

St. Peter-on-the Wall: heritage and landscape on the North Sea Coast

Johanna Dale (editor)

Short summary

The chapel of St. Peter-on-the-Wall, built on the ruins of a Roman fort, dates from the mid-seventh century and is one of the oldest largely intact churches in England. It stands in splendid isolation on the shoreline at the mouth of the Blackwater Estuary in Essex, where the land meets and interpenetrates with the sea and the sky. This book brings together contributors from across the arts, humanities and social sciences to uncover the pre-modern contexts and modern resonances of this medieval building and its landscape setting.



Main aims and scope of the book

The impetus for this collection is the recently published designs for a new nuclear power station at Bradwell-on-Sea on the Essex coast (see www.bradwellb.co.uk). In the foreword to the stage 1 consultation document, the 'long-established history of nuclear power' at Bradwell is invoked to justify extensive further development. This book places the 65 years of nuclear activity in the context of much longer-established histories of human activity in the area. It has as its focus the seventh-century chapel of St. Peter-on-the-Wall, which would be significantly impacted by both the construction and operation of a power station of the magnitude proposed. The book aims to establish an academic baseline about the monument and the landscape surrounding it. It highlights the multiple ways in which the chapel and landscape are historically and archaeologically significant while also drawing attention to the modern importance of Bradwell as a place of Christian worship, of sanctuary, and of cultural production. In doing so the book aims to inform debate and policy around Bradwell B. Beyond this it seeks to influence cultural and landscape heritage policy more widely, arguing that assessments of importance should encompass considerably more than the physical fabric of a monument. In analysing the significance of the chapel and surrounding landscape over more than a thousand years, this collection of essays will additionally contribute to debates about the relationship between space and place and particularly the interfaces between both medieval and modern cultures and also heritage and the natural environment.

St. Peter-on-the-Wall: an introduction

Johanna Dale

The introduction encompasses a brief overview history of the chapel, from its foundation by St. Cedd on the ruins of the Roman fort Othona and its early medieval importance, through its steady decline as a chapel of ease, lighthouse and finally barn, before a reawakening of interest in the building in the nineteenth century. It will also briefly describe the wider land- and seascape context of the site. Finally, it will outline the historic and proposed future nuclear development to which the volume responds, the aims of the volume and the scholarly contexts with which it engages.

I. The chapel and its pre-modern contexts

1. An architectural study of the medieval fabric of the chapel

David Andrews

The chapel of St. Peter-on-the-Wall was built largely of Roman *spolia* readily available at the deserted Saxon Shore fort athwart whose west wall it sits. The standing remains consist of the largely intact nave, with the westernmost stubs of the north and south wall of the apse still visible. Scars on both north and south walls of the nave point to the earlier existence of flanking chambers. The apse and flanking chambers were excavated in the nineteenth century and the line of the external walls is now marked on the ground by concrete. A possible original porch is indicated by scars on the western wall of the nave. This study will look at the fabric of the chapel to assess what it can tell us about how and when it was built, its cultural and religious affinities, and its vicissitudes over time, proceeding from the basis of previous assessments.

David Andrews is an historic buildings' archaeologist who worked for many years as a field archaeologist, conservation officer and historic buildings manager for Essex County Council. He is a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries.

2. An estuary of the ages: The intertidal archaeology of Bradwell and the Blackwater

Oliver Hutchinson

The foreshore of the Blackwater estuary in Essex can be considered one of the largest and richest intertidal archaeological sites in England. The saltmarsh and mudflats that characterise the coast have been shaped and re-shaped over millennia by the waves, tides and storms as well as by human endeavour. As a result, on almost all the shores can be found well preserved evidence of the people who once inhabited the area, harvesting and working this once rich coastal wetland. Uniquely in England, vast Mesolithic land surfaces (the largest exposure in the country) together with, for example, Bronze Age trackways, Iron Age and Roman salt production sites (Red Hills) and Saxon fish traps, are all exposed simultaneously in this single estuary. Bradwell and St. Peter's sit at the heart of this archaeologically rich landscape. The record of the changing exposures of the intertidal archaeological evidence here plays a crucial role in detailing the history of the Dengie peninsula and the technologies required to build and maintain the communication networks, industries and settlements that are key to its past.

Oliver Hutchinson is the lead archaeologist for the CITiZAN discovery programme on Mersea Island, a community inter-tidal archaeology project run by Museum of London Archaeology. He is an honorary research associate in the Institute of Archaeology at UCL.

3. Dengie, Othona and Ythancaestir – the late Roman and early medieval landscape context of St. Peter-on-the-Wall

Stephen Rippon

The foundation of St. Peter-on-the-Wall followed a well-established pattern of Anglo-Saxon churches being established within the ruins of late Roman sites, in this case the fort of the Saxon Shore at the tip of the Dengie peninsula. This paper will set the scene for the development of Othona, summarising what we know about the Roman fort and its landscape context (that was very different that of today in that it lay on a narrow peninsula, besides a major tidal creek, and surrounded by saltmarshes). The *regio* of Dengie, referred to in a charter of 706x709 in which King Swæfed of the East Saxons granted 70 hides to Ingwald, Bishop of London, will then be reconstructed, and it will be argued that Othona lay within this 70 hide estate.

Stephen Rippon is Professor of Landscape Archaeology at Exeter. His research focuses on the Roman and medieval periods in Britain and he is an expert in the Roman-medieval transition in Essex. He is a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries.

4. Put to good use: The religious afterlife of the Saxon Shore forts

Richard Hoggett

The Roman fort at Othona was one of a network of forts which spanned the coast of south-east England from north Norfolk to Hampshire, referred to collectively as the forts of the 'Saxon Shore'. After a period of abandonment following the Roman withdrawal, from the seventh century onwards most of these forts were reoccupied and put to religious use as part of the Christianization of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Bradwell's chapel of St. Peter-on-the-Wall is one of the best preserved and most significant surviving buildings from this period in southern England.

This paper examines the evidence for the religious reoccupation of Othona and the other forts within the Saxon Shore network, our understanding of which has been greatly increased by archaeological research undertaken during the last forty years. Although each site has a unique history and local context, such comparisons enable the identification of overarching themes within the conversion effort, as part of which many former Roman sites were repurposed as early ecclesiastical sites. This deliberate strategy of reoccupation provided a strong symbolic link with the Roman past and were a physical manifestation not only of Pope Gregory's attempt to evangelise a new people, but also of his ambition to reclaim spiritually the lost Roman province of *Britannia*.

Richard Hoggett is a freelance heritage consultant based in East Anglia and the author of 'The Archaeology of the East Anglian Conversion' (2010). He is a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries.

5. Cedd and the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England

Barbara Yorke

Without the work of Cedd from his Bradwell base the history of Christianity in England might have looked very different. The foreign missionaries from Italy, Francia and Ireland tend to dominate the narratives of the conversion of England. Their role was, of course, vital, but their achievements were precarious and even the Gregorian mission in Canterbury nearly lost its foothold in the country. The work of the second generation of natives who had been trained by the foreign missionaries was essential, especially as they were better placed to understand how Christianity might be fitted into Anglo-Saxon society, and could use their own language to explain it. Cedd from Northumbria led the way via his position as bishop of the East Saxons in persuading leaders and their subjects

in the midlands and southern England to adopt the new faith. The Anglo-Saxon remains at Bradwell are an unique testimony to the work of a pioneering individual who deserves to be better known, and to a key period in the early medieval history of England when Bradwell was a place of more than local importance.

Barbara Yorke is Emeritus Professor of Early Medieval History at the University of Winchester. She is an expert on the development of the English kingdoms in the early Middle Ages and their conversion to Christianity. She is a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries.

6. Early medieval monasteries on the North Sea coast of Anglo-Saxon England

David Petts

The early medieval monastic site at Bradwell has an impressive coastal location. It shares this proximity to the sea with many other important early medieval monastic sites in Insular Britain, ranging from Iona in Dal Riata to Lyminge in Kent. These are part of a wider trend towards island monastic sites found on the Continental mainland, which includes major early ecclesiastical sites such as Lérins and Noirmoutier. The choice of coastal location for such institutions clearly draws on a range of factors, including a rhetoric of isolation and the visual power of striking landscape locations, as well as more practical considerations such as access to maritime resources and maritime communication routes. This paper draws out a Christian rhetoric about the ocean and its symbolic connotations derived from Biblical sources and the experience of the Mediterranean and how this was adapted to the very different reality of the Atlantic world. It also explores how this resulted in different regional patterns of coastal monasticism, comparing in particular the complex archipelagic maritime cultural landscapes of Scotland and Ireland with the very different coastlines of the North Sea.

David Petts is an Associate Professor in the Department of Archaeology at Durham. He is currently carrying out a major programme of fieldwork on Holy Island, the site of the Anglo-Saxon monastery of Lindisfarne. He is a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries.

7. Land, marsh and sea. Transformations in landscape and farming at Bradwell, 1086-1900

Kevin Bruce, Christopher Thornton & Neil Wiffen

Coastal erosion, tidal flooding and the activities of man have all altered the landscape setting of St. Peter-on-the-Wall. This essay explores the transformation of the physical and farming landscape of Bradwell over the last millennium, focusing on the north-east portion of the parish, the land formerly comprising the manors and farming estates of East Hall and Down Hall, including the site of St. Peter's chapel and the land on which Bradwell Power Station was later to be constructed. The study will be based on a wide variety of documentary sources ranging from: Domesday book; medieval account and court rolls; surveys and leases; wills and inventories; estate maps, management documents and correspondence; the tithe survey and map; and national cropping returns.

Overarching themes will include the changing nature of the farming economy and how this impacted the landscape, principally the balance between dairy and arable production; the contribution of the parish's farming economy to the food supply of London via water transport; evidence for the contribution of fishing and other trades to local livelihoods; marshland reclamation and sea walls and the impact of storms and flooding; how Bradwell's farming landscape was affected by particular periods of economic expansion or depression, for example, the impact of the 'boom' years for arable production during the Napoleonic Wars, and the agricultural depression of the late 19th century which badly affected south Essex.

Kevin Bruce is a local historian who worked at Bradwell A Nuclear Power Station. Christopher Thornton is the county editor of the Victoria County History of Essex. He is a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, a Vice-President of the Essex Society for Archaeology and History and Chairman of the Friends of Historic Essex. Neil Wiffen is a local historian and honorary editor of the Essex Journal.

II. Modern responses to the chapel and its landscape setting

8. From barn to chapel: the rediscovery, re-consecration and renovation of the chapel in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

James Bettley

In 1864 interest in the chapel, then being used as an agricultural building, was reawakened following the excavation of the Roman fort, whose walls had been discovered as part of a land reclamation scheme. This essay explores the initial responses of archaeologists, amongst whom opinion was originally divided as to the age and purpose of the building before, in 1901, Charles Peers connected it with other Saxon churches of a similar type. In 1916 the chapel was conveyed to trustees including the Bishop of Chelmsford. It was conservatively restored by the Office of Works under Peers in 1919–20 and was reconsecrated on 22 June 1920. Within the course of about fifty years the status of the building thus changed from remote barn, of tangential importance as a landmark for shipping, to an iconic building with great symbolic significance for the new see of Chelmsford (created 1914).

This paper also draws on contemporary accounts and archival material (reports, plans, photographs) in the Essex Record Office, Chelmsford, the National Archives, Kew, and the Historic England Archive, Swindon to analyse the two twentieth-century restorations of the building. The 1920 restoration led by Peers aimed to preserve the ‘venerable simplicity’ of the building and it was minimally furnished; the floor was left as bare earth. By 1947 the chapel was badly in need of repair following war damage. Laurence King FRIBA was responsible for repairs carried out in 1947–9, including a new roof and paved floor, but his more ambitious proposals, for rebuilding lost portions of the building known from excavations (such as the eastern apse), were not carried out. The two restorations of the chapel in the twentieth century were not only of great significance for the life of the diocese, but, it will be argued they also provide interesting examples of contrasting approaches to the treatment of ancient buildings – the conservative archaeologist Peers on the one hand, and the committed churchgoing architect King on the other.

James Bettley is the revising editor of the Pevsner Architectural Guides to Essex (2007), Suffolk (2015) and Hertfordshire (2019). He received his PhD from the Courtauld Institute of Art in 1999 and is a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries.

9. St. Peter-on-the-Wall and the Blackwater Estuary: Literature, Culture, Practice

Beth Whalley

In the contemporary cultural imagination, estuaries have often and problematically been located at the periphery of things. In his lengthy 2007 biography of the River Thames, for instance, the writer Peter Ackroyd affords the river’s estuary just one short chapter. ‘This is not the wilderness of nature’, he writes, ‘but the wildness of desolation. It is not a human place.’

In recent years, however, artists, writers and psycho-geographers have deployed aspects of critical spatial practice to reinterpret tidal spaces and resist the notion of estuaries as

culturally marginal. Projects such as Ken Worpole and Jason Orton's *The New English Landscape* (2013), Rachel Lichtenstein's *Estuary: Out from London to the Sea* (2016), Tom Bolton's *Low Country: Brexit on the Essex Coast* (2018) and Metal's Estuary Festival (2016, 2021), to name just a few, reposition the estuaries of the south Essex coast as disruptive, difficult and radical 'human places' which are most definitely worthy of our attention.

This essay will situate the chapel of St. Peter-on-the-Wall within this complex estuarine cultural context. While Worpole, Lichtenstein and others base their important work predominantly on post-medieval histories, this essay will demonstrate that there is a much longer lineage of cultural and creative production in the Blackwater Estuary which continues to shape communal identities today. Drawing upon works as diverse as Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* (c. 731), the tenth-century Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*, the Old English riddles of the tenth-century Exeter Book, the 2013 project *Colm Cille's Spiral* by King's College London and Difference Exchange, and the artist Caroline Bergvall's multimedia performance *Ragadawn* (2016), St. Peter-on-the-Wall will be unveiled as a major site of transtemporal and transcultural estuarine exchange.

Beth Whalley is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Temporal Communities Cluster, Freie Universität Berlin. She gained her doctorate from the Department of English at King's College London for a thesis entitled 'Waterways and their Communities in Early Medieval Culture and the Contemporary Arts'.

10. 'Not a local issue': from Bradwell A to B **Gillian Darley**

When the first generation of atomic power stations was proposed by the Ministry of Fuel and Power (soon to be the CEGB) extremely little was known about this new source of electricity. It was noted, in debates in both Houses, that they were all proposed for remote sites of particular landscape quality. The naivety of the discussion is incredible to a modern eye but without precedent nobody grasped the dangers or the disruption that was on the table. This essay will draw on the various debates on the topic, consider the main players involved such as the CPRE and look closely at the Public Inquiry held at Maldon Town Hall in May 1956 [transcript held at the Essex Record Office], an event despairingly, and amusingly, recorded by John Betjeman in his 'City and Suburban' column in the *Spectator*. St. Peter-on-the Wall was listed Grade 1 on 30 December 1959 while the Saxon shore fort and Anglo-Saxon monastery had been scheduled monuments since June 1924. The disparity in available statutory protection as the development gained momentum (to open in 1962) is telling about the tenor, powers and concerns of architectural and landscape conservation at the time. The Inquiry lasted five days and was hardly noted in the national press although *The Times* reported it under the somewhat gnomic headline, 'Not a local issue'. It was concluded that the danger to the oyster industry was 'over-rated' and yachting and navigation were 'not affected'. The failure to mention or protect the ancient building and its setting, so close to the site, is startling. This essay will argue that the situation seventy years ago at Bradwell A, compared to what is being proposed at Bradwell B, in the immediate vicinity of a site now acknowledged as being of inestimable value, offers a salutary comparison.

Gillian Darley is an architectural historian and writer. Her books include biographies of Octavia Hill (2010), John Evelyn (2006) and John Soane (1999). She is a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and President of the Twentieth Century Society. She has written widely for magazines and newspapers including The Guardian, The TLS and The London Review of Books.

11. 'And withal a great silence': the Othona Community

Ken Worpole

In 1946 the RAF Chaplain, Norman Motley, keen to establish a sanctuary or retreat where British and German Christians could meet in a spirit of reconciliation after the war, visited Bradwell-on-Sea, where he already knew of the isolated chapel of St. Peter. In his memoir he wrote:

'On that vivid afternoon we came under the spell of that ancient building and of the whole area of the Blackwater Estuary. St. Peter's is situated a few hundred yards from the south shores of the river at the point where it enters the North Sea. There, one can breathe. The land on which we stood is almost a peninsula, with the mile wide estuary to the north and Bradwell Bay behind – and all round, and curving to the south, the North Sea. The cry of the curlew was heard, and a variety of maritime flora and many sea birds were evident on the saltings; and withal, a great silence.'

It was there that he and others established the Othona Community, which has been a thriving sanctuary for people of all religions and none ever since - perhaps one of the most successful sanctuary settlements in Britain still today. This essay will tell the story of the Othona Community, especially in regard to the uniquely hallowed landscape which this peninsula - at the meeting point of the Blackwater and the North Sea - inhabits. The match between the landscape and the idea of sanctuary is unparalleled, as this essay will show.

Ken Worpole is a writer and social historian whose work includes many books on architecture, landscape and public policy. He has served on the UK government's Urban Green Spaces Task Force, on the Expert Panel of the Heritage Lottery Fund, and as an adviser to the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment.

12. The St. Peter's Way: Leisure, Heritage and Pilgrimage

Johanna Dale

The St. Peter's Way, which runs 41 miles from Chipping Ongar to the chapel at Bradwell-on-Sea for which it is named, was planned and surveyed by members of two leisure walking groups (Epping Forest Holiday Fellowship and West Essex Ramblers) in the early 1970s. It was subsequently adopted by Essex County Council, becoming one of the county's promoted leisure paths and is now publicised as a pilgrimage route by the British Pilgrimage Trust (formed 2014), a charitable organisation which seeks to "advance British pilgrimage as a form of cultural heritage that promotes holistic wellbeing, for the public benefit".

This essay contextualises the route in three ways in order to understand its position at the intersection of leisure, heritage and pilgrimage. Firstly, it explores the route's origins in the context of the growth of walking as a working-class leisure pursuit in the twentieth century, the development of long-distance paths and the relationship between Essex's metropolitan fringe and rural coast. Secondly, it considers the route in the context of research into leisure-walking, green infrastructure and health and wellbeing. Thirdly, it places the path within the context of pilgrimage and medieval heritage in the twenty-first century. It uses heritage-tourism paths inaugurated in the 2000s for St. Cedd's Northumbrian contemporaries St. Oswald and St. Cuthbert to explore ideas of authenticity and it looks at two recent projects to develop medieval heritage-pilgrimage routes, the St. Thomas Way in the Welsh Borders and The Old Way on the South Coast, and argues that greater use could and should be made of the potential of the St. Peter's Way to deliver health benefits and to contribute to sustainable rural heritage tourism.

13. The Last of Essex **Charles Holland**

This chapter will explore a contemporary reading of pilgrimage in relationship to the landscape of Essex. It will focus on a specific building - A House For Essex (AHFE) – that has been conceived as the end point of a journey across Essex that takes in a number of key buildings including St. Peter-on-the-Wall.

A House for Essex can be seen as a contemporary re-working of themes present within St. Peter's. Formal and historical aspects of the chapel informed both the conceptual development and the design of A House for Essex. This essay will explore these connections alongside other buildings and places within Essex. In doing so it will place St. Peter's and AHFE within a contemporary reading of Essex and the idea of pilgrimage as a way to explore and understand contemporary landscape.

A House For Essex is a collaborative project designed by the architecture practice FAT - of which the author is a former director - and the artist Grayson Perry. FAT were commissioned by Living Architecture to design a house in Essex, where both Grayson Perry and the author grew up. The house – which is available for people to stay in – forms the end point of a fictional pilgrimage across the county.

The journey underpinning this pilgrimage can be read as a section through the socio-geographic landscape of Essex, one which includes inter-war 'plotland' settlements, post-war New Towns, Brutalist university campuses and late twentieth-century suburbia as well as its estuarine coast. It stretches from the industrial fringe of London at the southern edge of Essex to its agricultural north and takes in a number of religious or symbolic buildings including St. Peter-on-the-Wall, St. Laurence's Church, Blackmore and the Black Chapel, Great Waltham.

The idea of pilgrimage explored is also personal as the design development of the house, the research that informed it and visits to reference points such as St. Peter's form part of an autobiographical journey. The house can be read as exploring personal references, memories and landmarks. The paper will thus draw on historic sites to reflect upon a contemporary idea of pilgrimage.

Charles Holland is a Professor of Architecture at the University of Brighton and the principal of Charles Holland Architects, a design and research practice. He is also a Visiting Professor at the ABK Stuttgart and was previously a Visiting Professor at Yale. He has exhibited internationally, most recently at the Royal Academy, the RIBA and the Venice Biennale.

14. Care and Maintenance in Perpetuity? The Nuclear Landscape of the Blackwater Estuary

Warren Harper & Nastassja Simensky

The Blackwater Estuary is a microcosm of complex issues around history, heritage, ecology and the geo-politics of energy production, consumption and "disposal". It is home to one of the UK's first generation of nuclear power stations; proposed new nuclear programmes; the Grade I listed Chapel of St. Peter-on-the-Wall; and the Othona Community. Bradwell is situated in the midst of a SSSI, an area with a rich and diverse ecology as well as social history; from roots in Christianity to protests during the 1980s against Nirex, who at the time tried and failed to select Bradwell as a nuclear waste site.

Like any estuarine landscape its interrelationships are planetary: migratory birds; the ebb and flow of the tide; the panning and selling of the well-known Maldon salt; its involvement with the nuclear military-industrial complex; its medieval histories. Here the arrangement of humans and non-humans, historical sites and important ecologies should be considered, particularly when thinking about and acting upon the planning and implementation of the infrastructure of nuclear power production and storage. The development of place-specific curatorial and artistic methods 'in the field' enables new ways of highlighting current discourses around the nuclear in the region and the multiplicities of actors and forms of knowledge that run through as well as inhabit the estuary.

This essay will draw on the authors' current artistic and curatorial approaches to place and heritage within the specific context of the Blackwater Estuary. It will do this through the consideration of three interrelated threads: Time and Measurement; Care and Maintenance; and Transmission, to articulate the vital importance of more-than-human perspectives on care, stewardship, temporality, conservation and change.

Warren Harper is a curator currently undertaking a PhD in the Department of Art at Goldsmiths, where his practice-based curatorial research project investigates the nuclear landscapes of the Blackwater Estuary and Foulness Island. Nastassja Simensky is an artist whose place-specific practice focuses on the relationship between local and global structures in landscapes.

Editor biography

Johanna Dale is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of History at UCL where her research is focused on the political and cultural history of the medieval period. She has previously worked in the German Department at the University of Cambridge and the History Department at Karls-Ruprecht-Universität, Heidelberg. Her first book, *Inauguration and Liturgical Kingship in the Long Twelfth Century: Male and Female Accession Rituals in England, France and the Empire* (Woodbridge, 2019), was shortlisted for the 2020 Royal Historical Society Whitfield Prize. As a resident of Essex, she has a long-standing interest in the medieval heritage of the county.