

This guide is issued by Essex County Council.

You can contact us in a number of ways.

**By telephone:**

01245 437291

**By post:**

Essex County Council  
Public Rights of Way  
Chelmsford CM1 1QH

**By email:**

[pro.w.web@essexcc.gov.uk](mailto:pro.w.web@essexcc.gov.uk)

**or visit our website:**

[www.essexcc.gov.uk](http://www.essexcc.gov.uk)

ISBN No. 1852812508

**Essex County Council – making Essex a better place to live and work.**

The information contained in this document can be made available in alternative formats: large print, Braille, audio tape or on disk. We can also translate this information into other languages.

All the information was accurate at the date of publication

Published June 2005



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

DSO4 436



# Navigation Walks

Along and around the Chelmer and Blackwater



Essex County Council



A view from the navigation

## Introduction

In the heart of Essex, the rivers Chelmer and Blackwater blend into a navigation which flows through the countryside to the sea. Once it provided an economic artery to the town of Chelmsford. Today it gives us the chance to enjoy the gentle farming scenery, the churches, mills and mansions along a living waterway with abundant wildlife from its source to the sea.

To celebrate the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation, Essex County Council has produced a collection of walks on and around the towpath between Chelmsford and Heybridge Basin. The walks range from a gentle stroll on the sea wall to the full 15-mile length of the towpath.

Special thanks go to Dudley Courtman, Eddie Webb and Wendy Russell for their enthusiastic help with this publication.

## Contents

The History of the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation	2
Wendy's story	6
circular walk one <b>Palace walk</b>	9
circular walk two <b>Woodland walk</b>	11
circular walk three <b>Two Rivers walk</b>	13
circular walk four <b>Woodham Walter walk</b>	15
circular walk five <b>Beeleigh and Ulting walk</b>	17
circular walk six <b>Sea Lock walk</b>	21
<b>Wendy's Easter walk</b> The entire towpath	24
Circular walk maps	28
Wendy's Easter walk map	46

## The History of the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation

The first attempts to canalise the river began in earnest in 1677. The landowners and millers of Maldon opposed the navigation, fearing it would mean the loss of tolls on the roads across Danbury Hill and the river, once tamed into a navigation, could result in a reduced water flow (the power source for the mills). The high quality of arable land in the region had led to many corn mills being erected. With few windmills in the area, the watermills held a strong and financially successful position.

As the forests of Essex were cut down areas such as Great Dunmow and Great Waltham were paying five times the rate for coal. In 1793, Lord Petre began the attempt to get a Bill before parliament. Mr Lionel Lucking complained

in his evidence to the House of Commons “that the carriages of the inhabitants of the many parts of the county are obliged to be out for three days to fetch coal which they could do in one if the Navigation were made.” The need for a reasonable transportation system for goods had increased ten fold and after numerous wrangles and opposition from the people of Maldon, the Act was finally passed in 1793 (over 100 years after the first attempt).

Today, the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation is the only navigation still in private hands. All the original powers of the Act remain including the power vested in Justices of the Peace to deport anyone to Australia for acts of criminal damage.



The Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation has a highly respectable architectural pedigree. The navigation was designed by the canal architect John Rennie (1761-1821).

Rennie was famous for the construction of the Kennet and Avon Canal between Bristol and London. He had total confidence in his resident engineer, Richard Coates, who had previously worked on the Ipswich to Stowmarket Navigation. He brought many of his navigators (navvies) with him from Suffolk to work on the Chelmer and Blackwater.

After building the navigation, Coates' association with Chelmsford endured as he established the timber business at Chelmsford wharf and later the Chelmsford Gas Company. As the businesses flourished, Coates established the National Church School at Springfield and restored the church there, where he was



Heybridge Basin

There are twelve locks along the route which are situated approximately 1 mile apart, except for the 3 mile section called the Long Pond at Heybridge Basin. Originally, Thames barges would sail into the sea lock at Heybridge to unload. Later, when the sea lock was extended, Baltic ships brought in wood from Scandinavia, which was unloaded into lighters (shallow open boats) for transportation to Chelmsford.

All of the working boats on the navigation were lighters, used for the transport of goods. The original horse-drawn lighters had twin rudders to assist steering.

This was necessary due to the exceptionally low draft of only 2ft of water. No other navigation functioned in such shallow water. Cargo was mainly wood, coal, lime, manure, wheat and sugar beet. The barges were often named after the wives of the navigation men or a particular event in their lives. There were no families actually living on the navigation, although many local people were not only bound by the waterway, but also intermingled in marriage.

Horses hauled the barges along the towpath to Paper mill lock where they were watered and rested up for the night. This was the halfway point and represented a day's work for the canal horse. All breeds of heavy horse were used on the canal. The last horse to work on the navigation was Chelmsford Duke which belonged to the Chelmer and

Blackwater Navigation Co in the 1950's. The Navigation is full of history, wildlife and enjoyment. Today there are many people actively involved in making sure it is maintained for future generations.

The Chelmer Canal Trust is a charity which is actively involved in the preservation and recreational use of the waterway. New members are always welcome. For more information visit [www.chelmercanaltrust.co.uk](http://www.chelmercanaltrust.co.uk)



A view from the navigation

## Wendy's story

The people of the navigation did not seem to stray very far. Wendy Russell, the former water bailiff, recalls memories of her family who have lived and worked on the navigation for generations.

Wendy's grandfather William King and his brother George's family came from Sandford mill on the navigation. William and George worked on the river for over 40 years.



Goods transport before container lorries!



'Kings' mill lock at Little Baddow



Wendy's father the water bailiff

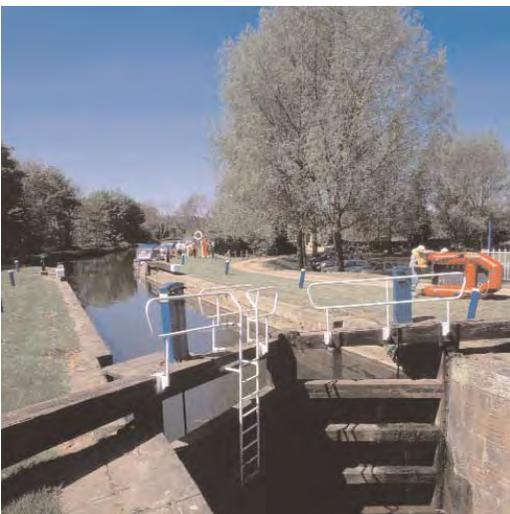
When William married Matilda in 1896, they moved to Little Baddow mill. William ran the coal yard whilst Matilda ran the tea room and the shop where she kept the eel traps and jellied the eels for sale. She also hired out the rowing boats to visitors and helped her husband load the coal deliveries in the mornings. When she was not doing that, she brought up nine children!

Because of this long association with the family, Little Baddow mill is also known locally as 'Kings' mill.

Eva King, William and Matilda's seventh child married Ernie in 1933. They moved to Hoe mill in 1937.

Ernie worked for Southend Water Company at the Langford Works and was the water bailiff for Chelmsford Angling Club all his working life, apart from a short spell in reserved occupation building motor torpedo boats at Sadds Timber Yard of Maldon.

Wendy was their only child and grew up at Hoe mill where she carried on the family tradition of water bailiff until 1980. Wendy's mother continued to live at the mill until 1981.



Hoe mill lock

In the 1830s Hugh Constable, brother of John Constable the Suffolk artist, lived at Hoe mill. John Constable was a familiar visitor to the Chelmer and Blackwater. Descendants of the family lived in the area until the 1950s. His fascination with rivers, mills, locks and boat building is a valuable source of information for industrial archaeologists, as well as admirers of his artistic talent.

Hugh Constable took a five year honeymoon on the Grand Tour during which his daughter, Arowinowa Constable, was born. Years later she painted a picture of her home at Hoe mill. The little watercolour is still with Wendy's family today.

The final walk in the collection is dedicated to Wendy.

## Palace walk

see maps on pages 28-31



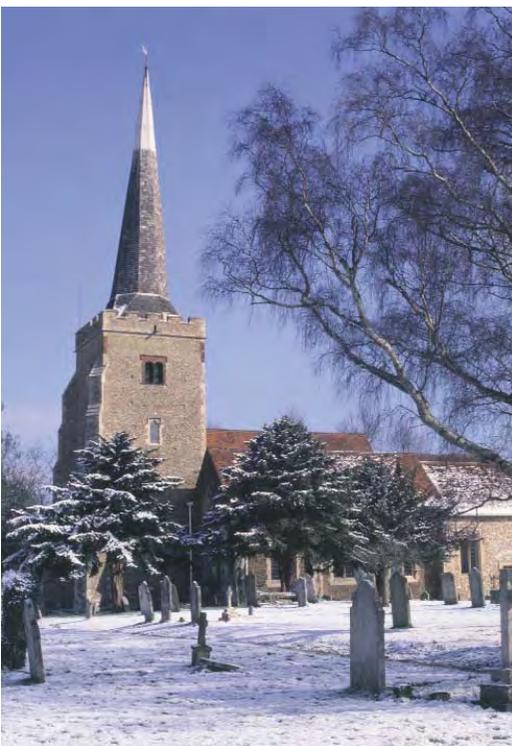
Danbury Palace built in 1832

The village of Danbury is full of open spaces and plenty of history. The walk takes you through the country park and affords views of Danbury Palace. Built in 1832 it is an example of Tudor Gothic, the Victorians' love affair with the architecture of the past. At one time it was the residence of the Bishops of Rochester and hence acquired the title of palace. In the Second World

War it became a maternity hospital for women from London's East End escaping the blitz. When the war ended local women also had their babies at the palace. Today it is a training and conference centre.

The church at Danbury is well worth a visit and both the stories of the Devil and the Pickled Knight are well documented. It is the last resting-place of the St Cleres family whose former home you will pass (St Cleres Hall). In the church are wooden effigies honouring knights dating back to 1300. In 1779 a coffin of an unknown knight was opened and the corpse was found lying in a pickling fluid not unlike mushroom ketchup according to a Mr T. White who took it upon himself to taste it!

The other story unfolds with the devil entering the church disguised as a monk and the wind tearing the church roof off at that very moment. The devil is supposed to have returned to steal a bell from the tower, but later dropped it on what is now Bell Hill, where it was believed to be buried.



Danbury Church

On Corpus Christie daie at evensong time, the devill (as was thought) appeared in a towne in Essex called Danburie, entring the church in likeness of a greie friar, behaving himself verie outrageouslie, plaieng his parts like a devill indeed so the parishioners were put in a marvellous fight.”

Holinshead Chronicles of 1402

There is a chance to visit Little Baddow Church and the fruit farm on this walk. Where the bridleway meets the road junction at Little Baddow Hall take a moment to enjoy the view of the grounds at Riffhams. The house was built in 1817 by John Spencer-Phillips. We are the beneficiaries of his foresight; those who planted the trees could only imagine the beauty of the mature landscape.

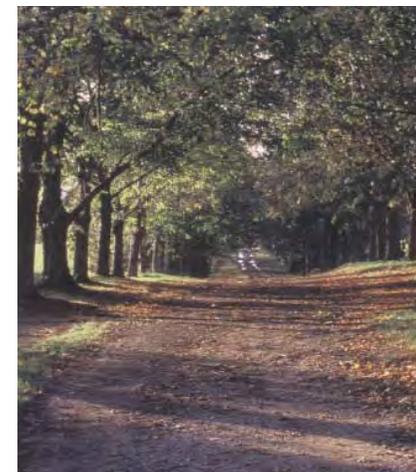


Springtime brings a carpet of bluebells. In early summer the quiet glades are the nightingale's auditorium. In autumn, blazing colours warm us before the dark days of winter.

## Woodland walk

see map on pages 32-33

In verdant spring or on autumnal days this walk warms the senses with the evocative scents and scenery of the woodland. Blakes Wood is owned by the National Trust. Traditionally coppiced sweet chestnut and hornbeam can be seen here. You can walk through woodland untouched since the storms of 1987 and see how nature regenerates itself on the forest floor.



Graces Walk

The tree-lined avenue beside Great Graces Farm crosses Sandon Brook. In 1615 Alice Mildmay came to Great Graces as a child bride. Following her wedding Alice drowned herself in the brook 'by reason of her husband's unkindness' and her ghost is said to walk by the bridge. A local clergyman turned this real event into a novel entitled 'Graces Walk'.

Waterhall Meadows alongside Sandon Brook is managed for the benefit of wildlife and visitors by Essex Wildlife Trust. The spring brings the cowslips and the summer brings a carpet of lady's bedstraw.

Away from the village, it would be worth your while to stop at St Mary's Church in Little Baddow. Look inside at the elegant and beautifully carved oak effigies set in stone recesses, dating from 1330 and the wall painting of St Christopher of 1375. The calming aura of this simple little church cannot fail to touch you. Behind the church is St Mary's Garden, planted with flowers and shrubs with heavenly connotations.



Oak effigies, Little Baddow Church

Holybred is an attractive woodland along the route that deserves a mention. It was once attached to Holybreds Farm. In the 16th century the farm was given to baking bread and brewing ale which was sold for the benefit of the church or 'parish funds'. Hence 'Holybreads', the bakes and brews were sold for feast days held in the church. It must have proved too popular, for it was stopped by the Church Ales Act in 1603.

## Two rivers walk

see maps on pages 34-37

The River Ter joins the Chelmer along this stretch of the navigation. Along the riverbanks you will regularly see tall willows. Unlike the weeping willow we associate with the riverbank, this species is a crop. After careful management these trees are harvested to produce some of the finest cricket bats in the country. The waterways provide the ideal growing conditions for strong straight timber.

These ideal growing conditions are a mixed blessing. The navigation has been invaded by the floating pennywort which insists on growing in abundance despite all efforts to eradicate it. This exotic plant is a native of South America and has made its way inadvertently into the river via a garden pond.

It grows so well it chokes up the waterway and has to be removed because it overwhelms native plants and animals, stops recreational use and becomes a health and safety hazard when dogs and children try to walk on it.



This walk can be halved if preferred as it follows a figure of eight, crossing at Paper mill lock. Mills have been recorded on this site from as early as 1272. Originally a corn mill, it was believed to have been converted to paper making in 1679. At one time there were two mills on the central island, one grinding corn and one making rags into pulp for paper making.

Paper mill lock was the halfway house for bargees and their horses. The Heybridge men would come upstream and the Chelmsford men downstream. They would sleep in the bothy (bunkhouse) and stable their horses overnight. Such was the rivalry between the two groups that fights regularly broke out and another bothy had to be built on the other side of the river to separate them!

In summertime the stables are open as a tearoom.



Upstream at Paper mill lock in winter

## Woodham Walter walk

see map on pages 38-39



Woodham Walter Common

A walk around Woodham Walter offers scenic views. The Danbury Ridge (a gravel covered plateau) contains a few small pockets of Essex heathland. Woodham Walter Common, Blakes Wood and Lingwood Common are also heathland sites on the ridge complex which are actively managed. This management is needed to prevent succession (the dominance of species which will eventually take over and turn the landscape to woodland).

Woodham Walter Common is managed by controlling bracken and encouraging low growing heathland species such as ling heather. This purple carpet in open glades in the woodland is a welcome change in the landscape. The colour intensifies in summer and autumn as the rowan trees begin to fruit.

The area is popular with wildflower enthusiasts. In spring it is possible to view a wealth of species on the Danbury Ridge such as Lily of the Valley, Yellow Archangel and the Greater Butterfly Orchid, as well as favourites such as the Bluebell and the Wood Anemone.

This is golfing country with two courses in the area affording views of open landscape.

The scenery of the Chelmer Valley can be viewed near Gibbs House on the Little



The Cats on Blue Mill Lane

Baddow Road and along the footpath leading to Retreat Farm on Bassetts Lane.

A stream runs alongside the house at Blue mill with its impressive manicured sunken lawn. In the past, this was a site of watercress beds. Across the road the stream runs along a delightful wooded lane. The course of the stream is constantly changing here so be prepared!

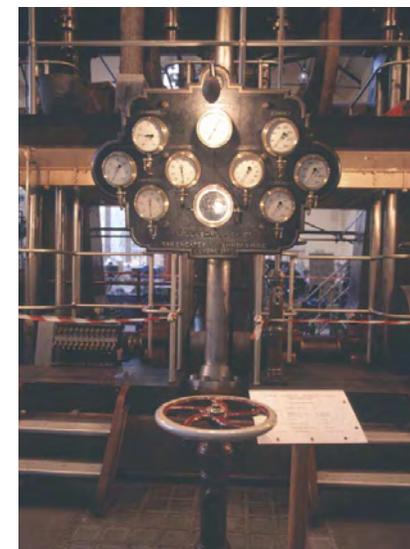
The village is well served for pubs, but if you prefer your picnic take it to Hoe mill.

## Beeleigh and Ulting walk

see maps on pages 40-43

A feast of features awaits you in this walk, beginning at the Museum of Power with its original steam driven pumps. Both the building and the engines are now Scheduled Ancient Monuments. Open to the public every day except Monday and run by volunteers. You have the chance to admire the magnificent steam engines that pumped the water supply to Southend-on-Sea from the River Blackwater. The work of the museum involves exhibitions and demonstrations of all types of power and movement. The museum is always looking for volunteers for restoration and general help. You may park there if you are walking, but check first with the staff.

The beautiful Beeleigh Falls are one of the best kept secrets of Essex.



Langford steam pumps

The weir system controls the point where the Rivers Chelmer and Blackwater meet the sea. Below the weirs the river is tidal and the brackish water provides a valuable reed bed habitat. Above the weir the fresh water is perfect for Kingfishers who can often be seen in the area.



Beeleigh Falls in flood

The remains of Beeleigh mill can be seen next to Beeleigh Falls House. In 1875 the five-storey building was destroyed in a fire that could be seen from Chelmsford and Colchester. The flow of the Chelmer ran underneath the mill in those days as barges with grain pulled up to unload their cargo. The milling gear, Wentworth steam engine and 'Elephant' boiler are still intact. Viewing details can be found at the nearby museum. The lovely Beeleigh Falls House with its wrought iron veranda conjures up images of a more genteel age.

It is a worthwhile detour to catch a glimpse of the 13th century Beeleigh Abbey, home of the late Christina Foyle of the world renowned Foyles Bookshop. The Abbey was founded in 1180 although most of the remains are 13th century. The Abbey is not currently open to the public but can be viewed from the footpath.



Beeleigh Abbey

Follow the gentle landscape of the Chelmer through fields and woodlands to Hoe Mill Bridge taking time to watch the activity at the lock.



Ulting Church

Ulting Church is set exquisitely on the bank of the navigation. Built in the 13th century the little church was restored in 1873. Only accessible on foot from the village, this is a Grade II listed building.

The extensive restoration of the church occurred in a period of ecclesiastical and spiritual revival inspired by the romantic movement. During this time many new churches were built imitating the Gothic style and many original examples benefited from renewed interest.

You could be forgiven for passing by the little gravestones in this churchyard when taking in the beauty of the surroundings. Weathered and almost lost are a few touching poems of remembrance from around 1800.

*She that lies here we hope at rest,  
With her infant at her brest,  
A loving wife and mother dear,  
Such was she that lieth here*

*Husband and children be content,  
for unto you I was but lent,  
My debt is paid my grave to see,  
Wait but a while and you'll follow me.*

*A daughter dear lies sleeping here,  
To keep us fresh in mind,  
For die we must and turn to dust,  
And leave this world behind.*



Ulting Church graveyard

Notice the little carved mouse on the lychgate and the ornate cast ironwork on the grave of John Sampson Piggott (died 1877 aged 31). His family were major contributors to the restoration of the church.



Ulting Church lychgate

Four little houses known as Sugar Baker's Cottages nestle close to the water by the old pipeline across the river. Nothing remains today except the name, but in 1832 it was the site of a courageous attempt to begin a new industry by producing sugar from sugar beet.

In the 1800s all of Britain's sugar came from the West Indian colonies and slavery was the cornerstone of the West Indian sugar trade. Robert Marriage, a devout Quaker, attempted to develop the new process, not in competition with the cane industry but in opposition to slavery. Complainants convinced Parliament that the new process could destabilise the social order and it was heavily taxed, which sadly contributed to its failure. Ironically in less than 200 years the majority of the UK sugar supply comes from East Anglian sugar beet.

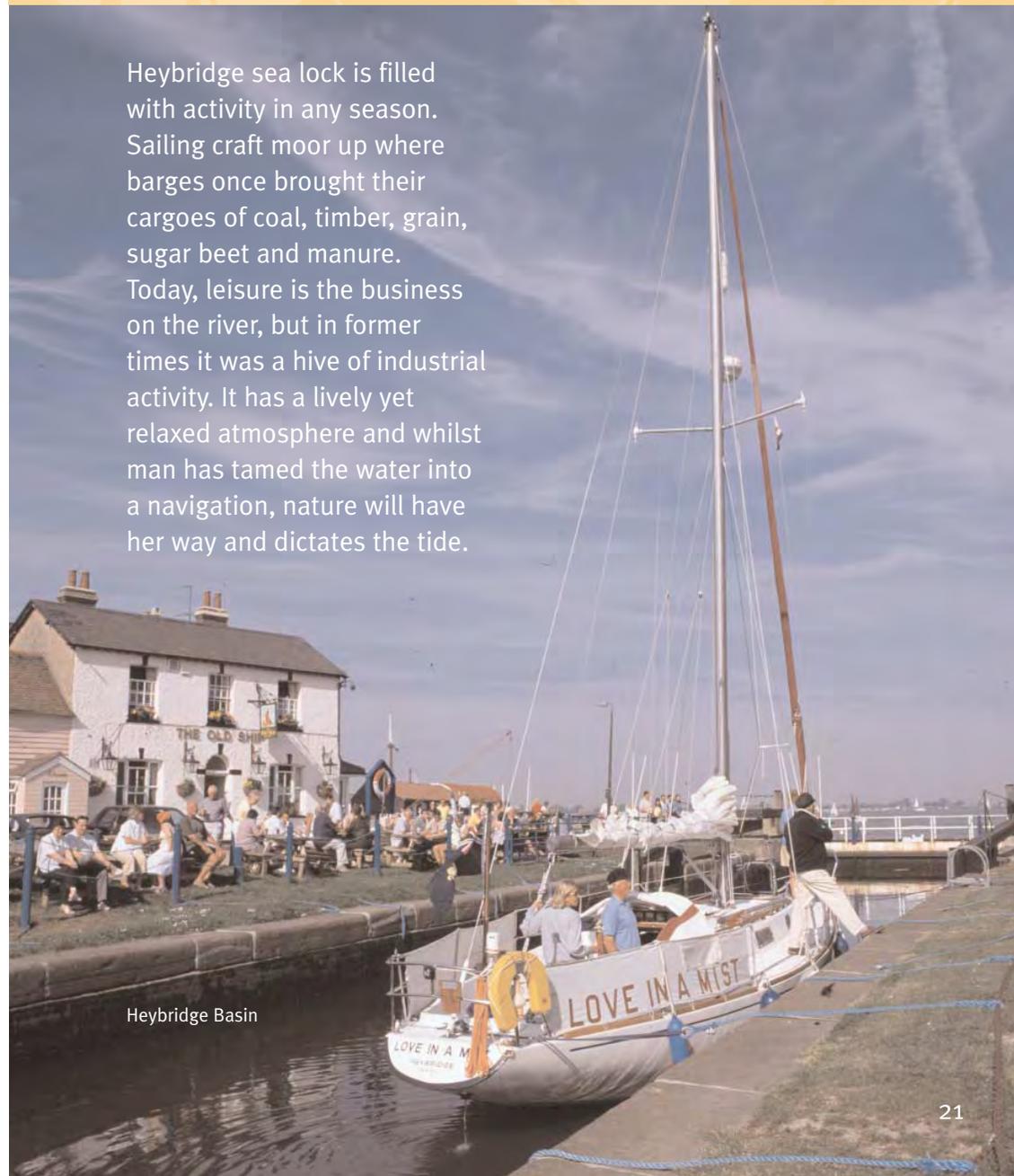


Ulting Wick Bridge

## Sea Lock walk

see map on pages 44-45

Heybridge sea lock is filled with activity in any season. Sailing craft moor up where barges once brought their cargoes of coal, timber, grain, sugar beet and manure. Today, leisure is the business on the river, but in former times it was a hive of industrial activity. It has a lively yet relaxed atmosphere and whilst man has tamed the water into a navigation, nature will have her way and dictates the tide.



Heybridge Basin

Wander along the sea wall and breathe in the fresh salt marsh air. Depending on the season you may see common tern, oystercatchers, redshanks, shelducks, swifts and swallows. In the colder months the estuary is alive with overwintering birds. In summertime the sea wall blossoms with mallow, bindweed, gorse and broom. Look across the water to Maldon where the Thames barges are moored. It is often possible to see one in full sail.

Joining the navigation again and walking back along the towpath you will pass the cemetery. Although it is no longer used today, there is a special gate in the Heybridge cemetery where the funeral procession barges stopped along the navigation.

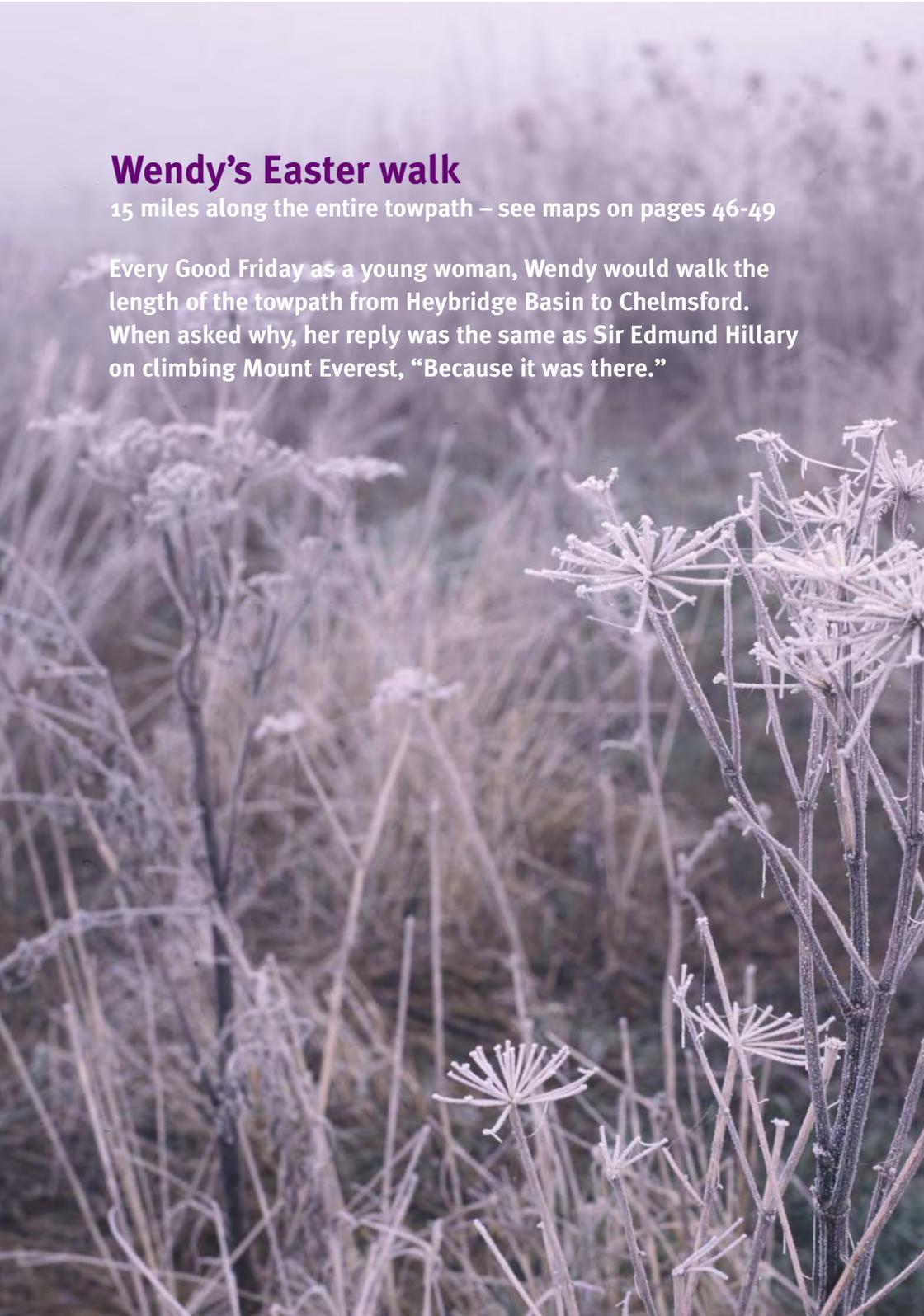
On the navigation there is a contrast in the ecology where fresh water supports iris, astilbes, king cups, comfrey, marjoram and water mint.

In summertime, terns swoop to snatch a fish, whilst martins scoop up insects in flight. Dragonflies and damselflies hover like iridescent jewels.

Returning to the sea lock where the ropes and halyards clink on the sailing boats, you might visit the local pubs or café, all of which are popular meeting places for mariners. In the days of the working navigation, the clogs of visiting Dutch sailors were a common sight outside the pubs.

Irises on the banks of the navigation





## Wendy's Easter walk

15 miles along the entire towpath – see maps on pages 46-49

Every Good Friday as a young woman, Wendy would walk the length of the towpath from Heybridge Basin to Chelmsford. When asked why, her reply was the same as Sir Edmund Hillary on climbing Mount Everest, “Because it was there.”

This is an all day bracing walk following the whole length of the towpath from Chelmsford to Heybridge Basin. A bus service runs hourly (check timetables) that will return you to Chelmsford. It is about a mile between locks except the final one between Beeleigh and Heybridge which is 3 miles and known as the ‘Long Pond.’

Begin at Springfield Basin, the original site of the timber yard owned by Richard Coates the engineer of the navigation. From here, follow Wharf Road running beside the navigation to Springfield Lock, cross the original old bridge and follow the towpath to the water meadows under the flyover passing the new Essex Records Office on your left. Follow the towpath passing Barns, Sandford and Cuton locks and then to Stonham's lock with views of Danbury Ridge on your right.

The next stop is Little Baddow (Kings) lock and then on to Paper mill lock, home of the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation.

This is a popular spot for anglers and pleasure boats with a tea shop to visit in summer. The towpath follows the open countryside of the Chelmer valley to Hoe mill lock. This is another popular place for boating.

The next lock along the route is Ricketts lock close to the Sugar Bakers Cottages, the site of the first sugar beet processing factory in this country. The navigation is particularly beautiful along this section and it has changed little in 200 years. Follow the path under the pipeline which was originally installed by the Southend Water Company to carry water from the Chelmer. This supplied the people of Southend on Sea with water in the days before Hanningfield Reservoir was constructed.



Maldon views from Beeleigh

Some of the land at Beeleigh belongs to the Essex and Suffolk Water Authority. The Museum of Power at Langford contains the original steam pumps.

At Langford the route crosses the weir at Beeleigh Falls and follows the boundary of Maldon golf club. The weir is a particularly beautiful spot and no excuse is needed to linger a while. There will be a chance to visit Beeleigh again on another walk.

The last lock before Heybridge Basin is the Long Pond. Along the towpath, the walk passes the former ironworks of Bentalls. At the turn of the last century every East Anglian farm owned a piece of agricultural machinery bearing their name. From here, make your way to the sea lock at Heybridge Basin.

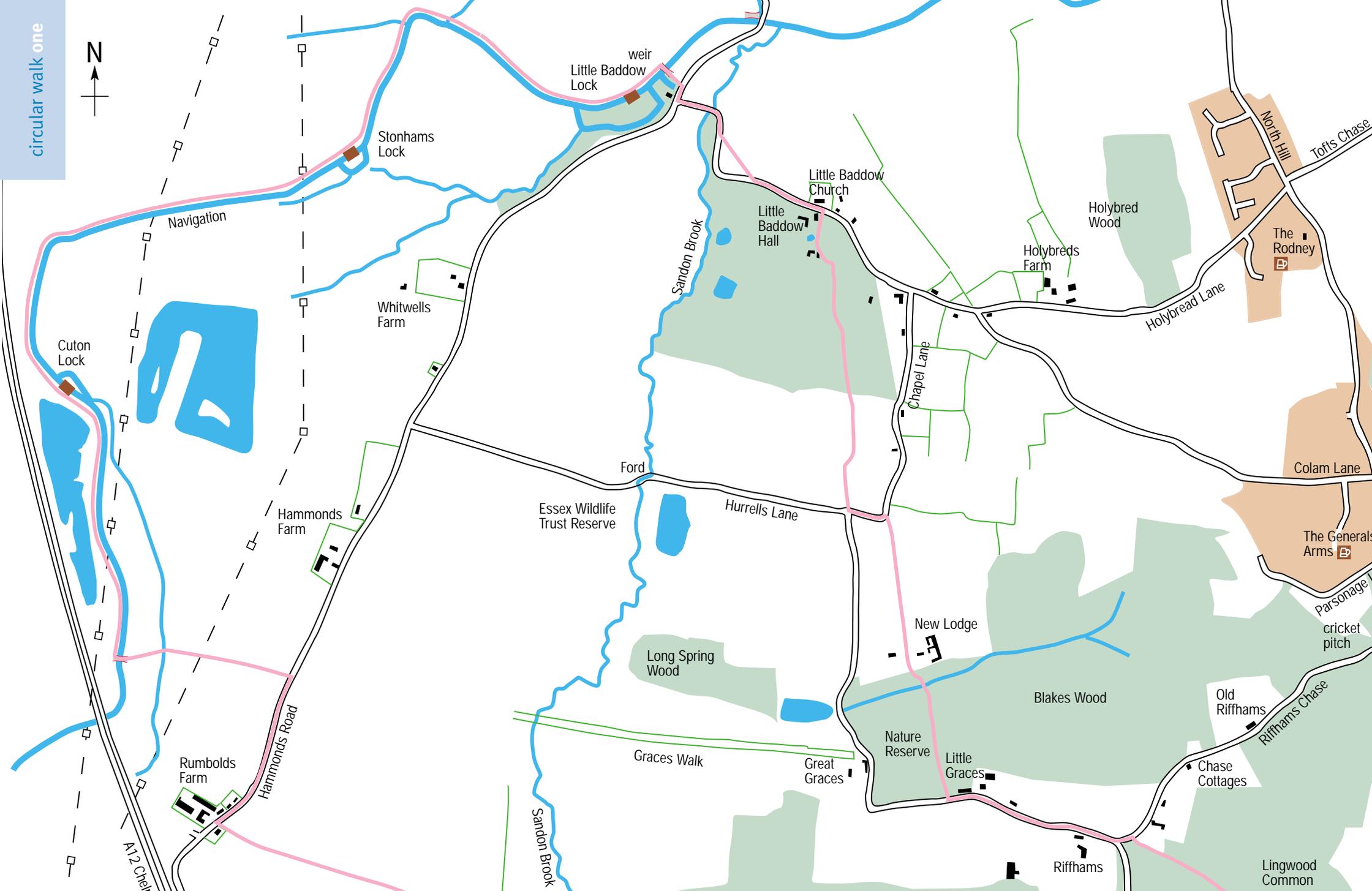
Imagine setting out at first light from here as the canal men did in days gone by. The horses would wear sacking on their feet to avoid waking the locals.

Thames barges would sail into the sea lock to load and unload. Today it is leisure craft and in the summertime you can see the lock working at high tide.

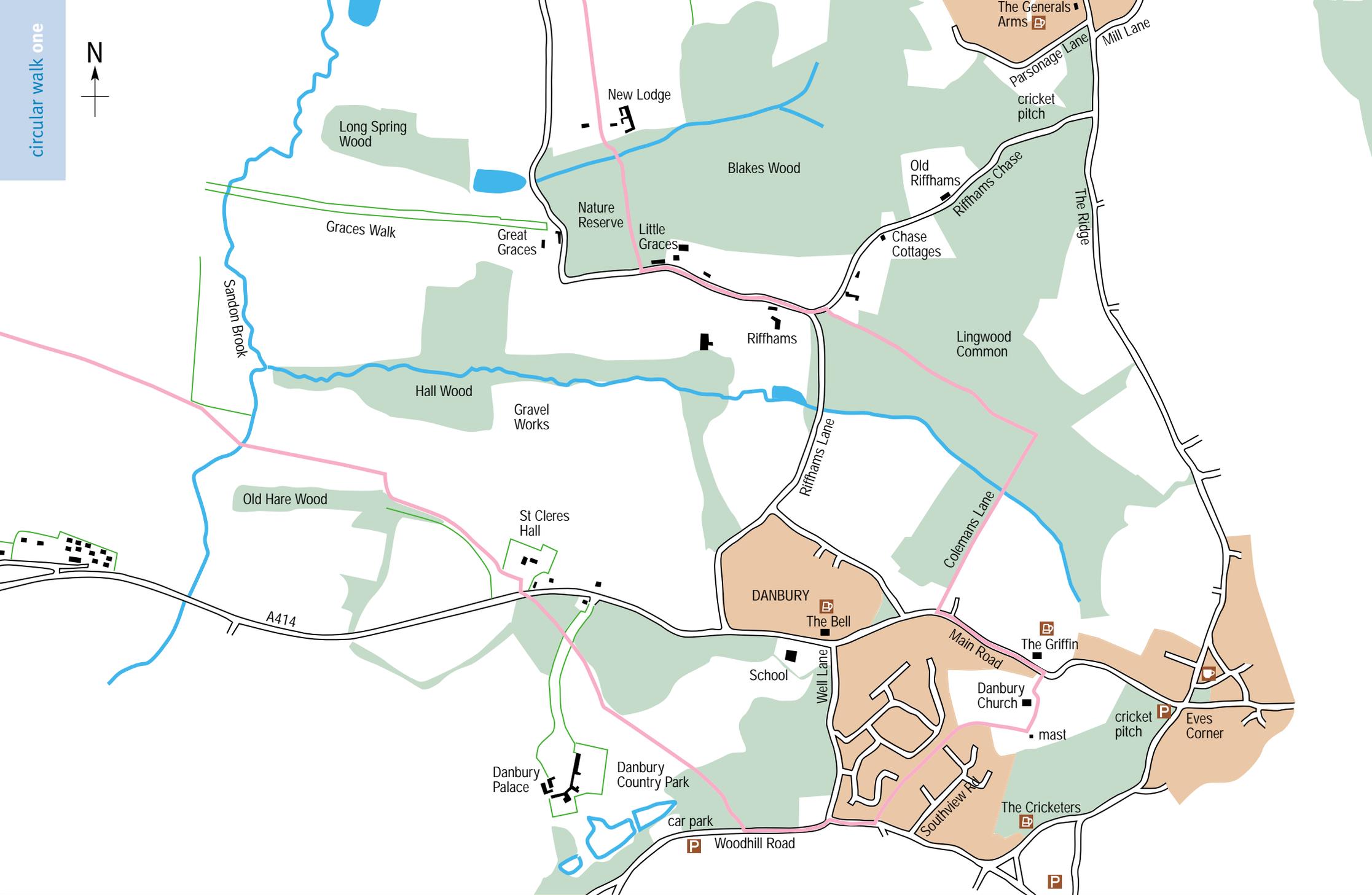


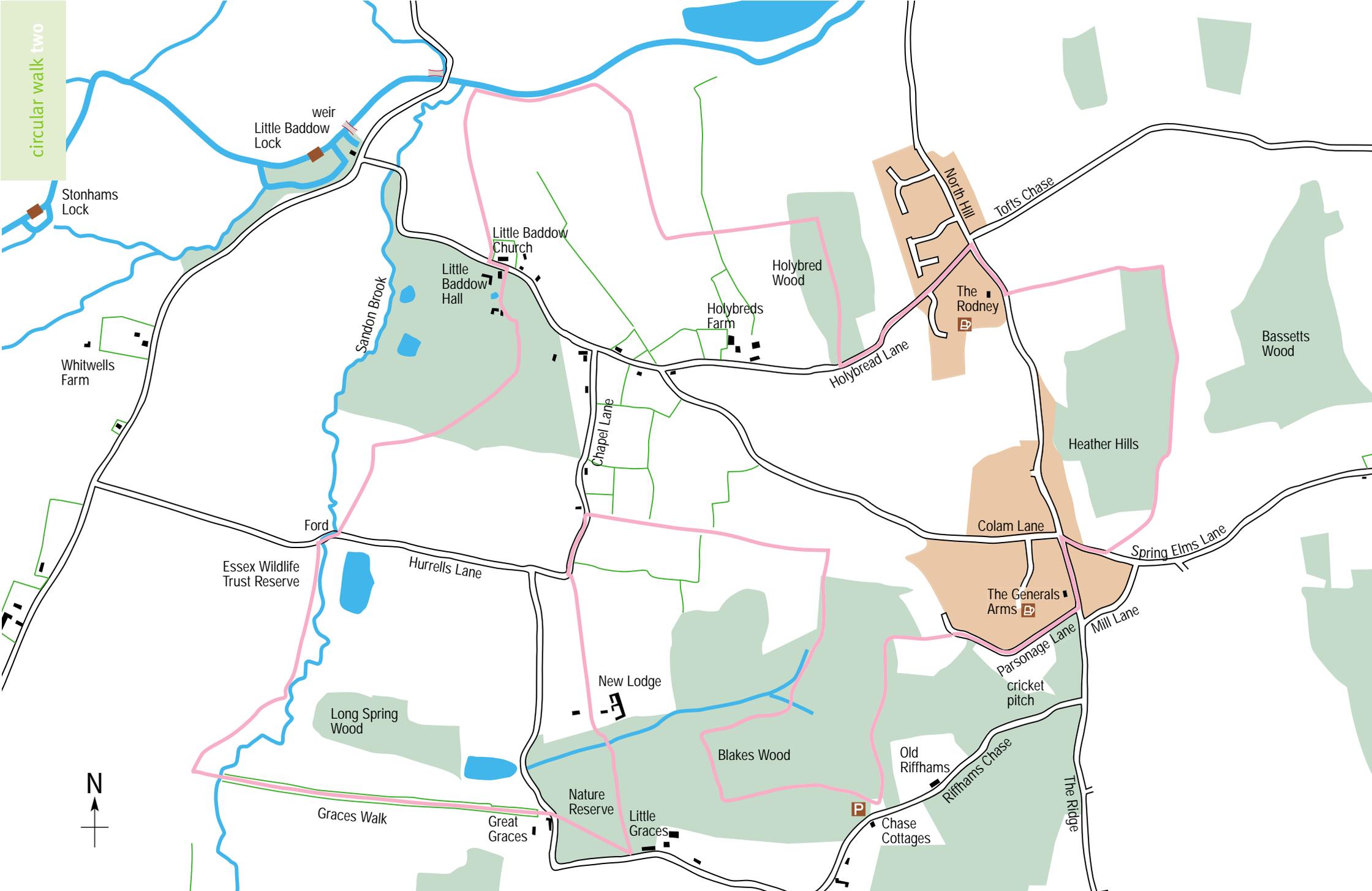
Thames Barges

Enjoy well earned refreshments at the local pubs or cafe and take in the views of the estuary before you journey home.



# Palace walk

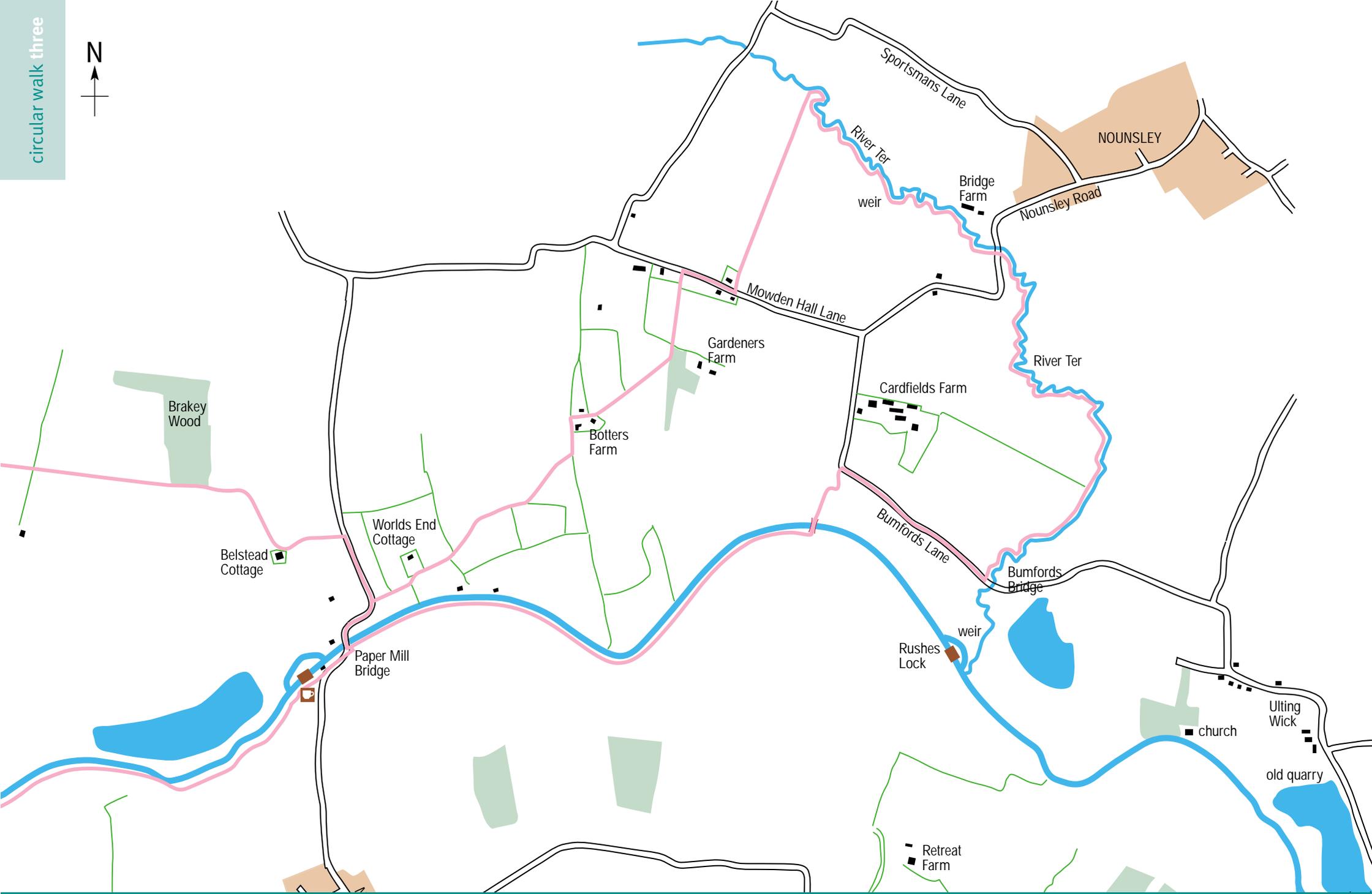




# Woodland walk

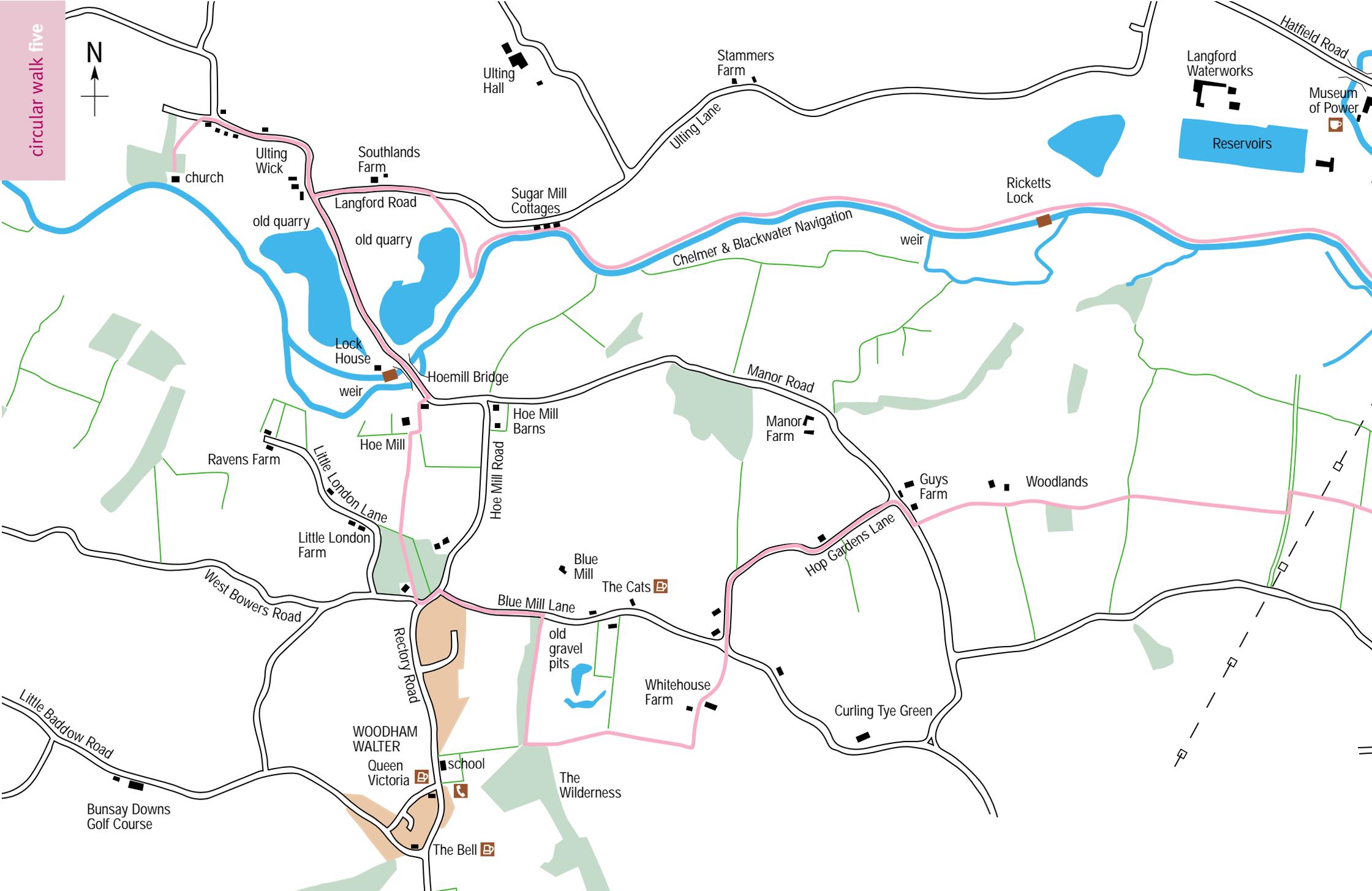


# Two rivers walk

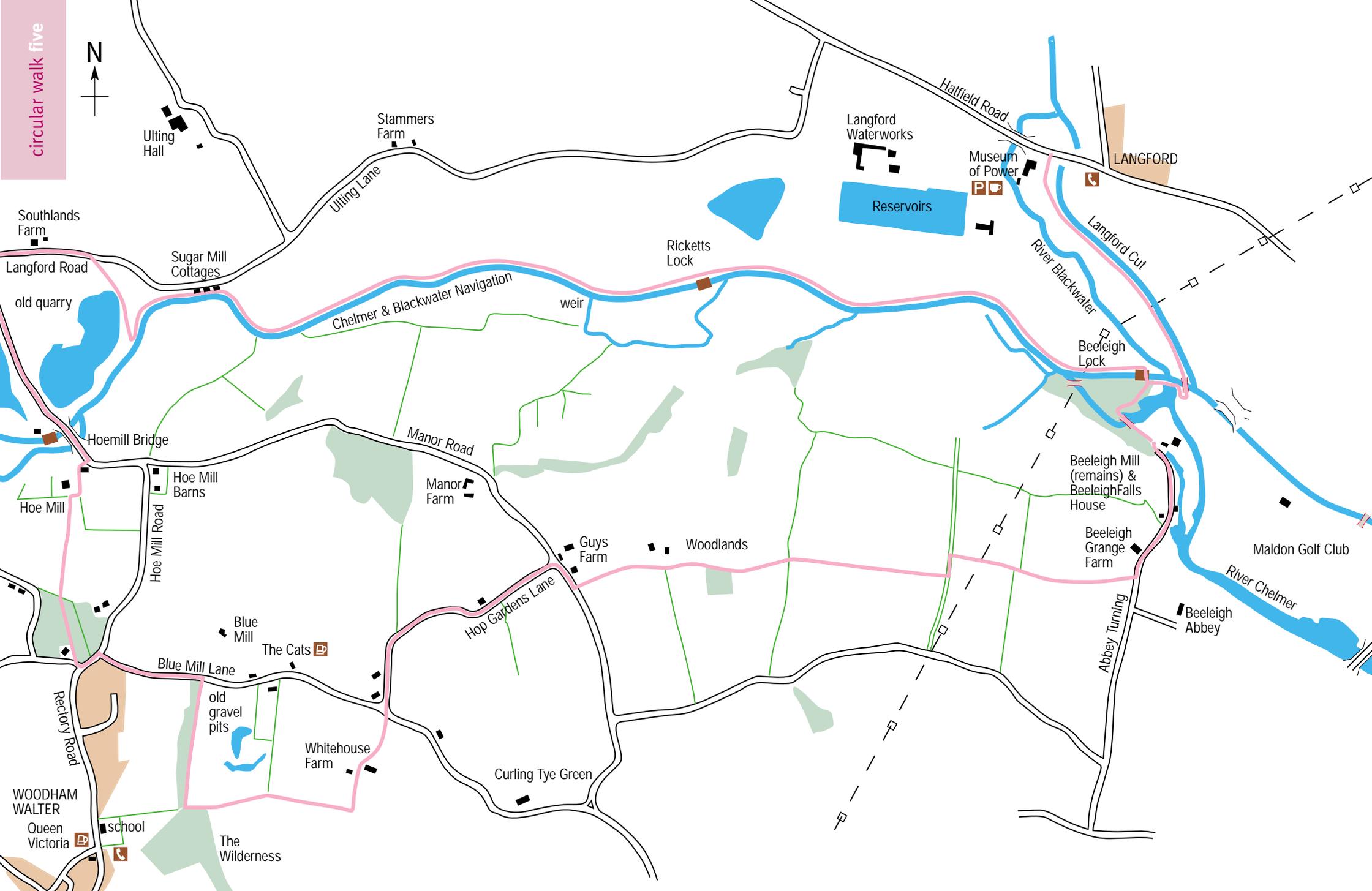




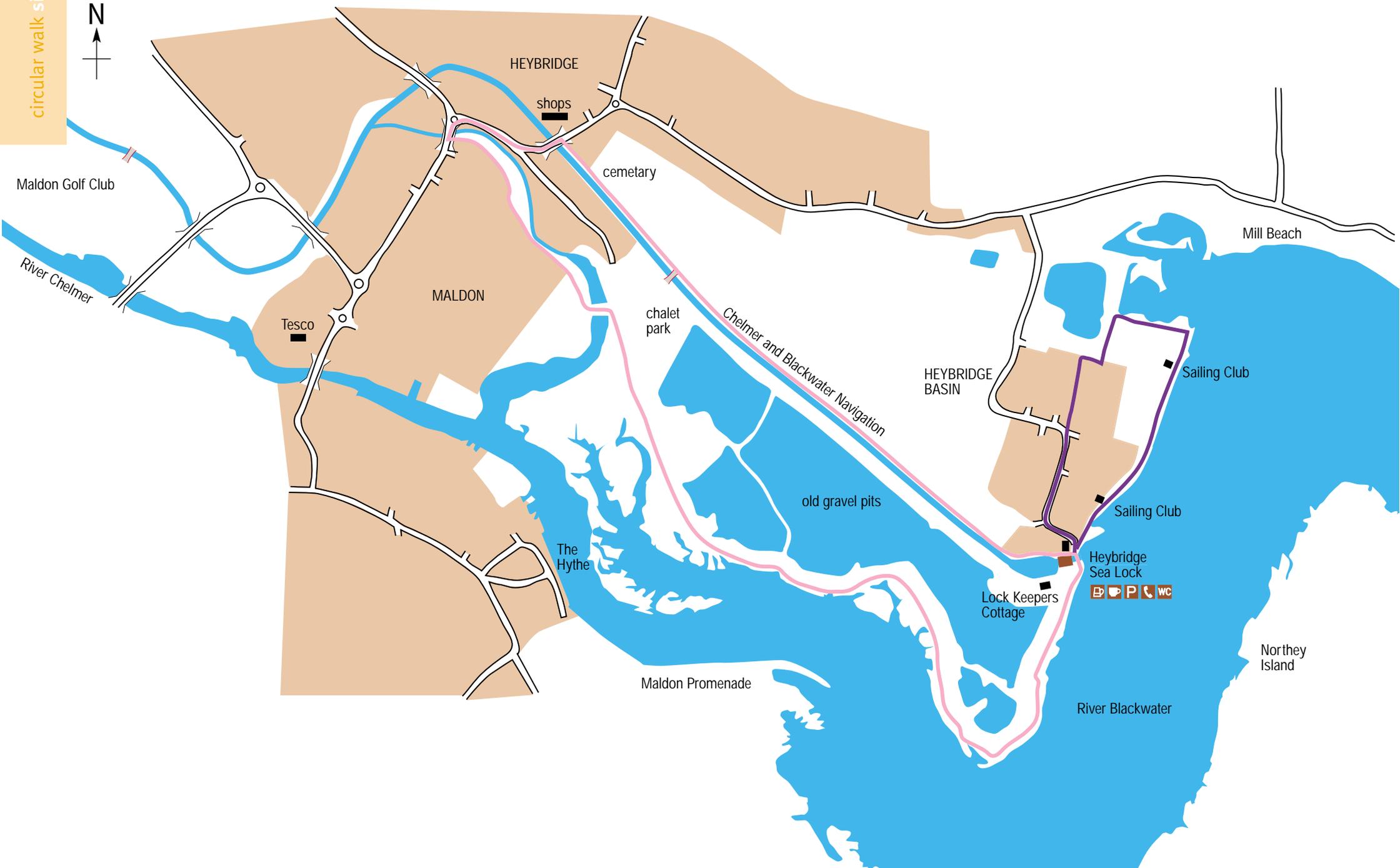
# Woodham Walter walk



# Beeleigh and Ulting walk

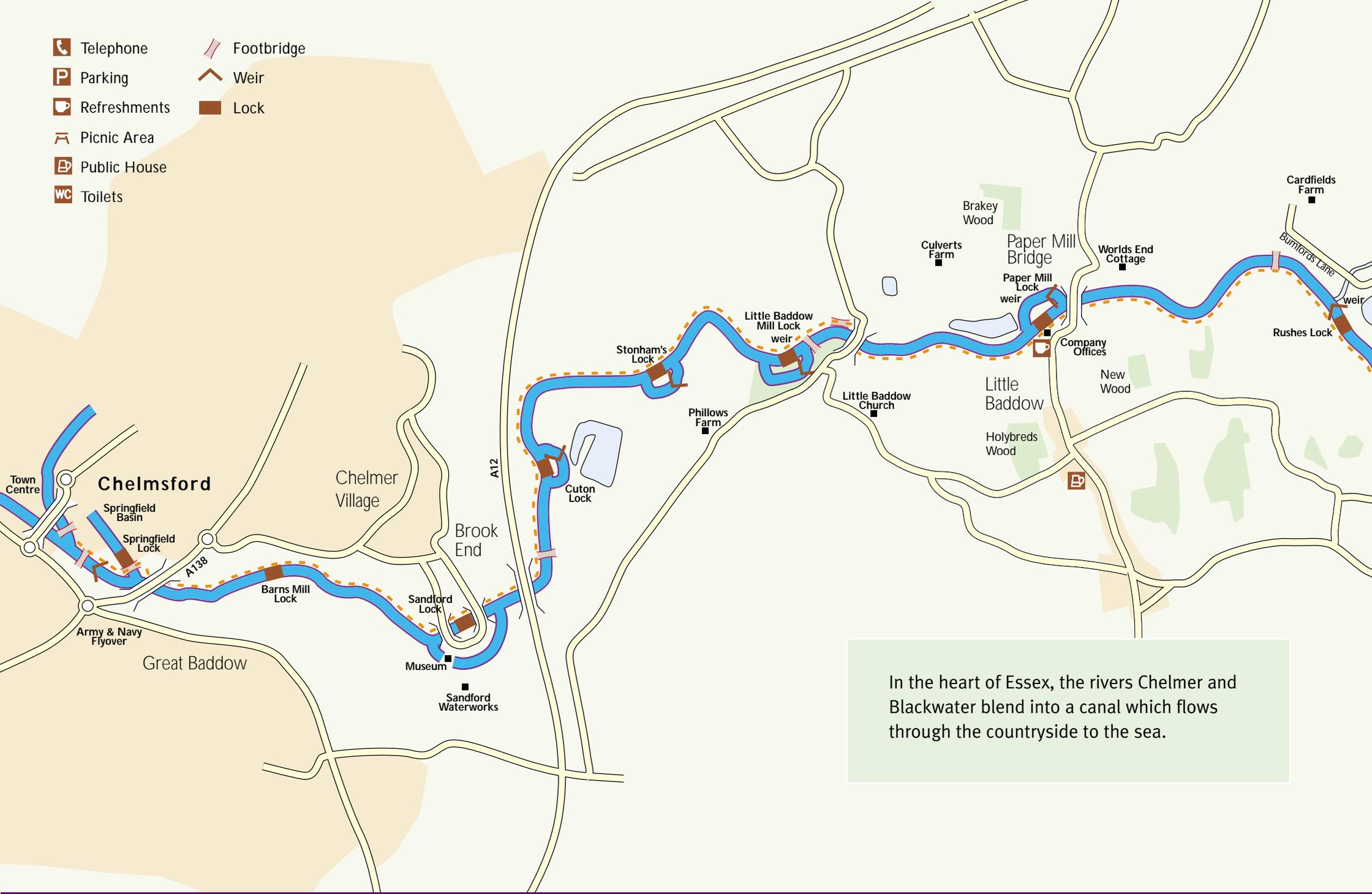


# Beeleigh and Ulting walk continued



# Sea Lock walk

-  Telephone
-  Footbridge
-  Parking
-  Weir
-  Refreshments
-  Lock
-  Picnic Area
-  Public House
-  Toilets



In the heart of Essex, the rivers Chelmer and Blackwater blend into a canal which flows through the countryside to the sea.

