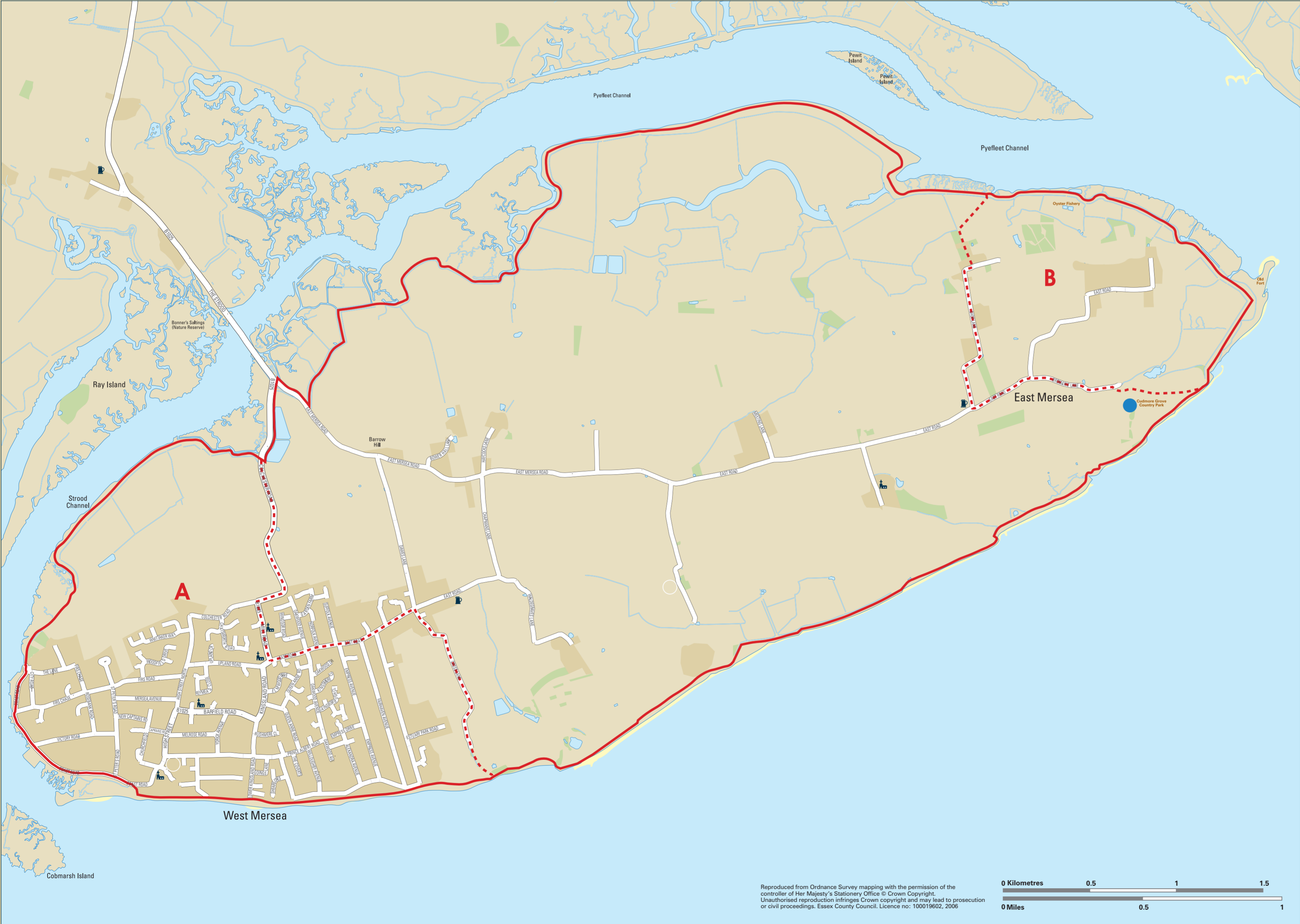


Oyster Beds and Salt Marshes; Magical Mersea

Mersea Island

Total distance of main route is **21.6km/13.4miles**



Short walks
A 8.9km/5.5miles
B 5.2km/3.3miles

This map is intended as a guide only. Please refer to relevant OS Explorer maps for specific details.

Key

- Walking Route 3
- Short walks
- Place of worship
- Telephone in rural area
- Public House
- National Rail
- Accommodation
- Restaurants

Reproduced from Ordnance Survey mapping with the permission of the controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office © Crown Copyright. Unauthorised reproduction infringes Crown copyright and may lead to prosecution or civil proceedings. Essex County Council. Licence no: 100019602, 2006





The first stretch, along the wilds of Mersea beach, was a stunning vista of yachts, dilapidated houseboats, and the 'monkey steps' where, in the 18th and 19th centuries, officials would guard against smugglers



By Stephen Emms

Give a man an island, and he'll have an overwhelming desire to walk round it. With its scenically diverse 22km perimeter path, Mersea is a case in point: the most easterly inhabited island in England, it's connected by the only Anglo-Saxon causeway in England, the 'Strood', but still cut off a few times a month at high tide. And it reeks of history: Roman pavements lurk under its elegant St Peter and Paul church (itself built in 1046); it bagged itself a mention in the Domesday Book (as home of one hundred 'souls'); and, during the First World War, a zeppelin was even shot down here.

But it's only walking the perimeter can you grasp a true feel for a place. And so, on a glorious morning, we set off from the anchorage's attractive 'Old City' quarter

of white clapperboard houses, and acclaimed Company Shed restaurant where, the day before, we had schlurped down native oysters with BYO local wine. Blue sky smiled over the creeks, and the sun pinged off the mudflats, but the wind was already up, the boat masts clinking as noisily as a gorilla running over a xylophone.

The first stretch, along the wilds of Mersea beach, was a stunning vista of yachts, dilapidated houseboats, and the 'monkey steps' (where, in the 18th and 19th centuries, officials would guard against smugglers), the spectre of Bradwell Power Station looming meanwhile across the water. Parasurfers sped by and we passed hundreds of beach huts in every shade of green, blue and brown, followed by ice cream coloured novelty versions with scalloped edges and balustrades.

Pill boxes dotted the coastline and distant specks of old men dug on the mudflats for cockles and whelks.

Passing along the sea wall at Cudmore Grove Country Park, at the island's eastern tip, we met enthusiastic ranger Dougal Urquhart, who pointed out geese, flocks of golden plovers and widgeons grazing on fields behind. At the highest cliffs on the island, a mere fifteen feet, fallen oaks littered the beach below, signifying their retreat by a metre a year. Dougal showed us river gravel in the low cliffs that is 300,000 years old: this was where, early last century, bones of elephant tusk, narrow-nosed rhino, bears and giant deer were discovered.

We left Dougal near the Old Fort, the town of Brightlingsea shimmering opposite, just as a light drizzle started. Turning the corner into the Colne Estuary National Nature Reserve, the mortal purr of the sea beyond, blankets of cloud thickened. The wind picked up, and a mist descended, as smoke from a distant log fire wafted temptingly over.

Passing the Colchester Oyster Fishery (the island has had a tradition of oyster fishing since Roman times), the weather cleared and the scenery became increasingly epic: vast fields, god-defying skies, longshore mudflats that stretched for ever, and creeks that surely must conceal crocodiles. The landscape was biblical: it seemed unbelievable that we were (thanks to GPS) just 48 miles from home in North London.



Cudmore Grove Country Park This Green Flag Award holder country park is located at the eastern end of the island. The fine views across the Colne and Blackwater estuaries are not to be missed. If you love sunsets this is the place to watch the sun slowly slip down through the hazy sky, casting a red glow as it drops lower and lower. Walk the sea wall, explore the shore and watch for wildlife. Behind the sandy beach is an area of cliff top and grassland providing a tranquil open landscape for picnics, flying kites and other outdoor activities.



St Edmund, King and Martyr church in East Mersea.

This was one of the few moated churches in the country. The area is thought to have been the camp of the Viking Hasten, who spent two winters in Mersea and plundered the country as far as Chester. The present building dates from the reign of King John, 12th-13th century. Its large, prominent tower looks out to sea and is a landmark for yachts sailing in the Blackwater. East Mersea's most famous rector was the novelist and hymn writer, Reverend Sabine Baring-Gould, who wrote the hymn Onward, Christian Soldiers.

"Seeding", nurturing and harvesting of the local oyster beds still remain as main industries of the island along with farming. The oysters from Mersea waters travel well and are appreciated worldwide. So whilst you are there you have to try out this local delicacy in one of the restaurants.



The island continued to pull us round in trance-like pleasure, the blur of marshes relentless, gulls ululating high above, and with no sight of The Strood I wondered whether it had swallowed us the way a toad gulps down a mosquito: but then, around the 15 kilometre mark, we climbed a ridge and – with a sigh of relief – spied cars crossing the distant Strood. The end was in sight!

The last few kilometres slipped by, after a hastily-gobbled lunch of sandwiches, juice, and squashed Jaffa Cakes. Balancing along a muddy ridge between two dykes, we crossed the main road and once again civilization dawned upon us.

Just five hours after our start, we collapsed on the mossy rocks of the anchorage, and grabbed a much-needed pint at The Coast Inn, a cosy waterfront pub once frequented by Winston Churchill. Never, it has to be said, did fish and chips taste so good.

Mersea is a very unique island offering a multitude of activities to the visitor. A variety of events including the annual regatta and food festival, the clean beaches and beach huts along with a number of holiday parks attract many for a short break to the island.

3

Oyster beds and vineyard tours



Mersea Island