

The Journal of Breckland Studies

Volume 5 2025

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Front cover:
Detail from Samuel Carter's engraving of Didlington heronry, published in the *Illustrated London News* (1868).

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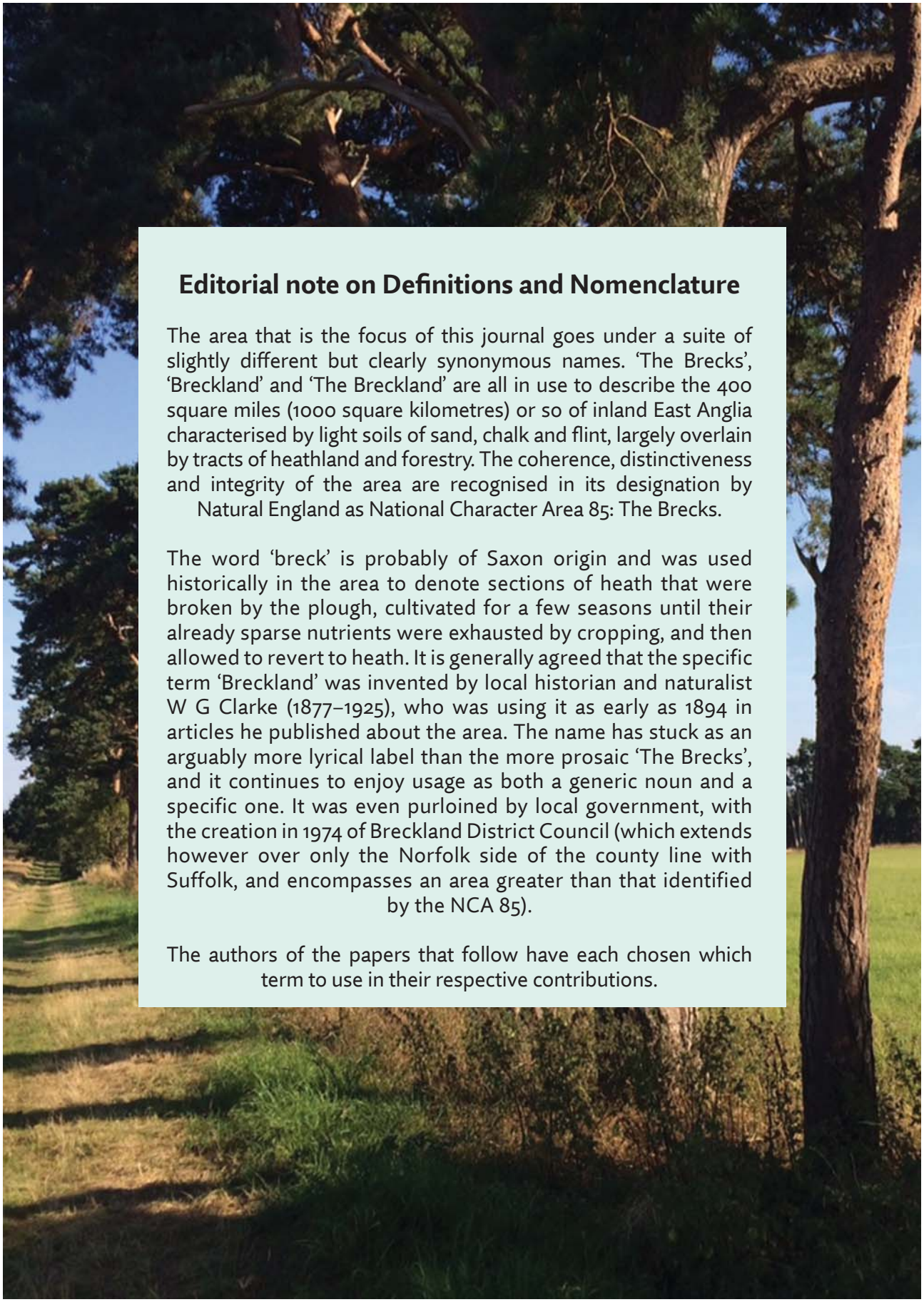
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Map: Artista Design



Editorial note on Definitions and Nomenclature

The area that is the focus of this journal goes under a suite of slightly different but clearly synonymous names. 'The Brecks', 'Breckland' and 'The Breckland' are all in use to describe the 400 square miles (1000 square kilometres) or so of inland East Anglia characterised by light soils of sand, chalk and flint, largely overlain by tracts of heathland and forestry. The coherence, distinctiveness and integrity of the area are recognised in its designation by Natural England as National Character Area 85: The Brecks.

The word 'breck' is probably of Saxon origin and was used historically in the area to denote sections of heath that were broken by the plough, cultivated for a few seasons until their already sparse nutrients were exhausted by cropping, and then allowed to revert to heath. It is generally agreed that the specific term 'Breckland' was invented by local historian and naturalist W G Clarke (1877–1925), who was using it as early as 1894 in articles he published about the area. The name has stuck as an arguably more lyrical label than the more prosaic 'The Brecks', and it continues to enjoy usage as both a generic noun and a specific one. It was even purloined by local government, with the creation in 1974 of Breckland District Council (which extends however over only the Norfolk side of the county line with Suffolk, and encompasses an area greater than that identified by the NCA 85).

The authors of the papers that follow have each chosen which term to use in their respective contributions.

Foreword

This is the fifth volume of the *Journal of Breckland Studies*, a publication devoted to research into the archaeology, history and natural history of this unique area, straddling the boundary between Norfolk and Suffolk. The six papers we present here address diverse topics, but all serve in their various ways to capture, and illuminate, essential aspects of Breckland's special character.

Poor soils and low land prices ensured that from late medieval times through to the twentieth century Breckland was characterised by large landed estates, centred on great mansions set in elaborate parks and gardens. In the first of our papers, Dave Deighton presents a meticulous account of the development of the grounds of one of the most important and much-visited surviving examples, the magnificent Oxburgh Hall, now in the care of the National Trust. Drawing on the latest archaeological evidence, as well as on that provided by maps and documents, he charts the ever-changing nature of the designed landscape, linking this both with wider developments in gardening fashions and with the fluctuating fortunes of the property's historical owners, the Bedingfeld family.

Breckland's landed estates, more perhaps than those in most parts of England, were managed for sport as much as for agricultural profit. Game shooting was the most important pursuit and had a significant impact on the landscape, encouraging the planting of coverts and shelter belts. But other sports were enjoyed by the wealthy, and one which has to date received little attention is here explored by Alan Clarke in a fascinating article on heron hawking at Didlington in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The ideal circumstance for practising the sport was where a heronry was separated from the nearest river by, in the words of one writer, "a vast open space of ground suitable to be ridden over, and wide enough to afford a flight of at least two miles ere the heron could reach either a sheltering wood or a piece of water". This is a useful reminder that Breckland was, and is, not merely an excessively dry land of wide arable fields, open heaths and plantations, on sands overlying porous chalk. It is also a wet one, dissected by the rivers Wissey, Little Ouse, Lark and Thet and their various tributaries, with their wide, peaty floodplains, and flanked to the west by the drained wetland of the Fens.

The character of Breckland arises in large part from the juxtaposition of these very different environments, a subject explored in a variety of ways, and with much success, in the recent Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers Landscape Partnership Scheme, funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and discussed in the final paper in this volume. Rivers, meres and springs not only provided obvious practical benefits, such as drinking water for humans and livestock, transport and irrigation, but they also afforded opportunities for recreation – and fun. Ordinary local people, and

not only the landed rich, enjoyed activities such as swimming, paddling, boating, fishing and ice skating, the recent histories of which, as Imogen Radford ably describes in her article, were explored using oral history as one important strand of this wider project.

Two of our articles consider the history of researching, and conserving, Breckland's heritage. As readers of previous issues of the *Journal* will be well aware, that heritage has a national importance in both archaeological and ecological terms. The two aspects are intimately connected. Breckland's heaths – still extensive, in spite of reclamation and afforestation over the last two centuries – not only sustain a distinctive flora and fauna but also serve to preserve, undamaged by agriculture, archaeological evidence for early human activity and settlement, intense and extensive on these light, easily farmed soils. In the past, the study of history and natural history were less segregated than they are in these academically compartmentalised times. Indeed, the character of Breckland has long encouraged a particularly close integration – and continues to do so, as shown by the existence of this journal. Nothing exemplifies this interdisciplinary approach better than the career of W G Clarke, author of the iconic book *In Breckland Wilds* and the founding father of Breckland studies – literally, as he appears to have been the first to use 'Breckland' as a term for our area, in the last decade of the nineteenth century. No biography of this highly significant figure has ever been written: James Parry's account of his life and work, presented here, represents important, cutting-edge research.

The history of local responses to Breckland's heritage is also addressed in Oliver Bone's account of the history of Thetford's Ancient House Museum, now a century old. The article serves as a powerful reminder – in these times of governmental cost-cutting – of the vital role that such museums have played in fostering a sense of communal pride and identity, over many decades. The content of the displays and collections, moreover, which focus on the town as much as its hinterland, reminds us that although Breckland is a predominantly rural area it also contains major urban centres – Thetford and Bury St Edmunds – and smaller ones, like Brandon and Mildenhall. They, too, are part of Breckland's rich and complex history and appropriate subjects for the attention of the *Journal*.

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Figure 1.
The gatehouse at Oxburgh Hall is the oldest surviving part of the building, dating back to the late fifteenth century.
© James Parry

1

An Overview of The Designed Landscape at Oxburgh Hall

Dave Deighton

Summary
This paper endeavours to open a window on the history of the designed landscape at Oxburgh Hall, now owned and managed by the National Trust and still lived in by members of the Bedingfeld family, whose home it has been for more than 500 years. The story is a complex one, with many different layers and features, some of which are only now becoming better known and understood because of recent research and fieldwork. What follows is a summary of current understanding of the chronology, components and character of the designed landscape around the fifteenth-century moated manor house that sits at the heart of the Oxburgh estate. Many of the historical features, remnant or otherwise, that we see today are the result of the Bedingfelds wishing to show their relevance and status, and to demonstrate that they were following the latest fashions; equally, the development of the landscape was influenced by their rising and falling fortunes.

Early Oxburgh and The Construction of Oxburgh Hall
Recent fieldwork and geophysical surveys have revealed a human presence at Oxburgh dating back to the Bronze Age (see Deighton, 2024), but the first reference to the Oxburgh estate dates to 1274 when the property is recorded as being in the hands of the de Weyland family. It appears to have remained in their ownership until 1434, when it was inherited by Sir Thomas Tuddenham from a cousin. An influential landowner, Tuddenham rose to be the holder of various high offices in the realm, but during the Wars of the Roses he aligned with the House of Lancaster and, following the Yorkist victory in 1461, was charged with treason and executed.

It is not clear if Tuddenham ever built substantially at Oxburgh, but dendro-chronology dates for timbers found in the hall during the roof restoration carried out in 2016–22 seem to coincide with his tenure; possibly they were either part of an earlier structure on the site or repurposed from nearby. There is also a record from his time noting that he had commissioned the construction of "an old dyke" that divided a meadow adjacent to Gooderstone Common and close to the "Church Brigge". It is possible that this dyke was part of water-engineering activities designed to feed a moat and/or fishponds.[1]

Following Tuddenham's execution in 1462, his estates – including Oxburgh – passed to his sister Margaret, the widow of Edmund Bedingfeld. Margaret's grandson, also Edmund, inherited the manor in 1474 and subsequently settled in Oxburgh with his first wife, Alice Shelton, relocating the family interests from Suffolk. The reasons for this move are not clear, but it may be that he saw the benefits of building on

1 Dallas, p.164 (referencing NRO PD139/52, an undated early seventeenth-century survey of the manor).



Figure 2. Oxburgh Hall and moat from the southwest. © *James Parry*

the powerbase that Tuddenham had begun. The years that followed marked the advent of a major period of landscape development and design at Oxburgh. The current hall is generally considered to date from 1482; this is the date of permission granted by the king for a licence to crenellate and a pardon for works already done (it might be thought of as retrospective planning permission!). Much of the activity undertaken during this time was directly related to the Bedingfeld family's desire to signal their influence and power, both to the high-status members of society that they were seeking to impress and to the ordinary laymen of the area. The buildings and the developed landscape are inseparable in this respect. The positioning of a magnificent church, a mill, a large barn and the manor house itself was critical to conveying the appropriate signals of authority.

Although no plans are known to exist, the moat and house platform at Oxburgh are very carefully engineered with precise angles and symmetry and it seems most likely that the house and moat were conceived as a single entity as a result of detailed planning. Pevsner noted how the imposing gatehouse at Oxburgh still dominates the gentle contours of the surrounding landscape.[2] The hall was designed to be a bold statement of the Bedingfelds' power and wealth and its very fabric – utilising brick – indicated that the family was on trend with the East Anglian elite building fashion.

The curtilage of the manor core was defined by three roads, respectively on the north, east and west sides, and by the River Gadder to the south. The north road is still extant and forms the main artery leading into the village from Swaffham to the north-east and Stoke Ferry to the south-west. The east road was moved further eastwards in 1844 (presumably to further isolate the private elite spaces). The west road, which ran past the barn to a patch of osiers close to the Gadder, remains fossilised as a pathway through this part of the estate.

2 Pevsner, p.584



Figure 3. Detail from *Map of the Parish of Oxborough* by Philip Wissiter, 1722. *Norfolk Record Office BRA2524/1. All rights reserved by Norfolk Record Office.*

Understanding of the early development of the designed landscape at Oxburgh relies heavily on two eighteenth-century maps commissioned by the Bedingfelds from Philip Wissiter (Figure 3) and Jacob de Wilstar (Figure 4), and dated 1722 and 1725 respectively. Apart from the hall itself, the most imposing feature in the landscape was the Great Barn, its size (comparable to one wing of the hall) and position (close to the hall) clearly designed to signal the importance of the Bedingfelds and demonstrate their control over the local population and agricultural output; this juxtaposition of barn and residence is seen in several contemporary residences in the region, for example at Baconsthorpe Castle. The Great Barn is recorded as having been demolished and rebuilt in 1693, but there is a strong possibility that it was contemporary with the hall or dated at least from the early part of the sixteenth century; it is shown clearly on the 1722 and 1725 estate maps, but seems to have been finally pulled down in the first half of the nineteenth century.[3, 4]

The Water Gardens and Wider Estate

Located immediately south of the hall, the part of the historical designed landscape at times referred to as the Water Gardens[5] represents a sometimes confusing and complex aspect of the estate. The 1722 and 1725 maps indicate the general layout of the gardens at that time, including designed water features, but much of the detail is hard to pin down and the precise chronology and purpose of the various elements remain unclear. The whole area is studded with earthworks and hints of earlier features; although some studies have been undertaken, there remains much scope for more extensive archaeological work, including geophysical surveys.

3 Eburne, p.23
4 National Trust Heritage Records Online ID: MNA199898
5 National Trust Heritage Records Online ID: MNA199855

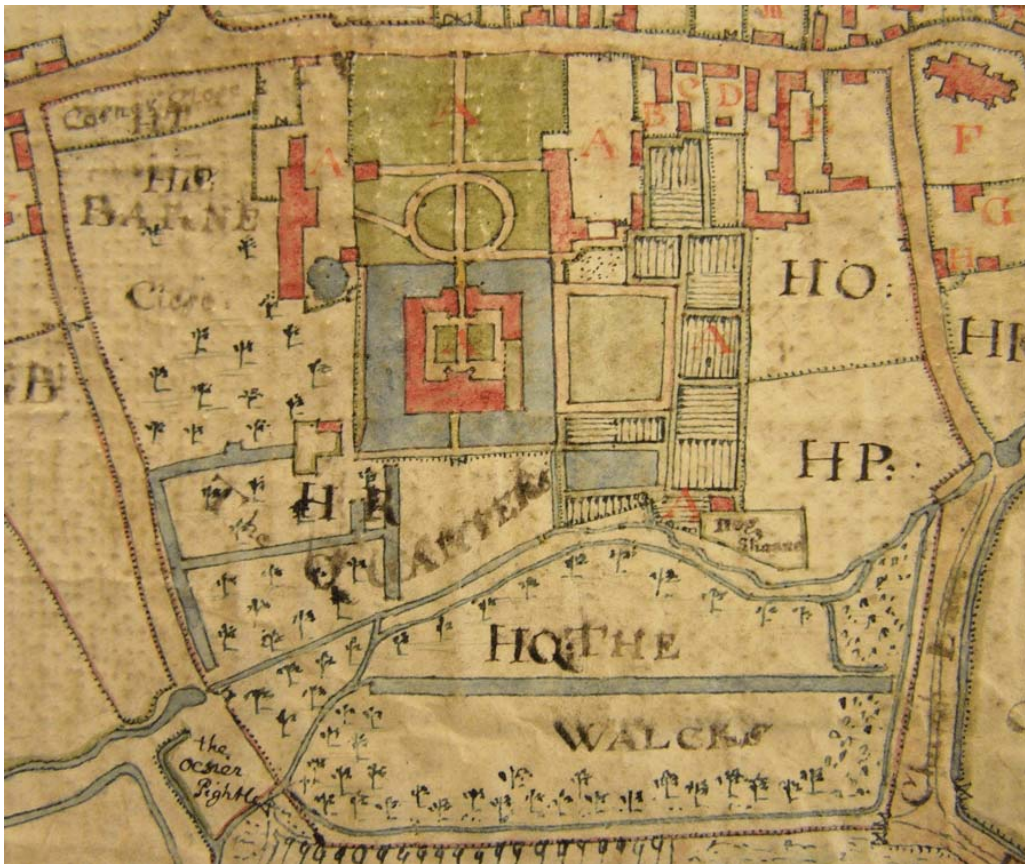


Figure 4. Detail from *Map of the Manor of Oxborough* by Jacob de Wilstar, 1725. *Norfolk Record Office BRA2524/2. All rights reserved by Norfolk Record Office.*

Elements within the gardens are described variously (at different times and in different sources) as The Quarters, The Oak Yard and The Walks, and often overlap or are intertwined with later features such as My Lady's Wood (see below).[6] 'The Quarters' could have several meanings; for a Tudor garden, a quarter was the term used to refer to a subdivision, typically a rectangular space or a quartered area, with well-defined and often colourfully decorated boundaries. It was a demarcation of a section within the garden that was devoted to particular purposes, such as a herb plot, rose bed, fruit orchard or even a 'wilderness'. Gardens were intended to be productive in terms of generating food for the table, as well as providing a space for meditation and exercise. Equally, they were designed to give a sense of theatre and drama, impressing visitors with the sophistication and status of the owner.

Another interpretation of The Quarters is that they referred to swan pens; the Bedingfelds had a swan mark that is recorded as being sold to Lionel Tollemache in 1634. It is possible that the mostly rectangular features to the south-west of the hall started out as areas within the medieval manorial enclosure that were divided by water-filled ditches and then variously reused to create a secure location for the swan herd. Fed by water from the moat, and with lines of trees along their margins, these ditches were further repurposed and developed as a water garden in the late seventeenth century.[7] The striking aerial photograph and earthwork sketch in *East Anglian Archaeology 104* (2003)[8] give a hint of the earlier form of the possible swan pens, showing a rectangular area divided into four sections with a circular central roundel; this has been somewhat truncated by later alterations that expanded the terrace around the moat (Figures 5 and 6).

6 Wass, pp.42, 47; Eburne, pp.33, 158.
7 The possible sequence of development is discussed in more detail in Eburne (pp.18–19) and Wass (pp.32–33).
8 EAA 104, pp.224–225



Figure 5.
Possible swan pens at Oxburgh Hall. *Cushion, EAA104 p.225. © Norfolk County Council.*

Amidst these phases of development, the Bedingfeld family's fortunes were impacted negatively by their support for the Catholic cause during the Reformation and for the Royalists in the English Civil War. The subsequent period of 'punishment' during the Cromwellian years was relieved by the changes wrought by the Restoration, which saw the Bedingfelds once again in favour and made possible their physical return to Oxburgh in 1684. Sometime between then and the 1725 map by de Wilstar a striking feature called the Broad Water was constructed to the south of the hall, close to the current course of the River Gadder. This impressive linear canal feature was some 222 metres long and nine metres wide, and located centrally in the area known as The Walks. Curiously, Wissiter's 1722 map does not show the Broad Water – it may be that this map is based on a survey that was done before the works had been carried out and then published sometime later. There is scant documentary evidence for further garden development after 1725, but a map dated 1801 indicates that by then the width of the Broad Water had been substantially increased, to some 40 metres – perhaps reflecting the fashion in the eighteenth century for more naturalised landscapes projecting large volumes of water.

My Lady's Wood, to the south-east of the hall, is an area of woodland planted up in the 1700s and formalised in the mid-nineteenth century with managed waterways based on the earlier water garden features. In addition to the provision of a gentle series of secluded paths through the trees, there are the remnants of what is thought to be an earlier washpit used for cleaning sheep fleeces and located close to where the former Church Lane crossed the Gadder via a ford; a grotto, dated to 1767–75 but now lost beneath an embankment and a large yew tree; and a cascade formed from what appears to be the inlet at the beginning of the Broad Water.

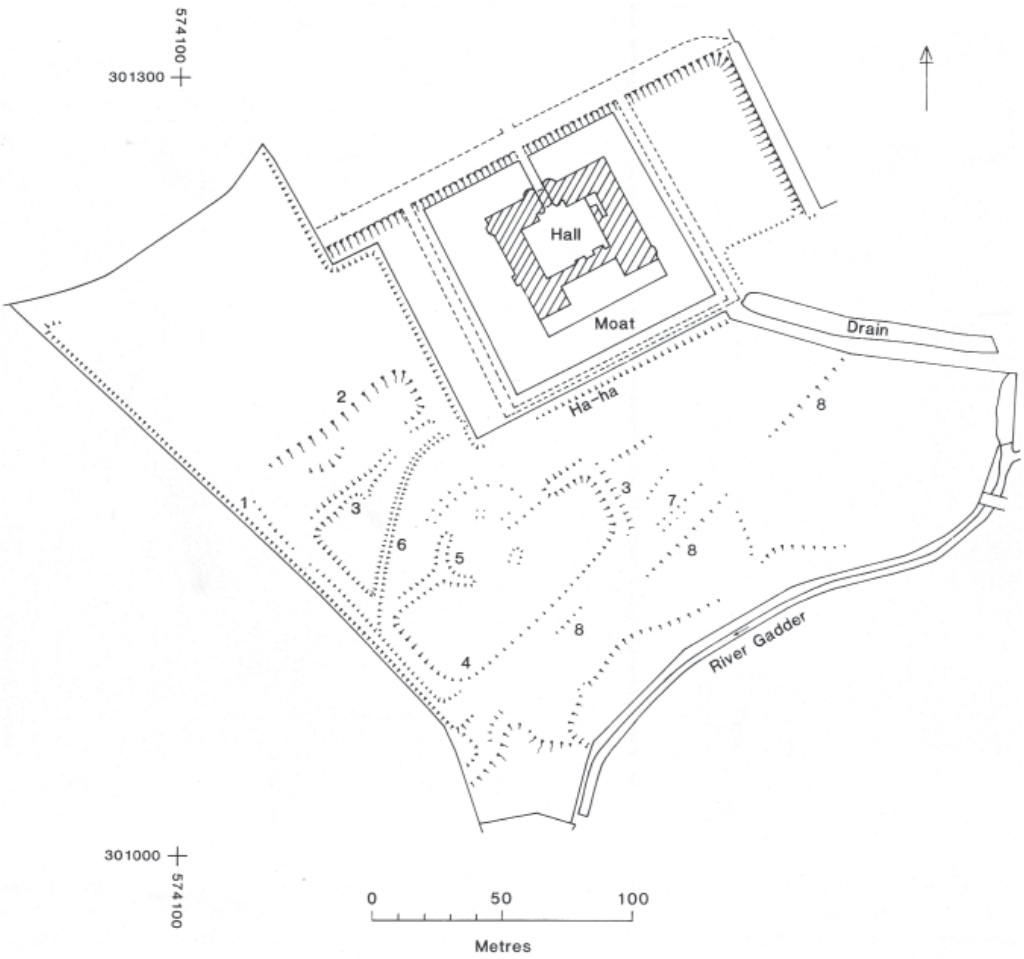


Figure 6. Sketch of the garden earthworks at Oxburgh Hall showing the possible swan pens. Numbers 3, 4 and 5 denote banks and other features potentially associated with the pens. *Cushion, EAA104 p.224. © Norfolk County Council.*

Another curious feature of the estate is Millers Leyes Bank, running through Home Covert to the south and west of the hall. It may reflect a partially completed carriageway approaching the hall from the south. Crop marks and an embankment indication on early OS maps indicate that this feature extended further than it does now, across the pasture towards the Gadder and the hall, but it appears that work stopped before the route was finished (Figure 7).[9] Excavations executed in 2023 during renovation work on this path revealed a substantial layer of compacted chalk some 20 centimetres thick at several points along the extant route. There are tantalising remnants of brick piers in the moat at the putative crossing point; these are much wider than would have been needed for the earlier, now removed, footbridge that once spanned the moat at this point.

Immediately adjacent is West Park, the location of a section of the former road that ran from Oxborough Hythe to the village and the site of the earlier village centre. The land on either side of this road was divided into field strips allocated to the various tenants of the Bedingfelds. As the focus of the village moved east, the buildings and associated fields became less prominent; seventeenth-century documents record the demolition of some of these structures and by the mid-1700s there were only some eight or so individual farmsteads or houses recorded along this street;[10] the small parcels of land along the road were gradually amalgamated into larger fields. This gradual transformation may reflect the general decline in

9 Eburne, pp.36–37, refers to a note in 1811 from the then steward to the estate attempting to dissuade Sir Richard Bedingfeld from executing the plan for a new approach road from the south as being "impractical".
10 These are visible on both the Wissiter and de Wilstar maps.

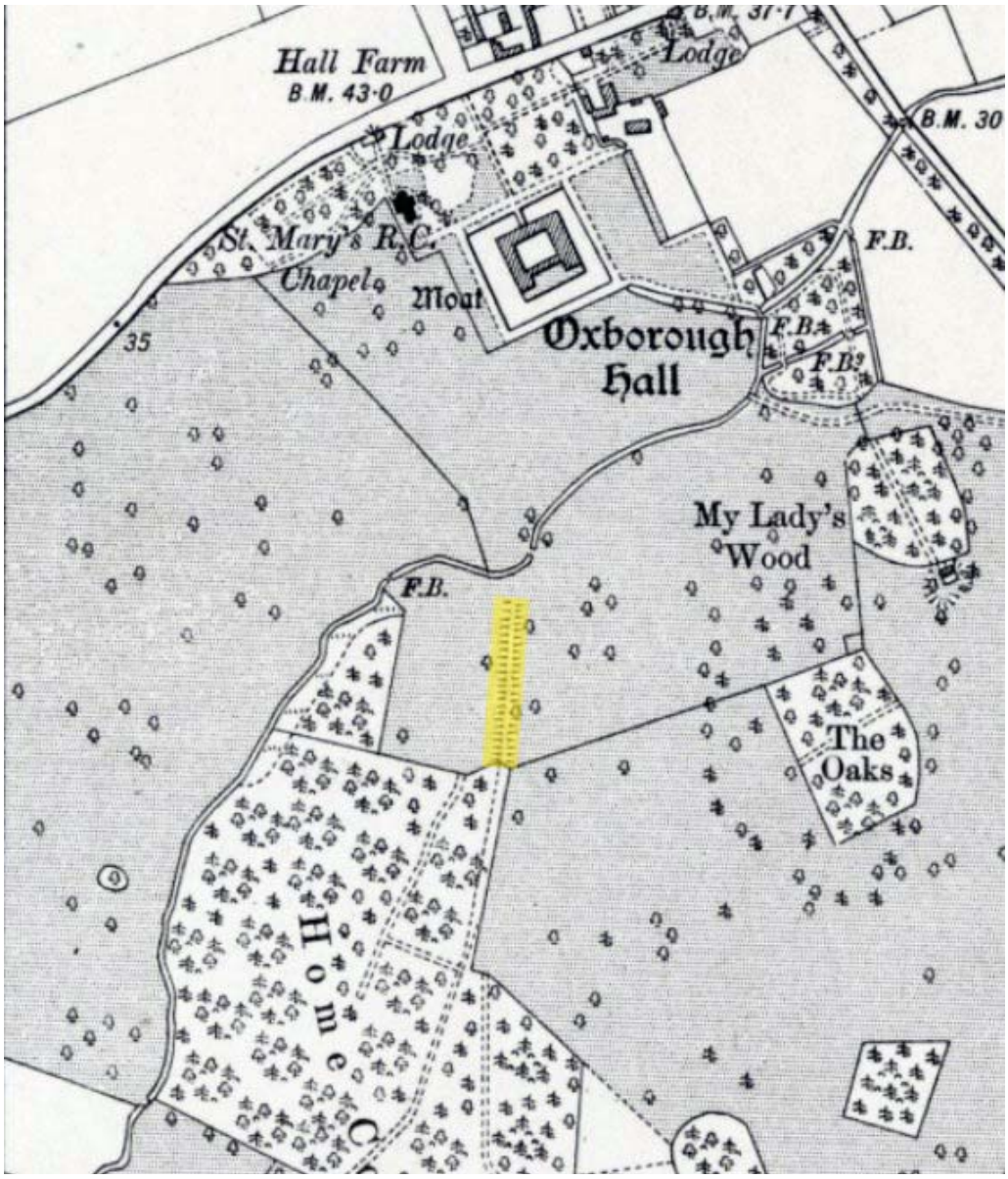


Figure 7.
Detail from the 1888–1915 OS six-inch map showing the earthwork (highlighted in yellow) extending from Millers Leyes Bank.
Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland.

prosperity during the late medieval period as the local textile industry became unprofitable and villagers dispersed in search of new opportunities. We do know that traffic along this road and the wharf at the Hythe was carefully controlled and a chain was used between two buildings as a simple toll gate.[11] In the 1830s the road was diverted to its current course, Ferry Road, and the area became open parkland with sightlines that perhaps rivalled those looking from the south of the hall over the earlier elite spaces and the water gardens; traces of the original field boundaries are clearly visible on a recent geophysical survey.

A prominent feature of the estate gardens is the parterre on the east lawn, which was created for the 6th Baronet in 1848 following a trip to France. Climate change and the depredations of box blight are now severely affecting the planting and so a restoration project is underway to produce a more resilient scheme. There were hints that an earlier parterre lay beneath the current arrangement, but a careful archaeological investigation in 2022 was able to determine that this was not the case and so the restoration will reflect the original nineteenth-century design.

11 See Marwood, in section 'The Hith House and stables'.

The Current Picture and Conclusions

The designed landscape at Oxburgh continues to evolve. In recent years the National Trust has reacquired significant tracts of the former holdings that were dispersed when the estate was sold and broken up in the 1950s. After careful archaeological investigation by field walking, metal detection, geophysical survey and LiDAR/remote sensing analysis (so that underlying archaeology is not disturbed), the ranger team has been steadily reinstating trees of the appropriate species – based on archival tree sales records – and in positions derived from the 1904 OS map. This effort, accompanied by careful grazing and land management, is now bearing fruit and reestablishing a landscape that reflects the more naturalistic pastoral character of the parkland at its peak, as well as helping to improve biodiversity. Some of the former field boundaries in West Park that were fossilised in the remnant trees visible on early OS mapping of the area will become more defined as the new tree-planting programme takes hold.

With many overlapping layers and phases of development, the Oxburgh estate landscape is both complex and complicated when viewed through a present-day lens. Our contemporary understanding is further confused by the often-fragmentary nature of historical records and mapping, which might be more representative than accurate (perhaps even presenting a vision of what might have been, rather than a record of what was). What is clear is the awareness of the Bedingfelds of the necessity and value of affirming their status and authority through the development of an elite landscape around Oxburgh Hall over a period of around five hundred years. With anecdotal information describing events or features in such a way that a century or two later the key reference points have changed, we have a delightful, if at times frustrating, set of puzzles to continue to untangle.

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Figure 1.
The Ancient House in 2006, shortly after a refurbishment including provision of an access ramp and railings, and widened pavement.
© Norfolk Museums Service

2

100 Years of Thetford's Ancient House Museum

Oliver Bone
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Summary
Thetford's Ancient House Museum was opened by the Duchess of Grafton on 11 December 1924. Gifted to the town by Prince Frederick Duleep Singh, it is one of oldest surviving houses in Thetford and is now run by Norfolk Museums Service as a museum of Thetford life with a large collection of important objects of local and wider interest. This paper outlines the history of the museum from its foundation in the 1920s to the present day, detailing how it has evolved and expanded its range of activities to develop awareness and appreciation of the town's heritage.

Beginnings
The initiative for a museum came from the Thetford Borough Council. In 1921, members of the council approached the antiquarian and collector, Prince Frederick Duleep Singh (1868–1926), who agreed to help. In a letter dated 9 May 1921, he wrote: "I am delighted that the Mayor and Corporation of the Borough of Thetford will accept my offer of the old house in White Hart Street for use as a museum and I wish to thank you for the kind way in which your letter of acceptance is worded. Mr George O. Read of Thetford will act for me with regard to drawing up a 'deed of gift'... I shall be very pleased indeed to serve on the Committee and to render any assistance I can." Prince Frederick's endowment of the Ancient House created a charity known as 'Public Museum' with the Corporation as Trustee (a role now filled by Breckland Council).

Prince Frederick had been a committee member for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) and was actively involved in campaigns in East Anglia, including for East Harling and Attleborough churches, and for Lavenham Guildhall. Founded by William Morris nearly 40 years earlier, the SPAB was born out of a reaction to the insensitive 'restoration' of churches. In the Prince's endowment of the Ancient House to Thetford, he placed a condition that the SPAB should have the right to comment on proposals for major alterations. The SPAB secretary, Albert Reginald Powys, visited and drew up plans of the building, and advised the Borough Council on the schedule of required building work. Prince Frederick and Powys had previously collaborated on the design and construction of the First World War memorial at Blo Norton, unveiled in November 1920. Blo Norton is a village east of Thetford and where Prince Frederick lived (in Blo Norton Hall).

The timber-framed Ancient House was constructed *c.*1490 as a dwelling and shop on the town's White Hart Street, once the main road from Norwich to London. It had been divided into two separate properties in about 1800, with new windows entrances, subdivisions, ceilings and staircases (shown in Powys's 'before' sketch

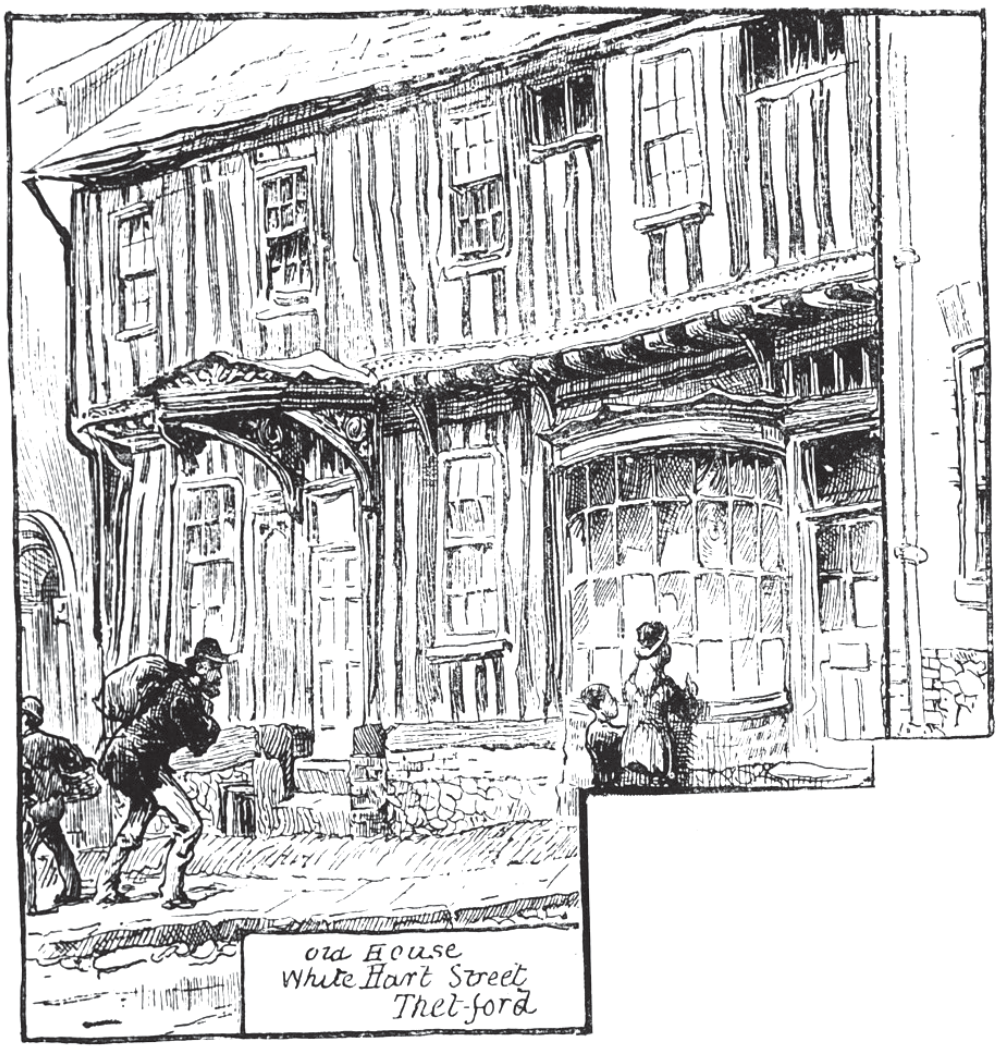


Figure 2. Old House, White Hart Street, Thetford by C J Staniland, 1887. The first known picture of the building, drawn when the house had been subdivided and had a separate front door on the right-hand side. *© Norfolk Museums Service*

plans). The building is referred to by local historian Leigh Hunt, who wrote that "two interesting Elizabethan studded houses were discovered in White Hart Street upon the removal of the external plaster". In his 1870 history of the town, Hunt perhaps planted the seed for a Thetford museum, writing how "It is much to be regretted that Thetford has not a public museum... Probably few towns could have produced a much better or more numerous collection of antique treasures and relics than this had there been a public repository for them".[1]

In the late nineteenth century Thetford did however have a Mechanics Institute, located on the town's Market Place and provided to allow working-class people access to some form of education and a place where they could 'better' themselves (see pages 57 and 59). Visitors could access a library, reading room and a display of collections that included flint artefacts, some of which form part of today's museum collections.

Powys proposed removal of later additions and returning the building to its original layout while respecting original features uncovered. An example of the SPAB approach to the work can be seen in the decorated oak bressumer beam over the fireplace, where plain pieces of timber were used around the original central section to distinguish old from new.

1 Hunt, pp. 155–56



Figure 3.
Museum display with fireplace behind showing repairs using plain timber on the right-hand side.
© Norfolk Museums Service

S Holden and Sons, builders of Station Road in Thetford, carried out the building work for a cost of £415. The rear of the museum was converted into living accommodation, with Ernest Wilson appointed as a live-in caretaker. He was replaced soon thereafter by Mr and Mrs Drake.

The Museum Takes Shape

A Museum Committee was set up with members including Prince Frederick Duleep Singh; Henry Dixon Hewitt FGS (1878–1966), an analytical chemist with Fisons; William George Clarke (1877–1925), journalist and author of *In Breckland Wilds* (see page 53); and the Reverend Henry Tyrrell Green FSA (1884–1966), an amateur archaeologist. They appealed for interesting exhibits and received many generous donations.

The Eastern Daily Press reported how, at the opening ceremony on 11 December 1924, the town mayor John Edmund Meek had thanked Prince Frederick as "a lifelong friend of Thetford" and described how he had "always taken a great interest in everything connected with the Borough. For his munificent gift of the Ancient House... they were indebted to him very much indeed".[2] The ceremony was attended by many local figures and came at a time in the post-war period that saw the founding of two other Norfolk museums that reused historic buildings: Strangers' Hall (in 1923) and the Bridewell Museum of Trades and Industries (in 1925), both in Norwich.

During the 1920s and 1930s the Ancient House Museum was promoted in guidebooks and postcards to appeal to motorists touring East Anglia. It appears, for example, in the 1931 *Guide to Thetford, Norfolk – land of Brown Heath and Shaggy Wood*, published by the Thetford Chamber of Trade and Advancement Association. Postcards encouraged people to "Come to Thetford for your Holiday". Royal patronage was to come in 1928 with a surprise visit by Queen Mary and party, who had been staying at Elveden Hall.

2 *EDP*, 12 December 1924.


EASTERN DAILY PRESS, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 12, 1924

OPENING OF THETFORD MUSEUM.

A GROUP TAKEN AT THE OPENING OF THE MUSEUM AT THETFORD YESTERDAY.
Left to right—The Deputy-Mayor (Mr. W. Lambert), Alderman S. Oldman, the Duchess of Grafton, the Mayor (Mr. J. E. Meek), Prince Frederick Duleep Singh, Alderman J. G. Brown (Chairman of the Museum Committee).

Figure 4. A press photograph of the opening of the museum in December 1924 shows Prince Frederick Duleep Singh (second from right); the mayor, John Edmund Meek; the Duchess of Grafton (next to the mayor); and members of the museum committee. © *Norfolk Museums Service*

Honorary Curator Henry Dixon Hewitt added to the museum collections of archaeology, photographs and natural history. These included local fossil and mineral specimens, an herbarium of dried plants, including Breckland specialities, and a collection of freshwater molluscs carefully annotated in a neat copperplate hand.

An Expanding Profile

Staff at Norwich Castle Museum started to help the museum in the 1940s, around the time that Dixon Hewitt moved away from Thetford. A report drawn up in 1946 by Gladys Violet Barnard, Norwich Castle Museum curator, emphasised that "a museum in a place like Thetford should be entirely regional in character, interpreting to the townspeople and visitors alike the natural features of the neighbourhood; in other words a Breckland Museum". The deputy curator at Norwich was Roy Rainbird Clarke, friend of Tyrrell Green and son of W G Clarke. Redisplays started with prehistoric archaeology and continued in 1948 with natural history exhibits to illustrate the wildlife of Breckland.

The regional focus was not absolute, however. In 1947 George Staniforth, a wealthy resident of Thetford, bequeathed his home, its contents and gardens to the people of the town. Some of these items came to the museum, including African game antlers and horns and a small collection of world cultures collections. Further, more local, additions came in the early 1950s as a result of archaeological excavations started in Thetford in 1949 and led by Group Captain Guy Knocker. A selection of



Figure 5.
Thetford Ware pottery, including oil lamps found at a kiln site, found during excavations by Group Captain Guy Knocker and displayed at the museum.
© Norfolk Museums Service

finds was displayed in what is now the Collectors' Room at the museum, including examples of Thetford Ware excavated by Knocker from Anglo-Saxon pottery kilns. New glazed wall cases were constructed at a cost of £60. During the 1960s Barbara Green and Bill Milligan, archaeology curators at Norwich Castle Museum, continued to support the Ancient House Museum with visits, advice and practical help. Two museum studies students, Sue Heald and Charles Lewis, also assisted with some redisplay work and cataloguing.

In 1974 the Norfolk Museums Service was set up as part of local government reorganisation, with Thetford's Ancient House Museum joining other local authority museums across Norfolk to form a joint district and county service overseen by a Joint Museums Committee. At Thetford new displays were installed, and exhibitions and events became part of the museum's public programming, with regular quizzes and trails for families. Items in the collection were numbered and catalogued using a card index system and a bound accessions register for the first time. New collecting interests included local industries such as Burrell's steam engine works and the Patent Pulp Manufacturing Company. Curator Alison Maddock started a children's club and a museum friends organisation was set up. From 1976 the museum hosted Thetford's Tourist Information Centre, which remained there until the 1990s.

From the late 1970s the hobby of metal detecting became popular and finds made by responsible detectorists started to be offered as gifts to the museum and for addition to the county's Sites and Monuments Record. In 1979 the so-called Thetford Treasure of late Roman gold jewellery and inscribed silver spoons was found on Gallows Hill, Thetford. This hoard now forms part of the collection at the British Museum in London. In the 1980s a local appeal was set up to acquire a replica set, which is on show at the Ancient House. An excavation at Gallows Hill (now Fison Way), directed by Tony Gregory, revealed an important archaeological site, one of many significant digs in Thetford revealing the town's history. Finds from the site were exhibited at Ancient House in the early 1980s.



Figure 6. Sue Heald, museum studies student, in 1968 with African trophies on the wall bequeathed to the town by G W Staniforth some 20 years earlier. *© Norfolk Museums Service*

New Partnerships

During the 1980s and 90s Norfolk Museums Service conservators managed a programme of conservation of the town's portrait collection, given by Prince Frederick Duleep Singh in 1926. A selection of these is on display in the museum. In 1988 the author became curator, aiming to build on the work of his predecessors. An early task was to open up the museum's old kitchen to the public as a display space and create a Tudor-style garden in the museum courtyard. Upstairs, a new Breckland display was created, featuring a figure of a rabbit warrener and a recording of the memories of rabbit warrener Doug Frost. Interest in the Brecks as an area of special natural and cultural heritage continues today.

Museum projects in the 1990s included the development of reminiscence boxes for care homes, holiday craft events supported by the Arts Council, living history events for schools and Norfolk Museums Service touring exhibitions. There was a collaboration with the Charles Burrell Secondary School on a First World War exhibition, including a tea party with veterans. In 1995 a *Made in Thetford* exhibition featured locally made products from blood bags and cycle helmets to Turkish delight. These have now been added to the museum collections.



Figure 7.
Children and teachers from Thetford's Norwich Road school in 1995 with the curator. Providing educational visits for groups of all ages has remained a priority for the museum since the 1970s.
© Norfolk Museums Service

More widely in the town, in 1991 the Burrell Museum opened, celebrating the steam engine manufacturers, and a heritage exhibition was staged in St Peter's Church. Interest in the Maharajah Duleep Singh, who lived at nearby Elveden Hall, saw two major festivals in the town and the installation of a statue unveiled by the Prince of Wales in 1999. For the 800th anniversary of Thetford's mayoralty that same year, Ancient House supported a pageant of Thetford history for local schools at Thetford Priory and a Viking Living History themed event at Castle Park. The museum continued to work with colleagues in the town to promote Thetford's heritage, and a heritage trail and information boards were created.

Advances in technology during the 1990s saw the use of computers to catalogue the collection. Staff and volunteers worked through the old index cards to create a digital record using the museum service's MODES database, now accessible through the Norfolk Collections website. The formation of the National Lottery for good causes in 1995 saw new opportunities for museums, heritage organisations and community groups, and it has continued to support projects in Thetford to involve and engage people in their heritage ever since. Projects involving the museum (with dates awarded) have included: *Imagine Outreach* (2000); *Ancient House Museum Development Project* (2003); *Tom Paine 200 Celebrations* (2008); *Tudor Thetford* (2013); *Breaking New Ground : A Landscape Partnership Scheme for the Norfolk and Suffolk Brecks* (2012); *Thetford and the First World War* (2014); *The Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers Landscape Partnership* (2017); *Thetford and Punjab Festival* (2018); and *Prince Frederick's Thetford Museum and the Duleep Singh Stories* (2023).

In 2000 European funding through the North Sea Viking Heritage project supported the creation of new Viking-themed displays in the museum and a town-wide Vikings trail. More trails were to follow, involving the museum as part of a Thetford Tourism and Heritage partnership and including a Dad's Army Trail (which in time led to the setting up of a Dad's Army Museum).



Figure 8. Viking Thor's Hammer pendant from South Lopham, displayed at Ancient House in the *Vikings! History on Your Doorstep* exhibition funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund through The Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers Landscape Partnership. © *Norfolk Museums Service*

In the early 2000s plans started for the conservation, redisplay and extension of Ancient House. Detailed assessments of the building were commissioned, including a building history study through analysis of the timbers by Robert Smith and a *Polychrome Survey of the White Hart Street Frontage* by Andrea Kirkham. Smith's study confirmed, for example, the former existence of an external stair turret and concluded that the building was initially longer to the south along White Hart Street. Kirkham's detailed study of paints and pigments helped inform choices for the modern decoration of the door, bow window and sash windows.

Renewal and Revival

In 2004 successful fundraising from the National Lottery, European Union, local authorities and others made possible a major £1.8 million refurbishment project. The building work was carried out in consultation with the SPAB, according to Prince Frederick's wishes, and the new look Ancient House, Museum of Thetford Life reopened in September 2006. Since the relaunch there have been exhibitions and events about the Thetford Treasure, Thetford Priory and the tombs of the Dukes of Norfolk, Thetford-born Thomas Paine, Thetford and the First World War, Toys and Games and LGBTQ+ History. Partners have included The National Lottery Heritage Fund, Arts Council England, the British Museum, Leicester University and the National Portrait Gallery.

Museum volunteers support the work of the museum. They have knitted mittens to make a flag in commemoration of Thomas Paine and have continued to enhance the museum's collection catalogue through photography and the scanning of prints and drawings. The after-school History and Teenage History Club (now THC Youth) have contributed to many museum projects, including Takeover Days for the annual Thetford Lights On event. During the Covid-19 pandemic Ancient House took its activities online, running Zoom workshops, storytimes and talks. The museum has continued to work with partners including the Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers Partnership, the British Museum and Suffolk Archaeology Service to hold exhibitions on Viking Thetford and Thetford's riverside industries.

During this period Ancient House also acquired the David Osborne Postcard Collection, which provides a unique insight into the life and look of the town with a particular focus on the early twentieth century. David Osborne, local historian and author, was a great friend to the museum and it was his wish that his collection should come to Ancient House after his death. Staff and volunteers are engaged in a digitisation project to bring the collection to a wider audience. There are currently more than 7000 items in the Ancient House collections, many of which can be seen on the Norfolk Collections website.

Ancient House looks forward to the next 100 years as a museum of Thetford and Breckland life. In the twenty-first century, museums are active, inclusive, participatory places at the heart of their communities and within the public realm. Ancient House contributes to local life through developing collections, exhibitions and learning programmes that reflect the diversity and energy of Thetford and Breckland. In pursuit of these objectives, the museum engages wide audiences, including young people, contributes to the local economy and enriches lives.

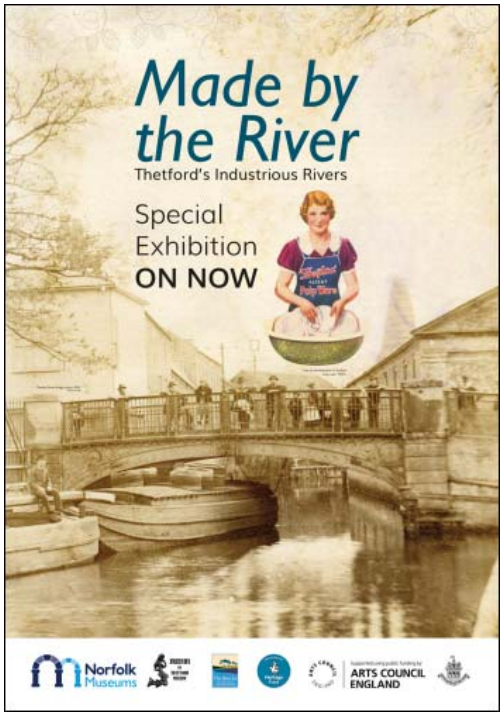


Figure 9.
Poster for the *Made by the River* exhibition at Ancient House funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund through The Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers Landscape Partnership.
© Norfolk Museums Service

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Figure 1.
The Thornton Urn, presented in 1781 to Sir Thomas Thornton, founder of the Falconers' Club.
© The Archives of Falconry, Boise, Idaho, USA

3

Heron Hawking at Didlington – Keeping Falconry Alive in England, 1770–1840

Alan Clarke

Summary
Once the favoured recreation of royalty and aristocracy, by the late 1700s the sport of falconry or hawking had almost died out in England. As Sir John Sebright lamented in 1826, "Hawking, the favourite diversion of our ancestors, is now so fallen into disuse that the Art of Falconry is in danger of being entirely lost."[1] However, he also emphasised that there was one part of England where falconry was not just surviving but thriving – the Norfolk Brecks. This paper describes how, for well over half a century, Colonel Robert Wilson's estate of Didlington Hall, just north of Mundford, was the home of English falconry. The very particular form practised there was heron hawking – the pursuit, from horseback, of the Grey Heron with powerful birds of prey such as the Peregrine Falcon and the Gyrfalcon.[2]

Introduction and Background
Falconry or hawking was traditionally the hunting of wild birds or small mammals using trained birds of prey. It originated in the Middle East and by early medieval times had spread across Europe, where it became the preserve of the rich and powerful, who vigorously protected their 'rights'. In 1361, King Edward III of England made it a felony to steal a hawk or its eggs, punishable by a year in prison, and in the same year the Bishop of Ely "excommunicated certain persons for stealing a hawk that was sitting upon her perch in the cloisters of Bermondsey".[3]

Several centuries later, English falconry had greatly declined. That it survived at all is almost solely due to a small group of rich, landed-gentry devotees whose activities gravitated to the Brecks, and specifically to the Didlington Hall estate. They were members of The Confederate Hawks of Great Britain, also known as The Falconers' Club, which was founded in 1772 by Colonel Thomas Thornton of Yorkshire. In 1781, he handed over the running of the club to George Walpole, 3rd Earl of Orford, who, at a dinner at Barton Mills on 23 June that year, presented Thornton with a large ornate silver-gilt tea urn (Figure 1).[4] Inscribed on it are the names of 56 members, including six earls, three dukes, one lord, one marquis and five baronets – along with Robert Wilson (later Lord Berners, then aged just 20) and "Mr Coke" (Thomas Coke of Holkham, then aged 27). The presentation took place at the end of the 1781 hawking season and its location suggests that by then the practice of English falconry may already have been centred in the Brecks.

1 Sebright, p.1
2 Also known by falconers as the Iceland Hawk.
3 Strutt, p.28
4 Known as the Thornton Urn, it is now in The Archives of Falconry in Boise, Idaho, USA.

According to the commentary on a Christie's sale of falconry paintings in 2008, "The Falconers' Club... meetings were held every April for kite[5] and crow hawking... [and] later became known as the 'High Ash Club'." This informal name suggests that by the early 1800s the club's activities were almost exclusively centred at High Ash on the Didlington estate, especially during the heron-hawking season of May and June.[6] A local newspaper advertisement for a large house to let in Swaffham in November 1820 stated: "It is surrounded by a fine sporting county, heron hawking in the neighbourhood".[7] It is striking that heron hawking was mentioned, rather than other field sports such as horse racing, fox hunting and hare coursing.

The Principal Players

Three local landowners were closely associated with heron hawking, their periods of active involvement overlapping and with each a driving force behind Breckland, and therefore English, falconry. Robert Wilson (1761–1838) was the owner of Didlington Hall, held by his family since the mid-1600s and where the estate lakes were the site of a large heronry. An army man, he retired with the rank of colonel and in 1832 became the 9th Lord Berners. Stephen Payne-Gallwey (1750–1803)[8] was born on the Caribbean island of St Kitts and inherited his family plantations (and slaves) there. In the 1770s he came to England, where he became a member of the Society of Dilettanti (Figure 2).[9] He purchased the West Tofts estate *c.*1780 and by 1783, if not earlier, was managing the heron hawking at Didlington; it was his name that appeared on the 'rings' fitted to captured birds, rather than that of Robert Wilson. Edward Clough Newcome (1808–71) was the owner of Feltwell Hall, which he inherited from his aunt *c.*1850, and was consumed from dawn until dusk by his passion for field sports. While heron hawking was his principal interest, he also enjoyed hunting skylarks with merlins. He was spoken of as the best falconer of his day, and by the time of his death had also amassed a huge collection of taxidermied birds, many of which he had personally shot and stuffed.

The Falconers Club was finally dissolved in 1838, following the death of Lord Berners, after nearly 50 years under his stewardship. However, his death was not the only reason for its demise. In 1892, eminent Victorian falconer Gerald Lascelles wrote how "Even so long ago as 1838, the draining of the fenland and breaking up and cultivation of the open heaths so limited the area in which it was possible to pursue the sport...".[10] With the club defunct, English devotees – especially Newcome – turned to Holland. The Royal Loo Hawking Club, based at the Dutch royal palace at Het Loo near Apeldoorn, was formed in 1839. Newcome joined in 1840 and became its driving force until its dissolution in 1855.

The Sport of Heron Hawking

So, how does heron hawking differ from other forms of falconry? A 1909 review in *The Field* stated: "Heron hawking was regarded as the highest branch of the sport, not only on account of the difficulty of getting hawks good enough to capture so large and strong a quarry, but also on account of the height at

5 Other sources indicate that heron hawking became predominant as kites became scarcer, due to kite hawking!
6 Other forms of falconry are mostly winter activities.
7 *The New Times*, London, 8 November 1820.
8 There is confusion as to whether Payne-Gallwey died in 1803 or closer to 1812.
9 The Society was condemned by Horace Walpole in 1743 as "a club, for which the nominal qualification is having been in Italy, and the real one, being drunk: the two chiefs are Lord Middlesex and Sir Francis Dashwood, who were seldom sober the whole time they were in Italy."
10 Lascelles, p.291. In fact, enclosures in the area had begun much earlier. The *Norfolk Chronicle* of 9 June 1781 carried the formal notice of the proposed enclosure at Foulden, a nearby village.



Figure 2.
Sir Joshua Reynolds painted two group portraits of members of the Society of Dilettanti in 1777–80; this is a later reproduction of the first. Stephen Payne-Gallwey is third from the left, seated and drinking.
Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

which they were flown, the distance they travelled, and the hard riding that was afforded to the mounted falconers." Lascelles defined it thus: "... the following conditions are necessary. A heronry of large size, situated far from any river or feeding-ground, so that the herons pass continually to and from the nearest river to the heronry, and pass also over some vast open space of ground suitable to be ridden over, and wide enough to afford a flight of at least two miles ere the heron could reach either a sheltering wood or a piece of water into which he will dive like a duck... Such conditions as these were well fulfilled at Didlington in Norfolk which was for many years the scene of the sport of the High Ash Club."[11] Although the Didlington heronry was very close to the River Wissey, the local fish population was probably too small to support the large number of herons. The birds were therefore compelled to fly over the adjacent open country in search of food further afield, behaviour that made heron hawking particularly productive.

11 Lascelles, p.291



Figure 3. Hawking in the Olden Time, an 1832 painting by Sir Edwin Landseer, depicts falconers pursuing their charges as they attempt to bring down a heron. *Image courtesy of Wikipedia.*

In July 1823, *The Norfolk Herald* carried a long account of a day's heron hawking: "Ten cast[12] of Hawks, with four falconers, natives of Germany,[13] to which country they repair annually in the autumn, to catch a supply of Hawks for the ensuing season, is kept at Didlington Hall... Every afternoon during the months of May and June, the Falconers are in attendance with the Hawks, in that spot which is judged to be most favourable to the sport, where they are met by a very large party of the Ladies and Gentlemen of the neighbourhood, who with their friends from distant counties, who visit them to enjoy the diversion, have frequently been seen to exceed the number of one hundred and fifty persons. The season of 1822 was very favourable to the sport, one hundred and seventy-three Herons having been taken."

The objective was not to kill the heron, merely to bring it to the ground; otherwise, even a large heronry would be wiped out in a few years. Lascelles notes how "It was the practice to save and liberate every heron that was taken, and it was a point of honour with the members of the Club to ride hard enough to... the finish, so as to make sure that the heron should not be injured. When liberated, a small copper ring[14] was fixed to his leg with the date of his capture written on it."[15]

12 The collective name for a pair of hawks or falcons trained to hunt together.
13 They were Dutch. The confusion may arise from the similarity of the words 'Dutch' and 'Deutsch'.
14 This was more a cylinder than a ring.
15 Lascelles, p.292

Naturally, many herons dispersed widely from Didlington and some were inevitably shot or captured. A ringed heron turning up elsewhere was often deemed noteworthy. In January 1789, the *Bury and Norwich Post* reported: "A few days since a heron was shot near Nayland, which had a ring on with the following inscription: 'Didlington Heronry 1787, S. Payne Galwey, Mangr.'" *The English Chronicle* contained the following report in July 1824: "A gentleman boat-shooting last week up the river Stour, about two miles from Harwich, shot a heron, which had fastened on its leg a piece of copper, with the following inscription: 'Major Wilson, Didlington, Norfolk, 1823, No. 50'." So, it had been the fiftieth Didlington heron brought down, ringed and released in the 1823 season.

The High Flight

This term was synonymous with heron hawking at Didlington. Strictly speaking, it is the name of a generic falconry technique used for herons and for other species, especially corvids; young hawks destined to hunt herons were often trained by being flown against crows or rooks. To quote from Salvin & Broderick: "The Dutch falconers introduced the vastly superior mode of placing themselves downwind of the heronry and waiting for the return of the old birds. Those which are seen going out to fish are styled "light herons" and are not, generally, interfered with. When, however, a bird is noticed returning homewards with a full crop, the warning cry of 'Au vol'[16] is raised, and if it passes sufficiently near to the Falconer, he throws off a cast of Falcons downwind of it and the sport commences. Immediately the heron perceives itself to be pursued, it commences to rise in the air... and at the same time lightens itself of the contents of its 'creel', so that trout, eels and frogs may be occasionally seen entirely out of their natural element descending from the skies..."[17]

"The heron... is enabled to gain a lofty pitch before [the hawks] can overtake it... it being an acknowledged rule among Falconers, that the higher the birds rise, the finer may the flight be considered. As soon as the first hawk has got above the heron, it makes a stoop,[18] which is evaded by a shift; this gives the second Hawk time to take up a similar position, and in turn make a like attempt. These stoops are repeated frequently, the birds continuing to rise, and, generally, going down wind, obliging the company to ride briskly in order to keep them within sight, often to the distance of two or three miles. At length, one of the Hawks succeeds in 'binding' ... that is, seizing the heron... immediately followed by the other, when the three birds descend slowly to the ground."

After a long explanation of how the falconer lures the hawks off the heron, to prevent further injury, the account continues: "... if not severely hurt... it is restored to liberty, a thin copper plate, with his [the landowner's] name and the date of the year engraved on it, having been previously fastened round the leg of the captive."[19]

Richard Lubbock (1845) gives a very comprehensive account of heron hawking at Didlington. Unlike most commentators, he had clearly been present at several events. He wrote: "The afternoon was the best part of the day [for heron hawking] ... If it was feasible, the hawking party, which was often numerous, was screened from observation under one of the belts of firs,[20] common in that part of the

16 "To the flight".
17 A report in *The Sphere* magazine in 1920 entitled 'The Revival of Falconry' compares this to a Zeppelin jettisoning its load of bombs to gain height and escape from its Royal Flying Corps pursuers.
18 A high-speed dive by a bird of prey towards its target.
19 Salvin & Broderick, pp.73–75
20 Probably what we know today as 'pine lines' – and therefore Scots Pines.



Figure 4. Falconer's Lodge at High Ash, photographed in 2023. The design of the tower has been described as Moorish or Arabian-Gothic in style, perhaps alluding to the tradition of falconry in the Middle East. © *Alan Clarke*

country; and two falconers on horseback each with hawk on fist looked out afar for the coming of a heron... According to the course of the bird, the falconers remained motionless or rode in advance, so as to get nearer to the line in which the heron was moving. If they could get within three or four hundred yards, the falcons were unhooded and swung themselves buoyantly into the air."[21]

The Dutch Connection

Except for a few individuals such as Newcome, the gentry rarely trained or flew their own birds; as with almost everything in their lives, they employed someone else to do it. Like fox hunts, falconry clubs charged annual fees – In the 1820s, membership of the High Ash Club cost £40 (approximately £4200 at current values) – and they engaged professional falconers. By the 1750s there were few experienced English falconers,[22] and almost all of Europe's professional falconers

21 Lubbock, p.22

22 The dearth of homegrown falconers in England was a result of the seventeenth-century Puritans having suppressed the 'decadent' sport – something from which it never fully recovered.

at that time came from the small Dutch town of Valkenswaard (*valken* is Dutch for falcon).[23] In the sixteenth century falconers at Valkenswaard developed a technique in which migrating falcons were trapped in bow-nets, then tamed and trained. Birds caught in this way were called passage hawks. In Britain, in earlier times, the tradition had been to take almost mature chicks from the nest for training; these were known as eyasses. Sebright observed: "I have known many falconers in England, and in the service of different princes on the Continent; but I never met with one of them who was not a native of Falconswaerd."[24] After the short season at Didlington, the Dutch falconers would return to Valkenswaard. They caught more young passage hawks and trained them to the point where they were fully ready to fly at herons. Some also undertook voyages to Iceland to capture highly valued Gyrfalcons.

On 16 April 1791, *The Norfolk Chronicle* reported: "On Tuesday last arrived at Mundford, from Germany [see footnote 13], Mr. John Daams, grand falconer to S. Payne Galwey, Esq. of Tofts Hall, the principal subscriber... There are seven cast of heron Hawks, with three Icelanders;[25] great diversion is expected from the number of birds at the Didlington Heronry, and the fine part of the county for sport, such as the High Ash at Igborough, Methwold and Cranwick Field, and adjacent places." However, being a prominent falconer could be perilous, as Lascelles recorded: "Daams... in 1808, when waiting at Cuxhaven for a passage to England was arrested by Louis Bonaparte... and made to reorganise the mews at Het Loo".[26]

Others associated with Didlington included Frank van der Heuvell, who was born at Valkenswaard in 1766 and apprenticed to Frank Daams, nephew of Jan Daams; subsequently he worked for Colonel Wilson. John Pells (or Pel) was born in Yarmouth in 1815. His father Jan was Master Falconer to the Didlington club, and yet another native of Valkenswaard. By 1842, Pells junior was managing Newcome's hawks at Hockwold. Also noteworthy was Scotsman John Barr (1840–80), "probably the cleverest falconer of this century" according to Lascelles. As a young man, Barr travelled through Italy and Syria with another famous Breckland resident, the Maharajah Duleep Singh, who employed him between 1857, when Barr was just 17, and 1865.

Falconer's Lodge

Built about 1814 as a clubhouse and to accommodate the falconers, this fine brick-and-flint building sits in the forest about half a mile north-west of the Desert Rats memorial at High Ash (Figure 4). In the heyday of the High Ash Club it had fine views for miles across open heath and farmland, and was described in newspapers as "a landmark for miles around" at the time of the 1910 sale of the Didlington estate. In the early 2000s, decaying and almost swallowed up by the twentieth-century forest plantations, it was rescued and restored by the Horrocks family. A detailed description can be found in the Norfolk Heritage Explorer.

Lubbock describes the lodge and its location: "The mews[27] in which the falcons were kept were on the top of an eminence, at the side of a plantation, in which was a lofty ash; and a flag flying at 'The High Ash' was a signal to all the country around that [heron] hawking would take place that afternoon."[28] The suitability

23 See https://vsmm.nl for why and how Valkenswaard became such an important centre for falconry.
24 Sebright, p.2
25 The Icelandic race of Gyrfalcon was highly prized among falconers.
26 Lascelles, p.348. Het Loo later became the home of the Loo Hawking Club.
27 The birds were kept in a separate building, possibly wooden, in the grounds. No trace remains.
28 Lubbock, p.23



Figure 5. Samuel Carter's engraving of Didlington heronry appeared in the *Illustrated London News* in 1868. *Image courtesy of James Parry.*

of a particular day was decided by the falconers based on the weather and especially the wind direction; herons returning with a strong following wind would be difficult to catch.

Didlington Heron Hawing in Literature and Art

In 1834 Maria Edgeworth (1767–1849) published her novel *Helen, A Tale*, and Chapter 17 contains a detailed account of a day of heron hawking. The fictional venue is called Clarendon Park, but the source of Edgeworth's knowledge is revealed in the names her falconers have given their birds: Lord Berners and Miss Didlington. The names are not fanciful. Lubbock recalled how: "Many years ago, the first time indeed I ever witnessed the hawking at Didlington... a cry was raised of 'bring Mrs. Waddington.' Two ladies in an open carriage leaned out anxiously as I was passing and again I heard 'Here comes Mrs. Waddington, now we shall see some sport'... the falconer appeared, talking to and caressing his favourite bird."[29]

The Illustrated London News of 6 June 1868 carried an article on the Didlington heronry. It was accompanied by a fine treetop-level engraving by local artist Samuel John Carter, the father of Howard Carter, who discovered Tutankhamun's tomb (Figure 5). It shows herons sharing the treetops with Rooks, Wood Pigeons, a Jackdaw and a Red Squirrel, and looks east from the heronry, across Didlington Hall's upper lake. Herons still nest at Didlington, but in greatly reduced numbers than during their heyday.

29 Lubbock, p.24

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Figure 1.
Regina Palik with her two boys paddling downstream of Brandon Bridge, *c.*1955.
© *George Palik*

4

Tales from the River: How people have interacted with the Brecks rivers, fen edge and other waters for recreation

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Summary
This paper presents an overview of the *Tales from the River* project,[2] part of The Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers Landscape Partnership Scheme (BFER), a wide-ranging set of projects funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and designed "to conserve and celebrate the unique heritage" of the area. The scheme's projects were delivered during 2020–24.[3] In order to illustrate the importance of water-based recreation in connecting the rivers and waters in this area and the communities that live, work and play there, *Tales from the River* gathered stories and accounts from across the Brecks and fen edge to build a history of how local people interacted with the rivers and other waters over the previous century or so.

Introduction
The Brecks is a mostly dry landscape of forest, heath and farmland, and the rivers that thread their way through it and along its western fen edge have long been important for travel and transport, industry and trade, for wildlife and for work and play. Water has shaped the Brecks landscape and the lives of its people: most of the major villages and towns in the Brecks grew up along the rivers and fen edge.

The BFER Landscape Conservation Action Plan (LCAP) encapsulated the purpose and detailed aims of the scheme's 24 projects, threaded through with an impassioned plea to celebrate the area and its rivers. It summarises the Brecks Landscape Character Assessment, which "shows the area as having [...] a unique biodiversity, history of settlement and land-use, resulting in a distinct culture that has been mostly lost or forgotten".[4] The LCAP goes on to recognise the important but often overlooked history of swimming and other recreation in the heritage of the Brecks rivers and fen edge and how these matter to local communities.[5] The *Tales from the River* project wanted to uncover and celebrate this history. It connected with *Healing Waters*,[6] another BFER project, to link outdoor swimming in the present and future with the rich heritage of swimming and other water-

1 @OSBrecks is the social media tag for Imogen Radford as lead on the two projects, *Tales from the River* and *Healing Waters (Outdoor Swimming)*, linked using the title 'Bathing in the Brecks: Outdoor swimming past, present and future', and for legacy activities. https://osbrecks.co.uk [Viewed 24 June 2025]
2 Project outline https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/os-brecks-2/tales-from-the-river-project-outline [Viewed 27 June 2025]
3 The Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers Landscape Partnership Scheme (BFER), https://brecks.org/BFER [Viewed 17 June 2025]
4 BFER LCAP, 2019, p.27
5 BFER LCAP, 2019, p.67
6 *Healing Waters (Outdoor Swimming)* project outline on https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/os-brecks-2/healing-waters-project-outline [Viewed 27 June 2025]



Figure 2. Violet Lillian Parrott, Celia Winifred Rissbrook and Marguerite (Daisy) Rissbrook at Brandon, *c.*1900. © *Pat Baldwin*

based recreation, as well as linking to another BFER project, *Industrious Rivers*,[7] which looked at the parallel and related story of industry and trade.

Building the history of river and fen edge recreation

Tales from the River project volunteers conducted oral history interviews in which people told us their memories of recreation and life by the rivers and other waterways. Along with written stories and other material collected and donated to the project, these accounts enabled us to compile a picture of how people related to the Brecks rivers and fen edge. We have shared memories and images gathered by the project in talks, maps, films, guided walks and on a website, and the material will be archived for study into the future. Local young historians used the material and their imagination and creativity to make an entertaining film[8] and an exhibition that toured libraries and museums and can be seen online.[9]

We collected 30 oral history interviews[10] from across the Brecks and fen edge areas,[11] with direct memories spanning ten decades. The years of birth ranged from 1925 to 1971 and the ages of those interviewed from 50 to 99. Some of the earliest stories include Cyril Matthews learning to swim in Lakenheath Lode at the end of the 1920s and Betty Norris paddling in the ponds on Thompson Common in the early 1930s. Later accounts include Ron West enjoying walking along the River Lark from Bury in the 2020s, and there are many from the decades between.[12] Nearly everyone we spoke to had lived in the area for all or almost all their lives. Many of their families had lived there even longer, so they could

7 The Breckland Society led on this project. Report and additional information on https://www.brecsoc.org.uk/industrious-rivers-project-archive [Viewed 17 June 2025]

8 Ancient House Museum Teenage History Club and filmmaker Lewis Wickwar, 'Tales from the Riverbank: A Fun History of Thetford's Rivers 1880s to 2000s', 2022. On the BFER YouTube channel https://youtu.be/RV3NDh5KQKs?si=Y4s-nStphnv101R5 [Viewed 17 June 2025]

9 'Tales from the Riverbank' exhibition, 2022. www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/os-brecks-2/tales-from-the-riverbank-online-exhibition [Viewed 17 June 2025]

10 Available to listen to audio or read transcripts on the OSBrecks legacy website https://osbrecks.co.uk/oral-history [Viewed 17 June 2025]. Download a PDF list of the 30 interviewees, including year of birth and main place mentioned, on https://tinyurl.com/OHIntsListTRproj [Viewed 26 June 2025]

11 A Google map shows approximate locations of interviewees, https://tinyurl.com/GMapOHLocs [Viewed 26 June 2025]

12 Matthews, Cyril (2023), interviewed by Imogen Radford with Hermione Brown, 11 January, Lakenheath (born 1927), at [00:04:07]. Norris, Betty (2024), interviewed by Imogen Radford, 13 August, Thompson (born 1929), at [00:06:33]. West, Ron (2024), interviewed by Imogen Radford, 19 March, Bury St Edmunds (born 1942), at [00:56:37].



Figure 3.
Boating upstream of Brandon Bridge, 1900s.
From the collection of the late Alan H Faulkner.

tell us stories from further back in time. Stories from Pat Baldwin included his grandfather being a hero for rescuing a boy from the river in 1899, and the oldest original photo he shared was of his grandmother and two other relatives rowing on the river in *c.*1900 (Figure 2).[13] Another interviewee, Eric Huns, relayed ghost stories from Victorian times that were apparently told locally to distract people from routes used by smugglers.[14] We also heard from those who had arrived in the area more recently, particularly in the Thetford overspill expansion, which provided a different perspective. The oral history interviews were supplemented by written stories and more casual anecdotes given to volunteers or gathered from social media, as well as by other research.[15]

A particularly valuable source was a degree thesis by Sarah Batstone, completed in 1994, which examined bathing in Thetford using interviews, written submissions from residents and detailed research.[16] It chronicles Thetford's river swimming baths from the 1889 correspondence that prompted their creation until their closure in 1972 (and beyond, as the concrete edges of the bath remain), and it also mapped locally known river swim spots.[17] Batstone went on to study the subject in a fascinating PhD thesis that has also been collected by the project.[18]

In addition to this written and oral material we collated many old photographs showing people in, on or by the rivers, and of the river landscape and structures, providing a rich source of information. We were also given some wonderfully evocative short cine films showing recreation, farming and the fen edge landscape.[19] Volunteers researched literature and historical sources, including

13 Baldwin, Pat (2022). Interviewed by Imogen Radford, 9 May, Brandon (born 1947). At [00:03:50]; [00:18:25].
14 Huns, Bunny (Eric) (2022). Interviewed by Imogen Radford and John Bowes, 14 March, Brandon (born 1947). At [01:00:17].
15 Including at Suffolk Archives, in its collection of photographs of soldiers relaxing in the River Lark at the Duck Sluice structure near Fornham Hall in August 1915, https://osbrecks.co.uk/soldiers-in-the-river-lark-1915 [Viewed 13 July 2025]
16 Batstone (1994). A copy of this document was donated by Alan E Batstone on 3 May 2022, and he and his family expressed their hope that the work of his daughter Dr Sarah Batstone (1971–2021) would be appreciated and of use to anyone researching the subject.
17 Batstone (1994), pp.7–8, Appx. 6, 7, 8, 9, p.32
18 Batstone (2000).
19 Waterfall. Cine films donated by his daughter Alexis Brand can be viewed on the OSBrecks legacy website https://osbrecks.co.uk/cine-films [Viewed 26 June 2025]



Figure 4. Soldiers in the River Lark at Duck Sluice near Fornham Park in August 1915, by Walton Burrell. © *Suffolk Archives BRO K997 67 1*

valuable material from local museums and local history societies, to supplement all of this and put it into context.

Oral histories can be a key element in building a community history. As historian Paul Thompson explained, "Oral history is as old as history itself. It was the first kind of history",[20] and as a discipline it has now developed and grown.[21] Interviews can "fill gaps in the historical record and provide important information"[22] and, as the Oral History Society says, "Everyone has a story to tell about their life which is unique to them."[23] Oral history interviewing was therefore central to the project and has given us a vivid portrait of the traditions and lives of local people over generations. It involves people and allows the stories to be told in their own words and voice, reflecting how the rivers, other waters and the landscape were key to their lives and providing unique material that will not be recorded elsewhere. Taken together, a collection of oral history accounts builds a picture. This is so even if the different perceptions do not always agree on detail, or if we cannot always completely rely on the facts stated within them (as everyone's memories can change over time).[24] That picture is evocative and true to people's own perceptions.

What people told us

People described a wide range of recreational and other activities at different stages in their lives (or those of their relatives or others they observed). Memories of youngest days often included paddling and wading in the water, swimming and learning to swim, fishing and boating, and ice skating in the winter on frozen fields, ponds, lakes and rivers. Some described walking and birdwatching from an early age or discovering these pleasures later in life. Fishing, foraging and poaching for food were important, particularly in earlier times. We were told about catching eels to make a living, making the eel hives (or traps) and other river-related craft activities; about boating for fun and for trade, and the hiring out of pleasure boats

20 Thompson, p.19

21 Oral History Society at https://www.ohs.org.uk/about-2 [Viewed 23 June 2025], where they describe Thompson's book as "...a key publication in the re-emergence of oral history".

22 Norfolk Community Archives Toolkit (produced by Norfolk Record Office) provides a practical guide to building a community archive including collecting oral history interviews, as well as introducing the discipline https://www.archives.norfolk.gov.uk/article/30958/What-is-oral-history Viewed 23 June 2025]

23 The Oral History Society provides practical information and is the representative body for this discipline of history https://www.ohs.org.uk/for-beginners [Viewed 23 June 2025]

24 Thompson, pp.91–92

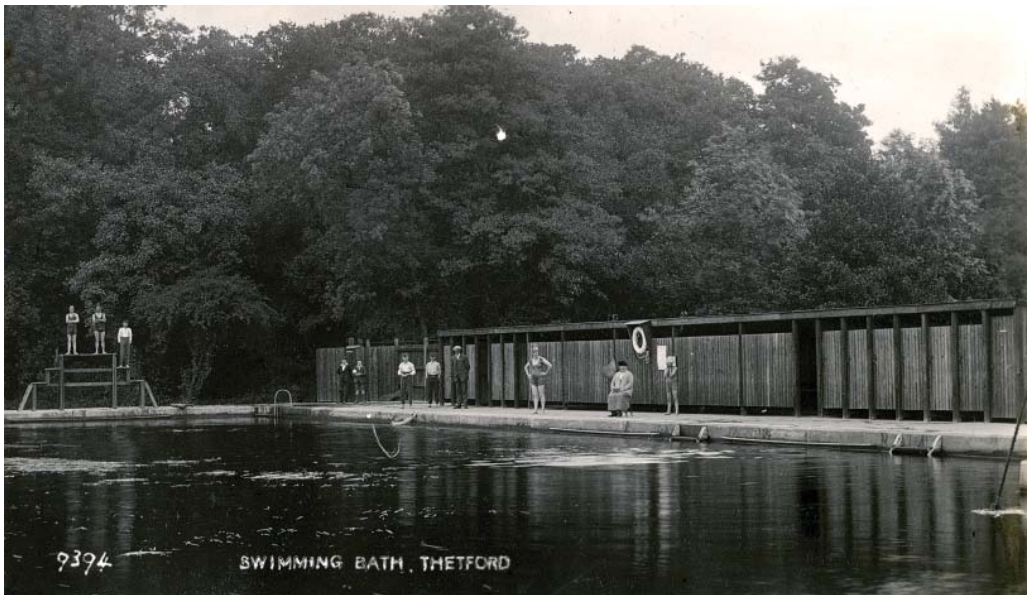


Figure 5. Thetford's river swimming baths near Nuns Bridges, *c.*1928.
© Norfolk Museums Service (Ancient House)

and moorings; about how the River Lark was famed for its use for baptisms; and how rivers and fen waterways were important for farming, with water meadows used for grazing and watering livestock.

Extracts from some oral history interviews:

"My sister told me once that when I was a child [we] lived in [a] cottage right next to a nice river, a small bubbling brook more than a river. And she said, 'You used to sleep soundly 'cause the river noise put you to sleep.' ... she always said it was the river for you."[25]

"... [Barnham] common, we used to go there seven days a week. All during the summer holidays. Get a jacket potato heated up at the gas works, take it down with us. Just play on the common and go down the river swimming. Then come home; when mum said tea's ready at 5 o'clock and we used to be there."[26]

"I learnt to swim ... in the Willows, which was a sandy part of the [Lakenheath] Lode, not far from the Hythe ... I suspect that my elder brother said, "Go on, get in, boy" and that was that. That's where I learnt to fish. And so many people used the Lode for recreation, for instance, walks along the bank and various things, but that's all gone.[27]

"I used to go fishing nearly every weekend with a pal of mine. ... I'd get on my bike and tie my fishing rods to the crossbar and I'd already been down to the staunch and caught live bait, which you'd carry in a bucket."[28]

"We used to get what you call belly tanks, they were the drop tanks off the aircraft, and you could chop a hole in the top, smacking your fingers a few times, as I remember, and get a piece of 4 x 2 wood across the top and you got two five-gallon drums each side, and made it into a boat, and you could then go out on the river."[29]

25 Grimond, Linda (2024). Interviewed by Imogen Radford 5 November, Brandon (born 1943). At [00:51:32], [00:55:53]
26 Bibby, Adrian (2022). Interviewed by Imogen Radford 3 May, Thetford (born 1944). At [00:19:52]
27 Matthews, Cyril (2023). Interviewed by Imogen Radford with Hermione Brown, 11 January, Lakenheath (born 1927). At [00:04:07], [01:00:55]. The Lode was buried or turned into a ditch when the Cut Off Channel was created 1954–64, causing much sadness to Cyril and others as recreation was forbidden on the new waterway.
28 Baldwin, Pat (2022). Interviewed by Imogen Radford, 9 May, Brandon (born 1947). At [01:51:36]
29 Thacker, Chris (2022). Interviewed by Imogen Radford and John Bowes, 3 May, Thetford (born 1941). At [00:04:51]



Figure 6. Children paddling in the ford on Houghton Lane, North Pickenham, in 1934. *© Swaffham Museum*



Figure 7. Jean Shinkins, Edna Turrington and Nellie Shinkins bathing in Lakenheath Mill Pond, Undley, in 1947. *© Lakenheath Heritage Group*

[In the Big Freeze, 1962–63] "...it was wonderful for us kids. And the cine films that dad took are really great. He flooded the yard, and he bought me a lovely pair of ice skates with ... the white boots, you know, the real ice skates. I'd be about 11 ... We also used to come up to Boughton Pond and skate there quite a bit. ... Skate everywhere, anywhere we could. We had to make the most of it 'cause we didn't know how long this freeze was gonna last."[30]

30 Brand, Alexis (2024). Interviewed by Imogen Radford, 21 November, Stoke Ferry (born 1952). At [00:04:30], [00:05:48], [00:10:16]. See also cine films, Waterfall, 1960s.

"My dad always ... took me for long walks from the youngest age ... and he'd point out different plants and birds, trees, animals, all kinds of things. ... You were as much a part of the landscape as the rabbits were, or the waterfowls or anything else, not, 'Oh, look, there's ecology over there, let's go take a look at it.' You were just part of that ecology."[31]



Figure 8.
Mary Baldwin (née Chapman) at Santon Downham Staunch in 1947.
© *Pat Baldwin*

Places for recreation

We mapped the historic spots for swimming and other recreation that we were told about, together with information on each, on a Google map.[32] The link between the places people went to for recreation and historical sites of industry and travel is very strong. Places include those related to travel along or across a river, such as bridges, fords and ferries, and haling (or towing) paths; for navigation, including staunches, locks and weirs; those created for flood relief, such as cuts and drains; and sites of industry or farming, including mills and their pools and weirs, hythes or quays, former quarries and cattle beaches and commons.

Sometimes the structures and the effect they had on the river made that location a suitable place for recreation: the gouging out of the river below a staunch or weir; locks and staunches holding up the water and creating deep stretches; fords with shallow water that could be paddled; weirs and mill races providing fast water that was fun to play in; and bridges, jetties and the remains of staunches or their modern replacements that could be jumped off. As local historian and journalist W G Clarke said in his description of the Little Ouse, "In the river below each staunch is a deep pool or 'staunch hole', usually a favourite place for fishing and bathing."[33]

What rivers mean to communities and lives, with changes over time

Interviewees talked about how important the river was throughout their lives and what it meant to the local community. In earlier times people had fewer opportunities to travel for recreation so they made the most of where they lived, learning to swim or fish in their local river and as children spending all their time there during the school holidays. As they moved through their lives, patterns of recreation changed. Work and bringing up families meant less leisure time, although they still enjoyed local spots at weekends, on summer evenings or during holidays.

31 Moss, Martina (2024). Interviewed by Imogen Radford and Ronan Devlin, 19 April, Brandon (born 1959). At [00:22:17]

32 Google map of Brecks Historic watery recreation locations gathered in the Tales from the River project https://tinyurl.com/GMapHistSpots [Viewed 17 June 2025]

33 Clarke, p.97



Figure 9.
Children in the river at the popular swim spot known as The Leeches, Brandon, *c.*1957.
© Pat Baldwin



Figure 10.
Boys fishing for tiddlers at the Iron Bridges in Thetford in 1957.
© *George Angus*

Swimming and other watery recreation form a thread running through generations and across the Brecks and fen edge, although with changes over the decades in terms of how common and normal these activities have been. This is particularly evident when it comes to swimming in the rivers. The second half of the twentieth century brought more money and leisure time so it was easier to travel abroad to warmer places or to the coast, and heated indoor swimming pools replaced swimming in the river for many.



Figure 11.
Family and friends at Thetford's river swimming baths near Nuns Bridges in Thetford, *c.*1933.
© John Bowes



Figure 12.
Children swimming in the river at Barnham Common, *c.*1966.
© Norfolk Museums Service (Ancient House)

"... up to when I was a teenager it was popular going down [to swim in the river] obviously 'cause they didn't have swimming pools. [That changed as] people got transport, that's where it sort of finished. It weren't quite so popular."[34]

In Thetford during the 1960s and 70s there was a long-running campaign for an indoor pool.[35] Londoners who had moved there and were used to such facilities

34 Palik, George (2022). Interviewed by Imogen Radford, 16 May, Brandon (born 1949). At [00:26:56],[00:30:03] (referring to when he was 15 or 16, ie. about 1965). George is pictured paddling in the river in Figure 1.
35 Batstone (1994), pp.42–53



Figure 13. Children playing on Brandon Staunch in 1978. *© John Basham*

called Thetford residents "hillbillies" for swimming in the river,[36] and fears about safety, disease and pollution scared people out of the rivers (whether or not these were real risks). As described in the Batstone thesis, "Parents' increased awareness of potential dangers associated with playing in water prevents most children enjoying the river as did their predecessors."[37] This period also saw changes in river management and a reduction in the number of places available or considered acceptable for swimming, a process that has continued. Many of those we mapped have now been lost.[38] However, families and youths have continued to go swimming outdoors. A hot summer day will bring many people out to a river or lake beach with their picnics and towels, and there is a wider resurgence of interest in outdoor swimming (promoted in the *Healing Waters* BFER project).[39]

Walking and cycling to the rivers continues, and walking and jogging along them have gained in popularity. However, there has been a big change in terms of access to the riverbanks. Although there have been a few gains, such as new trails and improved paths along the River Lark and the Cut Off Channel (thanks to the River Lark Catchment Partnership, Breaking New Ground and BFER),[40] interviewees gave numerous examples of once being able to walk freely beside

36 Rosemary Ellis, interview 8 September 1993, quoted in Batstone, 1994, Appx 20, p.3
37 Batstone (1994), p.39 (observed by the author in the 1980s and 90s)
38 Access to about 60 per cent have been lost. Details in the table (download PDF) https://tinyurl.com/HistRecLocsTable [Viewed 26 June 2025] used to create the Google map of Brecks Historic watery recreation locations gathered in the Tales from the River project https://tinyurl.com/GMapHistSpots [Viewed 17 June 2025]
39 *Healing Waters (Outdoor Swimming)* project outline https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/os-brecks-2/healing-waters-project-outline [Viewed 27 June 2025]
40 https://www.riverlark.org.uk/about.html# [Viewed 09 July 2025]; https://www.breakingnewground.org.uk [Viewed 09 July 2025]; https://brecks.org/bfer/projects/revealing-the-rivers-connecting-with-communities/4-3-accessible-rivers-improving-access [Viewed 09 July 2025].



Figure 14.
Raft race at Sapiston ford in the 1980s.
© Robin Howe

rivers and waterways in places now fenced off or on historical paths now lost. Fishing has also continued throughout, but again with changes; regulations now restrict where and when it can be done, as well as which fish, and how many, can be taken away.[41] There are fewer places where it is possible to access the banks freely, although more fishing lakes have been established and some of these aim to be accessible to local people.[42] Boating has also changed and is now enjoying a revival with the spread of affordable inflatable boards and kayaks. A warming climate means that ice skating is only rarely possible nowadays, but when flooded fen meadows do freeze enough, many people flock to them with skates and hockey sticks, flasks of hot drinks replacing summer picnics in a similar atmosphere to that on a beach on a hot day.[43]

Conclusion

Tales from the River has built a unique history of how people have related to the rivers and other waters in this distinctive area of the Brecks and fen edge.[44] In focusing on recreation and other non-work activities, the project has harvested a rich and enduring resource of material that encompasses aspects of cultural and social history that would otherwise pass unrecorded. Everyone we have spoken to, in interviews and informally, has shared memories. Some aspects of watery

41 https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-rod-fishing-byelaws-for-england-freshwater-fishing-with-a-rod-and-line#overview-of-national-and-local-angling-byelaws [Viewed 09 July 2025]

42 Such as the lake next to Brandon Staunch, run by the Brandon & District Angling Club and part of the Brandon Remembrance Playing Fields.

43 BBC website 'Frozen Fen skaters' joy at "such a big rink"' 19 January 2024 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-68031040 [Viewed 27 June 2025]

44 Other projects and groups in East Anglia and elsewhere that have gathered and archived oral history and other community material – some on a larger scale, others more narrowly focused – are listed on the OSBrecks legacy website, https://osbrecks.co.uk/oral-history-archives-sources-norfolk-suffolk [Viewed 08 July 2025]. However, the approach taken in Tales from the River has been unique in its focus on water and recreation.

recreation are recalled without much pleasure, such as being marched from school to Thetford river swimming baths on an April morning to learn to swim in the cold muddy water, and the interviews include some less happy stories and reflections. However, the eyes of interviewees often lit up when recounting stories about what they enjoyed (or still enjoy), especially when recalling their childhood or youth, and large numbers of people respond when old photos are shared on social media.[45] This level of engagement has made it a joy to gather and celebrate this aspect of the lives of Brecks and fen edge dwellers. Hopefully the *Tales from the River* archives will give pleasure and interest to anyone who reads and listens to the stories, looks at the images and films, and studies them in future.[46] If so, we will have succeeded in reclaiming this forgotten part of history.

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45 The *Thetford & Brandon Times* received many comments on its Facebook post of 6 October 2018, in which it shared an image of swimmers and sunbathers from 22 August 1975. https://www.facebook.com/TandBTimes/photos/a.475858179111794/2108671815830414 [Viewed 27 June 2025]. The same image, originally entitled 'Thetford Riviera', was also shared on Facebook on 2 September 2022 and received 100 comments. https://www.facebook.com/groups/1700294840292185/permalink/3279195432402110 [Viewed 27 June 2025]

46 The oral history audio and transcripts and other material is being placed on the OSBrecks legacy website https://osbrecks.co.uk/oral-history [Viewed 26 June 2025]. All of this material will also be preserved at Norfolk Record Office for future study.

Acknowledgements
Thanks to all the interviewees and to those who gave or lent us stories, information, documents, images and films; to the local historians, local history societies, museums, archives and libraries for support and material;[47] to all the project volunteers, including Helaine Wyett, John Bowes, Andy Carter, Ronan Devlin, Rosie Evans, Oona Kelly and the young historians at Ancient House Museum. Thanks also to everyone at BFER for their support, especially Nick Dickson for his enthusiasm to include this project in the heritage strand.

47 Ancient House Museum, Brandon and District Local History Society, Brandon Heritage Centre, The Breckland Society, Honington & Sapiston Parish Council, Isleham Society, Lakenheath Heritage Group, Loch Neaton Trust, Methwold History Group, Mildenhall and District Museum, Museum 4 Watton, Norfolk Libraries, Norfolk Mills, Norfolk Record Office, Oxborough History Group, Stoke Ferry & District History Group, Suffolk Archives, Suffolk Libraries, Swaffham Museum, The Wayland Partnership.

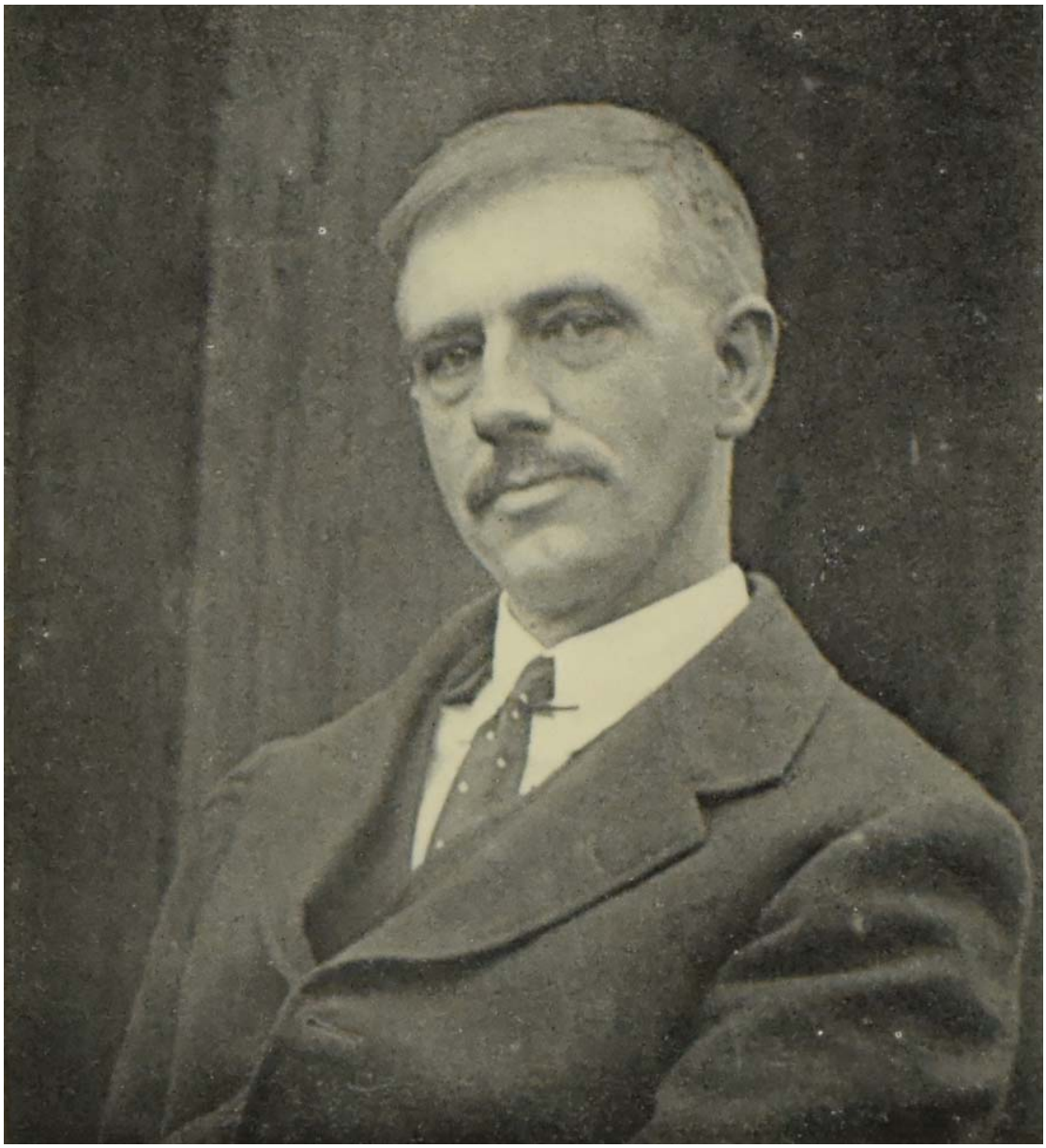


Figure 1.
William George Clarke, photographed in the early 1920s.
This is one of only three known photographs of him, all of which are reproduced in this paper.
Courtesy of the Norfolk & Norwich Naturalists' Society

5

William George Clarke: A Centenary Commemoration

James Parry
Chairman, The Breckland Society

Summary
William George Clarke (1877–1925) was a self-taught archaeologist, historian and naturalist who became synonymous with the Brecks. He was brought up in Thetford and became one of the leading authorities on the archaeology, natural history and wider heritage of a part of England little known to outsiders at the time. A journalist by profession, he was a prolific writer and is best known for his authorship of the iconic book *In Breckland Wilds*, which was published to wide acclaim a few months after the sudden death of Clarke himself. A century later, this paper seeks to deepen appreciation of the man and his achievements, highlighting his contribution to knowledge and understanding of the area that he knew and loved so well.

Early Life
Clarke was born on 7 January 1877 in Yorkshire, at Stokesley near Middlesbrough, to John William Clarke, a journeyman printer originally from Leiston in Suffolk, and Isabelle Clarke (née Freeborne). After short periods spent living in Nottingham and Alton in Hampshire, presumably in connection with Clarke senior's profession, the family moved permanently to Thetford in 1882. It was here that Clarke grew up, attending the local board school before securing a scholarship to Thetford Grammar School when he was 13. He was a diligent student and noted in an autobiographical summary how he was "top of his form 5 times out of 6".[1] In 1892 he won "a prize essay for the description of a Norfolk or Suffolk village" – no clue is given as to which one he wrote about – which was promoted in schools by the *People's Weekly Journal*. It was his first public recognition as a writer and marked the precocious beginning of a career that was to see him author thousands of articles and several books.

By this time his father was running a printing and stationery business, based in a shop on Thetford's King Street that he had acquired in 1889 from a Miss M Carley (Figure 2). Upon leaving school at the age of 15, Clarke joined the family firm as an apprentice, but his energy and interest were increasingly focused in other directions. From an early age he had been drawn to exploring the wild expanses of open countryside around Thetford, at that time a very different landscape to what one sees today. It was then dominated by vast tracts of open heathland that were traditionally derided by outsiders as worthless, if not downright hostile. Towns like Thetford and Brandon were quiet rural outposts, with a remote atmosphere

1 Norfolk Record Office, MS 118. He also remarks that he was "several times given up for dead", indicating that his childhood may not have been an entirely healthy one.



Figure 2. John Clarke's shop on King Street, Thetford, c.1910. Primarily a newsagent, bookstore and printer, it also sold a selection of "fancy goods". *© Norfolk Museums Service (Ancient House)*

and surviving largely from traditional local industries such as rabbit warrening and flintknapping. The writer Virginia Woolf spent part of the summer of 1906 at Blo' Norton Hall, a few miles from Thetford, and in her journal somewhat fondly recalled a cycle ride that she had made to the town one day. "Often in London shall I think of Thetford, & wonder if it is still alive," she wrote. "No one would notice if the whole town forgot to wake up one morning."[2]

Yet this was an environment in which Clarke found much to excite and inspire him, spending long hours in the field exploring on foot and by bicycle and acquiring a prodigious knowledge of seemingly every aspect of the local heritage. As a boy he was soon collecting birds' eggs, butterflies and geological specimens, and developed a passionate interest in prehistory that remained with him for the rest of his life. In an event described in an obituary as having "momentous consequences",[3] in late boyhood he came across a copy of Sir John Evans's *Ancient Stone Implements*, which motivated him to scour the landscape for evidence of Neolithic man and in particular the flint tools that became an endless source of personal fascination.[4]

First Articles and the Naming of Breckland

Clarke's earliest published article proved to be something of a landmark beyond being simply his first. 'A Breckland Ramble' appeared in *The Naturalists' Journal* of November 1894 and takes the form of a literary "short ramble over the heaths and brecks of South-west Norfolk".[5] It was Clarke's first exploration of a fuller-length

2 Cited in Earwaker & Becker, p.289

3 *Transactions of the Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society*, vol. XII part 1 (1924–25), p.129. A version of this obituary (presumably by the same anonymous author) had appeared earlier in the *Eastern Daily Press*.

4 *The Ancient Stone Implements, Weapons, and Ornaments of Great Britain* was first published in 1872. Prodigiously illustrated, it quickly became the standard work on its subject, with one reviewer (for *The North American Review* in January 1873) extolling it as "a monument of minute knowledge and careful industry". Clarke's approach to his own research could fairly be described in similar terms, and he was undoubtedly influenced in his endeavours by Evans's landmark tome.

5 *The Naturalists' Journal* (1894), vol. III no. 29, pp.90–2, 105–7

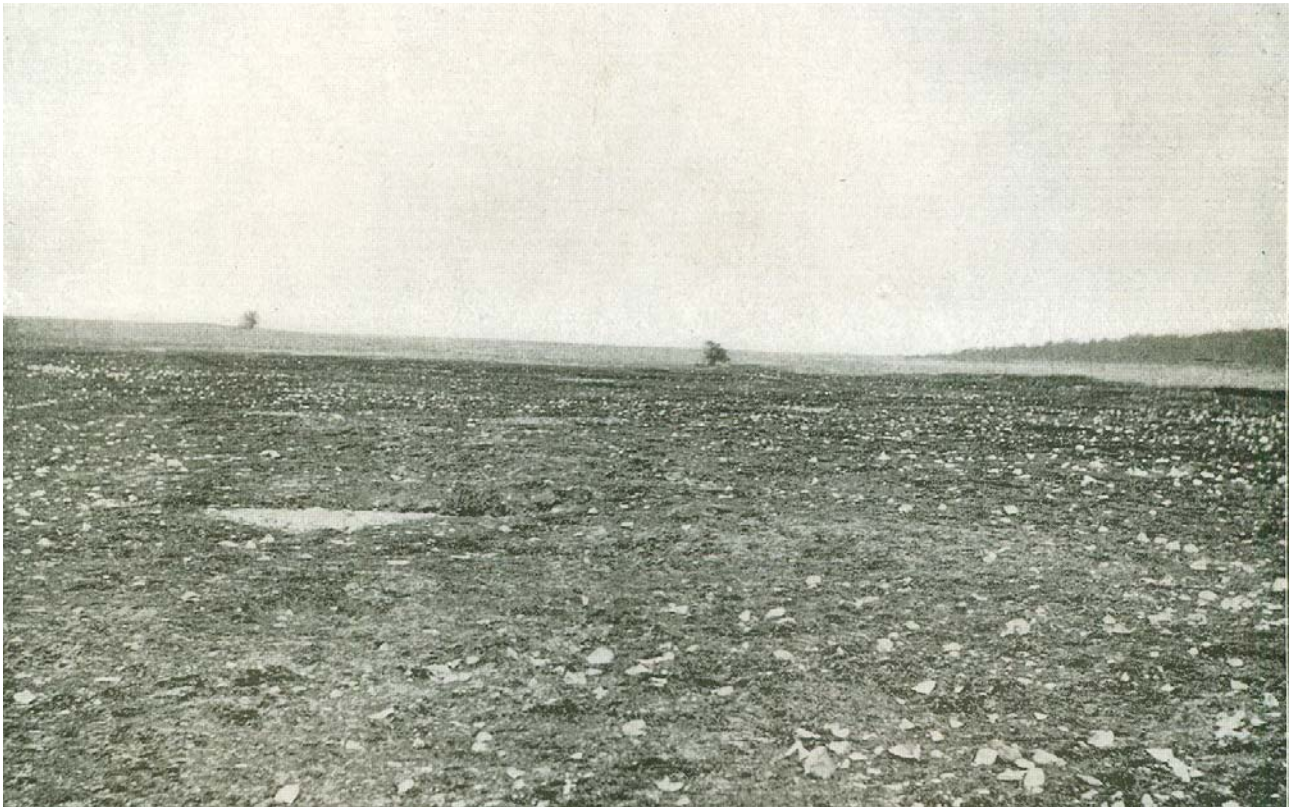


Figure 3.
A view of a classic Norfolk breck, possibly taken by Clarke himself. *Reproduced from* In Breckland Wilds.

narrative after his earlier essay success at school, and is notable for his coining of the term 'Breckland' – its first appearance.

The ramble takes place on a sunny day in September ("our 'Indian summer'") and introduces the reader to some of the iconic Brecks fauna with which Clarke was so familiar, including "the shrill whistling of the Norfolk plover, or stone curlew" – a bird that he saw and heard regularly near Thetford. He also uses the walk to highlight issues on which he was to write later at greater length, such as the vagaries of the water levels in the Breckland meres, and does not stint from proselytising on the wanton persecution of raptors and even raising the prospect of direct action. "We notice a few pole traps about and wish that we could destroy them, but visions of a magistrates [sic] discourse on 'the rights of property' deter us," he writes. "When will farmers and gamekeepers understand the balance of nature and learn the lesson in economic agriculture which would put the owls larder of rats and mice against the value of corn the latter destroy?"[6]

That same year (1894) saw Clarke elected as a member of the Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society, the foremost county association for those interested in natural history, scientists and amateurs alike. He must surely have been one of the Society's youngest members, but lost little time in making his presence felt. On 27 November he read his first paper at a Society meeting, entitled 'Neolithic Man in Thetford District' and which was published in the subsequent *NNNS Transactions* for 1894–95. It is a remarkable piece of work by one so young, not least for a demonstrably great command of his material, as well as his depth of scholarship and fast-developing narrative skills. He starts by acknowledging that the Brecks were already noted as an area worthy of attention by scholars of the Paleolithic era, but soon establishes his chief interest as being in the Later Stone Age, noting early on how "diligent search has

6 A wider campaign against the use of pole traps was underway by this time and they were eventually banned in 1904.



MINERS' PICKS, GRIMES GRAVES



MINERS' PICKS IN APSE OF GALLERY

Figure 4. Grime's Graves was where Clarke made some of his most notable discoveries. *Reproduced from* In Breckland Wilds.



Figure 5.
Clarke's involvement with the Mechanics' Institute in Thetford reflected his interest in widening access to education. The building now houses the Royal British Legion.
© James Parry

brought to light many surface implements referable to the Neolithic age, which for delicacy of workmanship yield the palm to very few English specimens."[7]

The paper underlines both Clarke's attention to detail and his disciplined but imaginative mind, already focused on presenting accurate information in an accessible and lively manner. He also shows an early commitment to presenting the broader picture, being at pains to point out the antiquity of Breckland sites such as Grime's Graves: "Even the explorer at Pompeii and Herculaneum as he disinters the relics of more than eighteen hundred years ago, is looking upon modern productions when compared with those found at Grimes' [sic] Graves." It was a form of contextual perspective that was to become a hallmark of Clarke's writing.

A Professional Journalist and Reformer

After finishing the apprenticeship with his father, Clarke worked for a period in Bungay at Clay's Printing Works (still in business today) and also held a position in London, although it is not known exactly what or where. It seems inevitable that he soon sought to make a living from his writing, rather than the production side of the publishing process, and in 1897 he moved to Norwich and joined *The Norwich Mercury* as a staff reporter. His daily duties involved writing on a very wide range of subjects and he cycled extensively about the Norwich area and beyond, gathering material and attending events that he (or his editor) considered worthy of a story.

Clarke rose to become sub-editor of *The Norwich Mercury*, later (after the First World War, see below) joining the editorial staff of the *Eastern Daily Press*, where he remained for the rest of his career. He continued to write throughout, and at a remarkable rate. An inventory compiled by his son Roy (see below) lists a total of 2894 articles written

7 *Transactions of the Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society*, vol. VI, part 1 (1894–95), pp.23–36



Figure 6. Clarke with Sir Ray Lankester, director of the Natural History Museum 1898–1907, at Whitlingham Pit in 1910. Lankester was one of many leading figures with whom Clarke enjoyed good relations. *© Norfolk Museums Service (Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery)*

by Clarke between 1891 and his death. In addition to the *Mercury*, he wrote extensively for *The Thetford & Watton Times* as well as for specialist publications including *The Naturalists' Journal* and *The Zoologist* and more general periodicals such as *The Cyclist* and *The Eastern Counties Magazine*. While he usually published under his own name, he used the *nom de plume* "Wandering Will" in some of his earlier pieces.

As well as his passion for history, heritage and the natural environment, Clarke had a deep interest in contemporary social issues and the prospect of improvements in the daily lives of Norfolk people. He wrote on a wide range of related subjects, ranging from women labouring in fields and the conditions for children in workhouses to proposed sanitation and sewage schemes and what he termed "the housing question" for working-class families, many of which were struggling to find affordable accommodation. Although he betrayed no obvious political bias in his writing, a representative of the Norwich Labour Party attended his funeral and from that we may deduce that he was at least a party member, if not an activist.

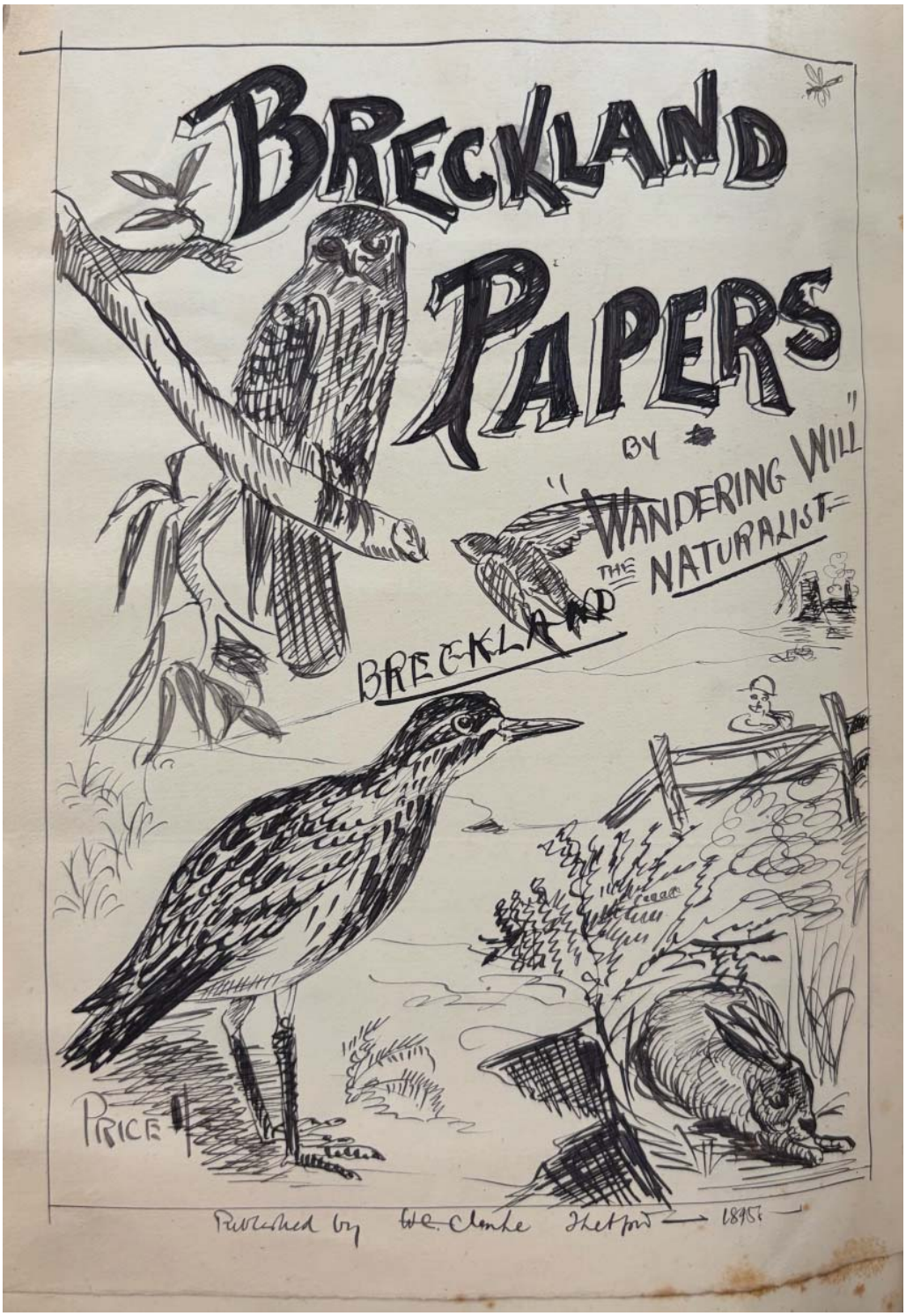


Figure 7.
Arthur Patterson was a talented artist and caricaturist, as seen in this proposed cover treatment for a publication by Clarke. *Norfolk Record Office, MC 447/1. All rights reserved by Norfolk Record Office.*

Clarke was certainly committed to the cause of reform, as suggested by his involvement with the Mechanics' Institute in Thetford, which opened in 1887 to coincide with Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee (Figure 5). Such institutes were set up to provide educational opportunities for working-class men, especially – but not exclusively – in technical subjects. The first opened in the 1820s, and by the middle of the century there were several hundred across the country. They offered courses and talks, as well as vocational training, and often housed libraries and/or ran book-lending schemes. At the Thetford institute, Clarke was responsible



Figure 8. A selection of objects donated by Clarke to the Ancient House Museum. l-r: cast-iron miniature cannon produced at Charles Burrell & Sons in Thetford; a framed print of Thetford Priory; a late eighteenth-century token celebrating Thomas Paine; a Neolithic flint arrowhead and fabricator; a medal produced for Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee of 1887; a mug commemorating John Wesley dated 1839. © *Norfolk Museums Service (Ancient House Museum)*

for creating and maintaining a small display of flint implements, fossils and other archaeological items, doubtlessly drawn from his personal collection. It was during this period that he married Edith Holden, the daughter of a local builder, in Thetford on 1 September 1899. The couple were to have two children, Lorna (born 1903) and Roy (1914), both of whom were given the middle name of Rainbird.[8]

A Respected Antiquarian, Naturalist and Author

In 1908 Clarke co-founded the Prehistoric Society of East Anglia, along with W A Dutt, H H Halls and Dr W Allen Sturge. It was his first major collaborative initiative and evidence of his reputation and stature within the field of archaeology, a renown that also saw him elected as a fellow of the Geological Society and develop close links with the British Museum.[9] Dutt, who later became known for his publications on East Anglia generally and the Broads in particular, was to become a friend. More widely, Clarke was in contact and correspondence with many of the leading natural historians of the day, people like Howard Saunders and Harry Witherby. One of the country's most eminent ornithologists, Witherby approached Clarke as early as August 1897 (when Clarke was just 20 years old) to invite him to contribute to 'British Ornithological Notes', a column that Witherby wrote for the magazine *Knowledge*.

8 'Rainbird' appears in the Clarke family tree as a first or middle name across several generations, having entered the family through marriage – by John Clarke to Hannah Rainbird – in 1732.

9 By 1914 The Prehistoric Society of East Anglia had more than 200 members, was publishing a journal of proceedings and that year funded its first excavation, at Grime's Graves. In 1923 it began to meet in London, and 12 years later simplified its name to The Prehistoric Society, a reflection of its ever-expanding geographical audience and wider appeal. Clarke remained passionate about prehistory throughout and in 1922 published Our Homeland Prehistoric Antiquities and How to Study Them, a practical guide aimed at satisfying "the needs of the beginner" and affirming prehistoric archaeology as "a branch of science in which important discoveries may be made by any serious student".

Clarke was particularly friendly with Arthur Patterson, who was based in Great Yarmouth and renowned for his vast knowledge of the natural history and folklore of Breydon Water and beyond.[10] It was Patterson who initially recommended Clarke to *The Zoologist* as a contributor, taking a particular interest in his writing and even going as far as designing a potential cover for a publication on the Brecks that he was urging him to produce (Figure 7). In the years that followed, Clarke saw his first three books published: *A Short Historical Guide to the Ancient Borough of Thetford* and *Guide to the Town of Brandon and the Oldest Industry in Britain* (both 1908), and *Guide to the Town of Swaffham and the Country Adjacent thereto* (1909). Although concise and modestly produced, they stand as exemplars of their type in terms of content and style.

In 1917–18 Clarke served as president of the Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society, which he had first joined as a teenager. A regular contributor to the Society's annual *Transactions*, he devoted his presidential address – delivered on 25 April 1918 at the Castle Museum in Norwich – to 'The Commons of Norfolk'. Wearing khaki and introduced as Lance Corporal Clarke,[11] he presented the results of his research and fieldwork on the county's tracts of common land, focusing primarily on their botanical value but also exploring aspects of social and cultural history such as common rights and the impact of enclosure.

In 1919 Clarke joined the editorial staff of the *Eastern Daily Press*, where he worked until his death.[12] His reputation as one of the foremost antiquarians in East Anglia only continued to grow, and 1921 saw the publication of his most ambitious book to date, *Norfolk & Suffolk*. Printed by the prestigious A & C Black of London and illustrated with 40 paintings – expensively reproduced in colour – by the artist Alfred Heaton Cooper, it runs to 264 pages and remains Clarke's biggest book. A topographical and historical survey of the two counties, it includes chapters dedicated to 'Breckland', 'In Prehistoric Times' and 'An Archaic Industry' (on flint in Brandon), allowing him ample scope to deploy his own particular expertise and experience. As he notes in the preface, "I have utilised the knowledge derived from a personal acquaintance with every town and village in Norfolk, and a majority of those in Suffolk".[13]

This period also saw Clarke closely involved in the creation of what was to become one of the most important public facilities in East Anglia for learning about archaeology and history: the Ancient House Museum in Thetford. Presented to the town by the antiquarian Prince Frederick Duleep Singh in 1921 (see page 19), the late fifteenth-century timber-framed building was restored at his expense and then prepared for opening as a museum. As one of the first members of the museum committee, Clarke played a central role in this process through donating and helping to source artefacts (Figure 8), as well as writing the first guide to the museum and providing advice on how to present the exhibits. At the opening of the museum by the Duchess of Grafton in December 1924, John Edmund Meek, the Mayor of Thetford, paid tribute to Clarke "who had been most helpful... from the inception of the idea of a museum, and for the past two months... had travelled from Norwich repeatedly and at considerable expense to arrange the exhibits and classify them as far as possible."[14]

10 The two first met in 1891, when Clarke was only 14. Patterson was exhibiting a stuffed whale in Great Yarmouth and Clarke appears to have paid a visit. Patterson was a prolific writer, often under the ironic pseudonym of "John Knowlittle".
11 Clarke served with the Norwich Cyclist Volunteers and, later, the Army Pay Corps.
12 He was the newspaper's leader writer at the time of his death.
13 *Norfolk & Suffolk*, pp.v–vi
14 Rather surprisingly, Clarke was not present at the museum opening and nor is there any record of his apologies being received. It is possible that he was suffering from ill health at the time.



Figure 9. Clarke photographed with his son, Roy Rainbird Clarke, a few weeks before his death in June 1925. *Reproduced from* In Breckland Wilds

The *Magnum Opus*

During the spring of 1925 Clarke was putting the finishing touches to what was to be his most celebrated publication, *In Breckland Wilds*. He had prepared the first draft manuscript back in 1913, but the war and his other literary work had prevented its completion. Today the book is appreciated as the culmination of three decades' work, a totemic endeavour made all the more powerful and enduring by the author's premature death just a few months before its publication in November 1925. Billed by the publisher Robert Scott of London as being "For Nature Lovers and those in search of Unknown England" and "containing many illustrations from the author's photographs", it was promoted through a pre-publication special offer of 7s 6d (a three-shilling discount on the cover price). The book opens with "An Appreciation" by Harold Massingham, a fellow journalist and writer on landscape and rural history who knew Clarke and was able to present his character and credentials to the reader.

In Breckland Wilds was hugely well received and the first print run of 2000 copies quickly sold out. What Clarke had written was a defining eulogy to the landscape he loved, underpinned by superb scholarship accessibly presented and offered

with a generosity of spirit that was very much his hallmark. Wide-ranging in scope and depth, the book considers all aspects of the Brecks, from topography and different habitat types, flora and fauna through to the history of human presence in the area, including cultural folklore and traditions, a chapter devoted to the poet Robert Bloomfield and coverage of the architecture and building materials of local settlements. While always empirical, the text carries a deeply personal tone and was described by Massingham as "a kind of love-story".[15]

Clarke anchored his narrative in beautifully articulated firsthand observation, often extending into an emotional realm that he professed to eschew. Yet, as a lover of poetry, he could not resist imbuing his prose with evocations. Writing about the Breckland landscape, he proposes that "he who has once vibrated with the thrill of the heathland is never quite the same again... It fascinates but few, but those who have once come under its spell are ever after its slaves."[16] He was a true polymath of the Brecks, and no one else could have written *In Breckland Wilds*, as Massingham recognised: "This strange land Clarke knew off by heart and by head. There was nothing he didn't know about it."[17]

Legacy

With his *magnum opus* complete, in late May 1925 Clarke and his family had travelled to the coast for a few days' away from their home in Norwich. While at Happisburgh, he fell ill suddenly and was taken to the Norfolk & Norwich Hospital, where he died on 14 June. The unexpected loss of one of East Anglia's leading naturalists and historians was keenly felt. His funeral at Norwich Cemetery was attended by many representatives of the myriad societies and institutions with which he was involved, a mark of "the wide esteem in which Mr Clarke was held".[18] His friend Arthur Patterson joined the vicar in leading the procession to the grave, where Clarke was buried in a plain oak coffin. Despite a request for there to be no flowers, "a bunch of heather, and a huge bunch of wild flowers, inscribed 'From Flordon Common', were placed upon the coffin".[19] The common was one of Clarke's favourite places.

As for Clarke the man, a sympathetic picture emerges. Small and wiry, he was remarkably fit (he had been an avid footballer in his youth) and regarded by his peers as being indefatigable in the field, demonstrating great powers of endurance as he yomped for hours across miles of open heathland leaving younger men gasping in his wake. He was always approachable, wearing his expertise lightly on his sleeve, and renowned for "his exceptionally kindly and personable nature".[20]

One of the most insightful accounts of Clarke as a personality comes from the pen of Ralph Hale Mottram, who talks extensively about him in his 1933 book, *East Anglia*. Mottram knew Clarke well, having served with him during the First World War and the two men had subsequently enjoyed many forays together in the landscapes of the Brecks. "I never knew anyone with a more lively sensibility for beauty of colouring, cadence of prose, even the very touch of any natural object that can minister to our pleasure," Mottram recalled. "And to this he added a quality that one would have thought naturally destructive of the other – a mind like a card index."[21]

15 *In Breckland Wilds*, p.xi
16 ibid, p.31
17 ibid, p.ix
18 'The Late Mr W G Clarke. Funeral at the Cemetery', *Eastern Daily Press*, 18 June 1925.
19 ibid.
20 *In Breckland Wilds*, p.ix
21 Mottram, p.17

Alongside his affinity with the Breckland landscape, it was perhaps for this encyclopaedic command of so many subjects that Clarke was most admired and respected. In a short appreciation that appeared in the *Eastern Daily Press* the day after his funeral, Arthur Patterson describes being out in the Brecks with his friend and how he was "astonished at his knowledge of botany. 'Will,' said I, as he named an obscure heath-plant, 'how many wildflowers and their kindred can you name straight off the reel?' 'A thousand, and perhaps a little over,' he replied."[22] It was a depth of knowledge that could only accrue from years of complete immersion in the subject, of living and breathing it, and extended across all aspects of Breckland's heritage, not least the Neolithic, which remained Clarke's great passion. As Mottram affirmed, "He did not merely study prehistoric man. He was one."[23]

Such was the success of *In Breckland Wilds* that a second impression was issued in February 1926. Eleven years later came a revised and expanded edition prepared by Clarke's son Roy, who was only 11 when his father died. He went on to read archaeology at Cambridge University, becoming one of the country's leading archaeologists and sharing his father's ability to communicate effectively to academics and laymen alike. Published in 1937 by W Heffer & Sons of Cambridge, the new edition contains several new chapters written by Roy, who also updated and expanded some of his father's original material and added four appendices. The result is a masterful and sympathetic development of the content and impact of the original book. Roy later became the curator at the Castle Museum in Norwich, where he worked until his death in 1963.[24]

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My thanks go to Oliver Bone and his team at the Ancient House Museum in Thetford; Sal Habboub at Norfolk Museums Service; Robert Kybird; Imogen Radford; and the staff at the Norfolk Record Office.

22 Patterson, 'A Short Appreciation', *Eastern Daily Press*, 19 June 1925.
23 Mottram, p.18
24 The Norfolk Record Office holds an extensive archive of W G Clarke material, much of it bequeathed by his son Roy.

6

Collaborative Management in The Brecks

Jude Clay
Volunteer & Engagement Officer
Brecks Fen Edge & Rivers Landscape Partnership

Summary
Over six years, the Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers Landscape Partnership scheme (BFER) supported projects spanning heritage, conservation, training, education and public engagement across the Brecks. Collectively, these projects painted a broad picture of what the Brecks are as an historical landscape, a working landscape and a home for humans as well as many other, often rare, species. Through this collaboration, the scheme delivered 154 per cent of its target outputs and connected with over 200,000 people, with many of its 1484 volunteers working across multiple projects. As a result, collaboration has led to a stronger sense of belonging and stewardship across the area, and a better understanding of what the Brecks are, why they are different to surrounding areas, and why that should be celebrated and protected.

Introduction
Between 2020 and 2025, BFER – funded with £1,970,400 by The National Lottery Heritage Fund – supported 24 projects spanning heritage, conservation, citizen science, training and education and public engagement across the Brecks. BFER was hosted by Suffolk County Council, and the 24 projects were led collaboratively by 20 national, regional and local organisations with an interest in the area, alongside community groups and members of the community.

The focus of the scheme was on the Brecks' fenland fringe, its primary river corridors and key freshwater habitats. This aquatic heritage has historically been overlooked in a National Character Area famous for being sandy and dry, yet it is the driving force behind the area's unique history. The river corridors provided the conduit for biodiversity and early settlement of what was otherwise a dry and hostile environment. Throughout the scheme, data was collected from volunteers, participants and project leads on their backgrounds, roles and experience of being involved. Feedback consistently highlighted the high quality of experience, depth of learning and the welcoming, inclusive approach of the programme.

Scheme Structure
The individual BFER projects were organised around four thematic programmes which together paint a full picture of what the Brecks are today and how they have been throughout their varied history.

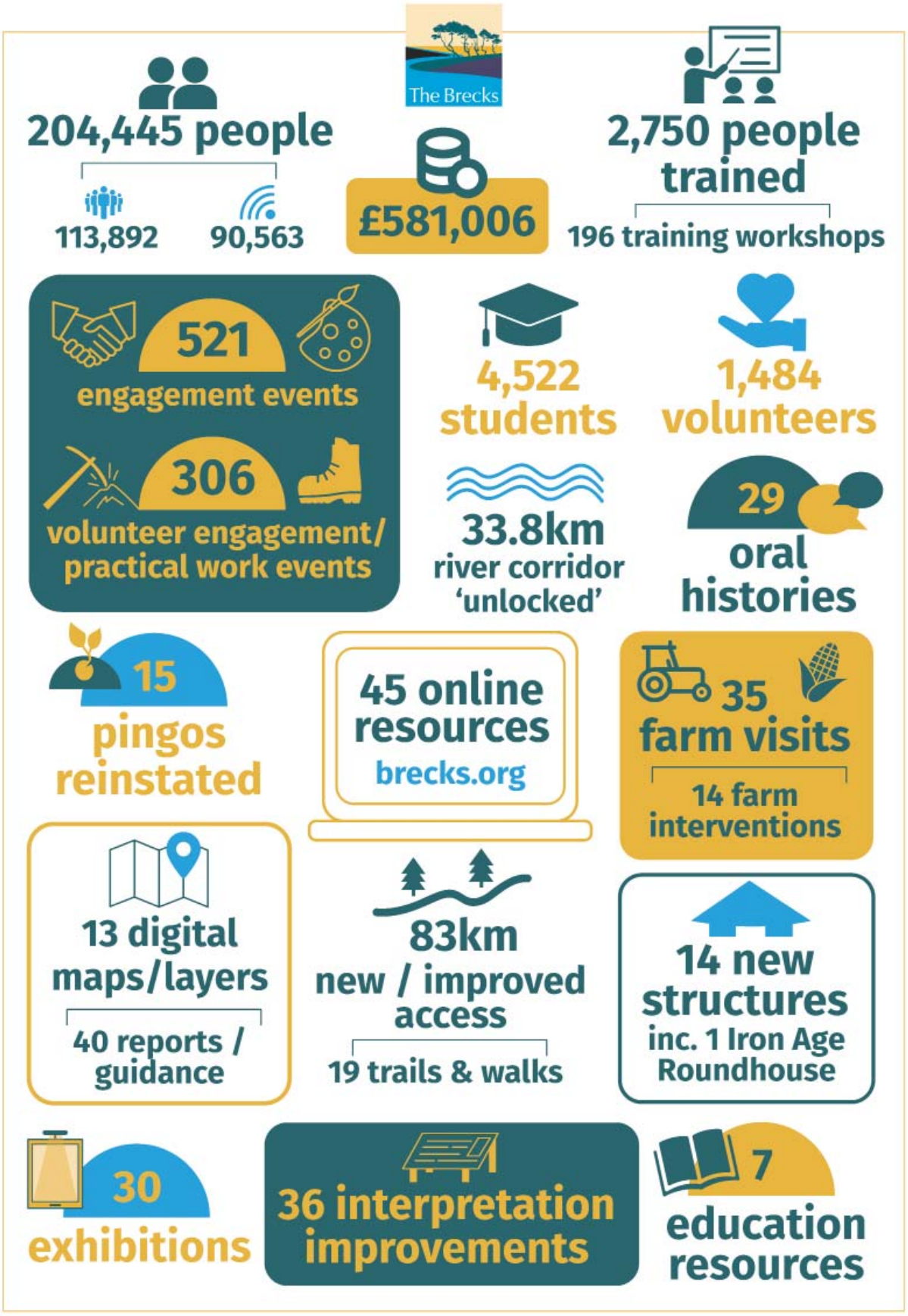

The Brecks
204,445 people
113,892
90,563
£581,006
2,750 people trained
196 training workshops
521
engagement events
306
volunteer engagement/ practical work events
4,522 students
1,484 volunteers
33.8km
river corridor 'unlocked'
29
oral histories
15
pingos reinstated
45 online resources
brecks.org
35
farm visits
14 farm interventions
13 digital maps/layers
40 reports / guidance
83km
new / improved access
19 trails & walks
14 new structures
inc. 1 Iron Age Roundhouse
30
exhibitions
36 interpretation improvements
7
education resources



Figure 1.
Carl Sayer (University College London) at a pingo event, 2024.
Jimmy King

1. Restoring the Water – Supporting Species and Habitats
Practical conservation activity to improve water quality and restore important freshwater habitats. Highlights include:

- Galvanising community and volunteer participation and equipping volunteer groups to undertake significant restoration of the River Lark
- Working with schools to raise elvers in the classroom before reintroducing them to rivers
- Installing a 'Larinier' style fish-ladder at Brandon Staunch to improve connectivity and aid fish migrations
- Creating a fish pass at Turf Lock, Mildenhall, where previously a staunch prohibited fish migration
- Restoring 15 ice age pingo ponds to allow for the regrowth of long-dormant seeds, unique habitats and significant biodiversity
- Sharing best practice for riparian land management through farm visits and intervention, webinars and online resource packs.

2. Under the Surface – Discovering Heritage
Heritage projects, researching and celebrating a wealth of knowledge about the fascinating history of the Brecks landscapes and producing a range of online and printed resources. Highlights include:

- Two day schools and a series of talks and webinars introducing adults to Palaeolithic and Holocene archaeology and geology in the Brecks
- Oral history interviews recorded with 36 local people about river recreation and their memories of rivers, with the stories and images collected in a touring exhibition, film, website, history walks and talks
- Webinars and site visits for Breckland Society volunteers, supporting them in their research and writing of the 124-page *River Raiders* and 114-page *Industrious Rivers* reports, both of which linked with exhibitions at Ancient House Museum
- Four InfoPoint units set up around the Brecks to enable organisations to share digital information with visitors without needing an internet connection.

3. Working Waters – Heritage Skills for the Future
Workshops, webinars and work experience to teach volunteers and young adults



Figure 2. Introduction to outdoor swimming at Lynford Water, 2023. *Imogen Radford*

a range of conservation, surveying and heritage craft skills, which they applied through volunteering activity. Highlights include:

- Water quality and eDNA testing over 70 water bodies across the area to map water quality and species distribution
- Archaeological surveying at previously under-studied sites, uncovering evidence of settlement from the Neolithic, Bronze Age, Roman, Medieval and Post-Medieval periods
- The construction, by volunteers, of a full-size Iron Age roundhouse using authentic techniques and local materials
- The creation of a strong relationship between local schools and the county wildlife trusts through a series of lessons, assemblies and trips to Norfolk Wildlife Trust's Thompson Common and Suffolk Wildlife Trust's Lackford Lakes
- The creation of a brand-new outdoor education programme to build confidence and new skills in young people out of education, training or employment, or with special educational needs, and then delivery of the programme to five cohorts of young people.

4. Revealing the Rivers – Connecting with Communities

Connecting people to the landscape by providing opportunities for local communities and visitors to the area to enjoy the Brecks through art, heritage, improved access and health and wellbeing activities. Highlights include:

- A new range of creative activities at West Stow Country Park from photography and painting to drumming, creative writing and singing
- A series of events at Ancient House Museum to supplement the *Vikings: History On Your Doorstep* and *Made by the River* exhibitions
- Improving access to and engagement with five Brecks rivers through collaboration with the Suffolk Rights of Way team, Thetford Town Council and the RSPB
- Introducing more than 700 people to the joys and benefits of outdoor swimming, as well as training over 50 lifeguards
- A BFER-led wider programme of around 500 events, reaching an estimated 11,000 people

Brecks Outdoor Festival

As a celebration of the network created under the scheme and the range of activities developed and supported over the five core years of funding, BFER created a festival to mark the final year of the scheme. 466 people took part in 46 events provided by 24 partners over the course of two weeks. When The Heritage Fund agreed to extend the funding by six months, it was with the proviso the festival was run for a second year. In 2025, 909 people took part in 50 events provided by 29 partners over two weeks in August.

Legacy

The work of BFER was to connect and support organisations and groups doing landscape and heritage-related work in the Brecks, with the aim of strengthening them enough to continue what was started under the scheme, even after BFER-support came to an end. This would create a legacy of stewardship for the area, not only for the organisations continuing the work but also on an individual level for local volunteers and participants.

Through collaboration, plans to continue works begun under BFER have already begun, such as the River Lark Catchment Partnership's involvement in the Government-led (DEFRA/OFWAT/EA) initiative to improve England's chalk streams, the *Chalk Stream Flagship* project.

Similarly, solo activities started under BFER will be continued by partner organisations, such as the research and publication of information, including *The Journal of Breckland Studies*, and engagement and wellbeing activities such as Run Breckland's social running events and larger river runs, and West Stow Country Park's summer yoga.

However, BFER itself is a legacy project of an earlier scheme called Breaking New Ground, which was developed from momentum created through the former Brecks Partnership. Now, The Heritage Fund has agreed to fund a further 18-month project called the Brecks Landscape Resilience Project, with the aim of creating a sustainable 10-year plan for managing and promoting the landscape and continuing collaboration beyond any short-term funding offer.

> *"BFER has changed people's perspectives – on their environment, on their heritage, and on their own ability to contribute to the care of both."* BFER Project Lead

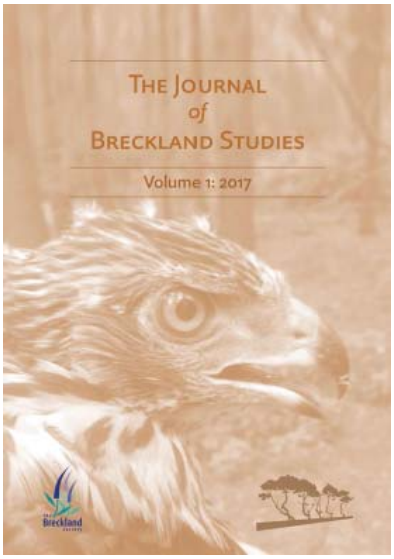
JBS

About The Journal of Breckland Studies

The Journal of Breckland Studies was first published in 2017 as part of the Breaking New Ground Landscape Partnership, a £2.2 million Heritage Lottery Fund scheme that delivered a range of heritage and landscape projects in the Norfolk and Suffolk Brecks. The purpose of the journal is to stimulate interest and research into the special character of the Brecks so the area is better understood, appreciated and promoted by:

- Publishing the results of research into aspects of the natural, built and social heritage of Breckland.
- Providing a resource for professionals and other stakeholders to inform landscape and heritage management policy and practice by disseminating information that is specific and local.
- Creating opportunities for individuals and voluntary organisations to publish the results of their work so this reaches a wider audience and contributes to knowledge and understanding of the area.
- Encouraging those working or volunteering in aspects of the Breckland heritage to further develop and expand their skills.
- Stimulating interest and enthusiasm among those not already involved in natural or cultural heritage activities so they value the area and wish to see its special qualities protected and enhanced.

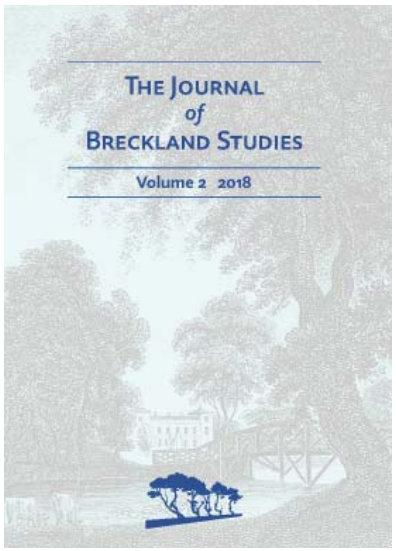
Potential contributors are invited to submit a summary setting out the scope and content of their paper, including a working title and an indication of potential illustrations, to info@brecsoc.org.uk.



Volume 1 (2017)

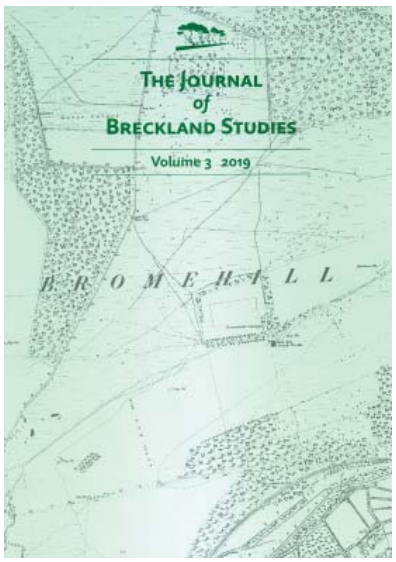
- A fieldwork study of former Desert Rat camps in the area of High Ash (*Julia & Tony Grover)*
- Exploring the lives of Goshawks in the Brecks (*Ian Henderson & Greg Conway)*
- The early Palaeolithic archaeology of the Breckland *(Robert J. Davis, Simon G. Lewis, Nick M. Ashton, Simon A. Parfitt, Marcus T. Hatch & Peter G. Hoare)*
- Using Google Earth™ to investigate Twentieth-Century Breckland Military Sites (*Alan Clarke)*
- The Diary of Frank Norgate (1842–1919) *(Barbara Pritchard)*
- Nature conservation, ground disturbance and protecting archaeological remains on Brecks heaths *(David Robertson & Robert Hawkes)*

Volume 2 (2018)



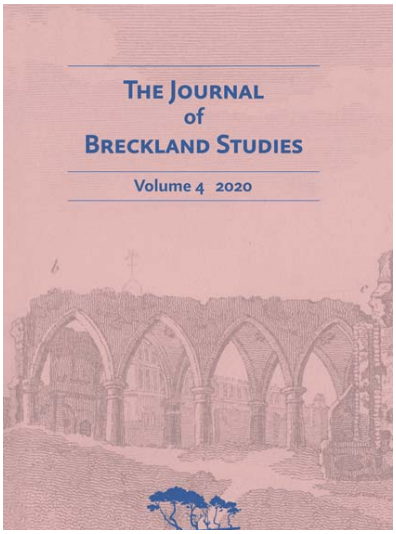
- Archaeological investigation of a 'lost' prisoner of war camp near Eriswell *(Daria Adamson)*
- The grassshoppers of Breckland: their classification and conservation *(Tim Gardiner)*
- The Beachamwell shepherd hut: a conservation project *(Peter Goulding)*
- The demise of the Breckland lichen flora *(Peter Lambley)*
- Before the Forestry Commission: planting woodland in Breckland prior to the 1920s *(Henry Kilvert)*
- Using large-scale citizen science to examine the importance of the Brecks for bats *(Stuart Newson & James Parry)*

Volume 3 (2019)



- Mapping a changing landscape: Breckland *c.*1750–1920 *(Jon Gregory & Sarah Spooner)*
- The macro-moths of Weeting Heath *(J. H. Symonds)*
- The decoration, ornament and owners of West Stow Hall *(Andy Gilbert)*
- Bringing the Breckland wormwood back from the brink: reprioritising conservation actions *(Phoebe Miles, Tim Pankhurst & Jo Jones)*
- Of Brecks thatch and sparrows (*Stephen Letch)*
- The importance of Breckland heaths and moth communities for breeding Nightjar (*Dr Greg Conway, Dr Ian Henderson & David Hunter)*

Volume 4 (2020)



- Pilgrim Badges of St Edmund of East Anglia *(Dr Michael Lewis)*
- The Depredatio abbatiae as a source on the uprising against St Edmund's Abbey, 1327–9 *(Dr Francis Young)*
- The Breckland Estates of Bury St Edmunds Abbey, 1100 to 1500 *(Professor Mark Bailey)*
- The Rivers Lark and Linnet at Bury St Edmunds:
- Their Hydrogeology and Landscapes *(Libby Ranzetta)*
- Written in Stone: An Evidential Connection with the Past *(Martyn Taylor)*

Back Issues

Digital copies of volumes 1–4 of *The Journal of Breckland Studies* can be downloaded from: http://www.brecsoc.org.uk/jbs. Volumes 2, 3 and 4 are also available in hard copy. For more information please email: info@brecsoc.org.uk.

> Once you are snugly housed at Thetford or Brandon, for the sake of your health or the quiet, or the fishing, there is not much sight-seeing to be done except for those who love long views into the distance, rare birds and flowers, or neolithic man.
>
> R H Mottram, writing about Breckland in his book, *East Anglia* (1933)

The Breckland Society was set up in 2003 to encourage interest and research into the natural, built and social heritage of the Norfolk and Suffolk Brecks. It is a membership organisation which works to help protect the area and offers a range of activities to those who wish to see the special qualities of this unique part of England protected and enhanced.

The Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers Landscape Partnership Scheme was a £3.5 million five-year programme focused on celebrating and conserving the landscape and heritage of the key freshwater habitats and river valleys of the Brecks. Supported by the National Heritage Lottery Fund, the BFER scheme involved more than 40 local, regional and national groups in the delivery of a wide range of projects between 2020 and 2025.

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