

# Lincolnshire Coast and Marshes

Character Area

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## Key Characteristics

- Flat coastal plain to east, rising gradually in west to more undulating land at foot of the Lincolnshire Wolds.
- Predominantly open, medium-scale agricultural landscape. Tendency to smaller farm units with pasture in east. Some remnant areas of ridge and furrow, and mixed arable to west.
- Woodland and hedge cover sparse yet increasing to west at foot of the Wolds.
- Dispersed settlement pattern through most of area. Concentration of larger settlements towards the coast.
- Land drained to coast by combination of irregular ditches, streams and dykes. Louth Canal is major man-made watercourse.
- Coastline experiencing both erosion and accretion. Major coastal dune systems and saltmarshes and artificial sea defences along the coastline. Extensive shallow beach.
- Brick and pantile vernacular architecture to the west. Coastal strip significantly altered by discordant 20th century development including seaside resorts, theme parks, bungalows, caravan parks and industry.

## Landscape Character

This is a coastal area bounded by the mouth of the Humber Estuary and the North Sea. It stretches from Grimsby in the north down the coastline to Gibraltar Point at the edge of the Wash. To the west the boundary is marked by the edge of the Lincolnshire Wolds. To the south there is a junction with the Fens along the river Steeping.

The wide coastal plain can be divided into three sub-areas which run broadly parallel with the edge of the Wolds. To the west is the Middle Marsh which comprises a softly undulating arable landscape that gently climbs up to the foot of the Wolds at the ancient Barton Street. This is a more

enclosed landscape containing a greater number of woodlands and hedgerows. To the east lies the Outmarsh, a land of rich pasture, including some remnants of ridge and furrow divided by narrow dykes with brackish water. Thirdly, the coastline itself is an area subject to continual erosion and accretion and, as a result, is vulnerable to high water and flooding. Artificial sea defences between Mablethorpe and Skegness are a significant feature of the coastline. Elsewhere, sand dunes and sea buckthorn follow the coast and two of these areas are designated as National Nature Reserves in view of both their flora and fauna. To the north, the offshore gradient is so slight that at low tide extensive sand flats are exposed. Settlement is concentrated on the coast, including the resorts of Skegness, Mablethorpe and Cleethorpes whose fine sandy beaches and low rainfall have attracted holiday makers for generations. To the north the large industrial town of Grimsby is situated at the mouth of the Humber.



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Low tide reveals extensive shallow beaches, such as at Saltfleetby-Theddlethorpe. These are a primary attraction for tourists to the area, but are often backed by important dune systems which are sensitive to recreation pressure.

At first appearance this may be a generally undistinguished landscape with a strong sense of geographical isolation. In contrast to the Wolds, the appeal of the rural areas and the



wide coastal flats is more subtle. The influence of the North Sea is significant in concentrating economic and recreational activities and is summarised by the old railway poster slogan: "Skegness: It's so bracing"!

### Physical Influences

During the last Ice Age, the eastern edge of the Lincolnshire Wolds marked the general limit of the ice front. Later, as the ice melted, glacial tills were deposited across the Middle Marsh. These produce slowly permeable, seasonally waterlogged fine loamy soils, good for cereals. Mixed with the clay tills are more localised areas of outwash gravels. Occasional 'blow wells' occur where sand and gravel lenses allow water from the Chalk to reach the surface. The Outmarsh by contrast, is composed of marine alluvium of similar character to most of the central fens, being created

by the higher sea levels following the Ice Age. It is believed that, until the 13th century, the coastline was protected by a line of offshore islands of moraine from the retreating ice-sheet. These barriers of boulder clay gave relief from coastal erosion and allowed the development of extensive lagoons and marshes. Here, the soils are now deep, clayey and calcareous and good for permanent grassland, cereals, potatoes, field vegetables and sugar beet. Areas of dune sand and marine shingle are found at Gibraltar Point and North Somercotes. These are of little agricultural value but important for wildlife and coniferous plantations.

A complex series of rivers and small streams drain slowly east across the plain towards the sea. Some are natural water courses, for example The Great Eau and Waithe Beck, while others rely on numerous man-made drains. The proximity of the sea, and the low-lying land, has caused permeation of the saline water into the coastal drains.





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A view towards Tetney in the Middle Marsh. Towards the foot of the Wolds the landscape becomes more enclosed, with increased woodland cover, particularly around settlements.

The influence of the North Sea has continued over recent centuries. Land and salt marshes have been reclaimed, for example those between Saltfleet and Somercotes were reclaimed in the 19th century. Conversely, high tides and erosion pose an ongoing threat to settlements in the south.

### Historical and Cultural Influences

The relatively elevated land of the Middle Marsh proved more attractive to the earlier settlers. The village names in the locality, that end in *by*, like Thoresby and Utterby or *thorpe*, as in Grainthorpe and Hogsthorpe, indicate the Danes were main settlers in the region. During the 12th century the coastline south of Grimsby was several miles further inland following what is now the A1031 road. However, settlers slowly drained and reclaimed the land. Ground level archaeology on the marshes consists mainly of medieval and post-medieval features, eg. saltworkings at Castle Hills, Tetney and Somercotes. Evidence of earlier activity in the Iron Age and Roman periods often lies buried under the silts which have subsequently been deposited. Dyke clearance work has unearthed saltern (saltmaking) sites. During the medieval period and up to the 18th century, the rich pasture created was extensively used to fatten livestock driven off the Wolds. Since then, a mixed pattern of farming has developed. Louth Canal, a major artificial water course with its marked embankments, was built in the 18th century.

Louth Grammar School had two famous pupils: Alfred Lord Tennyson, who was born in the neighbouring Wolds, attended the school from 1816 while the explorer John Smith, born at Willoughby, was a pupil until 1595. In addition to John Smith, the area was also home to other New World emigrants, including Thomas Paine, who

contributed to the American Declaration of Independence, and Anne Hutchins, America's first woman preacher.

### Buildings and Settlement

The traditional building materials on the Middle Marsh are brick and pantile. Spilsby Sandstone is used in a number of the churches, for example Alford. The use of mud and stud, and plaster walls with thatch, although common 150 years ago, has now died out. However, a group of brick properties with thatched roofs are located in Alford.

There is a dispersed settlement pattern throughout the agricultural areas. Historic market towns include Alford, Burgh le Marsh and most notably, Louth. At the foot of the Wolds the majestic 100 m spire of St. James' Church, Louth built in Ancaster stone, is reputed to be the tallest parish church in England and stands as a prominent local landmark. In contrast the elegant red brick Georgian town houses of Westgate cluster around the church. The town is still complete and unspoilt with small squares and a market hall.

There are a few parklands and houses in the Middle Marsh. These include Gunby Hall (National Trust), Well Vale Hall and Brocklesby in the north. The remains of Thornton Abbey (English Heritage) mark what was once one of the great ecclesiastical buildings of England yet only the impressive brick and stone gatehouse is still complete. Three good windmills in working order at Alford, Burgh le Marsh and Waltham help break the skyline on the coastal plain.



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Away from the coast, settlement is very dispersed with scattered isolated farmsteads such as here at Three Bridges.

The extent of 20th century settlement has been considerable. Grimsby, famous for its fishing heritage, is a modern sprawling town which has absorbed outlying villages. Several fine houses exist in the suburbs of Cleethorpes, reflecting the wealth produced by the fishing industry. The docks and oil refinery at

Immingham, although in the Humber Estuary character area, dominate the skyline for miles and create a major intrusion on the flat Outmarsh. On the coast, Cleethorpes, Mablethorpe and Skegness developed as tourist centres for holiday makers from the East Midlands over the last century or so. The Victorian and Edwardian villas of the towns have been added to during the 20th century by clusters of caravans, mobile homes, holiday camps and theme parks along much of the coastline. The Sandhills Act of 1932 effectively controlled the expansion of built development on the coast at Gibraltar Point and Saltfleetby. Most of the built coastline between Mablethorpe and Skegness is now protected by massive concrete seawalls following floods, including those in 1953. Within the agricultural landscape, the villages have suffered from sporadic and unsympathetic infill development, notably bungalows.



Ridge and furrow grassland is characteristic of the area, but has become increasingly rare in recent years as changes in farming have resulted in conversion to arable from the traditional cattle grazing. This example is near Saltfleet.

### Land Cover

The Middle Marsh comprises regular rectilinear fields bounded by occasional hedgerows. Cereal cropping and field vegetables predominate, with many of the crops bound for the neighbouring frozen food industry at Grimsby. Two areas of wooded open farmland persist, firstly around Claythorpe, and most noticeably around Brocklesby where the Wolds slide imperceptibly down to the clay drift landscape. Towards the centre of the Outmarsh field sizes are smaller and a more ancient drained landscape exists. Here there is a relatively high proportion of grass and rough grazing alongside vegetable crops. Traces of ridge and furrow can still be seen often containing a rich ground flora. However the influence of grazing and hay meadows has been in decline for decades.

Woodland on the Outmarsh is almost non-existent except around farmsteads and settlement edges. A large proportion of the north Outmarsh is under the direct influence of built development.



Much of the coastal strip has been significantly altered by 20th century development of caravan parks and seaside resorts, such as seen here near Mablethorpe.

Between Cleethorpes and Mablethorpe accretion has produced a wide shore of shingle banks and beaches backed by extensive saltmarshes and dunes. Here saltmarsh occurs on the open shore between sea and dune as a result of the offshore Sand Haile Flats which provide protection from the full force of the sea. Sea buckthorn is dominant on the dunes and provides shelter and food for birds.

Specific areas of the coast are protected and managed for wildlife, notably between Saltfleetby and Theddlethorpe. Species include water shrew, natterjack toad, common lizard and a colony of breeding grey seals. South of Saltfleet Haven an ancient calcareous dune system contains freshwater marsh and maritime fen. South of Skegness at Gibraltar Point another series of extensive dunes and saltmarshes exist.

### The Changing Countryside

- Marked agricultural intensification and farm amalgamation, particularly of smaller farms, on the Outmarsh. Increase in field sizes through extensive loss of hedgerows in Middle Marsh.
- Marked decline in grazed coastal banks and marshes due to ploughing traditional ridge and furrow meadows, cropping and reseeding.
- Field and cropping patterns influenced by growth of refrigerated food industry in neighbouring settlements, eg Grimsby.
- Accretion of dunes and erosion of coast.
- Spread of holiday resorts at Cleethorpes and between Mablethorpe and Skegness. Increase in holiday homes, caravans and theme parks.
- Development of infrastructure corridor, including A180(T) dual carriageway and power supply cables.

- Following tidal flooding and rising sea levels, coastal protection works undertaken formerly by major engineering and now by beach nourishment.

### Shaping the Future

- The creation of small- to medium-sized deciduous woodlands, linked by hedgerow reinstatement and tree planting, would reinforce enclosure in Middle Marsh area and visually contain the built edges of sprawling settlements. The management of existing woodland is important.
- Tree planting would help to emphasise the river courses. There are opportunities for the re-creation of flood plain grasslands as washlands and the enhancement of ditches and dykes for wildlife.
- The use of traditional bricks and pantiles in new building would help the integration of both infill and more substantial development in rural landscape.
- The retention and management of traditional ridge and furrow meadows for grazing is important.
- There is scope for ongoing management of coastal dunes, nature reserves and vulnerable lengths of coast.

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