

Summary

This report contains the results of a consideration of the historical, archaeological, architectural and map evidence relating to the development of Charmouth. It has focused on the understanding of its overall development from the earliest beginnings to the present day, with a view to defining how this has influenced the modern townscape, identifying what historical features and structures survive within the modern settlement, and comprehending what is the contribution of its historic dimension to the character of Charmouth today. This will enable an informed approach to the management of change and conservation of the urban environment to be undertaken.

Historical Background

The town of Charmouth was a deliberate foundation by the Cistercian abbot of Forde at the very end of the 13th or early 14th century, which makes it very unusual, as Cistercian houses tended not to establish new towns on their lands and only a very small number are known in England. The town was founded at the end of the great period of English town foundation and like many of these late towns, it was not a success and does not appear to have contributed substantially to the finances of Forde Abbey. Little is known about its subsequent history. There is some indication of prosperity in the 16th century, but the town does not appear to have expanded beyond its original limits. It was largely dependent on agriculture and fishing and remained a small town or large village. In the early 19th century Charmouth became a minor seaside resort, which encouraged the building of a number of villas and saw a modest increase in its size. This marked the beginning of its dependence on tourism as its major source of income, but it declined in the later 19th century. The period after the First World War saw increasing suburban development, which expanded markedly after the Second World War. Although Charmouth trebled in size during the 20th century, it remains a large village rather than a town.

Town morphology

Charmouth has a linear plan form arranged along a single main street with regular long narrow plots along both sides. Many of the original planned medieval burgage plots survive. Modern suburban expansion has taken place to the south of the medieval town, removing some of the medieval boundaries and blurring its original southern limits, and infilling almost all of the

area down to the coast. A number of historic lanes still survive running down towards the sea. The suburban expansion directly to the south of the town took place within a series of narrow rectangular fields, which encouraged small-scale developments confined within former field boundaries.

Built character

Charmouth has a high proportion of historic buildings, concentrated along The Street, Axminster Road and Old Lyme Hill. There is a varied range of structures including some 16th-17th houses, 17th-18th century vernacular cottages, early 19th century villas, and a range of later 19th century houses. The historic buildings are mainly constructed from local Blue Lias and Greensand chert, rendered for weather protection. The roofs are of slate or thatch. There is also a series of large stone walls which define the northern limit of the town and many of the burgage plot boundaries. The modern houses are mainly typical suburban estate houses and bungalows, largely of brick, or stone-clad, typical of their period with no remarkable local characteristics. The more recent developments are mainly in neo-Georgian or neo-vernacular styles.

Landscape Setting

Charmouth lies on a steep east-facing slope running down to the edge of the River Char and its tributary to the east. The slopes become increasingly steep to the west. It lies just inland from the coast. The steep slopes dominate the setting.

Historic Urban Character

Charmouth's local distinctiveness is derived from the relationship between its plan layout, plot structure, historic buildings and its landscape setting. The morphology of the town comprises a simple linear plan form with regular burgage plots arranged along a single main street. The town plan is not unusual, but it survives relatively complete and allows the layout and extent of the original planned town to be traced on the ground today. This plan has exerted a strong influence on the development of individual plots in the town, particularly in its northern part. To the south of the historic core, the influence of former small narrow rectangular fields (perhaps originally of medieval date) is evident in the layout of the 20th century suburban development, which has largely respected the former field boundaries.



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

The built environment exerts a strong influence on the historic urban character. The frontage of the main street is largely composed of historic buildings with relatively little intrusion from modern development. There is a strong contribution from late Regency and early Victorian houses and cottages throughout the town, punctuated by a number of older houses and cottages which add additional variety and interest to the built environment. The buildings vary in their position to the street, with some set directly on the street frontage and others set back behind front gardens. The topography also exerts a strong influence on the townscape character. The steep climb up through the town with its progression of buildings up the slope has a very different feel to the experience of moving downslope through the town from west, with its many good views over the lower parts of the town and the surrounding countryside. Trees and other green elements provide a very positive element to the urban character, ameliorating the hard urban elements along The Street and linking with the surrounding landscape. This

green element also serves to soften and mask the extent of the suburban development to the south and helps demarcate the difference between the historic town and later expansion.

Further Research

This report has highlighted a number of aspects of the historical development of Charmouth and how this has shaped the modern settlement. It has also indicated gaps in our knowledge and areas which would repay further research.

The main areas of suggested further study include:

- Research into the abbey's manorial estate prior to the foundation of the town.
- Research into the foundation and initial organisation of the town and whether any features can be specifically identified as Cistercian town planning.
- Research into the medieval and post-medieval development of the town.