

Folkestone & Hythe District Heritage Strategy

Appendix 1: Theme 1a Landscape – Romney Marsh

PROJECT: Folkestone & Hythe District Heritage Strategy
DOCUMENT NAME: Theme 1(a): Romney Marsh

Version	Status	Prepared by	Date
V01	INTERNAL DRAFT	F Clark	01.08.17
Comments – first draft of text. No illustrations or figures. Needs the addition of photographs. Current Activities will need adding to.			

Version	Status	Prepared by	Date
V02	RETURNED DRAFT	D. Whittington	16.11.18
Update back from FHDC.			

Version	Status	Prepared by	Date
V03	CONSULTATION DRAFT	F Clark	28.11.18
Comments – Check through and title page inserted.			

Version	Status	Prepared by	Date
V04			

Version	Status	Prepared by	Date
V05			

1(a) Romney Marsh

1. Summary

The Romney Marsh has a unique historic landscape that has evolved over thousands of years. It is now the largest coastal wetland on the southern coast of England and is well known for its natural beauty, diverse habitats and wildlife, rich heritage and extensive coastline. Its long and complex natural history is primarily one of land reclamation and the ongoing battle to manage and retain this land. A number of distinctive features are present throughout its iconic landscape that reflect a rich local heritage that is primarily centred on this battle for land drainage and coastal defence as well as a rich agricultural heritage, wartime defences, maritime heritage and the medieval churches of the Marsh. Its landscape is predominantly characterised by its openness and wildness and is unique in the county.

2. Introduction

Since the end of the last Ice Age around 11,500 years ago, the Kent coast has been extensively modified by generally rising sea levels. As a result, a number of contrasting coastal landscapes have been created through various coastal geomorphological processes, the deposition of sediment into river channels across Kent and the subsequent changes to river courses. Perhaps the most impressive of these is the extensive expanse of beach and alluvial deposits that form the Dungeness cusped foreland, Romney, Walland and Denge Marshes.

The Romney Marsh is the largest coastal wetland on the south coast of England covering around 100 square miles. It comprises several linked marshes; Romney Marsh Proper that covers the area to the east of the Rhee Wall (an old watercourse running from Appledore to New Romney), the Walland Marsh that forms the majority of the area to the west of the Rhee Wall, and the Denge Marsh which covers the area to the south of the Walland Marsh. Collectively these internally divided regions are known as the Romney Marsh.

The Marsh has a long and complex natural history that has given rise to variable geological deposits across its area. It is primarily a story of land reclamation and the ongoing battle to defend and adequately drain the fertile land that has been gained. The constant upkeep of drainage systems, massive earthen and man-made coastal defence walls and natural shingle barriers have allowed for the continued protection of the Marsh against the sea. Romney Marsh has become renowned for its natural beauty, diversity of habitats, rich history and extensive coastline. It is often referred to as *The Fifth Continent* which seems to originate from the words of Thomas Ingoldsby, the pen name of the nineteenth century author and cleric Richard Harris Barham, when he wrote in his *The Ingoldsby Legends* that “*The World, according to the best geographers, is divided into Europe, Asia, Africa, America, and Romney Marsh*”. As such, it is a distinctive part of the District that boasts a rich historic landscape and unique natural setting.

Evolution of the Romney Marsh

The evolution of the Romney Marsh began around 6000 years ago when a series of events triggered the beginning of the formation of the Marsh. Large amounts of shingle had been deposited on the Channel bed following the end of the last Ice Age which then began to build up as sand bars and shingle spits that were growing across the Rye Bay as a result of longshore drift. This shingle barrier continued to

build and soon stretched from present day Dungeness to as far northwards as what is now Dymchurch. The barrier created a large lagoon behind it which was open to the sea at Hythe and had the River Limen (later Rother) and its tributaries feeding into it. This gradually became mudflats and sediment deposition from the river valleys flowing into the lagoon from the Weald high ground created swamps, salt marshes and vegetated land. It is difficult to determine the sedimentary sequence of this early phase in the development of the Marsh as the shingle barrier was frequently breached during bad weather and storms.

Behind the barrier most of the Romney Marsh remained intertidal for some centuries, particularly as at times it appears that the sea levels were rising faster than new land could be created. Certainly, during the Iron Age, Roman and Early Anglo-Saxon periods (approximately 800BC to 600AD) large parts of the Romney Marsh were still underwater making settlement of the Marsh more limited.

Kent formally became part of the Roman Empire in 43 AD with the arrival of Emperor Claudius, most likely at Richborough. Following the Roman invasion and creation of the province of Britannia, some of the earliest parts of the Romney Marsh were beginning to develop. The settlement at Lydd developed during the Romano-British period on a shingle island that was still separated from the rest of the mainland. There is evidence of specialised site functions here for salt production that was also the case at Dymchurch and St Mary's Bay. All Saints Church, also known as the "Cathedral of the Marsh", was originally thought to have been Saxon in origin, but recent studies now date the oldest sections of the church to the latter half of the fifth century, making it Romano-British. Lydd would continue to develop as a town and reached its height during the thirteenth century by which time much of the Denge Marsh to the south had emerged though it was still an island that remained separate from Romney Marsh Proper and the growing Walland Marsh.

Newchurch and Burmarsh are also notable towns from the earliest parts of the Romney Marsh, both located on what would become Romney Marsh Proper. Newchurch was mentioned in the Domesday Book as the name of a hundred which suggests that there was a church here prior to the Norman Conquest in 1066. It was also historically the centre of the sheep and wool trade on the Marsh. Burmarsh is also recorded in the Domesday Book as *Borchemeres* and *Burwarmaresc*. The name is believed to come from the Old English "burh-ware" meaning *town dwellers* with "mersc" that meant *marsh* and so Burmarsh refers to the "marsh of the town dwellers". There is also evidence from around 275 AD that the Romans obtained salt from the area.

Old Romney also formed part of the earliest settlement of the Romney Marsh and was the original port of Romney. The name Romney is derived from the Old English for "at the spacious or wide river" and is recorded in 895 AD as *Rumenea* and then as *Rumenesea* in a charter that is dated 914 AD. This led to various derivations which included *Romenei*, *Romenal* and *Romney*. It appears that this was an early name for the Romney Marsh whose inhabitants are referred to as *Merscuuare* in 774 AD and *Merscware* in 796 AD which is Old English for "marsh people". Their territory in 811 AD is described as *Regio Merscuuariorum* which means "region of the Marsh People", and even earlier in 697 AD the name *Ruminingseta* appears which refers to the "fold of the dwellers by the spacious river" and *Rumeneia*. *Rumeneia* was the

name for the river that we now know as the Rother that historically flowed across the Romney Marsh and entered the sea at New Romney. By 1610 the name Old and New Romney appears as it is now known today.

Traditionally it has been believed that the settlement of Old Romney was a predecessor for New Romney. However, recent studies now suggest that there was a scattered village concentrated around the church of St Clement (survives at Old Romney) and that the *Romenele* (Romney) of the Domesday Book was situated around the Saxon church of St Martin (once stood at New Romney but has since been lost).

The shingle spur on which Romney was founded had begun forming during the Neolithic period. Between 450 and 700 AD the shingle barrier that had been building from Hastings to Hythe was breached by the sea which created a wide marine inlet and an outlet for the river Limen between Dymchurch and Lydd. By the eighth century the shingle spur on the north-eastern side of this new inlet was occupied. Old Romney formed part of the earliest settlement of the Romney Marsh and was the original port of Romney. The village church, St Clement, is one of the oldest churches in Kent as there is evidence of an earlier structure dating to the eighth century where the twelfth century church now stands. By the twelfth century the accumulation of land on the Marsh meant that Old Romney found itself further inland and as a result it gradually declined and became redundant as a port. This had also been the case some years earlier for the Roman port *Portus Lemanis* at Lympe which had found itself 3 miles from the coast and had quickly become redundant. By the seventeenth century only the church and settlement remained of Old Romney.

It is uncertain when the settlement at New Romney began, but the early church of St Martin and fishermen's houses are referenced in a charter dating to 741 AD. It must then have grown in size and importance and may have even been threatened by the Dane incursion of 893 AD when a fleet of 250 ships entered the estuary of the Limen and sailed as far as Appledore. Some years earlier in 841 AD another Viking attack on the Marsh had resulted in many being killed. New Romney would go on to become one of the five original Cinque Ports having replaced Old Romney as the port at Romney. However it too would eventually find itself landlocked and in its current position sits just over a mile from the sea.

As land on the Marsh was continuing to accumulate, early efforts were being made to defend this new land from being reclaimed again by the sea. Perhaps one of the earliest efforts dates back to the eighth-century with the construction of the Rumensea Wall which ran from the rear of the barrier between the Walland and Romney Marshes to the base of the abandoned cliff-line which originally framed the Rye Bay. By the early thirteenth century the vast majority of Romney Marsh Proper had been reclaimed and ongoing drainage networks were employed to maintain this fertile land. Lydd and the Denge Marsh at this time were still islands in the Limen estuary and parts of the Walland Marsh such as Oxney and Old Winchelsea were also still islands separated from the mainland.

The Rhee Wall and Dymchurch Wall

During the thirteenth century, two major structures were built on the Romney Marsh whose primary purposes were to provide adequate drainage for parts of the Marsh

and to protect its reclaimed land. The Rhee Wall was the first of these and was constructed during the mid-thirteenth century. It was a canal or watercourse that was situated along the interface between the lower lying lands of the Walland Marsh to the south west and the Romney Marsh Proper to the north east. It originally ran for a total length of 7.5 miles between Appledore and New Romney, then one of the Cinque Ports, and passed through Snargate, Brenzett and Old Romney. Its purpose was to help flush out the rapidly silting harbour at Romney Creek by redirecting sea water towards New Romney Port from further up the River Rother estuary. Sluices at Appledore, Snargate and New Romney helped to control the flow. The structure consisted of two parallel earth banks that ranged from 50 to 100 meters apart with the ground between being raised above the marsh on either side. It was also used as a shipping channel that linked the two settlements at Appledore and New Romney.

Despite these efforts, silt at the port of New Romney continued to accumulate and the canal itself was also prone to silting. As well as this, the southern coast of England was battered by a number of storms during the thirteenth century that brought about dramatic changes to the coastline and its coastal towns and ports. Significant storms hit in 1236 and between 1250 and 1252, but the most damaging was the Great Storm of 1287.

The Great Storm of 1287 hit with such ferocity that whole areas of the southern coastline were redrawn. Along the coast from the Romney Marsh, the port of Winchelsea was completely destroyed and was later rebuilt several miles inland. It became the first example of town planning in England that was built on a grid system similar to methods used in America. Despite its new position, Winchelsea retained its status as a Cinque Port. The most dramatic changes however were to the towns of Rye and New Romney. Prior to the Great Storm, New Romney had been a thriving harbour town which sat at the mouth of the River Rother where it ran into the English Channel. The Rhee Wall helped to protect the reclaimed marshes to the north from flooding during the storm which devastated the Walland Marsh as well as the ports of Romney to the south. The storm also caused the port at New Romney to become completely silted and was now landlocked about a mile from the sea. The amount of silt that was deposited was so substantial that the land level in the town rose by around 5 inches. This change in land level can still be seen at the parish church of St Nicholas where the floor of the church which is the only building remaining to pre-date the storm is several inches lower than the present street level.

It is asserted that the silting of New Romney diverted the course of the River Rother away from the town to Rye where a new channel was created that joined the River Brede and the River Tillingham. These combined rivers now flowed into the sea near Rye and created a new harbour. However, it has also been suggested that the route change to the Rother may have happened earlier than this based on occupation patterns on the Romney Marsh. It is still widely accepted that the Great Storm of 1287 was the primary cause of this route change. Rye went on to become a Cinque Port in the thirteenth century and the consequences of the Great Storm as well as the altered route of the Rother would have a lasting impact on the Marsh. The storms had caused a substantial amount of shingle accumulation which meant that beaches now ran along almost the entire length of the marshland coast. Land reclamation

also continued and by the fourteenth century much of the Walland and Denge Marshes had now been reclaimed.

The Rhee Wall continued to be used as a shipping route but fell into disuse by the fifteenth century. The section of the canal that ran between Appledore and Snargate continued to act as a drain for the south westerly marshes up until 1544 when a new gutt was made at Arrowhead. Following this, it has not held water since the medieval period though its dry, raised banks were used as an overland trade route across the marshes. Today a section of the Rhee Wall survives well at Snargate and is a Scheduled Monument.

Going back to the thirteenth century, the second major structure was the Dymchurch Wall that would make important contributions to the protection of the Romney Marsh coastline. Today, approximately half of the Romney Marsh coastline is defended by sea walls and the oldest of these is the Dymchurch Wall. Dymchurch has had a sea wall since the Roman period with the original structure being constructed to protect the harbour at Lympne, *Portus Lemanis*. Up until the thirteenth century a natural shingle barrier had protected the coast at this point and had proved effective. However, during the particularly harsh storms of the thirteenth century some of the massive shingle banks had been diminished and large amounts of shingle had been carried away mainly north-eastwards filling the Hythe Haven (now Hythe Ranges) and travelling towards Folkestone.

Construction of the Dymchurch Wall began in earnest during the late thirteenth century. It was initially built using local clay and other organic materials such as wood piles and faggots with rock groynes projecting into the sea to hold the shingle. It continued to be an important structure that protected the coastline and reclaimed land of the Romney Marsh. The majority of the marsh is below mean high tide level and so without coastal defences and drainage systems, much of the Romney Marsh would still be underwater most of the time. However, by 1803 the condition of the wall, which was 4 miles long and 20 feet high, was so bad that an outside engineer was needed to advise on improvements. Alterations were made that included the inclusion of Kentish Ragstone to protect the front face. Together with the Rhee Wall, the Dymchurch Wall ensured that the rich alluvial land deposited by the river Rother was maintained and could flourish as fertile farmland.

By the first half of the nineteenth century stone was being used on the seaward slope and the wall was steadily extended with widespread improvements undertaken in 1894. On the 20th July 2011 a new sea wall was built at a cost of £60 million and has been implemented as part of a wider scheme of coastal defence strategy for Folkestone to Cliff End. The new wall provides a more effective defence against flood risk and has also had some groynes reinstated that had fallen into disrepair. The current Dymchurch Wall stretches from the Hythe Military Rifle Ranges to the east of the St Mary's Bay boundary.

Romney Marsh from the Fourteenth Century

By the fourteenth century much of the Walland and Denge Marshes had been reclaimed using innings, the process of building embankments around the sea-marsh and using low-tide to let the area run dry by means of one-way drains that were set into the new seawall, running off into a network of drainage ditches. The

drainage dykes and ditches, known locally as sewers, that criss-cross the marshes drained water from the farmland and allowed it to flow to the sea via outlets and later were also pumped into the Royal Military Canal that eventually led to the sea.

Further storms during the fourteenth century as well as the Great Famine of 1315 to 1317 and the Black Death in 1348 to 1349 devastated the population throughout Europe but especially on the Marsh. The population of the Romney Marsh was already relatively low, but it fell by over a half where mortality rates were twice as high as in villages that were a few miles away. Land reclamation was not completed until later in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by which time the Marsh was divided into areas for sheep grazing and pasture. Sheep had grazed the marshes for centuries and the quality of the pastures available at Romney Marsh was renowned. By the fourteenth century wool had become England's most important commodity for internal trade and export and this continued into the sixteenth century. The introduction of Wool Acts in 1660 and 1699 led to an increase in smuggling activity and the Romney Marsh is often believed to be its birthplace along the southern coast of England due to its remoteness and high volume of grazing sheep. By the seventeenth century the problem of smuggling had reached epidemic levels and the Romney Marsh was largely considered to be at the centre of this activity.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Romney Marsh landscape was dominated by grazing sheep and was home to thousands of Romney Marsh Sheep, one of the most successful breeds. They were considered to be more resistant to problems such as foot rot and internal parasites than other breeds and were also able to feed on wet conditions such as is found on the Marsh. In the aftermath of the Black Death (1348-1349) and bouts of Malaria across the Romney Marsh from the sixteenth century until the early nineteenth century, the *Lookering System* emerged where absentee landowners began buying farms and tracts of land across the sparsely populated Marsh and combining them into large estates. Shepherds, known as Lookers, were employed to tend large flocks of sheep over vast areas of the Marsh which would often take them several days to cover. Lookers Huts were the Lookers only means of shelter and were dotted around the Marsh. They were brick buildings around 10 square feet with Kent peg-tile roofs, bare rafters and a chimney. All huts had a small window and fireplace but little in the way of domestic comforts. They were also often used for tool storage and some of the larger huts also had a shed attached where livestock could be kept.

In their heyday, there were more than 350 Lookers Huts across the Romney Marsh. Today less than 20 survive in varying forms of dereliction. The numbers of sheep have also reduced since most of the Marsh was ploughed for cereals during the Second World War. The large flocks that had once dominated the landscape of the Marsh never returned and today approximately only a third of Romney Marsh is used for pasture. However, they continue to make an important contribution to the landscape of the Romney Marsh and are a powerful reminder of the extensive agricultural activity that thrived across the Marsh for many centuries.

The Romney Marsh Watercourses and Drainage Systems

For many centuries, systems of drainage ditches and watercourses have been used to retain the fertile land across the Romney Marsh. This is essential to the Marshes survival given that a large proportion of Romney Marsh is below sea level and would

therefore be underwater for much of the time if it weren't for the ongoing drainage and seawall defences. Watercourses across the Romney Marsh include rivers, streams, sluices, dykes, drains and ditches that provide passages for water to flow whilst not forming part of a main river. These watercourses form a dense network of drainage ditches and have ensured the ongoing management and retention of the Marsh.

Most of the larger ditches, also known locally as sewers, have significant time depth and can be dated back to the earlier salt marshes. Smaller channels that are around 6 to 8 feet wide at bank level further form a network of minor drainage channels which connect to the main sewers of the Marsh.

Historically Scots or rates were levied on the occupants of the Marsh for the maintenance and upkeep of the sea defences and drainage systems. In 1462 the Romney Marsh Corporation was established to install further drainage and sea defences on the Marsh. This work continued into the sixteenth century by which time the course of the Rother had changed to its present-day channel and the Romney Marsh had now been completely reclaimed from the sea. In 1932 the responsibility for this work had passed to the Romney and Denge Marsh Main Drains Catchment Board, and then in 1937 to the Kent Rivers Catchment Board. From 1965 the Kent Rivers Authority managed this responsibility with the Romney Marsh Level Internal Drainage Board as the land drainage rating authority. Now known as the Romney Marsh Area Internal Drainage Board (RMAIDB), they continue to manage and maintain around 220 miles of watercourses across the Romney Marsh. Working together with the Environmental Agency, a comprehensive reed cutting programme to allow for the maximum efficiency of water flow off the Marsh is undertaken and a de-silting programme is also underway to maintain the current river capacity. Water currently drains into either the Royal Military Canal via pumping stations or into the sea via sluices or outfalls. Today there are eight outfalls and ten pumping stations across the Marsh.

In addition to the watercourses on the Marsh, a number of farms use a further land drainage method called *mole drainage* to ensure that their land is suitable for crop growing. Mole drainage is produced by using a mole plough, which is a bullet shaped instrument, through the soil to create a continuous passage. These drains are usually around 40-60 cm deep and 2-5 metres wide. They are temporary features that need renewing every 5-7 years and are also susceptible to collapse or sediment blockage. It is a cheap and easy practice that is commonly used as a secondary drainage system in combination with primary tile or ditch drains.

The Royal Military Canal

The Royal Military Canal as well as being a significant component of the county's military heritage (as discussed in the Napoleonic Defence Heritage theme paper later) is also an important waterway that is used to manage the water levels on the Romney and Walland Marsh. The canal was built between 1804 and 1809 as a third line of defence against a French invasion during the Napoleonic Wars and stretches for 28 miles from Seabrook near Hythe across to Cliff End near Hastings in neighbouring East Sussex. It runs along the border of the Romney Marsh and now acts as a sink for the extensive network of drainage ditches that criss-cross the Marsh. During the summer months, if rainfall is low then water is pumped from the

canal into the drainage ditches to irrigate the land. In the winter, when there is a risk of flooding water can be taken from the ditches into the canal and the excess water is then let out either at the Iden Lock or via the sluice at Seabrook. This vital function of the Royal Military Canal is managed by the Environment Agency.

As well as fulfilling an important role in the ongoing management of the Marsh, the canal has also become a distinctive feature in the Romney Marsh landscape and provides an important habitat for several plant and animal species. Parts of the canal are designated as a SSSI as a result with the remaining sections being a Local Wildlife Site. Wildlife such as Marsh Frogs, Emperor Dragonflies, Kingfishers and Mute Swans thrive here, and it is also a popular location for coarse fishing. It is also a particularly attractive place to walk and cycle and a public footpath runs along its entire length.

3. Description of the Heritage Assets

The Romney Marsh today is a distinctive landscape within the District that is well known for its natural beauty, diversity of habitats and wildlife, rich history and extensive coastline. Its landscape is largely characterised by flat and open fields that are bound by low-lying plants and criss-crossed by an extensive network of drainage ditches. For centuries the Marsh has been grazed by large numbers of sheep which have created flower-rich grassland with habitats that are rich in wildlife such as Water Voles, Medicinal Leeches and Great-Crested Newts. Without grazing animals and close management, the marsh would have been invaded by shrubs and trees such as willow and alder and would gradually develop as wet woodland. Many of the plant life that thrives on the Romney Marsh could not survive in the shade of shrubs and trees and so ongoing management is essential to maintaining the distinct open character of the Romney Marsh.

The Denge Marsh is also a particularly distinctive part of the Romney Marsh for its openness and wildness. Dungeness has only been sparsely occupied and the dwellings that do exist here have been established recently compared to other settlements within the District. These dwellings and other buildings across Dungeness reflect a unique built landscape and so they add to the special local character as much as the natural landscape. Some of the best examples to illustrate this are the railway carriage dwellings, fishermen's cottages and various remains of fishing and railway activity that are still scattered across parts of the Denge Beach. Like the Romney Marsh Proper, the natural landscape also offers a diverse range of habitats and wildlife that are often unique to this area. This includes the Sussex Emerald Moth, Great-Crested Newt and the Nottingham Catchfly plant. Ultimately the physical and built landscapes at Dungeness are both significantly valuable for their openness, wildness and quiriness, and the preservation of both is essential in maintaining the local character.

The Romney Marsh coastline is another attractive and extensive landscape that is highly valued for its vast expanses of sandy beach, sand dunes and safe sea bathing waters. Dymchurch, St Mary's Bay and Greatstone beaches are particularly prominent along the coastline and are increasingly popular with holidaymakers and day-trippers. Each of these will be explored in more detail during a later theme paper but it is important to highlight here the significance of the Romney Marsh coastline in the distinctive local landscape character. In particular the Greatstone Dunes which

are located between Greatstone beach and the coastal road are an important asset for this theme. These coastal dunes have developed by onshore winds blowing sand into the intertidal zone (area between the high and low tide marks) which is then trapped by specialised dune-building grasses that grow through successive layers of the deposited sand. The dunes support important ecosystems and as such are designated as a SSSI.

The drainage ditches, watercourses and sewers across the Marsh are a distinctive feature in the landscape and synonymous with the local character. The Royal Military Canal is a particularly impressive feature that borders the Romney Marsh. They are not only essential for the drainage of the land, but also provide diverse and valuable habitats for a number of rare and protected species. These include the Water Vole, Marsh Mallow, Medicinal Leech, Greater Water Parsnip and Great-Crested Newt. All of these species are protected by law and should therefore be considered carefully before any major works in the area take place. It is for this reason that parts of the Romney Marsh are included in the Dungeness, Romney Marsh and Rye Bay Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The Marsh's proximity to the Dungeness National Nature Reserve (NNR) also means that many rare species of migratory birds are recorded here and are attracted to the marshlands where they can feed and breed. Sympathetic management of the drainage ditches is important in order to preserve the valuable communities of wildlife that are found here as well as to avoid detracting from the distinctive local landscape.

The Rhee Wall played an important role in the protection and drainage of the Marsh from the time it was built during the thirteenth century to it falling out of use during the sixteenth century. A section survives at Snargate as earthworks and buried remains and is designated as a Scheduled Monument. Much of the monument has been infilled over the years and disturbed further by development of housing and land drains as well as agricultural activity. However, the surviving remains of this structure are an important asset for this theme as they illustrate the ongoing battle to maintain the reclaimed marshland as well as the dual purpose of the watercourse as a transport route for inland trade and communication. Monuments of this type are also rare as they required high expenditure of time and labour to construct and so this is an important survival of a medieval canal.

In addition to the watercourses and drainage ditches, sea walls have played a further essential role in the defence of the Romney Marsh coast and reclaimed land. Around half of the present Romney Marsh coastline is defended by sea walls, the oldest of these being the Dymchurch Wall. A sea wall at Dymchurch has existed since the Roman period and has undergone a series of modifications. It has more recently been rebuilt during 2011 as part of the wider Folkestone to Cliff End Sea Defence Strategy and on the Romney Marsh stretches from the Hythe Rifle Ranges to the east of the boundary of St Mary's Bay. It remains as a distinctive and imposing feature in the landscape that not only continues to defend the coastal towns against flooding and encroachment by the sea but is also an important heritage asset that highlights the long history of coastal defence on the Romney Marsh.

The open and low-lying landscape of the Romney Marsh offers a number of iconic views and vistas that further adds to the uniqueness of this character area. Views across the Romney Marsh Proper, along its attractive and sandy beaches as well as

across the extensive shingle foreland of Dungeness offer a unique collection of panoramic landscapes that are diverse and naturally beautiful. Much of this landscape is also sparsely occupied and so it is particularly special for its wildness and openness.

A number of iconic features within the landscape of the Romney Marsh also make an important contribution to its local character and distinctiveness. On the Romney Marsh Proper, the medieval churches are especially iconic and represent a rich heritage offering of the Marsh. These are explored in more detail in the later Church theme paper, but a few notable examples will be mentioned here. The St Thomas à Becket church in Fairfield is particularly unique as it stands alone in an open field that is surrounded by sheep and several watercourses. It once served the village of Fairfield that was west of Brookland but has since disappeared. It was abolished as a civil parish in 1934 and is now part of a parish which includes the villages of Brookland, Brenzett and Snargate. Another particularly attractive church is St Clement of Old Romney which again is surrounded on almost all sides by wide open fields. St Clement church is one of the most visited churches on the Marsh and was built on an artificial mound to protect it against flooding.

These churches are iconic features that are made more special by the unique setting of the open and low-lying landscape of the Romney Marsh. Views of these churches can be enjoyed from great distances and they are commanding features within the landscape. In addition to these existing medieval Marsh churches, there are also a number of lost churches on the Marsh and those that are ruinous are striking features in the landscape. Several villages and their churches have been lost over the course of history of the Romney Marsh. In some instances, this is due to the modern decline of rural communities. However, the coastal storms of the thirteenth century, the Black Death 1348-49 and Malaria have also helped to cause the disappearance of small communities across the Marsh. The ruins of Hope church of All Saints and Midley church are especially striking and can be viewed from great distances as they are again located within fields in the distinctive open landscape of the Romney Marsh. Any changes to the landscape that would reduce its openness will detract from the distinctive local character and wide vistas that make this a special and unique place.

Other features that make the Romney Marsh landscape distinctive are the Lookers Huts and sheep that reflect a long and thriving agricultural history of sheep grazing. The landscape has been shaped by the extensive sheep grazing that has continued over many centuries, and the surviving Lookers Huts are valuable assets from this heritage as well as important features on the Marsh. Sheep grazing continues on the Marsh today although not to the extent that was practiced before the Second World War. The Romney Marsh Sheep are however an important feature in the landscape of the Marsh and continue to make an important contribution to the local character and heritage.

4. Statement of Significance

The Romney Marsh is an especially distinctive historic landscape within the District and has a very strong local character. Its complex history has resulted in a number of diverse landscapes across its area that range from the vast shingle expanses at Dungeness to the lush wetlands of Romney Marsh Proper. Its openness and

sparseness make it a particularly attractive place for its tranquillity, diverse wildlife and rich habitats whilst its built landscape creates a unique sense of place and is often striking in the open setting of the Marsh. Several assets relating to this theme are of national as well as international importance and represent significantly valuable and often rare examples of their type. The Romney Marsh is also of major regional and local significance for its uniqueness and complex natural history and so the assets from this theme should be considered to be of **outstanding significance**.

Evidential Value

There are a number of important opportunities across the Romney Marsh for various assets to reveal further information regarding past human activity upon investigation. The section of the Rhee Wall that survives at Snargate has been preserved in relatively good condition and so it is likely that archaeological investigation of the site will reveal archaeological remains and environmental evidence relating to the landscape in which the canal was constructed and used. The site has already been partially excavated and the history of the canal is well documented. However, it is a rare example of a medieval canal and so further information regarding this structure would be a valuable addition to current records and understandings.

There is also the potential for important archaeological remains relating to the early medieval port of Romney to be found if investigation was to take place. This would greatly enhance the understanding of the historic development of this part of the Romney Marsh and add to this important aspect of its evolution. As part of the currently active Romney Marsh Fifth Continent Landscape Partnership Scheme (LPS) which will facilitate the restoration and enhancement of the built, natural and cultural heritage of the Marsh, a project will be undertaken to attempt to find the Romney Port.

In addition to this there are also important opportunities to reveal further evidence of past human activity relating to the medieval churches and “lost churches” of the Marsh. There is the potential for archaeological remains of church buildings predating the Norman Conquest in 1066 such as at St Clement church in Old Romney. As part of the Fifth Continent LPS, archaeological investigation of the alleged site of the St Martin’s church at New Romney could also reveal significant evidence of this Saxon church which was the first to serve this parish. The medieval churches of Romney Marsh further played significant roles in smuggling that was particularly active across the Marsh between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Future investigation of the churches may reveal further evidence of this heritage that is important to the local character.

Historical Value

There are many assets relating to this theme that have significant historical value for their ability to illustrate past events and aspects of life connected to life on the Romney Marsh. The diverse ranges of landscapes that are represented across this area illustrate the complex natural evolution of the Romney Marsh. The extensive shingle ridges at Dungeness record around 5000 years of coastal evolution and geomorphological processes that have shaped the landscape here, in particular the Dungeness cusped foreland illustrates the coastal processes at work to result in such a distinctive landscape. The flat and open landscape of the Romney Marsh is criss-crossed by an extensive network of drainage ditches and watercourses that

clearly illustrate the evolution of the Marsh and the ongoing battle to drain and maintain the land that has been reclaimed from the sea. Additional features such as the Rhee Wall and Dymchurch Wall further illustrate this ongoing battle and also provide an insight into how life on the Marsh would have been influenced by land and environmental conditions. The Rhee Wall is also able to demonstrate how important inland trade and communication would have been on the Romney Marsh during the medieval period.

Other assets such as the medieval churches are able to illustrate aspects of religious as well as village life on the Marsh. These churches would have been the focus point around which communities grew. They were built by the Lords of the Manor of the Marsh and so also reflect the importance of the patron as well as the parish. Where churches have been lost, they can represent connections to important events in history such as the Black Death (1348-49) and the decline of the rural community which resulted in parishes disappearing, settlements being abandoned and churches falling out of use. The churches on the Romney Marsh also have strong connections to the history of smuggling in the local area.

The Lookers Huts, farmsteads and grazing sheep across the Marsh reflect the areas agricultural history. Sheep grazing and the wool industry has been the primary agricultural activity on the Marsh for many centuries and reflect the importance of wool as one of England's historically most valuable commodities. It was also the introduction of Wool Acts that led to the infamous smuggling activity on the Marsh and so the agricultural assets can also be linked to this heritage.

Assets such as the Royal Military Canal and Martello Towers reflect the Romney Marshes role during wartime, in this case the Napoleonic Wars of the early nineteenth century.

Aesthetic Value

The aesthetic value of the Romney Marsh and the assets relating to this theme are significant. The open and flat landscape offers a variety of distinctive views and vistas which allow for a unique sensory experience. The setting is all the more unique as it is largely sparsely occupied and so the aesthetic appeal is substantial and only added to by the diverse habitats and wildlife that are supported here in this unique natural landscape. Various assets that are highly visible within the open landscape, such as the medieval churches and Dungeness Lighthouses, can also be enjoyed from great distances and provide striking points within the landscape. The openness and wildness of the landscapes here make it a uniquely attractive place and also make essential contributions to the local character.

Some of the assets such as the Royal Military Canal and drainage ditches support thriving habitats of various plants and animals and so are attractive for their natural setting and biodiversity. Other built features such as the churches are also particularly attractive architecturally as well as within the natural setting. This may be especially true of the ruinous churches that are striking features within the open and flat landscape of the Romney Marsh.

Communal Value

The communal value of the landscape and related assets from this theme are substantial. This may be especially true in areas such as Dungeness where the local character is particularly unique and local communities feel very strongly about the preservation of this character with minimal change to the built and natural landscape. The settlement at Dungeness is small but its dwellings are unique, such as the railway carriage residences, and there is a strong local heritage primarily relating to fishing, the railway and defence of the coast. As a more recent settlement, some of the heritage activities here will either be within living memory or a strong sense of collective memory will be felt by this local heritage that contributes to such a unique sense of place.

Significant communal value may also be derived from the agricultural heritage of the Romney Marsh where some families are continuing to work as part of this rural community. Romney Marsh Wools for example are a 6th generation farming family running a mixed farm consisting of arable farming and sheep grazing. Other assets such as the churches and coastal town attractions can instil significant communal value in the local heritage that makes such an important contribution to not only the local character, but also to the tourism offering and local economy.

5. Vulnerabilities

There are a number of factors that will make the assets relating to this theme vulnerable. The Romney Marsh and its diverse habitats and wildlife are exceptionally sensitive and are vulnerable to both natural and human influences. The evolution of the Romney Marsh has occurred over thousands of years as a result of several natural processes such as longshore drift and sediment deposition. The landscape is however vulnerable to the natural processes that created it in the first place. The coastline is continually vulnerable to coastal erosion and with much of the Romney Marsh being below sea level, the reclaimed land is at risk of flooding and encroachment by the sea if constant drainage and coastal defences are not maintained and managed. The watercourses and drainage ditches across the Romney Marsh are also vulnerable to silting and so their ongoing maintenance is essential to maintaining the land on the Marsh. Excessive silting of ditches could lead to reduced capacity for water flow, the promotion of pollution of the ditch water and growth of aquatic weeds, algae and bio-organisms.

Factors such as climate change could affect sea levels which in turn would put the Romney Marsh at risk of further flooding and erosion. It may also affect the cusped foreland at Dungeness which has built up over time as a result of longshore drift and the deposition of shingle from the barrier beach. The evolution of the foreland could be negatively impacted if natural influences such as climate change were to change extensively.

The drainage ditches and watercourses across the Marsh are also vulnerable to the physical erosion of their banks by livestock who occupy the surrounding land. Ditches may be used as wet fencing and are also used as a fresh water source for livestock. As a result, the banks may become trampled with little or no emerging vegetation and habitats for burrowing animals such as water voles may also be compacted. The diverse wildlife and habitats are an important aspect of the local character and damage to either of these would detract from this in a significant way.

It might be suggested that fences be put up across banks to protect this habitat, however this may also detract from the landscape which is characterised by its openness. Ongoing management of the ditches and watercourses is essential to ensure that the habitats and animals that thrive here are able to continue doing so with minimal change to the physical landscape.

Other natural factors that put the assets from this theme at risk include the encroachment of scrub and other invasive plant species that may put the native plant and wildlife communities at risk whilst also changing the natural setting. Scrubs such as Hawthorn and brambles will colonise unmanaged areas, especially ditches bordering arable land. If they become too densely consolidated then emergent vegetation and various animal species may be at risk. Invasive plant species such as New Zealand pygmy weed, Parrots Feather and water fern can cause extensive damage to native wildlife and in some cases even pose a risk to human health. Removal of these plants if found is the best course of action in order to maintain the environment of the Romney Marsh.

Farming practices also pose a threat to some features within the landscape. Parts of the Rhee Wall have been damaged by agricultural activity since it fell out of use in the sixteenth century. Parts of the wall have survived well as earthwork and buried remains and the remaining section that is well preserved at Snargate is now designated as a Scheduled Monument. It is a rare example of a medieval canal and it also important for the local landscape character. It should be noted that farming activity may cause damage to landscape features that are important as heritage asset and also to the local character.

The character of the Romney Marsh landscape is significant and unique because it is so open, flat and diverse. There are a number of panoramic views that can be experienced across the Marsh, and a number of iconic features such as the medieval churches that can be enjoyed from great distances across vast landscapes. These vista and views are a key part of what makes this landscape distinct, and so efforts should be made to retain the openness of the Marsh. Areas such as Dungeness are uniquely attractive for their tranquillity, peacefulness and wildness which are due to their open landscape and sparsely occupied spaces. This gives it a unique sense of place and is important to its distinctive landscape character. As such, the landscape is at risk of factors such as development and minor changes to residential plots that may have a large impact on this local character and detract from the landscape.

Changes to properties such as marking boundaries with tall trees and hedgerows which is not in keeping with the surrounding area will detract from the openness and overall landscape character. Paddocking is a growing issue on the Romney Marsh that detracts from the landscape character. Some properties such as those on the Dungeness Estate also have problems with trespassing onto private property as boundaries are largely not marked which is in keeping with the vast shingle expanses in the area. However, where some have marked boundaries with shingle or pieces of flotsam it can remain in keeping with the local character whilst also dealing with the problem of trespassing.

A final vulnerability that is particularly felt by Dungeness is the issue of visitor pressure and the negative impacts that this may have on conservation of this sensitive and delicate landscape. Large visitor numbers can have a number of impacts on the landscape that include unintentional damage of flora and fauna and littering. Many of the species and habitats that are found across the Romney Marsh are exceptionally sensitive and are also rare and therefore significant for conservation purposes. A positive balance must be achieved between supporting large numbers of visitors and continuing conservation work to maintain the landscape and its diverse habitats and wildlife.

6. Opportunities

Several important opportunities arise from the assets related to this theme. The unique landscape offers valuable opportunities to reconnect with the natural environment and also to instil a strong sense of place. Being outdoors and reconnecting with the landscape has important benefits for mental as well as physical wellbeing and can help to improve quality of life. The diverse landscapes also present a number of opportunities for niche activities such as wildlife watching, walking, fishing and dog walking.

The recreational potential of the Romney Marsh also offers opportunities for people to experience the landscape here in a variety of ways. Activities that are available include sea and coarse fishing, cycling, walking and wildlife watching. There are 19 circular walking routes that have been created around the Romney Marsh to encourage people to explore the diverse landscapes here as well as 5 cycle routes. Increasing physical activity will also have valuable benefits for health and wellbeing.

There are a number of local heritage initiatives and community projects that are presenting important opportunities for communal engagement with the historic landscape as well as raising awareness and understanding of its sensitivities and assets. The Fifth Continent LPS for example will offer a number of ways that the local community as well as wider volunteers can become involved with the local heritage. Projects involved with the medieval churches and old Romney Port for example will offer chances to become involved in various aspects of research and archaeological work. This is important in encouraging ownership of the local heritage and also empowering local people to make decisions about their own heritage. Community led interpretation will also be encouraged and a number of workshops and events will be involved that again engage wide audiences with the local heritage.

The Romney Warren Country Park Visitor Centre and Romney Warren Project offers a number of opportunities to become involved in the conservation of the Romney Marsh which is important in promoting the preservation of the delicate landscapes here. The project also provides training and employment opportunities for disabled and unemployed people.

Other aspects of the Fifth Continent LPS also offer important opportunities for active conservation of the delicate landscape features of the Marsh. For example, a project to carry out restoration of the shingle at Dungeness will be important conservation work to preserve this exceptionally delicate and valuable natural asset. Other projects aim to support and enhance the biodiversity of the Romney Marsh such as encouraging more bumblebees in the area. These projects will also promote a better

understanding of the delicate landscape, the issues that affect them and the means to conserve them for future generations.

7. Current Activities

There are a number of activities and initiatives that promote and engage with the landscape assets of the Romney Marsh. The Romney Marsh Fifth Continent LPS will facilitate the restoration and enhancement of the built, natural and cultural heritage of the Marsh. A number of the projects that will be undertaken as part of this will work to research, investigate and conserve various features of the Romney Marsh landscape such as the Dungeness shingle ridges, medieval churches and old Romney Port. Not only will this raise awareness of the area and its assets, but it will encourage community engagement and a greater sense of place.

The Romney Warren Project at the Romney Warren Country Park also works to promote the natural conservation of the Romney Marsh whilst also raising awareness of its special landscape, wildlife and habitats. The project is a partnership between Folkestone & Hythe District Council, Romney Warren Charitable Trust, Nelson Park Gardens (local care home), Shepway Volunteers Centre, the Romney Marsh Countryside Project and Kent Wildlife Trust. The park contains a visitor centre that is managed by the Kent Wildlife Trust and offers educational resources about the historic Romney Marsh and its flora and fauna. There are also trails around the parkland as well as landscaped areas. Parts of the park are also used for horticultural and landscaping training by Nelson Park Gardens and Shepway Volunteers Centre and aimed at adults from the local care homes.

A number of trails have already been established that cover the area of the Romney Marsh. These serve to highlight the landscape as well as its heritage assets. Some examples include the Dymchurch Heritage Trail, Dungeness Trail and Norman Trail around New Romney. There are also 19 circular walking routes that cover the Marsh and 5 cycling routes. Not only does this encourage local communities and visitors to reconnect with the landscape, but it will also have positive impacts on health and wellbeing.

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