The Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB

The Suffolk Coast and Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is one of Britain’s finest landscapes. It extends from the Stour estuary in the south to the eastern fringe of Ipswich and, in the north, to Kessingland. It covers 403 square kilometres, including wildlife-rich wetlands, ancient heaths, windswept shingle beaches and historic towns and villages.

A partnership of 26 organisations cares for the Suffolk Coast and Heaths, coordinated by the AONB Unit. The Unit acts as a champion for the AONB, working to conserve the area’s natural beauty and encouraging sympathetic, sustainable use. AONBs are part of the UK’s ‘family’ of protected areas that includes our National Parks and Heritage Coasts. All receive special protection because of their quality and importance.

Visiting Walberswick

Ordnance Survey Explorer Map No 231 Southwold & Bungay

Walberswick is approximately 3 miles/5 km from the A12 road at Blythburgh. The nearest train stations are at Darsham and Halesworth. Local buses serve Southwold, from where you can reach Southwold Harbour on the riverbank opposite Walberswick.

To travel by public transport see www.suffolkonboard.com or 0845 606 6171
The changing fortunes of Walberswick
– a village in a dynamic coastal landscape

There has been a settlement at Walberswick since at least the time of the Saxons. The name Walberswick is believed to derive from two Saxon words, Waldbert – probably the name of a landowner – and “wyc”, meaning shelter or harbour.

The village is located on a spur of higher ground, close to the natural haven of the River Blyth. Like nearby Southwold, Walberswick benefitted from being in a sheltered bay called Sole Bay (Sole is a derivation of Southwold), and this combination of features made it an ideal location for a port. Today, because of coastal erosion, Sole Bay no longer exists even though its name still appears on maps.

Map 1. It is thought that in the Roman era the Dunwich and Blyth rivers together formed a relatively large estuary, and there is evidence of a Roman settlement and anchorage. During the Saxon period, Dunwich gained steadily in importance and eventually grew to become one of the most important towns in Suffolk and a major east coast port.

Map 2. Considerable coastal erosion occurred between the Roman and early Norman era. A large shingle spit similar to modern Orford Ness called the Kingsholme, gradually formed, deflecting the mouth of the rivers southwards towards Dunwich. By the 1200s, Dunwich was at its peak. The town dominated trade in the area and boasted a population of several thousand people. Anyone wishing to sail up to Walberswick was charged a fee, something that caused resentment and led to a long-running dispute between the two communities.

Map 3. A severe storm in 1328 destroyed much of Dunwich and blocked the harbour mouth, causing the rivers to force a new path to the sea near Walberswick. Attempts were made to reopen the port, but none was successful and the town gradually declined as further storms and coastal erosion took their toll. With the loss of Dunwich, the focus of marine activity moved to Walberswick and Southwold. Walberswick remained a small port with an economy based around shipbuilding, fishing and trade. The village’s prosperity can be gauged from the ruins of the once-large St Andrews church, built in c1490. However, the fortunes of the village fluctuated and around two hundred years later, the church had fallen into such a state of disrepair that it was partially demolished and a smaller church built within the remains.

The changing coastline at Walberswick

Map 1: (200 A.D.) The likely coastline during the Roman era.

Map 2: (1250 A.D.) The coastline at the height of Dunwich’s prosperity.

Map 3: (1587 A.D.) The coastline after the destruction of Dunwich. Turn over the page to see how the area looks today.

Maps: Adapted from originals by Kenneth Pye and Simon J. Blott
The Railway, Ferry and the impact of World War Two

There has been a rowing boat ferry across the Blyth since at least the early 13th century.

In 1885, following the formation of the River Blyth Ferry Company, a pontoon that could carry a horse and cart was used. This was hand-operated by means of chains until about 1900 when a steam engine was fitted. In 1911, a new, larger steam-driven chain ferry was commissioned that ran until the outbreak of the Second World War, whereupon the ferry was anchored in mid-stream as part of anti-invasion measures. Sadly, the ferry broke free from her mooring and sank on the Walberswick side of the river. With the loss of the steam ferry, a rowing boat became the only ferry service again, a situation that continues to this day.

In 1879, a narrow gauge railway opened between Halesworth and Southwold that included a station at Walberswick. The railway followed the southern side of the Blyth valley, and crossed the river via a swing bridge on the site of the present day Bailey bridge. The line was initially very successful because it provided a useful connection to the East Suffolk Railway, both for the increasing number of holidaymakers and the thriving fishing industry. A link was added to Southwold Harbour in 1914, just as war broke out and the fishing industry collapsed. These twin misfortunes badly affected the railway, which went into decline. Increased competition from road transport, poor maintenance, and the worn-out state of the engines and rolling stock also took their toll and the railway closed in 1929. In spite of attempts to reopen it, the line was broken up for scrap in 1940-41, although you can still trace its path across Walberswick Common. The swing bridge was blown up as an anti-invasion measure and left skewed across the river, one of many changes that war brought to the area.

After the war, Suffolk County Council, prompted by Walberswick Parish Council, arranged for a Bailey footbridge to be provided across the river Blyth. This could not be positioned where the chain ferry had operated because of the width of the river and the need to allow navigation. Instead, it was erected on the site of the railway swing bridge, and still provides pedestrian access between Walberswick and Southwold today.

The Southwold Railway

Walberswick today

Today, Walberswick’s economy relies mainly on the tourism industry, and around half the properties in the village are holiday homes.

While the village appears tranquil and prosperous, history shows us that the possibility of coastal change is never far away. Sea level rise as a predicted consequence of global warming and the gradual tilting downward of the coast also presents a challenge. The village of Walberswick itself is vulnerable, but flooding by the sea also threatens to change the character of its surroundings. The fresh water marshes that flank the village may eventually become saline if the sea defences can not be sustained. It’s an issue that affects low-lying areas all along the Suffolk coast, but is of particular concern around Walberswick, where the marshes form part of the Suffolk Coast National Nature Reserve and support scarce wildlife, such as the bittern, that depend on fresh water. The solutions are far from straightforward and some difficult decisions may lie ahead.

Today Walberswick is more popular with visitors than ever before - testament to its unspoilt beauty. Tony Pick

Walberswick’s annual crabbing championship always draws the crowds. Tony Pick

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The area around Walberswick village offers some of the finest coastal walking in the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB. Both walks start from Walberswick village green, grid reference TM 498748 on the OS Explorer 231 Southwold & Bungay map.

**Walberswick Walk A**

**Distance:** 5km / 3 miles

This is a short summer walk for when the ferry is running (1.5 hours depending on ferry). Start on Walberswick village green facing the road, turn left and then left again onto the road at the top of the village green. Head up this lane and take the second path to your right, which has the bridleway sign. Follow this path across Walberswick Common and bear right down the track at the footpath sign.

Bear right at the next footpath sign and head down towards the river and Southwold, following the route of the now long-vanished Southwold light railway. Cross over the Bailey bridge and turn right, keeping the River Blyth on your right. Go past the busy boat yards, chandleries and fisherman’s sheds of Southwold Harbour and cross over the river on the foot ferry to bring you back into Walberswick. Keep going along the road which takes you back into the village. When the ferry isn’t running, it’s possible to do a similar walk by keeping to the Walberswick side of the River Blyth.

**Walberswick Walk B**

**Distance:** 11km / 6.8 miles

Walberswick Walk B is a longer walk, taking in the historic village of Dunwich (allow three-four hours). Start on Walberswick village green facing the road and turn right. Walk towards the village hall, following the road as it turns right, then take the footpath left before you reach the Anchor pub. As you leave the village there are a number of footpath options. Take the right fork, then the left, then turn left again. Don’t worry if this section seems a little confusing. Your aim is to end up on the Suffolk Coast Path with the narrow Dunwich River immediately on your left (look out for the blue and yellow Suffolk Coast Path waymarker discs). Once on the Suffolk Coast Path, the route is straightforward. Follow the Suffolk Coast Path across the marshes, passing the derelict Walberswick windpump which provides a useful landmark in this low lying landscape. Continue following the Suffolk Coast Path for approximately 1.5km into the edge of Dunwich Forest, then follow the broad track with the forest on your right and Dingle Marshes on your left. When the road is reached at Bridge Farm on the outskirts of Dunwich, turn left. There are plenty of places to get refreshments in Dunwich village.

From Dunwich, you have the option of either retracing your route, or walking back along the beach to Walberswick. The beach walk is shorter (approximately 5km) but mainly on shingle and can be tiring. The top of the shingle bank provides the best views but keep close to the sea where it is often sandier at low tide for an easier walk. In recent winters, the sea has sometimes broken through the shingle bank making the beach route impassable.
The Suffolk Coast and Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) has one of the finest concentrations of birds, plants and animals to be found anywhere in southern England, and Walberswick is an ideal location from which to enjoy these natural wonders. The village is surrounded by the Suffolk Coast National Nature Reserve (NNR), which covers 1,340 hectares. This wonderful reserve contains a rich variety of wildlife, much of it within easy walking distance.

Its many wildlife highlights include otters, deer and natterjack toads. Over 280 species of birds have been recorded, including many Suffolk Coast and Heaths' characteristic species such as bittern, marsh harrier, bearded tit, woodlark and nightjar. There is also a rich insect fauna with rare solitary bees and wasps, ant-lion, around 500 species of butterflies and moths, and many species of dragonfly and damselfly.

The Suffolk Coast NNR is managed by Natural England.