

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

Wareham lies near to the eastern tip of a low ridge formed of sand and gravel between the Rivers Frome and Piddle. The town is located

at the lowest bridging point of the two rivers before they empty in to the north west corner of Poole Harbour, at Swineham Point, approximately 1.25 miles to the east. The meaning of the name Wareham is thought to be *home-stead by a weir* (Mills 1977, 124).

The topography has had a major influence on the town layout. The ridge between the two rivers is aligned in approximately an ENE-WSW direction, an alignment followed by the grid layout of the Saxon town, whose town defences run from river to river, effectively cutting off the eastern end of the ridge. The major approach road from the west partly follows the ridge. The second major route through the town runs across the ridge crossing the Piddle at North Bridge and the Frome at South Bridge. This route seems to join a Roman road to Woodbury Hill near Bere Regis six miles to the northwest and may connect to the Roman industrial sites in Purbeck.

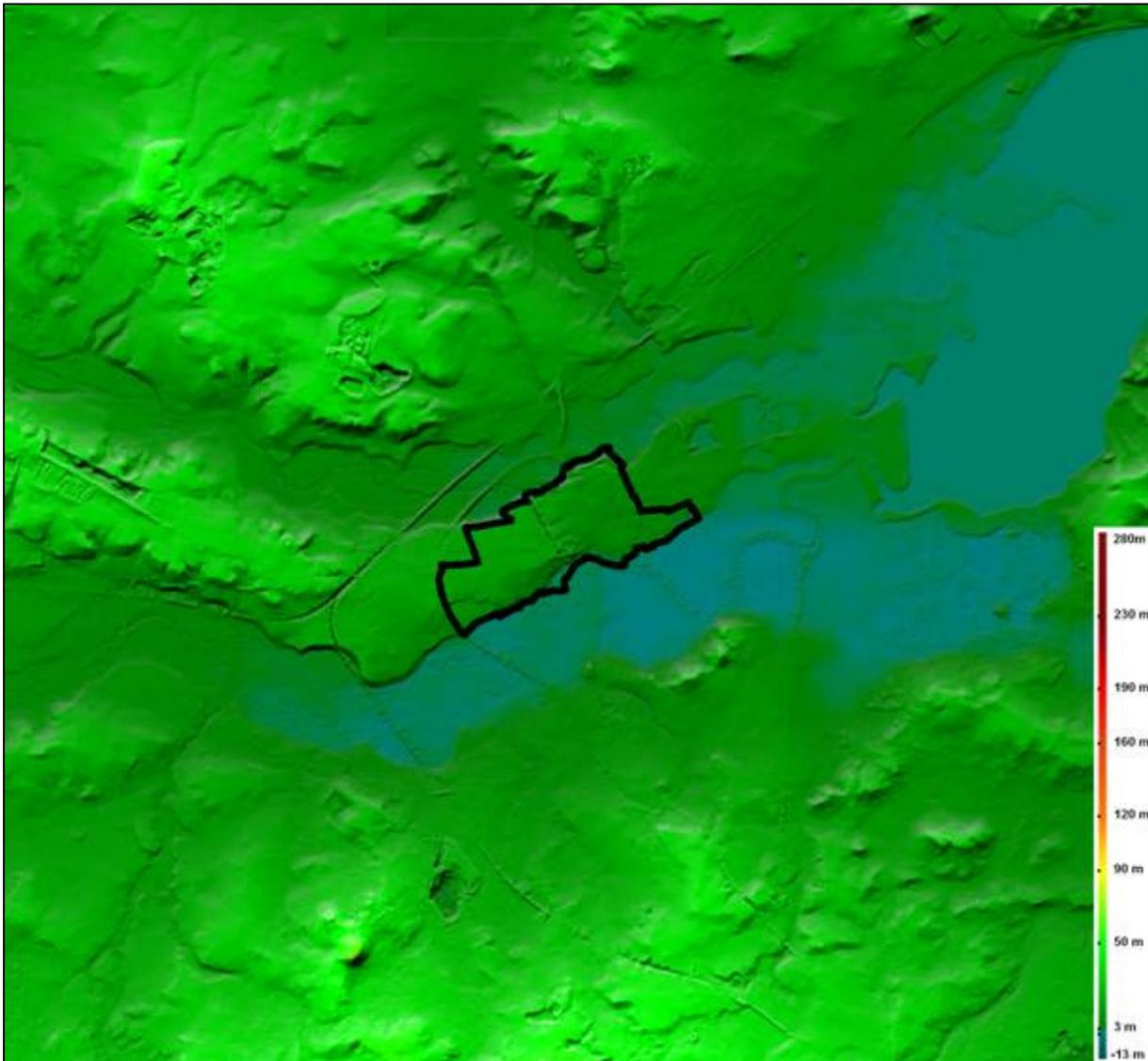


Figure 3: Wareham's topographic setting

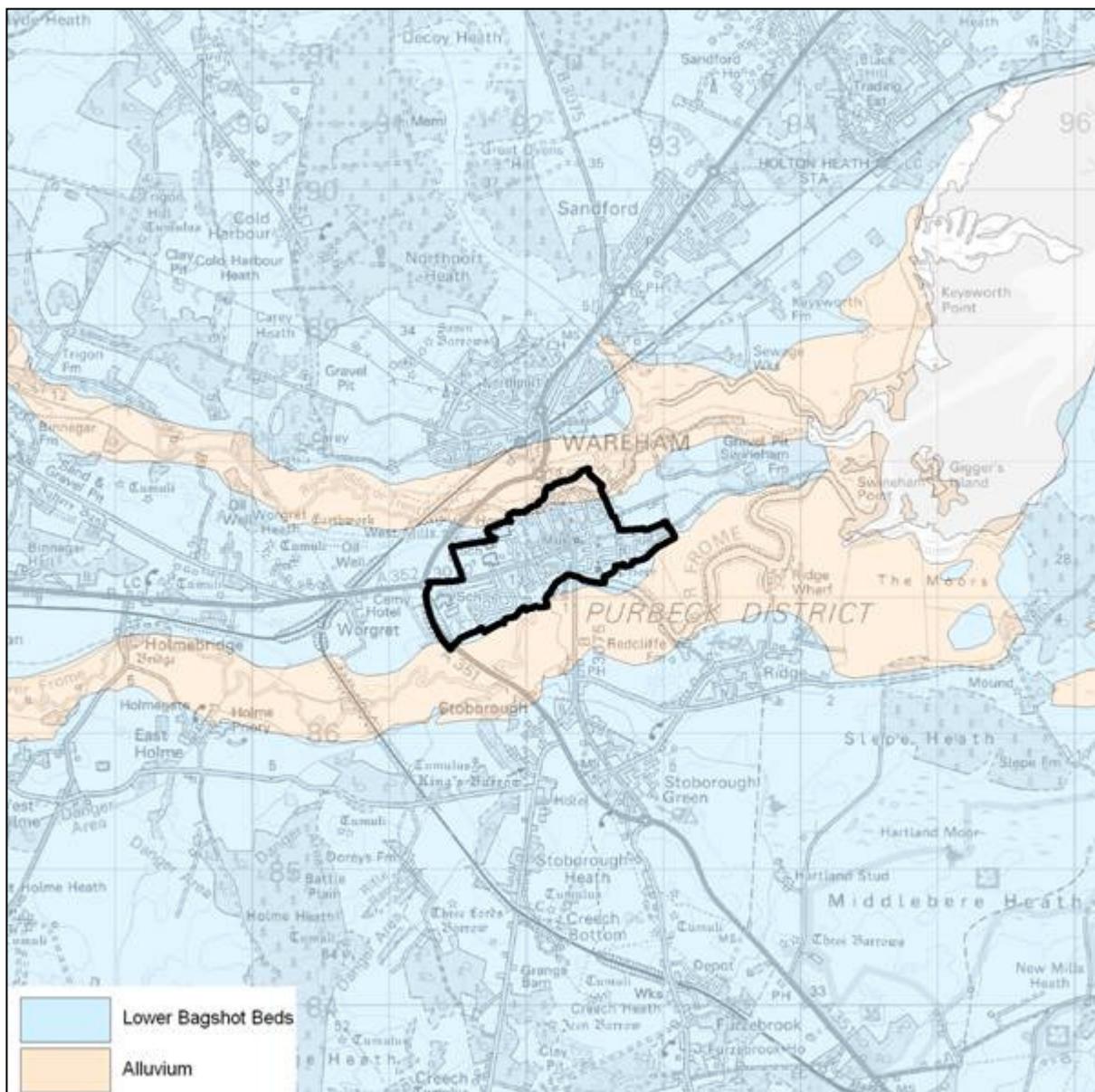


Figure 4: Geology of the Wareham Area.

3.3 Geology

The low ridge between the two rivers upon which the town sits comprises sand and gravel of the Lower Bagshot beds. These date from the Eocene Epoch (55-34 million years ago) and cover an extensive area of northeast Purbeck (Figure 4). They are thought to have been laid down as alluvial deposits by the River Solent and include Ball Clays derived from the granite area of Dartmoor. Clay within the Bagshot Beds has been important to industry in the region since the late Iron Age and Roman periods, when it was exploited by the Black Burnished ware pottery industries around Poole Harbour. Ball Clay has been extracted in large quantities south of Wareham since the 18th century. More recently gravel extraction was a major, if short lived, industry at Bestwall.

The nature of the underlying geology has influenced the appearance and built environment of the town. The Bagshot Beds contain some reddish sandstone (heathstone) used locally for walling. The local clays have also been used in the manufacture of brick from at least the 18th century and cob walling before that.

3.4 Landscape Character

Several landscape character assessments help place the town into its wider landscape context.

In the national assessment of countryside character, Wareham lies within National Character Area 135 *Dorset Heaths* (Countryside Agency 1999).

The key characteristics of National Character

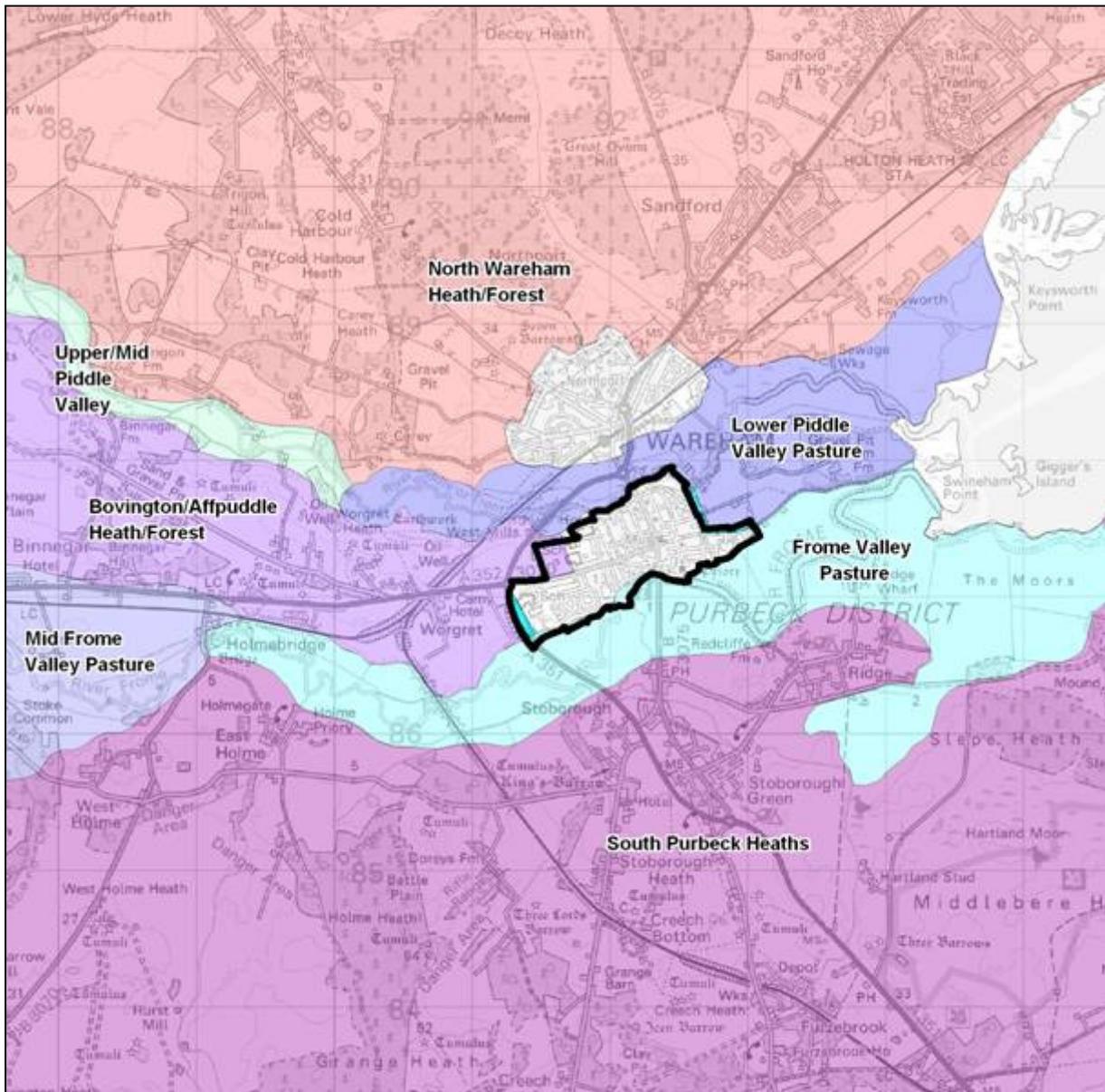


Figure 5: Wareham in its landscape character setting (Dorset AONB Landscape Characterisation).

Area 135 are listed as:

- An exposed, open, broad-scale landscape forming a strong contrast with the adjacent character areas
- Undulating lowland heath with tracts of heather, stunted pines and gorse scrub.
- Blocks of conifers forming locally-prominent landmarks.
- Mosaics of heathland, farmland, woodland and scrub.
- Much is sparsely populated with scattered settlements and a few small villages and towns but the extensive conurbation of Poole-Bournemouth forms a major influence in the south and east.
- Flat-bottomed, open valleys with floodplain pastures and willows.

- An outer edge of low, rolling hills with an irregular patchwork of pasture, woodland and dense hedges marking the transition to the chalk.

The Wareham region falls between two landscape character assessments; the Dorset AONB Landscape Character Assessment (Dorset AONB 2008) and the Purbeck District Landscape Character Assessment (PDC 2008). These documents provide a detailed record of the features and landscape elements present in the wider Wareham Area (Figure 5). The town is surrounded by the Lower Piddle Valley Pasture, Frome Valley Pasture and Bovington/Affpuddle Heath/Forest Landscape Character Areas (PDC 2008).

The key characteristics of the *Lower Piddle*

Valley Pasture Character Area are:

- Flat river valley flood meadow landscape.
- The meandering course of the River Piddle and its associated ditches and banks.
- Elevated river terraces and associated trees and scrub.
- Open pastoral expansive landscape with some views up the valley.
- The visually and physically intrusive transport corridors are major features.
- A largely undeveloped landscape used for informal recreation.
- A buffer between Wareham and Northport.

The key characteristics of the *Frome Valley Pasture* Character Area are:

- Meandering flat river floodplain with small wet woodlands, wet winter flooded grasslands and extensive pattern of water meadows.
- Extensive reed beds and coastal grazing marsh towards the harbour.
- Large open regular fields with dense copses of oak, hazel, holly; ancient woodlands and occasional individual trees.
- Linear and nucleated settlements of local stone along the river terrace margins.
- Long open views with a tranquil experience.
- Historic bridges, mills and ecclesiastical remains.

The key characteristics of the *Bovington/Affpuddle Heath/Forest* Character Area are:

- The patchwork of heath, scrub, plantation and farmland.
- Large scale blocks of conifer plantation create hard edges but act as screening and landscape features in places.
- Open expansive heathland with wide views
- Open views from elevated positions across the area.
- Recreational use and conservation management a key feature across the area.
- There are localised industrial/urban and military use impacts in the area.
- Straight fast roads often lined with plantation wood/forest.
- Bounded by the Piddle and Frome Valleys.
- There are some important views over the Vale from high places.

- Acts as a buffer between the two valleys particularly at its eastern end.
- The wooded ridgeline to the north is a key feature.

The draft Historic Landscape Character mapping shows Wareham sitting on a ridge between tracts of water meadows associated with the Rivers Frome and Piddle. The ridge comprises a variety of enclosed fields including planned, other regular, piecemeal and amorphous enclosures as well as a variety of settlements. Beyond the river valleys there is a patchwork of open heath, plantations and enclosures.

3.5 The Present Town

The town of Wareham lies in a strategic position on both the Rivers Frome and Piddle close to their confluence at the western end of Poole Harbour. The major conurbation of Poole and Bournemouth lies about 10 km to the east. The modern urban area covers approximately 99 ha. It lies on the A351 between Poole and Swanage and at the eastern end of the A352 about 15 miles east of Dorchester. It also lies close to the southern end of the B3075, 12 miles south of Blandford Forum. There are direct rail links with London Waterloo and Weymouth. The station lies to the north of the town centre. The town has grown steadily from the 1930s onwards, with the 1980s representing a particularly rapid period of growth during which the population increased by approximately 25% from 4,580 in 1981 to 5,620 in 1991. Today the population stands at around 6,000 (Dorset County Council 2008, 88). Wareham is important as a service and shopping centre for the surrounding villages and is the home of Purbeck District Council.

Wareham has one secondary school, the Purbeck School, one first school and one middle school. The retail sector comprises 82 shops, mainly local shops, but including some national chains. Wareham has two industrial estates at Sandford Lane Industrial Estate (9.02ha) and Westminster Industrial Estate (5.0ha), both of which lie outside the study area.

About 34% of the economically active population are employed in public administration, education and health; 29% within the service sector; 16% in manufacturing; 13% in banking, finance and insurance; less than 5% in transport and communications and 4% in construction (Dorset County Council 2008, 88-9).

Part 4: Sources



4.1 Previous research

Wareham can lay claim to being one of the oldest towns in Dorset and is one of only four boroughs mentioned in the Dorset Domesday book. For this reason the town has attracted interest from chroniclers throughout its history. William of Malmesbury in the 12th century, John Leland in the 16th century, Thomas Gerard in the 17th century and John Hutchins and Daniel Defoe in the 18th century all commented on aspects of Wareham's layout, history or economy (Hutchins 1861, 77-97; Defoe 1727; Coker 1732). Hutchins was rector of Wareham from 1744 until his death in 1773. The manuscript for his *History and Antiquities of Dorset* almost perished in Wareham's great fire of 1762 but was saved by the bravery of his wife. This great work, published posthumously in 1774, provided a springboard for 19th century local Wareham historians such as Levien (1872) and Clift (1908).

A number of informative general local histories and guides have been written in recent years (Ladle 1986; 1994; Broughton 1980, Davis 1984), together with some publications on more specific aspects of Wareham's past. Selby (1970) and James (2001) have both written on the history of non-conformity in Wareham. Ladle (1990) has written on the history of Wareham Middle School. Mitchell and Smith (2003) have written about the recent history of the Wareham to Swanage branch line. Davis (2004) has written about Wareham during the war years.

4.2 Historic Maps

Wareham is very well represented with 18th century maps of the town. The earliest dated map depicting the town is a survey with a detailed terrier and a series of sketch maps depicting the burgage tenements within the borough at that time. It is entitled *The Plan and Rental of the Manor and Borough of Wareham* and has written on the inside cover: *Survey of the Burgage Tenements in Wareham Jan 23rd-March 1st 1746* (DHC D/RWR/E53). This series of sketch plans was later pulled together and published as a single redrawn map (Clift 1908).

A further mid 18th century plan of the borough of Wareham depicts the boundaries of the five parishes (St Michael, St Martin, St Peter, Holy Trinity and Lady St Mary) that were still in existence at that time (DHC D/RWR/E18). The Dorset History Centre also hold a half size copy of an original manuscript map held in the British Museum entitled *map of Wareham Dor-*

set taken after the great fire in 1762 (DHC D1/10,367). The latest map in the series of 18th century town plans was drawn by Hutchins for his *History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset* (Hutchins 1861, opposite p. 77).

The tithe map of Wareham Lady St Mary dates from 1846 and that of Wareham St Martin dates from 1844. The characterisation was largely based on the 1:2500 scale Ordnance Survey maps dating from 1887 onwards.

4.3 Documentary Evidence

Primary documentary sources used in this report include the Domesday Survey of 1086 (Thorn & Thorn 1983) and taxation records including the Lay Subsidy (Rumble 1980) as well as Tudor subsidies and Muster Rolls (Stoate 1978; 1982). 19th century and early 20th century trade directories have also proved a valuable source of information. These documents have been used to gain an insight into the size, wealth and economy of Wareham in comparison with neighbouring towns from the 11th to 20th centuries.

4.4 Archaeological Evidence

Seventy archaeological events have been recorded for Wareham. This work has proved invaluable to our understanding of the development of the town. Antiquarian interest had largely been devoted to the question of the possible Roman origins of the town. This interest had been stimulated by the discovery of five 7th-9th century memorial stones inscribed on re-used Roman architectural fragments, during the rebuilding of Lady St Mary Church, as well as numerous isolated finds of Roman and prehistoric material from around the town (Bennett 1899; Farrar 1954a). However, it was not until the Royal Commission on Historic Monuments (RCHME) instigated excavations on the West Walls between 1952 and 1954 that the question of the origin of the town's defences was resolved. These excavations revealed a developmental sequence in which the initial rampart and external ditch was constructed during the 8th or 9th centuries, a wall built on top during the late Saxon period and the rampart heightened and the ditch re-cut during the 12th century. Other significant discoveries were the presence of a large quantity of residual Roman material within the rampart indicating significant Roman activity in the vicinity, and an Iron Age ditch and pits sealed beneath the ramparts (RCHME 1959). The early 1950s also saw the excavation of Castle Close and the discovery of the massive four-

datations for the 12th century stone keep (Renn 1960). These investigations, particularly those on the West Walls, inspired a generation of local residents to explore their gardens for evidence of Roman and Iron Age occupation. The results of a number of small trial excavations on a small area within the north West Walls of the town have provided the most convincing evidence to date of Roman and Iron Age structures within the area of the later town walls (Farrar 1954a, 84-5). During the 1970s David Hinton and Richard Hodges conducted a series of excavations inside the town as the opportunity arose. Successes included locating the outer defensive ditch of the Castle bailey as well as uncovering the first archaeological evidence for late Saxon structures at St Martin's House on North Street. Disappointments included the lack of evidence for early medieval structures relating to the Quay, although this negative evidence was itself informative, suggesting that the modern quay had been reclaimed from the river during the post-medieval period and that the medieval and Saxon quays lay further north.

From the late 1980s the Wareham and District Archaeology and Local History Society have undertaken a series of archaeological investigations around the town. These have generally taken the form of watching briefs conducted by Lillian Ladle MBE. This important work has often recorded archaeology, with the consent of the landowner, when no archaeological conditions have been attached to development.

Following the introduction of PPG 16 in 1991, a number of significant investigations were undertaken. Some of these have revealed evidence of medieval burgrave plots with associated structures behind North and East Streets (Wessex Archaeology 1995a). Other key discoveries include the existence of a deep and dark humic soil layer sealing medieval deposits across large areas of the walled town. This has been interpreted as a post-medieval cultivation layer relating to garden plots behind the four main streets. A large number of undated burials have also come to light in the vicinity of Lady St Mary's Church and Priory and St John's Hill. Some may potentially date from the late or post Roman period and could possibly provide a context for the 7th-8th century memorial stones at Lady St Mary's Church. Wareham's documented history is of variable quality, but seems to indicate that it was a successful international port by the 8th century. However, our understanding of the subsequent development of the town was less well understood and has been greatly enhanced through the archaeological record. A table of all archaeological investigations is presented in Appendix 3.

4.5 Historic Buildings

Wareham is particularly notable for its survival of historic buildings. St Martin's church is of prime importance among Dorset's historic buildings as a rare, intact example of a late 11th century nave and chancel. It also has a series of wall paintings, the earliest of which probably date from the 12th century (Newman & Pevsner 1972, 437). However, Wareham is probably better known for a late 7th-early 8th century church on the site of Lady St Mary, which was essentially demolished and rebuilt in 1842. The early origins for Lady St Mary Church are now known only from drawings and plans made prior to demolition. It seems to have been one of the largest churches of the early 8th century in England, indicating the importance of the town from a very early date (Pitfield 1985). During the demolition works a number of re-used Roman architectural fragments were found built into the nave of the old church and inscribed with British Christian memorials dating from the 7th - 9th centuries (RCHME 1970; Hinton 1992). The town has several other standing medieval structures in varying conditions including Holy Trinity Church and part of the Priory Hotel and a barn on St John's Hill.

Wareham has a very consistent Georgian street frontage along the four main streets. This is a consequence of the greater part of the town being consumed by a particularly destructive fire in 1762. The town was rebuilt, in the Georgian style, through subscription from a large number of benefactors, during the late 18th century. Wareham's historic buildings are characterised by the widespread and consistent use of local brick and tile. Many of these two and three storey buildings have intact 18th and 19th century shop windows, moulded pilasters in the doorways and porches, ironwork railings and casement windows. The town has a number of important focal points where groups of 19th century buildings interact to form iconic street-scapes. Perhaps best known is the view from the south bank of the River Frome to Wareham Quay with its collection of 18th century warehouses, industrial buildings and townhouses. St John's Hill also has a fine collection of town houses with a late medieval barn on the north side.