

Summary

This report considers the historical, archaeological, architectural and map evidence relating to the development of Bridport. It focuses on the overall development of the town from its origins to the present day, with a view to defining its influence on the modern townscape, identifying surviving historical features and understanding the contribution of its historic dimension to the character of Bridport today. This will enable an informed approach to the management of change and conservation of the urban environment.

Historical Background

Bridport began as a defended *burh* called *Brydian* established by King Alfred in the late 9th century, but its precise location is uncertain. By the late 10th century there was a significant town at Bridport, which flourished between the 12th and early 15th century, receiving its Borough Charter in 1253. Flax and hemp was an important industry and it became a nationally important rope-making centre by the 13th century. It managed to retain its dominant position in the rope industry throughout the 15th century, but the town declined from the late 16th to early 18th century largely due to difficulties in the rope industry and the problems with maintaining the harbour.

The late 18th and 19th century saw a return to prosperity and the emergence of the modern town, with expansion beyond the limits of the medieval town and a new artificial harbour. The prosperity came partly from the growth of the Newfoundland trade and partly from a change of manufacturing focus from ropes to nets. Bridport's traditional industrial base declined after the Second World War and almost disappeared, but the town retains some netmaking and other light industry and continues to function as a successful local market town.

Town morphology

Bridport has a distinctive T-shaped plan formed by East, West, and South Streets, with the market place at the junction of these roads. The Saxon town developed along South Street and the medieval town along East and West Streets, part of a deliberately planned medieval extension. The large number of surviving long narrow medieval burgage plots in the historic core is a major significant element of the town.

Suburban expansion beyond the limits of the medieval town began during the later 18th century, restricted to ribbon development along the major roads and with an area of villas and gentry housing on Coneygat Hill. Suburban expansion during the 20th century has engulfed the formerly separate historic settlements of Brad-

pole, Bothenhampton and Allington, infilling large areas around the periphery of the town with its own looped road networks and culs-de-sac that have little in common with the historic road network and the earlier settlement morphology. The by-pass on the east side of the town is along the course of the former railway line to West Bay.

Built character

Bridport has a large quantity of surviving historic buildings, mainly dating from the 18th and 19th centuries, with a small number of stone-built medieval buildings. The 18th and 19th century buildings comprise a distinctive mix of larger town houses and small workers' houses, with many industrial workshops, factories, and warehouses. The building materials comprise local bricks from Allington and Bothenhampton and local Inferior Oolite and Forest Marble (Bothenhampton) stone. The brickwork of many buildings is of high quality. Georgian and Victorian façades predominate with a great deal of variety of detail. The modern suburban housing is typical of its period with no remarkable local characteristics. The exception to this is the post-WWI suburb at Skilling, which was a high quality estate designed along garden city principles and carefully planned to provide linkages with the historic town centre.

Landscape Setting

The landscape and topographic setting of the town is a major factor of its character. The position of the historic core on a promontory at the confluence of the rivers Brit and Asker has provided a natural barrier to development immediately beyond the historic core of the town, resulting in the river floodplains forming green corridors through the town. The steep hills to the north have impeded development, forcing movement and development along relatively narrow corridors with the views of the other parts of the town blocked by the steep green upper slopes providing further intrusion of green spaces into the built-up area of the town. This adds to the impression of the close relationship between the town and countryside and provides a varied and dramatic backdrop to the urban and suburban areas. The rivers have provided power for the various industries and the surrounding soils are ideal for growing hemp and flax, thus influencing the development of the major historic industries of Bridport.

Historic Urban Character

There are four main components contributing to the local distinctiveness of Bridport: the historic T-shaped town layout with its wide streets, the



Figure 1: Vertical aerial photographic view of Bridport, 2005 (© Getmapping.com, 2005).

extensive survival of medieval burgh plots, the large number of historic domestic and industrial buildings, and the landscape setting. The medieval town plan survives virtually complete and exerts a strong influence, in terms of its street and burgh plot layout, affecting both the form of later historic housing and the location of rope walks and spinning ways.

The underlying historic town structure is complemented by the high quality of the historic buildings. The mixture of merchant's houses, worker's and artisan houses, industrial buildings including open and covered ropewalks and combined industrial and domestic buildings is unique to Bridport.

Further Research

This report has highlighted many aspects of the historical development of Bridport and how this has shaped the modern town. It has also indi-

cated gaps in our knowledge and areas which would repay further research. These include:

- Research into the location of the burh of Brydian .
- Research into the form of the late Saxon and Norman town.
- Research into the medieval development of the town, its economy and industry.
- Research into the post-medieval industry of the town.