

# EAST-SOUTH-EAST



## NORTH END, MABLETHORPE LINCOLNSHIRE

Alfred Tennyson, the Poet Laureate and later first Lord Tennyson was born not far inland from here at Somersby, where his father was Rector. His first published work (1827) was a joint venture with his brothers Charles and Frederick, a volume of poems for which they conceived the witty title *Poems by Two Brothers*. On publication day he came with Charles to Mablethorpe, where they sat among the dunes declaiming the verses to the empty sands ... as you do.

The sands were empty when I was there. The vast beach and dunes to the north of the town are Mablethorpe's great assets, or should that be its saving grace?

I am conscious while making my visual record of these compass points that for the finished paintings I am occasionally turning my back on views that might be more representative of some of the locations. These visually unrecorded scenes sometimes provide the abiding impression I have of a place, but as a landscape painter I do not do ugly.

I do my best to find even in the grimmest of locations something that redeems it, something that says even here in this unattractive spot there is this, so it's not that bad really.

Perhaps that means I am not being completely

objective and open minded and in the context of this book might give the impression that our coastline is more attractive than it really is, but I am not inventing anything. I only paint what is there, it just takes a bit of finding sometimes.

Fortunately I do not have to rely entirely on the paintings. Any imbalance can be redressed in my written view of each location. This is particularly relevant here where, for instance, in one of the town's more uplifting spots there is a holiday village surrounded by a tall perimeter fence topped with barbed wire. It brought to mind the film *The Great Escape* and I drove away humming the theme tune, hoping that I never get caught and hauled back there for more visual punishment, but the dunes and beach are great.

If you find yourself walking north away from the town along the sands (recommended) you may spot a harrier, or a falcon or even an eagle. Big cats: jaguar, puma and lynx are often seen here too, but I am not referring to the wildlife.

As well as being a nature reserve and the largest seal pupping area on the east coast, it is also what the RAF calls an Academic Range. That is, pilots fly their Jaguars, Falcons and Pumas etc. to here, not just from



53°20.8'N 0°15.8'E  
Mablethorpe



bases in Britain but also from Nato airfields all over Europe and even North America, to learn how to correctly 'deliver ordnance'. That doesn't mean how to wrap it properly and ensure it has the right value stamp on it, but it does involve making sure that it goes into the correct letterbox.

Sometimes they might be flying at over 6000 metres with the letterbox obscured by cloud, in which case they have to rely on radar to locate the right front door. They are allowed to miss it by six metres, that's because the parcel they are delivering will obliterate the whole neighbourhood anyway as it thuds onto the doormat.

For some strange reason that other Poet Laureate, John Betjeman's line 'come friendly bombs and fall on Slough' suddenly springs to mind.

The range is crossed by a number of footpaths and rights of way and is not fenced off. Red flags are flown to warn of an exercise in progress. It also extends up to seven miles out to sea where there are floating targets. For some people the target practice is quite a spectacle and they come along with their picnics and folding chairs to spend the day watching.

The bombs, cannon shells and other ordnance are not live of course. The bombs are fitted with a small smoke charge to help locate them, for marking points out of ten for technical ability and artistic impression. At the end of an exercise a team clear the range of everything that was dropped or fired, so it's safe to take Gnasher for his evening walk.

The seals don't mind this mayhem in the slightest. As the Flight Sergeant in charge there explained to me, "If it wasn't for the range they wouldn't be there."

The public are kept away for long periods of the day so they are left in 'peace' to enjoy what they like doing best, breeding and resting. No fishing is

allowed in the offshore range (who would want to?) so there is plenty of food for them. The MOD even employ a warden to oversee the interaction between the public and the seals, as young of both species tend to get a little excited and the ones whose territory this is then go through a defence exercise of their own, with teeth.

Two nature reserves extend for nearly eleven miles along the coast northward from Mablethorpe (Saltfleetby-Theddlethorpe Dunes Reserve) to Grainthorpe Haven (Donna Nook Reserve), much of the area designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest and some National Nature Reserve.

A variety of related habitats make up the reserves: sand bars, tidal sand and mudflats, sandy beach, ridges of dunes, salt and freshwater marshland and open lagoons, all a creation in one way or another of shifting sand.

The oldest landward dunes began to form on a storm beach in the thirteenth century and new dunes continue to be created in the area immediately to the north of Mablethorpe. The dunes and marshlands support an enormously varied bird population with over 250 species recorded. As the dunes system has developed areas of saltmarsh have become trapped between them. Over time their salinity decreases so changing the plant community that grows in them. In the summer the saltmarsh is particularly attractive in its covering of sea-lavender and there are extensive beds of samphire on the coastal fringe.

In some communities samphire seems to have undergone something of a rediscovery, or just discovery. Rick Stein, who can come and cook anything fishy in my kitchen any time he likes, reckons it's best blanched in fresh water, tossed in good olive oil with a squeeze of lemon juice and served warm. Nice!



Eric Drewery, who designed this book (as well as my previous two) grew up a few miles along the coast and remembers as a child picking samphire along these shores. My conversations with Eric usually revolve around supply dates for edited text, proof reading schedules, sizing of pictures and map content, but for once we talked about the subject in the text and he made his contribution there.

I asked him if there was a family samphire recipe.

"This goes back to when Mum used to be taken by her parents down to the coast on Thursday afternoons - it must have been in the 1920s or 30s, they picked samphire and dug for cockles. Grandfather was a baker and they were some of the first people in Grimsby to have a car - for deliveries, a 1914 Darraq.

The samphire was washed and then steeped in malt vinegar and pickling spices for three to four days. It would then be transferred to clean vinegar and bottled.

It was used as an accompaniment to cold meats etc, usually haslet, chine or other dubious parts of the pig which used to be very popular in Lincolnshire."

I can identify with the unusual pork products. Where I live in Wiltshire there was a once famous bacon curing factory that boasted it used every part of the pig apart from its squeal. Older residents delight in telling of what became of the lesser thought of parts of the pigs anatomy and the delicious meals they made: Bath chaps, crispy fried chitterlings and stewed trotters for instance. Perhaps Ainsley, Nigella and Jamie would like to give those some thought.

Eric's mother, now in her 80s, still goes occasionally to various places around Mablethorpe for a swim in the sea. I asked her for a view of the area.

"Wonderful place, but we don't go into the town. The beach is lovely."

I'll agree with that.



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