

# Summary

This report contains the results of a consideration of the historical, archaeological, architectural and map evidence relating to the development of Beaminster. It has focused on the understanding of the overall development of the town from its earliest beginnings to the present day, with a view to defining how this has influenced the modern townscape, identifying what historical features and structures survive within the modern town, and comprehending what is the contribution of its historic dimension to the character of Beaminster today. This will enable an informed approach to the management of change and conservation of the urban environment to be undertaken.

The origins of Beaminster are as a Saxon minster church and the centre of a large estate owned by the Bishop of Sherborne, which may have acted as a focus for settlement. It was granted a market and fair in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century and by the 14<sup>th</sup> century it had grown into a small industrial and trading centre, probably based on woollen cloth making and agricultural products. Although probably heavily affected by the Black Death, the town recovered and continued to thrive throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, largely as a result of its woollen cloth industry. However, the fortunes of the town were badly affected by two disastrous fires in 1644 and 1684 that almost destroyed the whole of the town centre. Beaminster grew very slowly during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as it took a long time to recover from the effects of the fires. The cloth industry continued to be important and sailcloth and other flax and hemp manufacturing became a significant industry in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, these industries declined and by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had almost disappeared. The population of the town fell during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the market declined and Beaminster became increasingly isolated and dependent on local agricultural trades. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw an increase in suburban growth and there was a resurgence of light industry in the town after the end of World War II.

Beaminster has a nucleated plan form focused on the triangular medieval market place with a radial array of roads running out from it. Unusually, the church is located away from the centre of the town on the edge of a stream valley. The medieval town developed around the market place and along the major roads. The properties in the historic core of the town are irregular in size and suggest the town grew organically, rather than as part of a deliberately planned

settlement. The exception is along East Street where regular long narrow plots suggest this may have been a planned medieval suburb. Modern suburban development has occurred to the north, west and east of the town along the major roads, expanding on small areas of late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century suburban settlement.

Beaminster has a large number of historic buildings within the town. The majority date to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as a result of the widespread destruction by the late 17<sup>th</sup> century fires. However, there are a number of high quality 17<sup>th</sup> century houses surviving on the outskirts of the town and a small number within the historic core which survived the fires. The buildings are largely constructed from the local stone and comprise mainly two-storeyed attached houses, short terraces and detached small cottages, larger houses (some with 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century shop premises built into them), and a number of large town houses. A small number of industrial buildings also survive, mainly converted to domestic or commercial uses. St Mary's Church is the only surviving medieval building and it has a particularly fine church tower, one of the best in Dorset.

Beaminster has a distinctive topographic setting, lying within a natural bowl near the headwaters of the river Brit. This location provides a dramatic natural background and the surrounding countryside is visible from many parts of the town, providing a distinctive green backdrop to the urban views. The network of streams and tributaries draining the natural bowl have had a major influence on the development of Beaminster, with most of the roads following the lines of watercourses.

There are perhaps three main components that contribute to the local distinctiveness of Beaminster: the historic town layout and plot structure, the historic buildings, and the landscape setting. The medieval and early post-medieval town plan survives virtually complete and exerts a strong influence on the character of the town, in terms of its street and plot layout and the continuing focus on the medieval market place. It is this completeness of the historic town plan that is significant, rather than any specific individual characteristics. The location of the church is perhaps the most distinctive element. Otherwise, the town plan morphology is typical of many medieval market towns and the individual plots are not distinctive in themselves.



Figure 1: Vertical aerial photographic view of Beaminster, 2005 (© Getmapping.com 2005).

The good survival of the historic structure is complemented by the high quality and large quantity of historic buildings. The survival in the historic core of a large number of unbroken groups of buildings, with little disruption from modern development, is a major factor which highlights the contribution made by historic elements to Beaminster's urban character. The harmonious use of a range of local building materials helps underscore its local setting and emphasises the linkage with the surrounding landscape.

The landscape and topographic setting of the town is fundamental to its character. The location of the various watercourses have helped define the position of the streets and influenced the slightly sinuous course of the roads, which together with the undulations in the topography have produced the distinctive curving, rising and falling of many of the streets. The surrounding escarpment and hills provide a dramatic backdrop to the town which serves to underline Beaminster's historic role as a small rural market town.

This report has highlighted many aspects of the historical development of Beaminster and how this has shaped the modern town. It has also indicated gaps in our knowledge and areas which would repay further research.

The main areas of suggested further research include:

- The investigation of the evidence for the Saxon minster church and bishop's residence and the nature of the settlement in the late Saxon and early medieval period.
- Research into the medieval development of the town, its economy and industry.
- Research into the post-medieval industry of the town.