



Viewpoint

A pinch of salt



Time: 15 mins

Region: East Midlands

Landscape: rural



Location: North Lane, Marshchapel, Lincolnshire

Grid reference: TA 36680 00100

Directions: Coming from the north into Marshchapel there is a chicane. North Lane heads east directly off the chicane. Follow the lane until you arrive at a fork in the road.

Keep an eye out for: Westward views up to the rising Lincolnshire Wolds

Despite their popular reputation, the marshlands of the Lincolnshire coast are far from flat.

In contrast to the high rolling chalk Wolds to the east, the coastal plain does lack a certain elevation, however, a closer look reveals all sorts of humps and bumps within the marshes.

The area east of Marshchapel is particularly well endowed with low mounds which seem to have no natural explanation.

Why are there low hills in the otherwise flat Lincolnshire marshes?



Standing where three tracks meet, two kilometres inland, you are surrounded by rich arable fields. You will notice how they rise and fall in a series of low hills, quite a contrast to the flat marshland between here and the Wolds.

East of the Wolds, the chalk dips down steeply and is overlain by glacial clays. This undulating surface has been covered by later sands and silts that have been washed in over the last ten thousand years. In places the clay surface pokes through these flood deposits, forming subtle raised 'islands'. In an environment once dominated by fluctuating sea levels, mudflats and tidal creeks, these islands offered dry land on which early settlements like Maltby, Hagnaby and Asserby grew up.

You might be forgiven for thinking the undulating fields surrounding this Marshchapel viewpoint are part of this natural clay formation. However, these mounds are man-made. Running for miles in a north-south direction, they mark the old coastline, complementing the storm blown sands and later reclamation schemes, which have all contributed to the terrestrial march eastward. These mounds are salterns – the waste heaps from salt making - and are the remains of an industry that was widespread along the Lincolnshire coast for thousands of years.

Salt is an essential commodity for good health for flavouring food, and was used as a preservative before refrigeration. Every society since the Bronze Age has tried their hand at making salt along this coast and left evidence behind, some of which is deeply buried by millennia of flood deposits.

The Marshchapel mounds represent the last throws of the salt-making industry in the 15th and 16th centuries. The salt laden silts and sands from the coastal flats and creeks were collected, washed and filtered through turf. The resultant brine was collected in large sunken vats and then evaporated over hearths to crystallise the salt. The discarded mud accumulated into piles and then the mounds we can see today.

The salt found its way out of the marshes and into the domestic market along the long straight droveways known as 'salt roads'. However, demand for salt extended across the sea and as well as being sent west, it was exported across Europe. The havens of these old Lincolnshire ports, such as Saltfleet, Somercotes and Theddlethorpe, have long since silted up.