

History and mystery

Elizabeth Fowler investigates a pair of sites on the edges of enigmatic Romney Marsh



Ordnance Survey
Landranger Map 189

‘THE WORLD is divided into five parts: Europe, Asia, Africa, America and Romney Marsh.’

So wrote Richard Barham in the 18th century. A mysterious, solitary place of huge open spaces, seashore and marshland, often hidden by rolling mists, this is the country of Dr Syn, the fictional ‘hero’ of smuggling adventures written by Russell Thorndike. Indeed real-life smuggling was rife in this area during the 1700s, adding a touch of spice to a stay at the two Club sites – Tanner Farm and Daleacres – at either end of Romney Marsh.

Six thousand years ago a shingle barrier formed between Fairlight and Dymchurch, and there is evidence that this was occupied by Bronze Age Man. A salt water lake behind the shingles gradually silted up and marshland developed. Early Roman inhabitants brought their sheep down from the Weald for summer grazing in the area and these are the ancestors of the famous

Romney Marsh sheep, which produce a distinctive meat and wool.

Eventually an area of land was reclaimed from the sea when a wall was built south from Hythe. By 1100 a number of churches had been established as the population of Romney Marsh increased. Following a route taking in these medieval buildings is a great way to explore the area. In fact, the beautiful little church of St Clement’s at Old Romney, in which the box pews and gallery are painted a surprising pink, was used for film adaptations of Dr Syn.

The Marsh is now a wonderful haven for wildlife and there is an excellent new visitor centre in New Romney surrounded by ponds, dune grassland and willow scrub. The centre itself is a unique straw-bale building (there are plenty of demonstrations on ways to reduce your own carbon footprint) from which you can birdwatch through the

huge viewing windows or get out along the many trails to bird hides.

After visiting the centre, I went on out to Dungeness where the old lighthouse stands tall and black above the huge shingle ridge that extends into the distance in both directions. This is an eerily strange place. Visiting on a wild, grey autumn day, as I did, it seemed harsh and forbidding, with the massive nuclear power station dominating the coastline to the west.

There are several information boards sited in the area providing historical and wildlife information to make your exploration more enjoyable, as well as a small, welcoming café close to the lighthouse. An excellent booklet, *RX Wildlife* lists nature sites across the marshes, and in the shadow of the power station is a bird observatory from which migrations have been recorded since 1952. A daily record is kept and visitors are encouraged to help. >>



A wooden tower overlooks a desolate beach near Dungeness



Bewl Water – the ideal spot for cycling and walking

The only sign of habitation in the immediate area is a scattering of small, idiosyncratic chalets, one of which is a gallery selling paintings.

The Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch Railway extends to this point and is a fun way to see the region. There are seven halts or stations on the railway's 13-mile route. The first going north from Dungeness is at Romney Sands holiday park, from which you can walk through onto the vast beach – busy in the height of season but almost empty on my visit.

New Romney Station is the railway's headquarters and here you will find a smashing model exhibition – there are 20 trains running and you can have a go at operating a layout yourself.

For the first few days of my trip I was staying at Tanner Farm Park, an Affiliated Site just north of Goudhurst in the lovely Weald of Kent. When approaching the site, the first view you have is of traditional red-brick oast houses in which hops from the surrounding fields were dried to be used in beer making. Hops were first introduced from the Continent in the 16th century

and quickly became established in this area.

The site itself is spread across small grass fields at the heart of the farm, and has first-rate facilities. Pheasants wander about, ducks paddle in the ponds surrounding the oast houses and shire horses work on the farm. Children can bottle-feed the lambs in spring and watch the pigs in their pens. This is a delightfully different Club site at which families can enjoy a real country holiday with lots of good attractions close by.

From here I made my way south to explore the area around Bewl Water. This is a glorious spot for gardens – should I visit The Owl House Garden, Ladham House, Bedgebury Pinetum or Sprivers Garden?

While making up my mind, I decided to visit Scotney Castle in Lamberhurst, where the autumn colours throughout the grounds were spectacular. This is a place that cannot be rushed. At the heart of the estate is the romantic ruin of the 14th-century Old Castle, built on an island. Made from golden stone hung with wisteria, the little round tower rising out

of the moat with leaded windows above timber balconies is straight from a fairytale. Above it sits the new castle, built in the 1880s in Elizabethan style.

Then on to Daleacres to scout the eastern end of the Marsh. This site sits just below the long ridge of hill that forms the backdrop to the Marsh, on which the impressive Lypnne Castle perches. There are wonderful views of the castle from many parts of Daleacres, which is an intimate and attractive level site with small shrubs dividing the pitching areas. The excellent new facilities include a TV and games room.

As you settle down for a quiet read, you may be surprised to hear lions and monkeys! Your ears are not deceiving you – the site is quite near to Lypnne Zoo; the Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch Railway is also within earshot. Also close by is the Royal Military Canal, created as a line of defence should Napoleon invade across the Channel.

The defence of the realm has always played a large part in the history of this area, each wave of invaders building defences against the anticipated next lot. Roman fortresses, Viking harbours, Norman castles, Martello towers and World War air bases are all now historic sites for visitors.

Whatever your interests, you will find lots to do here among the delightful villages, castles, gardens and long sand beaches. With Tanner Farm open all year, you can take advantage of the quiet season and enjoy walks through woodland and over marsh or shingle. Or go birdwatching with an expert, or build a bee home at New Romney Warren. The choice is yours. ■

DID YOU KNOW?
Malaria was a major problem in the Romney Marsh area until the 1730s

INFORMATION



SITES

Full details can be found on p142 (Tanner Farm Park) and p143 (Daleacres) of the *Sites Directory & Handbook 2009/10*

TOURISM

- **Romney Marsh Visitor Centre** – call 01797 369487 or see kentwildlifetrust.org.uk
- **Visit Kent** – visitkent.co.uk

CYCLING

From Tanner Farm Park: Pick up National Cycle Network Route 18 for a pleasant ride on minor roads to Tunbridge Wells.

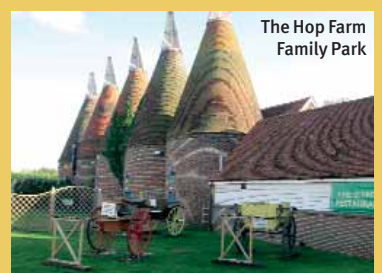
From Daleacres: National Cycle Network Route 2, part of the Garden of England Cycle Route, runs close to the Daleacres site. Follow the route north-east for a short ride to Hythe or south-west for a longer ride to Old Romney. See sustrans.org.uk for more information on both routes.

ATTRACTIONS

- **Scotney Castle**, Lamberhurst – call 01892 893820 or see nationaltrust.org.uk/scotneycastle
- **Bewl Water**, Lamberhurst – call 01892 890000 or see bewl.co.uk
- **C M Booth Collection**, Rolvenden – if you have ever admired or been lucky enough to own a Morgan car, this is for you. Call 01580 241234 or see morganmuseum.org.uk
- **The Hop Farm Family Park**, Paddock Wood – family fun park. Call 01622 872068 or see thepfarm.co.uk
- **The Old Lighthouse**, Dungeness – call 01797 321300 or see dungenesslighthouse.com
- **Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch Railway**, New Romney – call 01797 362353 or see rhdr.org.uk
- **Biddenden Vineyards** – call 01580 291726 or see biddendenvineyards.com
- **Port Lypnne Wild Animal & Safari Park** – call 01303 264647 or see totallywild.net/portlypnne



C M Booth Collection



The Hop Farm Family Park