

H

The Higgins
BEDFORD

THE GREAT OUSE

Explore



Hello, I'm Kevin the Platypus.

Come with me and explore one of my favourite places in Bedford, The Great Ouse. It's a fascinating place with lots of history, and many artists have been inspired by it.

Let's go outside and explore the river and some wonderful works of art along the way. The walk takes you up river and across Town Bridge, then back down river, over the Suspension Bridge and back to The Higgins.

Going to Town All the art works are on display at The Higgins and you can go and see them for free. Check thehigginsbedford.org.uk for details.

You can also explore some of them on our story map. Follow the link from our web page.



There are lots of opportunities to get creative as you follow the trail.

It's a good idea to take something to draw with, like a notebook and pencil. If you have a camera, you can take photos.

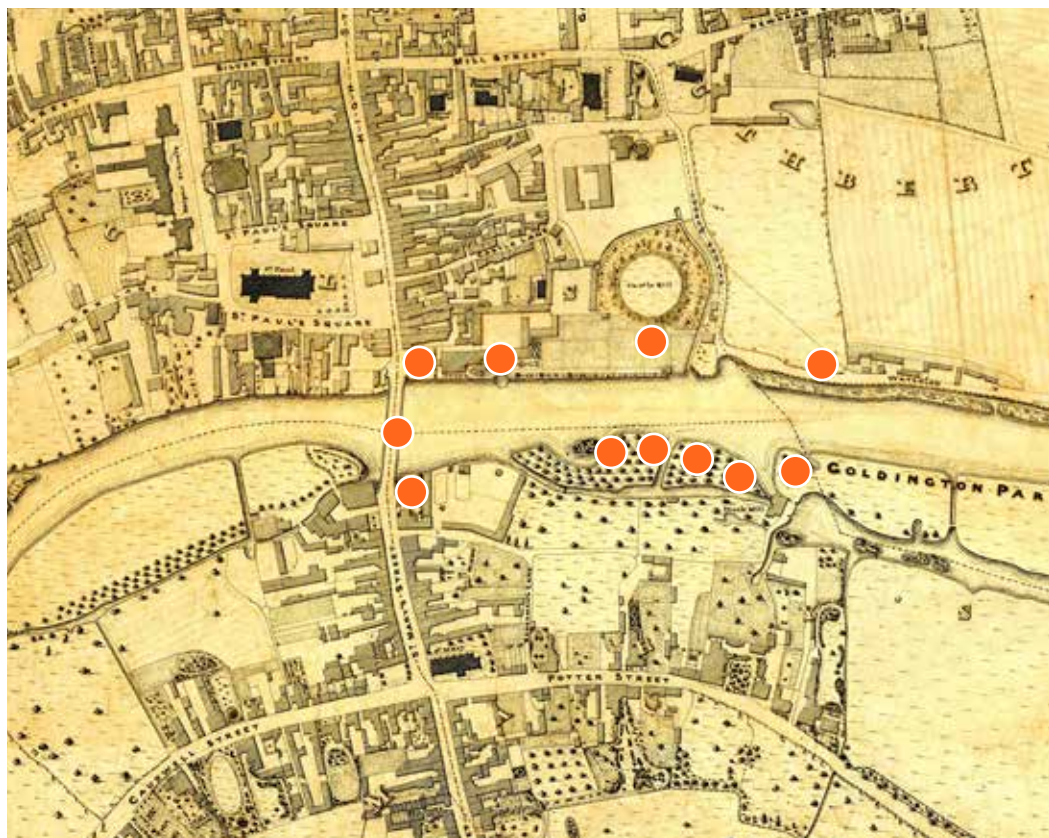


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Explore THE GREAT OUSE

Did you know?

This is from a map published in 1841, and shows Bedford as it was around the same time as many of the art works shown here were created. The dots on the map show your pause points on the way as you explore The Great Ouse. When you stand at these spots, you will be looking at a similar viewpoint as the artist.



Stay Safe

Rivers are brilliant places to explore, but it's very important to keep safe: Take an adult you trust exploring with you. Stay away from the edge of the river. Be very careful when you have to cross the road.





Start

Leave The Higgins and stroll through beautiful Castle Gardens, around past Castle Mound and pause at the bottom of the mound, facing the Embankment. You can see the river in front of you.

River Facts Bedford is named after a ford, where it was easier to cross the river. In Anglo Saxon times, a chieftain called Bede was in charge of the ford, so it was called Bede's Ford. Many years later, a castle was built near this important crossing place.



Bedford Bridge from The Swan Inn and Gardens 1824
By JH Matthiason

This picture shows Bedford from nearly 200 years ago.

Look up river and find Town Bridge and the Swan Inn (now Bedford Swan Hotel)

How many differences can you spot? Take a photo or draw the same view.

Things to do

1. Explore Castle Mound and find out why the castle isn't there any more.
2. Look through the gaps in the columns in the low wall opposite you. Sketch the shape you see and turn this shape into a fun river character.
3. Listen carefully for 30 seconds. How many different sounds can you hear? Which ones are coming from the river?



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Walk Up River

Move on a little further towards the Swan Hotel. Pause by the model of a swan. If you can cross safely, go and sit on a bench. You are now on the north bank of the river.

River Facts In Medieval times, when the castle was thriving, swans were owned by very wealthy people. They were a sign of nobility and people ate them at big important feasts. Swans are important to Bedford and you'll see them represented all over town. How many can you spot?



The Ouse from the North Bank 1906 by Vivian Charles Alger

This picture was painted over 100 years ago.

If you look across to the south bank now, you can see the boat house that was built on this spot just 15 years after the painting.

Take a photo or draw the same view.

Things to do

1. Walk a little further up river and look at Bedford Rowing Club opposite. Sketch the front of the building, just using squares, triangles and rectangles
2. Look out for boats on the river. How many different types can you see? Pretend you are rowing on the river on a sunny day.
3. Talk to someone about what you imagine this view will look like in a hundred years.



Cross the road safely...

...if you haven't already and walk up to the bench near the bridge. There is an information point here.

River Facts The first Town Bridge was probably built about a thousand years ago. It has changed a few times since then. In 1589, a gaol was built on the bridge and over the years it was washed away, rebuilt and then taken down.



Bedford Bridge from the North East, about 1800

The gaol on the bridge was taken down about 5 years before this picture was created and a few years later, the bridge you can now see was designed.

How many differences can you spot? Take a photo or draw the same view.

Things to do

1. Check out the information panel and find out more. Who will you share your new information with?
2. Watch things on the river (eg birds and boats) as they float under the bridge. Use your imagination—where are they off to?
3. Look at the reflections of the bridge on the water. Sketch a section of the bridge and its reflection. If you can't see the reflection, sketch your idea of what it looks like.



Explore THE GREAT OUSE



Move on to Town Bridge

Walk around the corner and pause on the bridge. Look down river (where you have just come from).

River Facts In the 1700s, making beer was big business in Bedford. Water came from the river and other ingredients and the beer itself may have been transported up and down the river. The Higgins is partly an old brewery, look for clues next time you're there.



The Swan Inn from the South West, as Built in 1874, by an unknown artist

This picture was painted when the Swan Hotel was newly built, around 225 years ago.

It was a busy coaching inn, with coaches stopping on their way to or from London every day.

Take a photo or draw the same view.

Things to do

1. Stand facing away from the Swan Hotel. Ask a friend to describe something they can see down river using up to 5 words. Turn back around and try to find what they were describing.
2. Look as far as you can down the river. Sketch the shape of the river, then give yourself 20 seconds to add as much detail as you can.
3. Find the metal information plaque on the bridge that tells you when it was reopened. What does it feel like?





Continue over the bridge

turn left and follow the path on to the south bank.
Find a spot to pause in front of the hotel, facing the river.

River Facts Here you can see the tower and spire of St Paul's church. It is likely that Saxon ruler King Offa founded the church and he was possibly buried there when he died in AD796. Local legend says that his grave was washed away in one of many great river floods.



Bedford Bridge by Thomas Hearne

You can see the old town bridge in this picture. The landscape also shows the south end of the High Street.

Look carefully at the skyline (the shapes made by the tops of the buildings).

Take a photo or draw the skyline you now see.

Things to do

1. Have a go at cloud spotting. Look at the shapes the clouds make and see if you can see other shapes, like animals in them.
2. Close your eyes and listen carefully. What can you hear? Are the sounds different on this side of the river?
3. Architecture; look at St Paul's tower and the tower of the hotel behind you. Describe the differences eg what are they made of?



Explore THE GREAT OUSE



Stay

where you are – in front of the hotel, on the south bank.
Remember to be safe and stay away from the edge of the river.

River Facts There have been many notable floods over the centuries. In 1947, the water level by Town Bridge rose by about 2 metres and almost came to the top of the arches you can see under the bridge. During another huge flood in 1998, thousands of people were evacuated from their homes.



Bedford Bridge and River by Edward Brown

This picture was painted in 1897 and you can see the High Street in the background. In this picture, on the left, rising above the bridge are the Bank Buildings. (They aren't there any more)

Take a photo or draw the same view.

Things to do

1. On the space where the bank once stood, you'll find an amazing 3D illusion art work showing the bank's hidden vault and its treasure. Go and explore it next time you're on the High Street.
2. The Vault art work was created by illusion artist Julian Beever. He is famous all over the world for his pavement art. Find out more about this artist.
3. Imagine what it would feel like to find hidden treasure under the ground near here.





Walk along the path

past Bedford Rowing Club and over two small bridges, passing the red brick buildings of Duckmill Crescent on your right. Find a bench close to the river.

River Facts Can you find the willow trees growing along the banks of the river? Osier willow branches are long and bendy and useful for weaving. For hundreds of years, people have woven willow to make baskets. There were once osier beds on the north bank opposite, where the Embankment is now.



Bedford Bridge by Arthur Anderson Fraser

This picture, painted during Victorian times shows the natural beauty of the river bank framing the town buildings in the far distance.

Using trees as a frame, take a photo or draw the view you can see now.

Things to do

1. Use natural materials (eg fallen twigs and leaves) found around you to create your own work of art on the grass. Learn how to make daisy chains.
2. Find as many different types of leaves as you can. Sketch each type and label it if you know what plant it is from. At home, try printing with the leaves.
3. What does the air around you feel like? Is it warm or cool?





Continue along the path down river

cross one more small bridge. Keep to the left and cross the bigger bridge over the weir. Pause at the bench that faces away from the Embankment, looking back where you have just come from.

River Facts A mill was first built here around the same time as a stone castle was built across the river. After a siege on the castle in 1137, the mill was given to monks. Four hundred years later, during the reign of Henry VIII it became privately owned and lasted for about 350 more years.



Duck Mill 1885 by William Winchester Fraser

This view of the mill was painted just five years before it was demolished. All that is left now are the weir and sluice gates you've just crossed over.

Take a photo or draw the same view.

Things to do

1. Go back to the bridges and look out for all the amazing wildlife that lives on, in or near the river. There are many birds, fish and insects and if you watch carefully, you might even see a heron.
2. Listen to the water as it rushes over the weir. Imagine what it was like to stand here in the time of Henry VIII.
3. Take photos or sketch one of the birds or insects you see. Try to take your photo from an unusual angle.





Continue along the path down river

cross the next small bridge and pause at the bench on the other side.

River Facts Locks were installed so that boats and barges could sail all the way from the sea. In 2018, a group of narrowboaters sailed across The Wash and 160 miles up river to join the River Festival 40th anniversary celebrations in Bedford.



Lower River and Mill Meadows Lock by Bradford Rudge

This picture was painted around 150 years ago during Victorian times. You can see barges carrying goods along the river and going towards the lock.

Take a photo or draw the lock as it looks now.

Things to do

1. Look out for boats on the river. Sometimes there are rowers and kayakers. Other times there are narrowboats. You might be able to cruise along the river on the John Bunyan Boat, or have a go on a boat at Longholme Café.
2. Either draw a boat you have seen or design your own boat to sail along the river.
3. How many different textures can you touch around you? (Remember to clean your hands after).



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Keep following the path...

...to the bandstand. You might want to explore here a little. Then continue following the path by the river until you see the benches where the path forks (X marks the spot!) You'll see the Suspension Bridge close by.

River Facts Since Viking times, people have been able to sail from the sea, up the Great Ouse towards Bedford. In 1978, the first River Festival was held to celebrate the re-opening of a route all the way from The Wash. Bedford River Festival is now held every 2 years and thousands of people come to join in the fun.



Mill Meadows by Thomas Jobson Jackson

When this view was painted in 1879, this area was very different to now, but Bedford and the river were changing quickly. In less than 10 years a new Suspension Bridge will connect Mill Meadows and the Embankment.

Take a photo or draw the same view.

Things to do

1. Share all the drawings and photos you have created today with a friend or family member. Tell them all about your adventures.
2. Draw the best things to eat if you were at a festival or having a picnic here.
3. Make the most of this big wide open space. Have a picnic, play games or explore further down river and find the hydro-electricity station or Longholme Island.



When you're ready



Walk over the Suspension Bridge, taking a look at the view both up and down the river. Turn left and stroll up the Embankment back towards The Higgins. Take notice of things you see along the way, like the War Memorial, the flower beds, the patterns and shapes on the buildings and the black and white Embankment Hotel. Pause before you cross the road (in front of Albany House).

River Facts People think that this area was originally called **Waterside** and that the people who lived there changed it to **Waterloo** after the battle of Waterloo in 1815.



Waterloo (Slum of Bedford) by an unknown artist

This painting shows a poor area with small run down cottages and houses by the river's muddy banks. They were demolished in the late 1800s and replaced by big Victorian homes, the Embankment Hotel, ornamental gardens and a wide footpath known as The Promenade.

Things to do

1. Head back to The Higgins, pausing to smell the flowers in Castle Gardens on your way.
2. Explore the exhibition 'Going to Town' using the I Spy on the back of this trail and have a go at achieving Arts Award Discover.