

By Andy Sherman

The Formby coast is one of the fastest eroding shorelines in the country, losing between 4 and 5m of land a year. On rough days over 14m of land has been known to disappear during a single storm. During the 1940's the Crosby Borough engineer estimated the dunes here were eroding by 4ft (1.2m) a year (Operation Sandstone archive, National Archives ref ADM 326-580). In the 56 years between 1902 and 1958 the Formby coast eroded by 915ft (330m) at Wicks Lane and by 1083ft (330m) at Victoria Road (Liverpool Echo 16th October 1961). It hasn't always been like this though, Formby Point was once an accreting landscape, slowly growing into the sea.

In the early 20th century it was the coast to the south of Formby at Blundell Sands that was eroding, so the local council decided to use explosives to alter the course of the River Alt. Diverting the river did slow the rate of erosion, but millions of tons of soil still had to be dumped behind a concrete seawall to provide the protection residents wanted.



Coastal erosion at Blundell Sands in the 1920's. (Photo ID SS_PA1_8, photograph courtesy of Sefton Library)



Stills from the British Pathe news film 'Diverting a river', shown in cinemas during 1929. (Film ID: 800.18, copyright British Pathe)



Changing the course of the River Alt, and increasing storminess brought on by climate change has only increased the speed of coastal erosion. This is probably most noticeable at the tobacco cliffs. From the 1950's to 1970's thousands of tons of tobacco were dumped on old asparagus fields by the British Nicotine Company Ltd. Today the sea has reached these fields and the tobacco is crashing onto the beach in large lumps. Sheets of Marston matting* and plastic shipping tags are also eroding onto the beach along with the tobacco. Since CITIZAN started recording the erosion of the tobacco cliffs in the summer of 2016 more than 20m of land has disappeared at an average rate of 4m a year. A rate of erosion more than twice that estimated at the start of the 20th century.



The forward edge of the tobacco cliffs, recorded in the summer of 2016 and 2021, marked on a satellite image taken on 01-01-2000. The shoreline in 2000 can be seen in the top left of the satellite image.



Volunteers examine the tobacco cliffs during summer recording.



Marston matting and chunks of waste tobacco on the beach (above). A plastic tag exposed in the face of the tobacco cliff (below).

Formby has a wealth of archaeology beyond the tobacco cliffs. To learn a little more about the stunning prehistoric footprints and the resolute lifeboat house follow the QR code.



*Marston matting is formed from interlocking metal grates used to make temporary roadways and airstrips. These were laid over re-used railway sleepers to create access to the dumping ground for the trucks carrying the waste tobacco. They are often mis-identified by members of the public as 'tank tracks'.

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