

The River Lark

This article, about the River Lark, is the first of an occasional series about Breckland's rivers. Whilst famous for its arid landscape with open heaths and plantation forests, Breckland has an equally important river system, both in terms of history and biodiversity, as the award by the National Heritage Lottery Fund of a Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers Landscape Partnership attests. There are national and county nature reserves, gardens and parks along the Lark, as well as many sites of historic interest. The article describes a little of the history of the Lark and lists some of the places that can be visited, with a link to the relevant websites, in case you would like to find out more.



The Lark at Temple Bridge Cavenham Heath

The River Lark rises as a spring at Bradfield Combust south of Bury St Edmunds and enters the Great Ouse at Branch Bridge, a few miles north of Prickwillow in Cambridgeshire. It is one of only 200 chalk rivers in the country, making it of considerable significance for biodiversity with a diverse range of plant and animal species. The Lark's broad floodplain includes extensive areas of nationally scarce lowland heath, for example at Icklingham, shown here. There is a mosaic of wetland habitats of reedbed, grazing marsh, flood plain meadow, carr woodland and large pools created by gravel extraction.

Visiting the Lark

The Lark Valley Path graded 'easy walking', extends for 13 miles from Mildenhall (TL711747) to Bury St Edmunds (TL853651) passing through riverside, heathland, woodland and parkland. Sites along the path include those below.

[West Stow Country Park and Anglo-Saxon Village](#) is a recreated Anglo-Saxon village at the site of the excavation of an Early Saxon settlement. There are riverside walks, a museum, and a café.

[Cavenham Heath National Nature Reserve](#) with heathland, woodland, carr, marsh, river and adjacent gravel extraction lakes, provides habitat for Wood Lark, Stone Curlew, Nightjar, Grey Wagtails, Hobby, Grasshopper Warbler and Nightingale. Adders and Red Deer are regularly seen on the reserve. WWII pill boxes, part of the Defence First Stop Line, and the low ditches and humps of glider traps dot the landscape.

[Lackford Lakes Nature Reserve](#) is a flagship reserve for the Suffolk Wildlife Trust with eleven lakes (created by gravel extraction), reedbed, Breckland grassland and an ash Carr. There is a visitor centre which serves refreshments. The reserve is designated as a Site of Special Scientific interest for both dragonflies and wintering wildfowl and is famous for its kingfishers. Otters are regularly present if infrequently seen!



Water Voles are found along the Lark



[Culford Park](#) and Culford Hall, now an independent school and wedding venue, has parkland created in the late 18th Century, in a style inspired by Humphrey Repton.



Culford Park and Hall in the distance

[The King's Forest](#) provides opportunities for walking and riding, and borders the River Lark in places and includes coniferous and deciduous woodland.



Fullers Mill house and mill stream

[Fuller's Mill Garden](#) at West Stow is a delightful woodland and water garden, with a small café on the banks of the Lark. Its creator, botanist and brewer the late Bernard Tickner, who created Abbot Ale for Greene King, gave some of his land to the Suffolk Wildlife Trust for Lackford Lakes Nature Reserve, which part of the garden faces. The garden is now in the care of the Perennial Trust.

The History of the Lark

The distribution of archaeological finds suggests that river valleys such as the Lark were significant in **Neolithic times** (c 4000 – 2100 BCE). Settlements were concentrated along the rivers, with communities living in small farmsteads such as at the site discovered at Fornham St. Mary. At nearby Fornham All Saints, the Fornham Cursus is a scheduled monument believed to have been a 1.2-mile-long Neolithic processional way with a cluster of ring ditches at its end. It may have included wooden henges and its significance has been compared with Stonehenge. It is now only visible by aerial photography – can you see the curved parallel crop marks in the photograph?



Iron Age settlements in the Lark Valley were mostly single self-sufficient farmsteads such as those discovered near West Stow. Between Bury St Edmunds and Fornham All Saints clusters of Iron Age grain storage pits have been discovered on both sides of the river.

Evidence of **Bronze Age** settlement includes ritual burial round barrows, situated on higher ground above the river, Beaker pottery fragments and some metalwork. For example, in the area north of the Lark near Mildenhall a remarkable concentration of finds were discovered at over a hundred sites. Bronze Age droveways have been identified of which the most famous is [The Icknield Way](#), claimed to be the oldest road in England. It crosses the Lark, although the original crossing point is a little uncertain - its route may have been across Cavenham Heath and the Lark at Temple Bridge (see photograph above), although other sources suggest that it crossed the Lark further the east, near Lackford.

The Romans settled the Lark Valley – for example there was a Roman town at Lackford, including one of the few known Christian churches and burial grounds, preceded by pagan temples on both sides of the Lark. Excavations at Icklingham revealed a line of Roman features including a building with underfloor heating, two cemeteries, and a potting kiln. In 1942, the Mildenhall Treasure, a hoard of 34 pieces of richly decorated Roman silver tableware was discovered at West Row, close to the Lark. The most spectacular object is known as the Great or Oceanus dish, which has the face of Neptune at the centre with an inner freeze of sea monsters and nymphs and an outer one of drunken revellers including Hercules, Pan and Bacchus. The Treasure is now in the British Museum but [Mildenhall Museum](#) has replicas and gives a fascinating account of the still mysterious circumstances surrounding the hoard's discovery.



The Great Dish (British Museum)

Evidence of an **Early Saxon** community was found on the site of the Country Park at West Stow where there is now a re-created Anglo-Saxon Village and museum (see above). The excavation revealed ten groups of buildings, each centred on a timber 'hall' and each likely to have been used by a family unit. At Lackford and West Stow rare pre-Christian stamped pottery cremation urns, some decorated with a swastika motif, have been found. Icklingham was one of the largest Anglo-Saxon settlements in the area - the image below shows jewellery from female graves found there. [The Black Ditches](#), a boundary bank, crosses the Icknield Way between Icklingham and Cavenham. It is believed to be the most easterly of a series of defensive earthworks that include the Devil's Dyke in Cambridgeshire.

By the second part of the 9th Century **Viking** raids on England had become regular events. We know that Thetford and its rivers were significant in enabling the raiders to penetrate and eventually settle further inland, but the role of the Lark has not been fully explored. The Breckland Society's Breckland Fen Edge and Rivers (BFER) project 'River Raiders' later this year will give us the opportunity to discover whether the Vikings used the Lark. The next sections of the article deal with three aspects of the use of the Lark from the end of the Middle Ages until the 20th Century: river crossings, water mills and navigation and transport of goods.



Icklingham Jewellery (Bury Chronicle)

River crossings were of great importance. Villages developed at fording points on the Lark, for example at Icklingham and Lackford. In 1173 an important battle took place at the river crossing at Fornham All Saints during the Great



Battle of Fornham village sign

Revolt of 1173–74. This was a rebellion against King Henry II of England by three of his sons, his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine, and their rebel supporters including the Earl of Leicester. At the Battle of Fornham, commemorated on the village sign, rebel soldiers were defeated by royal troops as they tried to cross the Lark.

There was a chain ferry at Jude's Ferry, West Row, just west of Mildenhall. Even in 2014 the auction particulars of a parcel of land at by the Lark at Ferry Drove, Isleham (Cambridgeshire) included the right to have a ferry crossing and charge tolls! The Lark near Jude's Ferry was known as the 'Jordan of the Fens' in the

19th Century because people came from miles around to be baptised by total immersion. The practice continued until the 1970s when the cleanliness of the water led to concerns about safety. A carved stone on the bank has the inscription 'Rev Charles Haddon Spurgeon, The Prince of Preachers, was baptised here 3 May 1850'.



Baptism by immersion

Spurgeon describes how, just before his 16th birthday, he walked eight miles to the ferry where *'The wind blew down the river with a cutting blast as my turn came to wade into the flood, but after I had walked a few steps and noted the people on the ferry boat, and in boats and on either shore; I felt as if Heaven and earth and hell might all gaze upon me; for I was not ashamed, there and then, to own myself a follower of the Lamb. My timidity was washed away; it floated down the river into the sea, and must have been devoured by the fishes, for I have never felt anything of the kind since I lost a thousand fears in that River Lark.'*

Mills were present along the River Lark from medieval times. The Domesday Book records at least 20 on the Lark between Mildenhall and the Fornham villages outside Bury St Edmunds, of which six are believed to have been in existence for centuries earlier. Mills were used not only for grinding grain, but also for fulling woollen cloth – a process in which it was thickened and strengthened by soaking in water and Fuller's Earth (clay minerals) or urine and then beaten by water powered mallets. Fulling mills were recorded on the Lark in the Domesday Book and by the late 14th Century there was such a concentration that the river had become seriously polluted. These mills would

have treated more woollen cloth than was needed locally, suggesting that fulling was an important specialism of the area.



Chimney Mills West Stow/Culford

Creating parkland to surround grand houses in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries often involved moving or demolishing villages and led to the demise of mills too. When the village of Ickworth was moved to Horringer to create Ickworth Park, Ickworth Mill was destroyed as was the mill at Fornham St Genevieve when Fornham Park was created.

Other mills were rebuilt in-situ or acquired other functions, and some were eventually converted to from waterpower to coal, gas or oil power. For instance, Chimney Mills at West Stow/ Culford was in continuous use from 1211 and 1916 grinding grain, after which it remained operational as a bakery until it was finally demolished in 1932. Abbotts Mill, one of four mills at Icklingham recorded in the Domesday Book, was also used to control a barrier across the river to enable tolls to be collected from merchants. When this mill burned down in the 18th Century it was rebuilt in a slightly different location. In 1890 its water wheel was replaced by a water turbine and at least part of the mill was used to grind locally extracted gravel which was transported along the river for roadworks. The mill at this site is now Heygates Mill which is still producing flour. Between 1919 and 1936 Lark Mill at Mildenhall also powered a dynamo which supplied electricity to part of the town. In 1969 it was converted from milling grain to processing animal feedstuffs. Mills can still be seen on the Lark, although in some cases only the mill house or stream remains.



Tuddenham Mill, now a restaurant and hotel

Navigation and transport The River Lark has a long history of navigation. It connected Bury St. Edmunds with the North Sea via the Great Ouse, which flows through the Fens into the Wash at King's Lynn, providing the main trade route for heavy goods for centuries. The Romans used the Lark and created an almost four-mile artificial cut from Isleham to Prickwillow in Cambridgeshire. Clunch quarried at Isleham was transported to Bury by barge during the building of the Abbey a thousand years ago. Records from 1700 show that coal, timber, grain, salt, long-fleeced wool from Lincolnshire and Romney Marsh wool from Kent were being transported, with peat turves being moved more locally (for those unable to afford coal) and dropped off from the lighters at small wharves at riverside public houses. In 1780 coal was the most important commodity but there were also cargoes of wine, stone, bricks, cheese, barley and wool.



Cherry Ground Lock West Stow has a stone with TGC 1842 inscribed on it

Navigation improvement began in 1638, when King Charles I granted a licence to charge tolls to pay for the works and to compensate millowners suffering damage, but work was interrupted by the Civil War. The Lark was directly connected to the sea until 1651 when the building of Denver Sluice and the Bedford Level had a major effect on the river's flow so that by the end of the 17th century it had become too shallow for navigation. In 1700 a Lark Navigation Act was passed, appointing Commissioners to carry out improvements to advance trade. Staunches, like a single lock gate combined with a sloping weir that controlled the level of the river, were built enabling boats to pass from one level to another. Between 1810 and 1845 further improvements were carried out by Sir Thomas Gerry Cullum and his son Revd. Sir Thomas Gerry Cullum who took over the affairs of the Lark Navigation.

Mildenhall Sluice and several new locks and lock-keeper's cottages were built, dredging took place and flood mitigation culverts were installed. These works can be identified today by inscribed stones with the initials TGC and a date. Trade was further stimulated by reducing tolls so that in 1845 10,000 tons of goods were transported.

Disaster struck with the arrival of the railway in 1846 which caused the movement of goods on the river to plummet. In 1849 Thomas Cullum reached a financial compensation settlement with the railway company and in return agreed to cease improvements to the Lark for ten years. Significant deterioration occurred during this period of neglect. Other than a short lived spate of energetic improvements between 1889 and 1892 when the Marquis of Bristol (of Ickworth Hall) and the Mayor of Bury set up a new Navigation Company and began major dredging and bridge raising works to allow steam barges along the river, the story of Lark Navigation is then one of gradual decline.

By 1900 the assets of the Navigation Company were sold off and in 1901 barge traffic upstream of Mildenhall ceased. The Parker Brothers, owners of three grain mills (including Abbey Mill) eventually bought the navigation rights and used the river to service their mills, and between 1889 and 1902 the pleasure boat 'Leisure Hour' made trips from Bury to Icklingham. The Lark is still used by pleasure craft today, but now Jude's Ferry is the limit of navigation.



Lighters and a steam tug on the Lark

The Breckland Society's second BFER project, beginning in 2021, is 'Industrious Rivers' project which will explore and conserve the industrial legacies of Breckland rivers including the Lark. I hope this short article has whetted your appetite to find out more and that you will consider joining the project.