

Part 5: Historical Analysis



5.1 Medieval Charmouth (AD1150-1539)

5.1.1 Historical Summary

Charmouth is first mentioned in the Domesday survey of 1086. *Cernemude* (i.e. Cerne mouth – the river Char was formerly known as the Cerne) was held before 1066 by Algar. Three villagers and 16 saltworkers are listed (Thorn and Thorn 1983). There is no indication of any nucleated settlement and the saltworkers may suggest that it was a coastal settlement, perhaps now eroded by the sea (Penn 1980). In 1086 it was part of the lands of the Count of Mortain.

By the mid-12th century, Charmouth had come into the possession of the Cistercian Abbey at Forde. This included land granted by Richard del Estre in about 1170 and confirmed by Richard I in 1189. The bounds of this land, together with another block of adjoining land, were confirmed in an early 13th century document and include mention of a cross and a stone bridge across the river (Keen 1999). A mill is mentioned in the mid 13th century and also the monk's grange and road leading to it. A chapel at Charmouth is mentioned in 1240 (Penn 1980). In 1281 the bishop of Salisbury gave his assent to moving the old chapel of Charmouth, which was on the shore and had been "*ruined by the battering of the sea and storms*", to a new site on the lands of the abbey (Keen 1999, 17). In 1278, the Abbot of Forde was granted a weekly market and a yearly fair at Charmouth (Penn 1980).

The documentary evidence suggests that by the late 13th century Charmouth was an agricultural settlement arranged on both sides of the main road between Lyme Regis and Bridport, with a stone bridge over the Char and a mill (probably on the site of the later mill situated on a tributary of the Char). The monastic grange may have been at Grange Mead on the

west side of the town (Figure 8). It is not known what the size of the settlement was and whether the houses were concentrated in a particular area. The settlement's main function may have still been the production of salt (Keen 1999).

In the late 13th century, William, abbot of Forde, created a 'free borough' to improve his manor of Charmouth. The date of the creation of the borough has traditionally been taken as 1320, after Hutchins (1863), but the document has been re-dated to 1290 x 1297 (Keen 1999). The charter defined the limits of the new borough and set out the size of the new building plots. It refers to the monks' mill, the chapel of the vill, a pillory and a cross on the road to Lyme. There is also mention of a guildhall. Burgesses were granted the right to keep a draught animal in the common pasture.

Charmouth is one of the few new towns founded at the end of the 13th or early 14th century, one of the last in the great period of English town foundation (Beresford 1967). The charter for the creation of the new borough makes it clear that it was a deliberately planned settlement designed to improve the manor and enhance the abbey's estate. This makes Charmouth very unusual, as Cistercian houses, in general, did not seek to establish new towns on their lands.

There is little known about the subsequent medieval history of Charmouth. It does not appear to have flourished. It is not listed as a borough in the Lay Subsidy Rolls of the 14th century and it did not contribute substantially to the finances of Forde Abbey (Keen 1999). The evidence of the Tithe Map suggests there was little real expansion beyond the town limits and the pattern of the burgage properties suggests that many were double plots (Figure 34). This could indicate that many plots were amalga-



Figure 6: View down The Street from the church.



Figure 7: Possible medieval market area at crossroads of The Street, Barrs Lane and Lower Sea Lane.

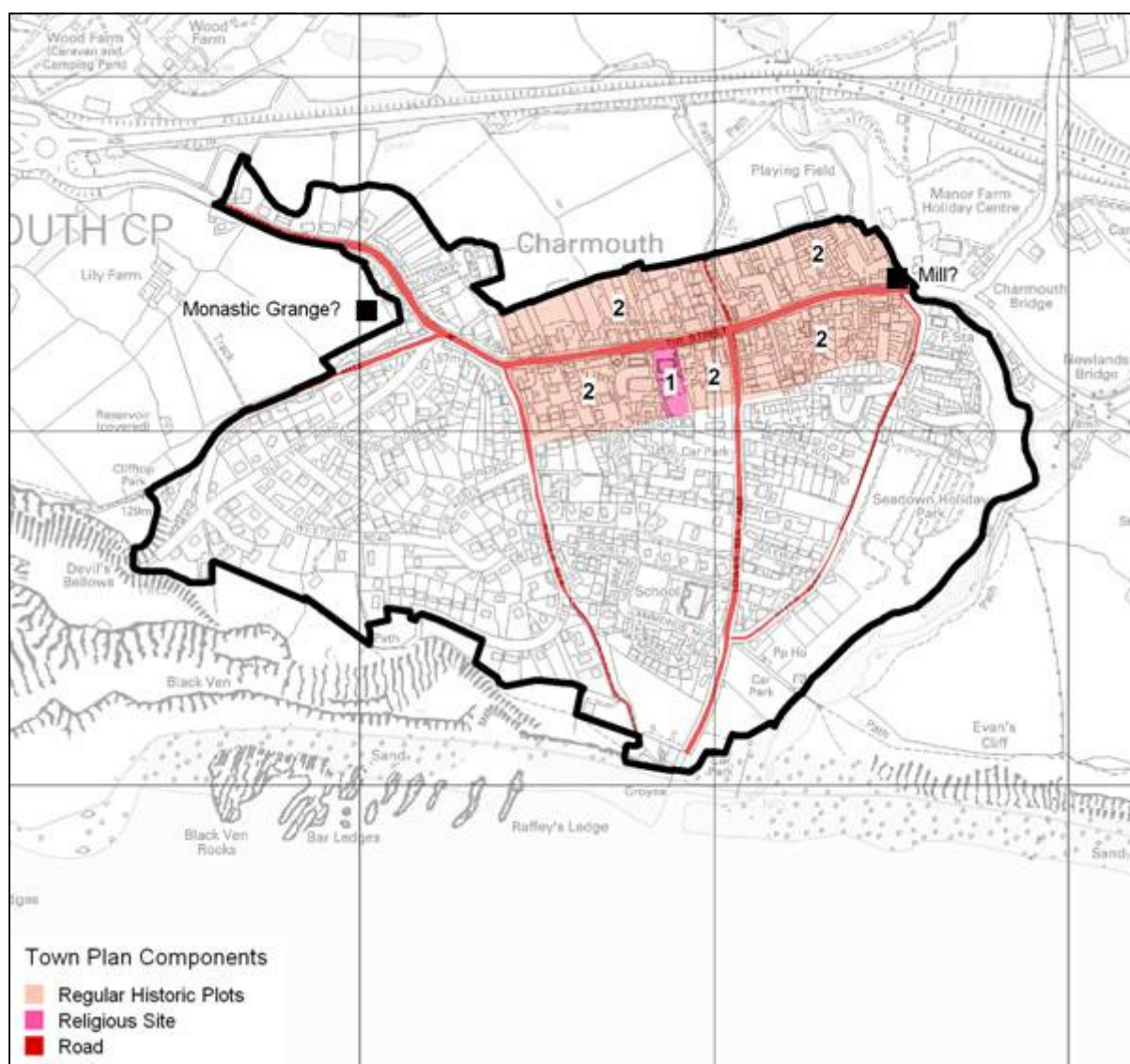


Figure 8: Charmouth Medieval Town Plan Components

mated because of the failure to attract sufficient tenants for single plots (Keen 1999). The town was probably too close to the market at Lyme Regis to become successful and remained dependent on the Abbey estates and on passing trade along the road.

There is some suggestion of 16th century prosperity. The church was completely rebuilt in about 1503 (Hutchins 1774), perhaps indicating a population increase or an increase in prosperity. Leland, in about 1540, described Charmouth as “a good fisher town a long mile” (Hutchins 1863, 218). The earliest depiction of the town is the 1539 Map of the Dorset Coast, which shows Charmouth as a cluster of houses dominated by the church. Clearly this image is stylised with an irregular arrangement of buildings, which do not appear to be aligned along a street.

5.1.2 Town Layout

The town was set out along a single main street (The Street) which formed the highway between Lyme Regis and Bridport, with regular burgage plots to the north and south (Figure 8). The present Barrs Lane and Lower Sea Lane may form part of an early route from Wootton to the sea and suggest the town was focussed on a minor cross-roads. Two other lanes (Higher Sea Lane and Bridge Road/River Way) run south towards the coast from the western and eastern ends of the burgage plots and could form part of the medieval layout. It is noticeable on the Tithe Map that the triangle of land bounded by these lanes was divided into a number of regular long rectangular fields running E-W. The Tithe Map Apportionment names them as ‘Single Common’ or ‘Double Common’ depending on their width. The date of these fields is unknown, but they may repre-

sent the enclosure of former medieval open strip fields.

'The Street' undoubtedly functioned as the market street of the medieval town, probably focused on the cross-roads – this area was known as the Market Place in the 19th century (Pavey 1960). The church was sited to the west of the cross-roads on the south side of The Street. The medieval mill was probably on the same site as the later mill which lay at the eastern end of the town on a small tributary of the Char (Figure 8).

A large number of the burgage plot boundaries still survive, particularly on the northern side of The Street. The length of the plots (between 70-110 yards) accords well with the specified length of plots in the original borough charter (110 yards). The widths of the plots are more variable. To the north of The Street and west of Barrs Lane, the plots are generally narrow (some about half the charter width of 22 yards), but the plots to the east and along the south side are wider and many are about twice the charter width. The suggestion is that the large number of double-width plots is the result of the failure to attract tenants for single plots, so two were amalgamated (Keen 1999).

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.* This may be the site of the chapel built after 1281 to replace the ruined chapel on the beach. The church appears to have been completely rebuilt in about 1503 (Hutchins 1774). It had a nave, chancel, south aisle, north porch and west tower and was dedicated to St Nicholas (Pitfield 1981).

2. *Burgage plots.* A series of regular burgage plots were laid out along both sides of the main street. The charter creating the free borough specified the size of the burgage plots as four perches (22 yards) by twenty perches (110 yards), i.e. half an acre. Many of the burgage boundaries still survive, often defined by high stone walls. In the eastern part of the town, the plots are generally double width (Keen 1999). The Queen's Armes is the only medieval buildings identified within a former burgage plot.



Figure 9: General view of probable site of medieval mill.



Figure 10: Stone wall defining northern limit of medie-



Figure 11: Detail of stone wall marking a former bur-
gauge plot boundary.



Figure 12: Queen's Armes, The Street.

5.2 Post-medieval Charmouth (1540-1799)

5.2.1 Historical Summary

This period is probably largely one of stagnation in Charmouth, following the possible increase in prosperity in the 16th century. There is little evidence for growth and Charmouth remained largely dependent on agriculture and fishing during this period. Its position on one of the major routes through Dorset means that probably it relied to a certain degree on passing trade from travellers along this road. The settlement at this date is more properly thought of as a large village rather than a town.

The Dissolution brought about a change in ownership of the town. Charmouth lost its ecclesiastical lord with the dissolution of Forde Abbey in March 1539, but there is no clear evidence that the fortunes of the town suffered unduly as a direct result of this. The Manor of Charmouth was granted to the Caldwell family and in 1648-9 was purchased by William Ellesdon. In 1730, the manor passed to the Henvill family, then was purchased by James Warden in 1783 (Hutchins 1863, 223; Pavey 1968a).

The Hearth Tax of 1662-4 recorded 30 people in Charmouth, with a total of 63 hearths in Charmouth tithing, which suggests a very small town (Meekings 1951).

Charmouth played little part in the events of the Civil War, unlike its near neighbour, Lyme Regis. However, in September 1651, after his flight following the Battle of Worcester, Charles II arranged to cross to France from Charmouth, but the boat did not arrive in time and he was forced to stay the night in the town, probably at the Queen's Armes. The following morning he was recognised and forced to flee towards Bridport.

There was a small non-conformist community in Charmouth. A dissenting meeting-house was

opened by John Brice some time after 1662. The first chapel was a small thatched cottage adjacent to the Queen's Armes, on the site of the present Congregational Church.

The main road through Charmouth was part of the 'Great Western Turnpike' which crossed the whole of Dorset from Harnham Hill near Salisbury to Axminster which was administered by the Harnham, Blandford and Dorchester Trust set up in 1753-4. The road to Lyme Regis from Charmouth was administered by the Lyme Regis and Crewkerne Trust established in 1757-8 (Good 1966).

5.2.2 Town Layout

The basic layout remained largely the same as the medieval town, with a single main E-W street and properties along both sides. There were undoubtedly some changes to the property boundaries from the medieval period, perhaps some amalgamation of plots, or the abandonment of some burgage plots along the south side of the town, but the precise details are unclear.

The main road and the road to Lyme Regis (the present Lyme Regis Hill) were turnpiked and it is unclear whether this led to any change in alignment of the roads. There was a turnpike gate at the west end of The Street (Pavey 1968a).

5.2.3 16th-18th Century Town Plan Components

The main plan components of the post-medieval town are shown on Figure 15 and are listed below.

1. *Church.* The 16th century church underwent some restoration in the 1730s (Pitfield 1981). A 17th century font survives in the present church.



Figure 13: View down Axminster Road.



Figure 14: Old Lyme Hill — former turnpike road.

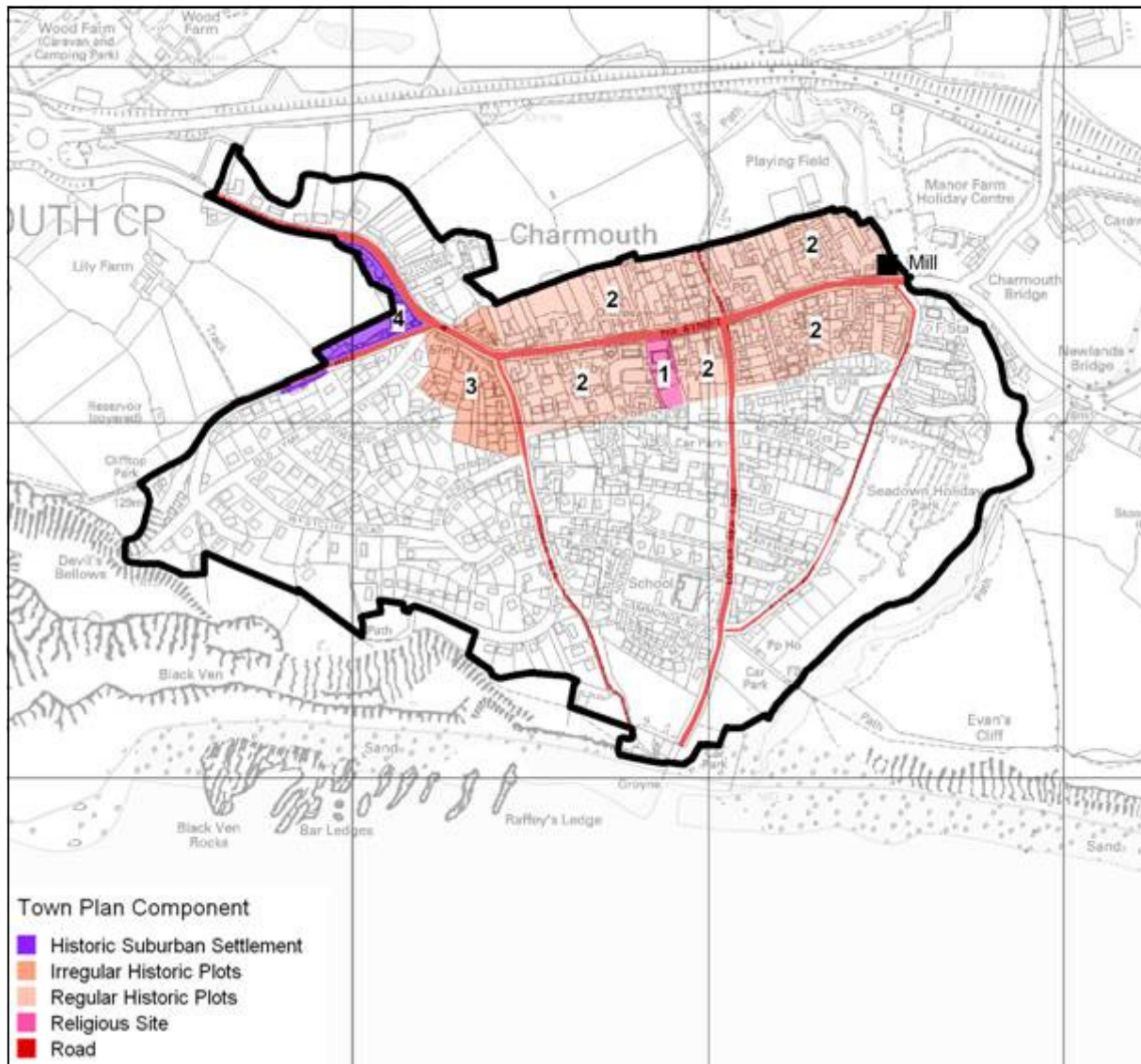


Figure 15: Charmouth Post-medieval Town Plan Components.

2. *Burgage plots*. The layout of the burgage plots probably continued much as they had been in the medieval period. The buildings along the street frontage had been replaced and a number of 16th and 17th century buildings, still survive, including the Queen's Armes, The George Inn, The Manor House, Charmouth House, and Albury House. Some 18th century cottages and houses also survive (RCHME 1952).

3. *Other Historic Plots*. There was some expansion westwards beyond the limits of the medieval town, perhaps during the 17th and 18th centuries. These properties are not as regular and buildings on the frontage. The earliest building is Badgers/Foxley Cottage, formerly the farmhouse of Foxley Farm, of 17th and 18th century date.

4. *Old Lyme Hill*. The Tithe Map shows a number of houses on small plots of land along the

north side of Old Lyme Hill and the west side of Axminster Road. There are also a small number of houses seemingly built on the south side of the carriageway of road to Lyme. The date of the development in this area is uncertain and may date after the creation of the turnpike roads to Axminster and Lyme in the 1750s. The strip of land north of Old Lyme Hill was waste belonging to the parish and in 1782 permission was granted to build two cottages in this area (Boston 2003).

5.3 Nineteenth – Early Twentieth Century Charmouth (1800-1913)

5.3.1 Historical Summary

The nineteenth century saw Charmouth become a minor watering-place and holiday resort, which promoted some revival in its fortunes. This encouraged the building of villas in the town in the 1830s and 1840s. The church was rebuilt and enlarged in 1836. The Independent Chapel was rebuilt in 1815. Charmouth was a select resort and its 'season' was in the summer, slightly before that of Lyme Regis (Roberts 1834, 316). There were two bathing machines on the beach. Most people only visited for the season, but there was also some influx of permanent inhabitants. The population of the town increased from 369 in 1801 to 601 in 1851, but this growth was not sustained and in the second half of the 19th century the population of the town actually fell, to 560 in 1901. This decline in the late 19th and early 20th century is mirrored in many towns in Dorset, partly as a result of the general agricultural depression.

The period saw a shift away from agriculture and fishing to tourism as the primary economic activity of the town. The only major attempt at industry in Charmouth was the rather short-lived cement factory built to exploit the cement stones eroding out of the cliffs (Woodward and Ussher 1911). The factory was established in the 1850s, but appears to have stopped operating by 1867 (Pavey 1969).

Several inns and guest houses were opened to cater for visitors. There were also a number of shops and the usual range of small industries and crafts found in towns, such as blacksmith, wheelwright, carpenter, baker, shoe and boot maker, etc. A range of agricultural workers were also resident in the town. Backlands Farm lay within one of the burgage plots on the

northern side of The Street. A church school, later a National School was established in Lower Sea Lane some time at the beginning of the 19th century. A cottage hospital was established in 1867 in what is now Charm and Heron Cottages. The first town water supply, fed by a spring in Grange Mead, was constructed in 1865 (Pavey 1968a).

Numerous fires are recorded within the town during this period, all of which were relatively restricted in the numbers of houses affected (Press 2006).

A number of changes and improvements to the turnpike road network were undertaken in the earlier 19th century. A tunnel was cut beneath Thistle Hill to the west of Charmouth in 1832 making the route towards Axminster and Exeter much easier. A new cutting of the road to Lyme was made in 1824, below the existing road (along what is now Old Lyme Road) in order to alleviate the steepness of the original route. This new road was not a success, as it was continuously affected by subsidence and badly affected by wind and weather. It was widened in 1839 and 1852. The bridge next to the Mill was rebuilt in 1824.

In 1906, the course of the mouth of the river Char was altered from its previous course so that it flowed directly into the sea adjacent to the cement factory, rather than turning and flowing eastwards to the sea.

In 1898, much of the land of the manor was put up for sale at auction. Very little was successfully sold at this auction and it was put up for sale again in 1904. This time many of the lots between Charmouth and the coast were sold, including the former common. This opened the way for the suburban expansion of Charmouth in the 20th century.



Figure 16: Early 19th century villas, The Street.



Figure 17: Former cement factory.

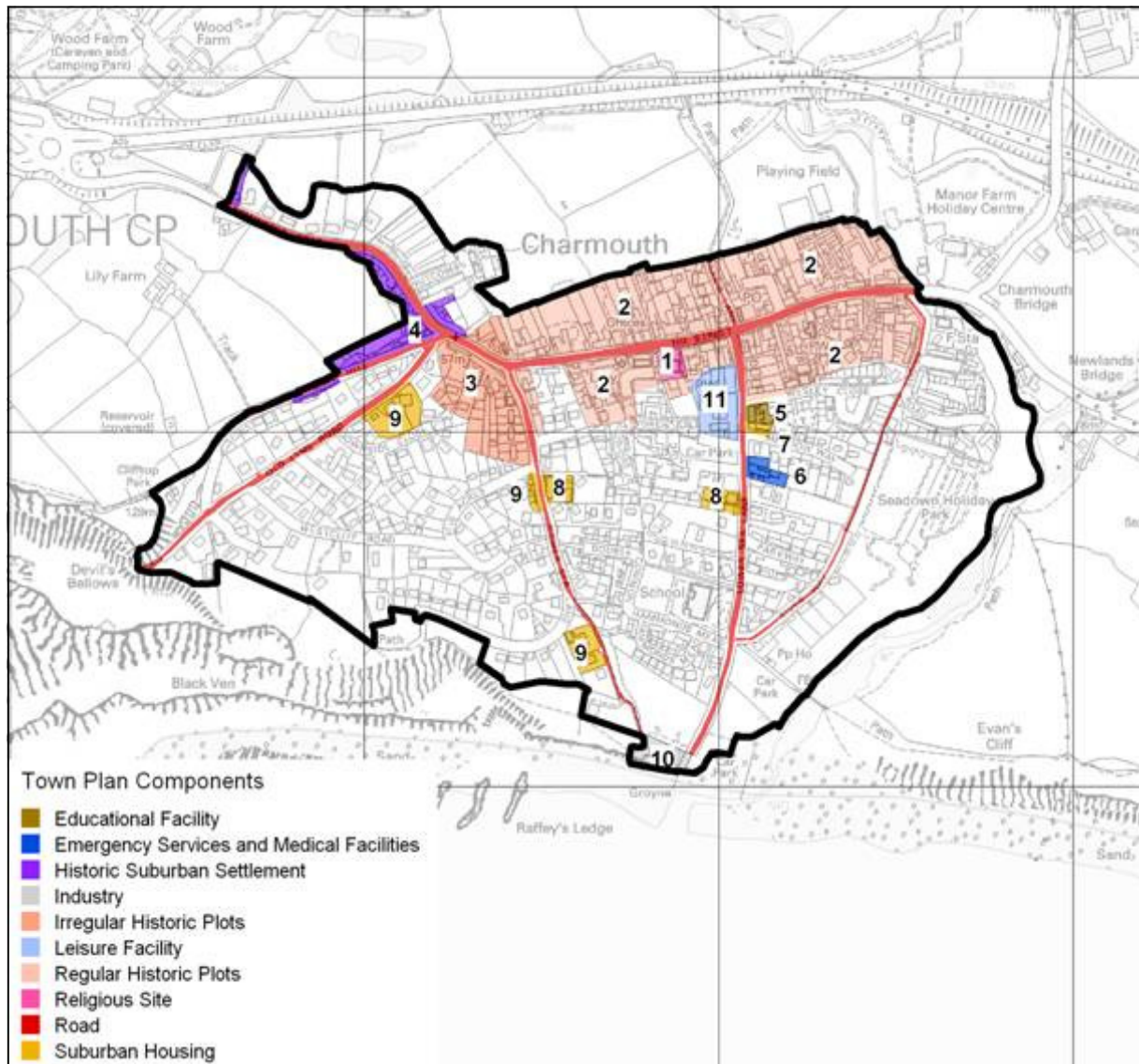


Figure 18: Charmouth Nineteenth—Early Twentieth Century Town Plan Components.

5.3.2 Town Layout

The basic layout of the town remained largely the same as the medieval and post-medieval town, with a single main E-W street and properties along both sides. Undoubtedly there were some changes to the property boundaries from the medieval and post-medieval layout, but these are not recorded in detail. The 19th century saw the beginnings of development along Lower and Higher Sea Lanes, including a number of cottages, larger houses, a coast-guard station and school. Development also expanded further along Axminster Road.

The main change in the road network was the construction of the new road to Lyme Regis, along what is now Old Lyme Road in 1824.

5.3.3 19th – early 20th century Town Plan Components

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

1. *Church*. In 1835 it was decided to enlarge the church, but the building was in a very poor condition and was demolished. It was replaced with the present church in 1836, built to the designs of Charles Fowler (Pitfield 1981). The dedication was changed to St Andrew, probably in the 1860s. A new rectory was built behind the church in 1835.

2. *Burgage plots*. The layout of the burgage plots probably continued much as they had been in the previous period. Many new houses, including elegant stuccoed villas, were built along The Street in the early 19th century, reflecting Charmouth's function as a minor water-

ing-place and seaside resort during this period.

3. *Other Historic Plots.* A number of houses and gardens were built here during this period.

4. *Old Lyme Hill.* The Tithe Map shows a number of houses on small plots of land along the north side of Old Lyme Hill and the west side of Axminster Road. There was also a small number of houses seemingly built in the south side of the carriageway of the road to Lyme. A number of houses and an inn were built on the north side of Axminster Road in the early 19th century. A cottage hospital was established here in 1867.

5. *School.* A church school was founded some time before 1834. It had become a National School by 1842. A new school building was constructed in 1871 and enlarged in 1881.

6. *Coastguard Station.* A coastguard station was built on the site of an earlier inn, probably in 1867. The station remained operational until 1909 (Pavey 1969).

7. *Almshouses.* A terrace of three cottages were built adjacent to the school in about 1868 for poor parishioners.

8. *West of Lower Sea Lane.* The first houses in the area between Lower and Higher Sea Lane were probably built in the very late 18th century. A small group of houses and gardens were built on Lower Sea Lane and used by the Coastguards in the 1840s. Sea House (later Gresham House) was built on Higher Sea Lane and was the residence of the Rev John Lucy in the early 19th century.

9. *West of Higher Sea Lane.* A small number of houses were built between Old Lyme Road and Higher Sea Lane in the last decade of the 19th century or first decade of the 20th century. These include a villa and several cottages along Higher Sea Lane and The Mount on Old Lyme Road.

10. *Cement Factory.* A cement factory was built on Charmouth Beach in the early 1850s. It was run by John Morcombe and Son of Plymouth. It was disused by 1867.

11. *Tennis Club.* The Charmouth Lawn Tennis Club was founded in the early 1880s and had its courts on land at the top end of Lower Sea Lane, formerly used as allotments (Levrington 2007).



Figure 19: Former roads to Lyme Regis — Old Lyme Hill to right and Old Lyme Road to left.



Figure 20: Charm Cottage and Heron Cottage, formerly a cottage hospital.



Figure 21: St Andrew's Church.



Figure 22: Former Coach and Horses Inn.

5.4 Twentieth Century Charmouth (1914-Present Day)

5.4.1 Historical Summary

This period is one of suburban expansion for Charmouth. The sale of the former manor lands in the beginning of the 20th century enabled the gradual development of much of the area between the historic core and the coast, as well as expansion along the Axminster Road. The population rose during this period from 575 in 1911 to 719 in 1931, 890 in 1951 and to 1320 in 2005. The rate of population increase was greatest in the 1920s, but has been climbing steadily during the second half of the 20th century.

Charmouth retained its function as a minor seaside resort and holiday destination throughout the 20th century and the main economic focus remained tourism. There are a number of

inns and guest houses and a small range of local shops. The former cement factory was converted into a heritage coast centre in 1985 and Charmouth is a Gateway Town to the Jurassic Coast. It has also become an attractive retirement destination and functions as a dormitory settlement for Lyme Regis and Bridport.

There were some changes to the road layout. In 1924, the existing road to Lyme Regis via Old Lyme Road was closed and the present route via Fernhill was created. The bridge next to the former mill was replaced by a new one in 1957. In 1990, a new bypass was constructed to the north of the town alleviating much of the through flow of traffic along The Street.

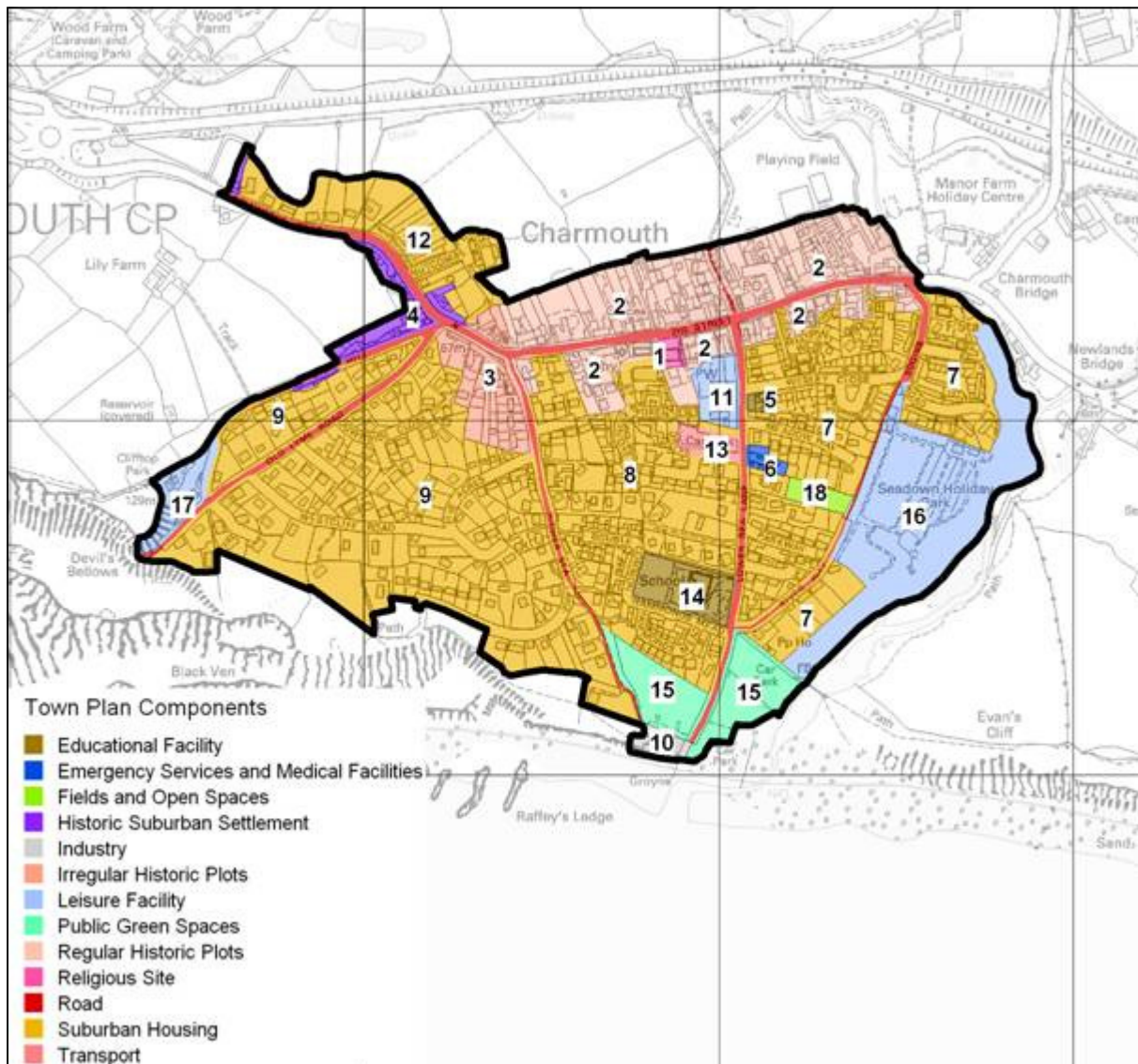


Figure 23: Charmouth Twentieth Century Town Plan Components.

5.4.2 Town Layout

The town retained its historic street pattern, though the entrance to Lower Sea Lane was widened in 1958. To the south, a number of new local access roads were created after World War 2 (some along the lines of existing tracks or paths) to serve the suburban expansion which gradually infilled most of the area to the coast. The creation of the new suburban housing and modern infill housing behind the frontage of The Street has removed a significant number of historic boundaries, particularly along the south side of the historic core.

5.4.3 Twentieth Century Town Plan Components

The main plan components of the twentieth century town are shown on Figure 23 and are listed below.

1. *Church*. Various restoration and repair works were carried out in 1936.

2. *Burgage plots*. The mill became disused in the early 20th century and the area developed as Catherston Manor Farm. Perhaps by about the late 1950s, the farm was disused. The farm buildings are currently being converted into holiday accommodation. There was erosion of the former burgage plots with the construction of a number of modern infill housing developments, particularly to the south of The Street.

3. *Other Historic Plots*. There has been significant alterations to the buildings in this area. Foxley farm was redeveloped in the 1930s. Some council houses were built along the upper part of Higher Sea Lane in 1921.

4. *Old Lyme Hill*. The occasional new house was built post-war.

5. *School*. The school continued on this site until 1992 and is now private dwellings. The playground was added to the school in 1926.

6. *Coastguard Station*. By the late 1920s, the coastguard station was no longer in use.

7. *East of Lower Sea Lane*. The almshouses, now Hall View, have been private houses since 1952. A number of houses were built below the Coastguard Cottages and behind the almshouses in the 1920s. River Way was created in the 1920s with some development along its eastern side. There was further building in this area during the 1930s, including two small housing estates to the north of Meadow Way and at Parkway, fitted into existing narrow strip fields. The post-war period saw the creation of new access roads, including Wesley Close and Bridge Road, and the infilling of most of this

area with housing. Wesley Close and infill behind the south frontage of The Street have eroded the historic boundaries in this area.

8. *West of Lower Sea Lane*. There was some housing development along both Lower and Higher Sea Lane in the 1920s. A large house, Hammonds' Mead, later a hotel, was built overlooking the coast. This has now been demolished and replaced by Hammond's Mead housing estate. In the 1930s, a number of small housing estates fitted within existing strip fields. After WW2, the whole area has been infilled with housing and a number of new local access roads built. To the north, the modern housing development has removed a number of former burgage boundaries.

9. *West of Higher Sea Lane*. The 1920s saw the beginnings of suburban development at the southern end of Higher Sea Lane. After WW2, there was extensive new housing development, with new local access roads, which infilled the whole of this area and the area between Old Lyme Road and Old Lyme Hill.

10. *Cement Factory*. The former cement factory was used as a store, etc, until 1985 when the building was converted into the Charmouth Heritage Coast Centre.

11. *Tennis Club*. This continues to be the home of Charmouth Lawn Tennis Club. Two hard courts were added in the 1950s and it now has four all-weather courts.

12. *Axminster Road*. A number of detached houses were built at the western end, north of Axminster Road in the 1920s. Nutcombe Terrace is a council house development dating to the early 1930s. Nutcombe Close is a small modern development behind the street frontage built in the early 1990s.

13. *Lower Sea Lane Car Park*. A car park was established here post-1970.

14. *Charmouth Primary School*. A new school was opened in 1993 on a new site on Lower Sea Lane.

15. *Charmouth Heritage Coast Centre Car Parks*. A number of small car parks and overflow car parks in former fields serving visitors to the beach and the Heritage Coast Centre, established post-war.

16. *Seadown Holiday Park*. A touring caravan and holiday chalet site, established post-1970.

17. *Clifftop Park*. Former touring caravan park, established post-1970, now private chalet site.

18. *Field behind Hensleigh Hotel*. Only surviving remnant of former fields and common.