

7.0 BRIDGEWATER CANAL CONSERVATION AREA

7.1 Definition and summary of special interest

The general character of the Bridgewater Canal Conservation Area is that of a late 19th century industrial community. The area stands to the east of the Leigh Town Centre Conservation Area within the historic township of Bedford, and is by far the largest of the four Conservation Areas. As well as the major historic, industrial, archaeological and landscape feature formed by the Bridgewater Canal, the Conservation Area contains a concentration of listed buildings (detailed at Appendix 1) and an important collection of industrial buildings, particularly those related to Leigh's silk and cotton textile industries.

Until the end of the 18th century and the arrival of the Bridgewater Canal, the area was largely rural in character. A small settlement grew in the Butts area at the junction of routes from Leigh to Warrington and Manchester. Documentary evidence exists for shops (from at least 1641), a fair, and an inn (landlords of the Bull's Head are recorded from 1792) at Butts. As well as agricultural production, coal-mining in the northern part of Bedford and domestic linen and muslin weaving formed the basis of the local economy.

Following the success of the Bridgewater Canal from Manchester to Worsley, the Duke of Bridgewater extended it to Leigh in 1795. The canal links to Manchester and Liverpool provided Leigh with raw materials, and markets for the end products. This stimulated industry in Bedford, and particularly within the Conservation Area. The canal also provided water

for the steam power, a technology which emerged in the mid-19th century.

The increasing need for labour in the mills led to the expansion of housing during the period, for example, along Warrington Road, Chapel Street, Rothay Street and Severn Street. A knock-on effect of the population growth was that new churches were built to serve the increasing population.

The severe decline of the textile industry since 1945 has led to the demolition of a substantial number of mills. Cleared sites have generally been redeveloped for housing, but, unfortunately, many of the surviving mills now stand empty.

The special interest of the Bridgewater Canal Conservation Area derives from: its significance as part of the late 18th and early 19th century canal network; its importance as a historic record of the most prevalent pre-railway method of freight transport network; its valuable contribution to the growth of Leigh during the 19th century; the historic and architectural interest of the canal and its associated structures; views of the focal points such as the church spires and the mill towers and chimneys.

7.2 Activities and uses

The Bridgewater Canal became the seat of large-scale industry in Leigh, on the back of technological advances made during the Industrial Revolution. The area includes numerous buildings of high architectural quality, the majority of which date from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The multi-storey mills are impressive at close quarters. At a distance,

they form a striking skyline visible for miles around Leigh, and can be seen from the West Coast main line, the Manchester-Southport line, the M6 and the East Lancashire Road.

With the decline of the industries, residential use has become more and more prominent, with a considerable amount of housing infill appearing in and around the industrial areas.

From 1875, many of the terraces on Chapel Street included purpose-built shop units, and the area has retained its function as a secondary shopping area within the town. Other uses that have survived in the same locations are the churches and pubs.

7.3 Spatial structure – form and density

The Bridgewater Canal Conservation Area has as its backbone the stretch of the Bridgewater Canal between Bedford Basin and Hall House Bridge. The canal is an informal linear space, curving gently through townscape which ranges from tightly built up development to the open fields of the countryside.

The Ordnance Survey map of 1849 shows that the area around the canal was still very undeveloped. The south bank in particular was almost all fields, and the only building of any note at this time was the Bull's Head Inn.

On the north side, Chapel Street is quite well built up in 1849, as is to be expected of an arterial route, and the small settlement around the Butts is evident. There is still a substantial amount of undeveloped land adjacent to the canal.

A number of industries have appeared, though, including silk and cotton mills, limekilns and brickfields. By 1893, Mather Mill and Stanley Mill (now demolished) have been constructed, and a large brickfield occupies the land where Butts Mill will be built.

This is very much an area of contrasts: the canal corridor is long, narrow, and very tranquil, with grassy banks, trees, the unmade tow path, and abundant wildlife. The mill buildings are a stark contrast, being utilitarian, overbearing and often very dramatic. Their bulk is quite striking against the flat, open ground of their surroundings. Chapel Street, the Butts and the housing areas are very different in character, and have more in common with the densely developed parts of the town centre.

7.4 Detailed character analysis

To make the appraisal more manageable, it is proposed to divide up the Bridgewater Canal Conservation Area into five character sub-areas. The sub-areas should not be taken as rigidly defined, or mutually exclusive in terms of their characteristics. The following character sub-areas have been identified:

1. Chapel Street frontages and immediate areas;
2. The canal corridor to the west of Warrington Road Bridge;
3. The Butts;
4. The housing grid at Rothay Street/Severn Street;
5. Bedford Brook and the canal corridor to the east of Warrington Road Bridge.

7.4.1 Chapel Street frontages and immediate areas

Definition of the character of the sub-area

Only a limited number of properties on Chapel Street are included in the Conservation Area, reflecting the degree to which the 1960s and 1970s development has conflicted with the historic character of the area. Facades have frequently been altered using alien materials or proportions, and the introduction of modern shop fronts, extensive fascia signs, and the rendering or cladding of elevations has been unsympathetic to the traditional character of the street. As a result, only two sections of Chapel Street have been included in the Conservation Area, i.e. the churches and the land around them, and the cluster of buildings around the Three Crowns Inn.

Buildings of townscape merit

Approaching from Leigh town centre, the first Chapel Street frontage is characterised by a cluster of ecclesiastical buildings.

On the north of Chapel Street, St Thomas' Church (1906-1910, R B Preston) sits in its own grounds, providing a very pleasant green space within the urban environment. The building is constructed of a very bright red Accrington brick with red Triassic sandstone details. The window tracery in decorated curvilinear style. With its height and robust form, the southern entrance tower is a landmark feature in the area. The picturesque lych-gate, erected as a Second World War Memorial, is a very attractive feature, set within a fairly high

brick wall which fronts the pavement. Set behind the church and away from the street, is the former vicarage of St Thomas. It is a good example of the Queen Anne revival style, complete with gabled roof, barge boards, 'flying' truss features, and the distinctive windows of the period.

99-103 Chapel Street is row of three sizable two-storey houses facing the street. Dating from the 1890s, they are good examples of higher status housing in Leigh, with small gardens at the front, and bigger plots to the rear. Built in Accrington brick, they are well detailed, with paired ground floor sash windows, panelled doors and attractive door surrounds. The hipped roof is plain, apart from the chimneys which complement the overall design of the row.

On the south side of Chapel Street stands St Joseph's RC Church (1855, J Hansom). Constructed of Coal Measures Sandstone in the Gothic Geometrical style, the building is set well back from the adjoining streets within its own grounds. Curved railings announce the presence of the church on the street, but the fine elevation is partially screened by tall trees. From Mather Lane, the west elevation is impressive, and dominates the car park. In the space behind the church, to the south, is St John's School.

To the right of the church entrance is St Joseph's Hall, an ambitious building of 1925. The central recessed section of the street frontage is in Portland stone with Gothic curvilinear tracery. On the left is the Standard Mower, whose name recalls Leigh's agricultural machine industry. The building has a long frontage to Chapel Street, with Jacobean transomed and mullioned windows and a pedimented roof feature. The

grand door surround has curved fluted pilasters, and a pediment that repeats that of the roof feature. But for these decorative features, the pub remains essentially domestic in scale, and is very much in keeping with the rows of terraced houses in the vicinity. Next door to the pub, the shop at 94 Chapel Street is of a similar scale, and has a good quality timber shop front and surrounds.

Moving south-east along Chapel Street, the other frontage included in the Conservation Areas is cluster of buildings around the Three Crowns. The pub dates from the late 18th century, with alterations, and appears to have originated as Naylor's Fold Farmhouse, reflecting the rural origins of the area. Notable features include its sandstone slate roof and sash windows. 178-186 Chapel Street & 196 Chapel Street are higher status terraced houses, distinguished by paired sash windows to the ground floor, and/or original panelled doors and door surround details. Dating from the 1890s, they are all constructed in Accrington-type brick.

Neutral or negative factors

In general, the buildings in the Chapel Street sub-area are in good condition, and well maintained. The fact that only very small parts of Chapel Street have been included has meant that only buildings of good quality appear in the sub-area. The most negative factor is the alterations that have been carried out to the historic buildings that do not keep in with their character and appearance.

The car parking areas next to St Joseph's Church and the adjacent school are neutral, and could benefit from upgrading

in terms of materials, and possibly some planting to complement the pleasant open spaces of the church yards.

7.4.2 The canal corridor to the west of Warrington Road Bridge

Definition of the character of the sub-area

This sub-area takes in a long stretch of the canal, from Bedford Basin to Butts Bridge, and contains the majority of the mill buildings that are located within the Conservation Area. Bedford Basin is a small, court-like space adjacent to the linear space of the canal. It was constructed in 1858 for coal transshipment from a rail line which served Atherton Collieries to the north-west. The Basin is still a focus for boating activity, as is the Butts Basin further to the east.

The presence of the towpath to the south bank makes a significant difference to the treatment of the canalside, as the buildings must be set back behind it. On the north bank, by contrast, buildings are built much closer to the canal, providing immediate enclosure to the space.

The spaces between the mills have gradually been filled in by modern housing, for example, at English Street and Duke Street. The quality of these developments is indifferent, and they do not contribute positively to the character of the Conservation Area. The area where Pendle Mill formerly stood, next to Butts Mill, has also been redeveloped for housing. Again, the quality does not compare to the historic buildings in terms of design and materials. The most successful examples, however, are the long, narrow blocks

which face onto the canal. Located at the eastern end of the sub-area by Butts Bridge, these buildings acknowledge the canal and provide enclosure.

Buildings of townscape merit

The mill buildings are of enormous historic and architectural significance. Dating from the High Victorian era, they demonstrate an important aspect of architectural thinking at the time, which was that all buildings should be designed and executed well, regardless of their status. Industrial buildings had previously been considered beneath the notice of the professional architect, but this was to change during the High Victorian period. It was felt that mills and warehouses should be designed to express strength, simplicity and capacity, and that chimneys in particular could be made to be magnificent objects. The sheer size of late 19th century industrial buildings demanded that they be taken notice of in the architectural world.

Added to this was the growing wealth amongst the businessmen and mill owners, allowing them to commission architects to take on their projects. They themselves took an increasing interest in the outward appearance of their premises, which served as an advertisement and symbol of an enterprise's success and probity. The upshot was that, gradually, industrial pursuits merited the attention of the leading architects and thinkers of the day. Fashionable styles were increasingly applied to industrial buildings.

Polychromy was a new departure in architecture at this time. The use of colour was inspired by European, and particularly

Italian examples. The aim was to heighten the potential impact of a building. Luckily, British geology could readily supply a variety of coloured bricks and stones. The arrival of the railway system allowed these materials to be supplied throughout the country at reasonable cost.

Chimneys were very important to the function of the factory. During the 18th century they had been relatively short, but became higher during the 19th century in order to increase the draft. However, flat surfaces generated a lot of wind resistance at height, and so the circular cross-section chimney provided the solution. Chimneys were visible, obvious landmarks, and so reflected changes in popular taste.

Internally, the mills are remarkable for their vast floor areas, and their scale was achieved using metal frame construction. They dwarfed anything that had gone before, for example, the 18th and 19th century warehouses which are now the Waterside Inn in the Leigh Bridge Conservation Area. Earlier mills had a fenestration pattern of an almost equal width of brick pier to window opening. Later mills displayed much larger windows, with a higher proportion of glass to solid wall. Butts Mill, for example, uses very tall windows separated by very narrow brick piers.

Mather Mill Lane No. 2 and its associated warehouse are built right up to the canalside and they form a pleasing composition with the Dick Mather Bridge in the foreground. The buildings are contemporary, dating from circa 1882. At only two storeys, with three facing the canal, the warehouse is considerably smaller than the mill. Mather Lane Mill No.2 is particularly notable for the use of continuous cast-iron posts of

square section, expressed on the exterior through four storeys, and the early use of concrete floors in 1882. The design of the mill is classical, resulting in a severe and monumental structure. The red brick facades, however, have a rich, mellow tone. The constant presence of grass and greenery along the canal also helps to soften the impact of these utilitarian buildings.

To the south elevation of the mill, facing the canal, are carding sheds. These are parallel to the canal but set at an oblique angle to the main range of the mill. Various features of the mill are unusual for its date, including the square plan, flat roof, and partly internal engine house. The architects, Bradshaw and Gas, were known as an innovative and technically biased practice, and Mather Lane Mill is one of their more important factory designs.

Across the canal and a little further east stands Brooklands Mill (1891-3), otherwise known as Mather Lane Mill No. 3. Also built by Bradshaw and Gas, the mill is notable for its severe classical style, and for the massive horizontal rectangular windows subdivided by a single cast iron mullion. Special features include the Italianate dust flue cover and the decorative water tower.

Butts Mill (1904-7) is more decorative than the earlier mills, making extensive use of contrasting yellow brick bands and Byzantine details in terracotta, especially at the towers. The Butts name panel at the top of the main elevation shows the great attention to detail, in terms of the yellow brick bands, the white bricks that form the Butts name, and the stone corncing. It should be borne in mind that it is virtually

impossible to see these elements from the ground, demonstrating that little expense was spared in the construction of this type of building. Butts Mill was meant to have been a double mill, but often the second block of a mill enterprise did not get built until business had proved the investment worthwhile. The western elevation of the mill was left conspicuously blank, as this is where the second block would have been added.

Neutral and negative factors

Vacancy or under use of the mill buildings is a particular issue in the area. Mather Lane Mill No. 2, for example, is partly occupied, but clearly does not generate enough revenue to keep the building in good repair. Finding viable uses for such large and specialised buildings is very difficult in this location. Similar buildings in city locations are frequently converted for 'warehouse' apartments, but Leigh appears unlikely to be able to support this sector of the housing market.

Although the towpath is in many ways a very pleasant area, it has an air of neglect and can feel quite lonely in places. The pathway from the canal through to Butts Mill is strewn with rubbish and dumped items, and looks particularly unsightly and unwelcoming to the pedestrian. A higher degree of building usage in the area would help, as would the promotion of the canal corridor for its leisure opportunities.

Although the early 20th century terraced houses on Severn Street are of historic and architectural interest, the curtilages of these buildings abutting the north side of the canal

unfortunately detract from the character of the canal. The area is messy and incoherent.

Other parts of the sub-area are very nondescript, and would benefit either from upgrading or screening. Examples are the disused car park to the west of Butts Mill, and the area next to Mather Lane Mill No. 2 belonging to St John's School. The lack of enclosure and relatively poor quality low-rise buildings between Brooklands and Butts Mill, and around Bedford Basin, require either redevelopment or more effective screening.

7.4.3 The Butts

Definition of the character of the sub-area

The Butts is fairly typical of the kinds of settlements that grew up around important junctions, in this case the junction of Warrington Road and Manchester Road. Again, the pubs are early survivors, characteristically clustered round the bridge to take advantage of passing trade on the roads and the canal.

Warrington Road is of reasonable spatial quality, being enclosed by mid-19th century cottages to the west, and the Bull's Head pub to the east. The junction of Chapel Street and Manchester Road has also largely retained its enclosure, although its quality is diluted by the 20th century housing development to the immediate north west of Butts Bridge. In general, the scale of the buildings here is noticeably smaller than those located in the town centre.

An attractive triangle of grass with trees just across the road from Butts Basin provides an open space reminiscent of a village green, which softens the urban environment.

Buildings of townscape merit

Dating from the 18th century, the Bull's Head served the Butts settlement, traffic on the Warrington Road and from the canal. It is a low building of a vernacular character, with very little decoration. The roof and chimney are very plain, as befits its general appearance.

14-28 Warrington Road are the oldest terraced houses in the Conservation Area, dating from around 1850. They are constructed of handmade brick, with severe classical detailing in the form of a moulded capital stone at the base of the brick arch above the door. 14 and 16 Warrington Road are notable as three storey buildings, designed as such to deal with the rise in ground level at the bridge. No. 14 has an elliptical arched underpass, now blocked, to the canalside. Unfortunately, this pair have been spoiled by unsympathetic render, but their value to the streetscape remains.

Despite unsympathetic alterations, these plain, modest buildings retain the typical character of tight development around important junctions. The view back from just north of the bridge across the upper floors and chimneys of these cottages shows them to their best advantage, with their row of robust chimneys contributing very positively to the street scene.

To the north of the bridge, the L-shaped Wheatsheaf turns the corner onto the Manchester Road, enclosing and defining the junction. The western elevation is set back slightly from the road. Like the Bull's Head, the Wheatsheaf is domestic in scale and vernacular in character, with very little in the way of ornamentation. Next door is the red brick MOT centre, Butts Garage, which backs onto the canal.

The third pub in the sub-area, the Foundry Inn, is distinguishable from residences in the area only by its double-fronted design and the ornamented door surround. To the ground floor are paired sash windows with shafted mullions, which are similar to those of the higher status terrace of houses near St Thomas' Church. The name of the pub recalls the presence of the Bedford Foundry on the adjoining site.

249 and 251 Chapel Street form a handsome visual stop at the northern edge of the junction, and are notable for their gabled roofline. The timber-work of the shop front at No. 249 has been retained, but sadly a domestic door and windows have been inserted into the area where the display windows would have been.

At the end of Clyde Street can be glimpsed the architectural confection that is the office wing of the former Alder Mill. Built in 1907, the office is an elaborate little brick building, with a blue brick plinth, yellow brick bands, and yellow terracotta dressings. Above the door rises an octagonal corner feature with cupola set back behind a parapet which echoed that of the mill water-tower. Also of note are the elaborate cast-iron gates and piers with moulded Art Nouveau decoration. Unfortunately, this building has been divorced from its context

by the loss of the mill. Nonetheless, its quirky individuality makes it a valuable inclusion in the Conservation Area. The former Wesleyan School, Forth Street, now a gym, is located just next to the Alder Mill Office, and forms a strong visual stop at this corner of the Conservation Area.



Neutral and negative factors

The townscape is relatively intact in the Butts sub-area, and so the main negative factor is the level of unsympathetic alterations to the historic buildings. However, the loss of enclosure and historic character to the north west side of Butts Bridge produces a neutral setting for the sub-area.

7.4.4 The housing grid at Rothay Street / Severn Street

Definition of the character of the sub-area

The grid of workers' housing formed by Rothay Street and Severn Street is concentrated in a small area between Chapel Street and the canal. These are tight terraces of houses built to the back-of-pavement, with yard or garden spaces behind. The form of development is typical of the Victorian gridiron development that was very prevalent around Leigh at the turn of the 20th century.

Buildings of townscape merit

The terraces of workers' houses were developed in 1903, and are considerably plainer than the houses on Chapel Street. Nonetheless, the terraces are distinguished by often subtle variations in window and door details.

Rothay Street has a number of tripartite sash windows divided by stout mullions, the wider central sash having a single vertical glazing bar. Above the windows are segmental brick arches. Some of these houses have segmental arched door

openings with double reveals whilst others have round, arched double reveal door openings.

On Severn Street, No's 51-56 incorporate wide single sash windows with a wide pane and two narrow margin panes. Elsewhere, single sashes of standard width with two lights to each pane prevailed. All the sash windows in the area have concealed weight boxes and are recessed behind the outer skin of brickwork. In some cases, decorative brickwork is present at the eaves.

Neutral and negative factors

The main factor here is the loss of group character amongst the houses due to the use of inappropriate design and materials in the name of home improvement. Windows and doors are essential to the character of Victorian and Edwardian housing, but all too often the original items have been removed and inadequate replacements installed. The size and shape of the openings has also been changed, disrupting the unity of the terraces. Stone and brick details, for example, window lintels, have in some cases been replaced with plain brick faced steel beams. Cladding and rendering unfortunately disguise the character of the Accrington brick. Similarly, the use of concrete tiles and other modern roofing materials instead of Welsh slate is visually disruptive, spoiling the appearance of the houses.

7.4.5 Bedford Brook and the canal corridor to the east of Warrington Road Bridge

Definition of the character of the sub-area

Bedford Brook was another important source of water, and so mill buildings appeared here in addition to those along the canal. The sub-area is now dominated by the massive Leigh Spinners Mill, which is visible from some distance around. Despite the encroachment of later housing development around the mill, the area retains a surprising rural character. Hall House Lane, for example, is narrow and unmade, and lined with tall hedges. Between the brook and Sanderson's Croft is a bowling green, which contributes open space and greenery. The brook itself is mostly hidden from view, and twists and meanders in contrast to the man-made structure of the canal. It is important as a wildlife corridor, and where it can be seen, it adds to the rural feel of the environment.

This sub-area also contains the stretch of canal between Butts Basin and Hall House Bridge. Moving away from the dense urban character of the settlement around Butts Bridge, the setting of the canal corridor becomes more sub-urban, and eventually moves out of the built up area into the countryside at the edge of Leigh.

Buildings of townscape merit

Built close to Bedford Brook, Leigh Spinners Mill (1911-1923) is one of the most monumental and complete mills surviving in Greater Manchester from the last generation of cotton mill building. Listed Grade II*, it is a double mill designed by Bradshaw, Gas & Hope, who designed the Mather Lane Mills. Materials are red brick with buff brick banding and dressings. Today the mill is surrounded by low rise modern industrial buildings which detract from its setting. The best close range

view of the mill is now from Sanderson's Croft, where its setting is enhanced by Bedford Brook in the foreground.

The Conservation Area includes the terrace of houses on Park Lane, which form the main approach to the mill. Although unfortunately altered, the row is a good example of the early 20th century housing in the area.

In this sub-area, the greatest concentration of buildings around the canal is at the western end, close to Butts Bridge. Butts Basin is picturesque with moored boats, and is overlooked by the interesting structure of the rear of the garage building. On the south bank of the canal is Platt Croft, a quiet residential area. Set back behind the towpath, the houses give a sub-urban feel to the canal corridor. Higher status houses are present here at Waltham Gardens, which are of interest as Italianate villas.

Regency Wharf is a modern development facing the canal. Although of indifferent architectural quality, the choice of red brick blends in fairly well with the characteristic materials of the Conservation Area.

From this point onwards, the canal becomes very rural in character. The gardens of Sanderson's Croft on the north bank are well screened by a variety of bushes and trees. Standing in front of Regency Wharf and looking east, no more buildings are visible.

Hall House Bridge is located at the far south-eastern corner of the Conservation Area. Built in 1795, the bridge is contemporary with the canal, and is characterised by a low

elliptical arch, which sits well within the flat landscape. It is an elegant brick and stone bow-plan, humped canal bridge. Butts Bridge and the Dick Mather Bridge attempt to replicate the form of Hall House Bridge, but neither has achieved its architectural quality.

Neutral and negative factors

Again, unsympathetic alterations to dwelling houses are the most negative factor in the sub-area.

7.5 Trees and green elements

The Bridgewater Canal Conservation Area is characterised by considerably more open space and greenery than the other three Conservation Areas in Leigh. The church yards of St Thomas and St Joseph are especially attractive, with trees, plants and open grassy areas. Adjacent to St Thomas' Church is a small park which leads through to a children's play area. Again, the park is planted around by, for example, flowering cherry trees, and provides a very pleasant natural space within a built up area.

Other open spaces in the Conservation Area are unfortunately not so attractive. These tend to be car parks, or hard-surfaced spaces which detract from the character of the area. For example: the area to the left of Butts Mill (if facing the building from the recreation ground); the 'play' area next to Mather Mill, belonging to the primary school; the hard-standing parking area to the rear of Waltham Gardens.

7.6 Settings and views

Key landmarks are the church spires and the towers and chimneys of the mills. For example, an excellent view of the tower of Leigh Spinners Mill can be had looking north-east from the junction at the Butts.

Though not always conventionally pretty in some places, the canal is notable for the views it provides to the rear of commercial, industrial and residential properties. From the canal itself, either from the water or the towpath, there are ever changing urban, sub-urban and rural views. Some are confined by development or greenery, others extend further afield. Important areas of open space include the entrance area to Bedford Square and Bedford Park, in addition to the open wooded character of Hall Houses. Also of importance is the extensive panorama southwards from the canal at eastern end of the Conservation Area.

7.7 Public Realm

In common with the other areas that are more peripheral to the centre of Leigh, the predominant surface treatment of the pavements is plain tarmac with concrete kerbing. Again, the lighting columns are the utilitarian 'hockey stick' kind. There are more substantial remnants of older surfacing, for example, the regular setts on English Street, adjacent to the canal at the Dick Mather Bridge, and at the entrance to Brooklands Mill. Some surfacing of the canal towpath itself survives along the stretch between Butts Mill and Butts Bridge. Elsewhere, the towpath is unsurfaced, which gives an informal air to this pleasant public space.

As is to be expected, the main thoroughfare of Chapel Street suffers the greatest amount of visual clutter in terms of traffic signs, traffic lights, guard rails, and other similar items.

7.8 Conservation Area boundary review

No revisions to the existing boundary of the Bridgewater Canal Conservation Area are considered desirable.