

Open Coastal Fens

Key Characteristics

- Flat landscape of peaty soils
- Wet grazing marsh and reedbeds
- Management for wildlife conservation
- Fringe of wet woodland on the inland side
- Prominent wind pump

Location

The one example of this landscape character type in the county is located on the coast between Walberswick and Dunwich and includes Dingle, Reedland, Westwood, Corporation and Oldtown Marshes, as well as the Dunwich River valley.

Geology, landform and soils

Flat valley floors and coastal flats with deep peat deposits that overlie river and marine alluvium.

Landholding and enclosure pattern

This area has a complex history because it has been heavily affected by marine erosion and the movement of coastal sediments. In the early Middle Ages the port of Dunwich lay on the south side of the mouth of the Dunwich River and close to the mouth of the (originally) south-flowing River Blyth. Storms in 1286-8 brought about changes that resulted in the periodic blocking of the harbour mouth with sand and shingle. In 1328 the original river mouth was finally blocked by a storm and the Dunwich River was forced to flow northwards along the old course of the lower Blyth to a new mouth to the east of Walberswick. The original port of Walberswick had lain on the north side of the lower Blyth, but the changes led to its abandonment in favour of a new port, on the new river mouth. This move had occurred by 1426, when the tower of the new Walberswick church was erected. By 1587 the Dunwich River was flowing parallel to the coast, past the old and new ports of Walberswick, to a confluence with the mouth of the River Blyth on the north side of Walberswick village. The Dunwich River still exits at the mouth of the Blyth, but coastal erosion has moved the course westward, leaving fragments of the old course in the coastal marshes and flats.

The date of the enclosure of Oldtown Marshes, so-named because of its proximity to the old port of Walberswick, is unknown, but the sinuous nature of its dykes suggests a relatively early date. Corporation Marshes (formerly Kings Holm) to the east of the

Dunwich River was already embanked along the river edge by 1587 and the area was dry enough to be used for fairs in the 1380s. To the west, Westwood Marsh (formerly East Marsh and Pauls Fen) was reclaimed from salt marsh by the erection of a sea wall around 1590. Early, probably curving, drains seem to have been augmented by later straight ones, but mid-20th century reflooding has led to the loss of many of the drains and the area is now part of the Suffolk Coast (formerly Walberswick) National Nature Reserve. To the south, Dingle and Reedland Marshes had also been embanked from the river by 1587. The area has a mixture of sinuous and straight drains, suggesting drainage works over an extended period of time. Included in the area is a rectangular decoy pond that was in existence by the 1880s; other ponds have been added in the 20th century for wildlife interests. The modern landscape is dominated by the grazing of cattle on this low intensity wet grassland and is dissected by a network of dykes that have some scrub growing along them in places. The northern end has been maintained or converted to a reedbed for conservation purposes.

Settlement

Because of the wetness, there is an absence of permanent settlements.

Trees and woodland cover

The Dingle and Reedland marshes are mostly treeless although the landscape is framed on the landward side by wet alder woodland that grades into dry woodland. This is evident looking inland along the course of the Dunwich River and eastwards through Westwood marshes.

Visual experience

Although this is flat open landscape it is contained by the woodland, and the rising ground, that surrounds it. Therefore the views are generally limited to within the landscape character type.

Condition

There is a dynamic quality in this low-lying landscape resulting from the powerful force of the sea. Attempts have been made to exclude the sea, but it is not easily tamed. There has been movement of major watercourses, loss of land and movement of beaches. Land has been reclaimed from the salt marshes by farmers and allowed to revert to freshwater marsh by naturalists, only for the sea to make unexpected incursions.