

THE LANDSCAPE OF THE DENGIE PENINSULA

The appearance of every landscape is influenced by the interaction between a variety of factors – geology, climate, human settlement, transport networks, and agricultural and industrial use. Any observant stranger arriving in the Dengie peninsular is aware of its distinctive character. The Essex Gardens Trust researchers were also struck by the almost complete absence of both substantial gentry homes and designed parks and gardens in this area. Creeksea Place is one of the few and is the only one shown on John Norden's map of 1594. Creeksea and many other manors were tenanted for long periods, and not occupied by their owners for whom they were an investment in fertile farmland rather than a desirable place to live. The heavy expense of maintaining sea walls (the landowner's responsibility till relatively recently) is a measure of how highly prized this agricultural land was. Though the Dengie may lack designed parks and gardens, its unusual and interesting landscape has been strongly moulded by a combination of its geology and the activities of its human settlers.

The earliest written glimpse of the Dengie is found in an eighth century charter. The evidence suggests that originally it covered a larger area, spreading westwards into Danbury. Its name may derive from an ancient tribe called the Daenningas, meaning 'dwellers in the woodland' and analysis of the Domesday survey of 1086 suggests that there was a north-south belt of woodland running from Hatfield Peverel to Woodham Ferrers, with an extension running east through Purleigh into Latchingdon.

Geologically the Dengie, to the west of Southminster, is composed of heavy London clay, overlain by bands of shingle which were deposited as the Thames estuary was forced south and east by the advancing icecap during the Ice Ages. To the east, there are the alluvial deposits of former saltmarsh. Both soil types were fertile, though the London clay was hard to work and traditionally referred to as 'three horse land'. The alluvial deposits would have only required one horse to plough them.

By the early Iron Age, the Dengie had a population large enough to justify the construction of a small fort on a gravel hillock at Asheldham. Archaeological evidence indicates that the area was already open grassland, with little evidence of tree cover. The rectilinear field system, orientated north-south, was probably laid out during the Iron Age (or, less likely, during the Roman period) and, though land use has changed over the last two millennia, this field pattern has survived largely unaltered to the present day. The present road system, rather than traverse the landscape diagonally, respects this layout and crosses it in a series of right angled bends. Planned landscape on this scale suggests a significant level of organisation and control, notably absent in the Essex boulder clay uplands where the field pattern is anything but regular. The low-lying parts have been grazed by sheep since at least the Roman period when a contemporary noted "an innumerable multitude of gentle beasts ... laden with fleeces". There were good reasons for rearing sheep here – salt marsh pasture makes excellent grazing, being less liable to dry out over the summer months. Also the salt content of the ground reduces the problems of foot rot and liver fluke and was claimed to give the meat a superior flavour.

During the Iron Age and the Roman period, the salt industry was established on what was then the coastal margins of the Dengie. Sea water was evaporated in clay vessels, and the pulverised remains

of this briquetage survives in the landscape forming shallow mounds now known as 'red hills'. The line of red hills is now well inland but runs close to the line of the coast before the later reclamation of salt marsh. The hills themselves may have been used by sheep, and perhaps also by shepherds, as refuges at times of flood. This form of salt production was replaced by less understood, but more efficient, methods after the Roman period.

In the second half of the third century AD, the Romans built a substantial fort on the north-east tip of the Dengie to protect the Blackwater from Saxon pirates. It appears to have been continuously garrisoned until the Roman withdrawal, but the town and port continued to be of importance throughout the Anglo-Saxon period until its destruction by the sea in 1099. The Venerable Bede referred to it as 'the city which the Saxons Ythancaestir', suggesting that it was a place of some importance. Significantly it was here that St Cedd, on his mission to convert the East Saxons in the mid seventh century, chose to build the chapel which still stands on the foundations of the west wall of the Roman fort.

In the early Saxon period, massive fish traps - up to a mile long - were constructed in the shallow waters of the Blackwater estuary. The sides of these 'V' shaped tidal traps were made with withies woven between stakes driven into the mud. At very low tides, the stumps of these stakes are still visible. Though this substantial fishing industry has left no traces on dry land, the size of these kiddles indicates that there must have been a considerable degree of organisation to harvest, process and distribute the substantial catches which they must have yielded. For reasons have not yet been explained, these large structures were abandoned in the course of the eighth century, and perhaps replaced by fishing from boats.

There is other evidence to suggest that the area once had greater importance than now. North and South Fambridge face each other across a quarter mile wide stretch of the tidal River Crouch. The place-name strongly suggests a bridge crossing at this point, but not even the earliest written sources contain any reference to such a structure. Three miles upstream, the bridge at Hullbridge collapsed in the seventeenth century and has never been replaced. The modern traveller has to go a further two miles upstream to cross at Battlesbridge. What justified the construction of these two Saxon or early mediaeval bridges, and what communities did they serve? The implication must be that, in earlier times, the area supported a larger and more affluent population, and that its success derived from the fertility of the land, from fish and fowl from the coastal margins, and from its maritime trade with other parts of the country.

By the thirteenth century, sea levels were rising, necessitating legislation to compel each marshland property owner to repair - and periodically to heighten - their own length of the sea wall. This was a costly process; by the early nineteenth century, the Mildmays were spending about £90 per mile per year on the sea wall between Creeksea and Holliwell. Inevitably enforcement was difficult and sporadic, and, from time to time, flooding occurred when a wall collapsed or was overtopped by a high tide. The marshes were grazed by sheep for much of this period. As well as providing meat and fleeces, large amounts of cheese were made, noted by Camden to be of 'an extraordinary bigness, which are used,.....to satisfy the coarse stomachs of husbandmen and labourers'. There are numerous 'wick' place-names in the eastern part of the Dengie, the name indicating a dairy where milk and its

by-products were processed. During the eighteenth century marshland was regarded as 'unimproved' (as well as being seen as the cause of marsh ague) and much was drained for conversion to arable, particular towards the end of the century when corn prices were rising sharply. The sea was pushed back in stages, with new sea walls constructed outside the old ones, a process known as 'inning'. Traces of these earlier walls - now marooned inland - can still be seen, and indeed served a useful function in the 1953 floods when they formed a second line of defence. Most of the innings were relatively small scale, though an Act of Parliament in 1852 authorised a plan (never realised) to reclaim 30,500 acres in the Blackwater estuary. Small lanes, running towards the coast but often not reaching it, are a characteristic feature of this series of 'innings'. Many of these lanes would have reached the former coastline and would have been used for getting agricultural produce to a wharf for transport by sea.

One of the consequences of inning is the progressive shrinkage of the exposed alluvial soil. This has left some areas below sea level (and consequently more vulnerable to flooding if the sea wall is breached). In the Middle Ages, raised sheep walks were constructed from wattles and earth to provide a necessary refuge for these animals, and traces of these structures can be seen in the Tollesbury and Langenhoe marshes.

Wildfowling has always been an important occupation with vast numbers of birds nesting on the poorly drained coastal margins. The introduction of decoy ponds (probably from Holland in the seventeenth century) left its mark on the landscape and vast numbers of ducks were trapped. These star shaped ponds (up to a couple of acres in size and protected by reeds and scrub) were equipped with curved netted tunnels down which the fowl were driven by specially trained dogs, partially concealed by screens, into trapping nets at the end. The Dengie was the site of over half of Essex's decoys and two (both in the parish of Tillingham) were still being worked in the first decade of the twentieth century. Traces of the ponds can still be found near the Dengie's eastern coastline, though their distinctive outline is best seen on aerial photographs. The shooting of wildfowl was also a popular sport for Londoners who ventured into the marshes with their guns, though Daniel Defoe noted that they often returned with 'an Essex ague on their backs, which they find a heavier load than the fowls they had shot'.

Another local natural harvest has left a more tangible mark on the landscape. Norden noted, in the late sixteenth century, that the Wallfleet oyster from the River Blackwater was particularly prized, "a little full oyster with a verie greene fyne" and cultivation still occurs in the estuary. Though this takes place in the tidal waters, groups of circular pits are found on the edge of the salt marsh. These were used for storage, as well as for 'greening' the oysters, a change caused by algae which tinted the beard of the shell fish and was thought to improve its flavour.

Up to the mid nineteenth century, the low-lying areas of Essex, and their salt marshes, were widely regarded as unhealthy due to the incidence of marsh ague. Norden, in the late sixteenth century, caught "a moste cruell quarterne fever" when visiting the low-lying parts of the county. This was probably malaria which can be transmitted by a particular species of English mosquito which breeds in brackish water. Though Norden noted optimistically that the "manie and sweete comodities countervayle the daunger", most clergy and minor gentry, fearful for their health, avoided living in

these parishes. This has had an indirect effect on the Dengie landscape, making the area unattractive to the resident gentry who were the principal creators of parks and gardens. Even in the early nineteenth century (1807), Arthur Young regarded these parts of Essex as unhealthy. By the middle of the century, however, the mosquitos' breeding grounds had been drained and 'marsh ague' had been largely eradicated.

Sea levels have continued to rise and, in spite of improved sea walls, flooding has occurred at times of exceptionally high tides and strong wind. There were major incursions in 1825, 1874 and 1897, each necessitating further strengthening and raising of the walls. A major breach at North Fambridge in 1897 required much toil and took eight years to repair, after several failed attempts. There were further incursions in 1928, 1938 and 1949. In 1953, the combination of a very high tide, a depression and a strong northeast wind caused numerous breaches all around the Dengie, with the flooding of hundreds of acres of farm land. The resulting increase in the salt content reduced the soil fertility for arable crops, and there were much reduced yields for several years.

The risk of flood has continued to increase, with rising sea levels and the gradual sinking of southern England. At some point it will become uneconomic to maintain adequate defences around the entire coast line, and managed retreat – the breaching of sections of wall to re-establish protective salt marsh – will become necessary. This has already been implemented in the Rochford Hundred to the south of Dengie, and these areas will quickly revert to their appearance before reclamation.

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