

Out and About in Holderness

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East of Hull lies Holderness, a two-hundred square mile portion of the former East Riding of Yorkshire, extending from Hornsea in the north to Spurn Head and flanked by the river Humber and the North Sea.

It is a very fertile tract of rich agricultural countryside but it is particularly known for the instability of its coastline.

Spurn Point is a rocky outcrop – potentially an island – attached to the mainland by a shifting and extremely narrow isthmus. Severe storms accentuate the regular movement of

the spit. This movement is part of a continuing westward encroachment by the sea and nowadays coastal defences are only maintained at key points such as the North Sea Gas Terminal at Easington, with natural processes being allowed to prevail elsewhere.

Today the spit itself is managed as a National Nature Reserve by the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust and the Humber Flats and Marshes to the west are a Site of Special Scientific Interest [SSSI], which regularly supports over 100,000 wildfowl and wading birds in winter. It is a Special Protection Area for

Birds. At the seaward end of the spit are the lighthouse and the RNLI station, but road traffic is seriously discouraged in view of the ecological sensitivity of the area.

In experiencing the surreal feelings aroused by standing on a narrow spit stretching out into the North Sea, there are two key connections to be made by local historians. Literally two miles to the east are lost villages recorded in the Domesday Survey, thereby illustrating how much the coast has been cut back in a thousand years. Even more astonishing is that just off the tip of Spurn Point in medieval times a substantial sandbank emerged on which the very important town of Ravenserod developed. It was such a successful town that it was awarded a fifteen-day fair in 1251 and its success threatened the fortunes of markets further up the Humber estuary such as Hull and Hedon. By Henry VIII's times the shifting nature of the tides had washed it away again.

West of Spurn Head in the arc formed by the beginning of the Humber estuary is an area of lush farmland known as Sunk Island. Slater's *Yorkshire Directory* of 1848 records that one hundred years earlier it had only comprised 800 acres but that it had now reached between 7,000 and 8,000 acres. So, whilst the North Sea coastline has been cutting back, the area inside the estuary has been silting up.

Nearest to Hull stands the small market town of Hedon. In 1727 in his *Tour* Daniel Defoe mistakenly sees Hedon as a potential threat to Hull, when, in reality, it had already been eclipsed by Hull, with the silting up of its



Satellite image taken by NASA showing Humber Estuary and Holderness. The silt in the estuary is clearly visible.



anchorage being a significant element in its decline.

Hedon is dominated by its medieval cruciform parish church, with the rare dedication to St Augustine. This dedication maintains the memory of St Augustine of Canterbury, who was sent to England in 599 to convert the Anglo-Saxons. The fact that this dedication survives so far north indicates both that Anglo-Saxon settlers and missionaries were active in this area, an area where a Celtic connection might have been expected, and also that it must have been a very well-established dedication because the later arrival of the Danes in

the area did not sweep away this symbol of Anglo-Saxon Christianity. Hedon Church is in Market Place Hill, a clear indication that the market originally occurred in and around the churchyard before the puritanism of the medieval Papacy insisted that commercial activities should cease in such locations. Its tower rises to 130 feet and, with the added advantage of its naturally elevated site, it is possible to see Patrington Church (which is about ten miles to the east) across the mudflats. For this reason Hedon's church is known as the 'King of Holderness' and Patrington's as the 'Queen of Holderness'. They were

seen as a pair because they were used by medieval shipping as fixed points as they piloted their way to Hedon Haven and later to Hull. Today it seems odd that these two church towers were so important in a practical sense, because the mudflats have tended to occupy what was a vibrant shipping lane. Nonetheless, this piece of knowledge does correspond with a pattern elsewhere, with the church buildings having non-religious utilitarian functions as well.

It is clear that Hedon was a Danish town before the Norman Conquest because most of its town streets have that '-gate' ending characteristic of the

St Augustine's parish Church, Hedon.



Danelaw. One is named St Nicholas Gate. This represents a wonderful piece of symmetry because, at one and the same time, it is a reminder of a lost church, named in honour of the saint venerated by Anglo-Saxon sailors, thereby confirming Hedon's status as a former port, whilst also having been assimilated into the Danish street naming.

Crossing the mudflats, Patrington proves to be a very small settlement, but it was a thriving market town in medieval times. Its church was judged by Alec Clifton Taylor to be one of the dozen most significant parish church buildings in England and its beautiful cruciform shape is enhanced by aisled transepts and by its extraordinary spire, which rises to 189 feet. Its scale and beauty reveal that this must have been a very wealthy area when it was built. Indeed, its sheer capacity may have a connection with that wealth: the wealth will have come from wool and there is often evidence that wealthy clothiers paid for churches to be built with a larger floor space than the population may have needed for worship so that they could, in due season, use the building for temporary storage, thereby emphasising that people historically often interwove their spiritual and commercial priorities.

Patrington is one of that small minority of English towns which has derived its place name from its church dedication. The choice of St Patrick is a very rare historical dedication in England and to be positioned at



Burton Constable Hall, Burton Constable, East Riding.

its eastern extremity is even more extraordinary. It may be further evidence of the cosmopolitan trading connections of the people who lived there a thousand years ago.

Between Patrington and Hedon there are two other churches which attract attention. St Mary's Church at Welwick, whilst standing at a very difficult junction on the main road, has important Norman work and also contains internal evidence of how it was

celebration. It was first damaged in a storm in 1880 and by 1900 it had been completely demolished, but it is still possible today to see its ornamental gated entrance. Set above the town, and now the town's museum, another important landmark is the white-painted lighthouse, built in 1893 (wisely, far away from the turbulence of the coast).

Further north is the resort of Hornsea, where a pier designed by Eugenius Birch and opened in 1879,

Deeper into Holderness the private Burton Constable Hall is one of its treasures. Dating from c.1600, its distinctive E-front was heightened in 1759–60 to contain a central pediment with a big coat of arms. Externally the seven-bay orangery dates from 1780 and the design for the grounds was certainly influenced by correspondence with Capability Brown.

An initial encounter with Holderness might yield an image of pastoral and

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used at one time as a schoolroom. St Wifrid's Church at Ootringham is likely to be evidence of a coastal pilgrim route towards St Wifrid's shrine at Ripon, possibly even where pilgrims crossed from Lincolnshire.

Withernsea is a town which grew with the emergence of the 'holiday trade'. After the opening of the railway in 1854, Withernsea became 'Hull's Holiday Town' and it grew quickly as a resort. In 1875 its 1,200 feet pier was opened under the management of the Withernsea Improvement Company, amidst much

had become derelict by 1897 and was completely demolished in 1910. This was another victim of the coastal turbulence which contributes to the continuing coastal erosion. Hornsea's parish church is dedicated to St Nicholas, a clear indication that this was historically a community which derived its income from the sea and venerated the Anglo-Saxon patron saint of sailors. Inland from the town is Hornsea Mere, the largest natural lake in Yorkshire, and its fresh water supports a wide range of fish and birdlife.

natural calm but this under populated landscape is surrounded by dynamic physical change and the treasures of the landscape betray the fact that historically this was a very prosperous part of England, standing as it did both alongside a major international trade route but also, as Defoe correctly assessed, alongside what was effectively a water-borne internal trade route, from the Midlands which emerged from the River Trent and then followed the coast to King's Lynn and London.

Pier Towers, Withernsea, East Riding.

