

# 1.4 BROAD CHARACTER: PORTS, DOCKS AND HARBOURS

## 1.4.1 CHARACTER TYPE: PORTS, DOCKS AND HARBOURS

### REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE: EAST ANGLIA

#### INTRODUCTION: DEFINING/DISTINGUISHING ATTRIBUTES

The ports of East Anglia have given the region huge importance and wealth in periods when commercial or military interests have focused on the continent (Wheatley 1990, 56). A number of large ports currently located in the area are crucial to the UK economy, most notably Felixstowe and Harwich in the south of the region but also Great Yarmouth and to a lesser extent Lowestoft in the north east. Smaller ports, mainly focused on fishing, remain all along the coastline such as Wells-next-the-sea in North Norfolk, Orford and Felixstowe Ferry in Suffolk.

The considerable ports of Felixstowe and Harwich are located within the finest natural harbour between the Humber and the Thames, at the confluence of the Stour and Orwell estuaries. This has had considerable influence on the success of the ports. The Port of Felixstowe is the largest container port in the UK and one of the largest in Europe (ranked eighth in 2008). It has a number of terminals which handle goods including containers, bulk solids, grain, bulk liquids, forest products and Ro-Ro (roll on-rolloff) cargoes. The total quay length at Trinity container terminal is 2354 m with depths between 11.6 and 15 m.

Expansion of Felixstowe port began in 2008 with commencement of the Felixstowe South project. The scheme involves the conversion of the area previously used by P&O North Sea Ferries Limited, plus the largely redundant Dock Basin and Landguard Terminal, into a new deep-water container terminal ([www.portoffelixstowe.co.uk](http://www.portoffelixstowe.co.uk)). The first stage of the development began trial use in early 2011.



*The port of Felixstowe from Walton Backwaters*

Harwich International Port (formerly known as Parkeston Quay) is one of the UK's leading multi-purpose freight and passenger ports handling freight and passenger traffic to and from Scandinavia and the Low Countries ([www.harwich.co.uk](http://www.harwich.co.uk)). As such the traffic using this area is continuous and dense. Depths along the quay range from 7.5 to 9.5 m and the Harwich Haven Channel is the deepest approach to any UK container port at 14.5 m deep. Proposals have been made

for massive expansion of the port at Bathside Bay to create a state of the art international container terminal. This would make Harwich one of the largest ports in the UK.

The port of Great Yarmouth comprises an older river facility which can accommodate vessels up to 125 m long with 6 m draft and a new deep-water outer harbour, which became operational in 2010. The latter can accommodate vessels over 200 m long with 10 m draft. The port has c. 3000 m of commercial quays on the River Yare and c. 1000 m of quay in the outer harbour. Traditionally the port has been a centre for North Sea natural gas and has now expanded to handle other freight.

Lowestoft also has some facilities to handle cargo although on a smaller scale and like Great Yarmouth acts as a centre for the offshore energy industry. In recent years Lowestoft, like many of the regions ports, has expanded to accommodate offshore windfarm traffic.

The influence of these enormous ports extends into the marine zone. Harwich harbour is controlled by a wider agency known as Harwich Harbour Authority (HHA), the jurisdiction of which covers the ports of Felixstowe and Ipswich and has far reaching impacts into the offshore area. The northern half of the region falls within the jurisdiction of Great Yarmouth Port Operations. As a significant shipping zone the offshore area is subject to the regulatory systems of these authorities and a number of cautionary restrictions including proximity to high-speed craft, and submarine cables.

## **HISTORICAL PROCESSES; COMPONENTS, FEATURES AND VARIABILITY**

It is likely that the earliest ports in the East Anglian region were Roman, probably situated on the rivers which provided routes inland. Ipswich, at the head of the Orwell was known to be a significant trading harbour at this time. Other likely locations for ports include Dunwich, situated on a large estuary within a natural harbour formed by the mouths of the Rivers Blyth and Dunwich; the town went on to become a large port in the Anglo-Saxon and medieval periods. A probable Roman port existed at Felixstowe as evidenced by the apparent approach via Roman road (Good and Plouviez 2007, 69). Other finds indicative of ports includes the discovery of 13 amphorae in a garden in Aldeburgh, possibly a deliberate deposit of traded containers (ibid, 54). A possible shipwreck or quay in the Alde was indicated by discovery of complete pots in the water at Iken. The Roman focus on the Alde is shown by the distribution of red hills (salt working sites) and settlement evidence from Barbers Point (see Meredith 2007).

During the Anglo-Saxon and medieval periods the ports of East Anglia became the most important ports in the British Isles (Wren 1976, 13). Saxon ports were known to have existed at Ipswich, Dunwich, Southwold and Beccles, with many more potentially lost to the sea through coastal erosion. Dunwich and Southwold were both recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086 as thriving ports and Beccles was known for selling herring (Countryside Agency 1999, 49).

Ipswich became the country's busiest port in the Anglo-Saxon era (Wheatley 1990, 59). The settlement was known as Gipeswic and centred around the quay. The town had become important by the 10th century AD; situated at the heart of a great wool producing area at the head of a sheltered and easily navigable estuary (Wren 1976, 132).

The East Anglian coast was punctuated by numerous minor and major ports in the medieval period (Williamson 2006, 24) and these ports enjoyed a degree of eminence (Malster 1969, 3). The area was attractive as a result of its proximity to the continent, its long beaches and sheltered estuaries in contrast to the treacherous shoals around the Thames estuary. It was far cheaper in the medieval period to move cargoes by water than by road and the area also boasted abundant fish stocks (Williamson 2005).



*The church at Blythburgh, a legacy of the medieval port*

The most important medieval ports were on the Suffolk coastline and included Dunwich, Ipswich, Aldeburgh and Southwold among others. However numerous settlements also had landing places for boats such as Blythburgh and Walberswick. Small trading centres and hards existed along the length of the estuaries. The 13<sup>th</sup> century documents of Butley priory describe the Kessingland, Benacre, Dunwich and Minsmere rivers as open to the sea and used as havens (ibid, 135). Many settlements in these areas had markets by the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries.



*Covehithe church*

The ports gained importance as centres for trade, shipbuilding and fishing (Countryside Agency 1999, 59). The main exports of the medieval ports were wool from the growing textile industry and grain from the agricultural hinterland. Imports included fish, timber and furs from Iceland and the Baltic, French

wines and luxury goods from Northern Europe and the Mediterranean (Wren 1976, 19). The wool and textile industry was crucial to the development of the East Anglian ports. Wool was processed on a large scale as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century but expanded massively over the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, with the Stour valley as the principal manufacturing district (Williamson 2006, 64-65). Later this expanded to other textiles as many immigrant workers moved in from the Low Countries. This success manifested itself in the built environment in the region and most notably the soaring Perpendicular 'wool churches' such as that at Blythburgh. These often remain as indicators of the presence of thriving medieval ports where these have long since disappeared.

### 1.1.3.1 CHARACTER TYPE: PORTS, DOCKS AND HARBOURS

Dunwich was East Anglia's premier port in the Norman period (Wheatley 1990, Blair 1990). The Domesday Book recorded in 1086 that the settlement had three churches and a population of 3000 but that land was already being lost to the sea, by the 13th century this had increased to eight parish churches, five friaries, a town wall and a market place (Williamson 2006, 115). In 1286 a storm swept much of the town into the sea, and partially silted up the harbour. This led to a decline in trade and maintenance of sea defences was abandoned. In 1326 a second storm completely cut the harbour off from the sea and by 1350 more than 400 houses, shops, churches and windmills had been destroyed (*ibid*). The port was economically ruined. Local diver and historian Stuart Bacon has been diving the submerged site for many years and has discovered a number of churches illustrating the prosperity of the town, as well as possible remains of a shipbuilding industry.

Ipswich prospered from the 10th to 14th century as a result of the wool industry in the nearby the Stour and Gipping valleys (Wren 1976, 133). It received its first charter in 1199 and the town's official seal dating from 1200 is the earliest known depiction of a ship with a modern rudder instead of traditional steering oar (Wheatley 1990, 69). In 1404 Ipswich became a staple port. This meant that the port was designated by the King as a legal port for the export of wool. An influx of Flemish weavers gradually changed the focus from wool to cloth by the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and Hanseatic warehouses (belonging to the Hanseatic League, an economic alliance of trading cities) had appeared in Ipswich by the mid 14<sup>th</sup> century. The zenith of Ipswich as a port was c. 1500 when it was known as the shipyard of London, constructing vessels up to 100 tons (Wren 1976, 134).

Norwich was the third largest city in England by 1066 and was a major port, trading with Scandinavia and the Rhineland from the Saxon period (Williamson 2006, 109). It was ultimately eclipsed by Great Yarmouth which was more accessible to the North Sea but small trade continued between the two ports.

Southwold, recorded as a thriving port in the Domesday Book, witnessed the construction of new quays, berths and slipways in the 16th century to handle the trade in wool (Edwards 1991, 104). Nearby Walberswick was also a port in the Medieval period and was used by the Icelandic fishing fleets in the Tudor period (Wheatley 1990). Orford was founded as a port by Henry II in the 1160s, lying near the mouth of a sheltered haven.

Excavation at Quay Pavilion in Harwich has revealed a masonry-walled quay structure, watergate and water-stairs dating at least to the 14<sup>th</sup> century illustrating the growth of a medieval port. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century a series of timber quay fronts were erected in front of the masonry quay face. The Kings custom house was constructed above the original quay line and some evidence was found for a pair of pivoting timber cranes on the waters edge (Essex County Council 1991b).

A new town quay was built at Harwich c 1550 and by 1577 the port had seven private quays and the town quay. Excavations show that by 1625 the quay had been much modified and extended out into the harbour. Churchwardens accounts from 1550-1600 record a regular source of income from tolls on herrings, wheat, rye, salt and coal landed at Harwich. A treadmill crane constructed in 1667 still stands in Harwich.

The town of Manningtree, located on the southern bank of the Stour, almost at the head of the tides, was significant as a port from the early 13th century and received its market charter in 1238. At this time the town appears to have been deliberately planted as a port, presumably by the lord of the manor (Essex County Council 1991a).

The port developed a successful local trade including shipping provisions to the fleet at Harwich, and fish to Colchester (*ibid*). Manningtree went on to become very prosperous in the 16th century, as evidenced by its surviving built environment. The Tudor port was known as Manytre and the majority of its wealth came from the cloth trade. The twin town of Mistley was a settlement trading in timber, fish and salt in 1070, it decayed in the 14th century due to the rise of Manningtree (Wren 1976).

Great Yarmouth also grew as a seaport after the Norman Conquest, trading with Scandinavia and the Baltic and eclipsing Norwich as Norfolk's main port. Its heyday of exporting grain, wool and cloth as well as herring was the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. By the 14<sup>th</sup> century three quarters of all Worsted (a traditional cloth of Norfolk origin) exports passed through its port, usually via wherry from Norwich.

Smaller ports are likely to have existed all along the coast and estuaries at this time. A quay was known to exist at Snape Bridge in 1155 serving the wool trade and priory. This acted as a small trading centre until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Sizewell had a market from the 13<sup>th</sup> century and probably remained as a small port into the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Edwards 1991, 93). A recent intertidal survey conducted by Suffolk County Council found the remains of quays, hulks, jetties, sluices, hards, post groups and alignments in all the Suffolk estuaries indicative of these smaller ports and docks (Everett 2007).

The loss of most of these thriving ports was a combination of a series of political, economic and natural disasters between 1300 and 1600 which ultimately brought about the collapse and decay of virtually all international trade in the region. As outlined above much of the port of Dunwich had been lost to the encroaching sea by the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The processes of increased storminess and erosion released large deposits of sediment which then drifted along the coast causing siltation and blockage of harbours. The entrance to Dunwich harbour was blocked by a shingle bank in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Later



*The historic river port at Great Yarmouth*

entrances were dug to the north but the port was finally closed by damming of the Dunwich River at Walberswick in 1700.

In the 16th century the flourishing port at Aldeburgh, which had itself benefited from the fall of Dunwich, declined as a result of increasing ship size and silting of the river and the port was moved south to Slaughden. Similarly the prosperity of Walberswick was brought to an end when the sea breached the spit which protected

the harbour. The present harbour was constructed by cutting through the shingle in 1590 (Edwards 1991, 100). Accumulation of mudflats and saltmarsh at Orford ensured the town was marooned some distance inland and approach from the sea became longer and more difficult (Williamson 2005, 136). Blythburgh also suffered from the deposition of a spit across the river mouth by the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### 1.1.3.1 CHARACTER TYPE: PORTS, DOCKS AND HARBOURS



*What remnants of the port at Slaughden*

This natural process was compounded by the advent of the Black Death which led to a sharp decrease in population, the continental wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century and the increased threat of piracy. Focus also shifted as exploration of North America became prominent, the cloth industry became mechanised and moved to Yorkshire and local fishing fleets were badly affected by competition from the Netherlands. The Hearth Tax of 1674 showed that coastal settlements in the region had become impoverished with low populations (ibid, 19).

Just as the lost prosperity is highlighted by the wool churches of Lowestoft, Covehithe, Kessingland, Blythburgh and Southwold, the decline of the ports is illustrated by Walberswick and Covehithe churches which are now in ruins. Walberswick church was said to once have been as impressive as Blythburgh and Southwold but after the decline of the port it was abandoned and a smaller one built within (Edwards 1991, 103).



*The decline of the ports is represented by the ruined church at Walberswick*

Despite this disastrous decline in fortunes some of the ports survived, taking advantage of the more localised trade which remained. The ports of Southwold, Aldeburgh (Slaughden), Woodbridge, Ipswich, Felixstowe and Great Yarmouth particularly flourished, although trade continued elsewhere (Williamson 2005, 136). Coastal trade was important to the area, including exports such as cloth, malt, corn and bricks, and imports including coal and coke from the north east (Edwards 1991, 100; Williamson 2005, 137). Coasters ran south to London and north to Northumberland and beyond (Williamson 2006, 24). The long rivers meant that goods could be easily moved inland on smaller craft, principally keels and wherries (Williamson 2005, 137).

The ports regained some importance after the 'Agrarian Revolution', particularly in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the agricultural hinterland was buoyant (Williamson 2005, 137) and East Anglia became the bread basket for the increasing population of the industrialised north. Some of the larger ports created their own distinctive markets. For example Ipswich became a major centre for emigration to New England between 1611 and 1634 and Great Yarmouth thrived on the herring industry until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Lowestoft prospered following the connection of the Waveney River to the sea via Lake Lothing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This provided a new route which avoided Great Yarmouth with a sheltered harbour for Lowestoft.

Slaughden remained a busy harbour until the 19<sup>th</sup> century initially handling typical cargoes but latterly operating passenger services to Ipswich and London exporting fertiliser from the industry which has grown up through coprolite extraction. Slaughden was said to be a large quay with fish houses and warehouses in 1679 and coal yards and saltings in 1840 (Good and Plouviez 2007, 57).

### 1.1.3.1 CHARACTER TYPE: PORTS, DOCKS AND HARBOURS

The river ports notably thrived. In the 19th century the western area of Walton Backwaters was a centre for busy coastal trade. This is represented by Beaumont Quay which was constructed in 1832 at the head of a cut, taking advantage of a straight, deep channel. The land was owned by Guys Hospital who used the stone of the demolished London Bridge to build the quay. A lime kiln, constructed shortly after the quay survives and has been recommended for scheduling as an ancient monument ([www.essexcc.gov.uk](http://www.essexcc.gov.uk)). An old Thames sailing barge 'The Rose,' launched on 1880, also remains in situ at the quay.

The port at Snape on the River Alde was rebuilt in stone in 1800 and a maltings and corn warehouses constructed in 1840-50. It became a busy port as a result of the maltings, but also exported sugar beet and coprolite.

Manningtree on the Stour was also a major centre of the Essex malt trade in the 19th century and Mistley was re-developed as a potential port and spa town in the 1780s with a thriving coastal coal and corn trade.

Butterman's Bay near Pin Mill on the Orwell was so called due to its role in the dairy trade with the Channel Isles. Trade also included sailing ships, riggers and steamers with grain, timber and fertiliser from as far as South America and the West Indies. Goods were taken by barges to the Ipswich Docks (Edwards 1991, 18).

During this time smuggling became widespread in the region and throughout the 18th century Sizewell gap was used to bring contraband ashore. At Woolverstone on the River Orwell a house facing the river was used as a signal and a cat was placed in its window to signify all was under control ashore (Hay and Hay 1972). This area of the river is still known as Cathouse Point.

Erosion and silting of the harbours remained a significant problem for the ports and a second period of decline occurred. The port at Slaughden had eroded completely by 1930. In contrast improvements to Southwold harbour in 1749 and 1752 could not prevent the build up of shingle banks across the harbour mouth which had been worsened by land reclamation (Williamson 2005, 138-139). This also affected Blythburgh, the approach to which had become blocked. The River Blyth Navigation Act was passed in 1757 to make the river navigable to Halesworth, however the last seagoing ship reached Blythburgh bridge in 1870 before the estuary completely silted up.

By 1800 Ipswich harbour was almost choked with silt (Wheatley 1990, 69). In 1805 an act was obtained to improve the port, and trade recovered after 50 years of dredging and dock building, although Ipswich became increasingly non-maritime.

A number of other ambitious schemes were put forward in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to combat the problems of siltation including creating new harbours at Aldeburgh and the mouth of the Orwell, however most did not come to fruition. The decline was also influenced by the rise of the railway network. As terrestrial routes improved investing money in port works became less attractive (Williamson 2005, 140).

In contrast although the coming of the railways completed the decay of smaller ports, it further enhanced those with rail connections (Wren 1976, 23). This particularly benefited Ipswich, Felixstowe and Harwich, which remain the largest ports in the area.



The emergence of the railways from 1846 brought new industry to the docks at Ipswich including packet routes to London and paddle steamers for passengers to Harwich on every tide (Wren 1976, 141). Trade has continually soared since WW2 (ibid 148) and the docks are currently undergoing a period of regeneration for commercial and residential needs.

Felixstowe port was founded by Colonel George Tomline who began the Felixstowe Railway and Pier Company in 1875. In 1879 the company title was changed to the 'Felixstowe Railway and Dock Company', and powers were given to construct a dock, warehouses and rail sidings. Later in the same year, the company title was again changed, to the 'Felixstowe Dock and Railway Company', as it is today ([www.portoffelixstowe.co.uk](http://www.portoffelixstowe.co.uk)). Sailing barges brought grain and goods and schooners took grain, malt and flour and small pleasure steamers travelled to Shotley and Harwich.

The port was taken over by the navy in World War II and in the 1950s the harbour was dredged and a new quay built. In 1964 the Oil jetty was constructed and in 1966 work began on the Landguard Container Terminal, developing the port into the international hub of today. Construction of container ships and the development of Ro-Ro ferries were both pioneered at Felixstowe.

The Continental Pier was constructed at Harwich in 1866 at the western end of the quay, and rebuilt in concrete in 1950s; it is now called Trinity Pier. Commercial activity was sustained throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century with various quays, a landing stage and a dry dock constructed. Passenger transport became important in Harwich from mid 19<sup>th</sup> century

By 1872, shipping trade had increased so much that the Great Eastern Railway obtained permission to reclaim land a mile to the west of Harwich, and build a new quay. This was opened in 1883 and named Parkeston Quay. The port had its own railway station, and a hotel was built between the northern platform and the quay. Ferries were moved from the town dock to Parkeston Quay after World War II and Harwich International Port began to flourish.

## **VALUES AND PERCEPTIONS**

The southern ports of Harwich and Felixstowe dominate sea-use in this region and bring income and employment to the local communities. They are perceived as industrial hubs, dominating any previous character they had as recreational areas or naval bases.

The smaller ports or previous ports are proud of their heritage and many try to sustain their character as ports through retaining small fishing fleets or area of trade, docks and warehouses. Some have adapted to modern use such as centres for offshore industry including Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft. In some cases aspects of the ports histories are important including the herring industry at Great Yarmouth and the smuggling activities along the estuaries.

Many ports have become tourist destinations, retaining their maritime character without any industrial or trade element. Disused docks are now used as maritime heritage attractions such as Harwich town docks and the historic docks at Great Yarmouth.

## **RESEARCH, AMENITY AND EDUCATION**

The ports of Felixstowe and Harwich, and to a lesser extent the smaller ports along the coastline, are essential to the UK's transport infrastructure and economy which is heavily dependant on international trade. They are also vital to the local economy, providing employment and income on a large scale. The ports of Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft have become crucial to the offshore energy industry.

Some research into the archaeology of ports and docks has been conducted within the region, most notably at Harwich where series of quays have been traced back to the medieval period. The Suffolk RCZAS has also shown the value of intertidal and estuarine survey to locating the potential locations for pre-medieval ports. Over the years summaries of the ports of East Anglia have been created, however there would be value in updating these studies with recent discoveries.

There is certainly scope for an educational approach to the ports and docks of East Anglia which are examples of politics, economy and climate change in action. These could be used as case studies in schools and in further education.

## **CONDITION AND FORCES FOR CHANGE**

The ports and docks in the East Anglian region have been subject to varying processes throughout their history as outlined above. As a result a number of thriving ports still exist in the region which are nationally important. In contrast many ports have fallen into disuse and disrepair.

Climate change and erosion remain very real threats to the ports and docks of the coastline and very little of the once important port of Dunwich remains. Where historic dock structures may remain these processes may be harmful.

Those ports which remain are still subject to factors of economy and politics and have to adapt to prosper as illustrated by the use of Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft by the offshore energy industry. The increased importance of European relations often means higher volumes of trade for the larger ports.

As a result many of the ports are embarking on large development projects. The proposed Bathside Bay development at Harwich would result in massive expansion of the port and its facilities but is dependent on other factors. Successful expansions are underway at Felixstowe and completed at Great Yarmouth.

## **RARITY AND VULNERABILITY**

The ports and docks of this region have always been vulnerable to external factors such as silting of harbours and international relations. This remains the case today, particularly with regard to the problems of erosion and deposition seen along this coastline. These can cause significant siltation which requires significant financial input to rectify.

Any archaeological remains of docks in area of erosion are at risk as the processes are expected to worsen as sea levels rise and storminess increases.

Ports are not rare in the region, however many smaller ports are being lost as a result of the decline of the fishing industry and this type of small port is at risk.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Blair, A., 1990, Suffolk Coast. Norfolk: Anglian Landscapes

Countryside Agency, 1999. *Countryside Character. Volume 6: East of England*. CA12. Countryside Agency, Cheltenham.

Edwards, R., 1991, The Suffolk Coast. Terence Dalton Ltd

Essex County Council, 1999a. Historic Towns in Essex: Manningtree Historic Towns assessment report. English Heritage

Essex County Council, 1999b. Historic Towns in Essex: Harwich Historic Towns assessment report. English Heritage

Everett, L 2007, *Targeted inter-tidal survey*, Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service, unpublished, Report 2007/192

Good. C & Plouviez. J. 2007 *The Archaeology of the Suffolk Coast* Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service

Hay, D. & Hay, J. 1972, East Anglia from the Sea. E Stanford

Meredith, J., 2007, *Barber's Point*, Friston: A Report on the Archaeological Excavations, 2004 and 2006, (Suffolk County Council, Ipswich)

Malster, R. 1969. *Maritime East Anglia*. Maritime Museum for East Anglia

Wheatley, K., 1990, National Maritime Museum Guide to Maritime Britain. Webb & Bower

Williamson, T. 2005. *Sandlands - The Suffolk Coast and Heaths*. Windgather Press

Williamson, T., 2006, England's Landscape: East Anglia. English Heritage

Wren, W. J., 1976, Ports of the Eastern Counties: The Development of Harbours on the Coast of the Eastern Counties From Boston in Lincolnshire to Rochford in Essex. Dalton

## Websites

[www.portoffelixstowe.co.uk](http://www.portoffelixstowe.co.uk)

[www.harwich.co.uk](http://www.harwich.co.uk)

[www.essexcc.gov.uk](http://www.essexcc.gov.uk)