

# UNDERNEATH THE ARCHES

## A brick in a million!

*Bridget Flanagan describes the importance of the Ouse Valley causeways and reveals a secret in one of them*

Over Christmas and New Year we saw the wide flood-plain meadows along the Great Ouse fulfilling their function and holding deep flood waters for several weeks. Such sights makes us realise the necessity of the elevated causeways across the meadows as they maintain access to the river bridges at St Ives, Godmanchester and St Neots.

In medieval times, when the river was much less regulated and floods likely to have been more frequent, the causeways were vital to the bridges and market towns. We read that at St Ives in 1238: *'the abbots of Ramsey paid yearly for the [causeway's] use a pair of scarlet hose, 2lb of pepper, 2lb of ginger, 1000 eels and allowed common rights in the abbey's wood.'*

The 220 yards-long brick causeway at St Ives – The New Bridges – comprises 55 arches and was built in 1822 by the Bury to Stratton Turnpike Trust. Today the structure is the responsibility of the County Council and is Listed at Grade II\*, which places it in the top 5.5% of listed buildings nationally. During the last ten years there have been extensive repairs to the arches, but now the parapets along the footpaths are in a dangerous condition and need repair if the causeway is to remain open to the public.

In October 2020 Historic England rejected the County Council's initial proposals *'not wishing to see wholesale replacement of large sections of the parapets due to the impact that the cumulative loss of historic fabric would have on the overall significance of this unique causeway.'* However, new plans have satisfied Historic England's concerns: *'The proposed parapet remediation works are now a proportionate response to the requirement for the New Bridges to be operationally fit for purpose.'*

On the schedule of drawings for the repair works one very important brick is carefully marked out; it is imperative that this brick be conserved. The bricks for The New Bridges came from The How brickyards about half-a-mile upstream of the site, and at the time it was calculated that 1.2 million bricks were used.

The special brick has the date of 1822 with the signature of John Turner, the man in charge of building The New Bridges. He signed it in the wet clay before the brick was fired. So, just like a mason's carving in stone, it is the maker's mark. You can find this brick on the internal face of the western parapet, close to the Dolphin Hotel end of the causeway. In September next year this brick and the New Bridges will be 200 years old - a very special part of our riverside heritage.

The Great Ouse Valley Trust promotes for public benefit the conservation, restoration and enjoyment of the landscape, wildlife and heritage of the Great Ouse Valley and environs in the county of Cambridgeshire. For more information about the Trust please visit [www.greatousevalleytrust.org.uk](http://www.greatousevalleytrust.org.uk)



Geoff Soden's aerial view clearly shows the arches of the The New Bridges built in 1822 with, in the background, the Harrison Way causeway and bridge of 1980.



The brick autographed by John Turner photographed by Chris Morgan