

GENIUS LOCI

LASZLOVSZKY 60

edited by
Dóra Mérai
and

Ágnes Drosztnér, Kyra Lyublyanovics,
Judith Rasson, Zsuzsanna Papp Reed,
András Vadas, Csilla Zatykó



ARCHAEOLINGUA

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Budapest 2018

The publication of this volume was generously funded by



CENTRAL EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY

ISBN 978-615-5766-19-0

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2018

ARCHAEOLOGUA ALAPÍTVÁNY

H-1067 Budapest, Teréz krt. 13

www.archaeolingua.hu

Copy editing and language editing: the editors

Layout: Zsanett Kállai

Map: Viktor Lagutov, Zsuzsa Eszter Pető, Mária Vargha, István Gergő Farkas

Front cover design: Eszter Bence-Molnár

Table of contents

Tabula gratulatoria	v
Kiadói előszó	vi
Publisher's Preface	viii
Köszöntő	x
Salutation	xi

Boundaries, Frontier Zones / Határvonalak, határvidékek

ALEKS PLUSKOWSKI – ALEX BROWN – SEWERYN SZCZEPANSKI – ROWENA BANERJEA – DANIEL MAKOWIECKI What Does a Frontier Look Like? The Biocultural Dynamics of the Lower Vistula Borderland in the Middle Ages	2
STEPHEN POW The Mongol Empire's Northern Border: Re-evaluating the Surface Area of the Mongol Empire	8
IAN WOOD Two Roman Frontiers and Their Sub-Roman Afterlife	14

Crossing Borders / Határokon át

SZAKÁCS BÉLA ZSOLT Gyulaírástól, avagy a rendi építészeti hagyományok átjárhatósága	19
CRISTOPHER MIELKE A Queen's Crusading Connections: Yolanda of Courtenay, the Fifth Crusade, and the Military Orders	25
BÁRÁNY ATTILA Angol keresztes a magyar végeken: Robert de Champlayn	28
CRISTIAN GAȘPAR Trespassing Pigs, Sons of Whores, and Randy Dogs: Marginalia on a Medieval Document from Caransebeș/Karánsebes	32
VADAS ANDRÁS A kecskeméti marhahajtók megpróbáltatásai és egy végvár jóllakott őrsége	38
LÁSZLÓ KONTLER Borders and Crossings: A Jesuit Scientist in the Whirlwind of Enlightened Reform	41
PAUKOVICS GERGŐ Hajszá az örök fiatalságért. Dr. Voronoff és a dübörgő 20-as évek	45
PINKE ZSOLT – STEPHEN POW A Gangesz-deltából a globális porondra: történeti ökológiai szempontok a kolera kórokozó (<i>Vibrio cholerae</i>) elterjedési területének átalakulásához	50
MARCELL SEBŐK Tangible Cultural Heritage: The Early History of Blue Jeans	55

Inhabiting the Landscape / Élet a tájban

SÓFALVI ANDRÁS	
A Barcaság határai és 13. század eleji településképe a Német Lovagrend adományleveleiben	60
NIKOLINA ANTONIĆ	
The Hospitallers' Estate of Čičan and its Neighbors: Spatial Analysis Yields New Information	64
ÜNIGE BENCZE	
The Abbey of Meszes: New Insights on the Site Location	68
MÓGÁNÉ ARADI CSILLA – MOLNÁR ISTVÁN	
Kísérlet a bárdudvarnok-szentbenedeki premontrei prépostság környezeti rekonstrukciójára	72
BEATRIX ROMHÁNYI	
Monasteries along the Danube	77
PUSZTAI TAMÁS – P. FISCHL KLÁRA	
A dél-borsodi síkság bronzkori és középkori településstruktúrájának összehasonlítása	82
VIZI MÁRTA	
Komplex régészeti kutatás egy egykori dél-dunántúli mezőváros területén	89
BATIZI ZOLTÁN	
Fagyosasszony és Kammerhof	95
PÁLÓCZI HORVÁTH ANDRÁS	
A középkori Kenderes településszerkezete	99
SZŐCS PÉTER LEVENTE	
Adatok Nagybánya és vidéke középkori egyházi topográfiájához	103
ZATYKÓ CSILLA	
Eltűnt berzencei malmok	108
SZABÓ PÉTER	
Középkori cseh erdőgazdálkodás a choustníki uradalom erdőszámadásainak tükrében	113
ANDREA KISS	
Before and After the Great Heat and Drought of 1540: Multiannual Trends of Grape and Grain Harvest Dates in the Vienna Hospital Accounts	117
LÁSZLÓ BARTOSIEWICZ	
“Kleine Fische, gute Fische” – But Sturgeon is Great	121
LYUBLYANOVICS KYRA	
Vad háziállat, házi vadállat: Számi rénszarvastartás a középkori és kora újkori Norvégiában	126
JUDITH RASSON	
Mountains in the Lifeways and History of Northern Macedonia	138
JEREMY MIKECZ	
Crossing the Abyss: The Apurímac Canyon at the Time of the Spanish Invasion of Peru (1533)	142

Busy Places / Nyüzsgő terek

PETROVICS ISTVÁN	
Újabb adatok Pécs késő középkori történetéhez	147
URBÁN MÁTÉ	
Lokális búcsújáró helyek a késő középkori Nyugat-Dunántúlon	151
BALÁZS NAGY	
The Marketplace of Csütörtök – A Local Market in Fourteenth-Century Hungary	156
KATALIN SZENDE	
The Sopron Fish Market	159
GERHARD JARITZ	
The Craftsman's Voice and Words in Late Medieval Austrian Urban Space	165

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ANA MARIA GRUIA Healthcare in Cluj in the Sixteenth Century: Overlapping Professions	168
ANA MARINKOVIĆ John Capistran's Mantle and the Early Propaganda of Franciscan Observant Cults in Dubrovnik	171
SABINA MADGEARU Ceremonial Space in Front of Medieval Buda: An Illuminated Fifteenth-Century French Vision	175
VÉGH ANDRÁS Óbuda látképeken	177

Layers of the Past / A múlt rétegei

KODOLÁNYI JUDIT Templomok és temetők a visegrádi Sibrik-dombon	181
ROSTA SZABOLCS Egy új lehetőség kapujában – tatárjáráskori védművek a Kiskunságban	186
BOTÁR ISTVÁN Árpád-kori edényégető kemence Csíksomlyón	193
PETAR PARVANOV Fire and Stone: Placing Flints in Graves in Late Medieval Kaliakra	197
GYARMATI JÁNOS Kumpi Wasi. Textilműhely egy inka tartományi központban	201
ZSUZSANNA PAPP REED Post It: Notes from Thirteenth-Century St Albans	207
VALERY REES The Salt of Genius: Marsilio Ficino on Food, Spices, and Nutrition	213
ROSSINA KOSTOVA The Mother of God Monastery near Varna, Bulgaria: More about Missionary Monasteries in Bulgaria in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries	217
DANIEL ZIEMANN The Imperial Abbey of Corvey in the Ninth and Tenth Century: At the Crossroads of Power	221
VIRÁGOS GÁBOR Kartal vagy Cyko? Kísérlet egy középkori nemesi család történetének rekonstruálására	226
TÓTH BOGLÁRKA – BOTÁR ISTVÁN A sepsikilyéni unitárius templom tetőszerkezeteinek kormeghatározása	244
RÁCZ MIKLÓS Egy tiszazugi újkori négyosztatú ház – Dokumentálás és építéstörténet	248

Objects beneath Our Feet / Tárgyak a föld alól

LANGÓ PÉTER A Tiszakeszi-Szódadombon talált kora Árpád-kori kereszt	254
RÁCZ TIBOR – NAGY BALÁZS Tatárjárás kori kincslelet Jászkarajenőről	258
SZENDE LÁSZLÓ Lehetett-e hadijelvény a csajági kereszt?	267
NÓRA UJHELYI Thoughts about Medieval Book Fittings from the Castle of Visegrád	270
MÁRIA VARGHA – THOMAS KÜHTREIBER Treasures of the “Lower Ten Thousand”? Hoards of Iron Objects	273

TABLE OF CONTENTS

K. NÉMETH ANDRÁS „Sarlóját ez okért bőszen fegyverré köszörülte” Késő középkori kiegyenesített sarló Kospa falu helyéről	280
MAXIM MORDOVIN A Collection of Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Cloth Seals from Szolnok	285
TÜNDE KOMORI Ottomans in Pest in the Light of “Luxury” Ceramics: Four Cups from Kígyó Street	289
WICKER ERIKA A 17. századi rácszentpéteri kincslelet	294

Marking the Place / Helyek és jelek

CSERNUS SÁNDOR Keresztes családtörténet és kőbe vésett emlékezet	300
LŐVEI PÁL A pilisszántói keresztes kő legendája	305
MÉRAI DÓRA Sügérek a Nyárádmentén: Sigér Mátyás síremléke leporolva	311
VESZPRÉMY LÁSZLÓ A bambergi lovas szobra és Szent István	316
TAKÁCS MIKLÓS A pétervárad-tekiai reneszánsz kőfaragvány	321
ANNELI RANDLA What and Whom Should We Remember? The Case of the Teutonic Order’s Church and Castle in Pöide, Livonia	325

Heritage Sites, Sacred Places / Örökségi helyszínek, szent helyek

ALEKSANDAR PANTIĆ The Ambiguity of Heritage Interpretation: A Late Roman Tomb in Brestovik, Serbia	330
GYÖRGY ENDRE SZÖNYI Rocamadour: Monastic Center, Pilgrimage Place, Art Historical Interest, World Heritage Site	335
KATEŘINA HORNÍČKOVÁ A Penitent Judas Iscariot: An Exemplum of Christian Morals on the Eve of Hussitism?	339
JAMES PLUMTREE Buddha, Lenin, and the Prophet Muhammad Approaching the Landscape and Cultural Heritage of Issyk-Ata	343
ROBERT SHARP The Thames Estuary: The Cultural Heritage and Memory of the Thames Estuary at Southend-on-Sea	349
ESZTER SPÄT Constructing Religio-Ritual Heritage: The New Shrine of Shekhsê Batê in Khetar, Northern Iraq	353
ZSUZSANNA RENNER Delhi, Old and New: Changing Cityscapes and the Cultural Heritage of India’s Capital City	357
FELD ISTVÁN Pseudovár vagy történeti rekonstrukció?	364
ILON GÁBOR A velemi régészeti témaparkról	371
WOLLÁK KATALIN Örökség alapú fejlesztés Kölkeden	374

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Places of Memory / Az emlékezet helyei

JÁNOS BAK	
Nádor 20 Capriccio	380
SZENTPÉTERI JÓZSEF	
Pilistől Tételig. Elektronikus levélféle a 60 esztendő's Laszlovszky Józsefnek	382
RICHARD HODGES	
Scarlino in the 1980s, Forty Years On	386
KLANICZAY GÁBOR	
Egy hozzászólás Kremsben	390

The Thames Estuary: The Cultural Heritage and Memory of the Thames Estuary at Southend-on-Sea

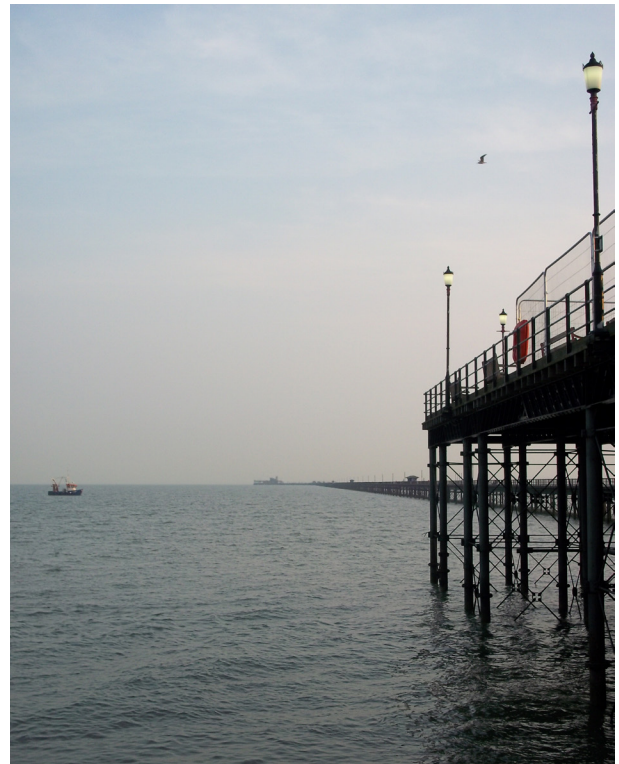
ROBERT SHARP*

“And indeed nothing is easier for a man who has, as the phrase goes, ‘followed the sea’ with reverence and affection, than to evoke the great spirit of the past upon the lower reaches of the Thames.”

Joseph Conrad, *The Heart of Darkness*¹

The town of Southend-on-Sea in the English county of Essex sits on the north shore of the Thames River Estuary, 34 miles from London. Southend’s strategic defensive position, access to natural resources, and maritime location led to its settlement by the Celtic Trinovantes tribe, the Romans, and the East Saxons. The hamlet of Southend derived its name from its position at the “south end of Prittlewell.” Prittlewell (“place of the sparkling water”) was the key medieval settlement in the region until the nineteenth century when, largely due to the popularity of Southend as a Victorian coastal retreat, Prittlewell was subsumed into the Borough of Southend-on-Sea. In the twenty-first century the northern side of the estuary around Southend has seen two archaeological discoveries of international importance. In 2003, a well preserved high status Anglo-Saxon burial with lavish grave goods was discovered at Prittlewell and in recent years, a number of artefacts have been salvaged from the wreck of the timber warship HMS *London*, which exploded in the estuary in 1665.²

This paper focuses on the tangible heritage of Southend-on-Sea and the preservation of this heritage through an analysis of three historical monuments: Hadleigh Castle, the Crow Stone and *The Endeavour*. The region is also rich in intangible cultural heritage and links to numerous illustrious historical figures are commemorated through legend and popular memory. King Cnut won the



► Fig. 1. Southend Pier, Southend-on-sea (photo: R. Sharp, March 2011)

battle of Assandun five miles from Southend and supposedly demonstrated his piety by trying and failing to hold back the tide at the Thames Estuary. Other notable figures include Emma Hamilton (Horatio Nelson’s lover) and Anne Boleyn, who is believed to have first met Henry VIII at his hunting lodge in Eastwood, now the Bellhouse pub. The memory of these notables is preserved through the names of other local public houses including The Anne Boleyn at Rochford, The King Canute at Canvey, and The Nelson in Southend. Queen Victoria was also a regular visitor to Southend and it was during her reign that Southend’s famous pier, the world’s longest pleasure pier, was built (Fig. 1). Her visits are preserved through “Southend Victoria” train station and a cliff-top statue overlooking the estuary.

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In addition to Victoria's statue, Hadleigh Castle, built in the early thirteenth century by Hubert de Burgh, the chief regent to King John of England, is another iconic clifftop monument (Fig. 2). The castle benefits from an expansive view over the estuary towards London in the west and the English Channel in the east. It was primarily a defensive fortification and acted as an early warning site for hostile fleets approaching London. The castle was ideally situated; any force attacking from the river would have had to contend with steep cliffs to reach the summit and a hostile force attacking from inland would face dense forest. Hadleigh Castle enjoyed its heyday during the rule of the Plantagenet kings of England, both Edward II and Edward III frequented Hadleigh for hunting. During the reign of Henry VIII, the castle was deemed important enough to be included in the dowries of Catherine of Aragon, Anne of Cleves, and Catherine Parr.



► Fig. 2. Hadleigh Castle, Hadleigh (photo: R. Sharp, September 2011)

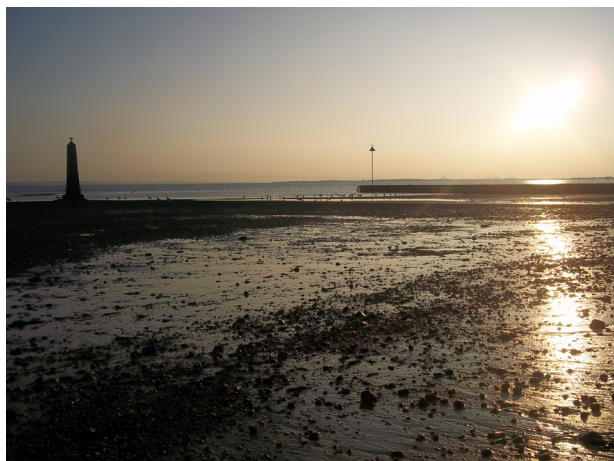
However, by the time Hadleigh had passed into the hands of Lord Richard Rich in 1551, it had fallen into a state of disrepair. Rich thus had much of the castle dismantled and sold for building materials. In 1828, the castle's remaining ruined tower, set against the backdrop of the vast estuary, was captured and romanticised by John Constable in his famous painting, *Hadleigh Castle*.³ By then the castle clearly no longer had a defensive function and was seen as a decrepit manmade structure largely reclaimed by nature. In 1891, General William Booth and his charity, the Salvation Army, purchased Hadleigh Castle and created an asylum for destitute men from London to learn agricultural skills. Though the land around the castle

was now in use again, the castle continued to suffer from subsidence until it was classified as a scheduled monument and given to English Heritage in the twentieth century. The site is now recognised as an invaluable part of the region's heritage. The area around the castle has also been declared a country park, and in 2012 Hadleigh once again enjoyed fame as the location for the London Olympic Games mountain biking course. Hadleigh Castle is an interesting example of how a multi-faceted approach to heritage preservation can be implemented successfully. A combination of the legacy of the Olympic Games, the continuation of the work of the Salvation Army, the protection of the natural scenery through country park status, and English Heritage's management of the castle ruins has led to the continued preservation of this site.

Another monument that stands in prominence against the watery backdrop of the Thames Estuary is the mysterious Crow Stone (Figs 3 and 4). The stone is a needle-like obelisk that stands in the mud off of the Chalkwell esplanade and at high tide is largely submerged by the Thames. The earliest written record of the Crow Stone dates to 1197, where it is referred to as the city stone of Leigh (Leigh-on-Sea was at that time a small fishing village, now within the borough of Southend).⁴ The current monument dates from 1836 and replaced the previous stone erected in 1755, now standing near Prittlewell Priory. The Crow Stone was traditionally a boundary marker that delineated the limit of the City of London's jurisdiction over the River Thames. There is a similar stone on the Kentish shore of the Thames known as the London Stone. The current Crow Stone has



► Fig. 3. The Crow Stone, Chalkwell (photo: R. Sharp, August 2018)



► Fig. 4. The Crow Stone, Chalkwell (photo: R. Sharp, August 2018)

been inscribed with the names of the Lord Mayors of London and there are records of a historic tradition involving the Lord Mayor which seems to have died out around the mid-nineteenth century. The Lord Mayor and his entourage would first sail from the City of London to the Crow Stone. The Mayor would then place the City sword against the stone, row around the stone three times, and drink a toast to the city.⁵ The reason for the name “Crow Stone” is not known, though crows and other birds do use it as a vantage point. Given the proximity of this site to the Prittlewell burial ground and references in early medieval sources mentioning Viking armies making camp on the north shore of the Thames Estuary, it could be that the site has ancient connotations to northern European pagan traditions – the crow being the emblem of Woden.

In addition to its medieval heritage, Southend-on-Sea retains a number of tangible reminders of its role in the two global conflicts of the twentieth century. Southend was the first town to be bombed in the Zeppelin raids of WWI and also suffered significant damage during the blitz of WWII. The Thames Estuary holds the wreck of the highly volatile *SS Montgomery*, an American ship wrecked in 1944 carrying 1400 tons of explosives, and the *Mulberry Harbour*, a large offshore platform designed for use in the D-Day landings that became grounded off the coast of Southend.

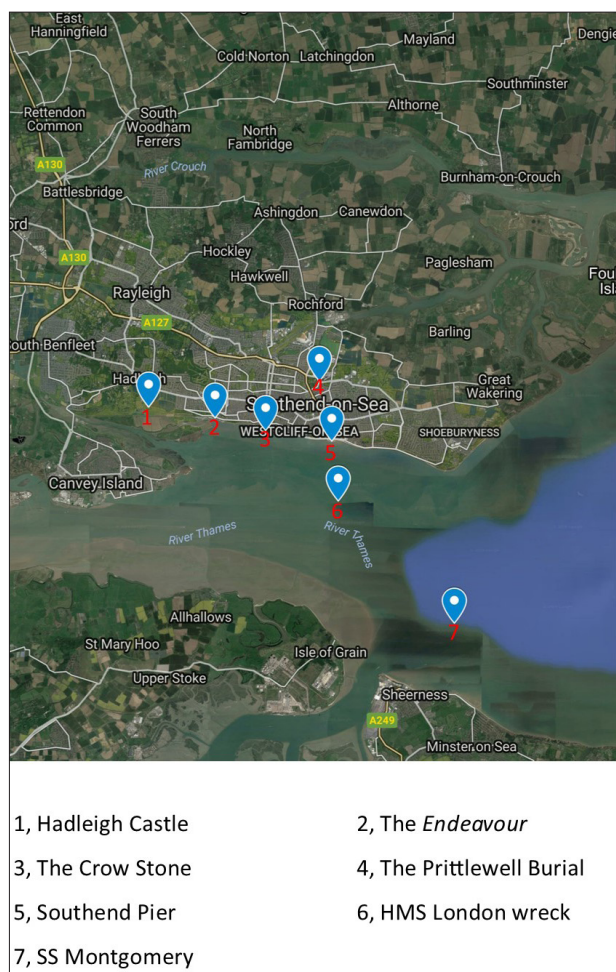
The *Endeavour*, a cockle fishing boat built in 1924 of a type locally known as a “bawley”—a corruption of the name “boiler boat”—, is less



► Fig. 5. The Endeavour, Leigh-on-sea (photo: R. Sharp, July 2011)

monumental in size than the *SS Montgomery* or *Mulberry Harbour*, but had a significant role in WWII (Fig. 5). The Dunkirk evacuation of the May 30, 1940, is famous in the collective national memory of the United Kingdom largely due to the role played by thousands of fisherman, who answered the call to cross the English Channel and evacuate Allied troops from the beaches of France. Six boats, including *Endeavour*, sailed from Leigh-on-Sea for Dunkirk. Each boat was “around 30ft long by 10ft wide” and each “rescued about 1000 soldiers” by ferrying men from the beach to the larger navy ships offshore.⁶ These boats, which had not previously left the Thames estuary, crossed the sea under constant fire from the German Luftwaffe and sadly, one, *The Renown*, struck a mine on its return journey, and all crew members were lost.

In 2001, a charitable trust was set up to restore the *Endeavour*, at that point lying in a state of disrepair in a Kentish shipyard. The initial plan was to create a static monument in the historic fishing village of Old Leigh, however, rather than a static monument, the innovative decision was made to restore the boat to working order as an example of living heritage. A number of local patrons and businesses pledged their support, volunteers were drawn from the local community, and the Local Authority granted permission to use oak from nearby woodland for the restoration.⁷ The *Endeavour* is now once more in use as a working cockle boat. When not in use, it can be seen moored near the Crooked Billet pub in Old Leigh. When in use, a sign at the boat’s



► Fig. 6. Map data ©2018 Google, Imagery C 2018 Terra-Metrics, accessed 29/08/2018.

mooring details where the boat is working in the estuary so that the public can identify it from the shore. The restoration of the *Endeavour* was a great success and the boat recreated its historic journey to Dunkirk recently appearing in Christopher Nolan's film, "Dunkirk."

Fortunately, much of the tangible cultural heritage of the Thames Estuary receives adequate care and funding. The collaboration of different

agencies at both Hadleigh Castle and the *Endeavour* Trust has been highly successful. However, it is fifteen years since the discovery of the Prittlewell Burial and yet the lavish grave goods remain out of public view in storage at the Museum of London. The current museum building of Southend Central Museum is not equipped to host such important collections as the Prittlewell Burial and the HMS London on a permanent basis. In 2009, the idea of a "Thames Estuary Experience" museum was conceived and the museum plans should be unveiled soon.⁸ This is a pivotal moment for Southend-on-Sea and an opportunity to create an attraction that will bring the wealth of the region's cultural heritage to both a regional and international audience.

Notes

- ¹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: Dover Thrift Editions, 1990), 2.
- ² Maev Kennedy, "17th-century HMS London gun carriage lifted from Southend seabed," *The Guardian*, accessed Aug 18, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/aug/12/gun-carriage-17th-century-hms-london-lifted-southend-seabed>.
- ³ John Constable, "Sketch for Hadleigh Castle," *The Tate Gallery*, accessed Aug 19, 2018, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-sketch-for-hadleigh-castle-n04810>. Constable wrote to his wife Maria after sketching Hadleigh in 1814: "At Hadleigh there is a ruin of a castle which from its situation is a really fine place—it commands a view of the Kent hills, the Nore and North Foreland and looking many miles to sea."
- ⁴ Ian Yearsley, *A History of Southend* (Chichester: Phillimore and CO, 2001), 18.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.
- ⁶ Judith Williams, *Leigh-on-sea* (Chichester: Phillimore, 2002), 114.
- ⁷ "Restoration," *The Endeavour Trust*, accessed Aug 5, 2018, <http://endeavourtrust.blogspot.com/p/cockling.html>.
- ⁸ "£40million plan for museum due soon," *The Southend Echo*, accessed Aug 18, 2018, http://www.echo-news.co.uk/news/16189282._40million_plan_for_museum_due_soon/.