



Essex Extras: Messing and Layer Marney

Start and finish: Messing, on The Street between church and pub (TL 897189)

Distance: 8 miles (12 km)

Walking time: 3½ hours

Maps: OS Explorer 183/184, Landranger 168

Transport: bus from Colchester and Maldon

Refreshments: the [Old Crown](#) in Messing, and café at [Layer Marney tower](#) when open

Layer Marney Tower is a worthy target, and this walk strings together two large woods and a smaller one on the out-and-back. There's an ancient earthwork too, and occasional glimpses of the sea.

With the pub on your right, walk along Lodge Road for about 80m, and turn right at a wooden sign. The path starts off between fields and past some old oaks before joining a concrete track along which you continue, turning sharp right with it when it meets a ditch. Turn left at a concrete sign in 120m and keep on the right edge of a field until you turn right at a marker to continue down a track to a road, the B1022.

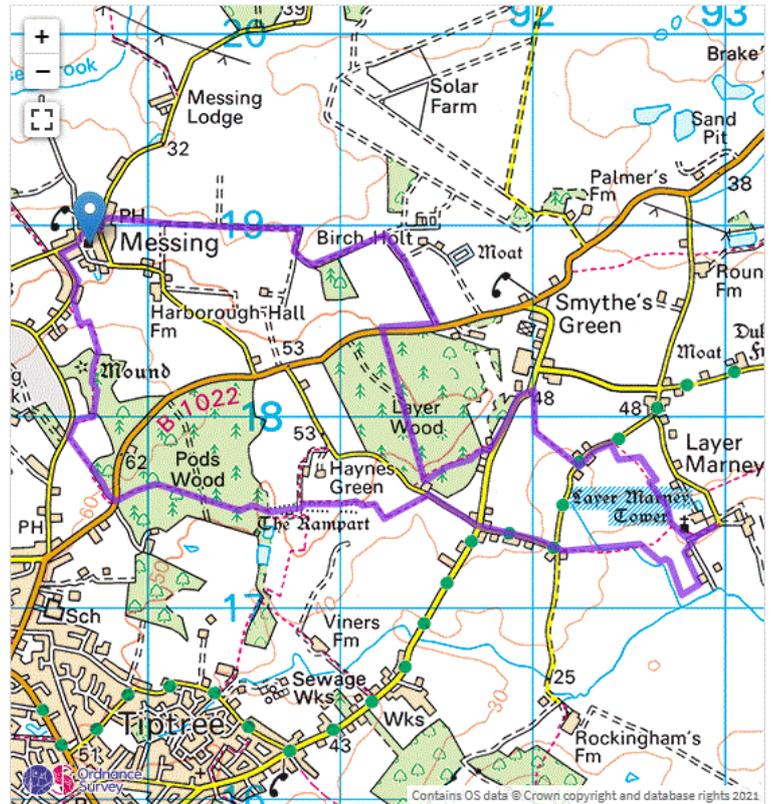
Turn right along the road for 250m, until you enter **Layer Wood** by turning left at a concrete sign. This part of the wood is owned by the Totem Archers, who hold occasional field archery events here. The woodland path heads arrow-straight for half-a-mile, until you come to the railings of a house called **Keepers**. For the shorter variant, turn right to a minor road, and look for the concrete sign just past Keepers.

Turn left at the railings and continue through the wood to a road on which you turn left, then right at a wooden sign just past **Grassreasons Farm**, with the Blackwater estuary soon visible ahead. At a gap by power lines, turn half-left to cross scrub, aiming for a point 100m to the right of a thatched cottage where a stile brings you out to a minor road. Turn left on the road, then right at a wooden sign, crossing a field on a faint path to a plank bridge. Beyond here, having had a first glimpse of Layer Marney Tower, continue past a metal sign and turn left through a gate to the churchyard.

Layer Marney Tower

This surviving fragment of what was to have been one of the grandest of all English country houses is a monument to the perils of primogeniture. Initiated by Henry Marney in 1520, on his death three years later his son John took over – only for his own decease two years later, without male issue, to bring a halt.

But what a fragment: the tallest of all Tudor gatehouses, plus the main range and other outbuildings, all built from terracotta and local



brick. With Langenhoe church, it was the most notable victim of the 1884 Colchester earthquake; restoration was sympathetic externally, but the interior reflects Edwardian rather than Tudor tastes.

Today, the tower is both a family home and wedding and conference venue. There is public access in the spring and summer, but not daily. Whether or not you can get in to the tower, don't miss the inside of the church, rebuilt when the tower was constructed: here are effigies of the two Marneys, together with – in alabaster – a 14th century ancestor, and a wall-painting of St Christopher.

Once you have had your fill of church and tower, turn right through a gate where the track below them meets the metalled road-end. The path enters a field which you follow round its left-hand edge to the very end. As you come back, Layer Brook is on your left. Cross it by the second footbridge, and just before **Hall Farm**, turn left beside the brook, recrossing it at a bridge in 200m. You come out to a deer fence. Keep it on your right, the mix of deer herd, church and tower justifying the diversion. Where the fence turns right, you turn left. *(To save about 800 metres / 0.5 mile, from the church retrace your steps to the metal sign and take the Tiptree path.)*

The path crosses a plank bridge and, keeping houses on your left, comes out to a road junction. Take the minor road running slightly uphill and continue ahead at a crossroads. Just before Keepers – the house you had met in Layer Wood – turn left at a concrete sign. Keep on the left side of a field for 250m and then cross it, from marker to marker. Go over a stile and soon you come to the ditch and earthwork that form **The Rampart**.

Local legend has it that The Rampart was the sight of Boudica's last stand – and there is a certain symmetry to the story, her earlier sack of nearby Colchester in AD60 or 61 being arguably her greatest victory against the Romans. Most modern historians, inconveniently, prefer locations near Watling Street in the Midlands. There are many similar dykes in East Anglia, such as Fleam Dyke in Cambridgeshire; Roman or Anglo-Saxon, many may have Iron Age antecedents.

Walk along the top of the earthwork for 400m, to where it is breached by a track. Turn left and right on the track, with the last section of earthwork now across the ditch, to a footbridge above fishing lakes. Here you enter **Pod's Wood**, principally birch; the path is clear, but ignore a prominent crossing track. Cross the B1022 and a stile at a wooden sign nearly opposite, onto a path beside passocks. At a minor road turn right for a short distance, to a wooden sign on the right. Stay on the left edge of another paddock and then enter **Conyfield Wood** over a plank bridge.

The path keeps to the left edge of the wood until you meet a group of giant redwoods. Here, rather than go ahead or take a path on the right, take the path heading half-right; this becomes broader after passing through five more redwoods. Leave the wood at a marker with Messing church ahead; the path is unmistakable through fields to the village. Turn right on the road, and right again past **Messing Green**, to return to the start.