

4 Environment

Key issues

- **Character and vitality of Wincanton.** Residents particularly value the friendliness of the town and its people. So far, Wincanton has avoided becoming an urban sprawl and should guard against this in the face of rapid planned expansion.
- **The countryside around Wincanton.** The countryside is very scenic and rich with the evidence of previous settlement. The majority of the countryside continues to be farmed in traditional ways, but there is great uncertainty over the future, particularly of the dairy industry.
- **Links between Wincanton and its surroundings.** The visual links from the town over the Blackmore Vale are partially threatened by housing development. A considerable number of footpaths link the town and its environ. Wincanton is also close to some important national trails and cycle routes.

4.1 Character and vitality of Wincanton

Distinctive characteristics of the town

The name 'Wincanton' means 'pleasant town on the River Cale'.

So far, Wincanton has avoided becoming an urban sprawl. Its built limits are distinct and it sits snugly on the southern slope of a hillside overlooking the Vale. The ridge of these hills defines the northern boundary of the town. The A303 defines its southern edge apart from sports facilities which have spilled over this boundary. To the east lies the village of Bayford which virtually joins Wincanton but with open countryside beyond. To the west, open countryside marks the edge of the town, though this boundary will shift with the development of the 'key site' at New Barn's Farm – see Chapter 5.

The Wincanton Survey 2003 asked residents what they liked most and least about the town. The results are summarised in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 What Wincanton residents like most and least about the town

Characteristic	Number of households mentioning this
<i>Like most</i>	
Friendliness of town / its people	212
Shops – good range	53
Smallness/ compactness of town	52
Sports facilities	43
<i>Like least</i>	
Shops – lack of big name/ variety	78
Empty shops	57
Shabbiness/run down/ not smart	46

Source: Lowe, J, 2003, Wincanton Survey 2003, Wincanton: Wincanton Town Council.

Focal points of the town and use of town centre

The main focal points of the town are the Market Place, library, car parks (favoured as a meeting place particularly by young people), Balsam Centre, pubs, Wincanton Racecourse, the skate park (used all year round). In the villages, a key focal point is their village halls.

Wincanton town centre has a good range of uses and consists of a mix of shops, houses, pubs and public services such as the library and police station.

Historical heritage

Wincanton is noted for its elegant Georgian houses and former coaching inns which remain as a reminder of the town's past as a busy staging post midway between London and Plymouth.

Many of the buildings in Wincanton date only from the 18th century due to the 'Great Fire of 1707'. The oldest building in the town is Prior's House, Nursery Lane off Church Street, parts of which are mediaeval. Prior's House is a Grade II* listed building. Wincanton has 109 listed buildings most of which are Grade II.

The central part of Wincanton is a conservation area and it is here that most of the listed buildings are clustered. The conservation area mainly covers the High Street, Mill Street, Market Place and part of Church Street.

Wincanton is an old market town and had a thriving cloth industry in the 18th century and some of the buildings still display evidence of this with their 'loom windows'.

To the West of the town lies the church of St Peter and St Paul dating from the 14th century although most of the current building is 19th century.

The original manor house is known as 'The Dogs'. It is believed that William of Orange lodged there during his journey from Brixham to London.

What the listing Grades mean

Grade I Building of exceptional interest.

Grade II* Important building of more than special interest.

Grade II Building of special interest warranting every effort to preserve it.

Source: Based on information retrieved from www.heritage.co.uk/apavilions/glstb.html on 6 September 2005.

The most significant of the historic and distinctive buildings in Wincanton are:

- The Dogs, South Street
- The Post Office, Market Place
- White Horse, High Street
- Dolphin Hotel, High Street
- Bear Inn, High Street
- Greyhound, High Street
- churches
- Town Hall
- Turnpike Cottage, Common Road/Bayford Hill
- Milk factory, Southgate Road, including the Cow and Gate stone relief sign (over the entrance to the Myakka store)
- Ireson House, Grants Lane
- Unicorn Inn, Bayford
- Prior's House, Church Street. (The oldest house in Wincanton dating from 1480)
- the whole of Mill Street
- Dial House, The Batch (dating from 1690)
- Shatterwell Shute, North Street.
- Clementina's, High Street (fascia)

- Masonic Hall, Church Street – this is a former silk mill. Although considered an eyesore currently, it could be made very attractive.

In the immediately surrounding area, further buildings of interest include:

- Moorhayes Farm
- Stavordale Priory
- manor houses at North Cheriton and Chalton Horethorne
- churches and farm houses at North Cheriton and Chalton Horethorne
- Roundhill Grange, Charlton Musgrove
- Charlton Horethorne church.

Condition of the town and concerns

Since 2001, Wincanton has benefited from the Heritage Economic Regeneration Scheme (HERS). This is an English Heritage scheme which offers assistance for building repairs and enhancements to improve the economic viability of conservation areas. The Wincanton HERS scheme was a three-year programme and all works approved during the three-year allocation period must be completed by March 2006.¹

Under the HERS scheme, English Heritage offered 50 per cent grants towards the cost of repairs and 75 per cent towards reinstatement of original features and shop-front replacements in the conservation area. Overall English Heritage provided 61 per cent of the funding for the Wincanton scheme. The balance was provided by South Somerset District Council (24 per cent), Wincanton Town Council (8 per cent) and Somerset County Council (7 per cent).

Table 4.2 lists the buildings which have benefited under the HERS scheme. In addition, a scheme to enhance the entrance to Carrington Way with stone paving, rustic lighting and planters was approved in October 2005 and is due to be substantially completed by March 2006.²

¹ Area East, South Somerset District Council, 2005, *Agenda October 2005*, Yeovil, SSDC. Retrieved from www.southsomerset.gov.uk on 19 December 2005.

² Ibid and South Somerset District Council, 2005, *Executive Bulletin No 190*, Yeovil, SSDC.

Table 4.2 Buildings in Wincanton which have been repaired/renovated with help from The Heritage Economic Regeneration Scheme

	Building
Grants already paid	The Post Office Uncle Tom's 7A Church Street 7 Church Street 21 High Street Greyhound 1 Market Place 23 High Street
Outstanding grants offered	17 High Street 17 Market Place Building adjacent to 23 High Street Green Dragon

Source: Area East, South Somerset District Council, 2005, *Agenda October 2005*, Yeovil, SSDC. Retrieved from www.southsomerset.gov.uk on 19 December 2005.

The compilers of the Healthcheck environment worksheet, noted the following concerns:

- huge local concern over the proposal to develop the southern slopes, of the twon (Deanesly Way development)
- too many road signs, confusion at entrance to town (particularly at Southgate end), old pavements in poor state of repair
- Eastern approach – inadequate signing
- Northern approach – congestion because of new housing developments and confusion at Market Place
- Castle Cary approach – too many signs and unattractive developments; Cheese factory, Long Close, and so on
- area around recycling bins in Memorial Hall car park is a no-go area at night
- street lighting – should be low level, but more needed (eg on footpaths to and from car parks).

The compilers also drew attention to the following areas of the twon which were deemed particularly unattractive:

- St James Shop opposite the Millers pub
- unsympathetic modern housing development particularly round Cavalier Way
- Cow & Gate site – run-down, unattractive, poor impression coming into town
- Morrisons

- overall: design of recent developments has been very poor. Deanesly Way development (two storey) will have serious impact on views from Bayford Hill.

On the environment element of the Index of Multiple Deprivation (see Chapter 3), Wincanton scores poorly with Wincanton South ranking only 5th out of the 103 SOAs in South Somerset and Wincanton North and Wincanton Centre ranking 24th and 27th, respectively. These low rankings, especially for Wincanton South, need to be addressed.

The environment element of the Index combines measures of the quality of both the indoor and the outdoor environment. Indoor covers housing condition and incidence of central heating while the outdoor aspect looks at air quality and road traffic accidents involving pedestrians and cyclists. This is a diverse collection of indicators and to address the low ranking it will be necessary to disaggregate the environment measure to find out which elements are contributing most to the poor ranking. For example, Wincanton South might be experiencing particularly low air quality due to its proximity to the A303. But Wincanton also has a higher incidence of pedestrian casualties than South Somerset as a whole (see Chapter 5).

Important trees

While planting in the town centre is somewhat lacking, Wincanton as a whole and its immediately surrounding area have some important trees which contribute significantly to the character of the town. They are listed in the Box below.

Important trees in and around Wincanton

Chestnut, limes and Scots pine in Churchfields
Groups of trees to right on West Hill
Trees behind old cinema
Beeches at Balsam House
Trees at Rickhayes and avenue on Rec towards cemetery
Trees off Common Road in Balsam Fields
Cedar at the back of Clementinas (and sweet chestnut)
Mulberry tree on Ruthvens land at Ash House
Cherry by library
Beech trees stand at Bayford hill past Eastfield
Trees in ground of Ireson House
Line of mainly beech on the ridge at Cucklington

Source: Healthcheck environment worksheet, 2005.

4.2 The countryside around Wincanton

Distinctive characteristics of the countryside³

The area comprises a distinctive crescent-shaped series of ridges and vales which form part of a much greater geological formation which begins at Lyme Regis Bay and extends hundreds of miles to the north. Parishes which lie in this region include, among others, Wincanton, Shepton Montague, Charlton Musgrove, Penselwood, Cucklington, Stoke Trister, Holton, North Cheriton, Horsington, Abbas and Templecombe and Henstridge.

The geology is a series of north-east and south-west aligned rock formations forming a succession of ridges or scarps, dip slopes and vales. To the north beyond a major fault line, the Mere Fault, coincident with the A303 at Leigh Common, the bands of rock become more complex in form, more convoluted and with a much more varied landform.

Land use is predominantly pastoral. Dairy herds are on the less well drained soils in the clay vales and sheep grazing takes place on the unimproved steeper slopes. Arable land can be found in most areas but is particularly concentrated on the easier slopes of the Yeovil sands and the oolitic limestone vale north of Charlton Horethorne to Yarlington.

There are some substantial blocks of woodland on the steeper slopes mostly mixed broadleaf and conifer. Commercial forestry takes place on the high ridge of the Greensand at Brewham and Penselwood.

Wincanton looks out over the Blackmore Vale. These landscapes are some of the best lowland pastoral landscapes outside the Somerset Levels. The vale is notable for the quality of its hedged landscape, its flower-filled droves and roadside verges and many aquatic habitats and marshy fields. There is a notable absence of settlement with few roads.

The A303 is an important highway situated on an east-west alignment which disrupts the continuity of the north-south geological and topographical 'grain' of the landscape as it slices through the ridges creating huge cuttings. The Mere to Wincanton stretch caused severe disruption to the landscape of a particularly sensitive location at the head of the Blackmore Vale, destroying part of an ancient common. Landscaping of the older lengths of the A303 improvements has led to some remarkably successful establishment of wildflower grassland, including cowslips and orchids.

³ Information in this section is taken from *The Landscape of South Somerset*, 1993.

Table 4.3 Nearby features of particular interest

Type of feature	Location
Sites of Special Scientific Interest	Shepton Montague Railway Cutting
Important geological sites	Hadspen Quarry South Pitcombe Road Cutting Bayford Cutting Penselwood Landslip
Historic parks and gardens	Stourhead House and Estate, Stourton, Wiltshire Redlynch House and Park, Stoney Stoke Hazelgrove House, Sparkford Ven House, Milborne Port

Source: Maps supplied by South Somerset District Council.

Areas of historic importance⁴

The Wincanton area has been well populated since late prehistoric times. The survival record of archeological sites is quite good compared with the more heavily cultivated land to the west. But even here sites are concentrated on the hill tops and marginal land such as the Selwood Forest area.

Prehistoric sites include Cadbury Castle, a scheduled ancient monument, and bronze age tumuli on Corton Hill. The region was also favoured by Anglo-Saxon settlement and there is a 7th century pagan cemetery at Hicknoll Slaits, Compton Pouncefoot. There are important Anglo-Saxon sites at Bruton, Milborne Port and South Cadbury. Selwood Forest became a mediaeval royal hunting forest and this discouraged settlement. Neolithic remains are said to have been found at Henstridge⁵.

This area of South Somerset was one in which the mediaeval open field system of farming was firmly established and evidence in the form of strip lynchets form impressive earthworks on the steeper slopes of South Cadbury, Corton Denham, Bruton, Pitcombe and Shepton Montague.

There is evidence in the area of abandoned or shrunken settlements during the economic misfortunes of the late middle ages. Maperton and Stowell are good examples.

There are also a number of high status sites which remain. These include 12th century castle sites at Ballonds Castle Penselwood, Cockroad Wood Charlton Musgrove and Castle Cary. There is a moated manor house at Marsh Court, Cucklington, and several hunting parks such as Stoke Trister, Mohun's Park and Ferset. Stavordale Priory and Bruton Abbey are important ecclesiastical sites.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Source: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.asp?compid=18743> retrieved 18 December 2005.

Use and condition of the countryside and concerns

The local countryside, comprising grade 2 and 3 agricultural land, has been of vital importance for agriculture, particularly dairy farming. However, in 2005, farming is in a state of flux with many dairy farmers selling milk below the cost of production, so it is hard to predict how this aspect of the rural economy will develop in future.

The majority of the land around Wincanton is being managed by farmers in the traditional way. But large tracts were covered by a Nitrate Sensitive Area (see Box) and farmers who signed up to the scheme may well have needed to diversify, for example, into fuel crops, in order to survive commercially.

Nitrate Sensitive Area

Voluntary scheme offering farmers compensation for a five-year undertaking to significantly change their farming practices in order to help reduce leaching of nitrates into drinking water supplies. The scheme closed to new entrants in 1998 and last agreement terminated in September 2003

There is potential for communities to participate in the management of the countryside by, for example, maintaining footpaths and conservation areas. One such scheme is the management by volunteers of Moldram's Ground in Penselwood.

The 1993 report, *The Landscape of South Somerset*, made the following observations. It is unclear whether, in the intervening 12 years, the concerns have been addressed or remain as problems today:

'The most important elements in this landscape region are its high number of woods, remnant unimproved grassland and surviving historic landscapes and sites, all of which may be threatened.'

'The parish councils ... showed concern for the core features of the landscape. The lack of management, investment or insensitive management of hedges, woodlands and water courses was repeatedly mentioned. Overhead wires and ugly modern barns were another irritation.'

'All of these concerns are justified. Many woods and hedgerow trees are becoming senile ... trees are well overdue for re-pollarding. Similarly many lanes are lined with ancient hazel and field maple stools long overdue for re-coppicing ... Conifers need to be removed and replaced with broadleaves. In general, more planting needs to be done for the future and opportunities taken to enlarge or link isolated woods together.'

'... The geology of the region has resulted in many hollows, concavities and old quarries. The disposal of waste, both licensed and unlicensed, is a constant threat to such features which often contain significant wildlife ... Hillsides at Hadspen and elsewhere have become scarred by motorcycle scrambling.'

'Many of the area's historic and pre-historic monuments are in urgent need of protection, by legislation or by agreements, before they are lost.'

4.3 Links between Wincanton and its surroundings

Visual links and boundaries

Wincanton is set on a hillside looking southwards down the fertile Blackmore Vale. The town affords memorable views over the Vale particularly from Bayford Hill when approaching the town from the East. One short stretch of view is preserved for the town. Remaining stretches are under threat from proposed new housing development.

Historic commercial links

Wincanton retains its Market Place, the site of local fairs and markets following the dissolution of Stavordale Priory, formerly the main venue for trading.

The town used also to have a cattle market and a town mill which would have been used by the wider community, but both of these are now gone.

Footpaths and bridleways

There are 52 footpaths in the Wincanton area, some within the town and others linking the town to its surrounding settlements. There are no bridleways in the immediate Wincanton area.

No National Trails pass through Wincanton but three pass reasonably close by:

- **The Monarch's Way.** This is a long distance footpath, 610 miles long, said to follow the route taken by King Charles II after his defeat at the Battle of Worcester in 1651 en route for Shoreham-on-Sea. The route enters Somerset near Chewton Mendip and crosses the Mendip Hills heading for Wells. It continues south to Yeovil, leaves Somerset en route to Charminster in Dorset and then reenters at Crewkerne from whence the trail runs eastwards
- **The Macmillan Way.** A 290-mile walking route that enters Somerset in the north-east and runs along the Frome Valley through the woodlands of the Stourhead Estate, continuing through Bruton, Castle Cary and North Cadbury. At Castle Cary, the route splits with the main route continuing into Dorset and a western spur running to Barnstaple in Devon
- **The Leland Trail.** A 28-mile footpath following in the steps of John Leland, Keeper of the Royal Libraries for Henry VIII, as he traversed the lowland landscapes of South Somerset sometime between 1535 and 1543. At Ham Hill, there are links to other trails including the Monarch's Way, The Liberty Trail and the Parrett Trail.

Wincanton has no designated cycle routes but the 80-mile South Somerset Cycle Route passes fairly close to the town. This is a 100-mile route around the South Somerset countryside from Yeovil eastwards to the hills and vales around Wincanton, across the low-lying Somerset Moors, then west towards Devon and Chard returning through the villages of South Somerset.

The 105-mile Somerset section of the National Byway (open to all traffic) is part of a 605-mile route through south-west England which starts and finishes in Winchester. The route passes through Penselwood then across to South Cheriton.

Several other national and county-wide cycle routes pass reasonably close to Wincanton. Local resident, Richard Nicholl has undertaken an analysis of cycling provision and proposed ways to link Wincanton to these national and county cycling routes – see Box below.

Routes to link Wincanton to existing national cycle routes

- **NCN26 and 80M at Sherborne:** Common Road/Moor Lane – Brains Corner – Battspool Bridge – Horsington – Stowell – Milborne Wick – Sherborne.
- **NCN26 and 80M at South Cadbury:** Lawrence Hill – Anchor Hill – Holton – Maperton – Blackford – Compton Pauncefoot – South Cadbury.
- **NCN26 and 80M at Castle Cary:** North Street – Verrington Lane – Shepton Montague – Pitcombe – Cole – Hadspen – Castle Cary.
- **NCN25 and WCW at Stourhead:** Bayford – Leigh Common – Penselwood – Aaron’s Hill – Gasper – Stourhead (through gates and past front of Stourhead House).
- **NCN25 at Gillingham (and NDC at Quarr):** Common Road – Shaftesbury Lane – Cucklington – Quarr – Gillingham.
- **NDC at Buckhorn Weston:** Common Road/Moor Lane – Rodgrove – Buckhorn Weston.
- **Former Somerset & Dorset Railway track at Sturminster Newton** – Wincanton – Rodgrove – Buckhorn Weston – Moormill Bridge – Park Lane Farm (existing bridle path would need tarmac) – Bellman’s Cross – Henstridge Marsh – Gibbs Marsh – Stalbridge – Bagber Bridge – Sturminster Newton (requires new cycle path on a bridle path or old railway track).

NCN26 = National Cycle Network 26 from Clevedon to Dorchester

NCN25 = National Cycle Network 25 from Bath to Poole

NDC = North Dorset Cycleway

WCW = Wiltshire Cycleway

80M = 80 mile South Somerset Cycle Route.