



Cambridgeshire
Geological Society

Cambridgeshire Geological Society

Newsletter: Spring 2023 www.cambsgeology.org

Welcome everyone to this CGS Spring Newsletter
Penny Coggill, Chair

For your delectation here are updates on the two major projects of the Society, the Fen Edge Trail and the local Geosites. There are also several book reviews, a report on a visit to Charnwood Forest which has whetted my appetite for a visit very soon, plus other interesting articles such as those on Jurassic reptiles and historic stones. If anyone wants to contribute an article to the newsletter next time or fancies having a go at putting one together even, that would be most welcome news. As you see we are a very small committee so any help in running activities or events, initiating new projects or helping with our geoconservation work would be hugely welcomed:

Chair - Penny Coggill **Treasurer & Membership - Martin Evans** **Secretary - David Brooks**
Programme secretary - Franziska Norman Geosites, Fen Edge Trail & Websites - Chris Donnelly

We have a number of walks and visits organised over the summer, so do support them by signing up via info@cambsgeology.org, for enjoyable days out in our beautiful but undervalued countryside. **AND, please let us know how we can improve what is on offer for you all - it is your Society.**

Our thanks to Reg!

Martin Evans, Treasurer

The March 13th meeting was the last meeting chaired by Dr Reg Nicholls, who was relinquishing his role as Chair of the Society. Those present at the meeting were happy to hear that Penny Coggill, an active CGS Committee member, had kindly volunteered to take his place and the Committee were pleased to formally co-opt Penny as Chair. All Committee roles are formalised at the Society's AGM in November.

Reg had signalled more than a year ago of his planned (albeit delayed) move out of the county and that other commitments were making it harder for him to continue chairing the Society, but was persuaded to stay on by popular demand. He has contributed hugely to the Society in many capacities (not least by also acting as Programme Secretary through Covid when he set up and ran our zoom talks) and during his time in office (as Membership Secretary too) the Society's membership and public reach was expanded substantially. He will be continuing with his Fen Edge Trail and Geosites work whilst he is still local and we will see him at monthly meetings. Despite his apparent preference for the older, harder strata in the British geological succession (something to do with his Scottish heritage?) he has been an enthusiastic and expert investigator of sites of particular geological interest in Cambridgeshire, helping to ensure they gained formal recognition (as LGS) by the relevant planning authorities. He also takes a keen interest in the institution of the rural public house and it is rumoured that sections of the Fen Edge Trail, to which Reg has made significant contributions, that both start and end near a pub were pioneered by Reg.

The Society thanks Reg for all his hard work on its behalf and wishes Penny well in her new role.

THE BUILDING STONES OF CAMBRIDGESHIRE *Reg Nicholls*

Ancaster Stone *Ancaster, Lincolnshire (just NE of Grantham)*
Middle Jurassic (**NB See our website for our visit to a stonemasons on May 12**)

This is one of my favourite Lincolnshire limestones as it is very distinctive with its "streaky bacon" stripes. Not all the markings are as regular as in the example shown right. Some of them display good sedimentary bedding features. If you walk down through Senate House Passage in central Cambridge, you will see some fine examples. Below is the relevant extract from the *Cambridgeshire Building Stone Atlas* from Historic England, which can be downloaded from the BGS: <https://www2.bgs.ac.uk/mineralsuk/download/EHCountyAtlases/CambridgeshireBuildingStoneAtlas.pdf>



Lincolnshire Limestone Formation (Upper Lincolnshire Limestone Member), Inferior Oolite Group:
A medium- to coarse-grained, creamy-white to pale yellow coloured (though rather ochreous in places) ooidal and bioclastic limestone. Weathered surfaces commonly display a distinctive 'streaky bacon-like' patterning. In Cambridgeshire, Ancaster Stone, along with other imported Inferior Oolite limestones, tends to have been used in the construction of prestigious buildings, especially in the construction of colleges, or for the dressings of churches or chapels.

A VISIT TO CHARNWOOD FOREST

Lee Wells (CGS member and Geosites team)

Imagine!... a three week voyage aboard a traditional sailing ship making various landings on Iceland and with visits to the Faroes, Shetland and Orkney en route to the final destination at Ullapool. It was a bucket-list fantasy that looked as though it was really going to happen and then... you-know-what intervened and the sail company used their enforced and extended gap in voyage operations for dry-dock maintenance. Their rational pragmatism was outweighed only by my disappointment but where else, I thought, have I always wanted to visit?

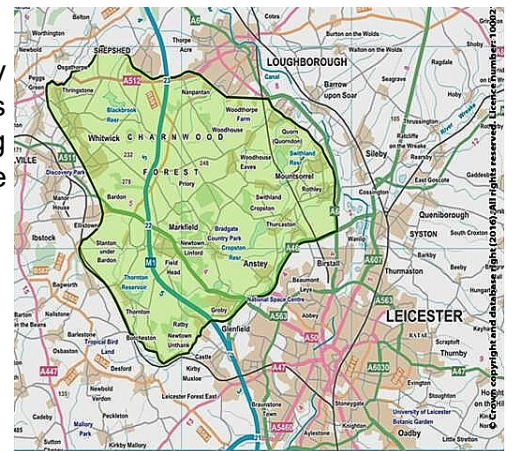


Charnwood Forest is one of the few parts of England where there are exposures of rocks dating to Precambrian times. During the 1950's a schoolboy discovered the first of a number of unique fossils from the Precambrian making this area a globally important geological site. The rugged topography is due to 'resistant craggy knolls' protruding through an overlying unconformity of Triassic age mudstone and Quaternary deposits. The resistant protrusions include pyroclastic deposits composed of plagioclase, quartz and volcanic ash.

The area lies about ninety miles from Cambridge and to the northwest of Leicester. A useful area to begin explorations is at Bradgate Country Park: this was formerly the family seat of the Grey family and the childhood home of Lady Jane Grey (the 'Nine-Day Queen'). In more recent times the estate was gifted 'to the people of Leicester' and is now a well-cared-for public park.

Staying within and close to the confines of Bradgate Park only afforded a limited view of the Charnwood Forest area but there was plenty to see during the two or three days I spent there. Going alone, I needed some guidance on the local geology and found the following source on line:

*Geologists' Association Leicester Meeting
Fieldtrip to Bradgate Park, Charnwood Forest September 2014
Leader Keith Ambrose, BGS*



Bradgate Park LEICESTERSHIRE

Key

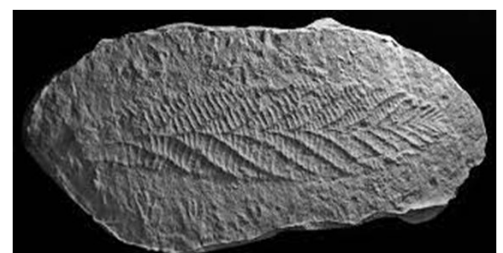
- Newtown Linford Car Park
- Hurrs Hill (Old John) Car Park
- Hatfields (Cropton) Car Park
- Swithland Wood South Car Park
- Swithland Wood North Car Park
- Little Matlock area
- River Lin
- Deer Meadow
- Centre Wall
- Yeomanry War Memorial
- Pheasantry
- Dogs on lead area by direction
- All dogs must be on leads between 9am-10pm in this area
- No Public access
- Woodlands
- Former Slate Quarries
- Toilets

Useful Distances

- P1 to Ruins 1/2 mile
- P1 to Deer Barn Tea Room/Visitor Centre 1 mile
- P1 to P3 1 1/2 miles
- P3 to Deer Barn Tea Room/Visitor Centre 1/2 mile
- Ruins to Old John Tower 1 mile
- P1 to P2 1 1/2 miles
- P1 to P2 to P3 to P1 (within the Park) 4 1/2 miles
- P1 to P5 1 mile

This fifteen-page guide was well illustrated with maps, coloured illustrations and photographs. The guide includes a visit to the Swithland Wood area formerly known for its *Swithland slate* quarries.

Well, it wasn't quite as exotic as the aforementioned Icelandic expedition but it was well worth the visit nonetheless.



FEN EDGE TRAIL UPDATE

Chris Donnelly

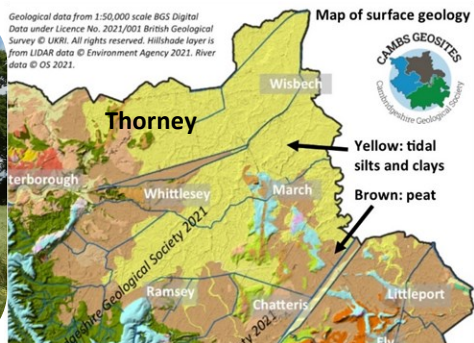


Even these days, you are never far from water in the Fens but, through geology, we also have a vision into the past to see evidence of ancient rivers, lakes and even sea incursions. There is a particularly watery theme running through our recently published walks when it comes to geological clues to dynamic, and historically significant, past environments. This spring and summer we have guided walks in both areas mentioned below.

Two of the new walks featured the southern end of the Ouse Washes, near Earith, not only interesting as a major centre of fen drainage and part of an internationally significant wildlife corridor, but also for its history of the River Great Ouse as it empties into the fenland. On our Somersham to Earith walk (orange on the map), you pass near a wide band of alluvium along the fen edge. This was once the course of the Ouse (the 'West Water') when it flowed north towards the Wash past Chatteris to Benwick to join a complex system of watercourses that included flow from the old Nene. Today only a small ditch, called the Cranbrook Drain, remains, carrying water from the highland to the west of Somersham, to the fenland. The map also shows alluvium depicting the much wider previous course of the Old West River flowing east to (now) join the Ouse to the Cam. Our walk out along the Old and New Bedford Rivers (pink) follows the recent alluvium from the 'new' Ouse Washes; a podcast produced by the Word Garden describes the fascinating 17th century digging of these two impressive, and hugely important (to current flood control), drains. Finally, the extensive swathe of river terrace gravels south of Earith tells the story of a huge braided 'ice age' river system forming a delta like landscape. Covered in peats, sands and silts, the impressive archaeological history of this area (now RSPB Ouse Fen) has been discovered by Cambridge Archaeological Unit (see the book *Twice-crossed River* by Christopher Evans) - a complex story on which we have thrown a bit of light in our Walk Guides! Download the Guides to have a read through, even if you don't do the walks www.fenedgetrail.org/ramsey-to-st-ives/warboys-to-earith.



In contrast to the freshwater environment around Earith (although the Ouse is currently tidal to a little further upriver), our walk at Thorney highlights the extensive marine deposits (labelled as 'tidal silts & clays' on geology maps) that surround the island. Many people assume that most of the fenland is covered in peat (albeit wasting away) but, even in Cambridgeshire, known for its peat fens, there is a large area of 'silt fen', reaching as far south as Chatteris and almost Ramsey. Distinguished by a lighter-coloured soil than the peat, these silt areas are obvious on a geological map. Further north there are silts from a c.2,000 year old (Roman age), less extensive marine inundation but, this far inland, these are much older deposits; they date back to the Bronze Age sea incursion (c.3,800 years ago) that buried the extensive (Lower) peat that had been forming for the previous few thousand years (and that now lies beneath them). Left by salt marshes, creeks and tidal rivers, these 'muddy' deposits now form slightly undulating land due to the many 'roddons' (beds of long-dry water channels) that have less peat beneath them and have not suffered as much from shrinkage. Further south, this layer of Bronze Age clays and silts (the famous 'Fen Clay' of Sir Harry Godwin et al), forms a layer within the peat that has been covered by a few thousand years of younger peat from more recent freshwater 'swamps' (www.fenedgetrail.org/overview/the-sea-in-the-fens). Our walk around the iconic 'fen' island of Thorney, therefore, sees no peat but crosses the silt fen, and it also reveals the fascinating history of the enigmatic 'March Gravels' that have a confusing mixture of warm (including marine) and cold period elements. There is more to Thorney than its 'model village' and abbey (although both are very interesting too!) www.fenedgetrail.org/thorney. **Guided walk in Thorney on July 2nd.**



CAMBRIDGESHIRE MARINE REPTILES *Richard Forrest, Chair PGP (guest article)*

Underlying the flat fenlands of Cambridgeshire are clays formed during the Middle and Upper Jurassic when the area was a warm tropical sea teeming with life. Some of the animals would seem familiar to our eyes but most were unlike any modern forms. The invertebrate fauna was dominated by ammonites and belemnites, cephalopods related to modern squid and cuttlefish. Many of the fishes were armoured with hard scales. Taking the place of modern sharks, whales and seals, were the great marine reptiles, the ichthyosaurs, marine crocodiles and plesiosaurs.

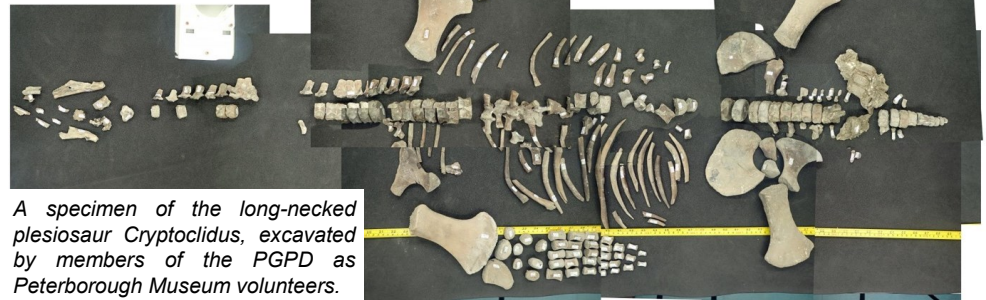
The dolphin-like ichthyosaurs were much more varied in the Triassic and Lower Jurassic and are represented after this by a single family, the Ophthalmosaurs, which persisted until the later part of the Cretaceous. Crocodiles evolved from land-dwelling ancestors and were much

more diverse in the past than today. They evolved a wide variety of forms, including the marine crocodiles - the teleosaurs which, unlike their modern relatives, were highly adapted for life in the water. Some of them had lost their body armour completely and had flippers for legs and a tail fin. Plesiosaur ancestry is a bit of a mystery. They appear quite suddenly in the fossil record after the big extinction event which marks the boundary between the Triassic and Jurassic. There was a wide spread of different body types when they first appeared, and the Middle Jurassic fauna includes large-headed predatory pliosaurs and several different genera of the more typical long-necked form. Specimens of all these marine reptiles, as well as a myriad of fish and invertebrates, are found in the Jurassic clays. We find bones of dinosaurs from carcasses which had been washed out to sea on very rare occasions, and even more rarely the bones of flying reptiles, the pterosaurs, in the gut contents of the marine reptiles.

The clays from which fossils of these animals are collected are exploited on a huge scale for brick-making, an industry still very active today. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, clay was excavated manually by labourers who came across vertebrate fossils as they worked, and sold them for a few shillings to local collectors. The most significant of these was the Leeds family whose home in Eye, near Peterborough, housed the largest collection of vertebrates from a single locality from anywhere in the world. It outgrew the space available twice, and parts of it were sold to the Natural History Museum and other institutions in the UK, Germany and other parts of Europe as well as the USA. Fossil marine reptiles continue to be found today, though on a smaller scale because of the more mechanised ways in which clay is extracted. New finds are especially important because we can record much more information than is available from historic collections. We can pin-point the exact bed in which they are found, and record the bones as they were lying on the sea floor. Palaeontologists used to be more interested in finding the most complete and perfect specimens rather than understanding the history of the fossils and unravelling the clues which tell the story of how they were formed and the environment in which they lived. Careful and systematic excavation opens new windows into the distant past.

Amateur groups have played an important role in making new discoveries. The Stamford and District Geological Society, formed and led by the late Alan Dawn, made a number of significant finds including species new to science. A direct successor of this is the Peterborough Geological and Palaeontological Group (:PGPT), set up in 2020 (just in time for COVID!) to continue their programme of field trips. Members of the group have found and excavated several scientifically important specimens. <https://peterboroughgeology.org/>

This specimen is now on display in the museum.



*A specimen of the long-necked plesiosaur *Cryptoclidus*, excavated by members of the PGP as Peterborough Museum volunteers.*



David Savory excavating PETMG.365



A nodule from the fossil collecting area on the King's Dyke Nature Reserve

Collected by David Savory with the help of Darren Withers, it took me over two years to prepare, during which process it acquired the name "The Famous Exploding Plesiosaur". The PGP is setting up an area at Flag Fen Archaeology Park to display this and other fossils found by our members.

THE MOOT STONES OF HUNTINGDONSHIRE *Don Hill (guest article)*

Visit the little church at Toseland¹ today and you will probably fail to notice it – an inconspicuous stone, half hidden in the ground, to the right of the old Norman doorway. According to tradition, this was a moot stone, one of four such markers, roughly evenly spaced across the former county of Huntingdonshire.



They are remnants of a medieval administrative system that once covered most of the country and they mark the places where the men of a

'hundred'² met to decide matters of law and order. Every four weeks they would gather, not in towns or in important buildings, but outdoors, in places of 'neutrality' as far as possible from the

influence of any specific community. Open-air winter assemblies must have been bleak affairs!

Huntingdonshire's other three assembly places were located in similarly remote positions. In the east the so-called 'Abbot's Chair' (or Hurstingstone) was placed at the highest point on the road from Old Hurst to



The Abbot's Chair in the Norris Museum, St Ives.

St Ives, though it is now in the Norris Museum. In the west, a large stone is displayed outside the churchyard gate in Leighton Bromswold but may once have stood to the east of the village. Normancross, in the north, was not a stone as such but a standing cross which once stood where the road from Yaxley to Folksworth intersected with Ermine Street. Now there is nothing to see.

Sometimes a clue to the origin of a moot stone is revealed by an intriguing place-name. Toseland for example is Viking, deriving from 'Toglos' grove', where Toglos was an early 10th century Viking Earl of Huntingdon, killed at the battle of Tempsford in the summer of the year 917. Similarly Normancross is 'the cross of the Norseman', after a Viking from that part of Scandinavia we now call

Norway. This is unusual in this part of the country, where most of the Vikings were Danes. All these places hold a long history, yet none has been systematically studied. Their place in the historical landscape, archaeological potential and the geological origins of the stones remain an untapped resource to be probed. Whilst a start has been made at the Toseland site, much remains to be explored.

¹ Immediately north-east of St Neots.

² A hundred was an administrative unit of land made up of multiple parishes but smaller than a county. In Huntingdonshire's case each hundred comprised a quarter of the shire.



The Leighton-stone

CGS is hoping to compile a record of large stones to be found in the county, many of which may be glacial erratics, so if you would like to help with this, please contact us. The article from Don highlights how many of these have been used in the past and shows their value in a cultural context. Do let us know of any that you have seen and if you have a photo that would be a bonus.

BOOK REVIEWS:**Penny Cogill**

Devonshire Marbles, their Geology, History and Uses, by Gordon Walker, in the GA guide series, No. 72, Vols. 1 and 2

These two volumes were recommended to me by Dr. Nigel Woodcock when examining the beautiful marble tables in the Watson Gallery at the Sedgwick Museum. The author and his colleagues were on a mission. Devonshire marbles got everywhere: in churches, museums, cathedrals, and country houses, here and abroad. However, knowledge

of them has been lost – the works are gone, the quarries overgrown and the labels mislaid. This book is witness to the success of the author in tracking them down and setting them clearly on the map in their rightful place as stones of exceptional beauty. Their most notable characteristics are their diverse colours and their beautiful coral patterning, as seen most clearly in the tables in the Watson Gallery.

Both these volumes are lavishly illustrated. The first discusses the geology and location of the marbles, which lies in a narrow limestone band formed in coral seas, now stretching from Plymouth to Torquay. The lime sediments of these seas became consolidated into rocks that were first deeply buried and later lofted to form eroding highlands. The book provides guided tours of the disused quarries that were once integral to an industry that produced lime for agriculture and building stone for cities. The family histories of the quarrymen are also described in detail along with the premises they occupied and the kinds of ornamental objects they created. The second volume illustrates where and how Devonshire marbles were used around the UK and the world and shows the reader how to distinguish them from superficially similar stones from other regions. Close to home, in addition to the tables, visit the Fitzwilliam Museum where the entrance hall stairway has East Ogwell balustrades and wall coverings, which blend admirably with the the Siena marble rails and Peterhead granite pillars. Sir George Gilbert Scott also used Devonshire marbles in the decorative shafts in his chapel at St John's College. *The books are a joy to read and a geologist's delight. As for decorative items featuring the marbles themselves, keep your eyes out in antique shops and car-boot sales. You might be lucky and spot a gem. (£12 each from the Geological Society.)*

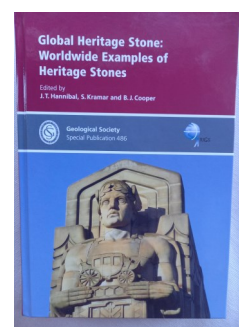
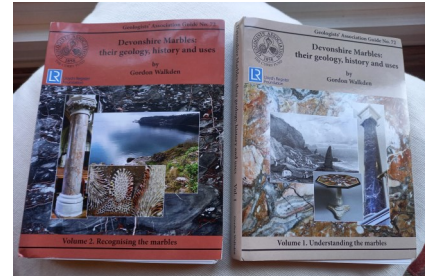
Global Heritage Stone: Worldwide Examples of Heritage Stones, edited by Hannibal, Kramer and Cooper - a Geological Society Special Publication, No. 486, 2020.

I bought this book on offer from the Geological Society hoping for some more insight into British stones, but none are mentioned here as they are dealt with (I guess and hope) in an earlier publication, *407 Global Heritage Stone: Towards International Recognition of Building and Ornamental Stones*.

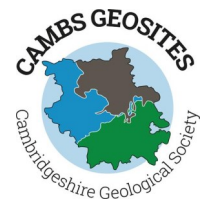
Much as our CGS is establishing buildings that can represent type-stones for the Lincolnshire Limestones used in Cambridge, so, internationally, committees are recognising particular quarries around the world for the heritage stones they have provided for key public buildings either locally or further afield. Sustained use of a particular stone contributes to the overall definition of a town or city or village, and using the correct stone in conserving a building such as Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris after the conflagration is vital for faithful renovation. This book is therefore a compilation of papers from geologists around the world attempting to justify why their particular stone and quarry should be registered as a Heritage Stone. Examples include: Victorian Bluestone in Australia – an iconic basalt stone from Victoria used domestically and internationally; Trentino Porphyry from Italy – a rhyolitic-rhyodacitic ignimbrite used for road-setts, paving and tiles both locally and internationally; Indiana Limestone – America's building stone; Belgian black 'marbles' – used extensively for their high polish in architectural decoration and sculpture; Connemara Marble from Ireland; and Shoksha quartzite from Russia – a haematic quartzite used for monuments and sarcophagi; Heritage stones of India. Formal recognition as a GHSR (Global Heritage Stone Resource) or a group of stones as a GHSP (Global Heritage Stone Province) is ultimately decided by the Heritage Stones Subcommittee of the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) Commission for Geoheritage (formerly the Heritage Stone Task Group of the IUGS).

This book is extensively illustrated with photographs of buildings and quarries and there is good geological detail of the formations discussed. Consult it next time you travel abroad so you can knowledgeably describe the local building stone types!

~£30 on offer.



GEOSITES UPDATE *Chris Donnelly*



We are very pleased to announce that our proposal for three new Local Geological Sites was accepted at the County Sites meeting in February bringing the total Cambs LGS to 11 (not including the 6 in the Peterborough District). The three sites are Heydon Chalk Pit, Isleham Lime Kilns and Ramsey Heights Brick Kiln & Clay Pits. All three qualified under the education, historical and aesthetic criteria and the first two also qualified for scientific value. More information will be on our website soon www.cambsgeology.org/local-sites.



Heydon Chalk Pit is a disused quarry that has small 'cliffs' of the Lewes Nodular Chalk, rarely exposed in Cambridgeshire, and also structural features indicative of disturbance of the Chalk at an ice-contact margin, with chalk breccia either glacial or periglacial in origin, overlain at one location by till (diamiction) which is regarded as part of the Lowestoft Formation. It is very possible that at least part of the exposures here represent chalk rafting – this is still being investigated. The quarry is mentioned as a site for chalk rafts in relation to the Anglian glaciation in at least two publications and was a significant source of rock for local building material. Owned by the

parish council, it has exposed faces encircling a County Wildlife Site designated for its chalk grassland, which is also a green space ('orchard') for villagers, situated in a typical chalk landscape of spurs and dry valleys. (Open access, limited parking.)

Isleham Lime Kilns are four disused kilns dating from c.1860, sitting within a quarry site where the Totternhoe Stone as well as the bounding West Melbury Marly Chalk and Zig Zag Chalk were quarried. The site is owned by East Cambridgeshire District Council and the kilns are now classed as an Ancient Monument. The outer lintels of the access doors are of Totternhoe Stone. The kilns would have burned mostly the poorer quality WMMC and Zig Zag Chalk, with the more prized, harder TS being used for building, and indeed there is evidence of substantial quarrying in Isleham for the TS since medieval times. There is full public access all around the kilns, but no access inside where bats may be roosting. Some of the interior of the kiln structure can be seen through window grills and there is an informative notice next to them showing the process of lime burning.



4) The ponds appear
This pond below you and other ponds around the nature reserve were created by the brick workers.

5) Horses pulling boats
A hundred years ago on the large boats could see the drain. Rather than using engines, the boats were moved by horses pulling along the bank.

6) The burning boat
Here you can see what looks like a boat. It is hard to believe that this was once a boat for the boats. Now the brick workers used large wooden boats to carry the bricks. Once the bricks were on the boat, they would be taken to the kilns where they were fired.

7) See brick-making tools and the kilns
If the staff are here when you visit, please do ask to take a look inside the classroom and see if you can see any of our many events.

Discover more facts, history photos and film on the Great Fen website, www.greatfen.org.uk

Great Fen team
Tel: 01487 75420
Email: info@greatfen.org.uk
The Wildlife Trust Countryside Centre, Chapel Road, Ramsey Heights, PE26 2PS, (formerly called Rampton Mill) Cambs.

Discovery Trail: Burning Bricks and the Hidden Harbour Wildlife Trust Countryside Centre

This trail guide is also available to be downloaded from the Great Fen team.

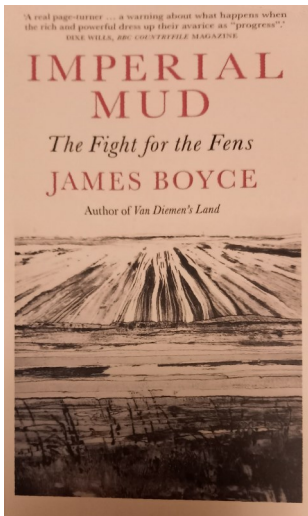
Great Fen
Distance: 800m
Time: 20-30 mins

Great Fen
www.greatfen.org.uk

The site of **Ramsey Heights Brick Kiln and Clay Pits** is a nature reserve owned and managed by the Wildlife Trust BCN as part of the Great Fen. It has several small clay pits (now ponds) where the Jurassic Oxford Clay was dug to produce both bricks and tiles, and a countryside classroom containing the trenches of a small brick kiln (seen from the outside through a window). It also has the remains of buildings used by brick workers and the adjacent lode that was used for transport of the bricks and the local heritage interest. Its setting within the fenland with nearby peat, used as fuel for the furnaces, adds to its value for geological education, as do the facilities and interpretation provided by the Wildlife Trust. It is a County Wildlife Site due to the population of great crested newts in the ponds. The site is open during daylight hours. The classroom has limited opening. **Our field trip to the Great Fen in July will visit the site (see website for details).**

We hope to work with Peterborough Geological and Palaeontological Group in the future to designate local sites in the north of the county as LGS, including those with Jurassic fossils (see page 4). We are also continuing our work to ensure geodiversity is considered alongside biodiversity in the county's Local Nature Recovery Strategy and, with help from Dr Steve Boreham, we have started to put together a report on the links between local geology and ecology. We are also liaising with other local organisations and were happy to provide our geology map and a diagrammatic cross section of Quaternary deposits for a recent presentation by Brian Eversham, Chief Executive of the Wildlife Trust BCN, at a Natural Cambridgeshire forum on landscapes and habitats. The references to geology (and CGS) are at c.5 and c.12 minutes www.youtube.com/watch?v=QuA15r9m92M. You may find the whole video of interest.

BOOK REVIEWS: Penny Coggill *Imperial Mud - The Fight for the Fens* by James Boyce



For anyone living in or near the Fens or who loves the ‘flatness’ of this wonderful land, this book is essential reading. It is not a chronicle of the *draining* of the Fens but rather of how the ‘Fennish’ (Boyce’s word for the local people) fought against it to defend their way of life. Begin by thinking of the Fennish as the indigenous people who had learned to harness and manage the seasonal vagaries of this ‘watery waste’ to their mutual benefit, procuring fodder and hay for their cattle and sheep during the summer from the dried-out marsh, and a plentiful supply of fish and wildfowl during the winter. Each man had possession of ten acres or so of land and a market for his produce even in London or abroad. There were local materials available for house-building and fuel, and there was no overall landowner to whom he had to refer. Everything came freely to him from the Common, which provided both his land and his livelihood. The unfortunate downside of all this was that, except in one small region of Lincolnshire, there were no official papers to legalise any of these rights.

Now imagine a new board of management in the country, whether formed of Romans, Normans, or the English aristocracy. The Fens were viewed by them as a marshy waste, good for nothing except breeding indolent, insolent and impoverished fen-folk. Clearly there was a huge potential in draining this land and converting it into vast arable fields to produce lucrative crops for the new overlords – those who had now just assumed all rights over the land. These men were empire-builders bent on ‘colonising’ the local population. Never during any of the dam building, ditch-digging or sluice-making was consideration given to the people whose lives were destroyed by these projects. The Fennish refused to do the digging themselves so foreigners had to be imported who were not well-received by the locals and season by season the ditches were filled in, the dams broken and sluices destroyed. In some places indeed this guerilla activity went on for decades or even centuries, but gradually parliament became stronger and more determined and the army more effective, until in many areas resistance was quelled and the marshes successfully drained. The Fennish were effectively thrown onto the parish or left to become peat-cutters for others. It is a heart-breaking story of both the people and the land.

Throughout the book the conclusion we are being invited to draw is that the Fennish way of managing the land has been vindicated and should never have been destroyed in the first place, especially as the soils becomes less and less productive as the peat is used up. By the end, one has fallen in love with the Fens completely.,(London: Icon Books, 2020).

Note from Chris: In summer 2022, members of the CGS Fen Edge Trail team were able to meet up with James on his visit to the UK to promote his book. We were happy to be able to attend his talk for the Wildlife Trust at Ramsey Heights Nature Reserve and to accompany him on a trip around the Great Fen. We also met up with members of the Great Fen Heritage group to enjoy lunch with him at ‘the lowest pub in England’, The Admiral Wells, at Holme. We’d like to thank James for his compliments about the Fen Edge Trail and the work of CGS.



Members of the Fen Edge Trail team and the Great Fen Heritage Group with James (centre) at the Admiral Wells (July 22)

Solution to the New Year Geological Crossword Puzzle
(as published in the last edition of this newsletter)

1.G	N	E	I	2.S	S				
A				H		3.C	O	4.P	
N		5.S	L	A	T	E			L
I		U		P		M			A
6.S	A	L	T			7.S	E	A	T
T		C			8.C		N		Y
E		9.U	N	L	I	T			P
R	E	S		A					U
				B	Y	S	S	U	S