

# ESSEX PAST

The newsletter of the VCH Essex Trust

NO.25

AUGUST 2021



Part of a view of the town of Harwich in 1730, from Samuel Dale's *The History and Antiquities of Harwich and Dovercourt*. The just-visible letters show:  
B-The Lesser Light-House; C-The Shotley Ferry-House; F-The Haven;  
G-The cliff where the Beacon stood; H-Boys gathering Copperas Stones

## LETTER FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Firstly, an apology.

Having missed the pleasure, both of an attended AGM, last year, and any kind of celebration for the publication of Volume XII Part 1, it is even more frustrating that this year the Trustees have again felt unable to risk an open AGM. Notwithstanding the government's 'Freedom Day' messaging, we are persuaded that to plan for an open meeting in September might well lead to its cancellation. At least, this year, we shall be offering Zoom participation for the initiated.

Covid, naturally, has had its effect on our programme as detailed in the Editor's report. So Volume XII, Part 2 (*the Sokens*) will almost certainly be published next year. The Southend 'short', too, may be slightly delayed. As a very solid and substantial piece of work by the Southend group, we are sure that it will be as popular as the Harwich 'short' which is still selling well.

Progress on Volume XIII (*Harwich*) is now benefitting from the Essex Heritage funded research post to enable the writing of the 18<sup>th</sup> century chapter, leaving the Editor free to progress the medieval and Tudor chapters.

Financially, you will see that our situation is quite sound, again due to the slowing of activity during the pandemic. This will change as activity returns and, as always, seeking forward funding will become a priority next year.

In this strange time, when the Trustees' meetings have been on Zoom, we have had little chance to develop the relationship with new trustees. This assumes a greater importance in that, over the last year we have lost another most experienced and valuable trustee, Stan Newens, who will be greatly missed (*see pages 8-9*).

Also likely to be greatly missed (and their loss deplored) is the threatened demise of departments of history in some of our universities. The actual or intended closure of history departments at Sunderland, Aston, South Bank and Kingston, plus that of the

prestigious archaeology department at Sheffield, is sending a message from government and universities that future financial rewards for their students are the only benchmarks for the existence of schools of study. This is barbarism and is a dark shadow developing over the future of the humanities in and beyond universities.

Whatever the future, the VCH Essex Trust is in a good position, its exceptionally fruitful publishing programme only slightly delayed by the pandemic (and the IHR change of publisher –see page 16). What we now hope and plan for is an open meeting as soon as is practicable with our friends and supporters where we can celebrate our successful programme and share our expectations for the future.

GEOFFREY HARE  
*Chairman*

**\*\*\* VCH ESSEX ‘VIRTUAL’ AGM \*\*\***

will be held on Saturday 18 September 2021 at 2.30 pm.

The formal papers for the AGM come to you with this issue of *Essex Past*, but with one significant change from last year’s virtual AGM - there will be a ZOOM component this year.

Please do try to give us the pleasure of seeing you by joining us on Zoom- perhaps even by begging the help of a knowledgeable friend or family member to set it up for you.

The technical information you need is on the Agenda; or here:

**Link for Zoom from 2.30 pm**

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83071822163>

Meeting ID: 830 7182 2163

For advice and help, please contact Sarah Manning-Press on  
[sarah.manning-press@virginmedia.com](mailto:sarah.manning-press@virginmedia.com)

## FROM THE EDITOR

This has been a very strange year for the VCH office, with a mixture of frustration and positive news in about equal measure. For most of 2020 and the start of 2021, many archives and libraries have either been closed or operating under restrictions. Although the ERO has now returned to virtual full-functioning, other archives including the TNA have restrictions still in place. Even when original documents may be consulted, the open-shelf libraries of archives are frequently closed. All this has had a limiting effect upon the original research carried out by the VCH and also upon the final checking of references before submitting material to VCH central office. However, we were fortunate in that an earlier policy of digitally photographing material for Volume XIII (Harwich and Dovercourt) left us sufficient to work on during lock-down periods.

Cause for celebration in 2020 was the final publication *VCH Essex XII: St Osyth to the Naze: North-East Essex Coastal Parishes (Part 1): St Osyth, Great and Little Clacton, Frinton, Great Holland and Little Holland*. As one friend has commented, with a title that extended no wonder it took so long to produce! The only pity was that the public health situation meant that a launch event was not possible. Also, in September 2020, *Part 2 of Volume XII: The Soken: Kirby-le-Soken, Thorpe-le-Soken and Walton-le-Soken* was sent to VCH central office for peer review and editing. Those processes were impacted by the health crisis and have taken a long time, with the final revisions only now being completed. The book's publication has been further delayed by the central VCH's decision to set up an in-house publisher, the University of London Press. However, as you can see from the brief report on page 16, Boydell & Brewer will still be the publisher of our Volume XII part 2, and I understand that a new publication timetable is to be issued later this summer.

Progress has also continued with Volume XIII. A report later in this newsletter concerns our new two-year project, being undertaken by Dr Andrew Senter, to cover the history of Harwich and Dovercourt, 1714–1815. Andrew’s contract started in April 2021 and he has got off to a flying start, having already drafted an Economic History section full of fascinating detail about the town and port of Harwich’s industries and commerce. I would also like to remind everyone that Andrew Senter’s VCH ‘Short’ *Harwich, Dovercourt and Parkeston in the 19th Century* is still available. It proved very popular with readers, partly as a result of the immense help we received from the Harwich Society in promoting the book. There are only about 50 copies remaining, which can be bought at £14 each (£16 with P&P) from the Hon. Secretary ([patriciaherrmann@talk21.com](mailto:patriciaherrmann@talk21.com)) or the editor ([c.c.thornton@btinternet.com](mailto:c.c.thornton@btinternet.com)).

Meanwhile, I have continued research and analysis for the medieval and Tudor periods, and plan to start drafting the text for the medieval sections in the second half of 2021 even if a few gaps may have to left for later completion (depending upon the archival situation). A short article about fishing in medieval Harwich, mainly drawn from the court rolls, is included in this newsletter. The medieval account rolls for Harwich have also produced much of interest, one aspect being information on the manor house of the Earls of Norfolk at Dovercourt in the late 13th and early 14th centuries. There is constructional detail about the house, which was apparently situated next to the church and rather grand. As well as the normal range of rooms it had, for example, a ‘knight’s chamber’ and an adjacent stable for their horses. Important visitors were accommodated, their horses fed and presents (or bribes?) given. In 1286, in the time of Roger Bigod, 5th Earl of Norfolk, one visitor was the royal coroner for Essex who came to take an inquest on two dead men at Harwich. Professional hunters were also hired to hunt in Roger’s park and his hounds and their pups were expensively maintained. In 1287

a large new rabbit warren was constructed and enclosed by 159 perches of ditch (at the standard 16½ feet per perch, the enclosure had about 875 yards of ditch, indicating a warren of perhaps 10 acres in extent). Early medieval rabbits were relatively frail creatures, and the Earl's officers looked after the new colony; hutches were made for the rabbits and enclosed by a hedge, presumably to keep out predators.

One misfortune brought about by Covid-19 was that the Clacton VCH Group's Port Books Project had to be temporarily halted in 2020 as it relied on face-to-face palaeography sessions. The Chairman, Roger Kennell, and I are watching the evolving health situation in the hope that we can re-start sometime in 2021 or, if difficulties continue, find another way of the group actively assisting. In the meantime, everyone in the group has maintained contact through a monthly e-newsletter. The Southend VCH Group led by Ken Crowe has been able to continue its research and is now completing the final writing up and revisions for its planned VCH paperback 'Short' on the history of Southend. As the word-length has now grown inexorably beyond the limit allowed by the VCH 'Shorts' publishing format, the Group will investigate alternative possibilities with VCH central office.

An initiative by VCH Essex trustee, Dr Johanna Dale, also led to the VCH Essex Trust organizing two online 'Zoom' talks. On 12 May Ken Crowe entertained us with 'The arrival of Mr and Mrs London at Southend' whilst on 16 June I summarised the essence of the forthcoming VCH Essex XII (part 2) in 'A very peculiar place: the Essex Soken from its origin to its dissolution'. Despite a few teething troubles with technology and recording, the talks were well attended and everyone seemed to appreciate them.

CHRIS THORNTON  
*Editor*

## THE TRUST'S FINANCES

In the accounts to 31 December 2020, I was very pleased to report a healthy level of reserves at £92,475 with a small increase over the previous year end which was £91,532. This was a difficult year without physical meetings, but volunteers have continued to work when possible with expenditure on the Editor and printing costs of £18,116 matched by some generous donations as well as a steady inflow of gifts from other one-off contributions.

In 2021 I am delighted to confirm that with the grant from the English Heritage Trust of £5,000, Andrew Senter has commenced work on *The History of Harwich and Dovercourt in the 18th Century*. His costs are running at £1,400 per month, and with the Editor's costs estimated at a minimum of £14,000 per annum, there remains a constant requirement to refill the reserves to cover other printing and publishing costs in excess of the support from the Victoria County History Central Office / IHR.

Looking back on previous years I can see that our budget and costs for each volume of the Red Book published were in excess of £160,000, primarily being the cost of all editorial time. Although the printing approach with 'Shorts' have changed some of the expenditure, we still need to be aware of the potential for such a large outlay being required over the next few years.

The total balances at 30 June 2021 stand at £92,042, with regular gifts around £4,450 ( plus tax repayments on gift aid of around £1,100) per annum. We shall soon therefore need to ensure that we can attract further donations from our generous supporters, otherwise the reserves will start to fall dramatically.

Please contact me or one of the other Trustees if you can help in any way, and please continue to contribute and mention Gift Aid, if you can.

LOUISA TIPPETT  
VCH Essex Hon Treasurer



## Arthur Stanley Newens, 1930–2021

Our friend, and longstanding VCH Essex Trustee, Stan Newens, a former Essex MP and London MEP, died on 2nd March 2021. Born on 4th February 1930, Stan lived his first nine years in Bethnal Green, London, but as war loomed his family decided to leave Bethnal Green for North Weald in 1939. Stan, however, always considered himself an East Ender and was tremendously proud of his roots.

He studied at Buckhurst Hill County High School and then University College London in 1948, and upon graduating trained as a teacher. Stan was elected as MP for Epping in 1964 and established his reputation as a leading, independently minded left-winger. After defeat in the 1970 election, he returned to teaching until re-elected as MP for Harlow from 1974–1983, and afterwards as MEP for Central London from 1984–1999. In his retirement Stan devoted his time to his books and his writing, and a wide range of political, historical and civic organisations.

Stan had a strong personal interest in history and was an avid reader and collector of Essex history books. In 1985 Stan published his *History of North Weald Bassett and its People*, a model local history that successfully achieved something not often attempted at that time: in Stan's own words 'to incorporate into it the lives of the people involved right across the social spectrum' Indeed, Stan said his favourite historical quote came from John Ball, a leader of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381: 'when Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?'.

After his retirement from public life in 1999, Stan had more time to devote to local history and heritage. He was deeply committed to protecting what he called the "riches and variety of historic Essex", stating that it was "one of the objectives of all local historical societies to defend the local heritage from vandalism, neglect and over development" – issues to which he brought all his political skills in campaigning and advocacy. Stan's networking stretched right across Essex, and very significantly often



bridged the divide between 'London Essex' and the rest of the historic county.

Very naturally, therefore, Stan was an enthusiastic supporter of the VCH project. After the Essex series resumed in 1951 the VCH had gradually published accounts of many places that Stan knew well, such as North Weald Bassett, Waltham Abbey and Harlow. After his retirement, Stan was a natural choice to join the VCH Essex Trust, becoming a trustee in 2001. He was a constant and enthusiastic presence on the committee and a very effective advocate for the VCH, providing enormous help in promoting the project and the securing of the funds needed for its continuation. Moreover, Stan was always supportive and interested in the staff and their research, even going so far as to read my colleague Herbert Eiden's thesis on the Peasants' Revolt - in its original German!

Everyone involved in the VCH has fond memories of Stan and will remember with deep gratitude the major contribution that he made to the VCH's continuing success. Our condolences go out to Sandra Newens and all of Stan's family.

CHRIS THORNTON

Stan's tribute page can be accessed at: <https://stannewens.muchloved.com>

## **Progress on the VCH Southend 'Short'**

With so many books having been published on Southend over the years, surely there is nothing new to say on the subject? Well, actually there is. And even confining ourselves to the 19th century, there is so much. And the reason for this? It's really down to the VCH approach to local and community history. As you will know, the Victoria County History aims to be an authoritative history of each community in the country, and the approach taken by the VCH scholars has informed and guided the Southend team of volunteer researchers in the compilation of their new history. A few highlights might be appropriate to give the reader a flavour:

By the end of the 18th century 'taking the waters' for health reasons at inland spas was giving way to visiting the rising number of 'fashionable' watering places on the coasts. Health was beginning to be replaced by leisure as the motive for travelling to the coast. In the south-east, Brighton and Margate were among these early resorts. The visitors to these early resorts were dominated by the aristocracy, and those wealthy enough to be associated with them. With the advent of the Thames steam packets (with fares a fraction of those of the stagecoach) advertisements had to assure nervous travellers that their fellow passengers were most respectable – many most certainly were not, being described elsewhere as 'unfashionable'.

The opening of the railway to Southend, in 1856, was followed immediately by 'excursion' trains, bringing many organised parties – charitable and works outings. With the passing of the Bank Holiday Act in 1871 the holiday season tended to migrate towards August and, with the opening of the second (GER)



Excursionists on the East Beach enjoying the 'Jolly Boys' performance.

rail line to Southend in 1889 combined with rising living standards among the working classes, Southend, the nearest resort to London, became dominated by the 'tripper' or 'lower classes of excursionists' as they were often called.

So, Southend, like other resorts (and, to a lesser extent, Clacton) had to find ways of, on the one hand, retaining the patronage of their traditional middle and upper class holidaymakers and, on the other, satisfying the needs of the tripper. 'Social zoning' was achieved through a system of licensing and bylaws by which the tripper was largely confined to the seafront east of the pier, where 'East London was let loose and 30,000 of its number poured into Southend on the first Monday in August' (letter from Thomas Arnold, farmer, 1882). To the west of the pier was laid out Western Esplanade and, inland, the new Westcliff-on-Sea (advertised as for 'City men and their families') and the Chalkwell Hall estate. Here, the 'better class' of excursionists could enjoy their quieter holidays and many would take up residence in the newly built estates.

KEN CROWE



Promenading on the new Western Esplanade  
(both photographs c. 1905, by courtesy of the Southend Museum)

## Towns and the Cultural Economies of Recovery

The Arts and Humanities Research Council is funding a research project taking place at the moment that is looking at the culture and heritage plans of four English towns – one of which is **Southend**.. A lead researcher on our project is Professor Catherine Clarke - Director of the VCH - and although we are not involving new primary research from the VCH, our understanding of Southend has been informed and supported by fascinating work from Ken Crowe. Ken is giving a presentation at an online workshop we are hosting with local cultural organisations, policymakers, and community groups – as well as representatives from national bodies such as Historic England and the Arts Council. The presentation will be based on work by Ken which illustrates the radical expansion of tourism in the late 19th century and its impacts on Southend communities, economies, and infrastructure. We would like to take this opportunity to thank Ken and the wider VCH Essex community for their support and contributions.

The *Towns and Cultural Economies of Recovery* initiative is a scoping project led by researchers from the University of Southampton and the University of London. It aims to understand how the creative, cultural and heritage sectors are involved in the broader and changing economies of towns - in the context of ongoing change to their landscapes, and post-Covid-19. The project is identifying new research agendas and opportunities for the arts and humanities – particularly in the field of place-based cultural and heritage policy.

The VCH is an incredible resource for this kind of work, and in the context of the Towns Fund and the Levelling Up agenda, the VCH is very well placed to support current and future place-based research. We hope that our project will have raised the profile of VCH Essex locally and nationally and created some new links and audiences. We are pleased to hear that after working with us, Ken has been invited to work with Southend artist Emma Edmondson, director of T.O.M.A.

Please see [www.AndTowns.co.uk](http://www.AndTowns.co.uk) and our Twitter @AndTowns for further information. If you are interested in finding out more about the project, please contact me at [m.j.howcroft@soton.ac.uk](mailto:m.j.howcroft@soton.ac.uk).

MICHAEL HOWCROFT

## HARWICH AND DOVERCOURT IN THE 18TH CENTURY

The two-year VCH Essex project, generously funded by the Essex Heritage Trust and the VCH Essex Trust, was launched in April 2021 to explore the history of Harwich and Dovercourt in the '18th century' (the project will actually cover 1714–1815). The work is designed to produce one chapter of *VCH Essex* Volume XIII, our next planned Big Red Book which will be covering the whole history of these communities. In advance of Volume XIII's completion and publication, this chapter will be published online in draft form on the VCH Essex website so that it will be freely available for public access and comment.

Research has started on documentary sources in the Essex Record Office, the British Library, The National Archives and in local collections in Harwich. The VCH is especially grateful to the Harwich Society and Harwich Town Council who have both offered to provide access to their collections and working space, and help to promote the VCH project locally. The research, as usual for the VCH, will encompass a very wide range of topics. The port and small town of Harwich was strategically significant for the defence of the country. It was the point of embarkation for soldiers during the many wars of the 18th century, and its significance grew during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars when barracks were established in Harwich to complement Landguard Fort. The packet station at Harwich was also of national significance, being one of the main routes to the Continent. As a result, royalty and other noteworthy visitors passed through Harwich regularly. The town also served as a base for HM Customs. The social life of Harwich was centred on the numerous inns in the town, particularly the Three Cups inn, as well as the church and freemason communities. Harwich was a treasury borough which sent two members to parliament. Attempts at political regulation of the borough led to conflict between HM Customs and the Post Office. Harwich and Dovercourt fell within the jurisdiction of the corporation, which was overseen by the mayor, eight aldermen and 24 capital burgesses.

First draft of the Economic History section of the chapter was completed by June 2021. The most important industries in Harwich

were sea-fishing and shipbuilding, while Dovercourt was a predominantly agricultural community. The following description of sea-fishing at Harwich is extracted from the current draft as a 'taster' of the material being collected.



### ***The fishing industry at Harwich in the 18th century***

The modern fishery at Harwich originated in 1712, when 'wells' for transporting live fish from distant fishing grounds for eventual sale in London were introduced from Holland. At that time there were only three Harwich smacks of 40 tons each and carrying about 20 men and boys. In 1714 Richard Orlibar entered into partnership with two fishermen from Horsleydown, Southwark (Surr.), but as their trade with Dutch fishermen was considered illegal they were fined £100. Orlibar resumed fishing from 1715 and was then joined by two other Harwich fishermen. The number of smacks increased from 12 in 1720 to 30 in 1735. Nathaniel Saunders established a co-operative fishing enterprise c.1740.

With Great Britain at war with France in 1744, protection by the Admiralty against French privateers was sought by Harwich's fisherman after two vessels were captured. A number of vessels were sold, but by the end of the War of the Austrian Succession in 1748 the fishery still consisted of about 37 boats. Harwich's turbot fishery was apparently established as a result of a petition of Harwich fishermen to parliament in 1766. The Harwich fishery had formerly operated off Cromer catching cod and haddock by hand lines, but by c.1700, Dutch

style long lines were in use off the Lincolnshire and Norfolk coasts from June until about November. Thereafter, and until April, long-line fishing for haddock and whiting moved to Dogger Bank before returning to the coasts of Lincolnshire and Norfolk until the end of May.

Renewed foreign wars again decreased the number of smacks operating, but by 1774 there were 62 boats employing almost 500 men and boys. In 1774 Harwich smacks brought about 1,800 tons of fish to Billingsgate market. During the American War of Independence privateer vessels again endangered Harwich fishing boats, as in 1777 when an American privateer captured Thomas Hobson's vessel carrying lobster from Norway. On one occasion in 1778 between 20 and 25 fishing vessels from Harwich were taken by the French, but subsequently freed by the French king.

The number of fishing vessels increased further to 73 by 1778, but by 1784 fell back to 58, owing in part to the loss of six smacks, together with all the men, on Dogger Bank during a gale in January of that year. In the fourth Anglo-Dutch war (1780-4) 13 cod vessels were captured by a French privateer on Dogger Bank and ransomed for an average of 150 guineas each. In 1785 there were 29 vessels employed in the lobster fishery from March to June and part of July in Norway and Scotland, with about five vessels employed to bring lobsters to the London market.

By 1786 foreign competition led to a proposal to impose a 10s. per ton levy on non-British ships importing turbot with bounties to be provided for British crews. Between 20 and 25 vessels were to be employed in the turbot fisheries at Harwich in 1786, providing that the Dutch vessels were taxed.

In 1792, immediately prior to the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, the number of fishing vessels reached about 75 in number, not including trawlers and lobster boats. In 1793 there were 60 cod smacks operating out of Harwich carrying about 500 seamen. There were many instances of seizures of fishing smacks

by privateers during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars with one shipowner losing 10 vessels up to the year 1800. Six fishing smacks were commandeered to protect against a potential invasion by the French in 1801, while in the same year 55 fishermen, one from each smack, were drafted into the local defence force known as the Sea Fencibles. Generally, however, there was some protection given to fishermen from being impressed. In 1803 each fishing vessel was armed with two 12-pound cannonades as a further protection measure.

The Iceland fishery had almost ceased by the end of the 18th century and Harwich's herring industry was in decline in spite of an improvement in the decade up to 1797. In the early 19th century, the North Sea fishery fleet amounted to more than 300 tons and employed about 500 seamen. In 1815 six Harwich fishing vessels belonging to Samuel Howard, of Mistley, were caught in a storm off Texel, Holland, with the loss of seven lives.

ANDREW SENTER

## News from Central VCH

During 2019, the University of London decided not to renew publishing contracts with outside companies, but to move the publication of VCH works to an in-house organisation. The consequential changes in management and staff appointments needed to achieve that aim were massively slowed by the effects of Covid-19, but a new team has now been created, with **Paula Kennedy** as **Head of Publishing** at the **University of London Press (UoLP)**. She and her colleagues need time to discuss and agree new policies affecting the production of both the VCH Big Red Books and the VCH 'shorts'. IHR has therefore come to an interim arrangement: Boydell & Brewer's contract has been extended for another year, during which time they will print and publish any VCH Big Red Books that were 'in progress' and almost ready to print. Our Essex Vol. XII part 2 is one of these, so it is now planned for publication by Boydell & Brewer in 2022, with a firm date to be fixed shortly. Your committee was consulted and agreed this decision, since it happily ensures that Essex Vol. XII part 2 will exactly match in appearance Vol. XII part 1, published in 2020.



## Fishing in Medieval Harwich

Harwich has probably always had a fishing industry; the first settlers on the site may have been fishermen before the town was founded in the late 12th century. It seems to have been an industry that fluctuated in scale and significance, reflecting changes in demand, technology and even periods of peace or war at sea. In the Middle Ages it involved several distinct methods, including coastal fish-traps and deeper-water boat fishing with lines, nets or trawls. Information about fishermen, fishing craft and their catches is somewhat scarce until the Tudor period, but Herbert Eiden's notes from Harwich's late 14th and 15th century court rolls provides some material, much of it concerning fish-traps, which is summarised here.

The court roll evidence on fish and fishing falls into several types. First, there is evidence relating to thefts, which can reveal some of the types of fish that Harwich people consumed or traded. In 1387, for example, a barrel of herring was stolen, and in another incident in the same year a thief abandoned a boat containing oysters and a barrel of haddock. Fish are also recorded in cases of 'forestalling', which is an offence of buying goods outside of a town and its market to try to create a monopoly (effectively a shortage) so that the trader could then make a greater profit by selling at a higher price. In 1430, for example, Harwich's 12 capital pledges (the jury of the court leet) presented that a man from Shotley had bought four lasts of herrings thus forestalling the herrings to the grave damage of the community. According to tables of measurement a single last = 2 tons or 12 barrels for cod and herring, or 10,000 to 13,000 fish for 'red herring', so he certainly bought up a lot of fish. He was fined 3s. 4d. for the offence.

As already mentioned, while some fishermen employed nets, another local method of catching fish used traps (known as

weirs or kiddles). The latter comprised permanent structures made of heavy posts driven into the mud or sand that supported wattle-type fencing in a funnel or V-shape to trap fish on the ebbing tide. Both nets and traps were recorded in a manorial account from 1268–69 when the lord of the manor received 15s. from rents of plots for drying nets and £1 4s. 3½d. from rents of weirs. Fishing by net is also referenced in 1420, when four men stole a fishing net from a certain ‘Dochman’ (Dutchman).

Evidence for fish traps is more extensive in the court rolls from the later Middle Ages as they were pieces of property and the court rolls regularly record their inheritance or sale (about 30 instances have been found so far). Most were held as customary tenancies from the lord of the manor for a certain rent, although a few may have been held freehold. A straightforward example of a grant of a new weir occurred in 1404 when the lord granted to Richard and Alice Bocher of Harwich one weir in the port of Orwell on the eastern side of an old weir belonging to Adam Nevyle. The annual rent was to be 1s., but the Bochers had to pay an ‘entry fine’ of £3 6s. 8d. – demonstrating the great commercial value of such weirs.

Some owners were clearly investors rather than fishermen and thus leased out (placed ‘at farm’) their fishing weirs. For example, in 1429 John and Alice Umfrey paid a fine of 6s. 8d. to the lord to allow them to lease three weirs (‘le Eldewere’, ‘Myddylwere’ and ‘Lytlewere’) to John Edward of Manningtree. Edward was to hold the three weirs from the Umfreys for 10 years at £12 a year. In a number of cases people were fined for leasing out their weirs without first obtaining a licence from the lord. The high leasing values also explain why the weirs were attractive targets for thieves, as in 1407 when two fishermen, Robert Pikeston and Henry Turnour, wer fined 3s.4d for stealing fish from weirs, ‘fish-trunks’ and ‘sewers’ presumably descriptive names for particular structures.

Looking at the fish-weir entries as a whole, several features stand out:

- 1) Some people held small groups of weirs, generally two or three. Could these have been enough to be a 'business' in their own right or were they adjuncts to boat-fishing businesses?
- 2) Several named fish-weirs appear in the court records at different times, suggesting that they were well constructed/maintained, or rebuilt on the same site. In the later Middle Ages some weirs may have been lost to coastal erosion, for one in 1453 was said to be in the hands of the lord because it was devastated and abandoned (probably as the result of storms/erosion). Similar references are found elsewhere on the Essex coast, suggesting the 15th century was a period of difficulty for this form of fishing.
- 3) Weirs are generally identified by their locations (east, west, north, south) in relation to other named weirs. This suggests that large groups of small weirs lay alongside each other in particularly advantageous locations. It might be possible to draw a simplified map of some of the weirs – at least in relation to each other. Many were stated to lie in the 'port of Orwell', which I have taken to mean located within the estuary rather than on the open coast to the south of Harwich.

\*\*\*\*\*

This has been only a brief review of what has been found so far for the Middle Ages. A greater amount, and more varied, material is also available for the 16th century, when the herring fishery was still significant and Harwich also played a rôle in the Icelandic cod fishery. In that period, new types of sources also become available: for example, the growing number of wills record bequests of vessels, salt-houses (where fish were dried/stored) as well as types of fish, while customs accounts (port books) record cargoes of fish and salt coming into the port. It is hoped that work on the latter material by the Clacton VCH group will be able to resume before too long.

CHRIS THORNTON

## What is the VCH?

Begun in 1899, and named by her permission after Queen Victoria, the *Victoria History of the Counties of England* aimed to give to 'each Englishman a history of his native land'.

For each county a set of volumes was planned to cover everything from the landscape and natural history to the development of towns and villages through prehistory to the industrial age and beyond to the present day. 14 of these county sets are now complete and work continues in a further 13 counties – including Essex.

The VCH is without doubt the greatest publishing project in English local history, and has become an institution, renowned for its scholarly integrity. No other project has covered the history of England with such closeness or with such a wide-ranging eye, encompassing archaeological, ecclesiastical, architectural, political and other sources.

You can find out about publication and progress of the Essex project at [www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/counties/Essex](http://www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/counties/Essex). The VCH volumes are available in main libraries and an increasing number of them can be read online at [www.british-history.ac.uk](http://www.british-history.ac.uk). You can also order them from Boydell & Brewer Ltd ([www.boydell.co.uk](http://www.boydell.co.uk)) or telephone: 01394 610600

### HOW TO GIVE

If you would like to support the *Victoria County History of Essex*, we would be happy to send you a leaflet about the great work, together with a form for both donation and gift aid.

Or you can simply send us a cheque, made payable to VCH Essex, with a gift aid declaration if appropriate.

The address for donations is that of the Hon Treasurer:  
Miss Louisa Tippet, ACA, BSc, 121 Colchester Road, West Bergholt, Colchester, Essex CO6 3JX; or she can be contacted by email at: [louisa@whittles.co.uk](mailto:louisa@whittles.co.uk)

*The VCH Essex newsletter is distributed to all our donors and published by the Victoria County History of Essex Trust, registered charity no.1038801. For information (and additional copies of this issue) please contact the Hon Secretary, Patricia Herrmann, West Bowers Hall, Woodham Walter, Maldon, Essex CM9 6RZ; tel 01245 222562; e-mail: [patriciaherrmann@talk21.com](mailto:patriciaherrmann@talk21.com)  
Printed by The Printing Place Ltd, Chelmsford, Tel: 01245 251001 [www.printingplace.co.uk](http://www.printingplace.co.uk)*