



Viewpoint

Everyday archeology



Time: 15 mins

Region: South East England

Landscape: rural



Location: Pegwell Bay, Sandwich Road, Ramsgate, Kent CT12 5HY

Grid reference: TR 35190 64343

Getting there: The bay can be viewed from the parking and picnic area just beyond the café. To access the bay, walk towards the Viking Ship and use the stairs going down to the left.

Keep an eye out for: Evidence of the old hovercraft slipways and parking bays.

Pegwell Bay, a National Nature Reserve, is a popular spot for birdwatchers and coastal path walkers. The mudflats and saltmarshes, fed by the Stour estuary, are rich in shellfish and invertebrates, attracting local and visiting wading birds.

But between the picturesque view of the bay and the picnic spot, with its bustling café and iconic Viking Ship, is a strange wasteland of broken tarmac and road paint.

What is the modern history of this ancient coast?



Here on the shore of Pegwell Bay you're experiencing a real edgeland, a space created by man and reclaimed by nature. From the 1960s to the 1980s, hovercraft crossed the channel from here to Calais, speedy in their rubber skirts. Now the hoverport buildings have gone, the parking bays and launch pad are overgrown with ivy and the traces that remain are ripe with narrative possibility. This is a place for junior explorers, storytellers, imaginative walkers and psychogeographers: archaeologists of the everyday and overlooked.

Follow the steps down to the bay and wander around. The joy of Pegwell Bay is in its hidden treasures and unlikely juxtapositions. Explore it as you would the garden of a grand estate with its carefully crafted 'wilderness' and follies. Rust stains on concrete lead to an iron ring like a giant plug. The beach is a heap of shells.

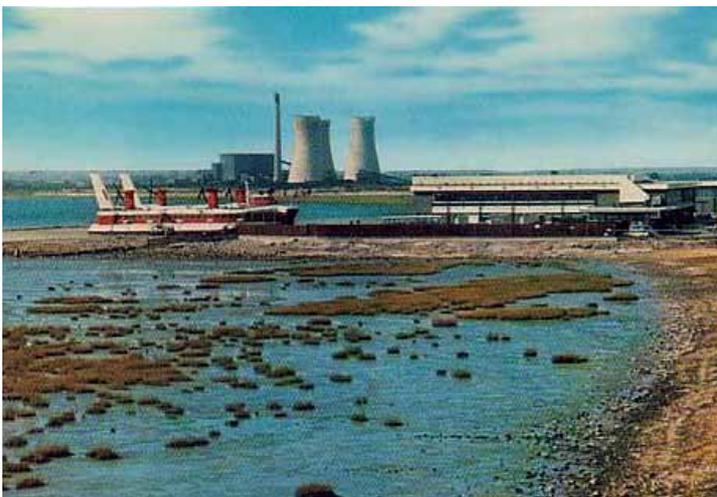
Explosions of white and lilac buddleia break through tarmac, ablaze with butterflies. The occasional artefacts from hoverport days raise questions, tease with their presence: sets of steps, a raised platform to nowhere, a wooden construction with cabling, bollards, drain covers, esoteric numbers in white paint, cats-eye sockets.

Reclaiming these with their tangles of foliage are the usual edgeland suspects, the plantain, dog roses and old-man's-beard, but here they grow amongst lines of evergreens that suggest deliberate planting. Aerial photography shows that the labyrinthine walls of greenery we can follow on foot mark the roads and bays of the port. A mini roundabout is now a heady scented island of jasmine.

This is a place alive with creaks, rustlings and chirpings. Crickets out-hiss the sea. Towards the water's edge are sibilant reed beds, bordered by ragged allotments of sea purslane, sea beet and wild rocket. Against the soundtrack of gulls, corvids and pigeons, ornithologists can seek out curlew, redshank, grey plover and turnstone. The exposed bank above is quarried by generations of nesting birds and tunnelling insects.

On a summer's day, the mustard-yellow umbrellas of flowering fennel and dusty alexanders are prolific, making a blue sky seem even bluer. This is good blackberry country, brambles growing in thick clumps amongst hawthorn and blackthorn. Foragers can do well here in the autumn.

Lovers of wintry coastlines can be certain of a good windy walk, the breeze coming fresh from the sea within the sheltering cliff arms. Spring sees tender greenery and blossom, with enough early sun for the first ice-cream of the year. The hoverport remains, like any set of ruins, add poignancy to your walk. Visit at any time of the year and you will discover something to make you stop, ponder, and possibly spin a tale.



Hovercraft port at Pegwell Bay and towers of Richborough power station



The white chalk cliffs of Pegwell Bay