

The significance of the Norfolk Coast landscape

Summarised from 'The Norfolk Coast Landscape: An assessment of the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' (Countryside Commission, CCP 486, 1995). This document is now out of print and not available in digital format, but a copy is available at the Norfolk Coast Partnership office if you wish to read it in full.

AONB designation

Judging the importance of a particular area of landscape is no easy matter. The importance and value attached to the Norfolk Coast landscape has already been reflected by its designation, in 1968, as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) as well as by the separate definition in 1975 of a more limited part of the area as a Heritage Coast.

It is helpful to consider the area's special qualities under four main headings:

- the value of the landscape as part of the **national and regional landscape resource**, by virtue of its rarity or representativeness, and including comparison with other areas of similar landscape character and with the surrounding landscape;
- the **scenic qualities** of the landscape, including the particular combination of landscape elements, aesthetic qualities, local distinctiveness and 'sense of place';
- evidence about **how the landscape is perceived and valued** by the general public and by writers and others who may have been inspired by it;
- **other special values** attached to the landscape including historical and cultural associations and special conservation interests, relating to features of outstanding nature conservation or archaeological interest.

Summarised below are the ways in which the Norfolk Coast demonstrates these qualities to an extent that makes the area a truly outstanding landscape.

A regional and national landscape resource

The Norfolk Coast is one of 11 coastal AONBs in England. However, only four of these are focused on 'soft rock' coasts that have anything in common with the landscape of the Norfolk Coast. They are Chichester Harbour, the Northumberland Coast, the Solway Coast and the Suffolk Coast and Heaths. There are some common features in these areas, but each has its own unique character. The Norfolk Coast is distinguished by its rich mix of unusual coastal features, combined with the contrasts of inland agricultural landscapes of rolling hills and ridges of chalk, greensand and sands and gravels.

It shares some of the characteristics of the Suffolk Coast, especially the exposed North Sea aspect, the geomorphological features of sand and/or shingle spits, the coastal saltmarshes and the heathland influences in some of the agricultural hinterland. However, the marshes are in a broad coastal band, rather than divided up into individual river estuaries as in Suffolk, and there is a quite different relationship between the coastal marshes, the coast road and the villages that lie along it.

In the East Anglian context, North Norfolk, including the coast, has special characteristics, distinct from the farmed hinterland of the inland parts of the region. The coastal plain has a wilderness quality - wide, open, unsettled land - which is rare in lowland England. The windswept and sea-washed scenery of the coastline is complemented by the rising land behind, with the wooded hills and heathlands of the Western warrens and Cromer Ridge forming a picturesque backdrop to the coast, and the distinctive farmlands of the rest of

the AONB, with their windsculptured trees and hedges, adding to this visual diversity. This farmland shares certain common characteristics with the agricultural landscapes to the south, into which they gradually merge.

Therefore, both at the national level where it is one of very few remaining areas of relatively undeveloped and unspoilt 'soft' coast, and regionally where it is a wild, rich and diverse foil to the intensive agricultural landscapes that dominate East Anglia, the Norfolk Coast is, without doubt, a most important part of our landscape resource.

Scenic qualities

The Norfolk Coast landscape displays a striking diversity of scenery, embracing a rich mix of coastal features and contrasting inland agricultural landscapes, all of which are influenced to a greater or lesser degree by the proximity of the sea. The coast itself is quite distinctive, with its soft, low, shifting shoreline bulging out into the North Sea, and combining the silt expanses of the Wash, north-facing coastal marshes and sand dunes, and high boulder-clay cliffs east of Weybourne.

Along the coastal strip, the sight and sound of the sea dominate the landscape. Inland, its effects are more limited, although strong offshore winds have sculpted the taller vegetation so that individual trees and even whole blocks of woodland can be seen to be leaning landwards. Glimpses of the sea frequently catch the eye, providing a constant reminder of the nearby shoreline.

The AONB embraces the finest, remotest and wildest of Norfolk's renowned marsh coastlands, but there is much more to it than that. The coast is backed by gently rolling chalkland and glacial moraines, including the higher, more intimate and undulating ground of the distinctive Cromer Ridge. There is farmland and heathland, chalk soil and sandy soil, wetland and woodland, all mingled with a wealth of buildings and settlements - imposing churches, quiet villages and small towns such as Wells-next-the-Sea - mainly in local materials of which flint is the most obvious and common.

The distribution of these elements and the different combinations in which they occur create marked variations in the character of the landscape and contribute to its notably diverse and complex nature. Much of the character and quality of the AONB landscape can be attributed to the contrasts which arise from this diversity. There are, for example, striking contrasts between the open and exposed saltmarsh and coast, and the shelter of the river valleys, and between the natural character of the heathland and the intensively managed character of the farmland around it.

These variations in landscape character are reflected in the eight main landscape types that were identified in the 1995 landscape character assessment of the AONB, and in the 16 landscape character types identified in the current Integrated Landscape Guidance.

How the landscape is perceived and valued

Much of the appeal of the North Norfolk Coast lies in its wildness and isolation, and these qualities have been reflected in the work of both writers and painters who have lived in and visited the area. The perceived isolation of the area has, in its turn, led to a lower level of literary and artistic representation than perhaps might have been expected compared, for example, with the coastlines of Suffolk and the West Country. In terms of distance, Norfolk is less remote from London than either Devon or Cornwall but many descriptions suggest an area apart from the pattern of life elsewhere. This aspect of the area has appealed to many artists and writers, most notably Clement Scott, the popularity of whose work, *Poppyland*, for a while seemed to undermine the very tranquillity it sought to celebrate. The sand dunes, marshes and crumbling cliffs still have the air of an

undiscovered country and those writers who have penetrated the region tend to represent them as such. The windmills and the bracing winds off the North Sea reinforce the eerie air of the coastal zone and this landscape is frequently described in contrast to the relative fertility of the farmland inland of the coast road.

During the 19th century, artists such as Robert Dixon, James Stark, James Bulwer and George Vincent have all depicted the long flat landscapes of the coastal fringe and this has remained a popular subject for professional and amateur painters alike. From the end of the 19th century, with the writings of Clement Scott and W A Dutt, there has been a slight but perceptible increase in the number of representations of the area in writing and paintings. This coincides with the rise in popularity of paintings with an emphasis on subjects such as marsh, heathland and fen. Wind and watermills, boats and picturesque cottages all feature in paintings of the area, but most emphasise the flat, open coast and the sky. This was a time when the railway network and increased leisure time were opening up access to the coast. Clement Scott stressed that the area could be reached in five hours from Liverpool Street Station. For contemporary writers, such as P D James, this relative accessibility increases the strangeness of the area - within a few hours the exile from London can be in a different world, with a completely different pace and pattern of life. [*Examples and quotations of literary and artistic associations can be found in the original 1995 landscape character assessment.*]

Of course writers and artists look at the landscape with a special perception, and record their impressions for us in words and pictures. It is much harder to discover what the landscape means to ordinary people.

Information from various visitor surveys carried out between 1990 and 1993 suggests that the area attracts visitors who prefer a more remote and unspoilt area, and that it is the qualities of beauty, scenery, distinctive landscapes and wildlife that primarily attract visitors to the area, rather than its more formalised recreation and tourist attractions and facilities.

As for local people, perhaps the most important members of the public, there is little to record their views of the landscape, but it is they, as home owners, farmers, fishermen, wildfowlers, businessmen, parish councillors and in many other guises, who have shaped the landscape in the past and will continue to do so in the future.

Other special values

The varied landscapes of the Norfolk Coast AONB provide a rich and diverse range of wildlife habitats, including wetland, coast, heath and woodland. The outstanding importance of this area for nature conservation is reflected in the number of designated sites, such as SSSIs and County Wildlife Sites, which occur throughout the area. Two extensive areas, the Wash and most of the North Norfolk Heritage Coast, are of international importance for their wildlife and have been scheduled as Special Protection Areas under the European Communities Council Directive of April 1979 on the Conservation of Wild Birds, and as Ramsar sites. Part of the AONB was also designated a Biosphere Reserve in 1977 by UNESCO under their programme 'Man and the Biosphere', recognising this area as part of an international network of important biospheres.

The landscape of the Norfolk Coast is also of great archaeological and historic importance. Among its 46 Scheduled Ancient Monuments are the Bronze Age burial mounds on Salthouse Heath; the Iron Age fort at Warham Camp; the Roman fort at Brancaster; the medieval priory at Beeston Regis; Castle Rising Castle and Blakeney Guildhall. In addition to these sites of national importance, there are more than 4,000 unscheduled sites of regional or local interest listed in the Norfolk Sites and Monuments

Record. These include settlements of all periods, earthworks, the find spots of single prehistoric flints, Roman coins or medieval potsherds and wrecks. The register also includes records of historic buildings, industrial archaeological sites, First and Second World War coastal and other defences, and subaqua finds.