



Photo: C. R. Temple

A STUDY IN NEGLECT

By John Arrow

For most of us, mention of the Norfolk Broads conjures up pictures of wide, beautiful waterways. In this article, Mr. Arrow shows us that some, at least, of our pictures are a little out of focus.

THE NORFOLK BROADS. Five rivers, with between them over 130 miles of good, navigable waterways; eight sizable broads, with a total acreage of 1,500; a summer holiday playground which attracts 100,000 people from all over Britain every year; a famous centre for amateur cruising and racing which supports eight recognised yacht clubs, the biggest of which, the Norfolk Broads Y.C., has well over 700 members. Broadland is all this, and much else. But pile up statistics as you will, you must

LEFT:—

A scene on the Bure characteristic of Broadland as it is usually presented in photographs

never take the Norfolk Broads for granted. They are changing all the time. And the most tragic fact about the area is that, under its present incredibly clumsy administration by River Commissioners, Catchment Boards, and a patchwork of local and area councils, it is a wasting asset.

Free yourself from the easy contemplation of white sails, blue water and green marshes under a vast and ever changing sky, and adopt an historical perspective. The result is melancholy. A hundred years ago the river mileage was significantly greater, and the condition of the rivers themselves was much better, for they were both deeper and wider. As for the broads, they covered 4,000 acres instead of the present 1,500; and they had an average depth of 10 feet instead of today's average depth of 4 feet or less. The broads have simply shrunk. Individual examples are illuminating; only 45 years ago it was reckoned that Hickling broad covered 464 acres; now it covers 300 only, and is much shallower. Before 1914 a regatta could be held there for all classes of yachts, including cruisers drawing up to four feet; in the '20's, the largest boats which could manoeuvre there with ease were half-deckers drawing a little

less than three feet. To-day, you can still race on Hickling — but only in dinghies drawing two feet or less.

Hickling Broad is not an isolated example. Barton Broad, in 45 years, has lost 170 acres out of 270, Horsey Mere has lost 56 out of 126. And everywhere the reeds and mud are reducing the depth of water at an approximate rate of one inch per year.

These are the results of neglect, but local residents and visitors alike have lost valuable amenities from direct action, too. Twenty per cent. of all the 2,500 acres out of 4,000 which have been lost to the amateur sailor have disappeared through enclosure by a handful of landlords in the last decade of the XIXth Century. It is debatable whether their action in barring off broads from the public was legal, since *all* Broadland waters are tidal. But legal or not, that action was effective. Hoveton Broad, Ranworth Broad, and Black Horse Broad are all sheets of water which are now deemed private, and upon which the public may not venture.

The sheer physical size, then, of the Norfolk Broads has notably diminished. But that is not all. Two factors are making what is left much less attractive than it was.

The first factor is the increase in the strength of the tides. Yarmouth Harbour has been progressively deepened, and the re-

sult of this is that the lower reaches of the Rivers Yare, Waveney and Bure, about 30 miles in all and nearly a quarter of the total river mileage in Broadland, are now streams where you may count on fierce tides. To navigate a sailing yacht against the current, except with a fresh and favourable wind is at best a tedious, and at worst a dangerous, operation. But the problem of an individual yacht battling with the tide is in itself a minor one; what is much more important is that since conditions get worse the nearer you

approach Yarmouth, and since Yarmouth must be visited to get from the Bure, or North River, to the Yare and the Waveney, communication between the North and South sections of Broadland is seriously hampered. This in turn has a part in the maldistribution of yachting facilities, to be discussed later.

The second factor which tends to spoil Broadland's facilities is not of man's making; but it could have been, and could still be, prevented by man. I refer to the growing up by the river's verge of thickets and bushes

which restrict the view, cut off the wind, and are a constant source of torn sails and frayed tempers. Above Horning, on the Bure, for instance, the yachtsman finds himself struggling through the logical conclusion of such unchecked growth, a sort of "Green Hell," a corridor between high trees from which there is no escape until the navigable river comes to an end at Coltishall. There are stretches of "Green Hell" on the other rivers, too; and in all about 20 miles of river have been spoilt.

THESE hard facts display the physical and topographical condition of the Norfolk Broads. It is vital for everyone with an interest in their well being, from the point of view either of nature lovers, or yachtsmen, or the many people who earn their livings from supplying and servicing the holiday crowds, *to realise that conditions will continue to deteriorate unless something is done.* The Broads are dying of neglect, let there be no mistake about that. A few more years, and it may be too late to do anything effective to save them.

But before listing the possible courses of action, there is yet one more way in which Broadland amenities have been damaged. The unrestricted building of bungalows on plots rented from the Catchment Board, on a yearly tenancy, has marred many otherwise beautiful stretches of river.

This topic has already been well ventilated; and it has been suggested that a remedy may be found in removing wholesale all the bungalows at present erected. But would such a decision, if it were carried out, be a practical solution to the problem of preserving and increasing amenities? Here are the facts.

At Potter Heigham the river banks are littered with an agglomeration of shacks, some of them home built, others constructed with a high regard for housing standards, but few of them having any claim to either beauty or charm. Originally, they were summer residences, only; but today very many of them house families which have nowhere else to live. Shall these people be turned out? It seems impracticable, unless a housing estate can be erected in the neighbourhood, for the vast majority of bungalow dwellers work locally.

At Horning and Wroxham the story is a little different. Whereas Potter Heigham's bungalows are mostly cheap and simple (and sometimes very ugly) the corresponding buildings at the other two centres are on a more elaborate scale, are kept spick and span with fresh paint, are often set in charmingly laid-out gardens, and in general are not unpleasing to the eye. Must they, too, go? They are not eyesores, as are many of their counterparts at Potter Heigham. But then,



A not-so-picturesque scene. This picture was taken at Potter Heigham.

Photo: Herbert Woods

neither do they, on the whole, house a working population with nowhere else to go. The writer's own view is that it is in the best interests of Broadland that the majority of all bungalows, especially those that clutter up otherwise open, marshland country, should sooner or later disappear. But no one should suppose that to remove them will make any *vital* contribution to saving the Broads; it is sincerely to be hoped that the authorities concerned will not be tempted to order their destruction merely as a piece of window-dressing to suggest that they have Broadland interests at heart, without first tackling the far more serious problems inherent in the condition of the waterways.

THE problem of the Dying Broads has been posed. What are the remedies. The following suggest themselves.

1. A wholesale cutting down of the ugly scrub that infests so many miles of river bank. The stretch from Ant Mouth to Horning, for instance, and including Ranworth Dyke, is a disgrace. There are others like it. Let the rubbish be chopped down; let in the wind; open up the view. It is debatable whether fully-grown trees should be felled, even if they overhang the river, as many of them do near Wroxham; some of them add a real beauty to the scene. But the wretched scrub must go.

2. Dredge out the broads themselves. To-day, only Wroxham Broad and Oulton Broad are in a fit condition for a large craft to sail on; and they are not getting any deeper! Dredging, clearing or killing weeds and reeds will be a long and expensive business. But do we want these acres of open water to survive, or not?

3. Construct a lock at Yarmouth, above the Haven Bridge, but below the confluence of the Bure and the Yare. If this were done the problem of tides would be solved and thirty miles of river would be made pleasant and safe. Breydon Water, too, could be made into a vast artificial lake instead of an expanse of mud-flats as it now is at low tide.

Moreover, if the tides could be tamed, the maldistribution of yachting facilities might be set right. At present, at least 80 per cent. of yachts are let from the Bure and its tributary, the Thurne. There are thirteen major concerns in this area; on the Yare there is one, and on the Waveney, if you include Oulton Broad, not more than three. This is partially due to the fact that seven out of the eight navigable broads still left to us are reached from the Bure and the Thurne. But it is also due to the communications difficulty mentioned above. Exceedingly significant is the fact that relatively few craft let to visitors at Yare and Waveney Yacht



The disappearing Barton Broad.

Only 40 years ago this was clear, deep and open water.

Photo: Herbert Woods

Stations are sailing craft. The majority are motor - cruisers. They, at least, can buck the tide and go places.

The Minister of Town and Country Planning has, in general terms, spoken against a lock such as I have suggested. There are snags, of course. One is that many of Yarmouth's sewage outfalls empty into the rivers well above the proposed site of such a lock; another is that it might hamper the trading vessels which use the River Yare to reach Norwich. But the idea of a lock is an old idea, and a persistent

one; it seems indisputable that it is a good one. If ever the idea turns into a reality it will give an enormous stimulus to healthy Broads development.

4. It should not be beyond the wit of men to devise a way in which the so-called private broads could be opened to the public without prejudice to the riparian rights of the landowners whose property partially surrounds them. There is already a precedent in the case of South Walsham inner broad, which is "private", but upon which boats may sail although landing is forbidden.

5. There are several minor steps which should be taken, eventually, to improve Broad facilities. One is the removal of certain buildings, discussed above. Another is the provision of proper landing places at the chief villages. Most of the staithes are in a thoroughly bad state, with rotting piling, choked and muddy dykes, and only the most primitive arrangements for mooring boats securely. But on this point, at least, let us take heart. For at Oulton Broad there is an outstanding example of how facilities for visiting yachtsmen should be laid on. The "marina" there, run by the Lowestoft Borough Council, is admirably organised and equipped. Compared to it, Yarmouth's Yacht Station, for instance, is a decrepit anachronism.

Sailing boats, as opposed to motor cruisers, might well be encouraged. Sailing is a more virile pastime than marine motoring; but there is little need to press this point, for some yacht owners are under the impression that there is a distinct trend in public taste favouring the sail boat.

IT would be easy to add many more items calculated to improve Broad facilities; but they would be refinements. What are urgently required, before the time comes to discuss minor improvements (and before it is too late), are the twin jobs of

clearing the scrub and dredging the broads. The question now arises: how?

It was, until recently, confidently expected that the Broad area would become a National Park. There is less confidence in the issue now. It has been suggested that the Norfolk County Council should set up machinery for the rescue, and then the control, of derelict Broadland. But whoever accepts the responsibility should, I believe, see to it

The author of this article is the Hon. Secretary of the Broadlands Protection Society. He points out, however, that while the opinions expressed are in conformity with the Society's objects, they are purely personal, and should not be taken to commit the Society in any way.

that there is one overriding authority which will not merely co-ordinate the efforts of River Commissioners, Catchment Boards, Parish Councils and so on, but which will direct the

campaign to save the Broad. For campaign it must be. Piece-meal measures will not be enough. Large sums of money will have to be made available; large schemes will have to be put in hand. We who live in or by Broadland do not much care who wields the authority as long as they follow the lines laid down in the admirable Report on the area drawn up for the National Parks Commissioners; and, above all, as long as they get something done.

As you sit by the gliding stream watching the yachts pass, as you listen in the evening to the cheerful talk of the holiday makers, if you attend one of the numerous regattas, you may find it difficult to believe that there is, after all, much wrong with the Broad. It is very easy to be complacent; and it is very dangerous. Remember, where our fathers sailed there are reed beds now. Unless we take action, our sons will find reed beds where we are sailing to-day.

"DO YOU KNOW?" ANSWERS

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|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 Barton Turf. | 16 Brancaster. |
| 2 Burnham Thorpe. | 17 Walsingham |
| 3 Banham. | (Waltzing Ham!) |
| 4 Horstead. | 18 Oxborough. |
| 5 King's Lynn. | 19 Trunch. |
| 6 Roughton (Rough ton). | 20 Dereham. |
| 7 Norwich | 21 Syderstone. |
| (Wymondham Road). | 22 Docking. |
| 8 Scole. | 23 Mundesley. |
| 9 Lakenham. | 24 Holt. |
| 10 Ludham. | 25 East Barsham. |
| 11 Ditchingham. | 26 Holkham. |
| 12 Quidenham. | 27 Caister St. Edmunds. |
| 13 East Ruston. | 28 Catfield. |
| 14 Hingham. | 29 Hethersett. |
| 15 Swaffham. | 30 Great Yarmouth. |