



BLAKENEY AND BLAKENEY POINT

PEOPLE AND PLACE

Believe me, my young friend, there is nothing – absolutely nothing – half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats

Ratty from *Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame

Blakeney can boast the only harbour still open on the Glaven estuary, and its sheltered waters, protected by Blakeney Point, make this the sailing centre of North Norfolk. On summer weekends, as the tide rises, dozens of brightly coloured sailing dinghies and yachts tack up the narrow Blakeney channel to the more open waters of Blakeney Pit. On some days, particularly when the high tide falls at a convenient daytime hour, the water off Blakeney becomes a Piccadilly Circus for yachts. It's amazing that more collisions don't occur!

Blakeney High Street has a charm all of its own. It slopes steeply down to the quay and its pubs, shops and cafes are a popular spot for visitors. Narrow alleyways known as 'lokes' lead off the High Street into yards, some formerly used for shipbuilding or as coal and grain stores. A chandlery and marine stores on the quayside service Blakeney's sailing industry and the Blakeney Hotel, a fine spot for morning coffee or lunch, has commanding views over the saltmarshes across to Blakeney Point.

Exploring Blakeney on foot, look out for the flood markers which show the levels of the storm surge tides in 1897, 1953 and 1978. A public barometer near the bottom of the High Street was once crucial for fishermen to judge whether to set sail. A rapidly falling glass might mean a decision to retire to one of the many local pubs. Sadly, the Crown and Anchor, known to locals as the 'Barking Dickey', popular with fishermen, and in former centuries with smugglers, was demolished in 1921.

Opposite: Piccadilly Circus for yachts – Blakeney harbour on a summer weekend.

Above right: Having fun at the regatta – the greasy pole competition.

Below right: The annual tug of war across Blakeney channel.





TIME AND TIDE

Boat building, fishing and trading: it's difficult to imagine just how busy Blakeney port was in medieval times. The original settlement here was known as Snitterley and undoubtedly fishing was its *raison d'être*. As early as 1222 there was a fish market and by the 1350s there are records of a great fish fair held annually selling cod, herring, ling and even sturgeon. Harvesting cockles and samphire from the marshes, sail-making, salt and smoked fish production, collecting oysters and mussels, sheep-grazing and rabbit-snaring were traditional ways people made their livelihoods.

However, the real wealth of Blakeney grew with its export trade. By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, corn, wool and goods such as malt were being traded with North Sea ports in Belgium, Holland and Norway. Ships up to 100 tonnes could sail from Blakeney and Wiveton harbours up to the sixteenth century until reclamation of neighbouring marshes caused silting and shallowing of the main sea channel. The scale of Blakeney's parish church, St Nicholas, reflects the wealth generated through this trade.

There is a long tradition of boat building in Blakeney and neighbouring Wiveton. As recently as the 1840s ships of up to 80 tons were constructed in Blakeney. The *Hull Packet*, launched in September 1844, was the last of the large ships built here but the tradition just about survives. Traditional wooden fishing boats are still built by David Hewitt at Saxlingham Road and Stratton Long Marine operates both boat repair and construction, building the modern day fibre-glass equivalents of the traditional local fishing boats.

Trading and commercial fishing out of Blakeney quay are alas no more. The last vessel to trade abroad was in 1889 importing timber from Sweden. However, well into the twentieth century, cargoes of corn, coal, cattle food and fertilizer were unloaded at the quay. Imagine the clatter of horses' shoes on the cobbles as horse-drawn wagons and carts dispersed the goods to yards, warehouses and granaries off the High Street.

Opposite: Blakeney in its setting – a late summer view.
 Below: Blakeney's village sign reflects its history of fishing and trading – the fiddler and his dog and the beetle hammers, which feature in traditional stories about Blakeney, also appear on the sign.



FLOTSAM AND JETSAM

~ What's in a name? At the time of the Domesday Book (1086) Blakeney was called Esnuterle and this name is later recorded as Snuterlea and Snitterley. The name Blakeney was first used in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries and probably means 'Black Island'.

~ The Blakeney fiddler. The story of the Blakeney fiddler and his dog is commemorated on Blakeney's village sign. Legend has it that a fiddler and his dog entered a mysterious tunnel leading from near Blakeney Guildhall. The fiddler's music grew fainter and fainter and he and his dog were never seen again. Rumours of a network of smugglers' tunnels under Blakeney have always been rife. Who knows? One day they may still be discovered.

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~ Shiver my timbers. The roofs of some of the older houses in Blakeney are constructed from timbers left over from ships built in the village. These oak timbers were first soaked in sea water for a year to prevent rot and woodworm.

~ The Blakeney Undercroft. This brick-vaulted chamber, owned by English Heritage and open to visitors, is said at one time to have been part of Blakeney's Guildhall. While its fourteenth century origins are still argued about, in more recent times it's been used as a grain store, a coal bunker, a worm and bait store, for growing mushrooms and as a mortuary for bodies washed ashore during the war years. The attractive brick arches are made from Flemish bricks which were used as ballast on the return voyage by Blakeney trading ships sailing back from Holland.

~ Blakeney's church lighthouse. The parish church, St Nicholas, has a curious second tower. This is said to have been used as a lighthouse with its light visible from over 20 miles out to sea.

~ Cart races. When there were granaries off Blakeney High Street the custom was to race the loaded wagons down its slope to the quay. Their momentum was sufficient for them to hit a barrier at the quayside tipping their loads into the holds of waiting ships.

~ I see him here, I see him there ... Baroness Orczy, author of the *Scarlet Pimpernel* books, stayed in Blakeney and was so inspired by local tales of smuggling and piracy that she named her fictional hero of the series, Sir Percy Blakeney.

~ Norfolk's first nature reserve. The National Trust acquired Blakeney Point in 1912 to safeguard the breeding seabirds and protect its unique landscape. This was Norfolk's first public nature reserve.

~ The moving finger ... Blakeney Point has for centuries been on the move, a constantly shifting pattern of shingle, sand-bars, dunes and marsh sculpted by wave and storm. The Point is the western end of a shingle spit running 15.5 kilometres from the cliffs at Weybourne and estimated to contain 82.5 million cubic feet of shingle. Blakeney Point has slowly been extending westwards and at the same time moving landwards as storm-driven pebbles are thrown from the seaward side covering marshes on the inland side. A bird's-eye view of the Point reveals a series of landward curved shingle ridges, like teeth on a comb, each indicating a former end to Blakeney Point. Today the shingle continues to move landwards on average a metre every year and the tip of Blakeney Point is still growing westwards.

Opposite: Blakeney channel leading out to the open sea beyond Blakeney Point.





WILDERNESS AND WILDLIFE

*Gulls hang on the wind above waves that surge and roar
Beyond a line of shingle
Vast space, an emptiness
Water, sky and silence*

Beyond the busyness of Blakeney's harbour lies a world of windswept marsh and mudflat protected from the open sea by the pebble, shingle and sand barrier of Blakeney Point. One of North Norfolk's most celebrated nature reserves, Blakeney Point, is a wild and remote place of solitude, isolation and moody open skies. Its creeks are edged with grey-green purslane and its saltings turn purple with sea lavender in July and August. The plant life here is extremely varied with different species colonising the shingle, sand dunes and saltmarsh habitats. Yellow horned-poppy, sea campion, stoncrop and thrift are attractive flowers characteristic of the shingle ridge. The marshes in contrast are carpeted with aster, purslane, sea lavender and samphire. A dark green jungle of shrubby seablite bushes dominates the upper edge of the marshes in the zone where mud meets shingle. Blakeney's high sand dunes are crested with silver-grey marram grass. Within the sheltered hollows of older dunes, areas are carpeted with grey lichens and a rich flora has developed. May and June are the best months to enjoy a profusion of dune flowers – ragwort, sea holly, sea bindweed, bird's-foot trefoil and orchids.

The Point is better known for its birds than its flowers. In Victorian times this area was recognised as an excellent site to find rare migrant birds in spring and autumn. The motto of these early ornithologists was, 'What's hit is history, and what's missed is mystery', and a gun was considered every bit as important as a glass (telescope). Some of the rarities shot on the Point in the late nineteenth century feature in the taxidermy collections of Holkham Hall, Sheringham Hall and Castle Museum, Norwich. There are bluethroats, wrynecks, hoopoes and sadly even a white-tailed eagle from this period. When easterly winds blow in spring and autumn the Point continues to be an excellent spot to seek wind-drifted rarities. Today's birdwatchers, fortunately for the birds,



come armed only with field guides, high power optics and digi-cams to record their finds.

In conservation terms it is Blakeney Point's breeding birds which are of special importance. Four species of terns: common, arctic, sandwich and little, nest on the shingle here. The breeding colony is roped off with access prohibited between April and August, but good views can be obtained from hides provided by the National Trust.

Rabbits, hares, stoats, weasels, shrews, voles and foxes make their home on the Point, but the best known mammals, the ones which attract thousands of visitors, are the seals. Several hundred common seals and smaller numbers of grey seals breed on sandbanks off the Point. From their once remote hauling-out areas, the seals have become accustomed to boats full of staring people, and simply stare back or idly wave a flipper at boats only a few metres away.

Opposite: Common seals at rest on sand banks off Blakeney.

Above: Migratory terns return to nest on Blakeney Point each summer.

WILDERNESS AND WILDLIFE



Blakeney Point was purchased by Charles Rothschild and given to the National Trust in 1912. It was the first public nature reserve in Norfolk and one of the first reserves in England. Today it is still managed and wardened by the National Trust and is now designated as a National Nature Reserve and also protected as part of the North Norfolk coast Site of Special Scientific Interest.

The Point is simply the end of the shingle ridge which extends westwards from Weybourne. The shape of the Point is constantly changing through storms, winds and tides. Over several centuries its length has gradually increased westwards and the shingle ridge has moved slowly landwards. Much scientific work has been carried out here on coastal landforms and ecology. London University have carried out research here since the early 1900s.

In summer the breeding numbers of sandwich and little terns are of national importance and oystercatchers, ringed plovers, redshanks, and shelducks also nest in good numbers. In winter the coastal mudflats and saltmarshes which have developed in the shelter of the Point are important feeding areas for geese, waders and wildfowl.

Left: Sea kale growing on the shingle of Blakeney Point.
Opposite: Seals on patterned sands – Blakeney.

