



A PLACE AT THE TABLE

Community engagement on the Deben Estuary
a report on four years of collaboration with the Environment Agency

A Place at the Table: Community Engagement on the Deben Estuary

This is an account of a Deben Estuary Partnership research initiative facilitated by the Environment Agency's 3Cs fund and co-ordinated by Helene Burningham, Professor of Physical Geography UCL and Simon Read, Associate Professor of Fine Art, Middlesex University London and Deben Estuary Partnership trustee.

This project has sought to develop strategies for community engagement on the estuary and adjacent coastline, encourage stewardship activities and a higher level of participation in the estuary management process

The Environment Agency and the 3Cs programme

The Championing Coastal Coordination (3Cs) programme, led by the Environment Agency with support from Natural England, the Marine Management Organisation (MMO), The Crown Estate (TCE) and the Association of Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities (IFCAs), seeks to enhance and progress coordination for coastal sustainability and resilience in England. This is in recognition of the major challenges that we face in our coastal and estuarine environments. Coastal communities have a front seat position to experience a multitude of climate and human driven impacts on coastal change. Climate change and sea-level rise present serious challenges of future land and sea management priorities, particularly due to intervention and interference in the coastal system by humans over different spatial and temporal scales. Coastal zones often attract intensive investment in development to deliver economic growth, such as housing, ports, recreational and transport infrastructure. Economic competition for space between diverse and legitimate interests places multiple stressors on coastal and estuarine environments and can result in coastal squeeze, habitat loss and a breakdown in resilience of environmental systems to respond to changes in forcing. If these pressures are not well balanced, public access and enjoyment can be compromised, and ecosystem health can deteriorate.¹

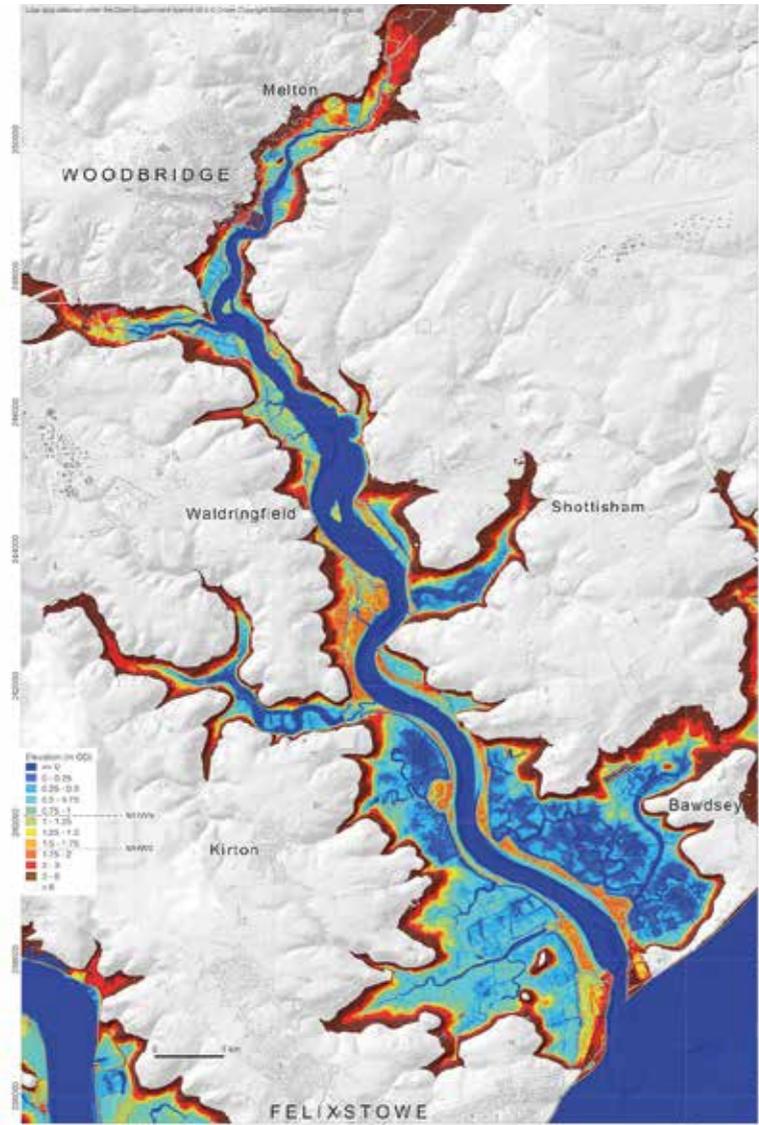
The Deben Estuary Partnership has been in receipt of funding from the Environment Agency 3Cs programme between 2022 and 2026,

over which time we have evolved a programme of engagement to build upon the enthusiasm of the estuary community to take the initiative for understanding how our coastal and estuarine systems work and become directly involved in stewardship activity towards their management and protection. The purpose of this report is to review the development of our 3Cs projects and assess their outcomes, impacts and transferable lessons, to clarify the legacy of sustained community engagement and communicate key insights.



Spinney Marsh

¹Ref: 'Championing Coastal Coordination 2025-2026-Call for expressions of interest-Introduction'
FINAL-250725-3Cs-EOIs-2526-Final(2)



Deben floodplane map

The Deben Context

The environments around us are inherited systems that have evolved through generations of human intervention, some that had immediate impacts and others that continue to influence in one way or another. The Deben estuary and its adjacent coastline is no exception, and like many other coastal valleys in the UK, its modern configuration is remarkably different to that just a few centuries ago. Multiple phases of land claim have reduced the high-tide area of the estuary by a third, and much of the contemporary estuary and open coast is now constrained, where intertidal zones are backed by embankments, sea walls and revetments. Like all natural landscapes, this estuary and coast are transient and have always been subject to change, but our ability work in alignment with change is hampered by an incomplete and uncoordinated grasp of the dynamic system. Time and again, the easiest option is to address the symptoms of change as they occur until the pressure becomes so great as to make it unaffordable.

Citizen Science and the estuary community

Engagement in coastal science is long lived within the Bawdsey community where there has been a broad interest in beach levels around Bawdsey Foreland for decades. In 2013, this was formalised into a systematic monitoring programme, instigated and run by members of the community, initially providing measurement of beach level at 16 locations along the rear of Bawdsey Beach, at around 25 m intervals. Following a few years of limited interest beyond the local community, and an intention to bring the

monitoring to an end, the Chair of the Deben Estuary Partnership at the time (Christine Block) introduced the beach monitoring team to a coastal scientist researching the Suffolk inlets (Helene Burningham). This was the start of a sustained and committed collaboration, that led to an immediate expansion in the programme (to include the Deben inlet / Bawdsey Quay shoreline) and a commitment to broadening the engagement with citizen science and enabling public access to the data and the learning from it.

In 2019, the collaborative project team secured funding from Bawdsey Parish Council to purchase and install an autonomous weather station to support the beach monitoring programme. Building on this and inspired by the success of public fixed point photography initiatives elsewhere, the team obtained funding from the Sustainable Development Fund (provided by Defra and managed by Suffolk Coast & Heaths AONB) in 2020 to launch the Deben PhotoPosts project. By 2021, beach levels were being measured at 17 points along Bawdsey Beach and at a further 11 locations toward Bawdsey Quay, weather conditions across the Bawdsey foreland were being continuously recorded, and four fixed point photography posts had been installed between Shingle Street and Bawdsey Quay.

Although local interest in the project and its findings was steadily increasing, the work remained largely invisible beyond the project team and the parish council, aside from a website and social media updates. In 2021, an opportunity arose to raise the project's profile by hosting a pop up exhibition in the old bus and ferry waiting room at Bawdsey Quay. The Deben Marine Centre was established in summer 2021 to showcase beach monitoring results, early images from the PhotoPost sites, and data from the weather station. These were presented through a series of posters alongside

drone photographs of the local coastline. The centre, run by local volunteers, opened twice a week for several months. It attracted both tourists and residents who showed strong interest in the emerging stories of coastal change.

In the earliest conversations around coastal change and coastal communities, the Deben Estuary Partnership was keen to explore opportunities for citizen science and community-based research to fulfil data needs, develop the science evidence-base, support decision-making and expand stakeholder interests. As the project evolved year to year, the activities shifted from developing and supporting coastal community champions through to enhancing the knowledge exchange between communities, policy developers and decision-makers. Grass roots environmental research had been strengthened and expanded within the Deben estuary region in recent years with a broadening engagement and collaboration between the community and scientific research programmes.

Despite the strength of the connections developing, the challenge of maximising the transdisciplinary potential of coastal community champions and their research efforts remained. Citizen science activities demonstrated a proactive desire by the community to contribute its own experience to the discussion over coastal and estuarine change and the management questions that arise from living in a dynamic coastal zone. This led to questions around what else this offered in terms of local knowledge and lived experience that would also strengthen the spirit of community partnership

At the time when the Championing Coastal Coordination (3Cs) pilot programme was announced in autumn 2021, Bawdsey Beach Monitoring, Deben PhotoPosts, and Deben Marine Centre projects



Measuring beach levels

were already highlighting the value of community engagement in coastal monitoring, delivery of coastal data, and conversations around coastal erosion risks, hazards and management. The Deben Estuary Partnership had also recognised a need to increase both public and agency awareness of the benefits and outcomes of citizen science, largely driven to that point by the Bawdsey community coastal monitoring projects.

Building Coastal Community Stewardship 2022-23

The aim of the initial 3Cs (pilot) project was to build on the Bawdsey projects to encourage broader coastal engagement and awareness, and to proactively support knowledge exchange between coastal stakeholders. The project was ambitious in planning a more permanent community coastal science hub at Bawdsey Quay, but to also expand citizen science around the estuary and to seek a transdisciplinary outlet for the accumulating monitoring data. We sought to gain an understanding of the drivers and motivations of the Bawdsey coastal community and their active and sustained interest in coastal stewardship to inform an intention to expand citizen science around the estuary. We also wanted to improve the exchange of information and use of knowledge between citizen science activity and those involved in environmental governance.

The funding supported the formal establishment of the Deben Marine Centre at Bawdsey Quay. In 2022, it was open to the public 11am – 4pm every Thursday and Sunday between March and October. The room was altered to provide several dedicated spaces to display panels of information about the different citizen science projects, and to disseminate data and findings. The weather station

data was made available as a live feed to a terminal in the centre that also provided public access to more detailed information and data available on the enhanced website and each individual project site.

Key to the success of citizen science activity is access to, and clarity and transparency of, the data and learning obtained. The Deben PhotoPosts project was extended to additional sites around the estuary – through collaboration with Woodbridge Town Council, a site was established at the Tide Mill in Woodbridge; engagement with the Environment Agency led to permission to establish sites at Waldringfield (north marsh) and Felixstowe Ferry, and connections to PGL at Bawdsey Manor permitted a 5th photopost around the Deben peninsula located at Bawdsey Quay.

We produced flyers for each of the project, that proved popular with those passing by the Deben Marine Centre, and we kept a visitor book for those who wanted to leave comments. Visitors from near and far had positive things to say about the information on display and the knowledge of those running the centre:

This is fascinating, and gets more interesting the more you delve in. The thoroughness of the research is impressive [Essex]

Very informative – especially on coastal erosion – great collaboration [Dublin]

Superb exhibition and projects – a really valuable resource [Felixstowe]

Nice to see a Marine Centre here. Interesting data produced by the volunteers. Worthwhile project to record the rate of erosion [Toronto]

The project also canvassed opinions – first, from the community to understand the drivers and motivations of engagement with community research activities and citizen science, and – second, from statutory bodies to establish how important these activities were to coastal monitoring and decision making. The results showed that communities are highly motivated by local environmental concerns, continuity of involvement, and opportunities for “hands on” participation; those already involved in participatory community volunteering were keen to sustain their contribution and offer their time and expertise to a positive cause.

Whilst the project demonstrated that citizen generated data can meaningfully enhance community engagement with environmental issues and understanding of coastal processes, it also highlighted a persistent disconnect - that statutory bodies recognise the value of community science for local engagement in matters of their concern, but currently struggle to see the benefit and value of citizen-science data in the formal decision making process.

Strengthening long term dialogue, data sharing, and collaboration between communities, partnership groups, and authorities emerged as an essential priority for achieving more effective, inclusive coastal stewardship.



Overview of Bawdsey foreland

Strengthening Coastal Community Stewardship 2023-24

In the second application to the 3Cs programme, we explored ways in which communities can deliver data and information that is of wider value. The support helped to consolidate efforts at the Deben Marine Centre, upgrading the space, and delivering new material (flyers and environmental education interpretation panels) which also permitted us to share some of the information boards with other community events around the estuary. The intention here was to raise the profile of citizen science activity around the estuary and demonstrate how good practice and rigorous approaches can deliver robust scientific data that can contribute something additional to our understanding of estuarine and coastal systems.

We delivered a dedicated Ground Truths event in Woodbridge to bring together key community 'stakeholders' who are involved or interested in estuary-action. The networking event provided an opportunity for different groups and enablers to present and discuss efforts and experiences but was also intended to provide the Deben Estuary Partnership with a broad recognition of community interests and activities around the estuary and its catchment that could be represented in the estuary plan.

In our earlier efforts to strengthen coastal community stewardship, we recognised a key challenge in investing in citizen science activities: community-acquired data is not valued or of interest to statutory bodies or management teams in its current form. In much the same way that efforts are made to translate scientific research outcomes into meaningful understanding and metrics for managers,

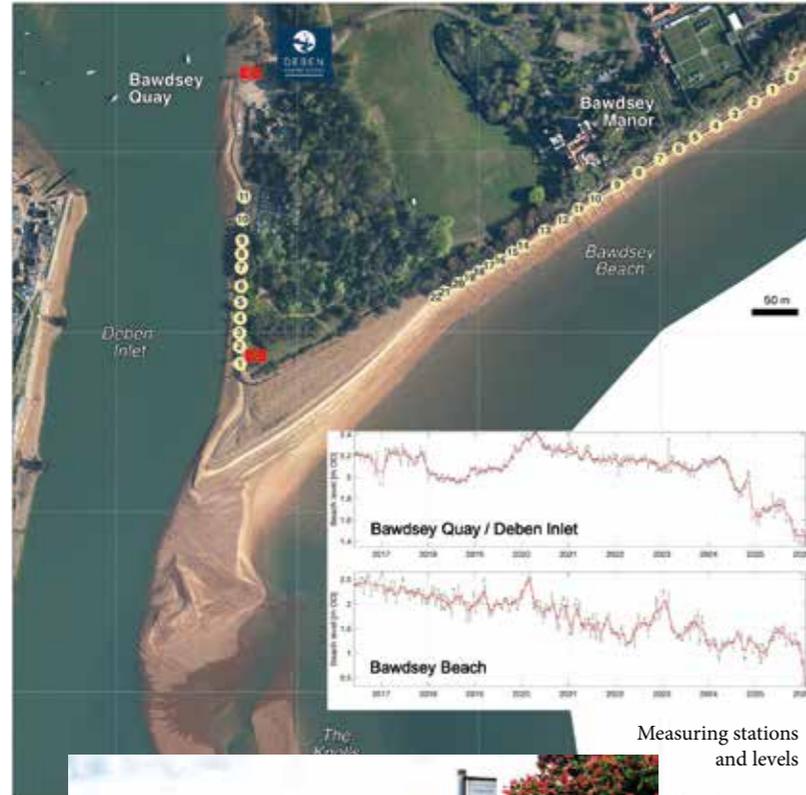
citizen science data requires translation. Knowledge exchange can only be achieved if the knowledge is exchanged in a form that is accessible. The citizen science data was not sufficiently grounded in the existing national monitoring approaches and as a result, these data are typically valued only for community education rather than for decision-making. To address this, we sought to scientifically validate and demonstrate the added value of citizen-science data by linking it with national monitoring datasets and translating the findings into a format familiar to authorities. Our work focused on a scientific review and analysis of existing community-led coastal data collection, evaluating its contribution to understanding estuarine and coastal change through a Coastal Trends report – produced in a style consistent with Environment Agency reporting.

In the open access, freely available report *Bawdsey Beach Monitoring: Coastal Trends* (Gong and Burningham, 2024),² the extending beach level data archive delivered by the Bawdsey Beach Monitoring team was analysed and compared with Defra/Environment Agency lidar and topographic profile data. The work demonstrated the close alignment between the citizen science data with the national monitoring datasets, showing that the data were robust and accurate in capturing beach dynamics at an annual time scale (the frequency of national surveys).

But the high frequency monitoring by the Bawdsey team revealed and explained far more about coastal behaviour than is possible from national public data. The findings were significant as not only did they illustrate that citizen science data can be trusted, but they also showed that the data were able to provide a more

nuanced understanding of spit and foreland beach dynamics and sediment movement. Gong and Burningham (2024) have shown that continued decline in sediment supply, driven by the growing separation of Bawdsey Beach from the Shingle Street sediment system, dwindling gravel supply, and the artificially controlled backshore around the Bawdsey foreland, combined with a dominant north-easterly wave climate is accelerating beach erosion at Bawdsey. Northeasterly waves can readily supply sediment from the north if it is available, but the long-term impacts of hard defences at East Lane on alongshore sediment connectivity has led to sediment deficit between Bawdsey and East Lane.

The system is now dependent on southerly waves to supply sediment from The Knolls and push sediment back into the beaches around the foreland and along Bawdsey Beach.



Measuring stations and levels



Deben Marine Centre



The Bawdsey beach measuring team

²Gong, J., Burningham, H., 2024. *Bawdsey Beach Monitoring: Coastal Trends*. Report to the Deben Estuary Partnership, 2407-1, 37pp.



The Co-produced Estuary: understanding the past to inform the future 2024-25

In the third project, we broadened the consultation process by integrating a wider range of local knowledge to support a more inclusive approach to estuary and shoreline management. Although communities are often invited to participate in discussions about estuary management, their lived experience and diverse ways of understanding a landscape are seldom fully considered. To address this, we selected two case study areas – the Bawdsey flood cell and intertidal zone and the Waldringfield waterfront – and initiated conversations with each community about how their landscape has changed within living memory and what this may suggest for future management.

Our intention was to deepen our understanding of how communities know and value their environments by drawing on memory, expertise and situated knowledge. Whilst much of the historical influence of these communities on the estuary may no longer be visible, traces remain in the landscape and in fragmentary recollections. By working closely with local participants, we sought to combine these different forms of knowledge to build a more complete picture of how the estuary system functions. Although we engaged with each community in the same way in an introductory meeting, it did not take long before we understood that the same approach for both was not going to work due to strong disparities in the interests, motivations and response, obliging us to follow a bespoke approach at each location.

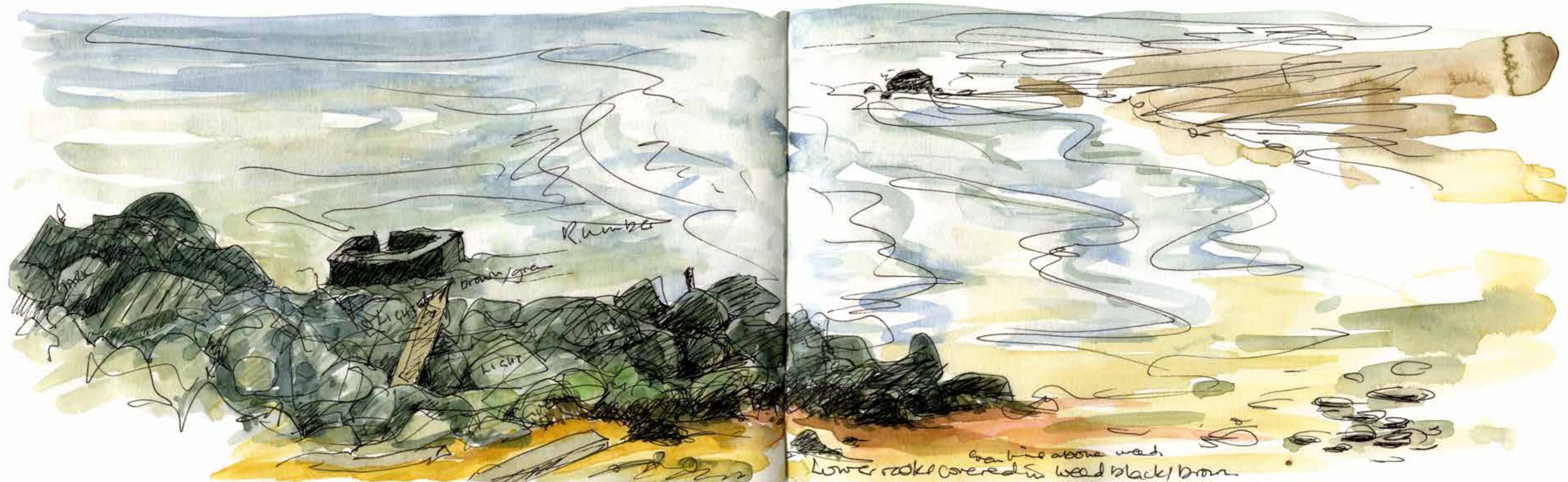
For Bawdsey, with citizen-science research and public engagement projects already in place, we had access to an amenable community

with a well-established commitment to participatory activities. But the aim to explore the community's inherent knowledge of its own landscape required a level of open exchange that proved more challenging than we had anticipated. Existing commitments already demanded significant time and energy of community members, and it transpired that extending participation into something beyond the beach monitoring and operation of the Deben Marine Centre added an understandable layer of uncertainty. Unlike the citizen-science work, which is centred on producing tangible datasets, our intention in the third phase of our 3Cs journey was not to generate a specific outcome but to encourage the sharing of local knowledge, memory and experience as a contribution to the estuary management process. The aim was to build on the strong culture of community ownership and sense of place, rather than to deliver a concrete product.

With the Deben Marine Centre already serving as an active focal point for discussing coastal change, it was a logical extension to use it as a space for exploring the narrative dimensions of landscape evolution. To support this, we produced two small publications as a pilot initiative to prompt reflection on historical change and spark insights into ongoing, incremental shifts in the landscape. These were made freely available at the Centre for both residents and visitors, encouraging them to view their familiar surroundings in a fresh perspective.

Lost to the Sea: based upon Margaret Wyllie's watercolour paintings of the disintegrating wartime pillboxes on the Bawdsey cliffs and her husband Jim's account of a walk between Bawdsey and East Lane in 1989. With a new text by Simon Read, this became an opportunity to consider what we mean by defence, expectations of permanence, and experience of loss on a crumbling coastline.

Associated publications for Bawdsey available at the Deben Marine Centre



Margaret Wyllie, from 'Lost to the Sea': view from East Lane with two pillboxes.



Bawdsey Ferry near Felixstowe Suffolk. John Moore of Ipswich circa 1890. courtesy Ipswich Borough Council.



Bawdsey Ferry near Felixstowe Suffolk Jeremy Young 2025.



Identifying saltmarsh plants

Ways of Knowing: following the discovery of the painting Bawdsey Ferry at Felixstowe by John Moore of Ipswich (circa 1890), and its instantly identifiable view of the estuary entrance from a location above Bawdsey and Alderton marshes, we worked with Jeremy Young, a local photographer, to identify and take a contemporary photograph from the viewpoint location. This allows community members to compare the views, reflect on past changes, and speculate upon future developments based on their own experience and knowledge.

At Waldringfield, our experience was quite different and was driven by a community already immersed in the wellbeing of the estuary and the management of its shoreline and intertidal zone. Consequently, once we had the germ of a collaborative relationship, we were pushing at an open door. As it was in Bawdsey, access was enabled by existing infrastructure, which in Waldringfield was a plethora of interest groups each with strong links to the other.

As at Bawdsey, our introductory meeting hosted by the sailing club was cautious and the response guarded, but it took just one individual to galvanise the discussion with the result that we came away with an initial agreement to run a series of workshops and an agreement to set an agenda for further activity. Predictably, the key topics from the floor were research and workshop activities related to the estuary system such as – a forum for understanding saltmarsh and its behaviour, monitoring water quality and testing for pollutants, mapping the extent of the underlying clay beds and their influence upon the location of the flood walls and dating the flood defences and other historic reclamation projects – all of which were scheduled into the spring and summer of 2025.

February 22	‘Reading the Intertidal Landscape’: an introduction to saltmarsh dynamics
June 6	Saltmarsh Monitoring Workshop
June 10	‘A Walk in a Transitional Landscape’: Kirton Creek and Hemley Marsh
July 2	‘Beachcombing with Waldringfield County Primary School’
July 19	‘Drawing on the Beach’ with artist Claudia Myatt
August 30	History Walk with Gareth Thomas of the Waldringfield History Group
August 30	Boatyard Studio: Open Studio
August 30	Singing to the River, The Rabble Chorus
August 30	Water quality sampling with David Findley from Deben Climate Centre
August 31	Boatyard Studio: Open Studio
August 31	Ipswich and District Detector Club on Waldringfield Beach
August 31	‘Managing Flood Risk at Waldringfield during Times of Change’ A walk along the floodwall with David Kemp EA

Although supporting community science projects and running workshops would have fitted perfectly well within our project brief, this would never have been any more than an instrumental approach to engagement were it not for a chance meeting on the beach in January 2025, and the comment, “What we really want is an exhibition”, when we acquired a sense of purpose and an agenda that the community could consider its own. With a new

title, ‘Waldringfield Beach: Memories of the Tideline’, the project became a vehicle for bringing the entire village community together in a celebration of their involvement with the estuary landscape and an opportunity for the members of the many interest groups in the village to share their knowledge in an ambitious public demonstration of good stewardship. Additional to the rolling programme of events on the foreshore outlined above, an open weekend was scheduled for the 30-31 August with events and displays in the village hall and on Waldringfield beach.³ Although it was not possible to confirm a date for the main project outcome before the formal closure of the project fund, our agreed itinerary enabled us to plan and complete much of the preparatory work well in advance. To mitigate the risk of any budget shortfall, we secured additional funding from Suffolk Coast and Heaths National Landscape to cover essential costs for the open weekend, including printing, equipment hire, publicity and transport.

³See the illustrated programme ‘Waldringfield Beach: memories of the tideline’



The Rabble Chorus on Waldringfield beach



Waldringfield County Primary School - Beachcombing day

Waldringfield Beach: Memories of the Tideline

As the programme evolved, the community adopted an increasingly proactive approach whereby some of the initiatives raised a wider level of interest through their correspondence with each other. For example, an activity that started with an extraordinary treasure trove of archaeological relics and fossil remains owned by long-term residents from a lifetime of foraging on the beach, prompted collaboration with the local primary school children through their own beach-combing activity. This led to a display of their finds in the exhibition at the village hall, which prompted an invitation to the Ipswich and District Detector Club who responded with enthusiasm by bringing a display of their finds and conducting demonstrations of detecting on the beach. This interwoven connection between projects and snowballing of enthusiasm to share knowledge contributed hugely to the success of the project. Combined with displays of the fossils found on the beach and the children's discoveries, this was an exciting and inclusive experience, and a good example of how an idea can gather momentum and different ways of knowing can complement each other.

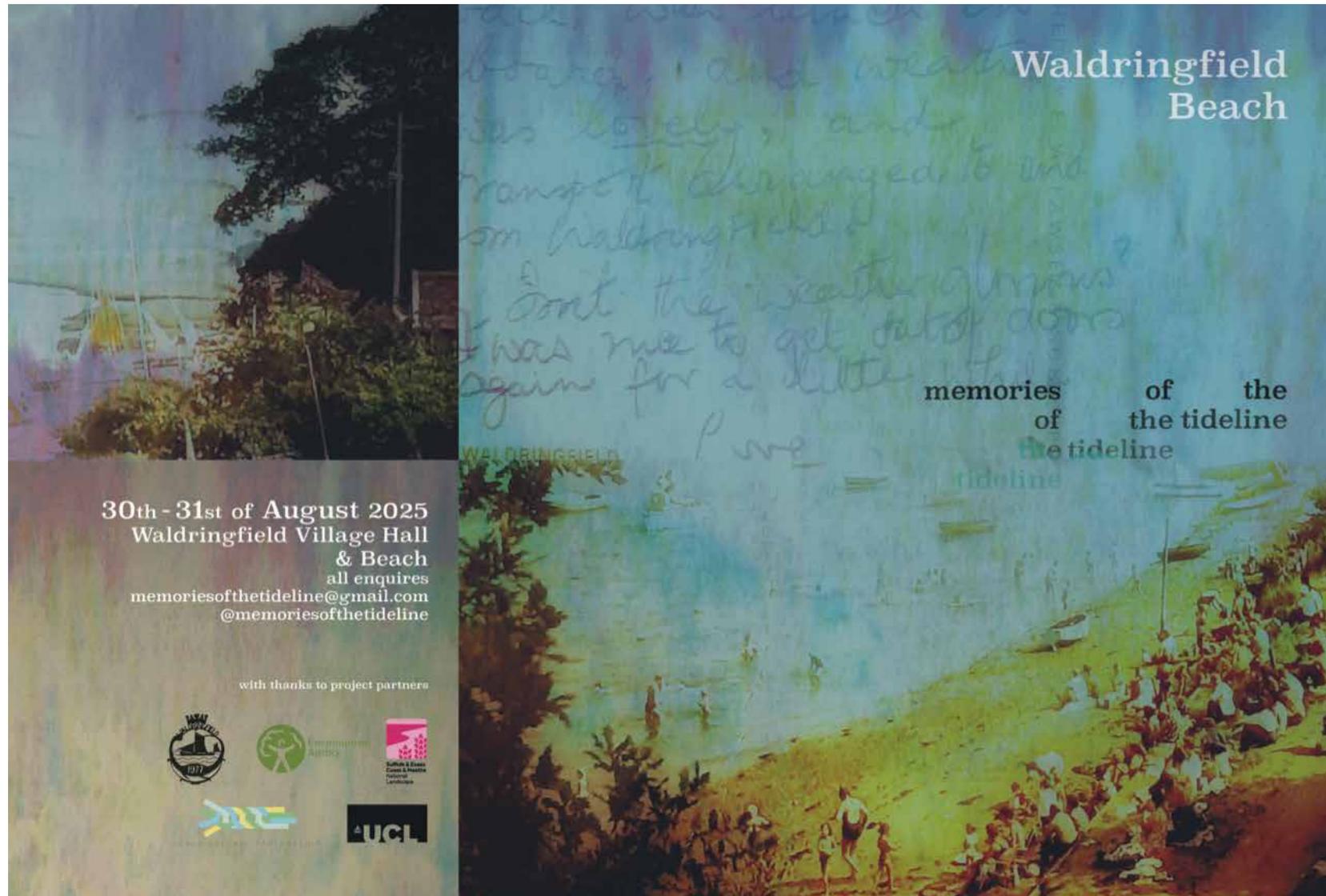
This resonated well with the aspirations of the programme to reflect as broad a range of interest in the estuary as possible, which included events as various as a workshop with Deben Climate Centre on gathering samples for water quality testing, a walk along the flood wall with David Kemp, EA to discuss flood risk management at Waldringfield, and a performance by 90 members of the Rabble Chorus, a local community choir, singing to the river.



Flood defence discussion on Waldringfield flood wall with David Kemp, Environment Agency



Ipswich & District Detector Club at Waldringfield Village Hall



30th - 31st of August 2025
 Waldringfield Village Hall
 & Beach
 all enquires
memoriesofthetideline@gmail.com
[@memoriesofthetideline](https://www.instagram.com/memoriesofthetideline)

with thanks to project partners



scheduled events

Saturday 30th

10am-4pm Boatyard Studio / Pixel Perfect Photography & Barra Art

10am-12.30pm Ipswich & District Detector Club / Waldringfield Beach

10am-1pm History Walk with Gareth Thomas / start from village hall

11.30am-12.30pm The Rabble Chorus community choir / outside sailing club

12.30am-1.30pm Water Quality Sampling with David Findley / slipway

Sunday 31st

10am-12.30pm Ipswich & District Detector Club / Waldringfield Beach

10am-4pm Boatyard Studio / open studio

2pm-3.30pm Managing Flood Risk at Waldringfield during Times of Change, A walk along the flood wall with David Kemp EA / meet o/s boatyard

4pm-5pm Sketchbook feedback, with Simon Read / village hall

Saturday 30th & Sunday 31st

10am-5pm

Main Hall / National Landscapes / Environment Agency
 Deben Estuary Partnership / River Deben Association
 Waldringfield Wildlife Group / Waldringfield Sailing Club
 Ipswich & District Detector Club / Deben Climate Centre

Art and The Shoreline, featuring :
 Waldringfield Art Group / Jackie Brinsley / Tim Curtis / Lizzie Hale / Malcolm Hodd
 Al Gurr / Ian Kay / Graham Kellaway / Claudia Myatt / Simon Read / Nell Sully
 Darren Tansley / Annie Turner / Jonathan Ruffle

Kennedy Room / Tim Curtis & Malcolm Hodd video compilation
 Waldringfield History Group / 3C's Project introduction
 Waldringfield Photoposts - Professor Helene Burningham

Corridor
 Ambient sounds by Darren Tansley with drawings by Jackie Brinsley

Waldringfield Beach

Waldringfield Village Hall

Welcome to Waldringfield Beach, Memories of the Tideline.

A series of events split between Waldringfield Village Hall and the waterfront. Conceived as a community-led project, the aim is to explore the different ways we know our estuary landscape, from the analytical to the emotional, the contemplative to the immersive. Waldringfield is host to a thriving network of clubs and study groups, each with its own diverse specialisms including sailing, biodiversity, history, archaeology or water quality but all in unanimous agreement over their devotion to this sheltered corner of the Deben, and all of whom will be participating in the weekend's events.

Join us for a stimulating opportunity to learn about our waterfront, exchange views and share our enthusiasm for our estuary landscape and its hinterland.

The catalyst for this project is a research study 'The Co-produced Estuary - Understanding the Past to Inform the Future', coordinated by coastal scientist, Helene Burningham and Deben Estuary Partnership trustee and artist, Simon Read, to promote the importance of community engagement in the estuary management process. This study has been supported by the Environment Agency 3C's (Championing Coastal Collaboration) programme with further support from an award by Suffolk & Essex Coast & Heaths National Landscape.



Force 9 storm - East Lane

Ways of Knowing 2025-26

Every community in every landscape has its own narrative for which every individual of every community has their own personal version. Although every landscape answers to its own measure and morphology, our suggestion is that human memory, agency and situated knowledge have a fundamental place in policy development and its governance. By ‘Ways of Knowing’ we refer to the inherent but frequently unappreciated knowledge held by any community of its own landscape and how it has evolved. Our belief is that this untapped resource should not only be considered an important complement to other more institutional information and data-gathering systems but also confers an enhanced sense of ownership upon the community and with it a sense of responsibility for good practice in its management.

In our next phase in the project, we decided to apply the lessons learned by conducting field workshops with the two coastal communities of Felixstowe Ferry and East Lane. East Lane is a quiet lane that extends to the open coast from Bawdsey, where a couple of dwellings sit alongside a Martello Tower and a WW2 artillery battery. Felixstowe Ferry is a small hamlet at the entrance of the Deben estuary, opposite Bawdsey Quay. Although geographically separate, they are connected through sediment and as a product of their experience of the climate of the southern North Sea.

The primary feature that distinguishes Felixstowe Ferry from East Lane is the shingle bar, known as The Knolls that guards the entrance to the estuary and at times provides shelter to Felixstowe Ferry. They are bound in a reciprocal relationship of giving and receiving;

although each is vulnerable according to its geomorphology, exposure to weather, wave action and tidal scour, they are symbiotically bound to each other via the sediment of the beaches and forelands around the mouth of the Deben estuary.

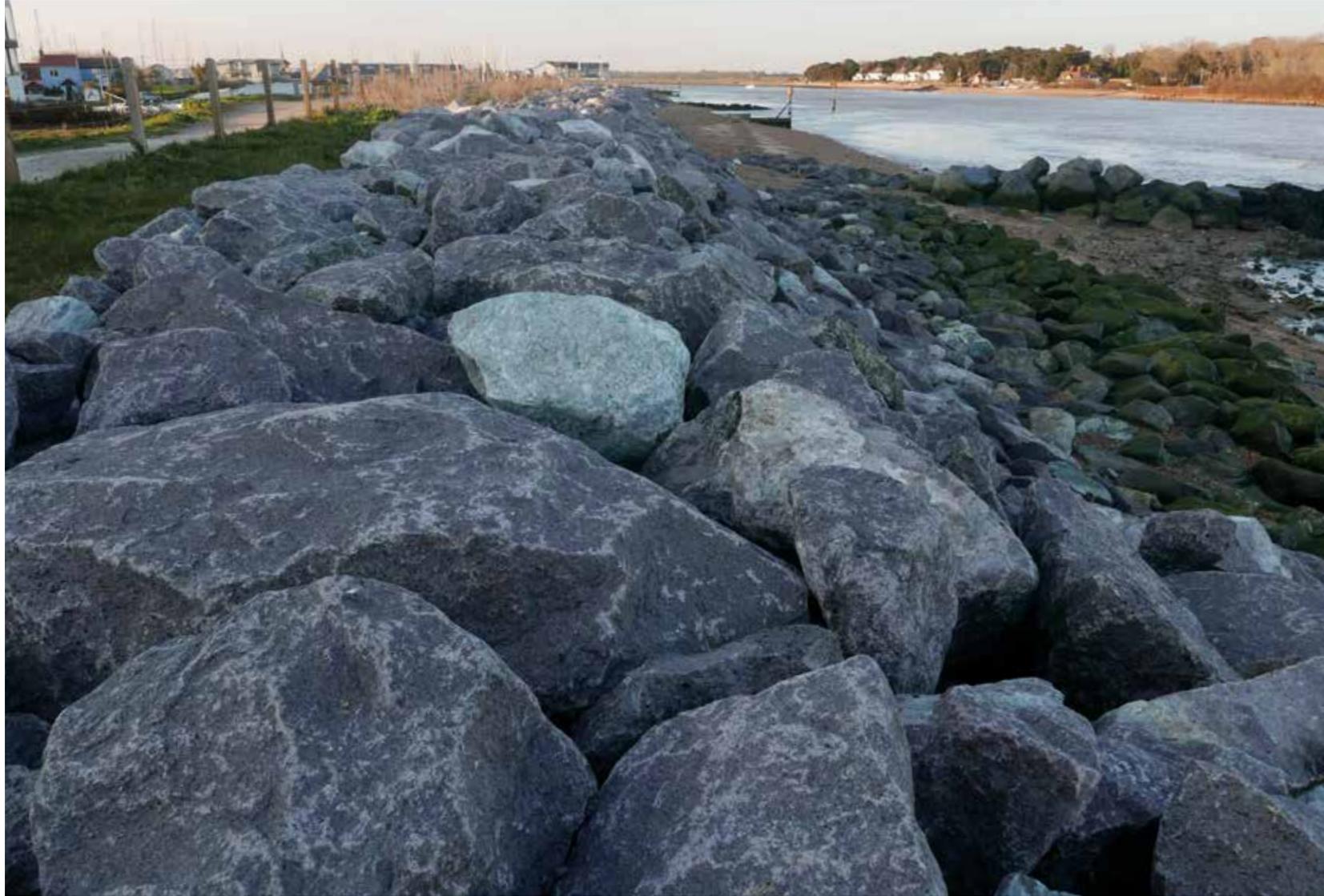
Felixstowe Ferry owes some of its stability to the shelter afforded by The Knolls, which in turn depend upon sediment recharge from Bawdsey Beach. This has become limited by accelerated beach loss and a decline in sediment supply from the north. East Lane has played a critical role here – increased intervention and defence has established a fixed point on an otherwise dynamic shoreline and now forms an implicit barrier to the conveyance alongshore of sediment. This story of mutual dependency is common the length of the East Anglian Coast, where the relationship between one coastal location and another would historically depend upon a consistent exchange of sediment which, once interrupted, can stall and founder.

Workshops

Our approach to the workshops follows a similar format to one we adopted for our earlier landscape-based project *Deben Soundings*⁴, which was to:

- identify a landscape and a theme for which there may be several interconnected levels of interest.
- invite participants who represent different interests, expertise or knowledge of the landscape.

⁴Deben Soundings was the working title for a research project ‘Imagining the Measure of Change: art, science and the estuary community’ by coastal scientist, Helene Burningham and fine artist, Simon Read for the UKRI Landscape Decisions programme 2018-2021



Rock Armour - Felixstowe Ferry

- ensure an informed but informal exchange of views by limiting the number of participants to around 20.
- supply a short introduction to the landscape character of the site in advance, not so much as a guide to the discussion, but more to indicate its scope.
- keep to a simple timetable for each workshop – meet on site in the morning to walk the landscape and identify each other’s areas of interest, adjourn to a suitable location for a light lunch and an afternoon session to explore issues that arose in the morning session in greater depth.

Our intention for these workshops was to share knowledge, explore synergies, learn from each other’s experience and enable a more informed understanding of the landscape. Given that we will have persuaded a rich mixture of participants to join the workshops, there is an expectation that it should be followed up in some way. Although we used the same approach for each workshop, it is predictable that they would turn out differently to each other, which led to the conclusion that if we were to take them further, our approach would need to be tailored to the community and the issues that arose.

Felixstowe Ferry 28 November 2025

For Felixstowe Ferry, the physical challenges to the stability of the Suffolk coast and the sustainability of its settlements are the backdrop against which life and livelihoods carry on. Even the brutal presence of rock armour across its frontage has done little to

diminish interest in the location. In fact, it adds to its uniqueness and brings an extra dimension to the daily reality of living on the edge that is characteristic of the place.

The continuing need to expand the protection of the shoreline, and the mobility and configuration of The Knolls promote a high level of uncertainty that dominates discussion; together, they overshadow its future viability and therefore it is of little surprise that the perceived identity of Felixstowe Ferry is circumscribed by risks and constraints that the community must live with or choose to ignore.

The characteristics that distinguish Felixstowe Ferry, The Knolls and defence works are as varied as those that do the looking:

- For the coastal scientist, The Knolls are an excellent example of an ebb-tide delta, which excites a great deal of research interest.
- Navigation: approached from the sea, the combination of negotiating the Deben Bar and the armoured shoreline can be intimidating, demanding favourable weather and sea conditions, up to date knowledge, seeking the advice of the harbourmaster, and steady nerves.
- The Knolls and the coastal defences are guardians of the gateway to the Deben. For the community they afford protection from excessive wave action and without them the seaward facing properties would be very exposed. They ensure a sheltered inner harbour in the lower reaches for commercial and recreational boats to lie afloat.



Harbour Villas - Felixstowe Ferry

- Beyond instrumental considerations, The Knolls resonate in ways that closely relate to the spirit of the place and fire the imagination and consciousness of residents and visitors alike. Although they are a physical coastal feature, for the uninitiated there is an uncanny quality to a mass of shingle that disappears twice a day and subject to weather conditions, can be in quite a different configuration when it reappears.

- The defence works are a constant preoccupation and assurance for the community; there is no other protection from wave action than the shelter afforded by The Knolls, which can vary from month to month.

Contrasting perceptions

Felixstowe Ferry was originally a tight-knit fishing community and even though fishing survives today in a much-reduced form, it remains deeply in the DNA of the community. The legacy of fishing is very much at its core and may have influenced the more recent influx of people attracted by its atmosphere and proximity to the sea.

Despite the obvious risk of flooding and shoreline erosion, new residential properties have sprung up on the footprint of existing structures but with extra attention to their resilience. Although improvement of the coastal defences may not directly affect the value of the properties, the decision to hold the line for the future is perhaps incentive enough to inspire a level of confidence in the investment.

With the decline of fishing, much of the marine activity is devoted to leisure and recreation, with the outcome that the original community has shrunk to the extent that, for the first time, not everyone knows everyone anymore.

One participant whose parents owned a small cottage at the Ferry and spent much of his childhood there, still spends time there with his family. He talks fondly of a childhood full of adventure, completely at home in and out of the water in the company of other local children.

Duties such as ferryman, harbourmaster and pilot automatically fell to those who knew the quirks and hazards of the place and were often handed on through generations of the same family. The fishing community with its intimate knowledge of the Deben entrance would be the source of expertise for these jobs, the essential depth of knowledge denotes a sense of ownership and responsibility, without which the long view of how the location has changed, the ability to predict change and the form it can take could be lost to the future.

Summary

Although there was plenty of conversation between participants throughout the day, there was not a great willingness to share thoughts, volunteer information or offer clues to take further. As a gathering, it was certainly very animated if not so fruitful as a workshop. However, from individual comments made during and directly after the event, there is plenty of scope for following up; especially concerning the fishing industry, how much it has shrunk over recent years and the effect that has had upon the cohesiveness and identity of the community. This was obviously a sensitive issue and possibly best followed up separately in an interview format.

Value

- o Natural diversity/biodiversity (lots of individual sites or man-made.)
- o Shingle spits, designations etc.
- o Agricultural value.
- o Tranquil remoteness
- o Lack of transport infrastructure leads to
- o Fossil value.
- o Goseford (local history) Martello towers.

Change

- o coastal erosion is good to be understood over millennia - shows how rapid its increased due to climate change.
- o remeandering etc - river paths naturally restoring, natural flood management.
- * - how do we understand changes?
- o Local history/knowledge
- o Data (maps + photos!)
- o monitoring.
- o historians and agricultural landowners
- o political change!

Control

now big is community - know community can't be stronger together effects us all

Q over what hold onto + save farmland? elisabeth on food security

↓

Dr let flood and look farmland but gain Saltmarsh habitats and hopefully land protection

local community visibility community tourism community.

importance for all stakeholders includes the above

Driven by - we react.

become no long term planning + not enough money

How we influence

We can all vote.

What can we do low scale without funding

East Lane 12 December 2025

East Lane is directly exposed to the sea and, where it is not defended by rock armour, it is totally at the mercy of whatever weather and sea conditions can inflict. Apart from the Martello Tower, a bungalow and corrugated iron villa on East Lane Point, the local communities of Bawdsey and Alderton are well removed from immediate risk of loss through erosion or flooding. Bawdsey Manor, to the south of East Lane, is responding to the continual loss of beach material and wave damage to its sea frontage by implementing its own coastal protection measures.

- We used the same principles for planning the East Lane event as we did for the Felixstowe Ferry workshop but took the precaution of setting a firm agenda for the day.
- We provided a brief introduction to the complexity of the coastline from Bawdsey Quay to Hollesley Bay, including the interconnectivity between episodes of human intervention and its effect upon coastal sedimentary movement.
- At the site meeting at East Lane, one of our participants who owns a property there gave a first-hand account of the changes that have happened over the past 25 years, and Helene Burningham was able to put this in context in an account of the geomorphology of the area and the links between sedimentary movement, the problems of beach loss and accelerated cliff erosion. At the southern end of Hollesley Bay at low water, we were able to witness the Saxon fish traps – clusters of twigs

standing upright and anchored in former wetland mud now exposed at the foot of the beach – variably covered by tide and shingle⁵.

- For lunch and the afternoon break out session, we were invited by PGL to use the Great Hall at Bawdsey Manor.⁵

The topics set to launch the afternoon session and the responses from the working groups were:

Value

Q What do we value about this coastal region and what makes it distinctive?

A The expression of the value of East Lane ranged from the experience of ephemeral qualities, such as the changeability of the weather and light conditions, the sense of tranquillity due to its relative isolation, evidence of its sheer impermanence to a sense of the wildness of the shoreline. More tangible characteristics denoting the uniqueness of the landscape were its biodiversity, including vegetated shingle, birdlife and the frequent presence of seals on the beach, the coralline crag cliffs and fossil deposits and the presence of historical evidence including 19th century Martello Towers, 20th century fortifications, the remnants of early 20th century groyne works and the ghost of the medieval port of Goseford.

⁵ <https://www.riverdeben.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/The-Deben-57-Autumn-2018.pdf>



Loss of shingle from at East Lane

Change

Q How do we understand the changes that have occurred in living memory? By understanding changes over centuries and millennia can we better understand and adapt to the changes we are facing? Does our understanding of the past inform our strategy for the future?

A Experience of climate change through sea level rise unsettled weather and increased storminess, a greater awareness of accelerating coastal change through improved understanding of coastal processes, well communicated scientific enquiry and evidence of historical change on the ground. Ways of gaining insight include community memory, landowner's knowledge, documentary evidence, scientific research and personal experience.

Intensification of arable farming practice.

Increased visitor pressure and greater footfall, less sensitivity to the site including littering and dog control.

We have a choice whether we accept change and work with it or continue to defend against it.

We are driven by change with a more reactive rather than strategic approach to long term adaptation.

Control

Q Our relationship with the coast is often centred on control - what types of control do we want to hold on to, and what could we let go? Do we drive change or are we driven by change?

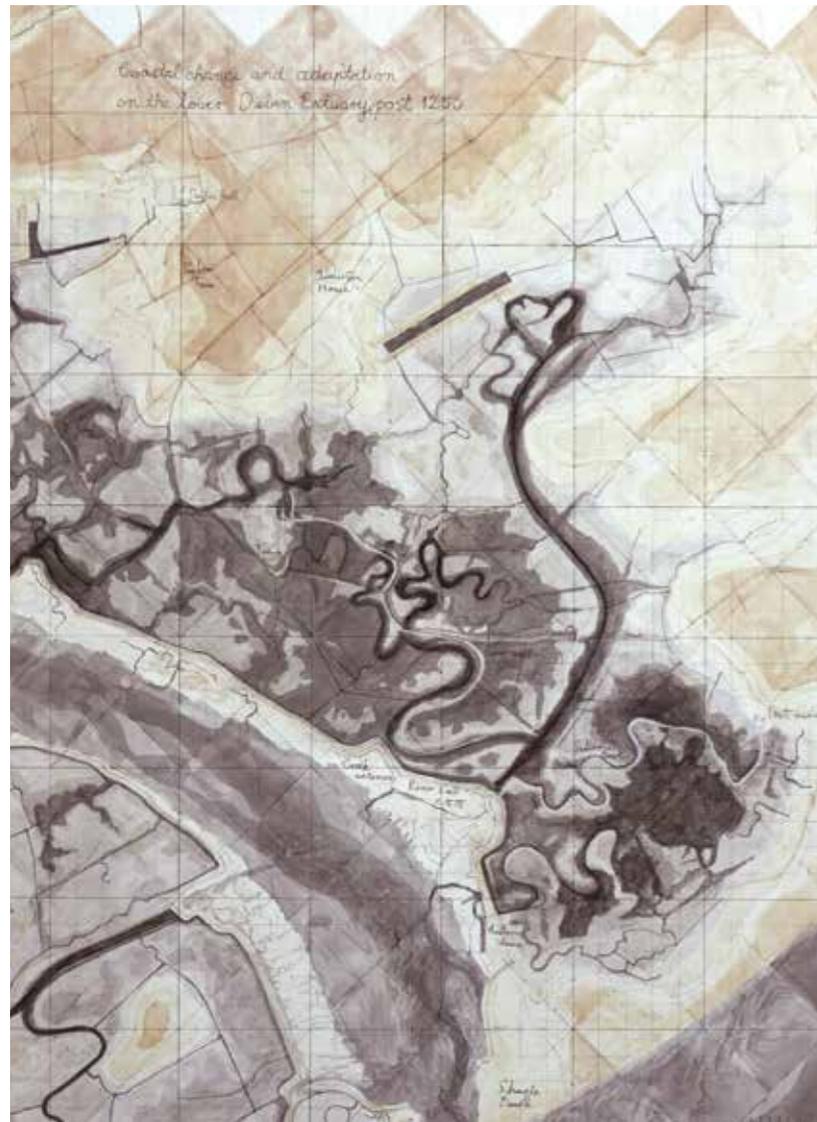
A Management decisions are more often driven by circumstances than long-term plan and the pressures to defend Bawdsey and East Lane are from the landowners and local community with logistical support from Environment Agency. Neither of these qualify for direct government funding.

For productive farmland, food security is justification for continued defence, but where land is not considered valuable enough to defend, such as the Bawdsey cliffs and fields, the landowner accepts that it would not be cost-effective to protect.

PGL is installing rock groyne works adjacent to their sea frontage, which leaves a question over the remaining unprotected cliffs.

One of the property owners at East Lane has been speculating over installing more rock armour to prevent erosion continuing behind the site.

The alternative to hard defences is to cease intervention altogether and let nature take its course.



'Coastal Change and Adoption on the Lower Deben Estuary post 1250 (detail)

Community

Q Should we be facing the future as individuals or as a community? What does community mean in the context of the coast? What role does the community have in relation to influencing the decision-making process?

A A: There is a difference between landowners and property owners with a fiscal interest and a community with no financial interests at stake that may be more inclined to let change happen.

Some from the local community have lived and worked in the area for generations and their knowledge is inherent (situated knowledge). Others have chosen to live in the area there and have adopted it. Their engagement is fired by curiosity and interest (acquired knowledge)

Bawdsey/Alderton are insular communities and feel relatively powerless to influence policy. This need not be so since the community can influence decision-making through local and regional government. There is certain to be greater need for consultation over continuing coastal change, for which the insight of a well-informed local community will be essential to the discussion.

Responses:

Since the workshop at East Lane was formally organised with a set agenda, it generated a fruitful discussion with plenty of scope for

how it could be taken further. After the discussion the question arose whether there is an appetite to follow it up and, if so, what form this might take? From the afternoon session, we identified the following topics that could be woven into a future programme:

- Medieval history and its application to our understanding of the present and the future coastal landscape.
- The decision to defend or let nature take its course
- Designations and criteria of government and non-government organisations for coastal management.
- Memory, narratives and documentation.
- Explore further collaboration with Wildlife Wise.



Exposed strata at East Lane

What we have learned from the workshops:

We ran the two field workshops to test our proposal that, common to all local communities is a deep-rooted knowledge and experience of the evolution of their own landscape. If there is a will to engage them in the discussion towards an integrated approach to coastal and estuary management, their lived-in experience would be vital to the information-gathering process.

Our aim was to bring together a broad and diverse range of participants all of whom have in common a connection to the place but bring different points of view to it.

Although we appreciate these events need to be stage-managed, our approach remains that they should be informal; this is one reason why we set an optimum limit on the number of participants to 20 to ensure that all participants had a voice and we determined that our role should be to facilitate rather than pre-empt discussion and risk limiting its scope by formally leading it.

The two workshops were quite different from each other in practice and outcome due to group dynamics and our facilitation. East Lane was much more successful than Felixstowe Ferry due to distributing the briefing paper well in advance to prepare the participants, setting an agenda to focus the afternoon session and having the freedom to organise the space to better facilitate discussion.

This had an effect upon the levels of participation: there was a greater level of engagement in the East Lane event than there was at Felixstowe Ferry, with the result that there was also greater satisfaction in the experience and interest in follow-up than there

was at Felixstowe, for which there was evidently plenty to explore but only practical at an individual level.

This experience echoed the conclusions reached by the collaborations with Bawdsey and Waldringfield, where success relied on establishing an immediate rapport with the community. Without this, it is impossible to establish a conversation based upon mutual trust and a collaborative approach to environmental stewardship. This led us to the observation that, to achieve success, the community dynamic of each settlement must be accommodated, and led to the conclusion that each project requires a bespoke approach that often depends upon key individuals becoming a touchstone and catalyst for the process.

Taking community memory and local knowledge into consideration as evidence towards a local management plan can promote a spirit of reciprocal confidence in the landscape governance process, leading to a higher level of informed dialogue and the confidence to take the initiative on the care and management of the immediate environment.



Fallen trees at East Lane

Broader Constituencies and Community Engagement

Over the past four years, with help from the 3C's programme, we have supported community initiatives that have raised levels of informed participation in the discussion over estuary management. In 2022 we contributed to the continuing development of the beach measuring scheme at Bawdsey and subsequently facilitated the production of a report to analyse the data produced by the project: 'Bawdsey Beach Monitoring: Coastal Trends,' by Jie Gong and Helene Burningham, published by The Coastal and Estuarine Research Unit, Department of Geography, University College London.

Whilst continuing to build upon the strengths of this project, we extended our enquiry by adopting a more discursive approach to community engagement based upon our concern that, although efforts are made to draw the community into the discussion over estuary management, this has often been a one way process with little provision for what the community may bring to the table as local knowledge and how diverse ways of knowing a landscape can enrich the decision-making process and making it locally relevant.

These two initiatives have provided material towards a chapter, 'Broader Constituencies and Community Engagement' for the upcoming Deben Estuary Management Plan, to be published 2026. In this chapter we seek to address a serious omission in the estuary management plan process, which is that the constituency it seeks to address is fundamentally the stakeholder community and the issues it can discuss are those that lend themselves to measure. From this it is evident that values such as sense of belonging, ownership and

emotional attachment to place do not lend themselves to inclusion in any orthodox manner, but these abstract values are precisely why people choose to live where they do and in the manner that they do, to visit and keep coming back.

Given the challenges we are facing on our coast and estuary, from accelerating coastal erosion, increased vulnerability of coastal settlements, loss of intertidal habitat increased flood risk within the estuary, it has become a matter of urgency that coastal and estuarine communities should be vigilant to the symptoms of change and the conditions that drive them. This is why we advocate a more inclusive approach to alerting the estuary community to the importance of an informed and grounded understanding of its tidal landscape and the need for a collaborative approach to the estuary management process. The projects we have run over these years represent a commitment to empowering communities by making them central to the discussion and confident in the knowledge that their contribution to the management process is valued and in a form that can be acted upon. This initiative not only contributes to our shared understanding of estuary systems but also offers a level of tangibility for the symptoms of change and our ability to recognise, respond and adapt to them.



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