

# The Fen Edge Trail Haddenham to Wilburton Via Aldreth

6.4 miles (10.3 km) (shorter option 4.8 miles 7.8 km)

'We crossed seven different types of geology in just over two and a half miles! That doesn't happen often on The Fens'

Jeff, Cambridgeshire Geological Society Geosites team



#### The route: 'on the Isle of Ely: from the high ridge, along the ancient causeway to the river'

This part of the **Fen Edge Trail** links the three villages of **Haddenham**, **Aldreth** and **Wilburton** which lie on the south west edge of the **Isle of Ely** (perhaps better thought of as an archipelago since it includes separate 'isles' such as Littleport, Coveney and Wardy Hill). The high ground forming the **Isle** sits on a series of ridges formed by **Jurassic** and **Cretaceous** bedrock and reaching a maximum height of some 40 metres (133 feet) above sea level, just to the west of Haddenham. The bedrock includes the famous **Woburn Sands** known better as the 'Greensand Ridge' in Bedfordshire but also significant at Ely where it forms the hill on which the Cathedral sits. Prior to the major draining of the fens in the 17th century the Isle was surrounded by freshwater marshes and meres. This walk follows ancient **droves** and **ways** around the edge of the 'island' linking the historic villages that sit on key crossroads, ridges and promontories from where our ancestors once looked out across, often daunting, expanses of freshwater, or even coastal, **marshes**. Starting on the high ground of **The Green** at the crossroads in **Haddenham**, the walk heads south on a ridge leading to the hamlet of **Aldreth**, where it drops down to the lower **fen**. From here, it follows the historically important **Aldreth Causeway** to the **Old West River** (part of the **River Great Ouse**), on the edge of the, now drained, 'bay' that extends west out towards the Ouse Washes. Returning to the higher land, the walk then climbs up to finish in the village of **Wilburton**, which sits further east on the main ridge that runs across the southern part of the Isle. The walk includes excellent views, particularly to the west and south from the **Isle** towards **Cambridge**. A shorter option omits the walk from Aldreth down to the river and back. The walk is good for wildlife and there are two nature reserves on the route.



Photos: 4.1f Willows along the Old West River by Aldreth Causeway; 3.4f View back up the Catchwater towards Aldreth; 10a.1f View south from ridge at Wilburton; 5a.1f Nine Acre Wood; 3.2f The right hand bank of the Causeway; 9a.1f Fishpond in Dog House Grove NR; 1.6f The Great Mill.

**Practicalities** As with all of the walks along the Fen Edge Trail, you can complete the full length of any walk or choose a short or long 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. Photos are shown in the order they are seen except for those on this front page (*f*). The walk links with the **Ouse Valley Way** and the **Rothschild Way** along the river.

**Length of walk** (one way) approx. 6.4 miles (10.3 km, guide time 3 hours or, without the river 4.8 miles (7.8 km), 2.5 hours. Grid ref for start TL463755. Two, shorter, circular walks could be made, the 1st using the Sand Path (or Lode Way) to return from Aldreth to Haddenham, the 2nd using the Sand Path (or Lode Way) to walk from Haddenham to Wilburton, returning along the main road. Maps O.S. Explorer 225/226. Free, easy to use online geology map viewer on **www.bgs.ac.uk/map-viewers/bgs-geology-viewer.** 

**Transport and services Buses** run from Wilburton to Haddenham (afternoons, not Sunday) and to both (check days) from Ely **www.dews-coaches.com.** There are train services to Ely. Street parking is available in both villages. Please park only where permitted and in consideration of others. There is a shop and pub in Haddenham and Wilburton.

Safety Be aware of risks you may encounter and take note of warnings by landowners or on paths. The terrain is generally flat, but with some slopes (on the rise to Wilburton). There are a few stiles to cross. Take particular care on uneven terrain and soft or slippery ground, near water, in the presence of livestock or walking along roads. Ensure dogs are kept under control as needed. All Fen Edge Trail walks are on publicly accessible routes. Anyone undertaking Fen Edge Trail walks does so at their own risk, these notes are for general guidance only.

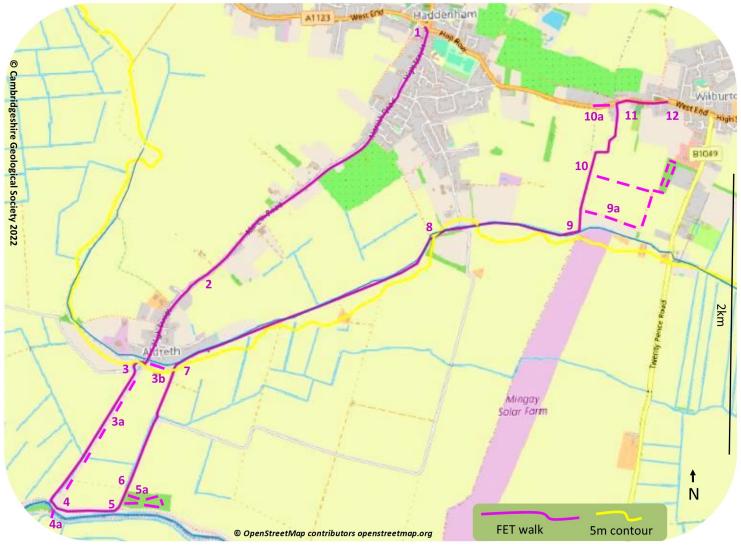


## The Fen Edge Trail Haddenham to Wilburton via Aldreth

Directions (6.4 miles / 10.3 km) (shorter option 4.8 miles / 7.8 km)



www.cambsgeology.org



- **1** Start at the **War memorial** on **The Green** at **Haddenham**. At the adjacent crossroads, turn right down **High Street** towards **Aldreth**. Continue along High Street, which changes to **Aldreth Road** before leaving Haddenham.
- 2 Continue on to and through Aldreth. The road is relatively quiet, with a pavement all along.
- 3 At the end of the village you reach a **bridge** over the **New Cut Drain**. From here, you walk south to the river along the route of the **Aldreth Causeway** choosing paths on either the eastern or western bank of the **Catchwater Drain**. For the best views, walk along **the west (right hand) bank** by turning right **over a small bridge** along the road called **The Boot** and then, almost immediately, left up the bank, past a pond amongst trees, to the path alongside the Catchwater.
- 3a To walk along the east bank, continue straight on along High St, now a byway, on the east (left) bank of the Catchwater Drain.
- 3b To take a shorter option (missing the river) turn left along Fen Side farm track, to reach Church Fen Drove where you turn left (7).
- 4 When you reach the **Old West River** (part of the **Great Ouse**), turn left (east) to walk along the bank, on the **Ouse Valley Way** (also part of the **Rothschild Way**). 4a If wished, first walk across **High Bridge** to the south side of the river (and back the same way).
- 5 At the end of the first field, turn left through a kissing gate onto Church Fen Drove.
- 5a At start of Drove, turn right for optional walk (figure of eight path) through Nine Acre Wood to emerge further along the Drove.
- 6 Follow Church Fen Drove, along the side of the Haddenham Engine Drain, to walk back towards Aldreth.
- 7 At the junction with Fen Side (farm track on the left) walk straight on. Here, there is a pair of parallel tracks, take the higher track on top of the bank immediately alongside the drain. Follow this raised route until you reach the small road coming out of Haddenham.
- 8 Reaching Lode Way on the left and Hoghill Drove on the right, cross the road and continue on the byway (still named Fen Side).
- **9** As you approach **Mingay Farm**, a modern solar power farm complex, look for the **Dog House Grove Permissive Footpath** on the left. Turn onto the footpath, and follow it, climbing up the hillside.
- **9a** To visit **Dog House Grove Nature Reserve**, turn right and follow the Permissive Path into the wooded area around the ponds, returning via a looped path that leads you out further up the hillside, alongside a ditch, to rejoin the main walk.
- 10 Continue uphill, following the well waymarked Path, crossing two styles and winding round a field edge before reaching the road
- **10a** When you reach **Haddenham Road** a short detour to the left will bring you to a high point, just along the street, with superb views south over The Fens to the hills beyond **Cambridge**.
- 11 At the main Haddenham Road turn right and walk along the main road to reach Saint Peter's Church, the end of the walk 12.

#### Walk: Haddenham to Wilburton via Aldreth - geology and landscape map

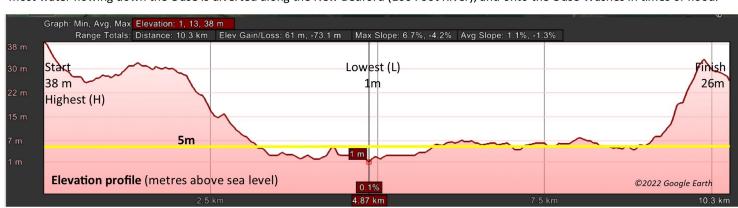
FEdgeT walk Ages of the rocks Haddenham H Contours 'Superficial' (height 10m 5m Holocene: above sea and Alluvium above level) Kimmeridge Clay Peat Wilburton Less than 11,700 years **Ampthill** Woburn **Grove NR** Pleistocene Clay Sands River (1st) Terrace Sands & Gravels c. 20,000 - 11,700 years Bedrock in millions of years (my) Kimmeridge Clay **Cretaceous:** Aldreth Gault (clay) c.101 to c.113 my **Woburn Sands** c.115 my Jurassic: **Ampthill Clay Kimmeridge Clay Terrace 1** c.152 to c.157 my **Ampthill Clay** c.158 to c.159 my **Peat** Alluvium Terrace 1

On this walk you pass over four different types of bedrock. The oldest, underlying the lower land in this part of the fens, is **Ampthill Clay** (**Jurassic** age). An extensive sea covered this part of Britain with the clay forming from material deposited on the sea floor. The **Kimmeridge Clay**, famous for fossils of marine reptiles such as **Plesiosaurs**, is younger (also Jurassic) and lies on top of the Ampthill Clay forming a **series of roughly east-west ridges**. Younger still (**Cretaceous** age) is the **Woburn Sands** (**Lower Greensand** group), a sandstone formed in shallow seas, that covers the higher parts of the ridge. The youngest is the **Gault clay**, formed in deeper seas again, which occurs in a narrow band along the ridge top.

The 'Superficial' deposits are much younger and, here, only cover the bedrock in the river valley. They consist of **River Terrace Sands** and **Gravels** plus **Peat** and **Alluvium**. As a river develops, it erodes the land and its gravels are left in a series of 'terraces', each slightly lower than the previous one. The sands and gravels in this area were deposited when the Ouse was a much larger, braided river, during the Pleistocene 'Ice Age' and towards the end of the last (**Devensian**) glaciation, before *c*.11,700 years ago. They form the youngest of the Ouse's terraces (the 1st Terrace). **Peat**, which formed from decaying vegetation in freshwater 'swamps' at some time in the last few thousand years, remains in the river valley in places and there is a covering of **Alluvium**, a fine material that is carried down the river and deposited in the channel or, during flooding, on adjacent land.

The walk starts on the very **western tip of the band of Gault clay** on the top of the ridge (and the **highest point** on the walk) but soon passes onto Woburn Sands that extend almost as far as Aldreth. Lower down, the **Kimmeridge Clay is reached** before a band of **Ampthill Clay** and then the **Terrace Gravels, Peat** and, by the river, the **Alluvium**, at the **lowest point** of the walk **c.1m above sea level.** The sequence is reversed walking back up. Haddenham and Wilburton are both mainly on the free-draining **Woburn Sands**.

From Earith, where the river valley meets the fenland, the Great Ouse once flowed north, to the west of Chatteris and on to the Wash. This river channel is known as the 'West Water' and can be traced as a significant band of Alluvium that still covers the Peat and River Gravels to the east of Somersham. At some time (post-Roman, probably during the Middle Ages), the river was diverted east when the Old West River was dug (possibly along an existing, smaller channel) taking the flow south of the Isle to join the River Cam. Today most water flowing down the Ouse is diverted along the New Bedford (100 Foot River), and onto the Ouse Washes in times of flood.



#### Places of interest along the Trail

This south west part of the Isle of Ely has a great deal of landscape and historical interest. Towards the end of the last glaciation, about 12,000 years ago, a very wide, braided river left large areas of sand and gravel (the **1st River Terrace** of the **Ouse**) on the edge of the Isle that, later, provided slightly higher and dryer land than the developing wet fens. This may have contributed to the rich history of the area. Local finds have included **Neolithic burial chambers**, the oldest about 6,000 years old - one of the oldest in **Europe** - attesting to very early occupation. To the west, out towards the Ouse Washes, are patches of **Shell Marl**, scattered over the low-lying peat. These are the remains of lakes that possibly formed due to the accumulation of freshwater following the major sea encroachment of the fens c.3,600 -3,200 years ago and its accompanying deposition of silts and clays nearer the Wash, impeding drainage. **Roman** remains have also been found locally and early Saxon records (970AD) refer to **Haeden Ham** or **Haeda's Homestead**,

giving the name that, by the Middle Ages had settled as **Haddenham**. Today's village grew out of the earlier hamlets of **Linden** (Linden Way), **Hill Row** and **Haddenham** (at the crossroads), as well as the neighbouring hamlet of **Aldreth**, and commanded principal land entrances to the Isle of Ely. The points of entry and their development eventually led to the village becoming a crossroad centre of some importance and helped bring prosperity to Haddenham which in 1562 was the most populous village in the county. The parish of Haddenham extends in the west almost as far as the New Bedford River and Earith Bridge, and includes large tracks of land alongside the **Old West River** (part of the Great Ouse). As a consequence, much of this land (**The Delphs**, and **Adventurers Fen**, some 2,000 acres in total) was inundated to the eaves of the houses in the **Great Flood of 1947**. During the **Second World War** Haddenham was a **Starfish** bombing decoy site, diverting attention from **RAF Bomber Command's** nearby airfields.

1 The walk starts at the fine Cornish granite War Memorial (1.1) on The Green in Haddenham, opposite the Baptist Chapel (1.2) and across from the Three Kings pub. This is one of the highest points on the Isle of Ely with an elevation of around 38 metres. This crossroads sits on the edge of an area of Gault (clay) that forms a thin band along the very top of the ridge from here east to Wilburton. Close by, a 1969 borehole showed Woburn Sands to 11.5m depth and Kimmeridge Clay to 33.4m i.e. just above the base of the ridge (which is 40m at its maximum). Beneath the ridge it showed Ampthill Clay to 66.2m depth, Elsworth Rock (limestone or clay) to 67.6m and, at the bottom of the hole, Upper Oxford Clay was seen to at least 77.1m depth. From this crossroad, as you walk down to the The Old West River you will pass over Gault clay, Woburn Sands, Kimmeridge Clay, Ampthill Clay, River Terrace Gravels, Peat and Alluvium - 7 geological strata in a distance of 2.6 miles!

Heading down **High Street** there are several buildings of note. The **Methodist Chapel** (1.3) on the right hand side, built in 1891, has particularly finely detailed **red brickwork** which contrasts noticeably with the soft '**Cambridge Yellow**' or '**Cambridge White**' brickwork of **The High Street School** a little further down the road (1.4). **The school** opened in 1861, and did not close until 1976. Sensitive conversion meant the retention of the **attractive rose window** and **bell tower**. The two buildings are of '**gault clay' bricks**, almost certainly obtained locally. Although 'gault' was commonly used to describe any local clay, the light colour of the bricks suggests they are made from true Gault clay, which has a high amount of **calcareous** (paler) content. Red bricks indicate a higher **iron** content in the clay (such as the Kimmeridge Clay) of other local pits – of which there were several in the village, particularly on the north side. A little further down the road is an excellent information board featuring some of the interesting features of the village (1.5).

As you leave the village and move to open countryside, the **topography** becomes more evident. You are on a 'headland' ridge of **Kimmeridge Clay** capped with a covering of **Woburn Sands** which reaches almost as far as the village of **Aldreth**. The raised, sandy, ground on both sides of the road, was once used extensively for **orchards**. On the left, between the end of the village and to just beyond **The Great Mill** (1.6f), is the only remaining area of fruit growing, once so important





Photos: 1.1 Haddenham memorial; 1.2 Baptist Chapel; 1.3 Methodist Chapel; 1.4 High Street School; 1.5 Haddenham info board.

to Haddenham. It is best appreciated from **Sand Path,** leading down **Linden End Field**. **The Great Mill** is one of only four surviving tower mills in Cambridgeshire. The four-storey building dates from 1803 and contains a near complete set of internal machinery.

Walking the ridge gives particularly good views to the south and the west as far as **Earith Bridge** and areas of the fen that were once salt marsh in the early/middle Bronze Age and then covered by large areas of freshwater lakes. **Aldreth Road** was originally known as **Sand Way** – the parish sand pit can still be seen on the right-hand side of the road. A short distance beyond the entrance to Parkes Farm but on the left-hand side of the road, is the historical site of **St Audry's** or **St Etheldreda's Well**. Although there are no longer any traces of the well, it was described in the 18th century as 'being popular for its **mineral waters'** and the site was still shown on the 1958 OS map. The spring would probably have been the result of water seeping through the **Woburn Sands**, hence its 'mineral' character, and emerging as it reached the more impervious **Kimmeridge Clay** underneath. This **spring line** is seen at several places in Cambridgeshire including, again, later on in this walk. A **vent stone**, from the Middle Ages, found at the site and thought to be part of the well is in Haddenham Library.

2 The hamlet of Aldreth lies within the parish of Haddenham. The name, meaning, 'landing place by the alders' says much about its history and the importance of its position. Located at the 'Isle' end of one of only three causeways onto the Isle, it has long been considered as a possible site for the famous battles between Hereward the Wake and William the Conqueror. Whether or not this is the case, the causeway has a long and important history as a route to the Isle - it eventually lost its importance when the new Cambridge to Ely toll road was built in 1763 (now the A10). The hamlet, known by some locals as Audry or Audrey, and the existence of



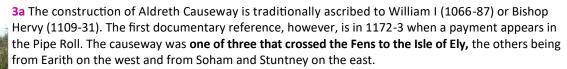
a 15th century cattle market and fair, is believed to have brought about the English word 'tawdry', because of the cheap and poor quality of goods sold at the 'Audrey' fair.

3 At the end of the hamlet is New Cut Bridge, over the New Cut drainage channel that runs around the edge of much of the Isle of Ely (by various names). The Catchwater Drain ahead of you, leading down to the Old West River (as this part of the Great Ouse is known) makes this one of the deepest

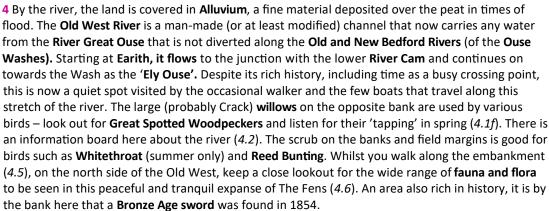
sections of gravity drainage. From here, the walk follows the route of the historic Aldreth Causeway across the flood plain of the Great Ouse. The area of trees by the river is a County Wildlife Site due to its 20 or so White willow pollards around a pond. It is managed by Haddenham Conservation Society (www.hcs.tinaboneuk.co.uk). The right hand bank (3.2f) offers good views of the causeway and



the surrounding landscape (3.3). The water channel is important for wildlife - Mute swans can be seen nesting here (3.4f). Look out for Water voles along the Catchwater - their presence given away by entrance holes in the banks and the occasional site used for droppings! Not far from New Cut Bridge you come off the Kimmeridge Clay of the ridge onto Ampthill Clay, which underlies the low fenland here. However, you soon reach the river gravels deposited during the Pleistocene 'Ice Age' when the river was much larger than it is today. The soil darkens (and there are less stones) as the land gets lower, reflecting a change to Peat. Between here and Earith, to the west, more than 50 'bog oaks' were dug from the Peat in 2009, a huge number to be found in one place.



3b Fen Side is a farm track alongside the New Cut. It lies (almost exactly) on the 5 metre contour so can be considered as truly on 'the fen edge', just above the maximum height of the marshes for much of the last few thousand years of history (prior to their draining).



4a It is worth crossing High Bridge (4.3) to the south side of the river to see an excellent information board about the causeway (4.4). There was once apparently 'a great wooden bridge upon Audrey causeway'. An extract from the Fen Times 19th April 1902 said: 'Aldreth Bridge works ... a square oak beam some thirty feet long, thought to have been used in the erection of a bridge previous to anything known, has been taken out in good preservation. Smaller things such as hammer heads and old sword etc have been taken to Cambridge, but nothing has turned up equal to what was ploughed up in a field within a mile of the bridge in 1857. Norman weapons and other military equipment have been found in this area'. Belsar's Hill, an Iron Age 'hillfort', lies at the southern end of the Causeway, (see the Fen Edge Trail walk from Willingham to Cottenham).

5 The drove is named after Church Fen which lies to the left between here and the Causeway.

5a Nine Acre Wood (5a.1f & 5a.2) is owned by the Woodland Trust (www.woodlandtrust.org.uk). Originally planted in 1995 to attract Golden orioles, it therefore has number of poplar trees. Now it is a mixed wood with shrubs and open rides and is good for butterflies, dragonflies, bats and Barn owls. A wander around its figure of eight pathway is highly recommended, making a pleasant picnic spot and a contrast to the surrounding fens.

back along the Causeway to Aldreth; 6 You soon pass a row of alder trees (6.1) on the right as you walk back towards the village that bears the name of this species, once a common tree in lowland river valleys. In the 1170 'Pipe rolls' the name is shown as Alreheða from 'alder' and 'hythe', meaning 'landing-place by the alders'. In spring and summer, look out for small birds such as Yellowhammers feeding amongst the low vegetation around field edges. The large drain that zig





Catchwater Drain; 3.3 Views over the fen; 3a.1 Trees along the route of the Aldreth Causeway; 3a.2 View 4.2 Information board about the river; 4.3 View east from High Bridge; 4.4 Information about the causeway; 4.5 Looking east along the Old West; 4.6 Cuckoo flower, a characteristic flower of waterside meadows in spring, along the riverbank. 5a.2 Nine Acre Wood.



zags from the east to run along side the drove is Haddenham Engine Drain. It then flows west to Haddenham Pumping Station where it joins the Old West River. It is botanically rich, especially for species of pondweeds, and is designated a County Wildlife Site. Nearing the village, you can see sands and gravels in the banks of the drain (6.2), after which you may notice the **Ampthill Clay** underfoot.

**7** From this point there are two paths alongside the **New Cut** taking the higher path on the top of the embankment (7.1) offers good views across the fen to the south and also views back up onto the higher ground to the north, including good

views of the large orchard and the Great Mill and the well-known land mark water tower of Haddenham (7.2). This is a good area for birds of prey. As you approach Sand Pit Lane, off to the left, you will see the 20 or so pollards of White and Crack willows that form Fen Side Pollard Willows County Wildlife Site.

8 At the junction, Lode Way is to the left whilst Hoghill Drove leads off to the south, being one of a few 'droves' that lead down towards the river after crossing the Haddenham Engine Drain. This area of low fen is criss-crossed by many small drains, some with droves alongside them. The river to the south here has a small area of 'Washes' (where the river is allowed to flood) between it and a smaller water course that runs alongside it.

9 As Mingay Solar Farm appears on the right a Permissive Path (not a Right of Way), courtesey of the Pell Estate, appears on the left leading across the footbridge and up past Dog House Field. There are some stiles and small bridges to negotiate as you once again rise up onto higher land.

9a A 'not to be missed' detour: fascinating things lie just off your route! Dog House Grove Nature Reserve contains a series of clay-lined fish ponds (9a.1f & 9a.2) which can be viewed by means of a circular path (part of the same system of Permissive Paths). Each pond is fed by the one above (9a.3), the water coming from a spring arising where water flowing down through the overlying,

free-draining Woburn Sands reaches the underlying, impermeable Kimmeridge Clay, causing it to seep out of the ground. The ponds, originally dug by monks in the 7th century offer a glimpse into local history as well as geology. Contained in a spinney of mixed trees, they are best seen in spring after a wet winter but the nature reserve, owned by the Pell Estate but managed by **The Wildlife Trust**, is a delight at any time of year (9a.4). **NB** Steep sides to ponds and some steeper slopes that can be slippery.

10 With careful observation, subtle changes in the soil are noticeable (10.1), particularly toward the last stages where you cross the Woburn Sands (Lower Greensand) bedrock once again. The path brings you out on the road running along the crest of the ridge between Haddenham and Wilburton, by which time you have arrived at a capping of Gault clay.

**10a** A short detour to the left, once the road is reached, will take you to an extremely good outlook point with extensive views to the south (10a.1). Here, you are on the band of Gault Clay that forms the very top of the ridge and at over 30m, almost as high as at the start, at the western end of the Gault. On a clear day it is possible to see beyond the spires of Cambridge to the Gog Magog Hills and the plateau south of the Eversdens c. 24km (15 miles) away.

11 The charming village of Wilburton lies on the important road linking Earith to Stretham. As with Haddenham, it was known for market gardens and orchards. The Pell family were lords of the manor for hundreds of years and continue to own much of the land in the area.

12 St Peter's Church (12.1) is Grade I listed and made of rubble and fieldstone (cobbles from the fields) with Chalk clunch and Barnack limestone dressings. The oldest parts (in the chancel) are 13th century. At the far end of the church is the village sign (12.2), the end of the walk.

The river valley here forms the central axis of the **New Life on the Old West** project managed by Cambs Acre. This project seeks to create a habitat corridor linking Ouse Fen Nature Reserve and Wicken Fen. We are working in

partnership to develop nature walks in the area. For information on events and walks see www.nlow.org.uk.





Photos: 6.1 Row of alder trees; 6.2 Sand in bank of drain; 7.1 Path along embankment; 7.2 Haddenham water tower; 9a.2 & 9a.3 Dog House Grove ponds; 9a.4 Path through Doghouse Grove NR in spring; 10.1 Sandy soil from the Woburn Sands bedrock; 12.1



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St Peter's Church; 12.2 Village sign.

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