



Viewpoint

River of memory



Time: 15 mins

Region: East of England

Landscape: rural



Location: Footpath along the south bank of the River Yare between Rockland St Mary and the Beauchamp Arms pub.

Grid reference: TG 34369 05127

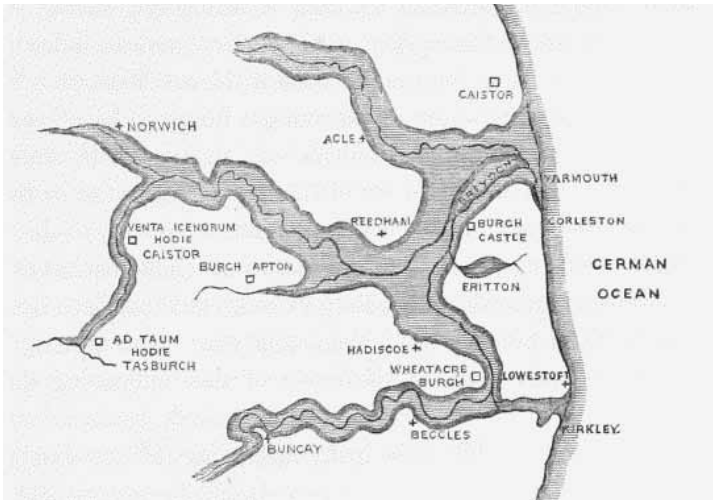
Getting there: Park near the New Inn at Rockland St Mary and follow the Wherryman's Way footpath to the river.

Keep an eye out for: Rooks flying overhead to their roost at Buckenham Carr between October and February.

The flat country of the Yare Valley in Norfolk is not a dramatic landscape. There are no contours to draw the eye or features to seek out. It's also awkward and inaccessible. In its entire course from Norwich to Yarmouth there are no crossing points to get from one side to another. It's said that people living on one bank have never visited the village opposite.

Yet for writer and naturalist Mark Cocker it is not only home, but a magical landscape which has inspired much of his writing.

What makes the Yare Valley so special to Mark Cocker?



Roman map showing the Yare Valley
© British History Online



Rooks heading to their roost at Buckenham Carrs
© Graham Gavaghan, Flickr (CCL)

The tides, which back up the River Yare twice a day as far as Norwich, still allow salt-loving fish to flourish even in the city. Those flounder are now one of the few indicators that the Yare's entire lower valley, including the marshes at Claxton, was once an arm of the North Sea, known to the Romans as Gariensis.

The river was slowly tamed and drainage of its hinterland almost complete by the mid-nineteenth century, when one Norfolk naturalist considered Claxton marshes 'as dry as Arabia'.

Yet I still think the landscape carries memories of its origins. The flood plain is more than two miles across at this point and the panoramic views from the footpath by the river are wonderfully free of interruption in all directions.

In July it is a sea of grasses and the dominant species, Yorkshire fog, has the habit of turning steadily paler as the month advances. Come that strange moment when the entire summer seems becalmed, Claxton marsh is the soft, even hue of lion skin stretched at leisure across the valley.

I love the place just as much on certain evenings in midwinter. Most of the greenery has gone and the far woods are skeletal yet the place still has a wonderful sense of abundance.

On these clear days the dome of blue overhead is crisscrossed by flight lines of gulls heading downstream to Yarmouth for the night, or by rooks ploughing a counter line to their roost in Buckenham Carrs.

Large flocks of wintering wigeon also rise and wheel at intervals amid volleys of their soft whistling calls. The air turns cold towards dusk. The mist wells up from dykes and spills on to the open fields. It winds in curving lines and steadily shoals over everything and everyone. A mist tide then fills the whole valley and Claxton is a sea of white once again.



Written and photographed by author
and naturalist Mark Cocker.
Mark's books include *Birds Britannica*,
Birds and People, *Crow Country*
and *Claxton*.