

LEIGH CONSERVATION AREAS APPRAISALS AND MANAGEMENT PLAN

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This document can be made available on request in other formats including larger print and braille.

A summary can be made available on request in a number of alternative languages.

We are seeking your comments on how the draft document can be improved.

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1.0 Introduction

The following document defines and records the special architectural and historic interest of four Conservation Areas within the town of Leigh. These are:

Name of Conservation Area:	Date of designation:	Approximate size (hectares):
Leigh Town Centre Conservation Area	24 January 1990	10.36
Railway Road Conservation Area	20 December 1989	1.59
Bridgewater Canal Conservation Area	25 May 1994	29.4
Leigh Bridge Conservation Area	20 December 1989	4.24

Conservation Areas are designated under section 69 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act, 1990. A Conservation Area is defined as 'an area of special architectural or historic interest the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance'. Section 71 of the same Act requires local authorities to formulate and publish proposals for the preservation and enhancement of any parts of their area which are Conservation Areas. Section 72 specifies that, in making a decision on an application for development in a Conservation Area, special attention shall

be paid to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of that area.

The 'special interest' of an area will generally derive from the relationship between buildings of historic or architectural significance, and the spaces which provide their setting. The prevalence of locally sourced building materials and craft traditions in their use may contribute to the special character of an area, as may aspects of the public realm, for example, paved surfaces, walls, railings, trees, green spaces and waterways.

This document has been prepared in response to the statutory requirements referred to above, and in accordance with the guidelines set out by English Heritage in 'Guidance on Conservation Area appraisals' (English Heritage, 2006). Government guidance regarding the management of historic buildings and areas is set out in 'Planning Policy Guidance (PPG)15: Planning and the Historic Environment'.

Each of the four Conservation Areas has been dealt with separately, but the management plan has been treated as one document, as many of the management issues will be common to all four Conservation Areas. Any issues specific to a particular Conservation Area will be highlighted accordingly. Similarly, the historical development section has been dealt with as one, as the histories of the four Conservation Areas are so closely interconnected.

2.0 Historical Development of Leigh

2.1 Early times to 1500s

It seems that the area that is now Leigh was not settled in prehistoric times, although there is archaeological evidence of early activity. Finds include a Neolithic polished stone axe, and a Middle Bronze Age (c.1500-1000 BC) bronze spearhead. Only one Roman coin, from before 323 BC, has ever been found in the vicinity.

The name Leigh is Saxon in origin, deriving from the word 'leah', which means 'meadow' or 'pasture'. The Parish of Leigh is known to have existed by about 1189, centred around the Church of St Peter. The first stone church was probably built in the late 14th or early 15th century, and its tower of 1516 survives as part of the present Church of St Mary the Virgin.

The medieval parish was extremely large, and was divided into six areas, i.e., the townships of Astley, Tyldesley, Atherton, Bedford, Pennington and Westleigh. As the centre of this parish, Leigh will have developed important functions to serve the needs of the surrounding area, which was predominantly agricultural in nature. The parish was administrated by the medieval manorial system, which gave rise to several manor houses being built in the countryside around Leigh. At least five of these manor houses were known to have been moated.

2.2 1500 to 1830

This period saw a steady increase in population, and the formation of an identifiable town around the market place. Farming activities in the surrounding area gave rise to associated industries, such as blacksmithing. Gradually, other small scale local industries developed, such as coal mining, nail making and textiles. Leigh also became particularly well known for cheese-making, thanks to land that was well suited to cattle pasture and dairying.

Georgian manor houses took the place of the medieval manors in the parish. The grandest of these was Atherton Hall, built between 1723 and 1742, whose main approach was formed by The Avenue in Leigh. The map of 1762 shows the ornate wrought iron gates at the entrance to the Avenue. With its market, shops and other facilities, Leigh was becoming a social centre for the local gentry. Leigh Musical Society formed in 1768, a theatre opened in 1770, and assembly rooms appeared at the George and Dragon.

Trade and transport links improved considerably during this period. In 1762, the Turnpike Trust was established to maintain and improve the road from Bolton to St Helen's. The toll house opposite Bradshawgate appeared at this time, with gates closing off Market Street and King Street.

However, possibly the single most important development of the era was the building of the Bridgewater Canal in 1795. The canal allowed trade links to be established with the bigger centres in the area, i.e. Wigan, Liverpool and Manchester. The textile industry in particular grew during this time, and coal mining also benefited from the construction of the canal systems.

Leigh's textile trade went through several different phases. Earliest production was of woollen cloth, but by the later 16th century, wool was superseded by linen spinning and weaving, utilising the locally grown flax crop. These were cottage industries in the true sense, with domestic looms set up in both urban and rural cottages. From 1600, fustian (a mixture of linen and cotton) replaced linen as the main cloth produced in Leigh. By the late 18th century, fustian was being replaced by pure cotton cloth, which eventually led to the production of muslin, a very fine cotton cloth.

In 1827, a pay dispute amongst the Middleton silk traders led to the muslin weavers of Leigh taking on silk weaving when they had spare capacity. They took well to handling silk as they were used to working with fine thread, and, eventually, Leigh became one of the principle production centres for the Lancashire silk industry.

The arrival of the railway was the next key development in Leigh after the construction of the Bridgewater Canal. The Bolton to Leigh line opened for goods traffic in 1828, making it the oldest public railway in the country. The railway did even more to boost the thriving economy in Leigh.

2.3 The Victorian and Edwardian period

In 1841, the population of the Leigh townships stood at 11,025. However, the built area was far from continuous, with large tracts of open land between settled areas. By contrast, development around the market place was intense, and

backland areas were being infilled in the form of courts and rows, either at right angles or parallel to the frontage properties. The spacious plots along Bedford Brook and the canalside in Bedford provided sites for very large mills and engineering works, whilst further out of town, massive collieries developed as the main generators of Leigh's wealth.

The silk trade thrived in Leigh until 1870, when a duty on French silk was lifted, and the local firms found themselves unable to compete with this new market. Powered weaving had been introduced in the 1850s, and no fewer than nine silk weaving sheds existed by 1870. On the decline of the silk trade in Leigh, most of these were converted to cotton weaving. The development of large textile premises continued apace. A large number of multi-storey spinning mills with massive floor areas appeared, the most impressive of which were the two groups of mills along the canal and Bedford Brook.

The other traditional industry that showed phenomenal growth in the second half of the 19th century was coal mining. From the 1870s, the industry developed rapidly, partly because Wigan's coalfields were in decline. Coal mining eventually ceased in the area in 1992, and whilst much of the infrastructure has gone, there are still remnants, for example, wharves on the canal like Bedford Basin, built in 1858 to handle coal from the Atherton collieries.

The third major source of employment in later Victorian and Edwardian Leigh was engineering. At the Bedford Foundry, established in 1845, agricultural machinery and household items such as fireplaces were made until 1902. Smaller

ironworks were located north of Brown Street, at Ellesmere Street, off Bridgewater Street, and near the Three Crowns just off Chapel Street.

The population increased rapidly with the influx of additional workers needed to work in the various industries. The 1860s saw the development of large numbers of sound and attractive workers' houses, in response to the increasingly unsanitary conditions the workers found themselves living in. The impact of population growth was also felt amongst the churches in the area. St Mary's Church was rebuilt between 1870 and 1873, whilst at Bedford; the new Church of St Thomas was created in 1839, and rebuilt between 1902 and 1920. For the Roman Catholic population, St Joseph's Chapel, 1778, at Chapel Street, was replaced by the stone Church of St Joseph in 1855.

A significant administrative change came about in 1875, when the townships of Bedford, Westleigh and Pennington amalgamated to form the town of Leigh. This date coincided with the 1875 Public Health Act, which brought about actions such as a privy conversion scheme and the closure and demolition of unsanitary housing.

Towards the end of the 19th century, Leigh's success was bringing problems in terms of congestion in the town centre, especially along the narrow, winding Market Street. A series of road widening schemes were carried out, and much of the town centre was redeveloped between 1890 and 1905. Bridge Street, Market Place and Street and Bradshawgate were widened between 1898 and 1900, and Railway Road was widened from 1893. Large housing areas beyond the town centre were also developed at this time on both sides of

Leigh Road, Railway Road, Chapel Street, St Helen's Road, The Avenue and the Henrietta Street area.

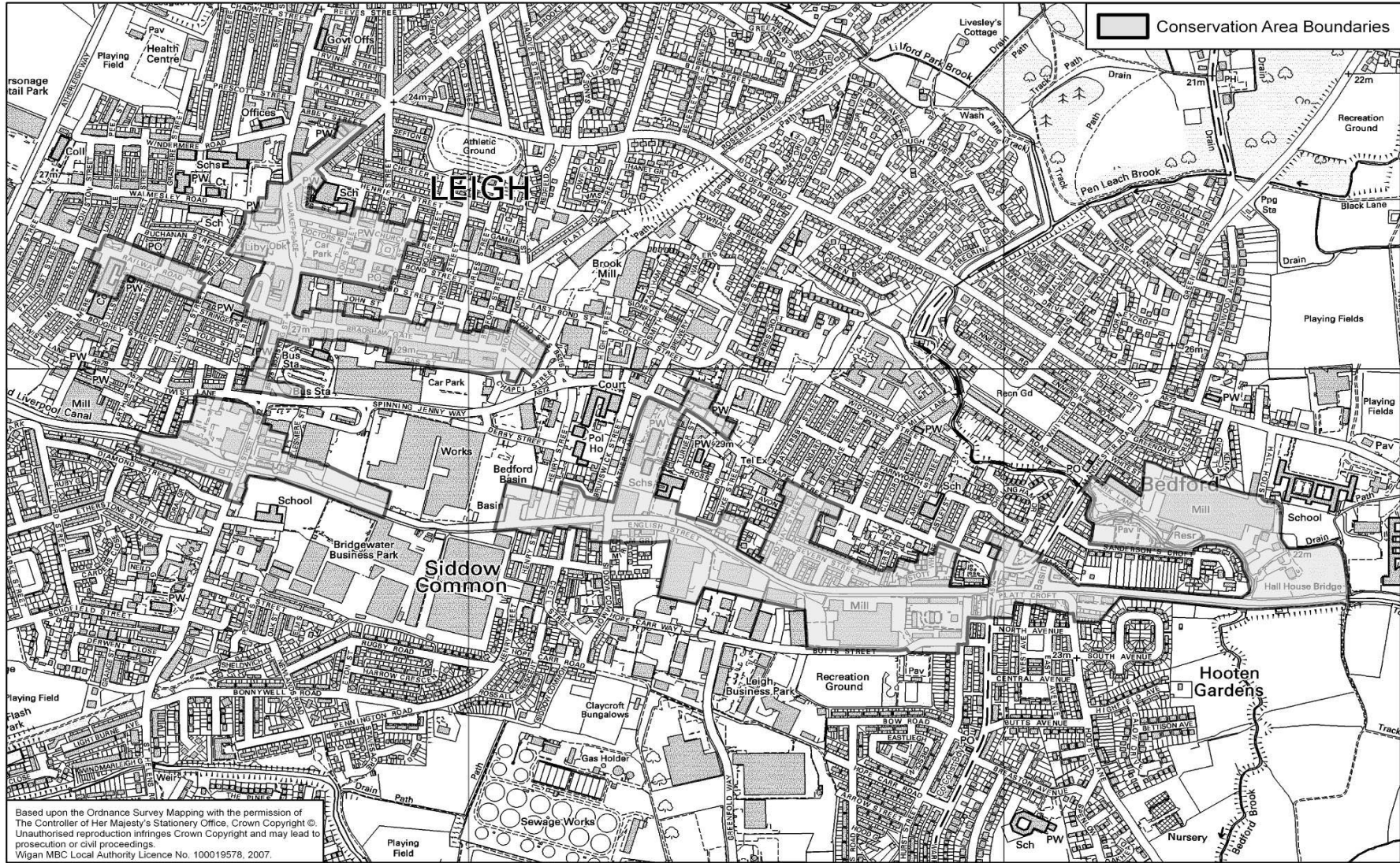
2.4 20th Century

By 1911, the population had quadrupled to 44,109. The building activity that had gathered momentum by the end of the 19th century continued into the early 20th century. The existing Leigh Town Hall was built between 1904 and 1907, an example of the increasing municipal activity being undertaken at the time. Since the decline of the industries that supported Leigh, the town centre areas have changed little since the late 19th to early 20th century, and it is this era that most characterises the settlement today.

3.0 Location and Setting of the Conservation Areas

The town of Leigh is situated within the gentle topography of the Lancashire plain. The bedrock is overlain by glacial drift, alluvium and silt, producing a gently rolling landscape. The underlying geology has provided economically workable seams of coal that have contributed to the industry of the area, and has also been the source locally distinctive building materials.

The four Conservation Areas lie in close proximity with each other in and around the town centre. Both the Railway Road Conservation Area and the Leigh Bridge Conservation Area are so close as to be indivisible with the Leigh Town Centre Conservation Area. The Bridgewater Canal is located at a greater distance away, but is still easily reachable on foot from the town centre.



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4.0 Local Geology and Building Materials

Stone: In terms of building materials, the local area has yielded several types of sandstone. Coal Measures Sandstone is a tough, erosion-resistant material which is highly suitable for building purposes. This stone was laid down during the Carboniferous era, approximately 300 million years ago. Coal Measures Sandstone takes on an attractive brownish colour when weathered, and when used as a roofing slate, the material is known as 'grey slate'.

The other local stones, the Permian-Triassic New Red Sandstones, occur above the Carboniferous layer, as opposed to the Old Red Sandstones which lie below the Carboniferous. The New Red Sandstones are less resistant to erosion, and so became less widely used after the development of the canal and railway systems, which allowed the sourcing of better materials from elsewhere. Occasionally, these stones are used for entire facades, but they are much more commonly used for details, for example, window cills and lintels.

In addition to the local stones, other types of stone were brought for the more important buildings in Leigh. White Portland stone was a prestigious material, and was used, for example, to construct the impressive Nat West bank building on Market Street. Different colours of granite were used to accentuate shopfronts towards the end of the 19th century.

Brick: Carboniferous rocks also contain clayrocks, or shales, from which the local bricks were made. They make very hard bricks of intense redness, and it is this material that has most

come to be identified with the industrial towns of Lancashire. Brick production occurred in the area from at least the 17th century to the early 20th century, and the most common types found within the Conservation Areas are Accrington and Ruabon. Brick bonds, or the pattern in which bricks are laid, are a further factor in the appearance of local buildings: the most common bonds are English Garden Wall and 'stretcher', but other bonds such as Flemish and 'header' can be found. Blue and cream bricks are often used for architectural detailing, and blue bricks have a specific use in the construction of railway structures.

Terracotta is a material used widely for detailing in Leigh. It is produced in a similar manner to brick, but uses finer, denser clays baked at high temperatures to produce a particularly hard but hollow material, ranging in colour from grey or buff to purplish red. It was extensively used at the turn of the 19th century in either plain or more ornate forms.

Roofing: The earliest roof covering was straw thatch, a readily available local material which survived on 17th century buildings until late into the 19th century. Sandstone slates were prevalent between the 17th and 19th centuries, but now only a few examples survive in Leigh. This is unfortunate, as stone slate makes a very distinctive and attractive roofing material. During the Victorian period, the railways and canals allowed a range of materials to be introduced from elsewhere in the country. Welsh blue slate became the most commonly used slate, superseding the local materials. The attractive Green Westmorland slate is also used to good effect in the Conservation Areas. The use of clay tiles became more common during the Edwardian period.