

The Levels

This is an open, expansive landscape of grazed wet meadows, criss-crossed by reed filled ditches. This windswept landscape of wide skies with few trees and hedges is framed in the south-west against the dramatic and distinctive backdrop of the South Downs and in the south east the High Weald. It inspires some of the most intense feelings of remoteness in south east England.

Location

This landscape area is not continuous but occurs in two separate units: the Eastbourne and the Pevensey Levels, and the Rye – Winchelsea area. Both areas are low-lying and are bounded on the south side by the sea, and they are adjacent to the High Weald.

The Pevensey Levels are surrounded by Eastbourne, Polegate, Hailsham and Bexhill. The Rye-Winchelsea area includes the Pett and Rye Harbour Levels and the most western part of the East Guldeford Level east of Rye. Pevensey Levels is the largest wetland tract in East Sussex. This area and Rye Harbour are of international importance for wildlife and have RAMSAR status.

Landform

The Levels are a dynamic landscape which is very young in geological terms. Their formation is dominated by the changing relationship between land and sea. The Levels are very low-lying with local landscape diversity added by ‘eyes’ – islands of high ground. Both the Eastbourne- Pevensey Levels and Pett and Rye Harbour areas were tidal inlets and in Roman times all land below 4m AOD was submerged at high tide. In the Middle Ages the eastward drift of coastal shingle cut them off and a salt marsh developed. From then onwards human influence on the drainage regime was the dominant force in the creation of the landscape of the Levels.

Camber Sands lie west of Rye Harbour and are the only sand dune system in East Sussex. This relatively narrow band of dunes is slowly accreting and is formed predominantly from sand brought down by the River Rother, the mouth of which lies to the west.

Historical impact of man

The landscape character is also young in historical terms. At the time of the Norman invasion in 1066 at Pevensey, much of the area was still a tidal inlet which was used for salt production. During the Middle Ages land began to be reclaimed to take advantage of the relatively fertile soils. Thus began a continuing effort to exploit the marsh.

Numerous drainage ditches were dug, creating a checkerboard of irregular fields fringed with reeds. For centuries a pattern of summer grazing and winter flooding was maintained, the drainage ditches acting as green fences. This continued until the 1960s when pump drainage was carried out and arable farming became more feasible. Aggregate extraction at Rye Harbour and Pett has created a series of lagoons which are of international importance as Rye Harbour Nature Reserve.

Woodland

The open windswept feel of The Levels is enhanced by the lack of trees and hedges. The few trees are mainly Willow and Hawthorn, these are often dramatically windsculpted.

Agriculture

The Levels are a large open landscape of predominantly pasture with some arable in drier areas. Cattle dominate to the west of Rye Harbour with sheep in the east.

Other habitats and features.

In addition to grazing marsh The Levels have a number of open waterways and reed filled waterways. Rye Harbour and Pett have lagoons and also substantial areas of vegetated shingle. The dune system at Camber is another special coastal habitat.

The Levels

Settlement pattern and routeways

The pattern of scattered settlements and open roads reflects the history of land reclamation from wetland. Isolated farmsteads are on higher ground or “eyes” this can be seen in placenames with the suffix ‘ey’ such as Manxey in Pevensey. Roads tend to be slightly raised above the surrounding land forming visual striations in the landscape.

Historic features

Military fortifications are scattered across the area. Pevensey and Camber castles were the sites of Roman military bases. Pevensey was expanded by the Normans, and Camber by Henry VIII. Martello Towers from the Napoleonic period are also evident.

Other details

Brick and flint buildings, weatherboarding and tiles are characteristic.

Remoteness

These flat low lying landscapes have very little tree cover, so the effects of disturbance are much more apparent. Fortunately much of the Levels are well away from sources of disturbance. This quiet simple landscape, with wide skies, the cries of wetland birds and the sighing of the wind in the reeds can provide some of the most intense feelings of remoteness in south east England.

Problems, pressure and change in the Levels

Agriculture: The change to pump drainage and arable agriculture has had a very detrimental effect on the natural ecology of the area; Modern agricultural buildings are particularly obvious in this open landscape.

Urban Influence Urban fringe problems: Urban edges are highly visible in this open landscape.

Development: Pressure for expansion of surrounding towns is a particular issue.

Recreation: Caravan sites, especially those at Camber Sands, are prominent in such open landscape. The coast in general is subject to intense visitor pressure with the dunes at Camber, a vulnerable habitat, receiving 20,000 visitors a day at the height of the season.

Water resources: Abstraction, pumped drainage as opposed to gravity drainage and pollution has had a marked effect on wetland and riparian habitats. There has been a large decrease in winter flooding resulting in a decline habitats for wetland birds. It has also meant that the seasonal refertilisation with alluvium has not occurred so arable production is maintained by artificial fertilizers. Nitrogen

run-off and spray drift from arable areas is increasing. Physical changes to watercourses, to increase discharge speed, mean that features such as meanders and shingle banks have been removed, thus further degrading riparian habitats.

Landscape Action Priorities for the Levels

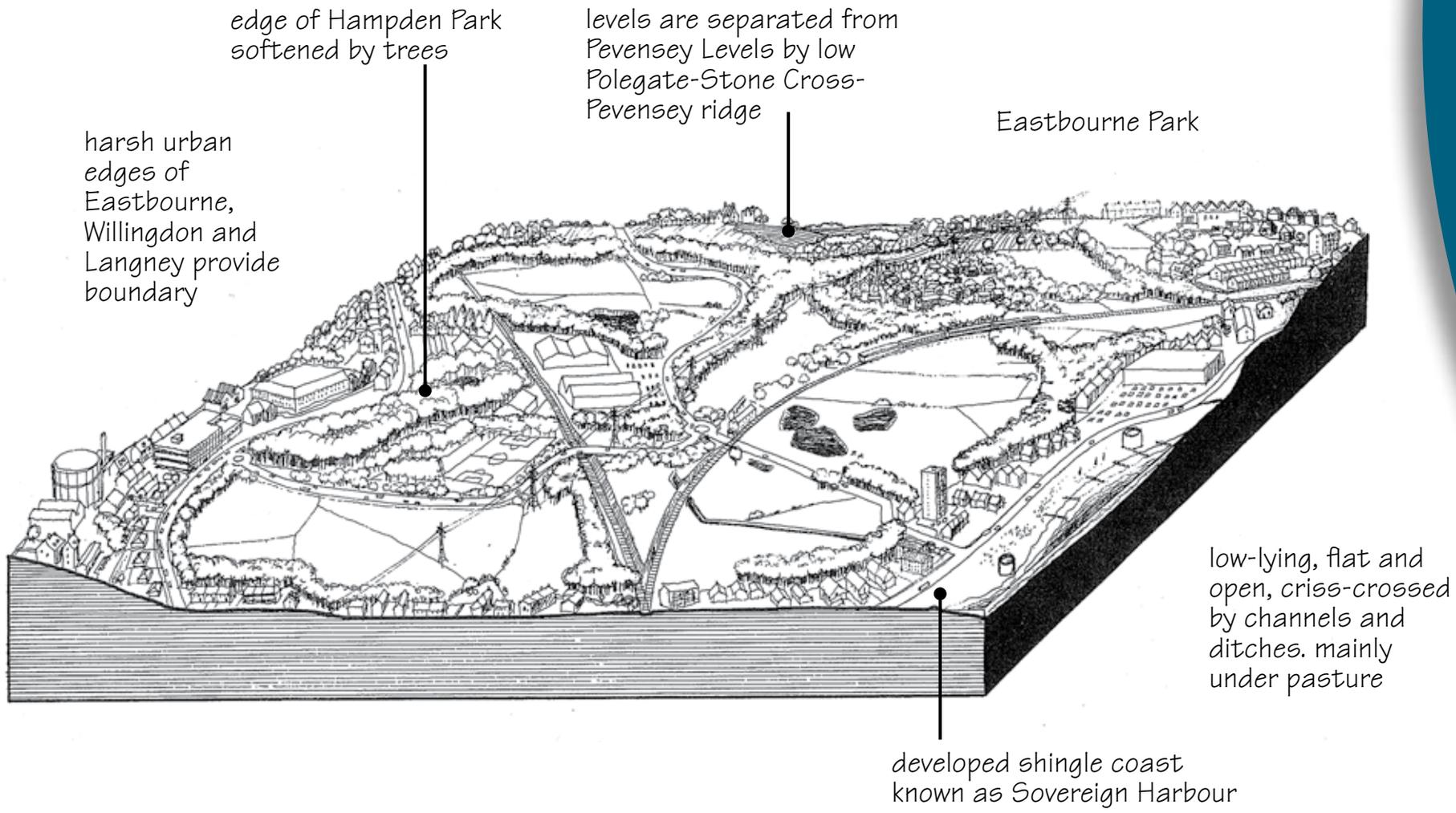
The distinctive network of ditches should be maintained and enhanced. Channels should be less frequently and less intensively dredged. Water levels need to be maintained and pollution should be controlled.

Encourage seasonal wetland flooding to create areas of damp pasture. Create new reedbeds on land with low nature conservation interest.

Tree planting around farm buildings, settlements and caravan sites would help minimise their effect on the open landscape.

Manage visitor pressure, diverting visitors away from vulnerable habitats.

Eastbourne Levels



edge of Hampden Park softened by trees

levels are separated from Pevensey Levels by low Polegate-Stone Cross-Pevensey ridge

Eastbourne Park

harsh urban edges of Eastbourne, Willingdon and Langney provide boundary

low-lying, flat and open, criss-crossed by channels and ditches, mainly under pasture

developed shingle coast known as Sovereign Harbour

Eastbourne Levels

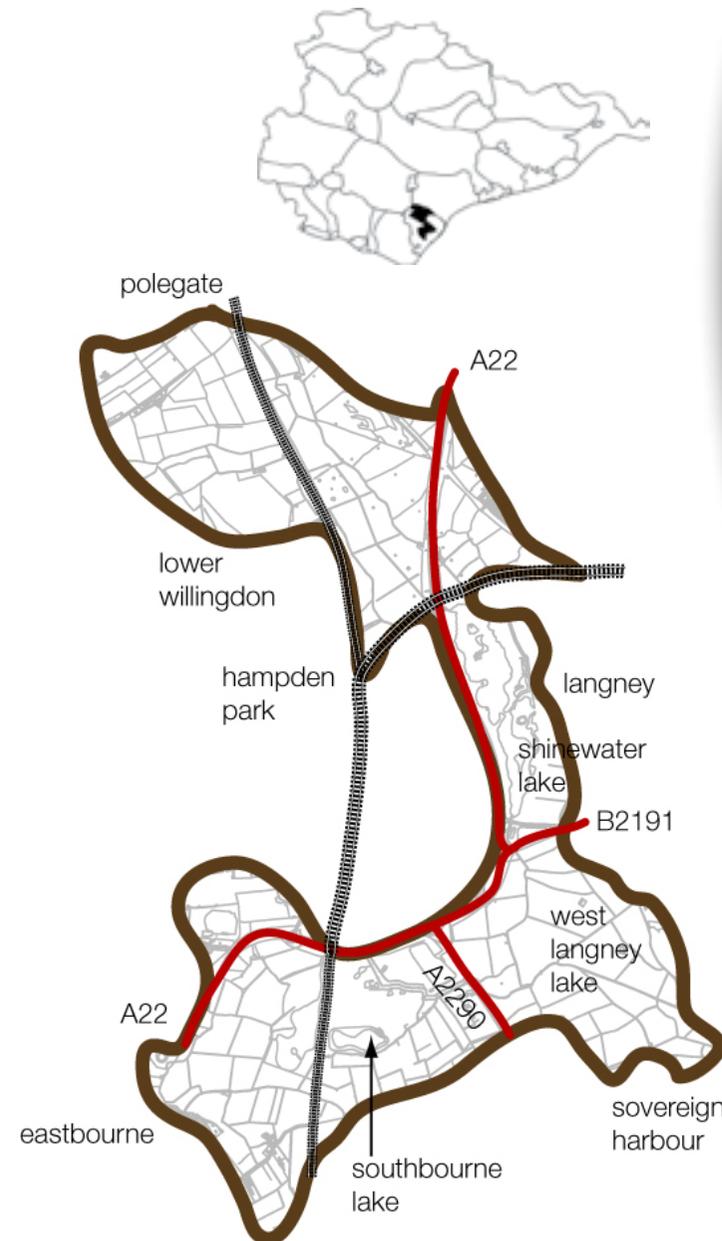
This small tract of levels is separated from the Pevensey Levels by the low Polegate-Stone Cross-Pevensey ridge. Its other boundaries are the urban edges of Eastbourne, Willingdon, Langney and Sovereign Harbour.

Characteristics

- Quiet pasture and reedy channels.
- Flat open landscape.
- Hard urban edges intrude on rural tranquility.
- Established urban trees soften this in places, notably at Hampden Park.

Special features

- Major new urban parkland: Eastbourne Park including Shinewater, West Langney and Southbourne Lakes. These are flood compensation areas for the extensive urban development around Eastbourne.



© Crown copyright all rights reserved
East Sussex County Council
1000196012004

© ESCC 2010

Eastbourne Levels

Problems, pressures, detracting features

- Flood compensation measures which create a superb opportunity for landscape renewal and community spaces.
- Two power lines cross the area. These are more dominating in such an open flat landscape.
- Railway crossing the area at the northern end of Shinewater Lake.
- Main roads cross the area, the A22, and the A2290.
- Hard urban edges are intrusive; most views terminate in a hard built-up edge of houses or factories. These are softened at the western side only by the line of the Downs behind.
- Urban fringe problems.

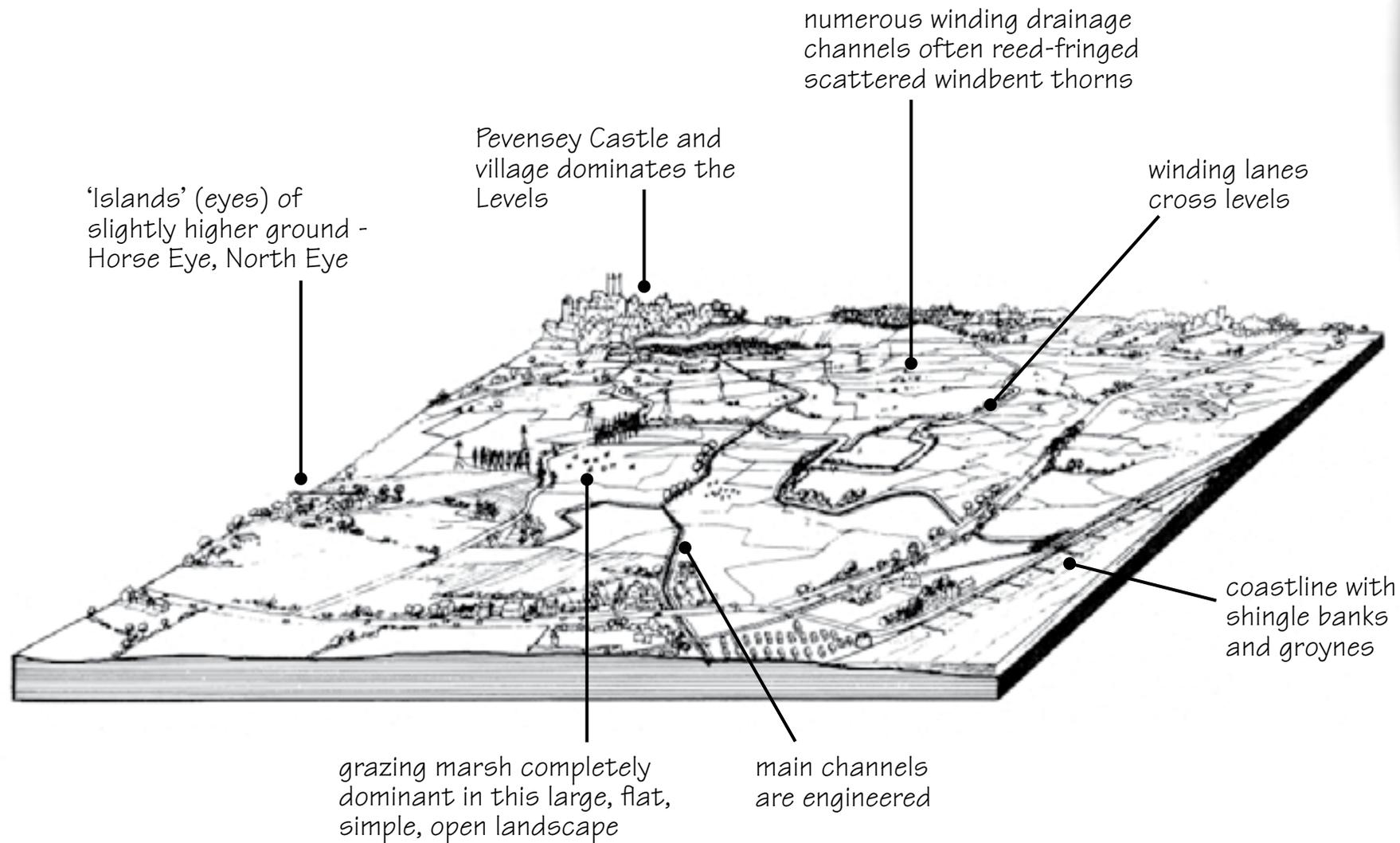
Vision

A renewed landscape of quiet pasture and large open stretches of water for the community to enjoy. A large twenty-first century informal open space in the heart of the town.

Landscape action priorities

- Plant trees around the area to create screening and seclusion for these quiet pastures and lakes.
- Continue to develop Eastbourne Park as a landscape and recreational resource.
- Continue to use this area for flood storage, to facilitate the further expansion of Eastbourne, and thereby create further informal open space for the town.

Pevensy Levels



Pevensy Levels

Pevensy levels lie to the northeast of Eastbourne. Grazing marsh and reeds are completely dominant in this large, flat, open landscape. This is a landscape characterised by reed fringed drainage channels with scattered thorns and willows. Away from the roads there is a distinct remoteness amongst the big skies and cries of wetland birds.

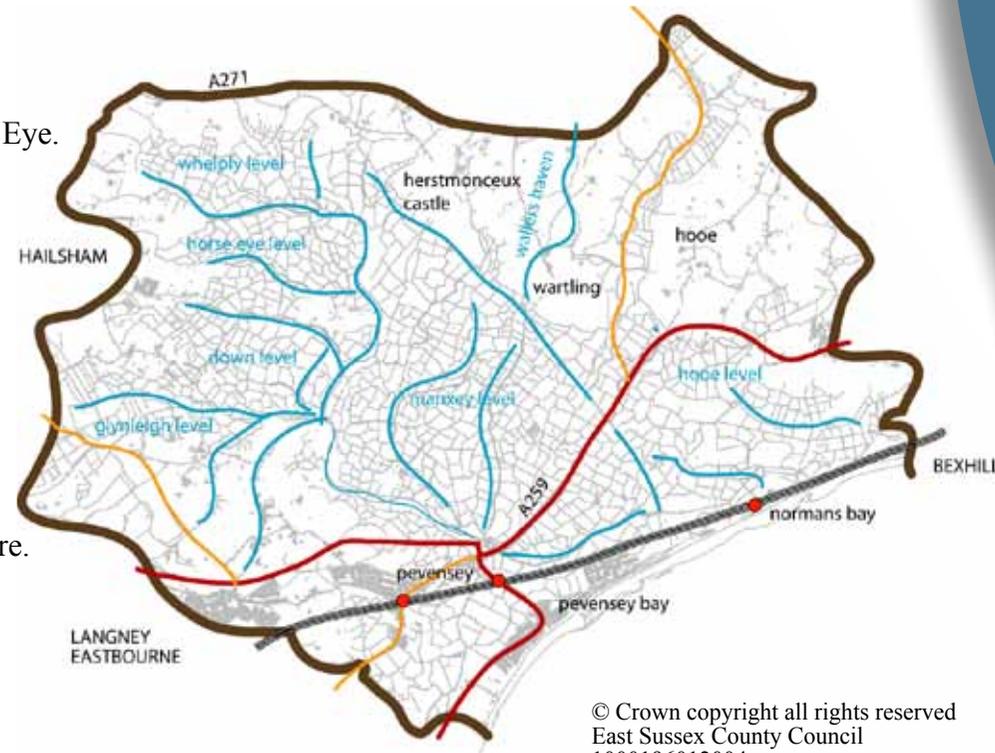


Characteristics

- Reed-fringed winding channels in open wetland pasture
- Scattered straggly willow and thorn along channels.
- 'Islands' (eyes) of slightly higher ground – Horse Eye, North Eye.
- Main channels engineered.
- Isolated farms and cottages.
- Winding lanes cross the levels.
- Coastline with shingle banks and groynes.
- Coastal development

Special features

- Deserted medieval village at Northeye.
- 1950s seaside housing at Pevensy with distinctive style, extensive use of weatherboarding and jaunty resort atmosphere.
- Pevensy Castle and village. The Castle is a widely visible landmark with major historical significance and associations.
- Wartling village and church on a prominent spur overlooking the Levels.
- Turf growing a significant land use.
- War time artefacts are part of the local setting.



© Crown copyright all rights reserved
East Sussex County Council
1000196012004

Pevensey Levels

25

Problems, pressures, detracting features

- Sanitisation of drainage channels to increase drainage efficiency; this pressure is declining with greater protection of natural processes.
- Loss of traditional pasture to arable, particularly as dairy herds decline.
- Pressure for urban expansion of Hailsham and in the Stone Cross area.
- Impact of power lines on the open landscape.
- Traffic on A259 and Polegate - Pevensey Bypass.
- Rat-running and fast traffic on lanes.
- Unsightly coastal development and clutter on undeveloped coastline.
- Engineered flood protection measures on the coast.
- Possible implications of future sea level rise and 'managed retreat' options.
- Modern farm buildings in open landscape.
- Large number of caravan sites especially on outer edge.
- Pollution of water resources also an issue.

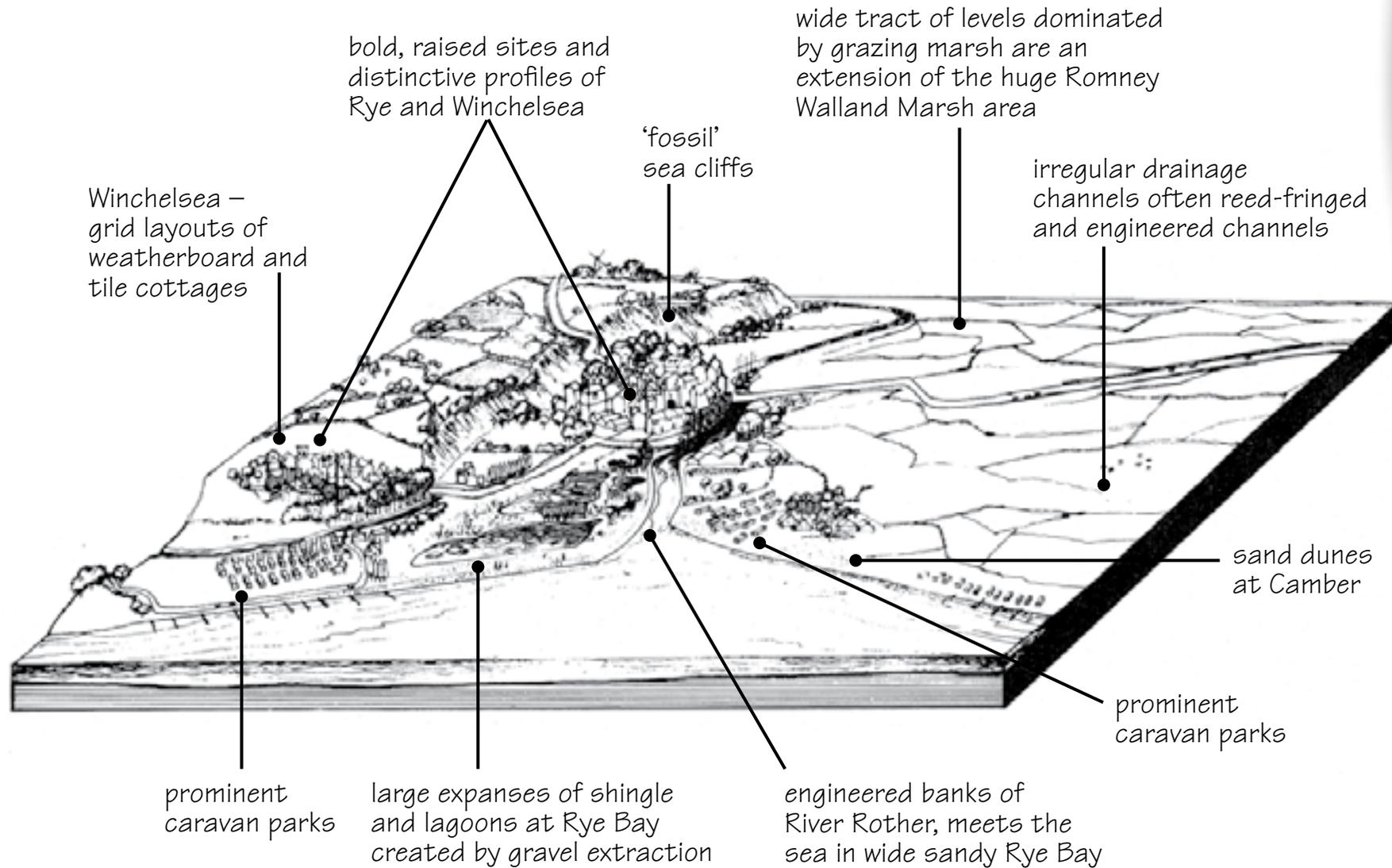
Vision

A quiet landscape dominated by pasture, reed beds and channels with diverse vegetation. Some land returned to wetland and seasonal flooding. An open landscape with distant views, where a sense of remoteness, wildness and solitude can be experienced.

Landscape action priorities

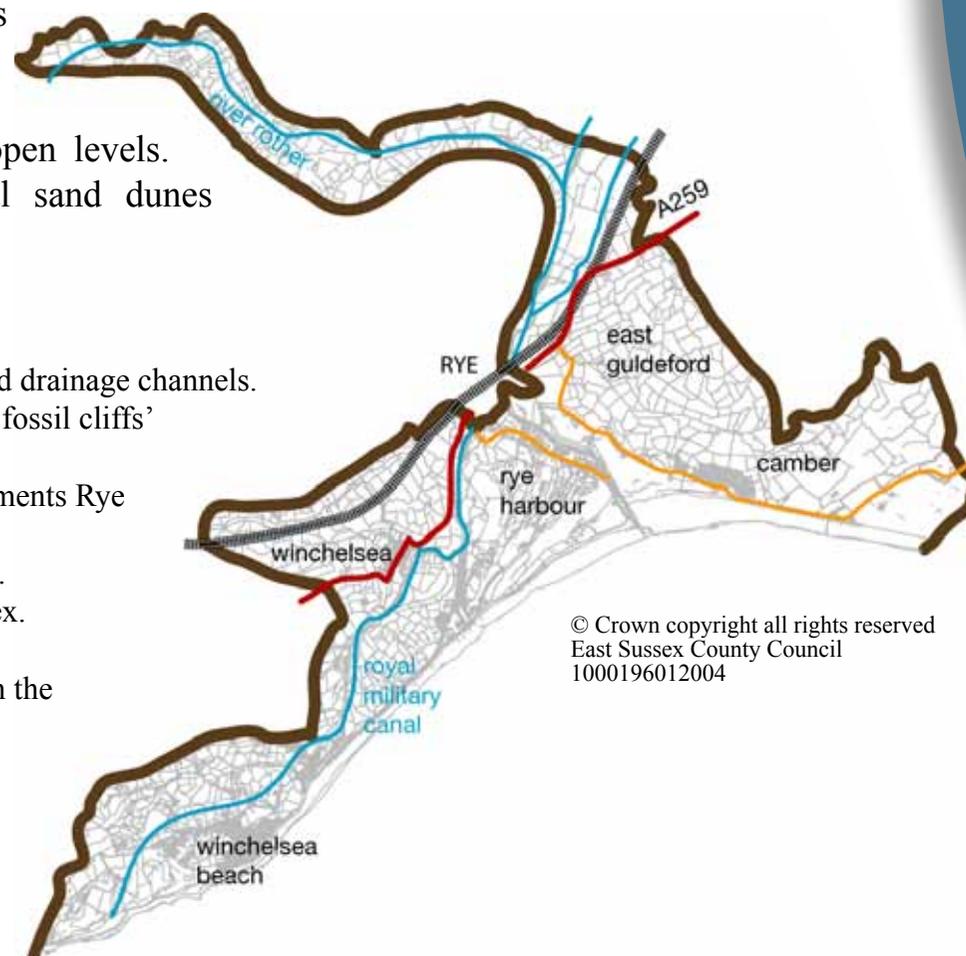
- Pursue opportunities to restore traditional pasture, wetland and channel diversity.
- Explore options for 'managed retreat' of the coastline.
- Prepare a coastal conservation and improvement plan, to improve the visual quality of the coastline.
- Establish acceptable development limits on the edges of the Levels, particularly at Hailsham and Stone Cross, and strengthen these with appropriate planting.
- Consider traffic calming and management on lanes across the Levels to protect and enhance their quiet, remote character.
- Pursue possible undergrounding of Powerlines
- Tree planting, where appropriate to screen modern farm buildings and caravan sites.
- Encourage suitable grazing regimes to maintain and enhance grazing pasture.
- Encourage ditch dredging and reprofiling to maintain optimum conditions for important and rare habitats.
- Maintain water levels in ditches.
- Encourage organic farming and reduce use of pesticides and fertilizers.
- Encourage the creation of new reedbeds.

Rye-Winchelsea Area



Rye - Winchelsea Area

Forming the most easterly corner of the county, this diverse area follows the River Rother to its confluence with the Royal Military canal and continues eastwards to Camber. This area is an extension of the extensive Romney – Walland Marsh and is a wide tract of coastal levels overlooked by bold spurs and ‘islands’ of high ground. The twin citadels of Rye and Winchelsea dominate the area from their bold, raised sites. The woods, farms and valleys of the rising ground contrast with the flat, open levels. The seaside village of Camber lies behind coastal sand dunes and an outstanding sandy beach.



© Crown copyright all rights reserved
East Sussex County Council
1000196012004

Characteristics

- Open coastal and valley levels with straightened or engineered drainage channels.
- Dominated by spurs and ‘islands’ of high ground, with steep ‘fossil cliffs’ descending to Levels.
- Bold, raised sites and distinctive profiles of the historic settlements Rye and Winchelsea.
- Expanses of shingle with lakes resulting from gravel working.
- Dunes at Camber and wide sandy beach, unique in East Sussex.
- Coastal flood banks, shingle beaches and groynes.
- Pasture and sheep a feature, though much more arable than on the Pevensy Levels.
- Contrast between woods, farms and fields of higher ground and the flat, open levels with their sense of space and wide open skies.
- Extensive remote areas and strong sense of history.
- Views towards Dungeness power station and the wind farm at Little Cheney Court Farm.

Rye - Winchelsea Area

Special features

- Winchelsea's historic grid layout of weatherboard and tile cottages, accessed through medieval gates.
- Steep wooded bluffs formed from the characteristic raised beach and "sea cliffs" isolated from the sea.
- Royal Military Canal, a broad quiet waterway.
- Camber Castle amidst the Levels.
- Rye Harbour Nature Reserve, an extensive area of lakes in old gravel workings. The sounds of the nationally important bird life are part of the landscape.
- Martello towers.
- Eastern extremity included within the Lydd Military Firing Range.

Problems, pressures, detracting features

- Unsightly coastal development, static caravan parks and clutter at Camber and Winchelsea Beach.
- Industrial development at Rye harbour detracting from views from Rye and the setting of the town.

- Loss of pasture to arable farming, creating expanses of featureless landscape.
- Canalisation of drainage channels, with hard engineered features along River Rother.
- Major electricity transmission lines.
- Pressure for intensified industrial development at Camber and Rye.

Vision

A dramatic landscape of interaction between the slopes, levels and beaches, with long views, remote areas, rich wildlife and a strong sense of history.

Landscape action priorities

- Diversify and enhance river channel and valley with the aid of agricultural grant schemes.
- Conserve and restore pasture, wetland and associated wildlife.
- Conserve and enhance remote areas.
- Improve the coastal environment, contain and reduce intrusive features, at Camber, Winchelsea Beach and Rye Harbour.
- Improve access to the countryside for walkers, riders and cyclists.
- Control and manage traffic and access.
- Strengthen maritime character.
- Conserve and enhance the setting of Rye and Winchelsea citadels.