

3.4.3 Totnes

Totnes is situated in the rolling hills of Devon's South Hams District. The strategic location of the town at the lowest crossing point of the River Dart meant it was well placed historically for both commerce and defence. The town has high archaeological significance, with some evidence of late prehistoric and Roman occupation in the vicinity of the later castle, but with origins more clearly rooted in a Saxon burh established at some time during the 10th century AD. It replaced the earlier local burh at Halwell and may have been an entirely planned town at this time. Tenth century Totnes possessed a royal mint and a minster church, later refounded during the 11th century as a Benedictine Priory. Totnes was one of the four boroughs in Devon recorded in Domesday Book. The Normans fortified the town and had a motte and bailey castle constructed in the north-western corner of the Saxon burh. By the late 13th century a medieval borough had also been established at Bridgetown in the adjacent manor on the eastern side of the river. By the 14th century Totnes was flourishing as a market town, with particular prosperity in the 15th to 17th centuries as a result of its textile industry. The town is particularly renowned for the exceptional survival of its 16th and 17th century merchants' houses which are characteristic of the main streets of the town centre. Ironically, the decline in wealth during the 17th and 18th centuries has saved many of these buildings from being wholly redeveloped.

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Fig. 89: Totnes study area

Fig. 90: Aerial view of Totnes. The outline of the town defences, superimposed Norman castle

and the medieval burghage plots are visible (Photo: Frances Griffith © Devon

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During the post-medieval period the town's quaysides were extended southwards

along The Plains from the bottom of Fore Street. The quays were a hub of maritime

activity and industry well into the early 20

th

century.

During the early to mid-19

th

century many fine villas were constructed on the high

ground and as a result the rural town edges of Totnes and Bridgetown remain green

and leafy. During the late 19

th

and early 20

th

centuries there was relatively limited town

expansion, with large areas remaining open meadow, orchards and garden enclosures, particularly across the areas of former saltmarsh. During

the later 20

th

century there was considerable expansion and infill within and around Totnes and

across the rural farmland to the south-east of Bridgetown. The role of the town today

is largely one of provincial market town, but its particular character has also attracted

a thriving artisan community.