Hadleigh, Leigh and sea

splendid walk offering expansive views across Canvey Island and the Thames estuary, with Canvey Wharf to the west and the rolling Kent countryside to the south. The walk is packed with historical interest – wildlife and waders along Benfleet Creek.

From the car park, follow the access lane back out to Chapel Lane, then turn right for 100 yards, climb a stile on the left and join the public footpath leading to Hadleigh Castle. The grassy footpath runs past the retaining wall of a reservoir, before broadening into a track that passes buildings which form part of the Hadleigh Castle Country Park. Continue on the track to the right, over a stile, and along the path to the right, past a large group of trees on the left. At the end of the path, turn left and continue along the footpath.

To visit Leigh-on-Sea, continue along the road into town, turn right immediately beyond the railway station, crossing the bridge spanning the line. Leigh-on-Sea is one of the most beautiful spots along the Southend coast and is more like two towns linked into one. On the banks of the estuary is Old Leigh, the fishing village and boat building port of days gone by, with its cobbled High Street, rows of attractive fishermen's cottages and cafes. The coastline is 14th-century, and three of Henry VIII's wives resided here in the ensuing years – Catherine of Aragon, Anne of Cleves and Catherine Parr. The castle ruins have been captured on a magazine cover and are also immortalized in art by numerous artists, including in Constable. If you are lucky, soro can be seen. Walk past the boatyard and cross the road to the right, joining the continuation of the footpath on the opposite side, which is initially along a surfaced lane.

The sea wall footpath runs between two watercourses, the natural Benfleet Creek to the left, with its brackish water, and a freshwater channel to the right, which was created following excavations for the sea wall. This too contains a good selection of wildlife, with swans, ducks and geese adding to the mix. The footpath eventually reaches a site that demarcates the grounds of Hadleigh Castle Country Park, with the castle ruins clearly visible to the right. Continue on along the sea wall for approximately one mile, to just beyond Marsh Pond, which lies in a field to the right, and go right over a stile beside a field gate. Walk through a meadow towards the obvious crossing over the railway line, with the massive Water Tower in Benfleet visible above the trees ahead.

Cross the railway line – STOP, LOOK & LISTEN – before doing so, then proceed in the same direction, alongside a drainage ditch, bearing slightly left at the far end to a stile. Once over, bear right through some scrub and at a "Y" fork after 10 yards go left and walk up the left side of a field. Hadleigh Castle Country Park is a haven for wildlife, the huge variety of habitats providing homes for small mammals, reptiles such as snakes and lizards, wild birds that range from wrens to kestrels and woodpeckers, as well as a plethora of insects, including butterflies, dragonflies and damselflies. At the top of a field and in front of a bench, turn right to reach a "T" junction with a broad track where you go right for 10 yards, then left through a kissing gate, alongside a multi-fragmented signpost. Follow the footpath up to the left-hand side of a pasture, veering right towards the top to negotiate a kissing gate leading into woodland and a flight of steps that lead back to Chapel Lane car park.

INFORMATION
Distance: 5 miles (9.7km)
Start: & finish: Chapel Lane car park, Hadleigh Castle Country Park
Parking: limited
Access: car park situated along Chapel Lane, signed off A13, 400 yards southeast of the A129-A13 junction in Hadleigh
Tourist Information: The Visiter, Information Centre, The Pier, Benfleet

Refreshments: Tea-room near Hadleigh Castle, all kinds in Leigh-on-Sea
Tourist Information: The Visiter, Information Centre, The Pier, Benfleet

If you are interested in wildlife and nature, the Essex Wildlife Trust has many groups and events throughout the year. Visit their website for more information.

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