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# THE PLOTLAND ERA



The Haven – Essex Wild life Reserve - Dunton



Registered Charity No.1176037

Registered Office: The Green Centre, Wat Tyler Country Park, Pitsea Hall Lane, Pitsea Essex SS16 4UH

## THE PLOTLAND ERA

We could go back 10,000 years to the Mesolithic period to look at the history of the Borough, but the period that seem to currently fascinate Basildon People is the Plotland era which is still in the life time of many residents.



If we go back to the Victorian period Basildon area was very rural, very similar to our East Anglian neighbours. In fact, if we go back a little further to the mid-1700s this is what Arthur Young had to say about Langdon Hills.

*“On the summit of a vast hill, one of the most astonishing prospects to behold breaks out almost at once – Nothing can exceed it unless that which Hannibal exhibited to his troops, when he bade them behold the glory of the Italian plains’.*



The 1850s were golden years of Agricultural boom years. Basildon was a great Wheat growing area but the heavy London Clay soil gave it the nick name of Three Horse land, it needed three horse to pull the ploughs, there were also plenty of sheep but very little cattle. But by the 1870s the Agricultural Depression had set in, very wet seasons resulted in poor harvest and not helped by cheap imports from the prairies of North America. Farmers started to go broke and many sold their lands to Land speculators.



The land lay derelict and slowly turn to scrub until the railway line from Barking linked up Upminster, West Horndon, Laindon and on to Pitsea. Then in 1891 the first land sales took place in Pitsea – Pitsea Railway Estate – this was followed the following summer with land sales in Laindon – Laindon Railway Estate. **The**

## Plotland era had started.

There were other social changes taking place about this time – Education Acts (Board Schools), Bank Holiday Acts and half day working on Saturday (except shops they tended to have half day working on other days of the week). People were therefore beginning to have more social time, resulting with people wanting to move from the slums of London, even it was only for weekends or holidays.

The Land speculators pegged out roads and plots, however initially it was a struggle to sell the land. Champagne parties were often held to attract people and train fares often paid for if they purchased a plot. Slowly people started to buy up plots – 20ft by 100ft at £5 a plot, some would buy several plots



The plotlanders as they were later called, initially built their own homes. Many would travel down at weekends with whatever materials they could bring or purchase locally and over the months would build their wooden homes. To us wooden shacks. Planning permission appeared to be non-existence and as many of the plots were far away from the centre of activity the authorities did not know they were even there.

While they were being built, they would live in tents and later on when it became viable and possible, they bought down Caravans, old Buses and old Railway carriages were often used, with many being attached to the wooden buildings as additional accommodation i.e., Bedrooms.



Facilities such as running water, main drainage, gas, electricity were nonexistent. Toilet facilities were the bucket and chuck it arrangement i.e., normally a separate shed at the bottom of the garden. The contents of the bucket having to be emptied in to a hole dug in the garden. The following is one or two individual memories:

*“We didn’t have main sewers connected to the bungalow, we had a bucket in a small wooded shed in the garden, where we sat with our foot against the door,*

*which was minus a lock. We called our loo 'The Opera House, on account of we often sang to let people know it was occupied'*

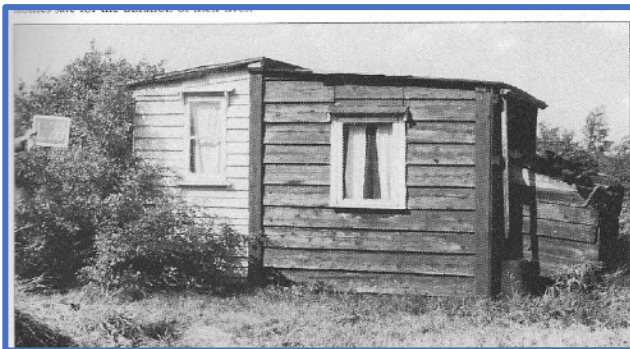
*"The bucket was generally cleaned out twice a week, we called it 'Burying the dead'".*

*"I remember we had a toilet in the back garden and often dad would at night stand at the back door while mum used it and on one occasion she screamed when an old tramp was sitting on the seat".*



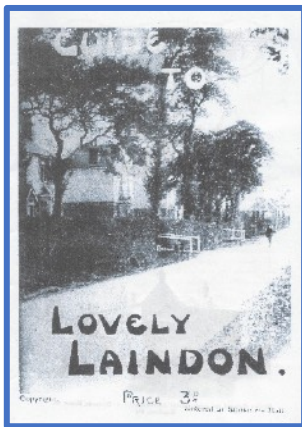
*"My Nan's toilet was down the garden and was occasionally moved to another position when the hole became full, it was absolutely freezing in the winter and you had to wear a coat if raining there was no toilet roll only cut up newspaper hanging on a nail and you used to end up getting a black bottom from the newspaper print".*

The roads were unmade and at times became impassable during the winter; items like coal had to be delivered in the summer. Wellington boots were a must. In many areas plotlanders got together and built cinder or concrete paths, these can still be seen today in many places where modern development has not taken place. As late as the 1950s concrete paths were still being built by the plotlanders.





While this slow plotland development was taking place, Scottish cattle farmers were having their own problems. It is understood that Lord Petre (Peter to us) was in the House of Lords talking to a Scottish Laird (Lord) about the problems. He pointed out that there was a lot of cheap land going in Essex. Soon afterwards an advert appeared in the Kilmarnock times and within a period of 20/50 years over 135 Scottish farmers moved to Essex. Many of them to the Basildon area bringing their cattle with them. Those local farmers still left followed suit changing from sheep and arable to Dairy and Beef Cattle.



Although the development was slow a plotland association was formed because the problems they were having with cattle and gypsies. By the 1900's shops were beginning to appear near the stations of Laindon and Pitsea. Local estate agents tried everything to encourage people to move to the area. In 1905 a pamphlet was produced 'A Guide to Lovely Laindon' stating that there was plenty of water. What it forgot to say was that you had to dig a large well to get to it or attach water butts to the house to collect rain water.



Because development was very sparse, people's nearest neighbour could be several hundred metres away, making it very lonely. However, many of them occupied their time planting fruit trees, growing their own vegetables, keeping animals, chickens, rabbits, goats and a few had pigs, all to help supplement their diet. Children

had to help with the daily chores either before their journey to school or when they returned home.

After the First World War the pace built up with more people moving down from London. Doctors were suggesting people moved to the country, partly brought about because of the death toll of Influenza known as the 'Spanish Flu'. Also, with the opening up of the Arterial Road (A127) to Southend in the mid-1920s helped open up a new wave of plotlanders. It's interesting to note that the papers were saying that the prettiest spot the new road ran through was Laindon.

It was also a time professional builders started to build more substantial homes, although facilities were similar, they improved if the homes were closer to the main village high roads, such as Laindon and Pitsea High Roads.

With the coming of the Second World War even more people moved down from London to help dodge the bombs and after the war because their homes were destroyed.



Improvement to facility was very slow, running water was possibly the first of the facilities the plotlanders received but even then, they had to walk to the end of their road to collect it from a standpipe which in most cases they had to pay for. The following is memories of residents living in a plotland bungalows during the 1940/50s:

*"We had no running water to the property, electricity, gas or sewerage pipes, only an oil stove for cooking. The oven had to be lifted from the floor onto two of the 3 burners if baking was needed in the Kitchen, otherwise a tin kettle for making tea went on one burner and the other for pots and pans. There was an open fire in the small dining lounge room and one in the bedroom. The floorboards were painted dark brown with handmade rugs scattered on the floor. The toilet was just six steps outside from the kitchen. Water was carried in two buckets usually with a yoke on the shoulders, from the standpipe about a four-minute walk away which in the winter would freeze up so newspaper and a match was needed to get it working. Later a rain tank was plumbed into the house and water transferred into it from buckets so we did not run out quite so often. Meat was kept in a meat safe*

*on the outside wall and milk and butter in a hole in the ground covered with a stone slab. Life was simple but we were happy living in the country”.*

*“As late as 1958 we could not play in the back garden because the cesspits mother had dug were too shallow and we still had gas lamps in the street, I remember the man with a ladder coming to light them”.*

*“In 1948 returning home from the war with my German bride, our bedroom was a shed in the back garden of my parent’s bungalow. Although well-built it had no lighting or heating other than candles and an oil stove, the walls were lined with asbestos, nobody then knew of the danger”.*



Memory from a resident in Laindon of his experience as late as 1955 – *“Bath times was once a week; dad would fill a large tin bath with hot and cold water enough for a suitable bath which was placed in front of the lounge fire. Children went in first, then mum and last Dad”.*

There is no doubt that the plotland era is a unique time in our history, it was a little like the Wild West of America it came and went in a period of 70 years, and by the end of the second World War, Laindon and Pitsea in particular had both become small towns with well over 100 shops each. However, due to the type of development the local Billericay council did not have the resources to provide the basic amenities for this burgeoning community.



In addition to the council’s problem, central government needed to find a way to provide new homes for those who had lost their homes through the bombing of the second World War. On behalf of the government Lord Abercrombie published ‘The Greater London Plan 1944’. He recommended eight New Towns. Basildon was not one of them but with the intervention of the local

Billericay council Basildon New Town came into being in 1949.

The Rt. Hon. Lewis Silkin, M.P., and Minister of Town and Country Planning in Clement Attlee’s post war-war Labour Government addressed a packed worried

public meeting in Laindon High Road School in October 1949 and this is what he had to say: -

*“Basildon will become a city which people from all over the world will want to visit. It will be a place where all classes of the community can meet freely together on equal terms and enjoy common cultural and recreational facilities. Basildon will not be a place which is ugly, grim and full of paving stones like many large modern towns it will be something which the people deserve; the best possible town that modern knowledge, commerce, science and civilization can produce”.*

The Plotland era was about to end. 70 years has since passed; will let you decide if these famous words have been achieved

But we must now run away from the idea that Plotland development only happened in the Basildon area. It was wide spread across the country, quite often near rivers and the sea. For example, South Coast- Camber sands to Hayling Island, Surrey and Kent Box Hill – North Downs, East Essex Coast - Point Clear to Jaywick, Isle of Sheppey, North of the crouch towards Maylandsea and even the Thames Valley – Henley on Thames. But Basildon area in particular Laindon and Pitsea saw the greatest density in the whole of the country.

The Basildon Corporation came into being in 1949 and the area they were going to cover was south of the A127 occupying a designated area of 7800 acres, with an estimated population of around 30,000. This included 8,500 properties of which 2,000 were of brick and tile, 1,000 light construction meeting current housing standards of the time. 5,000 were chalets and shacks and another 500 derelict but believed to be lived in. 6,000 unsewered, no surface water drainage other than ditches. Only 50% had electricity and there were 75 miles of grass track roads.

Just to give an indication of population growth in 1891 it was approximately 1,500, 1911 3,600 and in 1931 13,500. Today the whole area including Billericay, Wickford the Ramsden etc. is in excess of 185,000 the largest Borough/District in Essex.

Today on the Essex Wildlife Nature Reserve is one plotland home from the 1930s still intact. ‘The Haven’ which is a living museum, enabling visitors to learn more about the history of the Plotland era and the families who lived through this period. They have produced a ‘Plotland Walk’ pamphlet and a small booklet on the history of Plotlands.



Deana Walker provides a first-hand account in her book 'Basildon Plotlands' where she describes her childhood memories of spending weekends in the plotlands at Langdon Hills. Many more stories can be found on the web - [www.laindonhistory.org](http://www.laindonhistory.org)

The following is just one of the many poems written on the period; -

### **PLOTLANDERS**

They came from the east end of London  
To view a rural idyll,  
They paid their £5 deposit  
For a plot in Langdon Hills.

These enterprising people  
Built their little retreat  
To leave the slums of London  
At the end of each working week.

During the Blitz they came  
To escape the horrors of war,  
And live-in relative safety  
And forget the suff'ring they saw.

They grew their fruit and veg  
Kept goats and sheep and hens,  
And shared their surplus food  
So, neighbours became friends.

Plotlanders were later moved  
To a new community,  
Where there was running water  
And electricity.

They never saw their neighbours,  
Their friends lived far away,  
They longed to go back to the Plotlands  
For those were happy days.

So, when you visit Dunton  
A museum you will find,  
A reminder of the Plotlands

To transport you back in time.  
**By Sue Ranford**





## Plotlands

### The days of the early settlers on the plotlands of Langdon Hills.

I lived in Laindon quite near the station and the local bakehouse. People used to come on Sunday mornings with the weekend joints of meat to have them cooked in the ovens.

An uncle of mine had a small shop about where the end of Vowler Road is now. He used to make any odd items from wood and sheds for the people on the plotland area. On weekends I often used to go with him to help erect sheds and give them a coat of creosote. He also supplied what were termed accumulators (wet storage batteries) which ran wireless sets and were recharged each week. I used to collect and deliver these at odd times after school and Saturdays. A cycle was the only means of travel and I had a stout box to hang on the handlebars. In the winter the side roads were a sea of mud and only a narrow path was usable, sometimes these paths were covered with timber duck-boards heavily coated with preservative. Coal was delivered by horses and large sledges which slid over the mud. I have seen horses up to their stomachs in mud trying to pull the loads.

In the summer a better story, my mother and I used to take a barrow, which was a box on two wheels, and walk over to the colony at Dunton. Here one could buy cheaply all kinds of fruit grown and harvested by the men of the colony. This was a pleasant afternoon out, a walk of some five to six miles.

I remember in the late 1920s seeing the station packed, to what I suppose today would be classed as a danger level, with people holding bunches of flowers, going back to East London on a Sunday evening after a weekend on the plots.

Mr T Tyler

23rd June 1899

Messrs. Protheroe and Morris offered for sale a number of plots for the Lane Co. on Tuesday. About £400 was realised.

7th July 1899

On Tuesday Messrs. Protheroe and Morris offered for sale for the Land Co. a large number of freehold plots on the Wootens Park estate. An average of about £4 for plots 20ft. by 150ft. was obtained, the total amount realised being about £700.

Plot Owners' Meeting on the Laindon Station estate

There was a large attendance of plot owners, consisting largely of men holding 20 plots and upwards, at a meeting to devise the best means of dealing with the gipsy and cattle nuisance on the land on the Station Estate...Ultimately it was decided to form a Plot Owners' Protection Association, and be their own police, and to summons all persons turning cattle on the land, and prosecute the gipsies also if they should come. To carry out the work a committee of nine plot owners was elected. It was agreed that the grass growing in all unfenced plots should be sold, and the cash placed to the credit of the association, unless any member desired otherwise to have it, by letter to the secretary. It was observed that all that is wanted now to make this charming estate go ahead is water and the tithes redeemed - a question which the association intends to take up. Mr. E. Collings is the secretary and agent.

14th July 1899

By the Laindon Building Estate Co. at the New Hall, Laindon:- Plots in the main roads realised £12.10s and in the back roads £6. A brick-built bungalow, consisting of five rooms with an acre of ground, fetched £158. At the close of the sale a free social entertainment was given by the vendor. Mr. Hebmore and Mr. Wells each gave a recitation, two ladies sang, and instrumental selections were played. Refreshments were served. Next sale July 20th.

27th April 1900

At the Mart\* on Tuesday, Messrs. Beadel, Wood and Co. offered a number of freehold properties situated near Laindon covering an area of some 188½ acres. Out of these only part sold. A block of building land containing 17¾ acres, with a residence and farm buildings, known as Butler's Grove, Laindon Hill, realised £1000, and an enclosure of 4¾ acres of grass land, with a pair of cottages, in the same neighbourhood, went for £520, while among the unsold portions were a freehold brickworks with machinery and 71 acres of land in Little Burstead and Laindon Hills which was passed at £4,800; 58½ acres of freehold building and accommodation land in Laindon Hills, withdrawn at £1,900, and a freehold farm of 31½ acres, known as Nightingale's Farm, Laindon Hills, taken back at £1,500.

[\*Tokenhouse Yard, London E.C.]

T/P 181/7 and 11

Ken Porter  
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30/09/2022

