

Dorset Historic Towns Project

Bridport



Historic Urban Characterisation



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Historic Urban Characterisation

October 2017

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Summary

This report considers the historical, archaeological, architectural and map evidence relating to the development of Bridport. 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 understanding the contribution of its historic dimension to the character of Bridport today. This will enable an informed approach to the management of change and conservation of the urban environment.

Historical Background

Bridport began as a defended *burh* called *Brydian* established by King Alfred in the late 9th century, but its precise location is uncertain. By the late 10th century there was a significant town at Bridport, which flourished between the 12th and early 15th century, receiving its Borough Charter in 1253. Flax and hemp was an important industry and it became a nationally important rope-making centre by the 13th century. It managed to retain its dominant position in the rope industry throughout the 15th century, but the town declined from the late 16th to early 18th century largely due to difficulties in the rope industry and problems with maintaining the harbour.

The late 18th and 19th century saw a return to prosperity and the emergence of the modern town, with expansion beyond the limits of the medieval town and a new artificial harbour. The prosperity came partly from the growth of the Newfoundland trade and partly from a change of manufacturing focus from ropes to nets. Bridport's traditional industrial base declined after the Second World War and almost disappeared, but the town retains some netmaking and other light industry and continues to function as a successful local market town.

Town morphology

Bridport has a distinctive T-shaped plan formed by East, West, and South Streets, with the market place at the junction of these roads. The Saxon town developed along South Street and the medieval town along East and West Streets, part of a deliberately planned medieval extension. The large number of surviving long narrow medieval burgage plots in the historic core is a major significant element of the town.

Suburban expansion beyond the limits of the medieval town began during the later 18th century, restricted to ribbon development along the major roads and with an area of villas and gentry housing on Coneygar Hill. Suburban expansion during the 20th century has engulfed the formerly separate historic settlements of Brad-

pole, Bothenhampton and Allington, infilling large areas around the periphery of the town with its own looped road networks and culs-de-sac that have little in common with the historic road network and the earlier settlement morphology. The by-pass on the east side of the town is along the course of the former railway line to West Bay.

Built character

Bridport has a large quantity of surviving historic buildings, mainly dating from the 18th and 19th centuries, with a small number of stone-built medieval buildings. The 18th and 19th century buildings comprise a distinctive mix of larger town houses and small workers' houses, with many industrial workshops, factories, and warehouses. The building materials are local bricks from Allington and Bothenhampton and local Inferior Oolite and Forest Marble (Bothenhampton) stone. The brickwork of many buildings is of high quality. Georgian and Victorian façades predominate with a great deal of variety of detail. The modern suburban housing is typical of its period with no remarkable local characteristics. The exception to this is the post-WWI suburb at Skilling, which was a high quality estate designed along garden city principles and carefully planned to provide linkages with the historic town centre.

Landscape Setting

The landscape and topographic setting of the town is a major factor of its character. The position of the historic core on a promontory at the confluence of the rivers Brit and Asker has provided a natural barrier to development immediately beyond the historic core of the town, resulting in the river floodplains forming green corridors through the town. The steep hills to the north have impeded development, forcing movement and development along relatively narrow corridors with the views of the other parts of the town blocked by the steep green upper slopes providing further intrusion of green spaces into the built-up area of the town. This adds to the impression of the close relationship between the town and countryside and provides a varied and dramatic backdrop to the urban and suburban areas. The rivers have provided power for the various industries and the surrounding soils are ideal for growing hemp and flax, thus influencing the development of the major historic industries of Bridport.

Historic Urban Character

There are four main components contributing to the local distinctiveness of Bridport: the historic T-shaped town layout with its wide streets; the



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

extensive survival of medieval burgh plots; the large number of historic domestic and industrial buildings; and the landscape setting. The medieval town plan survives virtually complete and exerts a strong influence, in terms of its street and burgh plot layout, affecting both the form of later historic housing and the location of rope walks and spinning ways.

The underlying historic town structure is complemented by the high quality of the historic buildings. The mixture of merchant's houses, worker's and artisan houses, industrial buildings including open and covered ropewalks and combined industrial and domestic buildings is unique to Bridport.

Further Research

This report has highlighted many aspects of the historical development of Bridport and how this has shaped the modern town. It has also indi-

cated gaps in our knowledge and areas which would repay further research. These include:

- Research into the location of the burh of Brydian.
- Research into the form of the late Saxon and Norman town.
- Research into the medieval development of the town, its economy and industry.
- Research into the post-medieval industry of the town.

Part 1: Introduction



1.1 Background to the Project

The Dorset Historic Towns Survey forms part of a national programme of urban surveys of historic towns, launched by English Heritage in 1992 (English Heritage 1992) and subsequently modified in the light of approaches developed as part of English Heritage's Historic Landscape Characterisation programme (Thomas 2005).

The 23 places selected for inclusion in the Dorset Historic Towns Survey are shown on Figure 2. For the purposes of this project, Dorset is defined by its post-1974 boundary and includes the present administrative county of Dorset and the area of the Unitary Authorities of Bournemouth and Poole.

1.2 Rationale

Town centres have always been a focus for trade, industry and housing, consequently there have been many different pressures on their development. This has led to both the creation of a potentially rich, complex, deeply-stratified urban archaeological resource through past development of the town and, on the other hand, to serious threats to the survival of this archaeological resource and to other elements of the historical townscape through modern developmental pressure. Without knowledge and understanding of the historic urban environment it is too easy for significant elements to be damaged or removed through modern redevelopment.

The potential for the historic environment to play a complex and highly significant role in economic regeneration was outlined in *Power of Place* (English Heritage, 2000) and its value is highlighted in the government's response *The Historic Environment: A Force for the Future* (DCMS 2001). The potential of the historic environment is particularly significant in towns, where a high quality historic urban environment and the resulting distinctiveness and sense of place that this brings, has been shown to be a primary asset in promoting regeneration. The effect may be direct – through heritage tourism, for example – or more subtle, promoting a strong sense of identity and pride of place, thus creating new confidence and a positive climate for investment and growth.

However, before we can build upon the potential positive effects of the historic urban environment, we must understand it. Characterisation provides a means of understanding the diverse range of factors which create distinctiveness and a sense of place. However, in order to make the characterisation of the historic urban

environment relevant and meaningful, it needs to be based on a thorough assessment of the nature, quality and quantity of the historic resource of each urban centre. It is to this end that the Dorset Historic Towns Survey has been undertaken.

1.3 Aims

The aim of the project is to present a review of the existing archaeological, historical and urban morphological evidence and set out the historic character and development of Dorset's Historic towns:

- to produce a useful and flexible tool to aid in the understanding and management of the town.
- to inform archaeological and historic environment research.
- to inform the management and interpretation of historic urban buildings and land use.
- to provide an evidence base to feed into the Local Development Framework.
- to encourage the integration of urban historic characterisation into the wider process of protecting and enhancing urban character.
- to address a number of research aims set out in the South West Archaeological Research Framework into developing understanding of urban settlement from the Roman to the post-medieval periods (Webster 2008).

1.4 Report Structure

The Historic Urban Characterisation Assessment reports all have a similar structure, divided into six major sections. These are briefly described below to enable easy navigation to the various elements.

Part 1: Introduction is a general introduction to the Dorset Historic Towns Project and to this report.

Part 2 : Overview of Approach is a brief methodological section outlining the guiding principles and approach, together with an explanation of the main technical terms used in this report.

Part 3: Town Context is a consideration of the wider natural setting of the town. It includes a summary account of the geology and topography and makes reference to any Landscape Character Assessments undertaken in the area. It includes a summary of the present town, its population, economic base, etc.

Part 4: Sources is an outline of the main

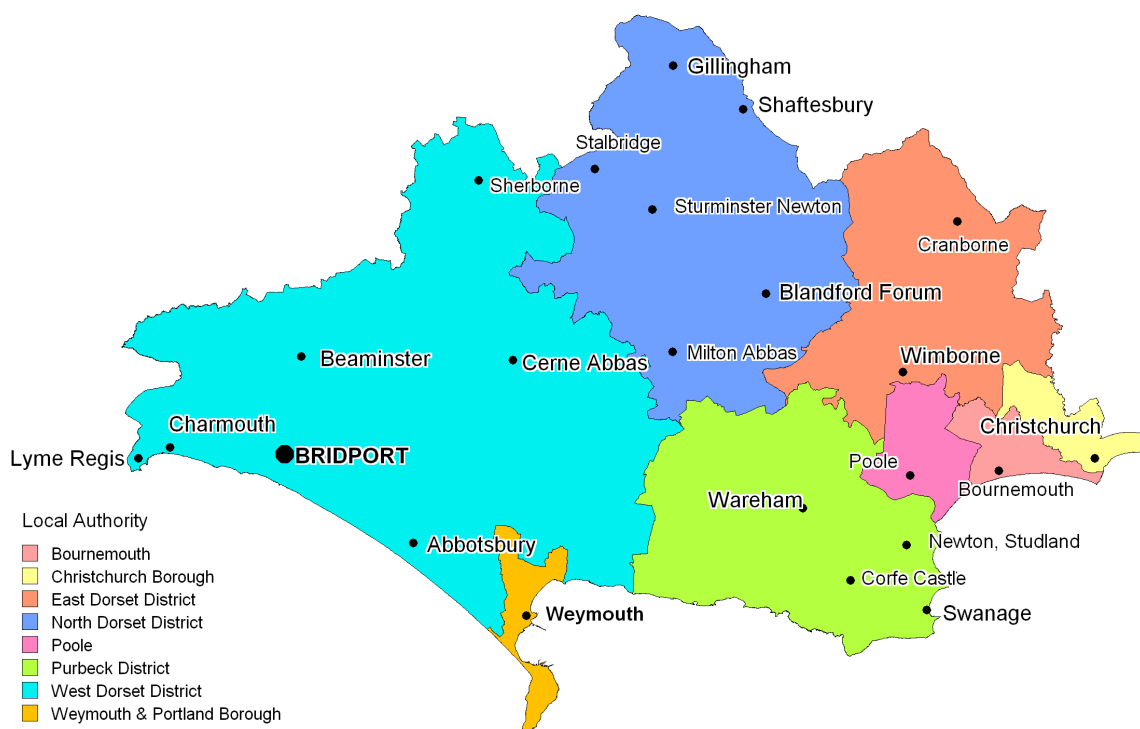


Figure 2: Map of Dorset showing the location of Bridport and the other towns in the Dorset Historic Towns Survey.

sources of historic, cartographic, archaeological and other information used in the report, together with a summary of previous research in the town.

Part 5: Historical Analysis provides a summary account of the chronological development of the town from its origins to the present day, and is a synthesis of the available documentary, archaeological, topographic and morphological information, based largely on a review of published sources. This provides the context for the consideration of Historic Urban Character.

Part 6: Historic Urban Character Appraisal presents the details of the historic urban characterisation work, identifying the physical remains of the past in the present day townscape. It includes a summary of the overall historic urban character of the town and a description of the Historic Urban Character Areas defined as part of this work.

Part 7: Research Framework provides a short research framework outlining the major research questions which could be used to guide and inform future research into the town and how these fit into the South West Archaeological Research Framework.

1.5 Who is this document for?

The information in this report is aimed at the public bodies, organisations and groups that play a role in the planning and management of the urban and historic environments. Additionally anyone who has an interest in the historic urban environment, including community groups, developers, architects and academics, may find aspects of this work of interest and relevance.

Part 2: Overview of Approach



2.1 Guiding Principles

Historic Urban Characterisation is a method of defining and mapping the historic dimension of modern townscapes. The approach used by this project has been developed and adapted from Historic Landscape Characterisation studies. The guiding principles of historic urban characterisation are as follows (adapted from Clark *et al.* 2004, 6):

- Present not past: it is the present-day townscape that is the main object of study.
- Townscape as history not geography: the most important characteristic of the townscape is its time-depth; change and earlier townscapes exist in the present town.
- All aspects of the townscape, no matter how modern, are treated as part of the urban character, not just 'special' areas.
- Characterisation of the urban landscape is a matter of interpretation not record.
- Urban landscape is and always has been dynamic: management of change, not preservation is the aim.
- The process of characterisation should be transparent, with clearly articulated records of data sources and methods used.

2.2 General Approach

In order to characterise the distinctive historic dimension of the present day urban landscape, the systematic identification of the historic attributes of the contemporary townscape is undertaken using a number of cartographic, historic, archaeological and standing building sources. These sources are used to identify 'Historic Urban Character Types' which are mapped onto the modern Ordnance Survey MasterMap base. These character types are used to inform the identification of a series of town plan components for the major periods of development for each town from its origins to the present day. The character types are also used to define a series of 'Historic Urban Character Areas' within each town. The character areas form the basis of a more detailed assessment of historic urban character.

2.3 Historic Urban Character Types

The identification of the historic urban character is based on the collation and analysis of a large quantity of information, including town plan form, building form, historic map evidence, aerial photographic evidence and archaeological data. This information has been used to

define specific areas of single character type within the modern town plan, based on the current settlement character, but taking into account previous uses and settlement history. These Historic Urban Character Types form the basic building blocks for analysing the historic urban character.

The methodology and terminology of these Historic Urban Character Types has been developed from that of Historic Landscape Characterisation and comprise a series of ten Broad Types each sub-divided into a number of more specific Historic Urban Character Types. The list and description of the character types is set out in **Appendix 4**. The Historic Urban Character Types used are a standardised classification across all the Dorset Historic Towns. This enables direct comparisons to be made between towns across the county and allows consistency in analysis of the historic environment of the different towns.

The Historic Urban Character Types are mapped onto the digital map base using a Geographical Information System (GIS), linked to a table containing data on the settlement attributes of the current Historic Urban Character Type, the period from which it derives, and data on all previous Historic Urban Character Types. This enables the character of the town to be displayed for all periods and allows a comprehensive picture of the development of the town through time and the time depth of the current urban character to be presented.

2.4 Town Plan Components

Town Plan Components are a series of recognisable morphological units with a definable time depth within an individual townscape. These plan components have been identified through the analysis of the town plan and building fabric, together with their historic urban character types, to form a series of larger units (on a street or block scale rather than on a plot scale) that illustrate the composition of the town within a specific chronological period. These town plan components have been used to identify and illustrate the historic development of each town, as set out in Part 5 of this report. A series of twenty seven standard types of town plan component have been identified.

2.5 Historic Urban Character Areas

The historic urban characterisation of the Dorset towns produces a large quantity of detailed data recorded within individual Historic Urban Character Types. This information is at a too fine-grained scale to enable easy understanding of the character of the town. Therefore, the

information has been used to define a smaller number of larger areas of distinctive character within the town known as Historic Urban Character Areas (HUCA). These can be used as a means of understanding the past and the present character of the town, simplifying the large quantity of data presented by the Historic Urban Character Types and enabling a more detailed appraisal of the historic urban character to be undertaken.

The Historic Urban Character Areas are recognisable distinctive areas which have meaningful coherence within the modern townscape. They are defined by one or more of the following attributes

- consistent historic urban character
- common historical development
- similar topographic location
- similar degree of archaeological and/or historic building preservation.

Each HUCA will have its own individual 'biography' that has defined its present character. Consequently, they can be used as a tool to help maintain and reinforce the historic character and individuality of these areas and the town as a whole.

2.6 Extent of the Study Area

The Dorset Historic Towns Project Study Area for Bridport is taken as the present-day urban extent as shown on the 2007 Ordnance Survey MasterMap digital mapping and partly informed the Defined Development Boundary set out in the West Dorset District Local Plan (adopted July 2006). It includes the whole of the parish of Bridport including West Bay, plus parts of the parishes of Allington, Bothenhampton and Bradpole. The urban extent includes areas of recreational open space, school playing fields, etc. around the fringes of the settlement. Where practicable, the boundary to the Study Area is along boundary lines marked on the MasterMap base.

2.7 Definition of Terms

2.7.1 Characterisation Terms

Historic Urban Character Area
See section 2.5 above.

Historic Urban Character Type
See section 2.3 above.

Sensitivity to Large Scale Development
The assessment of sensitivity to large scale development has been developed from that included in the landscape character assessment undertaken by West Dorset District Coun-

cil (WDDC 2008). Large scale development is taken to mean any form of development that is on a scale much larger than the existing plot pattern and building size.

Strength of Historic Character

The strength of character in each area is determined by judging the survival of historic urban elements in the modern townscape, together with its distinctiveness and recognisability. The strength of character is assessed as Strong, Medium or Weak.

Strong character is where there is widespread survival of historic boundaries and buildings reflecting considerable time depth, where modern development is unobtrusive.

Medium character is where there is survival of historic boundaries and buildings, but modern development is more evident.

Weak character is where there may be some historic elements present, but there is little time depth evident in the visible structures, which comprise mainly modern buildings and street and boundary layouts.

Town Plan Component

See section 2.4 above.

Urban Structure

This is the framework of routes, plots and spaces and the way they relate to one another, which forms the basic plan on which all other aspects of the built environment and historic development and use are based.

Housing Density

Low Density = < 30 dwellings per hectare (dph)

Medium Density = 30-50 dph

High Density = >50 dph

2.7.2 Archaeological Terms

Archaeological Intervention

A general term for any type of formal archaeological recording.

Archaeological Potential

Archaeological potential is an assessment of the probability of discovering archaeological finds and features, the likely amount and complexity of the archaeology, and the level of survival. See Appendix 5 for more detail.

Building Recording

Building recording refers to any survey and recording of the structure of a building.

Evaluation

An archaeological evaluation is a limited programme of fieldwork to determine the presence or absence of archaeological deposits or remains within a specified area or site. It can in-

clude trial trenching, test pitting, geophysical survey, etc.

Excavation

An archaeological excavation is a programme of controlled fieldwork exposing, investigating and recording an area of below-ground archaeology.

Watching Brief

A watching brief is a formal programme of observation and investigation conducted during any operation carried out for non-archaeological reasons.

2.7.3 Historical Terms

Borough

A borough was a town or part of a town upon which a degree of self governance had been conferred through the granting of a charter. Boroughs held their own courts, markets and were often subdivided into burghage plots held by burgesses (freemen of the borough) for cash rent rather than by feudal service.

Burghal Hidage

The Burghal Hidage is the name given to a group of documents written in Old English, which list thirty-three burhs or fortresses and how many hides were assigned to each. The places are listed in an order describing a clockwise circuit of Wessex, with some entries in Mercia and appear to describe a single system of fortifications. The documents have traditionally been dated to 911-14, but describe a system largely implemented in the last quarter of the 9th century. Haslam (2005) has argued that the document originates in the period 878-9 and describes a contemporary system of defence implemented by Alfred against the Vikings. One of the documents gives a formula for the estimation of hidages from defensive circuit (wall) lengths. This has been used to try to calculate the length of defensive circuit for individual burhs, but recent scholarship suggests that it cannot be used reliably for this purpose (Haslam 2009).

Hearth Tax Returns

The Hearth Tax was a tax introduced in 1662 and abolished in 1689. It was payable by householders on the number of hearths or fireplaces within a household. The tax amounted to 1 shilling per hearth or stove payable twice a year. The Hearth Tax Returns generally date from 1662-6 and 1669-74; periods when the tax was administered by royal bailiffs rather than private firms. They include a list of householders eligible for the tax per parish and the number of hearths in each household. They are used in this report to give a population estimate during the late 17th century.

Hide

A hide was an area of land defined for tax assessment purposes and was based on the amount of land required to support a family. The size of land unit covered by a hide varied according to its productivity but is generally thought to equal approximately 120 acres. Hides originated in the Saxon period but may be based on an earlier system of land holding.

Hundred

A hundred was an administrative subdivision of a shire based notionally on a grouping of 100 hides. They originated in the Saxon period and had their own courts and jurisdiction usually held at a meeting place close to the geographical centre of the administrative area, or at a point easily accessible from any part of the hundred.

Lay Subsidy

The Lay subsidy is a term given to a tax levied on the general populace (as opposed to the clergy or military) and was calculated as a proportion of their moveable wealth. The poor were exempt. The tax was levied occasionally as the king demanded in order to raise money for military campaigns from the late 13th to the 16th century. The lay subsidy rolls are documents recording the names of each person in a village or tithing within a specific hundred and the amount of tax payable by them. The rolls are particularly useful in the context of the Historic Towns Project because during the 13th and 14th centuries, surnames tended to reflect either occupation or place of habitation. The documents thus provide information on the size of the taxable population within a town, the range of crafts within a particular town or tithing, the names of the individual tithings and boroughs within a hundred and the names of other dispersed settlements within them.

Manor

A manor was a parcel of land, often assessed at 5 hides, over which a lord held domain and could exercise certain rights and privileges, such as the right to have the populace of the manor work the Lord's lands. The lord of manor could be a secular noble, the church, or the King himself; more important nobles held several manors. The manorial system was established in the late Saxon period, around the 10th century AD and became increasingly feudal following the Norman Conquest.

Tithing

A tithing was a small administrative subdivision of a hundred notionally containing ten land owning families.

