

Local and Essex History – October 2021

Essex Ghost Stories

ST OSYTH PRIORY & VILLAGE



St Osyth Priory - Credit: Archant

The priory was built during the 12th century and according to a 'Time Team' investigation, the village was not built before the 14th century. The priory has an unusual name, it is believed it was named after Princess Osyth, a royal figure who was beheaded by the Vikings because she refused to renounce her faith.

It is said when Princess Osyth was beheaded, she rose from the ground, picked up her head from the floor and walked to the monastery, where she banged on the door 3 times, collapsed and died.

It is said on October 7th that her ghost does the same walk, through Nuns Wood, clutching her severed head.

Other ghosts have been seen as apparitions of monks walking in the priory gardens, holding candles and one monk dressed in white appears more often than the rest.

Also spirits of witches haunt the surrounding area, ten local women were hung for practising witchcraft.

In 1921, two female skeletons were found in a garden in the village and it is thought that one belongs to Ursley Kemp, the first witch to be executed during the 16th/17th century witch trials, held in St Oysth.

Source Data: www.hauntedhovel.com

DENISE PHIPPS

THE BENFLEET DEVIL STEPS



These steps are in a wooded area that lies between Hill Road and Mount Road adjacent to the Bread and Cheese Public House

Steeped in **ghostly rumour** these concrete steps could have been built anytime from the early to the mid-20th Century, and are believed to have gained their name from several local folklore tales - the first is that they were devilish, drawing **crude words** from the mouths of tired pedestrians, as they reached the top of these incredibly old blighters!

Another tale is that a young women **fell to her death** tripping at the top of these steps, subjected to a fall steep enough to be fatal. Rumour has it that she still haunts these steps, having **seen the devil**, frightening her and causing her to fall back to her death at the bottom.

Other stories speak of the **devil himself** living under the steps - ready to pounce on those who linger too long! It is said to the **devil** once knocked at the door of the very old Jarvis Hall, a short way down the road at the top of the steps.

There is one story that once a drunken sailor began making his way from Thundersley down to his boat moored in Benfleet Creek to see a **horned creature with glaring eyes** coming out of the bushes at the bottom of the steps. It might have been a stray billy-goat from a nearby smallholder, **but maybe not!!!!**

Source Data: <http://beyondthepoint.co.uk>

EDWINA LAY

WAS IT a GHOST or WAS IT NOT?



This photo does not show the second hall at the eastern end of the building. However, it is a late photo of the original Thundersley Church School shortly before demolition. (To make way for houses. Sounds familiar?)

I generally consider myself to be someone who does not believe in the existence of ghosts. However, I recall something that happened when I was about eleven, that could have rattled that belief.

Anyone reading this who lived in the area during the 50's & 60's will almost certainly remember St. Peter's original church hall in Church Road, opposite the Thundersley Post Office.

The building was originally built in 1856, as a church school, paid for by Charles Bosanquet, Lord of the Manor of Thundersley, using his own money. This was Thundersley's first Church of England School. It continued to be a school until about 1928 when all remaining pupils transferred to the school in Dark Lane, which was built in 1921.

It is assumed that it then became St Peter's Church Hall. From personal experience I know that by the latter 50's a second hall had been added, at the eastern end of the original building. The halls were used for Sunday Schools, Scouting Groups, the local lending library, jumble sales, mother and toddler groups and the annual Church Christmas celebrations, to name just a few.

Part of the building was a residential unit which was originally occupied by an elderly couple, who were employed as janitors to maintain the building and prepare the halls for the various user groups. However, eventually the elderly couple retired and moved away and they were not replaced by residential janitors. The residential unit became storage area for the Church.

Sometime later, at the end of one of our Scout meetings, one of the scouts asked not to be locked out as he went to the outside toilets. He quickly returned looking somewhat grey and shaking almost uncontrollably. When he was asked what had happened, he said that he had seen a man standing in the grounds of the hall, who just disappeared.

He was so shaken up by the experience that the Scout Master had to take him home.

Subsequently, it came to light that the retired Janitor had passed away on the same evening the scout had seen the "man".

I will leave it up to you, as the reader, to decide was this a ghost, or not?

Source Data: Thundersley Postcard Memories first published 2019, www.hadleighhistory.org.uk

IAN PHIPPS

GHOST STORIES RELATING to CANVEY ISLAND

The Bride of Harvest Road

Have you heard of the tale of the bride that haunts Harvest Road? Apparently, she has been seen walking down Harvest Road in her wedding dress. According to the tale the lady in question lost her childhood sweetheart just before they were to marry.

The groom had stumbled under the wheels of cart and horses in the dark. The bride took to her bed, barely eating and was wasting away. Another marriage was arranged in the hope of bringing her to her senses. Instead, she put on the wedding dress from her wedding to her sweetheart and went out and threw herself in front of the horse at last to be reunited with her sweetheart.

Source Date: Taken from Canvey Community Archive

LEE KING

The Viking Ghost of Canvey

I wonder if those who live in the bungalows of modern Canvey ever see the ghost of the Viking who one moonlight night splashed through the shallow tide on Canvey Point, walked over the sea wall and across the dyke into Charlie's bedroom. Charlie told me the story.

"I laid in me truckle bed and saw the man come out of the water and in me bedroom window. He stood by the bed, dripping with salt water and looked at me right sorrowful. "What do you want mate? I asked. "Who are ye?" "I lost me ship, lost me mates and lost me way, he said. "I want to get home to Denmark."

"Go ye up river, to Grays or Tilbury and you will get a ship to any port in the world." That old boy looked at me right sorrowful. He wore a leather jerkin, what looked like strapped gaiters up to his knees, and a steel helmet with wings standing out over his ears. He carried a short sword in his belt and a battle axe in his hand. He was a Viking, sure as fate. I have seen em in coloured pictures.

"You don't understand" he said. "Me ship was sunk here in the creek and me mates were all killed by you Saxons. Now I am left alone and I can't get home." He turned round, went out of the window, along the plank which leads from the winder to the top of the sea wall, and then on the saltings and the mud flats. He made for the sea and splashed into it. He turned once and waved farewell to me, sad and sorrowful like. The water swallowed him up and I ain't never seen him since.

Source Date: Taken from Canvey Community Archive - James Wentworth Day's Article in Essex Countryside in 1981

LEE KING

Ghost of the Lake

An apparition seen walking the lakeside path is said to be that of a driver looking for his horse and cart. Following a stop at his local hostelry, the man, pursuing a short cut in a befuddled state, drove into the lake, horse and cart quickly sinking into the soft silt.

Another version places the incident in winter and the passage over a frozen lake that gave way.

It was thought by islanders to be a myth, but in 1947 following a very dry summer the lake dried out to a hard clay bed. No one seemed to realise what was beneath their feet until the partial skeleton of a large horse, thought to be a Suffolk Punch, and part of a wooden cart were found when the lake was dredged cleaned in 1982.

It was reported the bones were well preserved but few in number. The age of the horse was estimated by examination of its teeth and skeletal remains to 20+ years. The remains are now housed in the Heritage Museum.

Source Date: Taken from Canvey Community Archive

LEE KING

HARWICH REDOUBT FORT

A company called Essex Ghost Hunters has said that Harwich Redoubt Fort is one of the most haunted locations in Essex.

The fort, built in the early 19th century to protect Harwich port from invasion, is apparently home to a number of spirits. Witnesses have reportedly seen apparitions through the windows and have heard unexplained footsteps. Some have even reported being touched by unseen hands.

Russell Old, company director says they have been to Harwich many times and call one of the rooms, Annie's Room. He says "Her spirit holds people's hands and your hands get pins and needles, it's really good fun."

"But in the cells, there is a dark spirit. One time we could hear shuffling footsteps in one of the cells when suddenly the whole group was physically pushed across the room."

The group of ghost researchers claim there have also been many other mysterious noises, apparitions and hot and cold spots, and that the fort is well known for the apparition of a headless soldier.

It is reported that in 1972 a soldier was decapitated by a cable attached to a 12-ton cannon which broke under the strain. The soldier has been reported to be walking within the grounds of the fort headless and sometimes with his head tucked under his arms.

Harwich Redoubt Fort



Information courtesy of Essex Live

MARION COLEMAN

KEVELDON HATCH SECRET NUCLEAR BUNKER

The large underground bunker near Brentwood was maintained during the cold war as a potential regional government headquarters. Since being decommissioned in 1992, the bunker has been open to the public as a tourist attraction, with a museum focusing on its cold war history.

According to the group, several apparitions roam the complex, including a grey figure who moves from room to room. Witnesses have described it as taking the form of an 'unusually tall elderly lady'.

"We've had sleepovers there," Russell said. "It ended at 2am but a couple of us stayed until 7am in the morning.

"Once my head hits the pillow, I'm asleep, but the others said they couldn't believe I slept through what they heard during the night.

"The bunker was locked off so nobody could get in, but they heard doors banging and people were frightened, so much they couldn't even go out and look. I would have been straight out.

"The spirit of a high-ranking officer can be found in the communications room, he's a very 'no talking' and 'be quiet' type of person.

Kelvedon Secret Bunker



Information courtesy of Essex Live

MARION COLEMAN

ST NICHOLAS CHURCH, CANEWDON



The church tower, was built by Henry V to celebrate his victory at Agincourt. The churchyard with its leaning gravestones has a strangely subdued atmosphere and is haunted by an old woman who was executed for witchcraft and now returns on Halloween. Apparently, Essex Police cordon off surrounding roads to prevent the hordes of 'Halloween pilgrims' who descend on the church.

Canewdon was once renowned for its witches and any woman wanting to join the sisterhood, must dance round the church twelve times at midnight, where upon the devil will appear to perform the necessary initiation.

With acknowledgement to Richard Jones, Haunted Britain and Ireland

MAVIS REGAN

ST OSYTH'S PRIORY, ST OSYTH



The priory dates largely from the 12th century and is the most imposing monastic foundation to survive in Essex. St Osyth was a 7th century East Anglian Queen who refused to renounce her faith. She was beheaded in nearby Nuns Wood by Danish invaders.

Her executioners were astonished when she picked up her head and, holding it at arm's length, walked to the village church, where she knocked several times on the door before slumping to the ground.

It is said that on the 7th October every year, her ghost can be seen in the churchyard at midnight, holding her severed head.

With acknowledgement to Richard Jones, Haunted Britain and Ireland

MAVIS REGAN

THE THORN HOTEL, MISTLEY

The building was once home to Matthew Hopkins the self-proclaimed "Witchfinder General" who claimed to possess "The Devil's Own List" of every witch in the kingdom. Hopkins scoured the county imprisoning and torturing his unfortunate victims till they confessed to any number of heinous crimes. From 1645 - 1647 he was responsible for 74 executions and a further 36 people died in gaol awaiting trial. He made the equivalent of £100,000 from his activities, demanding a fee for every witch he brought to justice.

He died in 1647, but the evil he perpetrated in life has apparently prevented his spirit from resting, for his ghostly figure has been seen at the inn on several occasions.

In 1968 a film was made called *The Witchfinder General*, starring Vincent Price.

With acknowledgement to Richard Jones, Haunted Britain and Ireland

MAVIS REGAN

BORLEY RECTORY



The paranormal investigator Harry Price dubbed the old rectory "The Most Haunted House in England" and claimed that over two hundred ghosts resided within its walls.

Although the house burnt down in 1939, the church and its surrounds are still eerie and many visitors report a sudden feeling of foreboding the moment they set foot in the churchyard.

Ghostly organ music has often been heard coming from inside the empty church. Investigators have tape-recorded phantom footsteps, mysterious tapping, and even a menacing cry that has terrified those who have heard it.

Many photographs taken of the church exterior have been found to include ghostly forms gliding amongst the sunken graves or along the uneven paths.

With acknowledgement to Richard Jones, Haunted Britain and Ireland

MAVIS REGAN

THE FLOATING MONK

This account was related to the author by someone who worked in the photographic company, Ilford Ltd.

Late one summer Friday afternoon, his manager asked him if he would mind working until 6 o'clock that evening in order to complete an urgent order. When the work was completed, he left the premises and started to cycle home along the main road until turning into what was locally known as 'the old road', which took him past Holy Cross church and churchyard.

Just before reaching the church, he noticed what he took to be a man dressed in clerical attire coming from the field opposite the church. Without looking in either direction, the figure walked straight across the road in front of him, so close in fact, that he almost ran into him.

The cleric appeared to be completely oblivious of the near accident and continued on his way into the churchyard. The following Sunday, the cyclist had the opportunity to have a quiet word with the vicar. However, the priest assured him it was definitely not him who had crossed the road at that time, but he thought that what he had seen could well have been the apparition of a monk who had been known to cross the road from the field, about that time of the day, when he was apparently on his way back to his own grave in the churchyard.

Sometime later, the gentleman related his story to a lady colleague who told him that when one evening both she and a friend had been working late at the factory and were cycling home, they too saw what they took to be a monk appear from the field and cross the road ahead of them and vanish into a grave in the graveyard.

Shortly after this, two young girls, while cycling along a road near the Ford Motor Company factory, were startled to see what they were also convinced was a monk floating along the footpath coming from the churchyard, then cross the road and turn into the factory gates, where he vanished.

RINA MUNRO

THE HAUNTED BANK HOUSE

The following account was written in the early 1990s by the lady who then owned The Bank House, Leigh-on-Sea.

Friends threw a lot of stick at me when I bought it because the house had a weird feeling about it. Dark, musty, low-ceilinged, partially ruined by having been partitioned off into flats by previous landlords, ancient wiring, etc., but I fell in love with it.

Having been built in 1751 it was a daunting task, nevertheless, within six years, not only had beams been exposed, but it had been re-wired, re-plumbed and renovated to some of its former glory. When artist John Constable visited his former nanny, who at one time lived there, it was where he allegedly did the sketches for his famous 'Hadleigh Castle' during his stay.

The huge music room, built later on the back of the building, was awe-inspiring, with an inglenook fireplace and a 22 ft. high Tudor beamed ceiling and stained glass inset into the huge bay windows, and was where author Dennis Wheatley held several meetings.

One night, (or possibly early morning), I needed the bathroom. The dim half-light cast gloom across the black and white Italian marble floor in the foyer of what was after all originally a bank and the swing doors - with gold leafed cupids set above them - had been pulled back to allow some airflow, the humid night being the aftermath of a very hot summer's day.

I stepped onto the ice-cold marble tiles; the coldness made me alert and as I walked through the swing doors and up the stairs - the top of which was obscured by the ceiling of the hall - I saw something move above me. There, on the landing at the top of the stairs, was a woman dressed in a diaphanous dark blue muslin gown that looked old and threadbare. She glided into the room that overlooked the garden where usually the view of the sea and the moon competed for beauty.

Instinctively I knew that what I had seen was not human and I had to reluctantly admit to myself, (a sceptic), that I had seen a ghost. Being naturally nosy, I crept up the stairs, anxious to see more. I stood in the room but there was only blackness, there was no moon that night and being in the middle of re-wiring this particular room had no lights either.

'Is there anybody there?' I called. What was I doing, hoping for an answer? If I wanted a sign that my eyes hadn't deceived me, I was to be denied. For some minutes I stood waiting, every hair on my body alive and tingling. Wide awake and disappointed, I eventually went downstairs to bed, but there was no sleep.

When, later, I laughingly told the story to an old resident of Leigh, I half expected to be dismissed as crazy; instead, I got a shock and was very relieved when I was told, 'Oh, dark blue muslin she was dressed in? Then you must have seen the old lady of Leigh. Usually, she wanders round the library gardens.'

RINA MUNRO