



Viewpoint

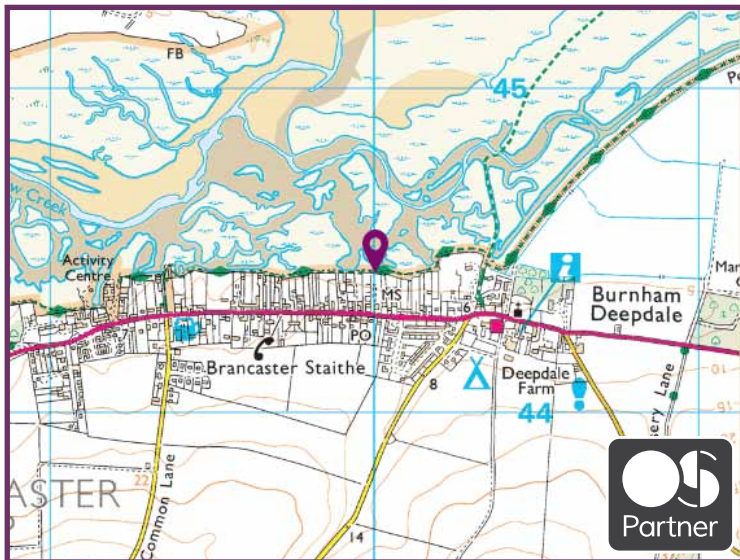
Worth its salt



Time: 15 mins

Region: East of England

Landscape: coastal



Location: Brancaster Staithe, Norfolk PE31 8BJ

Grid reference: TF 79343 44461

Directions: Park at the White Horse pub and walk through car park to stop at the Norfolk Coast Path

Keep an eye out for: Scolt Head Island – reached by boat or across the salt marsh at low tide

Depending on the time of day, this landscape can look very different. At low tide there's more land than sea. Glistening grey mudflats stalked by terns and waders stretch out endlessly ahead.

With a pair of stout wellies this feels like terra firma. At high tide it becomes another place. The vegetation is completely submerged. The land lost to view. Boats become the only means of travel.

So why is this shifting, unstable landscape so vital to the health and wealth of our coastline?



North Norfolk is one of Britain's favourite holiday places. The coastline is justly celebrated for its big skies and spectacular sunsets. People are drawn here to walk, sail, photograph, bird watch and of course eat.

And it's the salt marsh landscape that makes all this possible.

Pubs like The White Horse just behind us are known for their locally caught seafood and for samphire a seaweed-like vegetable that grows on the marsh. Notice too the fishing boats and lobster pots still used by fishermen.

Shellfish is still an important industry in North Norfolk, providing a livelihood and a way of life for local people. But salt marsh doesn't only bring economic benefits, it's hugely important in defending our coastline. Saltmarsh is made up of hardy plants and mud which absorb energy from the sea's waves, robbing them of their destructive force before they pound the shore and erode our coastline.

In some areas, particularly along the East Coast of England where artificial defences like sea walls line the shore, a process of 'managed realignment' now allows the sea to breach these defences (through strategic holes) and encourage new salt marsh to develop.

If you look straight ahead and slightly to the right, the higher land you can see is Scolt Head Island. This is a barrier island. As this spit of land has grown out parallel to the shore it has created a 'barrier' sheltering the coastline from the rough sea. It is in these sheltered areas that saltmarsh flourishes. As the sea moves more slowly in these 'low energy' areas, it deposits fine silt which in turn allows plants to put down their roots.

Plants like samphire and eelgrass colonise the silty mud and their roots further stabilise the soil. Gradually these clumps of vegetation grow and tidal waters are restricted to flowing in certain channels forming beautiful twisting creeks that from the air look like the roots of a tree.

Cockles and mussels alive, alive-o

Whitstable is known for its oysters, Southend for cockles and Morecambe Bay for potted shrimp. But have you ever wondered why these areas are famous for their seafood?

The answer is salt marsh. Crustaceans like lobsters, mussels, oysters and cockles thrive in the calm, nutrient-rich waters of estuaries or the sheltered lee of spits and islands.

Most of Britain's 80,000 acres of salt marsh is concentrated in just four areas – the Thames Estuary; the Essex Coast; Liverpool and Morecambe Bay; and The Wash making these places the seafood hotspots of Britain.