

Spring Weekend Tour to Essex 27-29 March 2026

A select group of 22 Club members enjoyed a weekend trip to the Crouch Valley, a 10x5km patch of farmland with an unique microclimate, drier, warmer and sunnier than most of England and on a clay soil, which combines to favour the growth of grapes and allows production of wines more typical of a much more southern climate.



Our first visit on the Friday was to New Hall Wine Estate, established in 1969 and the oldest vineyard in Essex, where we were greeted with glasses of their Railway Barn Charmat sparkling wine before the estate manager Lucy Winward and South African head winemaker Jacques Huysamer took us round the vines and the modern winery – and showed us their very new purpose built grape picking machine!

Back in their sampling room we tried their Single Estate Bacchus white, and Pinot Precoce rose and red wines, with commentary from Lucy and Jacques.



We then returned to our hotel, Pontlands Park, where we had an excellent 3 course dinner with wines supplied by Tanner's of Shrewsbury, introduced by Tanners' trade sales director Simon Barratt.

On Saturday we travelled by coach to Clayhill vineyard in Althorne where the owner Dale Symons explained how as a farmer he had moved into growing vines and the challenges he'd faced; although

most of his grapes are sold on to wineries elsewhere he has a small winemaking facility and in the onsite café we were able to sample 5 of his still wines made on site.

After this we moved on to the Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome. This unique museum is housed in the buildings of a 1916 built Royal Flying Corps airfield, nearly all of which survive in original condition due to the RAF abandoning the site in 1919.



In recent years volunteers have restored several buildings, recreated the grass runways, and collected a number of replica First World War aircraft. We were



welcomed with a cream tea style buffet before a leisurely guided tour, learning much about the risks of early aviation, and (as in world war 2) of the youth of the airmen.

From Stow Maries we moved on to Galleywood Vineyard to meet Ian Phillips. Originally a jazz saxophonist, Ian bought a smallholding at the western end of the Crouch Valley and was persuaded to try growing grapes; learning from the challenges of starting up a vineyard he now runs a separate business planting and maintaining vineyards, whilst on site he has built a large half-timbered traditional barn like building housing a small winery using a Coquard press and a gravity feed system, with barrel ageing and facilities to produce both sparkling and still wines from his own grapes, as well as a

professional kitchen and restaurant. We dined here in the winery hall, with a superb meal accompanied by a selection of Ian's white and rose wines, both sparkling and still.



Finally on Sunday we visited Crouch Ridge, a small vineyard in Althorne

where co-owner Ross Lonergan explained his scientific and precise approach to growing Burgundian clones of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, before a tasting of 5 Crouch Ridge wines, made offsite from their grapes for sale in their wine barn - sparkling white and rose, still white, rose and red, and the group agreed that despite stiff competition from the earlier visits these were the best wines of the weekend.

In conclusion, 4 vineyards, 4 very different attitudes to growing grapes, 4 very entertaining owners, and a range of exciting wines showing that this small corner of Essex can match many of its southern European competitors.

