

The England Coast Path

River Deben Association Autumn Meeting 29th November

Speaker: Giles Merritt, Lead Adviser, England Coast Path Delivery

(Norfolk and Suffolk Team) Natural England

Establishing the England Coast Path

The River Deben Association's Autumn Meeting on 29th November was well attended with over 150 members present. Giles Merritt, Lead Advisor for Natural England Coast path development in Norfolk and Suffolk provided a lively presentation about the England Coast Path with a particular emphasis on Suffolk and the River Deben. Giles has worked on the England Coast Path for several years, most recently in Essex. His talk covered current routes by the Deben and the challenges faced by Natural England in implementing the plans, local progress and the options for the Coast Path between Bawdsey and Felixstowe Ferry.

Giles explained that the England Coast Path was supported with extra funding from the Government in 2014 with the target for completion in 2020. The Path has a statutory framework going back as far as 2009.

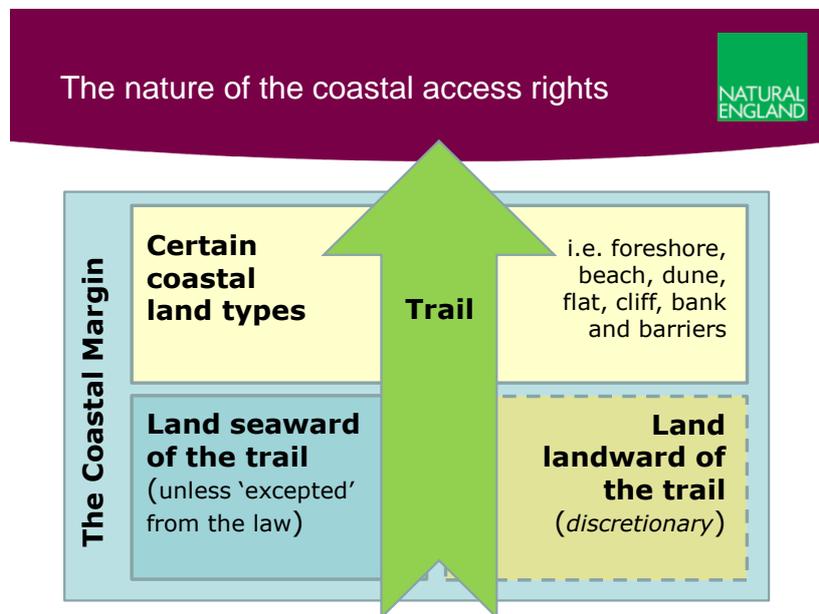
The Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 established a coastal access duty - to create a long-distance walking route around the English coast (the England Coast Path) which should be accessible to the public on foot. Natural England is charged with its delivery and must adhere to the Coastal Access Scheme which ensures that a balance is struck between the interests of those who own the land and the public in having new access rights over the land. It's a challenging balancing act, factors which must be taken into consideration include:

- for the public: proximity of trail to the sea, views, safety and continuity of the path
- for private interests: operational needs, income, privacy and change of use.

The Act also enables Natural England to respond to coastal change through proposing 'roll back' which will allow the path to be moved back if the coastline changes.

Over the 5 year period 2015-2020 Natural England aims to have completed 65 stretches - that's 2,700 miles - so the timetable is ambitious, but Giles says that Natural England are on target for completion within the time frame of 2020. The programme is required by the Marine and Coastal Access Act to undertake extensive consultation (with local interest groups, landowners and statutory

and environmental bodies) on proposed routes and plans. The plans, maps and routes also have to be approved by the Secretary of State. Any objection raised must be discussed further with objecting parties. These views must also be passed to the Secretary of State, who has the power to appoint an adjudicator to hear any objections. The Secretary of State makes the final determination.



The diagram shows the principles which determine the siting of the path to ensure the coastal characteristics and nature of the landscape are maintained but to also protect existing properties and landowners' interest from foot traffic caused by access to the Coast Path. Giles explained the concept of Coastal Margin, which is the land seaward of the trail to which the public would normally have coastal access rights. The Coastal Margin (and "spreading room" – land within the margin but excluding certain 'excluded' land types) has caused concern to landowners and nature-lovers, but Giles explained that the public are not permitted to access "excepted" land. Excepted land includes land covered by buildings and the curtilage of such land (driveways and farmyards, for example), gardens and arable land. Natural England is also likely to place an exclusion on coastal access rights on all saltmarsh and mudflats with importance for wildlife and the environment, although this will not affect historic use such as samphire gathering and wildfowling for example.

What does this mean for Suffolk?

Over the last 3 years Natural England has been consulting and planning with Suffolk County Council to implement 5 stretches of the Coastal path, representing 146 miles of pathway. However, 85% of the trail will be along existing rights of way, so using 116 miles of footpaths which are currently accessible. The proposed plans are scheduled for publication in Summer 2019 with a further

opportunity for consultation and then works will begin to develop new parts of the trail where there are gaps and improve existing pathways and rights of way. Maps of the route will be published in 2020, with the route clearly waymarked as part of the England Coast Path.

Implications for the River Deben Estuary

Naturally, members wanted to know how specifically the proposal would affect our river. The Marine and Coast Act provides specific statutory discretion called “Estuary Discretion” which applies to The Deben. Deciding whether to apply estuary discretion includes the following considerations:

- staying in touch with an estuary “feel”
- the economic cost of maintaining and developing a path along meandering reaches of river
- the distance up the estuary walkers may need to travel to cross the river
- extent of “excepted land” e.g. ports, industrial estates
- features of interest which would make an estuary route attractive to walkers
- the existence of a ferry route

A major additional factor is the protection from disturbance of wildlife, particularly in areas where there has been no footpath in recent use .

The Felixstowe Ferry to Bawdsey path is a 25 mile stretch and approximately 80% of the route will use existing public rights of way.

The three main gaps in the Deben estuary route are:

- Waldringfield to Martlesham
- around Sutton Hoo
- Ramsholt to Bawdsey

A number of people expressed a strong preference for Natural England to use the foot ferry between Bawdsey and Felixstowe Ferry, rather than have a path around the estuary. A year-round on-demand service for the ferry had been piloted in the winter of 2017/2018 with support from the AONB and other public and community bodies. Suggestions were made that Natural England should contribute to the cost of running the ferry year-round, but Giles explained that ferry costs were not within the remit of the England Coast Path budget.

Publication of proposed routes and completion of works 2019/20

Giles is meeting key landowners and stakeholders such as the AONB Unit and working closely with Suffolk County Council to establish the best way forward. He also intends to meet the Environment Agency to assess flood risk issues.

- The decision on estuary discretion has yet to be made
- As with all Suffolk stretches, a restriction on what is called “spreading room” or directing the path onto saltmarsh and mudflats will apply which will protect a very precious characteristic of The Deben
- Publication of final routes on Natural England’s website is likely to be Spring / Summer 2019 and hard reference copies will also be lodged in local libraries

The launch of the completed Path in 2020 will follow the final report and it is likely that local walking groups will then seek to promote the walks as part of their programme.

Photographs and diagrams are reprinted courtesy of Natural England

