Pevensey Levels

Key Characteristics

- Low-lying tract of largely reclaimed wetland, actively maintained by purpose-built drainage systems and river floodplain improvements.
- A predominantly open landscape with extensive grazed wet meadows and some arable fields with characteristic dykes, wetlands and wide skies. The open windswept feel is further enhanced by the scarcity of trees and hedges in the landscape.
- Widely-spaced roads and isolated settlements combine with the overall open character to provide a sense of remoteness.
- Local landscape diversity is added by 'eyes' – islands of higher ground, many with farmsteads – and also by reed-fringed ditches, scattered willows and patches of standing water with adjacent rushy pasture.
- Views out of the area to the south-west are framed against the dramatic and distinctive backdrop of the South Downs.

Landscape Character

Pevensey Levels are the largest tract of wetland in East Sussex. Lying between Bexhill and Eastbourne they mark the short transition between the Low Weald and the English Channel and are bounded on the north and east by the higher ground of the High Weald while, to the south-west, the steep scarp of the South Downs dominates the view.

The present day appearance of the Pevensey Levels results from a combination of natural sediment, depositional processes and extensive reclamation of the wetland for agricultural use.

The Levels are extensive tracts of low-lying reclaimed wetland with pockets of raised land typically associated with farm buildings and settlements. A distinctive windswept feel characterises the large-scale open landscape of predominant pasture. Large fields are set within an irregular network of drainage ditches and banks, with a few hedges (often associated with old silted dykes) and trees except on areas of higher ground where isolated groups of trees associated with small settlements add variety and interest. Ditches are typically fringed with reeds while patches of standing water and rushy pasture further reinforce the wetland character. Although intensively farmed, much of area is still wet pasture and is managed for grazing.

The Crooked Ditch, a 14th century sea defence and its embankment, follows the ancient irregular pattern of the individual fields. A chequerboard pattern of ditched fields in the landscape has remained virtually unchanged. The upper course of the ancient Mark Dyke, although no longer a major drain, is still visible today as a reed-filled, silted channel. Pevensey Castle overlooks the Levels near the coast, further adding to the historic interest of the area.

MARTIN JONES/COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

Power lines and isolated trees are prominent features of the extensive areas of flat rushy pasture and standing water.

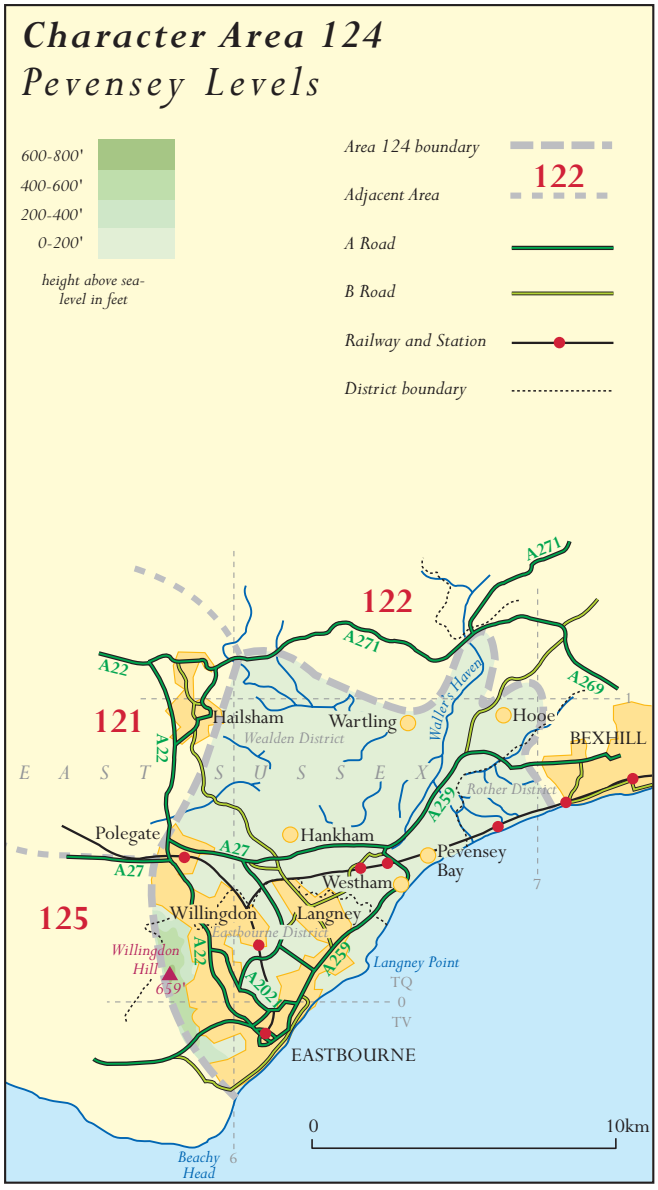
Physical Influences

At the end of the last glaciation, about 10,000 years ago, rising sea-levels flooded the lower reaches of the numerous coastal river valleys resulting in the creation of a tidal estuary. The present Levels were under water and consisted of a wide, shallow bay backed by the rising ground of the High Weald inland. By the 1st century the wide bay was partly sheltered by storm beach shingle spits which gradually developed across the bay allowing vast quantities of marine and estuarine alluvium to be deposited behind.

These sediments give rise to the present day loamy soils which, when drained, produce high-quality agricultural land. The Levels gradually changed from saltmarsh to reedy meadows although much of the area was still under water as recently as 700-800 years ago. In the course of succeeding centuries, more of the wetland was reclaimed for agricultural use and the former bay ceased to exist.

Historical and Cultural Influences

The present day Pevensey Levels landscape is relatively young in geological and historical terms. During the Roman period the Pevensey Levels was a broad shallow bay punctuated by numerous small clay islands, founded on the underlying Wealden beds, which provided suitable dry sites for Roman settlement of the area. These were later protected by the development of shingle along the coast affording natural protection to the first settlements located on the raised islands. The origins of many modern day settlements within the Pevensey Levels such as Chilley, Northeye and Rickney are reflected in the use of the suffix *eye* – Old English for island.



Pevensey Levels may still have been a tidal inlet as recently as the 11th century. At the time of the Norman Conquest much of the present area was under water, the tide having full access for several kilometres inland. Evidence from Domesday points to numerous salt-works where the sea-water was evaporated to make salt. These salt-works have resulted in distinctive low mounds of residues, 1-2 metres high and 15 metres in width. These form visible features in the present day landscape, such as the mounds at Wallers Haven.

The first arable fields appeared in the Pevensey Levels during the 13th century. Reclamation or 'inning' was largely undertaken and financed by local abbeys such as Battle Abbey. Individual farmers also carried out reclamation of the wetland which surrounded their farmsteads. The latter were built on the dry, isolated low hills sheltered by clumps of willow. The reclamation of the Levels involved the construction of meandering drainage channels such as the Mark Dyke which ran across nearly 4.5 kilometres of the lowest part of the Levels. The upper course, although no longer a major drain, is still visible today as a reed-filled, silted channel.

DAVID HARVEY/ENGLISH NATURE

Farm buildings and settlements traditionally of brick and flint construction, are situated on pockets of raised land.

Extensive floods and inundation by the sea in the late Middle Ages led to the abandonment of much of the Pevensey Levels. As the continued inning of the wetland reduced the tidal flow the outfall of the Levels became blocked resulting in widespread flooding as the discharge of land drainage into the sea was prevented. Early sea defence works, of the 13th century., using brushwood and wooden stakes, were followed by the 14th century Crooked Ditch. Further wooden sea defences constructed in the early 16th century were followed by concrete sea walls, first in the early 19th century and then again in the mid-20th century.

Buildings and Settlement

The pattern of scattered settlements and the open roads linking them together reflects the piecemeal influence of

the reclamation process. The pockets of higher ground provided dry sites for small settlements to develop, whilst the nearby wetland was 'inned' by the local inhabitants with little co-operation from the neighbouring settlements. Roads tend to be slightly raised above the surrounding land forming visual divisions in the landscape.

Particular built structures of note include the Martello towers along the coast and a number of fine churches set amongst the small settlements. The walls of the buildings, typically of brick and flint, also included weatherboarding or hung tiles, with plain tiles commonly used as a roofing material.

Land Cover

Much of Pevensey Levels, in contrast to Romney Marshes further along the coast in Kent, is still predominantly open cattle-grazed wet pasture. Although the Levels have been subject to extensive drainage and improvement for agricultural use relatively little has been subject to arable conversion. The often old drains that divide the fields are typically reed-filled, their channels forming barriers to grazing stock movement within the levels. Apart from along roadways, fences and hedgerows are infrequent features.

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The Pevensey Levels have remained primarily as grazed pasture, arable areas being confined to a few drier locations.

Woodland is restricted to areas of higher ground associated with settlements while the Levels are largely devoid of any significant tree cover, save for a few small windswept specimens that mark the line of silted dykes and the roads and lanes that cross the area raised on low embankments. Willows and hawthorn are common species along some wet ditches.

Electricity transmission lines and pylons form dominant vertical features in the flat and open landscape.

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Fields are drained by an irregular network of minor dykes and the area is crossed by long straight raised roads linking settlements.

The Changing Countryside

- Drainage and improvement works resulting in the loss of characteristic dyke, wetland and wet meadow vegetation cover.
- New roads and improvement schemes form visual divisions in the landscape
- Conspicuous new agricultural buildings and associated structures.
- Power lines are particularly prominent features in the open landscape.
- Expansion of urban development on fringes of Levels has impinged in some places on the open character of the landscape.
- Pressure from large developments along the coastline.
- Scrub invasion of dry ditches.

Shaping the future

- The development of planning and design guidelines would discourage inappropriate developments which might impinge on the remote, undeveloped quality of the Levels.

- The establishment of new areas of wetland and wet meadows, and the encouragement of seasonal inundation, should be considered.
- Tree planting on the edge of farm buildings and settlements would help minimise their effect on the open Levels landscape.
- The nature and scale of sea defences should be addressed.

Selected References

Past Sussex County Council (1984), *Environmental Appraisal and Strategy for East Sussex*, unpublished draft.

Millwood, R and Robinson, A (1973), *South-east England - The Channel Coastlands*, Macmillan, London.

University of Sussex, The Geography Editorial Committee (1983), *Sussex: Environment, Landscape and Society*, Alan Sutton, Gloucester.

MARTIN JONES/COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

Modern development around the fringes of the levels is often unsympathetic to local character. Here at Normans Bay it has impinged on the historic setting of the Martello tower.