



Elmbridge


Borough Council

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Design and Character Supplementary Planning Document Companion Guide : **The Character of Elmbridge** (An Overview)

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1 The Character of Elmbridge (An overview)

1.1 Elmbridge is well known for its high quality environment. It is located at a key transition between the strong urban form of the London Boroughs to the north and east and the rich and highly valued open countryside to the south and south-west. A recent survey ⁽¹⁾ which asked what residents particularly liked about the Borough highlighted their appreciation of;

- the waterways
- the wide variety of green open spaces that punctuate the urban areas together with the commons, farms, historic parks and woodlands that bring the countryside to people's doorsteps
- leafy residential areas and roads
- local areas that create a real sense of community

1.2 The natural features, and the visual and physical extent of the Wey Navigation and the Rivers Mole and Thames shape and define certain parts of the Borough. The railways and major roads (the A3 and M25) also in-part define structure, capacity and form of urban development.



Thames Riverside from Hampton Court Bridge

1.3 Historically, the area was limited to very localised areas of dispersed settlement; **Weybridge, Walton, Esher, Thames Ditton**

and **Cobham** related to the rivers and the principal routes to and from London passing through and crossing the rivers. Hampton Court Palace, located immediately to the north east of the Borough boundary, was also historically important. Outside these small dispersed settlements, the Borough comprised very large areas of common land, parks and hunting grounds associated with 18th century estates including Burwood Park; Claremont; Painshill; Oatlands; Cobham Park and Esher Place.



Old Village, Thames Ditton - a sense of the character of the older settlements

1.4 This pattern of landholding and ownership has had an important impact upon the character of the settlement areas seen today. The way in which land has been sold and brought forward for development has given us the often highly landscaped and stylised housing estates seen across the Borough. A particular feature of this landscape is the survival of specimen trees found to gardens and public spaces. These often form local landmarks of considerable importance.



Cedar of Lebanon to front garden, Fernhill, Oxshott

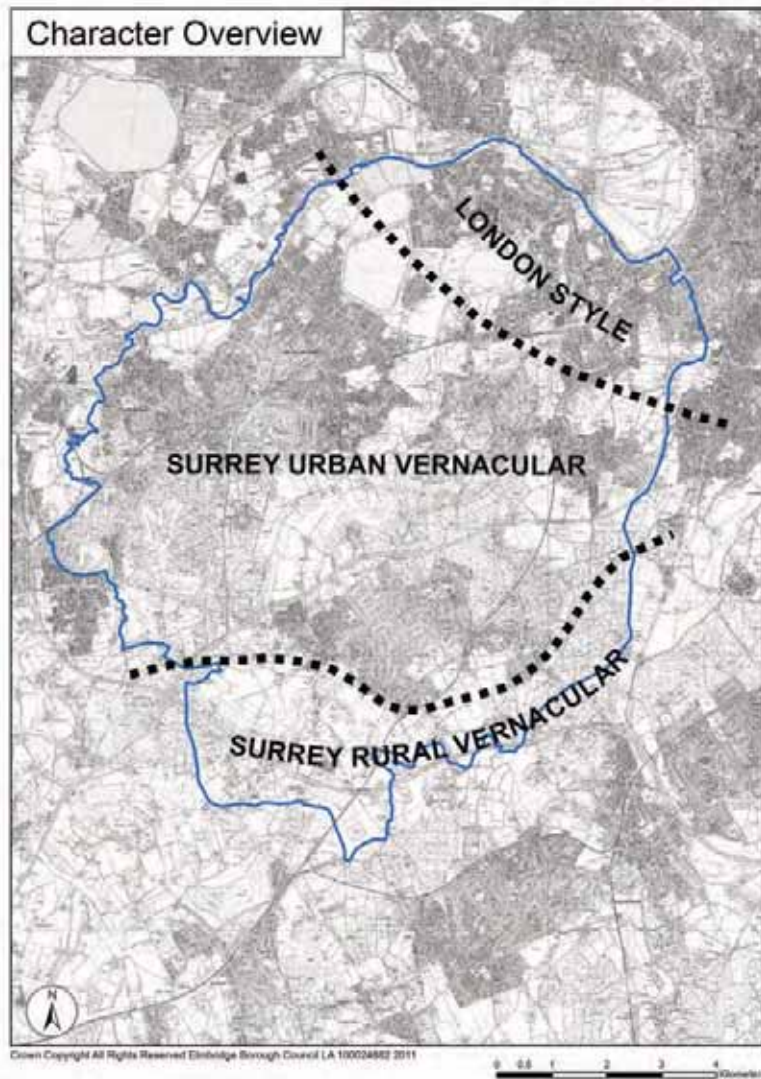
1.5 In terms of built form, there are three broad areas of character transition across the Borough. These are illustrated in Map CO1. The north-east of the Borough has a strong sense of a London suburban character, particularly around the Hampton Court Bridge area of **East Molesey**, for example Kent Town with its London brick villas and ragstone church. This is also apparent in parts of **Thames Ditton** and **Long Ditton, Hinchley Wood** and some the more modest estates of **West Molesey**.



Semi-detached villa, Kent Town, East Molesey



General view of houses, Hinchley Wood



This map broadly illustrates the subtle change in character of the built form across the Borough

1.6 The central belt of development, seen to run through the main settlement areas of **Walton** and **Weybridge**, and the estates of **Cobham**, has more of a Surrey influence with more reliance on the use of materials and Arts and Crafts inspired designs. These designs also feature in **Claygate**, although most of the area tends to take some form from its neighbours to the north and elements of material detailing from Surrey vernacular, with the exception of the Foley Estate area.



High end Domestic Revival, Oatlands Drive

1.7 The Surrey 'urban vernacular' is seen to penetrate to the heart of many of the early 20th century estates to the central belt of the Borough, and is much copied to varying degrees of success since. These early periods are strongly characterised by the use of high quality materials; handmade red brick, peg tiles and oak timber-framing, by a series of architects and their followers such as Edwin Lutyens, Harold Falconer, Charles Bailey, Ralph Nevill and later Leonard Martin (**Cobham**) and Blair Imrie (Clare Hill and Clive Road – **Esher**). A good example of the typical higher status 'urban vernacular' is to be found in the Foley Estate Conservation Area in **Claygate**. This quality is also found elsewhere in areas such as Clare Hill, **Esher** and sections of Oatlands Park, Portmore Park Road and Church Street environs, **Weybridge**.



Vernacular Revival, Foley Estate, Claygate



Corner of Church Street and Bridge Road; Arts and Crafts inspired commercial buildings

1.8 In the south of the Borough, the 'rural vernacular' displays a more locally distinctive use of materials and building type. Most of these buildings are either small country houses, large farmhouses (some of which probably originated as Manor houses), associated farm groups (barns, stables and outbuildings) and finally cottages set in dispersed groups.



Tinman's Cottages, Downside

1.9 The key to the character of the 'rural vernacular' is the functional use and form of materials, such as timber framing, dictating the scale and form of buildings and the functional (agricultural groups) and organic (village groups) patterns of buildings largely unspoilt or eroded by 20th century urban expansion. To these areas, the openness of their landscape setting is important but there

is also a framework to these areas which includes greens (Downside, **Cobham**), grass verges, and historic hedge boundaries (Hatchford, **Cobham**).



The Green, Downside



The open setting of development to the edge of Downside



Verges and boundaries, Hatchford



The semi-rural enclosed character of Leigh Hill Road, Fairmile

1.10 Often the only difference in the 'feel' of the central and southern parts of the Borough is the fact that to the latter, open views of uninterrupted countryside often form the setting to development. Whereas in the central part of the Borough a semi-rural character is derived from the very strong tree cover and enclosure to older lanes.

2 General Themes

There are a series of themes relating to character which can be defined in Borough-wide terms. These themes are sufficiently consistent to be dealt with as overviews of the Borough rather than much repetition within settlement and sub-areas. Where these are unique or unusual characteristics which do not fall into the following broad descriptions, they are defined within the sub-areas. An example of this might be the consistent use of a material which defines an area. In Elmbridge this is relatively unusual as the materials palette is diverse almost throughout, but a notable exception would be Whiteley Village, **Hersham** which is strongly defined by red brick and clay tile and developed almost in a single phase.



Whiteley Village, strongly defined by a narrow palette of materials

These themes are discussed in the following paragraphs:

- Settlement pattern
- Building types and architectural characteristics
- Materials
- Open spaces (public and private)
- Trees and landscape
- River frontage
- Views and vistas

Settlement pattern

2.1 Much of the early settlement within the Borough of Elmbridge could be considered as nucleated, meaning they formed into individual communities with a central core. Many settlements grew up at a crossing point to the river(s) such as **Weybridge, Walton on Thames** and **East Molesey** or at an important junction of roads (**Esher** and **Cobham**). The church is generally the oldest surviving building and is sometimes linked to a former Manor House (**Walton on Thames** for example). None of the settlements had significant markets, although no doubt trading occurred at these nodal points. There would have been accommodation for travellers, which in places developed into far more significant inns and staging posts in the late 17th and 18th centuries. This is particularly the case for **Esher** and **Cobham**, both on the London-Portsmouth Road. Between these nucleated settlements was common and heathland with scattered farms and hamlets. Hatchford (**Cobham**) and historic **Stoke D'Abernon** are good examples of these.



Early 13th century tower of St Nicholas Church, Thames Ditton

2.2 Further development occurred within these established historic settlements; houses were often remodelled and further cottages were built to the roadsides filling the spaces within focused areas of activity. To the older centres, houses from the 18th century and early 19th century are not uncommon and often form part of a later remodelling of a house. However, it was not until the arrival of the railway in the early part of the 19th century that any significant extension to these settlements took place. With the placing of stations along the route, the possibility of development to take advantage of a train service directly into central London and down to Guildford and beyond, became apparent. But with the exception of Kent Town in **East Molesey**, it was not until the late 19th century that the villages began to expand in any meaningful way.

2.3 The late 19th century saw relatively small scale but high density terrace, semi-detached or narrow detached houses set on grid pattern of straight, narrow streets.



Angel Road, Thames Ditton

This is well represented to the immediate north and east of **Walton on Thames** town centre and to the north of **Thames Ditton** village and parts of **East Molesey**.



Late 19th houses to Manor Road, Kent Town

2.4 The next significant phase in settlement development resulted from a breaking up of the large houses with extensive estates which sprang up across Surrey in the early part of the 19th century. They were characteristically picturesque in their landscaping with the Victorians likening the heathland of Surrey to that of the barren wilderness of Scotland ⁽²⁾, but with easy links to London and other major towns. The result at the turn of the last century, and up to the 1930s, was low density estates of detached houses set in generous grounds. These estates often have winding roads (Burwood Park in **Hersham** and Ashley Park in **Walton on Thames** are good examples) to create a semi-rural feel with natural enclosure from trees and hedges to the grassed verges along the roadsides. Some retain very high quality and complex landscape planting and other elements such as lakes, for example Burwood Park. Others retain earlier structures such as garden buildings, historic boundary walls and remnant parts of earlier houses such as Esher Place and Clare Hill in **Esher**.

2.5 Elsewhere the expansion of the settlements in the early part of the 20th century was along principal routes with infill roads forming informal grids, such as those seen to the south-east of **Walton on Thames** (Sidney Road environs) and east of **Esher** town centre (New Road, Esher Park Avenue and Milbourne Lane) and north and south of **Weybridge** town centre (Weybridge Park

environs and Thames Street and Portmore Park Road environs respectively). These are generally wide streets with street trees, usually grass verges and houses set well back from the roadside.

2.6 The inter-war and post war medium density housing expansion that follows these estates makes some attempt to copy and mimic the qualities of these low density areas through the use of curving crescents, grass verges, street trees and open green spaces. **Hinchley Wood** developed c1933-4, is a good example of this settlement type. At the same time, the influences of the Garden City movement are clear, particularly to Local Authority built estates which place much emphasis on the creation of formal green space enclosed by houses of a modest 'cottage' scale. Vaux Crescent and Burwood Road, **Hersham** are good examples.



Local Authority built housing in Hersham

2.7 In the town centres, the scale of buildings progressively increases through the 20th century, although the essential early plan form of the settlements remains intact. **Walton on Thames** sees a shift westwards of the town centre with a large pedestrianised centre in the 1960s. This has now been completely replaced by 'The Heart' development which is a significant mixed use scheme, bringing a new vibrance and vitality to the centre of the town. **Esher, Cobham** and **Weybridge** have retained their historic plan form but have had to accommodate significant increases in traffic.



The Heart, Walton on Thames

2.8 There is relatively little large-scale settlement development of the late 20th century. Hurst Park in **West Molesey** is a good example which does not follow the general trend of residential development characterised by a single 'spine' or through road. Instead, a series of short, curved cul-de-sacs are located off a secondary road. This layout can result in main roads being flanked by the rear garden fences of houses. Wellington Way (**Weybridge**) and Vanbrugh Drive (**Walton on Thames**) are examples of this layout type.



Rear garden fences 'front' Vanbrugh Drive

2.9 Significant commercial development has also occurred in the Borough during the 21st century. Most notable is the development of Brooklands retail park and 'The Heights' business park in **Weybridge**. This was sold to DaimlerChrysler UK Retail and Mercedes-Benz World opened to the public in 2006. This development incorporates a

vehicle test track and an off-road circuit and includes a conference centre and extensive showrooms.



Mercedes Benz World, Brooklands

Building types, materials and architectural characteristics

2.10 There is an historic and architecturally rich surviving building stock of commercial, civic and residential buildings throughout the Borough. These buildings are often found within or near the centres of towns or villages, many of which fall within one of the 24 designated conservation areas within the Borough. They are all covered by designation statements and some have Conservation Area Appraisals which give detailed overviews on the building types and architectural characteristics.

2.11 The most widespread building type across the Borough is the large semi-detached and detached house. There are some 18th century houses spread across the Borough but generally, apart from modern neo-Georgian pastiche, and some of the Queen Anne Revival examples of the late 19th century, Elmbridge does not have a strong 18th century building tradition which defines any particular area.



Queen Anne Revival style, NatWest Bank, Esher

2.12 Through the 19th century, the brick and stucco Victorian villa type, usually with a natural slate roof rather than the more vernacular clay tile is seen in numbers in Kent Town, **East Molesey**. It is also apparent in parts of **Thames Ditton**, most notably fronting Giggs Hill Green, but is limited to isolated examples or small groups. This was followed in the late 19th century and early years of the 20th century by the style which is commonly regarded as part of the Arts and Crafts movement. There are some fine examples within Elmbridge which reflect the quality and architectural features which are characteristic of the style.



Victorian Villa, Palace Road, Kent Town

2.13 Some of the best examples can be found in the Foley Estate, **Claygate**. Their materials vary but are generally a combination of red brick, painted pebbledash render or harling and faux timber-framing.

Timber-framing is often limited to an upper floor or a single projecting gable. A common characteristic is the use of tile hanging used to give additional protection from the weather, and applied to exposed elevations.

2.14 One of the most striking characteristics of these houses is the design of the roof which is often highly articulated and sweeps to deep eaves, and often low to form catslide roofs down to ground floor level.



Houses to Claremont Road, Claygate

They are invariably red clay tile, some are handmade but most are machine cut. They will always include large chimney stacks which often help articulate the roof form, breaking the massing up and creating skyline interest. Chimneys are also used in the plan to join sections of building to each other or when extending a building to reduce their impact and further define the host building.



Police Station, Portsmouth Road, Cobham

2.15 Windows are generally timber casements and grouped into three, four and more lights, often asymmetrically placed within a façade or gable, giving the impression of a building which has evolved organically.



House in Beaconsfield Road, Claygate

2.16 This style has permeated through all subsequent periods of development across the Borough. Often referred to as 'Stockbroker Tudor', it became the preferred style of the speculative builders of the 1920s and 30s. Clive Road, **Esher**, is a good example with a notable attention to detailing. Later versions, for example the housing at **Hinchley Wood** has some of the elements of this style.



Houses in Manor Road North, Hinchley Wood

2.17 The Vernacular Revival style of the early part of the 20th century is characteristic of some of the Borough's town centres, particularly **Weybridge** and **Cobham**, and to some extent, **Esher**. Here, half-timbering is a strong characteristic of the upper floors, usually applied to a series of gables. The projecting oriel window is a common feature to these commercial building types.



Weybridge Town Centre

2.18 The inter-war and post-war redevelopment of the town centres have seen a rise of mixed use units. These are purpose built, shops to ground floor, and offices or residential above. Occasionally other uses, such as a cinema in **Esher** High Street, are accommodated within the street frontage. Normally two and a half to four storey, they are generally of a larger scale than most of the older town centres units. They are usually in a restrained neo-classical style with tall large windows adding vertical emphasis. Some have good quality brickwork and detailing.



Mixed use development to High Street, Esher

2.19 There are isolated examples of flats throughout the Borough. They generally date from the 1960s onwards although there are some notable earlier examples of some quality, in **Walton on Thames** (Rydens Road) and Kingfisher Court (Grade II listed) to Bridge Road, **East Molesey**. There are groups of higher rise flats (up to ten storeys) in **Walton on Thames**, but this building type is not characteristic of the Borough generally.

2.20 In more recent years, there has been a rise in car showrooms which are generally highly visible, fully glazed and well lit, often located on prominent sites with large vehicle display areas.



Station Avenue, Walton on Thames

Open spaces (public and private)

2.21 The Borough is characterised by green open space close to most residents in Elmbridge. Green Belt designated land, flood plain, Strategic Open Urban Land, recreation grounds and sports fields, surround and are integral to, development within the Borough. 57% of the Borough is Green Belt, with large areas of common land making a significant contribution to the Borough's open landscape. The openness of the landscape setting, to much of the urban area, is an important characteristic and a key consideration which needs to be carefully assessed in any new development.⁽³⁾

Surrey has a number of identified Landscape Character Areas. Three types fall within Elmbridge, including the Thames Valley; Thames Basin Heaths; and Thames Basin Lowlands. These are further divided into different sub-landscapes and within and between these are significant landmarks and strategic views. For more information please refer to The Future of Surrey's Landscape and Woodlands publication.⁽⁴⁾

2.22 Schools often have extensive playing fields. Recreation grounds generally have public access and often form pedestrian routes to and through residential areas. These green corridors are important to the permeability of residential areas and the amenity of local people using these spaces for recreation, dog-walking and alternative pedestrian routes to busy roadways.



West End Green, Esher

2.23 The number of greens located throughout the Borough's urban settlements are considered a key characteristic. These green spaces vary considerably in size from 'pocket handkerchief' sites, to those of almost 500 metres in length. In most cases main roads lie to one or two sides of a green, or bisect it. They feature in both town and village centres and residential areas. These green spaces add to the sustainability of the area, encouraging biodiversity, contributing to sustainable drainage, and improving air quality. They also make a significant contribution to place making with the general suburban context of Elmbridge, as well as providing valuable green space for people's general use and recreation.

2.24 The large areas of relatively low density housing provide great opportunities for wildlife habitats to develop and thrive. Private gardens throughout the Borough, almost regardless of scale, are well landscaped and often include ornamental and sometimes broadleaf trees. In wildlife terms, these gardens are linked to each other and wider reaching green corridors, such as the railway lines and the series of historic green spaces left from vast tracts of common land. A good example of this is The Tilt, **Cobham**. Not only are these front gardens important to the private amenity of the owners, there is a wider appreciation of these in terms of views and in their defining role in the public realm.

3 Policy detail on Green Infrastructure can be found in CS14 of the Elmbridge Core Strategy

4 This document is not available in electronic format but a copy is available for reference at the Council Offices



Ashley Road, Thames Ditton - private gardens contribute to the quality of the public realm

Trees and Landscape

2.25 The abundance of trees in Elmbridge is one of its greatest assets, both in urban areas and open spaces. Surrey is the most wooded County in England with 23% coverage, and Elmbridge is the second most wooded district with 15% coverage. There is a great diversity of both private and publicly owned trees on the commons, woodlands, parks estates, gardens and highway providing 21% canopy cover. 2.8% of its total land area is Ancient Woodland and there are areas with a high concentration of ancient and veteran trees reflecting historic hunting grounds and landscaped estates. Trees add scale, structure and interest and help to reduce pollution, and provide important habitats for a variety of insects, birds and mammals.

2.26 Within settlement areas, three types of trees have been identified, large broadleaf and conifers; smaller ornamentals; and street trees. The first type relates to large species including lime, beech, oak, horse chestnut plus some Cedars and Wellingtonias found as individuals and groups in most urban public spaces. They are often located in large groups to rear boundaries, framing and providing a green backdrop to buildings and as individuals in front gardens adding to the quality of the street scene.

2.27 Second are the smaller ornamental trees, mostly seen in medium to high density 20th century residential areas. These amenity

trees include Birch, Rowan and Whitebeam and while they do not add scale, they do contribute to the general seasonal interest and diversity of these developments.

2.28 The third type is the street tree, which includes a wide variety of species and sizes, and form an important part of the public realm. Good examples are found within **Claygate** and **Weston Green**.



Wide grass verges and mature trees to Oaken Lane, Claygate

2.29 Tree and tree groups are specifically discussed in sub-area analysis where they make a particularly important contribution to the character of an area.

For design guidance regarding the incorporation and protection of trees in the design of development, please see section 7 on Landscape Design.

River frontage

2.30 John Burns described the Thames as “liquid history” and its historic and cultural landscape has inspired artists such as Canaletto, Turner and Sisley. The Thames, together with the Rivers Wey, Mole and Ember form a unique asset to the Borough and this is reflected in the Core Strategy [Policy CS12]. The riverscape provides contrast between open wider landscapes and more intimate views along tree-lined banks.

Although the Thames forms the Borough's boundary the many strategic views and landmarks cross this into and from neighbouring authorities. Although no longer significant as a transport route its locks, weirs, marinas, boatyards, boat clubs and slipways form an important landscape framework. Leisure activities such as walking, cycling, boating and fishing now predominate.

2.31 Development adjacent to the rivers reflects geographical constraints such as flooding and there are a number of areas of open space. The river edge is generally understated and has not been subject to significant development. Islands and adjacent banks often have chalet style houses with rooms in the roof. Elsewhere there are two storey boathouses, occasional public houses to the waterfront and industrial buildings, low key residential estates and more modern wharf side developments. The scale is mostly very modest. This, together with the diversity of design, forms an important characteristic of this part of the Borough. In addition a high degree of architectural quality is seen in the remodelling and alteration of properties to the riverside.



View of the south bank of the River Thames north of Thames Ditton

2.32 However the importance of the river has not always been recognised. Many developments have turned away from or have their backs to the river rather than having an active, interactive relationship with it. New buildings should be designed to face and

relate to the waterfront and provide a more interesting frontage. The Thames Landscape Strategy [Hampton to Kew] identifies and provides detailed descriptions of the different character reaches and their management.

Views and vistas

2.33 The Borough's landscape provides the setting for a number of key strategic views and landmarks.⁽⁵⁾ Given the generally low lying nature of the Borough, and the extensive tree cover within and beyond its boundaries, potential views are often foreshortened by tree enclosure or changes in topographical levels combined with woodland. There are however, a series of ridges which give rise to open views either to the north; notably from Oatlands Park Hotel, **Weybridge** and to the north of **Esher** on dropping down across Sandown racecourse; to the south from Telegraph Hill across **Claygate**; and from Oxshott Heath across **Oxshott**. These views are characterised by their tree dominance.



View from Telegraph Hill, Claygate

2.34 Short views, and local townscape views, often revolve around the notable church spires at **Weybridge, Esher, Walton, East Molesey** (Kent Town) and **Thames Ditton**. These are often glimpsed, rather than full views and often seen over buildings, particularly in relation to roofs. These views are sensitive to change especially where the proposed roofscape is likely to impact on views to an important heritage asset.



View to Christ Church, Esher