The Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB

The Suffolk Coast and Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty 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 Kessingland. It covers 403 square kilometres, including wildlife-rich wetlands, ancient heaths, windswept shingle beaches and historic towns and villages.

A partnership of 26 organisations cares for the Suffolk Coast and Heaths, coordinated by the AONB Unit. The Unit acts as a champion for the AONB, working to conserve the area’s natural beauty and encouraging sympathetic, sustainable use. AONBs are part of the UK’s ‘family’ of protected areas that includes our National Parks and Heritage Coasts. All receive special protection because of their quality and importance.

Wherstead Explorer

Discover wonderful woodland, farmland and the Orwell riverbank on two walks from the Suffolk Food Hall

Visiting Wherstead

- Ordnance Survey Map No 197 (Ipswich, Felixstowe and Harwich)
- Easy access from Ipswich (approx 3 miles) and the A12/A14, with good parking.
- To travel by public transport see www.suffolkonboard.com or 0845 606 6171

Contact: Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB Tel: 01394 384948
www.suffolkcoastandheaths.org

Explorer walks

01 Wherstead
02 Snape
03 Thorpeness
04 Walberswick
05 Kessingland
Wherstead walks

The Suffolk Coast and Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) has one of the finest concentrations of birds, plants and animals to be found anywhere in southern England, and the Orwell estuary is an ideal location from which to enjoy these natural wonders.

The Orwell is nationally and internationally protected for its wildlife and is a Wetland of International Importance. Over 50,000 birds spend winter on the rivers Stour and Orwell, and the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB works with its many partners along these estuaries to protect the saltmarsh, estuary and surrounding countryside of important lowland grazing marsh.

The Shotley peninsula is bounded by the estuaries of the Rivers Stour and Orwell, which form a natural harbour. The ports of Harwich and Felixstowe, with Ipswich port further up-river are amongst the most successful in Britain. The area is a magnet for naturalists, walkers, bird-watchers, horse-riders, cyclists and yachtsmen alike.

The Living Estuary

In the last ice age, Suffolk was covered by a vast glacier. As the ice melted, the sea level rose and created the wide estuary we see today. Both the Stour and Orwell estuaries were attractive places to live for early man, and there is evidence of Roman settlement.

Farming

As the population grew along the Orwell, so did the need for farmland, and people began to reclaim the river marshland from the water. Most river walls were built during the 16th and 17th century, turning marsh into farmland. The Paul family have been farming the area for five generations. They are proud of the land they farm, and take responsibility for the environment through the High Level Stewardship system, resulting in improvements to wildlife habitats and sensitive farming methods. Amongst its wildlife highlights are river birds such as Shelduck, Dark Bellied Brent Geese, Redshank and Dunlin, farmland birds such as Yellowhammer and Skylark, and insect fauna.

Highlights of the Wherstead Walks

1. The first English settlers to colonise America left Ipswich aboard the Godspeed and the Discovery with Captain Bartholomew Gosnold in 1607, saying farewell to Suffolk from the river Orwell. Marvel at the Orwell Bridge, which was opened in 1962 after taking three years to build. The main span is 190 metres, which at the time of its construction, was the longest prestressed concrete span in the world.

2. The Freiston Wood Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) has “typical light sandy soil with spring-fed valleys, of broadleaved, mixed and yew woodland. There is a long history of management which includes the creation of a deer park and the medieval introduction of Sweet Chestnut. It supports distinctive ground vegetation, including wild garlic and is among the best Bluebell woods in Suffolk. A number of medieval boundary banks are found in the wood and there are some extremely large pollard trees on these banks” (SSSI citation).

3. Near Lodge Farm you should see Red Poll cattle, the local native breed, grazing these pastures. Originally a dual purpose animal (prized for both beef and milk) these cattle are part of a modern agrarian renaissance as they fare well on an extensive farming system for slow matured beef and are compassionate to the environment. Suffolk Sheep and Suffolk Punch Horses are the other native breeds of the area.

4. Wherstead Park was largely ploughed up in the WWI ‘dig for victory’ campaign, indicating how its history has changed over the years. In WWI the Park was used as a staging depot for horses before their one-way export to the Front on the Continent.

5. The Hard at the end of Redgate Lane is thought to be the Roman causeway across the Orwell, and the crossing was still in use through to at least 1352 as the Dunham Bridge, marking the boundary of the Liberties of Ipswich. Redgate Lane probably linked local Roman villas with forts at Colchester and Walton in Felixstowe.

6. Cutler’s Wood, like Freiston Wood, is wonderful in spring for Bluebells, and is part of the SSSI of ancient woodland in this area. Stalls Valley has remained almost unchanged for centuries, and early maps show it with the same name. Victorian naturalists knew it for its flora, especially its ferns.

7. As Suffolk farmers, the Paul Family wanted consumers to have access to fantastic food produced locally, and the Suffolk Food Hall supports the rural economy - buy your supplies from local shops.

Images: Front cover – Looking towards Wherestead and Suffolk Food Hall from the Orwell Bridge (Rolando Ugolini); 1. Bluebells in Stalls Valley; 2. Red Poll bulls; 3. Skylark (Mike Lane/FMN/Minden/FLPA)
The historic villages of Wherstead and Freston are perfect for exploring the unique farmed and estuary landscape of the Suffolk Coast and Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The walks take in Freston Wood, a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

**Wherstead Walk A**

Distance: 3.5 miles (5.5 km)

Time: 1 hour 15 mins.

Terrain: Easy – Ground under foot fairly flat, part of route on minor public road, one stile

Start the Wherstead Explorer at the Suffolk Food Hall. Head south-east across the paddocks in front of the Food Hall, taking in the stunning view down the River Orwell. Cross the middle of the field towards the main road, taking care as you cross Freston Brook along a narrow verge.

After a bit of bird watching at the bottom of Freston Hill, you enter Freston Wood SSSI, an ancient woodland and a special part of the Suffolk Coast and Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

Leave the wood at St Peter’s Church, Freston, largely restored by local architect R.T. Orr in 1874. It includes an Arts & Crafts styled octagonal vestry and a sensitive rescue of the c.15th tower and the c.14th east window.

Follow the lane (taking care on the road) to Freston Village, turning right at the village centre then take the first footpath on the right to Freston Lodge Farm. Go through the meadow valley over a stile, across Freston Brook and along the line of poplar trees, to the Orwell Nursing Home.

Turn right onto Redgate Lane, and at the bottom turn left at Redgate Farm, back across the paddocks for lunch or tea at the Suffolk Food Hall.

**Wherstead Walk B**

Distance: 4 miles (7 km)

Time: 1 hour 30 mins.

Terrain: Easy – Ground under foot fairly flat, part of route on minor public road

On Walk B you can see more ancient woodland, the Stalls Valley, farmland and the village of Wherestead itself.

Start as Walk A then after Freston Wood continue on the lane to Freston Village (taking care on the road), turning right at the village centre, then right by Bond Hall, to Broom Knoll. The lane becomes a footpath, and takes you on paths between Cutler’s Wood and Stalls Valley, both designated as SSSI ancient woodlands.

Between Valley Farm and Wherestead village you walk along a farm track, with examples of good wildlife habitat being created by the Paul family, introducing new hedgerows and trees, to benefit birds such as Yellowhammer and small mammals such as voles and hedgehog.

From Wherestead village turn right at the crossroads. As you walk down to the Suffolk Food Hall you have a good view of the river

**Countryside Code**

The area has an excellent network of footpaths and bridleways and we have marked two suggested walks on this map. We also have a few simple suggestions to help you enjoy the area safely and assist our work to care for it – follow the Countryside Code www.countrysideaccess.gov.uk:

- Be safe - plan ahead and follow any signs
- Leave things as you find them
- Protect plants and animals, prevent fires and take your litter home
- Dogs are very welcome – please keep them under control

Orwell bridge, and by looking right, across rolling farmland to the hedges and trees, you have the picture of Englishness that helped make this area into an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Also in the area are Orwell Country Park and two Suffolk Wildlife Trust sites at Lexington and Tunley.

Contact: Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB Tel: 01394 384948 www.suffolkcoastandheaths.org