

Neither land nor sea

A self guided walk from Benfleet to Leigh-on-Sea



Explore the creeks, marshes and mudflats of the Thames Estuary
Find out how people have learned to live in a marginal environment
Discover wildlife adapted to the salty and muddy conditions
See a landscape under threat from climate change

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*the stories of our landscapes
discovered through walks*





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Cover image: Two Tree Island © Adrian Murphy

Neither land nor sea

Discover the tidal creeks and mudflats of the Thames Estuary in Essex

Thirty miles from central London, the River Thames widens into a great estuary on its way to the North Sea. Here mud, marsh and water blend into one.

Container ships navigate the deep channel as they come and go from the docks at Tilbury. On either side, the flat horizon is punctuated by the chimneys of oil refineries and industrial sites. This can seem like a barren and bleak landscape - it can appear grey and lifeless even on a sunny day.



Boats stranded at low tide on Leigh Creek
© Jenny Lunn

But it is actually a dramatic and constantly changing environment. This walk between Benfleet and Leigh-on-Sea in Essex explores the tidal creeks, salt marshes and mudflats on the edge of the estuary.



Birds beside the estuary
© Adrian Murphy

Discover how dynamic they are and meet a range of wildlife that are specially-adapted to existing here.

Also find out how people have learned to live in this marginal environment between the land and sea – battling the tides, earning a living and defending their shores.

Practical information

Location	Benfleet to Leigh-on-Sea, Essex, East of England
Getting there	<p>By train - Direct services run to Benfleet from London Fenchurch Street roughly every ten minutes. Local services also run from Tilbury and Southend (average 5 an hour).</p> <p>By bus - Benfleet is served by local services from Basildon, Chelmsford and Southend. The nearest stop to the start of the walk is on Ferry Road by the railway station.</p> <p>By car - Access from A13 or Junction 29 of the M25. Street parking is difficult so use car parks at Benfleet station, School Lane or Essex Way (charges apply).</p>
Start point	Benfleet railway station, SS7 1NF
Finish point	Marine Drive, Leigh-on-Sea
Distance	5 miles
Need a shorter route?	You can shorten the walk by finishing at Leigh-on-Sea station and omitting Stops 14 to 16.
Onward journey	You can return to the start of the route by train or bus. Bus routes 21, 26 and 27 run between Leigh-on-Sea and Benfleet. To return by train use Directions 16 at the end of the walk.
Level	Moderate – A mostly flat route with a steep climb near the end
Terrain	Surfaced lanes, footpaths, pavements

Conditions

The walk along the embankment (Stops 4-14) can be very muddy after rainfall so wear wellies! Note that it may not be possible to cross the creek at Two Tree Island (Stops 12-13) at high tide.

Suitable for

Families - A free children's activity download is available from the Discovering Britain website.

Dogs - A popular place for dog walking.

Refreshments

There are food outlets at the beginning and the end of the route, including a café outside Benfleet station (Stop 1). At Old Leigh (between Stops 14 and 15) are fish and chip shops, cafés and pubs around the harbour.

Toilets

- Benfleet station (Stop 1) but inside the ticket barriers
- Leigh Harbour (between Stops 14 and 15)

Best time to go

Two Tree Island is home to many nesting birds, including avocets, in the spring. Visit in winter to catch a glimpse of kestrels. There is a bird hide on the island.

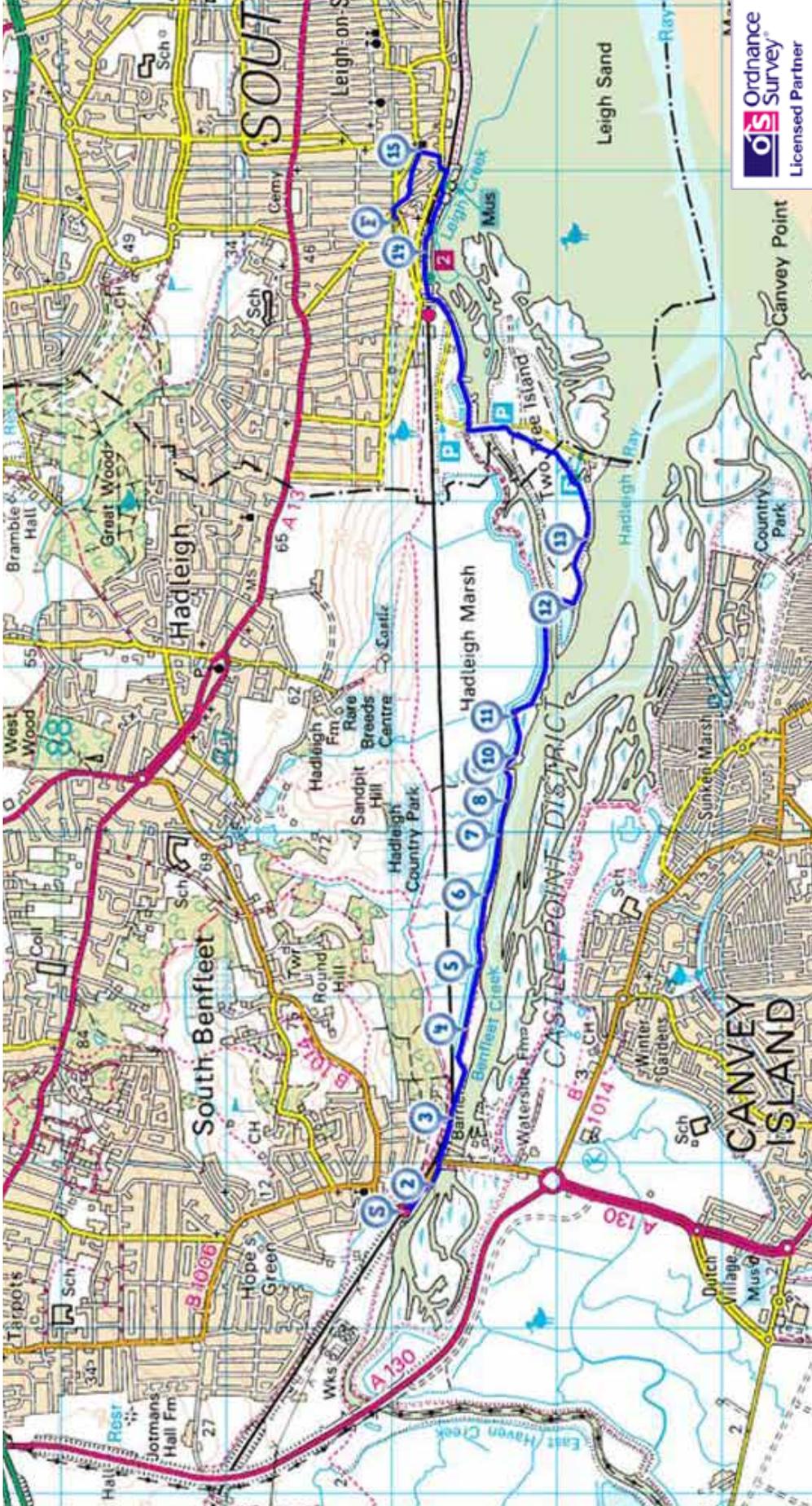
Family friendly activities

Hadleigh Farm is home to rare breed farm animals, plus a tea room, farm shop and large car park. Run by the Salvation Army. www.hadleighfarm.org.uk Tel: 01702 426260

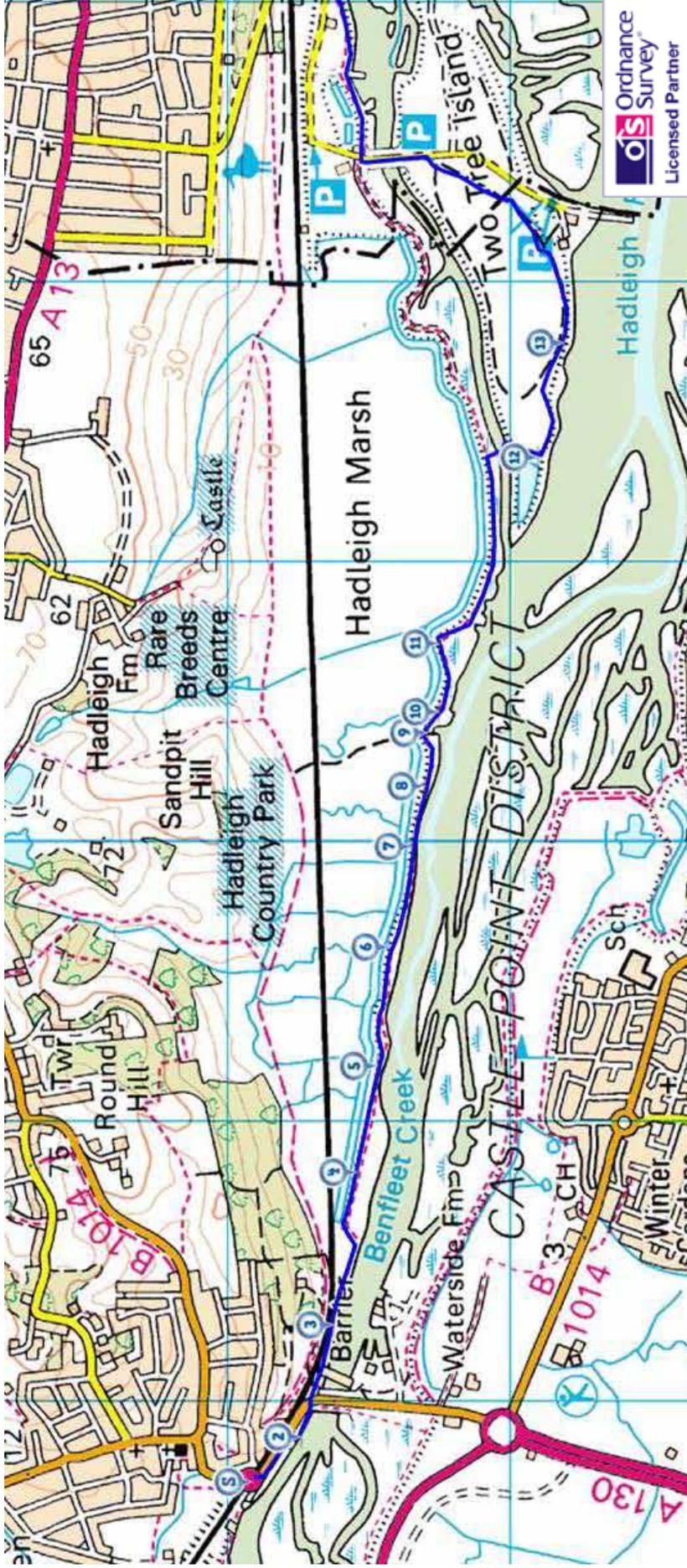
Hadleigh Castle (Stop 10) is free to visit. Park at Hadleigh Farm and walk to the site. Run by English Heritage. Tel: 0870 333 1181

Leigh Heritage Centre is well worth visiting for displays on local history and heritage. Located at 8-13 Leigh-on-Sea High Street, the centre is run by volunteers and usually open daily 10.30am to 3pm www.leighsociety.com/leighheritagecentre Tel: 01702 470834

Route overview



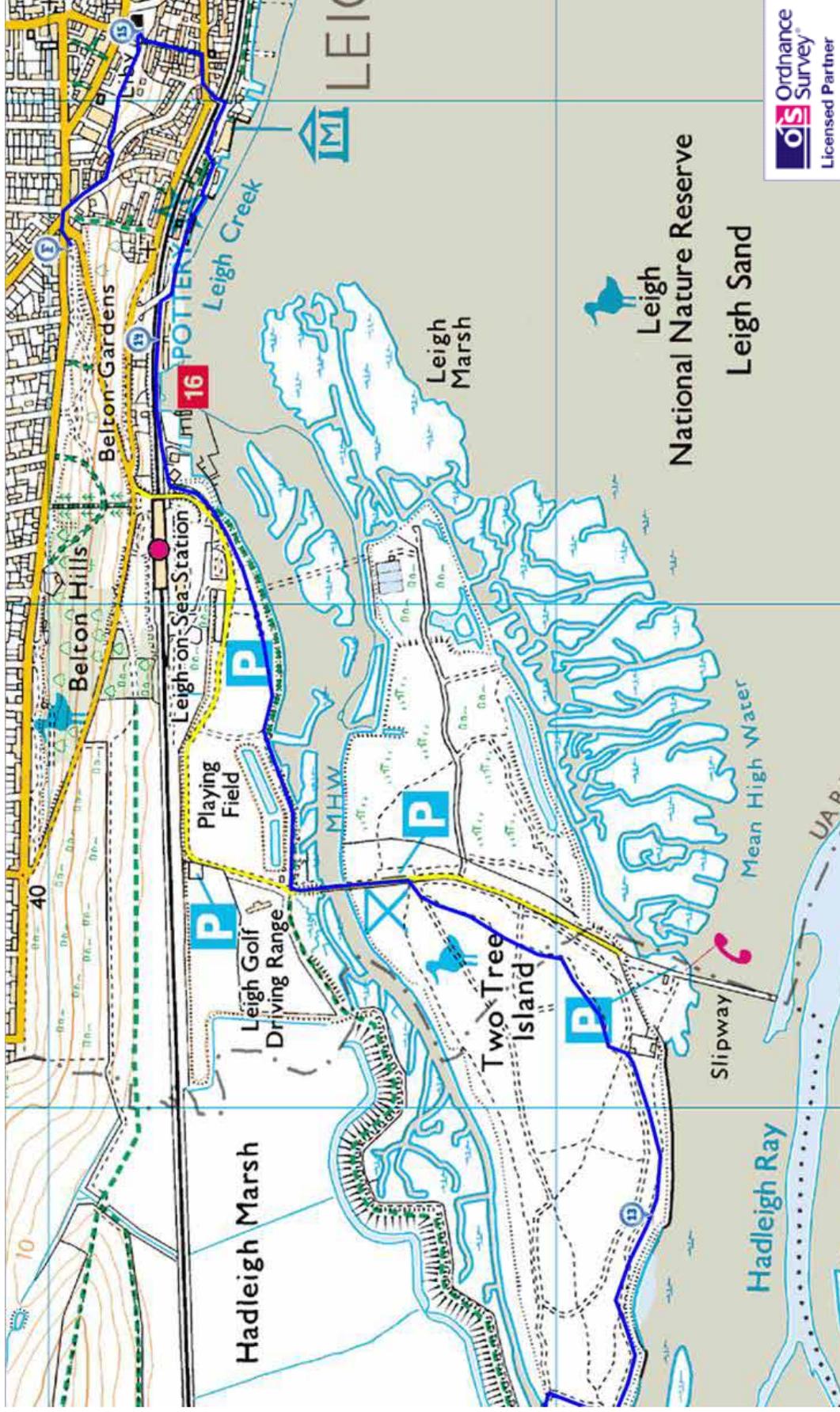
First part of the route



Stopping points

- 1.** Benfleet railway station
- 2.** By Benfleet Creek
- 3.** Benfleet Marina
- 4. - 11.** Benfleet Creek embankment
- 12.** Two Tree Island bird hide
- 13.** Two Tree Island

Second part of the route



Stopping points

- 13.** Two Tree Island
- 14.** Cockle sheds, High Street, Old Leigh
- 15.** St Clement's churchyard
- 16.** Marine Drive

Directions

Listen to each track then read the directions below to get to the next stop.

1. Welcome to the Essex Estuary

Benfleet railway station

Directions 1

Exit Benfleet railway station on the London-bound side. Pass the bus stops and cross the road at the pedestrian crossing. Stop on the footpath beside the creek. Listen to Track 2.

2. An Arcadian land

By Benfleet Creek

Directions 2

Continue along the path towards the road bridge. Cross the road into Ferry Road and walk parallel to railway lines. Go through the metal gates into the marina and listen to Track 3.

3. Messing around in boats

Benfleet Marina

Directions 3

Walk the full length of the marina on the tarmac road. At the end, go through the gate into Hadleigh Castle Country Park and follow the footpath along the embankment. After a short distance, listen to Track 4.

4. Not just mud

Benfleet Creek embankment

Directions 4

Continue along the embankment. Stop after a short distance and listen to Track 5.

5. Taming the tide

Benfleet Creek embankment

Directions 5

Continue along the embankment. Stop after a short distance and listen to Track 6.

6. Flood!

Benfleet Creek embankment

Directions 6

Continue along the embankment. Stop after a short distance and listen to Track 7.

7. Rising sea levels

Benfleet Creek embankment

Directions 7

Continue along the embankment. Stop after a short distance and listen to Track 8.

8. Fresh air

Benfleet Creek embankment

Directions 8

Continue along the embankment. Stop where the embankment bends and the footpath passes through a gate. Listen to Track 9.

9. Second chance

Benfleet Creek embankment

Directions 9

Remain in the same place and listen to Track 10.

10. A romantic ruin

Benfleet Creek embankment

Directions 10

Continue along the embankment. After a short distance the embankment turns 90 degrees to the right. Stop on the corner overlooking the fields and listen to Track 12.

11. Working the land

Benfleet Creek embankment

Directions 11

Continue along the embankment until you are alongside Two Tree Island on the right. There is a footpath that crosses the creek onto the island. This is passable most of the time, although you might get muddy. Once on the island, keep on the right-hand footpath and walk along to the bird hide.

Note: If the tide is too high to cross the creek listen to Stops 12 and 13 here then continue along the embankment. Rejoin the walk route by the road bridge off the island (see Directions 13).

12. Bird paradise

Two Tree Island bird hide

Directions 12

From the bird hide, take the footpath to the right and follow it round the edge of the island. Stop part way along this path and listen to Track 13.

13. From dump to sanctuary

Two Tree Island

Directions 13

Make your way across the island to the road bridge. Cross the bridge then take the footpath on the right round the back of Leigh Motorboat Club. Follow the embankment footpath for half a mile. On the approach to Leigh railway station, take the small road to the right between the railway line and the boatyard. Stop by the cockle sheds and listen to Track 14.

14. Cockles and mussels

Cockle sheds, High Street, Old Leigh

Directions 14

Continue past the cockle sheds to the seafront at Old Leigh. Follow the seafront path past the cafés and pubs. Follow the cobbled High Street past Leigh Heritage Centre. At the sign for Leigh on Sea Sailing Club, cross the pedestrian bridge over the railway. Turn right up Leigh Hill, cross at the pedestrian crossing and take the next left, which is Church Hill. Climb Church Hill and at the top turn right into St Clement's churchyard. Listen to Track 15.

15. Cockleshell heroes

St Clement's churchyard

Directions 15

Leave the churchyard the way you went in. Cross over the top of Church Hill and go through the gate. Follow the path through the Library Gardens. Near the end of the gardens, take the footpath on the left that drops diagonally downwards. Exit the gardens at the gate and steps at the bottom corner and turn right up Leigh Park Road (becomes Hadleigh Road). Follow the road upwards round the curve. At the junction, turn left along Marine Parade. Stay on the upper footpath to enjoy the views over the estuary.

16. A bleak affection

Marine Drive

Directions 16

You may wish to retrace your steps back into Leigh-on-Sea for rest and refreshments. To return to Benfleet, continue along Marine Drive then bear left down the slope to Leigh-on-Sea railway station from where regular services run. Alternatively you can return on foot via Hadleigh Castle and Country Park.

Try other walks in the Discovering Britain series elsewhere along the River Thames

City of streams and spires

Explore Oxford's fascinating network of waterways

<http://www.discoveringbritain.org/walks/region/south-east-england/oxford-waterways.html>



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Livelihood, leisure and literature along the Thames at Marlow

<http://www.discoveringbritain.org/walks/region/south-east-england/marlow.html>



Ebb and flow

Explore the non-tidal River Thames between Molesey and Kingston

<http://www.discoveringbritain.org/walks/region/greater-london/london-kingston.html>



Transforming the riverside

Discover stories behind the redevelopment of the River Thames in central London

<http://www.discoveringbritain.org/walks/region/greater-london/london-south-bank.html>



District 45

Travel back in time to London's Deptford 100 years ago

<http://www.discoveringbritain.org/walks/region/greater-london/london-deptford.html>



Trains and boats and planes

Explore the changing riverside and docks at North Woolwich

<http://www.discoveringbritain.org/walks/region/greater-london/london-woolwich.html>



Further information

350 Miles: An Essex Journey

by Jason Orton and Ken Worpole, 2005

Hadleigh Country Park

www.hadleighcountrypark.co.uk

Leigh on Sea Endeavour Trust

www.endeavourtrust.co.uk

Old Leigh community website

www.oldleigh.com

Canvey Island community archive

www.canveyisland.org.uk

Hadleigh Farm

www.hadleighfarm.org.uk

The Leigh Society

www.leighsociety.com

Project Redsand

www.project-redsand.com



Leigh Creek at low tide
© Jenny Lunn

Credits

The RGS-IBG would like to thank the following people and organisations for their assistance in producing this Discovering Britain walk:

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Sunset over the cockle boat 'Endeavour'
© Jenny Lunn



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