

A Rough Guide to the History of the Warren.

Around 12,000-10,000 years ago early man roamed this landscape foraging for food, leaving behind flint tools. About 3,000 years ago the Celtic Iceni tribe arrived and settled in East Anglia and then eventually around 100AD Romans settled locally. There was a small Romano-British farm not far from Maids Cross Hill which probably dates between 200-400AD.

5th – 17th century.

From 450AD the Anglo-Saxons came, first as invaders, then as settlers. At least two Anglo-Saxon burial sites have been identified on the warren: one of national importance on RAF Lakenheath held the remains of the Saxon Warrior, buried around 470 AD. The other, called 'The Old Churchyard' on an early 19th century map was not far from Maids Cross Hill.

The date of the village of the Saxon village of Lakinghythe on the edge of the swampy fen is uncertain but has been placed between 500-600AD.

After the Norman Conquest the Prior of Ely Abbey was granted the manor of Lakenheath by the King. One of the Abbey's feudal rights as lord was the 'right of free warren' - the right to all the game on the Warren. Rabbits were extremely valuable and were bred by village peasants for their lord, not only for their meat, but particularly their sought-after fur.

Ely Abbey became a Cathedral in 1109. It's Prior was lord of the manor of Lakenheath until it was dissolved in the reign of Henry VIII in 1539. Re founded in 1541 the lordship of Lakenheath was resumed by the Dean of the Cathedral.

To protect the rabbits from predators, human as well as animal, banks of earth topped with gorse called 'coneywarrens' were made by the village warreners and by the 17th century fortified warreners' lodges had been built to deter poachers, so valuable was the rabbit 'cash crop'. A few villagers, tenants of the abbey, could graze cattle and sheep here.

Origins of Maids Cross Hill.

It is known that until comparatively recent times the spring equinox (the coming of spring) was celebrated by village children by rolling down the hill, possibly echoing a very ancient pagan fertility rite celebrating the renewal of life where young girls danced to welcome the spring. Is this the origin of the place 'Maids' Cross'? The tradition of a local celebration at this time continued in the early 20th century when local shopkeepers set up stalls by the roadside on Maid's Cross Hill each Good Friday. The hill became known locally as Good Friday Hill.

The Cross.

In medieval times paths and tracks, particularly those on a route to a shrine or holy place, were often marked with a tall stone crucifix. A cross could also guide travellers to a place of shelter. Lakenheath village, being hidden as it is by the hill from the eastern valley, (airbase) could have been made known by a well-located cross which was visible from the valley bottom so showing the way to the village. It has also been suggested that the cross was nothing more than the work of a very religious farmer in times gone by. A short time after WW2 the top of the hill was levelled by deep ploughing as part of an attempt to grow asparagus and the original site of the cross was lost.

In 1972 a single broken worked stone, the remains of a possible base of a medieval cross, was found at Maids Cross and registered as LKH 043 in the archaeology register of Suffolk County Council. (Suffolk Heritage Explorer).

19th century.

1803. Gun flints were mined on the warren during the Napoleonic Wars and it's likely that the Lakenheath and Wangford Volunteer infantry (a bit like 'Dad's Army' of WW2) exercised on the Warren in preparation for a possible invasion.

It's fairly certain that the gravel of the warren had been dug for a considerable time but from about 1840 it was often used to surface the fenland droves. From the warren, it was carted to the Lakenheath Lode quays where it was loaded on to horse-drawn barges (fen lighters). The lode led to the Little Ouse so the gravel could be transported to other places. This continued well into the 20th century. When times were hard men from the village could earn a few pennies digging and transporting gravel to the quays.

Prince Duleep Singh acquired Elveden Hall Estate in 1863. He later acquired the Warren with its mineral rights from Ely Cathedral in 1872.

1864. In what was the first landing from the air of many to come, a hot air balloon made an emergency landing here having taken off from the Crystal Palace, London.

20th century.

World War I. Tank training took place on the warren and the Royal Flying Corps practiced bombing and ground attacks. The craters left are sometimes confused with gravel pits. Mr. Challis, the last shepherd working on the warren, lived in a bungalow where the Maids Cross car park is now.

World War II.

1939-40. Barrage balloon experiments were taking place near Eriswell. Two decoy airfields were established, one to protect RAF Mildenhall on the eastern warren just south of what was soon to become RAF Lakenheath, and another to protect RAF Feltwell on Eriswell Low Warren.

The Royal Observer Corps post (intruder aircraft warning) was sited in trees at the top of the ridge near this panel. Re-sited for safety reasons in 1944, it closed at the end of the war and re-opened in 1947 on its present site in a prefab Orlit building.

1940-50. RAF Lakenheath was constructed in 1941 and operations were flown until mid 1944. It was recommissioned in 1947 after major reconstruction to accommodate USAF Super-fortress bombers which involved the relocation of the A 1065 (Barton Mills to Brandon) further to the east. In 1950 the ancient road from Lakenheath to Brandon (Wings Road- Cemetery Road- Maids Cross Hill Road) was closed for security reasons to be replaced by the new Wangford Road. The base was handed over to the USAF in 1951 and was fenced for the first.

1958. The present ROC underground post was constructed in 1958/59 to monitor radio-active fallout in the event of nuclear war. It continued in service until 1991.

During building work on the air base in 1997 Saxon burials were found including that of the famous Lakenheath Saxon warrior.

1986. Maids Cross Hill was designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in order to protect its heathland and rare plant species.

Some information for the medieval warren QR has been sourced from:

The Breckland Society publication, 'Lakenheath Warren'. 2023.

Rev J T Munday. 'How We Lived 600 Years Ago', 1973, and 'Old Lakenheath,' 1969.

