

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

Sturminster Newton lies at the southern tip of a N-S aligned ridge within the Blackmore Vale.

This ridge forms the eastern limit of the upper valley of the river Stour. However, at Sturminster the course of the Stour changes to a more easterly direction, cutting through the ridge and enclosing the promontory upon which the town stands. The River Stour and its flood plain define the western and southern limits of the modern town and the Chivrick Brook, a tributary to the Stour, defines the eastern limit. To the north the limestone ridge continues into the parish of Hinton St Mary. There are two parallel sections of the ridge at Sturminster, with a small central vale dividing them.

The topography has had a major influence on the town layout. The oldest part of the town, St Mary's Church, sits on a bluff above the River Stour, where it cuts back close to the southern end of the town. A potentially pre-urban route runs in a northerly direction along the ridge to the west of the church and crosses the river to

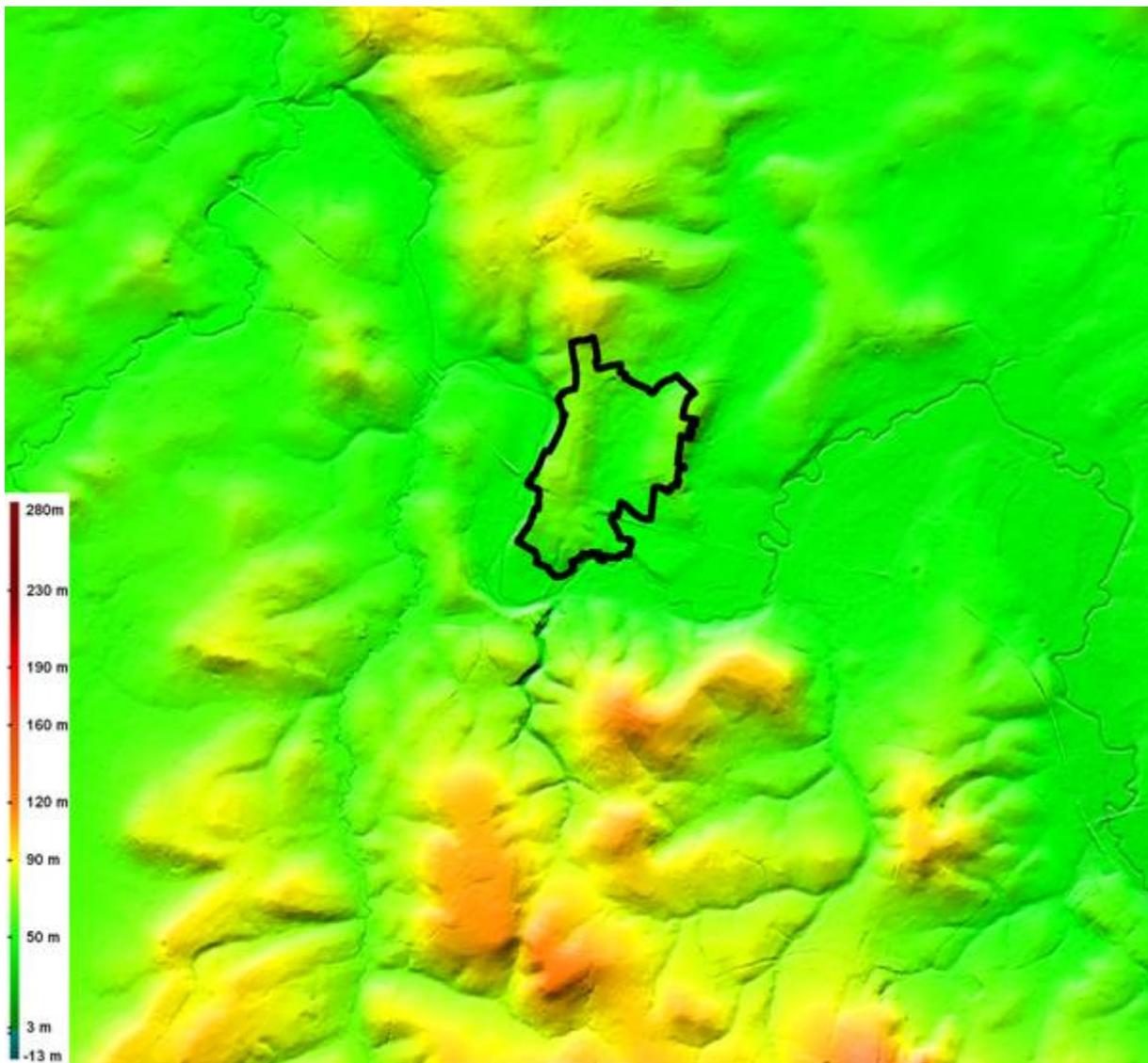


Figure 3: Sturminster Newton's topographic setting

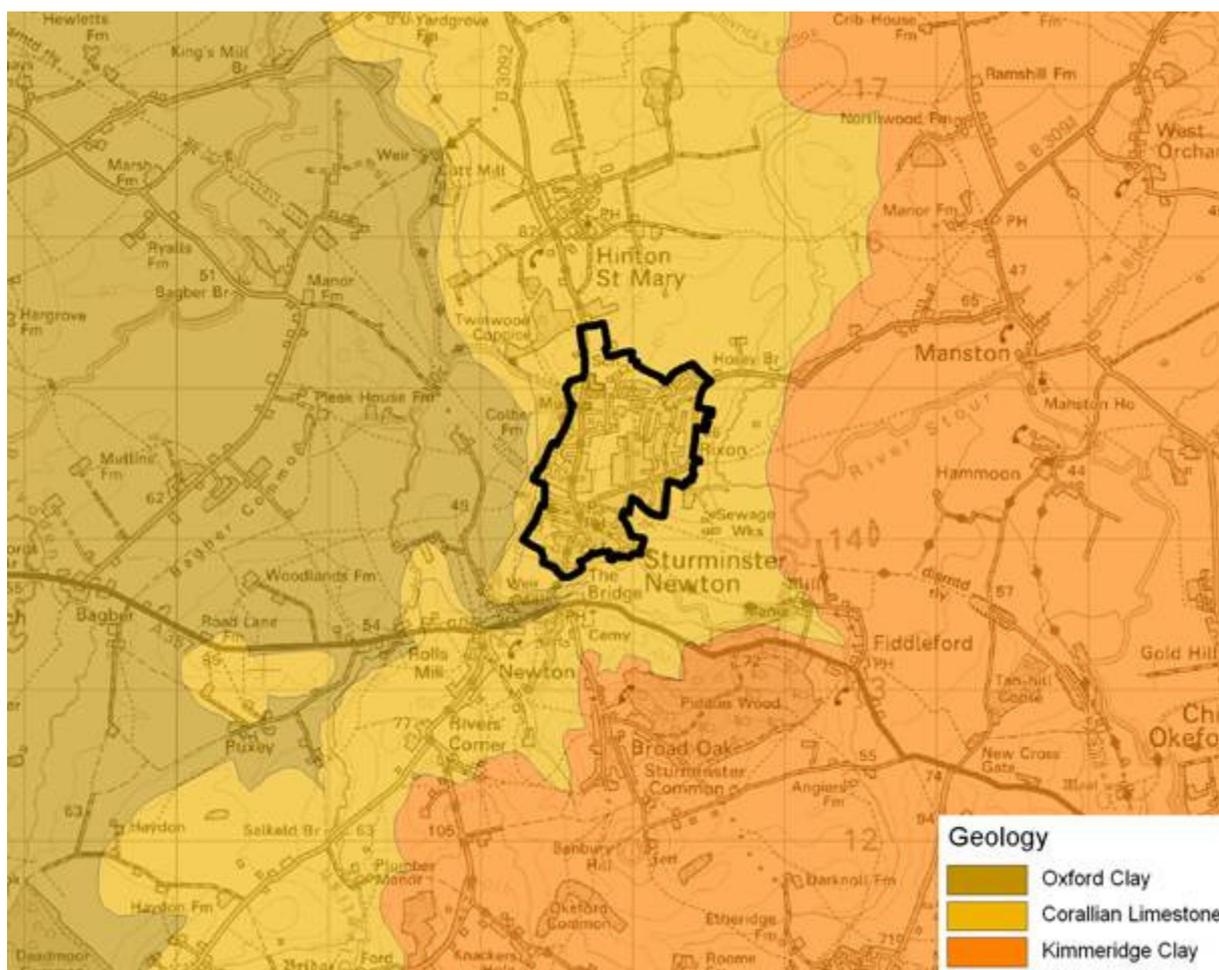


Figure 4: Geology of the Sturminster Newton Area.

the south at the site of an old ford east of the late medieval Sturminster Bridge. Two further potentially pre-urban tracks run in an E-W direction. The southernmost of these runs adjacent to the church and on to Fiddleford Mill where it crosses the Stour. The northern route remains on the north bank of the Stour. Thus, the Middle Saxon minster was founded on a prominent position above the Stour, close to the junction of two early land routes. The northern part of the town has been developed during the 20th century on the site of the former medieval fields. Boundaries in this area tended to run parallel with or perpendicular to the ridge and the modern street pattern fossilises these boundaries to some extent.

3.3 Geology

Sturminster Newton lies close to the southern tip of a N-S aligned ridge of Corallian limestone, where it is cut by the River Stour. This ridge forms the central spine of the Blackmore Vale, with lower lying Oxford and Kimmeridge Clays occupying the land to the west and east

respectively. The Corallian is a Jurassic Limestone forming the middle strata of the Oolite series of limestones. Its name derives from its coralliferous nature. This stone is shelly, pale buff in colour and used as a building stone, known locally as Marnhull Stone. The Oxford clay is particularly good for brick making, another important local building material.

3.4 Landscape Character

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

In the national assessment of countryside character, Sturminster Newton lies within National Character Area 133; Blackmore Vale and the Vale of Wardour (Countryside Agency 1999).

The key characteristics of National Character Area 133 are listed as:

- A complex mosaic of mixed farming: undulating, lush, clay vales fringed by Upper Greensand hills and scarps.
- Small, rectilinear pasture fields with hedgerow oak trees and many scattered small broadleaved woodlands.

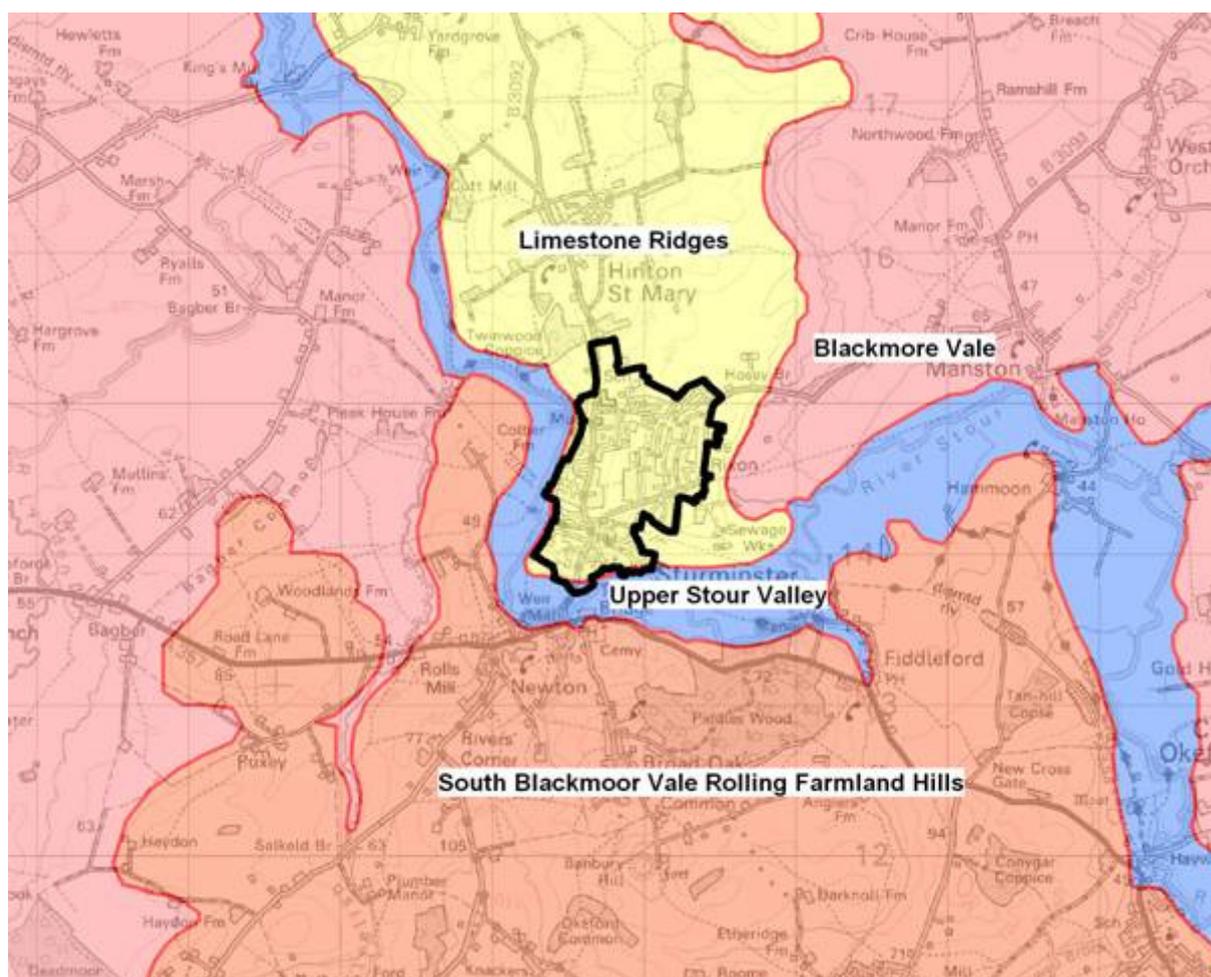


Figure 5: Sturminster Newton in its landscape character setting (NDCC Landscape Characterisation).

- Many streams and waterside trees.
- Broken, low, limestone ridges with shallow valleys crossing the clayey Blackmore Vale and steeper valleys around the margins of the area.
- Small villages and hamlets form nuclei within a patchwork of fields, hedges, woods and trees.
- Many villages at scarp foot, river crossing points and strategic sites.
- A wide variety of local building materials, including local stone and half timbering.

Sturminster Newton sits across two Landscape Character areas in the North Dorset District Landscape Character Assessment (Figure 5); most of the town lies within the North Dorset Limestone Ridges Landscape Character Area whilst the fringes on the south and west project into the Upper Stour Valley Landscape Character Area in a few places (NDDC 2008).

The key characteristics of the North Dorset Limestone Ridges character area are:

- Elevated open plateau areas of undulating farmland landscape with distinctive sloping

edges in places.

- Thick dense hedgerows and frequent small copses and plantations.
- Open views from higher areas across the Vale to the chalk escarpment.
- Many scattered villages and farmsteads and a distinctive settlement pattern along the ridges or on the side slopes to the ridges.
- The traditional use of locally available and distinctive limestone in the villages and in other buildings and structures.
- Numerous twisting hedge lined lanes, straighter ridge top roads and many public Rights of Way.

The key characteristics of the Upper Stour Valley character area are:

- A varied but generally flat, pastoral river valley landscape as it flows through the Limestone and Blackmore Vale character areas.
- Often a narrow river channel intensively farmed up to its edges with few marginal areas.
- Similar characteristics in places as the Black-

more Vale but less trees.

- Important associated groups and ribbons of trees following the course of the river in places to include visually important mature Willows and Alders.
- The meandering channel of the river itself is a key feature.
- Steeper wooded side slopes in places are key features.
- Old derelict mills, mill ponds, areas of reed and marginal vegetation and old bridges crossing the river are all key features of interest.
- The riverside meadows at Sturminster Newton are key features of historic and cultural importance.

The draft Historic Landscape Character mapping shows Sturminster Newton sitting within an area of largely enclosed fields, including piecemeal, planned, modern, other regular and other amorphous enclosed fields. The other dominant aspect to the historic landscape character is the valley floors of the River Stour and Chivrick's Brook, including an area of former water meadows. There are only isolated patches of deciduous woodland and coppices.

3.5 The Present Town

The modern built-up area of Sturminster Newton lies entirely within the large parish of Sturminster Newton and covers an area of about 112 ha. It lies at the junction and the southern ends of the B3092 from Frome and the B3091 from Shaftesbury. The settlement of Newton lies just outside the study area south of Sturminster Bridge over the River Stour on the A357 road from Wincanton to Blandford Forum. Sturminster has no rail links; the nearest station is at Templecombe, approximately 11.5 km away to the north. The population of the parish has been rising steadily throughout the 20th century but has risen significantly recently; by 25% from 2,490 in 1991 to 3,110 in 2001. The latest population figure for the town itself (2001 census) is 2,627. There were 1,859 dwellings in Sturminster Newton in March 2007. Sturminster Newton has one primary school, one secondary school and one special school.

The retail sector comprised 38 shops in 2005, mainly local shops and a supermarket. The town also has two industrial estates, although only one, Butts Pond Industrial Estate (5.18ha), lies within the urban area. 36% of the economically active population are employed in public

administration, education and health; 20% in distribution, hotels and restaurants; 14% in the manufacturing industries; 10% in banking and 10% in construction. Major employers include A. Hammonds and Sons Ltd, Caice Acoustics, Dorset County Council, Faccenda and Harts (Dorset County Council 2008, 82-3).

Part 4: Sources



4.1 Previous research

The antiquarian John Leland visited Sturminster Newton c. 1540 and recorded important information concerning the size of the town and quality of the market. Hutchins and his editors discussed the town in the late 18th and 19th centuries (Hutchins 1774; Hutchins 1815; Hutchins 1874).

A good number of local histories have been published during the later 20th century concerning specific aspects of Sturminster Newton's past. These include childhood memoirs (Young 2008; House 1989; Lydford 1989); a study of the parish church of St Mary (Morshead 1989) and the history of the workhouse (Barber and Bennett 2002). Sturminster Newton also has a thriving and active museum and mill society, members of which contributed information to this report and have recently compiled a general history of the town (Mountain 2006).

4.2 Historic Maps

The earliest detailed map of the town is an estate map dated 1783 in the possession of members of the Sturminster Newton Museum and Mill Society (Rivers 1783). This appears to be the map upon which the Tithe Map of 1840 was based. The 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 includes the will of Alfred in which he gives an estate at Sturminster (probably Sturminster Marshall) to his son Aethelweard in 873-888 (Sawyer no. 1507) and a late Saxon charter in which King Edgar gave Glastonbury Abbey 30 hides at Sturminster in 968, including all the parish of Sturminster Newton (Grundy, 1938; Sawyer no. 764). A further late Saxon charter dated c. 1016 grants 17 hides at *Newetone Kastei* to Glastonbury Abbey (Finberg, 1964, no. 618). Other primary documents consulted include the 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 Sturminster Newton in comparison with neighbouring towns from the 10th to 17th centuries.

4.4 Archaeological Evidence

Archaeological investigation in Sturminster Newton has been on a very limited scale. A few artefacts have been recorded as found in Sturminster Newton, but with no other provenance. They could in theory derive from anywhere within the parish and not necessarily the town itself. These include a stone amulet (PSANHS 32, 79), an Iron Age coin (Evans 1864, 61) and a polished stone axe (PDNHAS 55, lxix). Other finds of Roman coins during the construction of Sturminster Newton High School and tennis courts at the Vicarage, have been reported by members of the Sturminster Newton Museum and Mill Society. The only recorded archaeological investigation within the study area was an evaluation by AC Archaeology of land to the rear of Lloyds Bank during June 1998 in advance of the development of Stour Mews (Cotton & McMahon 1998). No significant archaeological finds or deposits were recorded.

4.5 Historic Buildings

Sturminster Newton has good survival of historic buildings, particularly in the historic core of the town, to the south of the disused railway. Approximately 170 structures in the urban area date from the late 19th century or earlier, 76 of which are listed. The buildings make a vital contribution to the historic urban character and are characterised themselves by their use of red brick, Marnhull stone and painted brick and render for walling and a variety of stone, slate, thatch or tile roofs. The majority of buildings in the historic core of the town are of two storeys, closely set, and date from the mid 18th and 19th centuries following the disastrous fire of 1729.

The 15th century market cross at the SW corner of the Market House, occupies a prominent position at the heart of the medieval town. Only the octagonal base of four steps and the octagonal pedestal survive.

The fabric of St Mary's parish church dates from the late 14th or early 15th century, although it was extensively rebuilt during the 19th century. The list of vicars is continuous since 1298, although no physical evidence for a building earlier than the 14th century has been recorded on the site. The oldest surviving building in the town centre is the 15th-16th century *Tanyard*, a late medieval partly timber-framed hall. Other historic buildings include the 17th century Ham Gate Farmhouse and 19th century school buildings.

Around the fringes of the historic town, a number of villas have been constructed, generally with panoramic views across the Stour Valley. The first of these was *Beech House*, constructed in the 17th century to the south of the town centre. Other significant villas include *The Lindens*, *The Hive* and the slightly later grade II listed *Bonslea House*, in brick with stone dressings and a turret dating from the turn of the 20th century. Smaller scale historic buildings survive in 19th century ribbon developments along Bath Road Station Road and Rixon Hill. The northernmost historic building is the mid 19th century Workhouse and associated chapel on Bath Road.