

Making the landscape

It would be easy, as you belt along the A12 or head north up the M11, to think that Essex is simply that unexceptional place you have to pass through before more interesting scenes arrive. That really does no justice to the variety of the Essex landscape, and the geologic and human forces that shape it still.

Indeed, the whole point of this mini-series for the Wren newsletter is to demonstrate how much contemporary English nature writing has drawn out the remarkable that has too often passed for commonplace. Time now to examine in greater detail the geology that underpins that natural aspect.

Two 1999 books stand out: *The Essex Landscape*, John Hunter's study for the estimable Essex Record Office; and Gerald Lucy's *Essex Rock*, for the Essex Rock & Mineral Society. The wealth of technical detail in the latter is leavened by a gift for description of the prehistoric, amply realised with visuals from ammonite to mammoth; Hunter widens out his study to examine the effect of landscape on the lives of Essex men and women.

It's worth quickly re-stating the basic facts about Essex geology. The far north-west of the county is chalk land, and there is chalk too in the south, mostly in Thurrock. Indeed the two are one feature, the chalk underpinning virtually the whole county but disappearing perhaps 400ft below.

Between is a clay basin; across it, half a million years ago, flowed the Thames. But even this basin is not unvariegated. Ice Age glaciers, repeatedly pushing south – as far as Hornchurch – and retreating north, not only moved the Thames, they scoured the land-surface, dragging materials from elsewhere and uncovering new deposits.

Hence in much of northern Essex, newer Boulder Clay (perhaps 80,000 years old) overlays London Clay. The two are sufficiently different to affect the agricultural uses of the county: the former has enough chalk and lime bundled within it to be good for crop growing, whereas sheep and cattle thrive on the latter.

But Hunter goes well beyond this simple analysis, linking geology to the pattern of land-use throughout the recorded history of Essex. In this he follows that WG Hoskins, the godfather of this approach through his influential *The Making of the English Landscape* (1955). Within 20 years, Hoskins' approach had been applied to the counties bordering Essex, but not Essex itself. "Probably just as well," writes Hunter, pointing to more recent archaeological work – paradoxically, much of it stimulated by the rapid development of the county – which has helped flesh out what would have otherwise been slim pickings.

So it's Lucy to find out what was the Essex landscape, and Hunter to find out what has been, if that's not too fine a distinction. But what of what will be? As Hunter points out, a county council report of 1972 warned of an open landscape dominated by "poles, wires, pylons, crude prefabricated buildings"; the prairie-farm movement was then at its height. We have stepped back from that. But as he warns, "prosperity is a key ingredient of an integrated and harmonious landscape", and at the present time we should all be worried about that.

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