

Today, Holme Fen is the largest lowland silver birch woodland in England, but it has had a very different history.

1 Whittlesea Mere and the Holme Posts

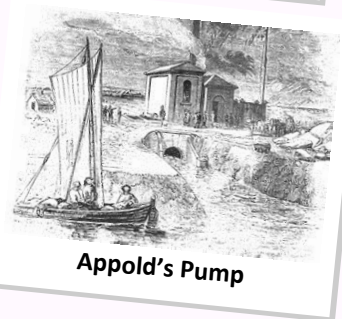
The ground beneath your feet was once level with the top of the Holme Posts. At that time, Whittlesea Mere was a short distance away to the east. At three miles across, it was a spectacular sight - the largest lake in lowland England.

You might have come to take part in one of the famous ice skating races (right), or you may have come to catch fish or wildfowl to feed your family.



Skating race on the Whittlesea Mere

Whittlesea Mere was one of the last parts of the Fens to be drained. Appold's Pump (right), the most powerful steam pump of the time was used. It was brought here from the Great Exhibition in 1851.



Appold's Pump

“The wind, which of autumn of 1851 was curling the blue water of the lake, in the autumn of 1853 was blowing the same place over fields of yellow corn.” Skertchy (1877)

Just before the Mere was drained, the original Holme Post was dug into the ground to measure the effects of drainage on the peat.

Once the Mere had been drained, over half the wildlife recorded in the area became extinct here. One example was the Swallowtail butterfly.

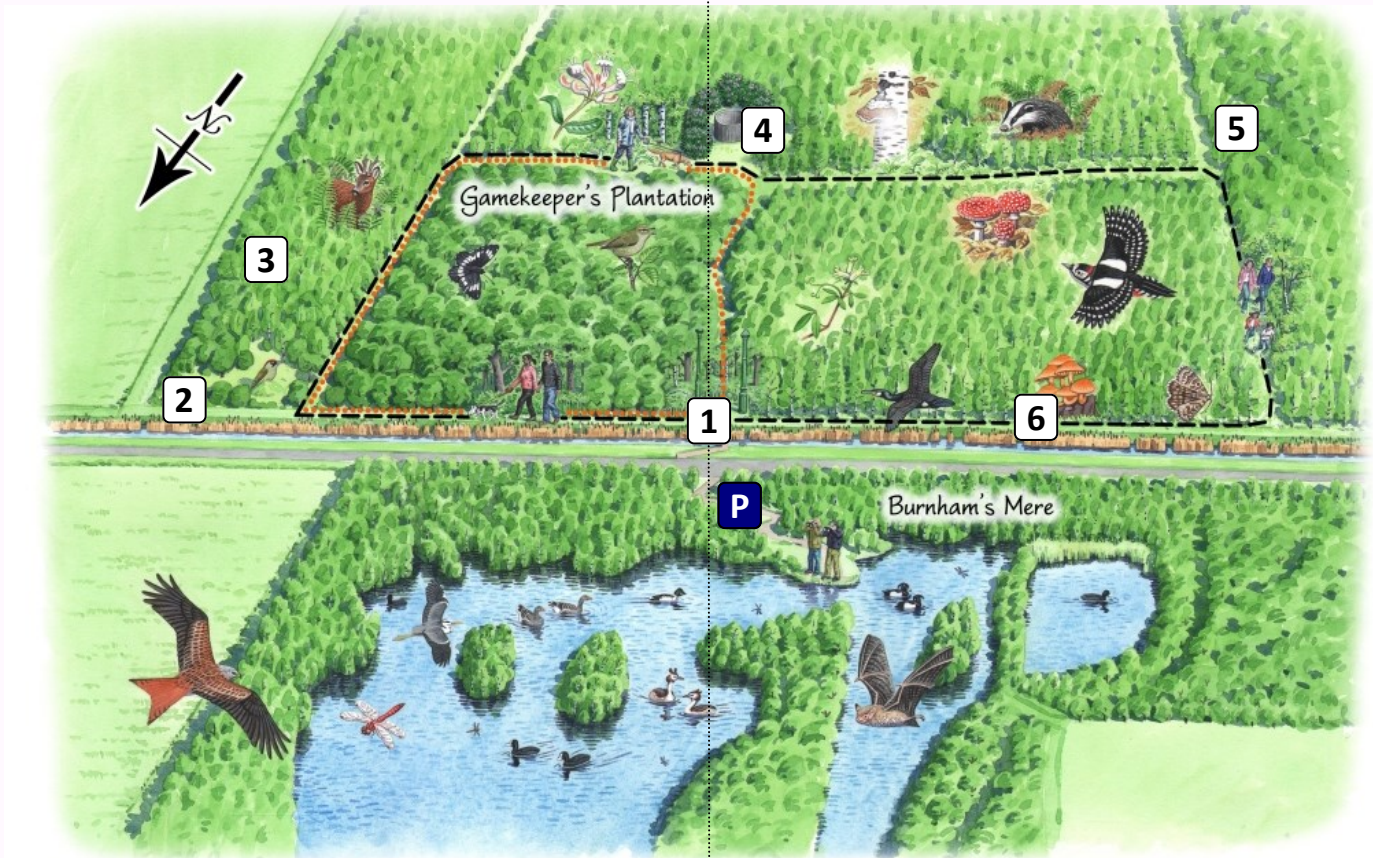


Swallowtail butterfly by Matt Berry

2 Disappearing houses

One of the most dramatic changes here has been the drop in ground levels following the drainage, as the peat dried out and eroded. Tony Redhead, whose family grew up here, remembers some of the effects:

“There was one house, in the 1950s, that had to be pulled down because you could walk underneath it. The house was up in the air!”



3 The gamekeeper's plantation

After the drainage, Holme Fen was not farmed because it was still too wet and boggy. As it dried out, Holme Fen turned from reeds to raised bog and then to birch woodland.

Earlier this century, this area was used for game. In the gamekeeper's plantation (also know as 'Ballard's Covert') you will see a mix of different trees including oak, birch, and alder.

The variety of trees makes it a good place to hear and see woodland birds, such as Blackcaps, Woodpeckers and Redpolls. Holme Fen was bought for the nation in 1952.

4 The charcoal bin

The charcoal bin here was used to make charcoal for gunpowder during WWII. A large part of the wood was cleared, and as it re-grew Nightingales could sometimes be heard in the spring.



Charcoal burning,
by Richard Allen

5 Fabulous fungi

As you explore, look out for some of the 500 different types of fungi in Holme Fen. They do so well here because the birches have a short life span of around 80 years, so there are many decaying trees.



Fly Agaric,
by Terry Brignall

6 The future

If you take a look at the drain, you can see how low the water is. This poses problems for the ancient fen species that survive here, which rely on moist peat soils.

Holme Fen has been literally 'high and dry', because the surrounding farmland has been getting lower and lower each year, as more peat is lost due to exposure with the air.



Ancient fen plants
are drying out

Over 99% of the ancient wild fens have been lost to drainage because farming on the peat soils was very productive.

However, the peat is disappearing and in some places has been lost forever. By connecting two of the last fragments of ancient fen - Holme Fen and Woodwalton Fen - the Great Fen will protect the remaining peat and create a stunning area for people and wildlife.

Holme Fen is a National Nature Reserve and is managed by Natural England.

Discover more trails, local stories, photos and film on the Great Fen website, or please get in touch with the team.



Young people on a visit
to the Great Fen



Photo: Holme Post c1920, courtesy of Huntingdon Archive

Great Fen team

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The Wildlife Trust Countryside Centre, Chapel Road, Ramsey Heights, PE26 2RS. (usually staffed 9am-4pm Mon-Fri).

Website www.greatfen.org.uk

For any enquiries directly relating to the National Nature Reserve please contact Natural England: 01487 812363.

This trail guide is also available in large print on the Great Fen website.

**Large
Print**



This trail is Heritage Lottery Funded

The Great Fen is delivered by:



Discovery Trail: The Lost Lake and other Holme Histories



**Holme Fen National
Nature Reserve**

Distance: 1.7 Km (1 mile)

Approx: 1 hour



Great Fen

www.greatfen.org.uk