

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

Sherborne lies on the south-facing slope of the Yeo valley. The river flows from ENE to WSW at Sherborne, having risen only a few miles away to the north in the limestone hills on the Somerset and Dorset border (Figure 3). The Yeo valley is asymmetrical in cross section in the Sherborne region; the north slope of the

valley is much smoother in gradient than the southern one which takes the form of a steep escarpment. The northern slope rises gently and consistently from the valley floor to a series of hills (Charlock, Patson and Ambrose) which sit above the town at a height of approximately 150m. The historic core of the town runs up the slope to the 85m contour, although the modern town has been extended to the 130m contour. The southern bank of the River Yeo is largely given over to meadow and the southern valley slope rises sharply above the valley floor. It has been suggested that the nature of the ground here would have favoured woodland in the medieval period (Fowler, 1951, 3-6) and it remains so today. The former Abbey precinct is situated on the Coombe Brook; a small tributary to the Yeo. It is likely that this stream gave rise to the place-name of *Scire burn* which probably means *clear or bright stream* (Ekwall 1960, 416).

3.3 Geology

The northern slope of the Yeo valley is formed from Lower Jurassic Inferior Oolite and Upper

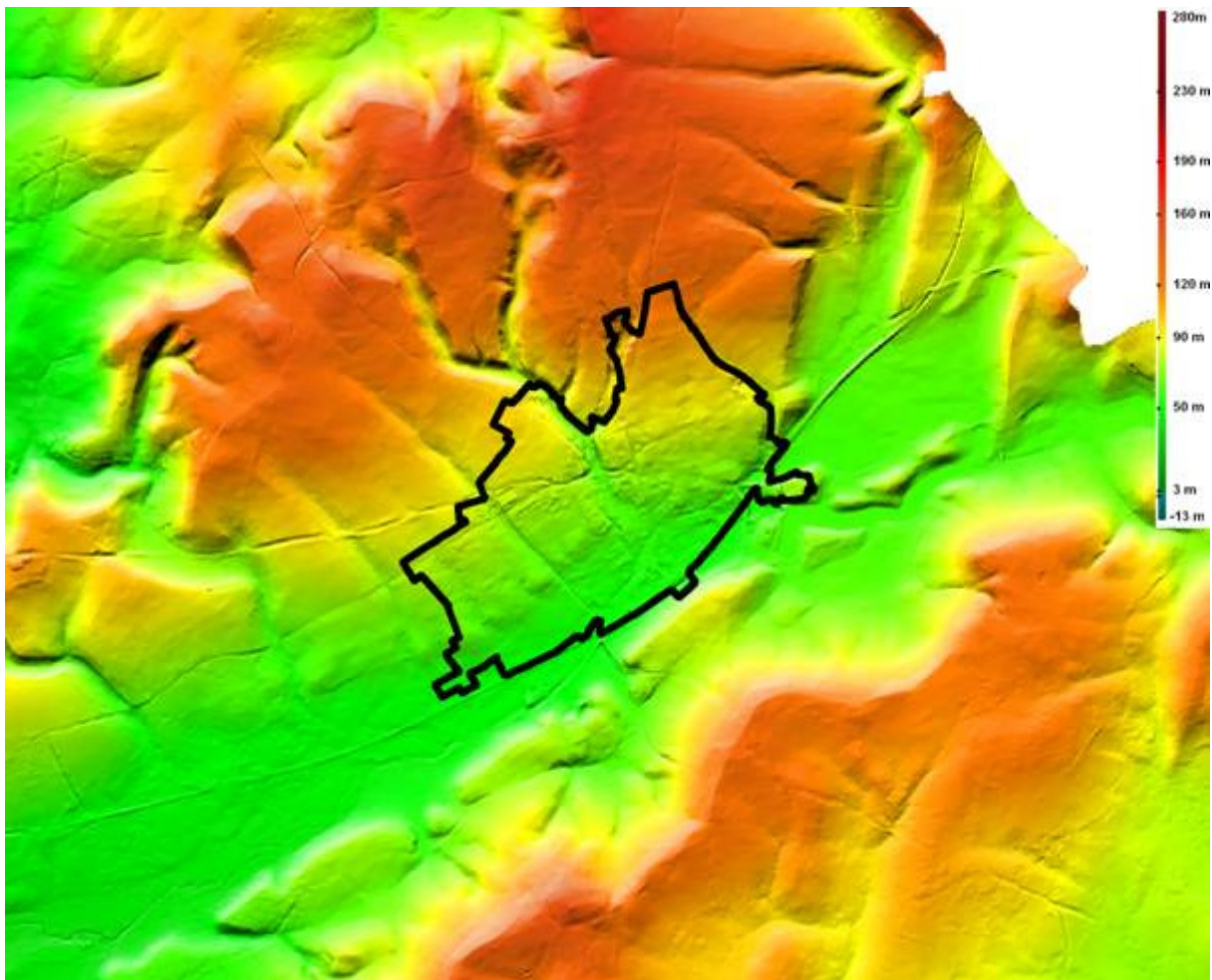


Figure 3: Sherborne's topographic setting

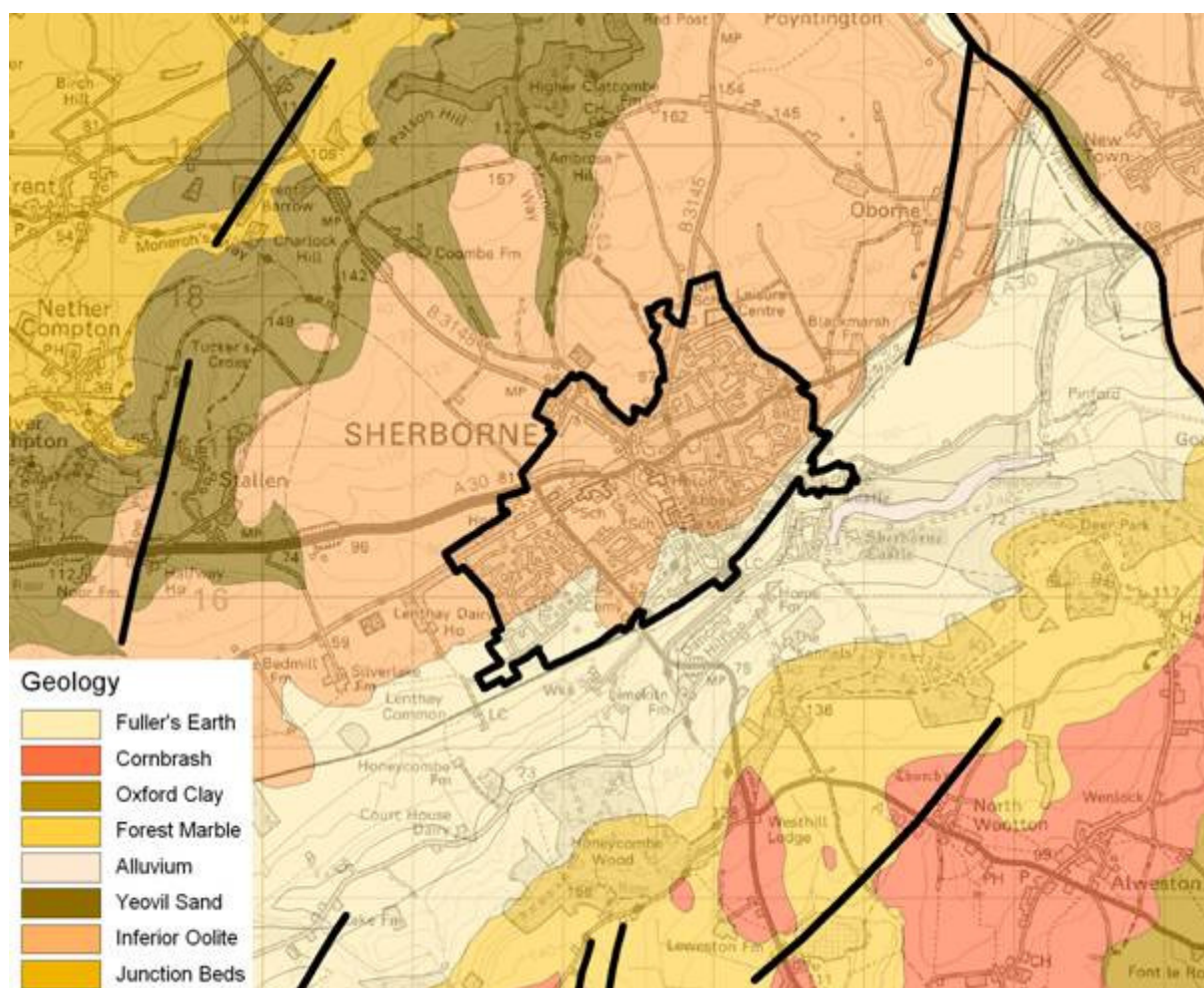


Figure 4: Geology of the Sherborne Area.

Lias Yeovil Sands (a subdivision of the Bridport Sands Formation). Beyond Charlock, Patson and Ambrose Hills is a north-facing escarpment overlooking the Sparkford Vale comprising Lower Lias clays and limestone (Figure 4). The gentle gradient of the northern slopes of the Yeo valley is determined by the dip slope of the Inferior Oolite. The soils here are relatively thin but well drained and fertile. The Inferior Oolite also provides good drainage for the area of Sherborne town. Sherborne Building Stone is the most massive of the Inferior Oolite beds. Much of the historic town is constructed from this stone which weathers to an agreeable soft fawn or buff colour. The great quarry at Red-hole Lane (just off the Bristol Road) supplied a large amount of the stone, along with smaller 'quarries' around the town (Fowler 1951, 8).

The escarpment to the south of the Yeo is formed from Fuller's Earth capped with Fuller's Earth Rock. The instability of these deposits and the steep gradient has proved to be a disincentive to development (WDDC 2007, 5-6). Nevertheless, one of the earliest foci for settlement in the Sherborne area, Castleton, has

developed around Sherborne Old Castle, which is built on a cap of Fuller's Earth rock to the east of the town.

In terms of drift geology, the Coombe brook has deposited a fan of alluvial gravel where it empties into the Yeo. This provides a further portion of well-drained land situated just above the Yeo floodplain upon which the southern part of the town has been built. The gravel is not entirely stable and residents have reported that the ground 'breathes' here, with cracks in buildings opening and closing over extended periods. This phenomenon is thought to be caused by differences in volume of the gravel in wet and dry conditions (Fowler, 1951, 9). The Yeo floodplain itself consists of alluvium and is dominated by meadow and regular arable or pasture fields.

3.4 Landscape Character

The landscape of the Sherborne region has been the subject of several landscape character assessments, which help place the town into its larger surrounding landscape.

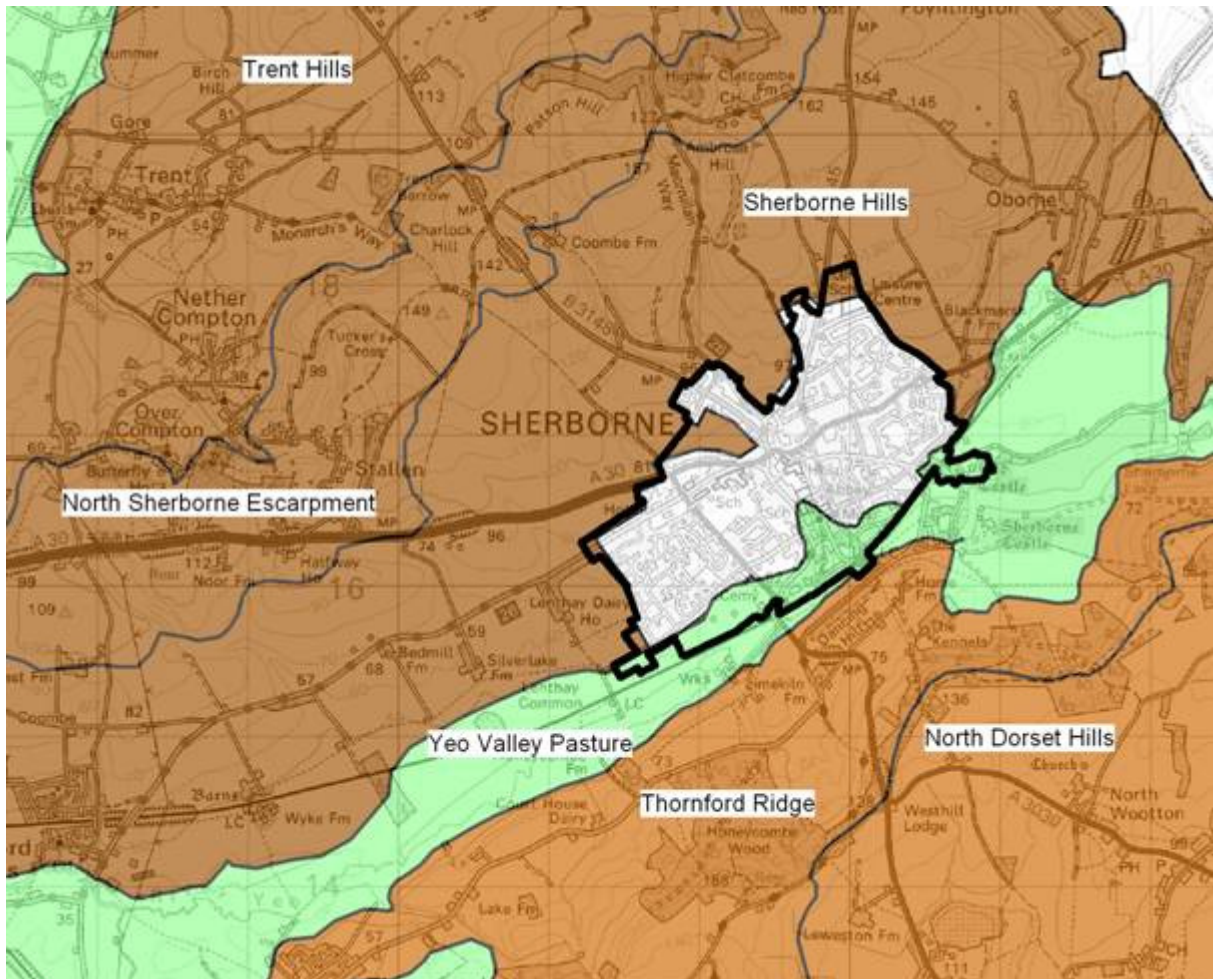


Figure 5: Sherborne in its landscape character setting (West Dorset Landscape Character Assessment).

In the national assessment of countryside character, Sherborne and its surrounding landscape is within National Character Area 140: *Yeovil Scarplands* (Countryside Agency 1999). The key characteristics of National Character Area 140 are listed as:

- A very varied landscape of hills, wide valley bottoms, ridgetops and combes united by scarps of Jurassic limestone.
- Mainly a remote rural area with villages and high church towers.
- Wide variety of local building materials including predominantly Ham Hill Stone.
- Small manor houses and large mansions with landscape parks.
- Varied land use: arable on the better low-lying land, woodland on the steep ridges and deep combes.

The West Dorset District Draft Landscape Character Assessment provides a detailed record of the features and landscape elements present in the wider Sherborne Area (Figure 5). The town itself is considered an urban area

and not characterised within the assessment. However, it is considered to sit within the Sherborne Hills Character Area (WDDC 2009).

The key characteristics of the Sherborne Hills Character Area are:

- Long and open views across the Yeo Valley.
- Large regular and small irregular shaped fields of predominantly arable and some improved pasture.
- Herb rich lowland meadow within small-scale valleys and combes .
- The fields are defined by uniform trimmed hedgerow boundaries and hedgerow banks. Occasional hedgerow ash trees.
- Small regular native copses associated with built form and functioning as shelterbelts.

Sherborne also lies partially in the Yeo Valley Pasture character area (WDDC 2009) The key characteristics of these areas are:

- The landform is generally flat and largely open in character, gently sloping towards the river floodplain
- Carr woodland and seasonally wet pasture,

- drained by networks of straight ditches.
- Medium to large arable and pasture fields bordered by trimmed hedgerows with hedgerow trees.
 - Small deciduous woodland, copses and tree groups associated with buildings or occupying the corners of fields.
 - Riparian vegetation such as Alder and Willow flank the river corridor.
 - Parkland landscape and 18th century gardens created by Capability Brown around Sherborne Castle.
 - A network of transport routes crosses the flat valley floor including the railway line. Small historic bridges, of local stone, provide crossing points over the waterways.

The draft Historic Landscape Character mapping shows Sherborne sitting within a mosaic of planned enclosure, other regular enclosed and piecemeal enclosed fields.

3.5 The Present Town

Sherborne dominates the north eastern corner of West Dorset District. The built up area covers approximately 340 hectares (840 acres) and falls mainly within the parish of Sherborne, although Sherborne Old Castle lies within the parish of Castleton. The latest population figure (2001 census) for the town is 9,310.

The modern town is centred on and dominated by the Abbey Church of St Mary. Such is the quality of historic fabric within Sherborne that over 50% of the built up area has been designated as a conservation area. In fact the whole of the pre-World War II town, except for a small area around Kings Crescent and Priestlands, falls within the conservation area (West Dorset District Council, 2007, 3).

The town centre contains mainly small shops, although these do include some national chains such as Boots, Sainsbury's and New Look. The town is only 5 miles from Yeovil which has substantial shopping facilities. As a result of the proximity to Yeovil the catchment area for Sherborne's shops extends to villages within about 5 miles of the town centre, except to the west of the town where the influence is considerably less. The 2001 population within the catchment was approximately 14,100.

The 2001 Census records 4,164 dwellings in Sherborne. Since 2001, a further 195 units have been built giving a total of 4,359 dwellings. At March 2006, a further 96 units have permission and 230 are allocated in the local plan. The Sherborne pyramid area has eight primary schools and one secondary school,

The Gryphon School with 1,399 pupils. It also has two major public schools; Sherborne School for Girls and Sherborne School (King's School).

The town has two business parks at Coldharbour (3.6 hectares) and South Western Business Park (4.1 hectares). 4,800 people are employed within the town, the largest sector of which works in public administration, education and health (41%). The remainder work in distribution, hotels and restaurants (27%); banking, finance and insurance (15%); transport and communications (approximately 10%); manufacturing Industries (8%); and others, including other service industries, construction and agriculture (approximately 7%). The major employers in the town include: Baurmann Springs & Pressings Ltd, Carlisle Process Systems, Dorset County Council, Interglass Technologies, Royal Navy, Sainsburys, Sherborne School, Sherborne School for Girls and West Dorset Community Health Trust.

Between 1994-06, 3.38 hectares of industrial land has been developed in Sherborne. The total area of land with permission and allocated in the local plan is 6.79 hectares.

The data used in this section have been obtained from Dorset County Council's *The Dorset Data Book* 2007.

Part 4: Sources



4.1 Previous research

Sherborne was an important ecclesiastical centre in the Saxon kingdom of Wessex. It is mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and Bede's *Historia* and has been studied by historians from an early date. Leland visited the town c. 1535 and recorded many important observations prior to the dissolution of Sherborne Abbey (Leland, 1745). Hutchins wrote an extensive entry for the town in his *History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset* (Hutchins, 1873) and there is a significant entry about Sherborne in Domesday (Thorn & Thorn, 1983).

The earliest history specific to the town was W B Wildman's *A Short History of Sherborne from 705 AD*, first published in 1896. Joseph Fowler's *Medieval Sherborne* published in 1951 provides an excellent background to the medieval history of the town and has been used extensively in this report. A B Gourlay was a master at Sherborne School and wrote a very useful history of it (Gourlay, 1951). J H P Gibb was also a master there. He wrote many works on the history, archaeology and architecture of the School and Abbey (Gibb, 1966; 1969; 1971; 1975; 1981; 2005; Gibb & Hayward, 2001), and directed excavations for the Sherborne School Archaeological Society.

In April 1998 a one-day conference was held in Sherborne to mark the one-thousandth anniversary of the founding of the Benedictine Abbey by St Wulfsige. Papers from this conference were collected together and published (Barker, Hinton & Hunt (eds), 2005). Teresa Hall's research into the Minster Churches of Dorset has a section relevant to Sherborne's Parochia and a discussion on the origin of the Cathedral and Abbey (Hall, 2000).

Other recent publications have considered the history and development of the shopping centre (Oxford, 2005), Westbury Silk Mill (Marsden, 1980), wartime Sherborne (Osment, 1984), Sherborne House (Hill, 2005) and childhood memoirs (Mogg, 2000).

West Dorset District council have recently conducted a Conservation Area Appraisal (WDDC 2007). The conservation area was first designated in 1970 and extended in 1989 and 1993 with a handbook published in 1983 (Pitman, 1983).

4.2 Historic Maps

The earliest known map relating to Sherborne is an estate map dated c.1564-1578 held in the

British Library (Add MS 52522). This is essentially a route map detailed enough to show small lanes and tracks over a wide region around Sherborne, as well as elements of the town plan. The next map was drawn by J Ladd and dated 1733. It shows the plan of the town in good detail, with individual buildings represented, and was originally published in the second edition of Hutchins, opposite page 75 (Hutchins, 1815). A further town plan by E T Percy and dated 1834 provides some useful information prior to the Tithe and 1st edition OS maps. Ordnance Survey maps have been used extensively in the creation of this report, particularly in the historic characterisation of the town.

4.3 Documentary Evidence

Primary documentary sources used in this report include the Domesday Survey of 1086 (Thorn & Thorn 1983). O'Donovan has produced a comprehensive study of Sherborne Charters (O'Donovan, 1988). Taxation records have also been consulted including, the Lay Subsidy (Rumble 1980) as well as Tudor subsidies and Muster Rolls (Stoate 1978; 1982). These documents have been used to gain an insight into the size, wealth and economy of Sherborne in comparison with neighbouring towns from the 11th to 19th centuries.

4.4 Archaeological Evidence

There have been numerous archaeological investigations in Sherborne (Appendix 3). The earliest archaeological discoveries in the town occurred in the 19th century. Most were chance finds of burials during renovation of the Abbey, but a notable exception was the discovery of a tessellated pavement at Lenthay Green in 1836 (Warne, 1865, 1).

Amateur archaeologist Charles Edward Bean undertook fieldwalking, observation and excavation from some time after 1925, when he became Sherborne town surveyor, until shortly before his death in 1983. Bean's discoveries, though little published, form the basis of our archaeological knowledge of the town. Many thousands of items collected by him were donated to the Dorset County Museum.

Sherborne Old Castle has been partially excavated in two separate campaigns between 1932 -1954 and 1973 -1976 (Farrar ed. 1949; Bean, 1950a; 1952; 1955a; Webster & Cherry, 1974; Keen, 1976, 54; Harrison & Williams, 1979). Fabric recording and excavation at the rear of the north gate took place between 1998

and 2000 for English Heritage in advance of consolidation works (Brown & Mathews, 2001).

A number of small excavations have been conducted over many years at the site of Sherborne Abbey and School. Burials were found during the 19th century refurbishment of St Mary's church. Elements of a Saxon tower had been revealed during work in 1870 at the west end of the church (Carpenter, 1877; Gibb, 1975), and excavations were undertaken here in 1949 (RCHME, 1952). Bean made observations at the north gate of Sherborne School and before the Medlycott Building was built in 1954-5 (Bean, 1955b). The school's archaeological society did several excavations between 1964 and 1973; at the School library (Gibb, 1975, 80-82); within The Slype (Keen & Ellis, 2005, 1); and on the site of All Hallows Church (ibid, 79 & 83-7). Laurence Keen and Richard Gem's excavations of the eastern part of the Abbey claustral buildings during 1972-4 were published as a DNHAS monograph in 2005. This work considered many previously unpublished excavations and documents relating to the Abbey and School (Keen & Ellis, 2005).

During the 1970s and 80s research focussed on the pre-Saxon origins of Sherborne. Katherine Barker has studied cartographic evidence and modern boundaries to delineate a possible pre-Saxon British estate and monastic enclosure (Barker, 1977; 1984). This putative enclosure has not been generally accepted (Hinton, 1981; Keen, 1981). Keen preferred the Old Castle site as a candidate for any British monastery with a later shift to Sherborne in the early 8th century, although recent discoveries at Sherborne Abbey do not preclude the possibility of activity here before the 8th century (Keen, 1981; 2005, 9).

More recently, there have been several significant archaeological investigations in response to new development. These include the former Foster's School, Tinney's Lane in 2002, where evidence for a Late Bronze Age settlement and pottery production site was recovered (Best, forthcoming); land to the south of Tinney's Lane was evaluated during 1997 (Mckinley, 1999); work in advance of construction of Sainsbury's supermarket in 1998 (Williams, 1998; Tann, 1998); and before construction of the Sherborne Abbey Primary School, Lenthay Road in 1998 (Brading, 1998).

4.5 Historic Buildings

Sherborne has a remarkable survival of historic buildings, many of which are designated as listed buildings and retain significant historic character. Of particular significance to the his-

toric character of the town is the Abbey church and associated buildings of Sherborne School, some of which occupy surviving elements of the medieval monastic precinct. The ruins of the early 12th century Old Castle dominate the skyline around Castleton to the east of the town. The Old Castle ruins were incorporated into the grounds of the current Sherborne Castle constructed for Sir Walter Raleigh in 1594.

As early as the late 19th century, the editor of Hutchins' third edition made mention of the strong historic element to Sherborne's character:

...not very regular, or lofty, having been so fortunate as to escape great fires, to which some towns owe their regularity and beauty: but of late years several neat houses have been built in the modern taste .

The historic buildings in the centre of Sherborne are generally constructed from local Sherborne Stone, some with stone slate or thatched roofs. This building tradition continued in the 17th and 18th centuries in the form of ribbon development along Coldharbour, Yeovil Road and Bristol Road corridors. Large town houses such as Greenhill House, Kitt Hill House, Cornhill House and Newell House were also constructed at that time. In the region of Westbury and Horsecastles, 19th century red brick terraces with fine detail enhance the character of the town and vistas from the south. Many of the medieval roads have important vistas leading up to Sherborne Abbey, including Long Street and Westbury. Landmark buildings such as the Digby Hotel, Sherborne Station and Sherborne Girls School date from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Edwardian terraces and suburban villas also add to the character of the area to the north of The Green at Priestlands, Kings Road, Wootton Grove and Simons Road.

Industrial architecture also has a part to play in creating the historic character of Sherborne, notably the silk mills at Westbury and the Dorsetshire Brewery at Eastbury.

Perhaps one of the most striking elements of Sherborne's urban character lies in how little modern infill occurs in the historic core. Modern development is largely restricted to housing estates to the west (Lenthay) and north east. Furthermore, many important architectural details survive intact including historic shop fronts along Cheap Street and street furniture such as 'splashes'.