

**REPORTER AT LARGE**

In the second of his English Journeys, *Edward Platt* visits the Essex hinterland where he was born, and discovers that there's more to this county than stereotypical manual workers and brash, self-made millionaires

# Low rise and shallow fall

*Photography by Jason Orton*



Twilight of the flatlands:  
Coryton oil refinery, viewed  
from Canvey Wick

Essex was my second stop in the series of journeys around England that I began last summer, at a moment of heightened tension in the country: shortly after I arrived in Hull in August, riots broke out in many cities, and by the time I got to Essex the extent and severity of the period of “austerity” we were facing was becoming apparent and protesters were establishing their camp outside St Paul’s Cathedral.

There was little to connect the two places on my itinerary except my family history: my father came from Hull, but he met my mother in London and they moved to a small village outside the county town of Chelmsford when they got married in 1965. I was born at a hospital in Chelmsford three years later. We left when I was two years old and I have rarely been back but, as I’m originally an Essex boy, I wanted to understand how the much-maligned county fitted in to modern England.

In the popular imagination, Essex is to London much as New Jersey is to New York – a grimy hinterland of industrial sites and commuter suburbs, inhabited by a brash species of manual workers and self-made millionaires. The stereotypical inhabitants of the area acquired particular significance in the 1980s, when the aspirational working-class families of Essex abandoned their Labour allegiances and helped Margaret Thatcher secure the neoliberal consensus that dominated British politics until the crash of 2008. Or so the usual political narrative went.

The town of Basildon and its inhabitants assumed a critical importance; take Basildon and you take the country, the saying went, and it proved a bellwether constituency in every election between 1984 and 2007. It had an especially significant role in the general election of 1992, when an early declaration of victory for the incumbent MP heralded the defeat of the Labour Party under Neil Kinnock and the demise of socialism as a credible electoral proposition. The romance between Essex and the Conservative Party was reprised in the 1990s through the career of Teresa Gorman, the Eurosceptic Thatcher manqué who was MP for Billericay.

Basildon returned a Labour MP in all three of Tony Blair’s electoral victories, and the boundary changes of 2010, in which it was merged into the hybrid constituency of Basildon and Billericay, represented another weakening of the link between Conservative Central Office and central Essex. The MP of the reconfigured constituency is John Baron, a maverick Conservative, and he believes that his constituents still embody the values that Thatcher sought to awaken in the British people. “They’re straight-talking,” he said when I went to see him at his office in Portcullis House, Westminster. “They don’t like people sitting on the fence. They say it as they see it, and if you believe, as I do, that life is not a rehearsal, then you relish those people.

And they’re entrepreneurial: if they take a knock, they get up, dust themselves down, and get on with it. In this country, if you fail, it tends to be seen as something to be ashamed of, but Essex is closer to the American model – failure is a step on the road to success.”

Baron’s association with Essex began many years ago. He served in the British army until 1988, and when he left he bought a flat in Chelmsford because he didn’t want to live and work in London and property was relatively cheap there. Countless other people have been drawn to the city for the same reasons, though the founder of its most significant industrial concern used to commute in reverse. The Italian engineer Guglielmo Marconi, who came to England in 1896, lived in Bayswater but based his business in a factory in Chelmsford that hosted the UK’s first publicised sound broadcast in 1920, earning the town the right to call itself “the Home of Radio”.

The name Marconi was associated with Chelmsford for most of the 20th century, and one morning I arranged to meet Peter Turrall, chairman of the Marconi Veterans Association, outside the factory on New Street. Later in the day, I wandered into Chelmsford Magistrates’ Court and listened to the trial of an apprentice plumber and his brother who were accused of breaking someone’s nose and headbutting two policemen, but Turrall was an Essex man of a different sort. He had worked at the factory for 47 years, which was all his – and more than half of its – working life. He started as a junior draughtsman and progressed to become a director; for the last 12 years, he had the “privilege”

### Weeds bloom on the concrete banks of the moat that supplied Marconi

of using Marconi’s office on the ground floor, near the main entrance of the listed exterior. At one point, 6,000 people worked in the factory; nor was it Chelmsford’s only significant employer – Turrall estimates that 25,000 people were employed in the town in the 1950s, when its population was no more than 40,000. Today, Chelmsford is four times the size but no more than 10,000 people work there, and Marconi’s demise is emblematic of the way the town has shed its industrial past.

Turrall retired in 1998, and the following year Marconi embarked on one of the most catastrophic restructurings in British corporate history. It had merged with GEC in 1968, and in 1999 it sold its defence arm to British Aerospace, renamed itself Marconi plc and began acquiring telecoms businesses. In 1996, the firm had £2.6bn in the bank; within six years, it had accumulated £4bn of debt. At the height of the dotcom bubble it overpaid for its acquisitions and it didn’t know how to run them. As Turrall said, the company was unable to do

what the new management wanted, “which was sell mobile phones effectively”. When the market had been at its most exuberant, the company was worth £34.5bn, but in the depths of the slump that followed, its valuation fell to just over £50m and its debts became unsustainable. It was broken up and sold off and the New Street factory closed in 2008.

“When you’ve invested 47 years of your life in a company and you see the office boarded up, it’s very, very sad,” Turrall said. The property developer that bought the factory and got permission to turn it into homes, offices and a hotel went bankrupt in 2009 during the financial crisis, and the building has remained empty ever since. On the northern side of the site, moss and weeds have begun to bloom on the concrete banks of the dank green moat that once supplied its machines with water.

Yet Marconi hasn’t disappeared altogether from the town. The research laboratory that it established in 1936 in Great Baddow, a village south of Chelmsford, is still running, now owned by BAE Systems, the company formed when British Aerospace bought Marconi’s defence business. Great Baddow has since merged with Chelmsford, and the BAE Systems Advanced Technology Centre lies along its southern limit, between an industrial estate and the open fields that stretch towards the A12.

The building was a nondescript 1930s block with low red-brick walls, metal windows and stone pillars flanking the front door, but once I got beyond the lobby, I found myself at the beginning of a corridor that seemed to have no end. “It’s a series of mirrors,” said one of the two amiable guides who showed me round, adding: “You’re three feet tall by the time you reach the end of it.” The *Alice in Wonderland* reference seemed appropriate for a business that displays copies of a magazine called *Land Warfare International* in its reception area, and describes the process of designing and manufacturing weapons as “tailoring solutions to individual customer needs”.

The showroom to the side of the long corridor displayed some of the devices developed at Great Baddow or one of the other BAE Systems R&D bases around the country, such as liquid body armour, “radar-absorbent material” and “over-the-horizon radar” (“the earlier a target can be detected, the more effectively it can be prosecuted”). Some had civilian applications – the computer system in the prototype of a land-based drone might one day become standard in cars, and the system of “video analytics” that can predict “antisocial behaviour” could be used to survey a building’s “perimeter” or to monitor “parking violations”. Great Baddow has also supplied the European Space Agency with communications systems and worked with the British Olympic Association on various sports.

Yet such activities are a fraction of the business done by BAE Systems. According to the Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT), more than 95 per cent of its income derives from the sale of “fighter aircraft, warships, tanks, armoured vehicles, artillery systems, missiles, munitions” and other military equipment. One of the purposes of my trips around the country was to explore the demise of the industrial sector that my father spent his career financing, and so I knew I should recognise the value of highly skilled technical jobs that places such as Great Baddow provide. Yet I also knew that the worth of the armaments trade is disputed; it accounts for 1.2 per cent of the total value of UK exports, and even that figure is only sustained with significant taxpayer investment. What’s more, any calculation of the economic value of the arms trade is inevitably incomplete – a widget has a productive life that a jet fighter self-evidently doesn’t, and a true accounting would have to include the many forms of destruction that the firm’s products cause.

Even John Baron – an ex-soldier who shares the widely accepted view that the British economy must be rebalanced towards manufacturing, and whose constituency includes another Marconi offshoot in the form of a defence electronics company called Selex Galileo – believes that Britain must conduct itself with more discretion in the global arms bazaar. In 2003, Baron resigned from his position as a shadow health minister because he opposed the war in Iraq, and he was one of the few MPs (and the only Conservative) who voted against the campaign in Libya last year. He concedes that he is “out on a limb” on the question of foreign intervention, yet he makes the unarguable point that our fondness for removing selected dictators is hardly consistent with successive governments’ role in promoting and subsidising the arms trade. “What rules are we living by?” he said when I met him in Westminster. “The Prime Minister made an important speech to the Kuwaiti parliament in February this year saying there is an issue between interests and values, and perhaps too often in the past we have focused on the interests – yet at the time, he was leading an arms delegation. There has got to be an element of consistency.”

BAE Systems might reply that it has always been perfectly consistent. According to CAAT, it routinely equips countries that the UK Foreign Office’s *Human Rights and Democracy* report considers as having “the most serious wide-ranging human rights concerns”. It has also been investigated by the Serious Fraud Office for “political corruption” in its dealings with many different countries. The gravest allegations concern its relationship with Saudi Arabia: the British government cancelled the SFO’s investigation into the vast al-Yamamah deal on the predictable grounds that it would endanger Saudi Arabia’s participation in “the war on terror”. But in March 2010, in a case brought by the US department of justice, a district court judge in



Canvey Island: soon to become a nature reserve?

Washington found BAE Systems guilty of “deception, duplicity and knowing violations of law... on an enormous scale” and fined the firm \$400m, or £257m – “one of the largest criminal fines in the history of DoJ’s ongoing effort to combat overseas corruption in international business and enforce US export control laws”.

That it no longer makes landmines or cluster bombs is the best that can be said for it. Yet my two guides saw no reason to apologise or explain; they regarded these inventions as “toys for boys” and said that the stigma of the corruption charges did not permeate to Great Baddow. One told me that he had always wanted to work at the centre. As a boy, he could see the radar transmitter tower that stands in the grounds from his bedroom window, and he wanted to emulate his grandfather who had served in the RAF during the Second World War. Such consistency might be preferable to the doublethink that fetishises the martial valour of old campaigns while deploring their contemporary equivalent, yet it seemed a shame that there had been no other businesses that dominated the horizons of his childhood. By the time I left Great Baddow, I had come to the conclusion that the presence of the last outpost of the Marconi empire in Chelmsford was more corrosive of Essex’s moral status than any number of brawling plumbers.

Essex is a large and varied county. Its western half is inevitably shaped by its proximity to London: there is green belt land where development is prohibited and the untouched expanse of Epping Forest straddles the metropolitan boundary, but elsewhere the capital’s tendrils stretch into the countryside. Commuter towns such as Chigwell and Woodford are part of the agglomeration of interwar suburbs, and in the postwar years another kind of urban overspill led to the creation of the “new

towns” of Harlow and Basildon. Yet the perception of Essex as a modern, essentially suburban creation is hardly consistent with the existence of Colchester, England’s oldest recorded town, and the capital’s influence fades as you travel east. “Because Essex begins somewhere among back streets in London’s eastern suburbs, some people think it has no mystery, but I know that Essex is a huge mysterious county, with God knows what going on in its remoter valleys,” wrote J B Priestley, in *English Journey*, the account of his travels round the country in 1933. It is England’s driest county, and one of its flattest. Its north-eastern reaches are “Constable country” – that fine picture of English rural life called *The Hay Wain* was painted at a ford on the River Stour, which forms the border between Essex and Sussex – and the nature writer Robert Macfarlane counts its south-eastern coast among England’s “wild places”.

Macfarlane is fascinated by a naturalist called John Baker, who spent the decade between 1953 and 1963 tracking the peregrines of coastal Essex as they travelled across a “mixed landscape of woodland, field, sea wall, mudflat and salt marsh”. Baker came to know south-east Essex intimately, Macfarlane writes, “its boulder clays and river gravels, its cricket-bat willows and hazel coppices. He moved, once winter arrived, along ‘the bone-white coral of frosted hedges’, and through ‘black hard winter woods’.” In Baker’s eyes, “the Essex landscape – never more than 150 metres above sea level, only 50 miles from London, heavily farmed – was as inspiring and elemental as the Pamirs or the Arctic”. He published *The Peregrine*, his classic account of his pursuit of the falcons, in 1967, and 40 years later Macfarlane retraced his footsteps, beginning in “a long thin skein of broadleaf wood” called the Wilderness, which lies east of the village of Woodham Walter, near Maldon on the Blackwater Estuary. Macfarlane was going in search of the “beyond world” that exists at one remove from “our world of tarmac and cars and pesticides and tractors”, and when I looked at the map to place his journey, I was surprised to discover that the wood he had selected as his emblematic wilderness was only three miles from the village where I was born.

My father used to divide the county along a north-south rather than an east-west axis: he used to say that the A13 was the barrier between the industrial and post-industrial zones on the edge of the Thames Estuary and the villages further north. Even though he worked at the Coryton oil refinery, he and my mother chose to live in a village near Chelmsford. Bicknacre lies five miles east of Great Baddow on the southern edge of Danbury Common, one of the largest areas of commonland in Essex. When I left BAE Systems, I went in search of the house where I spent the first six months of my life. I found the street easily enough. I parked in the middle of the lane beside the footbridge spanning a small, sunken stream and walked up the road, checking the names on the doors. I passed Garlands, ►

► Puffins and Copperfield, but I couldn't see one called Mariner, or the lifebelt that used to hang beside the front door. A man getting out of his car by the lawn where joke-shop police tape roped off a white plastic skeleton suspended from a tree in honour of Hallowe'en told me it was at the far end of the lane, and eventually I identified it as the bungalow without a name.

It didn't look like it did in our old family photos. The front had been extended by a small porch with stained-glass windows and fake carriage lanterns, though the path that used to run past it to a farm seemed unchanged and the fields beyond remained undeveloped. The side-window of the heavy Ford pick-up parked beside the front door was embossed with a peeling decal of a buxom squaw, and a baseball cap with "Native Pride" stamped on the peak was lying on the dashboard. There was a miniature headdress hanging from the rear-view mirror and another in the window of the caravan stationed on the hardstanding at the side of the house, but no chief or shaman came to the door.

From the Wilderness, Macfarlane had travelled east towards the reclaimed expanses of the Dengie Peninsula, where "woodland and field frayed away to salt marshes, and the salt marshes gave into miles of shining mudflats", but I drove south, towards the industrial heartlands where my father used to work. The land immediately south of Bicknacre was so flat that it might have been floodplain, or reclaimed land, though the Thames Estuary was still above 15 miles away. It took me 20 minutes to reach the small town of Hadleigh. As I turned off the busy high street, the flats and houses disappeared and the land fell away to reveal the river. I passed a field overhung by a fluttering canopy of birds and drew up at the beginning of a muddy footpath beside the Salvation Army's outpost at Hadleigh Farm. The Salvation Army bought the land here in 1891 and established a "farm colony" for "the benefit of men who, through misfortune, need a helping hand". It had already established a city colony in Whitechapel, and its founder William Booth hoped that its rural counterpart would be the "second rung on the ladder" for "the submerged

tenth" – "all and any who have been shipwrecked in life, character, or circumstances". It built dormitories, a hospital and a chapel, and five years later a visiting journalist found "one of the finest market gardens in England", with "all the elements of an industrial and agricultural community". In 1990 it reopened as "an employment training centre", though the news that it will host the mountain bike trials in this year's Olympics confirms how its relationship with London has changed – once seen as a place apart where the wrecked lives of Londoners could be redeemed, Hadleigh Farm has become another recreational resort.

The castle stood 200 metres up the track, on the last crest of high ground before the land began to fall to the river – "the last low rise, the last shallow fall", as the poet Lavinia Greenlaw, who grew up in Essex, put it in a prose poem inspired by Constable's sketches and paintings ("Nearing forty, he found himself at the mouth of the estuary"). Hadleigh Castle was built in the 1230s for the 1st Earl of Kent; it was later requisitioned by the crown because of its strategic location and it formed part of the dower of several English queens, including three of Henry VIII's wives. Black plastic bags, presumably filled with dog-shit, hung from the railings at the entrance, and as I entered the jagged ring of craggy turrets two red-hulled tankers were crossing in the middle of the pale expanse of water. To the east, a line of houses struck up the slope above Southend and, to the west, beyond the dense grid of streets on Canvey Island, a wavering flame hung above a cluster of towers and spires that looked like a version of the Emerald City.

Coryton was less alluring close up. A week later, I drove back along the raised carriageways of the A13, past the wind turbines at the Ford plant in Dagenham, and turned on to the dead-end road called the Manorway, which runs past the former refinery at Shell Haven and terminates at the gated entrance to Coryton. Even the car parks were barred, so I drew up at the roadside and walked over to the fence that

sealed the dense complex of interlocking structures and smoking chimneys that contrives to process ten million tonnes of fuel a year.

My father had got a job at Coryton because he wanted to work for an American company and to gain experience of industry – two mid-century ambitions that now seem quaintly old-fashioned – but he didn't enjoy it much. He was bored and underemployed, and he spent a lot of time going to interviews for other jobs.

Coryton has since passed from Mobil via BP to a Swiss-based business called Petroplus, which until recently operated seven refineries in northern Europe. It comes under the Port of London, which has expanded ever further east in search of deeper water as ships have grown in size, and it is one of the busiest refineries in England. In October 2010 a group of protesters called the Crude Awakening shut it down for seven hours by locking themselves to "immobilised vehicles" on both sides of the carriage-way and preventing lorries from leaving. "This place, this whole industry, must become a thing of the past," a spokesman said.

The group's attempt to break our dependency on oil was no more than symbolic, but the global recession has had a profound effect on Coryton's ability to function: last month Petroplus Chemicals announced that it would file for insolvency, after failing to reach agreement with its creditors to extend deadlines for loan repayments. The administrators, PricewaterhouseCoopers, say that the plant will continue to operate as normal, though job losses are expected. There are fears, too, that the bankruptcy will trigger increases in petrol prices and lead to shortages in the south-east.

Surprisingly, the presence of the refineries has not been an unmitigated disaster for the surrounding environment. P&O, the company that bought Shell Haven, will be obliged to compensate for the construction of a new container port on the site by creating tidal mudflats on both sides of the Thames, and the activities of another oil company on a site on the other side of Vange Creek have led, serendipitously, to the creation of what has been called "England's brownfield rainforest".

Canvey Island has been occupied intermittently since Roman times, though Dutch engineers constructed the first sea defences in the 16th century. It is divided roughly in two: since the 1950s, the grid of residential streets that I had seen from Hadleigh Castle has spread across the eastern half of the land, but the western half is a hybrid of fields, marshes and industrial sites. In the 1960s, a company called Occidental Oil made plans to build a refinery in Canvey Wick, which lies between Vange Creek and the Charfleets Industrial Estate, and it prepared the site by installing storage tanks, building a vast deep-water jetty and spreading river dredgings across the marshes. Yet the refinery was decommissioned in 1973 and the land was left untouched for 30 years. The local kids who adopted it as a motorcross circuit helped to prevent trees and shrubs from taking over by churning up the earth, however, and a rich variety of habitats has emerged.

When a quango called the East of England Development Agency (Eeda) bought the land in 2002, in the hope of building a business park on it, environmental surveys discovered that it had "more biodiversity per square foot than any other site in the UK". It is home to many rare insects, including the shrill carder bee, found in only a handful of locations in Britain, as well as two species – a ground beetle and a weevil – that are unique to Canvey. It also hosts a large variety of grassland plants and various kinds of orchids.

In 2005, 93 hectares in Canvey Wick were given the status of a site of special scientific interest (SSSI), but the designation has not put an end to the debates about its future. The RSPB is planning to open a nature reserve covering 17 hectares in its southern part, but the supermarket chain Morrisons, which owns the site, intends to retain the rest. There is still a plan to build a sustainable business park, incorporating "brown roofs", rough grassland and "bee banks", on a ten-hectare site to the north but, given that the government intends to shut down Eeda by March, it isn't clear when or how it will be realised.

In theory, there is no public access to Canvey Wick, but I walked down the half-finished road, turned on to a path that led across the fields to the abandoned jetty and climbed through a hole in the fence at the bottom of the slope below the sea wall, a reminder of Canvey's precarious estuarial location. The wall was built after the floods of 1953, in which 58 people on the island drowned. Canvey has pumps that can work faster than the tide, local people told me. It also has a pub called the King Canute and some elderly islanders refer to events "before the flood" and "after the flood", confirming its emblematic importance.

Yet the height of the sea wall informs one of the paradoxes of life on Canvey: its encircling parapet closes off all views to the horizon, and

many of the islanders have turned their houses upside down, placing living rooms above bedrooms to alleviate the claustrophobia. I had spent the morning in the interior of the island without catching a glimpse of the river, and as I climbed the slope towards the sea wall, a metal door on the platform of the jetty was banging in the breeze. It was one of those days when an unusually high tide sends islanders to the phone to rebuke the council for not closing the flood barriers – the wind had stirred the grey-green water into choppy waves that were slapping against the sea wall four or five feet below the parapet, and the line of boats moored mid-stream was bucking briskly back and forth. The jetty stretched into the middle of Vange Creek before turning south and running towards the main channel of the Thames. Oil storage tanks blossomed like mushrooms on the far bank.

The stiles at the entrance to the footpaths that led into the interior of the reserve were closed, so I followed the sea wall to the south-west tip of the island and a pub called the Lobster Smack. It's said to feature in one of the climactic episodes of *Great Expectations* when Pip attempts to help his patron Magwitch escape

## A man said the car park was the venue of the last legal cockfight in the UK

down the Thames. It also has other, more recent claims to fame – one local man told me that its car park was the venue of both the last legal cockfight and the last legal bare-knuckle fight in the UK. A colony of single-storey prefab holiday homes and modern semis clustered beneath a group of storage tanks on the south coast, and as I walked back along Hole Haven Road, I passed a man in a skull-and-crossbones headscarf picking sloes from the bush opposite the entrance to the oil plant. Two hundred metres further on, I reached the other end of the almost completed road that local people have labelled "the road to nowhere".

"It's costing £18m and people think it's a waste of money," Councillor Dave Blackwell of the Canvey Island Independent Party said when I went to see him at his garden centre on the edge of the Charfleets Industrial Estate. He argues that there is no need for the business park, either, given that almost a third of the units on the estate are empty. Blackwell has been campaigning to save Canvey Wick for ten years, and he spends many summer mornings photographing wildlife on the site. Now 64 years old, he regrets the way that Canvey has developed since he was a boy, when most of the island was farmland. "You can't live in the Dark Ages," he said. "People have got to have homes. But Canvey's reached saturation; we can't cope with the amount of people we've got now, and the council wants to build another 1,000 homes."

There is only one respect in which Canvey Island hasn't changed – it used to be "the East Enders' playground" and because 95 per cent of its residents came from east London it has retained something of the old East End spirit. However, a friend of mine who used to work as a barrister at the courts in Chelmsford and Southend once offered the anecdotal observation that 90 per cent of the convicted criminals in Essex come from Canvey. *Oil City Confidential*, Julien Temple's film about Dr Feelgood, the island's best-known rock band, described the place as "busted and broken" – a violent, hard-drinking wasteland.

Blackwell concedes that Canvey has problems, especially "antisocial behaviour", but he insists that it is no worse than anywhere else. He used to be a Labour councillor but he didn't like being told what to say and do by a central organisation, and he was so determined to assert the island's distinctive identity that he founded the Canvey Island Independent Party (CIIP) in 2004. "People were fed up with the mainstream parties and they needed someone to fight for Canvey," Blackwell said. "People are looking for something outside mainstream politics. Our councillors live locally, they know everyone, and they know what the local problems are. There are no politics."

The CIIP now holds ten out of 11 seats on the town council and 16 of Canvey's 17 seats on Castle Point Borough Council: it is one of the most prominent of the local parties that have begun to emerge as a consequence of disillusionment with Westminster politics – and another of the man-made ecosystems that have flourished on this reclaimed island on the edge of the Thames. "My ambition is for Canvey to run itself and determine its own future, rather than relying on other people," Blackwell said. "I hope I've created a party that will last for years and do something good for the people of Canvey."

As I walked back to Benfleet, I wondered what such localism meant in the context of Canvey, which might claim to be an island socially and politically but cannot say the same economically – most islanders commute to work in London, and it is indubitably part of the global trade in oil and gas which has shaped its landscape. I passed the flood barrier that marked the boundary of the island and began to ascend the low rise that led to the station. The boats beached in the muddy creek in the foreground and the shadows of the cars moving back and forth on the tree-lined road that is the main bridge to the mainland were beginning to blur into the darkness, and in the distance the steady flicker of the flare burner gave no indication of the financial difficulties that would soon beset Coryton's most recent owners. ●

Edward Platt is a contributing writer for the *New Statesman*. "City of Abraham", his book about Hebron, will be published by Picador in September. Read about his first English Journey, a trip to Hull, at: [newstatesman.com/writers/edward\\_platt](http://newstatesman.com/writers/edward_platt)



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