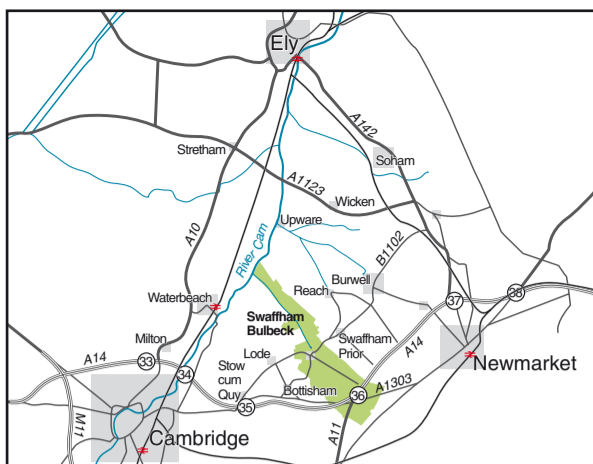


Explore local landscape and history on the footpaths of

# Swaffham Bulbeck



Sarah Wroot design 2011



The paths and byways of Swaffham Bulbeck record the ways in which people have lived and worked in this landscape for several thousand years. Walking your parish paths not only provides exercise and a chance to relax, it's an opportunity to walk through time.

Remember that other people hope to enjoy the footpaths and wildlife. Please clean up after your dog, and do not allow dogs to defecate in grazed fields. In spring and early summer, please keep dogs under control to avoid disturbing birds nesting on or near the ground in fields and hedgerows. Please take your litter home!

This leaflet has been produced by Swaffham Bulbeck Parish Council. We are grateful to Jacqui Green for her work in planning and surveying the circular walks shown on the map, and to Martin Rushworth for his photographic documentation of the routes.

Please contact the Parish Clerk on 01638 742358 to report problems with the paths, or to volunteer to assist in maintaining the paths. Information about the village and the Parish Council is available at [www.swaffhambulbeckpc.org.uk](http://www.swaffhambulbeckpc.org.uk)

## Geology and Wildlife

Swaffham Bulbeck is a fen edge village: until the 19th century, the fields north of the village were wet fen grassland, with bogs and sluggish streams and ditches. Wicken Fen NNR preserves a fragment of that wet landscape; here in Swaffham Bulbeck the drainage ditches and a layer of peat on the underlying Gault Clay are reminders of the fen. Some wetland plants still survive; in summer Purple Loosestrife is a striking contrast to the Meadowsweet that fills smaller ditches with white flowers and sweet scent. Coots, moorhens and swans patrol open water edged by Common Reed and Reedmace. Adult dragonflies and damselflies glitter in the sun while their larvae live in ponds and ditches along with water beetles and a host of other aquatic animals.



The south of the parish rises from the Lower to the Middle Chalk, sediments deposited on the Cretaceous sea floor about 135 million years ago. This gentle north-facing slope has been arable farmland for many centuries, while until recently the far south of the parish was open heath pasture. Watch for fossils as you walk here; sea urchins and shells are unusual, but flints preserve the shapes of sponges. Some plants that would have grown in the margins of the open fields and chalk grassland now flower in field margins and roadside grasslands. In high summer Knapweed and Scabious make a fine show of colour above the yellow haze of Lady's Bedstraw. The flowers attract bees, butterflies and other insects that in turn provide food for birds that find shelter in hedgerows.



## Swaffham Bulbeck

The parish was known simply as *Suafram* in 1066 and *Suafram* in an Anglo-Saxon charter of AD950, the name being Saxon for 'the place or home of the Swaefe [Swabians].' *Bulbeck* was added in the 1220s, from Hugo de Bolebec, who was granted a manor here soon after the Norman Conquest.

### Prehistoric Swaffham Bulbeck

Ten thousand years ago the Fens were covered by trees, the 'bog oaks' which drowned and were covered by peat as the prehistoric Cam and other rivers slowed and flooded the fenland basin. Mesolithic people who lived in that forest left fire-cracked flints and flint chips on the clay soil under the peat, not far from Swaffham Lock. As the forest flooded and the peat deepened, people moved to higher ground in the south of the parish: many Mesolithic and Neolithic flint tools have been found along the edge of the fen, and Bronze Age burial mounds known as *barrows* (since ploughed out) once stood on the skyline of Middle Hill.

### Roman and Saxon Swaffham Bulbeck

A Roman villa once stood in the fields near Howe Plantation, east of Bottisham Park, one of a line of villas running along the fen edge, and there is evidence of another near Downing College Farm. Tile and *clunch* (hard chalk) from a settlement have also been found near the Priory. In 1942 a first-century pot and 13 blocks of dressed stone from Barnack, near Stamford, were found in the old bed of the Cam in a field near Swaffham Lock. It was long thought that all the lodes in this area were cut by the Romans, but some may be Saxon or early Medieval in date.

The fen was a valuable resource, providing peat for fuel, thatching reeds, summer grazing, then

fish and wildfowl in winter when water levels rose. With grain and heath pasture for sheep on the chalk uplands, the fen edge villages grew prosperous.



*Fisheries were extremely important in the medieval fens. In 1086 Swaffham Bulbeck owed 100 eels to its lord; Bottisham owed 400.*

### Medieval Swaffham Bulbeck

The oldest part of the village surrounds the Church of St Mary on the road to Bottisham. Here the earthworks of medieval houses survive near Burgh Hall, rebuilt c. 1500 on the site of an earlier moated manor house. There were several other moated sites in and around the village; one of the Lordship Farm moats can be seen in Denny Plantation. In the 12th century the Bolebecs founded a small Benedictine priory, the Nunnery of Saint Mary, the remains of which were incorporated into The Abbey. Mill Lane led to the 'Nuns' Mill', one of several watermills driven by Gutter Bridge brook. Goods were being carried on the Lode; in 1376 the Bottisham bailiff challenged the 'immemorial right' of villagers to carry merchandise along it by boat.

Fen reeves regulated the use of the fens north of the village. Villagers had unstinted common pasture for livestock, could cut hay and sedge for fodder to feed animals over winter, and dig turf for fuel. In the 1570s they were not allowed to carry turf from the fen more than once each fortnight, but were required to have 2000 turves stored in their houses by November. Although there were sheepwalks in the fen, most fen livestock would have been 'great cattle', cows and bullocks. At this time the Swaffham fen was not partitioned; the fenreeves of the Swaffham Prior and Swaffham Bulbeck shared the fines levied when cattle strayed from neighbouring parishes. The rights

of fishery in the fen and river belonged to the manors; in the 16th century Burgh Hall shared theirs with the priory and with Mitchell Hall.

### Post-medieval Swaffham Bulbeck

The poorest villagers relied most on products from the fen and so suffered most when drainage of the Bedford Level began in the 17th century. Despite fierce protest the Adventurers occupied over half the fen by 1660, 'adventuring' their money to fund the work for the reward of arable land. At the same time waterborne trade was slowly increasing. At Inclosure in 1801 land was set aside for a public wharf at the head of the Lode. The Merchant's House was the centre of business for the Barker family, whose wharves sent grain from the local area by barge and lighter from Swaffham Bulbeck to King's Lynn and on to Newcastle, Rotterdam, Liverpool and London. Coal was brought in from the Tyne, as well as salt, timber and Baltic iron. The business fell into decline in the late 19th century; the warehouses were derelict in the 1930s and the channels originally cut to bring ships into the wharves were largely filled in by the 1970s.



Swaffham Bulbeck once again became an agricultural village. The south of the parish had been divided into heath and three arable open fields by the 13th century. Sheep were kept on the fallow and the heath; in 1620 Sir John Cage protested when 50 acres of his heath was taken for the king's hare park. Barley and wheat were the most profitable crops, but saffron was grown as well. Today Swaffham Bulbeck village still sits in an arable landscape, but most villagers work elsewhere.

