

discover the Wirral

» once again taken by how wild this place feels. Again, I think, it's the long reign of the tides. For the marshes are exposed for a short time and then flooded again.

The pull of the tides

On this occasion, with the tide out, I'm lucky enough to spot a little egret rising gently on the breeze and, eventually, settling on the banks of a rivulet snaking through the grasses. With the Dee Cliffs receding into the distance behind, you'll round a long corner and glimpse a cluster of white buildings peering out on to the vast marshes. This is Parkgate, once a major port and now a village of old houses huddled up against the sea. It is on the marshes near here, during the equinoctial spring tides, that in-the-know birdwatchers are treated to a magnificent display of raptors.

Along the promenade, the Red Lion pub is the perfect place to sit and stare out on to the marsh, where many-masted packet ships moored during the 17th and 18th centuries before heading to Dublin. As you stand on the sandstone sea wall here, looking back toward Hilbre Island and the Irish Sea, it's hard



to imagine why so few people visit this special coastline. Those who do will get a feel for how the centuries-old ebb and flow of the salty, silty tides have shaped a landscape of mudflats and marshes that bestows atmosphere almost everywhere you go. Allow yourself to be drawn in, too, and you'll forever feel the pull of this wild estuarine beauty. ☺

ABOVE Parkgate was once a busy port, but now the old quays have silted up and the village attracts birdwatchers and holiday makers instead



Daniel Cossins is a freelance writer from Liverpool, who grew up with the wild Wirral estuaries as his natural playground.

All you need to know Locating the Wirral's coastal treasures

EAT



The Cowshed Restaurant

SHELDRAKE'S
Banks Road, Lower Heswall
☎ 0151 342 1556

sheldrakesrestaurant.co.uk
This Mediterranean-style restaurant boasts genuinely spectacular views across the Dee Estuary and over to the Welsh hills. Good food, great balcony and even better sunsets.

THE COWSHED RESTAURANT
Raby Mere Road, Raby Village
☎ 0151 336 3416

wheatshaf-cowshed.co.uk
A 400-year-old thatched pub with a range of real ales, and an attached restaurant that serves high-quality food in a beautifully converted barn.

DA PIERO
5 Mill Hill Road, Irby
☎ 0151 648 7373

www.dapiero.co.uk
This Sicilian restaurant may not have the most picturesque spot but the authentic food served here is quite brilliant. Evidence of the quality comes from recent listings in the *Michelin Guide 2011*. It's worth coming from the olive oil alone.

SLEEP



Hillbark Hotel

42 CALDY ROAD
West Kirby
☎ 0151 625 8740
www.warrencott.demon.co.uk

The rooms at the back boast great views across the mouth of the Dee Estuary. The magnificent breakfast is perfect preparation for an early morning stroll to Hilbre Island.

HILLBARK HOTEL
Royden Park, Frankby
☎ 0151 625 2400
www.hillbarkhotel.co.uk

A sandstone and timber-framed mock-Tudor manor house set in mature mixed woodland in Royden Park. Not cheap, but rooms are luxurious and characterful.

MERE BROOK HOUSE
Thornton Common Road,
Thornton Hough
☎ 07713 189949

www.merebrookhouse.co.uk
A classy B&B in a tastefully decorated Edwardian country house. Beautifully landscaped gardens, spacious rooms and amazing service, including help-yourself homemade cakes.

WALK



Hilbre Island

ROYDEN TO THURSTASTON
From the meadow in front of Hillbark Hotel, follow the main path west and then bear south on to the rising sandstone ridge. This will take you to the viewfinder on Thurstaston Common. Then head down the slope to Thor's Rock and take a left to pick up the path that follows a sandstone wall back to Royden visitor centre.

ON THE MARSH
Park just before Sheldrake's restaurant (see left) and turn left on to the marshland path along the coast, heading south-east. The views to Wales are wonderful; look out for lapwings and little egrets. Follow the edge of the marsh until you reach the Parkgate, then follow signs along the disused railway line known as the Wirral Way.

HILBRE ISLAND
Strike out on to the sands from Dee Lane slipway in West Kirby and head to Little Eye, the smallest of the three islands. Turn right and pass Middle Eye before taking a footpath to Hilbre itself. Allow an hour for the crossing and always check tide times before you go.

DON'T MISS



Formby Sands

PORT SUNLIGHT GARDEN VILLAGE
www.portsunlightvillage.com
This enchanting village was built in the late 19th century for workers at a local soap factory. Set in beautiful gardens, the mishmash of architectural styles makes it a place of real charm. Don't miss the Lady Lever Art Gallery, famous for its pre-Raphaelite collections.

NESS BOTANIC GARDENS
www.liv.ac.uk/nessgardens
This 60-acre garden overlooking the Dee Estuary is a delightful place for a gentle stroll. Ablaze with flowering trees and shrubs in spring and summer, it also boasts a large indoor conservatory with exotic plants from tropical regions.

FORMBY SANDS
www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-formby-2
Shady woods of Corsican pine, red squirrels and long, sandy beaches: this unspoilt coastline is very special. Just a short drive north of Liverpool, the great expanse of wide, windy sand dunes and big open skies here make for a fantastic setting to get away from it all.