

Dedham Vale Society

Article : Mistley, Manningtree and David Cleveland

DVS member Maureen Cleave has interviewed David Cleveland, film maker, author and founder of the East Anglian Film Archive, who lives in Manningtree

David Cleveland, the film maker, and his wife Christine came to live in Manningtree because they had a boat and they liked the look of the estuary from the train. Their house is 350 years old, one of the oldest in the High Street. As MP for Harwich, Samuel Pepys would have gone past their front door quite often. You can still see the gas points for the lighting on the ceiling of the sitting room.

Next door lived first Dr. Bree and then Dr. Beckett and then Dr. Kelly, their cellars said to be mysteriously linked for smuggling purposes. When heavy traffic used to lumber past, it would shake the pictures off the wall. David earned £12 a week working for the BBC in Ealing Studios and he paid £5 a week rent. They didn't mean to stay long in Manningtree. But in 1971 they bought the house for £3,000 and, thirty six years later and with three grown-up daughters, they're still here. Christine worked in Manningtree Library and David, tall, with snow white hair and brown eyes that miss nothing, is a familiar figure about the place. He is just the person to write its history. He has called his book Manningtree and Mistley, the People, the Trades and the Industries.



Mistley in the nineteen seventies when trains still used the quay

There was so much I didn't know before I read his book. I didn't know that Mistley stretches to Horsley Cross and is much bigger than Manningtree; that its name probably comes from the mistletoe they used to grow there; that there used to be a courthouse and prisoners' cells in Mistley police station; and that, before the cells, prisoners were kept in cages; that before they built the sea wall in 1971 a high tide would flood into the fire station and up South Street; that until the nineties, Peter Ainger used to smoke fish with oak salvaged from Manningtree Church when it was demolished in 1966. "These must have been the only eels to come out of a smokehouse filled with seventeenth century smoke - Holy smoke!" said David Cleveland, sounding pleased.

Manningtree church, built in 1616, was demolished because of death watch beetle; and the Adam church (1735) between Mistley Towers was demolished because of dry rot. Knowing what conservationists know today, we would still have both of them.

The Clevelands come originally from Lowestoft . David was brought up on a remote 56 acre farm in Norfolk with no electricity. His passion for film began early. With a battery powered projector and no screen, he would show films projected on to the ceiling.

Those of us with long term memories of television programmes like Jigsaw and Vision On in the seventies might still see him as the Prof, a gangling figure in a white laboratory coat doing batty things like lying in bed in the middle of the High Street or swimming in the grass – avoiding the cowpats. Once, in a field belonging to a local farmer, we see him sitting at a table and ordering duck to eat. The waiter goes off and returns with a dish with a silver cover. He removes the cover and a duck flies out. The Prof shoots the duck. There's a terrific noise and an aeroplane lands on the table. The whole scene is watched by George, the farmer's donkey, grazing nearby.



Horse-drawn wagons and a petrol-driven lorry at the Swan fountain in the nineteen twenties. They belonged to Stone's, the local coal merchants, and were drawn-up across the access to Mistley quay in a dispute about parking.

Some years later, in 1976, he founded the East Anglian Film Archive. "The BBC was throwing films away; such things should be kept for the future. I managed to get enough money to pay a staff of seven and do the work, and then we got four million pounds and moved it into a brand new building called the Archive Centre which also houses the Norfolk Record Office in Norwich." He retired in 2004 when he was 61 but has never been happy doing nothing – hence the story of Manningtree and Mistley. "I'm not a historian," he says, "I'm just interested in the place where I live."

His main interest begins in Victorian times, his chief source being a fellow called Joseph Glass who was born in Colchester, who lived in Manningtree as a boy and who published in 1855 *Reminiscences of Manningtree and its Vicinity*. (It was Joseph Glass who invented extendable chimney brushes – the origin of what we use today – which meant the end of child chimney sweeps.) Glass's *Reminiscences* are written in appalling verse which is great fun to read and he gives you all the important facts, for instance that in the early nineteenth century there were 24 pubs in Manningtree, 16 in Mistley:

Houses with painted signs as we have seen,
Are places of resort where men convene
On business matters: they attend at first,
Then take a glass or two to quench their thirst.

Half pints they quaff, of ale, or stout, or porter,
And smoke and drink their rum and gin and water.
Meanwhile their business is so much extended –
'Tis hard indeed, to tell when't will be ended.
'Tis night! – one leaves for home with staggering gait,
But is not seen, as it is getting late."

The most exciting time to live here, David Cleveland thinks, would have been before the railway was built in 1846. It took 36 hours to get to London by a coach, starting from Harwich, called The Defiance which rather ruled out commuting, but there was a lot going on here - apart from all the jolly drinking - particularly in Mistley. They were building ships on the quay, the Rigbys had grand ideas for building a spa, and the Edward Norman was building the maltings.

The population of Mistley almost doubled between 1841 and 1851, there were no drains, no paving on the streets and the whole place stank. People caught typhoid and cholera. In these antiseptic times, it's hard to imagine the smells. Privies were emptied twice a year. Otherwise, waste of all kinds was chucked into the street. Not only that, but manure and waste were shipped down by barge from London, piled up on Mistley quay and spread on the land. "A glass of water," said David Cleveland, "would have things floating in it." A lot of sewage ended up in the estuary. (Indeed, before they built the sewage plant between the Norwich and Harwich lines in the 1970's, they were still emptying sewage into the river, as he could see from his boat.)

"In 1916, sailing barges and big fishing boats would come from London to Manningtree. The river was very active. They fished for flounders and winkles and cockles and whelks, all sold at the door. At Mistley quay coal would be unloaded on to the lighters which went up to Dedham and Sudbury. They would be poled along until Brantham lock. You were now in fresh water and the horses on the banks on the other side of the lock would draw the lighters up to Sudbury. There was a brick works in Sudbury and the lighters would bring bricks back to Mistley and load them on to barges to go to London .

There were still quite a lot of smells when he came to live here in 1969: "The plastics factory at Brantham smelt awful but, until the seventies, there was a sawmill down on the quay which smelt lovely." And there was always the sweet almond smell of the maltings wafting down from Mistley.

Things are still busy on Mistley quay, suitable and cheaper for smaller vessels to use. Passing through might be metal from Spain, building materials from Northern Ireland. The old maltings may be luxury flats with splendid views across the estuary to Suffolk, but Simpsons Malt behind Mistley station turns out 27,000 tonnes of malt a year, more than all the old manual maltings put together.

In Manningtree business has declined since the closure of the post office in the 1990's, but before his death Mr Howells finally persuaded the wisteria to grow up Wisteria House and we still have The Crown, The White Hart, The Red Lion, The Swan and the Skinners' Arms. We have beauty salons, a Bangladeshi restaurant, a tanning parlour, a fish and chip shop, a café, Townsends and the health food store. What will happen if we get Tescos, goodness only knows.

We still have the barber in South Street, we still have Mr Sadler and we still have the market. The Manningtree market charter dates back to 1238, the original market day being a Monday. During the Middle Ages, every year at the fair, the town roasted a whole ox. In Henry IV part 1, Falstaff talks about "that roasted Manningtree ox with the pudding in its belly."

What of Manningtree's most famous – and infamous – son, Matthew Hopkins, Witchfinder General, who is said to have had countless witches burnt at the stake during the Civil War? "There's a certificate," said David Cleveland, "confirming that he was buried in 1647 in the old churchyard at Mistley Heath, but no proof at all of his killing people in Manningtree on South Green at the top of South Street, or that he plotted and planned his killings at the Thorn in Mistley." Here's Joseph Glass again:

We find by records, that in former years
A most notorious character appears –
Was Matthew Hopkins named, of base renown,
Who long resided in our native town.
Large numbers by his wiles were guilty found,
And some were strangled, other burnt, or drowned!
While he for each convicted of this crime
Received full twenty shillings at the time.

There used to be nine bakers in Manningtree. Now there's only De'Aths where they start baking at 4am. "Another lovely smell," said David Cleveland. "I sniff it on my way to catch an early train."



Peter Kenny at work early in the morning breadmaking in Manningtree

David Cleveland's book, Mannintree and Mistley, the People the Trades and the Industries, is to be published by Malthouse Press on March 28 at £17.50. It is available in Manningtree Library and in various shops in the town. On March 31 he will be in Manningtree Library all day to sign copies.