

Lower Halstow conservation area character appraisal

Extract from report to Planning Committee 2 February 2006 (Agenda item no. 1.5)

Introduction

1. The small settlement of Lower Halstow is situated on the southern shore of the Medway estuary, and lies approximately mid-way between the eastern edge of the Medway Towns and Sittingbourne. It is set on the edge of a sheltered inlet which is formed by two peninsulas of land jutting out into the estuary, and where, at the head of Halstow Creek, a freshwater stream drains north into the tidal estuary. A winding secondary road runs through Lower Halstow, linking Lower Gillingham with the old A249 road (the latter connecting the mainland with the Isle of Sheppey); to the west of the junction with Vicarage Lane this road is known as The Street, whilst to the east it becomes Sheerness Road.

2. Lower Halstow itself is, therefore, situated on land that is generally less than five metres above sea level. To the south the landform rises gently towards the base of the North Downs dip slope; it also rises more locally to the south east. To the north is the huge sweep of the Medway estuary with its unique complex of channels and creeks winding between the many islands and saltmarshes and the vast areas of mud. As the estuary basin fills twice daily with the rising tide, so the water floods up into Halstow Creek via Stangate Creek.

3. The countryside around Lower Halstow, much of it low-lying, largely consists of orchards and grazing pasture.

Historical notes

4. Archaeological work has demonstrated the presence of extensive Roman settlement in the vicinity of Lower Halstow, and more generally around the Medway estuary. The remains of a Roman villa have been excavated at Boxted (just over a kilometre to the south), while the estuary itself was the site of many Roman potteries at a time when the level of the land was somewhat higher than it is now.

5. Historically, farming and fishing (including oyster fishing which ended commercially in 1914) have been the principle activities in and around Lower Halstow. The rather harsh circumstances associated with the fringes of the estuary are reflected in the relatively thinly scattered pattern of older development. Farming continues to be the major land use around the settlement; animal grazing and fruit growing now predominate.

Brickmaking

6. Notwithstanding the long tradition of farming around Lower Halstow the outstanding event in the history of this little waterside settlement was the

remarkable rise and fall of the brickmaking industry, which happened during the C19 and C20.

7. The earliest records of brickmaking in this vicinity date from 1830 and 1839. By 1861 fourteen brickfield labourers were recorded as living in the village at a time when brickearth was being extensively dug from either side of Breach Lane (to the south west of Lower Halstow).

8. A couple of decades later, in the 1880s, the brickfield at Lower Halstow was producing some 12.5 million bricks a year, with much of the output being sent for construction work in London. The stock bricks produced here (and elsewhere in north Kent) acquired a reputation for great durability, developing a hard 'skin' that was resistant to the corrosive, acid-laden London atmosphere and rain caused by polluting smoke from coal-burning hearths and factories.

9. The brickfield was acquired by Eastwood and Co. Ltd in 1896 and shortly afterwards output climbed to 17-18 million bricks a year with a workforce of some 120 men. Production then peaked in the period 1910-14. Some fifty years later in 1963 the site (then employing 180 people) was acquired by the Redland group, but the works were closed shortly afterwards in 1966. The abandoned buildings and other structures were later demolished, with the land (adjoining the western edge of Halstow Dock) being converted to a nature reserve/public amenity area.

10. During the C19, and the early C20 as well, the bricks made at Lower Halstow were transported away by a fleet of spritsail barges that sailed out of the creek, and often into the centre of London via the River Thames. Each of the larger craft carried 30-40,000 bricks (the smaller ones some 20-30,000). Halstow Dock was consequently a place that was then filled with the hustle and bustle of vessels loading and unloading. Moss's wharf, on the east side of the dock, was separately used for more varied cargoes such as coal, animal manure and flints. Barge building also took place hereabouts, and for a time was an important local activity.

11. From the mid 1800s through to the 1960s Lower Halstow was, therefore, an important centre of manufacturing activity. During that time the brickworks were the focus of village life but then, just a few decades after its closure, virtually all traces of the industry had disappeared. The brick-making tradition still continues, however, at the nearby Funton works approximately two kilometres to the east. Since the closure of the brickworks the tidal dock has been relatively little used, but the sailing barge 'Edith May' is currently laid up on blocks undergoing long-term repairs, and local people set out from here in small boats for fishing trips in the estuary.

Settlement form

12. The buildings that represent 'old' Lower Halstow are relatively small in number. The defining group is situated on the edge of the estuary shoreline close to Halstow Dock, and consists of the church and a scattering of farmhouses and farm cottages. Nearby to the west is a second cluster of

buildings centred on the Newington Drain stream which feeds into Halstow creek; these are mostly C19 in origin, but also here is the much older Three Tuns public house.

13. In the 1970s and 1980s a series of new housing estates was built at Lower Halstow (the number of dwellings in the settlement doubled between 1968 and 1973). These estates, which sit alongside the western, southern and south eastern edges of the historic areas of the settlement, brought about a significant change in the general character of the hitherto small and remote settlement because their suburban form and character was very different from anything that had gone before.

Buildings, and the Lower Halstow Dock

14. The parish church, Church House, Church Farm, Church Cottage and Home Place cottages, are clustered together close to Halstow Dock where they form a significant part of the historic core of Lower Halstow. The view of this group from the promontory to the north-west perfectly captures the essence of the place: the remote location, the diminutive scale of the buildings, and their intimate physical relationship with the large expanse of the Medway estuary. The special character of this little group is, however, more fully appreciated by reference to its unique location within the broad sweep of landscape around the whole of the southern edge of the estuarine inlet, which embraces Stray House and Stray Orchard Cottages to the east and the edge of the old brickworks site to the west. In this wider view the contrasting characters of the Medway estuary and the Kentish countryside meet to form a single, entirely pleasing, entity of landscape and buildings.

15. The church of St. Margaret of Antioch, standing on the very edge of the estuary waters, has a Saxon nave and chancel dating from the C8, lean-to aisles built in the C12, and a C13 tower. However, it is possible that a simple structure serving as a place of assembly existed here as far back as Roman times, because by the time the Jutes had settled here it seems to have been already well established as a sacred place.

16. The roughly-textured church walls are constructed from field flints and rubble stone and are attractively flecked with the orange-reds of re-used Roman tiles, whilst the steeply pitched roofs are covered with mellow-coloured Kent peg tiles. With its stout buttressed walls, small windows and steeply pitched roof sweeping low to the ground, the building gives visual expression to the rigours of a site exposed to the harsh estuary winds. But when the summer sun shines the stonework comes alive with an attractive medley of tints, and flowers bloom in defiance of the brooding presence of the river estuary. A small grassy churchyard, with a sheltering array of willow trees, surrounds the church; on its western edge it runs directly up to the edge of Moss's Wharf.

17. Church Cottage lies opposite the church, on the other side of Church Path. Although dating from 1633 it was extensively rebuilt (and extended) in the 1950s, but the prominent front elevation still retains a tolerably authentic appearance with its regular pattern of sash windows and red brick skin

enlivened with alternating blue headers. The plain, grassy front garden is appropriately enclosed with a plain, yellow brick wall. A pair of rather workaday Victorian cottages, numbers 1 & 2 Home Place, occupies a prominent position alongside in this waterside group.

18. Church Farm and Church House also form part of this closely-knit group but, somewhat hidden by trees, they appear less prominently in the defining view from the north across Halstow Dock. However, both buildings are tied into the rest of the group by the zigzagging Church Path; this attractive path-cum-road drops briefly down to cross the feeder stream behind the head of Halstow Dock and then connects through to Sheerness Road. The brick and render Church House, built in the C18, now has an extensively refurbished appearance, but the colourful peg-tiled roof authentically records the underlying age of the building. Church Farm has also been much altered; apparently built as a pair of cottages the building is now rendered and has been substantially enlarged with later extensions.

19. The tidal dock affords compelling evidence of Lower Halstow's historical links both with the estuary and with brick making. Its firm and level base provided a safe and reliable anchorage for flat-bottomed sailing barges and it therefore played an important role in the success of the industry. The western side of the dock is now mostly concrete-faced, although there is a short and visually more interesting older section of decaying timber; fixed ladders and mooring timbers are later additions. The eastern side of the dock, by contrast, has predominantly soft edges and the raised bank now forms part of the sea wall.

20. The in-situ concrete hardstanding alongside the dock marks the old quayside area. Just a few desultory remnants of rejected fused yellow bricks are still present here; otherwise the physical evidence of the former brickworks has largely disappeared.

21. Stray House and Stray Orchard Cottages, which lie a short distance along Sheerness Road beyond the church to the east, are somewhat detached from the main group of buildings. They are more obviously part of the local farming environment than of the estuary. Both are timber-framed, both date from the C16, and both are characteristically Kentish in appearance. Although they are rather hidden from view from the adjoining road by hedgerows and trees, in the wider view of Lower Halstow from the north west their steeply pitched, peg-tiled roofs take on a special significance, their unmistakable forms and local building vernacular making a vital contribution to the character of the local landscape.

22. Lower Halstow yacht club occupies land around the south-eastern corner of the estuary inlet. The facilities here are fairly basic and they consequently sit quite lightly within the expansive estuarine landscape. The club's landing stage, clad with columns of old tyres, has a rudimentary, yet workmanlike appearance; similarly, the portacabin club house and store, which are both utilitarian in design, are sufficiently modest in size and layout to be assimilated into the wider sweep of the landscape. Other remnants of landing stages once

used by trading barges still survive nearby; their traditional timber and iron construction affords another important, albeit decaying, physical link with the past.

23. The second group of 'old Lower Halstow' buildings is situated a short distance along the road to the west, close to the Newington Drain where it empties into Halstow Creek via the dock. Water abstraction has, in recent times, much reduced the flow of this once fast-running stream. Edward Hasted documented a water-powered corn mill working here in 1798 and milling appears to have continued until 1903. The existing Mill House was built in the mid C19 and is finished with white painted render. The adjoining yellow brick mill building is currently being converted into living accommodation. Parts of the network of waterways and ponds to the south were reasonably visible until recent times, but the filling-in of the old mill dam on land to the south and the incorporation in recent years of land into the back gardens of adjoining estate houses (and the subsequent raising of the land levels) has reduced some of the interest. The surviving traces of the old network of waterways, the feeder stream and the associated trees, nevertheless continue to be important to the character of the area.

24. The Three Tunns public house, which is early C18 in appearance, fronts directly onto The Street; records show it being used as a beer house in 1764. The building consequently occupies a prominent position on the road through Lower Halstow; its substantial visual presence and its use still as a public house is such that it makes a crucial contribution to both the identity of Lower Halstow and to the sense of special place. In the C19 a second public house, The Britannia, was present hereabouts on the opposite side of the road a short distance along the track leading to the tidal dock; it was then much used by brickworkers and bargees. The property still survives but in an extensively altered form following its conversion to a house (and an all-over application of pebble-dashed render); it is nevertheless one of the few surviving physical links with the brick-making industry. The adjoining property, also C19, has been similarly treated.

25. The Newington Drain passes beneath the road near to The Three Tuns public house and then runs north to the creek alongside a detached house (The Boathouse) built in the mid 1990s and of distinctive design. A small phragmites reed bed flourishes in the stream behind the sea wall. The bank and old hedgerow, which follows the western edge of the footpath alongside The Boathouse, marks the western edge of the historic area.

The old brickworks site

26. The site of the former brickworks alongside Halstow Dock, now owned by the Parish Council, is used as an informal recreation area and nature reserve. It is covered with a regenerating scrubby growth of sallows and willows together with hawthorn and ash, and is criss-crossed with a network of informal footpaths. A few fragments of the former brickworks structures survive towards the western edge, well away from the dock. The views from here towards Lower Halstow church and across the tidal estuary embody the true character of the place.

27. Glass Bottle Beach, around the northern edge of the site, takes its name from the dumps of china and glass from which it has been created. London refuse was brought to Lower Halstow by barge so that the coke and ashes could be removed to fuel the brick kilns. Ceramic and glass fragments were screened out and dumped around the foreshore; some residual material is still to be found here.

Landscape

28. Much of the lowest-lying land around Lower Halstow is used for animal grazing, whilst orchards are more typically present on the slightly higher ground. Scattered farmhouses and cottages tend to be half-hidden within a well-managed landscape, which is characterised by tall single-species hedgerows and lines of shelterbelts trees. Older mixed hedgerows are meanwhile steadily reducing. Tall hedgerows, soft verges and roadside banks characterise sections of The Street and Sheerness Road.

29. The mature trees clustered around the church and Church Farm are a defining feature in the local landscape. They afford valuable shelter to the buildings standing close to the edge of the estuary, and they are a visual marker in the wider landscape of the long-standing presence of the little settlement; the contrast with the more open appearance of the landscape around is striking and helps to define the strong sense here of historic place.

30. Tidal flooding around parts of Lower Halstow was once a part of the natural rhythm of life. At The Stray (the old parish wharf situated between Church Farm and the present-day yacht club site) high tides often covered the road. The strengthening of sea defences following floods in the 1950s placed a physical barrier between the estuary and the land, which has in some respects diminished the previously intimate visual relationship of the buildings with the water. The old Stray Wharf has vanished and been replaced by a grassy sea wall.

Concluding comments

31. The quiet isolation of Lower Halstow on the southern edge of the Medway estuary, and the manner in which the buildings are thinly scattered around the small inlet sheltering the tidal dock, are defining features of this little settlement. They represent the history of a place that has toughed it out on the harsh margins of the north Kent marshes. The distinctive environment that has been created makes it a place of special architectural or historic interest the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance.

32. This thin scattering of buildings on the edge of the exposed estuarine landscape constitutes a fragile environment where the undeveloped spaces, and the sense of isolation that they imply, are themselves an integral part of the place. This delicate balance is, however, increasingly vulnerable to pressures for change.

33. Changes affecting the spaces between the buildings here tend to have a disproportionate effect on the character of the place. The distinctive

architecture of The Boathouse, for example, built in the mid 1990s now pushes confidently forward into the pattern of older development, in a way that challenges the modest scale and 'hunkered down' posture of the older buildings. Parcels of agricultural land which have been absorbed into the curtilage of nearby dwellings are at risk of inadvertently acquiring a more suburban appearance. Changes are already evident, for example, along The Street and Sheerness Road where non-native planting has appeared, roadside edges have been strengthened with concrete kerbs, sight-lines have been improved, and the treatment of some plot boundaries has sometimes been out of sympathy with the rural character.
