



Essex estuaries such as the Blackwater have provided livelihoods for thousands of years. Physical features and geology have combined with changing political, social and economic conditions through the ages to shape coastal communities and livelihoods.

**Physical Features**

The Essex coast is mainly low and flat, with creeks winding through mud banks and saltmarsh into the backwaters and estuaries of the Stour, Colne, Blackwater and Crouch. The coastal waters are shallow with mud and sand banks spreading towards the northeast in the greater Thames estuary. The Essex coast has attracted the attentions of immigrants, invaders, traders and smugglers from across the North Sea. The natural resources include sheltered estuaries, fish, shellfish, offshore sand and gravels and energy resources in the form of wind and wave energy. The proximity of London has provided the impetus for transport and urban development, and has provided an accessible market for Essex goods.

Sea levels have undergone many changes since Britain was first separated from Europe. Around 4000 years ago sea levels started to rise and submerged sites that were occupied in Neolithic times. The coastline approached its present form about 1500-800BC.

**Geology**

Geologically Essex is part of the London Basin - a large chalk hollow stretching from the Chilterns to the North Downs, filled with London clay. The buried chalk feeds springs and wells, while the poorly drained clay soil favoured grazing rather than arable farming until heavier ploughs were utilised. The clay has also been used for brick making, for example at West Mersea where houses were built of bricks from Clifford White's brickworks until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Patches of gravel deposited at the end of the last Ice Age led to quarrying at coastal locations such as at Fingringhoe and Alresford.

**Transport**

For millennia the sea provided both food and transport routes. Despite the strong tides, the maze of sandbanks and ever-present threats from the weather, sea transport was the most practical and economic way of transporting goods and people around the coast. Boats such as Thames Barges were designed to fit the conditions and the cargoes. All this changed with the coming of the railways and then improved road transport. Today, apart from the ports at Harwich and Brightlingsea, the coastal waters have become the province of fishermen and leisure sailors.



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## Coastal communities through the ages

**Roman times** Salt manufacturing fuelled by wood and charcoal must have turned much of the coastline into a smoky semi-industrial landscape. Exports from Essex to other parts of the Empire included oysters and woollen tunics. Roads were built from Colchester to St Albans (A120), London (A12) and Mersea (B1025). The fort at Othona near Bradwell on Sea was built to defend against the Saxon invaders.

**Norman times** The Little Domesday Book recorded most of today's towns, villages and hamlets and some of the road network of minor roads and lanes. The coastal marshes supported 18,000 sheep and were full of activity from herding, milking, wildfowling, gathering shellfish, sea fishery and saltpans. The population of Essex was 14,600 households (say 58,400 people), with Maldon having 243 and Colchester 478. Each square mile had a human population of between 5 and 15, with up to 3 plough teams. There were manors at West Mersea, Great Wigborough, Tolleshunt and Rivenhall. Those who worked the land were serfs or villeins. Villeins worked on the estates and paid duties to the lord of the manor but also had small land holdings with access to common grazing land.

**17<sup>th</sup> century** The enclosure of the common lands robbed peasants of rights of pasture and farm labourers became the largest single economic group in Essex. By now many of the sea walls had been constructed to protect newly drained saltmarsh used for livestock grazing.

**Early 20<sup>th</sup> century** Coastal towns with rail links to London started to take on their modern character. The railway bypassed the Blackwater until the "Crab and Winkle line", a light railway from Kelvedon to Tollesbury, was opened in 1904. A pier was built and the line extended to it in an effort to develop Tollesbury as a coastal resort, but the First World War intervened and the pier line closed in 1921.

**Post war era** Improved road transport, the escalating demand for housing and the continued growth of London, caused huge changes. The population of coastal villages and towns has increased but many residents travel long distances to work. As well as commuters and retired people, the coast has a large weekend population who escape from London and elsewhere to second homes, caravans, boats and beach huts. The Blackwater alone has 3500 caravans and beach huts.

**Saxon times** A great estate, probably royal, around the Blackwater and Colne estuaries, commanded a labour force capable of building the causeway to Mersea Island. Saxon place names include Maldon (Hill surmounted by a cross), Mersea (Island of the sea), Salcott (Salt cottages), Wigborough (Wicga's hill), Wivenhoe (Wilfa's ridge) and, of course, Essex (East Saxon Kingdom).

AD

500

1000

1500

1600

1700

1800

1900

1950

2000



**Middle Ages** As early as 1250 some of the monastic houses of Essex exported wool to Italy and Flanders from Colchester and Brightlingsea. Duties were imposed to help to establish an Essex wool industry and in 1373 a wool fair started in Colchester. The wool industry thrived and by the 17<sup>th</sup> century employed 20,000 people. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries wars with Spain and France disrupted exports, then Essex was overtaken by the newly mechanised industry in the North where coal and labour were plentiful. By 1794 the industry employed 8000 and by 1840 had more or less ended.

**18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries** The Industrial and Agricultural revolutions produced radical changes as mechanisation decreased the local demand for farm labour. The migration to industrial towns continued during the agricultural depression as farming the heavy clays became uneconomic.

Coastal defences were built to defend against the Dutch and then the French - the Martello towers built during the Napoleonic wars still standing. This period was also the height of the smuggling era. Tobacco, cigars, spirits and silks were smuggled from the continent in boats with false bottoms, or in hollow masts and oars, and landed at night. The trade was lucrative and widespread, despite the threat of transportation to Australia.

**Second World War** Essex was fortified against a German landing and concrete pillboxes were built along the sea walls and the river mouths mined. Ships and boats from Colchester, Harwich, Brightlingsea, and Maldon took part in the evacuation of troops from Dunkirk. In the post-war drive towards national food self-sufficiency grazing land was converted to arable for the first time, agriculture became more intensive and farm sizes increased to optimise the investment in machinery.

Despite the huge changes brought about by developments in economic and social conditions and technological advances, some coastal livelihoods have persisted across the centuries as illustrated in these brief snapshots.

### Farming

Sheep have grazed the marshes since farming first began on the Essex coast and for much of this time sheep provided milk and dairy products as well as meat, skins and wool. Place names ending in the Saxon “Wick”, such as Fingringhoe Wick, were named after dairy farms and cheese making survived on Canvey Island until the seventeenth century. Former salt-making sites (the red hills) were often used to provide high and well-drained refuges for sheep. The decline in the number of sheep in Essex in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been due to the conversion of grazing land to arable and the severe impact of Foot and Mouth Disease.

Arable farming is difficult on “3-horse” London clay, so described from the horsepower needed to plough it, compared to 2-horse boulder clays and 1-horse light gravel soils. Land that was occupied in the late Iron Age was abandoned again towards the end of the Roman period and only re-occupied in the mid to late Saxon Period. Similarly in the agricultural depression at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, London clay was the first land to be abandoned. In modern times mechanisation has radically reduced the agricultural labour force and increased the size of farms. Landowners seeking other sources of income have diversified into riding schools, caravan sites, and renting out farm buildings for industrial uses. Despite the current pressures on farming, demand for coastal land is high because of the high conservation value of estuarine habitats.



### Fishing

The estuaries and shallow coastal waters have produced excellent fishing grounds. There is archaeological evidence of early fishing activities in the remains of Saxon fish traps and fish bones at processing sites. Trawling is known to have taken place as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century and numerous specialised fishing boats and techniques have originated along this coast. Such innovation continues today with efficient drift-net herring boats gaining the area the world’s first Marine Conservation award for sustainable fisheries. Today the fishermen face unparalleled challenges from declining fish stocks and increasing controls – in stark contrast to the days when fish were dredged for manure. Nevertheless Mersea still boasts an inshore fishing fleet, with catches of Dover sole, skate, bass and mullet in summer, and herring, cod and sprats in winter.

### Shellfish

Colchester has been famous for its oysters since Roman times and the remains of oyster pits and shell banks can be seen in many of the creeks, especially around Mersea Island. Only 40 years ago there were oyster merchants all along Coast Road who exported Colchester oysters to connoisseurs around the world. Oysters and other shellfish depend critically on the supply of nutrients from the marshes and the mix of fresh and salt water in the creeks, and are sensitive to pollution from sewage and chemicals. In the early 1980s after the disastrous effects of the disease *Bonamia*, the antifouling TBT and increasing regulation, the industry appeared doomed but determined oystermen have started again, using new methods learnt from the French in an effort to combat disease and improve marketing, and today the Colchester oyster industry is thriving again. As well as oysters the creeks and shallow waters are rich with mussels, cockles, winkles, shrimps and eels, which have provided both food and livelihood as long as there have been people to collect them.



## Wildfowl

The large flocks of wildfowl on the marshes are thought to have provided an important food source for early settlers though no archaeological evidence has been found older than the decoy ponds of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Twenty three Essex decoy ponds have been identified by crop marks, with concentrations on the north shore of the Blackwater and the Dengie flats. Wildfowling attracted enthusiasts from London as well as providing a livelihood for locals. Today the British Association for Shooting and Conservation has a 'Statement of Common Interests and Co-operation' memorandum of understanding with English Nature recognising common ground between shooting and conservation. Clubs shooting on sites of scientific interest (SSSIs) must have consents from English Nature agreeing the number of guns at any one time. There are refuge areas where no shooting takes place.

## Boats

Despite the concentration of sea transport into large modern ports such as at Harwich, boats and boating remain important activities along the coast. A walk along the waterfront at any of the coastal towns reveals boat yards, marine engineers, sail-makers and chandlers, and a huge variety of craft from wooden smacks and Thames Barges to modern fishing boats and fibreglass yachts. In the days of the stately J-class yachts professional crewmen were hired for the summer, returning in the winter to work on the fishing boats. Today the dozen or so sailing clubs on the Blackwater have an estimated 5000 members and summer weekends show the attraction of sailing and other water sports to residents and visitors alike.

## The inter-tidal zone

Although the intertidal areas of saltmarsh and mudflats may appear irrelevant to today's livelihoods, they play an essential part in many of these activities. Intertidal habitats are rich in invertebrates and plant life, and support fish nurseries as well as shellfish and large bird populations. Sheep can be grazed on marsh pasture providing excellent quality lamb. Saltmarsh is a great natural cleanser removing pollutants and carbon dioxide better than any other habitats. It also absorbs the energy of the sea, protecting boat moorings and marinas and reducing the need for costly artificial sea defences. Last but by no means least, it is largely the intertidal areas that give the Essex coast the special aura that means so much to artists, photographers, nature lovers and all those who live and work here.

## What does the future hold?

What livelihoods could be sustainable in the future? As we have seen, although some activities have died out altogether, many of the old coastal livelihoods still exist even if they provide employment for fewer people. New coastal jobs come from growth areas such as conservation, leisure and recreation, and supporting the increased residential population.

There are competing demands on coastal land from agriculture, conservation, tourism, housing and industrial developments. Every change has the potential to upset the balance between the different activities and land uses. On the other hand as we have seen "no change" has never been an option. The best that we can do is to recognise the inter-dependence between livelihoods and with the environment and try to manage it. This means taking account of the interests of a wide range of "stakeholders" in the coast, and balancing conflicting interests where they arise.

This is the essence of what we are trying to do at Abbotts Hall Farm. Although many external factors, such as sea-level rise and changing weather patterns, are beyond our control, many decisions are ours to take or influence. The aim is to maintain a coastline that supports a sustainable diversity of both wildlife and livelihoods.



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## Further Information

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The Local Studies Section of Colchester Library has an excellent collection of material on Essex life.