

The Mepal Way

Exploring the Ouse Washes

be a *Fens Adventurer!*



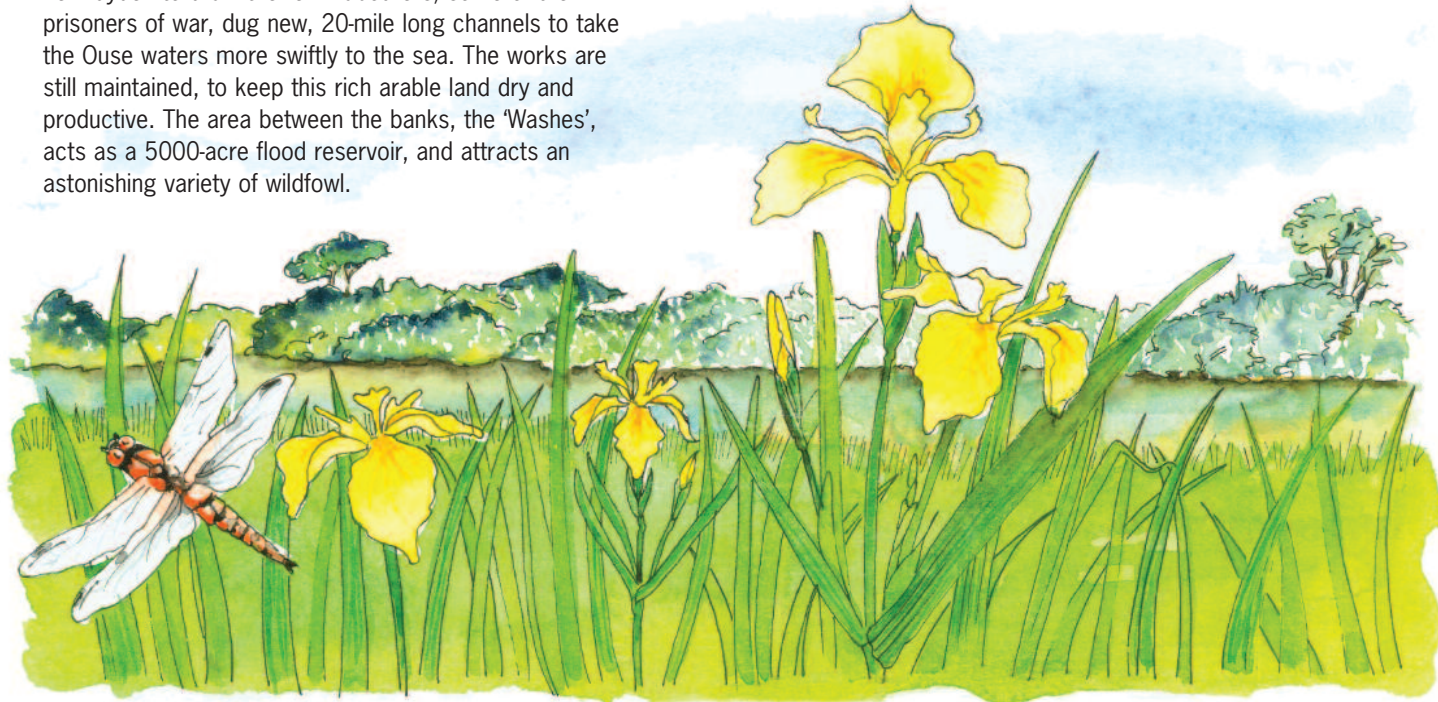
Descendents of Meopa

Mepal lies some 7 miles from Ely, at the far western end of the clay upland, where until the 17th century dry land gave way to fen marsh. Its name (rhymed with 'people') reflects its position: the Meapas tribe's low-lying ground next the water. Meapa was probably a personal name, though it might have derived from the Saxon word to mope. If so, the Meapas sulked or grumbled! They would have had no cause. In Saxon and mediaeval times, winter flooding of the fen provided a rich hunting ground for fish and wildfowl, and in summer, rich pasture. The charming 13th century church, still much today as when it was built, stands isolated now, but the remains of the mediaeval village can still be discerned in the field immediately to its north, close to Manor Farm.

The great banks and channels of the Old Bedford River (dug in 1636) and the Hundred Foot or New Bedford River (1651), which lie close to the village, are a monument to the extraordinary drainage project which changed life in Mepal for ever. Under the leadership of successive earls of Bedford, a company of Participants and Adventurers put up the money to employ the Dutch engineer Cornelius Vermuyden to drain the fen. Labourers, some of them prisoners of war, dug new, 20-mile long channels to take the Ouse waters more swiftly to the sea. The works are still maintained, to keep this rich arable land dry and productive. The area between the banks, the 'Washes', acts as a 5000-acre flood reservoir, and attracts an astonishing variety of wildfowl.

Well into the 20th century, huge numbers of duck and eels were sent to the London market, in flood time a ferryman took people across the waters (spot his grave in the churchyard), and the rivers provided a ready goods route to supply malt to the local brewery, coal and building materials to the village, and an import/export route for farmers. Now the area is a significant nature reserve and bird watcher's paradise, the A142 bypasses the village on a viaduct, and though the brewery is closed, the Three Pickerels on the river bank provides good food, good beer, and a unique, peaceful river view.

The past is still visible. Fortrey's Hall, a private house on the bank of the Old Bedford, was once the residence of Samuel Fortrey, fen 'adventurer' and son of a successful London merchant, a Dutch protestant refugee. Monuments to the family survive in the church. In the Washes, accessible on foot from the Three Pickerels in dry weather, is an 18th century lock and what was possibly the shortest canal in UK, dug to bring materials from the Gault Hole on the south to reinforce the northern banks of the Old Bedford River. Along the Old Bedford bank is the steam pumping engine house, built in 1840 to improve the drainage. It now houses successor diesel and electrical engines, still working to keep the fen dry.



An artist's palate

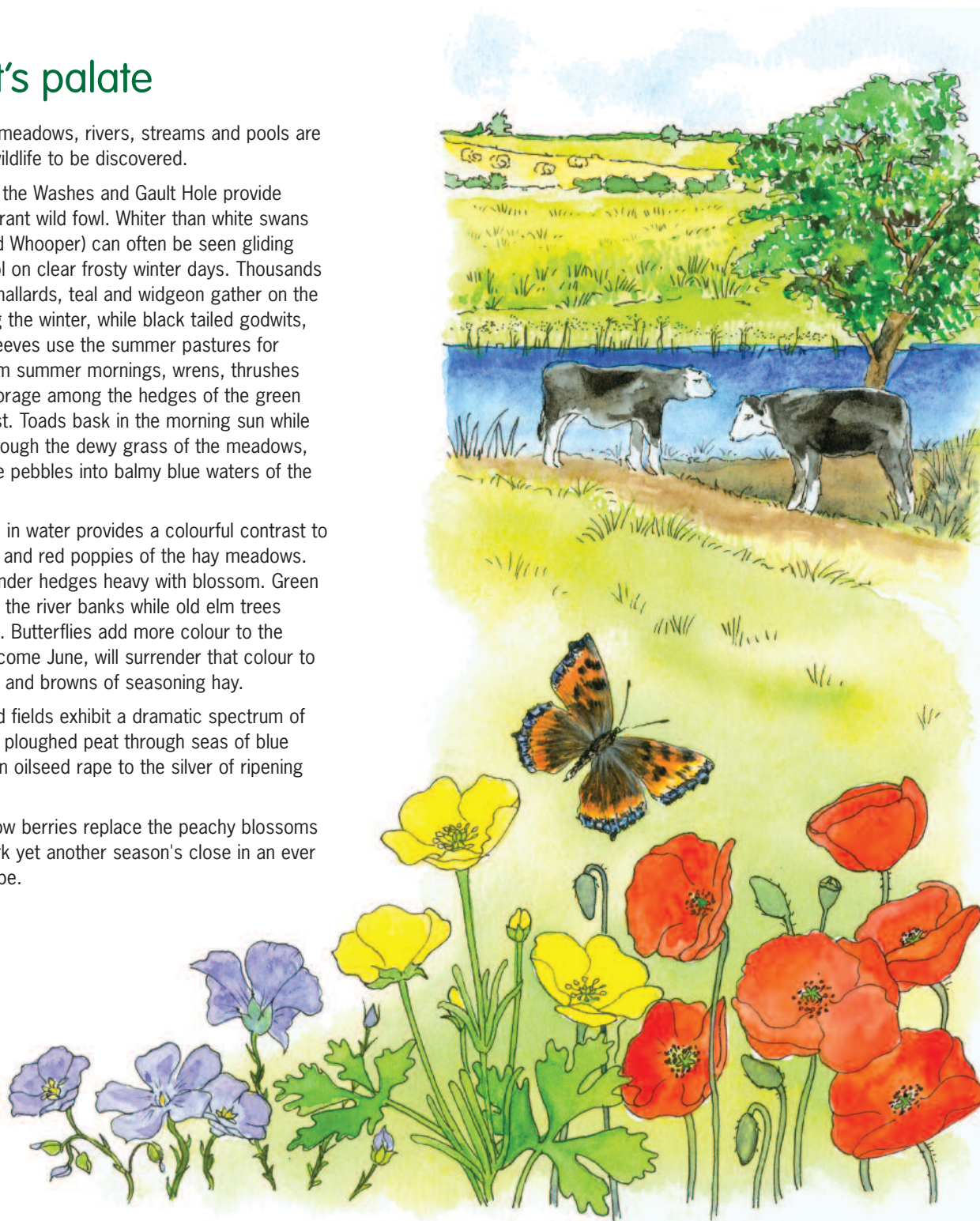
Green lanes, hay meadows, rivers, streams and pools are all teeming with wildlife to be discovered.

At times of flood, the Washes and Gault Hole provide sanctuary for migrant wild fowl. Whiter than white swans (Mute, Bewick and Whooper) can often be seen gliding over a glassy pool on clear frosty winter days. Thousands of tufted ducks, mallards, teal and widgeon gather on the inland 'sea' during the winter, while black tailed godwits, black terns and reeves use the summer pastures for breeding. On warm summer mornings, wrens, thrushes and chaffinches forage among the hedges of the green lanes for breakfast. Toads bask in the morning sun while spiders weave through the dewy grass of the meadows, and voles dive like pebbles into balmy blue waters of the river.

Blue sky reflected in water provides a colourful contrast to yellow buttercups and red poppies of the hay meadows. Cowslips nestle under hedges heavy with blossom. Green willows hang over the river banks while old elm trees cradle the Church. Butterflies add more colour to the meadows which, come June, will surrender that colour to the muted greens and browns of seasoning hay.

The arable fenland fields exhibit a dramatic spectrum of colour from black ploughed peat through seas of blue linseed and golden oilseed rape to the silver of ripening barley.

Deep red hedgerow berries replace the peachy blossoms of spring and mark yet another season's close in an ever changing landscape.



Follow the Countryside 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 walks is available on the Cambridgeshire County Council website at www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/environment/countrysideandrights and www.visitcambridge.org

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

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.

Public Rights of Way and Access, Box CC1305, Cambridgeshire County Council, Castle Court, Castle Hill, Cambridge CB3 0AP
Tel 0345 045 5212

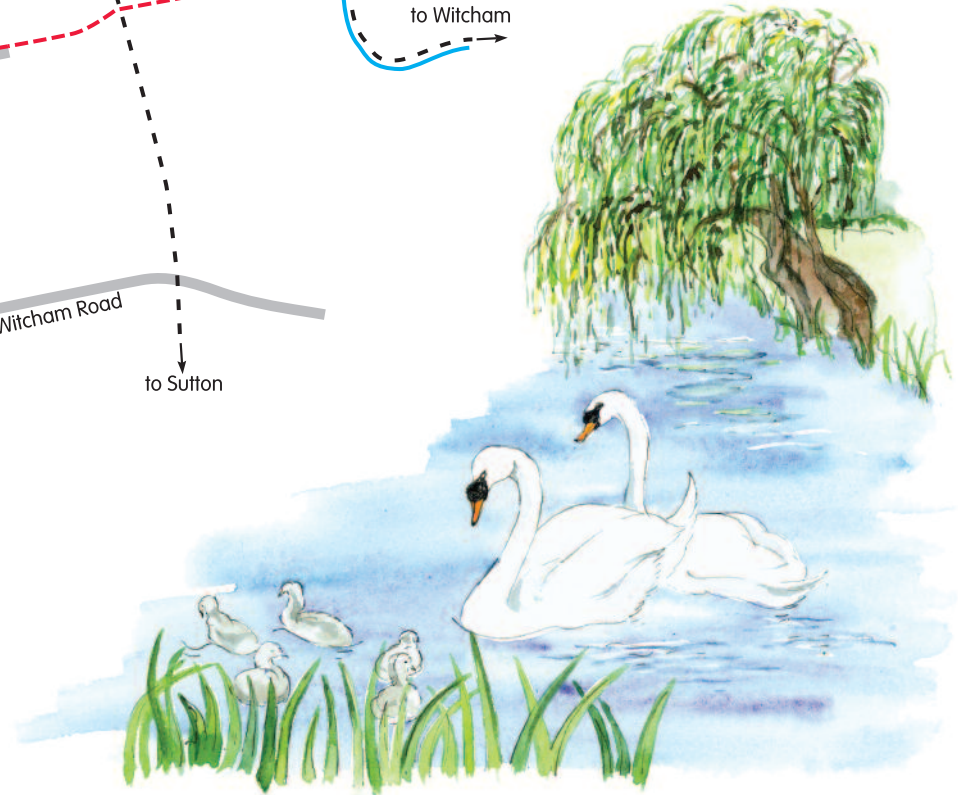
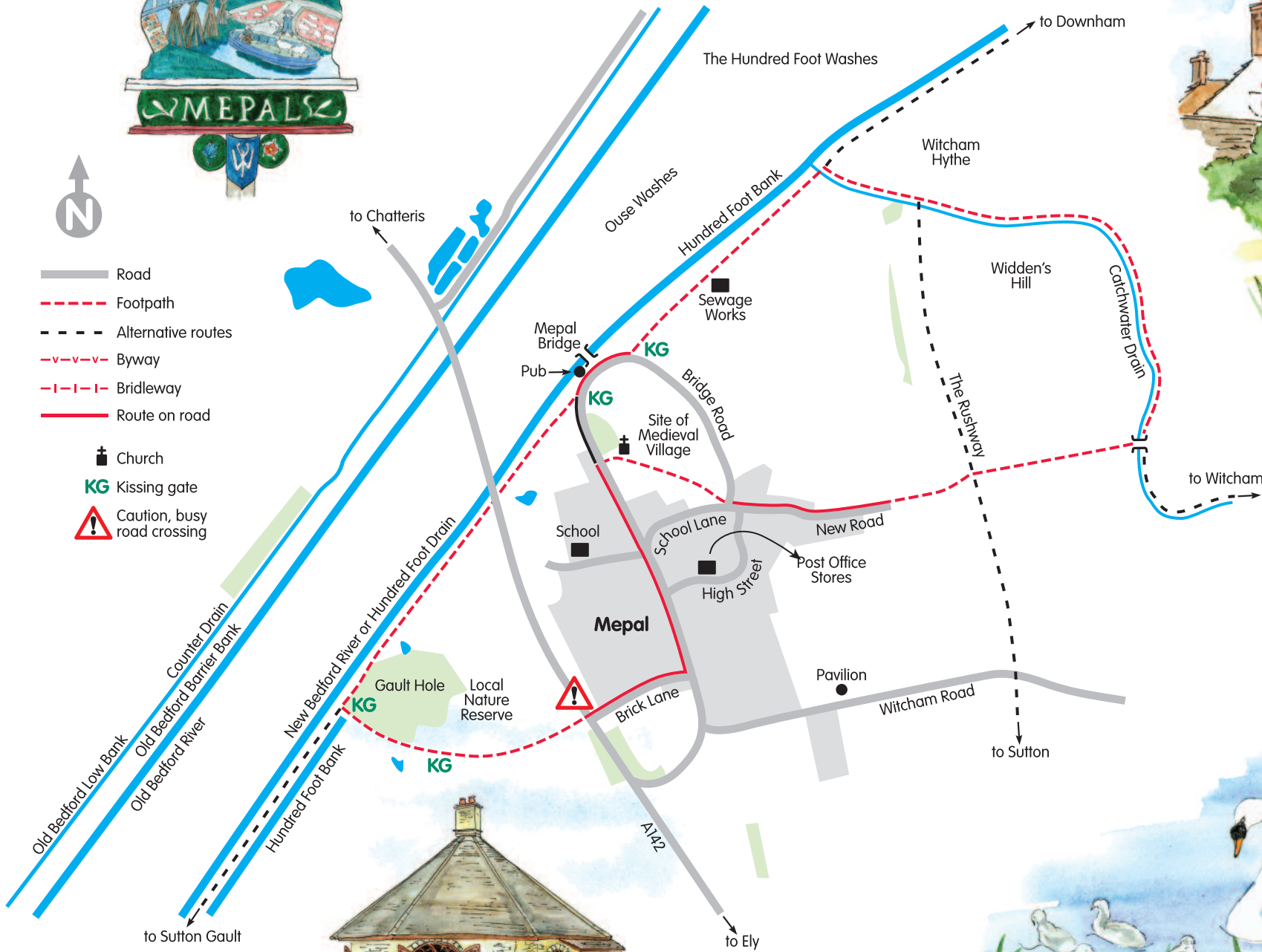
www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/environment/countrysideandrights

www.visitcambridge.org

© Cambridgeshire County Council. Published March 2013. 5th Edition.
Design by 2dgraphic.com



- Road
- - - Footpath
- - - Alternative routes
- - - Byway
- - - Bridleway
- Route on road
- ☪ Church
- KG Kissing gate
- ⚠ Caution, busy road crossing



The Mepal Way

Circular route **3 miles**
Allow approximately **2 hours**

The village of Mepal and its quiet setting on the banks of the Ouse Washes provides an enchanting introduction to this land of fish, fowl and flood. The village of Mepal overlooks the fenland farming landscape, whilst enclosed by a network of green lanes and tranquil waterways. Sample the magic of Mepal through its waymarked walks.

Mepal church makes an excellent starting point for a circular walk around the village. Car parking space is available on the Old Bridge Road (now a dead-end). Access the church via the footpath from School Lane, from River Close or from the Three Pickerels pub, from where the footpaths take you either up or downstream along the river banks.

Please park considerately in the village.



Further information

Footwear: The paths become muddy during the winter, so boots are essential. There may also be flooding along the Ouse Washes.

Maps: The route can be followed on Ordnance Survey 1:50000 Landranger Sheet 143 or on 1:25000 Explorer Sheet 228.

Waymarking: The paths are signposted with green signs from the roadside. Waymark arrows indicate the way along the route. Occasionally, other rights of way cross the route and these may also be waymarked.

Refreshments: Mepal Stores and Post Office sells ices, snacks, drinks and general provisions. The Three Pickerels on the river bank serves food, and offers bed and breakfast, whilst the Anchor at Sutton Gault is a mile's walk along the river to the west. Cross over the Washes there and return to Mepal along the far bank and across the viaduct.

More information:

Cambridgeshire County Council Rights of Way Team
Tel 0345 045 5212 [www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/
environment/countrysideandrights](http://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/environment/countrysideandrights)

Mepal Parish Council www.mepalparish.org.uk

The Wildlife Trust, tel 01954 713500
www.wildlifetrusts.org

RSPB [www.rspb.org.uk/reserves/guide/o/
ousewashes](http://www.rspb.org.uk/reserves/guide/o/ousewashes)

How to get there

By bus Stagecoach 01223 423578

By train Nearest station is Ely
National Rail Inquiries 08457 484950

By road A142 west of Ely

Inquiries Cambridgeshire County Council Passenger
Transport Inquiries tel **0345 045 0675**

