

The Fen Edge Trail Walk: Earith to Needingworth

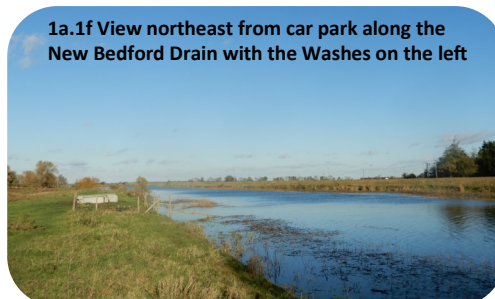
5.3 miles / 8.5 km

in partnership with

**Wildlife Trust BCN Hunts Local Group
& Huntingdonshire Ramblers**

'My favourite thing about this walk is that you can imagine being near the coast here 3,400 years ago, looking out over tidal creeks, with saltmarsh stretching into the distance'

Pat, Hunts Local Group
Wildlife Trust BCN



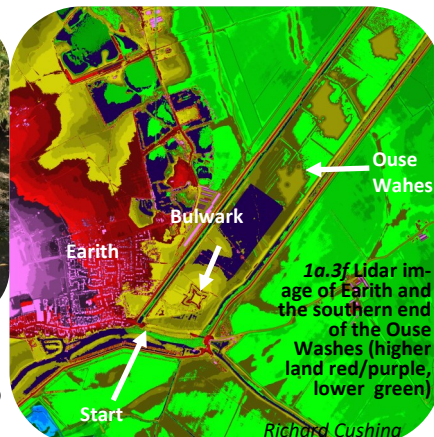
1a.1f View northeast from car park along the New Bedford Drain with the Washes on the left



3.1f Village sign



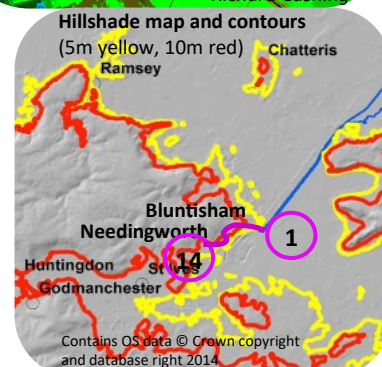
3.2f Sculpture showing a Bandy hockey player



Ouse Washes
Bulwark
Earith
Start
1a.3f Lidar image of Earith and the southern end of the Ouse Washes (higher land red/purple, lower green)
Richard Cushing

The route: 'into the valley of the River Great Ouse'

Having arrived at **Earith**, at the southern end of the **Ouse Washes**, the Trail turns south west to **Bluntisham** and **Needingworth**. Most of the walk is only a **few metres above** Mean Sea Level reaching a maximum of 21m. At several points it crosses the **5m contour**, the approximate **fen edge**. Partly following the River Great Ouse, the walk takes you through a gentle landscape that does not resemble the large, 'Ice Age', **braided river** that formed the lower part of the valley as it reached the fenland basin. Extensive research by **Cambridge Archaeological Unit** has revealed many significant cultural sites showing that people adapted to changing water levels over the last few thousand years, in a dynamic delta-like landscape. The furthest extent of the sea incursion c.**3,400 years ago, during the Bronze Age**, saw marine conditions extend to just south of Earith and waterways were possibly tidal much further inland. The **Ouse Valley** has always been an important travel route and the walk joins up with several long distance footpaths - the **Ouse Valley Way**, **Rothschild Way**, **Greenwich Meridian Trail** and the **Pathfinder** and **Via Beata Long Distance Walks**. The land adjacent to the river, all below 5m, has extensive gravel workings, much of which are now wetland again, forming the reedbeds and open water of the **RSPB Ouse Fen Nature Reserve**.



Hillshade map and contours (5m yellow, 10m red)

Ramsey Chatteris

Bluntisham

Needingworth

Huntingdon

Godmanchester

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13.3f The marina and cricket club house near the Pike and Eel



1.2f Aerial view of the Ouse Washes from just north of the start of the walk



13a.1f Ouse Valley Way board

Practicalities As with all of the Fen Edge Trail, you can walk the complete length of any suggested walk using transport one way or choose a shorter or longer round trip option, or just visit some of the places on the route. The walk is divided into numbered parts as shown on the two maps. Photo numbers refer to the relevant part and the order they are seen e.g. 13.3f is the third photo relating to part 13 (f = on this front page). A circular walk can be made from Earith by crossing the river at Brownhill Staunton and from Needingworth by either walking to Bluntisham along the main road or walking to point 9a through Ouse Fen NR. The **Wildlife Trust Local Group** organise walks and talks www.wildlifebcn.org/huntingdonshire-local-group. See www.wildlifebcn.org/nature-reserves/ouse-washes for info on the Washes. **Huntingdonshire Ramblers** helped with the initial planning of the route www.ramblers.org.uk/huntingdonshire. For the **RSPB Ouse Fen Nature Reserve** see www.rspb.org.uk/reserves-and-events/reserves-a-z/ouse-fen.

Length of walk (one way Earith to Needingworth) approx. **5 miles / 8.5 km**. Guide time (not including stops) 2hrs 30mins. Maps O.S. Explorer 225. BGS Geology Map 187 (New Series). Online map viewer www.bgs.ac.uk/discoveringGeology (plus iGeology mobile app).

Transport and services Bus services run between **Earith**, **Bluntisham** and **Needingworth** and to them from **St Ives** and **Ramsey** (www.dews-coaches.com and www.stagecoachbus.com). There are bus services from St Ives to trains at **Huntingdon** (10 miles) and **Cambridge** (17 miles). On-street **parking** in Earith and Needingworth. Please only park where allowed and in consideration of others. There are pubs and shops in Earith and Needingworth and a pub in Bluntisham.

Safety Be aware of risks you may encounter and take note of warnings given by landowners or on pathways. The terrain is generally flat, with some muddy ground. Take particular care with uneven terrain, when near water, on soft, slippery ground, near livestock or walking along or crossing roads. Some paths can be overgrown. Ensure your dog is kept under control as needed. All Fen Edge Trail walks are on publicly accessible routes. This walk follows Public Rights of Way when not along roads (except the optional detours into nature reserves on RSPB paths).

Places of interest along the Trail

1 The start is at a significant place in the current river system of the southern Fens - the point where the waters of the **River Great Ouse** (1.1) divide, with some flowing north into two 'new' major drains, the **Old and New Bedford Rivers**, and the rest continuing as the **Old West River**, joining the River Cam south of Ely. The sluice next to the start point controls the egress of water at times of high flow, from the Ouse into the Old Bedford River. You are standing at the southernmost tip of the '**Hundred Foot Washes**' (1.2f), the land between the Bedford Rivers that plays a major role in the region's flood defenses as well as being an internationally important wildlife area. Not far beyond the opposite bank of the River Ouse, to the south, was the furthest inland extent of the **late Neolithic/Bronze Age marine incursion**, based on evidence of the deposition of tidal silts and clays. There would have been a **large, coastal delta here c.3,400 years ago** with **tidal creeks** winding their way up the valley. **Salt marshes and mud flats** would have been present nearby, stretching out to the northeast before reaching open sea towards what is now the Wash. The **Ouse Washes** form an area of flood catchment that extends 20.8m (33.5 km) from Earith to Denver Sluice, preventing inundation of the surrounding land. It is confined between two major, embanked, artificial waterways. The oldest, on the western side, completed by 1637, became known as the **Old Bedford River** when the new channel, the **New Bedford River** (called the '**Hundred Foot**') was completed in 1652 to the east.



1.1 View west along the Ouse from the start next to the sluice

1a.2 View of earth mounds that are remains of the Bulwark (from the car park)



1a A short additional walk before the start takes you to a view over the **New Bedford** (1a.1f). These 'rivers' are named after the Duke of Bedford who, with others, commissioned **Cornelius Vermuyden** to oversee the construction of a new 'cut' to facilitate drainage of the Fens. Some work was carried out by **Cromwell's Scottish prisoners** from the **Civil War**. Today, the **Ouse Washes** are an internationally important wetland for the conservation of waterfowl, particularly winter visiting **Whooper Swans**, and breeding waders who use the summer pastures. It is designated under the international **Ramsar Convention**, as a European **Special Area of Conservation** and UK **Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)**. It also has a rich aquatic and semi-aquatic fauna and flora. Parts are managed by **The Wildlife Trust BCN** and the **RSPB (Welches Dam)** and the **Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (Welney)**. To the north of the car park, the uneven ground contains the remains of **The Bulwark** (1a.2 and 1a.3f), an **English Civil War** earthwork, built during military operations between 1642 and 1645. It was a gun emplacement in WW2 (no access).

2 As you walk into Earith, on your right is a **memorial** to the crews killed in a 1942 air crash between a Hurricane and Stirling. After the bridge, you start walking slightly uphill from low land covered in **Alluvium** to higher **River Terrace Gravels** which formed 'dry' land on which Earith was built. '**Earith**' means mud (or gravel) and 'hithe', a landing place. Its significance grew due to its location on the river. Bridge End, near the crossing point of the rivers, would have been an important part of the village (2.1).



2.1 House in Bridge End, Earith

3 To see the **village sign** (3.1f), turn left along Colne Rd to the corner on the A1123, and then return. The **pond** on Colne Rd (3.2f) has a memorial to the local sport of '**Bandy**', thought to be a precursor of ice hockey. A number of teams went to the 1920 Olympics only to find they had to play according to Canadian Ice-Hockey rules. It is still played today using a ball rather than a puck, although not locally as recent winters are usually not cold enough to freeze the waters sufficiently.



4.1 The path winds through a patch of scrub and small trees

4 The many **orchards** once found in the area grew well on the free-draining gravels. An area of grassland, scrub and trees is a haven for breeding migrant birds and butterflies (4.1).

5 Gradually, you go slightly uphill, crossing the 10m contour as you walk along the field edge, with the River Terrace Gravels forming the higher land to your right and the **Jurassic Amphthill Clay** the lower land to your left partly covered by a small, deciduous plantation.



5a.1 Berry Fen SSSI, looking east along the 5m contour, in the area of a large tidal creek 3,400 years ago

5a A detour takes you to **Berry Fen**, next to the river. Once through the gate, the path and the land to the west (right) is part of **RSPB Ouse Fen**, an important site for wintering wildfowl (**please take care not to disturb any birds present**). Looking east from the path is an area with a rich wetland flora, designated an **SSSI** (privately owned). Here, the land rises (5a.1) towards the roadside edge of the fen (along the 5m contour). **3,400 years ago in the Bronze Age**, this was the edge of a major **tidal creek** that wound across the valley as part of a coastal estuary. The site was also a favoured place for '**Bandy**'.

5b Walking along the river you have joined the Ouse Valley Way.

6 At the allotments (6.1) you are on a **River Terrace**, over 20m above the Ouse Valley floor.



6.1 Bluntisham allotments

7 In **Bluntisham**, at the **East St/Colne Rd** junction you join the **Pathfinder Long Distant Footpath** which links the historic RAF Pathfinder stations. Bluntisham was formerly known as **Blondesham** (14th century), Bluntsome and Blunsham (16th century). The manor dates from the **10th century**, when it was seized by Toli the Dane.

8 You will see a (Grade II) memorial with a shingled roof containing a **barograph** measuring atmospheric pressure. It was erected in memory of the family of **Charles G Tebbutt** who published the rules of Bandy in 1882. It records the location's altitude 60ft (18.29m), longitude 0° 0' 32" E and latitude 52° 21' 14" (8.1). Nearby, the **White Swan** is the only pub left in the village (the Prince of Wales on the A1123 recently converted for residential use). The village pump is on the house opposite the pub. The **Baptist Meeting House** is a red brick building in the graveyard further down on the left, with the **Sunday School** next to the street. Note a large house on the left before the A1123 -built in 1720 and formerly the Old Rectory, **Bluntisham House** was the home of author **Dorothy L Sayers**. A doorway is from Oliver Cromwell's home, Old Slepe Hall, St Ives, now demolished.



8.1 The barograph in Bluntisham



10 As you reach the river (10.1), consider the **rich environmental history** of the lower Ouse Valley. The **wet, alder woodland** in the valley floor of the **Neolithic** changed to **reedswamp** as freshwater started backing up and, by about 3,400 years ago in the Bronze Age, the most widespread marine inundation of the fens reached its maximum extent in this south western part of the **Wash Basin** (10.2). This area became the upper reaches of a tidal, brackish estuary with, further downstream to the north east, marine conditions (salt marshes,



mudflats and open water) stretching all the way to what is now the **North Sea**. Today, the Ouse is still **tidal to Brownhill Stauch** and seals are seen even further upriver, past St Ives, despite it being freshwater.

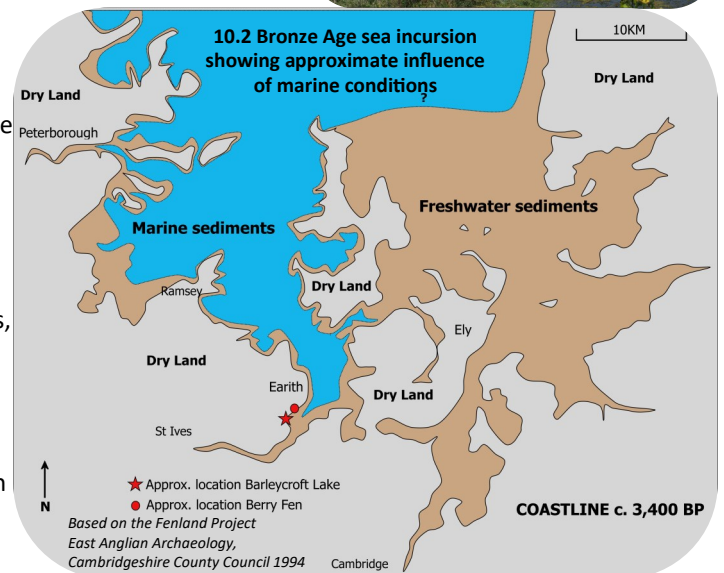
11 The Trail now follows the **Ouse Valley Way**. In summer look out for the many dragonflies (11.1) along the embankment southwards (11.2) to **Brownhill Stauch** (11.3). Old maps show an inn here, long gone. The Stauch has an **elver (young eel) pass** allowing their movement upstream. Problems have arisen due to the invasive non-native freshwater mussels clogging up internal pipes. It is also one of several stations recording river levels to help with flood warning. There is also a lock here allowing access for boats.



11a There is an **option to return to Earith** if wished (see next page). This takes you back along the opposite river bank with the main part of the **RSPB Ouse Fen nature reserve** to your right (see next page).

12 Staying on the main walk, the path takes you south, passing a marker (12.1) showing the position of the **Greenwich Meridian** (0 degrees longitude). This is one of many along the **Greenwich Meridian Trail** which runs 292m (470 km) from West Sussex through Cambridgeshire to the coast in East Yorkshire.

13 The **Pike and Eel pub** (13.1) is situated on an attractive stretch of the river (13.2) where herons and (in summer) terns can be seen. It had a ferry crossing to Over, on the opposite bank, and photographs show this was still in operation in 1914. The inn, once owned by a cousin of Oliver Cromwell has been extensively extended over the years. It has a marina and Boat Club with a thatched pavilion (13.3f). Seals (13.4) can sometimes be seen here at quieter times.





13.4 Common Seal by the Ouse

13a The **Ouse Valley Way**, which runs 142 miles (229 km) from Northamptonshire to Kings Lynn in Norfolk, continues across fields north of the river here to rejoin it at the village of Holywell. The **Ouse Valley Trust** has recently provided a series of 13 interpretation boards along the Way. These are very informative (13a.1f). See www.greatousevalleytrust.org.uk.

Passing two poultry farms on the left and the village hall you enter the village. Needingworth had an extensive fire in 1847 that destroyed much of the village. It is on the (mostly **3rd**) **Terrace** of the Ouse, the gravels providing well draining land, once having many fruit orchards.

14 The **War Memorial** (14.1) is at the end of the walk. It was erected in 1920 and now honours those who lost their lives in both world wars. The obelisk is made of **Portland Stone**, a high quality limestone from Dorset. The small building on the right is the **village lock up**!



14.1 War memorial

Round trip options - return to Earith

11a Note the owl breeding boxes. Along the footpath you may see flocks of feral geese in winter and many species of butterflies (11a.1 & 2) and other insects in summer. This is the route of the **Rothschild Way** (11a.3) which links the National Nature Reserves of **Wicken Fen** and **Woodwalton Fen**. This part of the **Ouse Valley** has been extensively quarried to extract the sands and gravels of the **River Terraces**. There are numerous pits, the largest area of which is here, on the south side of the river between Earith and Over. The land is now being restored (11a.4) to become the **Ouse Fen** nature reserve as part of the **Hanson-RSPB wetland project**. The **RSPB** has an aim of creating the largest area of reedbed in the UK here as breeding habitat for birds such as **Bittern**. The main entrance is at the northern end: www.rspb.org.uk/globalassets/downloads/documents/reserves/ouse-fen-trail-guide-2018.pdf

This area has also proved to be **one of the most important areas for archaeological and historical environment research in Cambridgeshire**, with many significant finds, including burial mounds and artefacts with dates covering thousands of years including the Neolithic and Bronze Age. It has been extensively studied by the **Cambridge Archaeological Unit** from Colne Fen in the north, Barleycroft in the west, across the **Old West River** to the Haddenham Upper Delphs and here, in the area between Earith, Over and Willingham. This lower part of the Ouse Valley also has a **rich landscape heritage**, shown by the discovery of a **series of large sand ridges** and **many palaeochannels** revealing a complex and dynamic history.



11a.1 Common Blue butterfly



11a.2 Speckled Wood



11a.3 Rothschild Way (looking along the Corporation Bank east to Bluntisham)



11a.5 The railway river crossing looking towards Bluntisham



11a.7 Looking west along the Bedford Level Corporation Barrier Bank 'Washlands'

You pass the remnants of the supports for the **Ely to St Ives railway** bridge across the Ouse Valley (11a.5). The line opened between Ely and Sutton on 16th April 1866 and closed to passengers in 1931, finally shutting to goods traffic in July 1964. The embankment also provides excellent views across the washland to **Earith Marina**

(11a.6). The constitution of the **Bedford Level** Corporation was settled by an Act of Parliament 1663. It is assumed the **Corporation Barrier Bank** was built around that time. The bank itself encloses a small 'washland' (11a.7). The 'Barrier', was built to prevent flood water from the River Great Ouse spilling onto the surrounding farmland. There is a stone (11a.8) commemorating a **breach of the Bank in 1947**. After the junctions of the Ouse with the Old Bedford and New Bedford, you reach the **Hermitage Lock** keeper's cabin.



11a.4 Developing the RSPB Ouse Fen nature reserve



11a.6 Earith marina from the Barrier Bank



11a.8 Stone commemorating breach of bank



Flocks of wigeon graze riverside grassland

www.fenedgetrail.org



@FenEdgeTrail

@cambsgeology

info@cambsgeology.org



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www.fen.land

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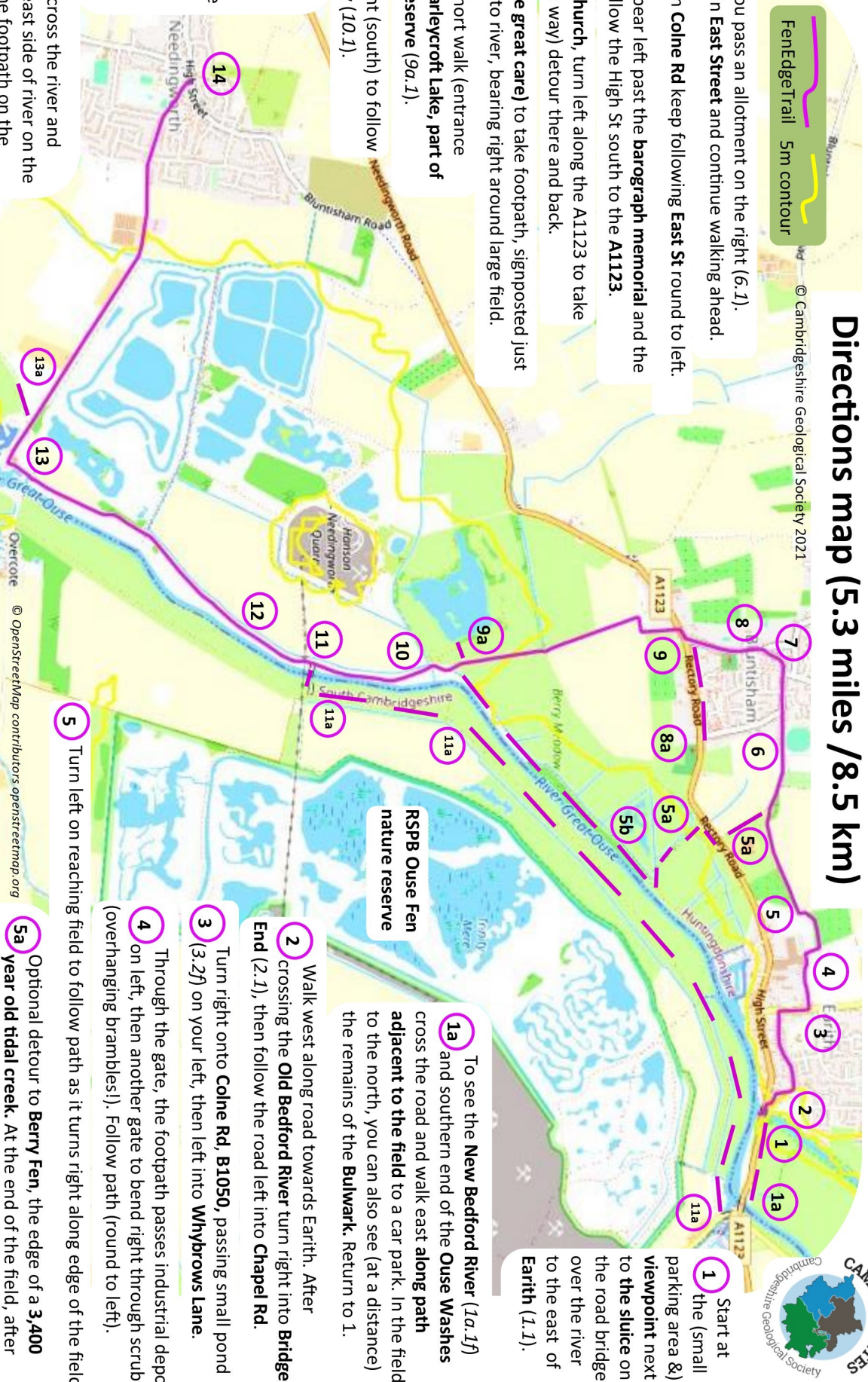
The Fen Edge Trail Walk: Earith to Needingworth



FenEdgeTrail 5m contour

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Directions map (5.3 miles /8.5 km)



Entering **Mill Lane** you pass an allotment on the right (6.1).

6 Follow the lane to join **East Street** and continue walking ahead.

7 Passing junction with **Cohne Rd** keep following **East St** round to left.

8 Joining the **High St**, bear left past the **barograph memorial** and the **White Swan** pub. Follow the High St south to the **A1123**.

8a To see **Bluntisham Church**, turn left along the A1123 to take a short (c.500m each way) detour there and back.

9 Cross **main road (take great care)** to take footpath, signposted just past bus stop, south to river, bearing right around large field.

9a If you wish, take a short walk (entrance gate on right) into **Barleycroft Lake, part of RSPB Ouse Fen nature reserve (9a.1)**.

10 At the river turn right (south) to follow the **Ouse Valley Way (10.1)**.

11 Follow the river southwards until you reach **Brownshill Staunton and Sluice (11.3)** where you find the only (foot) river crossing between Earith and St Ives. Note there may be grazing cattle in summer on the embankment.

11a For a circular walk, cross the river and return to Earith on east side of river on the **Rothschild Way**, along the footpath on the **Bedford Level Corporation Barrier Bank (11a.3)**. After exiting onto the A1123, turn left to cross the bridge over the New Bedford River (**take care when walking along the road!**). On the (north) side of the road is the car park mentioned in 1a. The footpath back to Earith runs from the car park along the field edge.

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5a Optional detour to **Berry Fen**, the edge of a **3,400 year old tidal creek**. At the end of the field, after passing first few trees, turn sharp left to follow hedgerow to main road. Cross (**beware traffic!**) and walk right to entrance of **Berry Fen, part of RSPB Ouse Fen**. Once through gate, look left to the distinctive 'edge', along the 5m contour (5a.1). To rejoin main walk, retrace steps.

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5b IF YOU DO NOT WISH to visit Bluntisham, walk on to river (**RSPB path**), turn right and rejoin walk at 10.

1a To see the **New Bedford River (1a.1)** and southern end of the **Ouse Washes** cross the road and walk east along path adjacent to the field to a car park. In the field to the north, you can also see (at a distance) the remains of the **Bulwark**. Return to 1.

2 Walk west along road towards Earith. After crossing the **Old Bedford River** turn right into **Bridge End (2.1)**, then follow the road left into **Chapel Rd**.

3 Turn right onto **Cohne Rd, B1050**, passing small pond (3.2f) on your left, then left into **Whybrows Lane**.

4 Through the gate, the footpath passes industrial depot on left, then another gate to bend right through scrub (overhanging brambles!). Follow path (round to left).

5 Turn left on reaching field to follow path as it turns right along edge of the field.

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Walk: Earith to Needingworth - geology and contours map

Landscape and Geology (more details on website)

The local bedrock is **Amphthill Clay**. It dates from the **Jurassic** period about 160 million years ago when 'mud' on the floor of a shallow sea became compressed enough to form a sticky and relatively soft rock. This is now overlain by much younger deposits, from the **Pleistocene** 'Ice Age', the oldest being **Glacial Till (Boulder Clay)**, material left by glaciers during the **Anglian glaciation** (c.425,000 years ago). There are also substantial amounts of **sand and gravel** deposited by powerful **Glacial Rivers** of meltwater which flowed during subsequent glaciations. Those river gravels associated with the current river valley form complex accumulations of material of different ages (dated by the fossils they contain). Deposited in a braided river system, they are mapped as '**River Terraces**', the Ouse having 3 in this area. The oldest (and highest), **3rd**, terrace dates mostly from the **Ipswichian** warm stage c.120,000 years ago and the younger **2nd** and **1st** from the following cold **Devensian** stage ending c.12,000 years ago. These deep sands and gravels have been quarried extensively in the area for use in construction. In the last few thousand years (the **Holocene**), **Peat** formed on top of the gravels when (fresh) waterlogging lasted long enough for the build up of this organic material. It is at the surface in places but mostly it is covered by river **Alluvium**, up to 2m deep and extending over hundreds of hectares in this area.

This walk **starts on the river Alluvium**, at 5m above sea level, passes across the **1st/2nd River Terrace gravels** going as high as 21m just on the **edge of the Glacial Till** in the centre of Bluntisham. It then crosses the **Amphthill Clay** on the way down to another patch of **1st/2nd Terrace gravels** before returning to **Alluvium** and levels as low as 2m by the river. It finishes at 15m on the **3rd Terrace** at Needingworth.

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