Dorset Historic Towns Project

Shaftesbury

Historic Urban Characterisation

DORSET County Council

North Dorset DISTRICT COUNCIL

ENGLISH HERITAGE

Dorset Historic Towns Project

Shaftesbury

Historic Urban Characterisation

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Summary

This report contains the results of a consideration of the historical, archaeological, architectural and map evidence relating to the developmental history of Shaftesbury. It has focused on the understanding of the overall development of the town from its earliest beginnings to the present day. This work has been conducted in order to; achieve a better understanding of how the historical dimension has influenced the modern townscape; identify what historical features and structures survive within the modern town and; comprehend the contribution made by this historic dimension to the present character of Shaftesbury. This will enable an informed approach to the management of change and conservation of the urban environment.

Historical Background

Shaftesbury originated as an Alfredian burh, probably in 878-880 on the highly defensible position on a Greensand spur. Alfred founded a nunnery, probably in the late 880s by the east gate and it became the largest house of Benedictine nuns in England. A town and market developed to the east of the abbey during the 10th and 11th centuries. The abbey became associated with the relics of King Edward the Martyr, murdered in 979 and became an important place of pilgrimage. Shaftesbury was one of only four Dorset boroughs at Domesday, although more than a third of the houses were destroyed between the Norman Conquest and 1086. The town was economically successful during the 13th and 14th centuries due to its location on the Great West Road and as a place of pilgrimage. The town had 12 parish churches and at the start of the 14th century it was the most populous town in Dorset. The abbey was dissolved in 1539, from which time Shaftesbury became no more than a regional market town. During the 18th and early 19th centuries it was the archetypal 'pocket borough'. The town never developed a significant industrial base, though it was a noted button making centre in the late 18th and early 19th century. The town stagnated somewhat during the 19th century but remained an important market town. During the 20th century the town saw increasing suburban expansion, particularly to the east.

Town morphology

The town can be divided into three main topographic areas, the Greensand spur, the plateau and the underhill areas. The spur has a single main street, Bimport, and a rather open settlement character. The main centre of the town is on the plateau area arranged around an irregular grid of three streets and linking lanes, with a dense series of plots which display remnants of earlier regular planning. High Street has a typical funnel-shaped market area. These streets run eastwards to meet Christy's Lane in the east, which forms a by-pass to the historic town centre. To the east of Christy's Lane are typical late 20th century industrial estates and suburban housing estates. Below the town to the south, St James comprises a single main street with back lane running around the lower slopes of the Greensand spur. Enmore Green lies on the northern slopes and comprises a semi-rural layout of irregular plots and cottages set around a triangle of roads with some small later 20th century suburban housing estates.

Built character

Shaftesbury has a large number of historic buildings within the area of the medieval and post-medieval town. There are very few architecturally important buildings, but the large number of vernacular houses built of local Greensand provide a strong group contribution to the character of the historic town. The majority date from the 17th to 19th centuries, but there are also three standing medieval structures: St Peter's Church, Edwardstowe and part of the Old School House on Abbey Walk. The ruins of the abbey church have been excavated and remain on display as a museum. Shaftesbury is perhaps best known on a national level for the collection of 18th century cottages along Gold Hill. Many of Shaftesbury's buildings were re-built during the 19th century, notably along the High Street where a number of three storey brick frontages were constructed, the Town Hall in the market place and three parish churches, rebuilt in the early English style. Behind the historic street frontages there has been significant modern development with large modern suburban estates on the fringes.

Landscape Setting

Shaftesbury is famous as a Saxon hill top town, lying on a prominent high Greensand promontory jutting westwards into the Blackmore Vale and spreading across the high Greensand plateau to the east. Spectacular views of the vale extend north, west and south from the town and the town itself is clearly visible atop the ridge from the south. There are no major water courses or springs within the town and traditionally water was carried up from springs at En-

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

more Green and St James until the mid 19th century.

Historic Urban Character

The historic urban character of Shaftesbury is closely bound up with its distinctive landscape setting and the quality of its historic fabric, as well as its significant early history. The dramatic hilltop setting and spectacular views from the town along Gold Hill, Park Walk and Castle Hill are major elements in the distinctiveness of Shaftesbury. The late Saxon and medieval town plan survives virtually complete, but the area of the Alfredian burh has largely lost its earlier settlement pattern. Most later suburban development has taken place outside the historic core to the east of the town.

The good survival of the historic town structure is complemented by the large quantity of historic buildings. The existence of many unbroken groups of historic buildings, with little disruption from modern development, is a major factor which highlights the contribution made by historic elements to Shaftesbury's urban character. The harmonious use 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. In particular, the visual impact of Trinity Church above the town and the town above the Blackmore Vale.

Further Research

This report has highlighted many aspects of the historical development of Shaftesbury 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:

- Research into the layout of the late 9th century burh and abbey
- Research into the late Saxon and medieval development of the town, its economy, industry and secular buildings.
- Research into the potential pre-urban settlement.

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 our 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. 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

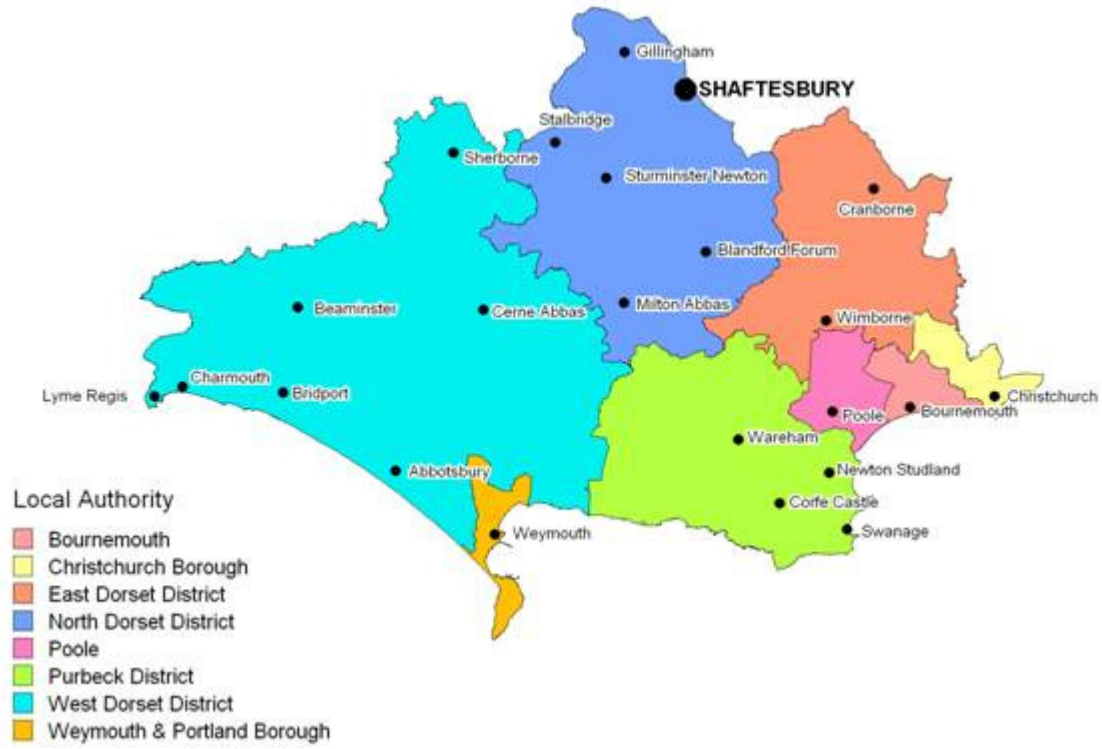

Figure 2: Map of Dorset showing the location of Shaftesbury and the other towns in the Dorset Historic Towns Survey.

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 Shaftesbury is taken as the present-day urban extent as shown on the 2009 Ordnance Survey MasterMap digital mapping and comprises only part of Shaftesbury parish but also includes a small part of Cann parish in the southeast. 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 archaeological 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 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 10th 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 13th to the 16th century. The lay subsidy rolls are documents recording the names of each person in a village or tithing 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 13th and 14th 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 tithing, the names of the individual tithings and boroughs within a hundred and the names of other dispersed settlements within them.

Hearth Tax Returns

The Hearth Tax was a tax introduced in 1662 and abolished in 1689. It was payable by householders on the number of hearths or fireplaces in a household. The tax amounted to 1 shilling per hearth or stove payable twice a year. The Hearth Tax Returns generally date from 1662-6 and 1669-74; when the tax was administered by royal bailiffs. They include a list of householders eligible for the tax per parish and the number of hearths in each household. The documents are used in this report to give an estimate of the population of the town during the late 17th century.