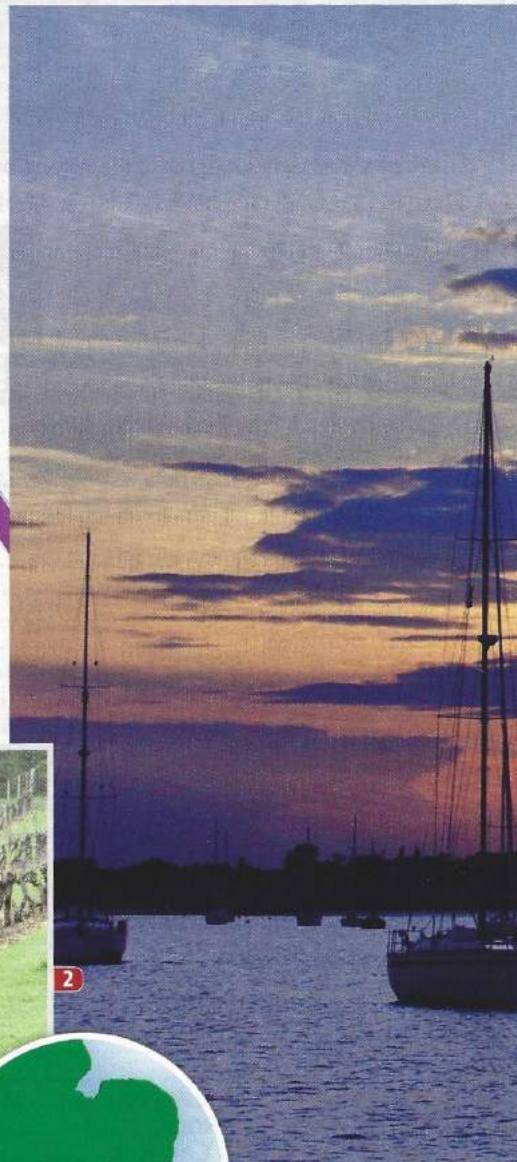


# THE ONLY WAY IS ESSEX

Part 2

Mike Trippitt continues his trip around the land of the orange people in George, his orange campervan, and discovers a slower pace of life

WORDS & PHOTOS MIKE TRIPPITT



**T**here is no denying that crossing the Strood onto Mersea gives a real feeling of arriving on an island. The tide is low, the mudflats a deep unappealing brown and the water nowhere to be seen. But the warnings of danger at high tide and the tide gauges either side of the causeway reinforce a sense of adventure. Across the tideway, saltings give way to a rich low-lying arable landscape before the island's only town, West Mersea, opens up before us.

It is a compact town of mixed architecture. The High Street has all that is required for independent living on the island. Leading down to the harbour, Coast Road provides views of the river and sea, and from behind boats swaying lazily, huge skies can deliver incredible

sunsets. Fishing, oystering and boatbuilding still flourish on Mersea, but the creeks within the harbour are also home to a fleet of leisure yachts and other pastimes.

### Living on an island

On leaving the harbour, a tractor blocks my way. It reverses down the hill pulling a cradle towards the water's edge. A yacht, *Ad Libitum*, her hull bottom freshly painted blue, sits high in the cradle.

My progress is halted, so I ensconce George in the Coast Road car park and watch. The tractor stops and then pushes *Ad Libitum* onto the hard from where she will be launched later at high tide.

I need not have waited. But life on an island is about slowing down, and I am

in no rush. Slowing down and watching the world go by is the essence of Mersea Island.

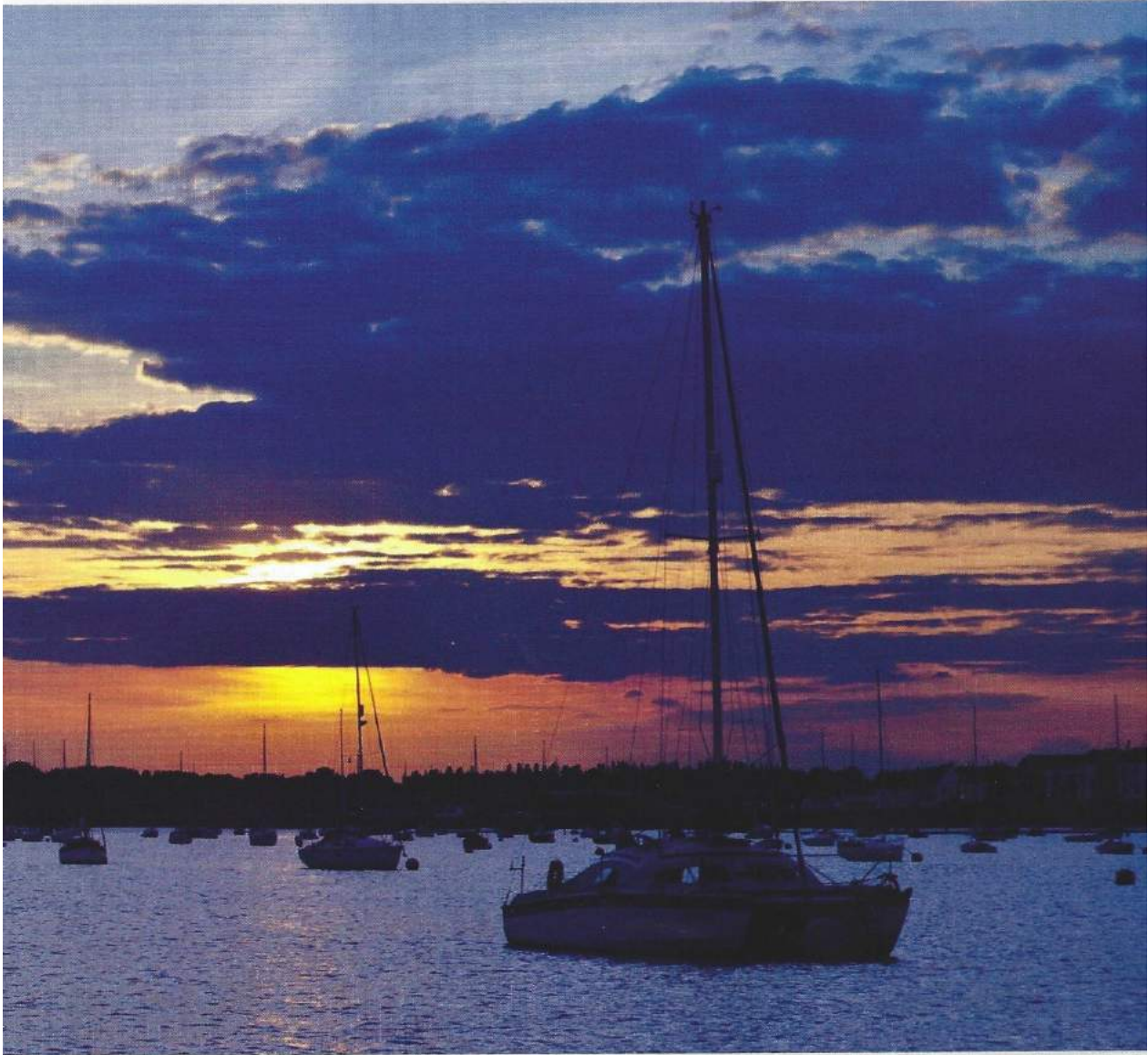
Further down the harbour, high above boats still waiting to be returned to the water for the summer, an RNLI flag flutters in the breeze. Always on the lookout for an RNLI shop I amble off in the direction of the lifeboat station. The short walk between a boatyard and rows of fishermen's cottages to the intriguingly named Dabchicks Sailing Club is sublime. This place is timeless, unchanged in decades.

### Delights of the vine

Beach huts in pastel hues of lilac, lemon, sky blue and apple green line the sheltered coastline at the other end of

1 Mersea Island Vineyard

2 Sunset over the River Crouch



West Mersea's shore. It is a popular spot for windsurfing. Signage and marker posts ensure the launching of sailboards is carefully controlled.

Before going to my overnight site, I have one further stop in mind. I was surprised to learn wine is made on Mersea and I'd become curious. As well as producing 20,000 bottles of wine a year from five varieties of grapes over five acres of vines, Mersea Island Vineyard has a micro-brewery, wedding venue, holiday accommodation and Maria's Tea Room. On my arrival, I meet owner, Roger Barber, a gently spoken, likeable man. He planted the vineyard in 1985 and has been here ever since. I ask him why a vineyard on the east coast works? Roger says it works because it is

**“I leave Heybridge Basin in good spirits and with a happy heart. I'd found a little piece of heaven”**

surrounded by water: “We don't generally suffer from spring frosts; the salt air keeps them away. So, the vines flourish better not getting frost. Mersea Island is probably one of the warmest and sunniest

spots in England. We get 30% less rainfall than Colchester which is just eight miles away.”

The vines typically flower during Wimbledon fortnight, but the best time to see them in fruit is in July and August. He says English vineyards can produce only white wines, but when the Romans grew grapes on the island things were different: “The ambient temperature in Roman times

was 10 degrees warmer than it is now

and they used to grow heavy reds. Any grape pips that have been found in archeological digs have always been on the heavy red side.”

In the tea room I wash down my lunch of a sausage sandwich and a fruit scone with a glass of Island Dry. I'm no wine expert, but it tastes really good: crisp, clean and distinctly moreish.

### Coast wandering

Later, as the sun drops and the temperature falls, I walk from Fen Farm Campsite out onto the beach and along the shoreline to Cudmore Grove Country Park. Miles of dimpled mudflats, exposed at low tide, stretch out eastwards, and pools of seawater reflect the evening sky. Although peaceful now, the signs of the

## ENJOYING ESSEX

sea's power abound. Fresh clods of earth, with grass still green and moist, lay below the soft cliffs. They have fallen when high winds and a large spring tide pounded this coast a few days ago. Further along, trees lay dead on the sand. Root tendrils hang down from trees at the cliff edge, the soil that nourished them having been gouged away. It's a stark reminder of the coastal erosion that continues apace in some parts of eastern England.

A busy day lay ahead after my first night on the island. Fen Farm is an ideal site to explore the rest of Essex.

### Heybridge Basin

My first stop of the day is at Heybridge Basin, a hamlet at the junction of the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation and the River Blackwater. We almost drive by the turn from the B1026 onto Basin Road as the side road is small and the signpost partially obscured by foliage. I'd never been here before, but had been told of its unique charm. Even so, my expectations are exceeded, especially as parking in Daisy Meadow car park is free!

The sea lock at Heybridge Basin is its focal point. Below the lock gates the tidal River Blackwater reveals its muddy shores

twice daily. The North Sea is just nine miles downstream. But above the lock gates the freshwater navigation is sheltered and still, its grassy banks lined with trees. Small boats rest at bankside moorings along the narrow canal, while larger seagoing craft awaiting the next tide occupy the wider basin.

Two waterside pubs, The Jolly Sailor and The Old Ship complement this idyll. There is a restaurant and tea room, and rowing boats for hire. I leave Heybridge Basin in good spirits and with a happy heart. I'd found a little piece of heaven.

Over the years Heybridge village has merged with Maldon, an historic town steeped in tales from Anglo-Saxon conflicts to nautical trade of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. It is the home to several Thames sailing barges; *Hydrogen*, *Reminder*, *George Smeed*, *Centaur* and *Pudge* sit in the mud at Hythe Quay. These old vessels spend their retirement taking customers on sailing trips and competing in barge matches along the Thames estuary.

A riverside walk leads past Promenade Park, a public open space that includes a children's playground, benches, tea bar and fish and chip kiosk. The path ends at

**3 Fen Farm site on Mersea Island**

**4 Heybridge Basin**

**5 The beach at East Mersea**

**6 Burnham-on-Crouch**

**7 The altar of St Peter's Chapel**

**8 St Peter's Chapel**

**9 The RAF memorial at Bradwell**

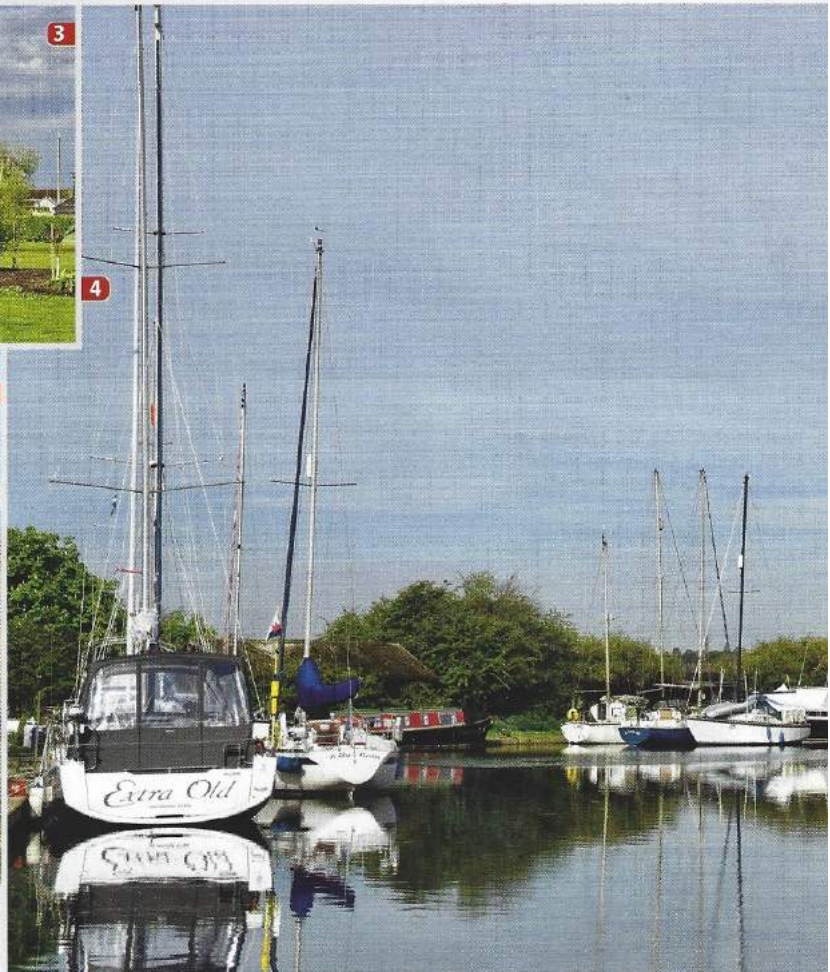
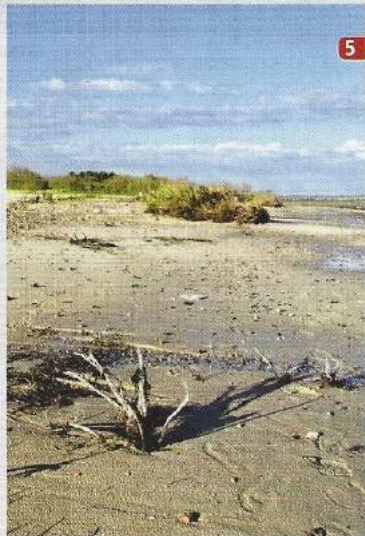
**10 The Statue of Byrhtnoth, Maldon**

the Statue of Byrhtnoth, an imposing creation of English sculptor, John Doubleday. Byrhtnoth was the Anglo-Saxon Ealdorman of Essex who died on 11 August AD 991 defending Northey Island from raiding Vikings. The poem 'Battle of Maldon' immortalised the incident, though historians are divided on how much Byrhtnoth was to blame for the Anglo-Saxon's defeat.

Maldon is also home to the Combined Military Services Museum, a collection of military equipment from conflicts on land, in the air and on the sea, both at home and far afield. Housed over three floors, its exhibits range from armour and pole arms of the 15th century to weaponry of the present day.

The museum possesses the only surviving canoe from the 'Cockleshell Heroes' raid on Germany in 1942, as well as the black combat kit, respirator and weapon used by an SAS commando during the operation to free hostages from the Iranian Embassy siege in 1980.

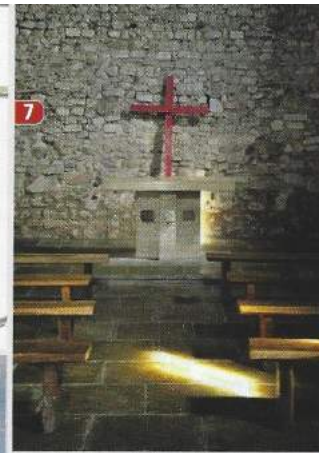
Just past a 'Handling Area' where children under supervision can try on combat jackets, uniforms and helmets I see part of an engine. The damaged remains and other small aircraft parts



around it are from a B17 Flying Fortress that collided with another B17 over the Thames estuary on 19th June 1944. Eight airmen survived, but 11 lost their lives. I am moved by the story and by being close to twisted metal that keeps the memory of those who perished alive.

It would not be the first time today that I become pensive. After a walk to the delightful St Peter's Chapel, an isolated, spiritual place on the shore at Bradwell-on-Sea, I pause at the RAF war memorial just outside the village. It is a fitting tribute to 121 airmen who flew from here in the defence of freedom, never to return.

After a moment of reflection and a study of the map, I move George just one hundred metres and park on the concrete remains of the WWII runway. RAF Bradwell Bay was a fighter airfield, but was also used as an emergency-landing destination for damaged bombers or those low on fuel after German raids. It was the only fighter base to operate FIDO (Fog Intensive Dispersal Operations), a British invention that burned petrol along the runway edge when fog or darkness stopped landings at other stations.



TRIP INFORMATION	
Total site fees	£165
Total miles in Essex	294



## Burnham-on-Crouch

Standing on a warm spring afternoon in the quiet Essex countryside it is hard to imagine how different it must have been on a dark foggy night, with the air thick with fumes from burning petrol and the noise of returning aircraft.

I am tired but enriched by the time I settle at the Silver Road Campsite in Burnham-on-Crouch. The town, renowned for its annual regatta, sits on the north shore of the river overlooking Wallasea Island to the south. A riverside path from the eastern end of the town to a marina out west leads past houseboats, boatyards, cafés, yacht clubs, two traditional public houses and the picturesque Olde White Harte Hotel.

I walk Burnham's waterfront after sunset and again in the early morning enjoying the changes in mood and light in this most photogenic of landscapes. But it is not the first time I've encountered picture-postcard scenery. Essex's coast, creeks and countryside have surprised and delighted me. Its people friendly, their welcomes warm. Apart from in my TOWIE guide, I haven't seen a fake tan or a fake boob anywhere.

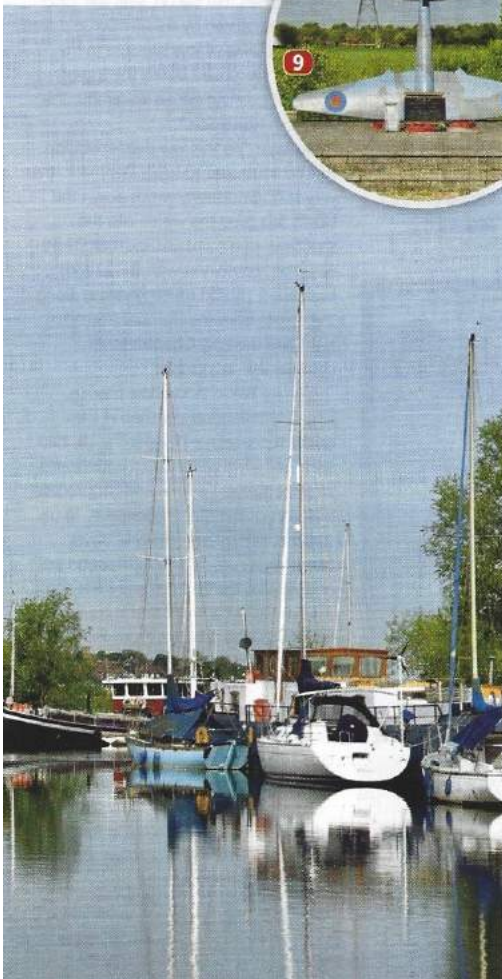
## Sarfend, innit

Just outside Burnham, Mangapps Railway Museum is my final destination before heading back to Mersea Island. There's a good collection of locomotives, rolling stock artefacts and memorabilia. Restored signal boxes, sidings and track transport the visitor the long journey back to the days before Beeching. A scheduled service transports them on the much shorter journey up and down the site. Railway enthusiasts and the more casual visitor are well catered for.

I have decided to conclude my journey through Essex by way of a contrast. I will venture further south to sample the rather more commercial side, and perhaps brash side of Essex tourism. I arrive at Southend-on-Sea.

Although tucked well up the tidal Thames estuary this is true English seaside. The Kent coast across the water appears distant and the passing container ships, though enormous, appear small. Southend declined as a tourist destination in the 60s and 70s due to the growth in package holidays abroad, but 6.4 million tourists visit annually.

It is a hot bank holiday Saturday and Londoners in their thousands have made the 40-mile journey west for a day in the sun. ➤



## ENJOYING ESSEX

Southend has everything. Bars, cafés, gardens, pubs, fancy goods shops, ice cream parlours, fish and chips, funfairs, sea and sand. To be frank it has them in abundance. It bustles and strains under the number of visitors, and yes, it is all rather 'kiss me quick', but if you like that sort of thing it is the place to come.

Southend's famous pier provides a focal point to the seafront. It was first built from wood in 1829 to bring visitors in by boat even at low water and is the longest in the world at 1.34 miles. A scheduled train service runs its length leaving the visitor the choice of walking all, part or none of the journey.

My stay in Southend is brief, just sufficient to see it and to get some understanding of it. While I will not return, millions will and consequently it will continue to play an important role in the tourism economy of the county.

### Chilling out in Canvey

My travels with George through Essex come to an end on Canvey Island. I've never been here before and it has occupied my thoughts for nothing more than fleeting moments over the years. It nestles below South Benfleet and Hadleigh, separated from mainland Essex by East Haven Creek. The island is accessible at all tides as bridges rather than causeways carry the two roads.

The island was reclaimed from the sea by Dutch engineers in the seventeenth century, but popularised as Canvey on Sea in Victorian times.

It is another warm day and day-trippers are here in force. I park George at the seafront and walk for a mile or so



**11** Southend-on-Sea funfair

**12** Southend-on-Sea hotel

**13** Mangapps Railway Museum

**14** Canvey Island sea wall

along the seawall. It is high tide so there is no exposed beach. But from the wall it is clear to see that the tide is higher than low-lying land. The wall is holding the sea back. I am fascinated.

Canvey's sea wall, an essential coastal defence, has dominated the island's entire southern seaboard since it was built in the 1960s. Yet it came too late for many of the island's 11,000 residents. The disastrous east coast flood of 1953 decimated Canvey. But why did it

happen? Veteran East Anglia meteorologist and former BBC weatherman, Jim Bacon, says the 1953 flood was caused by a storm surge driven by a deep area of low pressure in the Atlantic: "It moved across the top of Scotland pushing excess water into the northern North Sea."

He says: "As this low deepened and moved southeast towards Denmark, the very strong northerly winds down the North Sea piled the water into the shallower and narrower southern North Sea. This, combined with the already high tides, caused much flooding along the coasts from the Humber down to Kent and the Low Countries with considerable loss of life."

Canvey Island stood little chance. Fifty-eight islanders perished in the greatest peacetime disaster the UK had seen. Sixty-five years later, I understand why the seawall is vital, and I appreciate it as part of the island landscape. To my surprise, I enjoy my time on Canvey Island, especially its southern seaboard and view to the Thames and Kent coast.

I have spent a week in this county and leave knowing it better. From the noise and bustle of Southend-on-Sea to the quiet and calm of Heybridge Basin, from nature reserves and clifftops to sandy beaches and salt marshes, this North Sea coastline, its towns and rural villages have it all. If the campervanner is seeking a holiday destination that will provide variety, history and something for the whole family to enjoy, perhaps after all, the only way is Essex.

**WHERE TO STAY**

**Fen Farm Caravan Site**  
Moore Lane, East Mersea,  
Colchester, Essex CO5 8FE  
☎ 01206 383275 🌐 fenfarm.co.uk

**Silver Road Caravan Park**  
5 Silver Road, Burnham-on-Crouch, Essex CM0 8LA  
☎ 01621 782934 🌐 silverroadcaravanpark.co.uk