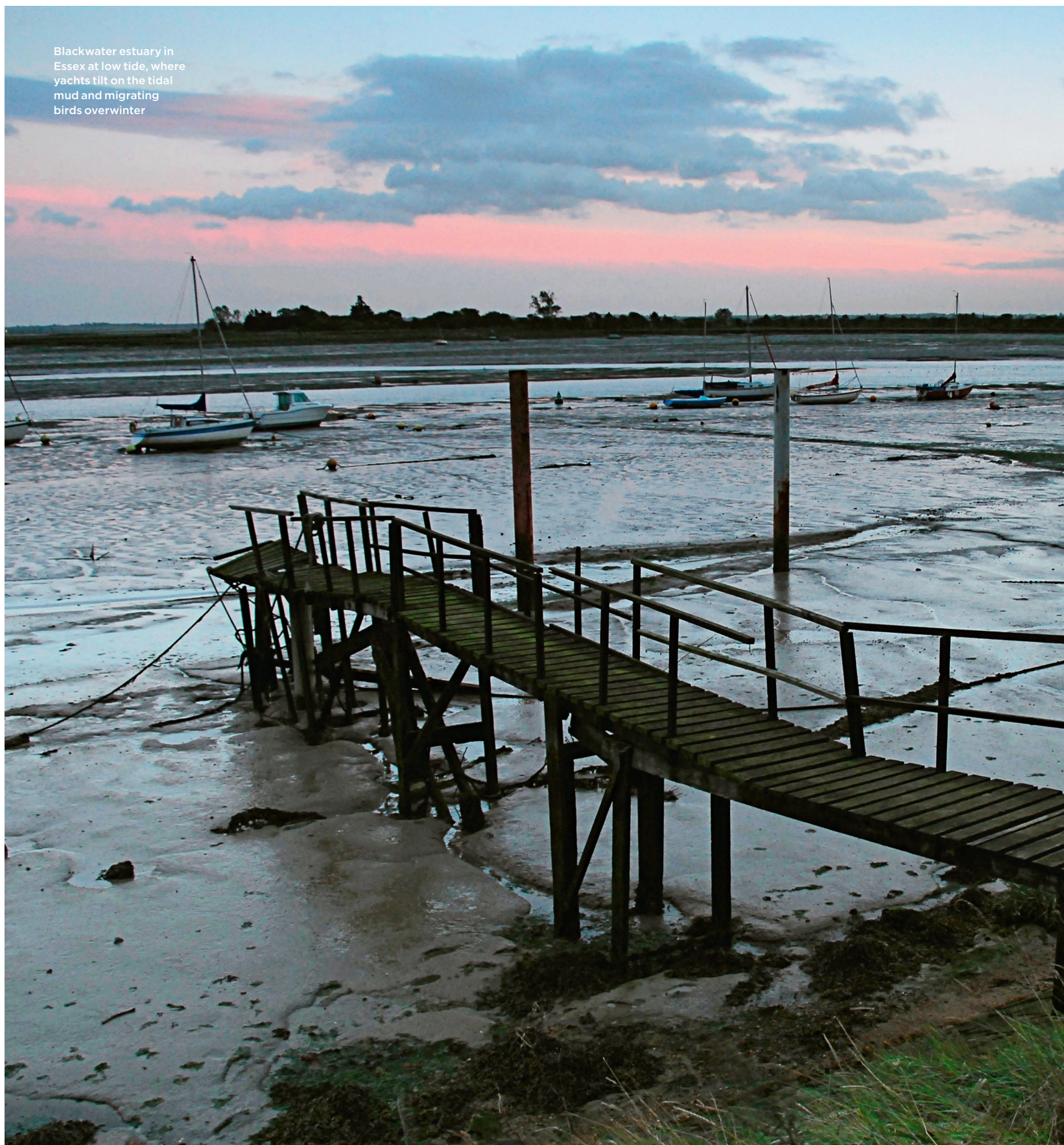


Blackwater estuary in Essex at low tide, where yachts tilt on the tidal mud and migrating birds overwinter





PHOTOGRAPHY: ALAMY

WHERE THE RIVER MEETS THE SEA

ESTUARIES ARE AT THEIR MOST POETIC AT THIS TIME OF YEAR. WANDER THERE FOR A LITTLE BROODING AND BIRD WATCHING

Words: **CLARE GOGERTY**

There are times when the landscape suits, even amplifies, your mood. A sandy beach on a sunny summer's day buoys feelings of jollity. A mountain top uplifts and exhilarates as you fill your lungs and look at the never-ending view. But where do you go when you want to indulge a reflective mood? When you want some time alone, perhaps, to think a little? To wander and wonder?

I always head to an estuary – the Blackwater estuary between Maldon and West Mersea in Essex in particular – and especially round about now when it is at its most evocative and mysterious. An estuary is the tidal mouth of a big river, a shifting landscape where the river and the sea meet. It reveals itself quietly: on a chilly winter morning, it is threaded with mist and the only sounds a muffled foghorn from a »



Estuary legends

Three spectral creatures who have arisen from the mists of an estuary
1. The Mermaid of Padstow, Camel estuary, Cornwall

Out hunting for seals, local man Tristram Bird came across a beautiful maiden and fell in love, legend has it. Some say she tried to lure him under the sea, others that she rejected his marriage proposal. Both agree that he shot her, only later realising she was a mermaid. Her wailing cry can still be heard “after a fearful gale, like a woman bewailing the dead”.

2. The Seawitch of Leigh-on-Sea, Thames estuary, Essex

Twice widowed and the mother of nine children, Sarah Moore gained a reputation as a witch in the 1880s. This was largely because she read fortunes and asked sailors for money in return for promising them a fair wind. A local pub still bears her name and a book, *The Drowning Pool* by Syd Moore, is partly based on her life.

3. Humber Monster, Humber estuary, Lincs/East Riding of Yorkshire

After a swimmer was killed there, this man-eating serpent was said to lurk in the estuary near Hull. A large, black shape was spotted making its way up river and was described as having a head the size of an elephant, six humps and flashing eyes. Locals are keen to point out that this beast, seen throughout the 1920s, predates sightings of the Loch Ness monster and is remarkably similar looking.



container ship or the clatter of startled crows disturbed from their roost. It is eerie and enigmatic, a place of saltmarsh, creeks and tidal islands linked to the shoreline by perilous causeways.

It's not surprising then, that Sarah Perry set her bestselling novel *The Essex Serpent* amid the Blackwater's saltings and marshland. It is a fitting location for a dark winged creature to lurk, slithering through the shallows, dark, viscous and terrifying. It is a landscape from which Magwitch from Dickens' *Great Expectations* could emerge, slathered in mud and blood, fresh from the prison boat (although in fact, that was the Thames estuary in Kent).

But it is not all creepy otherworldliness. At high tide, the Blackwater fills its banks and tributaries and moored boats bob about cheerfully. When the tide ebbs away, expanses of mudflats and saltmarsh are revealed and oystercatchers with their jolly

orange beaks descend in search of food. During the winter, migrating birds arrive at the Blackwater Estuary Nature Reserve in sociable gaggles to feast on the invertebrates burrowed beneath the mud.

My favourite place to meander thoughtfully is the sea wall along the edge of the Dengie peninsula, which overlooks the estuary. Built to mollify the impact of coastal erosion, this concrete path runs alongside the patchy and scrubby vegetation of the saltmarsh, past the lonely and ancient chapel of St Peter-on-the-Wall at Bradwell, and over a beach made entirely of yellow cockleshells. If ever there was a place to gather your thoughts, this is it.

When I have had enough moody introspection, I head to Mersea Island. Travelling there has an element of adventure itself as it's connected to the mainland by The Strood, a causeway flooded twice daily by the tide. Get your



timings wrong and you could spend more time than anticipated on the island. Which may not be a bad thing: this is the place to demolish a seafood platter, and oysters in particular – the rich sediment of the estuary creates the ideal habitat for these delicious shellfish, which have been farmed on Mersea for centuries. Once these have been eaten on the deck of the West Mersea Oyster Company, with a view across the oyster beds to the rickety houseboats moored alongside, all is right with the world.

If you aren't anywhere near the Blackwater estuary, there are 90 more estuaries in the British Isles, all with their own particular pleasures, so it is easy to find one within reach.

LARKING ABOUT IN THE MUD

The muddy banks of estuaries might not look like the most inviting place for an afternoon stroll; they don't have the come-

hither properties of a sandy beach or a grassy riverbank. But put on your wellies and pull on a pair of gloves and venture on to their squelchy shorelines and you could be rewarded with treasure.

This is especially true of the Thames estuary. The river rises and falls by over 7m twice a day here, revealing mudflats peppered with historic finds. The mud is anaerobic (without oxygen) meaning that it preserves whatever ends up in it. In the 18th century, searching for things lost in the mud was a profession – mudlarking – carried out by the young and the poor who would scavenge among the sewage and corpses of dead animals for items that had been lost or fallen off boats to sell for a few pennies.

These days mudlarking is a more wholesome practice, but some of the things found remain the same. Clay pipes, some dating back to the 16th century, are often unearthed: sold prefilled with tobacco then thrown away, they frequently ended up in the river. The popularity of mudlarking has led to licences being issued for more serious practitioners (available from the Port of London Authority, which will also advise you on where to look) but, generally, surface finds are OK to take home and treasure.

A SHIFTING, TIDAL WILDERNESS

Walk along the side of an estuary at low tide and, among the boats moored and mired in the mud, you will see wading birds – curlews, dunlin, oystercatchers, perhaps – pecking for food. They know that mudflats, with their wriggling channels and creeks, are rich with worms and shellfish. More than 85,000 waterfowl overwinter in the Severn estuary, for example, and now is a good time to pull out the binoculars and see »



Estuary bridges

1. Humber Bridge When it opened in 1981, this was the longest single-span suspension bridge in the world (it is now eighth). Elegantly poised above the Humber estuary near Kingston upon Hull, this 2,200-metre road bridge connects the East Riding of Yorkshire and North Lincolnshire.

2. Severn Bridge and the Second Severn Crossing The first suspension bridge spanning the Severn estuary opened in 1966, allowing motorists to zoom over the river between Wales and England, and its clever design earned it Grade I-listing. It has a cycle path and footpath for a more leisurely crossing. In 1999, the Second Severn Crossing opened.

3. Forth Road Bridge Connecting Edinburgh and Fife over the Firth of Forth, this suspension bridge is not to be confused with its proverbial neighbour, the Forth Bridge, but is just as spectacular, especially lit up at night. The bridge has a footpath and cycle track, and visitors can climb its main towers during an annual bridge festival (forthbridgesfestival.com).

① Mudlarking on the Thames foreshore.
② West Mersea beach on the Blackwater estuary.
③ The Humber Bridge, aka, that rare 1980s thing – an architectural beauty »



- ❶ Oyster pickers at Mersea Island, where oysters have been farmed for centuries.
- ❷ A historic barge on the river Orwell at Pin Mill in Suffolk.
- ❸ Brent geese at Northey Island in the Blackwater estuary.
- ❹ Red Sands Fort, in the Thames estuary

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Evocative estuary words

Saltings, saltmarsh, mudflats, creeks, fleets, gutways, swatchways, lagoons, inlets, meanders

if you can spot a few migrant species such as whimbrel and ringed plover, who arrive in large numbers to refuel mid-migration.

A large part of the Dyfi estuary in Ceredigion, a magical area of mudflats, peat bogs, river channels and creeks, is owned and managed by the RSPB and attracts Greenland white-fronted geese who overwinter there from October to March, although their numbers are worryingly dropping. Visit the Dee estuary, on the Welsh border this month, and look up: you might see pink-footed geese stopping off on their flight home to Iceland from Norfolk.

It's not just about birds, though. The transitional landscape of the estuary – half-sea, half-river – is home to many different species drawn by its variety of habitats. Alongside the mudflats is saltmarsh – formed where silt and sand accumulate – where sheep and cattle graze and waterfowl feed on the grass, and where salt-tolerant plants such as sea purslane and golden samphire form colonies.

The sheltered waters of estuaries also attract marine animals – seals are often

spotted in the Humber estuary, and Atlantic salmon swim up the Severn estuary on their way to freshwater rivers to spawn. Everything that lives here depends on the rhythm of the tide. It brings in food from the sea as it rises, and sluices everything clean as it falls away.

SOMETHING STRANGE IN THE SEA

As if sightings of eerie sea creatures rising from murky waters isn't enough to put shivers down the spine, there are other man-made constructions almost as otherworldly lurking in the Thames estuary. The steel structures that make up the Red Sands Fort look like alien creatures pausing before they continue their walk across the ocean. In reality, they were designed by civil engineer Guy Maunsell to provide anti-aircraft fire during the Second World War. Towed down the river and lowered on to the seabed in 1943, they were once inhabited by 265 men, but are now deserted. It is not possible (or safe) to clamber up and visit the structures (and the access ladders have been removed), but you can sail around them in a beautiful red-sailed Thames



barge (greta1892.co.uk), departing from Whitstable, and taking in those other eerie, man-made structures, the Kentish Flats Wind Farm, as you go.

ON THE WATER

The clatter and jingle of rigging on moored boats is as an evocative estuary sound as the melancholy honk of Brent geese (spot them in the Wash and Essex estuaries). Wide, sheltered estuaries with calm waters, like Salcombe in Devon, provide a great spot to tether a boat. Salcombe has 4,500 moorings, the assembled yachts and dinghies creating a jaunty, nautical mood. Many of these boats, from kayaks to tall ships, can be hired and offer the gamut of water-borne activities. The large tidal flow of estuaries means that the water recedes at speed, often reaching three knots – ideal for kayaking and dinghy sailing.

The more sedentary might prefer to stroll on to a ferry and watch the changing estuary shoreline and seascape from its blustery top deck. One of the coast's greatest pleasures is coursing over the waves between two attractive seaside towns, then hopping off for fish and chips at a warming pub.

During the colder months, there is the added thrill of choppy waters, keener winds and fewer people. Wrap up warm in something waterproof and embrace the elements. The Saint Mawes ferry crossing Carrick Roads (the Fal estuary in Cornwall), runs for 364 days a year, operating a slightly reduced service in winter. The 20-minute trip will take you from Falmouth to Saint

“Everything that lives here depends on the rhythm of the tide. It brings in food from the sea as it rises, and sluices everything clean as it falls away”

Mawes (or the reverse) with a good chance of spotting seals as you go. If you don't even want to get out of the car, head for the King Harry Ferry, a chain ferry that operates all year connecting St Mawes and the Roseland Peninsula with Truro and Falmouth and enjoy the novelty of being cranked over the water at a leisurely pace.

AN ALTERNATIVE WAY OF LIFE

Many houseboat communities have sprung up along the banks of estuaries offering an unconventional way of living that looks tempting from the footpath. Nothing tunes you into the rhythm of the tides like waking up as your home is lifted from the mud by water rising beneath it at high tide. The 20 houseboats of the Orwell estuary at Pin Mill in Suffolk sit higgledy-piggledy along the foreshore, some wrecked, the skeletal ribs of their hulls sticking out of the tidal mud, others spick and span and offering holiday lets. Several were once working barges carrying supplies up and down the river.

An afternoon stroll past the houseboats, spotting waders along the saltmarsh, then ending up at the waterside Butt and Oyster, is as satisfying an introduction to the pleasures of estuary life as any. **S**



Creative estuaries

LV21 Lightship Moored at Gravesend Town Pier Pontoon in the Thames estuary, this 40-metre steel-hulled lightship has been transformed into an art space and performance facility. Attend one of its many and varied events, or hire it to hold your own. lv21.co.uk

Creature of the Estuary As part of last year's Estuary Festival (estuaryfestival.com), film maker Eelyn Lee, with a team of artists, performers, designers and mariners, made a short film about fear, memory, migration and mud. Find screening dates at creatureoftheestuary.tumblr.com.

The Estuary Songwriting Project Eight musicians have produced original compositions around themes suggested by the Thames estuary, including landscape, natural history, social history, legends and folklore. Listen to the results at Cecil Sharp House, London, on 22 March (cecilsharp.org).