

The following article appeared in **The Times** on the 24th January and gives you a good idea of our location and what can be found nearby. The article was written by Christopher Sommerville who has spent over 25 years writing and broadcasting about country walks all over the world!

Sheppey, the big island lying low in the throat of the River Thames, is North Kent's remotest outpost.

The Norman church of St Thomas, down by the marshes in the furthest corner of the Isle of Sheppey, is only an hour from London. But as you set off across the fields from the tiny chapel, the capital seems a whole world away. Sheppey, the big island lying low in the throat of the River Thames, is North Kent's remotest outpost; and with a short winter's afternoon in hand, and a great need to escape the city and get some countryside under one's boots, it beckons irresistibly.

In winter, geese haunt the muddy Swale channel between island and mainland. The throaty sound of their gabbling came clearly across the flat landscape as I walked a field path through ploughland and grazing meadows, where a spatter of last week's snowfall still lay in the furrows. Before the First World War, pioneer airmen went spluttering in their stringbag biplanes across Sheppey's great flat apron of grazing marshes, confident of a soft crash-landing. It was at Leysdown, just up the hill, that John Moore-Brabazon made Britain's first official powered flight in May 1909, a jolting hop in his box kite Voisin biplane. Then he airlifted a piglet in a basket tied to the wing, just to prove that pigs could fly.

Today the still air held the bleating of sheep, and the cries of hundreds of thousands of seabirds. Out at the eastern tip of Sheppey a crunchy cockleshell beach lies between the cottages of Shell Ness hamlet and the widening Thames. 'Wonderful, don't you think?' confided a man outside Cackle Cottage, going home with retriever and binoculars from his afternoon's goose-watching along the seawall. 'Where else could you get such peace as this?' he murmured, sweeping a hand over white beach, blue-grey mud banks and stippled sea.

The sea wall path back to St Thomas's lay in absolute solitude, scoured by salty wind and flooded with wintry light. In the landward meadows, medieval saltmakers once boiled the salt-rich mud in great cauldrons. The spoil heaps they left behind, now grassy hillocks in the fields, cast long fingers of shadow pointing east to where clouds of wigeon swirled this way and that over the steel-grey North Sea. Small dark brent geese hurried low across the marshes, as purposeful as stout little ministers late for a meeting. Up in the misty air a curlew gave out its liquid bubble of a cry, *curleek! curleek!* – a call guaranteed to raise the nape hairs with its poignancy and melancholy.

As the afternoon light drained out into the thickening blue of dusk I splashed along a rough lane towards the Ferry House Inn. The old pub lay low, its lights twinkling across the fields. There would be a roaring fire in the low-ceilinged bar, a rumble of local chat, a plate of hot food, the pleasure of warmth and company after the cold, lonely walk. But before going in I lingered a while on the seawall, gazing over the darkening Swale, hearing the mutter of settling birds and the gentle slap of salt water on the mud. A forthright driver, leaving the island now, could be among the jostling West End theatre-goers in just one hour – an improbable notion, out here on the windy Sheppey shore.

Start & finish: Ferry House Inn, Isle of Sheppey ME12 4BQ (OS ref TR015660)

Getting there: M2 (Jct 5); A249 ('Sheerness') onto Isle of Sheppey; B2231; right on minor road to Sayes Court and Ferry House Inn

Walk (6 miles, easy grade, OS Explorer 149): St Thomas's Church (022662) – across flat fields by Brewer's Hill to Muswell Manor (043694) – seawall path by Shell Ness back to Ferry House.

Bring your binoculars!

Lunch: Ferry House Inn (roaring fires, good cheer): www.theferryhouseinn.co.uk

More info: Sittingbourne TIC <http://tourism.swale.gov.uk/isleofsheppey.htm>