

# **A BRIEF AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF COLCHESTER**

*ROBERT MILLER*

Before I was born, a sparkling river flowed through a lush green flood plain a little to the north of a small densely wooded ridge. At my conception, people came and removed much of the woods covering the ridge and populated it with a small collection of primitive huts surrounded by a wooden palisade and let their cattle roam along my flood plain and sent small boats along the river to catch the silvery fish that dwelt there. With time, more people came and chopped down the woodland south of the ridge and carved out their own fields which they planted with thistly wheat. Downstream from the ridge a landing place for boats was built and bigger boats came in from the sea and went back again with cargoes of my fish and oysters and clay pots made from my rich deposits near the newly-founded port. More huts were built and the palisade was extended to embrace them; in the centre of the huts a large barn-like structure arose which the people used as a meeting place and to store their wheat.

Later, strangely-garbed people came from the sea and forced out the old people from the confines of their palisade and built a great stone temple surrounded by a park of short green grass and by other, smaller buildings made of stone where some of the grander of the new people dwelt. The old people built more huts outside the palisade in the land around the ridge and so my boundaries grew.

The new people argued with the old people and one day a huge crowd of the older ones came dressed in metal clothes carrying metal spikes and wooden staves and led by a red-haired woman towed in a strange cart by two mighty horses. They burnt my huts and my temple and my palisade and the new people fled. But, after a year or so, they came back and re-built my temple, much grander than before and replaced my palisade with a high wall made of stone. The older people came back too and built their huts anew outside my walls. They were never let inside again.

So centuries passed and the buildings inside my walls became bigger and taller and the custom developed to build one hut on top of another and then they were called houses. A dozen or so lofty stone buildings with towers and steeples grew up and the temple disappeared and was replaced by huge squat tower. The little huts remained outside the wall, but I grew in stature inside. Many people now lived in me but then the people were struck by a series of catastrophes.

First many people fell ill and at times my streets were littered with smelly corpses scarred with big black patches and many of my fine houses fell into disrepair and roofs caved in and walls fell down and my fine churches (which was what the people called the buildings with towers and steeples) were neglected. Then people from the south came and barricaded themselves inside my walls and set up machines which fired balls of iron into the air and other people came and built huge earth walls outside my stone walls and set up their own machines and fired balls of iron at my churches until the tower of one of them fell down. And then these people came inside my walls and tore down the greatest of my churches and then they left and all the people inside the town were left poor so I was neglected for many, many years. And still my people had the plague.

Decades passed and slowly, oh so slowly, my houses and churches were restored to some of their former finery. Holes were knocked in my walls and several of the fine gates which let people in and out were knocked down so the narrow streets could become wider. More boats came up and down the river and many of my wooden houses were replaced with houses built of burnt clay. A grand building with a tower and ornate stonework and a defiant figure on top was built at my centre and more and more and more people came to live in me.

Now, my walls no longer seemed to matter and hundreds then thousands of brick houses were built outside them and broad black strips of stone were laid down along which metal boxes with people in them raced so fast they made me shudder. First a trickle of the boxes came, then more and more so now my air is thick with the smell they make and I cannot hear the sounds of the earth because of their noise and the noise of so, so many people.

Robert Miller, 11 January 2007 (811 words)

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