



Viewpoint

Turning the tide



Time: 15 mins

Region: North East England

Landscape: coastal



Location: Horden Beach, Horden, County Durham, SR8 4HN

Grid reference: NZ 45431 40816

Getting there: From Horden, go under the railway bridge to the end of Cotsford Lane

Keep an eye out for: Film crews – the beaches have starred in Get Carter and Alien 3!

This stretch of the Durham Coast is breathtaking, seemingly unspoilt, and as peaceful as you'd find in Britain.

Despite stunning views to rival those of neighbouring Yorkshire and Northumberland, you won't meet flocks of tourists on the beach or along the coastal path. It's also a wildlife haven, home to skylarks, rare butterflies and wildflowers.

But as recently as the 1980s this was once one of the most polluted beaches in Europe.

Discover why Horden Beach is one of writer Patrick Barkham's favourite places.



Under the railway line beyond the old mining village of Horden is a grassy clifftop field and then an impressive sweep of beach. Below slumping limestone cliffs, the sand is dotted with vividly-coloured stones – umber, clay and, most spectacularly, a sulphurous yellow.

These are not natural hues but stains of iron oxide constantly washed and rolled by the North Sea. The alien-looking colours are a consequence of a century of coal mining beneath the beautiful, neglected and continually overlooked coastline of Durham.

As late as the 1980s, British Coal continued to dump on Durham’s beaches waste from the mines that followed seams far under the North Sea: 40 million tonnes of toxic sludge and mine tailings were deposited on this coast in total.

Beaches like Horden’s became black with coal. Some locals collected it; others remember as children turning black with pollution after daring to swim in these waters.

After the last mines closed here in the 1990s, it was forecast to take at least half a century for these beaches to be washed clean again. But nature – assisted by Heritage Lottery funds – can repair our damage more quickly than expected and barely 25 years on they are stunning and virtually clean.

Local people say good fishing has returned and the main evidence of beach pollution – a miniature cliff of compacted “mine stone” of many colours – looks to the untrained eye like a rather attractive ancient geological deposit.

The mining towns were built turning their backs on the seaside. Today many visitors follow their lead – ignoring the great secret that is the Durham coast for the more predictable attractions of the North Yorkshire or Northumberland coast.

It may have been spoilt by the 20th century but in the 21st century, Durham’s beaches now meet every criteria for “unspoilt” coast – peaceful, free of human intrusion, and blessed with flower-rich Magnesian limestone grassland. And even the North Sea can be a surprisingly cobalt blue on a sunny day.

Patrick Barkham is the author of *Coastlines – The Story of Our Shore*, published by Granta



Collecting sea coal



Coal waste on Horden Beach