

Local History Link

Keeping you in touch during the coronavirus emergency

No. 30

Welcome to edition No. 30 of *Local History Link*. Malcolm writes about helping a friend buy a boat, Sue continues her ‘raining on my parade’ article, and Tony recalls a visit to Aylesford Priory. David reminds us that malaria was rife in Essex and visits the Kursaal!

We thank all our contributors who enable us to publish an edition each week, so please keep sending your articles, photos, etc., by email to Jim at jsanctuary28@gmail.com or post to 28 Darlinghurst Grove, Leigh-on-Sea, SS9 3LG. And as usual, keep safe and keep well! **Tony, Tricia and Jim**

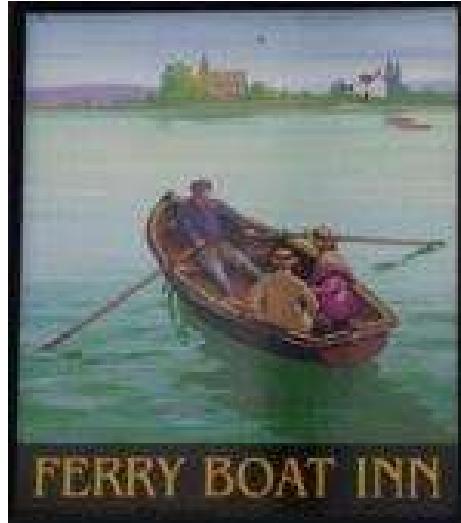


MICHAEL BUYS A BOAT

In about 1956, a friend of mine, Michael, decided that he’d like to buy a sailing boat and I spent many happy hours with him looking at boats for sale. The first one we viewed was laid up on Two Tree Island, when it was grassland with two trees – before it had been transformed into a rubbish tip! Unfortunately, this boat was unsuitable.

Nevertheless, the search continued and one fine day we travelled by steam train from Southend Victoria Station to North Fambridge, changing at Wickford. On leaving North Fambridge Station we walked a mile or so down the road to the River Crouch. It was one of those rare winter days with wall-to-wall sunshine, not a breath of wind, and although it was cold it was not penetrating cold. On each side of the road the fields had a covering of snow but the road was mainly clear, the branch network of the leafless trees standing out sharply against the bright blue sky. It was a very peaceful scene, although in the distance we could hear a dog barking. On reaching the seawall, the tide was in half flood with not a ripple on the water. Two boats anchored in the water were perfectly reflected in the water.

On the opposite bank of the river was South Fambridge. If you wanted to cross from the south to the north you had to attract the attention of the ferryman who would row you across the river in a small ferry boat.



We turned left along the seawall enjoying the view and walked a short distance to where a number of boats were laid up on the riverside of the seawall. We were looking for a boat named *Miranda* and soon found her amongst the other boats. *Miranda* was a cabin boat about 16' long with a white carvel hull. We climbed on board and Michael checked the vessel for any rot – not easy as there was a fair amount of water in the bilge. Unfortunately, he kept dropping my penknife in the freezing cold water and I then had to retrieve it! However, although *Miranda* was not what Michael was looking for, it had been a very pleasant day which I will always remember. Before walking back to the station, we visited The Ferry Boat Inn where we sat by a roaring fire to warm up and enjoyed a pint or two!

Another boat that we went to inspect was at Tollesbury. We travelled by bus to Maldon, which took two hours as it called at several villages en route. Arriving at Maldon we had to wait for quite some time for a

bus to take us to Tollesbury, so after a cup of tea in a local café we walked down to the quay to visit a chandler to see whether there were any boats for sale. We were shown a clinker-built boat laid up on the quayside called *Cejiba*. She was 16' long, with a cabin big enough to sleep two, possible three at a pinch, with a fair-sized cockpit, and a centre board which was ideal for this area and it would lay well on a mud berth. The hull was painted dark blue topsides and black below the waterline. The sale price included two red sails, a dingy and

an outboard motor. The boat looked to be in good condition and we thought this was the boat to buy. I recall the selling price was about £430. Michael told the vendor he would think about it and we went to catch the bus to Tollesbury.

Arriving at Tollesbury, we walked from the village down a road by the marshes to a small bungalow where a man came to the door. He had a great Essex accent and, if nothing else, it was worth coming all this way just to hear it. He showed us a boat laid up on the marsh which gave us quite a shock; it was in very poor condition and only fit for fire wood! After looking over the boat, Michael said he would think about it and let him know. Returning to Maldon, we had another look at *Cejiba* before having something to eat and catching the bus for the long ride back to Leigh. Later, Mike had the boat surveyed and bought it.

Footnote: some time ago I read a fictional book that started with a lady travelling from an Essex village, down a road with marshes on each side, to a cottage to buy a boat laid up on the marsh. In the story, the boat had taken part in the evacuation of Dunkirk in 1940. In fact, a small sailing boat did sail over the English Channel to help with the evacuation and is now preserved in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. Was this the boat Michael and I saw all those years ago? **Malcolm Bullock**



WHY DOES IT ALWAYS RAIN ON HM's PARADE (Part two)

Having finally been to one Jubilee celebration in 2002, I wanted to see something of the Diamond Jubilee event in **2012**, so Alan and I, and some friends, decided to push the boat out quite literally and booked with City Cruises. We had a cruise to Greenwich before making our way back to Westminster Pier where we were moored up waiting for the Thames Diamond Jubilee Pageant to begin. Whilst waiting we enjoyed a meal and a drink or two before going on deck for the Pageant: being served with Champagne for the loyal toast. We had a marvellous time spotting all the craft and although, when the boats carrying the Royal Family came through the bridge, they were nearer to the South Bank than to our side, it didn't spoil the occasion too much. After they had passed, we all started moving down river to Tower Bridge, where the Queen and Royal party remained standing on the *Spirit of Chartwell* to acknowledge the salutes from all of the boats. Our boat being the penultimate one, followed only by that with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and the Royal College of Music Chamber Choir on board, it took quite some time to arrive at the Pier. During this time, the weather got steadily worse and eventually the rain forced us all below decks until, as we neared the Pier, about ten of us decided to go on deck again, regardless of the downpour, to cheer the Queen. One of our tiny party was a young lady who had flown over from America specially to see the Queen as, she said, she so loved our Royal Family: we promptly made her



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an honorary Brit for braving our appalling June weather. As we neared the Pier, Prince Phillip, with a huge grin, raised his arm in salute as we accompanied (!!!) the following choir, who were still on deck (with no covering whatsoever), in singing ‘God Save the Queen’. By this time, we were all completely soaked through; my umbrella (covered in small Union Jacks and bought specially for the occasion) having proved woefully inadequate against the torrential rain. Alan was *not* one of those who joined us on deck and stayed to watch through a partially opened window: although I had left him with my camera, he managed only one snap but this was one occasion where I was quite happy just to retain the memories in my head and not in photos. **Sue Balkwell**

THE ‘WATER PILGRIMS’ FROM LEIGH

Aylesford Priory (photo below © Ian Capper) is situated in Kent on the river Medway not far from Maidstone and is the famous monastery of the Carmelites. It was sponsored and started in the thirteenth century by



Richard de Grey, a crusader returning from the Holy Land. The Order of Monks was named after Mount Carmel in Palestine.

It was initially intended for hermits returning from the Holy Land but soon developed into a centre for mendicant monks. Aylesford became the Mother House for the developing Order and soon there were 30 Carmelite Houses in England. Aylesford became a great centre of pilgrimage.

All this changed in 1538 when Henry the Eighth ordered the Dissolution of the

Monasteries. Aylesford became a private residence to one of the wealthy families who were supporters of Henry the Eighth and over the next 400 years Aylesford was occupied by successive wealthy English families as their private country residence. During this time Aylesford was sold by private treaty many times but never on the open market. And then in 1947, for the very first time Aylesford was offered for sale on the open market!

Fortunately, the Carmelite order with help from many generous benefactors was able to make the purchase and Aylesford returned to the Carmelite Order after more than 400 years. The Carmelite Order was obviously delighted to regain their Mother House and the monks worked with great enthusiasm to make restoration. They constructed a great open-air shrine for the modern-day pilgrims and restored the medieval Pilgrims Hall. In the Middle Ages many pilgrims travelled by boat down the Thames from London and then up the River Medway to Aylesford.

This story fascinated some of the young people at Our Lady of Lourdes Church at Leigh and in the summer of 1952, a little group from our church decided to try and arrange a ‘water pilgrimage’ to Aylesford. Some of the group went to the Golden Mile in Southend and arranged to hire one of the small pleasure boats used to take trippers for short excursions from the beach during the summer.

We went one Sunday in mid-summer. I am not sure of the numbers but I think we had about 30 Leigh people on board. We travelled across the Estuary to Chatham and then up the Medway until we finally reached Aylesford. Someone had contacted the Priory to say we were coming and as the boat came round a bend in the river, we saw the Priory and the monks waiting for us on the little quay by the Pilgrims Hall.

The monks told us that the last time this water door was opened was before 1538 and that we were the first ‘water pilgrims’ since that time. Unfortunately, we were not able to stay for long at Aylesford because of the tide. I remember the poor old pleasure boat well and luckily we did get back to Southend before the tide had gone, much to the relief of the Captain of the pleasure boat.

I visited Aylesford again some 15 years later and the monks who were showing the visitors round the Priory were still speaking enthusiastically about the ‘water pilgrims’ from Leigh and how they had to open the special water door in the Pilgrims Hall for the first time after 400 years! **Tony Bullock**



MALARIA IN ESSEX?

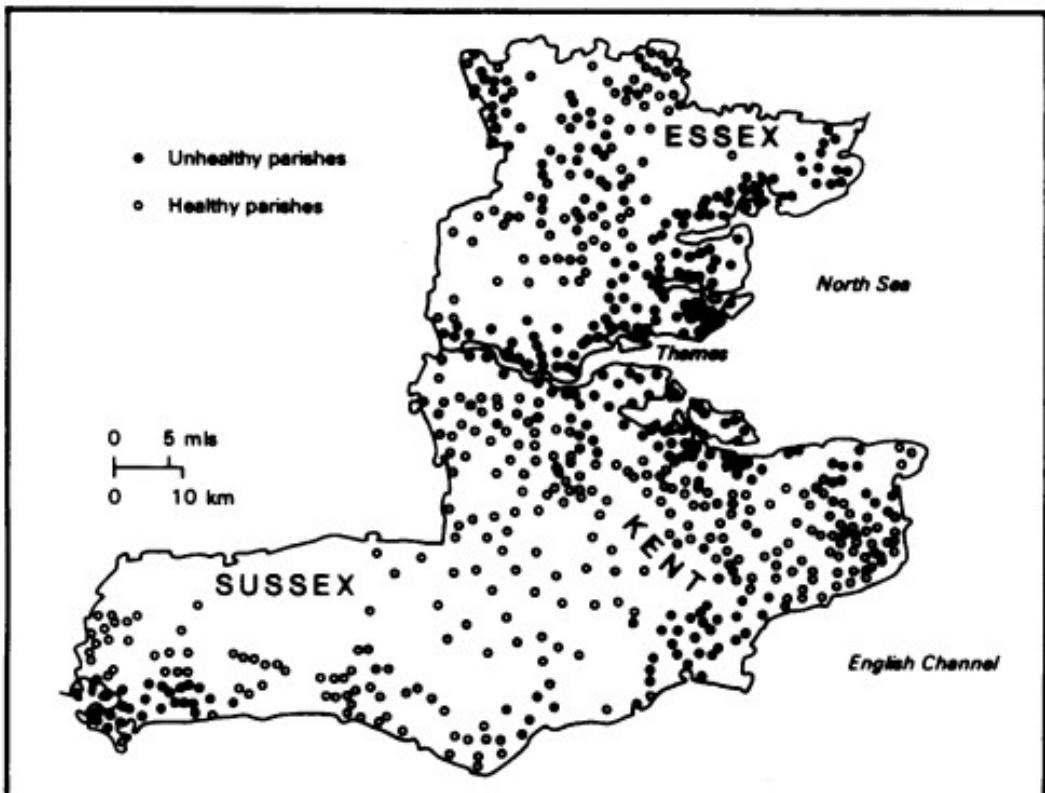
Over the years, malaria has been the cause of numerous deaths but not something we live in fear of in Essex, unless perhaps travelling to more remote parts of the world. However, surprisingly, that has not always been the case, and malaria was not that uncommon in the marshland areas of Essex which extended to Southend and many of the surrounding villages.

The topographer, John Norden, visited Essex in the 1590s but was unable to “comende the healthfulness of it: And especiallie nere the sea coastes ... and other lowe places about the creeks which gave me a most cruell quarterne fever”.

In the 17th century Thomas Sydenham wrote that “if one spends two or three days in a locality of marshes and lakes, the blood is in the first instance impressed with a certain spirituous miasma, which produces quartan ague”. And Essex, of course, had more than its fair share of marshes.

Daniel Defoe, most famous for his novel Robinson Crusoe, also wrote a three-volume travel book, Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain, which was published between 1724 and 1727. In Part 1 of the first volume he writes about his travels through Essex to Colchester. He makes reference to the “London men of pleasure” who travel to Osey or Osyth Island, commonly called Oosy Island for the pleasure of shooting. He tells us there was “an infinite number of wild-fowl” and that “the island, namely the creek, seems covered with them, at certain times of the year”. These men would often come home “very well loaden with game. But it must be remembered too, that those gentlemen who are such lovers of the sport, and go so far for it, often return with an Essex ague on their backs, which they find a heavier load than the fowls they have shot”.

Daniel Defoe also talks about a “strange decay of sex” referring to the many wives that local farmers - on the marshes of “Candy Island”, as well as places such as Benfleet, Prittlewell, Wakering and other local areas - would have; he refers to young women, coming down from the uplands to marry farmers, who then succumbed to ‘an ague’.





Eighteenth century topographers prepared a map showing healthy and unhealthy parishes in Essex, Kent and Sussex. A copy is reproduced above which may not be very clear but what you will spot is a mass of solid black dots particularly to the east and north of Southend representing unhealthy parishes. The reason for this was malaria and its fever, the ague (also known as marsh fever). Indeed, cross the Thames to Cooling, Kent, and you will find in the local churchyard the graves of a complete family, all killed by the ague (see photo).

It was noted, too, that the marsh fever was non-contagious and was confined to low-lying, slightly salty estuarine and marshy environments – yes Essex had all the right

ingredients for this killer disease which did not disappear until early in the twentieth century.

There are some who say with global warming it could return, so if venturing to Thorpe Bay or Shoeburyness to the east or maybe Wakering to the north, do take care! **David White**



BY THE DOME IT'S KNOWN - PART ONE



We all know of the Kursaal seen here in 1910, and those of us who have lived in the Southend area since childhood will have earlier fond memories of the fun we enjoyed on the rides in years gone past.

The Kursaal originally opened in July 1901, on a rather wet day as it happens, but this apparently did not deter a large number of people attending. The opening was attended by the Mayor, Town Clerk and Aldermen of the Borough. Southend had become a popular destination for the workers from the east side of London to come and enjoy a day out. It was also fuelled by cheap railway fares, the result of competing railway

companies wanting to attract more passengers, as well as the introduction of the Bank Holidays Act giving workers an extra day's holiday on the first Monday in August. This popularity led to the purchase of land and development of the Kursaal, and the creation of the Gardens in order to provide the attractions and entertainment to appeal to these visitors.

It was Alfred and Bernard Wiltshire Tolhurst (solicitors) that first purchased the land and created their Marine Park and then in 1896, they leased part of the park to the Pyramidal Railway Company. This company planned to spend £20,000 on building a Pyramidal Railway Ride along with various new buildings which would include a series of domes, the largest on the corner entrance that we still see today. The gardens included walks, shrubberies, lake, bandstand and a trotting track.

The original plans included a tall tower along the lines of the now famous Blackpool Tower, but this was never built and revised plans included the long arcade with sideshows and stalls which led from the entrance to the gardens. (I am sure we all remember that arcade, I certainly do because one school summer holidays I had a job of selling the Evening News and my patch was that part of the seafront including the Kursaal. It was always a fight between the News and the Standard to get the late afternoon Saturday classified edition

paper out first – it had all the football results - and if you managed to get along the arcade first you knew you had a guaranteed 40 or 50 papers sold as they all wanted to see the football results no matter which paper had them first. I’m pleased to say the Evening News won that tussle 9 times out of 10.)

In the early days the arcade led to the circus area where numerous circus acts could be seen including, of course, the animal acts such as lion taming, now looked back on as cruel but in those days perfectly acceptable and expected.

In later years, the gardens were home to a host of different fairground rides. One of the most popular was always the Water Chute, originally introduced in 1921, and was the one ride that could guarantee a queue, it was that popular.

Who remembers the Wall of Death? Introduced in 1921 it remained a firm favourite for many years and was originally advertised as America’s greatest thriller.

Eric the Whale was another attraction that visited the Kursaal for the summer of 1933 as part of a tour to the UK having previously toured America. The whale had originally been captured off the Californian coast before its blood was replaced with 60,000 gallons of formalin. It was housed in a sort of Noah’s Ark and had to be sprayed with paraffin every day to preserve it. One journalist at the time reported that the most noticeable thing was the smell – hardly surprising with that mixture of formalin, paraffin and whale!

Also, in 1933 season, Al “Scarface” Capone’s car made the trip across the Atlantic to be on display (see photo right) and entertain the crowds along with the regular Noah’s Ride (a carousel), Mountain Dipper (helter-skelter)

and Devils Glide, Mont Blanc, Petboats and Back to Nature. Then there was the “heaviest man in the world” along with the snake handler, Sacco the fasting man, and Zulu warriors (the Zulus were claimed to be from an African village but are actually thought to be workers from London’s East End dressed in grass skirts).

During the 1930s and beyond the Kursaal and Southend saw the arrival of what were known as the Monday Mothers; groups of women from the East End down on a Monday to enjoy themselves and it is said they chose that day to avoid the rent man!

Southend Football Club remained on the Kursaal site from 1919 until their move to the new Stadium ground in 1934. Their relocation gave the space to build the Cyclone roller coaster, the Kursaal’s largest ride. It had

almost 3,000 feet of track and rose to a height of 60 feet and was one of the biggest in the country at the time, surpassed only by Blackpool.

During WW2, the Kursaal was closed to visitors and the Water Chute tarred to retain its watertightness and was to be used as a reserve water supply (see photo left). The cinema building was put to use to make waterproof raincoats for the troops, and from October 1944 to make demob raincoats.

The large dome was used as a vantage point for fire-watching with the dome itself covered in some form of camouflage to stop it being an obvious landmark to the enemy. The Kursaal re-opened at Easter 1947 after a lot of refurbishment and repair work. I will write about the post-war years in a second article but please share your memories of the Kursaal by email to Jim. **David White**

