



Weston's changing landscape

Most modern visitors approach Weston across the great plain of Northmarsh, the northern section of the Somerset Levels. Worle Hill and Sand Point rise towards you on your right and on your left you can see Bleadon and Brean Down. These hills, an extension of the Mendips, appear like islands rising out of some ancient sea. This is exactly what they were in our prehistoric past when sea levels were higher and the Severn Estuary reached many more miles inland.



Weston, seen from Cadbury Congresbury hillfort © NotFromUtrecht

These hills are mostly made of carboniferous limestone, laid down 350 - 300 million years ago. The area was covered in a shallow tropical sea, creating rock full of corals, crinoids and bivalve shells. Later, as the sea level fell, swamp conditions led to the deposits of sandstones, shales and coal, now found in the North East Mendips.

The oldest rocks are igneous, created by a series of active volcanoes 425 million years ago. There are examples of volcanic rock on Worle Hill and at St Thomas's Bay which make these areas of particular scientific interest.

In 1791 the historian Collinson wrote of Worle Hill: *'The mountain is an immense rock of limestone, with but very little herbage intermixed; yet here and there a solitary sheep is seen pasturing on its naked, barren ridge, which, being elevated far above the surrounding country, and overlooking the long tract of the Severn Sea, is buffeted by every blast.'*

Worle Hill and Bleadon are now largely wooded but until recently they would have looked like Brean Down and Sand Point. Their bareness made them ideal defensive positions with excellent views of the surrounding lands, but not attractive places to live because they were exposed to wind and rain coming in from the Atlantic. The only shelter would have been behind walls such as those found at Worlebury Hillfort.

Sand was deposited as sea levels fell, building dunes which created a new coastline. However, much of the land behind them remained below the level of the estuary and subject to flooding. Consequently, farms and homesteads were confined to the lower slopes of the hills which were used to grow crops, with better soil and some protection from the sea. Higher up the hills the thinner soil was only suited to grazing animals.



A view of Sand Point © Rodw

During medieval times it became one of the manorial duties to maintain man made ditches called rhynes (pronounced *reens*) which began the work of draining the marshes. This provided fertile soil for crops, mainly Wheat, Barley and Rape.



Uphill Great Rhyne © Neil Owen

The need to drain the landscape controlled the size of fields. Produce was for local use rather than to be taken to market. Much of the land remains too wet for growing vegetables or cereals. It is instead used for cows or apple orchards, producing the West Country's most recognised products: milk, cheese and cider!

Progress towards draining the wetlands around Weston was slow. This changed in the early 1800s when the town began to grow as a resort and land was needed for its expansion.

Another major change was during the 1820s, when Worle Hill was planted with trees by the Smyth-Pigott family to create a hunting reserve. Originally these were Scots Pines but most of these were cut down during the First World War (for use in the mines as pit props) and the trees we see today have grown since then.

In the 1880s, in an attempt to stabilise the coastline and boost tourism, Weston embarked on an ambitious Seafront Improvement Scheme. The project had three major elements. Firstly, a levelling of the sand dunes or 'tots' as drifting sand caused major problems in the town. Secondly, the building of a sea wall with a promenade to contain the high tides that could flood well into the town. The final part of the scheme was the creation of lawns and gardens running the length of the seafront.

However, the scheme was unpopular with influential locals. They liked the rough coastal paths and the dunes. Even though sand blew everywhere and occasionally the town flooded up as far as The Boulevard. This might be because the people who ran the town did not like the sound of anything that might encourage working class tourism. Day trippers to the town were very 'undesirable'. If they'd had their way Weston would have developed very differently.

Transport links have also shaped the way that Weston has grown. The early settlement was isolated by its location, surrounded by marshes on one side and the sea on the other. This did not really change until the arrival of the railway in the 1840s, which allowed the town to blossom into a tourist resort. It also allowed industry to develop, in particular the potteries which used the local clay.



An early 1900s postcard showing Beach Lawns

In the late 1900s the arrival of the motorway prompted another period of rapid growth. North Worle, close to the M5, has become a dormitory not just for Bristol but all points North, South, East and West.

To bring us up to modern times, the most significant change to the landscape is increased drainage of the Northmarsh to provide even more land for housing. Large drainage ditches, flood 'ponds' and a range of other sophisticated flood defences have been created. But this creates new challenges for the town at a time when global warming means sea levels are set to rise again.



Weston-super-Mare
Town Council