## Hadleigh Castle & Chalkwell Oaze

*Benfleet station - Hadleigh Castle - Leigh-on-Sea - Chalkwell station*

An easy stroll through Thames-side marshes, climbing to the spectacular ruins of Hadleigh Castle, before a wander through the lovely fishing village of Old Leigh and along the promenade to Chalkwell.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length:</th>
<th>5 ½ miles (8.9km)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Underfoot:</td>
<td>Some of the first section through the marshes and meadows can be muddy after rain. Other sections are well drained or surfaced paths.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrain:</td>
<td>Almost entirely flat, except for the short, steep ascent to Hadleigh Castle and a very gentle descent from it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maps:</td>
<td>1:50,000 Landranger 178 Thames Estuary; 1:25,000 Explorer 175 Southend-on-Sea &amp; Basildon.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Getting there:** Benfleet is served by 6 c2c services per hour (4 per hour on Sundays) from London Fenchurch Street (38-59 mins). All trains call at West Ham (30-50 mins) for London Underground and DLR connections and at Barking (25-45 mins) for London Underground and London Overground connections. Four trains per hour daily call at Limehouse (38-55 mins) for DLR connections.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Useful websites:</th>
<th>The route passes through Hadleigh Castle Country Park and past the castle itself. It also passes through the centre of the fishing village of Old Leigh.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Getting home:** Chalkwell has 6 trains an hour (4 on Sundays) to London Fenchurch Street (50-69 mins) via Barking (33-52 mins) for London Underground and London Overground connections and West Ham (39-58 mins) for London Underground and DLR connections. Four trains per hour call at Limehouse (47-54 mins) for DLR connections.

| Fares: | The cheapest option is to purchase a super off-peak day return to Chalkwell, which will cover both journeys, for £10.90 (£5.45 child, £7.20 railcard). |
**Route description**

- From the Southend-bound platform at Benfleet station, take the subway under the lines and exit via the ticket hall. Follow the road ahead, passing the bus stops, with Benfleet Creek - which separates Canvey Island from the mainland - across the road to the right.

*Canvey Island consists of seven square miles of saucer-flat alluvial deposits, and is now home to over 37,000 people and a large petro-chemical works, never seperated from the mainland by more than a few metres of tidal creeks. Despite this, it was not linked by bridge until 1931 - the bridge you see ahead replaced the original bridge in the 1970s - allowing the island to develop. Most traffic now crosses via a second bridge, visible to the west. The flat island was one of the areas worst hit by the North Sea flood of 1953, which killed 58 people on the island.*

- Where the main road swings right to cross the creek, keep straight ahead on a smaller road, passing the brick building housing a flood barrier and past a gate into the extensive Benfleet moorings (ignore the 'Private' signs - this is a public right of way). Past the 'Barge Gladys' floating bar, continue on the tarmac road, passing a barrier. Where road ends at a little car park, continue ahead through a gate marked as the entrance to Hadleigh Castle County Park.

*The Country Park covers an area of downland, woodland, meadows and creekside of significant importance scientifically, and as habitats, including for over-wintering birds and rare invertebrates. The country park was established by local authorities in the 1970s, to protect the area from threats including a golf course and a huge housing development planned on land owned by the Salvation Army. In the early 1990s, the Park was again threatened by a scheme - which seems astonishing today - for an elevated road to cross from Canvey Island across the marshes to a roundabout below the castle. The proposal was rejected in 1991.*

- Follow the clear path along the low levee, with the creek to your right and the low hills rising beyond the railway to your left. As you walk along the creekside, the dramatic remains of Hadleigh Castle loom closer on the hilltop ahead. You may also catch glimpses of the mountain bike track constructed for the 2012 London Olympic Games.

- Just after passing the second '8 knots' speed limit sign on the creek, where the levee curves left around a small inlet, drop to the left to a stile and gateway leading into a field.

- Follow the faint path ahead across the field towards the gates and signs at a level crossing. Cross the busy railway line with care (there is good visibility in both directions) and cut across the small field beyond to kissing gate in the right hand corner.

- At a second kissing gate, do not pass through, but keep to a broad path to the right along the field edge. Ignore the first path to the left.

- Just before you pass below the castle, cross a stile to the left and cut ahead to join a climbing track. Turn left along the track, quite steeply uphill. Behind you, a panorama opens up of Canvey Island, the Thames estuary and the Isle of Grain. At the brow of the hill, turn sharp right to enter the fenced ruins of Hadleigh Castle.
It is easy to see the strategic value of Hadleigh Castle from the huge panorama of the Thames Estuary that it commands from its ridge-top site. When a castle was first built here - by Hubert de Burgh, Earl of Kent in 1215 - the Thames would have lapped at the bottom of the hill on which it stands. When de Burgh fell out of favour in 1239, the castle became royal property, but little attention was paid to it until the threat from France in the first half of the 14th century convinced Edward III to significantly expand and modernise the castle as part of a defensive network for London. The castle formed part of the dowry of three of Henry VIII’s wives, but by the mid-16th century the castle was falling into disrepair and the estate was broken up. The castle is built on an unstable ridge of London clay, and slippages have frequently taken more of the remains of the castle with them. Today, parts of two towers and the curtain wall remain.

- Having explored the site, leave via the faint path descending to the left of the round tower, dropping to a pair of kissing gates. Pass through both gates, heading right along a grassy ridge towards the houses of Leigh-on-Sea.

- The path descends steadily to a stile. From here keep ahead on clear path alongside the hedgerow at the foot of hill. The path climbs slightly again, running a little above the railway to eventually enter a small patch of woodland and join a busy road.

- Turn right along the pavement, keeping straight ahead at the junction by Leigh-on-Sea station. At a mini-roundabout just beyond, veer right on Belton Gardens, running above Leigh Marina. Just beyond a house on the right, veer right again on a road over the railway bridge (marked as a dead end), noticing the line of cockles stalls beside the railway.

- At the bottom of the descent from the bridge, keep straight ahead past the Crooked Billet pub along Old Leigh’s attractive High Street, lined with pubs, tea rooms and fresh seafood stalls.

Old Leigh is the historic centre of Leigh-on-Sea, though the vast bulk of the town is now situated on the hills above, separated from Old Leigh by the London-Southend railway line, built in 1854. Leigh originally grew up as a major port for London, rising to a peak of prosperity in the 16th century. However, as ships became larger, Leigh could not cope and its main channel was allowed to silt up, meaning that from the 18th century it reverted to a fishing village, supplying the London markets, being particularly noted for cockles.

- At the end of the road beyond Leigh Sailing Club, keep straight ahead on the tarmac path along the promenade, between beach and railway line.

- Continue along this path all the way to Chalkwell, past Essex Yacht Club, with the beached HMS Wilton as its clubhouse.

HMS Wilton was built in 1970s as a prototype minesweeper, and had the distinction of being the first warship in the world to be built of glass-reinforced plastic, earning her the nickname ‘HMS Tupperware’.

- Walk past the wall behind the platforms at Chalkwell station - there is no direct access from the promenade - then veer left up a rising path and round a corner to a footbridge over the railway. The station entrance is immediately to the left at the other side of the bridge.