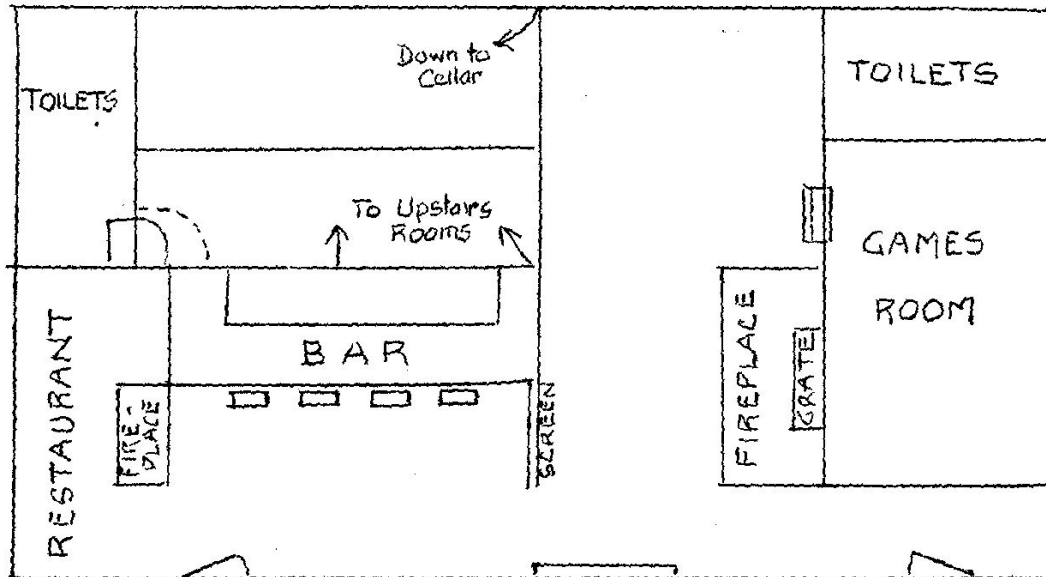


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THE HOY AND HELMET



The Hoy and Helmet is situated very near to South Benfleet Creek, at the foot of a hill before entering Canvey. Behind the Hoy and Helmet pub stands the local parish church St.Mary's, which is on the hill.

The Hoy and Helmet can be seen if you stand at the top of Essex Way, Benfleet and look down to the west. Here it is tucked below St.Mary's Church.

The pub is built on the battle site of the Vikings and the Saxons. The Vikings came to Benfleet in hope to find gold and silver in the low, green hills, as it was said that an English king of Roman days had mined there. But the Vikings never found gold or silver, but they did find wealth. Evidence of this can still be seen in the Roman bricks set, dull red, in the squat, four-square tower of St.Mary's Church. The Vikings were under supervision of King Hasten and the whole of Essex quivered under the power of him. The Vikings also were terrified of him and to comfort their grief they plundered the rich sheep farms of the peaceable Christian Saxons. The Viking warriors were like wild beasts roaming the land, raping the Saxon women, slaughtering their cattle and trampling their crops. Hasten's men found it so easy to take over the Saxons that they decided to colonise the land and use the Saxons as slave labour.

Hasten built a fort built for himself on a horse-shoe shaped piece of land where St.Mary's now stands. It was protected on three sides by the waters of Benfleet Creek and Canvey Marshes. The warriors built a stout palisade - a wooden wall - and they dug a network of moats on the landward side. Then he sent home for the Viking women and children.

The wealth poured in from Kent for the Vikings and life became hell for the Saxons.

But, then came a stroke of good luck for the Saxons. Alfred the Great's son, Edward, defeated the Vikings at a battle in Kent and the Vikings fled. At this time, Hasten and his warriors were not at Benfleet and so Edward attacked with his reinforcements. Hasten's wife and two sons were taken prisoner and all the Viking long ships were burnt and sunk. Never again after this incident did the Vikings trouble the Saxons.

Today the Hoy and Helmet is high and dry above the marshland, but once the water from the Creek lapped at its doorstep. The sea from Benfleet Creek was diverted and after the many floods the sea defences were strengthened in 1953 and now that area is just a shadow of its former self. It's a wide, grassy area that curves in an arc round the pub's decayed old ditchard which usually carried just a stream of water. But if you walk around that area now the majority of it is overgrown with weeds and tall grasses. This has only happened in the last few years and I can still remember playing by that small stream when I was younger, before it became overgrown.

After the Battle of Benfleet it is thought that the Saxons built a church for the thanksgiving of their victory and in later years, in the Norman times, St. Mary's Church was built on the same site. About two hundred years after the Battle of Benfleet a building was put up on the site of the Hoy and Helmet, possibly for the purpose of monks serving the Church.

About five hundred years ago some unknown artist-craftsman built a wonderful and exquisite porch for the Church and it was these same people who built the Hoy and Helmet Inn as it was known in those days. Architects and artists for miles came to see the wonderful timber work and these same artists and architects also visited the Hoy and Helmet.

The old Hoy and Helmet dates back to the 15th century or early 16th century, but some of the original building dates back to the 11th century.

At one time there used to be a blacksmith's shop adjoining the pub, but the blacksmith's was demolished and now forms part of the Hoy and Helmet's car park.

One thing that is interesting about the pub is its unusual name. Many people think that the name Hoy and Helmet is the first link with the Battle of Benfleet, the helmet being some sort of Viking headgear, but this definition would be wrong.

One explanation for this name could be that it is known in the 19th century that the pub was known just as The Hoy and that it may have been linked with another pub named The Helmet in the village.

Or, the second explanation is that which is most possible. During the 18th and 19th century the Hoy and Helmet was used by smugglers. The Government put levying duties up, to raise funds and so a lot of smuggling began. The men of Leigh had the reputation of pirates and the men of Benfleet were also suspected of being pirates, when they weren't fishing or looking after their farmland. Our Essex forefathers also had a nasty reputation for being 'wreckers'. The Hoy and Helmet must have been just the place for the men to sit and discuss their plots for smuggling. They would sit around a blazing fire, drinking home-made ale with the Creek's water lapping at the pub's door.

There used to be a quay, but this has long since gone. The quay would have been where the smuggled goods were landed. The wreckers would bring a fine selection of spirits from the French coast. And, as Kipling recorded, 'bringing brandy for the parson, bacoy for the clerk, laces for a lady and letters for a spy'. There would be a watchman, who would stand at the top of Essex Way and look to the south down the Creek, for the wreckers to return. When he saw them, other smugglers would be informed, who would probably be drinking in the Hoy and Helmet. They would then nip out to the Creek. The stolen goods would be

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taken ashore, where packhorses waited to take 'baccy to the parson'. Then the smugglers would return to the Hoy and Helmet and the other villagers would be none the wiser. Because of this smuggling we think that this is how the Hoy and Helmet got its name. 'Hoy' is Danish for 'boat' used by farmers to take their produce round the coast. 'Helmet' is an old English/Saxon name for a primitive jetty built out of packed earth and fling. So this could have been originally the place where a boat stood on a jetty and the name was handed down for several hundred years, until a public house was built.

The pub must have been a good pull-in for highwaymen and footpads. The Hoy and Helmet was remote with only one road that led to it. If the highwaymen were being searched for, they could easily hide in the marshes, which were very handy for them. It was thought that Dick Turpin was a regular footpad in this area. He was well-known in the Southend area as a smuggler and it was here that he started his career, who then turned into a highwayman.

Dick Turpin was not alone in his crimes and it was not strange that fishermen turned to smuggling, wrecking and piracy. It was probably due to the independent spirit of the fishermen that they brought smuggled goods ashore by using the many inlets of the Creeks and Thames and the Essex Marshes. There were many restrictions put down on the sea, which hit the poorer classes and so they turned to smuggling to make a bit extra on the side. The fishermen got theirs by poaching and stealing from the enclosed land owned by nobility.

Even now it is said smuggling is still carried on, with boats slipping quietly into the creeks around the Essex coasts. This isn't surprising, as there were and still are many inns and pubs occupying such positions, that were ideally situated for the illegal trade. It was as if they were purposely built for this trade, especially the Hoy and Helmet, with the Creek within a hundred yards from the doorway and the high land behind for smuggling and for keeping a lookout.

In 1953 a secret chamber and blocked-up tunnel were discovered, when some structural alterations were being made to the Hoy and Helmet. It was discovered that it led to the Church from the Hoy and Helmet. It is thought that maybe St. Mary's was used to store the smuggled goods, as in those days the Church was not used very often. The clergymen would only visit it once a week, for the weekly services and so it was an ideal place for storage and there is no doubt that other Churches were used for the same cause. It is also known that on Canvey the smugglers stored their goods under the pulpit and did so for many years. But the tunnel leading from the Hoy and Helmet to the Church remains a mystery, as many centuries ago it was very common to dig out a blind tunnel under pubs, for storing beer and spirits, which is quite possibly what this blocked tunnel was used for.

In Victorian days and later days, when modern cells were made, tunnels like this were found and many conclusions were jumped to and passed down to the present day.

From the outside the Hoy and Helmet does not look awfully impressive, but don't be put off by this. As we have seen, it is full of historic interest and it is very well run. It's one of the nicest kinds of traditional Essex pub, which are very popular to-day.

The tiles of the roof gave away the period when the Hoy and Helmet was built. They are of varying levels and are a study of home-made beauty, which can be seen from the car park. The walls are made out of lath and plaster and are not as beautiful as the tiles are.

One of the two chimney-stacks is built out of 16th century brick, though there is evidence that it was rebuilt when a stone barn was added to the pub.

There are many ghosts that can be conjured up in the small area and its surroundings.

First there were the Romans. Canvey was an important place long before Caesar came to England. Canvey exported wool to the Continent and there was a Roman road leading from the Island to Colchester, which proves that Canvey was important, as Romans didn't build roads without good needs.

The next ghost to conjure up is that of good St.Cedd. St.Cedd was the leader of the Celtic Church, who in the 7th Century sailed from Northumbria, to bring the God of Love to the fierce Saxons. It is very possible that St.Cedd built a Church out of wood on the site of the present St.Mary's Church, and when you stand nearby the Church and hear the eerie clang of the bell, warning Thames Shipping coming out of the darkness, you can almost imagine St.Cedd tolling his lonely bell, calling the faithful Saxons to prayer, who had given up violence for love.

When the Vikings came next, they found the Saxons a peaceable race and took advantage of their weakness. But the Saxons won the victory over the Vikings and perhaps St.Mary's, the Church built for the thanksgiving, was used to show the cruel Vikings how cruel the Saxons could be in return.

It is thought that the Saxons may have flayed their Viking prisoners alive and then nailed their skins to the Church door. It is known that this did happen in Colchester, in a Church at Copford, where Saxons nailed the skin of a Danish king on the Church door and at Hadstock as well. This is known because even until today, pieces of the skin can be seen and maybe this was Hasten's death - the Viking king who lost the Battle of Benfleet.

The next ghosts are those of the Conqueror's followers. These were the half-civilised Vikings that we now know as the Normans. Some of the Norman handiwork can be seen on the west wall of St.Mary's Church, where there is a plain Norman doorway, which leads into the later tower which has two blocked up windows.

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Three hundred years later, after the Conqueror, when the battle and St.Cedd and the Normans were just memories, the architects built the exquisite porch for the Church.

The next ghosts to conjure up are those of Leigh pirates and the smugglers, wreckers and highwaymen, who all found the Hoy and Helmet and Benfleet a very useful area for their unlawful trade.

More ghosts - this time those of the customs men, who cleared up the water-front, armed with nothing more than navy-pattern cutlasses. It was very possible that their spies joined the smugglers and wreckers, until the authorities had sufficient evidence against them.

Then, of course, there was always the traveller, who would eat there and spend the night in the hayloft, but this was when the Hoy and Helmet was known as the 'Inn'. This was kept with the Hoy and Helmet for a long time, until the landlord of the pub would not give a bed to a traveller. The landlord was taken to Court, as the word 'Inn' meant that it was the duty of the landlord to provide a bed. After this incident the word 'Inn' was removed promptly.

The last of our ghosts to appear are those of the local soldiers who served in World War II. The soldiers would gather in the Hoy and Helmet to dispel their fears in camaraderie and drink.

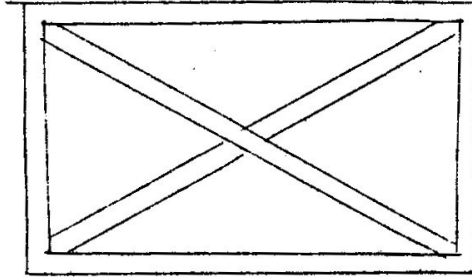
Outside, the doors of the Hoy and Helmet are old, encrusted with grime from High Street traffic. These are marked PRIVATE BAR and PUBLIC BAR. But as soon as you enter inside the pub, the warmth, friendliness and charm of the Hoy and Helmet hits you, which is very inviting.

There were many doors entering the pub, though some are blocked up from the inside and won't open from the outside. The main door which is used is on the right, further down from the bay windows. When you enter the pub using this door, through a passage there is a big old fireplace on your right, against the wall. Somewhere about a hundred years ago, some traveller executed two paintings, which are situated one on each side of the old fireplace, - on canvas. The picture on the right-hand side shows a boy in a medieval Florentine costume, pouring drinks from a jug, and the other shows a boy in similar clothes, with a glass of wine and a bottle. These pictures are not of great art but they are interesting and it has taken the 1970's to damage them, which is a great shame.

As I have already mentioned, the second World War soldiers would gather in the Hoy and Helmet, to dispel their fears and to record this fact, brass plates have been put on the timbers of the old fireplace, to memorize this. The past landlords of the Hoy and Helmet have kept this tradition up and so have customers and the present landlord, Mr.Llewellyn says anyone is welcome to do so now.

To the left of this main door and the passage is a screen, which once divided the saloon and public bar. But now, in the Hoy and Helmet, there is no such thing as a public and saloon bar.

The screen still stands there and is made out of oak beams. There are three beams running downwards, with one running diagonally across them. A wooden ledge runs along the bottom of each side of the screen and the whole thing is highly decorated, with brasses, like that of the old fireplace and there are fisherman decorations hanging from the beams at the top and potted plants on the wooden ledge.



This oak beam screen joins onto the edge of the bar, which is made out of wood. Adjoining the corner of the other side of the fireplace is another fireplace, which is smaller than the other old fireplace. Behind this smaller fireplace is a restaurant.

Going back again to the old fireplace are some stairs to the right of it, which lead into a games room, which has pool tables and fruit machines, and where children are allowed. But once this was a store barn that had been added.

It's the timbers made which really confirm the dates of the Hoy and Helmet. There are evocative, moulded wall plates - that is the beams going round the top of the walls, on which the low ceiling rests - and a moulded tie beam, the end of which has been cut away.

The Hoy and Helmet is a very comfortable place to sit and ponder the Battle of Benfleet and other past historic times, with its spacious bars, carpeted and resplendent with the old ships' timbers and priory beams and the two fires and the bar that serves new, real ale all add to the atmosphere.

There is a lot of old furniture, with the tables made from old beer barrels.

The Hoy and Helmet's fortunes must have come and gone over the centuries and the present landowners said they found the pub in a poor state, when they took over. They immediately started offering meals and snacks, which could be had at any time and you can now find people of all classes in the bar, from office and

factory workers to city people, winding their way home off the London trains from Benfleet station, which is very close by and because of this they get very good trade.

The upstairs is the landlord's private rooms and the upstairs floor consists of no fewer than seventeen levels. There is a passage which slopes appreciably uphill, with two steps there, and all the furniture has to be propped up with chocks. As the present landowner said, "When you walk about there at first you feel drunk, even when you're cold sober".

And to ghosts again, there are thought to be two real ghosts haunting the Hoy and Helmet. One is thought to be that of an old lady, who seems to occupy the area near the big old fireplace with its walk-in surround, an ideal place for keeping warm in a hard winter. No one has actually seen the old lady, but they merely feel her presence. The present landlord has felt her presence and so have some of his customers. A barmaid thought that the old lady had touched her shoulder once.

The second ghost is that of a headless monk, though similarly it has never been seen. But the presence has been felt in the corridor in the private quarters upstairs.

Interestingly, the upstairs was inserted in the 16th century, so the ghost could be just that of a monk associated with the Church and even Mr. Llewellyn's married daughter would not sleep in any of the rooms off the corridor!

The pub is listed by the Government as being of historical interest and this means that changes cannot be made without a Court's permission.

Two years ago the present owners converted an old kitchen into a dining room and the brewery brought in five hundred year old beams from a ruined priory in Hertfordshire, with which to do the work. They found they needed permission to be able to do this.

The freehold of this special architectural and historic pub was purchased on 18th April 1811 by Henry Lambirth Esq., (brewer of Writtle) and this eventually became part of Luker's Brewery at Southend in the 19th century.

On the 25th March, 1929 Luker's Brewery was purchased by Mann Crossman and Paulin Ltd., who became Watney Mann Ltd., in 1959 and then Watney Mann and Truman (Brewers) Ltd., in 1974.

Over the page is a copy of a Sale Notice dated 12th August 1882 when Lot 2, the Blacksmith's Shop was purchased by Henry Luker & Co., the Southend Brewers, though this Blacksmith's shop is now demolished.

Alison Lonsdale.