

Romney Marshes



Key Characteristics

- A flat, open and agricultural landscape, with distinctive drainage dykes, marshes and open skies. The treeless, low-lying, reclaimed marshland is now maintained by manmade drainage and river floodplain improvements.
- A high-quality agricultural land of extensive arable fields and some traditional open wet pasture land grazed by cattle and sheep. Narrow, straight roads and widely dispersed settlements with distinctive churches combine with the overall open character to provide a sense of remoteness.
- Clumps of trees on pockets of higher ground around farmsteads, reed fringed ditches, patches of standing water and rushy pasture, all contribute to local diversity in a relatively uniform landscape.
- The area's high nature conservation value is concentrated in the wet grazing marshes, dykes, mudflats and the less extensive but distinct sand-dunes and shingle ridges of Dungeness.
- Former sea cliffs, mainly of sandstone, mark the post-glacial shoreline and form a notable feature overlooking Romney Marshes at Rye, Winchelsea, Hythe and Pett. The Napoleonic Royal Military Canal runs along the base of this degraded cliffline for much of its length.
- 20th century development is evident in the towns along the coastal strip.
- The landscape displays a sharp contrast between the shingle coastal promontories, the extensive open, low-lying agricultural land behind and the inland backdrop of well-wooded rising ground.

Landscape Character

The Romney Marshes are an area of reclaimed open marshland, mainly in Kent but partly in East Sussex. The Marshes are bounded to the south and east by the English

Channel and to the north and west by old sea cliffs cut into the Wealden and Lower Greensand beds of the Lower Cretaceous.

Romney Marshes include Romney Marsh proper, the Walland and Denge Marshes, and the Broomhill, East Guldeford, Brede and Pett Levels. In contrast to the reclaimed marshes, there are extensive storm beaches of shingle at Dungeness Point and also small areas of sand dunes such as at Camber Sands.

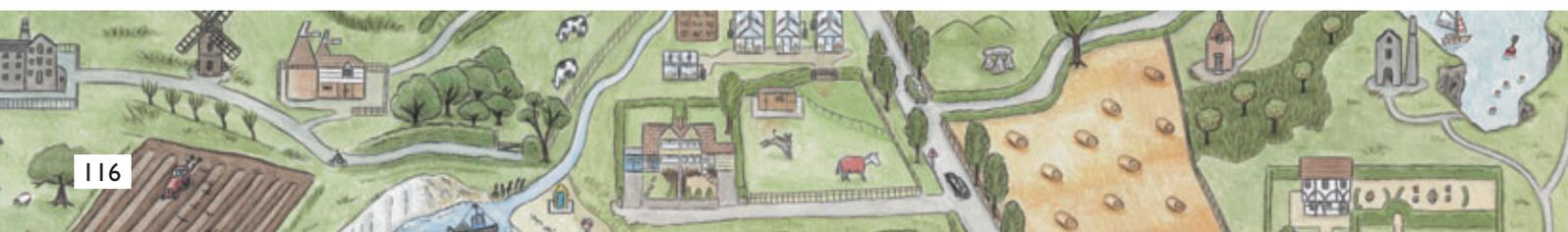


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Dungeness power station and its transmission lines dominate the shingle landscape.

The Romney Marshes owe their present day appearance to the natural process of sediment deposition behind large shingle promontories and to the reclamation in stages of the area for agricultural use. The Marshes have a distinctive windswept feel with flat, open marshland of either pasture or arable fields often divided by an irregular network of drainage ditches and banks with few trees and typically no hedges. The sky dominates the wide open, windswept character of the Marshes, much of which have a strong feeling of remoteness.

In this extremely flat and open landscape, the only real diversity in land cover is provided by the raised ground and clumps of trees of the marshland hamlets such as Old Romney and Newchurch. The dry landscape created by the widespread conversion to arable use produces less local but more seasonal variation in land cover, textures and colours.



man and remnant lagoons, particularly in the Romney Marsh area itself, have been gradually reclaimed a little at a time by individual landowners (a process known as ‘inning’).



MARTIN JONES/COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

Prominent village churches and the widespread use of weatherboarding and hung tiles create a distinctive architectural character for the scattered Romney Marsh villages such as Lydd.

Historical and Cultural Influences

The present day landscape of the Romney Marshes is young in geological and historical terms. Less than 2,000 years ago, the appearance of the landscape was radically different to that of today.

Between 43 - 100 AD, when the Romans first landed on the Kent and Sussex coast, the extensive area of Romney Marshes had not yet been fully formed by natural processes. Instead, the Romans would have been faced with a broad, open and shallow bay studded by an archipelago of upraised islands. These dry sites provided suitable locations for the first human settlement of the area. The villages of Lydd and New Romney in the Romney Marshes for instance have provided evidence of early human occupation in the form of pottery fragments dating from the 1st century.

The impoundment of the present Romney Marshes occurred earlier than at Pevensey Levels (further along the coast in East Sussex) having taken place in stages since the 8th century. An early charter of 744 AD describes reclamation being undertaken at that time, in Denge Marsh probably by farmers from an early dry settlement on higher ground such as Lydd.

By the early 9th century the gradual fall of sea level meant that what is now the Romney Marshes began to develop. Impoundment of the Marshes was a piecemeal process with each landowner reclaiming small areas at a time (‘inning’). The process was facilitated in around 1258 AD) when the Rhee Wall was built to retain an artificial watercourse. The irregular pattern of drainage ditches, however, is an indication that no single large-scale reclamation was attempted.

By the middle of the 13th century, most of the marsh land

had come into the hands of the local abbeys and thus much of the medieval reclamation was undertaken by the monks of such abbeys. Parishes outside the area would extend their boundaries to include the fine sheep-fattening pastures of the Marshes. The present day shape of the parishes, running from the uplands down the old sea-cliff and onto the Marshes, reflects this historic influence.

The remote, almost semi-wilderness character of the Marshes has been drawn upon by many notable writers such as H G Wells, Henry James, Joseph Conrad and Rudyard Kipling all of whom either worked in the Romney Marshes or used it as a setting for their novels. The strong emotional response to the Marshes is further reinforced by the interest shown by artists. Paul Nash is one artist among many who have depicted the coast at Dungeness in their paintings, while many others have used the views of sheep and marshlands as the subject of their paintings. The artistic inspiration of the Marshes still captures the imagination of photographers, such as Fay Godwin, and the film director, the late Derek Jarman, who lived at Dungeness.

Measures to reduce tidal flooding of the rich agricultural land of the Romney Marshes include early defensive works using brushwood and wooden stakes of the 13th and early 16th centuries and concrete sea walls, first constructed in the early 19th century and then again in the mid-20th century.



JOHN AND IRENE PALMER

Sea kale brings a splash of summer colour to the extensive storm and shingle beaches of Dungeness and Rye. The shingle foreland at Dungeness is the largest in Europe and is of international nature-conservation importance.

Buildings and Settlement

The nature of the scattered settlements and the long, straight, open roads linking them together reflects the piecemeal influence of the reclamation process. The pockets of higher ground provided dry sites for small settlements to develop, while the immediate marsh land was ‘inned’ by the local inhabitants with little co-operation from the neighbouring settlements. Roads tended to be raised above the surrounding land forming visual divisions in the landscape.



The low lying arable and pasture land is dissected by an irregular pattern of drainage dykes, canals and ponds, reflecting the piecemeal reclamation of the marsh. Clusters of trees around settlements offer some relief from the open, windswept spaces.

The distinctive architectural character of the settlements revolves around the widespread use, of weatherboarding and hung tiles, with some fine churches set among the buildings. Particular built structures of note are the defensive Martello towers along the coast and the Royal Military Canal lying at the base of the former sea-cliffs, both relict features of the Napoleonic Wars. The power station is a dominant feature in many local views.

Land Cover

Sheep grazing was the traditional land use in the Romney Marshes up until the second world war but, since that time, most of the land has been subject to widespread drainage and improvement with much arable conversion. Much of the reclaimed marshland is of high agricultural quality due to the productive loams formed during the creation of the Marshes from alluvial deposits.

Small fields, dykes and unimproved pasture are less common than they once were due to the increase in arable production marked by a decline in sheep grazing. Remnants of the once more traditional appearance of the Romney Marshes can be seen in the landscape around Walland Marsh.

Tree cover is generally limited to clumps and belts around the settlement on the slightly higher ground and to the random lines, groups and individual trees set within the wider landscape. The wet, waterlogged conditions typically support tree species such as willow and ash.

Extensive areas of open water exist around Rye Harbour

and Denge Marshes. This is the result of flooding of past gravel pits in the area.

Other land uses include power stations and associated transmission lines, gravel extraction and expanding holiday resorts along the coasts.

The Changing Countryside

- Widespread arable cultivation has replaced traditional wet grazing marsh.
- Drainage and improvement works resulting in the loss of characteristic dyke, marshland and wet meadow vegetation cover.
- Golf course development.
- Pressures from tourism related activities and developments on the coast including large and quite prominent caravan parks such as around Camber Sands.
- The open landscapes are particularly vulnerable to landscape change arising from the development of large new agricultural buildings and from military land uses.
- Past extensive gravel workings are particularly visible around Rye Harbour as is the dominating feature of the Dungeness Power Station with associated transmission lines.
- New roads and improvement schemes.
- Suburban influences.

- Possible de-commissioning of power station and resultant lack of beach nourishment measures.
- Erosion of fishing industry has led to a loss of distinctive shoreside character in places.

Shaping the Future

- The maintenance and enhancement of the distinctive network of ditches should be addressed, together with less frequent and intensive dredging of the channels, and the control of water levels.
- The re-creation of wetland, seasonal flooding and areas of damp pasture should be considered.
- Planning and design guidelines would discourage inappropriate developments which might impinge on the remote, undeveloped quality of the Marshes and shoreline.
- The restoration of gravel workings for landscape, wildlife and recreational uses is important.

Selected References

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Eddison J and Green C (eds), (1988), *Romney Marsh: Evolution, Occupation and Reclamation*, Oxford University Committee for Archaeology, Oxford.

Glossary

cusped: cusp shaped



The flat and windswept nature of the marsh with its wide open skies creates a strong sense of remoteness, in contrast with the neighbouring wooded and undulating land.