The River Great Ouse ploughs through the landscape of open fenland, hedge-lined meadows and cloud-filled skies. This powerful river, now enclosed by elevated earth banks, used to sweep across the land, changing course regularly. Now complemented by a system of dykes and catchwater drains, the river carries excess water to the Wash to avoid flooding miles of fen land.

The importance of the river to people living in the area can be traced back many years. The village of Little Thetford was first mentioned in AD 972 when it was spelt ‘piutforda’, meaning people (piut) of the ford (forda).

It is thought that the village of Little Thetford was a main crossing point of the river. This theory is reinforced by the discovery, in 1932, of a Bronze Age causeway leading from Barway to Chapel Hill in Little Thetford. There is also some evidence of Roman settlement in the area, again probably based on the river.

Causesways and waterways

Canals and quays

A former settlement at Braham Farm owed its prosperity to the river. In 1086, monks at a settlement called Brahmewere were recorded as supplying fish to the monastery at Ely.

Unusually, the monks at Brahmewere were totally independent of the other monasteries. They lived in a grange (now part of the present farmhouse) and were served by inhabitants of their own village settlement.

When the grange and village were at their most prosperous, the River Great Ouse flowed nearer the island of Stuntney. A channel was dug from the river up to Brahmewere, where it divided into two channels serving both the village and grange (now called Cawdle Fen Catchwater and Grunty Fen Catchwater). A turning pool was dug to allow boats to dock and turn round.

The site of the turning pool can still be seen from the banks of the Grunty Fen Catchwater and is now occupied by orchards.
Farming and fortifications

The occupants of the grange must have earned a good living from their estate because they remained independent for a long time. They would have kept sheep, pigs and rabbits as well as bees, whose honey would have been used instead of sugar and to make mead. They would have obtained fish and birds from the waterways and would have cultivated some arable fields using oxen.

The old ridge-and-furrow pattern formed by the oxen’s plough lines is still faintly visible from the path to the west of Braham Farm. In later years a fortress was built on top of the ridge-and-furrow fields for defence during the Civil War.

Only 100 years previously the grange had become part of the lands owned by Ely Cathedral. Henry VIII challenged the power of the monasteries and in the early 1500s dissolved them, bringing to an end 500 years of independence at Brahmewere.
The Cawdle Fen Way

Circular route 6 miles
Allow approximately 3-4 hours

A walk to the south of Ely takes you along the bank of the River Great Ouse, a river which has been the life blood to Ely through the centuries. This ancient and once powerful river now idles through open fenland, passing by an area known as Cawdle Fen. Cawdle means cold-spring and this spring once supported a thriving monastic community at Brahmewere.

These ancient waterways, hedgerows and pastures yield up their treasures to the inquisitive, so take a trip out alongside the river to the forgotten village at Brahm now hidden away by lines of willows and enclosed meadows.

Starting at Ely or Little Thetford

Public footpaths take you through Cawdle Fen. Car parking is available in Ely and the walk may be started at Barton Square (near the Kings School) or from the station at Ely High Bridge. Two footpaths lead from the village of Little Thetford to Hall Fen. A slightly longer walk along the riverbank can be made by crossing the railway line at the south-eastern end of the village and walking up Chapel Hill to the riverbank.

Further information

Take care on the busy road crossing at Angel Drove and railway.

Footwear: The surface is usually dry except after heavy rain, but sturdy shoes or boots are advisable for comfort.

Maps: The route can be followed on Ordnance Survey 1:50000 Landranger Sheet 143 or on 1:25000 Explorer Sheet 226.

Waymarking: The paths are waymarked with green signs from the roadside. Waymark arrows indicate the way along the route. Occasionally, other rights of way cross the route and these are also waymarked.

Refreshments: Plenty of cafes and shops in Ely. The riverbank is a good location for picnics but please take your litter home with you.

How to get there

By bus Stagecoach 01223 423578
By train Nearest station is Ely National Rail Inquiries 08457 484950
By road A10 north from Cambridge
Inquiries Cambridgeshire County Council Passenger Transport Inquiries 0345 045 0675