

THE OPEN ROAD . . .

Southern Baptist Country

Written and illustrated by DAVID KAYE

This month's journey begins in Crowland (or Croyland, as it has been spelt for much of its long history), for centuries a religious centre for the surrounding Fens. The Abbey of Saints Mary, Bartholomew and Guthlac was founded by the hermit Guthlac and his royal friend Ethelbald of Mercia around the year 700. Burnt by the Danes in 870, it was refounded in the reign of Edred in 948 by Abbot Thurketyl, destroyed by fire in 1091, rebuilt in 1114 (soon afterwards to be shaken by an earthquake), and burnt yet again in 1146. After the dissolution of the monasteries, only the north aisle was left standing as the town's parish church.

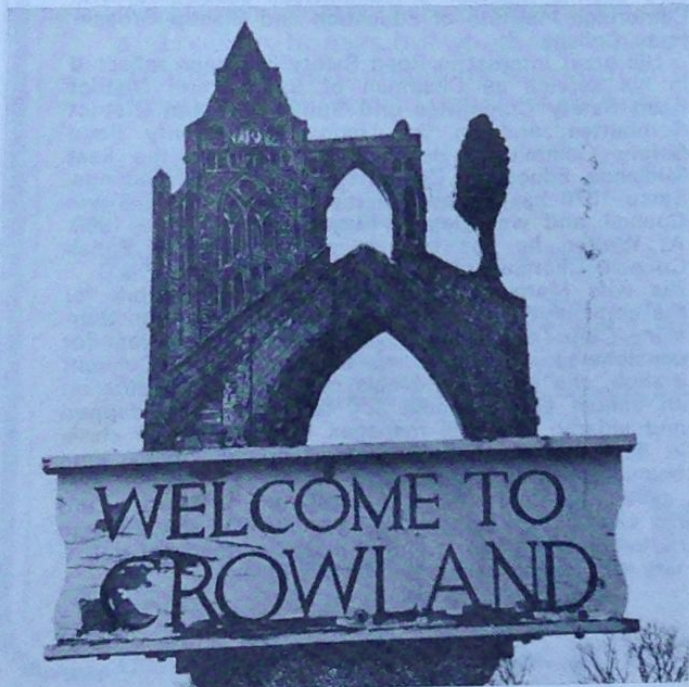
In the last century Crowland could also boast of four non-conformist chapels. Of these only the Wesleyan in Reform Street remains (the original dating just a year before the First Reform Act was passed). I found no signs of the Wesleyan Reform in North Street, where a note on the 1851 Religious Census return stated "Preachers and members expelled in consequence of expressing sentiments at variance with ministers on matters of church discipline". Nor does the Independent Chapel exist; here services were held alternate Sundays and every Friday evening. The Primitive Methodist Chapel of 1838 is now the Royal British Legion Hall, and was served in 1851 by the Revd William Kirby who travelled out from Peterborough.

Mercifully Crowland bypass was completed before the present wave of cuts in public expenditure started, so the former A1073 has been demoted to the B1040. Leave along its Hall Street/Postland Road section, and then turn left onto the A1073. Turn right by the Ministry of Defence receiving station onto the B1166.

This is the site of St James's Bridge. Here, according to tradition, St Guthlac's little boat came to rest after drifting helpless in the hands of God across the flooded Fen. Here from the 10th century stood St James's chapel referred to in a document of 1526 as "capellano de Ankerskyrk", and which Stukeley visited (albeit then a ruined fragment) in 1724 and again in 1735.

If you had proceeded in the opposite direction along the A1073 towards Spalding you would have seen two contrasting sights. At St Guthlac's Lodge gliders silently soar overhead, and just beyond this on your left is Brotherhouses cross (strangely omitted on the new metric O.S. map). This stands by what was Assendyke, one of the four rivers marking the limits of Crowland. It is one of several boundary marks dating from Saxon-Norman times that mark the edges of the monastic estates. The six lines of incised script, in fact, consist of only three words—HANC PETRA GUTHLAC—"This (is) Guthlac's Stone". Other such crosses in the area include Kenulph's Stone (nearby in a field, according to Pevsner) and St Vincent's Cross along the B1040 Torney road to the south-east of Crowland.

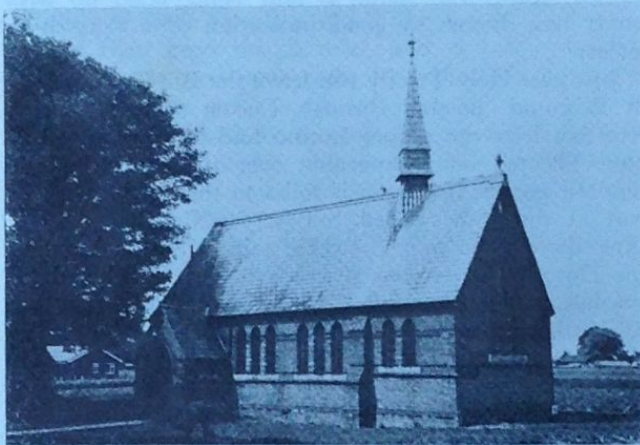
Returning to the B1166, follow this round towards the former Postland Station on the Spalding to March line, which was opened as a joint Great Eastern and



Chancel arch, Crowland Abbey.



Above: Methodist chapel and below St Polycarp's, Holbeach Drove.



Great Northern line on 1st April 1867. Now it is mainly for goods, and this had been so since the huge White-moor Marshalling Yard at March was opened in 1928. Nowadays there are only three passenger trains each way on weekdays—one to Ely and two going on to Cambridge. This meagre total is augmented on summer Saturdays with through trains from Great Yarmouth to Derby and to Sheffield. However, although it is almost 20 years since any stopped to pick up passengers at the little Fenland station both platforms are still there, whilst the station house (embellished with new bow windows and hanging flower baskets) and the erstwhile goods yard are now fully used by Fenland Tractors Ltd, whose ranks of caterpillars testify to the nature of the soil in this region. Postland has for centuries been rich farming country, as is witnessed by the impressive grave of Thomas Atkinson (1830-1904) and his wife Albina at Crowland Abbey. According to Marratt in 1814 "Porsland" was drained by several wind engines, and at that time grew hemp for the Royal Navy.

The nearest hamlet to Postland Station is Shepeau (pronounced Sheppy) Stow, named after the eastern boundary waterway of the Crowland estates—the Great Shipp Ea, as it is called in the 1578 Commissioners of Sewers reports. This was supposed to be 20 foot wide "to the middle of the channel", i.e. 40 foot, like the modern drainage dykes that have ousted both the Great and the Little Shipp Ea. Here until quite recently there was the Red Last public house, and as late as 1933 Harry Money ran a saddler's business and Fred Rose the carrier's cart into Spalding. Even the windmill has now gone, but at least the school remains. In 1867 the Methodists built a chapel on the outskirts of the hamlet, but like so many other small nonconformist

bethels in these sparsely populated Fens, it too has now gone.

Yet as you drive into Holbeach Drove it seems hardly "sparsely populated". Across the fields to your left are the houses of Whaplode Drove (which we visited in March's "Open Road"), and the next village of Gedney Hill almost joins up with its neighbour. This particular area has been fairly intensively occupied since Roman times. In 1856 Holbeach Drove itself had two public houses, two shops, two blacksmiths, a bootmaker and a butcher. Of these the survivors today are the Old Golden Ball, and one small shop which sports an ice cream sign hanging on a transplanted lamp post.

It still has its own bus depot, however. In 1933 William Rose ran it; when I first visited it 20 years ago Towlers (of Emneth, near Wisbech) had an out-station here for their Wisbech to Spalding route. In recent years it has seen the rise of the fleet of W. H. Fowler, who took over Towler's services. The big garage for double-deckers, which used to double up as a polling station, has now gone, but at least this community is not so cut off from the outside world as some are in the area.

Since it is eight miles to the centre of Holbeach parish from the Drove, in the 12th century this community had its own chapel dedicated to St Thomas. This had disappeared long before the present little red brick St Polycarp's was built in the middle of the last century, with its typically Victorian slate spirelet. It seems rather an odd dedication, in fact the only one in the diocese. I wonder how many people know anything about this Bishop of Smyrna, who had known St John the Divine as a boy, and who was eventually martyred at the age of 85? Next door, at the Old Golden Ball, they seem to cater for all tastes, with a children's playground (complete with a sheep) on one side, and a caravan night stayover and greenhouse full of juicy young lettuces on the other. Even the little Wesleyan chapel of 1833 has been modernised and looks used.

Gedney Hill is even further away from its mother church—about 9½ miles as the crow flies. Somehow or other over the centuries the intervening parish of Fleet seems to have been almost squeezed out of the deep fenland, consisting of the narrowest strip that separates Holbeach Drove and Gedney Hill villages. A spot height of three metres at the far end of the village demonstrates how relative such words as "Hill" can be in southern Lincolnshire!

It was here that I came across the first evidence of Baptists in this vast region. The General Baptists, as Dr John Gay states in his excellent "The Geography of Religion in England" were strongest in Kent, Lincolnshire, Leicestershire, Buckinghamshire and Sussex. He goes on to relate that "As a result of the impetus provided by the Evangelical Revival, the Baptists began to grow rapidly in numbers during the 19th century. Between 1800 and 1850 they quadrupled both their membership figures and the number of their chapels." They arrived in Gedney Hill about 1810, and rebuilt their small chapel in stock brick in 1883. In 1851 they met alternate Sunday afternoons, although as their minister, the Revd Daniel Billings, commented, "in winter months . . . roads are almost impassable . . . which renders a more impartial repair of the highways necessary."

Nowadays we are all accutely aware of the need for historical accuracy, but back in 1851 this was not always so. Thus the person who made the entries for Holy



Above: General Baptist church, Gedney Hill.

Below: Sutton St Edmund's school is now the village post office.



Above: Only the tower remains of the medieval Sutton St James's church—now the object of an appeal for funds.

Trinity Church at Gedney Hill in the Religious Census of that year was quite content to express its building as "probably in the time of some of the later Henries, certainly before the Reformation." As the chapel "de Fenende" it certainly existed in 1345, whilst on architectural evidence Sir Nicholas Pevsner agrees, when he suggests that the arch between the tower and the nave looks like a 14th century one. However, all other indications as to its foundation date were swept away in 1875, when James Fowler's plans (a sketch of which can be seen on the north wall of the aisle) were brought to fruition for a new nave and chancel.

The visitor can only judge from faded photographs

of what went before the present structure, with its rather low wooden beamed roofing, held up by octagonal wooden pillars mounted on unusually shaped blocks of stone. I must say that I was rather attracted by the modern stained glass window in the south aisle in memory of the Knowles family, depicting Saint John the Evangelist, accompanied by those two contrasting sisters Martha and Mary of Bethany. By the wooden south porch are the remains of the old village cross.

Gedney Hill also contains a Memorial Hall. The wooden hut has on its front two brass shields containing the names of the survivors and the dead of the First World War. It has been cleaned so vigorously and lovingly over the past six decades that the names on both have now been rubbed into oblivion! The space between the main core of the village and the disused windmill (strangely shown as still having sweeps on the latest O.S. map), is now being filled up with smart new homes, a good indication of a flourishing society.

Just past Holy Trinity you leave the B1166 for Sutton St Edmund, passing through Lutton Gate. It is interesting how the names Lutton and Sutton seemed to have become interchangeable over the years, for the modern parish of Lutton is miles to the north-west, yet was at one time called Sutton St Nicholas. At one time there were more of these saintly Sutton hamlets, for Dorothy Owen has found evidence for chapels in the late medieval period at Sutton Holy Trinity, Sutton St Katherine and Sutton St Thomas the Martyr, all having vanished even before the days of Stukeley, who would have surely discovered at least a footing of one of them.

It is easy to get lost out here, and the new low level guideposts provided recently by the County Council do not help, since they become covered in tall grass and flowering weeds. If you have passed the gaunt Lutton Gate Lodge on your right, you are heading for Sutton St Edmund, provided you turn sharp right just after the double bend in the road. Sutton St Edmund, alias Sutton Fen, alias Sutton-next-Marsh has a late Board School of 1890 that has now become the village post office. Turn left opposite it, and along the main street you pass the present village hall that started off life in 1840 as the General Baptist Tabernacle, but was rebuilt in 1870. Its situation cheek by jowl with a farm reminds us today how influential nonconformist farmers were in the past.

St Edmund's Church is a late Georgian creation of 1798, when it replaced one dating back to 1369. What took my notice was the churchyard. I do not recall ever

Below: The overgrown St Ives butter cross, Sutton St James.

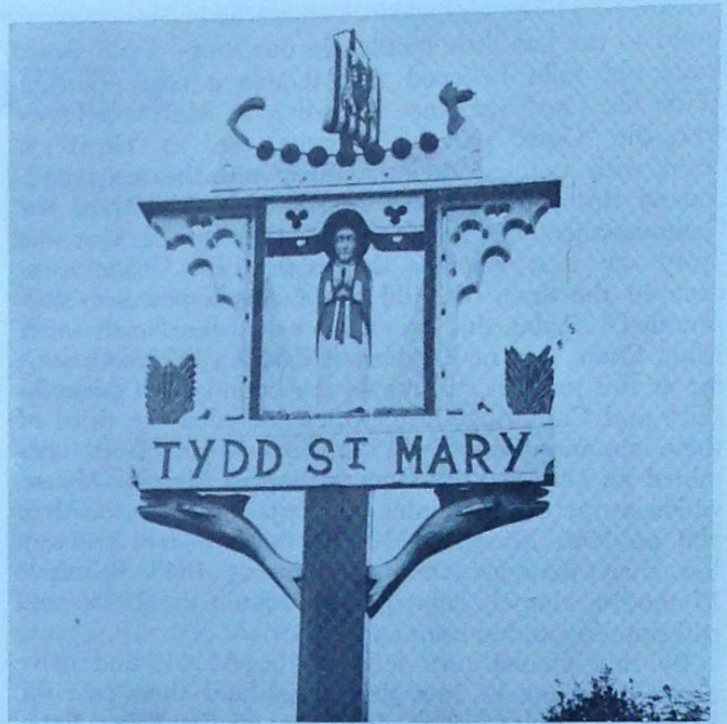


having seen one so divided into opposite halves. The northern half appears to be almost bald, with a jumbled assembly of 18th and early 19th century graves. The southern moiety consists of a smooth sward, in the middle of which is an oasis of roses—a tribute to those who died in the Burma Campaign in the Second World War.

Between this village and Sutton St James, I must confess that I lost my way. Probably the best route, now I reconsult my map, is to proceed onwards until you reach a slanted T-junction. Turn left, and then take the next turning on your right. Continue straight along this, and you should emerge onto the B1165 at St Ives Cross. I remember how tidy its little green used to be. Now the medieval butter cross (?), unique in the county, is overgrown by weeds, with the odd petrol drum kicked against it. Here, tradition says, country wives would sit with their produce to sell to passing travellers between Spalding and Wisbech.

Turn right onto this B road, and as you enter the village look out on your right for the 1834 (General) Baptist Church, well cared for and with a modern wooden cross affixed to its wall. No your eyes do not deceive you, the parish church has its nave missing. Local story tells of how this fell into ruin during the Commonwealth period and was never rebuilt, unlike the handsome chancel of 1879. Dating from the reign of Edward II, the tower is an interesting combination of ashlar and early brick, which unfortunately our Victorian ancestors decided should be encased in unsightly cement. Urgent repair work costing at least £15,000 must now be undertaken. Although the Department of the Environment has promised about half of this and, according to the "barometer" outside the churchyard, over £4,000 had been raised by the time of my visit in July, we are all asked to do our share in making sure that this fenland landmark, with its Great War memorial clock, continues to witness into the third millenium.

The fact that the 1933 Kelly's Directory shows four fruit growers living in Sutton St James reminds us that we are on the borders of what used to be the Isle of Ely County, with its rich fruit industry centred on Wisbech. Continue along the B1165, carrying straight on when the main road forks right, for the village of Tydd St Mary. Here the parish church of St Mary has the rare combination of a brick tower surmounted by



a stone, slender spire. My attention has always been attracted by the trio of statuettes lower down the tower. These must have been planned by someone with a symetrical sense of humour. In the central raised niche is the church's patron saint. Below her on the left is King Edward VII, whilst on the right is 'Bishop King'.

In 1851 the large chancel accommodated the 65 Sunday School scholars, 15 more than attended the 1848 Baptist church, where local farmer Thomas Douse was Manager. Incidentally there is no mention of any scholars at the 1831 Wesleyan Church (served by a Wisbech minister). Inside St Mary's is a modern window (1948) showing all three of the Bethany household, this time Mary being identified with the Magdalene, unlike the case with Gedney Hill. Crowland has a rather faded town sign; it looked as if Sutton St James is about to get its sign (the plinth and plastic encased post were in place on the day of my visit); Tydd St Mary have recently renovated their excellent and imaginative one, which shows a Viking ship, a reminder that in those days Tydd lived up to its name, with sea lapping close by.

Turn right on to the A1101, to bring us nicely



Statuettes of King Edward VII and Bishop Edward King at Tydd St Mary.

round to the last little hamlet on our tour—Tydd Gote. Some old folks believed that it was a corruption of “Tide Go Out” (at least according to Marratt). However, the “Gote” part is the same word as “Gowt”, a drain with pointed doors to keep out the sea water. Indeed this is made clear in the 1578 Report of the Commissioners of Sewers, when they stated that the “jury say that whereas the sayd Shire Goate is so decayed the town of Tidd St Maryes is peteously surrounded.” Today this “goate” is called the North Level Main Drain, but nevertheless it is still a “Shire Goate”, for at this point it still marks the boundary of Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire, which included the third of these communities—Tydd St Giles. Tydd Gote contained an 18th century General Baptist Meeting House, which attracted an evening congregation of no less than 100 on 30th March 1851. But this was still a dozen less than that for the neighbouring 1843 Primitive Methodist chapel, subsequently rebuilt in 1903, and still standing and in use.

By that chapel turn left off the A1101, and drive along the bank of first the Drain, and then past the hamlet of Foul Anchor, along that of the River Nene. At low tide (hence Tydd), it seems almost inconceivable that modern vessels can sail up to Wisbech with cargoes of timber, yet the warning signs to motorists are by no means relics of a past age.

Near the turn off for Foul Anchor, on your left, are the remains of Tydd Gote railway station, which was situated on a single track that led from Wisbech to Sutton Bridge, and was closed down in the pre-Beeching days. As you drive into Sutton Bridge your attention is taken inevitably by the fine swing bridge of 1897 that used to carry both the railway line from Spalding to Kings Lynn and the A17 road. This replaced the 1850 bridge that had been designed by none other than Robert Stephenson. After the track closed 20 years ago a long battle ensued between British Rail and the County Council for the use of the railway side of the bridge. Eventually the latter were successful, thus cutting out one of the major bottlenecks on this popular holiday route into Norfolk.



Top: The old Tydd Gate in the bank of the Nene at Foul Anchor.

Above: Advice to motorists on the Nene bank near Foul Anchor.

Below: Railway tracks once used the right side of Sutton Bridge.

Next month:
ASTRIDE THE FOSSE WAY

