

The Fen Edge Trail Wicken to Soham

6.3 miles (10 km)

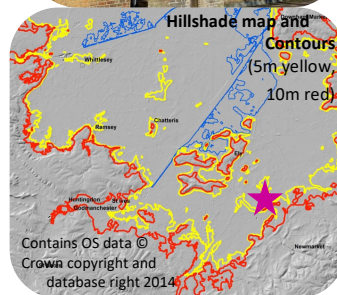
plus Kingfisher Bridge Nature Reserve and
Dimmock's Cote Quarry
additional 2.7 miles (4.3 km)
or short option 2.8 miles (4.5 km)

*'A fascinating walk –
the old mere, the
'coral reef',
windmills - this part
of the Fens holds
plenty of interest'
Ian, CGS Geosites
team*



The route: 'From the village on the ridge, around an ancient fenland mere and along the lode carrying the waters of the River Snail'

Having skirted the south eastern fen edge from Cambridge to the famous landscape of Wicken Fen, this walk continues the Trail with just two more walks to the Suffolk border. Starting in **Wicken village**, you walk around and then across one of the most fascinating landscapes of the southern fens - the **distinctive expanse of flat land** that formed the bed of **Soham Mere**. It also takes you across the **Jurassic 'Corallian' limestone** that forms a low 'ridge' running north from the village of Upware. Once across the mere, you follow **Soham Lode**, which carries the waters of the **River Snail**, a **chalk stream**, through the town of Soham. There is a very worthwhile option to visit **Kingfishers Bridge Nature Reserve** and also a viewpoint over a **quarry** in the famous **Upware limestone** - a **coral reef in the Fens!**



Photos: 2d.2f Soham Mill from Horse Bridge; 5.1f View across Soham Mere; 7b.1f Upware Limestone at Kingfisher Bridge Nature Reserve; 16.1f The Steelyard, Soham; 6.2f Soham Mere; 7b.3f Kingfishers Bridge NR lakes, from mound; 1.1f Wicken village cross; 1.2f The Maid's Head Wicken

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 from either village, or just visit some places on the route. Kingfisher Bridge/Dimmocks Cote could be done as a 5.5 mile round trip walk from Wicken. A shorter option (2.8 miles/4.5 km) from Wicken to Soham direct is also possible. 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). For information on visiting **Kingfishers Bridge Nature Reserve** see www.kingfishersbridge.org.

Length of walk (one way) approx. 6.3 miles/10 km, or 9 miles/14.3 km including Kingfisher Bridge and Dimmock's Cote. Walking guide time 3hrs plus stops (or 4.5 hrs including extension). Shorter, direct route 1.5 hrs plus stops. Grid ref for start TL571706 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 are **train services** to Ely and Newmarket from Soham. Soham has **bus services** to Ely and Newmarket but Wicken has no regular buses at present and there are none directly between Wicken and Soham. However, both are served by the (local government run) **Tiger On Demand** dial-a-ride bus (bookable 48 hrs in advance), which started in late 2024 (www.tigerondemand.co.uk). On-street parking is possible in both Wicken and Soham. There is a free car park in Soham and a National Trust (free for members) car park at Wicken Fen, near the start of the walk. Please only park where allowed and in consideration of others. There are pubs in both Wicken and Soham and shops in Soham. Kingfisher's Bridge Nature Reserve has a limited cafe, and there is a National Trust tearoom at Wicken Fen.

Safety Be aware of risks you may encounter and take note of warnings given by landowners or on pathways. The terrain is **generally flat**, but can be muddy in places. There are **deep water lodes or ditches** along much of the route. There is **one** footbridge with steps but no stiles. Part of the walk is **along country roads** (no pavement) where **extra care is needed** even if there does not seem much 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.**

Wicken to Soham

Directions map (6.3 miles / 10 km)

plus Kingfisher Bridge Nature Reserve/Dimmock's Cote Quarry
additional 2.7 miles (4.3 km), or short option 2.8 miles (4.5 km)

1 Start at the village sign on the green opposite Butts Lane and walk left (west) along the High St past the lane leading to the windmill (on the left).

2 Cross the High St, walking on to turn right onto the path at the end of the green and then the grassy path from the corner past the village pond. Follow the road left behind the pond back towards the High St.

3 Turn right on Pond Green passing the village hall to walk right along High St.

4 Turn right on Chapel Lane and follow the road to the junction with Lower Road at the playground.

5 Turn left at the playground to follow Lower Rd away from the village for 1 mile.

6 At the junction at Fenside Farm continue straight on following the road, now Padney Drive. After a further 0.3 miles, there is a path to the left marked by a Public Byway Dockings Lane sign.

7 Continue straight on to follow main walk passing Ash Tree Farm.

7a To visit Kingfisher Bridge Nature Reserve and see Upware Limestone outcrop and/or Dimmock's Cote Quarry (note paths could be very muddy after rain), turn left opposite the sign onto a footpath (Dockings Lane) alongside field (just past a house, no 7), then turn right at end onto High Fen Rd and follow 0.3 miles to a fork.

7b Follow road as it bends left. Walk through car park on right to see limestone outcrop in field beyond, on right. **Note: do not approach closely as it is not safe to do so and it is also used by nesting birds.** You can walk further into the nature reserve (follow signs) to see some of the wildlife areas and visit the tea shop and small visitor centre (see page 4). You can also walk to an area where you can look over a disused part of a working limestone quarry. Retrace steps back past the visitor centre and car park to bend.

7c At the bend, turn left on dirt track, Shaw's Drove, and follow path to rejoin walk at **8**

8 Passing Shaw's Drove on left, continue along road.

9 After a further 0.2 miles (9.1) take the signed path to the right at the passing place and cross the field to the right of the hedge (9.2). After 0.3 miles the cleared path ends. Turn right for a few metres, go past a large tree and resume the route in the same direction across the field, this time to the left of the ditch.

10 When the path meets the drain turn right and follow the drain 0.2 miles to the earth bridge.

11 Cross the earth bridge and follow the straight track for 0.6 miles until reaching Soham Lode just after the farm buildings.

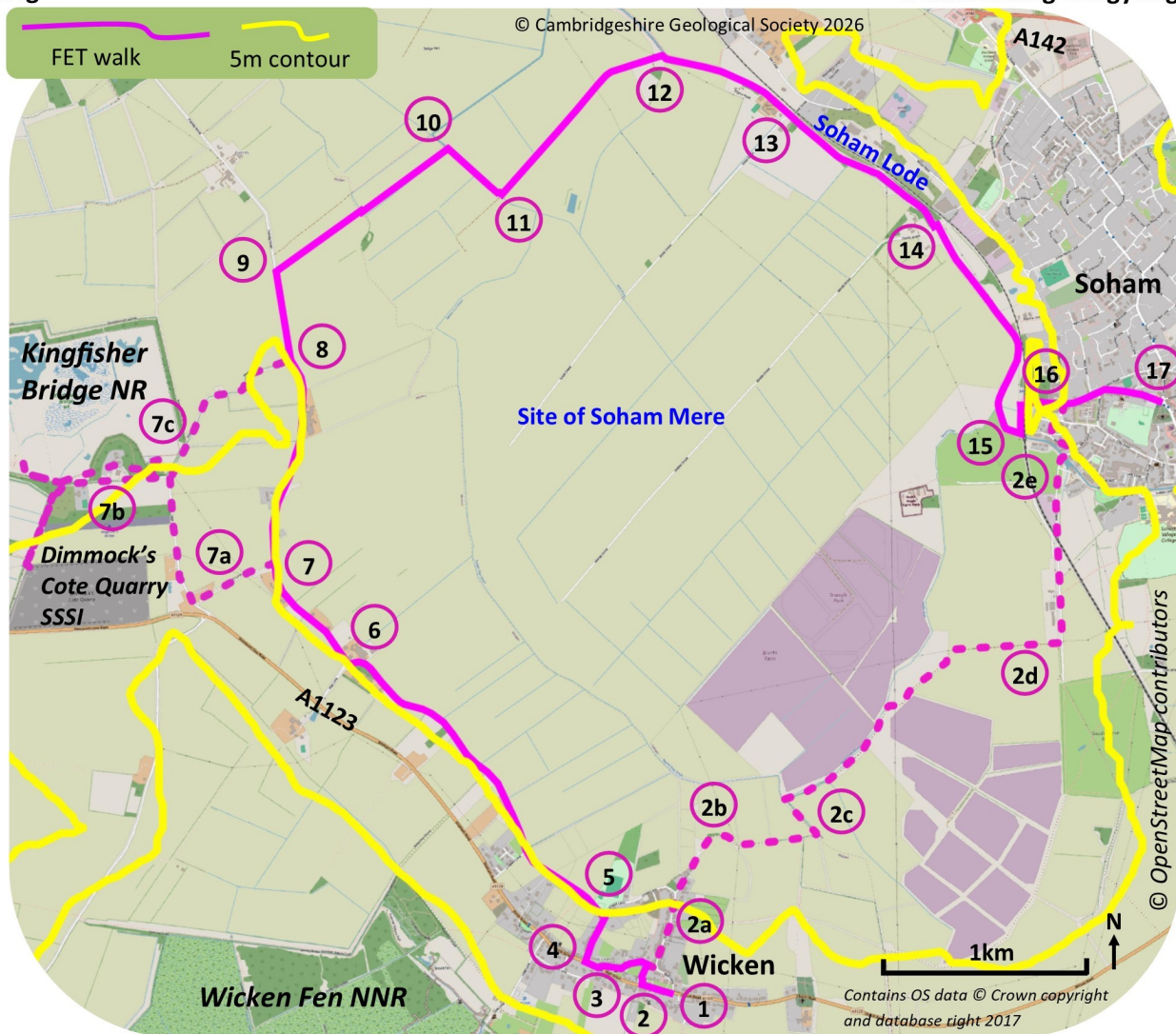
12 Walk to the top of the bank of the lode and follow path along bank for 0.4 miles to a road bridge.

13 Don't cross the bridge but continue following the lode for a further 0.5 miles to the next road bridge at Middle Mere Farm.

14 Cross the road bridge and then immediately turn right before the railway line to follow the lode along the other side. Follow the footpath for 0.7 miles past the railway station.

15 Just before the path ends turn left on the path between the railings and proceed to cross the bridge over the railway track.

16 Having crossed the bridge continue past the small carpark to follow straight on, going straight over a crossroads, towards the town along Station Road. At a fork continue to the right up Fountain Lane to the corner with The Fountain pub and St Andrew's Church, the end of the walk **17**.



Ages of the rocks

Superficial (years)

Holocene:

Under 11,700

River Alluvium, Lake Marl, Peat

Pleistocene 'Ice Age':

River Terrace sands and gravels

1st c.20,000

2nd c.50,000

3rd under 200,000

Glacial Till

c.160,000 or

c.425,000

Bedrock

(millions of years)

Cretaceous:

West Melbury

Marly Chalk

c.100 - c.96 my

Gault Clay

c.113 to c.100 my

Woburn Sands

c.115 my

Jurassic:

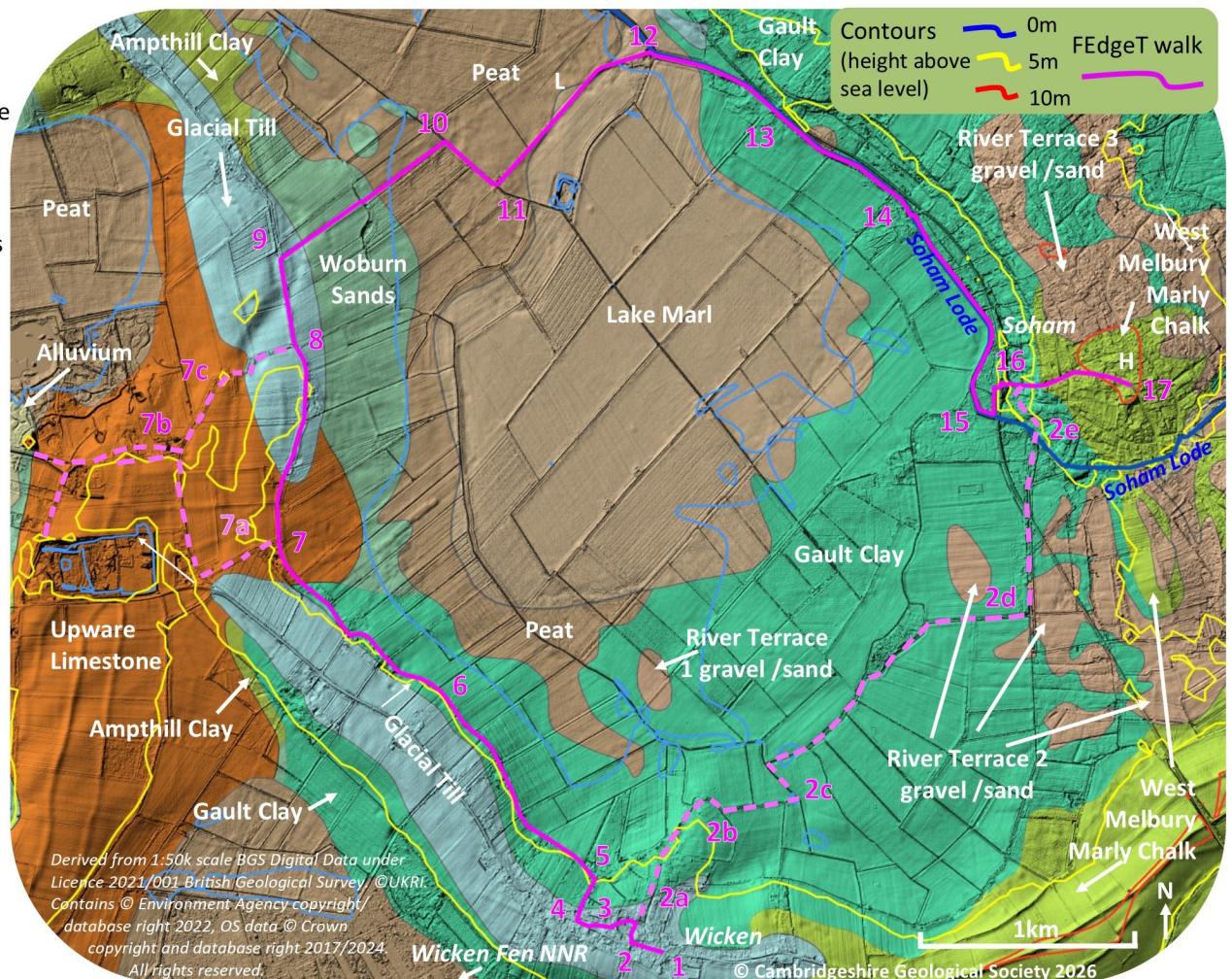
Amphthill Clay

c.159-158 my

Upware Limestone

c.161 my

Walk: Wicken to Soham - geology and landscape map



The bedrock under this walk ranges in time from the **Jurassic Corallian (Upware) Limestone** to the **Cretaceous Woburn Sands, Gault Clay and West Melbury Marly Chalk**. It also passes near to **Jurassic Amphthill Clay** bedrock. The much younger 'superficial' deposits that you walk over include **Glacial Till (boulder clay)**, material deposited by melting glaciers during the **Pleistocene 'Ice Age'**. Nearby patches of **sand and gravel**, carried here by the once strongly flowing River Cam, also date from the **Pleistocene**. More recent deposits include river **Alluvium**, **Peat** and a large area of **Lake Marl** (freshwater shell marl) from **Soham Mere**.

Starting on the Upware to Wicken Ridge, formed from **Glacial Till** that covers the **Gault Clay** bedrock, you walk down onto the low lying Gault to follow the edge of what was once **Soham Mere**. You soon walk across the northern most part of an outcrop of Corallian Limestone, which is viewable by taking a detour to **Kingfisher Bridge Nature Reserve** and/or (with limited views) **Dimmock's Cote Quarry**. After walking across another area of **Glacial Till**, you pass over sandstone of the **Woburn Sands** bedrock before reaching the Peat that once surrounded the Mere. As you cross the basin of the mere, you walk over **Lake Marl**, a fine, calcareous material deposited on the lake bed, over any Peat that had previously built up in this low lying area. The marshy conditions that enabled the build up of **Peat** occurred over the relatively permeable Woburn Sands bedrock as well as the impermeable Gault Clay. This occurred as there is a thin layer of silty clay under the Peat, enough to impede drainage. This perhaps came from an earlier lake or water channel a few thousand years ago or may be a periglacial deposit from the Pleistocene.

After following Soham Lode across the Gault Clay, you reach the base of the Chalk which is where the walk finishes. The Chalk found here, on the very edge of the Chalk ridge that starts as the northern end of the Chilterns, south west of Cambridge and continues north east into Norfolk, is the **Cretaceous West Melbury Marly Chalk**. This clay rich chalk forms a gentle slope along the south eastern fen edge. **Soham Lode** is a continuation of the **River Snail**, a **chalk stream** that arises near Snailwell.

The lowest point on the walk is **3m below sea level**, where you reach the Lake Marl of the mere. The highest is in Soham, as you start to 'climb' onto the Chalk. Here you are at **12m above sea level**, a little higher than where you started on the ridge at Wicken.



Places of interest along the Trail

Wicken is a small village built on **Glacial Till** (boulder clay) on the edge of the Fens, 5 miles south of Ely. It was listed as **Wicha** in the Domesday Book and as **Wiken** in around 1200 AD. It is famous for the nearby **Wicken Fen**. In the 17th century the villagers backed the local dignitaries who wanted the wetland to remain and, almost uniquely, won their fight against the drainers to enable the continuation of their way of life harvesting fish, wildfowl, reeds, sedge and peat. The wildlife attracted to the sedge fen and its surrounds ultimately led to the protective occupancy of the **National Trust** starting in 1899 and the eventual designation of an area of the local fen as a **National Nature Reserve** in 1995. There is the option of visiting the **Wicken Fen Nature Reserve**, which is easy to find along **Lode Lane** in Wicken being a 0.6 mile walk from Wicken Mill (www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/cambridgeshire/wicken-fen-national-nature-reserve). The village contains **many listed buildings** dating back to medieval times. The parish church of St Laurence, dates from the 13th and 14th centuries; now on the edge of the village (not on this walk), it is the burial place for some of **Oliver Cromwell's** family.



1 Starting at the **village sign** (depicting a Brimstone butterfly), further back on Cross Green you can see the 14th century **Barnack Limestone village cross** (1.1f) re-instated (Grade II listed). The village's only public house is on the green opposite. **The Grade II listed Maid's Head** (1.2f) dates from 1579, occupying a 15th-century thatched hall, later extended. Destroyed by fire in 1983 it was rebuilt outwardly to its original design and hosts the annual beer festival each May.

2 The **windmill** is a rare example of a fully operational smock or **wooden tower windmill** dating from 1813 (Grade II*), which still grinds flour and is open to the public, see www.tcmg.org.uk/wicken-fen-windmill-cambridgeshire. The four village greens were all grazed and the **village pond** originally served both as a drinking place for animals and by taking effluent from the surrounding stockyards. It was dredged and cleaned up in the 1990s.

3 On the green on the left, just before turning right, is the sole surviving **village pump**, a reminder that mains water only arrived in 1949. Wicken **village hall**, on the right, dates from Victorian times and was originally owned by the Church of England before it was taken over by Wicken Jubilee Village Hall Charity in 2017. On the right corner with Chapel St is a Grade II listed cottage with a **reed thatched roof**, once a common feature of the area. It is made from **pale-coloured bricks**, typical of the local (**calcareous**) **Gault Clay**.

4 **Chapel Lane** is primarily associated with the former **Methodist chapel**, on the right as you walk. Initially built in the late 1820s and later rebuilt in 1866, it closed in 1944. The building was subsequently sold and converted into a house. The new Methodist chapel was built in 1911 on North St (a continuation of High St), just a few metres beyond Chapel St.

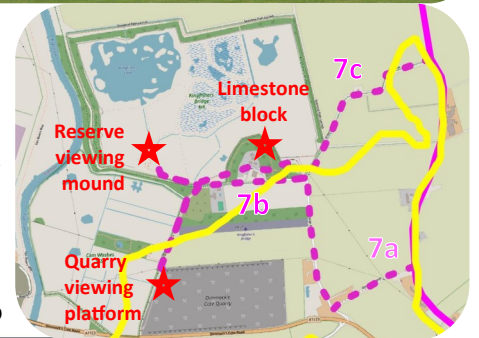
5 By the time the playground is reached you have dropped down to 5 metres above sea level (the 5m contour) and there is no Glacial Till covering the **Gault Clay**. The low lying land (to your right) stretching north from Wicken across to Soham and out into the fen (5.1f), was once a great mass of water known as **Soham Mere**: an extensive, inland, freshwater lake that had access to the port of **Kings Lynn** and the **Wash** via the course of the River Great Ouse. This large, shallow body of water was recorded from the 11th century onward, but in existence for a thousand or so years before then; its successful drainage was mostly effected after 1750 (see page 5).



6 **Lower Road** (6.1) follows what was once the edge of **Soham Mere** (6.2f) and you continue just below the 5m contour as you walk. Along it are farms that extend out onto the fertile soil produced by the calcareous lake marl on top of the peat (6.3).



7 Here the route passes from (Cretaceous) **Gault Clay** (deposited in a relatively deep sea) onto older (Jurassic) 'Corallian' **Upware Limestone**. This is a very localised rock named after the nearby village. It formed in a warm, shallow sea environment at a time that was very favourable for coral growth and it also contains abundant **fossils of ammonites, bivalves, gastropods and other coral reef fauna**. The area to the left has been quarried extensively for this limestone - most isn't visible but a small exposed outcrop can be easily seen by taking the excellent option **7a-7c**.



7a - 7c Option to visit **Kingfishers Bridge Nature Reserve**, a privately owned 250 acre site of former farmland transformed into wetland habitats since 2000. Bounded by the River Cam to the west, its northern section features reed beds in deep peats and its southern section grassland over the 'Corallian' limestone ('reef') bedrock. A block of the limestone can be seen near the car park (7b.1f). To visit the **Nature Reserve** enter the site at the main visitors carpark entrance and take the path to the left. There is a small **visitor centre and a tea shop** (7b.2). Head west to the viewing mound (7b.3) overlooking the lake to spot some wildlife (7b.4f). The reserve is a **County Wildlife Site**, designated for its breeding waders, reedbed, wet meadows and plant species. It is also part of the **Cam Washes SSSI**.



Photos: 6.1 Lower Road; 6.3 Black wooden farm barn alongside Soham Mere.

Extensive quarrying of **Upware Limestone** at the nearby **Dimmock's Cote Quarry** has exposed an important '**Corallian**' succession containing **separate coral, crinoid and sponge beds** in limestone on top of marls. Part of the site is designated a **geological Site of Special Scientific Interest** (called **Upware Bridge Pit North**). Although the quarry is not accessible (part is still being worked), it is possible to go to a **viewpoint** (7b.5) over a disused area; follow the track past the nature reserve entrance and at the fork beyond turn left. Walk south along the path to the viewpoint on a mound overlooking the north west corner of the works. Archaeological excavations have also unearthed **Early Neolithic/Middle Bronze Age** pits and **Late Iron Age/Roman** field systems. More information on the site and the limestone can be found on the CGS website www.cambsgeology.org/cambridgeshire-landscapes/fen-ridges.



8 Here the route has passed from crossing limestone to walking over a continuation of the **Glacial Till** that extends from the (low) ridge. However, a few metres beneath the Till, there has been a major change in the bedrock, from the **Jurassic Age Upware Limestone** to the much younger **Cretaceous Age Woburn Sands** (sandstone). This change is an 'unconformity', meaning that the deposition of the material was not continuous; in fact, there is a time gap of about 45 million years between these two rock formations. There was at least one period of erosion, when the land rose (relative to sea level) and the younger Jurassic clay that once covered the limestone was removed. As sea level rose again, a coastal environment resulted in the sands accumulating. As you look across to Soham, you can see that the **soil colour** changes considerably, from lighter Till and sandy soils to dark Peat soils in the distance (8.1).



9 Not far away to the west of this point is the **confluence of the River Cam and the River Great Ouse** (also known as the Old West). The walk turns to cross the old bed of the mere (9.1, 9.2) and you start descending to the lowest point on the walk. Any **Lake Marl** deposits that were once here have now disappeared from this north west part of the mere bed, although there is a significant area of **Peat** remaining from freshwater marshes that surrounded it. There is also an interesting geological feature here too (albeit not visible), as the permeable Woburn Sands sandstone underlies the Peat - accounted for by a layer of clay between the two which enabled waterlogged conditions, and therefore Peat accumulation, to occur. As in other areas of fenland, much of the Peat itself, as well as its covering of soil, is now being eroded away.



10 The landscape of the former mere is generally open, flat, ditched, and treeless. Most of the land is within internal drainage districts which provide adequate flood protection and water levels are controlled by pumping so that the peaty soils are generally well drained.



11 Not long after the bend to the left, you start walking over the northern edge of the remaining **Lake Marl**. This is a calcareous, mineral deposit, formed from the remains of plants and animals that lived in the mere, and creates fertile soil. A borehole made just to the south of here showed **0.8m of Lake Marl** still remained (in 1978) overlying **0.8m of Peat** on top of the Gault Clay. The people of the Fens resisted the drainage of the fenland from the 17th century onwards, much of which involved Dutch engineers. Resistance groups formed, known as "**Fen Tigers**" and there are many colourful stories of water works being blown up by reed boats full of explosives, houses of engineers being burned to the ground and officials being mobbed in the church in Soham. Despite their resistance, however, the fenland was drained, creating vast tracts of fertile land that were ideal for arable farming on a large, almost industrial, scale.

12 Soham Lode runs for about 7 miles through Soham to the River Great Ouse about 1 mile (1.6 km) downstream from its junction with the River Cam. It probably dates from the 1790s when it was built to reduce flooding in the Soham and Fordham area, by carrying water from the **River Snail**, which formerly flowed into the **River Lark**, to join the Great Ouse instead. Not long after reaching the Lode, the Lake Marl has disappeared and you are walking again over the bedrock **Gault Clay**, exploited locally for brick making; in 1890 there were four brickworks in Soham.

Soham Mere

As with other fen edge meres, such as the one at Willingham, Soham Mere probably formed due to the backing up of freshwater (draining from higher land) when sea levels rose about **2,000 years ago**, in the **late Iron Age/early Roman** times. The **reed and sedge** growing around it would have been important wild crops and it is recorded as an important fishery, particularly for **eels**. The rights to its fishing were much valued and held at various times by powerful landowners, including **Bury St Edmunds Abbey and Ely Priory** during the 11th to 13th centuries. Some drainage, unsuccessful in the long term, was carried out in the 1600s using a series of long tunnels that had to be dug under local rivers as the waters of the mere were so low that the pumps of the time could not raise them high enough to feed into the main channels. In **1794**, however, it is described as '**now drained** and brought into a profitable state of cultivation'.

Map showing Soham Mere (1689 Jonas Moore)



Photos: 7b.2 Visitor Centre, Kingfisher Bridge NR; 7b.3 Viewing Mound; 7b.5 Dimmock's Cote Quarry from viewpoint; 8.1 From the light-coloured, glacial till and sandy soils looking down towards the peat; 9.1 Approaching footpath across Soham Mere; 9.2 View of footpath to right of hedge. 5

13 This section of the **lode was navigable** though commercial traffic ceased about 1900. Lighters brought cargoes of corn to a **water mill at Soham**, and later brought coal when steam engines replaced the water wheel. Barley and timber were other important cargoes. The railway reached Soham in 1879, and resulted in the rapid demise of water-borne transport. On the other side of the Lode is the railway and beyond this is an area of land designated as a **County Wildlife Site** because of its **fenland plants** including Common reed and Lesser pond sedge. Not far to the east, in the northern part of the village, is **Northfield Windmill** (now a private residence), a small hexagonal smock mill, understood to have been built as a **fen drainage mill** in the 18th Century. It was moved to its present site in the 1830s, raised on a brick plinth up to three storeys and converted to grind corn. Though restored in the mid-1990s the sails have never turned since; to visit on open days see www.northfieldwindmill.org.uk.

14 Middle Mere Bridge crossed a channel which ran to and from **Middle Mere Mill**; built in 1867, it both milled flour and pumped the water from the mere into Soham Lode. Despite being, at the time, one of the best remaining fen drainage mills it was demolished in about 1929 by the County Council using explosives due to its, by then, dangerous state. Beyond the farm the drove crosses the fen (and the site of the mere) almost to Wicken village. Once across the lode, you walk through an area that is designated as a **County Wildlife Site** due to its **neutral grassland flora**. Soham is surrounded by **several commons**, one of which is **Angle Common**, lying on the other side of the lode as you approach the railway. These commons are characterized by **neutral grassland, or lowland meadows**, and are privately owned and managed, primarily by the Lord of the Manor.

15 There are good views across the area of the mere to Wicken from the railway bridge (15.1). **Soham station** was rebuilt and re-opened to passengers on the **Ely-Ipswich line in 2021**. The original 19th century station was destroyed in 1944 when a long **train carrying explosives blew** up, destroying several nearby buildings and damaging some 760 houses. Its replacement temporary station was demolished when the line was closed in 1965. Just to the north along Mereside is the new **Viva performing arts centre in Spencer Mill**. This previously abandoned late 19th century mill building is typical of what was once a **large collection of mill buildings** in the area, reflecting the once vibrant local industry and was opened in 2023.

16 Soham essentially developed as a linear village along the **route from Fordham to Ely**. In medieval times it was an **inland port on the mere**. Relatively few pre-1800 houses survive, as many older ones were lost to **the fires** that ravaged Soham's streets in the mid 19th century. Once over the crossroads you start to climb gently up from the Gault Clay onto the younger, higher Chalk. At the junction of Fountain Lane and the High Street is the **Fountain Public House** and **the Steelyard (16.1f)** next to it, both Grade II listed. The steelyard is a device for weighing wagons, probably 18th century in origin - part of the main arm and post, seen from the street, are original.

17 The medieval **Church of St Andrew** has its origins in the 12th century and was altered and expanded in the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries. Boasting carved angels and a tie beam roof, it is Grade 1 listed. The abolitionist and former slave **Olaudah Equiano** married Susannah Cullen here in 1792. Much of Soham was built on the Chalk or the River Terrace Sands and Gravels that cover it (the latter reflected in the name of Sand Street, to the south of the Lode), both providing slightly higher and drier ground than the surrounding fenland. Soham has an online **museum** that holds events on local history in partnership with Archaeology Cambridgeshire East. It also has a collection of local photographs and other local information www.sohammuseum.co.uk.

Short route Wicken to Soham:

2a From Wicken pond turn right and then left to go along **Drury Lane**. Where the lane goes left at the junction with **Chapel Lane** continue straight ahead along the track now called **Drove Road**.

2b The track bends to the right, then follow the path to the left as it crosses over the ditch.

2c Follow the path taking a dogleg to the right at the ditch confluence and continue to follow the ditch passing through a solar panel farm (2c.1). This path (**Bracks Drove**) then turns right along a wide track which runs in a straight line to the right of the ditch (**Twelve Foot**).

2d When the path ends at the footpath sign turn left and follow **Mill Drove (2d.1)** for 0.5 miles past industrial units on the left, cross the railway line and then cross the bridge known as **Horse Bridge** over **Soham Lode**. There are views of a former mill from the bridge (2d.2f).

2e At small roundabout turn left along **Mill Corner** (signposted to station). This was the site of **Lion Mill**, originally a water mill but rebuilt as a flour mill with silos after a fire in 1945; it was demolished in 2007/08. Note another original mill building on the left, with its flint walls, the style also used for the new extensions. Continue round the right bend, passing Clay Street on your right, named after the underlying Gault Clay. At the crossroad, turn right along **Station Road**. At a fork, continue to the right up **Fountain Lane** to finish at the corner of pub and **St Andrew's Church**, the end of the walk **17**.

Photos: 15.1 View to Wicken from Soham rail bridge; 2b.1 Following Drove Road track left over ditch; 2c.1 Solar Farm end of Bracks Drove; 2d.1 Looking back along Bracks Drove from left turn onto Mill Drove.



15.1



2b.1



2c.1



2d.1