

An ex-inhabitant writes



The Kingsferry Bridge

Few people can claim to have visited the Isle of Sheppey without it leaving a lasting impression. Nestling, as the gull flies, in the Thames Estuary forty miles South-East of London this charming nine by four mile hunk of swamp boasts around 37,000 residents, ninety percent of whom are vacuum-packed along the Northern edge of the island. The remainder of the landmass is uninhabitable, save for a haphazard network of brooding electricity pylons and the indigenous population of sheep from which the island draws its name.

First impressions are important and Kent County Council have recognised this. Since I left they have spent pounds on the sole strip of road linking the island's Southern gateway, the Kingsferry Bridge, to the nearest conurbation in the North. Either side of this road, paddling in the sodden, featureless marshes, are clusters of sullen sheep that regard motorists with an unsettling blend of indifference and territorialism. It's all rather intimidating until an optimistic sign, sketched by a five-year-old, half-heartedly welcomes me to Sheppey and its twinned town: Brielle in the Netherlands. Presumably, the Briellens fought hard for Grimsby as a sexier option.

Thus far, you may be of the opinion that I dislike Sheppey. Not strictly true. I like its stretch of contrasting coastline, from exposed, windswept cliffs to overgrown wild-grass hillsides ruffled by the predominant sea breeze, to pebbled beaches with their random assortment of wind breakers and fussing parents. Equally colourful wind surfers are a common feature of the coastline, as are the strong smells of sea salt and Barry's E-coli, sorry, Burger Van.

This untamed scenery gradually combines with an altogether more urban landscape the closer I wander towards the island's scabby main town of Sheerness; the beach shelters gutted by fire, discarded hypodermic needles beneath them; the gangs of skateboarding youths on the esplanade; badly spelled 'grafeetee', and the prickly sense of unease normally reserved for inner city ghettos. Yes, Sheerness has its problems. Amongst the cramped shops of the town centre, selling a curious mix of bric-a-brac and second-hand clothes, are a liberal sprinkling of pubs from which the youth subculture can plan their next drug-addled wave of petty crime. Oh, and forget a romantic dinner for two unless you're partial to McDonalds. Or kebab.

The ridiculously ornate blue clock tower will hold your interest for precisely six seconds. It may not be grey any more, as it was when I was a kid, but no amount of cosmetics can mask the fact that the four sets of hands don't agree on the time. This causes untold



Sheerness Clock Tower

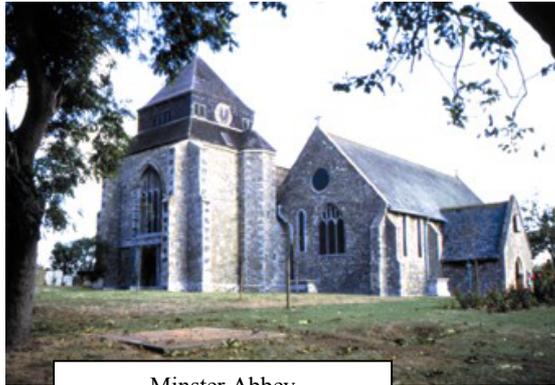
confusion during the many distinct countdowns at New Year when fights break out as one inebriated group claim their time is better than another's.

So, in the run up to Christmas, the Council hang tasteful plywood boards over the faces as a feeble crime reduction system. Now lacking a common focus, the groups find themselves forced to use their, predominantly stolen, wristwatches instead. Fights break out. Misguided presumption number two is that the boards will prevent the more amoebic members of the gene pool from damaging the clock faces in their ritualistic quest for King Kong supremacy. The Council evidently underestimate Sheppey's level of social sophistication.

Travelling around Sheppey is easy – car, taxi or bus. Realistically a car is the only viable option because taxis are expensive and buses in your chosen direction are as frequent as sightings of Aurora Borealis from the High Street. During the day. The grubby train takes you in the only sensible direction – the mainland – though once an hour is not nearly enough opportunity for escape.

On the Western tip of the island is Queenborough, a regal title for a place that has one glass factory and six shops. Its acclaimed historic moment was when the artist Hogarth stayed there once in 1732. The key word there is ‘once’, and I’ve yet to see one of his works with “Inspired by Sheppey” on it.

Alternatively there’s Minster, boasting the highest spot on the island. It too has six shops and if you count every pub in the village, you can do it on one finger. In its defence, you can look out from the cliffs here and see the protruding masts of the Richard Montgomery wreck with its few-thousand tonne cargo of TNT and, on a haze-free day, catch sight of beckoning Southend.



Minster Abbey

Minster is also the place from which to touch upon “Historic Sheppey”. It seems the Saxons were particularly skilful at being invaded since both the Vikings and Normans successfully had a go. Its popularity with such foreigners

was because of its Abbey, the oldest in Kent, founded in 664AD by Queen Sexburga who eventually became its abbess. It’s an odd shaped building – think school hall with lean-to that looks like it was designed by the guy who went on to conceive the Lunar Module – flanked by uneven cobbled pathways that have claimed their fair share of twisted ankles. The gatehouse that guarded the entrance is now a natty

museum where one can pick up pamphlets about Sexburga and her laughably named family: King Erconbert and their daughters Ermenilda and Ercongotha. Bet they loved school.

Further along the Northern shore, and a particular favourite with Londoners, is Leysdown with its jellied eel shop, holiday camp, amusement arcade and donkey. Skip along the coast further still to Shellness if you fancy stripping and sunbathing on spiky shale. Finally, on the very Eastern point, is the isolated Harty pub, somehow managing to remain profitable despite being the only building at the end of a treacherous dusty road.

If you're a nature-lover you'll be fine. The Elmley Nature Reserve is still here, lurking in what must be approaching a third of the island. If you're the sort of person that moistens at the thought of corduroy-clad ornithologists enthusing about how the wetlands attract a wide variety of rare species, including peregrines and short-eared owls, then this is for you.

For the rest of us though, Sheppey is a dull, uninspiring wart in the otherwise noteworthy Garden of England. It holds little cultural value except for teaching me how to abuse the glottal stop. Coming back after all these years with an outsider's perspective, I still get the feeling that if the whole North-Western corner was napalmed, no one else would really be concerned until the local authorities noticed the elocution level was up.