

10 DOWNWARDS TO AILSWORTH

Continue on the same pathway, noticeably lower than the surrounding fields. Millennia of farm transport has depressed this part of the track and made clear ruts.



11 GREEN LANE & AILSWORTH MARSH

A wet green way leads to Helpston Road and to the north three small fields hold a very special flora and fauna including common valerian and field scabious. You may, like John Clare, see a linnet.

*"Now infant April joins the Spring
And views the watery sky
As youngling linnet tries its wings
And fears at first to fly"*



AT THE JUNCTION WITH HELPSTON ROAD AILSWORTH, TURN LEFT AND CROSS THE BYPASS INTO THE VILLAGE AND ENJOY WELL-EARNED REFRESHMENT IN THE VILLAGES



9 OLD FIELD POND

TURN NORTH BY THE FENCE FOR A 1.2 MILE EXTENSION AROUND OLDFIELD POND

The pond is an example of the unique hydrology that shaped this area. It is spring-fed, part of the network of springs emerging along this higher ground and it is believed that the Romans lined it with clay as a reservoir. A highly respectable group (including a Canon and an Air Vice Marshal) turned water dowers and traced the pond outflow to the huge Roman baths that lie beneath the school playing field.



This was a favourite spot for dipping and ice skating before a much needed dual carriageway bypass cut Cow Lane in half and access became very difficult. The pond shows rich diversity and is home to great-crested newts and common toads.



Lady's bedstraw was gathered as sweet smelling bedding for medieval ladies.

8 COW LANE, THE DRIFT

This medieval ploughing headland forms the 1,000-year-old boundary between Castor and Ailsworth. It is a massive bank of accumulated earth deposited over hundreds of years as ploughs were turned in each parish butting up to this ancient common way from the villages. Enclosure recognised this and granted a sixty-foot carriage and occupation road giving access to allotments and the recreation ground.



The recreation ground and Oldfield Pond that were well used by locals before the A47 bypass was built.

7 SALTER'S WAY



You are walking through aeons. From prehistory, this wonderful agricultural land, plentiful water and stone have been accessed from this path. It has been used continuously and there is evidence that it was once a Roman road.

Skylarks breed in the open fields here and this thick blackthorn hedge is a nesting site for yellowhammers. Both species are in decline nationally but thriving in this ancient landscape. John Clare knew the yellowhammer well.

*"In early spring, when winds blow chilly cold,
The Yellowhammer, trailing grass, will come
To fix a place and choose an early home,
With yellow breast and head of solid gold"*



Look to the south towards the river and imagine the praetorium where the church spire is. Look north east to where the density of (as yet unexcavated) Saxon remains suggests an important chief lived there. A busy spot and rich in wildlife, skylarks, linnets, deer, hare and wildflowers appear in season. There have never been many hedges on this open landscape.

All around there is evidence of ancient agriculture. This has always been food producing land and shows the print of hundreds of years of ploughing, mostly by oxen, horses were late-comers. Where ploughs were cleared at the end of a strip, over hundreds of years banks grew up called Headlands.

The mounds of earth that can be seen from Salter's Way are where divided furlongs butted back to back and ploughs dropped soil as they turned on the divided strips. It is a feature which is shown on the early maps and is a remarkable survival.



STARTING THE WALK

1 ST KYNEBURGHA'S CHURCH

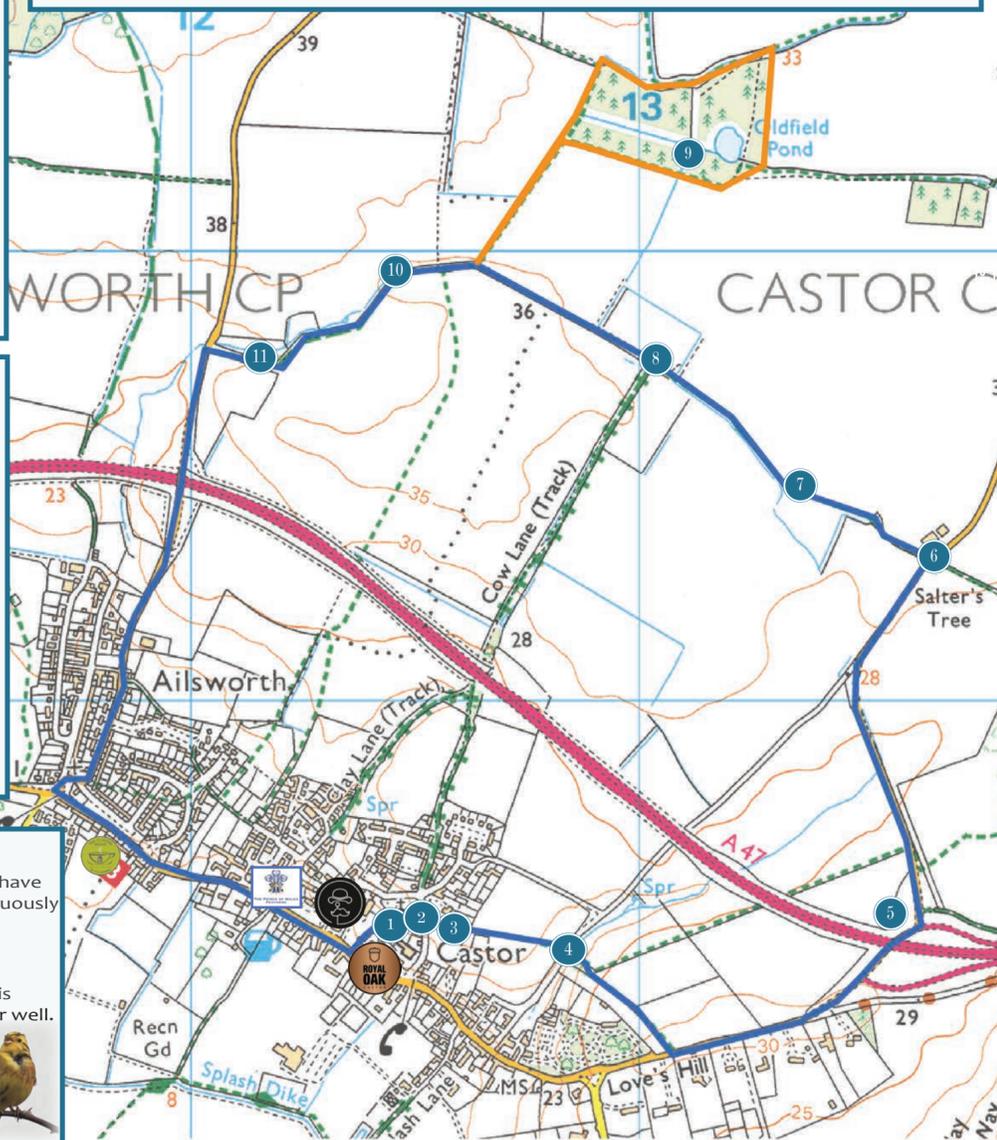
There has been a landmark here for over a thousand years. Where there is now a church spire, in 250 AD there was the roof of the Praetorium, one of the largest buildings in Roman Britain. The site covered about nine football pitches and the palace was twice the size of Peterborough Cathedral.



In his journals John Clare records working with Edmund Artis on this excavation. Artis' grave is to the right of the church porch and the information board opposite gives interesting insights.

Explore the Church, it welcomes visitors (and good dogs) and is included in *England's Thousand Best Churches* (Simon Jenkins, 2012). It is open every day from first thing in the morning until dusk. Go inside and enjoy the tranquillity. There is much to see, free information leaflets and a modestly priced guidebook.

LEAVE THE CHURCHYARD BY THE EAST GATE AND CROSS OVER STOCKS HILL



©Crown Copyright. All Rights Reserved. River Nene Regional Park: License No. 0100056899. Contains Environment Agency information © Environment Agency and/or database right

2 ROMAN WALL

Here are just two of several outcrops of Roman stonework integrated into the fabric of the village. They are scattered over a wide area and give an idea of the vast scale of the praetorium. It is believed to have been the administrative centre of the rich Fenlands.



OPPOSITE THE CHURCH GATE IS A FOOTPATH THAT RUNS BETWEEN THE OLD RECTORY AND GLEBE FIELD

3 GLEBE FIELD

Clare would have seen the medieval barns and known about the earlier earthworks that form the banks and steeply scaped features. This made great toboggan runs for generations of village children.



OVER THE STILE AND DOWN THE FIELD TO WATER LANE, WELL-NAMED AS THE PATH NOW CROSSES ONE OF THE HUNDREDS OF SPRINGS ON THEIR WAY TO THE RIVER

4 CASTOR HOUSE STREAM

A little bridge crosses a stream which once fed an enormous pond at Home Farm. This pond was so large that it may have been the fishpond of the 'missing' manor house. Three manor houses are recorded in the villages and only two have been identified.

The pond was fed by the network of springs that make their way from the limestone ridge on which Castor Hanglands sits, rising and falling south to the Nene.



SOUTH WEST OVER TWO FIELDS, FREQUENTLY GRAZED BY SHEEP, UNTIL YOU REACH LOVE'S HILL



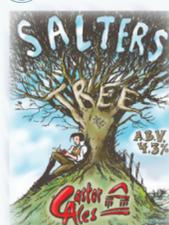
At the gate, look to the north west across the open countryside. On the horizon is Castor Hanglands, part of the once vast Rockingham Forest and beloved of John Clare.

It is a SSSI with an extraordinary range of habitats where orchids and nightingales thrive, and it has one of the most biodiverse ponds in England. A walk in the Hanglands and a lot more information is available in the route guide, John Clare's Footsteps through Castor Hanglands,

TAKE THE PATH EAST ALONG THE PETERBOROUGH ROAD AND TURN NORTH TO MARHOLM ROAD, CROSSING OVER THE TOP OF THE DUAL CARRIAGEWAY.

Once on the Marholm Road almost immediately on your left is Marholm Field Bank

6 SALTER'S TREE



'Salter's' is significant. There is a Salter's Way and Salter's Wood as well as families of Salter's living around here. We know there was a gibbet and a great elm tree which some villagers remember. A man called Salter may have been hanged or hanged himself from it but most likely it was the place where medieval salt traders met to do business outside of the village.

Today it is also the inspiration for an ale brewed in the village.

TURN LEFT, IN FRONT OF THE BARN AND YOU ARE ON SALTER'S WAY

5 MARHOLM FIELD BANK

A little spot of biodiversity, a herb-rich area of grassland with betony, pyramidal orchid, lady's bedstraw, bird's-foot-trefoil, marjoram and ox-eye daisy.

WALK ALONG THE MARHOLM ROAD FOR HALF A MILE UNTIL YOU SEE A FOOTPATH JUST IN FRONT OF TWO LARGE BARN.

THE WALK TURNS LEFT HERE BUT ON THE RIGHT HAND ANOTHER FOOTPATH SIGN MARKS THE LOCATION OF SALTER'S TREE



PRACTICAL MATTERS...

This Walk is over land that is well-drained but fairly exposed and firmly agricultural, so windproof clothing and sturdy footwear will be needed in all but the finest weather. The public footpaths that are followed on this walk welcome visitors wholeheartedly, walkers keep them open, but they do cross farmland where care has always been needed as animals graze and crops have always grown.



There is parking behind the village hall, in lay-bys on the road and on the drive up to the Church, where this walk starts.

THE STORY is one of a rare continuity

This little-known route has been used since prehistory. There is evidence of human occupation of the area for about 4,000 years, settlers from the Bronze Age, Iron Age as well as the Romans and Saxons all left their marks. The Romans changed the local landscape dramatically. It became a major crossroads due to relatively hospitable local tribes and a highly productive and beautiful river valley.

From the sixteenth century the agricultural revolution changed the landscape again. Bigger farmers claimed common land and enclosed it with walls or fences.



Larger fields increased efficiency and innovation but removed right of access and inconvenient landmarks.

In 1898, this was one of the very last areas in the country to be enclosed, so the open views are near timeless, a remarkable survival within the modern landscape and in need of protection.

JOHN CLARE in the 1800s

Helpston was Enclosed during the life of John Clare and he deeply mourned the loss of the common land "... Enclosure like Buonaparte let not a thing remain. It levelled every bush and tree every hill... ". His later madness may have been exacerbated by this grief and anger. He was connected to the countryside, perhaps more than any other poet, saying:



"...I found the poems in the fields, I only picked them up... ",

but he was not a simple peasant poet. He studied and worked with experts; Edmund Artis, archaeologist and Milton estate manager and shared a love and thirst for knowledge of natural history with the head gardener Joseph Henderson. In 1824 he writes of receiving a parcel of ferns and flowers from Henderson, including a hart's-tongue fern 'growing in a well at Caistor'. This area was not enclosed until after Clare's death. He walked these paths on his way to Milton Hall and what he saw on this route is impressively preserved as a part of Clare Country.

A SPACE TO BREATHE

This area continues to grow our food as it has for millennia. It is off the beaten track and offers quiet space to breathe and look around. Visitors are very welcome, until now it has been known mostly to locals and their friends, which included these evacuees from London in 1940, very posed in the old recreation ground.



Arthur and Esther Stone with evacuees, Annie and June

In the villages there are a choice of refreshments.



The Coffee House
107A Peterborough Road, Ailsworth
Perfect coffee, loose-leaf tea, breakfasts, lunches, delicious cakes and light bites to eat or take away. Cosy café with gifts, cards and Quentin Marks Estate Agency.

The Prince of Wales Feathers
38 Peterborough Road, Castor

Dog and walker friendly with real ale and home cooked lunches.



The Chubby Castor
34 Peterborough Road, Castor
Civilised dining restaurant with a summer terrace, serving food and drinks. Perfect for walkers with dogs.

The Royal Oak
24 Peterborough Road, Castor

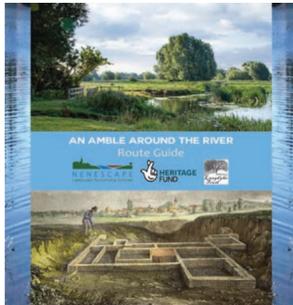
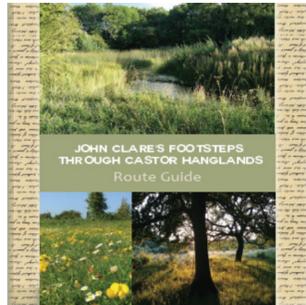
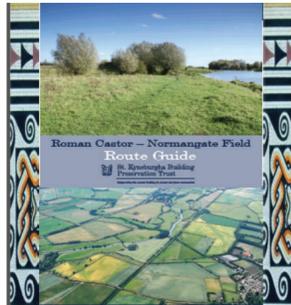
A welcoming pub with real ale, cocktails, artisan coffee and handmade, fresh dough pizzas.



and **The Village Store** will provide visitors with good quality refreshment

WHERE NEXT...

History, wildlife and guides to the Nene Valley and John Clare Country.



See those created by Langdyke Trust <https://langdyke.org.uk> and Nene Park www.nenepark.org.uk/visit-us/things-to-do/walk

With thanks to Sarah Lambert and Dr Peter Kirby who provided ecological information and many of the best photographs. Dr Stephen Upex who dug into the history. Local experts including Martin and Tom Chillcott, Mike Horne, Mark Smith, the two Judges, Brian Goode, Antonia Pounsett, Debbie Vickers and many others who gave their considerable skills, expertise, enthusiasm, time, photographs and tales.

Thanks to the many organisations who also shared skills and materials.

Peterborough & District Angling Association



What we all have in common is the determination to make this environment enjoyed, understood and protected, Elaine Wakerley.

SUMMARY

A four-mile circular walk on ancient ways, with an additional one mile detour to aptly named Oldfield pond.

In season, the sky rings with skylarks and wildflowers and grasses on the verges give a glimpse of ancient farmland. The land itself is shaped by continuous farming and its ridges and furrows are visible evidence of this ancient and fragile landscape, beloved by John Clare.

This is a hotspot for the common blue butterfly, a declining species.



LONG VIEW



As you walk look around at ancient landmarks

- North west is the ridge and treeline of Castor Hanglands and Ailsworth Heath, the remains of Rockingham Forest.
- South, over the fields the spire of St Kyneburgha Church is visible where a Roman palace, twice the size of Peterborough Cathedral, once stood.
- Due north from Salter's Way is an unexcavated Saxon settlement, described by an expert archaeologist as showing such density of remains that it was probably the residence of a powerful Saxon Chief.

Several thousand species of animals, plants and fungi have been recorded from Castor and Ailsworth, and these include more than a hundred conservation priority species, and many others which are scarce or threatened. There are records of 56 Red Data Book plants alone and of the 116 vertebrates known from the area, 15 are priority species. Red Data Book birds which breed locally include skylark, yellowhammer and linnet.