

# Summary

This report contains the results of a consideration of the historical, archaeological, architectural and map evidence relating to the development of Swanage. It has focused on the understanding of the overall development of the town from its earliest beginnings to the present day, with a view to defining how this has influenced the modern townscape, identifying what historical features and structures survive within the modern town, and comprehending what is the contribution of its historic dimension to the character of Swanage today. This will enable an informed approach to the management of change and conservation of the urban environment to be undertaken.

## *Historical Background*

Swanage originated as a small farming, fishing and quarrying settlement, which developed into a seaside resort during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Swanage existed as a number of separate manors with dispersed settlement in the late Saxon period, the boundaries of which had a distinctive long linear form in the southern part of the town, which is still visible within the landscape today. A number of the smaller settlements such as Herston and Newton have become absorbed into the town. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Swanage had become increasingly dependent on quarrying and the stone trade. In the 1820s-30s William Morton Pitt tried to establish Swanage as a fashionable watering place, but it was not until the later 19<sup>th</sup> century that it really developed into a seaside resort. The transformation of Swanage was largely due to the efforts of a small group of men, of whom George Burt and John Mowlem are perhaps the most well known. The arrival of the railway in 1885 helped open up the resort to many more visitors and consequently the town grew significantly, reaching its heyday in the 1920s-30s. Changing economic and social conditions after the World War II meant that Swanage declined in popularity as a seaside holiday destination, but increasingly the town has become a popular retirement place.

## *Town morphology*

Historic Swanage has a linear plan form focused along the High Street, with nodes of historic settlement along it. Later development has imposed a more complex morphology over this simple historic settlement pattern. The railway line runs roughly parallel to the High Street along the lowest part of the town and has acted both as a barrier to free movement to the north and stimulated development in this area, particularly between the station and the seafront

providing a second focus to the town and forming the present commercial centre. Development has taken place along streets running parallel to the railway with short linking roads to the High Street. Victoria Avenue runs from Herston over the railway to the seafront providing an alternative route avoiding the narrow High Street. To the north is a fairly regular grid pattern of suburban development and some modern housing estates with their own curvilinear road networks. To the south, suburban development is partly contained within the remains of earlier linear land boundaries which has influenced the largely parallel road network connected by relatively few curving crescents. To the east, this is less evident as the modern housing estates have largely imposed their own road networks, which have little in common with the earlier property boundaries

## *Built character*

Swanage has a diverse range of historic buildings reflecting its evolution from village to seaside resort. There are few pre-18<sup>th</sup> century buildings, of which Newton Manor is the most significant, but there are a range of 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century Purbeck stone cottages, survivals from the earlier quarrying and farming settlements. A small, but significant, group of early 19<sup>th</sup> century Georgian buildings including the former Royal Victoria Hotel are survivals from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century watering place.

The most distinctive buildings in Swanage are later 19<sup>th</sup> century, distinguished by their reuse of architectural fragments salvaged from buildings in London. The most important are the Town Hall and Purbeck House. There are also many Victorian and Edwardian houses, some probably built as guest houses, distinguished by their large stacked bay windows, particularly on the slopes to the south and in New Swanage to the north of the town. A few late 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial buildings survive, including the water works, station buildings and parts of the gas works.

Swanage has a large number of inter-war suburban houses, many of which may have been used as guest houses. There are also a relatively large number of post-war and modern housing estates of little local distinctiveness.

## *Landscape Setting*

Swanage lies at the end of the wide central Purbeck Vale where it meets the sea between Durlston Head and Peveril Point. The central part of the town lies in the flat low-lying floodplain and the town rises to the north and south up steep



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

slopes which give good views over the wide curving bay and sandy beach of Swanage Bay.

#### *Historic Urban Character*

The historic urban character of the town reflects the major phases of development from a farming and quarrying village to an early 19<sup>th</sup> century watering-place, later seaside resort and modern dormitory town. Each has contributed to the current character of the town. The groups of vernacular buildings around Church Hill and Herston reflect the earlier settlements. The small group of Georgian buildings at the end of the High Street reflects the early 19<sup>th</sup> century watering-place. The seafront and the station with the commercial development between, together with the large number of villas and guest-houses to the north and south reflect the rise of the seaside resort. The extensive inter-war and post-war suburban estates are testimony to the continuing popularity of Swanage as a resort

and latterly as a retirement place. The most distinctive elements are the late 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings associated with George Burt and the villas and terraces on the slopes rising up towards Durlston. The pleasing landscape and topographic setting has encouraged the development of Swanage as a seaside resort.

#### *Further Research*

This report has highlighted many aspects of the historical development of Swanage 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 work include:

- Research into the prehistoric and Roman settlement.
- Research into the stone industry.
- Research into the development of the seaside resort.