

# An Overview: The Character of Great Dunmow and Design Issues



**The town of Great Dunmow has grown rapidly in recent years as a succession of housing estates has been built on the edge of the ‘historic’ built up area. These have increased in scale and have culminated in the Woodlands Park estate which will consist of some 1600 houses.**

The ‘original’ Dunmow is quite hard to pin down. There was a Roman settlement in the area of modern day Highfields and Church End would appear to have been the core of the medieval settlement. However, the long established character of the town which most people would recognise and which is reflected in the conservation area status is derived from the High Street, Stortford Road, Market Place, North Street and the Causeway, Church End and Beaumont Hill. This essentially Y shaped settlement pattern lies alongside the River Chelmer with the later medieval Market Place located on higher ground, away from the flooding of the Church End area. This simple shape and its relationship to the landscape give Great Dunmow key aspects of its character in particular its relationship to the Chelmer Valley and the wider landscape. The other and perhaps essential part of the character of the ‘old’ town is however made up of its buildings and spaces.

## English Heritage Historic Settlement Study

Before looking in more detail at these aspects of the town it is worth quoting some of the findings and views of the recent English Heritage report that was submitted to the East of England Plan Examination in public.

The report describes Great Dunmow as “one of the region’s most important historic towns” and states that “The town is at a critical moment in its development”. It goes on to explain

the need for thorough capacity studies to be carried out before plans for expansion are adopted. “A detailed study is needed analysing its historic character and capacity for growth before decisions on future expansion are made.

*“The TDS completely endorse this view and welcomes (with some reservations) both the Conservation Area Appraisal and the Historic Character Assessment that have been published by the District Council.”*

The English Heritage Report identifies the following key features as being quintessential to Great Dunmow:

- An ancient street pattern
- A high proportion of historic buildings
- Ginnels running at right angles to the High St
- Glimpses of trees and open countryside
- An important common
- High quality approaches from the north and east
- Important views of the church from the Chelmer
- A distinct historic enclave around Church End
- A wide range of historic building types
- An informal palette of building materials, styles and colours

### Links:

<http://www.utlesford.gov.uk/documents/website%5CPlanning%5CCore%20Strategy%2Fhscgtdunmow%2Epdf>

<http://www.utlesford.gov.uk/main.cfm?Type=PLCCAP&MenuId=518>

## The Centre and residential areas

Dunmow is a linear town with relatively narrow thoroughfares lined with building creating a strong sense of enclosure through much of the centre. The market place consists of a slight widening of this channel and Dunmow has no formal space such as is found in Saffron Walden for instance. This pattern was very common in medieval England and many market towns across the country conform to it in one way or another.



The architecture of Dunmow is with one or two exceptions not formal or in any way grand but is modest and domestic in character. The buildings are at most three stories high but these are found next to two storey building so that the sense of enclosure is nowhere overwhelming. Nevertheless the sense of enclosure in the High Street and Market Place is strong with the gentle curve of the roads closing views at either end. Only glimpses of the wider landscape are possible.

The Essex vernacular is one of timber framed building rendered with steep tiled roofs. This is very apparent in Dunmow but the overall style of architecture is varied with a range of styles and materials. The character thus derives from the layout, scale and the diversity of style. Despite this it is a strong character easily recognisable and distinctive. It also in part comes from the small details of the buildings and spaces. Finally it derives from the diversity and vitality of the activity without which the town would be sterile and disappointing. It is a living town and no museum piece.

Predictably and inevitably the newer residential extensions to the town conform to almost none of the above characteristics. Purely residential in character they comprise fairly typical estates designed around the maximum use and penetration of the car. Low density on the whole they nevertheless are laid out with the express intention of maximising the number of plots. This approach which is the standard offer of the volume house builders produces a typical appearance with a series of cul de sacs linked by standard width roads; semi detached or detached houses with small front gardens or open areas and driveways. Green space is limited in extent and greenery is provided by private gardens.



The estates are wholly residential in character there being no commercial or retail activity. The style of the houses varies according to the style of the period in which they were built with variations in materials, brick or render, different types of roofing tile and external decoration.

More recently with the increasing emphasis on using brown field land and previously used sites the style of newer residential buildings has changed with three storey blocks and tightly packed courts being used. The style has also changed with a stronger emphasis on 'vernacular' type materials the use of render and chimneys to replicate the Essex style. In all situations a key challenge is to accommodate the car and it is this that does so much to determine the appearance of developments.

## Other areas and public buildings

Dunmow is of course a town and generates a great deal of activity commercial, public as well as residential. Much of the commercial activity is now located on the industrial estates – the Flitch, Ongar Road, Station Road, Hoblongs and Chelmsford Road. These comprise a series of sheds larger or smaller with a single spine road and are for most of the time highly congested with cars and delivery vehicles. The entrances to the estates make no attempt to create a sense of arrival or to contribute to the street scene. Internally there are few amenity areas or green space and the buildings are universally modest in design. The major retail space outside the town centre is the Tesco store on Stortford Road which occupies an extensive site with a petrol station and large car parking area. It has no pretensions to style and is simply a large shed, about to be made larger. The site is well screened from the main road by trees and a bund but is overlooked by houses on the Woodlands Park estate.

There are a number of public buildings in Dunmow outside the centre including the schools and the community hall; the Foakes Hall. The Helen Romanes School occupies a large site along with a sports centre off Beaumont Hill. The main building is modern in style and contributes nothing to the character of the area detracting somewhat from the cottages that front it.

The new primary school has been designed with energy conservation in mind and as a series of 'pavilions' it sits above the Stortford Road and plays little or no part in the street scene. The tall fence and entrance way being the dominant impression. The dense planting to the frontage will in time further reduce the impact.

### The setting

The landscape setting of Dunmow is not spectacular but is nevertheless a typical of the rolling agricultural landscape of NW Essex with stands of mature trees and dominated by long vista from the few high points. The Chelmer whilst being mostly a modest not to say retiring river contributes a strong landscape edge by virtue of its openness due in large part to the flood plain.

The town lies on a slight rise so that the approach from the south and particularly from the north is up a slight hill creating a sense of arrival and anticipation. The edge of the built up area is more or less strong on all sides but especially so on the north where the relationship between the town and the open country is very distinctive and immediate. Views from Beaumont Hill north east extend over open fields to a tree fringed horizon; views to the east are terminated by dense and mature woodland. This interconnection between landscape and the urban area is one of the most distinctive features of the town. To the North West the landscape is higher and more densely wooded and diverse merging into the former parkland of Little Easton. Unfortunately this sector has been eroded by the A120 which cuts Dunmow off from the Canfields and creates a noise blanket across the south east sector of the town and now by the Woodlands Park estate and its 'by-pass' which intrudes into the landscape and has bisected and partially destroyed an ancient woodland.

The Chelmer Valley as it approaches the town is purely agricultural but south of Church End is occupied to a large extent by the town's recreation area. The edge of the town to the north is distinct. The tower of the church is a key feature in the landscape.

South of Church End the Chelmer valley is open and used for recreation on the west with open fields running up a distinct slope to the housing in St Edmunds Lane. The recreation area is maintained by the Town Council and is for the most part very well used for both walking and more formal recreation. The landscape is not outstanding and the planting is not formal or planned. The river itself is indistinct and to a large extent inaccessible but with eroding banks and containing debris. The landscape structure does not reflect or reinforce the river valley. Further south the valley becomes agricultural once again with shallow slopes leading south west in an attractive and well treed section. Beyond the Braintree Road the valley enters more open countryside.

The B1256, the former A120 that follows the old railway line forms a very distinct south west boundary. Lying below the built up area, it is bordered by dense and mature hedges which positively limit its visual and to an extent noise impact.

A footbridge links New Street to the valley to the west. To the east of this are the edge of the Flitch Industrial estate and the Lukins Drive estate is distinct and a shallow depression separates the B 1256 from Olives Wood which occupies rising ground. More dense and mature or ancient woodland then stretches North West. South of Olives wood there is a stretch of agricultural land and semi formal woodland that separates it from the A 120 and the Ongar Road. The A120 constitutes a major barrier and a source of intense and continuous noise almost 100 meters deep despite being in a cutting. A so called amenity area has been created to the south west and has a fringe of struggling tree planting that does as yet nothing to disguise or enhance it.

This belt of woodland to the south of the B1256 is of extremely high quality ecologically and visually and is designated as of nature Conservation Importance. It provides a setting for the Flitch Way which meanders through it and is well used by walkers and locals for informal recreation. To such an extent that the condition of Olives Wood and some of the damaging activity such as motorcycling gives cause for concern.

To the east of St Edmunds lane is yet another strong and abrupt boundary with agricultural land rising gently to dense and mature woodland that comprises a prominent landscape feature. To the north, beyond the terrace of housing the approach from Stebbing gives a very open vista over gently sloping fields to the woodland surrounding the Church and to the fringe of woodland that traces the Chelmer.

### Summary and key issues – Dunmow and its setting

The English Heritage Report referred to above identifies the following 'particular challenges' facing historic towns like Gt Dunmow.

**Scale** – getting the balance right between the historic town and the peripheral development and ensuring that the grain of the centre is not swamped by plot amalgamations and over large buildings.

**Quality** – new development should reinforce not dilute existing character and aim to replicate local patterns of layout and permeability rather than ape vernacular styles.

**Pace** – gradual, well planned and mixed use development has more chance of fitting in and complementing a historic settlements than a massive development built quickly as an extension.

Once again the TDS endorses this view and we suggest that recent developments in Great Dunmow have failed to a significant degree to live up to the above criteria.

Before moving on to a more detailed characterisation of the areas within the town there follows a brief summary of the overall impression of Great Dunmow and an outline of the issues for development and change that are raised by the analysis and description of the landscape.



### **The Character – managing change**

The structure of the town is distinctive and quite clear – a Y shaped route pattern that has evolved from an early beginning in Church End to a strong and very urban street pattern lined by varied and attractive buildings. This built structure is complemented in a very distinctive way by very attractive open spaces that thread through and punctuate the built frontages. These include the Downs, Doctors Pond and Parsonage Downs and the Chelmer Valley park. Many trees punctuate these landscapes. From the built up areas the landscape setting is almost everywhere close and immediate. The edge of Dunmow is in several places abrupt and startling with a glimpse of agricultural open landscape available from the centre of the town. Despite being in a relatively flat landscape there is sufficient relief and variety to offer interest and to give quite long views and vistas to both the wider and distant horizon and to more closely defined woodland boundaries. These characteristics then are what constitute the visual character of Dunmow. A town of immense but honest charm firmly and attractively set in a mature and attractive landscape interspersed with very attractive and immensely valuable natural features.

It follows from this assessment that the continued expansion of the town in a way that complements the character will pose enormous challenges and very obvious dangers. Some of these challenges are generic. The question of how, essentially medieval urban forms, can be added to without compromising their essential character is faced everywhere. The solutions are not obvious and there is no best practice that much has to be admitted. The worst solutions, which abound, ignore the morphological structure of such places as Dunmow and create massive blocks of development out of keeping with the established grain. The best solutions work with the grain fitting new uses into old structures. This is the way, in fact, in which most towns have evolved in the past. There are many examples of this positive approach. York and Chester for instance clearly demonstrate how even city scale activity can be assimilated and how places can thrive in the face of 21st century pressures. So the solution for Dunmow, it is suggested lies in facilitating the structure to accommodate new uses. In part this is a matter of organisation – putting sites and buildings together perhaps and finding space within the existing fabric and in part a matter of design – complementing the rich townscape of the town where it is necessary to create new space. One of the first steps to adopting this kind of strategy is an assessment of capacity – what scale and intensity of activity can the fabric sustain? To date no such capacity study has been attempted in Dunmow.

### **The Question of traffic**

One of the key issues implicated in growth and change is traffic. The worst examples of change encourage rising volumes and even speeds of traffic whereas the best seek to constrain and manipulate traffic so that the centre remains essentially a pedestrian domain even though the necessity of deliveries and access are accommodated.

The unique proposition offered by historic towns such as Dunmow cannot be appreciated by car but only on foot. And yet in Dunmow currently the car dominates virtually all spaces – it is ubiquitous, only the narrowest of ginnels are excluded. So the initial premise of this guidance is that Dunmow will change; perhaps has to change. But that change must be managed so as to respect and complement the existing character and to create an environment, a public realm that is dedicated to the person not the vehicle. Both options are possible and within our grasp. If successfully combined, the centre of Dunmow can evolve to meet the needs of its existing population; which it can be said to be not doing at the moment and those of the future and potentially larger population.

### **The landscape and its setting**

The second issue that emerges from this overview is the immense importance and intrinsic value of the landscape large and small to the town. The historic settlement (lets say up to the 20th century) has embraced the landscape. It is the warp in as much as the buildings are the weft. The modern additions have done no such thing but have in effect turned their backs on the landscape. For the most part they could be anywhere. Where landscape has been allowed it is mean and apologetic. Only in a few places has a more positive approach been adopted. So the issue becomes one of the overriding need to protect the valued landscape and its component parts and the corresponding need to incorporate landscape and a quality public realm into new development in a way that is complementary to the character of Dunmow. In such a way extensions will add to the sum total and not as has so often been the case so far detract. In some case it is not a question of guiding the new but of enhancing the existing. Many opportunities exist and will continue to arise to improve what exists – residential, commercial and industrial. It cannot be said that in the past these opportunities have been taken.

The report will come back to these principles admittedly based on broad generalisations. It will hopefully provide the detailed evidence to justify them and will suggest detailed policies to give effect to them.