

Part 5: Historical Analysis



5.1 Medieval Beaminster (AD1150-1539)

5.1.1 Historical Summary

The date of origin of the town of Beaminster is unknown. The place-name and historic evidence indicates that it was probably the site of a primary Saxon minster church and was at the centre of a large episcopal estate (Hall 2000). These are likely to have acted as a focus for a settlement, but evidence of its form is lacking.

Beaminster was granted a market and fair in the late 13th century, but it is not clear whether this is in recognition of an existing trading centre or an attempt by the church to encourage settlement on its lands at Beaminster. With the increase in woollen cloth making in England in the 13th century, the granting of a market could stimulate local trade and increase the profits of the lord of the manor. By the 14th century Beaminster had grown into a small industrial and trading centre and it is likely that cloth-making was the most important industry.

Beaminster's woollen cloth industry was closely associated with that of Somerset, but there is little specific information easily available for the medieval period. We know that cloth was being made in Dorset and exported in the 14th and 15th centuries (Crick 1908, 360), but how much cloth was being made in Beaminster and how the industry was organised is less clear. The extensive chalk downland to the north of the town provided good quality grazing for sheep. It is also likely that the local Fuller's Earth clays were exploited by the cloth industry (Penn 1980, 15).

In common with the surrounding towns and settlements, Beaminster was probably heavily affected by the Black Death, but there is no information on the effects of the plague on the town. However, it must have recovered well, as the market successfully continued and there was sufficient wealth to rebuild the church in

the later 15th and early 16th centuries. There is likely to have been a considerable fall in the population of the town as a result of the Black Death and it is possible that there was little net increase in the number of inhabitants between the mid 14th century and the early 16th century. An estimate of the early 14th century population can be made for the town from the 1332 Lay Subsidy, using the formula set out by Eedle (1984, 27), which indicates there were about 182 inhabitants. The figures from the 1332 Lay Subsidy returns suggest that Beaminster was a populous manor but there were no wealthy individuals. The 1525 Lay Subsidy gives a rough estimate of 235 inhabitants (Stoate 1982).

Beaminster has a number of roads fanning out in all directions, leading to Crewkerne, Yeovil South Perrott, Corscombe, Bridport. Its position suggests that it could have served as an inland distribution point from Bridport. There were probably two roads running down either side of the Brit during the medieval period, but that along the western side of the river Brit may have been the primary route (Good 1966).

5.1.2 Town Layout

Leland described the town as a "*praty market town ... and usith much housbandry, and lyith in one streat from north to south: and in a nother from west to est*" (quoted in Eedle 1984, 39), thus giving a good indication of the town at the end of the medieval period. The street to the north was probably Fleet Street, that to the south was perhaps Church Street and St Mary Well Street (which was known as Church Street before the 18th century), Hogshill Street was the western street and East Street the eastern one. The course of the roads is largely determined by the course of the rivers and streams and by the topography. The large triangular market-place lay at the centre of the town and is one of the few planned elements



Figure 6: The Market Place.



Figure 7: St Mary's Church.

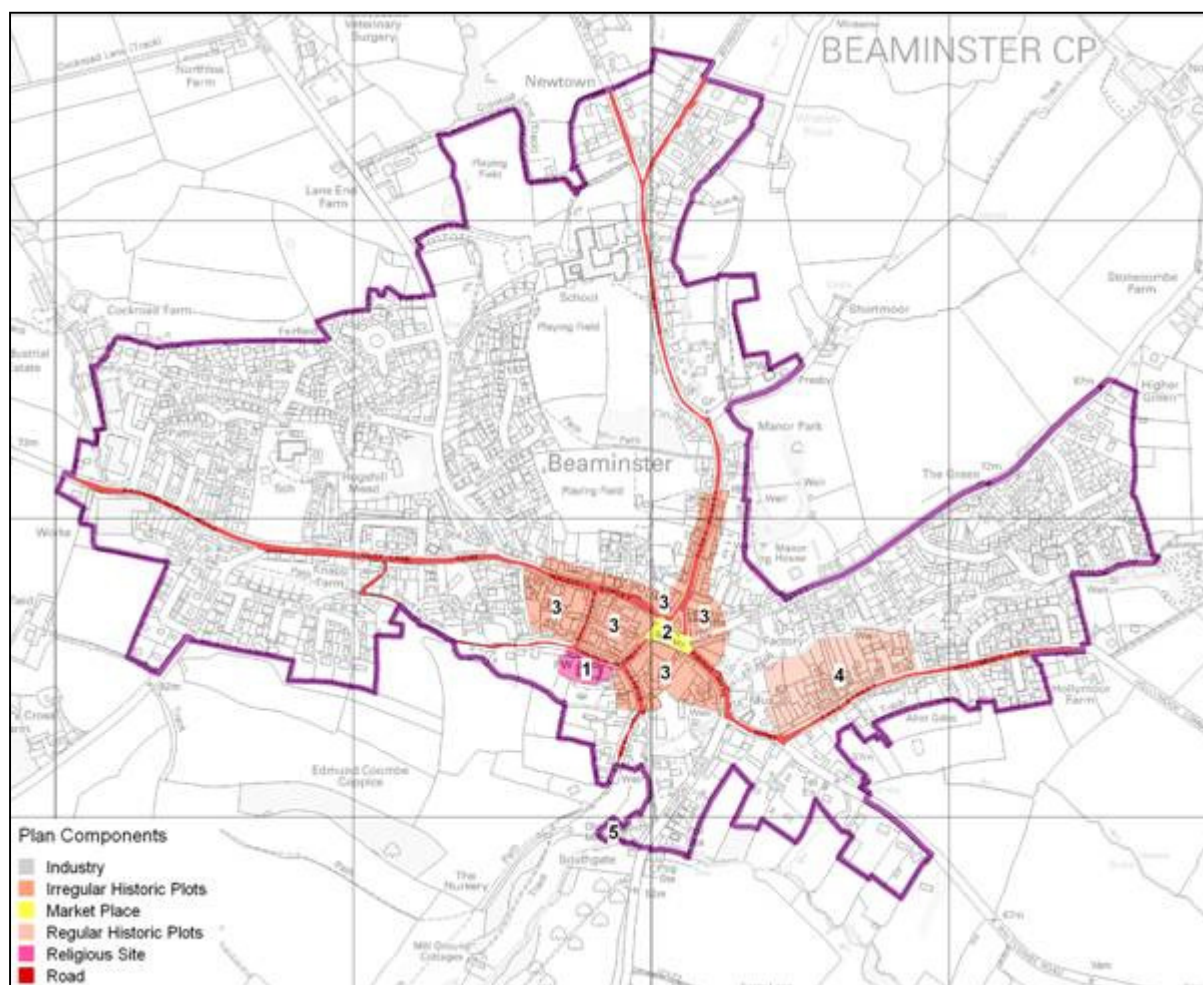


Figure 8: Beaminster Medieval Town Plan Components

identifiable in the town layout (Figure 8). The church did not occupy a central position but lay to the southwest of the market place on a spur above the river Brit.

The historic properties are fairly irregular and do not appear to have been part of a deliberately planned layout, but to have evolved organically. The exception to this is the group of properties on the north side of East Street, which have fairly regular long narrow plots, perhaps representing a deliberately planned element.

5.1.3 Medieval Urban plan components

The main plan components of the medieval town are shown on Figure 8 and are listed below.

1. *Church*. The church of St Mary was built in the 13th century, probably on the site of the Saxon minster church. During the medieval period it was not the parish church, but a chapel of Netherbury. It was enlarged and substantially rebuilt in the 15th and early 16th centu-

ries (Figure 7)

2. *Market-place*. Large triangular market-place, which probably dates from the late 13th century when the market charter was granted (Figure 6). There was a stone market cross in the centre.

3. *Historic plots*. The extent of the medieval town is not known for certain, but development is likely to have occurred along all four main medieval streets. The property boundaries suggest that this was not planned development.

4. *East Street Suburb*. The block of properties along the north side of East Street have fairly regular long narrow plots, which may indicate a planned layout. This area may be a later medieval suburb, but dating evidence is lacking.

5. *Beaminster Mill*. This may be the location of one of the Domesday mills.

5.2 Early post-medieval Beaminster(1540-1699)

5.2.1 Historical Summary

Unlike many English towns at the beginning of the 16th century, Beaminster appears to have continued to thrive, probably as a result of its involvement in the wool and cloth trade. Nevertheless, it was undoubtedly in the lowest rank of towns in the 16th and 17th centuries and did not develop any form of self-government. However, it was involved in the wider administration of the area as Quarter Sessions were held at Beaminster during the reign of Elizabeth and intermittently during the 17th century, when the sessions were held in the market house.

The population of Beaminster in the early 16th century was probably less than 250, but by the earlier 17th century had risen to about 1250 inhabitants. The early 16th century town was described by Leland as a 'pretty market town'. The market continued to grow and in the early 17th century a new market house was built.

Cloth-making remained the most significant industry in the town. Cloth making was carried out by hand in small workshops throughout the town. Flax and hemp were grown locally during the early post-medieval period and there was some local manufacture of linen and sackcloth, with a number of weavers recorded in the town in the late 17th century. Sail-cloth was also manufactured in the town towards the end of the 17th century (Hine 1914; Eedle 1984). Other industries recorded in the town at this date included tanning and gloving. There was a pottery on Hogshill Street in the late 17th century (Eedle 1984, 102).

During the Civil War Beaminster was held for Parliament. The town was occupied in 1644 by soldiers of the Royalist army of Prince Maurice. A major fire was started by soldiers firing muskets into the thatched roofs of the houses. The

fire started in North Street and most of the town was burnt (144 houses, plus barns and stables), with only East Street and part of Church Street escaping the conflagration. Another major fire happened in 1684, when a large part of the town, including the Market House and shambles, was burnt down. Only a small number of houses in the centre of the town survived the fires (Figures 9-13). The two fires had a significant effect on the fortunes of the town, which took a long time to recover.

5.2.2 Town Layout

The basic layout of the town, as described by Leland, comprised one main N-S and one main E-W street. The main streets were probably Fleet Street, Church Street/St Mary Well Street, Hogshill Street and East Street. The layout and extent of the town was largely the same as the medieval town, though there may have been some expansion of the built-up area along the major roads. A number of large houses were built on the edge of the town, along Whitcombe Road, Bridport Road and Fleet Street and also in the town itself. These include 'Champions' on Hogshill Street, 'Farrs', 'The Yews' and 'Hitts House' on Whitcombe Road.

5.2.3 16th-17th Century Town Plan Components

The main plan components of the early post-medieval town are shown on Figure 11 and are listed below.

1. *Church.* St Mary's was a chapel of the church at Netherbury during this period.
2. *Market-place.* Large triangular medieval market-place. A market house was constructed in 1625.



Figure 9: Former Eight Bells Inn, 5 Church Street — a 17th century survival.



Figure 10: 17th century house at 56 Hogshill Street.

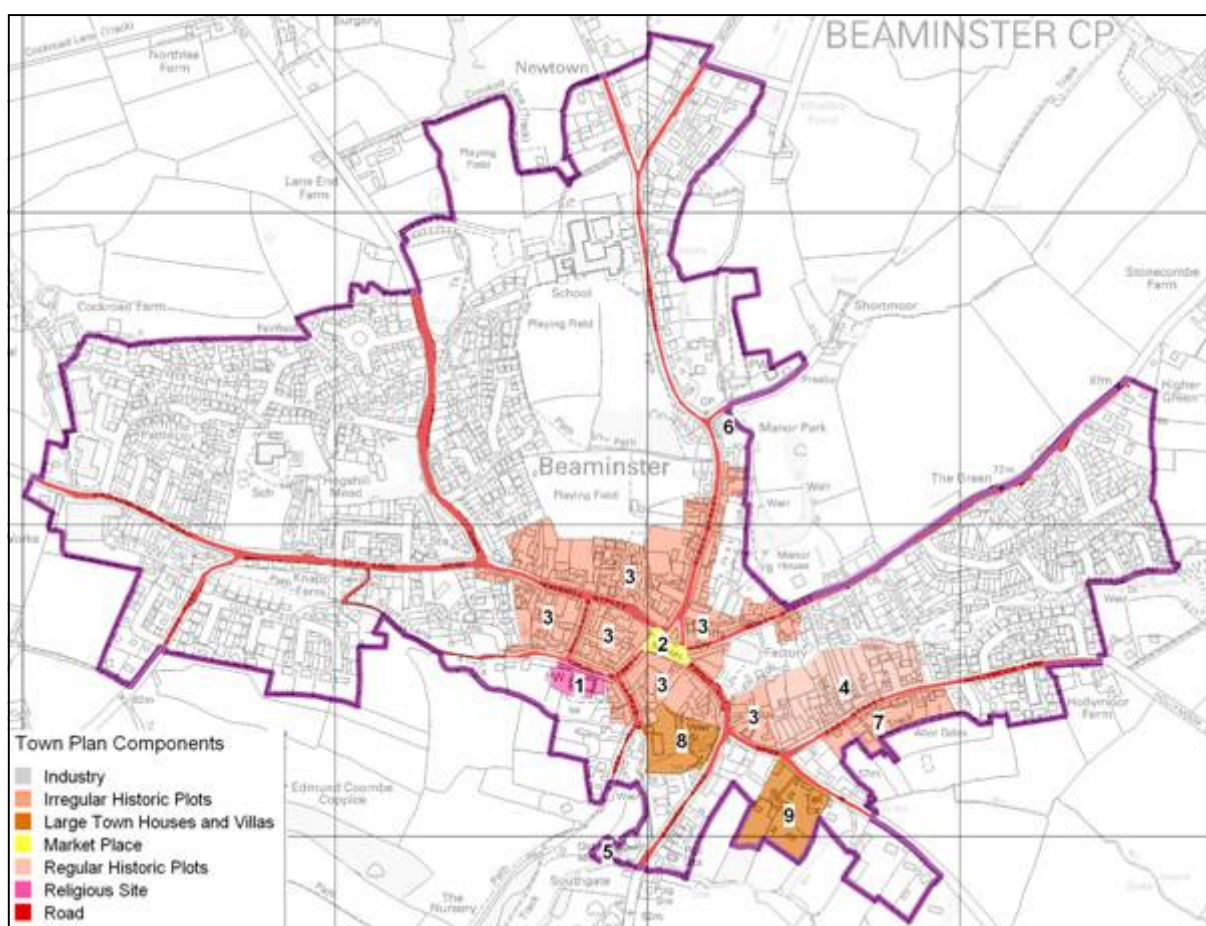


Figure 11: Beaminster Early Post-medieval Town Plan Components.

3. *Historic plots.* These are probably largely the same as the medieval plots, with some expansion along Fleet, Hogshill, North, and East Streets. They included some commercial property around the market place and domestic houses and workshops.

4. *East Street Suburb.* The suburb retained its medieval boundaries to the north.

5. *Beaminster Mill.* This is probably on the site of a Domesday mill. Its form and use in this period is uncertain.

6. *Town End.* Mills and a watercourse here

were owned by the Willmott family in the mid 17th century.

7. *Historic Plots on south side of East Street.* Fairly irregular plots developed along the south side of East Street, probably beginning in this period. It included Gilbert Adams' almshouse.

8. *Hams Plot.* A large 17th century house in extensive grounds.

9. *Whitcombe Road.* Some large 17th century houses probably built for wealthier merchants.



Figure 12: Bridge House, Prout Hill, a large 17th century house.



Figure 13: The 17th century 'Hitts House' Whitcombe Road.

5.3 Eighteenth – Early Nineteenth Century Beaminster (1700-1849)

5.3.1 Historical Summary

At the beginning of the 18th century, Beaminster was still recovering from the effects of the catastrophic fires of the previous century. As a result, the town grew at a slower rate than previously and below the average rate of growth for other towns during this period. A survey of Beaminster in 1775 recorded 1,708 inhabitants (and 390 houses) in the town. The actual population increase between 1775 and 1841 was very small. This may in part be due to a migration away from the town as a result of the decline in local industries, particularly the cloth and sail-cloth industries.

Woollen clothmaking remained the principal industry in Beaminster in the 18th century, but it declined during the first half of the 19th and by 1842 it was almost extinct (Eedle 1984, 99; Warren 1937). Flax and hemp manufacturing became more prominent in the town during the late 18th and early 19th century, though mainly using imported materials brought in through Bridport Harbour. The principal product of the industry in Beaminster was sail-cloth, with some sackcloth and bag production and some twine and thread manufacture. The largest sail-cloth factory in the late 18th and early 19th century was that of Cox and Company in Fleet Street. Other industries and crafts in Beaminster in this period include pottery making, clock making, paper making, metalworking, tanning and glove making. Two potteries were recorded in 1812, both on Hogshell Street (Eedle 1984). Beaminster had a successful clock making industry in the later 17th to 19th centuries, with a number of clockmakers resident in the town (Beney 1996). The industry declined in the 19th century as factory-made clocks became widely available.

A number of fires are recorded in the town in

the 18th and 19th centuries (Hine 1914). In 1781, a serious fire started in the King's Arms and all the houses on the west side of The Square and Church Street were burnt, together with houses on Shadrack Street and Hogshell Street. In all, over fifty houses were burnt. A smaller fire broke out in East Street in 1786 and in 1842 over forty houses were burnt in another fire. Two houses on the market place were burnt down in 1844.

The road communications of Beaminster were improved with the turnpiking of the major roads in the late 18th century. Two turnpike trusts were established in the district. The Bridport and Beaminster Turnpike Trust (Bridport Second District Trust) was formed in 1764-5 to operate the road between Bridport and Beaminster. Much of the present road between Bradpole and Beaminster is a turnpike creation (Good 1966). The turnpike entered Beaminster along the present Bridport Road and there was a gate at the south end of the town. It passed through the town and continued northwards towards Wood Common (along the present Tunnel Road) and also westwards towards Broadwindsor (along the present Broadwindsor Road) as far as Lenhams Water, just south of Horn Park Farm. This road was continued beyond this point by the Maiden Newton Turnpike Trust. In 1818-9 the turnpike was extended from Wood Common as far as Misterton Water in the direction of Crewkerne (Good 1966). In 1831-2 a tunnel was built under Horn Hill to facilitate travel towards Crewkerne (Eedle 1994).

The Maiden Newton Turnpike Trust was set up in 1777-8. Among the numerous roads administered by this trust was a new route from Beaminster to Toller Down (along Whitcombe Road and the present B3163), with a gate on Whitcombe Road (Eedle 1984).



Figure 14: 12 The Square, built 1687 after the 1684 fire.



Figure 15: Late 18th and 19th century houses and shops on Hogshell Street.

5.3.2 Town Layout

The 18th century sees the gradual rebuilding of the town following the disastrous fires of the late 17th century and consequently the majority of the existing houses in the historic core date to this period. The 1775 Survey (DHC P57/CW23) indicates there were 390 houses in the town, distributed as follows: Fore Place (The Square) 17, Hogshill Street (and Clay Lane?) 55, Fleet Street 66, North Street 39, The Green 35, East Street (including Prout Bridge, Whitcombe Road and Bridport Road) 96, St Mary Well Street 80 (Eedle 1980, 71).

The present street pattern was in place by the late 18th century following the improvements of the turnpike roads along the present Whitcombe Road, Bridport Road, Tunnel Road and Broadwindsor Road. These improvements included a new bridge over the Brit at Prout Bridge, the channelling of the stream to run beneath Hogshill Street, and the widening and straightening the road between the market place and the corner of Whitcombe Road. The size of the town remained similar to that of the early post-medieval period (Figure 11), but there was some expansion of settlement beyond the previous limits of the town. A large villa in extensive grounds was built off Tunnel Road and other large houses were built along Bridport Road and Whitcombe Road.

The period also saw the beginnings of modest suburban expansion to the west, east and north of the town. There was some development of small houses and cottages along the frontage of Clay Lane; a small suburban settlement was established at The Green, off North Street; and a dispersed settlement developed at Newtown (Figure 18). There was also a small suburban settlement at Shortmoor just outside the study area.



Figure 15: Former twine manufactory, Shadrack Street.

5.3.3 18th – early 19th century Town Plan Components

The main plan components of the eighteenth-early nineteenth century town are shown on Figure 18 and are listed below.

1. *Church.* St Mary's remained a chapel of the church at Netherbury until 1849. The churchyard was extended to the southeast in 1841.
2. *Market-place.* The medieval market cross in the large triangular medieval market-place was removed in about 1750. A new market-house was built in 1780 to replace the earlier one which had been damaged by fire.
3. *Historic plots.* These properties are perhaps largely identical to the medieval and early post-medieval plots, though it is difficult to identify how much the property boundaries have changed. Some expansion occurred along Prout Bridge to fill in the area as far as the properties along the north side of East Street. There was an increasing amount of commercial property around the market place, together with a mixture of domestic houses, workshops and factories. A number of large town houses were built along Hogshill Street.
4. *East Street Suburb.* This medieval suburb appears to have largely retained its medieval boundaries. Many of the surviving houses along the street frontage were built in this period. The area was damaged by fire in 1786.
5. *Beaminster Mill.* There was a brass and iron foundry here during the early 19th century established by Richard Waygood. A number of worker's terraced houses were built adjacent to the mill.
6. *Town End.* A grist mill and a fulling mill here were owned by the Henry Willmott, until 1806, when it was sold to John Read.
7. *Historic Plots on south side of East Street.* The fairly irregular plots along the south side of East Street continued to be developed and



Figure 16: Beaminster Mill.

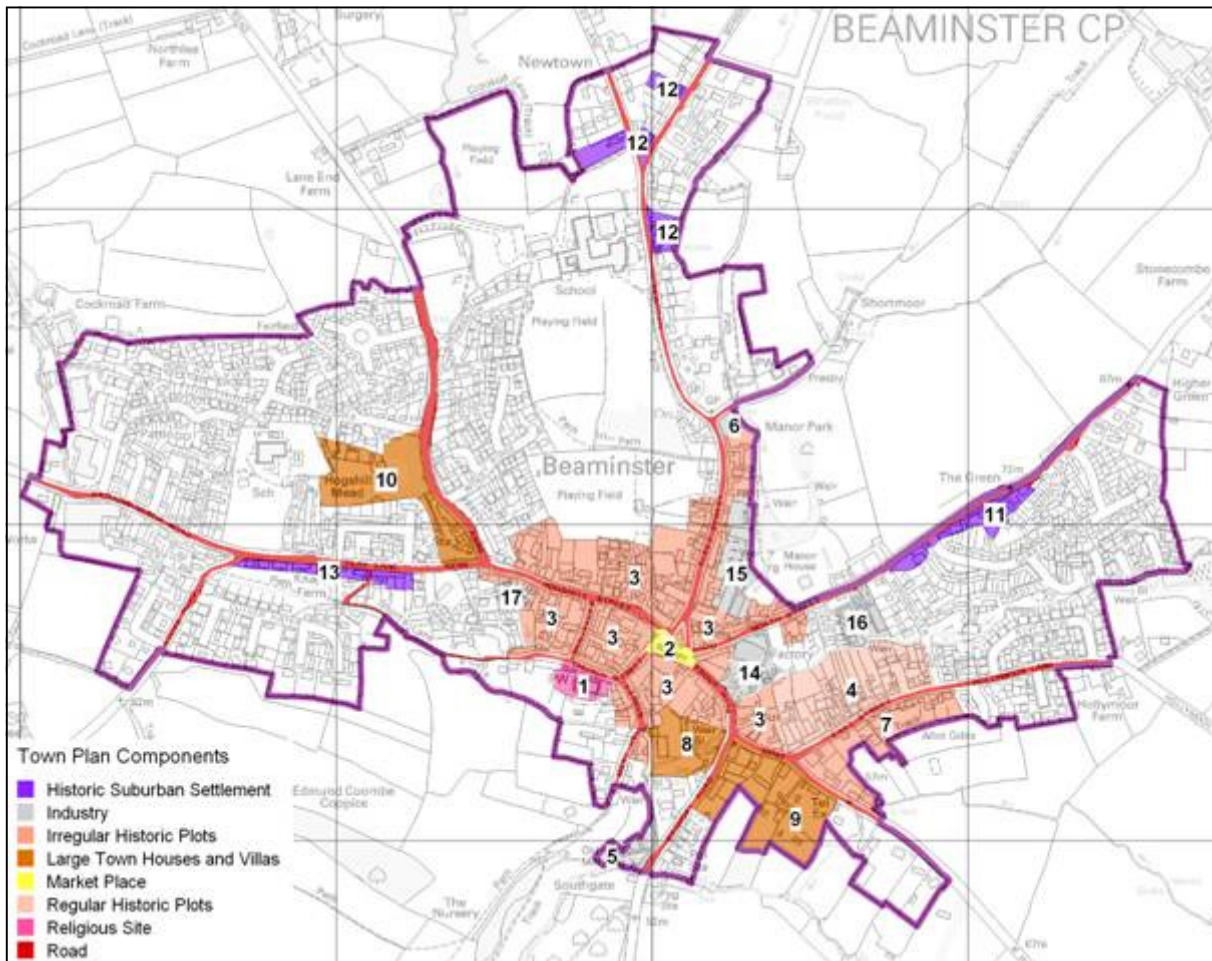


Figure 18: Beaminster Eighteenth—Early Nineteenth Century Town Plan Components.

many of the houses here belong to this period. The area included the workhouse and school (on the site of the former Gilbert Adams' almshouse).

8. *Hams Plot*. A large 17th century house in extensive grounds, considerably altered in about 1830, when it was owned by Thomas Fox.

9. *Whitcombe Road*. There was gradual expansion along Whitcombe Road and Bridport Road during this period, mainly larger houses but

with some industrial development also.

10. *The Lodge*. An early 19th century house (formerly known as 'Beaminster House'), owned and occupied by Edward Fox in the mid 19th century.

11. *The Green*. A suburban settlement of small cottages and small plots along North Street. It contained 35 houses in 1775.

12. *Newtown*. Dispersed suburban settlement around Whatley Farm and the road junction to



Figure 19: 18th century frontage of 'Barton End' 50 Fleet Street.



Figure 20: 'The White Hart' Hogshill Street, an early-mid 19th century inn building.

the north.

13. *Clay Lane*. A series of houses were built along the south side of Clay Lane in the late 18th and 19th century, along the turnpike road to Broadwindsor.

14. *Factory site, North Street*. Charles Coombs, millwright and flax spinner had his works here in 1840.

15. *Yarn Barton*. The large sail-cloth factory of Cox and Co. operated here in the late 18th and early 19th century. Much of the area was used for bleaching and drying yarn, hence the name 'Yarn Barton'.

16. *Flax Mill, North Street*. A flax-spinning mill beside the River Brit was owned by Charles Clay in 1843.

17. *Beaminster Pottery*. The pottery was owned by Robert and George Hallett in the mid 19th century, making earthenwares, tobacco pipes, flower pots, drain pipes, tiles, chimney pots and bricks (Hine 1914, 309-10).