



3.0 The Rural Landscape





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3.1 Christchurch's Rural Landscape

3.1.1 The rural landscapes are a defining feature of the Borough as a whole. Approximately 70% of the Borough is undeveloped, and of this just less than half is in agricultural production. The remaining areas are in a combination of forestry and recreational uses.

3.1.2 The rural landscapes of the Borough are roughly split between the agricultural landscape of the eastern part of the Borough and the more enclosed wooded landscape to the west. To the south the countryside is divorced from the coast by the extent of the built up area.

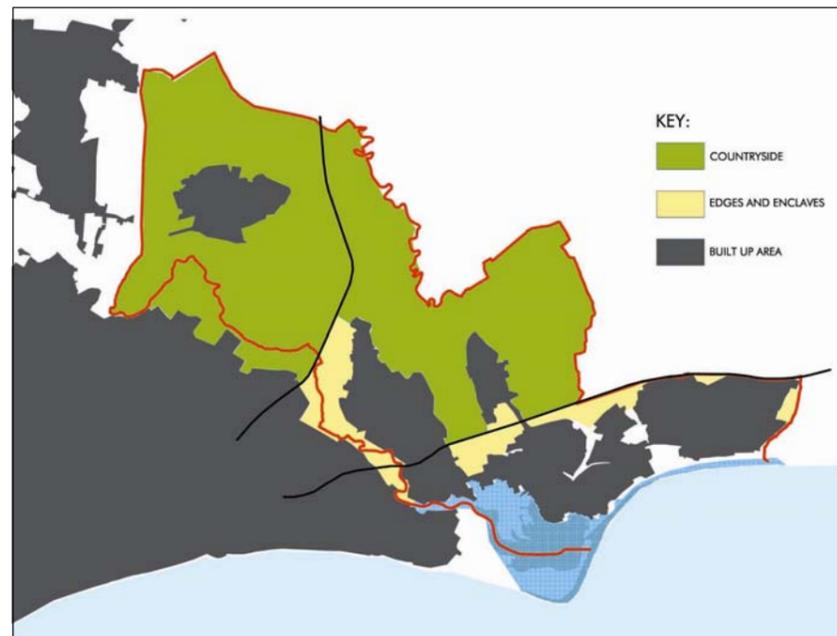


Figure 3.1

3.1.3 In most locations there is a sharp contrast between the edge of the built up area and the countryside. While there are localised conflicts between the rural and urban land uses there is no extensive 'urban fringe' landscape around the borough. Indeed areas of 'countryside' are an integral part of the setting of parts of Christchurch. As landscapes with a particular role in the environmental quality of the Borough the function of these interface areas are described in detail separately in Section 4.0.

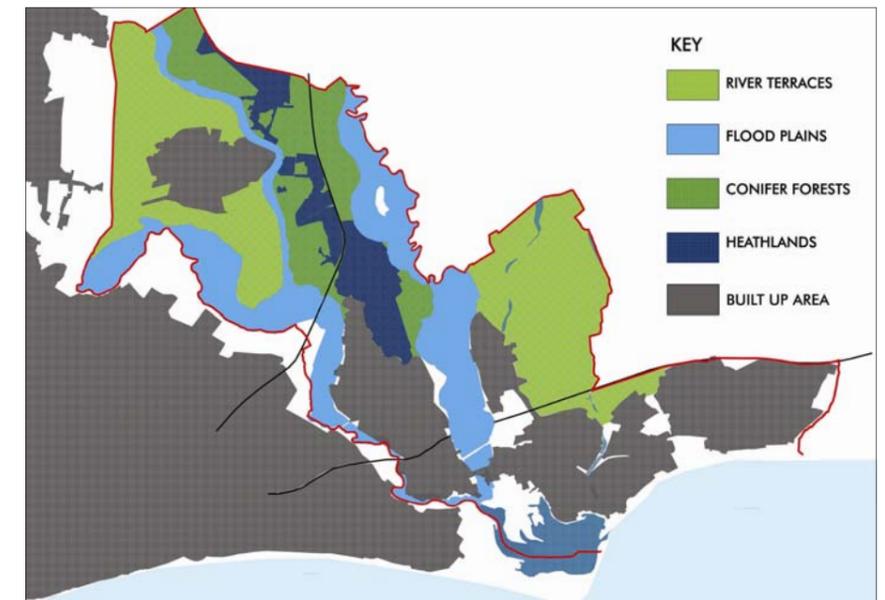


Figure 3.2

3.1.4 This section concentrates on the features and characteristics of the rural areas that contribute to the distinctive identity of the different sections of countryside in the Borough.

3.2 Landscape Types and Character Areas

3.2.1 There are four distinct rural landscape types within the Christchurch area. These are areas with common characteristics that can be found in different parts of the Borough, i.e.:

- The River Terraces
- The River Flood Plains
- The Heath Land Areas
- The Coniferous Woodlands

3.2.2 Various parts of the Borough can also be identified and described as local character areas. These are generally specific areas of landscape that can be distinguished as a unit. They may encompass more than one landscape type. Areas of landscape are often interrelated and may not always have clear boundaries. The descriptions of landscape character areas therefore include some overlap.



3.2.3 The four main landscape types set out above are directly related to the contrasting geomorphology of the St Catherine's Ridge and the valley floors. The deeper alluvial soils within the valley have provided versatile and productive conditions for agriculture. This allowed the development of water meadows and mixed farmland across the floodplain and river terrace areas. The thinner poor soils of the sandstone ridge have proved less productive. Historically the thin soils supported only managed heathland, and in the more recent past coniferous plantations.

3.2.4 The landscape pattern of ridgeline and valley extends out well beyond the Christchurch Borough Boundary. The two main river valleys sit within a low vale of landscape set between the high ground areas of Cranborne Chase and the New Forest. This landscape pattern is repeated across Dorset and can also be identified within parts of Hampshire.

3.3 Physical Landscape Structure

Topography and Drainage

3.3.1 The landscape and settlement pattern of the Borough has been shaped, and heavily influenced by topography and drainage. **Figures 3.3 and 3.4** illustrate the local topography and principal rivers. The topography reflects the soft nature of the underlying geology and deposits of alluvial 'drift' material. A modest ridge of high ground forms a north south axis through the Borough. St Catherine's Hill forms the highest part of the ridge at 45m above sea level (AOD). This spine of sandstone has been eroded away within the harbour area where the two rivers converge. However, the ridge reappears on the coast as the area of Hengistbury Head (36m AOD).

3.3.2 The valley floor areas are comprised of essentially flat terraces of alluvium into which the meandering river channels have cut broad flood plains. The boundary between the plains and terraces is generally defined by a distinct change in level. Alongside the Avon the river terraces extend to the eastern edge of the Borough where the land starts to rise up into the New Forest District. The Terraces alongside the Stour merge into the built up area of Bournemouth on the southern side of the river. To the north the airport extends across the level landforms of the river terrace.

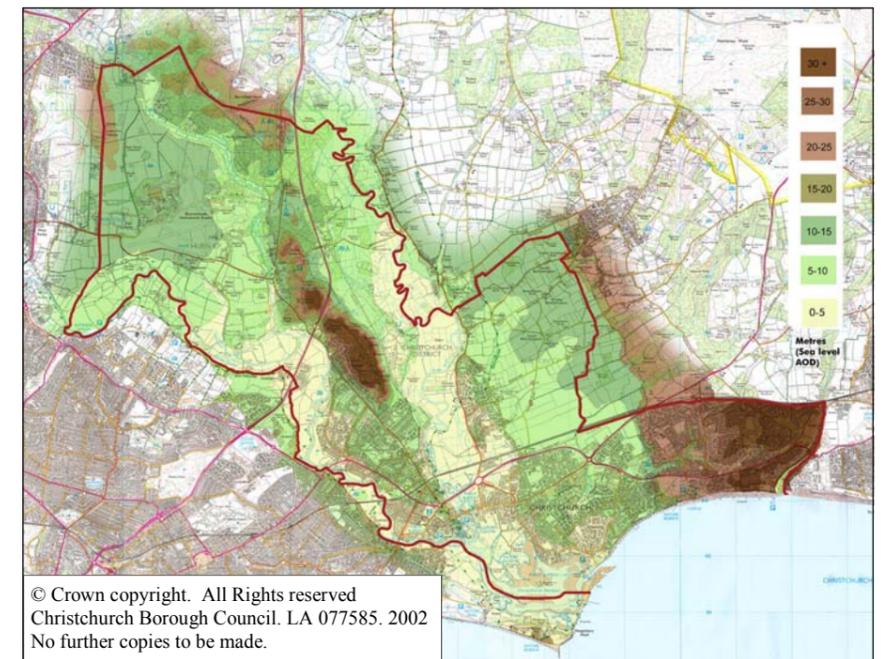


Figure 3.3 (See Figure 2.2 for enlargement)

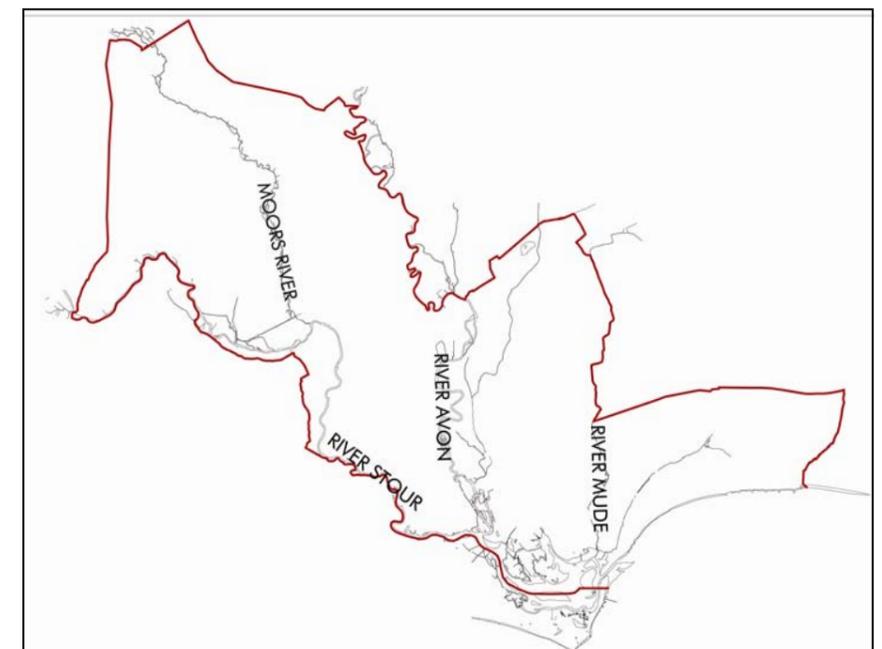


Figure 3.4

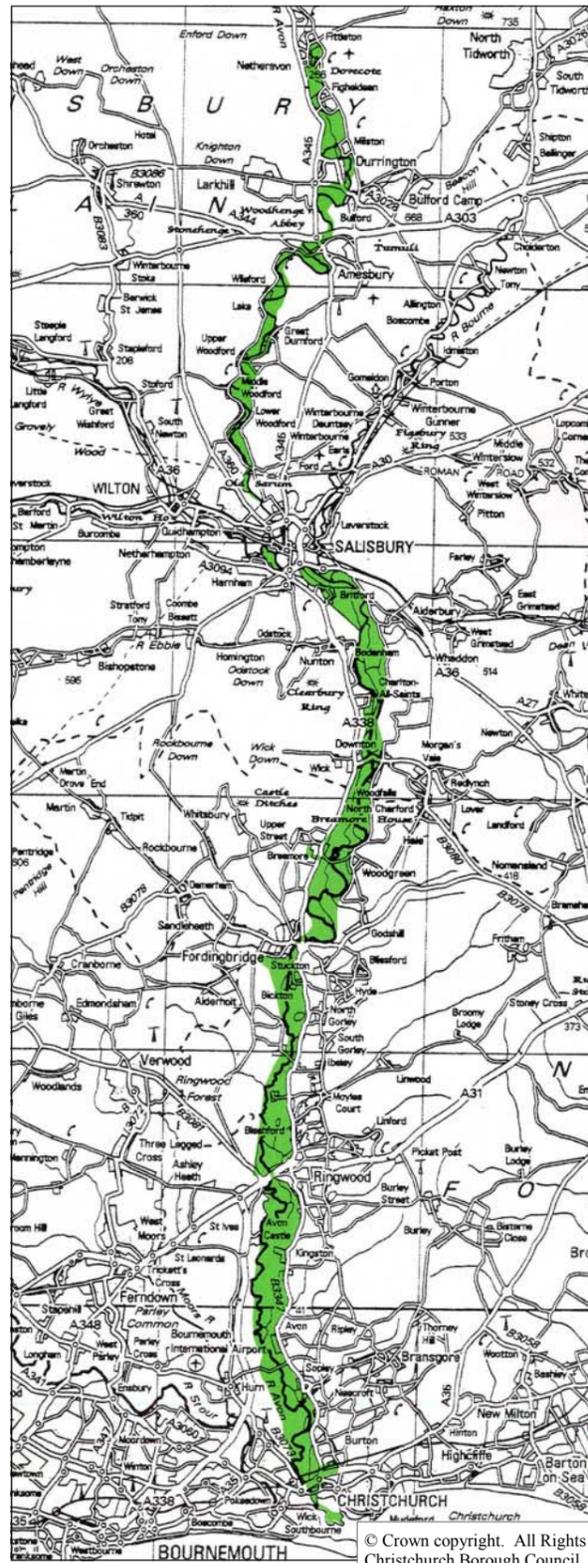


Figure 3.5 ESA Designated Area (Indicative Map)

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3.3.3 The River Avon flows into the Borough from Salisbury and Ringwood to the north. The Stour flows into the Borough from Wimborne to the north west and forms the boundary between Christchurch and the built up area of Bournemouth. Both rivers have a meandering course with minor tributaries and side channels set within the low-lying flood plains. A smaller river, the Moors, has formed a more incised small-scale course along the western edge of the Hurn Forest. Much of the main river flood plain areas lie below 5m AOD. Flooding in these areas can be exacerbated by tidal conditions within Christchurch Harbour.

3.3.4 The valley areas are also served by a number of small streams and ditches which help the management of the water meadows and provide drainage to the terrace areas.

Land Use and Management

3.3.5 There is a transition of land uses across the rural part of the Borough. On the eastern side the River Avon Terraces are mixed farmland, with arable and livestock management. The Avon Flood Plain is predominantly managed as water meadows providing summer grazing. This area is designated as an Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) by DEFRA. (See Figure 3.5). The designation provides grant assistance to landowners to help support the traditional management of the water meadows and pastures of the flood plain areas.

3.3.6 Between the river valleys the St Catherine’s ridge is a mixture of open heathland and coniferous plantations. These areas provide dual uses of forestry and open recreational land. In addition to the public access these areas also accommodate small scale privately operated recreational facilities including golf and equestrian activities.

3.3.7 Within the Stour Valley area the agricultural land uses or holdings have been fragmented by roads, the airport and other activities. Some mixed arable farming occurs on the edge of the river terrace but the agricultural activity is generally restricted to livestock and equestrian grazing in this area. The presence of the other non-agricultural land uses has a significant influence on the character of the landscape around the Stour Corridor.

Vegetation and Habitat Patterns

3.3.8 As with the agricultural management the patterns of vegetation and habitats within the borough respond to the underlying morphology of the area. The pattern of vegetation within the agricultural landscapes is restricted to the hedge lines and occasional small woodlands. The heathland and coniferous woodlands relate to the thin soils of the St Catherine’s Ridge.

3.3.9 Within the farmed landscape of the main valleys the tree cover varies between hedgerow oaks on the terrace areas and riverside willows and poplars in the flood plain. Within the flood plain the fields are generally fenced rather than hedged. On the terraces the fields are divided into a regular pattern by low mixed hedges of thorn, hazel, dogwood and field maple. On the Avon Terrace some further division is provided by occasional pine shelterbelt features and mature oaks. There are also views to more heavily wooded landscape to the east, but there are only minimal areas of semi-natural woodland cover within the Borough itself; namely Barrett’s Copse is an ancient woodland.

3.3.10 Alongside the Stour small pockets of parkland landscape tree groups occur on the outer edges of the flood plain. The existing pattern of hedge lines and tree planting dates from the 18th and 19th century enclosure of the landscape. Occasional more ancient trees may be found in the parkland area adjacent to the Stour or areas within the village settlements.

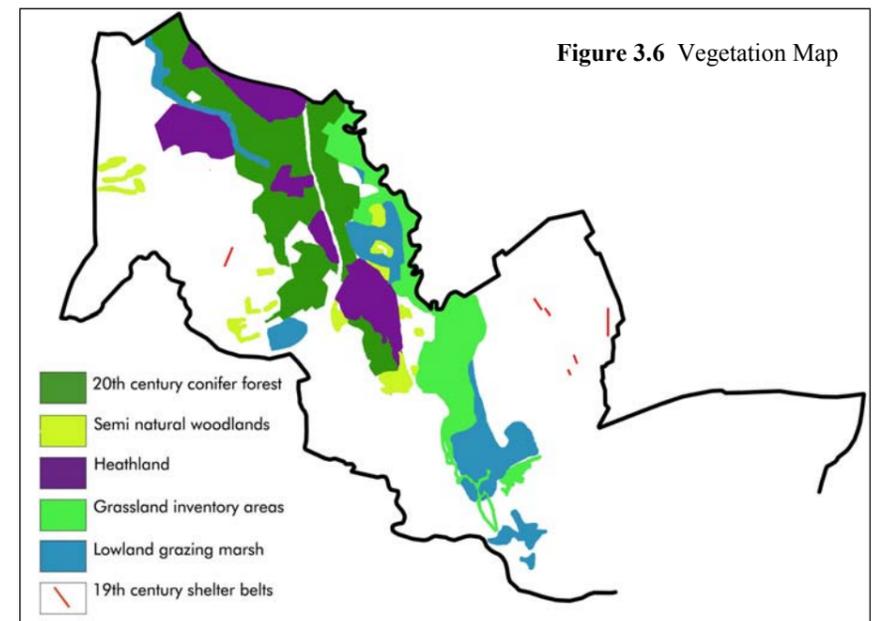


Figure 3.6 Vegetation Map



3.3.11 The origin of the heathland landscape is significantly older. With the Bronze Age clearance of the original woodland cover, the thinner soils were exposed to the leaching of soil nutrients leaving the areas too infertile for intensive agricultural use. Prior to the enclosure movement the Dorset Heaths were used for rough grazing and turf cutting. Some heathland reclamation occurred between the 17th and 19th centuries, but many areas were again abandoned during the agricultural depression of the late 19th century. Significant areas of the open heath land within the Borough have since been lost to plantations of conifers dating from the 1950's and 60's.

3.3.12 The remaining areas are protected by nature conservation designation. In some areas the cover of heather, bracken and gorse is interspersed with pockets of encroaching birch, pine and oak woodland. Species such as sand lizards, smooth snakes, the Dartford

Warbler and Nightjar are found within the heathland areas. The Dorset County Heathland Strategy has been prepared to help promote positive management of the County's heathlands.

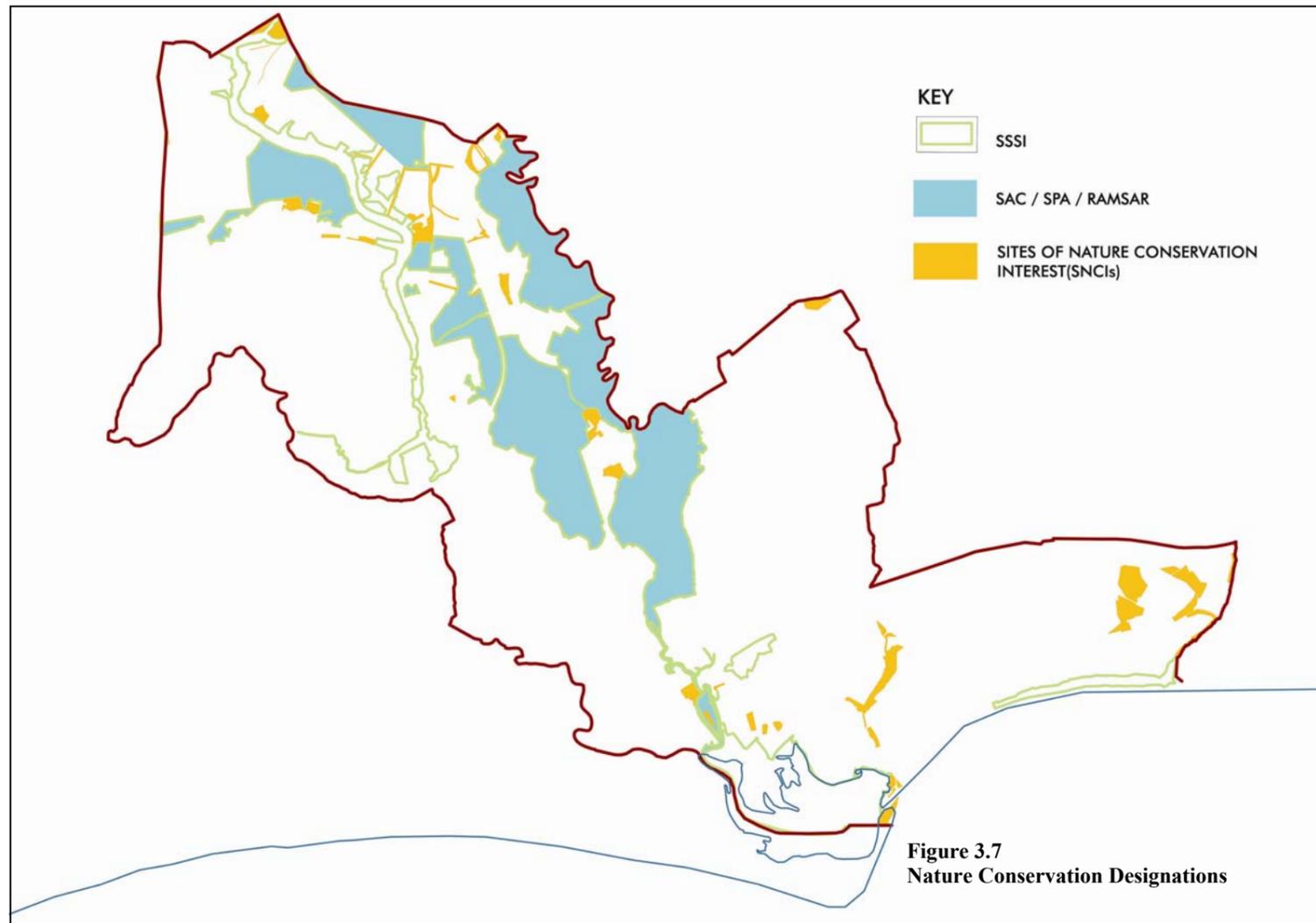
3.3.13 The terrestrial pattern of vegetation and habitat is complemented by a rich aquatic environment. All three main rivers are fed from chalk upland areas to the north. The generally high water quality condition and natural chemistry of the water courses support rich collections of flora and fauna. The River Avon and significant areas of adjacent water meadows are protected by national and international status Nature Conservation designations. This level of interest extends into the estuary area of Christchurch Harbour. The Moors River and its flood plain are also designated as an SSSI.

Settlement and Transport

3.3.14 The earliest settlements within the Borough took advantage of the strategic positions such as the high ground of St Catherine's Hill. These were later abandoned in favour of the main settlement around the Priory and Saxon Town and small farmsteads in the valleys. The character assessment of the old town and the relationship of the countryside to the modern settlement patterns are examined in Sections 4.0 and 5.0. Although the settlements within the rural part of the Borough are relatively sparse the distribution and form of the smaller settlements is an important part of the local landscape character.

3.3.15 The distribution and scale of rural settlements has again been influenced by the physical constraints of the river valley landscapes. The natural limitations of the floodplain areas historically prevented significant settlement alongside the rivers. More recent post war planning control has strictly protected most of the remaining open countryside from sporadic development.

3.3.16 The difficulty of crossing the wide floodplain areas has prevented the development of many east west routes through the rural area. The main routes developed along the edge of the flood plains north towards Ringwood and Salisbury. Burton, Winkton and Hurn are all located along such routes. The villages of Holdenhurst and Throop (located just inside Bournemouth) are located on the southern side of the Stour again on the edge of the flood plain. These were all small-scale agricultural hamlets with most buildings dating from the 18th and 19th century.



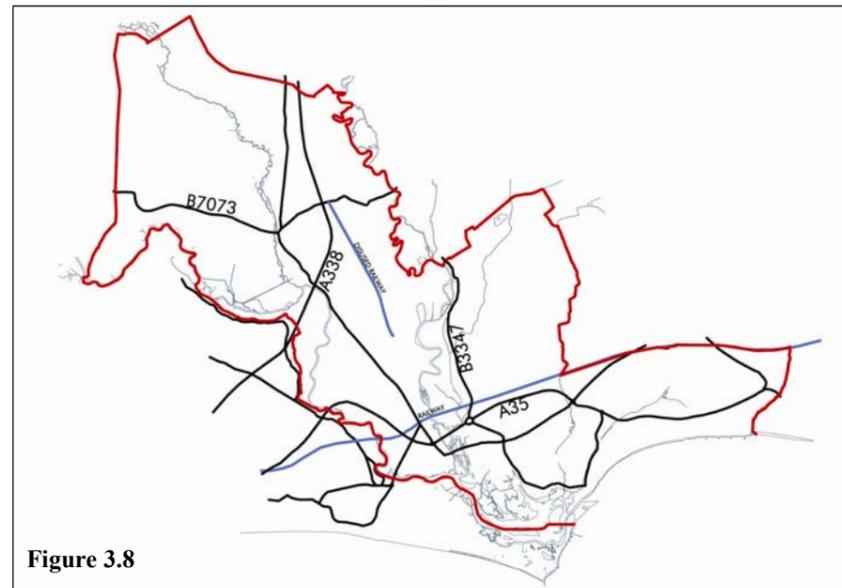


Figure 3.8

3.3.17 Burton has been substantially expanded with areas of post war housing. The other settlements remain largely in their original 19th century form. Outside of the villages individual farmsteads are set on the junction of the floodplain and river terrace on the north side of the Stour. Other farms are set alongside minor streams on the Avon River Terrace.

3.3.18 The rural settlements are served by a network of minor roads. Few roads cross the river corridors which means sections of the Borough road network are heavily trafficked by commuting traffic to and from Bournemouth. Other sections of the valleys are less accessible and thereby quite remote. The alignment of the rural roads would have been improved at the same time as the rationalisation of the surrounding farmland in the 18th and 19th centuries. Since that time the network has not been extensively modernised to improved modern highway standards. The roadways therefore retain a country road character throughout most of the Borough.

3.3.19 Two modern strategic roads pass through the western section of the Borough. The A338 dual carriageway forms a link between the M27 and Bournemouth. The large scale roadscape is contained in cutting and pine forest for much of its route but remains as a significant element in the landscape. The B3073 is a single carriageway modern standard road serving as a link between the outskirts of Bournemouth, the Airport and the A338. Both routes bring an urbanising influence to the local landscape in an area sensitive to urban encroachment.

Minerals

3.3.20 The Dorset Minerals and Waste Local Plan (April 1999) identifies two sites within Christchurch Borough for future sand and gravel extraction. The areas concerned are both located in the north western part of the Borough. The first is a 48 hectare farmland site at Hurn Court Farm, close to Bournemouth International Airport. The second, in a 75 hectare area referred to as Avon Common, is located to the north of the Avon Causeway and to the east of the A338 dual carriageway. The Avon Common area is predominantly conifer plantation, but also includes some heathland. Three sites of Nature Conservation Interest are included within the boundary of the site. Environmental Assessment will be required prior to extraction operations. The Local Plan suggests the final use of this area should aim for a net increase in the quality and diversity of ecological habits within the area. The location of the two identified sites is illustrated on **Figure 3.13**, and the potential impacts of each operation discussed in the appropriate character assessments contained later in this section.

Urban Infrastructure

3.3.21 The detailed inter-relationship of the urban edges and countryside areas is set out in Section 4.0. At a more widespread Borough-wide scale the proximity of the urban areas mean the general countryside is affected by a range of urbanising influences. There are a wide range of major elements of infrastructure, such as sewage farms and power lines, set within the rural landscape. There are also the rail link and major through routes across the Borough. The airport has an impact in terms of its position in the countryside and noise effects. These all combine with the physical presence and visibility of the built up area to urbanise sections of the countryside.

3.3.22 The impact of major noise sources, and visual intrusion of urban development can be illustrated in general terms by overlaying the presence of such urbanising elements on to one plan. **Figure 3.9** illustrates how the impact of the urban area can be related to the rural area of the Borough.



3.3.22 The combined effects of noise and visual intrusion from the railway, A35, power lines and visibility of the built-up area have an impact on the Avon Valley and terraces landscapes immediately to the north of Christchurch. The A338 trunk road bisects the northwest part of the Borough. A corridor of disturbance associated with the trunk road overlaps with the measured noise contours related to Bournemouth airport.

3.3.23 The remaining sections of countryside represent some of the more unspoilt and tranquil areas to be found within the Borough. By definition these areas are more remote from the built up area.