



A SUSTAINABLE VISION FOR HOYLAK BEACH

DRAFT ONLY: FOR COMMENT



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A beach in limbo... a beach without a plan?

INTRODUCTION

Hoylake has so many assets. Its wide expanse of sands, sand dunes and offshore islands are surely its greatest. Indeed Hoylake is world renowned because of them.

Yet there is a sense that our local beach is not achieving its natural potential nor its potential as a place that people can enjoy. There is growing evidence that this part of our foreshore is suffering as a result of a lack of positive management and its quality is in decline. It feels like a beach in limbo... a beach without a plan.

In the past it was a thriving place, with donkey rides, deckchairs, a wonderful swimming pool; lots of activity, lots of enjoyment. A lack of investment and competition from overseas saw all of these things, along with the visitor numbers, disappear.

We think It is time to think again about what we can be done to revive the quality and popularity of our local beach and waterfront; how can we create a public amenity fit for the 21st century; a beach and promenade that connects positively with the high street; a more natural, beautiful place that is a safe, pleasant public space to use. A beach that is better for wildlife. A beach that is safe for our children.



The Hoylake swimming baths



A MIRROR OF FORTUNES

For centuries, Hoylake's wealth was dependent on the sea. The presence of a permanent navigable channel known as the Hoyle Lake from which the modern town takes its name was its key economic asset. The 'lake' provided a safe haven for local fishing boats and a safe anchorage and a sheltered passage for merchant ships into the ports of Chester and Liverpool. It was an important embarkation point for Ireland famously used in 1690 by King William of Orange and his troops on their way to fight the Battle of the Boyne.

The advent of sea bathing and the opening of the Royal Hotel in 1792 opened up a new chapter. Hoylake's sands, dunes and lake provided for safe sea bathing, riding, horse racing, rabbit shooting and walking. Hoylake developed initially into a small but prosperous seaside visitor resort and later as a residential resort for Liverpool's wealthy mercantile classes.

Hoylake's fishing and farming families lived alongside prosperous ship owners and traders who were soon joined by the aspirant middle classes, a process greatly accelerated by the coming of the railway from Birkenhead in 1866.

Sailing and golf clubs were established, the dunes gave way to promenades, gardens and houses.

Today, the Hoyle Lake is long gone with the anchorage at Meols the only reminder of its existence and, whilst 'day trippers' still poured into Hoylake as recently as the 1970s, the closure of the outdoor bathing pool in 1987 marked the end of Hoylake's period as traditional seaside visitor resort.

But not all is lost: Hoylake has an international sporting profile. Its wide expanse of sands hosts international sand yachting and kite buggying competitions whilst its remaining dune-lands form the celebrated and historic Hoylake links. These glorious links, the second oldest in England, have provided a world class venue for international golfing competitions for over a century.

Moreover, Hoylake's beach with its sandstone outcrops, dunes and islands are equally renowned as wildlife habitats designated as internationally important for waders and wildfowl, a stopping point for rare migrant birds and a rich source of invertebrates. We have so much to celebrate. And much to make more of.



The dune system at Red Rocks looking out to Hilbre; a haven for wildlife and a draw for visitors

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

In the 10,000 years since the last Ice Age, the wide mouthed Dee Estuary has naturally silted up due to a lack of tidal scour. During the 19th century, efforts to preserve a navigable channel to Chester included canalising the Dee in the upper estuary and moving the main channel away from the English to the Welsh shore.

By 1909 a sea wall was also built along the whole of Hoylake's north coast. This wall has removed the natural conduit for blown beach sand to create and feed a sand dune ecosystem and affected the general profile of the beach.

Prior to this, the North Wirral Coast consisted of a long line of low dunes built up from blown sand and with a profiled sandy beach all the way from Hoylake to Wallasey.

All these changes, both natural and manmade, affected Hoylake's offshore channels and tidal currents to deliver a substantial raising of beach levels over the last century. However, it is the construction of seawalls that has had the most impact on the natural beach form in Hoylake.

Today, the beach is 'managed' to prevent wind-blown sand engulfing the promenade and to discourage the development of saltings. The result is that we have a flat and wet upper beach which is rarely washed clean by the tide.

Sand dunes and wet 'slacks' near Red Rocks have developed gradually over the last century. Initial saltings (marshy growth) in front of the older dunes are first shown on the 1927 OS map and would have been similar to those recently removed from the

vicinity of the new RNLI station. Some 80+ years later these saltings have been succeeded by fresh water slacks and a low dune ridge fronted by a narrow band of saltings upon which a new line of embryo dunes are establishing themselves as the coast moves slowly seaward.

However, this area, designated as a SSSI, a Site of Special Scientific Interest, has been downgraded by Natural England to a classification of 'unfavourable declining'. This means a 'lack of investment and positive management or a period of wilful neglect' requires imminent intervention to prevent further, more serious decline and to conserve the special wildlife and geological features of this site.

Current classifications in the areas adjacent to Hoylake beach include:

- Dee Estuary RAMSAR site
- Dee Estuary Special Protection Area (SPA)
- Mersey Narrows and North Wirral Foreshore pSPA (potential SPA)
- Dee Estuary possible Special Area of Conservation (SAC)
- North Wirral Foreshore Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)
- Meols Meadows SSSI
- Red Rocks SSSI
- Dee Estuary SSSI
- Hilbre Island Local Nature Reserve (LNR)

These designations clearly indicate that we live in a very special coastal environment; one worth conserving and improving where there is evidence of decline. Look at the picture opposite, then again at the picture of Hoyake beach on page 4.



Spartina Anglica growing on Hoyake beach: chemical treatment and digging has consistently failed for over 50 years

THE ISSUES TODAY

Some of the main issues reported about the beach are the encroachment of Spartina grass; the problem of dog fouling; the lack of a café or refreshment facilities and concerns that development might attract anti-social behaviour; a problem common to many 'amenity' beaches. People also say that the our local beach isn't evident enough from the high street – there is an inherent disconnection.

GRASS ENCROACHMENT

The concerns about management of the common cord grass [Spartina anglica] on the 'main' beach prompt many people to comment on the situation at Parkgate, where the grass has taken over the estuary. where transitions to swamp vegetation occur, dominated usually by common reed [Phragmites australis] and sea club-rush [Bolboschoenus maritimus]. But Parkgate is a very different estuarine environment to the exposed intertidal coastline of Hoylake beach. What does this mean for Hoylake beach? History and natural evidence suggests that if the grass vegetation at Hoylake was left to establish naturally without costly intervention, a dune system with slacks, more akin to that between Red Rocks and West Kirby, would develop; where windblown sand gathers around grass, it forms dunes. And where there is a lot of wind the dunes accrete quickly. Slacks also form, becoming a haven for wildlife.

DOG FOULING

Whilst most dog owners are responsible, it remains a sad fact of life that some are clearly not. Blue Flag beaches, such as the one at Newborough, Anglesey, have dog-free zones. This would appear to be a reasonable and equitable arrangement. Is it practical here?

Campaigns targetting irresponsible dog owners could also help raise awareness and reduce incidents of fouling. This is part of a separate conversation that affects the whole town, not just the beach.

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT AND ANTI SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

The proposed development of a café has prompted some concerns about licensing on the seafront, which has delayed progress. Other licensed premises exist, such as the sailing club and the Community Centre: with appropriate management and careful monitoring of activity could such concerns about new development be allayed?

Should we hold back from developing the beach for fear of anti social behaviour. Or can we design it out from the outset? Can we develop a beach that will not be attractive to those who would spoil the enjoyment for others but will be a destination for those who love nature, the environment and want child friendly facilities. Would you like to enjoy a glass of wine whilst watching one of the greatest sunsets in the world?

CONNECTING WITH THE HIGH STREET

In Hoylake, the high street and the beach are great assets, but over time they have both been suffered neglect and decline, and many people in the community have lost their relationship with both. We are exploring how to improve the high street and reconnect the community and have created a Town Team, Neighbourhood Forum and Business Network to this end. It is now time now to bring passion back to the beach too, and make sure the community cherishes it, learns from it, and loves it.



A BEACH FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Rising sea levels would indicate that over the very long term, the current siltation will reverse naturally, but for the foreseeable future we have an opportunity for current and future generations to enjoy a better, more natural beach.

Could a managed dune system along part of Hoylake's main beach evolve into an attractive, enjoyable area for both local people and visitors whilst retaining areas of cleaner amenity beach?

That way we could start to return the beach to its natural form and develop a more profiled beach which would gradually 'move' seawards as the current siltation of the Dee Estuary area continues. It would certainly help stop wind blown sand reaching the promenade, the road and drainage systems, currently costing circa £70,000 per annum to clear.

To recreate a natural ecosystem and beach profile would transform Hoylake for residents and visitors alike. It could be a nationally renowned ecosystem restoration project!

Boardwalks; hides for birdwatchers; viewing platforms for sand yachting and other beach based events, cycle hire, even some colourful beach huts used by artisan entrepreneurs, attracting both footfall and revenue?

Could Hoylake have a leisure beach, not a pleasure beach? A beach for those who love nature, who care about the environment... A beach that attracts an further abundance of wildlife... A beach that certainly does not attract those who would spoil the enjoyment of others through anti social behaviour?

Could we have cafés or even a restaurant along the promenade, overlooking all this increasingly beautiful, naturally evolving landscape and important habitat?

If this happens, we would be better placed to encourage more 'niche' shops to Market Street, selling beach and outdoor related goods: clothing; birdwatching and sand yachting equipment; a modern chandlery; cycling and beach sports shops; books about the natural environment and wildlife; artists supplies...?

National visitor trends show that more and more people are choosing to take short breaks in the UK, seeking natural habitats, fresh air and specialist activities. The opportunity is clearly there for Hoylake to become a destination for all these types of activities.

Is the current stalemate with nature sustainable? Or it is a costly approach, ultimately damaging the environment, as well as the local economy?



Could a modern version of the traditional beach hut provide opportunities for artisans to run small businesses?

COME ON BOARD...

Do you agree with us that something needs to be done? Have you got other ideas?

One thing is clear: it's time for a conversation; time for ideas and, importantly, it's time for the facts.

Hoylake Village Life are consulting with specialists in coastal management, design and planning with a view to inviting them to join in the conversations and help us to better understand our beach and what we can do with it in a more sustainable and positive way forward. This is not an academic research document; rather a proposal for a new approach to beach management. Will you join in the conversation? Email us at info@hoylakevillage.org.uk.

Sources and further reference:

Here are some of the main sources of information and reference used during the production of this document.

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The best of both worlds: note the dry sand in the foreground – a product of wind blown sand accreting at the foot of a young dune system, providing a distinct and clean amenity area