

Extract from 'A13, Trunk Road to the Sea'

By Billy Bragg

Shoeburyness Beach

Photography: Elli Constantatou

Southend is the mecca of Essex, with its Golden Mile and longest pier in the world. However, for my family, paradise was to be found beyond the arcades and winkle stalls, past the coloured lights that flashed out a welcome on even the wettest, windiest days. Go along the East Beach, past where Edwardian beach huts still stand in rows, through Thorpe Bay to the hamlet of Shoeburyness. Here, out of the mouth of the Thames Estuary, facing the North Sea itself, you will

find the finest beach in the county.

It was here that I came with my parents as a boy to sit on towels on the sand and watch the Thames sailing barges lazily cross the horizon, listening out for the big Navy guns being tested on Foulness Island, eating sandwiches from Tupperware containers.

One of the fondest memories of my childhood concerns the time my father let me drive his green Morris

Oxford very, very slowly across the field that served as a car park behind the beach. It was my first ever driving lesson and it ended abruptly when I nervously stamped the brake pedal down to the floor and father banged his head on the windscreen.

I must have been about twelve years old yet I can still feel the leather of the driver's seat warm on my bare back and hear the bonk as father, sitting half-sideways and caught

unawares, hit the Triplex hard. What great days. Every visit we would buy a plastic football and lose it before we went home and sometimes, if the tide was out, my little brother and I would walk almost to Holland it seemed, watched over through parental binoculars as we jumped in the puddles all the way back.

Shoeburyness. That name brings back memories of days spent far away from the cares of home, when

everything was fun except bedtime. The beaches are still there but the green Morris Oxford has gone the way of so many precious things and I shall never see it again. Me and my dad have joined the Saxons and the Peasants Revolt in history but the A13 is still there, rolling through a Springsteenesque landscape in which riverine Essex takes the place of the New Jersey shore, a tarmacadam trail to the Promised Land.

