

CROSSING THE GREAT OUSE

Bridget Flanagan explains how our bygone fords and ferries can tell us much about our past and the development of our communities along the valley.

Along the River Great Ouse the names of settlements mark them out as river crossing points – the Hemingfords, Hartford, the Offords and Eaton Ford. These place names originate from Saxon times (but may consolidate earlier names) and so are about 1,500 years old. The settlements were sited at the best crossing points, where the river was wide and relatively shallow with a firm gravel bed. In contrast, east of St Ives, the river runs deep at a sharp corner called ‘No Man’s Friend’ - not an advisable place to cross!

However, a ford is the least satisfactory way of crossing a river – you are likely to get your feet wet! It’s fine for moving livestock, and probably alright if on horseback or in a carriage. But the seasonal variation in height and flow of the water restricts its use. A bridge and causeway improve a river crossing immeasurably. The bridges at St Ives, Huntingdon and St Neots became strategic crossing points, and the towns grew into strong commercial centres.

Elsewhere along the valley, people continued to criss-cross the river as they had done for millennia – using ferries, many of which were located near the fords. The simplest form was a man and his boat, but these developed into rope or chain ferries where a boat was guided or wound across the river. In later centuries the ferries were big enough to carry a horse and cart, livestock and foot passengers. A pub was usually sited by the crossing so travellers could avail of refreshments while they waited for the ferry - the Old Ferry Boat Inn at Holywell for the crossing to Fen Drayton, and the Pike and Eel Hotel at Needingworth, for the ferry to Over. (Hereward the Wake is said to have crossed the river at Holywell as he fled the soldiers of William the Conqueror, but he probably didn’t have time for a beer or to wait for the ferry).

The ferries at Great Paxton, Holywell and Needingworth continued to operate until the 1930s; business declined when the car took over and travellers could easily drive further to find a bridge. But perhaps now is the time for a new era for the ferries? They would open up circular routes for many walkers, cyclists and visitors to the nature reserves and Ouse Valley Way. They could become a ‘ferry’ attractive way to enjoy our river!



An idyllic pre-WW1 postcard scene depicts the Hartford ferry loaded with cattle. Three ladies in a skiff, possibly tourists, pause to watch. Photograph courtesy Bridget Flanagan

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

