

THE LITTLE OUSE, OR BRANDON RIVER

The Little Ouse River, otherwise called the Brandon River shares its source with the River Waveney in an area described by the Suffolk Wildlife Trust as 'the largest area of river valley fen in England'. Here, following the cessation of water extraction by the water authority in July 1999 the water meadows have been restored. The Little Ouse Headwaters Project, a charity run by volunteers in the local villages has been very successful in establishing meadows full of flowers and wildlife, which are freely accessible by a network of paths across Thelnetham, Blo Norton and Bettys Fens. <https://www.lohp.org.uk/visit>



The river near its source

As the Waveney flows off eastward towards Breydon Water the Little Ouse goes west to the Great Ouse and finally The Wash. In Euston it is joined from the south by the Black Bourn, and in Thetford by the River Thet with its tributaries from as far as Besthorpe, near Attleborough and Stow Bedon near Watton, via Larling and Brettenham Heath. From here the river flows predominantly westward towards the Fens. Here it joins the River Great Ouse at Brandon Creek, where a public house, aptly names The Ship stands at their confluence.



Bee orchid at New Fen 1



The river near Hockwold

The Little Ouse is about 60 kms long, rising about 25 metres above sea level, and reaches Brandon Creek below sea level. For almost all of its length it forms County Boundaries. Initially between Norfolk and Suffolk from its source to just west of Hockwold, except for Thetford where the boundary veers westwards away from the river. The boundary has returned to the river before it reaches Santon Downham. As it crosses the Fens from Hockwold to Brandon Creek the boundary is between Norfolk and Cambridgeshire. However its course has been by no means unchanged through the centuries, diverted by great deposits of sand blown across its bed through the centuries especially in the Santon Downham area, and channelled by the commissioners who progressively drained the Fens downstream from Brandon.

Until the first Denver Sluice, installed in 1652, prevented the tides from raising the water level daily to provide enough depth for cargo-carrying boats, the Little Ouse River was navigable up to Lakenheath and Hockwold and possibly beyond Thetford, as were its neighbours the River Wissey to Oxborough and Methwold Hythes and the River Lark to Bury St. Edmunds. From the 1700s the navigation on the Little Ouse was maintained by the building of staunches, primitive locks to bypass weirs. These generally raised the water level upstream allowing a consistent water depth for boats. Now there is only one lock, close to Brandon Leisure Centre that raises the water level by about one metre allowing boats of less than 45ft to pass through to moorings in the town upstream of the road bridge.



A Staunch near Thetford.

In the more recent years of the 20th century its waters have been further controlled by the Flood Relief channel which can take flood water diverted from the upper stretches of the river into this channel which skirts the sloping land of Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire. This water can then flow north to join the Great Ouse at Saddlebow, or south to Essex where it can be stored for public water supply.

When Thetford Corporation held the Navigation Rights from 1696 it was reported that 'a barge carrying 14 or 15 Chaldrons of coal could reach Thetford, but after Denver Sluice stopped the tide only 2 or 3 could be carried.' (The weight of a chaldron / cauldron of coal increased over the years as tolls were charged by this unit of measure, however one chaldron weighed about about 910 kilograms).



River fun at Brettenham Heath

A list of tolls for Thetford Corporation in 1878 lists corn, coal, timber, reed, pantiles, bricks and gravel amongst others. The head of navigation was effectively Pit Mill, just above the Town Bridge where now a new cinema has been built, and the Anchor Pub once stood.

The town benefitted as the river provided an important means of transport for its industries, and for pleasure. It was a cheap means of transport for Fisons fertiliser works, Burrells traction engines which could be eventually transported all over the world, and general heavy goods such as coal and timber for the businesses of the town. A trip boat carried passengers to Santon Downham and back throughout the summer. The staunches between Crosswater, near Lakenheath and Thetford were essential to maintain a navigable depth of water but after their last rebuilding between 1827 and 1835 they were allowed to deteriorate as river

traffic declined due to the railway which reached Brandon from Ely in 1845.

The horse-drawn lighters (or barges) carried most goods. Fisons was a major user of the navigation and funded its maintenance to the end of the 19th century. Its goods travelled between Thetford and the port of Kings Lynn. The original business was established in the early 1800s milling corn, later producing animal feedstuffs and dealing in timber. In 1853 James Fison and Sons built a fertiliser works by the river at Two Mile Bottom, a remote site at the time where the power station now stands. To supply this industry gangs of up to 6 lighters, later drawn by an experimental steam tug 'Speedwell' carried coal, copper pyrites and fossils from Kings Lynn.

Charles Burrell and Son was another business to use the river in the 19th century. They even built some steam-driven iron barges when demand for their traction engines declined in the agricultural depression of the 1880s. In Brandon one of the last users of the river was William John Murrell, a general carrier of goods all over the fenland rivers as far as Cambridge and Peterborough.



*The Anchor.
Formerly on the Town Wharf*

Today the river carries only private pleasure boats. Its remoteness means that it is not heavily used because there are few places that can be accessed by road where small boats and canoes could be launched, or larger boats moored. For a few years in the early 2010s it was possible for boats which could pass through Brandon Lock to navigate upstream as far as the bridge at Santon Downham. However, thanks to the reckless felling of riverside trees into the river to restore the towpath between this village and Brandon, passage by anything other than the smallest of craft is impossible. For larger craft that cannot pass through the lock by Brandon Playing Fields there is a small wooden landing stage by the allotments.

Exploring the upper river.

The Headwaters

The clear water of this part of the river course, restored in quantity following the cessation of water extraction in the Fen, is heavily vegetated with reeds and rushes which together with fallen branches effectively prevent navigation by even the smallest craft.

From its source the fledgling river flows through water meadows between Theltenham and Blo Norton. Here the Little Ouse Headwaters Project has provided the means for improved wild flower meadows and managed woodland accessed by a number of signposted walks. Maintenance of this area is led by volunteers and there are opportunities to join them. <https://www.lohp.org.uk/>

In the churchyard at Blo Norton, a short walk from the river is the grave of Prince Frederick Duleep Singh who, along with his sisters lived in the village in the early 1900s. On the Suffolk side of the river is Hopton Fen, managed by the county Wildlife Trust.

After enjoying the tranquillity of the river meadows in the area cared for by the Little Ouse Headwaters Project the river passes under Gasthorpe Bridge and into the hurly-burly of the popular recreational hotspot of Knettishall Heath. Here families tumble out of their cars to picnic and



Grave of Prince 'Freddie' Duleep Singh

paddle in the river just downstream from the road bridge to Gasthorpe, and walkers can pause here on their journey along the long distance paths that meet here. On the heath the Peddars Way sets out for the North Norfolk coast at Holme and the modern Icknield Way finishes its route from Ivinghoe Beacon in Buckinghamshire. Both are crossed by the east-west route of the Angles Way following the county boundary of Norfolk and Suffolk from Yarmouth to Thetford. The ancient heathland at Knettishall, maintained by grazing since the Bronze Age also bears the sediments left by the ice sheets and outwash water in the Pleistocene era including 'Breckland Stripes' and river terraces.

<https://www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/knettishallheath>

<http://www.breakingnewground.org.uk/earthheritagetrail/knettishall-heath/>

From Knettishall the river passes through some of the large estates that surround Thetford. There are road bridges at Rushford and Euston but they provide only a brief glimpse of its waters. Near Euston it is joined by a large tributary,



Rushford Bridge

the Black Bourne from Ixworth, passing through Bardwell, Honington and Little Fakenham. The course of the Little Ouse is then diverted in a great bend by Snare Hill before passing through Barnham Common and approaching Nuns Bridges at Thetford.

Since 2015 Barnham Common, owned by the Town Council is the subject of a habitat restoration scheme to restore the grazing meadows and heathland. Trees and scrub have been removed and fences placed to enable grazing with the aim of returning rare plants that are unique to the Breckland ecosystem. There is free access to all. Continuing into the centre of Thetford the River Thet joins the river and there is a network of backwaters leading towards the 'Coffee Mill'.

Although once a water mill, probably for milling corn it takes its present name from the milling and storage of coffee here until the 1950s. Below the mill the two rivers make their conclusive confluence by Butten Island, where a statue of the Maharajah Duleep Singh on a horse stands.

The River Thet

The River Thet is the largest tributary of the Little Ouse. Its headwaters rise in a wide area from Stow Bedon and Scoulton in the west to Attleborough and New Buckenham in the east. Most of these waters meet in an area called Swangey Fen near Shropham. This is a Norfolk Wildlife Trust Reserve but access is only by arrangement.

<https://www.norfolkwildlifetrust.org.uk/wildlife-in-norfolk/nature-reserves/reserves/swangey-fen>

From Swangey Fen the Thet flows southwards where its valley has been altered by gravel pits. Then it crosses under the A11 at Larling, previously called Larlingford before reaching East Harling where it flows close to The English Whisky Distillery Company before passing by a disused mill and turning westwards towards Bridgham and Brettenham.



River Thet leaving Harling Millpond

From Thetford to Lakenheath Lode/Crosswater Stauch

The long distance footpaths that pass along the valley are marked on the 'Explorer' Series of Ordnance Survey maps. The Hereward Way follows the course of the river from the Power Station at Two Mile Bottom north of Thetford to Lakenheath Lode, but this strays away from the river at times. However there are two other paths – The Little Ouse Path which follows the towpath from Thetford to Brandon, and the St Edmund Way which crosses the Brecks from the River Lark to Thetford at Nuns Bridges to join the Little Ouse Path. These follow the banks of the river more closely. Canoes and paddle boards can be hired at Thetford. For more information on this the tourist office in the town called 'Leaping Hare' is most useful.

<https://leapinghare.org/events/norfolk-1/thetford-1/sport-3/weekend-canoe-and-stand-up-paddleboard-hire/>

For a longer trip up the river, motor cruisers can be hired from Bridge Boatyard at Ely, and there is a new dayboat available for hire at Little Ouse Boats of Brandon Creek.

<https://www.bridgeboatyard.com/>

http://www.littleousemoorings.co.uk/Day_Boat_Hire.html

Other places to visit.

Thetford

There are several museums at Thetford. The Norfolk Museums Service is at The Ancient House, where aspects of the town's history are explored from its close links with the Maharajah Duleep Singh and the Sikh religion, to the Thetford Pulp factory that manufactured a wide variety of papier mache goods (some made from secret WW2 documents) from 1879 to the 1950s, later developing the 'Centurion' motorcycle helmets.

<https://www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk/ancient-house>

The Burrell Museum is in the workshop of one of the foremost traction engine builders in this country, exporting all over the world.

<https://www.steamheritage.co.uk/museums-and-attractions/entry/charles-burrell-museum>

There is also an extensive 'Dad's Army Museum' in the old Fire Station, a tribute to the cast and crew who lodged in the town during the making of the series. When visiting the town fans of this series must not miss the 'Captain Mainwaring' seat by the river, opposite the new cinema. <https://dadsarmythetford.org.uk/>



Bishops Mill, Thetford

By Nun's Bridges there is a footpath to a nature reserve called Nunnery Lakes. The British Trust for Ornithology have developed lakes in the river valley behind their offices, and provide free access to visitors.



Old bathing pool at Nuns Bridges

<https://www.bto.org/about-bto/reserve>

There is also access to Barnham Common where the Breckland flora and fauna are returning as an extensive programme is carried out to remove scrub and trees to restore heathland.

A new venture by the river in the centre of the town is Canoe and Stand-up Paddleboard Hire.

<https://www.bushadventuresuk.org/thetford-hire-stand>

Santon Downham



St Helen's Well

As the river passes through the village it provides a popular recreational site for local families. There is a large car park known as 'St. Helens', from which a large grassy area slopes down to the water where people can paddle in the clear water, canoes can be launched etc. In the other direction, a walk under the railway bridge passes a fascinating tunnel under the railway which preserved access to St Helens Well, where a spring bubbles to the surface. At one time the well here was considered sacred, but the short 'canal' off the river was actually built to preserve access to a quarry that was used to dig flints and clunch. This destroyed any remains of the well, but there is still a spring here.

<http://www.breakingnewground.org.uk/earthheritagetrail/st-helen-s-well/>

Brandon

The Heritage Centre at Brandon is run by local enthusiasts and houses some remarkable artifacts of the Flint industry in the town, including panels made by master flint knapper William Carter who died in 1904. There are also displays of the history of rabbit warrening and goods made from their fur, and collections of neolithic and bronze age finds from the area.

Well known for its former industries associated with flint and rabbits, the town formerly took advantage of good river access to Kings Lynn, Cambridge and across the fens to Wisbech. Boats exchanged cargoes of corn for coal, to power amongst other things a large sawmill, and to supply the town gas works from 1869. Bricks were carried upriver from Ely to build houses in the town and barley was delivered to maltings.

<https://www.brandonheritage.org.uk/>



The railway crosses the river downstream of the town before the large village of Hockwold where its water can be diverted into the cut-off channel as it reaches the fens. Before a bridge was built, a ferry crossed the river here to Lakenheath. Chicory was grown around this town supplying a processing factory originally established by Chivers in the early 1900s, and survived several changes of ownership until the early 1980s. Water was pumped from the river and left in settlement beds before being returned.

In a wedge of land between the river and Lakenheath Lode the RSPB has established a reserve. Carrot fields were flooded and thousands of reeds planted to create a wetland now visited by birds including Common Crane, Bittern, Marsh Harrier, Hobby, Bearded Tits and many more, water voles, etc. Unfortunately the stands of poplar trees, originally intended as matchwood, and nesting site for Golden Oriole are now used by other birds.

Entering the Fens

From here to Lakenheath Lode the river continues to meander, now with banks to confine it to its channel, and shallow lakes and scrapes litter the wide floodplain beyond the banks where birds, flowers and all types of wildlife can be seen. In the wedge of land between Lakenheath Railway Station and Lakenheath Lode, the RSPB have restored a natural fen



Common Crane Andy Hay

where bittern, common cranes, cuckoo, marsh harrier, hobby, warblers and many other birds can be heard and occasionally seen in spring and summer. Fields producing arable crops on either side of the river here have reverted to a more natural state grazed by cattle, sheep and horses. One feature of this reserve and several other stretches of the riverbank are the stands of poplar trees, thought to have been planted for matches but largely abandoned to nature. At one time they provided a nesting habitat for golden oriole but these have not been seen in recent years.

Adjacent to Lakenheath Lode a light railway was shown on early OS maps connecting brickworks in the fields on the north bank across a bridge. No evidence of this is now to be seen.

Bibliography

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