

## THE RIVER WISSEY

The source of the River Wissey is the cause of some controversy. Some authorities state that the source is east of Bradenham in the countryside north of Shipdham, but the older generation of Watton claim that the Watton Brook flowing westwards from Scoulton Mere is the true Wissey. Whatever claim is made, the source is about 70 metres above sea level, and the river is about 50 kms long, rising in springs from the chalk rock that underlays the glacial sediments clothing the area and joining the River Great Ouse at Fordham, near Denver slightly below sea level. The valleys of the Wissey and the Watton Brook vary along their lengths from relatively narrow to wide, suggesting a postglacial landscape of lakes which occasionally overflowed, cutting through the low ridges of sediment left by melting ice. At Lynford Water, gravel extraction has revealed something of the nature of the valley some 60,000 years ago. Here over 1000 bones of mammoths and 41 complete flint hand axes and were unearthed from 1992 to 2002. Tim Holt-Wilson describes it as 'a chilly, open mammoth steppe landscape with a very different wildlife population and a population of Neanderthal humans'.



*Image from Breaking New Ground*

<http://www.breakingnewground.org.uk/assets/Projects/C2-EHT/brecksehtbookletfinalforweb.pdf>

The area that the river flows through has a long history of habitation, being lighter and drier land that was easier to till than the clay drift to the south or the wet, or the infertile, sandy Breckland and the boggy fenland. Along the margins of the river are many scatterings of pot boilers where early man heated these small flints in their fire and then used them to heat water. In the fields of villages such as North and South Pickenham, Great and Little Cressingham, Bodney and Hilborough artifacts, from



*Bodney Church*

prehistoric flint implements to Saxon brooches have been unearthed. Many Bronze Age burial mounds have been identified including a 'cemetery' of eight grouped together near Hopton Farm, Little Cressingham. The Peddars Way, and other Roman Roads cross the area and at Threxton where these roads crossed by the Watton Brook, this crossing was guarded by a Roman Camp of several 100 soldiers. The churches at Hilborough and Bodney carry the remains of earlier Saxon buildings and an abandoned medieval village stands in the fields of Priory Farm at Great Cressingham.

Between Hilborough and Lynford its waters flow through the 'lost' villages of Langford and Buckenham Tofts in the STANTA Army Training Ground. Here it is described by Tor Falcon in her book 'Rivers of Norfolk' 2019.

*The water is transparent, giving glances of a gravelly bottom in deep channels between layered islands of emerald underwater weed.*

Leaving STANTA the river passes Lynford Water where gravel pits have revealed evidence increasing anthropologists knowledge of Neanderthal man and the late periglacial environment referred to earlier. The water has also been diverted into lakes enhancing the grounds of Lynford Hall Hotel. This

hall, built on the site of an earlier house by 'the richest commoner in England' Stephen Lyne Stevens in the early 1860s was occupied by his widow until 1894, although in 1861 it had been considered an alternative to Sandringham as a country house for Edward, Prince of Wales. It has survived through the 20<sup>th</sup> century when so many houses were lost, passing into the hands of the Forestry Commission in 1929 having been gutted by fire a few years earlier. During this time it was saved from demolition and refurbished by Sir James Calder as a 'grace and favour' residence. He had made his money supplying timber during WW1, and had also bought Weeting Hall and its forested land for this purpose. He entertained many rich and influential guests here including John F Kennedy and his father Joseph. It became a hospital during the war and its later use as a Forestry School in the 1950s has left the legacy of a glorious arboretum in its public grounds. Standing empty in the 1970s it provided a film set for the TV series 'Allo 'Allo and Dads Army as well as hosting antiques auctions for Tyrone Roberts.



*Fighting Bulls and Redwoods.  
LynfordHall*

Close by, on the river at Ickburgh, Bridge House, is a former leper chapel now divided into 2 cottages.

<https://www.forestryengland.uk/lynford-water>

<https://www.forestryengland.uk/lynford-arboretum/walking-trails-and-routes/lynford-arboretum-green-walk>

The river flows on past the grounds of Didlington Hall, once a fine mansion containing valuable collections of paintings, rare books, tapestries, and furniture. There were Egyptian artifacts in a specially built museum, bought and collected by Lord Amherst and thought to be the inspiration for Howard Carter's Egyptian excavations. From here the river curves round rising land to the south before reaching Whittington and Stoke Ferry, now the present head of navigation. Just downstream of this its waters pass over the Cut-off channel in a rare aqueduct, where floodwater can be released from the channel to prevent downstream inundation.



*Didlington Hall*

The small volume of the river limited its use for navigation. This may be one reason that the only substantial settlement by the Wissey is Stoke Ferry where it enters the Fens. The Hythes at Oxborough and Methwold suggest it had some use, although they are set back from the river and accessed by artificial cuts or lodes. Methwold Lode was more than 2 miles long. In 1781 Bloomfield recorded that Oxborough Hythe was the head of navigation.

*'Here are granaries for corn, and coal yards; and lighters and boats pass from hence to Lynn, Cambridge and other towns on that navigation'.*

*Bloomfield 1781.*

Another reference to its importance is made by a local historian

*The site of the Oxborough Ferry has been well used over the decades, and certain cargoes could be said to have been extra special. One such delivery is said to have been the pulpit for St Andrews church. Having been brought from elsewhere by barge, the tale goes that the pulpit was transported the rest of the way by road and into the village.*

*From Northwold and Whittington Village Life by Mike Coley March 2005*

<https://www.northwold.net/>

There were a number of mills along the course of the river Gt and Little Cressingham, Hilborough, Buckenham, Northwold, Dilton (Whittington) Saham Toney etc. The mill by the river at Little Cressingham was driven by both wind and water. It is owned by Norfolk Windmills Trust and is occasionally holds open days. It holds not only millstones but, in a separate building there is a water-driven Bramah Pump which was used to pump water up to the Hall nearby. Despite some restoration in the 1990s the exterior of the tower is in a poor state, although the machinery inside can still be run from the much reduced millpool. The milling machinery in the watermill at Hilborough is also still complete, including the waterwheel. This is privately owned. The mill and house are Grade II listed. Northwold Mill stood on the Didlington Estate. It was a ruin by the 1940s. <http://www.norfolk Mills.co.uk/Watermills/lt-creasingham.html>



*Corn mill and water pump  
Lt. Cressingham*

Roger Deakin, the author of *Waterlog* (1999) swam in the River Wissey as part of his tour of Britain. He parked near Ickburgh Bridge, near Mundford, and the book describes a stunningly beautiful description of the river in summertime.

*'It was full of fish and wild flowers, and, for all I knew, crayfish and naiads, wonderfully remote from any sort of civilisation. The banks were thick with purple water-mint, forget-me-not, hawkbit, and clouds of yellow brimstones and cabbage whites browsing on the purple loosestrife along the banks. The water was polished, deep green and gold, shining from its velvet bed of crowfoot and fine gravel; it seemed quite out of time, flowing as sweetly as the river in Millais' painting of the drowned Ophelia, decked with wild flowers.'*

Stoke Ferry, adjoining Whittington is now a shadow of its former self. Large houses, built and once occupied by wealthy merchants who traded in wool and corn as well as importing coal and timber from Kings Lynn are now divided into flats or lacking maintenance, and the substantial church of All Saints is now redundant. River freight was replaced by rail when a branch line reached here from Downham Market in 1882, and the turnpike from Kings Lynn lost its use as the bridge at Hilgay carried the A10 south towards Cambridge and London. Pleasure boats come up the river but there are no convenient moorings.



*Stoke Ferry*

#### Bibliography

The Brecks Earth Heritage Trails No 7 Lynford Water. Tim Holt-Wilson  
Rivers of Norfolk. Tor Falcon 2019  
Northwold and Whittington Village Life March 2005  
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