

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

Bridport lies near the southern edge of the

open flat Brit Valley, which drains the Rivers Brit and Mangerton/Asker, running from the bowl-shaped vale around Beaminster down to the sea at West Bay. The valley is surrounded by the rolling woodland hills around Powderstock to the east, the Axe Valley hills to the northeast and the conical Chideock Hills to the southwest. Marshwood Vale lies on the western side of the valley, to the north of the Bridport Study Area.

The topography of the Bridport study area is very varied, providing a consistently interesting and dramatic backdrop to the urban and suburban areas of Bridport and has helped shape development of the town. A major component of the topography is the confluence of the Rivers Brit and Asker near the centre of the study area. The river valley floodplains provide a Y-shaped area of flat low-lying ground running down to the sea at West Bay and this serves to

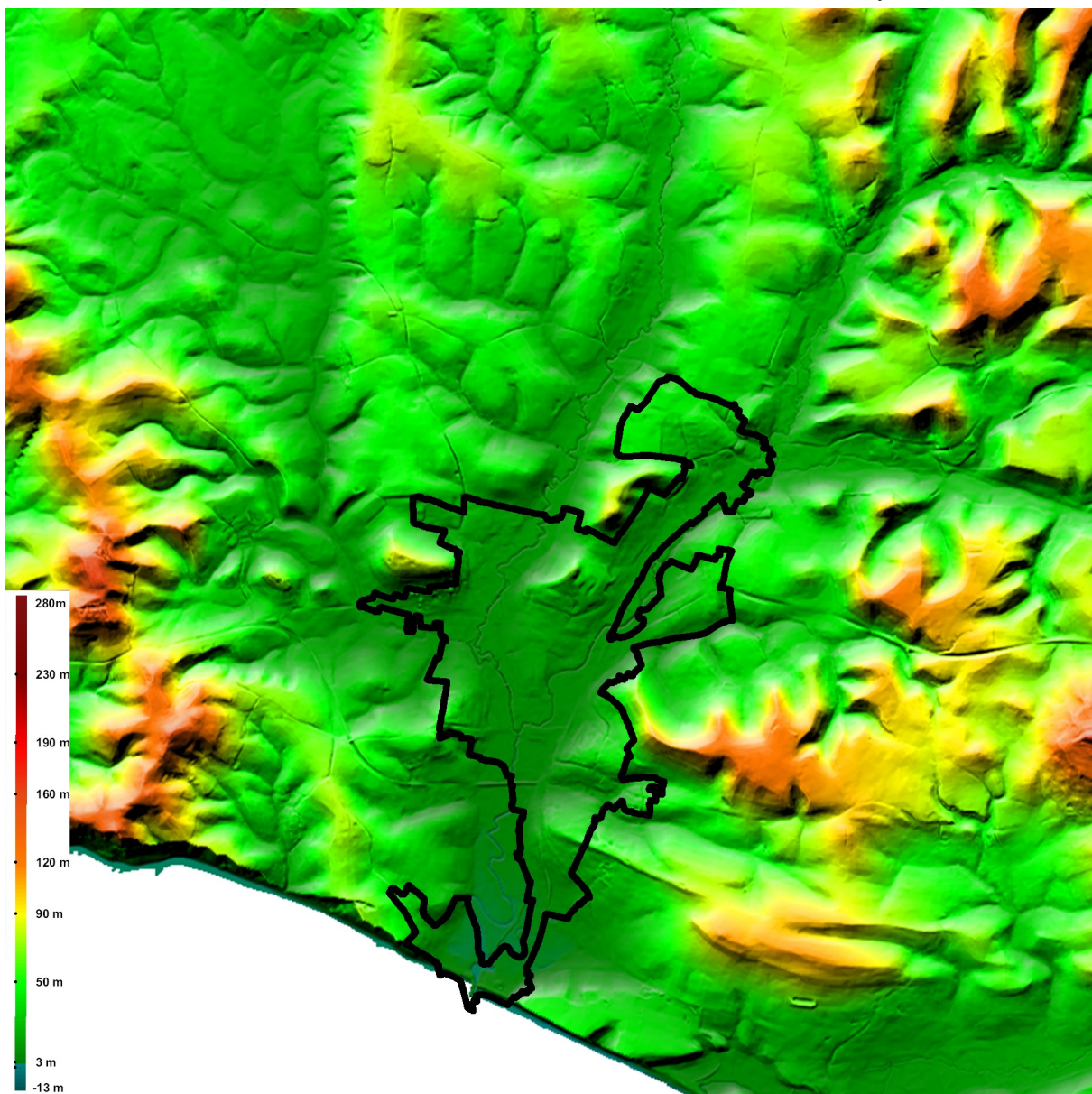


Figure 3: Bridport's topographic setting.

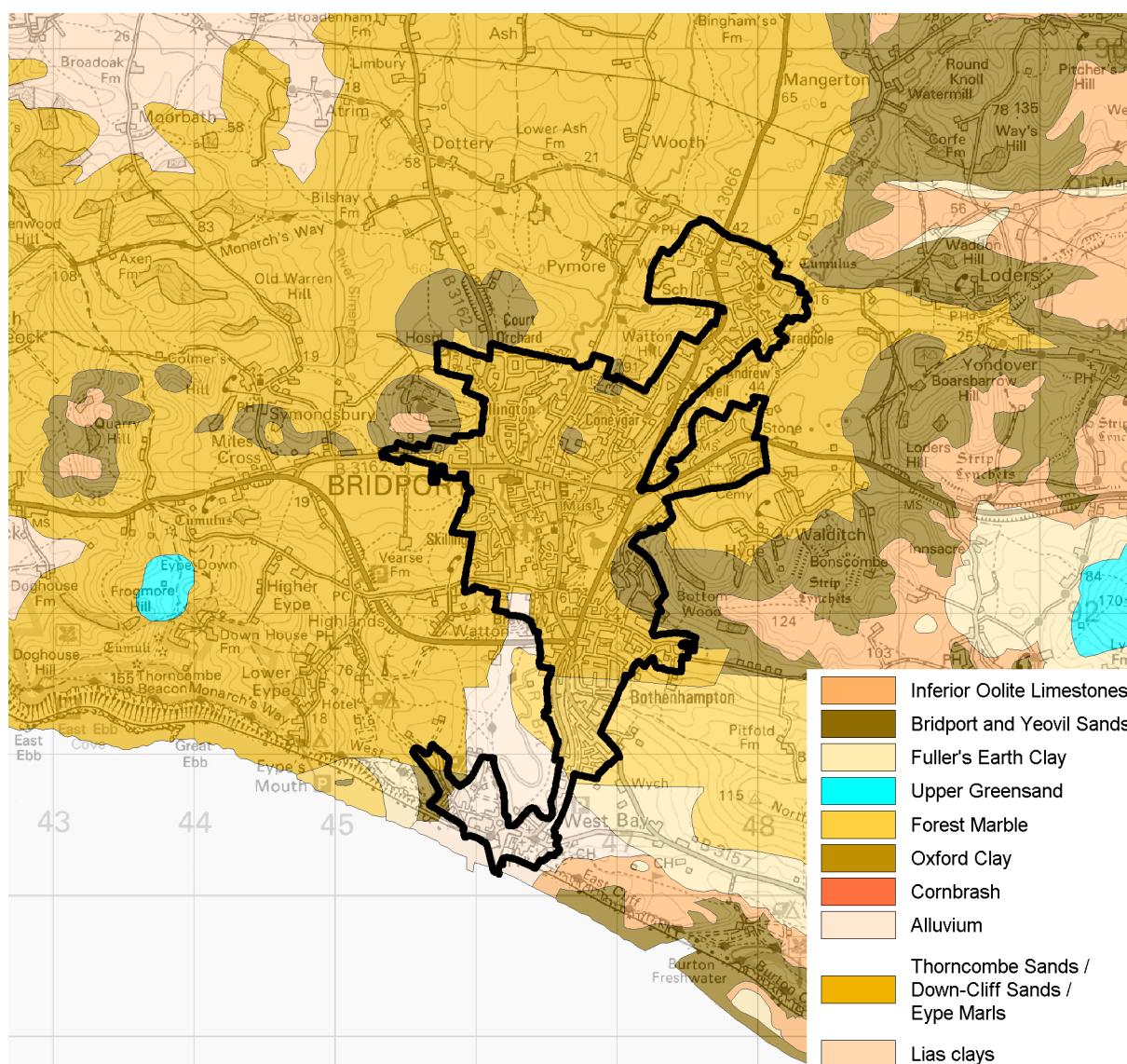


Figure 4: Geology of the Bridport Area.

define the historic centre of the town. The River Simene joins the Brit near the western side of the study area. The central part of the town lies on a broad triangular-shaped promontory with a round-backed profile rising to about 15 m above sea level, immediately north of the Brit and Asker confluence. The area to the north comprises a series of conical hills (Allington Hill, Coneygar Hill, Watton Hill) rising to heights up to 90 m above sea level. The ground on the western side of the Brit valley between Bridport and West Bay slopes fairly steeply up to Skilling Hill and West Cliff. The area to the east of the study area is framed by a series of hills (Coneygar Hill, Hyde Hill, North Hill), marking the eastern side of the Brit valley. There are a number of small stream valleys between these hills, draining down into the River Brit. West Bay lies on the flat low-lying Brit floodplain where it meets the sea and is framed dramatically by East and West Cliff.

3.3 Geology

The bedrock geology of the Bridport area comprises Early and Middle Jurassic sandstones, clays and mudstones (Figure 4). Bridport mainly lies on Early Jurassic Down Cliff and Thorncombe Sand sandstones, Eype Clay siltstones and limestones, with Middle Jurassic Forest Marble and Fuller's Earth mudstones around Bothenhampton. There is a band of Bridport Sand forming Allington, Coneygar and Watton Hills.

The superficial deposits within the Bridport study area principally comprise alluvium in the valleys of the rivers Brit, Asker and Simene. West Bay is built on alluvium.

3.4 Landscape Character

Bridport and its surrounding landscape lies within the Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), recognised as a nationally

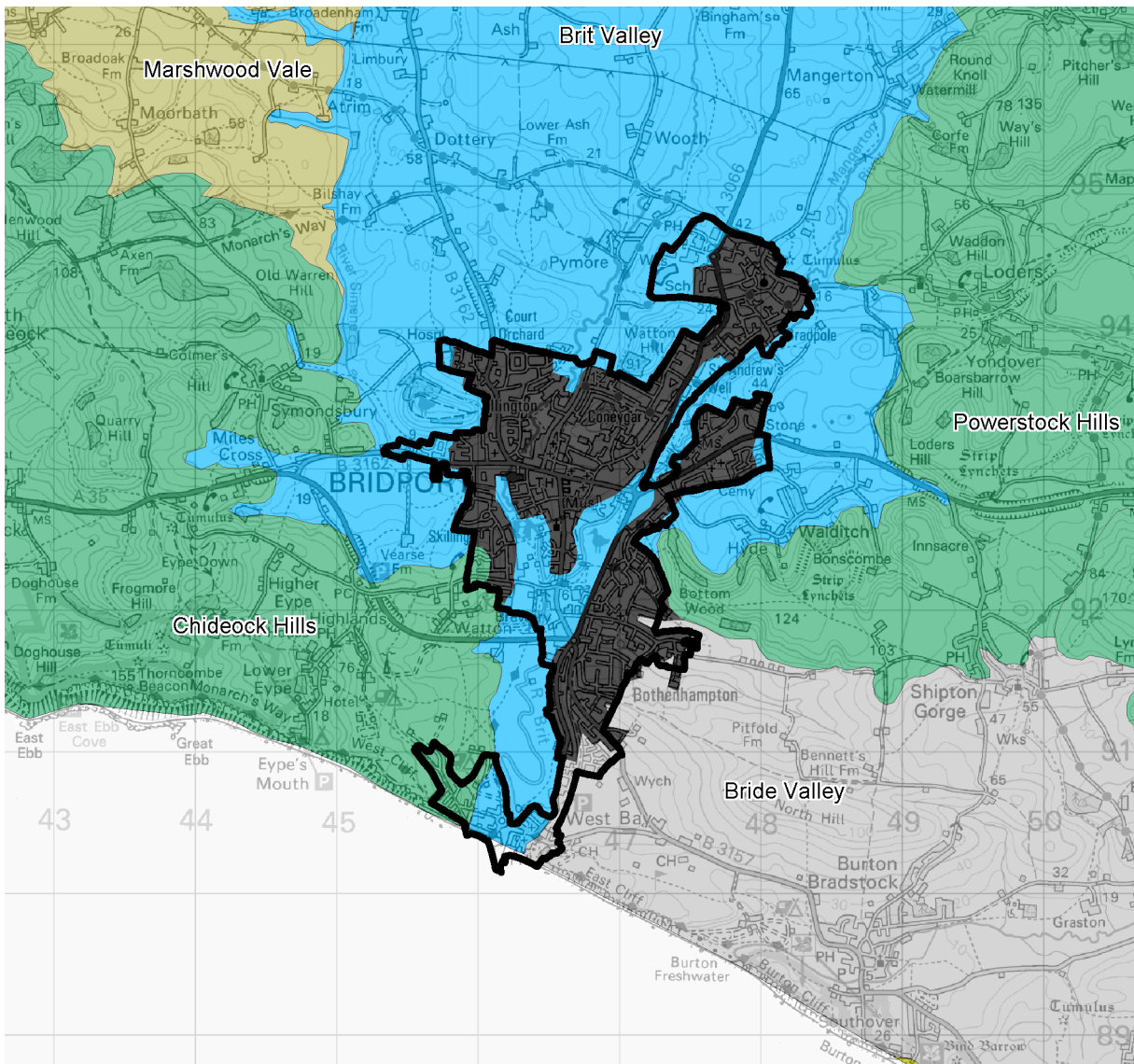


Figure 5: Bridport in its landscape character setting (Dorset AONB Landscape Characterisation).

important landscape. The landscape has been the subject of several landscape character assessments, which help place the town into its larger surrounding landscape.

In the national assessment of countryside character, Bridport and its surrounding landscape is within National Character Area 139 Marshwood and Powerstock Vales (Countryside Agency 1999). The key characteristics of this character area are listed as:

The key characteristics of National Character Area 139 are listed as:

- Bowl-shaped clay vale surrounded by irregular ridges and hills of Upper Greensand with deeply incised valleys.
- Pasture vale landscape with ribbons of woodland, regular field pattern and abundant hedgerow oaks.
- Scattered hamlets and farms linked by narrow, winding lanes in the clay vale: many compact villages on the valley floors else-

where.

- Wooded and heathy scarps.
- Upper Greensand summits and conical hills with patches of heathland.
- Distinctive coastline with undulating farmland to cliff edge; slumped, mobile cliffs are punctuated by prominent headlands.
- Attractive stone buildings, built of limestone and Ham Hill Stone.
- Prominent hillforts overlooking the Vales.

Bridport was included in the Brit Valley Landscape Type in *West Dorset 2000* (WDDC 2002), which provided a detailed record of the features and landscape elements present. This has now been superseded by a new Landscape Character Assessment of the Dorset AONB (Dorset AONB 2008) and a complementary West Dorset Landscape Character Assessment (WDDC 2008). In these latest assessments, Bridport lies almost completely

within the Brit Valley Character Area, part of the Settled River Valley Landscape Type, with small areas in the Chideock Hills, Powerstock Hills and Bride Valley Character Areas (Figure 5).

The key characteristics of the Brit Valley area are:

- Meandering flat river floodplain with water meadows, damp neutral pastures and linear wet woodlands
- Undulating hills with shallow, branching clay valleys
- Patchwork of small, open fields on valley bottom with trimmed hedgerows, trees and occasional stone walls
- Small oak, ash and hazel woodlands on valley sides with large arable and pastoral fields with strip lynchets
- Long open views along the valley floor
- Historic bridges and watermills of local stone along the valley floor
- Extensive reed beds and grazing marsh towards the coast
- Scattered clustered settlements of golden limestone and thatch along the branching valley bottoms
- Market towns with a strong industrial heritage
- Occasional orchards and parkland landscapes

The draft Historic Landscape Character mapping shows Bridport sitting within a mosaic of planned enclosure, other regular enclosed and piecemeal enclosed fields, with areas of open fields around Walditch and Hyde to the east.

3.5 The Present Town

The modern built-up area of the town of Bridport includes the whole of the parish of Bridport, together with parts of the parishes of Allington, Bothenhampton and Bradpole, and covers an area of approximately 500 hectares. It lies on the A35 South Coast Trunk Route and has no rail links. The population is 13,070 (2005 mid-year estimate) which places it the upper part of the second rank of towns in Dorset, based on population size, being considerably smaller than Bournemouth, Poole, Christchurch and Weymouth, but having only a few thousand fewer inhabitants than Dorchester. The rate of population growth was about 10% per decade for the 1970s-1990s, up from the around 4% increase in the 1950s-1960s, largely the result of net inward migration. The popu-

lation contains a large proportion of older people – over 33% are aged over 60. The 2001 Census records 6,346 dwellings in Bridport and a further 528 have been built since 2001, giving a total of 6,874. There are eight primary schools, one secondary school and a special school.

The retail sector comprises 128 shops/119,000 sq. ft. (2005). The town centre still has mainly local shops but there are some national chains also, including an out of town supermarket. The catchment area for major food shopping extends around 4-5 miles in a north, east and west direction. There is a weekly market.

Between 1994-2006, 6.78 hectares of industrial land have been developed in Bridport. There are six industrial estates in the town: St. Andrews Trading Estate (2.4h), St. Michael's Trading Estate (1.8h), Dreadnought Trading Estate (1.6h), Gore Cross Business Park (6.1h), North Mills Trading Estate (2.2h), Old Laundry/Sea Road North (0.55h).

The most significant employers are in the Distribution, Hotels & Restaurant sector employing 36% of the workforce, Public Administration, Education, and Health (28%), Manufacturing (12%) and Banking, Finance and Insurance (10%). The manufacturing industry includes a significant proportion of nets being made by Bridport Aviation Products (cargo restraining nets for cargo) and sports nets (Edwards Sports Products), amongst others.

The data used in this section have been obtained from Dorset County Council's *The Dorset Data Book 2007* (April 2007).

Part 4: Sources



4.1 Previous research

Bridport has never had a thorough comprehensive published history. There have been a number of good studies of different aspects of the town, but a full history remains to be written. Brief descriptions of the town were recorded by the early topographers of the 16th and 17th centuries, Leland, Camden and Gerard (Coker), but the earliest history of the town is that of John Hutchins in his *History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset*, first published in 1774, with a second edition published in 1796-1815 and a third edition in 1861-1874. The second and third editions were considerably enlarged by their editors, but all editions provide invaluable information, much of which may have otherwise been lost. The section on Bridport is fairly lengthy and mainly concerned with ecclesiastical and administrative history. The lack of early historians and antiquarians in Bridport has meant that much of Bridport's history has remained hidden. This is admirably illustrated by the statement in Black's *Guide to Dorsetshire* that "Bridport has no history" (Black 1881, 32). In 1855 Joseph Maskell bemoaned the paucity of information on the old buildings and relics of the town and the lack of local legends and traditions, but his conviction was "not that Bridport has no history, but rather, its inhabitants have never possessed sufficient enthusiasm for the past to retain its legendary lore" (Maskell 1855, 11-12).

It is probably fair to say that it was not until the work of Bridport's foremost historian, Basil Short, in the 1970s and 1980s that the situation improved and a number of different elements of the town's history became better understood. Short made extensive use of the Borough archives and was the first to investigate the Saxon and medieval topography of the town (Short 1975; 1988). Many strands of his interest in the history of Bridport were published in *The Book of Bridport*, co-authored with John Sales in 1980. Perhaps his most valuable work is his history of early post-medieval Bridport, *A Respectable Society: Bridport 1593-1835*, published in 1976.

There have been comparatively few scholarly articles produced about aspects of Bridport and its history, many are referred to in the text of this report and will not be individually mentioned in this section. However, there are a number of important papers worth highlighting. Henry Symonds produced a very good account of the history of Bridport Harbour in 1912 and in 1922 an important paper identifying the earliest numismatic evidence for Bridport and its Saxon origins. More recently Laurence Keen has reviewed the evidence for Saxon Bridport in an article on the Saxon towns of Dorset

(Keen 1984) the Burghal Hidage evidence has been reviewed in Hill and Rumble (1996).

Most of the more recent published local history books have been volumes of historic photographs (Sales 1986, Stidwell 1995; Legg 2001, Gosling and Berry 2004) and local histories that draw mainly on secondary sources and anecdotal evidence (Over 1988; Gosling 1999; Legg 2003).

One of the most useful summaries of the archaeology, history and the major historical sources of Bridport was published in 1980 in the *Historic Towns of Dorset* by K J Penn. This has proved invaluable in the research and collation of this present report and in many ways is a forerunner to it. More recently Simon Foote has collated the existing historical and archaeological evidence for the origins and development of Bridport as part of the Higher National Diploma in Practical Archaeology at Bournemouth University (Foote 2003). This is largely based on secondary sources and builds on Penn's work, bringing it up to date with a consideration of more recent archaeological work.

The importance of Bridport's flax and hemp industry has long been recognised, but it remains an under-studied topic. M M Crick wrote a good account of the Dorset hemp and flax industries in volume 2 of the Victoria County History of Dorset (1907). Another good summary of the historical geography of the industry was published by Janice Pahl in 1960. Other useful articles on the history of hemp and flax have been published by Dewar (1969), Perry (1964), Bone (1981) and Short (1982). Gordon Beckles produced the first popular account of the history of Bridport's foremost industry in 1953, published by Bridport Industries Ltd. Anthony Sanctuary has written on rope and net making in Bridport from an insider's viewpoint of the industry and he was instrumental in setting up the Museum of Netmaking at Uploders (Sanctuary 1980). A small volume on the history of Bridport's rope and net making was produced by Celia Martin on the 750th anniversary of the granting of Bridport's Royal Charter (2003). The first major contribution to the industrial archaeology of the Bridport rope and net industry was an article by Michael Bone published in 1985 by the Bristol Industrial Archaeological Society. Another major contribution to the history and recognition of Bridport's industrial archaeology and history is the work by the RCHME/English Heritage South West Textile Mill Survey in 1998 and subsequent work on the assessment and recording of Bridport's industrial heritage (Jones and Williams 2002; Williams 2006), which finally provided major recognition to its quality and importance.

The most important sources of information on

the historic buildings of Bridport are the RCHME *Inventory of Historic Monuments of Dorset West*, published in 1952 and the *Inventory of Non-conformist Chapels and Meeting-houses* (Snell 1991), together with the recent English Heritage assessment and survey of the townscape (Jones and Williams 2002; Williams 2006). There has been almost no historic building recording done in Bridport, other than that done by Kirsty Rodwell on the Chantry (Rodwell 1990) and Philip Brebner on the Bridport Arms Hotel, West Bay (Brebner 2003).

4.2 Historic Maps

The first map showing the whole of Bridport was produced for the first edition of Hutchins *History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset* (1774), which provides an invaluable wealth of detail on the form of the town in the late 18th century. There is only one other map of the town that may be earlier – an undated, probably mid-late 18th century map, which is a rather conventionalised depiction of the northern part of the town, produced in connection with a dispute over houses in Stake Lane (now Barrack Street). This is held in the Dorset History Centre (DHC DC/BTB B3/R2). The 1845 tithe map is not very detailed. The characterisation is largely based on the 1:2500 scale Ordnance Survey maps dating from 1887 onwards.

4.3 Documentary Evidence

Bridport is fortunate in having a large number of surviving historic documents in the Bridport Borough Archives (deposited in the Dorset History Centre), the earliest of which date from the end of the 13th century. The Bridport Records were included in the survey of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts in 1877 and a selection was transcribed (HMC 1877). The records were also described by Thomas Wainwright in a published lecture in 1889 (Wainwright 1889) and more widely publicised by him in transcribed portions printed in *The Bridport News* in 1898-9 (Wainwright n.d.). Unfortunately, despite the potential of these records, there has been little serious subsequent study of them. In 1907, the Reverend Bartelot produced a short account of 14th century life in Bridport, based largely on the existing document transcriptions (Bartelot 1907). In 1956, the accounts of Munden's Charity were published with a detailed introduction by Dr K L Wood-Legh (1956) and Basil Short made extensive use of the records in his publications. They remain an under-exploited rich resource for future study.

4.4 Archaeological Evidence

Little archaeological investigation has been un-

dertaken in Bridport (**Appendix 3**). No excavations or other archaeological recording was carried out within the historic core of Bridport before 1975, when an excavation was undertaken on glebe land to the rear of St Mary's Church, directed by John Bailey (1975). This excavation was undertaken specifically to search for remains of the Saxon town, but was unsuccessful in this regard. It was followed in 1977 by a small trench excavated by Jim Chaplin within the cottage at 10 Chancery Lane. Again, this failed to find any evidence of the Saxon and medieval town.

Previous to these excavations, the only archaeological fieldwork within the study area had been the excavation of a Roman grave on Watton Hill, discovered in 1965 during housing development (Peers 1968).

During the 1980s, the Dorset Institute of Higher Education (now Bournemouth University) undertook watching briefs on the site of the former church at Allington and on the site of the former Star Garage in East Street, both of which produced largely negative results (Hunt 1986a and b).

Following the introduction of Planning Policy Guidance for archaeology (PPG16) in 1990, there has been an increase in archaeological work in the town, but this has been largely disconnected small evaluations and watching briefs, often undertaken with little apparent understanding of the historic urban morphological context. The small scale of the works has meant that most of the archaeological results have not been properly analysed and published. In fact, there has been only one major excavation within the historic core of the town, when Wessex Archaeology excavated the site of the former fire station at 43 South Street, prior to the construction of the Bridport Library in 1996 (Godden *et al.* 2000). This excavation is the only site in Bridport which has included palaeoenvironmental sampling, analysis and publication. There has only been one other publication of a site in Bridport, a watching brief carried out by Terrain Archaeology on land to the rear of 41 and 43 East Street, where the ditch of the medieval town defences was revealed (Bellamy 2005). The results of all the other archaeological work are available only in grey literature reports or remain unpublished.

There have been a number of archaeological interventions associated with the proposed development of the South West Quadrant of the town. In 1997, AC archaeology undertook a desk-based assessment and observations of geotechnical pits (Cox *et al.* 1997; Cotton 1998), followed by trial trenching in 1998 (Valentin 1998). This work largely confirmed that this area lay beyond the historic core of the town. It was followed by an assessment of the

industrial archaeological heritage of St Michael's Trading Estate and the bus station in 2007 (Stanier and Cox 2007).

The southeast quadrant of the town has also received some archaeological investigation. Evaluation trenches were dug on the site of the Tourist Information Centre, 51 South Street and on the site of a new residential development to the rear of the former Volunteer Inn, 53 South Street in 2000-2001 (Valentin 2000 and 2001), both followed by small excavations. A limited archaeological evaluation was also carried out in the adjacent area, known as 'New Zealand' (Valentin 2003).

Of the remaining archaeological interventions, only two (at 29 South Street and 13 Gundry Lane) have included part of the street frontage (Currie 2001; Goodwin 2007). The other small evaluation excavations and watching briefs have been mainly in the rear of the properties along South Street, including the site of the former Bridport Tannery (Brading 1998), the rear of Nos. 32 and 42 South Street (Hewitt and Hodgson 2001; Dyer 1999), together with isolated limited watching briefs to the rear of East and West Streets (Martin and Robinson 2004; Allum 2007; Whelan 2007).

Away from the historic centre of Bridport, there has been little archaeological work. An evaluation excavation took place in advance of the construction of the Bridport Community Hospital, Allington in 1993 (Graham and Richards 1993) and a watching brief was undertaken at the Church of the Holy Trinity in Bradpole in 2003 (Bellamy 2003). At West Bay, there have been a number of assessments of the archaeology and history of the harbour in advance of harbour improvements, the most important and comprehensive being that produced by Keystone Historic Building Consultants in 1997. An archaeological evaluation of the old west pier was done in 2003 revealing some hidden elements of its structure (Gifford and Partners 2003). Otherwise, there have been only two limited watching briefs around the harbour (Bellamy 2004; Slator 2007).

4.5 Historic Buildings

Bridport has a large quantity of surviving historic buildings, as reflected in the very large numbers of Listed Buildings. There are a small number of stone-built medieval buildings, most notably the Chantry and 'The Castle' in South Street. St Mary's Church is a very fine example of a medieval church with a central tower. The overwhelming majority of the historic buildings date from the later 18th and 19th centuries. The buildings are a distinctive mix of larger town houses and small workers' and artisans houses, with a significant number of industrial work-

shops, factories, warehouses and combined industrial and domestic buildings. It is this mix of typical market-town buildings and industrial buildings which is a major factor in Bridport's individual character. The building materials comprise a range of local bricks from Allington and Bothenhampton and local Inferior Oolite and Forest Marble (Bothenhampton) stone which strongly contributes to the character and quality of the historic core. The brickwork of many of the buildings is of high quality and Georgian and Victorian façades predominate, but, with few large planned schemes in the town, the buildings exhibit a great deal of variety. One distinctive element in the domestic architecture of Bridport is the stuccoed late Regency/Early Victorian villas, which lie on the edges of the historic core of the town. The modern suburban housing is typical of its period and has no remarkable local characteristics. The exception to this is the post-WWI suburb at Skilling, which is an example of a high quality estate designed along garden city principles and carefully planned to provide linkages with the historic town centre.

