

CANVEY ISLAND

This copy of the Introduction to the History of
Canvey Island was compiled by Norman Bambridge

CANVEY ISLAND – AN INTRODUCTION TO IT'S HISTORY

In her book **"The Makers of Canvey Island"**, Mary Cox introduces her history by this sentence:

"To assert that Canvey Island possesses one of the most unique histories of any locality, within a short distance of London is no unreasonable claim to distinction which at first glance, appears quite destitute of any of the usual historical landmarks. This was at the beginning of the twentieth century."

Even today, Canvey has no buildings or even ruins such as are to be seen in the cities of Colchester or St. Albans. To most people Canvey does not date its history B.C. or A.D. but "before the flood" or "after the flood", the dividing line being the floods of 1953. Yet Canvey Island or Islands have seen much of England's history even if there were no inhabitants at times, to be involved in it.

The Coat of Arms granted to the then Urban District Council on 5th January, 1971 as depicted on the front cover in the language of heraldry, which describes such coats of arms says:

"Barry undy argent and azure gutty reversed on a lozenge throughout vert a fat-tailed sheep couchant proper within an escutcheon voided embattled over all or between four oyster shells proper and for the crest on a wreath or and azure on a mount of earth a representation of a Canvey Island Dutch Cottage all proper".

In other words, within a shield (escutcheon) of silver (argent) and blue (azure) wavy lines which represent the Thames, a green (vert) lozenge representing the island. In the blue bands, white droplets representing the salt industry. In the corners of the diamond, four oyster shells.

A second "embattled" shield of gold (or) indicates the sea wall and the seven indentations are the seven original sluice gates to let off water as the island was drained. In the centre a fat-tailed sheep lying down (couchant). Every coat of arms has a crest and helmet, since they were originally given to knights.

The green leaves on either side were originally the silken drapes on the helmet. In our case the crest is not an animal, but a Dutch Cottage on a blue and gold wreath. The motto "Ex Mare Dei Gratia" "from the sea by the grace of God" was suggested by Mrs. M. Calton in a local competition. Thus Canvey's early history is quickly illustrated, but will take a little longer to read and understand.

BRITONS AND ROMANS

There is very little evidence to indicate to us what Canvey was like during the early part of British history - no stone or brick remains or earthworks. From its position, it was almost certainly low marsh ground though it could have been from ten to fifteen feet higher than today and was probably joined to the mainland.

Early historians such as William Camden* in 1582 as well as later ones, have suggested that it was the island of "Counos" or "Conennus" mentioned by Ptolemy, but this is now thought to have been Sheppey further down the Thames. The mainland, or at least the higher parts such as the Downs, would be covered with forest except where the Iron Age Britons had made clearances from the fifth century B.C. By the time of the arrival of the Romans, there must have been a settlement on the Island.

Archie White who wrote "The Tideways and Byways of Essex in 1941" imagines the scene as follows:

"In those dim and dark ages, the Island resembled a swamp, intersected, divided and cut about by innumerable creeks and gullies. The spring tides almost submerged it. Those few who lived there, ploughed up the clay with their primitive ploughs or ploughed up the muddy fore shore with their feet in search of whelks, cockles, periwinkles and other shellfish.

Some ventured in crazy craft upon the muddy river to catch fish. The meagre harvest from land and sea would be taken upstream to the settlement at London and there bartered for goods only to be had in a town.

There, they would hear tales of how the Romans had been upsetting the peace in the southern part of the country and had since gone away.

Consequently when they saw Triremes (Roman Galleys) pass up-river, their banks of oars rising and falling methodically, watchers on the island would understand and know that the Romans had come again. The wide, low, soft, yielding mud protected the islanders from the invaders.

With his ships anchored far away in the stream and with his heavy armour weighing him down as he floundered through the ooze, the Roman would have been no match for the British slings and arrows. The great galleys, therefore, went further up-stream to stay the night at a bend in the river where a deep channel scoured near to a hard foreshore convenient for anchoring to remain afloat, or handy for beaching and getting away again.

Up to ninety or a hundred feet in length, these galleys amounted to great rowing boats filled with soldiers. They had a square sail hoisted athwart-ships to help them forward when the wind served, but there was little "sailing" and the art of 'tacking' was not at all understood. By the arrival of the Roman Army on A.D. 43 there must have been many farms along the shore and as far inland as Rayleigh, Rawreth and Great Wakering. The Roman's depended on them for corn for their troops and thus left them alone.

Canvey and its neighbourhood lay in the land of the Trinovantes and it may have seen some of the struggles between its rulers and the Cantiaci (Kent) but the struggle between Boadicea of the Iceni and the Romans, which led to the sacking of Colchester, London and St. Albans, would have probably passed them far to the west. One thing is certain, the Romans would have visited the area at this time or later collecting not only wheat but salt. Salt was so important that Roman Soldiers received part of their pay in it. Salarium was the salt money (blocks of salt) they received.

This salt was produced from sea water in the "Red Hills" situated along the banks of the tidal rivers. Of the two hundred or so found in Essex, Canvey had at least twelve and thus must have been a major salt producing area. These hills composed of red burned earth in which are found crude pottery pans, tanks, fire bars and pieces of the walls of kilns made from baked clay.



An eroding saltern (picture by Geoff & Norma Lewin)

It appears that sea water was collected in pottery/tanks, supported on fire bars under which brushwood was burned. As the water evaporated, more sea water would be added until, when cooled, the brine would crystallize into salt crystals. This is the most usual explanation of these large mounds, often from two to six feet deep.

Another explanation mentioned by Wentworth Day in a newspaper article in the Southend Standard, mentioned an idea put forward by Sir Flinders Petrie in 1910, that they were also used for making potash from sea weed, to be used in the manufacture of soap and glass, whilst Elsie Karbacz who wrote "The Red Hills of Essex" article in The Essex Countryside magazine, thinks that many fragments of worked pottery suggest potters' kilns in the area and it is possible from the large amount of Simian Ware found on Canvey, that Roman merchant ships unloaded here for distribution to South East Essex.

Dr. Harold Priestley writing of the history of Benfleet believes that a Roman road ran at right angles to the main roads from London to Colchester. Burials, both cremations and later after the adoption of Christianity, wooden coffins, have been found.

Very few finds relating to Roman religions have been found in Essex. In fact, outside of the Colchester area, the only temple sites known are those at Harlow, Great Chesterford and Chelmsford, but undoubtedly more await discovery.

Pagan worship however, may have been strongest in the home, a theory which is supported by the discovery of figurines of pagan deities on farmstead sites. These statuettes are generally made of bronze or of pottery of a pale cream colour, known as "pipe clay" which were imported from Gaul.

Portions of pipe clay figurines of Venus have been found at Rawreth and this almost certainly relates to the Roman Road between Canvey and Chelmsford of approximately fourteen miles. The Road proper, commences at a point on the mainland, on the northern bank of the creek just opposite the extreme northerly point of the Island where the heads of Hole Haven and Benfleet Creeks join and about a mile west of South Benfleet Church.

From Canvey and from Leigh came a representation of a boy carrying fruits, whilst Mucking has yielded a rare figure of Mars. The only Bronze statuette from South East Essex is that of a household divinity, or Lar, which was found near Hadleigh Castle. Such figurines of deities may well have been placed in niches, in the walls of principal rooms in villas and farmhouses. Along this road might have trundled the simple carts carrying salt and wheat to the Roman colonies of Caesaromagnus (Chelmsford) and Camulodunum (Colchester).

Back on Canvey itself, quite a busy life must have continued. At least one large villa, or farm existed in the Leigh Beck area. Though probably inhabited by a Roman or Romano Briton, it was not built of stone or brick, which would have been difficult to obtain and very expensive but more probably of "Wattle and Daub" construction.



The Roman occupation continued until the fourth century and then Canvey must have been again in the fore of the next "invasion." To protect their lands the Romans and their British allies built defences called "Forts of the Saxon Shore". Although the nearest official defence was Othona (Bradwell), it is possible that a small camp at Hadleigh, 250 feet square, large enough for a cohort of 500 men, discovered outlined on the downs towards Hadleigh Castle, could be an outpost. Although discovered by an aerial photograph in 1949, so far, it has not been excavated, neither has a similar sized one on Upper Horse Island on the other side of Canvey.

SAXON AND DANE

There are no signs of Saxon invasion, though the fact that the farm at Leigh Beck was destroyed by fire, could indicate that it had been attacked. Perhaps, even it was at this time that Canvey sank from view beneath a tidal wave or landslide. At least this is one theory put forward by Basil Cracknell who wrote "The History of a Marshland Community" in 1959, puts this a little earlier.

What is certain is that "Romano-British Domestic fire-hearths which 1900 years age must have been four or five feet above high water mark, have been found at depths now twelve or thirteen feet below that level.

The only reminder of the Saxon invasion, which gave its name to the County - the land of the East Saxons, is according to Cracknell, Canvey's name, the land of Cana's people. Richard Jones in the Essex Countryside magazine tells the story.

The Saxon settlement of the mainland was not to live in peace. The next to cast envious ideas on the land around were the Danes and Vikings.

King Alfred who had unified the English after fighting and beating their leader Guthram, made a treaty with him, dividing England in two. The East of England lay in Danelaw and had to pay taxes to the Danes. In 893 there arrived at Benfleet, Haesten the Black, leader of a party of raiders who had crossed from Kent.



HOW THE DANES WERE DEFEATED AT BENFLEET

Benfleet was the base from which the Danish invaders of Britain set out on many of their marauding raids against King Alfred the Great and the English late in the ninth century. In the autumn of 892 a large Danish fleet, some two hundred and fifty vessels strong, sailed across the channel from Boulogne. They landed at the mouth of the River Lympne on the South Coast of Kent. In doing so they were retracing the route taken by the Roman invaders some 850 years earlier.

The Danes towed their boats upstream to Appledore, where they found a partly completed encampment which they adapted for their own use. Meanwhile another smaller force of Danes landed on the north coast of Kent, near the Isle of Sheppey and fortified their encampment.

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This double threat was of concern to King Alfred. He particularly feared that the two parties would combine to form a formidable force. To counter this he positioned his army midway between the two camps. Throughout the winter of 892-893 his men were continually raiding the invaders, gradually whittling down their powers of resistance and eventually the Danish Chief, Haesten was compelled to meet with the English leader.

Haesten gave an oath to Alfred that he would keep the peace, even having his two sons baptised as an earnest of his good intentions. Alfred and his ally Ethelred were nominated as godfathers to the two boys. However, as was usual in that age, very little reliance could be placed on the word of a Dane. First the fleet at Sheppey sailed across the estuary to Benfleet. It was soon followed by the main force from Appledore.

At Benfleet great fortifications were raised by the side of the creek to make the base secure from attack.

Living quarters were constructed within these fortifications. Parties were constantly raiding the surrounding countryside for food and valuables, the inhabitants of nearby London suffered particularly severely.

It was decided that Edward, the son of Alfred, and Ethelred should march against this painful thorn in the English flesh and an army was gathered together consisting of men from Wessex, Mercia (the midlands) and a strong contingent of willing volunteers from London.

The English leaders chose their opportunity carefully. They attacked while Haesten was leading a strong marauding party in the midlands. This assault was completely successful, the defending Danes were either slaughtered or put to flight. Their great fleet was captured in its entirety together with a large hoard of war material. Most ships were sailed away to the English ports of London and Rochester and all boats and materials that could not be sailed or carried away were broken up and burnt on a gigantic bonfire.

The Anglo Saxon Chronicle written by Ethelreard, great grandson of Alfred's brother about 70 years later, says:

"Haesten had formerly constructed that work at Bam(en)fleet, and was then gone out on plunder, the main army being at home. Then came the king's troops and routed the enemy, broke down the work, took all that was therein, money, women and children and brought them all to London. All the ships they either broke to pieces, or burned and his two sons they brought to the king who returned them to him, because one was his godson and the other, Alderman Ethelred's"



Do you believe in ghosts? Wentworth Day tells the story of one that perhaps inhabited Canvey Point from this time. "In the 1920's when, as a young man, I worked closely with Lord Beaverbrook, I would leave the clang and thunder of the printing presses of the Daily Express just before midnight, catch the last train to Benfleet carrying a duck gun, wading boots, oil skin and pyjamas stuffed into a game bag.

At Benfleet, one was rowed in a cranky old wooden boat across the tidal channel to a muddy foreshore where a Ford van picked up and rattled across muddy, bumpy roads to Canvey Point.

There, under the sea wall, with dormer windows peering just above the sea wall over grey, misty saltings and shelving mud flats to the salty seaways of the Thames mouth, stood a wooden shanty cottage, built of barge timbers.

There dwelt Charlie Stamp, fisherman, fowler, winkle picker, punt-gunner, longshoreman and born seaman, being small, wrinkled, with quick beady eyes, a handgrip of iron and a cheerful chuckle, as if stepped out of the reign of Elizabeth I. He should have been a pirate.

Charlie could neither read or write, but had infinite wisdom of the sea, of fish and of wild birds. He had muscles of steel and the heart of a lion. Not, you will observe, the make up of a neurotic or fanciful man." This is the story Charlie told me as we sat in the little living room in front of a spluttering fire of driftwood on the great brick hearth:

"I laid in me truckle bed upstairs one night last week and I looked out over the top of the wall on the tide a'flowing in. Bright moonlight that was. All of a sudden I seed a man come wadin' ashore. He was knee deep when I first clapped eyes on him, kickin' up the spray. Then he got onto the mud and come right straight for this cottage. He knew how to walk on mud too, long slidin' strides, same as you and me, when you don't dig your toes or heels in, otherwise you'd get stuck.

Well, he sort o' skated across the mud, same as us, got onto the saltings, jumped a rill or two and then came over the top of the sea wall. He crossed the plank over the dyke and the next thing I know'd he was in my room. Tall, handsome chap he was with long golden flowing hair down like a gal's. He wore a sort of tunic with leather jerkin over it and cross garterings below his knees.

He had a long droop moustache, a rare old snout on him like an eagle, blue eyes and a helm on his head that must have been steel 'cos that flashed in the moonlight and there was a pair of wings stickin' out of it, one on each side. He looked down at me right sorrowful and he said "Mate, I've lost me ship. I want to get home, beyond the seas, can you help me?"

"Goo you on down to Grays or Tilbury, ow'd mate" I says, "There's forever o' ships come in there. You'll find one to take you to any port in the world." He looked at me again, shook his head and said, sorrowful like, "You don't understand, I've lost me ship, I've lost me country, I'm a lost man." and with that, sir, he went out of the winder, all six foot of him and over the sea wall, across the saltings and down on to the mud and into the tide. He waded out under the moon, his helm a-flashin' in the moonlight and then he vanished. The sea swallowed him up. Who do you reckon that was sir?

Now Charlie, as I say, could neither read or write, he had never seen a picture of a Viking warrior in his life. Yet he described faithfully almost every detail of his ghostly visitor's dress and headgear. He described moreover, the face and bone structure of a Dane. I am convinced he had seen the ghost of one of Haesten's warriors, doomed forever to search for a ship that would take him to his homeland.

During the next hundred years, the fortunes of Danes and Saxons varied. In the year 991, the Saxons under the Earloman Brythmoth were defeated in the Battle of Maldon and in 1016 Canute beat Edmund Ironside possibly at Ashingdon on the River Crouch, within a month of the battle, Edmund was dead and Canute (Knut), King of England.

FROM THE NORMAN CONQUEST TO TUDOR TIMES

Thirty years later, the Norman's under William I, had carried out the last real invasion and later William sent his Commissioners around the countryside (1087) making a survey of all land belonging to the King. Again no mention is made of Canvey though Benfleet and the mainland manors in the Hundred of Barstable and Rochford are fully detailed. In the "Little Domesday Book" which covers Essex, we read what the Commissioners found out.

In his book, Dr. Priestley writes:

"One day in 1086, meetings were called in all the hundreds and those who came were told by the chief men that the king was about to send out his commissioners to enquire what land each man held, how it was stocked and how much it was worth. He also wanted to know its value at the time of King Edward the Confessors death.

This enquiry had to be fair to all and the king ordered that any points which were not agreed on, such as whether a certain owner was really the rightful one, should be decided by a jury which was half English and half Norman and they should hear all the evidence.

On the day appointed for Barstable Hundred, men from South Benfleet and Thundersley, with others from North Benfleet, Wheatley (Rayleigh), Wickford, Laindon, Pitsea, Vange and all the lands around, accompanied by their Priests, took the rough paths to Barstable to give their evidence on oath to the Commissioners.

There, probably in the open air under the spreading branches of a tree, they took their places, one small party after another, in front of clerks, who wrote down with their goose quill pens, what we today would call formal statements. Later, what they had said was read back to them by clerks and, in the presence of the clerks and the commissioners they swore that all was right and just.

When this had been done and the peasants were on the way back home, the clerks filed all the pieces of parchment on which the statements had been written so that they could be rearranged under the names of the owners of the land and the results copied out into a big book or register.

The first part of the Domesday entry for South Benfleet runs "In Benfleet St. Peter's has seven hides and thirty acres which used to belong to the Church of St. Mary in King's Ward time, but King William gave the church with the land to St. Peter of Westminster."

"In which land there are two ploughs on the demesne and five ploughs belonging to the men." This means that the Abbot had two ploughs or sixteen oxen on the Hall Farm and the men of the village had five ploughs or forty oxen which they possessed in common.

Thus in ploughing time everyone would be out in the fields. First, under the watchful eye of the resident bailiff they would plough up half the land on Hall Farm, leaving the other half fallow to recover its fertility for the following year.

In some parts of Essex, especially in the north, a three field system was worked whereby one third of the land was left fallow each year, but the land in South Benfleet is heavy and needed to be rested more. When the Hall Farm had been ploughed up, the men were then at liberty to tend to their own holdings.

Who were the men? The Domesday record now goes on; "There are now fifteen villans, then seven bordars, now twelve." The Domesday Book was not a census, for although it counts the labourers, the cattle, the pigs, mills and beehives, it has nothing to say about personal servants, clerks, women or children, for the Conqueror was more interested in the value of his domains than their population.

There were neither free men nor serfs on this manor, but there were fifteen villans (villanus Latin for the inhabitant of a vill or village). These were bondsmen of the better class, each holding some thirty acres or more and paying service of some three days a week in the work done on the lord's land either by the villan himself or by the grown up son. There were also twelve bordars (Latin for Borda - a cottage) who each had a small plot of land of four to eight acres and performed in return for this, menial service for their lord.

The Domesday survey shows that all over Essex between 1066 and 1086 the number of villans tended to decrease while that of the bordars increased.

"There is now half a mill" We often come across entries such as this in Domesday and they are very puzzling until we find who has the other half. In this case it was the manor of North Benfleet which before the conquest had been held by King Harold and at the time of Domesday was in the hands of William and in the care of a certain Ranulph who was its bailiff.

The mill probably stood in South Benfleet and was tidal, high up in the creek where it narrows enough to catch the incoming and outgoing tides. It belonged jointly to the Abbey and the King and all those who lived on the two manors had to use it and pay for 'multure' this is, to have their own corn ground there.



Ogilby and Morgan's map of 1678 shows that there was a windmill at Benfleet.

The survey then goes on to say that the manor had pasture for two hundred sheep, though there were only thirty and that there were three pigs. The sheep pasture was probably on Canvey Island, for there, sheep rearing was the only industry at that time. This was so important that not only Canvey but all the coastal marshlands were apportioned out between the various manors lying near the coast.

These marshes supplied a large area of summer pasture and in spring the shepherds from places inland were accustomed to drive their flocks to Benfleet, crossing at low tide where the bridge now is, or farther eastwards down the slopes now known as 'the slides' Canvey was divided between the people of nine parishes.

Marshes were also held on the other side of Hole Haven Creek by Corringham, Fobbing, Mucking, Little Warley and Dunton. As early as 1066 the Essex marshes held about eighteen thousand sheep and as the years passed, the numbers grew larger and larger, for the sheep was a useful animal, providing meat, fat, wool and cheese. Canvey cheese from the milk of sheep was almost the only kind that Londoners could buy in the 'middle' ages.

Another manor was held by Sweyne who lived in Rayleigh Castle. This too had pastures for two hundred and fifty sheep presumably on Canvey. This may have been Jarvis Hall for some five hundred years later, this was one of the marshes in the hands of the Appleton family who were chief among those who embanked Canvey.

SOUTH BENFLEET

One interesting fact concerns the pub "The Half Crown" at the foot of the hill at Benfleet. Originally it was the Mitre, since the Lord of the Manor was the Bishop of Westminster. At this time it was renamed "The Crown" since the men were still loyal to the King. A few years ago half of this ancient building was demolished when a lorry 'jack-knifed' and ran into it. The owners then renamed it "The Half Crown" a reminder of pre-decimal currency.

HADLEIGH CASTLE

The castle which must have been a dominating influence fell into disrepair when De Burgh quarrelled with Henry III, but by 1381 it had been repaired by its new owner De Vere, Earl of Essex. This rebuilding caused much hardship to the peasants of his manor and no doubt was responsible for the fact that at least seven are named at an 'inquisition' at Chelmsford in the fifth year of Richard II's reign as having stolen from manors and "risen up against the King and his leiges." They include "John atte Marsh of Hadleys." This was the peasant revolt of 1381.



In that year, heavy taxation due to expensive wars against France and the loss of labourers due to the Black Death, caused the men of South East Essex, with others, to rise against King Richard II in the peasants revolt. Whether anyone lived on Canvey then is doubtful but men of Corringham, Vange and Fobbing, some of whom must have been responsible for sheep on the Island, led the uprising. According to Dr. Priestley in his novel "Swords over Southdown" men from Benfleet went too. Thomas Spragg is the only one named.

A ferry from Benfleet via Canvey was used by the leaders such as John Ball of Colchester in rousing the men before they attacked the King's Commissioner, Thomas Bampton at Brentwood. They burned manor records and finally marched to Mile End and Smithfield, where their leader Wat Tyler was killed. The rebellion was almost over but a few of the braver souls tried to hold out against the King's men at the Battle of Billericay only to be ridden down by horsemen, their pikes and farming tools being quite inadequate against trained bowmen and the cavalry of Thomas Woodstock and Sir Thomas Percy.

"These commons had fortified themselves at Billericay with ditches and carriages, nevertheless although there was a great number of them, with small business, they were scattered into the woods, where the Lord's enclosed them, lest any of them might escape; and it came to pass that five hundred of them were slain and eight hundred of their horses taken, the others that escaped this slaughter being gotten together, hasted to Colchester."

MEDIAEVAL TIMES

During the next five hundred years, Canvey remained as the 'sheep run' for surrounding parishes. There are several mentions of land being owned by Lords of Manors on the mainland and the Island was divided up until it became one parish in 1881.

It was not then one, but several islands divided by deep "guts" or creeks, mainly salt marsh, much under water at high tide, in the same way as the saltings are today. Exceptional tides periodically washed away land and it was not suitable for permanent homes. However, since pasture for sheep was needed, it, like other areas, would be inhabited by a community of shepherds living in temporary shelters and guarding their sheep against high tides.

Thomas de Camvibe of Fobbing claimed against Robert de Sutton, the marsh of Richerness (Russellhead) which had been granted to his grandfather for "cheeses and wool rushes." Later references to Caneveye, Kaneveye (1317), Canefe (1322) as to sheep marshes.

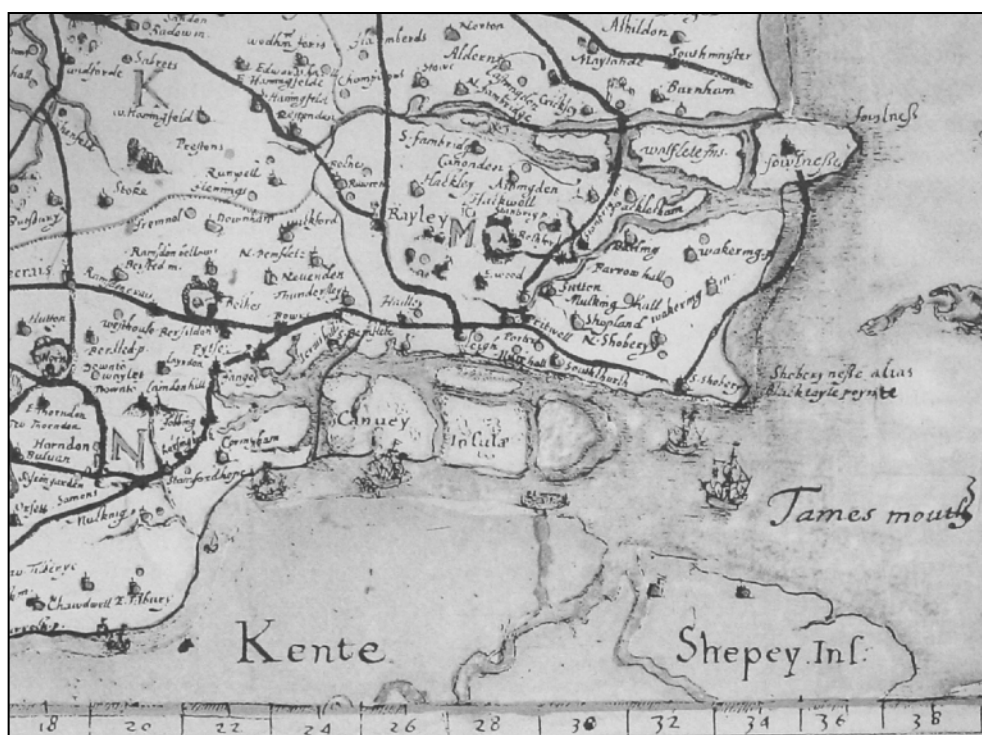
During this time in 1230, Hadleigh Castle was built to protect the estuary by Hubert de Burgh. The building on this well known stronghold, guarding the estuary of the Thames, was naturally an event of immense importance locally. The castle, which was without a keep, was almost oval in form and the entrance thereto, was on the north west side. It was defended on the north, east and west fronts by a moat and on the south by the steepness of the hill. The building was of Kentish ragstone and a strong cement, largely composed of cockle shells brought from Canvey Island.

There is little reference to Canvey in the fifteenth century except for two references to the building of sea walls in the bailiff's accounts in the manor of Southchurch. In 1437 for making one hundred and fifty four 'rods' of marsh wall in Canvey Island, taking a 'rod' as twenty one feet and at 3d (old currency) per rod, totalled thirty eight shillings and six pence.

In 1438 for making 80 rods of sea wall in Canvey at 2d. per rod came to thirteen shillings and fourpence. In today's currency that would be £1.95 for just under half a mile and £0.66 for four hundred metres. These would be embankments in the Leigh Beck area which belonged to Southchurch. This indicates that either the islands were becoming more liable to flooding or that more land was needed.

By Elizabethan times, this was becoming even more necessary. In his description to accompany his map, John Norden "Speculi Britanniarum Pars" A historical and Chronographical description of the County of Essex in 1594 writes:

"Nere the Thames mouth below Beamflete, are certain islandes called Canvey Islandes, low merishe (marshy) grounds and for that passage over the creeks is unfit for cattle, it is onlie converted to the feeding of ewe's which men milke and there of made cheese (such as it is) and of the curdes of the whey, they make butter once in the year, which secureth the clothier."



There probably being part of Canvey, the others stretching as far as Southchurch. The reference to butter probably means it was sold at the clothing towns inland, Coggeshall or Colchester." Again, William Harrison in his "A description of England 1577" explored the Essex Coast by boat and described the Canvaie Isles, which some call marsh onlie" divided up by "the salt rills also that cross the same" and describes the ewe's milk as "fulsome, sweet taste and such in taste as (except such as are used to it) no man will gladly yield to live and feed without."

But the fullest description comes from Camden in his account of 1586 and especially in his 1607 edition: "It is so low lying, that often it is overflown, except for hillocks cast up on which there is safe retreat for sheep. For its pastures about four thousand sheep of very delicate flavour, which have seen youths, carrying only a womanly task, milk, with small stools fastened to their buttocks and make ewe's cheeses in these cheese sheds which are called "Wickes"

The 'wicks' which have given their names to various parts of the island and other areas of the marshy coastline, were rough huts placed on the highest points, often artificial mounds raised by the shepherds, a safe place for sheep in times of exceptionally high tides. Such as are recorded in 1327, 1376, 1448 and 1527.

Mention is made of these in the sixteenth century records:

1543 Knightswick, Southwyke and Attenash - Edward Barker.

1557 Northwyke and Westwyke also Chaflett and Fartherwick - Sir Robert Appleton.

1604 Salt marsh, Ant Liche and Wolfspittle - Sir Henry Appleton.

Two other maps, Stent's 1602 and Speed's 1601 show Canvey divided into several islands while William Hole's map of Essex published in 1622 shows Canvey as an island of sheep.

The Essex cheese must have been very strong and I doubt whether we should be able to eat it. An unsavoury early sixteenth century Surrey ale wife describes:

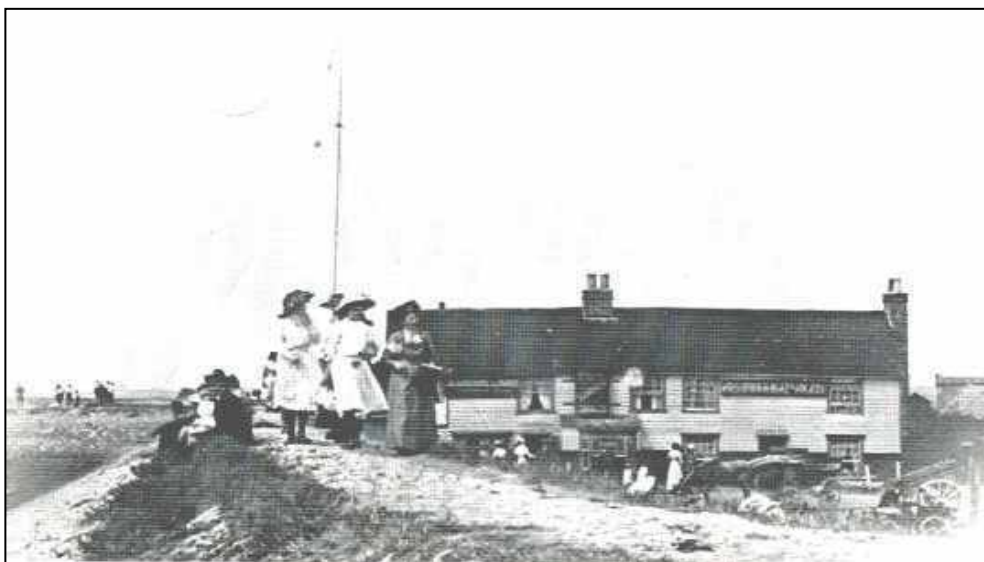
***"A Cantle of Essex Cheese
Was well a foot thick
Full of maggots quicke (alive)
And mighty strong meat
For the Devil to eat
It was tart and punicate."***

No one seems to have spoken well of it but it was hard and kept well so these huge Essex cheeses were taken on board ships leaving the estuary on long voyages.

THE LOBSTER SMACK

One building on the Island dates from Elizabeth's time, the Lobster Smack, or World's End which dates from 1563, probably even 1510 if a lip tile in its roof is an original. There would have been every justification for the location of an Inn there even before the Island was enwalled, since Holehaven Creek is a deep and sheltered inlet where many vessels entering and leaving the river would take up temporary anchorage.

It is interesting to see that the old Inn lies within the protection of the two arms of the "Y" formed by the causeway as it approaches Holehaven Creek. According to tradition, Queen Elizabeth I landed here after her celebrated visit to the army at Tilbury in 1588 and was met by the Earl of Essex, who conveyed her across the marshes to Hadleigh Castle. It is difficult to imagine why such a roundabout journey was taken except that the tide may have been unsuitable for the navigation of Hadleigh Ray. The tide never presents a problem at Holehaven, where the water just offshore is fifty feet deep.



The Lobster Smack was host to prize knuckle fighting. It was not unusual to find a 'grudge match' in progress, due to a long standing dispute. Supposedly the outcome of such a fight would settle the participants disagreements once and for all. One such arrangement took place between Ben Court, a champion between the years 1838 and 1845 and Nat Langham. Thought to have originated from a family feud, Caunt aged 42, took 37 year old Langham to the sixtieth round on 22nd September, 1857.

Though still on his feet, Langham had been knocked down no less than fifty nine times during the fight. It may have been Langham's sheer determination to continue fighting back at all costs that drew the match to an amicable conclusion at this stage, for they had decided to end it by shaking hands and made up the quarrel.

Earning himself a title amongst islanders, Tom Sayers was pronounced the greatest of them all and habitually fought on Canvey. In a dramatic contest against Aaron Jones on 19th February, 1857, the fight was finally declared a draw by the referee when it became too dark to see. The count on the exact number of rounds on this occasion seemed to be vague, some reckoned it lasted sixty two rounds while others were just unmovable in their belief it was over sixty five. However, the return match caused no such dispute as Sayers won in the eighty fifth round, when his opponents seconds threw in the sponge, declaring him the outright winner.

A championship fight held on 16th June 1858 between Sayers and Tom Paddock lasted not nearly as long. In fact, a mere twenty one rounds drew the contest to its conclusion, Sayers emerging victorious. Of course, there was a considerable sum involved in this match, as, apart from the purse, there was also a three hundred sovereign side stake. This may have been reason enough to finish the bout speedily, but, just to show his opponent that he possessed a sporting nature, Sayers collected thirty pounds amongst the spectators for defeated Tom Paddock.



The modern day Lobster Smack Inn, Haven Road.

THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

A feature of Canvey's sixteenth century history is of special and rather unusual interest. The first concerns Hadleigh Ray, the stretch of water on the north east of the island and one that forms the eastward extension of Benfleet Creek. In the sixteenth century, this estuary was much used in oyster cultivation, the young breed that was fattened here later being taken across the Thames to mature on the famous Whitstable beds.

However, not all transactions were strictly 'by the book' as the men of Essex were apparently in the frequent habit of stealing mature oysters from Whitstable. Things were so bad that in 1598 the inhabitants of that town petitioned no less a person than the Archbishop of Canterbury with the complaint that 'certain seafaring men of Essex have lately come hither into Kent and have there dredged oysters and caught great store of other fish near Whitstable and thereabouts, yea, and within the precincts of the divers liberties which are yet perfectly known and the bounds thereof.

The Archbishop appointed two men to catch and admonish the offenders but it appears they were not successful for the raids continued and thirty years later reference is again found to measures being called for to stop Essex men dredging Kentish oysters. The affair was not, however, all one-sided for Kentish oyster men made return sorties to the beds in Hadleigh Ray and, indeed, this form of poaching continued for well over two hundred years.

With a possible sinking of the land and with a change in eating habits, the need for Canvey to be embanked fully became more and more necessary. Meat was taking the place of “whitemeat” (cheese) and Norden specifically says Canvey was unfit for cattle. Butchers wanted land to fatten up cattle to be carried by boat to London. They obviously couldn’t be taken across the creeks. To make good grazing Canvey must be drained.

THE DUTCH COTTAGE ON CANVEY

By 1620 the need for enclosing the whole island became urgent. By this time the marshes had been acquired by a small number of persons so this became possible. It is probable that at least one Dutchman was already settled here, the older Dutch Cottage dates from 1618 and they were already involved higher up the river at Dagenham.

From then onwards, the walled-in islands were divided into “third acre lands” (those which had been Croppenburgs share) “freelands” (those belonging to the previous owners and their successors) and “outsands” (land later reclaimed privately). On the “third lands” fell all the cost of the upkeep of the walls protecting both “thirdlands” and “freelands” leaving the occupiers of “outsands” to look after themselves. The agreement would be broken if any breaches in the sea wall were not made good within one year.



Sir Henry Appleton and others subsequently agreed to do this by an agreement dated 6th April, 1622 made between the following landed proprietors of Canvey Island, namely Sir Henry Appleton, Julius Bludder, John, William and Mary Blackmore, Thomas Binckes and Abigail Baker on the one part and Jonas Croppenburg of the other.

The said landowners granted unto Croppenburg, in fee simple, one third of their lands in consideration of his sufficiently “inning” and recovering the islands from the overflowing tides, the encroachments of the sea and maintaining an effective sea wall at his own costs and charges.

This agreement was subsequently, by mutual consent, made a decree of the High Court of Chancery on 27th February, 1623 and a further agreement was entered upon and registered bearing a date of 1st December in the same year, whereby Sir Henry Appleton made over to Jonas Croppenburg one third of his lands including Westwicke, Shonares, Westatenes, Chaffleet, Wellispitt, Darlette and Castlewicke.

Though there is no actual proof, it is generally agreed that the engineer, who drew up the plans and was responsible for the drainage, was Cornelius Vermuyden who had married Croppenburg’s niece and who had been involved in the Dagenham levels.

Jonas Croppenburg engaged the services of this celebrated Dutch engineer, who was Cornelius Vermuyden, a native of the island of Tholen in Holland and a pupil of the renowned engineer and architect Jacob Van Kemper, who had done much to beautify Amsterdam and who possibly knew more than any other individual of that period about reclaiming and draining land. When Vermuyden undertook the task, he brought over with him from Holland an efficient staff of some two or three hundred Dutchmen all well skilled in the art of land reclamation.

So thoroughly did Vermuyden accomplish his task of reclamation, both here and in other adjacent reaches of the Thames at Dagenham, that King Charles I, recognising his skill and ability in this respect, conferred the honour of Knighthood upon him at Whitehall on 6th January, 1628 hence, through his connection with Canvey Island he became Sir Cornelius Vermuyden. Most of the money needed had probably been borrowed in Holland, for in 1637 Henrick Brouwer, says that through his acquaintance with the Croppenburg's he obtained a sixteenth share in the embankment of Canvey Island.

The method of reclaiming the land appears to have been to dig a deep and broad ditch, called a delf, some little distance from the shore and to have banked up the earth obtained by this means along the tide line, facing the whole towards the sea with stone. Marshes thus protected were levelled by filling up the small runlets, the water which was tidal, being thereby directed into the larger ones that discharged themselves into the sea by sluices, seven in number, in various parts of the island.

These are now known as "Commissioners' Dykes" and in no way belong to the farms through which they run. The utilisation of these natural water-ways accounts for the very tortuous dykes that form the boundary of one field from another. "Sunken" and "Rilly" marshes appear never to have been levelled after enclosure, for they bear today the deep traces of the smaller streams; but perhaps the best idea of a general condition of the land before the Dutch began their work may be gathered from the saltings, as seen in photographs of the island taken from the mainland.

When once the island was secured from the tides, considerable numbers of Dutch labourers settled there. In 1627 some two hundred were employed in "tilling and husbanding of ground in Canvey Island" and petitioned George Montaigne, Bishop of London, that services should be held in Dutch, either in some near church, or in the house they had provided and fitted for divine service until they had built their intended chapel, within two or three years. This petition apparently was granted by King Charles I allowing them to "do honour to the Great Architect of the Universe."

On 21st December 1631, the Dutch community of Canvey Island elected Cornelius Jacobsen as their minister, agreeing to pay him three pence for every acre in their possession "on condition that as long as the land does not produce anything the proprietors shall allow the half of this contribution to be paid from the rent."

The introduction of the Dutch Church, the Dutch religion and its conduct in the Dutch tongue seems to have perturbed the British dwellers on the island. Their Parish Church was St. Mary the Virgin at South Benfleet, some two miles off and in order to save their long journey in all weathers, they, in turn, petitioned the Dutch for the occasional use of their church, whereby the service could be rendered in English.

This, the Dutch peremptorily declined to acquiesce in, with the result that the British indignation and resentment was aroused and anarchy between the two factions became so rife that on Whitsun Monday 1656, it culminated in a general riot and a free fight for the possession of the church. It appears that the British provided themselves with a minister of their own choosing, formed themselves into a body, marched to the Dutch church and demanded the keys. The Dutch had evidently anticipated the British designs, for they were also assembled in strength and prepared to withstand, by force if necessary and thus repel what they regarded as an invasion of their legitimate rights and a free hand to hand fight ensued between the opposing factions for the possession of the keys, which were successfully withheld by the Dutch and the disconcerted British were eventually defeated and routed.

The controlling powers or colloque of the Dutch church in London, seem to have acquired, probably from Croppenburg, many large tracts of land on the island, which they let out in small farms or "wicks" to those of their own nationality and religious persuasion.

The Dutch records of this transition period are unfortunately lost, or such as remain accessible for historical purposes, are so bald and commonplace that they almost cease to become interesting.

It is unfortunate too, but we can discover little or nothing of any note respecting the Croppenburg family. It is however, clearly evident that he was not a member of the Dutch Reformed Church, although he married a lady who belonged to that austere community. She evidently incurred the displeasure of her church on this account and until she had made atonement and a full confession of her "guilt" was considered excommunicate.

This she apparently did and the erring 'sheep' was received back into the fold as will be seen in the following translated extract from the "Register of the London Dutch Church" under the significant heading of "Confessions of guilt"

"Entry 3141" A.D. 1585 - Lievine, the wife of Jonas Croppenburg, whom she married two years ago, against the ordinance of our church, without the banns having been published.

The religious offence of this lady, if it can be considered, was evidently absolved by the church, for in a later entry, under the heading of "Baptisms" we find that a son of this worthy couple was duly baptised to the Lutheran rites.

How, for many years, the Dutch people fared in a spiritual sense is equally uncertain. It is clear, however, that the religious ministrations of Canvey Island were, to say the least, only occasional and intermittent. From the same authority, quoted previously, we call under the heading of "Attestations" the official appointment of another Dutch minister:

"Entry 574" Thursday 30th November, 1638.
Cornelius Jacobson, Minister of the Divine Word in England, in the
Netherlandish Community at Canvey Island.

Also, another, some seven years later:

"Entry 708" Tuesday 16th.
Adriaen Munnix, Ecclesiastes in the Dutch Community in Canvey Eylant,
in the name of the Conistory. Chrysostijmus Hamelton.
On the brethren of the Dutch Community at London.
Dated Canvey Eylant, 16th December, 1645.

The last Dutch Minister of whom we know, was a certain Dom Emelius Van Cullenborg, who died in the year 1704 and was buried on the 14th October at St. Marys Church, South Benfleet. About this time, the Dutch people began to vacate the island, leaving their church in the hands of smugglers as a repository for illicit wares.

A source of irritation was the draining and ploughing up of the island (it was the first marshland to be used in this way) instead of using it for livestock. Daniel Defoe in his tour of Eastern England wrote in 1722 "The greater part of the lands in these levels are held by farmers, cow-keepers and grazing butchers who live in and near London and that they are generally stocked with large sheep." The Dutch wanted the land drained while the English wanted the water level higher for their stock.

A ballad written at the time says:

***"Our smaller rivers are now dry land
The eels are turned to serpents there
And if Old Father Thames play not the man
Then farewell to all good English beer.***

***Why should we stay then and perish with thirst?
To the new world in the moon then let us away
For if the Dutch Colony get thither first
'Tis a thousand to one that they'll drain that too."***

Eels and wild fowl which had added to their diet, were no longer available to the wildfowlers and fishermen. The "third acre tax" on the other hand was resented by the owners, who saw their English neighbours getting away without paying and as the land was shrinking as it was drained, the banks must have constant supervision.

By the middle of the century, Britain and Holland were at war and in 1667 the Dutch Admiral de Ruyter sailed up the Thames and burned Charles II's ships in Chatham dockyard. At the same time Dutch sailors landed on the island, probably looking for food.



Miller Christy in the Essex Review vol. 14 1905 "The Dutch in the Thames." tells the story:

"Early in June 1667, during what is known as the Second Dutch War, the Dutch Fleet under the great Admiral de Ruyter, entered the mouth of the Thames, there being at sea no English fleet capable of meeting it. On the 9th de Ruyter detached a squadron of eighteen light ships and frigates, with one thousand men, under Vice Admiral Van Ghent, to ascend the Thames and endeavour to surprise English ships they had heard were in the river.

In the evening, the wind fell and the squadron unable in consequence, to advance further than Hole Haven, at the western end of Canvey Island, where they anchored during the night. On the following day, the 10th, in the morning, some of the crews landed on Canvey, where they stole some sheep and burned houses and barns.

Of this latter event, nothing whatever is said in Dutch narrative, but we are able to obtain from English sources of information, ample evidence that it really took place. Thus on the same day news reached Chelmsford and Sir John Bramston, writing thence to a friend in London, informs him that "the enemy hath burned barns and houses on Canvie Island."

By the 11th the news had got as far as Harwich, in a letter to Williamson, Secretary of State in London. He learned that, the Dutch had 'landed in Canvey Island and plundered it' They had a score of small boats attend them which are for that purpose and I believe they intend little else in this fanfare than steel sheep; which they attempted at St. Osyth but the people appearing, they retired to the fleet."

Further, one John Conny, a ship's surgeon, forwarding to Williamson several days later, a narrative of the events of the raid, says: "On the 10th, in the morning, (the enemy) fired eight or nine houses on Canvie Island, on the Essex side of the Thames and stole a few sheep."

Finally, the Reverend George Naule, Rector of Vange and owner of a farm on the Island, when making his will on the 23rd September 1667, directed that 'the residue of his goods and chattles and plate should be released (sold) and expended in erecting a new building of my house and barn on my farm on Canvey, burned by the Dutch."

The testimony of these totally independent witnesses leaves, therefore, no doubt that the Dutch did ravage Canvey Island. Later, de Ruyter ordered severe punishment for some of his sailors 'who had gone ashore without leave and had committed great outrages, carrying off and pillaging everything they met with.'

Whether this was the Canvey 'invasion' we do not know, nor do we know if they raided the farms of their countrymen on the island. In any case, it would not have improved relations between the two communities.

Finally, the Dutch may have succumbed to the dreaded 'ague' or malaria, prevalent on all the marshes. Daniel Defoe makes this comment, which we need not take too seriously:

"I took notice of the strange decay of the sex here insomuch that all along this country, it was frequent to meet with, nay, and some more. I was informed that in the marshes on the other side of the river over against Canvey Island, there was a farmer who was then living with the five and twentieth wife, and that his son, who was then about thirty five had already about fourteen. Indeed this part of the story I had only to report from good hands too, but the other is well known too."

"The reason as a merry fellow told me afterwards was that they, being bred in the marshes themselves and seasoned to the place, did pretty well with it, but that they always went into the hilly country, or the uplands for a wife. That when they took the young lasses out of the wholesome and fresh air, they were healthy, fresh and clean, but when they came out of the native air into the marshes among the fog and damp, they presently changed their complexion, got an ague or two and seldom held above a half year, or a year ay the most."

Malaria is not often fatal, and its recurrent fevers were probably no worse than a bad attack of 'flu' but several Dutch ministers did not survive long on the island and two hundred years later it was still prevalent as the article following shows.

Whatever the reasons, the Dutch community seems to have disappeared by the beginning of the eighteenth century, leaving only the sea walls and the two 'Dutch' cottages. Some may have left the district in which they still felt they were 'foreigners' some may have married into the English community, others may have found it easier to take English forms of their names. A Mr. Orgher, who was associated with the Dutch church may have been the 'Mr. Edgar' mentioned following.

THE CURSE OF THE ESSEX MARSHES

The Reverend Julian Henderson of South Benfleet (1859-72) had to resign his living on the advice of his doctor, being so long ill of the 'ague' that if he stayed he was given no more than a few months to live. His daughter described what happened when his first headache and lassitude were followed by the violent attack of shivering.

"My mother filled hot water bottles, piled up blankets and eider downs, but my father still felt deathly cold and the bed shook with his shivering. High fever followed and he became burning hot and after that came such excessive perspiration that the sheets might have been dropped in water. The patient would come back to normal, though he might be left very weak."

The maladie 'ague', as the French called it because of its intensity and rapid development, was more prevalent in the Thames estuary than other parts of England, because it was thought to be caused by the fetid air rising from the marshes and English doctors invented the term mal-aria, but layman still continued to call it by the old name.

Daniel Defoe, chatting with the marshmen during his tour of the eastern counties in 1724, told how it was common among them to go to the uplands to get wives, but when these girls, fresh from the wholesome air, came to live amid the fogs and damp, they rapidly changed in complexion, got an ague or two and seldom lived for more than a few months.

"And then" said one merry fellow, "We go to the uplands again to fetch another," In this way these marsh farmers might have anything up to fifteen wives, or even more although Daniel Defoe suspected one or two of them "fibbing a little" he was convinced that there was a great deal of truth in their stories.

An examination of the parish registers hardly bears this out, though there are records of men having been married four or five times. An epitaph in South Benfleet churchyard on the headstone of James Matthews, who died in 1733, now so weathered as to be quite illegible, ran thus:

***"Sixty-three years our hoyman sail'd merrily around
Forty-four lived Parishioner where he's aground."***

***Five wife's bear him thirty-three children, Enough.
Lands' another as honest before he gets off."***

On his arms, still visible, is a stork with its wings folded, an apt comment on his remarkable achievements. The 'ague' was probably responsible for disposing of more than one of his wives.

Because of the belief that the disease rose out of the undrained marshy creeks and inlets it was customary in these parts to close all windows and doors during the early evenings and to avoid going out at that time to breathe the polluted air. People visiting the Thames marshes remarked on the sickly looks of the inhabitants, especially women and children and it was often necessary, in order to attract enough labour, for the farmers to offer higher wages than the usual rate.

Various cures were advised. Two hundred years ago it was customary to pound a variety of herbs to a paste, mix them with white wine, vinegar and rose water, spread the paste on a cloth and apply it to the wrists, where it was believed to be absorbed into the blood stream. Another favoured remedy when an attack was expected was to take on an empty stomach as much gunpowder as would cover a shilling, in a little water. This composed of sulphur, saltpetre and carbon, if it did no good at least did little harm.

For those who could afford it, the best remedy was the bark of the cinchoa tree of Peru. It was said to have been brought to Spain by returning Jesuit missionaries, was therefore, known as Peruvian bark or Jesuit's bark and was the base of Quinine. A favourite method of preparation was to take the powdered bark and mix it with aromatic herbal ingredients and treacle to make it more palatable.

Champion Russell, of Stubbers, North Ockendon, always had a supply of Quinine for 'ague' sufferers and folk from miles around, even from beyond Gravesend, came to him for help. When he died in 1887 his son found more than a gallon of Quinine, two large bottles of which had not been broached. During his last years, there were very few applicants for it, as the disease was then rapidly disappearing.

"The malaria parasite, carried by the mosquito had been isolated in 1880. It was thought Thames-side that the mosquito was being wiped out by the dust coming from the new cement works and some very high tides which had scoured and purified the marsh ditches." Today, thanks to good drainage and improved preventative medicine, 'ague' has disappeared leaving hardly a memory.

CANVEY IN THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURY

Since the death of Dom Emilius van Cullenborg, the Dutch rebellion had, vulgarly speaking "gone to the dogs" and the English residents being aroused to a sense of duty, once more determined to re-assert themselves, with the result that the Reverend Mr. Lord, a Church of England clergyman, was invited to administer to their spiritual consolation; and to accomplish this laudable purpose, it became necessary to once again requisition the use of the only available building, the old Dutch church and this time it was done with success.

Mr. Richard Gough F.S.A. in his valuable work entitled, "British Topography" dated 1780, gives us "an exact narrative of many surprising matters of fact, incontestably wrought by an evil spirit or spirits, in the house of Jan Smagge, farmer, in Canvey Island, Essex upon the 10th, 13th, 14th and 16th September, 1709, in the day time, in the presence of the Reverend Mr. Lord, Curate of the said island, Jan Smagge, the master of the house and several neighbours and servants and many strangers whose curiosity had led them to this place of wonders."

The Reverend Mr. Lord, mentioned in this quotation, also vouches for the "extraordinary things credibly said to have disturbed the house, both before and since Mr. Smagge came into the house. The utmost caution being used not to exceed the truth in the minutest circumstances."

Historical records tell us, that this said Jan Smagge rented "thirty acres of land lately in the occupation of Peter Van Bell, in the south part of Holyhead, alias Canvey Island." at eight pounds per annum; and tradition also asserts that strange sepulchral noises, accompanied by sulphurous fumes, disturbed the household both by day and by night.

This alarming state of affairs seems to have culminated on the dates given in September 1709, in the presence of the Reverend Mr. Lord, when to the consternation of all present, groans and screams were heard, the house shook violently, windows involuntarily cracked themselves and sober articles of domestic furniture played grotesque antics to the amazement, fear and trembling of all beholders. Like all reputed haunted houses, which

have, in bye-gone days sheltered evil spirits, things eventually resumed their normal condition; for today, this incredible circumstance, however respectably vouched for, is almost forgotten on Canvey Island.

Probably, according to the superstitious custom prevailing in those benighted days, the Reverend Mr. Lord was called in to a function well known at the time of "laying the ghost" requiescat in peace. However, there is another side to this alleged ghost story and one probably unthought of by the good, but perhaps too confiding Curate, the Reverend Mr. Lord. The Dutchmen of Canvey Island were not all such simple minded folk as their stolid features portrayed.

This is, in all probability, a feature which he overlooked in his conscientious endeavour for the pacification of those disquieting elements, "the evil spirits." Be that as it may however, whilst the Reverend Mr. Lord, the wily Jan Smagge, the servants and the strangers within those uncanny gates "whose curiosity had led them to their wonder of wonders" were engaged in witnessing these wonderful alleged supernatural manifestations, it possibly did not occur to him that other astute Dutchmen were also, at that psychological moment, assiduously engaged in removing, not only "evil spirits" but other contraband produce from the little place of worship he had been called upon to do duty in pursuance of his holy calling. Yes, these simple minded Dutchmen knew something after all; for it was while the Parson was "praying" in the house of Smagge, other astute Dutchmen were not only "watching" but working in the church.

In the interregnum, since the death of Dom Emilius van Cullenborg, for some un-ascertained cause, Divine worship seems to have been suspended. In the meantime, the Dutch church, since the cessation of religious services, has been converted into a wholesale repository for the storage of smuggled and contraband goods; and consequently it became imperative for those concerned to effect a speedier clearance of the illicit revenue, defrauding produce hidden snugly away there and this very necessary operation was being very effectively performed whilst all disinterested persons were assembled witnessing "the wonderful manifestations" we have described at the instant of Jan Smagge. The process of removal complete, it is almost unnecessary to add that the "manifestations" subsided and "evil spirits" disappeared.

The tumble-down desecrated, barn-like structure which had been used as a church by the Dutch, did not last long in the hands of the English; for, thanks to the generosity of a certain Mr. Edgar, then owner of Charfleets Farm, Canvey Island, who is described as an officer of the Victualling Office, it was pulled down and a more suitable structure erected to accommodate about eighty people. Dedicated to St. Katherine it was duly consecrated by the Bishop of London on 11th June, 1712 and a Curate was appointed to preach twenty sermons per annum at the highly remunerative figure of ten pounds for the course.

The frequent flooding reported by Thomas Cox in 1700 in which he states "the island lies low and so is sometimes flown by the tide; but the sheep which are fed there in abundance, so readily retreat to some hills in it, that few are lost." He reports that the custom of making cheese from ewe's "is disused because their milk makes the cheese strong."

Other floods occurred in 1713 and particularly in 1736. The "Gentleman's Magazine" for February 1736 describes "The little Isles of Candy (Canvey) and Fowlness (Foulness), on the coast of Essex, were quite under water, not a hoof was saved thereon and the inhabitants were taken from the upper part of their houses into boats."

The Rev. Philip Morant, however, says "one half cattle and sheep were drowned. A cow and five hogs, then happening to stand on a dung hill, were swept by the on-rushing water nearly a mile over a deep creek and luckily preserved from being driven with the rapidity of the stream, by the dung hill being stopped by a high bank."

These floods probably due to the inadequate care of the sea-wall, now the Dutch had departed, besides causing loss to the eighty inhabitants and landowners, probably undermined the foundations of the chapel, for in 1745 a new chapel, this time dedicated to St. Peter, was built by Daniel Scratton of Prittlewell. He also left ten pounds to provide services and a further ten pounds for twenty sermons. Marriages, however, had still to be performed in one of the nine parishes which "owned" the island and burials took place at South Benfleet.

On days when services were to take place, a flag was hoisted onto a small spire and the shutters taken down. Since the minister awaited the hoisting of the flag before coming from the mainland, it was sometimes

“unsuitable” not because of the weather but because a cargo of smuggled goods was being hidden there before being distributed inland.

There was no service held during the winter months, it being felt no doubt, that even a minister having regard for the spiritual welfare of his flock, should not be subjected to the hazards of the journey. To have to find his way across the creek and the water filled dykes which traversed the island, on winter days when daylight faded rapidly, when footbridges and familiar landmarks were liable to be engulfed in darkness or blanketed by fog; or in the teeth of the howling easterly gales often accompanied by driving rain which swept, unbroken, across the flat marshlands in winter, was not easy.

Indeed, it could be dangerous as for instance, in September 1859 when the Reverend John Aubone Cook, Vicar of South Benfleet, returning from visiting one of his parishioners on Canvey, lost his way, fell into a dyke and was dead within two weeks from typhoid fever.

New lands were being regained during this century with new walls and counter walls “Newlands”, “Sunken Marsh” and “Sixty Acres” are some of these, especially on the Hadleigh Ray area. The burden of the cost of maintaining the sea walls on the “third acre lands” became too great and in 1792, after the 1791 flood, when the walls were severely damaged on 16th to 27th November, they petitioned Parliament with an act for “effectively” embanking, draining and otherwise improving the island of Canvey in the County of Essex. Twenty four Commissioners of Sewers were appointed to be responsible for inspecting and repairing the sea walls and empowered to levy a rate for the walls maintenance.

Although most of the inhabitants of Canvey were Essex born and only a few came from places as far afield as Suffolk, Norfolk and Huntingdon, nevertheless, Canvey was not without a “foreign” community for further up Holehaven Creek, dug into the marshes and floating only at high water, was the ‘Emulous’ a Watch vessel belonging to the Preventative Service and manned by men from Cornwall, Devon and Northern Ireland.

This Coast Guard Station had not been established without good reason as the desolate Essex marshlands provided numerous isolated spots where contraband could be (and was) landed safely and the people of Canvey, like other Essex marshmen, were not above engaging in a little “free trade.”

The method most frequently employed in the estuary was the bladder and feather marker. Small craft such as fishing boats would bring jorums of spirit and other taxed commodities from places such as Amsterdam and when in the estuary, would throw them overboard attached to a line.

A sinker at one end would anchor to the sea bed while an inflated pigs bladder to which was attached a bunch of feathers, was tied to the other end. This would float on the surface acting as a marker-buoy for the men in their small boats who would row out and recover the goods often concealed among fishing nets or lobster-pots.

It is not surprising that anyone wishing to own a boat had first to obtain permission and a license from H.M. Excise Department and each application was forwarded to a central office with a report from the local excise man testifying as to the reputation of the applicant.

For example, in April 1834, William Pratt of South Benfleet applied for a license for the open boat “Bee” and it was stated by the official that he had been convicted several times for smuggling “but not for several years” while Bernard Lockwood also of South Benfleet applying for a license for the open boat “Hero” had never been concerned with smuggling.”

It would seem, however, that the people of Canvey had to make the journey to South Benfleet, irrespective of the season, in order to buy provisions which they required; or that trades people would come to them.

Although the Register of Baptisms in 1843 describes one John Hart in Pitsea Parish (i.e. probably at the village) as a labourer and a shop-keeper, the shop could only have provided a minor part-time occupation for there is no mention of it in the 1851 census.

The coast-guards and their families must have made most of the purchases at Benfleet because in May 1836, Jonathan Woods of Hadleigh who owned land adjoining the “Emulous” watch vessel had claimed compensation from the Excise Board on the grounds that officer and trades-people with carts supplying the vessel had made a track across three fields between the road and the vessel with the subsequent loss of vegetation.

Canvey was now mainly used for growing corn especially during the Napoleonic war, when much unsuitable land was ploughed up. The farms, mainly built on old 'wicks' changed hands often. Not one of the twenty two farms between 1773 and 1777 was owner occupied but they were let to bailiffs and their families.

Six or seven cottages, clustered around the road junction near the church, occupied by farm labourers, comprised the village, while a mile further along Haven Road was the Lobster Smack on the strategic location at the entrance of the deep Holehaven Creek, which could be used at any state of the tide, it would have seen crews of Dutch eel-boats and fishing smacks.

It is possible, that some children on the island also made the journey to South Benfleet fairly regularly for there was no school established on Canvey prior to 1873 yet in the 1851 census, several children from Canvey are described as scholars, for instance;

Frances Mason, aged eight years of Shepherd House.

Stephen Morley aged six years of Wrackhall Farm.

Robert and Joshua Morley aged ten and eight years of Smallgains Farm.

Canvey land was very heavy to work, especially in wet seasons, as we still know and the extra expense of adding chalk meant that profits and agricultural labourer's wages of the sea wall foremen was reduced from one pound to sixteen shillings a week.

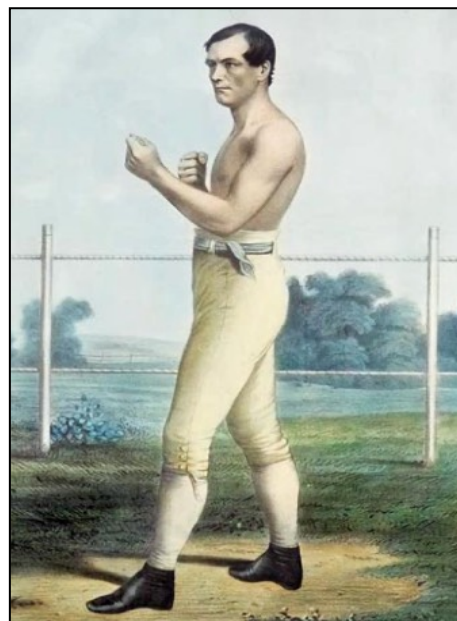
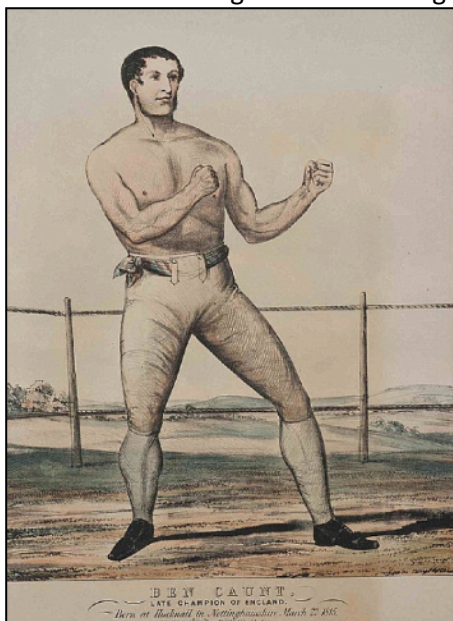
Few could afford to leave the island even after the coming of the railway in 1851 for the cheapest return fare to London was four shillings and two pence, half a mans wages for the week.

The coming of the railway however, brought another type of visitor to Canvey namely Barefist or Knuckle fighting as a forerunner to modern boxing. It was illegal but vast sums of money changed hands in bets. Some have already been mentioned in the history of the Lobster Smack Inn.

Another famous contest was between two veterans who had been friends but had quarrelled. Ben Caunt who had been champion from 1838 to 1845, had retired to become a prosperous publican and owned The Coach and Horses (now The Salisbury) in St. Martin's. In 1857, as a result of a family feud, Ben Caunt at forty two and Nat Langham at thirty seven, signed articles to fight.

The Caunt verses Langham fight took place on Canvey on 22nd September, 1857. The result after sixty rounds was an agreed draw.

It is even said that Big Ben, the bell in the Houses of Parliament clock tower, was named after him, as he was a favourite with MPs who would go and see him fight.



CHARLES DICKENS

Whether Charles Dickens did visit the Lobster Smack or whether it is the model for the one used in "Great Expectations" is open to doubt. Other Inns along the coast nearby also made the same claim. The description and circumstances, however, do give us the idea of what it might have looked like at that time.

The hero 'Pip' has been befriended by a convict, Provis, who he had helped before the farmer was transported to Australia. There, Provis made his fortune and sent money back to Pip through a lawyer. Pip does not know who has paid for him to become 'a gentleman' and is horrified when Provis risks his life to come back to England to see him, for anyone who was transported for life was hanged if he tried to return. Knowing Provis to be in danger of arrest, Pip arranges with two friends to row him down the Thames and board a steamer going to Hamburg or Rotterdam.

His description:

"By the time the river had lifted us a little, so that we could see above the bank. There was red on the sun, on the low level of the shore, in a purple haze, deepening into black; and there was a solitary flat marsh; and far away there was rising grounds between which and us there seemed no life, save here and there in the foreground, a melancholy gull.

As the night was falling fast and as the moon being past the full, would not rise early, we had little council; a short one, for clearly our course was to lie by at the first lonely tavern we could find. So, they plied their oars once more and I looked out for anything like a house. Thus we held on, speaking little, for four or five dull miles. It was very cold and a collier coming by us, with her galley-fire smoking and flaring, looked like a comfortable home."

The night was as dark by this time as it would be by morning and what light we had, seemed to come more from the river than the sky as the oars in their dipping struck at a few reflected stars. At length we decried a light and a roof and presently afterwards ran alongside a little causeway made of stones that had been picked up hard by.

Leaving the rest in the boat, I stepped ashore and found the light to be in a window of a public house. It was a dirty place enough and I dare say not unknown to smuggling adventurers; but there was a good fire in the kitchen and there were two double bedded rooms "such as they were" The landlord, his wife and a grizzled male creature, "the jack" (odd job man) of the little causeway, who was as slimy and smeary as if he had been low water mark too.

I lay down with the greater part of my clothes on and slept for a few hours. When I awoke and the wind had risen and the sign of the house was creaking and banging about, with noises that startled me.

Rising softly, for my charge lay fast asleep, I looked out of the window. It commanded the causeway where we had hauled up our boat and as my eyes adapted themselves to the light of the clouded moon, I saw two men looking into her. They passed by under the window, looking at nothing else and they did not go down to the landing place which I could discern to be empty, but struck across the marsh in the direction of the nore.

Two points in the story certainly tie in with the Lobster Smack. The custom ship "Emulous" later to be replaced by the coastguard post and cottages in 1852, was moored in the Holehaven where the deep water made it possible for boats to come in close and the Inn was a well known haunt for smugglers.



The eight Coast Guard Cottages built around 1883 and still surviving today.

Secondly, the bodies often those of “preventative men” or customs officers who had been killed after boarding ships in the Thames, were washed up by the current into “Dead Man’s Bay” as Thorney Bay used to be called.

The current caused much erosion to the walls between Sluice House and in 1864 a Surveyor was engaged to advise on the effect on the sea wall. Another danger to the walls - a fore runner of those which are the sources of worry today, was the decision in 1875 to allow hulks (worn out ships) to be filled with dynamite, to be moored in Holehaven. Because of the danger of collision, it was forbidden to carry explosives further up the Thames than Canvey.

In 1897, Coulson Dernaham who wrote “Captain Shannon” 1897. “The evil-looking dynamite hulks which lie scowling in the water, like huge red coffins, are the most noticeable features in the scenery of Canvey. Upwards of a dozen of the nest of devilry are moored off the island and are the first to catch the eye as one looks out from the sea wall.”

He goes on to wonder why Canvey was chosen for the storage of such a deadly explosive but concludes the “the spot is so remote and out of the way that it is doubtful if any safer and securer place could be found. His only worry had been for Thames shipping not for Canvey and its inhabitants. What would he have thought of subsequent storage facilities?

By 1881, the economy of the island was in a very poor state. There were only forty one occupied houses and farmers could not sell their wheat owing to the importation of wheat from Canada and the United States of America. In 1882 six farms, Knightswick, Kibcaps, Kittcats, Scar House, Lubbins (or Labworth) and Northwick were up for sale.

To add to the farmer’s difficulties, on 18th January 1881, a fierce gale caused a breach in the sea wall for three miles from Sluice House to Leigh Beck. Huge gaps of ten to fifteen yards wide, were ripped out of the walls and tossed into the delf ditch behind.

Some one thousand five hundred acres were submerged and houses were flooded to a depth of two and a half feet. The damage was estimated at twenty thousand pounds and emergency work was needed to save the island. In that year too, Canvey became a separate parish for the first time in its history. No longer was it divided up among the nine mainland parishes.

The Reverend Henry Hayes had arrived as Curate in Charge, became the first vicar and began nineteen years of service to the community. Within three years he had built a new school for about fifty pupils and a new Church, dedicated to St. Katherine. The school stood opposite the Church.

To commemorate the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria, in 1887, he set about the sinking of a well to give the island a supply of fresh water. Previously according to a contemporary writer “the only source of water for many of the inhabitants had been rain, or ditch water.”

Some of the islanders were fastidious in this respect “they took their supplies only from those ditches which were the home of water rats.” The cost of providing the well was largely met from public subscription aided by a grant from the Corporation of the City of London.

Sinking the well was entrusted to Mr. Furlong who had the unenviable task of boring through some three hundred feet of mixed beds of sand and London Clay. It was however, a great day when the well was officially opened on 5th December, 1889. Crowds gathered at the spot to witness the event and as the first bucket was drawn from the depth, up went the cry “Water! Water!” Excitement was intense, especially amongst the older inhabitants who saw the new amenity as a “veritable oasis in the desert”



For the next thirty three years the pump remained in constant use and during this period its reputation for providing water regarded as the “best supply in the parish.” A thatched roof covered the iron pump and around the eaves a painted wooden board bore the inscription “Whosoever drinketh of this water that I shall give, shall never thirst.”

As a focal point, the village pump became a meeting place for the exchange of news and views and the island’s ‘smith who worked in the small forge, was no doubt grateful for the large horse and cattle trough nearby.

In another novel “Andromeda” written in 1900 by Robert Buchanan, he wrote “Flat as a map, so intermingled with creeks and rivulets, that is difficult to say where the water ends and the land begins. Canvey Island lies, a shapeless octopus, right under the high ground of Benfleet and Hadleigh and stretches out muddy and slimy feelers to touch and dabble in the deep waters of the flowing Thames.” and as his heroine says “I ain’t a country girl, I hate the country, I hate Canvey Island most of all.

It’s right enough, perhaps, in the summer time, but in the winter, when the fogs come, and the sun rarely shine and there is nothing to look at but the black marshes and the river and the rainy sea out yonder, it’s like being dead and buried.”

When the Reverend Henry Hayes died in the first year of the Twentieth Century, in his obituary (notice of death) it was said “he had presided over his remote island parish, the welfare of which was profoundly near to his heart.”

THE CHAPMAN LIGHTHOUSE

After more than a century of use, a short ceremony was held to say ‘goodbye’ to Chapman Sands Lighthouse before it was demolished in 1957. The Lighthouse with it’s clockwork mechanism came into operation in 1851, four years after a lightship had been moored in the area.



Part of the 1951 centenary celebrations of the Chapman Lighthouse

For centuries, the perilous off-shore mud flats had claimed many victims. The Roman's are thought to have devised some form of beacon as warning in the area. It was not until the 19th century that the pressure brought to bear on Trinity House by a group of ship owners, registered the need for a permanent signal, taking into account the unstable condition of the riverbed. James Walker, Consultant Lighthouse Engineer to Trinity House at that time, drew up a unique design for a pile lighthouse made entirely of iron.

The hexagonal-shaped living accommodation for the lighthouse keeper and his assistant was somewhat spartan, comprising a living room, bedroom, kitchen-cum-wash room and a storeroom. For the purpose of going ashore, a rowing boat was suspended from the side of the lighthouse.

The salt water eventually took it's toll and the lighthouse became in danger of collapse. Today, in it's place, bobbing, eight hundred yards off-shore, is a single bell-buoy. No doubt it does the job but is considered by many to be a far less attractive guardian.



The Chapman Buoy (picture by Norman Bambridge)



The 'Tug' "Castle Point" (picture by Norman Bambridge)