LOW COUNTRY: BREXIT ON THE ESSEX COAST

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Low Country

Brexit on the Essex Coast

Tom Bolton

Penned in the Margins
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THANKS

This is for Jo, who did just as much walking as me.

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— TB
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Low Country
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'There are places, just as there are people and objects and works of art, whose relationship of parts creates a mystery.'

PAUL NASH, *OUTLINE* (1949)
INTRODUCTION

On a Friday night in early Spring 2016, Jo and I met after work at Liverpool Street Station to take the train to the Essex coast. We had been walking the coast off and on for several years, using spare weekends and bank holidays to inch our way around the margins of Britain. We were living in south London, where Jo grew up, and to where I had moved after university. Both of us loved the city and lived our lives within its ebb and flow, but we were also drawn away from the centre to the edge, and to the sea. The smooth hills and chalky edges of Sussex and the cliffs, bays and marshes of Kent pulled us from London. So we developed a deceptively simple plan. We would walk along the entire coast of south-east England, through the car parks, sewage works, industrial estates and oil refineries, as well as places designed for day trips. We began by walking out of London along the south bank of the Thames towards the protrusions of Kent, the Sussex havens and cliffs.

I was brought up in a village in the south Warwickshire countryside, in a triangle between Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwick and Leamington Spa. Warwickshire lies deep in the heart of England, as far from the coast as it was possible to retreat, weighted by history and cushioned by geological layers on all sides, rimmed
with bands of igneous rock. As a child, I felt the pull from sharper edges at the horizon: the retreating, layered hills to the west, where the Malverns climb towards the Marches, the Black Mountains and, eventually, the distant Welsh coast at Aberdovey and Fishguard, where the Irish Sea bends into the sunset.

We made steady progress. By the end of 2015 Jo and I had walked the coastlines of Kent, East Sussex, West Sussex and Hampshire all the way to the Solent, with a detour to loop around the Isle of Wight. But we had yet to visit Essex. Although close to London, the Essex coastline seems designed to deter the casual visitor. It is little visited and unfashionable, its landscape barely known. Visitors look past Essex to the Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in nearby Suffolk, far enough away from London to seem like a proper holiday. The Essex coastline also presents a particular set of physical barriers; multiple broad estuaries, lethal mudflats, coastal reclamation projects, collapsing sea-walls, eroding cliffs, munitions depots, Ministry of Defence firing ranges and seasonal ferries stand in the way of the day tripper. One of the county’s largest islands, Foulness, although equipped with a network of public footpaths, can only be reached via a low tide path called The Broomway, a track branded ‘the most dangerous footpath in Britain’.
It is often claimed that Essex has the longest coastline of any English county at 350 miles. There is far more of Essex than seems possible. Its estuarine complexity, compounded by the shifting relationship between land and sea, means that the length of its coast changes with the tide and is more or less impossible to measure. Indeed, the very concept of a coastline is inherently unstable; there is no single accepted definition of its physical form. In parts of Essex the high and low tidelines are more than a mile apart.

On a map of northern Europe, Essex is a mirror image of the Netherlands. Each landmass, facing each other across the North Sea, is licked by long tongues of water – low countries of marshland, islands and tidal creeks. This is more than just appearance: the Dutch brought their drainage skills to England in the 16th century, turning Essex into a reclaimed outpost of their own country with a new, firmer coastline protected by long sea-walls.

Essex also specialises in islands. I was intrigued to discover that there are 19 inhabited islands in Essex, from the larger and better known such as Canvey and Mersea, to a host of smaller, inaccessible islands: the off-limits military zone of Foulness and the Essex Archipelago; the privately-owned Osea Island in the Blackwater; semi-accessible nature reserves such as Ray Island,
Skipper’s Island and Northey; and a succession of uninhabited or abandoned locations, from Bridgemarsh Island, where the sea came flooding in over the marsh in the 1930s, to Wallasea, where the sea-wall was deliberately breached and much of the island handed back to the sea. And there are also ghost islands, abandoned after catastrophic breaches of their sea-walls, leaving just a trace of their outline on the map.

We could no longer resist the mysteries of a county so near to home. The task would require research and planning. We strung together the trains, buses and, occasionally, taxis that would connect us to the low country of Essex, and calculated routes between overnight stays. We consulted the small canon of Essex coast writing of which a highlight was 350 Miles, a limited-edition pamphlet of essays by Ken Worpole and desolate photographs by Jason Orton – just the kind of niche literature that leads me to visit obscure places. We identified sites of dereliction to seek out, hidden stories to follow.

During the course of 2016 and 2017, Jo and I walked the 350 miles of the Essex coast – all except those stretches closed to the public by the Army or an encroaching North Sea. We became regular Friday night visitors to Liverpool Street Station, where we boarded trains to Burnham-on-Crouch, Colchester, Thorpe-
le-Soken, Walton-on-the-Naze, Harwich and Manningtree. Our starting point was the Essex county boundary at Rainham Marshes, tucked between a landfill site and the M25 motorway crossing. We pushed out along the Thames Estuary past the Crowstone at Southend, an obelisk out on the sands which, half-submerged at high tide, marks the end of the river and the start of the North Sea. As we tracked upstream along estuaries and then downstream along the opposite banks, we became increasingly aware that we had chosen an exceptionally strange time for our walks. Political events – a referendum, surprise elections in Britain and the US and the stream of chaotic blowback that followed – formed the background to our coastal trips. A rising tide of populism took the political establishment completely by surprise. Not only that, but as I walked, I began to realise that these strange events might have unexpected origins in Essex.

Essex is a place everyone thinks they know. It has some of the most familiar stereotypes anywhere in the country, but it seems to date back only a generation. In 1979 Margaret Thatcher entered government thanks to a working-class shift to the Conservatives. It was centred on Essex, and the bellwether constituency of Basildon. On the suburban fringes of London, Basildon and the unglamorous, suburban towns of the London/Essex fringe were unfashionable and overlooked before ‘Essex
man’, the council-house-buying archetype of the new Tory voter, scorched a new, brash vision of Essex into the culture. Essex found itself both the beneficiary of the new economic boom – Jags and yachts, property investment and sambucas, Florida holidays and Ray-Bans – and the butt of the joke. Essex man and Essex girl knew what they enjoyed, could afford to buy it, and did not care what anyone else thought. They were easily mocked, most notably by sketch comedian Harry Enfield, whose character ‘Loadsamoney’ instantly became part of the 1980s’ highlights reel. Thirty years on, the reality TV series The Only Way is Essex, so popular it is only known by its initials, has recycled the same themes as parody. One of its stars, Joey Essex, is named after the place he comes from and is famous for being stupid.

The Essex story has consumed itself, but the politics burns more fiercely than ever. I knew that beyond the reductive media images, Essex has a quite different history: of radical politics, social experiment and alternative ways of living. It has been a place of exile, where progressive thinkers and artists have retreated to shape their philosophies. The path was from city to country, Londoners moving east to see things differently. Working-class east London had moved, often without much choice, into the Essex suburbs after the Second World War. However, this new, forward-looking society built on socialism, new towns and new
ways of living had also seeded Thatcher’s counter-revolution. Then, in the early 1990s, a group of Essex MPs ignited the anti-European movement with their opposition to the Maastricht Treaty agreement negotiated by John Major’s Conservative government, to which they belonged. Major’s time may seem distant now but the Maastricht rebels have never really gone away; their ideas spawned UKIP, the EU referendum of 2016 and the march towards Brexit. People underestimated by the country as a whole, and the capital in particular, have taken a grip on national politics and identity in a way that seems certain to define an era. Essex is more than political caricature and London overspill. The east of the county is remote, and the long stretches between seaside resorts little visited by outsiders. The opening lines of J.A. Baker’s Essex nature book *The Peregrine* describe the dividing line between country and marshland Essex: ‘East of my home, the long ridge lies across the skyline like the low hull of a submarine. Above it, the eastern sky is bright with reflections of distant water, and there is a feeling of sails beyond land.’ Hidden downwind of London, in the shadow of its suburbs, the coastal areas remain obscure.

During our entire time on the Essex coast we did not encounter anyone else who seemed to be engaged in long-distance walking. Local walkers emerged close to settlements, often with
dogs, soon dropping away as we passed out again into the marshes. Farmers crossed our path, almost always in the far distance. I later discovered that Worpole had predicted our project, astutely identifying those ‘who have returned to exploring the terrain on foot ... a new kind of secular pilgrimage, based on immersion.’ Our walk was exactly that. It provided space for thinking and the consolation of the outdoors, which proved welcome as our sense of reality and our understanding of the country we lived in was undermined by the referendum, the election of Donald Trump in the US and the polarisation of politics into Remainers and Leavers, Liberals and the Alt-Right, us and them. In Essex, big skies and distant horizons seemed to offer release and, perhaps, the freedom to see our country more clearly.
The line of the Essex County boundary across Rainham Marshes Nature Reserve is marked only by a collapsed chainlink fence, an abandoned border crossing. Its crooked cement posts fixed both the end of London and the start of our journey along the Essex coast. As Jo and I crossed the boundary fence and walked to the edge of the reserve, a sleeping bag lay discarded in the middle of the path and, further along, a fire site blackened the earth. High above us, an early skylark twittered and purred like a busy modem. We paused, looking towards Dagenham. The Thames was dwindling into the distance. Then we turned east to begin our 350-mile walk to the other end of Essex, following its meandering coast all the way. Our first walk would take us to Benfleet, halfway up the Thames in the direction of Southend-on-Sea. As we crossed the boundary, Jo felt a strange, electric tingling along her arm. There was a charge in the air.

We had set ourselves a project, to walk the Essex coast, attracted by the lure of the overlooked, of places that no one bothered to visit. I was also intrigued by the idea of marshes, an unfamiliar setting with undertones of mystery and danger. To begin our journey, Jo and I headed for Purfleet, on the Thames Estuary. The boundary between the London Borough of Havering and the County of Essex lies halfway across the leftover slice of wetland at
Rainham, deep among the estuary’s industrial landscapes. Most people pass through on their way to Southend, but the estuary has its own, dedicated railway line, the C2C, that leads nowhere else; it threads east among riverside logistics parks, power stations and overpasses, passing through east London on a viaduct beside the Thames to Southend and Shoeburyness, where both the river and the line come to an end. Beyond lies only white space on the map, merging into the light brown of mudflats, where sea and land become hard to separate. The spread of the light brown is as large as the white, pushing out across the North Sea channels.

Many of the capital’s noxious industries are to be found alongside the estuary in the outer boroughs of Barking and Dagenham and Havering, as well as under the shadow of the M25 bridge. They lie in the Thames Gateway, an area optimistically rebranded in the late 1990s to welcome housing estates and new town centres that have proved slow to arrive. Since the industrial revolution Essex has been a convenient place to dump anything London does not need or want: from toxic waste shipped to landfill to effluent pumped into the Thames by machines such as those found at the ornate, Victorian pumping station at Crossness.

Essex is also very flat. John Norden, writing in 1594, observed that ‘[i]n this shire are no great store of hills.’ The railway journey gave us a high-line tour from the viaduct, revealing
abandoned works huts, invisible from the street, and offering close-up views of rumpled sheets in chain hotel bedrooms. We passed through Dagenham Dock into territories unknown. This is where industrial London has ended up, squeezed out of the centre to the very edges. There were almost no people to be seen, only Eddie Stobart lorries and Canute tankers parked up beside impossibly large grey and pastel warehouses. The tankers advertised: ‘Personal solutions for you, wherever you are in the world.’

On the train, Jo read an article about the variable nature of time. Time, she told me, passes more slowly at sea level than higher up, for example in the mountains. The difference in the distance rotated by the Earth can be measured by placing clocks at contrasting altitudes. The clocks show a small disparity that grows over time. Life passes more quickly at altitude, and a person spending their time in the mountains lives and ages faster. At sea level – zero feet – there is more time, whether or not anyone realises. The literal pace of life differs from place to place, and slowest of all was the route we would be taking, as close to sea level as the path would take us.

We left the train at Purfleet, the first town in Essex, in long-term transition from a military base and port to something else, still to be defined. Creative industries were welcomed to
Thurrock, now the town’s preferred name. The Royal Opera House in London had moved its scenery workshops here some years before, but the anticipated cultural economy remains elusive. Meanwhile, in 2014 the World Health Organisation reported that this area had the highest levels of particulate air pollution in the UK.

Purfleet is synonymous with the Esso Fuel Terminal. Its hulking storage tanks dominate the riverfront, surrounded by tracks of cleared land. Railway Cottages, the 19\textsuperscript{th}-century terraces
opposite the station, had been boarded up and marked as ‘acquired for development’, with the exception of one lone, cussed house in the middle, still occupied.

This was our first visit to Rainham Marshes. Separated from Purfleet by the culverted Mardyke, the marshes are said to resemble the pre-industrial state of the Thames basin. Before drainage, development and embankment, the river was wider and slower than it is now and washed across much of inner south
London at high tide. The pre-urban landscape was good for duck hunting but poor for staying dry. London’s marshes were drained and pushed to the very edge of the city, leaving Rainham as a remnant connecting Greater London to Essex.

We crossed a wooden bridge to an elevated hide operated by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), an observation platform with a wetland vista, backed by power stations, overpasses, pylons and sluice gates. Visitors were recording the migrating birds that come and go from Africa and Europe, stopping at Rainham on their bi-annual global trips. A whiteboard reported the day’s spots in black marker, with coloured bird illustrations. Willow, sedge and reed warblers were arriving on the marshes. Terns were fishing on the river. With a pair of huge binoculars, a volunteer showed me a solitary Great Egret in the far distance that looked like a scrubbed heron.

It was immediately clear to us that Rainham had been a Ministry of Defence firing range, disused and reclaimed for public use. An array of rifle targets still stood on the marsh topped with carved, greying numbers. In 1990, Rainham had been seriously considered as a location for a theme park run by the American company Universal Studios. Twenty-five years on, Paramount Pictures is planning a park on the opposite bank, in Dartford. Regular gunfire echoed over the site from the Kent bank, where
the remaining shooting range on Dartford Marshes was busy. The embanked path ran along a sea-wall and was dotted with small groups of birders, mostly men in safari jackets and floppy sunhats, carrying telescopes in their own miniature rain covers. Jo and I took the path across the reserve, beside the Thames, towards the rounded, green hill of the former landfill site, studded with black plastic vents. A group of young men headed around the perimeter fence towards the Ford plant at Dagenham, each carrying a can of cider and a cigarette.

In the river beside the reserve, we spotted a series of tar black posts standing in grey mud, the remains of a 6,000-year-old forest. A tangle of tree trunks – ash, elm and alder – are preserved in brown peat beneath the river mud. The trees belong to the Neolithic era, and flint tools found here hint at hunter-gatherers who roamed the Thames shore. The relict forest links this coastline straight back to a darker, wilder place far beyond the edge of recorded history. The ancient stumps – astonishing archaeology, noticed by almost no one – seemed to me a sign that this was a good place to be searching for the underside of Britain.

We left Rainham Marshes, passing the single surviving building of the Royal Gunpowder Magazines complex. Purfleet had been the central storage facility for Britain’s gunpowder from the Napoleonic Wars to the Second World War. It was housed
in five magazine warehouses, specially constructed to resist bombardment, each containing more than 10,000 barrels of powder. The information board noted that workers had not been allowed to smoke. Purfleet Barracks, once nearby, had vanished without trace, but the riverside housing that had replaced them faithfully replicated the Barracks’ atmosphere.

I knew Purfleet through Dracula, which was surely its trump card. Bram Stoker located Carfax House, the count’s estuary residence, in Purfleet and it was here that he had come
ashore in boxes of earth shipped from Transylvania. It is likely that Stoker had actually visited Purfleet, a popular Victorian day trip destination from London, and appropriated its dark, secluded atmosphere. ‘It is surrounded by a high wall, of ancient structure, built of heavy stones, and has not been repaired for a large number of years. The closed gates are of heavy old oak and iron, all eaten with rust.’ However, Stoker had fictionalised the setting so that no ideal model for Carfax House could be found, and there was certainly no associated Goth festival as in Whitby. The painter