

Southend's Seaside Heritage

A proposal to recognise and protect the heritage of our seaside city

Introduction and Background

The clue is in the name.

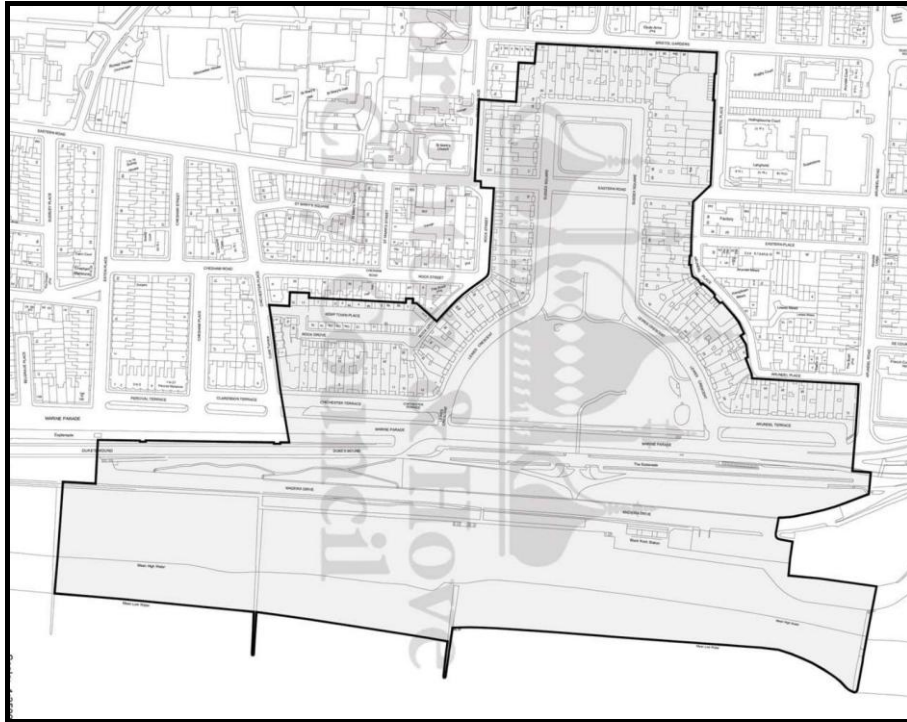
Southend-on-Sea sits on the north bank at the mouth of the river Thames estuary. It has a 7 mile, south facing, tidal seafront that runs for the entire length of the city.

As the defining feature of the city, the seafront has been used and enjoyed for over two hundred years, from the very first development of the *south end* of Prittlewell to today's extensive residential outlook, place of leisure and high-octane pleasure arcades and fairgrounds. The seafront comprises an extensive promenade and beach, giving way in parts to gently rising cliffs with an elevated outlook from the top, right across the estuary to north Kent. When the tide is out a vast expanse of mud flats comes into view, ever changing their appearance in the reflected light. Our great pier, known across the world as the longest pleasure pier in existence, stands as an ever-present marker of the city's place on the UK coast.

Our seafront is the single greatest heritage asset that the city possesses, and it is vast. It has helped to form our city, its local centres and coastal neighbourhoods, and, over time, the great focus for leisure and the visitor economy. Without it there would be no Southend-on-Sea.

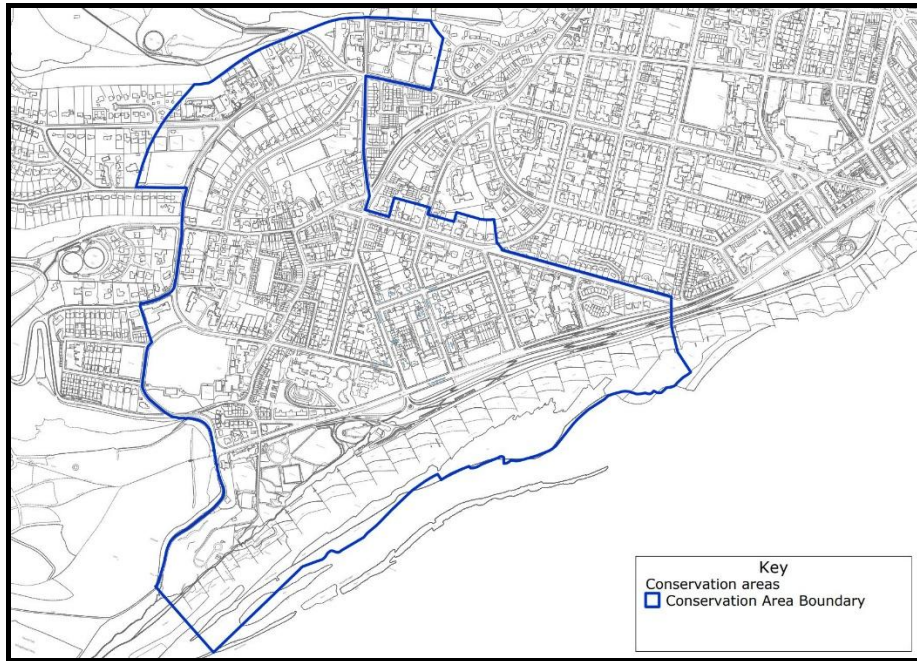
Yet there is no recognition or protection of this great heritage. The city has numerous designated seafront conservation areas but none actually include our seafront, with the small exception in Old Leigh. Other coastal town and cities, where most of the historic development over the last two hundred years has taken place beside the seafront, extend their designated seafront conservation areas across their promenades and beaches, down to their low water mark – recognising this essential importance of *seafront*. This can be seen in Brighton, Eastbourne and Scarborough. In Southend's case an extension to our seafront conservation areas down to the bottom of the beach might be more appropriate.

It is also worth noting that Southend is the UK's second only seaside resort city, Brighton being the precursor. No other city carries this distinction and this elevates the importance of Southend's seafront. It also elevates the responsibility on the people of Southend to recognise this importance.



Brighton Kemptown Conservation Area extending to the low water mark. The open area may not be architecturally significant but has an open beach and a vegetative bank that is an historically significant place. *Brighton City Council website*





Eastbourne Meads Conservation Area with the boundary extending to the low water line. The area is utilitarian and not architecturally significant but is an historically significant place. *Eastbourne Council website*



History

The history of Southend-on-Sea's seafront is one of transformation from a quiet, pastoral riverside and 18th century fishing hamlet into one of the United Kingdom's most iconic and bustling seaside resorts.

The development of the town commenced in the 1790s with the first Georgian origins, the construction of Royal Terrace and other buildings around pier hill. The first pier of 1830 and the use of pleasure boats and bathing machines on the seafront made the sea accessible and invited the first visitors. Perambulation along the sea front and cliff gardens became popular. Southend rivalled affluent resorts like Brighton and the visit of Princess Caroline of Brunswick (the Princess Diana of her day) boosted the town's reputation.



Edwardian bathing machines at Southend. *Essex Record Office*

Because of the extensive mud flats and the difficulty for boats to dock, the first wooden pier was built in 1830 and later extended to over a mile in length, allowing passenger steamboats to land.

In 1856 the London Tilbury Southend Railway arrived in Southend, transforming the seafront, allowing thousands of working-class Londoners cheap and easy access to the coast. In 1889 the ageing wooden pier was replaced by the iron and steel pier, featuring in 1890, the world's first electric pier railway that we see today. The Kursaal opened in 1901 as one of the world's first purpose-built amusement parks with a grand ballroom, circus and mechanical rides. Later, during the 1920-30s the popularity of the town led to the construction of the brightly lit penny arcades and other amusement venues, most of them displaying Art Deco frontages. Additionally, at different times in the early twentieth century the promenade was widened, and the Westcliff bastion and swimming pool were created.

During World War II the seafront was heavily militarised, the pier taken over by the Royal Navy and renamed HMS Leigh, acting as a critical convoy control point. Over 1,800 concrete anti-tank blocks lined the beaches to stop potential invasions.

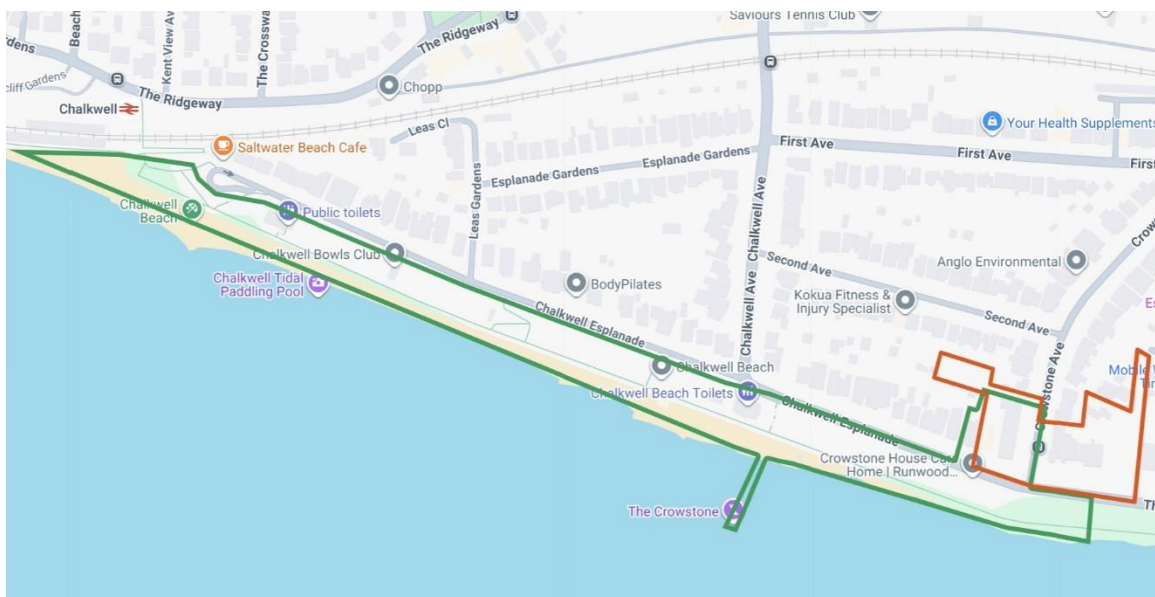
In the postwar period of the 1940-50s the seafront hit peak popularity with millions of holidaymakers crowding the beaches annually. With the rise of cheap foreign package holidays in the 1960s and 1970s, Southend saw a decline in traditional long-stay tourists. The iconic pier also suffered devastating fires in 1959, 1976, and 2005. However, the town maintained its popularity for day trippers with bank holidays seeing a heavy influx of visitors. From the 1960s onwards, large crowds of bikers visited Southend seafront en masse.

Today the promenade thrives as a top destination for day-trippers, anchored by the beaches, the pier, the restaurants, cafes and kiosks, the amusement arcades and the Adventure Island amusement park.

How can we protect our seafront heritage?

The easiest way to recognise the importance of Southend's seafront and its great heritage is to extend the existing seafront conservation areas. These are areas that have already been assessed, designated and managed over many years. They recognise the heritage of Southend. Without the seafront within their actual boundary they are, to some extent, missing the context of their very existence.

This would give the opportunity of conservation designation from Chalkwell to the pier, or perhaps up to Adventure Island. By extending The Crowstone and The Leas Conservation Areas, and creating a new Cliff Gardens Conservation Area, all extended to the bottom of the beach, a new zone of conservation area designation would be created along a large part of our seafront, potentially from Joscelyne's Beach at Chalkwell to Adventure Island. Exceptions could be included for structures extending beyond the bottom of the beach including the Crowstone monument, our breakwaters and the hard paths leading out towards Ray Gut.



Suggested change of boundary to Crowstone Conservation Area – the green boundary shown here as extended to the west to include the Crowstone monument, White Shelter, Chalkwell promenade and Joscelyne's beach

Oddly, our pier is not a conservation area, another oversight that should be corrected. Whilst the pier is listed grade II, protecting the structure, conservation area designation would help to protect the place of the pier and its character. Again, this is something that has been in place for years at other piers across the country.

[It may even be considered that another new conservation area should be considered for the 'Golden Mile' with its numerous, largely intact Georgian through to interwar Art Deco structures. This could connect to the Kursaal Conservation Area.]

Significance

The key legislation for designating and managing conservation areas is the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990. This requires local planning authorities to determine 'areas of special architectural or historic interest the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance' from time to time. The National Planning Policy Framework provides more detail on how conservation areas are formed and Southend City Council Core Strategy Policy CP4 includes 'safeguarding and enhancing the historic environment, heritage and archaeological assets, including Listed Buildings, Conservation Areas and Ancient Monuments'.

The emerging Local Plan includes the following draft strategic objectives:

Strategic Objective 11: Enhance the city's built heritage and capitalise on it to promote tourism and regeneration.

Strategic Objective 12: Maintain and enhance the distinct character and environment of the city's neighbourhoods to ensure that they remain vibrant, attractive and accessible.

Strategic Objective 18: Protecting and enhancing the quality of the coastal environment and its marine biodiversity.

All of this legislation and policy mitigates in favour of conserving our seafront heritage.

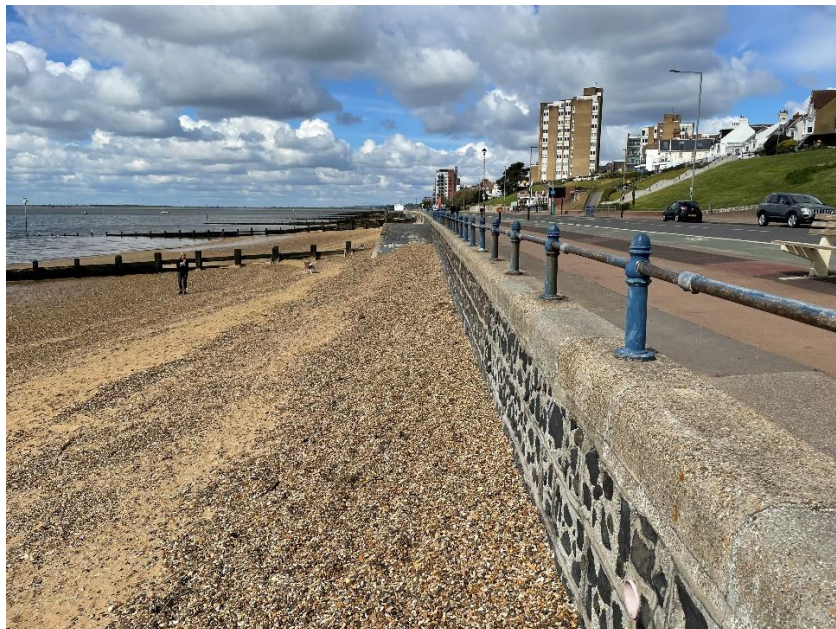
Historic England in advice note 1., titled 'Conservation Area Appraisal, Designation and Management' gives detailed advice on conservation areas. In assessing the *special interest* of a place the following 'key elements' are described as likely to include:

- The visible impact of the area's historical development on its plan form, townscape, character and architectural style and social/ historic associations and the importance of that history
- The contribution to the special interest made by the setting on the area
- Local distinctiveness and a sense of place which make the area unique
- How the places within it are experienced by the people who live and work there and visitors to the area

- The design, planting or past use of open spaces, green areas, parks and gardens, and trees

All of these criteria can be found, in different measures, at Southend's seafront. In assessing the setting of a place, the junction between land and sea can hardly be more definitive. Whilst Southend seafront clearly carries its own distinct beauty, setting isn't necessarily always beautiful as can be seen in the designated areas in Brighton, Eastbourne and elsewhere (see above). Raw and utilitarian aspects of setting can also carry special historic interest – the place where people have accessed and enjoyed the seafront for hundreds of years.

UNESCO goes further in describing both tangible and intangible heritage. Tangible heritage includes physical aspects such as the beach, promenade, sea wall, seaside structures and buildings. It also includes sea wall construction and finishes such as granite and basalt, decorative railings, breakwaters and hard paths. All of these features contribute to *special interest*.



The foreshore at Westcliff with historically significant beach and promenade and Architecturally significant details (basalt faced sea wall and cast iron railing posts)

Intangible heritage includes things like the ever-present appeal of a particular place and the lifetime of celebration and memories that result. People come to the seafront for many different reasons, perhaps described at its highest zenith by the seafront screams of excitement. Then there are the myriad of intangible activities that have created the seafront heritage - bathing and paddling, swimming and sailing, walking and exercise, family and friends gathering, playing the fairground and arcades, taking refreshments and morning, noon and night-time meals. Supporting the seafront economy. It goes on and on.



'The Crabbing Bridge' by John Wonnacott
beautifully illustrating the public heritage of these pathways

But the influence of the seafront extends way beyond the seafront itself. It extends into how the city was made and what the city has become, in numerous ways. Residential roads are orientated to the south and the sea, and much of the domestic, Edwardian and interwar architecture includes outlook balconies, bay windows and decorative features. Businesses include a very high number of eateries, the café vendors, and pleasure providers. Little surprise that the city's football team are affectionately known as the *Shrimpers*.

Heritage significance, of material or abstract form, is certainly in heaviest abundance at our seafront.

The way forward

It is seriously remiss that the historic seafront has not, to date, been recognised. As we have pointed out, this is pretty standard practice elsewhere in the country where seafront conservation areas are designated.

Designation would bring with it access to heritage funding, funding that at present is being directed to other towns and cities, suitably recognising their seafront heritage. This funding that could help with seawall repairs, reinstatement of Edwardian railings or other repairs to sea features. Having recognised heritage status could also assist other seafront activity

projects, helping the appeal of the city and the visitor economy. Southend is therefore disadvantaged by not being able to compete for this funding.

A longstanding, latent concern may be the potential for restrictions to seafront development potential. Conservation Area designation does not stop development but it does set a higher bar for development standards, respecting this great city heritage. Once again, this works elsewhere across our country. This is not a negative concern if we first choose to look after our primary heritage.

The next steps would seem to be support in principle from the Council Cabinet and a roll out of public consultation.

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Andy Atkinson MSc FRSA FIPM
Chair
MILTON CONSERVATION SOCIETY
1st September 2026

*Thanks to John Wonnacott for his permission to use his painting 'The Crabbing Bridge'