

Part 5: Historical Analysis



5.1 Medieval Weymouth and Melcombe Regis (AD 1250-1597)

5.1.1 Historical Summary

The beginnings of the urban history of Weymouth and Melcombe Regis are taken from the time of the earliest borough charter for Weymouth in the mid 13th century. The earliest history of both towns is unclear, but both grew as dependent places of earlier settlements at Wyke Regis and Radipole. There is significant evidence for Roman activity and settlement in the area, particularly at Radipole, but there is no evidence to suggest the Roman settlements were the direct antecedents of the medieval towns. The medieval period saw the rise of both towns as successful trading ports and was the period of intense rivalry between the two boroughs.

An indication of the beginnings of urban development may perhaps be found in the early 12th century, with a documentary reference to Weymouth and Melcombe in terms which suggest that both places were already separate from their parent parishes of Wyke Regis and Radipole, and recognised as ports. A weekly market and annual fair were granted to both towns in the 13th century, and in 1252 Weymouth was given the status of a free borough. Edward I made Melcombe a borough in 1280, and the town was re-planned, becoming the staple port for wool in 1310. As early as 1242 the first sea defences were constructed, as in that year Anselm Capellanus paid a rent of 4d for a piece of land, 'won from the sea in the port of Weymouth'

Melcombe Regis is notorious as the port through which the Black Death entered Britain, in the summer of 1348. Both towns were badly affected by the plague, as well as raids by the French, beginning in 1386, the prosperity of the



Figure 6: The church of St. Nicholas, Broadway.

towns declined until in 1433 Melcombe lost its status as a staple port. This was, to some extent, balanced by the licensing of the two towns for the carriage of pilgrims to continental shrines. This trade flourished and began a connection between towns and French and Spanish ports that continued until the twentieth century.

The reformation, and with it the ending of the pilgrim trade, does not seem to have affected the ports. However their proximity appears to have caused problems. Camden describes 'Waymouth, opposite to which, stands Melcombe, between whom and Waymouth arose great controversy, both enjoying like privileges'. The constant legal squabbles eventually infuriated the government which linked Weymouth and Melcombe Regis by an Act of Parliament in 1571, and in 1597 they were linked physically with the building of the first bridge across the harbour.

5.1.2 Town Layout

Medieval Weymouth comprised a single street running parallel to the southern side of the harbour.

Medieval Melcombe was laid out in the form of a grid around four principal north-south streets: St Nicholas, St Thomas, St Mary and Maiden streets.

Other settlements of probable medieval origin



Figure 7: The approach to All Saints Church Wyke Regis.

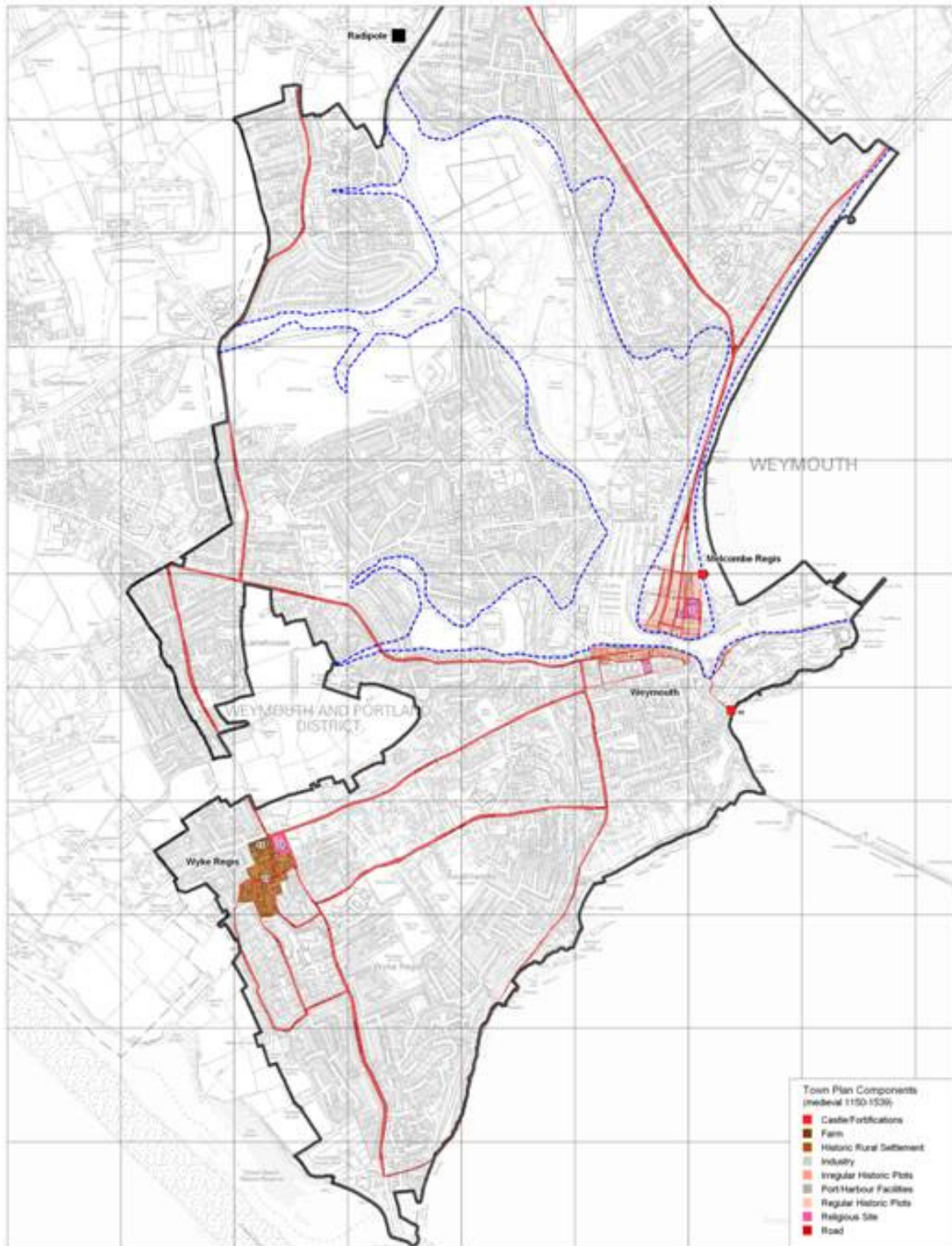


Figure 8: Medieval Plan Components (South)

within the study area are Wyke Regis, Broadwey and Elwell. Wyke Regis appears to have developed around an irregular square close to the church and manor house. Broadwey was a linear settlement along the Melcombe to Dorchester Road which is thought to follow the line of a Roman road. There is little evidence for

the origins of Elwell, which seems to have developed at the junction of the Dorchester road with a side road to Upwey, as well as being at a convenient place for resting horses prior to the ascent of Bincombe Hill.

5.1.3 Medieval Urban plan components

The main plan components of the medieval towns are shown on figures 8 and 11, and are listed below.

1. *Chapel, Melcombe Regis.* Leland mentions a chapel at Melcombe Regis in 1538. The date of foundation of the chapel is not known, though in 1426 it was claimed the town lacked a 'place dedicated to God' (Boddy and West 1983, 17). It was a chapel of ease to Radipole and stood on the site of the present St Mary's Church.

2. *Historic Plots, Melcombe Regis.* Melcombe was laid out on a grid pattern within the peninsula on which the town was built. A market square may have been laid out at the junction of St Thomas' and St Edmund's streets.

3. *Melcombe Regis Friary.* A Dominican friary was established in 1431 at the junction of East Street and St Alban Street. It was dissolved in 1538 but the building continued in secular use.

4. *Melcombe Regis Quay.* The quay seems to have run along the northern side of the harbour from the end of Maiden Street to St Nicholas' Street.

5. *Town Defences, Melcombe Regis.* The medieval town bank and ditch, called Conybery Hills on a late 16th century map, formerly ran along the line of Bond Street.

6. *Small Platform, Melcombe Regis.* A small fort is shown on a late 16th century map on the shore of Melcombe Regis. It may be late medieval in date.

7. *St Nicholas Chapel, Weymouth.* A chapel dedicated to St Nicholas was built on the heights above Weymouth in 1377 or soon after. It was a chapel of ease to Wyke Regis and gave its name to Chapelhay.

8. *Historic Plots, Weymouth.* Weymouth was built along a single street, the High Street, which ran parallel to the southern side of the harbour and was fronted by the quay. The original settlement seems to have lain to the west of the Cove, and only extending to and around the Cove in the sixteenth century.

9. *Weymouth Quay.* The quay seems to have run along the southern side of the harbour from just west of the Cove to Chapelhay Steps.

10. *Land reclamation and Coastal Defence.* Some land had been 'won from the sea' by the thirteenth century, probably west of the present Marsh Road.

11. *Lookout, Newton's Cove.* A crenulated

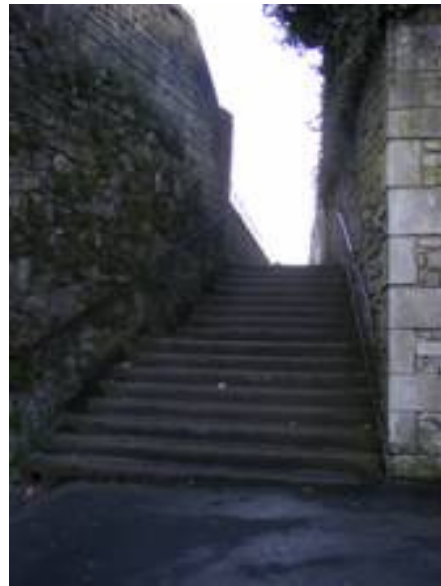


Figure 9: Chapelhay steps - the approximate location of the medieval chapel of St. Nicholas



Figure 10: Elwell

semi-circular structure at Newton's Cove is depicted on a late 16th century map and Hutchins' 1774 map shows a semi-circular earthwork called the look-out in the same position. This may be the same structure and it could have its origins in the late medieval period.

12. *All Saints Church, Wyke Regis.* The earliest reference to a church at Wyke Regis is dated 1172, but the church is likely to have been founded earlier. The present church dates from the mid 15th century (RCHME 1970).

13. *Manor Farm, Wyke Regis.* Manor Farm may have its origins in the late Saxon period.

14. *Historic Wyke Regis.* Wyke Regis has its origins in the Saxon period. There is a charter dated AD988 describing the bounds of Wyke. The form of the medieval settlement is not known, but is likely to have focused around the church and Manor house.

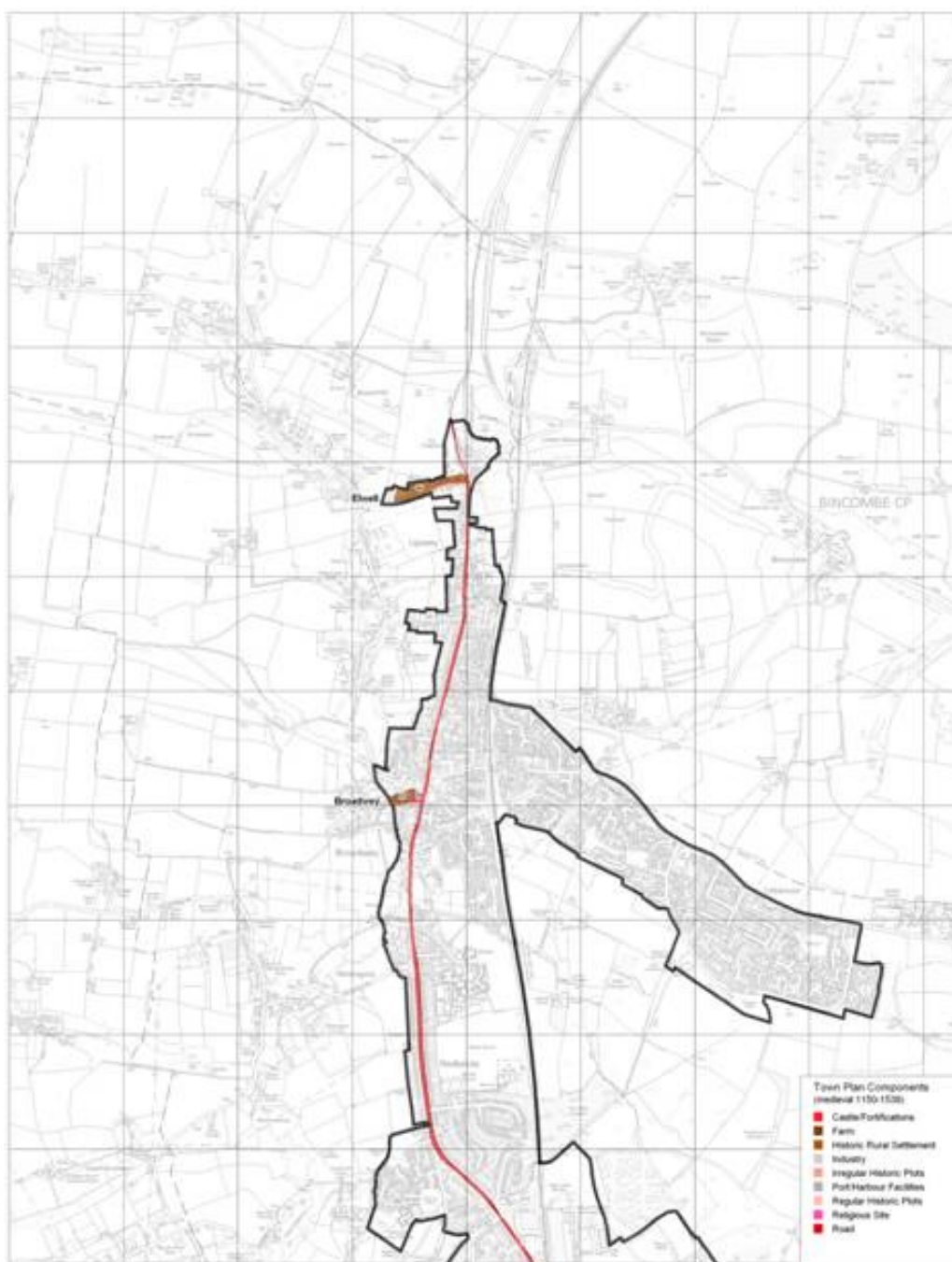


Figure 11: Medieval Plan Components (North)

15. *St Nicholas Church, Broadway*. This was originally a chapel, probably of Upwey before 1291 and prior to 1403 was dedicated to St Michael. The original 12th-century church consisted of a small nave and chancel only. There was some reconstruction of the church in the 15th and 16th centuries (Pitfield 1981).

16. *Historic Broadway*. The precise extent and form of the medieval settlement of Broadway is unknown, but is likely to have been focused on the church and the adjacent Manor farm.

17. *Historic Elwell*. The extent and form of the medieval settlement of Elwell is unknown, but is

likely to have been centred on the junction of the Dorchester road with the side road to Upwey, at a convenient place for resting horses prior to the ascent of Bincombe Hill.

18. *Town Bridge*. The bridge was built in 1597, funded by London merchants. It was situated in approximately the same place as the present bridge, at the end of St Thomas Street.

19. *Sandsfoot Castle*. Sandsfoot Castle was built in 1541, it operated in conjunction with Portland Castle in protecting Portland Roads.

5.2 Post-Medieval Weymouth and Melcombe Regis (AD 1540-1750)

5.2.1 Historical Summary

Weymouth seems to have maintained its prosperity in the late sixteenth century, although a census of 1582 recorded 20 ships in Weymouth, most of them small ships of less than 50 tons. When the crisis of 1588 began Weymouth claimed to be unable to provide the two ships of 60 tons demanded by the government, however when the Armada was in the channel two ships of 100 tons, one of 70 and two of 60 sailed from Weymouth. So, the 1582 census figures are probably a serious underestimate, possibly the result of a deliberately-low return with a view to avoiding tax.

The substantial merchants' houses around the former Cove in Weymouth, such as the Tudor House Museum and the Old Rooms reflect this prosperity. In Melcombe similar buildings can be seen at the Milton Arms and the White Hart Inn (formerly the house of the Thornhill family), these are stone built, reflecting the proximity of Portland with its fine building stone. Other buildings in the town were undoubtedly timber or half timber, only one wall of the Black Dog Inn remains of this building type.

The defences of the town were also increased, with gun platforms being installed along the seaward side of the town, and guns on the Nothe as well as the armament at Sandsfoot.

During the Civil War Weymouth was fortified by Parliament and besieged in 1644-45. In the course of fortification, the chapel of St Nicholas was demolished and a fort built on the site, and records suggest the construction of earthworks, including entrenchments in the market place. The town suffered some damage during the war, particularly to the sea walls. In the 1660s the town defences were removed, with the exception of the battery on the Nothe, which was abandoned during periods of peace, then rapidly refortified when the international situation worsened.

In the late seventeenth century Weymouth seems to have begun to decline. In 1708 the harbour was 'choked up with sand occasioned by the ruins of the said quays and bridge'. The town's fortunes only began to change in 1750 owing to the development of tourism.

5.2.2 Town Layout

The basic layout of the town remained fundamentally unchanged from the medieval period. There was some expansion of Melcombe to the north and east. Weymouth, however, was restricted by hills on the southern side and could only expand easily along the harbour edge. It may be that the land reclamation schemes were aimed, in part, at increasing the available area of flat land.



Figure 12: The Tudor merchants House, Weymouth.



Figure 13: Milton Arms

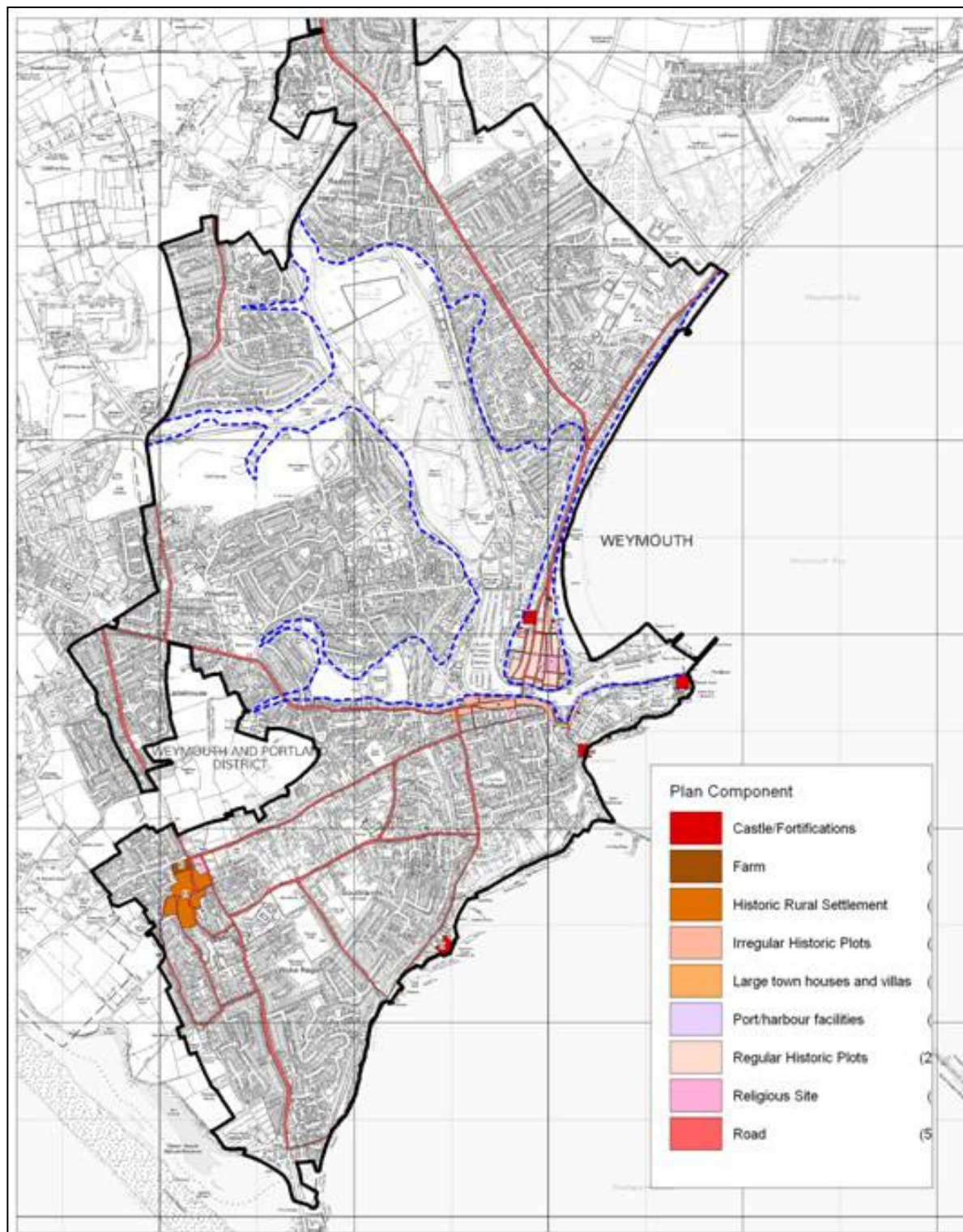


Figure 14: Post-medieval Town Plan Components (South)

Whilst most of the houses were extended or replaced during this period, there seems to have been little change in the size of the surrounding settlements of Wyke Regis, Broadway and Elwell.

5.2.3 Post-Medieval Urban plan components

The main plan components of the post-medieval town are shown on figures 14 and 15 and are listed below.

1. *St Mary's Church, Melcombe Regis.* The chapel at Melcombe Regis was replaced by a new building, the first St Mary's Church in

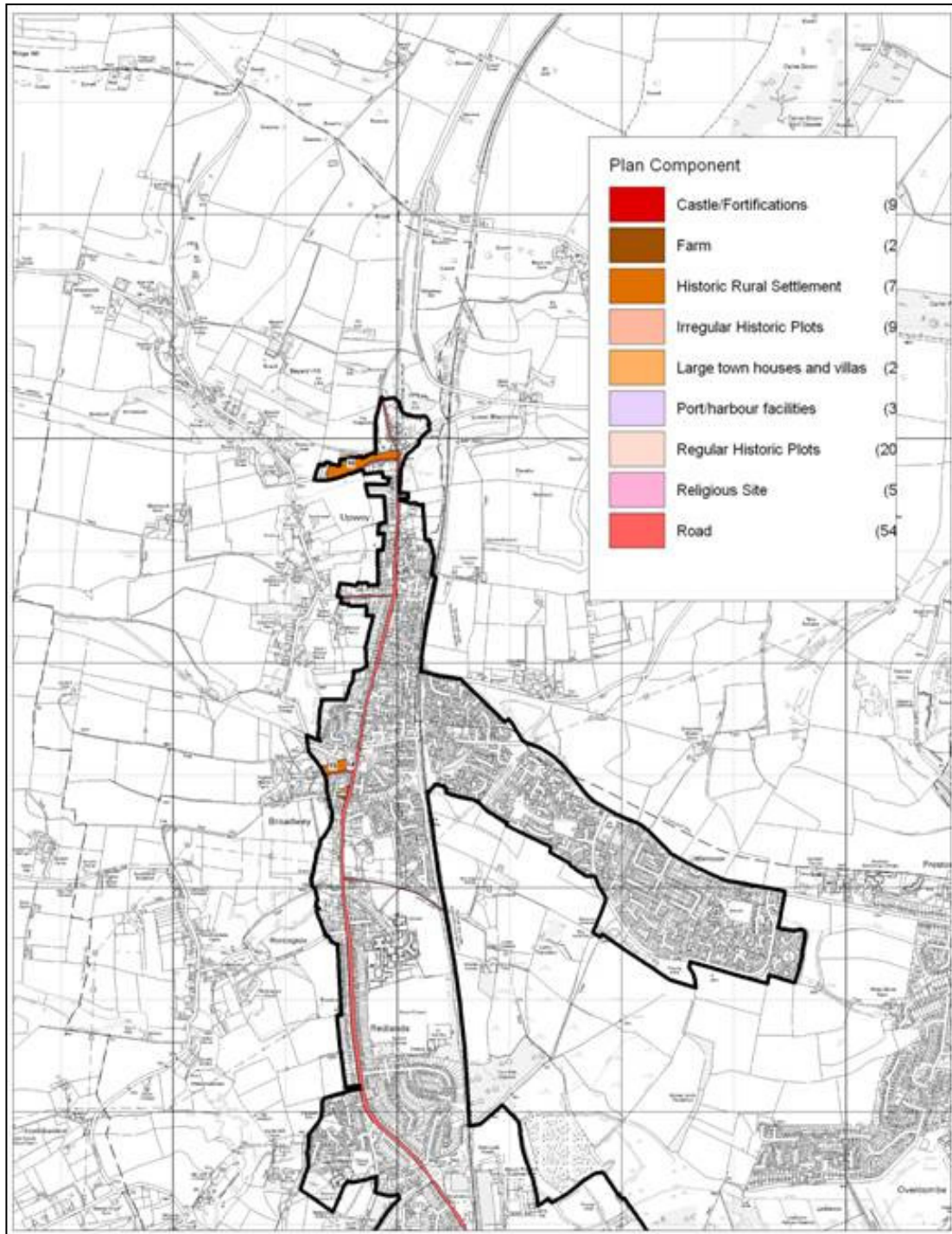


Figure 15: Post-medieval Town Plan Components (North)

1605, being granted parochial status in 1606.

2. *Historic Plots, Melcombe Regis.* The layout of the town remained unchanged during this period, buildings were replaced but there seems to have been no change to the street plan.

3. *Melcombe Regis Friary.* The 'Priory' is shown by Hutchins in 1774 at the junction of East Street and St Alban Street.

4. *Melcombe Regis Quay.* The quay seems to have run along the northern side of the harbour,

eastwards from St Nicholas' Street. After the Civil War a short pier was built.

5. *Town Defences, Melcombe Regis.* Refortified during the Civil War but slighted in the 1660s, this remained as the demarcation of the northern edge of the town.

6. *Small Platform, Melcombe Regis.* The platform was refortified during the Civil War but removed in the 1660s.

7. *St Nicholas Chapel, Weymouth.* St Nicholas

chapel was demolished in 1644-5 and its material used to build a fort.

8. *Historic Plots, Weymouth.* There seems to have been some expansion along the harbour eastwards around the Cove. It is likely that buildings were damaged during the Civil War, particularly in the Chapelhay area.

9. *Weymouth Quay.* The quay was extended around the Cove with substantial merchants houses being built, particularly on the western side of the Cove.

10. *Land reclamation and Coastal Defence.* Land was reclaimed to the west of Marsh Road in the sixteenth century. The sea wall was damaged or neglected during the Civil War, and rebuilt in the 1660s.

11. *Lookout, Newton's Cove.* A crenellated semi-circular structure at Newton's Cove is depicted on a late 16th century map and Hutchins' 1774 map shows a semi-circular earthwork called the lookout in the same position.

12. *All Saints Church, Wyke Regis.* There was little change to the church during this period.

13. *Manor Farm, Wyke Regis.* Manor Farm was rebuilt in the mid seventeenth century.

14. *Historic Wyke Regis.* The form of the settlement seems to have been concentrated around the square to the south west of the church.

15. *St Nicholas Church, Broadwey.* There was little change to the church during this period.

16. *Historic Broadwey.* There was little change to the form of the settlement during this period.

17. *Historic Elwell.* There was little change to the form of the settlement during this period.

18. *Town Bridge.* The bridge was rebuilt on the same site in 1713 and 1741. In 1770, it was rebuilt on a new site to the west of the location of the present bridge, at the end of St Nicholas Street.

19. *Sandsfoot Castle.* Sandsfoot Castle was maintained, despite erosion of the cliff on which it stood, until the Civil War, when it was held for the King and was the scene of some fighting. It was abandoned in 1665, but was used as a storehouse until the 1690s, and was then allowed to go to ruin. In the early eighteenth century the ruins were sold to the town of Weymouth who used some of the better, and more easily accessible, stone in the building of the new Town Bridge.



Figure 16: *The White Hart, former home of the Thornhill family.*



Figure 17: *The Black Dog, St Mary Street*



Figure 18: *The remains of Sandsfoot Castle*