

# The Great Ouse

Mike sets off with George, the campervan, to find out if the River Great Ouse is really as great as it sounds...

WORDS & PHOTOS Mike Trippitt

**N**ot far from Brackley, the home of the Mercedes Formula One team, The River Great Ouse moves rather more slowly than the Silver Arrow. From its source close to the Northamptonshire town, it meanders gently and leisurely through Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire, before creeping under the A1 into Cambridgeshire, and onward to Norfolk and the North Sea beyond.

George, my campervan, and I are following the Ouse Valley through Cambridgeshire, to explore the settlements along the way and enjoy its rural riverside environment. 'Valley' is something of a misnomer. This land has no mountain highs, no valleys deep. Cambridgeshire is flat; very, very flat. Yet what it lacks in altitude it makes up for in charm: it's bustling little towns, elegant villages, outstanding natural beauty and big, big East Anglian skies.

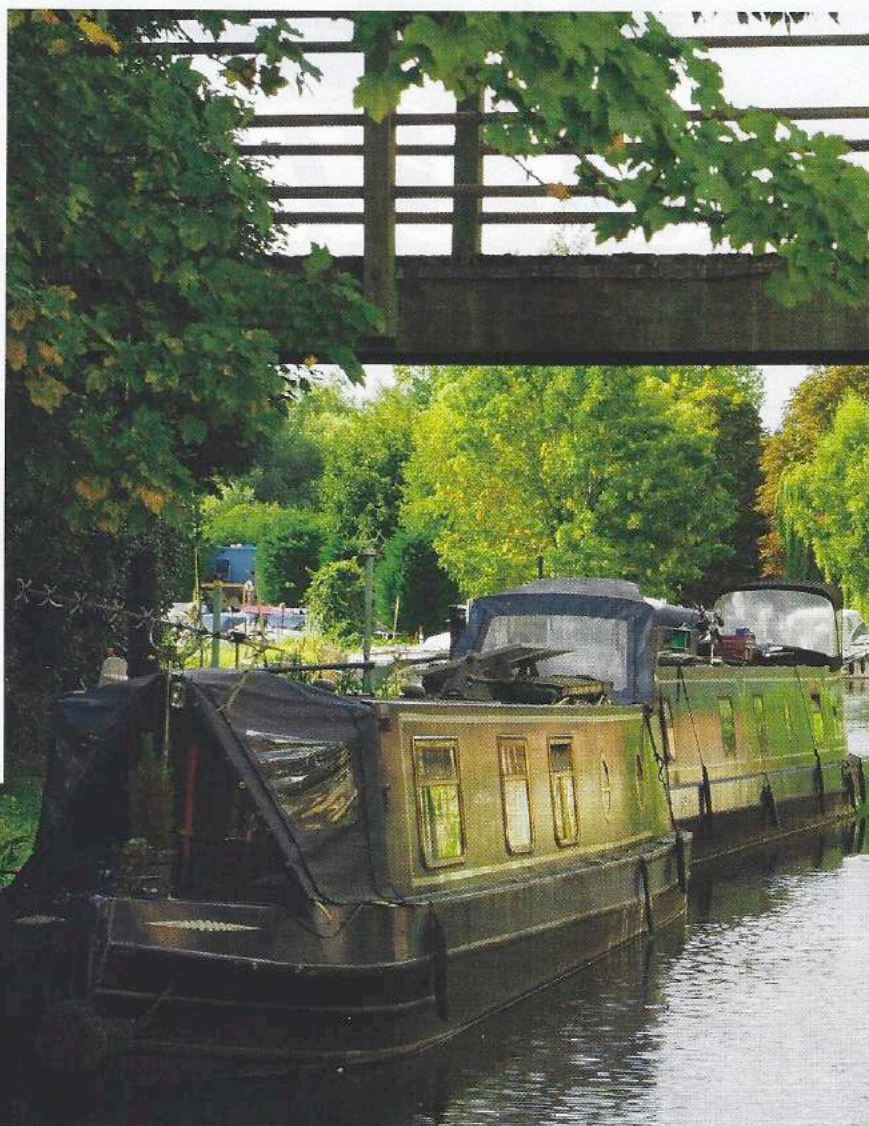
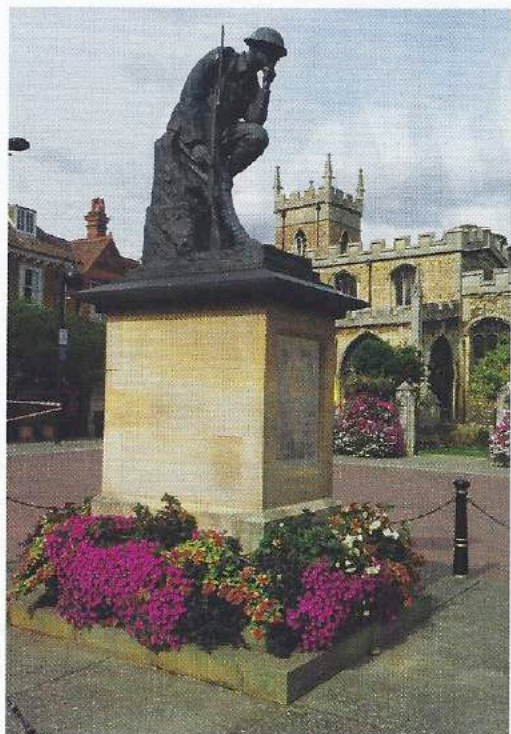
## A saintly start

We arrive in St Neots, parking at the riverside close to the centre. The Great Ouse flows through the town, bisecting wet meadows and parkland rich in flora absorbing the low,

late summer sunshine.

St Neots is rich in history. Fiercely Parliamentarian in the civil wars, its bridge over the Great Ouse was heavily protected from Royalist attack.

I head to the town museum in the former magistrates' court and police station. The old cells, austere and almost sinister, are an unchanged reminder of how justice was dispensed from within these walls. Recently, they've begun a new life, in the increasingly popular 'escape room experience' market. Paying customers are given one hour to get out! Retired local solicitor Clive Dawson's escape took a little longer: "Back in the 1980s I'd gone into a cell to see a client awaiting his court appearance. When I'd finished, the police jailer came to let me out, but could not open the door. The cell door lock was jammed. A solicitor locked in a cell: that made some folk laugh!" Happily Clive wasn't detained for too long: "A locksmith was found. When he arrived, he opened the lock and I was free again." But astonishingly the locksmith found a note stuffed inside the cell door. A soldier serving in France in the First World War had written it almost 70 years earlier.



He had lived locally but had overstayed his leave and had been detained in the cell after his arrest, before being returned to the front line.

The Camping and Caravanning Club site on the town's fringe is a delightful spot for our first night. Many of its grass pitches abut the riverbank. Campers come here to walk, fish or simply to sit at the water's edge enjoying the peace and quiet. With George settled, the sunshine warm and the breeze gentle, I play my ace card. Out comes my folding bike. I flip it open and cycle off along the footpaths through St Neots' riverside parks and meadows known as its 'Green Corridor'. The Great Ouse dominates this part of town. With beves of swans inching slowly along the calm waters, and cruisers and narrowboats easing quietly up and down, time somehow seems to slow down here.

### Hunting for Huntingdon

We leave St Neots for the short drive downstream towards Huntingdon. The B1043 passes through the Paxtons, (Little and Great), Offord D'Arcy, Offord Cluny and Godmanchester before reaching Huntingdon.

The Great Ouse is never far away, occasionally peeping out through woodlands and meadows. The East Coast Main Line to our left carries trains to and from London. This is one of just a few places where a railway, a roadway and a river run side by side.

For tonight's stop we choose The Willows at

**ABOVE LEFT**  
The Huntingdon war memorial

**MAIN** The Hen Brook, St Neots

**BELOW** St Neots town sign

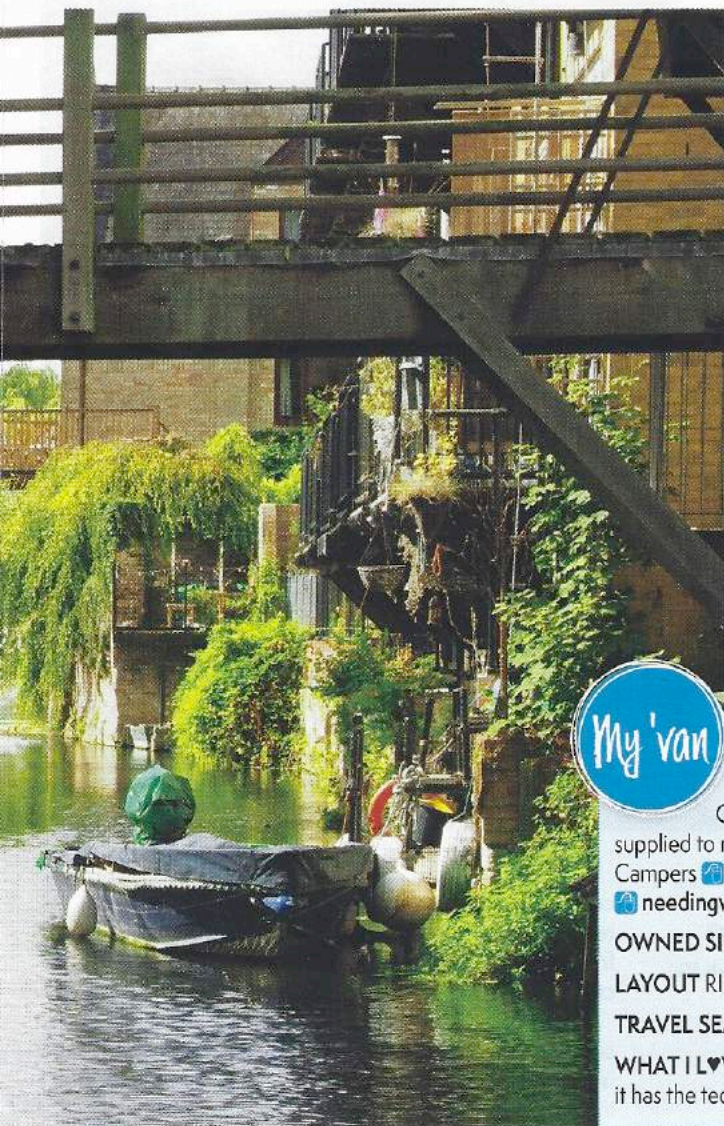
Brampton, one mile west of Huntingdon. Behind us and to our left a small creek is home to a dozen jetties. The motor cruisers moored there, bows facing the riverbank, look like cattle huddled around a feeding trough. Just across the lane a riverside pub, Brampton Mill, is a popular haunt for visitors by road, by foot or by river.

With pop-top raised, electric hooked-up and camera at the ready, I set off once more on my little bike.

Portholme lies between our campsite and Huntingdon. Bounded by the river to the east and south it's one of Europe's largest meadows and a Site of Special Scientific Interest. It's a hay meadow in summer, but at other times livestock graze to encourage wildlife and a habitat for ground-nesting birds. I have chosen to cycle around the edge of Portholme into town, although it's a little bumpy and demanding for the small wheels of my Brompton!

Once in Huntingdon, I walk around the town and absorb the present and the past. Down at the waterfront, pedestrians and cyclists are blessed with well-maintained walkways. A charming riverside path through willows and greensward is both safe and flat. Cyclists are encouraged to keep off the busiest highways here and, for the adventurous, Cambridge, over 20 miles away, can be reached with just the odd stretch of cycling on a main road. Perhaps not for me today! Instead, to create a circular route, I cycle back to The Willows through the adjoining settlement of





2016 VW T6 Highline

**CONVERSION TYPE**

Camper King Retrotrek

supplied to my spec by Needingworth Campers [camperking.co.uk](http://camperking.co.uk)

[needingworthcampers.com](http://needingworthcampers.com)

**OWNED SINCE** 2016

**LAYOUT** RIB bed and side kitchen

**TRAVEL SEATS/BERTHS** 4/3

**WHAT I LOVE ABOUT IT** Although it has the technology and

environmental credentials of the modern age, the two-tone orange and white body and retro orange side kitchen give George the soul of the 1960s!



Godmanchester. Now a borough of Huntingdon, it originated in Roman times. It was here that the Roman road, Ermine Street, crossed the Great Ouse on its way from London to Lincoln.

That evening, before sunset, I wile away an hour in Hinchingsbrooke Country Park. It's just a stone's throw from my pitch, and its 170 acres of woodland, wetland, lakes and meadows provide the backdrop to a network of footpaths. It's perfect for easy walking or cycling.

**No man with seven wives**

Although the Great Ouse is 143 miles long from source to sea, many folk believe that the six miles from Huntingdon downstream to the market town of St Ives are its best.

With that in mind, the National Trust campsite, Waterclose Meadows, at Houghton Mill is our next stopover. Houghton's eighteenth century watermill stands imposingly at the water's edge. The mill pool is popular for paddling and swimming. With a tea room, two country pubs close by and leisure boats always providing something to watch, it's no wonder the site gets booked up well in advance in summer. Not only is it a peaceful retreat for those wanting to hide away, but it's also a great base from which to walk or ride.

My plan is to cycle to St Ives three miles away, so I follow an off-road footpath called 'The Thicket'. I meet no man with seven wives, so the debate whether the rhyme

originates in Cornwall or Cambridgeshire can be left for another day!

Once an inland port called Slepe, St Ives was renamed in 1001AD after the bones of St Ivo were discovered at nearby Ramsey Abbey, 400 years after he is said to have died here. The town holds many surprises. It is one of only four in the country to have a chapel on a bridge, and one of just three places where a statue of Oliver Cromwell is displayed. There are riverside walks, numerous places to eat and a renowned market. In the old days of its linen market, the cheapest, shabbiest cuts of cloth were sold at stalls closest to St Audrey Lane (known locally as 'T awdry Lane'). The word 'tawdry' originates here.

But I'm most interested in the bridge. A tiny chapel stands at its highest point, and of its five arches, three are Gothic, but two Renaissance. "The present stone bridge and chapel dates from the fifteenth century," says Richard Carter, museum assistant at the town's Norris Museum. "The bridge chapel was consecrated in 1426, giving an indication of when the bridge was completed." Richard tells me that in 1645, parliamentary forces replaced the arches at the far end of the bridge with a drawbridge during the Civil War, but the drawbridge was removed and arches rebuilt, though not of Gothic style, in 1716.

At lunchtime in the Oliver Cromwell public house, just along the quay from the bridge in the quaint old port area

**ABOVE TOP TO BOTTOM**  
My little bike and me; George, the campervan



**ST NEOTS CAMPING AND CARAVANNING CLUB SITE**

Hardwick Road, Eynesbury, St Neots PE19 2PR

[campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk](http://campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk)

**WATERCLOSE MEADOWS**

Houghton Mill, Mill Street, Houghton,

Huntingdon PE28 2AZ

[nationaltrust.org.uk/holidays/waterclose-meadows-campsite](http://nationaltrust.org.uk/holidays/waterclose-meadows-campsite)

**THE WILLOWS CARAVAN PARK**

Bromholme Lane, Brampton, Huntingdon PE28 4NE

[willowscaravanpark.com](http://willowscaravanpark.com)

**RIVERSIDE CARAVAN AND CAMPING PARK**

21 New River Bank, Littleport, Ely CB7 4TA [riversideccp.co.uk](http://riversideccp.co.uk)

**ALTERNATIVE SITE**

**STROUD HILL PARK** Fen Road, Pidley PE28 3DE

[stroudhillpark.co.uk](http://stroudhillpark.co.uk)

of the town, I settle myself at a table with a pint and a new book. The book, *The Pubs of St Ives* by former Norris Museum curator, Bob Burn-Murdoch, tells the story of St Ives' intoxicating, and intoxicated, past. It is hard to think that this sleepy little town once boasted 120 alehouses and licensed premises. They've been serving beer here at the 'Ollie' since the 1840s.

After an enjoyable afternoon, my time in St Ives ends in an Indian restaurant. It is dark when I cycle back along The Thicket to Houghton Mill.

**The Isle of Ely**

Some would deny that our next halt is in the Ouse Valley at all, preferring instead to say that I'm on the Isle of Ely. If truth be told, they'd be right. Were it not for the fourth Earl of Bedford's cash and Dutch engineer Cornelius Vermuyden's skills, much of the eastern part of Cambridgeshire would remain under water.

The Great Ouse flows unhurriedly to get here. But without the fens being drained in the seventeenth

**ABOVE**  
Houghton Mill

**BELOW** Inside Ely Cathedral's Octagon Tower



century, it would not have the enthusiasm or means to reach the open sea. For centuries the waters flowing from Bedfordshire loitered around here going nowhere, creating a boggy, watery marshland around the Isle of Ely.

Ely, a small city of only 20,000 souls, is dominated by its cathedral. In fact, the landscape, flat but rich in agriculture, is dominated by it for miles around. Once I've left George in the city's all-day free parking (of which the council is rather proud), I climb the hill to its ecclesiastical heart. Little did I know I'd spend most of the day there...

"There has been a place of worship on this site since 630AD, although most of the present cathedral was built by the Normans between 1081 and 1189," says David Mynott, a cathedral tour guide who I meet in the impressive nave.

I warm to David instantly. With his flowing, long, ponytailed grey hair, gingery-white beard, maroon shorts and bright red trainers, he's not your typical guide. But his knowledge and laconic humour bring this beautiful building alive. Imagine my joy when he tells me he's got a VW T4 campervan! Tour guides don't come much better than this.

Though it's a sin not to visit the cathedral, there is far more to Ely. Its attractive waterfront has plenty for the visitor: the Maltings, a multi-use centre consisting of an event venue, cinema and restaurant; a vast antique shop housed in a riverside warehouse; a number of cafés and restaurants; walks in abundance, and an essential riverside pub. For a small place, Ely has much to commend it.

I spend my final evening just a short drive from Ely at the Riverside Caravan Park in Littleport. Over dinner at The Swan (another riverside pub close by), I reflect on what I've seen and learned in the last few days.

Central Cambridgeshire might not be the first place in campers' minds for a long weekend or short break in their campervans, but a visit will heap rewards. Good times and good memories will ooze from this most gentle of valleys.

