

MARKET TOWNS

Highlighting the assets

English Heritage's urban archaeological strategy programme and other initiatives are helping to show that the history and historic fabric of market towns can be an asset for the future

The market town is a quintessential part of the traditional image of rural England and a vital part of the English rural economy. Like the countryside, market towns face a wide range of problems and challenges, including the economic and social impact of change; competition from out-of-town shopping; the effect of traffic on the urban fabric and environment; pressure for new housing; and the concentration of certain functions (for example, health care) in fewer, larger, centres.

In response, many smaller towns are assessing what the future may hold in order to adapt to a changing economic and social context. The Countryside Agency's Market Towns Initiative is intended to promote this process.

There is nothing new in this notion of reappraisal and change. As centres of economic, political and administrative activity, towns have always been subject to changes in fortune beyond their control. Many of the planned market towns of the Middle Ages, for example, either never flourished or have now shrunk to little more than hamlets.

Towns are conscious of their vulnerability to change in the wider world and competition from neighbouring towns. As a result, towns – as institutions and communities – have a strong interest in their own antiquity, longevity and durability. This is seen most clearly in roadside signs greeting the visitor: 'Anyborough – market town since 1204 AD'. The message is clear that this town is enduring and worth investing in.

Totnes Castle in Totnes, Devon, is an English Heritage historic property. It is a dominant feature in this historic market town, and the visitors which it attracts help to support the local economy



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Today, the history and urban fabric of England's market towns are potentially major assets. They can make a signal contribution to economic prosperity, to the attractiveness of a town as a place to live, work and shop, and – perhaps most important of all – to local pride and identity.

English Heritage supports a number of initiatives that are helping to support these assets. This article describes our current urban archaeological strategies programme and other aspects of our work in English market towns.

Urban archaeological strategies

Since 1992, English Heritage has been supporting urban archaeological strategy studies throughout England (see *Conservation Bulletin* 41, 16–21). One part of this programme covers major historic centres (including some places that fall into the category of market towns, such as Cirencester or Shrewsbury). A second part covers all smaller towns on a county-by-county basis. About half of the country has now been included. When the programme is complete, over 1000 towns will have been covered.

English Heritage provides grant-aid to local authorities. For county projects, the grant normally goes to the county archaeological service, which carries out the work in-house. The local authorities (both county and district) contribute significant help in kind. At an average total cost of around £5,000 per town, these projects represent remarkably good value for money.

Each town is subject to a three-stage process. First, a database of archaeological and historical information is created that would normally be kept in the County Council Sites and Monuments Record (SMR). Second, an assessment report is made, including the history of the town, its archaeological interest, major monuments and buildings, as well as a map-based analysis of the town's historic topography. Finally, a strategy document is drafted to identify the needs of archaeological protection and possible ways of presenting the archaeology and history to the public, by town trails for instance.

Projects covering Avon, Essex, Gloucestershire, Hampshire, Herefordshire, the Isle of Wight, Shropshire, Somerset and Worcestershire (228 towns in total) have already been completed, and work on a further 15 counties (covering some 350 towns) is now underway. The aim is to achieve national coverage over the next few years.

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These projects, although initially aimed at the needs of archaeological protection under PPG 16, can serve a wider range of purposes. The assessment reports provide a ready basis for Conservation Area appraisals. The topographical analysis can help to inform future development plans by highlighting the established (and often ancient) urban grain. The assessment reports will also be a valuable source for those who wish to find out more about a town's history, and all reports will eventually be available on the Internet. The strategy document can focus attention both on conservation needs and on the potential for making the town's history accessible to a wider audience of visitors.

Attractive historic buildings and spaces are characteristic of English market towns, as here at Leominster, Herefordshire. Pleasant environments of this kind are both socially and economically important

This programme is developing to meet current needs. In Cornwall, English Heritage and EU Objective 1 funds are each providing half of the £300,000 cost of the Cornwall and Scilly Urban Survey. This project focuses on 18 towns in Cornwall and will produce frameworks for regeneration that respect historic character and regional distinctiveness.

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Important archaeological remains are visible in some market towns. Some of the foundations and mosaic floors of this Roman town house in Dorchester, Dorset, have been displayed under a new cover building, with support from the Heritage Lottery Fund and advice from English Heritage

Consultation and advice

English Heritage is routinely consulted on a wide range of matters affecting market towns, notably planning proposals of various kinds. These include local plans, planning applications for major developments in Conservation Areas, and applications for listed building consent and scheduled monument consent. We work closely with local authorities to reach decisions that meet the needs of the place without comprising its historic value. The surveys described above will be an increasingly important tool for this work.

Grant-aid and assistance

Various kinds of English Heritage grant-aid and assistance can benefit market towns. Notable among these is the Heritage Economic Regeneration Scheme (HERS). HERS is a successor to the earlier Town Schemes and Conservation Area Partnerships (CAPs) which, in their day, resulted in improvements in the character and appearance of many English towns. HERS is designed to stimulate the economy by enabling historic buildings to be repaired and the urban environment to be enhanced.

Almost half of the current HERS are in market towns, and £3.5 million per annum (over a third of the annual HERS budget nationally) is being spent in these towns. Research published in our 1999 report, *The Heritage Dividend*, has shown

that £10,000 of English Heritage grant-aid can attract nearly £50,000 of further investment from public and private bodies. The economic benefit to market towns of English Heritage's commitment to HERS is, therefore, considerable.

English Heritage grants and assistance for individual buildings (including places of worship), monuments and archaeological work can also benefit market towns. Such grants will often provide local employment and support for local (and regionally distinctive) craft skills such as thatching and stone-masonry.

Historic properties

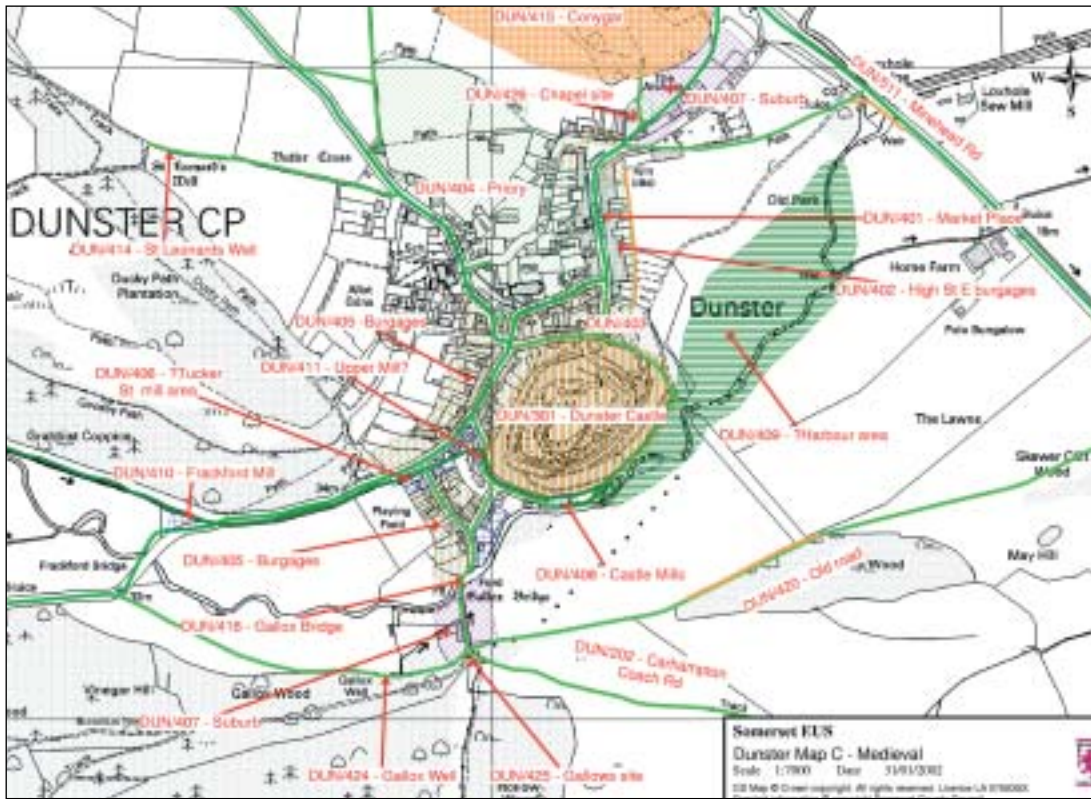
A good number of our own historic properties are in, or close to, market towns. Such monuments as Helmsley Castle (North Yorkshire), Much Wenlock Priory (Shropshire) or Launceston Castle (Cornwall) contribute substantially to the character of those towns and attract visitors, thus aiding the local economy.

In common with their surrounding countryside, market towns have always changed, and will continue to do so. Their long history and often rich historic fabric are assets which, wisely used, can help to produce an agreeable and interesting environment, economic prosperity and a sense of civic pride and identity. □

Roger M Thomas
Head of Urban Archaeology

Downham Market, Norfolk, Bridge Street and Market Place. Grant-aid from the Historic Environment Regeneration Scheme (HERS) has been used for window and roof repairs at the Town Hall (facing Market Place). An enhancement scheme and traffic calming will be carried out later this year





Dunster, Somerset. A survey was funded by English Heritage, and carried out by Somerset County Council's archaeology service, to analyse the historic topography of this market town. The resultant understanding can help to inform future planning and development



Aerial photograph of Dunster