

# Great Fen Local Group Newsletter

Number 6 January 2017

Great Fen 

## Chairman's words

A warm welcome to the Great Fen Local Group Newsletter.

As with previous years the Local Group has been busy organising a variety of events. Back in April the quiz night was another success, pitting 15 teams against each other and raising over £600. Our talks programme covered a wide range of subjects including the Pathfinder squadron, Romans in Fenland, the Spitfire excavation, frugal food of the Fens, the work of a Fenland Poet Laureate, and working in Antarctica. We raised around £700 from these talks.

The walks programme continued throughout the year, and included King's Dyke pits at Whittlesey, Grafham Water, Brampton Wood, Woodwalton Fen, Lady's Wood for bluebells, Godmanchester Nature Reserve, the Last of the Mere's Trail, Woodman's Way in March, Ferrar House in Little Gidding, Castor Hanglands, Ramsey Forty Foot, Hambleton Peninsula. All these walks were about 5 miles long and invariably finished at a suitable hostelry for refreshments. I would like to thank Clare and Andrew from our Local Group and George Cottam from the Hunts Local Group for leading some of these walks. We raised over £550 from these.

The Local Group has also been involved in visiting local care homes and putting on reminiscence sessions for the residences.

From funds raised this year the Local Group has donated £2,000 to support the Volunteer Officer programme which provides training for two young people to improve their skills in land management and wildlife conservation (see article on p4).

For 2017 we will continue to put on talks, walks and a quiz (see p6), including a visit to the Pathfinder Museum at RAF Wyton to see the remains of the excavated Spitfire (date to be confirmed).

The Rothschild Way is a subject close to my heart, as I devised the route. Although not organised by the Local Group, a sponsored walk



Fenland habitat returns at Kester's Docking

along its whole length of 39 miles will take place on 24 June – do try and take part if you can, even if you just walk part of it as a relay.

Last but not least I would like to give my thanks to the Local Group committee for their continuing efforts in making all the above possible. We are all very grateful to the Great Fen staff (Louise, Mandy and Lauren) at the Countryside Centre for their support for our committee, and particularly Paula Monaghan who arranges the talks programme.

**Adrian Kempster**  
**Chairman, Great Fen Local Group**

The Great Fen is delivered by:



Bedfordshire  
Cambridgeshire  
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# Restoration update

## Habitat creation on the Great Fen

The biggest restoration project this year has been land-forming on the western fields at Engine Farm, which began in February. The farm, which is 182 hectares, will ultimately consist of wildflower meadows, wet and dry grassland, and areas of open water.

An old linear ditch was partly filled in and a new meandering channel was excavated through the middle of a field, linking from a 'slacker' in the river bank to a distant section of the old ditch. The slacker will enable us to take water from the river to top up water levels.

Once the new channel had been re-profiled work began on creating a large habitat pool of about 2 hectares. As the base of the pool already consisted of a fairly thick layer of clay no liner was needed, except around the edge to prevent a lateral movement of water through the upper peat layer. The pool will be fed by a pipe connected to the new channel, allowing excess water in the channel to be stored in the pool.

The wildflower meadows are in their second year and most of the sown species have appeared. There has been a significant amount of thistle growth this year. A contractor cut and baled the material which will benefit the development of the flowers by reducing soil fertility and competition.

### Water levels

Water levels at Ryme's Reedbed and Kester's Docking have been higher for longer this summer due to a wet, late spring. Although late summer and early autumn have been very dry, soil moisture levels at Kester's have remained high in places.

### The Countryside Centre

Work at the Countryside Centre has continued in order to clear the ponds. The Environment Agency provided a work party to help with some of this work, helping great crested newts in particular. Further work across the site will be carried out this winter.

### New Decoy bungalow demolition

The old bungalow at New Decoy has been cleared away. This was carried out because of the asbestos within it and will clear the area for the future Visitor Centre facilities.

### Great Fen Volunteer Reserves Officers

Rosie and Phil, our Volunteer Officers, joined us at the beginning of February, although Phil could only stay for a few months. They have been involved in all aspects of the restoration and monitoring work at the Great Fen as well as completing brush cutter, first aid and chainsaw courses. We are extremely grateful to the Local Great Fen Group for the very kind donation presented to us for Volunteer Officer training.

### Friday work party and mid-week volunteers

Work parties have alternated between Natural England at the NNR's and ourselves. Tasks have included hedge laying, tree pruning and planting at New Decoy, hide maintenance, ragwort pulling at Summer Standing, thistle pulling in one of the wildflower meadows and sapling control at Rymes Reedbed.

Extra mid-week help has been provided by Geoff Willis and Andrew Cuthbert who have repaired dipwell enclosures amongst other tasks.

The Great Fen team is extremely grateful for the continued support and hard work of our enthusiastic volunteers.

**Helen Bailey, Great Fen Restoration Officer**

A new channel at Engine Farm



A pipe from the channel feeds a large, recently constructed habitat pool



Hedge-laying at New Decoy





# The formation of Fenland

## How the ice ages shaped our land

Over the last 2 million years there have been eight major periods when the global climate alternated between cold (glacial) and warm (interglacial) periods. The cooling climate caused polar ice sheets to expand and sea levels to fall. A warming climate caused the ice to melt.

The last ice age, the Devensian, ended about 20,000 years ago, marking the beginning of the most recent interglacial, the Holocene. Rising temperatures caused land-based ice caps to melt and sea levels to rise. At first this rise in sea level was rapid, but slowed as the volume of ice decreased. About 6–7,000 years ago, global sea levels were near their present position and the coastline roughly where it is today.

However, other forces were at play during this period. In Great Britain, the weight of ice in the north depressed the land surface, causing the land further south to bulge upwards. With the release of this pressure the 'bulge' began to subside, though with a considerable time lag in comparison to sea-level change.

### Fenland subsidence

This subsidence was particularly marked in southeast England. Thus, in Fenland the combined effect of these two processes caused an almost continuous rise in sea level from 12,000 to 6,000 years ago. By then, the Great Fen lay at the edge of what was a major tidal basin – essentially an enlarged version of the present-day Wash. Fresh water flowing onto the marshes combined with poor drainage probably resulted in the development of fen peat and oak woodland and an expansion of these habitats seawards. This effectively pushed the coastal margin seaward again.

### Rising sea levels

About 5,000 years ago this seaward movement was reversed, relative sea-level rise dominated, and the edge of the sea migrated inland again, covering the peat. At about 4,000 years ago, the sea reached its maximum inland extent.

For the next 2,000 years a reversal of this process took place. Impeded drainage helped increase freshwater conditions and with it peat formation. This encroached onto the tidal land



including the creeks, which became infilled with silt. The enclosure of saltmarsh and other tidal habitats from Roman times onwards pushed the land seaward, creating Fenland. Wastage of peat on the surface of former tidal land has revealed 'ghosts' of ancient saltmarsh creeks, known as 'roddons'. Look at Google Earth and you will see the imprint of these tidal lands on agricultural fields, allowing us to get an impression of the coast some 4,000 years ago.

### The Fen Edge project

The figure above shows the limits of the shore from the main periods of seaward or landward movement of the coast during the Holocene. The Great Fen lies near the furthest inland margin, providing an opportunity to understand the long-term changes that continue to influence Fenland today.

Interpreting this ancient landscape forms part of the Cambridge Geology Society's Fen Edge project. The aim is to create a walking route around the edge of the Fens in Cambridgeshire (roughly following the 5m contour). This will highlight the landscape history, geology and soils, and their links with human history and wildlife (see [www.fenedgetrail.org](http://www.fenedgetrail.org)).

***Dr Pat Doody is a coastal ecologist based in Brampton***

## A chance to learn

A Volunteer Officer, partly funded by the Local Group, describes what she has gained from the role

Before becoming a Volunteer Officer at the Great Fen I spent a few years after university in and out of different roles. It had taken me a little while to find the right place to start in the field – and then I rocked up here.

I thought I had a fairly good idea of what to expect, and I was more excited about some things than others – becoming chainsaw-qualified was certainly not something I'd considered before! The idea of being able to spend a whole year shadowing the Great Fen team and contribute to such an iconic project had immediately intrigued me. The theory I studied at university prior to this has given me grounding in the ecological principles involved. I have worked outdoors a lot, previously around horses, but this is the first time I have had the opportunity to get out and working on a site like this. I admit I had not heard of the Great Fen before, but on reading up before my interview I became hooked, and I was crossing all fingers that I'd be offered the role.



Rosie and a colleague spotting otter tracks



Rosie, on the right, monitoring a dipwell

### Unusual smells

I fully expected to spend the first few months worked off my feet and collecting bruises and aches, and I wasn't wrong. I've come home smelling of ditch water, manure, peat, fuel, decomposing barn owl, sheep, and, very occasionally, car shampoo for the Land Rover. I've learnt exactly how often my arm cramps up just two trees into a felling day, and just how long I can balance on a plank leading to a stilling well while a laptop downloads months' worth of hydrology data. The work is everything I want to be doing from here on out, and now I have more of the training and experience to help me stay in conservation. I have experience of both the management needed to restore land for conservation and the surveying.

### Funding for courses

A lot of the training happens on the job. However, as a Volunteer Officer I'm also lucky enough to receive specific training in some of the licences needed to take on roles in restoration. The donation from our Local Group has funded my brushcutter, first aid and chainsaw courses, along with all the personal protective equipment I need. And I've used all those skills and equipment since attaining the qualifications.

Having such formal training is pretty essential for my ambitions to keep myself outdoors and making a difference, so I'm very glad to have been given the chance!

*Rosie Goldsmith,  
Great Fen Wildlife Conservation Volunteer*



## Walks in 2016

The monthly walks organised by Local Group chairman Adrian Kempster have raised £550 in 2016 for the Great Fen. Here are some pictures.



Admiring the bluebells in Lady's Wood

Barbara Cradwell



Taking a break at Ramsey Forty Foot

Mike Grant

# Great Fen Local Group committee

The committee is detailed below. Anyone who wishes to help on a casual basis, or get more involved, then please speak to one of the committee. You may be able to help on a stand at a local event, distribute posters and leaflets, prepare the Countryside Centre for talks, or help with refreshments.

Chairman: Adrian Kempster

Secretary: Andrew Cuthbert

Treasurer: Nicholas Edwards

Events Secretary: vacant

Fundraising Secretary: Clare Dean

Publicity Secretary (& newsletter editor): Mike Grant

Let us know if you have any thoughts on how the money we raise can be spent on the Great Fen. We prefer it to be spent on identifiable projects rather than feed it into general fundraising.

## Local Group talks and walks in 2017

### Talks – all start at 7.30pm, £3. At Wildlife Trust Countryside Centre, Chapel Road, Ramsey Heights PE26 2RS

**Wed 8 March** A screening of the recently released “**Great Fen Spitfire Excavation**” DVD, with an introduction by a project leader.

**Thur 6 April Prehistoric Sea Creatures of the Fens**, by Naomi Stevenson. Hear about the creatures that lived in the Jurassic seas that once covered the Fens. The talk will explore all life, from plankton to the giant reptiles which sometimes turn up as local fossils.

**Thur 4 May Looking for the Goshawk – the Lost Raptor**, by Conor Jameson. The speaker’s search for a magnificent bird of prey that is making a comeback in the UK. He has recently published a book on the subject.

**Thur 1 June The Past and Future of Natural History**, by Brian Eversham. Local Wildlife Trust chief executive discusses the evolving nature of the study of natural history.

**Thur 5 October Great Fen Local Group AGM**, plus talks on progress at the Great Fen and free drinks and nibbles.

For talks after October, please see Great Fen website later in the year.

### Walks – all start at 10.00am, £2.50

**Wed 18 January** Grafham Water. Meet at Visitor Centre carpark at Grafham Water for a 5-mile on the circular cycle path to Perry, finishing at The Wheatsheaf pub. Transport will be provided to take the drivers back to Marlow car park. Contact Clare Dean: 01480 710134 or 07708 979694

For more details of walks, and those after January, please see Great Fen website.

### Quiz Night

Saturday 1 April at Bury Village Hall, Brookfield Way, Bury PE26 2LH.

Teams of 6. Info & tickets: Clare Dean 01487 710134

**For up-to-date details of events, please visit: [www.greatfen.org.uk/events](http://www.greatfen.org.uk/events)**

General enquiries about the Great Fen Local Group: [greatfenlocal@gmail.com](mailto:greatfenlocal@gmail.com)

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