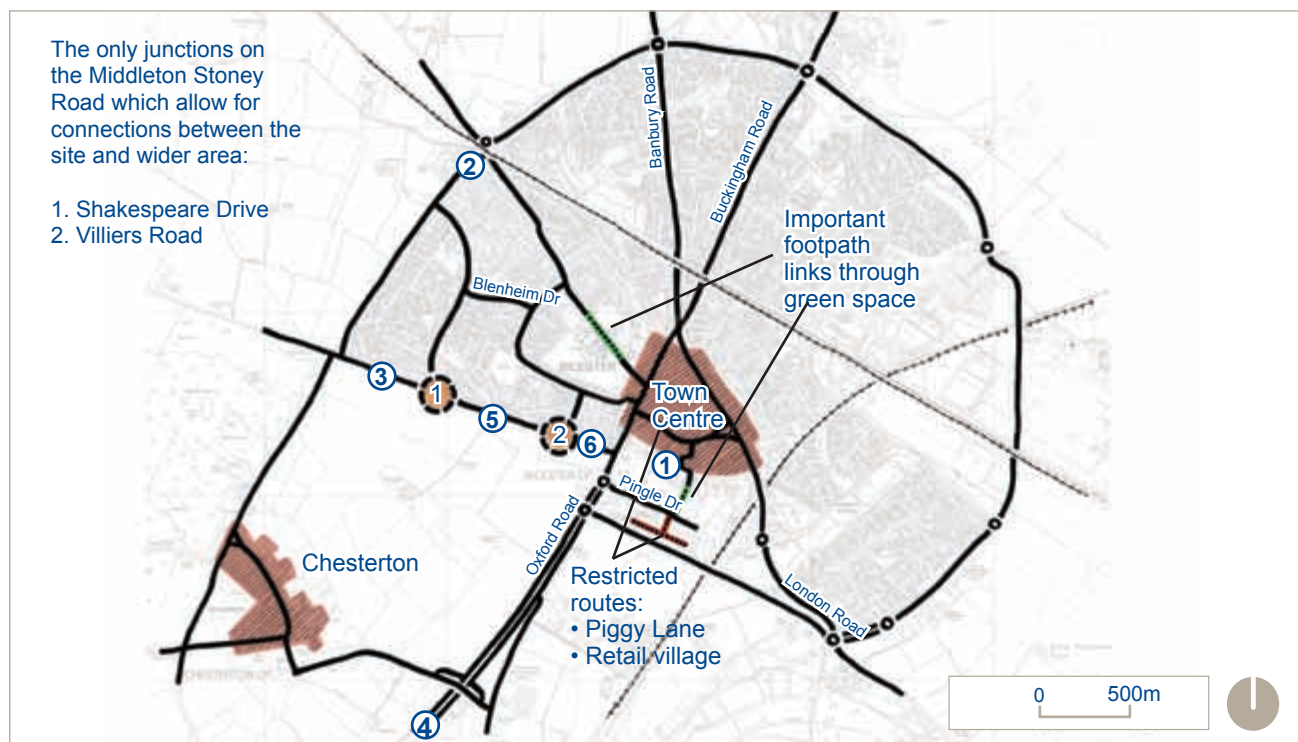


Figure 2.2 Strategic connections



Bicester has a series of local neighbourhood centres, the focus of which is often a few shops, a pub or post office. These provide services to the residents within an approximate 400m walking catchment while the town centre serves a wider area of 800m or so. Many of the local centres are not located on 'through-routes' and therefore do not benefit from passing trade. As such, they have remained small in scale and marginal in viability. The new development needs to learn from this. It must also ensure that it does not undermine the viability of these existing centres.

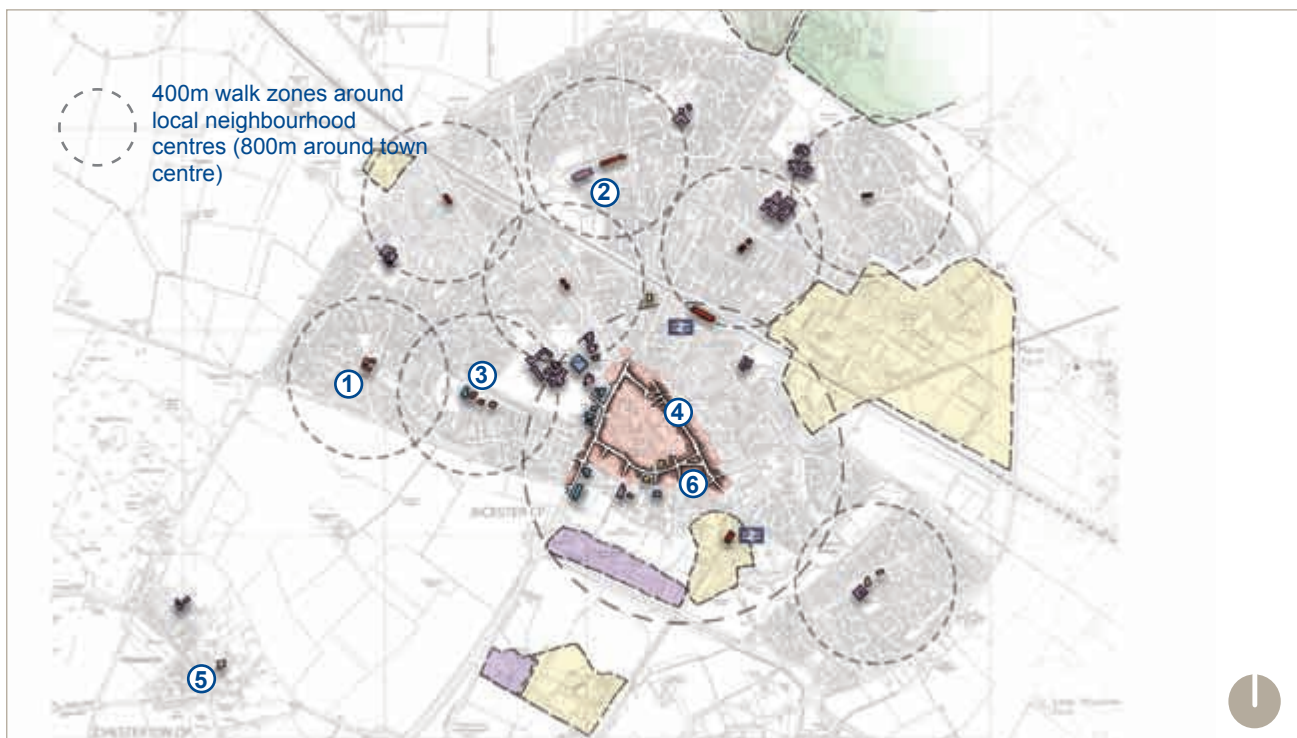


Figure 2.3 Local services and facilities



Two examples of streets where houses fail to positively address the public realm.



Two examples of streets where houses provide positive definition and face the public realm.

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The more successful parts of Bicester and Chesterton have a clear distinction between public and private space. This is best achieved by ensuring that building fronts are presented to the street, while building backs are kept private. The older parts of town stick to these rules more closely than the more recent suburban developments. The new quarter needs to learn from this, adopt the better characteristics of town and avoid the poorer ones.

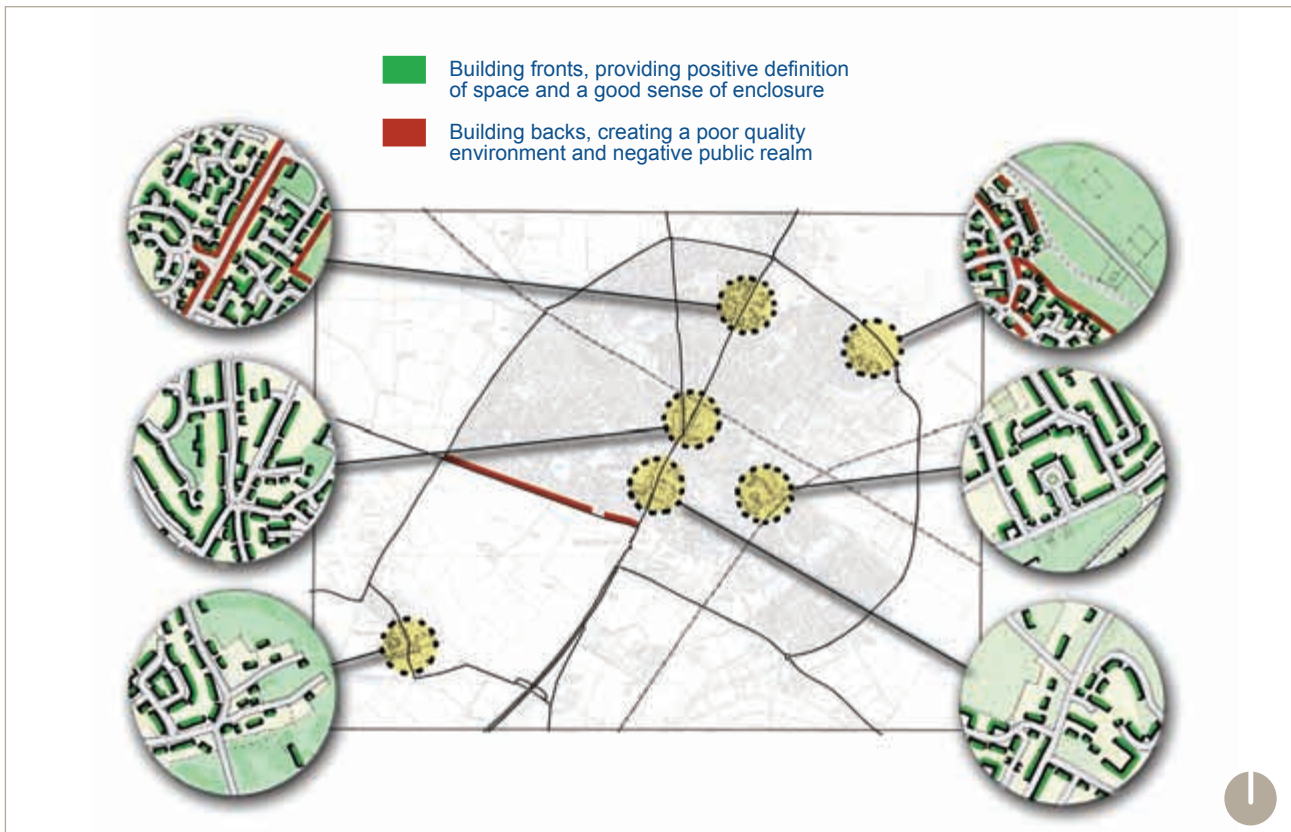


Figure 2.4 **Examples of building orientation and layout**

Four examples of poor connections in residential areas



The inner areas of Bicester have a series of well-connected streets, providing a wide variety of movement choices. The more recent suburban expansion however consists of cul-de-sac dominated estates, which can often frustrate movement choices. Again, the new quarter needs to learn from these differences and adopt a positive approach to its street patterns.

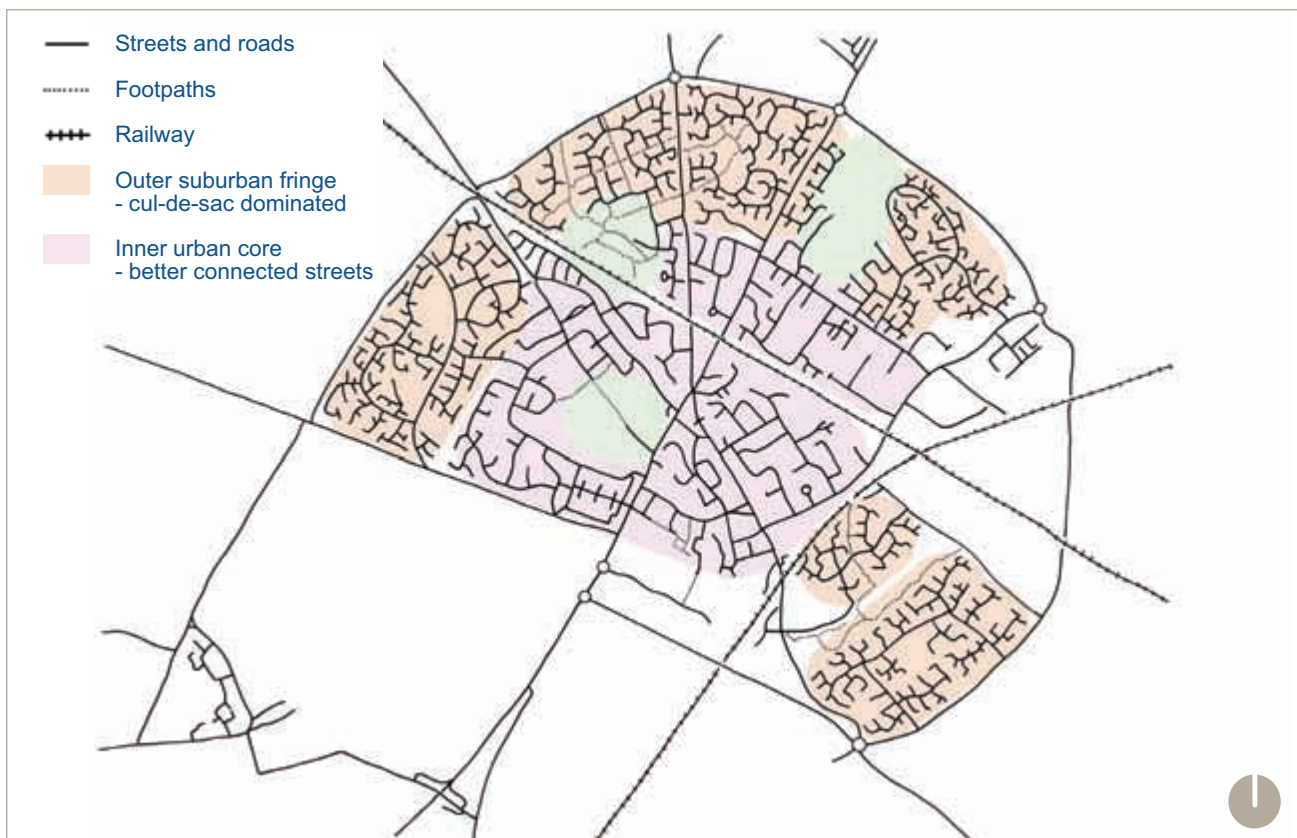


Figure 2.5 Access and movement



Bicester has a wide variety of open space (examples are shown to the left). The proposal needs to provide high quality areas of new open space that complement these. Analysis has shown that while there is a good supply of informal open space, there is a deficiency in formal sports pitches in the town. This shortfall can be addressed through the development at south-west Bicester.

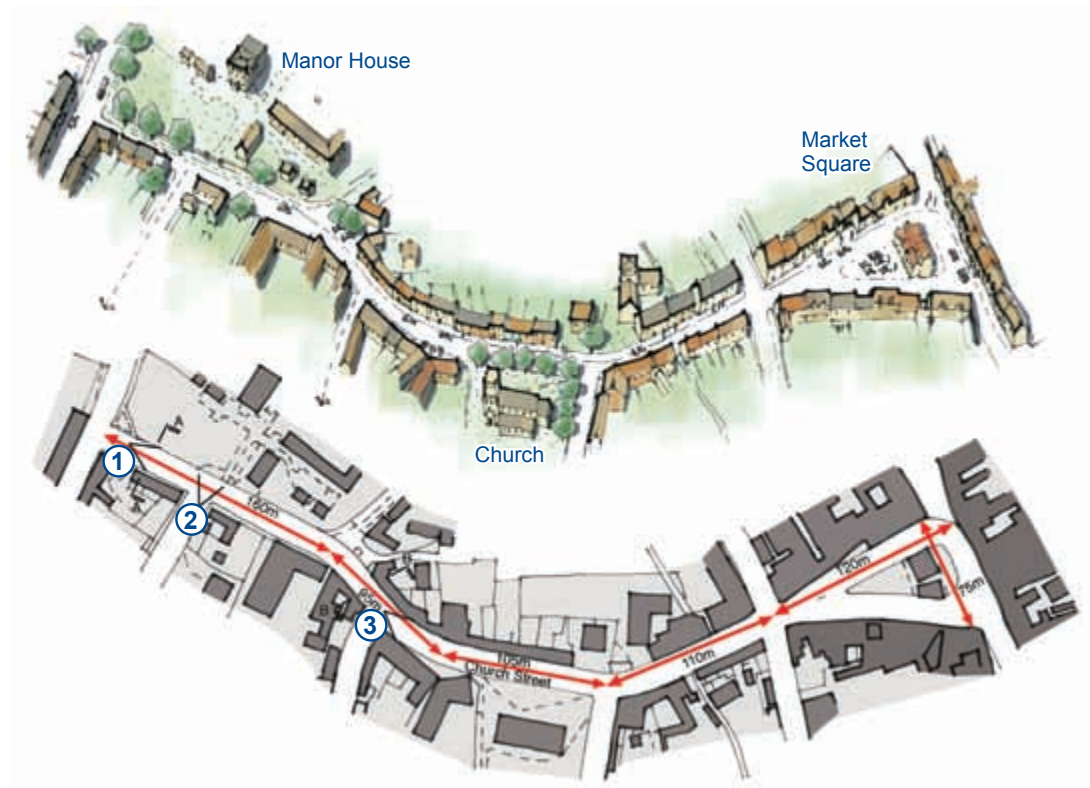
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Figure 2.6 **Open space**



Church Street varies in width, with a 'pinchpoint' before it opens up into the town square (left). The street is not always edged by buildings. Private gardens and a church yard enclose the street too, with walls and railings at the boundaries (right).

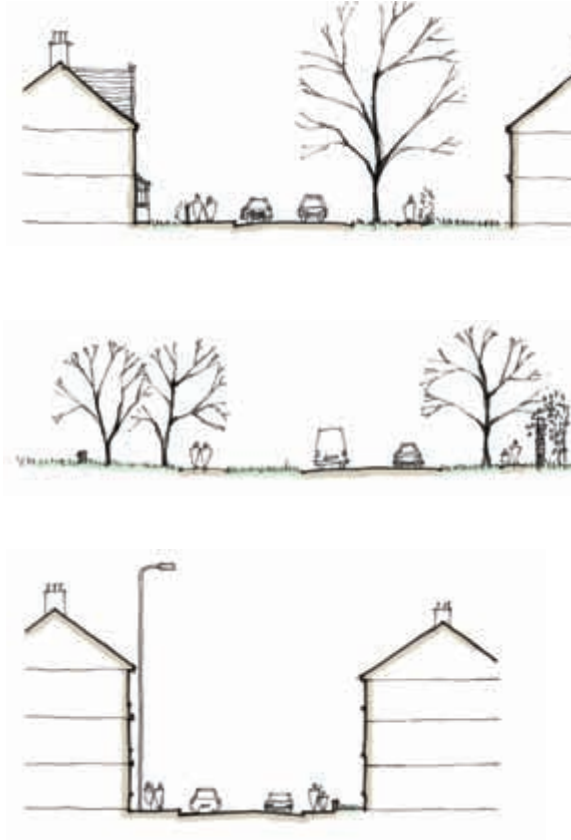


Church Street is one of the finest streets in Bicester, with a constantly changing alignment that creates a series of short views. Building fronts are close up against the street, with more significant buildings, such as the church and the Manor House, set further back to emphasise their importance. The street leads to Market Square, which is triangular in shape and edged with buildings. The new development can learn from this very successful part of town.



Figure 2.7 Analysis of Church Street

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Queens Avenue varies in width, with a variety of edges, including buildings, walls and railings. Tree-planting is a significant feature, denoting the street as an important through route.



Kings End and Queens Avenue is the main through route in town, with the greatest traffic flows in the town centre. Despite this, the traffic tends to keep moving, even at rush hour, and pedestrians can cross the road easily due to the slow traffic speeds and the numerous dedicated crossing points. The street also feels safe for pedestrians as the majority of the street is overlooked by development.



Figure 2.8 Analysis of Kings End/Queens Avenue