

The Fen Edge Trail

Walk: Sawtry to Wood Walton

4.4 miles (7 km)

in partnership with

The Great Fen Heritage Group

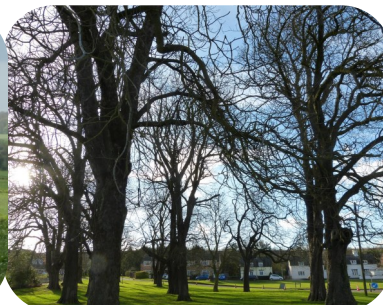
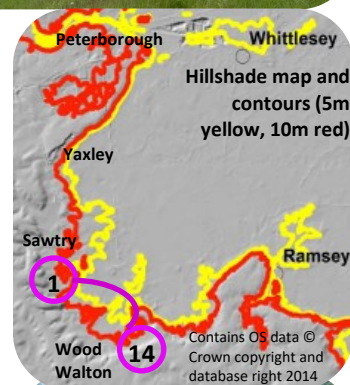
'This is a lovely, quiet, undiscovered part of the fen edge, full of history'

Paul, Great Fen Heritage Group



The route: 'follow in the footsteps of the monks'

This, now **quiet, corner of the Fens** hides a rich and eventful past with the remains of historical sites such as **Sawtry Abbey**, a medieval **motte and bailey**, and **St Andrews church** viewable from the walk. Having travelled south from the village of **Holme**, the Trail arrives in **Sawtry** and then heads southeast to the village of **Wood Walton** on its way to **Ramsey**. The walk passes under the main London to Edinburgh **railway line** and through one of the **borrow pits** that were dug to obtain construction material, now being a nature reserve valuable as a small wetland habitat for birds. The walk passes mostly over **Oxford Clay bedrock** but also over an area where **Peat** remains, covering the clay. There are also views up to the ridge behind Sawtry which is made of **Glacial Till**, material left after glaciers retreated c.425,000 years ago. This western part of the Fen Edge is **ecologically important**, having two **National Nature Reserves**, one being a key part of the **Great Fen** wetland restoration area. The walk passes through the southern end of the Great Fen and includes two nature reserves on the route itself.



Photos: 11.1f St Andrew's Church; 8.1f Five Arches bridge; 1.2f Sawtry village sign; 6a.1f Site of Sawtry Abbey across lode; 14.3f Wood Walton village sign; 6.1f View west over Sawtry Fen to Archer's Wood on hills south of Sawtry; 14.1f Wood Walton green; 8.2f Five Arches Pit NR

Practicalities As with all walks on the Fen Edge Trail, you can complete the full walk using transport one way or choose a short or long round trip option, or just visit some places on the route. The walk is divided into numbered parts as shown on the two maps. Photos are shown in the order seen except for those on this front page (f). Information: nature reserve opening www.wildlifebcn.org/nature-reserves; St Andrew's Church www.friendsoffriendlesschurches.org.uk/church/st-andrews-wood-walton-cambridgeshire;

Length of walk (one way) approx. 5 miles (8 km). Walking guide time 2hrs 30mins plus stops. Grid ref for start TL167837. Maps O.S. Explorer 227. Free, easy to use online geology map viewer on www.bgs.ac.uk/map-viewers/bgs-geology-viewer

Transport and services There are **buses** from Cambridge and Peterborough (via St Ives, Huntingdon and Yaxley) to Sawtry on most days www.stagecoachbus.com. There are very limited bus services to or from Wood Walton (and **none between Sawtry and Wood Walton**). Check www.ramseybus.org.uk and www.dews-coaches.com for current information. **There may be Ting (on demand) bus services** until at least Nov 2023, info on 0115 777 3187 or get the VECTARE app. There are **train services** to Peterborough and Huntingdon. Parking available along some streets in Sawtry and Wood Walton. Please park only where permitted and in consideration of others. Pubs and shops in Sawtry. Wood Walton has no shops (a new pub on the Green now seems closed).

Safety Be aware of risks you may encounter and note warnings given by landowners or on pathways. The terrain is generally flat, with a few gentle inclines. **It can be muddy walking across the clay fields if the ground is wet (or 'rocky' if very dry!); walking boots are recommended.** Take particular care with uneven terrain, when near water, on soft or slippery ground, in the presence of livestock or walking along or crossing roads. Ensure your dog is kept under control as needed. Fen Edge Trail walks are on publicly accessible routes (including Rights of Way on this walk). **Anyone undertaking walks on the Fen Edge Trail does so at their own risk; these notes are for guidance only.**

The Fen Edge Trail

Walk: Sawtry to Wood Walton

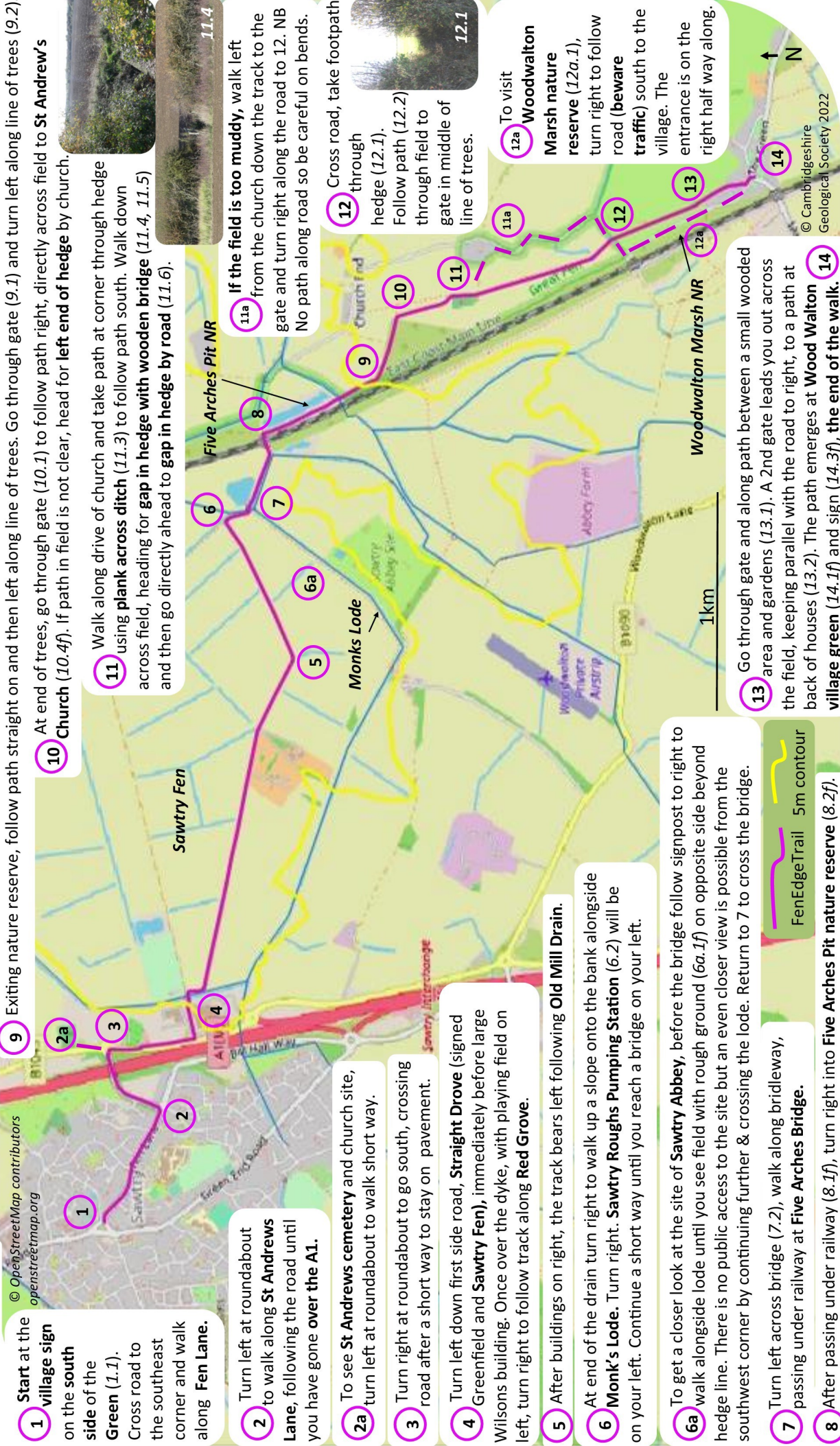
Directions map (4.4 miles / 7 km)

www.fenedgetrail.org

www.cambsgeology.org

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- 1 Start at the village sign on the south side of the Green (1.1). Cross road to the southeast corner and walk along Fen Lane.
- 2 Turn left at roundabout to walk along St Andrews Lane, following the road until you have gone over the A1.
- 2a To see St Andrews cemetery and church site, turn left at roundabout to walk short way.
- 3 Turn right at roundabout to go south, crossing road after a short way to stay on pavement.
- 4 Turn left down first side road, Straight Drove (signed Greenfield and Sawtry Fen), immediately before large Wilsons building. Once over the dyke, with playing field on left, turn right to follow track along Red Grove.
- 5 After buildings on right, the track bears left following Old Mill Drain.
- 6 At end of the drain turn right to walk up a slope onto the bank alongside Monk's Lode. Turn right. Sawtry Roughs Pumping Station (6.2) will be on your left. Continue a short way until you reach a bridge on your left.
- 6a To get a closer look at the site of Sawtry Abbey, before the bridge follow signpost to right to walk alongside lode until you see field with rough ground (6a.1f) on opposite side beyond hedge line. There is no public access to the site but an even closer view is possible from the southwest corner by continuing further & crossing the lode. Return to 7 to cross the bridge.
- 7 Turn left across bridge (7.2), walk along brideway, passing under railway at Five Arches Bridge.
- 8 After passing under railway (8.1f), turn right into Five Arches Pit nature reserve (8.2f).
- 9 Exiting nature reserve, follow path straight on and then left along line of trees. Go through gate (9.1) and turn left along line of trees (9.2).
- 10 At end of trees, go through gate (10.1) to follow path right, directly across field to St Andrew's Church (10.4f). If path in field is not clear, head for left end of hedge by church.
- 11 Walk along drive of church and take path at corner through hedge using plank across ditch (11.3) to follow path south. Walk down across field, heading for gap in hedge with wooden bridge (11.4, 11.5) and then go directly ahead to gap in hedge by road (11.6).
- 11a If the field is too muddy, walk left from the church down the track to the gate and turn right along the road to 12. NB No path along road so be careful on bends.
- 12 Cross road, take footpath through hedge (12.1). Follow path (12.2) through field to gate in middle of line of trees.
- 12a To visit Woodwalton Marsh nature reserve (12a.1), turn right to follow road (beware traffic) south to the village. The entrance is on the right half way along.
- 13 Go through gate and along path between a small wooded area and gardens (13.1). A 2nd gate leads you out across the field, keeping parallel with the road to right, to a path at back of houses (13.2). The path emerges at Wood Walton village green (14.1f) and sign (14.3f), the end of the walk.
- 14



Walk: Sawtry to Wood Walton - geology and contours map



Landscape and Geology

In this area there are 'rocks' of 3 different ages at the surface, two of which you walk over on the walk. The oldest by far is the 'bedrock', the **Oxford Clay**, which is about 160 million years old (from the **Jurassic Period**). An extensive sea covered this part of Britain at the time with the clay forming from fine material deposited on the sea floor that subsequently became compressed to form a soft rock (a mudstone). The Oxford Clay is famous for its fossils of marine reptiles, such as large **Ichthyosaurs** and **Plesiosaurs** (including **Pliosaurus**). In places it contains harder bands that form low ridges, providing higher and, therefore, dryer land. Most of the walk is over this clay, including the villages themselves.

The other two surface 'rocks' are much younger, being from the current 'Ice Age' which started 2.6 million years ago. The oldest is **Glacial Till**, material 'dropped' by glaciers c.425,000 years ago (**Pleistocene** age). The **Glacial Till** forms the **high ridge** to the west of Sawtry and to the south of Wood Walton. The youngest is **Peat**, deposited in the **Holocene** (the last 11,700 years, since the end of the last glaciation). It formed where freshwater persisted long enough for organic material to build up in the waterlogged conditions. You walk over it as you pass through **Sawtry Fen**.

The 'Peat' of the Fens is very complex, its character dependent on the type of vegetation that it contains, including **reeds**, **wood** and **sphagnum moss**. The latter grows where material has built up high enough to escape the **calcareous 'fen' waters** and be influenced by (acidic) rain, thereby creating **acidic Peat bog**. This only occurred in a few areas but particularly in the 'bays' of this western fen edge. The most extensive marine incursion, during the Bronze Age, did not reach this far allowing a deep sequence of Peat to form uninterrupted (possibly since as long ago as c.8,000 years), although much has now gone.

Places of interest along the Trail

Sawtry was a strategically important village, lying at the edge of the fenland, just above the 5 metre contour, and also on the main road north, **Ermine Street** (later called the Great North Rd). It was recorded as **Saltrede** in the Domesday Book (11th century), **Saltreia** and **Saltreiam** in the 12th century, **Sautre** in the 13th century and Sawtry by the 16th century. The names refer to a 'salt stream', the village being an important place where **salt**, having been evaporated from salt workings nearer the coast, was brought along the waterways to be taken overland by mule. From long before Roman times, **salt production** in the Fens was a significant industry. The village once consisted of three separate parishes, **Sawtry St Andrew's**, **Sawtry Judith** (which belonged to **William the Conqueror's niece**) and **Sawtry All Saints**.

1 The Green (1.1) was often the centre of village activity and fairs were held there on feast days. The village sign (1.2f) shows the name 'Saltreiam' and depicts a goose, eels and figures unloading salt. The information board (1.3) describes various walks from the village including the '**Farm labourers walk**' which takes you up onto the **Bullock Road**, an ancient droveway on the **high ridge to the west** of the village, formed from **Glacial Till**, with great views down over the village and the Fens beyond. **Greystones pub** (grade II listed), off the southwest corner of the Green, is said to be built from stones (limestones) from the demolished **Sawtry Abbey** (see 6a).

2 As you turn left down **St Andrew's Way**, note that **Fen Lane** continues straight ahead until it ends at the A1. It once crossed the Great North Road and **continued as Straight Drove** to reach the fen, passing the **landing place for the salt**.

2a To see the **village cemetery** and the site of **St Andrew's Church**, founded in 1238 and demolished in 1879, turn left at the roundabout once over the A1. The stone from the demolished church was used for the new **All Saints Church** in the main part of the village. Many old gravestones can be seen including 121 memorials dating from 1736 to 1941.

3 The road here is the old **Great North Road**, once a **Roman Road** called **Ermine Street** which linked **London to Lincoln and York**. Domestic remains from the Roman roadside settlement have been found here. Behind the new industrial buildings **Black Horse Drain** stretches off to the left (east) into the fen, once linking to the main waterways of the Fens. In this area was the **landing place for the salt**, once very important for preserving food and often difficult to obtain. It would have been loaded onto land transport here (such as mules) for distribution far 'inland'. Archaeological excavations in this area (near what was Black Horse Farm) showed that there was a sandy promontory here rising above the surrounding wetland. **Ring ditches** were found, evidence of one or possibly two **roundhouses or barrows**. Direct evidence of occupation included pottery sherds, daub, animal bone and burnt stone with initial dating suggesting they were from the **Iron Age**. On the right just before you turn left, and now under the A1, is the site where the **Royal Oak** pub used to stand (demolished 1996) on **Fen Lane** (which continued from the other side of the A1, see point 2). Further south on this road (not on this walk) is an **old marker stone** showing the boundary between the parishes of **St Judith and St Andrew**, and also **Toll Bar Cottages**, a reminder of the 18th and 19th centuries when the Old North Road was a **turnpike road**.

4 **Straight Drove** was a continuation of Fen Drove, leading from the village to the fen. Just before turning right down **Red Drove**, you cross a lode (4.1) that drains water from the higher ground to the west of Sawtry and carries it south into **Monks' Lode**, named after the monks of Sawtry Abbey and seen later on this walk. Since leaving the road, walking along Red Drove (4.2), you have dropped down below the 5m contour, onto low fenland that lies in a small, (roughly) round **basin** excavated by **periglacial (freeze-thaw)** activity during the last glaciation.

5 Just before you get to the bend in the track, as you pass the farmhouses, you start walking over **Peat**, which covers the **Oxford Clay** from here until you walk up the bank of Monks' Lode. This area is known as **Sawtry Roughs** and lies at the southern end of **Sawtry Fen**. The Fen lies below 5m, with the eastern half mostly **below 0m** and you reach the lowest point of the walk here at **minus 1m below sea level**. As early as 1278, 15 acres of meadow were reclaimed from the fen. The main portion was included in the 'Great Level Drainage' undertaken by engineers like **Vermuyden** for the Duke of Bedford in the 17th century.

6 From the bank, looking back along **Old Mill Drain** (6.1f), to the south west of Sawtry, you can see **Aversley Wood (a Site of Special Scientific Interest, SSSI)**, situated on the **high ridge** that is capped by **Glacial Till** (a clay-rich material deposited by glaciers about 425,000 years ago). To the south is the smaller **Archer's Wood**. Both woods are owned by the **Woodland Trust** and are ecologically important due to being remnants of the **ancient ash-maple woodlands** that used to cover the higher land adjacent to the fen edge. Archer's Wood was cut back, away from Ermine Street to deter its use by highwaymen. It contains the remains of the 12th century **Sawtry Judith Manor**, now a **Scheduled Ancient Monument**, that once provided food and livestock for Sawtry Abbey. Excavations found wattle and daub walls, bread ovens and hearths used for metal work. Climbing the bank of **Monks' Lode** (6.1) you will see **Sawtry Roughs pumping station** (6.2), managed by Sawtry Internal Drainage Board. The lode was used to bring the famous Jurassic limestone from **Barnack Quarry** near Stamford, along the Nene and across **Whittlesey Mere**, for the construction of the Abbey.



Photos: 1.1 Sawtry Green; 1.3 Walks board; 4.1 Lode carrying water into Monks' Lode; 4.2 Red Drove; 6.1 Monks' Lode; 6.2 Sawtry Roughs Pumping Station.

6a The site of Sawtry's 12th century **Cistercian abbey** is now a grassy field with rough ground showing where the buildings once stood (6a.1f). Approaching the site, it becomes evident that the monks chose the highest patch of land in the area on which to construct their abbey, as it sits on a small promontory above the 5m contour which almost surrounds it. Taking almost 100 years to complete, it was probably made from **Barnack Stone**, the limestone used for many ecclesiastical buildings, including Ramsey Abbey and Ely Cathedral. In the 19th century the building stones were removed and used elsewhere; some are seen at the village church, All Saints. It seems to have always been a 'poor' abbey, although **royalty, such as Edward II**, are known to have stayed there at times. In 1536, the monks kept an overnight vigil for **Catherine of Aragon's body** here on its way to burial at Peterborough Cathedral. After Henry VIII's 'dissolution of the monasteries' starting later in 1536, the abbey, and its church of St. Mary, fell into disuse and were eventually demolished.



7 To the right of the path lies a large '**bog oak**' (7.1), a remnant of a forest that grew here before being inundated by rising waters. These trees, which include yew and pine as well as oak, are dug from the peat having been preserved in the waterlogged, anaerobic (lacking in oxygen) conditions. They died at different times, depending on local conditions but most are several thousand years old. From here there are good views north west over **Sawtry Fen** and to the hills to the west. The bridge (7.2) crosses **Monks' Lode**, once the major waterway between **Sawtry Abbey and Whittlesey Mere**. The hedgerows along the path to the railway bridge are very good for birds (7.3). The large wood in the distance to the south, visible through the hedge to the right, is the large **National Nature Reserve (and SSSI) of Monks Wood**, one of the most important lowland woods in the country known for its history of ecological research.



8 Having passed under **Five Arches Bridge** (8.1f), which carries the East Coast Mainline railway, you reach **Five Arches Pit Nature Reserve** (8.2f, 8.3), owned by the **Wildlife Trust for Beds, Cambs and Northants** and designated a **County Wildlife Site**. Formed by a **borrow pit** from which clay was extracted for use on the railway, it is now flooded and, as a small wetland on the fen edge, provides good habitat for migratory and breeding birds. The clay was used to build the railway embankment in the 1840s. The path passes through the reserve, running parallel with the railway line. Please keep to the path and **note the danger of deep water elsewhere**.



9 Within the scrubby area to the right of the path (no entry as private land and also hazardous) lies a small pit called **Church End Clay Pit**. The Oxford Clay excavated here was also probably used for the railway, although elsewhere it was dug for brick and tile making. These scrubby areas alongside the railway are now good breeding or roosting habitat for small birds.



10 As you walk up the gentle hill towards the church, look back towards the north and you will see the small group of buildings that make up 'Church End' (10.2). Wood Walton's two listed buildings are here, **Corner Cottage and Thatched Cottage**. Behind the houses is the site of the 12th century **Wood Walton Castle, a Norman Motte & Bailey castle 'within a moat'**, that is now a scheduled ancient monument. The motte stands on a natural hillock and is about 135ft in diameter and 8½ ft high above the bottom of the surrounding moat. Further in the distance to the north, the '**island**' of **Higney** can be seen rising above Church End.



Belonging to Ramsey Abbey, it was home to a hermit, Edwin, and his



servant at the time Sawtry Abbey was founded. After the dissolution the land was owned by the Charterhouse Hospital in London from 1616 to 1919. It is actually a peninsula of Oxford Clay that rises to over 5m and would have provided an area of dryer land mostly surrounded by wetland. It appears to have been used as an encampment by the early drainers. The once deep Peat that formed in the surrounding low, waterlogged fenland has gradually eroded since the drainage but some still remains, particularly in Woodwalton Fen just to the east. This valuable remnant of fen is now highly protected as a National Nature Reserve, SSSI and Ramsar Site.

11 **St Andrew's Church** (11.1f) sits on the slope of a hill in a commanding position (11.2) between Sawtry and Wood Walton villages and Wood Walton Castle. It was mentioned in the Domesday Book (1086) but dates mainly from the 13th and 14th centuries (with tomb slabs from the 12th and 13th centuries). It closed in 1967 and has been in the care of the **Friends of Friendless Churches** since 1979. Due to the poor drainage of the bedrock clay that underlies it, it has suffered significant 'movement' for many



Photos: 7.1 Bog oak and Sawtry Fen; 7.2 Bridge over Monk's Lode; 7.3 Monk's Wood in distance; 8.3 Five Arches Pit NR; 9.1 Gate through trees; 9.2 Path along tree line; 10.1 From gate, path heads across field to church; 10.2 Church End in front of site of motte & bailey; 11.2 St Andrew's Church.

years and its recent restoration has been a major achievement enabling it now to be opened to visitors on certain days (see www.friendsoffriendlesschurches.org.uk/news/st-andrews-is-no-longer-at-risk). Although once a parish church, it is in an isolated position (there is ongoing debate about the reason for this) which has caused it to suffer significant vandalism and theft (since at least the 16th century!). Two rare, stained glass windows depicting **St Catherine and St Lawrence** and dating from between 1310-1330 are now in the care of the **Stained Glass Museum in Ely**. Built of coursed limestone rubble with dressings of Lincolnshire Limestone (probably Barnack Stone), it contains 'carved stone coffin lids, Early English arcading to the north aisle and Perpendicular to the south, Neo-Classical monuments and dazzling Victorian tiles'.

12 As you emerge through the hedge line be careful of traffic on the road. Looking to the east as you walk across the field (12.2), you can see the low hills (12.3) that were formed by glacial material (Till) deposited on top of the Oxford Clay by ice c.425,000 years ago. You gradually walk uphill towards the village which lies on the lower slopes of these hills.

12a **Woodwalton Marsh Nature Reserve (12a.2)** is owned and managed by **The Wildlife Trust BCN**. It has unimproved (i.e. not fertilised) 'neutral' grassland (meaning neither calcareous nor acid) and, therefore, has an unusual plant community for this part of the county, including cowslips, pyramidal orchids and the nationally scarce sulphur clover. The sheltered aspect provides suitable habitat for butterflies including marbled white and grizzled skipper and among its many anthills are common lizards. In spring it is a good place to hear several species of warbler, which nest in the scrub.

13 As you walk on the path by the trees (13.1) you see a pond (private, no entry) on the left which adds to the interest for numerous small birds that live on the edge of the village. In the reign of Edward the Confessor, **Saxi of Walton**, a kinsman of Leofric, Earl of the Mercians, held the manor. After the Norman Conquest it was given to Hugh de Bolebec, his son granting it to the **Abbey of Ramsey**. It was known as **Waltune** in the 11th century, Walton in the 12th and **Wodewalton** in the 14th.

14 You emerge onto the attractive **village green** (14.1f) with its impressive stand of tall trees. This is the **highest point on the walk, at 19m**. There is a stone base to a cross next to the **War Memorial** (14.2), the latter made of Jurassic Weldon Stone from Northamptonshire. Across the road is the **village sign** (14.3f), the end of the walk.

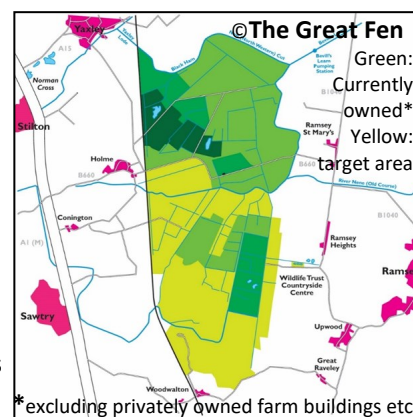
Photos: 11.5 Bridge through hedge heading to road; 11.6 Looking back uphill through hedge by road; 12a.1 Entrance to Woodwalton Marsh NR; 12a.2 Woodwalton Marsh; 12.2 Path through field to line of trees; 12.3 View east to low hills; 13.1 Path alongside trees; 13.2 Path at back of houses; 14.2 War memorial and base of cross.

Wildlife in the area

This western edge of the Cambridgeshire Fens has a steadily increasing biodiversity due to the **Great Fen** wetland restoration project, managed and owned by the **Wildlife Trust BCN and Natural England**. It includes **Woodwalton Fen** to the north east of the village which was



designated a **National Nature Reserve** in 1954, having been maintained as a nature reserve by the **Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves** for the previous 35 years. A rare remnant of undrained fenland, it is also now an internationally important **Ramsar Site** as well as an **SSSI**. Also in the Great Fen area are the **Wildlife Trust BCN** nature reserves of **Woodwalton Marsh**, **Five Arches Pit** (both on the walk) and **Gamsey Wood**, and nearby to the east are **Lady's Wood** and **Upwood Meadows**. This quiet corner of the Fens is already of significant value for wildlife. See www.greatfen.org.uk.



The **Great Fen Heritage Group** is an active group of volunteers who meet regularly at the Countryside Centre in the Wildlife Trust's **Ramsey Heights Nature Reserve**. They are interested in all aspects of the rich fenland heritage, including archaeology, architecture, historical events and local people's stories. The changing fenland landscape, its wildlife and its place in the lives of local communities is a theme running through all of their activities. See www.greatfen.org.uk/great-fen-heritage-group



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