

The Levels

This is an open, expansive landscape of grazed wet meadows, criss-crossed by reed filled ditches. This windswept landscape of wide skies with few trees and hedges is framed at Pevensey and Eastbourne against the dramatic and distinctive backdrop of the South Downs and at Rye and Winchelsea the High Weald. It inspires some of the most intense feelings of remoteness in south east England.

Location

This landscape area is not continuous but occurs in three separate units: the Eastbourne and the Pevensey Levels, and the Rye –Winchelsea area. All three areas are low-lying and are bounded on the south side by the sea.

The Pevensey Levels are surrounded by Eastbourne, Polegate, Hailsham and Bexhill. The Rye-Winchelsea area includes the Pett and Rye Harbour Levels and the most western part of the East Guldeford Level east of Rye.

Pevensey Levels is the largest wetland tract in East Sussex. This area and Rye Harbour are of international importance for wildlife and have several designations in recognition of this.

The Eastbourne Levels are the smallest area and are surrounded by the built up area of the town.

Landform

The Levels are a dynamic landscape which is very young in geological terms. Their formation is dominated by the changing relationship between land and sea. The Levels are very low-lying with local landscape diversity added by ‘eyes’ – islands of high ground. Both the Eastbourne- Pevensey Levels and Pett and Rye Harbour areas were tidal inlets and in Roman times all land below 4m AOD was submerged at high tide. In the Middle Ages the eastward drift of coastal shingle cut them off from the sea and salt marsh developed. From then onwards human influence on the drainage regime was the dominant force in the creation of the landscape of the Levels.

Camber Sands lie west of Rye Harbour and are the only sand dune system in East Sussex. This relatively narrow band of dunes is slowly accreting and is formed predominantly from sand brought down by

the River Rother, the mouth of which lies to the west.

Historical impact of man

The landscape character is also young in historical terms. At the time of the Norman invasion in 1066 at Pevensey, much of the area was still a tidal inlet which was used for salt production. During the Middle Ages land began to be reclaimed to take advantage of the relatively fertile soils. Thus began a continuing effort to exploit the marsh.

Numerous drainage ditches were dug, creating a checkerboard of irregular fields fringed with reeds. For centuries a pattern of summer grazing and winter flooding was maintained, the drainage ditches acting as green fences. This continued until the 1960s when pump drainage was carried out and arable farming became more feasible.

Aggregate extraction at Rye Harbour and Pett has created a series of lagoons which are of international importance as Rye Harbour Nature Reserve.

Woodland

The open windswept feel of The Levels is enhanced by the lack of trees and hedges. The few trees are mainly Willow and Hawthorn, these are often dramatically windsculpted.

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Agriculture

The Levels are a large open landscape of predominantly pasture with some arable in drier areas. Cattle dominate to the west of Rye Harbour with sheep in the east.

Other habitats and features.

In addition to grazing marsh The Levels have a number of open waterways and reed filled waterways. Rye Harbour and Pett have lagoons and also substantial areas of vegetated shingle. The dune system at Camber is another special coastal habitat.

Settlement pattern and routeways

The pattern of scattered settlements and open roads reflects the history of land reclamation from wetland. Isolated farmsteads are on higher ground or “eyes” this can be seen in placenames with the suffix ‘ey’ such as Manxey in Pevensey. Roads tend to be slightly raised above the surrounding land forming visual striations in the landscape.

Historic features

Military fortifications are scattered across the area. Pevensey and Camber castles were the sites of Roman military bases. Pevensey was expanded by the Normans, and Camber by Henry VIII. Martello Towers from the Napoleonic period are also evident.

Other details

Brick and flint buildings, weatherboarding and tiles are characteristic.

Remoteness

These flat low lying landscapes have very little tree cover, so the effects of disturbance are much more apparent. Fortunately much of the Levels are well away from sources of disturbance. This quiet simple landscape, with wide skies, the cries of wetland birds and the sighing of the wind in the reeds can provide some of the most intense feelings of remoteness in south east England.

Problems, pressure and change in the Levels

Agriculture: The change to pump drainage and arable agriculture has had a very detrimental effect on the natural ecology of the area. Modern agricultural buildings are particularly obvious in this open landscape.

Urban Influence Urban fringe problems: Urban edges are highly visible in this open landscape.

Development: Pressure for expansion of surrounding towns is a particular issue.

Recreation: Caravan sites, especially those at Camber Sands, are prominent in such open landscape. The coast in general is subject to intense visitor pressure with the dunes at Camber, a vulnerable habitat, receiving 20,000 visitors a day at the height of the season.

Water resources: Abstraction, pumped drainage as opposed to gravity drainage and pollution has had a marked effect on wetland and riparian habitats. There has been a large decrease in winter flooding resulting in habitat decline for wetland birds. It has also meant that the seasonal refertilisation with alluvium has not occurred so arable production is maintained by artificial fertilizers. Nitrogen run-off and spray drift from arable areas is increasing. Physical changes to watercourses, to increase discharge speed, mean that features such as meanders and shingle banks have been removed, thus further degrading riparian habitats.

Landscape Action Priorities for the Levels

The distinctive network of ditches should be maintained and enhanced. Channels should be less frequently and less intensively dredged. Water levels need to be maintained and pollution should be controlled.

Encourage seasonal wetland flooding to create areas of damp pasture. Create new reedbeds on land with low nature conservation interest.

Tree planting around farm buildings, settlements and caravan sites would help minimise their effect on the open landscape.

Manage visitor pressure, diverting visitors away from vulnerable habitats.