

Bosham



Harbour haven

In the first of a new series on Britain's Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and National Scenic Areas, Don Jolly visits Chichester Harbour in Sussex



West Thorney Church's RAF commemorative window

In the south-west corner of West Sussex, with its western border just crossing into Hampshire, Chichester Harbour Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is an inlet on the Solent, where fingers of sea have broken through the coastline to form numerous peninsulas and coves.

Bordered to the north by the A259 between Fishbourne and Warblington, to the east by the A286 and B2179 to West Wittering, and in the west along the east side of Hayling Island, Chichester Harbour's low-lying land largely comprises salt marsh and tidal flats, ideal habitat for a variety of birds. It also boasts plenty of footpaths and quiet lanes for exploration on foot or by bike. This

AONB has no towns wholly within its borders, but has several villages, Bosham being the largest.

King Canute had a palace at Bosham in the early 11th century, from where it was believed that he unsuccessfully commanded the rising sea to turn back. Originally thought to be a delusional act of power, it actually demonstrated the limits of the king's power to his excessively obsequious courtiers.

In 1035, Harold Godwinson, Earl of Wessex, sailed from Bosham to Normandy for talks with Duke William about the succession to the English throne, after the death of Edward the Confessor. Despite swearing an oath that he would support

William's claim to the throne, Harold took the crown himself when Edward died, leading, in 1066, to William invading England and Harold's death at the Battle of Hastings. The Bayeux Tapestry, made shortly afterwards, documents the lead up to the battle and shows Harold entering Bosham church to pray before sailing to meet William.

Bosham is delightful. Its Saxon church was rebuilt and enlarged by the Normans, but still includes earlier features. It also displays an embroidered mid 20th-century copy of the tapestry scene. There's a watermill near the church, and a popular pub, The Anchor Bleu, on the waterfront, along with former fishermen's cottages. However, don't be tempted to park on the

church. Later, West Thorney was taken over by the Royal Artillery Regiment.

The island is separated from the mainland by a waterway, Great Deep, but is linked by a pair of footbridges. A high-security fence crossing the island's northern end has locked gates, where the footpath enters and leaves the military area. Walkers gain access by pressing a button. If the faceless ones scrutinising the CCTV like your look, the gate will open remotely; if not, you may be questioned. It's all rather creepy.

Mystery is further added by the case of Commander Lionel 'Buster' Crabb, a Royal Navy diver, who disappeared in April 1956 while on an MI6 mission to inspect the hull of a Soviet cruiser in nearby Portsmouth Harbour. More than a year later, his headless body was found floating in the sea off Thorney Island. There is much speculation about how and why he died, but we must wait until 2057 for official Government documents to be released to be any wiser.

BIRDWATCHERS' PARADISE

A positive from the island's military occupation is that its sandy beaches are virtually untouched and there are plenty of interesting birds. We spotted little egrets and, unexpectedly, an osprey, perched on a post. Just to the south, tiny Pilsey Island is an RSPB nature reserve. Possible sightings include Brent geese, grey and ringed plovers, oystercatchers, redshanks, dunlins and terns.

North-west of Thorney Island, Emsworth has a pretty waterside setting, while to the south, the gap between Hayling Island's Sandy Point and East Head becomes busy with yachts, cruisers and sailing dinghies. Not far from East Head, Rolling Stone Keith Richards has a home between West Wittering and West Itchenor, another popular sailing centre on the Chichester

Channel. From Itchenor, boat cruises aboard the *Wingate III* offer varied harbour aspects.

In summer, a foot ferry links Itchenor with Bosham Hoe, from where a footpath follows the water's edge to Bosham. Alternatively, you can walk from Itchenor along the New Lipchis Way to the city of Chichester, or, if you branch off on a lesser path at Chichester Marina, to Dell Quay, where the waterside Crown and Anchor pub offers refreshments with fine views of the South Downs.

Continue and you come to the head of the Fishbourne Channel, where there was once a Roman harbour. In the 1st century AD, it served Fishbourne Roman Palace, the largest Roman residence discovered



seafront road unless you know the state of the tide – you could return to a flooded car or motorhome! There is a car park a short walk away. Also nearby is Bosham Walk, a rambling oak-beamed building with craft shops and a café.

To the west, the village of Prinsted, with its thatched cottages, is the gateway to Thorney Island, more a peninsula really, with the village of West Thorney on its east coast. There is an air of secrecy about the place, partly because visitors are only allowed to walk along its coastal footpath, part of the Sussex Border Path. The RAF commandeered the village in 1938, in time for the Second World War, and stayed until 1974, a fact commemorated in the village

Thorney Island



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north of the Alps, which was unearthed in 1960. Highlights of a visit are the superb mosaics, including a virtually intact one depicting Cupid on a dolphin, and the museum, which includes a reconstruction of what one of the rooms might have looked like. There are also reconstructed gardens. The palace was abandoned after burning down around AD 270.

A visit to this stunning area of southern England will, no doubt, have you harbouring thoughts of returning for more.

INFORMATION

- For your visit to Chichester Harbour AONB, stay at Rowan Park Caravan Club Site – for the most up-to-date details, see The Club website. Alternatively, turn to p93 of the *Sites Directory & Handbook 2015/16*. To book, call 01342 327490 or see caravanclub.co.uk/searchandbook.
- There are also several CLs within or just outside the AONB – Cobnor House and Fir Trees being just two. See p473-4 of the *Sites Directory* for further details.



Thornham Marina