



Peterborough to Cambridge on foot: five days in the fens

item	kg
80 litre rucksack	1.8
tent	1.93
s.bag and silk liner	1.48
air mattress	0.39
camera	0.97
lens 17:55mm	0.72
lens 70:200mm	1.58
lens filters	0.23
toiletries and 1 st aid	0.3
phone	0.24
head torch	0.09
kindle	0.4
iPod	0.16
clothing	2.04
sundries	0.74
total	13.07

Day 1, Wednesday, June 3. Sheffield to Peterborough by rail. I arrive mid day, lunch at a noodle bar near the cathedral, then head for the north bank of the Nene to go due east toward Whittlesey.









To save weight I left not only cooking gear at home but maps (three needed) and compass. Bad idea. I got away with it last July on the Highland Way – Richard kept us both on track – and solo in August on the coastal stretch of the Cleveland Way: *sea to left, follow cliff tops; simples!*

But Fenland is different. Signs show paths but seldom where they lead, let alone distances. These problems are exacerbated by flat land and big sky. As on open water, features that look one mile away turn out to be four.

There's insensitive mirth when I phone the ranch, late afternoon, for Googled directions to March from 'where Wrights Drove meets Straight Drove'.

*Oh, you don't want to be **there** if you're heading for March!*

An hour later I have to call again, from Oil Mill Drove in mid Nowhereshire. After miles of meandering, some of it circular despite a constant sun to guide me, I'm so far south of March it no longer makes sense to head there.

Ely is more logical, though I won't reach it by nightfall.

No worries. The raised banks of Nene and drainage dyke offer many places to pitch tent after dark. At sundown I opt for one by the Forty Foot, thinking to be in Chatteris, five miles away, for coffee by mid morning next day.

My tent is up in two minutes. With toothpaste spat out into carefully parted nettles, and floss wrapped for next day disposal, I slip inside my sleeping bag, tent flap open to the western sky.



Day 2. Traffic till midnight and beyond on the B1096 – here tucked coyly between farm and far bank, though the reflector posts are a giveaway – didn't stop me sleeping, while the lush grass made my air mattress redundant.

As a rule the name of the game when camping wild is to stay clear of dwellings and be up and away early doors. But neither farm nor traffic trouble me this morning. I doubt anyone will be put out by so tiny a tent on the flood bank, and I'll be sure to leave only a small patch of flattened grass. In any case Farmer Fen will have his work cut out catching me. On my side fields run as far as the eye can see, the nearest bridge at Ramsey Forty Foot, three miles away. Then he'll have the same three miles, on foot or chugging tractor, up the bank to my pitch.

Where he'll find nowt but aforesaid flattened grass and a thank you note.

I lie in till eight, then drink cold coffee made yesterday at home, follow with the last of my water, take my time packing. With the sun already beginning to burn I strap sandals to rucksack to walk barefoot on grass still damp, the air ringing with birdsong and a seamless, droning commuter thrum from the B1096.





A huge carp glides across the Forty Foot, its back an unusual beige; dorsal fin nicking the surface in a slick, v-shaped ripple. A cormorant swims by, faster than me and in the opposite direction. Every twenty seconds it dives, resurfacing with bleak or small rudd in beak, to cruise on without pause: breakfast on the go. In this heat I lack the energy to ease rucksack from shoulders, extract telephoto lens and run back on myself to get a picture there for the taking. (Yesterday I passed on a grazing deer – close enough to allow a good shot but far enough to be unfazed by my presence – for the same reason. You could say I lack the wildlifer mindset.)



Aware of my laziness – but not enough to fight it – I'm minded of an old and terribly non-PC joke. Paddy hits London, having heard tell in deepest Mayo of streets awash with money. He arrives mid evening and, walking down Euston Road, sees in the gutter a fifty pound note. He stoops to pick it, then stops midway.
Nah, fuck it – I'll start tomorrow.
I saw no more cormorants. Nor carp nor deer.



Away from the water the land is still flat, the sky huge and the illusion of things being closer than they really are as strong as ever.

This path took me off the murderous A142, where I'd trudged a dreary hour. There was no walkway, though mostly the traffic would swing out to leave me room. Mostly.

As usual the signpost flagged a public bridleway (the sun telling me its direction chimed with mine) but not where it led. It turns out to be a horseshoe. After several miles I'm dumped back on the A142 a mile on from where I'd left it.

Shoulda brung those maps.

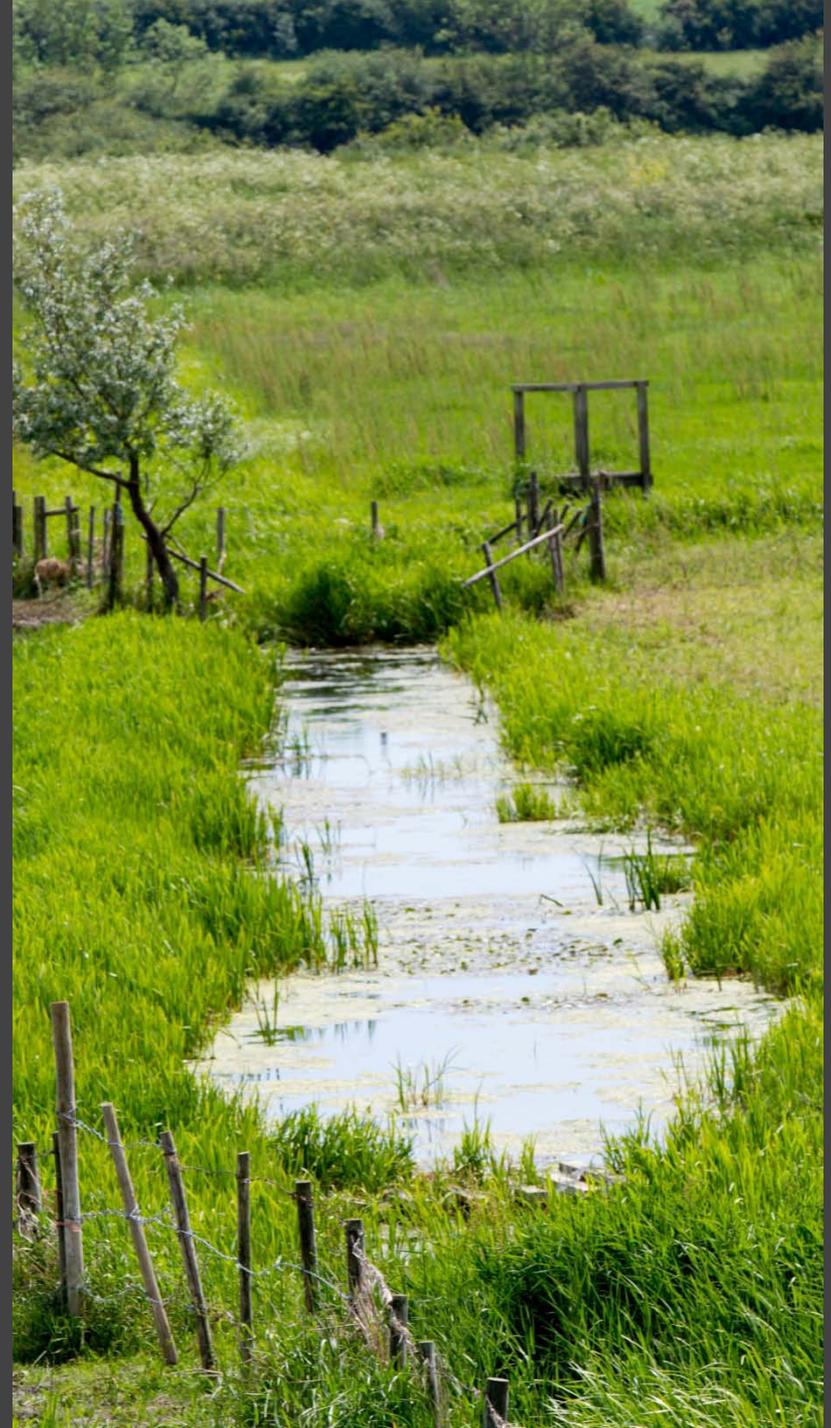


Early afternoon. My first human encounter of the day is with a blonde sixty-something, pink-topped and parked by the dyke to walk two Maltesers. I get the life story. RAF hubbie died, leaving her in their rented cottage on Desolation Fen – she points dispiritedly to a lone yellow brick affair, stark in the distance. *“It’s alright on a day like this but, come winter, depressing’s not in it. As for the folk round these parts ... well, they can be right funny.”*

She wants out, back to North Yorkshire; her ten years here nine too many. So what’s stopping her?

“I’m on the internet every night but all I find is places that are too expensive or won’t allow dogs.”

Though both tenant *and* landlord, I resist the temptation to make suggestions. Instinct and experience tell me she wants a good moan, not solutions. She’s a northern souler, she confides, as she points me toward Ely. As with March, and for the same reason, I’ve overshot Chatteris. I’m parched and perspirational, longing for a skinny dip and pint, in that order since sweat is starting to produce chafing. *Water, water everywhere nor any yet to drink.* I’d take my chances with the microbes but who knows what they spray on the crops round here, much of it leaching into the dykes? As for the dip, every one of the channels criss-crossing the fen seems edged with spiky reed, stinging nettle and flag iris rooted in swamp. I need water I can get in and out of without being caked in mud and stung in places as precious to me as they are sensitive.





A photograph of a fen landscape. In the foreground, there are tall green reeds and several bright yellow flowers, likely irises, growing along the edge of a narrow water channel. The water is dark blue and reflects the sky. In the background, a flat expanse of green fen stretches to the horizon under a clear blue sky with a few wispy clouds. A utility pole with power lines is visible in the distance.

Around three I find this spot. My clothes are off in a flash, so to speak. (On the fen you'll see anyone coming an hour before they arrive.) My feet sink deep into mud soft and sensuous but, by keeping still so as not to stir it, I can stand in gin clear water up to my neck and squat to go under. Then I swim, lazily, on my back. Nothing but blue skies do I see.
Now all I need is that drink.

It turns out I'm only three miles from Sutton. I reach The Anchor, on the outskirts, late afternoon: dead tired but skin tingling from my dip.

Only after draining two glasses of water do I allow myself a first sip of Sparta, the local brew. Gold and bitter clean, with undertones of grapefruit – the hop mix has to be good in a pale ale: there's not enough malt to hide mediocrity – it does not disappoint. The water having slaked my thirst, I can now take my time. It's a felony to rush a good pint.

From Sutton I take the few miles to Ely by bus, using a recently acquired senior citizen's pass for the first time outside of Sheffield.

I've no idea where I'll be sleeping. As ever, the Beatles are bang on the money: *oh that magic feeling, nowhere to go.*



There's no way I can camp in Ely, not without walking up or downriver to leave town. My weariness amazes me; I'm rounded on my feet. This, and a sad forecast for tomorrow, have me heading for the camp site allegedly a mile and a half south of town.

It's too late for a bus. I tramp down the A10 as per instructions while lorries roar past. At least there's a pavement. The walk is closer to three miles and the site dreadful. As is the price, £14 a night, but I'm over a barrel.

It's dark by the time I've pitched and showered. I block out the din of shrieking kids – *shouldn't they be tucked up in bed?* – and slip morosely into my bag.

Day 3. The promised rain arrives. I lie in half the morning to Mozart, Miles and Lucinda Williams. By ten thirty the overhead percussion has eased off. I shower again and bus it to Ely. Breakfast and coffee lift my spirits, as does the first glimmer of sunshine over the cathedral.

I decide on a day of leisure: Ely's an attractive place and tonight I'll camp upriver.





Historically, eels are to Ely as pilchards to St Ives. The *y* or *ey* suffix is Saxon for *island* (the undrained fen more perilous to cross than mere water) so Ely the elevated is “isle of eels”.

Cool name for the shop. I’m reminded of an Incredible String Band album from the sixties but *that* daughter, easy on the eye, wasn’t sired by an eel catcher. She was the hang-man’s beautiful daughter and you can tell, from the wares on view, the shop owner’s an unreconstructed ISB fan.

After a pleasant afternoon pottering I take the bus – free of course – back to camp for my stuff. I'm psyched up for a row about leaving my tent all day when not staying a second night. The owner sees me but gives me no grief. He knows my views on charging £14 a night for a solo camper on foot.

The evening is a peach, its rainwashed skies a landscape photographer's dream. I buy a Tesco salad, check the disabled loo for washing in the morning, and eat by the Great Ouse. My two Eccles cakes I save for breakfast, when I'll be needing the carb hit.









My pitch of choice, a mile up from Ely and clocked on a previous visit. With clear night forecast, and full on sun tomorrow, the low ground between river and hillock doesn't worry me – the latter shielding me from view in fact – but grazing cattle, just off-picture, do. I don't fancy being woken dead of night by the heavy breathing, inches from my face, of curious kine. Close by I find an engineering works, behind it a fishing pond. It's a pretty spot,

out of the way, its mown grass banks leaving me spoilt for choice. My cranny of fancy can't be seen from the path, and with so handsome a river close by I doubt any dog walker will trek past the factory to surprise me. The water looks carpy though. Carp anglers do it at night so I bide my time to see if anyone comes. I dump my rucksack in a clump of nettles, check it isn't visible to the casual eye, and take a stroll, shoulders joyously released.

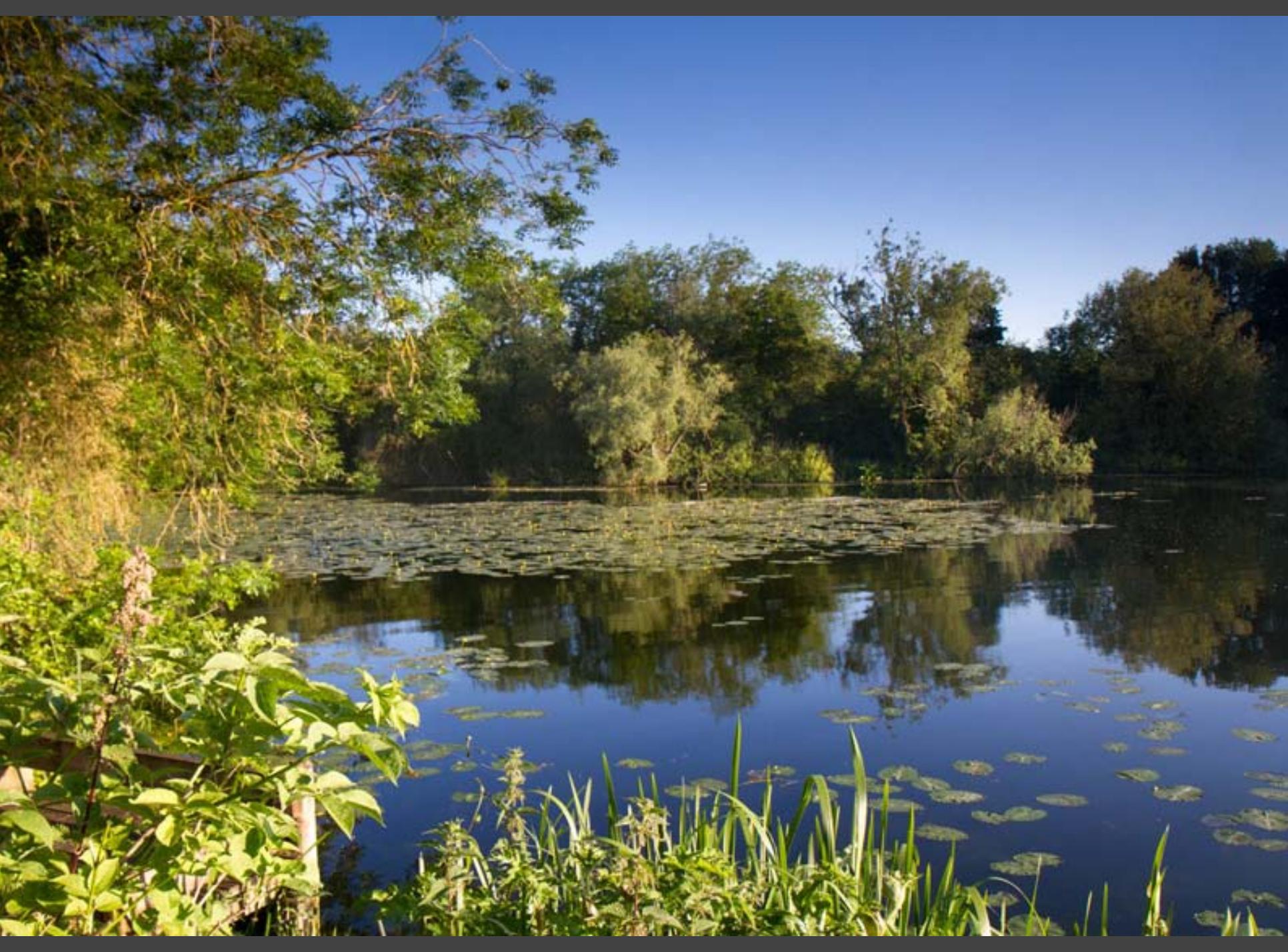


At ten I return: no anglers, but two twenty-somethings on a bench by my chosen spot. I like the look of them, and like better the weed aroma: not cos I want a draw – those days are for me long gone – but cos they won't do me. I play the candour card, telling what I'm about and that I'm not asking them to go. They're impressed when, with hefty stick, I retrieve the rucksack they hadn't spotted, a bare metre from where they sit.

They are Dan and Joe. We chat companionably: India in the seventies, wild camping, skunk v hash, the follies of prohibition and – Dan's passion – canoeing. We enjoy the sunset together, then they leave me to pitch tent. With teeth brushed and sleeping bag waiting, I get this shot by resting camera on angler's platform – a wood jetty – and holding the shutter open for several seconds.



Day 4





Ely Saturday Market. I snap her long before start of play, then head for Tesco by the station. I'm 20 minutes in the disabled loo – full strip wash, then clothes – but it's not

yet eight and, unlike Roy in that inspired IT Crowd episode, I can live with the guilt. As Clint so wisely counsels in Heartbreak Ridge, *improvise and overcome*.

Stop
Look
Listen
Beware
of trains.

I'm fresh as a daisy: wet shorts, boxers and T-shirt fixed to back of rucksack for wind and sun to do their magic. On the east bank of the Gt Ouse I head south for Cambridge

and happen upon this. The Samaritans sure know where to declare their presence. Flatland, fen and fast trains? I hear Pink Lady from two days ago: *depression's not in it.*

Warning
Do not trespass
on the Railway
Penalty £1000

We're in your corner
Whatever life is doing to you,
we're here for you. Any time.



The Great Ouse flows north-east to the Wash so to walk south is to walk upstream. The Cam, left and also flowing northwards, joins it here. I'm just a dozen miles from

Cambridge but don't want to get there till tomorrow. I'll lunch here on Tesco hummus, crudites and bread roll. May as well finish off the clothes drying while I'm at it.









East Anglia leaves many clues to the influence on the landscape of the Low Countries. Dutch engineers have been helping to drain the English fens since the middle ages. For a stirring account of the war, lethal and cruel, between fensman and farmer – with the history of brewing and a gripping yarn thrown in at no extra cost – try Graham Swift’s 1983, Booker short-listed, *Waterland*.

Clayhythe, six miles from Cambridge. It's not yet seven so I've time on my hands. Again I jettison my sack, this time in the hollow of a huge, lightning-struck tree. (As with outdoor sex, there's a *frisson* to leaving £3k worth of camera gear like this.) I carry on upriver but after a mile and a half with nothing suitable, retrace my steps, extract the rucsack and walk a few hundred metres further to the Bridge Inn, passed an hour ago. Behind it, on the west



side of the Cam, I find what I'm looking for in the flood plain. It'll be a terrible pitch should it rain but that's not what's forecast, while the flood bank above is too visible to a nearby marina for my liking. My decision made, it's back to the Bridge Inn for food, pint and leisurely read of my kindle. I won't be pitching till at least ten-thirty. With all these boaty types messing about on the river, to do it any earlier might invite unwelcome attention.



Day 5
great crested
grebe



I hear birdsong all morning, notwithstanding a steady increase in townsfolk from Cambridge, boating and jogging on this fine bright Sunday.





Near Grantchester Meadows
on the edge of Cambridge.
A fine baby boomer I'd be
not to think of Pink Floyd's
Ummagumma at such a
time. Alas, the closest to it
on my iPod is *Atom Heart
Mother*. I have *Dark Side of
the Moon* and *The Wall* too
but they came way, way
later. GM is vintage Floyd.









courtyard cafe

from St Mary's Tower











trinity



kings

THE PICKEREL INN



Pie and pint here, then to the youth hostel where I'm in a shared dorm for the night. Fascinating conversation, on academia and much besides, with Christian, a Bulgarian looking to shift his Ph.D to the UK. His story is humbling. I'll tell it another time.

Day 6. Up before six for stroll round a deserted centre. Back at the hostel it's breakfast, much as I can eat, and coffee, much as I can drink, for just over a fiver. Train to Sheffield changes at Ely, Peterborough and Doncaster. I'm home for 2pm. A bit French lacquered, to be honest.

