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

Charmouth lies on the coast on west side of the river Char valley (Figure 3). The Char flows in a southwesterly direction along eastern edge of the Study Area and is joined by a tributary flowing in from the NNW to the northeast. The ground rises fairly steeply to the west up the lower slopes of Timber Hill and less steeply to the north. The ground rises from about 8 m above Ordnance Datum in the east to about 70m in the northwest.

The Char valley provides relatively easy access down on to the beach. This is probably one of the main determining factors in the siting of the town, which is situated adjacent to a river crossing. The historic core of Charmouth lies about 650 m from the coast on higher ground, less prone to flooding and the direct effects of the sea.

3.3 Geology

Charmouth lies almost completely on Lower Jurassic Liassic marine clays with a small are along the western edge on Upper Greensand.
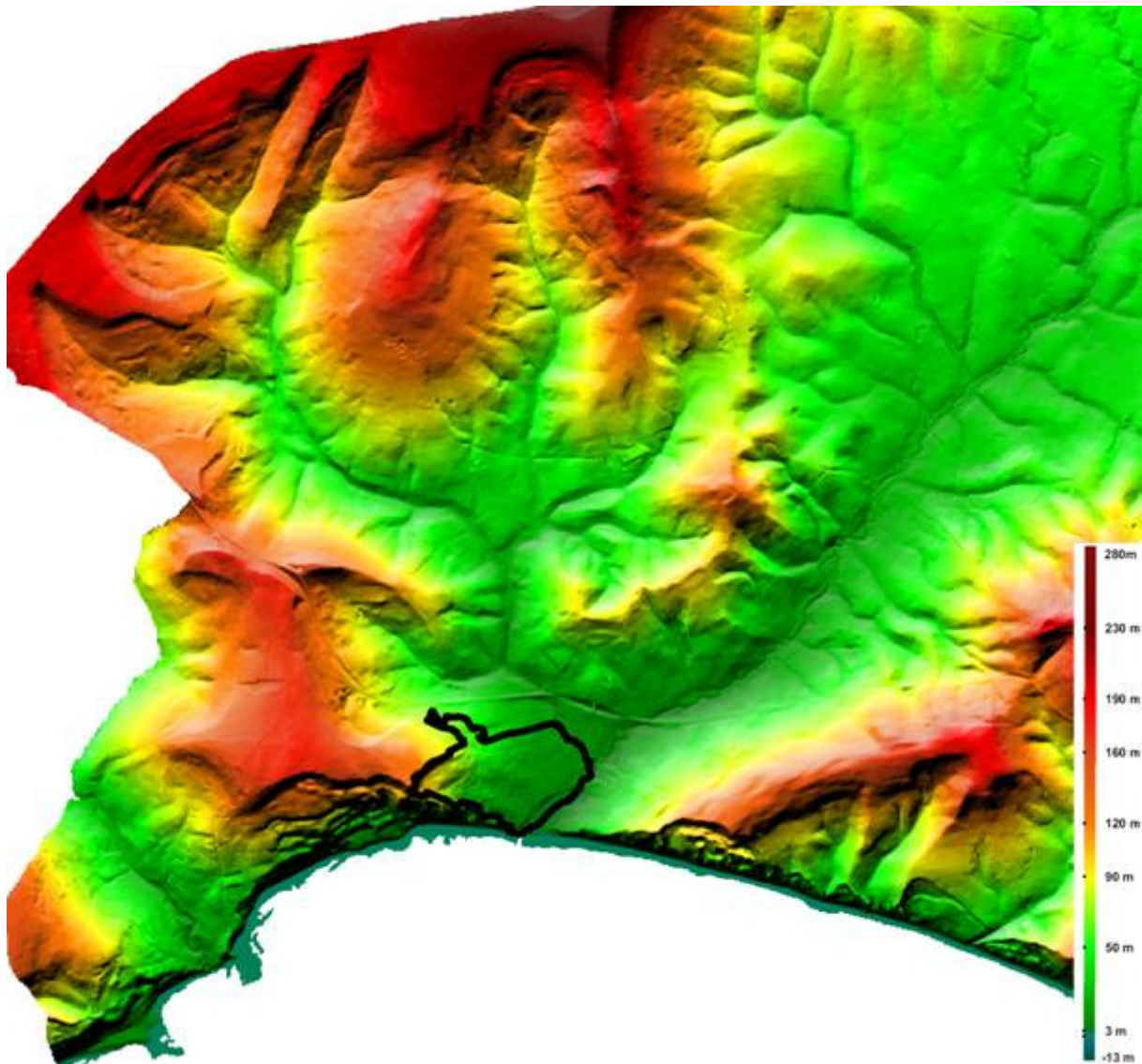

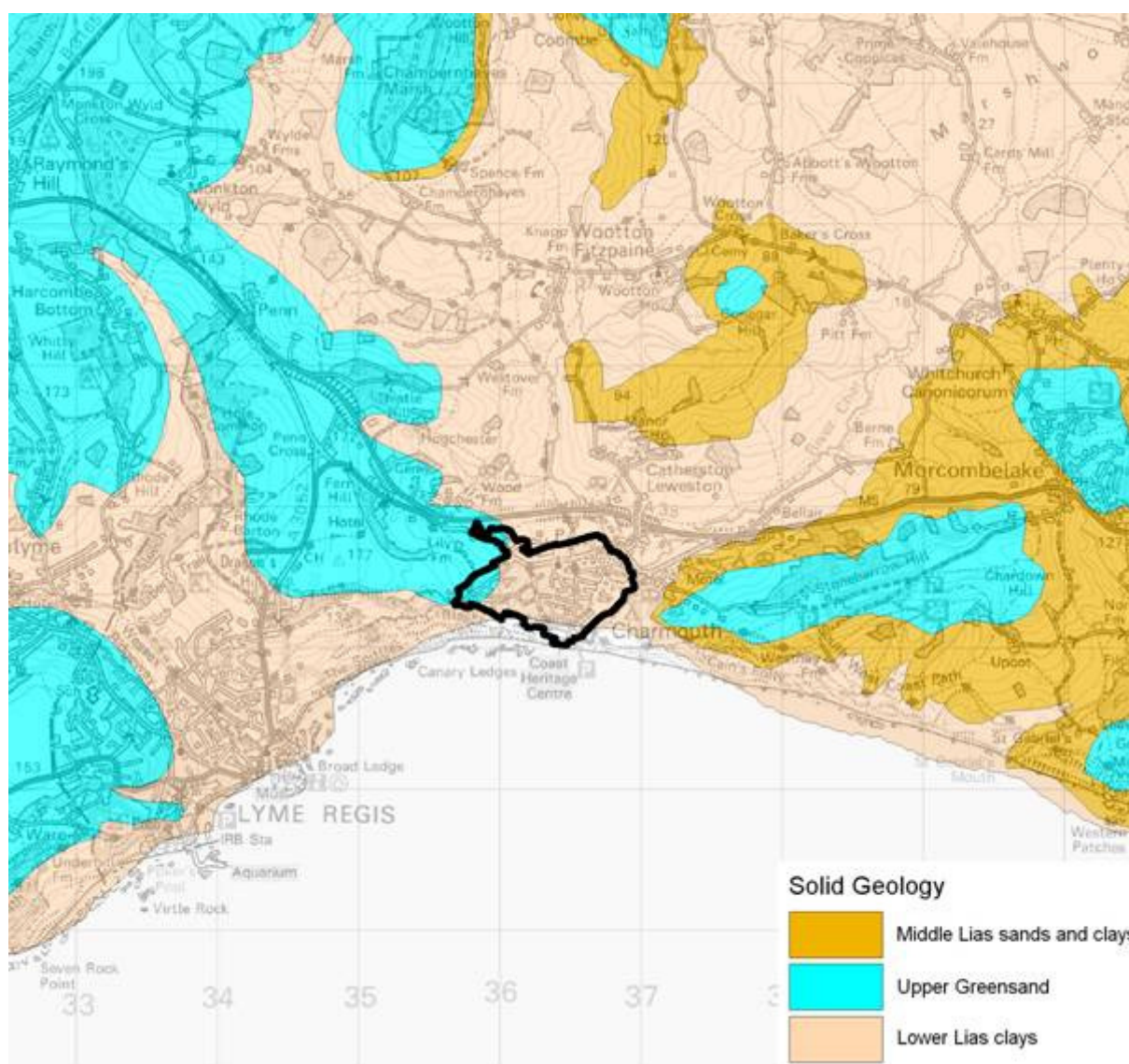*Figure 3: Charmouth's topographic setting*

Figure 4: Geology of the Charmouth Area.

Upper Greensand caps the hills to both east and west of the town (Figure 4). Just offshore are the remains of a submerged forest, with the remains of ash and birch tree trunks and bones of mammoth and red deer.

3.4 Landscape Character

Charmouth 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.

In the national assessment of countryside character, Beaminster and the countryside to the south is within National Character Area 147 Blackdowns (Countryside Agency 1999).

The key characteristics of National Character Area 147 are listed as:

- Contrast between open, heathy windswept plateaux and ridges, and sheltered lush valleys.
- High ground with rectilinear field patterns and straight roads.
- Slopes and vales with strong patterns of small, irregular fields and sunken lanes.
- Wooded scarps and slopes.
- Beech shelterbelts and avenues on high ground.
- Hamlets and villages mainly in the valleys with buildings of chert, cob and thatch.
- Distinctive coastal landscape of unstable undercliffs, irregular headlands and valley saltmarshes.
- Several coastal settlements but remote inland areas.

Charmouth was included in the West Dorset Farmland and West Dorset Cliffs and Under-
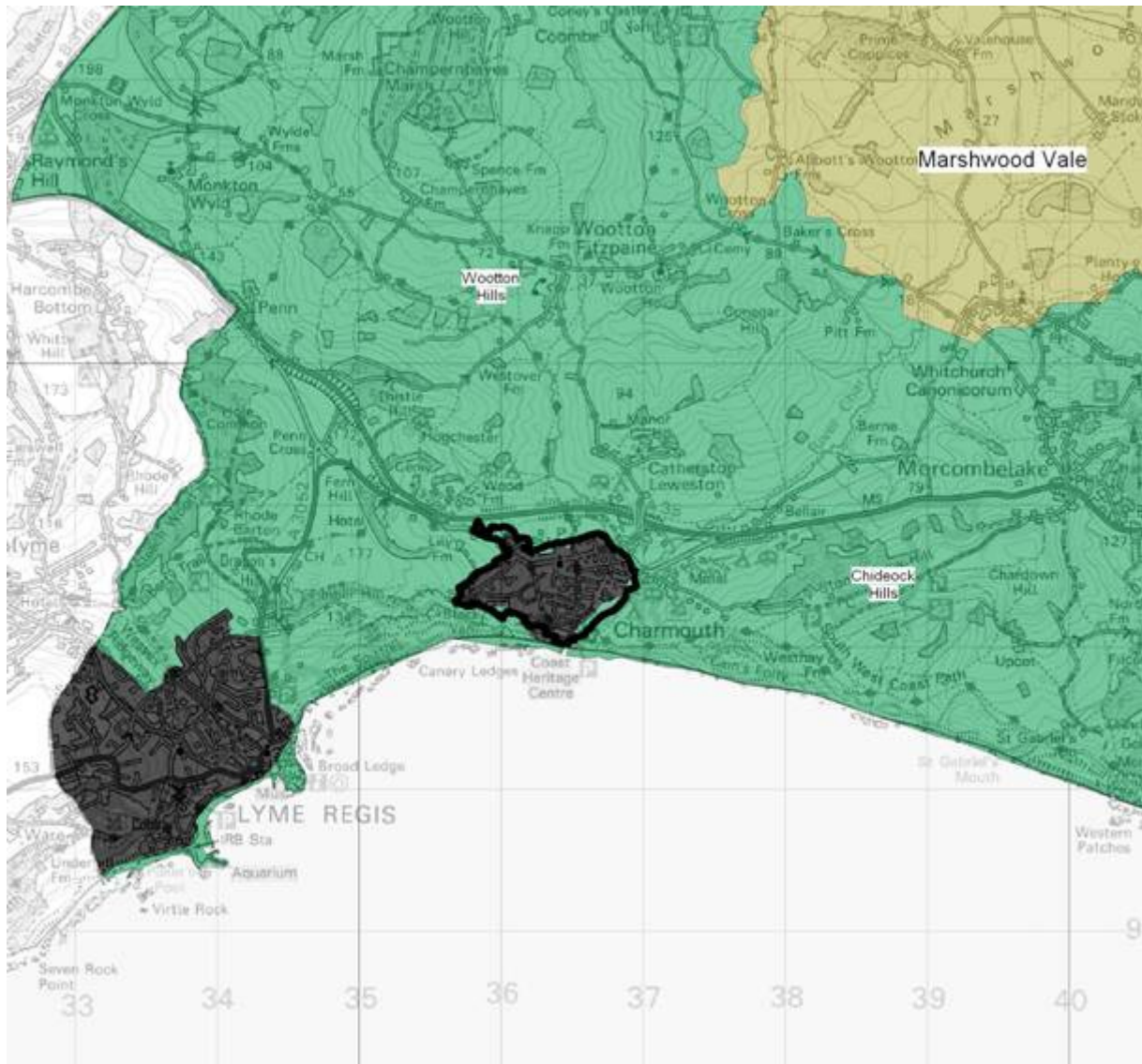
Figure 5: Charmouth in its landscape character setting (Dorset AONB Landscape Characterisation).

cliffs Landscape Types 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, Charmouth lies on the junction between the Chideock Hills Character Area to the east and the Wootton Hills Character Area to the north and west, both part of the Wooded Hills Landscape Type (Figure 5).

The key characteristics of the Chideock Hills area are:

- Numerous conical hills of greensand with deep, branching clay valleys
- Open hill tops of greensand summits, with a heathy character of bracken, heather and gorse, often with dramatic hillforts

- Patchwork of small regular pastoral fields on valley bottoms with dense species rich hedgerows, hedgerow trees and small broadleaved woodlands
- Deep, narrow winding lanes with hedge banks and occasional dark tree canopies
- Large oak and ash woodlands with arable fields on valley sides
- Dramatic remote coastline of imposing summits, coastal landforms and sheltered valleys
- Intimate and enclosed landscape of close horizons
- Scattered clustered settlements of golden limestone and thatch along the valley bottoms
- Occasional orchards

The key characteristics of the Wootton Hills area are:

- Numerous conical hills of greensand with deep, branching clay valleys
- Open hill tops of greensand summits, with a heathy character of bracken, heather and gorse, often with dramatic hillforts
- Patchwork of small, regular unimproved pastoral fields on valley bottoms with dense species rich hedgerows, hedgerow trees and small broadleaved woodlands
- Deep, narrow winding lanes with hedge banks and occasional beech tree canopies and avenues along ridge tops
- Large oak and ash woodlands and arable fields on valley sides
- Dramatic remote coastline of imposing summits, coastal landforms and sheltered valleys
- Intimate and enclosed landscape of close horizons
- Scattered clustered settlements of golden limestone and thatch along the valley bottoms.
- Occasional orchards

The draft Historic Landscape Character mapping shows Charmouth sitting within an area of largely piecemeal enclosed fields and other regular enclosed fields, with open ground to the north around Hogchester and to the east around Stonebarrow. There are also small areas of woodland on Timber Hill and Stonebarrow.

3.5 The Present Town

The modern built-up area of Charmouth lies completely within the parish of Charmouth and covers an area of about 61 ha. It lies just off the A35 South Coast Trunk Route, which bypasses the town just to the north. It has no rail links, the nearest station is at Axminster, about 8.5 km away. The population of Charmouth parish is 1320 (2006 population estimate) (DCC 2008). The population has grown in the post-war period, largely the result of net inward migration. The population contains a large proportion of older people – over 43.5% are aged 60 or over. The 2001 Census records 780 dwellings in Charmouth parish. There is one primary school in Charmouth. There are a small number of local shops, pubs, small hotels and guest houses. There are a number of caravan parks on the outskirts of the town. There is no industry in Charmouth, which is a minor holiday resort and acts as a dormitory settlement to Bridport and Lyme Regis.

Part 4: Sources

4.1 Previous research

There has been relatively little historical research on Charmouth. The major social historian is R W J Pavey who recorded a large amount of information on the ownership and social context of the houses in Charmouth and collected many recollections from the older inhabitants from the later 1920s, when he retired to Charmouth, until his death in 1973. Much of his work was recorded in a number of manuscript volumes dating to the 1960s (Pavey 1961, 1968a-b, 1969). His work is being continued today by the Pavey Society and published in their journal *The Village Echo*.

The first collation of the historic sources and the earlier history of Charmouth was done by K J Penn in *The Historic Towns of Dorset* (1980). Laurence Keen in his 1999 article is the first to recognise Charmouth's unusual history as a Cistercian town foundation and he provides the only detailed account of the evidence for the foundation of the town and an analysis of the medieval boundaries.

4.2 Historic Maps

Charmouth is shown on a 1539 map of the Dorset Coast (BL Cott. Aug. I.i, f31), but the depiction of the houses and church is likely to be schematic rather than an accurate depiction. John Ogilby's road map of 1675 shows Charmouth as a street lined with houses.

The earliest detailed map of the town is the 1841 Tithe Map. The characterisation was largely based on the Tithe Map and the 1:2500 scale Ordnance Survey maps dating from 1889 onwards.

4.3 Documentary Evidence

The Cartulary of Forde Abbey contains fifty-seven document relating to Charmouth and forms the primary documentary for the administration of the abbey's Charmouth estate and the foundation of the town (Hobbs 1998; Keen 1999).

There are few later documentary sources for Charmouth.

4.4 Archaeological Evidence

There has been some archaeological investigation in Charmouth, primarily watching briefs in the backlands of the burgage plots in the historic core (**Appendix 3**; Figure 34). In addition, there was an evaluation prior to the construction of Nutcombe Close, which lay outside the built-up area of the town. This archaeological work has generally revealed very little in the way of archaeological features, but has contributed to an understanding of the density of occupation in the medieval town.

No formal historic building recording has taken place, despite major works to some of the more significant historic buildings in Charmouth.

4.5 Historic Buildings

Charmouth has a relatively high proportion of historic buildings, primarily concentrated along The Street. The buildings include a small number of late medieval-17th century large cross-passage houses, some smaller vernacular buildings of 17th-18th century date, early 19th century villas and a range of later 19th century houses. The buildings include a number of larger gentry and resort houses, historic inns and public houses and a range of smaller cottages. There is only one significant surviving industrial building, the former cement factory.