

Summary

This report contains the results of a consideration of the historical, archaeological, architectural and map evidence relating to the development of Corfe Castle. It has focused on the understanding of the overall development of the town from its earliest beginnings to its abandonment and the creation of the present village and landscape park. It attempts to identify what historical features and structures survive within the present landscape, and comprehend what is the contribution of its historic dimension to the character of Corfe Castle today. This will enable an informed approach to the management of change and conservation of the urban environment to be undertaken.

Historical Background

Corfe Castle originated as a Norman castle, built in AD1080 by William I and recorded in Domesday under the name Wareham Castle. There is a suggestion that buildings possibly associated with Shaftesbury Abbey existed on the site prior to the Norman Conquest. It has also been suggested that the town originated as a workers camp during the construction of the castle. The trade in Purbeck marble, which fed the town's economic prosperity, was well established by the late 12th century. The town held borough status and was referred to as such during the 13th century, although it did not possess a charter until 1575. It was granted a market by King John and two annual fairs by Henry III. The market ceased before 1848. The castle was held for the king during the Civil War and endured many sieges between 1643-6. It finally fell through intrigue rather than military conquest and its destruction was ordered by parliament in 1646. The trade in Purbeck marble was in terminal decline by the 15th century and virtually ceased by about 1700. Nevertheless, the town seemed to flourish during the post-medieval period, perhaps due to the expanding ball clay industry. Many buildings in the town date from the 17th to 18th centuries. The Swanage Branch Railway opened in 1885 and closed in 1972, although it has since been re-opened as a heritage steam railway. Today the town relies on the tourist trade.

Town Morphology

The current town plan is based largely on the medieval layout, which comprised a market square outside the castle gates, with the church on the south side of the market. Two initially roughly parallel roads, East Street and West Street, emanate from the square on either side of the church, with burgage plots on the west

side of West Street and the east side of East Street. The southern limit of these plots is marked by a series of lanes perpendicular to the main streets. This block seems to have been planned, possibly in the 13th century and might overlie an earlier settlement or field system on a different alignment. The burgage plots on West Street survive largely intact but those on East Street have been truncated by the railway. To the south the two streets diverge. East Street became the main street in the late 18th century, replacing the earlier main street of West Street. The 20th century has seen suburban expansion, particularly at the southern end of East Street, engulfing an earlier dispersed settlement at Town's End.

Built character

Corfe Castle has a large number of historic buildings within the historic town centre. The majority date from the 17th to 18th centuries, although there are also significant groups of 16th and 19th century buildings. The Square and the northern parts of East and West Street form an almost uninterrupted frontage of historic buildings. Medieval structures include the ruins of Corfe Castle itself, which dominate the townscape from most directions; the 15th century tower of St Edward's Church (the rest of the church was rebuilt in 1860); and a number of possible 15th and early 16th century hall houses on West and East Streets. Important late 16th and early 17th century town houses include Uvedale's House and Morton's House on East Street. The historic buildings make an important contribution to the character of Corfe Castle and are typified by Purbeck stone rubble walls and stone slate roofs, varying in height from 1.5 to 2.5 storeys. Two-storey porches are a common feature of the town. Brick, thatch, slate and tile are relatively rare building materials in the historic core of the town. The effect is a remarkably consistent and coherent vernacular style made more charming by the variation in roof line reflecting the time depth of development. Modern development is almost non-existent in the town centre. Large-scale suburban housing estates are restricted to the south, around Town's End.

Landscape Setting

The fundamental and distinctive aspect of Corfe Castle's landscape setting is the Castle ruins set atop a steep-sided chalk hill within a gap in the Purbeck Ridge. It is this gap, carved by the two branches of the Corfe River, that gives the town its name (*Corf* = pass or gap). The town sits below the castle on the Wealden Clay in the



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

Purbeck Vale, and it is the interrelationship between the two, emphasised and framed by the dramatic landscape, that greatly enhances the town's historic character.

Historic Urban Character

The historic urban character of Corfe Castle is closely bound up with its distinctive landscape setting and the quality of its historic fabric. The Castle ruins provide a magnificent backdrop to streetscapes within the town. The medieval town plan survives virtually complete and the associated post-medieval streetscapes are largely intact. Modern suburban development is largely limited to the southern part of East Street. The landscape and topographic setting of the town is fundamental to its character, in particular, its location within a gap in the Purbeck ridge and its containment between the two branches of the Corfe River.

Further Research

This report has highlighted many aspects of the

historical development of Corfe Castle and how this has shaped the modern town. It has also indicated gaps in our knowledge and areas which would repay further research.

The main areas of suggested further research include:

- Research into pre-conquest activity on the site of the Norman Castle, particularly in terms of evidence for Romano-British and late Saxon structures.
- Research into the origins and form of the planned town, particularly in terms of evidence for a pre-urban field system or putative construction camp.
- Research into the medieval development of the town, its economy, industry (particularly the Purbeck Marble trade) and secular buildings.