



Explore the Great  
Outdoors

Bedford & Beyond



Wonderful planting at Bedford Park

# Tales of the Riverbank

As it winds its way through the town giving Bedford what has been described as one of the finest riverside settings in England there is little doubt that the River Great Ouse is the jewel in Bedford's crown. Along with its tributaries, the Rivers Cam, Lark, Little Ouse and Wissey, they comprise the major navigation in the Fens and East Anglia, providing about 240 km (150 miles) of navigable waterway, flowing through some of the most unspoiled water environments in Britain.

Bedford owes its origins and continued development to the river since Anglo Saxons times, when timber framed halls were built; earthworks and a stockade sheltered a small settlement; fertile land near the banks of the river was cultivated and a community grew. When bands of invaders arrived; some seized land and stayed, others navigated inland from the Wash establishing trade routes along the way.

Within a century the Kingdom of Mercia had been established and Bedford quietly developed for two hundred years, especially under King Offa, who, legend has it was buried in a chapel on the banks of the river close to the town.

When the Danes invaded, the community was ransacked and pillaged again; King Alfred could not drive the invaders away this time so instead made peace and agreed a boundary line north-east of which the Danes would be left in peace. The boundary ran along the River Great Ouse and through the town; Bedford had become a frontier town. By exploiting its connections with both the English and the Danes, the town grew and prospered once again.

It was close to the banks of the river that Ralf de Tallebosc chose to build a castle soon after the Norman Conquest of 1066. The castle would have consisted of a large mound of earth with a wooden tower on top. In order to build the castle the Normans flattened a large part of the existing Saxon town.

In 1087 William the Conqueror granted the Barony of Bedford to Hugh de Beauchamp who may have enlarged the castle and rebuilt the wooden buildings with stone ones. In 1130 it was recorded that the castle had "a strong and unshakeable keep".

In 1137 King Stephen laid the castle under siege and in 1215 King John sent Falkes de Breaute to attack it as a result of a minor rebellion.

The most famous siege however was the siege of 1224 when Henry III ordered William de Breaute to surrender the castle. The siege lasted for two months. When it was over William de Breaute and eighty men were hung and the castle dismantled. The keep was flattened and the ditch filled in. The mound has been modified and re-used many times over the centuries and its flat top was even used as a bowling green from the 16th Century.

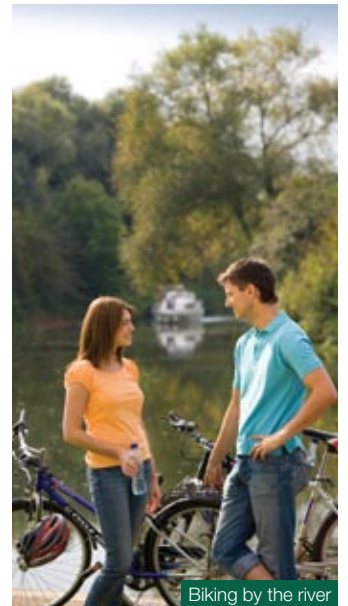
A major restoration of the Castle Mound was completed in 2004, a project which won Highly Commended in the Heritage in Britain Awards. Now visitors can enjoy its green open space and elevated position with sweeping views across the town and along the riverscape.

For centuries the river supplied power to grind corn at Duckmill and Newnham; it provided invaluable trade links as barges could navigate the 74 miles from The Wash and the North Sea, right through to Bedford's heart. It was a place too for spiritual cleansing and John Bunyan himself had his adult baptism in its waters near the town.

The Embankment we see today was created during the Victorian era and it was during this period that it became quite the most fashionable place to promenade; with its tree lined avenues, formal gardens and open meadows, weirs, bridges and ornate bandstand, there is still no place like it for an afternoon stroll or picnic. The restored bandstand in Mill Meadows hosts a summer programme of concerts and family entertainment. See event pages for more details.



A spring scene at The Embankment



Biking by the river



Bedford Park café

With the age of steam and later the motor car, water transport was seen as outdated and many of the locks fell into disrepair during the 19th and early 20th Century. During the 1930s and 50s however interest in preserving these waterways was revived and work began to re-instate the locks. In 1978 the final lock at Castle Mills was completed and the river was once again open to the sea. Bedford's River Festival, held every other year, was established to mark this momentous occasion. The next River Festival will be held in 2010.

Where once the river provided the life-blood for Bedford's trade and industry, it is now a central focus for leisure. With the locks re-instated, pleasure boats navigate on the Great Ouse from the Nene and Cam, whilst associated navigations lead to Kings Lynn and the Wash or through to the Grand Union via Northampton. Boat owners can enjoy overnight mooring at Sovereign Quay close to the town centre, Old Mills, Goldington and Great Barford. Rent a boat and mess about in the shallows of Longholme Boating Lake or enjoy an ice-cream or hot drink at the nearby Lakeside café. For longer boat trips aboard the "Artful Dodger" – for information turn to page 16 and look for Danish Camp Visitor Centre.

The river is haven for wildlife including birds such as moorhen, mallards, swans, grebes and herons. Since lead fishing weights were largely banned in 1987 the population of swans has increased dramatically and the river is now graced with large numbers of these beautiful creatures.

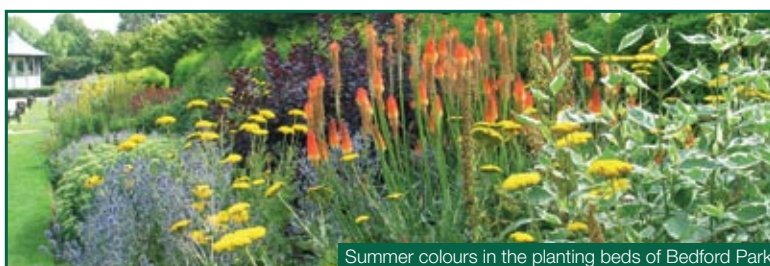
Bedford has a long standing rowing tradition and school and club teams are a regular sight on the river as they complete their daily practice regimes; the commitment required even at beginner's level for competitive rowing is immense, with a minimum 3-4 days training a week for up to 10 months a year. It is thanks to the work and dedication of many club volunteers and enthusiasts that Bedford is considered one of the foremost rowing centres in the country today.

From February through to October the river is host to competitive races including Bedford Regatta in May. When the event was established in 1853 the Regatta drew huge crowds of spectators; young men in their boaters and blazers, ladies with their best hat and parasol converged on the river banks to cheer for their home crews. In sporting terms Bedford Regatta is still by far the largest river regatta in the country. Homespun talents have included the Olympic 'Oarsome Foursome' team member Tim Foster and the winners of the 2004 Oxford/Cambridge Boat Race crew member Basil Dixon, both of whom competed in the Regatta during their school days. See our events pages for a full listing of rowing events.

The river acts as a stage not only for sporting excellence but each year for the Festival of Fire and Light. The river is lit with flares and floating candles and illuminated figures drift along on the water. The festival closes with a firework finale lit from the riverbank or a flotilla on the river itself when the town's Christmas lights are switched on. During the summer too, the river provides a beautiful backdrop for afternoons of musical entertainment when the Music in the Meadows series of bandstand concerts take place at the Victorian bandstand on Mill Meadows. (see out event listings for dates in June, July & August).



Practicing rowers do not disturb Bedford's many swans



Summer colours in the planting beds of Bedford Park



Bedford Regatta has always been a highlight of the social calendar



Castle Mound during Bedford River Festival

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## Bedford & Beyond

### Getting started on the River Great Ouse

**Bedford Rowing Club** provides equipment and training for rowers of all ages. Active social calendar, clubhouse and events throughout the year.  
01234 353183 [www.bedfordrowing.co.uk](http://www.bedfordrowing.co.uk)

**Star Rowing Club** provides equipment and training for rowers of all ages. Active social calendar, clubhouse and events throughout the year.  
01234 212027 [www.starclub-rowing.org](http://www.starclub-rowing.org)

#### Viking Kayak Club

Deserving the reputation as one of the best family clubs in the area the Viking Kayak Club is friendly and has been helping people of all ages and backgrounds get into kayaking and canoeing since 1961. Club membership offers access to tuition, equipment, modern facilities and people to paddle with, whether you fancy slalom, marathon, white water trips away or just having fun on the river. The club also organises a number of spectator events throughout the year; visit their website for details.

0845 094 5783 [www.vikingkayak.co.uk](http://www.vikingkayak.co.uk)  
[membership@vikingkayak.co.uk](mailto:membership@vikingkayak.co.uk)

**Water Ramblers Canoe Club** is a friendly, informal group of paddlers, welcoming anyone at any level or ability. They run regular trips with B.C.U qualified coaches. The emphasis is on fun, whether you prefer flat water, bumpy water, white water or even a bit of bridge jumping. The group meets regularly on Saturdays at 10.30 on the Great Ouse at Harrod Bridge, Bedfordshire.

<http://homepages.tesco.net/~water.ramblers/>  
[water.ramblers@tesco.net](mailto:water.ramblers@tesco.net)

**Bedford Sailing Club** provides water activities including rowing, sailing, canoeing, kayaking and messing around in pedalos; also tuition and events to members from their beautiful tranquil location, nestling on the banks of the Great Ouse in the pretty village of Stevington. Visit their website for more information on their lively and well attended programme of social events throughout the season.

<http://uk.geocities.com/chrisandsue.thornton.t21@btinternet.com/BSC/>

**The Great Ouse Boating Association (GOBA)** represents boaters on the rivers Great Ouse, Cam, Lark, Little Ouse, Wissey and associated East Anglian waterways of England. Established for nearly 50 years, we have over 3000 boating members.

[www.goba.org.uk](http://www.goba.org.uk)

**Bedford Boat Club** is a river cruising club, based in Fenlake, Bedford. Moorings take craft up to 33ft in length.

01234 344884 [jhodgson@rivouse.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:jhodgson@rivouse.fsnet.co.uk)

#### Priory Sailing Club, Priory Country Park

The club provides opportunities for people of all ages to learn and enjoy the fun of sailing. It is also a recognised teaching establishment for windsurfing, kayaking and open canoeing.

01234 271638 [www.priorysc.org.uk](http://www.priorysc.org.uk)

