

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

Cranborne lies on both sides of the River Crane in the upper reaches of its valley (Figure 3). The chalk down of Pentridge Hill rises gently on the NW side of the town and a low ridge to the south of the town contains the motte and

bailey of Cranborne Castle at its south eastern end, overlooking the town. The open chalk downland of Cranborne Chase expands to the west of the town and to the east the landscape is dominated by the extensive woodland of Verwood and Ringwood Forest. The historic core of Cranborne sits astride the River Crane at approximately 55m above Ordnance Datum. The river Crane flows in a southeasterly direction, draining into the Moors River and then the Stour at Christchurch.

The topography has had a major influence on the town layout. The High Street runs along the course of the River Crane; culverted in the centre of the town, but originally flowing openly through the centre of the streets and market. Further west the river remains open along Water Street. Two further roads run parallel to High Street and Water Street on either side of the river, forming back lanes to plots fronting on to High Street as well as providing alternative through routes in times of flood. Other roads and paths run at right angles to the river,

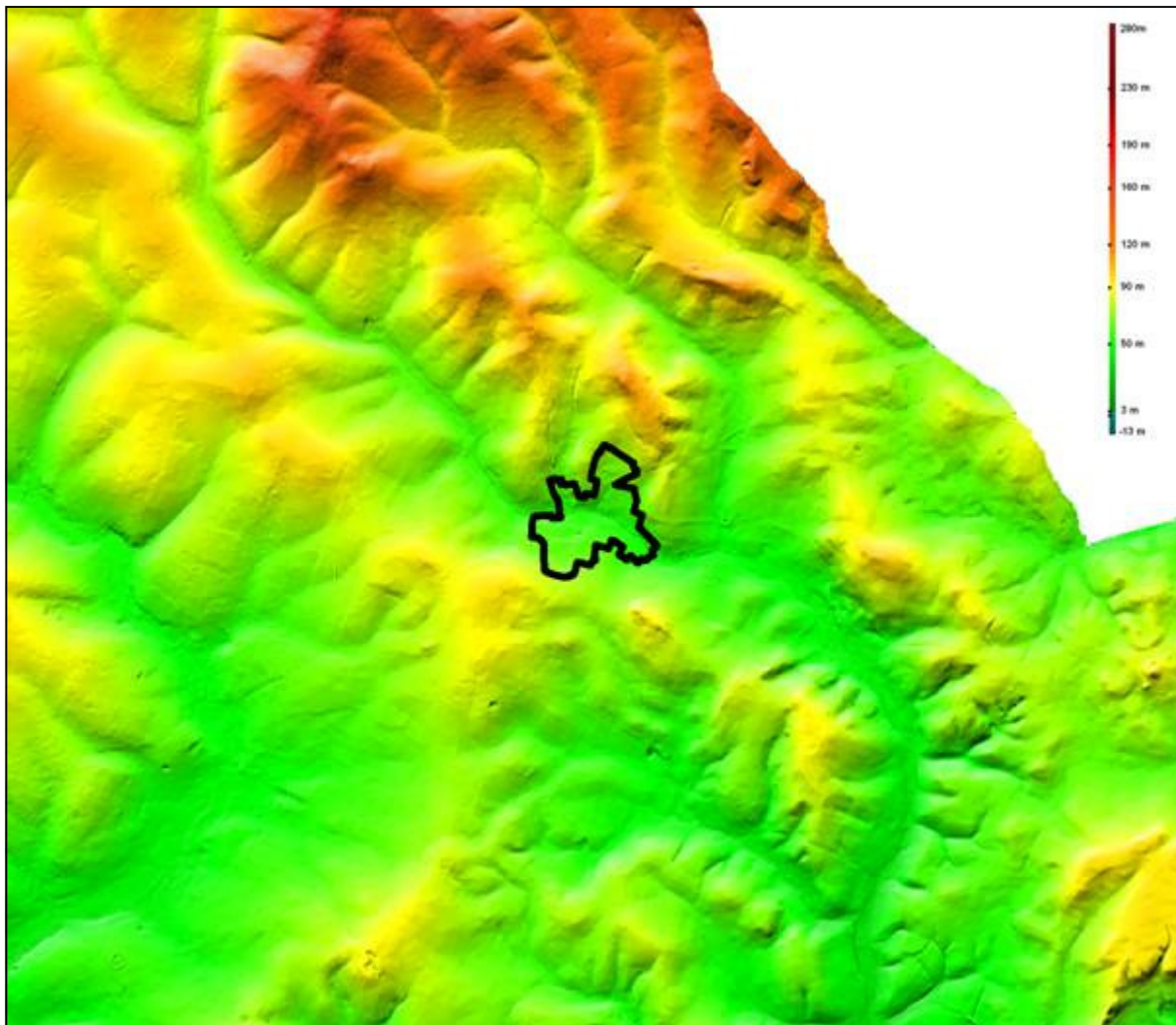


Figure 3: Cranborne's topographic setting

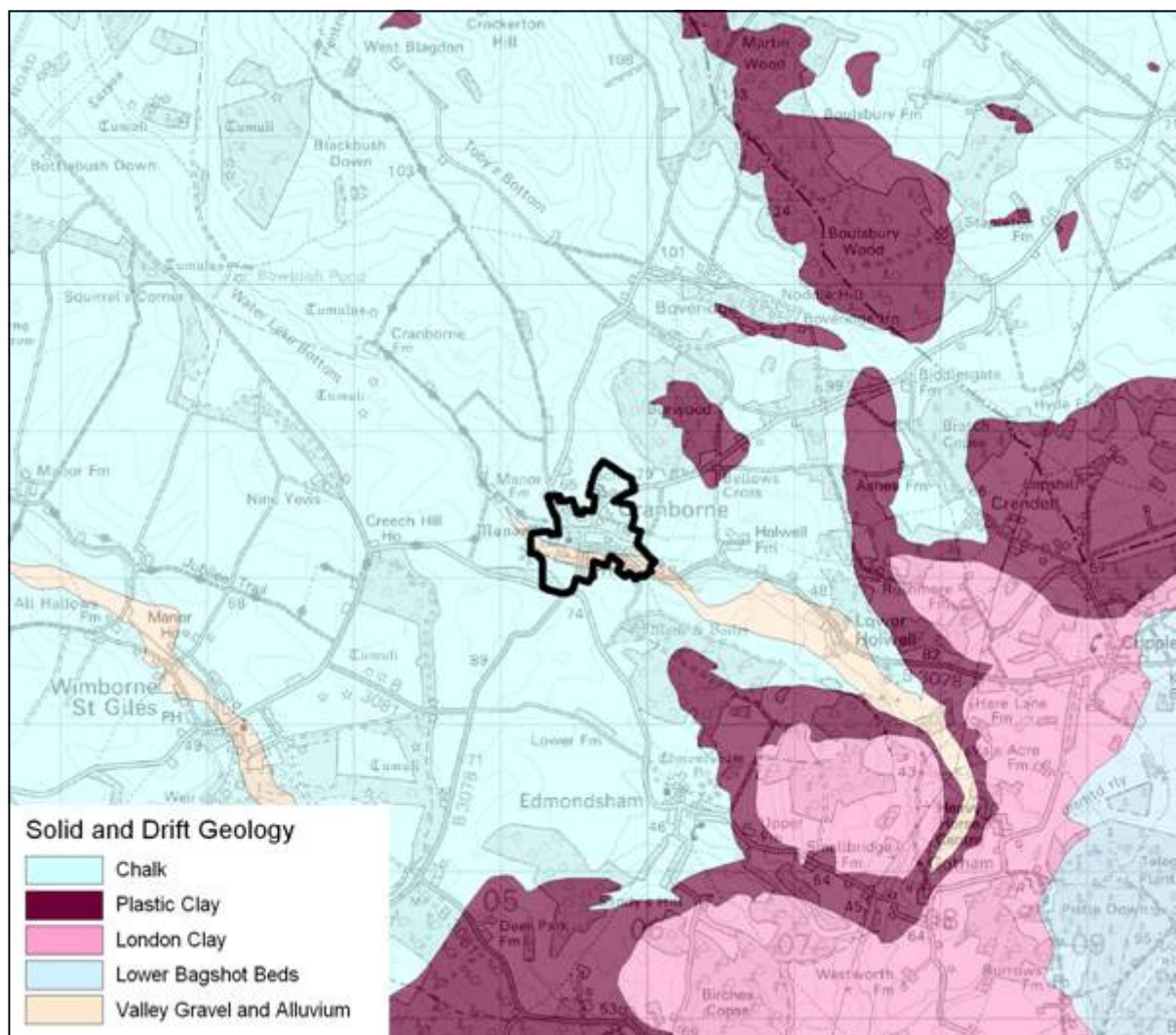


Figure 4: Geology of the Cranborne Area.

connecting the axial routes and forming an irregular grid pattern.

3.3 Geology

In broad terms Cranborne lies close to the junction of two distinct geological formations. The area to the north and west of the town comprises the chalk downs of Cranborne Chase. The area to the south and east of Cranborne lies on the edge of the Hampshire basin and the tertiary deposits of London Clay and Bagshot Beds (RCHME 1975, xxiii). The footprint of the town itself lies entirely within the limits of the chalk, although a Pleistocene deposit of valley gravel and alluvium runs through the centre of the town along the river valley (Figure 4).

The geology of the region has influenced the building materials used in the town. Flint is the local material, although a small amount of heathstone rubble has also been used, derived

from the Hampshire Basin to the southeast. Chalk has been used for cob walling and the proximity of the London Clay has led to brick being important in the region from the 16th century onwards. Thatch was the traditional roofing material, although plain clay tiles now predominate.

3.4 Landscape Character

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

In the national assessment of countryside character, Cranborne lies at the south eastern edge of National Character Area 134; Dorset Downs and Cranborne Chase (Countryside Agency 1999).

The key characteristics of National Character Area 134 are listed as:

- A rolling, chalk landscape with dramatic scarps and steep-sided, sheltered valleys.

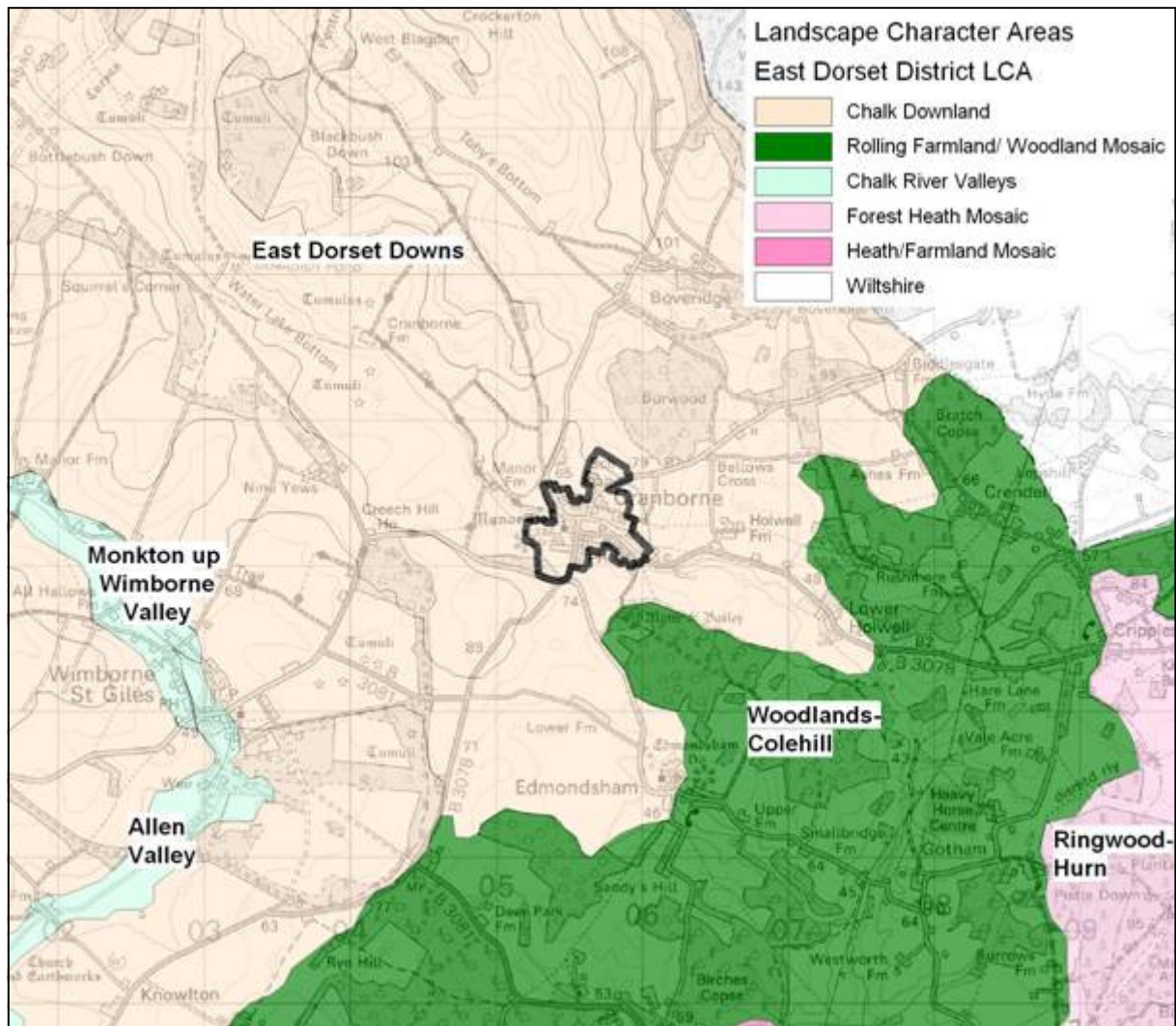


Figure 5: Cranborne in its landscape character setting (East Dorset District Landscape Characterisation).

- Scarp slopes with species-rich grassland, complex combes and valleys, spectacular views, prominent hillforts and other prehistoric features.
- Open, mainly arable, downland on the dip-slope with isolated farmsteads and few trees.
- Very varied valleys with woodlands, hedged fields, flood meadows and villages in flint and thatch.
- Distinctive woodlands and deer parks of Cranborne Chase.

Cranborne sits within the East Dorset Downs Landscape Character Area in the East Dorset District Draft Landscape Character Assessment (EDDC 2007). This document provides a detailed record of the features and landscape elements present (Figure 5).

The key characteristics of the East Dorset Downs character area are:

- Long, expansive views from ridges

- Large field sizes
- Isolated woodland blocks
- Historical land use pattern representing enclosures
- Historic parkland including the Drive Plantation
- Sparsely settled, especially further north
- Wealth of archaeological features

Cranborne also sits within Landscape Character area 5c, Stour and Avon Tributary Valleys, in the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB Landscape Character Assessment (Countryside Agency, 2003).

The key characteristics of the Stour and Avon Tributary Valleys character area are:

- Dipslope streams have eroded shallow valleys into the upper chalk - the upper parts of most of these valleys are dry.

- The shallow nature of the valleys means that they have been exploited either as improved pasture or, more commonly, large arable fields.
- Smaller, narrow fields, in places fossilising old strip patterns, predominate around the villages.
- Mature willows and poplars form a dense ribbon of trees, tracing the course of the river. Withy beds were once characteristic of the valleys and some survive today as features.
- Country houses and their designed parkland contribute features such as avenues, shelter belts and brick walls.
- Picturesque villages inhabit the valley bottoms, following the course of the river in a linear form the stream typically runs through the village with cottages reached via small bridges.
- Deserted Medieval villages are marked only by farmsteads or individual houses.
- Red brick, flint and thatch are locally distinctive materials.
- Roads occupy each valley floor.
- The Dorset Cursus, and numerous Bronze Age round barrows and channels of post-medieval water meadows contribute to the visible archaeology.
- This rural area is lush farming country that provides a peaceful and unified environment.

There have been two separate historic landscape characterisation (HLC) projects that have included the Cranborne area: the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB Historic Landscape Characterisation (Rouse 2008) and the Dorset County Council Historic Landscape Characterisation. The Cranborne Chase HLC shows Cranborne within an area of primarily regular and semi-regular pre-1800 fields with some Parliamentary enclosures and pre-1800 woodland (Rouse 2008). The draft Dorset County Council Historic Landscape Character mapping shows Cranborne sitting within an area of largely piecemeal enclosed fields and planned enclosed fields, as well as areas of parliamentary enclosures and modern enclosed fields. These are divided by large blocks of deciduous woodland and coppice.

3.5 The Present Town

The modern built-up area of Cranborne is entirely within the parish of Cranborne and covers

an area of about 39 ha. It lies on the B3078 road between Wimborne and Fordingbridge and is also close to the southern end of the B3081. It has no rail links; the nearest station being at Salisbury, approximately 19 km away to the north. The latest population figure for the parish of Cranborne is 779 (2001 census). This represents a 33% rise from 1971. The town has one primary school, Cranborne CE VA First School, and one Middle School. Cranborne Middle School has the Ancient Technology Centre attached to it. The town also contains a small fire station, a doctor's surgery, a veterinary clinic, a village hall, a sports pavilion and the offices of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB team.

The retail sector comprises one village shop, a post office, two pubs, a garden centre and a car spares shop. The nearest business centres are at Fordingbridge and Ringwood (Hants) and Wimborne (Dorset). Census data only exists for the wider electoral division of Cranborne Chase which includes a population of 8,420 (2001). Of the 430 firms recorded in the electoral division 93% are classified as micro-firms, employing 10 people or less. In fact 21.7% of the workforce is self employed.

Part 4: Sources



4.1 Previous research

The antiquarian John Leland visited Cranborne *circa* 1550 and recorded important information concerning the layout of the late medieval town. Hutchins discussed the town in the late 18th and 19th centuries (Hutchins 1774: 1815; 1868). The local physician and antiquary Thomas William Wake Smart also wrote a history of Cranborne town and chase in 1841 (Wake Smart 1841) as well as two papers in the Dorset Proceedings concerning Cranborne Castle and Priory (Wake Smart 1887; 1890).

A small number of local histories have been published during the later 20th century. These include a study of towns in NE Dorset (Hinchy 1957); a study of the late medieval and early post-medieval economy in Cranborne (Clarke nd); and an account of the post-medieval town (Mackenzie 1987).

4.2 Historic Maps

The earliest detailed map of the town is John Norden's survey of Cranborne Chase which includes a depiction of the town, the manor and some architectural detail (Norden 1605). The tithe map dates from 1840. This 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); taxation records including the Lay Subsidy (Rumble 1980; Mills 1971) and Hearth Tax Returns (Meekings 1951). These documents have been used to gain an insight into the size, wealth and economy of Cranborne in comparison with neighbouring towns from the 11th to 17th centuries.

4.4 Archaeological Evidence

Whilst there is a wealth of archaeological monuments just outside the urban area on Cranborne Chase and Cranborne Castle, relatively little work has been conducted within the town itself. Foundations of the Priory have been noted just south of the parish church (Penn 1980, 52) and a brick-lined ice house was observed during earth moving at Sinodun, Grugs Lane in 1981 (Penny 1986). A substantial amount of archaeological investigation has been undertaken in the area of Penny's Farm in advance of housing development between

1982 and 1996. This demonstrated activity on the site from the Late Neolithic to the medieval period and found rare evidence for middle Saxon occupation (Wilson and Chowne 1987; Lewis 1996; Bellamy 2000).

A recent evaluation on the site of the Ancient Technology Centre, Cranborne Middle School also revealed significant evidence for a prehistoric field system, potentially modified and used into the medieval period (Heaton *et al.* 2000).

4.5 Historic Buildings

Cranborne is fortunate in its good survival of historic buildings; approximately 70 structures in the urban area date from the late 19th century or earlier. Almost all the buildings in the town are of local red brick, with the notable exceptions being the Manor House and the church. The historic buildings consist largely of 18th and 19th century two-storey houses and cottages, with a small number of 17th and 18th century thatched cottages and other buildings. There are also a number of barns and stables and at least one surviving former workshop in the town.

There are a small number of exceptional historic buildings in the town. Cranborne Manor House is probably the most significant building and is extremely important both as a rare survival of early 13th century domestic architecture and as a fine example of an early 17th century country house. The parish church of St Mary and St Bartholomew mainly dates from the 14th century, with some 12th century fabric and it is presumed to be on the site of the 10th century Abbey church. Cranborne Lodge is a very good example of an early Georgian house.