

# A LITTLE HISTORY OF SOUTHCHURCH

By Mike Penry

## Episode 15: THE JANE AUSTEN YEARS - LIFE BEYOND SOUTHCHURCH

This month I thought we would wander a little further afield, to see what our neighbours were up to at the beginning of the 19th century.

Any part of Essex would have made a reasonable setting for a Jane Austen novel (although not, of course, as magnificently as Southchurch). Essex was still a county of villages and small towns in Georgian times, all mainly dependent on agriculture. London was the rich customer but not yet the powerful invader. The map of 1777 shows Leyton,



Detail of Becontree Hundred from the Chapman and André map of Essex, 1777.

Leytonstone, West Ham, Plaistow, East Ham, Barking and Ilford as villages, hamlets and small towns, all separated from one another by open countryside. Colchester (population 11,500 in 1801) was easily the largest town in Essex.

The Essex coast was still remote and thinly populated, with almost continuous marshland (which made good summer pasture for sheep but was less healthy for people). Only where there were good anchorages backed by rising ground, as at Leigh, could ports grow up and flourish. When England began to discover the pleasures of the seaside in the 18th century, Essex trailed behind Margate, Brighton and Weymouth in developing as resorts, before a determined effort was made in the 1790s to develop the South End of Prittlewell as the first Essex seaside resort.

Coming nearer to home, “Southend-on-Sea” was still little more than a collection of villages and farmsteads. Prittlewell just about deserved the epithet “market town”, but its status as the third largest settlement in the Rochford Hundred (after Rochford itself and Rayleigh) hardly qualified it as a metropolis.

South-End, which lay within Prittlewell parish, consisted in the mid-18th century of little more than a few fishermen’s huts, together with Thames Farm, which stood in what is now Woodgrange Drive, reached by Old Southend Road. By 1790, South End had established itself as a small sea-bathing resort, clustered around the Ship Hotel, but was still so small that some of its fashionable visitors had to stay in Shoebury, Milton or Southchurch Lawn. The twin breakthroughs on the path to genteel greatness - genteel greatness until the railway arrived in 1856 - were the “New Southe-End” scheme in the 1790s, which led to the development of the cliffs area, and the visit of Princess Charlotte in 1801.



The Ship Hotel, once the centre of Southend’s sea-bathing.

Let us celebrate Southend with a little more of the poetry of our past curate, the Rev Thomas Archer:

*Goddess of song! that erst inspir'd the lays  
Of tuneful Bards recording Baia's praise;  
And thou sweet Nymph of Health, Hygeia, lend  
Thy welcome aid to celebrate SOUTH-END.*

*Where Thames in ampler current laves the shore,  
With Ocean soon to join his liquid store;  
Hard by the princely river's northern bound,  
The ancient tower of Prittlewell is found.*

Southchurch Lawn had a secret resident during 1804: Lady Hamilton. During her time here she gave birth to twins, and it is thought although not clarified that Lord Horatio Nelson could well have been in attendance at the birth due to his Naval movements around that time. It is recorded that a gentleman with an eye patch and an empty sleeve to his jacket was present, together with Thomas Seacole who was Nelson's ship's surgeon. The births of Elizabeth Caroline Lind Seacole, and Edwin Horatio Hamilton Seacole are recorded at St Mary's, Prittlewell. **Were they, in fact, Nelson's offspring?**



Lady Emma Hamilton

Milton, like Leigh, was a busy little port. It comprised the land south of London Road between Porter's Creek and a line roughly following Leigh Cliff Road and Chalkwell Park Drive. In the early 1800s, it was just about hanging onto its status as a separate ancient parish.

Leigh-on-Sea consisted of the High Street by the waterside, a few dwellings on the slopes above, particularly on Leigh Hill, St Clement's Church with the Rectory, Leigh House, and the manor house, Leigh Hall. The rest of the parish was agricultural land or woodland.

Why was St Clement's church built at the top of the hill when the people lived at the bottom? The answer may be that the lord of the manor chose a site near his own house and in the direction where the villagers lived. This spot too was near the meeting of the only roads in Leigh. Another explanation - possibly also relevant in the case of Southchurch - may be the partiality of pre-Norman church builders to choose sites on the summits of hills.

And that was about it. To the east, the two ancient parishes of North and South Shoebury were still almost entirely rural, and, according to the map by Chapman and André, bounded to the east by 'The German Ocean'. The Shoeburyness School of Gunnery did not arrive until 1849. Chalkwell was still little more than Chalkwell Hall estate, and the name Westcliff did not come into use before 1880-90. All in all, bucolic peace and quiet reigned more or less supreme across Southchurch and its neighbours.

**Come back in a couple of weeks' time for Episode 16: "What Our Victorian Rectors Did for Us".**

- Nepotism at the Rectory.
- The church gets heating.
- Tiles from a Russian Orthodox church.

See all Episodes of 'A Little History of Southchurch' [here](#)