

Travel and Transport from early times.

Background: Medieval Lakenheath.

Ely was the largest island in the fens: the Prior and Convent of Ely Abbey had been Lords of the Manors of Lakenheath and Undley since Saxon times and were kept supplied with essential produce by the villagers (villeins) who supplied the abbey with grain, wildfowl, meat and wool in addition to the payment of land tenancy and cottage rents. A village steward represented the Abbey's interest, supervising manorial labour, ensuring that the village met its feudal obligations (villeinage). He would have made regular visits to the abbey and abbey clerics would have visited the village.

Feudal service to the Abbey required the villagers to work a certain amount of time each year (days per week or months per year) to provide it with produce from the land and fen in addition to paying rent on their 'cotts'. Once this service was discharged the villeins could work for themselves to support a family, maybe selling surplus produce at the village market. (There was one here in the early 13th century.) Travel to and from the Abbey at Ely was important to the smooth functional of the Manor.

Note: Villeins = peasants. A very small number of inhabitants worked entirely for themselves. They were 'free' villagers (Freemen) and were not 'tied' to feudal service. They paid an annual rent for their land to the Lord of the Manor (the Abbey) which eventually became the 'copyhold tenancy' system. There may also have been a small number of 'slaves', the un-free, who worked solely for their Lord all year round without pay in exchange for a 'cott', possibly an outbuilding of a manorial building such as a barn.

Getting to Ely by boat.

From earliest times up to the 17th century much of the land west of the village was fenland, effectively a barrier consisting of large tracts of marsh which flooded each year, open water, and small islands of which Undley was one. From time-to-time over centuries attempts had been made to drain parts of the fens.

Inhabitants of the fens and the fen edge had from time out of mind navigated their way around the region by boat, hunting wildfowl and fishing. It's known that in the 13th-century, a boat licence could be obtained on payment of a fee to the Manor and it has been suggested that local names which include 'Row' in their name. eg Beck Row and Holywell Row, were places along the fen edge which were easily accessed by boat.

In medieval times Lakenheath was a 'staging post' between Ely and elsewhere in Norfolk used by abbey officials. It also was the 'port' which serviced the needs of the Abbey at Ely.

*"Lakenheath's role as an inland port linking the western edge of Suffolk to *Bishop's Lynn via the fenland waterways.....Senior officials were ferried between Ely and Lakenheath enroute to Norwich. On one occasion the Lakenheath warrener was summoned to Ely by boat. Other produce such as grain, livestock and wildfowl were also shipped to Ely."*

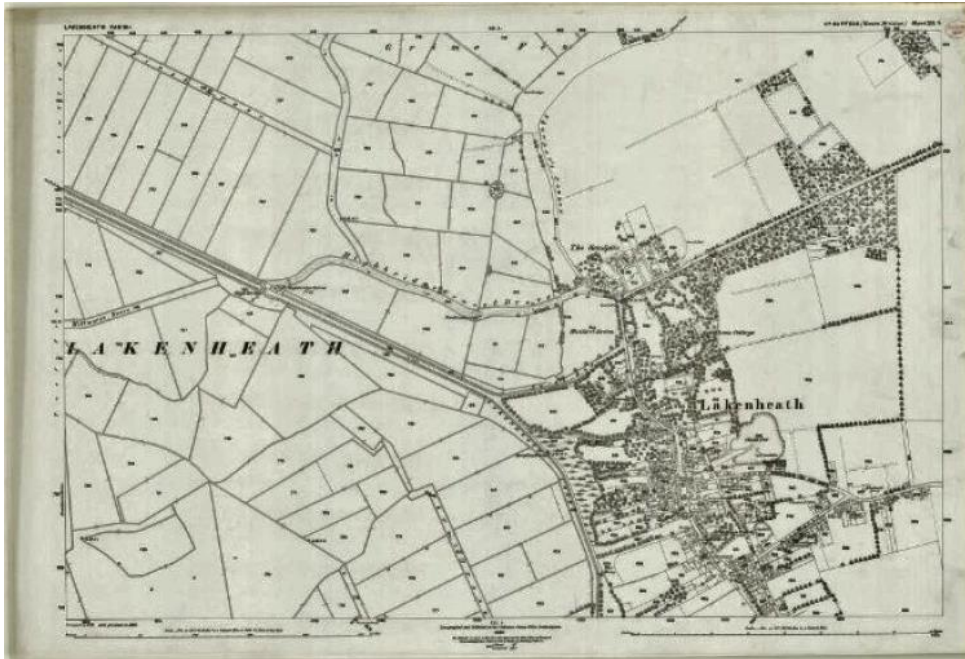
'The Prior and Convent of Ely and their Management of the Manor of Lakenheath in the Fourteenth Century'. Mark Bailey.

*Not King's Lynn until 1537

The 17th -20th Centuries.

When the Lakenheath Fen was drained in the 17th century a 'new' Lakenheath Lode (River) was dug which connected the village to the river Little Ouse, also known at the time as the Brandon River. This effectively created a route to Ely and King's Lynn and beyond via the Little Ouse. Lakenheath Lode had three *'hythes', Yards End at the Half Moon pub, the Anchor Inn in Anchor Lane and a southern quay down a track opposite the church. The southern quay may have been built in the mid to late 19th century by Prince Duleep Singh when he dredged the Lode to improve the exporting of sand and gravel from the village. A tow path ran the length of the lode which might have provided a footpath to the Sedge Fen before Sedge Fen existed as a hamlet.

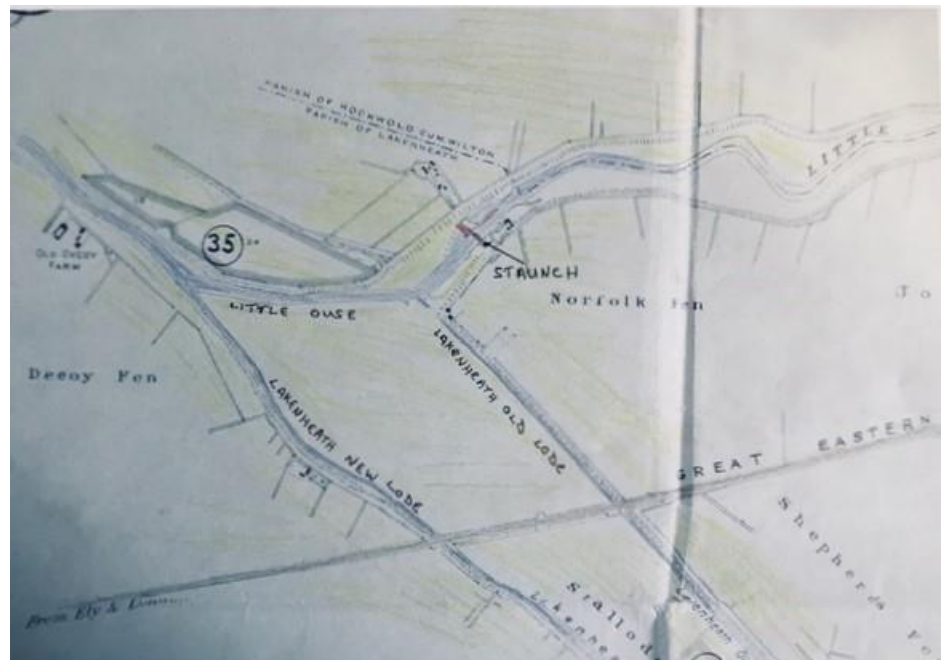
*A Saxon word for a quay or jetty.



The village in relation to the Lakenheath Lode

National Library of Scotland. 6" OS map XII. NW Suffolk.

Pub 1887. Attribution CC-BY-NC-SA



This map shows the junctions of the Lode with the Little Ouse.

Based on the 1914 sale of Lakenheath Hall Estate. Colin Brown.

This extract from Bradshaw's Canals and Navigable Rivers. 1904 describes the Lakenheath Lode.

"Lakenheath Lode. – A branch waterway from the Brandon River".

"The Lode commences to be navigable at Lakenheath village in the county of Suffolk and proceeds in a north westerly direction to a junction with the Brandon River below Crosswater Stauch. 3¼ miles."

"The trade done on the Lode is *confined to gravel which is brought down from Lakenheath".

*Note: This relates only to the 19th and 20th centuries.

The Handbook also states the maximum size of boats permitted on the Lode, described as fen lighters: Length- not limited. Width-12ft 6 inches. Draught- 2ft 6 inches.

Bradshaw's Canals and Navigable Rivers. 1904. Henry Rodoloph de Sallis.



A Fen lighter entering the Little Ouse from Lakenheath Lode.

It may well be that a journey to Ely by boat was far from unusual until the 19th century roads were constructed.

Roads and tracks around Lakenheath. The medieval period, 10th – 16th centuries.

Local medieval tracks around Lakenheath seem to run mainly to the east and south of the village, probably following late Roman and early Saxon paths. *In the 13th century long distance ‘roads’ passed well clear of the Brecks although there was a route into Norfolk from London via Newmarket and Thetford to Norwich and Yarmouth, now Great Yarmouth. Ely was linked to Newmarket and Bury St. Edmunds.

**The Transport System of Medieval England and Wales- A Geographical Synthesis. James Frederick Edwards, University of Salford.*

A pilgrim route to the holy shrine at Walsingham passed near the eastern boundary of the airbase, heading roughly northwards towards Weeting. This may have been an off-shoot of the Celtic Icknield Way which ran from Wiltshire to Norfolk (Grimes Graves). Another medieval track, Madley Lane, ran east to west through the grounds of Lakenheath Hall to the fen edge, and another connected the village to Undley to the west, crossing the fen over a causeway which is still identifiable. This was undoubtedly constructed to ensure a durable pathway between the abbey’s manors of Lakenheath and Undley.

Local tracks became established by daily work; fishing in the fens, sheep or rabbit farming on the Warren, then much larger than it is now, and the manorial obligations of the villeins. The need to move grazing flocks and herds led to the development of local droves which in time resulted in a simple network of routes: the width of the village High Street is the result of the movement of herds from the southern grazing common to the northern common at Mutford Green. It certainly dates from the late Saxon period, and is almost as old as Lakenheath itself.

Ely Abbey established the first market in Lakenheath (this is a story in itself. See Timeline 1 ‘The Village’ at 1201 AD), and this must have encouraged the development of rough roads connecting nearby villages: a medieval ‘road’ was nothing more than a well-used path which usually had to be maintained by the peasants as part of their manorial service.

By the 16th century quite a few of the earlier tracks would have become well used but as the Hodkinson map shows (see below), the fen was completely avoided. The road, rather than a track, to Eriswell was certainly in existence from much earlier, and was probably the route taken by the *50+ ‘Men of Lakygheth’ enroute to the muster of arms ordered by Henry VIII at Mildenhall in 1537.

**Lakenheath Records. J T Munday 1969*

18th and 19th Centuries.

Before the 18th century many 'main' roads were little changed from their medieval origins, hot and dusty in summer and quagmires in winter, especially in remote countryside. Travel by foot, horseback and coach was slow and sometimes dangerous even without highway crime, but by the end of the 17th century longer journeys could be made by Stage Coach on the early turnpike roads.

Local roads remained difficult and even short distances could be unpleasant as the 2nd Earl of Oxford described:

"The next day, Thursday the 21st, 1732, we set out from Brandon, seven long, very long miles to Barton Mills over the sands, terrible tedious travelling both to man and horse. I could not but reflect what terrible travelling it must be where the heat of the sun is intense upon the wide sandy deserts, where the poor travellers are often with the sand or scorched with the sun's heat reflected from the burning sands. We leave the sands at Barton Mills which we were very glad of. The river that runs by Barton Mills is navigable as I said, to Bury. We left Mildenhall, the seat of Sir Thomas Hanmer, on the right hand, a most miserable situation. On one side he is subject to be choked with sand, on the other he lives close to a dark vile black fen which lies the north east of him; so that he enjoys that wicked wind with the addition of the air from that fen"

From the St. Edmundsbury Chronicle 2000: David Addy. stedmundsburychronicle.co.uk

The growth of commerce in the 18th century led to the improvement of roads between towns and cities. Letters and parcels could be sent by mail coach, greatly aiding commercial activity; for the first time since Roman times roads were constructed using crushed stone topped with gravel, making for better drainage. Better surfaces and improved suspension on coaches led to higher speeds and shorter journey times. **In 1750 the Cambridge to London journey took two days but by 1820 it could be done in under seven hours. Royal Mail coach routes were developed (circa 1784-1792) and in 1785 the Royal Mail route between London and Norwich was established.

***'The Stage Coach'. Ben Johnson. Historic UK. historic-uk.com*

Reduced journey time due to better roads was militarily important in the Napoleonic Wars of 1803-1815, speeding up communications across the country and this, coupled with Royal Mail coaches, improved the delivery of mail. Amongst other things this led to the development of letter-writing between friends, families, and acquaintances. (This is of considerable importance to historians).

Dates from Wikipedia

In Lakenheath most people got about in much the same way as they had since the middle-ages, usually on foot or by cart, by cadging a lift on a waggon with a carter. *In 1853 JOHN HARDY and THOMAS SMITH were earning a living by 'carting' or 'hauling', going to Bury on Tuesdays and Saturdays. This way of getting about was common at least up to the First World War.

**1853 Census*

*A typical cart. 19th century.
These had remained basically
unchanged for many years.*



Hodkinson's Map of Suffolk 1783.

This map of Suffolk is reliably detailed when compared with earlier maps. At the time of the survey roads were undrained and often deeply rutted by cart and coach wheels. At best, some received an occasional sprinkling of sand or gravel and in bad weather they could be passable only with discomfort and difficulty.

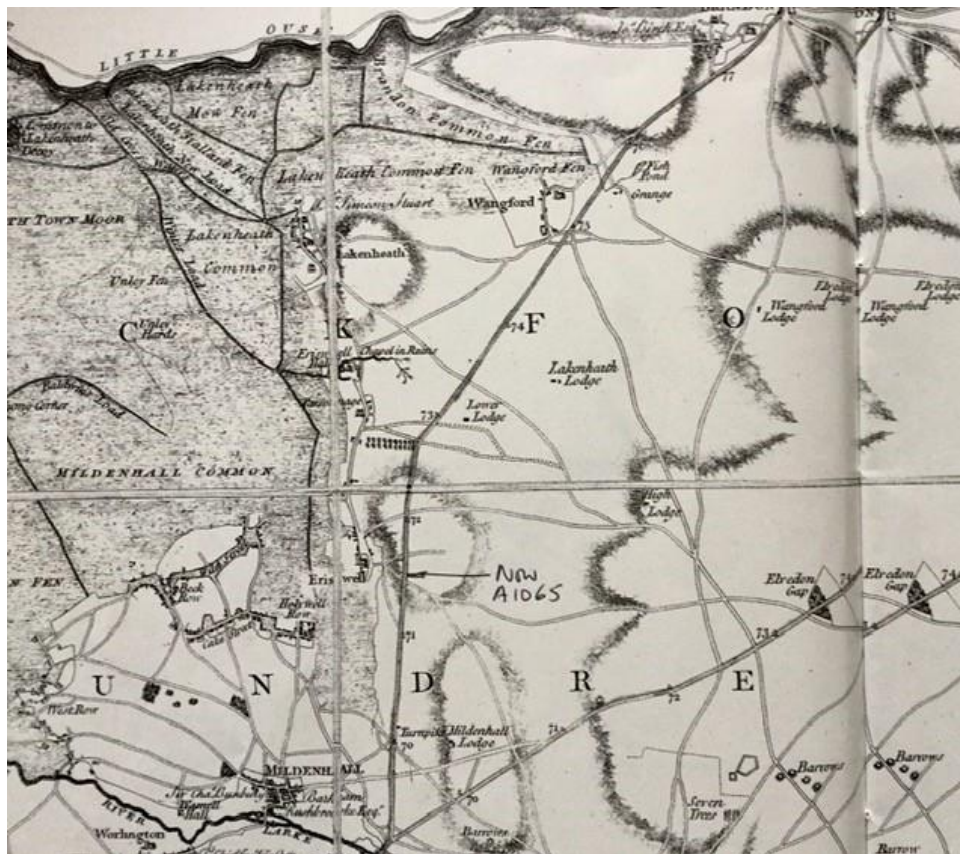


View looking down Broom Road.

This photo gives an idea of what a road could look like in the early 18th century. At the time of the photo Broom Road was a track leading from the gravel pits on the Warren.

In open country, roads were not hedged or fenced, and deviations from routes when the surface became difficult were common. This could cause problems at night time or in stormy weather and such tracks may have been responsible for the *death of Robert Eagle's postillion in 1829 whilst returning a horse in bad weather, hired maybe from the Bull Inn at Barton Mills or a hostelry in Mildenhall.

**The Bury Free Press 1829*



The Hodkinson map of 1783.

Reproduced by permission of The Larks Press, Dereham.

The map shows:

the route north east via Wangford to the bridge over the Little Ouse at Brandon where there is a route to Thetford.

a road travelling south between Lakenheath and Eriswell church adjacent to common land to the east and the fen to the west. No roads connect Eriswell to Mildenhall leaving open common around Holywell Row. There was at least one path to Mildenhall across this common.

that there is no road north from Lakenheath across what is called Lakenheath Common Fen. To reach the ferry over the Little Ouse at Ferry House meant a route via Wangford. There were probably some paths and droves to the grazing land to the north and north west up to the Little Ouse.

that the direct road from Barton Mills to Brandon, now the A 1065, is an early turnpike road. The Bull Inn is an old coaching house on the mail coach route from London to Norwich which eventually became the modern A 11. **The route passed through Cambridge, Newmarket, Red Lodge, Barton Mills, on to Thetford and Norwich.

***Greg Roberts in wickedwilliam.com*

The drainage of Lakenheath Fen in the 17th century had opened up large acreages of new land which eventually required access tracks or 'droves' which had to run across frequently unstable land. Some of these droves ultimately became part of the road network, whilst others still serve their original purpose.

The Lakenheath to Hockwold Road 1828.

A road linking Lakenheath to Hockwold had become essential. For centuries the nearest bridge over the river had been at Brandon and there was a ferry at Wilton which is shown on Hodkinson's Map of 1783 as Ferry House. Parliament had been petitioned by local landowners and in 1828 Parliament gave its approval to the formation of The Lakenheath and Hockwold Roads Trust.

The following is an edited extract of the 1828 Act of Parliament reproduced here by kind permission of Vlex: vlex.com.

The 'other Roads therein mentioned' included road from Mildenhall to Hockwold which in Lakenheath ultimately became Station Road. It was stipulated that the roads be a minimum of 14 feet wide.

GEORGII IV. REGIS.

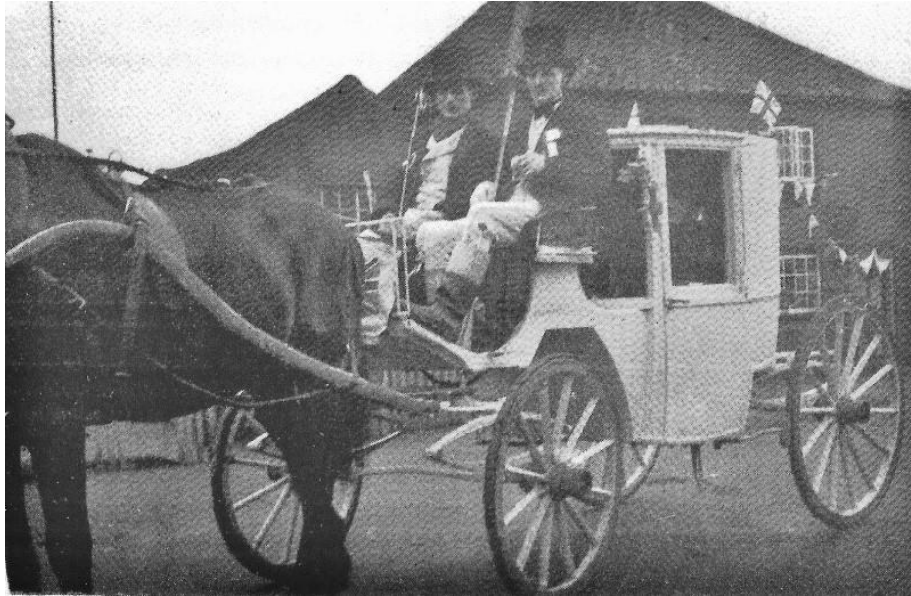
Cap. xlv.

An Act for making and maintaining a Road from *Beck Fen Lane*, in the Parish of *Mildenhall* in the County of *Suffolk*, to the South-east End of the Bridge over the River *Ouse*, in the Parish of *Littleport* in the Isle of *Ely* and County of *Cambridge*, and other Roads therein mentioned, in the Counties of *Norfolk* and *Suffolk*.

[13th May 1828]

.....another Road from the Pound at the entrance of the Town of *Mildenhall* aforesaid to the Church of *Lakenheath* in the said County of *Suffolk*, and from thence to the Church at *Hockwold* in the County of *Norfolk* and from thence to the Turnpike Road leading from the *Devil's Ditch* to *Stoke Ferry* in the said County of *Norfolk*, at or near a certain Inn or Public House in the Parish of *Methwold* in the said County of *Norfolk*, called or known by the Name or Sign of the *Cock*; and also the making, improving, and maintaining another road branching from the said last mentioned Road at or near a certain Piece of Land called or known by the Name of *Mutford Green*, in the Parish of *Lakenheath* aforesaid, to join the first mentioned Road at or near a certain Inn or Public House in the Parish of *Mildenhall* aforesaid, called the *Plough and Duck* and in the Place where the said second-described Road will cross the *Little *Ouze River*, to make and erect a good and substantial Bridge of Stone, Brick, Wood, or Iron over the said River, with proper Approaches thereto: and which said Roads shall form one District of Roads, and shall be called and known by the Name of "*The Lakenheath and Hockwold Roads*".

*Spelling in 1828



Mr. Presland's coach shows the benefit of the improvement in road surfaces: lighter construction and faster transport. This coach was probably intended for local journeys.

The Lakenheath and Hockwold Road Trust.

The new roads were governed by *Turnpike Trusts made up of influential landowners and justices of the peace initially appointed by Parliament who were required to 'make and maintain' the road by levying charges to users. The powers of the Trusts were closely defined by the Act.

*It's been suggested that the name, 'turnpike', may originate in medieval times from guards armed with pikes whose weapons were turned away from the traveller when permission to pass was given.

Turnpike charges laid down by the Act:

'Horse or other Beast of Draught drawing any Description of Carriage. Sixpence.

For every beast not drawing a vehicle. Two pence.

For every Drove of Oxen, Cows, Sheep or Lambs, etc. Eight pence per score.

Four wheeled Carriage not drawn by Horse or Beast of Draught but propelled by *Machinery. One shilling and Sixpence.

Two-wheeled Carriage, not drawn by any Horse or Beast of Draught but propelled by Machinery. Nine pence.'

**In 1803 A Road locomotive powered by steam was demonstrated in London by Trevithick and Vivian. The first electric carriage (car) was built in London in 1884.*

The toll charges covered 'return' journeys and no more than one charge per day was permitted. No more than two full tolls could be demanded on the same day for the passing and repassing of Cattle etc.

Further:

'Any Stage Coach, Diligence, Van, or Caravan or other Stage Carriage propelled by Machinery for pay or reward shall pay each time of passing.'

Those on foot had to pay One Penny to cross the river by the new bridge.



A barouche- A light weight carriage used by affluent people: Sir William Dunn, Lakenheath.

******By 1833 The Lakenheath and Hockwold Turnpike Trust were having to advertise but clearly without much success because in 1835 the Trust was dissolved.

******turnpikes.org

Amongst the Trustees from Norfolk and Suffolk of the 'Lakenheath and Hockwold Road' were ***John Angerstein** and ***Francis King Eagle**.

***John Angerstein** – Owner of Weeting Hall, an exceptionally wealthy landowner.

***Francis King Eagle**- Robert Eagle's eldest son. Barrister, Circuit Judge and first Mayor of Bury St. Edmunds.

William White's History of Norfolk and Suffolk recorded that, *"A new road was made, with a suspension bridge across the river in Suffolk in 1828...."* Kelly's 1883 Directory of Suffolk recorded that, *"The Ouse is crossed by a suspension bridge at Lakenheath."*



The first bridge

The second bridge, built in 1899, shows the Toll House.



At the end of the 18th century there were about 500 Turnpike Trusts which covered over 13000 miles of road. It was not until WWII that local B roads began to resemble what they are today.

Some of our local B roads remained unsurfaced until the Second World War, an example being Undley Road. The road to Sedge Fen from the village which ultimately joins the A1101 Mildenhall (Beck Row) to Littleport road was not made until the mid 1960's. Before this the Sedge Fen area was accessed using a combination of droves beginning at Sharps Corner along Highbridge Gravel Drove, crossing the Little Ouse at the High Bridge, or on foot along the Lode tow path and it may be that the old way of getting about by boat continued into the early 20th century.



The High Bridge, Lakenheath.

The Coming of the Railway: The first steam railway in Suffolk!

Travel and transport were transformed by arrival of the railway and turnpikes soon became obsolete. In 1844-5 the first steam railway in Suffolk connected Cambridge to Brandon via Lakenheath and shortly after was extended to Norwich making Lakenheath and Brandon the first places in Suffolk to receive steam trains. Robert Stephenson was the engineer.

Suffolk in the Age of Steam. Robin Jones.

Jeffery Flint gives us more information about Lakenheath Station and its Signal Box. This includes a video of the final closing by hand of the level crossing gates.

['Times Remembered'](#)

The Bicycle.

The arrival of the modern bicycle in the late 1890's made independent travel possible for working people. - with the obvious exception of walking!



A Penny farthing bicycle owned by Alfie Morley.

The improvement of local roads made cycling a safe and relatively comfortable activity. Before long the practical possibilities of the 'bike' became clear: not just a leisure activity limited to those who had time to spare, but offering convenience and greater mobility, a 'go as you please' independence not previously available to most people despite the availability of 'lifts' in a horse-drawn cart or trap. The invention of the pneumatic tyre made for a more comfortable ride.



John Lloyd Dunlop, inventor of the pneumatic tyre.

Circa 1915

Unknown. Public domain via Wikimedia Commons



Cecil (Huddie) Cooper on his delivery bike.

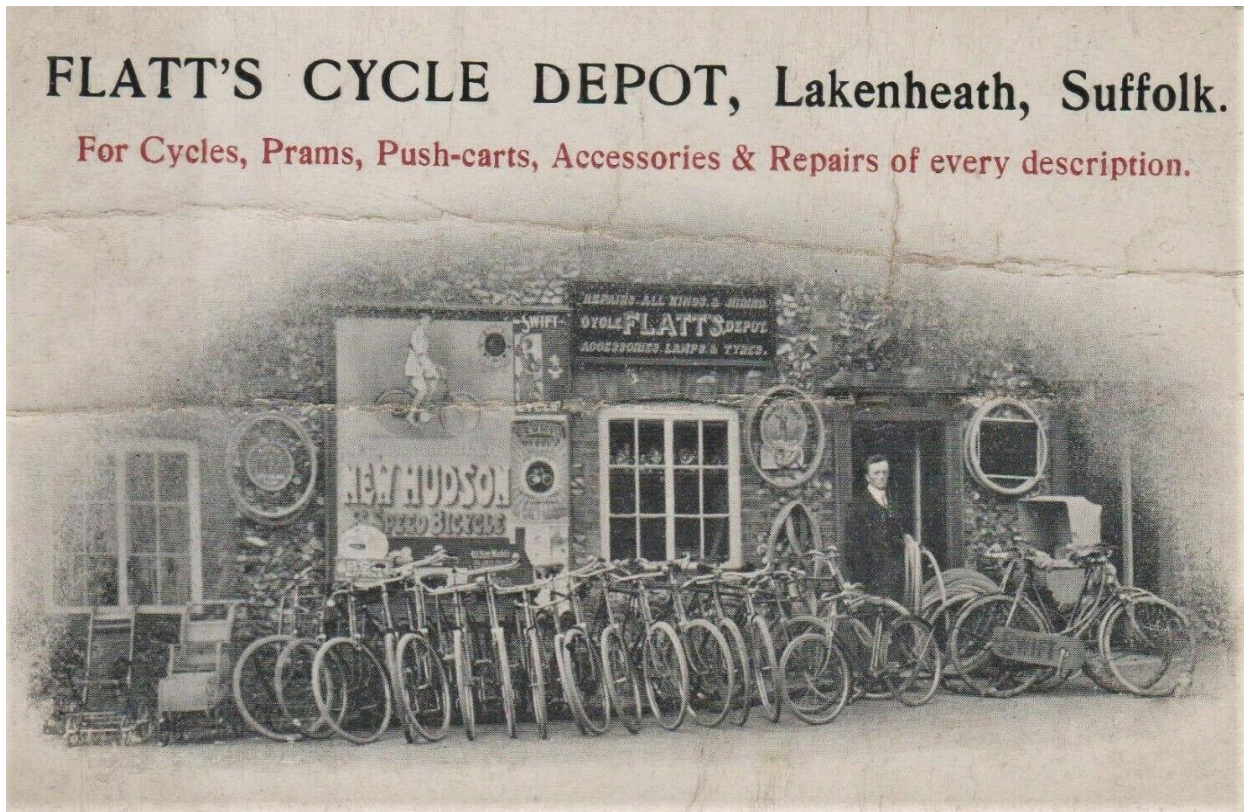
In rural Lakenheath a bike made getting to and from work on the fens easier and quicker and local villages and towns became more accessible so that a trip to the market or a sociable meeting with friends could be a simple matter of owning or having access to a 'bike'. Bikes also reduced the journey time home at the end of the day, allowing more time to grow vegetables for the family, and delivery 'boys' became a common sight. Possibly the most popular 'delivery bike' was the one which brought ice cream to town streets.



Walls Ice Cream tricycle.

*Creative Commons Attribution cc-by-2.0
Flickr2 Common.*

In 1912 bicycles were available for hire from *Henry Flatt's house in Mill Road and he was careful to charge the affordable rate of six pence per week, making a success of his business venture. Later he introduced an early form of hire purchase.



Henry Flatt's house with cycles ready for hire.

At this time an **agricultural labourer's wage in Suffolk was 15 shillings and 9 pence per week.

*Henry Flatt's story is in Timeline Part 5 at 1912. **Hansard 1914 vol 15 cc942-96