

Bredgar conservation area character appraisal

Extract from report to Planning Committee 2 February 2006 (Agenda item no. 1.3)

Location

1. Bredgar is a small rural settlement situated some six kilometres south west of Sittingbourne on the dip slope of the North Downs. It lies astride the Sittingbourne-Hollingbourne road (here called Primrose Lane and The Street) where Gore Road joins from the west and Bexon Lane from the east. Post war development has extended Bredgar's traditional linear form further to the north, whilst other housing has been built away from the historic north-south axis to the west along Gore Road and into Silver Street.

Historical notes

2. The road from Sittingbourne to Hollingbourne crosses the North Downs and is one of a series of (sometimes) sunken lanes that strike across the grain of the county towards to the south west. These lanes are said to have been once used as droeways for moving animals back and forth from the pastures on the north side of the Downs to summer grazing in the Kentish Weald and on Romney Marsh.

3. Edward Hasted, writing at the end of the C18, commented on the significance then of the road through Bredgar: 'it has a tolerable thoroughfare and considerable traffic is carried on through it by carriages of various descriptions from below the hill to the keys of Milton and Sittingbourne loaded with corn, hops, wood etc. for London and other parts, and coals, ashes, coke and other material are conveyed back again and then to the different villages below Hollingbourne Hill'.

4. The countryside around Bredgar was settled well before the Romans arrived; an Iron Age fort has been identified in the adjoining parish of Borden. During Roman times the area was actively farmed, and a scattering of villas was present. After the Roman occupation, however, population numbers are thought to have dropped throughout the North Downs area, allowing the forest to take fresh hold.

5. No specific mention was made of Bredgar in the Domesday book, but it is possible that it was included within the entry for Milton. Bredgar church was certainly in existence by 1066.

6. A chantry college was founded here in 1392 by Robert de Bradegave, at which time the church was considerably enlarged so as to make it into a place of appropriate status. Much of the old college, in the form of Chantry House,

still survives. The original building provided the living quarters for a chaplain and two clerk scholars.

7. Historically, much of the wealth of Bredgar derived from the prosperous agriculture of the surrounding countryside. Until quite recently farming was still relatively mixed in character, with orchards predominating around the edges of Bredgar itself. In the last few years, however, the land devoted to fruit has been much reduced and large open arable fields have been appearing instead.

Development form

8. The historic area of Bredgar lies towards the southern end of the present-day settlement. Development in the second half of the C20 has caused the linear form of the settlement to be extended to the north, where the edge is defined by the M2 motorway. This development form has, however, been further modified by other new housing which has taken place (and largely filled the gap) between the western edge of Bredgar and the hamlet of Silver Street. The extent of C20 development consequently now exceeds that of the historic area.

9. Historic Bredgar embraces the church, the village pond, a couple of farmsteads (one where a number of buildings have been adapted to other uses including a farm shop) and an array of old houses. The pond and nearby buildings mark the northern edge of this historic enclave, whilst the vicarage and Parsonage Farm define the southern edge beyond which open countryside resumes. These traditional elements of the historic environment are mostly set out along The Street; the primary school building is, however, a notable exception being situated close by in Bexon Lane, whilst Parsonage Farm lies at the eastern end of Parsonage Lane.

Buildings, and the village pond

10. The parish church of St John the Baptist, which probably replaced an earlier wooden structure, stands at the heart of Bredgar. It is, however, most prominent in the view from Bexon Lane. The present-day building mostly dates from the C14 but the west door at the base of the tower is C12 in origin and notable for its chevron moulding carved from Caen stone. Like many other churches along the North Downs St John's is substantially built with flint, which material was obtained locally from the chalk of the surrounding North Downs countryside. Although mostly laid in courses the flints used here are quite roughly shaped; re-pointing has, for the time being, somewhat altered the stonework's overall appearance. The church stands within a rather plain looking grassy churchyard, enclosed along the two road frontages by a two metre high red (but sometimes almost yellow) brick wall probably dating from 1895; a 'plinth' of three courses of flints is visible in places at the base, which is an interesting local detail. A C20 timber-framed lych gate, celebrating the Millennium, now marks the skewed entrance from Bexon Lane in a thoroughly traditional way.

11. Chantry House, lying a little to the north west of the church on the opposite side of The Street, is the old chantry college building. Many original

features from the late C14 are still present although the main east front has windows and an entrance inserted in the C18. The walls of the long rectangular building are some 0.9m. thick and are faced with knapped flints, whilst the ashlar dressings have been fashioned from Kentish ragstone. Local materials are, therefore, much in evidence here. It is now a single dwelling once again (having been converted back from a one-time division into four houses). A small, square-shaped timber-framed barn (sometimes described as a dove-cot) stands within the curtilage of the property and fronts onto Gore Road. Old boundary walls and railings, including those on the frontage to the Street, relate well to the character of the house.

12. The village pond, adjoining Chantry House to the north, is a defining feature of Bredgar. Said to be naturally occurring, it has been much improved over the centuries and three sides are now hard edged. The group of tall trees on the south side of the pond (which includes willow, horse chestnut and sycamore) plays a key role in the street scene, reinforcing both the long-standing history of the site and the sense of special place. Despite its hard edges the pond still retains a reasonably natural-looking appearance although some non-native 'amenity' planting is present around the margin. Its position at the junction of Gore Road with The Street makes the edges especially prominent in the street scene; concrete posts linked by double rails along the northern edge are robust (if somewhat utilitarian), whilst newer panels of steel railings along the Street respond to old ironwork on the opposite side of the road. The resident ducks serve to reinforce the rural character of the place, and their habit of straying out into the adjoining roads causes the boundary between the pond and highway to be pleasantly blurred.

13. Bredgar farm shop, incorporating a post office, lies opposite the south-eastern corner of the pond where it occupies the first of a series of timber buildings that perhaps once formed part of the Gibbens Farm complex. These C19 timber-clad structures front onto a farm access track running east from The Street; a pet supplies shop is also present. These retail uses, serving the day-to-day needs of the local community, are a vital component of Bredgar's traditional 'village' environment, bringing both life and vitality to the place and welcome visual diversity into the street scene as well.

14. Much of the special historic and architectural interest in Bredgar derives, however, from the impressive array of Kentish vernacular houses, mostly timber-framed, which are informally spaced out at intervals along The Street. These buildings, in association with the intervening spaces, successfully combine with the other components of the physical environment to make Bredgar a special place.

15. Primrose House is the most northerly of these buildings; its C17 timber-frame is clad with now-painted C18 brickwork, whilst the generous uninterrupted sweep of its roof is covered with plain clay tiles. Bredgar House (opposite the pond) started out as a small but typical Georgian house, but an extra storey was added in the C19 by its Chinese owner. The resulting curiously proportioned and vaguely Italianate front elevation is rendered with flanking pilasters. Prominently positioned opposite Gore Road, this building

makes an especially individual contribution to the street scene. The front edge of the site is marked by an attractive run of iron railings with a double pair of entrance gates, whilst a walled garden commensurate with the scale of the house is present at the rear; both these features contribute to the character of the property.

16. Burnham House lies further to the south and dates from the C16-C17 (reputedly 1522). The front elevation of this timber-framed building is notable for its C18 cladding of mathematical tiles; successfully mimicking brickwork whilst avoiding the weight of conventional bricks, the tiles are special to this part of Kent and date from a time when it was fashionable to remodel old buildings. Also here are other quintessential features of Kentish building work including exposed timber-framing, white-painted weatherboarding and Kent peg roofing tiles. Opposite is Brewer's House, another good example of Kentish vernacular architecture; this time the house is set well back from the road. Dating from the C17 the timber frame is exposed on the upper floor with traditional infill panels of contrasting white-painted plaster, whilst the ground floor is now clad with brick.

17. The Chuntries, dating from the C16, and the former Post Office building are also timber-framed, but both are relatively small in size. Both are set close to the edge of the road on quite small plots, in contrast to the more spacious surrounds of some other Bredgar houses. Despite their more modest circumstances the strong physical presence of these buildings close to the edge of the highway plays an important role in defining the structure of the physical environment hereabouts. A large arable field sweeps right up to the southern flank wall of the former post office so that the building forms a particularly abrupt and well-defined edge between open countryside and the built environment of Bredgar.

18. On the opposite (eastern) side of the road the now more tightly-defined form of development continues south beyond the junction with Bexon Lane. Chimneys (built circa 1700) very solidly defines the corner, the house being set directly onto the edge of both roads. Park House, adjoining to the south and also set close to the footway, continues the almost unbroken frontage; here attractive cast iron railings enclose a tiny front yard. Brickwall, a C17 timber-framed house but now rendered and lined, adjoins to the south and is similarly set close to the footway. A high, red brick boundary wall (dating from C17-18 and with areas of blue brick diaper patterning) then links with Millstone House (built in the 1980s); the latter is appropriately positioned so that one leg of its L-shaped plan abuts the narrow footway.

19. The Sun Inn visually marks the southern edge of Bredgar; the first licence for premises on this site was granted in 1704. It is however The Vicarage, hidden behind a line of conifer trees, which defines the southern extremity of the settlement. Tile hanging on the upper section of the public house, red brick beneath, and a roof covering of peg tiles all contribute to its Kentish character. Like the local shops further to the north, the life and vitality generated by the public house make a vital contribution to the traditional

character of Bredgar. The large macadam-surfaced parking area alongside is, however, a less welcome (albeit necessary) feature.

20. The Vicarage, on the south side of Parsonage Lane, is an appealing C17 timber-framed house clad in the C18 with chequered red and blue brick. Also strikingly Kentish in appearance, it is special for its uncluttered setting within an open grassy garden lacking fences and walls. This pleasing simplicity of setting has largely vanished from dwellings elsewhere in the Kentish countryside as domestic garages, secure boundaries and hard paved driveways have become more commonplace.

21. The village school, which originally incorporated the teacher's house when built in 1868, is situated on part of the former Playstool in Bexon Lane. The Gothic revival design of the building makes it instantly legible as a village school, whilst the yellow brick with contrasting red brick detailing is entirely characteristic of C19 work in north Kent. An extension, echoing the general design theme, has recently been completed.

22. A small number of houses, mostly detached, have been built within the last 30-40 years on various plots scattered around the historic core of Bredgar. Millstone House and Beech House (opposite Gore Road) have proved quite successful, but the character and appearance of some others suggests that the historic context was rather less than influential in their design.

23. Parsonage Farm (once owned by the Dering family of Pluckley) occupies a slightly detached position on the southern edge of Bredgar. The farmstead is, however, prominent in the view across the field from Bexon Lane. The farmhouse was built in the first half of the C19 (an earlier house having been destroyed by fire); the red bricks are said to have been manufactured from clay dug from a nearby site. The cluster of farm buildings to the south-west is mostly modern but alongside to the west of the farmhouse is a C17 red brick cart house. The approach along Parsonage Lane continues to be quite distinctive in appearance being flanked by the remnants of a once-impressive avenue of lime trees; the lane now terminates at a security gate which marks the entrance to the farm complex.

24. By contrast, Gibbens Farm (lying some distance to the north) is more intimately interwoven with the fabric of Bredgar, especially now that people are invited into part of the site by the presence of the local shops. The access track ends in front of a modern single-storey farmhouse, but any resulting sense of visual anticlimax is largely offset by the nearby presence of a large C16 timber-framed barn, which apparently still remains in agricultural use. The black-tarred weatherboarding, huge cart doors and the steeply pitched hipped roof are all characteristically Kentish in character, although the original roof covering has now been substituted with corrugated sheets.

The public highway areas

25. The north-south road through Bredgar follows a relatively straight alignment. However, its precise shape varies attractively as it passes through

the historic core where it assumes a very slightly winding form. For much of the day the numbers of vehicles using the road are relatively modest, but on-street parking nevertheless intrudes in places.

26. The highway environment is strikingly spacious at the junction of The Street with Gore Road. The continuity of both the layout and the form of the houses in Primrose Grove (including the generous highway verge across the front) helps to define the northern western edge of this space, although much of the distinctive 'Airey' appearance has been lost following recent refurbishment work. The war memorial (erected in 1920) stands on a triangular 'traffic island', although the diminutive size of the stone cross is such that it makes a relatively modest contribution to the street scene and, arguably, the large cone-shaped concrete bollards on the corners of the island compete for visual precedence.

27. To the south of the pond the carriageway narrows and the road becomes more tightly defined, in large part due to the significant presence of mature trees on either side of the road (especially those in the vicinity of Burnham and Chantry Houses). Railings, walls, precisely-clipped hedges and other planting also contribute decisively to the well-defined sense of enclosure, and yew trees at the church reinforce the historical context. Further to the south again it is the buildings themselves that define the highway edges, thereby creating a harder feel to the built environment; houses press forward to the edge of the road and create a traditional sense of 'village' enclosure whilst the position of the former post office building creates a distinctive pinch-point at the southern entry to Bredgar.

28. Footways along The Street are incomplete, and where they are present they are variable in width and mostly rather narrow. This somewhat fragmented format gives an appropriately informal appearance to the road edges, and also helps to reinforce the pleasantly rural character of the place.

29. Footways are wholly absent from Bexon Lane, the narrow country lane approach from the west. The southern side of the lane is somewhat haphazardly defined by a mixture of old and new boundaries marking the back edge of an informal parking area, whereas the walls on the northern side around the churchyard and across the front of the school define a pleasantly traditional roadside edge, both being set close to (or on to) the edge of the carriageway. The junction with The Street is distinctive for its tightly defined form, with structures on either corner restricting visibility.

30. Street furniture in Bredgar includes a chunky-looking cast iron telephone box of the K6 type designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott in 1935, which is neatly fitted into a niche by the front entrance to the church. By contrast the modern directional finger post and sign, which is prominently positioned alongside the pond, seemingly lacks the individuality of design and presence that the location demands.

Landscape

31. Until recently the settlement of Bredgar was more or less surrounded by orchards, but latterly this traditional 'Kentish' setting has been steadily eroded. The intimacy of setting afforded by the old orchards has been replaced for the most part by open arable fields; those on the southern and south-western edges are especially large and featureless and in places sweep up to the very edges of the historic core.

32. Still present, however, throughout 'old' Bredgar is a strong 'green' framework of trees and shrubs which thrives within the network of spacious private gardens and grounds. The loss of orchards from the edges of Bredgar serves to underline the critical role played by these trees and other plantings which reinforce the strength and presence of the built environment.

33. Within Bredgar itself this framework of planting convincingly binds together the various elements of the built environment and helps to reinforce the sense of age that is a crucial part of the character of the place. The scale and maturity of this planting results in large part from the generous extent of the spaces between and around many of the buildings which has allowed trees, especially native species, to grow unhindered to full maturity both as groups and individuals. And now that orchards around the margins of the historic area have largely disappeared, this framework of mature planting plays a greatly enhanced role in defining the physical presence of Bredgar in the wider landscape.

Concluding comments

34. The historic core of Bredgar, with its distinctive array of Kentish vernacular houses attractively interwoven with other traditional features of the rural environment, is an area of special architectural or historic interest the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance.

35. The spacious gardens and grounds within the historic environment are an integral part of this special character. They contribute to the historical context, they have allowed trees and shrubs to flourish and mature, and the resulting framework of structural planting makes an effective contribution to the fabric of the place.
