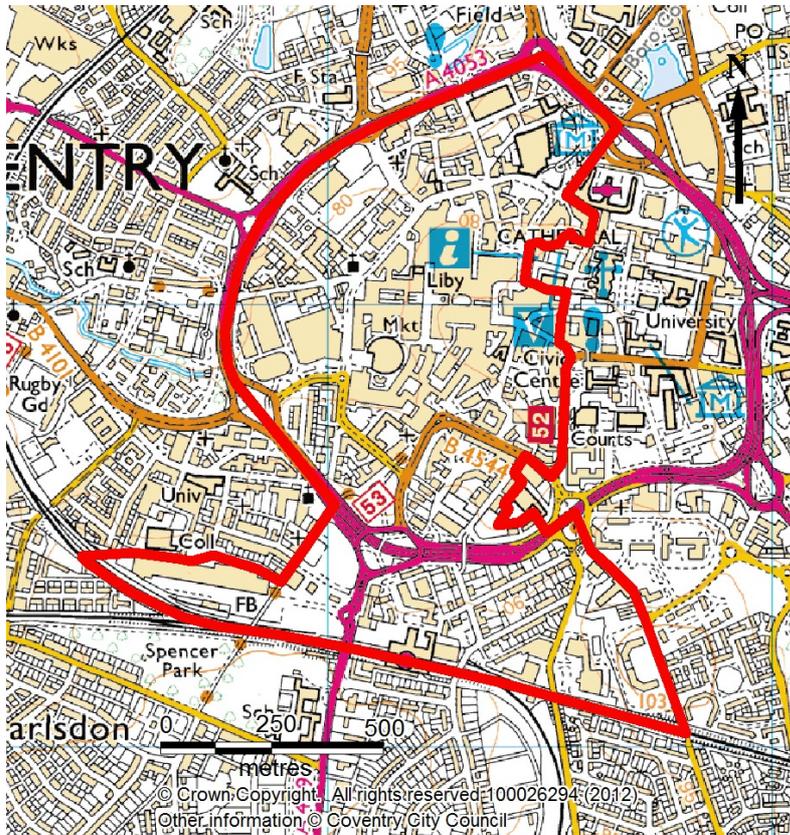


Location and Context



This character area is the western section of the city centre which predominantly comprises shops and offices. The Character Area is mainly surrounded by residential areas, with civic buildings to the east. The western boundary of the Character Area follows the course of the ring road. This section of the ring road has poor access between residential areas on the one side of the ring road and the city centre to the other, creating a very strong, distinct boundary to the Character Area.

Heritage Designations in the Character Area

- Scheduled Ancient Monuments: 8
- Archaeological Constraint Areas: 5
- Listed Buildings: 77
- Locally Listed Buildings: 21
- Conservation Areas: 5
- Registered Parks and Gardens: 1

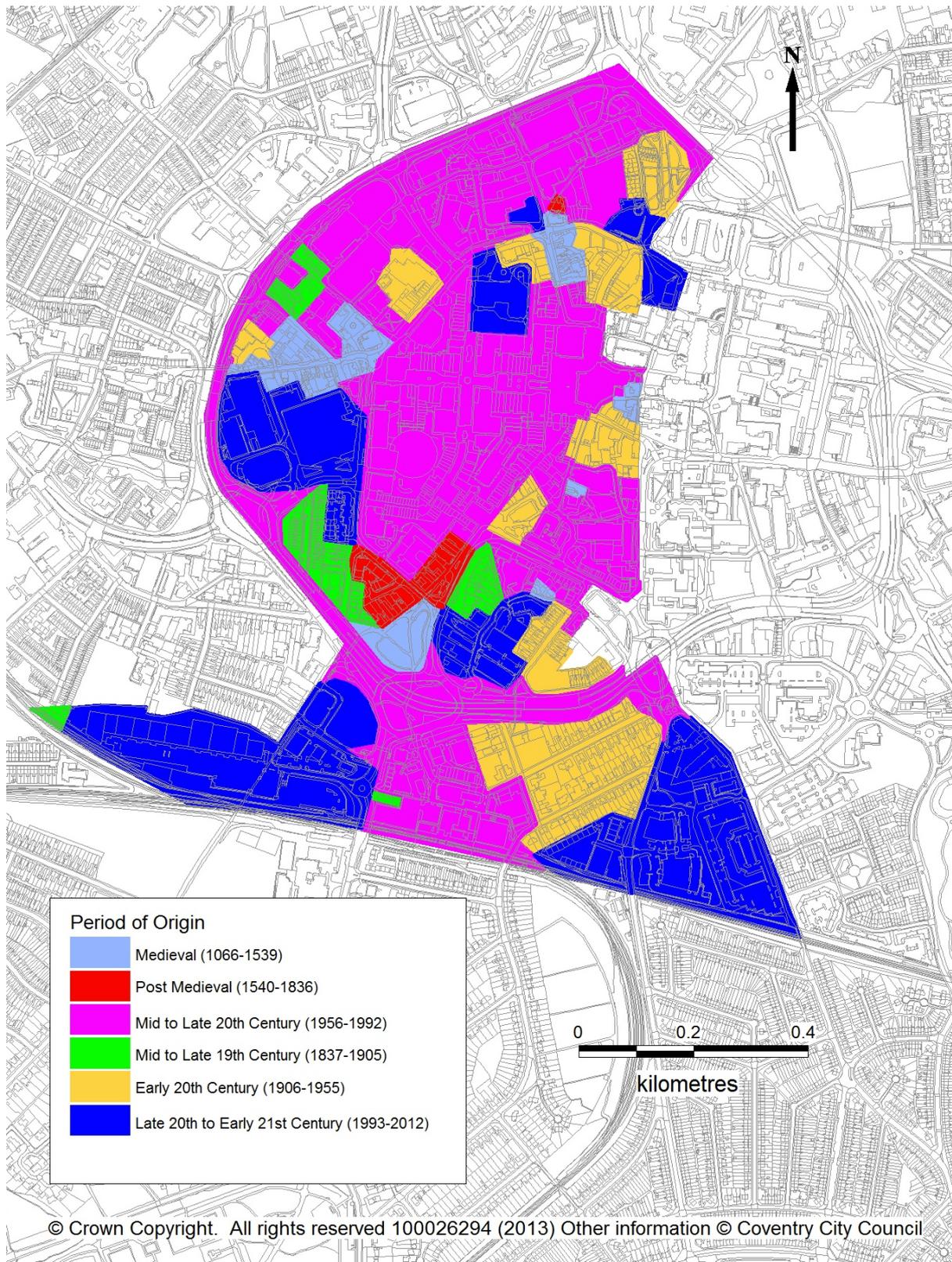
Historic Development

The development of this character area originated along the ancient roads that crossed it; the east to west route along Spon Street, Smithford Street, High Street and the north to south route along Bishop Street, The Burges, Cross Cheaping, Broadgate and Greyfriars Lane. The point where the two routes crossed at Broadgate was the site of two major markets from at least the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards; the Earl's market outside the 'broad gate' of Coventry castle and the Prior's market, a large triangular space to the north of Broadgate that stretched down to Ironmonger Row. Anglo-Saxon Coventry is believed to have been sited in the area around Holy Trinity Church although some of the best evidence for the pre-conquest settlement has been recovered from the infilled valley of the River Sherbourne that loops around the northern edge of the character area and is now mostly hidden in culverts.

Environmental evidence recovered from 6m below Hales Street indicated a well exploited 10<sup>th</sup> century landscape of willow coppicing, oak woodlands and arable cultivation in the locality, while a wooden trough radiocarbon dated to 1000AD was found below Silver Street. Relatively little archaeological work has taken place in the western half of the city centre and it is fair to say that the origins of this part of the city are less well understood than the eastern half despite the tantalising hints mentioned above.

Records suggest that Smithford Street was lined by burgage plots by the late 12<sup>th</sup> century which had their extents demarcated on the southern side by the Poddycroft Ditch which separated the settlement from the agricultural land beyond. A street named West Orchard was inserted on the northern side of Smithford Street as the density of the city increased and large areas of the Prior's market were encroached upon to form the streets of Butchers and Little Butchers Rows. To the south of Broadgate, along Greyfriars Lane was a Franciscan Friary, beyond which was the suburb of Greyfriars Green arranged around a triangle of common land. The city wall was constructed through this character area in a clockwise direction commencing at the Greyfriars Gate in c1381 and arriving on the Priory's land at Pool Meadow in c1411. The construction of the wall resulted in Greyfriars Green and Spon Street becoming extra-mural suburbs outside the walled city. The walls ceased to function as a defensive circuit after King Charles II ordered their removal in 1660 in the aftermath of the English Civil War, although most of the walls and gates survived long enough to be drawn and mapped in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century.

Coventry had declined and stagnated in the early post-medieval period but began to revive in the early 19<sup>th</sup> thanks to the industries like ribbon weaving. The city's population began to grow and were initially accommodated in courts of houses built towards the rear of the medieval burgage plots as common land grazing rights prevented the expansion of the city beyond the area of the walls until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century many industrial workshops had developed on the land behind Spon Street, Smithford Street and West Orchard, while the city had expanded southwards with residential areas of desirable villas for the growing professional classes around Greyfriars Green and the railway station.



The growth of industry meant that Coventry was Britain's fastest growing city in the inter-war period with the highest levels of car ownership in the country. The volume of cars brought particular strain to the roads of the medieval city and plans were made to ease congestion by inserting new roads into the street plan. Traffic had been an issue in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and had led to the construction of Hertford Street, Hales Street and Holyhead Road, but the

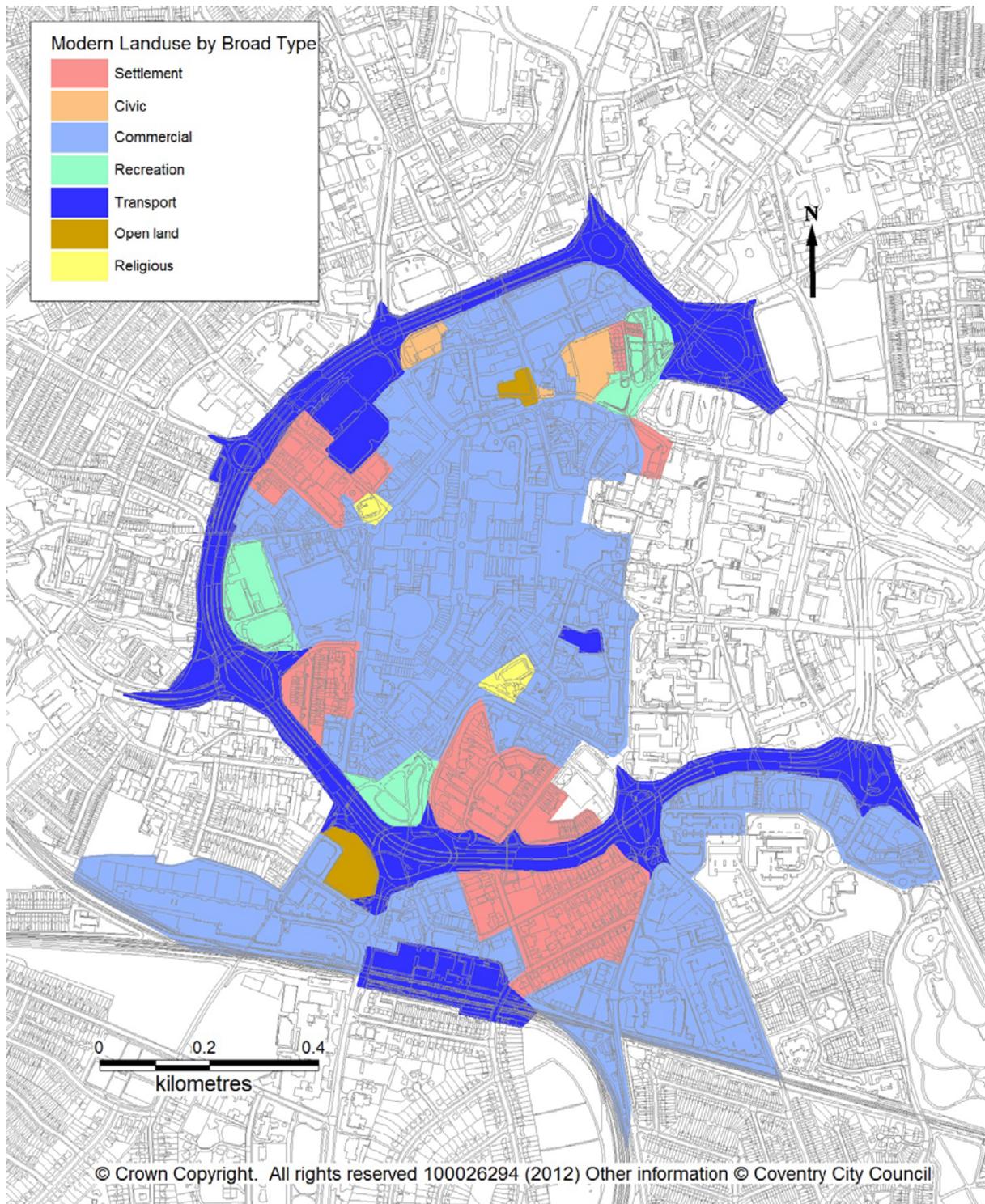
construction of Corporation Street and Trinity Street in the early 1930s resulted in large scale clearances of medieval streets like Butchers Row.



*Grade II Listed Broadgate House, Broadgate*

The bombing of November 1940 destroyed most of the buildings in the central area around Broadgate and Smithford Street and helped facilitate the radical changes that had been proposed by the newly appointed City Architect Donald Gibson in the late 1930s. The new Broadgate was opened in 1948 with Broadgate House being completed in 1953, with its mirror block the Leofric Hotel and the Owen Owen department store being completed a year later. The Precinct to the west was one of the first pedestrian shopping areas in Europe and was completed in 1956 with two tier shopping allegedly inspired by The Rows in Chester. Much of the Precinct was built by private firms rather than by the Council but the development followed consistent rules on scale and materials to achieve a uniform appearance with the Broadgate buildings. The Lower Precinct was built in a slightly different style and completed in 1959. Tower blocks were never part of the original city centre plan as it was felt they would reduce the visual impact of the medieval spires, but this policy was relaxed as the towers of Mercia House, Hillman House and Coventry Point were added in the late 1960s and early 1970s. A new Post Office sorting office was built on Bishop Street in the 1970s and West Orchard Shopping Centre was built on the north side of the Precinct in the late 1980s. The most recent major additions have been the Coventry Skydome on the site of the former GEC works in the late 1990s and IKEA and Belgrade Plaza dating from the mid-2000s.

### **Modern Character**



The development of the post-war shopping precinct was not sensitive to former building plots or street plan and in the course of redevelopment many streets were either lost altogether like West Orchard or realigned like Smithford Street in order to create straight, formal, symmetrical pedestrian-friendly roads and spaces. Despite this the views of St Michael's medieval spire were a crucial focal point for the design and remain so today. The architectural language of the Broadgate and the Precincts with their strong uniformity is still legible with the repeated palette of browns and green-greys created by Blockley brick and Westmorland slate, although some of the symmetry has been harmed by poorly conceived

additions like the entrance to West Orchard Shopping Centre. The shopping precinct is characterised by many public spaces and seating areas which often host market stalls and events. This is a lively pedestrian area where people like to congregate although activity sharply decreases when the shops close.



*The Upper Precinct*

Several streets from the pre-war city do survive such as The Burges and also along Spon Street which has been enhanced with some timber framed buildings moved from elsewhere in the city centre. These streets contrast with the Precinct shopping area with a more traditional and intimate feel. The land to the north of the character area around Bishop Street has never really recovered from the damage inflicted during the Second World War and is a mix of surface car parks and small business premises, many of which are empty. The inward looking Precinct turns its back on the Bishop Street area while to the north the area suffers from poor permeability and access to the suburbs beyond as a result of the ring road. To the south Greyfriars Green is a green and welcoming entrance to the city centre lined with late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings.

### **Geology and Topography**

This area overlies sandstone. There is a drift geology consisting of an alluvial deposit which follows the former watercourse comprising sand with clay and gravel. Overall the land level rises from the north at 85m above sea level to 100m to the south.