

The quality of the landscape defies precise definition. It is open, not high—below 300 feet at its highest, and, although reasonably well provided with good buildings, lacking any architectural feature of the very first quality. It seems to me, nevertheless, to have the quality which one recognizes as Englishness. If I had to show a visitor from overseas a scene which epitomized England I should take him not to Buttermere or to the Avon at Stratford but to the church of Belchamp St Paul and point across the rolling, fertile fields to the distant line of the Stour. Here is a landscape busy with the business of producing food. Having no thought for beauty it contrives, by minding its own business, to be very beautiful.

Let us go then to Belchamp St Paul, an overlong journey from Ashen because the old airfield has cut the road. There is not much in the village and the church lies beyond with only the hall for company. It is an attractive group, the church massive and challenging, the hall withdrawn and quietly perfect. The wide lawn which flanks the drive has been left unfenced, a generous gesture which shows confidence in the good sense of those who come this way. There are not many country churches in these parts which illustrate so clearly the strength of the fifteenth century. It is not extravagant, like the great wool-churches across the Stour, but massive. It looks as if it could sit in this setting till Judgement Day. It has, like Castle Hedingham, its original stalls with their misericords. The carving of these is conventional and unenterprising. The bench-ends are excellent, however, with finely carved poppyheads and figures. A seated king, only a little mutilated, has a grave dignity which is genuinely moving.

Next comes Belchamp Otten, a small village with a very plain church, Norman in origin. It has retained its early Victorian (or earlier) fittings. Nearby is a Georgian hall with a good plain porch set asymmetrically.

Beyond this the lane drops down towards the Belchamp Brook at Belchamp Walter and comes to an end just past the church and hall. Paths radiate from here, tempting the traveller to a more intimate acquaintance with this country on foot. Belchamp Walter offers one of the most pleasing of the characteristic groupings of church and hall which we have found everywhere in Essex. The former is of mixed dates, from twelfth to fifteenth centuries. The tower is tall but endearing rather than imposing—partly the effect

of a naïve little belfry turret. The church contains one of the most elaborate mediaeval tombs in Essex. Here, according to the surviving heraldic evidence, lay a very tough warrior who played his part in the wars of Edward I and II, Sir John de Botetout. The tomb—no chest or effigy remains—is recessed into the north wall of the nave. There is an extravagantly rich canopy which may well have been the entrance to a chantry chapel, but of this no trace remains. Sir John died in 1324, and his memorial represents the latest word in the Decorated style. It may seem surprising that the height of fashion should have been followed in so remote a spot, but here was no rustic craftsman but a sophisticated master of the art which had, not so long before, produced the Eleanor Crosses. The wall-paintings are of this period too and of a high standard. The Virgin and Child is remarkably like that at Great Canfield. Had the painter, one wonders, seen the older painting in the Roding valley, or did both turn to the same copy—perhaps a thirteenth-century Book of Hours—for their inspiration?

The most conspicuous monument from the eighteenth century is to Sir John Raymond. This elegantly formal work commemorates the builder, or rather rebuilder, of the Hall.

The first Raymond to come to Belchamp, another John, bought the manor from the spendthrift Sir John Wentworth of Gosfield, and settled in an Elizabethan house. The Raymonds had come to stay! The present house is owned by Mr St Clere Raymond. It was built in 1720 in a style which was perhaps just a little old-fashioned in its day—Queen Anne rather than Georgian. It is Essex brickwork at its best. The façade is gravely formal, nine bays wide with a central porch—a replacement but in the spirit of the original. The main block of building is unchanged, except for the addition of charming overhung powder-closets on either side. In its exquisite setting, framed by superb trees and with a contemporary stone vase on the terrace enhancing the impression of classical dignity, it is as satisfying a house as we shall find in Essex. The owner generously shows the principal rooms by appointment. They contain Armada treasures—Sir William Harris, whose daughter married a Raymond of Charles I's reign, commanded a ship in the battle and brought home Spanish trophies, including an exquisite Flemish triptych—family portraits, including one of the founder, and a sweet-toned chamber organ associated, more probably than most, with Handel.