

Part 3: Town Context



3.1 The Setting of the Town

No town exists in isolation. All towns are shaped and influenced by their surrounding landscape. Topography and geology have a profound influence on the way a town develops; constraining development, shaping communication routes, and providing raw materials for building and other economic activity, amongst other things. In order to understand the character of a town, its surrounding landscape and natural context need to be understood. This section of the report briefly sets out the wider context of the town and the landscape character of its hinterland.

3.2 Topography

Beaminster lies within a natural bowl near the head of the Brit valley, formed by the high ground of the chalk downlands to the north and

east which rise to a height of about 250 m above Ordnance Datum, while to the west the ground rises up into a number of prominent small hills (Figure 3). The town itself lies on relatively level ground at a height of about 60m above Ordnance Datum. The river Brit rises to the north of the town and the headwaters comprise a large number of small tributaries rising over a wide basin, a number of which join within the area of the town. The Brit runs south through a narrow gap in a series of flat-topped hills, flowing down past Bridport, about 8.75km to the south, to join the sea at West Bay. The streets of the town have tended to develop along the lines of some of the small streams, resulting in a star-shaped settlement pattern.

The topography has had a major influence on the communication links of the town, which are relatively easy south from the town towards Bridport along the river valley, but the steep slopes to the north and east impede easy

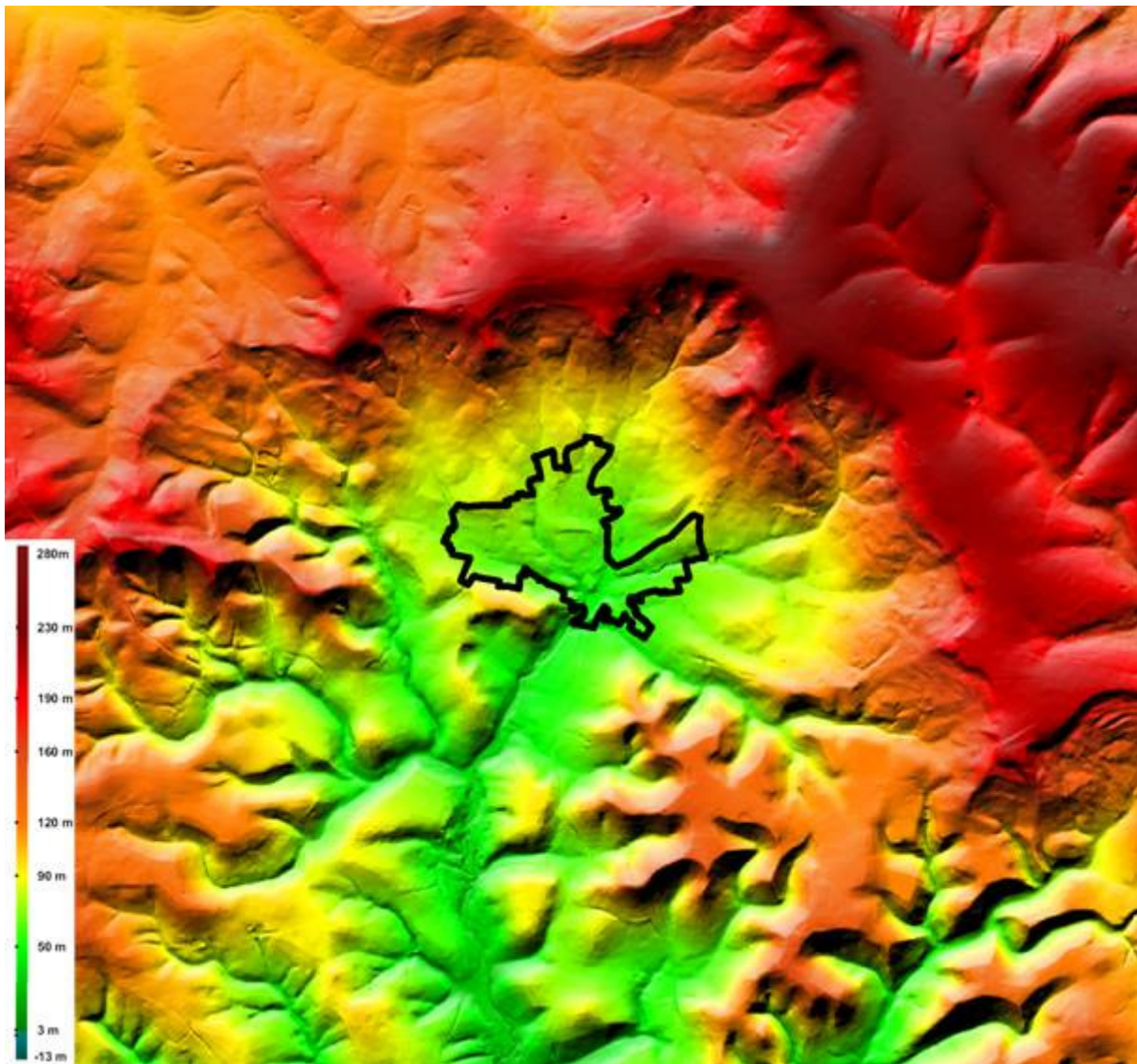


Figure 3: Beaminster's topographic setting

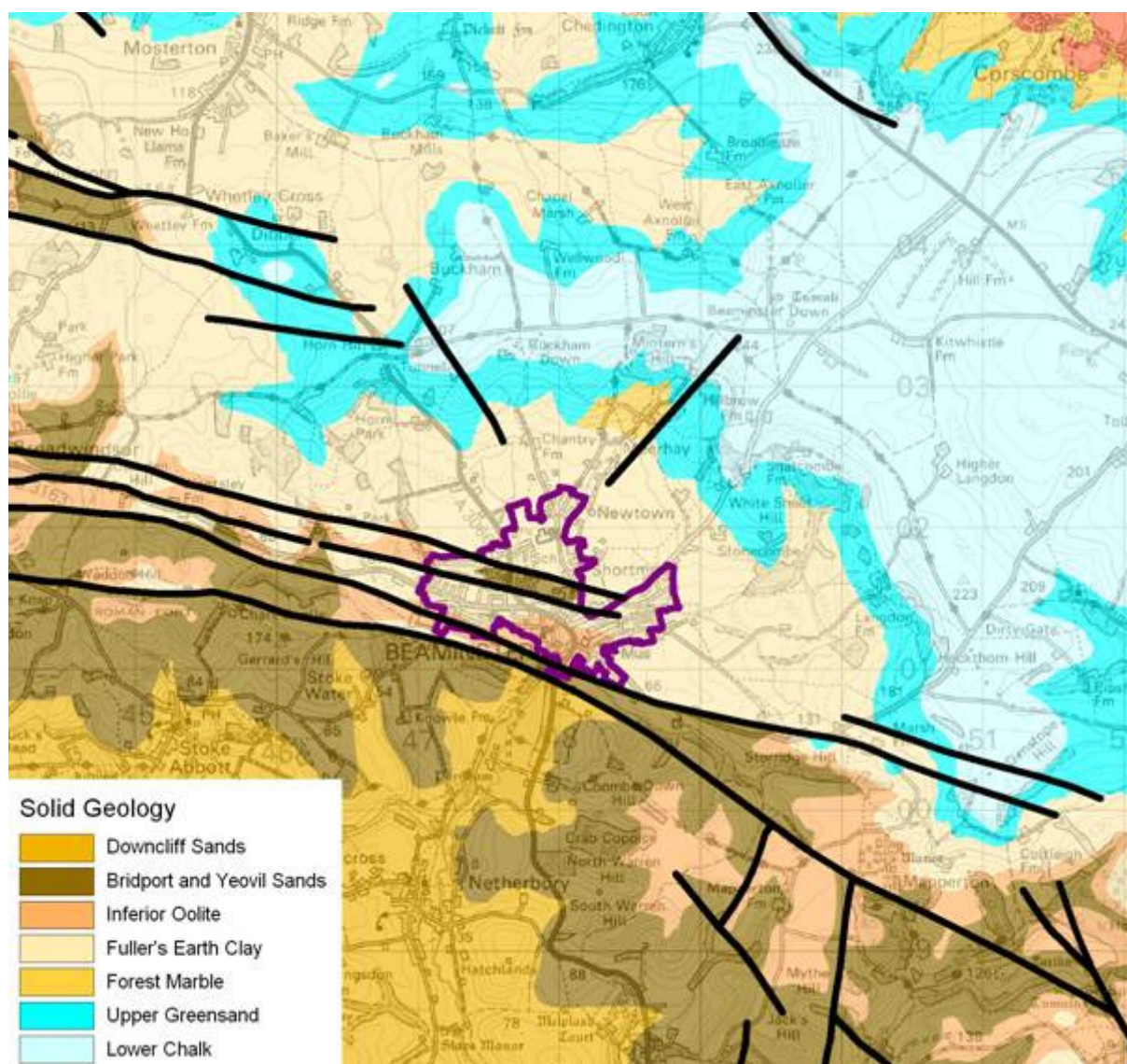


Figure 4: Geology of the Beaminster Area.

travel in these directions. However, beyond the high ground of Beaminster Down the land slopes away down to the River Axe to the north providing access to Crewkerne and south Somerset.

3.3 Geology

Beaminster lies on Middle Jurassic Fuller's Earth Clay with small areas of Inferior Oolite along the southern margins and a roughly E-W exposure of Bridport and Yeovil Sands forming a small ridge just to the north of the centre of the town (Figure 4). There are a number of faults trending WNW-ESE running through the town and the area immediately to the south.

The geology south of the town comprises mainly Lower Jurassic Bridport and Yeovil Sands that form prominent hills and Downcliff Sands in the river valley and on the lower hill-

slopes (Figure 4).

To the north of the town is a small area of Middle Jurassic Forest Marble at Meerhay, but most of this northern area comprises Upper Cretaceous rocks forming the higher ground. The Upper Greensand forms the steep escarpment on the edge of the downs, with Chalk forming the downs beyond (Figure 3).

A small area of alluvium is found in the river valley immediately south of the town.

3.4 Landscape Character

Beaminster lies within the Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), recognised as a nationally important landscape. This area has been the subject of several landscape character assessments, which help place the town into its wider surroundings.

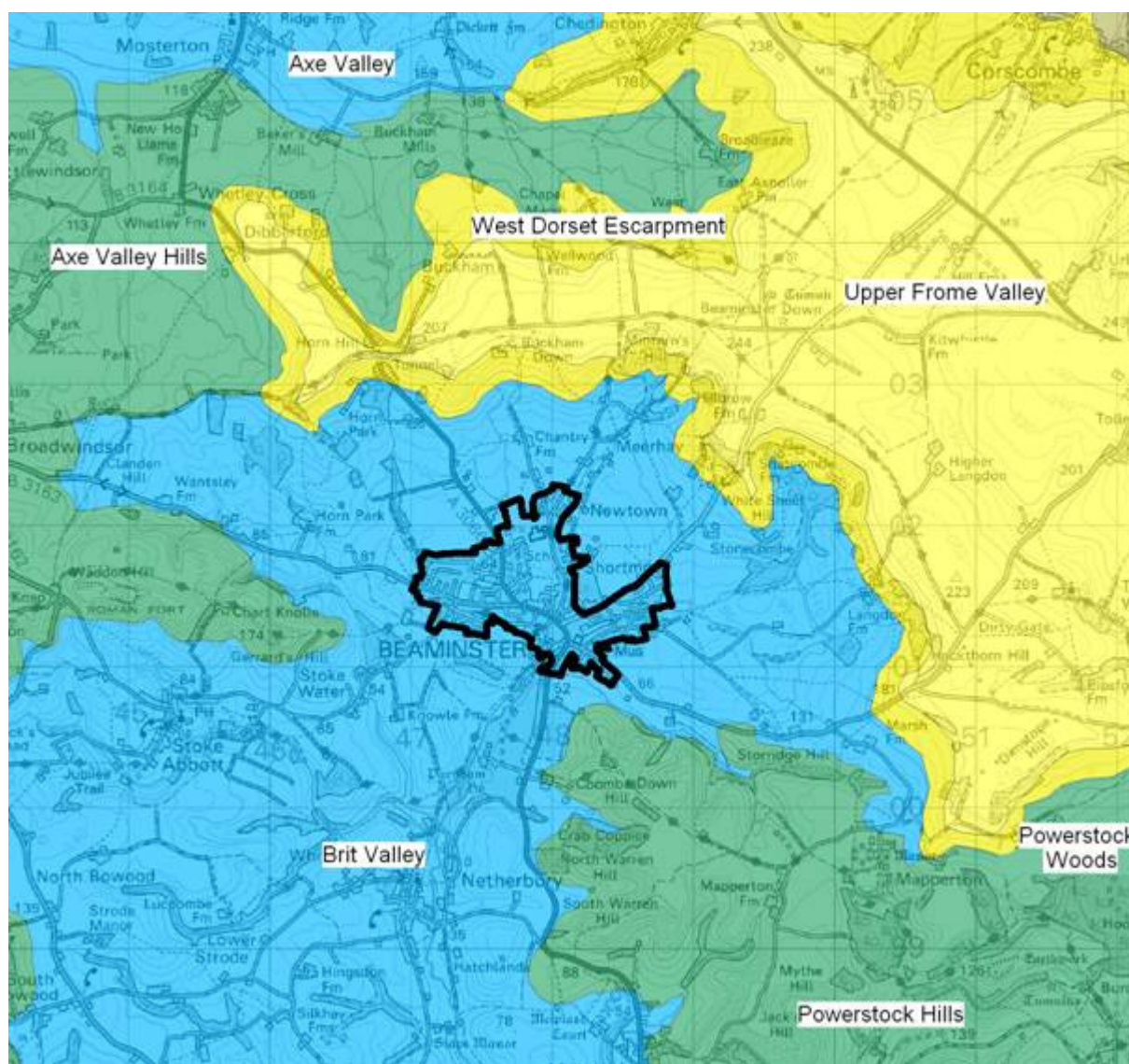


Figure 5: Beaminster in its landscape character setting (Dorset AONB Landscape Characterisation).

In the national assessment of countryside character, Beaminster and the countryside to the south is within National Character Area 139 *Marshwood and Powerstock Vales* (Countryside Agency 1999). The area immediately northwest of Beaminster is in National Character Area 140 *Yeovil Scarplands* and the area immediately northeast is in National Character Area 134 *Dorset Downs and Cranborne Chase*.

The key characteristics of National Character Area 139 are listed as:

- Bowl-shaped clay Vale surrounded by irregular ridges and hills of Upper Greensand with deeply incised valleys.
- Pasture vale landscape with ribbons of woodland, regular field pattern and abundant hedgerow oaks.
- Scattered hamlets and farms linked by narrow, winding lanes in the clay vale: many

compact villages on the valley floors elsewhere.

- Wooded and heathy scarps.
- Upper Greensand summits and conical hills with patches of heathland.
- Distinctive coastline with undulating farmland to cliff edge; slumped, mobile cliffs are punctuated by prominent headlands.
- Attractive stone buildings built of limestone and Ham Hill Stone.
- Prominent hillforts overlooking the Vales.

The key characteristics of National Character Area 140 are listed as:

- A very varied landscape of hills, wide valley bottoms, ridgetops and combes united by scarps of Jurassic limestone.
- Mainly a remote rural area with villages and high church towers.

- Wide variety of local building materials including predominantly Ham Hill Stone.
- Small manor houses and large mansions with landscape parks.
- Varied land use: arable on the better low-lying land, woodland on the steep ridges and deep combes.

The key characteristics of National Character Area 134 are listed as:

- A rolling, chalk landscape with dramatic scarps and steep-sided, sheltered valleys.
- Scarp slopes with species-rich grassland, complex combes and valleys, spectacular views, prominent hillforts and other prehistoric features.
- Open, mainly arable, downland on the dip-slope with isolated farmsteads and few trees.
- Very varied valleys with woodlands, hedged fields, flood meadows and villages in flint and thatch.
- Distinctive woodlands and deer parks of Cranborne Chase.

Beaminster was included in the Brit Valley Landscape Type in *West Dorset 2000* (WDDC 2002), which provided a detailed record of the features and landscape elements present. This has now been superseded by a new Landscape Character Assessment of the Dorset AONB (Dorset AONB, 2008) and a complementary West Dorset Landscape Character Assessment (WDDC 2008). In these latest assessments, Beaminster lies near the head of the Brit Valley Character Area, part of the Settled River Valley Landscape Type. It is surrounded by the Axe Valley Hills, the Powerstock Hills, the West Dorset Escarpment and the Upper Frome Valley Character Areas (Figure 5).

The key characteristics of the Brit Valley area are:

- Meandering flat river floodplain with major settlements and transport routes
- Rolling hills with shallow, branching clay valleys
- Patchwork of small, neutral pastoral fields on valley bottoms with trimmed hedgerows with trees, stonewalls and linear wet woodlands
- Occasional small oak and ash woodlands on valley sides with large arable and pastoral fields
- Long open views along the valley floor
- Historic bridges of local stone crossing the rivers

- Extensive reed beds and grazing marsh towards the coast
- Scattered clustered settlements along branching valleys bottoms of golden limestone and thatch
- Occasional Orchards

The draft Historic Landscape Character mapping shows Beaminster sitting within an area of largely piecemeal enclosed fields and other amorphous enclosed fields. To the north on the downland are other regular enclosed fields. There is a substantial area of former open fields to the south around Coombe Down Hill, with surviving strip lynchets and remnants of open fields further west near Stoke Abbott. There are areas of enclosed strip fields to the east of the study area at Higher Green and around Northfield Farm and also to the north-west along Cockroad Lane.

3.5 The Present Town

The modern built-up area of Beaminster lies completely within the parish of Beaminster and covers an area of about 150 ha. It lies on the A3066 road from Bridport to Crewkerne. It has no rail links, the nearest station is at Crewkerne, about 7 km away. The population is 3010 (2005 mid-year estimate), making it one of the smaller towns of Dorset. The post-war rate of population growth has been about 2%, largely the result of net inward migration. The population contains a large proportion of older people – over 37% are aged 60 or over. The 2001 Census records 1527 dwellings in Beaminster and a further 58 have been built since 2001, giving a total of 1585. There is one primary school and one secondary school in Beaminster.

The retail sector comprises 29 shops/21,000 sq ft (2005). These are all local shops and the catchment area for shopping is within about a two mile radius around the town.

There is one industrial estate, the Broadwindsor Road Industrial Estate (1.5ha). The most significant employers are in the Public Administration, Education and Health sector employing about 40% of the workforce, together with manufacturing industries (c. 20%) and distribution, hotels and restaurants (20%). The major employers are Clipper Teas, Danisco, and Dorset County Council.

The data used in this section have been obtained from Dorset County Council's *The Dorset Data Book 2007* (April 2007).

Part 4: Sources



4.1 Previous research

Beaminster's first historian was John Banger Russell, who recorded items about the history of Beaminster and neighbouring parishes from 1779 to the 1790s, mainly with a view to supplementing Hutchins' 1774 history (Eedle 1984). His manuscripts have been lost, but some of his material was incorporated in the second edition of Hutchins (Hutchins 1904) and in Richard Hine's 1914 *History of Beaminster* (Eedle 1984). Richard Hine's *History of Beaminster* (1914) is the first individual history of the town. It is a masterly account, containing a large amount of information, much of it which would otherwise be lost.

Another extremely good history of the town by Marie Eedle was published in 1984. This extended the history of the town into the later 20th century and considered a much wider range of sources than the earlier history. It is the major source used for the historical background of this report.

There have been other local histories produced subsequently, either on specific topics such as the Horn Hill Tunnel (Eedle 1994), the Congregational Chapel (Eedle 1996), Clockmakers (Beney 1996) or more general books of historic photographs, largely building on Eedle's work and local reminiscences (Beaminster Museum 2007; Gosling 1993).

4.2 Historic Maps

The earliest detailed map of the town is the 1843 Tithe Map. The characterisation was largely based on the Tithe Map and the 1:2500 scale Ordnance Survey maps dating from 1887 onwards.

4.3 Documentary Evidence

The historic documentary record for Beaminster was largely destroyed during the catastrophic fires that devastated so much of the town in the 17th-19th centuries. There is a survey of the town dated 1775 by Samuel Cox, which gives the number of inhabitants and houses by street in the town (DHC P57/CW23).

4.4 Archaeological Evidence

There has been very little archaeological investigation in Beaminster. This is limited to watching briefs at Barnes Lane (Adkins 1996) and 6 Prout Hill (Clarke 2007) and an observation of an 19th century pit at Sandhurst House (Wallis

2000). No archaeology was revealed at Barnes Lane and a very limited amount of information was recovered from Prout Hill due to the nature of the works. There have been two building recording surveys during works at 12 The Square (Rodwell 2006) and during restoration work at St Mary's Church (Graham 2005). These have produced some interesting detailed results but are limited in the amount of information they can contribute to an overall understanding of the town. A list of all archaeological investigations within the town is presented in Appendix 3.

4.5 Historic Buildings

Beaminster has a large stock of surviving historic buildings, the majority dating to the 18th and 19th centuries, a result of the destructive fires of the 17th century. There is only one surviving medieval building, the 13th-16th century Church of St Mary. Fifteen 17th century buildings survive in the town; the best examples on the outskirts, away from the areas affected by the fires. There are also some 17th century elements surviving in some later buildings. There are a large number of 18th and 19th century buildings of a variety of types from large gentry town houses, to houses incorporating commercial premises to more modest artisans and workers cottages and short terraces. A small number of 18th and 19th century former industrial buildings (mainly workshops and warehouses) also survive in the town. There are relatively few late 19th and early 20th century buildings in the town.