

THE ONLY WAY IS ESSEX

We thought we were a Cotswolds kind of family until we gave Essex a chance, says **SYBILLA HART**



When you think of Essex, let's face it, a host of clichés spring to mind. Electric gates, *TOWIE*, yellow Mercedes, yellow ladies. These clichés aren't entirely unjustified – there is no smoke without fire – but cast your eyes

further away from Brentwood and towards the rural fields of the north and the findings couldn't be more different. Ancient timber-framed farmhouses pepper the gently undulating landscape and at dusk it is easy to see why the magical sunsets made these Constable skies famous. When I first visited the Colne Valley, 15 odd miles to the east of Colchester, I couldn't believe my Satnav. How was it possible to be only an hour and a half from London in this rural idyll? And further still, how could we be in Essex? It turns out that Essex should not be dismissed as either the cockney backyard of East London or the cheeky cousin of loftier, more refined, rural Suffolk. There is so much more to this county than I first thought.

The breathtakingly beautiful Dedham Vale – a valley in the north east of the county, with the River Stour running through it – is a good place to start. It is cream tea territory and, during the summer months, it is not without the invasion of the tourist bus. The painter Alfred Munnings lived in Dedham and described his part Tudor, part Georgian abode (now a museum housing his art) as 'the perfect house'. When we drove towards Dedham for the first time I had to keep stopping the car to look at the view. It was



Dedham Vale



Jacobs Hall, Brightlingsea

as if I had waited my whole life for this countryside. Eighteen months prior to our arrival in Essex we had traipsed around at least 40 houses in Gloucestershire, infuriating every estate agent in the vicinity. I recall asking one particular man in the Cirencester office if he thought a certain house would suit us. His reply came as a bit of a shock to me, because even he had grown tired of our fruitless search. 'I'm not sure what would suit you', he said, hopelessly. The estate agents of Essex are keen to inform that the commuter links are excellent (this is true) and it is generally considered that you can get more brick for your buck than in the other home counties.

Though we don't have Daylesford, we do have plenty of good restaurants in Essex. Le Talbooth is probably the most celebrated. Set in the most romantic location right on the River Stour, it has a *Lord of the Rings* feel to it. Le Talbooth is an absolute treasure trove of culinary delights, and is owned by the Milsom group, which seems to have Essex covered in terms of hotels and eateries. They have another more informal restaurant down the road, Milsoms, and own Le Maison Talbooth (a hotel), as well as the seaside Pier hotel in Harwich. The Pier has added a dousing of much needed glamour to the Essex coast. We haven't had the Rick Stein effect in these parts – yet.

Believe it or not, Essex boasts the longest coastline in England. You can combine a coastal visit with a pizza extravaganza at Lucca Enoteca at Manningtree, hand on



Brightlingsea

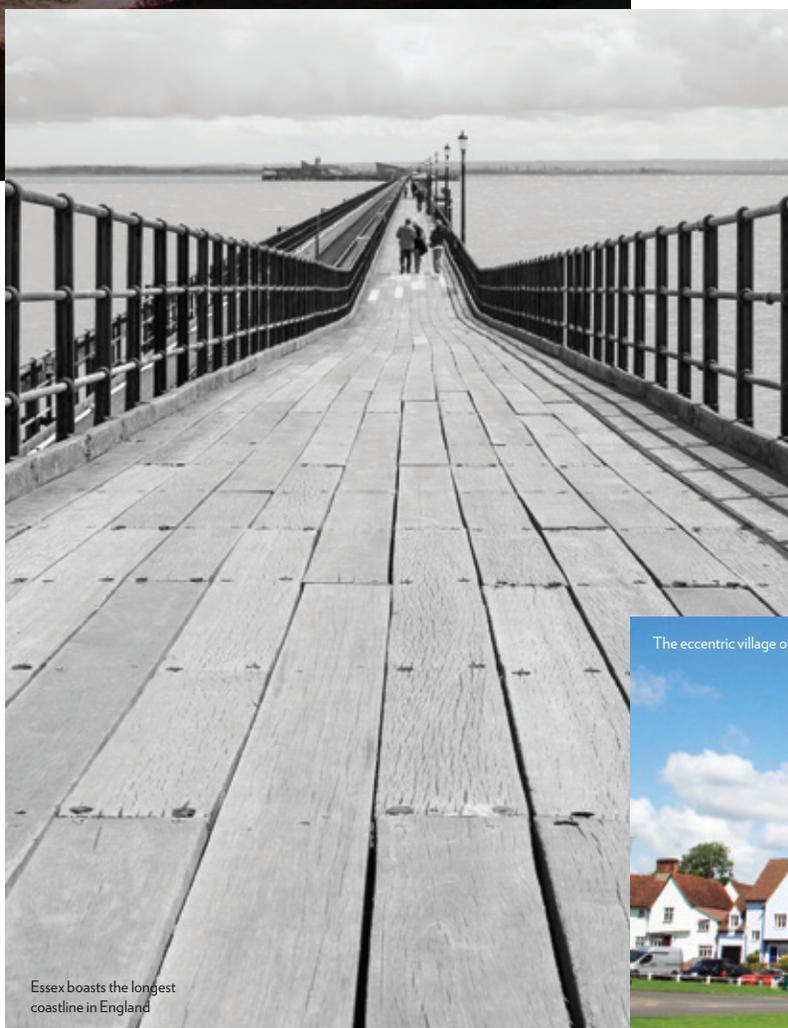
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heart the best pizza in England. They even do a Nutella pizza for pudding. Further south at Mersea Island you can see what all the locals are talking about and book in for dinner at The Company Shed restaurant – Essex's best kept seafood restaurant. You take your own bottle of wine and sit back and enjoy the view of the marshy coastline. Neighbouring Frinton-on-Sea is retirement central and the sort of place that your great aunt might have summered at years ago. The vast red brick Victorian villas just behind the beach must have been full of happy house parties years ago.

Venturing north west back into the countryside you will find Hedingham Castle, a fort run by a family who still live in the main house. The castle is host to a gluttony of events, from jousting tournaments to wedding receptions. The day we visited a live production of *The Three Musketeers* was taking place on the lawn at the foot of the fort. If a medieval wedding is your thing, a falcon will fly down from the Minstrel's Gallery to the altar to deliver the wedding rings. Most couples choose to marry in the 12th-century fort and have their reception in the Queen Anne mansion, a few minutes walk away. The drawing room looks down onto the beautifully kept gardens, parterre and lake. It is the stuff of BBC period dramas. I could almost picture Mr Darcy emerging from the lake (originally made up of six ancient ponds). The village Castle Hedingham itself is picture perfect: higgledy-piggledy houses look as though they are going to collapse into the street at any moment. It is oddly quiet, and there never seems to be anyone about. Whisper it – you are in Essex and only 60 miles from London.

Move slightly west and you will find the deeply eccentric village of Finchingfield. Last year we happened across the annual festival of the Morris Dancers, which we felt would be best described as the festival of general oddness. The prettiest pond in England sits next to the village green, flanked by tiny tumbledown cottages in varying bright pastel shades.

The Colne Valley steam railway will showcase the scenery I am harking on about as will the Thames Barges, which sometimes lays on lunch and afternoon tea on its cruises. As with all the places we visit in Essex, both are child friendly, unusual for us Brits. Perhaps we Essex types are more continental, we do have a lot of poplar trees after all. As a friend who recently visited us said: 'It feels like we are on holiday in Tuscany, not Essex.' Take it from me – Essex has all of the benefits of going on holiday, minus the airport. ■



Essex boasts the longest coastline in England



The eccentric village of Finchingfield