

## THE OPEN ROAD . . .

# Between Spalding and Holbeach

Written and illustrated by DAVID KAYE

LEAVING SPALDING along the A1070 Crowland and Peterborough road, you drive along a steep-sided embankment, looking left and right over a pattern of narrow, elongated fields. The name of Cowbit (pronounced "Cubbit") Wash was well-known in Eastern England a century ago as the area where the All England Skating Championships were held. Before the coming of the steam engine and pump several square miles were regularly inundated each winter, and when a sharp frost came then conditions were ideal for long distance races to be held over the miles and miles of frozen waste. Drainage has brought not only Charlelois cattle and corn in place of fowling and ice frolics, but it has brought in recent years the ubiquitous dinghy, so that an armada of masts now punctuates the top of the banks of the nearby drain.

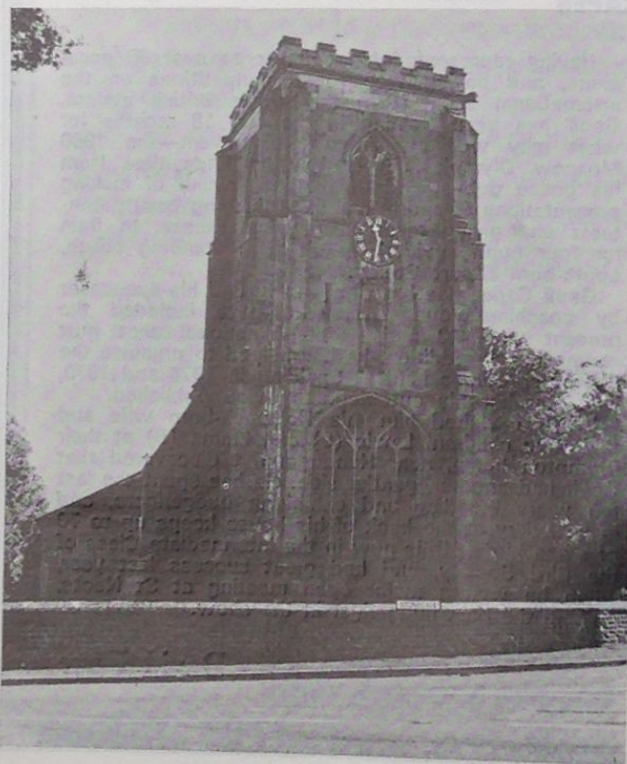
Cowbit village itself is an interesting shape, being in the form of a triangle, but a very large triangle, with fields in its houseless centre. The angles of the figure are the sites of St Mary's church, the railway station and the adjacent hamlet of Peakhill. This hamlet is first referred to in 1220 as Pikehale, and is known to have had its own chapel (presumably a daughter church to St Mary's) in 1396, this building was still being marked on Saxton's map nearly two centuries later.

St Mary's is a good example of how brick structures are less weighty than the equivalent building in stone. The ashlar tower is believed to have been consecrated

by Bishop Russell in 1487, and now leans over at a drunken, yet safe inclination. A few years ago I ventured up into the belfry, and found this rather a strange experience since, although the floor was laid horizontally, the walls slope away in a crazy fashion, which can make one feel quite insecure. On the other hand the brick nave, with its fine stone mullions, by tradition is said to have been commissioned by Prior de Moulton of Spalding at the beginning of the 15th century, and still remains as erect as the day on which it was blessed. Inside are some charming statuettes, including one of St Hugh and his ever-present swan. But what was the odd carving over the north entrance, now so worn away by weathering? Incidentally, I cannot recall having seen anywhere else in the county the subject of St Peter attempting to walk on the sea in a stained glass window.

The lane joining the church and the station is called Stonegate, but why? All the other buildings in the village are constructed of brick. Perhaps it has something to do with a boundary stone, for the edges of the huge estates of Crowland Abbey were so marked, and some of these still remain (as at Brothertoft alongside the A1070).

The railway came to Cowbit on 1st April 1867, when the Great Eastern Railway opened their line from March to Spalding, which remained the terminus until the line was extended to Lincoln under a joint running



Right:  
A fen wildfowler  
mounted his gun on a sledge  
with four skates  
when Cowbit Wash froze over  
in the winter 60 years ago.  
(Photo by S. Jepson).



Opposite below:  
St Mary's church Cowbit  
with its leaning tower,  
and bridged north entrance  
with carved stone over the doorway.

agreement with the Great Northern Railway in 1882. The line took a new lease of life in 1928 when the extensive Whitemoor Marshalling Yard at March came into use. It is satisfying to see that, in spite of the closure of the station and its accompanying goods yard and the installation of flashing light signals and lifting barrier gates, the old G.E.R. signal box still remains active in its lofty perch—and long may it remain so! What I did find pleasing was the way in which the crossing keeper's cottage has been extended and modernised without losing its Victorian charm. How unlike the fate of many of the similar buildings on the old G.N.R. main line between Boston and Grimsby.

Once you venture onto the fen beyond the village, then you come across a weird and wonderful collection of architectural styles and building materials. A "for sale" notice caught my eye beside a pair of ancient wheel-less railway coaches parked beside the road to Moulton Chapel. In that fenland settlement there is even more variety, with the corrugated iron village hall and the Plough Inn with its mock beams painted in a very untudoresque fashion on its exterior.

The church of St James is a Georgian gem, dating from 1722 and being in its earliest period octagonal. Less than a century ago, in 1886, a brick chancel was added to the most easterly orientated side, but this was tastefully designed so as to blend in as well as possible with the earlier structure. Standing as it does at the "summit" of a hillock, reminiscent in shape to a Norman shield, it looks far too small to have ever been able to house the local populace. However, once inside you discover its secret—a fine wooden gallery. I feel that we often ignore the Georgian heritage in churches in this county. Indeed we are probably endowed with these more bountifully than almost any other area in the country.

The early 20th century Methodist church nearby is an equally fine example of the ecclesiastical architecture of its day. It stands right against the roadway, masking the earlier square Wesleyan chapel erected in 1812, and which sat 108 against the 120 claimed in the 1851 Religious Census for St James's. That same census showed that on the afternoon of March 30th in that year 60 people attended the chapel service, against 30 at the Anglican place of worship, thus reminding us that the Holbeach area was one of those in Lincoln-

shire where non-conformists outnumbered adherents to the established church.

Moulton Chapel is a village of yew hedges, which not only smarten up the place, but also act as very useful and necessary windbreaks for keen gardeners.

To reach our next village, Whaplode Drove, continue in the same direction from which you approached Moulton Chapel and at the end of the houses turn right at the crossroads, past the school to Snake Hall. To your left is a drain with a road on the other side; cross over the drain and retrace your way along the opposite bank. The lane winds through the fields for about half a mile, until you reach a second crossroads. Here you should turn right and this road will lead straight over the South Holland Main Drain to the oddly named Cate's Cove Corner, where it bends sharp left into Whaplode Drove. Turn left as you enter the village for the remarkable little church of St John the Baptist.

The first of a long line of "perpetual curates" appears to have been appointed in 1519, but it seems possible that the tradition of being originally an oratory belonging to Crowland Abbey dates its true foundation to the Middle Ages. A document of 1322 speaks of this community being cut off from the mother church of St Mary, Whaplode, five miles away, by flooding by the "Southea and Schepeea" rivers. The Sir Joseph Banks collection of prints housed in the City of Lincoln Library, and dating from the last decade of the 18th century, shows a thatched building with a wooden turret. This primitive structure was replaced by the present church in 1824. Designed by Jethro Pacey, who had a hand in some of the churches in the newly drained fens to the north of Boston, it is another gem of Georgian Lincolnshire, with its fine rounded windows and little cupola surmounted bell turret rising above the honeysuckle clad south wall. What took my fancy, however, was something much older than the first church, and something newer than my previous visit to this charming little church. The first is a Roman altar that stands tethered in the porch, and was garlanded with autumnal flowers on my last call. This, like another found nearby at Pear Tree Hill Farm in the 1960s, is one of the reminders that this area was already occupied in the second and third centuries AD. The other item that caught my eye was the new iron fencing in front of the war memorial, where three crosses have



Above:  
Moulton Chapel's Georgian  
octagonal parish church.

Left:  
Tasteful modern addition  
to the crossing keeper's cottage  
at Cowbit.

Below:  
19th and 20th century  
Methodist churches  
stand cheek by jowl at  
Moulton Chapel.



been picked out in bronze paint, the middle one being raised above the level of the others. Very effective imagery.

Retrace your route to the "main" road, turn right and continue down the bumpy driveway, instead of bearing left along your original route. You recross the South Forty Foot Drain as you proceed towards Pear Tree Hill Farm. In front of you to the left is the newest feature in this part of the Fens—Pennington's Shooting Range, with its 99 foot high tower, from which clay pigeons are hurled towards waiting marksmen. Visitors are invited to cross the wooden gangplank and jog up the driveway, past a glinting mound of empty cartridge cases, to the car park, from which you can observe the skill (or lack of it in some cases!) of those taking part in this fast growing sport. The clubhouse is open to serve visitors.

Plenty of evidence of earlier occupation was found in a series of excavations by the Gentlemen's Society of Spalding during the 1960s in the fields on either side of Pear Tree Hill Drove. Aerial photographs show that in Roman times there was quite a different, but equally effective, system of drainage. Kilns which I uncovered showed that saltpans for evaporating sea water were manufactured here, but a section through one of the early dykes showed that these were freshwater. So these flat, friable dishes must have been used much nearer the shoreline. The standard of living of the not inconsiderable population in that period was quite high. They might have lived in small wattle and daub huts (like the one I excavated at nearby Laming's Bridge in



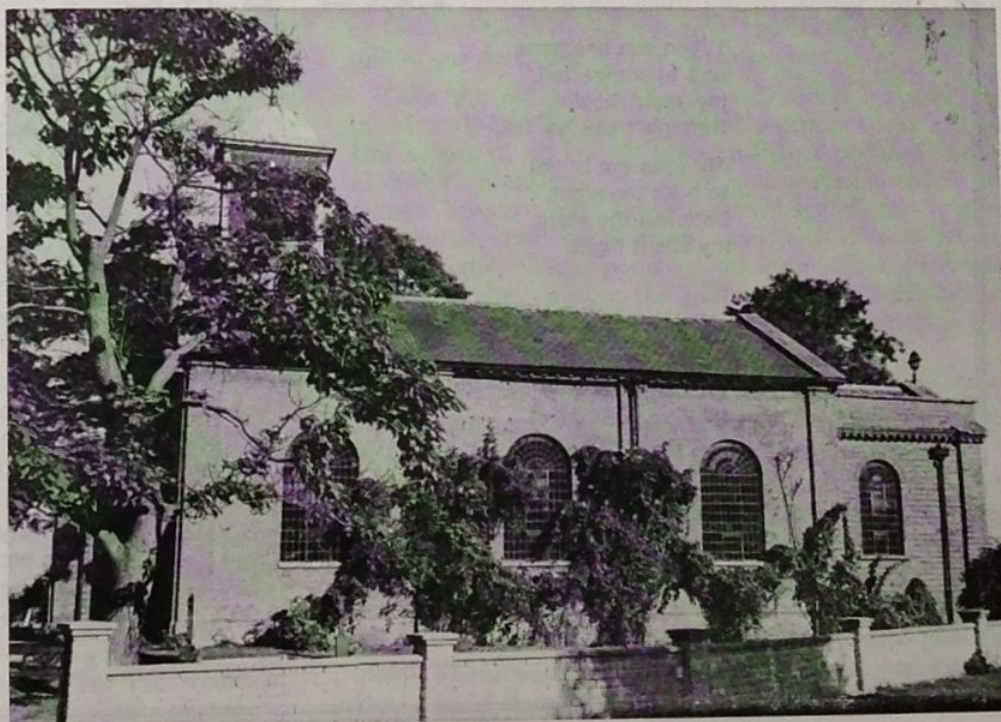
Above: Roman pottery excavated from the fens in the 1960s. (Photo by courtesy Lincolnshire Free Press).

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Below: The present parish church at Whaplode Drove dates from 1824, but in the porch is a Roman altar (left—decorated for a Harvest Festival).



1968), but they dined off high class Samian ware and drank out of delicate "hunting ware" goblets made at the Castor potteries, near Peterborough (the Stoke-on-Trent of Roman Britain). Few Roman coins have been found in this area, but it is likely that fishing and fowling led to a bartering economy.

At the end of the driveway, turn right for the Fenland Airfield. This surprising enterprise began in 1971, when a local farmer turned 16 acres of cornfields into a small airstrip. Now it has a brand new control tower, runway lights (installed by members of the Fenland Aero Club during 1977) and two grass runways—2,200 feet and 1,400 feet respectively. Since 1974 an annual Air Display is mounted on the first Sunday of September each year, when up to 10,000 spectators come to see the light aircraft cavorting in the sky. Although most of the aircraft are privately owned, two are the property of the Aero Club to teach people to fly, and a full time instructor is kept busy doing just this for most of each week. One member has used the hanger facilities to restore to flying condition the only extant Luton LA 4a Minor. Surface drainage was an initial problem, but pipes filled with gravel were laid under the runway three years ago, and this seems to have helped the situation. The public are welcomed to drive onto the

car park and enjoy the vicarious experience of flying from the safe comfort of their cars.

Continue along the roadway until you join the B1168, which will lead you into Holbeach. The small village of Holbeach St John was known in the last century, when it built its places of worship, as Holbeach Fen. The Wesleyans were first in the field with their chapel in 1824, followed by the Church of England 16 years later (a common sequence in such an area). Holbeach must be the only parish in England where the mother church is dedicated to All Saints and the daughter churches in the various outlying settlements are named after the four Gospel writers (the others being Holbeach Marsh Matthew, and Mark; Holbeach Hurn Luke).

So many of the driveways end in the word "Gate" (from the Old Norse "gata", a road). We have Herongate and Broad Gate, but my favourite is just before you reach Holbeach itself, where a signpost proclaims "Further Old Gate"!

Next month:  
THE FENS NEAR SPILSBY

Below: Fenland Airfield.



## THE OWL

When sun has gone  
and shadows fall,  
my night begins  
through trees so tall.

My eyes are bright  
to hunt the night,  
between the stars  
my silent flight.



It is said of me  
this home my tree,  
the leafy oak  
that shelters me.

The farmers friend  
I have become  
to save him shots  
from angry gun.

They call me tawny  
thats my name,  
browns my colour  
but free of shame.

A wise old bird  
I have to be,  
to feed by night  
and guard my tree.

The leafy oak  
thats home to me,  
this wise old owl  
I have to be.

Philip Jackson