

THAMES ESTUARY PATH: Tilbury Town to Southend



Introduction

There has been a long-term ambition to create a path from Central London, through East London and Essex, to Southend for some time. Over the years numerous parts of the path have been achieved but many gaps remain.

In 2008, the cycling and transport charity Sustrans carried out a complete survey of the path for the Department of Communities and Local Government (CLG) and this is on the CLG website if you search under "Thames Estuary Path".

The Thames Estuary Path through Essex is an amazing path taking you past Thameside Forts, ancient Churches, through Thames Marshes and along the sea wall over-looking internationally important marshes and mudflats. From Tilbury to Southend it is approximately 30 miles, but the route has the advantage of being shadowed by C2C railway line with stations at Tilbury Town, East Tilbury, Stanford-le-Hope, Pitsea, Benfleet, Leigh, Chalkwell and Southend-on-Sea. This enables the walker or cyclist to do "short sections" and returning on the train.

The beauty of this route is you can choose to start at one station and walk for as much as you like and then get the train back. The stations are generally 3 to 4 miles or 6 to 8 kms apart. When describing the route the distance from Tilbury Town station is shown in brackets when the path passes subsequent stations.

Sensible Precautions

All walking is inherently risky and before starting your journey you should consider:

- Food and drink
- Walking sticks (if necessary)
- Sun screen (summer)
- Warm and waterproof clothing
- Sound footwear especially as many parts of the path are muddy outside summer.

Most of the paths described are footpaths and, as such, cycling is prohibited. Occasional footpaths are obviously used by vehicles and probably can be cycled with caution. Others are so remote and away from farm stock and other users to be safely cycle-able. However cyclists should always dismount or slow down if approaching walkers to let them pass. Generally speaking, cyclists cannot use footpaths and should push their bikes over paths which is perfectly legal.

All path-users should be aware of other hazards namely:

- 1) The path often shares the sea wall which has substantial drops in places.
- 2) The path often leads straight on to a road, where children and dogs are vulnerable to passing traffic.
- 3) The path passes close to the railway line and there may be occasional holes in the fence so walking dogs should be done with caution
- 4) Occasional small bridges cross ditches made of wood are in poor repair and should be crossed with caution.
- 5) Finally, near Vange, and the London Gateway port two footpaths cross the main rail line to Southend. This must be crossed with extreme caution.

Maps

To guide you it is always useful to have the Ordnance Survey maps. The 1:25,000 Explorer map are best. The maps required are:

175 Southend-on-Sea and Basildon

Alternatively you could download the Sustrans map from the CLG website. However please note that neither of these maps highlights the route described here. The route described here is predominantly shown on the OS maps as footpaths (small green dotted lines) and bridleways (long green dotted lines) which are cycle-able.

The Thames Estuary Path website has a guide which can be downloaded. Details below:

<http://www.thamesestuarypath.co.uk/>

It is also on the Visit Essex website

<http://www.visitessex.com/what-to-do/thames-estuary-path.aspx>

The Route from Tilbury Town Heading East to Southend

Exit from Tilbury Town station on the south side. There is a cycle path on the pavement as you turn left (east) out of the station. This road has many large fast lorries going to Tilbury Port.

The cycle path crosses to the other side of the road and continues to Tilbury Ferry Terminal at a roundabout. The cycle path runs in front of the Ferry Terminal, bearing left.

Brief History of Tilbury Docks and The Empire Windrush bringing first Caribbean Migrants 1948 to Great Britain

Tilbury Docks was opened in 1886. The floating river Landing Stage was opened in 1930 by Prime Minister Ramsey MacDonald, expanding the passenger line services at Tilbury, allowing berths of liners at all states of the tide. Notable people have travelled through Tilbury Docks include Mark Twain and George Orwell.

In 1948 it was Tilbury Docks that received the first post-war Caribbean migrants on the ship 'Empire Windrush' from Kingston, Jamaica.

The Empire Windrush set sail from Kingston, Jamaica on May 24th (Empire Day) 1948 with 492 official Caribbean migrants (being a mixture of Trinidadians, Jamaicans and Bermudans) but also numbers of troops, lower deck passengers and a few stowaways. Each of the mainly black migrants, including many who had served in the armed forces, had paid £28 to travel to Great Britain in response to job advertisements in their local newspapers.

The Empire Windrush arrived on 21st June 1948 and on the 22nd June Caribbean migrants started to disembark at Tilbury Docks and begin their new lives in Britain. The majority of travelers were soon on their way by train to pre-arranged addresses and contacts; for others with nowhere to stay, accommodation was found in the Clapham Deep Shelter, a part of the Northern Tube line, which had been used as an air-raid shelter during World War II.

Further information can be found at: www.thurrock.gov.uk

The path continues past the board walk where you can see across to Gravesend on the other side of the Thames. Ferries leave regularly to cross to Kent.

As you continue on the cycleway the Worlds Ends Pub comes in to view and the path remains on the right, keeping to the sea wall and takes a sharp right to the river. The path continues along the river and Tilbury Fort comes into sight on the left with its magnificent entrance arch.

Tilbury Fort

Tilbury Fort is a good example of a star shaped bastion fort of the late 17th century. Tilbury Fort is today under the control of English Heritage and is regarded as one of the finest examples of the 17th century fortifications in the country. The artillery fort is on the Thames estuary and protected London's seaward approach from the 16th century through to World War II.

Henry VIII built the first fort here and Queen Elizabeth famously rallied her army nearby to face the threat of the Armada. With its complete circuit of moats and bastioned outworks, still mostly surviving, it is much the best example of its type in England.

Opening Times

- 1st April to 31st October open every day, 10am – 5pm, including bank holidays.
- 1st November to 31st March, open Friday to Monday, 10am – 4pm
- Closed 24th – 26th December and 1st January

Further information can be found at: www.thurrock.gov.uk

The concrete paths continue towards the former Tilbury Power Station site, now demolished. After a gate the surface changes to a limestone surface which is also designed for cyclists.

At the wall of the former Power Station, steps take you over the sea wall, turning right. There is a tyre groove for bikes to be rolled parallel down the steps. At the base of the steps is the concrete apron of the wall which is walk-able and cycle-able. However it is not useable at very high tides which are rare. **In this situation of high tides** you will need to take the path north through the moats of the fort to return to the road. These roads are very busy and dangerous so be very alert!! Turn right or north across the marsh until you reach a junction and you bear right or east. This road bend around to the left and meets a T junction. To the left is West Tilbury church, but you should turn right, under the railway, eventually coming to a T junction where you turn left and after 500m you bear right until you reach the road which on turning right will lead down to Coal House Fort, Also after high tide the river washes up much detritus that makes walking and cycling difficult.

During 99% of the time during lower tides: once you are past the former Tilbury Power Station there is another limestone path. In places you are walking on a very old landfill site which is strewn with glass so caution is required if you are pushing a bike. Also look out for large holes where “bottle diggers” hunt valuable Victoria bottles and pots. The beach at this point is almost entirely made of glass and ceramics and makes a great “tinkling sound”.

Remarkably a tarmac cycle path appears after a stile. This takes you all the way in to Coalhouse Fort.

Coalhouse Fort

Coalhouse Fort was built between the years 1861 and 1874 partly under the direction of General Gordon (of Khartoum) and was one of a number built to fortify the Thames estuary. It was intended to counter the threat of French seaborne invasion.

The Fort stands within a parkland setting and has a number of World War II gunnery posts still in situ. The Park is located immediately adjacent to the River Thames and offers a unique combination of Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) salt marsh and grassland habitat, historic features, parkland, play provision and wildlife.

The fort is undergoing restoration by 'The Coalhouse Fort Project'. Whilst not all areas of the Fort are open to public access, regular open days and events are held throughout the year, guided tours are available on these days.

Further information can be found at: www.coalhousefort.co.uk

Walk through the car park and take the signed path, keeping the Fort to your right, on the left is a muddy track on uneven ground. At the top of the slope the sea wall appears which is concrete and allows magnificent views of the estuary. To the left below the slope is a grassed track which gives great views of the marshes. The sea wall and marshes track continue for about 2 miles where they are blocked by a fence of the Mucking Landfill sites, part of which has become the Thurrock Thameside Nature Park run by Essex Wildlife Trust.

Just before the fence, walk down to sea wall on the left and the path crosses the ditch to join the fence and runs alongside the fence for about a mile. It is a surfaced, if narrow, path, but liable to flooding in winter!

At a large metal vehicle gate the stile into the Thurrock Thameside Nature Park appear on the right. Take this track if you want to continue on the Thames Estuary path and to the Park and Stanford le Hope station. See directions below.

If you want to continue to East Tilbury station continue on the path which takes several bends to the left and emerges with open fields on the right and the backs of houses on the

left. A grassy track allows you to travel straight on and the new Gobions Park is on the right. A kissing gate allows access on to Princess Margaret Road and East Tilbury Station is (6.75 miles) 75 metres on the right.

If you are starting your walk at East Tilbury station, turn right out of the station and cross the road to Gobbions park. To the right of the park is a sign and track which runs down the side of the houses. Follow this until the houses disappear and the fence of the Thurrock Thameside Nature park appears on the left and a stile allows you into the Thurrock Thames Nature Park.

Once in Thurrock Thameside Nature Park you will see that much of it is still a landfill site which is being restored. The path runs north and is very muddy in winter. Do not enter any gates and simply follow the track. It bends left and crosses a huge lake which is excellent for bird watching. The path then runs parallel to the train line until eventually turning right away from the line. The path crosses the access road to the landfill site and two stiles stop children and dogs running into the access road, but please take care.

Once you have crossed the road you will find yourself in the Thurrock Thameside Nature Park car park and a sign reads left to Stanford le Hope Station and right to the Thurrock Thameside Nature Park and Pitsea station.

If you are going to Stanford le Hope Station turn left out of the entrance onto the road. On the right you will see a farm and an old Essex Barn and further on you will see Mucking Church on the right, which is a private residence. It also has a fine old rectory next door.

Mucking Parish Church and The Green Man of Mucking

The Parish Church was dedicated to St John the Baptists. It was largely demolished and rebuilt in the middle of the 19th Century. It is now redundant and used as a private dwelling.

The Green Man, who is sometimes called Jack-in-the-Green, has a long history in traditional custom and art. The foliage that surrounds him shows that he is a spirit of the woods and he is particularly associated with growth and fertility. A stylised logo version of the Green Man of Mucking was created from a colour transparency slide in the Thurrock museum collection of the actual sculpture in Mucking Church. The 'Green Man' emblem is to be found on a 13th. Century sculpture which decorates the top of a stone pillar with in Mucking Church.

Just before the Church is a footpath between the farm and the Church grounds is a stile which leads to a well surfaced path across Stanford Marshes. However to continue to Stanford le Hope Station keeping walking past the church and over the railway crossing and to the end of the road where there is a surfaced path in the field running north alongside the road. (you can take a short cut by going through the hole in the hedge on right just past the level crossing). Continue up the surfaces path until it meets the school fence on right and turn right and take the path between the hedge and the fence. At the end of the path, cross the railway bridge and follow the path to the road. Turn left along the St Margarets Avenue. Carry on down the road and cross the Hassingbrook River and walk up the wide alley to the left up the hill. Where the alley meets Fairview Avenue, turn left and continue straight onto Chantry Crescent. At the end of the road is a walkway which leads to Church Hill, turn left and Stanford le Hope Station is 50 metres on the left.

If you want to walk onto Pitsea and continue on the Thames Estuary Path going east turn right into the Nature Park and after 100m take the footpath across the park. After about 500m you will see a wooden kissing gate on the left. If you want to see the fantastic Visitor Centre, with food, drinks, toilets and play equipment in the park bear right and the Centre is about 10 minutes away. To continue to Pitsea go through the kissing gate and follow the path over the Sluice Gate and the path travels along the south side of Mucking Creek. The path bears left with extensive views on the right of the new mudflats created by London Gateway and the massive cranes of the new London Gateway container port in the distance. Follow the path to the end of the track where there is a metal kissing gate and turn right down the non-vehicle road, which has elm hedges on both sides.

At end of road bear left where you will see a new bridleway and tarmac cycle path created by London Gateway. If you walk up the bank you look over the Stanford Wharf nature reserve, a large area of inter tidal marsh created by London Gateway from farm land. Travel to end of cycleway which crosses the railway line on a level crossing, so please take care! LOOK BOTH WAYS AND LISTEN AND CROSS QUICKLY. IF YOU ARE IN A LARGE PARTY CROSS QUICKLY IN SMALL GROUPS. The track from the level crossing joins Rainbow Lane, a road leading north which is also a bridleway. On the right almost immediately is another new bridleway. Follow this over the new blue bridleway bridge which passes over the access road to the port. On the other side of the bridge take a sharp left back on yourself and another bridle way runs alongside the access road with the fence on the left. The bridleway comes out on a road called the High Road. Turn right. At the end of the road is a crossing. Cross over and turn right into Thames Haven Road which is a slip road overlooking the dual carriageway. At the end of the road is an alley on the left. Take the alley and this leads to Church Road in Corringham. Cross the road and turn right towards the church and keep to the road on the left and eventually you pass the door of the Bull pub. From here you get a fine view of the Norman Corringham Church .

Corringham Church

The Parish Church of Corringham, dedicated to St Mary the Virgin, stands today on what has become the outer edge of Corringham village. It is thought that a Christian Church was first built on the site in the 7th Century and this would have been a small wooden structure.

From the beginning of the 9th century the Thames estuary was under constant attack by Viking raiding parties and the wooden building would have been burnt to the ground. The wooden church was encased with a stone wall approximately 3feet thick, parts of this Saxon herringbone stonework remain today in the chancel wall.

In Norman times St Mary's began to take the form seen today. The nave walls were made taller and the windows were replaced with the round headed ones in the Norman style. The main addition at that time was the tower, which remains largely unaltered today. St Mary's was built between 1080 and 1120.

The North chapel, dedicated to St Catherine, was added in 1328 along with the North Aisle. In the early 15th Century restoration began. The spire was added to the tower and the window replaced with the ones seen today and the roof was replaced. After a long period of time where little money was spent on St Mary's except to repair immediate damage on 1843 she was closed and completely restored inside and the south porch was added. Later in 1864 a new vestry was added. In a thousand years, from a small wooden structure to the beautiful stone building of today, St Mary's has seen many changes and been a focal place of worship for the Parish of Corringham. It remains today in the care of the worshipping community who are trying to maintain and preserve this heritage for future generations.

Further information can be found at: www.stmaryscorryham.org.uk

Take the alley past the end of the pub which is a footpath leads straight to Fobbing, crossing a road and passing by a school on the left (Herd Lane). At the end of the path the fenced path becomes a grassy/muddy path running downhill in a field with a fence on the right to join a vehicle track. Turn left and this will lead to the main road at Fobbing (Fobbing Road). Turn right up the hill and the medieval “White Lion” pub is on the left.

Once past the pub the road bends left. But if you take the right turn, Fobbing Church appears on the left.

St Michael's Church, Fobbing

St Michael's is renowned for its historic association with the smuggling trade. Once upon a time the church was near the waterfront of Fobbing Harbour. Smugglers sailed up Fobbing Creek guided by the distinctive church tower but after the great flood of 1st February 1953, the creek and Harbour were sealed up by a dyke and drained. Underneath the church are many tunnels which were reportedly used by the smugglers in the fourteenth century.

The oldest portion of the church is the Nave, which is Anglo-Saxon in origin. Behind the Jacobean pulpit can be seen the Rood Loft staircase, which dates from the 15th Century, and was discovered during the restoration of the church in 1906. There is a beautiful small 13th Century lancet window in the north wall of the Sanctuary, while in the east wall behind the Altar is a 15th Century window. The small marble font is very old, dating from the 12th Century, comes from the former Fobbing Mission on Bell Hill, Vange. The South Chapel dates from 14th Century and the Vestry was built in the 19th Century. The West Tower was built in the 15th Century, and contains a peal of eight bells comparable with any. Four of them were installed in 1629, and the tenor bell was hung in 1724.

The now quiet village is renowned for its history, which includes being one of the main villages involved with the Peasants Revolt. On 30th May 1381, John Brampton attempted to collect the poll tax from villagers at Fobbing. The villagers, led by Thomas Baker, a local landowner, told Brampton that they would give him nothing and he was forced to leave the village empty handed. Robert Belknap was sent to investigate the incident and to punish the offenders. On 2nd June 1381, he was attacked at Brentwood. By this time the violent discontent had spread, and the counties of Essex and Kent were in full revolt. Soon people moved on London in an armed uprising. In 1981 a metal sculpture by B R Coode-Adams was erected as a memorial to the Peasants' Revolt at Fobbing to commemorate the 600th anniversary (located in the local recreation ground off Fobbing High Road –OS175 Map Grid Ref TQ717 824).

Further information can be found at: www.stmichaelsfobbing.org.uk

Walkers can travel from the White Lion pub in Fobbing by turning left out of the pub and taking the main road left around the bend and after 5 minutes walking down “Marsh Lane” which is set back on the right after a row of houses on the right and has a sign. It is an unsurfaced bridleway downhill joining the footpath at the bottom of the hill.

As walkers approach the bottom of Marsh Lane the track bends to the left. Around the corner are two fields, take the field on the left which has a defunct wooden kissing gate. The path runs along a grassy headland between the fields and after 500m bears right and after 100m the Essex Wildlife Trust sign for Fobbing Marsh can be seen on the left. Head for the EWT sign. Enter the Fobbing Marsh gate and follow the footpath arrow which bears to the left. This is a grazed marsh with cattle and sheep so all dogs should be on leads. The footpath runs underneath the second line of pylons towards the embankments of the sea wall. This is an open exposed marsh so follow the second row of pylons and look out for the raised bank of the sea wall. Walk up onto the embankment and you can see the tidal Thames Marshes to the right and the freshwater marshes to the left. As you cross the stile you are leaving Thurrock and entering Basildon. Once over the stile, bear right and keep the creek on your right. You can see views across the creek to Wat Tyler Country Park. This area on the left is part of the huge RSPB marshes which are also grazed for nature conservation purposes.

Continue along the creek until you see a Thames Estuary Path sign on the left leading you across a field. The path joins the surfaced track. The track ends at a "T-junction" with a wooden gate opposite. Go through the wooden gate into a field and keep to the left of the field. At the far end of the field, the path bears to the right and seemingly disappears, but in the undergrowth is a bridge crossing a ditch. Cross the field keeping the railway on your left (hidden behind the trees) until you find another sign and stile crossing another ditch and hedge. A further gate must be straddled and a farm house appears on the left. Carrying on crossing another wooden bridge and the path turns left up a narrow wooded path between fences and emerges, after a stile, on to a small road.

Turn right and cross a road and continue to the end of the road where a large metal gate displays a sign for RSPB Vange Marsh.

Vange Marsh

Vange Marsh is a mosaic of wetland habitats. Fresh and saltwater lagoons attract breeding avocets, common terns, little ringed plovers lapwings and reed buntings. In winter, wigeons, teals and shovelers visit the site and bearded tits thrive in the reed beds. Scarce emerald damselflies buzz around the reserve in summer. The site has a population of adders, and barn owls can be spotted hunting over the marshes.

RSPB manages the site and further information can be found at www.rspb.org.uk

Continue walking on the grass path with the railway on your left. A track on the right takes you to the bird hides where you can look across the newly created wetlands. After 500 metres a gate and stile leads you out of the Marsh into another scrubby field. Continue to keep the railway on your left. After 300m you will see the tight metal kissing gate on your left where the footpath crosses the train line. **LOOK BOTH WAYS AND LISTEN AND CROSS QUICKLY. IF YOU ARE IN A LARGE PARTY CROSS QUICKLY IN SMALL GROUPS.** Walk through the kissing gate off the railway line and proceed to the end of the path and turn right on an old tarmac road in the shadow of the A13 Pitsea flyover. This enters a car park / builder's yard and emerges opposite Pitsea Train Station (16 miles).

From here you can turn right and visit Wat Tyler Country Park (5 mins to entrance) or turn left and continue on the Thames Estuary Path to Benfleet.

Wat Tyler Country Park

Wat Tyler Country Park (previously known as Pitsea Hall Park) was originally the site of an ammunitions factory that was primarily used during the First World War. The explosives factory was established in Pitsea in 1891 by George McRoberts who had been a chemist from 1873 to 1888 at Nobel's British Dynamite Company Limited at Ardeer. The Company was called The British Explosives Syndicate Limited and traded until 1923,

Currently Wat Tyler Country Park is 120 acres of meadows, woodland, ponds and marshland. There is also a museum, children's playground, historic buildings and a miniature railway (the original track was installed in the 1890s).

The new Wat Tyler Centre opened in Wat Tyler Country Park, in late July 2009 funded by the Heritage Lottery fund and features a permanent exhibition, themed around the industrial and environmental heritage of the park. Visitors of all ages are invited to explore the exhibition through it's graphic information panels and custom digital and manual interactives ranging from a nitroglycerin mixing hut where the roof blows off if you get the mix wrong, to an unexploded bomb you can de-fuze, to oral history listening posts set into the fins of a second world war bomb replica.

In the 1980s Wat Tyler became home to several historically significant buildings that needed to be relocated from elsewhere in Essex. These included several cottages from the 15th to 17th Century. The cottages have been arranged together around a grass area next to the children's play area to create a kind of 'Village Green' as a focal point and gathering place for visitors.

The Country Park also houses the RSPB Visitor Centre and the Green Centre. The latter tells the story of environmental issues such as global warming and climate change. These were paid for by the Parklands Project.

Further information can be found at: www.wattylercountrypark.org.uk

To continue along the Thames Estuary path turn left over the Railway Bridge and take the first right. Above you on the hill is St Michael's on Pitsea Mount.

St Michael's Church, Pitsea Mount

There is little known history about Pitsea but its earliest recorded name is Piceseia which was in 1086 and probably recorded as this in the Doomsday Book. It is thought that the name is derived from the meaning of Pics' Island, which refers to the area now known as Pitsea Mount.

The most prominent landmark is that of the 13th century church of St Michael, situated on Pitsea Mount. The church fell into ruin and only the main tower now survives.

Further information can be found at: www.basildon.com/history/churches

Keep on the right hand pavement of the road with the railway on your right. A small green appears before some houses. Bear right to the corner of the green by the railway fence and in the trees is the footpath which runs between the houses and the railway. After about 500 metres, through a kissing gate, the footpath opens out into a huge field with views north.

The path continues along the side of the railway fence crossing several small bridges across ditches. The field often has horses and the fence to the railway is open so it is advisable to put dogs on leads. The Bowers Church comes in to view.

St Margaret's Church, Bowers Church

A stone church was built by Sir John Giffard in the early fourteenth century and traces of this building still remain in the South Wall (circa 1320) and West Doorway. The church was a gift of the Lords of the manor, the Giffards, who eventually gave their name to the small village of Bowers Gifford. Sir John fought in the battle Crecy and there is an incomplete brass of him in full armour in the Sanctuary.

The church is build mainly of Kentish ragstone with a tower and wooden spire which was added in Tudor times. In the bell however, which is reached by 25 steeply winding steps, three bells are housed, all of which are original 14th Century. The bells are amongst the oldest in the County and are still rung regularly.

Further information can be found at: www.st-margarets-church.co.uk

The footpath comes out on Church Lane, turn right under the railway and continue on track until you see a gate on the left which is signed. Take the track to the end where there is a sharp right. You are now on the RSPB's Bowers Marsh Reserve. The path proceeds through gate and turns left an immediate right down the side of an overgrown hedge. The path come to a cross roads and it should be signed left to Benfleet station. The path begins to bear right and a large meadow appears on left either bear left in the meadow on the edge and posts appear to show the way towards the A130 or head through the middle of the meadow towards the A130. At the eastern end of the meadow are steps down to a bridge and the path leads to steps up to Benfleet Creek under the A130.

Benfleet Creek separates the mainland from Canvey Island opposite and is a fantastic natural area good for water birds. Continue on top of sea wall until you are forced to walk at the base of the sea wall. It is muddy here occasionally at high tides. After about 30 metres the path goes back up a bank onto a path parallel to a scrambling track, which is only used on weekends, so it is worth keeping dogs on leads at this point. The path runs up a slope and eventually runs through the gap in the fence where it bears left over rough ground coming out on a mown grass area. Continue along the edge of the rough grass and the path runs to the right of another fence and leads back to the creek. Keep the fence on the left until you see the house boats and the path leads along the creek finally emerging on the road at Benfleet. Walk along the pavement overlooking the Creek and eventually the pedestrian road crossing allows you to go to Benfleet Station if you turn left once you have crossed the road. If you turn right the path leads towards Leigh on Sea.

If you are heading to Leigh the road bears right and crosses the bridge onto Canvey Island. On the bend cross the road and enter the wide track which runs to the left of the Canvey flood barrier. The wide path passes a marina on the creek. At weekends this path is heavily used by cyclists.

Pass through the wooden kissing gate onto the sea wall which is part of Essex County Council's Hadleigh Park. As you walk along the sea wall you see the woods of the Country Park on the hills to the left and the Olympic Mountain Biking course and eventually Hadleigh Castle

Hadleigh Country Park and Hadleigh Castle

Hadleigh Country Park offers unrivalled opportunities for countryside recreation and wildlife watching as well as magnificent views over the estuary to Kent. Extending to 152 hectares (387 acres) it is one of the largest country parks in Essex and comprises a mix of woodland, pasture, hay meadow and marsh with old hedgerows and ponds. The park can be explored by foot, by bike or on horse.

Further information can be found at: www.hadleighcountrypark.co.uk

Hadleigh Castle

Hubert de Burgh originally built Hadleigh Castle sometime between 1215 and 1239. Soon after it was completed Hubert fell out of favor with the King and the crown seized his castles. However, over the following decades Hadleigh appears to have fallen into disuse, although its estate remained an important source of income for the crown.

It was not until the end of the century that there was clear renewed royal interest in the castle, with records of building repairs and two visits by Edward I in 1293 and 1305. After a number of building campaigns by 1316 it was probably regarded as a royal residence. By 1330 the castle was neglected for a number of decades, but by the 1360s a major rebuilding programme was underway. This included the tall drum towers at its eastern end, which were designed to create a conspicuous display of royal power as ships approached London. In 1551 the castle was sold to the first rich baron Richard Rich. After this point the castle ceased to be a residence and was gradually dismantled for its building materials.

Further information can be found at: www.english-heritage.org.uk

After 3 miles the path runs through a metal gate onto a road. Almost opposite is a path on the embanked sea wall which overlooks the estuary. If you turn right down the road you come to Two Tree Island, a nature reserve run by Essex Wildlife Trust.

Two Tree Island

Two Tree Island was reclaimed from the sea in the 18th Century by building a sea-wall around salt marsh. It was used for rough grazing until 1910 when a sewage farm was built on its eastern tip. In 1936 Southend Borough Council acquired the whole island with the object of using it as a rubbish tip. In 1974, having completed tipping on the eastern part of the island, the Council granted a long lease to the Nature Conservancy Council (now English Nature) covering the reserve as it now stands, and it was designated a National Nature Reserve (NNR).

*The island itself consists mainly of grassland and scrub, with the former rubbish tip supporting a number of interesting alien plants and 'escapes'. A wide variety of birds is seen, and particularly migrants. **Kestrels** hover over the grassland and **Short-eared Owls** visit during the winter, hunting for field voles. Grass snakes and lizards are seen. Insects of note include the marbled white butterfly, Roesels bush-cricket, the house cricket and the lesser marsh grasshopper. The saltmarsh along the southern shore of the island is one of the best surviving in the Thames estuary. Among many typical sea-wall and saltmarsh plants it has golden samphire, sea wormwood, sea aster, common and lax-flowered sea lavenders and sea purslane.*

The mudflats support dense beds of eel grass and provide a valuable feeding ground for wildfowl and waders, including the dark-bellied brent goose and avocets. The concentration of thousands of these birds arriving on their autumn migration is of international importance. Waders such as curlew dunlin redshank, grey plover and knot occur in significant numbers outside the breeding season. The nearby Leigh cockle sheds bring winter flocks of turnstone close inshore and attract some of the rarer gull species.

EWT manage the site and management consists mainly of work on the island: keeping paths and grassland mown, controlling the growth of invasive scrub (hemlock is a particular threat), tending hedges and maintaining hides. More soil cover is being added to exposed patches of the old tip so that plants will be encouraged to colonise.

Further information can be found at: www.essexwt.org.uk

Take the sea wall path straight ahead which leads to a small road on the right which goes to Old Leigh. If you want to go to Leigh Station cross the road opposite the road and walk around the front of the station.

The road to Leigh turns sharp right at the bottom of the slope. Along the road are the shell fish shacks selling an assortment of shell fish. This road leads to a mini roundabout which leads onto Old Leigh High Street, which has four pubs and numerous restaurants specialising in fish.

At the end of the High Street is the footpath between the estuary and the railway which leads to Chalkwell Station. On the southern side of the station you can pick up the seafront which has a cycleway and promenade all the way along the front to Southend Pier.

If you walk all the way to Southend, and wish to return on the C2C line to Fenchurch Street Station London, locate the Southend Central Station [5 minutes walk from the Southend seafront]. But if you want to return to London Liverpool Street you need to find Southend Victoria Station [15 minutes walk from the seafront].