

British travel

By Jack Goldfarb

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'O Oysters, come and walk with us!'

The Walrus did beseech.

'A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk,
Along the briny beach.'

— Through the Looking Glass
Lewis Carroll may not have been thinking of England's Mersea Island when he wrote these whimsical lines, but it could very well have opened here. Mersea's oysters are fat, plentiful and much in demand. Its briny beach is a pleasant place for a stroll and a leisurely sit. And, though no walruses have yet been sighted here, there are lots of carpenters, busily building boats.

Surrounded by the estuaries of the River Crouch and the River Blackwater, and the Puffin Channel, Mersea lies in rich, oyster-studded waters teeming with some of the finest bivalves found anywhere.

Mersea Island is linked to the Essex mainland by an ancient causeway called the Strood. Built by the Saxons out of gravel, clay, and with thorn sticks. Improved by the Romans, the roadway has been macadamized in modern times. Twice a month, when the spring tides flow up the Pyefleet Channel, the Strood dries underwater and Mersea becomes a complete island again for a few hours.

Because of its sheltering tidal flats and its access to the mainland rivers and creeks that run into the North Sea, Mersea is a bustling anchorage for pleasure craft, big and small.

Mersea Island— where foaming brine flavors famous oysters, colorful past

A walk along West Mersea's coast road brings into focus a boat-oriented world. Yachts, dinghies, and catamarans careen on the beach or perch in cradles while their decks are hammered on, their engines tinkered with, their hulls painted.

Snapshots in agents' windows propose boats for sale or swap. Ship chandlers offer the gamut of gear and the latest in marine gadgetry. Public notices advertise navigation classes, lectures on nautical safety, and entry rules for the annual August regatta.

Out on the western end of the island are situated the big shipbuilding yards, the mast and sailmakers, and the exclusive yacht clubs.

On Mersea you can stop at the beachfront stall of a chatty oyster seller whose French ancestors settled here 300 years before. While

you peer into the ultraviolet tank where his "green bearded" West Mersea oysters are undergoing customary 48-hour decontamination, he can quote Joyce on the joys of travel and Kipling on the mystique of smuggling.

"Smugglers did a lucrative trade around here not so long ago," the oysterman told me. "Isolation from the mainland helped, of course. You can still find houses here with secret doors, tunnels, and hollow ceilings. The contraband gangs sold their goods over on Tiptree Heath to the eager merchants up from London."

Like many Merseans, the stall owner insists that West Mersea oysters outclass the renowned Colchester variety — named after the neighboring ancient capital once ruled by the legendary Old King Cole.

"What'd they know about oysters in Colchester?" he declared with a wink. "Colchester's eight miles inland!"

Farther east along the seafront, Mersea's public bathing beach is flanked by hundreds of wooden huts stretched out in a long enfilade. Here are accommodated the crowds of summer visitors.

Still farther east lies the "other half" of Mersea, the sparsely populated rural parish of East Mersea. Consisting mostly of farmland and grazing marshes, the eastern side of the island has a bleak and undeveloped coastline.

High above the green, flat countryside and visible far out to sea towers an 11th-century church built to honor St. Edmund, the martyred East Anglian king.

But another church is the island's most interesting landmark: the venerable church of Saints Peter and Paul. This tree-shaded edifice stands on the site of a Roman vestal temple and incorporates not only stones from that structure, but sections of a Saxon and a Norman church, both erected here more than a millennium ago. Its battlement tower contains beautiful works of art accumulated over the centuries, including a sculpture by Giovanni della Robbia.

There are no hotels on Mersea itself. The town of Colchester has several good inns: the George, the Red Lion, the Rose and Crown, and the Grosvenor. These range in price from about \$12 for a single bed and breakfast at the George, to about \$6.50 at the Grosvenor. Transportation to the island is available.