



# Flag Fen Futures:

A ten-year strategy to research and  
revitalise Flag Fen Archaeology Park

2025 – 2035



# Introduction

## Flag Fen Futures: A ten-year strategy to research and revitalise Flag Fen Archaeology Park.

The story of Flag Fen begins in 1971 when excavations ahead of the construction of Peterborough New Town revealed an almost intact Bronze Age landscape, which ran along the edge of the drained fen. Then in November 1982, archaeologists surveying out in the depths of the basin came across timbers of what was to prove to be an internationally important site - Flag Fen.

The rich archaeological collection and remains at Flag Fen are important in understanding the wider prehistoric landscape of the Flag Fen Basin (see Fig 1) and what was happening in Britain during the Bronze Age. The Flag Fen post alignment was discovered in 1982 during a survey of Fenland dykes and the main excavations were carried out between 1982 and 1996. In 1989 the power station, on Fourth Drove, funded an excavation of the site. The Fengate landfall of a timber causeway was traced the whole way across Flag Fen from the posts initially discovered in 1982. Alongside the timbers swords, daggers, rapiers, spearheads, jewellery, and tools were revealed. The items were dated to approximately 1300 to 900 BC with a few finds from the Iron Age.

Since its discovery, the management strategy has almost always been to protect these remarkable remains by leaving them buried in the ground that

had protected them for 3500 years. However, even then we knew that the land would not protect the archaeology forever and that one day this precious vanished world would succumb to climate change and fen drainage, leaving nothing but dust. New evidence shows that we have reached the point where no intervention changes from protection to abandonment. It is therefore time to move from a strategy of protection in situ to a research agenda. This ten-year investment strategy - Flag Fen Futures, addresses that need.

The archaeology park, when new, was a vibrant place where people could view and participate in archaeology; where experimental archaeology was engaged in and Flag Fen was a source of local pride and playing a part in the local tourism economy. This investment framework will address how we will capture the archaeological value of Flag Fen, retain the spirit of this special place and regain relevance to our lost and potential audiences. As we reveal the hidden layers of this pre-historic landscape we will create public value through community participation on a grand scale, learning experiences and training the archaeologists of the future. Our mission is to create access on all levels through new interpretation and visitor experiences.

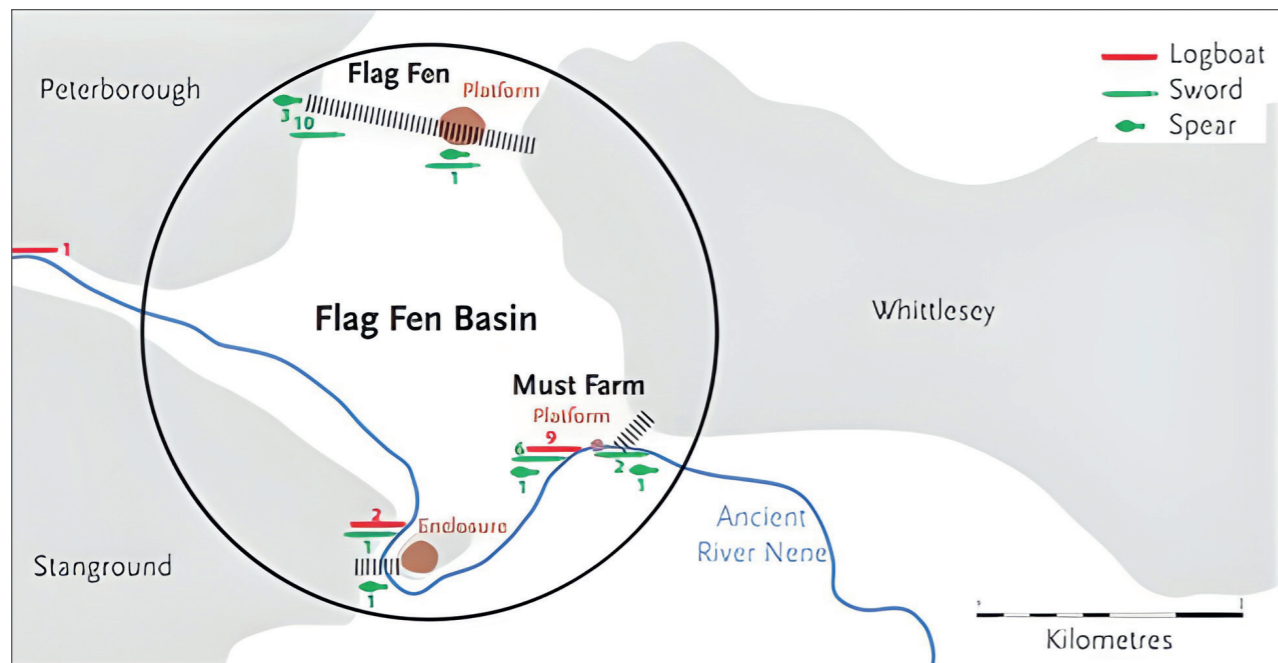


Fig 1 - The Flag Fen Basin.

# What do we know about Flag Fen?

## Flag Fen is one of Britain's foremost Bronze Age monuments and the largest wooden prehistoric structure in the country.

The monument incorporates a post-alignment, made up of at least five parallel rows of posts (1.1km long and 10m wide), and a platform, comprising a widespread, multi-layered distribution of horizontal timbers (c. 2ha). The post-alignment spans the northern neck of the Flag Fen Basin and involves an estimated 22,000 axe-sharpened posts or piles, the bulk of which are oak.

The platform is located towards the eastern end of the post-alignment and coincides with the deepest part of the Flag Fen Basin. Both components were constructed shortly after 1300 BC, as the basin became progressively more waterlogged, and both constructions were added to over a period of 400 years during the later Bronze Age.

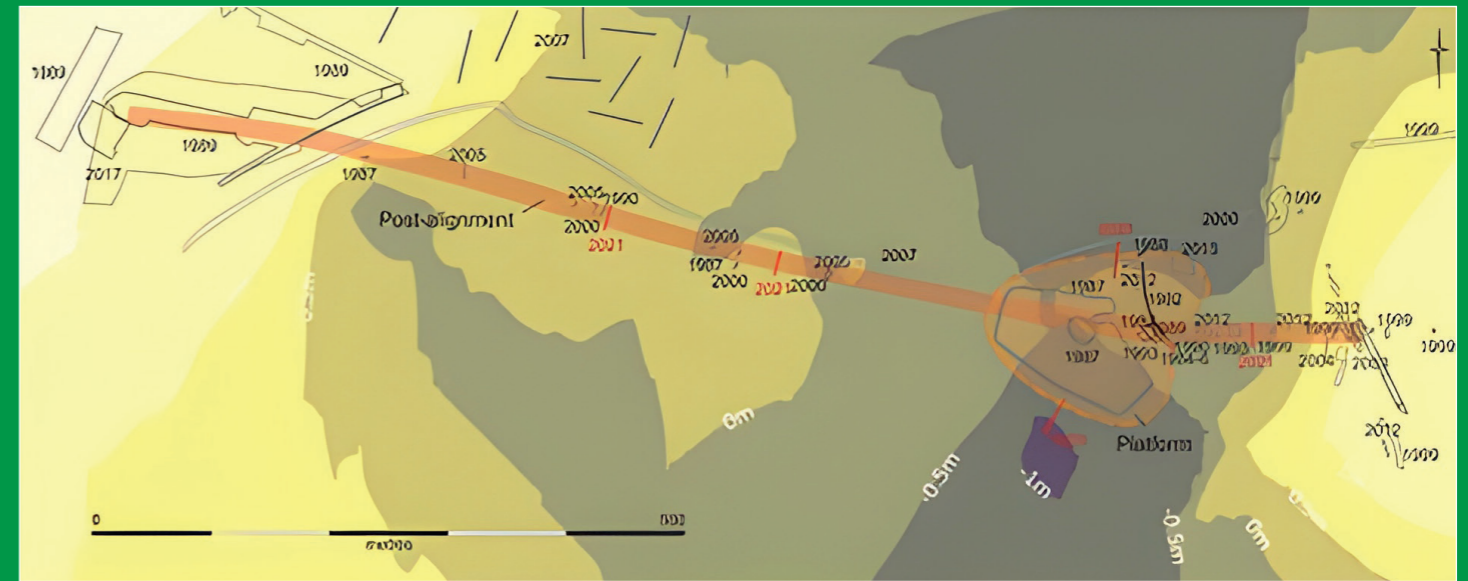


Fig 2 - plan of the post-alignment and platform (with location inset).

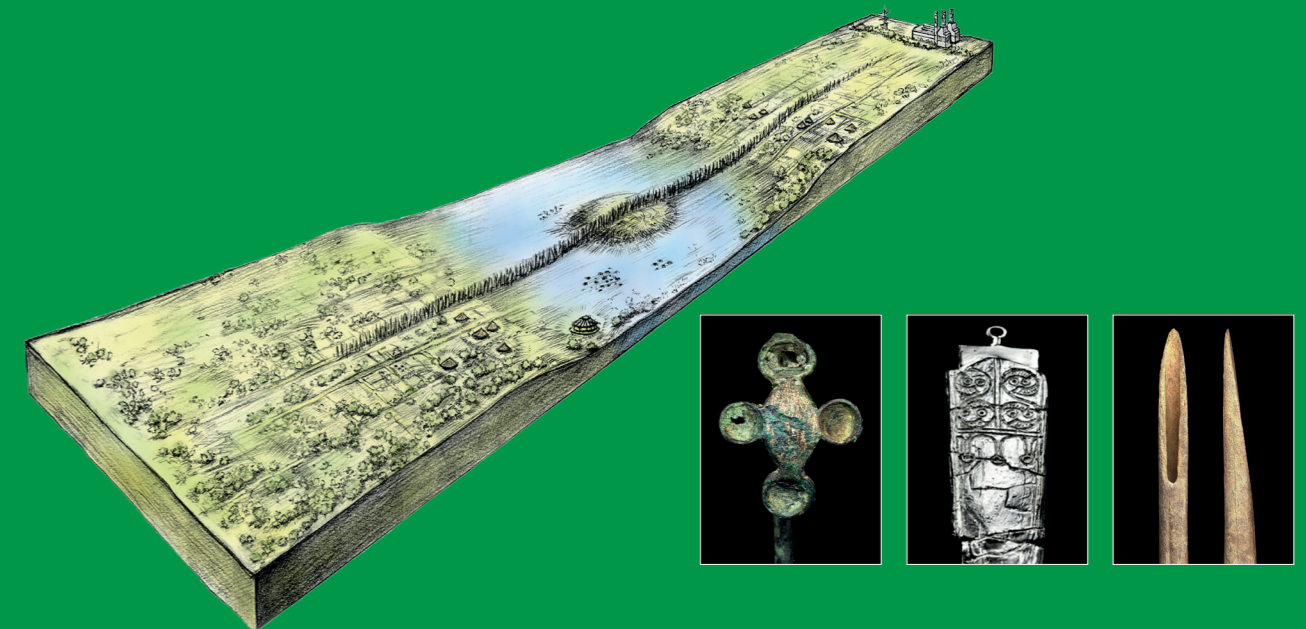




Fig 3 - Photograph of Pryor's Area 6 excavation showing post rows and horizontal timbers.

Since its discovery in 1982, excavations at the site, led by Francis Pryor, have captured the imagination of the archaeological community and wider public alike. Through a steady stream of high-profile publications, now spanning more than four decades, the story of Flag Fen has shifted in step with its history of investigation. The initial interpretation of a timber platform settlement site, was subsequently reinterpreted as a succession of closely spaced parallel boundaries or barriers, flanked and woven by a series of timber walkways. Throughout, the easterly positioned platform element remained enigmatic, punctuated by open pools of water, and circumscribed by a 'revetted' perimeter walkway.

Along with the preserved wooden architecture the site has yielded a breath-taking array of special finds involving over a hundred bronze weapons and tools (rapiers, swords, spears, axes, gouges, razors, awes etc.), wooden artefacts (axe hafts, an axle and a wheel), whole quern stones, pots and disarticulated human remains. Deposition of these things coincided largely with the 'use' of the post-alignment and platform. They are thought to represent purposeful offerings allied specifically to the monument's increasingly watery setting – adding to the idea of Flag Fen as a special place.



Fig 4- Distribution of sites/post-alignments/metalwork/settlement.

# A site understood?

Given the prominence that Flag Fen has achieved in both academic and popular narratives of British prehistory, one would be forgiven for thinking that the site has been comprehensively examined. But this is not the case. Despite the fact that there have been 36 excavations in the last 40 years, only 5% of the monument has ever been explored

in full archaeological detail. The long history and complexity of this monument is far from fully understood. Many questions remain for the site, not only relating to its chronology, architecture and use, but also to its wider place and significance within the Flag Fen embayment and the Fenland Basin as a whole.

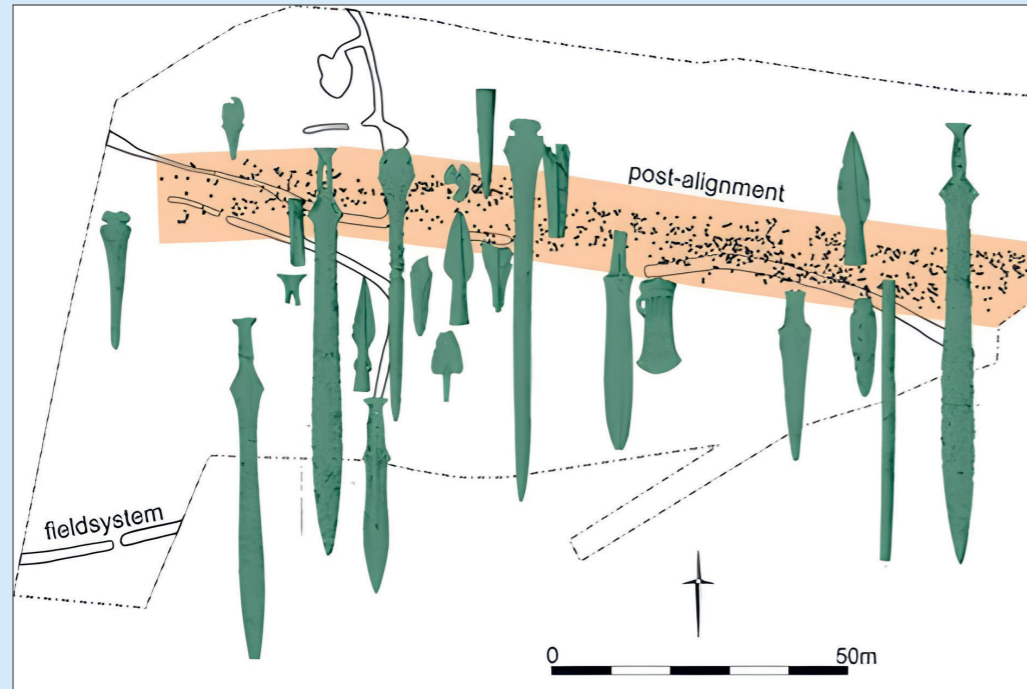


Fig 5 - Metal deposition at the Power Station.

# Archaeological decline

The timbers forming the internationally-significant Flag Fen post-alignment are degrading. There is now a risk of catastrophic loss to the preserved archaeology. Flag Fen is the largest known wooden prehistoric structure in the UK, yet, the kilometre-long post-alignment and its enigmatic platform have only ever been partially investigated. Time is running out fast if we want to properly understand this truly remarkable monument and its equally remarkable history of deposition.

Falling water levels mean the shallower stretches of the monument are no longer waterlogged. Very soon, large swaths of the Bronze Age post-alignment will be in such poor condition that the bulk of its structural remains will barely be recognisable, beyond saying what survives was once worked wood. Our ability to gain new information from the sites organic components, including its paleoenvironmental record of pollen and insect remains, being largely or wholly lost. Bereft of these remains it will also be nearly impossible

to comprehend the context of the extraordinary artefacts, such as the metalwork or the human remains.

The understanding of Flag Fen is therefore contingent upon the articulation and survival of both organic and inorganic components, with the decay of the former jeopardising the significance of the site to Bronze Age studies. Unfortunately, the window of opportunity to capture this evidential value is rapidly diminishing.



Fig 6 - Composite image showing condition of the buried causeway in 2021.

# What next?

Alarm bells are rightly ringing about the condition of Flag Fen, but small archaeological interventions in 2021 generated a range of new observations and questions which challenge the original interpretation and invite a major re-thinking of *what Flag Fen is*.

All baseline assumptions about the site require further scrutiny, with recognition that enough answers will not

be found in the 5% sample excavated to date, nor in further small-scale interventions. A bold new approach is needed to understand Flag Fen, with archaeology research framework questions directed at gaps in our knowledge:

- **Context or setting:** What was the underlying palaeo-topography of Flag Fen and its associated deposit sequence? Which parts of the basin became wet first and when? What is the relationship between oak woodland, evidenced by the stumps encountered, and the first elements of the Flag Fen monument?
- **Extent:** What is the horizontal extent of the Flag Fen wood mass, and what is its relationship to the post-alignments and the platform? Where are the monuments true edges?
- **Chronology and duration:** When did the construction of Flag Fen start and when did it finish? Can the dating of the non-oak component of the post-alignment/platform change our perspective on chronology? Can we build a fine-grained chronology, and sense of duration, that articulates the start-stop nature of construction and activity across a long-lived, multivarious wooden edifice?
- **Deposition:** How frequent was deposition at Flag Fen, and how might we understand the range and chronology of different depositional practices?
- **Appearance:** What did Flag Fen look like, and how did its appearance change over time? Was the monument composed of free-standing posts beside and between ground level timber walkways, or was there a raised superstructure? How real or distinct is the five row alignment model of posts? Can we build a blueprint for Flag Fen?
- **Landscape relationship:** How did Flag Fen relate to the other post-alignments in the basin? Given its longevity, what role did Flag Fen play in relation to the changing settlement patterns during the later Bronze Age and earlier Iron Age?



Fig 7 - Artist impression of the post alignment towards the end of its life - about 900BC. Rob Fuller.



## The Flag Fen Futures project team will put conservation and public value centre stage in our plans.

Our challenge is to capture the archaeological value of Flag Fen; retain the spirit of this special place; and regain relevance to our lost and potential supporters. The scale of this challenge is immense and so is the opportunity. As we reveal the hidden layers of this pre-historic landscape we will create opportunities for public participation. By working with local communities, we will co-create new experiences,

these could be archaeology, ecology or visitor management based. Inclusive consultation with local people will guide us through the decisions we make on this project. We will encourage local people to retain a long-term involvement and investment in this site by participating at every level of Flag Fen, from volunteer opportunities to governance and strategic direction.

## What do we want to do?

- Establish the best and most exemplary public participation and archaeology research there has ever been in the UK
- Deliver 10 years of exemplary research to the highest standards
- Create a new narrative framework to tell the story of Flag Fen
- Provide new visitor offerings to ensure accessibility to Flag Fen at all levels

# Our vision

Flag Fen is revealed and revitalised, it is a hive of discovery and learning, exciting and innovative, respectful of the past and open to new narratives. Inclusive and welcoming, where new connections with people and place can be made. Flag Fen is a destination for discovery and relaxation which people treasure and come back to time and time again.



# Outcomes and benefits for archaeology

| Output   | Outcomes   | Benefits   |
|--|--|--|
| A new framework for archaeological research  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DCMS approved mandate to implement archaeological investigations</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better able to protect the heritage asset</li> <li>• Flag Fen's past is relevant to Peterborough's modern day climate change challenges</li> <li>• Join modern day climate change conversations by better understanding the challenges faced by the Bronze Age communities of Flag Fen</li> </ul>   |
| Archaeology being done on site   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater understanding of what Flag Fen was to pre-historic communities</li> <li>• Rescue and research archaeology that is at imminent risk of irreversible decline</li> <li>• New evidence to create enjoyable visitor and learning experiences</li> <li>• New contribution to regional archaeology research framework key questions about pre-historic East of England</li> <li>• Local historic environment record increased</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Able to make Flag Fen accessible to all</li> <li>• Deeper relationships between Flag Fen and the national and international academic community</li> <li>• Retain the chance to learn from precious organic deposits whilst they still retain archaeological value</li> <li>• Raises the profile of Flag Fen, leading to more visitors and greater financial security</li> </ul> |
| <p>Public participation in archaeology</p> <p>New volunteering opportunities to participate in archaeological research</p> <p>Provide emotionally rewarding and intellectually stimulating experiences based on feedback from community consultation</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitate lifelong learning</li> <li>• Support people's wellbeing</li> <li>• Encourage people getting into paid work</li> <li>• Create opportunities that help to attract and train the Fenland specialist archaeologists of the future</li> <li>• Increase local interest and support for Flag Fen</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local communities feel connected with Flag Fen and our conservation purpose, which translates into support</li> <li>• Closer long-term relationships with our local communities so that they are engaged in and advocate for our shared journey</li> <li>• People are inspired to support our cause</li> </ul>  |
| Continuous consultation with local communities, specialist groups and academic institutions  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flag Fen provides opportunities that people want and care about</li> <li>• Volunteers and supporters will increase</li> <li>• Visitor numbers will increase</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Closer long-term relationships with our local communities so that they are engaged in and advocate for our shared journey</li> <li>• Flag Fen will receive good visitor feedback and recommendations</li> </ul>   |
| New learning packages and facilities   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help to attract and train the Fenland specialist archaeologists of the future</li> <li>• Increase the ability to practise a dynamic approach to excavation and scientific research immediately</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instant decisions about how and where to excavate can be made at the point of initial discovery rather than be delayed and require a second, less timely intervention</li> <li>• Live action communications can be made available as the excavations happen attracting media interest and increased visitors/volunteers</li> </ul>  |

Continued overleaf



# Outcomes and benefits for archaeology

| Output   | Outcomes  | Benefits   |
|--|---|--|
| Accessible archives and collections  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flag Fen provides opportunities that people want and care about</li> <li>• More people are able to research and study Flag Fen and they will increase understanding of what Flag Fen was to pre-historic communities</li> <li>• Enhanced museum facilities and accreditation</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased eligibility for external grant funding</li> <li>• Better external grant eligibility</li> <li>• Improved museum displays to increase visitor enjoyment</li> </ul>  |
| Digital and outreach offer   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Flag Fen archive information will be available off-site in a digital format</li> <li>• Online resources will be developed and made available to a wider audience who are unable to visit</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flag Fen profile raised through being more accessible to a wider audience</li> </ul>  |
| Immersive, enjoyable experiences that inform<br><br>Provide emotionally rewarding and intellectually stimulating experiences based on feedback from community consultation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New causeway preservation experience</li> <li>• All new experiences will be fully accessible to all</li> <li>• The new visitor offer will be award winning</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People are inspired to support our cause</li> <li>• Visitors expectations of what their experience of a heritage attraction should be are met and exceeded</li> <li>• Improved visitor offer generates repeat visitors</li> <li>• Visitor offer generates good word of mouth message and great media feedback</li> </ul>                                    |
| New site facilities  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Museum large enough to display the full Flag Fen collection alongside the Must Farm Paleochannel collection</li> <li>• Provision of enough toilets and car parking for visitors</li> <li>• Secure increased workshop and storage space</li> <li>• Larger and improved simulated digging area</li> <li>• Better use of existing built spaces</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visitors expectations of what their experience of a heritage attraction should be are met and exceeded</li> <li>• The fantastic visitor offer generates repeat visitors</li> <li>• Visitor offer generates good word of mouth message and great media feedback</li> <li>• Increase staff and volunteer retention through better job satisfaction</li> </ul> |
| New staff and volunteer facilities   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provision of staff and volunteer welfare facilities</li> <li>• Provision of enough space for project research to take place - i.e. laboratory/storage/office</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase staff and volunteer retention through better job satisfaction</li> <li>• Improved volunteer recruitment through better tools to achieve learning outcomes</li> </ul>   |
| Physical connections   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better public transport links with Peterborough and Whittlesey</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flag Fen visitor numbers increase through being accessible to a wider audience</li> </ul>   |

# Can you support Flag Fen Futures?

People will be central to everything we do throughout the project. Funding will enable Flag Fen and the archives to be made accessible to all, provide a wide range of opportunities for public participation and will also provide the resources needed to research and look after the archaeology for future generations.



# Please can you help to fund:

- Projects that will help support local people's wellbeing and learning opportunities through volunteering at Flag Fen
- Build volunteer welfare facilities
- Projects that will contribute to creating new accessible infrastructure
- Repair Fourth Drove access road so that Flag Fen can reconnect with Peterborough once more and be accessible by public transport
- Archaeological research
- Help us to renew the Mere, create new wetland habitats and protect the buried archaeology

And much more...

If you would like to support Flag Fen, either through volunteering your time, corporate volunteering or financial support, please contact

[flagfenfutures@peterboroughlimited.co.uk](mailto:flagfenfutures@peterboroughlimited.co.uk)





***Flag Fen***  
***Archaeology Park***

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