

Local and Essex History – May 2021

History of Local Churches

ST MARGARET'S of ANTIOCH BOWERS GIFFORD, BASILDON, ESSEX

The official name of this church is St Margaret's of Antioch. However, locally it is more generally known as St Margaret's Church.

St Margaret's Church is of Anglican faith and it is located on the edge of Bowers Gifford marshes on the outskirts of Basildon, Pitsea in Essex.

The church is of historic interest and is a Grade 2 (star) listed building with English Heritage. The church dates back to Saxon times and is recorded in the Domesday Book and is a rare example of a working marsh located church.

St Margaret's Church is built of Kentish ragstone rubble with some flint and Roman brick, the dressings are Reigate stone and the roofs are slate. There is a wooden spire which was added in Tudor times, also the bell tower was added around this time. The tower can be reached by climbing twenty-five steeply winding steps where you can see three bells housed, these bells are fourteenth century amongst the oldest in the county, and they are rung regularly.

In the grounds of the church lay the remains of a stone church built by Sir John Giffard in the early fourteenth century and traces of the church still remain in the south wall. The church was a gift given by the lords of the manor, and eventually the Giffard gave the name to the village of Bowers Gifford.

In the church there is an incomplete brass of Sir John Giffard's armour, in the sanctuary. There is also a fifteenth century piscina with moulded jambs and tri-folded head, (a free-standing wash basin for washing holy vessels). There is a wooden font cover dating back to the sixteenth century, it has an old finial with facets and lozenges ornaments, painted gold, red and white. The font has an octagonal bowl moulded under edge, plain stem with hollow-chamfered base. The glorious east window was installed in 1871, after winning a prize in the Paris Exhibition of 1870.

Several times the church has fallen into neglect. During the eighteenth century the church was actually used as a barn. Restoration work still continues and in 2000 the wooden steeple, which was perforated by woodpeckers was restored thanks to the Cleanaway Pitsea Marsh Trust. In 2003 they also generously helped to fund and restore the roof.

It has been said that the church is haunted and during the middle of the last century parishioners were praying in the church when the organ started playing, but no one was there. No other reports have been found, but people have said if you stand among the ancient tombs, you never feel alone.

Another strange phenomenon has been reported in the area where people driving down the lane to the church in the evening have experienced electrical problems with headlights flickering and then going out plunging the road into pitch darkness, others have experienced brake failure.

Unexplained shadows flicker over the site, thuds, whistles and rattling of chains have also been heard.

On visiting St Margaret's Church, you will experience the calm and tranquillity of this historic building with its haven of peace in this busy world and the sense of the spiritual atmosphere which gives you the strength to face these hectic times.

Source Data: www.essexghosthunters.co.uk, www.st-margarets-church.co.uk, www.british-history.ac.uk, www.achurchnearyou.com

DENISE PHIPPS

FROM THE DUTCH CHAPEL to THE HERITAGE CENTRE FORMALLY CANVEY'S CHURCH of ST. KATHERINE

Until the early 17th century, what is now known as Canvey Island was unsuitable for human habitation. However, it was valuable grazing land, with the grazing rights divided between the nine parishes of South Benfleet, North Benfleet, Bowers Gifford, Pitsea, Vange, Laindon, Hadleigh, Prittlewell, and Southchurch.

In 1618 the Dutch Cottage was built, which remains on Canvey Island to this day. It is probable that a Dutch Engineer, funded by a wealthy, London based haberdasher, resided in the cottage while pondering a solution to stop the island flooding, which all too often resulted in the loss of valuable livestock.

Four years later work began on the sea wall, with several hundred Dutch labourers. Sea defences were finally finished in 1624. About two hundred of the Dutch labourers who had been employed on the sea defences remained on the island, where they found employment working on the land.

In 1628 these Dutch citizens petitioned King Charles 1st to be allowed to hold services in a local church in their mother tongue. The King agreed and in 1631 a small timber chapel was completed on the site of today's Heritage Centre.

Due to the location of the chapel, it was difficult to obtain willing ministers and between 1631 and 1649 the chapel had a total of six ministers. In 1650 the Dutch were complaining that they had been without a minister for a whole year.

From 1651 to 1654 England and Holland were at war, so the lack of a minister could not be addressed. Even after aggression ceased the issue of a suitable minister could not be resolved between the Dutch Church in London and the Canvey based community, until late 1657 when a minister was finally appointed, although, that minister only remained until May 1658.

By 1657 a number of English families had located to Canvey, making it an inconvenient distance to continue using their previous parish churches. They applied to be allowed to use the Dutch Chapel instead. However, the request was refused on the grounds that permission was given to build the chapel on the understanding that services should only take place in the Dutch language.

Finally, a minister was appointed in 1661, who remained in place until he resigned in 1681. However, services somehow continued until 1704. By then most of the Dutch workers had moved from the island, settling on the mainland and having learnt English were able to attend services in local parish churches.

After a few years the chapel was in fact used for English services and in 1709 Reverend Mr Lord was appointed as curate-in-charge of the island.

However, the Dutch Chapel had become very dilapidated and in 1712, 81 years after it was originally built, it was demolished and rebuilt, most likely on the same spot. The new building was consecrated as St. Katherine's Chapel, by the Bishop of London, on June 11th 1712, making it the first English Church on the island. It was a small timber structure able to accommodate around 80 worshipers. Services were held until 1745, with ministers being supplied by the 9 parishes on the mainland.

Despite the Dutch having completed the original sea defences in 1624, it is believed that failure to adequately maintain the defences resulted in serious flooding of the island.

A violent storm in February 1713, (exactly 240 years, to the month, prior to the 1953 floods), resulted in particularly heavy flooding. There were also numerous floods between 1720 and 1738. The one in February 1736, (what is it with Canvey & flooding in February?), being perhaps the worst, with the water four feet deep, resulting in the loss of many livestock.

It is believed that jointly these floods had an ongoing detrimental effect on the fabric of the chapel, as by 1745 another rebuild was necessary. A period of only 33 years.

The second English Church was similarly constructed as the first church, with a timber construction, roofed in red tiles. However, this church was dedicated to St Peter instead of St Katherine.

No services were conducted at the church if the weather was considered bad, or during the winter. In order to communicate that the church was open, a flag was raised on the spire and the shutters on the windows were taken down.

Marriages of residents were conducted at their respective parish churches and burials generally took place in South Benfleet. There are those who believed that for long periods the church was only used as a convenient repository for smuggled goods.

By 1792 there were 50 houses on Canvey, housing a population of about 200. However, the church was considered, by those in authority, to be adequate because no attempt to increase its size was made. It was partially rebuilt in 1849, perhaps due to ongoing floods, particularly during its early days.

In 1862 the interior underwent some beautification actions. Five stained-glass windows were added, seating was renewed and a communion table and pulpit were added.

In 1872 the Reverend Henry Hayes became curate-in-charge of Canvey, becoming Vicar in 1881 when the island became a separate civil and ecclesiastical parish.

Reverend Hayes had plans to enlarge the church, by obtaining additional land to extend the site. This proved to be very difficult, so it was decided to erect a new church in the existing churchyard, but about 20 foot further back from the road.

The third English Church was consecrated on November 9th 1875, by Bishop Claughton of Rochester, and dedicated to St Katherine.

Like the previous three places of worship built on this site, the main structure is timber. Looking at the building today you could be forgiven for thinking that it is a brick structure. However, the timber structure was rendered over during the 1930's, giving it the appearance, it has today.

While the majority of the third English Church was a new build, the porch, five stained-glass windows and some interior furniture from the previous building were incorporated.

At time of this document being written the current building is 146 years old and is the longest survivor of the four houses of worship built on this site. However, unlike the previous buildings this one has undergone a number of changes, including the addition of an organ, three years after the building's consecration.

In fact, the last nail had hardly been hammered in when the decision was made to add a Choir Vestry to the north wall of the building. This was approved and added, without which the footprint of the building would not be a cruciform as it is today.

During the 1970's a decision was made to demolish the current building as it was no longer being used as a parish church. However, we have Aubrey Stevens and Margaret Payne to thank for the building's reprieve. By establishing a Historical and Conservation Society and working with the Church Commission the building has been used as an Arts and Crafts Centre and Folk Museum since 1979.

I have family connections with this church. My maternal grandparents' ashes are buried in the graveyard, my parents were married there in 1950, and I remember as a child attending the weddings of elder cousins there.

Source Data: www.canveyisland.org, www.canveyislandheritagecentre.com

IAN PHIPPS

ST JAMES THE LESS CHURCH, HADLEIGH

Hadleigh's Parish Church, St James the Less, is thought to have been built in around 1140 by the Normans. However, this may not be true. By the north door of the church there is a Saxon Elf charm on the wall. This was thought to stop the Devil from returning after baptisms.

The main part of St James is about the same size as the Saxon church of St Peters at Bradwell. The Normans sometimes altered or extended Saxon churches which were built of stone and this may be what happened at St James as the rounded apse is typically Norman. Perhaps then, Hadleigh has a rare Saxon church which contains a stained-glass window showing an East Saxon king.

On the south side of the chancel in St James church is a beautiful stained-glass window showing a king and a bishop. Saebert was a pagan king of Essex. He became a Christian and was probably baptised by St Mellitus. King Saebert helped St Cedd set up the then wooden building of St Pauls in London. He died in 617.

Two years later in 619, St Mellitus became Archbishop of Canterbury. For a long time, it was believed that Saebert was buried in Westminster Abbey but it seems more likely he was buried close to Prittlewell Priory.

The churchyard is Saxon. When the Salvation Army came to Hadleigh in 1890, because they were not allowed to bury their dead in un-consecrated ground, it was agreed that the south east corner of the churchyard would be reserved for them.

Later burials were made in other parts of the churchyard. It is a fascinating graveyard with many interesting gravestones. One shows that the wife of Commissioner Smith, Elizabeth, was a missionary to the Zulu people. Another two belong to men who fought in the Crimea War.

On the south side of the church are graves of members of the Wood family who gave the church some of its stained-glass windows. The Wood family were local landowners and were active church members. They lived at Solby's House during the 19th century.

Another grave is that of an old lady whose ghost has roamed to local buildings for many years. Finally, there is the grave of Hadleigh's White Wizard, Cunning Murrell...!

Source: <https://www.hadleighhistory.org.uk>

Pauline Harrington

CHURCH OF ALL SAINTS, VANGE



A church could have stood in this commanding hilltop position for 1000 years. For most of this time All Saints served a small village community which was called 'Fengge' in 963, 'Phenge' in Domesday Book (1086) and 'Fange' in 1203, indicating a fen or marshy area.

Now it is situated near the southern boundary of Basildon, which has developed in and around former country villages over the past 50 years. In the 1860s Vange was a tiny village of 160 inhabitants, now it is a vast parish of over 12,000.

With the growth of Basildon southwards, a new church of St Chad was built in 1957–58 just to the north-east of the old church. Both churches were in use until 1994 but the isolated position of All Saints led to vandalism and theft, and after two major thefts of tiles from the roof, the building was closed and declared pastorally redundant in 1996.

Because of its antiquity and interest, it was vested in The Churches Conservation Trust in January 2003, to be cared for by the Church and the nation*

All Saints has changed and evolved over the centuries and contains work of many periods. This hilltop position may indicate an early site of Christian worship, although there is no visible evidence in the present building.

Late 1000's and 1100's – Much of the present nave, its east wall and the chancel arch and also maybe parts of the chancel, date from this period. The font was made during the late 1100's.

The 1300's and 1400's – The earliest recorded rector was John de Bampton, in 1328.

The 1500's – When John Sawnder's coffin was carried up the path for burial in the churchyard in 1503, a sheep (valued at 13d) was driven in front of it, fulfilling an Essex custom, called the 'fordrive', where an animal, given as an offering to the church when a person died, was driven at the head of the funeral procession. In 1518 repairs were taking place when Walter Bundock bequeathed 3s.4d towards the 'reparation' of the church.

The 1600's and 1700's – By this time the interior was furnished for the requirements of the Church of England. During the 1600's it acquired a pulpit, of which the top deck forms the present pulpit. A set of rails was installed to prevent dogs from 'defiling ye sanctuary'. The royal arms of Queen Anne (1702–14) were known to have been in the east window and it may have been during her reign that the work was done.

1816 – A parish rate was levied which raised £240 for repairs; a considerable sum in those days and the repairs must have been extensive. The belfry was rebuilt and possibly the interior was re-seated with new box pews. The weather vane displays the date of 1816, when the belfry may have been rebuilt.

In 1836 –37 the west wall was either rebuilt or extensively restored and the western gallery was erected to provide additional seating for 70 people. The work cost £70.1s.3d. In 1896 the nave was restored; its roof was re-boarded and the box pews were replaced by the present seating. At this time the pew-rent system was abolished and all seats became free of any charge.

The churchyard was extended in 1929 and again in 1949. All Saints continued in regular use for much of the 20th century and repairs were made in 1961, 1966 and 1970.

Following its vesting in The Churches Conservation Trust, a major programme of repairs costing some £300,000 was carried out during 2004. The wall paintings and monuments were conserved.

All Saints stands proudly on the summit of its hillock, visible for some distance along the A13 to the south. The church entrance is from the old London Road through its large churchyard extension which contrasts with the old country churchyard round the church at the top.

From this elevated position there are views eastwards to the hilltop tower which is all that remains of Pitsea's demolished church and to Canvey Island, southwards across the Thames to Kent and south-westwards to the tower of Fobbing church.

Inside, light floods in through the clear glass of the windows creating a bright and homely interior. The vandalised and destroyed Victorian windows were replaced in 2004 by clear glass with blue borders. The east window contained 19th Century stained-glass and was reglazed and reset in 1964. All that remains of this are the rays of the Holy Spirit at the very top.

Some fragments of the smashed glass were incorporated into a wooden cross now in the parish church of St Chad. Also destroyed were the late-19th Century figures of Peter and Cecilia in the north window of the nave.

The Norman chancel arch is small and low, probably 900 years old, although much repaired. On the wall to the west of the south chancel window are traces of 13th-century wall painting showing a masonry pattern, imitating stonework, with little flower designs. This is one of the small areas where the plaster remains.

There are several memorials on the walls of the church.

1. A wall plaque commemorates Rev George Maule who was rector for 28 years until his death in 1667.
2. Rev David James, 'near 20 years Curate of this Parish' (d.1806) and Elizabeth, his eight-month-old daughter, who died in 1804, are commemorated on a rectangular marble plaque.
3. A plaque in black and figured marbles commemorates Mary Maule (wife of Rev Maule), who died in 1659. Also commemorated is Charles, their only child, who died shortly before his fourth birthday.
4. A small plaque (unveiled in November 1935) to Elijah Barham Johnson (d.1924) and Ellen his wife (d.1933), who were 'lifelong members of this congregation'.
5. A brass war memorial plaque, mounted on wood, bearing the names of 21 Vange parishioners who lost their lives in the First World War (1914–1918)

MAVIS REGAN

Acknowledgements

The Church Conservation Trust Pamphlet by Roy Tricker (Field Officer with The Churches Conservation Trust 1991-2002) who acknowledges an earlier pamphlet on the church by Mrs J K Payne and the research of the church's architect, Alan Greening and to Lambeth Palace Library and the Essex County Record Office for the use of material in their care.

*The Churches Conservation Trust is the leading charity that cares for and preserves English churches of historic, architectural or archaeological importance that are no longer needed for regular worship. It promotes public enjoyment of them and their use as an educational and community resource. Whatever the condition of the church when the Trust takes it over its aims are, first and foremost, to put the building and its contents into a sound and secure condition as speedily as possible. Then the church is repaired so that it is welcoming to visitors and those who attend the public events or occasional services that may be held there (Trust churches are still consecrated). There are some 340 churches scattered widely throughout England. Many of the churches are open all year round, others have keyholders nearby; all are free. A notice regarding opening arrangements or keyholders will normally be found near the door. Otherwise, such information can be obtained direct from the Trust during office hours or from the website www.visitchurches.org.uk.

ST PETER'S CHURCH, THUNDERSLEY

The Original Church on the St Peter's site was dedicated to St Michael and was erected in 1120. On Christmas Day 1209, it was burnt down but part of the Norman structure was saved. The church was rebuilt between 1220 and 1230 and was then dedicated to St Peter. It was opened on St Peter's Day (June 23rd) in 1230.

In 1885, Rector William Wordsworth Talfourd rebuilt and extended the 12th century Chancel. This was the first time its structure had been changed since it burnt down in 1209. He used pine for the roof timber and replaced the three rectangular east windows, of non-descriptive glass, with the beautiful East window in memory of his father.

The weather vane bears the figures of St Michael and St Peter. The bell tower was built later to carry the bell given to St Peter's to commemorate the victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588. The modern extension was built in 1965-6 and was consecrated on 2nd April 1966. This left very little of the old chancel.

St Peter's Church is the Parish Church of Thundersley, located in Church Road on top of a hill with far reaching views across south Essex. It is alongside Coombe Wood which has Village Green Status. The hill beneath the Church is home to very active badgers and their setts can be seen around the steps beside the cemetery.

Robert Drake was a Rector of the Parish. He was burned at the stake on 24th April 1556 at Smithfield market for his Protestant Faith. A memorial to him and other martyrs can be found in Rayleigh High Street. He is commemorated at the Church every year around 24th April. The Primary School at the bottom of the Hill is named after him. A plaque in his memory was erected in St Peter's Church in 2013.

The Ecclesiastical census of 1851, appears to say that the Church "much requires and is well worthy of repairs" and "is distant (2 miles away) from a newly arisen cluster of 36 cottages in the Parish". A "new Day school to be built may increase the Sunday Scholars." It also mentions that "The Parish is in extreme poverty". Informant: William Howlett, Minister.

I was married at St Peter's in 1960 before it was extended. Although I lived in Leigh-on-Sea, my husband's home was within the Parish. Our reception was in the upstairs room at The Castle in Hadleigh.

(From various sources but particular thanks to Hadleigh and Thundersley Community Archive www.hadleighandthundersleycommunity)

MARION COLEMAN



Image from Margaret Blewitt's article "St. Peter's Church before the extension"
(approx. 1961/2)

This picture of St. Peter's Church was taken around 1961/62

The picture below was taken this year



ST. MARY'S CHURCH

The original small church, which very probably rose in the aftermath of the Battle of Benfleet of A.D. 893, would have been led by a priest sent by the nuns of St. Mary's, Barking Abbey.

The beginnings of the present church date from soon after the Norman Conquest. Benfleet's vicar was, and is, appointed by Westminster Abbey. The earliest known was John de Cornubiensis (1189-98).

Francis Clerke, Rector of North and South Benfleet, died in 1734. In his will he bequeathed three houses, including his own residence in Shoreditch, to his sister. He also charged his sister 'In Trust' to have the chancel laid out in marble and to buy and set up a new organ in the parish church of South Benfleet '.....in two years after my decease' and also to pay yearly for ever an organist £30 'to play upon the same'.

In 1737, George Frederick Handel, after a mild stroke, began composing. His new opera was Faramondo. When this was produced in London, in January 1738, a 'Mr. Mantel' is named as one of the subscribers.

That is the earliest known record of Benfleet's new organist Johann Christian Mantel in England and would place his arrival here around 1737. Later Handel reciprocated by becoming a subscriber to Mantel's music.

St. Mary's has six bells. The largest and oldest of 1636 is the tenor, 3 1/2 ft. in diameter, and weighing 11 3/4 cwt. The newest is the treble, added in 1949 to commemorate the Peace after the Second World War.

Dating from late in the 15th century, the south porch has been called the glory of St. Mary's, a beautiful specimen of carved oak. It is one of the oldest in the country.

Sir Charles Nicholson, who died in 1949, is buried on the south side of the west tower in a family tomb that also contains his wives, Evelyn Louise, nee Olivier, who predeceased him and who was an aunt to the actor Laurence Olivier and Catherine Maud, nee Warren.

Other monuments include a table tomb from the 1720's which belongs to James Matthews, a local farmer and Hoyman. The inscription reads 'Sixty-three years our Hoyman sailed merrily around. Forty four lived parishioner where he's aground. Five wives bear him thirty-three children. Enough, land another as honest before he gets off'. The monument is listed as Grade II.

Source Data: Taken from South Benfleet a History by Robert Hallmann & Wikipedia

RINA MUNRO