



6.0 Coastal and Inter-tidal Area





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6.1 Introduction

6.1.1 Christchurch Harbour and Beaches form the final element of the unique package of Environmental assets within the Borough. The natural harbour provides navigable water up to the Iford Bridge on the Stour and Bridge Street on the Avon.

6.1.2 Below the confluence of the two rivers a meandering channel opens out into an expanse of sheltered water, saltings and marshland. The harbour is protected from the South / Southwest by the dominant headland of Hengistbury Head. Sand spits restrict the harbour entrance to a narrow channel. "The Run" and the harbour entrance is marked by the popular Mudeford Quay. Outside of the harbour the beaches of Christchurch Bay provide some 5km of continuous sandy beaches round to the Borough boundary.

6.2 Physical Geography

6.2.1 The harbour was formed when the sea level rose at the end of the Ice Age. The harbour area is a shallow basin with extensive inter-tidal mudflats. The full tidal reach extends to the Iford bridge on the Stour and the Mill Pool above the A35 causeway of the Avon. The river channels are therefore tidal and tidal conditions in the harbour can cause or exacerbate flooding in the low lying areas along the

river. Parts of Christchurch town are protected by flood protection barriers.

6.2.2 Aside from the main rivers, a series of smaller streams and creeks enter the Christchurch side of the basin from Stanpit, and Mudeford (Purewell Stream, The Mude, and Bure Brook).

6.2.3 River sediments are deposited in the harbour. The Stanpit and Grimbury Marsh are extensive areas of salt marsh within the heart of the harbour. The low lying area reaches no more the 5.0 m AOD on the "high" point of Crouch Hill within the marsh. At low tide, these areas are expanded by the mud flats between the deeper channels. Outside the harbour mouth the unstable sandpits create a barely covered shallow at high tide. The growth of this feature in the 1800's extended it up to near Highcliffe Castle. The sand was later washed round towards the beaches of Highcliffe and beyond.

6.2.4 The beach areas are backed by low soft cliffs formed by the Bracklesham Beds (layers of clay, sand and gravels). Progressive erosion of the beaches and cliffs has been managed by various coastal defences. Seawalls, groynes, and cliff vegetation are all part of the controls used to help protect the sea front and property above.

6.2.5 Between Friars Cliff and the western end of Highcliffe, the "cliff" faces are nearly vertical. Adjacent to Highcliffe the Bracklesham Beds give way to the Barton Clays and the coast is more of a steep slope. The "cliffs" rise to some 25m AOD. On the Eastern side of Highcliffe the Walkford Brook has cut a deep valley





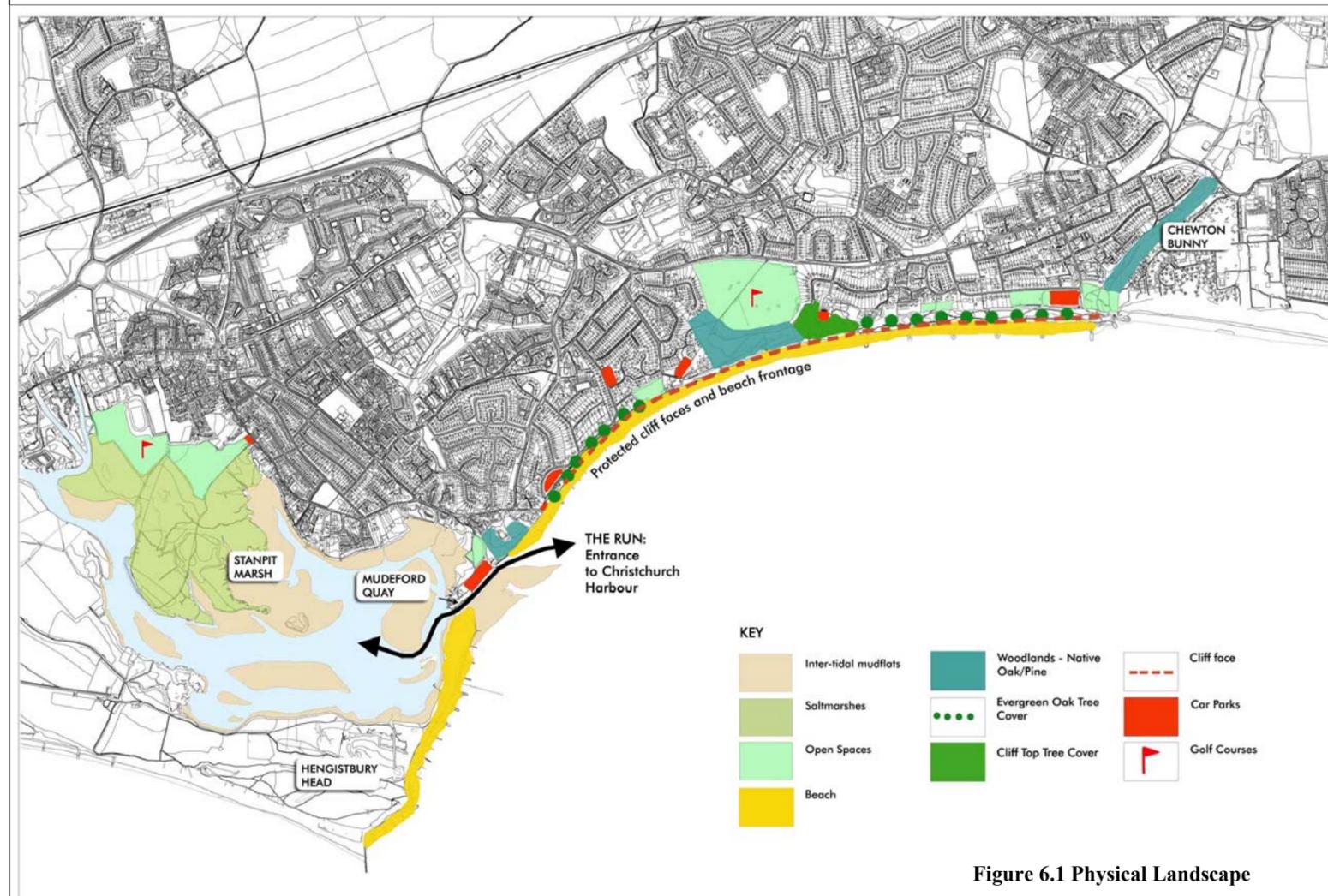


Figure 6.1 Physical Landscape

creating a narrow cliff frontage. This is intriguingly referred to as “Chewton Bunny”. The position of the Walkford Brook marks the Borough Boundary. To the East of Christchurch the shore line is left in its natural state. The clay slopes continue as slumped slopes adjacent to Barton on Sea. The Brook itself is culverted from the edge of the woodland to the sea. The precise position of the natural limit to the Borough is therefore now buried under the beach frontage.

6.3 Coastal Activity

6.3.1 Hengistbury Head was an early coastal trading centre, particularly active during the Roman occupation of France. The main harbour with its constricted entrance and shallow estuary never attracted commercial shipping. The area was historically a haven for smugglers. The Mudeford area also supported a cottage fishing industry.

6.3.2 The area has now become a popular sailing and mooring location with numerous boat yards and river moorings. The harbour hosts an annual Regatta and other regular events. The harbour is also a popular sail-boarding area. The extensive boating facilities around the harbour brings an added interest to the town and other water frontages. In summer, many areas come to life with constant boating activity. However, significant areas of the water frontage are dominated by boating activity and exclusive land-uses which limit other forms of public access to the coast.

6.3.3 An added dimension of the boating activity is the local boat building and maintenance industry. Part of the diversity of the land-uses within the town centre are the boat yards tucked into the riverside areas. These are generally private and quite secluded but they are part of the historic fabric of the town.

6.3.4 The wildlife interest of the Harbour and coast is yet another aspect that draws people into the waterfront areas.

6.3.5 The Borough prides itself on the attraction of its beaches. Although on the edge of the built up area, the beach areas are not dominated by development. The shoreline within Christchurch bay (although continuous) is divided into six beach areas. These are well served by footpaths and car park access. Highcliffe also provides a cliff top car park with views over the bay.





6.3.6 As a response to the complex management issues relating to the coastal environment the Borough Council have prepared draft management plans for Mudeford Quay and the Mudeford sandbank areas.

6.4 Nature Conservation

6.4.1 As a continuation of the River Avon the harbour is designated an SSSI and candidate SAC. The designated area is recognised for its salt marsh, wet meadows and ornithological interest. Within this Stanpit Marsh is a Local Nature Reserve. This designation is aimed at promotion and improved interpretation of the wildlife interest of the sites particularly those close to urban areas.

6.4.2 The Highcliffe section of the cliff extends to Milford-on-Sea and is also an SSSI. This area is designated for its geological interest.

6.4.3 To assist with the management of these important sites the Borough Council have prepared management plans for Stanpit Marsh and the Steamer Point Nature Reserves.

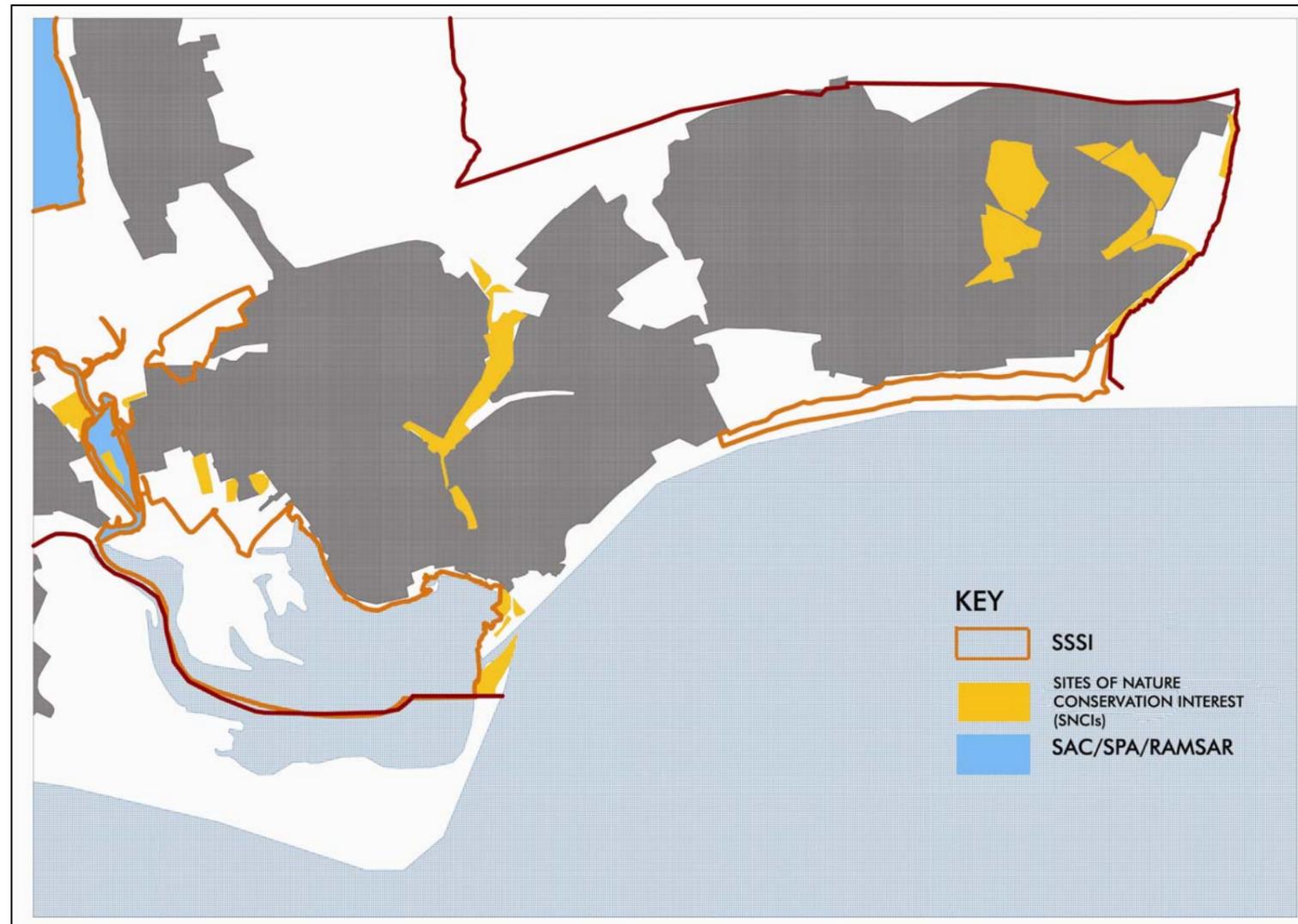


Figure 6.2

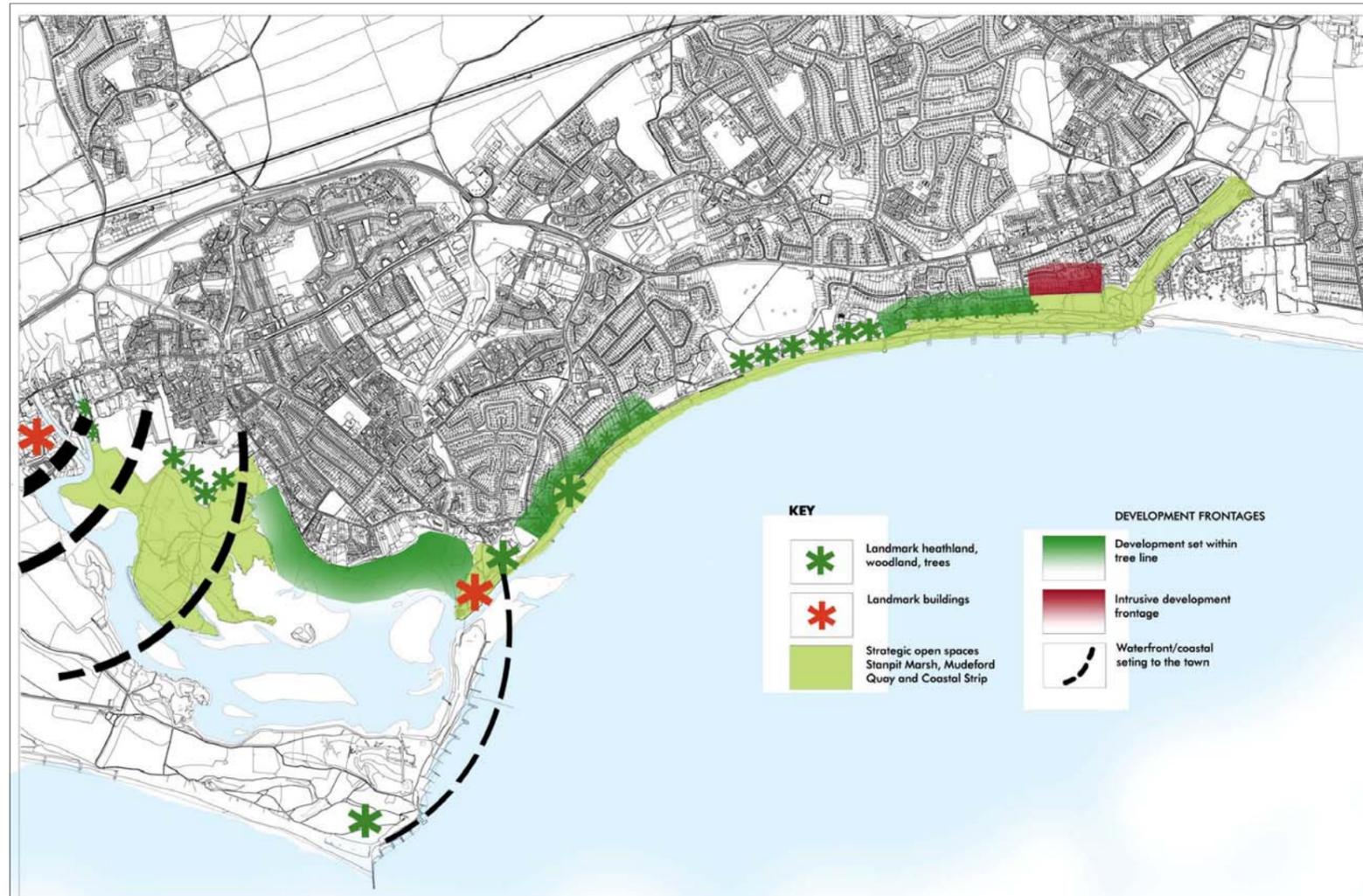


Figure 6.3 Landscape Settings

6.5 Landscape Settings

6.5.1 The Harbour forms a dynamic and attractive setting to a wide area. Views are gained from numerous points across the area to different elements of the harbour edge. Hengistbury Head provides the most elevated view and looks down into the town and areas of Stanpit, Mudeford and along the coast to Highcliffe.

6.5.2 Other lower angle views from Mudeford Quay, Fishmans Bank, Stanpit Marsh includes the Priory as a key landmark across the water and low lying marshes.

6.5.3 The coastal strip provides a number of vantage points. The open views include the Needles on the Western tip of the Isle of Wight. The beach front also benefits from the backdrop of the cliffs, sections of which are topped by dominant tree lines of pine and Holm oak.

6.5.4 The native oak woodland areas of the Steamer Point Nature Reserve and the evergreen oak cover around Highcliffe Castle are especially important as a strong block of tree cover that separates the Mudeford/Friars Cliff area from Highcliffe. The evergreen oak creates a distinctive kind of woodland cover.

6.5.5 A key view of the Borough is the view from the water looking back. To the east of the Borough the coastline is not so well vegetated, to the West, Bournemouth is seen as a mass of development. In between, the tree topped cliffs, and Hengistbury Head form distinctive landmarks that identify the entrance to Christchurch Harbour and positively mark the well treed character of the Borough.



Coastal Character Areas

- a) Christchurch Harbour
- b) Mundeford Quay
- c) Christchurch Bay

Figure 6.4 Character Areas



Character Areas

6.6 CI Area 1 : Christchurch Harbour

6.6.1 The harbour is an open expanse of sheltered water and low-lying marshland fringed by the built up area. Boat moorings are clustered around the deeper water channels which generally relate to the more developed sections of water frontage.

6.6.2 The river channels provide the deeper water up close to Christchurch Town Centre. Close to Mudeford a channel cuts through the Saltings in towards Stanpit. It is suggested that historically this channel provided access to Tutton's Well, one of the few freshwater sources in the area. The various elements of boating activity around the more public fringes of the harbour provide a lot of visual interest to the area. The area does not appear to cater for the more intensive/intrusive jet ski/power boat type activities simply due to the small scale extent of open water.

6.6.3 Away from the moorings Stanpit Marsh provides access out into the open expanse of the harbour. Although surrounded by the built up area this landscape provides a rare opportunity to find remote isolation on the seaward side of the town. Views to development are relatively distant or shielded by vegetation or landform. The landscape character is very much one of low key semi natural environment. The marshland areas support distinctive salt-tolerant vegetation and are subdivided by creeks and ditches.

6.6.4 The areas are grazed but do not have an agricultural character. The areas are recognised for their nature conservation interest which again reinforces the semi natural character to the landscape.

6.6.5 The harbour areas act as a foreground setting to a wide range of views from around and within the harbour basin. The Priory, Mudeford Quay and Hengistbury Head are key landmarks and viewpoints within these views.

6.6.6 Simply as a coastal environment the harbour provides a strong sense of place and acts as an important setting to significant parts of the surrounding borough. In terms of the unique qualities as a coastal setting to the town, the harbour is particularly valuable as a small scale natural estuary in which the recreational and natural landscape conservation issues appear well balanced. This area is of Borough-wide importance as part of the identity and unique assembly of environments within the Borough.

6.6.7 Main Characteristics

- Small scale natural estuarine harbour.
- Deep water areas limited to meandering river channels and deep water channels through mudflats.
- Moorings and active frontages limited to deep water areas such as the river frontage around the Town Centre.
- Water area surrounded by extensive areas of low lying marshes and mudflats at low tide.
- Development generally set back from water front with marsh land providing the separation. On the Christchurch side of the harbour the Town Centre and Mudeford have a direct relationship with the water frontage. On the Bournemouth side the development is set back by low lying marshes, but with a backdrop of encroaching suburbs.
- Marsh areas have retained a low key open character with strong influences of coastal setting and semi-natural vegetation cover.
- Overall area supports a mix of activities and environments with a low key-understated character. There is a sense that the various aspects of recreation use, nature conservation and landscape setting complement rather than compete with one another.

Sensitivity to Change

6.6.8 The inherently attractive character of the harbour areas is based on a number of relatively fragile attributes. The modest impact of development is limited to only sections of the harbour edge. Most of this is historic and low key. The tranquillity of the open marshland areas would be sensitive to noise, activity or visual intrusions. The views across the harbour are low level and visually sensitive.

6.6.9 As such the high quality distinctive environment of the harbour should be seen as highly sensitive to any change that intensifies the sense of surrounding urban areas or recreational activity of the harbour. The areas of land on the Bournemouth side of the harbour provide a low key 'unmanaged' backdrop to the harbour and should be seen as an important part of the wider setting.



6.7 CL Area 2 : Mundeford Quay



6.7.1 The area of Mundeford Quay is the open public breakwater at the harbour entrance. The area provides a seafront car park and hard quayside setting to the harbour entrance with a more informal open green space inside. This is a popular access point for people to reach the sea and look back into the harbour areas. The Quay provides spectacular views out to sea and back to Christchurch town.

6.7.2 The Quay is based on a natural shingle spit that forms the edge of a double spit formation at the harbour entrance. The outer area is referred to as the Mundeford Sandbank. The two are separated by the narrow harbour channel known as 'The Run'.

6.7.3 A cluster of historic buildings is set at a key focal point on the breakwater providing a local landmark and a hub of visitor activity. These are thought to date from c.1695 (Haven Cottages) and c.1830 (The Haven House Inn). These original buildings were set out on the shingle peninsular. The area has progressively become a more formal hard environment as firstly a melted road, then sea defences and then surfaced car park were installed. At the same time, the popularity of the area as a visitor attraction has grown as the inner area of saltings has become a dinghy park and a promenade has become established on the sea front. Traditional commercial fishing activity occurs on the Quay, as evidenced by the stacks of lobster pots close to the harbour mouth.

6.7.4 The area is now split by the exposed frontage to the sea and the more sheltered waterside parkland on the harbour side. This split is reinforced by a large car park and a strategic line of maritime pines that link with the tree cover along the coast. The area is constantly busy with both visitor and/or boating activity. In addition the tidal race through the harbour mouth and waves over the sand bar create a dynamic setting.

6.7.5 This area has a very distinctive character and provides unique focal points at the harbour entrance. As a popular visitor destination the Quay is a key part of the overall identity of the borough.

6.7.6 Main Characteristics

- This is a hard seafront providing public access and views out to sea and into the harbour.
- The main interest on the site is the cluster of historic buildings set on the head of the Quay.



- The surrounding area has a mix of visitor attractions and the interest of a small scale working fishing quay.
- The remaining area of sea front is dominated by large scale car parks that wrap around a line of low pine trees.
- Taller tree cover provides a backdrop and separates the Quay from the development of the Mundeford Village.
- The outer edge has a dynamic outlook to the open sea. The inner site has a more controlled and sheltered setting looking into the harbour over amenity grassland and dingy storage.

Sensitivity to Change

6.7.7 The Quay provides a major tourist focus for the Borough, an active commercial quay, the setting of a group of listed buildings, a coastal defence function and public open space. To help manage these complex, interrelated and potentially conflicting functions, the Borough have prepared a management plan for the Quay. There are also specific policies relating to the Quay in the adopted Local Plan.

6.7.8 The two documents provide a comprehensive framework for controlling change on the Quay. The danger for an area of such complex activity and open public access is that the various facilities, furniture, signage and safety requirements, become the dominant features of the site and the original attraction and interest of the site is lost.

6.7.9 In considering the original form of the site as a natural shingle spit, this has happened with the modern hardstandings and car parks. If the character of the Quay is to be preserved or enhanced into the future then attention needs to be given to how the historic humble origins of the Quay can be drawn out within the context of the modern use of the site. Simplicity, high quality surfacing and detailing, and continuity of design approach would be an appropriate guide to future change.



6.8 CI Area 3 : Christchurch Bay



6.8.1 Outside the harbour entrance the hard setting of Mudeford Quay gives way to a continuous sweep of sandy beaches. These are backed by the soft geology of the Bracklesham Beds cliffs, topped with a dominant line of evergreen pine and oak. The beach frontages vary where alternative coastal protection works have been carried out along the bay.

6.8.2 Sections of the cliff at the western end are protected by a low sea wall. This gives way to oak planting on the cliff below Highcliffe Castle, and then very dominant block stone groynes at the eastern end of the beach. The cliff faces below the evergreen oak woodland is generally sparsely vegetated, and as a consequence these areas suffer soil erosion. The non-native oak are a distinctive feature of the Castle grounds. A series of stoned or hard paved paths run along sections of the back of the beach but are not continuous for the full length of the bay. The cliff top areas also vary from semi natural woodland cover to areas of residential development. The latter often being set in amongst mature tree cover.

6.8.3 In line with the generally low key nature of the development along the seafront, a group of private beach huts are located against the base of the low cliffs on Avon Beach and Friars Cliff Beach. The modest scale and discrete position of the huts fits with the generally low key nature of the coastal strip.

6.8.4 The various engineering works along the coast bring some sense of a managed coastline. But the general setting is dominated more by the tree cover than any sense of a developed seafront. Elements of the engineering works are very dominant and do not provide features that enhance the public access or use of the beach areas. There is also excessive signage associated with the newer stone groynes that further detracts from the natural environment of the beaches.

6.8.5 The beach areas are noticeably more protected than the areas to the east of the borough, but in terms of the erosion and cliff top treescape these factors give this section of coast its own character distinct from the other areas to the east. These areas are part of the overall identity of Christchurch.



6.8.6 Main Characteristics

- Expansive sweeping bay divided into local beach areas by different approaches to coastal protection and beach management.
- Areas vary between low key sandy beaches and sections of shingle beach divided by heavily engineered 'fish tail' stone groynes.
- Beach frontage benefits from low 'cliff' backdrop that provides strong natural feature and separates beach from development.
- Treescape along cliff tops reinforces the separation of beach and hinterland and forms a key feature of the coastline.
- Where development is seen it is generally low key, but well maintained residential development set within or behind tree cover.
- Seafront parking areas of varied attractiveness, but generally modest scale and not dominant to beach frontage.
- Seafront facilities such as kiosks, toilets and beach huts also thinly spread and subservient to natural setting of the coastline.

Sensitivity to Change

6.8.7 As a dynamic environment the coastal frontage is highly sensitive to change. The existing coastal protection work will have a controlling influence over the process of coastal erosion. At the same time these features bring a clear human influence to the beach frontage. In this regard the area should be seen as sensitive to further engineering that may tip the balance between a natural or urbanised seafront.

6.8.8 In a similar vein the character of the beaches are protected by the dominant fringe of tree cover along the cliff tops. This feature is again sensitive to changes in coastal management or conditions.