

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

Blandford Forum lies within a loop of the River Stour as it cuts its way through the Dorset chalk

downs west of Cranborne Chase. The river provides a natural boundary to the town on its south and west sides resulting in the modern town expanding to the north and east (Figure 3). The land rises from just under 40m above OD adjacent to the Stour, to nearly 90m at Kite's Corner in the extreme NE corner of the study area. The suburb of Blandford St Mary lies on the south side of the Stour and rises to a height of nearly 70m on to the chalk downs south of the town. The historic town was founded at the junction of pre-existing routes where they met and crossed the Stour. The name *Blandford* is thought to mean 'Gudgeon Ford'. (Mills 1991, 39). The eponymous ford pre-dates the town and crossed the river about 50m east of the present Blandford Bridge.

The topography of the region has influenced the layout of the town, albeit through the pre-urban rural landscape. NE-SW aligned roads and field boundaries represent the last vestiges of a po-

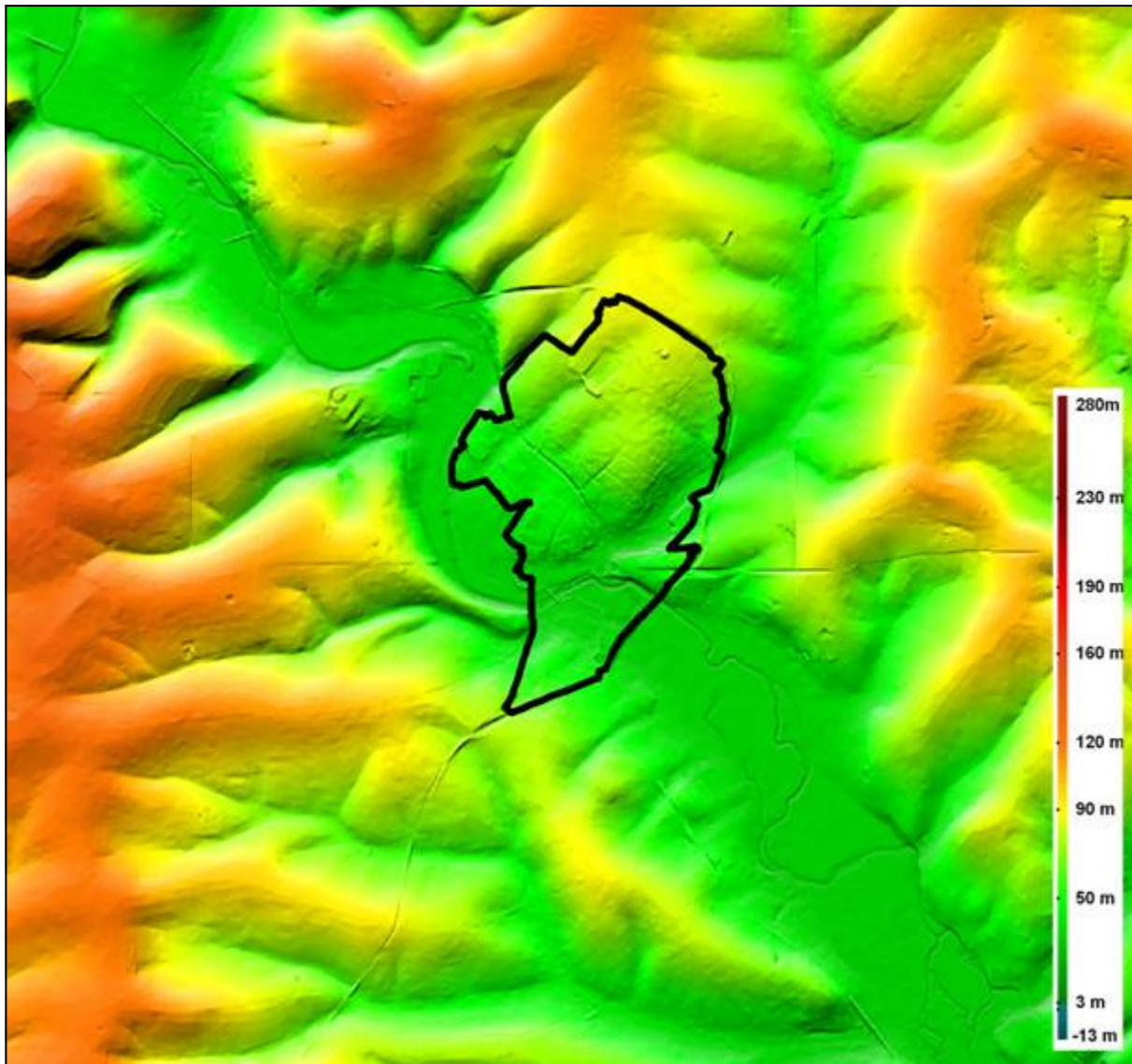


Figure 3: Blandford's topographic setting

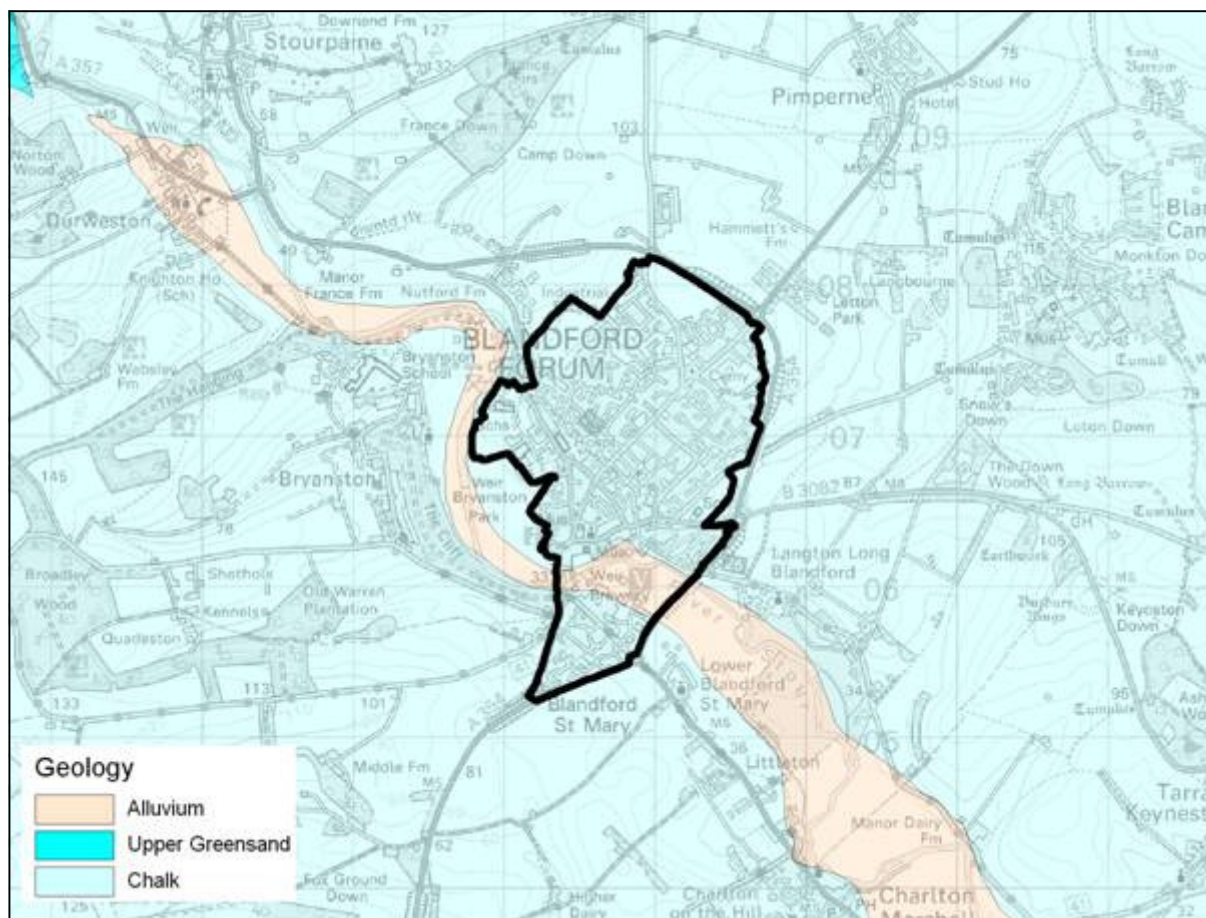


Figure 4: Geology of the Blandford Area.

tentially late prehistoric co-axial field system, which formerly existed along the Mid Stour Valley between Blandford and Sturminster Marshall. These alignments run perpendicular to the topographic grain and subdivided the landscape into a series of units, each with a share of the valley floor meadow, lower arable chalk slopes and higher chalk down pasture. The major routes of the B3082 (Damory Street, Park Road and Milldown Road), Bournemouth Road and the A354 (Salisbury Road) are the most obvious examples, although Black Lane, Tin Pot Lane, School Lane (Blandford St Mary) and parts of Shaftesbury Lane, East Street, The Close, Common Lane and Wimborne Road are also representative.

3.3 Geology

The Geology of the Blandford study area is Chalk with a band of alluvium along the flood-plain of the River Stour (Figure 4). Chalk is a poor building material, but traditionally used in cob walling. Flint found within the chalk can be used as walling material, either as rough nodules or knapped.

3.4 Landscape Character

Several landscape character assessments help place the town into its wider landscape context.

In the national assessment of countryside character, Blandford lies at the heart of National Character Area 134; *Dorset Downs and Cranborne Chase* (Countryside Agency 1999).

The key characteristics of National 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 combes 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.

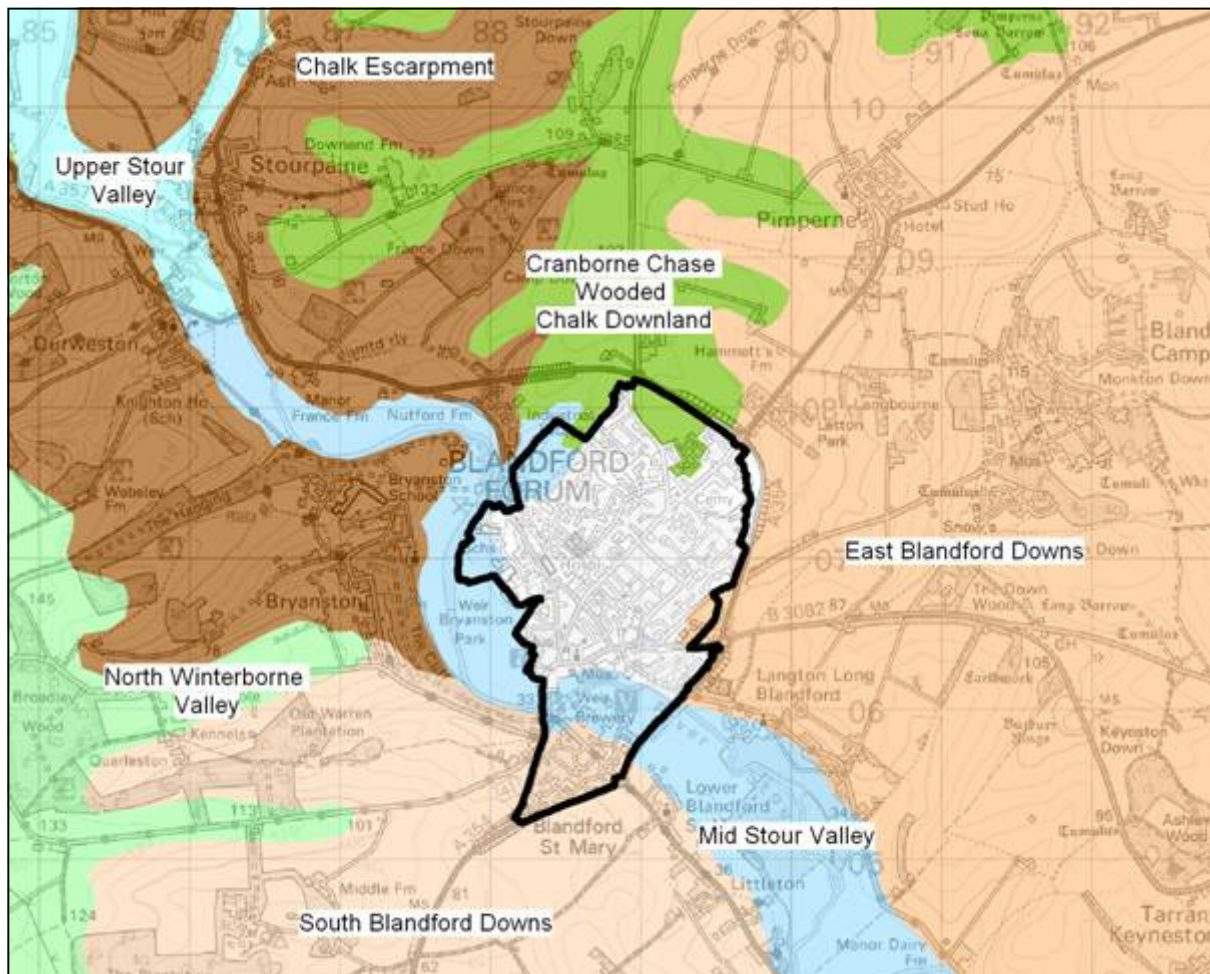


Figure 5: Blandford in its landscape character setting (NDDC Landscape Character Assessment).

The North Dorset District Draft Landscape Character Assessment provides a more detailed assessment of the features and landscape elements present in the wider Blandford Area (NDDC 2008). Blandford sits between the Cranborne Chase Wooded Chalk Downland, East Blandford Downs, Mid Stour Valley and South Blandford Downs character areas (Figure 5).

The key characteristics of the East Blandford Downs Character Area are:

- An open expansive and rolling chalk downland landscape
- Some distinctive elevated plateaus and wide ridgelines which afford wide views
- Open, large scale geometric-shaped and mainly arable fields often bounded by thin, straight and weak hedgerows or replacement fencing.
- Some very large fields with no boundaries at all, but all of a geometric shape.
- Distinctive, narrow shelter belt woodland plantation strips.
- Straight roads, lanes and footpaths run across the area.
- Lanes lined with clipped hedgerows and the occasional group of trees.
- Numerous Neolithic barrows and tumuli dot the landscape.
- The area is well served by bridleways and footpaths.
- Blandford Camp is a locally prominent landmark and creates an urban impact in the middle of the area.
- The visually prominent edges to Blandford and Pimperne create hard edges in places.
- A few steep-sided and wooded or scrub-covered slopes provide important key features of local interest.
- Pimperne Valley and its associated narrow stream and/or lane along the valley floor is a feature of interest.
- The estate wooded landscape around Tarrant Gunville is a key feature of interest.
- The Jubilee Trail passes through the area at Tarrant Gunville.
- Chettle House and its parkland are key fea-

tures in the area

The key characteristics of the South Blandford Downs Character Area are:

- An undulating open chalk downland landscape distinctively subdivided by chalk river valleys
- These river valleys create distinctive subdivisions within the area
- Medium to large scale fields bounded by low, straight and clipped hedgerows
- Intensively farmed and arable landscape.
- Regular-shaped small plantation woodlands dot the landscape.
- Narrow, widely spaced out straight lanes are bounded by continuous clipped hedgerows with the occasional hedgerow tree.
- The urban settlement edges to Milborne St Andrew and Winterborne Whitechurch at junction of the chalk stream valley and upland landscape form detracting features in places.
- A distinctive linear settlement edge along the eastern side of the area as it dips steeply down to the Stour Valley.
- Blandford St Mary creates a hard urban edge to the north of the area on the outskirts of Blandford and forms a detracting feature.
- Weatherbury Castle, which is an SNCI and SAM, is a key feature.
- The Spetisbury Rings are both an SAM and a SNCI and a feature of interest.
- The Jubilee Trail, which crosses the area, is a key feature.
- Long Falls Wood, which is partly an SNCI and its surrounding tumuli which is a SAM, is also a key feature.
- Some important SNCI woodland copses and plantations.
- Milborne Wood is a key feature and an SNCI
- A distinctive network of straight bridleways and paths, some of historic importance.
- The parkland landscape at Watcombe Park is an important local feature.

The key characteristics of the Mid Stour Valley Character Area are:

- A flat and wide flood plain with gently rising sides to the northeast and steeper on the south western side.
- Meandering river and associated sub-

channels, ditches and streams.

- Distinctive linear settlement pattern along the sides of the flood plain with locally distinctive use of flint and stone.
- The road network follows either side of the valley floor at the junction with the chalk downland landscape.
- Small copses, wet woodland, tree groups and individual trees follow the river course and the edges of the area.
- Important historic crossing points, for example, at Blandford.
- Provides an important setting and context for Blandford.
- Steep valley side plantation woodland (The Cliff) and the parkland landscape at Bryanston are key features.
- The remnants of traditional river valley features, such as old withy beds, mills, weirs and the water meadows are all important features across the area.

The key characteristics of the Cranborne Chase Wooded Chalk Downland Character Area are:

- Medieval royal hunting grounds with surviving features such as park pales.
- Few settlements and disbursed scattering of farmsteads.
- An exposed and elevated wooded chalk downland landscape with dramatic folds and dry coombs, ridges, smaller valleys and plateaus.
- A mixed arable and pastoral landscape with arable dominating further south.
- The Rushmore Estate provides a typical 'estate managed' landscape with distinctive managed copses, shelter belts, plantations, parkland trees and hedgerows in a well managed built environment.
- A mosaic of chalk grassland, broadleaf and conifer woodlands and arable farmland.
- Numerous barrows, tumuli and other pre-historic earthworks.
- Panoramic views over the adjacent escarpment and foothills.
- Many SNCI grasslands and woodlands of importance, such as Ashmore Wood
- Several Scheduled Ancient Monuments such as cross dykes and earthworks which form key features across the area.

The urban area of Blandford Forum lies on the southwestern fringes of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB. Small parts of the study area have been included within the

AONB's Landscape character assessment. The Milldown lies within the Melbury to Blandford Chalk Escarpment landscape character area. The area of new housing development on the north side of Shaftesbury Lane, the new site of the Archbishop Wake's School on Black Lane and parts of the Stour Mead in Blandford St Mary all lie within the Southern Downland Belt landscape character area (CCWWDAONB 2006).

The draft Dorset Historic Landscape Character mapping shows Blandford Forum sitting within a landscape dominated by enclosed fields and comprising primarily planned enclosures. Piecemeal and other enclosures also contribute, as well as a patchwork of coppice, deciduous and mixed woodland. A variety of settlements including historic villages, housing estates and country houses pepper the rural landscape.

The CCWWDAONB Historic Landscape Characterisation maps the rural fringes of the town to the north and east as part of the Chalk Downland Historic Landscape Character Area, which is typified by large 19th and 20th century fields with boundaries cutting across the prevailing topographical grain; a rich archaeological record and historic road junctions (CCWWDAONB 2010).

3.5 The Present Town

The town of Blandford Forum on the River Stour between Wimborne Minster and Sturminster Newton. The modern urban area covers approximately 268 ha. It lies on the A350 trunk road 13 miles NW of Poole and 12 miles south of Shaftesbury. Blandford also sits on the A354 17 Miles ENE of Dorchester and 23 miles SW of Salisbury. It also lies at the northwestern end of the B3082, 9 miles from Wimborne Minster. Blandford sits at the southern edge of North Dorset District. It has no direct rail links; the nearest station is eleven miles away at Hamworthy. The current population (2008 mid year estimate) stands at around 9,610 (DCC 2008) but is still rising. Blandford Forum is the administrative centre for North Dorset District and is important as a service and shopping centre for the surrounding villages.

Blandford has one secondary school, The Blandford School, and three primary schools. The retail sector comprises 110 shops, mainly local shops, but including national chains such as Boots, Morrisons, WH Smith, Argos, Tesco and Homebase. Blandford also has four industrial estates at Blandford Heights (9.47ha), Clump Farm (1.30ha), Holland Way (7.32 ha)

and Uplands Industrial Park (1.34ha).

30% of the economically active population are employed in public administration, education and health; 29% in the service sector; 20% in manufacturing; 11% in banking, finance and insurance; less than 10% in transport and communications and 3% in construction. Major employers include Blandford Hospital, Bryanston School, Dorset County Council, Environment Agency, Hall & Woodhouse Ltd, North Dorset District Council, Royal Signals, Morrisons, Tesco (Dorset County Council, 2008, 88-9).

Part 4: Sources



4.1 Previous research

Blandford is mentioned by early topographic writers Gerard and Defoe, and Hutchins conducted his own research into the town (Hutchins, 1874). An informative eye witness account of the Great Fire was published at the time by the then Vicar of Blandford (Blake 1736). The editor of the 3rd edition of Hutchins' *The History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset*, William Shipp, was a resident of Blandford and a collection of his papers on the town was published posthumously following his death in 1873 (Shipp 1923). Interest in the 18th century town continued in to the mid 20th century when Colvin published a paper concerning the Bastard family of architects and builders who rebuilt the town following the fire of 1731 (Colvin 1948).

The later 20th century has seen a proliferation of small books and pamphlets published under the auspices of the Blandford Forum Museum Trust. This trust was established in 1976 and the Museum opened during the early 1980s (Le Bas 2007). The Trust has published research by a number of members concerning specific aspects of Blandford's past including the economy (Cox 1983a; 1992; Adams 1984c); churches (Cox 1983b; 1989); the Great Fire of 1731 (Cox 1993); Blandford's neighbouring estates and local gentry (Adams 1984b; Cox 1986); and the town's World War II defences (Schmidt 1987). Pictorial histories of Blandford Forum have been published by the Museum Trust and others (Cox 1995; Sackett 1984). Memoirs of life in Blandford Forum during the early 20th century have been produced by Lavington (1988) and Clark (1990?). In recent years Cox has been the most prolific of the Blandford local historians and, apart from texts on specific aspects of Blandford's past has also written a number of more general histories of the town (Cox 1984; 1987; 2003).

4.2 Historic Maps

There are a series of 17th century maps of Cranborne Chase which, although covering a wide area, show enough detail of Blandford Forum to give a reliable impression of its size and plan at that date. The Norden map of 1605 is the earliest (DHC Photocopy 311) and shows that the borough had expanded little beyond its original planned medieval limits at that date. An 18th century revision of the Cranborne map by Richard Hardinge and ostensibly dated to 1618, shows the town in slightly

greater detail, including the suburb of Blandford St Mary on the south side of Blandford Bridge (Langton and Jones 2009). A map of Bryanston dated 1657-9 also depicts the extent of the Blandford St Mary suburb during the 17th century (DHC Photocopy 500). The Bastard brothers produced a very detailed survey of the town as it was at the time of the Great Fire in 1731. This clearly depicts the medieval burghage plots and indicates that the town was rebuilt on exactly the same layout as before the fire. A copy of this map has been published by the Royal Commission for Historic Monuments and used extensively during the characterisation of the town (RCHME 1970, plate 104).

The tithe map of Blandford Forum dates from 1838 (DHC T/BLF) and has also been used extensively during the characterisation of the town. The Blandford St Mary Tithe Map dates from 1840 (DHC T/BLM). The later 19th and 20th century characterisation was largely based on the 1:2500 scale Ordnance Survey maps dating from 1887 onwards.

4.3 Documentary Evidence

Primary documentary sources used in this report include the Domesday Survey of 1086 (Thorn & Thorn 1983) and taxation records including the Lay Subsidy (Rumble 1980; Mills 1971) 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 Blandford in comparison with neighbouring towns.

Unfortunately most of the town's municipal records were destroyed in the Great Fire of 1731, although local historians from William Shipp onwards have gathered together an important collection of papers and documents now held in the archives at the Blandford Town Museum (Le Bas 2007).

4.4 Archaeological Evidence

Twenty archaeological events have been recorded for Blandford. Seven of these have been undertaken within the narrow confines of the medieval and early post-medieval town, with a further six in Blandford St Mary. This work has proved invaluable to our understanding of the medieval landscape around Blandford as well as identifying a number of important prehistoric sites. There were no early antiquarian investigations into Blandford Forum, though evidence for a Roman cemetery was recorded within the study area during the 19th century, approximately a quarter of a mile due

south of Blandford Bridge (Hutchins 1874, 178).

Archaeological evidence for prehistoric activity within the study area is forthcoming from three sites. A Bronze Age urned cremation was recovered during an evaluation in advance of the development of the Stour Park retail complex in 1993. This cremation was associated with fragmentary remains of a possible ring ditch (Graham and Cox 1993b). It is possible that further evidence for a more extensive cemetery awaits discovery at Stour Park. A second significant prehistoric site has recently been excavated in advance of the construction of new buildings at Milldown School during 2009 where substantial late Neolithic and early Bronze Age settlement activity was found. A third site, evaluated in 1994 at Blandford St Mary in advance of housing development, revealed evidence for a rectilinear field system. No dating evidence was found in association with the field ditches, although Bronze Age flints were recovered from the spoil heap (Dodd 1994). There is strong landscape evidence for a rectilinear field system across this part of the Stour valley comprising field, parish boundary and road alignments fossilised in the modern landscape, running perpendicular to the strike of the valley. During the medieval period this landscape pattern was associated with dispersed settlements strung out along both sides of the river, just above the flood plains. The scant dating evidence from Blandford St Mary may suggest that these alignments originated during the Bronze Age. To date no evidence has been found for Iron Age or Romano-British dispersed settlement within the study area.

There have been a number of small archaeological investigations in the area of the medieval town of Blandford Forum, but the only major excavation of medieval archaeology has taken place in Blandford St Mary in advance of the development of the Stour Park retail site. This revealed evidence for a medieval settlement along a hollow way running perpendicular to the river Stour, with some slight evidence that this settlement may have originated during the late Saxon period (Graham and Cox 1993a; b).

4.5 Historic Buildings

Blandford Forum is notable as one of the finest ensembles of Georgian country town architecture in the United Kingdom, a result of the rebuilding of the town following a major fire in 1731. Only the northern part of the town escaped the devastation and three large late 17th century houses still survive here. The eastern part of East Street also survived the 1731 fire, but had been rebuilt following an earlier fire of

1713.

The only surviving medieval building in Blandford is the ruined and recently restored St Leonard's chapel, just outside the medieval town to the east. This became part of the outbuildings to St Leonard's Farm during the post-medieval period but was roofless by the 19th century.

The historic buildings of Blandford are dominated by the rebuild between 1731 and 1760 under the direction of John and William Bastard. town centre has a number of important groups of buildings, particularly around the market place, including the parish church of St Peter and Paul, the town hall and a number of large domestic and commercial premises. Another important group of buildings occupy the Square behind the church and include a number of large town houses.

Nineteenth century architecture in Blandford has often been overshadowed by its Georgian buildings. Nevertheless, there are some important groups of domestic and industrial buildings. A small early 19th century estate of terraced houses was built on Dorset Street and Orchard Street, around a central square. This square was later filled in with industrial buildings, only some of which survive today. The greatest concentration of Victorian housing lies to the east of Damory Street where a substantial suburb was developed following the opening of Blandford Station in 1863. This suburb comprises rows of short terraces interspersed with semi-detached houses, the whole arranged around a planned grid pattern of streets. The expansion of this suburb at the turn of the 20th century was characterised by wider streets with mature trees and larger detached houses of quality. 19th century detached town houses are also a feature of White Cliff Mill Street.

Another important group of historic buildings dating from the 18th and 19th centuries lies on the south side of Blandford Bridge along Dorchester Hill and Poole Road. This marks the site of the late medieval or early post-medieval suburb of Blandford St Mary.

The late Victorian Hall and Woodhouse brewery buildings are the best preserved example of industrial architecture in Blandford and considered to be of regional importance.