Part 5: Historical Analysis

5.1 Medieval Lyme Regis (AD1150-1539)

5.1.1 Historical Summary

The origins of the settlement at Lyme Regis is obscure. A scattering of Roman pottery and coins have been found within the town and a rather doubtful identification of a Roman building found during the construction of stables at Belmont on Pound Street, indicating some activity in the area during the Roman period. Katherine Barker has suggested that Lyme was part of a large salt-producing Roman estate (Barker 2005).

Salt was certainly important to Lyme in the early medieval period. The first documentary reference to Lyme is a charter dated 774 in which King Cynewulf granted to Sherborne Abbey land on the west bank of the river Lim "near its mouth, in order that salt may be obtained there, both as a seasoning for food and for ritual use" (quoted in Penn 1980, 72).

The Domesday survey indicates that saltworking was still very important in the 11th century. Lyme was divided into three manors: the Bishop of Salisbury (formerly Sherborne) held the land west of the river; the King's servant William Belet held the land east of the river; and St Mary's, Glastonbury held the manor of Colway (Thorn and Thorn 1983). Thirteen salt-workers are mentioned in connection with Colway Manor and fourteen in the King's manor (Keen 1987). The entry for the Bishop of Salisbury mentions fishermen.

The form of the settlement in the 11th century is uncertain, and it may have been fairly dispersed. The area of saltworking was undoubtedly close to the shore in an area now completely washed away by the sea. The position of the shoreline in the late Saxon and medieval periods is not known, but was much further out than the present one.

Some time between the 11th and the late 13th century, the settlement grew into a town and seaport of some consequence. It is possible that the port grew in importance after the nearby harbour at Axmouth was destroyed by a natural disaster in the 13th century (Fowles 1982, 9). The church was rebuilt and enlarged in the 12th century, and a stone bridge was built across the river in perhaps the late 12th or early 13th century, though the present bridge is 14th century in date. It was granted a market in 1249-50. In 1265 there was a dispute between the sailors of Lyme and those of Dartmouth, which suggests that Lyme was becoming an important port (Penn 1980). A market and fair was granted to Elias de Rabayne in 1270 and in 1274, Bridport complained that the market was held every day instead of weekly.

In 1284 Edward I made Lyme a free borough with a charter and also created a merchant's guild (Penn 1980). It is likely that the creation of the guild is a reflection of a substantial trading community already existing at Lyme. There is documentary evidence for a great deal of trade with France in the late 13th century, with large quantities of wine entering the port (Penn 1980). The Cobb may date from this period of prosperity in the 13th century; it is first mentioned in 1294. In this same year Edward I ordered Lyme to build a galley of 120 oars for use in his war with the French. In the event, a galley of 54 oars was built between 1294-1296, the surviving accounts list at least eighteen shipwrights, including four master shipwrights, suggesting that there was a reasonably well-developed local shipbuilding industry at this date (Friel 1986).

Broad Street, may have been deliberately planned and built as a wide market street during the late 13th century in response to the increasing trade and prosperity of the town. There was a leper hospital, the Hospital of St

Figure 6: Coombe Street from Bridge Street.

Figure 7: Broad Street from the market place.

Mary and the Holy Spirit, established some time before 1336, when it was repaired (VCH ii, 100). The location of this hospital is not known. The 1539 map of the Dorset Coast (BL Cott, Aug, I, I, 31, 33) shows a building with a tower on the west side of the town and this has been suggested as being a depiction of the hospital. Traditionally, the site has been taken to be on the north side of Broad Street, but a location within the town seems unlikely and no evidence for this being the location exists (Draper 2006a). The so-called Leper's Well is assumed to be the last remaining part of the hospital, but the name itself appears to be relatively modern and the structure itself is of uncertain date.

Lyme's early period of prosperity continued into the 14th century, when the Lay Subsidy of 1332 recorded 35 taxpayers in the borough of Lyme paying a total of £8 3s 6d, suggesting a fairly wealthy flourishing town. It was assessed only slightly less than Melcombe Regis, the leading port of Dorset at that time; it had some of the wealthiest men in the county as its citizens and it had attracted settlers from as far afield as Chelmsford, Wales and Toulouse. The list of taxpayers included a Taverner, Brewere, Cogger (merchant-ship master), Goldsmith, Peleter (leather currier), Tanner, Cook, Baker, which gives some indication of the range of occupations within the town at this date (Mills 1971; Fowles 1982, 12).

By the mid 14th century, the fortunes of the town had taken a turn for the worse and it suffered a period of decline through the late 14th and 15th centuries. This was due to a combination of factors, including the Black Death, the effects of the French wars and more particularly from the destruction caused by storms and landslips. 'Increasing adversities' were recorded in 1340 and the greater part of the town had been destroyed by storms and the sea (Hutchins 1863, 43; Fowles 1982, 11). A writ of enquiry dated 1377-8 records that in 1330 Lyme had been well built with many merchants, but some time before 1377 the greater part of the town had been laid waste by the sea and many merchants were dead, with most of the others having left because the Cobb had been totally ruined by storms (Roberts 1834, 54). Seventy-seven houses, fifteen large ships and forty boats were destroyed in a severe storm in 1377 (Roberts 1834, 54). Petitions for relief because of damage, lack of merchants, etc, continued to be made on numerous occasions in the early 15th century (1407, 1410, 1412).

5.1.2 Town Layout
The full details of the medieval town layout are

not known as it is likely that a substantial part of the medieval town has now disappeared, washed away by coastal erosion. There is a folk memory that Broad Ledge rocks to the east of the town were once crowded with houses (Fowles 1982, 13).

The medieval town layout that can be deduced from the form of the present town comprises three major elements. The earliest part is the area of St Michael's Church and Coombe Street along the river, which developed along what is probably the earliest route into the town in the bottom of the valley. The historic properties in this area are fairly irregular, the roads are narrow, and the area does not appear to have been part of a planned development, but to have evolved organically over a period of time. This is in contrast to Broad Street (formerly West Street), which is a wide, straight road with regular properties on both sides and appears to be a deliberately planned market street, probably laid out in the late 13th century. The third element is the Cobb, which was constructed some distance from the town and accessed along the beach from Cobb Gate.

5.1.3 Medieval Urban plan components
The main plan components of the medieval town are shown on Figure 8 and are listed below.

1. St Michael's Church. The church sits in a prominent location overlooking the river. The earliest surviving fabric of the church is in the tower and dates to the early 12th century.

2. Butter Market. The lower part of Church Street was known as the 'Butter Market' in the early 19th century and this may mark the location of a planned medieval market place (Penn 1980).

3. Broad Street Market. The lower end of Broad Street was the location of a medieval market probably dating from the 13th century.

4. Coombe Street. Coombe Street follows the river and is probably the earliest street in the town, which, together with Monmouth Road leading to the church, forms the surviving nucleus of the original town. The streets are narrow and the irregular plots suggest this was not an area of planned development.

5. Broad Street. This wide straight street with a series of regular plots on both sides was probably a deliberately planned element of the town, possibly set out as a market street some time in the 13th century. The earliest documentary reference to it dates to the late 13th century
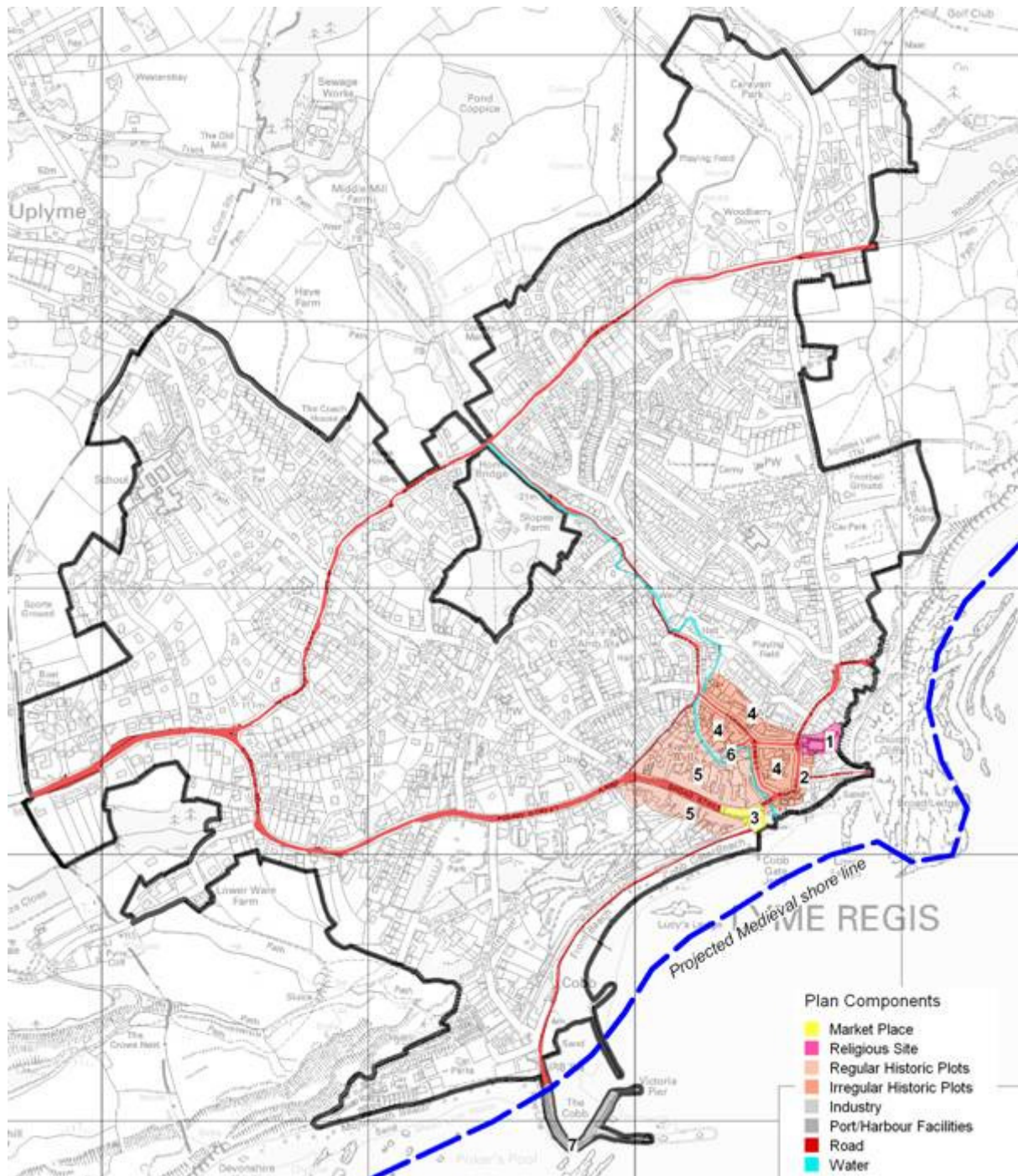
Figure 8: Lyme Regis Medieval Town Plan Components.

(Penn 1980).

6. Town Mill. A mill owned by the Borough of Lyme was built in 1340 on the site of an earlier mill (Graham *et al.* 2005). This may be the location of one of the Domesday mills.

7. The Cobb. The Cobb was probably constructed in the late 13th century. It was a timber structure filled with stones, with a fort at its end, as depicted on the 1539 map of the Dorset Coast (BL Cott, Aug, I, I, 31, 33).

5.2 Early post-medieval Lyme Regis (1540-1699)

5.2.1 Historical Summary

There was a revival in the fortunes of Lyme Regis from the late 15th century and this period up until about the mid 17th century can be considered its heyday as a mercantile port. It was the most prosperous port in Dorset in the early 17th century (Stephens 1973) and by 1677 Lyme ranked fourteenth most important port in the country with customs receipts exceeding those of Liverpool (Keystone 1994). The main export from Lyme was woollen cloth from East Devon and West Somerset and the main imports were French wine and French cloth (linen and canvas), together with smaller amounts of other goods. Although the main trade was with France and perhaps particularly with Morlaix in Brittany at this time, there were more distant trading links to the Mediterranean, Africa, the West Indies and the Americas. It took part in the triangular pattern of trading salt cod from Newfoundland for wines and other goods in Spain and Portugal to bring back to Lyme (Fowles 1982).

Leland in about 1540 describes Lyme as "*a praty market town, set in the rootes of an high rokky hille down to the hard shore. This toun hath good shippes, and usith fishing and marchauntice. Marchaunts of Morleys in Britaine much haunt the toun. [...] 'There is but one paroch chirch in Lime. There is no haven at Lime: but a quarter of a mile by WSW form the toun, is a great and *** in the sea for succour of shippes*" (quoted in Hutchins 1863, 37).

The Hearth Tax assessments of 1662-4 give 160 taxpayers with 475 hearths in the borough of Lyme Regis (Meekings 1951). This indicates that it was the second largest coastal town (after Weymouth/Melcombe Regis) in Dorset and was probably in the second rank of towns in the county. It was the most important place in the west of Dorset. The population at this time was about 300.

The main industry of Lyme was probably cloth making (Crick 1908). In 1648, the town was given a quantity of timber for the reconstruction of "fulling racks for cloth" (as well as houses, ships and mills) destroyed during the Civil War (Roberts 1834, 108). Lace making was also carried on in the town but at a much smaller scale than cloth making (Wanklyn 1927, 98). There was a small shipbuilding industry in Lyme, which probably operated throughout this period. In 1654 a frigate was built for the navy, the Government shipwrights 'having approved

the place for building a second-rate ship' (Wanklyn 1927, 95). The shipyard is likely to have been close to the Cobb.

Lyme became increasingly Puritan and anti-Royalist in the 17th century and was held for Parliament in the Civil War, playing a significant part in the events. In 1644, because of its economic and strategic importance, Lyme was besieged by a large Royalist army under Prince Maurice. Despite being heavily outnumbered, the Lyme garrison successfully resisted the siege, which lasted two months. A number of forts and gun platforms were built around the town and it was enclosed by a bank and ditch. A number of Royalist siege works were also built outside the town. These works were removed in 1647 (Bayley 1910). The siege caused much destruction by fire within the town.

In 1685, the Duke of Monmouth landed just beside the Cobb (on what is now known as Monmouth Beach) in his abortive attempt on the crown of James II. His choice of Lyme was partly based on its strong anti-papist sympathies and because it allowed relatively easy access to the centre of West Country unrest at Taunton. Following the defeat of Monmouth at Sedgemoor, Lyme was severely punished for its sympathies in the Bloody Assize of Judge Jeffreys.

5.2.2 Town Layout

The basic layout of the town remained largely the same as that of the medieval town, but there is likely to have been continued coastal erosion and some of the medieval town had been washed away by the sea. Silver Street was established as a street during this period, though it is likely to have been in existence as a path or track for a considerable period of time prior to this.

The position of the town between steep hills, with the lands of Colway Manor immediately behind the town, meant there was little scope for expansion. There was some new development along Silver Street and probably some development along Church Street, possibly as far as East Cliff, with the Tubold Almshouses marking the limit of the settlement in this direction. Also there was likely to have been major rebuilding of individual properties following major damage to the town in the 14th and 15th centuries.
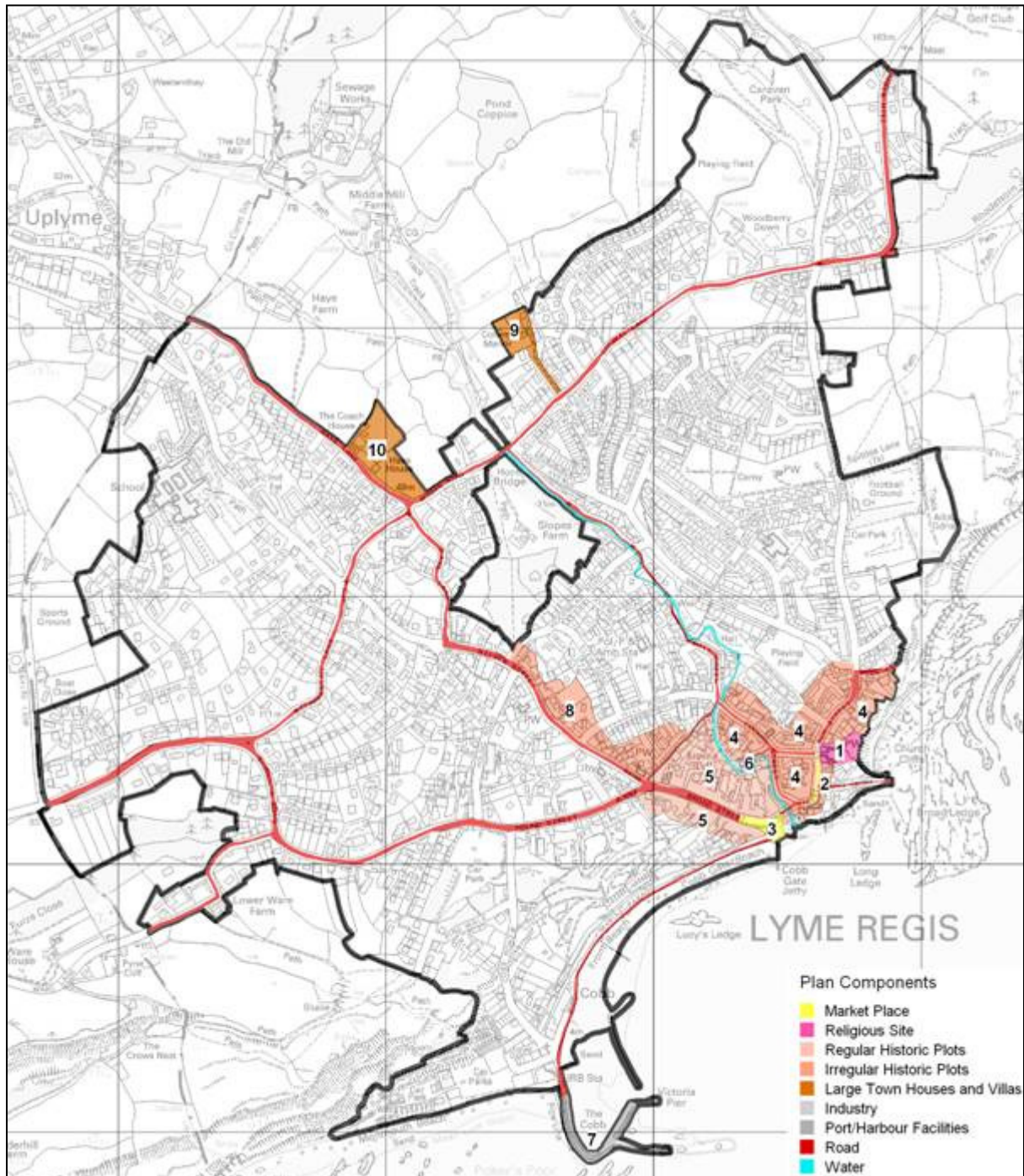
Figure 9: Lyme Regis Early Post-medieval Town Plan Components.

5.2.3 16th-17th Century Town Plan Components

The main plan components of the medieval town are shown on Figure 9 and are listed below.

1. St Michael's Church. The church was substantially enlarged in the late 15th or early 16th century by constructing a new nave, chancel, aisles and chapels to the east of the tower, to create the present church layout (Figure 10). The earlier transepts were removed but the earlier nave to the west was retained (RCHME 1952). This substantial enlargement was probably a reflection of the increasing fortunes of the town.

2. Butter Market. The lower part of Church Street was known as the 'Butter Market' in the early 19th century and may mark the position of a market place (Penn 1980).

3. Broad Street Market. The medieval market place at the lower end of Broad Street continued to hold a market throughout this period. A market house was built here at some date,

Figure 10: Parish Church of St Michael.

Figure 11: Tudor House Hotel, Church Street, a 16th century house remodelled in the 18th century.

Figure 12: Tubold Almshouses, Church Street.

Figure 13: View up Silver Street from the top of Broad Street.

possibly at the end of the 16th century (and demolished in 1750).

4. Coombe Street. The medieval properties along Coombe Street and Monmouth Street continued to be occupied, though no details of the changes to the plots are known. However, there was considerable rebuilding following the storm damage of the 14th and 15th centuries. There was some expansion of the area of occupation up Church Street at this date. Some buildings on Coombe Street and Church Street have surviving 16th-17th century work (Figure 11). Tubold Almshouses were built on Church Street on the edge of the town in 1548 (Figure 12).

5. Broad Street. This wide straight market street remained one of the major streets in the town. There are no details known of the changes to the properties, but there is likely to have been substantial rebuilding following the decay and damage of the 14th and 15th centuries.

6. Town Mill. The mill was rebuilt as a double mill in the early 17th century and then rebuilt and enlarged as a double mill and dwelling in the later 17th century (Graham *et al.* 2005).

7. The Cobb. The Cobb suffered from severe storm damage in the 1580s. It appears to have been remade into a completely stone structure by the 1680s and buildings constructed on it in the 1690s (Keystone 1994). The Cobb was not attached to the land at high tide at this date.

8. Silver Street. Silver Street appears to have been opened up in the late 17th or early 18th century (Wanklyn 1927, 255). There was a chapel on the corner near Broad Street from 1653.

9. Colway Manor. Colway Manor House was built in the 17th century. This was probably a replacement for an earlier manor house. The manor was owned by the Henley family from 1601. It was one of the Royalist headquarters during the 1644 siege of Lyme.

10. Haye House. Haye House was the home of John Alford, a rich Lyme merchant, from the 1620s. Haye House was the Royalist headquarters of Prince Maurice during the 1644 siege of Lyme.

11. Cobb Hamlet. The date of the development of Cobb Hamlet is not certain, but there is some suggestion of 17th century activity here (Keystone 1994). This probably included shipbuilding.