

Inspiring Landmarks

What makes our landscape different? Bridget Flanagan, Trustee of the Great Ouse Valley Trust, describes the unique appeal of its iconic features, past and present



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November dawn with iconic Ouse Valley landmark

When we are out and about in the Great Ouse Valley, as so many of us now are, we like to lose ourselves amongst the great stretches of meadows and vast open skies - in complete contrast to the restrictions and confinement of current times. There is a huge sweep of horizons in this low, flat landscape – but what and where, I wonder, are the landmarks that draw the eye, allow us to establish our location and are distinct to the area?

The first must be the church spires, where the faithful of each parish looked heavenward. They are an iconic feature along the river. St Ives is a town with two spires: the nineteenth century Free Church vying to outdo the 46.5 metres (151 feet) of the spire of All Saints (see photograph). To the west is the elegant spire of Hemingford Abbots and next the Godmanchester spire with its distinguishing three tiers of window lights. To the east, the collection of spires of Fenstanton, Swavesey, Fen Drayton, Over and Bluntisham preside over the river and fen.

Then there are the windmills. We think of them as gentle, romantic landmarks of the past, but the valley has just four survivors. Those at Over and Willingham are splendid with full sails: at Hemingford Grey and Swavesey only the towers remain.

Less appealing are the functional, solid and stark water towers – especially when painted white, such as that at Wyton.

Many landmarks have been lost. The industrial chimneys of breweries and nineteenth century steam mills at Huntingdon, St Ives and St Neots are now demolished. In 1989 the two cooling towers (55 metres/180 feet) and three chimneys, (the highest 76 metres/246 feet) of the old coal-fired power station at Little Barford, were blown up as watched by Blue Peter viewers. New, colossal landmarks have appeared – wind turbines. The most prominent are the eight turbines at Graveley with a blade height of 128 metres (415 feet). In reality they are even higher: this wind farm is situated above the valley at c 51 metres (165 feet) so its white giants can be seen for miles around.

Closer to our affections are the landmarks made by trees. The most notable are newcomers - the giant sequoias, or 'Wellingtonias', introduced from the Californian Rockies in the mid-nineteenth century. Extremely fashionable and expensive as rarities, they were planted in many a country estate and rectory garden. Having now reached 46.2 metres (150 feet), these sequoias have overtaken England's tallest oak of 40.6 metres (132 feet) and are catching up with poplars of c 50 metres (165 feet) high. But these trees are still in their infancy compared to the world's tallest in California at 85 metres (275 feet) high and 2,000 years old. Across the UK, and here in the Ouse Valley, they are landmarks now - and still growing for future generations.

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

