The Fen Edge Trail
Fordham to Isleham

6.5 miles (10.4 km)

In partnership with

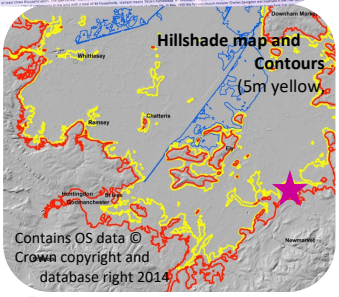
In partnership with The Isleham Society & Friends of Isleham Nature Reserve

a journey across a landscape and time

'Start along a chalk stream, stroll through the fen to a historic village and end at a major fenland river'

Richard, The Isleham Society

The route: 'From the village on the River Snail to the village on the River Lark - the last walk on the Fen Edge Trail'



This walk is the **last on Cambridgeshire's Fen Edge Trail,** which takes you from the border with **Lincolnshire** in the north west to the border with **Suffolk** in the south east. The geology in this area is mostly **Grey Chalk**, with the prized **Totternhoe Stone** outcropping in Isleham, which is pockmarked with shallow **quarries that date from pre-Medieval times**. Starting in **Fordham**, a village on the **River Snail,** a **chalk stream**, you walk alongside the **river** into the fen, passing several historic sites before entering **Isleham** on the **River Lark**, one of the major rivers of the area. Here, the you visit two Scheduled Monuments: the ancient **Priory** (including the **Church of St Margaret of Antioch**) and the **Lime kilns** (also a **Local Geological Site**), as well as the impressive **12th century church of St Andrew**. After heading back out into the **fen**, you finally reach the end of the **Fen Edge Trail at the Washes of the River Lark**.

Photos: 11.2f The Isleham Lime Kilns; 2.1f River Snail; 10.3f Isleham Priory Church; 8.1f Map of Historic Isleham locations; 11.5f St Andrew's church, Isleham; 14.2f View over Isleham Washes; 1.1f Memorial, Fordham; 14.6f The footbridge leading to the Lock on the River Lark.

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).* The walk can be **split into two parts by finishing or starting in Isleham**. The Long Path long-distance walk passes near Fordham. For information on **Isleham Priory** see **www.english-heritage.org.uk.**

Length of walk (one way) approx. 6.5 miles (10.4 km) or 7.8 miles (12.4 km) with longer option to avoid stiles. Walking guide time 3.5 hrs plus stops (4 hrs with longer option without stiles). Grid ref for start TL631708 Maps O.S. Explorer 226. Free, easy to use online geology map viewer on **www.bgs.ac.uk/map-viewers/bgs-geology-viewer.**

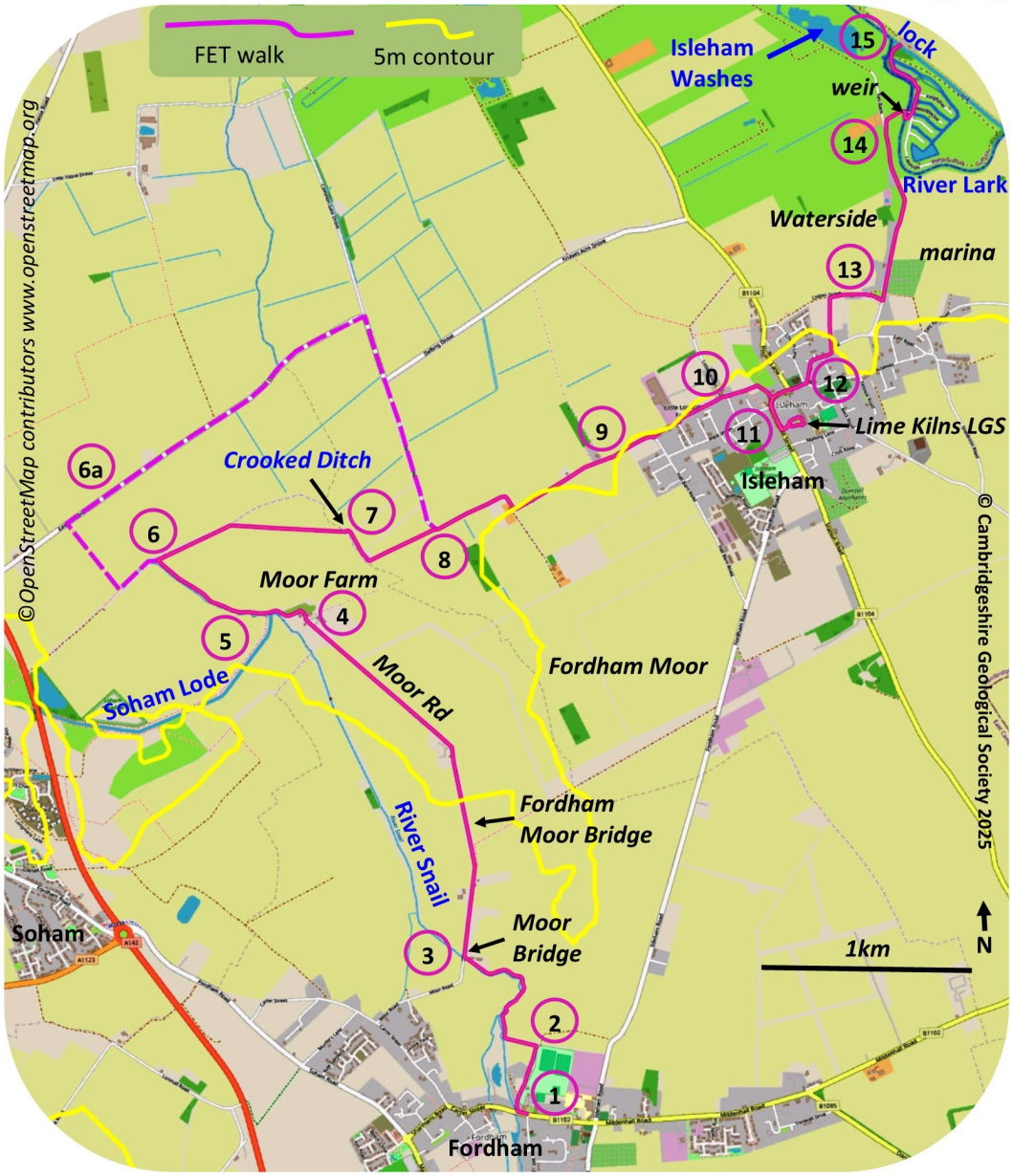
Transport and services There is no bus service directly between the two villages but there is a bus to Fordham from Newmarket and Ely (**www.stagecoachbus.com**) and **Tiger On Demand** offers a service (see **www.transport.cambridgeshirepeterborough-ca.gov.uk/buses/tiger-on-demand/**). **Train services** run to Ely. On-street parking is possible in both villages. You can also park at the recreation ground in Fordham, near the start of the walk. Please only park where allowed and in consideration of others. There are pubs and shops in Fordham and Isleham (and the Beeches Centre in Mill St, Isleham, has a café).

Safety Be aware of risks you may encounter and take note of warnings given by landowners or on paths. The terrain is **generally flat**, but can be muddy in places. There are water channels alongside some of the paths. **There are two stiles** (avoidable by optional detour), kissing gates, and steps on a footbridge. Part of the walk is **on country roads** (no pavement) where **extra care is needed** even if there is little traffic. 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. All Fen Edge Trail walks are on Rights of Way or other publicly accessible routes. **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
Fordham to Isleham
Directions map (6.5 miles /10.4 km)

www.fenedgetrail.org

www.cambsgeology.org



1 Start at the **Memorial Gardens on Church St.** Turn right out of gardens and head west along Church St to the **bridge** across the **River Snail**. Follow footpath sign to go right before bridge, with river on left, along gravel track. At gate, take waymarked path with hedge on right.

2 At T-junction of paths, turn left at field edge, along path 200m, then follow path to right along river through 2 kissing gates for 600m to **Moor Rd**. **Take care as path is alongside river edge.**

3 At bridge turn right onto **Moor Rd** for 2km, keeping to left at fork in road next to barns, to **Moor Farm**.

4 At **Moor Farm** go through gate on right with footpath sign; go across yard towards sign and bear left at back of barn then follow track for 50m next to **Soham Lode**.

5 As the lode bends left, carry straight on along track. Pass into next field where the hedge is on the left and pass by two unused gates. Path becomes gradually less visible, but keep hedge on left at edge of field.

6 At end of field near trees, **turn right along north edge of field** keeping hedge on left. After *c.*400m, cross stile into next field. Cross this field diagonally (going south east) for 600m to stile and footbridge. Path across field marked by 2 old stiles.

6a Or to avoid stiles (extra 0.9miles/ 1.5km), **turn left at end of field** near trees, along Little Bank drove, then take 1st right to join **East Fen Drove**. Go east until a 'T' junction, then turn right to rejoin at **8**.

7 Cross **stile** and footbridge over **Crooked Ditch** and turn immediately right to kissing gate. After 200m go through 2nd gate and to end of copse on left. At footpath sign, bear left to cross cultivated field diagonally (north east) for 300m aiming for **right hand end of line of trees** (*7.1*) NB This is a Right of Way across field. Just to left of corner of trees go through narrow overgrown access onto road.

8 Go right here onto **Temple Road** to follow it (including a double bend part way along) for 1 km to Isleham.

9 **At the bend** on the outskirts of the village, **turn left off road at footpath sign** onto concrete track. On next bend to left, take waymarked lane on right. Follow this path passing old clunch walls, going straight across a narrow road. Reaching some houses, go straight along road **(Little London Lane)** to the bend and take grassy path to the left shown by footpath sign next to a **water pump** (*9.3*).

10 Ignore a path on the right and keep going to kissing gate at entrance of the **Priory field**. Cross field diagonally to the right for 75m to the gate next to **Isleham Priory** (watching out for horses in field). Exit field next to the Priory through gate,

11 Cross car park and go right (south) along **Mill St.** After c.150m turn left down **Limestone Close** to see the limekilns. Retrace steps to car park and go right (east) along **Church St,** passing **Pound Lane** to reach the **Church of St Andrew**.

12 Past the church, cross **Church Lane** and bear left into **Sun St**, passing the **Rising Sun** and **Zoar Chapel**. Take narrow signposted footpath to left between nos. 41 & 45. Follow this north until it intersects with a track, **Coates Drove**. Turn right to follow this track.

13 Bear left at the green at end of road to turn left onto **Waterside** and follow the road as it becomes a causeway (**Fen Bank**) with lower fen on left and an embankment on right (with footpath on top of embankment).

14 Follow the right fork in the road leading to the Marina and before the bend take the right grassy path (*14.1*) to pass car park and cross **lode** using **metal footbridge** across weir. Turn left across grass to follow road, noting footpath signs. Keeping lode on left, cross through car park onto gravel path on left between lode and narrowboat berths. This bends round and you cross a wooden footbridge (with steps). Go straight ahead along a (sometimes muddy) path, curving to the right to reach another footbridge. In the middle of this bridge lies the **County Boundary, between Cambridgeshire and Suffolk,** the end of the walk, **15**.

Walk: Fordham to Isleham - geology and landscape map

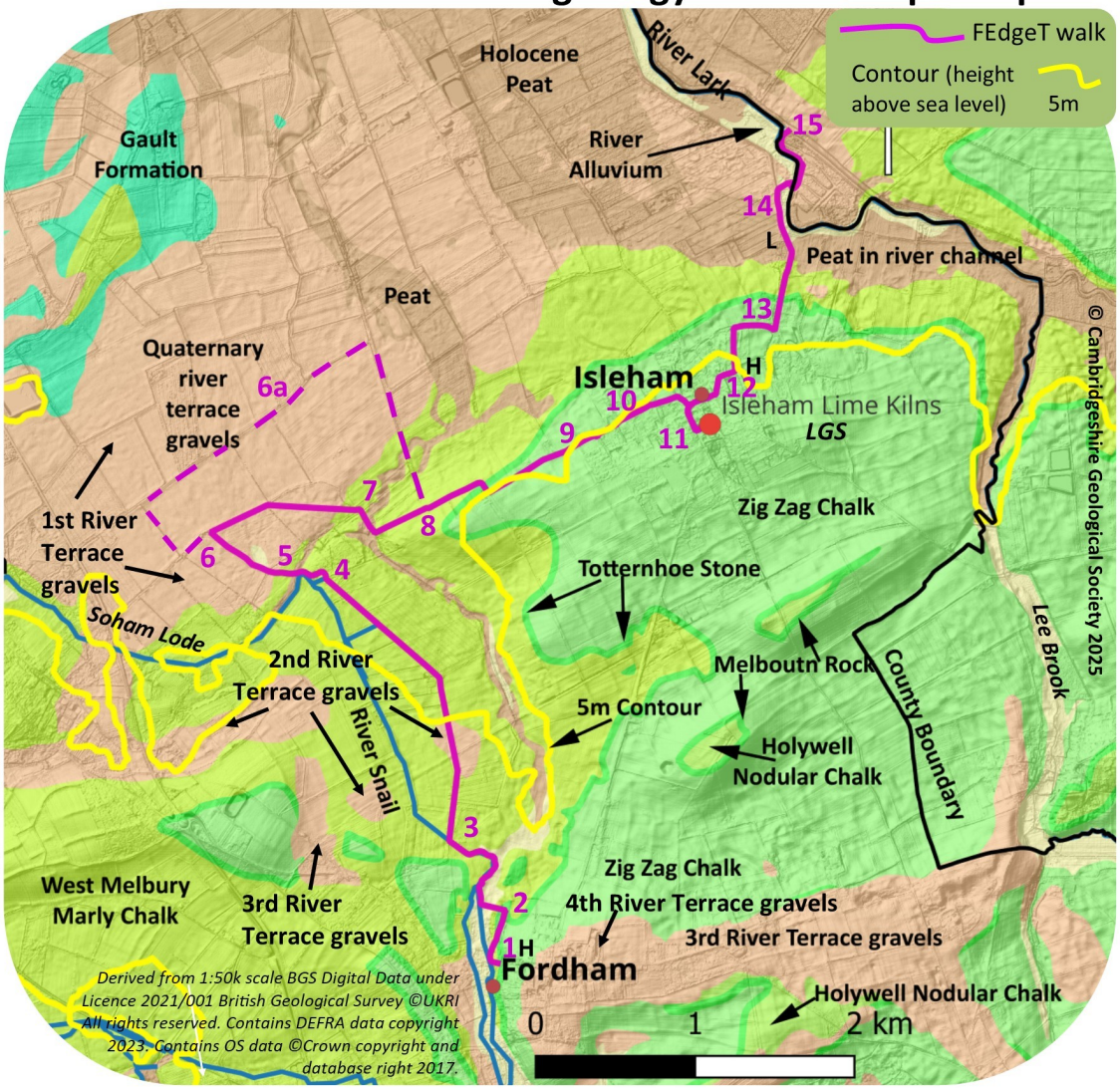
Ages of the rocks

'Superficial'
Holocene: Under 11,700 years
River Alluvium and Peat

Pleistocene 'Ice Age':
River Terraces sands and gravels (very approx. dates)
1st *c.*20,000 years
2nd *c.*50,000 years
3rd under 200,000 years
4th *c.*300,000 years

Bedrock (million years)
Cretaceous:
Holywell Nodular Chalk (incl. Melbourn Rock) *c.*94 - *c.*93
Zig Zag Chalk (incl. Totternhoe Stone) *c.*96 - *c.*94
West Melbury Marly Chalk *c.*100 - *c.*96
Gault clay
*c.*113 to *c.*100

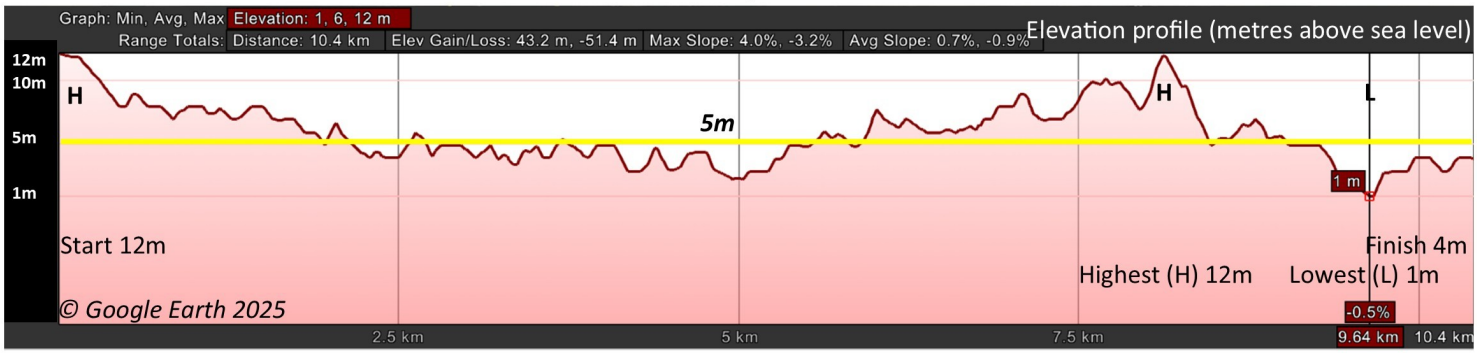
The hard chalk ('clunch') of the **Totternhoe Stone**, at the base of the Zig Zag Chalk, was quarried in the past for building stone. **Isleham** was one of the major clunch quarrying areas of the fen edge, and there are still many signs of the industry, which played a significant role in the history of the village.



The bedrock here is Chalk, with a **thickness of 33 metres** (including 1m+ of Cambridge Greensand at its base) being found in a well dug in 1934 by a pumping station on the Fordham to Isleham road. Under it lies the Gault clay, which is at the surface further north west. Much **younger deposits**, from the **Pleistocene 'Ice Age' and the recent Holocene**, overlie the Chalk in just a few places on the walk. The start of the walk is on the narrow band of the **Totternhoe Stone**, which is a hard layer of Chalk that forms the boundary between the oldest, lowest Chalk bedrock, the **West Melbury Marly Chalk**, and the **Zig Zag Chalk.** The walk then follows the small valley of the **River Snail,** infilled during the last few thousand years with **Alluvium**, a fine material carried along by the current. The next section passes over **West Melbury Marly Chalk**, a soft, clay-rich Chalk which can often be seen ploughed up in the fields.

The walk crosses a small patch of **river sands and gravels** from the **2nd Terrace** and then the large area of **1st Terrace** to the north. These river terraces comprise a complex series of deposits, mostly sands and gravels, that have been left by strongly-flowing river channels, precursors of the current **Cam-Ouse system**. As the river cut down at various times, the deposits formed a gradually lower (and younger) set of (roughly defined) terraces as the topography changed. All four terraces occur in this area; the higher parts of eastern **Fordham** lie upon the **sands and gravels** of the **3rd and 4th Terraces**. Due to reworking of the material, the ages of the various spreads of gravel are difficult to assess but radiocarbon dating of fossils and other organic material has produced dates, covering both cold and warmer periods, from *c.***300,000 years ago** to the end of the last glaciation *c.***20-12,000 years ago**. In the marshy conditions of the last several thousand years (the **Holocene**), **Peat** formed over much of the (relatively impermeable) marly Chalk and the gravels, but now remains only in small patches; this includes some **thin ribbons** along the previous courses of water channels, which carved incised "valleys" into the Chalk, shown by the southward detours of the 5m contour.

After climbing back over the 5m contour, onto the **Zig Zag Chalk** above the **Totternhoe Stone**, the walk then goes back down the succession of the Chalk and onto the **Peat** and **Alluvium** in the valley of the **River Lark.**



Places of interest along the Trail

1 **Fordham** is named as a '*homestead or enclosure by a ford'* and shown as Fordeham in the Domesday Book (1086) having had this name since at least the 10th century. The **WWI memorial** (*1.1f*) is Grade II listed as it was designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, a nationally renowned architect. Built in 1921 of **Portland Stone** (a high quality, Late Jurassic limestone from Dorset), in Doric column style, it also commemorates WW2. Its original bronze statue of St George was stolen in 1991 and replaced by one in fibreglass. Exiting the **Memorial Gardens**, the house on the corner opposite (1 Carter St) is a **16th century building, Grade II listed** (*1.2*) with an adjoining old **clunch (Chalk) wall** that shows a complex history of use, as seen by the infilled sections (*1.3*). Next door, just before the river, is a **double barn**, also 16th century and Grade II, more recently used as a warehouse. The **River Snail** (*1.4*) is one of the many **chalk streams** that can be found along the southern section of the Fen Edge Trail; having arisen in Snailwell, it flows through **Fordham Woods Nature Reserve** to the south and then through the village. The second of the two cottages by the river is 18th century, Grade II **Poet's House** (*1.5*), built of (plastered) **clunch** it was once the home of James R Withers (1812-1892), **'the rural poet of Cambridgeshire'**.

2 The once more powerful river has eroded the Chalk and after turning away from the river, you leave the river Alluvium and walk over the hard band of **Totternhoe Stone** that occurs on the (shallow) valley side. You may see some native water plants as you reach the river again although, sadly, most chalk streams have had their unique water quality degraded by pollution and low water levels (*2.1f*). The River Snail used to go north from the bend here to join the **River Lark**, along the small valley now only shown by the remaining Peat, but its waters were diverted into a new course further west, now joining **Soham Lode** (in the **Ely-Ouse South Level**), which was probably dug in the 1790s to reduce flooding in the Soham-Fordham area.

3 As you reach **Moor Bridge** (*3.1*) on **Moor Rd** look out for wildlife on or near the river; the telegraph poles near the bridge make ideal perches for owls and sparrowhawks surveying the land. The area you are walking through is named **Fordham Moor** rather than Fen as it has patches of sand (from the 2nd Terrace over the Cam system) lying over the Chalk in some places. Peat remains only in the old river valleys. As you walk along the road you pass **Fordham Moor Bridge** over the route of a dismantled railway (*3.2*): the railway opened in 1885 and closed in 1964. Further to the east (off the Fordham to Isleham Rd), the area around the old line has been turned into the **Isleham Local Nature Reserve**, valuable for its **chalk grassland**. Volunteers from the **Friends of Isleham Nature Reserves** help with its management. Part of it is a **County Wildlife Site** called Isleham Railway Cutting, designated for its **calcareous grassland indicator plants**.

As you walk through and alongside the fields, watch out for examples of **worked flint**, not uncommon in this area, some possibly left by the roaming hunter gatherers in the **Mesolithic Period**. Ancient pollen and snail shells in the fen soil record how the creation of woodland clearings in the **Neolithic** evolved into a pastoral/arable landscape by the end of the **Bronze Age**. Chalk Farm, to the north of the nature reserve, is where Isleham farmers Arthur and William Houghton turned up '**The Isleham Hoard'** in 1959. This metal workers' stock of about **6,500 small and broken pieces of bronze** (dating from *c*.1,000 BC) is the **largest such find in Britain** and is now on display in the **Anglo-Saxon Village Museum, West Stow** (*3.3*). Nearby is a 70m **circular enclosure** that dates to the **Bronze Age**, visible from the air but not from the ground. In the same area, the gently rising ground is almost certainly the location of the now-vanished settlement of **Little Isleham,** which probably had a dozen dwellings, a chapel and a watermill in **Medieval** times.

4 To the east of the farm is the unexcavated **Moor Farm Bowl Barrow** scheduled monument dating from the Bronze Age. You pass **Soham Lode** before it turns sharply south west along an old river channel which has left a narrow strip of Peat, which you briefly cross after the bend in the lode.

5 From here until after **7** you are walking across the sands and gravels of the 1st Terrace, deposited over the Chalk by a strongly flowing river towards the end of the last glaciation *c*.20,000 years ago.

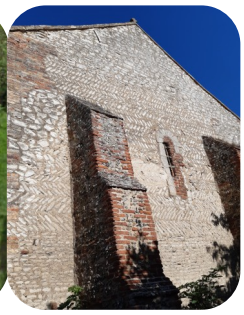
6 This area is the eastern part of a **Nature Recovery Network Priority habitat**, important for lowland meadows, ancient hedgerows, ponds and rivers/drains); it is managed by grazing and hay cutting with the aim of maintaining populations of orchids, other meadow and marsh plants, and farmland birds.

6a This loop passes along **East Fen Drove**, named after **East Fen Common**, one of the commons of Soham, a short distance to the west.

7 The footbridge crosses **Crooked Ditch**, the old course of the **River Snail;** still a chalk stream, it is potential habitat for water voles and wintering snipe. Now back on the Chalk, you cross a thin strip of overlying **Peat** that remains in the old channel. A Bronze Age Aurochs bone was found here during archaeological excavations that also radiocarbon-dated the palaeochannel deposits back to the Mesolithic.

Photos: 1.2 16th century building; 1.3 Old clunch wall; 1.4 River Snail; 1.5 Poet's House next to river; 3.1 Approaching Moor Bridge; 3.2 Road bridge over old railway; 3.3 West Stow Archaeology Gallery; 7.1 Path across field - aim towards right hand end of trees.

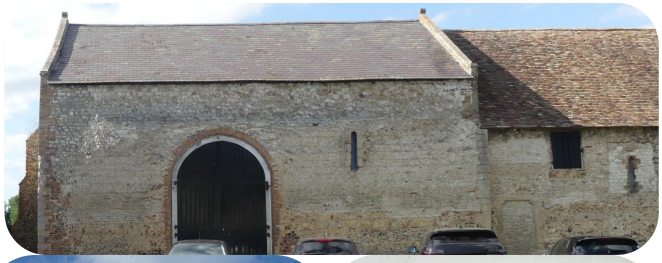
8 Tradition has it that there was a **Roman temple** here, on your left along Temple Rd, between Concord and Field Farms. This is unlikely although there might perhaps have been a **Roman** farm building. Much more likely is that the road, the original land route into Isleham, is so named because there was a rest house for the **Knights Templars**. Two **Templars** are buried in **Chippenham** churchyard and their major centre at **Denny Abbey** is not far away. You might spot fragments of **brick and tile** in the ploughed land to your left. At the bend in the road, you cross the **Totternhoe Stone** again and are walking over the less marly and therefore more permeable and less waterlogged, **Zig Zag Chalk** on which the main part of Isleham village (*8.1f*) sits.

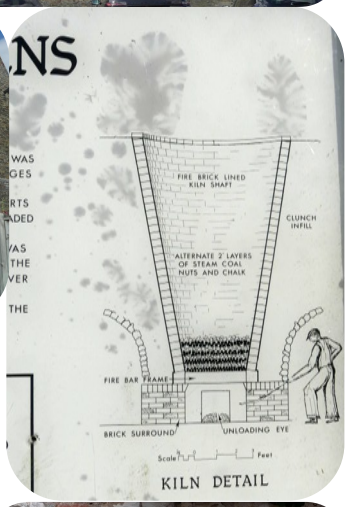


9 As you walk off the road onto the path, on the left is the reconstructed remains of **The Hall**, also called **Great Bernhard's Hall**. It is still a fine building but now retains only part of its original size and grandeur following a fire. It was acquired by the Bernard family, somewhere between 1199 and 1216, and passed to the Peytons in 1430. The **sixteenth century barn** behind the Hall retains its original timber roof. Both Hall and Barn are Grade II listed. On **Little London Lane** nos 18 and 10 are Grade II **16th century cottages**.

10 The field you walk across is part of the area of the **Isleham Priory Scheduled Monument** (*10.1*). Notice the hollows in the field. One theory is that they were fishponds to provide a Friday meal for the two or three monks at the **Priory**. A more recent opinion is that they were **wharves** for small boats to bring supplies to the village and Priory at a time when carriage by land for parts of the year would have been impossible. They would have been the 'terminus' of a waterway system, possibly dating from 1090-1254, linking similar bays at the western and eastern ends of **Coates Drove** (**13**) to present day '**Waterside'** and then to the **River Lark**. Isleham is known to have had several public quays and at least one private wharf.

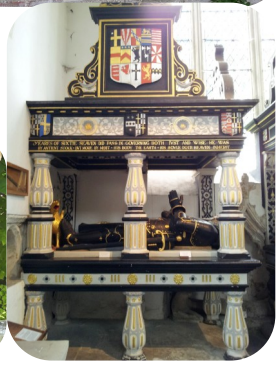
The **Priory Church of St Margaret of Antioch** (*10.1, 10.2, 10.3f)* was built sometime around 1100 at the bequest of Alan Count of Brittany who commanded the left flank of **The Conqueror's** army at the **Battle of Hastings**, or by one of his successors. By 1254, the **Benedictine** monks were moved to Linton. In 1440 Isleham was granted to **Pembroke College** and at some point after the **Reformation**, the chapel was converted to a barn. It is a rare example of a small **Romanesque church**, never extended and little altered except for the great door cut in the 16th century to facilitate its use as a **tithe barn**, and now one of the most complete Norman buildings in the UK. Notice the fine example of "herring -bone" pattern of the **clunch blockwork** in the walls. **Barnack** Stone, a **Jurassic limestone** from the west of Peterborough, was used for the internal archways and earlier windows. This stone was probably transported on the river system to the village.





11 As the route enters the village of **Isleham**, there is abundant evidence of quarrying for the prized **Totternhoe Stone** throughout the village. The Grade II listed house (built *c*.1730) at no. 1 Mill St, on your left, has locally characteristic **narrow Gault clay bricks** to the front with **clunch** in other walls, along with **Ely clay roof tiles** (*11.1*). Many of the old quarries have now been used as housing estates, but if you look around behind the houses in the pit which contains the **lime kilns**, you can still see the white chalk quarry faces. The **Totternhoe Stone** was extensively quarried here and the **Zig Zag Chalk** would have been burnt in the lime kilns. In Limestone Close you see the **Isleham Limekilns Local Geological Site** ahead of you. The **limestone kilns** (*11.2f*) were built around 1860 in the middle of the pit from which the chalk, or clunch, was quarried. There is an information board describing the lime-making process (*11.3*). Broken chalk and coal were built up in two-inch layers until full then lit from the bottom. The resultant **quicklime** was extracted from the eyes at the bottom each day. The fires never went out as long as there was a demand for mortar. Children with whooping cough were made to inhale the kiln smoke! The kilns closed around 1935. The site is a Scheduled Monument and is also protected for its colony of bats. Excavation at a site further along Mill St found six large clunch pits and was shown to be worked from the 11th to 16th centuries. Six accompanying wells supplied water to soak the blocks to prevent their hardening. Another quarrying area nearby, now residential, is still known as '**The Pits'** (*11.4*). There used to be a pound for stray cattle on the corner.

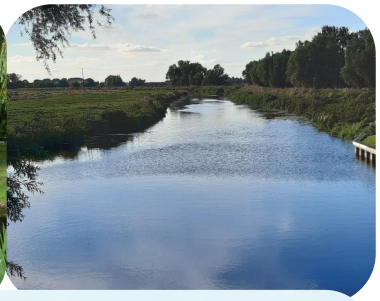
On your right is the **Griffin Hotel** (Grade II, 16th century, timber framed), a coaching inn where wealthy Victorian farmers such as the **Robins** would host the **'Hokey' Harvest Festival** celebrations. The **Church of St Andrew** *(11.5f)* well deserves its Grade I listing as it is amongst the thousand finest in the country. **The Lych (Old English for 'body') Gate** (*11.6*), which provided a place to rest a coffin, is the oldest in Eastern England and Grade II listed. The recess on the left used to house the village stocks. Inside, admire the magnificent angel roof raised in 1495, be surprised by the dramatic Peyton family, 16th century **six-poster tombs** (*11.7*), and rest on the **misericord stalls (mercy seats)**, dating from about 1350, in the Chancel.



Photos: 9.3 Path past water pump; 10.1 East wall of Priory Church; 10.1 Isleham Priory Church; 11.1 House at 1 Mill St; 11.3 Sketch of kiln on Interpretation Board; 11.4 Clunch wall along 'The Pits' street; 11.6 Lych Gate at Church of St Andrew, Isleham; 11.7 Six-poster tomb.

12 **Corner House**, just past Church Lane, is a late 17th or early 18th century, Grade II listed building. The '**R M'** wrought iron letters seen as bracing on the far end wall refers to **Robert Moody,** a merchant and also, from 1699-1703, the **Ruling Elder (Pastor)** of **Pound Lane Chapel**. **Clunch** can be seen in the walls of no. 2 Sun St, opposite. This area was, in the 19th century, a busy commercial connection to the river and several houses that you pass were pubs serving bargemen; the **Ship Inn** was one, and the **Swan** at number 53 another. You pass the Zoar Chapel on the left, now a private house; it is built of pale-coloured bricks locally made from Gault clay. Along Coates Drove could be the remnants of the "catchwater" ditch (now mostly infilled) marking the edge of the old village. The ditch becomes more marked as you reach the green; here there was a medieval quay (more recently used for open air services by the Free Church).

13 As you turn left, on the far side of Waterside (behind the allotments, is Cherry Drove, at the end of which is the **village pond**. Further on (on East Fen Rd) is the site of the **Coal Yard**. In the late 1890s the Robins family of entrepreneurial farmers made a cut to the river, making Isleham a regional distribution centre for this vital energy source. Barges brought coal from King's Lynn and left laden with clunch to be used as a building material. See **www.islehamparish.gov.uk/about/history** for more Isleham history. Here on the **fen edge** of the village, the land ahead would have been subject to flooding. Remains of a **Roman** embankment and of **Saxon** field ditches were found during housing developments. The road becomes a causeway, the **Fen Bank;** this used to be the old 'road' to Ely, hence the houses and, in the past, there was a chapel, school, and several pubs here. On the left is the low land of the fen (*13.1*) and on the right an embankment; you are now on the **Peat** of the valley of the **River Lark**; the **lowest point on the walk** is along here, only 1m above sea level.

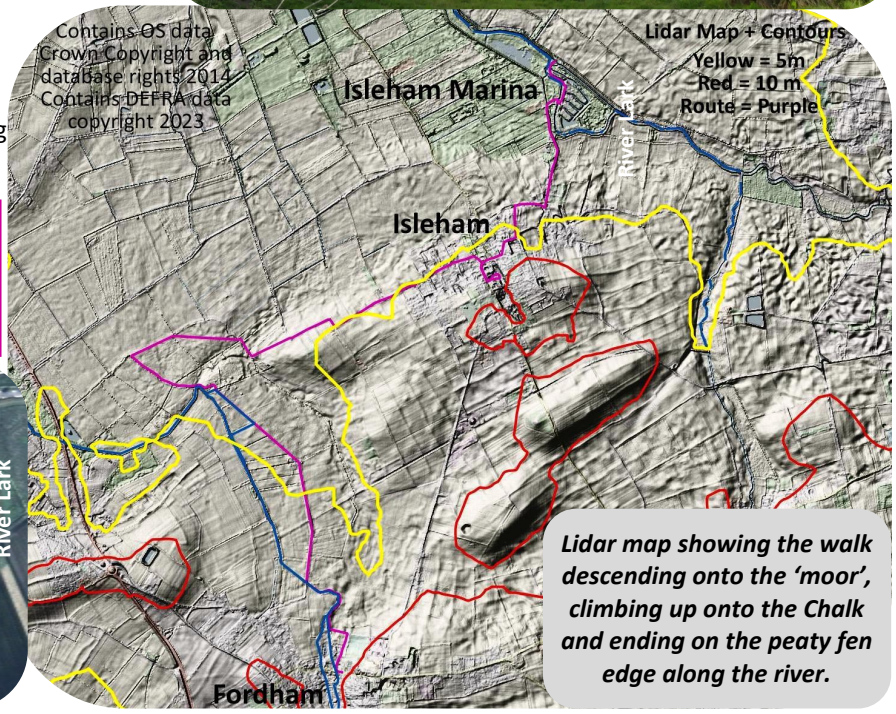


14 As you walk through the trees (*14.1*) you enter the **River Lark County Wildlife Site**, which includes the main channel and its 'washes' alongside the river to the north. **Isleham Washes** (*14.2f, 14.3*) is a nature conservation area visited by waders such as **avocets** and **oystercatchers**, and many ducks, geese and swans. The river, once tidal to Isleham, and navigable as far as Bury St Edmunds until the 19th century (now to only a short way past Isleham), forms the county boundary; once you enter **Riverside Island Marina** over the **footbridge above the weir** (*14.4*), you are in **Suffolk**. Following the river (*14.5*), you cross a footbridge (*14.6f*) to reach the lock.

15 The end of the walk is at **Isleham Lock.** Upstream is the short channel cut to avoid navigation of the weir; beyond this is the site of the old **Isleham ferry** and a famous site for outdoor baptisms. Downstream (*15.1*), the river travels a modified route to **Prickwillow**. It then follows the pre 1830 course of the **Great Ouse** joining the current river south of Littleport.

YOU HAVE NOW REACHED THE END OF THE FEN EDGE TRAIL TAKING YOU FROM THE LINCOLNSHIRE BORDER, THROUGH CAMBRIDGESHIRE, TO SUFFOLK!

Aerial view of the end of the walk



Lidar map showing the walk descending onto the 'moor', climbing up onto the Chalk and ending on the peaty fen edge along the river.

***Photos**: 13.1 Low fen to the west of the road past Waterside; 14.2 Path through trees to the marina; 14.3 The Isleham Washes; 14.4 The footbridge over the weir; 14.5 The River Lark as it passes the marina; 15.1 The view north along the River Lark from the lock.*

Cambridgeshire Geological Society
www.cambsgeology.org

www.fenedgetrail.org

info@cambsgeology.org

Cambridgeshire Geological Society © Dec 2025
Please contact CGS if you wish to reproduce any part of this guide.

fenedge Trail