

The Fen Edge Trail

Walk: Warboys to Somersham

4.8 miles / 7.6 km
in partnership with



Warboys Archaeology Group

'There are amazing views across the Fens from the high 'plateau' at Warboys. You can even see Ely Cathedral on a clear day'

Mike, Warboys
Archaeology Group

a journey across a landscape and time



4.4f View down from Warboys ridge



2.1f Warboys



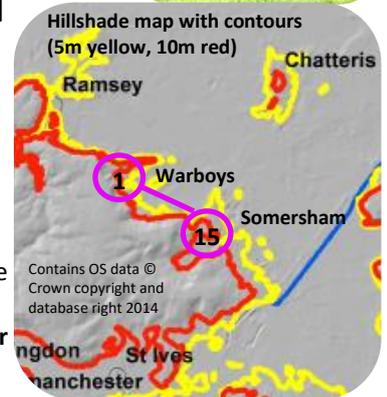
15.1f The Old Tithe Barn, Somersham



15.2f Somersham

The route: 'cross the fen under wide skies to the gravel peninsula of Somersham'

This walk, on the south western Fen Edge, is the third stage of the Trail linking **Ramsey** and **St Ives**. Having climbed up to higher land at **Warboys**, the route now descends again to the lower lying fen to head east to **Somersham**. Starting at about **32m** above sea level in Warboys, the walk reaches as low as **1m** about half way through, as you briefly walk on the edge of the **Peat**. Somersham is important for geological research as it has well-preserved sequences of **River Terrace gravels** from 'the Ice Age'. These show the climate changing between cold and warm periods, the rivers changing course and the fenland being flooded by freshwater and the sea at various times. This large peninsula of well-drained gravels has provided a significant area for human settlement. The walk follows the **Pathfinder Way** and the **Rothschild Way**. **NB This walk crosses the A141, a fast, busy road, needing great care (and it should not be crossed from the direction of Somersham to Warboys due to a blind bend).**



4.2f Footbridge, Warboys Heath



15.5f Millenium Stone



8a.1f All Saints Church, Pidley



7.2f The Gault Drain

Practicalities As with all of the Fen Edge Trail, you can walk the complete length of any suggested walk using transport one way or choose a shorter or longer round trip option, or just visit some of the places on the route. The walk is divided into numbered parts as shown on the two maps. Photo numbers refer to the part they relate to and the order they are seen e.g. *ph2.1f* is the 1st photo relating to part 2 (*f* = on this front page). **Length of walk** (one way) approx. **4.8 miles** without Pidley (guide time if not stopping c 3 hours). The GPS track is available – please email us. Grid ref for start TL30745 80117. Maps O.S. Explorer 225/227. **BGS Geology Map 172 Ramsey** (1:50,000, New Series). Free, easy to use online geology map viewer (and phone app **iGeology**) on www.bgs.ac.uk/discoveringGeology.

Transport and services Warboys is on bus routes from **Huntingdon** to **Ramsey** and **March** (www.stagecoachbus.com). Warboys and Somersham are on a bus route from **St Ives** (www.dews-coaches.com). **Buses do not run on all days. Train services at Huntingdon** (8 miles). **Parking** in Warboys public car park on the High St (B1040) near the library signposted 'Car Park, Parish Centre, Tennis Courts'. In Somersham there is a car park in Church St. Please only park where allowed and in consideration of others. There are cafes, pubs and shops in Warboys and Somersham.

Safety Be aware of risks you may encounter and take note of warnings given by landowners or on pathways. The terrain is mostly relatively flat but with some gentle slopes e.g. when leaving Warboys. It can be muddy when walking across the fenland, especially in winter and on 'sticky clay' as on this walk in places: walking boots needed in these conditions. Take particular care with uneven terrain, when near water, on soft or slippery ground, in the presence of livestock or walking along or crossing roads. Some paths can be overgrown, long trousers advised. Ensure your dog is kept under control as needed. All Fen Edge Trail walks are on publicly accessible routes. **Anyone undertaking walks on the Fen Edge Trail does so at their own risk, these notes are for general guidance only.**

Places of interest along the Trail

As elsewhere in the Fens, historic sites are usually found on the edge of what was low, marshy land, the **'highland' of Warboys** and the **gravel peninsula of Somersham** being good examples. The many **Palaeolithic flints** found in the Somersham gravels show that the area has been inhabited from very early times. **Bronze Age** tools and a 37ft long wooden dug-out canoe found in Warboys Fen (dated c.1,000 BC) are from a time when there was the most extensive incursion by the sea leaving marine silts, now only seen in the **roddons** ('fossilised' tidal channels) that rise above the **Peat**. An archaeological excavation in 2018 showed that Warboys was continuously inhabited from c.100 BC to c.600 AD i.e. from the **Late Iron Age**, through **Roman** and **Post-Roman**, and into the **Anglo-Saxon** migration period. It is a rare example of the **Roman to Saxon transition** in the east of England. Warboys was listed in the **Domesday Book in 1086** as **'Wardebusc'** when it already had a church and a priest. This Saxon name meaning "look-out wood" (from Old Norse words for 'beacon; and 'bushes'), is due to Warboys' position overlooking fenland and is thought to be unique, no other settlements in the world having it.

Warboys is situated in an area once dominated by the great 'Fen Five' Benedictine monasteries, all of which have early foundations. Around 974 AD, **Dunstan**, Archbishop of Canterbury, gave the **manor of Warboys** to **Ramsey Abbey**, which continued to hold it until the Dissolution, when it passed with other Abbey property to **Sir Richard Cromwell**. **Chapel Head**, to the northeast of Warboys (across the fen from part 9 of the walk), is on the **Oxford Clay**, just above the level of the **Peat**. It was reputedly the site of a medieval chapel owned by **Ramsey Abbey** and was the subject of a 2008 **Time Team excavation** - rather than a chapel they thought the structure found might have been a **medieval grange** (an outlying farm belonging to a monastery, abbey or feudal lord).

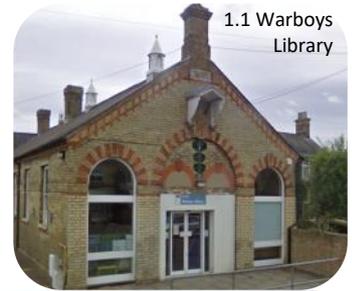
1 The start of the walk is **Warboys Library** on the **High Street**. Here, you are on **Glacial Till**, deposits left by glaciers in the **Pleistocene Ice Age**. As you near the village pond you walk off the glacial material onto the **Amphthill Clay**. The remains of many fascinating **Jurassic** animals are no doubt hidden in the deep clay under your feet. Clay is fairly soft and usually forms lower land but here it has been protected by a covering of glacial material and probably only exposed to erosion in the latter part of the Ice Age. Within the Clay formation in this area is a harder **limestone** (once visible in the, now infilled, **Warboys Pit**). Warboys is, therefore, on a high ridge, with a significant slope down to the fen, which lies on even softer **Oxford Clay**.

2 The **village pond**, known as **'The Weir'** (*ph2.1f*), is on a **springline** where water seeping through the Glacial Till above reaches the impervious Amphthill Clay. This would have been a valuable resource for the inhabitants of the early settlement. The Baptist church (which you have just passed) baptised c. 3,000 people in the pond's waters in 1905.

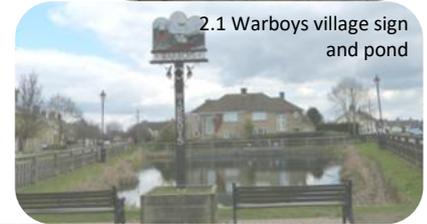
3 **NB TAKE GREAT CARE** when crossing the A141. **This is a fast, main road.**

4 You cross **Warboys Heath** (*ph4.2f*) which lies along the fen edge. There are good views down onto the fen (*ph4.4f*) and, further on, back up to the heath (*ph4.5*).

5 The heath is mostly on **Oxford Clay** but to the north, near the main road, there are **small ridges**, including **Fox Hole Hill**, where patches of **Glacial Till** still protect some remaining **Amphthill Clay** that lies over the older Oxford Clay.



1.1 Warboys Library



2.1 Warboys village sign and pond



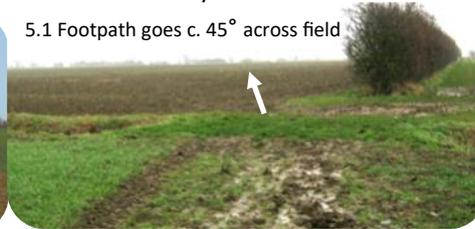
4.1 Entrance to footpath off A141



4.3 Path through hedge



4.5 View back up onto Warboys Heath



5.1 Footpath goes c. 45° across field



6.1 Footbridge across ditch



6.2 Follow hedge on right along Gault Drain



7.1 Junction with 'Footpath to Warboys' sign

6 **Fenton**, including Fenton Manor, to the south of the track, is part of the 13th century 'Pidele et Fenton' settlement. This part of the walk lies on the 5m contour.

7 **Gault Drain** (*ph7.2f*) is one of many small drains that carry water off the fen into one of the larger channels. It flows north into **Fenton Lode** (Twenty Foot Drain) via Chatteris and into the **Forty Foot Drain**.

8 Turning north you leave the **Oxford Clay** and walk onto the **Peat** for the first time.



8a.2 View down to fen from Pidley church grounds



8.1 Left turn along footpath with hedge on right

8a Walking south to **Pidley church** (*ph8a.1f*) you walk up onto the **Amphthill Clay** and then **Glacial Till**. Standing on **higher ground**, there is a good view down to the fen from the church grounds (*ph8a.2*).

8a The village name of **Pidley** originally meant 'Woodland Clearing of a man called Pyda'. In the 13th Century it is listed as Pydele, Puddle or Pidel, in documents held at Ely Abbey. The pond at the junction of Warboys Road and Fen Road, known as '**Hoss Pond**' is near the highest point of the walk, at 33m. The church was rebuilt in **Victorian** times using much of the original **12th century** building stone. A war memorial in the grounds is made from **granite**, a crystalline rock formed when magma flows from deep in the earth but solidifies before it reaches the surface. Granite is not found in Cambridgeshire and is imported for significant buildings and memorials.

9 **Pidley Fen** lies to the north - it contains some ecologically important ditches, managed as a **County Wildlife Site** to ensure the survival of characteristic fenland plants, lost from much of the Fens. As you approach Pidley golf course the footpath runs along the **old railway embankment**. Here, the **Peat** stretches out onto the fen to your left, the **Oxford Clay** is to your right and the **Amphill Clay** forms the base of the higher land to the south, with the **Glacial Till** on top of the hill where the road runs.

10 The **Ramsey to Somersham railway line** cost £56,000 to build and **opened in 1889**. It carried both freight and passengers but closed to regular passengers in **1930** and to freight in 1964, closing finally in 1967. **Somersham railway station** was on the **Great Eastern Railway** between **March** and **St Ives**. The station house was moved to a private Fawley Railway Museum in Buckinghamshire.

11 Once out of the trees, you leave the peat and start walking back up onto the Jurassic clays.

12 The allotments and small holdings on the edge of the village here date back to the beginning of the 20th century and would have supported the domestic economy of the village.



11.1 Wooden hut on Golf Course Hole 3



11.2 Turn left into trees

13 As you near **Somersham** you reach the River Terraces which form the higher land on which the village lies. This is formed by sands and gravels deposited when the River Ouse was much stronger flowing. The early settlers made use of the better drained land that the terraces provided - there has been a settlement here for at least 2,500 years—and the gravel has been dug extensively.



11.3 Go back into trees



11.4 Emerging from trees onto old railway track

14 The village was listed as **Summersham** ('Sumar's homestead' or 'homestead of the South Mere') in the **Domesday Book** in the Hundred of Hurstingstone in Huntingdonshire.



12.1 Footpath into copse



13.1 After allotments, turn left, along track



14.1 Turn right through 4 bar gate

15 Many of the buildings in the village centre are made of the local, **pale-coloured 'gault' bricks**. An exception is the timber clad **Old Tithe Barn** (*ph15.1f*), with a dark wood, weather boarded frontage seen on the opposite side of the road as you turn onto the High St. To see the village sign (*ph15.2f*), turn right and walk a few minutes along the High St until it becomes St Ives Rd. The walk



15.3 The Cross, Somersham

finishes at the **Cross** (*ph15.3*), the site of the **medieval market**. Somersham lies on the **Greenwich meridian line** and a **marker** (*ph15.4*), dating from 1884, can be seen in the pavement of the High St, 28m east of the Cross, showing its position. There is also a **Millenium memorial stone** (*ph15.5f*) in front of **John the Baptist church** - turn right at the Cross to take a detour down **Church Street** to see it. The church is made of rubble with **Barnack Stone** (limestone) dressings (a Jurassic stone from a quarry near Stamford). Further down this road is the site that held the **Manor (or 'palace')**, which had two fishponds

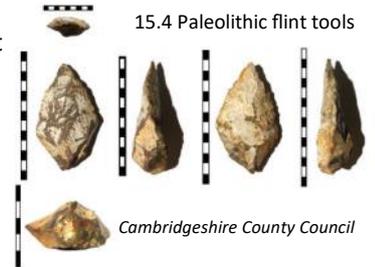
15.4 The 1884 Meridian marker

and a **large moated island** containing the palace earthworks. In **1086** there was one **manor** at Somersham and 41 households, with 'eleven ploughlands with the capacity for a further one, 20 acres of meadows, 1,361 acres of woodland, and three fisheries'. The manor was held by the **Abbots (later Bishops) of Ely** who obtained it from the **Anglo Saxon Ealdorman Britnoth** after his death at the Battle of Maldon (in 991). The formal gardens date to the **12th century**, possibly earlier. A **Tudor palace** was constructed over the mediaeval building by **Bishop James Stanley, of Ely**, under Henry VII and it passed to The Crown when **Elizabeth I** seized it via dubious means at the end of the 16th century. In 1634 it passed to **Henrietta Maria, Queen of Charles I**. It remained in royal hands (valued for its well-stocked deer park) until the aftermath of the **English Civil War**, when it was disposed of by Parliament. The manor was sold to **Robert Blackborne of Westminster** in 1653, who in turn sold to **Oliver Cromwell's brother-in-law Valentine Walton**, which ultimately resulted in a suit between the two parties. Following the Restoration, the manor was returned to the Crown. When the **Hammond** family acquired it in the late 17th century the buildings were in a poor state. They were pulled down c 1762.



Geology and Archaeology at Somersham

The fen edge at Somersham has proved to be an **important area for geological research** due to its extensive gravel deposits of the **River Terraces** here (up to 7.5m thick), together with interbedded organic material. These hold a valuable record of environments during the current 'Ice Age' (the **Quaternary Period**) including the **Pleistocene** (Middle and Late) and **Holocene Epochs**. A channel cut in the Jurassic **Amphill Clay** (by a previous course of the **River Great Ouse**) contains gravels from the end of the **Tottenham Glaciation** in the Late **Wolstonian** cold stage (ending c.130,000 years ago) covered by **loess** (a fine, wind-blown material). Pollen studies show that there are also freshwater and marine-influenced deposits from the temperate (warm) **Ipswichian** stage (130,000 to 115,000 years ago) and more recent lake deposits from **Lake Sparks**, which formed at the end of the last glaciation, the **Devensian** (c.20,000 years ago), when ice blocked the flow of water into the Wash to the north, causing an extensive lake to form in southern fenland. Lake sediments found here include red Hunstanton Till – carried from the Norfolk coast. Deposits of marine silt (the '**Fen Clay**') in the area show that marine conditions reached the (wider) Ouse valley between Chatteris and Somersham, interrupting **Peat** growth. The date suggested by the deposits is c. 3,855 years ago, a few hundred years before the likely fullest extent of this (early Bronze Age) 'sea incursion'.



Extent of sea incursion c.3800 BP (Early Bronze Age)

Somersham's **gravels** have provided **archaeological finds** (ph15.4) such as **4 flakes** (now at the **Sedgwick Museum**) and a **handaxe** (at the British Museum) probably from Station Pit, dated to the **Lower or Middle Paleolithic**. The finds include Levallois flints, usually associated in Great Britain with *Homo neanderthalensis*.

The next walk, **Somersham to Earith**, passes through gravel pit areas including **Somersham Local Nature Reserve** taking you along the **disused railway track** and past a **flooded gravel pit** (the gravel used for railways construction).



Warboys Archaeology Group

Warboys Archaeology Group (WAG) began in 2012 as a sub-group of **Warboys Local History Society** but it is now an independent organisation. It has undertaken several excavations locally. Among its many excavations, discoveries of note are:

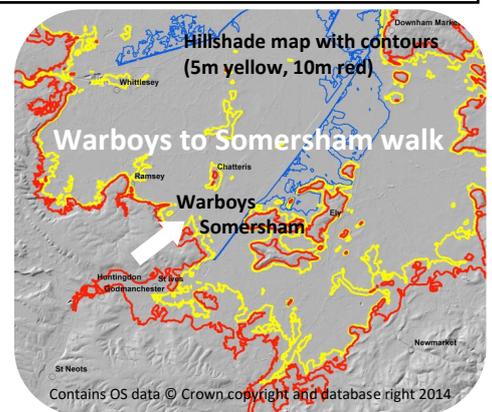
- The floor and part of the walls of a small building under the lawn of the Manor House (c.1620), next to the parish church. The building appeared to have been associated with a light industrial activity, possibly processing fish and eels, in the late 17th C.
- A small banjo-shaped enclosure, dating to the late Iron Age/early Roman period, near RAF Wyton. A banjo enclosure is a banjo-shaped ditch with low earthworks and a fence or hedge used to corral animals overnight and often containing a roundhouse.
- Late Iron Age/early Roman ditches close to the Fen Edge Trail between Warboys and Pidley.
- A medieval moated enclosure near Pidley.
- In 2019, WAG assisted Oxford Archaeology East in the excavation of an important Late-Iron Age to Early-Saxon settlement on the edge of Warboys. The earliest finds include 8 roundhouses, some of which date back to c. 100BC, three crouched human burials and 2,500-year-old pottery remains. The 10-acre site provided evidence of Roman rural industry, including a 15ft corn dryer and kilns. Archaeologists uncovered human cremations and 6 burials. They also "seem to have stumbled upon a shrine" and discovered cattle skulls and a largely intact horse skeleton, which they believe could be votive offerings. The settlement reverted to agricultural use after the 7th Century.

WAG received a National Lottery grant for a 3-year investigation of the site of the 10th century Ramsey Abbey. It has completed an extensive geophysics survey and has arranged and assisted with annual community excavations run by the professional group Oxford Archaeology East. The group also assists other amateur and professional groups on their excavations.

About The Fen Edge Trail

Linking the landscape of the Fen Edge to the local geology, history, culture and wildlife

The **Fen Edge Trail** is a walking route around the Cambridgeshire Fens, roughly following the 5 metre contour (the land that is 5 m above sea level), where the low-lying fenland meets the surrounding higher land. From the Lincolnshire border near **Peterborough** in the north west, via **St Ives** and **Cambridge**, to the Suffolk border at **Isleham** in the south east, it will also extend to include the 'fen islands' including **Ely**, **Whittlesey**, **March**, **Chatteris**, **Thorney** and **Wisbech**. The Trail is an initiative set up by the **Cambridgeshire Geological Society** as part of their **Geosites** work which aims to identify and protect local sites of landscape and geological value, and share their importance and interest with local people and visitors to the county. We are working with several community organisations who are each exploring their local landscape to help develop the Trail.



www.fenedgetrail.org

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Cambridgeshire Geological Society

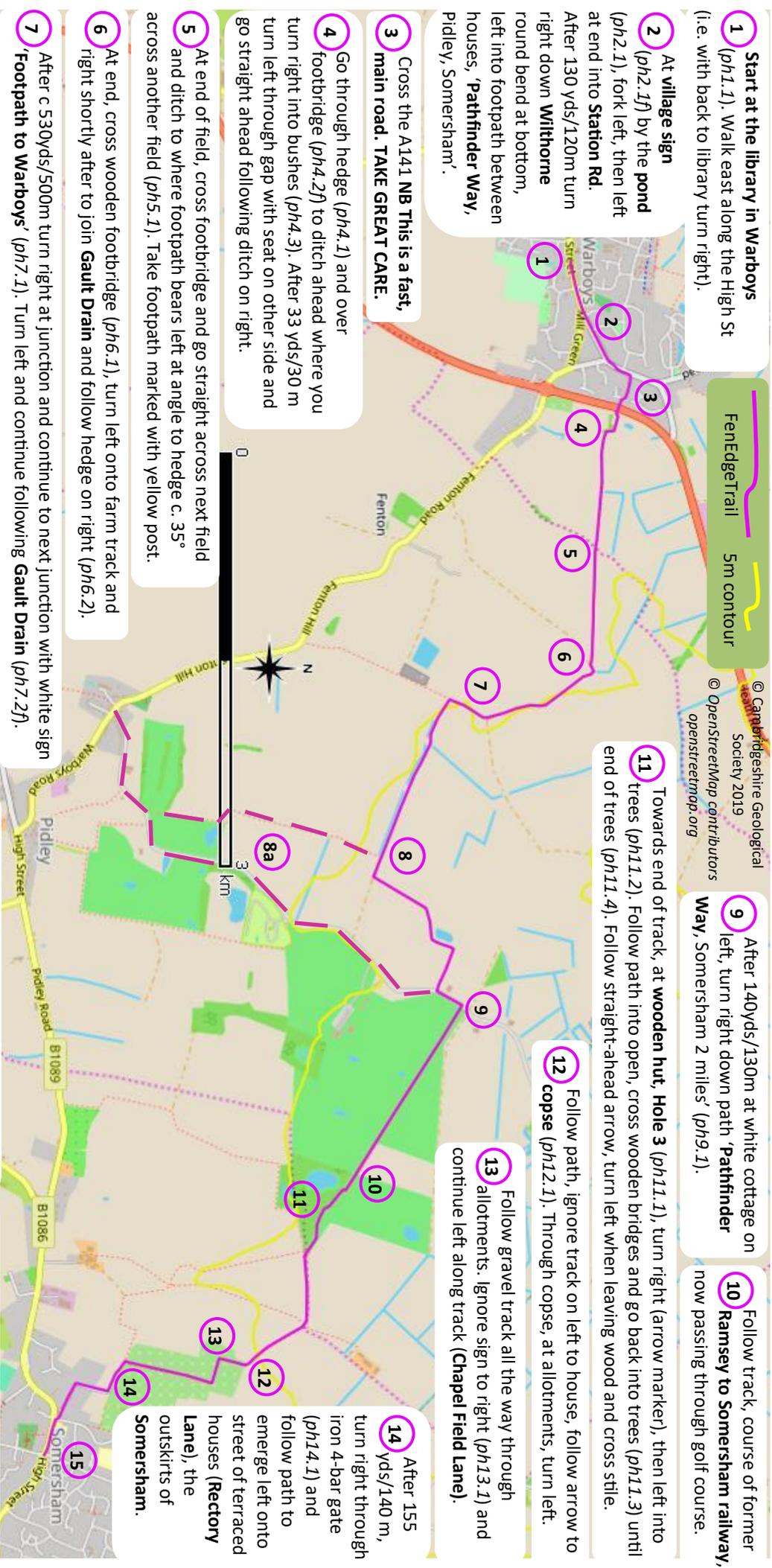
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www.fen.land

The Fen Edge Trail Walk: Warboys to Somersham

Directions map (4.8 miles / 7.6 km)



1 Start at the library in Warboys (ph1.1). Walk east along the High St (i.e. with back to library turn right).

2 At village sign (ph2.1f) by the pond (ph2.1), fork left, then left at end into Station Rd. After 130 yds/120m turn right down **Withthorne** round bend at bottom, left into footpath between houses, '**Pathfinder Way**, Pidley, Somersham'.

3 Cross the A141 NB This is a fast, main road. TAKE GREAT CARE.

4 Go through hedge (ph4.1) and over footbridge (ph4.2f) to ditch ahead where you turn right into bushes (ph4.3). After 33 yds/30 m turn left through gap with seat on other side and go straight ahead following ditch on right.

5 At end of field, cross footbridge and go straight across next field and ditch to where footpath bears left at angle to hedge c. 35° across another field (ph5.1). Take footpath marked with yellow post.

6 At end, cross wooden footbridge (ph6.1), turn left onto farm track and right shortly after to join **Gault Drain** and follow hedge on right (ph6.2).

7 After c 530yds/500m turn right at junction and continue to next junction with white sign **'Footpath to Warboys'** (ph7.1). Turn left and continue following **Gault Drain** (ph7.2f).

8 Along Gault Drain, ignore all yellow posts for footpaths to right (unless you want to visit **Pidley 8a**). Carry on to next junction, turn left (ph8.1) and follow path with hedge initially on right. Go past reservoir on left hidden by trees, bear right to pass yellow-ochre coloured house (**Sidings Farm**) and at end of path turn left onto metalled road.

9 After 140yds/130m at white cottage on left, turn right down path '**Pathfinder Way**, Somersham 2 miles' (ph9.1).

10 Follow track, course of former **Ramsey to Somersham railway**, now passing through golf course.

11 Towards end of track, at **wooden hut, Hole 3** (ph11.1), turn right (arrow marker), then left into trees (ph11.2). Follow path into open, cross wooden bridges and go back into trees (ph11.3) until end of trees (ph11.4). Follow straight-ahead arrow, turn left when leaving wood and cross stile.

12 Follow path, ignore track on left to house, follow arrow to **copse** (ph12.1). Through copse, at allotments, turn left.

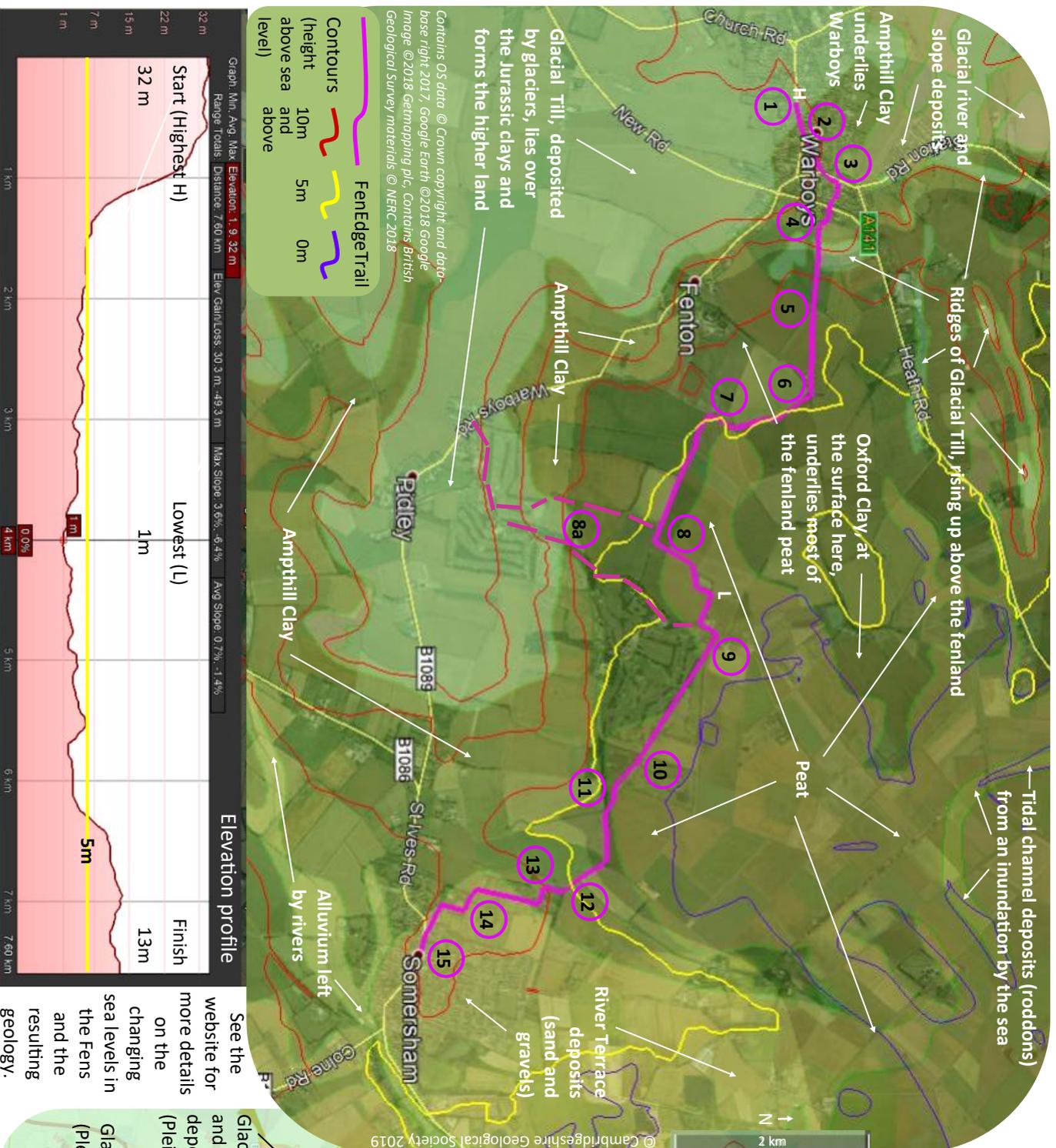
13 Follow gravel track all the way through allotments. Ignore sign to right (ph13.1) and continue left along track (**Chapel Field Lane**).

14 After 155 yds/140 m, turn right through iron 4-bar gate (ph14.1) and follow path to emerge left onto street of terraced houses (**Rectory Lane**), the outskirts of **Somersham**.

15 To visit **Pidley church** (ph8a.1f) and village centre if wished, take path to right (in 8) to Fen Rd, walk up hill. Church is on right. Return via **Fen Rd** to rejoin '**Pathfinder Way** before 9.

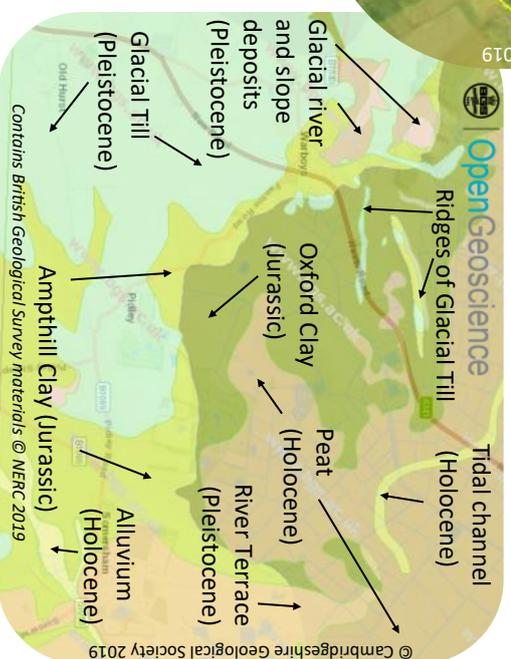
15 Go to end of Rectory Lane, turn right and then left onto Somersham **High St**. Walk 175 yds/160 m along High St to **The Cross** (ph15.3), the end of the walk.

Walk: Warboys to Somersham - geology and contours map



Landscape and Geology

In this area there are three general types of 'rock' currently at the surface. The oldest, underlying the lower 'fenland', is **Oxford Clay**, which is c.160 million years old (from the **Jurassic Period**). An extensive sea deposited on the sea floor becoming compacted to form clay - it is famous for the fossils of marine reptiles such as **Ichthyosaurs** (one was found in **Warboys Pit**). **Amphihill Clay** is younger but also of Jurassic age, lying over the Oxford Clay—it is at the surface in Warboys and along the fen edge here. The third type of surface 'rocks' here are much younger, being from the current '**Ice Age**' (the **Quaternary Period**, which started c. 2.6 million years ago). The oldest are **glacial deposits** (such as sands and gravels, river and slope material and finer 'till' from the **Pleistocene Epoch**). The higher land to the west is formed of this **Glacial Till** whilst the extensive gravel pits to the northeast of Somersham have made use of the material left by extensive rivers draining from the melting glaciers. The younger are from the **Holocene Epoch** (the last 11,700 years) and consist of three types: **Alluvium** (finer, river material) from channels within the wider Ouse Valley, **Peat** (formed in freshwater swamps), and small remaining areas of marine **Silt** (from tidal channels c.4,000 years ago when the coast was much nearer than it is today).



See the website for more details on the changing sea levels in the Fens and the resulting geology.