

February 2015 Islip

"Here be fine hobgoblins indeed," Mistress Moulso observed in 1611. Surprisingly, she was not commenting upon the Shamblers making their way across the fields near Islip, but instead upon her smock, which to her horror she had found, "bespotted with the pictures of Toades, Snakes and other ugly Creatures." A curse, no doubt, from one Helen Jenkenson who lived just across the bridge in Thrapston; for Mistress Moulso had recently examined Helen and had discovered, "that insensible marke that all Witches have in some place or other of their bodies." With such evidence, Helen Jenkenson was duly hanged on the gallows in Northampton.

Had Mistress Moulso's linen really been cursed by Jenkenson, or more likely just splattered with mud? Ask any of the Shamblers on the February walk and they will probably tell you, that even to this day, clods of Islip's mud still clings to their boots, in strange shapes.

Our guide had informed us, as we took our cautious steps, that the previous year, these meadows had been thigh deep in fast running water; and that those living in the area had never seen the like. There remains a lot of drying out still to be done. Though we should have known it, for the name, 'Islip' is derived from 'slaep' the Old English word meaning 'a slippery place'.

A weak sun, hidden behind February clouds, slowly lifted the soft mist over scattered willow shrubs, oak and ash trees on the further shores of the lakes, as we followed 'The Nene Way' through an open landscape.

Here long ago the men of Islip took especial care not to slip. Dressed in the onesie of its day: a flannel garment, lovingly made for them by their wives, they would at the right season of the year walk into the river; and then armed with a long curving blade fixed to a pole, cut from underwater the six-foot tall rushes: the finest in the land. Hauling them out on the banks to drain, they were then afterwards dragged back to Islip, and set out in fan shapes by the side of the road. Once dried, they were made into 'rush collars' for which Islip became famous: the thick collars worn by dray horses working the land.

We saw no men that day dressed in pyjama suits cutting the rushes, for the last 'rush collar' was made in 1960. Instead, we noticed tight buds on slender trees, resistant to the promise of spring.

In such a sleepy village, it is hard to imagine there was once a pig-iron industry here, with mines, furnaces and a chimney stack 185 feet high. Escaping gases once lighting the sky as they burnt. The work so hard, that there was a saying here that: "at Islip they made pigs and old men."

During the war, the work became even more arduous, for to hide the site from German bombers, corrugated sheeting was placed over the tops of the four 'pig bays'; subsequently, the workers suffering the effects of extreme heat and gassing.

Our walk in the fresh air, took us along an old abandoned railway line, much romanticised by our chatter of steam engines. Most of us completely unaware that at the nearby foundry, fifty tons of pig-iron were once man-handled onto waiting railway trucks, during each and every shift, until the final 'pig' was cast in 1942.

After the last iron deposits were depleted, sand and gravel reserves were then dug out, creating the mosaic of tranquil lakes and wetlands, that we explored. A carved landscape, one through which a strange, prehistoric, elephant-type creature once walked, with curving long tusks five feet, four inches long, and which was discovered deeply buried in sediments here dating from the mid-glacial period. Perhaps it slipped.

On our return, we passed cottages where for hundreds of years, fingers of every family members were busily employed in the plaiting of dried rushes into matting, carpets and baskets.

Later, some Shamblers members tucked into roast dinners at the Woolpack, unaware that this building was once used as a coroner's court; and that in the adjacent barn, bodies of whose had slipped into the river were laid out.

Despite such perils, we survived the slippery mud, and thankfully, there was no Mistress Moulso to look askance at the strange marks on our trouser leggings as we got back into our cars, as it is doubtful that our guide, Colin, would have escaped his hanging.

Many warm thanks to Colin our intrepid guide, and also Barnacle Bill who watched all backs.