



Leigh Railway Road Conservation Area Appraisal

January 2022



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1 Location

- 1.1 Railway Road is the smallest of the conservation areas in Leigh, it covers an area of 1.6 hectares immediately to the west of Leigh Town Centre and was designated on 24th December 1989.
- 1.2 Although there are no listed buildings in the conservation area, it is nonetheless an area of significant townscape quality, including the former Wigan and Leigh College Building which is a local landmark. The conservation area is largely linear following the east-west route of Railway Road which originally led from Leigh's first railway station to the crossroads in the town centre and is overwhelmingly from the late 19th century.
- 1.3 The conservation area is a mix of commercial and residential properties but still has a strong cohesive quality with many buildings sharing architectural features such as the shaped gables, materials such as red-pressed brick and terracotta ornamentation and decorative fenestration such as on the former Co-operative and Leigh Socialist Society building at 95-97 Railway Road.



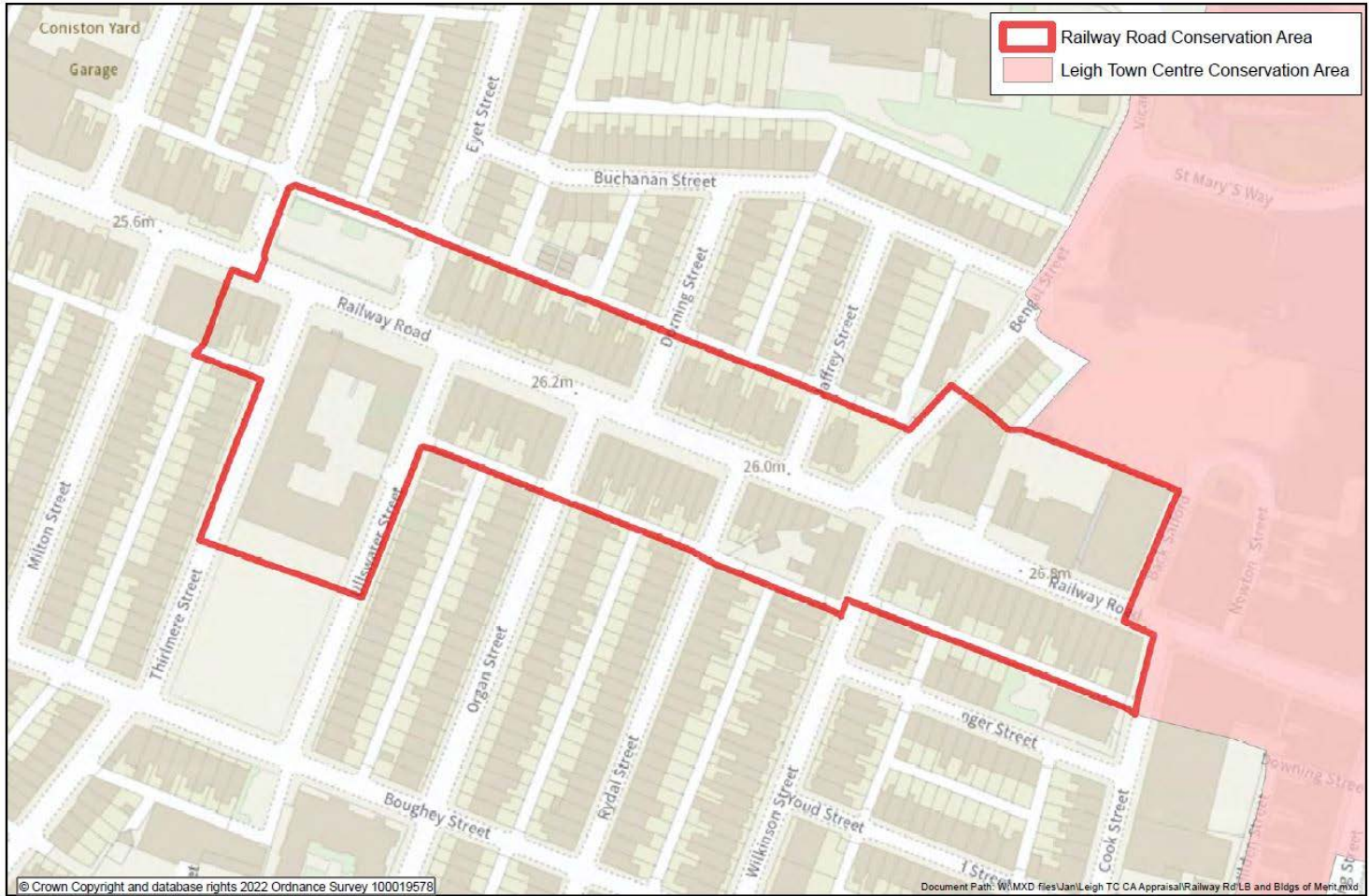
Picture 1.1 The conservation area is linear with the former College building as a key focal point.



Picture 1.2 Brick, stone and pointed gables are a feature of the conservation area.

Map 1: Leigh Railway Road Conservation Area Boundary

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Historical Development of Railway Road

- 1.4** The growth of Leigh in the early 19th century focussed to the east, where the former village of Bedford with its fast-flowing brook became the home of numerous mills. The west side of the town remained largely rural until the very late 19th century (maps of historic development can be found in the appendix).
- 1.5** One notable development was the 1828 Bolton & Leigh Railway - the first public railway line in Lancashire. It was motivated by the desire to transfer coal from Bolton to the Leeds & Liverpool Canal in Leigh. A small station was built between what is now Railway Road and Walmsley Road on the site of the present Atherleigh Way. The station opened in 1831 and was upgraded and renamed Westleigh in 1876, however it appears that access was informal via Twist Lane or a footpath across fields towards the Market Place.
- 1.6** Until 1893 Railway Road was only developed to Bengal Street, the land beyond remained as fields. But by the end of the century Railway Road had attained most of its built form of terraces of shops and houses interspaced with schools, chapels and other public buildings. The speed and extent of development at this time illustrates the increasing prosperity of Leigh and the growth of mass-production and commercialism, through both the quality and type of materials utilised and the purpose of the buildings as houses and commercial shops, often with accommodation above.
- 1.7** During the 20th and 21st centuries the character of Railway Road has not substantially changed. It has retained a commercial character to the east and a more residential character to the west. There has been no substantial demolition, except for the clearance of the relatively modern rear extension to the Railway Road College building, located outside of the conservation area. However, some character has been eroded through changes in windows and shopfronts.

Form and Character

- 1.8** The Railway Road Conservation Area is linear and covers a small portion of Railway Road, which is busy road running west from Leigh Town Centre. The topography is flat.
- 1.9** The road was developed in the late 19th century as the main thoroughfare to Leigh's first railway station. The road was terminated at the western end by the raised embankment of the railway. The character of the conservation area is consistent, formed by a collection of ornate late Victorian and Edwardian terraces within a wider grid-pattern of dense residential terraced streets.



Picture 1.3 Ornate designs define the terraces in the area. Picture 1.4 Deep and narrow building plots with vertical emphasis.

- 1.10** Building plots are deep and narrow, built to back-of-pavement and filling their plot. This creates a dense layout with no gaps between buildings and limited space to the rear. Although the buildings along Railway Road express a vertical emphasis, they are not nearly as tall as those around Market Street in the town centre with heights generally being between 2 and 2.5 stories in Railway Road and often 3 storeys and grander proportions on nearby Market Street.
- 1.11** In contrast to the variety of architectural styles of the main town centre, the architectural character of Railway Road is a combination of late Victorian and early Edwardian style. There is less variation in terms of form and materials here than elsewhere in Leigh, but the majority of the terraces are ornate compared to the wider variety of terraces elsewhere in the town. The conservation area comprises five main terraces of buildings fronting onto Railway Road. On the south side, these are all in commercial use at ground floor. On the north side there is a mixture of business and residential premises.



Picture 1.5 Railway Road is made up of a combination of shops and residential properties, sometimes in the same block.

2 Key Characteristics

- 2.1** Railway Road's rapid growth in the late 19th century led to a strong consistent architectural character of red-pressed brick terraces, ornamented by terracotta and stone detailing. There is commonality of materials and an immense variation in the decoration around windows, cornice bands and string courses on each block.



Picture 2.1 Decorative stone and terracotta are a feature found on cornice bands and windows.

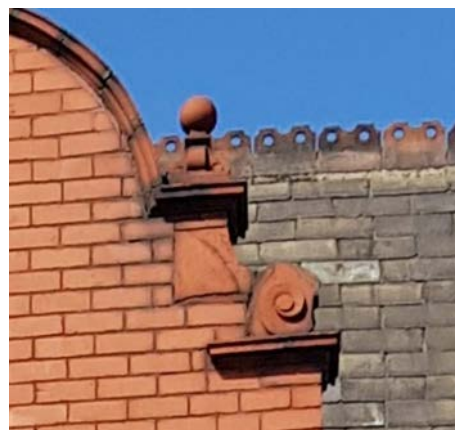
- 2.2** Another key characteristic of this conservation area is the prominence of gables facing the street. The most ornate gables are those found on the commercial terraces, particularly those in the Dutch-style with curving shapes rising to a pediment. The gables found on the larger houses tend to be more traditional triangular type with decorated bargeboards there are still some original finials that survive. Roofs are generally slate with this are large expressive chimneys which are prominent in the streetscene.



Picture 2.2 A triangular gable on a residential property with surviving finial.



Picture 2.3 Decorative brick window heads and a surviving sliding-sash window.



Picture 2.4 Ball finials and scrolls alongside grey slate roof with traditional decorative ridge tiles.

2.3 A number of original Victorian and Edwardian shop fronts remain on Railway Road and these contribute positively towards the character and appearance of the conservation area. They can be identified by their traditional features such as ornate cornices, console brackets and pilasters as well as recessed doorways. There are some modern shopfronts that have followed traditional patterns and also include recessed doorways.



Picture 2.5 Evidence of traditional shop fronts survive under modern interventions.



Picture 2.6 Recessed shop doorways and original windows can be seen behind modern security grills - roller shutters hide these features

2.4 Of particular importance on Railway Road is the fine former Wigan and Leigh College building, which was the original Leigh library by J.C. Prestwich. Prestwich was a local architect of national significance and therefore buildings he designed in Leigh have particular local importance. Given the similarity in style, material and age it is highly probable that Prestwich and his practice had a hand in many of the buildings in Railway Road although this is difficult to prove conclusively.



Picture 2.7 The most significant individual building in the conservation area is the former College building.



Picture 2.8 Designed by JC Prestwich the building has a commanding presence throughout the conservation area.

- 2.5** The conservation area is a mix of commercial and residential uses and character. The commercial elements, towards the east (town centre) end of the area are dominated by small independent shops and hot food takeaways, which tend to be closed during the day.

2.6 Key characteristics which stand out in the conservation area and contribute towards it being an area of special architectural and historic importance, include:

- Terraces between 6 and 18 buildings long
- The use of terracotta and stone ornamentation and detailing
- Notable former college building by JC Prestwich
- Predominantly red-pressed brick
- Strong lively gables facing the road
- Slate roofing materials and large chimneys

Map 2: Key Views and Buildings of Townscape Merit

1:1,500 



3 Definition of Character

Open Spaces

- 3.1** There is little open space in this conservation area. The only notable open space is a site opposite the former Wigan and Leigh College building which is used as a car park and includes a small community garden.



Picture 3.1 The open space in the area is limited to this carpark with a small community garden.

Key Views

- (a) View south east from the car park on Railway Road (Eyet Street) towards the former Wigan and Leigh College building.

This view is from the western end of the conservation area across Railway Road looking south east. It is a compact view which terminates at the south eastern edge of the conservation area with the former Wigan and Leigh College building. The college is a dominant building within the townscape by virtue of its scale, height and massing, and architectural quality. It becomes the main focal point in this view, providing a clear boundary marker for the conservation area. Glimpses of this building can also be seen through the terraced streets surrounding the conservation area giving the building a wider presence.

- (b) View east along Railway Road towards Leigh town centre

This view is along the length of Railway Road from the western boundary of the conservation area to the eastern boundary. The view extends towards Leigh town centre and terminates into the distance along Railway Road and Bradshawgate. The former Wigan and Leigh College building dominates to the south however, the linear nature of the road is emphasised by the strong building lines on either side of Railway Road.

- (c) View west along Railway Road

This view is along the length of Railway Road from the eastern boundary of the conservation area to the western boundary. The view is away from the commercial centre of Leigh and is terminated by the Parsonage Retail Park which is located on the opposite side of Atherleigh Way, but is quite prominent due to the

contrasting form of the premises and colour of the signage. The former Wigan and Leigh College building is however, the most dominant building in this view, forming a focal point to the south of Railway Road. The linear nature of the road is emphasised by the strong building lines on Railway Road.



Picture 3.2 The linear view towards Leigh town centre.

Architecture, Materials and Details

- 3.2** As a late 19th century development, Railway Road is typical of the Victorian gridiron pattern, resulting in straight street lines and robust geometric blocks of buildings. Building plots are deep and narrow. Buildings fill their plot, with a back of pavement building line, limited space to the rear and no gaps between buildings creating a dense layout. Although the buildings along Railway Road express a vertical emphasis, they are not nearly as tall as contemporary buildings on Market Street and King Street.
- 3.3** Materials are invariably brick, yellow sandstone and decorative terracotta. There are some details such as decorative metalwork, fences and gable-finials that are iron. Traditional windows are typically timber.

Detailed Character Analysis

Former Wigan and Leigh College Building

- 3.4** The conservation area is dominated by the former Wigan and Leigh College building (1894, Prestwich & J H Stephen). It is substantially taller than the surrounding terraces and fills the block where it is located. The striking corner tower is topped by an impressive ogee cap roof and open fretwork lantern with finial and lead roll ribs .



Picture 3.3 The former College building showing its impressive and ornate tower and decorative terracotta work.



Picture 3.4 The side elevation of the college is less ornate than the front.



Picture 3.5 The former College building is substantially taller than other buildings in the conservation area.

- 3.5** Immediately attached to the college building but having a separate entrance and originally being a standalone building is the Marsh Gymnasium. Built in 1902, Marsh Gymnasium was presented to the town of Leigh by William Edward Marsh who recognised the benefit of physical health. Leigh gymnasts Ada and Hilda Smith trained at the Marsh Gymnasium for the 1928 Olympics and the building remains locally significant for its historical associations. Although the building is in poor condition and is not as ornate as the college it has important cultural significance.



Picture 3.6 The Marsh Gymnasium is in a poor state of repair but culturally important,

- 3.6** The two shops on the corner of Thirlmere Street, next to the college, are relatively plain in comparison to the other shops on Railway Road, although they do retain some unusual features. The corner unit on the left has an oriel window at first floor which originally had elegant, curved panels with leaded top-lights and decorative woodwork – it was recently replaced by UPVC.

Eye Street to Dorning Street:

- 3.7** In this area, two ‘set-piece’ terraces sit side by side. The south-eastern block of terraced properties is more ornate, in a fine Flemish Renaissance design, constructed in pressed-red brick and terracotta. This eight-bay block is symmetrical and stands at two storeys high with attic floor. There are ‘broken’ Dutch gables at the end bays, and above the two central bays.
- 3.8** Other notable features of this terrace are the tripartite transomed and mullioned windows, with sculpted cartouches above. The character of some of the shop fronts has been spoiled by over-deep shops signs which straddle several bays and some inappropriate modern-infill where poorly-matched brick has been utilised and window proportions and detail bear no regard to the overall structure.



Picture 3.7 Two set-piece terraces stand next to each other, differentiated by their design. (west)



Picture 3.8 Two set-piece terraces stand next to each other, differentiated by their design. (east)

- 3.9** The terrace to the north-west is plainer in style than the eight bay terrace, with shaped (not Dutch) gables at each end. The window openings are simple, in contrast to the adjacent terrace. On the ground floor, some bay windows are complete, with terracotta cornices, parapets and small ball finials. The boundary walls that were once outside these buildings have all but disappeared. At the left-hand end (nearest Eyet Street), the shaped gable is repeated to the rear elevation.

Dorning Street to Bengal Street:

- 3.10** Osborne Terrace, built in 1895, is a row of townhouses with walled front gardens. Historically, these properties were occupied by professionals, such as surgeons and dentists, who also practiced on the premises showing a level of historic prosperity in this part of the town.
- 3.11** The features displayed by the most distinguish terraced houses of the Victorian era are bay windows, paired front doors and back extensions. The bay window was designed as a status symbol, but increasingly became a standard item once prohibitive window and glass taxes were abolished.



Picture 3.9 The terrace comprises sizeable two storey houses, with attic floors lit by a single window within steep gables.

- 3.12** The terrace comprises sizeable two storey houses, with attic floors lit by a single window within steep gables. There are large bay windows to both the ground and first floors. The houses were originally constructed with half basements, although the windows have now been removed and the openings blocked. The low brick boundary walls are largely intact and one pair of houses has railings. Some of the original stone piers and copings still exist. The terrace is not quite symmetrical as there are an odd number of houses in the row.



Picture 3.10 The walled front gardens demonstrate the higher status of these dwellings however unsympathetic shutters detract from the pair.

- 3.13** Adjacent to Jaffrey Street, a further pair of houses sits by the junction. These Victorian properties make a positive contribution to the conservation area. The pairing of the front doors in this way is a practical as well as an aesthetic measure. The walled front gardens demonstrate the higher status of these dwellings however unsympathetic roller-shutters have been installed on one of the pairs reducing their overall impact.
- 3.14** Away from the town centre plots become deeper, although not wider. The rear extension or 'outrigger' began to fulfil the function of the basement, particularly if access from the rear of the plot was possible. By the late 19th century, basements were being regarded as unhygienic and unsatisfactory. The coupled rear extensions had very practical benefits, in terms of extra warmth provided by the party wall, and the saving in building costs. In terms of the streetscape, they create strong shapes repeated uniformly down the terrace. The rear elevations tended not to be so altered as the frontages, and more original fenestration occurs along the back lanes.

Wilkinson Street to Rydal Street:

- 3.15** This terrace is an architectural extravaganza, with a row of six shops each with a Dutch gable finished with a triangular pediment in terracotta. The attic spaces are lit by a narrow slit window to each gable. The large transomed and mullioned windows to the first floor have a delicate scalloped pattern to the face of the terracotta lintels. There are remnants of the classically detailed shop fronts, although they have been much altered.



Picture 3.11 Wilkinson Street to Rydal Street, 'an architectural extravaganza'.

- 3.16** The chimneys are of particular note. In the late Victorian period, chimneys had become prominent features in themselves, often dominating the building they served. This is certainly the case on this terrace, as the chimneys seem very out of scale with the buildings. Unfortunately, the chimney on the gable of Rydal Street has been truncated and lost its expressive design.



Picture 3.12 Large and expressive chimneys are of a particular note in this terrace.

- 3.17** To the east of the terrace is a small, gabled building which was the Leigh Grammar School. It is set back slightly from the street frontage, with a small open space behind modern metal railings. These buildings make a positive contribution towards the character of the conservation area.

Rydal Street to Organ Street:

- 3.18** Within its context, this terrace seems quite plain. It was built in 1896 for George Hampson, who owned and developed much of the land in Railway Road. Features of interest are the shop fronts at No's 67 to 85, with their classical pilasters and coved fascias. Above the plain sash windows on the first floor are projecting brick hoods with stepped brick corbels, and ornate moulded brick eaves

cornicing at the eaves. Unlike the other terraces, these buildings are only two-storey, and the plain hipped roof is punctuated only by chimney stacks. Again, almost all the original fenestration has gone, apart from those at number 85 Railway Road.



Picture 3.13 A plainer terrace but still with prominent chimneys and window heads.

Organ Street to Ullswater Street:

3.19 This is a terrace of individually designed buildings which contrast with the terraces of uniform design in the vicinity. The two shops nearest Ullswater Street were branches of the Leigh Friendly Co-operative Society. On the first floor was the original headquarters of the Leigh Socialist Society. The central façade is a small but exuberant design, crammed with architectural detail. These include twelve short, bulbous Ionic columns, five to each gable, and two supporting a massive arch. Two highly decorative first floor oriel windows incorporate Venetian windows. On the ground floor, the shop fronts remain largely intact and features decorative console brackets between each fascia board. The adjacent properties have paired sash windows to the first floor with a fine column running the height of the mullions.



Picture 3.14 The fine architectural details of the former Leigh Friendly Co-Operative Society Headquarters are the highlight of this terrace.

Wilkinson Street to Cook Street

- 3.20** The terrace on the south side is probably the earliest terrace block on Railway Road with an ornate date-stone with a carved bulls-head saying: "George Hampson Buildings, AD 1888". The buildings share the form and design of the later terrace within the conservation area (Nos 67-85) including the decorative cornice details and ornate window heads. As such they are important in informing the understanding of the development of Railway Road.
- 3.21** Although there are no surviving original shop fronts and the loss of some chimneys, there are a number of original timber sash-windows still present which would benefit from protection as well as elements of disrepair that could be targeted (e.g. vegetation growth in gutters).



Picture 3.15 Datestone saying 'George Hampson Buildings, AD 1888'



Picture 3.16 Original sash windows largely survive on this terrace..

Bengal Street to Back Salford

- 3.22** The buildings to the north of the Railway Road are varied in their form representing a mix of Victorian and early 20th century properties. It is likely that many of these buildings were residential properties that had front gardens, these have subsequently been extended at the ground floor level to create commercial/retail premises. Also within this block is the large building that once housed the Leigh Palace Theatre (1913). The ornate Prestwich designed frontage has long gone but the rear of the building still retains its large theatrical footprint.



Datestone saying 'George Hampson Buildings, AD 1888'



Original sash windows largely survive on this terrace..

Historic shop fronts and advertising:

3.23 The former Post Office, 40 Railway Road, on the corner of Dorning Street, has a very special original shop front comprising very wide vertical sliding sash windows, which enabled trading and display through the shop front when the lower sash was raised. This design was once common for butchers, fishmongers and grocers, but is now fairly rare. The original occupier of the Post Office was Collier & Sons fruiterers, fishmongers and poulterers.



Picture 3.17 The former Post Office has an historically important shopfront.



Picture 3.18 Notice the very large sliding-sash windows. A rare survival.

4 Issues and opportunities for enhancement

Shopfronts

- 4.1** Over time the alteration of shop fronts and particularly the use of unsympathetic signage in the conservation area have had a detrimental impact on its character. However, it is sometimes the case that historic shop front features survive underneath later additions. Where this is the case, every effort should be made to encourage the restoration of the historic shop front, where practicable. The shopfront quality map below indicates that there is significant scope to enhance shopfront in this conservation area.

Shutters and large hoarding signs

- 4.2** Large advertisement hoardings on properties have a negative impact on the conservation area, and they are particularly obtrusive features which obscure architectural features on historic properties. This is particularly notable with 'for sale' signs - some quite permanent - and other projecting signs
- 4.3** External roller shutters represent a very negative factor, especially in the case of premises that are closed during the day, making frontages appear blank and lifeless. The boxes used to house the shutters are often unsightly and disfiguring elements.

Windows and doors

- 4.4** The townhouses and upper floors of the shops have also suffered from the loss of historic and architectural features. Many original doors and windows have been lost, eroding not only the character of individual buildings, but also the overall appearance of the conservation area. Other significant losses include boundary walls and railings.

Vacancy

- 4.5** The number of vacant shop units and upper floors is a problem in the Railway Road Conservation Area as this often results in lack of maintenance and threatens deterioration of the building fabric.

Gap Sites

- 4.6** As there are no gap sites - capacity for any substantial development in the area is limited. The only exception is the car park opposite the former college, but with the current pressure for parking in the vicinity, it seems unlikely that this space will be developed in the foreseeable future.

Public realm

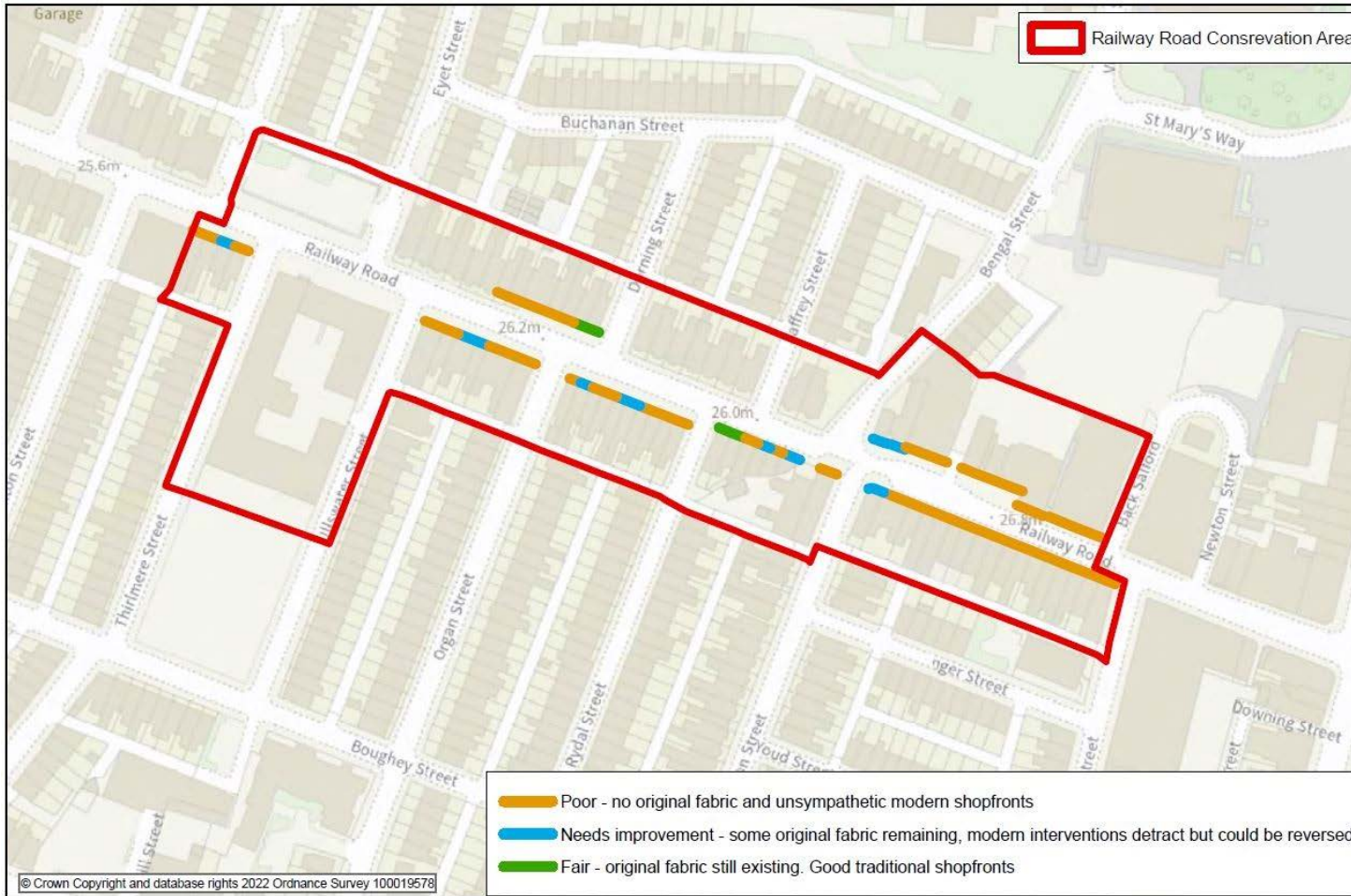
- 4.7** No historic floorscape (i.e. cobbles) remains in the Railway Road Conservation Area. Pavements are mainly surfaced in tarmac or concrete flags with concrete kerbing. The footpaths are relatively wide, creating a reasonable sense of space in the streetscape.
- 4.8** The lighting columns are modern in style but are not particularly intrusive. The one-way road system has created the need for the accompanying traffic signage, but the area as a whole is not particularly cluttered.

Trees and Green Infrastructure

- 4.9** Within Railway Road Conservation Area there is very little green infrastructure. The only notable elements are: the surface car park opposite the former Wigan and Leigh College Building which includes a small grassed area, shrubs and trees; and some small private front gardens with privet hedges.

Map 4: Shopfront Quality Map

1:1,500 



5 Summary

- 5.1** Leigh Railway Road Conservation Area is a busy urban conservation area with a commercial feel – although more akin to a local high street than a town centre. It contains no listed buildings but has a streetscape of exceptional quality, comprising commercial and residential terraces which date to a relatively small time period. This period was a time of wealth and expansion for Leigh and this is demonstrated through the highly decorative, extravagant details and the materials used. There are some original surviving shopfronts and windows, however these are at risk of loss, largely through incremental unsympathetic change.
- 5.2** The following summarises the neutral and negative factors identified in the conservation area that present an opportunity for enhancing the character of the conservation area.
- There has been a slow erosion of building fabric. Details such as the loss of chimneys, wooden sash windows and shopfronts along with a general lack of maintenance have contributed to this.
 - Railway Road has a strong material palette, the use of render or non-matching brick erodes this character and needs to be avoided.
 - Wooden details such as barge boards, shopfronts etc have been replaced in upvc which harms the character of the area.
 - Unsympathetic shop fronts detract from quality buildings.
 - The addition of external roller shutters with exposed boxes harm the amenity of the area, this is exacerbated when used on takeaways which remain shut most of the day.
 - Proposals for new signage, particularly to shop fronts need to be carefully considered to ensure that they do not have a detrimental impact on the character and appearance of the conservation area.
- 5.3** Vacant upper floor space above retail premises is a threat to the vibrancy and character of the conservation area. Vacant and underutilised space is susceptible to limited maintenance which can result in the deterioration. The full use of premises, encouraging sensitive conversions, would help to secure the future of the historic fabric.
- 5.4** There is little opportunity within the conservation area for future infill development. Should proposals be put forward for any future development, care must be taken to ensure it is sympathetic and that it does not have a detrimental effect on the character and appearance of the conservation area.

Buildings and Sites at Risk

- 5.5** The former Wigan and Leigh College building is the primary building of concern in the conservation area. This is a large, architecturally fine and impressive building which dominates the conservation area and has been in a state of vacancy or semi-vacancy for many years.
- 5.6** As it is an unlisted building, it is primarily the external appearance that is of historic importance and every effort should be made to retain it as it is the ‘focus’ that brings the conservation area together. As such the internal layout, floor levels and fenestration should respect the external envelope of the building. It is also important that the qualities of this large building are not compromised by inappropriate conversion.
- 5.7** The plot the building is on is only partly within the Conservation Area, the cleared land behind it is prime for development and a suitable development here could enhance the setting of the conservation area. Development on this site must have regard to the tight urban grain of the area and the proximity of the historic building. It would be preferable to see a development that utilises the whole of the site integrating the historic building into a comprehensive scheme.

6 Conservation Area Boundary Review

- 6.1** The boundary of the conservation area was considered as part of the review of this Conservation Area Appraisal. The review concluded that the boundary should be extended to the east and this change has been incorporated in this document.

7 Article 4 Direction Review

- 7.1** Residential dwellinghouses enjoy a variety of permitted development rights which mean that certain alterations can be carried out without the requirement to obtain planning consent. These include works such as replacement windows, doors, addition of rooflights, solar panels, removal of chimneys and demolition of boundary walls, amongst others. Changes of this nature can affect features of importance and significance within the conservation area, having a detrimental impact upon character.
- 7.2** Under Article 4 of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 2015, permitted development rights may be restricted which means that planning consent must be secured. Expanding the types of development that require planning permission provides the Local Planning Authority with the opportunity to ensure that the proposed development is not detrimental to the character of the conservation area.
- 7.3** During the review of this Conservation Area Appraisal the potential for introducing an Article 4 Direction has been considered. This assessment has considered: (a) the existence of architectural features that contribute character of the conservation area but may be altered/removed without planning consent; and (b) the degree of change/alteration to these features in the subject property and block (thus the level of intactness and impact of further loss on the character of the conservation area).
- 7.4** The review concluded that as Railway Road Conservation Area is predominantly commercial in nature - with a number of apartment conversions, but few residential dwelling houses – there is little benefit of making an Article 4 direction as commercial properties and apartment have more limited permitted development rights.

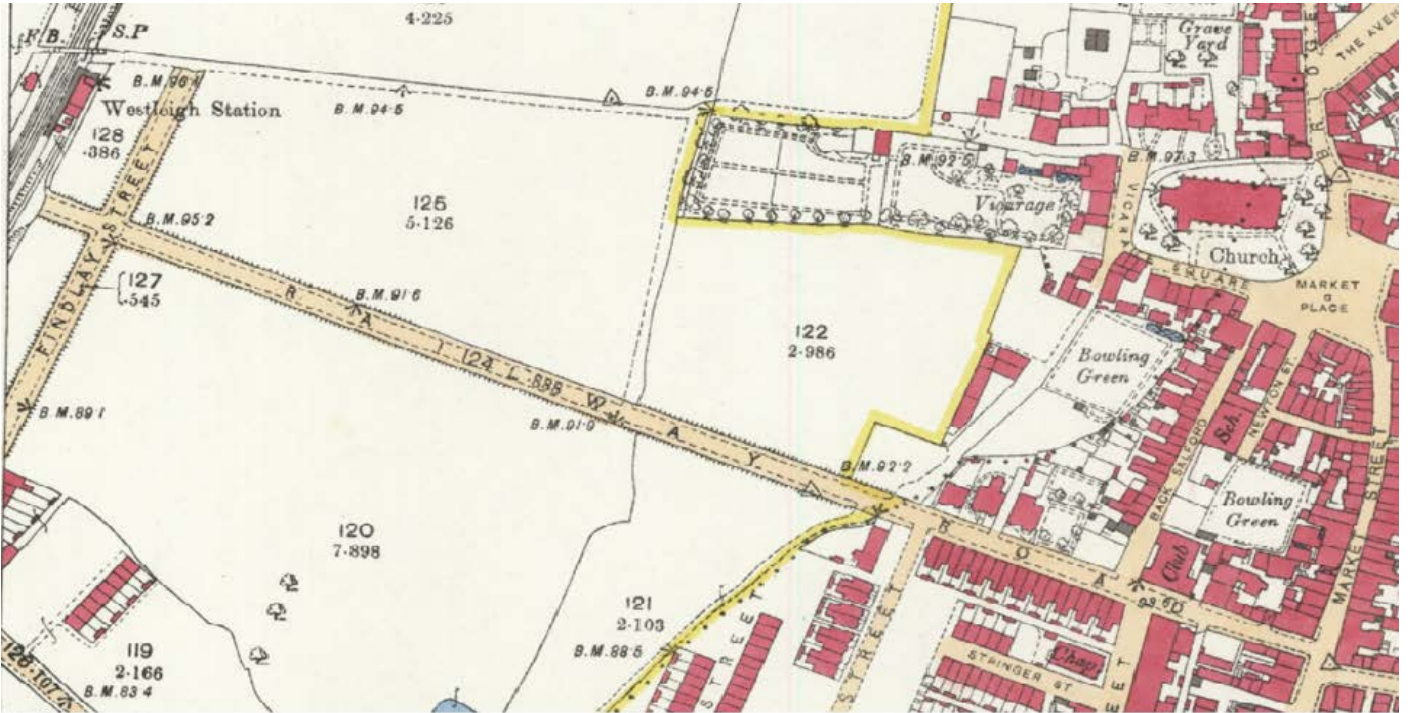
8 Appendix 1 - Historic Map Regression

- 8.1 To understand what makes a place significant, it is important to understand its historic development. One way to understand that is through historic map regression. Below is a sample of historic maps showing the development of Leigh between 1845 and 1938.



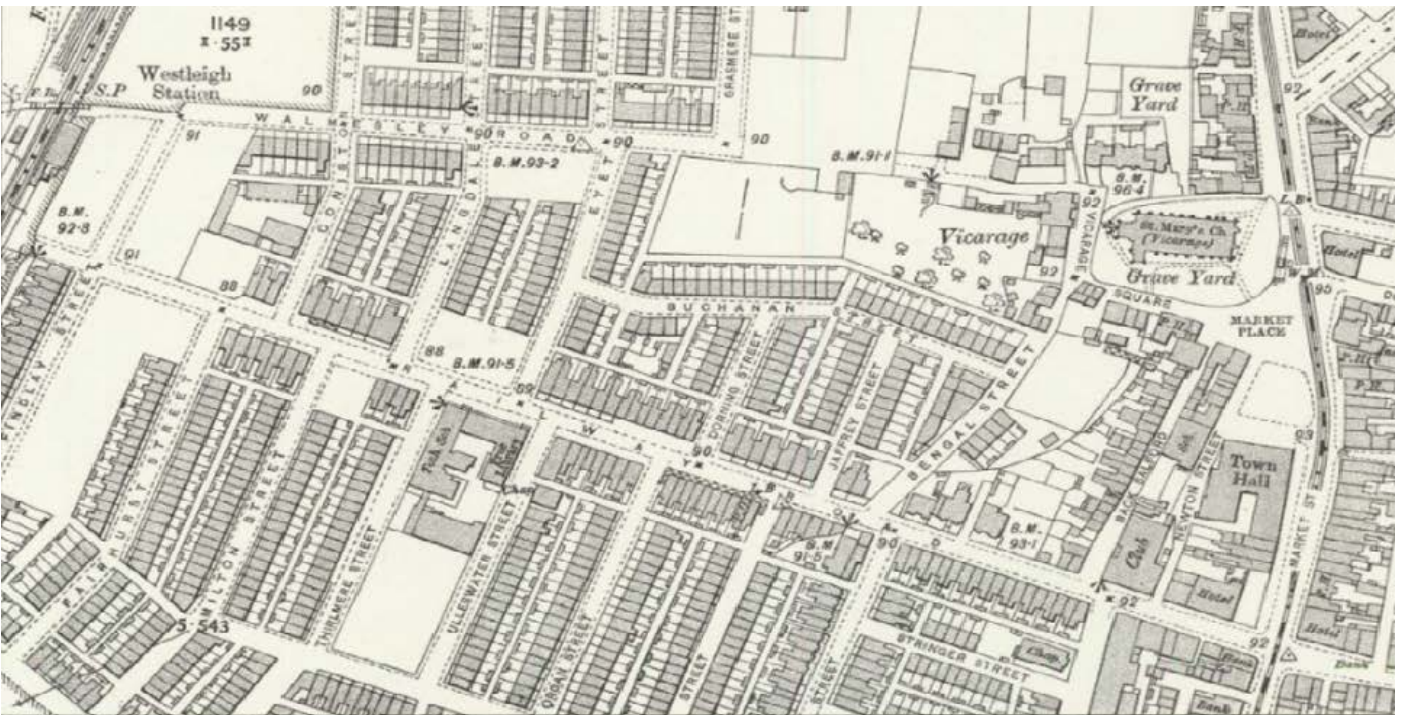
Ordnance Survey, 1845, Railway Road

Picture 8.1



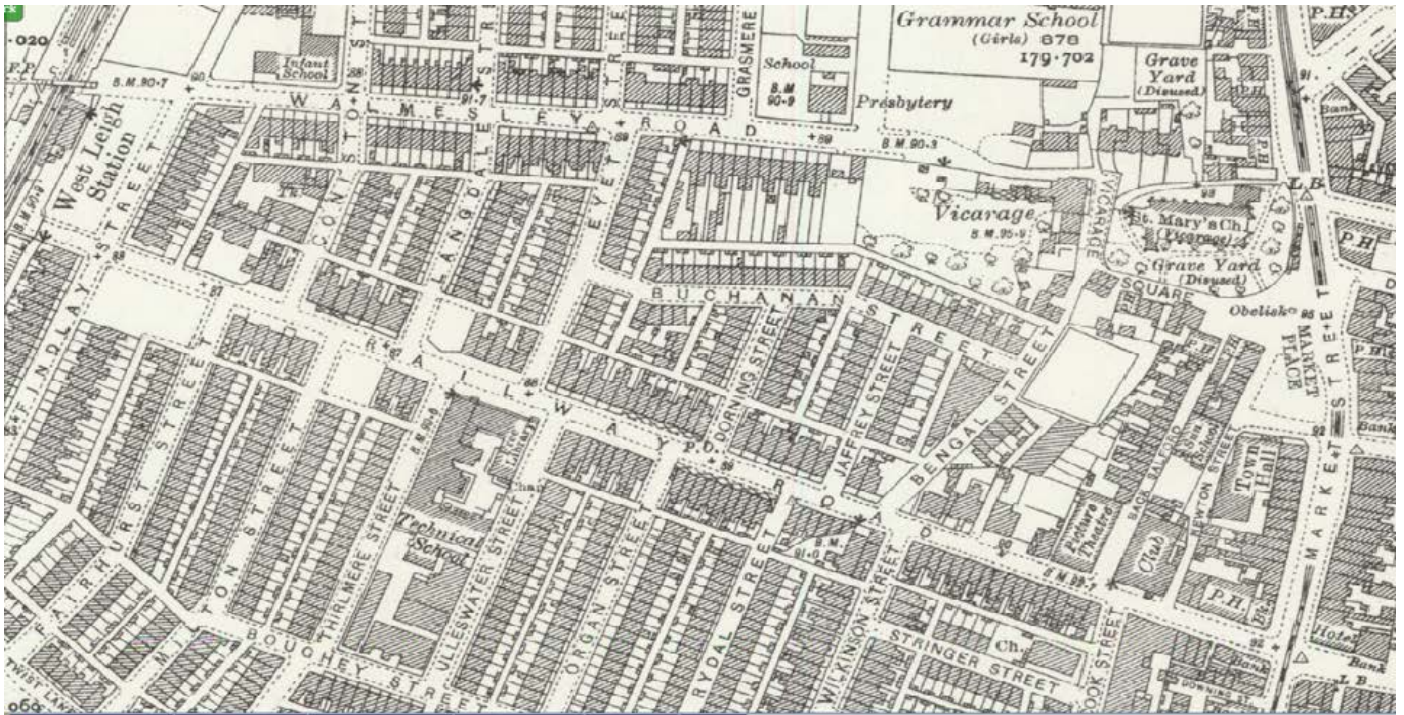
Ordnance Survey, 1893, Railway Road

Picture 8.2



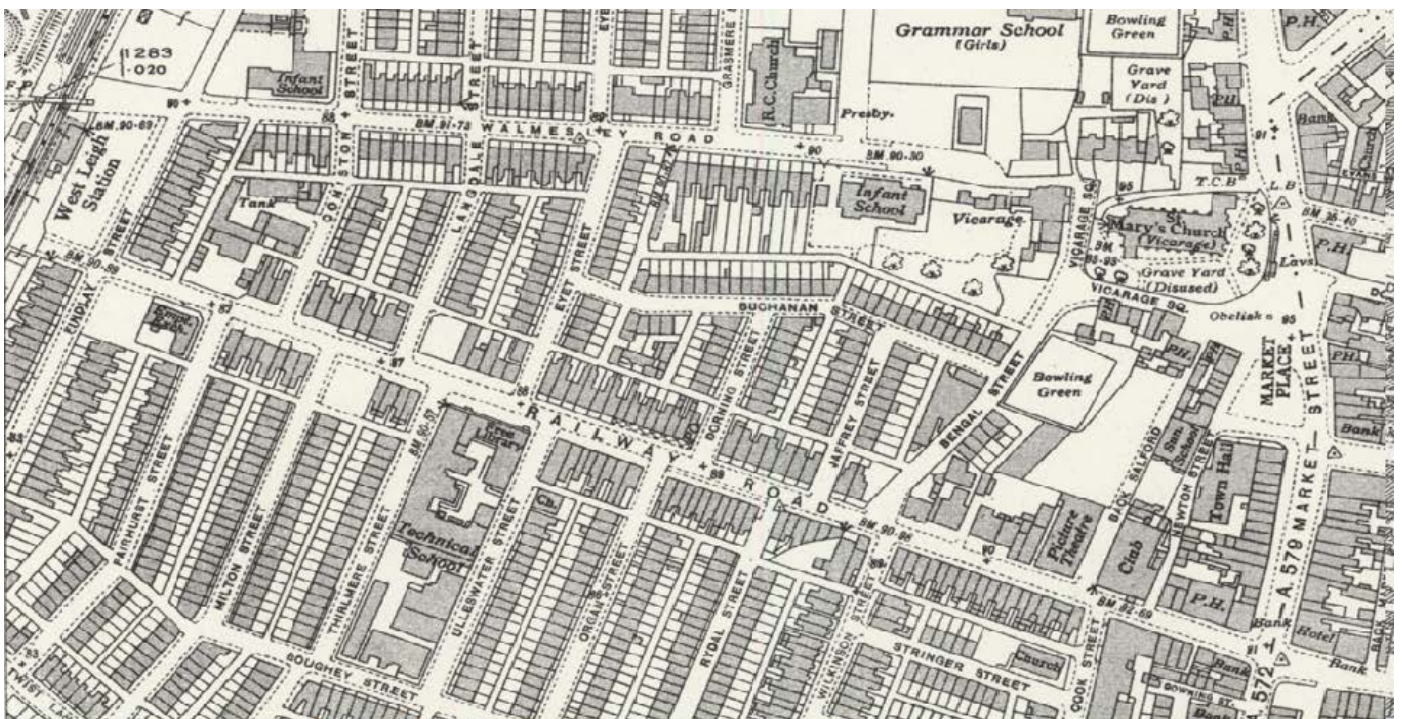
Ordnance Survey, 1907, Railway Road

Picture 8.3



Ordnance Survey, 1928, Railway Road

Picture 8.4



Ordnance Survey, 1938, Railway Road

Picture 8.5



Ordnance Survey, 1952, Railway Road

Picture 8.6



Ordnance Survey, 1969, Railway Road

Picture 8.7

