Leigh Cliff Conservation Area

Leigh Cliff's Special Interest

Leigh Cliff marks the start of Leigh's transition from a village to a larger urban area in the late 19th century. Its special interest comes from its association with Leigh's expansion and changing role, its typical late Victorian and Edwardian architecture and its fine position on the hillside overlooking the Estuary. Aspects contributing to its interest include:

- Its position towards the top of the hill slope, the straight alignment of its streets and the open cliff gardens to the south provide a fine setting with many views of the Estuary.

- Some properties in the Conservation Area, especially those fronting Cliff Parade, take advantage of the Estuary views with balconies and verandas. These and other features of their varied designs are typical of seaside architecture, produce a lively cliff top frontage and contribute to Leigh Cliff's character.

- Late Victorian and Edwardian houses have typical designs, materials and detailing. Most are modest semi-detached houses with mirrored designs recessed entrance porches and doors, two-storey bays with decorative mouldings and columns, timber sliding sash windows, yellow stock brick walls and slate roofs with finials above the bays. As styles changed towards the end of the century, red brick was used increasingly for detailing or the complete frontage and plane clay tiles for roofs.

- Leigh Broadway remains a thriving shopping centre with views of the Estuary and a mix of converted late Victorian houses and more substantial purpose-built shops and flats dating from the early 20th century. Traditional shopfronts and upper floors in the Broadway contribute to the Area's character. Poorly designed modern shopfronts harm its character and the reinstatement of appropriate traditional designs will be encouraged.

The Grand Hotel is the most notable building in the townscape on a prominent corner site. It is a richly decorated four storey red brick Edwardian style building, with distinctive shaped gables and chimney stacks. The windows are traditional painted timber casements, with curved heads, fanlight detailing and decorative stone surrounds which decrease in prominence on the higher storeys. The rooms on the first floor front elevation have small ornate iron balconies with views of the estuary.

Leigh Cliff's History

Historical Background

Leigh has a long history as a settlement dependant on the sea. It was first recorded in the Domesday book of 1086 as "Legra", a tiny fishing hamlet. With increasing trade during the Middle Ages the settlement took advantage of its good sheltered position on the important shipping route to London and began to grow. By the 13th century it had its own parish church,
although the present building dates from the 15th century.

By the 16th century Leigh had become a fairly large and prosperous port handling coastal and continental trade, especially with France and the Low Counties. Fishing and shipbuilding were also important and Leigh developed strong links through its seamen with both Trinity House and the Royal Navy.

During the 18th century, ships became larger and patterns of trade altered. At the same time, Leigh's deep-water channel silted up and the town's importance consequently declined. Gradually, it reverted to a fishing village, working local fishing grounds and supplying the London market by road and barge. When the London to Tilbury railway was extended to Southend in 1856, it split the village in two and was responsible for demolishing many of its timber-framed buildings. However, it did encourage the fishing industry with fast transit to Billingsgate.

Speculative development followed the railway and towards the end of the 19th century Leigh began to expand eastwards over fields along the top of the hill slope to form the Leigh Cliff area. It was promoted variously as a resort to rival the "Queen of Watering Places" and in one instance, even Naples, and as a peaceful residential dormitory for London.

Typical late Victorian and Edwardian houses were built, most being semi-detached on a formal street layout, and contrasted with Leigh's earlier buildings. From the 1880's those fronting the Broadway (formerly called Leigh Hall Road) were gradually converted to shops to supersede the Old Town as Leigh's shopping centre and the Grand Hotel, built in 1899, aimed to attract visitors to the projected resort.