

## 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

Christchurch today sits on the eastern edge of the Poole/ Bournemouth conurbation extending from the northern and eastern sides of Christchurch Harbour (Map 1). The harbour itself is a natural ria accessed by a narrow channel between Hengistbury head and Mudeford Quay. This channel, known as 'The Run', is not now suitable for the passage of larger, commercial, vessels, although the harbour is extensively used for recreation. The historic town occupies the southern tip of a NNW-SSE aligned gravel ridge where it meets Christchurch harbour. This ridge reaches a maximum height of 45m at St Catherine's Hill, less than 3km north of the Saxon core of the town. This

hill provided a dramatic setting for a Bronze Age barrow cemetery and now forms an important recreational space on the edge of the urban area. Flanking the ridge to the east is the lower valley of the River Avon. This river has a flood plain, over 1km wide in places, draining south into Christchurch Harbour where its alluvial deposits form Stanpit marsh. The river Stour forms the western boundary of Christchurch Borough and the study area. The Stour also drains into Christchurch harbour effectively isolating the historic core of the town on a low peninsula, the narrow neck of which is created by a meander of the Stour east of St Catherine's Hill. The habitable area of the town is thus restricted by the flood plains of the Avon and Stour Rivers to the east and west and St Catherine's Hill to the north. The major expansion of the town has, of necessity, occurred to the east, beyond the Avon flood plain and coastal marshes. This occupies a strip of land 3.5km wide between the sands of Christchurch Bay to the south and the railway to the north. This land rises gradually to the east, away from the Avon valley, although it is itself deeply cut by small streams. Perhaps this is most dramatically illustrated at Chewton Bunny, a narrow gorge cut through the gravels by the River Chew and forming the eastern boundary of the Borough and study area. The landscape of Christchurch is dominated by NNW-SSE trends formed through the erosion of extensive plateau and valley gravels by the Rivers Avon, Bure, Mude, Stour and Moors. These in turn

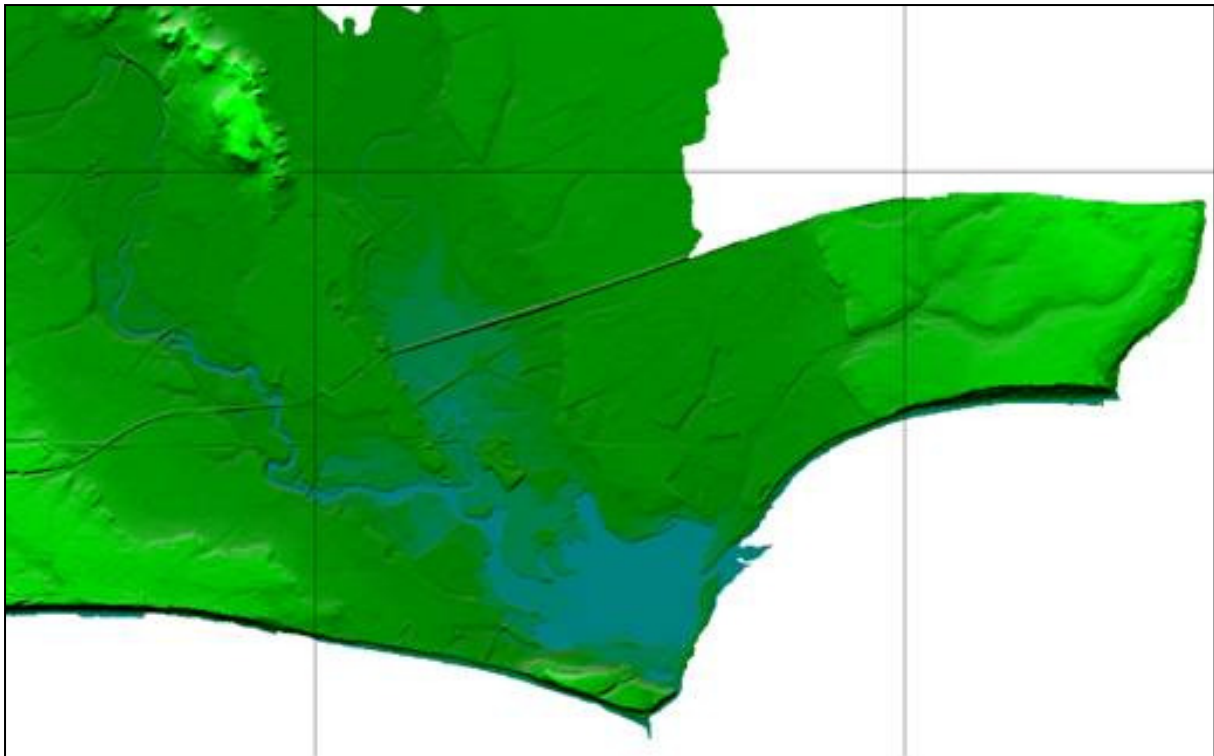


Figure 3: Christchurch's topographic setting

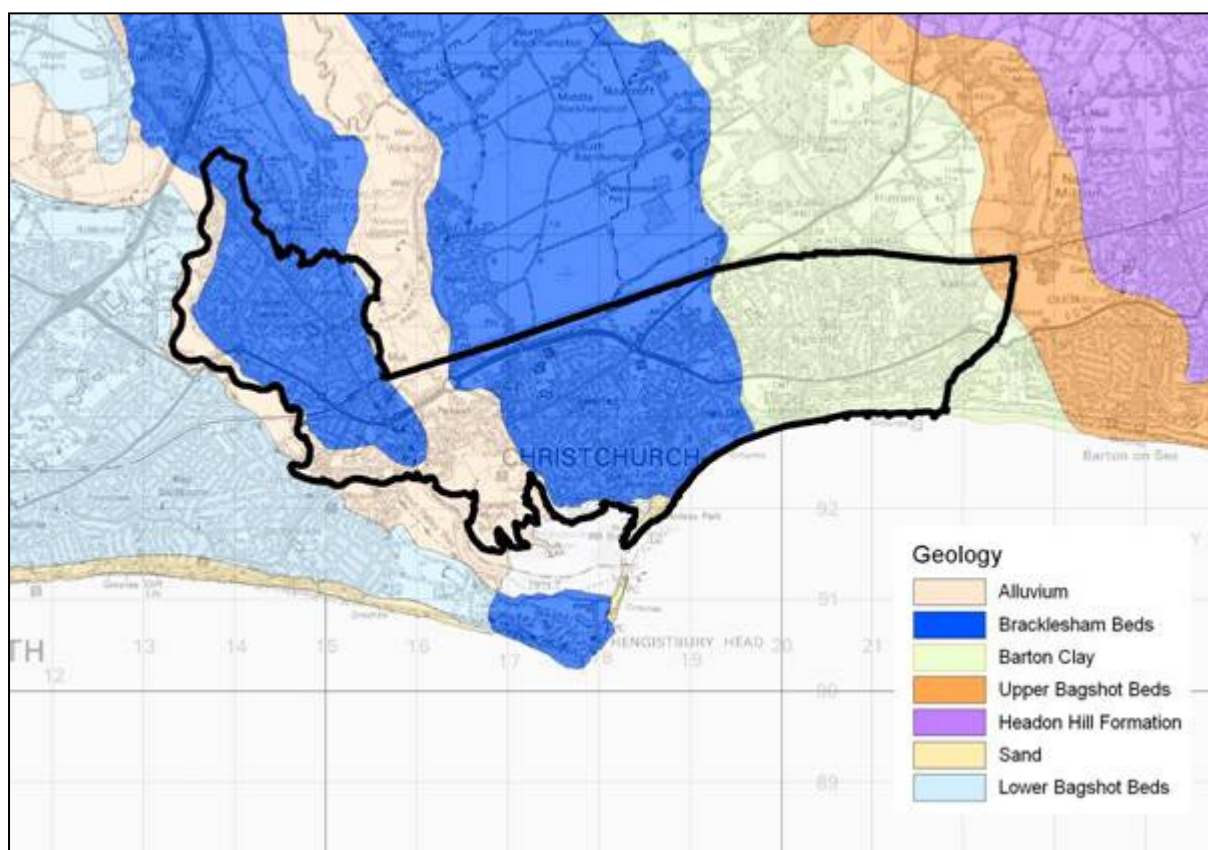


Figure 4: Geology of the Christchurch Area.

run perpendicular to the dominant ENE-WSW geological trend of the Hampshire Basin syncline. These trends have influenced modern field patterns, which may themselves represent the latest phase in the continual use and modification of field alignments first laid out in the late prehistoric period. It is the low ridge of plateau and valley gravel, upon the southern tip of which is situated the historic town of Christchurch, that forms the most visible manifestation of these trends.

### 3.3 Geology

The bedrock and superficial geology of the region is depicted on Map 2. It is dominated by glacial alluvial gravels. These are essentially fluvial in origin, although the rivers that produced them were of vastly greater volume than the streams of today. One such river, the River Solent, would have drained the region from west to east along the Hampshire Basin syncline. The gravels deposited by this vast river form the plateau gravels of the region. These survive today as isolated caps to Hengistbury Head and St Catherine's Hill and as more extensive deposits further west in the Bournemouth region and to the east at Walkford, Highcliffe and The New Forest. These gravels overlie the Bracklesham beds comprising sand, brickearth, and pebble beds. The brickearth in

particular is considered to be a flood deposit. At St Catherine's Hill these beds comprise Branksome Sand, Parkstone Clay and the Poole Formation; whereas in Highcliffe and Walkford they are made up of Boscombe Sand, Chama Sands and Barton Clay.

Both of the alluvial deposits (plateau gravel and Bracklesham beds) have themselves been cut and redeposited by precursors of the Rivers Stour and Avon to form the valley gravels, which are recorded in numerous terraces, numbered and dated by Palaeolithic implements found within them. These terraces are thought to represent raised beaches formed through numerous changes in sea level during the Pleistocene epoch.

The latest event in the sequence is the continuing deposition of alluvium in the flood plains of the Rivers Stour and Avon (Chatwin, 1960, 76-85).

### 3.4 Landscape Character

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

In the national assessment of countryside char-

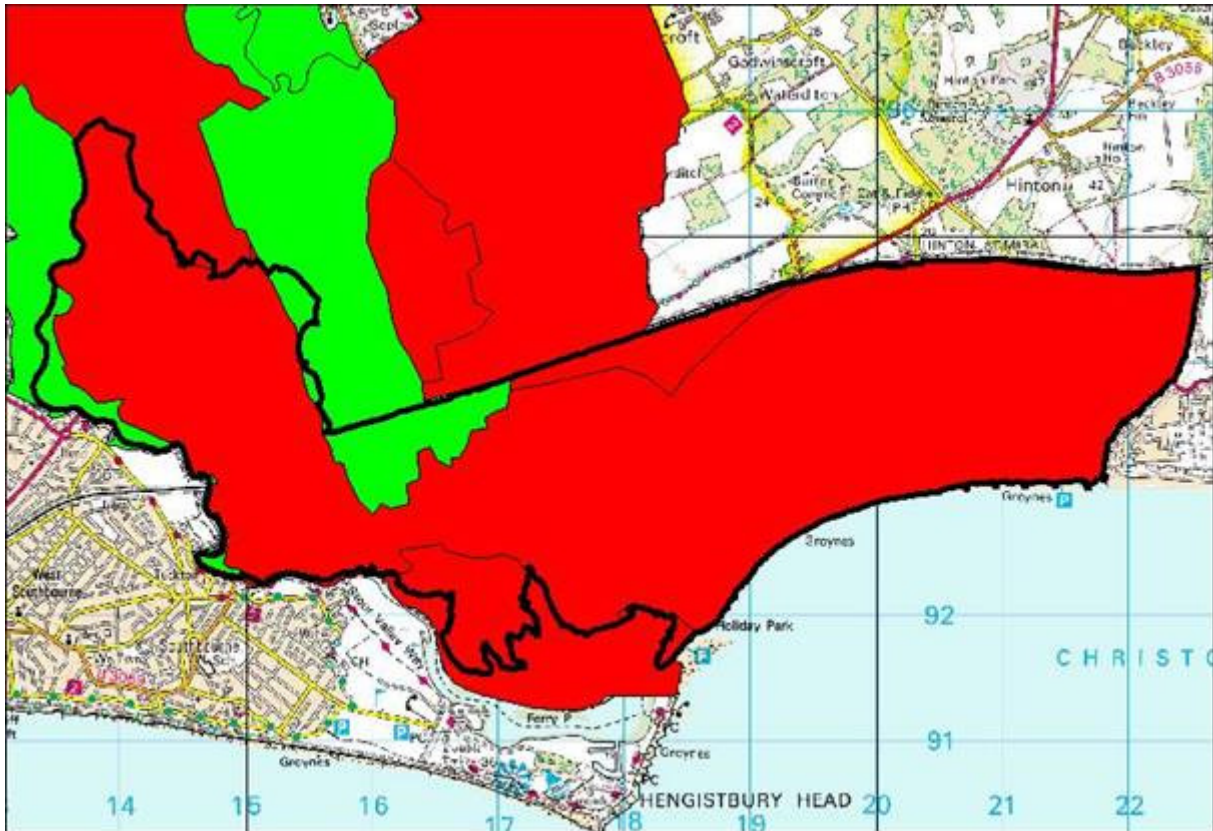


Figure 5: Christchurch in its landscape character setting (Dorset AONB Landscape Characterisation).

acter, Christchurch and its surrounding landscape is partly within Joint Character Areas 131 New Forest and 135 Dorset Heaths (Countryside Agency 1999). The key qualities of these character areas are listed as:

New Forest (eastern part of the study area)

- An extensive and complex mosaic of broad-leaved and coniferous woodlands, unenclosed wood pasture, heath, grassland, and farmland.
- A constant presence of numerous grazing ponies and cattle, both a strong visual element and a significant impact on the land cover.
- Open and exposed plateaux and small valleys dominated by heath, with heather, gorse and grassland with scattered birch and pine. Bog vegetation in valley bottoms.
- Pockets of farmland and widely dispersed settlements with large isolated dwellings, bounded by high hedges, contained within the woodland.
- Wood-pasture of mature oak woodland, patches of bracken interspersed with glades and heavily grazed 'lawns', verges and commons.
- Large woodlands of mature broadleaves and an understorey of holly and bracken, contrasting with dark blocks of coniferous plantations.
- Fringe areas of farmland with villages. Small fields lined by full hedges, opening out to larger

arable fields, with contrasts between the more intimate features of the Avon Valley, and the salt-marshes and shingle beaches on the southern coastal plain.

Dorset Heaths (western part of the study area)

- An exposed, open, broad-scale landscape forming a strong contrast with the adjacent character areas.
- Undulating lowland heath with tracts of heather, stunted pines and gorse scrub.
- Blocks of conifers forming locally-prominent landmarks.
- Mosaics of heathland, farmland, woodland and scrub.
- Much is sparsely populated areas with scattered settlements and a few small villages and towns but the extensive conurbation of Poole-Bournemouth forms a major influence in the south and east.
- Flat-bottomed, open valleys with floodplain pastures and willows.
- An outer edge of low, rolling hills with an irregular patchwork of pasture, woodland and dense hedges marking the transition to the chalk.

The draft Historic Landscape Character mapping shows Christchurch sitting within a mosaic

of enclosed fields, coniferous and deciduous woodland, common, heath and areas of water-meadows along the major river valleys of the Stour and Avon (figure 3).

### 3.5 The Present Town

The borough of Christchurch occupies the south eastern corner of the county of Dorset, with Bournemouth to the west and The New Forest district of Hampshire to the east. The borough covers an area of 50 sq. km. encompassing the wards of Burton & Winkton Grange, Highcliffe, Jumpers, Mundeford & Friars Cliff, North Highcliffe & Walkford, Portfield, Purewell & Stanpit, St Catherine's & Hurn, Town Centre, and West Highcliffe. The EUS study area, however, is restricted to the modern conurbation as depicted on the Ordnance Survey MasterMap.

Modern Christchurch is located on the eastern edge of the Bournemouth conurbation. The town remained largely within its medieval limits, however, until the 19<sup>th</sup> century from which time extensive residential suburbs have developed, initially in the Portfield (figure 4) and Jumpers Common areas to the north of the town. The modern suburban area has grown, in parallel with Bournemouth, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century to encompass many previously isolated villages including Mundeford, Highcliffe, Stanpit, Purewell, Bure, Hoburne and Walkford. The latest population figure (2005 mid year estimate) for the town is 45,074. The borough also has a large thriving business base with over 1,300 companies.

These factors have led to an increased development pressure. Between 1994 and 2006, 14.94 hectares of industrial land had been developed in Christchurch. The 2001 Census records 21,769 dwellings in Christchurch. Between 2001 and 2006, a further 663 had been built giving a total of 22,402.

The aviation industry has been important in the Christchurch area since an airfield was established at Bure in 1935. This housed the Air Defence Experimental Establishment from 1940. After the war it was used as an aircraft manufacturing site until it was finally closed in 1962 and developed for housing. Bournemouth International Airport lies outside the study area to the NW but the industry remains important in the region. 11% of the workforce is engaged in the transport sector. Major employers include BAE Systems, BASCO, Beagle Aircraft Ltd, Bournemouth International Airport Ltd, College of Air Traffic Control, Data Track Process Instruments, European Aviation and FR Aviation

Ltd.

The largest employment sector in the borough is hotels, restaurants and distribution, employing 29% of the workforce. This probably reflects the seaside situation of the region. The public sector, including health and education, is the second largest, employing 21% of the workforce; Banking/finance employ 15%, manufacturing industries 14% and transport 11%. Construction industries employ 6% of the workforce and Agriculture less than 1% (Dorset County Council, 2007).

## Part 4: Sources







## 4.1 Previous research

A number of studies of Christchurch have been completed. Penn's *Historic Towns in Dorset*, published by the Dorset Archaeological Committee in 1980 is an important work which is still of relevance today. This was added to by further research undertaken by Keith Jarvis in 1983 and published as an introductory chapter to his *Excavations in Christchurch*. Both of these works concentrated on the Saxon and medieval aspects of the town's history. More recent publications have brought the history of the town forward into the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Newman, 1998a; Hodges, 2003a). Books have also been published which are dedicated specifically to the history and development of The Priory (Polk, 1994), the Castle (Hodges, 2003b), and the harbour (Powell, 1995).

## 4.2 Historic Maps

There are some important early maps relating to Christchurch. The earliest known are the Mews Estate maps (c. 1715) held in the Hampshire Record Office (1M53/1175/1-2). They are a pair of painted parchment maps of lands held by Sir Dewey Bulkeley in Christchurch. They depict some features of interest including fish weirs, a salmon house and burgage plots. Another important early map held at the Hampshire record office is a map of the tythings of Pokesdown, Iford, Tuckton and Week, Christchurch Borough, Bure and Street in the County of Southampton, dated 1796 and known as the Malmesbury Estate map (9M73/139). This map depicts extensive and regular field boundaries covering the borough around Highcliffe and Somerford prior to parliamentary enclosures. The tithe map importantly shows the Portfield and Stanpit field subdivided into individual arable strips prior to enclosure.

## 4.3 Documentary Evidence

Important documentary sources include the Christchurch Cartulary, a manuscript held in the British Library as part of the Cotton Library collection (cartulary of Christchurch, Twynham: BL, Cotton MS Tiberius D. vi, in 2 parts). Domesday, the Burghal Hideage and the Anglo Saxon Chronicle also contain important references to Christchurch. In terms of secondary sources, the Victoria County History of Hampshire Volume 5 (Page, 1912) has been used extensively in this report.

## 4.4 Archaeological Evidence

Herbert Druitt, a significant figure in the history of Christchurch archaeology, founded the Red House Museum in 1919 in order to house his private collection. These included many Palaeolithic implements gathered from the Christchurch region as well as a significant number of Neolithic to Roman domestic and funerary artefacts from the Latch Farm and Mill Plain areas to the east of Fairmile. J Bernard Calkin, another local archaeologist whose *Discovering Prehistoric Bournemouth and Christchurch* was the first attempt at a synthesis of the archaeological knowledge of the Christchurch area (Calkin, 1966). A countrywide gazetteer of Palaeolithic sites was published in 1968 with a sizeable section dedicated to the Bournemouth and Christchurch regions alone (Roe, 1968, 75-94).

Christchurch has also been the subject of a concerted campaign of research excavation from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. Michael Ridley excavated at the important sites of St Catherine's Chapel, Christchurch Priory Garderobe and Crouch Hill during the late 1960s, throughout the 1970s and early 1980s excavations were partly a reflection of a national campaign for the recording of sites prior to their destruction through. However, in Christchurch the issues were not simply those of 'rescue' archaeology but also a specific research focus into the identification of the Saxon burh defences recorded in the early 10<sup>th</sup> century document, the Burghal Hidage. To this date Christchurch is probably still the most extensively examined of the Dorset burhs. Many of these were directed by Keith Jarvis for Poole Museums Service, and published as the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society monograph number 5 (Jarvis 1983). In that volume the sites are numbered X1-X17 a numbering system retained as a form of shorthand in this volume.

A number of excavations had also been conducted in Christchurch by the fledgling Trust for Wessex Archaeology between 1981-3. They were published in a single paper in the Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society, volume 105 (Davies 1983). In this paper the sites are labelled W5-10, 23, 37 and 42-3 a system retained in this report. The results from this work added to and complemented that of the earlier Poole Museums excavations.

Since the introduction of new planning policy guidance in 1991 (PPG16) archaeological mitigation has become a routine part of urban development in Christchurch. It may be that this

has been to the detriment of research driven archaeology and it is partly to this end that the Extensive Urban Surveys have been initiated; recognition that the data collected from development led archaeology needs to be collated and analysed within a research framework. A list of archaeological investigations is presented in Appendix 4.

## 4.5 Historic Buildings

The listed buildings are the most visible element of the historic character of Christchurch. Of the six grade 1 listed buildings in the study area, four are medieval in origin; the ruins of the castle keep, the Constable's Hall, The Priory church of the Holy Trinity and Town Bridge. Place Mill also has a medieval stone foundation and the Old Court House, 11 Castle Street is a 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century timber framed building. Some parts of the medieval priory precinct fabric also survive. Only six buildings can be securely dated to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, although others may have later facades on an earlier fabric. It seems that timber framed houses have survived better in the former rural parts of Christchurch. Most of the surviving 17<sup>th</sup> century buildings in the centre are constructed in stone. The vast majority of Christchurch's listed buildings were constructed during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Particularly large numbers of late 18<sup>th</sup> buildings survive along suburbs such as Bridge Street and Mudeford. High Street has a higher number of 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings than 18<sup>th</sup> century. This might suggest that the late medieval and Tudor timber framed buildings were replaced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. High Street contains a mix of modern shop fronts and historic buildings, although the buildings remain within their historic plot widths. Church Street has important groups of traditional shop fronts and street furniture. Castle Street is lined with 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century town houses and adjoining former warehouses. Milhams Street is a narrow residential street lined with modest historic brick terraced housing. The Witehall/Wick Lane area contains modest late 19<sup>th</sup> century brick houses and terraces which form a pleasant and contrasting entry into the busy town centre. The Church Lane/Quay Road area has a mix of vernacular red brick and formal Victorian housing with good surviving details which provide a good backdrop to the neighbouring priory church (Christchurch Borough Council, 2005, 21-37).