The Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB

Designated in 1970 and located on the coast of East Anglia, the Suffolk Coast and Heaths is one of Britain’s finest landscapes. It extends from the Stour estuary in the south to the eastern fringe of Ipswich and, in the north, to Keswick. It covers 408 square kilometres, including wildlife-rich wetlands, ancient heaths, windswept shingle beaches and historic towns and villages. The additional project area shown on the map is not part of the AONB but is managed to the same standard. It is hoped that one day it will be included within the AONB.

The Suffolk Coast and Heaths is part of the UK’s ‘family’ of protected landscapes that also includes our National Parks. There are 49 AONBs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland including two in Suffolk: Suffolk Coast and Heaths and Dedham Vale. You can also find out more about the area in our Walberswick Visitor Centre, from our publications or by visiting the Suffolk Coast and Heaths website: www.suffolkcoastandheaths.org

The Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB Unit

To champion the care of the AONB and co-ordinate the work of the Partnership, the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB Unit was set up in the early 1990s. The Unit comprises a small team, hosted by Suffolk County Council and funded by Natural England, Suffolk County Council, Suffolk Coastal District Council, Babergh District Council, Waveney District Council, Tendring District Council and Essex County Council. The Unit’s main roles are to raise awareness of the AONB and oversee the delivery of a Management Plan that is reviewed and updated every five years.

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The changing fortunes of Walberswick – a village in a dynamic coastal landscape

There has been a settlement at Walberswick since at least the time of the Saxons. The name Walberswick is believed to derive from two Saxon words, Waldbert – probably the name of a landowner - and “wyce”, meaning shelter or harbour.

The village is located on a spur of higher ground, close to the natural haven of the River Blyth. Like nearby Southwold, Walberswick benefitted from being in a sheltered bay called Sole Bay (Sole is a derivation of Southwold), and this combination of features made it an ideal location for a port. Today, because of coastal erosion, Sole Bay no longer exists even though its name still appears on maps.

**Map 1.** It is thought that in the Roman era the Dunwich and Blyth rivers together formed a relatively large estuary, and there is evidence of a Roman settlement and anchorage. During the Saxon period, Dunwich gained steadily in importance and eventually grew to become one of the most important towns in Suffolk and a major east coast port.

The changing coastline at Walberswick

**Map 1:** The likely coastline during the Roman era.

**Map 2:** The coastline at the height of Dunwich’s prosperity.

**Map 3:** The coastline after the destruction of Dunwich. Turn over the page to see how the area looks today.

Map 2. Considerable coastal erosion occurred between the Roman and early Norman era. A large shingle spit similar to modern Orford Ness called the Kingsholme, gradually formed, deflecting the mouth of the rivers southwards towards Dunwich. By the 1200s, Dunwich was at its peak. The town dominated trade in the area and boasted a population of several thousand people. Anyone wishing to sail up to Walberswick was charged a fee, something that caused resentment and led to a long-running dispute between the two communities.

Map 3. A severe storm in 1328 destroyed much of Dunwich and blocked the harbour mouth, causing the rivers to force a new path to the sea near Walberswick. Attempts were made to reopen the port, but none was successful and the town gradually declined as further storms and coastal erosion took their toll. With the loss of Dunwich, the focus of marine activity moved to Walberswick and Southwold. Walberswick remained a small port with an economy based around shipbuilding, fishing and trade. The village’s prosperity can be guessed from the ruins of the once-large St Andrews Church, built in c1490. However, the fortunes of the village fluctuated and around two hundred years later, the church had fallen into such a state of disrepair that it was partially demolished and a smaller church built within the remains.
Above: Girls Running, Walberswick Pier (1888-94) by Philip Wilson Steer. During the late 19th and early 20th century, Walberswick became the haunt of some of the leading British artists of the day - both Philip Wilson Steer and Charles Rennie Mackintosh stayed in the village.

Below: Scottish fisherwomen and the fishing smack Excelsior. The seasonal abundance of herring each winter brought migrant workers from Scotland to Suffolk. Walberswick flourished as an overflow port to Lowestoft until the outbreak of the First World War, but never recovered after the end of that conflict.
The Railway, Ferry and the impact of World War Two

There has been a rowing boat ferry across the Blyth since at least the early 13th century. In 1885, following the formation of the River Blyth Ferry Company, a pontoon that could carry a horse and cart was used. This was hand-operated by means of chains until about 1900 when a steam engine was fitted. In 1911, a new, larger steam-driven chain ferry was commissioned that ran until the outbreak of the Second World War, whereupon the ferry was anchored in mid-stream as part of anti-invasion measures. Sadly, the ferry broke free from her mooring and sank on the Walberswick side of the river. With the loss of the steam ferry, a rowing boat became the only ferry service again, a situation that continues to this day.

In 1879, a narrow gauge railway opened between Halesworth and Southwold that included a station at Walberswick. The railway followed the southern side of the Blyth valley, and crossed the river via a swing bridge on the site of the present day Bailey bridge. The line was initially very successful because it provided a useful connection to the East Suffolk Railway, both for the increasing number of holidaymakers and the thriving fishing industry. A link was added to Southwold Harbour in 1914, just as war broke out and the fishing industry collapsed. These twin misfortunes badly affected the railway, which went into decline. Increased competition from road transport, poor maintenance, and the worn-out state of the engines and rolling stock also took their toll and the railway closed in 1929. In spite of attempts to reopen it, the line was broken up for scrap in 1940-41, although you can still trace its path across Walberswick Common. The swing bridge was blown up as an anti-invasion measure and left skewed across the river, one of many changes that war brought to the area.

After the war, Suffolk County Council, prompted by Walberswick Parish Council, arranged for a Bailey footbridge to be provided across the river Blyth. This could not be positioned where the chain ferry had operated because of the width of the river and the need to allow navigation. Instead, it was erected on the site of the railway swing bridge, and still provides pedestrian access between Walberswick and Southwold today.

Walberswick today

Today, Walberswick’s economy relies mainly on the tourism industry, and around half the properties in the village are holiday homes. While the village appears tranquil and prosperous, history shows us that the possibility of coastal change is never far away. Sea level rise as a predicted consequence of global warming and the gradual tilting downward of the coast also presents a challenge. The village of Walberswick itself is vulnerable, but flooding by the sea also threatens to change the character of its surroundings. The fresh water marshes that flank the village may eventually become saline if the sea defences can not be sustained. It’s an issue that affects low-lying areas all along the Suffolk coast, but is of particular concern around Walberswick, where the marshes form part of the Suffolk Coast National Nature Reserve and support scarce wildlife, such as the bittern, that depend on fresh water. The solutions are far from straightforward and some difficult decisions may lie ahead.

Left above: Walberswick Steam Ferry
Left below: The Southwold Railway
Both above © Walberswick History Society
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Exploring Walberswick

The historic village of Walberswick is the perfect place from which to explore the unique coastal landscape of the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB. The area has an excellent network of footpaths and bridleways, and large areas of forest and heathland where open access is permitted. We also have a few simple suggestions to help you enjoy the area safely and assist our work to care for it:

Be safe - plan ahead
Make sure you have the latest information about where you can go and follow any signs. Be prepared, check tide and weather conditions and let someone know where you are going - some areas of this coastline do not have good mobile phone coverage.

Leave things as you find them and follow any signs
Much of the countryside around Walberswick under conservation management, so please leave things as you find them and follow any signs. The footpaths and bridleways, and considerable areas of 'access land' makes this area a wonderful landscape to explore, but be aware that your right to go onto some heathland areas is restricted during the wildlife breeding season. Please leave machinery alone and don't interfere with animals, even if they appear in distress.

Be a responsible dog owner
Make sure your dog is not a danger or nuisance to farm animals, wildlife or other people. On most areas of 'access land' you must keep your dog on a short lead between 1 March and 31 July, and all year round near farm animals. You do not have to put your dog on a lead on public paths, but it must be under close control. Always clean up after your dog and follow any signs.

Protect plants and animals, prevent fires and take your litter home
Make sure you don't harm animals, birds, plants or trees. Litter and leftover food is unsightly and can be dangerous to wildlife and farm animals - please take it home with you. Fires can be devastating - be careful not to drop a match or smoking cigarette at any time of the year.

Consider other people
Busy traffic on small country roads is unpleasant and can be dangerous - so slow down or, better still, leave your vehicle at home. Please respect the needs of local people - for example, don't block gateways, driveways or other entry points. Support the rural economy - buy your supplies from local shops.

Walberswick Visitor Centre – the former congregational chapel

Walberswick Visitor Centre was built in 1885 by the Southwold Congregational Church as a local chapel. Around 1918 the building ceased to be used as a chapel and was sold to the County Educational Authority for use as a temporary school. In the mid 1920s, it was sold again, this time to a local solicitor for £25, and used as a local working men's club and reading room. Following the closure of the club, the chapel changed hands twice in 1931 and, after turning down a request to demolish it in order to build a bungalow, the Parish Council laid down conditions for its future use.

For many years thereafter, it was known as the Yew Tree Studio or the Blue Hut, and used for storage or as an antiques shop. In 1956 a lease was granted to the St John's Ambulance and, in 1958, they added an extension at the back of the building. Finally, in 1979, the building was sold again for use as a Heritage Coast Centre. In 1996 the Heritage Coast Project was expanded to reflect the wider significance of the Suffolk Coast and Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. This meant a change of name for the chapel, although its use as a Visitor Centre has remained much the same.

Today, Walberswick Visitor Centre is managed by the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB Unit. In 2009 it was refurbished thanks to the generous support of the Adnams Charity and the Sustainable Development Fund.
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