

WONDERFUL WIRRAL

Venture on to this often overlooked peninsula and you will be rewarded with peaceful countryside fringed by miles of wild and beautiful coastline.

Daniel Cossins is your local guide

Hilbre Island feels like a remote, forgotten place. A great hunk of grass-blanketed sandstone, one of three tidal islands at the mouth of the Dee Estuary, it lies less than two miles off the coast of north-west England and yet somehow feels far more distant, even decades away.

It could be the empty clapboard cottages, nestled in long-overgrown gardens, which gaze out across a vast swathe of ridged, silvery-brown mudflats. Maybe it's the idle clinking of rope on mast, the moaning of seals hauled up on a nearby sandbank or the insistent calls of the carrot-billed oystercatchers congregated on the rocky foreshore. Or perhaps it's simply that access is governed by the ancient tides, which makes it a sanctuary for birds and bestows a castaway feel.

Every time I come to Hilbre I'm captivated by the solitude, especially when striding out alone from West

Kirby first thing in the morning, long before other silhouetted figures make their way across the sands. It's still a privilege to explore such a wild place so close to where I grew up, a place that so many overlook.

But it's not just Hilbre. Standing at the island's highest point, with briny winds off the Irish Sea whistling past, you're afforded an unrivalled vista on the west coast of the Wirral peninsula. Sandwiched between Liverpool to the north and Wales to the south, few people would consider this sliver of land a destination. Most bypass it without a second thought.

But away from its more industrial eastern shores, the Wirral boasts an unspoilt landscape of sand dunes, mudflats and salt marshes. On the sandstone ridges that rise from its fertile plains, it also supports woodlands, meadows and vast expanses of heath all thronging with insects and birds. It's a little-known



New Brighton Lighthouse stands at the mouth of Mersey, where for more than 140 years it protected passing shipping from the perils of Perch Rock