

River Great Ouse

The River Great Ouse rises in Northamptonshire and is canoeable from Buckingham. Unfortunately access to most of the river above Bedford is denied by intransigent fishing interests. The present navigation extends from Kempston weir through to the Wash, although few canoeists will want to paddle either the Bedford river sections between Earith and Denver or the Great Ouse beyond Ely. However the river does link with the Little Ouse, the Wissey, the Lark and the Cam, offering touring access to a vast placid water network.

The river is controlled by the Environment Agency who issue the required licence to canoe; BCU membership covers this river and its tributaries except the Cam above Baits Bite Lock, which is administered by the Cam Conservators who issue a separate licence.

The right of navigation on the Great Ouse from Kempston extends to ALL the backwaters; the only problem areas are at St Neots and Offord, where fishing clubs believe (erroneously) that they control the navigation of the backwaters. Paddlers should be aware that the right to navigate does not include the right to access weirs or to encroach within their walls; however, the backwater weirs identified below present no problems and I am not aware that anyone has ever been challenged on them.

The best complete guide to the river system is that published for cruising by Imray Laurie, Norie & Wilson, Ltd. and written by Andrew Hunter Blair of the Great Ouse Boating Association. This has a wealth of useful information on the river and fascinating local historical insights into the local area.

I have summarised the campsites available below.

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| Start at Kempston | 0 miles |
| Great Barford Scout campsite | 10 miles |
| Rush Meadows, Eaton Socon | 17 miles |
| Brampton | 25 miles |
| Houghton Mill | 29 miles |
| Holt Island St Ives (Scouts) | 31 miles |
| Earith | 38 miles |
| Popes Corner | 50 miles |
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Groups will need to use the public campsites that exist along the river, but I have never had any problem camping discreetly with one or two tents or bivvis – settle in around dusk and move on at daybreak and no-one is any the wiser. So much of the Great Ouse runs through remote farmland that you often miles from any habitation.

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| Kempston mill - Grid ref: 024477 From the A5134 Kempston High Street, turn into King William Road and left into River View. At the end is a car park and public toilet. | 0 miles (approx distances along the main river) | Under normal flow, the river here is about 18 inches deep and has the fastest flow of the navigable sections. Between here and Bedford there is very little river traffic, footpaths either side of the river, some pretty sections between trees and open scenery, with houses set back from the river. Sometimes aggressive swans in late Spring. Herons and kingfishers abound. |
| Railway bridge | 2.3 miles | Keep to the river right and watch out for rowers from here through Bedford |
| Bedford Town Centre – Riverside Car Park (free on Sundays) river left, with public toilets. You may launch from pontoon at the Star/Viking boathouse, but be observant of rowers. | 2.5 miles | Under the Town bridge: the right hand arch is best for canoes. |
| Duckmill weir – to the right, a stepped weir, safe to shoot in low /normal water levels if the sluices are closed, but may be fishermen in the pool below. | 2.7 miles | Or continue on past the lock, under the Victorian suspension bridge and just past the next weir. Portage at the disused boat rollers, about 150 yards further on. Once on the lower river, motor craft become more common, especially after Priory Marina at 3.5 miles, in a beautiful wide reach. From here to Gt Barford the scenery is predominantly rural, tree-lined stretches alternate with fields. |
| Cardington Lock – Carpark accessible from the A421 through Priory Business Park, but there have been car break-ins here. | 4.5 miles | Just before the lock the Cardington Artificial Slalom course, river left, provides spectator fun on many weekends. Portage river left just after the lock, a low canoe platform gives an easy launch. |
| Castle Mills Lock – Portage right. | 6 miles | The downstream canoe launch steps were closed awaiting repairs in Sept 2005. |
| The Danish Camp, Willington – hot and cold food, drinks and ice-creams. | 8 miles | Their jetty is often cluttered and hard to use. |
| Willington lock | 8.2 miles | An easy portage right at low platforms or portage the weir on the left at the public footpath |

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| Great Barford – Shops are 1 mile away in the village and the Anchor pub is riverside. There is a scout camp site at Barford. Contact David White on 01234 870837 | 10 miles | Limited parking at roadside by the church. Portage the weir on the left bank at the public picnic area. The section to Roxton lock is particularly pretty and peaceful. |
| Tempsford lock - Portage right but with no easy portage platforms, so a high exit and fences to negotiate. | 12 miles | Shortly after the lock, 'The Anchor' (Tempsford) provides another refreshment opportunity. After the A1 bridges, a long, open reach eventually leads to the Little Barford power station |
| Eaton Socon lock – an easy portage with low platforms. The Mill is a very pleasant pub / restaurant | 16.5 miles | Alternatively at low flows, shoot the side weir into the backwater (river right, under a low footbridge where the river curves left several hundred yards before the lock). |
| Rush Meadows Camp site river right - TL180596 Tel 01480 474404 | 17 miles | A pleasant although sometimes damp campsite, very convenient for an evening paddle to the Mill |
| St Neots – good carpark river left, access through a narrow channel by the boating pond. Ice-creams and other refreshments, toilets. | 17.5 miles | Look out for rowers on the main river and of course motor cruisers! |
| River Kym | 18 miles | The Kym is navigable from Hail Weston and has been regularly paddled in spate from Kimbolton, but beware of the barbed wire! |
| St Neots Paper Mills lock – portage left across the busy B1041 Ideally post a lookout for traffic as the lorries come quite fast and the lines of sight are very poor. | 19 miles | There is a nature reserve on the left, but the main railway line on the right can disturb the peace!. |
| Offord lock – portage right at the lock, across a busy minor road and over a kissing gate. | 22.5 miles | The side weir before the lock is a clean shoot in the centre – there are iron stanchions protruding at the sides of the weir and the landowner (left bank) is very aggressive (Offord anglers) |
| Backwater | 24.3 miles | The side weir (right) can be shot into a quiet backwater which joins the main river above Godmanchester. If you are going to paddle the backwaters, then turn upstream to Brampton lock and then right at the Mill |
| Brampton lock – portage left. There is a campsite in Bromholme Lane, accessible from the backwater behind the Mill. 01480 437566 | 25.5 miles | Just below the lock is Brampton Mill restaurant. If you want to park here and access the river, please ask – and buy a drink! |

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| <p>Godmanchester Lock The portage platform is built onto the brick wall of the old lock, parts of which can still be found on the bank beside the new lock. Or paddle down to the Pool at Godmanchester where there is a small slipway and several pubs and a chip shop, pass under the Chinese bridge and follow the little backwater, get out on the left (just above the old mill sluice) and carry down the steps to the back of Island hall and thus out onto the main river. Turn right onto the main river. Just before the town bridge is the Bridge Hotel; quite posh but does very nice afternoon teas (for open boaters)</p> <p>You'll pass the end of Cooks Backwater on your right and then the end of Brampton backwater on your left before proceeding on the main river under the town bridge.</p> <p>There is a public car park on the left with good access at the rowing club. TL245718</p> | <p>27 miles</p> | <p><u>Backwater route</u></p> <p>At the Mill, turn left and follow the small stream past moored cruisers. After a small bridge, follow the right hand fork (left is Alconbury Brook) You get an excellent view of Hinchinbrooke House (now a school, but formerly one of Oliver Cromwell's residences). This leads you into the woods and a low limbo girder bridge. At summer levels lie down and pass underneath the girder; at high water levels you may need to climb over the girder! After another right fork, you'll hear the sound of rushing water and you'll know that the weirs are ahead. The right hand weir may be shot by short kayaks (it has a concave face) but most people prefer (and open canoes must) go down the left hand weir. It is has a very gentle slope with a small drop at the bottom – usually a scrape. I often get out onto the left hand wall, line the canoe down and then climb down the wall to get back into the canoe – saves boat wear and tear!</p> <p>Follow the meandering backwater through to where it re-joins the main river just above the A14 bridge in Huntingdon. To follow the main river turn left or to navigate Cooks backwater, turn right.</p> |
| <p>On the main river you'll pass under the town bridge and then to Hartford, Hartford church is in a very pretty setting and was regularly visited by William Cowper (poet)</p> <p>There is a small car park here (off Church Lane) with good river access TL255725</p> | | <p><u>Cooks Backwater.</u></p> <p>This is a very pleasant meander with more flow than the main river; the left fork will take you to Hartford church, but carry straight on to where the backwater joins the main river at the very large Harford Marina – turn right downstream. (You will see a small side weir on the right about 100m before the end of the backwater; it is possible to drop over this and bushwhack you way through to Rhymers Pool, but the cut is very overgrown nowadays).</p> |
| <p>Main river paddlers will pass the Three Jolly Butchers landing stage on their left (good beer and excellent food) before approaching <u>Houghton Lock.</u></p> | <p>28.5</p> | <p>Just after Daylock Marine (left – teas and Ices), you'll see a wide weir which drops into Rhymers Pool. If there is any water on it, then kayaks can shoot the middle of the weir which has a very gentle slope</p> |

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| <p>Just to the left of the lock you'll find some disused punt rollers. This is the easiest portage. Do not go down the left stream towards the mill; there can be a very strong current to the sluices there.</p> <p>The Mill is a National trust property; you get the best photo of it from the pool below. There are pubs and shops in Houghton village, about 1/3 mile on your left. There is a nice camp site at Houghton Mill, fronting onto the Mill pool – phone number 01480 466716. They don't like teenage groups!</p> <p>On the way down to Hemingford, don't be tempted by the LH side weir at 289709 which leads to a navigable back water – there can sometimes be a heavy holding stopper with deep recirculation on it.</p> <p>Hemingford Grey church stands right beside the river with a curiously cut off steeple – local legend is that it is in the bottom of the river, although another legend holds that the Devil flew off with the steeple when the incumbent would not damn all Catholics from the pulpit. Believe what you will!</p> | | <p>but a sharp edge at the bottom since recent work. Open canoes are best to line down <u>the far left</u> side of the weir and re-enter. Rhymers Pool is shallow and a very good place to practice your poling technique. Continue through onto a widening backwater which leads you down to Hemingford Abbots.</p> <p>Turn left at the back of the Island, rejoin the main river, and paddle upstream towards Houghton Mill for 200m to find the next backwater on your right, with a small footbridge across it. Slither down – a very small slither! and wend your way down Trout Stream (although I've never seen a trout there!) to where it joins the main river in the pool below Hemingford Lock. (Turn left)</p> |
| <p><u>Hemingford Lock</u>. The upstream landing at Hemingford lock is not as easy as some – quite a high staging, and there is a narrow bridge on the portage but good river access downstream.</p> | <p>30 miles</p> | <p>There is a Scout campsite on Holt Island (just before St Ives) For information email Cromwell@cambridgeshirescouts.org.uk</p> |
| <p>The river widens out as it approaches St Ives.</p> | <p>32 miles</p> | |

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| <p><u>Hermitage Lock</u> Here the Old Bedford and New Bedford rivers take flood water straight through to Denver. The New Bedford is straight, windy and tidal and takes you through to Denver. The only pub is the Three Pickerels in Mepal (6 miles on)</p> <p>Heritage lock is an horrendous portage across a busy road, and the lockkeeper usually locks canoes through to avoid the road.</p> | 39 miles | You may be able to camp at Westview marina tel 01487 841627 in Earith (left bank) and you can certainly get a drink at the Crown, which has a landing stage |
| <p>The river(now called the Old West River) winds on through farmland; very quiet and remote until you arrive at the A10 and the Lazy Otter pub which welcomes paddlers</p> | 47 miles | Access is possible here from the Stretham Ferry bridge just past the pub |
| <p>Stretham Engine (right) is an historic Fenland pumping engine that is often open to the public. Worth a look.</p> | 48 miles | |
| <p>Popes Corner. Junction with the River Cam (Cambridge 13 miles) and a super pub, the Fish and Duck</p> | 50 miles | It may be possible to camp at or near the Marina. tel 01353 649580. |
| <p>Turn left at Popes corner, and Ely Cathedral soon appears. Ely Waterside is always busy; the best places to stop are at the Cutter pub or, if you are linking up with your car, go through the main town, past the marina (right) and to the small park just before the railway bridge. (Willow walk, off Lisle Lane)</p> | 53 miles | |
| <p>Littleport. It is a long straight stretch and the Black Horse is the only respite before the confluence with the Little Ouse at Brandon Creek (13 miles to Brandon; 20 to Thetford)</p> | 59 miles | |
| <p>Brandon Creek. The Ship Inn – and public car par / picnic area</p> | 63 miles | |
| <p>Confluence with R. Wissey</p> | 68 miles | (11 miles to a pretty riverside campsite at Whittington near Stoke Ferry bridge. |

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| <p><u>Denver Sluice</u> The Jenyn Arms is a welcome sight – left bank. There is a public car park straight ahead of you to the right of the main sluice. Please only get on and off at the Jenyn arms if you are buying food / drink there. Denver sluice is a fascinating historical place; worth having a look at.</p> | <p>69 miles</p> | <p>Beyond here the river is tidal with muddy banks and strong currents to Kings Lynn. Not recommended. However, you can paddle through Salters Lode lock and onto Welle creek and thus to the Middle Level and the river Nene – and could find you way back to Northampton!</p> |
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My thanks to Anne Dorber for prodding me into action to write this up and for contributing some up to date information on the river above Huntingdon. Any queries or updates, do please email me david@mepal.co.uk