Leigh Old Town Conservation Area

Historical Background

Leigh has a long history as a settlement dependent 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.

Shipbuilding was one activity to benefit from increased trade and ships of up to 340 tons were built at Leigh. In addition to trading ships, many would have been built for the local fishing fleets which concentrated on the fishing grounds around the Thames Estuary.

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 also responsible for demolishing many of its timber-framed buildings. But it did encourage the fishing industry with fast transit to Billingsgate.

Special Interest

Constrained on one side by Leigh Creek and on the other by the railway, Leigh Old Town is not much more than one main street. Yet its townscape is diverse and with its variety of marine activities squeezed almost at random into its small area - boat building and repair, sailing, fishing, cockle processing and retailing, together with pubs and houses - it has its own unique character as a working marine village.

Historically, the Old Town was densely developed with mostly small buildings packed close together in an informal layout. Despite some 20th century demolition and redevelopment, it has generally kept this close urban "texture" with buildings on the edge of the narrow High Street and narrow gaps providing glimpses of the Creek. With the curved alignment of the High Street and varied building designs, this close texture has produced an attractive and lively townscape.

Its position overlooking Leigh Creek and the marshes to the south and backed by Leigh Hill to the north enable extensive views into and out of the area and add to its townscape interest.

Notable buildings of historic interest include:

- the 16th century Crooked Billet, possibly the home of Sir Richard Haddock.
• 62/63 High Street another 16th century house

• 74/74A High Street, built in 1815 as the Custom House for maritime trade.

• 13 High Street, rebuilt in the mid-19th century as the village smithy and now the Heritage Centre.

Mixed uses, with a predominance of marine activities (notably boat building and repairs, fishing, cockle processing and sales, and boating) continue Leigh’s historic role as a working marine village and are essential for its character.

This mix of uses has led to a variety of building designs and materials which adds to the area’s lively appearance. Traditional buildings and materials predominate and help establish the area’s character and include:

• Feather-edged weatherboarding

• Yellow stock brick

• Steeply pitched roofs for pre-19th century buildings

• Slate roofs

• Timber sliding sash windows.