

Part 3: Town Context



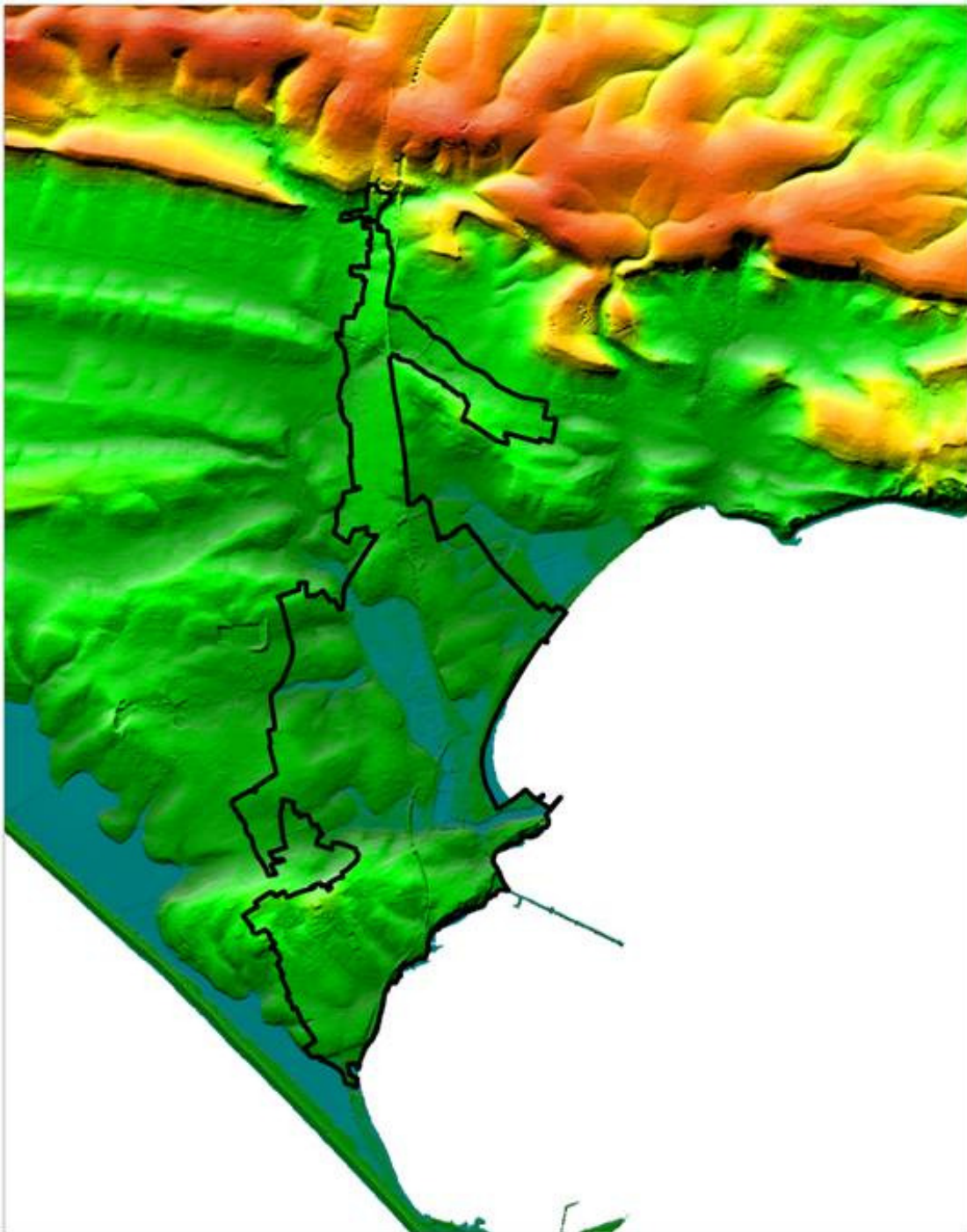
3.1 The Setting of the Town

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 under-

stood. This section of the report briefly sets out the wider context of the town and the landscape character of its hinterland.

3.2 Topography

Weymouth lies within a complex topographical area comprising a number of different elements. The focus of the historic town centre is on the mouth of the river Wey and the Wey valley forms a significant element in the topographical setting of the town. The Weymouth



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conurbation lies to the south of the prominent E-W chalk ridge of the South Dorset Ridgeway, which forms a view stop to the north of the town. To the south of the Ridgeway, the landform is essentially a series of parallel E-W rolling ridges with clay vales between. These are particularly apparent to the west of the Wey Valley, becoming lower and less well defined towards the south, but the southernmost Wyke Ridge is higher, rising to 69m above sea level

and forming one of the major topographic elements of Weymouth. To the east the ridges are more broken. Southdown ridge is the main ridge to the east, forming the southern side of the Bincombe Vale.

With the Isle of Portland to the south, Weymouth sits between Lyme Bay to the west and Weymouth Bay to the east. The topography has had a major influence on the communica-

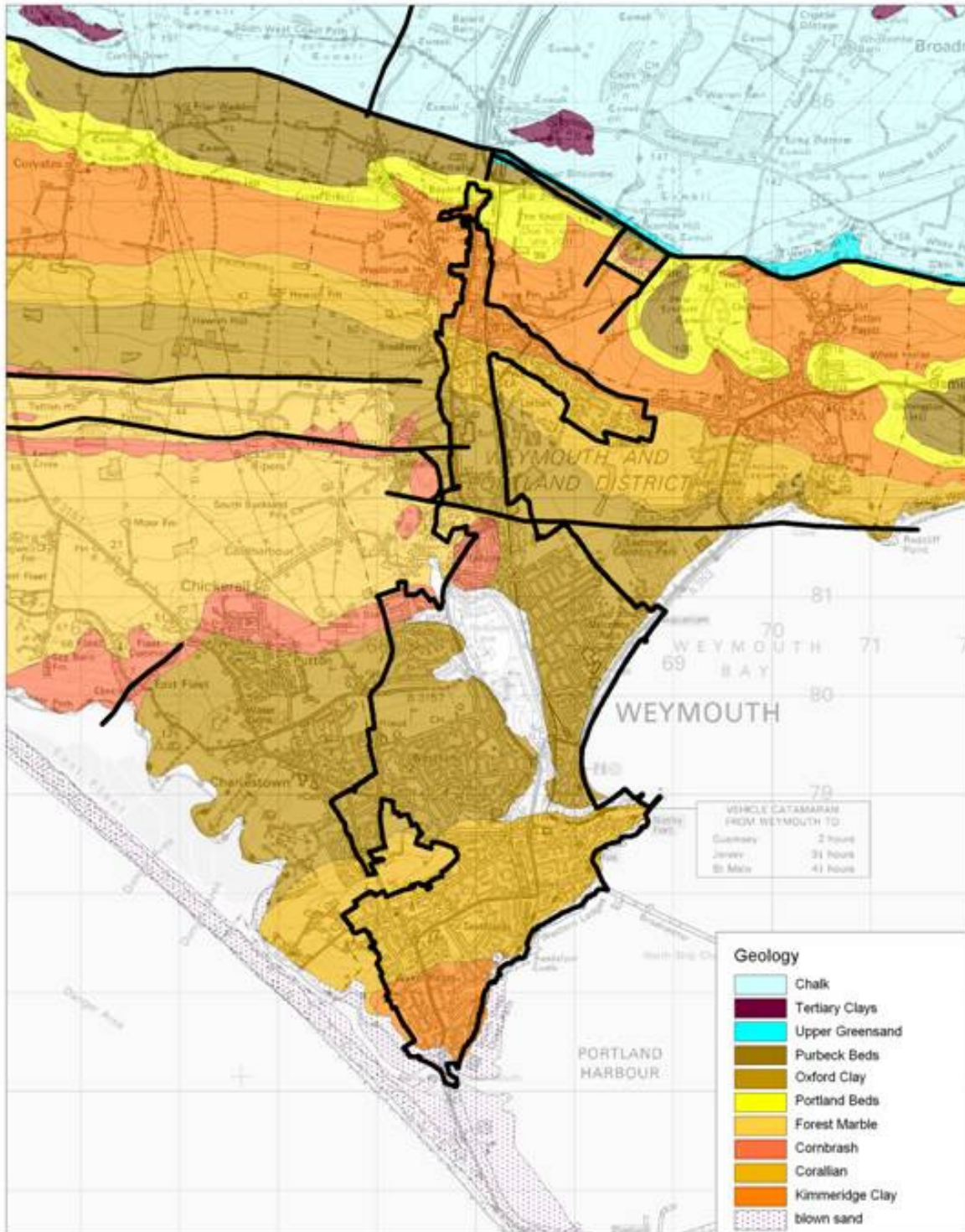


Figure 4: Solid Geology of the Weymouth region

tion links, with transport and communication by sea being the primary factor in the town's development and economy for much of its history.

3.3 Geology

Weymouth has a very complex geology (Figure 4). There is Kimmeridge Clay around Wyke Regis, at the southern tip of the study area. To the north of this is a band of Corallian Lime-

stone in the northern part of Wyke Regis, Southland, Rodwell and along the southern edge of the river to the Nothe. This is succeeded by an expanse of low-lying Oxford Clay across Wesham and Southill in the western part of the study area, extending to Weymouth Bay and Lodmoor. There are outcrops of Cornbrash in the northern part of Southill and at Radipole. The northern part of the study area is crossed by bands of Corallian Limestone, Kim-

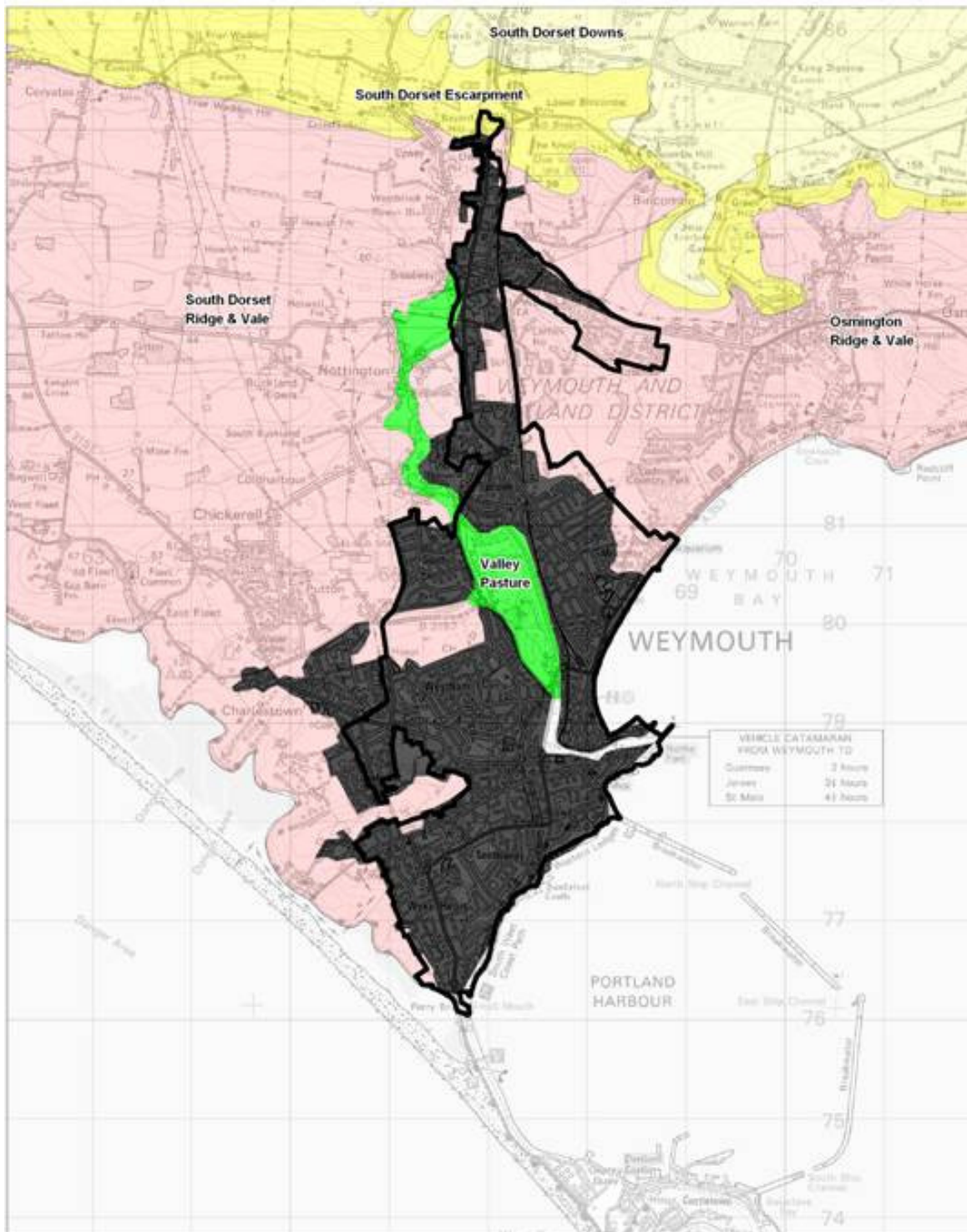


Figure 5: Weymouth in its landscape character setting.

meridge Clay and the chalk of the Ridgeway.

3.4 Landscape Character

Weymouth lies just outside the Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), which surrounds it to the north, east and west. The coastal strip is part of the Dorset and East Devon Coast World Heritage Site. 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, Weymouth is within National Character Area 137/138 Isle of Portland/ Weymouth Lowlands (Countryside Agency 1999). The northern tip of the study area is in National Character Area 134 Dorset Downs and Cranborne Chase.

The key characteristics of National Character Area 137/138 are listed as:

- Varied area, united by underlying broad ridge and valley pattern and spectacular coastline.
- Open, largely treeless, ridge tops with large, commonly arable fields.
- Valleys with villages, mixed farming and valley-side woodlands.
- Exposed, windswept coastal grassland.
- Distinctive coastline of Chesil Beach enclosing the brackish lagoons of The Fleet.
- Dramatic wedge-shaped peninsula of the Isle of Portland with its distinctive untidy character and strong sense of history.
- Extensive urban and urban fringe land use around Weymouth.

The key characteristics of Joint Character Area 134 are listed as:

- A rolling, chalk landscape with dramatic scarps and steep-sided, sheltered valleys.
- Scarp slopes with species-rich grassland, complex combs and valleys, spectacular views, prominent hillforts and other prehistoric features.
- Open, mainly arable, downland on the dip-slope with isolated farmsteads and few trees.
- Very varied valleys with woodlands, hedged fields, flood meadows and villages in flint and thatch.
- Distinctive woodlands and deer parks of Cranborne Chase.

The areas surrounding Weymouth have been included in the Landscape Character Assessment of the Dorset AONB (Dorset AONB,

2008). Figure 5 shows the Dorset AONB Character Areas, together with a small area of Valley Pasture along the Wey Valley taken from the Dorset Landscape Character Assessment. In these latest assessments, Weymouth lies between the South Dorset Ridge and Vale and the Osmington Ridge and Vale Character Areas, both part of the Ridge & Vale Landscape Type. The northern end lies in the South Dorset Escarpment Character Area, part of the Chalk Ridge/Escarpment Landscape Type and the South Dorset Downs, part of the Open Chalk Downland Landscape Type, just beyond to the north.

The key characteristics of the *South Dorset Ridge and Vale* area are:

- Broad pastoral clay vale landscape with small limestone ridges with rocky outcrops running from east to west.
- Exposed, rough coastal grazing marsh with scrub.
- Continuous patchwork of planned enclosures of neutral and acid grasslands becoming larger and more open towards the ridge tops.
- Enclosed by chalk escarpment to the north.
- Mixed boundaries of stone walls and stunted hedges and occasional hedgerow trees.
- Smaller scale landscape towards the west.
- Settlements of local limestone located along the chalk escarpment base.
- Sweeping views towards smooth ridge tops, the Fleet and coast.
- Small broadleaved woodlands of oak and ash along the lower slopes and vales with occasional hazel coppice.
- Shingle bank and saline lagoon of the Fleet.

The key characteristics of the *Osmington Ridge and Vale* area are:

- Broad pastoral clay vale landscape with small limestone ridges running east to west with occasional barrows.
- Occasional exposed, rough coastal grazing marsh with scrub.
- Continuous patchwork of complex regular fields of neutral and acid grasslands becoming larger towards the ridge tops.
- Enclosed by chalk escarpment to the north.
- Mixed boundaries of stone walls and stunted hedges and occasional hedgerow trees.
- Smaller scale landscape towards the east.
- Settlements of limestone located along the chalk escarpment base and valley floors.
- Sweeping views towards smooth ridge tops, Portland and the coast.

- Small broadleaved woodlands of oak and hazel coppice along slopes and vales.

The key characteristics of the *South Dorset Escarpment* area are:

- A dramatic and exposed steep and narrow escarpment with occasional rounded spurs and deep coombes.
- Patchwork of small scale pastoral fields on lower slopes with scattered farmsteads located at gaps in the escarpment.
- Areas of rough unimproved calcareous downland turf on steep slopes with soil creep.
- Large, straight-sided arable fields of late regular 18th or early 19th century enclosures on escarpment top.
- Occasional hanging ancient oak, ash, hazel woodlands on lower slopes.
- Dense gorse scrub on steep ridge sides.
- Thin calcareous soils with underlying geology of chalk.
- Panoramic views of the surrounding coastal landscape.
- Prehistoric barrows, prominent hilltop forts and extensive prehistoric field patterns.
- Ancient sunken, winding lanes with an open character towards the top.

The key characteristics of the *South Dorset Downs* area are:

- Broad open rolling uplands with convex slopes and broad dry valleys giving way to large open skies and distant horizons.
- Thin calcareous soils with underlying geology of chalk.
- Valley slopes with patches of semi-natural chalk grassland, old hazel coppice stands and small broadleaved woodlands.
- Remnant winding chalk winterbourne with floodplain supporting occasional water meadows, wet woodland, water cress beds and rough damp meadows.
- Straight rural lanes with occasional farmsteads with a series of small linear and nucleated villages of brick and flint, stone, thatch and cob along the valley floor.
- Large, straight-sided arable and pastoral fields of late 18th or early 19th century enclosures with hazel hedgerows, with post & wire on higher ground.
- Extensive scattering of prehistoric monuments on higher ground.
- Network of stone walls towards the South Dorset Escarpment.

The draft Historic Landscape Character mapping shows Weymouth sitting within an area of fields

largely enclosed through planned enclosure with other regular enclosed fields. Around the fringes of the study area are areas of complex settlement interspersed with smaller areas of fields enclosed through piecemeal enclosure, some areas of land used for recreation and, to the north, areas characterised as valley bottom.

The area in the vicinity of the South Dorset Ridgeway is a mixture of other regular enclosures, piecemeal enclosures and small area of planned enclosures of post-medieval date and small area at Bayard's Hill of post-1914 strip fields. There is a substantial area of former field systems to the north east around Chalbury, with surviving strip lynchets.

Around Broadwey and Upwey there are fields formed mainly through planned enclosure of post-medieval date, together with small areas of linear settlement along the Wey valley with enclosed paddocks and closes and dispersed settlement to the east.

Around Radipole and Lorton there are fields characterised mainly as other regular enclosures of post-medieval date, with country houses, enclosed paddocks and closes of post-medieval date, deciduous woodland and valley floor.

Fields in the vicinity of Chickerell are characterised as being planned enclosures, mainly post-medieval in date, with some areas of industrial use and industrial estate. Fields around Wyke Regis are other regular enclosures, of mainly post-medieval date, with some areas of camp site. Lodmoor is characterised as a post-war nature reserve.

3.5 The Present Town

The modern built-up area of Weymouth covers an area of about 1850 ha. It lies at the southern end of the A354 to Dorchester. It has direct rail links to London and Bristol, with two railway stations. The population is 52,950 (2005 mid-year estimate), making it the third largest town in Dorset. The post-war rate of population growth has been about 5%, largely the result of net inward migration. The population contains a larger proportion of younger people than the average for Dorset – over 32% are aged 18-44. The 2001 Census records 23,405 dwellings in Weymouth and a further 1051 have been built since 2001, giving a total of 24,456. There are twelve primary schools and three secondary schools in Weymouth.

The retail sector comprises 292 shops/404,000 sq ft (2005). These include both national chains and local shops and the catchment area for major food shopping is around three miles northwards and seven miles in an east and west direction.

There are two industrial estates, Granby Industrial Estate (32.69ha) and Lynch Lane Industrial Estate (7.27ha), both of which are in Chickerell Parish, immediately outside the Study Area. The most significant employers are in the Distribution, Hotels and Restaurants sector employing about 39% of the workforce.

Part 4: Sources



4.1 Previous research

Weymouth's first historian was George Ellis whose 1829 *The History and Antiquities of the Borough and Town of Weymouth and Melcombe Regis* was written in emulation of George Roberts *History of Lyme Regis*.

In the twentieth century Eric Ricketts carried out detailed studies on the buildings of the towns whilst Maureen Atwool has written several books detailing different aspects of Weymouth's history.

4.2 Historic Maps

The earliest known maps of Weymouth are a 1539 map of the Dorset coast, and a more detailed map of the town of Weymouth from 1597. The map of 1774 in Hutchins *History of Dorset* is extremely useful as it shows the town at the point when it started to develop as a holiday resort. There are various detailed maps of 19th-century date, including John Wood's *Map of Weymouth* of 1841, the Tithe Map of 1842 and Pierce Arthur's *Trigonometrical Map of Weymouth and Melcombe Regis* of 1857. The characterisation was largely based on the Tithe Map and the 1:2500 scale Ordnance Survey maps dating from 1863 onwards.

4.3 Documentary Evidence

There are references to land at both Weymouth and Melcombe in 10th-century charters, but the extent to which there was settlement here is not clear. Neither can be identified clearly in the Domesday survey.

4.4 Archaeological Evidence

There have been a number of antiquarian and later salvage records and observations in Weymouth (Farrar 1951) but relatively little archaeological investigation. The archaeological investigations are mainly restricted to limited evaluations and watching briefs linked to development. These have produced some interesting results but are limited in the amount of information they can contribute to an overall understanding of the town. A list of all archaeological investigations within the town is presented in Appendix 3.

4.5 Historic Buildings

Weymouth has a large stock of surviving historic buildings, the majority dating to the 19th and 20th centuries, a result of the growth and

redevelopment of Melcombe Regis in particular as a spa and seaside resort. There are several surviving buildings that date from the 16th or 17th centuries. Probably formerly merchants' houses, these buildings are stone and so likely to have survived great fires at Melcombe Regis in 1665 and Weymouth in 1673 relatively unscathed. There are a large number of 19th and 20th century buildings (of which 709 are listed) in the study area. They are of a variety of types from large terraces of elegant gentry houses, to hotels and their service buildings, to commercial premises with accommodation, and more modest workers cottages and short terraces. A small number of 19th and 20th century former industrial and commercial buildings (mainly warehouses) also survive in the town. There are also notable military buildings and structures in the study area.