

**Billericay Archaeological  
and Historical Society**  
**newsletter**



Autumn 2026



The Essex Broomway

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I would like to thank Roger O'Rourke and Alan Taylor for their contributions to this edition of the BA&HS newsletter. It would be lovely if other members would make a contribution as well. It doesn't have to be very academic, in the past we have had some lovely family stories which have been very varied and of interest to all members.

Since the last edition we have had our AGM and now welcome Geoff and Heather Douglas onto the committee. They are taking responsibility for managing meet & greet at front of house and organising the refreshment rota and stock.

Jacky Hathaway, Newsletter Editor

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## Membership

We are maintaining a healthy number of members. Currently we have 55 members on our books, with between 34 and 42 attending meetings. Of course we will always welcome new members, so if you have any friends, family or neighbours who you might think would be interested in joining please encourage them to come along.

Our fees will stay the same for next year, £15 for a single membership and £25 for a double. As usual I will start to collect these at the December meeting.

Lynne Beard, Membership Secretary

## Catering

Heather and I have taken over the running of the Tea, Coffee etc. Chris Crane has done a great job and her shoes will be hard to fill. The rota which she has passed over to us is as follows:-

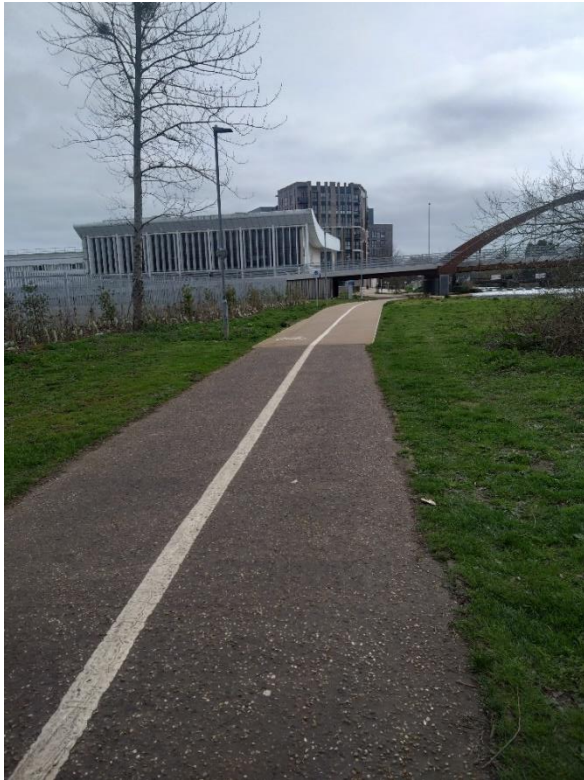
|           |                      |
|-----------|----------------------|
| September | Jo & Geri            |
| October   | Ann Taylor & Jacky   |
| November  | Mike & Barbara       |
| December  | Volunteers           |
| January   | Jacky & volunteer    |
| February  | Jonathon & volunteer |
| March     | Jo & Geri            |

As you can see, we need volunteers for at least 3 meetings. Please consider volunteering as we can't continue without your support.

Geoff & Heather Douglas, Catering Officers

## Recent visits

Friday 17<sup>th</sup> April, Essex Record Office



12 Society members went on a “Behind the Scenes Tour” of the Essex Record Office (ERO) at Chelmsford. Neil Wiffen, archivist, gave us a thorough and entertaining explanation of what happens at the ERO and how the archives are looked after and accessed by the public.

Firstly, we were taken to the Search Room which is where members of the public can carry out their research using documents retrieved from the archive. Neil had laid out a selection of historic maps of Billericay for us to look at,

Next, he took us into the archive store, explained how items are stored and showed us some of the special items kept there.

Finally, we were taken to the document conservation workshop where Diane Taylor,

conservator, described some of the actions she takes to ensure that items that have not been digitised are still available for the public to see.

Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> August, Copped Hall



26 members of the Society enjoyed a visit to Copped Hall, near Epping, to see the progress of the restoration project there. The House had been destroyed by fire in 1917 with only walls remaining

We were split into two groups and our guides, Phil and Rebecca, took us on comprehensive and fascinating tours of the House and the Gardens. Some rooms are still in a state of disrepair and so are not visited but others are nearly finished and taken back to how they would have looked in Georgian times when the Hall was first built.

Also within the different rooms are collections of furniture and equipment appropriate to the purpose of the accommodation. We explored the main rooms on the Ground Floor, more restored grand rooms on the First Floor and then were taken down to the Basement where all the hard-working staff would have been found.

The Grounds cover many acres and would have been part of Waltham Forest, used as hunting grounds by Royalty. More formal gardens, including a walled garden, are also being painstakingly restored.

### **Meeting notes**

Feb 9<sup>th</sup>                      Ted Woodgate                      The Four Marys

The four Marys were women whose actions in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century did much to organise the employment rights of women working in lowly paid jobs. After giving a vivid description of life for the poor at that time Ted explained the contributions of Mary Driscoll to the Match Girls at Bryant & May in London, Mary MacArther to the chain makers of the Black Country, Mary Bamber to the laundresses of Liverpool and Mary Barber to the women trying to protect their property rights during WW1 in Glasgow while their men were fighting overseas.

March 9<sup>th</sup>                      Philip McKinder                      Lynmouth in 1952

This was a detailed and very well illustrated talk explaining the flooding disaster in Lynmouth in 1952 which resulted in many lives being lost and extensive destruction of buildings. Philip described how the picturesque village became a popular tourist destination at that time then, using before and after photographs as well as listing many of the people affected, we understood the devastating impact of the event.

13<sup>th</sup> April                      Richard Bale                      Colchester's Roman Temples and Theatres

Richard described the layout of the Roman town and the architecture of the public buildings therein. He explained the political and religious context, both locally and throughout the Roman Empire. We were shown how the remains found at Gosbecks and Sheepen would have fitted into the story.

11<sup>th</sup> May                  Jennie Randall                  The Crooked Billet. The story of the V2 rocket attack

This talk was about a V2 attack in Bromley, Kent. Jenny has completed a very detailed research of this event and put together an excellent talk beginning with facts about the V2, the Crooked Billet pub, the people involved and then told the story of the event, the aftermath and her efforts to get a blue plaque for the site.

8<sup>th</sup> June                  Chris White                  Picasso

Chris spoke at length and showed a number of slides depicting different influences on and styles of his work. A few of the images showed portraits painted when Picasso was in his early teens and his talent and ability were evident. An interesting talk which opened our minds, particularly to those not that familiar with Picasso's work.

13<sup>th</sup> July                  Richard Pusey                  Captain Cook's three voyages

To start with Richard explained how Cook became a seaman showing a good ability to navigate and chart maps. This led to him being chosen to take ships to find a large continent believed to be in the southern hemisphere. Voyage 1 took him to New Zealand which he discovered was two islands and not a vast land. Voyage 2 was to explore Antarctica which he realised was uninhabitable. His third voyage was to try to find the North West passage by western Canada. He was unsuccessful and the journey home led him to Hawaii where sadly he was murdered

No meeting in August

### **The Broomway: fact and folklore.**



In February 2026 an Amazon delivery van was stranded off Wakering Steps whilst following a sat nav that directed it onto the historic Broomway. The Broomway is called the deadliest path in Britain.

The first written record of The Broomway was in 1419 but it is believed to have existed long before that. It was the only practical way onto Foulness, other than by boat, as the salt marshes were impassable. A land route was completed in 1922 with the completion of a final bridge. The Foulness burial register alone records 66 bodies recovered from the sands since 1600; it is estimated over 100 have drowned since that date and many more before that date. Many bodies never being recovered locally.



The Broomway is a byway open to all traffic which follows a sandbank running about 450 yds (400m) offshore, its route marked on Ordnance Survey maps. It starts at Wakering Steps and runs to Fisherman's Head a distance of about 6 miles (10 km). Between the Broomway and shore is an area that runs fast during mid flood and which can be sluggish during the ebb due to the prevailing southward current. Soft and treacherous silts are deposited (locally

called The Black Grounds) between the shore and the Broomway. The routes out to the Broomway are stone causeways (called hards or heads). The Broomway is submerged by the tide twice a day. On these vast almost flat sands the flood tide can race at an alarming speed. It is claimed by some that the water's advancing edge can move faster than the average person is able to match for any length of time. Low tide was not always at the most convenient times. The Broomway was sometimes crossed using the light of a full moon: a dangerous time when the tidal range is greatest and the flood is fastest.

The route was marked by church lay workers with 3 ft poles buried to a depth of 2 ft. Bundles of twigs were tied on to the poles to make them more visible. The markers were about 100 ft (30m) apart. There were two lines of "brooms" marking the safe sands. There are 2 versions of how The Broomway got its name; the first being that the markers looked like besom brooms and the second is that most of the twigs were taken from the local broom scrubland.



The route is prone to fog and mist. When the shore cannot be seen there are no points of reference for the traveller who would easily be disorientated without the markers. The fogs and mists can be formed in two ways. Firstly, by the exposed sand becoming colder and warm moist sea air drifting in over the

sand and cooling, this causes condensation and hence the fog or mist is formed. Secondly in Summer the Sun's rays rapidly warm the wet sand causing the water to evaporate and create a mist. One method of navigating in thick fog and poor light, was called "the stone and thread". A heavy stone was dropped by a broom; the traveller then sought the next broom whilst holding onto a linen line tied to the stone. On finding the next broom the line was pulled in and the process repeated. If the next broom was not found the traveller could retrace his steps and start again.

There is a third and much more interesting, though less scientific, explanation concerning the formation of the fog. "The vengeful lost souls of the drowned conjure up fogs to confuse and lead astray the unwary. The local monks placed brooms no more than 30 steps apart to save the souls of travellers."

Expansive mudflats are sometimes described as a liminal space where the boundary between sky and sea disappears. Lone walkers report an “other worldly” experience and a sense of being in awe of nature. The scenery can seem uplifting or desolate depending on the weather and light. Robert Macfarlane’s book “The Old Ways” describes the route in emotive and mysterious tones calling the flats the Mirror World. The locals of bygone years had many superstitions and tails ranging from the Devil himself creating The Black Grounds to assorted ghostly figures walking the sands in the dark or fog. The rather more earthly dangers of today remain the tide itself and, if you wander further out, unexploded ordinance.

Roger O Rourke

## **The Mayflower, Civil War and Restoration**

A ship, named "The Mayflower", left Plymouth to travel across the Atlantic Ocean to New England. It was a small ship, weighing in at about 180 tons. The date of this expedition was the 6<sup>th</sup> September, 1620. On board were one hundred passengers, many from the Eastern Counties of England. They included four people from Billericay.

The four included Christopher Martin, a victualler of ships. It is believed that he lived in the High Street. The other "Billericayites" on board were his wife Mary Martin, Solomon Prower and John Langerman.

As time went by, more and more people from Billericay made this journey to the New World, together with other folk from all over Essex. This resulted in a number of townships in Massachusetts being given names from places in Essex. One of these was named Billerica.

More recently, a "twinning programme" was set up between the peoples of Billericay and the descendants of these early pilgrims, who still live in and around the area of Billerica.

Charles I came to the throne in 1625. However, between 1642 and 1660, the country was divided between the Royalists and the Parliamentary adherents. Cromwell's Ironsides were mainly recruited from the Eastern Counties area. This area of Essex being known for its Puritanism, it is quite reasonable to suppose that young men from Billericay were part of the Ironsides army.

However, the fighting did not reach Essex until 1648, when the Royalists, under Sir Charles Lucas, marched upon Colchester. They seized the town and "dug in", preparing to withstand a siege. On hearing of this action, General Fairfax, who was in Kent, at the time, decided to cross the Thames at Tilbury and march upon Colchester. It is said that his army passed through Billericay on its way to Colchester and that the local inhabitants turned out in force to cheer the troops on their way.

Apparently, there was a rather strange diversity that existed in the area at that time. The Rector of Little Burstead was John Well and he was an ardent Royalist. However, at Great Burstead, there was a Mr Wennington, and he was a staunch supporter of Cromwell. Apparently, no records exist of the sermons that each of them gave in their churches at that time. Surely, they would now make very interesting reading, indeed!

In Billericay, at around this time, there were quite a number of shops, which had "sprung up". However, housewives continued to make their own bread. Also, although there was now a brewery in the town, the farmers continued to make their own beer.

In 1665 was the advent of The Great Plague! It sent Londoners fleeing into the countryside to try to escape its ravages! Although Essex did have casualties, it did not have the effect that had been previously caused by the dreadful Black Death during the fourteenth century.

The year of 1688 led to the end of the Stuart reign. In the year of 1693, during the reign of William III, the chapel of St. Mary Magdalen, in Billericay, caused a major controversy. This was because doubts were expressed as to whether it had ever been consecrated! Therefore, on the 30<sup>th</sup> August, 1693, the necessary rite was performed, and the chapel was "handed over" to the Bishop of London.

In 1662, Vicar of Benfleet was the Reverend Francis Baylye, who lived in Great Burstead. When he died, he left part of his estate to found and maintain a free school in Billericay. The amount was £35.00 per annum. The school was one of the smaller Grammar Schools and it continued in operation through to the end of the nineteenth century.

Alan Taylor.  
Source: "Billericay through the Ages". W.G.Harper.

**Talks at the Essex Record Office**     [www.essexrecordoffice.co.uk](http://www.essexrecordoffice.co.uk)

Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> September 10.40m – 12noon and 18.30 – 20.00     Prof. Marion Gibson

*Witchland*: talk and book launch  
Recovering stories of Civil War witches in Essex, Norfolk and beyond

Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> October 10.40 – 12noon     Simon Coxall

*How to dig up a Medieval castle*  
Excavating the Anglo-Saxon castle at Clavering

Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> October 10am to 4pm

*Essex and the French Wars 1795 – 1815* with the Waterloo Association

An exploration of the County and its people during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars

Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> November 10.40 – 12noon     Philip Wise

*Coin Hoarding in late Saxon Essex*

The Braintree and Hatfield Peverel Hoards, why they might have been buried and what they can tell us about the use of coins in 11<sup>th</sup> Century.