EARLY LYME REGIS

The pattern of human settlement in and around Lyme Regis has been shaped by rising sea levels and unstable cliffs. The seashore would once have been much further out; many early prehistoric settlements may have been lost to the sea.

Bronze Age burial mounds (barrows) have been found at Shapwick Common, Hardown Hill and Charmouth. They would have been associated with farming communities.

Iron Age hill forts are nearby at Lambert's Castle, Coney's Castle, Musbury Castle and Hawkesdown. The small settlement of round huts made of wood and thatch at **Holcombe** was founded probably towards the end of the first century BC, and continued to be inhabited up to the Roman invasion of AD43. The people who lived here were farmers. A **bronze mirror** was their finest possession; a replica is displayed in this showcase.

The first **Roman** building, also timber but rectangular, was built at Holcombe around AD100, after a period when the site had been deserted. This was replaced by buildings with stone foundations around AD 17 5. The villa gradually grew larger, adding a bathhouse. It reached its full extent around AD 350. It was later abandoned.

Very little is known about the British in this area in the early **Anglo-Saxon** period after Roman rule had ended around AD 410. After AD 600 West Saxon rulers gradually took over. Displayed in the showcase are Saxon finds, probably from a burial, found on Hardown Hill, Morecombelake.

The **first mention of Lyme Regis** comes in a charter of AD 774, when land on the west bank of the River Lim was granted to Sherborne Abbey.

Further information on this display can be found in a booklet in the adjoining wall hopper.
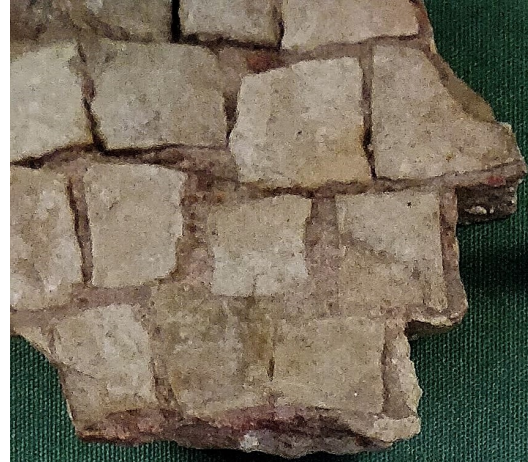
Two Roman oil lamps, thought to be from the Holcombe villa. They are made of fine pottery, with a central hole to fill them with oil, and a spout to take the wick. One has a handle for carrying.

Roman coins found in Lyme Regis and the area around. No Roman sites are known, except the Holcombe villa. All are the type and date of coin likely to be found in Britain, except the earliest, the dupondius of Augustus, and the Egyptian tetradrachma. Augustus ruled the Roman Empire 30 years before the invasion of Britain, so it is possible that the coin arrived here with the Roman soldiers in AD 43. The tetradrachma of Claudius II is more likely to be a later collector's loss because no such coin has been found by excavation in Britain, so that it seems they were not in use here in Roman times.

The find spots of most of these coins is simply the Lyme area, but the coin of Augustus was found in Lyme churchyard during the renovations of 1885; the Postumus was found at Horn Cottage in 1937; and the Claudius II was found near Bridport in 1939.

Dupondius of Augustus (27 BC-AD 14).
Denarius of Trajan (AD 98-117)
Denarius of Faustina I (AD 141-165)
both given by Rev G F Eyres.
Denarius of Severus Alexander (AD 222-235)
given by Rev G F Eyres.
Radiate of Postumus (AD 260-268)
given by Tom Stoward.
Tetradrachma of Claudius II, minted in Alexandria (AD 268-270) given by P C Cross.
Siliqua of Valens, found locally

THE MEDIAEVAL TOWN

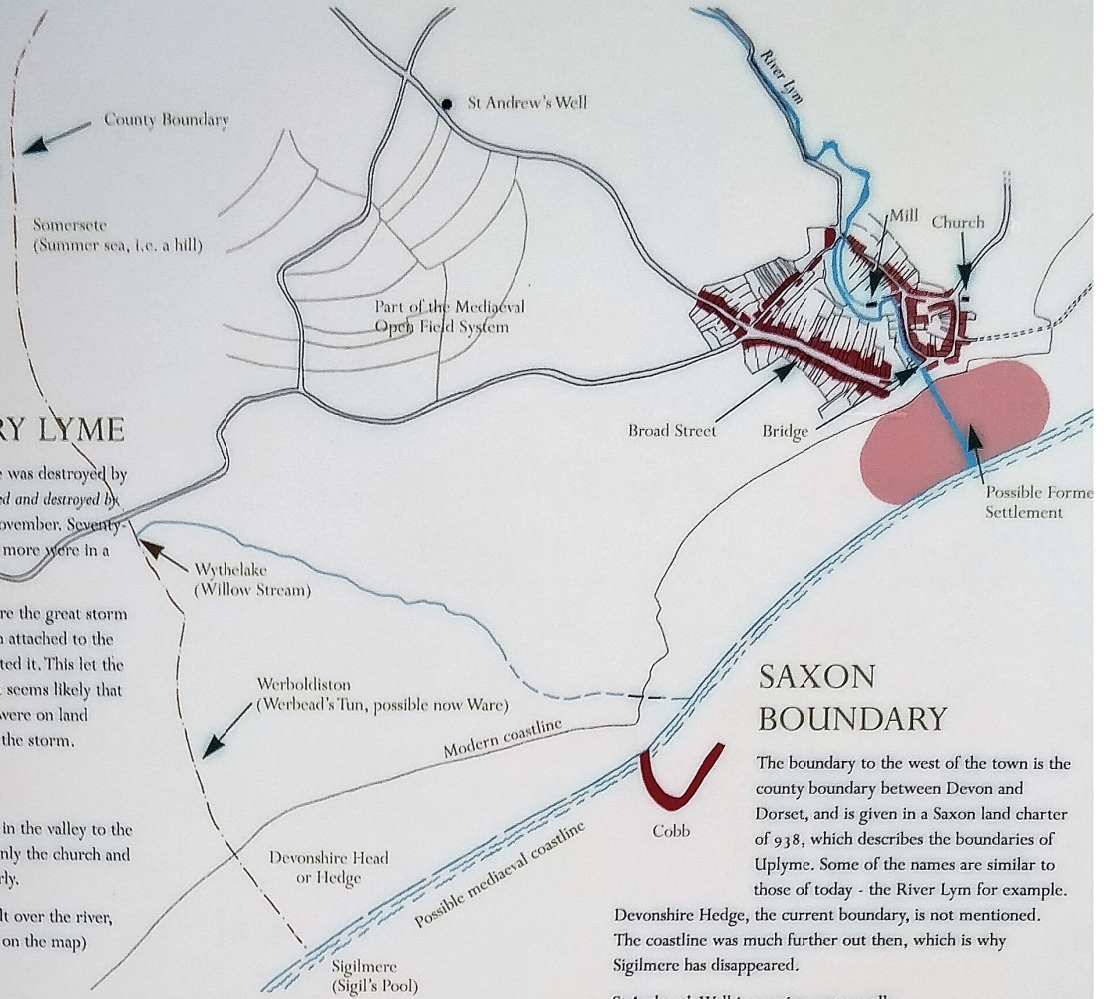The seal of Edward I, from the Lyme Regis charter of 1284.

County Boundary

St Andrew's Well

Somersete
(Summer sea, i.e. a hill)

River Lym

Part of the Mediaeval
Open Field System

Mill Church

Broad Street   Bridge

Possible Former
Settlement

Wythelake
(Willow Stream)

Werboldiston
(Werbead's Tun, possible now Ware)

Modern coastline

Devonshire Head
or Hedge

Possible mediaeval coastline

Cobb

Sigilmere
(Sigil's Pool)

MAP OF 14th-CENTURY LYME

In the 14th century much of the town of Lyme was destroyed by
bad storms. In 1377 the Cobb was 'totally ruined and destroyed by
the sudden fury of the sea on St Martin's day' 11 November. Seventy-
seven houses were also destroyed, and seventy more were in a
bad state.

The map shows a possible layout of Lyme before the great storm
of 1377. It is suggested that the Cobb was then attached to the
land, and the storm broke through, and separated it. This let the
fury of the seas break on the town itself, and it seems likely that
the seventy-seven houses that were destroyed were on land
either side of the river which was removed by the storm.

THE TOWN PLAN

The original settlement at Lyme was probably in the valley to the
east of the river Lym (red on the map). Certainly the church and
town mill are here, and both were founded early.

In the 13th century a big stone bridge was built over the river,
and it is suggested that Broad Street (dark red on the map)
was then developed.

THE TOWN OF LYME

In 1086 the survey of England called Domesday showed that
Lyme was inhabited by fourteen saltmakers and some fishermen
(with their families). Only one farmer with a small amount of
ploughland and meadow is listed, along with a mill.
The record suggests a seaside village with a large salt industry,
rather than a town. Thirteen more saltmakers are listed but
probably belong to the manor Colway, just north of Lyme.
This village of Lyme grew much larger in the next 200 years,
but still did not become a town.

THE NAME

Cobb is an unusual name and is used from 1293. It is probably
from the same linguistic root as cobble, meaning something
rounded, or forming a roundish lump.

LYME'S TRADE

Disputes give occasional glimpses of the sea-borne trade of
mediaeval Lyme. In 1284 an Exeter merchant purchased 85
tuns (large casks) of wine, and employed Hereward de
Lemynistre to deliver it to Topesham. Hereward passing by that
port, took the said wine to lym, and sold it there as his own. He was
caught doing so, and sued.

Wine occurs all through from the later 13th century, most of it
imported from France. The main export mentioned is wool. In
1325 the ship Le Rede Cogge of Lyme, freighted with wool and
other merchandise for Flanders, was captured at sea by Flemish
sailors, and taken by force to Calais. The owners of Le Rede
Cogge appealed to the King for help.

LYME'S SHIPS

It is difficult to know exactly how many ships used Lyme,
or were based here. In 1326 the Bailiffs of the town were
ordered to send all ships of more than fifty tuns to
Portsmouth to form the navy (the usual way of forming a
sea force in mediaeval times) to fight or frighten off the
French. Lyme provided five ships - La Blythe; La Welyfare;
La Mighel and apparently two called Le Saintemaricogge.
The five owners went with them, and 154 other mariners.
Lyme must have been a flourishing port to supply so many
large ships and sailors.

When the Cobb was beaten down in the storm of
November 1377 'fifteen large and great ships and forty boats',
twenty of which were used for fishing, were destroyed
along with it. The numbers give a good indication of the
ships and boats using the Cobb - the larger ones were
merchant vessels.

Our Lady of Lyme -
SHIP CHARTER OF 1322

'cogue Nostre Dame de Lim de Wauter Gifard mastre' is named
in what is perhaps the oldest surviving ship charter in all
North European history.
The Our Lady (also called the St Mary) was a typical flat-
bottomed trading vessel of the 1200-1400 period. Such a
ship is the central feature of our first town-seal, of about
1284. The agreement was made in French at Bordeaux
(then English), and concerns a cargo of wine and flour,
valued at £53.11.0, which the owner-master, Walter
Giffard, promises to discharge at Newcastle-on-Tyne
within fifteen days from sailing. He left on 23 May, 1322.

The voyage was successful, for safe receipt is endorsed on
the back, although it is noted that 16 tuns of wine are
lacking. Lyme had been engaged in the wine trade since at
least 1250. In the early days the town's enemies at sea
were not all foreigners. The men of Dartmouth resented
this mercantile upstart from Dorset, and there was such
bad blood between the two ports that in 1265 Henry III
himself had to intervene.

SAXON
BOUNDARY

The boundary to the west of the town is the
county boundary between Devon and
Dorset, and is given in a Saxon land charter
of 938, which describes the boundaries of
Uplyme. Some of the names are similar to
those of today - the River Lym for example.
Devonshire Hedge, the current boundary, is not mentioned.
The coastline was much further out then, which is why
Sigilmere has disappeared.

St Andrew's Well is a spring, not a well.
It probably had a small chapel in mediaeval times.

THE COBB

Somewhere about 1250 documents start to describe Lyme as a
port - for example in 1254 Henry III was assembling a fleet at
Portsmouth and included Lyme in the list of ports which were
to send all ships capable of carrying sixteen horses. Lyme could
not have become a port without the Cobb, its artificial harbour,
so the Cobb must have been built at around this time.

Quite why Lyme decided to build such a costly structure we do
not know. It has been suggested that the river mouth at
Axmouth, just to the west, became blocked at this time,
preventing ships from using the wide river there, and that
Lyme's Cobb was built to take its place. Certainly a refuge for
ships was badly needed on this treacherous coastline, since there
is no other harbour between Weymouth on the east and the Exe
on the west. The Cobb may also have been designed to protect
the town from erosion by the sea.

The Cobb made sea-borne trade possible, and the little
settlement soon grew into a town. In 1284 Edward I gave it a
Royal Charter, and Lyme became a borough. It also added Regis
to its name to commemorate its royal connection.

The town was half a mile from the Cobb, and all goods
unloaded at the Cobb had to be carried on horseback to Cobb
Gate, at the bottom of Broad Street, where duties were paid.

The 13th-century seal of the town of
Lyme Regis, showing a merchant ship.

THE COBB

In Elizabethan times the Cobb was called 'a great and costly jetty' (Holinshed), a description which neatly summarises most early visitors' reactions. The Cobb was a miracle of early engineering, something which had to be expensive.

A report for Sir Francis Walsingham in 1586 remarked on its position, detached in the sea, and the construction 'with great tymber trees and rocks'. It cost a good deal to maintain, but the revenue it yielded made it a good investment.

In the 1620s Thomas Gerard described how the stones were carried to the Cobb buoyed up by empty casks. Roger North, who visited in the 1670s or 80s, described this in more detail: the large foundation stones for repairs were searched out at Culverhole, five miles along the coast 'and mounting them upon casks chained together, with one man mounted upon them, he with the help of a pole conducts it to the place where it is to lie, and then striking out an iron pin, away go the casks, and the stone falls into its place'.

North certainly visited the Cobb, and he describes it as being 'an immense mass of stone...no one stone that lies there was ever touched with a tool, or is bedded in any sort of cement; but all being pebbles of the sea, are piled up and hold by their bearings [ie weight] only, and the surge [of the sea] plays in and out through the interstices of the stone in a wonderful manner.' Clearly by this time the Cobb was built mostly of stone, rather than timber and stone as it had been earlier.
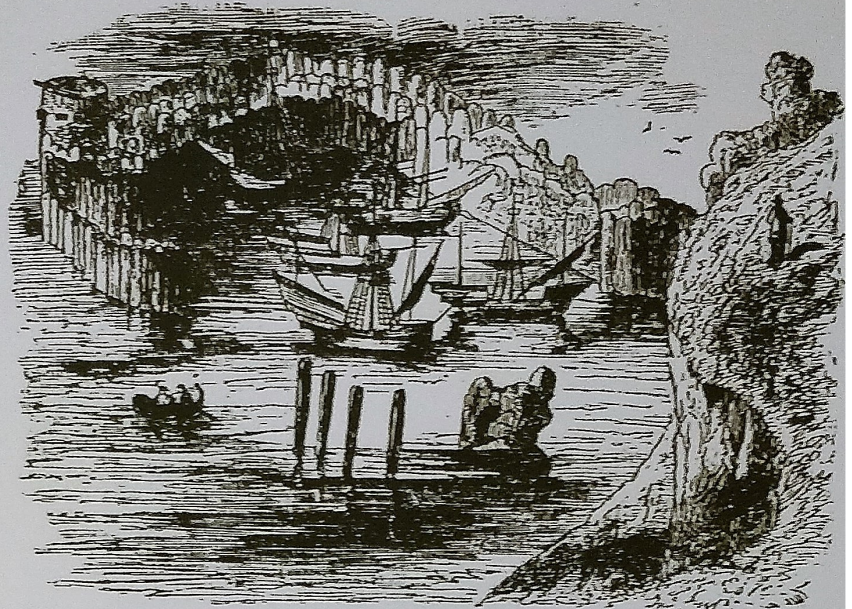
George Roberts's redrawing of the 1539 map, showing the Cobb.

The earliest proper record of the Cobb is the drawing on a map made in 1539, showing it constructed of great baulks of timber which enclose stone filling. The map is not very accurate, but does show a beacon east of Lyme, probably above Black Venn.
By courtesy of the British Museum.

Part of a printed list of the duties payable at Lyme Regis, 1595. The trone means a public weighing apparatus. The odd symbol means 'pr' An earlier clause makes it clear that the King's beam is the only legal weighing device in Lyme, and all goods have to be weighed on it.

LYME REGIS IN THE 16th CENTURY

John Leland visited in the 1530s or 1540s, and described Lyme as 'a praty market town set in the rootes of an high rokky hill down to the hard shore. This town hath good shippes, and usith fisshing and merchauntice. Ther cometh a shalow brooke from the hilles about 3 miles north, and cummith fleting on great stone thorough a stone bridge in the bottom.... Ther is no haven at Lime: but a quarter of a mile west south west of the town is a great and [ ] in the sea for succour of shippes'.

Leland probably had difficulty in finding the right word for the Cobb because there is no exact word for a detached harbour, set in the sea. He also mentioned that merchants from Brittany were often found in the town.

Lyme Cobb in about 1900, showing the back of the Landing Quay, where rounded local cowstones like those used for the 17th-century Cobb still survive.
Given by Robert Hubert.
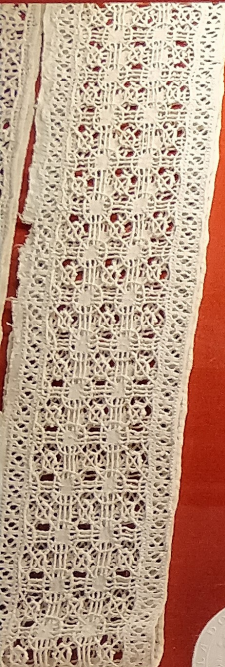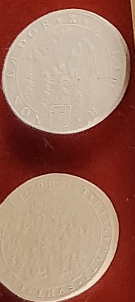
Model of the Elizabethan Cobb, made for the
Museum by David West. It is based on the 1539 map.

Lyme ships in the 1570s

longer, listing 54 men. Twenty must have been the owners of
... and the ... trade, a decline in the woollen cloth

Four 16th century German jettons from Lyme. They are quite
common finds in England.

Silver sixpences of Elizabeth I,
...

Model of the Elizabethan Cobb
Museum by David West. It is b

Lyme ships in the 1570s

A list of Lyme ships made in 1578 gives twenty vessels
based here. Only one - the *Golden Ryall* - is large at 110 tons.
The rest range between 60 and 40 tons, and the other ten are
of 8 to 30 tons.
The names reflect the chanciness of the s...
the *Gallant* and the *Swepstake*. S...
...rge (the usual 16th ...
...wallowe. Th...