



The Fens

Towering church spires and windmill sails punctuate the sweeping skyline of the pancake-flat Fenlands. Read on for details of great windmills, wildlife-watching sites and historic towns.

Refreshingly free from tourist and urban sprawl, the Fens make a great touring destination in summer – especially for lovers of sweet villages and cultural heritage. Hereward the Wake, Oliver Cromwell and the Pilgrim Fathers are provincial alumni, there are Georgian market towns aplenty and historic gems to discover, ranging from precious Bronze Age relics to some of England's most enchanting medieval churches and the beguiling Ely Cathedral.

GETTING THERE

By train

East Midland Trains (www.eastmidlandtrains.co.uk) operate to Ely (via March) from Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield, Nottingham and Norwich. They also go from Peterborough to Spalding, Heckington and Boston. Trains from Nottingham take just under two hours to Boston.

• **Cross Country Trains** (www.crosscountrytrains.co.uk) link Ely with Stansted airport, Cambridge, Leicester and Birmingham.

• **First Capital Connect** (www.firstcapitalconnect.co.uk) go to Ely and on to King's Lynn from London and Cambridge (just over an hour for London to Ely).

• **National Express** (www.nationalexpress.com) operate to Ely from Peterborough, Cambridge, and Norwich.

By bus

• **Ely** The X9 bus (www.stagecoachbus.com) links Ely with Cambridge.

• **Wisbech** The nearest train station is at March, but National Express coaches go daily from Wisbech to London (four hours, via Cambridge), Birmingham (via Leicester) and Great Yarmouth (via King's Lynn).

• **King's Lynn** The Excel X1 from First (www.firstgroup.com) goes to King's Lynn from Peterborough and Norwich.

• **Boston** An hourly bus goes from Lincoln, taking 1½ hours (it continues to Spalding).

GETTING AROUND

By train

From Ely, it takes 30 minutes to King's Lynn on First Capital Connect and 20 minutes to March on Cross Country Trains or National Express.

By bus

From Boston, it takes from 45 minutes to reach Spalding (roughly every hour) Mon-Sat, and one hour to Long Sutton. From Wisbech, it takes 35 minutes to reach March; 45-60 minutes to Peterborough. Various Norfolk Green (www.norfolkgreen.co.uk) buses link King's Lynn to Wisbech (45 minutes) and Spalding (1 hr, 20 mins).

THINGS TO SEE AND DO

Sights are listed in the order shown in the magazine report. Note that several close at 4pm or 4.30pm.

Wild Fens

Wicken Fen

South of A1123, three miles west of Soham
www.nationaltrust.org.uk/wickenfen

Admission £5.25 (including Gift Aid); £2 car parking; free to National Trust members.

The Trail Guide is worth buying (£1.50) as information is limited to the few hides.

Visitor centre open Mar-Oct, Tue-Sun

Ouse Washes RSPB Reserve

Nearest village is Manea

www.rspb.org.uk

Admission free (including visitor centre and information leaflets)

Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, Welney

100 Foot Bank

Two miles south of Welney village, off the A1101

www.wwt.org.uk

Admission £5.95 (including Gift Aid); free to WWT members

Freiston Shore RSPB Reserve and Frampton Marsh RSPB Reserve

Admission free

www.bostonwashbanks.com

www.rspb.org.uk

There's no visitor centre at Freiston Shore RSPB reserve, just a board with a map and limited information. The lagoon circuit trail is suitable for wheelchairs.

On our visit to Frampton Marsh RSPB Reserve in May 2008, there were no facilities, but by April 2009, new footpaths (including a one-hour reed-bed circuit), three hides and a small visitor centre should be open to the public.

For the full magazine report on The Fens,
see p32 of the January 2009 issue of Which? Holiday

Ely

The Thursday and Saturday markets have a good variety of stalls. Every Sunday at 2.30pm, a guided 1½ hour town tour leaves from the visitor centre (£3.50).

■ Ely Cathedral

www.cathedral.ely.anglican.org
www.stainedglassmuseum.com

Admission £5.50 (includes guided tour); £9 (includes tour of Octagon or West Tower); £11.80 (includes all the above, plus entry to Stained Glass Museum and beverage). Tours last around an hour. Three Octagon tours per day in summer. No charge for photos.

■ Ely Museum

Market Street
www.elymuseum.org.uk
Admission £3.50

■ Oliver Cromwell Museum

29 St Mary's Street
www.eastcambs.gov.uk/tourism
Admission £4.30 (includes an audio guide)

Huntingdon

■ Cromwell Museum

Market Square
www.olivercromwell.org
Open Tue-Sun
Admission free

Pop into the sweet church opposite, which shows off his baptism certificate.

Ramsey

For a quintessential Fenland drive and sweeping views, head from charming Chatteris along the dead-straight 40-Foot Drain to Ramsey.

Windmills

■ Maud Foster Mill

Willoughby Road
Boston
www.maudfoster.co.uk
Open Wed & weekends (+ Thu & Fri in July & Aug)
Admission £2.50; guidebook £1

■ Sibsey Trader Mill

Off A16, five miles north of Boston
www.sibsey.fsnet.co.uk/traderwindmill.htm
Open Apr-Oct weekends + Tue
Admission £2

■ Heckington Windmill

Open mid July-mid Sep: daily noon-5pm (rest of the year Sat and/or Sun 1pm-4pm)
Admission £2

■ Moulton Windmill

High Street, Moulton
Open Thu-Sun
Admission £4 for a tour (no set times but last tour at 3.15pm)

■ Denver Windmill

Near Downham Market
www.denverwindmill.co.uk
Admission £3.75 (50p discount vouchers may be found in local tourist guides)

■ Houghton Mill

Near Huntingdon
www.nationaltrust.org.uk
Open May-Sep: Sun-Wed, 1pm-5pm,
& Apr-Oct: Sat 11am-5pm
Admission £3.70 (including Gift Aid)

Wisbech

The town has a market on Thursday and Saturday, and a farmers' market every other Friday. In summer, the visitor centre sells tickets (£2) for weekly themed tours and talks.

■ Peckover House

North Brink
www.nationaltrust.org.uk/peckover
Open Mar-end of Oct: Sat-Wed
Admission £5.50 (house and garden)

■ Octavia Hill

South Brink
www.octaviahill.org
Open Sat-Wed 1pm-4.30pm
Admission £3.50

■ Wisbech and Fenland Museum

Museum Square
www.wisbechmuseum.org.uk
Open Tue-Sat
Admission free

March

■ St Wendreda's Church

One mile south of town centre
The key is obtained from the nearby Stars pub after 11am. See the church's old silverware in the town museum, whose crammed displays also include a catapult ball from the nearby Stonea Iron Age Fort.

■ Flag Fen

Northey Road, near Peterborough
www.flagfen.org
Open Tue-Sun
Admission £5.50 (including Gift Aid). There's a free guided tour on most days but the time varies.

King's Lynn

An annual music and arts festival is held here in July. Market days are Tuesday, Friday and Saturday. Tickets for guided tours in summer are available at Tales of the Old Gaol House.

■ Lynn Museum

Market Street
www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk
Open Tue-Sat
Admission £3 (includes an audio guide)

■ True's Yard Museum

North Street
www.truesyard.co.uk
Open Tue-Sat
Admission £3

■ Tales of the Old Gaol House

Saturday Market Place
www.visitwestnorfolk.com
Admission £2.90 (includes an audio guide)
The audio tour accounts of witch hunting and punishments are atmospheric but lengthy, so you may prefer to ask for a script on entry instead.

■ Castle Rising

Castle
www.castlerising.co.uk
Open Apr-Oct daily & Nov-Mar: Tue-Sat
Admission £4 (includes an audio guide)

Spalding

www.visitspalding.co.uk
There are markets on Tuesdays and Saturdays.

■ Tulip Festival and Parade

www.flowerparade.org
Taking place on the first Bank Holiday in May, the festival lasts three days, but the parade, from Springfields to the town centre, is on Saturday. Get a place by the barriers two hours early if you want a close-up view in the town centre.

In addition, many of the South Holland churches host flower festivals in the week or so leading up to the Tulip Festival, while floral tubs outside homes and schools in Spalding and neighbouring villages are linked in 'tulip trails'.

■ Ayscoughfee Hall and gardens

www.ayscoughfee.org
Churchgate
Open Tue-Sun
Admission free

■ Springfields: Fenscape & Festival Gardens

www.springfieldsgardens.co.uk
Camelgate
Admission free
A shuttle bus between Spalding and Springfields leaves every ten minutes (£1), or pay £3 for the 30-minute ride on the Water Taxi (www.spaldingwatertaxi.co.uk).

Long Sutton

Get a copy of the free town trail pamphlet to explore the area. Nearby Gedney's huge 'wool' church is also worth a peek.

Boston

www.boston.gov.uk
Markets are held on Wednesday and Saturday.

■ St Botolph's church

www.parish-of-boston.org.uk
Admission £2.50 to climb the tower (last climb 3.30pm); 30p for information leaflet

■ Guildhall

South Street
www.bostonguildhall.co.uk
Closed Tuesdays
Admission £3.75

East Fen

■ Parrot Zoo
Follow signs to National Parrot Sanctuary
from A16 or A52
www.parrotzoo.co.uk
Admission £5.50

GOOD PLACES TO STAY

Prices are for the cheapest double room, including breakfast, in May 2009. Unless stated, each accommodation accepts Mastercard and Visa, is open virtually year-round, but doesn't have specific facilities for wheelchair users.

BOSTON

■ White Hart Hotel
High Street
Tel 01205 311900
www.whitehartboston.com

This smart, welcoming 19th-century hotel stands right in the town centre with views over the river to St Botolph's church and plenty of free parking. Catch the sun at lunch from the Bistro's terrace (also see 'Good places to eat') with both the Union and Lincolnshire flags flying from the roof. The trendy décor extends from the Courtyard Bar – exposed brick, arty prints, a long bar and cosy lounge – to the 23 spacious, tip-top bedrooms. These feature plasma-screen tvs, earthy tones and huge shower rooms. **£105**

ELY

■ Riverside Inn
8 Annesdale
Tel 01353 661677
www.riversideinn-ely.co.uk

This classy, spick-and-span guesthouse is in a great spot not far from the cathedral, with two of the four rooms facing the River Great Ouse. Old photos of boats grace the landing walls, and Lithuanian Lily provides thoughtful touches like chocolates on the pillow, biscuits, bottled water, fresh fruit and flowers, and motion sensor lights. The elegant rooms (one is on the ground floor) sport rich golden curtains and bedspreads, good toiletries and sleek, powerful showers, although the single room is rather poky. 10% discount for the next-door Boathouse restaurant (see 'Good places to eat'). Parking is limited. **£70**

■ Sycamore House

91 Cambridge Road
Tel 01353 662139
www.sycamorehouse.gb.com

This family home-cum-guesthouse is set back from a main road on the outskirts of town (a ten-minute walk to the cathedral). Old local maps adorn some walls, while guests sit around one

smartly laid table in the large breakfast room. The four pristine (ground floor) rooms are in annexes, such as the floral Carriage room (where political playing cards are framed) and the Potting Shed. Host John, who is also a cathedral tour guide, has put plenty of Fens information in each room, along with china teasetts and biscuits. Cash or cheque only. **£70**

HOLBEACH

■ Elloe Lodge
37 Barrington Gate
Tel 01406 423207
www.elloelodge.co.uk

Wood-panelling and old photos add character to this informal B&B on a quiet but central street. An elegant entrance (a gravelled drive with a conifer roundabout) leads to the Edwardian house where prints of horse-racing and hunting line the stairs. Informal hostess Gill offers four cheery rooms with quality furnishings and simple bath/shower rooms, as well as a comfy guest lounge. **£65**

HUNTINGDON

■ The Old Bridge
1 High Street
Tel 01480 424300
www.huntsbridge.com

Standing on the town's inner ring-road and beside the river, this elegant, ivy-cloaked hotel dates back mostly to the 18th century. Refined public areas include the wood-panelled breakfast room, the entrance lobby's grandfather clock and grand chandelier, and the clubby bar with its antler-topped lights and log fire when cold – a great post-prandial spot. Nine of the 24 individually designed rooms face the river – all come with quality accessories, and themes vary from Scandinavian minimalism to a 'Toad of Toad Hall' room and a large safari-themed room with wildlife pictures and leopard print cushions. Try perhaps the home-baked bread and haddock with spinach at breakfast. See also 'Good places to eat'. **£120**

KING'S LYNN

■ Bank House
King's Staithe Square
Tel 01553 660492
www.thebankhouse.co.uk

This former Georgian merchant's home and bank is tucked away behind imposing iron gates on a peaceful, traffic-free square in the old town centre. Original shutters, arches and elaborate plasterwork provide lots of charm, and you may walk through the old bank vault. The ten spacious rooms (half overlooking the river Ouse) blend stylish décor and high-quality bathrooms with bygone beams and fireplaces. Thoughtful touches include flat-screen tvs, impressive welcome folders and mini fridges. Spending time and money here should prove a worthy investment! Since we visited in May 2008, the Counting House brasserie has also opened. **£100**

■ Fairlight Lodge

79 Goodwins Road
Tel 01553 762234
www.fairlightlodge.co.uk

Although this Victorian B&B isn't central, but in a residential part of town, the 15-minute stroll to the old town is through the pleasant 'Walks' park. Polite hosts Steve and Joella whip up a mean, speedy breakfast (a wide choice includes croissants, omelettes or kedgeree) and also do cream teas in summer. Pictures of local landmarks adorn walls while the seven neat and cheery bedrooms (four on the ground floor) come with homemade biscuits and several novels. In general, the shower rooms are small but smart. Off-street parking. **£53**

SARACEN'S HEAD

■ Pipwell Manor
Washway Road
Tel 01406 423119
www.smoothhound.co.uk/hotels/pipwell.html

In a hamlet two miles from Holbeach, this homely Georgian, red-brick guesthouse makes a relaxing, great-value base. Hostess Lesley welcomes guests with home-baked cakes and offers free use of bicycles, while husband John (a Fens historian) may take you around the extensive, pretty garden on his miniature train, and past the collection of station signs. Bookshelves heave with novels and reference guides in the cosy, floral lounge, while at breakfast, you'll sit around one table for home-made fruit compote or salad and eggs from their own hens. The four delightful rooms look chintzy and feminine. Packed lunches on request. Cash or cheque only. **£56**

SPALDING

■ White Lodge
10 Halmergate
Tel 01775 719002
www.whitelodge-guesthouse.com

The town centre is only a five-minute walk from this stylish guesthouse on a residential road – the Tulip Parade passes by the house. Behind the appealing guest lounge (cherrywood floor and a wood burner) and light breakfast room is a spacious conservatory looking onto a lovely rear garden with spiral topiary and a patio with basketweave chairs. The four bedrooms sport trendy fittings and furnishings, with superb bathrooms. We especially liked room two, with its ornamental fireplace and rear balcony. One room is adapted for wheelchairs. **£75**

WISBECH

■ White Lion Hotel
5 South Brink
Tel 01945 463060

You can't get more central than this small, Regency terrace building across the river from Peckover House on South Brink. In summer, people have lunch at picnic tables in the rear creeper-walled courtyard, but meals are mainly

served in the appealing bar lounge, which has pot plants, old gilt-framed pictures, a tapestry and views to North Brink. The varied breakfast includes cheeses, cold meats or kippers and the 13 sizeable rooms have good facilities. Those staying in front-facing rooms may notice traffic noise. **£85**

GOOD PLACES TO EAT

As well as the places listed here, we'd also recommend some of the windmills mentioned earlier (Maud Foster, Sibsey Trader, Denver Mill), which sell home-baked scones and other enticing snacks.

BOSTON

■ Black Orchid Bistro

(‘See Good Places to Stay’ for contact details) The White Hart has one of the most upmarket restaurants in town and serves locally sourced produce. The menu might include pork tenderloin with sage and onion crumble and sautéed potatoes in port sauce, then panacotta with rhubarb compote and shortcake. Our main course tasted good but we were disappointed with getting a badly marked wine glass and errors in what was brought to our table. Starters £4.50, mains £10-18; wines from £12 a bottle.

ELY

■ The Boathouse

5-5A Annesdale

Tel 01353 664388

www.cambscuisine.com

The only University Boat Race not rowed on the Thames set off from here in 1944, and so oars hang on the walls of this chic but unpretentious restaurant. Friendly staff bring freshly baked bread chunks, then good-value dishes such as sausage and mash. This gets its own mix and match menu, so you might choose pork with sage and peppercorn, with a red wine sauce and garlic mash. There's usually eel on the menu too – we had tasty smoked eel in a beetroot salad. Several English wines are on offer, along with a real ale menu. Starters £4.50-7, mains £10-20, set lunch £11 (or £15 for three courses). Advance reservations are recommended.

■ Peacocks

65 Waterside

Tel 01353 661100

www.peacockstearoom.co.uk

Voted ‘Britain’s Top Tearoom’ in 2007, this dainty, wisteria-clad place near the river encourages people to maintain the tradition of drinking tea from the saucer. The plentiful, well-mannered and prompt young staff serve home-baked cakes and grilled light lunches, but most people come for the tea. The brain-straining list of 65 global loose-leaf teas ranges from Taylor’s Yorkshire (£2.25) and flavoured black teas such as Lapsang Souchong, to Moroccan mint tea and specialities

(at £3.25) such as aniseed chai with cardamom and orange peel. It can feel crowded inside but there’s a candlelit fireplace, antique tea caddies on the shelves and tea-themed pictures on the walls. A cream tea costs from £6 per person. Coffee is also available! Open Wed-Sun (& Bank Holidays), 10.30am-5pm.

HUNTINGDON

■ The Old Bridge

(See Good Places to Stay for contact details)

A combination of picture windows, a large skylight and murals suggesting you could be at a French hillside villa, give a light, cheery air to this upmarket hotel restaurant. The conservatory-style décor encourages plenty of chit-chat while young, polite staff serve attentively. The daily-changing, organic menu might include venison with celeriac and potato mash, spinach and red wine sauce and desserts like date and walnut pudding with maple panacotta. With a wine shop due to open in the hotel, and an annual wine festival hosted here, it’s no surprise that the wine menu is huge – around 450 varieties. Starters £7, mains £11-25.

KING’S LYNN

■ Bradleys

10 South Quay

Tel 01553 819888

www.bradleysbytheriver.co.uk

Riverside tables soon fill up outside this Georgian merchant’s house in summer. Inside, the attractive wine bar has period-style Regency stripes and a wood burner, while upstairs the elegant main restaurant has chandeliers, ship paintings and river views through sash windows. You could start with Scottish mussels in white wine cream followed by Gressingham duck breast with Grand Marnier sauce. On our visit, the full restaurant seemed understaffed. Starters around £7, mains mostly £13-19, three-course set dinner (Mon-Thu) £19.50.

SPALDING

■ Turners

New Road

Tel 01775 722502

You could end up queuing for a plaice at this popular fish restaurant in the town centre, but the service is speedy as well as efficient and friendly. One of the white-coated chefs may even walk around the tables to check that customers are satisfied. It’s a typical no-frills café in design, with black and white photos on the walls, but people come here for traditional meals of tasty, battered fish (cod, lemon sole, halibut, etc), chips and mushy peas. A prime cod with chips and peas costs around £6, while a cup of tea is only 60p. Fish is delivered daily from Grimsby.

WISBECH

■ Gallery restaurant

New Inn Yard, Union St

Tel 01945 475767

Tucked away from the street, this cream-brick wine bar has a peaceful, welcoming atmosphere and a charming balustraded gallery with A-frame beams. Several bygone paintings and photos of Wisbech add interest. Sup the local Elgoods beer while perusing the menu of typical pub fare such as home-made steak and ale pie, gammon steak or Sunday roast. Mains £7-11.

WEBSITES

www.visitthefens.co.uk

www.fenswaterways.com

www.eastcambs.gov.uk/tourism

www.huntsdc.gov.uk/leisure+and+culture

www.lincolnshiremillsgroup.org.uk

www.fenland.gov.uk

www.visitwestnorfolk.com

www.sholland.gov.uk/leisure/visiting

www.visitlincolnshire.com