

Some impressions of the East Mersea Meet.

This being my first visit to Mersea Island I had no idea what to expect. My only two perceptions of Mersea being the Sabine Baring-Gould descriptions of both places and people, and in my road atlas this area of land reached by a causeway from the mainland. The island has been described as a place where the wind constantly blows, Mersea did not disappoint, and then wind was accompanied by driving rain! This was not going to dampen my enthusiasm for here was the location of Mehalah, the novel which resulted in Sabine Baring-Gould being compared with such as the Brontes and Thomas Hardy.

On arrival at East Mersea Village Hall it was good to be meeting other members again. After a welcoming coffee and an assurance from the locals that the inclement weather would clear we drove to the 'Old City' at West Mersea.

With "The Company Shed" protecting us from the wind we were given a brief family history, complete with photographs, by Heather Howard. The whole flavour of Mehalah was inside this shed, the smell of the salt marshes, the fruits of the sea (would Mrs De Witt be in for smelt, shrimps, dabs and eels to retail?), generations of seafaring people battling against the elements. I could imagine Mehalah giving a similar presentation.

On leaving the shed Heather conducted a tour of the Old City pointing out relevant buildings and streets. Heather gave us a real flavour of the area, people, and even the fish which everyone enjoyed at lunchtime. Thanks Heather.

Our next port of call was Virley Church, where Mehalah was married to Elijah Rebow. Although only a ruin there is sufficient to relate to the description given in the story - "Virley Church is not bigger than a stable that consists of two stalls and a loose box, where of the loose box represents the chancel." It is hoped that Colchester Borough Council through the Millennium Project will renovate these ruins and thus preserve this landmark with Mehalah Country.

Whilst lunching back at the Village Hall Mrs Penny Burns told us of her family's connection, through four generations, with the Rose Public House at Peldon (in the novel, Jane the landlady, was based on Penny Burn's grandmother). Penny had some very interesting old photographs to accompany this presentation. "A more desolate region can scarce be conceived, and yet it is not without beauty, gulls were screaming and curlew uttered their mournful cry." - Nothing could better confirm this description than a walk to Ray Island. David Nicholls who as National Trust Warden was able to give a very informative and enjoyable tour of the island led this walk.

Once more we return to the Village Hall, this time for tea, buying and selling of S.B-G books, and the AGM.

East Mersea Church was our early evening venue. The evening was begun with everyone singing 'Onward Christian Soldiers', we were then treated to readings by Marianne Jones and Jim Sunnocks, a brief history of S.B-G by Keith Lister and musical presentations by both Kathy Knight and Martin Graebe. The day was rounded off by a social visit to the Peldon Rose.

On Sunday morning a large number of members attended Parish Communion in East Mersea Church and I found it very interesting to hear our own David Shacklock preach. After our 'practice' singing of Onward Christian Soldiers on Saturday evening it was good to hear members in fine voice again on Sunday morning. There can be no better finish to an Annual Gathering.

We were so lucky over the weekend to have so many local people involved. By them being unable to hide the unbridled pride and enthusiasm they have in holding on to the legend of Mehalah, and of her creator Sabine Baring-Gould having been such a part of their history I am reminded of the inscription at Red Hall:- 'When I hold, I hold fast.'

Many thanks to all those involved in the organisation of this very enjoyable weekend.

R.S.

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The rain cleared - the sun shone, the wind blew-Many of us miles from home, were spending a day in which fact and fiction were woven together in an Essex - Baring-Gould tapestry. No-one would have been surprised to see Sabine & Mehalah walking hand in hand in the wind to join us.

Truly a day to remember with grateful thanks to all involved in arranging it.

S.M. Tope.

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Another View

Foul weather clearing & becoming superb... the buzzing and expectant crowd gathering in the Village Hall...meeting old friends and new...the warm welcome and efficient arrangements for a full and thoroughly enjoyable day (thank you Marianne)...the enthusiasm for Mehalah as a 'real' person...Heather's fascinating and 'fragrant' oyster shop and conducted tour of the City...the walk to the Ray: no scenario quite like it...baby B-J taking all in...busy book buying... the informal but multi-talented evening in speech and song at the church (thank you Keith, Kathy, Martin and Jim)...the social cum supper at the Peldon Rose...the chat and hospitality of the Rectory (thank you Robin and Jane)...the gathering at Church and afterwards on Sunday morning...the beautiful drive home...a great weekend, with Roger Bristow, Keith Lister, [David Shacklock*] Marianne Jones, Heather Howard, David Nicholls, Penny Burr, Kathy Knight, Jim Sunnucks, Robin Elphick, and the ghost of old Sabine and all...and the ghost of old Sabine and all.

D. P. R.Shacklock. [*added by Editor]