

Statement of Significance.

Wicken Fen – the National Trust's first Nature Reserve – and the most famous Fen

'For the entomologist who is not afraid of work, and who is no mere dilettante, The Fens probably afford the richest of all localities for Lepidoptera in this country. Amongst the fen-lands Wicken still retains its virgin soil and flora, unspoilt by drainage or cultivation' **Carrington** 1880

Wicken Fen is one of Britain's oldest nature reserves and in 1999 it celebrated its 100th anniversary. On May 1st 1899 the National Trust purchased its first two acre strip for £10. 56 conveyances later the reserve is over 1600 acres (660 hectares). The ancient Fen has been managed traditionally for centuries by sedge cutting and peat digging which has produced a unique fenland habitat rich in wildlife particularly invertebrates. For example 1000 species of moth and butterfly, 1400 species of beetle, approaching 2000 species of fly and 25 species of dragonfly, 29 species of mammal, over 200 species of birds, have been recorded on the Fen. The Fen is a refuge for a very large number Red Data Book and Nationally Scarce species.

The Fen is a National Nature Reserve, a Site of Special Scientific Interest (both national designations), a Special Area of Conservation (a European designation) and a RAMSAR site (international wetland designation).

The Fen also has deep social connections. There is restored a fenman's cottage to highlight the importance of villagers working the Fen for peat and sedge from as early as 1414. The site also contains the last working wind pump in the Fen basin, originally used for draining peat trenches and the remains of the old brick pits and kilns still survive.

The Fen has also long been associated with natural history and research. Charles Darwin collected beetles on the Fen in the 1820s and at the turn of the century the fathers of modern ecology and conservation, the Cambridge botanists Sir Harry Godwin and Dr. Arthur Tansley carried out their pioneering work. The Fen's long partnership with Cambridge University continues to the present day.

Wicken Fen is one of only four 'wild' Fens which still survive in the enormous Great Fen Basin: 99.9% of the former Fens have now been replaced by arable cultivation.

Wicken Fen is well used and enjoyed by local people and visitors from further away. There are 40,000 visitors per year, and over 5000 school children come to take part in our formal education programmes, events for families and individuals attract a further 1500 visitors each year.

The boardwalk is central to the visitor facilities. It allows barrier free access for all to the wetland areas. It makes Wicken Fen the primary site to experience a wetland 'wilderness' with relative ease. As a result, the Fen is an important visitor and tourist attraction in East Cambridgeshire and plays a valuable role in the local economy.

Wicken was known to entomologists in the early decades of the 19th century. From then on Wicken became known as a mecca for lepidopterists. 'Eddystone lighthouses' (an early type of moth trap) were a common sight on the Fen and some accounts describe them as lighting up the place at night like a small city.

In the 1890s the sedge (used for roofing and animal bedding) and peat (a fuel) economies collapsed being replaced by more efficient alternatives. As a result there were major concerns that the Fen would be

drained as had happened elsewhere. A number of the early entomologists (particularly G.H. Verrall and The Hon. N.C. Rothschild) played a vital role in ensuring Wicken's survival by acquiring parts of the Fen and donating them to the National Trust. Much has changed in and around Wicken Fen since their gifts.

- They would find parts of Sedge, Verrall's and St Edmunds Fens covered in scrub.
- Adventurers' Fen as they knew it had been lost - gone are the areas of peat digging and fen habitats - replaced by wet grasslands, a large Mere and reed beds.
- In summer the whole Fen would appear much drier - no longer almost inaccessible to the naturalist.
- There would also be no sign of the swallowtail butterfly - that icon species so familiar to the early naturalists.
- The nature reserve now managed by the National Trust is much larger than the original Fen

Habitat changes - the collapse of the local economy. Once the economic value of the Fen was lost there was no longer anyone to cut the sedge or dig the peat - scrub invaded and much of the open nature of the Fen was lost.

In these early days the ecological principles of succession were not understood (indeed it was not until the 1920s when Professor Harry Godwin carried out his pioneering work at Wicken that it was). The National Trust could afford only to employ one person - the Keeper of the Fen - George Barnes. One person could not do the amount of work the local community had done before and as a result the open habitats tumbled into scrub. The Barnes family (George and his three sons - Henry, William and Wilf) played a huge part in the management of the Fen, all worked as wardens with Henry amassing 50 years service and Wilf working for 51 years.

The Trust's policy has been to keep as large an area as possible of open Fen on Sedge and Verrall's Fen, harvesting sedge and hay to encourage the huge diversity of animals and plants. In 1965 the Ganges Basecamp was constructed to accommodate navy cadets (from H.M.S. Ganges) to clear scrub.

Digging for Victory. Adventurers' Fen was partially drained in the 1840s but this was not very successful and as a result by the end of the 1900s it consisted of rich Fen habitats and extensive areas of peat cuttings. It was very rich in wildlife being renowned particularly for its bird and beetle communities. However, during the Second World War the land was requisitioned by the War Office, drained again by Alan Bloom and converted to arable cultivation. Indeed an earlier suggestion had been that the area be used as a bombing range, but this was successfully resisted.

After the war the land was handed back to the National Trust and the Mere, reed beds and wet meadows were created. Today it is a very valuable area for wildlife although the loss of the rarer and more valuable Fen habitats is most regrettable.

Draining the Fens - dying of thirst. Once the drainage of the Great Fen Basin began the peaty soils shrunk considerably. This had a profound effect on Wicken Fen leaving it higher than the surrounding landscape. In addition the drainage of the Fens led to the development of a very sophisticated pump drainage system and sets of sluices. This tamed the various rivers - the effect on Wicken Lode was profound. These engineering works stopped the natural cycle of flooding at Wicken Fen.

The loss of wet conditions on the Fen particularly in early summer is a serious problem for the Fen and one which must be resolved if the habitats are to be restored. Some steps have already been taken to improve this problem; for example an impermeable liner has been installed along the entire northern length of Sedge and Verrall's Fens.

Ebbing and flowing biodiversity. Naturalists were originally drawn to Wicken because of its species richness and the presence of rarities. The Fen has therefore received a great deal of recording effort and huge species lists have accumulated. In diversity terms Wicken Fen is Britain's version of a tropical rain forest. An amazing 7800 species have been recorded at Wicken Fen. However, now that the Fen is so isolated from other fen habitats, natural local extinctions tend to become permanent because immigration from other similar sites is very low on account of their remoteness. This list of extinctions includes some of the Fen specialities such as the Swallowtail butterfly and the Marsh Moth.

Drawing conclusions from the first 100 years. The decline of traditional management practices, the threat to the reliable water supplies, the isolation of sites and the loss of biodiversity are not phenomena unique to Wicken Fen - all the other surviving Fen sites in East Anglia have suffered in similar ways. Fortunately sufficient money and legal backing is now available to actually implement restoration plans. As we embark on the next 100 years of Wicken Fen's history under the National Trust plans are well advanced to restore the Fen and halt the declines.

Restoring Sedge and Verrall's Fens. From 2006 to 2006, over 50 hectares (120 acres) of scrub has been cleared from these Fens and areas of sedge and fen meadows have been restored. The unique cutting regime on the Sedge Fen, which dates back to 1400, will be expanded to ensure these restored habitats are maintained. On Verrall's Fen, konik ponies have been introduced and their grazing will maintain the open fen habitats. The next challenge is to ensure that the Fen receives sufficient good quality water to keep the fen wet enough to allow the plant communities to thrive.

The next 100 years. The National Trust launched the Wicken Vision in 1999, an ambitious and exiting project to create a large nature reserve for people and wildlife in the area between Wicken Fen in the north and Cambridge in the south. These large new areas of land would be managed largely by 'natural processes' such as grazing animals and high water tables and not by intervention management such as reed cutting and mowing. Since 1999, the Trust has doubled the size of Wicken Fen Nature Reserve by purchasing land, and the restoration of this land is well underway.

'My personal feeling about Wicken is a complicated one: a mixture of enjoyment of fenland plants and animals (both aesthetically and scientifically), glimpsing the past and sensing the passage of time, while all the time enjoying the great open fen landscape under its vast skies. Of course I have little vignettes of special memory. For example watching swallowtails emerging from their pupae, looking at Adventurers' Fen in 1940 knowing it was soon to be destroyed and more recently the enjoyment of being part of a very special endeavour to understand Wicken and conserve it. To me Wicken is the first English Nature Reserve, a very special wetland and the most famous fen.'

Norman Moore – one of the founding fathers of nature conservation
and a former Chair of the Wicken Committee.