

# Summary

This report contains the results of a consideration of the historical, archaeological, architectural and map evidence relating to the developmental history of Wareham. It has focused on the understanding of the overall development of the town from its earliest beginnings to the present day. This work has been conducted in order to; achieve a better understanding of how the historical dimension has influenced the modern townscape; identify what historical features and structures survive within the modern town and; comprehend the contribution made by this historic dimension to the present character of Wareham. This will enable an informed approach to the management of change and conservation of the urban environment.

## *Historical Background*

The origins of settlement at Wareham are obscure. There has been no convincing evidence for a significant Roman settlement on the site of Wareham town, but there appears to have been an important post-Roman British church on or close to the site of Lady St Mary Church. This church certainly existed by the early 8<sup>th</sup> century and there may have been a settlement that grew up adjacent. However, the history of Wareham as an urban centre begins with the foundation of the Alfredian burh in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century. Both the town defences and the origins of the street pattern derive from the creation of the burh and both have had a profound effect on the subsequent layout and development of the town. Wareham appears to have become a successful settlement, probably developing as a trading centre and port. By the time of the Norman Conquest, Wareham was the largest town in Dorset. A castle was built in the southwest corner of the town. This became the focus of much military activity during the civil war between Stephen and Matilda in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and this appeared to have a detrimental effect on the economy of the town, leading to a decline in its importance. By the end of the medieval period, Wareham's importance as a port had declined in favour of Poole and, from this period onwards, it became a relatively small market town. Wareham played an important part in the Civil War, due largely to its proximity to Corfe Castle. In 1762, there was a serious fire in the town, destroying much of centre. The town was rebuilt largely in brick in a Georgian style.

## *Town morphology*

Wareham has a grid plan form laid out within the rectilinear Saxon town defences. The main

streets form a cruciform arrangement with the historic market place in the centre. Behind the main streets are a series of narrow streets and lanes. The grid layout is most evident in the northern part of the town. In the southeast part, the streets are more irregular and arranged around the open areas of St John's Hill, Lady St Mary Church and The Quay. In the southwest corner, the lanes have a distinct curvature, reflecting the line of the former Norman castle. Twentieth century suburban development has been largely focused on Northport, to the north of the historic core, together with limited development to the east and west of the town along Bestwall Road and Worgret Road.

## *Built character*

Wareham has a large number of historic buildings within its historic core. The majority are late 18<sup>th</sup> century Georgian brick buildings, the result of rebuilding after the 1762 fire, which gives a coherent character to the main streetscapes. There are a small number of earlier buildings, including some architecturally important structures, the most notable being the 11<sup>th</sup> century St Martin's Church. Medieval structures include Holy Trinity Church, Priory House, a barn on St John's Hill and 14 North Street. There are a range of 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings, including small terraced houses along back lanes and suburban villas. Modern development has taken place largely behind the main street frontages.

## *Landscape Setting*

Wareham lies on a narrow ridge of river gravels between the floodplains of the rivers Piddle and Frome. Beyond the floodplains lie extensive and expansive areas of open heathland mixed with a patchwork of enclosures, plantation and mixed woodland. Beyond the heath to the south is the Purbeck Ridge, affording pleasant vistas from the Quay southwards. The town has expanded east and west along the ridge, although the floodplains provide green buffers between Wareham and Northport to the north and Stoborough to the south.

## *Historic Urban Character*

The historic urban character of Wareham is a reflection of both its origins as a Saxon burh and the changes wrought by the major fire of 1762. The street grid and rectilinear form of the town centre has its origins in the laying out of the burh. The survival of the Saxon town defences as significant earthworks has defined the shape and structure of the historic town and



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

constrained suburban development. The long narrow historic properties along the main streets have defined a characteristic rhythm to the streetscapes with their predominantly Georgian brick houses built after the 1762 fire. This unity of historic built environment is a major component of the historic character of the town. The survival of many unbroken groups of buildings, with little disruption from modern development, is a major factor that highlights the contribution made by historic elements to Wareham's urban character. The landscape setting of the town on a low ridge between two rivers has constrained suburban development to immediately east and west of the town and encouraged expansion further to the north at Northport. The extensive views from the Town Walls and the Quay across the floodplains and the surrounding landscape is another significant element in the character of the town.

#### *Further Research*

This report has highlighted many aspects of the historical development of Wareham 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:

- Research into the pre-Saxon origins of the Lady St Mary site
- Research into the potential pre-burh settlement and activity.
- Research into the extent of Saxon and medieval occupation within the walled town.