

ESSEX GATEWAY

Looking eastwards, **Malcolm Anderson** heads into Essex

Owning and driving a Caterham Seven expands your horizons, and you will certainly drive to new places — near and far — to explore the road over the next hill, around the next bend or past the next town.

Essex is a local county to me — the border is only a 25-minute drive from home — but not one I have had much experience of as a *Driven* destination. Previously, to get to Essex I would traverse the M25 Orbital Motorway, turn off on one of the many large spur roads — the A12 or M11 most likely — and drive directly to the chosen destination. But really, Essex is a large rural county, and as I have discovered, has a network of minor roads that are a brilliant way to spend a day driving. My preconceptions of Essex were based on my 1980s-90s' childhood — so white-van man abusing other drivers, boy-racers in modified Ford Escorts and other such clichés. Maybe these still exist in some places, but luckily, the empty backroads and B-roads are usually gloriously white-van free.

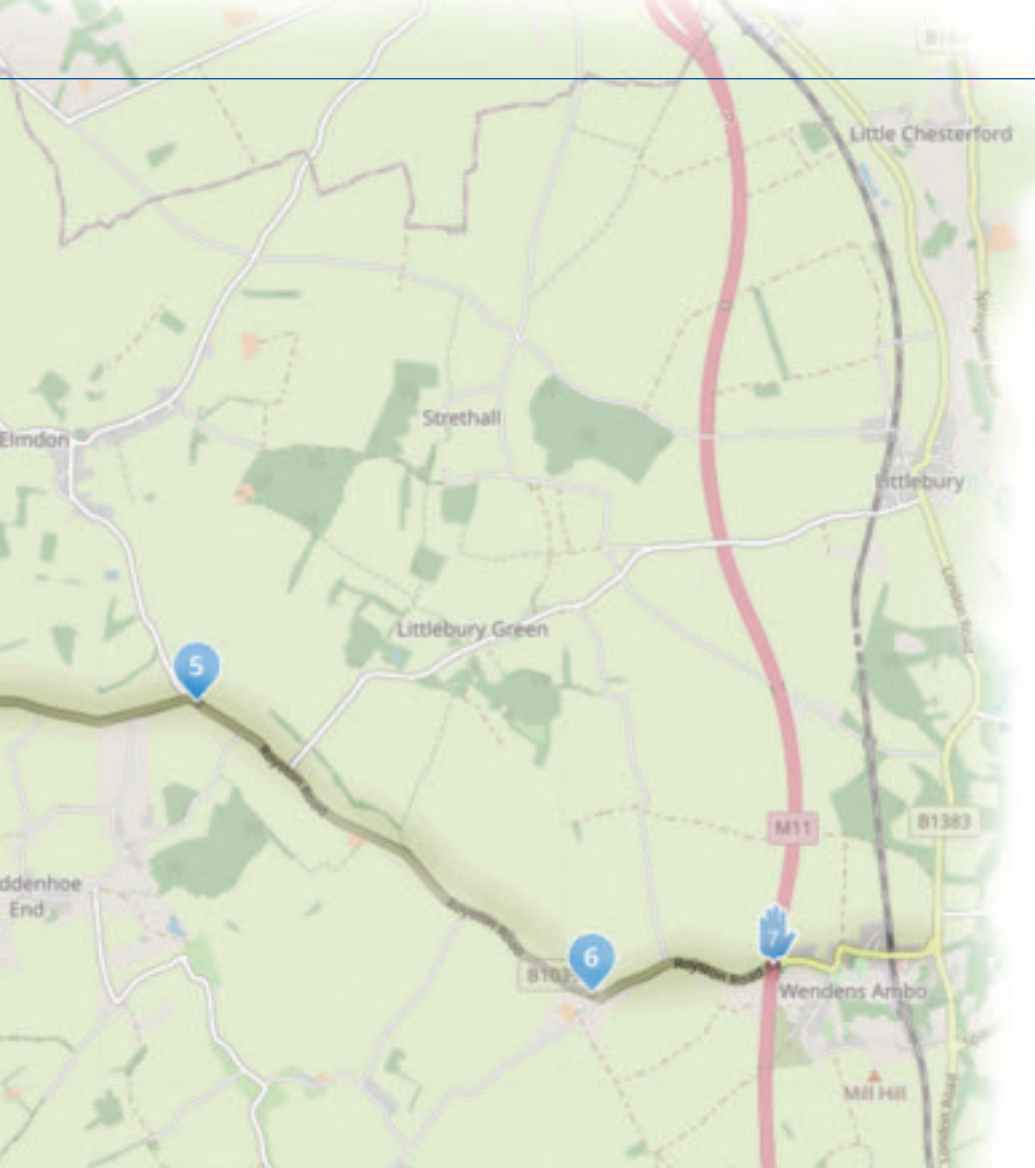
I had thought Essex was flat. A bit like nearby Cambridgeshire, or its northern neighbour Sussex, with large open skies and

not much else. I was wrong. With a series of rivers and smaller streams carving up the landscape, Essex has a crinkly relief which creates enough ups and downs to put a smile on any driver's face. The highest point in the county at Chishall Common may only be 143m, but the frequency of dips, drops and rolling hills can provide an undulating and enthralling drive in every direction. It would also seem that the Romans decided that Colchester (Camulodunum) was such a good place to be that they didn't bother 'modernising' the more rural roads. Each is a curve-fest of bends, criss-crossing the fields and low hills, linking villages in the same way that the horse and cart used to over 100 years ago. In the Caterham, these roads are a joy to drive.

Hats off to the Essex highways team too — the road surfaces and 'feel' of the Tarmac under the wheels is far superior to Hertfordshire or Cambridgeshire's. Maybe it's the lower traffic levels, or just a better attention to the job, but there is a clear difference at the county border and Essex comes out on top. There can be a lot of water about — rainwater run-off from the

fields takes a while to drain, plus leaves all manner of debris and muck behind. In the summer this is not an issue, but for autumnal driving, and I suspect in spring too, things can get messy. A post-drive washdown should be part of the plan.

The B1039 is my gateway to Essex. It's a 10-mile run from Royston in Hertfordshire, across a pinnacle of Cambridgeshire and into Essex itself after about five minutes of driving. The fun starts as soon as the National Speed Limit signs appear on the outskirts of town, with the road snaking gently upwards and curving out of sight on a long lazy lefthander. The deeper you go into the curve, the higher the road rises and just as it crests the curve, it switches the other way, peeling off on a long right. It's a two-lane B-road, so the Seven takes all this with barely a lean on the steering wheel. Think left, think right and you're through. A short straight flies by before a further left takes the view of road ahead away again. If the hedges have been cut, the rolling hills on the horizon tell of more undulations to come. Now the road begins to fall away. It's mostly straight, with the occasional kink



over the next mile-and-a-half, but the run down through Wardington Bottom is thrilling, as the road drops quite sharply. There are some private driveways and an MOT test station on the right, so a watchful descent is needed, then at the base of the hill the road swoops left — the bend is open enough that you can carry as much speed through the corner as you dare — and then out on to the short straight section that crosses the valley bottom. The road rises slightly here, and then banks to the right before dipping again. Another short straight runs down to the trees and a series of gentle kinks rolls first to the left, then right, before climbing again. Cresting the brow, the view ahead is dead straight and it's just under a mile to the next bend. To get there, we drop down through open farmland and this is a good opportunity to pass any slower traffic or just let the Seven run up through the revs. The righthander starts to draw you in gently, with the road still rising towards a second apex. This is a little tighter, with hedgerows obscuring the view ahead, so don't be tempted to drift across the dashed white lines. Once through, the road levels off and straightens out. Passing Manor Farm on the left, you can see the road as it rises ahead with another set of smooth curves that culminate in the 30-limit at the top of the hill. From here it's a gentle cruise on to the crossroads at Barley, the now-warm Seven tink, tink, tink tink, eager for the next section.



The Essex esses — flowing roads and little traffic



LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Stuart Bond — ‘TeaBag’ to his mates — includes this drive as part of his ‘long way round’ to and from the Club meetings at the Moon and Stars Pub in nearby Rushden. Driving in from close to Cambridge, he is more familiar with the reverse direction of this route, starting at Wendons Ambo.

“I often pause in the tunnel under the M11” says Stuart, “and take it as an opportunity to clear my head (and the road) ahead. With so little traffic joining along the way, it’s a good point to engineer some space in which to enjoy the drive”.

“The road is great but I only discovered it by mistake,” admits Stuart. “I was looking for a longer route to the pub, and this seemed like a good loop. With so few villages and side roads, there are some great stretches to enjoy. It’s usually quieter than the surrounding roads, and the surface seems smoother too”.

Stuart’s car — his third Caterham, is as the numberplate suggests, an R400. He discovered the Seven in 1982 while browsing Thoroughbred & Classic Car magazine in WH SMITH, and he still owns the influential issue. Stuart bought his first Caterham, powered by a 1.4 K-series in 1994, and has since traded his way up to the present R400. An enthusiastic driver, he also enjoys planning routes and sharing them with his mates. Thank you, Stuart. This one is a cracking drive.



Barley village feels like one of the pre-car convolutions of farm tracks. The village is squashed into a triangle of land where two B-roads intersect. It all gets a little narrow before the sign to Great Chishill appears and we can exit the village and pick up the NSL roads again.

It’s only a mile-and-a-half by the road sign, but we get to cross another sinuous rolling valley of farmland. In high summer, the hedges and tall verge grass block out the view — but you might just glimpse Chishill Windmill on the far side hilltop before you fly up and under its sails. There are stables nearby, so watch out for horses on the roadway, but if it’s clear the run down and up to the windmill is a great little blast. Great Chishill is a little more sprawling than its neighbour, and the 40/30 limits seem to rumble on a little longer, but it is worth the wait. The next NSL sign at the village limits marks the start of a seven-mile stretch of back-road bliss. Apart from the odd house, farm entrance and way-back-off-the-road hamlet, there is no interruption until the B1039 passes under the M11 before entering Wendons Ambo.

Having climbed up to Chishill, the drive resumes on a plateau and picks up the field boundaries as it makes its way eastwards. The open gentle lefthander feeds directly into a deceptively tight right. The wide road, dashed with white centrelines and open sightlines encourages you onwards. Be wary of over-cooking it — the next left tightens again, and between corners can be measured in car

lengths as the complexity rises. The next left is tighter still and overshadowed by a broad oak tree. There are some unsettling bumps and a large drain cover just ahead of the apex, but with no clear view ahead, drifting too wide is not advisable. A short straight run to the next right, and this is a tricky turn. The road narrows here — not enough to lose the centre-lines — but sufficient to bring oncoming traffic over towards the middle. Definitely not one to cut. Once out the other side it’s a swish-swash flick across the gentle esses and these carry us over the border into Essex. More flowing esses as the road rises slightly and then we clear the crest to see the tarmac dipping out of sight. Here things get more intense. A red triangle warning sign says ‘wiggles’ for one-and-a-half-miles and it’s not wrong. A three-car length straight allows you to settle the Seven before entering the hard left. The high hedge blocks the view of the entry point, which is a shame as the jump from left-to-right bend is near instantaneous, and all while the road falls away off the hillside. It’s a slow exit to the corner, but this can create an overtaking opportunity and the following short straight can help you hop past any slower traffic. The next bend has a side road branching off, but the main curve of the B-road is smooth and easy to follow. Another few car lengths whizz by and the pattern is reversed — a left hand side road joins on the longer righthander. Unfortunately, your approach is out of sight to anyone turning across your path. Side-on

Passing Chishill Windmill



Malcolm manages a YouTube channel featuring videos and blogs about exploring the best UK roads at the wheel of his Caterham Seven. Search for “Seven Drives” or use the QR code above.



vehicles crossing your lane are not unknown here, so hold off the throttle until you can see the junction is clear. Then bury it. It's a screaming straight that flows in to a left-right swoosh before coming to a tighter right over a brook. The corner is clearly marked with metal railings where it crosses the stream, but it does narrow slightly as you turn in, before rising and banking left and on to a longer straight. Still rising slightly, the road follows the hedge-covered stream with only a few kinks until the trees thicken up and the next proper corner arrives. It's a lefthander, not too tight. The road has narrowed a little, with the trees crowding over. There is plenty of room for the Seven, but any oncoming traffic looms large. Still the road wiggles out ahead, never quite settling straight. You can add a little more speed, watching for farm gates and back lanes, until the narrow confines give way to a dashed centre line and the long straight. The righthand bend has an accompanying junction on the left. For cars joining the B1039 it's well sighted, but oncoming traffic is obscured by the bend and the hedges. Keeping well to left, and alert for anyone turning across your nose, follow the main road to the right and up the hill. Accelerating up the hill, the crest can be taken at speed as the road stays mostly straight, with only a slight left curve. The road is wide and clearly sighted, so the gentle bends can be flowed through at speed. All the side roads are well-marked and any waiting traffic should see you approaching in good time.

Arriving at the first house, and a pumping station with a tall black metal fence, the road changes character. The frequency of bends rises, and the trees thicken, signalling the approach to the hard left that turns the roadway in a more northerly direction. This bend is another curve-junction combination, with a side road peeling off to the right. Entry to the bend is blind — and this also means oncoming traffic can appear

suddenly — so while it doesn't look like much on the approach it does need slightly more care. Once round, there is a short straight to help build up speed again, and a further set of flowing curves. These do host some private driveways and farm entrances, but it's usually a clear run to the 30 limit and the tunnel under the M11 — marking the end of this drive with a glorious sonorous send-off. **LF**

SIDE ROADS AND EXCURSIONS

Having passed under the M11 on the B1039 there are now a host of other roads to explore that weave their way across the Essex countryside. Those that seek a technical challenge will enjoy the unclassified (but well paved) roads just south of RAF Debden. If another B-road is more to your liking, then pick up the B1051 at Elsenham. It runs all the way to Thaxted, and from there many options branch out to enjoy.

On the return to Barley, the B1368 — as recommended by Dikko in *Lowflying* September 2020 — is a fab run north or south.

