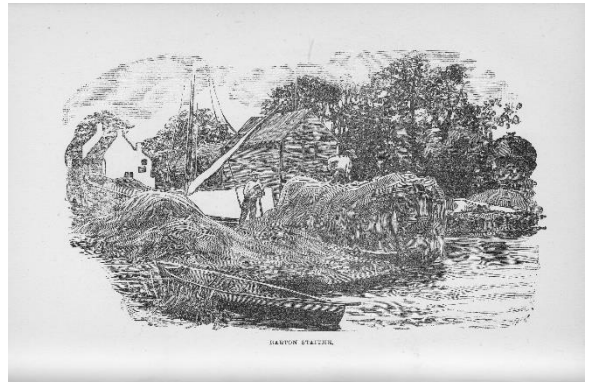


Living off the Marshes in Neatishead, Irstead and Barton Turf

One hundred years ago, and before that, there were five main marshland crops: **marsh hay, reed, sedge, boulders and osiers**. Within easy reach of Barton Broad and the River Ant many villagers earned their living from working on the surrounding marshes. The marshes intersected by dykes drain the land and provide navigation, and must be “drawn” and cleaned annually for maximum efficiency. The marshmen used boats called **reedlighters** which were like row boats but bigger, heavier and worked with a quant. The crops would be loaded onto the reedlighters and brought to **staithe** for unloading.

Marsh Hay/Litter was cut in the summer and left at Irstead and Barton Staithes, much of it went to London to feed the cab horses, though as more horses were used in the war effort there was less call for marsh hay there. It would though have been used locally for horse feed.



Pictured right: Marsh hay being unloaded at Barton Staithe (From: *The Handbook to the rivers and broads of Norfolk & Suffolk pub. 1890*)

Reed is used for thatching. It grows in large reed beds in shallow water and is cut in the winter by reedcutters on a 2 year cycle. *George Cox (b. 1830) used to hire Barton Broad every year for cutting reed and marsh litter. They started cutting reed about the last week in November and the agreement said they must finish by 6th April when the young reed-colt started to sprout. He had three reedlighters and they rowed them across to Barton Staithe or back to Callow Green where they lived.”* Callow Green ***pictured below*** with stacks of

reed. (From: A Jam Round Barton Turf by John Yaxley)



Sedge is more flexible than reed and is used to cap the ridges of thatched buildings. It was also used in the making of collars for horses. It is cut in the summer on a 3-4 year cycle.

Irstead Staithe and **Gay's Staithe** were both used for landing reed and sedge. Gay Staithe was named after John Gay, a wherryman, who lived near the staithe. He died 14.5.1907 and is buried in Irstead Churchyard.



***Pictured left:** Sedge is still grown and harvested near the River Ant and unloaded at Irstead Staithe.*

Osier is a type of willow used in the making of baskets and fencing. *“Once more towards Neatishead, down the hill [from Barton Turf] and on the left was an osier bed of about half*



an acre. Now almost unrecognisable as such, with trees grown to 60' tall, this is one bed from which the Haylett family cut and carted the material required for their trade as basket makers.”

(From: A Jam Round Barton Turf by John Yaxley)

***Picture left:** James Haylett, basket maker, Barton Turf.*

Boulders (greater reedmace) as they are known in Norfolk are actually the real “bulrushes” and **Gladdon (lesser reedmace)** the yellow flag iris are both softer rushes and are used together. They were braided and woven into mats and frail baskets. Being soft and light in weight these were often used in horse collars when breaking in young horses (colts).

Eel fishing on Barton Broad was another occupation that provided food and income for many marshmen especially in the autumn when the eels were running downriver towards the sea on the way to distant breeding grounds. They were caught in **eel sets**, by using a **pritch or spear**, or by **babbing**. After the War during the 1920s and 30s Barton Broad was also a renowned place for **pike fishing** when they were considered edible and made a good cheap meal. ***Pictured right:** Barton Mill and Eelcatcher.*



Claire Penstone-Smith, November 2015

Neatishead, Irstead & Barton Turf Community Heritage Group