

Geography of the Folkestone and Hythe area

The overall climate of the region owes much to its general location in the extreme south-east of the country, only separated from the continent by the Straits of Dover, with this continental influence often far more important than the usual maritime control prevalent over most of the British Isles. The climatic variation within the district, however, is as important as these overall influences, there being quite distinct differences resulting from changes in altitude, aspect, or distance from the sea. As with the geological basis, the Folkestone and Hythe area may be thought of as comprising four distinct geographical regions: the Downs, the Warren, the Lowlands and the Marsh.

The Downs are characterised by the smooth, rounded relief of the chalk hills, with a dominant scarp line and a wider area of dip slope trending to the north-east, gently dissected by a system of dry valleys. Rarely is much surface water seen, except for the springline activity at the foot of the scarp (at Holywell by Sugarloaf Hill and the Cherry Garden reservoirs), but when the water table is high enough in the chalk, the floors of otherwise dry valleys have 'bournes' flooding the lower levels.

The higher relief on the Downs causes more cloud and precipitation than is experienced on the lower lands nearby, but farming in the region is generally more concerned with local variations in microclimate, relating to shelter and aspect. Naturally the sunnier south-facing slopes are generally sought, while the frost hollows, where cold dense air collects on clear nights, are avoided for such sensitive land use as fruit growing. Fruit crops or orchards form part of a complex land use pattern of mixed farming, bordered by the rough grazing lands offered by the steep slopes of the scarp face.

The distinctive qualities of the Warren are derived directly from the complex geology and relief that result from its history of major landslips. Irregular in relief and drainage, it has remained isolated and relatively unspoilt. Apart from the camping sites at the more accessible western end, the only real penetration has been by the railway. The threat to the railway of landslips, attributable to the action of coastal erosion, has necessitated the building of a large concrete 'apron' intended to act as a sea defence as well as stabilising the Gault clay, preventing its extrusion under the weight of the overlying chalk.

Between the chalk escarpment and the Marsh lies the topographically much more varied Lowland area, which is situated on sandy limestones and clays. It is the site of some mineral extraction, with brick-making being for long an important local industry using the Brick-earth deposits on the Gault, while sands were still being dug in pits quite recently, for example at the Newington Quarries. The well-known Kentish Ragstone, a limestone of the Lower Greensand Hythe Beds, has been used extensively in the region for building purposes and the evidence remains in many old houses, often, as at Lympne, with the supplying nearby quarries now abandoned and overgrown. It is now primarily quarried for use as road metal.

The land-use of the area is essentially mixed farming, the actual type practised being influenced by such local factors as soil, slope and drainage. Large areas have long been occupied by the Ministry of Defence, as at Shorncliffe Camp and Dibgate Camp, and there has been an increase in housing since the second-world war, as well as the construction of the Channel Tunnel site and the M20, which have replaced areas such as Biggin's Wood.

The Marsh is flat and exposed, with a distinctive character of its own, derived largely from its relative isolation from the rest of Kent and Sussex. It is made up of vast areas of fertile silt, which provide good sheep grazing and deep soil for crops, and infertile gravel, which is part bare, part covered with natural vegetation. The gravel has been excavated to leave the man-made lakes at Nickoll's Quarry, and the Ministry of Defence uses the shingle area south of West Hythe for military training.