



# Car Dyke Roman canal

Explore the Car Dyke canal section at Waterbeach and Clayhithe near Horningsea, a walk of approximately 1 km.



Start at car park at Waterbeach recreation ground, off the sports fields

**1** Proceed from here south along the path/track, with fingerpost sign to the Car Dyke Roman canal.

**2** Interpretation board at end of path by kissing gate

You are now standing beside the Car Dyke, a Roman canal that is thought to run for over 120 kms, from the River Cam at Waterbeach all the way to Lincoln. It was constructed in the early 2nd century AD, during the reign of Emperor Hadrian (AD 117-138) and in whose reign the Cambridgeshire Fens were first drained.

Excavations on the Waterbeach section of the dyke in 1997 (by Stephen Macaulay of the Archaeological Field Unit, supported by English Nature and South Cambridgeshire District Council) showed that the ditch is approximately 22m wide and 4m deep. It also confirmed the suggested date for the dyke's construction (early 2nd Century AD) and the date of its abandonment, at the start of the 4th Century AD. This was mostly due to the deteriorating climate and rising water levels in the Fens at this time, coupled with the gradual breakdown of Roman authority.

The excavation also recovered a wooden harpoon and a hob nailed leather sandal. Also of great interest was a pottery kiln built

into the bank of the canal, so pottery could be fired and loaded directly onto waiting barges. The most significant finds were the remains of a timber warehouse that would have stored produce destined for transportation along the dyke and River Cam.

Proceed to the southeast along the north side of the Car Dyke.

**3** Along Car Dyke (past large willows)

The dyke benefits from an ongoing management plan designed by the Wildlife Trust and Cambridgeshire Archaeology, to protect the buried remains while retaining the sites important wildlife habitat. Where the dyke is open there are willows and reeds, while blackthorn, hawthorn and elder are present in the more overgrown areas. Birdlife includes moorhens, coots, finches and thrushes.

The land to the east of the dyke rises slightly and this is all that now remains of the bank that once ran along the side of the canal. Almost 1500 years of agriculture and more specifically the past 100 years of tractor ploughing have levelled it and today what remains is now preserved under the grass strip you are walking on.

Continue south along the side of the Car Dyke, stopping at the area where the canal gets very overgrown.

**4** Cross the Car Dyke, look southwest towards Milton and Cambridge

We don't know what the Romans called the canal as there are no literary references to it; however, there are two possible origins for its current name. Firstly, in the 13th century the dyke was owned by a man of Danish decent called Kari, hence Kari's Dyke or Car Dyke, while in Old English "Car" means overgrown (with marsh, reeds and shrubs) which is very fitting. Finally, the Waterbeach section is also known as the Old Twilade (Old Tillage) which literally means to "load, unload and re-load again". This is a very interesting, as in the medieval period the dyke functioned only as a drain and this name refers to its use as a canal some 1000 years earlier!

Proceed south to the gap in the bushes, there is a small path that crosses Car Dyke and emerges on the other side. Turn left and continue south to where the undergrowth in the ditch thins and you can see south and west (towards Milton and Cambridge).

**5** Southwest side of Car Dyke (looking southwest towards Milton)

Car Dyke isn't the only important archaeological feature in the Waterbeach area - all along the River Cam from Cambridge, past Milton, Horningsea and Waterbeach are extensive Roman settlements and the remains of a very large pottery industry (known as Horningsea ware). These are the settlements whose produce would have been loaded onto barges and shipped up and down the canal.

Walk south to the CLOSED level crossing over the railway - DO NOT ATTEMPT TO CROSS - and look into the hay meadow to the tree line and River Cam beyond.

**6** End of Car Dyke at old railway crossing (Hay Meadow south of railway)

The apparently flat field here is in fact the most important section of the canal, despite the fact you can hardly see it anymore, as this is the place where it joined the River Cam. If you look closely, following the alignment of the ditch to the north across the railway, you can see a faint trace of the canal ditch (darker green) and banks (lighter green).

Return north along the west side of the Car Dyke back to the interpretation board.



Pollarded willows, Car Dyke roman canal