

ST. MARGARETS OF ANTIOCH

The **Church of St Margaret**, is a 14th Century grade II* listed Church near Bowers Gifford, Essex. The church is notable for being surrounded by fields and marshland, originally a remote village surrounded by estuary marshes, the church sits a mere 10 metres above sea level.

In 1080 the Domesday book stated Bowers Gifford had 4 land holders, 4 ploughs and sheep, a wooden Saxon church stood at that time. St Margaret's Church dates back to 1350, officially the Church is known as St Margaret's of Antioch.

The first mention of Giffard family in Bowers Gifford was in 1242 when William de la Dune and his wife granted a William Giffard land in the village and its marshes, William Giffard was a direct descendant of William the Conquer, he and his heirs became Lords of Essex Marshes, and would supply the King with Lard and Bacon, on the 27th December 1292 the royal court granted the Giffard family the right to hold a fair on this date, and additional markets every Friday and it should be on the Vigil feast and morrow of St Margaret's to whom the parish church was dedicated, finally the right to warren was confirmed.

Sir John Giffard a Knight in 1324 was exempted for bearing arms for one year by the King, the Giffard family were in debt from 1329, in 1337 Sir John handed over all his possessions to his wife Alice and his son John, and by 1349 both Sir John and his son had died, a year earlier the Black Death had crossed over from France, it's likely that both Johns died of the Black Death.



Set within the church along the north wall of the Chancel lays the 7' stone slab and damaged monumental brass effigy of Sir John Giffard who died in 1348, this brass is of great historic importance, and is the earliest monumental brasses known in the whole of England apart from one, that of Sir FitzRalph 1320, what makes it so unique is the period lack of period armour, the Jupon or field dress is the earliest to appear on any Monumental Brass, the Jupon is combined with chain mail stockings, unprotected by Jambs or Solievets, this could be due to the debt issues

of the Giffard family.

In 1845 of the Archaeological Society of Essex, dated the armour to around 1330 due to its design.

Up until the reign of Elizabeth I, the brass was intact, by 1740 the brass monument was gone, an old parishioner at that time remembers the monument prior to that date, and was intact. The Brass was at some point kept in a barn.

Major Spitty of Billericay, a wealthy land owner, by the 1820s St Margaret's Church was under major renovations, the then Church Warden handed over the brass to a Major Spitty for safe keeping, by coincidence the Major had inherited Sadlers Farm at Bowers Gifford from his grandfather, the Spitty family has lived in Bower Gifford since the 16th century, now could the brass of Sir John Giffard been in the Spitty barn at some point?.

Major Spitty had a keen interest in History and Archaeology, and contacted and presented the damaged brass to Reverend W.W. Tireman 1855. Rev. Tireman then had the brass restored and mounted on a new artificial slab, the original slab of stone disappeared possibly in the extension phase, by 1898 the whole brass had come loose, one leg becoming detached in two pieces, and was left in the church.

The Council of the Essex Archaeological Society agreed to donate Two Guineas along with donations from church funds, the brass was a second time restored, this time being brazed together and mounted correctly, it was also agreed to outline the original missing, head, shoulders leg and toe onto the stone slab, rather than commissioning replacements, the work was carried out by a Mr. Henry Young of Herongate. What lays before us today is of the greatest quality and detail even after 700 years.

When undertaker John Harris was tasked with the reburial of the 3,300 skeletons that were discovered in 2015 by the Crossrail tunnellers under the site of the infamous Bedlam hospital at Liverpool Street station, he found there was no room left in London's cemeteries. So, he did what any self-respecting East Ender does when they feel the capital has deserted them – he found a nice spot in Essex to rest his bones.

“There isn't the burial space in London, just like there isn't the housing,” says Harris, the director of T Cribb and Sons, one of the oldest family-run funeral directors in east London. The plot he found for the Bedlam skeletons was in Willow cemetery on Canvey Island, reclaimed land in the Thames estuary. “In Essex, it gets cheaper to bury people, the same way it gets cheaper to buy a house.”

Plotland premises were holiday homes, with a unique twist: they were often built of London's detritus. From train carriages to old doors and sheds, East Enders used bits of London to build homes from Canvey Island to Clacton – a tangible representation of the leakage of the overpopulated city into the vacant countryside. Sometimes the dismantling of the establishment was literal. One Canvey development was built from the remnants of a Georgian home in Battersea that had been used by William Wilberforce and his fellow slave-trade abolitionists. The new Essex emigre was akin to a Borrower or a Womble: what London no longer needed, they eagerly pounced upon.

The practice of using the land east of Tower Bridge to dump noxious industry and waste management is a long one. "Bovril" boats – so-called due to the rich, brown hue of their pungent cargo brought from the sewerage works of east London and dumped at the mouth of the Thames – were an Estuary tradition for more than 110 years, until the practice of sloshing the capital's excrement into the brine was phased out in 1998.

At around the same time as the Bovril boats first started their trade, east London vestries such as Mile End bought up land in Essex with the intention of using barges and steam tugs to shift the rubbish they didn't have space for. In 1889, Kensington began sending its rubbish to Purfleet, in what is now the unitary borough of Thurrock. As Lee Jackson recounts in his history of the filthy capital, *Dirty Old London*, an LCC official cut to the chase when describing the reason for using Essex as a place to dump waste: "The natural solution is to shoot it in some sparsely inhabited district, where public opinion is not strong enough to effectually resent it being deposited." Essex was out of the way – an extremely convenient place for London's political class to shift the stuff the powerful did not want in their backyard.

Mucking Marsh in Thurrock was one of the largest landfills in western Europe, taking on 660,000 tonnes of rubbish from the dustbins of west London each year, brought downriver on barges every day before dawn. "It could be seen from space," says Graham Harwood, a Goldsmiths academic and artist based in Southend. He and his wife, Matsuko Yokokoji, run the art initiative YoHa, whose recent project *Wrecked in the Intertidal Zone* unpicked the Essex estuary's hidden past. "Up until about 1994, they didn't record what went in the landfill – there were a lot of toxic cocktails."

Harwood says he has been told by some former drivers at Mucking they would lock themselves in their cab to avoid the stench of gases that came out of the ground.

"There was no protection for the drivers, nothing. Sometimes they would see tyres melting."

In 2012, Mucking Marsh stopped taking rubbish, and has been named a site of special scientific interest due to its complex toxicity. Yet it was also recently converted into a nature reserve – by DP World, the company behind the new London Gateway port. Similarly, the landfill Two Tree Island, downriver from Mucking, was converted back into public land in the 1970s, even though some areas are still deemed too dangerous for the public. Evidence of its past is pushing through nonetheless: blackberries, apples, pears, damsons, plums and cherries now all grow from the former dump. Another large landfill site at Pitsea is earmarked to be transformed by the RSPB in the next decade. Many of the hills along the estuary – at Beckton and Rainham, for example – might look geological, but are in fact the remnants of former dumping grounds.

Long after the abused landscape has been cleaned up, it lives on, both in soil and in memory. “I remember going to the beach and trying to swim in the estuary one summer in the 1980s,” writes author Rachel Lichtenstein of younger days in Southend in her new book *Estuary*. “Police were walking up and down the shoreline, warning people of the dangers; there were rumours that there was a risk of polio and other infections from the filthy water drifting in on the tide.”

I grew up in Southend too, and remember a similar fear of the murky water: Ian Dury famously contracted polio from paddling in the water at Southend in the late 1940s. Though our home was suffixed with the words “-on-Sea,” we Southenders imagined what might be floating down the river from London to greet us: remains of bodies offloaded by imagined gangsters, raw sewage, three-eyed toxic fish.

A Crossrail exhibition called *Tunnel: the archaeology of Crossrail* will open at the Museum of London Docklands in February 2017, featuring one of the skeletons found at Bedlam, which DNA shows died from plague. It is also planning to install a memorial to Bedlam’s dead at Willow cemetery on Canvey, and another at Liverpool Street station in London – marking the perpetual eastern passage of London’s emigres, whether dead or alive. The old insecurity remains. “There were loads of rumours,” says John Harris about locals’ reaction to the news that the Bedlam “plague pit” skeletons were coming to their neighbourhood. “One was we were bringing the black death to Canvey. You get these visions of the grim reaper.”

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