

Introduction

Welcome to St Osyth



St Osyth village clusters where four lanes meet, on a foreland between the pebbly North Sea beaches and the mudbanks of the River Colne. From its low hill you can look west in the direction of London and east towards the Netherlands across the sea. In past times the village's chandleries and sail-lofts equipped barges trading between the Thames Valley, the east coast of England and Holland. St Osyth's fields and fisheries supplied big markets, most notably London. Ships of up to thirty tons could navigate – carefully – up the silty little creek to the village wharf and they shipped out cargo after cargo: tiles, bricks, gravel, wood, wool, vegetables, fish, oysters and cheese. St Osyth was a lively hub, although now it is a quiet corner: it hardly feels like the setting for the panicked whirl of activity that spreads a witch-hunt across the map, from home to home, village to village. Yet that is what St Osyth and its surrounding villages became in the winter of 1582: witchland.

In Elizabethan times the quayside rang with the hammering, singing and swearing of shipwrights and sawyers, rope slapping on sea-bleached wood, sails cracking as they filled with wind. Smells of pitch and resin fragranced the air. On Mill Street, which led from the quay to the Priory, inns catered to hungry mariners as well as to carriers bringing produce to and from the ships. Landladies made malty Essex ale and beer, and served mutton, from

marsh-fed sheep, and rabbit pie: there was a warren in the Little Park next to Mill Street. Deals were done and trade disputes argued out in the market square and guild halls, one of which was a former monastic hospital. It stood on Mill Street too, in the section called The Bury outside the Priory gate, and was flanked by the fine houses of gentry and merchants facing onto the Priory grounds. A large community of farmers, craftspeople and specialist traders – painters, victuallers, dyers, wheelwrights, oyster dredgers, blacksmiths, spinners, clothiers, saltmakers, shoemakers, glovers, caulkers – served the town, its traders and sailors.¹

Before reclamation and drainage extended its fields and firmed its paths, the village must have felt even more maritime than it does now: the end of the Essex earth and the beginning of the water. Estuarine Essex was flooded more deeply then, and was wilder. Hills that now look down on flat green fields were once islets standing above pools and reed beds, and where the land rose above the tideline it did so as heathland and scrub. Essex maps still bear names that tell this story: Causeway End, Marsh Road, Heath Farm. Early field names frequently included the suffix ‘marsh’ and some were called ‘wadings’ or ‘swamp’. Villages were linked in Elizabethan times by fragile bridges, wooden walkways and earthen banks that repeatedly required repair but seldom received it. Even in

¹ Cheshire Archives DCH/o/17; Valerie Scott and Libby Brown, *St Osyth: Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan* (Tendring: Tendring District Council, 2010) *passim*; Christopher Thornton and Herbert Eiden, eds., *The History of the County of Essex* vol. 12 (London and Woodbridge: Institute of Historical Research / Boydell and Brewer, 2020) 133–40, 147–9.



FIGURE I.1 The Mill, St Osyth. (Source: Chronicle / Alamy Stock Photo.)

Note: A black and white version of this figure will appear in some formats. For the colour version, please refer to the plate section.

modern times, the Essex coast has the feel of a land very close to becoming sea, ‘a series of gently swelling ridges, green rollers of smooth grassland, about half a mile from wave to wave’.²

St Osyth went right down to sea level at the creek – which was also known as ‘the fleet’ – but it had areas of higher ground too: the village sits on the crown of a mound, and Beacon Hill is nearby. The main area of settlement on the mound was connected to the coastal marshes by a narrow causeway that dammed the creek to form a tidal mill pool (Figure I.1). Until this causeway was widened and straightened in 1936, large vehicles such

² E.g. ERO D/DHw T99; D/DZI 18; D/DCr M1; Donald Maxwell, *A Detective in Essex* (London: John Lane, 1933) 18.

as buses could not venture across it. They had to turn around at the end of Mill Street, unable to go out onto the flat marshlands.³

By then, the coast was dotted with chalets, bungalows and caravan parks, but in Elizabethan times it was empty except for a few farmhouses and their sheep and cattle. Parts of it often flooded, south of the fleet and along its length, despite sea walls. Even in recent times a tidal surge could pour up to a mile inland in Essex, as it did disastrously in the ‘Great Flood’ of 1953. On that January night, the St Osyth mill dam was under five feet of debris-swollen water and at Lee Wick to the south the water depth reached ten feet.⁴

In calmer seasons, the marsh along this stretch of the Essex coast was a lonely, still place. Swans, ducks, gulls and wading birds – curlews and oystercatchers – picked over the flats for worms and shellfish, sand eels, refuse and flies. When it was hot, the creeks ponded at low tide of decaying sea weed and discarded waste from fish-gutting that had been tipped in near the quay. Further out, there were flocks of dunlin, turnstones and plovers trotting across silvery mud, and herons stabbing salty pools. Humans were rarer creatures than birds. Banked paths

³ Geraldine Craig, *St Osyth* (Clacton-on-Sea and St Osyth: Guild Press and St Osyth Historical Society, 2003) 13, 15; Thornton and Eiden, *The History of the County of Essex* 145–147.

⁴ Phyllis Hendy, *St Osyth Parish Council: The First 100 Years* (Clacton-on-Sea: Campwood Press, 1993) 46–7; Thornton and Eiden, *The History of the County of Essex* 67 – two people drowned in the floods at St Osyth (Point Clear) in 1953; see also Hilda Grieve, *The Great Tide* (Chelmsford: Essex County Council, 1959) *passim* and *Essex and the Sea* (Chelmsford: Essex County Council, 1970) 1–6; Craig et al., *St Osyth* 71.

and, where these ran out, oval wooden boards strapped to the feet kept oystermen, bait-diggers and wild-fowlers from the ooze. Whiting, cod and gurnard could be caught offshore, and there were flatfish, shellfish and mullet in the creeks. Oyster pits riddled the foreshores. The sea provided villagers in this corner of the county with both food and salt but, although there was plenty of saline water, long, dry summers could easily cause drought: eastern Essex is the least rainy part of England. This was one of many challenges for farmers. In summer, wheat and barley fields could bake and crack, but during storms the waves pounded sea walls and river cliffs, and spray soured all the coastal lands.⁵

Farm-folk in the coastal villages and all over the district of Tendring Hundred raised pigs, cattle and sheep, many of whom fed on the marshes where they ate a coarse hay. Farmers' wives and their maids churned butter and pressed curds into vast quantities of cheese made from milk from both cows and sheep. The local cheeses were famous for their size: huge wheels of hard sheep's cheese were shipped out of St Osyth from the quay to be sold in local markets along the coast and in London. The cheese-making farmers also kept geese, ducks and some chickens and sold their meat, eggs and feathery down. Raising and selling chicks was a profitable business. Where they could, people also planted plum and apple trees or kept bees on the heaths to supplement their diet and income. In the hedgerows were fat blackberries, free

⁵ Thornton and Eiden, *The History of the County of Essex* 151–2; see Hervey Benham, *Essex Gold: The Fortunes of the Essex Oysterman* (Chelmsford: Essex Record Office, 1993).



FIGURE 1.2 Old houses in Stone Alley, St Osyth. (Source: Rodger Tamblyn / Alamy Stock Photo.)

Note: A black and white version of this figure will appear in some formats. For the colour version, please refer to the plate section.

food but with a short season at the end of summer, and likewise there were hips and nuts. But in general there were few large trees outside of the copses. At St Osyth these copses were Riddles Wood and Hartley Wood, both of which were inland and north of the village. There was also little shelter from hedgerows, so crops and creatures alike shivered in the legendarily sharp east wind.

That bitter wind meant that St Osyth's medieval clapboard houses could be draughty, and when wet they rotted and leaked. In summer, mosquitos whined in and spread fever among those whom they bit. Some homes were of thatch and cob or clay construction with earthen walls, warm in winter but vulnerable to heavy rain (Figure I.2). So were many of the barns that kept grain and animal

fodder dry. Mould and mice whittled away carefully hoarded stores. If trade was bad, St Osyth's poorer people had limited food to fall back upon. They could apply to the Collector for the Poor, a charitable parish office filled by a clothmaker in the early 1580s: John Johnson, whose wealth came from the wooltrade. Wool dominated the economy of the women and many of the men of the village, so John would interact with them almost daily as his agents distributed wool to clean, spin and dye. As Collector, he would give them a little money or a little beef and bread from the charitable funding he had collected. Some folk flourished, but it was not a forgiving time or place to be poor.

Before the Augustinian canons had closed their doors at St Osyth some fifty years before, things had been different, at least in the memories of older people. Trade was brisker, and the canons had a straightforward religious duty to give alms. They appointed a dedicated almoner to do so, and he held Amperswick Farm in the village. Older memories of wealth and charitable piety were associated with a seventh-century foundation, after whose first abbess – Lady Osgith or Osyth, a Mercian princess and martyr – the village was renamed. Its original name, Cicc or Chiche, remained in legal documents but most people called the place 'Saint Oses' or, more briefly, 'Toosey'. When Osyth's successors, the canons, left and their foundation was closed, asset-stripped and privatised in 1539, ancient patterns of trade and charity both ceased. They were replaced piecemeal under the direction of the land's new owners: the Darcy family. The Darcys renamed the site 'the Priory' and they held other formerly religious property in the village and beyond.

The Tolleshunt branch of the family owned St Clere's Hall, a few hundred yards from the Priory, and the wider family held lands across Essex through Little and Great Clacton out to Walton le Soken on the east coast and also in many parishes inland. In fact, it must have seemed that Darcy men owned almost all the rights to everything in the area. Just about everyone was a tenant, partner or debtor of theirs in some way, and this fact will matter later in the story of the witches of 1582.

The Darcys gave gifts to the Elizabethan-style food bank maintained by the Collector, and they would have fed their poorer neighbours on religious holidays and during the peak seasons of agricultural work.⁶ But still people went hungry and sometimes they were understandably ungrateful for the scraps they were given from the loaded Priory tables. Some looked back to earlier times with nostalgia, others had welcomed the religious changes of the Reformation and felt they should have gone further. Across the Darcy lands and beyond, people met in unlicensed assemblies to hear radical preachers or debate shocking ideas of religious autonomy. Even the suspicion of such activities prompted sharp questions from ecclesiastical authorities. Meantime, international

⁶ Jake Millar, email 2 February 2021; Craig, et al., *St Osyth* 62, 64–5; Thornton and Eiden, *The History of the County of Essex* 135, 139–40; F. G. Emmison, *Elizabethan Life: Home, Work and Land* (Chelmsford: Essex County Council, 1976) 8; ERO D/DGh M45/16; Philip Morant, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Essex*, vol. 1 (London, 1748) 456; Hendy, *St Osyth Parish Council* 6; F. G. Emmison, *Tudor Food and Pastimes* (London: Ernest Benn, 1964) 46–53; on poverty and charity see Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Poor Relief in England 1350–1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) especially 252–69.

religious links and trading relationships had changed, as had the practices and markets that sustained the villagers. The overseas wool trade that had flourished in eastern England in medieval times because of its proximity to Flanders and Holland faltered, and nothing could replace the wealth it had brought to St Osyth and the wider Tendring district.

It was in this context – of economic and religious change, of the tense relationship between the villagers of Tendring Hundred and the Darcys and in the middle of a bitter, hungry winter – that the first witchcraft accusations were made in St Osyth in February 1582. This book explores those accusations and their consequences. While the story of the Essex witches of 1582 is indeed a story about St Osyth, it is also a story of Weeley, Little Clacton, Thorpe le Soken, Little Oakley, Beaumont, Moze, Walton le Soken and the other villages and manors of the Darcy estates, as well as their wider connections across eastern England. But it all starts in St Osyth, with two women whose anger grew to engulf not just their own but also the surrounding villages, and with the man whose assumptions framed their quarrel, encouraged and spread it to serve his own ends. Let's start at the hearth, the heart of the home of the first accuser: Grace Thurlowe.