

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

The topographic situation of Corfe Castle is dramatic and distinctive. The eponymous cas-

tle is perched upon a steep-sided hill set within a gap in the Purbeck Ridge (Figure 3). The town was built outside the castle gates which lie on the south side of the hill where it merges into the central Purbeck vale, albeit separated by a deep, dry and partially natural moat. The central Purbeck vale rises gently towards the south and then more steeply as it meets the broad tableland formed by Purbeck and Portland beds. The town sits on a raised platform separated from the central vale on either side by the north flowing East and West Corfe Rivers (also known as the Byle Brook and the Wicken Stream respectively), which have carved the distinctive gap in the Chalk ridge occupied by the castle. It is this landscape feature that gives the town and castle its name; *Corfe* meaning gap or pass.

The topography has had a major influence on the town layout. The oldest part of the town, closest to the castle gates sits on a narrow

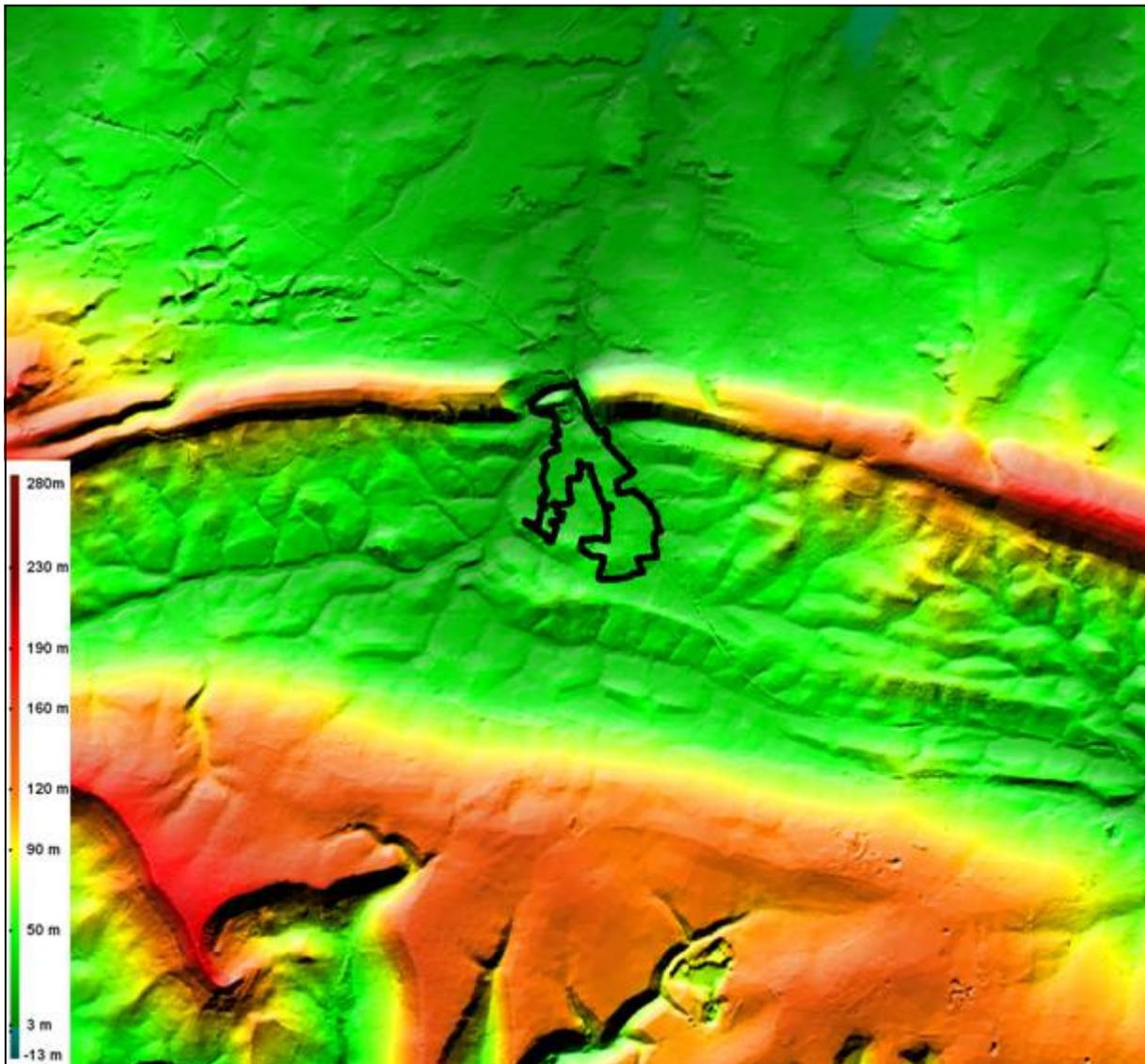


Figure 3: Corfe Castle's topographic setting

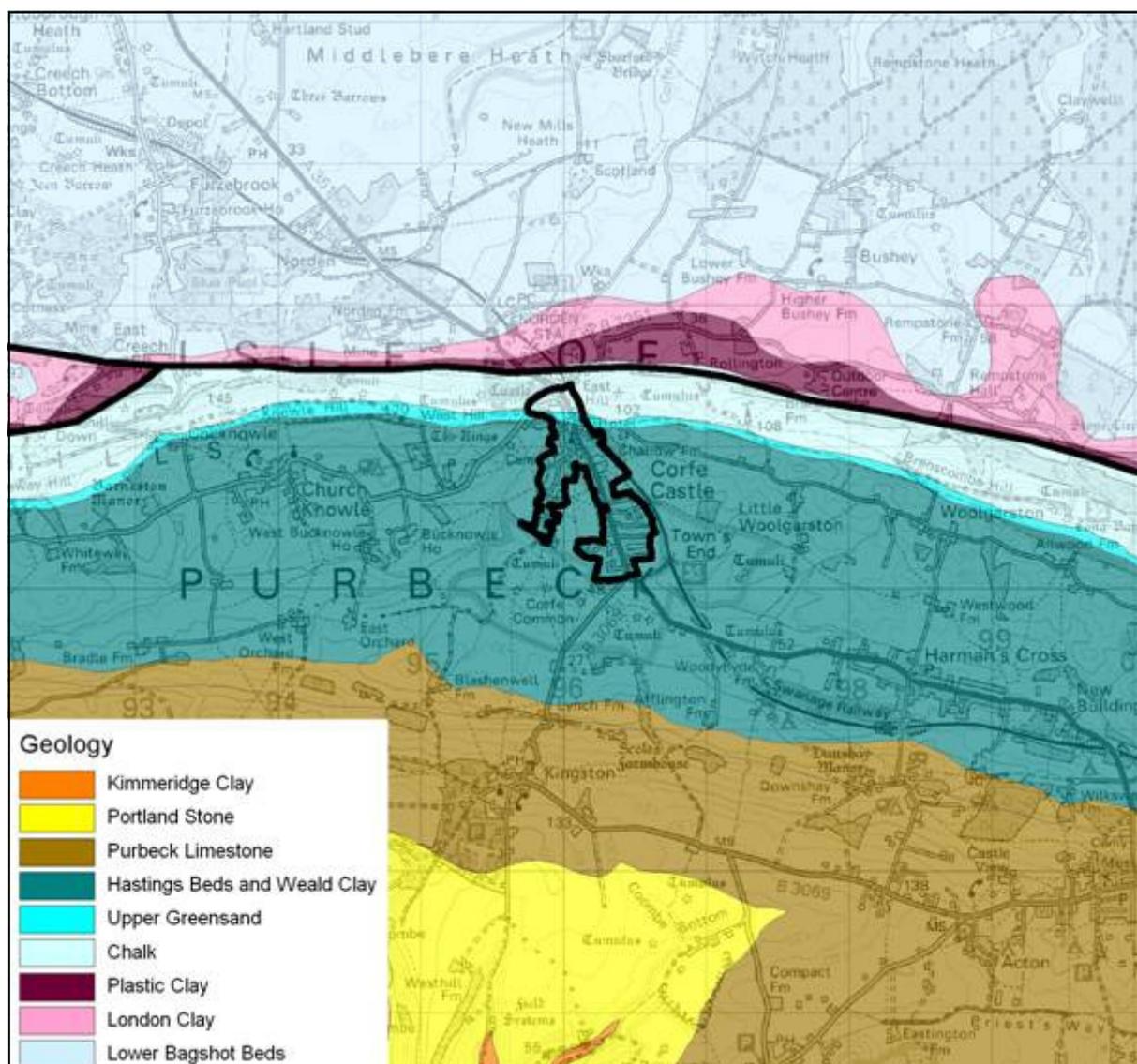


Figure 4: Geology of the Corfe Castle Area.

neck of flat land between the two rivers. Bur-gage plots run down on either side to both river banks. This part of the town is aligned in a NNW-SSE direction, following the line of the East Corfe River. Field boundaries, roads and tracks in the immediate vicinity of the town to the south also follow this alignment. This is at odds with the prevailing field alignments in East Purbeck which cut across the topographic grain in a NNE-SSW direction. The implication of these observations is that the town was planned in the medieval period, with field and property boundaries based upon and adding to the original design, but superimposed over a pre-existing landscape of fields, tracks and dispersed settlement.

3.3 Geology

The Castle Keep lies at the highest point of

Castle Hill, which forms part of the chalk Purbeck Ridge (Figure 4). The Outer Bailey on the south side of the Keep is lower and lies on Upper Greensand, which forms the southern scarp of the Purbeck Ridge. The junction of the Upper Greensand and the softer Wealden Beds, which form the central Purbeck Vale, is marked by a slight valley, which has been enhanced to form the southern moat dividing the castle from the town. The medieval and early post-medieval economy of Corfe Castle was largely dependent on the quarrying and working of Purbeck Marble. This bed outcrops approximately 2.5km to the south of the town in the north face of the southern Purbeck plateau formed by Purbeck and Portland Limestone Beds. Purbeck limestone has been important as a building stone in the region and beyond. The town and castle at Corfe are largely built from this material. The Wealden Clay, upon which the town of Corfe sits, was important in

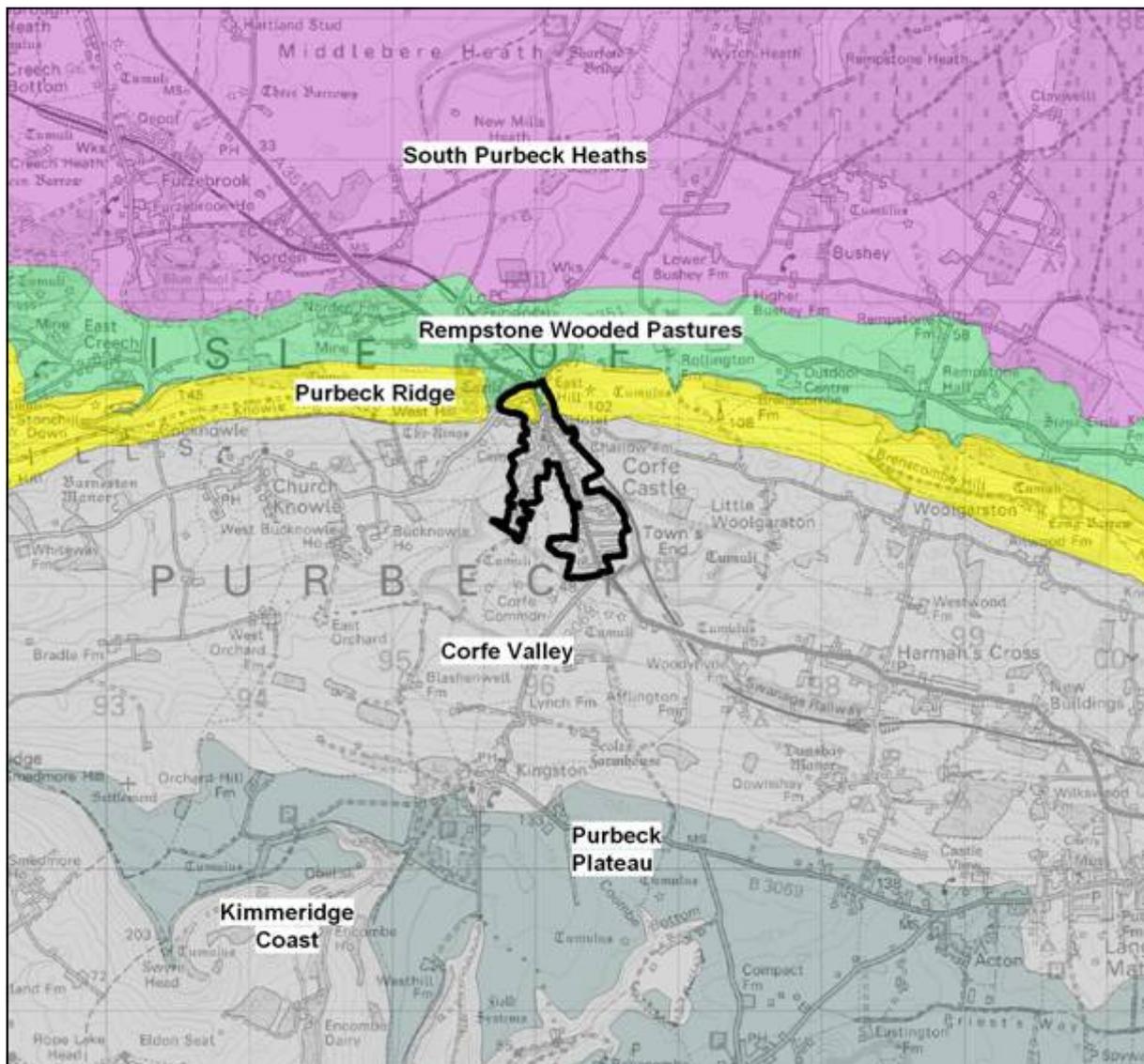


Figure 5: Corfe Castle in its landscape character setting (Dorset AONB Landscape Characterisation).

the manufacture of bricks. Hand made bricks using the Wealden clay are still produced today in Swanage. Ball Clay was extracted and exported in increasingly large volumes from the late 18th century. The largest works were about one mile to the north of Corfe Castle in the Norden area. .

3.4 Landscape Character

Corfe Castle lies within the Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), recognised as a nationally important landscape. 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, Corfe Castle lies within National Character Area 136; South Purbeck (Countryside Agency 1999).

The key characteristics of National Character Area 136 are listed as:

- An exceptionally diverse landscape with sharp contrasts within a small area; strongly influenced by its underlying chalk, limestone, shale and clay rocks.
- High historical interest, including early settlements, medieval industrial sites and dramatically-sited Corfe Castle.
- Outstanding and diverse coastline encompassing Chalk, limestone and shale cliffs and sheltered bays.
- Open, windswept Chalk ridge and limestone plateau.
- Sheltered central valley and steep-sided minor valleys.
- Abrupt transition to heathland to the north.

Corfe Castle is included in the Landscape Character Assessment of the Dorset AONB

(Dorset AONB 2008). Corfe Castle town lies within the Corfe Valley Landscape Character Area, part of the Clay Valley Landscape Type, while the castle is in the Purbeck Ridge Landscape Character Area, part of the Chalk Ridge/Escarpment Landscape Type (Figure 5). To the north of the Purbeck Ridge is the Rempstone Wooded Pastures Landscape Character Area. A very small part of the northeast corner of the Study Area lies on the margins of this landscape character area (Figure 5).

The key characteristics of the Corfe Valley area are:

- Sweeping and secluded clay valley enclosed by the dramatic chalk escarpment to the north and undulating limestone ridge to the south.
- Continuous patchwork of small regular intimate pastures with dense hedgerows and small broadleaved woodlands of oak and hazel.
- Small scattered nucleated villages and farmsteads of limestone on the valley floor with adjacent paddocks and piecemeal enclosures and dense small broadleaved woodlands.
- Occasional springs, flushes and wet woodlands on the valley floor with damp rush pasture and meadows.
- Dramatic views of the coast towards the west and east.
- Network of stone walls towards the Purbeck Plateau.
- Winding rural lanes with dense hedgerows and hedge banks .

The key characteristics of the Purbeck Ridge area are:

- A dramatic and exposed steep, narrow ridge with dry valleys
- Underlying geology of chalk with greensand, giving rise to predominantly thin calcareous soils.
- Patchwork of small scale pastoral fields on lower slopes with scattered
- farmsteads along the ridge bottom
- Extensive areas of unimproved calcareous downland turf on steep slopes.
- Large rectangular arable fields on the ridge top.
- Ancient oak, ash, maple woodlands on the lower northern slopes
- Patches of dense gorse scrub on steep ridge sides.
- Panoramic long distance views of the surrounding landscapes

- Prehistoric barrows dotted along ridge top.
- Ancient sunken, winding lanes with an open character towards the top.

The draft Historic Landscape Character mapping shows Corfe Castle sitting within an area of enclosed fields to the east and west of the town, including piecemeal, planned, and other regular enclosed fields. To the north and south of the town the historic landscape character is dominated by large areas of open ground at Corfe Common to the south and rough open ground to the north along the Chalk ridge. There are only isolated patches of deciduous woodland, mixed woodland and scrub, although more extensive areas of mixed woodland and plantations lie only 2.5km away at Wytch Heath, Rempstone Heath, Furzebrook and Kingston.

3.5 The Present Town

The modern built-up area of Corfe Castle lies entirely within the large parish of Corfe Castle and covers an area of about 53ha. It lies along the A351 approximately mid way between Wareham and Swanage. The B3051 to Studland joins with the A351 immediately to the north of the town and the B3069 to Kingston and Langton Matravers joins the A351 immediately south of the town. Corfe Castle is linked to the Swanage Railway, a heritage steam railway running between Norden and Swanage on the former Wareham to Swanage branch line, with a connection to the main line at Wareham 7km away to the NW open for special charter trains. The population of the parish as a whole is 1429 (2001 census). Corfe Castle has one primary school and one pre-school. The town lies within the catchment area of Purbeck Secondary School, Wareham. The town also has a library, a surgery and an active village hall.

The retail sector comprises around 14 shops, including several specialist tourist shops located in the Square, East Street and West Street. The town also has two hotels, several guest houses, four cafes or restaurants and two pubs. There are no industrial or trading estates but the Sandy Hill Workshops (on the site of a former milk factory) contain a furniture maker and a gallery for local artists. 24.5% of the economically active population were employed in managerial and professional occupations in 2001; and 13.4% were self employed or small employers. There are no major employers in the town. The tourist industry is the largest provider of local jobs, although these are seasonal and poorly paid (2001 census parish profile; Corfe Castle Parish Plan, 2004).

Part 4: Sources



4.1 Previous research

There is a rather surprising lack of published material concerning the history of Corfe Castle, as the town and castle hold a significant place in the nation's past and have been considered in some of the earliest national histories as well as text books on castles, the civil war and fortifications. The small number of published books have tended to focus almost exclusively on the history of the castle itself, with only passing mentions of the town. The historian John Hutchins writing in the late 18th century is one of the few exceptions to this and his (and his continuators) account of the town is a major source of information (Hutchins 1774: 1796; 1861). George Bankes, whose family owned Corfe Castle, wrote a history of the castle and its part in the Civil War, in part using his family memoirs (Bankes 1853). In 1883, Thomas Bond published a history and description of the castle, based on his researches in updating the entry for Corfe Castle in the third edition of Hutchins history of Dorset (Bond 1883).

A large number of different guide books to Corfe Castle have been published and have gone through many editions, from the 19th century onwards. The guide books by Philip Brannon (1884) and R Grosvenor Bartelot (1912) are of particular interest and contain some useful information on the town as well as the castle. The most recent guidebook, concerned with the castle itself, has been published by the National Trust (Yarrow 2005).

There have been relatively few modern local histories which have been focussed specifically on Corfe Castle, generally it is included within more general histories of the whole of the Isle of Purbeck. One exception to this is a potted local encyclopaedia published by Rodney Legg (2000).

4.2 Historic Maps

The earliest detailed map of the town is Ralph Treswell's *Plan of the Town and Castle of Corfe 1585*, which is reproduced in Hutchins (Hutchins 1796, 286). The Tithe map dates from 1844. The characterisation was largely based on the 1:2500 scale Ordnance Survey maps dating from 1887 onwards, together with Treswell's 16th century map.

4.3 Documentary Evidence

Primary documentary sources used in this report include a late Saxon charter in which King Eadred gave to Ælfthryth, a religious woman; a

grant of 8 hides (*mansae*) in the Isle of Purbeck AD 948. This probably represents the southern part of Corfe Castle Parish around Kingston (Grundy 1935; Sawyer no. 534). Other primary documents consulted include the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Domesday Survey of 1086 (Thorn & Thorn 1983) and taxation records including the Lay Subsidy (Mills 1971; Rumble 1980) These documents have been used to gain an insight into the size, wealth and economy of Corfe Castle in comparison with neighbouring towns from the 10th to 17th centuries.

4.4 Archaeological Evidence

Archaeological investigation in Corfe Castle has tended to focus on the castle itself, initially in a rather haphazard way. Thomas Bond investigated the curtain wall of the Middle Ward during 1883 and his excavations were reopened the Royal Commission on Historic Monuments (England) during the early 1950s. Tony Brown, a well-respected local amateur archaeologist excavated a few small trenches in various locations around the castle during the 1950s (Farrar 1951; 1974). A more structured approach to excavation within the castle was undertaken between 1986 and 1996 by The National Trust during consolidation works in the Keep, the West Bailey, the Outer Gatehouse, the Outer Curtain Wall, and a new gravel path from the Outer Gatehouse to the Keep (Thackray and Papworth 1987; 1990; 1991; 1992; 1993; 1994; 1995; Grace and Papworth 1997).

There have only been limited archaeological investigations within the town itself, dating from 1993 onwards (**Appendix 3**). There have been only two larger scale investigations, at 84-90 East Street and to the rear of 58 West Street. The latter site comprised an initial evaluation followed by a larger excavation, which revealed evidence for both Mesolithic and medieval activity (Gardiner 2003; Wessex Archaeology 2005). The evaluation and subsequent watching briefs at Abbot's Cottages, 84-90 East Street revealed slight evidence for medieval activity, mainly in the form of boundary ditches (Cox and Cotton 1995; Hambleton 1996; McMahon 1998). Two other evaluations have been undertaken in the town at Pound Barn (Wessex Archaeology 1995) and the cemetery extension (Cox 1996), both of which revealed no archaeological features. The remainder of the investigations have been small-scale watching briefs during development of individual houses or extensions, at 6 Halves Cottages (Valentin 1993) and 52 West Street (Cottrell

1994). A small watching brief has also been undertaken on Boar Mill (National Trust 2001). Building recording has been undertaken on a single building in the town at Uvedale's House (Papworth 2004).

In addition, there have been a number of discoveries of unstratified finds. The most significant of which are Purbeck Marble debris in West Street (Hutchins 1861; Drury 1948), Iron Age and Roman pottery at the Castle and at Town's End (Farrar 1964) and Purbeck Stone mortar roughouts at 66 East Street (Bowd 1999).

Overall, the archaeological evidence has provided some interesting contributions to the history of the castle site, but is rather less informative on the development of the town.

Historic Buildings

Corfe Castle has remarkable survival of historic buildings, particularly in the medieval core of the town, that is, around the square and the north ends of East and West Streets. Approximately 170 structures in the urban area date from the late 19th century or earlier, 129 of which are listed. The buildings make a vital contribution to the historic urban character and are characterised themselves by their vernacular style and predominant use of Purbeck Stone (some robbed from the castle) for walling. Wealden brick is also used in some buildings, and for chimney stacks. Roofing for the historic buildings is also predominately in Purbeck stone slate, although occasional thatched, tiled and imported slate roofs are also found. The majority of buildings in the historic core of the town are of two storeys, closely set, and date from the 17th and 18th centuries.

The village is dominated visually, historically and architecturally by the Castle. Slighted following its capture during the civil war, it now has the appearance of a dramatic and monumental ruin. Nevertheless it remains one of the largest and distinctive medieval castles in England and is of national importance (PDC 2009).

The tower of the parish church of St Edward the Martyr dates from the 15th century, although the remainder of the church was rebuilt in 1860. There are also four late medieval houses in the town, three on West Street (numbers 35-7, 38 and Furzeman's) and one on East Street (number 30). They lie on the fringes of the medieval town centre, a distribution which reflects the rebuilding of the town core in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Important post-medieval buildings in the town include the Old Town Hall built in the 17th century and now used as a museum. The Town House was built in the late 18th century, above an earlier cellar and is constructed in ashlar with a stone slate roof. The building incorporates the mayor's robing room with a distinctive large window fronting a two-storey porch. Morton's House is a late 16th-early 17th century manor house in rough ashlar walls with ashlar dressings now used as a hotel.