

Bures Walks – Snippets of History (embroidered with Mystery!)

The walking guides have been hastily written to give some general guidance to the routes of a selection of walks from Bures, so that local people can get out into the fresh air, and into our beautiful countryside, on their permitted daily exercise outing, without having to drive or use public transport.

So here are a few notes to ponder on, either while you are walking, or during those hours when confined to the house. Much of what follows can be checked and enlarged upon by judicious use of Google. The order is random, but these are all places you will find as you follow our local rights-of-way.

The Mount at Mount Bures



An information board below the steps leading to the top of the mount gives much of the history as it is understood by archaeologists today. This is without doubt an important vantage point from which to watch the comings and goings along the valley below, and, at times in its history, the mount would have been fortified, its top being surrounded by a wooden palisade which, with the ditch around the mound, would make it a typical Norman motte-and-bailey.

But does it have an earlier history? Some say that Queen Boadicea (now more usually spelt Boudicca) was buried on the spot in AD 60 or 61, after poisoning herself following her eventual defeat by the Romans after many battles to keep them at bay, and that the mound was raised over her tomb. Excavations into the top of the mount revealed no evidence, but what if she is buried at the bottom? The mount is also on a convincing leyline which runs from Golden Square, just beyond Mount Bures, to St John's Well, an ancient holy well at Great Barton near Bury St. Edmunds. For good reason this mysterious line of earth energy is known as the Dragon Line, so our next subject must be....

The Dragon



If you've discovered "our" dragon and seen him from the best vantage point, just beyond St Stephen's Chapel, you'll probably have found his history for yourselves so I won't repeat it all here. If you missed the delightful cast-iron information panel do wander back to read it. It is sufficient to say that Geoffrey Probert's magnificent depiction, with nearly half a mile of outline cut into the hillside, is quite recent, having been created in 2012 to celebrate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee.

But of course the legend is much older, and the beast itself ageless, and, some (including me) say still with us, lurking in the unplumbed, silty depths of Wormingford Mere.

The same dragon is remembered in a Wiston church wall-painting, though the story there makes Wiston men the victors, and in his crocodile guise he can be seen devouring a rare Wormingford virgin in a stained glass window of that village's church.

There are dragon legends all along the valley, and when we are free from the constraints of Coronavirus I'll be happy to lead you beyond the village bounds on Dragon Days...

The Stephen's Chapel



There is plenty of history, written and visual, in this lovely little chapel beside the dragon-viewing spot, but it may be that the building has to be closed during Coronavirus restrictions, as most churches are. Suffice to say that the current building was consecrated on the Feast of Stephen, 26th December 1218, by no less a personage than the Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton. This

may well be because of the site's links with St Edmund, King & Martyr, who, so the story goes, was crowned in an earlier church on a hill above Bures on Christmas Day 855. But was it here...?

As an aside, it might be fun to ponder on this chapel being dedicated to St Stephen, and consecrated on his feast day, which happens to be close to the winter solstice, and the church at Mount Bures being dedicated to St. John the Baptist, who just happens to have a summer solstice feast day...

Then try a bit of sacred geometry: plot an equilateral triangle with two mile sides. I think you'll find the two churches, St Stephen's and St John's are just two miles apart. Draw equal lengths of line from each, as an equilateral triangle, in the direction of Wormingford and they'll meet on Lodge Hills, which could be considered as a point of equinox. Years ago this was dubbed The Mystic Triangle. Subsequently that triangle has been found to contain an incredible wealth of ancient spiritual sites – ceremonial ways known as cursuses, burial barrows and trackways. Directly along the line of one of the ancient cursuses the sun rises over Lodge Hills at the winter solstice.

The chapel declined in importance, and for a while was used as a barn. Indeed many locals still know of it as Chapel Barn. In the 1930s the Probert family restored the chapel and transported some magnificent alabaster tombs of various Earls of Oxford and their Ladies from Colne Priory, in Earls Colne, which the family also owned (and which happens to be my old home).

But was King Edmund crowned exactly on this spot? There seems little doubt it was in or near Bures, and on a hilltop. Some believe the site to be a little further up the valley. For myself, well I have a feeling it wasn't quite here, but within sight...

Some of the walks take us by or through the paddocks which adjoin Fysh House. In the paddock directly to the east of that impressive house, which is crossed by a public footpath connecting to the track to Moat Farm, is a small but noticeable, flat-topped hillock. I have a feeling that it was there that the original wooden church in which Edmund was crowned probably stood. Geographically it fits the bill, and it ties in much better with St Edmund's Lane, which runs up from the village, than does the 13th century site which is better linked by Cuckoo Hill.

I haven't confirmed the origins of Fysh House's name, but *if* this was the site of Edmund's coronation, and St Edmunds Lane a pilgrim route to it, did Fysh derive from "The Sign of the Fish", an ancient Christian symbol, and a name often given to pilgrimage taverns? Perhaps just such a hostelry once stood where the House now stands.

Lodge Hills



Mentioned in connection with The Mystic Triangle, and the destination of one of the walks, the tree-crowned Lodge Hills are a focal point of the valley downstream from Bures. They stand on a high bluff overlooking the magnificent Smallbridge Hall, home of the Waldegrave family who were embroiled in the dragon affair, and who also had the dubious and expensive “pleasure” of being able to claim “Queen Elizabeth slept here”.

In their day these hills were a deer park, and stalking parties were entertained in a hunting lodge on the hilltop directly above the Hall. A small diversion from the recommended walk will bring you to the spot which was recently excavated and has a useful information panel.

The neighbouring village of Wormingford may owe its name to the dragon, being “The Ford of the Great Worm” as dragons were often called. On your way down from the summit of Lodge Hills you may glimpse the dark waters of the tree-shielded Wormingford Mere. Beware! He’s still in there!

Bures Mill



Seen here from the footpath which crosses the sluice where the navigation lock used to be, the mill has a history dating back to the Dark Ages, when it was a watermill operated by a Saxon named Witgar. “When I were a lad”, the mill was still operating, though no longer using water power, and it belonged to a man named Witgar, which is some indication of my great age!

The River Stour Navigation



The River Stour was made navigable to barge traffic as early as 1705, and trade on the waterway continued until the beginning of the First World War. There were numerous timber-sided locks along the way, raising the waterway from sea level at Manningtree, to the quay in Sudbury. Bures was a river port, its main public wharf being along what is still known as Wharf Lane. Every imaginable commodity was moved by barge, but freights such as coal were most common. After the coming of the railway, waterborne freight declined rapidly, and the prospect of war, and the possible use of the barges by occupying forces, gave a welcome excuse to bring barge transport to an end. Many of the barges were scuttled in Ballingdon Cut, where their upper-works could be seen until recently. Sadly most of the horses were shot. As far upstream as Strafford St Mary the locks have been restored, so you can still get a good idea of what our lovely river was like in its trading days. Cornard Lock has been restored too, and is the one place where you can still see a (replica) Stour lighter locking through.

On the Lodge Hills walk you will follow the line of the Swan Cut, a canal which formed part of this historic waterway.