

Walking and Sailing the Mysterious and Weird Essex Shoreline and Estuaries

Shôn Ellerton, April 6, 2022

One of the most haunting and weird places to walk and to sail must be along the shores and estuaries of Essex.



If you're one who enjoys walking on the flat near the sea, watching the birdlife, enjoying peace and quiet, and being enveloped in a weird mysterious atmosphere, and, of course, happen to be in England at the time, look no further than coastal Essex. I refer, in particular, to a stretch of coastline that weaves from Mersea Island in the north to Southend-on-Sea to the south that spans two estuaries, the River Blackwater and the River Crouch.

This is a very strange place, especially when the mist sets in and the sounds around you are dampened to an odd womblike silence. Estuarine Essex is largely flat dotted with little villages, heavily mottled with numerous muddy inlets from the sea, and home to some quite strange features including an island in the middle of the Blackwater Estuary accessible only by low tide, a nuclear power station at Bradwell and an eerie spit of land called Foulness Island surrounded by impenetrable mud; a place which all sailors are keen to avoid. Notwithstanding, Foulness Island is also owned by the Ministry of Defence and, unless you're one of the few that live there, it is off limits to the public. This adds to the strangeness of the place, including a medieval tidal road, ominously called the [Broomway](#), a worn out track which leads straight out into the tidal muds of the sea running for nearly 10 kilometres to connect with Foulness Island. It is Britain's deadliest path having claimed more than a hundred lives.



More should be said about the mysterious Broomway, pictured at the beginning of the article. The origin of the name comes from having bits of cloth tied to sticks marking the path and should the waters rise above the mud, there is nothing else to keep you from veering off it, a potentially deadly mistake. The waters around Essex are highly tidal and it is not uncommon for wanderers who misjudge the incoming tides to get lost and perish. Oddly, the Broomway, was the only way to get to Foulness Island until a bridge was built in more recent years. Here's a [link](#) of a website with guided tours, the safest way to walk it. I've never walked it but having a healthy respect of the sea and of Essex tides and mud, this is not something I would undertake without a guide. I doubt anyone of a sane disposition would attempt this at night!

Much of the coastline around the shores of Essex may be walked along low-lying seawalls, much of which are quite wild in places, overgrown and wind-swept.



As a young teenager, I used to visit my grandparents who lived in a small village near Tollesbury. Having a taste of independence, adventure, and an enjoyment of following routes on Ordnance Survey maps, I had them drop me off at some point on the seawall in the morning, and to then pick me up at the destination later in the afternoon. In those days of course, this meant looking for a payphone when I got to my destination! Armed with my map, a windbreaker, a good pair of shoes, and of course, plenty of food kindly packed by my grandmother, I would set off alone along the lonely seawalls. And, indeed, they were very lonely places. Hardly did I see a soul walking on them.

The first thing that strikes you when walking here is the feeling of isolation and desolation, although, in reality, you're never that far away from some old farmstead or hamlet. Seldom do you see or hear any traffic on any road because the sea walls are often separated by vast tracts of marshland from the mainland. You are, in essence, kind of trapped on both sides until you reach the next village where the seawall can be accessed. The other odd thing about walking here is the notable absence of the sound of the sea. Vast tracts of mud separate you from the quiet but treacherous sea during low tide. Treacherous due to the enormous tide differences, unpredictable weather, and often nasty currents and undertows. Moreover, Essex mud is no ordinary mud. Veering off the grassy seawalls and into the mud is highly ill-advised and, no doubt, some souls have met their fate getting lost in fog and finding that they are sinking in quicksand-like mud as the tide comes in. Quite a scary prospect.



Part of my childhood was growing up with a father who liked to sail around the Essex coastline. I have many a fond memory of being in the sailboat floating around the treacherous little creeks and negotiating the shallow estuaries with little in aid of navigation save for a compass, a nautical map and any hope of locating lonely bobbing buoys and guidance posts along the featureless shoreline; those triangle things which you align with another to get a direction fix. My father often quipped if one could sail the Essex waters, you could sail *anywhere*! And indeed, many times, sailors often get stuck in mud misjudging the tides, sitting helplessly in a sailboat inclined on its keel, awaiting darkness and the fog with a cup of tea and being wrapped in warm clothes until the water releases you again. In calm weather, this is almost a spiritual sort of feeling, being cocooned by mist and darkness surrounded by water and silence, but if the weather turns inclement, it is absolutely frightening. These days, with the advent of cheap availability of GPS, mobile phones, and drones, getting lost is much less likely. Drones are especially useful to sailors and kayakers to picture where they are, because when one looks from above, the creeks and estuaries often form vastly complex mazes leading to many dead ends. The picture below is the salt flat around Tollesbury Harbour, a crazy convoluted maze being a paradise for the adventurous yachtsman. Due to the extreme tides and currents, kayakers need to be very experienced here.



One of the strangest sights from the waters are the remnants of rusty towers and partly sunken barges, shipwrecks, and lonely ephemeral mud islands, only to disappear at a moment's notice with the shifting tides. Strange and secluded old farmhouses situated in the weirdest of places. One wonders who lives there, and what it's like inside. Perhaps an old grandfather clock ticking solemnly inside an otherwise silent house while a mournful crow caws outside in the early morning mist. Out across the water on clear days, the illusion of distance is distorted when far-away tankers on the horizon touch over the shimmering air hanging over the mud flats between. Walking along the ancient worn-out seawalls is also interesting if one is interested in old disused structures and abodes. Disused buildings and bunkers, creaky rusty old antennas from the War, old signposts, abandoned cabins, and non-descript chunks of concrete half-submerged in the pungent marshes.





For those sailing the estuaries, my fondest memories are setting anchor in the middle of some creek, getting into an outboard-powered dinghy, and making off to a local pub on the shore. Perhaps things have changed since with the rise of safetyism and the police state, but back in the 80s, it was standard practice to be completely inebriated before making the return trip by dinghy to the boat. This often involved much stumbling and fumbling with ropes accompanied by a lot of laughing at one's own stupidity and clumsiness. My father was not the most responsible of men, but he was certainly interesting.

One such memorable experience of a shore pub was near North Fambridge on the River Crouch in which a delightful but enterprising white goat, a pet of the pub landlord, slyly drank up as many pints of ale as 'goatingly' possible in the garden section for those not keeping an attentive eye on their drink. My father, being distracted from talking with a budding sailor, failed to notice that half a goat's head was plunged into his pint of lager after my many attempts to point it out.

All in all, walking the Essex seawalls is more of a maudlin affair than anything. It is not as popular or well-known as walking the White Cliffs or hiking up Snowdon or traversing the Pennine Way, but this fact alone, adds more appeal. Apart from it being flat with no hills, for me, I found more adventure and mystery walking along the Essex seawalls than many more popular and exciting walks and hikes anywhere in the country. As for sailing, especially when visibility is poor, the Essex estuaries are some of the most interesting and

challenging but Britain for being what Britain's best for doing at, is its love of having a cosy pub and a warm fire to enjoy a pint of beer when the weather closes in. And the Essex estuaries have plenty of those!

