

# Nature Notes

## Shell stories

Most local people will know the Shingle Street shell line. It's the long trail of gleaming white shells that snakes its way over the shingle from the Coastguards Cottages to the high-tide mark.



Cheryl Gray

*The shell Line*

There's a story here. Two women – childhood friends – both suffered serious illnesses in later life at about the same time and came to Shingle Street together in 2005 to recuperate. They marked the progress of their recovery by constructing a line of shells in stages over the shingle, until they were healed and the line was complete.

A simple and very moving celebration of the renewal of life. And each year they return to repair this fragile thread of shells from the ravages of wind and weather

But there are other life stories to be told here, too. Who lived in these shells before they were cast up as empty husks on this wild beach? The line stretches for over 300 yards and I reckon it must contain some 20,000 individual shells.

Most of those in the Shingle Street shell line are common whelks, but there are some other species mixed in too, each with their own shapes, textures, decorations and delicate architecture.

Shells fall into two main families. First, the bivalves, the ones with two hinged halves that can open and close, which include mussels, cockles, scallops and oysters. Secondly, the gastropods (an unlovely term, which means 'stomach feet'). These have a single shell enclosing their soft bodies, usually designed as a coiled spiral narrowing to a sharp point, and they move around on a large, muscular 'foot' protruding from the wide end. This second group includes such familiar species as whelks, periwinkles, limpets and cowries.

Collectively, these shells are all classified as 'molluscs' and the name literally means 'soft things', which are of course the living creatures inside these their hard, protective shells and the parts we eat if we have a taste for shellfish.

Molluscs are among the most ancient creatures on earth, dating back over 500 million years, and they occupy the largest living-space on the planet – the seas and oceans. There are over a 100,000 different mollusc species worldwide and their shells have been a perennial source of wonder to humankind, used from earliest times as jewellery, ornaments, food and sometimes even as currency. They have entered folklore as creation stories (Botticelli's 'Venus' emerging from a scallop), sex symbols (cowries with their suggestive shapes) and trumpets (the conch in *Lord of the Flies*).

One final layer of symbolism in the Shingle Street shells, whose original inhabitants have long since departed, is that some of them are now re-occupied by other creatures like tiny spiders and hermit crabs – new life in old homes.

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