Leigh Conservation Area

Historical Background

Leigh has a long history as a settlement dependant on the sea, and despite many changes still has much of the character of the old seafaring community. 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.

In its heyday, Leigh had strong links through its seamen with both Trinity House and the Royal Navy. Being strategically located at the mouth of the Thames, Leigh and its shipping were frequently used by the Navy against threats from pirates and the French, Spanish and Dutch navies. Many local men entered the Navy from choice or via press gangs, and some rose to high ranks such as Sir Richard Haddock who became Comptroller of the Navy in the 17th century.

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 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. But it did encourage the fishing industry with fast transit to Billingsgate. It also lead to new housing development on the hillside to the north to replace houses demolished for the railway and, towards the end of the century, to provide better housing in place of the overcrowded and often unsanitary conditions in the Old Town.

Leigh’s Special Interest

The Conservation Area’s special interest comes from its history as part of the working marine village, its varied traditional architecture and its fine position on the hillside overlooking the Estuary.

Historically, the village was centred on the waterfront at the foot of the hillside. Horse Hill (now Leigh Hill) was the main road from the village. The Parish Church in its prominent position at the top of the hill overlooking the Estuary was separate from the main settlement. Until the mid-nineteenth century, only a few higher status buildings were close to the Church with sporadic buildings close to the road into the main village.

From the mid 19th century, the village spread up the hillside towards the Church with modest vernacular housing, schools, and a new lane to the Church (Church Hill). New houses in the Broadway were gradually converted to shops to supersede the Old Town as Leigh’s shopping centre.
The Conservation Area contains a variety of architecture. Buildings are mostly on a small domestic scale with simple designs in uniform terraces and more loosely connected groups. Traditional buildings and materials predominate and help establish the area's character. Features include:

- Feather-edged weatherboarding - terraces on Church Hill and individual buildings on Leigh Hill are particularly important.
- Yellow stock brick; red brick detailing and frontages are evident in buildings from the late 19th century.
- Slate roofs - views over the Area from the hillside give roofs greater prominence.
- Timber sliding sash windows.

**Setting & Townscape**

Leigh's unique townscape on the hillside reinforces its character as a working marine village. Factors important to its townscape include:

- The varied alignment of narrow streets and paths and buildings set almost at random on the hillside.
- The close urban "texture" of most buildings, interspersed with substantial open spaces, gardens, trees.
- Extensive views from many points in the Area across roof tops, between buildings and from open spaces, streets and paths, towards the Estuary to the south and the marshes and downs to the west.
- The green open spaces on the hillside to the west and east of the Area define the edges of the former village and maintain its visual separation from later development.
- Focal points, notably the Parish Church which dominates views into the Area, Clements Arcade which closes the view up Leigh Hill and 60/62 Leigh Hill which is central to the view westwards.