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Essex surnames

by Frederic Vanson

LIKE every English county Essex has its list of distinctive and local family names some of whose bearers, leaving the county behind have taken their patronyms with them to the great cities, to other parts of Britain and abroad to our former colonies and to America.

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Certain surnames are common all over Essex and have been for many generations. Examples are Cole and Ellis. So too are Mott, Raven, Rayner, Joslin, Seabrook and Bacon. Essex can boast a long line of knights bearing this last name. Some of these frequently-found names have a long history. Felgate, for example was represented in the 13th century by one Felaga; Folkard goes back at least to the 11th century when one Folcard, a Flemish scholar, was Abbot of Thorney. Leatherdale, a frequent Essex name is found also in Suffolk and there was a Lytherdale of Hasilwood in that county in the 16th century. A William Luckyn gave £50, then a very large sum, to help raise the fleet which fought the Armada, and Lucking is still an Essex surname.

Similarly with Fairhead, a man of which family was executed for sheep stealing at Rayleigh in 1820. Wiseman, Tabor, Spurgeon, Patmore, Langdon, Ketley, Whitlock, Pannell are also found in fair abundance in our county. The great Victorian poet Coventry Patmore was a distinguished scion of this ancient Essex family.

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Some Essex names are more odd than these. Examples are Arthy, Alp, Bones, Egg, Sneezum, Trubshoe and Hollowbread. Other county-wide names include Byford, Caton, Challis, Winterflood, Littlechild, Maskell, Nottage, Pledger, Quilter, Scroby, Sorrell, Wren, Ruffell and Vanner. And of course Essex!



The sturdy butteressed tower of Pagle-sham church. Photograph by Janet Bord.

In the Canvey Island district are examples of Dutch names dating back to the days of land drainage in which these people were expert. These include Vandervord, Verlander and Guiver. The Huguenots too brought many names to Essex such as le Grys (Grice), Poupart and Martineau.

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Villages have always given rise to surnames and Essex has many such examples. Rochford, Lambourne, Woodford, Tilbury, Hatfield, Harlow, Wenden, Stock, Hockley, Plaistow, Upton and Stratford are examples among many.

Some family names are commoner in particular areas of the county than others. Thus in the Colne Valley district we find Cansdale, Patten, Sillitoe, Root, Goody, Lay and Everitt. In the Southend corner of Essex are many Dowsetts, Garons, Gentrys, Eves and Cotgroves, while Colchester has its Sparrows, Cants and Munsons.

In this short article I have, of course, only touched upon the fringes of the

subject and no doubt readers will easily be able to add their own lists of area and county names. This account cannot possibly be exhaustive since the subject is nearly inexhaustible. But it is also a fascinating one and I hope that interested readers may enjoy searching out and compiling their own lists of Essex families, famous or obscure.

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As aids to this study old county or town directories are enormously helpful, and do not despise the humble, utilitarian but very informative telephone directories. Much useful data can be found in them still despite the modern habit of moving house at fairly frequent intervals and the influence of modern transport in spreading country-wide families which for generations remained in one locality.

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