

Welcome to Christopher Somerville's real Essex

Christopher Somerville is the author of 'Coast', the accompanying book of the BBC series Coast published last year. He had a strong feeling for Essex before he even set foot in the county thanks to a much loved book of his childhood. The book was 'Sporting Adventure', in which James Wentworth Day wrote so thrillingly of the Essex marshes and creeks that you could smell the salt and hear the geese. To Christopher Essex spelt mystery, romance and strangeness, three qualities he has come to appreciate more and more about this secret, special place – under an hour from London, yet a whole world away.

For this year's guide, we invited Christopher Somerville to share his experiences of Essex with you and hope that the following pages will inspire you to discover your very own real Essex.

Welcome to Essex

Delights and surprises of back country Essex

by Christopher Somerville

"It's just like another world, isn't it?" says the jolly business type at the bar of the Bell Inn in Horndon-on-the-Hill. "You leave that M25 all jangled and knackered at the end of a bad day, and ten minutes later you're in here drinking good beer in this lovely medieval pub and wondering where all that stress has got to!"

On a rainy autumn night, with the world going mad five miles up the A13, there really is nothing better than shutting it all out at the Bell. This half-timbered pub in its miraculously preserved hilltop village, high above the oil refineries and storage depots of the Thames' Essex shore, is a stepping stone, my first port of call on every pilgrimage I make into England's most under-explored and overlooked county. John and Christine Vereker run the Bell like a home from home and treat their customers like friends. But then Essex is full of such treasures, as anyone may discover for themselves once they get out beyond the London sprawl.

The great thing for Essex-fanciers is that the delights of their favourite county are such very well-kept secrets. Who would guess, if they didn't already know, that down on the Thames,

squeezed between the docks at Tilbury and the oil refinery at Corringham, is a fascinating old fort built by King Charles II against the threat of Dutch invasion, complete with a hugely elaborate sculpted stone watergate? And who would tumble to the fact that Canvey Island, with its tight-packed housing and gas terminals, also possesses enormous empty grazing marshes where you can walk the sea walls and watch brent geese arriving for the winter from their Arctic Circle breeding grounds?

I saunter those open green spaces of Canvey all the following morning, before making eastward to where Essex fractures into a thousand winding creeks and windswept marshes. This is a moody, muddy coast of subtle shapes and colours, where the sea creeps up on the land and the land melts down into the sea, a place of shifting margins and hauntingly beautiful cloudscapes. I am just in time for a sandwich at the Punch Bowl at Paglesham Churchend. You'd never believe, looking at this butter-wouldn't-melt-in-its-mouth place today, that Paglesham was once a nest of smugglers dominated by a gang >



Main image: North Fambridge
Below left: Walking the Essex Way
Below centre: Tilbury Fort
Below right: Frinton-on-Sea



The coast

“The sea wall is where one appreciates the true wildness of Dengie. Dark-bellied brent geese dominate this autumn day.”

Below from top: Harwich High Lighthouse

Dengie Peninsula



Main image: Maldon boats at sunset

Right: Cycling the Essex coast
Centre: Robert Adam bridge at Audley End House

Far right: St Peter-on-the-Wall



< leader called Hard Apple who would wrestle bulls, drink kegs of rum and chew broken glass to shock and awe his sidekicks.

North of Paglesham I come to Baltic Wharf on the muddy River Crouch, where cranes are picking pink baulks of timber from the hold of a rusty old freighter. Beyond Paglesham Creek lies Wallasea Island, a dead level and lonely wedge of ploughland where isolated black barns ride in that ship-like fashion so characteristic of Essex marshland farms. Wallasea was famous from Roman times for its oysters, 'a little full oyster with a verie greene fynn'. Famous for witches, too, such as Old Mother Redcap who could sometimes be seen crossing the sky on a hurdle. Apes, bulls and invisible birds haunted Tyle Barn near the river wall. No clergymen would go near the island; they feared the deadly Essex marsh agues as much as the occult inhabitants.

“Well, I’ve never heard of Mother Redcap,” says the girl who brings me coffee at a table outside Davy Jones’ Locker. “But I wouldn’t be surprised. You know they block up their doors with crossed broomsticks to keep the witches away in Canewdon, and that’s only

a couple of mile away.”

Next day I take a tremendous 20-mile hike round the edge of the Dengie peninsula, a place of saltings and mud flats, decoy pools, marshes and curious weatherboarded villages. This blunt nose of land, pushing out east between the parallel estuaries of Crouch and Blackwater, is less than an hour’s journey from central London. But Dengie, the wildest and least urbanised place any stressed Londoner could dream of, a moodily haunting retreat on the capital’s own doorstep, remains overlooked and ignored.

The sea wall is where one appreciates the true wildness of Dengie. Dark-bellied brent geese dominate this autumn day. Freshly arrived from Siberia, with their characteristic hound-like bark and whistling wings they bring with them the feeling of winter. Sunlight washes the craggy walls of the barn-like chapel of St Peter-at-the-Wall, striking warm red colours from the Roman tiles embedded in doorways and windows. The oldest church still in use in Britain stands much as St Cedd built it in AD 654 – scrambled together by the saint >

Boats, barges and native Mersea oysters

< and his assistants out of what lay around at the time, mainly odds and ends from the Roman shore fort of Othona.

A crook-winged tern sails the south-east wind, balancing against it with infinitely subtle adjustments of tail and wings. Redshanks and curlews dig busily on the tideline. A pair of oystercatchers streak low above the sea, cutting into the wind with wings as curved and silvery as sabres. Out beyond the gleaming muds of St Peter's Flat a red-sailed barge beats up the Blackwater Estuary towards Maldon, its shivering sails and heavy lurches in the choppy seaway a crude echo of the tern's instinctive mastery of wind.

They still make salt from seawater in Maldon, the atmospheric little river port that slopes down to the muddy shores of the Blackwater. Maldon smells of salt and marsh: you see nautical caps in the streets and down along the Hythe, the old river quay where redundant sailing barges have settled in cosseted retirement.

"I just love this boat," says a proud owner when he sees me staring admiringly.

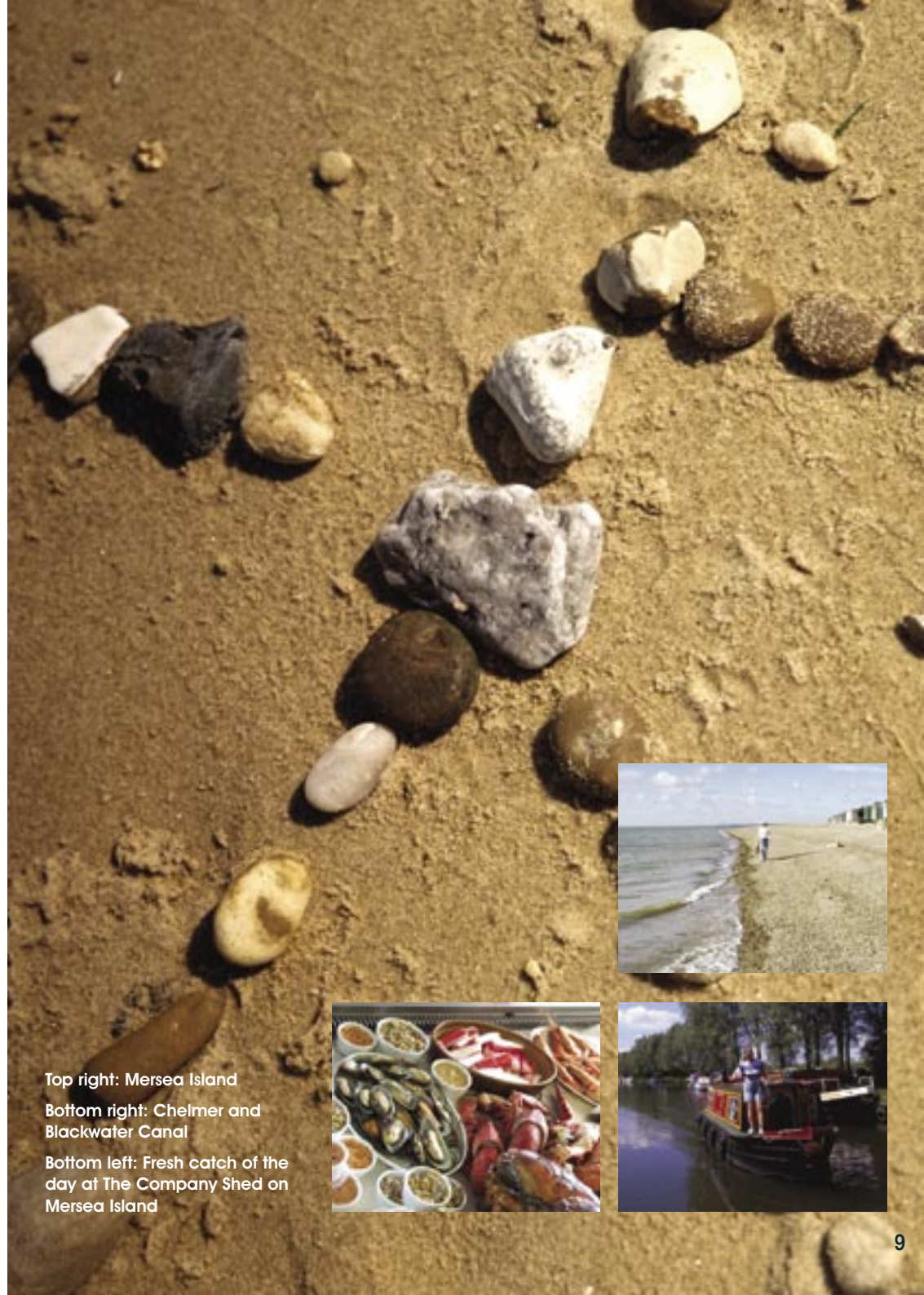
He spreads his hands, one clutching a polishing rag, the other a sandwich. "Loved her since the moment I saw her rotting in a creek. I'll take you, I said: I'll clean you up, and I'll look after you like a lady."

Redundant barges, pensioned-off torpedo boats and retired trawlers, many converted into more or less crazy dwellings, lie up in the remote creeks of this lonely coast. 'Come up and I'll give you a cup of tea,' is the invitation from a wild-haired woman on a tottering houseboat on Mersea Island. Who could refuse? We chat over the teacups like old friends. "Have you tried a Mersea oyster yet?" she quizzes me. "Never had one? Well, now's the time – the local ones are just coming on sale." I take her advice and make for the oyster shed. "Go on!" is the advice to the hesitating oyster virgin. "Tip it in!" Of all the culinary pleasures of Essex, maybe the keenest is that first metallic, salty tang of a native oyster pressed between palate and tongue. Helped down with just a sip of Mersea Native¹, you know...

¹ A dry white wine, fresh tasting with a slight acidity from Mersea Island Vineyard. An excellent choice to go with fish or white meats. A blend of the vineyard's Muller Thurgau, Chardonnay & Reichensteiner grapes.

Below from top: Rowing the Stour River

Thames sailing barges at Maldon



Top right: Mersea Island

Bottom right: Chelmer and Blackwater Canal

Bottom left: Fresh catch of the day at The Company Shed on Mersea Island

Medieval Origins

“My walk takes me back along the Old Salt Road, a rutted track where pack horses plodded through the Middle Ages laden with sea salt panned down on the River Crouch.”

Below from top: The Sun Inn, Saffron Walden

Pargetting

Wendens Ambo, near Saffron Walden



Main Image: Burnham seafront at sunset

Right: Greensted church

Far right: Waltham Abbey

There are so many charms to the coasts of Essex that you could easily spend a fortnight on the sea margin and never move inland. But the further north you travel, the more the county's half-timbered market towns and medieval wool villages cry out to be explored – in particular Saffron Walden with its wealth of timber-framed buildings and the richly decorated plasterwork of its old Sun Inn.

The Sun (no longer a pub) was already 300 years old when Oliver Cromwell made it his regional headquarters towards the end of the Civil War in 1647. The pargetting or decorative plasterwork on the building's walls is reckoned the finest in existence. Among the floral and foliage wreaths I spot a crane doing the Charleston, a disembodied leg in a stocking (a medieval hosier must have lived here), and local hero Tom Hickathrift using a wheel for a shield as he battles the Wisbech Giant.

Inland Essex is a rolling place of ancient landscapes. In the country north-west of the River Crouch the farm names echo medieval origins – Flambird's, where some Flemish immigrant must have settled; Jacklett's and Wickham's, occupied

in Plantagenet times by yeoman farmers Roger Jeket and John de Wycoumbe. The hornbeams and chestnuts of Thrift Wood are tended by volunteers of the Essex Wildlife Trust, who carefully coppice this remnant of England's ancient wildwood. Strolling down green Charity Lane nearby, I count seven tree species growing in an enormously thick hedge that could well be seven or eight hundred years old. Perhaps it was planted by yeoman Wycoumbe. My walk takes me back along the Old Salt Road, a rutted track where pack horses plodded through the Middle Ages laden with sea salt panned down on the River Crouch.

A little to the west I come upon St. Andrew's Church at Greensted-juxta-Ongar, Essex, standing modestly under trees in a well-kept graveyard. One's first impression is that the church has been cobbled together out of three completely unrelated buildings. To the west stands a typically stumpy Essex rural church tower, weatherboarded and whitewashed, topped by a broach spire hung with shingles; to the east, a solid little chancel of mellow red Tudor brick, half-hidden behind a churchyard yew. In the middle is a low-slung >

The flat shores

< nave made of thick sections of tree-trunk six or seven feet high, stripped of their bark, set upright side by side in an oaken sill. It's these timbers that are so remarkable, because St Andrew's is the oldest wooden church in the world, and the oldest wooden building in England. This dark box of a nave has somehow escaped destruction by fire, axe, insect and fungus for almost a thousand years.

Timber churches, hornbeam woods, ancient farms and beautiful old towns – it is all a far cry from the hideous satellite estates of Essex mythology. Walking is the one and only way to see this rural, back-country aspect of inland Essex, and I take to Shanks's Pony as often as I can. The best walk of all during these few days is one I follow around Bulmer near the Suffolk border. Medieval wall paintings adorn the church at Belchamp Walter, and in the smoke-belching kiln at the Bulmer Brick & Tile Company I watch fancy bricks being baked by hand just as

“Under the crumbling clay and sandstone cliffs of the Naze I pick up shells, bones, bits of amber, and four little shiny black T-shapes – shark's teeth from aeons ago”

grandfather used to do it. In the end the creeks, the marshes and wide sea horizons draw me away, as they never fail to do. I return to the flat shore and follow it north past Clacton, Frinton and Walton-on-the-Naze, the three holiday queens of the Essex coast now looking a touch jaded, a trifle sulky in their out-of-season rust dribbles and salt smears. Under the crumbling clay and sandstone cliffs of the Naze I pick up shells, bones, bits of amber, and four little shiny black T-shapes – shark's teeth from aeons ago.

Towards nightfall I go wandering on the margin of the strange inland tidal sea known as the Walton Backwaters. Beside a glinting creek I stop short, holding my breath in delight, staring at a short-eared owl on a fence post almost close enough to touch. The owl stares right back, completely unfazed, a king enthroned in a wild marshy world into which it seems as if humans might never even have ventured.

Below from top: Beach huts at Frinton-on-Sea

On the way to Bulmer



Below left: Beth Chatto Gardens

Below centre: Kitchen garden at Audley End House

Below right: Colchester Castle

