

Footpath 3059

Chichester Harbour Conservancy

Briefing Note – Summer 2022

Introduction

On 25 February 2021, Natural England published NERR090, A Condition Review of Chichester Harbour sites: intertidal, subtidal and bird features.

<http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/5535304204419072>

The Review was an honest assessment of the state of Chichester Harbour Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The overall assessment downgraded the SSSI from 'Unfavourable Recovering' to 'Unfavourable Declining'. One reason for the decline was cited as coastal squeeze, which prevents the coastline from naturally rolling back. Consequently, there has been a 58% loss of saltmarsh at Chichester Harbour since 1945, and today the rate of decline is ongoing with the advent of climate change.

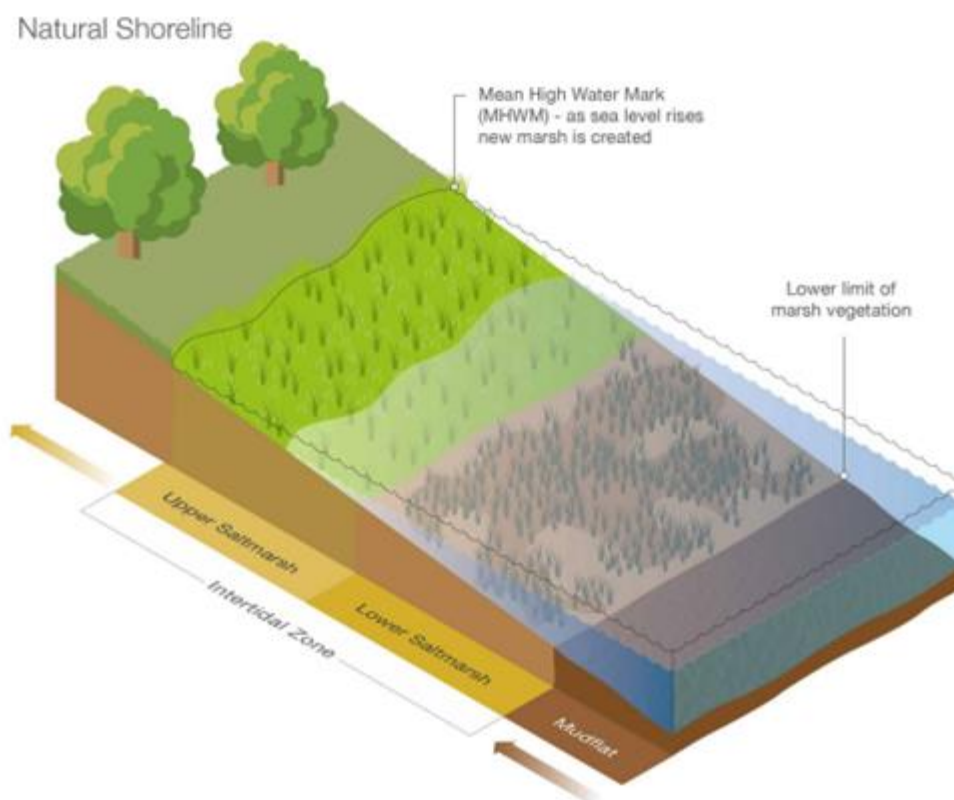


Figure 1. This is how a natural shoreline should function, with the very gradual migration of mudflat, lower saltmarsh, and upper saltmarsh towards the wooded fringe. The natural shoreline is a special quality of Chichester Harbour Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

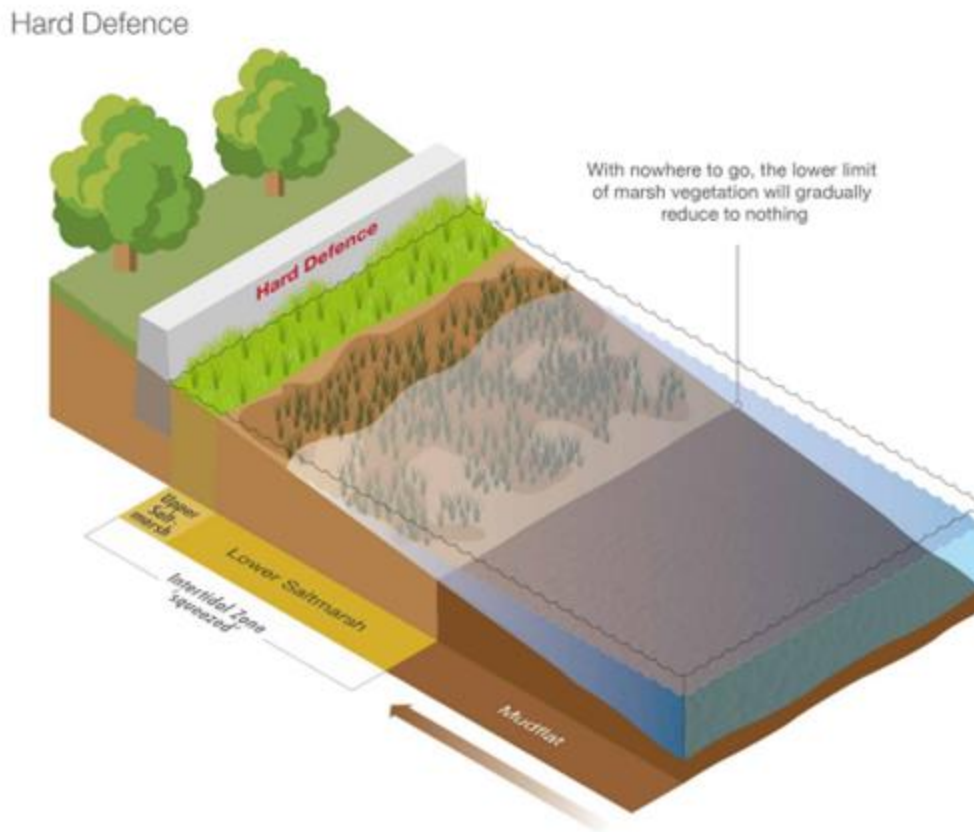


Figure 2. The installation of hard sea defences causes ‘coastal squeeze’. This process prevents saltmarsh from naturally migrating landwards as sea levels rise. The result is that saltmarsh is gradually drowned and reduced to nothing.

Chichester Harbour Conservancy’s historic policy on sea defences was to support like-for-like replacements. However, the Condition Review prompted a change of approach, and on 8 November 2021, the Conservancy changed its policy. From that point on, like-for-like replacements would have a greater degree of scrutiny before being approved, especially if there were opportunities for new saltmarsh habitat creation projects and the England Coast Path could be rolled back inland.

On 18 February 2022, Storm Eunice struck southeast England, with gusts reported of 122 miles per hour on the Isle of Wight. The Storm resulted in extensive damage at Chichester Harbour, affecting multiple sea defences, buildings, and infrastructure.

Footpath 3059

Footpath 3059 is within Fishbourne Parish. The site is owned by Chichester Harbour Trust, and the adjacent paddock is managed in partnership with a local tenant farmer. Storm Eunice damaged the sea wall and Footpath 3059 in two places, and the overall integrity of the sea wall at other locations along the stretch was also compromised.

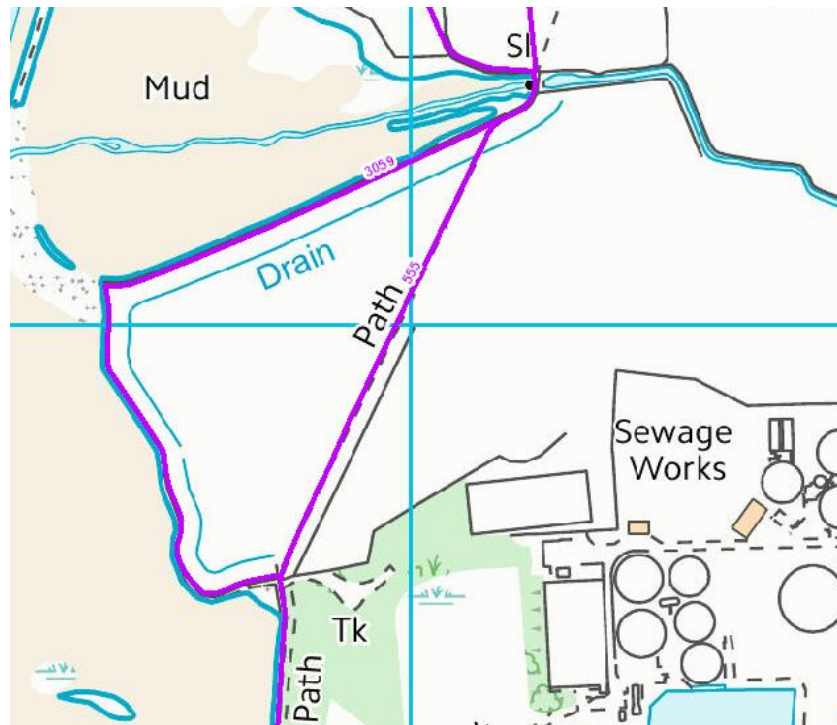


Figure 3. Footpath 3059 and Footpath 555 are located to the south of Fishbourne Parish. Source: West Sussex County Council Public Rights of Way iMap.



Figure 4. Erosion to Footpath 3059 caused by Storm Eunice. © Shirley Rushmer, 19 February 2022.



Figure 5. Erosion to Footpath 3059 caused by Storm Eunice. © Shirley Rushmer, 19 February 2022.



Figure 6. Erosion to Footpath 3059 caused by Storm Eunice. © Shirley Rushmer, 19 February 2022.

Closure Notice: Footpath 3059

West Sussex County Council, as the Highways Authority, established a temporary closure notice until 23 September 2022. For the purposes of public information and safety, Chichester Harbour Conservancy installed a new barrier and signage, at both ends of Footpath 3059.



Figure 7. The temporary closure notice and barrier installed by Chichester Harbour Conservancy in partnership with West Sussex County Council.

Under the diversion, walkers were directed to use the existing Footpath 555 across the paddock.

On 21 July, Chichester Harbour Conservancy wrote to West Sussex County Council and asked for the temporary closure notice to be extended. The Conservancy also suggested to West Sussex County Council that Footpath 3059 may need to be extinguished in the future, pending the outcome of Feasibility Study at this site, to assess the potential for a habitat creation project.

To prepare for this eventuality, the Conservancy is installing boardwalks across the paddock on Footpath 555, so it will be accessible throughout the winter months, when it typically gets wetter underfoot.

The seawall on Footpath 3059 is the responsibility of the landowner, Chichester Harbour Trust. It is unsustainable to keep repairing this sea wall, in the context of Natural England's Condition Review. These hard sea defences are part of the problem and a reason why the status of Chichester Harbour was downgraded since they directly stop the creation of new saltmarsh habitat. The Trust has therefore asked the Conservancy to consider options for a new habitat creation project at this location, in the paddock between Footpath 3059 and Footpath 555.

25 Year Environment Plan

On 11 January 2018, the Government published it's 25 Year Plan for the Environment.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan>

"Our natural environment is our most precious inheritance" (page 4).

The Plan set new ambitions for designated sites like Chichester Harbour Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), whilst recognising the coast is dynamic, and the rate of change is speeding up.

"The effects on wildlife and habitats are stark. We are in danger of presiding over massive human-induced extinctions when we should instead be recognising the intrinsic value of the wildlife and plants that are our fellow inhabitants of this planet. Furthermore, human-induced climate change threatens unpredictable and potentially irreversible damage to our planet. It is in everyone's interest to be part of the solution. Over the next 25 years we must safeguard the environment for this generation and many more to come" (page 17).

In planning for change, the Plan says we need to be realistic with the climate projections, including hotter, drier, summers, and warmer, wetter, winters, with increased instances of inclement weather. Business as usual is not an option. There needs to be a renewed focus on habitat creation, restoration, and enhancement opportunities during the 25 Year period.

When habitat creation opportunities arise, like that on Footpath 3059, it presents a chance to adapt and support the transition inland (i.e. moving from Figure 2 to Figure 1).

Furthermore, there is a requirement to comply with the legal obligations as laid down in the 25 Year Environment Plan.

If habitats creation opportunities like this are lost, it will affect the green inheritance for the next generation. This includes the loss of visual beauty, the carbon storage potential, the natural sea defence, the habitat, the recreational opportunities, and the wellbeing benefits from spending time outdoors.

It is therefore important, with cases like Footpath 3059, that local people are engaged so we can develop a shared ambition to work with nature and natural processes from now on. This approach will help us all to enhance Chichester Harbour for future generations.



Saltmarsh Habitat



Figure 8. The natural shoreline of Chichester Harbour, along Footpath 1.

Saltmarshes are coastal wetlands that are flooded and drained by the tides.

“Scientists at Durham University warn that rising sea levels mean the UK could lose all its saltmarshes by 2100 and they could disappear completely from southeast England by 2040.” (Source: www.wwt.org.uk).

The paddock between Footpath 3059 and Footpath 555 is 4.5 acres (1.8 hectares), and subject to a Feasibility Study, could be a site for a future saltmarsh habitat creation project. Saltmarshes are important for several reasons, providing what is called an *ecosystem service* to society.

- During storms, saltmarshes absorb flood waters and wave energy.
- One acre of saltmarsh can absorb up to 1.5 million gallons of floodwater, which is equivalent to more than 2.25 Olympic-size swimming pools.
- By filtering runoff and excess nutrients, saltmarshes help maintain water quality.
- Saltmarshes are home to many small mammals, small fishes, birds, insects, spiders, and marine invertebrates. Marine invertebrates include crustaceans such as amphipods and isopods, sea anemones, shrimps, crabs, molluscs, and snails.
- Saltmarshes and coastal wetlands sequester and store carbon at a rate 10 times that of mature tropical forests, helping to moderate the effects of climate change.
- Saltmarshes are one part of a complex coastal ecosystem with interdependent habitats. For example, by filtering pollutants, marshes help oyster beds and seagrass beds, which need clean water to survive. But as saltmarshes degrade, the health of adjacent coastal habitats and marine life suffers.
- Saltmarshes are consistent with the AONB designation at Chichester Harbour. They are naturally beautiful, especially when compared to hard sea defences.

Estuaries like Chichester Harbour need to be connected to their floodplain for them respond to coastal processes. Naturally, saltmarshes would accrete vertically if there was sediment and only then roll back, and these would be expected to fluctuate. Hard defences are not so sophisticated at absorbing and responding to these energetic processes.

Next Steps



The Conservancy is assessing this site through the Chichester Harbour Protection & Recovery of Nature partnership. The CHaPRoN partners are, Chichester Harbour Conservancy, Natural England, the Environment Agency, Coastal Partners, the RSPB, Chichester District Council, Southern Water, and Sussex IFCA. The partners are working closely with Chichester Harbour Trust on this case.

It is the objective of CHaPRoN to maintain access, and by improving Footpath 555 it is hoped that the stretch will be available to walkers for many years to come.

At time of writing, there are no plans to repair the sea defence or to force the breach of the remaining sea wall. Instead, it is likely that the approach will be to seek to maintain the closure notice for the foreseeable future, whilst CHaPRoN commission a Feasibility Study to assess the habitat creation potential at this site.

The Feasibility Study will also consider whether a secondary defence is required to protect key infrastructure from coastal flooding, in preparation for the time when the primary sea defence does naturally breach (for example, by installing a new earth bund along Footpath 555).

Natural England have confirmed they will work with the Conservancy and West Sussex County Council to establish the new route for the England Coast Path at this location. The existing route along Footpath 3059 could be rolled back to Footpath 555. Since this is an alternative route to be used when the Bosham to Itchenor Ferry is not in operation, there would not be an associated coastal margin.



Contact

Whilst nothing is yet decided, should you have any comments or questions please do not hesitate to contact Sarah Chatfield or Richard Austin at Chichester Harbour Conservancy.

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We do appreciate there is a great deal of local affection for Footpath 3059. However, the coast is best understood as constantly changing, rather than a permanent line on a map. It is our intention, where possible, to work with nature and maintain Chichester Harbour as an AONB for generations to come.

This is the first Briefing Note to be published on Footpath 3059. The next edition will be available in the winter of 2022/23.

Ends

17 August 2022