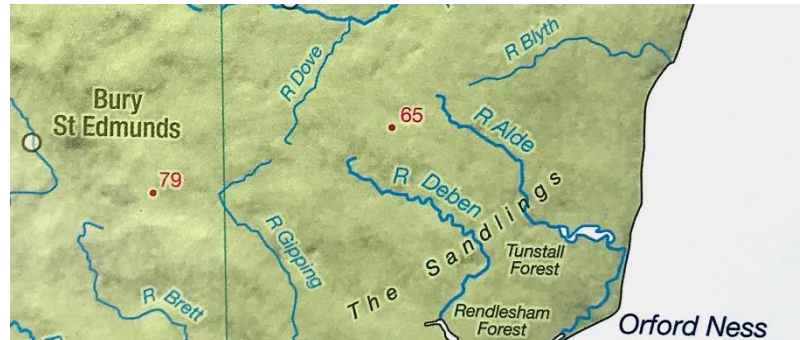


5.13. River Blyth

1. Location

This case study considers the tidal section of the River Blyth in East Suffolk located between Southwold and Walberswick on the North Sea coast.



2. Why was the Case Study Site selected?

The study site was selected because the Blyth has a long history of illustration by artists through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a school of artists flourished in the village, with many of the great names of British landscape art painting there. At the same time, the Blyth is an example of a relatively short river flowing through the low-lying Suffolk countryside, passing through areas of outstanding environmental and nature conservation interest, and alongside the historic village of Walberswick to the sea. The rich art heritage of the Blyth is illustrated through an extensive range of artworks, which, alongside the present-day views, describe changes that have taken place along the lower reaches of this river (Scott, 2002¹; Munn, 2006²; McInnes & Stubbings, 2010³; McInnes, 2014⁴).

3. Summary of the Geology, Fluvial Geomorphology and Processes

The course of the Blyth passes through gravel and sand deposits of the relatively recent (in geological terms) Cenozoic Era. The course of the river initially flows through agricultural land between Laxfield and Hailesworth, before passing through the estate of Heveningham Hall and the village of Walpole. East of Hailesworth the river has been canalised in places and has a clear floodplain, with land being used as grazing marsh. At Blythburgh, it is crossed by the A12 trunk road, before entering the estuarine section of the river. The estuary mouth forms the main harbour area of Southwold on the north side and is still an active fishing harbour; the lower section is a tidal estuary.

The Blyth Navigation Canal was opened in 1761, running for 11 kilometres from Hailesworth to the Blyth Estuary, leading to the canalisation of the river east of Hailesworth. The canal was insolvent by 1884, partly due to attempts to reclaim saltings at Blythborough, which resulted in the estuary silting up. The Navigation Canal was used sporadically until 1911 but was not formally abandoned until 1934 (Blythweb.co.uk, 2012).

4. How can the Art Imagery inform us of river change?

The quantity of artworks produced illustrating the lower reaches of the Blyth provide opportunities to examine change between 1822 and the present day. The river is a flourishing 'harbour' and has been a centre for the fishing and boat building industries for centuries and this, therefore, proved an immediate attraction to visiting artists. Their paintings show the gradual development of the waterfronts over time and the limited defensive measures to protect the communities on both sides from river erosion and flooding, with parts of the frontage still undefended today, although the river mouth and the most developed areas do benefit from a mixture of defence types. Equally, the images show the natural environment in the environs of Walberswick, which, today, are designated on account of their outstanding environmental and nature conservation interest. Sites such as this where artistic communities flourished can provide a source of information for a range of users, including those interested in river planning and management, and changes to the natural environment of the area.



Figure 13.1 (above): An extensive view of the River Blyth with the historic village of Blythborough (right). The estuary continues between Southwold and Walberswick to the North Sea.

Courtesy: Shutterstock Images.

Figure 13.2 (below): The village of Blythborough painted by Leonard R. Squirrell RWS RI RE (1893-1979) showing Blythborough Church surrounded by the marshes and the River Blyth.

Courtesy: Bonham's.





Figure 13.3 (left):
The picturesque boatyards on both sides of the lower Blyth were a favoured subject for artists. Both A. R. Quinton and A. H. Cooper painted the ferry crossing the river in c.1910. In their views the fast-flowing river is undefended on both sides, although today a range of timber and concrete defences protect the more developed frontages.

Courtesy: Salmon's.



Figure 13.4 (centre):
Walberswick by Alfred Heaton Cooper.



Figure 13.5: The view across the Blyth towards Walberswick today.



Figure 13.6 (left): A range of defences protect the banks of the Blyth estuary; here the bank has scoured at the end of the vertical timber breastwork.



Figure 13.7 (above) and Figure 13.8 (below): This fine oil painting by John Moore of Ipswich was painted in 1882 and looks up-river; the scene has changed little today except for the boatsheds which line the banks.

Courtesy: Figure 13.7 - Bonham's.





Figure 13.9 (above): A companion oil by J. Moore of Ipswich shows the view looking down-river towards the sea, with Walberswick to the right.



Figure 13.10 (left): This present-day view is taken towards the mouth of the estuary, which is defended on account of the strength of the tide.

Figure 3.11 (below): Myles Birket Foster painted the waterfront scene at Walberswick, looking north towards Southwold, in c.1850.

Courtesy: Sotheby's.





Figure 13.12 (above) shows a scene at Walberswick Marshes in 1889 by Thomas Benham. This fine, detailed painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1889. It provides information on the natural environment and flood defence embankment at this readily identifiable location.

Courtesy: Private collection.

Figure 13.13 (below): An oil by John Moore, c.1880, provides a close view of the Walberswick shoreline at Low Water.

Courtesy: Eastbourne Fine Art/Private collection.





Figure 13.12 (above): William Daniell produced this fine aquatint engraving of the entrance to the Blyth, with Southwold beyond, in 1822.

Figure 13.13 (below): Today the riverbanks are well protected with a range of concrete structures.



5. What are the key issues that can be learnt from this Study Area?

The Blyth is a site where there is a continuity of high-quality art images of a river frontage extending over 150 years. It allows the physical nature of the river to be viewed at various points in time as well as the defences and the riverside environmental conditions. It is a location where there appears to be relatively little change in the way that people have used the river and occupied the river banks since the mid-nineteenth century and can, therefore, help inform decision-making over future management requirements in the face of sea level rise. Case studies such as this could be of potential interest to a wide range of managers and stakeholders and feedback will be sought on how such imagery can be interpreted to assist river management in its widest sense.

6. References

1. Scott, R. 2002. *The Artists of Walberswick*. Art Dictionaries Ltd. Bristol.
2. Munn, G. 2006. *Southwold – An Earthly Paradise*. Antique Collectors Club. Woodbridge.
3. McInnes, R.G. & Stubbings, H. 2010. *Art in Support of the Understanding of Long-term Coastal Change in East Anglia*. The Crown Estate. Crown Copyright.
4. McInnes, R.G. 2014. *British Coastal Art 1770-1930*. Cross Publishing. Chale, IW.



Figure 13.16: Charles Robertson

On the Edge of the North Sea at Walberswick

c.1883

Courtesy © Christie's Images, 2022.