

# HARWICH

## LES YEUX D'ATGET

Jonathan P Dayman

One approaches Harwich (Essex, pop. 18,798 in 2021) by a long, mainly single-carriageway road, the A120, through mainly flat, occasionally gently undulating, countryside, with the Orwell estuary getting progressively visibly nearer. One gets a sense of approaching an end of the country, rather like one does the Lizard, or Land's End, or Anglesey. A Lidl, a Morrisons, with the Orwell estuary now very apparent on your left, wide stretches of mudflat and marsh, roundabouts with dead-end exits that were clearly built assuming more development than has happened. A sign of the place, a sign of the times. And then the outskirts, with old houses set back, a couple of modern packaging factories, warehousing sites, indicative of trade and commercial port activities. Now, a strong hint of the town's deep maritime past: the Trinity House site, with dozens of huge, red buoys lined up like the Coldstream Guards, their modern office headquarters building, and, adjacent, an older 1950s predecessor.



Coming into Harwich on the A120,  
towards The Quay

It is an interesting and intriguing mix, the town. Mostly old and very old buildings, but with some patches of modern building a signal of the Germans' offensive work in 1943. The streets feel wholesome, but in a shabby, slightly desperate sort of way. There are some smart, renovated houses but they are a minority. One feels that the integrity of the town's fabric is held together by sheer community spirit and resolve. Harwich once had a far more significant past as a major port, and in 1690, it was the country's foremost naval shipbuilding yard. Samuel Pepys (1603-1733) was MP here between 1685 and 1689, the Master of Trinity House (1776-77 and 1685-86) and the Secretary of the Admiralty. The Kindertransport children arrived in England at Harwich-Parkeston Quay (there is a poignant bronze statue of children disembarking from a boat on the quayside). And contrary to popular belief, that famous ship, the Mayflower, which sailed from Plymouth to the New World in 1620, was actually built here in Harwich and the majority of the crew were from Harwich. Plymouth appropriated the credit of being the Mayflower's town – which seems a little wrong.





Golden Lion Lane

Harwich is still is a port: ferries still sail from here to Hoek van Holland, there is talk of services restarting to Denmark. Cargo ships dock at the Harwich quay, even if the main port is now Felixstowe, standing impressively, expansively and industrially, across the river estuary. The Port of Felixstowe is the largest container port in the country. It is indeed huge, viewed from across the water. It is easy to wonder if Harwich feels some remorse that the other Suffolk town has stolen its business and purpose.



‘Shakers Bar, Golden Lion Lane





Kings Quay Street, at junction with Cow Lane



The Globe, est 1753, Harwich's oldest pub,  
and still trading.

A local pub guide: "Inside are old beams,  
and upstairs the ceilings were once  
decorated with plaster motifs of Fleur-de-  
llys, Tudor roses and unusual carbuncle  
shapes. Originally, the pub contained a  
Wash-house, Pantry, Tap Room, Parlour,  
Cellars, Bed Rooms, two Attics and Yard".





Kings Quay Street, towards the Old Bank,  
now an art studios



Castlegate Street

The lady at No. 2a Market Street opened her door next to me, for a vape, and said: "Is it for sale again then?". I replied: No, sorry, I am not an estate agent, I'm a photographer." "Ah. Because it'd be good if it was." "Why?" "Well, the people who took the shop over turned it into a pet care home and did out out really nicely. But then the people who bought the land there, where the pub burned down, bought the shop as well and turfed them out. It was a shame. It's just falling down now. Look at it" The place did indeed give the impression of falling down. The site had been The Hannover pub before, until fire destroyed it. Later, another Scots lady walking past piped up and said, "It's lovely tiling there, isn't it?". And indeed it was. A sign of much prouder and wealthier times.





Market Street

“What are you up to?” said the lady coming through the gate near where I was squinting to take a photograph of the stairs leading upwards on the High Lighthouse. I explained and she looked interested – and told me about Lil, a woman who lived in the lighthouse long ago. Lil used to like to make a bit of money, and have some fun, the lady told me, and when she did, she put a red light in the lantern and charged “a pork pie and a tanner” (six old pence, or 2.5p). Her house was old, and she told me there used to be another similar house next to it, but, she explained, the Luftwaffe had created some space there in 1943 – now occupied by some dull modern garages. Harwich was an important port and defence location during World War II, hence the attention, more probably, at that stage of the war, from a German nuisance raider than a full-scale Blitz raid.

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The old chap, scruffy, with a boil on his nose, asked: “What are ya doin’?” “I’m taking photographs”, I replied. “I can see that. Wha’t ya taking photographs of?” “This street, and that old house. Of old Harwich. I love Harwich, it’s fascinating.” “‘Tis too”, he said.” Cold innit? Cor, was 35° in the summer. And now we’ve gone to snow at Christmas!” He wandered off, probably a bit sozzled from a visit to one of the remaining pubs. There are still a few, and they are still well frequented.





Upper: The High Lighthouse

Lower: Church Street

I was tripod-fiddling, focused on the pair of old houses and doorways across Church Street, opposite The Stingray pub, when a voice piped up: “Want to take a photo of us?” I should have immediately turned the camera around, because the two men hanging outside the pub doors were characters. One taller, one shorter, both dragging on short, thin roll-ups, and looking very relaxed and content. This, The Stingray, was their local. A proper pub, for drinking and smoking (outside), for men who drink and smoke, swear, complain, and are always telling jokes. The shorter one was a softly-spoken Scot, who told me that he’d lived in Harwich for ten years, but had lived here at a time before that. He liked living here, and I told him I wanted to live here too, for I had started to love the place. He said, “Aye, and much cheaper than Colchester”. I wondered if he had been a sailor, years ago. I found that often here – generally, people love the place, they appreciate it for what it is, especially the community and the history. It has that effect. It feels genuine, whole, cohesive, honest. It gets into your blood, too, no doubt. I should have taken their photograph, I realised later, as one does.



St Helen's Green





Upper: West Street  
(south end)

Lower: West Street  
(north end)



West Street, going west out of town,  
The Salvation Army building





Market Street





Kam Cheng restaurant, Church Street



Eastgate Street, with Inde Coope  
sign above right-hand door





St Helen's Green

I was just getting the composition right, and a car approached, and stopped and a window wound down, and the chirpy voice said, "I could've knocked you down, there!" "Yes, you could have, but I am very grateful that you didn't!" She and I had a pleasant exchange of observations and witticisms about the day and the place and life in general. She was, I guessed from the logo on her shift, a care worker, and all I can say is that her clients are lucky, so fun and fizzy was she.



Market Street

The sea is still at the very heart of Harwich. That sense permeates the place, through plaques, pub names (there are quite a few pubs and even more pubs-turned-houses, an indication of sailors from the past letting off steam on shore leave), the Trinity House and coastguard buildings, the small, shingle beach and sailing club dinghies. You can feel the ghosts of those sailors and the people who served them in shops and boarding houses. But Harwich is usually very quiet, with few about. As everywhere, cars and small vans are parked along most stretches of street, but traffic is very light (unless one is taking photographs with a tripod, and the optimum point of view is the middle of the road).





Kings Quay Street



The Electric  
Palace  
cinema







The Electric Palace cinema, Kings Quay Street. It opened in 1911, closed in 1956, reopened in 1981, and was restored again in 2021.



Angelgate, near the Harwich Haven Authority building

Photographing Harwich is pleasing and intriguing. The town is an enigma in many ways. Well past its best, rather unkempt, forgotten and abandoned, its glory days were gone decades ago. It is also unusually very quiet, but the people one does meet are very friendly, and interested in what one is doing, and why. Several folk tell me that Harwich is such a nice place to live, quiet but congenial, with a real community spirit.

Walking about, noticing ancient details, signs of the maritime past, interesting shabbiness, intriguing symbols, one's senses become bewitched, mixing up past memory and present perceptions.

Photography can be a way of grounding the present into history, capturing a time and a place, making fixed a moment for posterity, to aid or underpin memory. At another time and in another place entirely, Eugène Atget photographed the old parts of Paris, those that were disappearing, for posterity's sake. Most of his pictures contain few people.

These pictures, here, are intended to pay homage to that great but modest and ingenuous man. The places both apparently barely populated, the images made with similar intent. Both places, that Old Paris and Harwich now, were or are now past their best, but are typified by being proud, fascinating and resolute, both in photographs and in real life.



The photographs were taken between 4 December 2022 and 4 January 2023, with a Mamiya 7ii, using Kodak Tri-X ASA 400 film, over a total of eleven visits to Harwich, each time for two-three hours. I used nineteen rolls of 120 Tri-X film (ten frames per film for the 6x7cm camera).

The films I developed in Rodinol, scanned using a Epson V800 Photo scanner, and lightly adjusted in Adobe Lightroom Classic and Photoshop – but no more than would normally be done in the darkroom, that is: curves, contrast, exposure, de-spotting, minor cropping to tidy the edges.

Edited firstly in Lightroom for an initial selection, and then by hand using 6x4" prints on a magnetic white board.

Text is my own. Laid out in Adobe InDesign.

Typefaces:

Century Old Style;

Andale Mono

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