

The Fen Edge Trail The 'island' of Thorney

2.3 miles (3.8 km)

In partnership with
**Thorney Society and
Thorney Museum**



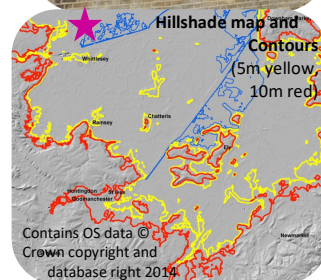
*'In 1135 William of
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that Thorney was
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..delightsome as
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agree!'*

**Dot, Thorney Society &
Thorney Museum**



The route: 'an iconic fen island – monks, marshes and a model village'

Thorney, the '**Isle of Thorns**', was a **fen island** surrounded by marshes until the drainage projects of the 17th century. It has been known since the 7th century for its major **Benedictine Abbey**; the large Abbey church remains impressive, even though much of it was lost in the 16th century. The **Victorian village** is of the characteristic local brick and is famous for being a '**model village**', built in the 19th century under the Duke of Bedford's ownership. The **Thorney Museum** is housed in the **Bedford Hall** and has plenty of information on the local history. This walk is a good introduction to the geology of the northern part of the Cambridgeshire Fens, including silt from extensive **tidal marshes** and **ancient river beds** (roddons), the **River Terrace Gravels of the Nene** and the complex '**March**' Gravels. The latter created the island itself, raising it above the low fenland; these gravels also form the islands of Whittlesey, March and Chatteris. Not far from the City of Peterborough, this easy walk takes you through an **historic fenland village** and quiet countryside with plenty of wildlife, giving a taste of the **iconic landscape of the Fens**.



Photos: 3.1f The windmill; 9.1f Small footbridge across drain; 8.2f Footpath through arable fields; 1.1f St Mary and St Botolph Church; 13.1f Bedford Hall holding the Museum; 4.2f The Thorney River; 9.2f Cattle in the Cricket Field; 2.2f Village sign.

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). **Thorney Museum** is open regularly in the summer and appointments at other times can often be made www.thorney-museum.org.uk.

Length of walk (one way) approx. 2.3 miles (3.8 km). Walking guide time 1hr plus stops. Grid ref for start TF282041. Maps O.S. Explorer 235. Free, easy to use online geology map viewer on www.bgs.ac.uk/map-viewers/bgs-geology-viewer.

Transport and services There are **buses** to Thorney from Peterborough and Wisbech (firstbus.co.uk or www.stagecoachbus.com). The nearest **train station** is Peterborough. On-street parking is available. Please only park where allowed and in consideration of others. The village has a pub, shop and tea room, but please check opening times before you set out.

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 potentially muddy ground in autumn and winter. Take particular care with uneven terrain, 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. All Fen Edge Trail walks are on publicly accessible routes. On this walk, any off street walking is on Rights of Way. **Anyone undertaking walks on the Fen Edge Trail does so at their own risk, these notes are for general guidance only.**

The Fen Edge Trail Thorney

Directions map (2.3 miles / 3.8 km)



- 1 Start outside the church of **St Mary and St Botolph** (1.1f), all that remains of **Thorney Abbey**.
 - 2 Walk down **Abbey Place** and turn left at the traffic lights to go over the **bridge**, walking on the wide grass verge of **The Causeway**.
 - 3 After just over a quarter of a mile, past the windmill (3.1f), there is a **kissing gate** on the left (3.3). Go through it and follow the path right, taking you through an **avenue of lime trees** (going south west).
 - 4 The path (on the **Haling Bank**) bends left (4.1), follow it down the side of the field, **parallel to the river** which is on the right.
 - 5 Where the path diverges from the river, follow it left a short way until you reach a **private farm road**.
 - 6 Turn left along the farm road, **Toneham Lane**, towards the farm buildings. Go through a gate using the gap at the left hand side.
 - 7 Walk past **Toneham farmhouse**, passing a **pond** (7.1) and continue past a house on left.
 - 8 Past the house, take the path to the **left at the footpath sign** (8.1), to go north through a field (8.2f).
 - 9 Once you reach the hedge line, walk across the **wooden bridge** (9.1f) over a ditch and through another **kissing gate** into the '**Cricket Field**' (NB there may be livestock in this field). Follow the path round the left (western) edge of the field following the hedge line, and head towards the road.
 - 10 Reaching the road go through the gate and cross the road to turn left on the pavement of the B1040, **Whittlesey Road**.
 - 11 Keep going (walking north) towards **The Green** and then on to the **church**, to arrive again at 1.
- To explore more of the village:**
- 12 Continue past the church and turn right down **Church St**. After the road bends to the left, you reach the main road (Wisbech Road). Turn left and walk to the pedestrian crossing just before the junction. Cross Wisbech Road to the **Rose and Crown pub** opposite.
 - 13 Walk left to the corner and turn right, next to the pub, to go along **Station Rd**. Turn right when you get to the **Tankyard** (13.2f) to reach the **Bedford Hall** which houses the **Museum** 14.



Walk: Thorney - geology and landscape map

Ages of the rocks

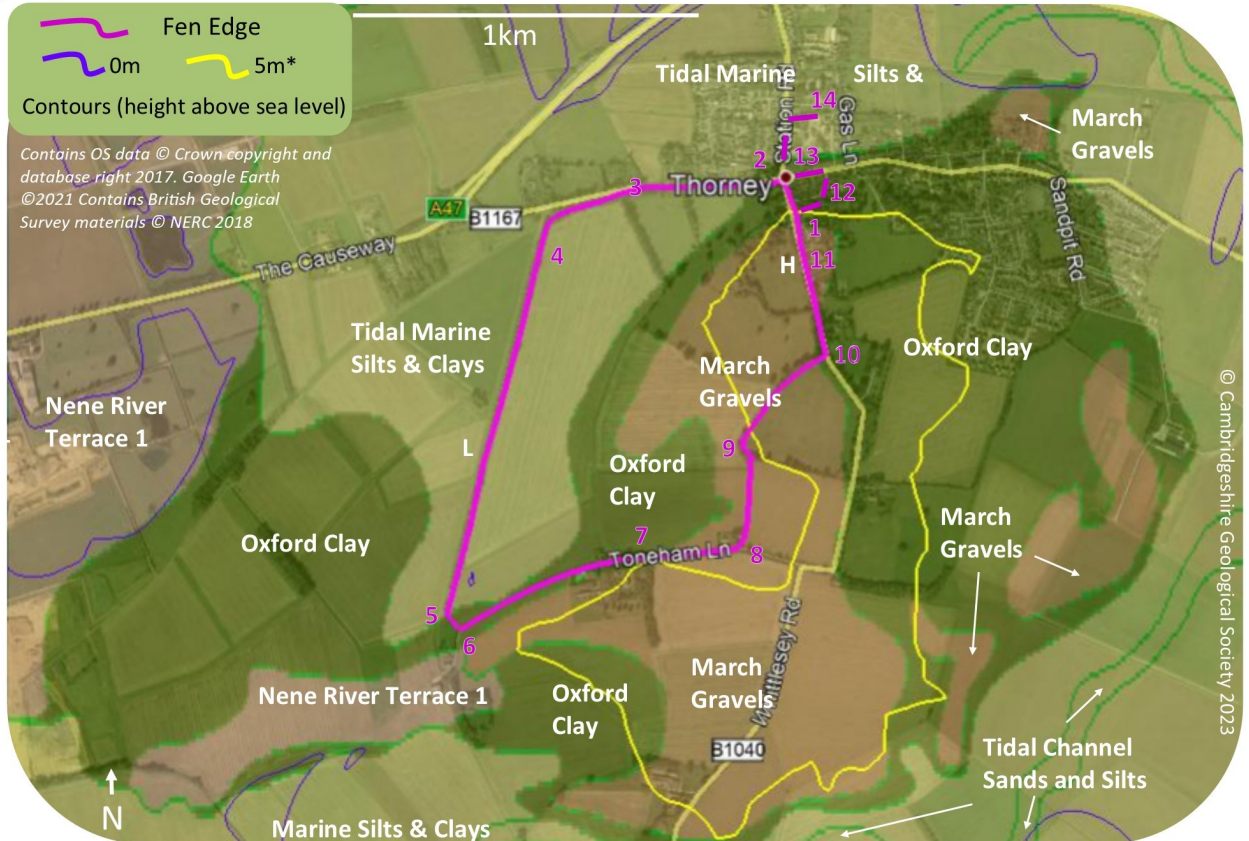
In the Fens, there are 3 types of 'rock' currently at the surface, each dating from a different period of time. And each telling a very different story in earth's history. **This walk features all 3** and is a good introduction to the geology of the Fens:

Holocene: Marine Silts & Clays c.3,400–3,800 years

Pleistocene: River Terrace Gravels c.60–30,000 years

March Gravels c.120–60,000 years

Jurassic (bedrock): Oxford Clay c.160 million years



The oldest is the **bedrock**, the **Oxford Clay**, which is c.160 million years old (from the **Jurassic Period**). It underlies most of the western part of the Cambridgeshire fenland. An extensive sea covered this part of Britain at the time, the muddy deposits on the sea floor becoming compacted to form a mudstone (clay). It is famous for containing the fossils of huge marine reptiles such as **Ichthyosaurs** and **Plesiosaurs** and smaller fossils such as ammonites. It is also well known for being used in the local brickmaking industry. The youngest two are better described as 'deposits' rather than rocks as they are so young that they have not yet become 'consolidated'. The oldest are two types of gravels dating from the **Pleistocene 'Ice Age'** which started 'only' 2.6 million years ago. They consist of flint-rich gravels which cover the bedrock, forming land that is slightly higher (and therefore, in the past, drier) than the surrounding low fen. As they contain large amounts of sand in places, they form a significant aquifer. The **March Gravels** contain material from the **warm Ipswichian Period** (c.120,000 years ago), including **marine fossils**, and also from the later **cold Devensian Period**. They form the '**islands**' of **Thorney, Whittlesey, Chatteris and March**. The **Gravels of the River Nene's 1st (youngest) Terrace** were left by extensive rivers that flowed during the last glaciation (the Devensian) when tundra covered the area. At Pote Hole gravel quarry, just to the east, many mammal fossils have been found including woolly rhino, mammoth, elephant and bison.

The youngest deposits date from the **Holocene Epoch** (the last 11,700 years) and, in this area, consist of **Tidal Silts and Clays** that formed in salt-marsh conditions. They are known as the **Barroway Drove Beds** and are about **3,800 years old** (from the Bronze Age) when there was a significant incursion by the sea. The lidar map shows that there are many 'fossil' channels (known as **roddons**) rising above the surrounding land; sands and silts that were the beds of tidal creeks and rivers. These have a range of dates associated with the Barroway Drove Beds, although some in the east may be from the more recent sea incursion (c.2000 years ago in **Romano-British times**). There are still patches of **Peat** (the Upper Peat) overlying some of the silts (although not large enough to be mapped) and there is **Lower Peat** underlying the Tidal Silts in some areas; **6,800 year old (Lower) Peat** was found at depth in **Adventurers Fen SSSI**, not far to the east. This would have formed in the extensive freshwater marshes created by the backing up of rivers due to rising sea level after the end of the Ice Age.

Our walk descends to sea level (0 metres) as we walk south across the low 'tidal marsh' fen on the west side of Thorney. Just after turning left at the crossroads, you drop down past the 5 metre 'fen edge' and don't rise above it again until just past Toneham Farm. The highest point is along the road, south of the Abbey. The land here is about **7m** above sea level (the building of the road increasing it a little to 9m). The difference in elevation often dictated where the dry land was and was very significant to the island's inhabitants.



Places of interest along the Trail

Close to Thorney, tantalising evidence of Bronze Age life on the edge of wetlands has been found, particularly at **Flag Fen, Must Farm and Pode Hole**. Thorney itself is known for its later history, mostly related to its Abbey and its rich history means it now has many listed buildings. In the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle of 656 the island was called 'Ancarig' (meaning the home of anchorites or religious hermits), but its name changed to Thorney reflecting the **natural vegetation** of thorny bushes. (Note that there are other islands in marshy parts of the country which share the name of Thorney – in Somerset, Hampshire and Nottinghamshire, for example).

Thorney Abbey (refounded in 972) was one of five major **Benedictine** houses set up across the Fens by **Aethelwold of Winchester** (a member of King Aethelstan's royal household and later known as St Aethelwold), bringing Anglo-Saxon royal power to the area and demonstrating that the Danelaw had ended. Endowments of land, relics and money encouraged the development of a **major church and monastic settlement**. Aside from the presence of the monastic foundation, evidence for Saxon occupation at Thorney is scant and the village did not develop until later. This was probably due to the fact that sea level had risen significantly since Roman times causing extensive freshwater marshes to form inland due to impeded river flows. In 1135, William of Malmesbury wrote '*it is a little paradise... and what of the glorious buildings, whose very size it is a wonder that the ground can support amid such marshes*'. The marshes were an important resource and the Abbey had fishery and fishing rights to **Whittlesey and Ramsey Meres**. In the 14th century it seems that the monastery was falling behind others and coming under the influence of **Peterborough Abbey**. When Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries, the property was sold to the **Russell family (Earls of Bedford)**, based at Woburn Abbey. The estate produced **fish, eels, wildfowl, reed and sedge (for roofing)**.

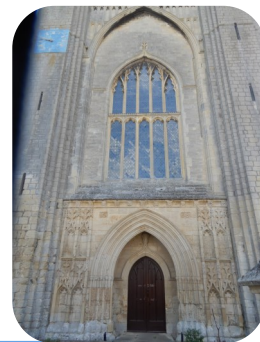
In the 1630s, as the settlement grew and was granted the right to a market, major drainage schemes were enacted, first backed by Charles I and the Russells, using Cornelius Vermuyden as the engineer, then continued during and after the Civil War by the **Earl of Bedford**. He was the main 'Adventurer', well known for drainage of the **Bedford Level** across the Cambridgeshire Fens. Thorney was a **centre of the drainage work** and base for the Earls' (later Dukes') stewards and agents. The drainage brought most of the estate into agricultural use. Many **Protestant refugees from Flanders**, known as 'Walloon', and others from France, settled in Thorney in the 17th century, having come after the main drainage work. They worshipped in the Abbey, where ruins had been brought back into use by the Earls of Bedford. In the 1840s and 1850s the **estate village** was rebuilt to improve housing conditions and amenities. The facilities of the **Tankyard** provided running water, town gas and manufacturing capabilities and around 80% of the cottages were rebuilt with earth closets, then water closets, and improved facilities for cooking and living. The focus then moved to rebuilding the farms, such as **Toneham Farm**, with '**model**' barns and cartsheds as well as comfortable farmhouses and more cottages. Around the turn of the century, agricultural profits were reduced, and the responsibilities of landlords were increasing. In 1910 the Duke of Bedford put the estate up for sale, and local farmers bought the land and buildings.

1 St Mary and St Botolph Church (1.1f & 1.2) was built between 1085 and 1108 as the **Abbey church** and is now Grade I listed. As there is no local building stone in this area, the Abbey was largely built of **Barnack Stone**, as were Ely and Peterborough Cathedrals. This is a high quality Jurassic limestone which comes from quarries now worked out and known as the Barnack Hills and Holes Nature Reserve. The church is still large and impressive, even though much of it was lost in the sixteenth century. The eastern end of **Thorney Abbey** was built in 1840 of **Wansford Stone** (another Jurassic limestone), from another of the Russell family estates. Limestone was also used for some of the nearby buildings (1.3). The church stands on **Oxford Clay**, just on the edge of higher land covered by the **March Gravels**. The gravels probably used to extend further, protecting the Clay from erosion and leaving the area as relatively high land.

2 The Rose and Crown pub (2.1) at the crossroads was built in 1910. The name of **The Causeway** reflects a probably seasonal route, accessible only in summer before major land drainage, where the **Turnpike road from Peterborough to Thorney** was built in 1792. Passing the village sign (2.2f), which depicts the Abbey, you descend onto lower land. This is covered in silt left by **tidal marshes** during the major inundation of the Fens by the sea in the **Bronze Age**, c.3,800 years ago.

3 The Windmill (3.1f), on the outskirts of the village, dates from 1787 and is Grade II listed. It is a **grain mill**, originally with six sails; no drainage mills survive in the village. During the War, four German prisoners of war used it as a base during the day while working the land. Formerly, a pub called the **Chequers Inn** stood next to the windmill (3.2). After going through the gate to take the path into the trees (3.3), you pass through a grove of lime trees (3.4); look out for butterflies in summer in the dappled shade provided by the trees.

4 The Haling (or Hauling) Bank path (4.1) runs alongside the '**Thorney River**' (4.2f); now a ditch, this is the remaining part of the drainage channel around the 'island' of Thorney, once also used to carry agricultural products to the Nene. There are views left back up onto the higher land where



Photos: 1.2 The church front; 1.3 Limestone walls of Abbey House; 2.1 The Rose and crown; 3.2 Chequers Pub, once next to mill; 3.3 The gate to path; 3.4 Lime trees (and a horse chestnut); 4.1 Haling Bank path; 4.3 Views back up onto the higher land where the Abbey was built.

the Abbey sits (4.3). In the first field on your left, depending on the season and what's growing in the field, a **roddon** may be visible. This shows as a line of raised land, formed by coarser silts and sands that were the bed of an ancient water channel. It is now higher than the surrounding fen, which is lower due to shrinkage of underlying peat. The lowest point on the walk is just after halfway along the river, as you walk through the low 'silt fen'. A borehole near the river here recorded the **Oxford Clay at a depth of c.3.5m**, with **c.2m of the Bronze Age marine silts** lying over it and then c.1.5m of soil on top. However, there were **peat layers within the silt**, showing the dynamic **changes between freshwater (peat) and tidal water (silts)**. On your right is **Guy's Fen** and not far to the west beyond this is **Pode Hole Quarry** where extensive archaeological excavations have shown that the fen edge here was occupied from the Mesolithic through to the Iron Age, and particularly during the Neolithic and Bronze Age. The higher land of the **River Terrace** gravels is seen to the southwest.



5 At the bend, note the view to the south to Whittlesey and **King's Delph brickworks and chimneys**, the last evidence of a **huge local brickmaking industry**. This area remains partly industrial, hosting a wind farm as well as the McCain's factory. It is also the site of **Must Farm**, a major archaeological site on the fen edge, described by some as 'Britain's Pompeii'.



6 Reaching the lane, to the right is a farmhouse near to which, along the river, there was a **clay pit** dug to obtain the local Oxford Clay for brickmaking. The **characteristic 'yellow' local bricks**, known as '**Thorney Lumps**' (6.1), were made here and then transported along the river, including those used to build the **1850s model village**. The track of Toneham Lane is along an exposure of **Oxford Clay**, with the difference between the higher **March Gravels** on the right (the south) and lower **silt fen** to the left (the north) easily seen (6.2).



7 **Toneham Farm** is an ancient site, settled according to legend by an **Anglo-Saxon saint, Tona**. It is said that **St Aethelwold** loved it so much that he spent Lent there. Here, we are up onto the **March Gravels** – with the **River Terrace Gravels** extending out to west. The **views here are so extensive** that the farmer's wife living here during World War II said that the reflection of the fires of the London Blitz could be seen on clouds to the south. A pond can be seen where the water drains the gravels forming a spring where it meets the underlying clay (7.1). There is a limestone block (possibly brought from the limestone quarries at Stamford) bearing the farm name (7.2) on top of what is possibly a millstone, made of harder stone.



8 After turning off the track (8.1) you walk through arable fields; the more free draining land of the **March Gravels** suits some crops (8.2f) and can be used for pasture. The **March Gravels** extend to the south, forming most of the land above 5m. Agriculture was only possible on limited areas of Thorney island itself, and there are surviving patches of ridge and furrow visible as **earthworks in Abbey Fields** and other pasture fields around the village. The monks would have had to rely more on their outlying manors for corn.

9 Once over the small wooden bridge (9.1f), you enter the '**Cricket Field**' which often has livestock in it (9.2f). Near the road, **Abbey Fields**, designated an area of **Historic Landscape and Parkland**, is to the left of the path, over a fence (there are better views later).



10 You emerge onto the B1040 where Ashley Pool Lane (to the right) becomes **Whittlesey Road** (to the left). One of the longest B roads in England, it is a very old and well-used route linking Thorney to St Ives, and the abbeys of Ramsey and Crowland. The first house you pass, set back from the road, is **Thorneycroft**, a gentleman's house of the early Victorian period, with associated stables and domestic outbuildings. This is a rare example of a **garden stocked with Victorian favourites** available during the 19th century. It provides an idea of what so many Victorian gardens would have looked like before perennial and ground cover plants became popular. On the opposite side of the road, you see the **Grade II listed estate boundary wall**, possibly

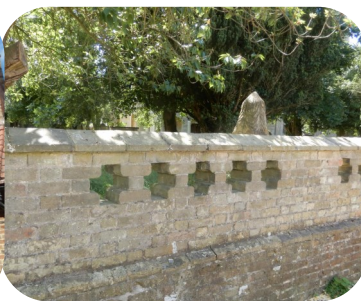


dating from the 16th century, and heightened in the 19th century (10.2). By the gates, there is an information board (10.3) about the medieval earthworks excavated in Abbey Fields and about the **Wildlife Park** that was here in the 1970s, developed from the winter quarters of Robert Brothers' Circus. Great crested newts now inhabit the Penguin Pool! Along the road, the **Oxford Clay** is now at the surface for a short way; the gravels may once have covered more of the bedrock but have been eroded (or maybe dug out for use).

11 You walk up the gradual slope onto the gravels to reach **the Green** (11.1), with its mature trees and 17th and 18th century houses. **Abbey House** (now 3 dwellings), opposite the church, is based on parts of the **Abbot's lodging**, pre-1539; the '**Old Laundry**' is believed to be the Abbot's kitchen, with a square louvre. It was extended to form the Steward's home and workplace in the 16th century, then a new manor house was built around 1660, but rarely visited by the Russell family. It had a formal garden discovered by phosphate investigation in 2005. The roof is tiled with **Collyweston Slate**, a **limestone** (not slate) that fractures and can be used for tiles. It now has a Georgian Front.



Photos: 6.1 Thorney bricks; 6.2 Walking along the strip of Oxford Clay with higher March Gravels to right and lower silt fen to left; 7.1 Toneham Farm pond; 7.2 Limestone block at Toneham Farm; 8.1 Signpost across fields; 10.2 Old wall of Abbey Fields; 10.3 Information board; 11.1 The Green.

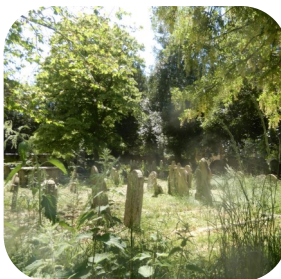


Seeing more of the village (short additional walk)

12 In **Church Street** is the former girls' and infants' school (1850s) (12.1), now the library, and the walled **village churchyard** (12.2, 12.3). Along Wisbech Road the model **estate cottages** (12.4) can be seen, built of the pale **Thorney bricks** and with roofs of Welsh slate.

13 As you walk north, you go from Oxford Clay onto the Tidal Silts of the fen. Thorney **railway station** was opened in 1866, depressing the former river trade for goods via the

Nene. The station was on the old **Peterborough to Wisbech** line, with an additional station in the parish at **Wryde**. It closed in the 1960s and little evidence to suggest a rail link now remains, apart from a set of replica wooden level crossing gates at the west side of Station Road. The neo-Jacobean building (the '**Tankyard**'), known as **Bedford Hall** (13.1f), includes a 96 ft high water tower, erected in 1855, that supplied fresh water to the village. It includes the village **War Memorial** (13.2) and houses the **Thorney Museum**. When the Tankyard was built though, the local brickworks did not have the capacity for such a large building, so bricks were brought from Whittlesey. The museum has displays about the large parish which cover the full range of history to the present day, including models and maps.



Photos: 12.1 The old school; 12.2 Wall of churchyard; 12.3 The churchyard; 12.4 Model Estate cottages; 13.2 War memorial at Bedford Hall.

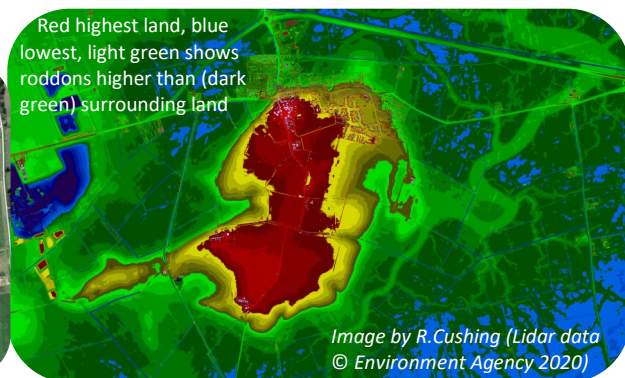


Geology and Archaeology

The famous fenland 'peat and peaty soils' tell only the very recent part of the story of the Fens. Underneath lie interwoven layers of peat and silts that can tell us when each specific area was part of a **freshwater marsh or lake, a wet woodland, a reedbed, a riverbed, or even a salt marsh or mudflat**. Being near to where the River Nene enters the Fens, the Thorney area has a complex recent geological history that is closely related to its occupation by man and is therefore often revealed during **archaeological excavations**. In the Late **Neolithic**, the freshwater marshes, where peat had been forming for possibly thousands of years, were replaced by **tidal creeks** connected to an early side channel of the Nene that ran near the south east of Thorney. Extensive salt marsh and mudflats, with associated deposition of tidal silts, gradually developed until the sea incursion reached its **furthest extent in the Bronze Age**, c.3,800 years ago. For much of the last few thousand years, occupation was possible only on the higher and drier areas of the gravel 'islands'.

Many years of archaeological research carried out in the area of **Pode Hole Quarry** just to the **west of Thorney**, has shown that it was part of an extensive, **prehistoric fen edge landscape**. Early Bronze Age burial mounds were found containing, in one barrow, the **nationally significant remains of an infant burial** on a birch bark mat. Pottery dates helped to show that the site was occupied **throughout the 2nd millennium BC**. Just to the north of the Causeway, at Tower's Fen, the waterlogged remains of a Bronze Age wooden bucket was found in 2004–5. However, by the 4th

century BC the area was mostly abandoned due to the sea encroaching, with the surrounding land now mudflats and salt marsh.



Photos: Roddons visible as bumps in the surface of the field; Bronze Age bucket; Aerial view of roddons winding across fields; Lidar map showing large roddon to east of Thorney and many small roddons.

