

SLEA WALKS 10

CHAPEL HILL AND THE RIVER WITHAM

This short walk explores the final half a mile of the Sleaford Navigation from its junction with the River Witham. There are extensive views across the remote surrounding fens and beyond the river to Tattershall castle and Coningsby.

Chapel Hill has always been remote. From 1773 it was a part of Swineshead parish – Swineshead village being some nine miles to the south - and had only a Chapel of Ease. This was rebuilt in 1826 and again replaced in 1884 by the present Holy Trinity church (now a private house), a quarter of a mile to the south. The flood defence doors near Chapel Hill Bridge [A] were built in 1964 as a safety measure to prevent the flow of water from the Witham causing flooding should the Kyme Eau embankment be breached.

In the early 19c there is believed to have been a brick kiln in the vicinity of Home Farm, near to where the walk leaves the Kyme Eau [B] and nearby ponds are therefore likely to have been clay pits associated with this industry. There was probably another such kiln near the river where there are more ponds close to the caravan site passed later in the walk.

The countryside around Chapel Hill is almost entirely man-made. As late as the Middle Ages the undrained fenland stretched almost to Lincoln and was inhabitable only where small raised islands existed. Nevertheless the area generated considerable wealth especially for monasteries and abbeys, the attraction being ease of communication offered by the river, but coupled with a remote location well suited to sheep farming, the monks' main source of income. Thus there came to be a remarkable concentration of nine such establishments in the Witham valley (on both sides of the river) between Kyme and Barlings. The Witham [C] retained its importance over the centuries as it was gradually straightened (a process that possibly began as early as Roman times) and embanked to result in the course of the river that we know today. By the late 1700's, at the height of the canal age, it became a bustling waterway following the opening of the Sleaford Navigation in 1794 and the Horncastle Canal in 1802 - this joins the river just two and a half miles further north. The river's new importance then stemmed from the links it provided to the industrial midlands, the north of England via the Fossdyke and the Trent, as well as to Boston and the sea, not only for commodity cargoes but also for passenger packet boats. By modern standards this means of travel was quite slow for the return journey between Horncastle to Boston took four days!

The Witham eventually became a rail corridor too once the Great Northern Railway had opened its Boston to Lincoln line in 1848. [D] Until the present main line was opened between Peterborough and Doncaster, the Boston / Lincoln route formed the main line between London the north of England and Scotland. The line, which closed in 1963, ran on the eastern bank.

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This is a short circular walk 2¼ miles (3.5 kilometres) in distance starting at Chapel Hill, Grid Ref. 207541 easy riverbank paths, tracks and quiet roads. This short walk can be pleasantly extended in either direction beside the River Witham; northwards to Tattershall Bridge (1½ miles each way) or south towards Langrick. There is roadside parking at Chapel Hill, but please be considerate. A good picnic place is on the banks of the River Witham and there are refreshments at the Crown Lodge Inn, Chapel Hill.

MAPS : OS. Landranger 122 (Skegness) / Explorer 261.

ROUTE INSTRUCTIONS.

- (1) Locate Chapel Hill Bridge over the Kyme Eau and turn onto the footpath along the north bank so that you are heading away from the River Witham and with the Kyme Eau to your left. Follow the embankment for half a mile.
- (2) Just beyond a gate and a pumping station the waterway swings away to the left. At this point turn right down onto a track and follow it to a road. Turn right again.
- (3) When you reach a road junction keep ahead for a short distance until the road climbs onto the bank of the River Witham. Here make a third right turn along a tarmac access road to a caravan site. In 200 metres leave this to continue beside the river on the wide grass embankment.
- (4) When you reach two white cottages there is a choice of route back into Chapel Hill. You can either take the footpath down between the cottages - this emerges near the Crown Lodge Inn - or you can stay beside the river to its confluence with the Kyme Eau and turn right back to Chapel Hill Bridge

