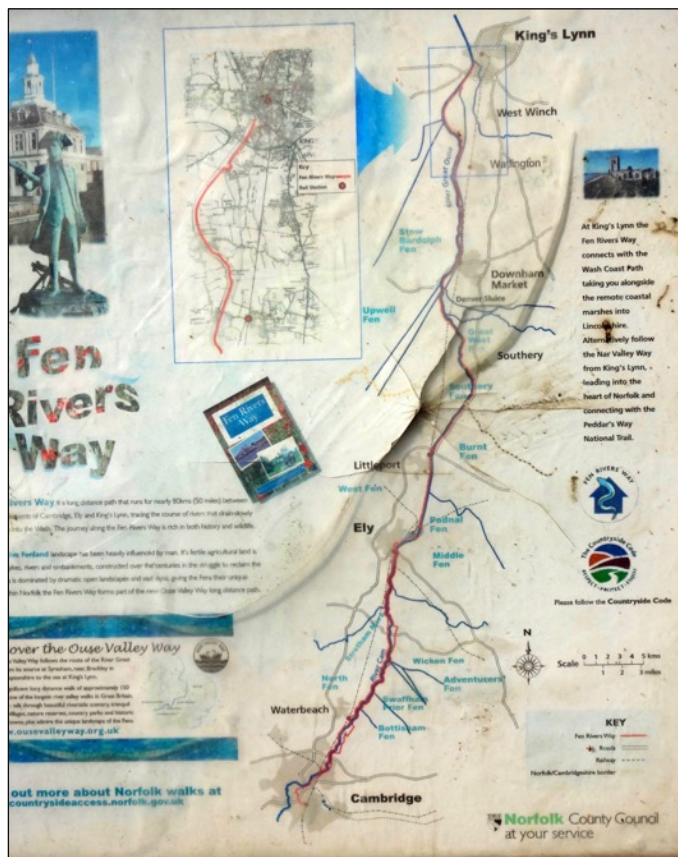


Walking through Waterland

The Fen Rivers Way - October 2016

The Fen Rivers Way follows the Cam and then the Great Ouse for fifty miles from Cambridge to King's Lynn on the Norfolk Coast, an ancient Hanseatic port. You can walk on either the west or east bank much of the way; the decision largely turns on the location of pubs en route. The path parallels a railway, too, all the way, which offers convenient shuttling opportunities. And it's FLAT. At pensioners' pace, including sightseeing, it took five days.



It was the start of term, with anxious parents hovering nearby, so B&B space was scarce in Cambridge. Coming up from London we - Chuck, Judith and her sister Carolyn - dropped our backpacks at an unmodernised terrace house owned by a friendly, unmodernised retired couple. Carolyn's room had been their son's bedroom and it was still decorated with Magic Roundabout wallpaper.

We set out on an afternoon stroll to Waterbeach, six miles down the track. That

village has no accommodation, but the train would take us back to our Cambridge digs. Walking through quiet roads of Victorian houses and workers' cottages, we reached the riverside at Midsummer Common, where the only hazards were bicycles and cows and swans.

We chose the east bank path. Scullers and "eights" glided through the water, their coaches cycling alongside, shouting vocal encouragement. The path strayed from the riverside to fetch up for lunch at the *Ancient Shepherd* pub in Fen Ditton. Further along were Horningsea and Waterbeach, two of the several village names recalling that this endless, level farmland that grows most of our vegetables was until the 17th century a vast inland estuary of reedbed and marsh which could be traversed only by small boat. In

Horningsea, a red telephone kiosk acts as a local unattended library or book exchange. At Clayhithe, we passed a fine gabled Dutch house, once the home of the conservators who by act of parliament have controlled the river since 1702. Beyond, the villages yield to an empty landscape, but we had reached the end of today's journey. The ticket machine at the Waterbeach rail station was not working so we had a free ride back to Cambridge and met with friends for dinner under the tented ceiling of a Moroccan restaurant called *Bedouin*.

Next morning we took the train back to Waterbeach. Martin met us there to transport our backpacks to his narrowboat moored in the centre of Ely, twelve miles downriver. East bank or west bank? The east path offered a pub with an intriguing name: *Five Miles from Anywhere – No Hurry*. But it was too near for a lunch stop, so we opted for packed lunches and set off along the west bank.



We walked on top of formidable flood banks. A little elevation goes a long way in a flat land. You can't see over these banks if you travel by road or on the river, so this is much the best way to experience the 360-degree landscape vistas. As the huge skies of the East Anglian fens opened up around us the path clung close to

the river. Tilled soil was rich and black. The flood plain is well below sea level – and sinking. Borderless fields of corn, celery and leeks coloured the fields in muted shades of grey-green. The path may not be well-used but it is well-grazed most of the way to the sea; only occasionally did we have to wade through brambles and nettles.



The scenery was vast and featureless, but not without interest. A dredger patrolled the river's edge, nibbling on the floating weed with a metal scoop. Yellow throw-rugs of water-lilies swayed in the river, willows trembled on the horizon and cattle munched in the water meadows. There was the occasional dog-walker, but mostly our companions were herons, grebes, coots, swans, martins and a charm of goldfinches. The sun shone, but we were walking into a strong wind flowing in across the North Sea and we kept our anoraks buttoned up.



Suddenly, five miles from Ely, the gothic cathedral with its distinctive octagonal 'lantern' tower appeared around a bend in the river. Some

neighbouring industrial buildings hardly detracted from the drama this view must have commanded in medieval times.



A couple of miles further the Cam merges into the Great Ouse. We could see only a railway bridge in the distance, so we were relieved to discover a small arched footbridge.



Martin met us at his narrowboat, *Puzzle*. A year ago it was just shell, but it was fitted out to a very high standard at the tiny boatyard where it's now moored. There was radiator heating, running hot water, a



shower, comfortable beds, even an espresso machine that we were unable to master. And modern marine toilets are a great advance on the primitive 1930s mechanism we had on the *Amaryllis*, the wooden yacht we used to sail.



Ely sits on a mound and was once known as Eel Island, but the last eel-catcher hung up his traps recently. Now it's a delightful, tidy little town clustered around the ancient cathedral, a generous green parkland populated by rabbits and horses, and a pretty waterfront. It was quiz night at the recommended pub, the *Prince Albert*, so they picked up the phone and booked us into the *Royal Standard* for our steak and fish-and-chips.

The next day's journey, to Littleport, was only six miles. Martin transported our backpacks on to the next B&B, refusing to take any payment, and we spent the morning exploring Ely Cathedral.



The present building was erected almost a thousand years ago. This massive gothic stone structure has foundations only five feet deep and sit on a floating plate of sandstone. The builders weren't to know that, but had they dug much deeper they would have broken through to the mud and the cathedral could not have been built. The original tower collapsed in 1322, fortunately at a rare moment when the monks were not at prayer. They replaced it with an octagonal tower capped by a lantern.



Its wooden frame could not be replicated today because there are no longer oaks tall enough. It's clad with a lead roof, and whenever it leaked more lead was added, until it became too heavy and had to be recovered



centuries later. Access to the commanding views offered from the roof is by a very narrow spiral staircase – most modern people couldn't fit.

A few drops of rain sprinkled us as we set off. This inclemency soon evaporated but so did the sun. The river runs monotonously straight for three miles of the route, but we were diverted by a few lingering views back to the cathedral, a glittering kingfisher, swooping skeins of geese, and outposts of patient fishermen. One of these proudly demonstrated his ingenious self-designed seat-cum-equipment store, which he trundled along on wheels.



Littleport is a lengthy sprawl of houses, and the path led through back gardens to the train station, where we found the Gatehouse B&B close by, and a warm welcome from the proprietress, Edna, with tea and home-made muffins.

The only drawback was that the *Swan on the River* pub (inexplicably transmogrified from the *Black Horse* noted in our guidebook) was a mile back down the track. So the delightful Edna drove us there through the meandering village. After dinner we needed our torches to retrace our steps through the back gardens. Edna's B&B was perfection, with a large selection of different teas, and home-made jams at breakfast, plus dainty home-made shortbreads which we promptly popped into our pockets.

We organised a taxi to send the backpacks on to Downham Market while we embarked on another 12 mile jaunt. Once again, the placement of the pub, at the ten-mile mark, wasn't ideal. That section, indeed, is called the Ten Mile

Bank, much of it a straight stretch on a dyke along a busy road, with open trucks roaring by and spilling potatoes onto the verge. We plodded on through a dull morning across bleak farmland. Occasionally a ridgetop poked out over the opposite bank, with no track apparent leading to the isolated house.

At a bridge crossing a local was looking for seals, which he said often basked on the concrete. Not today. He informed us that if all the flood barriers were opened at once the river from Cambridge to the sea would empty in forty minutes. This wild estuary was tamed by a Dutch engineer, Cornelius Vermudyen, who built the first sluice and began draining and reclaiming the marshes in 1651. These works aroused much local opposition, because the fenmen feared it threatened their livelihood, eel-fishing. This led to insurrection and public hangings. There is a fine balance to be struck between flooding and maintaining navigability of the rivers all the way to Cambridge. Vermudyen's new sluice controlled the rivers, but as they now flowed more slowly they dropped silt, clogging the channel and increasing flood risk.

As mid-day came and went we remarked that remote pubs often cease serving food at two pm. As the youngest of the party, Carolyn was dispatched loping on ahead as an advance messenger to the *Jenyns Arms*. Providential. She arrived a few minutes before two and managed to get in an order for hot soup, which appeared when we arrived a quarter of an hour later. We sat out by the river in fitful sunshine with a view of the Denver Sluice. This is a where Vermudyen first began to drain the fens. Today it is a series of massive river gates where the Great Ouse engages with colossal drainage channels. The people who control it have a 24/7 responsibility and live in a cottage right by the works.

The pub ran to a strict schedule and they turfed us out on the stroke of three. The river was now tidal, and mud banks appeared. After passing a huge flour mill we entered Downham Market, which has a spartan and faintly down-at-heel air. There is a clocktower to regard, but not much else. On Railway Road we found Dial House, an old building that was formerly a private school. We ate that night in the cosy snugger of the saloon bar in the old-fashioned Castle Hotel at the top of the village. We never saw our landlady, but she prides herself on providing a breakfast based on a bountiful supply of fresh fruit salad. Her husband, Robert, hovered over us, challenging us to identify them all. There were about twenty different fruits, all harvested from the local Morrisons.

The final stage to Kings Lynn was another twelve miles. This time we left the bags behind at Dial House. The river straightened again as it rushed towards the sea. We found a roofless, ruined church at Wiggshall St Peter which is



kept tidied up by local residents. This is one of the small villages with long names – Wiggenhall St Mary Magdalen and Wiggenhall St Germans are two others – tucked under the riverbank. In the latter there was a pub situated around the halfway mark, the *Crown and Anchor*. It was intensely local, a few idlers at the bar, a

shambling fellow behind it who brought us mountainous, cheap platters of rubber chicken, leathery liver-and-bacon and fat greasy chips. Only Carolyn, who walks so fast, cleared her plate.

On the skyline factory buildings and curling smoke from a power station announced the imminence of Kings Lynn. Crossing a sluice gate, a stentorian command made us jump. It was a loudspeaker, triggered automatically, warning us to take care as we crossed. (But we were already across; perhaps most of the foot traffic goes the other way?) We had little time to investigate Kings Lynn, which, judging from the shopping centres, is a prosperous market town. Instead of waiting around for a train our idea was to take a taxi back to Downham Market. But it was Saturday and there were none to be had. So we took the train, hopping off at Downham Market to pick up our backpacks from Robert at Dial House, and then back to the station café for a



leisurely cup or two of tea. A clever dodge, we thought, but the ticket office was shuttered and so was the café and there was no handy pub. No tea. No beer. But lots of time to catch up on the crossword while waiting for the next train back to London.