

# A LITTLE HISTORY OF SOUTHCHURCH

By Mike Penry

## Episode 12: OYSTERS AND LORDS

A chance discovery was made at the beginning of the Eighteenth Century, which, in time and by a somewhat circuitous route, changed Southchurch from a rural backwater into a suburb of Southend. About 1700 a fisherman named Joseph Outing, having drawn up his boat on the seashore near what is now the Kursaal, discarded a number of small and apparently worthless oysters. A year later he found some very fine oysters at the same spot, which, he suspected, must be those he had previously rejected. He laid more small oysters on the same ground, and the result was so successful that he secured from the lord of Southchurch manor, George Asser, a lease of this part of the foreshore at a small rent. From this beginning he built up a flourishing business and became a comparatively wealthy man.

Outing's discovery occurred close to the boundary between the manors of Prittlewell and Southchurch. The boundary was important: foreshore ownership provided fishing rights, rights to take gravel from the beach for local road repairs and even rights in connection with wreckage. (We know that in 1781 a dispute arose concerning the point at which a wreck had grounded.) From early times there had been a route to the seashore from Prittlewell village, which, at its southern end, was hard up against the boundary with Southchurch (approximately following the modern East Street, Sutton Road, Southchurch Road and Southchurch Avenue). The first permanent dwellings in South End were built at the end of this road (and, as such, were closer to Southchurch than to Prittlewell). As the century progressed the hamlet spread westwards along what is now Marine Parade. (The first reference to "Sowthende" occurs in 1481. It would, of course, be churlish to point out that the historic records for Southchurch may go back a further 650 years.)

Outing's success brought others into the oyster business and, within a quarter of a century, the whole of the foreshore from Shoebury to Hadleigh, so far as the ground was suitable, was being utilized for the cultivation of oysters, mainly for the London market. This affected the oyster industry on the Kent side of the river, and in 1724 about 500 men from Milton, Queenborough and Faversham, led by Captain Evans, Mayor of



Detail of South Church and Prittlewell from Chapman and Andre's map of Essex, 1777.

Queenborough and Member of Parliament, and Gabriel Ruck of Milton, sailed over to Southchurch foreshore and began to raid the oyster beds. The local men were unable to oppose them, and Justices of the Peace were called to read the Riot Act on the foreshore. Hearing this, Captain Evans and his raiders boarded their vessels and sailed away, shouting "King George for England". No violence was used but plenty of oysters were taken, and the beds disturbed.

Naturally the local men sought their revenge and three actions for trespass, etc, were taken against the leaders. Two of the actions were heard at Brentwood in March 1725, and Outing, who won his case against Ruck, was awarded £1,100 damages and £50 costs.

The supply of young oysters from natural beds on the local foreshore soon proved insufficient to stock the feeding-grounds, and “brood”, or small, oysters were collected in large quantities for the purpose from the south coast and even from the coast of Brittany. Outing’s ground, until his time almost valueless, later cost him £100 a year or more as rent. Other oyster layings, formerly equally valueless, were leased at £500 a year, and in 1773 some 800 acres of foreshore, lying off Old Southend, were leased by the lord of the manor of Prittlewell to a company, for oyster cultivation, at a price of £6,000.

Whilst on the subject of Oysters, here’s a delightful little ditty to the oyster trade, penned by Mr Evan, Mrs Welch and Mrs Pinney for Holy Trinity’s 1924 centenary celebrations:

### The Oysters’ Song

#### *Prologue:*

An oyster rarely speaks a word; In public he is never heard.  
But when his mouth is opened wide, Only good things are inside,  
The moral of this tale is clear – If our M.P.s would only hear,  
But if an oyster had a tongue, His song in this way would be sung:

In far off days of good Queen Anne  
To Southchurch came a fisherman;  
Now he was late and could not wait;  
His little boat was overstored,  
So he tipped us oysters overboard.

#### *Chorus:*

*There in Southchurch mud we lay,  
All untested, many a day;  
As we scattered far and wide,  
We increased and multiplied.*

And so there passed a year before  
The man returned to Southchurch shore;  
He uttered cried of great surprise;  
The tide was out and we were shown,  
And he saw the size that we were grown.

#### *Chorus*

“This Southchurch mud,” the fisher said,  
“Will make a wondrous oyster bed;  
I’ll lease the shore, and breed some more,”  
He started trade, and kept to that,  
And soon became a plutocrat.

#### *New Chorus:*

*There in Southchurch mud we lay,  
Now well-tended every day;  
As we scattered far and wide,  
We increased and multiplied.*

And so went on the thriving trade,  
Which healthy Southchurch mud had made,  
Till fever pains came from the drains,  
And joined the river at Southend,  
Alas! The oysters met their end.

#### *Epilogue:*

No more in pleasant mud we lay; Oyster trading passed away;  
There in vain at ebbing tide, You will seek us far and wide.

Perhaps the ultimate irony is that our current Mayor of London has recently announced his plans to clean-up the Thames... by creating oyster beds!

**Come back in a couple of weeks’ time for Episode 13: “Church and Manor”.**

- Did you know our church once had a minstrel’s gallery?
- Find out about the different “musickers” that accompanied services.
  - Take a closer look at the Drew memorial.

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