**Tales from the River Mildenhall Museum talk 1 May 2025: Notes (see also slides)**

1

Tales from the River project

Imogen Radford

One of 24 projects – heritage, conservation, outdoor activities and more –

about the Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers (BFER for short)

supported by National Lottery Heritage Fund, 2020-2024 (extended to Oct 2025)

I will show images and talk about

* the project – stories we’ve gathered
* the types of places for recreation and for trade, industry and travel
* then take a trip along the river Lark to show what people did for fun and work

Before we start I’d like to get an idea about you

– put your hands up –

* who remembers swimming or playing in the rivers when you were children, later?
* …or did you go fishing …boating
* …walk by the river or do other activities?

Nearly everyone has some kind of memory related to water, usually pleasant

2

this map shows the rivers snaking across the Brecks

in a landscape that is forest, heath and farmland – the rivers matter

– long used for transport and moving heavy things – stones, flints, coal, corn, sugar beet

– often the reason why towns or villages grew up where they are

– now more for recreation and appreciation of wildlife

3

this map shows the Brecks and the BFER project area – the wider area in dotted black line, and the blue bits are mainly following the rivers

4

topographical map – shows sea level, the river valleys and how low the Fens are

5

mapping the historic places for recreation, large proportion swimming, using spreadsheets and Google Maps – so far up to about 129. Click icons for more info on online map, access via OSBrecks website (<https://osbrecks.co.uk/stories-along-rivers/>)

6

what we have been collecting:

Oral history, written input, from museum volunteers, responses from people at talks, guided walks and drop-in events and social media – this of great interest on social media

Three young women in 1947, Lakenheath Mill Pond (Lakenheath Heritage Group).

 on Facebook Relatives speak of how much fun they were

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Gathering stories and photos of recreation

in/on/by rivers and other waters, and of trade/industry

This image shows boating, but also shows Maltings and a Bailey bridge at Brandon.

How the rivers were used for trade and industry is more fully covered by the Industrious Rivers project, whose extensive study is available to download from the Breckland Society website (and a copy is at the museum).

8

Places for recreation: ferries, bridges, fords, mills, staunches

The places that people went for travel – ferries, bridges, fords

navigation – staunches, locks

– or industry such as mills, quarries

– also places that they went and still go for leisure activities,

can get access, long history of going there. Staunches and mills create deep pools

Image shows boys jumping and diving off a bridge in the Fens; the remains of a staunch in the river at Santon Downham

**River Lark**

9

We are going to take a trip along the river Lark, with selected examples of recreation and trade/industry

I’ll go from downstream up towards the source

I’m using maps from the Environment Agency – the statutory Main river map, highlighted with the key parts of the river.

10

A gang of Mildenhall Fen Drainage Board lighters in 1913 on the river Lark

(between Cross Bank and the Cock Inn. Also in Elijah Wells The Fens As I Saw Them 1976)

(well downstream out of Isleham along Fen Bank – which originally had several houses, pubs and school). The Fens – originally marshes drained over several centuries, and water had to be continually pumped and the banks continually built up and maintained.

It was an important route from King’s Lynn and the sea up the rivers to towns like Mildenhall and Bury St Edmunds on the Lark.

The Pepperpot

This eight-sided building is the base of one of the original wind powered pumping engines - one of the few remaining examples.

11

Important industry/farming – sugar beet – taken from the river Lark area to Ely

Memories of using a horse and cart to take sugar beet to Ely beet factory – could jump the queue as they couldn’t wait like lorries. This image is Cantley, 1912

Memories of seeing the barges being loaded up with sugar beet from the fields (Whittington) later used rail, then road.

12

Sugar beet being carried by barges, Wissington sugar beet factory, 1970.

13

A rural ferry, taking horses across. Ferries were important, just for getting to places, to save a long journey. Jackie who grew up and still lives downstream from Isleham used to use the ferry from the Cock Inn with her friend to get to Mildenhall (closed 1980s). Will who farms at Isleham made his own ferry with a couple of tractor tyres and a chain to get across the river to his land on the other side, saving several miles. He tried taking sheep across once but they wouldn’t behave properly!

14

Isleham Ferry (upstream of the current Marina, itself fairly new). Private but can visit once a year on the first Saturday in May at the ‘Spurgeon Trundle’, organised by Isleham Society and local churches

15

Isleham Ferry, chapter heading illustration, autobiography of Charles Spurgeon 1897

who became a famous 19th-century preacher to crowds of 10,000 +.

In 1850, aged 15, he walked 8 miles from Bury St Edmunds to be baptised in the river Lark – famous at the time and known as the ‘River Jordan’

Extract describing his baptism:

*“… The wind blew down the river with a cutting blast, as my turn came to wade into the flood, but after I had walked a few steps, and noted the people on the ferry-boat, and in boats, and on either shore, I felt as if Heaven, and earth, and hell, might all gaze upon me…My timidity was washed away ; it floated down the river into the sea, and must have been devoured by the fishes, for I have never felt anything of the kind since. Baptism also loosed my tongue, and from that day it has never been quiet.”*

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Baptism at Judes Ferry, West Row, 1914. River baptism stopped in the early 1970s.

Now a popular riverside pub at the head of navigation for motorboats,

popular for swimming and jumping off the bridge

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a further baptism in 1982, an American serviceman, And a swimmer got baptised at Brandon staunch in 2022.

**Other activities:**

18, 19, 20

* Sunday Baptist chapel outing by boat drawn by horses around 1900
* outing on three lighters joined by poles, 1905, from March
* Mildenhall Gala and Aquatic Fete 1889

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Boating on the river at Wamil

22

Walking along the bank at Wamil

The Hythe at Worlington – *“when I was about 5 years old my parents took us here for a picnic. There were a number of families there doing the same.”* (Robert Leonard)

The village still maintain it as a picnic area with steps into the river

**23**

Wamil White Stone

no one knows what this unprepossessing stone in the river is, though there was a double staunch here. But is it is an iconic location in the memories of locals

*“The fun days we used to have as kids spent by the river up Wamil at the White Stone, with a blowup tube from Thoombs garage and jam sandwiches and a bottle of squash.”*

*I remember the early 70's that area of Wamil being a major kids play ground, if we weren't swimming in it, we were fishing it! It was packed down there in the summer holidays.*

*Molly Star [local teacher] would take us girls there to swim after a hockey game, on hot days.*

**Mildenhall Cricket club**

24 – seeding, the second pitch (early 1990s)

Just over 50 years at the current river side site, soon to celebrate 150 years.

Cricket club has a wonderful archive collected oral history memories. Including Mike Kill, about how they established the ground, using the fertile soil from the riverbank dredging is to create an excellent square. They got everything ready by the summer of 71, then realised they had all this grass to cut. Mike said: “*… look I’ll make a start on it and I’m still doing it [2019]”* – and still is!

Peter Finnis: *“… for me sport was what filled the day really when I wasn’t at school – off down the football field or playing cricket outside …a sense of freedom to able to off and do what you wanted, it was lovely. So swimming in the Wamil just down past the club here... In the Lark that’s where I learnt to swim.*

25

the team in 1973, new at the current site

26

* water slide on a hot sunny day, 2013

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Looking downstream to Turf Lock with lighters, (On the left is Bridge Mill)

navigation in the rivers of the Brecks goes back a long way

Bury St Edmunds Abbey was rebuilt in around 1080 with Barnack stone carried up the river Lark from Peterborough. For centuries, this was the best way to carry heavy goods.

The river Lark was busy in the 17th and 18th and early 19th centuries.

In 1845 10,000 tons of goods and coal through Mildenhall to Bury on the 16-mile (26 km) navigation, stopping at villages and mills along the way.

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Looking up to Town Bridge

Lighters are the type of barge used on these rivers. With a shallow draught, they could navigate these relatively small rivers. Several would be joined together in a gang. Usually pulled by horses, occasionally by steam tugs

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Workers at Mildenhall Turf lock around 1889

There was a valiant attempt to revive the navigation in the late 19th century.

Hundreds of navvies worked hard to dig, repair and build, including turning the old staunch – a rather slow and laborious way of navigating – into a more efficient turf sided pound lock. Their labour over a cold winter was rewarded by a dinner of roast beef and plum pudding in 1890, paid for by public subscription.

But the coming of the railway had led to a drastic drop in trade:

by the 1900s only a few lighters were operating to take flint and gravel from the quarry and coal and corn to Icklingham Mill. Trade virtually dwindled to Mildenhall by the 1920s

Pleasure boats took parties up and down the river for longer, and local journalist William Howlett reported seeing 40 boats containing day trippers between Mildenhall and Temple Bridge on August Bank Holiday 1899.

30

Gasworks. The Lark was called the ‘coal river’ as so much coal was transported to Bury and the Mildenhall Gasworks – most towns would have a gasworks, burning coal to create gas for lighting and cooking. The name lives on in the ‘Gas Pool’.

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Gasworks, Gas Lock and Pen

Not sure what they are doing here – have a tin bath and a tin bucket – something to do with fish? Any ideas?

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In the Gas Pool and Pen people would swim or jump off the sluice – even on their BMXs – and one remembered *“jumping in fully clothed after a session at the Ship”.*

One group of lads would borrow the River Board’s weed cutting punt and go up to Barton Mills and back.

Some went fishing, catching eels that Snushalls fish shop would buy. The bream were said to be “*as big as dustbin lids by the cricket meadow*”.

33

This is an image of Parkers Mill, rebuilt in 1908

In the 1920s and 30s the mill generated electricity for part of the town. In the 1930s it provided a radio relay service, sending programmes by wire to speakers in subscribers' homes.

Milling stopped in the late 1970s, possibly later, now converted to flats.

and the Ship Inn (now rebuilt as a private house further back from the road), 1960s

34, 35

and two later photos – 80s

36

image of two bridges to the island where the rivers split – now replaced with the new bridge further upstream

*“My earliest memory of the river Lark is learning to swim at the age of 8 near the entrance to the Jubilee fields, in those days it was known as the Dolvers and owned by James Carter. I used to swim there with my cousins who were both older than me and strong swimmers. Theoldest one of my cousins used to swim down river to what was known as Cocksedges landing and back with me holding on to his shoulders.”* (Robert Leonard)

In the 1970s, an event called Larking in the Lark included raft building and racing, swimming, tug-of-war and a bonfire.

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Barton Mill

From the times when corn was bought and loaded with horse and cart. All changed now, Mill has gone, A11 cut through.

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Icklingham Mill

Several water mills are recorded in the Domesday survey of 1086 on the Lark and its tributaries, and some were still operating into the early 20th century.

Icklingham Mill ground corn and animal feed, trapped eels in an eel sluice, and traded coal at its wharf. Known as Marston’s for a century and now as Heygates, it has been rebuilt twice, extended, modernised, converted to a roller mill running on electricity, and still produces flour – though not using water power now.

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**Temple Bridge**

ancient river crossing point (Icknield Way), name comes from the medieval Christian Order of Knights Templar who had a temple and lands nearby, collected money from local mills.

Bridge raised for steam tugs to go under – though navigation had more or less finished by the time they finally got it built in 1912.

Vehicles crossed the river here until 2002 when that bridge became unsafe. It was later replaced by a bridleway over the weir just downstream.

Teachers from Mildenhall Upper School would take pupils with canoes to play in the river and on the weir here in the early 1980s.

*“Many a summer spent down Temple Bridge, I vividly remember my mum saying I wasn’t to go down the weir and of course I didn’t listen and had to come home in my new white denim shorts covered in green algae. I got in so much trouble!”*

*“I remember a night or two taking a rubber dinghy down the weir in the dark while camping.”*

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Icklingham Farthing Bridge/3 Bridges. location of an old staunch / lock

*“I plunged in a delightful deep pool beside an old hump-backed bridge above the mill at Icklingham.”* Roger Deakin, *Waterlog*, 1999

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Soldiers at Duck Sluice, Fornham, August 1915

Walton Burrell collection, in Suffolk Archives, photographer fascinated by the soldiers

stationed at Fornham Hall in the First World War, collection

showing their exuberance while relaxing in a hot summer

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Showing the structure – creates a waterfall to play in and a deep pool

One of our interviewees grew up in the 1950s on the new Mildenhall Road estate in Bury St Edmunds, and the nearby river was a magnet for all the children. The staunch boards were still there, so there was a long stretch of 6 to 8 feet deep water ideal for swimming

*“we always used to call it the ‘Cold’ rivers, when we were kids, but of course it was the ‘Coal’ rivers” (It was cold, too!)*

The St Edmundsbury Chronicle website tells the river’s long and varied history: navigation ; leisure; and restoration as a chalk river.

43 interpretation panels – Mildenhall Cricket club

44 Cavenham Heath/Temple Bridge

45, 46

at this one there’s also off-line web content, access with your smart phone at the site

– a couple of screenshots of some of the content, also info on the Heath, the river, local walks, other local history and art

(Three bonus slides about another activity popular in the area:

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Skating was very popular in cold winters, on the Fens and Brecks, on meres, rivers, lodes and flooded meadows.

*In the winter of 62/63 the Lark was completely frozen over some of us teenagers rode our bikes on the river towards Barton Mills and back.”* (Robert Leonard)

*Several folk remember skating on the river behind Mill Street in harsh winters.*

*“Skating was a big thing. we'd go up to Wisbech and you'd see people with their skates. With their long speed skates. One of my dad's friends was one of the champion Fen skaters.”* (Alexis Brand/Waterfall)

Image from Elijah Wells book – Littleport, 1891, Tommy Wells

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image from Cambridge News: famous fen racer with daughters (**Philip Doubleday) 1966**

2016 mini-documentary called “Chasing Ice”, on YouTube

– a story from cold winter of 1963:

*“…dad flooded the yard, and he bought me a lovely pair of ice skates with...the white boots, you know, the real ice skates.”* On cine film taken by dad.

*“my granddad used to say, 'crack she bears, bend she breaks'. So, if it cracks when you're going, that's fine. But if it's bending, it's not fine.”* (Alexis Brand/Waterfall)

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photo of people skating in the mid-80s – a period with very cold winters again – from Colin Ashton, one of our oral history interviewees, still has his skates and skating jumper

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Maps showing the rivers Little Ouse, Thet, Blackbourn, Lakenheath Lode

and the Wissey and its tributaries, and the Cut Off Channel, or New Cut

Together these make up the main rivers in the Brecks of interest to the project,

plus other water bodies such as lakes, ponds, meres. More in Online Talk…

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Thanks:  To you for listening

To our oral history interviewees and all who told us their stories and lent us their photos – a special thanks to the museum and its volunteers here

Find the online talk covering the whole of the Brecks on the BFER YouTube channel.

More information: [https://brecks.org/](https://brecks.org/a) and [osbrecks.co.uk](http://osbrecks.co.uk/)

Imogen Radford 1 May 2025