

Dorset Historic Towns Project

# Beaminster



## Historic Urban Characterisation





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**February 2011**

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## Summary

This report contains the results of a consideration of the historical, archaeological, architectural and map evidence relating to the development of Beaminster. It has focused on the understanding of the overall development of the town from its earliest beginnings to the present day, with a view to defining how this has influenced the modern townscape, identifying what historical features and structures survive within the modern town, and comprehending what is the contribution of its historic dimension to the character of Beaminster today. This will enable an informed approach to the management of change and conservation of the urban environment to be undertaken.

The origins of Beaminster are as a Saxon minster church and the centre of a large estate owned by the Bishop of Sherborne, which may have acted as a focus for settlement. It was granted a market and fair in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century and by the 14<sup>th</sup> century it had grown into a small industrial and trading centre, probably based on woollen cloth making and agricultural products. Although probably heavily affected by the Black Death, the town recovered and continued to thrive throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, largely as a result of its woollen cloth industry. However, the fortunes of the town were badly affected by two disastrous fires in 1644 and 1684 that almost destroyed the whole of the town centre. Beaminster grew very slowly during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as it took a long time to recover from the effects of the fires. The cloth industry continued to be important and sailcloth and other flax and hemp manufacturing became a significant industry in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, these industries declined and by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had almost disappeared. The population of the town fell during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the market declined and Beaminster became increasingly isolated and dependent on local agricultural trades. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw an increase in suburban growth and there was a resurgence of light industry in the town after the end of World War II.

Beaminster has a nucleated plan form focused on the triangular medieval market place with a radial array of roads running out from it. Unusually, the church is located away from the centre of the town on the edge of a stream valley. The medieval town developed around the market place and along the major roads. The properties in the historic core of the town are irregular in size and suggest the town grew organically, rather than as part of a deliberately planned

settlement. The exception is along East Street where regular long narrow plots suggest this may have been a planned medieval suburb. Modern suburban development has occurred to the north, west and east of the town along the major roads, expanding on small areas of late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century suburban settlement.

Beaminster has a large number of historic buildings within the town. The majority date to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as a result of the widespread destruction by the late 17<sup>th</sup> century fires. However, there are a number of high quality 17<sup>th</sup> century houses surviving on the outskirts of the town and a small number within the historic core which survived the fires. The buildings are largely constructed from the local stone and comprise mainly two-storeyed attached houses, short terraces and detached small cottages, larger houses (some with 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century shop premises built into them), and a number of large town houses. A small number of industrial buildings also survive, mainly converted to domestic or commercial uses. St Mary's Church is the only surviving medieval building and it has a particularly fine church tower, one of the best in Dorset.

Beaminster has a distinctive topographic setting, lying within a natural bowl near the headwaters of the river Brit. This location provides a dramatic natural background and the surrounding countryside is visible from many parts of the town, providing a distinctive green backdrop to the urban views. The network of streams and tributaries draining the natural bowl have had a major influence on the development of Beaminster, with most of the roads following the lines of watercourses.

There are perhaps three main components that contribute to the local distinctiveness of Beaminster: the historic town layout and plot structure, the historic buildings, and the landscape setting. The medieval and early post-medieval town plan survives virtually complete and exerts a strong influence on the character of the town, in terms of its street and plot layout and the continuing focus on the medieval market place. It is this completeness of the historic town plan that is significant, rather than any specific individual characteristics. The location of the church is perhaps the most distinctive element. Otherwise, the town plan morphology is typical of many medieval market towns and the individual plots are not distinctive in themselves.



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

The good survival of the historic structure is complemented by the high quality and large quantity of historic buildings. The survival in the historic core of a large number of unbroken groups of buildings, with little disruption from modern development, is a major factor which highlights the contribution made by historic elements to Beaminster's urban character. The harmonious use of a range of local building materials helps underscore its local setting and emphasises the linkage with the surrounding landscape.

The landscape and topographic setting of the town is fundamental to its character. The location of the various watercourses have helped define the position of the streets and influenced the slightly sinuous course of the roads, which together with the undulations in the topography have produced the distinctive curving, rising and falling of many of the streets. The surrounding escarpment and hills provide a dramatic backdrop to the town which serves to underline Beaminster's historic role as a small rural market town.

This report has highlighted many aspects of the historical development of Beaminster and how this has shaped the modern town. It has also indicated gaps in our knowledge and areas which would repay further research.

The main areas of suggested further research include:

- The investigation of the evidence for the Saxon minster church and bishop's residence and the nature of the settlement in the late Saxon and early medieval period.
- Research into the medieval development of the town, its economy and industry.
- Research into the post-medieval industry of the town.

## Part 1: Introduction





## 1.1 Background to the Project

The Dorset Historic Towns Survey forms part of a national programme of urban surveys of historic towns, launched by English Heritage in 1992 (English Heritage 1992) and subsequently modified in the light of approaches developed as part of English Heritage's Historic Landscape Characterisation programme (Thomas 2005).

The 23 places selected for inclusion in the Dorset Historic Towns Survey are shown on Figure 2. For the purposes of this project, Dorset is defined by its post-1974 boundary and includes the present administrative county of Dorset and the area of the Unitary Authorities of Bournemouth and Poole.

## 1.2 Rationale

Town centres have always been a focus for trade, industry and housing, consequently there have been many different pressures on their development. This has led to both the creation of a potentially rich, complex, deeply-stratified urban archaeological resource through past development of the town and, on the other hand, to serious threats to the survival of this archaeological resource and to other elements of the historical townscape through modern developmental pressure. Without knowledge and understanding of the historic urban environment it is too easy for significant elements to be damaged or removed through modern redevelopment.

The potential for the historic environment to play a complex and highly significant role in economic regeneration was outlined in *Power of Place* (English Heritage, 2000) and its value is highlighted in the government's response *The Historic Environment: A Force for the Future* (DCMS 2001). The potential of the historic environment is particularly significant in towns, where a high quality historic urban environment and the resulting distinctiveness and sense of place that this brings, has been shown to be a primary asset in promoting regeneration. The effect may be direct – through heritage tourism, for example – or more subtle, promoting a strong sense of identity and pride of place, thus creating new confidence and a positive climate for investment and growth.

Before we can build upon the potential positive effects of the historic urban environment, we must understand it. Characterisation provides a means of understanding the diverse range of

factors which create distinctiveness and a sense of place. However, in order to make the characterisation of the historic urban environment relevant and meaningful, it needs to be based on a thorough assessment of the nature, quality and quantity of the historic resource of each urban centre. It is to this end that the Dorset Historic Towns Survey has been undertaken.

## 1.3 Aims

The aim of the project is to present a review of the existing archaeological, historical and urban morphological evidence and set out the historic character and development of Dorset's Historic towns:

- to produce a useful and flexible tool to aid in the understanding and management of the town
- to inform archaeological and historic environment research
- to inform the management and interpretation of historic urban buildings and land use.
- to provide an evidence base to feed into the Local Development Framework
- to encourage the integration of urban historic characterisation into the wider process of protecting and enhancing urban character.
- to address a number of research aims set out in the South West Archaeological Research Framework into developing understanding of urban settlement from the Roman to the post-medieval periods (Webster 2008).

## 1.4 Report Structure

The Historic Urban Characterisation Assessment reports all have a similar structure, divided into seven major sections. These are briefly described below to enable easy navigation to the various elements.

**Part 1: Introduction** is a general introduction to the Dorset Historic Towns Project and to this report.

**Part 2 : Overview of Approach** is a brief methodological section outlining the guiding principles and approach, together with an explanation of the main technical terms used in this report.

**Part 3: Town Context** is a consideration of the wider natural setting of the town. It includes a summary account of the geology and

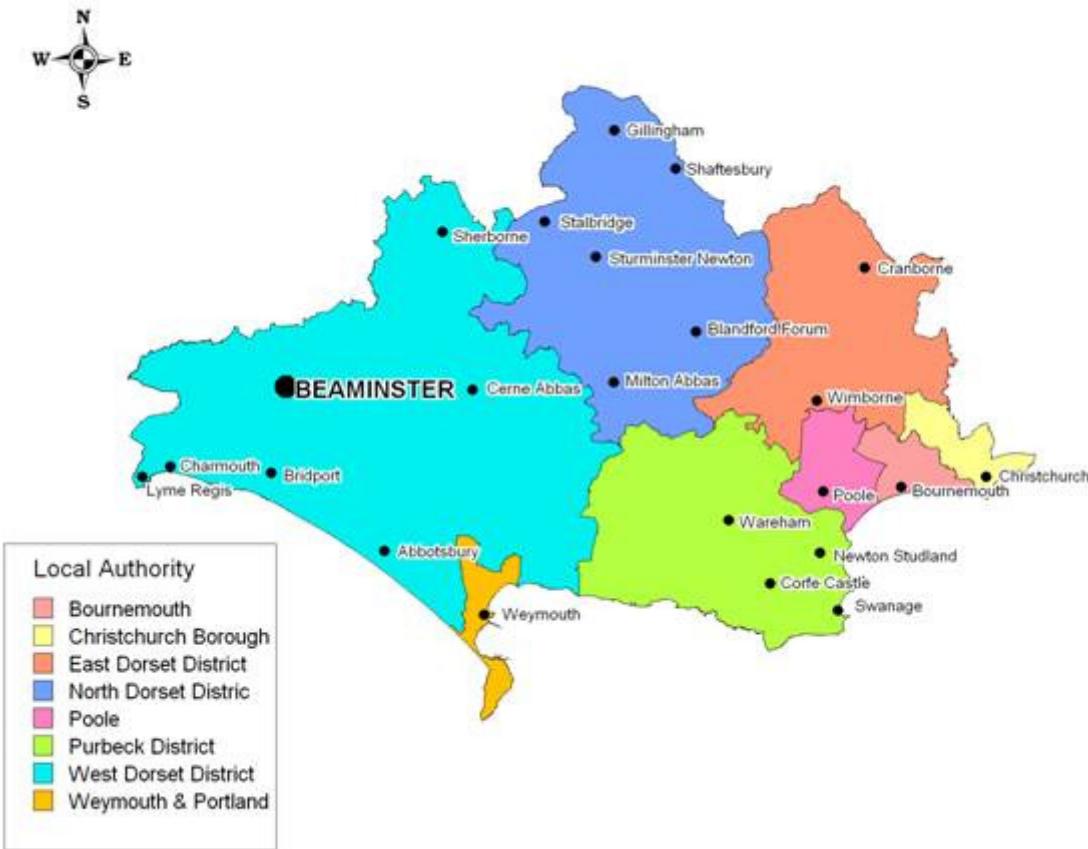


Figure 2: Map of Dorset showing the location of Beaminster and the other towns in the Dorset Historic Towns Survey.

topography and makes reference to any Landscape Character Assessments undertaken in the area. It includes a summary of the present town, its population, economic base, etc.

**Part 4: Sources** is an outline of the main sources of historic, cartographic, archaeological and other information used in the report, together with a summary of previous research in the town.

**Part 5: Historical Analysis** provides a summary account of the chronological development of the town from its origins to the present day, and is a synthesis of the available documentary, archaeological, topographic and morphological information, based largely on a review of published sources. This provides the context for the consideration of Historic Urban Character.

**Part 6: Historic Urban Character Appraisal** presents the details of the historic urban characterisation work, identifying the physical remains of the past in the present day townscape. It includes a summary of the overall historic urban character of the town and

a description of the Historic Urban Character Areas defined as part of this work.

**Part 7: Historic Environment Research Framework** outlines the major research questions which could be used to guide and inform future research into the town and how these fit into the South West Archaeological Research Framework.

## 1.5 Who is this Document for?

The information in this report is aimed at the public bodies, organisations and groups that play a role in the planning and management of the urban and historic environments. Additionally anyone who has an interest in the historic urban environment, including community groups, developers, architects and academics, may find aspects of this work of interest and relevance.

## **Part 2: Overview of Approach**





## 2.1 Guiding Principles

Historic Urban Characterisation is a method of defining and mapping the historic dimension of modern townscapes. The approach used by this project has been developed and adapted from Historic Landscape Characterisation studies. The guiding principles of historic urban characterisation are as follows (adapted from Clark *et al* 2004, 6):

- Present not past: it is the present-day townscape that is the main object of study.
- Townscape as history not geography: the most important characteristic of the townscape is its time-depth; change and earlier townscapes exist in the present town.
- All aspects of the townscape, no matter how modern, are treated as part of the urban character, not just 'special' areas.
- Characterisation of the urban landscape is a matter of interpretation not record.
- Urban landscape is and always has been dynamic: management of change, not preservation is the aim.
- The process of characterisation should be transparent, with clearly articulated records of data sources and methods used.

## 2.2 General Approach

In order to characterise the distinctive historic dimension of the present day urban landscape, the systematic identification of the historic attributes of the contemporary townscape is undertaken using a number of cartographic, historic, archaeological and standing building sources. These sources are used to identify 'Historic Urban Character Types' which are mapped onto the modern Ordnance Survey MasterMap base. These character types are used to inform the identification of a series of town plan components for the major periods of development for each town from its origins to the present day. The character types are also used to define a series of 'Historic Urban Character Areas' within each town. The character areas form the basis of a more detailed assessment of historic urban character.

## 2.3 Historic Urban Character Types

The identification of the historic urban character is based on the collation and analysis of a large quantity of information, including town

plan form, building form, historic map evidence, aerial photographic evidence and archaeological data. This information has been used to define specific areas of single character type within the modern town plan, based on the current settlement character, but taking into account previous uses and settlement history. These Historic Urban Character Types form the basic building blocks for analysing the historic urban character.

The methodology and terminology of these Historic Urban Character Types has been developed from that of Historic Landscape Characterisation and comprise a series of ten Broad Types each sub-divided into a number of more specific Historic Urban Character Types. The list and description of the character types is set out in **Appendix 4**. The Historic Urban Character Types used are a standardised classification across all the Dorset Historic Towns. This enables direct comparisons to be made between towns across the county and allows consistency in analysis of the historic environment of the different towns.

The Historic Urban Character Types are mapped onto the digital map base using a Geographical Information System (GIS), linked to a table containing data on the settlement attributes of the current Historic Urban Character Type, the period from which it derives, and data on all previous Historic Urban Character Types. This enables the character of the town to be displayed for all periods and allows a comprehensive picture of the development of the town through time and the time depth of the current urban character to be presented.

## 2.4 Town Plan Components

Town Plan Components are a series of recognisable morphological units with a definable time depth within an individual townscape. These plan components have been identified through the analysis of the town plan and building fabric, together with their historic urban character types, to form a series of larger units (on a street or block scale rather than on a plot scale) that illustrate the composition of the town within a specific chronological period. These town plan components have been used to identify and illustrate the historic development of each town, as set out in Part 5 of this report. A series of twenty seven standard types of town plan component have been identified.

## 2.5 Historic Urban Character Areas

The historic urban characterisation of the Dorset towns produces a large quantity of detailed data recorded within individual Historic Urban Character Types. This information is at a too fine-grained scale to enable easy understanding of the character of the town. Therefore, the information has been used to define a smaller number of larger areas of distinctive character within the town known as Historic Urban Character Areas. These can be used as a means of understanding the past and the present character of the town, simplifying the large quantity of data presented by the Historic Urban Character Types and enabling a more detailed appraisal of the historic urban character to be undertaken.

The Historic Urban Character Areas are recognisable distinctive areas which have meaningful coherence within the modern townscape. They are defined by one or more of the following attributes

- consistent historic urban character
- common historical development
- similar topographic location
- similar degree of archaeological and/or historic building preservation.

Each character area will have its own individual 'biography' that has defined its present character. Consequently, the Historic Urban Character Areas can be used as a tool to help maintain and reinforce the historic character and individuality of these areas and the town as a whole.

## 2.6 Extent of the Study Area

The Dorset Historic Towns Project Study Area for Beaminster is taken as the present-day urban extent as shown on the 2007 Ordnance Survey MasterMap digital mapping and partly informed by the Defined Development Boundary set out in the West Dorset District Local Plan (adopted July 2006). It comprises part of the parish of Beaminster only. The urban extent includes areas of recreational open space, school playing fields, etc. around the fringes of the settlement. Where practicable, the boundary to the Study Area is along boundary lines marked on the MasterMap base.

## 2.7 Definition of Terms

### 2.7.1 Characterisation Terms

#### *Historic Urban Character Area*

See section 2.5 above.

#### *Historic Urban Character Type*

See section 2.3 above.

#### *Sensitivity to Large Scale Development*

The assessment of sensitivity to large scale development has been developed from that included in the landscape character assessment undertaken by West Dorset District Council (WDDC 2008). Large scale development is taken to mean any form of development that is on a scale much larger than the existing plot pattern and building size.

#### *Strength of Historic Character*

The strength of character in each area is determined by judging the survival of historic urban elements in the modern townscape, together with its distinctiveness and recognisability. The strength of character is assessed as Strong, Medium or Weak.

**Strong** character is where there is widespread survival of historic boundaries and buildings reflecting considerable time depth, where modern development remains unobtrusive.

**Medium** character is where there is survival of historic boundaries and buildings, but modern development is more evident.

**Weak** character is where there may be some historic elements present, but there is little time depth evident in the visible structures, which comprise mainly modern buildings and street and boundary layouts.

#### *Town Plan Component*

See section 2.4 above.

#### *Urban Structure*

This is the framework of routes, plots and spaces and the way they relate to one another, which forms the basic plan on which all other aspects of the built environment and historic development and use are based.

#### *Housing Density*

Low Density = < 30 dwellings per hectare (dph)

Medium Density = 30-50 dph

High Density = >50 dph

### 2.7.2 Archaeological Terms

#### *Archaeological Intervention*

A general term for any type of formal archaeo-

logical recording.

#### *Archaeological Potential*

Archaeological potential is an assessment of the probability of discovering archaeological finds and features, the likely amount and complexity of the archaeology, and the level of survival. See Appendix 5 for more detail.

#### *Building Recording*

Building recording refers to any survey and recording of the structure of a building.

#### *Evaluation*

An archaeological evaluation is a limited programme of fieldwork to determine the presence or absence of archaeological deposits or remains within a specified area or site. It can include trial trenching, test pitting, geophysical survey, etc.

#### *Excavation*

An archaeological excavation is a programme of controlled fieldwork exposing, investigating and recording an area of below-ground archaeology.

#### *Watching Brief*

A watching brief is a formal programme of observation and investigation conducted during any operation carried out for non-archaeological reasons.

### **2.7.3 Historical Terms**

#### *Hundred*

A hundred was an administrative subdivision of a shire based notionally on a grouping of 100 hides. They originated in the Saxon period and had their own courts and jurisdiction usually held at a meeting place close to the geographical centre of the administrative area, or at a point easily accessible from any part of the hundred.

#### *Hide*

A hide was an area of land defined for tax assessment purposes and was based on the amount of land required to support a family. The size of land unit covered by a hide varied according its productivity but is generally thought to equal approximately 120 acres. Hides originated in the Saxon period but may be based on an earlier system of land holding.

#### *Tithing*

A tithing was a small administrative subdivision of a hundred notionally containing ten land owning families.

#### *Manor*

A manor was a parcel of land, often assessed at 5 hides, over which a lord held domain and could exercise certain rights and privileges, such as the right to have the populace of the manor work the Lord's lands. The lord of manor could be a secular noble, the church, or the King himself; more important nobles held several manors. The manorial system was established in the late Saxon period, around the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD and became increasingly feudal following the Norman Conquest.

#### *Borough*

A borough was a town or part of a town upon which a degree of self governance had been conferred through the granting of a charter. Boroughs held their own courts, markets and were often subdivided in to burgage plots held by burgesses (freemen of the borough) for cash rent rather than by feudal service.

#### *Lay Subsidy*

The Lay subsidy is a term given to a tax levied on the general populace (as opposed to the clergy or military) and was calculated as a proportion of their moveable wealth. The poor were exempt. The tax was levied occasionally as the king demanded in order to raise money for military campaigns from the late 13<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The lay subsidy rolls are documents recording the names of each person in a village or tithe within a specific hundred and the amount of tax payable by them. The rolls are particularly useful in the context of the Historic Towns Project because during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, surnames tended to reflect either occupation or place of habitation. The documents thus provide information on the size of the taxable population within a town, the range of crafts within a particular town or tithe, the names of the individual tithings and boroughs within a hundred and the names of other dispersed settlements within them.