

A short introduction to the history of the Diocese of Chelmsford

How did we come to be such a huge diocese? Of our four archdeaconries, West Ham's population is twice as numerous as those of some older dioceses – Gloucester and Hereford, for example, with four archdeacons between them; the Archdeacon of Southend serves more people than the four archdeacons in the Diocese of Salisbury between them, and the Archdeacon of Colchester has more churches than the whole of the Diocese of Birmingham, or Bradford or Bristol.

We have the longest coastline of any diocese in England, three major airports (Stansted, London City and now London Southend), the largest container port in the UK at Tilbury, and Europe's biggest shopping mall at Westfield. We have arguably the oldest town in England (Colchester) and one of the newest cities (Chelmsford), and let's not forget the 2012 Olympic Stadium, the Velodrome, the Aquatic Centre and athlete's village, all of which lie within the Diocese of Chelmsford.

It's a place of such variety and change. Its four corners – Canning Town, Saffron Walden, Harwich and Southend – seem to have little in common, and yet we do have a sense of belonging. Is this despite or because of the history of constant change and ecclesiastical reorganisation through the centuries? After all, it is still less than 100 years since Chelmsford became a diocese.

So where do we start? Maybe with **the Romans** fighting the Iceni and their fearsome Queen Boudicca, building both a garrison at Colchester and a road from there to London, crossing rivers along the way at Chelmsford, Romford, Stratford and Old Ford.

Or in 597, with **Augustine**, who consecrated a Roman monk, **Mellitus** as Bishop of London. He never made much impact in Essex, though, unlike **Cedd**, a true Anglo-Saxon who spoke our language. Trained by Aiden in the Celtic monasteries of Iona and Lindisfarne, Cedd arrived at Bradwell in 653. He established fortified centres of evangelism – 'minsters' - at Bradwell, Tilbury and Canewdon, and later at Southminster and Upminster.

Our historical boundaries are significant. At the time of Alfred the Great, the River Lea, which is our western boundary, was the border between Saxon England and Viking-controlled **Danelaw**. Safe, sophisticated Saxon London was on one bank of the Lea. Dangerous Essex was on the other, 'beyond the pale' for those from the City or Westminster. Some would say that the attitude persists. As a result there is much about life in Essex and East London, and about *church* life here, which has always been different to that of the rest of London.

That is not to say that Christianity did not thrive here. Abbeys were established at Barking, Waltham Cross, and Stratford, and these were centres of learning and culture, both before and after the Norman Conquest. **Chaucer** mentions the Prioress who spoke French 'after the school of Stratford-atte-Bow', where there was a Benedictine convent. It is not clear, though, whether he was praising her or mocking her cockney accent.

For many centuries, Essex was largely **agricultural and coastal**, and Essex people displayed the independence that prosperity allows. **The Peasants' Revolt** in 1381 owed much to Jack Straw and his Men of Essex who marched from Danbury to London, many of them ending up butchered by the King's men in Norsey Woods, near Billericay. Billericay was also the gathering place for the Pilgrim Fathers before they sailed for the colonies on the Mayflower. And *Foxes' Book of Martyrs* lists too many Essex folk, such as Thomas Watts of Billericay, who were executed for their faith in Bloody Mary's reign.

One major theme ever since then has been **the influence of London**, or 'London Over the Border'. This was first seen in the growth of market gardening in places like West Ham and Leyton, serving the markets in the City of London. It is hard to imagine it now, but in the 1760s Plaistow, for example, was known for its potatoes. Around Ilford and Barkingside, fruit and veg grew readily on land enriched by horse manure brought by barge from London up the River Roding.

It was the **1844 Metropolitan Building Act** which changed everything. The Act restricted dangerous and noxious industries from operating in the London metropolitan area, the eastern boundary of which was the River Lea. Consequently, many of these activities were relocated to the other side of the river, to Stratford and

West Ham. As a result, this area became one of Victorian Britain's major manufacturing centres for pharmaceuticals, chemicals, and processed foods. This rapid growth earned it the name *London Over the Border*.

Shipbuilding thrived there by the river. The *Thames Ironworks and Shipbuilding Company* was a world leader in warship design and construction. HMS Warrior was the largest, fastest, most heavily-armed warship in the world, so fearsome as a deterrent that it never had to fire a gun in anger. So successful were Canning Town's exports that when Russia and Japan went to war in 1904, both nations' navies had ships that had been built here (That history lives on in the works' football team *West Ham United FC*, known as 'the Hammers' or 'the Irons' because of the riveters' crossed tools).

By this time, the changes had become a problem for the church. In 1901, more than half the population of Essex lived in what is now the five London boroughs of our diocese. Essex had been part of the Diocese of London, then of Rochester, and finally of St Albans, making an impossibly large diocese. When the second Bishop of St Albans died in 1902 it was said that 'London-Over-The-Border killed him' (Owen Chadwick in *Cathedral and City* p.88). The **case for a Diocese for Essex**, removing the problem from St Albans, was unstoppable, and so it was that we came into being in 1914. It is worth noting that the first diocesan bishop came to us from an East End parish, in Bethnal Green, all the better to tackle the challenge of London in Essex.

The metropolis continued to spread along the **railways**, of course. From Liverpool Street and Fenchurch Street, lines went to Tilbury and Southend, to Chelmsford and Colchester, and Loughton and Chingford. They played a big part in determining the nature of growth – the line to Liverpool Street from Walthamstow, for example, offered cheap tickets on early trains to blue-collar workers, at times when the line through Leyton and Leytonstone was strictly for white-collar clerks and office staff.

The railways also made it easier for Essex to come to the City, or even to other parts of Essex via the City. It was easier, for example, to get from Saffron Walden to Witham by rail via Liverpool Street than by road. And it is interesting to note that for the first fifty years of the Diocese's life, our Board of Finance met not in Chelmsford but in London, at St Botolph's, by Liverpool Street station. The diocesan offices were similarly sited with the railway in mind, in Romford Road, Stratford, and only moved to Guy Harlings in 1952.

Quickly, though, the **roads** became prominent migration routes, each with their own character. One slightly unfair way of understanding Essex has long been to say that the A11 represents 'old money', the A12 'new money' and the A13 'no money'. It is certainly true that towns and communities along these roads are populated by Londoners of varying kinds who have moved away but bring their values with them. So it is that, even though the population of Essex now probably exceeds that of the five London boroughs, it can be said that the majority of those people are East Londoners or the descendants of East Londoners, and carry something of the East End in them. Meanwhile, the churches of Newham and Waltham Forest, especially, are being richly blessed with an influx of Christians from all around the world, bringing with them attitudes and styles of worship from other parts of the Anglican Communion.

The challenges remain. This diocese is metropolitan and yet rural, with suburbs, towns, villages, seaside and city. All human life is here, with all the varieties of lived human experience. The challenge that we face in our time is to be a *Transforming Presence* in such a place as this.