

Bogged down in Broad Fen, 1949

By Roy Webster

The first inkling that something unusual was happening at the top of the lane was a continuous deafening howling and yapping of dogs. And it was getting closer.

The Boy Roy parted the thin spiky branches that camouflaged his peep hole through the hawthorn hedge bordering the single access into the family property leading to the reedy remnants of Dilham Broad and the lower reaches of the NWD canal.

Marching towards him was a very strange assembly of fast walkers in fancy dress mingling with more than a dozen excited lop eared shaggy dogs.



The sixteen year old immediately sensed the need to inform The Old Man of this sudden worrying development and raced the 50 yards towards the tool shed where a vermin cage trap was being carefully completed by ageing yet nimble fingers from close mesh wire netting and stout bamboo canes.

“Pop! Pop! There’s a crazy crowd of funny looking people and lots of dogs coming down the Loke” the Boy bellowed with undisguised agitation.

“Damned otter hunt. I’ll come out and tell them where to get off,” The Old Man grumbled, worried the excitable hounds would scare his flock of egg laying hens from performing their daily duty.

Thus, as the hunt rounded the final corner along the house wall leading to the sole gateway to the small marsh meadow, father and son were guarding a main access to the ancient Dilham peat diggings and the North Walsham Canal, legs apart and arms akimbo in threatening defensive mode.

The advancing motley group was headed by a diminutive tubby male attired in variegated regalia and a blue striped butchers’ apron. He was brandishing a 6ft long pole that was more stave than stick.

However, it was not he who caught the eye but the next person in line – a massive broad beamed middle-aged woman, some 6ft tall donned in thigh length waders, a thick lined leather bomber jacket and an Australian bush hat.

“You can stop right there, you are not coming any further,” hollered The Old Man above the din created by the excitable canines leaping among the hunt enthusiasts.

“My good man, you cannot stop us. We are heading for the Dilham reach of the North Walsham Canal and possess rights of access under the Magna Carta,” retorted this formidable lady in a posh, throaty, refined high decibel accent, waving her forked rambler’s walking stick threateningly under the Old Man’s nose.

“I don’t know who Maggie Carter is, I have never heard of her but I do know your dogs are worrying my live stock. Listen to them hens. They are cackling already and have yet to lay an egg today,” He retorted. “If you come through this gate I believe I will qualify for compensation from you and your gang of ruffian otter hunters for disturbing the peace and quiet around here.”

Clearly, he had punctured the confidence of this officious female who now appeared to be gasping for air and considering her position in the loud verbal confrontation. “Do you recognise these? I offer you them to obtain access. Will they do?” she asked in a more

subdued tone while displaying five crisp brown ten shilling notes drawn in a frantic fumble from a well concealed inside pocket.

“Yes Madam, they will do very nicely, come right on through”, grinned the Old Man with an instant change of temper, doffing his cap with his other hand in hypocritical and typical lower class mid twentieth century deference to an obvious member of the influential rich and powerful.



However, he had omitted to warn the dominant sporting lady of the risk involved in attempting to reach the canal via an invisible, deep bog concealed by a dense reed bed and shallow rooted scrubland.

This mass of decaying vegetation bubbled away from view under the natural succession from a man-made broad of flooded mediaeval peat diggings to a treacherous life threatening deep seated swamp. One careless false step and the unwary could be swallowed up in a fifteen foot deep reeking morass of black liquid peat.

And so it turned out. A sudden shriek of alarm penetrating the leafy alders and fleet rooted silver birch was followed by repeated cries for help that scattered the resident flock of wood pigeons and half a dozen carrion crows pairing off for the nesting season.

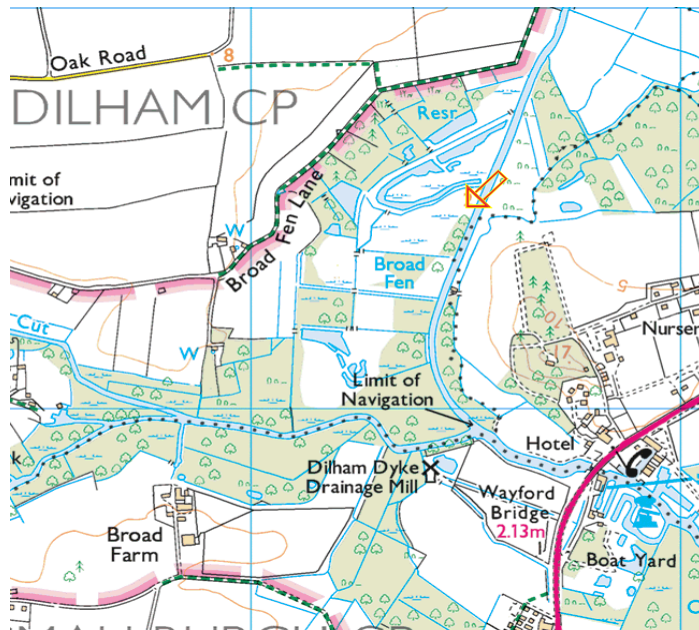
This posh sporting lady had completed the natural equation: One from the upper crust + penetration of the lower crust = human disaster. Once again Mother Nature had demonstrated how homo sapiens tends to reflect its classy ruling society, largely immune from the normal trials and tribulations of everyday life, enjoys no exemption from serious consequences when faced by life threatening situations.

Fortunately, there were four strong, agile young men available within earshot to grab and haul the frantic woman out of the relentless environmental, deep suction process created by centuries of natural decay. And she emerged from her ordeal a trembling, squelching, swamp spattered grotesque figure in urgent need of a hose down.

It required two willing helpers to prise her goo filled waders from trembling legs before the Old Man led her bare foot to his soft water tank to rinse off the worst of the obnoxious congealing pollutant while instructing The Boy to “Go indoors, make a pot of tea and put that small bottle of whisky on the tray when you fetch it out!”

Now well wrapped in a dry blanket, the still shivering narrow escapee knew she could have died out there.” I cannot thank you enough!” she whispered hoarsely but gratefully between sips of well laced whisky tea from The Boy’s pre-war Coronation mug. And after fumbling in the pockets of her damp clothes she squeezed five more sodden brown bank notes into the Old Man’s hand which He carefully fingered gratefully into a warm, skin tight, waistcoat pocket to dry out.

That near fatal disaster ended the NWD Canal otter hunt for the day. The main beneficiary was the Old Man who pocketed a princely reward of five quid for his genuine display of due care and attention which, in 1949, was more than the farm worker's gross weekly wage of £4.14s.0.



The Boy was rewarded with a damp ten bob note he tightly clutched and fluttered in the weak mid-morning sunshine until it dried out. And a hound that went missing during the shindig had swam to dry land and was eventually picked up from the roadside in the Smallburgh village above Wayford Bridge where the NW.Canal joins the River Ant. Luckily, it really was a case of everyone and everything living happily ever after. The cautious Otter Hunters abandoned the meet and never revisited the dangerous, life threatening, Broad Fen bog bordering the lower reaches of the North Walsham, Dilham Canal.

Furthermore, the European Otter (*Lutra Lutra*) was eventually designated an endangered species and hunting it, one of the Nation's most popular mammals, was finally outlawed by Government vote in 1978.

Populations of the children's favourite Henry Williamson's Tarka have since recovered to acceptable 1960 levels while by ironic contrast numbers of the child friendly redundant otter hound have plunged to the point of possible extinction.