

# Local and Essex History – December 2020

## FERRY ROAD AND BENFLEET CREEK

For centuries, Benfleet Creek has flowed out to the sea across Canvey Island. With the coming of the railways, a bridge was built across the creek at Benfleet station.

Church Creek was home to the people who lived on houseboats on the Benfleet side of the station. In 1960, the creek was closed off to enable the construction of the road under the new railway bridge (thus removing the need for the level crossing at the eastern end of the station).



*This photo was taken from the top of St Mary's Church of the houseboats on Church Creek. The original railway bridge and station are to the top left and Richmond Rec on the right.*

*The Hoy and Half Crown would be in the bottom left.*



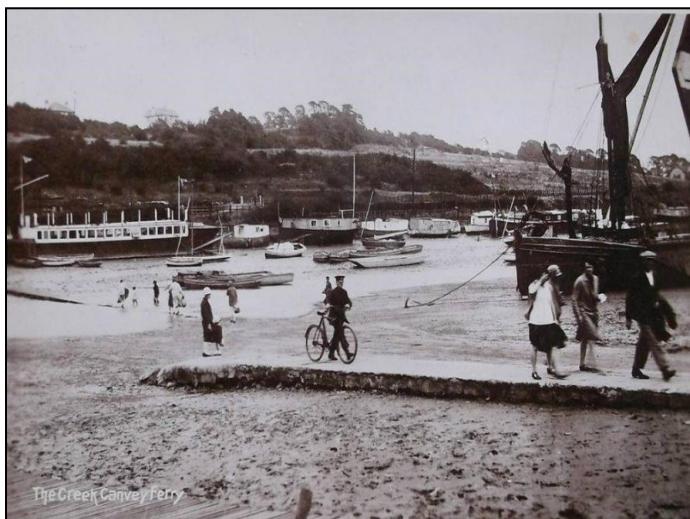
*Again taken from St Mary's looking across Richmond Rec towards Pitsea. The railway line and Canvey Creek can be seen in the top half of the picture. Strange to think that all that's left now is a drainage ditch!*

As it flowed under the bridge, the creek became the channel which for centuries had effectively separated Canvey from the mainland. For generations cartloads of gravel and larger stones were dumped on the bed of the creek, creating a firm crossing place at low tide.

Eventually, "Benfleet hard" became the crossing place for pedestrians and vehicles alike.

For many years the stepping stones and the hard remained the only ways of getting on or off the island at low tide. Once the tide had turned the only way to cross was by means of the small ferry boat that operated throughout the year. Crossing on the ferry cost a couple of coppers.

A small ferryman's cottage was built on the side of the creek close to the spot where the present bridge stands. For the convenience of travellers, Ye Olde Ferry Tea Rooms were opened and continued in business for many years.



With the increase in population it was realised that something more permanent was needed and in the late 1920s the local authority began negotiating for the construction of a bridge across the creek.

Work started on the Colvin Bridge, the first pile being driven in at a special ceremony performed by the then Lord Lieutenant of the county in 1930. It cost about £15,000.

## MAVIS REGAN

## **LITTLE COOPERS COTTAGE, WAT TYLER COUNTRY PARK**



This is Little Coopers Cottage and it is the oldest cottage on the village green at Wat Tyler Country Park. It's thought to date from the 15th Century and is the only cottage of its kind to be found in Essex.

In 1980, the British Airport Authority wanted to build a new terminal at Stansted Airport. On the site was a small group of important listed buildings, which stood in their way. The BAA paid £48,000 for the whole site, which included Little Coopers Cottage.

It was originally an agricultural workers cottage and was dismantled and rebuilt to recreate its appearance in the late 17th Century. It has now been relisted.

**PAULINE HARRINGTON**

## DANIEL DEFOE 1722

Daniel Defoe is best known for writing Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders. However, in 1722 he wrote "A journal of the plague". In that year he was also writing about a trip through Great Britain. This was in Part 1 Through Essex to Colchester – plague, Essex? Seems appropriate today!

Part of a letter written by Daniel Defoe in 1722 "containing a description of the sea coasts of the counties of Essex...." An interesting read!

"At this place may be said to end what we call the Hundreds of Essex; that is to say, the three hundreds or divisions, which include the marshy country, viz. Barnstaple Hundred, Rochford Hundred, and Dengy Hundred.

I have one remark more, before I leave this damp part of the world, and which I cannot omit on the women's account; namely, that I took notice of a strange decay of the sex here; insomuch, that all along this county it was very frequent to meet with men that had had from five or six, to fourteen or fifteen wives; nay, and some more;

and I was inform'd that in the marshes on the other side the river over-against Candy Island, there was a farmer, who was then living with the five and twentieth wife, and that his son who was but about 35 years old, had already had about fourteen; indeed this part of the story, I only had by report, tho' from good hands too; but the other is well known, and easie to be inquired in to, about Fobbing, Curriingham, Thundersly, Benfleet, Prittlewell, Wakering, Great Stambridge, Cricksea, Burnham, Dengy, and other towns of the like situation:

The reason, as a merry fellow told me, who said he had had about a dozen and half of wives, (tho' I found afterwards he fibb'd a little) was this; That they being bred in the marshes themselves, and season'd to the place, did pretty well with it; but that they always went up into the hilly country, or to speak their own language into the uplands for a wife;

That when they took the young lasses out of the wholesome and fresh air, they were healthy, fresh and clear, and well; but when they came out of their native air into the marshes among the fogs and damps, there they presently chang'd their complexion, got an ague or two, and seldom held it above half a year, or a year at most; and then, said he, we go to the uplands again, and fetch another; so that marrying of wives was reckon'd a kind of good farm to them:

It is true, the fellow told this in a kind of drollery, and mirth; but the fact, for all that, is certainly true; and that they have abundance of wives by that very means: Nor is it less true, that the inhabitants in these places do not hold it out; as in other countries, and as first you seldom meet with very antient people among the poor, as in other places we do, so, take it one with another, not one half of the inhabitants are natives of the place; but such as from other countries, or in other parts of this county settle here for the advantage of good farms; for which I appeal to any impartial enquiry, having myself examin'd into it critically in several places."

**MARION COLEMAN**

## BENFLEET WATER TOWER



Edward Clack / Aerial view of the Benfleet water tower in the snow

Although it has never been tested for poltergeist activity, Benfleet Water Tower is apparently home to some supernatural presence.

Paint pots have visibly moved on their own account and strange noises have been heard in the tower when there has been no-one else about.

Scary though this may be to some, the blame for these activities is actually laid at the door of a resident poltergeist, nicknamed Herbert, who is not a destructive sprite, but is considered to be user-friendly.

Quite why the tower should be haunted is not clear, but it could have something to do with the history behind a plaque on an inside wall on the ground floor of the structure which refers to an incident involving two policemen there in the 1920s.

The inscription is unfortunately difficult to read and attempts to discover its significance through an appeal to the local newspaper have proved unsuccessful.

An alternative solution to the cause of all the ghostly activity is that perhaps the site was once used for pagan worship or for a beacon.

On October 6th, 1981 the tower was declared a grade two listed building.

Information is from the BENFLEET COMMUNITY ARCHIVE.