

Boreham Neighbourhood Plan Evidence Base

EB3 Chelmer Valley Landscape Character

'East of my home the long ridge lies across the skyline like the low hull of a submarine. Above it, the eastern sky is bright with reflections of distant water, and there is a feeling of sails beyond the land. Hill trees mass together in a dark-spined forest, but when I move toward them they slowly fan apart, the sky descends between... The calmness lures me towards them, through them and on to others. They layer the memory like the strata'.

The Peregrine J. A. Baker

1. Introduction

This study of the Chelmer valley landscape character has been prepared as part of the Evidence base for the Boreham Neighbourhood Plan and is concerned with that section of the valley east of Chelmsford. The Chelmer Valley forms the whole of the southern part of the Parish and provides the physical and visual settling for the nucleated village of Boreham. Accordingly, it is of considerable significance to the future the Parish, not least in maintaining its character as a village in a rural setting with a clear separation from the urban are of Chelmsford to the west and the nucleated village of Hatfield Peverel to the north-east. This study briefly considers earlier work on the character of the valley landscape (part 2), provides a brief overview of the Chelmer valley landscape (part 3), a consideration of the valley landscape in Boreham Parish (part 4), and concludes by identifying some key issues (part 5).

2. Previous work

The landscape of Boreham was considered in the landscape character assessment carried out for Chelmsford Council and neighbouring Local authorities, in 2006 (Chris Blandford Associates [CBA] 2006), which forms part of the City Council Local Plan evidence base [eb-099-braintree-brentwood-chelmsford-maldon-and-uttlesford-landscape-character-assessment.pdf](#) . The parish falls largely in two of the character areas used in that study; A7 Lower Chelmer valley and B21 Boreham Farmland Plateau. Given its scale, covering almost half the county, that study is quite coarse grained with large character areas. That is problematic when looking at the landscape of an individual parish; for instance, B21 Boreham Farmland Plateau includes most of the southern part of the parish which in fact is visually and physically part of the Chelmer valley. The CBA study is also quite old now, though it is broadly still applicable and used as a primary source for more recent landscape character assessments.

The Chelmer and Blackwater navigation conservation area appraisal provides a detailed description of the of the immediate environs of the river and the lower slopes of the valley [chelmer-and-blackwater-navigation-conservation-area.pdf \(chelmsford.gov.uk\)](#) Pertinent to the Boreham part of the valley are an assessment of the landscape setting of Boreham House and New Hall (Beacon Planning 2009) and a landscape sensitivity assessment of potential development sites (Amec Foster Wheeler 2017) both of which form part of the evidence base for Chelmsford City Council's Local

Plan. These more recent studies are useful, but only deal with specific locations; they do not provide an assessment of the landscape Chelmer valley as it affects Boreham Parish as a whole.

The Boreham Village Design Statement (VDS 2008) provides useful information regarding key views and the valley's contribution to the form and setting of the present nucleated village. Two documents prepared as part of the evidence base for the Neighbourhood Plan are also pertinent, the *Historic Environment Characterisation* (HEC), which describes the ancient structure of the contemporary landscape and the *Natural Environment evidence base*.

None of these studies (with the exception of the HEC) recognise that the Chelmer Valley, through its association with the work of J. A Baker, is increasingly seen as one of this country's key literary landscapes (Cocker 2010; Saunders 2017), a significant omission given the importance of cultural value in the assessment of landscape character. Cultural value is one of the five key components listed by Natural England for defining landscape character

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/landscape-and-seascape-character-assessments> and is integral to the European Landscape convention's definition of landscape [Council of Europe Landscape Convention / Official website - Council of Europe Landscape Convention \(coe.int\)](#) .

3. Overview of the Chelmer Valley landscape east of the A12

The geology of the valley is complex consisting of a variety of sands and gravels, with alluvial deposits on the floodplains of the Chelmer and its tributary streams, the northern side is marked by the boulder clay plateau, the southern side by the gravels overlying London Clay on the Little Baddow/Danbury Ridge (Allen and Sturdy 1980; Hunter 1999,1-100). Many of the landscape features that give the valley its character are of more or less ancient origin and a full description of the historic structure of the landscape is provided by the HEC.

Adapting the description provided in the CBA study the general character of the valley may be described as follows. The river Chelmer between Chelmsford and Maldon has a broad shallow valley with a wide flood plain and gently sloping sides, the slopes being somewhat steeper on the south side where they run up to the Little Baddow/Danbury ridge. There are medium to large scale arable and pastoral fields bounded by hedgerows with frequent hedgerow trees, in places extensive hedgerow removal has created a more open landscape. Where roads cross the river valley they are generally bounded by ditches with banks and may be partly sunken. The river and its tributary streams are bordered by cricket bat willows, there are also plantations of bat willows and coppice willow, as well as smaller areas of wet alder/willow woodland. There is the occasional small copse and wood dotted along the northern side and there are extensive woodlands along the Little Baddow/Danbury wood on the southern side. There are clearly defined nucleated villages of Boreham and Hatfield Peverel otherwise settlement is dispersed as it has been for millennia, with individual farms and small clusters of buildings scattered through the landscape. Although distant traffic noise from the A12 can often be heard, there is an overall sense of tranquillity. Along the upper slopes of the valley, the views are open and often panoramic; descending into the valley there is a sense of enclosure.

4. The valley landscape in Boreham Parish

The valley landscape provides the physical and visual frame for the nucleated village of Boreham giving it its rural character. In particular; entering or leaving the nucleated village, whether by road or by

footpath, the views across fields to distant wooded hills on the south side of the valley provide a distinct rural ambience.

For the purposes of this study the landscape has been divided into three areas, land to the west of the Boreham village (4.1), land to the south (4.2), and land to the west (4.3). For each area the landscape is briefly described and the views from the village considered.

4.1 Landscape to the west of the village

4.1.1 Description

Area 4.1 lies to the west of the nucleated village of Boreham and south of Main Road and provides the setting for the grade I listed Boreham House and its registered garden, which together form a prominent feature in the landscape. The area is bisected by the valley of the Bulls Lodge, aka Boreham, Brook, a locally significant tributary of the Chelmer which is bordered by hedges. The stream itself is likely to have been utilised as a boundary feature from at least the medieval period. Hedged fields run south from Main Road, across the brook the landscape is more open and flatter running down in a gentle slope to the river Chelmer which is bordered by cricket bat willows. Beyond Boreham House and screened by the foliage of its gardens and a tall row of poplars, are the remaining outbuildings of the former Cheese Farm, to the south are a group of large green modern agricultural buildings. Land use is largely arable with a large field south of the Cheese Farm outbuildings being permanent grass used for a boot fair at weekends during the summer months. Power lines supported on large pylons run across this area and frame the sky. The general pattern of historic field boundaries, tracks and paths with scattered groups of buildings, typical of the historic landscape, survives.

4.1.2 Views

Moving along main road or the footpaths running across the fields south and west of the village, looking west the view is across fields and hedgerows toward the rooftop of the Grade I listed Boreham House and the trees of its associated registered Park and Garden. Looking south-west from the western edge of Boreham village across valley of the Bulls Lodge aka Boreham Brook lined by cricket bat willows, beyond which the trees along the Chelmer blend with the distant wooded hills to create a bosky background. The broad sky typical of east of England views is framed by the row of pylons. The pylons lead the eye toward a prominent mast which can be seen on the distant ridge, a listed structure, one of the original chain radar towers of 1940 moved to its present location from its original position in Canewdon.

4.2 Landscape to the south of the village

4.2.1 Description

Area 4.2 lies to the south of the nucleated village, bordered to the east by the line of Church Road, a protected lane; the lane is bordered by low banks and is partly sunken. The area is crossed by a number of footpaths and tracks and is bisected by the Bulls Lodge, aka Boreham, brook which is bordered on the northern side by a species rich hedge. The stream is a prominent feature in the landscape, likely to have been utilised as a boundary feature from at least the medieval period. Some of these boundaries include earthwork features; for instance, the line of a field boundary followed by a footpath from the village to the brook and marked by two surviving hedgerow oaks, was, thirty years ago, marked by a small lynchet 0.3 – 0.5m high. Subsequently ploughing has reduced this to no more

than a slight slope, except to west of the two oaks where, protected from plough damage, it survives to its full height. The hedge bordering the footpath from the brook to Risley mead has a distinct hedge bank, and despite the dominance of suckering elm and black thorn, the hedge is species rich. At its northern end the hedge bank widens and rises to form a broad earthwork about 2m high at its junction with the brook. This appears to be a mill dam probably the site of one of the medieval mills known to have existed in Boreham; a depression in the field to the west may be the site of the mill pond. A small copse lies on the other side of the brook to the north of this earthwork. In the west of this area lies Boreham Hall and its associated agricultural buildings, Mulberries with its distinctive roof line lies east of Church Lane. Land use is largely arable, but in the south of the area on Risley mead is more varied. Risley Mead, a large former meadow, lies within the Chelmer and Blackwater navigation Conservation Area adjacent to the river Chelmer, which is marked by a line of cricket bat willows. The northern and western boundary of Risley Mead is marked by a hedge and a prominent lynchet, which has been emphasised and heightened by the construction of a gravel trackway along its northern edge. The western part of Risley mead is now arable, the eastern part a plantation of widely spaced cricket bat willows. The north-east corner is a plantation of coppice willow for biofuel, and there is a similar plantation on part of a former arable field to the north. The confluence of the Bulls Lodge/Boreham Brook and the Chelmer lies in this area and here the verge of Church Lane has been identified for its conservation value. The general pattern of historic field boundaries, tracks and paths with scattered groups of buildings, typical of the historic landscape survives.

4.2.2 Views

Looking south from the footpath which emerges from the southern edge of Boreham village across valley of the Bulls Lodge, aka Boreham, Brook lined by hedges, beyond which the cricket bat willows along the Chelmer blend with the distant wooded hills to create a bosky background. To the west is Boreham Hall and its associated agricultural buildings occupy an area of rising ground. To the south there is a panoramic view across the Chelmer valley; as fine as any in the east of England from the Thames to the Wash and characteristic of the landscape which forms the background to the work of J.A. Baker. In the middle distance, is the partly sunken Church Lane with the distinctive roof line of 'Mulberries' beyond which is the broad sweep of the valley backed by the prominent wooded hills of the Little Baddow/ Danbury ridge, capped by the broad sky typical of the east of England.

4.3 Landscape east of the village

4.3.1 Description

Area 4.3 lies east of the village and south of Main road, Church Road, a Protected Lane, runs along the western edge of the area. The northern part is the flat edge of the boulder clay plateau, the southern part descends into the Chelmer valley. Land use is predominantly arable and there has been considerable loss of hedgerows during the 20th century creating a largely open landscape. Brakey Wood an area of probably ancient woodland, is a prominent feature in the east of the area, there is a smaller area of woodland east of 'Mulberries' and linked by a hedge to the house with its distinctive roofline. Mulberries is one of a number of individual houses or groups of buildings scattered across the area. One of which Culverts Farm, is the site of one of Boreham's medieval manors. Culverts Chase a farm track is a prominent feature of the landscape running west to east from Boreham village to Brakey wood where it turns south. Culverts Chase links Culverts Farm, Culverts cottage, Belsteads cottage and groups of modern agricultural barns. It is an integral part of the pattern of historic roads and tracks which linked the dispersed settlement pattern in the parish, and is of ancient, possibly

Roman, origin (Kemble 2011). Agricultural reservoirs occupy the bottom of the valley adjacent to the river which is fringed by cricket bat willows and is part of the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation Conservation Area.

4.3.2 Views

Looking south from Main Road the view is across the open countryside of the edge of the Boulder clay plateau to the wooded hills of the Little Baddow/Danbury Ridge. Moving down the footpath which runs south along the eastern edge of Boreham village, the view opens out to provide a panoramic view across the Chelmer valley, as fine as any in the east of England from the Thames to the Wash and characteristic of the landscape which forms the background to the work of J.A. Baker. To the west runs the partly sunken Church Lane with, more centrally, the distinctive roof line of 'Mulberries' and its small wood, to the east, in the middle distance, Culverts Farm lies partly concealed by a fold in the valley landscape. Beyond these lies the broad sweep of the Chelmer valley, the cricket bat willows along the Chelmer blend with the prominent wooded hills of the Little Baddow/ Danbury ridge to create a bosky background surrounding Little Baddow church. The view is capped by the broad sky typical of the east of England.

5. Key issues

"My life is here, where soon the larks will sing again, and there is a hawk above."

'The Hill of Summer' J. A. Baker

- The valley landscape provides the physical and visual frame for the nucleated village of Boreham giving it its rural character.
- The valley landscape west of the village is essential to the maintenance of the identity of Boreham as a village, clearly separated from urban area of Chelmsford west of the A12.
- The Chelmer valley landscape has a high cultural value, it is increasingly seen as one of this country's key literary landscapes through its association with the work of J.A. Baker.
- The historic environment of the Chelmer Valley, the pattern of fields, woods, tracks and paths with individual farms and groups of buildings is of ancient origin and requires careful maintenance and enhancement.
- The diverse character of the Chelmer valley landscape is a vital resource for biodiversity and requires careful maintenance and enhancement.
- The valley landscape is a key resource for the physical and mental well-being of the people of Boreham; it provides physical and visual access to the countryside and nature, facilitated by the network of paths and tracks which give access to it.
- In recent years traffic has increased along Church Road affecting the tranquillity of the valley and potentially damaging the character of protected Lane.
- Use of the river Chelmer and its tow path has notably increased since the pandemic creating management issues for the character of the river, for instance the conservation verge west of Church Road where it approaches the river has been damaged by car parking.

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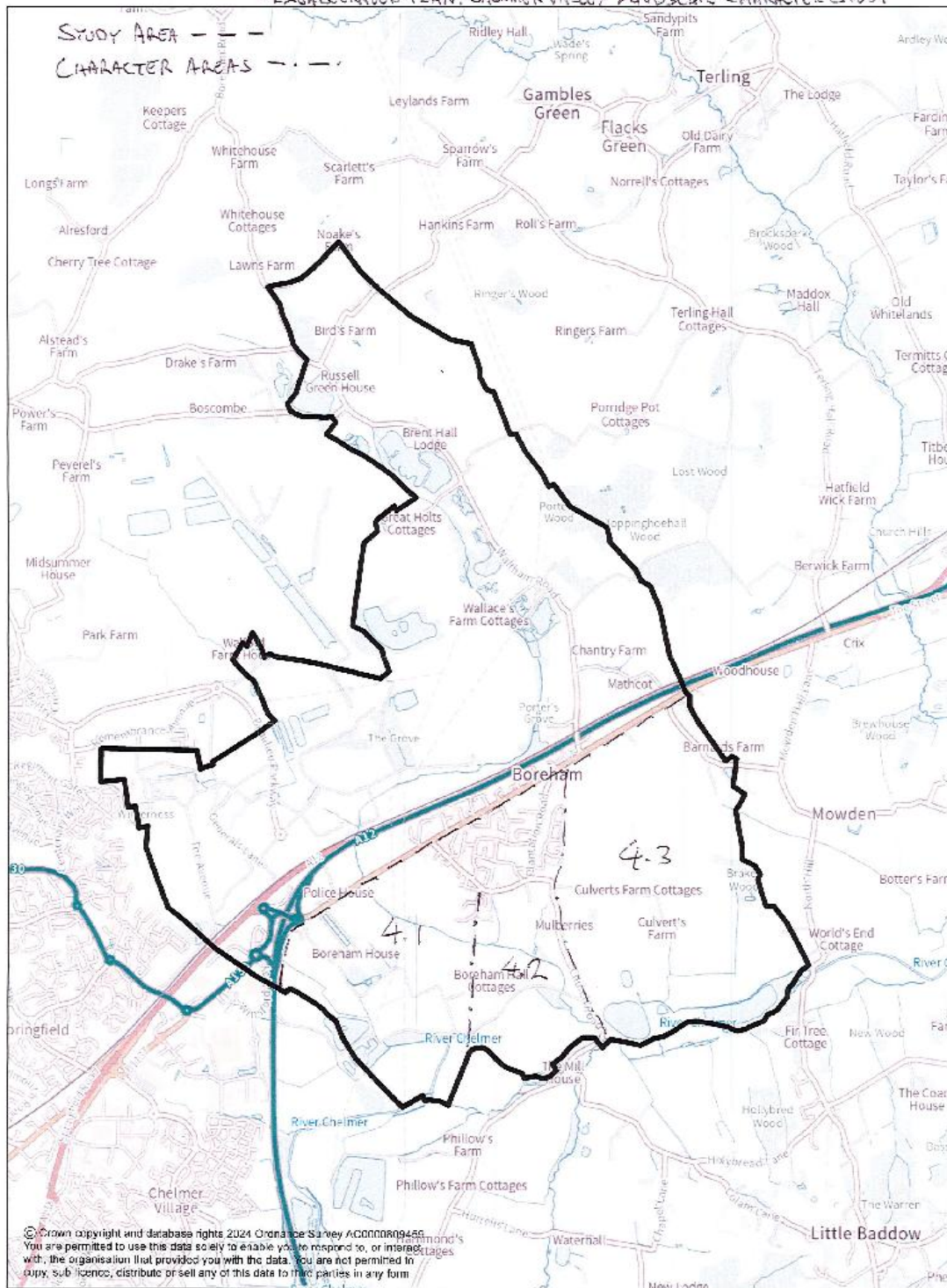
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Boreham - Parish

NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN: CHERMER VALLEY LANDSCAPE CHARACTER STUDY



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Metres

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