

## The Whittlesey Way

Whittlesey • Eastrea • Coates

be a **Fens Adventurer!**



## A landscape created from water

Whittlesey was historically an island of dry ground surrounded by marshy fen, its name deriving from Whittle's Ea. Ea is the Anglo-Saxon for 'island'. The town has a long history. Bronze age settlers built a kilometre-long timber causeway across the marsh between Whittlesey island and Peterborough island (remains of which can still be seen at the nearby Flag Fen centre). The Romans built a raised gravel road through the marsh north of Whittlesey (the Fen Causeway). Whittlesey Museum contains fascinating historic exhibits dating back to the Neolithic period. The town is mentioned, as Whitesig, in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Famous Whittlesey men include William de Whittlesey, Archbishop of Canterbury 1368-1374, and Sir Harry Smith, the 'Hero of Aliwal' who rose to high rank in the British army.

Attempts were made in medieval times to improve drainage so that the marsh could be brought into productive use. In the 1470s Bishop Morton of Ely caused **Morton's Leam** to be built to improve the River Nene navigation between Peterborough and Wisbech. This was superseded in 1728 by Smith's Leam, a straight cut from Peterborough to Guyhirn made by the Bedford Level Corporation. The wide drain of Morton's Leam now seems to be part of the natural landscape of the Wash and there is a lovely walk along a green drove along its southern bank.

Situated to the south of the town, **Whittlesey Mere** was the largest area of freshwater in southern England (covering 3000 acres in winter) until it was drained in 1850 to provide farmland. The Mere formed part of a complex of natural and man-made waterways used for transport from earliest times. There is a story that King Canute and his Queen Emma were crossing the Mere when a squall shipwrecked them and two of their children drowned. Canute had a new watercourse cut to bypass the Mere, still known as Kings Dyke. In 1774 the Earl of Orford sailed a flotilla of 9 boats to the Mere for a month of nautical high jinks.

Lying to the north of Whittlesey, the **Nene Washes** comprise a large area of open land created as a result of the drainage of the surrounding fenland for agriculture in the 17th and 18th centuries. The land serves as the flood storage area for the River Nene. The combination of grassland and the wetness make the Washes a great place for wildlife. Important numbers of wildfowl winter here including Bewick swans from Russia and Whooper swans from Iceland. The Washes are some of the best floodplain meadows left in England and support a significant proportion of the country's nesting black-tailed godwit and snipe. In addition to farming and wildlife, the washes are used for skating, wildfowling and fishing, in part making up for the loss of Whittlesey Mere.



Coates village green





Whittlesey is still connected to the River Nene to the north by Kings Dyke, part of the Nene-Ouse Navigation Link, and there are attractive moorings on the Briggate River on the south side of the town centre.

## Drainage of the Fens

The great enterprise of the drainage of the fens began in earnest in the mid-seventeenth century when syndicates of investors (or 'Adventurers') led by the Earl of Bedford contracted with Dutch engineers to construct great drainage channels (the Old and New Bedford Rivers) at the heart of a network of local drains and dykes. Water was pumped from the surrounding land into these drainage channels, and the land was then available for agriculture. Pumping was initially powered by inefficient windpumps. Success was only properly achieved in the nineteenth-century with the introduction of steam pumps. Today internal drainage boards maintain 286 electric pumping stations and 3800 miles of watercourses which keep the valuable agricultural land of the Fens free from regular inundation.

## Straw bear

The Straw Bear festival takes place on the second weekend of January and is an old Whittlesey custom, resurrected in 1980 by the Whittlesea Society after having died out in the early twentieth-century. Originally a man or boy dressed in best local straw danced from door-to-door for money, drink or food. Now, the Bear dances around Whittlesey accompanied by his Keeper, and the 2-day festival includes local and visiting traditional dance sides and folk groups.



## Follow the country code – why?

Because the countryside is a place to be enjoyed by all; do protect wildlife, plants and trees, don't leave rubbish behind and don't disturb others with unnecessary noise.

Because the countryside is a place of work; do keep to paths and use stiles and gates to cross boundaries; don't let your dogs disturb stock and don't interfere with crops or machines.



The Cambridgeshire countryside is there to be enjoyed by everyone. This route follows farm tracks and grassy field edge paths. The surface is uneven.

The Public Rights of Way and Access Team is endeavouring to replace stiles with gates where a barrier is necessary. More information about other Access for All walks is available on the Cambridgeshire County Council website at [www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/environment/countrysideandrights](http://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/environment/countrysideandrights)

*Come and enjoy it!*



This project is supported by the Fens Adventurers Local Action Group (LAG) who deliver the Rural Development Programme England in Cambridgeshire and West Norfolk through the Leader approach. The LAG is managed by Cambridgeshire County Council & Cambridgeshire ACRE and supported by EEDA, Defra, Local Authorities and the EU's European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development: Europe Investing in Rural Areas.

Web Link: [http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rurdev/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rurdev/index_en.htm)



This leaflet is one of a series produced by Cambridgeshire County Council to encourage the use and enjoyment of some of the many public rights of way in Cambridgeshire. We hope you have enjoyed the walks and would appreciate any comments you may have.

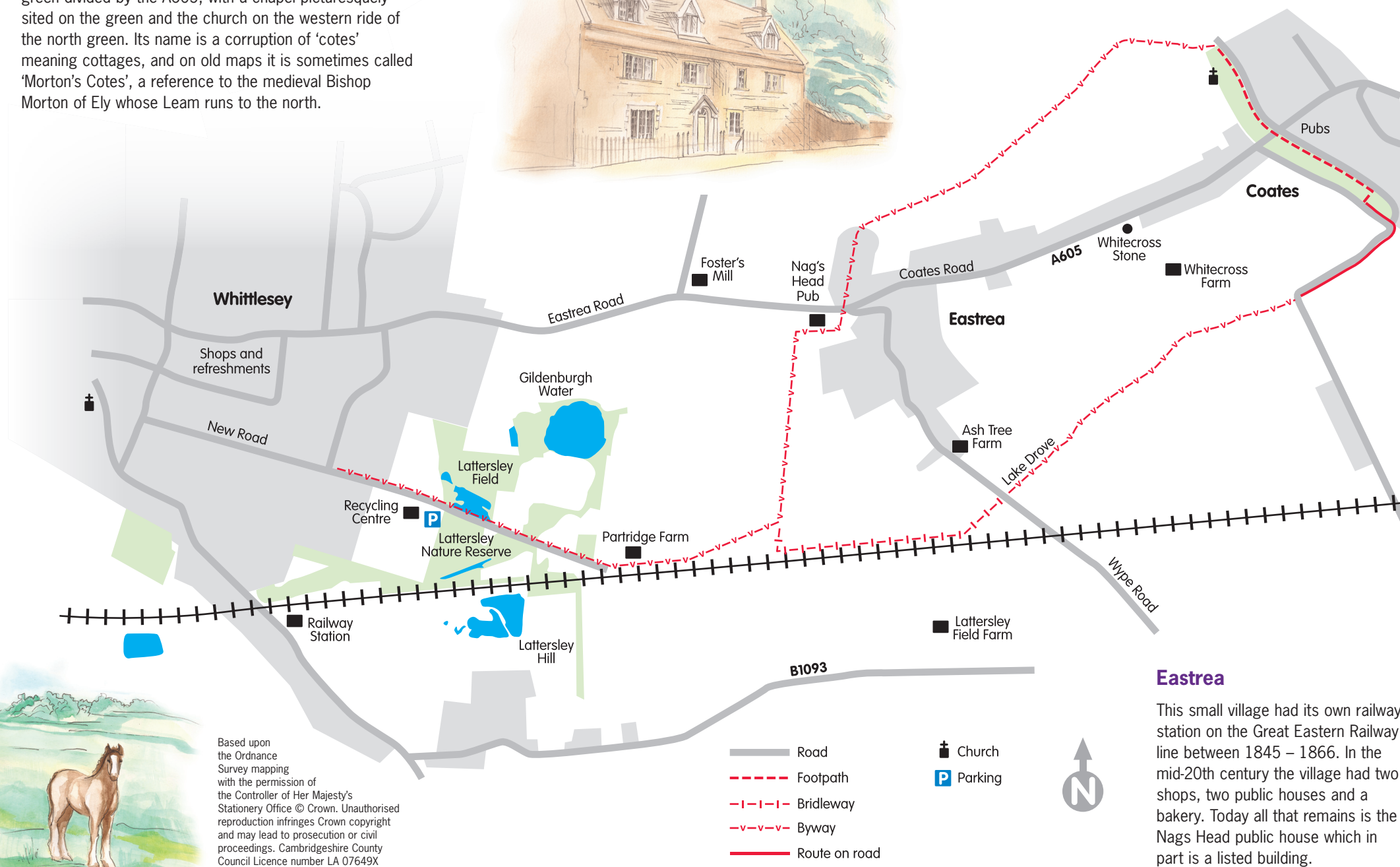
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[www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/environment/countrysideandrights](http://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/environment/countrysideandrights)

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## Coates

This village to the west of Whittlesey has a large village green divided by the A605, with a chapel picturesquely sited on the green and the church on the western ride of the north green. Its name is a corruption of 'cotes' meaning cottages, and on old maps it is sometimes called 'Morton's Cotes', a reference to the medieval Bishop Morton of Ely whose Leam runs to the north.



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# The Whittlesey Way

A circular walk of **5 miles**  
Allow approximately **2 hours**

Following grassy drives this route takes you on a walk through the history of this evocative part of the countryside, where you will see medieval and modern industry tempered by nature to produce a distinctive and attractive fenland landscape.



## Lattersey nature reserve

Now a Wildlife Trust nature reserve, this area used to be a quarry for brick clay for the nearby railway line. The abandoned pits filled with water and were colonised by local wildlife. As the surrounding land was taken over for agriculture, the reserve became a haven for birds such as woodcock, sparrowhawk and tawny owl, insects such as dragonflies, damselflies, moths and beetles, and small mammals such as water voles and shrews. Flowers including bee- and common- orchids thrive on the drier grassland.

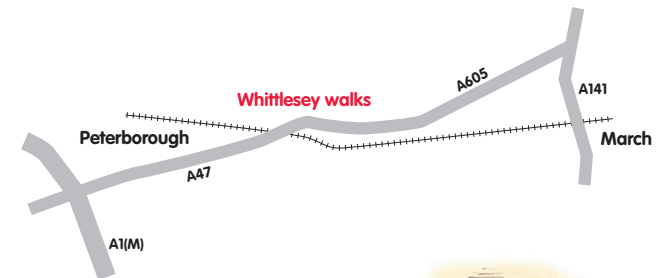
### Towers, chimneys and turbines

An extensive outcrop of Lower Oxford clay to the west of Whittlesey makes this a major area of brick production. The chimneys of the Kings Dyke brick works can be seen for miles across the surrounding fenland. Although brick production is in decline, it has provided many valuable jobs for the town. A recent addition to the Whittlesey skyline are the three 80-metre high wind turbines powering a local factory – the largest on-shore wind turbines in England. In contrast to these modern landmarks, the towers of the two parish churches of Whittlesey can also be seen from a long distance – the town was divided into two separate parishes until 1849.



## How to get there

**By bus** Stagecoach in Peterborough 01733 554575  
**By train** Nearest station is Whittlesey  
National Rail Inquiries 08457 484950  
**By road** A605 east of Peterborough  
**Inquiries** Cambridgeshire County Council Passenger Transport Inquiries  
0345 045 0675



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## Further information

**Footwear:** Most of the route follows grassy drives which can become very muddy in winter, particularly after heavy rain. Strong waterproof footwear is essential.

**Maps:** The route can be followed on Ordnance Survey 1:50000 Landranger Sheets 142 or on 1:25000 Explorer Sheet 227.

**Waymarking:** Green metal signs indicate the route where paths leave the tarmaced road. Smaller metal waymark arrows indicate the route in open country.

**Refreshments:** Plenty of cafes and shops in Whittlesey. Shop and pub in Coates and pub in Eastrea. However, it's a good idea to take a snack with you for when you stop to rest and enjoy the countryside.

**Detailed information from:** Whittlesey Town Council, Grosvenor House, Grosvenor Road, Whittlesey PE7 1AQ  
• Tel: 01733 351296 • Email: whittleseytowncouncil@btconnect.com