

## Sylvia Townsend Warner Society Weekend

June 10–12 2016

Essex is an unexpected county, with a gobby, gangsterish reputation at its London end, an ancient forest at its heart – and the world's longest pier on its southern shore. Then there are the marshes.

On our weekend, we came across them suddenly, turning the corner from Maldon's recycling unit to saline expanses of water and mud. Our group had met up the night before, at Bella's Italian Bistro in Burnham-on-Crouch, a long and lively town, with almost as many boats as people. Two bottles of wine magically appeared on our table, ordered by member Jay Barksdale in New Jersey, and we drank to his health.

Now, on Saturday morning, we were walking along the Blackwater estuary (with a cuckoo calling) to reach the causeway to Northey Island. Northey is one of the few publicly accessible islands in the Essex archipelago, and then only when the tides are right.

In STW's novel *The True Heart*, Sukey Bond lives on such an island, and Jenny Wildblood gave an evocative reading from the book. There were further readings when we returned to the shore, which was also the site of the Battle of Maldon in 991, when the ill-fated Byrhtnoth failed to foil the Viking invaders who were advancing from Northey Island. Eileen Johnson declaimed some of the poem about the battle in the original Old English.

We lunched at the Cricketers in Bradwell-on-Sea. One of STW's poems begins 'At Bradwell in the marshes there is an inn...' Unfortunately, there are three such inns, but the Cricketers happens to be by the Roman road which leads to St Peter's Chapel on the headland. The landscape continued to amaze. We had seen old Thames barges with brown sails sailing up the estuary. Now all around were the horizontal lines of the blossoming pea fields and the enormous sky.

The seventh century chapel sits squarely on the Saxon shore, on the site of a Roman fort. As well as its enduring religious purpose, it serves as a sea mark. Parts of the building are original, including the buttresses and the Roman brick around the windows. Inside it is hushed and airy – and never locked.

Further along the shoreline, on the other side of a small wood, is a watch house dating from Napoleonic times. Outside the wooden hut, the chatty occupier was drinking a cup of tea. He casually drew our attention to a marsh harrier, gliding over the sea. This was a rare sight for us, but an everyday occurrence for him.

We too were ready for tea, which we enjoyed not in a genteel tearoom, but in a bar at the Cap and Feathers, Tillingham, with the sound of European football in the background. It was a very generous one, with home-made scones, good strong tea and wedges of fruit cake.

Another Tillingham attraction is a half-demolished house, formerly used as a chapel by the Peculiar People, a non-conformist sect which was – how shall I put it? – peculiar to Essex. Zeph in *The True Heart* declares himself to be a member of this group.

The chapels are in decline, but there are still plenty of pubs. The last two we visited – the Three Horseshoes on Saturday night and the Huntsmen and Hounds on Sunday lunchtime – proved tricky to find, but worth the effort. Sunday morning was spent in Burnham's Arcadia Hall, where the writer Ken Worpole gave a vivid talk about the marshes, which he described

as a poverty-stricken, peripheral landscape, a sanctuary for escapees from London. Many experimental communities began there: social, political or religious. Ken's talk provided background detail and rich colouring to all that we had seen during the weekend.

Thanks go to the organiser of the trip, Jenny Wildblood, who had coped with such hazards as tricky tides and the National Trust to ensure that all went smoothly, and to Richard Searle, who patiently ensured that the pubs we visited were still in existence.

***Judith Stinton***