

Saturday Walkers Club

Walk 209 Higham to Gravesend - Cliffe Pools Nature Reserve and the spectacular and atmospheric Thames estuary.

This walk used to be a short circular walk to Higham but with the closure of the Railway Tavern in Higham there is now no refreshments option so the walk has been developed into a longer walk along the Saxon Shore Way all the way to Gravesend where you can pick up a fast HS1 train back to London.

This is a flat walk on the periphery of the Hoo peninsula in northern Kent that visits the RSPB reserve at Cliffe Pools, one of the most important wildlife habitats in the UK. You also take lunch in the interesting village of Cliffe whose history can be traced back to Norman times and possibly earlier. The walk is best done at low tide when the extensive estuary mud flats are exposed and there more opportunities to view the bird life.

Important notes

- (1) At para 22 there is a short 10m stretch of the path which has become badly eroded. There are earlier signs warning you about coastal erosion and the path being closed. However if you take care you can navigate the path or you can drop down the 2 to 3 feet to the small shingle beach and then climb back up again. **You do this at your own risk.**
- (2) The shorter route back to Higham after leaving the Saxon Shore Way can be very muddy and difficult to negotiate in parts after a period of rain.

Length	18.4km (11.5m)
Maps	Landranger 178 – Thames Estuary. Explorer 163 – Gravesend and Rochester
Toughness	3 out of 10. The walk is almost entirely flat with very gentle up-hill slopes on the morning route up to Cliffe village. Walking boots are recommended for the tracks and grassy paths.
Features	<p>This walk is best done in autumn or spring to get the best out of the bird-watching opportunities as you go round the path bordering the huge lakes and mud-flats of Cliffe Pools and by the river Thames. However it can be done at any time of the year and in the summer you are likely to be serenaded by the nightingales that inhabit the bushes and scrub of the reserve.</p> <p>This is not a typical countryside walk and you are aware of the industrial heritage of the area but the spectacular landscape of open water, marshes and big skies is evocative and atmospheric with a rich sense of history. There are gravel working operations at Cliffe Fort but this does not detract too much from the walk.</p> <p>Cliffe village Cliffe may have been the location of the ancient Saxon town of Cloveshoo that dates back to the 8th century. The lovely church at Cliffe is dedicated to St</p>

Helen the only one in Kent dedicated to that saint. It has commanding views over the marshes to the river Thames. A church at the site was mentioned in the Domesday Survey but there have been considerable additions to the building over the centuries. See [here](#) for an interesting history of the Church. In the corner of the church graveyard is a Charnel House, thought to have been erected in the mid 19th century that was used to store bodies dragged out of the river Thames estuary.

Cliffe Ponds Nature Reserve

The reserve is one of the most important places for wildlife in the UK with huge flocks of wading birds and waterfowl. A number of nature trails cross the reserve, affording great views of the pools, wildlife and the River Thames which runs alongside.

During spring and autumn migration periods, there is an excellent chance to see some unusual species, such as sandpipers and stints. Big flocks of ducks and grebes also gather at this time, and hen harriers and other birds of prey are regular visitors. In summer, breeding redshanks, avocets and common terns may be seen, with nightingales and turtle doves singing from the bushes. The RSPB has an extensive and informative web-site where you can find information on recent sightings. See [Cliffe Pools Nature reserve](#)

Cliffe Fort

The fort was built in the 1850s as a defence against the invasion of London via the River Thames. The fort is now fenced off and falling into dereliction with parts of its now inaccessible courtyard flooded due to coastal erosion.

Along the path near the fort you cross the remnants of the **Brennan torpedo tracks** a 100 year old, but then state-of-the-art, guided missile system and you also see the remains of the **Hans Egarde** a wooden 3 masted ship built in 1922 which was eventually beached at Cliffe after her weakened structure began to take on water .

Gravesend

This ancient town in North West Kent is not the most beautiful of places but it does have a fascinating maritime history with settlements dating back to the Stone Age.

It has one of the oldest surviving markets in the country with a charter dating back to 1268, the remains of a Tudor fort on the riverfront built by command of Henry VIII in 1543 and a statue of the native American princess Pocahontas who died in Gravesend in 1617 aged just 21.

If you have the time it is well worth visiting the main landmarks and the town's extensive and well-written Wikipedia entry is invaluable here.

Walk options

Three options for shortening the walk

	<p>1. Taking a bus from the Six Bells. If you do not want to go round the paths of the Cliffe Pools Nature Reserve then you can end the walk at Cliffe by catching a 133 bus outside the Six Bells pub. On a Saturday there are hourly buses to Strood and Rochester with the last bus at 17.30.</p> <p>On Sundays and Public Holidays there is a two hourly service on the 193 bus from the Six Bells on the same route as the 133. The last bus is at 17.53.</p> <p>A full timetable can be found here</p> <p>2. Circular walk back to Higham, 14.6km (9.1m) You can shorten the walk by returning to Higham to complete a circular walk. There is no refreshment stop on this walk but you do pass close to the lovely St Mary's Church in Lower Higham which is well worth a visit and a nice place to rest. See the end of the main walk directions for details about the route.</p> <p>St Marys Church, Lower Higham. This Anglican church is now redundant but is lovingly maintained by the Churches Conservation Trust and is a Grade 1 listed building. There has been a church on this site since Saxon times and the present church was rebuilt after the Norman conquest and still maintains some Norman features despite many alterations and additions. Adjacent to the church is the site of a former Benedictine nunnery which closed in the 16th century.</p> <p>3. Charles Dickens and Higham circular walk. If you are interested in literary walks then there is a Charles Dickens and Higham 10.6km (6.6m) circular walk produced by Kent County Council. (Charles Dickens was a great walker averaging 12 miles on his daily walks!) The walk starts from, and returns to, Higham station. Instructions and a map for the walk plus related Dickens commentary can be downloaded from here</p>
<p>Transport</p>	<p>Trains. You have two options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) the fast HS1 train from St Pancras International or Stratford to Gravesend where you then pick up a connecting train from Charing Cross to Higham . (2) Slower direct trains from Charing Cross to Higham. There are two trains an hour on a Saturday and a Sunday <p>Use the http://traintimes.org.uk/ web site to check train times and departures as starting stations and train times can change when there are engineering works.</p> <p>Buy a day return to Higham. If you take the HS1 to Gravesend you will pay a small extra amount than if you had travelled from Charing Cross on the slow</p>

	train.
Suggested trains	From Charing Cross take the nearest train to 10am; if you take the HS1 route you can start a little later and pick up the slower Charing Cross train at Gravesend.
Lunch and tea	<p>Lunch</p> <p>The recommended lunch-time pub is the Six Bells in Cliffe refurbished in early 2015, and which serves basic “pub grub”. The food is good value for money and the service is friendly. There is a small garden with tables and benches. Outside the pub is a bus-stop where you can take buses to Strood and Rochester.</p> <p>If you bring a picnic St Helen’s church just a few metres from the pub is a lovely place to stop.</p> <p>Tea</p> <p>You will pass a number of pubs and cafes on your way to Gravesend station, none of them in my view, particularly distinguished. There is a Costa Coffee in the pedestrian shopping area on your route and if you want to explore the town there will be other options so if you have Google Maps on a smartphone you may find something that appeals.</p>

Higham to Gravesend. 18.4km (11.5m) Toughness 3/10.

Higham Station to Cliffe

1. Leave Platform 1 at Higham station by the gate to the right of the ticket office. (Higham station ticket office and toilets are only open Mon-Fri) Turn right up the station approach road. In 80m turn right with the road over a railway bridge. Follow the road round to the left, ignoring a footpath sign over to your right by Station House. (This is a path for the Charles Dickens literary walk.)
2. In 30m pass the former Railway Tavern on your left. In a further 30m turn right following road signs to Wainscott, Rochester and Cliffe Woods. (take care on this road as there is no footpath). In 40m bear left with the road following road signs to Cliffe and Cooling. You will stay on this road for the next 700m but in more detail.
3. In 100m there are open fields to your left. In a further 100m the road bears to your left. In 50m ignore a footpath sign to your right and in a further 30m ignore Bull Lane to your left. In 70m there is a lake to your right. Keep ahead on the road. !!! In 200m with the road bearing gently to your right there is a 2m high footpath sign in a field 30m away to your left.
4. *(60 metres further on from this footpath sign, heading due North along rough overgrown terrain with a line of trees just to your left there is a difficult to spot wooden footpath post pointing diagonally across the field. There may be faint*

tractor tracks showing the onward direction here but the “agribusiness” owners of the land have virtually obliterated the footpaths and planted or ploughed over the fields. You are not advised to try to follow the direction of the footpath signs, particularly as in wet weather it will be very muddy and you may well be walking through crops. Instead it is recommended you take a zig-zag route following clear car-wide tracks along field edges and generally heading in a NE direction. These paths are used by riders and walkers and although not marked as public footpaths they are clearly well used.)

5. At the 2m high footpath sign turn right and continue along the field edge with a line of trees to your right . (If this route is too overgrown or muddy you can continue along the tarmac road for another 170m where you reach the grassy track and turn left.)
6. In 150m you reach a car-wide grassy track and turn left with a line of telegraph poles immediately to your left and bushes to your right. In 200m you reach a cross paths and take a car-wide dirt track to your right. There is a line of trees to your left and horse paddocks to your right, In 200m you pass some caravans and then in 70m a bungalow to your right. 40m beyond the bungalow and by a white cottage to your right you reach a tarmac lane at a T junction. Turn left here along a car-wide dirt track.
7. In 150m there are footpath post signs to your left and right. Turn right here and continue gently uphill with a fence immediately to your left heading towards some trees. In 100m you cross a track and continue ahead along a clear grassy path. There may be some poly tunnels immediately to your left. In 200m along a potentially muddy path you reach the field edge where you turn right with a small fence to your right and a line of trees and a ditch to your left.
8. In 150m you cross a bridge to your left and continue ahead along a rough track heading towards a footpath post just visible about 80m ahead of you. In 80m you cross a plank bridge into the next field where you immediately turn right along the field edge heading towards electricity pylons ahead of you. In 70m you start to pass a small orchard to your right and you continue ahead. In 150m you reach a small pond and just beyond that a tall hedge and a lane. Turn left here through a potentially muddy patch with the hedge to your right and just beyond that a tarmac lane. In 60m you pass under some electricity pylon wires
9. In 80m you reach a footpath sign RS 71 at the edge of the field pointing diagonally back across the field. You turn right to leave the field and take the tarmac lane to cross the railway bridge immediately ahead of you.
10. After crossing the railway bridge continue up the tarmac lane. In 80m you pass the entrance to Buckland Farm on your left. In a further 80 metres you reach a row of houses on your right. Immediately after the row of houses turn right down Rectory Road to walk along the grass verge on your right. In 80m you pass Rectory cottage on your right. 30m beyond Rectory cottage cross the road to turn left through a very wide gap in the hedge onto a clear track. (You now essentially keep on this track/path heading north all the way into Cliffe. You will be parallel to a fairly busy road (Station Road) around 200m to your right which is the main road in to Cliffe.)

11. **In more detail.** In 30m pass under telegraph wires. The track narrows and there is a cluster of houses ahead of you just to your right. In 100m you continue ahead at a path T junction to pass a footpath post with a yellow arrow to your right. There are houses to your right and open fields to your left. In 40m you pass another footpath sign on your right. The route veers slightly to the right by a signpost and you continue ahead on an enclosed path with fences to your right and hedges to your left.
12. In 300m you go through a gap in the hedge and onto a tarmac lane. There are houses ahead of you. Turn left on the lane and in 20m turn right down a grassy track. There are houses to your right. In 80m the houses end and you continue ahead on a grassy track. In 150m a line of hedges begins on your right. In 200m continue ahead at a cross-paths. There is a metal barrier to your right. In 40m pass under telegraph wires. 200m to your left across the fields is a curious half-timbered house with two very large chimneys and soon you should be able to glimpse Cliffe Pools Nature reserve ahead of you.
13. Keeping on the path in 150m you reach a tarmac lane where you turn right passing a house called Arizona on your right in 10 metres. There are excellent views of the marshes away to your left. You pass a row of houses on your right. Continue ahead along the lane soon passing a green and St Helens Church on your left. Your lunch-time pub the Six Bells is immediately ahead of you.

Cliffe Pools Nature Reserve to Higham

14. After lunch turn left out of the Six Bells to go down Pond Hill and continue past Reed Street following a sign for the Saxon Shore Way on your right. The road now swings to the left and becomes a wide dirt track. There is a new housing development to your left. You are now on Pickles Way.
15. Ignore footpaths to your right and continue ahead along the rough track Pickles Way, with open fields and marshes to your right. In 400m ignore a narrow footpath slanting off to your left. In a further 60m you come to a T junction with the expansive waters of Cliffe Pools Nature Reserve ahead of you. (There is a viewing point here for bird-watching.)
16. Turn left at the T junction to go along the Saxon Shore Way. In 30m ignore a narrow path to your left. There is a wooden bench here overlooking a pool. Continue along the car-wide dirt track passing a footpath post on your left and bear right with this track. In 15m go through a large metal squeeze gate to the right of a metal barrier. You continue along the Saxon Shore Way ignoring all ways off. Along this track there are gaps in the hedge to your right where you can view the nature reserve and stop to enjoy the bird life.
17. In 300m you ignore a signed footpath to your left and continue ahead along the track. In 150m you reach a path cross-roads! (Here it is worth continuing ahead for 40m to a sign for Pinnacle Point where a short climb along a narrow dirt track brings you to a superb birdwatching viewpoint with the marshes and ponds below you. From here away to your right you can also see your onward track bounded by shrubs and running between two large pools. Retrace your steps to the crosspaths).

18. Your onward direction is to turn sharp right (300 degrees) along a car-wide dirt track. Along this track there are gaps in the edges with viewing points for bird-watching, resting and panoramic views over the marshes and the Thames.
19. In 700m ignore a narrow raised path to your right across the pool. In a further 800m at a T junction there is a 1.8m footpath post to your left with 5 direction signs on it. Just ahead of this on the other side of a wide dirt track there is a 4m high footpath pole (RS332). Cross the wide dirt/shale track to the footpath pole where you turn left. You are now on a narrow grassy path 5 metres from the wide dirt track on your left and with a 70cm high concrete wall immediately to your right and panoramic views of the mud flats and the Thames beyond this. In 70m you reach a 4m high footpath sign RS331 and just beyond this is a wooden bench.
20. At this footpath sign (RS331) take the steps over the low concrete wall to your right and go along the narrow grassy path straight ahead of you. This path is a continuation of the Saxon Shore Way. You are walking towards a 1.5m high steel fence 50m ahead of you. You go through a gap in the fence and bear right with the raised path. You stay on this path for the next 1.6km with panoramic views all around you.
21. In 300m there is a low moss-covered brick wall to your right. Continue on the path now also with hedges to your left. In 200m you pass an old concrete footpath marker to your right. You continue on along a now wider dirt track with a sea wall 10m over to your right. Soon you will be aware of a large gravel works ahead and away to your left. The path will take you through the gravel workings.
22. With a sea wall straight ahead of you turn left with the path and head towards the gravel works. The path is now enclosed by a wire fence on your left and bushes on your right. In 100m you turn left with the path and in 30m turn right to go under the gravel works conveyor belt. In 10m take care when crossing a lorry track and continue along the enclosed path. You pass a footpath erosion sign and you will need to negotiate with care a 10m stretch of the path shortly ahead which is badly eroded.
23. In 100m you go down and up some concrete steps passing over the **Brennan torpedo tracks** and in 10m you pass a wooden seat on your right. Continue along the path. Cliffe Fort- now decaying is fenced off to your left. You pass a further wooden seat with a Saxon Shore Way sign on it and in 80m on your right the ruined hulk of a wooden ship the **Hans Ergarde**). In 80m go through a steel gate.
24. Continue on this raised path wending its way right and left through a rather scruffy tidal environment. In 600m go through a former gate and pass another footpath erosion sign on your left. In 60m pass some old concrete blocks and in a further 40m you reach the concrete base of a former gun emplacement. **If you want to shorten the walk and return to Higham on a circular walk and are happy to forego a refreshment stop then refer to the walk instructions at the end of these directions.**
25. If you are not taking the short cut back to Higham then continue on the Saxon Shore Way with the 1km -wide Thames on your right. You stay on this path, which can be a bit tough going in places, all the way into Gravesend.

26. After about 5km walking along the Saxon Shore Way enjoying the expansive views across the Thames the path enters a semi-industrial zone. Continue on the path passing some jetties and eventually reaching the Ship and Lobster pub, a possible refreshments stop.
27. Continue past the pub to soon bear left into Mark Lane which bears right into Wharf Road. You are in an unattractive and semi-derelict area of dilapidated buildings but keep ahead on the road.
28. You reach a pathway called Gordon promenade and you continue ahead into Commercial Place passing New Tavern Fort and going through a pleasant riverside leisure area where there are refreshment opportunities and public toilets.
29. You swing left and up-hill with Commercial Place to turn right into the Terrace where you continue ahead until you reach the Crown and Thistle pub where you turn left into the A226. Continue ahead to the Clock Tower and then bear right with the A226 and continue ahead into a pedestrian shopping area where you will find a number of places for refreshment including a Costa Coffee.
30. Continue through the pedestrian area crossing Windmill Street and go along new Road reaching T junction where you turn left into Stone Street. In 70m you turn right onto the A226 (Clive Road) reaching Gravesend station in 80m.

Short route back to Higham – no refreshment stop

Word of warning: the first part of this route back to Higham may be very difficult to negotiate after a period of wet weather. It can be very muddy, particularly the winding path in para 2 below which passes through densely packed hawthorn bushes and other scrub.

1. Leave the Saxon Shore Way and the best route – if the dip in the ground between you and the raised grassy bank ahead is not flooded - is to climb the raised bank and turn left and continue on the top of the bank for the next 400m until you are 10m away from the concrete wall mentioned in para 2 below.. **Alternatively** you can turn left on a narrow grassy path heading towards a large body of water. Bear right with this path and continue on the sometimes indistinct way ahead . In 400m you will reach the raised grassy bank. Climb this bank. **(Here you need to take care to ensure you find the onward path.)**
2. On top of the bank position yourself so the concrete wall ahead is 10m away to you left. Go down the bank to find a path ahead of you in the bushes just to the left of a creek. Take this path with the creek immediately to your right. Keep on this path which can be very muddy in places . In 100m you pass a wooden post on your left. You can see giant electricity pylons ahead of you. Continue on this clear path that meanders through bushes and scrub. There are fields to your right beyond the creek and a lake over to your left. 450m after the wooden post you reach a stile to the right of a six barred iron gate.

3. Cross this stile and take a faint path across a large field heading just to the left of a church in the distance your direction 190 degrees. In 250m after crossing a small ditch and then passing under electricity pylons cross a stile to the left of a 6 barred iron gate which has a footpath sign on its right hand post. Cross a concrete bridge beyond the stile and continue towards a wooden gate 50m ahead of you with a six-barred iron gate to its left.
4. Go through the gate and cross the railway line with care. Go through a wooden gate on the other side and continue on a clear track towards a church. In 60m on your left there is an impressive modern private house on the site of a former priory. In a further 40m go through a small iron gate to the left of a large six barred iron gate and continue up the tarmac road
5. In 40m you pass the entrance to the lovely St Marys Church, (a nice spot to rest and the Church should be open and it's well worth a visit.). 50m beyond the Church yard entrance you reach a triangular area of grass with a tarmac lane to your right. You ignore this right turn and the footpath sign to your left to continue ahead on the lane, passing some houses to your right.
6. You can continue along this lane all the way to Higham but 60m after the last house on your right there is a public footpath sign to your left and you take this following a clear ,but potentially muddy, path across a field. In 200m you reach a field edge and you bear slightly right with the path across another large field. You can see a white painted house ahead of you. In 100m you reach a line of bushes on your right. Continue along the clear path and in 150m veer right with the path to reach a tarmac lane.
7. Turn right on this lane with a row of terraced houses to your right. In 130m the footpath and houses end and you continue along the lane. In 30m you reach a T junction. Here cross the T Junction , to go through large gap and take a clear car-wide track immediately to your left which runs parallel to Church Street. Follow this track with an orchard, then a horse paddock and then a second orchard all to your right . After 200m at the end of the second orchard go through a gap in the hedge to your left and immediately a gate to re-enter Church Street and turn right to continue along the road.
8. In 100m you reach a staggered cross-roads. .Continue ahead along Chequers Street. In 60m you pass the former Railway Tavern pub and in a further 30m bear right with Chequers Street to cross the railway bridge where you reach a T junction and turn left. In 30m bear left with the station approach road and in 80m you reach Higham Station on your left. Trains for London Charing Cross and Gravesend are from Platform 1.