

Summary

This report considers the historical, archaeological, architectural and map evidence relating to the development of Lyme Regis. It focuses on the overall development of the town from its origins to the present day, with a view to defining its influence on the modern townscape, identifying surviving historical features and structures, and understanding the contribution of its historic dimension to the character of Lyme Regis today. This will enable an informed approach to the management of change and conservation of the urban environment.

Historical Background

The origins of Lyme Regis are obscure but it appears to have been an area of salt production in the Saxon and early medieval period. The settlement grew into a town and seaport of some consequence some time between the 11th and late 13th century. It was granted a market in the mid 13th century and its borough charter in 1284. The Cobb was probably built during the 13th century and encouraged substantial trade with France. After about the mid 1300s Lyme entered a period of decline, brought on by a combination of factors including the Black Death, the French Wars, and damage by storms and landslips. However, the fortunes of Lyme revived and the period between the late 15th and mid 17th century can be considered its heyday as a mercantile port; it was one of the more important trading ports in England with substantial trade with France and also with Africa, the Mediterranean, the West Indies and the Americas. Lyme was also a significant cloth-making town. The town was unsuccessfully besieged by Royalist forces during the Civil War. In 1685, the Duke of Monmouth landed here in his abortive attempt to take the crown. Lyme waned as a port from the late 17th century.

Lyme Regis underwent a major transformation into a fashionable seaside resort in the later 18th century, attracting many rich and famous visitors. It also became famous for its part in the development of the sciences of geology and palaeontology. Lyme continued to produce cloth in the 19th century. There was significant quarrying along the coast, bringing about rapid erosion, but the industry had died out by the end of the 19th century. Today Lyme is a town largely dependent on the tourist trade.

Town morphology

The plan layout of Lyme Regis consists of a series of routes radiating out from the mouth of

the river. The course and the importance of the historic routes have changed, and the present road layout dates largely from the 18th-20th century. Historically, Lyme Regis had two main parts – the town centre at the mouth of the river, and The Cobb further along the coast, linked only by a track along the beach. The historic core can be divided into two contrasting areas, the narrow streets and small properties round Coombe Street along the base of the river valley and the wide, straight Broad Street with regular properties along both sides and market area. The beach and seafront developed as part of the seaside resort from the later 18th century onwards. On the slopes to the west and north-west of the town is an area of 18th and early 19th century villa development, which has been largely subsumed within later suburban housing estate development on the higher slopes to the north of the town.

Built character

Lyme Regis has a large number of good quality historic buildings, mainly late Georgian and early Victorian, that date from the period of the town's revival as a seaside resort. It has a good range of town houses, suburban houses, sea resort villas, and workers' cottages. Broad Street has good groups of large three-storey houses, some with surviving historic shopfronts and some historic hotels and inns. Elsewhere, the houses are more modest in scale. Pound Street and Silver Street have a number of large villas. The buildings are mainly of local Blue Lias, but most have been rendered or slate-hung to protect them from the elements. A small number of historic industrial buildings primarily associated with the former cloth industry have been identified. The Cobb is the most significant and distinctive historic structure in Lyme Regis and is its most familiar landmark.

Landscape Setting

Lyme Regis has a distinctive and dramatic topographic setting, focused on the mouth of the River Lim and flanked by steep hills. The landscape is extremely active, prone to landslips and to coastal erosion. The nature of the topography has meant that Lyme has always had poor inland communications. Its location makes it a useful position for a harbour of refuge, but with no natural harbour here, it is only the artificial harbour, the Cobb, that enabled it to become a port. Its natural setting has proved a great asset in its function as a seaside resort and holiday destination.



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

Historic Urban Character

Lyme's historic character is closely bound up with its landscape and maritime setting, street pattern, and its historic buildings, which together contribute to its local distinctiveness. The historic core consists of both planned and unplanned elements. The separation of the medieval town and the medieval harbour is also very distinctive. The narrow winding streets in the centre provide a very strong contribution linking the present town to its medieval past.

The high quality and quantity of historic buildings (many of late 18th and early 19th century date) form a major component of Lyme's historic seaside resort character.

The landscape setting is perhaps the most dominant element, shaping the layout of the town and constraining its growth. The unstable nature of the ground, particularly near the coastline has inhibited urban development. The steepness of the slopes have made inland

movement difficult and provide many vantage points to view the surrounding landscape and seascape. It is a magnificent backdrop to the town, enhancing Lyme's attraction as a seaside resort.

Further Research

This report has highlighted many aspects of the historical development of Lyme Regis and how this has shaped the modern town. It has also indicated gaps in our knowledge and areas which would repay further research. These include:

- Investigation of the character and location of the early settlement at Lyme.
- Research into the medieval development of the town, its economy and industry.
- Research into the post-medieval industry of the town.
- Research into the development of Lyme as a seaside resort.