



Once upon a time, in the age of sail when ships were small and roads were mere tracks (and usually impassable in winter), river transport was the thing. In the flatness of Broadland with its 125 miles (200km) of relatively lock-free navigation, a notable transport system developed.

First there were the square sailed keels, cumbersome craft which worked moderately well only with the wind astern although with no competition, expediency was not a claim,

nor even an aspiration, of their operators.

From the keels however developed the wherries, also slow but graceful and more capable - relatively speaking - to windward, and some were still working in the early 20th century. For nearly 200 years, wherries connected the sea port of Great Yarmouth with Beccles and Bungay on the River Waveney, Aylsham and North Walsham on the canalised upper sections of the Bure and Ant and, most importantly, with the city of Norwich up 'The Norwich River' as the watermen called the Yare and its tributary, the Wensum.

But Norwich had a problem in that Yarmouth handled cargoes between sea-going ships and wherries and, again, with no competition, expediency was not an aspiration and neither for that matter were low charges. Yarmouth was slow and expensive.

So in the early 19th century, the merchants of Norwich hatched a cunning plan. Enlisting the Norfolk born engineer, William Cubitt, inventor of the 'patent sail' for windmills, they sought to make Norwich directly accessible to sea-going ships. They looked at various river dredging options but finally decided to by-pass Yarmouth altogether.



The scheme, which they called 'Norwich a Port', involved a new canal two and a half miles long between the Rivers Yare and Waveney above their confluence at Breydon Water to the south west of Yarmouth. A new port would then be developed near the small fishing village of Lowestoft which would link with the Waveney through a channel dredged in shallow Oulton Broad connecting to a dredged and widened Oulton Dyke.

There was resistance from Yarmouth, of course. A House of Commons committee heard in particular from one John Bracey, Yarmouth harbour-master, who claimed the cost of towing ships up to Norwich would be prohibitive, adding: 'They would track them up by those steamboats while they last - but they are going out'.

The first navigation bill failed in 1826, but another succeeded the following year and the New Cut linking the Yare and Waveney opened in 1832. When two sea going vessels were towed upriver to Norwich on September 30th, Norwich had indeed become a port.

But Harbour Master Bracey was right - unwittingly - in one respect, for the new navigation, though used for a long time, was never really busy. More particularly, by the second half of the century, steamboats were indeed 'going out' because railways were taking their business - and that of the wherries and of the navigation itself. With revenue insufficient to service borrowings, it was sold in 1844 to Samuel Morton Peto and his partners who were more interested in building a railway alongside the New Cut.

But the whole adventure had done something unusual. It had created a 2000 acre island, a wedge of grazing marsh between the Cut, the Waveney and the Yare. Today, though those waterways are heavy with holiday traffic in the warmer months, the Island, also known as Haddiscoe Island, is one of the remoter places in East Anglia.



Indeed, Haddiscoe Island is a place apart in just about every respect. There are no public roads except the A143 which clips its south-eastern corner and the only public access is by a footpath which runs around the 12 mile perimeter. There are just five dwellings on the main part of the Island, two of them 19th century, one a modern bungalow and another the thatched 17th century Raven Hall, opposite Berney Arms across the Yare. The fifth, a converted drainage mill, recently changed hands. Otherwise, the Island's only buildings are of boating businesses on the Waveney edging St Olaves village together with a former pub which became a restaurant and is now for sale as a dwelling beside the Cut next to the

main road.

Away from that road, the Island gets few visitors. Hares lope about among summer grazing cattle under a big Norfolk sky unbroken by any vertical intrusion save the few derelict drainage mills which were long ago superseded by steam engines, diesel pumps and finally electric units. Only two electric pumps are now needed. Reed beds cover the Waveney flank, filling the rond between the river wall and the river itself. Grass and reed, very much in that order, are the Island's only products. But there is a constancy about the place. The marshmen looking after the cattle and grazing today are from families with a history of such work who, in the case of the Maces - Bob, Brian and Paul - are three generations of an Island line which goes back at least to the 19th century and includes the Hewitts who once featured large in Island affairs.

That line and others and their work and lives are traced in the book, 'The Island, (The Haddiscoe Island) Past and Present' (2002) by Sheila Hutchinson whose childhood was spent at Berney Arms. She tells of the Hewitts, resplendant with cryptic nicknames: William 'King Billy' Hewitt and his son, James 'Wesmacott' Hewitt and his grandson Henry 'Yoiton' Hewitt.

She tells of Yoiton living in Raven Hall before the Second World War, taking his cows' milk by motor boat up the Yare to Reedham for collection by the Milk Marketing Board and taking his children the other way to school, walking them over

the marshes and then along a boardwalk through the reeds on the Waveney side from where he would row them across to Burgh Castle overlooked by the flint walls of the Roman town. His wife, Annie, made and sold mushroom ketchup until the '53 flood wiped out the mushrooms.

His mail was delivered to Berney Arms across the Yare, itself just a farmhouse, a drainage mill and, these days, a summer opening pub, all remote enough with no public road, although there was - and is - a railway halt. There was a signal post with an arm to be raised when Yoiton had mail to collect. But by the time that Yoiton's son Stanley and his wife had Raven Hall after the War, boating holiday makers had cracked the code and were perpetrating too many false alarms to make it workable.



Telegrams were another problem. When Stephen Hewitt lived at Upper Seven Mile House (demolished in the late '70s) before the War, he would get telegrams telling him when Irish cattle would be arriving to graze the marshes. The delivery boy had to bike from Reedham alongside the railway line north of the Yare, looking over his shoulder for trains and trying not to wobble off, and then walk over two marshes to reach the river. There he had to shout loud enough to make Stephen hear, or at least to make his dogs bark, and then read the telegram to him when he had rowed over.

But there was a decent tip at the end of it. .

These days, Bob Mace, born at Berney Arms and great grandson of King Billy Hewitt, is the link with those times. In '53, he still lived over the river and crossed to the Island each day to work the marsh, but for the seven weeks of the flood, he stayed on the Island. He recalls five pumps working at a time, including an Admiralty pump with so much compression that it needed three men to start it. In the '70s, Bob was awarded a British Empire Medal for identifying a copper deficiency in the cattle which was causing their black colouration was turn brown and rings to form around their eyes. A ministry investigation confirmed the condition and copper injections were given. The cattle still have copper supplements when necessary but the problem has abated, coincidentally or otherwise, since the old Yarmouth power station closed. Bob had always suspected a connection. When the wind was from that direction in the summer, he says, it could be quite stifling on the marsh.



These days, King Billy and Co might be surprised by electric pumps, mobile phones and the volume of holiday traffic on the rivers (though Yoiton actually worked the electric pumps) but they would recognise the general nature of the place. The Island still supports about 2,500 cattle each summer; the grazing is still let in late March by auction at the Bell Inn, St Olaves. There are fewer hares perhaps -

marsh harriers are taking the leverets lately - and there have been no bitterns for years, probably deterred by degeneration of the reed bed. Years ago, the whole rond used to be cut.

But even that might revert to the old times, for Norfolk reed is in demand, even in the face of cheaper imports, and they have been reclaiming more of the Waveney rond over the last two winters in response. Even the Environment Agency with its new emphasis on flood defence, is spending money, strengthening or renewing the river wall for the first time since the '60s, which should hopefully protect the terrain for a while against the ravages of a changing climate.

In which case, in an age of accelerating change, the Island, still physically, economically and spiritually intact, might just remain a place apart for a few generations more.