

A LITTLE HISTORY OF SOUTHCHURCH

By Mike Penry

FINALE: SOUTHCHURCH THROUGH THE 20th CENTURY

We've reached the concluding episode of our little history, in which we attempt to scan the 20th century goings-on in Southchurch, and bring out notable events (with many thanks to the histories of William Pollitt and Alfred Goodale).

In 1892 Southend attained the status of a Borough, which comprised the whole of the parish of Prittlewell and had a population of about 13,000. On its west the new Borough was bounded by the parish of Leigh, and on the east by the parish of Southchurch.

Only five years passed before the boundaries of the Borough were extended in 1897 to bring within them the area of the old parish of Southchurch. One of the principal reasons for extension was Southend's need of a new and improved sewerage and outfall system, made necessary by the rapid development of the town and the increase of population. Southend had already interests in Southchurch. A recreation ground (later Southchurch Park), twenty acres in extent, had been presented to the town in 1895 by Messrs. Baxter, Dowsett and Ingram. In the previous year an Eastern Valley Sewerage Committee had been appointed by the Southend Corporation.

Amalgamation was initially opposed by Rochford Rural District Council, Southchurch Parish Council and Southchurch Brickfields Company. Agreement was reached, subject to conditions which included the Corporation making up a beach roadway. The beach road was completed as far as Bryant Avenue by 1899, the Halfway House Hotel by 1909 and Thorpe Hall Avenue by 1912. Southchurch foreshore was acquired by the Corporation in 1907. The Corporation took over Thorpe Esplanade and the sea wall (between Thorpe Hall Avenue and Mason's boathouse) from the Burges Trustees in 1929.

The early park names are a little confusing. The Recreation Ground presented by Messrs. Baxter, Dowsett and Ingram was named Southchurch Hall Park in 1904 and was extended by the addition of land to the north and east in 1923. Southchurch Hall itself was offered as a gift to the town in 1925 and the restored Hall and its grounds opened in 1931. The name of the park donated by Baxter, Dowsett and Ingram was changed to Southchurch Park in 1930 to avoid confusion with Southchurch Hall Gardens.



Southchurch Hall Park in 1928, later re-named Southchurch Park

Thorpe Bay railway station opened in 1911. The 'Bay' was added to the old manor name to indicate a seaside resort. Southend East railway station opened twenty years later in 1931.

Trams were an important part of the early Twentieth Century vision for Southchurch. In 1901 trams began operating along Southchurch Road to the White Horse Hotel, with another route to Old Southend via Southchurch Avenue. The tram service was extended to the Halfway House in 1909. In



A tram on Southchurch Boulevard

1910 the 'Boulevard scheme' was approved, with trams in use along Southchurch Boulevard, from the White Horse Hotel to Bournes Green, by 1913. In 1914 the Boulevard from Bournes Green to Thorpe Bay Esplanade was completed, again with trams in use. The tram service through the Boulevard was discontinued, and the track removed, in 1938.

Churches also proliferated. Belle Vue Avenue Baptist Church opened in 1905, the Salvation Army Hall in 1907 and Southchurch Park Congregational Church in 1908. Thorpe Bay Free

Church was established in 1921 and the Roman Catholic Church of St Gregory opened in 1927. Meanwhile the ancient parish of Holy Trinity Southchurch was broken up to reflect the huge population growth. In 1921 the daughter parish of St Augustine's Thorpe Bay, was constituted, and all the eastern part of the parish, south of the railway, was detached. The church of St Augustine's Thorpe Bay was consecrated in 1935, with a peal of eight bells installed in 1947. Indeed, St Augustine's will be celebrating the 90th anniversary of its current church building in May this year (2025), with a service led by Bishop Adam. In 1923 the corresponding western part of the parish, south of the railway, became the parish of Christ Church. Both St Augustine's and Christ Church had formerly been mission districts.

New schools were needed. Southchurch Hall School opened in 1904, Hamstel Road School in 1914 and Thorpe School in 1934. In 1946 Southchurch Hall School was regraded, becoming Southchurch High School for Boys and Southchurch High School for Girls. The old National or Church School, which was started by the Holy Trinity Church under a Trust Deed of 1857, closed on 21st December 1948. It was then being used to its full capacity, with a recognised accommodation for 95 pupils. The school was closed as the result of a decision that it would not be possible to bring it up and maintain it at the standard required by the Education Act of 1944. The pupils were transferred to Hamstel Road Schools.



Lifstan Way was completed in 1932, with its name chosen to commemorate the Anglo-Saxon thegn who gave Southchurch to Canterbury. The names of two roads at its south end - Canterbury Avenue and Winter Avenue - were dropped, and the thoroughfare from the White Horse Hotel to the beach given the one name. The first Lifstan Club for young men was founded by the then Rector of Holy Trinity, Canon E. A. Welch, in the 1920s and met initially in the old tithe barn.

The club was revived in 1950 and, with the support of H.R.H. The Duke of Edinburgh, the boys built their own headquarters in the rectory meadow from ex-army property. H.R.H. The Duke of Gloucester suggested on a visit to Southchurch that the boys should aim for an even greater building

and in three years over £8,000 was raised and the club moved to its present headquarters in Lifstan Way.

The Second World War saw the darkest days in Southchurch history but also demonstrated Southchurch's amazing resilience. Air raids led to a mass evacuation, including of 8,500 children. Over a thousand incendiary bombs fell on the White Horse area during one raid. Despite this a fete in the Rectory meadow in 1942 attracted over 2,000 people and the money raised provided an ambulance for the Red Cross. The following year over 3,600 people attended the church's fete in the meadow. Holy Trinity's church hall was used a good deal for the entertainment of the forces, with entertainers including Peggy Mount and Frankie Howerd.

The histories of Southchurch end on a nostalgic note. The old tithe barn, which had been the social centre of the parish, was used by the Home Guard during the Second World War but had to be pulled down because of a combination of fire risks and death watch beetle. The little lane which had led to the barn became Southchurch Rectory Chase. Alfred Goodale noted that when Canon Norwood arrived as Rector in 1963:

"No cornfields, no lanes and meadows, no humble village folk in his parish now; his ministry is to many thousands in a great urban sprawl which is likely to extend with the advance of regional development".

And there we have it: we started with a Saxon Thegn gifting large swathes of land to the church, we heard about Richard de Southchurch sending incendiary chickens towards London, and peasants attempting to burn down civic buildings. Southchurch may be less exciting today, but it has developed into a comfortable, some would say thriving, community, glorying in the many jewels in its crown: its people, its schools, its parklands, its pleasant seafront, and the place that started it all, Holy Trinity – the South Church.

To conclude, we offer our grateful thanks to Mike Perry for his industrious development of this little history and we hope you have enjoyed reading it. A warm welcome awaits you at Holy Trinity Southchurch; join us and contribute to the next centenary of our community.

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