

Centurions Spring walk – 22nd March 2014

Where Romans once stood; a walk around Canvey Island

When the Romans needed salt they came to Canvey Island. As Centurions we will walk upon the Islands soil and perhaps, if we are lucky enough, find some trace of Canvey's Roman past.

Excavations on the Island have unearthed the remains of Roman structures and objects that date the first settlement of Canvey between 50–250 AD. The remains point to a community with a farmstead, a garrison, a burial ground, and the operation of a large salt-making industry, revealed by the existence of several 'Red Hills'. These distinctive features are mounds of fire reddened soil and broken coarse pottery. A Roman road terminates across the creek at Benfleet, possibly a means to facilitate the salt's distribution to Colchester. The particular pottery and glassware recovered suggests the Romans may also have exploited Canvey's location in the Thames for shipping.

Walk around Canvey (15 miles)

We will gather at the main entrance to **Benfleet Railway Station** (C2C London – Shoeburyness line) at 09:30am. Toilets are available on the platforms.

For those coming by car, there is a large public car park within 100m of the station in **School Lane SS7 1NS**. Parking is free at weekends. Public toilets are about a mile away in Richmond Park, Richmond Avenue, off the High Road. For satnavs use code SS7 5HA.

I would suggest bringing a packed lunch or snacks for the walk. There will be refreshments available in cafes and shops on the route at 7.5 miles and just off route in other places. Public Toilet facilities are available at 7.5 miles.

Hadleigh Castle and Old Leigh Cockle Sheds Extension (5 miles)

Refreshments at Old Leigh.

Public Toilets at Old Leigh.

Following the walk around Canvey, we will continue east to include the Olympic mountain bike venue (actually taking in part of the course), Hadleigh Castle and the Cockle Sheds of Old Leigh. There will be an opportunity to return to your cars if required before starting this extra section.

Those not wishing to walk any further may still enjoy the Castle and Old Leigh which are within easy driving distance. An alternative is to catch the train to Old Leigh. It is one stop east from Benfleet.

Map

OS 1:50,000 Landranger 178 "The Thames Estuary".

Conditions

Easy underfoot all the way. Not suitable for training shoes when wet or muddy.

Accommodation

Oysterfleet Hotel, Knightswick Road, Canvey Island, Essex SS8 7UX (01268 510111)

Emergency Contact

Steve Kemp 07792 565209

Questions

01268 680461 or racewalker@sky.com

The route

Our walk begins at Benfleet railway station and almost immediately we cross the creek to Canvey Island. The road bridge dates from 1973 replacing the island's first bridge to the mainland built in 1931. The old *Colvin Bridge*, named after Brigadier-General R.B. Colvin, the Lord Lieutenant of Essex, operated with a sliding 59 ft central section that retracted for boats passing along Benfleet Creek.



Prior to the *Colvin Bridge's* construction, crossing the creek was achieved by either rowing-boat ferry, or by a gravel causeway or stepping-stones at low tides. Compare what you see today with the scene just 83 years ago!



Turning west we join the Islands sea wall embankment created by the Dutch early in the 17th century to provide a defence against the tides. We walk the wall anti-clockwise taking in the freshwater marshes and hopefully spotting some of the bird life that flocks to the newly created nature reserve. Walking here, you get an idea of what Canvey must have looked like 100 years ago, before escapees from the East End of London began to build little dream homes beside the estuary. Much earlier, during the 5th century Saxons introduced sheep-farming which would dominate the island's industry until the 20th century.

Turning south, we pass near the old Port of London jetty and catch sight of the new super container port at Coryton. We approach the Lobster Smack Inn, first recorded in the Domesday book and reputedly a haunt for smugglers in a bygone age. In the 1860s, Charles Dickens knew the old smugglers' pub as the loneliest inn on the Thames marshes and sent Pip and the fugitive Magwitch in *Great Expectations* to hide there while waiting for the Continental steamer. Nearby is a row of wooden coast guard cottages that date from the late 19th century.



Lobster Smack, Canvey Island

Signs of industry now begin to appear, housing, and Thorney Bay Camp with its hundreds of caravans.

The gradual rise of the tide may look gentle today. But on the night of January 31, 1953, a north-east gale and a high tide sent devastating floods sweeping across the east coast of England. Canvey Island, lying behind its inadequate wall, was hit hard. The wall breached, the sea broke in, and 58 people drowned. Following the disaster the wall was strengthened and now comes into view along the southern shores of the estuary.

Reaching the seafront we see sandy beaches, play areas, amusements, night clubs, a cinema, and bowling alley. During the Victorian era Canvey was a fashionable place to visit, and its air was promoted as having healing properties. Thousands of people flocked here. The Labworth café, will be a familiar sight to racewalkers that have competed in the Nicola's 5.



Labworth Cafe. built circa 1933.



Canvey Seafront

On the other side of the estuary the Kent coastline can be seen and as we push on towards Canvey's eastern point we glimpse our first view of Southend's famous pier.

The eastern edge of Canvey was the area favoured by the Romans for their salt industry. Proof of Roman occupation has been found, with pottery showing evidence of the Romans using this part of the island to extract salt from the sea water as this was an important and expensive mineral to trade in.

We pause to enjoy the views out to sea and imagining that it has changed little since the last Centurions were here.

Our final leg takes us past the yacht club, country park and golf course. Across the creek on our right stand the ruins of Hadleigh Castle, but for now we continue to follow the sea wall path that brings us back to Benfleet station.

Hadleigh Castle, Olympic Mountain Biking and Old Leigh Cockle Sheds Extension. (5 miles)

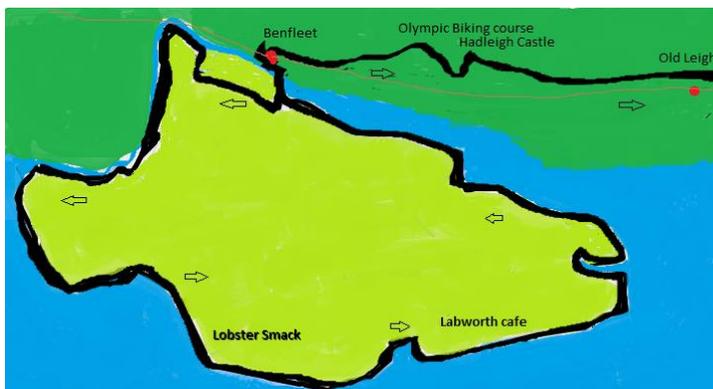


Walking east from Benfleet station we take in part of the 2012 Olympic mountain bike course.

We then continue to the ruins of the Norman Castle at Hadleigh c1215. A large section of one tower remains along with many sections of wall. It is worth a visit and you will readily appreciate the strategic advantage the castle perched on the hillside provided against raiders going up the estuary towards London. Entry is free but there are no facilities at the Castle.

Dropping down into Old Leigh, we stroll along beside the cockle sheds and enjoy the sea air. Old Leigh has quaint stores selling gifts, refreshments, and of course the locally caught sea food. There are four pubs and public facilities.

Our day is completed by catching the train from Leigh back to Benfleet.



route