

... anything the  
... you can walk to the shore and  
harvest seaweed and samphire by the armful.'

## ART BY THE WATER

**Southend** tends to be defined by its old-school, East End-on-sea larks, but over the past few years its creative reputation has been rising. The **Village Green** and **Estuary** festivals, both returning in 2021, celebrate the region's contemporary scene, which also has a home in the **Focal Point Gallery** and its events venue **Twenty One**. 'They've changed the dynamic,' says Elsa James, an artist based at the town's **Old Waterworks** studios. 'I don't have to travel to London for my art fix – it feels as if there's an Essex renaissance happening.' James's identity as a Black woman living here informs her conceptual pieces alongside her activism work with the Essex Girls Liberation Front collective. Her film projects, such as *Forgotten Black Essex*, drawing on historic muses such as Princess Dinubolu from Senegal, who entered a Southend beauty contest in 1908, and *Black Girl Essex*, in which James, dressed in Carnival costume, walks around Tilbury Docks (where *Windrush* landed in 1948), give a new narrative to the stereotype. (For another take, Sarah Perry's new book *Essex Girls* is a spirited defence of 'profane and opinionated women' who dare to speak out of turn.) 'Westcliff-on-Sea is very culturally diverse, while Leigh-on-Sea has cafés and small places such as **Vino Vero** for wine,' says James. 'After an art preview, most head to **The Railway** for drinks; there's also **Craftwerk** for ales. The **Oyster Creek Kitchen**, set in a Victorian sun shelter on the seafront, is lovely. And if friends are staying, I point them to **Seven Hotel** for the night.' RICK JORDAN

House for Essex in Wrabness, 'a monument to thwarted female  
dill at The Sun Inn in Dedham; Georgian house in Mistl...