

BACKGROUND TO THE BRECKS



The Brecks is 370 square miles/940km² of countryside in Norfolk and Suffolk

The Brecks is one of the natural areas of Britain. It covers some 370 sq miles / 940 km² of the western Norfolk-Suffolk border. The area is founded on chalk bedrock, but this is largely covered by windblown sands. It enjoys a semi-continental climate, with low rainfall, hot summers and cold winters, and yet frosts may occur in any month of the year. The landscape is dry and undulating, with few towns and villages. Extensive areas of pine forest contrast with expanses of arable land and sandy heath. River valleys and occasional groundwater-fed wetlands provide essential permanent moisture.



Ancient heathland once covered huge areas of the Brecks, created by prehistoric farmers and grazing sheep and rabbits. The poor, dry soils made farming difficult. Sheep walks, rabbits warrens

and temporarily-farmed 'brecks' had unstable soils prone to sand storms. Through many centuries the area became home to a distinctive range of plants and animals.

Over the last hundred years the ancient character of the Brecks has been changed forever. The large-scale pine plantations of Thetford Forest and the use of modern farming technology have transformed much of it into more productive land. The remaining stretches, and the more open parts of the forest, are now vital areas for wildlife conservation. The Brecks is an ideal area for quiet recreation, and the forests now welcome over 1½ million visitors each year.



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PEOPLE AND LAND IN THE BRECKS



Flint scraper, High Lodge

The story of human settlement in the Brecks begins 500,000 years ago, with flint tools found at High Lodge, Mildenhall. Early humans were knapping scrapers and handaxes beside a river. This is one of the earliest sites in Britain.

In later prehistoric times, after 3,000BC, farmers made clearings in the primeval forest and established the first permanent settlements. In this dry region water was a vital resource, and settlements were clustered along the valleys, round meres, and along the fen-edge. A big flint mining complex was established at Grimes Graves, where quality black flint was extracted for making tools, such as axes for clearing the forests. Today one of the pits is open to visitors.



Grimes Graves



Over the centuries the people of the Brecks became adept at making a living from the poor soils. Valleys were used for raising cattle, shifting cultivation of cereals such as rye took place on the slopes, and sheep were grazed on higher, drier ground. However the soil was too poor for intensive exploitation, and by Roman times there is evidence that heathland had begun to develop.

The present day towns and villages of the Brecks were founded in Saxon times. A small village dating from this period has been excavated at West Stow, and has been reconstructed for visitors to see. By late Saxon times Thetford had become one of the biggest towns of England, with a mint and a major pottery.



West Stow Anglo-Saxon village

MUSEUMS FEATURING THE BRECKS HERITAGE

Ancient House Museum, White Hart Street, Thetford

Up-to-date displays on Brecks landscape and heritage, in fine timber-framed Tudor merchant's house. Open Mon to Sat (plus Sun afternoons in summer). Free entry, but small charge in Jul and Aug. Tel: 01842-752 599.

Brandon Heritage Centre, George Street

Displays on the rabbit and fur industry, flint mining and knapping, as well as forestry and social history. Disabled access. Open restricted hours Thurs, Sat and Sun, Easter to end Oct. Small charge. Tel: Brandon Tourist Information Centre 01842-814 955.

Charles Burrell Steam Museum, Minstergate, Thetford

Displays of internationally renowned Burrell steam engines and agricultural machinery from c.1840 to 1928. Open Sats and Bank Holidays, and Sun afternoons, Apr to Oct. Entry charge. Tel: 01842-751 166.

Mildenhall Museum, King Street

Displays on the Brecks, Fenland, RAF Mildenhall and local archaeology. Wheelchair access to ground floor. Open Weds to Sun afternoons, Mar to end Dec. Free entry. Tel: 01638-716 970.

Moyses Hall Museum, Cornhill, Bury St Edmunds

Oldest Norman domestic house in East Anglia, with displays covering archaeology and social history of West Suffolk. Wheelchair access to ground floor. Open Mon to Sat, plus Sun afternoon. Small charge. Tel: 01284-757 488. NB: closed for redevelopment work 2000-2001.

Swaffham Museum, London Street

Displays on local archaeology and social history. Wheelchair access. Open Mon to Sat, Easter to end Nov. Small entry charge. Tel: 01760-721 230.

HERITAGE TRAILS

Thetford Heritage Trail

Explore 2,000 years of history in this ancient town, including Castle Hill, Nun's Bridges, Charles Burrell Steam Museum and Thetford Priory. Collect a leaflet from the starting point at Ancient House Museum, White Hart Street. Tel: 01842-752 599.

DISCOVERING THE BRECKS

Find out more about the natural and cultural heritage of the Brecks with leaflets and booklets published by the Brecks Countryside Project.

For more information contact Tourist Information Centres at Brandon, Bury St Edmunds, Newmarket, Swaffham and Watton; or Ancient House Museum, Thetford; or visit the Brecks website www.brecks.org



HISTORIC PLACES IN THE BRECKS



The Brecks



In Mediaeval times sheep and rabbit farming provided a good income for manors, such as Weeting Castle, and monastic houses, such as Thetford Priory. Arable farming was more of a chancy business, however, because of the drought-prone soils. Nevertheless rye was profitably grown, and malting barley which was exported to distant markets by river.



The Gatehouse, Thetford Priory

Vast areas of open heath were used as grazing lands or 'sheepwalks' for the local Norfolk Horn breed. Rabbits were introduced in the 12th century for their meat and fur, and were kept in large enclosures called warrens which had earthen boundary banks. There was always a risk of poaching, and the warreners lived in semi-defensive lodges where the nets, traps and precious skins were stored. The best preserved lodge is at Thetford.



The Old Norfolk Horn breed, now extinct

Unfortunately the large numbers of grazing animals often led to soil erosion, with ferocious sand storms. In 1668 moving dunes engulfed Santon Downham and almost blocked the Little Ouse River. Many early travellers commented on the bleak and desolate nature of the Brecks ("*drie, barren and miserably sandy...*" (John Evelyn, 1667).



Thetford Warren Lodge, 1906



View over Thetford Warren, 1866



Flint mining at Lingheath, c.1925

The last three centuries have been a period of great change in the Brecks. During the 18th and 19th centuries the people of Brandon turned to manufacturing gunflints, making the town the flint capital of Britain. Traces of their mining industry can be seen at Lingheath.



Lynford Hall, built c.1860

The open landscape was being transformed at this time, as thousands of acres of sheepwalk, warren and breck were enclosed by planting shelterbelts of pine trees, and became part of fashionable shooting estates. Great houses such as Elveden, Culford and West Harling Hall were built.

However agricultural depression after 1870 meant that many acres of farmland became unproductive and reverted to heath. Estates were bought up by the Forestry Commission in the 1920's for planting pine trees as a strategic timber reserve. The Brecks was further transformed by the compulsory purchase of land for airfields and the Stanford Military Training Area (1942). In 1959 Thetford became the fastest growing town in Britain, as new industries and population overspill from London were moved in. Today the application of modern agricultural technology, such as irrigation machines, plastic mulches and chemical fertilisers, has transformed the profitability of arable farming in the Brecks.



7th Armoured Division memorial, Ickburgh