Local landscapes

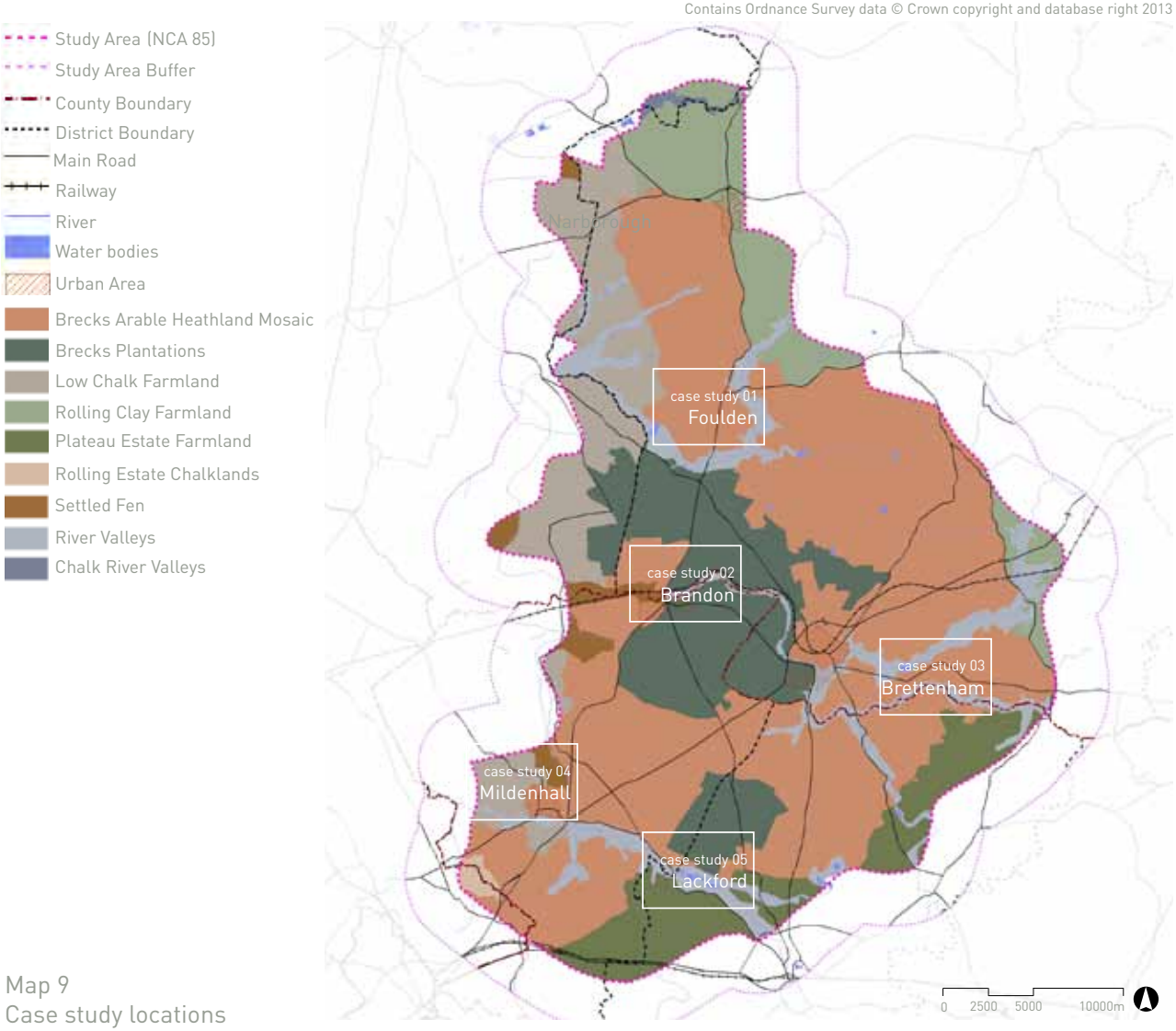
Five case studies which demonstrate how the Brecks LCA can be used to interpret landscape character and landscape history at a local scale.

Introduction to the case studies

This landscape character assessment provides the tools for 'reading' the landscape, through an understanding of its physical character and its particular path of historic development. Every landscape is different, but the LCA shows how the familiar patterns and forms of fields, roads and settlements are shaped by the underlying rocks, landform and soils and by layers of human activity.

This section of the LCA illustrates how the Brecks LCA can be used to interpret and understand landscape character and landscape history at a local scale. This is done through case studies, which tell the story of five local landscapes, illustrating how the landscape has evolved from post glacial times to the present day. They highlight the remnant historic features that help to create a strong local identity, contributing layers of meaning and a sense of time-depth in the landscape.

The five case studies have been selected to illustrate local landscape stories in different types of landscape. They are shown on Map 9. Each is focused on a local landscape which forms the hinterland to a settlement and covers the area of a typical walk. The case studies are exemplars, which demonstrate how any local landscape can be 'read', by looking closely at its landscape patterns and the historic features that may have been left as clues to its specific historic



Map 9
Case study locations

evolution. They may kickstart an exploration of the cultural history of places, showing what they have meant to people over time. The five case studies are:

- Foulden
- Brandon
- Brettenham
- Mildenhall
- Lackford

For each case study there is a sequence of illustrative diagrams, which show the topography of the area and the evolution of the landscape from prehistory to the present day.

The location of the archaeological and historic sites shown on the diagrams has been informed by reference to the Historic Environmental Record held at Norfolk and Suffolk County Councils, but the diagrams are presented as an illustrative guide and not as an accurate historic summary. The known sites recorded in the Historic Environment Record are not the result of systematic survey across these areas (some parts may have been studied in more depth than others), but the result of a variety of techniques. The diagrams illustrate one interpretation of the way local landscapes have evolved based on the evidence available today. The evidence will change as further research and archaeological survey is undertaken. It is estimated that the known sites represent only a small fraction of the total number of sites, with some more visible, or more easily detectable, than others. For instance, Roman sites are generally more visible than Anglo Saxon sites and so evidence from the Roman period might appear over-represented in comparison to the Anglo Saxon period.

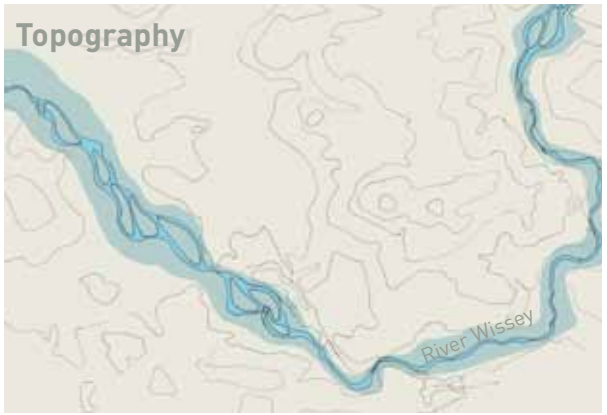
The degree to which any particular tract of landscape would have been wooded, farmed, settled or traversed at different periods in history is not known, but we can use the evidence from archaeological research and the Historic Environment Record to make an informed judgement.

The final illustration in the sequence is a sketch which depicts an oblique aerial view of the landscape as it is today. Remnant historic landscape features and patterns from the past are highlighted to indicate how the character of today's landscape has been influenced by its inheritance.

Landscapes are never static and will continue to evolve, but an appreciation of the 'footprints' from past landscapes enriches our understanding of local identity and our ability to conserve a unique sense of place.

Foulden (Case study 01)

The villages of Mundford, Ickburgh and Northwold lie on the edge of the River Wissey floodplain. The village of Foulden is to the north, on the lower west-facing slopes of the chalk plateau.



Neolithic

Hunter-gatherers from the Mesolithic period occupied temporary settlements along the river valleys. People gradually became more settled and, by Neolithic times, the first farmers had partially cleared the post-glacial forests. These communities began to farm small areas close to the river and its tributaries.

Roman

Archaeological evidence suggests that there was a Roman settlement near to present day Hillborough and that the village of Ickburgh was also a thriving Roman settlement. The road linking these two sites, the present day A1065, may perhaps have originated as a Roman route.

Middle Saxon

Clustered settlements developed along the river valley - many of the present day villages originated as Saxon villages. Part of the Fossditch, a defensive embankment and ditch thought to date from the Early Saxon period, crosses the plateau to the south of the River Wissey. Its construction suggests that local communities felt that they were threatened by attack from other tribes.

Medieval

The area was densely populated during the medieval period. The riverside villages were often associated with watermills, moated manors (often with fish ponds) and extensive open fields, which were part of a complex system of agricultural rotation involving crops on fertile river valley land and extensive grazing on the less fertile heathy soils at a distance from the village.

Post-medieval to modern

Many of the smaller riverside medieval villages (at Bodney, Langford, Colveston and Cranwich) contracted or became deserted due to population decline and a marginal local economy. The majority of the land was in agricultural use, but there were remnant commons on heathy and marshy land at Foulden Common and Borough Fen. Wealthy landowners developed shooting estates with designed parkland and water meadows at Didlington Park, Buckenham Tofts Park and Lynford Park. Lynford Park was used as a military hospital during World War II, when there were also military camps in the forest to the east of Mundford and to the north of Ickburgh.

Modern

The lakes and mature parkland trees at Didlington Park and Lynford Park are features in today's landscape; Lynford Park is now a hotel and arboretum. Conifer plantations on the outskirts of Thetford Forest now form a backdrop to views across the slopes of the chalk plateau.

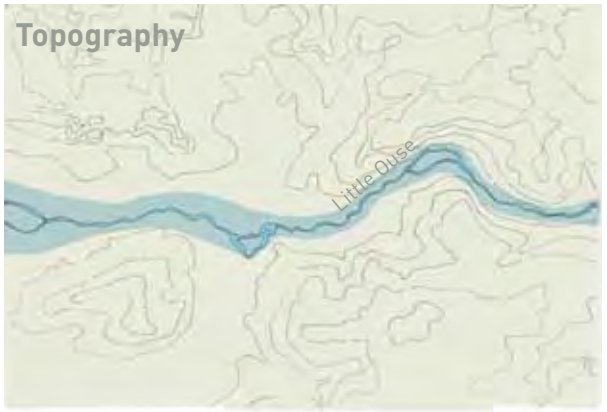
Current day

The village of Mundford has expanded, but the deserted medieval settlements, fishponds and moated manor houses are barely visible as small bumps and hollows in the fields. The majority of the farmland is under arable cultivation, but much of the River Wissey floodplain is pasture, with areas of reedbed and carr woodland alongside.

Angle of view

Brandon (Case study 02)

The town of Brandon developed at a crossing of the Little Ouse River. The town is sited to the south of the river, the village of Weeting is to the north and the village of Santon Downham is within the dense plantations of Thetford Forest to the east.



Bronze Age

Settlements developed along the valley of the Little Ouse. Forest clearance was more extensive and the some of the round Bronze Age burial barrows would have been sited on open ground so that they were visible on local skylines from the valley settlements.

Iron Age - Roman

There was a large Romano-British settlement on the north bank of the Little Ouse. Outside the small town, Roman villas and other farms exploited the valley and adjacent upland.

Middle Saxon

During the Middle Saxon period, a high status settlement developed at Staunch Meadow, to the south of the River Little Ouse, possibly in response to trade along the river, where there may have been a ferry crossing. The embanked defences of the Fossditch may have been built to protect Early Saxon settlements from attack by tribes to the east.

Medieval

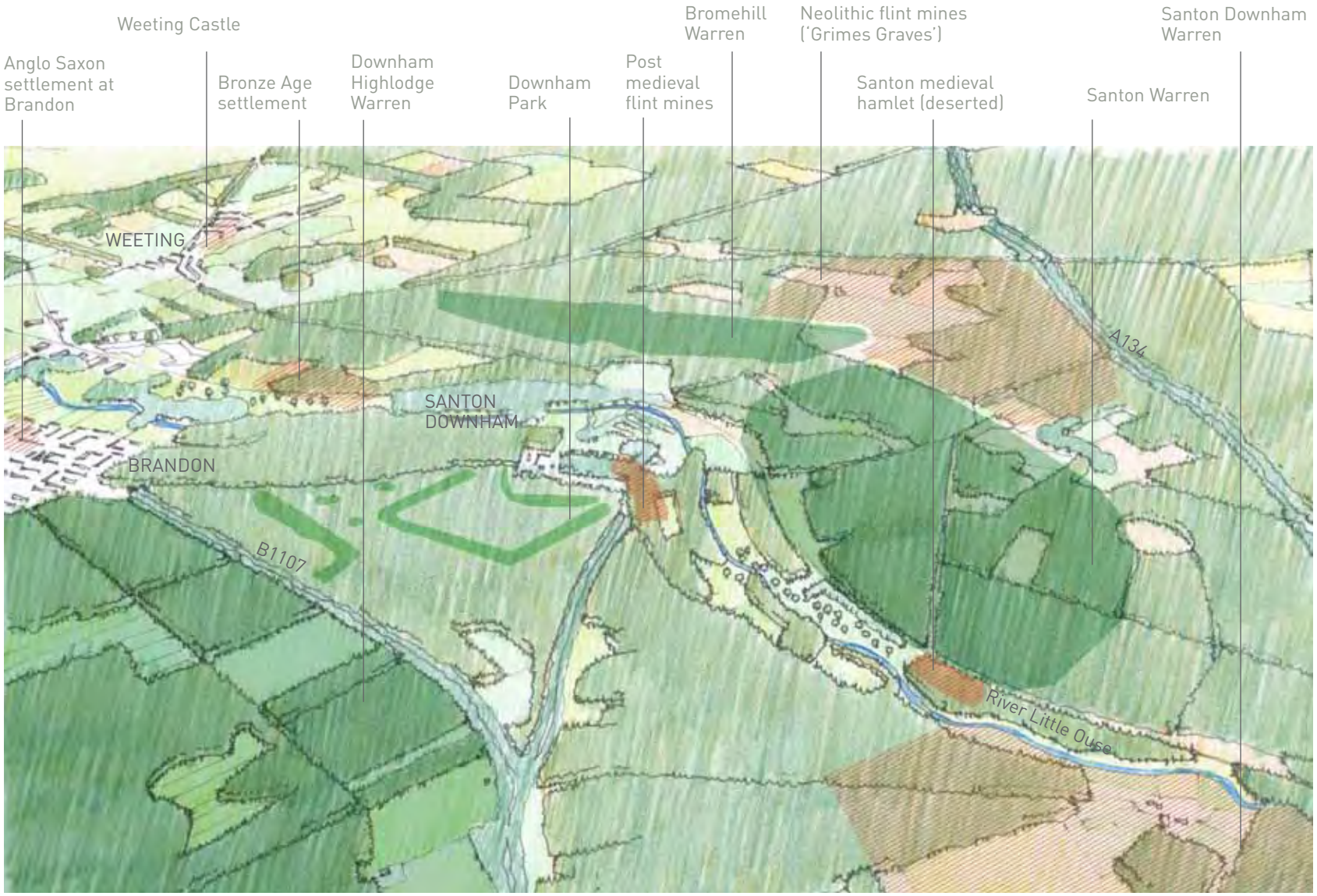
Medieval villages developed close to or at the sites of earlier Saxon settlements, some with moated buildings (as at Weeting and Santon). The common-field agricultural system expanded across fertile land near the river while the dry soils of the higher plateau were used for grazing sheep. Large areas of heathland were developed as rabbit warrens (Bromehill and Santon Warrens to the north; Downham Highlodge Warren, Santon Downham Warren and Brandon Warren to the south), although at this stage most were not defined by banks.

Post-medieval

Settlement became concentrated at Brandon and Weeting and the medieval settlement of Santon was largely deserted. The medieval rabbit warrens were enclosed by warren banks. New flint mines around Brandon were developed to support the gunflint industry, particularly during the Napoleonic Wars.

Modern

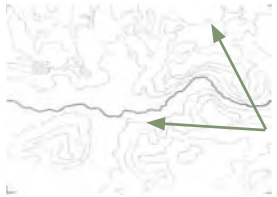
Thetford Forest was planted in the 1920s to supply timber when it was urgently needed following World War 1. The conifer plantations completely transformed the historic pattern of the landscape and the village of Santon Downham, together with the hall and parkland of Downham Park, was surrounded by the dense plantations of Thetford Forest.



Current day

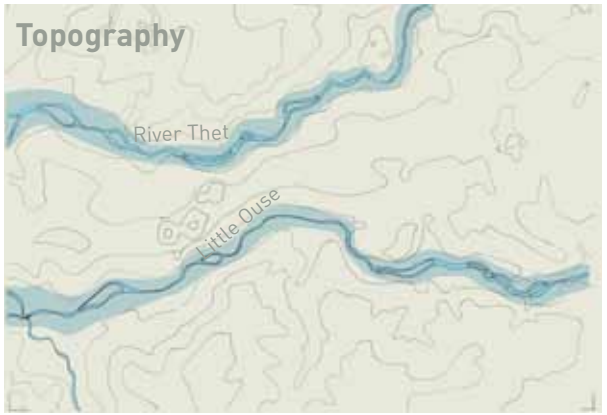
The Neolithic flint mines of Grimes Graves are an important heritage site – the remnant shafts appear as a 'lunar' landscape of craters. The area is dominated by the mature, dense plantations of Thetford Forest, but remnants of the medieval warren banks, deserted settlements and the 18th century parkland of Downham Hall can still be traced beneath the trees.

Angle of view



Brettenham (Case study 03)

The villages of Brettenham and Rushford are sited at river crossing points to the east of Thetford; Brettenham on the River Thet and Rushford on the Little Ouse River.



Bronze Age

The post glacial forests were partially cleared and settlement was concentrated along the river valleys. Some round Bronze Age burial barrows were sited on local ridges, so that they were visible on the skyline in views from the river valley settlements.

Roman

The Peddar's Way provided an accessible regional trading route. A Roman villa was sited close to the point where the Peddar's Way crossed the River Thet.

Anglo Saxon

Anglo Saxon settlements were clustered farming communities, sited close to rivers. The surrounding land would have been used for grazing stock and cultivating crops. The Peddar's Way continued to be used as a through-route, supplemented by local trackways and roads.

Medieval

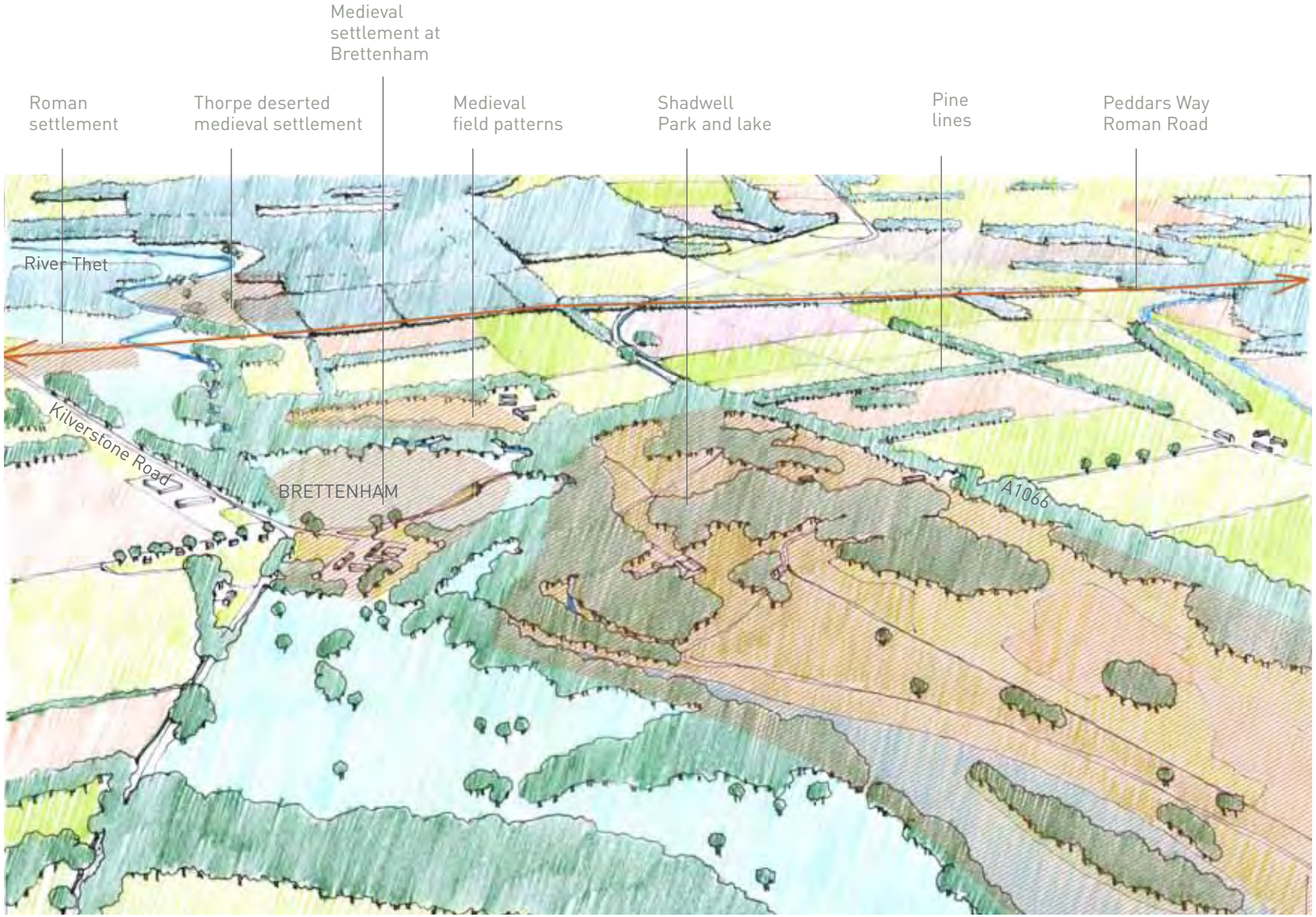
The river-side settlements of Rushford and Brettenham were clustered around the river crossing points and their churches. Important properties on the river floodplain were enclosed by moats. Villages were surrounded by common fields, with a complex 'infield-outfield' system for rotating crops and grazing animals. This allowed intensive cropping of the fertile river valley soils and grazing on the upper slopes. Sheep were brought onto the arable fields overnight so that their dung would help to fertilise the soils. The infertile heathland areas were also used as rabbit warrens, such as Snarehill Warren.

Post-medieval

The pattern of villages contracted as some earlier medieval settlements were abandoned and land holdings became concentrated in fewer hands. The popularity of hunting encouraged a proliferation of landed estates – John Buxton began to lay out Shadwell Park in c.1720 and Sylvanus Bevan, a successful banker, bought the Riddlesworth estate in 1789. The pattern of farmland was extensive, but areas of heath and warren remained as common land on relatively infertile soils.

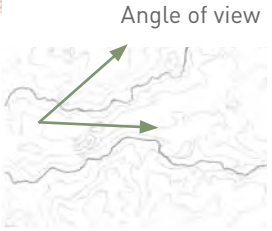
Modern

Many of the remnant heaths, including West Harling Heath, parts of Knettishall Heath and parts of the former Snarehill Warren have been planted with conifers, but part of Knettishall heath is retained as open access land and is also a nature reserve. Riddlesworth Park is used as a school. Land to the SW of Knettishall Heath was used as a WWII airfield - RAF Knettishall. The alignment of the former runways is still visible within the arable fields.



Current day

The intimate landscape of the river valley meadows with the small riverside village of Brettenham is dwarfed by the scale of the surrounding arable fields, woodlands and plantations. The deserted medieval settlement of Thorpe and the moated medieval buildings at Brettenham are just discernible as bumps and hollows in the fields. Shadwell Park is a mature (19th C) parkland landscape and the Peddar's Way is a long distance footpath – now used for recreation rather than trade.



Mildenhall (Case study 04)

The town of Mildenhall is on the western margins of the Brecks and on the edge of the Fen Basin. The Mildenhall Airbase is ringed by the smaller fen edge settlements of West Row, Beck Row and Wilde Street. The village of Eriswell is further to the east, on the edge of the Brecks Plateau.

Early Settlers - Neolithic

The concentration of archaeological finds around the edge of the fens suggests that this area was well used by hunter-gatherers from the Mesolithic period and later by the first farmers of the Neolithic period, who would have exploited the wide range of wetland and forest resources available. Excavations at Hurst Fen show that this was the site of a Neolithic settlement.

Bronze Age

Numerous Bronze Age settlements were sited around the fen edge and a 'hoard' of Bronze Age weapons was found close by. There is also evidence for Bronze Age settlement on the edge of the higher land to the west.

Roman

There was a band of Roman settlement on the western edge of the higher land, including areas near Beck Row and on RAF Mildenhall. A hoard of late Roman silver vessels was found near a probable small Roman farmstead site (a Scheduled Monment) at Thistley Green.

Medieval

The higher land on the edge of the fen was intensively farmed. Mildenhall was a medieval market town, but a string of small hamlets developed around the common fields to the north of Mildenhall. There was a small moated manor house at Aspal Hall The land surrounding the villages was farmed in accordance with the infield-outfield system – the infertile land on the heaths to the south east of Mildenhall was enclosed by the Abbots of Bury St Edmunds as Mildenhall Warren, for rearing rabbits. Drove roads led out onto the seasonally waterlogged pastures of the fen to the west.

Post - medieval

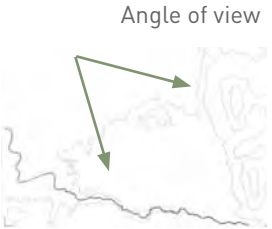
The drainage of the fens transformed land use on the low lying land to the west with the result that the settlements in this area were no longer perceived to be on the edge of a wetland, but the small scale, linear pattern of settlement was retained.

Modern

The construction of the cut-off channel (to reduce the risk of flooding) in the 1950s separated the promontory of well settled high land to the west of Mildenhall from the higher Brecks plateau to the east. The Mildenhall common fields became a major World War II airbase and the land to the north and east of Mildenhall is now dominated by the plantations of Thetford Forest. The remnant demesne of Aspal Hall is now a public open space and local nature reserve - Aspal Close

Current day

There is very little trace of the past in the intensively farmed arable landscape today, but settlement is still concentrated on the higher land near Mildenhall and Aspal Close Local Nature Reserve at Beck Row is a remnant of the domestic wood pasture associated with the adjacent moated medieval manor house. The site of the Neolithic settlement at Hurst Fen is now a Scheduled Monument.



Lackford (Case study 05)

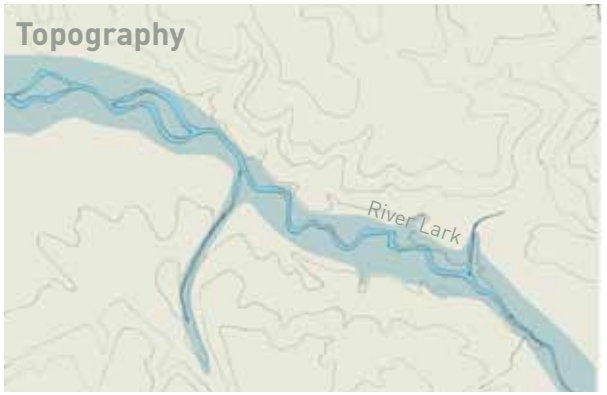
The villages of Icklingham, Lackford, West Stow and Culford are sited on the gravel terrace above the floodplain of the River Lark. Evidence from early Ordnance Survey maps and aerial photographs suggests that the river channel was originally braided and that it meandered across the wide floodplain. The area has a long history of settlement from post glacial times.

Bronze Age

The Icknield Way and other historic routeways crossed the River Lark at fording points and small agricultural settlements developed on the north bank of the river. Round barrows for ritual burial were sited outside settlements on higher land towards the fringes of the river valley and may have been prominent on local skylines.

Roman

Agriculture dominated the economy but settlements became increasingly clustered and more urban in character as trading developed and expanded. A small Roman town developed along the course of an east-west Roman road. It included one of the very few known Roman Christian churches and burial grounds, preceded by pagan temples on both sides of the river. A smaller Roman settlement developed to the south of the river. There was a regular pattern of farms, especially on the north bank of the Lark.



Early Saxon

Early Saxon settlements developed on the slopes of the Lark Valley. Excavations at West Stow indicate a self-sufficient riverside farming community which would have exploited both wetland and forest resources locally. Construction of the 'Black Ditches', a defensive boundary across part of the Icknield Way, suggests the area was subject to attack from other peoples or tribes.

Late Saxon to medieval

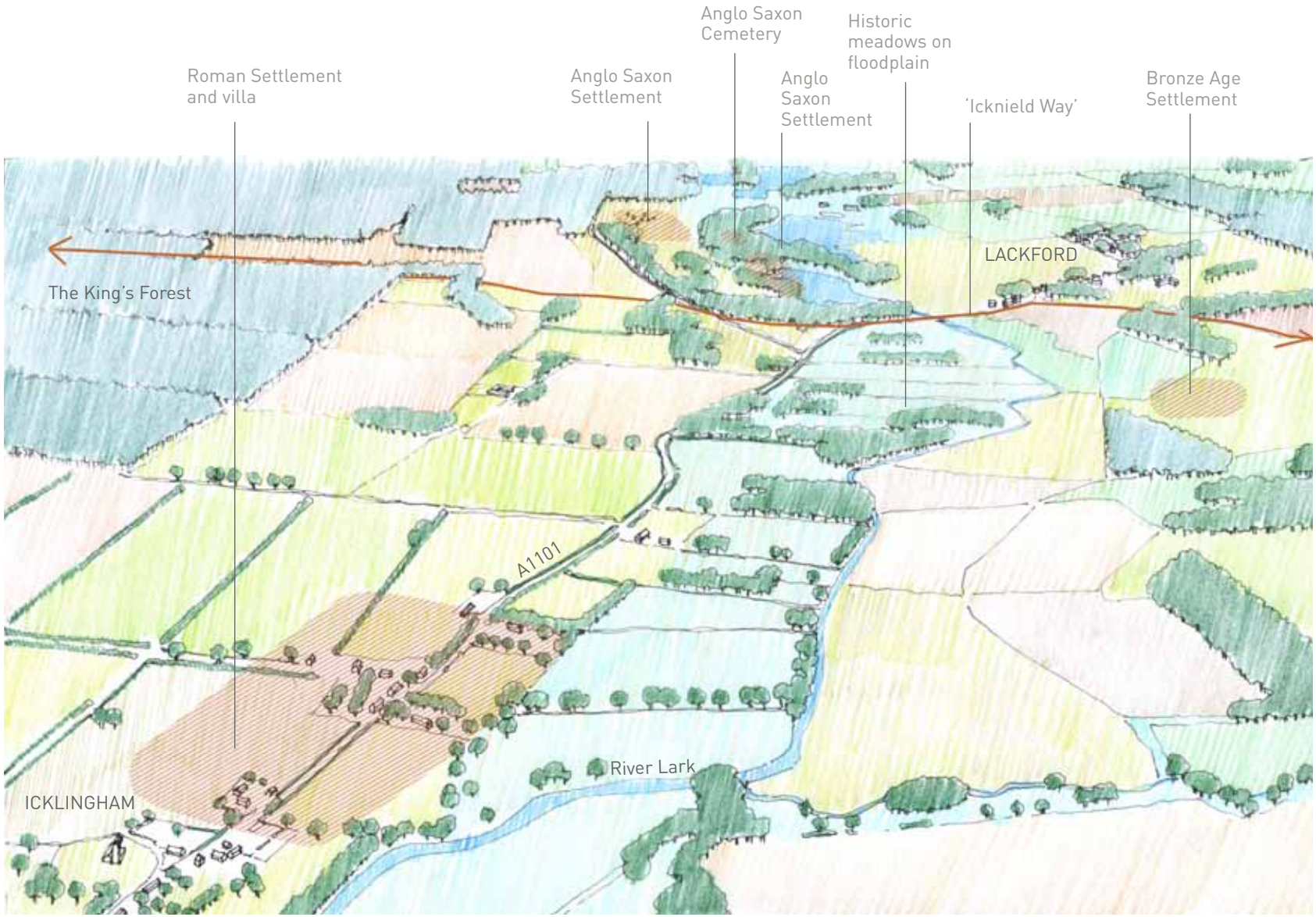
Settlements were clustered on the edge of the floodplain and at river crossing points. Churches were prominent local landmarks and there were watermills at intervals along the river and its tributary streams. Villages were surrounded by common fields, but sheep were also grazed on nearby heaths. A complex system of rotation was in place which used manure to maintain the fertility of the arable soils.

Post-medieval

Land within agricultural use expanded, but areas of remnant heathland were conserved at Cavenham Heath and Icklingham Plains. The medieval villages continued to expand along local routes, but the small village of Wordwell was deserted and the centre of Lackford moved slightly to the west of its medieval church. Large halls at West Stow and Culford Park were developed by wealthy landowners. Culford Park was set within a Repton inspired landscape which dominated the area to the west of Culford Village.

Modern

Thetford Forest extends down to the Lark Valley and The King's Forest forms a backdrop to views on the north side of the river. Extensive gravel extraction to the east of Lackford has changed the character of this part of the river floodplain; the gravel pits have been restored to wetlands, which are now (in part) managed as the Lackford Wildfowl Nature Reserve. Remnant heaths remain at Cavenham Heath (a National Nature Reserve) and Icklingham Plains.



Current day

The landscape of the Lackford area has been transformed as a result of extensive quarrying and subsequent restoration of gravel pit wetlands on the floodplain to the east. This area is now a valuable nature reserve. The vast King's Forest plantation carpets the land to the north, but the presumed course of the Icknield Way is conserved as a recreational route across the river and through the forest. The historic field pattern is clearly visible along the edge of the floodplain.

Angle of view

The Brecks in literature

Compiled by James Parry with research by Sue Pennell
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'Lovely old country'

How literary responses to the landscapes of the Brecks have motivated and inspired writers and their readers through the centuries.

This … he who has once vibrated with the thrill of the heathland is never quite the same again … It fascinates but few, but those who have once come under its spell are ever after its slaves.

So wrote historian and naturalist W G Clarke in his iconic work, In Breckland Wilds, published in 1925. Clarke's connection with the landscape of the Brecks was primarily through its vast tracts of wild and open heathland, which he found entrancing and inspiring. Yet his lyrical words also acknowledged that the seemingly barren and unforgiving heaths were not to everyone's taste. Indeed, earlier literary visitors to the Brecks had been less than captivated by what they found. Of particular concern were the notorious shifting dunes of sand, which at times could be an obstacle to travel and even threaten life and property. In 1668 they had engulfed the village of Santon Downham and blocked the Little Ouse River, prompting the diarist John Evelyn to remark how "The Travelling Sands … that have so damaged the country, rouling from place to place, like the Sands in the Deserts of Lybia, quite overwhelmed some gentleman's whole estates."

Such disruptions – and the unremitting flatness of the Brecks – were in stark contrast to those parts of England that were to inspire the likes of Wordsworth and Coleridge with their peaceful soaring hills and intimate verdant valleys. Even so, writers did the best they could with the raw ingredients to hand. The poet George Bloomfield (1757–1831) even felt moved to introduce some underappreciated local topography into his poem Thetford:

O Thetford! round thy flow'ry fields I've strolled,
From Tutt-Hill's eminence and Croxton's height,
Have view'd thine ancient ruins with delight,
Thy sloping hills and wooded vallies gay,
Whose silv'ry Ouse meand'ring winds his way.

The distinctive characteristics and understated power of the landscape and countryside termed by Clarke as 'Breckland' also struck a chord with writers more concerned with depicting the grim reality of rural life than pandering to any fanciful notions of a pastoral idyll. Life in rural East Anglia was unremittingly

hard for many folk, particularly so during periods of agricultural recession when labourers often found themselves out of work and their families close to starvation.

One literary figure who took up the cudgel on their behalf was Mary Mann, née Rackham (1848–1929). A merchant's daughter from Norwich, she moved to Shropham in the eastern Brecks following her marriage to yeoman farmer Fairman Mann. Shocked by the conditions of the rural poor there, she produced a series of gritty portrayals of local life, full of local dialect and bravely tackling uncomfortable social issues that were rarely aired in public. Among her many works, Mann's collection of short stories, The Fields of Dulditch (1902), stand as stunning testament to her skills as a writer and social commentator, a rare combination that earned her the admiration of DH Lawrence and the sobriquet 'Norfolk's Thomas Hardy'.

The evocation of daily country life was also very much the strength of writer Michael Home, who was born in 1885 in Great Hockham, a Brecks village which he described as standing "with its shoulders humped, as it were, into and against the oncoming bracken." Home was a prolific author, penning over fifty detective novels under his real name of Christopher Bush before turning his attention to life and events in his village during the Edwardian era and the interwar years. In books such as Autumn Fields (1944) he describes with great insight and beauty the rhythm and pace of the seasons and how the land was worked and cherished by the local people – a moving elegy to a way of life that has now vanished.

Whilst such homegrown writers saw the Brecks from the position of insiders, the perspective of visitors from elsewhere can be equally revealing. For Virginia Woolf, who spent August 1906 at Blo' Norton Hall and was delighted by the "lovely old country" nearby, it was Thetford that made a particular impression. "Often in London shall I think of Thetford, & wonder if it is still alive," she wrote in her journal, adding that "No one would notice if the whole town forgot to wake up one morning."

The Brecks were certainly awoken by the First World War, which saw extensive military activity across the area. The open and flat terrain was ideal for the creation of airfields for the Royal Flying Corps, with the largest airfield in Norfolk established at Narborough. It was here that local man WE Johns, who had worked as a sanitary inspector in Swaffham before enlisting, was stationed and worked as a pilot instructor. He later achieved great renown as the author of the celebrated Biggles novels, which were inspired by his time at Narborough.

'No one would notice if the whole town forgot to wake up one morning'

Bluebells in Wayland Wood, the scene for a sinister tale that endured for centuries. Photo. © Nick Ford 2012

More recent decades have seen even more illustrious visitors featuring the Brecks in their works. Booker Prize double-winner Hilary Mantel set part of her novel A Change of Climate (1994) in the area, describing the famous pine rows and how "the bowed, arthritic pines that line the roads creep to the edges of the small towns ... they gather round the new housing estates, like witches at a christening." More recently, growing interest in the literary traditions and inspirational qualities of the Brecks has seen the establishment of the Breckland Book Festival and the reprinting of works by Mary Mann, among others. There are doubtless other local literary gems out there, just waiting to be unearthed.

Meanwhile, one of the most poignant tales is also among the oldest – that of the 'Babes in the Wood', which was first published in 1595 in Norwich, as an anonymous ballad. Anecdotal evidence and folklore maintain that the story is based on real events that took place in Wayland Wood near Watton, involving two young orphans who were entrusted to the care of their aunt and uncle. In order to appropriate their inheritance, the uncle arranges for them to be killed by two thugs. These fall out with one another, one killing the other but then leaving the two children alone in the wood, where they starve to death. Such was the power of this tale, despite the lack of firm evidence definitively linking it to Wayland, that well into the 19th century the wood – and even a particular tree, under which the children were reputedly abandoned – was a popular destination with ghoulish Victorian sightseers. Even today, some local people maintain the wood has a singularly sinister atmosphere, underlining the enduring potency of literary associations with Breckland landscapes.

Acknowledgements

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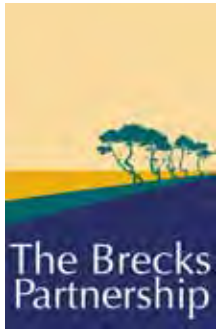

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