

# Leigh-on-Sea (UK)

## An Upper Class Fishing Village Where Heritage Is Everything

> Karen Dabrowska

At the end of June, Leigh-on-Sea in Essex (South-East England) did what it does best: it showcased its heritage with a folk festival. The festival was first held in June 1992 as part of National Music Day. In Leigh its success prompted a repeat performance during the past seventeen years with each incarnation bigger, better and brighter than the last.

**M**orris dancers, where out in force, reinventing a traditional ritual to welcome spring which dates back to the 15th century. Waving handkerchiefs and sticks with bells and badges jingling from their clothing they delighted the locals and hundreds of visitors. The folk festival also featured contemporary and traditional folk music.

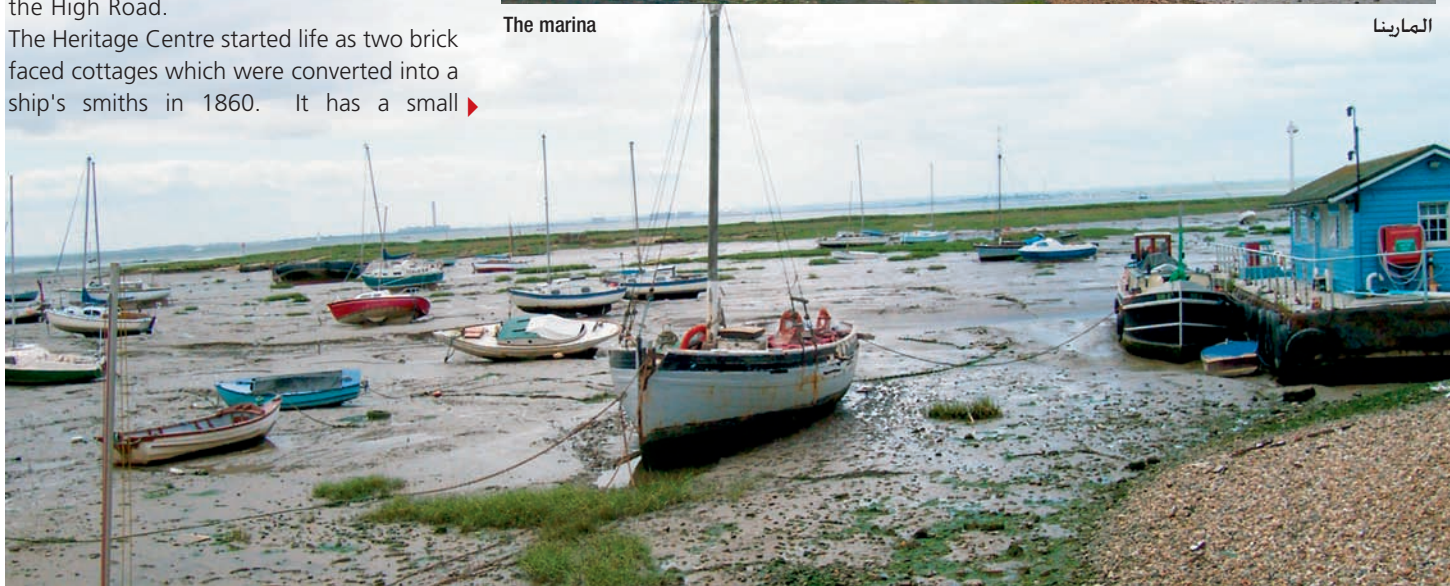
A walk down the high street is a walk through history which begins at the Bell Wharf originally built in 1775. The present wharf is made largely of rubble from buildings demolished during the construction of the railway in 1856. Three other wharves can also be reached via the High Road.

The Heritage Centre started life as two brick faced cottages which were converted into a ship's smiths in 1860. It has a small ▶



The marina

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The waterfront

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museum and many useful books and leaflets about Leigh as well as information about local entertainment.

The Conduit was restored in 1975 by members of the local branch of the Royal Institute of British Architects to mark European Heritage Year. From 1712 it was used to provide a source of fresh water for the residents of the Old Town.

Leigh Hill, above the Old Town, has a number of historic buildings including St Clements Church, Bank House and the Leigh library and gardens. Parts of St Clements Church date from the 15th century but there is evidence of an earlier church on the site.

Bank House was built in the 18th century and was the first bank in Leigh. It contains beautifully panelled rooms and a high oak beamed ceiling. Stained glass windows, older than those of the house, are thought to come from St Clements Church.

The library was built in 1838 in Tudor Style. Two cedars of Lebanon, were planted towards the end of the 18th century by John Loten the Collector of Customs.

In August 2007, the Evening Standard named Leigh-on-Sea as the second best place to live within the south-east England. The town, described as Legra in the Domesday book, dates back to 1086. With increasing trade during the Middle Ages it took advantage of its sheltered position on the important shipping route to London and by the 16th century had become a prosperous port handling coastal and continental trade, especially with France.

The 16th century was the heyday of shipbuilding in Leigh: the Mayflower in which the Pilgrim Fathers made their voyage to America, was either built or owned in Leigh. During the 18th century ships became larger, patterns of trade altered, the sea level rose resulting in the silting up of Leigh's deep water channel and the town declined in importance, reverting into a fishing village which supplied the local market by road and barge.

The arrival of the London, Tilbury and Southend Railway in 1854 spurred the

town's development allowing greater trade with London and the rest of the world and making it a commuter town for London's workers.

The Leigh Conservation Area to the north of the railway, rises from the Old Town up the steep hillside to the parish church at the top. This area contains many of the attractive, old terraced houses and cottages with architectural features dating back to past centuries and making Leigh an upper class fishing village where heritage is everything. ■



Morris dancers

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