

Dorset Historic Towns Project

Lyme Regis



Historic Urban Characterisation



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February 2011

Historic Environment
Environment Directorate
Dorset County Council
County Hall
Colliton Park
DORCHESTER
DT1 1XJ

Acknowledgements

This report was produced as part of the Dorset Historic Towns Survey, undertaken by Dorset County Council, in partnership with West Dorset District Council and funded by English Heritage.

The report was written by Peter Bellamy and John Davey and subsequently edited by Peter Bellamy with assistance from Gordon Le Pard and Claire Pinder.

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Summary

This report considers the historical, archaeological, architectural and map evidence relating to the development of Lyme Regis. It focuses on the overall development of the town from its origins to the present day, with a view to defining its influence on the modern townscape, identifying surviving historical features and structures, and understanding the contribution of its historic dimension to the character of Lyme Regis today. This will enable an informed approach to the management of change and conservation of the urban environment.

Historical Background

The origins of Lyme Regis are obscure but it appears to have been an area of salt production in the Saxon and early medieval period. The settlement grew into a town and seaport of some consequence some time between the 11th and late 13th century. It was granted a market in the mid 13th century and its borough charter in 1284. The Cobb was probably built during the 13th century and encouraged substantial trade with France. After about the mid 1300s Lyme entered a period of decline, brought on by a combination of factors including the Black Death, the French Wars, and damage by storms and landslips. However, the fortunes of Lyme revived and the period between the late 15th and mid 17th century can be considered its heyday as a mercantile port; it was one of the more important trading ports in England with substantial trade with France and also with Africa, the Mediterranean, the West Indies and the Americas. Lyme was also a significant cloth-making town. The town was unsuccessfully besieged by Royalist forces during the Civil War. In 1685, the Duke of Monmouth landed here in his abortive attempt to take the crown. Lyme waned as a port from the late 17th century.

Lyme Regis underwent a major transformation into a fashionable seaside resort in the later 18th century, attracting many rich and famous visitors. It also became famous for its part in the development of the sciences of geology and palaeontology. Lyme continued to produce cloth in the 19th century. There was significant quarrying along the coast, bringing about rapid erosion, but the industry had died out by the end of the 19th century. Today Lyme is a town largely dependent on the tourist trade.

Town morphology

The plan layout of Lyme Regis consists of a series of routes radiating out from the mouth of

the river. The course and the importance of the historic routes have changed, and the present road layout dates largely from the 18th-20th century. Historically, Lyme Regis had two main parts – the town centre at the mouth of the river, and The Cobb further along the coast, linked only by a track along the beach. The historic core can be divided into two contrasting areas, the narrow streets and small properties round Coombe Street along the base of the river valley and the wide, straight Broad Street with regular properties along both sides and market area. The beach and seafront developed as part of the seaside resort from the later 18th century onwards. On the slopes to the west and north-west of the town is an area of 18th and early 19th century villa development, which has been largely subsumed within later suburban housing estate development on the higher slopes to the north of the town.

Built character

Lyme Regis has a large number of good quality historic buildings, mainly late Georgian and early Victorian, that date from the period of the town's revival as a seaside resort. It has a good range of town houses, suburban houses, sea resort villas, and workers' cottages. Broad Street has good groups of large three-storey houses, some with surviving historic shopfronts and some historic hotels and inns. Elsewhere, the houses are more modest in scale. Pound Street and Silver Street have a number of large villas. The buildings are mainly of local Blue Lias, but most have been rendered or slate-hung to protect them from the elements. A small number of historic industrial buildings primarily associated with the former cloth industry have been identified. The Cobb is the most significant and distinctive historic structure in Lyme Regis and is its most familiar landmark.

Landscape Setting

Lyme Regis has a distinctive and dramatic topographic setting, focused on the mouth of the River Lim and flanked by steep hills. The landscape is extremely active, prone to landslips and to coastal erosion. The nature of the topography has meant that Lyme has always had poor inland communications. Its location makes it a useful position for a harbour of refuge, but with no natural harbour here, it is only the artificial harbour, the Cobb, that enabled it to become a port. Its natural setting has proved a great asset in its function as a seaside resort and holiday destination.



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

Historic Urban Character

Lyme's historic character is closely bound up with its landscape and maritime setting, street pattern, and its historic buildings, which together contribute to its local distinctiveness. The historic core consists of both planned and unplanned elements. The separation of the medieval town and the medieval harbour is also very distinctive. The narrow winding streets in the centre provide a very strong contribution linking the present town to its medieval past.

The high quality and quantity of historic buildings (many of late 18th and early 19th century date) form a major component of Lyme's historic seaside resort character.

The landscape setting is perhaps the most dominant element, shaping the layout of the town and constraining its growth. The unstable nature of the ground, particularly near the coastline has inhibited urban development. The steepness of the slopes have made inland

movement difficult and provide many vantage points to view the surrounding landscape and seascape. It is a magnificent backdrop to the town, enhancing Lyme's attraction as a seaside resort.

Further Research

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

- Investigation of the character and location of the early settlement at Lyme.
- Research into the medieval development of the town, its economy and industry.
- Research into the post-medieval industry of the town.
- Research into the development of Lyme as a seaside resort.

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.

However, 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 six 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

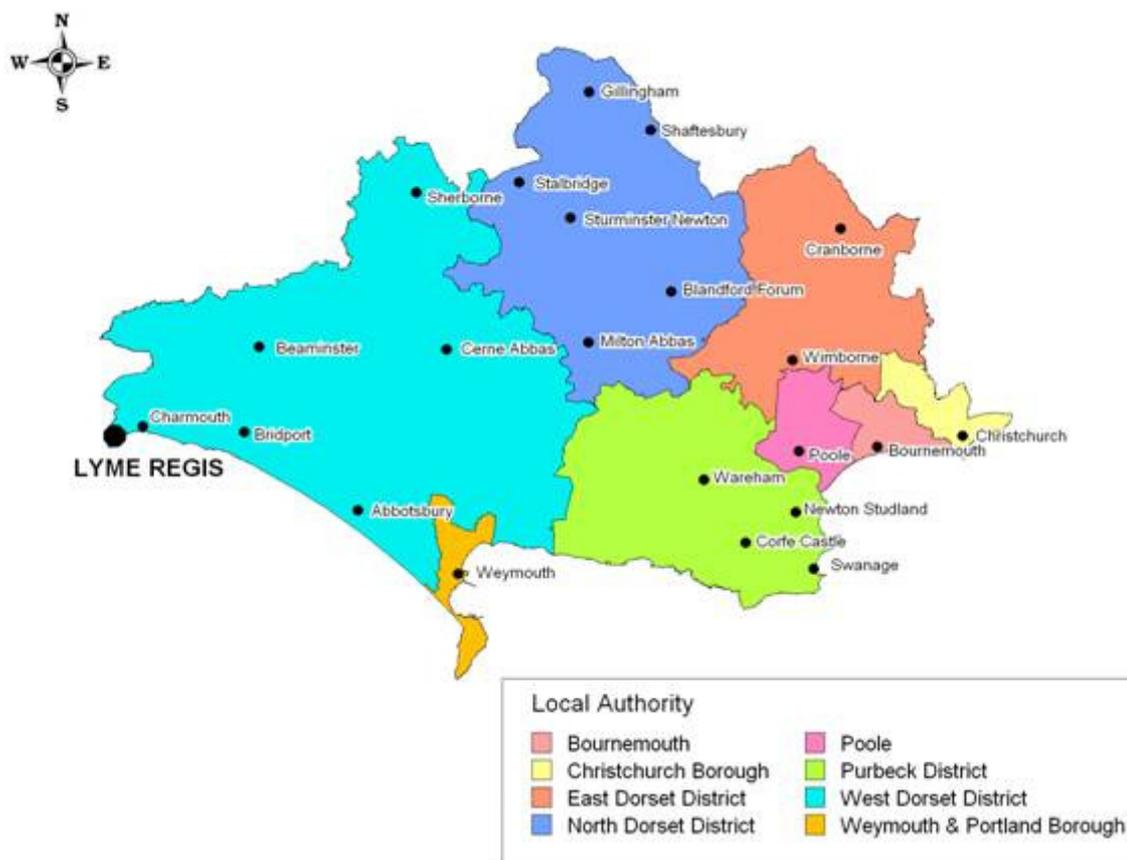


Figure 2: Map of Dorset showing the location of Lyme Regis and the other towns in the Dorset Historic Towns Survey.

summary account of the geology and 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: Research Framework provides a short research framework outlining 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 Lyme Regis is taken as the present-day urban extent as shown on the 2007 Ordnance Survey MasterMap digital mapping and partly informed the Defined Development Boundary set out in the West Dorset District Local Plan (adopted July 2006). It comprises part of the parish of Lyme Regis 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 to 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.

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 within 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; periods when the tax was administered by royal bailiffs rather than private firms. 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.