

Chapter 2

Present Situation

Scroll down for Chapter 2 content

[Back to Contents](#)



Chapter 2

Present Situation

Christchurch – An Historic Borough

- 2.1 The early history of Christchurch is obscure. Barrows on St Catherine's Hill provide evidence of settlement during the Bronze Age (c 1800 BC – 600 BC) and there are traces of occupation during the Iron Age (600 BC – AD 43), particularly on Mill Plain. It was during the Iron Age (first century BC) that Hengistbury Head became an important trading centre dominating the area around what is now Christchurch.
- 2.2 In the Roman period (AD43 – AD410), Hengistbury Head became a small settlement possibly known as Dunium. Little is known of Christchurch after the departure of the Romans in AD410. King Alfred, who came to the throne in AD871, developed the strategy of fortified places, known as burhs, to enable the population to concentrate and resist Viking Raiders and Christchurch was one of the burhs of Wessex. The first written record of Christchurch is in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle which refers to it being captured by Ethelwald in AD900. Excavations during the 1970s uncovered part of the Saxon defences. The entrance to the defences is believed to have been sited near where Bow House now stands in the High Street. Excavations by the Mill Stream revealed a Saxon cemetery.
- 2.3 The Domesday Book of 1086 described Christchurch as a small market town. Mention is also made of a Saxon monastery of the Church of The Holy Trinity occupying the site of the present Priory Church. The Normans launched the building of the Priory. At the same time that the Priory Church was being constructed, Twynham Castle was built as a stopping place for journeying forces. In about 1160 a domestic building (known as the Constable's House) was erected at the foot of the Castle to house the Constable. The ruins of both remain today.
- 2.4 The town appears to have been prosperous in the early medieval period but seems to have declined temporarily from about 1350, possibly due to the Black Death. After 1600 the town was small but prosperous, making its living from agriculture and fishing.
- 2.5 In the 17th and 18th Centuries Christchurch became a centre for smuggling. Whole communities were involved in this clandestine trade.
- 2.6 Christchurch remained a generally small town, expanding very little beyond its medieval suburbs, until the present century. The town has expanded along its major roads, establishing areas such as Jumpers and St Catherine's Hill. The outlying villages now form the main urban area. The village of Burton has seen major residential growth separated from the main urban area, while Hurn and Winkton have remained small in comparison. Christchurch now forms part of the wider conurbation of Poole, Bournemouth and parts of East Dorset, with an overall population of some 360,000.

Conurbation Context and Regional Context

- 2.7 The Borough of Christchurch lies at the heart of the south coast of England in the south - eastern corner of Dorset. It consists of coastal, urban and rural areas offering residents a varied and attractive environment. Christchurch has the role of a local service centre providing a range of shopping, sporting, recreation and other community facilities. As well as forming a corner of Dorset the Borough also forms the far south - eastern corner of the south - west region. It borders the south - east which is usually recognised as the area within the sphere of influence of London. The physical location ultimately ensures that pressures on the Borough are governed by various factors. South - West Regional Planning Guidance will influence future development patterns across the south - west, although Christchurch will unavoidably be subject to pressure outside the region.

Population Profile

- 2.8 The 1998 mid-year estimates show Christchurch as having a population of 43,864, compared to 37,700 in 1981 (source: 1981 census). 23% of the population are aged between 0 – 24, 44% between 25 and pensionable age and 33% of pensionable age and above (source: ONS mid 1998 population estimates). Christchurch has the highest percentage of retired people of any district in the country and some areas of the Borough have over 50% of the population of pensionable age. Recent years have seen the continuing trend of elderly people retiring to Christchurch.
- 2.9 Between 1981 and 1998 – 4533 dwellings were completed. The increase in population may appear small in comparison but an explanation for this growth pattern may lie in the fact that Christchurch, like other coastal areas, has a low average household size – this being 2.21 persons per dwelling in 1991, compared to 2.36 in 1981.
- 2.10 Unemployment figures give the Borough an unemployment rate of 2.5% (at April 1999). Particular areas of the Borough are worse affected than others, for example the ward of Grange, including the Somerford Estate (which contains the majority of social housing within Christchurch) has an unemployment rate of 4.5% (source: DCC Monitoring series 'Unemployment').