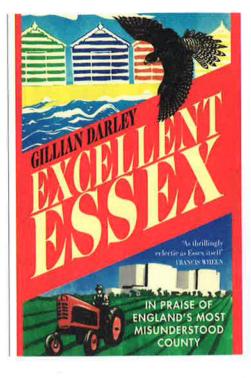
## Eastern Promise

Hana Loftus reviews Gillian Darley's perambulations around Essex

'Excellent Essex: In praise of England's most misunderstood county' Gillian Darley Old Street Publishing, 336pp, £15

## Right

Map of Essex (ph: M31-1957-Polish edition, John Davies & Alexander Kent, redatlasbook,com); 'Epping welcomes the Queen' (ph: The View Epping Forest Collection, City of London).







Essex has always tussled with its stereotype shadow — from being prized as the breadbasket of the south-east to being decried as the overspill of London, and more recently, despite a mini-revival as an atmospheric edgeland landscape, as a Brexit heartland. The one constant, as Gillian Darley's readable romp through a millennium and more of Essex stories makes clear, is that the people of Essex itself have never cared much what anyone else has thought of them. "Idiosyncrasy and incongruity are left free to roam", not only in her pages, but among the towns and villages they describe.

This live-and-let-live attitude — as well as the deceptive quality of the Essex landscapes, where you plunge into deep rurality as soon as you leave a dual carriageway, and where the twisting coastline hides numerous remote promontories — has attracted a wild variety of adopted residents. They have been seeking an escape from others, or from their own weaknesses; a place to reinvent themselves, or the freedom to express their own peculiarity — quite literally in the case of the many odd sects, including the Peculiar People, that have made the county home.

The seaside towns of Essex, shunned by the snobbish second home-seekers, attract a larger cohort for whom it is a place of well-earned rest and reminiscence. Selling up in the inflated London market, you can buy a bungalow or park home near a beach full of happy memories from your teenage summer holidays, and live off the difference for the rest of your years.

Excellent Essex', true to the character of its people, is far from the pretensions of psychogeographers or the condescension of Pevsner, whose coverage of Essex was notoriously reluctant. It is an omnivorous miscellany: a gathering of vastly diverse anecdotes, observations and historical footnotes hung together in a delightfully token attempt at categorisation and order.

And it is much the more enjoyable for it, as within a few pages Darley takes the reader from comparing a Walthamstow tea-set with Catherine the Great's Wedgwood, through Daniel Defoe, John Locke's peculiar water-filtering stone, the Civil War and the 28-volume diaries of a certain Clarrissa Trant, to émigré Cornish dairy farmers, Homes for Heroes, the World Scout Jamboree, and a grumpy Norman Lewis (an exception to the merry rule and rightly named the 'crabbiest ever resident of Essex'). I am only sorry that a few of my favourite Essex sects — the Orthodox monastery which still thrives near Maldon, and the anarchist-pacifist community of Dial House - didn't make the cut.

Darley's focus on people and their stories has a more serious point — to explore the county's economic and social evolution, and how the county itself has been reimagined and reshaped by forces ranging from the ever-shifting sea to the spooks who created the Soviet-era 'Red Atlas' and wonderfully captured the Essex accent in Saufend-on-Sji and Klekten.

Essex — between London and the Continent — has been a base for the military, as well as for smugglers, since pre-Roman times, and a central part of the wider national story. It is frequently a bellwether for future trends, for good and ill, and worth paying close attention to for that reason, if no other.

Darley's perambulation jumps centuries and skips merrily around the county, accumulating a plentiful store of incident and detail along the way. It is a pleasure to read an account that does not roam in self-absorbed solitude around the landscape, but quotes liberally and colourfully from primary sources and obscure archival material. One can only hope that a second edition will follow swiftly, so that the illustrations can be upgraded from barely legible black-and-white reproductions, tiny on the page, to equal the character of the text. This is particularly the case because Darley — although an architectural historian - offers only the briefest pen portraits of the physical stuff of Essex, recognising that the dedicated church-lover will have the (revised and improved) Pevsner to hand, and those on the modernist trail have already read plenty about Silver End. Her trail of glinting pebbles is an invitation to find out more - to search out your own version of Essex, in all its complexity of people and place. A