

Shifting sands

A self guided walk around Rye and Winchelsea



Explore the changing fortunes of two historic East Sussex towns
Find out how land and lives were shaped by the power of the sea
Visit a harbour inland, a castle that moved and a port that vanished
Discover how people have adapted and thrived in an unusual landscape

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*the stories of our landscapes
discovered through walks*







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Shifting sands

Explore the changing fortunes of Rye and Winchelsea

Introduction

A harbour two miles inland. A town that fell into the sea. Sheep that like to live by the coast. Smugglers sneaking across tidal marshes. Pilotless planes appearing from across the water. A coastal walk where you only glimpse the sea from afar.

Some surprising stories await you on this walk around the historic towns of Rye and Winchelsea in East Sussex...

Discover how coastal processes – tides, waves and currents – have created a distinct physical landscape. Find out how people have made a living from an ever-changing environment subject to the whims of the sea. Also explore how the coastal position has influenced military fortifications and defences.

This walk is a fascinating story of human resilience, adaptation and survival in response to the forces of nature.



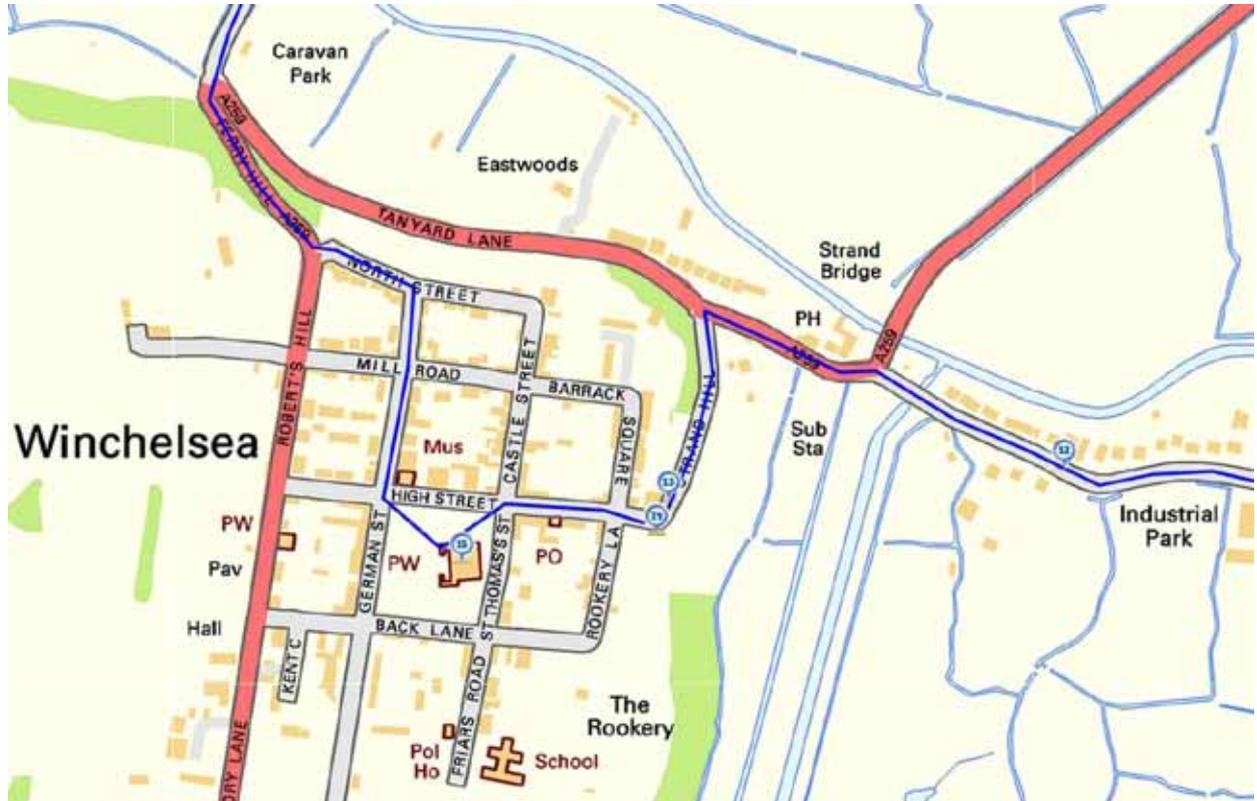
Rye old harbour (top) and inland shingle ridges at Camber Castle (bottom)

Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

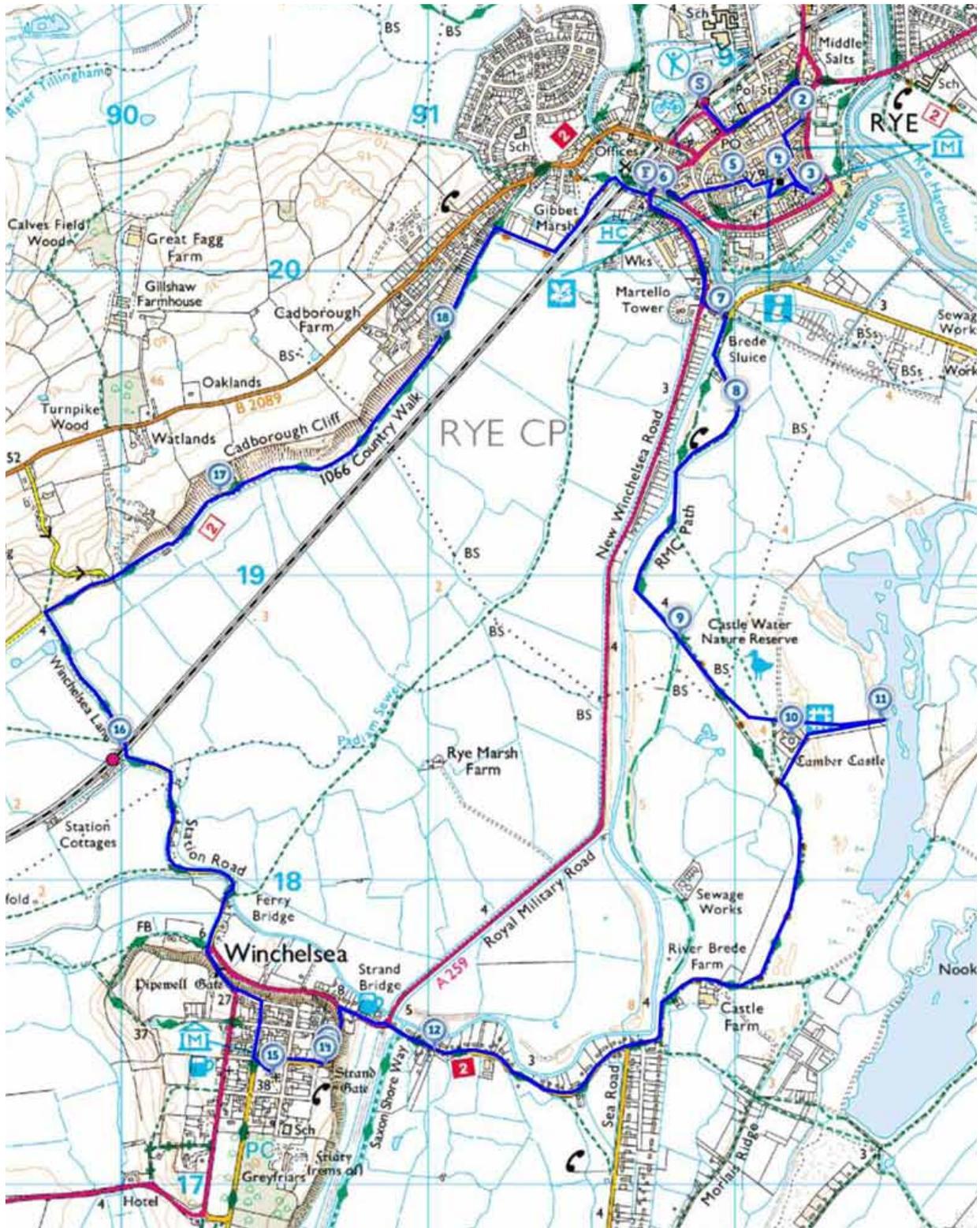
Detail of the route in Rye



Detail of the route in Winchelsea



Route overview



Stopping points

1. Rye railway station
2. The Lookout, Hilder's Cliff
3. Gun Gardens, next to Ypres Tower
4. St Mary's Church
5. Mermaid Street
6. Old Rye harbour
7. Bridge and lock over the River Brede
8. Path beyond Castle Cottages
9. On footpath towards Camber Castle
10. Camber Castle
11. Castle Water Nature Reserve bird hide
12. Sea Road
13. Strand Gate
14. The Lookout, beside Strand Gate
15. Winchelsea Church
16. Winchelsea railway station
17. Footpath beneath Cadborough Cliffs
18. Footpath beneath Cadborough Cliffs
19. Rye old harbour

Practical information

Location	Rye and Winchelsea, East Sussex, Southeast England
Getting there	<p>Train - Rye is on the 'Marshlink' line with Hastings and Ashford International (two trains per hour)</p> <p>Bus - Stagecoach routes 100 and 101 run to Rye via Dover and Hastings (one bus per hour). There are also local routes from Tenterden and Tunbridge Wells. The nearest bus stop is outside Rye train station.</p> <p>Car - Rye is on the A259 between Folkestone and Hastings. The town is accessible from the M20</p> <p>Bicycle - located on National Cycle Network Route 2</p>
Start point & postcode	Rye railway station, TN31 7AB
Finish point	Rye old harbour
Onward journey	The route is almost circular. To return to Rye station from the end of the route please use the directions on page 33.
Distance	6½ miles
Level	Moderate – a mostly flat route with some steep hills in the two towns. Mixture of paved roads, cobbles and grassland.
Conditions	<p>Wear good walking shoes and watch your footing on the grazing land before Camber Castle. The Brede Lock and Camber Castle section can be very blustery.</p> <p>Take great care when crossing the railway line at Winchelsea station.</p>

Suitable for

Families – plenty to explore in the towns plus stories of smuggling to entertain children

Dogs – keep on a lead by the towns, roads and grazing land

Refreshments

There are plenty of cafes and pubs in Rye, including The Mermaid Inn (at Stop 5)

In Winchelsea, The New Inn pub on German Street serves lunch and evening meals (Tel: 01797 226252)

There are no refreshments between the towns so you may want to prepare a picnic / buy provisions in Rye

Facilities

Public toilets opposite Rye station and at Rye old harbour

Other info

Rye Heritage Centre houses the famous Rye Town Model and a collection of antique amusement machines (see Tourist information below)

Rye Castle Museum is based at 3 East Street and the Ypres Tower (Stop 3). The Museum is open weekends and Bank Holidays, the Tower is open 7 days a week subject to weather conditions. Small entry fees for both (Tel: 01797 226728)

St Mary's Church tower (Stop 4) is well worth a visit for views across the town and to see the bells. Open subject to weather. Tickets on sale at the tower base.

Rye Farmer's Market is held each Wednesday from 10am at Strand Quay

Binoculars are recommended for birdspotting at **Rye Harbour Nature Reserve** (www.wildrye.info)

Tourist information

Rye Heritage Centre, Strand Quay, Rye TN31 7AY
(Tel: 01797 22 66 96, website: www.ryeheritage.co.uk)

1. Shaped by the sea

Rye railway station

Welcome to Rye and Winchelsea. My name is Raymond Molony and I am a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. This coast is always an interesting location to visit. It's a place where physical geography meets human geography and there are always so many fascinating stories to tell.

This part of the South Coast has been shaped by the sea – using its waves, tides and currents. The coastal location has offered both challenges and opportunities to centuries of settlers, invaders and defenders. Its two towns Rye and Winchelsea have variously prospered and declined over the centuries in response to the ever-changing landscape.



Town signs for Rye and Winchelsea
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

During this walk, you will be able to see evidence of the coastal processes that have shaped, and continue to shape, the landscape. You will learn how people have made a living from this marginal environment over the centuries. Discover how this area has been at the front line of defending the country from continental attack for over a thousand years.

This circular walk is about six and a half miles long, from Rye to Winchelsea and back. The route is mostly flat - but since both Rye and Winchelsea are located on high ground, there are some steep slopes in the two towns. The route uses a mixture of roads and footpaths. Please take care when crossing roads.

Directions 1

Follow the road immediately outside the station. Turn left along Cinque Ports Street, which becomes Tower Street. Turn right though the Landgate and walk up Hilder's Cliff. Stop at the viewpoint on the left hand side.

2. Welcome to Rye

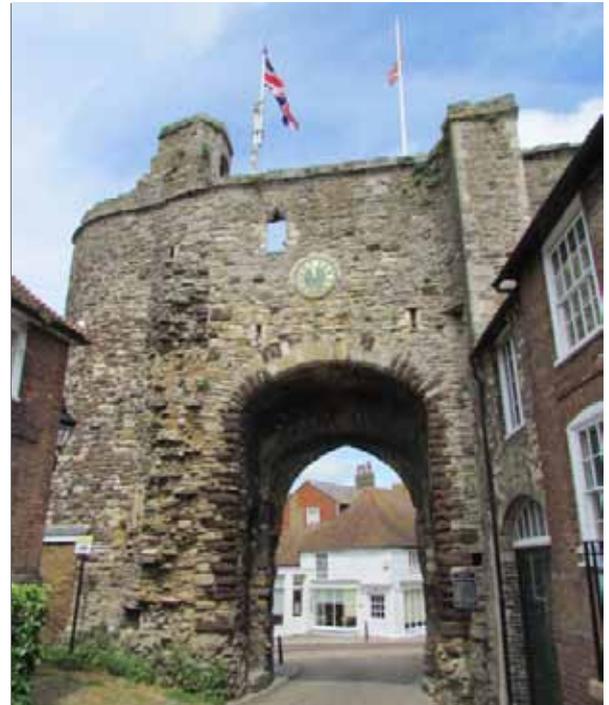
The Lookout, Hilder's Cliff

You've just come through a stone gateway called the Landgate. It was built in 1340 and is one of the historic entrances into the town of Rye.

Today, Rye is a small town with a population of about 4,000. But its small size and status today conceals a history as an important port and defensive site. There was probably a settlement and port here in Roman times, but our history on this walk begins with the Normans.

William the Conqueror invaded England a little further along this coast in 1066. Rye itself was spared from the pillaging of his soldiers because the town was owned by French monks. The town reverted to English ownership in 1247. By medieval times, Rye prospered, largely because of maritime trade, as we shall find out when we reach the old harbour. Many of the town's buildings date back to the medieval era. Some have now changed their usage, but others still retain their original function.

In subsequent centuries, Rye's fortunes waned – but the townspeople managed to adapt and survive. On this walk, you will find out how they made a living through fishing and farming, legal trade and illegal smuggling. You will also see evidence of Rye's contemporary reinvention as a leisure and tourism destination.



The Landgate, built in 1340
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Directions 2

From the lookout, continue along the High Street. Take the first left into East Street. At the top, follow the road along to the right. Take the first left into Church Square. Follow the cobbled street down to the Ypres Tower. Go through the stone archway to stop at a lookout point where there are some cannons.

3. Defending the realm

Gun Gardens, next to Ypres Tower

From this viewpoint, you get a sense of the elevated position of Rye old town above the surrounding land and rivers. The town is located on top of a rocky outcrop known as the Citadel. As you can see, this is an excellent defensive position for spotting and repelling any invaders coming from the sea. In fact, the south coast of England has always been at the front line of attacks from the continent, which is just over 30 miles away.

The stone tower is known as the Ypres Tower. It is thought to have been the town's only defensive structure in the thirteenth century until King Edward III gave several grants for the building of town walls and two gates – the Landgate that you went through earlier and the Strandgate. The defenses didn't stop the French, who raided the town several times in the fourteenth century. After that, the tower had a variety of other functions over the centuries including a court house, prison, soup kitchen for the poor, mortuary, fire engine house and a private residence. Since 1954, it has been the home to the town's museum.

Meanwhile, a Gun Garden was created in the sixteenth century during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Elizabeth was at war with Spain and the Spanish Armada sailed up the English Channel ready to attack. Rye was an important invasion target so this platform was created for cannon. By 1649, there was no longer a threat of attacks so the Gun Garden became a bowling green open to residents of the town.



The Ypres Tower and Gun Gardens, both of which have served a variety of purposes
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

By 1740 Britain expected war with France, Saxony and Bavaria so the gun platform was strengthened and expanded. Later, during the Napoleonic wars, men from Rye who volunteered for military service drilled here. The cannons were also used by local clubs with people coming from miles around to watch the annual spectacle of Prize Firing Day. By 1925 it was opened to the public as a viewpoint. A visitor to Rye in the 1950s and 1960s would find it populated by flower beds and deckchairs!

The Ypres Tower and Gun Garden show how sites created for military purposes have been reused in different conflicts and how the sites can be reinvented for pleasure and recreation in more peaceful times. Throughout this walk, you will see more evidence of military fortifications and defensive sites created over a period of 1,000 years for different wars and conflicts.



Picturesque houses in Church Square
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Directions 3

Retrace your steps through the arch. At the corner of the churchyard, turn left along Church Square. As you walk, take time to admire the wonderful medieval houses. At the far corner of the churchyard, turn right into the churchyard.

4. Stolen bells

St Mary's Church

Building of this church began in the early twelfth century when the French monks owned the town of Rye and the surrounding area. But by the fourteenth century, the French were the enemy. There were a series of raids on the town, the worst being in 1377, when the French looted the town and set it on fire. The church was extensively damaged and the roof fell in.

Even worse, the French stole the church bells and carried them back to Normandy. But the people of Rye sailed across the following year, recovered the church bells and much of their stolen possessions. One of the bells was hung in the town to give warning of any future attack – the street became known as Watchbell Street.

Look for the church clock above the main door. It was installed in 1561 and is one of the oldest church turret clocks in the country still functioning.



St Mary's church tower and clock
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



St Mary's Church bells
© Laura Shawyer

The present clock dates from 1760 and inside the church you can also see the swinging pendulum. It's an unusual clock because it strikes the quarter hours but not the hour.

Do go inside the church and look around. You can also climb the tower (it is open daily, weather permitting). From there, you will get a good sense of the layout of the old town and the surrounding countryside.

Directions 4

When you leave the church by the main door, turn left and walk along the right hand side of Church Square. Continue straight along West Street, which is a narrow cobbled street. Follow it round to the right and then take the first left down Mermaid Street, which is also narrow and cobbled. Stop outside the Mermaid Inn.

5. A smuggler's song

Mermaid Street

As you go down Mermaid Street, you won't find it hard to imagine that you're back in the fourteenth century, when Rye was a thriving town. Look out for buildings with strange names such as 'The House Opposite', 'The House with the Seat' and 'The House with Two Front Doors'.



Look out for the unusual house names on Mermaid Street
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

The Mermaid Inn is one of England's oldest inns. The sign says that it was rebuilt in 1420. The oldest part of the building is the cellars, cut from the rock, which date back to 1156. By the 1300s, the inn here was built from wattle and daub. It brewed its own ale and charged a penny a night for lodging. When the French raided Rye in 1377, the inn burned down along with the rest of the town, although the cellar survived. It was rebuilt in its current form in 1420.

This street – which was then called Middle Street – was the main entrance into the town from the port which was at the bottom of the street. So the inn was well used by merchants, mariners and tradesmen.



Mermaid Street takes you back to the fourteenth century
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

We will hear later in the walk how and why the fortunes of the town changed. In place of legal trade the townspeople survived by smuggling. Contraband was stored in the cellars of houses and inns of the town. There was even a secret passageway between The Mermaid Inn and The Olde Bell Inn. In the mid 1700s, the Mermaid Inn was the headquarters of the notorious Hawkhurst gang, which was a band of about 600 smugglers.



The Hawkhurst Gang breaking into the Poole customs house in 1747
Illustration from *Sussex Smugglers* (1749) by 'A Gentleman of Chichester'

There's a poem by Rudyard Kipling called *A Smuggler's Song* that captures a scene that could easily have taken place right here in Mermaid Street on a dark evening. Here are the first two verses:

*If you wake at midnight, and hear a horse's feet,
Don't go drawing back the blind, or looking in the street.
Them that ask no questions isn't told a lie.
Watch the wall, my darling, while the Gentlemen go by!*

*Five and twenty ponies, Trotting through the dark --
Brandy for the Parson, 'Baccy for the Clerk;
Laces for a lady, letters for a spy,
And watch the wall, my darling, while the Gentlemen go by!*

Directions 5

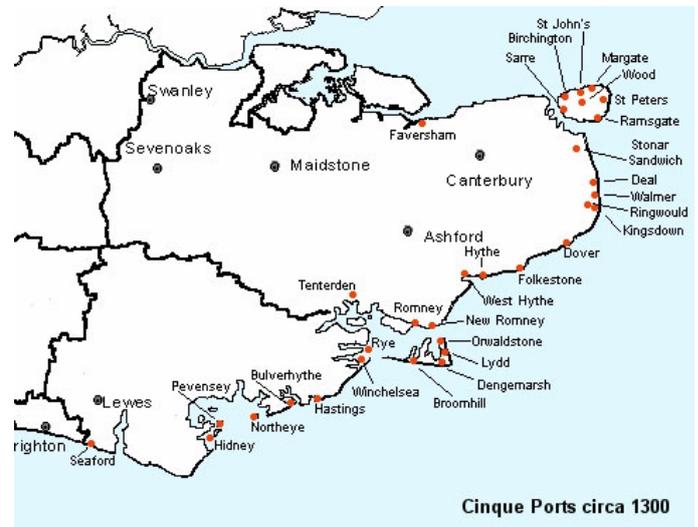
Continue down Mermaid Street. At the bottom of Mermaid Street is Rye Heritage Centre. Cross over Strand Quay to the banks of the harbour.

6. Changing fortunes

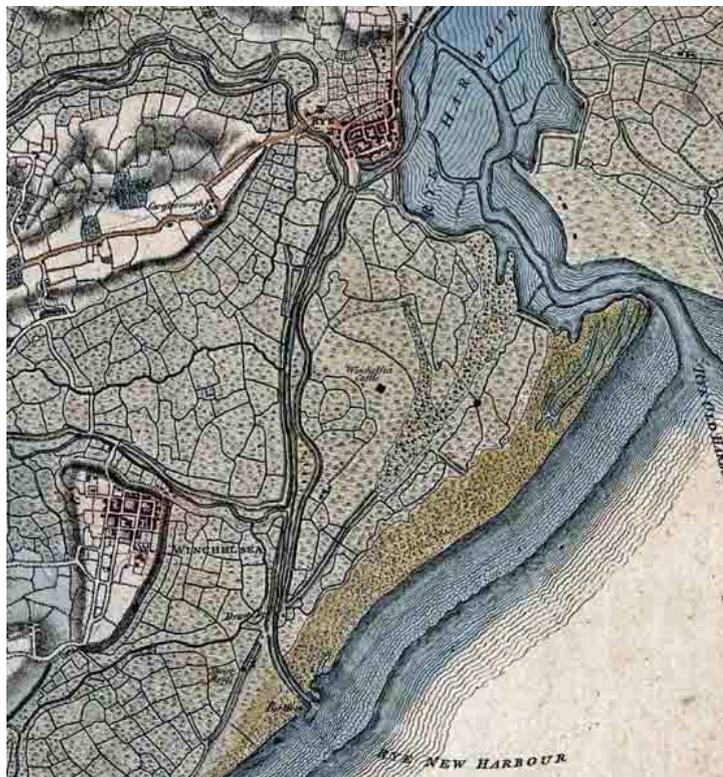
Old Rye harbour

This is Rye's ancient harbour. Medieval maps show that Rye was located on a huge bay in the English Channel. Now this harbour is about two miles from the open sea, but we shall learn about the physical processes that moved the coastline later in our walk.

Nine hundred years ago, this harbour provided a safe anchorage. In 1189, the town became a member of the Confederation of Cinque Ports. This group of ports along the South Coast received special privileges from the king in return for providing ships and men for the navy in times of war. Under this royal protection, Rye became a thriving port. Wines were imported from France; wool was exported to the continent.



Map of the Cinque Ports (c. 1300)
By kind permission of www.villagenet.co.uk



Map showing Winchelsea and Rye
and the marshes between them (1783)
By kind permission of Rye Harbour Image Library

But after the fourteenth century, the thriving maritime trade was threatened by two things. The first threat was long shore drift. Long shore drift is a process where sand or shingle from beaches is gradually moved along the coastline. Where these materials move across a bay or a mouth of an estuary, they can change the flow of water.

The second threat was land reclamation. On the marshes, landowners had started draining the land for agricultural use. This reduced the natural tidal flow which normally kept the river channels clear. So, as a result of both long shore drift and land reclamation, Rye harbour began to silt up.

It was such an important port that an Act of Parliament was passed to keep the River Rother navigable to ships up to Rye harbour. But humans only have a limited capacity to intervene in natural processes. Over subsequent centuries, the river became shallower. At the same time, ships were getting larger. Trade moved to more accessible ports elsewhere along the coast and the people of Rye had to find alternative means of earning a living.

Today, old Rye harbour still has a small fishing fleet. There are about 20 vessels, which catch scallops, plaice and sole in the shallow waters of Rye Bay. Most of the fish is sold across the channel at Boulogne in France.

The old harbour is also part of Rye's re-incarnation as a destination for leisure and tourism. For example, the white windmill that you can see across the Winchelsea Road has been turned into an upmarket bed and breakfast establishment. Meanwhile, the new Rye Harbour is located a mile and a quarter down the River Rother towards the sea.



Rye Harbour is still a working harbour though now often used for leisure and tourism too
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Directions 6

Cross over the harbour at the road bridge and follow Winchelsea Road round to the left. Continue along the pavement for about 400 yards. Where the main road bends to the right, note the entrance to Martello Close; you might be able to see a Martello Tower which is now a private house. Turn left along Harbour Road, following the signs for Rye Harbour. Stop at the bridge and lock on the River Brede.

7. Fighting the French

Bridge and lock over the River Brede

Rye is connected to three rivers – the Rother, and its tributaries the Tillingham and the Brede. While the River Rother provided access from the town to the sea, it was also a channel for potential invaders and therefore needed defending.

During the early 1800s, a Martello tower was built in Rye. There was a chain of Martello towers all the way along the South Coast defending England from the advances of the French Emperor Napoleon. Each tower consisted of 25 men and cannon designed to sweep away the approaching enemy. There is still one near here, just where you turned into Harbour Road. It is now a private house.



The Martello Tower from above (left) and just visible from Winchelsea Road (right)
© Webb Aviation www.webbaviation.co.uk / Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



The Royal Military Canal at Brede lock
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

In 1809, the River Brede was made part of the 28 mile long Royal Military Canal guarding this coast from Seabrook in Kent to Cliff End near Hastings. There were fortifications along the entire length, including guard houses at each bridge and gun positions every 500 yards. Running alongside the canal was the Military Road. This meant that reinforcements could be rushed to the area quickly to deal with any problems.

In fact, the canal never saw military action. It was used instead to try to control smuggling from Romney Marsh, which we shall hear more about at our next stop.

Because of their strategic location, many defensive sites are reused time and again, as we shall see several times on this walk.

Here at the canal is one example. The canal was built for defense during the Napoleonic Wars. But 132 years later, it was used again in the Second World War.

Look in the garden of the house beside the lock. Can you spot the Second World War concrete bunker? Soldiers would have been posted here defending the canal in 1941.



Can you spot the pill box in someone's garden by Brede lock?
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Directions 7

At the lock, turn right following the signs for Winchelsea Beach. Follow the track to the left of the cottages and go through the gate. Stop where the path bends to the right near a solitary tree.

8. Sheep and smuggling

Path beyond Castle Cottages

At the old harbour, we heard how landowners were reclaiming the marshes from the sea. This flat area was once part of Rye Bay before it was drained for farmland. You can see various drainage channels that are still used today to keep the land dry. Land reclaimed from the sea is rarely suitable for growing crops – it is regularly waterlogged and the soil can be very salty. Instead it is best used for grazing animals.

Here in Rye, specialist sheep flocks were developed that could cope with the wet conditions. Their wool was highly valued by the French. In order to cash in on this trade, the government imposed a wool tax.



Drainage channels that keep the former marshes dry
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



Sheep on the marshes near Camber Castle
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

The locals were not too keen on handing their profits over to the government, so smuggling became rife. The smuggling of wool was known as owling. While wool was smuggled out, tea and spirits were brought in without paying import tax.

The creeks and marshes were an ideal environment for smuggling. As we heard earlier in Mermaid Street, smuggling was rife from the eighteenth century. Locals knew the shifting channels and dangerous sands well and were able to evade the customs officials, although in February 1821, there was a big battle at Brooklands between the customs officials and 250 smugglers. We won't see bands of smugglers on our walk today, but rather the descendants of those Romney Sheep whose resistance to foot rot made them suitable animals for grazing here on the coastal marshes.

Directions 8

Keep following the footpath. After the last of the houses on the other side of the canal, the path takes a left turn and heads straight towards Camber Castle. Stop at the metal gate half way to the castle.

9. Defence and deception

On footpath towards Camber Castle

Rye's position in the English Channel placed it on the front line during the Second World War. Following the evacuation from Dunkirk, Britain was expecting an invasion by the Germans in 1940. In fact, this area had been earmarked by the German 16th Army as a beachhead for Operation Sea Lion the German plan for the invasion of England.

The flat landscape was an ideal landing place – troops could land using gliders or parachutes, cross over the Military Canal then secure airfields further inland. Troops arriving by boat could land on the gently sloping beaches then advance across the flat landscape to seize important ports such as Dover.

With the threat of German invasion, defences were installed to counter this possibility. Camber Castle that you can see in the distance was an observation point. A radar station was set up to the north at Brooklands to detect incoming aircraft. The beaches were mined. The area was fortified with concrete pill boxes which would hold machine gun positions. A system of decoy lights was set up to encourage German bombers to drop their load on this open area rather than on Rye. Concrete bunkers were built for the control staff to shelter in during raids. Today, the rare remains of a concrete Standen Sector shelter can still be seen. Meanwhile, many of Rye's residents were evacuated. This included 85,000 local sheep that were relocated to Yorkshire by train!



Map of Operation Sea Lion
Wereon, Wikimedia Commons



Second World War defences – a Standen Sector Shelter
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Directions 9

Continue along the footpath directly towards Camber Castle. Stop when you reach the castle entrance.

10. Cannon fire on a moving coast

Camber Castle

At this stop, we need to go back in time a few centuries. Following his divorce from his Spanish wife, Catherine of Aragon, Henry VIII feared invasion from Spain and its ally, France.

So he built a series of artillery fortifications to defend the southern coast of England. These were known as Device Forts and Camber Castle is a good example of these Tudor coastal defences.

The castle was constructed in 1539. Its layout reflected the latest thinking in defensive design. Cannon topped its rounded walls, providing improved ballistic protection from ships firing artillery from the bay nearby. The castle cost £16,000 and had a garrison of 42 men.

At the time of creating this walk the castle was usually only open for guided tours on limited days in the summer – check the English Heritage website for details.



Camber Castle from above (top)
and on approach (bottom)

© Webb Aviation www.webbaviation.co.uk /
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



A Tudor map showing Camber Castle (top centre) in an important position defending Rye Harbour

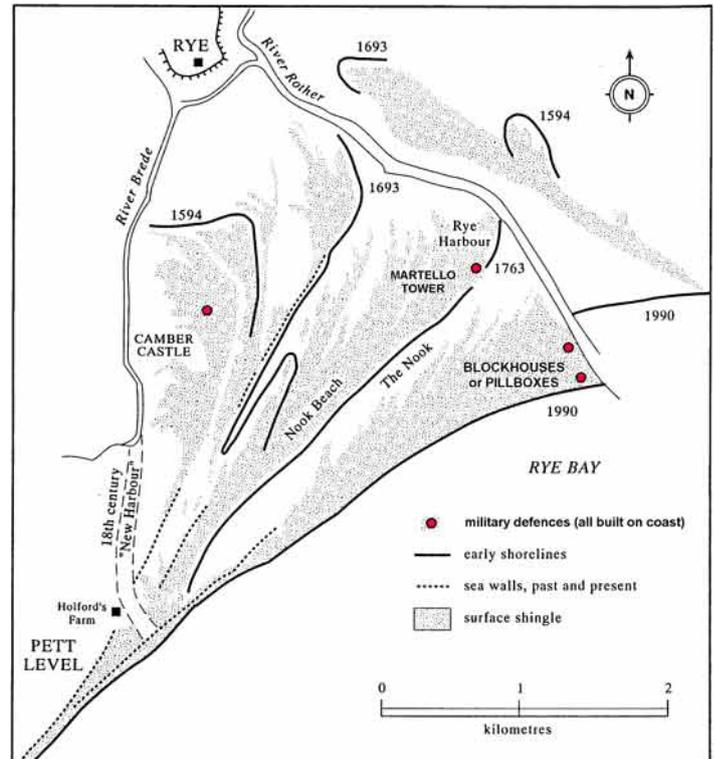
© The National Archives

As we have already seen on this walk, natural processes were at work on this coastline. Sediment was being shifted along the coast by the action of wind and waves, being deposited here and gradually moving the shoreline.

Effectively, the castle was moving inland. Within a few years, cannon balls fired from the castle could not reach the sea! Attempts were made to heighten the castle and to increase the range of the cannons.

But the forces of nature prevailed and eventually the castle closed in 1637. This is an excellent example of nature making military technology redundant.

As you continue walking, look out for a number of gravel ridges around the castle. These are evidence of the position of the beach in the 1500s.



The shifting shoreline and military defences around Camber Castle
Adapted from H. Lovegrove (1953)
Old Shore Lines Near Camber Castle
The Geographical Journal Vol 119, p200-207
By kind permission of Rye Harbour Image Library



Shingle ridges around Camber Castle are evidence of the former position of the beach
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Directions 10

Go clockwise around the castle but do not go through the gate. Follow the path leading away from the castle keeping the fence on your right. Head towards the trees and look for a bird hide.

11. Shingle life

Castle Water bird hide

Low-lying areas near this coast are of limited usefulness for human activities but they are ideal for wildlife. The area to your left over the line of trees is a nature reserve. An estimated 3,300 species are found on this 326 hectare site. The lagoons and marshes are a perfect habitat for particular types of wading birds. Look out for lapwings, golden plovers and curlews.

Meanwhile, the shingle hereabouts is a specialised habitat for many rare and endangered plants and animals, such as the hairy-legged mining bee. In years past, the shingle was extracted for building and the large pits left behind have become a valuable habitat for wetland wildlife.

The site is now the Rye Harbour Site of Special Scientific Interest and also has European wildlife designations of Special Protection Area and Special Area of Conservation. Protecting sites like this also has economic benefits. This nature reserve is a popular attraction with an estimated 200,000 visitors a year. Although entry to the reserve is free, visitors also spend time in Rye and Winchelsea, injecting money into the local economy. This is one part of the contemporary reinvention of the town.



Birds typically found at Rye Harbour Nature Reserve – ringed plover (left), curlew (centre) and lapwing (right)
© Rye Harbour Nature Reserve

Directions 11

Retrace your steps back towards the castle. Go round the left side of the castle through two gates and over a stile. Don't forget to look for the gravel ridges which show where the beach used to be.

Follow the track across the field towards farm buildings in the far distance. Follow the track through Castle Farm. Pass a row of houses and continue along the tarmac lane. Look out for the donkey sanctuary on the right hand side and a wartime pillbox on the other side of the canal.

At the junction with Sea Road, turn right towards Winchelsea. Shortly after Sutton's Shop, there is an opening in the trees on the left hand side of the road with views across the flat expanse to Winchelsea Beach. Stop Here.

12. The town that fell into the sea

Sea Road

The flat fields that you can see on the other side of the road were once sea. The line of this road was once the location of the beach. This area is thought to be the location of Old Winchelsea. You may not have heard of it before, but at one time Old Winchelsea was England's third most important port by tax revenue in Southern England after London and Southampton.

Old Winchelsea was located on a shingle bank in front of the estuaries formed by the Rother, Tillingham and Brede rivers. The sea broke through the shingle bank sometime after 800 AD and this provided shelter in the tidal estuary for shipping. Records indicate that as many as 400 ships could be accommodated in its tidal creeks.



The view from Sea Road – the site of Old Winchelsea – towards today's shoreline
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Look at the house names and you'll find evidence of the port of Old Winchelsea. For example, there's a house called The Quay – but now it's over a mile from the sea! So why is the port no longer here? Between 1233 and 1288, strong storms eroded the shingle bank and destroyed the settlement. So in 1288, a replacement new town of Winchelsea was built on higher ground. You might be able to see it above the trees and we will be going there next.

Humans have always tried to tame the coast, but natural processes never cease. An attempt in 1787 to build a new harbour failed due to the effects of coastal deposition. Even today, the tourist resort of Winchelsea Beach, established in the 1930s, is currently under threat from coastal erosion.

Directions 12

Continue along Sea Road to the junction. It can be busy here and the pavements are narrow so take great care. Turn left following the signs for Hastings and go past The Bridge Inn. Then turn left up Strand Hill into Winchelsea. Stop at the Strand Gate.

13. Searching for the sea

Strand Gate

We're at the half way point on our walk and this viewpoint gives us our first glimpse of the sea on this 'coastal' walk. This spot also gives us a better idea of how the coastline has moved over the centuries and how this has affected human settlements and activities.

We are on top of a rocky outcrop which was once a sea cliff. The flat land in front of us was once a bay and marshes. Down to the left are the houses along Sea Road where we just came from and where the old port of Winchelsea was before it was washed away by the sea.



The view over the former marshes to Winchelsea Beach
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



The Strand Gate, built in 1300
to defend the town of New Winchelsea
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Directly below you can see part of the Royal Military Canal. All the flat land between the canal and the sea is former marshes drained for agriculture. By the sea is the resort of Winchelsea Beach. Over to the left you can just see Camber Castle – and just how far it is from the beach today.

As we've already heard, after Old Winchelsea was destroyed, a new town was built here on the higher ground. This provided protection from the destructive power of the waves, but it was also a better defensive site. The rather spectacular Strand Gate is just part of the town's fortifications. It was built in about 1300 to defend the road up from the port.

Directions 13

Go round the side of the Strand Gate to "The Lookout", a good view point with a bench and shelter.

14. Coastal power

The Lookout, beside Strand Gate

In the distance across Rye Bay you can see a set of wind turbines and the square bulk of a nuclear power station. These two sites of energy generation provide excellent examples of how twentieth-century humans have taken advantage of the particular characteristics of this coastal site.

We have already heard that the marshy land by the coast is not of much economic value to humans. These areas are susceptible to flooding and therefore unsuitable for building houses. The marshes are pretty empty other than sheep. Add to this the fact that the coastal position often means strong winds. This makes Romney Marsh an ideal position for a wind farm.



Cheyne Court wind farm
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

The 26 turbines at Little Cheyne Court were erected in 2008, although not without opposition from local residents and conservation organisations. It is the largest onshore wind farm in the South of England, generating 60MW of electricity – enough to power 33,000 homes each year.

Nuclear power stations are usually located in remote areas away from large towns and cities. They are also located at the coast or beside a large lake because they need large amounts of water for the cooling processes.

The enormous shingle spit at Dungeness, created by the coastal processes of deposition is completely unsuitable for human settlement but an ideal spot for a nuclear reactor. There are two reactors – A and B – that were built between 1965 and 1985. Reactor A is no longer functioning but Reactor B has an electrical output of 1040 MW, which supplies 1.5 million homes. It is due to be decommissioned in 2018.

You might consider that this wind farm and nuclear reactor blight the surrounding landscape. However the marshes around the wind farm and the shingle peninsula of Dungeness are environmentally-sensitive areas and protected under the auspices of several bodies. The lack of humans in these areas also contributes to preserving wildlife and their habitats.

Directions 14

Walk up the High Street into the town. Enter the grounds of the parish Church on the left hand side.

15. The smallest town in England?

Winchelsea Church

The new town of Winchelsea was set out in a grid pattern during the reign of King Edward I. The town prospered, importing 737,000 gallons of wine in 1306 from Gascony in France. These were stored in the town's 70 cellars. Look out for cellar tours by the Winchelsea Archaeological Society, which are held several times a year.

But, just like Rye, the town's fortunes faded as the harbour silted up and trade moved elsewhere. With fewer means of earning a living, people moved out too. By the end of the sixteenth century, Winchelsea had declined to little more than a village.



Winchelsea Church
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

But, bizarrely, Winchelsea had two Members of Parliament elected by just three people! Winchelsea was what was known as a 'rotten borough', a constituency with a very small electorate which could be used by a patron to gain undue and unrepresentative influence within Parliament. So even in times of decline, someone saw an opportunity.

Today, Winchelsea is still very small. According to the community website, there are 278 houses and about 580 people. It lays claim to be the smallest town in England and even has its own mayor! You might like to visit the Museum (in the old Court Hall on the square) which is open daily except Mondays.

Do go inside the church, which dates back to 1294. The grandeur of this church and wealth of decoration gives a feel for the affluence and influence of this parish. Look out for the three effigies on the left hand side, which were rescued from the former church in Old Winchelsea after it was washed away by the sea.

Directions 15

When you are ready, leave the churchyard at the corner by The New Inn. Take the road opposite with the museum (old court house) on your right. At the bottom, turn left along North Street to the Pipewell Gate. Turn right down Ferry Hill. Take care here because the pavement is very narrow. At the bottom of the hill where the road doubles back, go straight across, following the signs for Winchelsea Station. Although this is a quiet road, again there are no pavements so please be aware of traffic. Stop at the station.

16. Transport revolution

Winchelsea railway station

As we have already heard, Winchelsea, like Rye, prospered from maritime trade in the fourteenth century but subsequently fell on more difficult economic times as coastal deposition silted up the harbour. But the town was given a new lease of life in 1851 when the railway came.

Winchelsea Station was on a branch line that ran between Ashford in Kent and Hastings in East Sussex. Here between Rye and Winchelsea, the line snaked across the area below the cliffs of the former coast.

The railway had brought tourism to other seaside towns on the south coast and Winchelsea wanted to tap into this new potential. Winchelsea Beach was developed in the 1930s, as a tourist resort.

By the 1970s tourists were increasingly travelling by car. The railway line faced closure. One of the platforms closed in 1979 and is now part of the grounds of a house. But the station clung on. Today, trains run every two hours. There is no ticket office. There are no station staff. The platform is cleaned and maintained by local volunteers.

Nowadays at half a mile away the station is simply too far from Winchelsea itself. As you have seen walking to the station from the town means using unlit and unpaved country lanes and climbing a steep hill. Today it provides an invaluable service for walkers in the area.



Winchelsea's single platform station
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Directions 16

Continue along Station Road. At the junction, turn right on Dumb Woman's Lane towards Rye. Follow the road until it bends sharply to the left. Continue straight on here onto the footpath at the base of the slope. Cross over the cattle grid, continue along the path and stop at the first gate.

17. Bad air

Footpath beneath Cadborough Cliffs

Throughout this walk, we've seen a constantly shifting coastline. The steep slope beside the footpath is Cadborough Cliffs. These cliffs would have formed the coastline in the tenth century in this part of Rye Bay. The top of the cliffs would have been the road from Udimore to Rye. Many people would have followed its rutted track from Iron Age travellers, to Roman traders and then William the Conqueror's foot soldiers.

Also take time to look back towards the town of Winchelsea where we've just come from. From here you can appreciate its position on a rocky outcrop above the danger of the waves and foreign attackers.



Cattle grazing on drained land beneath Cadborough Cliffs
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

You should see herds of cattle grazing on the drier fields here. As we heard earlier, this is where former marshes were drained in the Middle Ages. At one point in the Middle Ages, these marshes were known as the most unhealthy area in South East England. The stagnant waters and damp climate of the marshes were an ideal breeding ground for mosquitoes and the malaria they carried. Visitors frequently commented on the 'foul and fatal airs and waters' and 'evil-smelling stagnant waters'.

Life expectancy for those living around the marshes was 25 to 30 years old. At the time malaria wasn't understood. The ailment was called ague or marsh fever and the causes were believed to be "poison in the air" – hence the name malaria – mal air – or bad air. By 1850, the situation was almost completely reversed with the Romney Marshes considered some of the healthiest places in Kent.

Directions 17

Continue along the footpath beneath the cliffs. Stop when you begin to see houses on the cliff top.

18. Cliff top position

Footpath beneath Cadborough cliffs

This cliff top also played a part in wartime defences. Throughout the walk, we have seen advances in military technology embraced through the centuries. In 1944, the German Luftwaffe had a new attack weapon – the V1. These pilotless flying bombs travelled at 400mph and were launched against Britain. Twenty-eight of these missiles landed around Rye and Winchelsea. In response, the British launched Operation Diver. This included a deployment of anti-aircraft guns across Southern and Eastern England. Here in Rye, there were eight static 3.7 inch anti-aircraft guns placed on these cliffs. The anti-aircraft guns installed here were radar controlled. A new American fire control system gave a better chance of shooting down the V1 rockets, which were known as ‘doodlebugs’.



Rye's Edwardian suburbs on top of Cadborough Cliffs
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



The windmill at Rye
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Nowadays, Cadborough Cliffs contain parts of the suburbs of Rye which developed during the twentieth century. At the end of this path, you can see the former sanitation station which was built in 1907 to deal with the needs of the expanding town during the Edwardian era.

We heard earlier how the townsfolk earned their living in the Middle Ages – first from the port and later from smuggling. By the early twentieth century, the people of Rye were mostly employed in shipping, pottery or the education sector. Today, many are employed in the town's tourism and leisure industry.

Directions 18

Continue along the footpath. Just after the pumping station and before the houses, turn right along a footpath. Continue following the footpath back towards the town.

Go past Gibbet Marsh car park, turn right at the windmill and cross over the railway. This brings you back to the old harbour.

19. Walk through time

Rye old harbour



The shifting coastline created opportunities for military infrastructure, smuggling, tourism and farming
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

This walk has told the story of two adjacent towns, their fortunes rising and falling with the tide – literally. These coastal settlements have been shaped by the forces of nature as wind, waves and tides have eroded land in some areas and deposited material in other parts. We've seen how the coastline has shifted several miles over the last millennium, leaving harbours and sea cliffs stranded inland. In fact, on our 'coastal' walk, we have only glimpsed the sea once!

Some of the physical processes have made life difficult for the people here. The harbours at Rye and Winchelsea silted up, bringing an end to once-prosperous maritime trade with the continent. The shingle bank at Winchelsea was breached by storms, destroying the natural harbour and the old town. But some of the physical processes have created opportunities. The creeks and marshes were an ideal environment for smuggling activities, which revived the incomes of the two towns. The land reclaimed from the sea was ideal for sheep farming and led to a lucrative wool trade. The beach at Winchelsea was developed as a tourist resort and today both towns are popular visitor attractions.

The strategic position on the south coast has also placed Rye and Winchelsea at the forefront of real and anticipated continental attacks. This has required appropriate fortifications. We have seen throughout the walk how defences have adapted to the changing physical landscape and advancing military technology.

The lives of people in Rye and Winchelsea have been unquestionably shaped by the sea. The landscape here is constantly shifting. Over the centuries, residents have been expert at finding opportunities created by their coastal position and adapting to the changing landscape. I hope you have enjoyed this walk. There is a lot to see in Rye and Winchelsea so do take time to explore more about this fascinating area.

Directions 19

From the old harbour you may wish to take time to explore more of Rye. To return to the railway station, take Wish Street from the roundabout. At the first main traffic junction, continue straight along Cinque Ports Street and then turn left into Station Approach. The station will be straight ahead.

Credits

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