

## The Essex Way

**Day 4:** Coggeshall is comfortably the largest town, except for the termini of Epping and Harwich, which has the honour of being visited by the Essex Way. However, the footpath skirts the town centre itself, and leaves Coggeshall via the back door.

From Coggeshall Abbey, the path crosses an ancient bridge over the “back ditch” – a narrow waterway which was the original course of the Blackwater before monks diverted its channel under the mill and across its waterwheel, providing them with bread for centuries. The two sections of the river meet again a hundred yards beyond the mill, at a confluence known as Perch Pool, having been parted for a quarter of a mile. The little stone bridge was probably built by the monks in around 1200 and leads the footpath out through horse paddocks, past weeping willows and watercress beds, and back towards Coggeshall. From here we had a fine view of the church, which commands a position on a slight rise above the town.

The church itself, which the Essex Way passes, was built in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and badly damaged by a bomb in the Second World War, apparently randomly dropped by a plane on its way back to Germany after a raid in London. The building was fully restored in the 1950s, however, and now sits peacefully amongst pollarded lime trees and lichen-covered graves.

As we left Coggeshall by crossing the A120, a thin rain started to fall, which dampened the spirits, and slowed our limping progress for the next few miles along field margins and farm tracks towards Great Tey. This was not a very memorable section of the walk (I blame the weather for this rather than the flat agricultural landscape), though there was a moment of interest when the guidebook indicated that we were passing the curiously named Dillory, an area where, perhaps unsurprisingly, dill used to be grown.

My companion Jamie’s mood visibly dipped further on finding that, on reaching Great Tey, The Chequers was still closed, but I exhorted him to find inspiration from the magnificently imposing village church, located next to the pub, instead. Whether it was setting his mind on higher thoughts, or the emergence of the sun soon afterwards, feelings began to soften as we crossed the railway line and took in the magnificent view of the Chappel viaduct to the north, by now lit by a watery late morning sun.

The branch railway here, linking Marks Tey with Sudbury via Chappel and Bures, is now marketed as The Gainsborough Line. The advertising executives of the Stour Valley Railway clearly felt that the 80s mullets and roguish Essex antique dealers evoked by its previous incarnation as The Lovejoy Line were no longer quite the ticket. There is a push to extend the neighbouring Dedham Vale AONB, and marrying Constable country with Gainsborough, rather than with Eric Catchpole or Tinker Dill, was probably deemed more suitable to these efforts.

The viaduct itself is a vast and impressive Victorian edifice, with the guidebook informing us that it is built of over 7 million bricks and “is probably the largest feat of engineering in Essex”.

The footpath leads down into the valley at this point, and joins the River Colne, which it follows downstream for the next few miles. This is a lovely quiet stretch of the walk, through cricket bat willow plantations, past pumpkin fields and along the summery loveliness of the meandering river. Moorhens and ducks dabbled about amongst the reeds, a kingfisher whistled past, and a couple made their ponderous way upstream in a rowing boat hired from the garden centre a little way ahead. Incongruously, though, the river bank is studded with Second World War pillboxes - built after Dunkirk in anticipation of an East Coast invasion.

The Way crosses Fordstreet and Mill Road in Fordham before leaving the Colne (the longest “all Essex” river) for good just outside West Bergholt. It was then a case of forcing weary feet onwards a little further, until The Half Butt Inn of Great Horkesley came into view, our welcome stop for lunch.

The afternoon saw us entering apple country, reached after we had had passed through a mile or two of wide fields en route to Boxted. This is near where the famous Discovery apple was first produced, while the original tree, dating from the 1950s, can still be seen in Langham. But the area is also renowned for its vineyards, some of which we passed when walking through Carter’s Farm. In fact, the village sign for Langham includes both hanging bunches of grapes and the branch of an apple tree.

The shade and the cool greens of the orchards and vines were a welcome relief from the, by now, oppressive heat, which had been beating down on us on the wide open fields east of Great Horkesley. We were also rewarded with magnificent views of the Stour Valley, above the woods of Boxted.

This is the start of Constable country proper, and it was not long before St Mary’s, Langham, came into view across the Stour valley. This church is familiar for its depiction in many of Constable’s paintings, but the hill on which it was built was also often used as a viewpoint by the artist. St Mary’s is said to contain one of the oldest church chests in the country, which is hewn from a single piece of oak. The churchwarden told us that it was probably used to store finances raised for the Crusades in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

Magnificent Langham Hall, situated opposite the church, also provided an interesting historical diversion. The manor was originally owned by Walter Tiril, the nobleman suspected of having killed William Rufus during a hunt in the New Forest in 1100. The ever-informative guidebook also provided an explanation for the extremely wide turning into the driveway. This was apparently built to accommodate the 6-horse coach driven by the squire William Nocton, High Sheriff of Essex, a colourful character of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

By now, the late afternoon sun was slanting across the lovely Dedham Vale, and it was with some difficulty that we dragged our protesting feet the final mile or so towards the A12, which scythes thunderously across the tranquil scene near Stratford St Mary. By the time we reached Le Talbooth restaurant, the sun was above the yard arm, and two extremely grateful and weary Essex Way pilgrims cooled their blisters in the Stour, pint in hand.

Encountering this river, which for much of its length forms the border between Suffolk to the north and Essex to the south, marked an important landmark on the Way for us, as it would be the dominant theme of the final stage in our journey. Day 4 would take us out along the Stour estuary, and the river would shepherd our final 20 miles towards our final destination at Harwich and our date with the North Sea.

**Day 4:** We slept well that night. But any hopes that the final day’s push would prove to be a stroll in the park were dispelled by the time we had painfully descended the hotel stairs. Our aching muscles and throbbing feet begged us to call it a day, and to take the London to Harwich train line instead. But the thought of the grey North Sea spurred us on, and, partially restored by a plate of bacon and eggs, we set off again, with a gentle breeze at our backs and (figuratively speaking) the smell of salt in our nostrils.

With the roar of the A12 receding into the distance, the footpath here leads through the glorious water meadows on the southern bank of the Stour. With the cows grazing amongst a golden blur of buttercups, butterflies shimmering in and out of the frame, and pollarded willows easefully swaying along the course of the river, we could have been looking at one of Constable's immortal scenes. Indeed, Flatford Mill is less than a mile and a half from the point where the Essex Way diverges from the river to enter the village of Dedham itself.

Dedham is, of course, a charming place, and caught on a quiet weekday morning in summer, as we were lucky enough to find it that day, its effect is that of balm on the soul. The main street is lined with fine Georgian buildings, such as Sherman's House and the Marlborough Head Hotel, while the church is staggering in its scale and beauty. The wealth provided by the wool trade is everywhere to be seen. An enthusiast of history would also certainly enjoy reading about the village's historical connections with some of the first American settlers (including the ancestors of Civil war general Sherman himself), while Alfred Munnings' House – kept exactly as it was when the artist lived there – would have provided leisurely wayfarers with yet more local interest. But we were not men of leisure that day, and skirting Dedham to the west and then the south, we forged onwards.

We passed Dedham Cricket Club, to which the huge church tower provides an elegant backdrop, and along lush paddocks edged with horse chestnut trees. Horses and their foals galloped past, while others drank at a pond sporting a thick carpet of water crowfoot and sprouting willow branches. It was turning out to be a gentle late summer morning, and for a golden moment the world seemed to be at peace with itself.

After a couple of miles of walking through a landscape of farms, fields and alder cars, the reassuringly solid brick and flint tower of Lawford Church came into view. We took a few minutes to rest and to inspect what the official Essex Way guidebook describes as a "a must see" – the elaborate 14<sup>th</sup> century stone carvings inside. They did not disappoint. Gargoyles, local worthies and creatures of all descriptions intermingled with the ornate pale foliage in an effusion of petrified life and energy. But the cool of the church and lush representations got us thinking about lunch, which we had planned to eat on the banks of the Stour, so we wearily trotted on eastwards, towards Manningtree and the vast mudflats of the estuary.

The tiny 22 acre parish of Manningtree, with its associations of witch finder generals and cattle fairs, came and went, as we re-connected with the Stour at the Mistley quayside. It was low water, and small boats lay beached on the mud. Around them gulls squabbled and Canada geese honked noisily, while the attentions of the more discreet wading birds – redshank, oystercatcher and a single curlew, were focussed on the silt and the million million slimy things writhing within. The brackish air was a tonic, and the wide watery vista quite a change from the deep green landscapes we were leaving behind. For us this marked the start of the final stage in our four day pilgrimage, as salt water and huge skies were to dominate the last long afternoon of walking.

Mistley was once a significant port town, with a significant ship building industry, and a trade hub for bargeloads of goods coming from upriver before heading to the sea and on to London. However, the arrival of the railway largely put an end to that.

Passing Mistley towers, the smell of malting barley reached our nostrils. It seemed to have reached those of the swans too, because a large number of them were milling about in the water close to the EDME factory yard, through which the footpath passes. Malting is a very old and important industry in Mistley, and EDME are now the largest producers of malt in the country, with an output of about

13,000 tons of malt-based ingredients. The chimney looms massively over the village, and the sweet smell of malting barley is pervasive.

The Essex Way here takes a sudden diversion south, away from the water and up into the woods of Furze Hill, before heading eastwards again. Here we marched across the arable fields and through Bradfield, eager to quickly cover ground, regain the company of the estuary and find a spot for a picnic lunch. In no time we had dipped under the railway track and had met the sea wall again at Jacques Bay, which is part of Wrabness Nature Reserve. Managed by the Essex Wildlife Trust, this 28 hectare site is a rare stronghold for turtle doves, and was recently extended to link different sections.

It was shortly after having re-joined the land of salt and mud, that, from the scrubby bushes on the shore, our reveries were interrupted by that miracle of nature – the song of a nightingale. The ecstatic, sobbing notes stopped us in our tracks, and, to (almost) quote Clare, for a few minutes we shared the happiest part of Summer's fame with that little bird. The river, the mudflats and that June day itself had for us, and for those few minutes, been lifted a hair's breadth above the mundane earth. A bird has the power to change everything.

With the rapturous song of that immortal bird fading gradually behind us, we followed another short detour inland, and up to the small village of Wrabness. The churchyard was deep in buttercups and set amongst these was the delightful wooden bell-cage, home to two of the church bells ever since the original stone tower collapsed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Outside the Hall next door, a small stall had been set up, with an honesty box, selling vegetable plants and seedlings, and a small selection of bread and pastries. We gleefully took advantage, and bought a couple of tasty-looking cheese numbers for lunch.

With rumbling stomachs, we snuck down a shaded lane and back towards the shining expanse of the Stour, respectfully averting our eyes from the caravan site on our left, past some beach huts, onto the sea wall, and out amongst the salt marshes, where we finally let our rucksacks and bodies drop onto the lush reeds above the tide line.

I have rarely enjoyed a lunch so much. Not only did it feel truly earned, with 12 or 13 miles already under the belt that morning, but the setting was sensational. We were out of the breeze, with a view across the muddy tidal inlets, with their wading birds and sea lavender, over the strip of sandy beach and away to the peaceful river beyond – and beyond that still to Suffolk, shimmering hazily in the afternoon heat, with the Royal Hospital School lying low and monumental on the horizon. We kicked off our boots, lay back, and dozed while a cuckoo called tirelessly at our backs, and a reed warbler flitted in blissful ignorance close by.

After lunch, the footpath took us along the estuary for a while longer, past glimpses of Grayson Perry's startling "A House for Essex" and out to the lovelier Copperas Bay, itself a nature reserve fringed with woodland reaching down to the water, a site visited by large numbers of overwintering waders. Here, we were again reluctantly forced to make our way inland, with the windmill in Ramsey soon in sight and beckoning us on. This post mill was actually built in Woodbridge, over the border in Suffolk, but was moved to Ramsey in 1842. It was working until the Second World War and still has its sails from that era.

We jinked our way across Ramsey and deftly found a gap between the metropolises of Dovercourt and Little Oakley, to emerge into wide open grassy fields, with the path set upon a dyke bearing us unmistakably towards the coast.

It was a joy to have our first view of the North Sea after four days of inland walking. In fact, the only slight drawback to the Way, in my mind, is that it is unable to take in more of Essex's massively long coastline – most of which is made up of the glorious tangle of mud and saltmarsh along the Colne, Blackwater and Crouch estuaries to the south. But that is a fault of geography, and only a minor disadvantage to the more direct south-west to north-east trajectory of the footpath. Hopefully anyone who undertakes some or all of the Essex Way, and who is not previously familiar with the beauty of the Essex countryside, will be convinced to venture further afield and to discover more of the county's hidden delights at their leisure.

Soon enough, we reached the sea, and the path turned to nudge us up the coast along the final section of the walk. It was late afternoon, the wind had got up, and white horses broke on the grey face of the water. On the horizon ahead of us, the cranes of Felixstowe port loomed like a scene from another planet, so distant had modern industry and machinery seemed since we had left the tube station at Epping. We followed the curve of the stony beach on one side and the colourful beach huts on the other, and watched the commercial shipping, pleasure boats and the bright seagulls tackle the whipping wind and the vicissitudes of the *mackerel-crowded sea*.

We passed the iron lighthouses of Dovercourt Bay, rounded the breakwater, and strolled, tired but happy, along the prom of Harwich proper, as the journey neared its conclusion. The High Lighthouse, set just back in the town, marks the end of the Essex Way, and it was with a sense of achievement that we finally reached the waymark and took the obligatory photographs. A dip in the sea, followed by fish and chips on the beach, were a fitting end to four days and 81 miles of walking.

For as long as I can remember I had wanted to walk the length of the Essex Way, and when I eventually got round to doing it, it did not disappoint. It winds through a wonderful variety of Essex's landscapes, and offers constantly changing scenery mixed with endless points of historic and cultural interest. The route is a splendid testament to those pioneers at the CPRE who, fifty years ago, put their ambitious ideas into action, and went about linking footpaths from Epping to the North Sea to create this delightful long distance route, the first of its kind in England.