11 Aldeburgh

Grid reference [TM 460 568]

The cultivated seaside resort of Aldeburgh is a quiet place, except when swept by storms from the North Sea. Despite first appearances, coastal erosion is part of the Aldeburgh story.

Five hundred years ago there were as many as six streets lying on the seaward side of the town; these have now disappeared, as has the fishing hamlet of Slaughden a mile to the south. In Tudor times, the Moot Hall stood in the middle of a broad Market Place; today it stands close to the sea front, looking distinctly vulnerable. In future, Aldeburgh will have to deal with rising sea levels as well as periodic storms.

Aldeburgh is sited on a low rise, underlain by a ridge of economically useful Coralline Crag and Norwich Crag bedrock, once exploited in many local quarries; three of them have been designated as SSSIs for their geological importance. The Coralline Crag yielded soft, lime-rich sandstone used for building and making up roads, and the Norwich Crag yielded clays for making the characteristic red Aldeburgh bricks. These can be seen in many parts of the town, often framing panels of flint cobbles from the beach, both knapped and naturally rounded types.

The River Alde describes a wide meander round Aldeburgh Marshes before turning abruptly southwards towards Orford. Standing at Slaughden Quay, the river is separated from the sea by less than 100 m (330 ft) of ground; it is not difficult to imagine it may once have flowed eastwards. Research has shown that there is a buried valley here, carved in the Crag bedrock some 14 m (45ft) below sea level. Its easterly course can be traced offshore into the North Sea basin for over 7 km (4 miles), and at Slaughden it is floored with peat deposits dating back about 8,500 years, to Mesolithic times. As sea levels rose, the coastline retreated landwards to a position about 1.6 km (1 mile) offshore, perhaps some 3,000 years ago during the later Bronze Age. Under the influence of southerly longshore drift, a shingle spit then began growing across the mouth of the Alde, diverting the river southwards. This is the origin of the spit of Orford Ness, which has now reached some 16 km (10 miles) long.

Figure

(Figure 31) Aldeburgh Brick Pit, 1931, showing beds of the Chillesford Clay Member (Norwich Crag) exploited for brickearth. Beds of glacial sand and gravel are lying on top. © British Geological Survey P236203.

(Figure 32) Storm damage to cottages at Crag Path, 1898.© British Geological Survey P205645.

(Figure 33) Coastal defences: the Martello Tower at Slaughden is protected by rock armour and groynes. The beach is regularly recharged by bulldozers.

Aldeburgh Brick Pit, 1931, showing beds of the Chillesford Clay Member (Norwich Crag) exploited for brickearth. Beds of glacial sand and gravel are lying on top. © British Geological Survey P236203.

Storm damage to cottages at Crag Path, 1898.© British Geological Survey P205645.

Coastal defences: the Martello Tower at Slaughden is protected by rock armour and groynes. The beach is regularly recharged by bulldozers.