

Gedney Drove End

Start: Village Hall car park in Gedney Drove End (TF460294).

Distance: About 8 miles.

Refreshments: The 'Wildfowler on the Wash' pub at start/end of walk (check opening times). Possibly the 'Rising Sun' also in the village, but it was closed at lunchtime when I did the walk.

Not for the first time, have I planned a walk, only to discover that staff at Lincs. C.C. have beaten me to it! This walk is similar to their Gedney Drove End leaflet, but more up to date. Apologies to Spalding Group, on whose 'patch' I have walked, but try as I might, I have been unable to plan a more original walk of similar length in the area.

Nevertheless, this is a fine, level ramble with distant views over The Wash and across the River Nene with Norfolk not far away. Plenty of bird life, also the RAF at play, so take binoculars and pick a day with good weather and visibility!

From the Village Hall car park, where a signpost proclaims 'Gedney Dyke 4 miles, Amsterdam 215 miles', turn left along the road and in a few yards take the signed path left, alongside a bungalow. The path leads you to the Old Sea Bank and once on it, turn left, continuing to a junction where you go right, heading out towards the coast. Ignore a lane on the right, but continue ahead on a track, eventually passing a barrier and crossing a road before climbing the (new) sea bank.

Out ahead is The Wash and the Holbeach bombing range, with observation posts left and right (the marsh is one of the busiest aircraft bombing ranges in the country). Our route is right, towards the dark green observation post **POINT A**. Look a little to the left, to see a man-made island, with the coastline of Norfolk stretching away on the horizon. The town of Hunstanton can be seen away to the left on a good day.

This circular artificial island is called the Outer Trial Bank. It is one of two islands constructed during the 1970s for a governmental water resources scheme (the other, smaller one lies further east and closer to the Norfolk coast). The plan was to see whether freshwater from the Rivers Witham, Welland, Nene and Great Ouse could be captured using a tidal barrier, then stored in offshore reservoirs. However, building these test lakes on a tidal estuary meant the fresh water soon became saline and with the trial costing over £3m, the plans were soon shelved and the trial banks abandoned. They have now gained a new importance as a breeding bird colony, with around three thousand pairs of sea birds now nesting on the outer bank.

Continue on, crossing a stile, then passing a footpath right that leads directly back to the village. Ignore two further paths right, to reach a stile beyond which another path joins from the right **POINT B**. The silence of the walk is often punctuated by the plaintive cry of the curlew and the more urgent warning whistling of the redshank. Inland, look for tinkling flocks of goldfinch and linnet.

Eventually, the sea bank turns right as the River Nene is reached. Continue, with twin 'lighthouses' ahead on either bank. Pass a footpath right, then notice the small wood beyond **POINT C** planted to provide cover for birds. Cross a waterway – one of many that drain the fens – and continue, passing another path turning, to approach the greatly extended lighthouse. Go through a kissing gate and follow the narrow path to reach a road.

The River Nene rises in Northamptonshire and was widened and straightened near its mouth in 1827 to facilitate shipping to the ports of Sutton Bridge and Wisbech. The lighthouses, designed by John Rennie the architect of Waterloo Bridge, were built in 1831 to commemorate the opening of the Nene outfall cut. They never functioned as lighthouses, but were merely markers to guide ships into the cut. In the 1930s, the East Lighthouse was inhabited by the naturalist and artist Sir Peter Scott. The one on the west bank that you have just passed was restored in 1986 and is home to Lighthouse Films, who make cinema and TV documentaries.

Turn right and walk with care along the tarmac. On the corner of the first right-hand bend a chapel stood for around 70 years **POINT D**.

Called St Philip's Mission Church, it was built in 1869 as a Chapel of Ease for the labourers working on the construction of the New Cut of the river Nene. The building was demolished sometime around 1940 having been derelict for many years.

The road walking continues for just under a mile, to a point where the road bends sharp left. Here, go ahead on a track, which narrows to a path before widening again to reach a road **POINT E**. Turn right and walk to a T-junction where you take the footpath ahead, walking on this old sea bank for about a mile, before reaching a lane. Turn left, walk to the road junction and turn right.

Heading back to your transport now, you pass the 'Rising Sun', formerly the 'Black Bull' and left at the road junction, the 'Wildfowler On The Wash' a more romantic name than the earlier 'New Inn', which of course it was in the mid 19th century. If ignoring the hostelry, walk ahead to the car park on your right.

The name Gedney Drove End clearly illustrates the purpose of the road you drove along to reach the village. 18th century maps show a track, Gedney Drove, running the four miles from Gedney Dyke out to the saltmarsh, where cattle were taken to graze. A century later, a thriving community was established at the end of the drove road, boasting four pubs, a chapel, corn mill, blacksmith and a coastguard station.

