

EXTRACTS FROM
LITTLE BOOK OF ESSEX
BY DEE GORDON

Dick Turpin was born at *The Bell Inn*, Hempstead in 1704, his mugging lifestyle since romanticised beyond recognition. He seems to have had hide-outs at Sewardstone and High Beach, frequented *The Spotted Dog* at Upton, and, as a hobby, raided churches in and around the area, including Chingford and Barking. He is known to have been the ringleader of the Essex Gang for a while before taking off up north to escape the Essex constabulary.

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Barnaby Rudge and *Great Expectations* reveal Charles Dickens' familiarity with the county. The first begins with a description of Epping Forest in 1775 and also features Chigwell and its public house, *The King's Head*, believed to be the model for *The Maypole*. Dickens once hired a steamer from London to Southend, and it is almost certainly this journey that gave him the detail and insight he needed when describing the mud flats and river at the end of *Great Expectations*. *The Lobster Smack* on Canvey Island is reputed to be the "dirty" pub featured in this latter novel, the hostelry where Pip spent the night. Indeed, the infamous Magwitch says of himself that "I first became aware of myself down in Essex, thieving turnips".

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A Wanstead housewife wearing white gloves was mistaken for the Duchess of York when the car she was in – en route to see the 1926 visit by the Duke (later George VI) and Duchess – turned by mistake into Ilford's Cranbrook Road, duly sanded and flagged in honour of the

occasion. Not wanting to disappoint the cheering crowds, she duly assumed the royal wave.

What happened when the real Duchess and Duke arrived is not recorded.

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The coxswain of Southend's first lifeboat, William Bradley, saved twenty-seven lives at sea in the 19th century. He lived as the light keeper at the end of Southend Pier for twenty years, and seems to have found it more expedient on occasion to just jump into the sea feet first from the seaweed-clad roof of his home to save an errant swimmer or boater rather than use the lifeboat.

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The Darby Steam-Digger, built at Lodge Farm, Pleshey, near Chelmsford, won a prize *c.* 1879, but the digger was not taken up by farmers who were more used to horses. Its inventor, farmer Thomas Darby, must have been sorely disappointed at its resultant lack of commercial success.

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The breasts of two dozen birds (four and twenty blackbirds...) with added fat for flavour were used as a filling for a suet pie by Essex marsh men more than a hundred years ago. 12th May was Rook Shooting Day across Essex, although the strong taste of rook was masked with onion and bacon. Even during WWII, Rook Pie was still popular, especially among the poor.