

Water wonderland

Jonathan Manning heads east to spend a week in the flatlands of the Fens, which are packed with nature, never-ending views and captivating towns and cities

Wicken Fen: hoping for a bite

THIS MONTH'S SITES

GREAT FOR KIDS



1. FERRY MEADOWS
See p82 of the *Sites Directory*.
Open: all year. **Facilities:** playground.

GREAT FOR KIDS



2. GRAFHAM WATER
See p85 of the *Sites Directory*.
Open: 1 Mar-2 Nov. **Facilities:** outdoor heated pool, playground, play area.



3. CAMBRIDGE CHERRY HINTON
See p76 of the *Sites Directory*.
Open: all year.



4. FIELDS END WATER CARAVAN PARKAS
See p83 of the *Sites Directory*.
Open: all year.



You can book your pitch online at caravanclub.co.uk/searchandbook or by calling our Advance Booking Service on **01342 327490**. Please call Affiliated Sites (AS) directly.

For the most up-to-date details of all the featured sites, see The Club website. Alternatively, turn to the relevant pages of the 2015/16 Sites Directory

FOOD + DRINK



The Brewery Tap

Inside this former Peterborough labour exchange is the award-winning Oakham Ales microbrewery. Tasty, good-value Thai food, too.

Contact: 01733 358500, thebrewery-tap.com

Nearest featured site: Ferry Meadows

Houghton Mill

Enjoy a cuppa in the riverside tearoom, then stock up on wholemeal flour, ground at this Huntingdon mill itself. Isn't it time you packed your breadmaker when you go caravanning?



Contact: 01480 301494, nationaltrust.org.uk/houghton-mill-and-waterclose-meadows

Nearest featured site: Grafham Water

The Orchard Tea Garden

It's a lovely walk along the river from Cambridge to this heavenly Grantchester tea garden, which has deckchairs scattered below the apple trees. In the 1910s, it was the haunt of poet Rupert Brooke, economist Maynard Keynes and author Virginia Woolf... but you don't need to swim naked in the river like they did.

Contact: 01223 551125, orchard-grantchester.com

Nearest featured site: Cambridge Cherry Hinton

Fitzbillies

Behind the classic shop front of this Cambridge cake shop and café/restaurant, there's one bake you have to add to your order – a super sticky Chelsea Bun, something of an institution for generations of students.

Contact: 01223 352500, fitzbillies.com

Nearest featured site: Cambridge Cherry Hinton



A classic Fenland scene

Welcome to a geometric landscape, one sliced and diced by drains and dykes into an orderly shape. The flatlands of the Fens are an extraordinary place, where giant skies and vast horizons deliver an epic sense of space. Every slight change of light alters the mood, from blue sky optimism to grey sky melancholy and black sky menace. At their best, the Fens are mesmerising, but even at their bleakest there's an other-worldliness to them. Is this a landscape or a waterscape, or perhaps a hybrid waterland?

These featureless, black-soiled fields represent some of the most valuable farmland in the country, and have done for centuries. The wealth they created has spawned spectacular architecture and beautiful villages, towns and cities, which makes this a fascinating region to visit.

My journey starts at Ferry Meadows Club site in Peterborough. Carefully planted trees mask the size of this neat site (253 pitches, 132 on hardstanding), while just beyond the gate is a lovely country park with lakes, water meadows and the leisurely River Nene. With hides for birdwatching and an excellent network of smooth paths for exploring on foot or bike, it's an outdoor delight.

The Nene Valley Railway has a stop close to the site entrance, and its star attraction is a cheeky, blue engine named *Thomas*.

I decide to head into Peterborough under my own steam, an easy bike ride along the river towpath, before making a beeline for the cathedral precinct, an oasis of calm amid the bustle of the shops. The 13th-century cathedral is magnificent inside and out and, from the top of its tower, I reckon it must be possible to spy Ely cathedral, on my list for later in this tour.

TREASURE TROVE

First, though, a quick detour to Burghley House, whose turrets and chimneys create a dramatic skyline. It was built by Sir William Cecil, Queen Elizabeth I's treasurer, and its collections continue the 'no-expense-spared' theme, with walls of Old Masters paintings. But it's the colossal kitchen, with its polished copper and giant range, and the Hell Staircase that stick in my mind – different pictures of infernal heat. Far more lighthearted is the fun Garden of Surprises, where my children squealed with delight as they splashed through the water features.

Upping sticks, my next stop is the pretty Fields End Water Caravan Park (53 pitches,

“...peace reigns at pretty Fields End Water Caravan Park, the quiet helping fishermen trying to catch carp in the site's two lakes”

19 on hardstanding), where peace reigns. It's an Affiliated Site and adults only. The quiet helps the fishermen trying to catch carp in the two lakes and it's a blissful spot in which to sit and relax, until your float bobs below the surface of the water...

A short drive takes me to Ely, across Fenland where watery ditches divide the landscape with perpendicular precision. From miles away, I spot Ely cathedral sailing over the compact city, and I arrive in time to hear the choristers rehearse for evensong, their voices echoing around the fabulous nave.

Spirit restored, I head into town, where Tourist Information occupies space in Oliver Cromwell's House. This one-time home of the Lord Protector of England has eight modest rooms, which offer a fascinating insight into 17th-century family life, and I find myself spending much longer than anticipated browsing through the home of the man who allegedly 'banned Christmas'!

BEST OF FENS

With more time on my side, I could walk the path that accompanies the rivers Great Ouse and Cam all the way from Ely to Cambridge, but I'm determined to sample a full-on Fen experience.

One of the last remaining traditional Fens, Wicken Fen is at the heart of a project to restore the wetlands that once spread across this region. It's not being abandoned to nature, but water levels are higher, creating an environment where rare plants, birds and dragonflies thrive among the sedge and reedbeds.

Standing on the boardwalk, I'm overwhelmed by this floating landscape. Terra firma could become 'terra squelcha' with one wrong foot, and the sense that I could submerge and disappear feels slightly sinister. When I spot the free-standing metal bath tub in the restored Fenland cottage, I wonder whether it was used for taking a wash or as a lifeboat!

FOR THE FAMILY



Imperial War Museum Duxford

Such a spectacular collection of aeroplanes merits at least a full day's exploration. Perhaps time your visit to the area with one of the three fabulous air shows scheduled for 2016.

Contact: 01223 835000, iwm.org.uk/visits/iwm-duxford

Nearest featured site: Cambridge Cherry Hinton

Skylark Maize Maze & Funyard

This outdoor play centre in March is open at weekends through the summer holidays for pedal go-karting, den building, pig racing and a huge maize maze.

Contact: 01354 741212, skylark-events.co.uk

Nearest featured site: Fields End Water Caravan Park



Hamerton Zoo Park

This low-key safari-style zoo near Sawtry is home to many animals, including Malaysian tigers, cheetahs, wolves and wallabies, as well as an amazing collection of birds.

Contact: 01832 293362; hamertonzoo.com
Nearest featured site: Grafham Water



Nene Valley Railway

Catch a ride on this heritage steam railway whose locomotives include a familiar blue engine named *Thomas*.



Contact: 01780 784444; nvr.org.uk
Nearest featured site: Ferry Meadows

CULTURE

“Punting along the Backs (back of the colleges) is a wobbly thrill, more akin to dodgems than a gondola ride”



Just a few miles, but a complete world away, is the buzzing city of Cambridge, a hub of history and hi-tech industry. Base camp is Cambridge Cherry Hinton (56 pitches, 48 on hardstanding) where different levels create the feel of a sunken valley. The caravanners to whom I speak all offer the same advice – don't try to drive into the congested city centre, where bicycles 'attack' from all directions.

Happily, a bus stop virtually on site provides a launchpad to whisk me into the heart of the city, although I still have to keep my senses alert to the 'whispering menace', otherwise known as student cyclists. Thankfully, very few seem to oil their bike chains so they approach with a warning squeak, which is just as well because my attention is elsewhere, distracted by the beauty of the colleges.

TAKE A PUNT

King's, with its famous chapel, Trinity and St John's have the showiest facades, but I'm smitten by pretty Clare College and handsome Downing. Punting along the Backs (back of the colleges) is a wobbly thrill, more akin to dodgems than a gondola ride, and I do my best to stay upright and dry to the disappointment of my children.

However long I have to spend in Cambridge, it's never enough, but I manage to squeeze in a visit to the brilliant Fitzwilliam Museum, before stocking up with appetising treats in the market.

Just out of town, it's impossible to ignore the fascinating collection of aircraft at the Imperial War Museum Duxford, a big hit with my boys, while Wimpole Hall with its magnificent parkland, gardens and rare breeds farm is an instant family favourite.



Burghley House

Set aside a full day to visit this majestic Elizabethan house in Stamford. Once you've seen all the treasures inside, head outside for the fun Garden of Surprises, the Sculpture Garden and the Deer Park.

Contact: 01780 752451, burghley.co.uk

Nearest featured site: Ferry Meadows

Ely Cathedral

Dominating the city and the countryside that surrounds it, Ely Cathedral inspires an even greater sense of wonder inside. The interior represents a stunning feat of medieval engineering, while the view from the West Tower seems never-ending.

Contact: 01353 667735, elycathedral.org

Nearest featured site: Fields End Water Caravan Park



Fitzwilliam Museum

Celebrating its 200th anniversary in 2016, the Fitzwilliam in Cambridge houses the richest of collections, from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts to Renaissance masterpiece paintings. Admission is free.

Contact: 01223 332900, fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk

Nearest featured site: Cambridge Cherry Hinton

Wimpole Estate

There's a 20th-century feel to the interior of this National Trust house in Royston, the largest in the county. Don't miss the fabulous walled garden and traditional farm with rare breed livestock.

Contact: 01223 206000, nationaltrust.org.uk/wimpole-estate

Nearest featured site: Cambridge Cherry Hinton



OUTDOOR FUN



Grafham Water

The perimeter track around this giant reservoir makes an easy 10-mile trail with dazzling waterside views and no traffic to disturb the peace. Just note there's a 10mph speed limit for bikes.

Contact: 01480 812154, anglianwater.co.uk/leisure/water-parks/grafham

Nearest featured site: Grafham Water

Wicken Fen Nature Reserve

An impossibly rich nature reserve, Wicken offers a heart-stopping sense of space with its vast skies and endless horizons. It is also the National Trust's oldest nature reserve.

Contact: 01353 720274, nationaltrust.org.uk/wicken-fen-nature-reserve

Nearest featured site: Fields End Water Caravan Park



Cycling

The nine-mile 'Lodes Way' takes you from the stunning Wicken Fen Nature Reserve to the pretty village of Bottisham, letting you explore Cambridgeshire's manmade waterways and beautiful Fen landscapes along the way.

Contact: sustrans.org.uk



Punting, Cambridge

Balance precariously on the end of a punt and push your way along the Backs with a pole for a fabulous view of Cambridge's prettiest colleges. Or let an expert guide take the strain.

Contact: 01223 359750, scudamores.com

Nearest featured site: Cambridge Cherry Hinton

CHANGE OF LANDSCAPE

It's a wrench to leave all this behind and head to the immaculately maintained Grafham Water (63 pitches, 30 with hardstanding). The move represents not simply a change of landscape, but of mindset, too – if Cambridge was about being a spectator, Grafham is all about being a participant. On the reservoir, there are boundless trout fishing, windsurfing and sailing opportunities, while the 10-mile perimeter path is perfect for walking and cycling. What's more, on the horizon the land begins to rise. Cambridgeshire finally finds some contour lines.

Finally, a quick confession. If the superlatives throughout this article seem a bit excessive, it's because this has been my home turf for nearly a quarter of a century, initially in Cambridge and more recently closer to Peterborough.

Bound up in these wonderful landscapes, buildings and attractions are thousands of happy memories of dates, days out and children's birthday parties. Yet the chance to revisit them has revealed so much more – am I the only one to think that what lies on the doorstep can often be far more engaging and enjoyable than far-off lands?

MEMBERS' VIEWS

In between days out, **Phil Newbury** from Radstock, Somerset, was hoping to land a giant carp from the lakes of Fields End Water Caravan Park. "I came here because I have not spent a lot of time in this part of the country at all," he said. "I had heard about the Fens and thought I would come and see them." At the end of a "really good week", his highlights had been Cromwell's House and the cathedral in Ely, Sandringham, Cambridge... "and a couple of nice carp!"



Reluctantly packing up after a three-week stay at Cambridge Cherry Hinton, **David and Helen Green** from Northwich, Cheshire, would soon be returning. "We like looking at the colleges and I like King's College Chapel," said Helen. "We also go to Ely and my husband is a keen birdwatcher so we go out to a few nature reserves."

During a week-long stay at Grafham Water, **Colin Evans** from Spalding, Lincolnshire, had visited Sawbridgeworth Antiques in Essex, as well as St Neots, St Ives, Huntingdon and Cambridge in Cambridgeshire. "I really did like Cambridge and the park and ride is brilliant – just £1 to park and the bus fare was free with my pass. There is so much to do from here in Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire as well."



A regular visitor to Ferry Meadows since the 1970s, **Robert Jolley** from Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, was just coming to the end of a fortnight stay, his second of the year. "The country park brings us back," he said. "We have a dog so it's ideal for going for a walk, plus I like to fish and play golf, and they are both here."

Club Together

The online community that just keeps growing

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