

## May 2015 Walk - A gentle walk from Great Houghton, crossing the River Nene, passing Northampton Boat Club, Billing Aquadrome and back through Little Houghton.

In high spirits, our walk began at Great Houghton's Elizabethan inn: 'The Old Cherry Tree'. "Built in 1576," Chrissie informed us.

Initially, it was built as a barn close to the farmer's cherry orchards, and it would have stayed as such, had not the ale brewed by the farmer's wife gained a reputation amongst travellers for its excellence.



This barn was built on land belonging to the Treshams, which was later confiscated in 1605 after Francis Tresham got into a bit of bother for his involvement in something called 'The Gunpowder Plot'. A secret tunnel is said to have existed between The Old Cherry Tree and the Manor House. Tresham and his men are also said to have used it once. Following his death Tresham's head was displayed in Northampton as a warning to others, alongside those of his co-conspirators Catesby and Percy.

Leaving the Inn behind, we followed an ancient path across fields towards Little Houghton. This path greatly helped the success of The Old Cherry Tree for it offered the traveller the best chance of arriving at Northampton dry-shod.

After crossing the bypass, we then entered Little Houghton. The time on the church clock stood at twelve minutes to eleven. Which was just as well, for there is an account of how a man driving through this village late one September night in 1973, looked up and noticed that it was two o'clock in the morning. After that he remembered nothing else.

He came to and found himself on foot, soaking wet, and stumbling through the village of Bromham, some 16 miles away, with absolutely no idea of how he came to be there, where his car was, or what had happened in the missing five hours since he had last glanced at Little Houghton's church clock.

Assuming he had crashed somewhere, and then had been wandering in a daze, he called upon a friend for help. They found his car, quite undamaged, in the middle of a field near Turvey. Curiously, despite heavy rain, there were no tyre tracks to it from the shut gate, nor any footprints; and it took a farmer's tractor to tow it away out of the muddy field and back onto the road.





Several years later, he had a flashback and recalled seeing a white glowing light with fuzzy edges heading directly towards his windscreen, just as he was driving out of Little Houghton, but other than he could recall nothing else.



What actually happened to that twenty-one year old, remains lost in the wisteria of time; but I am sure a few Shamblers, recalling their own experiences of the seventies, might be able to offer an explanation or two.



Chrissie next led us across a field, spiked with the green-bladed leaves of a stout cereal crop.



Across the distance, we enjoyed open views over Northampton.

A lower field had been ploughed, but left strewn with the remains of parsnips. Perhaps this was the same field which had once belonged to the vicar of Little Houghton, one by the name of Willimus Drakeforde, who particularly loved turnips.

Unluckily for this vicar, he must have annoyed someone, for an aggrieved man took an ingenious form of 'Christian' revenge upon him. This enemy announced loudly one night; in one of Northampton's ale houses (if not all of them) that the good vicar of Little Houghton wished to donate his entire turnip field to the poor people of Northampton. Upon hearing this there was great celebration and Willimus Drafeforde's charity was widely praised.

The following morning, much to the astonishment of the vicar's servant, hordes of men, women and children turned up at the field and began to help themselves. Once it was stripped bare, these happy people set off homewards, their bags bulging with root crop



Along their way home, they saw two men riding towards them. Initial alarm turned quickly to delight when they realised it was in fact Willimus Drakeforde, together with his worried looking servant. At the vicar's approach the poor people of Northampton removed their scarves and then waved them in the air giving uproarious cheers. However, their cheers quickly turned to screams as the vicar, wielding his whip, and cursing loudly, galloped straight at them. Terrified, the poor people of Northampton scattered, leaving the road strewn with their dirty digging implements, scarves and an occasional turnip or two.

Hopefully though, those 'Poor People of Northampton' ate well that night. Most certainly the instigator of this caper must have chuckled in his bed at the thought of the vicar getting his just desserts.

Leaving behind this ploughed field, we made our way down towards the river along a route once favoured by animals from the Upper Pleistocene era when there was a water hole here, a mere 120,000 years ago.

Long before any ancestors of the Shamblers walked here, horses, elephants, musk ox, woolly rhinoceros, bison and reindeer made the path we now followed. Though it must have been far more treacherous in those days for many of their fossil bones now lie beneath the River Nene's gravels.



At around 8,500 BC, just as the last Ice Age retreated, a great glacial lake burst its banks. The resultant flood carved out the wide valley before us; and at the same time exposed a rocky outcrop and nearby cliff. This rocky area soon became the only safe place to cross the river's swampy lands for miles around.

The Romans quickly realised the importance of this ford and built a fort here. The Normans, being of similar mind, built a motte and bailey castle. By then the mound on the cliff had gained its name, 'Clifford Hill', taken simply from the words 'cliff' and 'ford'. Today, Clifford Hill remains one of the largest mottes of its kind in the British Isles, and yet we Shamblers barely noticed it. Though perhaps we would have done, had we been hit on the head by a bowling bowl. For in the 1600s, one by the name of William Ward levelled off the top of the castle's motte and turned it into a bowling green!



Swans graced the quieter waterways, close to where the Saxons built a far more practical water mill. We then passed holiday lodges, and a field of tiny huts balanced upon bricks, close to where boats were moored; before one kind Shambler shared his polo mints with a pony.



Sheep, ragged from being sheared, grazed a curving flood defence bank as we returned towards Great Houghton under gathering clouds.



Incidentally, blue was once a well-known in Great Houghton from another plant: woad. From its leaves a useful dye could be extracted and then used to colour cloth black, blue, purple or green. Yellow flowering woad was also useful in banishing the wireworm prevalent here before cereal crops were grown.

Great Houghton's parish register, up to the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, records what it terms 'Woad People'. These people were obviously considered outsiders. They lived to the south of the village along 'Blue Lane'. This lane is now lost, so it cannot have been more than a track, perhaps similar to what we were walking along. Alongside this track the 'Woad People' built their cabins of turf and wood. After three years or so, they would then move on to the next parish that needed their skills, with the intention of returning to Great Houghton and Blue Lane every twelve years or so. It seems one year they never made this return journey and these 'Woad People' simply disappeared.

Happily, all the Shamblers did safely return to The Old Cherry Tree Inn very eager to tuck into well-deserved Sunday lunches, which happily, as far as I am aware, did not feature any turnips! Nor, did we have any seventeenth century conspirators whispering in our ears about gunpowder, treason or root crops!

With many thanks to Chrissie for organising such a lovely varied walk, and also our backmarker, Mike.