

QUEEN of the SALTMARSHES



Windswept and magnificent, Lincolnshire's saltmarshes are among the last unspoiled habitats on the planet. They are home to mysterious plants such as samphire, elegant wading birds plus wild geese that fly in from the Arctic. There is no one who knows the traditions and wildlife of the saltmarshes better than JUNE BARTON. This is her fascinating story.

Front cover: Me amidst the samphire - an edible marsh plant that has played a major part in my life in more ways than one. Photo: Ernie Robinson.




Filming on the saltmarshes - Alan Hardwick is among several broadcasters I have enjoyed taking out on the seabank.



Serene, majestic and totally unspoiled - the magnificent expanse of the Lincolnshire saltmarshes.

QUEEN OF THE SALTMARSHES



Back in summer 1950 - that's when it all started! Just six weeks after I was born on June 4, my father decided it was time to introduce me to the most captivating place on God's earth - the saltmarshes of The Wash, Britain's largest estuary.

Ever since then, I have never lived more than a few hundred metres from this unique and captivating coastal landscape. The marshes mean more to me than anything.

Through my talks and tours, they are even providing me with a livelihood. It is no exaggeration to say they have brought me a happiness and fulfilment beyond compare.

But their magic is hard to explain. It is something that cannot readily be put down in pen and paper.

Is it something in the fresh, salt air? Is it the play of shadow and sunlight on the tapestry formed by hundreds of different mud-loving plants? Is it the ever-changing expanse of sky?

Or is it the sense of peace - broken only by the sound of redshank or curlew?

Probably it is a combination of all these elements - and many others - that give the marshes their strange and magical appeal.



Home for me is a cottage just off a country lane not far from the village of Fosdyke and within a short ride to the marshes on my drop-handle sports bike.

But I was actually born at Kirton Marsh on the outskirts of Kirton, eight miles from Boston.

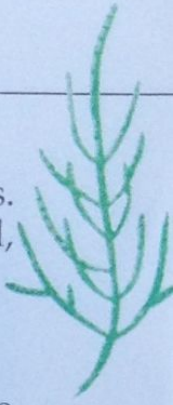
Although off the tourist track, Kirton is a large village full of charm and history, with the friendliest people you could wish to meet, plus a magnificent church overlooking the main street.

The registry shows that this was the parish where I was born. But it would be of more truth to say that I am a person not of Kirton but of the marshes - that is where my identity lies.

It may seem a small distinction, but it is an important one.

You will generally find that individuals - indeed whole families - who were born and brought up on the edge of The Wash have a different attitude from those who were born just a few miles inland.

In many ways we are probably less worldly. For instance, I have a TV, but though I may catch the occasional wildlife documentary, I have to say that I rarely switch it on. I could not name a single character from *Coronation Street*, *EastEnders* or any of the popular soaps.



But marsh people are in close harmony with nature and the seasons. Living alongside The Wash brings knowledge and wisdom. Once learned, the lessons of the marshes are never forgotten.

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But let's return to 100-Acre Farm - the house where I was born and where I spent the first 22 years of my life.

My Dad, Tom, a farmer, never made any secret that he would have liked another son.

I have a brother, Charles, who is six years older than me. But dad wanted a second boy.

If that had been the case, there is more than an even chance that I would have been named Dick - after Dick Barton, the special agent. That was the nickname he gave me.

Who was Dick Barton? The name may be unfamiliar now to most people aged under 40, but back in the early 1950s, before the days of TV, he was a fictional private eye who was famous all over the country as the hero of a long-running BBC radio series.

When I arrived, my parents were undecided on what to call me.

Dad favoured Susan, but that was a name disliked by my mum. She preferred Jennifer - but that was unacceptable to my dad.

June was the compromise suggestion of a family friend, Mrs Watson, who was present at my birth and reckoned it was appropriate because of the month.

I am happy enough with the choice. It's short and not too much of a mouthful.



Where my life began - 100-Acre Farm where I was born and spent the first 22 years of my life.

Sometimes people who know me well lengthen it to "Junie" but usually only if I've upset them - or if they've upset me!

I have strong and fond memories of both my parents. They were a loving couple. Times were often hard, but Charles and I could not have asked for a happier start to life.

Sadly my mum - her name was Hilda - died when I was just 13. It was a tragedy and the first moment of adversity in my life.

There have been others. Sad to say, there is ill health in the family. Many

of my uncles and aunts died at a young age - several within a short space of time.

Charles and I had a cherished younger sister, Freda, who had to struggle with poor health all her life. She was only 39 when she died in 1995.

When she was not working, Mum had always been a keen bowls player and a very accomplished dancer.

To be honest, I haven't taken after her one bit. In fact, I couldn't have grown up more different. I was certainly never a dancer. When it comes to the foxtrot or the tango, I've got to be honest - I am two left feet!

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Dad, to whom I was always closer, was a dedicated and hard-working farmer - both crops and livestock. He was especially good with bullocks.

He was originally from Leverton, between Boston and Skegness, but moved later to Kirton.

He was a strict father but always fair and very caring. It was he, above all, who encouraged me to love the marshes - and also to respect them.

For all their beauty, they can also be a dangerous place - especially to those foolhardy enough to venture out with no knowledge of how fast the tides can come in or how quickly the creeks can fill. Time and tide wait for no man - never was a truer word spoken.

It was a lesson that, back in 1216, went unheeded by King John during his war with rebel barons. On a march from Kings Lynn to Long Sutton in October, his retinue underestimated the treacherous crossing of The Wash with fatal consequences.

According to a chronicler of the time, "the ground opened in the midst of waters, and whirlpools sucked in everything, men and horses."

John also lost to the quicksands his immense array of jewels, gold, silver and other treasures which were being carried in wagons. Almost eight centuries later, they have never been recovered.

The tides go under a variety of names - for instance, the Lambeth tides come in the first week of August. In October, bore tides are generated by strong north-easterly winds which can really whoosh the water up the Welland - one of five rivers that flows into The Wash.



My brother, Charlie, at work on his vegetable plot - there's no one who grows better crops.

The mud, too, is a law unto itself. It is still and inanimate, but it has a strange and powerful strength. At its most treacherous, it is a form of quicksand. It can take hold of foot or leg - and never let go.

Over the years, I have learned a special technique that enables me to traverse the mud on foot in relative safety, but one thing is sure - I never dilly-dally on the way.

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My dad was always loyal to the marshes - and he has made me just as loyal, probably even more so.

I am sure that he would be proud that I am now giving talks about The Wash to groups and organisations of every description all over Lincolnshire and beyond.

I have enjoyed a regular slot on BBC Radio Lincolnshire and sometimes guest appearances on BBC-TV and ITV programmes in the East Midlands and Yorkshire. Broadcasters who I have taken out on to the marshes include the late Michael Clegg and Alan Hardwick.

They enjoyed the wide open spaces, but another, who was not so keen, was BBC Look North weatherman Paul Hudson. He even went so far as to describe the wondrousness of the magnificent expanse as "desolate".

But I did not take offence. Every man to his own taste. It takes all sorts to make the world go round. And I accept that, to some, love of the marshes is a taste acquired only after many visits.

It is fair to say I have found a way of life and career largely rooted in what my dad taught me and encouraged me to experience.

One of my earliest memories is, aged about four or five, being taken out wildfowling.

I was covered in camouflage netting to make me invisible to the mallard and other ducks as they flew overhead, quacking and whistling.

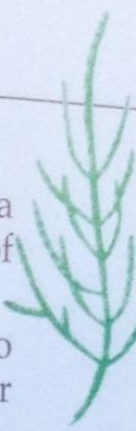
From my earliest age, therefore, I was familiar with the range of birds - especially the waders and wildfowl.


One of my favourite sights and sounds has always been that of a flock of 200 or more brent geese rising powerfully into a powder-blue February sky, yapping like a pack of excited terriers.

With the sunshine sparkling on their grey, black and white plumage what could be a more exhilarating spectacle!

They have a very short breeding season in Siberia before arriving here from the second week of October onwards. They remain throughout winter before flying north again in spring.

We also get other species of geese, especially pinkfeet, on the Lincolnshire saltmarshes but they are mostly passing through on their long





journey from Iceland and Greenland to the Norfolk side of The Wash or beyond - perhaps to the Severn where the Wildfowl Trust has its HQ at Slimbridge.

Whereas the brents feed on eel grass, the pinkfeet favour the stubble fields where sugar beet or potatoes have been grown.

That reference to Slimbridge reminds me to mention the Wildfowl Trust's founder and my favourite artist, the late Sir Peter Scott, who is probably best remembered for his superb paintings of geese and other wildfowl in flight. There is no question they capture, on canvas, the special magic of wild places.

Scott first came fully to appreciate ducks and geese when, after completing his education at Oundle School and Trinity College, Cambridge, he lived on the edge of The Wash, leasing the east bank lighthouse from the Nene River Catchment Board for £5 a year.

The birds were part of his life and he was never happier than when painting studies of them with the huge skies as their backdrop. The lighthouse is now named in his memory.

Who knows, the geese which I watch every winter are probably descendants of those he came to love and admire.

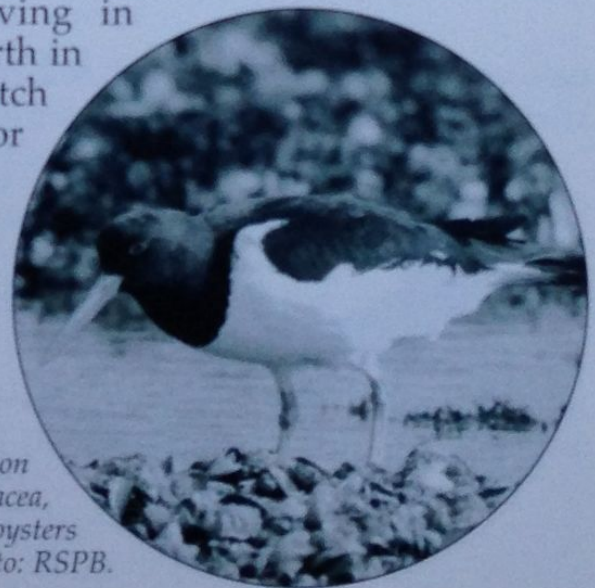
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The brent geese are the most conspicuous of the wildfowl. But the marshes are also popular with wild duck - not just mallard but also other species such as teal and wigeon which arrive in autumn and spend most of winter feeding on the various grasses and other vegetation which grow in profusion.

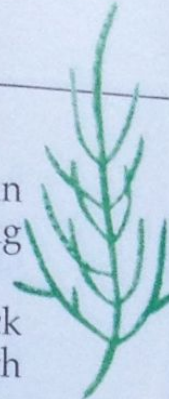
The wigeon - also known as the whistling duck on account of its call - is one of my favourites.

Mark you, when they start arriving in numbers from Scotland and further north in early autumn, I know it is time to watch out for a change in the weather. Storms or frosts are most likely on the way.

The migration behaviour of wildfowl is a great predictor of the weather - far better, in my view, than many forecasts on the TV.



Despite its name, the oystercatcher - a common sight on the saltmarshes - feeds mostly on a variety of crustacea, worms and insects (However, it should be noted that oysters have been commercially farmed in The Wash) Photo: RSPB.



When I hear the first skeins yapping and cackling overhead on an October night, I know it is time to pull out the blankets from the airing cupboard and check the anti-freeze in the radiator of my car!

Another duck I should mention is the large and very handsome shelduck which favours the habitat where the mud becomes sandier and meets with the sea.

With its striking, green, white and brown plumage, it is unquestionably one of the most handsome birds you could hope to see.

Shelducks nest in old rabbit holes or burrows, usually laying between eight and 15 eggs, though as many as 20 have been recorded. As a young girl, I recall once sinking my arm into a burrow and pulling out one of the eggs which are large and cream-white, not unlike that of a hen.

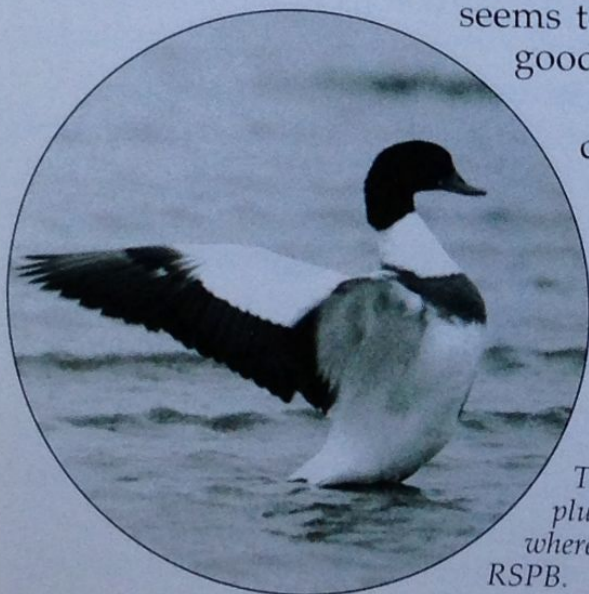
I am not sure that my dad was best impressed because he was quick to ask me: "What if a rat had been on the other end of that?"

Also widespread across the whole breadth of the marshes are wading birds - none more so than the redshank which is so named because of its red shanks (the old English word for legs).

It is a nervy species that seems incapable of relaxing. The slightest distraction or disturbance and it will be up in flight, uttering its panicky callnote. It is known as the watchdog of the marshes because of the racket it never fails to kick up.

This bird also has a cousin, the greenshank, which is less common but is sometimes to be seen (or heard) feeding in creeks or lagoons during a short stop-off on its long migration between northern Scotland or Scandinavia, where it breeds, and southern Africa where it winters.

Another familiar citizen of the marshes is the curlew - unmistakable because of its long downward curved bill. It is more unhurried and laid back than the redshank, with a much slower flight that seems to send out the message "all in my own good time - I'll get there when it suits me."



To be honest, its brown plumage is dowdy, but it makes up for this with its clear, haunting call and a bubbly song which brings a musical quality to the marshes, especially in spring.

Other waders that mostly use the marshes either as a winter home or

The shelduck is one of the largest and most handsomely-plumaged birds to be seen - it mostly inhabits the areas where the saltmarshes give way to sand and sea. Photo: RSPB.



precious stopping-off place to feed and rest on their way from north to south or vice versa include oystercatcher, lapwing, golden plover, grey plover, ringed plover, snipe, jack snipe, common sandpiper, green sandpiper, avocet, godwit and ruff.

There is also a newcomer, the little egret, which has been encouraged by warmer winters to spread north from the Mediterranean. They are regularly to be seen at Freiston Shore, and a pair raised chicks at a secret marsh location in summer, 2005 - the first successful breeding for Lincolnshire.



What do these waders all feed on? Their long bills are ideally suited for probing the mud for various kinds of worms, crustacea and molluscs - everything from crabs to the microscopic creatures that are at the bottom of the food chain.

Mud, glorious mud! It is rich in the nutritious remnants of organic material brought in from the sea or down from rivers. Throw into that mix an ever-changing blend of salt water and fresh water and you have in, The Wash, one of most productive habitats on the planet.

The inland edges of the marshes also attract visits from kestrels hunting for shrews and voles, plus, in winter, other more unusual birds of prey such as merlins and peregrines.

Among the most spectacular of the raptor family are the harriers. Although only a passage migrant, the largest and most impressive is the marsh harrier which, with its size and slow wingbeat, makes it the emperor of the marshes.

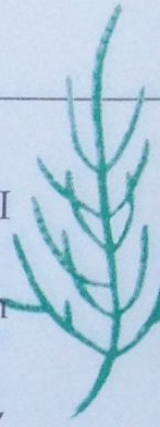
Its smaller cousin, the hen harrier, nested successfully at the RSPB reserve at Frampton in 2004.

Short eared owls, which hunt by dawn and dusk as well as night, are also another fine sight as they glide along either side of the seabanks in their quests for voles or other small mammals and perhaps the occasional frog.

In autumn and winter smaller birds such as, linnets, goldfinches and reed buntings find a ready harvest in the seedheads of plants of the inner marshes, while skylarks live throughout the year in the grassier areas grazed by farm livestock.

On spring and autumn migration, swallows, martins and swifts follow the line of The Wash, taking insects on the wing as they skim across the vegetation.





Love of the marshes and knowledge of its wildlife was not something I learned from a book.

It is all based on experience. From the earliest age, I picked it up both from my dad and from my everyday life.

As a young schoolgirl, I had plenty of play-pals, both boys and girls, but, looking back, I was probably more solitary than most of my counterparts.

I was never into toys or dolls or teddies or pretty frocks. I was more of a tomboy. It never worried me to be squaddied up with mud from playing in the creeks.

From when I was five or six, I was more independent and self-reliant than other children of the same age. The marshes were both my garden and my playground.

Sometimes I would just be happy to run freely with no particular purpose in mind - just happy to be alive somewhere so beautiful, spacious and exhilarating.

At other times I would love cantering along on my ponies - one was called Whisky, another Suki. It may have been risky but it was great fun jumping the creeks.

But it was far from being all play. I also had to help on the farm. There was always work to be done, even more so after my mother died.

No way could Dad afford to employ a pool of labour or to invest in the latest machinery.

As far as Charlie and I were concerned, it was all hands to the pump.

Setting plants, lifting tates, picking beans - it was all part of growing up and I am certainly none the worse for the experience. Those days helped shape me and my personality as they are today.

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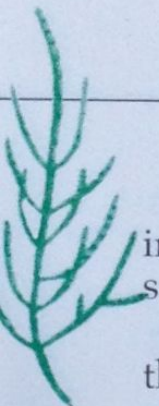
The first school I went to was Kirton Marsh Primary which now no longer exists. It was pulled down many years ago and the site is now occupied by farm buildings.

When I was 11, I moved on to Kirton Middlecott Secondary Modern - now abbreviated simply to Middlecott.

What sort of pupil was I? I can say with complete honesty that I was definitely not top of the class!

The trouble was that I was never cut out for sitting indoors hour after hour. Classroom life was not for me. I was never one for studying.

I was restless and impatient. I had a strong independent streak. I always wanted to be out and about in the fresh air and the wide open spaces.



Looking back, I hold the view that school can stifle individuality and imagination. It is set up in such a way as to make children conform. For some that is fine, especially those who are academic or studious by nature.

But, as they grow older, it is often hard for young people to break out of the mould. Some people never find their own inner self. It is as if school has programmed them to spend their whole life following others.

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From what I have just said, it may be thought that I am hostile to education. Nothing could be further from the truth. As they get older, even in to retirement, many people (me included) seek out learning in a way that would never have seemed possible when they were younger.

Someone once said that schooling and education are wasted on young children! Perhaps there is more than a grain of truth in that. As they get older, some adults become more curious about life and the world around them than when they were young.

I love giving talks to organisations such as Probus where the room is full of professional people. They are educated and humorous. I love the cut and thrust of the questions, the banter and the teasing.

I think listeners often find it hard to suss me out. That's part of the fun. I am a woman but, in many ways, I think like a man. They are intrigued that I am on the same wavelength - but they can't understand how or why!

Considering my childhood dislike of the classroom, it is an irony that I now make my livelihood by giving talks and lectures. I have become a kind of teacher. You could say the wheel has come full circle.

The big difference is that I don't use a blackboard and chalk. There are no rules. People can come and go as they please. And I don't give out any homework!

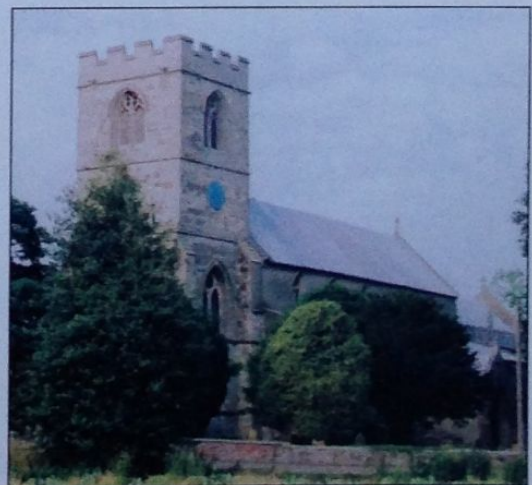
Returning to my own schooldays, although I was an outdoor type, I was never a great one for sports.

It was not that I was short of energy, but I lacked the co-ordination, timing and speed of movement that is required in games such as netball, hockey and tennis.

However hard I tried, I was never going to make it into any of the school teams.

I just wanted to be free to charge about at my will on and around my beloved marshes.

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Dating back more than 750 years, All Saints at Friskney is one of many magnificent marshland churches.

Mum and Dad ensured that Charlie and I had a grounding in religion because they also sent us to Sunday school at Kirton Skeldyke Methodist Chapel.

But I don't think many children are cut out for Bible-study, singing hymns and saying prayers.

Religion is something that's hard to grasp at a young age. And, for me, it was harder than for many.

Not that I have anything against parsons or the clergy. I number many of those I have met as among my closest friends, including one who has occasionally come out with me on the marshes.

They are good, honest people who do wonderful work and provide great support, comfort and inspiration - especially to people in times of need.

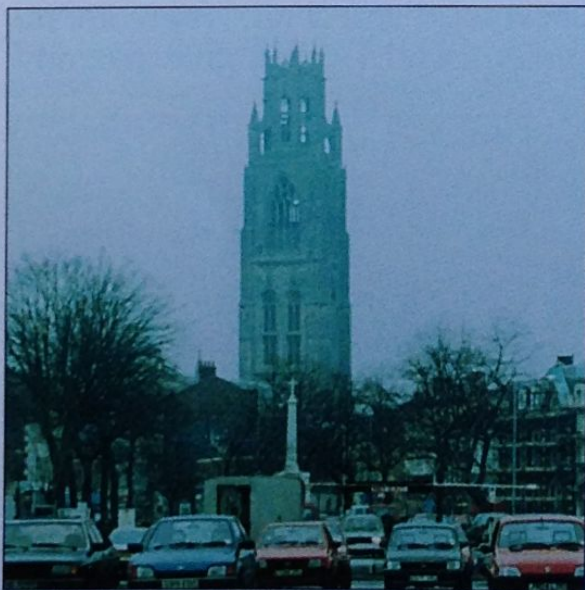
Although on my admission I was never the best scholar at Sunday School, over time I have come to appreciate more and more the splendour of the churches that are such handsome features of Lincolnshire's marsh villages.

In my view, they are among the finest in the whole of the country. With their elegant spires or sturdy towers, they are proud landmarks that carry in their walls the secrets of generations.

As I drive past them on my travels, it is as if they are sailing past like magnificent ships.

St Peter and St Paul at Kirton is the one with which I am most familiar. It is acknowledged among church historians for its many striking features.

But there are many other parish churches of marsh or fen which, in their own individual ways, are also impressive and imposing both externally and within.



St Botolph's church - much-loved and known in Lincolnshire as the Stump - is a landmark for miles around.

It is hard to know where to start so I will be tactful and list some of the most majestic in alphabetical order - Amber Hill, Benington, Butterwick, Fishtoft, Fosdyke, Freiston, Friskney, Gedney, Holbeach, Leverton, Long Sutton, Moulton, Old Leake, Spalding, Sutton Bridge, Wainfleet St Mary, Wrangle and Wyberton.

But there is one missing from my list, St Botolph's at Boston - the famous Boston Stump which looks down on the town and the surrounding farmland like a guardian angel.

It is breathtaking in its magnificence and a landmark for miles around. Its soul seems to shine from within. Even to non-believers, it surely represents permanence, stability and reassurance even when times are most troubled.

Why were these churches built on such a grand and magnificent scale?

In the case of the Stump, it was a reflection of the prosperity when Boston was once of the most prosperous trading ports in the land, trading wool, timber and other products with the countries around the Baltic Sea.

In the case of the others, it is a mystery why they were built to standards so impressive and imposing. Logically speaking, most are far larger than ever would be required for the relatively small populations they serve.

What is more, there is no local building stone so almost all of it would have to have been brought by barge along rivers and fen drains - often from as far away as Northamptonshire.



All this reflection on churches begs the question: Do I believe in God? Not necessarily in the way religion is sometimes presented. But I do think there is a force of nature. There is a Plan. It's impossible to put my finger on but I am often aware of it.

This is never more so than when I am out on the marshes. Simultaneously, they share both power and serenity. Depending on their mood (and on mine), they can be a truly spiritual place.

There is a pattern and continuity in the way the seasons come and go. The marshes are like waves on the sea - always changing, yet always the same.

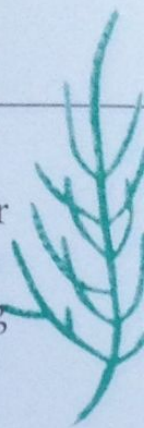
If you look at the creeks, as they ebb and flow, they seem to be permanent, but this is not so. One day their flow is no more than a trickle, then it may be fast-flowing like a torrent. Over time, some disappear and new ones emerge.

The process of change is constant - over weeks, months, years, decades and centuries.

It is determined by a whole range of factors - tides, weather and the competition among sea purslane and scores of other plants that, with their strong roots, bind the marshes together.

I mention sea purslane because of its particular dominance. Its roots are incredibly stocky, tough and determined.

In a way, these are the very characteristics that could equally be applied to the people who grow up in the marsh. We're a stocky breed! Truly you never get a willowy-legged dolly bird born to a marsh family.



I have asked doctors why this should be so and they just shrug their shoulders. You have to form your own interpretations and conclusions.

Perhaps it's just that tough thighs and calves are needed for plodding over the mud or jumping the creeks.

* * *

The saltmarshes are a tapestry of a whole range of plants - the likes of sea blite, sea meadow grass, sea aster and sea wormwood.

Sea scurvy grass, which has a white flower, was taken to sea by sailors as an antidote to the dreaded condition known as scurvy. Traditionally, it was also sometimes used to make a tonic known as sea scurvy ale.

One of my favourites plants is sea lavender which, with its rich mauve shades, never fails to light up the scene in summer, especially with the sun shining down brightly, bring out the colour in its full richness.

Time was when every house on the marshes had a stem of sea lavender in a vase on at least one window sill. But not any more. Picking it is banned by law. It seems a heavy-handed restriction, especially as grazing cattle are more than happy to eat it. Surely the odd sprig or two would never be missed.

All the plants on the marshes have to be tough, resilient and adaptable. Depending how far out they grow, their roots may be waterlogged regularly and sometimes permanently.

Then there is the unpredictable chemistry of the water itself, with its varying content of different salts. These would be toxic probably to all garden flowers. The marshes are no environment for delicate petals.

The most famous plant of the marsh and the one I am asked about most is samphire (pronounced "samfer").

Whoever first made the discovery that it is edible deserves a medal.

It may look nondescript, but why would that matter with something so succulent, so tasty and so rich in iron and other goodness?

Between the end of July and September, it can be plucked from the marsh and eaten in its raw state, but it is advisable to wash it first - you never know what has been brought in by the sea.

Or you can take it home and boil it in water for 10 to 15 minutes - but beware, it smells to high heaven. Then serve with a dab of butter, either on its own or as a vegetable. It is particularly good with fish.

That being said, I like samphire best pickled in malt vinegar and left to season in a jar. I store a few which stand me in good stead over autumn and winter.



On July 28, 1981 samphire was served at the wedding reception of Prince Charles and Diana. The comments of the Royal couple and their guests are not recorded but I am sure they can only have enjoyed it.

Samphire is sometimes referred to as the poor man's asparagus, but this is to do it an injustice.

Asparagus certainly has many merits, but, in my book, samphire wins hands down - it has more authentic character, texture and flavour.

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At this stage, I am happy to confide that this is a marsh plant to which I owe the greatest debt of gratitude for, in one way, it changed my life.

Back in autumn 1991, the local Press reported on official proposals to ban the picking of samphire because its environment is a protected habitat, a site of special scientific interest.

But such a measure struck me as over the top - as ridiculous as telling people not to go brambling or to gather the fruits of the blackthorn for making sloe gin.

I felt so strongly about the proposed restriction on an age-old liberty that I contacted a newspaper, the *Boston News*, which ran a front-page report in its edition of September 13.



Among the cattle reared on the banks of the marshes (inset) are the superb, prize-winning limousins owned by the Pitcher family of Friskney. These magnificent beasts have as their ancestors the creatures depicted in the prehistoric cave painting in the Dordogne region of France. Pictured are father and son Peter and Ian Pitcher, plus stockman John Twigg.

WHAT OF THE FUTURE OF THE LINCOLNSHIRE SALTMARSHES?

Despite their status as a site of special scientific interests, there are, alas, no guarantees about their long-term survival.

Every now and then someone comes forward with an idea to develop them. Over the years, there have been suggestions for an oil refinery, a chemical plant, a dump for industrial waste, an airport or even a whole new town complete with housing and shopping arcades.

One of the most fanciful schemes in 1930 was for a substantial area of the marshes to be drained and transformed into a 15-mile track for the likes of Sir Malcolm Campbell to make attempts on the land-speed record.

Happily, in my view, none of these schemes has ever progressed beyond the sketchpad stage. They have all withered on the vine.

But you can never be too complacent. The next threat could be encroachment by the energy industry.

Even now, in some office of some multinational company, I have little doubt that someone is hatching a scheme for a wind farm of 50 turbines or more.

It is a prospect that I scarcely dare contemplate. The upshot of such a project would be to industrialise and devastate this most wonderful of places.

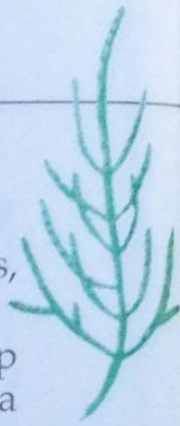
There may be truth to the claim that an individual turbine is sleek and elegant, but to install a whole platoon of them would have a cruel impact - not just on the beauty of the marshscape but also on the birds and other wildlife that live and breed here.

As long as I live, I will do anything to ensure that the wonder of my beloved marshes are preserved for ever.

** June Barton gives talks and walking tours of the saltmarshes by appointment. These are increasingly popular with professional, social and community groups. She can be contacted at Boston (01205) 260249 or 260687.*



I love the vastness of the saltmarshes - but, make no mistake, I am also a lover of trees.

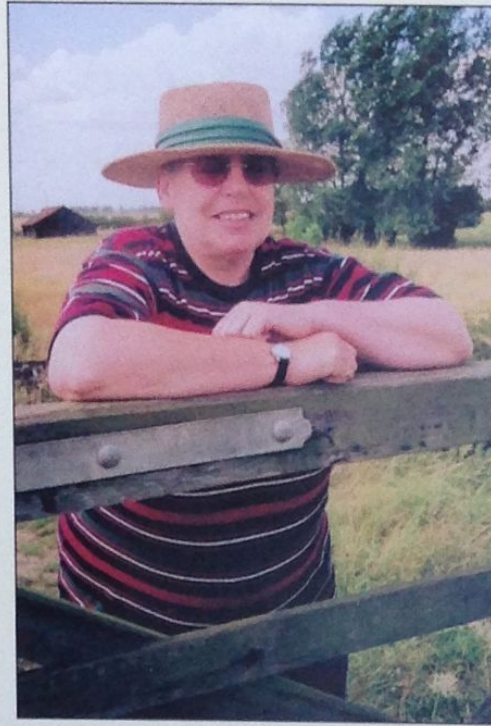




You never know what unusual bird might turn up along the marshes - especially on spring or autumn migration. It is a popular habitat for birdwatchers who will sometimes travel hundreds of miles to glimpse a rarity.



Although trees and shrubs are not a feature of the marshes, they flourish in sheltered spots where they provide a temporary haven for flycatchers, warblers and other songbirds on their journey to or from warmer climes.



Among the many landscape-types of the British Isles, the saltmarshes of The Wash have a magic which is unique.

They are a vast expanse where, for centuries, the sea and the land have vied for supremacy.

Not everyone appreciates the sense of space, the drama of the enormous ever-changing skies and the almost mystical serenity.

But to June Barton, who has lived alongside them all her life, the marshes are a kind of paradise on earth.

Whatever the season and whatever the weather, she is attuned to their powerful spirit.

It is as if she were at one with the ever-changing texture of the plants and vegetation, the meandering creeks and the rich array of wildlife - not least the wading birds and wildfowl with their striking plumage-patterns and haunting calls.

Not for nothing has June become known as the Queen of the Saltmarshes.

In this, her frank and long-awaited first publication, she shares secrets of her upbringing and describes how the marshes have shaped her robust but kind-hearted personality, her remarkable intuition and her forthright philosophy on life.

It is a remarkable story, characterised by honesty, exuberance and, above all, a powerful love of the wildness and wonder of her beloved marshes.

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