

Peckover House and gardens in Wisbech



# Foray into the Fens

You don't need to travel to the ends of the earth when there's beauty in your own backyard. **Norman Wright** takes a short trip from our Peterborough HQ to visit fantastic Fenland

SOME OF the most interesting places to visit are often on our own doorsteps, although inevitably we frequently travel further afield rather than explore locally.

That's been turned on its head by Covid, so most of us are now looking to home shores rather than to venture overseas, with all the restrictions and complexities. That made us think of what *Choice* has in its Peterborough backyard and take a foray into the Fens to discover the treasures we have overlooked for too long.

The Fens, centred on Cambridgeshire but spreading into Lincolnshire and Norfolk, have a stark natural beauty, a diverse environment with human,

geographic, archaeological and historical stories to reveal from many thousands of years.

The history of the Fens as a wetland landscape began around 10,000 years ago when rising sea levels caused Britain to become an island.

Marine and estuarine clays and silts were deposited as the sea underwent a succession of advances and retreats. These formed the Silt Fens around The Wash where, from north to south, the Rivers Witham, Welland, Nene and Ouse drain into the North Sea.

In other areas where the sea had a less direct influence, high sea levels and the deposition of marine sediments had the

effect of slowing the movement of water off the land and into The Wash. This caused the rivers to flood and create boggy areas. It was under these conditions that the deep peat soils of the 'Black Fens' further inland were formed.

The Fens are very low-lying compared with the chalk and limestone uplands that surround them – in most places no more than 33ft above sea level.

As a result of large-scale drainage in the 18th and 19th centuries and the subsequent shrinkage of the peat fens, many parts of the Fens now lie below sea level and include the lowest land in the UK. Within the Fens are a few hills, which have historically been called

One of the Bronze Age homes recreated at Flag Fen



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islands, as they remained dry when the low-lying fens around them were flooded. The largest of the fen-islands was the 23-square-mile island on which the cathedral city of Ely was built. Its highest point is 128ft above sea level.

A network of drainage channels and built-up banks for flood protection reclaimed the land, some of the most productive in Britain and ideal for arable crops, particularly vegetables. If you travel on the East Coast main railway line, you will see the black soil in the fields between Huntingdon and Peterborough.

The low-lying land means that those

rivers would drain slowly without help. Originally water was pumped into the drainage systems and then into the rivers by windmills, later by steam power and now increasingly by electricity.

To start our exploration we didn't need to travel far from our Peterborough base.

## Flag Fen

Flag Fen Archaeology Park is close to the city and you can explore how the prehistoric people of the fen lived more than 3000 years ago. There is a Bronze Age village with reconstructed roundhouses. Original Bronze Age

remains can be seen in situ in the form of the preserved timbers of a monumental engineering achievement.

Excavations on the site revealed details of a wooden platform-and-post alignment that stretches for nearly a kilometre across the fen. These were built up between 1350BC and 950BC and are of great national and international significance. Due to the waterlogged nature of the fens, this unique monument has been remarkably preserved.

It is believed that the post alignment consists of 60,000 vertical timber posts and 250,000 horizontal pieces of wood, spanning the wet and marshy fen to meet a droveway on dry ground at each end. All the pieces of wood had been worked and shaped with tools.

It could it have been a boundary and defensive structure protecting the valuable resources of the fen. Or it could have been created as a bridge to drive cattle across.

Within the structure, hundreds of metal, stone and bone artefacts have been found. The range of ancient objects found on the site, including weapons, jewellery and England's oldest wheel, are on show in the museum. It is believed that many of these were placed into the waters as ritual offerings to the gods or spirits.

■ For more information, see the website and follow the links: ([www.visitpeterborough.com/things-to-do](http://www.visitpeterborough.com/things-to-do)).

Welney Wetlands Centre nature reserve near Wisbech run by the WWT



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Wonderful Georgian terraces alongside the River Nene in Wisbech



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Morning mist rises over the reed and sedge landscape at Wicken Fen National Nature Reserve, Cambridgeshire

### Stonea Camp

Stonea Camp is an Iron Age hill fort located at Stonea near March in the Cambridgeshire Fens. Situated on a gravel bank just 6ft 7in above sea level, it is the lowest hill fort in Britain and was an important settlement in Roman and medieval times. Interpretive boards explain what would have been sited here when the Fens would have looked very different from today.

### Wisbech

Wisbech is known as the Capital of the Fens. The tidal River Nene sweeps through, with beautiful Georgian architecture on both banks.

Peckover House is one of those gems; a classic Georgian merchant's town house, it was lived in by the Peckover family for 150 years.

They were a family of wealthy Quaker bankers. Their association with Wisbech began in 1777 when Jonathan Peckover established his grocery business there. Then on the death of Alexandrina Peckover in 1948, the house and garden came into the care of the National Trust.

The gardens are outstanding—two acres, complete with orangery, summerhouses, croquet lawn and beautiful rose garden. Website: ([www.nationaltrust.org.uk/peckover-house-and-garden](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/peckover-house-and-garden)).

Octavia Hill, one of the founders of the National Trust, was born in Wisbech in 1838, the eighth daughter of James Hill, a prosperous corn merchant and former banker. You can visit the house where she was born.

In 1885, Octavia Hill, Robert Hunter and Hardwicke Rawnsley (who collected rents for Octavia as a young man) worked together to raise public awareness of the railway developments threatening the Lake District. This collaboration led to the foundation of The National Trust for the Preservation of Historic Buildings and Natural Beauty, to hold land and buildings in perpetuity 'for ever, for everyone'.

■ Website: ([www.octaviahill.org](http://www.octaviahill.org)).

### England's 'Holy Land'

The Fens have been referred to as the 'Holy Land of the English' because of the former monasteries, now churches and cathedrals, of Crowland, Ely,

Peterborough, Ramsey and Thorney.

Peterborough and Ely Cathedrals are two of the finest in the land, with rich history.

Crowland Abbey is the parish church within the ruins of the old Benedictine monastery. Also in the centre of the village is the quaint three-way bridge.

### Holme Fen

Managed by Natural England, Holme Fen is a nature reserve across 657 acres of landscape.

It is home to a variety of wildlife species throughout the year. The meres have islands and shallow banks which encourage birds, dragonflies and marsh plants, including more than 500 types of fungi, enabling the reserve to be designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

Visitors can explore the finest silver birch woodland in England and visit the famous Holme Post where you will be 9ft below sea level – the lowest land point in Great Britain.

If you had visited Holme Fen a few hundred years ago, you would have had a view of the largest lake in southern England, Whittlesea Mere. An impressive three



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Fenland fields of the famous fertile black soil in front of Ely Cathedral



Silver Birch woods at Holme Fen

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◀ miles across, it was a place for ice-skating and sailing, and home to many species of wildlife found nowhere else. Some of these species, including the large copper butterfly, became extinct when the mere was drained to create farmland in the 1850s.

After drainage, an area on the mere's south-western shore was still too wet for farming. This became Holme Fen and survives as one of the only fragments of ancient wild fen. There are still small areas of acid grassland and heath as well as a very small piece of raised bog.

There is a way-marked walk in Holme Fen, which starts at the Holme Post.

Holme and Woodwalton Fen, also a national nature reserve, are the last wild parts of the Great Fen between Peterborough and Huntingdon.

## King's Dyke Nature Reserve, Whittlesey

The history of the site dates back to the Twenties, when clay was dug by pickaxe and shovel. The site was worked out in the Seventies and was finally restored in 1995. It now offers an example of how industrial land can be transformed to benefit both wildlife and the local community.

Access to the reserve is only open to current members who will be provided with a code for the gate, which is currently locked. If you are not a member, you will need to complete a free membership form.

■ **Details on the website:**  
([www.kingsdykenaturereserve.com](http://www.kingsdykenaturereserve.com)).

## Wicken Fen

Wicken Fen, near Ely, one of Europe's most important wetlands, supports an abundance of wildlife. There are more than 9000 species, including a spectacular array of plants, birds and dragonflies.

The raised boardwalk and lush grass droves allow easy access to a lost landscape of flowering meadows, sedge and reed beds, where you can encounter rarities such as hen harriers, water voles and bitterns.

Wicken Fen Vision, an ambitious landscape-scale conservation project, is opening up new areas of land to explore. Grazing herds of Highland cattle and Konik ponies are helping to create a diverse range of new habitats.

■ **Website:** ([www.nationaltrust.org.uk/wicken-fen-nature-reserve](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/wicken-fen-nature-reserve)).



The quaint three way bridge in Crowland dates from the 14th century

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## Find out more

For more information on the Fens, contact Fenland Tourism, website: ([www.visitcambridgeshirefens.org](http://www.visitcambridgeshirefens.org)).