

Hit the heights in the low-lying Fens

Cambridge is firmly established as a tourist destination, but what of the fenland that surrounds it? There's more to this watery wonderland than you might expect, says Mark Sutcliffe

Cambridge conjures up images of punting along the Cam, many elegant college facades and undergraduates cycling to tutorials, gowns billowing in their wake. This sophisticated city is well worth a visit, and makes an ideal destination for a short break or a long weekend, with plenty to keep visitors occupied and amused.

But beyond the city limits, there's a wild and rather remote hinterland, sparsely populated by shy and naturally-reserved locals living among a stark landscape dominated by endless East Anglian skies. Among the flatlands of the Fens, you can catch glimpses of a mysterious waterworld, which even the Romans struggled to subdue and where Fen Tigers still roam among the whispering reedbeds. Until successfully drained in the 18th

>>



DON'T FORGET

You can book your pitch online at caravanclub.co.uk/searchhandbook, by calling our Advance Booking Service on 01342 327490 or, for AS sites, calling them direct.

THIS MONTH'S FEATURED SITES

- CAMBRIDGE CHERRY HINTON**
See p69 of the *Sites Directory & Handbook 2013/14*
- GRAFHAM WATER**
See p77 of the *Directory*
- HOUGHTON MILL**
See p79 of the *Directory*
- STROUD HILL PARKAS**
See p88 of the *Directory*



Cambridge Cherry Hinton Club site

FOR THE FAMILY



Full steam ahead

The Nene Valley Railway offers regular services throughout the year – daily services during August. There's a café and marshalling yard at the line's Wansford HQ.

T 01780 784444
W nvr.org.uk
Nearest featured site
Grafham Water



Working estate

The National Trust's Wimpole Estate in Royston comprises an immaculate country house, extensive gardens and a veritable menagerie of farm animals. Look out for regular special events (above) during the school holidays, too.

T 01223 206000
W nationaltrust.org.uk/wimpole
Nearest featured site
Cambridge Cherry Hinton

WATCH THE BIRDIES

Fur and feathers

The Raptor Foundation and Animal Experience are two separate visitor attractions next door to one another. See majestic eagles, falcons and owls before getting up close and personal with meerkats, snakes and spiders.

T 01487 741140
W raptorfoundation.org.uk
Nearest featured site
Stroud Hill Park



Rich pickings

There are many fruit farms where you can pick your own. Look for signs by the roadside, but one of the biggest can be found at Pidley, which specialises in strawberries.

T 01487 840259
W pidleystrawberries.com
Nearest featured site
Stroud Hill Park



FOOD + DRINK

Local option

The superb à la carte Barn restaurant at **Stroud Hill Park AS** offers a mouth-watering menu using largely local ingredients. Booking essential at weekends.

T 01487 842204
W stroudhillpark.co.uk
Nearest featured site
Stroud Hill Park

Riverside dining

Unashamedly posh and genteel, the **Old Bridge Hotel** sits alongside the Great Ouse in the centre of Huntingdon. Affordable lunches are served in the elegant riverside terrace restaurant. There is a serious wine list as the proprietor is a Master of Wine.

T 01480 424300
W huntsbridge.com
Nearest featured site
Houghton Mill

The big cheese

By law, Stilton cheese can only be made in Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire or Derbyshire, but now **The Bell Inn Hotel** at Stilton, from where the cheese was distributed nationwide and thus acquired its name, is staking a claim to be the rightful birthplace of the King of British cheeses.

T 01733 241066
W thebellstilton.co.uk
Nearest featured site
Grafham Water

AI FRESCO TREAT

Tea time

Tea and scones at the **Orchard Tea Garden** in Grantchester is a rite of passage for all arty Cambridge undergrads. Luminaries such as Rupert Brooke, John Maynard Keynes, Virginia Woolf and Bertrand Russell hung out here.

T 01223 551125
W orchard-grantchester.com
Nearest featured site
Cambridge Cherry Hinton

Ely Cathedral



“...the Fens are home to some of the most fertile soil in Britain”

century to create hundreds of square miles of fertile farmland, the Fens were largely out of bounds. Transport across the bogs and marshes was difficult, so after some limited attempts to tame the place, the Romans give it a wide berth.

The Fens then became the stronghold of the mysterious Iceni tribe and the region remained fiercely independent for centuries – its impenetrable vastness offering a base for Hereward the Wake to launch his uprising against the Normans in the 11th century.

Renewed attempts to drain the Fens in the 1600s were met with stout local resistance and despite expert consultancy from the Dutch, after initial success, these efforts resulted in an even greater area of the Fens ending up under water.

Nowadays the reclaimed land is home to some of the most fertile soil in Britain and, in an effort to turn back the tide of industrialised agriculture, environmentalists are attempting to return large swathes of land to their naturally fluid state in the Great Fen project.

Despite its untamed nature, fenland has always traditionally been a God-fearing region and is home to some of the most beautiful churches in the country. Prior to the urban sprawl which has latterly sprung up around them, the towering spires of beautiful

cathedrals such as Peterborough and Ely must have utterly dominated the flatlands that surrounded them.

Cambridgeshire is blessed with some of the Club's best (and busiest) sites, so while touring the county without racking up serious miles between stopovers is a doddle, it's important to book well in advance to secure your pitches.

Cambridge itself needs little introduction. An ancient seat of learning with some of the most striking urban architecture anywhere in the country, this compact little city is best explored on foot or by bike. Take time to meander along the 'Backs' of the famous colleges, admire the Bridge of Sighs and maybe take a punt along the river.

The city is easily accessed by public transport from the Club's Cambridge Cherry Hinton site and you can easily while



Houghton Mill Club site

away a couple of days sightseeing in this historical treasure trove.

Popular city sites like Cambridge Cherry Hinton are open all year round and don't really experience any let-up in demand, so don't assume that off-peak pitches will be freely available.

THE NEW AND THE OLD

Our suggested tour itinerary visits Peterborough in the north of the county and meanders in a vaguely south-easterly direction through the heart of the Fens to culminate in Cambridge.

Peterborough's 1960s and 70s new-town architecture can make it seem a bit of a soulless place, but there are pockets of beauty to be found if you know where to look. Like many places in the Fens, the city is cycle-friendly, with traffic-free routes, and the cathedral is an absolute must.

On the outskirts of the city, Flag Fen Archaeology Park offers a fascinating insight into the history of the area and is not to be missed. From Peterborough, it's only a 45-minute tow down the A1 to Grafham Water, where the Club site can be found hiding in a pleasant glade just to the north of this 1,500-acre man-made reservoir.

With pitches informally arranged, this pretty site is home to a rather unusual resident – Ollie, a two-foot tall European Eagle owl, who sits motionless throughout the day, occasionally uttering the odd baritone 'twit-twoo'.

The reservoir is within easy walking distance and the nearby visitor centre offers bicycle hire, snacks and access to low-level walks along the shoreline. You can also hire a boat to fly-fish for the reservoir's plump rainbow trout or attempt to spot one of the many rare birds which



DID YOU KNOW?
The Fens occupy an area of nearly 1,500 square miles in Suffolk, Norfolk, Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire

Grafham Water Club site

stop off at Grafham on migration in spring and autumn.

For a more comprehensive tour of the Fens, taking in some of the more remote towns and villages, head east towards Whittlesey, then south to Ramsey, continuing on through the interesting market towns of Huntingdon and St Ives before checking in at Houghton Mill or Stroud Hill Park.

CROMWELL COUNTRY

Conveniently located between Huntingdon and St Ives, Houghton Mill is a simple site adjacent to a National Trust-owned watermill on the Great Ouse. The pretty village of Houghton is just a couple of minutes' walk away and has a good pub and there are plenty of riverside walks direct from the site.

This is Cromwell country and the towns of St Ives and Huntingdon have close associations with the Lord Protector during his brief reign over the Commonwealth when Britain abolished the monarchy following the Civil War.

Cromwell spent most of his life in Ely (one of the smallest cities in England), where his family home can still be visited, but he was born in Huntingdon and established a modest power base in the area before becoming MP for >>



Houghton Mill

OUTDOOR FUN

Look Ouse walking!

The **Ouse Valley Way** passes right next to Houghton Mill and there's a lovely six-mile circular walk straight from the site gate. Look out for brightly-jewelled damsel and dragonflies and beautiful butterflies about the ancient water meadows adjoining the river.



Nearest featured site
Houghton Mill

PLAIN SAILING



Water world

Wicken Fen National Nature Reserve is a wonderful, watery wilderness superbly managed by the National Trust, where you can stroll among the Fens as they would have looked centuries ago and encounter flora and fauna you're unlikely to see anywhere else.

T 01353 720274
W nationaltrust.org.uk/wickenfen
Nearest featured site
Cambridge Cherry Hinton

Cycling

Highlights here include the mostly traffic-free route from **Great Shelford to Waterbeach** via Cambridge, which marks the 10,000th mile of the National Cycle Network with an eye-catching artwork. **NCN Route 12** crosses the western edge of the county and includes a delightful traffic-free ride around Grafham Water.

W sustrans.org.uk

Fen-tastic!

The hugely-ambitious **Great Fen** scheme is aiming to return a large swathe of the farmland between Huntingdon and Peterborough to its original state – creating a 9,000-acre wetland where the wildlife unique to the Fens can thrive.

Photo: Terry Brignall

T 01487 710420
W greatfen.org.uk
Nearest featured site
Grafham Water



CULTURE



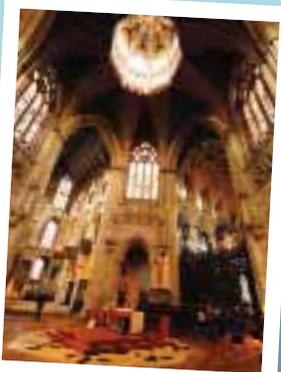
Bronze Age remains

Step 3,000 years back in time, when Bronze Age settlers eked out an existence on the edge of the wetlands. **Flag Fen** is home to roundhouses and a preserved timber causeway built over the marshes.

T 01733 864776

W vivacity-peterborough.com

Nearest featured site Grafham Water



Tower of good

Ely Cathedral's wooden octagonal central tower is unique – don't miss the chance to climb it on a guided tour. Admission is quite pricey but worth every penny, and the staff are enthusiastic and knowledgeable.

T 01353 667735

W cathedral.ely.anglican.org

Nearest featured site Houghton Mill



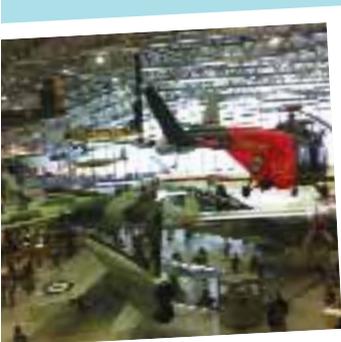
Tomb with a view

Catharine of Aragon is buried at **Peterborough Cathedral**, as was Mary Queen of Scots, until her remains were given a grander final resting place in Westminster by her son, King James I.

T 01733 355315

W peterborough-cathedral.org.uk

Nearest featured site Grafham Water



Aces high

The **Imperial War Museum** at Duxford houses a fabulous collection of aircraft, including Concorde, the massive American B-52 bomber and one of the world's fastest aircraft – the 2,200mph Blackbird SR-71.

T 01223 835000

W iwm.org.uk

Nearest featured site Cambridge Cherry Hinton

Cambridge in 1640, providing a springboard for his later ambitions.

Stroud Hill Park, an Affiliated Site, is a little further off the beaten track near the village of Pidley. Beautifully maintained with outstanding facilities and a seriously good restaurant in the beautiful barn which forms its focal point, this adults-only site is truly original and superbly run. Open all year, it's very popular at Christmas, New Year and Valentine's Day.

From Huntingdon, Ely is a 40-minute drive along the A1123 and you should allocate at least half a day to exploring the city and its wonderful cathedral – it's worth the trip to Cambridgeshire on its own. Its size and grandeur is on an epic scale, reducing even the most goddess of visitors to awestruck pilgrims.

Some would say this is Britain's – if not the world's – finest cathedral. The best place to view it over open country is to the south-east, near Stuntney, but if you're leaving Ely in a motorhome or towing a tall tourer, don't try to get under the low bridge below the railway – it's just 9ft high!

Cambridge is just a short hop down the A10 from Ely, but beware of the traffic at peak rush hour, which can be extremely



Stroud Hill Park AS

heavy on both the A10 and A14. The Cambridge Cherry Hinton site is on the eastern edge of the city and can be a bit of a fight to reach when it's busy, so plan your journey accordingly.

Built in an old quarry, the site is very sheltered and rich in wildlife, which explains its SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) status. Look out for squirrels, rabbits and all manner of birdlife. Open all year, with a high proportion of hardstandings and excellent facilities, it's right on the bus and cycle routes into town, which are the best way of getting into and around this wonderful city centre. ■

MEMBERS' VIEWS



Mike and Susan Ford from Potters Bar, Hertfordshire, have been staying at Grafham Water for the last 12 years and love the countryside around the site. "It's only just over an hour away, but it feels like a different world," said Mike. "If the weather's looking good for the weekend, we just pack up and head up the A1 and we can be pitched up and enjoying a cuppa before it gets dark."

Sparky the Jack Russell and Tilly the West Highland Terrier enjoy staying at Houghton Mill: "There's plenty of room for us to run around and loads of other dogs to play with and some lovely long walks along the river. And we can get into Cambridge or St Ives on the bus without having to move the caravan off the pitch."



Michael Obertelli and Janet Molyneux (below) are relatively recent converts to caravanning but they enjoy the lifestyle and set off from their home in Wigan, Lancashire, as often as they can. The couple love the quiet surroundings of the Grafham Water site, from where they explored Cambridge, Ely and St Ives, before heading off to the North Norfolk coast.



To read even more member views, see our fantastic online forum at caravanclub.co.uk/together

