

# The Fen Edge Trail

## Walk: Witcham to Sutton

6.3 miles (10.1 km)

*'Fascinating – three ancient villages on the water's edge, one in a bay, one on a headland, one on a steep ridge'*

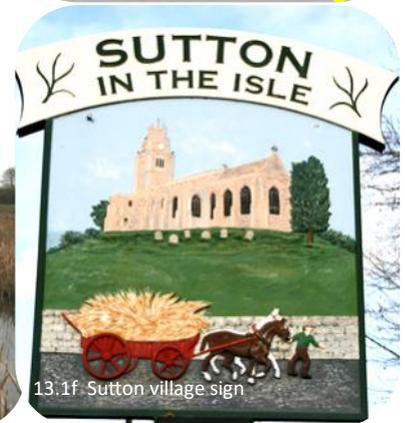
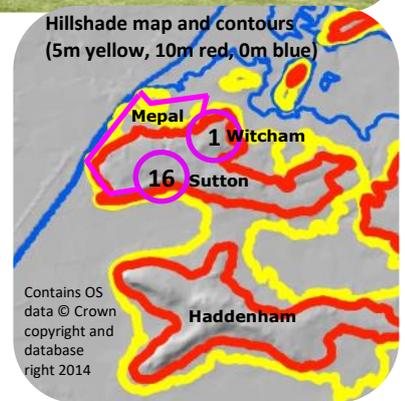
*a journey across a landscape and time*

The route: 'on the edge - between the Isle of Ely and the wild fens'

Jeff, Cambridgeshire Geological Society Geosites team



This walk, on the northwest edge of the **Isle of Ely**, links the three villages of **Witcham**, **Mepal** and **Sutton**. The high ground forming the Isle, reaching some 86 feet (26 metres) above sea level, consists of **Jurassic clays** overlain in part (although not in this area) by **Cretaceous Lower Greensand**. This bedrock is capped with **Glacial Till** and **Glacial River** material. The Isle of Ely is better thought of as the 'Ely archipelago' since it includes such separate 'isles' as Littleport, Coveney and Wardy Hill. Prior to the draining of the fens in the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Isle was surrounded by freshwater marshes and meres. This walk follows ancient droves and 'ways' around the edge of the 'island' linking the historic villages that sit on key promontories where once our ancestors sat and looked out across the extensive marshes (a sea during Neolithic times!). We start in a 'bay' where **Witcham** sits; we then rise over one of several headlands to drop down into the fen via a **2000 year old road**. By following the old **Catchwater** and crossing a section of fen we arrive at the village of **Mepal** - once the jumping off point to the island of **Chatteris**. From **Mepal** our way follows the great works of the 17<sup>th</sup> century drainage engineer **Cornelius Vermuyden**, as we walk a section of the raised banks of the 'New' **Bedford Level**. At **Sutton Gault** we start walking up off the fen to arrive at a 'headland' that rises steeply back up onto the Isle at the village of **Sutton**.



**Practicalities** As with all of the walks along the Fen Edge Trail, you can complete the full length of any walk using transport one way or choose a short or long round trip option, or just visit some of the places on the route. An optional route via Widden Hill is included as well as a detour if the Ouse Washes are in flood. 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. *ph1.3f* is the third photo relating to part 1 (*f* = on this front page).

**Length of walk** (one way) approx. 6.3 miles (10.1 km), guide time if not stopping 3 hours. The GPS track is available – please email us. Grid ref for start TL463799. Maps O.S. Explorer 225 and 228. BGS Geology **Map 173 Ely** (1:50,000 New Series). Free, easy to use online geology map viewer (and phone app **iGeology**) on [www.bgs.ac.uk/discoveringGeology](http://www.bgs.ac.uk/discoveringGeology). The walk overlaps with the **Mepal Way**.

**Transport and services** There are **buses** from Ely to Witcham [www.dews-coaches.com](http://www.dews-coaches.com) (not Sunday). Mepal and Sutton are served by buses from Ely (not all days) and Sutton is served by buses from Cambridge (not all days) [www.stagecoachbus.com](http://www.stagecoachbus.com). **Train services** at Ely (6 miles) and Cambridge (18 miles). Street parking available in Witcham and Sutton. Please park only where permitted and in consideration of others. Pubs in Witcham, Mepal and Sutton, shops in Sutton (small shop in Mepal). The website has links to places of interest, services and local organisations.

**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 slopes, such as those found on the Sutton ridge. Take particular care with uneven terrain, when near water, on soft or slippery ground (it may be muddy near the Washes), 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.

# Places of interest along the Trail

**1** The walk starts at the **village green in Witcham**. Before starting, cross over the road to read the excellent information board about the **Isle villages** (ph1.1) and note **Yew Tree House**, a 16<sup>th</sup> century farmhouse with some fine mullioned and stone windows (ph1.2). *The village sign* (ph1.3f) is a short way down the **The Slade**, to the south (right at crossroads). The green is the location of the annual **World Pea-Shooting Championships** and is adjacent to **The Hall** (ph1.4), built in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. **Witcham** gets its name from **Wiceham/Wycham** - 'Hemmed-in land where wych-elms grow' – a small copse of which still grow nearby. At one time, due to the building of **Mepal Airfield**, the village was on the primary route between **Ely** and **Chatteris**. Some of the airfield buildings nearest Witcham formed a hutted camp first for the **WAAF**, then the **Womans Land Army** and for several years after WW2 as a **Polish Resettlement Camp**. Having walked up the **High Street** you come to the 13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> century **St Martins Church** (ph1.5f). Cut **clunch** (a hard chalk quarried on the southeast fen edge), rubble infill and extensive brickwork can all be found (ph1.6). The tower, originally dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, was rebuilt in 1691. There is a **rare late medieval stone pulpit** and an **octagonal font** on five shafts dating from around 1300. The east window is by Geoffrey Webb.



**2** Don't miss the small lane after the church (ph2.1) taking you to the northern edge of the village (ph2.2).

**3** **Wardy Hill Road** is a 'green lane' (ph3.1f), thousands of years old but not officially recorded until 1311! Fine views are gained from the lane – particularly to **Ely Cathedral** in the east (ph3.2). As you drop down the lane you pass from the highest point of the walk on the **Glacial Till** to **Jurassic Kimmeridge Clay** and eventually down onto **Amphill Clay**. It is worth noting the drop in altitude and the change in land use. Much of the 'highlands' are given over to pasture (cattle, sheep, horses and, recently, alpaca!) whereas the fenland out in front of you is arable.



**4** The **Catchwater Drain** (ph4.1) is a common ancient feature around the **Isle** – designed to capture runoff water from higher ground before it reaches the fen from whence it would be difficult to remove.



**5** You pass **Hive Road** ('road to the **hythe** 'landing place') recorded in 1251, becoming **Gravel Drove** as it goes north. This is an excellent spot to appreciate the 'lie of the land' with the uplands to the south and the view out to the **Peat** fen to the north and the area of **Witcham Gravel** – where the famous **Witcham Roman Helmet** (ph5.1) was found (now in the **British Museum**).



**6** The path slowly bends to the right until the footbridge on the left is reached (ph6.1). Whilst crossing the field (ph6.2) on the other side of the bridge, note the distinct form of **Widden's Hill** to the north (ph6.3). This **Kimmeridge Clay** hill is capped with a small area of **Glacial Sand and Gravel** which was probably deposited during the **Totternhill glaciation 160,000 years ago**. It rises up to over 10m to form the only **Isle of Ely** 'island' with no current signs of habitation. **Mesolithic flints** were found on smaller sand topped hills nearby showing its use when the surrounding land was probably under water. The walk continues to Mepal.

**7** The main walk crosses the ancient **Rushway track** (ph7.1).

**7a** Note option to take alternative route over **Widden's Hill** via **The Rushway track**. When you arrive at the **New Bedford Level (River)** you are at the only place on the walk that crosses the **peat** (just on this corner).



**8** The 13<sup>th</sup> century village of **Mepal** lies on the western end of the **Isle of Ely** on the lower slopes of what would have once been a 'headland' creating a natural point (once a port) from which to travel northwest out into the watery fens to such places as **Chatteris** (nunnery), **Ramsey** (abbey) and eventually **Peterborough** (cathedral). Its name is thought to originate from 'nook of land of a man called **Meapa**'. The village now lies very close to the **New Bedford Level** whose course was designed to avoid the raised ground on which the village sits.



**9** There is a memorial garden (*ph9.1*) at the start of High St dedicated to the **New Zealand 75<sup>th</sup> Squadron** with which the village has a strong connection due to the WWII airfield which sat on the hill above the village. You also pass the village shop and a second war memorial which is made of a fine granite - a rock formed deep in the earth when molten magma cools and crystallizes - look for crystals in the stone. **At School Lane** - note the interesting listed 'Round House' (*ph9.2*).



**10** On **School Lane** is the village green. Note on your right, what is thought to be the oldest dwelling in the village, **Ash Cottage** (*ph10.1f*). Many older properties were lost in a great fire in the village sometime between 1861 and 1871. Turning left at the village sign (*ph10.2f*) the lane is called **Mepal Church** and leads to **St Mary's Church** (*ph10.3*), built of rubble and flint with dressings of **Barnack Stone** (*ph10.4*), a finer quality Jurassic limestone (much of it re-used and believed to have come from **Ely Cathedral**). This small church is unique on the Isle of Ely for having no tower or spire but instead a **double bell-cote**.



To the right of the path beyond the church is a small woodland noted for the old elm trees believed to be **Plot Elm hybrids** (*ph10.5*). On arriving at the back of **The Three Pickerels** (a pickerel is a fish called a pike), walk to the front for excellent views (*ph10.6*) and a very good information board on the **Ouse Washes** (*ph10.7*). **The Three Pickerels Pub** is where you re-join the route if you took the option of walking over **Widden's Hill**.

**11** There are extensive reed beds at **Gault Hole** (no access) on your left (*ph11.4f*). The track leading around the side of the hole is called **Brick Lane** and runs back into **Mepal** - a fair clue as to the creation of the hole into this area of **Amphill Clay**. 'Gault' is actually the name of a younger clay found further to the southeast of the county but the name Gault is often applied to any brick clay feature in the fens. Looking out across the **New Bedford Level** (dating from 1651) you see the distant bank which runs alongside the **Old Bedford Level** (dating from 1636). Part of Vermuyden's scheme, these two drains were of major significance in the drainage of the fens. In the **Civil War**, Scottish prisoners of Cromwell, were marched south after the Battle of Dunbar, to work on the younger drain. The land



enclosed between the two Levels forms the **Ouse Washes**: a flood storage area often under water in the winter leading to extensive deposits of alluvium, up to 2m deep, covering hundreds of hectares. The Washes are **internationally important** for wintering and breeding wildfowl and waders, being designated a



**RAMSAR** site. The **RSPB** and the **Wildlife Trust** manage extensive areas at **Welches Dam** (on the opposite bank) whilst the **Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust** manage the land at **Welney**, further north. Both provide birdwatching facilities and it is possible to enjoy wildflower walks in summer in the botanically rich floodplain meadows.



**11a** *If the Ouse Washes are in flood the alternative route takes you via **Brangehill Lane and Brick Lane**. NB very carefully cross the **A142**.*



**12** There is another information board at the **Anchor Inn** at **Sutton Gault**. Walking towards **Sutton-in-the-Isle**, on your left is the highest part of the next 'headland', which is covered in **Glacial Till**, with what would have been the watery fens out to your right. You pass **Burystead Farm** (*ph12.1*) where the Manor House, with **17<sup>th</sup> Century** moat and extensive gardens once stood. The **18<sup>th</sup> Century** farmhouse now standing here was built incorporating a **13/14<sup>th</sup> Century Chapel** (*ph12.2*) constructed of rubble with Ashlar dressings. Across the road on the north side can be seen remains of the **moat** (*ph12.3*) - the many ancient trees are thought to be part of the original garden. The land now begins to rise once again onto the **most westerly headland on the Isle of Ely** passing from **Amphill Clay**, to **Kimmeridge Clay**. The hill to the left is capped by Glacial Till.



**13** As you turn left, this road is called **The America** or just **America** – once considered a separate village but now part of **Sutton-in-the-Isle**. Originally recorded in the 1086 doomsday book as ‘Sudtone’, **Sutton-in-the-Isle** is one of the largest villages on the Isle (*the village sign is on The Brook, off the High Street, ph13.1f*). Known locally as just Sutton it derives its name from ‘Sut’ – South and ‘ton’ – enclosure. The village is situated on the far westerly end of the Isle and would have been the point of contact, across the impenetrable marshes, with **Earith** and the towns in the west and south of Cambridgeshire. Sutton has perhaps the most attractive situation of any of the Isle villages with many of the dwellings being sited on a steeply sloping south face with excellent views across an area of fen toward the high ground on which **Haddenham** sits. The wide section of the **High Street** is evidence to the fact that in 1312 Sutton was granted the right to hold a weekly street market. The village was considered to be so prosperous that it was recorded in 1599 to be ‘**Golden Sutton**’.

**14** Dropping back downhill, on West Lodge Lane, you cross onto an area of **Glacial Sand and Gravel** which lies on the southern slope of the ridge of **Kimmeridge Clay**. This deposit of sand and gravel may well be the reason that the village has grown out toward the fen in this location creating the area known as **The Row**. The Row has some interesting mediaeval cottages and dwellings incorporating **mansard roofs** and **tumbled brickwork** which are unusual in this area. (*ph14.1 & 14.2*). (*If you want to visit the pub in Sutton walk up to the High Street via Painters Lane*).



**15** The High Street boasts a Methodist chapel (*ph15.1*), a Baptist chapel and an Anglican church plus some fine houses and excellent views out to the fen and the distant Haddenham ridge, down a series of roads dropping off to the south (*ph15.2-15.4*).

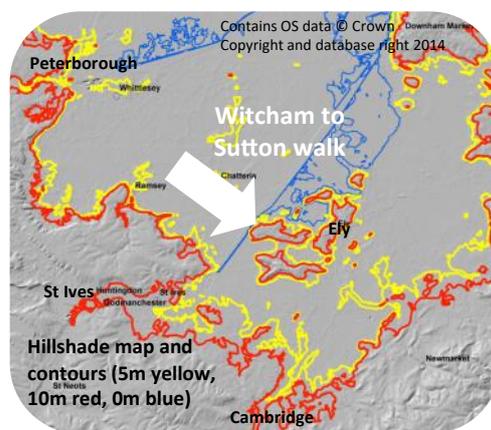


**16** **St Andrews church** (*ph16.1*) stands on raised ground at the end of the High St at a point which must once have given impressive views over the fens. Built in the 14<sup>th</sup> century of **rubble** and much finely worked **Barnack Stone**, the use of battlemented parapets (*ph16.2*) and the unusual window tracery gives the church a marked individuality. The tower, known locally as ‘**The Pepperpot**’ consists of four stages, the top one being octagonal, which is then crowned by a smaller octagon (*ph16.3*). The resulting effect is **unique in English medieval churches**. The lofty tower combined with the church’s prominent position means it can be seen from a great distance. **This is the end of the walk.**

## 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. Information on the Trail, and points of interest along it, are gradually being added to the website together with the walk guides.



**Cambridgeshire Geological Society**

[www.cambsgeology.org](http://www.cambsgeology.org)



[www.fenedgetrail.org](http://www.fenedgetrail.org)

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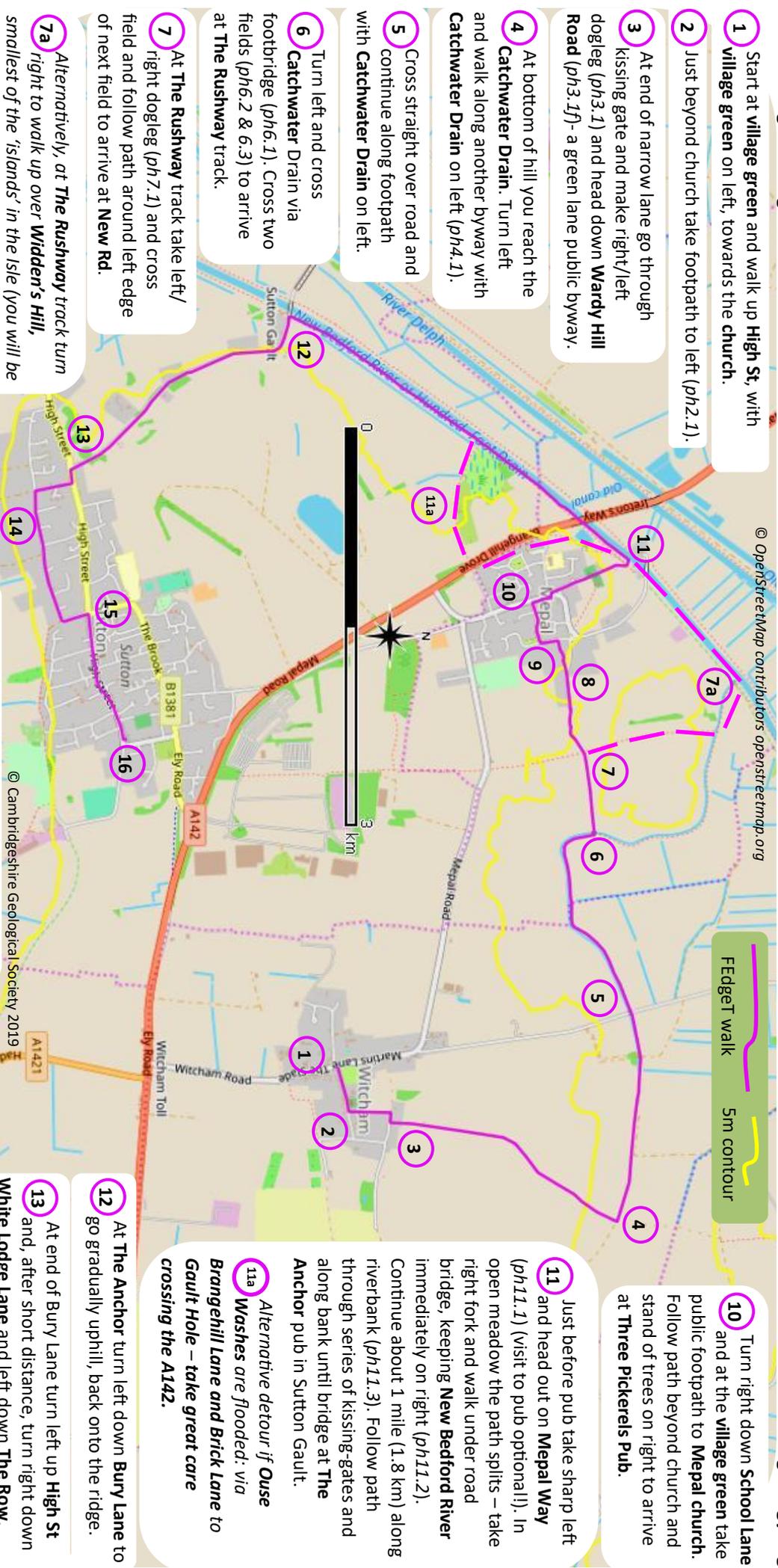
[www.fen.land](http://www.fen.land)

# The Fen Edge Trail Walk: Witcham to Sutton

Directions map (6.3 miles / 10.1 km)

[www.fenedge trail.org](http://www.fenedge trail.org)

[www.cambsgeology.org](http://www.cambsgeology.org)



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FenEdgeT walk  
5m contour

10 Turn right down School Lane and at the village green take public footpath to Mepal church. Follow path beyond church and stand of trees on right to arrive at Three Pickerels Pub.

11 Just before pub take sharp left and head out on Mepal Way (ph11.1) (visit to pub optional!). In open meadow the path splits – take right fork and walk under road bridge, keeping New Bedford River immediately on right (ph11.2). Continue about 1 mile (1.8 km) along riverbank (ph11.3). Follow path through series of kissing-gates and along bank until bridge at The Anchor pub in Sutton Gault.

Alternative detour of Ouse Washes are flooded: via Brangehill Lane and Brick Lane to Gault Hole – take great care crossing the A142.

12 At The Anchor turn left down Bury Lane to go gradually uphill, back onto the ridge.

13 At end of Bury Lane turn left up High St and, after short distance, turn right down White Lodge Lane and left down The Row.

14 Follow The Row until end and return up hill to High St.

15 At High St turn right and continue past shop.

16 You reach St Andrews Church (ph16.1), the end of the walk.

11 Turn right down School Lane and at the village green take public footpath to Mepal church. Follow path beyond church and stand of trees on right to arrive at Three Pickerels Pub.

10 Turn right down School Lane and at the village green take public footpath to Mepal church. Follow path beyond church and stand of trees on right to arrive at Three Pickerels Pub.

9 At end of alleyway turn left onto High St and follow it round to right, past shop and on to war memorial at junction with Sutton Road/School Lane at the Round House (ph9.2).

8 Walk down New Rd taking small alleyway on left (ph8.1).

7a Alternatively, at The Rushway track turn right to walk up over Widdler's Hill, smallest of the 'islands' in the Isle (you will be inside a circular 5 m contour). On reaching the Catchwater Drain turn left and at the New Bedford Level Bank turn left again until you reach The Three Pickerels Pub. The path on top of bank affords the best views.

7 At The Rushway track take left/right dogleg (ph7.1) and cross field and follow path around left edge of next field to arrive at New Rd.

6 Turn left and cross Catchwater Drain via footbridge (ph6.1). Cross two fields (ph6.2 & 6.3) to arrive at The Rushway track.

5 Cross straight over road and continue along footpath with Catchwater Drain on left.

4 At bottom of hill you reach the Catchwater Drain. Turn left and walk along another byway with Catchwater Drain on left (ph4.1).

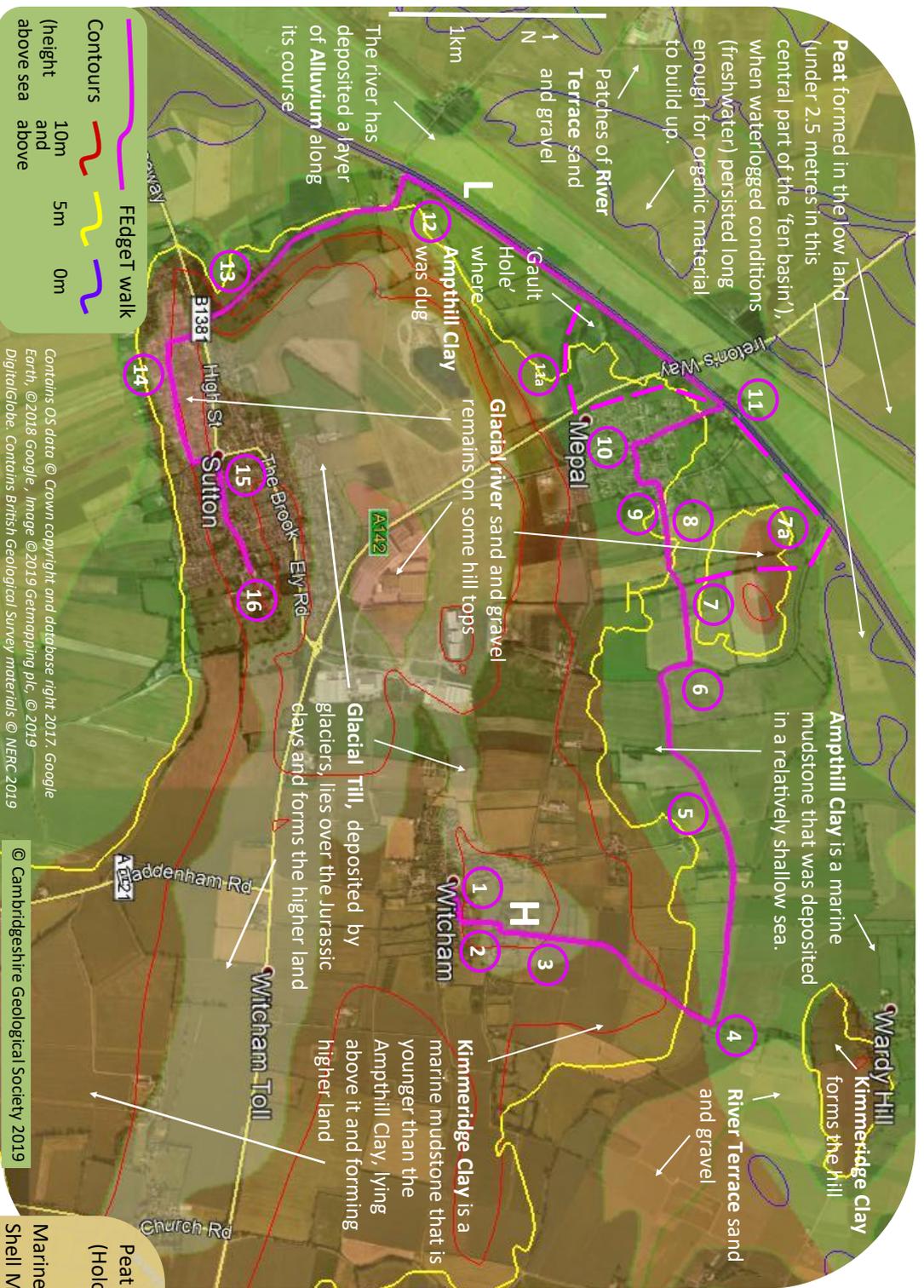
3 At end of narrow lane go through kissing gate and make right/left dogleg (ph3.1) and head down Wardy Hill Road (ph3.1) - a green lane public byway.

2 Just beyond church take footpath to left (ph2.1).

1 Start at village green and walk up High St, with village green on left, towards the church.

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# Walk: Witcham to Sutton - geology and contours map



Amphihill Clay is a marine mudstone that was deposited in a relatively shallow sea.

Peat formed in the low land (under 2.5 metres in this central part of the 'fen basin'), when waterlogged conditions (freshwater) persisted long enough for organic material to build up.

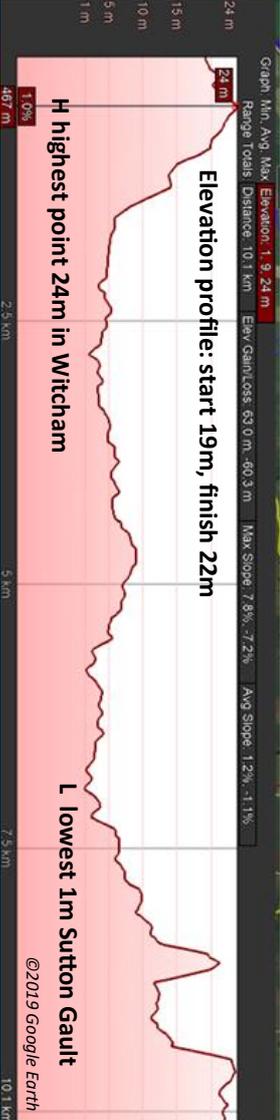
Glacial Till, deposited by glaciers, lies over the Jurassic clays and forms the higher land

Witcham is a younger than the Amphihill Clay, lying above it and forming higher land

Kimmeridge Clay is a marine mudstone that is younger than the Amphihill Clay, lying above it and forming higher land

The river has deposited a layer of Alluvium along its course

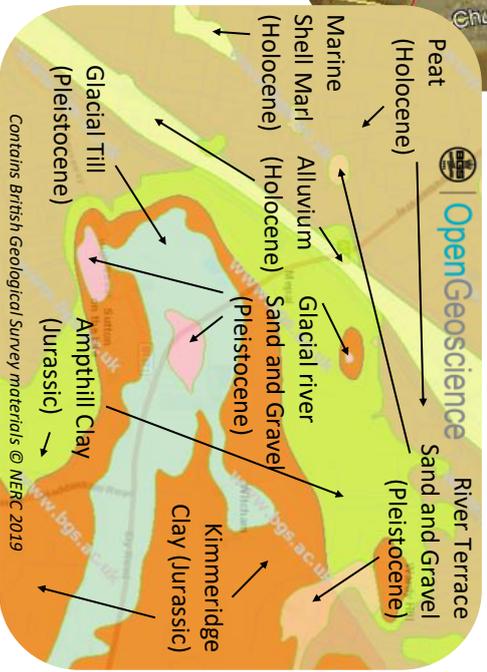
Elevation profile: start 19m, finish 22m



## Landscape and Geology

In this area there are two 'bedrocks' at the surface. The oldest, underlying the lower land in this part of the fens, is **Amphihill Clay**, which is c.155 million years old (Jurassic age). An extensive sea covered this part of Britain with the clay forming from material deposited on the sea floor. The **Kimmeridge Clay** is younger (also Jurassic) and lies on top of the Amphihill Clay forming a **series of roughly east-west ridges**. It is famous for the fossils of marine reptiles such as **Plesiosaurs**.

The other surface 'rocks' are much younger, from the current 'Ice Age' (starting 2.6 million years ago). The oldest is **Glacial Till** left by retreating glaciers, and **Glacial River Sands and Gravels** which remain on the hill tops. These are both of **Pleistocene** age - deposited during the **Totterhill Glaciation**, 160,000 years ago when a tongue of ice extended south over the fens. In the **Holocene** (the last 11.7 thousand years, since the **Devensian Glaciation**), the Ouse has deposited **River Terrace Sands and Gravels**, some remaining northeast of Witcham and in Mepal Fen, west of the Washes. A small patch of marine **Shell Marl** in Mepal Fen shows the sea once reached here (in the **Neolithic**). **Peat** formed from decaying vegetation in freshwater 'swamps', whilst **Alluvium** is fine, river material, that is still deposited when the river floods.



The walk starts on the ridge of **Kimmeridge Clay** and **Glacial Till**, travels down onto the **Amphihill Clay** and then climbs back up onto the ridge, passing over a patch of **Glacial River material**.