

The management of wetland archaeology in the East of England's lowland Fens: A field trip to the archaeological Bronze Age site of Flag Fen, Cambridgeshire

As part of the [IUCN UK Peatland Programme](#)'s annual conference on 4th October 2023, 38 peatland specialists from across the UK visited [Flag Fen Archaeology Park](#) in Cambridgeshire. At the heart of the Flag Fen basin, an internationally important Bronze Age landscape, Flag Fen Archaeology Park features part of a stunningly preserved 3,500-year-old timber causeway and platform, Bronze Age boats discovered nearby at the world-famous Must Farm and a museum housing one of the earliest known wooden wheels in England. The exceptional preservation environment created by the surrounding fen peat mean many of the artefacts recovered at Flag Fen are extremely well preserved, providing a hugely important and unique record of Bronze Age life.

The event brought together practitioners, regulators, policy makers and peatland advocates from the natural and historic environment sectors. Representatives from a wide range of organisations including government, statutory bodies, NGOs, academic institutions, the private sector and diverse peatland partnerships were introduced to the archaeology of Flag Fen and nearby Must Farm, gaining an understanding of wetland archaeology and the challenges facing its future preservation and management.



The artificial mere at Flag Fen, which helps to maintain waterlogged conditions across part of the wooden platform and causeway and provides habitat for species including water voles and grass snakes. Credit: Jane Akerman.

Jacqueline Mooney, General Manager at Flag Fen, introduced the site, its current management and future ambitions, and led delegates on a guided tour encompassing the preservation hall, artificial mere, Must Farm boats and Bronze Age roundhouse reconstruction.



Delegates in the preservation hall at Flag Fen, observing an exposed part of the 3,500-year-old causeway preserved in the peat and kept wet by a ceiling-mounted sprinkler system. Credit: Jane Akerman

A series of presentations then highlighted the importance of waterlogged environments such as peat in preserving archaeological remains, creating unique records of human history. There were also great examples of the tools being used to understand and preserve cultural heritage, and how these tools can educate and connect people with the landscapes in which they live.

Mark Knight, Senior Project Officer at Cambridge Archaeology Unit, described the incredible preservation and diversity of remains at Must Farm, where the whole repertoire of daily life has been captured: cooking, eating, building, dressing, sleeping and their associated tools and weapons. Zoe Outram, Historic England Science Advisor (East of England) shared the results of recent Historic England-funded excavations and described the decision-making processes involved in preserving archaeological remains, including the practical and legislative challenges of wetland archaeology. Kate Argyle, Local Heritage Education Manager for Historic England shared her work as part of the Heritage Schools Programme in connecting children with their cultural heritage and understanding landscape change in the fens. Matthew Pluke, Head of Environment and Sustainability (Major Infrastructure) at Anglian Water, discussed their plans to create two new reservoirs in the fens and the challenges of managing water resources at landscape scale for multiple stakeholders and interests.

A final facilitated discussion, led by Historic England's Will Fletcher (Team Leader – Development Advice, East of England), then enabled delegates to explore opportunities for cross-sector working, during which the power of cultural heritage in engaging communities with landscapes and their future management was a key theme. There was clear evidence that the event succeeded in creating new connections between different organisations and sectors, with plans to continue knowledge sharing and conversations around the future management of the fen landscape and its cultural heritage beyond the event itself.



Delegates visit a reconstructed Bronze Age roundhouse, based on the layout of one excavated at Fen Gate.
Credit: Jane Akerman.

Cultural heritage was a key theme at this year's Peatland Programme conference, with representatives from Natural England and Historic England providing a cultural heritage stall, and the conference virtual platforms featuring [key resources and research](#) relevant to peatlands and the historic environment. Hannah Fluck, Senior National Archaeologist for the National Trust, also chaired a workshop on cultural heritage and peat, now available on the Peatland Programme's [YouTube channel](#).



Kat Hopwood-Lewis (HE Senior Advisor (Peatlands)) at Natural England and Zoë Hazell (Senior Palaeoecologist at Historic England) manning the cultural heritage stall at the Peatland Programme conference. Credit: Zoë Hazell.

Following the conference, 76 in-person delegates completed a feedback survey, and of these over one quarter described the field trips as the most useful aspect of the conference. Reasons included "...to get a different perspective on peatland restoration and challenges", "...they provided informal opportunities to speak to others and discuss issues in a way that the formal sessions and workshops did not" and "...facilitated opportunities for discussion".

Going forward, work is continuing to ensure cultural heritage is embedded in the Peatland Programme work plan, building on the knowledge and contacts developed at Flag Fen and the wider conference. This will include improved cultural heritage information and resources on the programme's forthcoming new website and a joint publication on cultural heritage and peat.

The Peatland Programme would like to thank all the speakers and Flag Fen staff who offered their time and expertise, sharing knowledge and experience of cultural heritage from a diverse range of perspectives. Special thanks also to Zoë Hazell (above) for leading the organisation of the event and creating a varied and interesting programme for our delegates.