

## The River Wensum is why Fakenham is where it is

The River Wensum is why Fakenham is where it is. Old deeds referring to the Old River suggest that it ran north east to the town and then east along the edge of the old town and then south and then east. The contours of the land have suggested that it ran south to a point beyond where the gasworks now stands before turning east. Any evidence to support this theory was lost when the Lynn and Fakenham railway was built. Having said that, the water table in the gasworks site is very high and the ash pit in the retort house has to be kept pumped out.

About half a mile downstream there once was an ancient mill resulting in nearby enclosures having names such as Mill Moor and Malt Moor. It is said that this mill could be seen from the old Norwich road which was partly obliterated by the building of the Dereham and Fakenham railway and crossed the river a little to the west of where that railway crossing is.

Until a new mill spanning the whole width of the river, replacing an ancient one operated by the priory, the river was open to navigation from Sculthorpe to Fakenham. It is said that a lighter used to ply back and forth, no doubt using Hall Staithe in Fakenham. The river was always considered to be the boundary between Hempton and Fakenham. During the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries there were disputes over the responsibility over the upkeep of the ford at Brig-mill-dam over the river between the two towns. The location of this ford is open to speculation although the name may give us a clue!

A map of 1650 shows the river in its present situation, probably realigned for the benefit of a new mill at Fakenham although the river is not at the bottom of the valley. The Hempton road is lower than the river which caused problems with an event like the great storm of August 1912 when the Hempton road was flooded because the river overtopped its bank.

The three local mills had different owners yet were able to cooperate by monitoring the head of water flowing downstream. This was done by sending smoke signals from their chimneys.

Ryburgh was not included in this arrangement as it was out of sight.

The bridges over the river were the private property of the mills and others had to use the nearby fords. This caused problems at Fakenham when the soon-to-

be Queen, Victoria, was passing through the town when her carriage became stuck in the ford. She was not amused, neither were the good folk of Fakenham who resolved to build a bridge there to avoid a repeat. Using labour from the Poorhouse on the Heath, a bridge was built. Earth was taken from the top of Hempton Green to construct the ramps while bricks were supplied by the Holkham Estate for some reason.

Following the Second World War, extensive work was carried out in the river to improve the flow even though Hempton mill had ceased to function years earlier and Fakenham had gone through steam to electricity. The local anglers were less than impressed with this work as it spoilt some areas of fishing along the river.

Today the River Wensum is considered an amenity and with little ecological refinements has been left to look after itself.