Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

MORECAMBE BAY

Lancaster Civic Society Guide 40

Morecambe Bay is big – 615 km² – second largest bay after The Wash in the UK. The tides in the Bay are very large – up to 10.5 m at Heysham – so the Bay has the most extensive area uncovered between high and low tides of any coast in the UK. Three major rivers (the Leven, Kent and Lune) flow into the Bay.

The Leven and Kent channels shift across the Bay, sometimes moving to the western side and then eastwards again a few years later. As they shift, the saltmarshes move too, extending out to sea on the side the channels are abandoning.



Morecambe Bay (Google Earth)

The traditional industry of the Bay was fishing – flat fish such as plaice, flounder and dabs in the channels; cockles and mussels on the higher banks (locally known as skears); and shrimps in the mud and sand areas. The latter gained national recognition as Morecambe Bay potted shrimps, supplied nationwide after the railway arrived in the mid-nineteenth century. The shrimp and shellfish harvests continue.

Sea traffic is concentrated now in the ports of Barrow, Heysham, Glasson and Fleetwood with regular ferries to Northern Ireland, Ireland and the Isle of Man as well as ro-ro traffic and bulk-cargo vessels.

Out in the Bay, easily visible from the shore, are several major windfarms, whose turbines have a generating capacity of 1655 megawatts, which is around 5% of the UK's onshore and offshore potential from wind power.

Further still out in the Bay are the Morecambe Bay gasfields, first discovered in 1974 and producing gas since 1985. The sea is still quite shallow here (around 30 metres) but the gas itself is over 900 metres underground.

Barrow is where the gas arrives onshore for treatment and supply to the national system, and Heysham is the offshore supply base for the rigs. At its peak the field supplied round 13% of UK demand, but supply is slowly declining, offset in part by the new Rhyl gasfield that is under development.

Several proposals have been made for a bridge across the Bay – to cut journey times, or a barrage to store water or generate electricity on the tides – but financial and environmental concerns have prevailed so far.

Any development needs to be done carefully as the Bay is heavily protected by UK and EU environmental legislation. It is a Natura 2000 site, a Special Area of Conservation, a Ramsar wetland and a Special Protection Area.

Together these designations give priority to the plants, marine life and birds that are so important a feature of this biologically productive area of marshes, mudflats, sand and shallow channels. The biggest attraction for tourists and local people is the wide range of birdlife, especially the northern species overwintering. They feed far out in the Bay at low tide when immense areas are exposed, and are pushed nearer to the shoreline at high tide. Guide gives more details about bird watching in the Lancaster area.

The Morecambe Bay Partnership is a charity aided by a consortium of public bodies the aim of which is to promote sustainable tourism and the local economy around the Bay. Their website shows what they do: Home | Morecambe Bay Partnership

The most distinctive tourist attraction of the Bay is a Cross Bay Walk. These are headed by the Queen's Guide to the Sands (a royal appointment dating from 1548).

Originally, he guided horse-drawn coaches across the sands; today it is walkers, often raising money for charity. https://guideoversands.co.uk

NB. A guide is essential because of the serious dangers from shifting channels, quicksands and fast-incoming tides. Never attempt this walk or venture out into the Bay without a guide.

The development of Morecambe is described in several guides in this series, particularly Guides 12 and 13. Guide 25 on Birdwatching is a useful read.



The Bay from above Morecambe, looking north (BBC photograph)



A guided cross-bay walk (from *Your Guide 2 the Lake District*)



Shrimpers in Morecambe Bay (from Booths)



A rig in the Morecambe Bay gas field (from Centrica)



Walney wind farm (BBC news)

Text – Gordon Clark.
Published by Lancaster Civic Vision (©2015; revised 2025)
Lancaster Civic Vision is the trading name of Lancaster Civic Society, registered charity no. 258434