

Historical Journeys along the Rivers of East Norfolk – The Rivers Yare, Wensum, Waveney & Bure

Synopsis

The document describes virtual journeys along 4 rivers of East Norfolk, namely the Rivers Yare, Wensum, Waveney and Bure; the perspective is historical against the background of the current scene. Significant tributaries joining the rivers have also been tracked back to their start-points, and general aspects of the river catchments are considered. Particular attention is given to bridges and watermills because of their intimate associations with the river, but other nearby buildings, both religious and secular, also feature. People of note have been associated with the river, and brief biographical notes are provided, where thought appropriate. Norwich is the only city encountered, but there are other substantial towns on the rivers; they are not fully described but attention is given to the parts close to the rivers. The term 'virtual journey' is used because the account comprises descriptions of places, many of which have been visited, but they are not as a matter of course linked by accounts of walks along the river banks. Much of the river has been followed at greater and lesser distances by car, but the information gathered from site-visits has been augmented by desk top surveys, to provide continuity.

As regards watermills, Alastair Robertson's Tables attached to the accounts of each river, list the commercial watermills*, locate them on sketch maps and wherever possible specify their functions.

** a commercial watermill is paid by customers to process raw materials like grain or wool, differentiating them from any farm mill, a machine located on a farm, which operates at the behest of the farmer, normally without money changing hands.*

Access to the individual river journeys is gained by clicking on the links below, while the general introduction and short bibliography follow.

1. [River Yare](#)
2. [River Wensum](#)
3. [River Waveney](#)
4. [River Bure](#)

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Introduction

Before embarking on the journeys proper, they will be briefly set in context, within a project, which has put together accounts of 45 river journeys. The starting point was an exercise to describe virtual journeys along the relatively small rivers in the Lothians, around Edinburgh, the native city of my brother, Alastair Robertson, and myself, who have collaborated on the project. Alastair put together the information on watermills, whereas I have taken the main responsibility for producing accounts of the river journeys. From there the project has grown, without really changing the aspects of rivers, on which we have focussed, namely broad patterns of landscape, historical man-made artefacts, people of note with strong associations, and commercial and transportation developments. On the other hand, limited knowledge, and a desire to maintain coherence, has meant that our treatment of the natural world, the plant and animal life in the river valleys has been cursory, as has been our consideration of leisure pursuits, from boating to fishing. We have been fairly disciplined in staying within the river catchments concerned, but have allowed ourselves occasional excursions to interesting nearby sites; we have stuck close to rivers, as they passed through large towns and cities, to avoid accounts becoming inferior guide books. Mostly, we have used information gathered during visits, backed by an extensive desk top exercise, consulting maps, books and the internet, though in a few cases we have benefitted considerably from local knowledge supplied by correspondents.

It was always appreciated, that bridges, and watermills would deserve special attention, as uniquely associated with rivers, and as we expanded the project, the work on watermills, carried out by Alastair Robertson, assumed greater prominence. Homing in on the commercial mills, which operated after 1750, sketch maps were produced, locating them, along with tabulations, which specified their types, e.g., cornmills, textile mills, etc. The date was selected, because although viewed nationwide, there is much available information on mills operating before then it is patchy, and thus not amenable to analysis. We produced accounts of the East Norfolk rivers, quite early in the project, and have considerably refined the techniques for identifying watermills since then. In particular, methodologies were developed to identify farm mills, mainly threshing mills, marked on old British maps digitised by the National Library of Scotland (nls), so allowing full accounts of all of the milling installations. In a number of cases, these developments have caused us to revisit early versions of the documents, revising the appendices dealing with watermills, and taking the opportunity to make some changes to the accounts of the river journeys.

However, we had access to the excellent Norfolk Mills website from the start of our investigations, so it is unlikely, that revisiting Alastair Robertson's analysis of commercial mills on the rivers and their main tributaries would unearth many installations, which had not been identified. In other catchments we have found commercial watermills on small tributaries and (tributaries of tributaries), but the generally low-lying, flat landscape in the county would have made it difficult to arrange suitable water supplies, emanating from those small streams, so we think it unlikely that there we would find many additional commercial watermills by looking there. As for farm mills in the East Norfolk river catchments, we have done some preliminary scouting, which suggests, that there were very few, if any. At least part of the explanation may lie in the facts that water (and horse) powered threshing machines, by far the commonest farm mill installations, originated in East Lothian, spread relatively quickly into northern England, but more slowly further south, and that riots accompanying their installation in

some southern English counties were a discouragement. The landscape effect applies even more strongly to the ditches and streamlets which might have supplied water on farms, while one alternative, horse power was not commonly utilised for this purpose, in England. There are many windmills in Norfolk, so wind power might have been an option, but we have seen little evidence, that it was used to drive farm/threshing mills. By c1850, steam powered threshing machines had been developed, and they were soon made portable; they probably were used in Norfolk, but could not readily be detected on the early edition OS maps of Norfolk. An informal correspondence with the creator of the Norfolk Mills website, lent weight to the idea that there few if any farm mills in Norfolk, at least, before portable machines became available.

Accordingly, we have decided to stick with the results of our original investigations of watermills, on the grounds that the very considerable effort required to fill in the gaps, would be unlikely to produce results of commensurate value. Apart from the points made above, it must be remembered that we do not consider windmills in these accounts, and there were many in the East Norfolk river catchments. A comprehensive view of milling arrangements would have to consider them. This is one reason for our exclusion of the watermills on the East Norfolk rivers from wider comparisons of watermill distributions, albeit that we consider the results presented here to be of interest on a stand-alone basis.

Returning to other considerations, the intention was to follow the courses of the East Norfolk rivers which discharge their contents by way of Breydon Water, near Great Yarmouth, into the North Sea, while identifying and describing sites beside them, of present and especially past, significance and interest. That simple statement hides an aspect which seems to be mildly contentious. Certainly, older maps show the River Yare, having taken in the contents of the River Waveney, continuing through Breydon Water and emerging from its north-eastern shore. The river is then joined on the left bank by the River Bure, and swings south between Great Yarmouth on the left bank, and Gorleston on the right bank, before turning east again to enter the North Sea. By this reckoning, the Rivers Waveney and Bure are tributaries of the River Yare, and the town of Great Yarmouth is indeed at the mouth of the river from which it takes its name. Modern maps and some descriptive accounts seem to extend Breydon Water to the sea, so treating it as an estuary into which the three above-mentioned rivers flow. Obviously, this does not matter greatly, but as our main purpose is historical, we shall consider the River Yare as flowing all the way to the sea. This short discussion has resulted in the naming of 3 of the rivers, which are treated separately, namely the Yare, Waveney and Bure, and the fourth dealt with in this way, is the River Wensum, a tributary of the River Yare by convention, but actually, much the larger river. There are other tributaries, and they will be considered as we move along the main rivers from source to mouth, at the point, where we arrive at the relevant confluences. However, we do not treat the Broads in detail, limiting ourselves to brief comments, and to giving an indication of where their meres and other waterways intersect with rivers, when we come to such points in the journeys. Access to the accounts of the river journeys, is gained by clicking on the name of interest, as it appears below the Synopsis on the previous page.

The journeys have been in an important sense virtual, in that neither of us have tramped for significant distances along the river banks. There are walkways, like the Wherryman's Way beside the River Yare, which have been followed for short stretches, but for the most part, the rivers have been followed on maps and satellite views, to identify sites of interest, many of which had been visited before the project began, over more than 30 years, because friends in the area, Mr. & Mrs. Andy Moore had taken one of us to a significant proportion of the most

interesting places. Where gaps became obvious, a few further planned visits took care of most of them, though occasionally there proved to be no way of getting a desired view, usually because the site concerned is private, which status has been respected by doing no more than mentioning the building of interest. Where access is available occasionally or conditionally, we have sometimes used photographs from the Internet, usually acknowledging their provenance. In rather fewer cases, usually near sources of rivers, points of interest were not reached, and again any available photographs have been used; should there be objections to our use of any such material, we shall seriously consider its removal, if contacted by way of the relevant website. Many documents, including books, monographs and published learned papers have been consulted and those, which have been helpful, are either indicated at the point of reference in the text, or are listed in the short bibliography which appears after this introduction, but it is right to highlight the relevant Pevsner and Arthur Mee 'King's England' volumes, which have been indispensable, and can be used to fill out many of the short accounts presented here. Although it is at least half a century since they were published, this is not of great moment for historical journeys, provided that the continuing existence of any buildings has been confirmed. Maps on the National Library of Scotland website, maps.nls.uk have given a 19th century baseline to historical enquiries and have been a key tool for identifying the sites of water mills.

The places described are all fairly near to the rivers in question, and although the occasional detour has been made, especially in riverside towns, the catchment has rarely been left. The aim has been to keep the rivers and their tributaries central to the narrative, rather than using them as a vehicle for a wider study of the lands around them. The city of Norwich presented something of a dilemma, given that there was no desire to add another, less comprehensive, guidebook to the many which already exist. So, the accounts stay particularly close to the Rivers Yare and Wensum when tracking them through and around the city.

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Addendum

A1. On returning to this document after completing the accounts of the separate river journeys, we realised that there were a few general points worth making, though they should not be treated as points of comparison with other catchments.

As regards the commercial watermills on the rivers and their main tributaries, an overview is given in the Table below;

River	No. of Watermills	Corn Mills	Paper Mills	Cloth Mills	Other	No. of Waterwheels
R. Yare	17	14	3	2	0	24
R. Wensum	17	16	3	2	1	27
R. Waveney	14	14	0	2	0	19
R. Bure	20	20	1	2	2	23
Totals	68	64	7	8	3	93

Notes;

1. Some mills had more than one function over time, and/or sometimes separate waterwheels carried out separate tasks in the same mill, so numbers do not add simply.
 2. 'Corn Mills' is used generically to include all types of grain and flour mills.
 3. It is no surprise in a county of much arable farming that there is a predominance of corn mills, but it is surprising that there are so few performing other tasks. In particular, no other specialities grew up along any of the rivers, except arguably, papermills near Norwich, and there appear to be none that would be classed as having heavy industrial functions.
 4. Many of the watermills operated in tandem with windmills, and a substantial number were boosted by steam engines from the mid-19th century onwards. Of those which survived to the later 20th century, a few were converted from water power to electric power.
 5. On each river, the watermills are confined to the middle stretch. Upstream the flow of water was not large enough to power a mill consistently, while downstream, navigation was a priority in the period of interest, and mills extending across a river to access all the water flow, were a major obstruction.
- A2. It is disappointing that so few old bridges still cross the rivers (my criterion is pre-1700). There are 2 in the River Yare catchment, 1 in the River Wensum catchment, none in the River Waveney catchment, and 3 in the River Bure catchment; 6 in all.
- A3. It is worth remembering that Norfolk is a dry county, with the annual rainfall in Norwich 629mm, compared with the English average of 855mm. Given that fact, it is perhaps surprising that there is so much water to be seen around each of the rivers, though much of it can be described as standing in old sand and gravel pits, ponds, and meres, rather than flowing in ditches and drainage channels. Nonetheless, at Yarmouth, the mean discharge rate by the River Yare of 162000 gallons per minute, is substantial for an east coast outflow.

Short Bibliography

Title	Author (s)	Publisher	Date
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The Round Church Towers of England	Hart S.	Lucas Books	2003
Medieval Religious Houses – England & Wales	Knowles D. & Hadcock R.N.	Longman	1953
The King's England - Norfolk	Mee A. ed.	Hodder & Stoughton	1951
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The Round Towers to English Parish Churches	Messent C J W	Fletcher & Son Ltd.	1958
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The Waveney Valley	Reeve C.	Fonthill Media Ltd.	2015
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Rivers of East Anglia	Turner J.	Cassel & Co. Ltd.	1954
Water and Wind Power	Watts M.	Shire	2005

Websites

Site	Comment
britishlistedbuildings.co.uk	
pastscape.org.uk	English historic buildings
maps.nls.uk	Historic maps
gridreferencefinder.com	Convenient access to Google & OS maps
drtomsbooks.files.wordpress.com	My own gazetteer of ancient bridges
en.wikipedia.org	
ceh.ac.uk/index	Hosts the National River Flow archive
norfolkmills.co.uk	Exceptional source of information

In the course of the project, we have read guidebooks acquired during visits to historic sites, and consulted many local websites. Information has been extracted, but text has not been copied. We are keen to thank those who have made available, so much, that is interesting.