

Upchurch conservation area character appraisal

Extract from report to Planning Committee 2 February 2006 (Agenda item no. 1.4)

Introduction and historical notes

1. Upchurch lies close to the southern edge of the Medway estuary, a short distance to the north east of Rainham (the latter being the easternmost of the Medway Towns). It is situated on a spur of slightly elevated ground that projects north into the estuary; the landform to the north of the settlement consequently slopes gently down to a network of saltmarshes before meeting with the water.
2. Historically, Upchurch was a remote and rather meagre place even into the first half of the C20, at which time it consisted of the church, a few groups of modest cottages and a village school, along with two or three shops and a couple of public houses. Today, however, the settlement of Upchurch is an altogether different place consisting largely of speculative housing developments built in the second half of the C20, which rather suddenly transformed Upchurch into a place of some substance. These housing estates are, however, for the most part rather commonplace and suburban in character and therefore unconnected with the local context.
3. Settlement in the area around Upchurch is, in fact, of considerable long-standing; extensive Roman occupation in the locality has been confirmed by numerous finds of Roman pottery, kilns, buildings and other artefacts. One of the most important early English potteries was sited hereabouts; from here various products were exported all over Europe, and such was its significance that the term 'Upchurch' is now given to a widely-found variety of this pottery.
4. Upchurch was also mentioned in the Domesday survey commissioned by William the Conqueror in 1086.
5. Edmund Drake, the father of Francis Drake, was rector of Upchurch from 1560-1566. It is said that his son learnt his early seamanship skills in the nearby creeks and waterways of the Medway estuary. In those days the rector carried out various duties connected with the estuary in his role as Chaplain of the Hulks (the hulks being decommissioned warships used as prisons); these tasks serve to illustrate the close relationship which then existed between Upchurch and the river.

Development form

6. 'Old' Upchurch is centred on a staggered crossroads where the east-west road, which originally linked Chatham with the Kings Ferry across the Swale to the Isle of Sheppey, crosses a north-south road connecting with the London-Canterbury Road (now the A2). This layout of offset crossing roads, with the church positioned in the north-west angle, remains a key physical feature of the place and this arrangement still manages to convey an historical

and distinctive sense of place at the centre of Upchurch. Of special note is the way in which the east-west route doglegs through a sharp double bend around the edge of the churchyard.

7. Despite the close proximity of the river estuary there is now little physical connection of any great consequence between Upchurch and the water, with C20 housing more or less isolating the centre of the settlement from its rural surroundings. A visual link with the water has to be searched out by crossing to the northern edge of the churchyard; it is from here that extensive views across the vast open spaces of the Medway estuary still suddenly open up in a truly dramatic way.

8. Aside from the church the surviving buildings in 'old' Upchurch largely date from the mid/late C19. They are mostly arranged north and south along The Street, although a scattering of cottages also extends south-eastwards into Forge Lane (and to a lesser extent westwards into Horsham Lane). The historical record of 'old' Upchurch consequently rests largely on the church and the associated cluster of C19 buildings. However, even this modest pattern of older development has to some extent been modified by C20 residential development, which has filled in a number of gaps.

Buildings

9. The parish church of St Mary The Virgin continues to be the defining building in Upchurch. Dating from mediaeval times it is the outstanding exception to the otherwise C19 character of 'old' Upchurch. And now, somewhat by chance, it has become the centrepiece of a largely C20 rural settlement.

10. The church stands within a rectangular-shaped graveyard. Visually the building is everything that a country church should be with its textured flint and rubble-stone walls, colourful clay-tiled roofs, a clock striking the hours, and a circle of mature trees which in the summertime cast deep and cooling shadows across the old gravestones. The chancel dates from circa 1300, whilst the slightly later nave and east chapel date from the C14. The imposing tower is topped off with a curious-looking, but highly distinctive, shingled spire consisting of an eight-sided cone set on top of a pyramid (dating from 1915). The substantial size and prominent position of the church make it a truly commanding and pivotal presence in the centre of Upchurch, whilst the mature trees standing within the graveyard add further substance to the site's strong sense of history.

11. The C19 development to the north-east and south-east of the church consists largely of groups of modest-looking cottages arranged along The Street; in amongst them is The Crown public house, the former village school building, and three shops. A scattering of other cottages is present along the first section of Forge Lane. Although these buildings are for the most part quite workaday in character and appearance they are nevertheless the faithful record of past times in this small rural community which made its living from the sometimes less-than-favourable fringes of the Medway marshes. The

surviving C19 buildings now play a key role in defining both the structure of The Street and the sense of place at the heart of Upchurch.

12. Many of these buildings have, however, been subject to piecemeal alterations: red and yellow brickwork, a key feature of the local C19 building vernacular, has sometimes been covered with render and/or paint; Welsh roofing slates have mostly been replaced with coarse-looking, interlocking concrete roof tiles; window openings have in a few instances been re-sized and enlarged; more frequently, traditional windows and doors have been replaced with modern products; and front boundaries around garden areas have in a number of instances been removed, altered or otherwise simplified.

13. Also, the incomplete and fragmented nature of this C19 development which was once a defining characteristic of this remote little community has itself been modified, having been infilled with pockets of C20 housing which have consolidated the pattern of development.

14. Despite this rather unhelpful sequence of events some important elements of C19 development nevertheless survive unscathed. The Crown public house, for example, makes an especially important contribution to the life and vitality of Upchurch, and the building itself has survived largely intact.

15. The greengrocer's shop to the north of The Crown, also presents an enduring and traditional focus for 'village' activity, with merchandise spilling out of the shop and into the highway where it presents an ever-changing display of colour and informality. The pleasantly detailed C19 shopfront still survives whilst the general form and presentation of the adjoining terrace, of which the shop is part, also remains largely intact.

16. The school building, which lies to the south-east of the church, was built in 1881; originally the local infants' school it is now a privately-run nursery. The small windows, yellow stock brickwork with red brick detailing and clay-tiled roof all contribute to its attractive appearance, and aptly reflect its modest rural context. Instantly recognisable as a school building it is perfectly suited in scale and character to its rural situation.

17. Other groups of cottages and terraced houses, mostly positioned close to the edges of the road, define the informal layout of the historic core in a way that is entirely characteristic of rural development in the C19. This easy-flowing organic form of development contrasts strikingly with the rigid layouts adopted by the adjoining housing estates.

18. Despite the loss of some authentic features, therefore, the traditional forms of these little C19 buildings, still for the most part topped off with stubby chimney stacks and clusters of clay chimney pots, continue to define a sense of historic place at the centre of Upchurch.

Landscape and external works

19. The countryside around Upchurch is in mixed agricultural use. Commercial orchards continue to be a feature of the local landscape,

characterised now by rectangular patterns of precisely-managed half-standard trees enclosed by lines of shelter-belt trees. These orchards, interspersed with arable and grazing fields, continue to give the local landscape a reasonably distinctive Kentish appearance, albeit a modern version lacking the attractive standard fruit trees of past times.

20. Although the heart of Upchurch is now largely detached from its rural surroundings by modern housing, a few remnants of an older rural landscape nevertheless survive in places along Oak Lane, where mature trees and fragments of old hedgerows which originally stood in the open countryside have been overtaken by later development. In particular, the mature trees around The Paddock amenity area and the adjoining vicarage record the historical association with former glebe land. The planting around The Paddock still retains attractive elements of semi-natural woodland, although modified by the distinctive presence of non-native, but long-standing, species such as holm oak.

21. The mature trees around the church, which include lime, sycamore and yew, are all of considerable size and age; they consequently reinforce the long-standing history of, and the sense of unique presence associated with, the site. The long boundary wall around the southern and eastern sides of the churchyard plays a vital role in defining the street scene along Horsham Lane and The Street; sections of it are built, like the church, in flint and stone rubble (although the quality of the work is of an appropriately lesser standard) whilst other parts are in red brick; the reduced height of the corner section is offset by a topping of rusty railing. This knobbly-textured flintwork and red brickwork, repaired many times over, is an important part of the character of the space at the heart of Upchurch; its continued survival is therefore vital, although its age and vulnerability to damage from passing traffic makes it a rather fragile thing.

22. The role played by the other surviving external works in the fabric of 'old' Upchurch is relatively modest: old boundaries are largely absent and the front garden walls relating to C19 properties have sometimes been removed or replaced with modern materials in piecemeal fashion. There is, however, a pleasing, if modern, continuity in the presence of diamond-patterned chestnut fencing along the two road frontages to The Paddock and along the south side of Horsham Lane opposite the church.

Public highways

23. Much of the informal rural character of the roads within Upchurch has vanished as C20 developments have brought with them a series of associated highway 'improvements'.

24. However, the general form of the staggered crossroads has survived substantially intact, although its original simplicity has been somewhat altered by C20 development and by highway engineering measures. With priority now given to traffic turning into The Street from Forge Lane the old status of The Street as the principal entity of Upchurch has effectively been cut in two for both traffic and pedestrians. The informal shape of the highway in Horsham Lane outside the church has also been re-modelled in favour of a modern

layout that includes a formalised bus lay-by surfaced with in situ concrete paving. However, the continued absence of a footway around the edge of the churchyard still means that the long and attractively old-fashioned edge between the graveyard and the carriageway survives.

25. C20 highway works, including the construction of parking lay-bys, have therefore eliminated some of the informality and simplicity once associated with the historic road pattern. Traffic calming measures (consisting of speed humps and concrete block paving) implemented in the 1980s on the edge of 'old' Upchurch have also been uncompromisingly urban in character.

Concluding comments

26. The historical and architectural legacy of Upchurch is a relatively modest one; with the outstanding exception of the church the small core of older buildings is relatively workaday in character. The piecemeal modernisation of the C19 building fabric has, in a number of instances, further compromised the authentic character of the surviving heritage.

27. Nevertheless, there is an undoubted sense of both history and of distinctive place still to be found at the heart of Upchurch. These qualities of age and individuality are all the more important for their survival amidst otherwise rather undistinguished C20 development. The old core of Upchurch, of central importance to the historic identity of the settlement, is therefore a place of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance.

28. The surviving historic environment in Upchurch is, however, a relatively fragile thing, and its setting amidst C20 housing development is likely to bring further pressures to bear on its traditional character. The preservation, and reinstatement where appropriate, of features contributing to the distinctive character of the place should be a priority.