

Dorset Historic Towns Project

# CHRISTCHURCH



Historic Urban Characterisation





**Dorset Historic Towns Project**

# **Christchurch**

**Historic Urban Characterisation**

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## Summary

This report contains the results of a consideration of the historical, archaeological, architectural and map evidence relating to the history of Christchurch. It has focused on the understanding of the overall development of the town from its earliest beginnings to the present day. This work has been conducted in order to achieve a better understanding of how the historical dimension has influenced the modern townscape, identify what historical features and structures survive within the modern town and comprehend the contribution made by this historic dimension to the present character of Christchurch. This will enable an informed approach to the management of change and conservation of the urban environment.

Christchurch has a distinctive historic character reflecting both its origins as a Saxon burh and its maritime associations. Despite the rapid proliferation of housing estates from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the original geographically isolated position of the historic core means that it still retains the character of a small medieval town. This character is further distinguished by its maritime connection, including the harbour, salt marshes and sandy beaches of Christchurch bay. The growth of modern marinas reinforce the significance that Christchurch harbour has played in the development of the town and the position of the Priory Church is such that it still dominates the harbour today much as it has done throughout the last millennium.

The urban morphology of the historic core of Christchurch is a function of the topography of the gravel ridge upon which it sits. The earliest settlement was around the Saxon Minster church on the site of the present Priory Church at the southern tip of the ridge. The town then developed only slowly northwards from the Minster and later Priory along the central spine Road of High Street. A cross ridge road probably ran along the approximate route of the modern Castle Street and Wick Lane to form a central cross road to the north of the Minster. This street arrangement may have been modified by the insertion of a Norman castle across the earlier route of Castle Street, diverting it slightly to the north. There are few visible remains of the late Saxon defensive bank and ditches or stone town wall; demolished by the 13<sup>th</sup> century. However a concerted campaign of archaeological excavation in the 1970s and 80s has highlighted the significance of these structures for the town's development, as well as the potential for further sub-surface archaeological remains.

Christchurch had two medieval extramural suburbs at Bridge Street and Bargates. Bridge Street retains significant character whilst the historic part of Bargates has been decimated by the construction of the Christchurch by-pass in 1958.

The historic suburban centres of Purewell, Stanpit and Mundeford also retain important historic street frontages which form a continuous link around the east side of Christchurch harbour and with the town centre via Bridge Street. The cluster of buildings at Staple Cross retain a village feel with a small green and stone cross separated from the suburb of Somerford by the Christchurch by-pass. Former medieval hamlets at Bure, Somerford, Nea and Hoburne do not retain their character so well, being subsumed into the suburban housing estates of Somerford and Highcliffe. The group of 18<sup>th</sup> century cottages at Chewton Common retain their character but are backed by a modern housing estate occupying former common land. The 19<sup>th</sup> century settlements at Walkford and Highcliffe Newtown have retained their period feel. To the north of Christchurch town centre medieval settlement had been characterised by dispersed farms (Grove Farm and Bosley) set within enclosed fields and common. They have now become completely absorbed into the inter-war suburban developments here.

The division of the modern urban area of Christchurch into 34 Historic Urban Character Areas enables an overview assessment of the historic character of the town to be presented (Table 1). An assessment of the significance of the contribution of each Historic Urban Character Area to the historic character of Christchurch reveals that the areas of highest significance are the historic core comprising the burh and medieval suburbs of Bargates and Bridge Street, together with the former common at Quomps, now a public park (Map 15). This area contributes to the historic character through its settlement time depth, historic street and boundary pattern and historic building stock. Avon Mead and Stanpit Marsh are included, not only because of their archaeological significance, but also because of their historical integrity as green commons associated with and delineating the medieval town centre. Similarly Chewton is an example of surviving medieval common containing a fine collection of 18<sup>th</sup> century cottages. 18<sup>th</sup> century cottages also survive at St Catherine's Hill, on the edge of a significant prehistoric Roman and medieval monuments. Highcliffe Castle is in-



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

cluded on the grounds of the quality of the renovated house and grounds. The hospital and workhouse is a conservation area with important historic buildings as well as depth of social history.

Other areas of which provide a high contribution to the historic character are the historic village centres of Purewell (Street), Mudeford, Staple Cross, and Bosley (Map 15).

Areas of medium contribution to the historic character of Christchurch include the industrial areas of Mill Plain (Avon Industrial Zone) and Stony Lane. Priors and Rossiter's Quays also have an industrial element. The site of the barracks has been redeveloped but has national importance in terms of military history. Medieval rural areas bereft of significant surviving fabric have been included in this category, including Stanpit, Bure, Somerford, Nea, Hoburne, Latch Farm and Knapp, Roeshott Farm, and Grove Farm. Nevertheless, Map 15 shows that in many of these areas the core of these settlements have been categorised as of presenting a high contribution to the historic character of Christchurch (Stanpit, Bure, and Hoburne). Highcliffe Newtown and Portfield housing estates retain significant late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century character that are also sensitive to change. The areas which contribute least to the historic character are the areas of modern housing estates and retail parks at Grove, Somerford, Highcliffe and Walkford.

## **Part 1: Introduction**





## 1.1 Background to the Project

The Dorset Historic Towns Survey forms part of a national programme of urban surveys of historic towns, launched by English Heritage in 1992 (English Heritage 1992) and subsequently modified in the light of approaches developed as part of English Heritage's Historic Landscape Characterisation programme (Thomas 2005).

The 23 places selected for inclusion in the Dorset Historic Towns Survey are shown on figure 2. For the purposes of this project, Dorset is defined by its post-1974 boundary and includes the present administrative county of Dorset and the area of the Unitary Authorities of Bournemouth and Poole.

## 1.2 Rationale

Town centres have always been a focus for trade, industry and housing, consequently there have been many different pressures on their development. This has led to both the creation of a potentially rich, complex, deeply-stratified urban archaeological resource through past development of the town and, on the other hand, to serious threats to the survival of this archaeological resource and to other elements of the historical townscape through modern developmental pressure. Without knowledge and understanding of the historic urban environment it is too easy for significant elements to be damaged or removed through modern redevelopment.

The potential for the historic environment to play a complex and highly significant role in economic regeneration was outlined in *Power of Place* (English Heritage, 2000) and its value is highlighted in the government's response *The Historic Environment: A Force for our Future* (DCMS 2001). The potential of the historic environment is particularly significant in towns, where a high quality historic urban environment and the resulting distinctiveness and sense of place that this brings, has been shown to be a primary asset in promoting regeneration. The effect may be direct – through heritage tourism, for example – or more subtle, promoting a strong sense of identity and pride of place, thus creating new confidence and a positive climate for investment and growth.

Before we can build upon the potential positive effects of the historic urban environment, we must understand it. Characterisation provides a means of understanding the diverse range of

factors which create distinctiveness and a sense of place. In order to make the characterisation of the historic urban environment relevant and meaningful, it needs to be based on a thorough assessment of the nature, quality and quantity of the historic resource of each urban centre. It is to this end that the Dorset Historic Towns Survey has been undertaken.

## 1.3 Aims

The aim of the project is to present a review of the existing archaeological, historical and urban morphological evidence and set out the historic character and development of Dorset's Historic towns:

- to produce a useful and flexible tool to aid in the understanding and management of the town
- to inform archaeological and historic environment research
- to inform the management and interpretation of historic urban buildings and land use.
- to provide an evidence base to feed into the Local Development Framework
- to encourage the integration of urban historic characterisation into the wider process of protecting and enhancing urban character.
- to address a number of research aims set out in the South West Archaeological Research Framework into developing understanding of urban settlement from the Roman to the post-medieval periods (Webster 2008).

## 1.4 Report Structure

The Historic Urban Characterisation Assessment reports all have a similar structure, divided into seven major sections. These are briefly described below to enable easy navigation to the various elements.

**Part 1: Introduction** is a general introduction to the Dorset Historic Towns Project and to this report.

**Part 2 : Overview of Approach** is a brief methodological section outlining the guiding principles and approach, together with an explanation of the main technical terms used in this report.

**Part 3: Town Context** is a consideration of the wider natural setting of the town. It includes a summary account of the geology and

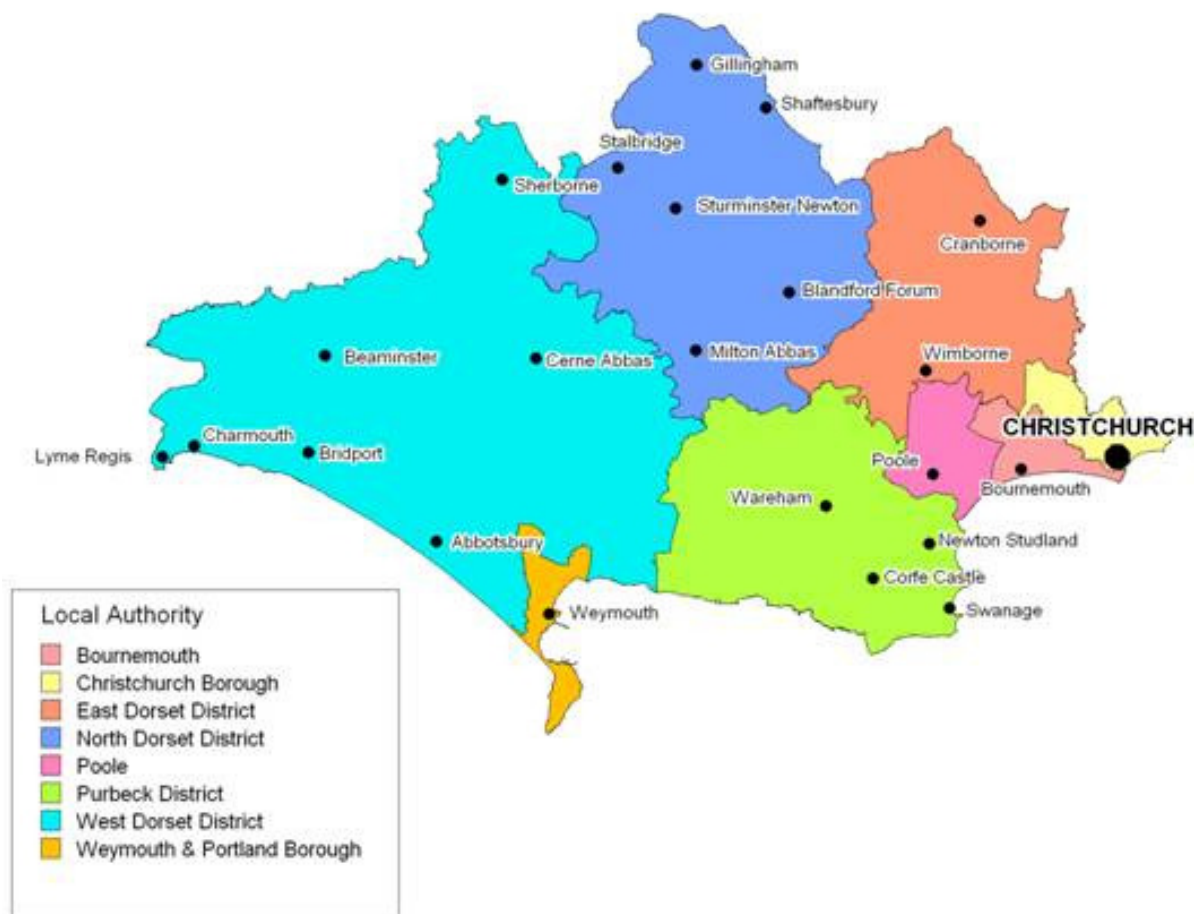


Figure 2: Map of Dorset showing the location of Christchurch and the other towns in the Dorset Historic Towns Survey.

topography and makes reference to any Landscape Character Assessments undertaken in the area. It includes a summary of the present town, its population, economic base, etc.

**Part 4: Sources** is an outline of the main sources of historic, cartographic, archaeological and other information used in the report, together with a summary of previous research in the town.

**Part 5: Historical Analysis** provides a summary account of the chronological development of the town from its origins to the present day, and is a synthesis of the available documentary, archaeological, topographic and morphological information, based largely on a review of published sources. This provides the context for the consideration of Historic Urban Character.

**Part 6: Historic Urban Character Appraisal** presents the details of the historic urban characterisation work, identifying the physical remains of the past in the present day townscape. It includes a summary of the

overall historic urban character of the town and a description of the Historic Urban Character Areas defined as part of this work.

**Part 7: Historic Environment Research Framework** outlines the major research questions which could be used to guide and inform future research into the town and how these fit into the South West Archaeological Research Framework.

## 1.5 Who is this Document for?

The information in this report is aimed at the public bodies, organisations and groups that play a role in the planning and management of the urban and historic environments. Additionally anyone who has an interest in the historic urban environment, including community groups, developers, architects and academics, may find aspects of this work of interest and relevance.



## **Part 2: Overview of Approach**





## 2.1 Guiding Principles

Historic Urban Characterisation is a method of defining and mapping the historic dimension of modern townscapes. The approach used by this project has been developed and adapted from Historic Landscape Characterisation studies. The guiding principles of historic urban characterisation are as follows (adapted from Clark *et al.* 2004, 6):

- Present not past: it is the present-day townscape that is the main object of study.
- Townscape as history not geography: the most important characteristic of the townscape is its time-depth; change and earlier townscapes exist in the present town.
- All aspects of the townscape, no matter how modern, are treated as part of the urban character, not just 'special' areas.
- Characterisation of the urban landscape is a matter of interpretation not record.
- Urban landscape is and always has been dynamic: management of change, not preservation is the aim.
- The process of characterisation should be transparent, with clearly articulated records of data sources and methods used.

## 2.2 General Approach

In order to characterise the distinctive historic dimension of the present day urban landscape, the systematic identification of the historic attributes of the contemporary townscape is undertaken using a number of cartographic, historic, archaeological and standing building sources. These sources are used to identify 'Historic Urban Character Types' which are mapped onto the modern Ordnance Survey MasterMap base. These character types are used to inform the identification of a series of town plan components for the major periods of development for each town from its origins to the present day. The character types are also used to define a series of 'Historic Urban Character Areas' within each town. The character areas form the basis of a more detailed assessment of historic urban character.

## 2.3 Historic Urban Character Types

The identification of the historic urban character is based on the collation and analysis of a large quantity of information, including town

plan form, building form, historic map evidence, aerial photographic evidence and archaeological data. This information has been used to define specific areas of single character type within the modern town plan, based on the current settlement character, but taking into account previous uses and settlement history. These Historic Urban Character Types form the basic building blocks for analysing the historic urban character.

The methodology and terminology of these Historic Urban Character Types has been developed from that of Historic Landscape Characterisation and comprise a series of ten Broad Types each sub-divided into a number of more specific Historic Urban Character Types. The list and description of the character types is set out in **Appendix 4**. The Historic Urban Character Types used are a standardised classification across all the Dorset Historic Towns. This enables direct comparisons to be made between towns across the county and allows consistency in analysis of the historic environment of the different towns.

The Historic Urban Character Types are mapped onto the digital map base using a Geographical Information System (GIS), linked to a table containing data on the settlement attributes of the current Historic Urban Character Type, the period from which it derives, and data on all previous Historic Urban Character Types. This enables the character of the town to be displayed for all periods and allows a comprehensive picture of the development of the town through time and the time depth of the current urban character to be presented.

## 2.4 Town Plan Components

Town Plan Components are a series of recognisable morphological units with a definable time depth within an individual townscape. These plan components have been identified through the analysis of the town plan and building fabric, together with their historic urban character types, to form a series of larger units (on a street or block scale rather than on a plot scale) that illustrate the composition of the town within a specific chronological period. These town plan components have been used to identify and illustrate the historic development of each town, as set out in Part 5 of this report. A series of twenty seven standard types of town plan component have been identified.

## 2.5 Historic Urban Character Areas

The historic urban characterisation of the Dorset towns produces a large quantity of detailed data recorded within individual Historic Urban Character Types. This information is at a too fine-grained scale to enable easy understanding of the character of the town. Therefore, the information has been used to define a smaller number of larger areas of distinctive character within the town known as Historic Urban Character Areas. These can be used as a means of understanding the past and the present character of the town, simplifying the large quantity of data presented by the Historic Urban Character Types and enabling a more detailed appraisal of the historic urban character to be undertaken.

The Historic Urban Character Areas are recognisable distinctive areas which have meaningful coherence within the modern townscape. They are defined by one or more of the following attributes

- consistent historic urban character
- common historical development
- similar topographic location
- similar degree of archaeological and/or historic building preservation.

Each character area will have its own individual 'biography' that has defined its present character. Consequently, the Historic Urban Character Areas can be used as a tool to help maintain and reinforce the historic character and individuality of these areas and the town as a whole.

## 2.6 Extent of the Study Area

The Dorset Historic Towns Project Study Area for Christchurch is shown on Map 1. It is taken as the present-day urban extent as shown on the 2007 Ordnance Survey MasterMap digital mapping. It comprises the borough of Christchurch excluding Hurn, Burton and St Catherine's Hill. The boundary of the study area to the south of Burton is taken as the railway line between the river Avon and Chewton Bunny. This excludes the large rural wards of Burton and Winkton (except for those parts that lie south of the railway line) and the major part of St Catherine's and Hurn. The urban extent includes areas of recreational open space, school playing fields, etc. around the fringes of the settlement. Where practicable, the boundary to the Study Area is along boundary lines marked on the MasterMap base.

## 2.7 Definition of Terms

### 2.7.1 Characterisation Terms

#### *Historic Urban Character Area*

See section 2.5 above.

#### *Historic Urban Character Type*

See section 2.3 above.

#### *Sensitivity to Large Scale Development*

The assessment of sensitivity to large scale development has been developed from that included in the landscape character assessment undertaken by West Dorset District Council (WDDC 2008). Large scale development is taken to mean any form of development that is on a scale much larger than the existing plot pattern and building size.

#### *Strength of Historic Character*

The strength of character in each area is determined by judging the survival of historic urban elements in the modern townscape, together with its distinctiveness and recognisability. The strength of character is assessed as Strong, Medium or Weak.

**Strong** character is where there is widespread survival of historic boundaries and buildings reflecting considerable time depth, where modern development remains unobtrusive.

**Medium** character is where there is survival of historic boundaries and buildings, but modern development is more evident.

**Weak** character is where there may be some historic elements present, but there is little time depth evident in the visible structures, which comprise mainly modern buildings and street and boundary layouts.

#### *Town Plan Component*

See section 2.4 above.

#### *Urban Structure*

This is the framework of routes, plots and spaces and the way they relate to one another, which forms the basic plan on which all other aspects of the built environment and historic development and use are based (DETR 2000).

#### *Housing Density*

Low Density = < 30 dwellings per hectare (dph)

Medium Density = 30-50 dph

High Density = >50 dph

### 2.7.2 Archaeological Terms

#### *Archaeological Intervention*

A general term for any type of formal archaeo-

logical recording.

#### *Archaeological Potential*

Archaeological potential is an assessment of the probability of discovering archaeological finds and features, the likely amount and complexity of the archaeology, and the level of survival. See **Appendix 5** for more detail.

#### *Building Recording*

Building recording refers to any survey and recording of the structure of a building.

#### *Evaluation*

An archaeological evaluation is a limited programme of fieldwork to determine the presence or absence of archaeological deposits or remains within a specified area or site. It can include trial trenching, test pitting, geophysical survey, etc.

#### *Excavation*

An archaeological excavation is a programme of controlled fieldwork exposing, investigating and recording an area of below-ground archaeology.

#### *Watching Brief*

A watching brief is a formal programme of observation and investigation conducted during any operation carried out for non-archaeological reasons.

### **2.7.3 Historical Terms**

#### *Hundred*

A hundred was an administrative subdivision of a shire based notionally on a grouping of 100 hides. They originated in the Saxon period and had their own courts usually held at a meeting place close to the geographical centre of the administrative area, or at a point easily accessible from any part of the hundred.

#### *Hide*

A hide was an area of land defined for tax assessment purposes and was based on the amount of land required to support a family. The size of land unit covered by a hide varied according to its productivity but is generally thought to equal approximately 120 acres. Hides originated in the Saxon period but may be based on an earlier system of land holding.

#### *Tithing*

A tithing was a small administrative subdivision of a hundred notionally containing ten land owning families.

#### *Manor*

A manor was a parcel of land, often assessed at 5 hides, over which a lord held domain and could exercise certain rights and privileges, such as the right to have the populace of the manor work the lord's lands. The lord of manor could be a secular noble, the church, or the King himself; more important nobles held several manors. The manorial system was established in the late Saxon period, around the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD and became increasingly feudal following the Norman Conquest.

#### *Borough*

A borough was a town or part of a town upon which a degree of self governance had been conferred through the granting of a charter. Boroughs held their own courts, markets and were often subdivided into burghage plots held by burgesses (freemen of the borough) for cash rent rather than by feudal service.

#### *Lay Subsidy*

The Lay subsidy is a term given to a tax levied on the general populace (as opposed to the clergy or military) and was calculated as a proportion of their moveable wealth. The poor were exempt. The tax was levied occasionally as the king demanded in order to raise money for military campaigns from the late 13<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The lay subsidy rolls are documents recording the names of each person in a village or tithing within a specific hundred and the amount of tax payable by them. The rolls are particularly useful in the context of the Historic Towns Project because during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, surnames tended to reflect either occupation or place of habitation. The documents thus provide information on the size of the taxable population within a town, the range of crafts within a particular town or tithing, the names of the individual tithings and boroughs within a hundred and the names of other dispersed settlements within them.

#### *Hearth Tax Returns*

The Hearth Tax was a tax introduced in 1662 and abolished in 1689. It was payable by householders on the number of hearths or fireplaces in a household. The tax amounted to 1 shilling per hearth or stove payable twice a year. The Hearth Tax Returns generally date from 1662-6 and 1669-74; when the tax was administered by royal bailiffs. They include a list of householders eligible for the tax per parish and the number of hearths in each household. The documents are used in this report to give an estimate of the population of the town during the late 17<sup>th</sup> century.